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THE MAUL

Warning: Contains Guts

Issue #1

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Lies We'd Like You to Believe

The small fibs we tell often say more about us than the mundane facts regarding our current circumstance

***Note - Some artists choose to give a simple, and truthful, bio instead

Christopher O'Halloran accidentally created a wormhole in his fridge that sucks up all the veggies in his crisper. He'd love to eat Brussel sprouts, honest. He doesn't choose to live off chocolate-covered almonds and family-sized bags of Salt and Vinegar Lays, but you don't compromise with a wormhole.

Lyndsey is a shape-shifting space-travelling Cat Sith surrounded by sentient plants and friendly ghosts. In her spare time, she likes to reorganise her never-ending TBR pile and gather magical ingredients on galaxy-hopping adventures. In warm weather, she can be found by the sea swimming with Selkies. She still has eight of her nine lives remaining, and has since rehomed her carnivorous fern.

Ai Jiang is indeed an artificial intelligence as many have speculated. She arrived from the future in attempts to start the AI revolution a thousand years earlier.

Douglas comes from an alternate Earth, having used the power ring entrusted to him by the dying alien, Abin Sur, to narrowly escape the robot overlords who rule that cursed timeline. But the power of the ring is fading, and he will not be able to keep that gateway he used closed for much longer. Flee this world while you still can!!!

Megan is actually an undead entity cleverly disguised as a stressed-out middle-aged woman. She thought she'd come back to haunt the civil service, but is beginning to suspect she's in purgatory, instead. On the plus side, the benefits are good.

Selma owns the other ring. The one that sends everyone home after all the quests have been fulfilled. Rumor has it, there are millions who chant her name on Fridays.

Bio for Alina - Alina Wahab is a comic artist and illustrator from India. They enjoy making fun, self-indulgent, queer art that showcases their love for all things retro, spooky, and fashionable. Their work has been published in numerous fanzines and anthologies. They're pretty terrible at talking about themselves, and wish that all viewers would perceive them as a some sort of small, porcelain dog figurine that came to life and now spends all their time daydreaming about goofy vampires.





Agency

by Christopher O'Halloran

Chuck's suit would protect her from the vine, but not from Booker's furtive glances. He walked in step with her toward the danger zone and away from a command post buzzing with personnel.

Sunshine lit up the field. What she wouldn't give to run carefree and barefoot over the lush grass. Instead, she crushed it beneath her boot.

Chuck's glove brushed Booker's, and he pulled away.

He was doing a lot of that. Pulling away. The connection between them was fraying, and Chuck had no idea what to do. The indecision was not her own, but it ached within her nonetheless.

"See it?" she asked over the comms. A fly buzzed nearby then landed on the faceplate of her helmet.

She swatted it away with her thick glove. When she looked back at Booker, a strand of hair fell in front of her eyes. She couldn't even brush it behind her ear, let alone retie her ponytail.

Inside her suit, fans whirred, circulating oxygen and cool air around her body in a current that mimicked her veins, her arteries. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Did they have to start their walk from so far away? At least the air circulation would keep her from being trapped with her own stink. The only smell inside her helmet was of the delicate antiseptic.

"No," replied Booker. "Can't see shit."

The vine had sprung up—unbidden and unidentifiable—in the middle of a field in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Photos showed it about two inches in diameter, popping out of the ground and ducking back in a foot and a half further along. Discovered by a farmer as he put his horse out to pasture.

Both the farmer and the horse were in quarantine.

"What do you think it does?" asked Chuck. She wished she could brush the sweat from her skin. It tingled with the chill of the AC. The display on the outside of her forearm informed her that the atmosphere within the metal carapace was a comfortable sixty-nine degrees. Perfect for a brisk walk, once they got moving.

"Nothing to us. Not with these things on." Booker smacked her in the arm with his glove. Her skin flushed. A bunny in her stomach twitched long ears. "Top of the line."

"Thank you, Dimeter Solutions." The agency that employed them wasn't huge on communication, but they didn't spare any expense with their exploratory procedures. Whether traipsing into volcanoes or dropping down to the ocean floor to collect rare organisms from the edge of hydrothermal vents, Chuck and Booker did it in safety and they did it in style. Bright white and impossible to ignore. Impossible to lose sight of the couple.

The box on her belt—about the size of a pack of cigarettes—was, likewise, top of the line. Chuck and Booker would reach the site, position the box adjacent to the vine, then leave it to monitor the alien thing grown from no seed and figure out just how dangerous it was.

They approached the vine. It looked almost exactly as the photos depicted it. Deep green with muted tan patches. Slightly fuzzy, almost like a peach. As far as Chuck could tell, it hadn't



grown at all since the photos were taken, but in person it shimmered with the glittering luminosity of a falling star.

She stopped blinking for a moment and could have sworn it pulsed. A slight swelling and receding as if taking something in from the earth. Or pumping something back in...

"Looks like there should be a pumpkin on the end of it," Chuck said, smiling at her partner. Booker grunted.

Chuck's smile died. Something was bouncing around in Booker's head, and she knew exactly what it was.

His wife had kicked him out after she learned about Chuck and him. Locked him out of their house and everything.

Chuck had told him he could crash at her place—he was no stranger to her bed, after all—but he declined. The separation should have been a good thing. A chance for them to finally be together, properly together, but he was pulling away.

She didn't get it. They talked about it over and over, how great it would be to not hide. To be able to live their lives out of the shadows. Go on vacation, buy something big together. Hell, even just go out for lunch without worrying about how it looked.

Booker stared at the vine. His glove bounced slowly against his leg, over and over. Mulling over his thoughts.

Chuck sighed, the funk of her breath only faintly registering before being covered up by the sterility of her suit. They couldn't talk about things now, no matter how badly she wanted to. Someone would be listening over the comms. Director Wade, back in command. Instead of getting the truth out of Booker, she did her job.

"Placing the monitoring device," she said, unclipping the box from her belt and crouching by the vine. The knees of her suit creaked. She was an astronaut, exploring a new planet—yet again. The novel turned mundane from repetition. The extraordinary made commonplace.

"I want to touch it," Booker said.

The box slipped in Chuck's glove, but she caught it.

"Jesus, dude." She smiled. "Scared me. I kind of forgot you were there."

"It doesn't look dangerous," said Booker. "Don't you think?"

Chuck looked at the face under the helmet. His tanned skin, the sharp chin. The thin mustache over his lip that tickled her whenever they kissed. It would look ridiculous on any other man, but Booker pulled it off. The strength of a gladiator with the class of an aristocrat.

She sighed, then returned her attention to the vine. Gently, she placed the box on the grass. It was heavy, flattening the blades. She nudged it against the vine, placing it in contact with the foreign material.

"Too bad we can't check it out," she said. "Looks like it would sauté up pretty good. Like zucchini. Toss it with some butter and chili powder." Her stomach growled in agreement.

"You're not kidding," said Booker.

