

# CAMPFIRE TALES

COLAVITO

ROGERS

DALEY

FARHAS

MORGAN

ARCE

PELTON

O SULLIVAN SACHAR

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PsychoToxin Press is Christopher Pelton and Jester Knieght

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**THE LEGEND  
RAY DALEY**

## Campfire Tales

**When the lights of civilization finally go out, there will be nothing left but bands of weary people gathered together around welcoming fires, entertaining each other with tales of a life now lost to history.**

\*

I stood for four hours, blanketed in the comforting familiar darkness, watching their group intently and listening to them tell their lies and stories. Until finally, I approached the light once again. Twelve years is more than a lifetime when spent in almost complete darkness.

The stories were still being passed around the fire as I drew closer. “Heard from a fella, back down Cleveland way. Said he’d seen him riding a mountain lion like it was a pony. A god-damn mountain lion!”

I tried not to snort. I knew they were talking about me. Groups like this almost always were. I made sure to step on a few small branches as I approached, for fear one of them still might have a working weapon.

One of them called out to me, as I’d hoped they would. “Who’s that out there? Show yourself, you hear me?”

And with that, I stepped into their friendly circle of light. “Just an old man, sir. Just a fellow traveller moving through these here parts, hoping you might have some space at your fire?” I did my best to sound convincing. I’ve been run off many times in the past, by people who didn’t even want to share their fire.

“Jeez-um crow, you’s an old one, Mister! Gotta be ...what, late forties?” I assumed he was the one who’d built this particular camp, the leader was generally the one to speak first.

I laughed at his guess. It’ll be four hundred and eighty

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next month, but these folks didn't need to know that. I've always hated having to lie about my age. But I guess some lies are easier to stomach than others. "Forty-six, if you must know. And not so much of the old. Still got life in my bones yet. I can still hunt. Got a rabbit, if you'd care to eat?" I held it up for all to see.

Rabbits are always easy to catch for someone like me. They move so slowly, that it's barely even a challenge these days. Now those mountain lions, they run real fast. Fight back hard, too. Never saw any in Cleveland, though. Well, not personally.

"Rabbit, you say?" He had a slight twang of the South about his voice. N'orleans, I reckoned.

"Yes, sir, good healthy rabbit, too. Still fighting in the snare when I found him. Good sized adult male. Got a few herbs and suchlike too." The herbs almost always settled the deal. It wasn't any different here either. I hadn't just been listening to them swapping stories about me all evening. I'd been listening to them bitch about how difficult they all felt it was to catch game in these parts. And then suddenly there was I, with a nice recently caught rabbit. And fresh herbs too.

I could almost feel the smiles in their voices from there. "Come on over, Father, plenty of space around this fire. We've beans, if you've a hankering?"

I came right up to the fire then. There were fewer of them than I'd thought. I was sure I'd counted eight different voices from the darkness, but I only saw five. The fire was a good size and it'd burn all night, maybe even past sun up too.

It'd do for now. Not that I really needed it. "They might go well with some rabbit. I'd be happy to share it with you folks. He's a big 'un, and I ain't got no way of curing him."

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And with that, I was invited to sit on a ragged blanket next to the leader. I took one of the very edges, making sure I had a good eye line on all sides of me. Some of these fire groups had a real nasty habit of sitting a stranger as close to the flames as they could, making it easier for them to jump him later. That wouldn't be happening here. At least not to me.

I soon had my pocketknife out and was skinning and preparing the beast. He had good strong legs, and a lot of meat all over him. He'd clearly lived a good life before crossing my path.

"Be sure and save that skin, sir." That was one of the younger men. I'd already heard him talking. He had a few interesting tales. Nothing true, though.

"That I will, son, that I will. Don't let me keep you fellas from your stories. I know how a circle like this hates to be silent. Might even have one or two I'll share with you myself a mite later." I skewered the rabbit onto a thick branch and soon had him over the fire. He'd be ready quickly enough.

However, this group was more than ready to get back to their stories. One of the smaller men tapped himself on the chest. "I'm Mitchell. Saw him myself one night, not all that long ago. Never kept his-self a fire, came across the individual cosied right up with a brown bear. And she weren't no cub neither."

"And where was this?" That was one of the bigger guys, I hadn't caught his name yet.

"Around Detroit." Mitchell sounded pretty sure of that.

#

*I racked my memory for a few moments before I recalled the evening. Sure enough, he'd been telling them the truth. I'm pretty sure*

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*Mitchell only ever saw my back. The bear was passive enough; she knew I had sufficient power to take her out without any struggle and she'd been far from her den. We'd come to a wordless understanding, and she'd hunkered down beside me.*

*We'd been just laying there under the stars keeping each other warm when I heard Mitchell and his friends approaching. His friends hadn't been all that cautious, and that bear took two of them. I let her keep them both. I'd already fed myself to sated the previous day. Now I was close to Mitchell once again, I recognised his smell. I doubted he'd recognise me, I'd changed clothes at least four times since then.*

*Detroit had recently succumbed to the forests. It was getting real pretty there, now the concrete wastelands had been overtaken by nature once again.*

#

Mitchell gave a grunt, the same that all these circle groups do to show he'd finished his piece.

The leader tapped his chest next. "I'm Smith, you all know me. Had two run-ins with the man. One you know. The other one, I don't normally tell. Now, we got us a new friend, sharing his catch. So I feel that I gotta earn the man's meat." Smith then nodded at me.

I returned the nod. Friends for now.

We'd see where the night took us, though. It almost never ended well around circles like this. Too many bandits, these days. And these fellas absolutely stank of that.

Smith continued. "I was up near New York. There's still a little of the old city left, in places. I'd taken shelter on Broadway, there'd been a bad snowstorm. He'd been there most of the day when I arrived, holding court almost. He had meat, something he called zebra. Said it'd come from the zoo, of all places. Had a woman with him too. Shared her around



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the group, too. She was a really nice girl, so she was. The only problem, some fool tried it on too strong with her. He flat-out ended the fella right there in front of all of us.”

I didn’t recall the incident myself. I’ve never travelled with any women before. You almost never found them around circles like this. They prefer the safety of caves and what few buildings are still left standing. I caught Smith’s eye. “If you don’t mind me asking, sir, when was this?”

Smith did that thing, looking up and left. He was about to lie to my face. “Two years ago. Better times, those were. Apart from the snow, of course.”

I smiled, letting the lie pass. “Of course. Snow can be a bitch.”

I let the group talk for another hour. The rabbit had cooked itself to perfection by then. The meat just fell off the bones, there was almost no need to cut it. Everyone got plenty, and Smith was true to his word, giving me a cup full of the beans. I tossed the bones and remnants into a small tin with some water and the herbs.

“Wassat?” That was the tall one, he’d introduced himself earlier on but I’d already forgotten his name.

I smiled at him. “Terribly sorry, friend. The road’s been long and time ain’t been good to me. I plum forgot your name.”

The look on his face told me he was used to it. “Anders. Ain’t a thing, Father. Age comes to all of us one day.” He looked more like a bear in his fur jacket.

I pointed to the cup as I hung it high over the fire. “In the morning, it’ll be soup, Mister Anders. A good hot breakfast for us all before we part company and go our separate ways once more.”

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“That’s right nice of you, Father.”

Finally, I tapped my chest. “I’m Timmons. I’ve walked this Earth longer than most here, I’d wager.” That got a few muttered comments. I cleared my throat, to quieten them down again.

Then I could hear the other three, the ones I’d been sure were there before I came. One of them clearly had black lung, from the old fires. I could hear him wheezing, lightly as it might have been, I could hear him plain as a winter day. My ears told me they were hunkered down in the gully about fifty feet away. I guess they were just waiting until we bedded down to take me out then?

I tapped my chest again, bringing the attention of the group back to me. “I’ve only ever seen the gentleman once in my life when I was but a boy. I was down in N’orleans, your stomping ground if I’m not wrong, Mister Smith?

Smith just nodded, looking surprised.

“We’d taken shelter at the edge of the city, in a graveyard. Fella I was with had started a small fire, barely kept us warm through the night, and then drifted right off. Only he weren’t sleeping, if you get my drift? So I lay there all on my lonesome, but a boy no more than thirteen, all alone in a graveyard with its latest recruit. And then he stepped on out of the fog that seemed to have come in from nowhere. He was a mountain of a man and I was afeared for my life, right enough.

I pretended to be sleeping, but he knew, calling on me not to be afraid. ‘It’s all right, boy,’ he told me, ‘I ain’t come for you tonight, I’m here for your bedmate.’ And sure enough, he stood beside me and snatched that man up like he was nothing but a pile of rags. Then he stepped back into the fog, left me all by myself with only a fire ‘til daylight.”

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*No-one else wanted to tell another story after that.*

Smith let the time idle past before suggesting we bed down for the night. “Reckon it’ll be day soon. What say we get us some rest?” Then he snuggled himself under most of the blanket I was sitting on.

The rest of the group curled up and were soon snoring, bellies full of my wonderful rabbit and their foul, week-old beans. I’d been too polite to mention it to their faces. Normally, that kind of comment generally ends in the death of the commenter. I’ve seen it before and I’m sure I’ll see it many times again before Old Man Time comes for me.

As I huddled my face into my legs, I could hear the other three whispering to each other. How long they were going to wait, who had which weapon. I only heard knives mentioned. This would be easy enough.

#

They waited another hour, all told. Waited until I started to pretend to snore, in fact.

Then they moved towards me, trying to be stealthy, I assumed. I let them get within a foot before I moved. When I move as quickly as I can, people don’t see it. *They didn’t.*

The one with the biggest knife was dead first because you always take out the leader to see if it’ll dishearten the rest. Like the true Bandits they were, it didn’t even remotely put them off their stride.

So I ended the others. Then carried them away back down into the gully, so I could feed myself. Rabbit is fine enough but my kind needs real blood.

Their possessions weren’t worth stealing, but they’d tried to kill me. I’d have probably done the same, in their shoes.

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The others will find them dead and drained in the morning, and it'll mean another story added to the legend of the Vampire Walker.

By then I'll be a thousand miles away, wearing a different face, and different clothes. And that group will be happy they survived the night with me. But they'll all tell a different lie around another fire tomorrow night.

THE END.

THE SECRET  
OF  
GREENWOOD

SUSAN E  
ROGERS

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Mari squinted through the trees from the back deck of the house, but couldn't see anything except the dark trunks standing sentinel along the perimeter of the yard. Even the mid-day sunlight didn't penetrate the forest of high-canopied oak and ash. She leaned against the railing and crossed her arms.

"It could be dangerous in there, especially when it gets dark."

"That's why we're going to mark the path now, during daylight. When we're with Cara and Beth later, we'll know exactly where we're going. Come on."

Ally waved the plastic bag filled with fluorescent orange ribbons and started off toward the trees at the edge of her backyard. Mari straightened up, shrugged, and trudged after her. The overnight camp out in the woods in her backyard was Ally's idea as a fun way to celebrate Cara's birthday. Cara and Beth agreed right away, but a queasy feeling settled in the pit of Mari's stomach.

She wasn't afraid of the woods, really, just didn't like being in unfamiliar places. Even though she grew up in Jenson, the next town over, Greenwood was a mystery to her. Her parents never came here when she was a kid, or even drove through that she could remember. Nobody in her family ever talked about Greenwood, and she never knew anybody who lived here until she met her friends in college. As far as she was concerned, Greenwood didn't exist. And now, she was about to spend the night in the woods here.

"Wait up," Mari called and started to jog.

Ally stopped and looked back, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

"Let's go. What are you waiting for?"

The women stepped across the line where the grass gave

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way to the underbrush and, like walking through a portal, the world around them changed. The warm sunshine vanished and cool shadow took its place. Mari squinted now to focus her vision in the dim light. The smell of warm chlorine from the pool gave way to a mingling of fresh foliage and the musky-sweet smell of rotted vegetation. The air was different, too, heavier and thicker. Mari wheezed with each breath.

Ally reached up and tied an orange ribbon to the tree at the edge of the yard and then tied one on another tree across from the first.

“Can you see those okay?” She took a few steps backwards, looked at Mari, then back at the tree.

Mari nodded. “Fine. Want to give me some of those? I can tie on one side while you tie on the other.”

As they walked farther into the woods, the light became even more dim as the overhead branches grew closer and leaves blocked the light. Although Ally usually kept up a constant chatter, she was uncharacteristically quiet as they made their way along a path that only she could see. They tied about a dozen of the orange ribbons to the lower tree limbs, when Ally stopped short.

“There it is.”

She pointed to a clearing not more than twenty feet ahead and picked up her pace. Mari tied three more ribbons along the way before she reached the open area where Ally stood with her hands on her hips.

“So, what do you think?”

“Well, it’s definitely a secluded spot. If that’s what Cara wants, she should like it.”

“She’ll love it. We can set up the two tents next to each

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other right there and put the fire pit in the middle. It'll be perfect."

Mari didn't respond. Her heart beat was a bit too fast and her breath came in little gulps. She wiped her sweaty palms on the legs of her jeans as she watched Ally pick up a few small pieces of deadfall and put them in a pile near the center of the clearing. It was a lovely spot, with a soft mossy groundcover, the whispering of leaves and bushes in every imaginable shade of green, and the splashing sounds of a small stream somewhere close by. Despite all this, her skin prickled, and she wanted to run back to the house. Blood pulsed against her temples and throbbed in her ears.

"Do you want to bring everything over now?" Mari rubbed her arms and looked hopefully at her friend.

"Yeah, we might as well. We can get everything set up so all we have to do later is play."

Mari ran back through the trees, following the path of orange ribbons. For the next hour they carted the stuff Ally said they would need for the night to the clearing with a small wagon that bumped over roots and clumps, and threatened to dump the contents at every snag. Mari volunteered to lug the wagon back and forth while Ally unpacked the equipment, set up the tents and coolers, and opened the four camp chairs around the fire pit.

By the time Mari brought the last load of tote bags filled with snacks, paper plates, and bottles of wine, Ally had everything ready. Sleeping bags and pillows were laid out, two in each tent. The coolers, with a layer of ice packs in the bottom, were set up to the right of the tents. One of those portable fire pits was centered in the clearing a few feet away and four folding lounge chairs were open around the pit. Mari plopped in one of the chairs as her friend checked through



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the bags of snacks and put the wine in one of the coolers.

“You know what’s weird?” Mari tilted her head to one side and listened. “I don’t hear any birds. You’d think there’d be birds chirping away out here.”

She flinched at the glare Ally threw at her. “I can’t help it if there’s no birds. Birds are a nuisance anyway. We don’t need them around here.”

“Um, okay then. I was just making an observation.” Mari winced and leaned back into the lounge.

Ally turned away without another word. Mari listened for a minute and frowned before she got up and wandered over to where her friend was picking up sticks and branches for the fire pit.

“Want me to help?”

“Sure. You can never have enough firewood.”

Ally smiled as though the previous exchange between them never happened. Mari shook her head and decided to let the whole topic of birds drop. They spent the next twenty minutes gathering wood. Two sizeable stacks sat next to the fire pit when they were done.

“I’ll set the wood for the fire.”

Ally got down on her knees and started to sort through the pieces of wood for what she wanted. She looked up at Mari who stood and watched.

“There’s nothing else left to do. You can go back to the house if you want.”

“I was going to wait until you were done and we could go back together.”

“I don’t need you to wait for me. Just go.”

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The last words sounded harsh, and Mari bit her tongue.

“Fine.”

She turned around and stomped her way toward the path to the house. She was only a few feet away when the clearing disappeared behind her, hidden by the trees. Mari muttered under her breath and wiped a tear away before it fell down her cheek. She walked on for a couple of minutes and thought she followed the ribbons, but when she looked ahead into the trees, she couldn't see any. A glance over her shoulder showed nothing but empty branches in the dim light that had turned gray since she left Ally at the clearing.

A shiver ran down her spine. There were no ribbons anywhere that she could see. Her heartbeat fluttered and her breathing came in short gasps. She stood still and closed her eyes, taking slow, deep breaths. Once her body calmed, she pivoted in a slow circle and peered through the trees in every direction. From the left, a flicker caught her attention, and she headed toward it. A cat jumped out of the shadows. Mari stepped back, stumbled over a protruding root, and fell on her butt in a pile of leaves and twigs.

The cat mewed, sat on its haunches, and licked its paw.

“Aw, just a sweet, harmless cat. Here, kitty, kitty.”

Mari held out her hand and made kissing noises. The cat hesitated and then ran over to her, rubbing up against her legs. She petted the soft fur, picked it up, and snuggled her nose into its neck. It smelled like the forest around them, earthy and fresh at the same time. The cat was an orange tiger, and its alternating stripes rippled like the ribbons in the trees.

