

12-2014

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Recommended Citation

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Department of Literature and Language
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“Beyond the Pavement” and “Setting Fire to the Sky”
With Critical Introduction: “Exploring the Dark: Gothic Short Stories”

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
English Honors-in-Discipline Program

November, 24 2014

Signature of Thesis Director Date

Faculty Advisor

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Exploring the Dark: Gothic Short Stories

Beyond the shadows of stormy nights, behind the alleyways where killers hide, before the blood and gore of horror films and thriller movies there was the chilling world of gothic literature. Gothic short stories have existed for as long as the genre itself has. It is a timeless, classic genre, and when done correctly, can be so enticing it haunts the reader long after the last words have been read. According to the Oxford Dictionary, gothic literature is “An English genre of fiction characterized by an atmosphere of mystery and horror” (“Gothic Literature”). Gothic Literature is one of the most popular and influential genres that exist. The gothic combines elements of both horror and romanticism. It is a distinct category of literature that uses tone, mood, setting, and characterization to build suspense and create a chilling, disturbing story that will leave readers’ hearts pounding in their chests.

Many of the greatest authors in literature have created gothic masterpieces. Among these authors are Joyce Carol Oates, Shirley Jackson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ray Bradbury, and the great Edgar Allan Poe. Each of these authors are creative, unique individuals that specialize in different aspects of gothic literature. Some, like Gilman and Oates for example, are wonderful at portraying women in distress and also creating unreliable narrators. Others, like Bradbury and Jackson, specialize in leaving their readers hanging with cliffhanger endings. There are some rare individuals, like the great Poe, however, that are masters at weaving all of the different elements together to build suspenseful, spine-chilling works of fiction. I aspire to one day be able to count my name in the ranks of these great authors.

Gothic literature is one of my favorite types of stories to read. They are often some of the most interesting and entertaining stories, and they often end in cliffhangers, which are my favorite type of endings. Most of the stories I write are gothic, mainly because I enjoy creating

stories that end abruptly. Stories that end completely and have a resolution tied up neatly with a nice bow are mundane. The last thing I want is for my writing to be mundane. Therefore, I prefer to create strange, odd, mysterious stories that cause readers to think about them over and over. I want my readers to feel, to experience strong emotions when they read the words I have laid out for them. My two stories of gothic fiction are “Beyond the Pavement” and “Setting Fire to the Sky.” These stories are both strange, mysterious tales that occur in supposedly normal towns. Both of the stories center around teenagers in high school, and both have a suspicious lack of adult characters. Many of the common elements of gothic literature are implemented in my stories, including suspense, unreliable narrators, and cliffhanger endings. “Beyond the Pavement” is a short piece of fiction that is told from the point of view of a teenage boy known only as Fox. He is new to town and quickly becomes obsessed with the local legend of a cannibalistic boy that lives in the woods surrounding the town. When several students begin going missing, Fox decides to prove once and for all that the cannibalistic boy does not exist. My other story, “Setting Fire to the Sky,” is the story of a young teenage girl who has trouble moving on after the death of her boyfriend. The appearance of a new boy in town, however, leaves her with no choice but to move on.

My stories, like all stories that fall into a genre, include many of the characteristics necessary for a story to be considered gothic. I believe that there are three major elements of gothic literature, including suspense, unreliable narrators, and cliffhangers. The way that authors fulfill these elements include manipulation of word choice, repetition, setting, dialogue, characterization, and the implementation of the supernatural.

Suspense might just be one of the most important elements of gothic literature. Without suspense, a reader loses the feelings and emotions they get when reading a gothic story. There

are many ways in which authors build suspense in gothic literature. Word choice, repetition, setting, and dialogue can all play a vital role in building suspense in a story. Take, for instance, Poe's famous short story "The Tell-Tale Heart." In this story, Poe uses word choice and repetition to elicit emotions in his readers, thereby building suspense throughout the chilling story; "I was nervous. Very, very dreadfully nervous!" (Poe 2). Just in these two lines the word choice—words such as 'nervous' and 'dreadfully'—set the mood of the story. These words create an uneasy feeling in the pit of readers' stomachs. And the repetition of the words 'nervous' and 'very' hint at a only assist in deepening this feeling of anxiousness that sets in while reading Poe's haunting tale of murder.

