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Ivy House and Other Stories: A Collection of Horror

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Women and Horror: An Introduction

Any examination of the literary horror genre should start with the Gothic genre that gave birth to it. In The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales (1992), Chris Baldick, defines the Gothic as “a set of ‘historical fears’ focusing upon the memory of an age-old regime of oppression and persecution which threatens still to fix its dead hand upon us” (xxi). Baldick is using the past of tyranny and oppression to explain the root of society’s fears, which is the fear of losing control and power (for those who have it) or fear of the actions of those with control and power (for those who lack it). Women have always had their control and power stripped from them by men, making them true artists of the Gothic.

In Kate Holden’s “Formations of Discipline and Manliness” (1999), she explains the reason society perpetrates misogynistic thinking toward women is because of the false expectations of what a woman should be. Holden writes, “this ‘femininity-as-female-nature’ is a male myth constructed to complement prevailing masculinity” (150). The patriarchy pressures women into being feminine to uphold ‘the perfect women’ ideal not because it is true or right, but to solely keep men in a position of authoritative power by disempowering women. Holden explains, “the male view blames ‘female nature’ for what are seen as intrinsic weaknesses which justify ideas about female inferiority and consequent subordination” (150). She is basically saying that men want women to be ‘weak’ or ‘submissive’ in nature so they can enforce their superiority and power over women. Holden emphasizes how damaging it is for women when men blame women for their weakness when the only weakness, they have are the control men have over their autonomy. It’s as if these same men think women want to be treated as less than humans because that’s what the generations before them taught them to think, continuing the vicious cycle of dehumanizing women.
Writing is a significant form of protest for many women, but especially for Gothic and Horror-writers as they incorporate their own social injustices within their work and show the reality of repression towards women. Helene Meyers in the book *Femicidal Fears* (2001) reinforces the use of the Gothic as a protest for women saying, “Gothic romance has meditated upon the potential for female victimization … women writers and readers have used the female Gothic tradition to protest and accommodate themselves to women’s lot” (26). Meyers talks about how female Gothic writers represent female victimization as a way of representing themselves, especially during times when their voices and opinions were unappreciated and unwelcomed. Only in the last 100 years have women been able to vote on what happens to their lives, and even today we as women don’t have full autonomous rights regarding healthcare, with Roe v. Wade being revoked within the last year. The point is women have to fight for our rights, and since women haven’t always been able to freely speak or act, using art forms like writing is a form of liberation.

Specifically, the Gothic was a form of liberation for many women writers like Anne Radcliffe in the 18th century and Elizabeth Gaskell in the 19th century. A time when rights for women were paper thin to nonexistent. Their voices held no power in the political sphere, so they turned to write as a protest for themselves and other women trapped under the patriarchy. Anne Radcliffe arguably became the mother of Gothic writing, with popular novels like one big example being *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), and Elizabeth Gaskell’s domestic Gothic began a new era for the genre with “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852).

In *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Radcliffe uses the Mazzini family to display how toxic patriarchal figures use and abuse women to benefit themselves, which normalizes the suffering of women. By creating this story, Radcliffe not only inspired many Gothic literary concepts but
also argued, she is arguing for women to be seen as human beings and not objects to be discarded in a castle dungeon. By creating the character of the Marquis, Ferdinand Mazzini, Radcliffe shows how abusively and selfishly some men treat their wives specifically during and after becoming mothers.

Let’s break down Ferdinand’s abuse towards his ex-wife (not by divorce, but by dungeon), Louisa. Poor Louisa married a man who seemed prosperous, a man with wealth and power. She thought she was going to live a life of a princess with her prince in their castle. Unfortunately, Ferdinand grows tired of Louisa, falling in love with his future wife Maria, faking Louisa’s death, and locking her in the dungeon for most of her children’s lives. Ferdinand lets his children believe that there is a ghost in the castle when they start hearing mysterious noises, rather than their own mother probably yelling for help.

In the end, Ferdinand confesses his crimes to his son after being fatally poisoned by Maria. This ending where both Maria and Ferdinand die resembles Shakespeare’s ending of Romeo + Juliet, but instead of dying for love, they die because of their lust. Maria is killed for cheating, and Ferdinand is poisoned by the person for whom he destroyed Louisa’s life. With this parallel, Radcliffe creates a clear picture of how patriarchal influence can be deadly not just for women but also for the men who abuse it.

In Ferdinand’s dying confession he says, “Heaven has made that woman the instrument of its justice, whom I made the instrument of my crimes; —that woman, for whose sake I forgot conscience, and braved vice—for whom I imprisoned an innocent wife, and afterwards murdered her” (Project Gutenberg, Chapter XV). Breaking down the way he speaks about Maria, he calls her an instrument two times, objectifying her twice by comparing her to a tool rather than a human being. Then he calls her “that woman” twice as well, and the emphasis on ‘that’ creates
an othering effect that suggests he’s demeaning her identity as a woman when essentially blaming her for everything. Not only that but, this is his wife he is supposed to be in love with not just some woman. If this is someone, he truly loved he wouldn’t just consider her “that woman”, showing the reader he only uses Maria to fulfill his lustful desires that Louisa didn’t give to him. Further emphasizing how Ferdinand is a toxic male who participates in patriarchal ideals is in his confession, where blames his own bad behavior on Maria while also blaming Heaven for killing him rather than accepting it’s his own fault for his demise. Using Ferdinand’s character, Radcliffe protests how the patriarchy influences men into rationalizing their mistakes as the universe being against them rather than taking accountability for their own wrongdoings. Through the demise of Ferdinand, Radcliffe shows how inevitably these same men who abuse their power will not be able to avoid the consequences of their actions forever which will lead to their downfall.

The story ends with Louisa, the now-freed ex-wife of Ferdinand, becoming the matriarch of the household. Radcliffe empowers Louisa after her being imprisoned for so long to represent her own longing for women’s freedom. In 1790s England, women couldn’t just leave their husbands if they were being abused; they were considered the property of their husbands, just as Louisa is in the medieval setting of *A Sicilian Romance*. Radcliffe uses Louisa’s empowering position, in the end, to protest how women deserve freedom from repressive marriages.

Next, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852) the entire plot is centered around a woman (Maude) and her daughter dying at the hands of the patriarch of the household (Lord Furnivall, the women’s father) with complicity from Maude’s sister. For some background information, Lord Furnivall never let his two daughters marry, let alone flirt with men, so when a foreign musician visits the home, both women are drawn to the chance of romance their father
denies them. Maude and Grace fall in love with this same man who ultimately marries Maude in secret, leaving her pregnant. Instead of taking care of his family, the musician abandons them, leaving Maude to be a single mother at a time that this was frowned upon.

Maude is not only a victim of her father’s suppression but a victim of this man who abandons her. Then to further her victimization, her sister Grace exposes Maude’s secret child to their father who is outraged that his daughter disobeyed him and brought shame to their family’s reputation. Lord Furnivall kicks Maude and her child out into the brutal snow where they die. Grace stands by and says nothing as her sister is basically being sentenced to death. Maude’s act of defiance causes Lord Furnivall to become a physical representation of how the patriarchy condemns women who love freely. Gaskell also uses the foreign musician as an embodiment of toxic masculinity because of the competition he caused between the sisters and then his abandonment of his newly wedded wife Maude after she gives birth to their baby. Gaskell is showing how abusive men will take advantage of a woman when she is vulnerable, and when they no longer see a benefit from that woman, they discard them like an object rather than a human being. Likewise, Lord Furnivall didn’t have absolute-power over his daughter any longer; this made him think his own daughter was worthless because an object he could manipulate, but a human being with free will was of no use to him. Gaskell uses these men in two different ways to emphasize how the patriarchy benefits by objectifying and suppressing a woman’s identity. This abuse is lethal to their autonomous rights as human beings and sometimes literally lethal to the woman as well.

Another toxic presence in the story is Maude’s sister Grace who ultimately was the reason she was being thrown out of her home in the first place, and the reason to blame is toxic femininity. It exists in many forms such as mothers pressuring their daughters into being
ladylike, women body-shaming one another, etc. Toxic femininity goes hand and hand with toxic masculinity in the sense that a woman upholds the values of the patriarchy to disempower other women. With toxic femininity, there is an inherent competition created by the patriarchy where women are constantly competing to be the ‘perfect’ woman, an unachievable ideal that disempowers women by dividing them. This is exactly what happens with Grace as she feels she needs to compete with Maud for the chance at love with a man who ultimately doesn’t choose her. In the 21st century, Grace would be called a ‘pick-me’ which is a phrase referring to women who appease men by putting down other women, this especially happens because of jealousy. Grace losing a romantic partner to her sister made her believe her own sister was her enemy when the only enemy in the household is Lord Furnivall. The patriarch suppressed both sisters’ desires and opportunities for love. It is clear Grace regrets the choice she made in her sister’s demise when saying, “what is done in youth cannot be undone” (32). Only after aging and becoming alone, can she clearly see that she made a mistake out of bitter envy, which never would have existed if Lord Furnivall had let the girls marry and explore a love life. In “The Fiction of Sex”, Rosalind Miles argues that social constructs like gender roles are unconsciously embedded in us, which we can see in Grace’s character when she takes out her repressed anger on her sister instead of the person who deserved it, Lord Furnivall. Miles states, “both sexes display an uneasy half-consciousness that the areas of behavior must be kept distinct in the service of some dim notion of the health of society” (34). Miles is explaining that gendered behavior is comparable to muscle memory where people inhabit their behavior according to the way society assigns value to their gender. Those who defy these norms are considered a nuisance to the ‘health’ of society when in actuality by breaking the bounds society has wrapped around
them, they are actually benefiting the world by allowing and influencing identities to be liberated.

Both Radcliffe’s and Gaskell’s works progressed the Gothic genre as a whole, but they don’t enjoy the same fame as Gothic male writers like Bram Stoker or Sheridan Le Fanu. Both women showed the reality of how women feel trapped or isolated, not only in their personal relationships but in the larger society as well. Unlike, Stoker and LeFanu, who tend to demonize sexuality within their female characters, specifically in their most famous works, like Stoker’s *Dracula* (1892) and Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872). The reason I briefly touch upon this is to show how female and male perspectives differ, especially when it comes to fear. In literary horror, men’s fears tend to center on losing power not only over themselves but others as well. Compared to women’s fears that stem from the constant suppression, abuse, and disempowerment they already face from men.

There are many fears that both genders relate to, but when it comes to power and control that’s where the gendered fears differ. Men fear a loss of power they already hold, while women fear those who have power over their freedom. Now I do have to make a quick note, for a long time this power didn’t apply to all men, and even to this day, there are marginalized men who still don’t have as much power as white, cis men. So yes, there are men out there who rightfully have the fear of losing their freedom, but the fear is still different from women as we are still fighting for freedoms men never have to worry about fighting for, they just have it. Men have ideal healthcare, while women don’t especially in regard to abortion and birth control. Men get paid fairly, while women don’t as there is a literal wage gap among genders. Items marketed for women are always taxed more, and a huge example of this is the pink tax whereas implied in the name pink items are marketed higher. In the US, rights for women are getting closer to equality
but there are still many countries that have total and utter control over woman’s rights. For example, one of these countries is Afghanistan where it is illegal for girls to receive an education past the primary level. This is why it’s so crucial to understanding why fear differs among women and men, and why women horror writers who use their work to protest these fears need more recognition. More recognition for women in the horror genre will bring more awareness about gender inequality as they share the reality of what the female perspective is like in a male-dominated world. Gaskell is a prime example of using her female perspective to show the difference in gendered fear as her heroines don’t have to fear a loss of power; they are already disempowered. Both Radcliffe and Gaskell write to represent the dangers and inequality women encounter in their interactions with men. Radcliffe and Gaskell’s literary representations of toxic masculinity and patriarchy inspired more recent Gothic texts like Agatha Christie’s “S.O.S” (1926) and Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s Mexican Gothic (2020).

Starting with “S.O.S”, there are many similarities between this story’s portrayal of domesticity and patriarchy to that of “The Old Nurse’s Tale”. The patriarchal figures in both stories aim to suppress female characters to the point of death. Even though in “S.O.S” the targeted character Charlotte doesn’t die, her adoptive father Mr. Dinsmead’s end goal when poisoning her. The father’s crime is exposed but not brought to justice, implying he may not stop trying to kill the girl to get her inheritance, since he didn’t get in any trouble when caught the first time. Mr. Dinsmead in “S.O.S” and Lord Furnivall in “The Old Nurse’s Story” are similar because they are both corrupt, abusive men. In “The Old Nurse’s Story,” the scene of Lord Furnivall exiling his daughter and granddaughter presents a clear picture of how abusive he was to these girls. Gaskell writes, “the east door gave away with a thundering crash, as if torn open in a violent passion, and there came into that broad and mysterious light, the figure of a tall old
man, with grey hair and gleaming eyes. He drove before him, with many a relentless gesture of abhorrence…” (30). The gleaming eyes of Lord Furnivall mirror Christie’s description of Mr. Dinsmead’s, “little pig’s eyes that twinkled under his bushy brows” (1). The twinkling pig’s eyes symbolize the greed and evilness of the plan Mr. Dinsmead has in motion. Mr. Dinsmead wants the share of wealth that legally belongs to Charlotte, and eliminating Charlotte from the equation is how he plans to get that. Lord Furnivall’s gleaming eyes of hatred and Dinsmead’s eyes of greed are symbols both women authors use to represent this similar toxic desire within these men to disempower the women around them. Through the eyes, the writers express that this a perception issue among patriarchal men, believing they need to control the women in their lives, constantly watching to make sure these women are following the social norms that are an advantage for men like Mr. Dinsmead and Lord Furnivall.

The night the story takes place, Mr. Dinsmead is plotting to kill Charlotte, his foster daughter, to secure her inheritance. This action shows how evil Mr. Dinsmead is, and Christie creates a sexist male antagonist to show how damaging the patriarchy can be. From page one, Mr. Dinsmead orders his wife about like she is his personal servant as he says, “a good dish of eggs, cold corned beef, and bread and cheese. That’s my order for supper. So come along and get it ready, Mother” (1). The power dynamics in their relationship are unequal and disproportionate because of how he orders her around, expecting her to do exactly what he says and when he says it. This is a form of emotional abuse that limits a person’s quality of life by instilling fear of what would happen if they were to disobey their request. Considering how meek Mrs. Dinsmead is in the story and how she always follows her husband’s commands shows how they’re in an abusive relationship. The fear is clear in her demeanor, especially when she is around her husband.
Another quote from Mr. Dinsmead that emphasizes his toxic sexist ideas is when Christie writes, “‘the tea is cold’, he said brusquely, ‘make us some more, will you, Mother?’” (29). First off, the word brusquely implies he is being blunt and rude in his manner when he is demanding her to make more tea for them. Now you may argue that he’s not demanding because he asks, ‘will you,’ but truly he’s not really asking. He is putting on a nice front for the family’s guest Mortimer, so he won’t suspect corruption within the household. Another piece of this quote that leads the reader to believe he is sexist is calling his wife mother instead of her name or a nickname, as it shows how he is only labeling Mrs. Dinsmead as the mother of his children rather than a human being with her own identity. It is clear that Christie displays how toxic men who marry and have children with women are doing it for their own benefit, not caring at all about the woman’s benefit or her identity as a human being.

Breaking away from the characterization of Mr. Dinsmead, it is the crime he commits that really emphasizes Christie’s message of the patriarchy being poisonous to women’s identity. For one, Mr. Dinsmead’s choice of weapon being poison couldn’t paint a better picture of how patriarchal men are venomous to the women around them, lethally sucking the life from them. It is strange to see a man use poison rather than his own brute strength to kill a woman. Poison is often seen as a woman’s weapon. The Washington Post verifies this in an article called “The weapons men and women most often use” by Dan Keating, where he writes, “women are seven times as likely as men to choose poison as their murder weapon.” Keating cross-references criminal databases to find this fact, but another piece of information he shares is “the first thing to know is that men commit so many more murders than women -- 90 percent of them -- that every kind of weapon is used much more by the guys …there are nine male killers for every one woman killer.” What Keating is saying here is that men are overall much more likely to commit
violent crimes, so even if the numbers say more total men have used poison as a weapon, it
doesn’t change the fact that women are more likely to use poison than other weapons. Now you
may be wondering what this has to do with the poison in the story, and the fact is that Mr.
Dinsmead uses a weapon that women use more, which has to mean something. Christie gives
Mr. Dinsmead a ‘woman’s weapon’ to show how he wants something a woman has and is
willing to kill that woman for it. The weakness he tries to impose on women with his poison and
patriarchal hold reveals his own insecurities of constantly craving more power. Christie wants
readers to realize that yes men have power over women, but there is weakness in that power and
women need to seize that weakness to liberate their own autonomy.

What does the tea stand for in itself? Toxic masculinity. The more you drink it the more it
kills you. Toxic masculinity doesn’t just harm women but also produces weakness in men as
well, because toxic masculinity shrinks men to themselves to these identities, men come to
believe it is acceptable to limit women’s identities as well, like ideals of mother and wife.
Unfortunately, society's standards which were created for the male benefit also cage men into
believing they can only be one way, limiting their identity to the masculine ideal. Not only do
these patriarchal rules fall on women but also men which is why these vicious cycles of men
abusing women keep happening. One reason being men are taught to act and present themselves
a certain way, and two, they release their pent-up anger from having to be the ‘manly’ man
society constructs them to be and take it out on the wrong people like women. Toxic masculinity
is poisonous to all those who encounter it, and that’s why Christie uses the character of the
patriarch poisoning his adopted daughter to represent how dangerous this mindset is.