The cat jumped out of her arms and took off into the brush. Its color popped out here and there through the leaves

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and Mari followed after it. She chased the orange flashes through the woods until she reached the trees at the edge of Ally's yard. Her breath was ragged, and she propped herself against a smooth slender trunk as she looked to her left and saw the ribbons waving from the branches. She felt the cat rub against her legs.

"Thanks, kitty."

She reached down to pet the cat, but it was nowhere in sight. The noise of something crashing through the underbrush startled her, and she turned to see Ally coming toward her.

"Hey," Ally called out. "I thought you'd be back at the house by now." She stopped to catch her breath.

"Um, I was just checking out the trees here near the yard."

"Oh. Well, I guess we're all set. Cara and Beth will be here at five, so you can go home and come back then."

Mari followed her onto the deck and into the house. Ally got two bottles of water from the refrigerator and handed one to Mari.

"Thanks." Mari unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. "So, what's your cat's name?"

"What cat? I don't have a cat." Ally wrinkled her eyebrows.

"There was an orange tiger cat wandering in the woods. Really friendly. I thought it was yours."

"Nope. Not mine. Never saw it before." Ally shuddered.

Mari looked out the back slider. A bit of orange flashed, and she saw the cat lying in the branch of a tree, flicking its

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tail. She decided not to say anything. She glanced at her watch.

“It’s 1:45 now. I’m going home for lunch, and maybe take a nap. I doubt we’ll get much sleep tonight.”

Ally chuckled. “You’re probably right about that.”

“Okay, I’ll be back about five.”

Ally walked her to the front door and waved as Mari headed toward her car parked in the driveway.

\* \* \*

Nobody was home when she got there, and Mari hurried in the back door to the kitchen. She went to clean up, then poured some iced tea and took a long drink from the sweaty glass, the bitter scent of the tea tickling her nose. She grabbed what she needed from the refrigerator to make a salad and dumped it on the counter. Before she started to chop the vegetables, she hit the icon for her mother’s number and put the phone on speaker.

“Hey, Honey. So where were you off to so early this morning on your day off?” her mother asked.

“Ally and I were setting up for Cara’s birthday tonight. We’re camping out at Ally’s house.”

“That sounds like fun. Where does Ally live?”

“Greenwood.”

There was complete silence from the phone, and Mari stopped what she was doing to make sure the call hadn’t dropped.

“Mom? You still there?”

The noise of something metal clattering to the floor made Mari cringe.

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“Mom, what’s the matter? Are you all right?”

“I... I thought... Did you say Greenwood?” Her mother’s voice was trembling.

“Yes, that’s where Ally lives. We’re all spending the night at her house.”

“No. No–no–no.” She spit out each word.

“What’s wrong with Greenwood?”

“Please don’t go there.” Her mother’s voice was an octave lower than usual and a slight snarl curled in the back of her throat.

“Mom, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, honey.”

“What is it? You have to tell me, Mom.”

“Look, I can’t talk about it over the phone. We’ll discuss it tonight and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I won’t be home tonight. I’m going to Ally’s with Cara and Beth.”

“Please don’t go there, Mari. Please, for me,” Her mother pleaded.

“Just tell me why.”

There was a long pause before her mother answered. “Our kind doesn’t belong in Greenwood. Greenwood belongs to them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What do you mean by our kind? And who is them?” Mari shook her head at her mother’s vague answers.

“Mari, I’ve got to go now. Please don’t go to

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Greenwood. Stay home tonight and I'll tell you everything, okay?"

The phone went dead in her hand. Her mother sounded like a crazy woman. She'd never heard her talk like that before, and Mari had no idea what any of it meant. She was a grown woman and wasn't going to stay home just because of some weird idea her mother had. They could have their talk tomorrow.

She went upstairs to her room to take a nap before she went to Ally's. The curtains on the open window billowed in and out from the afternoon breeze. She started to drift off almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, but a thud roused her with a start. A glimmer of orange flickered in the window and instantly disappeared. The image of the cat from the woods this morning suddenly came into Mari's mind, and she smelled the earthy scent of its fur. She shook her head, closed her eyes, and fell right to sleep.

\* \* \*

### *Welcome to Greenwood.*

The green road sign punctuated Mari's thoughts as she drove by. During the entire trip to Ally's house, all she could think of was the warning her mother gave her on the phone. Mom didn't know anything about Mari's friends, and she usually never judged anyone. Mari didn't understand it at all, but she wasn't going to miss out on Cara's birthday for some weird prejudice. They could sort it out tomorrow.

Beth's car was parked in Ally's driveway when Mari arrived. She could hear voices from behind the house, so she wandered across the lawn to the backyard. The three of them were dangling their feet in the pool, talking and laughing. They didn't notice her right away, and she gasped at the sight of them together, with what looked like wings flapping

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around them. Mari closed her eyes and shook her head, their chatter sounding like a raucous caw-caw,

“Mari,” Beth called in her normal voice. “Hurry up. We’re waiting for you.”

Cara laughed at that, and Ally sprayed a mouthful of the water she was drinking into the air. Beth sat between them and nudged them both with her elbows. Mari noticed how much alike the three of them looked, from their long dark hair banded with blonde highlights to their pointed noses and round dark eyes. She shivered, but tried to giggle along with their laughs.

Ally stood up and toweled off her feet. “I say we get this party started.”

“Yeah, happy birthday to me.” Cara put on her sneakers and danced around the edge of the pool, high-stepping across the pavers and flapping her arms.

Mari wondered if she really knew these women. She went to college with them for four years and shared a dorm room with Beth, but she didn’t remember them ever acting so strangely before. She sighed. Maybe it was just the Friday night mood and the chance to hang out and party with no responsibilities for the night, a sense of freedom none of them had very often these days.

“Well, then, let’s go. Everything’s already set up and waiting for us at the clearing. Mari and I did that this afternoon,” said Ally as she rolled down the legs of her jeans and slipped her feet into her shoes.

“Well, what are we waiting for. Let’s go,” said Beth who took off toward the woods.

“Follow the orange ribbons,” Ally called out and started off behind her.

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Cara grabbed Mari's hand, and they ran to catch up with the others. When they arrived at the clearing, her body responded with the shivers. She felt the vibrations rise from the ground and travel from her feet up to her head, where the blood danced around her temples. She grabbed the arm of a chair and fell into it while she waited for these feelings to subside.

Ally took sub sandwiches from the cooler and handed one to each of them. Mari grabbed a paper plate and dumped out a mound of potato chips to go with her sandwich. Maybe some food would help. She hadn't eaten anything but that salad all day.

"What do you want to drink? Water? Wine?"

"I think I'll have water for now and save the wine for later," Mari said.

"Me too." Beth chimed in from behind her.

After she handed out the drinks, Ally kneeled at the side of the firepit. She held a butane lighter to the pieces of sandwich wrapping and newspaper stuffed between the pieces of wood. They caught instantly, igniting the kindling. The women settled into their chairs spaced around the firepit and a peaceful calm spread over them as they ate. They chatted about work, shopping, and the men they dated recently. Mari began to think she imagined things earlier until she turned and caught Ally staring at her with a sneer on her face. Mari shifted her position in the chair and pretended she didn't notice.

"So, Mari," Cara said. "Did you ever live in Greenwood?"

"Um, no. Always in Jenson. What about you?"

"Oh, the three of us have always been in Greenwood.



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Seems like forever. Right, ladies?” Cara cackled and the other two women joined in.

“What’s so funny?” Mari felt uncomfortable again.

“Not a thing, girlfriend. Not a thing.” Cara snorted under her breath.

“So you never heard the stories about the monsters in these woods?” Beth asked.

“Monsters? No. What kind of monsters?” Mari leaned back and scrunched up her face.

“Like giant birds with glowing eyes and long sharp talons. They steal people and stash them away in their nests, never to be seen again.”

*Maybe this was why her mother didn’t want her to come to Greenwood—they’re all crazy.* Mari shook her head. “That sounds creepy. Did you ever see one?”

All three of them looked at each other and laughed. Ally got up. “I think it’s time for some wine.”

She took the bottles from the cooler, opened them, and started to pour with her back to the group. Beth stood up and moved the chairs around so Mari couldn’t see what Ally was doing until she returned to the circle. Ally handed Mari a plastic cup filled with a deep red liquid.

Mari sniffed the wine and brought it to her lips to take a sip. A tangy, rich flavor of berries flowed over her tongue and around her mouth. She took another sip and then another. She lifted the cup to her mouth again, but it was empty. Mari frowned and looked overhead at the leaf canopy. Her vision seemed a little blurred but she could see the sky beyond was dark, too dark. A single star flickered through the leaves. It had been only five o’clock when she joined the others in

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the backyard, but somehow without her being aware, hours passed and it was now full night.

Mari brought her gaze back to the fire and was instantly mesmerized. Flares jumped three feet into the air and then fell back into the pit to devour more wood. Fingertips of flame curled around the logs, shoving them whole into an insatiable maw that chewed them to bits and spit them back out as sparks.

Cara sat beside her, took her hand in a fierce grip, and laughed at her. That awful cawing rasped against Mari's nerves and jolted her from her trance. Beth grabbed her other hand, and the two women half-led, half-dragged Mari to stand by the fire and left her there.

The blaze flared in the pit and Mari peered across to the other side. Her three friends sat on the ground huddled together, holding hands. The flames reflected in their eyes, which now were solid black orbs. The bottom of each nose fused with dark lips, swollen and pursed, that protruded from their puffed-out cheeks. Their voices mumbled strange syllables in an eerie harmony, and Mari was sure she heard the raspy caw-caw woven through the song. She tried to move, but her legs had no strength. Her heart rapped in staccato beats against her breast as her skin reddened in the heat from the flames. The chanting stopped with an abrupt croak and all three pairs of eyes glared at her.

"It's almost time," Ally said, never taking the beads of her eyes off Mari. "You two share that tent. Mari's with me. Let's go."

Mari had no choice but to do what she was told, like her body was under Ally's control. Her legs moved beneath her toward the tent. Mari's thoughts streamed through her brain.

*What are they going to do to me? I should have listened to Mom.*

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*OMG, they look like birds. What was in that wine? Are they the bird monsters? Will they take me to their nest? Somebody help me. Please.*

The only sound she could make was a soft mewling. Her mouth wouldn't work and her tongue felt too long as it ran across sharp teeth that seemed wrong in her mouth. Her fingers were stiff and stubby and her knees bent backwards. Her head was spinning as she stumbled across the clearing toward the tent where Ally waited for her, unable to change direction. When she reached the entrance, Ally shoved her inside and climbed in after her.

"Don't think you can get away. I'll be with you every second," Ally said as she zipped the flap closed. "Sit."

Mari eased herself down on one of the sleeping bags and Ally plopped on the other one.

"This isn't funny, Ally."

"It's not supposed to be funny. It's very serious."

"What's serious? I don't understand what's going on."

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough. As soon as midnight gets here in..." She looked at her watch. "Twenty minutes."

"Wh... what happens at midnight?"

Ally ignored her. Mari's whole body trembled and she couldn't stop her teeth from chattering. She had no concept of how much time passed, as she fidgeted with the zipper on her sleeping bag. Loud thuds and screeching came from the next tent. Ally couldn't sit still and scratched at her arms and legs constantly. As Mari watched, small black bumps popped out all over Ally's skin.

A loud caw-caw came from outside. Ally jumped up and whipped open the zipper on the tent flap. Through the opening, Mari saw two figures silhouetted against the glare

## Campfire Tales

of the blaze. Ally ran out to join them and the three began to whirl and spin around the fire, as they sang that same strange harmony. Their dancing became more frenetic as the song rose in pitch and the wildness of the tempo increased with the crackling percussion of the flames.

Something crashed into Mari and knocked her on her back. The earthy smell of rotted wood filled the tent. She tried to scream but a heaviness on her chest wouldn't let her draw in enough breath. She raised her head and the orange cat blinked back at her, sprawled across her chest. A part-smile curled one corner of Mari's mouth and she reached out to touch the soft fur. The cat jerked its head and sank its sharp teeth into the fold of skin between her thumb and forefinger.

“Oww!”

Mari's hand flew straight to her mouth, and she sucked the blood from the wound.

“Why did you do that?” Mari whispered.

She reached out again and this time the cat licked the wound on her hand, its rough tongue scraping the tender skin. The cat lifted its paw and Mari held out her upturned hand. The cat lashed out with claws extended and raked her palm. Blood oozed from the four slashes. Before Mari could react, the cat ran its tongue across the wounds and jumped at her face, smearing the blood across her mouth.

“Yow!”

Mari licked her lips and scowled. The cat blinked again and jumped down, escaping under the side of the tent just as Ally pulled back the flap in front.

“It's time. Let's go.”

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Mari gasped. Ally's skin was covered with tiny black feathers that undulated in the air with her every movement. Her voice was changed, too, deeper and harsh. Mari stared at her face. The nose and forehead were flattened and her eyes seemed farther apart. Her lips swelled three times their normal size and pointed straight out.

"What happened to you?" Mari cried out.

"Just my true self coming out."

Ally laughed and grabbed Mari's arm to yank her to a standing position. She turned to drag her through the flap, but stopped and sniffed.

"What's that smell?" Ally tilted her head to the left and right.

"What? I don't smell anything."

"Smells like... Was there a cat in here?"

"No, of course not. How could a cat get in here?" Mari lied by instinct.

Ally sniffed one more time, then pulled on Mari's arm. "Let's go."

Mari pulled back and batted at Ally's face, but the woman was too strong. Mari stumbled and tripped as Ally laughed and pulled her through the opening toward the fire. In the glare of the flames, Beth and Cara looked as grotesque as Ally did. Tears welled up in Mari's eyes and her body shook in spasms. Her friends were morphing into birds and she was their prey.

"Stand here."

Ally positioned Mari inside a square outlined with sticks on the ground and moved next to the other two. Mari took

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two steps and Ally reached out to pull her back.

“I said stand there.”

“Please, why are you doing this to me? I thought we were all friends.” Mari’s voice wavered as she looked at each of them with wide eyes.

Beth took a step forward and put her feathered arm around Mari’s shoulder. “It’s nothing against you, Mari.” Her voice was low and crooning. “Once a year at midnight on this date, we have to make a blood sacrifice to the sky god in order to keep our bird selves secret and maintain our human bodies. Ally picked you this year. I’m so sorry. Really. But we have no choice. It’s the way of the Greenwood.”

Beth pecked at Mari’s cheek gently and squeezed her shoulder before she stepped back to join Ally and Cara. Mari felt the energy of the earth tingling against her feet. The hairs on her arms stood up in the electrified air.

The three closed in and the round beads of their eyes focused on Mari. The feathers on their bodies grew longer and thicker, as black as coal. The chanting grew louder with harsh squawks. While they chanted, their lips extended into long, pointed beaks. They danced in circles that twirled and twisted around Mari. Their arms turned to wings that waved jagged patterns in the air and their feet became clawed talons.

Mari was stunned into silence, suspended in a stupor while watching the horrific transformation of the three women who had been her friends. Her legs were paralyzed and her feet frozen to the ground, but even so, she had nowhere to go, with the fire at her back and the three bird women around her. A tear tracked down her cheek and she whimpered. The bird figures were indistinguishable now, identical in their darkness. One leaned in and pecked at her neck with its beak. She dodged out of the way only to feel another on the opposite

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side pinch her arm.

They were all on her at once, pecking and biting. She wriggled and twisted to avoid their attack, covered her face with her arms and kicked out to push them away. Nothing she did deterred them. She heard cloth rip and saw a tear in the side of her t-shirt. A thin line of blood oozed from the skin beneath it. A beak grabbed at her hair and yanked. She ducked and tried to butt them away but they were too close.

Something soft circled around her ankle and Mari looked down to see the orange cat as it ran its paws along her skin. She flinched and swerved her head as a beak lunged toward her eyes. The ground thrummed beneath her feet, and the cat continued to bat at her legs, drumming a beat into her body in time with the earth's vibrations. Weird tingles coursed up through her nerves and pulsed in her fingers and toes. Her nose filled with the cat's earthy smell.

Mari felt suspended in time as she watched the hair on her arms grow into thick orange fur. A soft pelt covered her legs and torso. Her ears shifted position and changed shape, while silken whiskers grew from the sides of her nose. She felt a pop from her lower back and a tail flicked through the air behind her.

