

# HARROWING TALES

STORIES FROM THE  
IOWA YOUTH WRITING PROJECT  
GOTHIC FICTION WORKSHOP

FALL 2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The IYWP thanks The Haunted Bookshop and the IYWP volunteers for making “Harrowing Tales” possible. Special thanks to Amy Leners for volunteering her bookmaking expertise.

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## ABOUT THE IYWP:

The Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP) is a collective of like-minded individuals that aims to join Iowa City's unique literary heritage with its community, fostering creativity and writing among the children of Iowa City and neighboring communities. It provides writing, tutoring, and publishing opportunities to Iowa's children and teens. These opportunities are provided at little or no cost to participants through the volunteer work of Iowa City's literary community and partnerships with local programs, organizations, and institutions.

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## “LADYBUG, LADYBUG, FLY AWAY HOME”

BY EMILY MORLAN

*Why did I ever come on this trip? Of course Dad would take an unknown route just to avoid traffic.*

I glare at the top of my father's black-haired head and turn to look at the rolling hills we have passed. Nothing interesting, just field after field of crops. Boring. We pass through all the same little towns that can't even be called towns; all of them have a one-pump gas station and a bar, and besides that, nothing. It's in one of these small towns that we have to stop because my stepbrother whines.

“Mom! I have to go to the bathroom!”

My stepmother sighs and has my father stop at the next gas station. And then, of course, our battery dies. My Dad gets easily frustrated and curses when Triple A can't be here until tomorrow. But we are in small luck, because there is an empty little motel a little ways away, and we trek out to it with our bags on our backs. We manage to get two rooms. My sister and I get to share a room since my stepbrother prefers to cling to his mom, despite being ten years old.

My sister and I laze around and flip through the TV. Nothing of interest is on, so we leave to take a walk. My film camera is in hand, because you never know when a good picture can come into view.

We walk through the empty streets. It's painfully obvious that there is no reason for any of the resi-

dents to be out; there's nothing to do. We just strike up a conversation and continue walking. We find ourselves at the other end of the small town, it isn't even seven blocks. Fields surround the town with little forests and trees dotting the landscape. I spy a cat and I take off after it; my sister follows because we both have the urge to cuddle a cat whenever we see one. It scurries into a large abandoned building and I look at the stone. Above the boarded up doorway reads "Public School." Being non-cautionary people, we kick at the door and crawl through the small hole we make.

Empty hallways greet us, grimy lockers lining the sides. We carefully creep down the hallway and enter a large gym. The floor is covered in leaves and the basketball hoops are old and rusty. I tell my sister to run at it as if she was about to score, and I snap a photograph as she does so. I won't know if it was any good until I check the negatives later. I stare at the corner beyond my sister. A feeling of creepiness crawls on the back of my neck, so I hurry out with my sister trailing behind me.

I spot a stairway and test the stairs to see if they are wood; they're solid stone. I run up the dirty steps with my sister yelling after me, but I just want to get away from the gym. Once at the top, I stop and take a look around. There are two hallways, so I take off toward the double doors at the end of one.

Opening the doors, I find a big library still containing books. They are strewn on the floor and some still cling to their bookshelves. Taking a close

look at the books, a lot of them are yellowed, ripped, and some are even a little burnt. It rouses my curiosity as to why they were burnt. I pick one up and set it on a table standing up, and then I back up and look at it through my film camera. It looked very good, the single burnt book standing up on a table all alone with no one reading it.

I snap the shot and move the exposed film. My sister is glaring at me, and I sheepishly laugh. She says nothing and I ask her to go and sit in front of the book. She does so, but gives me a disgusted look as she sits on the rusty chair. She looks right at me as I take the shot, and I ask her what is wrong.

Her eyes are weird, like they aren't really focused, and I look around but see nothing. I snap my fingers at her and she slowly turns to me. She gets up and says that we should go back to the gym. I ask her why, and she says that she saw a basement door that she wanted to look at. I don't really want to go into the basement of a place like this, but I can't help but follow my sister. I don't want to be left alone.

We go back down and enter the creepy gym, yet again passing the odd corner. I get the odd feeling that I am being watched, but I ignore it, trying to focus on my sister, who seems to be walking oddly, more gracefully than my clumsy sister usually does. I ask her if she is okay again, but she says nothing, and we reach the old door.

I should have stopped right then, but I cared for my sister too much.

We descend into the dark basement, little streams of light coming through the ceiling, but I turn on my phone to lead me. My sister is no longer in front of me and I swing around wildly, looking for her. I call out her name, but I receive no reply. I panic and try to find my way back to the stairs, but I am slammed into. I crumple to the floor clutching my torso, and my cell phone slides away from me to rest at the Converse-clad feet of my sister, who reaches down and turns it off. I cry out to her for help, but she merely smirks at me.