Besides the threat of poisoning, Christie dangles the idea that there is a supernatural
threat to emphasize the human threat of Mr. Dinsmead. Throughout the story, Christie has the
readers questioning whether the Dinsmeads’ troubles were really caused by their house being haunted, especially when Charlotte says, “I think – it’s the house. Ever since we came here it has been growing and growing. Everyone seems different somehow. Father, Mother, Magdalen, they all seem different” (33). Of course, the truth is they’re being poisoned, but the suspicion the house being the problem is not entirely incorrect. The household itself is changing for the worse, and who is the head of this household? Mr. Dinsmead. He is directly causing these negative changes in the house and personifying a home tainted shows that the real problem is a living one.

Christie also uses Mortimer as an embodiment of a different toxic masculinity, the type that allows abusers to retain their power. Mortimer says to Charlotte, “my child… you don’t believe in the past, but I do. I believe in the atmosphere of this house” (43). It’s weird he calls Charlotte ‘child’ here when at the beginning of the story, he refers to her and her sister as “two beautiful young ladies” (31). Inferring that they must find it dull in the home and that they should be out exploring their love lives. Calling Charlotte, a beautiful young lady first, and a child later on, creates a strange and unsettling dynamic. Then to make matters worse, Mortimer, the one who solves the case, doesn’t do anything about it. He simply puts the blame on the house being haunted, as if the atmosphere of the home is a reasonable cause for a father to poison his adopted daughter. After exposing the crime to the family, Mortimer says, “apart from that I will do nothing” (43). Then he leaves Charlotte in danger by leaving her to live with the man who was plotting her death. Christie presents Mortimer as a bystander who allows abusive men to continue to abuse, thereby protecting the patriarchy. His position of power as a man would’ve made all the difference if he used it for good and exposed Mr. Dinsmead to the authorities, as for women it is harder to be believed, especially during the era this was written in. Instead, he
contributes to the problem by silently abiding by an abusive man to protect the power of patriarchy. Christie uses Mortimer as a bystander to show that toxic masculinity isn’t just about being a man who disempowers others, it can also be the man who allows that abuser to get away with their abuse.

Before wrapping up the discussion of the similarities between these stories, let’s focus on the historical elements of the time periods in which these stories take place and how, despite the time differences, gendered traditions continued. “S.O.S” takes place in the Great Depression era, and “The Old Nurse’s Story” takes place in the Victorian era. The two eras—and families—are extremely different as during the Great Depression most people, including the fictional Dinsmeads, were financially struggling while the Furnivalls reflect the wealth and power of the English landed class in the Victorian era. Despite these differences, gendered traditions placed upon women continued to define femininity under one narrow socially acceptable ideal.

Moving into the 21st century we find another story where men abuse others in the name of protecting the patriarchy Silvia Moreno-García’s *Mexican Gothic* (2020). Readers are introduced to the Doyle family and their repressive world as Noemí visits High Place in concern for her cousin Catalina. Catalina sent a hysterical note to Noemí, saying she was being poisoned, and even pleaded “you have to save me” (8). High Place symbolizes a physical representation of patriarchal imprisonment, and the reason it is owned by the Doyle’s is that they love to use powers such as race and sex as tools to create oppressive forces. The Doyle’s consist of the patriarch Howard, his son and Catalina’s husband—Virgil, Howard’s niece—Florence, and her son—Francis. Moreno-García’s language personifies sexism as an invisible force or power that darkly and strongly thrives within High Place, a metaphorical patriarchal prison.
From the very beginning, the Doyle men, excluding Francis, take complete control over their wives as if they were property rather than human. It should be noted the time setting in which the story takes place is the 1950s. During this time the idea of the nuclear family was very popular. Nuclear family dynamics include a husband and wife where the wife takes care of the home and children while the husband works or at the very least financially provides for the family. These sexist ideals thrive in High Place as the patriarch and those under him like Virgil and Florence are determined to keep gender roles in place. A quote that reinforces harmful gender roles in High Place is when Howard says, “a woman’s function is to preserve the family line” (75). He is dehumanizing women when saying their ‘function’ is to have babies and keep a lineage going. The idea that a woman might not become a mother is considered ridiculous and impossible in High Place, especially by men like Howard and Virgil who uphold poisonous traditions of controlling the women in their lives. They would do anything to keep the power they have, even if that meant hurting others.

There’s a moment in the text when Moreno-Garcia really vents her frustrations about gender roles through her protagonist Noemí, as she thinks, “women needed to be liked or they’d be in trouble. A woman who is not liked is a bitch, and a bitch can hardly do anything: all avenues are closed to her” (58). Here Noemí feels that men can be assertive about their opinions but when a woman does, she is considered a ‘bitch’. The double standard which is being displayed in the 1950s setting is still very much alive today. I have been called a bitch so many times just for having an opinion or being assertive, by both men and women, which makes me think this is a systemic issue where society has socially trained us to behave in certain ways, especially on the terms of gender, to be ‘socially acceptable’. Moreno is fighting back against
sexist notions and criticizing this double standard through Noemí questioning these gendered social rules.

Noemí is portrayed as a feminist protagonist who opposes the oppressive forces within High Place. She defies the typical gender norms within this story with her education, her strong personality, and her rebellious, nonconformist behaviors and desires as a single woman. Noemí goes out to parties and dates whom she pleases without worrying about marriage. She chooses to continue her education instead of becoming a housewife or continuing in her family’s business. The fact that she chooses to pursue education is an act of freedom and gives her the autonomy and freedom of knowledge every human deserves. Unlike other stories set in the 1950s with a female protagonist, this is the first female character you see with autonomous rights, up until she goes to High Place. Moreno-Garcia’s modern take on the Gothic shows progress in women defying the patriarchy that aims to suppress them.

While staying at High Place, Noemí is constantly in conflict with the Doyles (excluding Francis) because they abuse the power of sexism to their advantage. By not letting Catalina leave the house and forcing the ‘rest cure’ on her, the Doyles are strengthening their patriarchal power over the women in High Place. Even Florence contributes to patriarchal, oppressive behaviors and ideology, which shows (as we saw in “The Old Nurse’s Story”) how people, regardless of gender, have been socially trained into believing that gendered norms are the ‘correct’ way of living. Moreno reinforces the idea that the Doyles thrive on their patriarchal power when Noemí is stressed about her inability to help Catalina leave High Place. Moreno-Garcia writes, “Catalina was his wife, and he was the one who could make choices for her. Why, Mexican women couldn’t even vote” (92-93). You can feel the helplessness behind these words as the patriarchy
is repressing Catalina under her husband’s control while also showing the repression against all Mexican women that was happening in this story’s era.

In the end, we finally understand High Place’s invisible source of power, which Moreno-Garcia personifies as the gloom. The gloom is a dimension the Doyle’s get access to through a special mushroom that grows on their land. This mushroom is extremely poisonous to most, hence why Catalina is having a bad physical reaction to living in High Place. In fact, hundreds of workers employed by the Doyle’s died from the mushroom’s poison, unable to survive the gloom. Francis explains, “the fungus, it runs under the house, all the way to the cemetery and back. It's in the walls. Like a giant spider's web. In that web we can preserve memories, thoughts, caught like the flies that wander into a real web. we call that … the gloom” (211). Moreno-Garcia shows how this power, the gloom, mirrors the poisonous power of patriarchy. It runs deep throughout the land and within the walls of High Place, showing that this family, and particularly its patriarch, obtains power by disempowering others, The metaphor of flies and a spider’s web shows how the Doyle’s entrance people by their power but then eat them alive with that same power. The Doyles get immortality from the gloom but it’s a double-edged sword, as they can’t survive or thrive without its presence. Howard Doyle is older than a century and plans on putting his soul into Francis’ body to keep being immortal, showing how the patriarchy transfers poisons from father to son to even nephew. Luckily with the help of Noemí, both Francis and Catalina survive the Doyle’s and Moreno-Garcia is arguing that to break these poisonous patriarchal powers we need strong women to stand up and fight against them. The only way to break the system of patriarchy is to defy it as Noemí did in High Place.

Moreno-Garcia protests against a lingering past of men disempowering and repressing women. The story takes place only about 70 years ago and in the vastness of time, that’s a piece
of sand. Gender roles and double standards are still affecting us today; men are still abusing women with their power.

Moreno-García’s protest continues a line of women horror writers like me, as her work inspired me to write a novella and short stories for my honors thesis.

The centerpiece of my thesis is called Ivy House and it’s a gothic novella that is very inspired by Mexican Gothic, showing similar themes of a family abusing the natives of the land to the point of their own demise. The other four short stories I write are all inspired by female horror and Gothic writers before me, as I represent a lot of the struggles women face and fear.

My stories also elevate themes of repression through addictions, the supernatural, isolated settings, and everything in between.

The reason I became a horror writer, like many women before, is because I often feel my voice is not enough. Women aren’t taken as seriously as men in every aspect of life, which is why I write. Women horror writers are fighting in a male-dominated industry, and I am one of them fighting to be recognized.
Works Cited


Halloween. It’s that one time of year where the energy in the air turns wicked. A sinister snake slithers along the edge of danger and the delicious sinful behavior that releases our sexuality, our darkness. As if chaos intoxicates the air and the insatiability of our desires comes out from the shadows and into the moonlight. Despite these provocative joys, there is an edge of danger lurking behind every gravestone, every tree, everywhere unseen. There are things in this world we all imagine living in the dark causing goosebumps to flutter up our arms and send our teeth chattering. There’s always that fear that maybe something will go bump in the night. That fear never really struck me as a bad thing, I’ve always danced with the devil, even my Mother says so. There is something exciting about the adrenaline of not knowing whether the superstitions will come to life on the most mystical holiday of all.

Even if nothing scary happens you can still be guaranteed to have some wicked fun if you’re not a bore like my family in the lovely town of Cedar Hills, Utah. If you’re ever thinking about going to Utah, just don’t. Save your money unless you’re a man who's interested in joining a polygamy cult or a very white, Christian, conservative family like mine. Leaving that dumpster fire of a place behind me and moving to the great city of Boston was the best decision I ever made. I drove to the other side of the country to start over, to forget who I used to be. I still had their shitty brown hair, their shitty blue eyes, and their shitty last name. Wren Fiddler. What a horrendous name, I sound like a cosplayer at a larp convention. I was thinking about changing it but for $150 I could buy a few lines of coke, which sounds a whole lot more fun to me and I care more about drugs than I do about a few silly letters on a birth certificate. I don’t even have most of my records for that matter, so who knows if I would be able to. Just a license that definitely
expired a year ago. I would never dare reach out to my mother and ask for them though, the thought made my stomach churn.

Boston didn’t last long despite how much I loved it. Everything was too expensive, too many jobs drug tested, and I knew I didn’t stand a chance. Hell, to be honest, I didn’t even try, wasn’t worth the rejection. There is no quitting drugs, we were meant to be, a toxic relationship I’ll admit but one I’m dependent on. The only other constant in my life is my beat-up Jeep I named Daisy. I remember being fifteen and working at a grocery store for months straight to save up for Daisy, and she is my biggest accomplishment to this day. Besides Daisy, drugs are the only thing I can count on. They are the only thing that makes me smile, that make me disappear into nothing, and for those brief moments of peace where I forget I’m breathing, it’s the most alive I can ever feel.

The one exception is Halloween, every Halloween I come alive. Excitement enters the hearts of children for the tasty treats they’ll collect in their neighborhoods. Adults prepare to get wasted at some party a friend of a friend is throwing. Everyone everywhere has their own ritual for Halloween night whether that be conjuring a séance or not celebrating the holiday at all. Me? I like to get high out of my mind. Granted I’m high every day, but Halloween is just different. It reminds me of my childhood friend Rikki, we met on Halloween when we were five.

My mother wouldn’t stop talking to one of our neighbors and I wandered off, too excited about what candy I was going to get, and which house would have the big chocolate bars. I was on the street over when a boy came up to me in his werewolf costume asking me what I was. I was Hermoine. To him that meant nerd. He tried stealing my bag of candy, and I remember how I put my whole weight into taking it back, but he kept tossing me around like a ragdoll. I thought for sure I was going to lose all the candy I had, but I wasn’t going to let it happen without a fight.
I didn’t have to fight much longer as a little girl in a Jigsaw costume drove her bike into the back of his heel. He fell face down on the pavement while she rode over him. The boy got up crying, running for his mommy. After he was gone, she took the Jigsaw mask off and introduced herself as Rikki. Just like that we became best friends and were best friends for eleven years.

Halloween was our holiday. We’d coordinate our costumes. Make trades on candy. Ending the night by sleeping over at Rikki’s to watch a scary movie together. When her parents fell asleep, she would always change it to something rated R. Rikki was all I had. I didn’t have other friends, people thought I was weird, mainly because I was. I didn’t like to talk unless necessary, I enjoyed the silence. I had mood swings that I didn’t even understand the cause of, and no one wanted to deal with me. I don’t blame them; I don’t even want to deal with me. But Rikki didn’t care. She loved me for me, and she was the sister I always wanted. Instead, I got Amber and Brad who have become photocopies of our parents. I was never close to them anyways being the black sheep of the family. It’s a hard job but someone has to do it.

It was when we were sixteen that things changed between Rikki and me. All thanks to puberty. My boobs had finally come in, my braces were off, and I no longer had acne. Suddenly everyone looked at me differently, treated me differently. Rikki had always been good-looking, but for me this was ground-breaking. I was suddenly making friends and getting invited to parties. As Rikki did. She was always popular, so this was nothing new for her. What was new was that there was another girl rising in the social ranks and the fact it was me made it ten times worse. How could she not be happy for her friend is how she acted but deep down she was scared of her ‘spot’ being taken. Our friendship soon became a competition. Our minds focused on stupid shit like which guys we had crushes on, how to have the perfect body, what clothes to wear, who to be friends with, who will be cheer captain, who will be prom queen, and you get
the idea. All teenage girl bullshit, yes very cliché but let me point out to you again this is Utah, where people are stuck in their traditions and my mother wanted me to be the ‘It’ girl. For a long time, I was the perfect daughter, I did everything my mother wanted.

By junior year I was the most popular girl in school with Rikki as my sidekick, we were unstoppable together but there was always that lingering resentment I felt from her that she wasn’t number one. Like she always wanted everything I had. Now I know it wasn’t resentment I was feeling from her, but at that time I had no clue how she truly felt about me. I hate thinking about myself then. How much I craved approval, how desperate I was to be someone, how entitled I felt from the power of attention. Until I committed social suicide. I got pregnant, birth control wasn’t an option for me with the parents I have, and do you really think Utah’s education system prioritizes sex ed? Because Jason Tiller – the guy every girl wanted – believed in the pull-out method and I foolishly believed he was right after ten minutes of him speaking bullshit to convince me it was completely safe. I couldn’t tell Jason no, I couldn’t let the most popular guy slip from my hands, not when Rikki was in the race. As you can see, Jason and I were fucking idiots. I wanted to get an abortion, and I sure as shit wasn’t going to tell anyone I got knocked up. My mistake was going to my family doctor – Dr. Renee Chapel. I trusted her, she had been my doctor my whole life. But I should’ve known, after I left the appointment with a pamphlet on abortions and the options for adoption, I returned home to find my mother and father waiting for me. You see, Renee and my mother had been friends since they were children, and somewhere she forgot her duties as a doctor to her patient’s confidentiality when exposing my pregnancy to my Mother dearest. I can’t remember much of what happened between my parents and me that day. I have blocked a lot of that memory out for a long time now. What I do remember is a suitcase waiting for me at the door. The yelling. My mother’s palm slapping my
cheek with a deafening echo in our house, the sting of it lingering for an hour after and a bruise that grew within the day. Slut-shaming me as they kicked me out, telling me how disappointing I am. They told me to not come back until I ‘dealt’ with my issue, slamming the door on my face. A lot of Christians are against abortion, my parents were until it came time to their teenage daughter. They couldn’t risk the chance of having a harlot of a daughter, oh no they just couldn’t, not in CEDAR HILLS, UTAH that is. They’d rather break their faith than have the truth exposed of what a whore their daughter was. Vulnerable and heartbroken I ran to the only person I trusted, Rikki.

She was there for me. She held me as I sobbed in her arms. I thought finally someone would be there for me it’s when I began thanking her that she kissed me. I was so stunned I had no idea what to say. I remember backing away from her in alarm, and that is one of my biggest regrets because she took that as me rejecting her. Even though I didn’t see Rikki in that way, I would never intentionally hurt her. I began to apologize and so did she. She asked me if I loved her the way she did for me, and I didn’t want to lie to her, I couldn’t.

“You’re my sister, Rikki… I love you like my sister...”

Those words shattered our relationship completely. In an instant she was cold and detached.

“Get out.”

“What? Rikki, I’m sorry-”

“Get the fuck out, slut.”

Once again, my heart was broken. Not only had I lost my biological family, but I had also lost my chosen family as well. I remember driving my car with tears profusely falling from my eyes, I could barely see the road. I pulled into a side street I trusted would be safe for the night,
sleeping in my now-only companion- Daisy. It was freezing, I remember shivering my ass off. Now after five years of sleeping in a car, I am used to it but that first night the frost chilled my bones, and every chill led to another ache in my body. My teeth felt like ice cubes in my mouth, and I shoved the tips of my fingers under my armpits to keep them warm. After a few hours of tossing and turning, I got some sleep to be woken up by a knock at my window. It was morning and a concerned neighbor checked on me. I quickly left being embarrassed, I couldn’t imagine someone thinking I was homeless at the time, now it’s the only label I had going for me these past years.

After I relocated to a Walmart parking lot where I knew I would be uninterrupted I checked my phone to see I had hundreds of notifications. Everyone knew I was pregnant. I got some congratulations, which I knew were fake politeness. I got the concerned texts of: is this a prank? I saw the posts on Instagram and Facebook slutshaming me. Compulsively I had to find the source that exposed me. Even though deep down I already knew who it was, I just needed confirmation. The original post was from Rikki tagging Jason and me in a Facebook post, congratulating us and saying ‘what a good mother’ I will be. She did it because she knew it would hurt me as I hurt her, but the difference is she did it on purpose. I would never have done what she did; with one post she ruined me. I saw it all in a matter of minutes. My life as I knew it was over. I had nothing, no one, and nowhere to go. On top of all that mess, I was pregnant. I wanted to die. I remember imagining driving my car straight into a tree. Or maybe into a river where Daisy and I could sink together into an eternal sleep, where I didn’t have to feel what I felt then.