The bird monsters were caught up in their own frenzy, pecking, chattering, swirling and flapping around Mari and the fire. A sudden yowl broke over their noise and filled the woods around them, rising to a crescendo that halted the birds' hysteria. A bolt of orange erupted from between the trees and bowled into the three of them, knocking them to the ground. The cat was transformed too, into a large wild beast, tiger-like in size and power. Mari, in similar cat form, leaped into the skirmish, landing on the back of one bird. The monster shrieked and flapped her wings to rid herself of her attacker, but Mari was stronger and held her captive.

## Campfire Tales

The smell of singed feathers and fur filled the air as clumps of black and orange were tossed high and fell back into the fire with sizzles and pops. Screams erupted into the night. Claws and talons ripped through skin and flesh. The struggle rang with the rage of ancient rites and sacred battles.

Mari stood panting over the body of the bird that was finally still and looked to the side. The enormous orange cat was a few feet away, sniffing at the other two birds prone on the ground. All that remained of the fire was a pile of glowing embers. Black feathers littered the carpet of moss and grass. One tent was collapsed. Chairs and coolers were flung across the clearing. Branches stretched black into the sky, which had lightened to charcoal in anticipation of the dawn.

Mari's tail swished as she stepped away from the body. The orange tiger followed and the two of them sauntered away from the firepit and toward the trees. As the energy from the center of the clearing subsided, Mari felt her body returning to its normal form. She plopped cross-legged to the ground and watched the orange fur recede along her arms and legs. Her ears returned to their position. The whiskers were gone. Her fingers extended to their human length, and she felt her tail retract into the base of her spine.

Now that she considered it, she had to admit that this transformation didn't surprise her at all. The process felt natural to her, and she wondered why the change had never happened before. The orange cat, no longer the colossal beast, wove between her ankles and mewed when she looked down. Mari reached out and scratched behind its ears. The cat jumped into her lap and snuggled, rubbing its head against her arms.

Mari and the cat sat together and waited. An occasional moan issued from one of the birds, but they didn't waken. As the sky grew lighter, the three of them began the return to



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their human bodies. Feathers fell away and the black follicles eased back to smooth skin. Their facial muscles smoothed, the beaks dwindled to the original lips and noses, and eyes twitched beneath closed lids. As the sun peeked over the horizon, the cat jumped from her lap and Mari stood and walked toward the women lying near the firepit filled with cold ash. She stared at them for a few minutes, as the cat slinked between the battered and bruised bodies, sniffing and poking.

The sun shone through the branches overhead and threw dappled shadows over the clearing. A light breeze rustled the leaves. She picked up her clothes from the piles strewn across the clearing and dressed in her torn shirt and jeans. This battle might be won, but Mari knew there would be more to come. She had a lot of questions for her mother. She gathered the cat in her arms and headed for the orange ribbons.

“Come on, kitty. Let’s go home.”

THAT OF  
WHICH WE  
SHOULD NOT  
SPEAK

J. ROCKY  
COLAVITO

## Campfire Tales

My nightly ramblings usually take me deeper and deeper into the bayou, a wondrous place where you can hear a symphony of alligator growls, the splashing of nutria, the calls of night birds, and the trilling of thousands of different kinds of insects. Spanish moss that festoons the trees makes for an excellent facsimile of a reed, creating musical overlay on windy nights. The different smells make for an olfactory gumbo, mostly pleasant, occasionally not when the wind blows just right over the gnawed bodies of creatures that ended up being a predator's meal.

And when there are different smells and sounds, one tends to take notice. I know I do. And on one night, the sounds and smells were particularly pungent.

I came upon the three men huddled around a campfire on a dry bank near the fork of one of the bayou's many tributaries. Their pirogue was pulled up onto the muddy part of the bank and lashed to the stump of a fallen cypress. I secreted myself within the curtains of Spanish moss. Supplemented by darkness, I was nearly invisible. I was close enough to smell the fire and hear its crackling. I could see the three men were three generations, grandfather, father, and son, probably seventy, fifty, and thirty if you were keeping track of ages. Fancy rifles lay on the ground by their sides, far enough from the campfire to avoid being set off. They were dressed similarly, wader overalls with waffled long sleeved t-shirts underneath, ball caps announcing their being fans of the football team at the local mega-versity, and black gum boots. The pile of empty beers cans indicated they'd probably been here awhile. They were currently passing around a clear glass jug. I got a whiff of badly made moonshine.

Moonshine is a marvelous creation, especially when it's prepared right. This batch wasn't, but it still served its purpose. It loosened tongues and inhibitions, and these three

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were deep in conversation about a local legend.

“Lucien, I am tellin’ da trut.” The oldest man slurred as he took a swig and passed the jug to the youngest. “Dere is sumptin’ dat lives in dis here bayou, sumptin’ dat everyting fears. It’s our dere somewhere, maybe feedin’, maybe matin’, maybe searchin’ . . .

“Paw, you done tole dat story since I was a boy, it gets stranger ever time you tell it. What it be dis time? Da one where de ting gives maman gator de ride of her life, and den comes back when de baby ready to hatch so’s he can have supper? Or mebbe de one where he carries off de most beautiful woman at de dance and makes her his wife?” This from the middle-aged man, who took the shine jug from the one called Lucien.

“Pawpaw, I heard all da stories not only from you, but from does rifferaff that hand around de bait shop porch. Pere mal Fait is ten foot tall, dey say, it’s a cross between a gorilla and a gator, wit de head of a snapping turtle. It can swallow a hunting dog whole. It . . .”

“Hold yer tongue, boy; I’s e ‘bout to tell you de biggest secret of all, sumptin’ I swore to never tell anyone, not even my son.” I saw as the man he’d referred to cast a weird look his father’s way.

“If dis is dat craziness about how mama disappeared again, I am not gonna let you have any more of dis here shine.” The man growled as he pulled the jug away from his father’s reach.

The eldest man waved a hand as if shooing away a swamp fly. “No, dat is sumptin’ people already know as gospel, even da preacher accepts it. Folks of my generation still give me a sympaty ever now and den. Dis is sumptin’ diffrint; dis is sumptin’ I have carried wit me ever since it happint

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years ago, when I was a little younger den Lucien. I'm de last one knows what really happint, everyone else is crazy or dead."

"Den why are you spillin' de secret; if it's sumptin' dat you're not s'posed to share?" the youngest man asked.

I lean forward, taking care not to give my presence away; I want to hear the answer myself.

"Becuz you bot know dat I have de cancer, and dat dem doctors can do nuttin' for me 'cept pump me full a doze chemicals that make me trow up. Dis is impotent enuf to share so if de circumstances comes around agin, someone will know how to deal wit it."

"Pawpaw, you might give yourself a little longer if you do what de doctors tell you."

"No, don't want to go to de hospital just to die dere; de bed I shared wit your memaw will be just fine. Her spirit sleeps beside me. Now, gimme anuter drink a dat shine, and you will hear de secret. You bot can decide if you want to believe it or not. But telling you means I dun my job."

The young one, Lucien, takes the jug from the one I presume to be his father and hands it to his grandfather, who quaffs so deeply that, when he takes the jug away, he goes into a coughing fit. He hawks a bit of phlegm into the fire and it pops, creating a larger puff of flame.

"Like I sed, dis happen when I was younger den Lucien. Dis group of friends and I raised so much hell de devil took notes. We was a crazy bunch, grown-ups still actin like kids, doin' stupid tings, raisin' all kinds of mischief." He pauses to take another drink. "We decided to do a ghost hunt in de bay-ou 'round Halloween time; a bunch of us, your memaw included. We borrowed a bunch uh pirogues, had your memaw

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and sum a de oter girls sweet talk old man Treschon out of a barrel of beer, and headed out into de swamp. We brought torches, Trey Landry had a pistol, most uh de rest of us had knives, your memaw had a fancy switchblade—remember it, Troy, how you almost cut your fingers off playing wit it?”

The middle-aged man grumbled and verified the memory.

The young man threw some more branches on the fire to keep it fed. I could feel its heat from my hiding place.

“We went deeper into duh swamp den anyone had ever been. De darkness seemed alive, clawing at de light de torches made, tryin’ tuh catch and strangle it. De deeper we go, de quieter it gets, soon dere’s no sound oter den what we put out. Little by little, our fol de rol stops, and soon all we here is duh beatin’ of our hearts and our own heavy breatin.’ Your memaw was de first to suggest dat we head back. We shoulda lissint.”

The old man took another drink of the shine; this time he couldn’t handle the taste and spit it into the fire. The liquid whoomped and the flames reached higher.

“De tree pirogues bumped into each oter, de darkness ate de torch light to almot nuttin;’ we had no idear where we wert. Dat’s when it happint.”

“Sumptin’ surged up out de water and captized one o de pirogues. De people in it was screamin,’trashin’, nearly captized de boat your memaw and I was in. Trey Landry started firin ‘his pistol; he usually couldn’t hit nuttin,’ he shot two people in de water in de head, and anuter in the pirogue he was in. Sombudy grabbed Troy and dey fell overboard. Dat’s when we saw it.”

“Sumptin’ big surged up out de water like a gator; it had

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Troy and dis oter kid, Beauchamp, I tink. It had dem by the scruff uh de neck and was shakin' dem like nutria. We heard dere necks snap and den de ting bit dem in two. Pieces uh dem were fallin' off and floatin' in de water. It trew de pieces aside and grabbed de oter pirogue."

The old man pauses again but doesn't take a drink. He's beset upon by a coughing fit. Loud, phlegm ridden honks echo.

"Here, pawpaw, let me help you." Lucien rises and whacks his pawpaw on the back. It loosens whatever was stuck and it flies into the campfire. I hear the sizzle and get a slight whiff of something foul before it evaporates.

"Tank you, Lucien, where was I, oh, it had de secont pirogue, four people in dat one after Troy and Beauchamp went into de ting's mout. It lifted de full pirogue fulla scream-in' kids over its head like it was nuttin. It brought de boat down level wit its chest and started squeezing. It collapsed de sides inward like a tin can, squishin' de kids in it together. Dey couldn't move. It smiled, turned de pirogue over, and dumped it into de water upside down. It pulled a foot out of de water and pressed down, submerging de boat. We saw bubbles at de surface, den dey disappeart."

The old man continued; "Duh ting was nuttin' like de stories you hear-t; it was easily ten foot tall and cover-t wid de moss, it looked like dat—what you call it, da ting you wear huntin' when you want to blend in with grass—a ghillie suit, but one with bright sharp teeth like a saw blade, and dese claws dat could stick right trew you and come out your back."

The old man shuddered and continued.

"And red eyes, four o dem!"

Lucien looked at his father, who surreptitiously drew

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circles around the side of his head.

“Dat left me, your memaw, Dempsey LeGasse, and Gavin Guidry. Dere girlfriends had been smart enough to not want to come. Da ting grabbed our pirogue and looked like it was goin’ tuh trow us into de water, too. It leant towards us, close enough tuh smell its breat. Sick smell, like every bit uh deat dat you can find in de bayou. Its mout was wide and opent like dis.” The man put his hands together and demonstrated. “He could fit any one of us in dere if it wanted. But it dint; it did sumptin’ worse.”

The father and son leaned forward to hear the secret.

“It curst duh four of us; it told us its story, all de horrors it experienced, all de terror it caused, all de power it held, and all de tings dat were yet to happen to us dat we cun’t control.” He had another coughing fit, the worst of all.

I knew the source, and it wasn’t the cancer.

The father and son went to the coughing man’s side, trying different methods to help him bring up whatever was causing the fit. He brought up a mass of liquid and debris.

“What de hell; paw, what is dis?”

“It looks like swamp water; dere’s insects in it. Oh sweet baby Jesus, dey’s alive!”

Both men looked at the mass; black specks were leisurely swimming through it.

The old man shuddered again and coughed up another mass; this one tinged with red.

“We got to get him outa here!” The man called Lucien yelled. He pulled the old man to his feet and started to drag him toward the pirogue.



## Campfire Tales

I decided it was best to reveal myself. So, I did.

The two men screamed; Lucien dropped his grandfather when I revealed myself.

“It’s real.” The middle-aged man said as he fell to his knees.

“You have a talent for stating the obvious; of course, I’m real. And,” I grin my most scary grin, “I’m hungry.”

The old man falls to his knees; Lucien faces me, a placid look on his face.

I look at him, he seems familiar.

“You do not fear me?” I ask, ignoring the prayers uttered by the two older men.

“No, sir. I don’t.”

“Why do you call me sir?”

“I was raised to be respectful of my elders.”

“Then why are you here; don’t you respect the warnings?”

He gestures at the prostrate men, “Dey’re my elders, too; dey told me tuh come wit dem.”

I nod; the young man has a proper perspective.

He looks at me inquisitively; like he is cataloguing everything he can observe. He fixes on my face, such as it is.

“Why do I interest you?” I ask Lucien.

“Becuz I tink I know you. From a long time ago.”

A flash of memory cleaves my mind; and I suddenly know why Lucien is familiar.

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Lucien reminds me.

“Long time ago, when I was not even seven years old, I disobeyt my maw and paw and took a pirogue into de swamp. It started raining, and I got lost. Den, I lost one of de paddles. I screamt myself hoarse, but nobody came, except you.”

“I remember, the look on your face was thankful, not scared. You tried to tell me where to take you, but it was too dark and late. You had to spend the night with me.” I say.

“Yes, you showed me how to start a fire, even doh I knewt it might hurt you; you showed me how to catch de rain for water to drink, and you helpt me catch a catfish wit my bare hands. Dat was de best catfish I’ve ever hat.”

“Do you remember the stories I told you before you fell asleep?”

“All of dem; I wrote dem down when I should have been doin’ my schoolwork. I have dem in a buncha notebooks, duh kind wit de hard black and white cover.”

Lucien’s father and grandfather have stopped praying and are looking on incredulously.

My manner turns grave: “Do you remember what I foretold of for you?”

The young man tries to hold back tears and fails. “It is why we are here tonight.”

The old man understands; the middle-aged man doesn’t.

“It was de answer to de riddle you tol.” The old man gasps out.

Lucien nods, tears streaking his face.

“What de hell is goin’ on here-t?” The middle-aged man asks, rising to his feet. I can sense his mind calculating if he

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can grab one of the guns with a dive.

“You can’t.” I tell him.

“I cain’t what?” He’s belligerent; trying to cover his fear.

“Even if you could grab one of the guns, the shot would just go right through me.”

“What about de fire?” he asks.

“I’m waterlogged, it might singe me a little, and make me angrier. That would probably extend your death throes a bit.”

“Det trows? What de hell are you talkin’ bout?”

“De answer to de riddle, son.” The old man says shakily.

“What riddle?”

I tell him. “3 men, two fathers and two sons, go into the swamp, one father and son do not come back. Two men leave the swamp; how is that possible?”

“Is dat de new math? Only one man, come back!”

Lucien breaks the news. “I’m sorry father; you are the sacrifice to sate his wrath.”

The middle-aged man looks at his son, not believing what he heard.

“I’m sorry, too, son.” The old man’s voice is garbled with phlegm.

The middle-aged man shakes his head in disbelief. “Haven’t I bin good tuh you bot?”

“When you felt like it; when you wern’t drinkin’ up your paycheck, or when you wern’t too busy chasin’ dem road-house floozies. Maw died from a brokin’ hart.” Lucien blubbers.

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“I gave you bot a good home; let you bot back in when you had hardt times. Got you help from de doctor when you needt it. Fed y’all . . .” I hold up a hand and stop his filibuster. His mouth moves; he grabs at his throat, but he’s lost his voice.

“Are you both ready for the ritual?” I ask the two men.

Lucien nods and he and his grandfather fall to their knees.

My voice deepens as I recite the prayer; they chant each line:

Under cover of the night

A father will sacrifice a son, and a son will sacrifice a father

This offering to the swamp

To balance the scales

As nature giveth

Nature must reclaim

We do this so that the balance remains.

I reach out and embrace the middle-aged man and squeeze. My form flows over him, starting with his gum boot-ed feet. He offers no resistance, resigned to his fate. I sense a small bit of comfort driving the fear from his mind. In his own way, the man understands his place in the equation, and by the time he is fully encased in the matter of my form, he is at peace.

I look to the other two men; Lucien helps his grandfather rise. The old man’s cough has subsided.

“Go in peace, my children. You have the story straight,

## Campfire Tales

right?”

“He fell overboard and de gator got him.” The old man says.

“And you remember what you need to do?”

“I have already passed it on to someone in de community; a single man with no mother whose father is an unbeliever.” Lucien says.

“And I have told de father’s father. Your mark is upon both. Dey will see you in a year’s time.”

“It is well, you are released from your debt. Old man, you will have a peaceful death. Young man, your patience will be rewarded. But remember to make sure that your offspring know what you can tell of my story, and that they take heed of it. No man should have to bear the curse or *Pere mal Fait* more than once.”