Who is this? This is not my sister.

But I have no time to dwell on this thought, because I am thrown up into the air and crash into the cement wall. I fall to the floor and cry in pain. I struggle to my feet and reach for my camera. I miss it and swipe at it again, but my hand goes right through it. I stare at my hand, and I can see the floor right through it. Looking in horror at my sister, she stares at the floor where I fell, and I follow her gaze to see that my body is standing up. Once it is up, it looks right at me and smiles, a crazy look is in my blue eyes. I scream at them both, but they say nothing and walk toward the stairs. I scramble after them and realize that this is not my sister, so where is she? My question is answered when I hear my sister's voice screaming from upstairs. She calls my name and I yell at her; I'm at the front door following our bodies when she appears. She clutches my hand, and I am glad that I can feel her, and our bodies turn to look at us. My body whispers,



“Here you must stay,  
For twenty years you must play.  
You must keep them in,  
So that you can atone for your sin.”

I cry out to them and ask what sin we had committed. My sister's body says,

“For entering that which is gone,  
For thinking that you would be gone before the  
dawn.  
We were kept here for longer than thee,  
So be grateful when you can get free.”

My sister sobs, saying that they have our bodies,  
how would we ever be free?

“When two more foolish ones enter,  
You must lead them to the center.  
Push them out,  
Then you will be free to go on your route.”

They leave us. We try to follow after them, but we cannot cross the threshold and can only wail as our bodies leave us behind. We calm ourselves and look about for anyone else who might be trapped here. We see no one but can hear odd singing from the gym. Following the sound, I cross the door with my sister clutching my hand, and we find a crowd of children. They cease singing to turn and look at us.

One approaches us and asks, "Are you our new teachers?"

Numbly, I nod my head, and the child smiles. It has pointy teeth. The children join hands and surround us in a large circle. They sing,

"Ladybug ladybug fly away home,  
Your house in on fire and your children are gone,  
All except one and that's little Ann,  
For she crept under the frying pan."

The same child comes up to us as they sing and rhyme,

"Mary Mary quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?  
With silver bells and cockle shells  
and pretty maids all in a row."

The child points at my sister and says, "You are Ann." The child then points at me and says, "And you are Mary."

The children giggle and dread fills my throat. The child in front of me grabs my arm, and it burns. With a cry, I wrench my hand from it and run with my sister. We run all the way upstairs, and none of the children follow us. We collapse in a restroom and my sister begins to weep. I go to the window and yell out for help. But not a sound responds.

My sister asks me what they were singing, and I tell her that the ladybug song refers to a fire. She recalls the burnt books and mentions that a lot of

the rooms were black and burnt as well. She then asks who Ann is. I tell her that I don't know. Ann is supposed to be a child, but we are their new teachers now, could Ann have been a teacher who got trapped?

My sister jumps up and says that Mary was Bloody Mary, the queen who tortured Protestants, and I get sick. I can't tell what happened here, but I have a basic idea. We huddle in the corner and hug each other, fearful of moving.

The shadows move across the walls as the sun sets. We haven't heard a peep from the children in the gym, but we can hear something coming upstairs. The bathroom doors opens and our bodies stand there. I fly at them and try to hurt them, but I merely pass through them. They giggle as tears spring in my eyes from frustration. I yell at them, ask them why, why us. My body says,

“Because dear, we have work to do yet,  
Do not fret, you will be free.  
But tell us your plea.”

I ask them what happened. They both smile. My sister's body says,

“We taught them,  
But they didn't even learn em.  
We had no choice,  
We had to delete the tiny voice.  
But our fire  
While there was dire.

We were locked in,  
So we left with a grin.  
I crawled under the bookshelf,  
And so I burned myself.  
Mary watched the soulless,  
And gave them no bless.  
So for many years past,  
We tortured them with the same blast.'

I scream obscenities at these cruel women. They were supposed to protect these children, but they killed them and tortured them all these years. I weep for the children; Mary and Ann turn and leave the restroom. We follow after them, and they go outside. They turn back and Mary says,

"We are gone.  
You are the ones they can take their revenge on.  
Farewell."

The singing is behind us; I turn and see a firewall of children dancing around us. We are burning, and we scream long and loud. Flames lick our bodies. I scream after Mary and Ann. Mary raises my camera at us and takes a shot. They climb into the car with our family. We scream as loud as we can, but no one turns their head.

Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home.