My father texted me to never come back, I had brought shame to the Fiddler name. Pompous asshole. Fuck the Fiddler name, a family of clowns. I guess I’m just the biggest joke of
them all. The anger fueled me to become independent, but I couldn’t afford an abortion alone. I had some savings, but I needed to be smart, $500 wasn’t going to last me very long and if I were to pay for the abortion I would be in even more trouble. I begged Jason for the money, and he happily gave me it to get me the hell out of his life. Because a guy can escape the scandal of pregnancy, but for a teenage girl, it’s a stain on their identity. Backward fucking knowledge if you ask me, but I’ll repeat this: IT’S FUCKING UTAH WHERE EVERYTHING IS FUCKED UP!

Unfortunately, I was at the eleven-week mark of my pregnancy when Jason finally gave me the money, which meant shit got surgical. After the embryo went bye-bye, they put me on pain pills, and as you can guess shit went downhill real fast. Pain pills were like candy to me, the more I popped the sweet bliss in my mouth and swallowed it down my black throat, the more I craved another one. For a month I recovered in my car, as you can imagine it was an awful experience. All I had to numb everything were these beautiful blue pills called Fentanyl, and little teenage me had no idea what that even meant just knew it was the only thing keeping me going at that time. Two refills later I was cut off from the good stuff, and I actually attempted to go sober because at that point I only had $100 to my name. I started driving toward the east coast and never looked back. The withdrawals were the worst thing I had ever felt in my life. I lasted two days before I caved. Picked up some weed in Colorado before I hit Kansas, but all it did was dull the constant headache I had. Then when I hit Chicago, I started working on the streets, selling myself to make a living which gave me money to get the harder shit. Sometimes I got my hands on oxy, but again I was working on a budget so sometimes I took heroin, crystal meth, or anything I can get my hands on. After a few months of working there and saving my money, I was on the road to the east coast. When I hit Boston not much had changed but I felt freer the
farther I was away from Utah. I didn’t stay in Boston long though, I moved down to Brockton about 45 minutes away, less police to question what a lady like myself is doing on the corner at 3 am in the morning. I deleted all social media long before Boston, although sometimes I’ll create a fake account to cyber-stalk the people of my past. Mostly Rikki. She’s married and had a baby with some frat guy who wears loafers and Ralph Lauren polo shirts. My heart breaks for her knowing how different her life could’ve been had I felt the same for her, but then I remember what she did to me, and my heart no longer feels sad but bitter with hate. It doesn’t take long for all of these emotions to depress me, so those accounts get deleted almost as quickly as they were made.

Today is our holiday though, Halloween is and always will be our holiday to me. It’s the only piece of my past I miss. So, opening the Instagram app on my phone I quickly create an account under a false name and check Rikki’s profile. I click on the newest post reading the caption “My family and I love Coraline!” Rikki holding her two-year-old with her husband to her right, the two of them sporting wide fake smiles for the camera while their baby looked confused by the flash. Coraline was one of our favorites, and just like that, she replaced our memory with a new one. Just another betrayal to the list. She hasn’t cared about me for years, not one phone call or text. Yet, I can’t shake how much our friendship once meant. Every day I miss her, and at the same time, I hate her.

The rage is bottling up inside of me along with the loneliness of having no one. I need something to make me not feel, and I know just the guy who can hook me up. I always go to Randy for my drugs, he’s a real crumby guy but he always has good product for a low price. Through text, we arrange a meet-up spot, and I told him to bring the best of what he had to which I just got a thumbs-up emoji in response.
My body was in motion before my brain could even process what I was doing, and the next thing I know I’m in my car, turning the key in the ignition and typing the location on my phone’s GPS. The hunger inside me is impatient to reach new levels of euphoria, of release, to forget that damn picture I just saw. As I drive by, I see trick-or-treaters with their parents and friends playfully yelling with delight. I admire the different outdoor decorations people put on their lawns like one had two 10 ft tall skeletons with boxing gloves facing off with each other or the blow-ups of Jack Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Sometimes I even like the simplicity when a house just has jack-o-lanterns with the tea candle flickering in the wind like a beacon for the dark night to come.

Waiting in the parking lot of an abandoned school I never even knew was in Brockton, I couldn’t help but get the creeps from the place. An old, crooked sign at the front of the building with missing letters reads “S sie’s Sunsh ie Da care”. I’m not spooked easily but it’s something about how the paint of what once was white is now greyed and covered in ivy. The playground was overrun with weeds as the swings swung alone in the wind and there was a screeching sound of metal coming from a rotting rocking horse that has rusted to the point where half of the horse's face is caving in on itself. I watched it rock back and forth, thinking about how children once played here on that very horse that has now withered and decayed into a forgotten memory. In a way, it reminded me of myself, and I think that’s why it scares me because one day I know when these drugs win, I’ll be just like that horse, forgotten. I guess in a way I already am.

This only makes me want to get high more, knowing the fate that’s coming for me. I couldn’t stop biting my nails in anticipation, the sides starting to bleed and my leg shaking in fear of being alone while waiting here.
Twenty minutes of slight panicking later two large head beams enter the now-darkening parking lot as the sun sets. He pulls up to my driver's side window rolling his own down to greet me.

“How’s it going there, pretty lady?” Randy says as if he isn’t old enough to be my grandfather.

“Better now you’re here, could you have picked a creepier meeting spot? Like a Walmart parking lot would have been fine too, next time you should think of that—”

“Woah, just calm down, now. No wonder you’re looking for a fix I can tell you need one. I chose this spot because no one ever goes here,” he says as he puts a cigarette in between the gap where one of his front teeth used to be.

He lights it and blows the smoke in my face like the douchebag he is. Kind of used to it now, and I will never jeopardize an opportunity to get drugs.

“Well in advance let’s avoid places that will end up in my nightmares,” I say.

“If you’d like we can spend some time together and I can show you what dreams are made of,” the dirty old bastard says and breaks out into laughter.

It takes everything in me not to gag in front of him and I can tell he gets off on making me uncomfortable. Randy’s weathered face breaks out into a smug grin breaking my poker face and revealing my disgust. His thick grey eyebrows buck forward, daring me to talk back. One time I had stood up for myself against his creepy comments, after that he wouldn’t serve me for six months out of spite. He knows the drugs are more important to me than my pride, and he knows he can get away with whatever he wants because I will always keep coming back for his supply.
“I’ll pass on that,” I brusquely reply, “what’s on the menu tonight?” steering the conversation to the reason I came in the first place.

“It’s new, it’s called Violet Venom. You only need one drop, any more than that can cause some really freaky shit to happen. I can sell you a bottle with a dropper that’s worth $100 or I can sell you individual papers that are infused in it that are about $10 per square. The dropper is a better deal but what do you want?”

I almost laugh out loud at the idea, Randy knows I can’t afford that shit. A good twenty-five bucks are all I have tonight.

“I’ll take two of the papers,” I say handing over the cash.

A minute later after he sorts his drugs out, he hands me a small plastic bag holding the two pieces of paper. The papers have a violet hue, and a symbol in the middle of a snake eating its own tail.

“Remember one is enough. It’s potent, I don’t want to get caught up because a druggie died on my drugs,” he warns.

I shiver at the thought of an overdose; it’s happened to me twice now and luckily I was saved in time. I don’t think my heart could take a third, but then again what could be worse than my life right now?

“Aye, aye, Captain!” I say while mockingly saluting him.

“Yea, yea. Don’t fuck around now. Have a safe trip and Happy Halloween.” He says driving away in his truck, not giving me a chance to reply.

I turn my keys back in my ignition to leave too, not wanting to wait another minute near this freaky ghost town of a school but instead of the normal smooth rev of my engine coming to
life, my car sputters and dies on me. I try the ignition two more times before giving up and slamming my hands on the wheel in frustration.

“Goddamnit, Daisy!”

Daisy’s old and has failed me a few times now, so this is not my first time having to call Triple-A. So, I call, but they tell me it won’t be for hours, that Halloween night is one of the busiest nights. A lot of accidents they say.

Now I’m stranded in this creepy ass place with all these thoughts and emotions that need to go away, and I have just the thing to help me. Violet venom will be my friend in these few hours I must spend alone. He said it was potent and to only take one, but I’ve been doing this for years, my body should know the memo at this point. I open the plastic bag and decide to say fuck it to Randy, fuck it to Triple-A, fuck it to my life, fuck it to my parents who disowned me, definitely a big fuck it to Rikki, just FUCK IT! So, I put one piece of paper on my tongue, and let it dissolve, it has a sweet and flowery taste as it melts into my mouth. A trick and treat all in one. I repeat the process with the second paper and wait to feel it kick in.

Sleepiness is the first motion of this drug. I can tell by the way the weight of gravity is dragging my face down as if it were melting onto the ground and I couldn’t put my skin back where it belonged. My fingers are numb besides the constant tingling I feel at my fingertips. Then my eyes start seeing things. Things running in front of my car. At first, they appear as just flashes of lights and then they become total shadows running along the sides of the deserted building. I hit my head trying to shake myself out of the trance I’m being put into, but my body feels as if it were being boiled from the inside. Like soup simmering in a pot as if I were liquidating and becoming nothing but a puddle. Needing to escape the burning sensation coming
from within I fling myself out of the car and into the chilly autumn night where I hit the cold concrete. Knocking the wind from my lungs in the process.

I sit there trying to catch my breath, but that damn rocking horse is looking at me. It’s looking at me as the metal begins to expand, and the horse's legs turn into a spider-like position as it creaks into a standing position. I’m frozen watching the rotten rocking horse become alive once again, its coal-black eyes now a bright purple. Its mouth opens, frothing with saliva, and what appears to be a purple goo leaks from its lips, revealing long fangs that belong to no horse. In a fast motion it charges at me, I can hear the metallic springs echoing in the night and the creature lets out a vibrating roar that shakes the ground beneath me.

I shut my eyes and prepare to die.

It never comes though, and when I open them, the horse is back in its place.

Gaspig for air, I flip on my back and stare at the sky. A velvety purple waste glittered with white stars flickering in violet luminescence. Lilac fireflies dance while bats with indigo eyes fly up above. Treasuring the fresh, crisp autumn air that filters my lungs, the pain I feel slips away. This is the part of drugs I like, and I enjoy the moment while it lasts.

“Wren,” A little girl’s voice calls out my name in a sing-song manner, and just like that the moment is gone.

I jump up into a sitting position and immediately get dizzy from the sudden movement. Trying to gather my focus I see the shadow of a little girl waiting to the side of the building, with only the moonlight giving a slight view of the figure. I can see no definitive features, but when I get up the little girl begins to run behind the school, the only sound is her giggling which begins to quiet in the distance.

“Wren, come find me!” She calls out.
I recognize the voice now, I didn’t at first because it’s impossible, but I know that voice.

“Rikki?” I call out.

There is no answer, and I refuse to move. Could it be Trick-or-Treaters? The more I try to think the more violet my world becomes. Everything is surrounded by a purple glow and reaching my hands out in front of me I see my skin moving in circular motions. I try and grab my skin to stop moving, but I feel nothing, and my skin keeps moving. Nauseous, I put one hand on the side of my car trying to balance myself.

“It’s no fun playing hide and seek by myself, come get me!” The little girl cries out.

With those words, vomit spills from my mouth and all over my shoes. The only pair I have by the way.

“Fuck!”

I open my car to find something to clean them and hear the little girl singing in the distance.

“Ring around the rosie, pockets full of posie, ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

“Whoever is playing this stupid prank come the fuck out right now or I’m calling the police!”

It’s a bluff I would never call the cops, especially while high out of my mind but whoever this is needs to leave me alone especially when I’m tripping this hard. I try to look into the dark distance, but I see nothing. Someone taps my left shoulder, and I turn fast to see nothing behind me.

“Over here!” The girl calls to my right.
Then I see her shadow running once again into that dark unknown. All of a sudden, I remember my phone has a flashlight and I feel like a complete dumbass trying to look into the nothingness of night.

Turning it on, I see the purple shadow of the little girl peering from the corner of the school, and the light is on the figure just long enough for me to see the face before the girl runs again. It’s Rikki, child Rikki though. This time I run after her, not thinking, just chasing after the sounds of her giggling. Before I know it, my knees whip past the weeds of the playground and I’m turning the corner behind the daycare. She’s not here. I flip my flashlight but nothing.

“Rikki!” I yell out.

Silence. I begin crying.

“This isn’t funny!”

A whole lot more silence, and I drop to my knees. Head falling into my hands, sobbing uncontrollably. A small hand begins rubbing up and down my back in false comfort, but that icy chill sends a shiver up my spine. This is no friend touching my back, I can feel the claws growing the more it rubs, and I slowly turn my flashlight behind me.

The little girl of Rikki has two empty eye sockets that are full of purple puss that leak from the holes. Maggots jut from open flesh marks that cross her cheeks. Her jaw hangs far too low only being held with the threads of pink muscles and she begins to moan. She has no teeth, and her tongue is long and falling out of her mouth. Her mouth grows wider as if she is going to eat me whole. I go to push her off of me with my full force and fall face first into the dirt, chunks of it going into my mouth. I spit out the tufts of grass and look for any sight of the girl.

Deciding I don’t ever want to see Rikki’s little demon self again, I run as fast as I can to my car. Passing the corner of the school, my flashlight catches a figure standing next to my car.
The thing is abnormally tall and thin with long arms that look like they were made for kidnaping. The darkness hid the rest of its features as beaming purple eyes glow, staring right back at me. I stop right in my tracks and turn my flashlight off, hiding in a bush away from the beast. I watch it and again despite being in complete blackness of night, the being knows exactly where I am, staring into my soul with those violet lanterns.

I’m crying. I’m cold. I’m shaking. I don’t want to die but it feels like that’s what’s going to happen. I wait for the creature to make its move, to kill me and end this, but it never comes. Just remains watching.

The jolting sound of Daisy coming to life and her lights flashing directly at me startles me, causing me to fall backward on my palm. I see Daisy on and running. Her lights shine on the creature, and I immediately miss the darkness we were once in. The monster’s skin is a deep burgundy. Its face long with spikes of its cheekbones ripping from the flesh, standing like gates of protection all the way down to the mouth where a mouthful of dripping purple slathers across his chin. It looks like a rabid animal waiting for me to make a move so it could pounce. When I thought it couldn’t be scarier looking, it cocks its head to the right, smiles, and slowly waves at me.

Demon little girl Rikki appears from the darkness and skips over to the beast as if it were her bestie. The creature looks down on her, they hold hands and turn back to stare at me. Two pairs of violet eyes burning brighter right at me, two sinister grins leering at me.

I put my head in my knees not wanting to see what comes next, panicking as I rock back and forth. This is it. I’m never getting out of here. That thing is going to swallow me whole just like all the pills I’ve taken. A hand grabs my shoulder and I freak the fuck out.

“GET THE FUCK OFF ME! HELP!”
“WOAH LADY! CALM DOWN!” a human’s voice says, and I stop hitting them to see it’s the Triple-A driver who finally has shown up to help me. Relief floods me as I see my car is dark once again and the two fiends are gone.

“Thank god, you have no idea how much I needed someone right now.”

He pushes me off and gives me an uncomfortable glance.

“Lady, I’m just here to fix your car,” he says, clearly weirded out by me which is fair.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to hit you. I’m just freaked out by this place. I thought I saw something near my car, and I thought they were going to break in, long story short that’s why I’m hiding in this bush.”

“What the hell were you doing out here? Especially on Halloween night? This is something straight out of a horror movie, shit I wouldn’t even want to be here in the day.” He jokes, warming up to me a little bit.

“You have no idea,” I mumble under my breath to which he cocks an eyebrow too. “Just lots of weird noises and shadows you know.”

He nods even though I can see slight disbelief in his eyes, and I continue to try my best to act sober while he connects jumper cables to my car.

The sound of the little girl indistinctly singing in the distance sends a shock through my body.

“Do you hear that?!?”

He begins to look around and listen. I can hear her but can’t make out what she’s saying.

“I don’t hear anything; look I get you’re freaked out, but you don’t need to make me freak out either. Just chill out in your car and turn the key when I need you to.”
I follow his instructions and do my best to ignore whatever I’m imagining. Within fifteen minutes Daisy comes back to life. I thank the man profusely as he quickly gets in his truck, and I don’t blame him. It's time for me to get the hell out of here too.

Driving as slowly as I can, I pull into my familiar home, the Walmart parking lot, and park Daisy for the night. After tonight, I vow not to touch another drug again, and more importantly, never look for Rikki.
When I turned twelve my father took me hunting. It wasn’t the birthday I asked for, but it was the birthday I got. We didn’t have the money to afford a party, but it didn’t matter to me anyways. The whole point of a party was to invite your friends, and I had none. Since pre-school, I was estranged from my peers. I was the weird kid with overgrown hair and dirty nails. My clothes never quite fit me right because it was whatever my mother could find for me at the Goodwill dollar bins. I probably even smelled a little funny because we only had cold water at home, so showering wasn’t something I did often. All I had were my parents, and that seemed like enough.

I remember how my dad got me a full camouflage outfit to match his as my gift. I felt so cool, like my dad was to me. I remember how I was in awe that he spent money on me, and hell it seemed like a lot. It was when I saw the price tags, the ones he forgot to remove, that I realized he hadn’t spent more than ten bucks on me. The same cost as his daily pack of cigarettes. It didn’t matter though, I pretended to not see the price and gave him a big ol’ bear hug.