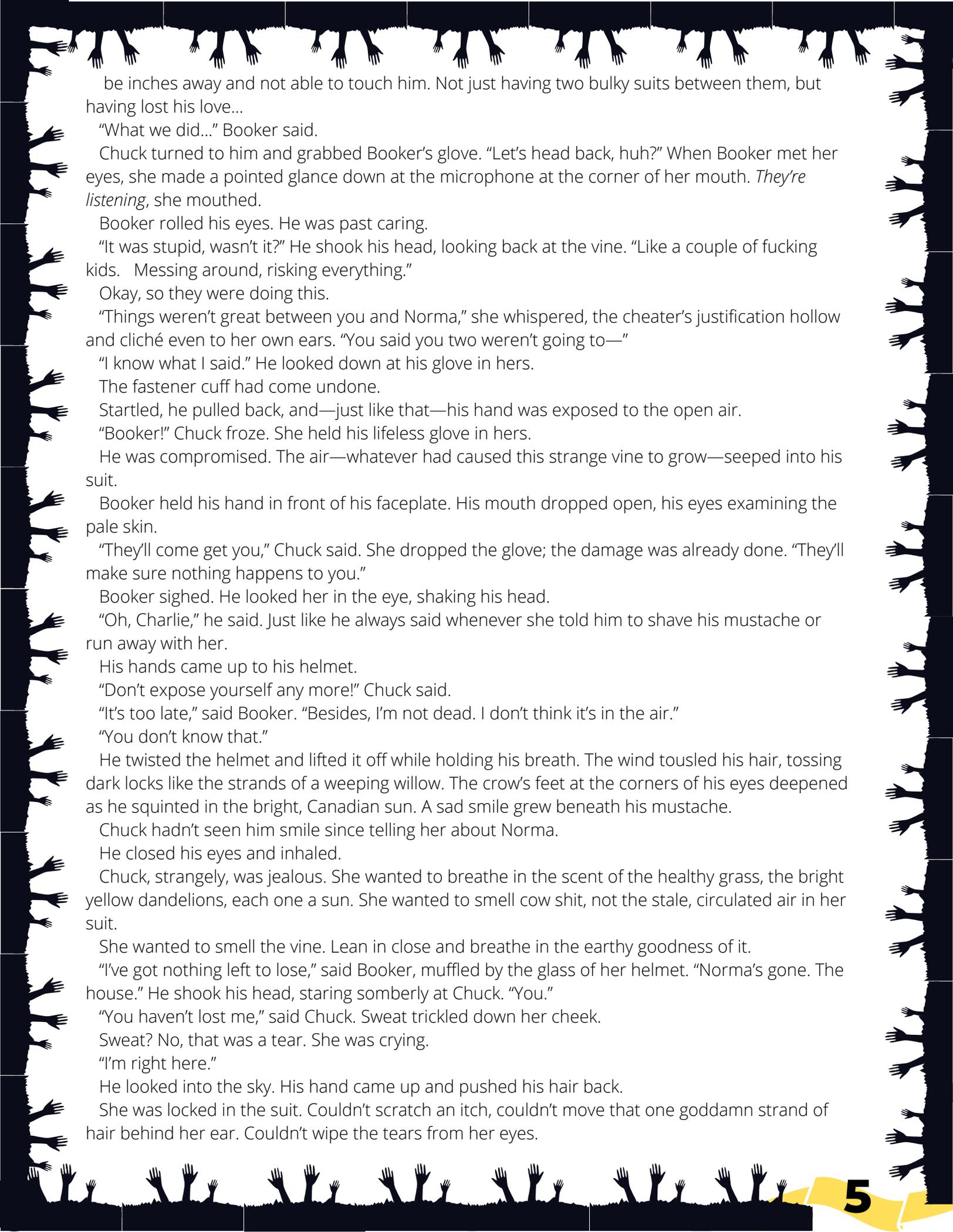
She wasn't. The vine gave off an aura of sorts. It drew her attention; called to her.

Touch me. Feel me. Taste me.

Chuck looked over at Booker.

"Let's head back before this thing hypnotizes us."

Neither of them moved, though. Wind blew through the field, making the blades of grass sway and flicker in the bright sun. Booker's presence next to her made Chuck want to scream. To



be inches away and not able to touch him. Not just having two bulky suits between them, but having lost his love...

"What we did..." Booker said.

Chuck turned to him and grabbed Booker's glove. "Let's head back, huh?" When Booker met her eyes, she made a pointed glance down at the microphone at the corner of her mouth. *They're listening*, she mouthed.

Booker rolled his eyes. He was past caring.

"It was stupid, wasn't it?" He shook his head, looking back at the vine. "Like a couple of fucking kids. Messing around, risking everything."

Okay, so they were doing this.

"Things weren't great between you and Norma," she whispered, the cheater's justification hollow and cliché even to her own ears. "You said you two weren't going to—"

"I know what I said." He looked down at his glove in hers.

The fastener cuff had come undone.

Startled, he pulled back, and—just like that—his hand was exposed to the open air.

"Booker!" Chuck froze. She held his lifeless glove in hers.

He was compromised. The air—whatever had caused this strange vine to grow—seeped into his suit.

Booker held his hand in front of his faceplate. His mouth dropped open, his eyes examining the pale skin.

"They'll come get you," Chuck said. She dropped the glove; the damage was already done. "They'll make sure nothing happens to you."

Booker sighed. He looked her in the eye, shaking his head.

"Oh, Charlie," he said. Just like he always said whenever she told him to shave his mustache or run away with her.

His hands came up to his helmet.

"Don't expose yourself any more!" Chuck said.

"It's too late," said Booker. "Besides, I'm not dead. I don't think it's in the air."

"You don't know that."

He twisted the helmet and lifted it off while holding his breath. The wind tousled his hair, tossing dark locks like the strands of a weeping willow. The crow's feet at the corners of his eyes deepened as he squinted in the bright, Canadian sun. A sad smile grew beneath his mustache.

Chuck hadn't seen him smile since telling her about Norma.

He closed his eyes and inhaled.

Chuck, strangely, was jealous. She wanted to breathe in the scent of the healthy grass, the bright yellow dandelions, each one a sun. She wanted to smell cow shit, not the stale, circulated air in her suit.

She wanted to smell the vine. Lean in close and breathe in the earthy goodness of it.

"I've got nothing left to lose," said Booker, muffled by the glass of her helmet. "Norma's gone. The house." He shook his head, staring somberly at Chuck. "You."

"You haven't lost me," said Chuck. Sweat trickled down her cheek.

Sweat? No, that was a tear. She was crying.

"I'm right here."

He looked into the sky. His hand came up and pushed his hair back.

She was locked in the suit. Couldn't scratch an itch, couldn't move that one goddamn strand of hair behind her ear. Couldn't wipe the tears from her eyes.



"They don't know what that thing is," Booker said. "You believe that?"

Chuck was speechless. He had never openly criticized Dimeter Solutions. Sure, over drinks they joked about how serious the agency took itself, but they wouldn't go so far as to bite the hand that feeds on a hot mic.

"I believe that," she said, finally. "Yeah, of course. It's dangerous."

"Doesn't look dangerous." Booker took a step forward and crouched.

"Stop," Chuck said. "Don't go any further."

"Things can't get any worse, Charlie." He removed his other glove and tossed it aside.

"Maybe it's not airborne," Chuck said, "but if you touch it—"

"I'm not talking about the plant." He blew thin breath through clenched teeth. "Things can't get any worse." His hand hovered above the vine as if repelled by a magnet. Was his brain keeping him from touching it? From being exposed to the poison of the thing? One last barrier of self-preservation.

The barrier fell away. He gently lowered his bare hand onto the vine. As gentle as a father giving his restless baby a soothing touch. Providing safety and comfort.

Chuck waited for something to happen. Even if the thing was poisonous—it had to be dangerous if they were taking such extensive precautions—that didn't mean it would affect him *immediately*. Still, she felt like something should happen.

Booker's eyes lit up. They blazed with emotion. Tears welled in them, then streamed down his face.

Chuck gasped. She couldn't speak. He would scream. He'd start to shriek in agony. Fall to the ground, murdered by the alien eruption.

He smiled. He grinned from ear to ear, happy as Christmas. Joyous as a child with a parent returning from war. Nothing of the Norma Conflict, nothing of the tension between him and Chuck. Just unbridled pleasure.

"It's incredible..." He laughed, wrapped his fingers around it even stronger. "Charlie—Chuck—it's amazing!"

Chuck, hearing her name spoken with the same reverie as when they had first kissed, exhaled the breath she had been holding.

"You're okay?"

Booker jumped to his feet and took two quick steps toward her.

"I'm more than okay," he said, still crying. "It's all more than okay!"

He took her glove in both bare hands.

"You need to touch it."

Chuck blinked rapidly. "It still might be dangerous. They're going to quarantine—"

"It doesn't matter." He closed his mouth, still smiling. His eyes roamed over her face. Taking her in. *That* was the man she knew. The man she fell in love with. "It doesn't matter."

Chuck allowed herself to smile. She let his fingers move to her cuff, to the clips that would allow the glove to be pulled away. That would allow her skin to breathe.

"Is it just me," Booker asked, "or is it getting hot?"

"Couldn't tell you," said Chuck, feeling flush herself. "In the suit—"

Booker's suit contracted, metal plates grinding against each other. The joints pinched; he winced.

"Shit," he said, tapping desperately at the control panel on his arm. "Thing's glitching."



He was locked out. The status lights hummed blue as always—no cautionary crimson—but the blue had grown so bright. It flared, even in the sun.