## “DEAD HEART”

BY ZACH JONES

It's been one hundred years, one hundred long years since I've turned. At first I saw it as an advantage; I'm pretty much invincible. All I have to do is feed off the living for eternity. Since then I have remained the same age. Just imagine being eighteen for one hundred years: sounds like a blessing, but more a curse in disguise. I still have my long black hair that falls in the way of my cold blue eyes, my skin is as white as this paper I'm writing on and it is as cold as ice to the touch. It is very difficult for me to be happy and feel joy after all of these years of feeding and being classified a monster and being forced to be alone all of the time, but somehow she still finds something good in me.

I met her last night, and I targeted her as my next victim and went to pursue her, but something happened. I felt guilt, I felt that what I was about to do was terribly wrong, and then she turned around and interrupted my thoughts with her soft voice.

She said, “Excuse me, do you know where Burlington Street is? I'm trying to find my new apartment I just moved into.”

I broke my eye contact away from her and looked away shyly, trying to find my voice. I told her, “Keep following this road and turn to your next right and you should find it.”

She thanked me but did not turn around and proceed, instead she looked at me curiously and asked, “What's your name?”

I looked at her, surprised, and said, "Zach."

She smiled and blushed and then said, "Would you please walk me home? I hate walking around these parts in the dark."

We walked and talked about our interests and what we wanted to do with our lives, and she kept thinking I was sick because I looked so pale; she felt my forehead and pulled her hand away quickly, saying, "Oh my god! You're as cold as ice!"

I gave her a solemn look and we kept walking. She kept glancing at me, thinking I might pass out at any minute. We finally reached her apartment and I walked her to the door.

She turned, smiling at me, and said, "Thank you. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

I said, "Don't worry. I wasn't doing anything, just enjoying this wonderful night." She gave me a smile and handed me a small piece of paper with her phone number on it, and then she turned around and went inside, closing the door behind her softly. I stayed there staring at the paper for what seemed like forever, and then I looked over towards the horizon where the sun was beginning to shine, and I turned and disappeared into the darkness.

I kept seeing her almost every night; I knew it was dangerous, but I made sure we were somewhere public so I wouldn't have such a strong urge to feed. Then one night I was walking her home again; it was a cool October night and the moon was shining down brightly on us in a sky filled with twinkling stars. I could feel her shivering under my

arm, so I took off my heavy jacket and wrapped it around her and held her closer. She looked up at me with a bright smile and thanked me as she rested her head on my shoulder, and we continued to walk.

We arrived at her apartment and I walked her to the door like I do every time I walk her home. I told her goodbye and began to turn away, but then she called out, "Wait, do you want to come inside?"

I stood there with my head down, thinking and beginning to feel paranoid, when she grabbed my hand and led me into her apartment. She turned and closed the door once we were inside; no lights were on and it was almost completely dark except for the spot of moonlight that we were standing in, shining through a window. She turned to me and pulled me close to her, and then she rested her head on my shoulder. I could hear her blood pumping through her veins, I could smell its essence.

I fell down to my knees yelling, "No not now! Why?" She looked down at me terrified as I began to sprout fangs. I looked up at her with pleading eyes and handed her a wooden stake I had been keeping inside my pocket in case I couldn't control myself when I was around her, and then I pointed towards my Dead Heart.





“JULY 7TH, 2013”

BY MAYA CLAUSSEN

I never thought it would end this way. Never thought I could feel this much pain. This much sorrow. Ha. Of course I can. Can't everybody? I wouldn't know, I don't watch much TV anymore, ever since the accident... Well, I should probably tell the story now...

I was out in the graveyard behind our house the day it happened. I bent down to run my hand through the thick layer of moss that formed the makeshift pillow I was sitting on. I heard the front door slam. Must be my sisters, Jazzy and Salli. Ah well, guess my time of peace comes to an end. I rose to my feet and started to scale the thick rose vines that climbed up our old Victorian house, which had belonged to my great-great-grandfather. As I got to my room and started to change, I realized that my sisters weren't running up and down stairs calling my name like the menaces they are. I should have been happy, right? Wrong. I was actually kind of concerned. So I headed downstairs and called out for them.

“Jazzy?”

No answer.

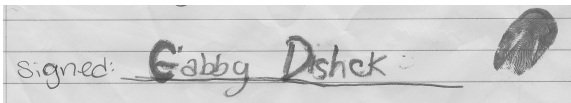
“Salli?”


Nope. Nothing.

Then I kicked something under my feet. It was a note. I unfolded it and found three words written in a sloppy, fast written writing: “Check The Calendar.” I dropped the note and hurried to our multi-

year calendar. Nothing this month. I flipped through the calendar until I saw something quite unusual. There was a red stain on one of the days. What was it? Grape juice? No... it was too thin for it to be that.