“We’ll share my rifle, kiddo,” he said as he ruffled my hair.

I followed my father as we left our shack of a home to the woods that lived behind us. The trees were tall and spiny as if they were reaching out to you, wanting to eat you whole and let you disappear back into the earth. It was an overcast day with a breeze in the air that felt like the chill was kissing your neck, sending goosebumps down your body. Sixty or so degrees out, completely odd for July. Not a sunbeam in sight, just clouds, not birthday weather whatsoever. The day seemed off, like the universe was tugging strings of chaos behind the curtain. Despite the gloom of it all, I tried to keep up with my father’s pace. My legs were too short, and I always fell behind him. He would slow down to teach me how when certain branches are broken it can
show an animal passed through, or how if you hold your breath and are silent enough you can hear the world around you and the animals that shaped it. He showed me how to use the gun, how to put on the safety, and never to aim at myself or anyone for that matter.

“Unless they’re asking for it,” he said.

We ended up in a heavily bushed area and waited hours for something to cross our paths. Every hour we’d switch positions, and after switching four times, the gun was back in my hands. Finally, the silence cleared, and we heard rustling. I remember thinking how I needed to impress my dad, that I needed to be like him. So, before the animal could burst from the bushes, I squeezed the trigger, and the loud bang rang heavy in my ear. The sound took me so aback that I didn’t even see my dad had left and was running towards the animal, so I ran after him. Only to realize this wasn’t an animal, it was a hunter. I had hit him right in the chest, and he was bleeding a lot.

My dad and I stood over the man in shock watching as blood spewed from his mouth and opened wounds. He began choking on his blood, reaching his hands out toward us as if we could do something to help. He was going to die; my father and I knew it.

“We have to go home and call 911-”

All of a sudden, the man reached an arm at me, grabbing my leg. I panicked trying to kick him off, gun still in hand, finger still on the trigger. **BANG!**

Just like that the bullet went into his head, and he was dead. The blood splattered onto our clothes as we stared at his exploded brain. His face was completely blown off from the impact, and the one eye that did survive twitched as if there was a bug moving behind it. It was an accident I couldn’t undo. I didn’t even realize my grip had tightened on the gun, but it must’ve been because of the struggle.
I began crying, looking for my dad for any sort of comfort and his face twisted up something ugly.

“Why are you crying? You’re not the one who died.” He said in revulsion towards me.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? What the hell were you doing? What is wrong with you?!?”

He grabbed both of my shoulders, shaking me back and forth. The rage encapsulated his face, veins rising from his skin. He pushed me to the ground and my palms were badly scraped as I tried to protect my fall.

My father paced back and forth talking to himself, concocting a plan but nighttime was coming, and we were losing light. I stayed silent the entire time. Even as I wept, I made sure no noise escaped from my lips.

“Mark, get your ass up, and help me move him.”

“How would we be able to help him now? He’s gone and we’re not. You shot him a second time. They’ll never believe it’s an accident. Hell, they’ll probably pin it on me.”

“I’ll tell them it was me.” I relent.

“It doesn’t matter what you tell them, boy! You fucked up and it’s time to fix that fuck-up, now grab his arms!”

He was convincing at the time, and twelve-year-old me wasn’t going to argue with him. I did as he told me, and we dragged the body for miles. I remembered how I would drop his dead weight to the ground, multiple times each time earning me a new searing slap from my father upside the head. It took us an hour or maybe it was two when finally, we came across these caves that had ascending angles as if they were jagged steps to an entrance. Twelve-year-old me
imagined they were the gates of hell and just looking upon it cursed me. The cave ran deep down into the ground, and it would echo at any sound. It was made of dark granite stones covered in moss and shade as the sun was almost completely set. The inner parts of the cave were complete blackness, devoid of life.

“In there, we’re gonna have to go down a little bit and then toss him.”

“No … I don’t want to, please don’t make me,” I begged, grabbing his arm.

He twisted that same arm until he almost snapped it out of my socket.

“It’s not about want anymore, you’ll help me so we can go home and enjoy the cake your mom made for you. We’ll pretend like this never happened, understand me?”

I nod and he murmurs something along the lines of ‘that’s what I thought’. It was already hard dragging this heavy man for a while, never mind having to bring him into a cave that falls downwards. I lost my balance at least twice, but always caught it by grabbing onto the roots that lined the entirety of the cave. Once we hit the third step in, my father told me to let go and I did.

We heard his body thud and squish as it hit every step going down the deep, dark hole.

That was the first time I looked death in the face, the first time I caused it as well. There were flyers about the missing man everywhere in town for the next year, and his wife had five different search parties for him. That was twenty-five years ago, and the body has never been found. The guilt ate me alive for years, and that’s when I turned to taxidermy. Collecting roadkill on the side of the road, learning new ways to reanimate them. Although I can’t bring the animals back to life, I can reconstruct them to look alive. It was cathartic, and the only therapy I could get. It’s not like I could go to a therapist with this guilt, so the only way I keep it buried inside is by working.
I own the #1 and only taxidermy shop in Zachary, Louisiana. You’d be surprised how many people ask me if it’s just animals we do. To which I always respond, legally I can’t work on humans because it’s the truth but if I could, I would.

Today I work on a pet squirrel. His name was Pipsqueak and he died at the old age of eighteen. His body was rotting before he died which makes my work harder, but I’m always up for a challenge. I begin stuffing his body when the bell at the front door rings letting me know a customer is here.

I stop my work, take my gloves off, and head to the front of the store. It’s a shock to see John Davison, the mayor, waiting in his finely crisp suit and cleanly cut hair.

“Mayor Davison, how are you doing today?” I say.

We shake hands and simple pleasantries.

“I wish I could come for a better reason,” he looks at all the animal displays around my store, “but I’m here because I have a job for you.”

“Of course, I would assume so,” I make a joke, to which he tries to fake a laugh, but he’s clearly disturbed by the inner workings of my store.

“Well, it’s not one of your taxidermy jobs, it’s something a little different.”

“If you’re going to ask me whether I can taxidermy a human or not, I legally-”

“Oh God, no!”

“Good then what is it?” I ask.

“It’s a hunting job. For a while animals and people have gone missing in this area. It has to be something big, because we found the remains of a bull too far from its farm, all the meat stripped from its body. All that was left was a spit-out microchip and the bones.”
“Aren’t there more qualified hunters in town? It’s true I’ve hunted big game before, but it’s been a long time. I’m rusty.” I explain.

“There are but none of them could get the job done,” he says rather suspiciously.

“And if they can’t, what makes you think I can?”

“You know animals better than anyone, that’s a fact.”

“I know dead animals. Living ones are much more complicated.”

“Well, maybe twenty thousand will make this less complicated for you because that’s the reward money. Not only that! You will be able to display such an animal as your work and it will surely bring in more clients!” He tries to convince me.

And it’s working. The money and the notoriety could do wonders for my business, but I know there’s something he’s hiding about this animal. The way he is nervously sweating and practically begging me to do this job is out of character for John. He’s always well put together and never ever asks someone a second time for something.

“Fine, I’ll do it, if I’m supplied with gear and explain to me how the others failed.”

“Deal, but we shake hands first and you must agree that no matter what I tell you will stop you from doing the job.”

I don’t this one bit, but the idea of being something greater burns into me. Not just some weird freak who owns a death shop, no, I’d be a hero, for once.

We shake hands and I wonder what I just got myself into. He goes into all the gory details of how some hunters were found chewed alive and others were never found at all. So far only one has lived, and he had severe injuries, he was very lucky to have survived. John visited him every day in the hospital, and it took him days to wake up. When he did, John forced him to
speak on it and the hunter recalls how the beast tried to drag him into a cave, but he shot a bullet in its eye, and it let the man go.

The description triggers me into silence. A constant replay in my head of my twelfth birthday. The hunters missing face, the sound his body made as we dragged it, the blood on my hands.

“Mark?” John breaks me from my trance. I try to play it off as just thinking.

“Well, there you have it. The thing is probably dead, it was shot in the face point blank.”

I deadpan and John shakes his head at me.

“If that were the case, would I be here? The bull happened this last week, that hunter took the job months ago and I haven’t seen him since. The thing is still around which means it can’t just be an ordinary animal if it can survive that type of attack.” John explains.

“You know what this sounds like to me?”

“What?! Do you know what it is?”

I give him the dirtiest look I could muster.

“It sounds like you just made me agree to a suicide mission.”

“No backing out now, remember you shook hands-”

“Fuck your handshake” I seethe out.

He drops his jaw as if he didn’t deserve it, which he did.

“So that’s it then? You’re breaking your word?”

“I’ll check it out and see if it’s worth the trouble, happy?”

“Yes, actually I am.”

“Good, now get the fuck out of my store,” I say somewhat jokingly with a pointing gesture.
John doesn’t hesitate, he leaves a map where the hunter said the caves were then he tips his head as a shitty thank you and leaves. This is either a really stupid idea or potentially a rich one. I could fail and die, but I also could win and reap many rewards. I mean how will I ever know if I don’t try?

I put Pipsqueak away to be worked on later, as I spread the map over my workstation. Unfortunately, I know these woods all too well. It’s the same one where I killed the hunter. The thought of going back to the area is terrifying, I haven’t been back since. It plagues my dreams, the sight of those downward steps into the caves, and inside is the echo of the man begging for help. I’ve had that dream hundreds if not thousands of times. I don’t know if I can go back there without freezing from fear.

But how can I let something control me for the rest of my life? I can’t, I can’t go on if this is holding me back. What if I do kill the beast and then I can replace the memory of what happened there before? As if it will undo the past that was written in those woods.

Most people would think I’m insane for living in the apartment above my taxidermy shop, but what do I have to fear? I work with death all the time; it’s not going to hurt me if some of it is sleeping under my roof. I take a long nap before I go out at dusk for the hunt. It hunts at night so it will still be out at dusk but more visible for me to see. At 4 a.m., I put my rifle and flashlight in the passenger seat, and peel out of my driveway. Following the map to where the woods are.

Leaving the windows down I drive in silence admiring the purple sky, as the mixture of morning and night slowly seeps into a pretty lilac color. The hazy light only allows a brief glimpse of the trees, casting a charcoal shade over the leaves. Lamplights are scarce on most of these small-town streets, and my truck’s headlights are the only source of light I can rely on. I
drive slowly and keep my focus sharp; the neutral tones of an animal’s hide make them harder to see especially since the moonlight has begun to set and sunlight has yet to rise.

I turn on Old Miller Road and park as close to the wood clearing as I could. It is a narrow road surrounded by dense forest; the sun always has a hard time reaching through the branches making it always appear as dark as night. I flick my high beams on, and they help ambush the darkness. Two large reflective eyes shine through the obsidian shade of trees, and at first sight, I assume it is just an owl enjoying its last couple hours of nocturnal peace, but then the closer I drove by the more I notice the eyes were far too large to be that of an owl. It’s been watching me; how else would it be here in such a timely manner?

Gotcha, I thought, reaching for my rifle and when I turn back the sucker is gone. I was planning on rolling down my window and shooting it from the safety of my truck. Looks like that plan is out of the question now.

I slowly exit out of the driver's side and onto the road, leaving the car running for the headlights. I remain silent like my father once taught me. I can hear the flutter of wings overhead, and I know that that is the worst possible scenario. I couldn’t imagine being dangled from his claws as we fly, and so I get back in my truck before that fear becomes reality.

I wait for it to show itself, and if it’s smart it won’t which so far it hasn’t. Rolling my windows up, I wait to see what the animal’s next move is. Finally, I see movement, its as if it’s shifting its head back and forth, trying to get a better view of me. One moment it is still, and then the next the loud sound of wings whooshing propels the creature out of sight. I couldn’t think of any species of bird or bat that could be that large, I am paralyzed by this unknown beast and feel glued to my seat with fear. Although the creature is out of sight, I can hear its wings loud flutter
in the distance. The wings lashing against the air growing louder by the second, alerting me to the animal descending upon my truck.

It lands roughly against the roof of my truck. Whatever it is, it’s abnormally large as it rocks my car back and forth with its weight. Before I have a second to react to the creature’s landing, its claws impale through the metal and the roof makes a terrible squealing sound as the animal rips the top of my truck off. On instinct, I roll out of the driver's side door and into the street. I only have a brief second to take in its appearance before fleeing. The thing looking at me has wide, pure white eyes the size of baseballs and a wide jaw with four sets of sharp, canine-like teeth. Its mouth is structured in a way to make it seem as if it were grinning at you while it slobbers in excitement for its next meal. The creature is dark brown and looks like a mixture of a bat and a moth. Wide saucer eyes like an insect stare at me waiting for me to make a move, or maybe a mistake. Intricate details patterned its wings as the creature flares them out before diving toward me. It lets out a blood-hurtling screech as its green slobber slaps against its chin.

With no hesitation, I run straight into the woods. If I keep running in a straight path it will catch me quickly, but the trees will make it harder for the creature to follow me. The pounding of its wings in the air propels me to move my feet faster, pushing my legs harder even as my lungs cry for reprieve. It lets out another otherworldly screech and I can hear it getting closer. The darkness of the woods starts dissipating as I follow the rising sun in the distance, and just when I think I’m about to reach the safety of a road two sets of claws dig deep into my shoulders drawing blood. I cry out in pain, it feels as if my shoulders are about to be ripped clean off my body as it clung onto me through its razor-sharp talons. In its clutches, we fly through the air, and I scream for help only to give up after a minute of realizing the thing has taken me high enough in the air to dull my screams.
After a few minutes, we land in a wooded area, the same one I dared to enter long ago. It flies into the familiar cave, one I dreamt about in terror, the one I never wanted to go back too. It drags me to the very back of a dark void the creature calls home, where the morning sun cannot reach. There is only pitch-black nothing, and the sound of the creature licking its lips with heavy breaths of insatiable desire to eat me. I try to crawl away from the noise but in one motion it takes a bite out of my left leg. Luckily just a flesh wound, and I hear it licking my blood from its fingers. A sound escapes my throat in raw reaction and the pain is searing hot under my right knee. Eating my calf, I can hear it slobbering on my flesh as I cry in suffering.

I think it will finish me off but instead, I hear it climb up the walls of the caves and it takes me an hour of laying in paralyzed fear to realize it had fallen asleep. It must sleep during the day and hunt at night. At least I’m hoping that’s the case, but I’ve lost a good amount of blood and have little to no energy left in me. Despite wanting to, I’m not giving up on surviving just yet. Wherever the creature is keeping me smells like rotting flesh and the ground is moist with a thick liquid. I can only imagine all the other creatures and people that died in this very spot, and I don’t want to end up like them. The first problem I need to solve is a light source. Checking my pockets, I find my phone and try to call 911, but it fails. No service wherever I am, but at least I can use my cell phone screen as a light. The flashlight on it might wake up the creature being so bright, so it’s better to be subtle about my escape.

I slowly turn my phone screen to my surroundings and human bodies line the walls of the cave. Covering my mouth to stifle surprise as I see women and men half-eaten alive, framed along the walls in a slime-like film that glues their corpses all around the cave. Their bodies are completely preserved despite the pieces the creature had taken. Their outfits show all different time periods, one man wearing a petticoat while the girl next to him is wearing a Nirvana band
Soaked in their own blood but you can still make out what they were wearing, what type of person they could’ve been. One women’s entire left side had been eaten as if the creature split her in half. Her flesh grey and blue under the slime that kept their bodies in statue-like positions. Next to her was a man who looked my age with his entire throat ripped out and eyes bulging out of his head like he was screaming just before he died. His eyes were so like those of the animals I had worked on in the past. This creature’s diet of choice seems to be human, and I just happened to serve myself to it on a platter.

In the middle of the creature’s deceased human museum, is someone I know all too well. With a bullet wound in the heart, his head was completely missing, but I could tell by his clothes and the ring on his finger that this was the same hunter I accidentally killed. Twenty-five years and it’s as if his skin were still alive under the goo. I swear for even a second I saw his hand twitch, but I know my mind had made it up. I knew we pushed him into a hellhole but to see how his remains were treated made my stomach churn. At least he wasn’t alive to experience the creature in the first place. Maybe this is my karma, after all these years.

I try to shake my pessimism off and continue to leave out of the cave. It’s hard with all these memories coming back to the surface. The sound of his body hitting the sounds of the cave, the way his eyes looked at me when I was standing over him. I begin climbing the walls of the cave quietly, holding my phone in my mouth to keep the flashlight, using the rocks as steps pulling my weight up. I just have to get to the top. I’m halfway up when I a rock falls from underneath me, and I’m forced to hold on to vines to support myself. So much for being quiet, the monster roars to life and I know I’m screwed. I climb faster but it’s immensely harder with not rocks as support. I was never good at rope climbing in PE as a kid, but I am trying my hardest to remember what I was taught. How to maneuver both legs at once to propel myself
forward. It’s working but I see the greyish-brown creature trekking the cave walls as if it were a ladder.

I move faster, not looking down. I can feel it climbing so close behind me but it pushes me to move faster. I’m finally climbing the top steps of the entrance of the cave when the creature grabs my leg. It tries to throw me down the pit, but I bite its shoulder. Black blood oozes from the top of its wing making it scream out in pain. I poke both its eyes inwards causing them to explode like jelly all over my face. It claws my chest leaving five bloody marks, and it’s as if the claws had scraped my rib bones in the process. I stumble backward grabbing at the marks as the creature claws at its eyes. I start spitting up blood, but I don’t give up. I’m there at the final step laughing a victory laugh when I hear the hideous wind that whooshes under the creature's wings. Not laughing anymore, I struggle to pull my weight up over the hole, and it’s no use. The creature flies grabbing my legs and we’re in the air.