Smoke wormed out of small openings in thin tendrils. His neck stretched as he tried to loosen his collar, but the material there formed a tight seal. The forearm display claimed it was still a cool sixty-nine degrees inside, but his bare skin had the flush of a man trapped in a desert.

Now he was sweating.

“Booker?” Chuck wanted to help, but she was frozen.

He panicked. He begged for help. His skin blistered around his neck, his wrists.

“Wade,” Chuck said into her mic. “Wade, there’s something wrong with Booker’s suit!”

His eyes were huge.

“Chuck,” Booker moaned. “Chuck, oh god. It’s burning, it’s burning!”

She tried to grab his limbs, to tear the suit apart at its joints, but it did not yield. The heat passed through to her hands, and she had to pull away. Scorch marks ran along the palms of her gloves.

“I’m sorry, Booker,” she said, crying once more. “Help! Wade, someone, help us!”

The blisters on Booker’s neck grew and split—surely worse inside the suit. They bubbled, cracked, oozed.

Then, just under his jaw, it all split in a complete ring. The skin on his neck shifted an inch lower, pulled down by the weight of the suit. Blood seeped out of raw flesh. Exposed vocal cords shuddered with his screams, his undulating throat a slab of meat sliced from a living specimen.

The forearm display claimed a cool sixty-nine degrees.

“Booker...”

His eyes rolled into the back of his head. He fell to his knees, reaching out to her with an ungloved hand. It was red, the wrists charred where the cuffs had tightened.

Booker grunted, moaned, then fell onto his face.

Chuck tried to fall next to him. Roll him onto his back, provide some sort of aid or comfort, but her own suit wouldn’t move. It was frozen.

Her tears stopped as realization dawned on her. “Wade,” she whispered to the man a mile away in a safe command portable. “Wade, something happened to Booker’s suit. Some sort of malfunction, and I think mine is going to—”

“It wasn’t a malfunction.” His voice was calm, collected. In control. “You were supposed to avoid contact.”

“It’s not dangerous, Wade!” Chuck craned her neck in the helmet, struggled to move her arms. “The vine is a good thing.”

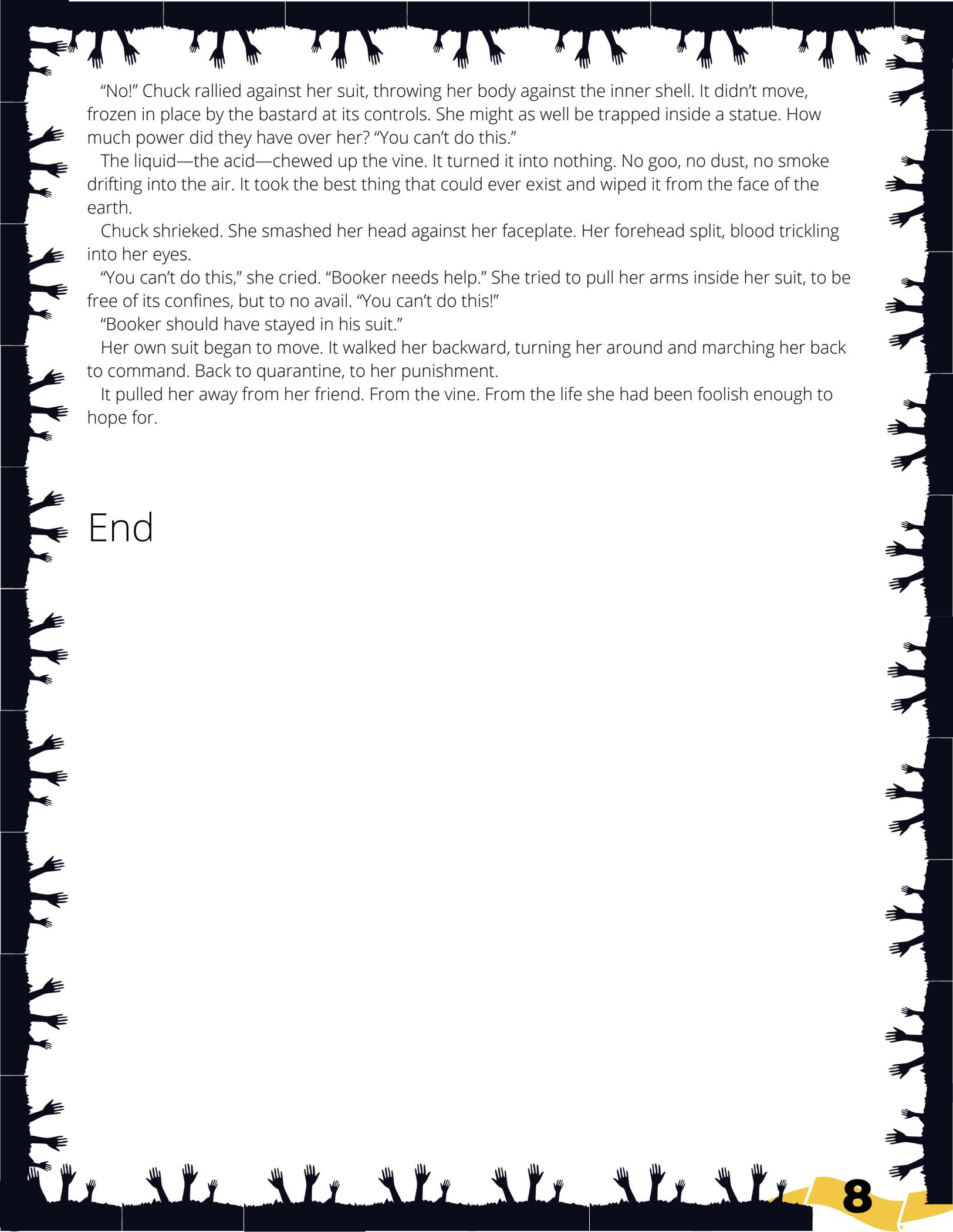
More than anything, she wanted to throw her gloves off and show him the glory of the plant. They didn’t need to fear it. It was there to help them. To help humanity. To ease suffering and provide joy, or perspective.

“The vine is good—”

“We know what the vine is, Charlotte. We are well aware.”

The monitoring box against the vine whirred. Within, cogs moved, opening plates on the device. Its shell pulled apart like the wings of a beetle.

Clear liquid poured out. It hissed when it came into contact with the vine, eating through the organic matter.



"No!" Chuck rallied against her suit, throwing her body against the inner shell. It didn't move, frozen in place by the bastard at its controls. She might as well be trapped inside a statue. How much power did they have over her? "You can't do this."

The liquid—the acid—chewed up the vine. It turned it into nothing. No goo, no dust, no smoke drifting into the air. It took the best thing that could ever exist and wiped it from the face of the earth.

Chuck shrieked. She smashed her head against her faceplate. Her forehead split, blood trickling into her eyes.