It was then that I realized there was something, or someone, behind me. I whipped around. A man. A knife. My sisters' bodies. My blood. The last thing I saw before I died was the date on the calendar. It was July 7th, 2013. My birthday. My thirteenth birthday.



Signed: Gabby Dshck : 

## “THEY PLANNED IT”

BY CARMEN GONZALEZ

It was the night of Halloween 2005. My friends and I were going to a party we had heard about. It was supposed to be totally off the hook. Sadly, it was on the other side of town, so we had to drive there. My friend Melissa had her license, so she was the one driving. She had straight A's and had never been to the principal's office in her life. She was extremely responsible. That's why I was really surprised when she got pulled over by the policeman on our way to the party.

“Were you going over the speed limit?” I asked her as she pulled over.

“No way, I would never do that. The limit was 45, I was going 44.”

Then the officer walked up to the window.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, Miss?” he asked with a straight face. He was shining a light on us, but I could see him. He was as pale as a ghost.

“No, officer, what was I doing wrong?” asked Melissa.

“A sign of resistance,” said the officer. “I am going to need you to step out of the car, Miss.”

“Sure, Officer,” said Melissa, looking back at me.

About five minutes passed, then ten, then twenty. It was starting to get pretty dark, and since Melissa left the windows open and took out the car keys, we were all getting cold.

"It's been thirty minutes, should we go look for Melissa?" Max asked.

"No," I said, "she will be here any second now." And I was right. Melissa came back to the car. She was smiling, but I noticed something strange. Her side teeth were larger and pointier than usual.

"So, are you in trouble?" I asked, staring at her mouth.

"No," she said, "but you guys are."

Then the policeman came to the car. Suddenly their eyes turn red simultaneously and their teeth grew longer.

"Just how we planned," was the last thing I heard Melissa say just before I felt two sharp teeth dig into my neck. And I slowly felt blood being sucked out, and I died.

## “INSANITY AND DEMONS”

BY MILES ANDERSON

I walked into the building; all around me were insane, depressed, manic, bipolar, suicidal patients, all with very severe cases of some mental disorder. The St. John's Insane Asylum. It was mid-winter, so there was an increase in depression. We had a slew of new patients, all practically manic depressive. Recently, a very heavy snowfall happened; a lot of people were snowed in, most of them sadly died because their heaters broke down, and/or they just went insane from snow and white wall houses. For some odd reason it was raining in the middle of winter; the building was twenty stories tall and thirty stories dug underground. It all had been newly renovated: the underground area was ten times the width the original building was. It was not only an insane asylum, but back in the 1820s it handled all types of ailments.

I removed my fedora and trench coat, hanging them in my new office. First day here required a tour. I entered the elevator and slowly began to descend. Yells echoed through the hallways. I heard “No, no! Please, don't!” followed by a blood-curdling scream. It smelled of medicine, alcohol, blood, and dust. Not at all kind to the nose. I rushed to the sound of the scream; everything seemed to move in slow motion, no one else moved. I burst through the door, and there, on the wall written in blood and that odd, glowing green substance that I saw earlier in the lobby, “Bring

heaven with you, roof, soon.” I knew what the pentagram meant, or at least what *some* of it meant. Heaven? What did he mean? Or was *he* an *it*? I looked up and saw a dead body encased in some goo. I puked. Not from the sight, but the *smell*. Sulfur. The stench was so foul I ran. The thought ran in my mind, I went to the clergy. I asked him what it meant. He gave me a cross, holy water, rosary beads hung from the cross, yet this was still unknown to me.

I'm at the elevator and I press the button. The door opens in an instant. I entered, the door closed, and I rushed fifty miles an hour straight up. The door opened directly at the roof. There was a swirling storm in the air, and I was in the eye of it. In front of me, balancing on the parapet stood a scraggly man in torn robes with long stringy hair, facing forward, chanting some odd language which I did not know. After that I screamed at him, “Who are you?!” but he didn't respond, not even to turn around, just kept chanting. I screamed the same question again. Slight response. He waved his hand, indicating I should leave. Was he making the other patients more insane? Affecting their progress? I then began to say a prayer, which was inscribed on the cross. He turned around and I realized he was a demon.

He smiled and began to speak in his language and then it turned to English: “I am the cause of the snow, the storm, the patients' insanity.”

“Why?” I replied.

“I am an old patient that was maniacally insane. I killed many people. I went to hell and became a demon.”

“Why do you have to cause these many troubles to our small town?” I said.

“All mortals must die. Demons will rule the earth.”

My heart stopped within an instant.