The two men bow their heads and tend to putting out the fire; can’t have my neck of the swamp going up in flames, can we? They pick up their guns and empties, stow them in the pirogue, and cast off. They don’t look back as they disappear into the moments between night and dawn.

And, as for me, I shall retire to my sanctuary among the denizens of the swamp that have yet to show themselves, and, with a full belly, I will keep them safe, and entertained with another story of my interactions with the swamp folk.

THE MUD  
MAN

CHRISTOPHER  
DELTON

## Campfire Tales

In the west, the sun was on its way down for the evening. As the first plumes of smoke rose, they signaled the opening stages of that great childhood tradition, the camp out. The four boys scurried around the site, setting up tents, digging latrines, securing their food, preparing for an evening of revelry, and friendship. The field at the corner of Richards Avenue and West Cedar Street had served as a campground for generations of Norwalk youth. Just last summer, the Norwalk Public Library set up a historical display featuring hundreds of pictures, many of which had been shot in precisely the location where the boys were preparing to settle in. Sadly, that was all going to change next spring after the town announced they would be breaking ground and beginning construction on the future Norwalk Community College.

The June night was warm, but it was early enough in the month that the bug population was still low. The air was still and filled with the sound of raucous conversation, the kind that you can only get when a group of boys gets together.

“That’s why you’ve got to stay out of those woods.”

Tony sat and stared blankly at Jeff. He seemed like a good guy, but there was no way that a single word of that story had been factual.

“Just so I’m clear on this whole thing, you’re telling me that back there in those woods there is a man who travels in underground tunnels and that the entrances to these tunnels are marked off by wooden triangles?”

Jeff shook his head in frustration. While he, Jimmy, and Alex had grown up in Norwalk and were quite familiar with the story, Tony had just moved to town and was hearing all of this for the first time.

“That’s right, and if you step on one of those triangles, the Mud Man will come up from the ground and skin you

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alive.”

Tony looked around the campfire into the faces of the other boys. While he wasn't entirely convinced, he could tell by the look in their eyes that they genuinely believed the tale that had just been presented to him.

“Have any of you seen a single one of these triangles?”

Jimmy and Alex simultaneously shook their heads. In actuality, neither of them had even been in those woods. They weren't confident in just how much of the story had happened, but they had always considered Jeff to be a stand-up guy. They also knew that it would be a cold day in hell before either of them was going into those woods. Jeff again spoke up.

“Well, I haven't seen them, and I've spent plenty of time in those woods.” offering a display of pre-adolescent puffery.

“My brother Phil told me a story he heard from his buddy Steve. He said that a couple of years ago, he was out camping with his Boy Scout troop, and the group discovered two of them about five miles apart. On the second night of the camp-out, one of the kids went missing. When the troop found his empty sleeping bag the next morning, they searched the woods for hours before one of the Scouts hollered out in fear. Scattered about a clearing was a Scout manual, a pocket knife, and a sash covered in merit badges. In the middle was a wooden triangle. No one ever saw the missing kid again.”

Tony shook his head in disbelief.

“There's no way that happened. A kid in 1959 doesn't just disappear on a camping trip. Somebody had to have reported it.”

“I heard that the kid's parents reported it, but the police and the Boy Scouts worked together to sweep it under the



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rug to prevent a panic.” Alex piped in.

Jimmy nodded his head in enthusiastic agreement.

“And has anybody ever actually seen this Mud Man?”

“Of course they have, they just don’t live long enough to tell anyone,” Jeff stated matter-of-factly.

“All right, let’s pretend for a moment that this Mud Man story is true. Where did he come from? I mean, did he just show up one day? Can I walk into the library and find some details about this whole thing?”

“Oh, you don’t need to go to the library. Alex here can tell you the whole story, can’t you buddy?”

As Alex leaned forward into the fire, the light threw elongated shadows into the woods behind them.

“All right, so according to my uncle, he works at the library you know, the whole thing started back in April 1898. Back then, there had been a string of child abductions. Like in one month, something like ten kids had gone missing. The police had followed up on each disappearance the best they could, but you know they didn’t have the methods that they have today so there really wasn’t too much they could do. They talked to the parents and friends, posted a uniformed officer on the grounds of the primary school, and checked out all the usual places the town children would congregate, but each investigation went nowhere.”

A chill began to run down Tony’s spine, and he leaned closer to the fire.

“So all these kids go missing, and the police have no clues or leads. The town, in a show of support for the families of the lost, started a campaign insisting that the Mayor call in the state police. For weeks they were given the run-

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around, but once the son of the mayor disappeared, the investigation got a kick in the ass. Not only were the State Police called in, departments from neighboring towns like Stamford and Westport sent any spare men that were available. After just two days, the police had a suspect in mind but there was never enough to tie him to any of the crimes. According to my Uncle, supposedly the guy was a Civil War vet who came back home a bit fucked up. He had become a drunkard who, from time to time, would forget the war was over. Upon returning from the war, he settled outside of town in a mud hut back in the woods.”

Tony gazed over Jeff’s shoulder, and into the blackness that might be home to a monster.

“I heard that one winter he went out hunting with two other guys he had served with. It was a really bad season, and it was nearly four months before there was any word from the party. When the snow melted, the Mud Man walked out of those woods alone.” Jimmy interjected.

“Right right. So anyway, now that the Mayor’s kid had gone missing, they organized a manhunt, even offering \$100 to anybody who brought him in.”

“Oh man, that’s still a lot of money today, back then you’d be rich.” Jimmy offered.

“I don’t know about all that, but it certainly did push the already motivated townspeople directly into a mob mentality. So after three whole days of looking, a tosspot who had been friends with a member of the lost camping party, led the mob through the woods and back to the old man’s hut. It was night, and the torches of the mob lit the path. They found the hut, and several of the men in the party threw open the door and dragged the Mud Man out into the woods. Entering the shack, the police began ransacking, and after tossing the

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makeshift bed aside, they discovered a wooden triangle dug into the ground. Prying the lid open, they found all the evidence they needed. Down in the hole was a pile of children's clothes, several locks of hair, and what appeared to be two full sets of adult teeth."

"Did they know that the clothes or hair belonged to any of the missing children?" Tony asked.

"It didn't matter at that point. The police had found their man, and the mob was ready to dole out their means of justice. One of the vigilantes in the group clubbed the old man who fell to the ground and was quickly absorbed into the mob. The Mud Man did his best to cover up, but the fury of the crowd could not be satiated. Two men, one of whom counted their child amongst the missing, grabbed their victim from the ground and dragged him back into the hovel. The police barricaded the door, and the mob encircled the hut with a stack of kindling. Then somebody put a torch to it, and the dwelling erupted into flames. The mob fled, and it was three days before the blaze was under control. After everything had come to an end, more than twenty acres of forest were burned to ash. Upon returning to the scene, the police found no evidence of the hut and no sign of any bodies, children, and, more importantly, no evidence of what had occurred the night before. Nothing, except for a charred triangle of wood sticking out of the ground."

"So, they never found him?" Tony asked.

"That's what my uncle said. He also told me that from the time he was a kid, his mother warned him to stay out of these woods. He also said that in the sixty years since the fire, more than one hundred kids have gone missing. So far, there were no updates on any of the cases."

"Come on, that's crap!" Tony shouted. The sudden in-

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crease of noise caused Alex to jump out of his skin.

“You had me going there for a while, but there is no way that so many children go missing from one town, and not one of them has been found?. If that’s true, then this town must have the worst police department in the country.”

“Believe what you want to believe, but every kid in this town knows the story and knows that it’s not safe to go into the woods alone.”

Tony looked at Jeff and Jimmy and could see the fear in their eyes. There was no doubt in his mind that they sure believed it.

“I’m sure there is a story like this in every town. Something kids used to scare each other. I don’t buy it for a minute.”

Jeff reached into his nap sack and pulled out a flashlight.

“Tell ya what tough guy, if you don’t believe me why don’t you take this flashlight and head down that path right over there.” Jeff shined the beam to illuminate the way.

For a split second, Tony felt a tinge of fear run through his body. He had been called out by his new friends, and he certainly couldn’t risk looking like a candy ass in front of them. He snatched the flashlight from Jeff’s hand.

“So go ahead and follow that path down about a half-mile or so. Make sure to keep your eyes open and focused on the ground. Wouldn’t want you to trip over anything out there in the dark.” Jeff taunted him.

“Come on, Jeff, enough is enough. You’re not going to send him into those woods alone, are you?” Alex asked in a shaky voice.

“If there’s nothing out there, then there’s nothing for

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him to be worried about is there?” Jeff snapped back. “So what’s it going to be, Tony?”

Taking a deep breath, Tony rose from his place around the fire and headed into the woods. He could hear the crackle, and the low, whispered voices of his friends fade away as he moved deeper into the woods. The sound of branches crackled under his feet. He was about halfway down the path when he tripped and banged his knee hard into the ground. Tony felt what could only be blood running down his leg. Focusing the flashlight beam on the injury, he saw something extruding from his shin. Pulling it out, he discovered a piece of wood that may, at some point, been triangle shaped.

# THE MIRROR

CASSANDRA  
O'SULLIVAN  
SACHAR

## Campfire Tales

Looking around the crowded, stuffy antique store, Jessica sighed. “Mom, this is so boring.” She couldn’t even sit down anywhere; her mother wouldn’t let her in case she might ruin a “priceless treasure.”

“Just a few more minutes, honey, I promise,” Mrs. Macintosh said without looking at her twelve-year-old daughter. She was too busy surveying every knick-knack, chair, and lamp in the whole store.

“Like I haven’t heard that before,” Jessica muttered under her breath. Her mom was absolutely obsessed with antiques. It was bad enough that she was always dragging Jessica to every store in the state that sold old stuff, looking for items for her decorating business or their house, but now her mother was actually looking for furnishings for Jessica’s room! All of her friends had at least gotten to pick out their own furniture, but, no, not Jessica. Her mother said that the house needed to have a “universal decorating theme,” or something like that, and that meant she was pushing these nasty ancient furnishings into Jessica’s own private space.

She pushed the issue one more time, even though she knew she wouldn’t get her way. “Are you sure you have to pick out my furniture? No one even goes in my room but me, Mom. Your friends and clients don’t need to know if my stuff comes from, like, Ikea or Target.”

Her fingers caressing yet another prize, Mrs. Macintosh ignored her daughter once again. “Well? What do you think?”

As irritated as she was, Jessica had to admit that the mirror was beautiful. Large and rectangular, the glass was held in place by an intricately carved, mahogany-stained wooden frame. Jessica peered more closely to see the decorative leaves and flowers. “It’s pretty, I guess,” she grudgingly admitted.

Mrs. Macintosh beamed, her professionally whitened,

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even teeth almost glowing in the shop's dim lighting. "It's fabulous. And look at the price! This little old guy doesn't have a clue how much his antiques are worth." She lowered her voice conspiratorially, stealing a quick glance in the direction of the stooped, prune-faced man behind the cash register. "I guess he doesn't know the ins and outs of the business."

Jessica rolled her eyes behind her mother's back. She hated how her mom always gloated over finding stores where the owners were more interested in servicing their shoppers than making a quick buck. Rather than respecting their honesty, Mrs. Macintosh seemed to think she was superior to them since she knew how to squeeze every penny out of her clients. Jessica loved her mom, but she didn't understand why she was so greedy.

They walked up to the proprietor of Blackthorn Antiques. Mrs. Macintosh left the mirror where it was, feigning disinterest. "Hello?" she said, though she was right next to him. "I think there might be a mistake? I like your little mirror there, but the price seems awfully high for something that isn't by a known designer. And the condition is only fair, at best."

Jessica tried to block out the back-and-forth haggling between her mom and the little old man. It was so humiliating, hearing her mother speak to this poor soul like he was cheating her instead of the other way around. Finally, it appeared to be over, for Mrs. Macintosh bore a triumphant smile on her face.

"Young lady?" It took Jessica a moment to realize that the old man was addressing her. "Take good care of that mirror," he told her seriously in a scratchy voice. "It has a lot of history."

"Yes, sir," Jessica answered. That was what her mother



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loved, and she hated about antiques. While Mrs. Macintosh adored imagining all the people who had used the item before, Jessica thought it was kind of gross, like sharing a tissue someone else had used. Oh, well; it was just a mirror. All people had done was looked in it before. No harm there.

Later that night, after much prodding from his wife, Mr. Macintosh hung the mirror in Jessica's room. Jessica had to admit that her mother was a wonderful decorator, for the mirror looked at home amongst her other furniture. Except for the few "modern" possessions she was allowed to display, Jessica's room now looked like it could have come from a century ago with the beautiful wooden four-poster bed, dowry chest, and armoire. As much as she would have liked to display posters of her favorite singers and actors, like her other friends did, she knew her room looked magnificent.

Jessica peered into her new mirror, marveling that the glass still looked so fresh and unclouded. Her mother had once told her that mirrors often failed to survive the ages; even if the glass remained unbroken, mirrors could easily scratch or become tarnished. Yet this mirror only revealed her reflection.

Studying her long, straight dark hair and her deep set, brown, heavily lashed eyes, Jessica somehow felt prettier reflected in this mirror. Feeling obnoxious and vain, she took one last glimpse of herself and finally peeled her eyes away. Time to get ready for bed.

Suddenly, Jessica awoke. Had she heard something? What *was* that? Of course, she wasn't allowed to keep a modern, digital clock with easy-to-read, glowing numbers near her bed, and her parents took her cell phone away at night, so she didn't know what time it was, but the pitch darkness of the room told her it was late.

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Well, it was almost entirely dark. From her bed, Jessica could make out the faint sheen of the mirror's glass in the dark.

Tap. Tap, tap. Then silence.

The noise was quiet, subtle, but it still might have been what woke her. Jessica strained her ears. Where was it coming from?

Tap, tap, *tap, tap, tap!* It was getting louder.

Only when the mirror nearly shook on the wall did she realize that the noise was coming from there.

Jessica clutched her comforter tightly around her, trying not to breathe. Maybe whatever it was would stop if it didn't know she was there.

Silence again. Was her plan working?

"Jessica." The single word disturbed the calmness. Spoken in a scratchy, wheezy sigh, the voice almost made her think she was dreaming. But, no, she was wide awake, and something had stated her name. Something that was not quite human, she realized.

Jessica didn't know if she should answer or continue trying to remain unnoticed. All she knew was the taste of her own terror, bitter in her mouth. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and goose bumps broke out on her flesh.

"Come, Jessica." The voice, slightly louder and stronger by now, seemed to be coming back to life, gaining momentum.

"Go away!" she said with as much courage as she could muster, covering her ears with her hands to drown out that incessant demand. "Leave me alone!" She hoped her parents would hear her and come to the rescue. But, at twelve years

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old, she hadn't needed them in the night for years and years.

"No. You are mine now. You have gazed into the mirror," the hollow voice rasped.

A cold shiver ran down Jessica's spine. She felt helpless, trapped.

But it was just a mirror, right? As long as she kept away from it, nothing would happen. She wanted to hide under the covers, but she didn't want anything to creep up on her, just like she didn't want to look at the mirror, but she couldn't take her eyes off of it, either.

And that was when she saw the figure emerge, gray and shadowy, out of the glass. It was a woman, a young woman who might have once been beautiful. Now, with her dead, loose skin and tangled, dirty hair, she was simply horrifying. Very slowly, painfully, she oozed through the mirror until she was standing in Jessica's room.

"Come. You have gazed into the mirror," the figure said, its voice steel. "I will take you now."

Freezing in her bed, unable to move or make a sound as the terrible creature limped closer and closer, Jessica opened her mouth to scream, but no sound materialized. The rotting hands clasped her shoulders and would not let go; Jessica's struggle was of no use. The thing dragged her back to its mirror and crept back inside, no longer alone behind the glass.

Six months later, Jessica's parents finally packed up or sold their belongings and moved out. The memories of their lost daughter were too heart-wrenching to remain in their house.

The mirror ended up for sale once again. The Macintoshes couldn't even look at it; the day they bought and hung

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it was the worst day of their lives, so they wanted nothing to do with it. Mrs. Macintosh even sold it for less than she had paid—that's how much she hated the mirror, never knowing that her daughter, or at least what was left of her, resided inside.

In the back of the antique shop, the original thing, as well as the thing that had once been Jessica, waited patiently to meet their next eternal companion.

**CURSED  
WORDS**

**JEFFREY  
ARCE**

## Campfire Tales

The cabin in the woods had been abandoned for years, but one night, a candle burned in the window.