A burning sensation starts at my legs where the creature is holding, and I see it’s on fire from being in sunlight. It screeches in pain not knowing where to go, not being able to see that it was flying into its own death. Like Icarus it continues to fly toward the sun, burning even faster, burning me in the process as I squirm in its rapidly decaying arms. At last, I catch on fire with the beast, its flames consuming me. In the air, the beast is clawing and biting me, and I let him as I turn him over to be the first to bare the pain of a concrete landing. My skin blisters from the heat and the creature's acid-like blood sear my skin and flesh. Spinning in the air we hit trees first and then land on the cement. The creature cushions my fall and prevents me from instant death, but I am bound to die soon. Every bone in my body is broken, and I feel my heart slowing down. Blood sputters from my lungs as I breathe out. It’s strange though despite all the pain I endured, I feel nothing now. Utterly numb, probably from paralysis. Before closing my eyes for the last
time, I see an eight-wheeler truck coming straight for me and the corpse of the creature. For the first time, I know what it feels like to be roadkill.
The Blind Mirror

Everyone thinks twins inherit their bond at birth. That we are destined to be best friends. For Delora and I this couldn’t be further from the truth. We had always resented one another. Always seen as a pair, as half of a person. It was not a verbal discussion that one day we decided to be at odds, it was a gradual grating of nerves. A slow, seeping burn edged between our sisterhood that made us compete. To be seen as the ‘better’ or more important twin. As the cooler one, the one with more friends, or style, or popularity, or whatever bullshit seemed important that week. Our similar need for attention put distance between us, and we stood no chance of being friends, let alone, stereotypical twin sisters.

Pranks were our only way of communicating with each other. Cruelty, given at birth or taught, was our language and we spoke it fluently. Especially since our parents gave up on their whole parenting gig. They were too busy being at each other’s throats, whether it be because of the bills piling up or because they simply were not in love anymore. Whatever the reason, we were all we had, yet we could not stand to be around one another. Hair pulls, slaps, and violent words were our interactions. Our love language was pranking one another.

The first pranks were small, incomparable to where they went. Fake spiders and snakes in beds, stink bombs, putting chocolate in each other’s back pockets, or spilling lemonade onto one another’s lap. Kids play. Then from one prank to the next, we both strived to play the most extreme, epic trick and things quickly got out of hand. She put green dye in my sham poo, so I put hair removal cream in her conditioner. She would steal my crushes, so I would steal her friends. I guess you can’t really ‘steal’ anyone but that’s how it felt to me, like moving pawns in a chess game just between us two. I know she saw it this way as well. Her eyes were snake-like, and we could telepathically sense each other's weaknesses. Sharpening our swords, we used
these vulnerabilities to slice poison into the other’s heart. Despite hating each other, we were obsessed with one another.

How could we not be? We were alike in every way. Our movements, our gestures, our looks. Two blondes with matching blue eyes, just like the twins from *The Shining*. Even our parents sometimes struggled to identify which twin we were. Having a real-life doppelganger is enough to make anyone crazy, and with crazy comes obsession.

Every birthday we celebrated by throwing a Halloween-themed party because we were born just one day off from the holiday. Our parents first started that tradition, but we were the ones to carry it during our teenhood. It was our seventeenth birthday, and we put up a couple of dollar decorations around our basement and set up a snack and punch table. Delora’s boyfriend Jerry brought the booze, and my best friend Holly brought the drugs. We only invited our closest friends and in total only about ten people showed up.

The night started naïve and innocent, all laughter and love until the more substances we abused the more the mood shifted. An envious energy shifted between Delora and me, both vying for the spotlight among our friends. I always knew they noticed the shift as well, but they fed on our desperation and enjoyed the entertainment of competing. It was some sick fetish for them.

So, like any dumb teenagers in the nineties, we started playing games like Spin the Bottle, Never Have I Ever, and the most cliché of all: Truth or Dare. Jerry dared his friend Trevor to lick the bottom of his shoe. Trevor dared Heather and Holly to kiss. The stupid festivities continued until the truth started becoming too real. Meghan, the group’s gossip, and pot-stirrer turns to Delora and asks her truth or dare. Del picked the truth. Meg saw what others couldn’t, by their body language and face. They didn’t have to tell her their secrets she would find out soon
enough, all she had to do was sit back and observe. Her sneakiness was her best skill, but her ruthlessness was something we as a friend group overlooked for too long. She had been watching Delora for quite a while. How Delora squirmed in Jerry’s arms, how she avoided his kisses, how she refused to sleep with him or even cuddle with him in the same bed, how Delora stared at Heather when she wasn’t looking. Worst of all she read Delora’s diary for the final confirmation.

When Meghan offered up the chance of humiliating Del, I took it without hesitation, giving her the journal without a second thought, without even glancing at the contents of the journal. Had I known Meg’s plans I would’ve never given her Delora’s diary, I would’ve told her to keep what she knew to the grave, or I’d put her there myself.

After Delora’s choice, Meg aims her weapon and shoots, “Is it true you’re a lesbian who's in love with Heather?”

The entire room was silent. Meg had just outing my sister and instead of getting defensive, Delora let out the loudest nervous laughter of her entire life while the entire room stared in suspicion and silence.

“Nice one, Meg. Don’t let Jerry get any fantasies,” she joked, but I saw through her poker face.

Everyone laughed except Meg as she pulled out a page ripped from Del’s diary reading aloud, “sometimes I lose my breath at her beauty. Her black hair, her clear skin, her green eyes, her walk, her talk, her fire, and her desire. I almost kissed her the other day, but the fear of losing her friendship would kill me. One day I will tell Heather how I feel, but only if I ever feel she is in love with me too.”

Meghan looked up with a smug grin knowing she had hurt Delora, and I couldn’t understand why until I saw the way she looked at Jerry. It was the briefest of seconds, but I saw her
motivation, she wanted Jerry for herself. She thought he would come crawling to her after the reveal, but it was her execution that ruined her plan.

“What the fuck Meghan?” I yelled.

“Is this true?” Jerry turned to Delora.

Delora opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“I think everyone should leave,” I said.

“I was planning on it; I’ve got the creeps.”

Heather’s words were like a whip to Delora, and she burst out crying, running out of the room. As much as I thought I hated my sister, seeing her break tore me to pieces.

Jerry yelled for her, “how could you do this to me?”

As if it had anything to do with him in the first place.

“This is fucked up,” Holly said.

“Yea way to ruin the night, Meg” Trevor speaks now, a hand on Jerry’s shoulder consoling him.

“Hate me all you want but all I told was the truth,” Meg said.

“Everyone get out now!” I yelled in a fury.

No one lingered and the basement was empty save for me. The house filled with silence. Looking upon our ruined birthday party with the cheesy decorations, a single tear of disappointment had fallen from my eye to the messy floor covered in red solo cups and ashes from cigarettes and weed. I was sobering up and soon the room smelled disgusting, the air thick with regret and teenage must. All I knew was I had to get out, that I had to find Delora and for the first time in her life make sure she was okay. I didn’t have the best relationship with my sister, but this unraveling of truth made me feel closer to her than ever. Knowing she was hiding
such a large secret from me, from everybody, and I was the one who exposed her. Knowing I released that information to the world made my stomach flip with guilt. I ran to find Del as soon as I could. I knew I had to apologize, something neither of us had ever given to the other.

Besides a drunk sleeping mother and an absentee father who was in his ‘man cave’, I couldn’t find Delora anywhere. I searched even in our hiding places as children, and she was nowhere to be found.

I began yelling her name but never got an answer. The only place I had yet to search was our upstairs attic that no one had been in for decades. I just couldn’t even fathom her being up there, but I had to look and know for myself. It didn’t make sense the door to the attic was closed and you could only close it from where I was standing, not from the inside. Still, something told me to check, even though my whole body protested to stay where I was. Where it was safe. I grabbed the string that hooked a ladder to the door, and after a slow climb of dread I peered my head just barely above the attic’s entrance.

I remember the darkness except for a stray beam of moonlight that filtered from the window. The smell of dust and years of neglect hurt my nose, but the sound of repeated angry whispers kept my footsteps going. There was a subtle wet, squelching noise of slicing. I knew it was Delora and I had called out to her but got no clear response, she had continued mumbling unfazed by my presence as if in a trance. As I got to her, I noticed Delora kneeling in front of an old, antique mirror that looked insignificant at first glance. The gold chipping in some places while turning green in others. Golden swirls of Victorian women in ball gowns decorated the edge of the mirror. It was old and anything old uninterested me at the age of 17. It was on second glance that I saw the shattered glass at the bottom of the mirror circling the floor around my
sister. I couldn’t see her face because that part of the mirror lay on the floor, so I put a hand on her shoulder to try and comfort her.

“Del, what’s going on? That glass will cut you, come on let me clean you up. Let me be there for you, this is my fault, all my fault. I’m so sorry Del.” I apologized but she kept repeating the indiscernible language on a loop.

I moved around to face her. Everything moved so slowly then, I still remember the slow motion of it all. I saw the jagged piece of broken glass in Del’s hands but even then, I couldn’t imagine what came next. She turned towards me, her expression like a robot as she repeatedly sliced in movements of Xs into both of her eyes. At this point, her eyeballs were chopped into pieces and the pink matter leaked around the holes of her eyes. She stared at me with an open mouth and said, “I must cut, the lady in the mirror told me I must cut the sin out of me, I must cut, I must cut, I have sinned.”

Not once did she stop repeating these words, and not once did she stop cutting until I physically had to wrestle that glass out of her hand. She screamed and begged me to let her continue. Only then did that wake up my mother who helped us for the first time in a long time. An ambulance came and for thirteen years Delora lived in a mental institution. She of course lost both eyes, but also scratched the surface of her frontal lobe, permanently damaging the way she talked and thought. She no longer remembers names or faces. She no longer could be cunning and conniving like we were as children. Now in ways, she was dead to me. I had lost the sister I never gave a chance. This version of herself isn’t truly a person but rather a shell of what used to be a life worth living.

Now we’re both thirty and have no one to rely on besides each other. Even if Delora wasn’t here mentally at least I’ll have someone physically present in my life. Our parents gave us the
house after they divorced and left us to live their own lives alone with grief and pain. They could barely stand us when we were normal, now that we were damaged goods, we became nothing but a burden to them. They got to move on, while we are stuck in this memory of a failed life.

After seeing Del the way, I did, I never found love or looked for any relationships that could lead to friendship or more. Knowing the way I ruined Del, I promised I would never hurt another person, so I just kept people away altogether. I still blame myself for her breakdown, or what the doctors are saying are the delusions of a bad drug trip. Last time I checked weed never made me cut out my eyes, and I still smoke it to this day.

What I think is Del saw something in that mirror. It may not have been the lady she claimed to see but she saw something to put her in that spell. That convinced her to cut her eyes out of her skull. Today I take her back to our childhood home, the home we can call ours even though she wouldn’t even know what that means. Picking up Delora, my nerves feed off my fear knowing I’ll have to live and take care of my sister for as long as she lives. I’m just glad I’m not utterly alone in that house anymore. I only kept it because I never went to college, so the best job I could find was a secretary job that keeps the bills paid.

For the last 13 years stuck in this house, I could hear the attic calling my name, to revisit the scene where my sister killed herself, but not fully. She killed her essence that night, and I struggle to live every day knowing that I brought her to that point of wishing death over life. One moment in time after the incident I thought about ending my own life. How easy it would be to step off the ledge of a tall building or how easy it would be to swallow too many sleeping pills that would put me to rest for good. Except it wasn’t easy, I never pulled the trigger and I’m glad I didn’t. Even though I lost my sister’s presence, it doesn’t mean I can’t make things right in the here and now by taking care of her at her worst.
I wish I knew the Delora that lived in her diary. I wish I saw her live her life loving whomever she wanted to love, living however she wanted to live, going off to college, and becoming an activist who got arrested for advocating for human rights. Delora was a riot, and it took me too long to see her for who she truly was. I see the life she never lived every day on repeat, and I’m reminded of why I deserve my isolation from the world. Logically, I know it’s not all my fault, that my parents and our cruel friends were also complicit. But my gut blames it on me, and so I live with it every day hoping to redeem myself.

It's the first night and things seem to be going well. Delora rests on one of the sofas in our living room, watching tv. I put on one of her favorite shows from our teenage years – *Sister, Sister*. She can’t see it, but she can hear the punchlines, and every so often I hear a giggle release from her lips. The sound brings me joy but also sorrow knowing how repressed her happiness is in this state. Delora continues to watch TV as I prepare dinner, spaghetti, and meatballs. I’m not a great chef but I’ve been practicing knowing Del was coming home.

The meal is nearly finished as I set the table, placing placemats at each seat despite us two being the only ones eating. Folding a napkin and putting our silverware like a fancy restaurant, I feel content with making the dining room seem as welcoming as possible. Delora got the gift of losing sight, but I hadn’t, and as we eat dinner I stared into her eyeless face. My appetite is completely gone, because my eyes can’t stop looking at those puffy pink mounds that lay on her face as a reminder. Scars etch all over where her eyes once lived, and instead of it being two empty holes they were filled with rough, scarred skin that ooze from the sockets. They had tried to give Delora glass eyes, but every day after they would install a new pair they would go missing. Eventually, they gave up on that and tried eye patches, but those too disappeared. They
blamed Delora but as we sit eating in front of one another, I can tell she couldn’t have done it herself. She’s like a newborn baby and a senile elderly person all in one. Eating sloppily, her movements are slow yet careless, and she didn’t make sense at all when she speaks. If she were ripping out the glass eyes or ripping off the patches wouldn’t there be evidence of that, instead they found none of the eyes or patches at all, so how could Delora make them vanish when she can barely find her own fork to her mouth?

We finish our meals and I put Delora to bed. The nurses at the institution told me she enjoyed listening to stories before bed. So, tucking her in, I sit on the bed next to her and read aloud *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Roald Dahl. She cracks a smile every so often at certain lines and at one point she squeezes my hand. A light fluttering of warmth fills my heart, and I squeeze her hand back, saying to her physically: *I’m here now, you’re safe.* I read until she falls asleep, I can hear her soft snores beginning and I took that as my time to go. I shut off the lights and head to bed myself.

Before I can turn the door handle of my bedroom, a loud creaking sound at the end of the hallway stops me in my tracks. I turn to see the attic door has creaked open on its own with just a small sliver of creeping blackness beaming between the brief opening. Walking towards the attic I check on Delora and see she is still perfectly, sound asleep. Grabbing a broom from a small storage closet in the hallway, I press the handle into the attic door, close it, and go to my bedroom to sleep.

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That night I have awful nightmares, none I can remember. I had awoken every hour after three a.m. in a sweaty frenzy more confused and anxious than the last. It’s at seven a.m. when I
give up on the chance to rest. Before I go to perform my daily morning routine of a cup of coffee combined with listening to the news, I check on Delora. She is still sound asleep, and I watch her endless black voids stare back at me despite her being in a dream state. Despite the emptiness where her eyes once were, I can feel the fire of her soul staring at me, burning me for what I had done. The guilt has me shutting her bedroom door without thinking and continuing life as if she wasn’t there. I check again on her around noon, and this time she is awake. Just sitting upright in bed, murmuring nothings to herself.

“Good morning,” I say, and it breaks her out of her trance.

Her head cocks to me, as if turning would allow her to see me.

“You talking to yourself?” I ask, walking closer.

Her mouth hangs open and she doesn’t respond. We remain that way for far too long of silence than is comfortable for me, so I shrug it off and begin getting her ready for the day. I change her into her day clothes, brush her hair and teeth, and finish by putting healing ointment on her scars so they don’t get dried out.

The day is not much different from yesterday. She stares at the tv, mumbling and occasionally laughing. At what I’m not sure. While watching tv it’s not like she’s actually paying attention more like she’s in another world watching another show laughing at something I can’t see. It creeps me out, so I quietly leave her alone and check on her every so often when she needs help to use the bathroom. It’s harder to be around her than I expected it to be. I thought she would be keeping me company, but she’s not really there with me. It hurts not knowing what to do to make her better.

Nighttime comes after what seems like an eternity of wasting time, and once again I put her to sleep with a story. This time when I walk to my room, I continuously turn my head over
my shoulder to see what the attic door is going to do tonight. Nothing, it does nothing. Relief fills me as I go into my room and begin changing into my pajamas. I sit in bed and do some work at home since I can’t make it into the office while transitioning Delora to this house. Once we both get comfortable with this change, I can get an at-home health aide and make my life a whole lot easier.

I fall asleep while working, waking up to my light still on and the laptop still on my chest. I go to put my laptop on the empty side of my queen bed to find it’s not so empty anymore. Delora lay next to me mouth wide open as if she is trying to yell and nothing can come out. I scream out of reflex, jumping out of bed and she jumps up in a sitting position like a puppet on a string.

“Del, what the hell is going on?! How’d you even get out of bed?”

No answer, and it frustrates me to my core that she never answers. I shake off my grievances and usher her to her room. This time after putting her back to sleep and going back to my room, I lock the door. Scared that she may wander again. Does that make me negligent? I don’t know and I can’t care because the thought of her doing that again shakes me to my core. I try to sleep but toss and turn the whole night until the sun comes through my window and I give up trying.

I get out of bed to check on Del and see she is still sleeping thankfully. Thanking the universe, I can get some alone time in the morning. I do my routine that I used to do before Delora moved back in. It’s nice to feel normal again. By noon I hear the creak of Del’s bed alertting me she’s awake and the calmness ends. I don’t wait for her to wander on her own, I go up and help her.

“Del, you ready to have some lunch?” I asked.
Upright in bed, she turns to me, with an open mouth and nods.

Getting her up out of bed I grab her arm and guide her to the kitchen table, and I sit her down carefully. I put on the radio and hum to the music as I make her a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup on the side. By the time I finish making her meal, I turn to see that Delora has disappeared from her seat. Putting the plate of food down quickly, I frantically start searching the house for her. Yelling her name fearful of where she wandered this time and if she hurt herself. If that happened under my care, I just couldn’t live with myself, I couldn’t live knowing I failed her again.