## “HERE I AM”

BY GWYNETH FORSYTHE

I looked up at the old house, the one everyone in the town swore was haunted, the one at 2639 Mors Manus Drive. I doubted; that's why I bought it. Yes, I know it was a rash act, but I had to prove everyone wrong. It's a sort of addiction. I had to always be right, so I was constantly finding loopholes to the truth and other various things like that. Normally I'd be all for believing this house was haunted, but I had to see for myself.

Just tonight, I thought as I took a deep breath. Maybe this legend had scared me more than I thought. I lifted my bags up and walked up the large, sloping driveway of the house. I felt the autumn wind blowing on the starved leaves as I climbed.

Once I had finally made it to the front, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key. I unlocked the door and stepped in the old Victorian house and placed my bags down. The house groaned and creaked with every step. White and gray sheets covered the old dusty furniture that seemed as old as the house. “Thank God I love antiques,” I laughed as I passed through the foyer to the kitchen then the dining room, stopping in what seemed to be the parlor.

I heard something, almost a rummaging sound near my bags. I turned around and looked down the hallway to where my bags were, but there was nothing there. One of my bags was tipped over. I

quickly convinced myself that it fell when I put it down. I need to be right, I told myself. I proceeded to the upstairs through what seemed to be miles of corridors until I reached the room with a bed in it and laid down.

I spent the next hours just sitting there watching the sun go down and the moon come up. I looked up at my watch. 10:30pm. *Great*, I thought, I probably should go to bed. I went downstairs with my flashlight on because I didn't want to get electrocuted.

I went to where my bags should have been but they weren't there.

"What the heck?!" I yelled.

I looked around everywhere for my two bags with my clothes and other things one should pack. Eventually I gave up looking for them, because I was tired and needed to sleep.

When I got upstairs I went straight to bed. Then I heard a knocking coming from the washroom. This scared me for there were no windows or anything like that in the washroom; it's completely isolated from the world outside. I pulled the covers tighter over me so I could not hear it anymore. Then the knocking got louder and louder. It was joined by a faint call.

"Sparrow... Sparrow... come here, Sparrow."

I sat bolt upright. No one knew my real name, not even the people from whom I had purchased the house. I always went by a different name, in this case, Elizabeth. My own curiosity took me into the washroom. I heard the tapping again along

with the calling. I looked around everywhere. I couldn't see where it was coming from.

"Where are you?" I called. I looked everywhere.

"Sparrow, I'm past the vale. Come find me," the voice said. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, but the voice definitely belonged to someone young.

"Where is the vale?" I asked, but there was no answer. I'll find out in the morning, I thought. I walked back toward the bedroom to find the door had been locked behind me. Great, now I'm stuck here.

I looked around the dimly lit room and saw a small closet. I knelt down to the closet. I tried to open it, but it was sealed shut. I kept pulling at it until I heard a small crack. I smiled; something compelled me to keep trying to open it. I did and it opened. I looked in to see nothing was there. Disappointment spread across my face. I was about to turn around when I saw a very young girl standing in the closet. She seemed almost transparent and looked like she was glowing.

"Hello Sparrow, it's good you found me." Her voice was happy, and it sounded like bells.

"Hello, who are you?" I asked. I felt comforted by her appearance.

"My name is Sarah. I used to live here before the fire. That's how I died—I suffocated," she said with a smile.

I was stuck in silence because of her happiness for the subject.

"Now that you're here, I want to show you something," Sarah told me.

I watched her hand come toward me. I wasn't aware of what she was doing until I was being strangled by a six year old. I tried to get away, but I was paralyzed. The girl smiled as her eyes turned black. I felt my cells screaming for air. My eyes started to close, and my heartbeat started to stop.

I tell you this story from my grave, so you will know what happens to those who live at 2639 Mors Manus Drive.

## “THE FOOTBALL STORY”

BY JASON LEE

The day had finally come. It was the day we registered for our tackle football team. Several of my friends and I registered for the tackle football team. Although we signed up for the team, there was one more challenge ahead. The challenge was the try-outs. It was worse than the championship games. Last year, we had our favorite coach, Will Johnson. Unfortunately, this year we had a really strict and scary coach, Bob Smith.

It was the day for the try-outs. Everybody was laughing and talking much louder than usual. The try-outs had started. We measured how far we could jump, how fast we could run, how high we could jump, and all those skills that you need to have when playing football. Lots of people were nervous, so they didn't do very well. One of my best friends, Austin West, didn't do very well. He fell down while running and didn't catch a single pass. Well that was too bad for him, but I couldn't worry for him, I had to then worry for myself.

Now I was up for the tryouts. I ran as fast as I could ever run. I caught 8 passes out of 10. So that meant I couldn't be WR. I also got to do the passing tryout for the QB. I threw the ball perfectly, and every time I threw a ball, it landed right in the receiver's hand. I could be QB if I was lucky, but I could also be a running back, either full back or half back. I hoped I could be QB.