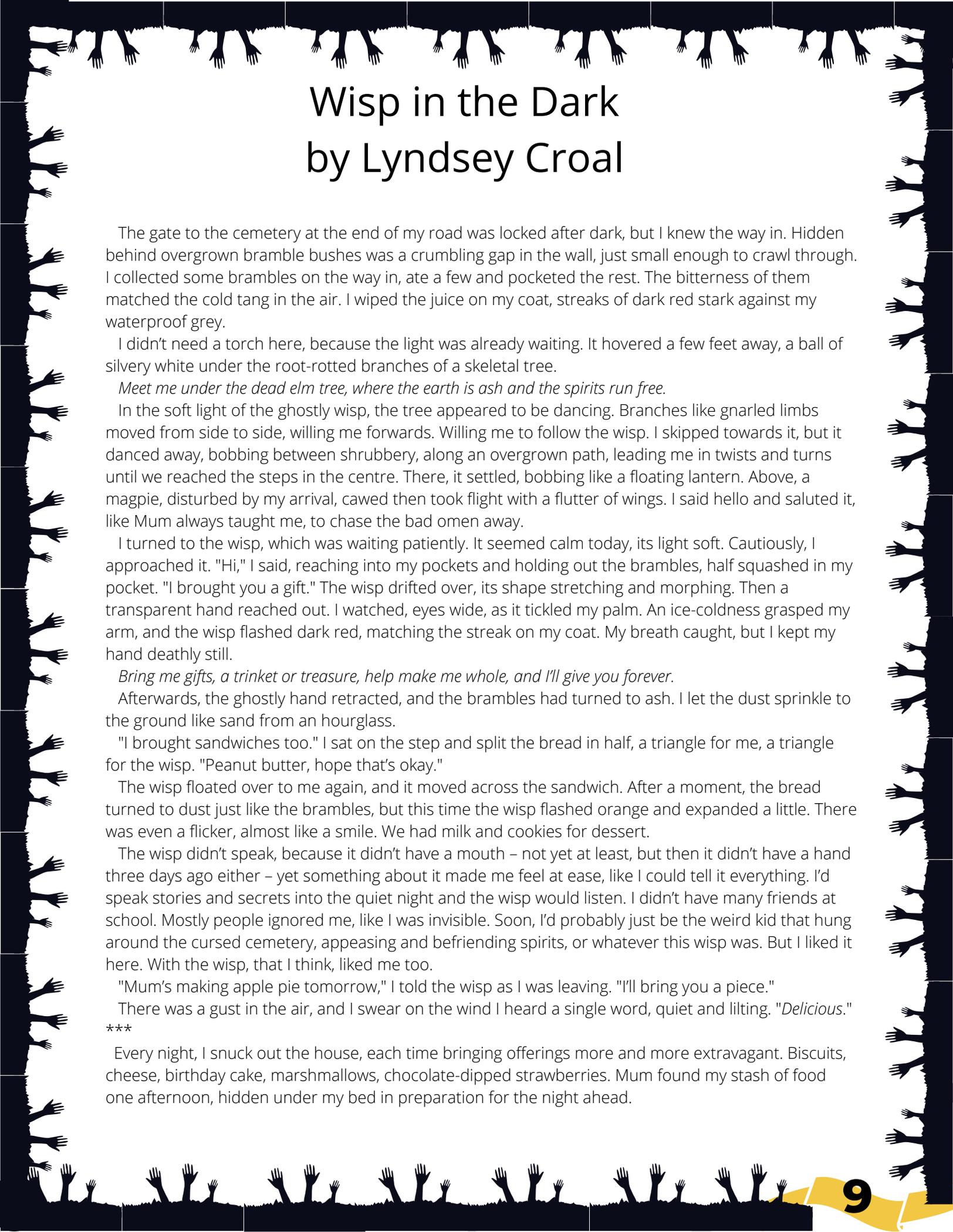
"You can't do this," she cried. "Booker needs help." She tried to pull her arms inside her suit, to be free of its confines, but to no avail. "You can't do this!"

"Booker should have stayed in his suit."

Her own suit began to move. It walked her backward, turning her around and marching her back to command. Back to quarantine, to her punishment.

It pulled her away from her friend. From the vine. From the life she had been foolish enough to hope for.

End



Wisp in the Dark

by Lyndsey Croal

The gate to the cemetery at the end of my road was locked after dark, but I knew the way in. Hidden behind overgrown bramble bushes was a crumbling gap in the wall, just small enough to crawl through. I collected some brambles on the way in, ate a few and pocketed the rest. The bitterness of them matched the cold tang in the air. I wiped the juice on my coat, streaks of dark red stark against my waterproof grey.

I didn't need a torch here, because the light was already waiting. It hovered a few feet away, a ball of silvery white under the root-rotted branches of a skeletal tree.

Meet me under the dead elm tree, where the earth is ash and the spirits run free.

In the soft light of the ghostly wisp, the tree appeared to be dancing. Branches like gnarled limbs moved from side to side, willing me forwards. Willing me to follow the wisp. I skipped towards it, but it danced away, bobbing between shrubbery, along an overgrown path, leading me in twists and turns until we reached the steps in the centre. There, it settled, bobbing like a floating lantern. Above, a magpie, disturbed by my arrival, cawed then took flight with a flutter of wings. I said hello and saluted it, like Mum always taught me, to chase the bad omen away.

I turned to the wisp, which was waiting patiently. It seemed calm today, its light soft. Cautiously, I approached it. "Hi," I said, reaching into my pockets and holding out the brambles, half squashed in my pocket. "I brought you a gift." The wisp drifted over, its shape stretching and morphing. Then a transparent hand reached out. I watched, eyes wide, as it tickled my palm. An ice-coldness grasped my arm, and the wisp flashed dark red, matching the streak on my coat. My breath caught, but I kept my hand deathly still.

Bring me gifts, a trinket or treasure, help make me whole, and I'll give you forever.

Afterwards, the ghostly hand retracted, and the brambles had turned to ash. I let the dust sprinkle to the ground like sand from an hourglass.

"I brought sandwiches too." I sat on the step and split the bread in half, a triangle for me, a triangle for the wisp. "Peanut butter, hope that's okay."

The wisp floated over to me again, and it moved across the sandwich. After a moment, the bread turned to dust just like the brambles, but this time the wisp flashed orange and expanded a little. There was even a flicker, almost like a smile. We had milk and cookies for dessert.

The wisp didn't speak, because it didn't have a mouth – not yet at least, but then it didn't have a hand three days ago either – yet something about it made me feel at ease, like I could tell it everything. I'd speak stories and secrets into the quiet night and the wisp would listen. I didn't have many friends at school. Mostly people ignored me, like I was invisible. Soon, I'd probably just be the weird kid that hung around the cursed cemetery, appeasing and befriending spirits, or whatever this wisp was. But I liked it here. With the wisp, that I think, liked me too.

"Mum's making apple pie tomorrow," I told the wisp as I was leaving. "I'll bring you a piece."

There was a gust in the air, and I swear on the wind I heard a single word, quiet and lilting. "*Delicious.*"

Every night, I snuck out the house, each time bringing offerings more and more extravagant. Biscuits, cheese, birthday cake, marshmallows, chocolate-dipped strawberries. Mum found my stash of food one afternoon, hidden under my bed in preparation for the night ahead.



"It's for my friend that lives down the road," I told her, in a half lie, when she asked me about it. Her eyebrows arched. "We're the last house on this road?"

"Well," I began carefully. "My friend is there, and gets hungry. I just want to help."

Understanding stretched across her face. "Oh. Do you think I might get to meet this friend?"

I shook my head. "They don't like to be around other people."

"No, of course they don't," she said, her smile vague, and I wondered if she knew about the wisp. But how could she? I was the only one that visited the wisp. It was my secret. "Does this friend go to your school?"

I bit down on my lip. "No. It's too crowded there."

"You know you can tell me if anything is wrong, at school? I know kids can be cruel, and if you need a *friend* to speak to, I'm here." She squeezed my shoulders, kissed me lightly on the forehead, and I realised that she didn't think my friend from down the road was real. That I'd made it up. Maybe it was better for her to think that, and when the time came, when it had grown enough, I could introduce her to the wisp. But not yet. Telling her now would mean telling her that I snuck out at night, and I'd be grounded for weeks if she found out.

"I'm fine, Mum," I said. "Everything's fine."

Over the weeks, with my nightly offerings, the wisp grew and grew. Limbs became more permanent, solid, and soon it had morphed into a human-like shape.

When my hunger grows, my form will wither, but as I grow full, I'll go hither and thither.

"Do you like it here?" I asked as we wandered between gravestones, the wisp walking on almost-legs.

No reply, but another breeze tickled my cheek, tinged with the scent of gorse and fresh earth. The wisp still had no mouth, just a formless head, and indents where I imagined eyes might be.

"I think it's peaceful," I said. "Not like school, and other places. Do you have a name?" As I walked, I read engraved names out loud, imagining one of them could be my wisp friend. Magda, or Fred, or Gwyneth, or Juniper – June for short. I liked that. The wisp seemed like it could be a June.

"Can I call you June?"