Dusk was just beginning to set in as they were returning home. That morning started a bit dreary for a day celebrated as the longest one of the Summer. Now they were trudging right into the shortest night unprepared for what lies ahead. Samantha followed close to her father, despair plaguing her ambience. Fireflies swelled like embers against the dark, brightening the gloomy night, if only a little. The forest was quiet. Twigs snapped, and gravel crunched beneath their feet, but beyond that there was only peace and serenity. Not a creature yowled or crooned. It seemed even the crickets had gone to bed early that evening. Michael wondered if the woods could somehow sense their woe. Could it be sentient enough to recognize their loss? Could it feel the death clinging on to them like a morbid perfume? He didn't know. Maybe he was depressed.

*Sometimes when you're upset, he knew, you can make the unfortunate mistake of believing that the entire world was right there with you having the worst, longest day of their lives.*

Or maybe the popular phrase "bad-vibes" was a tangible thing, that could be pernicious enough to rankle everything in its path.

Who knows?

Samantha was the first to see it. She glanced up only for a second, trying to navigate the familiar pathway through the hazy beam of her father's flashlight. She halted, staring off the path into the threaded foliage. Her big brother doubled back to check on her. He was carrying a shovel over his shoulder like some back-country lumberjack with an axe. When he approached her, he stuck the point of the shovel into the dirt and leaned in on its handle. Their father was too lost in his

## Campfire Tales

own thoughts to take notice that his family was no longer at his side.

“There’s a light,” Samantha said with the slightest touch of wonder livening her otherwise tepid mood.

Michael followed her gaze. He only saw the butts of bugs winking over the blackness. “You mean the lightning bugs? It’s summer.”

“No,” she sounded frustrated. She pointed again, fiercely persistent, and said, “*There*, in the window.”

Michael squinted as if narrowing his vision somehow helped to cut through the dark.

“Come on, kids,” their father said, never slowing in his pace. “It’s getting late. I wanna wash up before dinner.”

Samantha wasn’t sure how anyone could think about eating after having to bury Russell. She kept that opinion to herself. Yet still, she pressed, “Dad, *stop!* I’m serious. A light just came on in that weird house.”

Phillip knew exactly which weird house she was referring to. The old decrepit log cabin has been a blemish on this property since he bought it. And though it has become something of an infamous relic in their small rural neighborhood over the years, it has not housed life since sometime in the late 80s. It was a tumbledown ruin barely standing on its last leg. The only thing in the world that could ever want to dig into that place is the blade of a bulldozer, which he already had noted in his ever-growing list of things to do.

Phillip let out an exasperated sigh as he turned to look back at them, blinding the girl with his flashlight in the process. Its piercing glow set her blue eyes and strawberry red hair on fire. She winced as though the very heat of the sun was burning off her face. Her fourteen-year-old brother,

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however, was unaffected by the light. He only kept searching the wilderness, as hopelessly lost as ever.

Not even bothering to entertain the ten-year-old's alleged discovery, Phillip simply slumped his shoulders and complained, "Sweetie, I'm tired."

"Just *look*," she whined morosely.

"I don't need to. I know the place. It's creepy, I get it. But there are no blinds in the windows, and there are fireflies everywhere. That's probably all it was that you saw, honey. Now please, let's—"

"I see it," Michael exclaimed. "She's right! Dad, look, I think someone's in there."

He closed his eyes and groaned, "Nobody's in there. I'm up to my knees in muck. I just wanna get out of these clothes and relax, you guys."

"Looks like a candle." The teenager observed.

Seeing no other way out of this, Phillip huffed and said, "*Fine*, let's check it out."

Michael snatched up the shovel like a cartoon aristocrat taking up his cane.

Phillip cut through the foliage with the beam of his flashlight. The old, dilapidated structure looming behind it stood out over everything like an ugly skin tag at the center of a small glade. The logs that made up its foundation were slowly deteriorating from years of abuse by the unsleeping hands of mother nature. Its roof, made up of rusting sheets of metal, haphazardly nailed into place, was beginning to loosen and slough over the edges like a bad haircut. The windows were gone. The front door was gone. The porch was a splintery, gaping, death trap. It looked like a yawning mouth



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lined with jagged fangs, and yet they were marching right into its clutches. It wreaked with the musty odor of mildew and decaying wood. Phillip quietly cursed his bad fortune.

*Shoulda had this knocked down months ago.*

Michael led the way, bulling through the thorny brush- es, possessed by wonderment. Samantha reached out for her father as anxiety took her.

When Phillip took her hand, he lashed the light across his son's eyes to steal his attention back. He said, "Hey, keep close."

That reeled him in. Eagerly, he looked at his father and said, "Do you see it?"

Phillip saw it. There was indeed a yellowish glow flick- ering inside the vacant window to the right of the crumbling doorway. Just then, he stepped over an invisible threshold that made the hairs on his arm stand up, and raked prickles down his spine. It felt to him like a sickness. It felt like a trap.

He froze in his tracks, seizing his daughter with a protec- tive hand before she could advance further. Samantha gasped as the queer sensation suddenly coursed through her as well. Michael seemed to never have felt it.

Phillip's jaw unhinged as he carefully studied the haunt- ing structure. He knew it has been standing there in that same location long before his kids were ever even considered, and he was confident enough to believe that it would stay that way no matter how they choose to proceed. Nevertheless, he was apprehensive. He didn't like it and he didn't want any of them to disturb it.

"We should go back."

"Oh, come on, dad," Michael groused. "It's just an old

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house.”

“Yeah, *well*, I got a bad feeling.”

Samantha pressed close and said, “I did too. That was weird.”

Michael was incorrigible. He inched forward, brushing away his father’s caution to test his luck. He studied the area where the lambent light was pulsing, trying to see around the cabin’s barbed and broken façade, which blocked his view.

“We have to know who’s in there.”

*He’s probably right.* Phillip then grabbed his son by the arm, his focus still channeled in on that cajoling glow inside the cabin. He said, “Stay behind me.”

The fraying floorboards cringed as he set his weight into the bowing wood. His children did as he commanded and fell back behind his lead, taking careful steps. When Phillip was closing on the entryway, he cast the beam from his flashlight into the stygian, cluttered womb of the old cabin. Inside, he found a rotting desk snug against a shadowy corner, a turned over trestle chair riddled by termite damage, a tattered couch with its fluffy guts bursting out here and there. Clumps of dust as thick as carpeting draped over everything. Scraps of crumpled paper and scattered pieces of debris littered every visible surface. And there were cobwebs strewn over everything, like it was the spectral adhesive holding it all together.

“*Hello*,” their father called in, “Someone in here?”

No answer.

Samantha turned her head as if to glance up at him, but she was still focused on that glowing window. She whispered, “Maybe he’s deaf.”

“Maybe he’s dead,” Michael chimed in, holding up the

## Campfire Tales

shovel they used to bury Russell like a baseball bat, ready to swing.

Phillip, proceeding with caution, said, "Come now. Let's not assume anyone's gender here."

"Don't be a simp, dad," said Michael.

To this Samantha asked, "What's a simp?"

Michael paused to think about that for a moment. Then he wrinkled his nose and answered tentatively, "Actually, I'm not entirely sure. I think it's a—"

"Shut it," their father said.

Just before Samantha was about to follow them into the dusky cabin, she heard something. In the distance, far back behind the woods a dog was barking. She whirled on her heel to have a look.

"Russell?"

That stopped her father. Though he did adore their late pup, a small part of him was relieved that he finally passed on. He was suffering in his final days. There came a point in the weathered old golden retriever's life where all he wanted to do was cry or bark his dumb little butt off. It drove Phillip near on the brink of madness. Still, he knew his baby girl loved that poor mut to death. *No pun intended.*

He gazed at her contritely. "Sweetie," he said, "*Russell*... Russell's gone now."

"But I heard him!"

"It was the wind," Michael offered.

Sullenly, she pouted, "It wasn't the wind—"

Suddenly, a jarring clatter in the next room startled them.

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They turned to face it. Phillip was on the move again, navigating his way tentatively through the dank living room. He drew near. Just around the bend, they could see an opening into the kitchen area. There, against the warped and peeling wallpaper they found candlelight flickering. Creaks and groans shuttered through the floorboards as they went.

“*Ob my God,*” the teenager cried out, startling both his father and sister. “What the hell is that thing!”

Samantha followed his pointing finger to the desk resting in the corner. She approached an ancient device set on top of it. It sat there, unbothered for ages under a gauzy film of dense spiderwebs.

She said, “It’s like a computer...but where’s the screen?”

Phillip grimaced at their discovery as he joined them. “It’s not a computer. It’s a typewriter.”

“*Oooh,*” the girl said with fascination.

Michael put aside his shovel and reached in to pluck the old sheet of paper threaded into its carriage. He was too quick for his dad to stop him.

Savagely, he tore the sheet free, leaving his father to suck his teeth and frown at him. Michael said, “Something’s written here! It says...”

Samantha stood on the balls of her feet to try to see over his arms, as Phillip hovered in behind him. He was curious, too. He held the flashlight high to give his son better light.

Together they read, “...and the sound brought them to the basement...”

Michael was not impressed. “That’s it? That’s all it says?”

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Then Phillip whipped his flashlight across the floor to unveil all the crumpled balls of paper surrounding them. They saw a dense screed of endless text scrawled on the pages, bleeding through every piece of scrap as the light found them. “I think there might be a little bit more to this story, Kids.”

“Good,” Samantha grumbled. “I hate those spiny top endings.”

Michael giggled. “You know that Christopher Nolan made more movies than just that one.”

“Really,” she said. “Did they bomb?”

Again, Michael laughed. “*Well*, funny thing is...”

Just then there was a loud scrabbling sound. It came from somewhere in the kitchen. Phillip stalked after it. Samantha was at his right, Michael on his left, bat shovel ready.

In the kitchen, they found an old iron pellet stove, its exhaust chimney still attached to the wall on their left. The trim around its edges was decorated with floral reliefs that ran along the stove’s four sides like tendrils, coalescing at the base. Its trestles were shaped with the antiquated likeness of a lion’s paws. Next to this was a closed wooden door about Phillip’s height. Samantha began exploring over there. What interested Phillip and Michael, however, was a lone candle alight just before the rotting windowsill looking out onto the porch. Melted wax ran down the half-exhausted candlestick, lapping over the fringes of its silver holder. Where it cooled in tiny puddles on top a small, scarred counter, they found a book—a journal.

Phillip leveled his flashlight and picked it up. His son drew in as he opened it. The book was sticky with cobwebs,

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and its stiff spine whined ever slightly in protest.

“What’s this,” Phillip said as he began scrutinizing the frenzied writings preserved within.

“What’s it say,” Michael asked, intrigued.

Phillip’s eyes scanned the passages studiously. After a moment to digest it, he at last answered, “It’s his journal. The guy who lived here...before. Looks like he was a writer of some sort. According to this, he was suffering from a terrible case of writer’s block after a...*prompt challenge* left his imagination *stunted*.”

“What’s a prompt challenge?”

Phillip was thumbing through the pages. He took note how increasingly chaotic the handwriting had gotten toward the end where it all just abruptly stopped in the middle of the journal, leaving the rest of it blank and untouched.

“It’s a kind of creative writing exercise,” Phillip decided.

Meanwhile, Samantha was examining the door behind them, wondering where it might lead. She reached out for the rusty knob when something slipped out from beneath the door and slid between her feet. She kneeled to retrieve it: a very old newspaper clipping; it was stained yellow with age. She picked it up from the floor and read.

“He gave up his job,” Phillip continued, pulling more information from the mysterious journal in his hand. “Says here that he spent most of his life savings procuring this property, hoping that a change in scenery might help to clear his mind.”

“Sounds like he was obsessed.”

“I think he was,” Phillip agreed. Then he flipped to the last entry. Another chill raced down his spine as he recited a passage.

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*“...it haunts the woods... It dwells in the cabin...”*

Michael asked, “what does?”

*A fair question.*

Samantha was still squatting over the floor, reading the newspaper clipping she had just found.

### Writing Contest!

Participants have the chance to win up to

\$5,000 in prizes!

We are looking for only the scariest stories.

All entries must begin with the following prompt:

“A lonely cabin in the woods is abandoned for many years, until one day, a light comes on in the window.”

*That’s strange,* Samantha mused.

Suddenly, the door towering over her mysteriously unlatched and slowly drew open, its rusty hinges whining along the way. Samantha clutched the scrap of paper to her chest and stood, gaping at the inky void there on the other side. She saw stairs descending into complete darkness. Just as she was about to retreat, she heard an animal down in the depths growling.

*Russell?*

Though circumspect, she crept closer to the threshold. She leaned in, hoping for a clearer look at what was down there. A susurrus of strange voices seemed to be stirring at the bottom. It was like a tribalistic cult of witches chanting imprecations under a cloak of shadows. But there was more to it than that. There was conflict. The raspy voices were arguing... clashing.

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One had said, *“Perhaps it’s a ghost?”*

Another spurned, *“No, that’s too predictable.”*

*“Maybe the candle is some kind of allegory,”* the previous voice offered again.

*“Don’t be naïve!”*

Suddenly, an amorphous appendage exploded from the void and coiled around her legs. It lassoed her up, ripping her off her feet and immediately began dragging her down the stairs. She let out a blood-curdling scream. Her father and her brother spun around at once. The door slammed shut before they could get to her.

*“SAM,”* her brother cried.

Instinctively, Phillip tried twisting the knob, but it wouldn’t budge. Then he rammed his shoulder into the door thrice, but it wouldn’t give.

*“Let me try,”* Michael said, nudging his father aside.

The boy threw the point of his steel shovel with all his might into the latch of the door, loosening only splinters. After a couple of whacks, an anxious Phillip snatched the tool from his son’s grip, trading it up with the flashlight. He tried hacking at the door with a loud *BANG! BANG! BANG!* But it was useless effort. The door was impenetrable.

Samantha was crying, squirming, and thrashing as the black, slimy tentacle continued to climb up her thighs. She caught hold of one of the steps and heaved, fighting the creature’s overwhelming strength. It was a kind of strength that came with vengeance. It was a strength that would lose grip on reality before it would ever dare let go of her. But how could it? Samantha was the closest thing to an original idea it could hope to find in a dozen decaying generations.



## Campfire Tales

Samantha looked back at it from over her shoulder. It was hideous. She saw it with her mind rather than with her eyes. It felt like great loss, and doubt, and failure all rolled up into one smoky entity. So desperate it was to solve the impossible puzzle that plagued its very being, it would dare throw anything it could grab at it, even a child. Anything to escape its grasp. Samantha began to wonder what she herself would throw at it now to get away.

Her fingernails felt like they were about to break off as she scratched at the steps to resist its pull. She heard the voices quarreling behind her again.

*“Could the cabin be alive,”* One voice husked.

The other then rebuffed, “Yeah, I’m sure nobody’s ever thought of that before!”

*“Maybe it’s a monster. Maybe it baits its prey with the light...”*

*“Maybe you’re an idiot!”*

Their curious squabbling only served to terrify the girl ever more.

*“Daddy,”* she screamed, tears sluicing down her face, “Help me, *please!* I’m scared!”

“I’m coming, baby,” Phillip promised as he jabbed and jabbed with the shovel, his son joining him by kicking at the door as hard as he could.

Samantha was seconds away from losing her grip. In that fateful moment, she thought only of Russell. She remembered how his golden, fluffy chicken butt bounced gracefully up and down as he went loping after a ball or a Frisbee. She remembered how he always looked like he was smiling at her, with his silly tongue lolling to one side. His playful puppy-dog eyes loving every moment of life with Samantha and Michael.

## Campfire Tales

He was so whimsical in life that he seemed almost like a cartoon. But he was real. He was beautiful. He wasn't twisted by tenacious agony. He wasn't ugly and grotesque like this thing pulling at her feet was. *I guess I'll be seeing him again soon;* she supposed.

A beast snarled above her head. She looked up to find Russell and his feathery coat billowing over her. He appeared as a translucent phantom, lunging at the monster in the dark with gallant impetus.

As the ghost-dog arched over her with its claws drawn and its jaws ready, she heard the whispery voices screeching incredulously, *"Saved by her dead dog?"*

*"No! That's cliché!"*

*"Not even death can break their eternal bond..."*

*"It can't be..."*

Russell pounced on the snake-like appendages around her legs and sunk in his teeth. He ripped at it until a screaming hiss came writhing from out of the darkness. Then, the girl was free. She sprinted up the stairs as fast as she could, not bothering to look back.