Finally, I make it upstairs to see the attic ladder down to the ground. The attic door is open once again. I don’t hesitate like I did when we were seventeen. I rush up the attic steps only to find the attic empty save for that damn mirror. I swore my parents got rid of it after the accident but maybe they were just as afraid as I was to come back up here. Confused I stay still for a moment until the loud slap of the attic entrance slamming in on itself sends me jumping five feet in the air. A shiver goes up my back as I realize I’m alone up here. Luckily daylight came in from the window making the place not as terrifying as it usually is. Yet, I can feel something watching me in the shadows. Not trying to find out what I rush to the attic door, gripping the handle with all my life trying to free myself from the space, but it won’t budge. The attic has no lock meaning it’s jammed shut or something on the other side of it is keeping me in.

Delora couldn’t be doing this. Could she? No, I’m getting ahead of myself. Pacing along the floor, I stop and look into the mirror at my reflection. I have aged well despite everything, with my skin retaining youth and my body in good shape. It’s in my eyes that you can see the age, that I have lived through more than I have asked for. Staying perfectly still it’s hard not to notice a black, shadowy form growing behind me. I turn quickly but nothing is there, I feel like
I’m playing a game that no one clued me in on. Looking back at the mirror the shadow is still forming, it looms larger than seven feet tall, in a feminine figure. Whatever is conjuring behind me is trying its hardest to look like a human woman, but it fails miserably. The shadow begins appearing more clearly with the demon's jaw hanging crooked to the side, cracking into place and more bone-cracking snaps continue to echo the attic as the figure becomes more real. My gut is screaming at me to look away, to not look into her eyes. Before her face fully forms and shows itself to me, I shut my eyes in a clamp-like lock.

“Look at me my child… Look at me… I can solve all your problems just look into my eyes,” the ‘woman’ hissed into my ear.

I can feel a slimy hand with long claws attached to it, play with my hair as a mother does to a child yet this felt like a predator playing with its prey.

“You’re the one who hurt my sister? Aren’t you?”

I know the answer, but I ask anyways.

“She came crying to me. Confessing her sinssss. She needed my help as you do. Confess to me, and I can help you. Just open those pretty eyessss. I am your friend; don’t you want to see me?” the entity tries to get me to look at it.

Its claws move around to my face, to my eyes. They try to peel the lids forward, forcing me to look. The claws nearly digging into my eyeballs but never quite reaching.

I fight back, taking off my shirt I wrap it around my eyes, to avoid her stare of death. Not being able to see the creature, it no longer is able to touch me, as if its power ceases to exist when it’s out of eyesight. I can feel the creature angrily slither around me waiting for me to make a mistake. Guiding my way through the blackness of my blindfold, I drop to the ground and try to find my way toward the attic door. The entity makes noises to try and lure me in different
directions, trying to scare me in the direction away from the door. Despite being in the presence of death itself and despite wanting to give up, just to shrivel up and die, I keep fighting. If I die, Delora will be alone and this thing that destroyed our lives once will win again.

Finding the attic door still locked shut, with all my weight I stand on it jumping up and down until finally the weak, old wood wears out and releases me onto the level beneath me. I fall hard, my ribs and head hitting the ladder on my way to the rough ground. Knocked out of breath I hold my ribs in my pain, I begin to cry, and my blindfold is moist. Uncomfortable, I readjust my blindfold so I can finally see and the adrenaline begins to mask the pain.

“Belinda!” Delora yells my name from somewhere in the house.

The first time she has said my name in thirteen years.

I run without hesitation towards the noise, it’s coming from my bedroom on the opposite side of the hall. Except I get there, and the room is empty. I start weeping knowing something seriously wrong is happening.

“Delora! Where are you?!?”

Nothing but silence follows.

Then a child-like giggle erupts through the house sending a chill down my spine. It sounds like Delora’s laugh when she was a child when she was still herself. It has to be another trick by the same devil who lured me to my bedroom. I search every room in the house and she is nowhere to be found. The only place left to look again is the attic and I want nothing more than to set this whole house on fire than face the creature again. It has to be attached to the mirror, it’s the only way it could physically touch me. I have to destroy the mirror and then maybe it will destroy whatever this thing is.
Going back to hell, I put my blindfold back on. Despite the broken mess of wood splinters and a broken step, the ladder is still accessible. I press it against the attic’s entranceway in hopes it will still hold my weight. It does as I climb into the attic, and the entity hisses in excitement at my return.

“Are you looking for Delora? I can show you; you just have to look.” It spoke.

“Go to hell,” I spit out at it.

This only excites it more as I can hear the saliva gathering in its mouth waiting to consume my essence as it did to my sister.

Finding my way through the blindness, I find the mirror that started this mess and grab it by both sides. The creature violently slithers toward me and lets out an unearthly screech next to my ear. The smell of death heavy upon its breath. The entity just confirmed that this mirror is important to the monster, meaning it could be its foothold here. If I break that foothold, I could send it away forever. Breaking the mirror will not be enough, Delora shattered it and the creature still lived to torture her, so I have to destroy the mirror somehow.

I bring the mirror down the attic ladder, falling once again, some of the glass breaking off. I can feel the creature follow me as I drag the mirror downstairs and through the kitchen where I exit out the backdoor of my house. Dropping the damned thing into the grass the creature’s power is weak but I can still feel its negative energy trying to make me look at the devil. Staying blind, I rummage through my kitchen until I find the large bottle of Jack Daniels that I keep for special occasions. This is one hell of a special occasion if you ask me. I grab that and feel my way through countless drawers until my hand reaches the pack of matches. Heading back outside, I go on all fours on the grass searching for the mirror with one hand while keeping the items of the liquor and flame with me. A sharp cut of an edge to my finger signals me to its
presence. Pouring the whole bottle over the mirror, I strike a match and set the mirror aflame. The creature cries out in pain, and I finally take my blindfold off.

In the flames of the mirror, the demon who attempted to look like a woman now shows its true self of blood-red skin, four sets of eyes, a tongue as long as a tape measurer, and fangs as long and thick as fingers. Roaring, it stares into my soul, but I win as I watch it melt away as does the frame of the mirror. The intricate swirls and designs of women on the frame melt into a pile of golden goo.

I head back into my house and yell for Delora, but she is where I had left her before. In the same kitchen chair as if nothing had happened. Except when I look at her, she has her eyes back. She is healed. She eats the grilled cheese with the tomato soup that has steam rolling out of it as if nothing has happened.

“Is this real?” I ask, tears flowing from my eyes.

“Is what real?” Delora asks, confused.

“How? How did you get your eyes back?”

“I mean… they never left my face. Is everything okay with you?”

I rush over and hug my sister, laughing in relief that everything has been fixed. That I did it. I finally have my sister back. When I pull away it’s when I notice the reflection of the spoon gleaming a devilish red.
IVY HOUSE

PROLOGUE

At the end of a long dark dirt road in the middle of tall, watching pines lies Ivy House. Owned by the noble Ivy family, the once beautiful manor attracted villagers to celebrations where women would come in their finest of gowns and men came in the finest of suits. Where wine always flowed, and feasts were aplenty. A time when everyone had jobs, and they could afford to play dress up because not only were the Ivy’s wealthy, but the village was as well. All the men worked in the Ivys’ mines while the women provided education and care for the children.

Reginald Ivy, the patriarch of the family, was born into wealth. Before the mines, the Ivy name was known as one of the most esteemed equestrian families who built their empire on thoroughbred stallions. Horses and money were all Reginald knew for the first eighteen years of his life. His father beat him like his father before, trying to mold his child into a clone of himself. It was a cycle the Ivy men had been using for centuries to uphold their status, and Reginald planned to be the first to break it. He hated horses, he hated his father for hurting him, and he hated his mother for letting him. Most of all he hated his Ivy name. Just three letters had him bound to a legacy he never wished for. For a long time, Reggie felt dead walking among the living. A life deprived of joy and love that pushed him toward his insatiable desire for a fresh start. When Reggie turned eighteen, he gained access to his trust and moved east. As far from home as he could get. On his journey, he met his wife Amelia, with whom he’d have three children with. Two boys and a girl. It was only when Reggie began running out of inheritance that he began pursuing his own wealth, his own reputation.
Taking a year-long trip away from his family, he went looking for gold, and he struck it in the Stonybrook mines. Of course, at the time the land was called Silva Vivit by the natives who had lived there long before the Ivys claimed the land for their own. The natives spoke Latin, which Reginald knew a little of making it possible for friendship. Their leader who was the first to meet Reginald and was the one who kept his community together and strong. The leader of the natives was called Claudius. He had golden brown skin and long dark brown hair that cascaded along his back. Claud was strong with large muscles and scars that covered his body, warrior marks he called them. Reginald was the exact opposite appearance-wise with pale skin, blue eyes, short blonde hair, and a much smaller stature. Claudius was married to a woman named Qetsiyah, the most beautiful of their tribe. She was a witch. Only the tribe knew that; it was the one secret they kept from their new ‘friend’. To them she only did nature or healing magic, they never knew the real danger that came with her power.

Reginald was with the natives for two months before he went back home, and over that span of time, the tribe of Silva Vivit trusted him. The natives felt safe with Reginald because of his close bond with Claudius. The two were inseparable during this short stay, and they were always off alone in the woods with the excuse of hunting for resources or searching for gold. The tribe just saw this as a strong brotherhood. In reality, the two men had fallen in love. The woods were their safe place. They hid their affair from the world, and the only time they truly felt alive was when they were together. As their love grew, the natives welcomed Reggie into their homes and told him secrets about the land which eventually showed him where to find the mine. Without them, he probably would’ve been searching for years. To them they could care less about the gold, they were happy with what they had. The only thing they asked of Reginald was when he left not to tell a soul where Silva Vivit was. Without hesitation, Reg agreed to the deal.
knowing he could never fulfill it because Reggie wanted more than gold, he wanted their lives. In them, he saw the family he always wanted, the one he never had.

Reginald spent the last night, before he went back to his family, with Claudius. The entire time he had contemplated whether he could really go through with taking the land from the people who had treated him with genuine care and love. He had love for his children and wife, for the legacy he could build with them, but it was nothing compared to the happiness he felt while away. The happiness he felt while in Claud’s arms. Still he couldn’t let go of the chance to be wealthier than his own father, to give that to his children. It was a fight between the heart and the mind, and Reginald’s heart grabbed onto Claud’s presence trying to win the battle.

The men lay next to each other that night on top of fallen leaves and moss, underneath trees where the moonlight was fighting to break through. Staring at the stars they breathed in the moment like it would be their last on earth. Little did they know that hiding in the darkness was Qetsiyah, watching the two men speak to one another. At this point, Reginald had come a long way in his Latin, and Claud had begun to learn English. Communication was no longer the biggest barrier to their relationship. She had begun to catch on to their affair but followed them that night for confirmation. Waiting in the pitch-black nothingness she listened, holding her breath in silence.

“I’ll be back, not just for the gold but for you,” Reggie spoke while caressing Claud’s cheek.

“I know … I wish you didn’t have to go at all.”

“I have a wife as you do and yours will start wondering why you are so hesitant to start having children. My children probably miss me dearly, I can’t delay any longer.”
“You’re right about Qetsiyah. All our conversations these days are about how she wants children and me telling her to wait. It doesn’t help the tribe is constantly asking us about kids… so while you’re gone, I plan on putting a baby in her belly to quiet them all.”

“That is smart,” Reggie said, his gut twisted at the thought.

“I’m afraid…I’ve never been with a woman. Qetsiyah and I have been married for half a year, I don’t know how I’ve gotten away with it this long. Your presence has been a good excuse, so when you’re gone there will be nothing to hide behind.”

Reginald scooched closer to Claud, their chests touched as they lay on their sides, eyes locked.

“Just pretend it’s me.” Reggie said while pressing a kiss to his lips.

The sight, the words. All of it pierced Qetsiyah’s heart and she stumbled from the woods towards the kissing couple, a hand over her opened mouth. The two men completely unaware by her gawking, too lost in each other.

“How could you?!” She screeched.

It echoed along the woods and the pair jumped in a quick motion, separating. Fear lodged in the men’s throats, and they were frozen. Mouths agape, eyes bulged. Their silence only angered her more, her power growing more uncontrollable by the second.

“I’m sorry … this was a mistake. You know how I love you, please forgive me” Claud pleaded with lies, anything to fix the mess he was in. Reginald was hurt for a second being called a mistake, but he knew it was the only thing Claud could do to save himself.

“A mistake?” She laughed out bitterly.
She was losing control, her eyes begin to flicker. Reginald had no idea what was going on but he knew to be quiet. Claud had begun walking towards Qetsiyah, slowly with his hands up in caution.

“Forgive me, I love you” Claud pleaded again.

These were his last words as her magic flashed from her hands, and a yellow surge of energy shot through the air, slicing Claud’s throat. His hands immediately went to the wound, blood spilling over his body and onto the forest floor. Claud’s knees sunk down into the bloody leaves, falling over while holding his open neck.

“NOO!” Reginald yelled, running to his lover.

Reg began sobbing over a dying Claud, whose eyes were full of terror and his mouth sputtered blood onto Reggie’s face. Claud tried speaking a goodbye but all that came out was more blood. Within seconds he was dead, and Reginald held him in his arms. He rocked back and forth letting out loud cries of anguish. Qetsiyah went to send a second strike of power to the last man standing, but her eyes flickered, and nothing would come from her hands. She wasn’t strong enough to conjure the same power she did moments ago. She seethed wishing she had killed Reginald first.

“One day when you have forgotten him, when you are happy, I will be there to take it all away,” Qetsiyah cursed him and fled into the darkness of night.

Reginald could care less about her words as he cried over Claud’s corpse. Until night turned into day, he held him wishing it was him instead. After a long time, he got up and began to drag Claud’s body back to his tribe. He refused to let his remains rot alone, and he knew how sacred death was to the tribe. To Claudius. When he returned, the tribe loudly mourned their loss, and soon blamed Reginald for his death. Before they could kill him, which they would have, he
fled. He lost his love, and the love of the natives all in a matter of hours, he couldn’t process his hurt, he could only feel rage.

When he returned to his wife and family, he never mentioned Claud. Never mentioned the magic he witnessed or how the tribe took him in like one of their own. Instead, he told tales of how the natives were savages, evil and uncivilized. That they were monsters that deserve punishment. He never believed his own lies, but everyone he told did. Soon he enlisted a small army of men to help him take Silva Vivit from the people he once called friends. His men went in first, he was too much of a coward to be the one taking charge of the conquest. They tore the people out of their homes. Took mothers from their babes. They killed all the men. All that was left of the Silva Vivit tribe was the blood that flowed from their bodies and seeped into the ground. The injustice soaked in the land, as Reginald laid claim and replaced all the history that once lived there when founding Stonybrook.

The only person he didn’t see in the crowd of corpses was Qetsiyah. The only one he truly wished death upon somehow managed to escape. After that Reginald quickly built up the village, putting the men who fought for him in the mines while he and his family lived in the large, looming Ivy House. It was white with baby blue shingles and had hydrangeas that grew out front. He built bedrooms for each Ivy. Even Reg had his own room. After Claud, he preferred to sleep alone or to just be alone for that matter. He was social when need be but tried to make himself scarce. Amelia took care of the home and their children while Reginald played God in Stonybrook. He was in complete control over everyone, and they let him because it was easier that way.

Thirteen years had passed since founding the village, and it was Reginald’s fiftieth birthday. They held a celebration inviting his closest of friends and investors he was trying to
schmooze into more money towards new mining tools. That night the Ivys played to their roles. Reginald and Amelia appeared as the perfect wife and husband. Marcellus the eldest son of seventeen played the flirt with young noble women. Clara the second eldest at sixteen nailed each dance perfectly to entice her potential suitors. Charles the youngest at fourteen boasted to his friends that he was the best archer of them all. Everything seemed perfectly normal.

Until halfway through the party the house fell cold as ice. Everyone’s breath fogged in the ball room, and goosebumps fluttered their skin. The musician's violin strings snapped from freezing over and everyone stilled waiting for a pin to drop. No one said a word as if they were truly frozen.

Qetsiyah loudly entered the ballroom throwing the doors off their hinges with her power. The doors hit multiple guests as they flew through the air, hurting many and killing some. Reginald felt his heart sink to his stomach. He knew what she was here for. Death.

“Qetsiyah! I am the one you want, please let them live!” Reginald begged.

Amelia went towards her husband, her mouth opened to ask what was happening when Qetsiyah lifted her hand. With a flick of the wrist, Amelia’s neck snapped, and her body fell to the floor with a hard smack. The Ivy children wept and ran to their mother, Qetsiyah began raising her hand to them when a guest jumped on her back. She wrestled with them not knowing where to aim her power without hurting herself in the process. More guests flooded to the fight trying to take her down. They looked like they were winning, and hope seemed possible, until flashes of light went through their bodies like lasers. Qetsiyah cut each one down, and by the end of it they all were just chunks of bloody meat lying on the floor. The only people left were the three remaining Ivys, and there was nowhere to run.
“Please don’t do this, I’ll do anything!” Reginald pleaded, standing in front of his kids as if he could protect them.

“Blood for blood. Did you really think I would let you live after everything? You killed my people, so I killed yours. I waited years building my power, preparing for this exact moment. Do you really think a few silly words are going to stop me? So, stop begging, and watch what you’ll become.” Qetsiyah spoke as she lifted her hand once again.

The four Ivys waited for their death, the children by their mother, and their father stood over them. Except it wasn’t them Qetsiyah was using her magic on. Amelia’s bones snapped, cracked, and popped as she began to rise. The children pushed themselves away but were still within reach. Green vines of ivy shot from the ground through the floor into her body. The vines wriggled through her until they started climbing out of her mouth. Her once blue eyes were shoved out by green moss and formed two pairs of black obsidian. What had been Amelia turned to her children and hissed, she locked eyes with Charles and as if she were Medusa he turned to stone. The other two children soon became statues with their brother. With a motion, Qestsiyah flung Amelia hard to the ground to stop her advancing toward Reginald, her face buried into the ground as she rabidly fought against the witch’s magic. The two people left standing stared at each other. Reginald with tears in his eyes, Qetsiyah with a smile on her face.