It was next day when we knew what position we were going to be. I was QB! Sadly, Austin and another friend weren't on the list of players. I was so glad that I was QB though.

The next day, we had practice. At practice the defense was really bad. They couldn't block any receivers. We kept practicing, and it was getting better. And finally it was our first game. It was against the NWJH 7th Grade Gold. We beat them by a landslide. But suddenly, we got the news that somebody in the NWJH team died. For the next several games, one of the people also died on the other team. We were very worried. It was our championship game. And we wondered if somebody would die again. But the night before the championship game, my friend Mick discovered something. He noticed opponents' scores were the same as the jersey number of the person who died. He texted everybody on our team, but unfortunately, he forgot to text our team's kicker.

Finally, it was our last game, the championship game. We had our plan, which was to not to get the same score as any jersey numbers for the other team. There was a jersey number 21, and 20 was the score that we were going for. 17-14. We were losing but that didn't matter. The goal was to get 20. We had to score one TD and not get one 1 PAT. But sadly, our kicker didn't know... Another guy died... One day, we got into the coach's room, and there were the jerseys of the people who had died. Red and blood stained... And the coach was nowhere to be seen...

## “NIGHT TIME WALK”

BY ANNIE HARTLEY

The falling sun stained the horizon with its dying rays, enunciating the shadows with stark contrast. One by one, the building's lights flicked off as the business day came to a close. The blood red lights spoke of death, and none of the city-dwellers dared venture out their doors.

All except one.

A young girl, new in the city and lost, hurried through the narrow and dirty streets, the dark buildings looming over her. She paused at a corner and glanced back over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of the tail of a black coat whipping out of sight. She inhaled sharply and hurried on, moving quicker this time.

Something rattled on the street behind her. She gasped and whirled around. A shattered stone was splashed across the cobbles. She looked up; a leering gargoyle stared down at her and grinned malevolently. The girl gulped and began to run, tripping over her own feet in her haste. Shadows flickered at the edge of her vision, and once she thought she heard a low, menacing laugh echo through the still air. But when she looked around, there was no one in sight.

The girl turned a corner and froze abruptly, uttering a short shriek. There, standing beneath the stark, flickering light of a streetlamp was a black-clad man. He wore an old-fashioned suit over a high-collared shirt. The collar was open and ex-

posed a smooth, white, unblemished neck. His chin was tucked down low by his collarbone, and his dark fedora threw shadows across his pale face. His arms were folded across his chest, thin fingers tapping his sleeves.

The girl gulped and began to back up, hoping he hadn't noticed her. But her foot struck a loose rock and sent it skittering noisily across the ground. The man's head snapped up and the girl froze; she thought that his eyes had gleamed red. He smiled at her and, head thudding, she turned and sprinted away. She heard no pursuit, but suddenly he was in front of her. She skidded to a halt and stumbled back, heart pounding. She turned and ran back the way she came. She heard nothing but the sound of her blood pounding in her ears, but she could tell that he was right behind her, arms reaching, fingers ready to snag her collar. She cut sharply to the left and headed down another alley. Oh, could no one see her plight? Or was this such a common occurrence that they simply just did not care?

She stumbled over something in the dark. A cold, cruel laugh echoed through the alley. The girl sobbed and tried to run faster, a stitch burning in her side. Then she skidded to a stop, as the alley ended abruptly. The cold laugh came again, chilling her to the bone and piercing her mind like icicles. She spun around; the man was strolling up the street with his hands in his pockets. He knew she couldn't escape. She turned around again, searching frantically for a way out. Then a hand clamped



down on her shoulder and spun her back around. It was the man, malice radiating off him.

“’Ello doll,” he said and grinned, exposing his razor sharp teeth.



## “UNTITLED”

BY MAJA BLACK

I never would have thought this would happen to me. He had said to meet at the entrance of the underground tunnel system so we could get out of this pit of a town, but when I showed up, no one was there. Now it was bordering on dusk, the dangerous hour, and there was not a living thing in sight. The dusty plain extended for miles to the West, slowly rolling up into mountains in the North. The best entrance to the tunnel network that extended below to the other side of the mountains lay on the border between the town of Myne and the abandoned coal mine at the base of the mountain range. It was said that if you could make it out of the tunnels, you would be in the promised land on the other side of the mountains, but no one had ever come back from that kind of adventure.