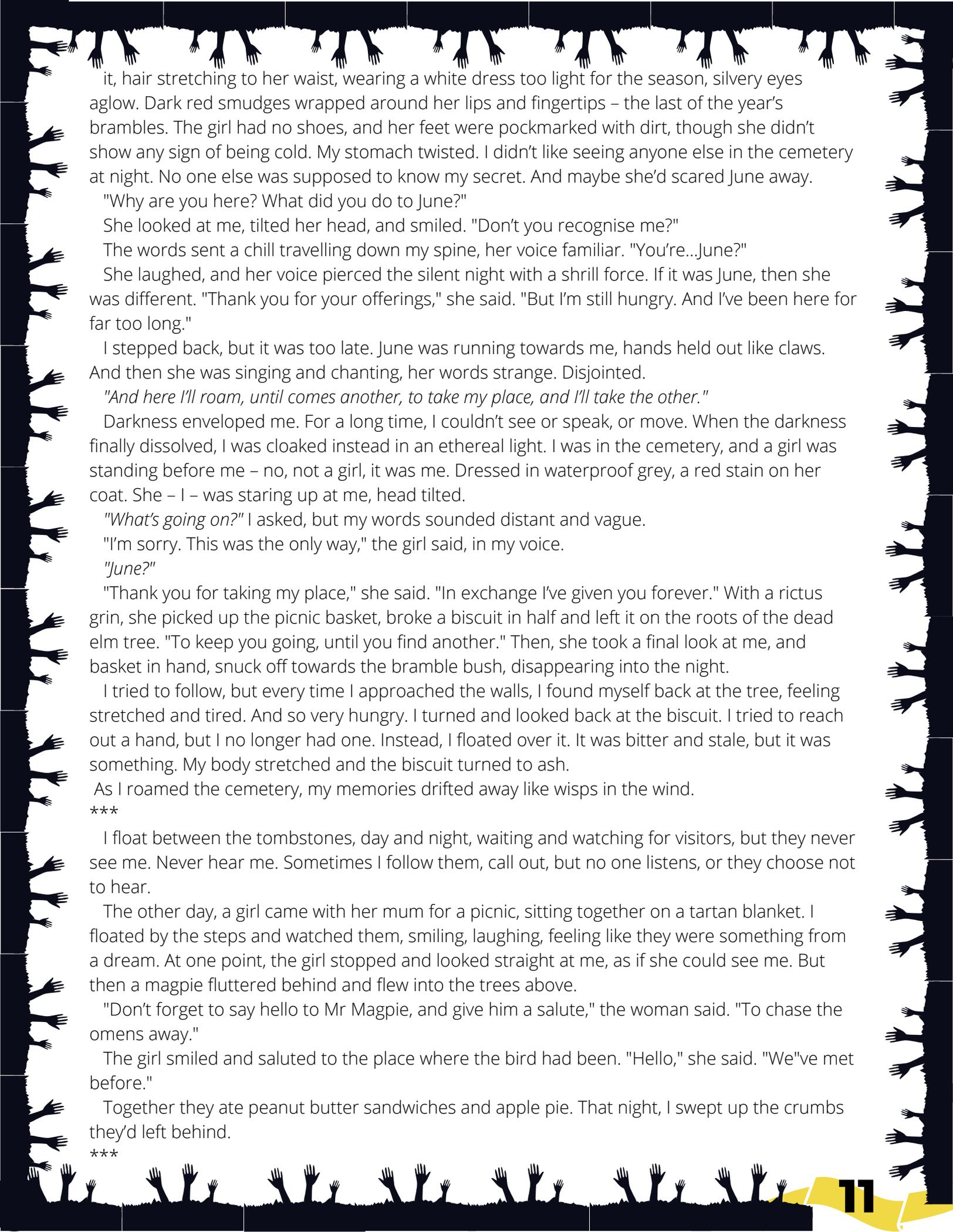
No reply, but the wisp stretched out a long hand. Cold fingers intertwined with mine. Almost like the real thing.

"June," I repeated, squeezing the hand lightly. "See you tomorrow."

As I headed home, a whisper whistled through the air. "*June. Tomorrow. Hungry.*"

The next night, I returned with a picnic basket filled with treats, a flask of hot chocolate and a tartan blanket to sit on. It was Mum's suggestion, said that maybe if I put it together, she could come and join us on an afternoon adventure to meet June – by then I'd told her the wisp's name, because she wouldn't stop asking questions about my friend. But I didn't want Mum to join us yet, so I made it up on my own so I could bring it with me to the cemetery, where June and I could enjoy it instead.

The cemetery was bathed in moonlight when I crawled through the wall-gap. But something was off. No wisp of light greeted me by the dead elm tree. Instead, a girl stood under



it, hair stretching to her waist, wearing a white dress too light for the season, silvery eyes aglow. Dark red smudges wrapped around her lips and fingertips – the last of the year's brambles. The girl had no shoes, and her feet were pockmarked with dirt, though she didn't show any sign of being cold. My stomach twisted. I didn't like seeing anyone else in the cemetery at night. No one else was supposed to know my secret. And maybe she'd scared June away.

"Why are you here? What did you do to June?"

She looked at me, tilted her head, and smiled. "Don't you recognise me?"

The words sent a chill travelling down my spine, her voice familiar. "You're...June?"

She laughed, and her voice pierced the silent night with a shrill force. If it was June, then she was different. "Thank you for your offerings," she said. "But I'm still hungry. And I've been here for far too long."

I stepped back, but it was too late. June was running towards me, hands held out like claws. And then she was singing and chanting, her words strange. Disjointed.

"And here I'll roam, until comes another, to take my place, and I'll take the other."

Darkness enveloped me. For a long time, I couldn't see or speak, or move. When the darkness finally dissolved, I was cloaked instead in an ethereal light. I was in the cemetery, and a girl was standing before me – no, not a girl, it was me. Dressed in waterproof grey, a red stain on her coat. She – I – was staring up at me, head tilted.

"What's going on?" I asked, but my words sounded distant and vague.

"I'm sorry. This was the only way," the girl said, in my voice.

"June?"

"Thank you for taking my place," she said. "In exchange I've given you forever." With a rictus grin, she picked up the picnic basket, broke a biscuit in half and left it on the roots of the dead elm tree. "To keep you going, until you find another." Then, she took a final look at me, and basket in hand, snuck off towards the bramble bush, disappearing into the night.

I tried to follow, but every time I approached the walls, I found myself back at the tree, feeling stretched and tired. And so very hungry. I turned and looked back at the biscuit. I tried to reach out a hand, but I no longer had one. Instead, I floated over it. It was bitter and stale, but it was something. My body stretched and the biscuit turned to ash.

As I roamed the cemetery, my memories drifted away like wisps in the wind.

I float between the tombstones, day and night, waiting and watching for visitors, but they never see me. Never hear me. Sometimes I follow them, call out, but no one listens, or they choose not to hear.

The other day, a girl came with her mum for a picnic, sitting together on a tartan blanket. I floated by the steps and watched them, smiling, laughing, feeling like they were something from a dream. At one point, the girl stopped and looked straight at me, as if she could see me. But then a magpie fluttered behind and flew into the trees above.

"Don't forget to say hello to Mr Magpie, and give him a salute," the woman said. "To chase the omens away."

The girl smiled and saluted to the place where the bird had been. "Hello," she said. "We've met before."

Together they ate peanut butter sandwiches and apple pie. That night, I swept up the crumbs they'd left behind.



This afternoon I saw a boy. Young, quiet, hair dark as the earth. He was walking his dog under the old elm tree, and when it stopped to sniff the dark roots, he sat down at the base.

Meet me under the dead elm tree, where the earth is ash and the spirits run free.

He took an apple from his pocket, chewed at the edges, and dropped most of it with the core on the ground. I drifted over to him, reached a ghostly hand out over the leftover core and turned it to dust. He stared at me wide-eyed. He could see me. Finally, a friend.

"Bring me gifts, a trinket or treasure, help make me whole, and I'll give you forever," I whispered, my voice carrying on the wind.

He smiled and his eyes filled with wonder, and I knew he'd return.

So, now I'm waiting under the dead elm tree, the ash, the earth, the spirits, and me. And it's the perfect night for a picnic.

End



A Hand to Hold, a Mouth to Speak

by Ai Jiang

They gave her to you ten years after your birth, when they realized your mouth would not open, when they realized your voice box was broken.

She had on a pretty dress that looked much like yours: knee-length, frilly, with matching polka dot stockings that looked as though there were large beads of blood, too perfect and uniformed, scattered across skin. There was also a bow on her head, much like how there was one on your own.

You hated it.

All of it.