“This,” she pointed at Amelia, “is what you will become, and the town you killed for will die and your entire existence will be erased like the worthlessness you are.”

Vines again rose from the ground and Reginald was no longer Reginald.
PART ONE: THE JOURNEY

There in the mountains above Stonybrook, I feel Ivy House looking down at our village. It’s impossible to see the manor past the dense woods, but I can feel it. Haunting us, waiting for another one of us to get curious and lure us into the death trap. The inhabitants of the decaying domicile have not been seen for half of a century. Our village speculates that the family is lying together to reproduce a ‘true’ lineage as many noble families do. There is another rumor of them shipping women and men from the highest of nobility to wed and feed the Ivy line. Or they simply died out and the rest of us were too scared to dare and learn the truth for ourselves. Everyone knows that those who go into Ivy house never return. There are no authorities within the grasslands of Stonybrook to investigate these disappearances, only we townspeople left to control one another, to keep the peace.

All fifty-three of our elders collectively agreed to never pursue the truth about Ivy House even if loved ones have fallen victim to the mouth of the beastly manor. The ten children of our village were never included in this discussion, only told the wild legends that live in the richest part of our land. I am one of those ten children. When I was three my village made a declaration that I could not keep, and now fifteen years later I must break my people’s oath. My brother’s disappearance solidified an invisible treaty between Ivy House and the village. At age twelve, Henry was the final victim of that hellhole, and my family did nothing about it. My entire village condemned him to a fate of oblivion when choosing not to search for him, all because he didn’t listen to their warnings. He was just a young boy; how could he not succumb to his curiosity! Any child does at one point or another. He did and now he’s gone.

Now that I am an adult, I will venture the same path Henry did, but I will be prepared. I will bring weapons, enough food and water to last me a week, medicine, and bandages for worst-
case scenarios. As well as a second set of clothes just in case I destroy my bearings during my journey. I will tell no one in the village of my intentions, besides my most trusted friend and loyal lover- Cyrus. He is only one year older than I, and being the only two around the same age, we were bound to become companions.

My mother coos in my ear, marry him! She was bound to a loveless marriage when she was my age and after my whole life of watching my father strip every bit of essence from her spirit, I spit on the idea of marriage. The sounds of her yelling in protest as he beat her, the cries of my brother and I when we came in the crossfire of his cruelty, and the lashing whip that cracked in the air while my mother watched her children be abused. These sounds are in a constant loop in my mind reminding me why I will never trap myself in marriage. No matter how in love with Cyrus I am, I can never take the risk of being stuck like my mother is.

When I tell my mother I don’t ever want to be wed, she says she could ship me off to some lord and strip the choice away from me. It’s a threat; one I don’t wish to come true. I only lie to her about accepting Cyrus to be my husband. When the day comes, I will be long gone, riding my horse out of this dying place to escape the fate of damned domestication.

I always wonder if Cyrus would join me on that journey. We’ve never been outside of Stonybrook and it’s a lot to ask him to leave everything behind, especially since he knows I’ll never marry. As a test, I plan on asking him to come to Ivy House with me. To uncover this mystery once and for all. If he says no, I will still go alone. Disappointment will fill me if he does say no, and I pray that doesn’t happen. If he says yes, I will have a protector and won’t have to roam the cursed fortress alone. This decision will reveal to me the lengths he would go to for me, whether he would live and die for me the way I would for him. Living away from the commitments of marriage, a life where we both choose what we want without the expectations
that have been passed down for generations. We would love like lovers, play like friends, and trust like family. Not just be husband and wife, but partners in this tragedy we call life. Either way by tomorrow I will be entering the unknown of Ivy House, with or without him.

Earlier I left him a note to meet me under our willow tree, the one where we always have our rendezvous’ when the crickets chirp and the skies are littered with stardust. When not one soul ever stirs in their sleep to catch us holding each other under the moon. Only the moon knows our secrets, and I’m thankful she keeps mine. It would be unladylike of me to be alone with a man out of wedlock, and our town likes to twist its stories. Although, it would be true. Cyrus and I have loved one another. He did not bed me, no. He loved me. He held me. He listened to me. Above all, he became the home I never knew existed, and I became that for him as well.

His father was just as unkind as mine and when he would lash his back so hard giving him permanent scars, I was the one who tended his bloody wounds while his mother pretended to not hear him cry out in pain as my own did. When he needs a secret to be held, I hold it for him. When he cries and reveals emotions that men never share, he bears these burdens to me, and I carry them for him. I’ve never lived a life without him, nor do I wish for a life without him. Yet the thought of being his wife still sends shivers down my spine and knots in my stomach. It’s something I just will not do, no matter how much love I feel.

Gathering my sack of belongings, I put on my sturdiest boots that will withstand the elements and a heavy fur cloak to protect me from the winter chills. The black shawl is embedded with wolf fur, hunted by my father. It is the only gift he has ever given to me. When he did, I was shocked he cared enough to keep me warm, but I guess he did it more from a reputation standpoint as no man can be respected in the village if they are not providing for their
own kin. I also put a dagger Cyrus made for me at the waist of my belt. It’s a beautiful weapon, a pure silver dagger. Took him a whole year to save up for the materials and a whole other year to make it. Whenever I look at it reminds me of how devoted he is to me, as I am to him. Taking one last look in the mirror before I leave, the woman staring back at me seems so foreign, so brave. My long chestnut brown hair holds a fiery red hue as it reflects in the moonlight cascading through my window. My dark brown eyes are emboldened with fear and dread.

Slinking into the night, the crunch of snow echoes through the silence and I hold my breath as if that will lighten my footsteps. I quickly pass by the homes of neighbors. Their wooden shingles smothered in snow, their lanterns out for the night. The pines loom over me as I follow the small pathway in the dark of the woods that leads to the now-dying willow tree. Winter has come and stolen its vitality until spring comes again to bring it back to life. If I hadn’t gone down this path a million times before I would’ve tripped and stumbled on the rocky hills that are home to the tree. Trust me, the first hundred times I did. Now my foot knows what crooks and crannies are safe to step in; my hands know which tree branches are sturdy enough to pull my weight up as I climb the hill to the meeting spot.

After trekking for what seems like an eternity, I see the shape of Cyrus sitting under the withered tree waiting for me. He is no knight but always carries a sword for protection with him. I see the shine of silver at the belt of his waist and relief fills me knowing he has something to defend us, that is if he says yes. His grey eyes look at me in adoration as I walk to him. Without exchanging words, he pulls me fiercely towards him both hands on either side of my face smashing his lips against mine, his stubble scratching my face in the quickness of the action. As much as I wanted to melt into him, to forget the reason I came, I just can’t. I quickly pull away from him. He looks hurt and confused when searching my face for an answer.
“I came to ask you a favor,” I say, and it comes out harsher than I intend.

His hands fall from my face and to both of my hands. His eyes never leave mine.

“You needn’t ask me; I will do whatever you need me to,” he speaks.

“But you don’t know what I’m asking yet, and when you do, you’ll understand why you deserve a choice in the matter,” I explain.

“Visenya, you may ask me, but I already know what my choice will be,” he says, stubborn as ever.

I take a pause to savor the moment before ruining it with my chaos of a plan. His dark shoulder-length hair moves slightly in the breeze, and I stop myself from reaching up and touching his soft curls.

“I’m going to Ivy House tonight,” I state, too scared to ask what he already knows.

His face contorts in anger and despair.

“You can’t go, you’ll die. I won’t let you.”

“Let me? You don’t have a choice in what I do, but you can choose to come with me.”

I go to grab his hands to pull him closer to me, but Cyrus turns his back to me in a moment of frustration. He sighs as if he has lost a battle and has to accept defeat.

“We will die.” He turns back again. “Is this really what you want?”

“Do you think I want this? I don’t want to go, I am terrified! But I must know the truth about my brother, I can’t live any longer not knowing. I am the only one whose willing to look for him, and even if he is no longer with us, at least I can say I tried.”

A softness in his eyes breaks my heart. He puts a hand on the side of my face caressing some of the stress away.
“I will go anywhere with you, even if it means my death because I love you, Visenya. I wouldn’t be able to breathe knowing you’d be going to that Hell house alone.” He says these magical words and my heart does a flip in my chest.

I spring into a kiss wrapping my arms around his neck and the force drives him back so hard he nearly falls over. His big arms surround my waist and for a second I can forget the misery that will ensue on this trip. That second doesn’t last long before I ruin our kiss for a second time with the burden of Ivy House.

“We must go now, before morning, before people notice we are gone,” I say.

“Are you sure we should go out at night? To get to the road of Ivy House we must go through swampland first. There could be alligators, snakes, wolves, bears—”

“Compared to the danger of Ivy House, I’m sure they will be the least of our worries. Plus, you brought your sword with you, and I have my dagger” I argue.

“Fine, but you must promise me one thing.”

“Yes, my love?” I ask, worry laced in my words.

“If things get too dangerous, we will turn back. If you can promise me this, we can leave now.”

As much as I want to say the truth, I must lie. I wouldn’t risk his life. But mine? Well, it’s fair game.

“I promise.” The lie falls from my mouth and with that, we leave our spot to join my horse, Esme. Her beautiful white coat glows in the dead of night, and hitching ourselves onto the saddle, Cyrus takes the front and I hold onto his waist from the back.

An hour later we reach the swamp lands known as the Doom. Many people have lost their lives in these swamps, so I tie Esme to a tree just outside the Doom and we begin walking
through the rugged land. The overgrown grass makes it hard to see where you’re stepping and many times, we heard the squashing sound of our boots plummeting into the mud. Moss on everything makes for a slimy, slippery task of not slipping and staying grounded. Fireflies, moths, and mosquitos litter the air and we both find ourselves constantly swatting at the bloodsuckers. The stars and moon are the only light to aid us through the dirty and damp swamp. The trees sag under the weight of leaves, vines, and any other living green thing that was wrapped around their bark.

In the trees ahead of us, I see a white owl watching us from a branch, its large yellow eyes inquisitively observing what type of creature we are, as I’m sure no humans have been in these lands for years. As we approach the tree the owl sits in, it flies away, disappearing into the void of darkness. We pass by the true swamp the one where all types of creatures lurk and wait for their prey. There is only a brief section of shallow water to trudge through to get to the other side, but that doesn’t mean the dangers within that water can’t still reach us. Sudden movements would alert these predators, but going too slow could get us caught.

Cyrus grabs my hand, and we enter the water together, attempting to be soundless, but the ripples of the water ruin that attempt. The murky green water is like a slimy goo oozing disgusting green algae that sops into our clothing. The water smells rotten; I can’t help myself from gagging. Cyrus covers my mouth to hide the noise. The sound of the water rippling from the left of us is deafening and we both turn to see what creature I’ve awoken. A ten-foot-long brown python with moss coating its reptilian scales starts wading through the water, aiming straight at us. I turn to run but Cyrus stops me, shaking his head no. He pulls out his sword and pushes me behind him.
“They’re incredibly fast if we turn our backs to it, it’ll wrap around one of us and crush us to death,” he says.

Despite his bravery, his hands shake. He’s never used his sword except on dummies and practice duels with other lads in our village. The snake is nearly two feet in front of us when something pulls its tail beneath the water. Blood begins to flood the waters, and pieces of the now-dead snake float to the top of the swamp.

I grab Cyrus’ hand and thrust him forward. Whatever just killed that snake had to be a whole lot bigger and I don’t want to be its next victim. We run through the dense slime and Cyrus makes it to shore before me. He holds out his hand for me and I reach for him. Before my hand ever touches, I’m under the water, something taking hold of my foot and dragging me through the green ooze. Holding my breath under the dirty water, I try to open my eyes, but algae blind my gaze frosting my eyeballs in a green haze. All I can see is the glowing lilac iridescent scales embracing the creature's body, and the more I keep my eyes open the more shock filled my core. The monster has human-like hands, yet they are webbed like a fish, and its eyes glow a shocking blue. Its face has a similar construction to that of a human but instead of teeth it has fangs, and instead of a nose there are two holes sticking from its face releasing bubbles.

I try to lash out of its grasp, but it only holds on tighter and keeps dragging me to the deepest points in the swamp. I can’t hold my breath any longer, and the slime of algae and dirty water hit my tongue. Water begins to fill my lungs and it feels as though my brain is being compressed against my skull from the pressure. The monster goes into the darkest depth of the swamp, where no sun can reach. My vision is completely black, and the cold water begins tightening my muscles making the pain of drowning worse.
I stop fighting the creature, having no fight left in me. My body is tossed onto the cold concrete ground, and I begin vomiting all the water that filled my lungs. I gasp for breath and once I catch it I kiss the ground beneath me.

“I wouldn’t do that, we’re in the sewers,” the creature says, in a deep tone.

Spitting immediately, I wipe my mouth, but the taste of rot doesn’t go away. I get a better look at the creature’s face. Its skin is radiant, having no wrinkles at all despite living in the water. With large blue eyes, it holds a friendly gaze and despite having fangs, the creature smiles at me as if it were innocently sweet.

“You could’ve killed me,” I gasp for breath, “but you didn’t, why?”

“I am a friend of your brother, Henry. In Ivy House they know everything that’s happening within these swamps, they can sense the new energy. They have eyes and ears everywhere, even the most innocent-appearing animals could be working for them. They knew you were coming, and he sent me to find you. I brought you to the sewers because it’s the safest entrance to the house without being seen. They are expecting your arrival, and if the Ivys see you, you’ll be stuck here forever,” the creature replies.

My mind goes to the inquisitive owl I saw on our way into the swamp. Was it a spy? This is crazy I’m talking to a literal swamp monster and apparently, the Ivys are animal whisperers. Which I guess wouldn’t be the craziest gossip I’ve heard about that family. I feel as if I’m in a terrible fever dream.

“Henry’s still alive?” I ask.

I search the creature’s eyes in hope, but they only convey sadness.
“He is stuck in limbo, a state in between life and death. It is uncertain if he will ever be whole again. For now, he appears as pure energy, I’m only able to speak to him through images he shows on the surface of the water,” the creature explains.

“Is there a chance to make him ‘whole’ again?” I ask.

“Possibly. You must break the curse to find out.”

There’s still a chance for Henry to make it out of Ivy House. Cyrus and I just have to get in and do whatever it takes to break whatever curse he’s talking about. I realize Cyrus doesn’t know I’m safe and panic tells me he’s probably swimming in the swamp looking for me.

“My friend, the one you saw me with, please bring him to me. He’s in danger, I beg of you!” I plead.

Without another word, the creature swims back into the abyss as my head flies with a million thoughts. The possibility of having my brother back has my blood racing with excitement, even knowing that he isn’t fully himself. I sit there hovering over the edge of the water until the creature makes it back tossing Cyrus from the water onto the sewer ledge. He goes through the same vomit spell as I did when the creature first brought me here, grasping at his throat as if it’ll let the air in faster.

I thank the creature while rubbing Cyrus’ back to comfort him. An aquatic firefly, maybe even a fairy. That’s the only way I could describe the being in front of me.

“Henry is waiting for you at the end of the sewer tunnel, he won’t be what you remember him as, and remember do not let the Ivys see you; do not look in their eyes,” it warns.

“What’s your name? How do we know if you’re actually helping us or leading us into a trap?” Cyrus asks now he has gained his breath back.
I notice bloody scratches over Cyrus’ face, some on his throat. Something attacked him before the creature saved him, and I feel guilty that I didn’t have the creature get him sooner. I clutch him closer to me, grateful he’s alive.

“My name is Rune and I’m helping you because you may be the only hope for the souls stuck in Ivy House. Qetsiyah, the witch who cursed the Ivys, has had her revenge for the last fifty years and it’s time to restore the balance of nature. As a servant of nature, it’s my duty to end this once and for all. Too much death in one place can disrupt the balance with its dark energy leaking into the Earth. The Ivys were once like any other family, but they stole the land of Stonybrook killing dozens of innocents. Qetsiyah’s revenge restored the balance of the past massacre of her people for a time, but now the curse has killed far more people than the Ivys did. Now dark magic runs through the Ivy vines that envelop the home. Don’t go near them they will eat you whole. There are monsters in the home, don’t look into their eyes no matter what you do. Silence and surprise are your only friends don’t forget this. Good luck.” He bids us farewell and sinks into the deep swamp.

Cyrus and I just stare at each other in awe; this is far stranger than our imaginations expected. I look closer at his cuts and grimace with worry.

“We are in over our heads,” Cyrus says.

“I know, we’re so close let’s just get this over with,” I say, gathering his hand in mine and leading him down the tunnel.

Instinctively, he switches our positions and leads the way. His left hand holds my right, and his right holds out his sword for protection. A green fire glows at the end of the sewer's abyss and a small shadow of a boy glows around the walls. I only realize how narrow the pathway when the gloom of a green light closes in the walls making me feel claustrophobic. We
are so close to the light, and I realize the green fire is more like an aura hugging the shadow of what I assume is Henry’s ghost. There are no features, just an empty shadow looking back at us. My heart wants me to see Henry in the green orb, but my mind tells me to be cautious. The shadow boy doesn’t wait to meet us as we close the distance, instead runs to the right into a different path of the sewer. Impulse gets the better of me and began to run, trying to keep up with the green fire of a boy while Cyrus tries to keep up with me. Our footsteps patter and echo through the tunnels, making me worried that others could hear us. We run after the noise for a time, but Cyrus stops me by grabbing my wrist. Seething, I shoot him a look of death and struggle against his hold. His face is unfazed, and he doesn’t let go. As upset as I am that he’s stopped me, I’m grateful he hasn’t given up even though I know how badly he wants to.