These days, the tunnels were blocked off, surrounded by rusty warning signs full of bullet holes and toppled barbed wire fences. No one had tried to leave Myne for a full five years, but we had to try. There was nothing left of us in this dying wreck of a ghost town. But none of that mattered now. The tired red sun was going down, illuminating all the dust that seemed to eternally hang in the air around the coal mine, and I was alone outside the borders of protection that shakily still held around Myne. I wrapped my coat more snugly around me and carefully readjusted my grip on the crossbow Eric had gotten me for my birthday last year.

"We have to go now," he said as he stumbled towards me, sweat giving his gaunt face a shiny pallor.

"Eric. It's too late- it's dark," I started.

"No no no! We have to go. There's no going back now."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my heart slipping into the pit of my stomach.

"They--they took the town. Myne is no more," he gasped, hands on his knees as he tried to draw a complete breath.

"No--you're lying to get me to go now! I'm going back--"

I started back towards the town, but his hand gripped my arm, and I froze as I heard the screams suddenly shatter the eerie silence that always falls at dusk. I spun back towards him, and my hands and feet felt empty as my heart thumped double-time. His face was frozen in a tight grimace.

"They must have found the stronghold," he said, "Everybody was making a last stand in the bank, but. You know. They can always find you when you smell like fear."

I nodded; the knowledge of the inevitable journey now ahead and my calloused heart the only things stopping the tears from escaping my eyes. I thought of everybody I had accepted leaving behind, how I had imagined their lives would play out, how it was all dark and shadowed ahead now. I thought of Old Edie, who had survived three attacks with her ancient and crusty sawed off shotgun. I thought of little Benji and Angie, the blue-

eyed, blonde-haired twins who had brought so many smiles to lined and dirty faces on their fifth birthday. I thought of my father—too stubborn to leave, too senile to care—his grizzled face peering out through the grimy window as I had walked away. I closed my eyes, cementing his face that was no more into my memory, then gripped Eric's shoulder.

"Let's go," I choked out through tight lips, then stumbled off towards the entrance to the tunnels.

We had prepared and planned for this trip for a long time, trying to imagine the perils that lay in the tunnels and trying to think of how to survive. We each had a knapsack filled with the typical survival supplies: food, water canteens, flashlights, a blanket. We had agreed to wear as many clothes as possible—and pack none. I had my crossbow and several knives concealed in my boots and strapped to my arms. Eric had his grandfather's pistol and a fighting staff he had carved out of the last standing cedar tree on his grandpa's ranch.

I took a deep breath as we dug out our flashlights, glanced at Eric with my heart in my mouth, then carefully began climbing down the rusty ladder that was the entrance to the tunnels.

"Did you remember the compass?"

"I thought you were stealing your aunt's."

"No... remember they buried it with her last week? You were going to take the one from the gas station."

"Oh no," his voice reverberated down the dark expanse of the tunnel. I could feel the onset of panic tingling down my spine.

"Check your pack," I said, thinking that maybe, just maybe, one of us had packed one and had just forgotten. We both tore our knapsacks off and pawed through the contents, looking desperately for something that wasn't there. I could feel the blood pumping in my ears. Eric finally stood up, shaking his head.

"Lara."

I ignored him and continued to frantically search.

"Lara, it's not there."

"No," I shook my head and started digging through the side pockets of my pack.

"Lara! Listen to me! We don't have a compass! I know that, you know that--"

"No! We have to! You don't understand--" My voice elevated as the panic surrounded me.

"No, Lara! I do understand! I left behind just as much as you and want to survive just as much as you do--" he stopped yelling as we both heard the crumble of rocks and dirt trickle down from the entrance to the tunnels. I stared at Eric, frozen by the sound of almost certain death.

"Run--" he whispered, and, the tense silence broken, we both turned and sprinted down the tunnel on the right, Eric's flashlight bouncing light around the jagged walls of the cave. My breath came in ragged gasps as I tried to keep up with Eric, imagined or real sounds of pursuit behind me,

I couldn't tell. All I knew was I was running, running as fast as I could, faster. The panic thundered in my ears, through my veins, in the pit of my belly. My mind was so far away as my primal instincts of fight or flight took over that I almost didn't notice Eric's flashlight suddenly clatter against the wall and flicker out, almost didn't notice Eric falling into the sudden pit of darkness, but then it was too late. My stomach flipped to the sudden feeling of weightlessness, and then I too launched into the bottomless dark.

Dark. Dark, black shadows, the inky depth of the dark consumed my eyes; I couldn't tell if they were open or not. The smell was suffocating, musty and damp. My head ached; I reached up and gently brushed the sticky spot where I must have been knocked out. Ouch. I blinked several times, trying to clear my vision of what seemed to be endless blankness, then whispered.

"Eric."

The rasping wisp of my voice was eaten up by the malevolent darkness. Quite the opposite of echoes, the dense shadows seemed to steal the words right out of my mouth, until I couldn't even hear myself speak.