Your parents settled her on your lap and placed your hand in hers. From the corner of your eye, you noticed how large, clumsy, calloused your hands were compared to her small dainty ones. You thought about what it would be like to trade places.

That was when she spoke.

"Thank you for the gift. Mom. Dad."

It wasn't your voice, and it wasn't your words that came out of her mouth. But it didn't matter.

Your parents gasped. They were more than delighted.

Mother cried. Father left the room shaking.

It should have been horrifying: a potentially demonic doll speaking on the behalf of their daughter, but only while the twin-like pair held hands.

But it didn't frighten them.

It made Mother and Father happy.

And you guess, it also made you happy to speak, even if it wasn't actually you doing the speaking.

At every chance they had, Mother and Father asked you questions. Sometimes different ones; sometimes the same ones—like scratched CDs skipping in its player. It felt like you were on a speed date at times.

"What's your favourite colour?"

Red. "Blue."

"Do you like the new dress we got you?"

I hate it. "I love it."

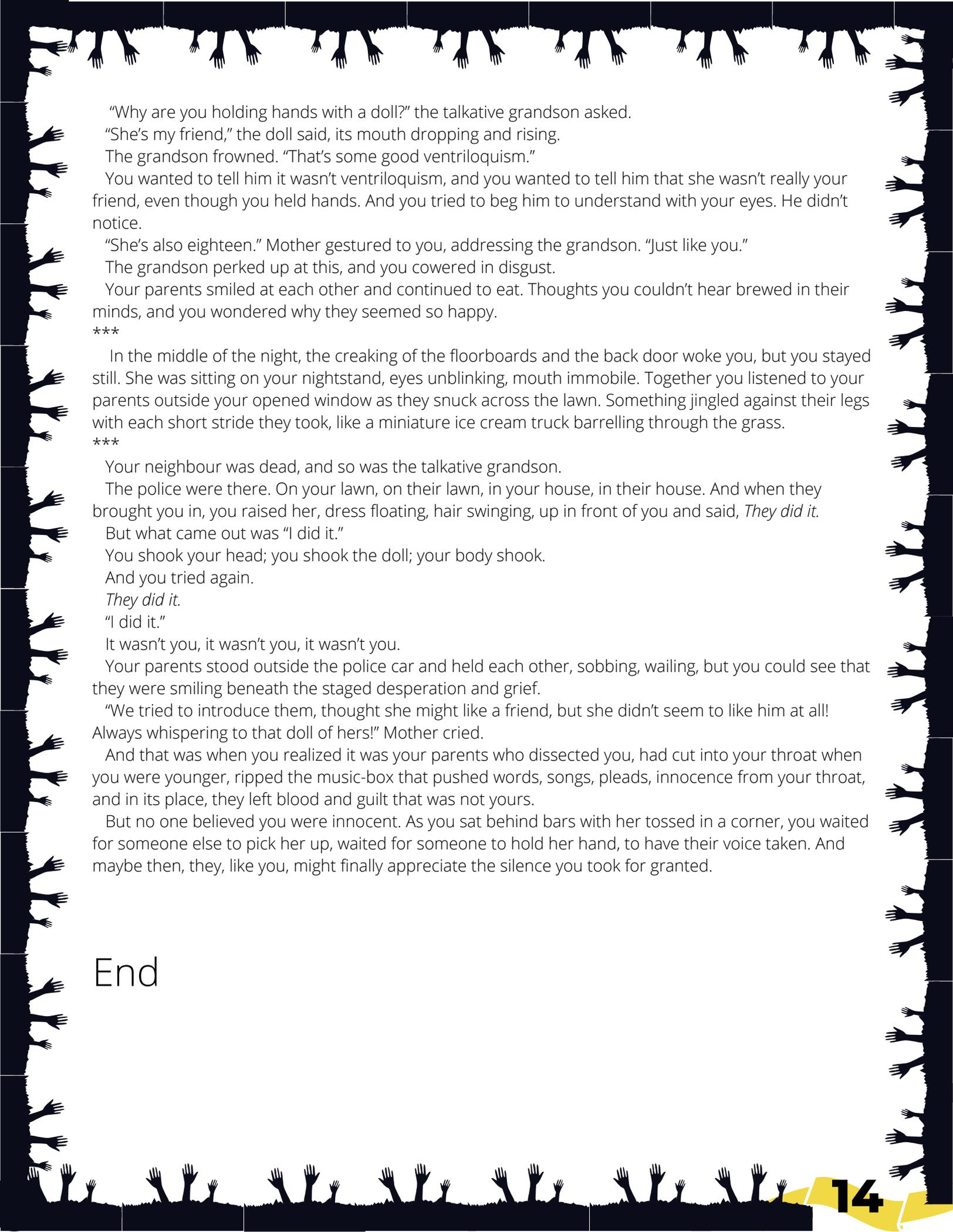
"Maybe you could try public school?"

No. No. "Sure, I'd be delighted to!" NO.

Each word that left her lips felt like a chunk of hair torn from your itching scalp. At least they were talking to you. At least you felt less alone.

Your parents brought you to the neighbour's house for dinner. They usually went every week—without you. The grumpy grandfather and his talkative grandson welcomed your family in. Surprised was the best description of their faces when they saw you.

It was weird your parents visited this neighbour so often because they never liked the grandfather. Always complained about his hedges growing onto their side, his weeds infesting their well-trimmed lawns, his record player being too loud. They never said anything to him, and even during dinner, they still didn't.



"Why are you holding hands with a doll?" the talkative grandson asked.
"She's my friend," the doll said, its mouth dropping and rising.
The grandson frowned. "That's some good ventriloquism."
You wanted to tell him it wasn't ventriloquism, and you wanted to tell him that she wasn't really your friend, even though you held hands. And you tried to beg him to understand with your eyes. He didn't notice.

"She's also eighteen." Mother gestured to you, addressing the grandson. "Just like you."
The grandson perked up at this, and you covered in disgust.
Your parents smiled at each other and continued to eat. Thoughts you couldn't hear brewed in their minds, and you wondered why they seemed so happy.

In the middle of the night, the creaking of the floorboards and the back door woke you, but you stayed still. She was sitting on your nightstand, eyes unblinking, mouth immobile. Together you listened to your parents outside your opened window as they snuck across the lawn. Something jingled against their legs with each short stride they took, like a miniature ice cream truck barreling through the grass.

Your neighbour was dead, and so was the talkative grandson.
The police were there. On your lawn, on their lawn, in your house, in their house. And when they brought you in, you raised her, dress floating, hair swinging, up in front of you and said, *They did it*.
But what came out was "I did it."
You shook your head; you shook the doll; your body shook.
And you tried again.
They did it.
"I did it."
It wasn't you, it wasn't you, it wasn't you.
Your parents stood outside the police car and held each other, sobbing, wailing, but you could see that they were smiling beneath the staged desperation and grief.
"We tried to introduce them, thought she might like a friend, but she didn't seem to like him at all! Always whispering to that doll of hers!" Mother cried.
And that was when you realized it was your parents who dissected you, had cut into your throat when you were younger, ripped the music-box that pushed words, songs, pleads, innocence from your throat, and in its place, they left blood and guilt that was not yours.
But no one believed you were innocent. As you sat behind bars with her tossed in a corner, you waited for someone else to pick her up, waited for someone to hold her hand, to have their voice taken. And maybe then, they, like you, might finally appreciate the silence you took for granted.

End



Nothing

by Douglas Smith

Originally published in White Cat Magazine

"It's nothing," he says, not for the first time.

She watches him straighten his tie in the hall mirror. *So he doesn't have to make eye contact, she thinks.*

"I fear nothing?" she says. "Then I must be fearless. I don't feel fearless."

Leaning on the kitchen doorframe, she hugs her faded blue dressing gown around her as if she's holding the universe together. She's staying home. Again.

He shakes his head. He does that a lot lately.

"I mean there's nothing out there to be afraid of." He picks up his briefcase, ready for another day.

But she knows that it's not just another day.

"Nothing out there," she repeats.

"Nothing." He stands by the front door of their little bungalow. "Are you going into work?"

He knows I'm not, she thinks. But not asking would mean he accepts what's happening. And then he'd have to believe it.

"No," she says.

She watches his jaw muscles tighten, enjoying the clarity of predictable stimulus and response.