Another author that effectively implements suspense is Joyce Carol Oates. In her story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," Oates creates an atmosphere of mystery and suspense through her setting and the unsettling dialogue of the strange Arnold Friend character. Arnold says things like, "Gonna get you, baby," and, "I know your name and all about you, lots of things" (Oates 250, 262). While Arnold Friend never does anything physically menacing or dangerous towards the protagonist, Connie, his dialogue is certainly frightening. He threatens her family's safety, tells her in no uncertain terms that she would be his, and also that she has no choice in the matter—all in a pleasant, friendly tone with a smile. Oates also deepens the suspense by manipulating the setting of the story. She takes a place that is supposed to be normal, supposed to be safe, and twists it into an area of danger, a realm of the strange: "The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her" (Oates 261). By doing this, she alienates the protagonist from her home, her family, and her life. This makes the entire story seem more surreal by taking things that should be normal and making them strange.

In my story “Beyond the Pavement,” I use word choice and repetition in order to build suspense, and set the mood and tone of the story. Word choice and repetition are extremely important, as editor Beth Hill writes in her article, “Creating Emotion in the Reader.” Hill states, “Know the power of word choice in eliciting emotions. Use words throughout a scene to express your exact meaning so a scene is cohesive and the emotion is consistent...some words are triggers in themselves that can be used to set off the reader” (Hill). Several times throughout the story I refer back to Dex’s glasses, which break when he is being bullied in the school restroom. Once the glasses are broken, it looks as though he has multiple eyes. I write:

He clutches his glasses in his hand, and I notice a large crack running across one of the lenses... He takes his hand and slicks back his sopping hair, and then puts his glasses back on. The cracked lens multiplies the amount of eyes that look out at me. I grimace involuntarily. (“Beyond the Pavement”, 3)

These glasses, and the effect that they have on Dex’s eyes, are repeatedly mentioned throughout the story in order to create an eerie, creepy feeling and to further readers’ suspicions that something is off about this town and this school. The appearance of multiple eyes also causes Dex to take on seemingly supernatural qualities, thereby cluing readers in on the fact that there is more to his character than meets the eye.

The other main way that I build suspense in “Beyond the Pavement” is through the setting. Like in Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” the setting of my story appears to be just a normal town like anywhere. There are houses with perfectly landscaped yards, and the school is just like any other high school. Woods surround the town, like they do in many areas. However, there are ways that I manipulate the setting in order to build suspense. By locating the story in the Olympic Peninsula, the weather of the story is an almost-constant

rainstorm: “I turn back to the forest. I’m not sure how long I stand there, staring, before the low grumbling of the thunder sends me hurrying home” (“Beyond the Pavement” 5). By making the weather gloomy and dark, I am able to set the mood as dark and grim. Other ways that setting builds suspense is when the reader learns that Fox is squatting in someone’s house:

I jump the picket fence and walk around to the back yard. The neighbors on this street are not home from work yet. In the small, square garden, amongst the phlox and tiger lilies stands a porcelain garden gnome dressed as a king, with a flowing red cloak and a golden crown. I tilt King Gnome backwards, altering his view of the world momentarily, turning his eyes to the sky, and retrieve the spare key from underneath his throne. I go to the back door, slide the key into the lock, and walk into the Gardners’ home. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner smile down at me from behind the glass of the picture frame. (“Beyond the Pavement” 5)

When the readers realize that Fox is a squatter, it adds an entire layer of mystery to the story. The readers begin to wonder who the protagonist truly is, what he is doing, and what connections he has to the mysterious events that are occurring in the town.

In my story, “Setting Fire to the Sky,” I build suspense in different ways than I did in my other story. Instead of using repetition and setting in order to build suspense, I use dialogue and the supernatural as a means of creating an eerie, surreal feeling throughout the story. In this story, which was inspired by Oates’ “Where are you Going, Where have you Been,” the character of Shane seems friendly enough on the outside; however the things that he says hints to an underlying danger:

Everything about him was laid back, natural. He was leaning back in his chair, his long legs stretching out from the lab table into the isle. He had his right hand

resting on the table and his left hand in his lap. In his left hand he held a lighter, and was repeatedly flicking the cap open, lighting it, and shutting it out. She looked from the lighter to him.