The toxic voice rattled behind her, *"it's banal!"*

Its counterpart retorted, *"using fancy words won't help!"*

*"This is a terrible twist!"*

*"It's overdone!"*

*"That won't work!"*

Then, as the door flew open and Samantha leaped into her father's unsuspecting arms, they both collapsed to the floor. The creature downstairs roared, *"NO! NOOOOOOOOO—"*

## Campfire Tales

The flame from the candle blew out from the breath of their momentum, leaving only a wisp of smoke clinging to its charred wick. And then, the forsaken log cabin went quiet and still. The kitchen was dark again. The monster in the basement dissipated. The phenomenon was vanquished.

Samantha was lying on her father's chest, mewling in his embrace. He tried to slow his breathing as he soothed, "It's okay. You're safe now."

Michael ran up on them and asked excitedly, "What happened? What did you see?"

Samantha wouldn't be able to answer that question if she had a thousand years to try.

They gathered themselves and retreated from the cabin, hurrying swiftly out of that place as if it were on fire. All Phillip knew for certain was that he needed to get that shack demolished first thing in the morning.

"I don't know," Michael protested. "That was kinda cool, I think we should keep it."

Both Samantha and Phillip glowered at that response.

Michael shrugged his shoulders, "What?"

Later, Samantha would try to piece it all together in her head. She found herself flummoxed by the implications. Curious, she tugged at her father's sleeve and asked, "*So*, the person that used to own this place...he somehow got so absorbed by his obsession to win the writing competition that he eventually became...*whatever* that thing was in the basement?"

"Seems to be the case," Phillip said contently.

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“*Dub*,” Michael put in.

Samantha was mystified. “But...*that* doesn’t make any sense.”

Phillip took a knee so he could be eye to eye with his daughter. He set his hands on her shoulders and he said, “Sometimes, sweetie, the best stories—the most successful ones—rarely do, and that’s why writers are getting replaced by AI.”

She mulled her father’s revelation over for a minute in her head. Then she acquiesced. Smiling brightly at him, she said, “I love you, Daddy!”

Phillip blushed as his little girl leaped into his arms for a deep, long embrace.

“*Awe*, I love you too, honey.”

While she was hugging him, she saw a fluffy pup with a golden mane flanking a wall of shrubs far off in the distance. A halo of static electricity was swimming around his head. The dog stopped in his tracks to look up at her. That familiar smile and lolling tongue appeared overjoyed to see her.

She whispered, “*Thank you, Russell.*”

As if to answer her, Russell barked her way three times. The sound came shrouded by a dissonant clash of fabricat-ed tones, like the twisted sound of a corrupted audio file on the internet. But Samantha didn’t mind. She still believed it was Russell coming back to say, “I love you.” That thought warmed her heart.

In truth, however, her ghost-dog was only doing what ghost-dogs love to do best: bark their dumb little butts off.

*Screech!*

## Campfire Tales

—bark their dumb little butts — *Screech!*

—bark their dumb little butts — *Screech! Wobble-wobble-wa*

---

The End.

ALWAYS  
CHECK THE  
BACK SEAT  
OF THE CAR

STEVEN  
FARKAS

## Campfire Tales

Andy drove along the barren backwoods of the Delaware River Water Gap. It was in the northwest part of New Jersey where Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey come together. He was miles from home, driving from Montclair on his way to Binghamton New York for an accountants convention.

It had been half and hour since the bespectacled man of small stature and mild demeanor had left the restaurant he had stopped at for a dinner break. The Sun had set and the dark woods looked creepy on each side of the two lane back road. He had decided to take the scenic route when he left home in the sunshine. Now, in the dark, he was regretting his decision.

The radio blared and Andy sang along to the crooning sounds of Sinatra and Bing. While singing, he caught something out of the corner of his eye in his rearview mirror. Anytime his car passed one of the few streetlights, there was a flash of something against the back window.

He began to notice movement on the back floor of the car. A sense of fear began to rise inside of him. He questioned whether he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing. He wondered how someone could have gotten into his car. Then he remembered the stop at the restaurant. He couldn't see his car from where he was sitting inside. Had he remembered to lock the doors?

Andy moved to try and get a better look at the rear of his car. He could see the back seat, but not the floor. Maybe he was just creating all of his fears in his mind.

Then he noticed something showing in his rearview mirror. There, between the seats, he was sure he saw an eye looking through the gap and staring at him. He quickly looked away, hoping the person the eye belonged to had not noticed

## Campfire Tales

he saw him, or her, looking through the seats.

He quickly looked around where he was. There was nowhere to stop. He kept going, gradually increasing his speed, hoping a gas station or any sign of life would appear soon.

Andy glanced again at the gap between the seats. He tried to do it in a way that the eye wouldn't know he was doing it. The eye had disappeared. Andy let out a sigh of relief. Had there really been an eye, or had he imagined it?

Then a dark shadow rose from behind the seats. Andy could see the knife in the shadow's hand. He turned the steering wheel, making the car jerk to one side. The shadow dropped onto the back seat. He floored it and sped up, all the time looking for civilization.

The shadow steadied itself and rose back up with the knife in hand. Andy turned the steering wheel again. The shadow lost its balance again and crashed through the window behind Andy's seat, launching shattered glass into Andy's hair and neck.

The shadow suddenly swooshed the knife at Andy and cut open the headrest on Andy's seat. Once again, he turned the wheel, hoping the shadow might go through the window. But, there was no such luck.

The shadow came again at Andy with the knife. Andy ducked, the knife missed.

A small gas station appeared. Andy swung his car off the road and brought it to a rest near the station door. He jumped out of the car and ran into the station, yelling for help.

The gas station attendant was startled and grabbed his bat from behind the counter. Andy quickly explained what was happening. The attendant ran to lock the front door while calling the police on his cell phone. He was met there by a



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young woman with fire red hair.

“Get in here now!” he shouted to the woman. “There’s a maniac on the loose.”

She ran inside, and the attendant locked the door. When he turned around, he was stabbed in the chest. The girl with the fire red hair pushed the knife deeper as she gleefully watched the life drain from his eyes.

She turned and ran at Andy who was frozen in place. By the time he had turned to run, she had plunged the knife between his shoulder blades. Andy dropped to the floor, bleeding out.

“That’s what you get for leaving me,” she said. “No one puts me on the shelf.”

A state trooper arrived at the gas station. He found a car running with the doors open. He walked to the glass entry door to the station. He peeked inside and saw two bodies on the floor. He radioed in what the situation was. He turned to go back to his car when he felt the knife go through his throat from behind. He grabbed his throat and turned to see the eyes of a girl with fire red hair.

**THE ANNUAL  
HUNT**

**JENNIFER  
MORGAN**

## Campfire Tales

It all started with the phone call Darren received just after returning home from dropping his kids off at their schools. It was his day off and he was looking forward to a few hours of downtime in the otherwise empty house.

“Hello?”

“Darren Ferguson?”

“Yes, speaking...”

“This is Rita O’Connor from Human Resources at Maple Springs Hospital. One of our nurses isn’t able to make it in for her shift this evening. I see you’re on the overtime call-out list. Are you interested in coming in to work from 3 to 11?”

Darren opened his mouth to decline, but then thought better of it. He could really use the extra money since his wife, Samantha, had taken a leave of absence from her teaching job to take care of her sick mother at her childhood home a couple of hours away.

But the timing couldn’t be worse. It was Halloween, and he had planned to take his daughter, Marcie, trick-or-treating. Sam was the one who usually took her out while Darren stayed home to pass out treats to the neighborhood kids. So he was really looking forward to taking her out himself this year. He supposed his older daughter, Becky, could do the honors, and then babysit Marcie until Darren got home from work. But he was sure it would come with a price. Such as allowing Becky to borrow his car on the weekend. Or welcoming a horde of giddy, loud, 16-year-old girls into his home on Saturday night for a sleepover.

“Yes, I’ll take the shift,” he said, reaching for a pad of paper and a pen from the kitchen’s junk drawer. “Which ward will I be working on?”

## Campfire Tales

“You’ll be working on Ward 5B, the forensic juvenile psychiatric unit on the fifth floor. It’s a locked unit, so I’ll ensure your employee ID card is temporarily programmed with the necessary access before your arrival so you won’t have any issues gaining entry.”

As if a sliver of ice had been placed down the back of his shirt, Darren shivered in the warm kitchen. He stared at the goose bumps that had popped up on his arms in confusion and tried to ignore the sudden feeling of foreboding that overcame him.

*What the hell?*

“Mr. Ferguson, are you still there?”

“Yes...”

“I feel I should ask you, have you worked on this ward before?”

Darren struggled to keep his voice steady while his entire body shook with waves of nervous energy he didn’t understand. “No. No, I haven’t. But I’ve worked on the geriatrics’ long-term psychiatric ward a few times, so I have some experience interacting with patients suffering from mental illness.”

“That’s great to hear. But I should warn you that there are certain... rules specific to Ward 5B that absolutely must be followed. You will be reporting to the head nurse, Georgina Hanson, when you arrive and she will go over them with you in detail before she leaves at 7 o’clock.”

Darren felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise and his stomach lurched. His intuition was screaming at him to tell the HR lady that he’s changed his mind about working this shift. But instead, he heard himself calmly reply, “Okay, thanks for the heads up. Have a great day.”

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“You, too,” she said, and hung up.

He sat down hard on a kitchen chair, overcome with a feeling that something awful was going to happen so strongly that his pulse was racing from anxiety.

*Don't be so foolish, he berated himself. What could possibly go wrong?*

He knew that he would be the only medical staff member on duty during his shift after the supervisor left, but the hospital had a full security detail that could be called on if things got out of hand, or if he needed help with subduing a patient.

*They're just teenagers, for God's sake, Darren reminded himself. It's not as if they're going to attack me or anything. Besides, they'll be locked in their rooms by the time I'm left alone.*

At least he thought so.

He guessed he'd find out after getting all the instructions and protocol guidelines from the head nurse.

\* \* \*

Darren called Becky on her cell phone during lunchtime.

“Hi, hun. I have a huge favor to ask—” he began, but she cut him off.

“Hmm, this is an easy one. You got called into work and you want me to take Marcie out trick-or-treating, and then watch her until you get home?”

Darren laughed. “How'd you guess?”

“How often do you call me at school?” she asked. “Besides, I knew this might happen since you're trying to pick up extra shifts with Mom away. And the answer is yes. But it's gonna cost ya!”

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“I figured as much,” Darren said, smiling and rolling his eyes.

“We’ll work out the details later, sucker,” she teased. “What time do you have to work?”

“From 3 to 11.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later tonight, then. And don’t worry, I’ve got everything covered.”

“Thanks so much.”

Becky snorted. “You may not thank me after I tell you my terms!”

“No, probably not! Try not to be too hard on your old man.”

“We’ll see. I gotta go. Bye, Dad. I love you.”

“Bye, hun. Love you, too.”

Darren realized after hanging up that there was a piece of him that had secretly hoped that Becky would have told him she couldn’t take Marcie trick-or-treating. That she needed to go to the library and study for a test, or had plans to hang out with her friends after school. If Becky had told him she wasn’t available, he could call the HR department at the hospital back and let them know he can’t work the evening shift after all.

Darren shook his head, wondering where these thoughts were coming from. He sat on the couch and took a few minutes to really focus on trying to figure it out. He came to the ridiculous conclusion that he was scared, which made no sense at all.

Was he nervous about working on a unit at the hospital he hadn’t worked on before? No, that wasn’t it...

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Okay, then. Was he afraid of working the second half of his shift by himself?

Nope, that wasn't it either. He had worked alone dozens of times during evening and overnight shifts in the past.

Then what the hell was wrong?

He had no idea. All he knew was that he couldn't shake the overwhelming feeling...almost certainty... that something absolutely terrible was going to happen.

But what could it possibly be?

To distract himself, Darren pre-heated the oven and threw together a macaroni and cheese casserole for the girls so that Becky wouldn't have to cook for herself and Marcie prior to heading out. He also wanted to make sure they had something relatively healthy to eat before gorging on the candy and potato chips and other junk food Marcie would end up collecting that evening.

Once the casserole was in the oven, Darren went upstairs to get ready for work and, as he passed Marcie's bedroom, noticed that she had laid out the costume she had excitedly picked out to wear that evening on her bed. She had decided to dress up as Elsa from the movie Frozen. He walked into her room and smiled down at the way his daughter had surrounded the pretty, glittery, blue dress with the wide array of accessories that had been included as part of the costume. A necklace and earrings, a wand, a pair of gloves, and, Marcie's favorite, a tiara.

An hour later, freshly showered and dressed in scrubs, Darren filled a container with some of the macaroni and cheese concoction that lay cooling on the stovetop to take with him for his meal break. He took his jacket and white, comfortable sneakers from the hall closet and put

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them on. Then grabbed his hospital ID badge and keys from the table near the front door and left the house, locking the door behind him.

\* \* \*

According to his car's dashboard clock, it was 2:38 p.m. when Darren pulled into a parking spot at the hospital. He had plenty of time to make his way to Ward 5B and track down the head nurse before his shift started.

In an effort to divert his attention away from the strong sense of dread he couldn't seem to shake, Darren had hooked up his phone to his car speakers and blasted his favorite band, *Queen*, with the window all the way down during the 20-minute drive.

And it actually seemed to work. For the first time since the phone call that morning, Darren felt like himself while driving just a little too fast and belting out song lyrics as loudly as he could.

As he grabbed his work bag and exited the car, Darren chuckled as he thought of how ridiculous he must have looked to the occupants of the cars he passed, not to mention the pedestrians. A 42-year-old man in a Toyota Camry that had seen better days, singing *Bohemian Rhapsody* off-key at the top of his lungs.

The song was still in his head as he entered the building, and he hummed it under his breath as he waved at the security guard behind the front desk and headed toward the bank of elevators. He pressed the button to go up, and, a couple of moments later, the elevator doors to his right slid open.

After waiting for several people to exit, he walked into the confined space, and was greeted by his friend and colleague, Bernice, who he worked with regularly on the surgical



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ward.

“Hey, Darren,” she said. “What are you doing here? I thought it was your day off?”

“Sam’s still away, so I added my name to the overtime list and got called in for the evening shift.” The doors closed, and the elevator began to rise. Bernice was standing by the control panel, so Darren added, “Can you press ‘five’ for me?”

“Five?” she asked, pressing the button. “The psychiatric floor? Well, that will be an interesting switch from changing dressings and giving shots of morphine. Which unit?”

“5B.”

“Wait... Isn’t that the ward that Kerry Young works the evening shift on? I bumped into her this morning at the coffee shop on my way to work around 10:30 and she seemed just fine. Strange that she called in sick...”

Darren felt a chill slither down his spine as he realized the phone call he received occurred close to two hours before Bernice ran into Kerry, who apparently didn’t seem sick at all.

Was there some other reason she didn’t want to work this evening?

“Yeah... weird,” Darren mumbled as his heart galloped in his chest. He was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness and a nauseating feeling of claustrophobia. He needed to get the hell out of here before he passed out.

The elevator finally stopped on the fifth floor and, as Darren stumbled towards the door, Bernice said, “Have a good day!”

“You, too!”

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He exited the elevator, and the doors closed behind him.

Like the other eight floors in the hospital, the fifth-floor entranceway had four wards to choose from.

Unlike the other floors, these doors featured swipe-card access strips on the walls beside them in order for authorized personnel to use their employee ID cards to gain entry. There were also buttons for visitors to press which alert staff that someone is seeking entry. Then the parties can communicate via an intercom system at the nurses' station, and the staff member can choose whether or not to buzz the person in.

Although Darren was already aware of these added security features on the psychiatric floor, he had never really given them much thought. But he found himself feeling oddly relieved, knowing that he would be in complete control over allowing entry to anyone after Georgina left for the day.

But what if the threat is *inside* the ward? he wondered, causing his hair to stand on end. He shook his head, trying to get this ridiculous thought out of his mind.

Darren bent forward, hands on his knees, and took a few deep breaths to calm down and tell himself that there is no threat. That there *is* no reason to be nervous or scared. And, most importantly, to assure himself that *nothing bad* was going to happen. That everything would be fine.

Despite his powerful gut instinct's insistence that he was wrong.

So, so wrong...

\* \* \*

Darren swiped his ID card in the access strip beside the door leading to Ward 5B, and heard a click. He pulled on the door and went inside. Out of curiosity, he tried pushing on

## Campfire Tales

the door after it closed to see what would happen, but the door wouldn't budge, which is what he expected on a locked unit. He noticed a swipe-card access strip on the wall, identical to the one on the other side of the door, and tried swiping his ID card again to make sure it worked. Sure enough, the door clicked, and he was able to push it open. Darren breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that at least he could get out if he needed to.