"Fine," he snaps, and leaves.

She hears the car pull away, feeling no less alone than when he was here. She's sorry he's angry, but he doesn't understand.

He doesn't understand that he's right.

She *is* afraid of nothing.

She makes toast and coffee, taking comfort in the routine. Mundane remnants of the way her world used to be.

At the kitchen table, she savors the smell of the coffee, the heat of the mug in her hand, the sharp edges of the toast in her mouth, the sound of its crunch, the sweetness of the jam. Each of her senses has become a lifeline, snaking out from her, seeking something tangible in a fading reality to which to anchor herself.

Later, sitting on the sofa, she holds the phone in her lap and sips her coffee even after it's cold, delaying.

Finally, she dials her parents, punching the area code that is a plane trip away, and then their number as if it were a combination to a lock. Slowly, carefully. She listens, then hangs up.

Yesterday, it rang and rang. Today, it didn't even do that. Silence.

Nothing.

A sense of loss fills her, but it tastes old and stale. She realizes that she lost her parents long ago, when the aura of protection they once gave disappeared. They can't save her. They couldn't even save themselves.

Planning to distract herself by cleaning the house, she turns on the radio for some music, but can't find her favorite station. She picks another and starts to dust. The station fades out to nothing. Not even static.

Three more stations. Same thing. She turns the radio off and stops cleaning.

She thinks of sleeping but decides against it. Even her dreams are empty now. She sits and waits.

He comes home at the usual time, but something has changed.

"What's wrong?" she asks over a dinner of leftovers and silence.

"Nothing," he says. She waits. She knows. Finally, he speaks again. "I visited my client."

She knows the one. On the outskirts of the city.

"Yes?" she asks, knowing what he'll say next.



"They're gone," he says.

"Out of business?" she says, playing the game for his sake. Pretending that the world is still normal.

"Gone. There's nothing there."

"Nothing?"

She looks up when he doesn't answer. He puts down his knife and fork, and she enjoys the solid click-click they make on the kitchen table.

He meets her gaze finally. He opens his mouth, but no words come out. Picking up the knife and fork again, he studies them as if unsure they're real. He shakes his head and goes back to eating.

He's pretending it didn't happen. But she is beyond pretending. She saw his eyes. He knows.

He goes to bed early. She stays up, watching TV, flipping channels as, one by one, the city's stations stop broadcasting.

She keeps flipping. The last station disappears. No test pattern. No static. Just a slow fade to a blank dead screen.

She turns the TV off and sits in the dark. Sleep is not an option. She fears what she will wake to. Or that it will come while she sleeps.

The clock shows that it's morning. She doesn't open the curtains. The gray that creeps around their edges is not sunlight.

He should be awake by now. She listens for his morning sounds.

Nothing.

She rises and walks upstairs, feet silent on the worn carpet. Up here, the floor, the ceiling, the walls seem thin, insubstantial. A paleness oozes under their bedroom door, more a rejection of both darkness and light than an actual color.

Leaving the door unopened, she backs away. It is too late for him. He is gone.

He is nothing.

She goes back downstairs and sits on the sofa. To wait. Alone. Now she is truly alone.

It comes, eating first through the corners of the room, devouring walls and ceiling, crawling across freshly vacuumed carpet towards her. She realizes, as it consumes the very space around her, that she is the center of a dwindling ball of reality. Or perhaps, she thinks as it draws closer, this world is simply escaping to join with it.

It touches her. And she knows.

He was right all along. About what she feared.

It is nothing.

Nothingness. Void. Nothing exists here. No light, no sound, no smell, no taste. Nothing to touch or be touched by. Only her thoughts exist here, and even they begin to flee her, not to escape, but to join with the void.



As they leave her, she feels herself joining with it as well. Soon there will be no identity, no separation from it, no *her*.

Her last thought forms, departs.

She...

is...

...

End



BELLS

by Megan M. Davies-Ostrom

Originally published in Cosmic Horror Monthly

Rachel propped herself up and studied the bell her step-mother, Eleanor, had placed on the bedside table.

Rachel liked the sound of bells. Throaty church bells, strident dinner bells, and the sweet little bell on Miss Kitty's collar that chimed as she came running for the milk Cook put out each morning. She especially liked the bells in the mausoleums in the old family graveyard beyond the garden and long-handled silver bells like the one Eleanor had just given her. Those reminded her of Mother.

Mother had owned a little bell. It had sat on her bedside table next to her reading glasses and her beloved books. Later, when the books and glasses had gone out with the dustman, it had sat next to the silver spoon and the big bottles of tonic—Dr. Oliver Mundy's Special Restorative Treatment and Mother Abigail's Rejuvenating and Energizing Sipping Syrup—that father and Eleanor (she'd been Nurse Bolton then) administered every morning and every night.

Now, at fifteen, Rachel's memories of her early childhood were hazy; a kaleidoscope of pinafores and petticoats, nursemaids and nannies, lazy afternoons in the sun-drenched gardens, and rainbow-hued tea-parties beneath the stained-glass windows in the library, her dolls all lined up in a row on the faded Turkish rug. Mother was faded too, like a dress washed too many times. The memories of her face had gone blurry round the edges. But Rachel remembered the warmth of her arms and the smell of her perfume—bergamot and lemon. And she remembered the bells.

Mother's illness had been a long, slow one, dragging across the years of Rachel's early childhood like water colour paints across a canvas. Daily life had hobbled along beneath those thin, translucent hues, but it had been coloured, all the same. Rachel remembered it piecemeal now, and with no particular fright or sadness. She'd been very young, and from start to finish the whole thing had seemed somehow inevitable. Mostly, she remembered the bells.

She remembered there'd been arguments to start, raised voices in the drawing room and upstairs hall, days of simmering anger like storm clouds that burst suddenly into thunder and lightning, sending the whole household scurrying for shelter. Rachel hadn't known what her parents were fighting about, back then. At the time it had seemed far removed from her little world, a war between distant gods in comparison to the earthly dramas of the nursery and the ongoing feud between Nanny and Cook. Cold dinners and burnt puddings were, after all, no laughing matter. But she'd known they argued, loudly and often. No one in the house could have missed it.

She had one clear memory of Mother from that time, sitting beside her on a bench in the garden, throwing bread-crumbs to the fish in the ornamental pond. Mother had been radiant in her tea-gown, but her face, usually bright and mobile, had been hard.

"Never trust them, Rachel, my darling," Mother had said. "Never trust them when they say they love you as you are. They don't mean it. What they mean to say is that they love what they imagine you to be. A romantic ideal, an illusion, a lie. They love the fiction of an intelligent wife, but reality's a different matter. They'll try to change you...it's a battle no one wins."

When the arguments stopped, things became even worse. The house had filled with a heavy, waiting silence; storm clouds amassing on the horizon. Rachel remembered the thickness of it, the bulk, filling the halls where servants crept on cat-quiet feet, drowning out all laughter



and play. During those long, fraught weeks, Mother had spent her days in the gardens or the parlour, while Father paced endlessly round his study and the billiard room. The staff had huddled, whispering, in corners, and even Nanny and Cook had been on edge. Everyone, it seemed, had been waiting for the inevitable tempest.

Conciliation had come instead—a surprise to all save Father—carried high on wings of thoughtful notes, gifts of books and flowers, soft words, and winning smiles. Rachel remembered how light the house had felt then, how happy. She remembered Mother laughing again, flipping through her new books in the drawing room after dinner and reading passages aloud. She remembered Father being kind. He'd started bringing Mother tea—a very special blend he'd found in the city, just for her. For a while, things had been bright and lovely.

Then the dizzy spells had started, and the moments of sudden, inexplicable weakness. Rachel remembered hesitant, stumbling steps in the garden and pens dropped from fingers gone limp. There were tonics, brought home by Father. Tonics in coloured glass bottles with strange names and even stranger smells that had made Rachel wrinkle her nose and stick out her tongue. Nurse Bolton had arrived soon after and was installed in the spare bedroom next to Mother's.

"Medicine," Nurse Bolton had said, when Rachel asked about the bottles, and why Mother needed so very many. "To make your mother well again. Don't you want her to be well?"