“H-hi.” She stuttered. She watched as he summoned the flame once more, and then she said, “We aren’t allowed to have lighters in school.”

He looked down at the lighter in his hand and snapped the lid closed.

“And do you always follow the rules?” he asked. (“Setting Fire to the Sky” 7)

When Shane says things like this, it makes the reader question his motives and the reason that he is here. Readers start to wonder who he really is, and what his plans are for the protagonist.

The other way that I build suspense in “Setting Fire to the Sky,” is by incorporating elements of the supernatural. Elodie, the protagonist, lost her boyfriend, Benji, in an inexplicable house fire. However, Elodie partakes in nightly rendezvous with her late boyfriend on the top of a lookout outside of the town. Readers do not realize that Benji is actually dead, however, until after Shane appears in the town. By never stating outright that Benji is dead, and leaving the readers to make conclusions of their own, I build suspense and create more of an aura of mystery surrounding the story.

Unreliable narrators are another element that is important in gothic literature. Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” is a great story with an unreliable narrator, as is Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” In Gilman’s story, the narrator is slowly driven to insanity due to solitary confinement. She begins believing that there is a woman living behind her wallpaper. Authors implement unreliable narrators for many reasons, but the most common one is because an unreliable narrator causes the audience to question the events of the story. Readers find themselves wondering if the characters are crazy, if the events that happen actually do happen or

if everything is just occurring in the protagonists' head. The perspective that gothic stories are told from plays an important role in setting the mood and tone of the story. Having an unreliable narrator increases the stakes in a story and adds tension to the mood. With an unreliable narrator, readers never know what to expect.

My story, "Beyond the Pavement," is written in first-person point-of-view. Anytime a story is written in first-person, there is a chance that the narration is unreliable. The protagonist could be biased, opinionated, have a hidden agenda, or could just be lacking valuable information that other individuals know and they do not. In any case, because the reader can see nothing outside of the protagonists' perceptions, readers have a difficult time judging what is truth and what is a lie. There are several indicators throughout the story that hint at the idea that Fox might not be the most reliable narrator. First, he is new to the town, and has quickly become obsessed with a local ghost story: "Legend has it there's a boy who lives in the woods outside of town. He is said to be cursed, a wild savage capable of devouring a human being in less than a day" ("Beyond the Pavement" 1). He does not step in and help when he witnesses someone being bullied in the restroom. Instead, he thinks, "If life has taught me anything, it's to mind your own business" ("Beyond the Pavement" 2). But then, later, he ignores this mantra in lieu of going into the woods to prove the entire town wrong without a clear motive for doing so. Fox's entire identity is kept somewhat hidden from the readers. He reveals that he named himself, and readers learn that he is squatting in a family's house while they are away on vacation. None of these are character traits of a well-grounded person, and everything hints at the fact that Fox is unreliable as a narrator. Readers do not know what he is hiding or why, but his obsession with the legend led to his eventual demise.

Another common trait across the sphere of gothic literature is the cliffhanger. Cliffhanger endings are something that I feel are a work of art within a story. Done correctly, they will be an ending that the reader loves to hate. They will be the reason that the story sticks in the mind and hearts of the reader, the reason that they will think of the characters and events in the middle of the night and think to themselves, ‘What happened?’ To me, cliffhanger endings are a must in gothic literature. Everything about the story is building up to the end—or the lack thereof. Cliffhanger endings are the culmination of the suspense that has been building throughout the story. Author J. E. Fishman writes, “Suspense is defined most simply as leaving someone hanging in the anticipation of the next thing” (Fishman). That being said, what completes that task more effectively than an ending that leaves readers hanging in the very middle of the action without a resolution? The majority of gothic short stories end in a cliffhanger. Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” and Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” all end in cliffhangers. However, of all the cliffhanger endings I believe that Ray Bradbury’s “The Veldt” is the one done most beautifully. In his story, Bradbury spends the entire story slowly building suspense, hinting at the danger that is to come, until finally the story just ends, without ever revealing what actually happens. As Fishman writes in his article, “A cliffhanger raises the stakes and then leaves that part of the story in a state of incompleteness. Having brought the protagonist to the precipice, the author abandons him there” (Fishman). One of the toughest challenges that authors face is knowing when to end their story. This daunting task becomes much more of an obstacle when an author ends their story with a cliffhanger.