Cyrus pulls me closer and says firmly, “this seems like a trap.”

I hate that he’s right, but I won’t admit it, not now at least. He releases me now that he knows I’m not going to chase after the ghost. We still have to keep going, but he’s right, we need to be smart and not run into the unknown. But if it is really Henry, he wouldn’t hurt me. Right? Granted it’s been years, what if he’s changed? What if Ivy House ruined him? I begin to doubt Rune’s sincerity and the memory of Henry and even myself.

“We’ve come all this way; we can’t give up now. I agree this whole thing is suspicious and we need to continue with caution, but we also don’t understand the rules of this land. A mystical swamp creature just saved us from a giant snake, the realm of possibility has grown quite large and for all, we know the laws of the afterlife might be suppressing his presence here. He might be doing his best by leading us into the house… the limbo Rune talked about. That has to be it he can only do so much from his side,” I reason.
Cyrus quirks an eyebrow showing disbelief and the weight of not knowing what to do sags down on me. He sees my shoulders droop in defeat, and pity enters his eyes. Pity is such a sour and bitter taste on my tongue, I wish I could erase that look from my mind. My eyes pin to the ground as I try to not let tears come out. I feel like I am going crazy, rightfully so after the night I’m having. Cyrus puts both of his hands on either side of my face breaking me out of my anxious thoughts.

“I’m not saying we should give up, and hell you might be right this could be your brother. If you want to continue to follow him you know I’ll take that journey with you, but no more running and no more impulsive decisions, okay? Because that’s how you get yourself killed and if you die, I die, get it?” he asks me.

“Okay, you’re right. What do you suggest we do?”

He smiles at me in relief.

“We’ll follow the shadow at a steady pace, speed walking. But every turn we take we take slowly; we don’t know what’s around the corners waiting for us to make a mistake. You always stay behind me, I have the sword it just makes sense I go first, but still have your dagger out, just in case.” Cyrus explains and I nod in agreement.

I pull the dagger out of its sheath that hangs from my belt. It’s one of the few items that survived the swamp dive. Like yin and yang, we hold hands in the center range of our bodies, and in our other hands, we hold our weapons.

We peer over the corner of the tunnel we saw Henry run down and the green shadow just waits for us at the end. The shadow just stands there watching us in stillness and silence. I can feel the fear radiating off from Cyrus, but I don’t feel sinister intentions from the spirit at all. I feel comfort, and that’s how I know this has to be Henry.
PART TWO IVY HOUSE

After a while of playing the worst game of tag, the green spirit of Henry stands in front of a door no longer moving away from us. Standing face to face I try to examine his green essence, trying to see Henry somewhere in there. Nothing, no features whatsoever. It’s like a blank piece of paper covers Henry’s face. No eyes, no mouth, no nose. Just nothing but the outline of a child.

“Henry?” I ask, reaching my hand out to touch him.

What sounded like the wail of a wounded deer erupts from Henry as if begging for my help. As my hand passes through nothing, Henry’s green essence disperses into the air disappearing altogether.

I look to see Cyrus’ bewildered face; he is trying his best not to lose his mind, but he can only hold onto this illusion of bravery for so long. I worry for him the further we go; I almost wish I hadn’t been stupid enough to ask him to come. If I lost him, I couldn’t live with myself. I’ve already lost Henry once so the idea of saving him is great but not greater than risking Cyrus’ life, the love of my life. What was I thinking? It’s too late to be angry with my decisions, I have to commit to this and ensure in the end we come out alive.

Cyrus opens the door as quietly as he can, but the old, rusted hinges let out the ugliest hiss. We both freeze in fear we’ve been heard. A minute passes and the house is dead silent. No floorboards creak, no voices or music to be heard. Just stillness.

It looks like we’re in the basement of the house. Dark, dusty, and spidery just like any other basement. A thick layer of dust coats barrels of wine and boxes full of storage. The dust is on everything except for the blood-red vines that are growing from outside into the busted windows of the cellar. The vines pulse like a vein does, pushing blood to the heart, and it makes me wonder if these vines are circulating the life of Ivy House. Rune’s warnings ring heavily in
my mind and all I can think about is putting as much distance between me and those things as possible. They are all over the stairs and floor leading up to the door that I’m guessing connects to the first level of Ivy House.

“Don’t touch the vines” I whisper as quietly as possible to remind Cyrus.

He nods in response. We step carefully on the small places of the ground uncovered by the grotesque throbbing red ivies that have embedded themselves in the home. After a few minutes of dancing our way along the cellar floor to the stairs, we reach the door that leads to the kitchen. Opening it, the hinges let out an ugly hiss like the cellar one did, and this time someone or something hears us. Floorboards rapidly race on the creaking floorboards above us, the sounds getting louder the closer get. There is no time to take in our surroundings everything becomes a blurry whirlwind. All I remember is Cyrus pulling me. I see flashes of the kitchen before we move left into the dining room and Cyrus ushers me under the table, where a long red tablecloth conceals us completely. The thing is coated in ten layers of dust and mold with tiny holes showing time has disintegrated the once expensive cloth. The loud march of whoever is after us rings a heavy vibration throughout the dining room as old porcelain clinks against each other in a glass cabinet against the wall. I’m guessing this is one of the monsters Rune is talking about.

A hissing noise sends shivers up my spine as the footsteps begin coming closer to where we hide. Only it’s not just one hiss anymore; a second joins in on the terror. The monsters communicate through grunts and groans. After a moment of silence, we hear the shuffle of the two separating, one still in the dining room.

It lets out an awful snarl that makes the table itself vibrate, and I nearly jump in shock but luckily Cyrus’ hand clamps onto my own. He shakes his head at me, and his eyes say don’t move a muscle. Two footsteps and the monster is right in front of the table. All we can see from under
the cloth is two feet that wear dress shoes only they have deteriorated far past use. Green moss coats the essence of the shoes, and a few tiny mushrooms grow on the tip of them. On the left shoe, the big toe of the monster points out of a hole, and I would think it were a human if it weren’t for the greyish-green skin that’s attached to it. The toenail is black and yellow puss expunges from underneath it. It takes all my strength to not gag. To make matters worse, this monster smells of rotting flesh.

We hear its bones begin to crack as it slowly begins to bend down to look underneath the cloth. Not waiting for a second, I grab Cyrus and pull him carefully. As the creature peers underneath the cloth, I guide Cyrus away from the dining room taking my moment of opportunity. We exit into a hallway out of the dining room, and I get one glance at the monster in its kneeling position. It looks like what used to be an old man. Mostly bald except for a few straggles of white hair, its head had fungi growing all around its skull as if it were wearing a mushroom crown. Mr. Reginald Ivy is the monster on the ground in front of us. I hesitate for a moment too long, curiosity getting the best of me, and the monster turns its head toward us. With everything in my power, I make sure not to look in his eyes, looking at everything but them on its face. Mr. Ivy wears a tarnished suit. His jaw is unhinged, and the only thing keeping it attached to its face is red vines like the ones we saw in the basement. The pulse of the vines moves the jaw back and forth as if it were a kite moving to the breeze. His tongue lay in the center of long tendrils of green ivy that reach out in front of him like a Kraken looking to suck in its prey.

Mr. Ivy lets out another harsh growl that sends the house vibrating and we start running down a hallway. The only thing keeping me going is Cyrus’ leading hand that guides me. My whole body feels heavy and weak, the more we twist through the never-ending halls the more I
struggle to keep up with Cyrus. I don’t know if it’s from the moldy air, anxiety, or magic but I feel like I’m going to pass out. I keep going despite feeling my limbs trying to give out. Mr. Ivy’s footsteps bound toward us and a howl from the other side of the house alerts us that the monster has help on its way to catch us.

The hallways twist and turn, as we look for any safe place to hide. We must be in the center of the house at this point because we stand in the middle of an entranceway, the one Rune helped us avoid. I can see why. Red vines pulse all over the front door, no entrance or exit is possible that way. Makes me wonder how Henry got in here in the first place.

We dash up the stairs to the second level of the house. I open the nearest door pushing us both inside and locking the door behind us. We catch our breath and I lower myself to the ground. Completely exhausted, I have no energy left in me. Two minutes pass by and it feels like we’re in the clear. The creaks of the Ivys shifting around the house are minimal but still there, alerting us to be more careful. At some point, we need to leave this room and it hurts my chest just thinking about it.

I finally focus on the room we hide in. It appears to be a girl’s room, or what used to be of course. Faded pink walls with the same red vines breaking in through the windows. A cool winter breeze settles along the room. The bed is perfectly made and the dust on top of it is like a second blanket. A light brown, wooded bureau lies in the left side of the room while a makeup vanity lay on the right. This must be their daughter’s room. Clara Ivy. I wonder if all the Ivys were like Reginald now. The thought of encountering more like him could make me vomit.

Nausea becomes overwhelming and my body is vibrating with heat despite the chill in the room. I can’t stop shaking and my teeth start chattering. Cyrus raises his brows in worry.

“Something is wrong, I feel sick,” I whisper hazily to Cyrus.
He presses a hand against my forehead and the concern in his eyes doesn’t make me feel any better.

“You’re running a fever. We can rest for a moment but eventually, they will find us if we stay here long enough.”

He’s right and it feels like we’re screwed.

“I’m scared, Visenya. Please just say something,” he says.

I’m scared too, but I need to give him hope. That there’s a chance where we get out of here alive.

“I just need one more moment of rest and then we’ll move. I know this is going to sound insane because we’re supposed to avoid them, but we need to follow the vines. The more there are or the thicker they are maybe they’ll lead us to the heart of what’s controlling the Ivys. Then we can kill it and set Henry free,” I say.

He sits next to me, putting both arms around me, and says, “okay.”

I turn to him and press my lips to his. We hold the kiss for a long time and for some reason we both have tears running from our eyes. Maybe it’s because we’re both thinking at least I’ll die beside the love of my life. Or maybe I’m just thinking that and he’s crying because he’s terrified. Either way, hope seems so far away when we need it most.

After sitting like that for a few minutes, I finally find the strength to get up. Cyrus stands in front of me, our hands locked together. Before turning the knob of the door, he turns his head questioning me if I’m ready, and I shake a yes in response.

Luckily this time the door does not shriek in response to us opening it. We peer our heads outside the door and the hallway is empty. We slowly walk to the right as that’s where the thick vines lead. As we walk down the hallway the family portraits of the Ivys linger on the walls as
the sunrise begins to illuminate their presence. One of Mr. Ivy standing tall in a fine green suit with a tall cane in his left hand. Guessing he doesn’t need the cane to walk now he’s dead, but how do the dead walk at all? He has a white beard and thinning white hair on the top of his head.

Then we pass Mrs. Ivy’s portrait, and she is beautiful. With her long red hair swept over her shoulder, she wears a beautiful purple gown. Around her neck is a gold heart pendant that almost shines even in this old painting. We continue walking and that’s when the children’s portrait comes up. The three of them together, all in the same shade of green. Marcellus and Clara with their father’s features of blonde hair and blue eyes, while Charles was a ginger like his mother, with Amelia’s green eyes. They all were beautiful, hauntingly beautiful.

The portraits are all in perfect condition untouched by the vines and ruin of the house. Despite the wallpaper and floors being tarnished, these paintings survived and look pristine, as if cleaned regularly. The vines continue to grow thicker, almost as if they were arteries being clogged the way they throbbed. Soon the vines grow as thick as the snake we had seen in the swamp, and the hallways become tighter and tighter to walk through without touching them. The floor is covered in red-blood moss that squishes under our feet, producing a red liquid that looks like blood. The vines lead us to a tall black door with intricate designs that at first appear to be smudges of artwork, but the more closely you look you realize its carvings of people burning alive. Really welcoming house if you couldn’t tell already.

I’m about to press my hand to the knob when that awful snarl vibrates from down the hallway. This time Mr. and Mrs. Ivy stand at the end, staring at us through their decomposing faces. Mrs. Ivy wearing a blue ball gown that is ripped and torn to the point it’s barely hanging onto her body. Mushrooms grow out from her ribs and throat. I wonder if they are on the top of her head like the same mushroom crown her husband wears. Logic outweighs my need to check
as Rune’s warnings repeat in my mind on a constant loop.

“Don’t look in the eyes!” I yell at Cyrus.
We throw ourselves into the room, slamming the door behind us. Cyrus holds the door as the two monsters pound at it, slowly getting closer and closer to the door popping entirely off its hinges. I grab a chair and push it under the handle. It won’t hold long. The room reeks of death and all around us are the statues of every missing person of Stonybrook. Henry is one of the first I see, with his two hands out in front of him for protection and a scream on his face. My heart hurts knowing the fear he was in. At least we know now what happens when you look into their eyes. In the center of the room, the vines are pulsing rapidly where they sink down to the first floor all the way into the Earth. The center is full of a pile of pulsing red goo.

“Visenya, please tell me you have a plan,” Cyrus pleads.

I look around the ballroom and see empty bottles of wine. I quickly check all of them until I finally find one with some left in it. I pour it down the hole where the vines pulse from.

“I do,” I say while searching through my bag knowing I threw in a box of matches before I left home. I just don’t know if they survived the swamp. I searched the dirty, half-empty bag to only find a few strewn matches. The box with the striker must be down in the swamp. It doesn’t matter to me, I only need one and I sure as hell can start a fire without the striker.

“We need to break a window. If we can we’re going to throw the statues onto the grass outside and then light this place on fire. If they’re too heavy we’re still getting out of here no matter what, okay?”

He nods and does as I say. Both of us take a chair and start pounding it at the glass. It takes multiple sharp punts to the glass until it shatters. He grabs the first statue he sees and tosses it on the ground. It lands without breaking, but there’s limited space, so we can only save a few.

“Henry first, then go by youngest to oldest,” I say, and he nods.
We work together, moving Henry’s statue when the door begins to bulge under the Ivy’s pressure. Working faster we send him over the edge on the lush, uncut grass.

“I don’t think we can save the others; we don’t have time,” Cyrus says.

He’s right because the two monsters have their hands breaking through the beams of the doors to get in. I walk close to the pit of vines but not too close, just enough for my match to hit its mark. I put the match between my teeth and the first time it just hurts like hell, feels like I chip my tooth but the second time it lights. I toss it into the pit and watch the flames engulf the vines. The house lets out a monstrous groan and shakes like an ill person with tremors. The Ivys finally break into the room, first tumbling over the broken door and then quickly getting back up they run full charge towards us. I don’t hesitate. I grab Cyrus' hand running to the window, we quickly look to avoid jumping on a statue and then took the leap. We hear the monster snarling behind us as we fell.

Falling on my side, I break a rib or maybe a few. I can tell by Cyrus’ reaction that his fall hurt just as bad as mine. We looked up at the Ivys staring down at us; they look as if they can’t leave the house. As if invisible shackles held them back. The fire soon takes them, and they stand still and silent as they burn into ash.

Together, Cyrus and I wordlessly begin moving Henry’s statue state away from the fire as it spreads. A safe distance away we wait to see if something changes. If I will get my brother back. Hours pass and the house burns to the ground. Nothing has changed and I feel like I did something wrong.

Cyrus watches me worried that I will break down from this, only making me want to freak out more. Daylight is in full bloom and the forest is alive while we wait.
Slamming my fists repeatedly onto the hard rock, I scream in frustration. All of this pain cannot be for nothing. Cyrus grabs my now bloodied fists and stops me. My blood runs down the stone and it begins to crack. Slowly pieces of the rock break off until finally Henry is freed, but he isn’t moving. I watch as the color returns to his features as he returns to the land of the living. Suddenly, his eyes shoot open and he sits up straight, gasping for air.

“Henry!” I yell in happiness while hugging him tightly.

I probably should’ve given him space to breathe, but the happiness I feel is bursting through me.

Not only did I survive Ivy House, so did Cyrus, and now Henry did too. It feels surreal.

“Blood for blood,” Henry says it as if it should mean something to us.

Cyrus and I look at each other in concern, worrying that coming back to life has changed him.

“What?” I ask.

“Qetsiyah’s curse, it wasn’t just the fire that broke it. The fire killed it, but the loophole was that only blood could break through the stone. On the other side, all I had was time to find out how to free myself, and I also had Rune although it was hard to get my messages to him. The three of you saved me, I thought I was going to be stuck here forever, I was so scared—” Henry continues his child-like ramble, to which I nod and just go through a loop of responses to be there for him. Saying how sorry I am that this happened to him, asking him what it was like.

Cyrus and I guide him home. On our journey I feel a sense of peace knowing my brother is in my life again. Despite that, I have to leave and live a life for myself. It wouldn’t be fair of me to bring him with me. All he talks about on the way home is home, and it would be unfair of
me to ask him to start over when all he wants is to go back. And it wouldn’t be fair to me to stay when all I’ve wanted to leave.

We finally reach the home we grew up in when Henry’s about to walk inside. Cyrus remains by Esme, letting us have our space.

“Henry, I love you, and tonight proved I would do anything for you. But I can’t stay here any longer. I know you miss our parents, and your life before so I understand that you want to stay but I … I just can’t. It’s not home for me like it is for you. But just because I’m leaving doesn’t mean I’m gone. I’ll check in on you as often as I can, and when I have a home of my own you can come visit me all the time.”

“You’re leaving now?” he asks sadly, causing my heart to shatter.

“I have too, you know they will never let me leave freely, not without a husband to give me to. This is my only shot; I have to take it.”

He nods, “I love you, thank you for saving me, I always knew it was going to be you.”

Happy tears well in my eyes as I tell him I love him too, pulling him into a tight hug. For a long time, we hold each other crying, until finally I pull back and bid him farewell. Cyrus helps me onto Esme, and we ride into the burning sunset just as I always imagined. Leaving Stonybrook behind us, to start anew.