"Eric!" I began groping around frantically in the dark, for something, anything that would deliver me from this pit of despair. The cold rock was slightly wet under my fingertips, but that was it. No Eric, no flashlight, no anything. Just me and the dark.

I sat up, the sudden realization spinning through my head. I was alone. Utterly and completely alone.

“Oh god,” my voice cracked as my panic escaped my lips. Caught in the moment of despair, I frantically crawled around, desperate to find anything, anyone.

I still felt nothing but the damp rock. Anguish twisted my heart into a knot until suddenly I felt the rough corner of canvas—one of our knapsacks. I couldn’t remember putting mine back on as we fled, so I assumed it to be Eric’s. My breath rushed into my newly hopeful lungs, and I dragged it towards me, wincing as my head pounded. *Flashlight, please let there be a flashlight*, the thought rushed through my head, I might have whispered it, I don’t know. My cold fingers wouldn’t work—*Oh god, oh god, please let there be a flashlight*.

I felt the crinkly packages of food, the hard edges of the water canteen. Yes, *good*, I thought, *but what about a flashlight? I can’t find my way without a flashlight*. My thoughts seemed incredibly loud and panicked in the thick darkness until I felt the hard corner of something—something that wasn’t supposed to be there. A compass.

“Eric?” I whispered, confusion clouding my thoughts. *Why would he say he didn’t have a compass? Why would he betray me like that? Did he betray me? Who was he? When did he start keeping secrets from me? Wasn’t he my best friend? Why did he hide the compass? Why? Why?* My thoughts thundered in the front of my head, freezing me in indecision about what to do. How could I continue with the thought of Eric’s betrayal hanging over my head? How could I continue without a



flashlight? A solitary tear coursed down my grimy cheek as my brain spun with the questions. I resolved to continue searching through his pack in the hopes that there was another light.

As I pulled out the packages of food and water canteens, I felt the darkness pressing in around me. Worry about what was out there pushed me to move faster, and I almost missed the crinkle of a slip of paper that brushed my fingers. Knowing the scarcity of paper in our town due to the loss of the forests in the first attacks, I trembled with the possibilities of what lay written on it. Was it a map for Eric's escape? Was it a note from someone in the town, telling him to leave me to die? I knew that I had to find a light.

Frantically, I tore the rest of the contents, and there, at the bottom of the pack, I felt it. The small paper package of matches, the last one we stole from the gas station. With shaking fingers, I pulled one out, and hurriedly struck it against the rough part of the package. The light flared, and in my surprise I dropped it. *Shoot*, I thought, and quickly pulled a second one out of the package. The all-consuming desire to see what lay on the paper overwhelmed my sensibility for saving the matches. The second one lit, and carefully I held it close to the paper, straining to see what it said in the flickering light.

*Lara,*

*If you are reading this, I assume I am dead. I hope you have found the compass, and I hope I died honorably, protecting you, saving you. You are my best friend, and I needed to know at least you would survive this horrible life. I want you to know that it's not you—I couldn't continue anymore in this way. You know I loved Anya, I saw it in your face. When she died—well, something in me died as well. Seeing her cold, blank eyes, I just knew that I needed to be with her. But I needed you to live. Lara, you have been like my sister since the first attacks when we were toddlers. Remember how we planned to escape even then? Oh, but I'm getting off track. Lara, I hope you find the way—I love you.*

*Eric*

As I read the last few lines, which were shakily scrawled and nearly illegible, my heart grew tense. It all became clear as I remembered all the signs, all the little things I never noticed: Eric's resigned face at Anya's funeral, the lack of tears in his dark and brooding eyes; his sudden re-interest in our childhood dream of escaping through the tunnels; giving me the crossbow for my birthday, him saying tiredly that he hoped I would find a good use for it; seeing him talking to David, the man who worked at the gas station, tucking something small into his pocket; it all fit together in my mind for an instant. Eric never planned on surviving to make it to the other side. He had planned some heroic last-ditch

effort to get me out. Me, the last person he cared about in his life. He packed the compass and the matches and the note in his pack for a reason—he didn't betray me at all.

I was so absorbed in the thought of Eric's last message that I didn't notice the little scraping sounds coming closer, the high-pitched breathing creeping closer and closer to my light. As I slowly lowered the note, the last few flares of the match flickering, I saw it. The small pale face emerged from the gloom, pointy little teeth gleaming. It was closer than I had ever seen one. Its dark eyes sparkled deceptively in the yellow light, giving it the appearance of innocence. I had been so caught up in Eric's note that I didn't notice it right in front of me. I froze.

"No," I whispered, and it leaned forward and blew my light out.



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