Most of the stories that I write end in cliffhangers. In “Beyond the Pavement.” The ending of the story is also the apparent end of the protagonist:

‘I told you to stay out of the forest. You should have listened.’ Dex says. His left eye is twitching, and in his hand he grasps a pistol. The long, lean neck of the suppressor protrudes from the butt of the gun and glints in what little sunlight filters through the trees. He lifts a shaky hand, and it is as if the gun is laughing at me, laughing at what is to come. I close my eyes, but not before I see him pull the trigger. (“Beyond the Pavement” 9)

By ending the story in this way, the reader loses all hope of ever finding out the ending of the story. The only one who learns the secrets that are hidden in the forest is the protagonist, and because the story is written in first person, when the protagonist dies, any hope of finding out more is gone. I have heard countless complaints concerning cliffhanger endings. I have heard that my cliffhanger endings fail to fill an obligation that I, as a writer, have for my readers—to relate the story in completion from beginning to end. I have heard that cliffhanger endings will turn readers off of a story, because there is no use in stories that ‘are not finished.’ However, there are several reasons why a cliffhanger is appropriate. Authors implement cliffhangers, as Fishman writes in his article, “Because the reader wants to be entertained and that entertainment derives, at least in part, from a sense of uncertainty. The longer that uncertainty prevails, the more likely we are to stick with the story” (Fishman). As a writer, one of my main goals is to have my stories stick with the readers, and as Fishman also points out, one of the most satisfying questions to hear readers ask is, “What happens next?” A well-written cliffhanger will elicit that response.

In my story, “Setting Fire to the Sky,” the cliffhanger ending is linked to yet another element present in much of gothic literature—the idea of a female in distress. The ‘damsel in distress’ motif has been prominent in literature for centuries. It is an ever-enduring gender

inequality ideology that accompanies patriarchal societies: weak women are endangered and must be rescued by a strong man, to whom they eventually owe a great deal. Most of the time, they are placed in a circumstance of distress by being abandoned, left alone either on purpose or by accident, and have no protector. In Oates' story, Connie is left alone at the house when Arnold Friend comes to take her away. In addition to that, many stories in gothic literature also involve women being threatened or oppressed by a powerful, tyrannical male. Oates' story is yet again a prime example of this—Connie obviously does not wish to leave her house or to go with Arnold, but she is eventually overtaken by his words and must do as he says. In "Setting Fire to the Sky," which was in part inspired by Oates' story, the protagonist, Elodie, is essentially left alone and unprotected by the death of her boyfriend, Benji. Her life was saved through the sacrifice of his, but that has left her vulnerable in his absence. When she meets Shane—a character inspired by Oates' Arnold Friend—Elodie is captivated by him. Shane is a dangerous character, in the story. It is hinted at and there are undertones of danger that lurk beneath his gorgeous blue eyes. The ending of my story is similar to the ending of Oates' story: "'Get in,'" Shane whispered. Elodie staggered to the passenger side and slid into the car. The car door shut behind her with a deafening thud and she looked at Shane, who smiled at her as he started the ignition" ("Setting Fire to the Sky" 14). The fact that Shane knows so much about Elodie, along with his obsession with fire, guide readers to the conclusion that whatever happens after Elodie gets into the car at the end of the story is not good.

While not all of my fiction falls into the gothic genre, I do hold a certain affinity for the dark, mysterious properties that the genre allows me to explore when writing it. Humans, at their core, are curious creatures. And while most people pride themselves in being decent, upstanding

citizens, there is a part of human nature that causes us to want to explore the realm of the creepy, of the terrifying, of the gothic, and it is for this reason my stories exist.

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Beyond the Pavement

Legend has it there's a boy who lives in the woods outside of town. He is said to be cursed, a wild savage capable of devouring a human being in less than a day. Whispers drift through the halls of carnivorous teeth, pointed and sharp, which could rival those of the deadliest animals. Rumor has it he is the cause of all the disappearances.

I've only been here three weeks, and already two students from my class have vanished. When the first one vanished, late one Friday night after football practice, most people thought it was just a wild night that got out of hand. They waited a day, and then another. But he still didn't come home. When his teammate disappeared a little over a week later, that's when I first heard the hushed murmurs about the little boy in the woods. It's not that I believe all the gossip, but my thoughts keep returning to the boy.