The rhythmic cadence made by rubber soles on vinyl flooring caught Darren's attention, as he turned away from the door and started down the corridor. He looked up and caught sight of a tall, thin woman in a white uniform speed-walking towards him with a sour look on her face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Stop screwing with the damn door!" she said, clearly irritated.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry," said Darren. "I was just testing my ID card and—"

She cut him off. "Well, you're in here, ain't ya? So it's obviously working. You don't need to keep swiping it over and over again, for God's sake. The damn thing buzzes at the desk every time the door opens and whenever someone pushes on it. I thought you were a patient trying to get out."

"Oh... I didn't realize that. I'm really sorry."

*Well, this is just great,* thought Darren sarcastically. *I've made a stellar first impression with someone I have to work with, and basically report to, for the next four hours. Maybe this is why I've had the beebie-jeebies all day.*

"Whatever. I'm out of this hellhole in a few minutes anyway."

Darren was confused. Wasn't the nurse supervisor supposed to work until 7 o'clock? He could have sworn that's

## Campfire Tales

what he'd been told...

"Listen," she said. "I'm sorry for freaking out at you, it's been a long day. My name's Linda, I'm the day-shift nurse." She reached out her hand and he shook it, trying to mask his relief that he wouldn't have to work with this angry woman for the next four hours. "And you must be covering for Kerry this evening. I heard she called in sick."

"Yes," he said. "I'm Darren. Nice to meet you, Linda."

She sighed and glanced at her watch. "Here, come with me and I'll introduce you to Georgina. Then I'm out of here. Like I said, it's been a long day."

Darren walked with Linda up the corridor, until they reached the strategically placed, circular nurses' station in the middle of the ward. A heavy-set, middle-aged woman wearing Halloween-themed scrubs must have heard their approach because she stood up and smiled. A smile that touched her eyes and lit up her entire face.

Darren felt himself relax and smiled back.

"No one was trying to get out," Linda said. "Darren here was just testing his ID card."

"Thanks so much for checking, Linda. I appreciate it. Now get out of here and enjoy the rest of your day. I'll see you tomorrow." Georgina turned to Darren as Linda grabbed her belongings and headed out.

"Welcome to Ward 5B, Darren! I'm so glad you were able to come in. I'm Georgina, the head nurse, in case you haven't already guessed." They both laughed and shook hands. Her grip was as strong as a man's. "I've seen you around the hospital, but I don't recall you ever working on this unit before. And I've been here a long time."

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“No, I’ve never worked on this ward before. I’ve worked on 5A with the seniors, though. But it’s been a while.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll fit in here just fine!” She gestured towards a chair beside hers. “Come, have a seat. We’ll go over a few things.”

“Sounds great!” he said, moving behind the desk and sitting beside her.

He watched as Georgina unlocked a drawer and withdrew a manila folder. “Everything you could possibly need can be found in here,” she said, smiling and handing it to him.

The smile suddenly dropped from her face as she stared him in the eye, and her upbeat, friendly-sounding voice suddenly sounded cold and serious as she continued speaking.

“Now, listen carefully. The most important document is the top one. It lists the rules of this ward. These rules are not simply guidelines. Instead, they are set in stone and absolutely must be followed. No matter what. Is that clear?”

Her change in tone made Darren feel uneasy, and he mentally struggled to fight off the sense of dread that was trying once again to rear its ugly head. He took a deep breath and said, “Yes, I understand. I’ll make sure all the rules are followed. No exceptions.”

“Excellent!” she said, sounding friendly again, and he felt a bit better when he noticed her smile had returned. “So why don’t you read over the document, and then I can answer any questions and address any concerns you might have.”

“Okay, sounds good,” he said, opening the folder and removing the document that would dictate what he could and could not do during his shift.

\* \* \*

# Campfire Tales

## Staff Rules for Ward 5B

### Preamble

Ward 5B is a locked-down, high-security, forensic mental health inpatient unit for juveniles, aged 13 to 17, who have been involved in, have been known to have committed, and/or are at high risk of committing, violent acts and/or criminal offenses based on previous behavior.

The majority of these patients are in the process of being assessed to determine whether they are mentally fit to stand trial and take criminal responsibility for their actions, as ordered by the courts.

All patients should be considered as having violent tendencies.

The following rules have been established to ensure employee, visitor, and patient safety, and are expected to be followed by all staff members working on the ward.

### Rules

1) Patients shall remain locked in their rooms at all times, with the exception of the following:

- Designated mealtimes in the dining room, during which time a minimum of two medical staff members and one security guard must be present.

Breakfast - 8 a.m

Lunch - 12:30 p.m

Supper - 5 p.m.

- One hour of free time in the common room, during which time a minimum of two medical staff members and one security guard must be present. Free time will take place immediately following each meal.

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- During pre-arranged meetings with legal counsel, appointments with psychiatrists or other medical personnel, and scheduled visitations with approved, immediate family members. These shall take place in one of three secure, partitioned rooms off the common room.

2) All prescribed medications shall be administered to patients in their rooms by nursing staff, based on doctors' orders. A minimum of two staff members must be present when entering a patient's room. At least one of the staff members must be a nurse.

3) Under no circumstance should any staff member enter a patient's room alone.

- If access is required for medical reasons, a minimum of two employees must be present, with at least one of them being a nurse or doctor.

- If access is required for any other reason, a minimum of two employees must be present, with at least one of them being a security guard.

4) Security guards are on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To access security, dial 888. 5) Doctors are on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To access a duty doctor, dial 999.

Darren felt relieved after reading through the rules. His feelings of what he considered irrational fear earlier in the day had disappeared. It seemed that all precautions necessary to ensure the safety of the staff, patients, and visitors to the unit had been enforced.

As he returned the document to the folder and got ready to read over the next one, Georgina turned from the computer she had been working on and smiled at him.

“Done reading the rules?” she asked, peering at him over her reading glasses.

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“Yes.”

“Do you have any questions about them? As I mentioned, it’s vitally important that they be followed.”

“No, no questions. They’re pretty clear and self-explanatory and I promise to follow them, no matter what. I was actually just about to read the other papers in the folder.”

Georgina shook her head. “No need. They’re just telephone numbers of who to call if, say, the thermostat breaks, for example. I mean, certainly, feel free to glance through them if you like, but there’s nothing there that you need to know in order to work in the unit. You’d only need to refer to this information if something unexpected happens, which is very unlikely.”

“Ah, okay. Got it,” Darren said, hoping to hell that she was right. He definitely did not want anything unexpected to happen. He just wanted to work his shift and go home to his girls.

“Well, if you don’t have any questions for me, how about a tour?”

“That would be great, thank you.” Darren stood and stretched, then followed Georgina into the corridor.

“There isn’t really much to see,” she said. “But you might as well know where everything is. And then, when we get back to the desk, I’ll show you how we access patient files and make notes on the computer. The ward has become pretty much paperless. Dr. Bradley, our head psychiatrist, insists on it because a lot of our records are not only medical but also legal in nature. Besides, the guy’s a total computer geek.” Georgina rolled her eyes, and they both laughed.

“I wish we’d do more with the computer system on the surgical ward where I usually work, but since the patient



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admissions are usually short term, it just seems easier to write our updates in their charts the old-fashioned way. Then our admin assistant inputs our notes into the computer after the patients are discharged.”

“That’s how we used to do things here, too. Transitioning to electronic patient records was definitely a learning curve.”

“I bet,” said Darren as they started passing the rooms surrounding the nurses’ station.

“Okay, so there are a total of twenty-four patient rooms on the ward, twelve on this side and twelve on the other, separated by the dining area and common room. All of which can be seen from the desk. As you can see, there are glass panes in the doors so staff can look in and see what each patient is doing. Each room, of course, has its own bathroom, complete with toilet, sink, and shower. Although the patients can lock their bathroom door, we can override the locking mechanism with our ID tags, if required. The ID tags also allow us to gain entry into the patient rooms themselves.”

Darren and Georgina walked past the few remaining patient rooms and then entered the common room.

Two large couches in the center of the room sat at right angles to each other with a square table in front of them. They faced a TV attached to a wall in the corner. A few armchairs were scattered throughout the room and several circular tables surrounded by chairs were at the back, near the barred windows. A bookshelf to the left displayed a number of board games, playing cards, magazines, and paperbacks. There were also three doors leading to rooms on the far right.

“As you read in the rules, the patients are permitted to spend an hour in here, three times a day, after each meal, while being closely watched and monitored. Those rooms

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over there are where meetings, appointments, and visitations take place. Come, take a look.”

Georgina swiped her ID to gain access to the one on the right and turned on the light. Darren followed her inside.

He found himself in a small rectangular area, with a table and chair facing a second, identical mirror image of the area on the other side of what appeared to be a plexiglass partition, set up so that the occupants of either side would be facing one another. A door to his right led to the second area. Phone receivers were attached to the walls beside each table, and there was just enough space at the bottom of the glass to pass small items back and forth, such as paperwork.

“So, what we do is escort the patient into the other side and, once the door is securely locked, we bring in whoever the patient is meeting with on this side. There are call buttons on both sides in case either party requires assistance or to alert us once the interaction has concluded. Then we reverse the process, allowing the person who the patient had met with out first. Then, once the individual has left the unit, we return to escort the patient back to his or her room. Any questions?”

Darren found himself impressed by the level of security, but also reminded of the fact that the patients on this ward are considered violent and dangerous. “Just one. Are any of the patients scheduled to have an appointment or meeting in here this evening?”

Georgina laughed. “Nope, you’re off the hook, as far as I know. There currently aren’t any meetings scheduled during your shift. But it’s good to be prepared for the unexpected, just in case. For example, once in a blue moon, a patient’s lawyer will insist on meeting with his or her client outside normal business hours. When this happens, by law, we need

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to accommodate. But it's a rare occurrence and not worth your time worrying about."

He must have appeared worried or nervous, because Georgina reached out and touched his arm. "I know this is a lot to take in, but you're doing great. As long as you follow the rules, you'll be just fine."

Darren nodded, forcing a smile. "Thanks."

Georgina smiled back and checked her watch. "Okay, we have just enough time for a quick look at the dining area before suppertime."

She led him out of the meeting room, closing the door behind her, and they headed back out into the corridor. A few feet away was the door to the dining room, and they walked inside.

The room was set up cafeteria-style. Stacks of trays and paper plates sat beside containers of various plastic utensils at one end of the long serving area, where two women wearing aprons were arranging covered trays of food. At the other end, styrofoam cups were piled beside a beverage dispenser, which offered several drink options.

"Good day, ladies," Georgina said, smiling and waving. "Carla and Dawn, meet Darren. He's filling in for Kerry this evening."

The kitchen staff workers greeted them both, then continued with their work.

Darren looked around at the rest of the room, which had an assortment of different-sized tables surrounded by chairs.

"Some of our patients enjoy sitting together during mealtimes, while others prefer to eat by themselves, which is

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why we have tables of different sizes. Since any periods of time when the patients are out of their rooms are considered high-risk, we do what we can to keep them from...well... behaving inappropriately.”

Darren frowned. He certainly didn't wish to witness or deal with any of the patients acting up on his watch. “Does that... um... happen often?”

“No, almost never,” said Georgina, as they left the dining area. “The patients are very aware that if they misbehave during meals or free time, they will lose the privilege of leaving their rooms altogether. Their meals would be brought to them, and they wouldn't get free time at all until they'd been assessed by a psychiatrist, who would determine when it's safe for them to leave their rooms again. As it stands now, we have twenty-one patients on the ward, and not one is without his or her out-of-room privileges.”

Darren tried to relax as they arrived back at the nurses' station.

“It's almost 5 o'clock. Bobby should be here any second, and then we can get this show on the road,” said Georgina.

“Bobby?” asked Darren.

“Oh, sorry. He's the security guard who will be helping us out while the patients are eating and during their hour in the common room.”

“Oh, right,” Darren said, as he remembered reading about the fact that a security guard must be present during meals and free time in the rules. This extra layer of security made him feel a little better.

A sudden, loud buzz made Darren jump, and, moments later, he heard heavy footsteps grow closer. He looked up to see an enormous man, at least six foot three and 350 pounds,

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wearing a security guard uniform.

“Hey there, sunshine,” Georgina said to Bobby, then introduced the men to each other.

“Nice to meet you, Darren!” said Bobby, in his deep baritone voice.

“Likewise,” said Darren, standing and accepting Bobby’s strong handshake, momentarily mesmerized by the fact that his own hand all but disappeared in the big man’s, which was about the size of a large ham.

He tried not to wince as his knuckles rubbed together painfully. Then he noticed Bobby wore a duty belt around his waist containing a baton, an aerosol container that Darren guessed contained pepper spray or something similar, and a gun.

“Let’s round up the troops,” said Georgina, as she stood.

She pressed a button on the intercom and her voice echoed throughout the ward as she informed the patients it was suppertime, and to get ready to line up and make their way to the dining room.

Bobby made his way to the opposite side of the nurses’ station in order to escort the patients from the twelve rooms on that side. Georgina told Darren to stand near the closest patient room on this side and wait for her.

Then she unlocked a panel in the wall with her ID and pressed a button, which opened all the patient doors at once. The patients stepped out of their rooms, forming a line of sorts, and waited until either Bobby or Georgina and Darren reached them so they could be escorted into the dining area in single file.

\* \* \*

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Darren watched in awe as, like a well-choreographed assembly line, the patients, one by one, picked up a tray, placed a plate on top of it, chose their utensils, and allowed the kitchen staff workers to scoop food onto their plates. Then they filled their cups and sat at the tables. He had been expecting at least a little jostling for position or complaints from the patients, but there was none at all. He believed that Georgina had been right, that the patients valued their time out of their rooms so much that they didn't dare act up.

While Bobby stood at the entranceway with his enormous arms folded across his chest, looking downright intimidating, Georgina walked around the room, smiling and occasionally talking to the patients.

Unsure of what to do, Darren also walked around the room. Although he concentrated on smiling and appearing friendly and approachable, he didn't speak to any patients, since he didn't know them. The last thing he wanted to do was inadvertently upset any of them.

But he couldn't help but notice how... robotic they acted. They rarely spoke to one another and were a lot quieter than he thought people of this age should be. His thoughts turned to Becky, who was the same age as many of these patients, and the fact that she was always giggling and chatting with her friends. Then he realized that part of the reason these kids weren't interacting could be because they may be on some heavy-duty medications to keep them calm and drastically reduce the risk of them becoming violent. Darren wouldn't be surprised if a good number of them were stoned out of their minds.

As Darren continued to walk around the room, he suddenly had the sensation that he was being watched. He glanced over at Georgina, thinking maybe she was looking over at him to see how he was making out. But, no, she was

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on the other side of the room, sitting at a table and talking to a couple of the young patients. The feeling of being stared at grew stronger, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. His eyes surveyed the room, and he nearly jumped out of his skin when he noticed one of the young male patients glaring at him. Darren smiled at him, but the boy's expression didn't change. He just continued to stare at Darren. He didn't even blink.

Darren turned away and continued walking around the room. He couldn't wait for supper to be over, and felt relieved when he glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was nearing 5:30 p.m., almost time to move into the common room. The sense of being watched suddenly stopped, and he looked over at the boy who had been staring at him. He was now turned sideways, talking animatedly... to an empty chair. As he watched the boy laugh and chatter away, Darren realized he looked familiar, although he was sure he had never met the kid before.

A few minutes later, Georgina announced to the room that it was time for the patients to dump their trays into the garbage cans, pile them up on a nearby table, and get ready to enjoy their hour-long free time. A few of the patients cheered or showed signs of happiness or excitement, but the majority of the patients simply did as they were told and formed a line.

Bobby led the way, with the patients walking in single-file behind him, and Georgina and Darren pulling up the rear.

Upon entering the common room, some of the patients chose board games or decks of cards and sat at the tables. Others selected magazines or paperbacks and settled in arm-chairs to read. Both couches filled up, and the patients stared at the blank TV screen until Georgina turned it on. Darren noticed that it was connected to a DVD player, rather than a cable line, which made sense. Although he didn't do much

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censoring of programs with his girls, he could understand why these patients shouldn't have access to potentially violent TV shows.

"We watched the first half of *Space Jam* after lunch," said Georgina. "Let's find out what happens next!" She pressed 'play' and Bugs Bunny, along with his buddies, came to life on the screen.

As she had in the dining area, Georgina walked around the room, occasionally stopping to talk with a patient. Bobby, once again, stood guard at the door. Darren also circled the room, smiling at patients, and watching parts of the movie, which he knew by heart because it was one of Marcie's favorites.

Then Darren, once again, felt like someone was watching him. But this time, he was pretty sure he knew who it was. When he turned around and searched the room, his suspicions were

confirmed as his eyes met those of the youth who had been staring at him previously. He maintained eye contact with the patient, who was shuffling a deck of cards. Then the boy turned his head and smiled across the table while dealing the cards into two piles.