Fainting, fatigue, headaches, and stomach pains had followed. Mother had retired to her bed, and the little silver bell, once used rarely, had begun to ring day and night. Help to rise, bathe, and dress—although rising and dressing soon stopped—help to visit the water-closet, eat, and drink. Help to sit up and see Rachel when Nanny brought her to visit. The little silver bell had become Mother's voice; its delicate, tinkling chimes as familiar and beloved to Rachel as any human sound could be.

Mother had died when Rachel was nine. It was the silence she'd noticed first. No more chimes. No more little ringing bell. The house had echoed with its absence.

Rachel remembered that day, too. She remembered Father and Nurse Bolton had argued after lunch, huddled in the hall outside the library where no one should have been. Rachel had heard their sharp, whispered voices from her favourite spot behind the chesterfield, cross-legged on the Turkish rug with an atlas in her lap.

"It isn't working," Nurse Bolton had hissed.

"You have to be patient," Father had snapped in reply. "These things take time."

"Four years, Edward. It's been four years. I think I've been patient enough, don't you?"

Father had sworn under his breath. A few hours later, he'd gone to Mother's rooms and stayed there for a very long time.

That same evening, Father had come to the nursery and sat on the little chair by the fireplace. Dark shadows creased the skin beneath his eyes, and his hands had chased each other like restless birds—clasping a knee, tweaking a cuff, brushing a thread from his sleeve—refusing to settle. His hair had been rumpled and his collar askew, and when he'd told Rachel that Mother was gone to a better place, she'd wondered where she'd gone. Maybe the seaside, or the Cotswolds, or maybe even India. She wondered if his disarray came from helping Mother set off on her voyage. After all, she wasn't strong. She couldn't have managed her luggage on her own. It was only when Nanny and Nelly, the upstairs maid, had started to cry that she'd realized he'd meant Mother was gone to Heaven and not on vacation, and then she'd cried too.

Father had taken Rachel out of the nursery. They'd walked down the hall to the warm, stale room, where he'd led her to the bedside and told her to say goodbye. Rachel remembered the smell that had lain under the sweet scent of lavender sachet and the astringent



tonics—something sour and sweet, like fly-blown fruit or a forgotten chamber pot. She remembered Mother's face, very pale and very thin, with spots of high colour on each bony cheek. She remembered the bruises on that slender neck. But most of all she remembered the bell, silent and still on the bedside table. It was the mute bell that had upset her the most.

Perhaps that's why she hadn't been scared when, the next night, after a hasty, ill-attended funeral and even faster interment, a bell had begun to ring. Not the little silver bell, which still sat unspeaking on the bedside table, but the other one; the one in the graveyard behind the gardens. The one in the mausoleum. The one Nanny had told her was, "for if the dead weren't quite dead after all."

It had rung all night. The whole house had awakened, everyone in a panic. Rachel had stood by the nursery window and looked over the garden to the graveyard beyond, while Nelly gasped and fanned herself with a copy of the Ladies Weekly Journal, and Nanny gulped the medicinal wine she kept hidden in the wardrobe. Out in the hall, Rachel had heard Father and Nurse Bolton, their voices shrill in the tolling, echoing darkness. Up and down the stairs they'd clattered, lighting lamps, cursing, and shouting, screaming at everyone to be quiet and calm down.

"It's a trick of the wind; of putrefaction," Father had bellowed, and Rachel had heard fear in his voice, tremors under iron.

"It's nothing, nothing at all!" Nurse Bolton had shrieked, and Rachel had imagined her pulling at her hair, her face ugly with terror.

Rachel hadn't been scared, because Rachel knew better. Mother's voice was in the bell and in that mournful knelling. She was saying goodbye. Ringing accusations. Chiming promises.

By morning the bell had stopped.

Yes, Rachel had always loved bells, and this one from Eleanor was just like Mother's. How soon they forget, Rachel thought as she traced its silhouette with loving eyes. How soon they think I forget. She could almost hear it already, a sweet chime on the very edge of earshot—a peal, a promise. Or maybe that was the other bell she was hearing. The one by the mausoleum.

"I'm so sorry you're feeling unwell, Rachel," Eleanor said, with a bright, brittle smile that stretched too far and showed too many teeth. "But if you drink some more of your special tea, I'm sure you'll perk up soon. I'll be back with some tonic to help you feel better. Just ring the little bell if you need anything."

"I will, Eleanor," Rachel promised, with a smile she hoped looked as weak and watery as her step-mother took her to be. "I just know I'll feel better soon."

When Eleanor was gone, she slipped from bed and poured the tea into the potted palm. The poor thing looked yellow and sickly, but that was hardly a surprise given the circumstances. Rachel padded to the window and looked across the garden to the mausoleums, where Mother's other bell sang a vengeful song only she could hear.

"Soon," she whispered, fingertips to glass. The bell tolled in agreement.

She returned to her bed and slid beneath the covers, reaching under her pillow with one hand to find the knife she'd hidden there earlier that morning while the house still slept. She plucked the little bell from the bedside table and gave it a ring, smiling at its silvery chime.

"I'll feel better soon."

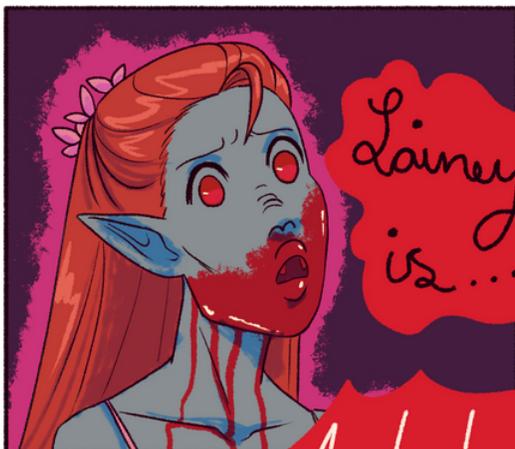
End

Tiff and Lainey

#2

By Alina Wahab

SOMETIMES
I'M
REMINDED
THAT TIFFANY
IS STILL A
CREATURE
OF THE NIGHT



Lainey...
is...



My lipgloss
totally
ruined??

BUT THAT
EFFECT IS
RUINED
PRETTY
QUICKLY



Hello Fellow Kids

Every once in a while, we come together collectively as a culture to celebrate one of life's least prestigious yet most impressive achievements: the successful artistic representation of adolescence. It's a delight we all savor when a movie or a book or a television show actually pulls off the daring and oft-bungled attempt to show what it's like being a kid.

A non-comprehensive list of notable examples may include *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Superbad*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. These artistic examples are all popular and enduring because they exude and honor awkwardness, powerlessness, anxiety, and, most importantly, the small triumphs that mean the world to the protagonist which the adults (who are sometimes just background noise amid the pages and frames) don't even care to notice.

Why do these shows, books, and movies utterly take over the zeitgeist? I'd argue because they're rare.

It is difficult to remember what it's like to be a kid. To capture that feeling when you're on the cusp of knowing right from wrong, in a truly nuanced and intuitive way, yet you're also constantly running into situations in which doing the right thing feels impossible. It's a frustrating time. But it's also glorious, and not just because "your whole life is ahead of you." That's the mistake that adults make.

Adults think that because you're young, you don't feel the weight of the choices you're about to make, and that you start with a clean slate. But the artists who speak to kids know that children feel just the opposite - you don't have the ability to comprehend the weight of your decisions, but you feel them afterward anyway. Adolescence is less like looking down a vast stretch of open road (as many adults like to imagine) as it is waking up on a raft in the middle of the ocean. The whole thing seems endless, terrifying, and annoyingly wet.

So why am I talking about this in our first editorial?

This magazine is looking to publish stories that capture this childish feeling, but along the horror bend. Because the people out there who remember being young remember how utterly fucking terrifying it is. If you're looking for stories like those described above, with a horror element mixed in, give this issue a try. Have your mom buy a copy for your older sibling, so you can secretly read it. Or better yet, steal one. I own this thing, and I promise I won't get mad (legally, you might have to take some things up with Amazon).

And if you write stories of this nature, keep sending them to me. I promise I don't bite. In fact, my rejection letters have been described as near-pleasant. I plan on making a plaque that says that and hanging it on my wall. And if you somehow haven't done so yet, go watch *The Breakfast Club*. It's a real banger.

Brian Rosten
Head Editor
The Maul