"So, what's up with this kid in the woods?" I ask today at lunch. I direct the question to a blonde girl I'd met in my English class the week before. I cannot remember her name, but she is cute, with her long, blonde hair that curls into perfect ringlets and a small, heart-shaped face with deep-set baby blue eyes.

"Spencer?" she asks.

"If that's his name," I say.

"It is. And, well, he's not really a kid. People forget that he's actually our age. But the last time anyone ever saw him was when he was like nine or ten years old."

"So what happened? Why's he in the woods?"

"He ate his entire family. Bones and all."

“That’s impossible.”

“You’d think so,” she replies.

She opens her mouth and tears another bite off the sandwich. I watch as she chews forcefully. Her mouth opens between bites just enough for me to see her molars grinding the food to brownish-gray sludge.

“Later,” I say. I rise from my seat and toss my lunch tray into a garbage can near the door to the hallway. We aren’t technically allowed to leave the cafeteria during our lunch period. I scan the room to see if anyone is watching, and when I see that they aren’t, I push open the door and step out of the room. I take a couple of steps in the direction of the library, but then I hear the voice of the vice principle coming from around the corner. I do an about face and duck into the bathroom instead. Inside, muffled sounds touch me from the stall on the far side of the room. I take a few steps forward and peek in. A scrawny boy struggles in the grasp of a large, jersey-clad football player. Number 34 has the scrawny kid by the collar with one hand, and is using his other hand to push the kid’s head towards the toilet bowl. The kid flails his arms, spots me, and calls out for help.

I hesitate, but take a quick step back, sliding into the empty stall beside of theirs and shutting the door. If life has taught me anything, it’s to mind your own business. I sit on the commode and try to block out the imposing sounds of the flushing toilet next to me. Soon, Number 34’s footsteps retreat from the bathroom. I sit for a while longer, waiting for the kid’s coughing to subside and for him to leave. When I hear nothing other than the steady drip of the bathroom sink, I open the stall door. I flinch when I see the kid standing there, staring at me. I thought he had left, but he is almost nose-to-nose with me. Halfway down his chest he is drenched, toilet water trickling down the side of his neck. He smells faintly of urine. He clutches

his glasses in his hand, and I notice a large crack running across one of the lenses. The anger in his face is apparent.

“You could have stopped this,” he says. His voice is shaky and sharp.

I shrug. “So could you.”

His eyes narrow, “You didn’t even try.” His voice is full of indignation.

I shake my head. “What was I supposed to do?”

He stands there, staring at me for what seems like an eternity. He takes his hand and slicks back his sopping hair, and then puts his glasses back on. The cracked lens multiplies the amount of eyes that look out at me. I grimace involuntarily.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” he asks.

I nod, fighting the urge to check my watch. I do not want to be late to class. It’s English, my favorite subject.

“I’m Dex. What’s your name?” he asks.

“Fox,” I say.

His expression turns thoughtful and it feels as though he is examining me. I have been sized up before, but this is different. His gaze is overbearing.

“Fox...” he mutters to himself. “What an interesting name.”

“Thank you. I picked it myself.”

He nods and then he turns and walks out of the bathroom without another word. The late bell rings, and I rush to my class. The rest of the day passes by quickly. We discuss Robert Cormier in English, an author I had never heard of. History brings tales of the Civil War, and mathematics teaches me the foundations of trigonometry. Geography, however, is what catches my attention most. Today is an in-depth lecture about the town. I listen eagerly, hoping that the

teacher would mention the half-forgotten ghost stories that seem to haunt this place. I am disappointed though, when she talks only of the weather, climate, and land formations of the Olympic Peninsula. Things I know far too well.

The forest seems to stare at me through the window during my last class. I think about the tale of this cannibalistic boy, Spencer. Unwanted images flood my mind. A small child, naked in the woods, sinks his teeth into the flesh of a large man. Blood oozes from the body, dribbles down the face of boy. The man opens his mouth to cry out and at the same time the dismissal bell rings and I shake the thoughts from my mind. I leave the schoolhouse and find my feet carrying me, not to the sidewalk, but to the edge of the forest behind the school.

“You’re not thinking of going into the woods, are you?”