Except no one else was there.

\* \* \*

As the movie credits rolled, Georgina walked over and turned off the TV.

"Okay, everyone, you know the drill," she said. "Line up, single-file, starting at the door. As usual, our wonderful kitchen staff have left snacks in your rooms in case you get hungry later."



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Returning the patients to their rooms was as easy and drama-free as it had been when they were escorted to the dining room, which was a relief to Darren. He felt himself relax as the last patient door closed and locked with an audible click.

Darren and Georgina returned to the nurses' station while Bobby paused on his way to the exit. "Well, I'm out of here. It was nice to meet you, Darren. I'll be lurking around the hospital until 11 o'clock, so if you need security, I'll come running."

"Thanks, Bobby. It's been a pleasure, but I hope I don't see you again today. No offense."

Bobby roared with laughter. "None taken. Have a great night. And Georgina, I'll see you tomorrow."

"You sure will, sunshine," she replied.

Darren heard Bobby's footsteps grow quieter as he walked down the corridor and, even though he was expecting it this time, Darren jumped when the door buzzed as Bobby swiped out. Now he could fully understand why the day nurse had been so grumpy earlier when Darren had been testing his ID badge to make sure his access was set up properly.

"It's almost time for me to get out of here too," said Georgina. Darren glanced at the wall clock and was surprised to see it was almost twenty minutes to seven. Although there was no window from his vantage point, he knew this was around the time it started to get dark, and he suspected the girls were just about ready to head out. "I have just enough time to show you how to access the patient files."

Georgina gave Darren a temporary username and password and, for the next fifteen minutes, showed him how to access the electronic patient files, as well as read and write

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notes in their charts. She told him that his computer login would be removed from the system after his shift was over, much like his ID card access to the unit and the doors within the ward.

“Well, my shift is over, so I’m heading out. Do you have any questions for me before I go?”

“No, I think I’m good. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome. And please, if anything happens that makes you feel uncomfortable, call security. You’ll get Bobby, who you already know. He’s a great guy and would be happy to help.”

“I will. Thanks again. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Darren sat back in his chair as he listened to Georgina’s footsteps fade. He was ready for the buzz that would sound when she swiped out this time, or so he thought. But when it came, he jumped.

\* \* \*

Since Georgina left, the unit was eerily quiet, and he literally had nothing to do. He considered going into the common room to find a magazine or book to read, but the patient who had kept staring at him kept entering his mind, so he decided to access his file and find out who he was, especially since he looked familiar.

It took just a quick search to locate the patient’s name, Gary Hanson, based on the fact that Darren knew the kid was in room six after watching him go into that room after free time. Then he accessed the patient’s file and skimmed through his admission forms.

He discovered that Gary had been admitted to the ward

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almost two years ago to the day, shortly after he turned 13 years old, and that he had been arrested for attempting to kidnap a young child. He had told the police at the time that it had actually been a friend of his who had grabbed the kid, even though Gary himself had been caught red-handed. After further investigation, the friend that Gary named as committing the crime couldn't be found and there was no record of him anywhere.

Darren also learned that it was as a result of a mental competency hearing that the courts ordered that Gary be hospitalized, based primarily on statements by psychiatrists for both the prosecution and the defense. They had each testified that Gary was mentally unfit to stand trial or take responsibility for his actions and that he suffered from one or more mental illnesses that required extensive assessment and treatment.

Darren vaguely recalled reading about the case at the time and decided that Gary probably looked familiar to him because his name and picture had either been in the news or online. Maybe both.

As Darren was about to exit Gary's patient records, he noticed a file entitled Police Statement. After a brief hesitation, his curiosity got the best of him, and he opened it.

### **Transcript of Gary Hanson**

**Audio recorded by: Detective Morris Williams**

**Transcribed by: Melanie Davis, Office Clerk**

**Date of Interview: Wednesday, November 12, 2021**

**The following is a verbatim statement of Gary Hanson's account of events to police following a brief (12-day) admission in hospital for a psychiatric assessment to determine whether Mr. Hanson should be considered a threat to the safety of himself and/or others.**

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-- Beginning of transcript --

I guess it all started when my dad told me that it was my fault that my mom and my little sister, Heather, didn't live with us anymore. He said Mom hated me, so she took Heather and moved away. But he was lying.

You see, Dad used to hurt Mom all the time, and she let him. I think it was because of the time I heard him tell her that if she took us and left him, he would find us and kill us all. But when she found he had hurt Heather, she freaked out at him and they got in the worst fight ever. I watched it happen while peering down through the bars of the railing upstairs outside my bedroom, but I was too scared to do anything to stop it.

He punched and kicked her until she was curled up on the floor with a whole bunch of blood coming from her head and she wasn't moving anymore.

The fight must have woken Heather because she ran out of her room and down the stairs. I tried to stop her, I really did, but it was like I was frozen. Then she screamed when she saw Mom and all the blood.

So Dad threw her on the floor and kicked her over and over in the head until she stopped moving, too. And then he started singing a really creepy song, that went like this:

“I kicked, kicked, kicked her in the head. I kicked her in the head until she was dead.”

I was so terrified that I went back to bed. But a little while later, I heard a noise outside, so I peeked out my window and saw Dad digging a big hole in the backyard. Then he threw my mom and Heather in and covered them back up with dirt.

He looked up at my window when he was done and I wondered if he was checking to see if I was watching. Or making sure I wasn't.

The next morning, Dad locked me in the basement. He told me it was punishment for forcing my mother

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and little sister to leave. I was too scared to tell him I knew what really happened to them because I'm pretty sure he would have killed me, too.

It was really gross living in the basement. I had to sleep on a metal cot with a dirty, stinky mattress without a pillow or blanket and I had to poop and pee in a bucket. And, when I was thirsty, the only thing to drink was the yucky brown water from the old sink.

There were great big spiders and other bugs all over the place. And rats. So many rats. Sometimes they'd bite my feet while I was sleeping and it hurt so much and made me scream.

I was always hungry too, since I think Dad forgot I was there sometimes. But once in a while, he brought me a cheese sandwich, or an opened can of the food we fed our cat, Misty. He never talked to me when he came down to the basement, and I was too afraid to talk to him.

It was so dark down there, especially at night. But in the daytime, a bit of light came in through the little window near the ceiling.

One morning I had an idea. I thought that maybe if I slant the cot against the wall under the window, I might be able to climb up and open it to get some fresh air since it was getting really hard to breathe down there and I was coughing really bad.

So after I heard Dad leave for work, I moved the cot under the window, and after a few tries, my idea worked. I pushed on the window and it opened right up. Then I realized that I could probably fit through it and I was right.

From that day on, I'd sneak out to play in the woods behind the house and make sure to return to the basement before Dad arrived home. I thought about running away, but I knew that if I did and Dad found me, he'd kill me like he did my mom and sister.

Then one day I met Tommy in the woods behind

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the house. I was scared at first because I was afraid he might tell my dad that I was out of the basement. But I realized he probably didn't even know my dad.

We started talking, and it was cool because we discovered we were both ten years old.

From then on, Tommy and I hung out nearly every day. We became best friends and, one day, I finally told him what my Dad did and he swore he wouldn't tell anyone. Then I started sneaking him into the basement through the window.

As the days grew colder, I stopped going outside because I didn't have a jacket or anything. Besides, I had Tommy with me now. He would knock on the window and I'd let him in. Then he'd stay with me in the basement all day, even after Dad got home. If Tommy was with me when Dad came downstairs, he would hide in the tiny closet, or huddle under my cot.

Sometimes he would sleep on the floor beside my cot at night. He was often gone when I woke up. But some mornings he was still there.

Then, one day, a miracle happened. The police showed up. I think someone must have complained about the disgusting smell I had noticed coming from the backyard where Dad had buried my mom and sister because I could hear them digging out there. They must have located the bodies because they arrested my dad, and then two officers came downstairs and found me curled up on the cot.

I looked around for Tommy, but he was nowhere to be seen, so I guessed that he must have been hiding in the closet.

It wasn't long before I started living in a nice house with a man and woman who said they were my foster parents. There were also three other children there, but they were much younger than me. It was so nice to have toys to play with and lots of yummy food to eat. And no one got yelled at or hurt anyone else.

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There was just one problem. I missed Tommy desperately. So I prayed for another miracle to happen. For Tommy to come find me.

On the third morning in my new room, my prayers were answered. I woke up and Tommy was there, sitting on the rug beside my bed. He told me that he had also been moved into the house because his dad was a bad man, too.

Although he had never mentioned this before, I was so happy to see him that I didn't even ask him about it. I had my best friend back, and that's all that mattered.

On the first Halloween Tommy and I spent at our foster home, the younger children dressed in their costumes, excited about going trick-or-treating with our foster mother.

Tommy and I didn't want to hang out with the little kids and planned to go out on our own instead. But our foster parents told us we were too young to leave the house and roam the streets after dark without an adult. So we had a choice. Go out with our foster mom and the other children. Or stay home with our foster dad and miss out on collecting treats. We chose to stay home.

Then, with a mischievous gleam in his eye, Tommy suggested a third option. Sneak out.

So, after everyone left and my foster father was working on his car in the garage, Tommy and I put on our identical clown costumes over our clothes and quietly left through the back door.

Tommy suggested we start at the opposite end of the street where there was just one little girl and, a few feet away, a bored-looking teenager staring at his phone.

We ran in that direction, confident that we were unrecognizable behind our silly homemade masks in case we ran into our foster mother.

Then Tommy snuck up behind the little girl and yelled, "Boo!"

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The kid jumped and let out a scream, but the teen, who I assumed was the girl's older brother, didn't even bother looking up.

For a reason I couldn't completely understand, the fact that the guy was completely ignoring the little girl he was obviously supposed to be looking after made me so mad I got the shakes. I guessed it was because I had always done my best to protect Heather, even though I failed in the end. But at least I had tried.

Then the child noticed Tommy's hilarious costume, and we all laughed. Except for the teen, that is. His attention remained on his phone. The rage inside me increased, and I couldn't understand how he could ignore her like this.

And it was then that, without warning, Tommy clamped his hand around the little girl's mouth, lifted her up, and took off running. Not knowing what to do, I ran after them. We sprinted into the woods. To a deserted shed we had played in before.

It was there that Tommy threw the child to the floor. And kicked her in the head over and over until she stopped moving.

Then he started singing the same song my dad had sung after he had killed Heather. 'I kicked, kicked, kicked her in the head. I kicked her in the head until she was dead.'

I didn't remember telling Tommy about that part of that awful night, but I realized I must have. How else would he have known about the song?

Tommy then reached down and picked up the twisted, bloody Minnie Mouse headband from the floor that had fallen off the girl's head as he was kicking her. He told me he wanted to keep it. I was so startled by what he'd done that I didn't even ask why.

Our costumes were splattered with blood, so we removed them, left them there, and hightailed it home. We snuck into the house and acted as if nothing happened.



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The next day, we went back and buried the body behind the shed.

This exact same thing happened twice more during the next two Halloweens we lived at our foster home. The victim was always a little girl around the same age my sister had been when my father killed her. And she was always with a teenager who wasn't paying attention, which always made me so, so mad.

Every other day of the year was normal. We'd go to school. Do our homework. Chill out at our clubhouse. Share secrets.

We never hung out with other boys. They tended to ignore Tommy. Maybe it was because, at thirteen years of age, Tommy still looked as he had when we first met three years earlier. He hadn't grown taller. His voice hadn't begun to crack like mine.

Maybe those mean teenage boys didn't want to be seen with someone who could pass for a ten-year-old. Not me, though. Tommy was my best friend. My only friend. And I was his.

The day I was arrested, on Halloween, just a couple of weeks ago now, I woke up feeling lightheaded, anxious, and sick to my stomach. I couldn't think straight. And I knew that the reason was because of what was going to happen that evening. What I've come to refer to as The Annual Hunt.

At thirteen years of age, we were finally old enough to go out on our own. There was no need to sneak out like we had the past three years. So, as soon as the sun started to set, we just walked out the front door.

A couple of blocks away, Tommy spotted his target. A little girl with a teenager, who I guessed was her big sister. Since no one else was around, Tommy crept up behind her and shouted, "Boo!"

The kid jumped, but instead of laughing like all the other little girls had, she started to cry. And unlike the other teenagers, this one looked up in alarm.

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I couldn't understand what was wrong at first, but then Tommy and I looked down at ourselves in unison and realized that we had forgotten to put on our funny costumes that make little girls laugh.

But this didn't stop Tommy from performing his ritual. He grabbed the young girl, claspng one hand around her mouth and the other surrounding her body, and started to run, just as he had all the other times.

I ran after him, as I always did, but, this time, the older girl screamed and chased us. Then she tackled me to the ground, and the little girl escaped my grasp.

But I didn't understand then, and I still don't today.

Why and how had I been holding the girl?

And where the hell was Tommy?

- - End of transcript - -

\* \* \*

Darren's hands were shaking so badly, it took him three tries before he managed to close the file. He was so blown away by Gary's statement that he had a hard time trying to figure out what had actually happened. Had Tommy been a figment of the boy's imagination the entire time? Darren only had basic training in psychiatry, but, if he had to guess, this patient was suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, and Tommy was an alternate personality. But from his limited knowledge and understanding of this mental illness, he thought he recalled reading that the personalities weren't aware of one another. Then again, he could be wrong about that.

The desk phone rang, and Darren nearly jumped out of his skin. After a couple of deep breaths, he answered it.

"Ward 5B, Darren speaking."

"I'm so sorry," a woman's voice said. "It wasn't fair of

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me, but I couldn't deal with it again."

"Deal with what? Who is this?"

"He's coming, I know it. He showed up last Halloween, and I just know he'll show up again tonight."

"Who? Who's coming?" Darren's heart galloped in his chest and he felt lightheaded. "What the hell are you talking about? Who is this?"

"It should be me in there, not you. I'm so sorry..."

Darren tried to understand what this obviously distraught woman was talking about. Maybe it was a prank call. But Darren's intuition was telling him otherwise. He thought hard about what she could possibly mean by saying that she should be there instead of him. And then it hit him.

"Kerry?"

No answer. But he could hear someone breathing.

"Kerry? I know it's you. Who's coming? Please..."

"I'm sorry," she said, and the line went dead.

Darren found himself struggling to breathe, and he felt a searing pain in his chest. His heart raced while chills wracked his body as sweat drenched his face, back, and under his arms. The room spun, and he felt like he might pass out. He somehow realized he was having a full-blown panic attack and leaned forward with his head between his knees, hoping it would pass.

After a few minutes, Darren was able to take several deep breaths, and he sat back in the chair. The pain in his chest was gone and his temperature was returning to normal as his heart rate decreased. He was finally able to think straight and assess the situation. He concluded that the com-

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mination of the very disturbing transcript he had read, immediately followed by the strange phone call that may or may not have actually been from Kerry had been too much for his body to handle. After all, he couldn't be in a safer place, really. Although he was surrounded by young people who most likely had committed violent crimes, they were locked in their rooms and couldn't hurt him. Likewise, he was in a secure, locked-down unit that required anyone who wished to enter to have authorized access.

Darren forced himself to relax and decided that he would absolutely not be reading any more patient charts. He glanced at the wall clock and noted that it was just after 8 p.m., meaning he only had roughly three more hours of his shift to go. But he resolved at that moment that he would never agree to work on this ward ever again.

Just as Darren was about to stand and stretch and go for a walk around the ward, the door buzzed, and, as usual, he jumped. He wasn't sure who it could be, but suspected that it was Bobby coming to check on him.

His cell phone rang. He checked the call display and saw that it was Becky. "Hi, hun, how are—"

Faint footsteps echoed from the end of the corridor.

"Dad! Oh my God, someone grabbed Marcie and ran off with her! I tried to stop them—"

"What? Who grabbed Marcie?"

The footsteps grew louder, closer.

"I don't know. I tried to catch up to them, but it was like they disappeared. I called the police—"

The footsteps stopped beside the desk, and the first thing Darren saw from his seated position was Marcie's tiara.

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Relief washed over his body. His little girl was safe.

“Becky! She’s here. Marcie’s here!”

He dropped the phone on the desk as he stood and peered over the desk, smiling at his little girl. “Marcie, what are you doing here? Are you okay?” he asked.

A small face smiled back up at him.

A face he had never seen before.

A face that was covered in blood.

As his brain tried to make sense of what the hell was going on, the young figure began to sing. “I kicked, kicked, kicked her in the head. I kicked her in the head until she was dead.”



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