The voice comes from behind me, loud and sudden, like the unexpected firing of a gun. I turn to see Dex staring at me, his eyes magnified through the massive lenses of his black-rimmed glasses. The cracked lens still adds a kaleidoscope effect and I can see my reflection staring back at me from inside many large, dark pupils. I take a step back. His unnatural closeness makes me uneasy. His proximity, paired with the odd way his eyes seem to pop out of their sockets, is enough to cause the hairs on my arms to stand on end. If he notices that he’s startled me, he doesn’t show it.

“Well, yeah, I was. Maybe if someone went into the woods, it would prove to everyone that there’s nothing there.” I’m still uncomfortable with his disregard for personal space.

He drops his voice to a whisper, “Don’t.” He jerks his head away and walks off. I stare after him until he disappears around the corner of the school building. I turn back to the forest. I’m not sure how long I stand there, staring, before the low grumbling of the thunder sends me hurrying home.

I walk along the edge of the woods, making sure not to veer too close to the trees that loom over me. I try not to stare into the forest. Now and then I glance to my right, straining my eyes for a moment, trying to see beyond the dark curtain of branches. A part of me hopes that I will catch a glimpse of the cannibal.

Not that I believe he exists.

I veer to the left and make my way down a residential street. All of the houses are nice, but eerily identical. I had vowed never to live in the suburbs again, but I don't have much of a choice at the moment.

I jump the picket fence and walk around to the back yard. The neighbors on this street are not home from work yet. In the small, square garden, amongst the phlox and tiger lilies stands a porcelain garden gnome dressed as a king, with a flowing red cloak and a golden crown. I tilt King Gnome backwards, altering his view of the world momentarily, turning his eyes to the sky, and retrieve the spare key from underneath his throne. I go to the back door, slide the key into the lock, and walk into the Gardners' home. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner smile down at me from behind the glass of the picture frame.

I grab a bag of chips from the kitchen and then walk into the living room, where I have set up residence for the moment. I will have to leave soon, before the family returns to find me living in their home. I do my homework carefully, read each word from the assigned chapters and answer each question correctly. When I am finished I grab a book from the shelf and sit down on the couch to read. After a while, my eyes become heavy. I shut the book and lean back, unable to concentrate. I fall asleep thinking about the boy in the forest, and wonder if his story is anything like mine.

My eyes fly open and I jump up, heart pounding. My dreams had been filled with disturbing images, blood and flesh and dark forests. I walk over to the window and stare out, breathing carefully in an attempt to calm my rapid heartbeat. Twilight has settled upon the world, a blanket of deep blue. My eyes find their way to the towering trees of the forest. I wonder at how a little boy could survive for so long alone. As I watch, a flock of birds shoot into the sky and scatter. They fly in different directions, each one a blur of black feathers. They disappear as quickly as they appeared, leaving the tops of the trees rustling for a moment before falling still once more. I watch for a while longer, but the world fell asleep.

The next day, the school is silent as I walk into the building. The tense atmosphere makes it difficult to breathe. The unfamiliar faces are pale. Their eyes are glistening with tears. I spot the girl I'd spoken to at lunch leaning against the wall near the girl's bathroom.

"What happened?" I ask her.

She looks up at me, kicking the ground with the point of her shoe. Her mascara matts her eyelashes together, and her bottom lip quivers as she speaks. "He didn't make it home. She begins shaking her head, as if denying her own words, and then ducks into the bathroom. Throughout the day, I learn that yet another of the football players had not made it home after practice the night before. Scared, trembling voices spill out into the halls and frightened whispers fill classrooms. By lunchtime, all are silent. None are hungry. Everyone agrees: the boy in the woods has claimed another victim. Sitting in the silent cafeteria, I feel anger rising up from the pit of my stomach. Outside, I can see police cars parked, their lights flashing. The officers stand on the pavement, looking out across the grassy field and into the forest. They teeter on the edge, looking as if they were about to step off the ledge of a thirty-story building. None of them move to act. None of them enter the forest.

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s it.” I jump up, my chair skidding across the linoleum. Every pair of eyes in the room turn to look at me, curiosity mixes with the sadness in their faces. I say nothing else. I just walk out of the cafeteria. I leave the school, and walk between two of the teetering police officers. I make my way across the pavement, towards the grass that separates the school from the forest.

“Hey, kid, you can’t go in there!” a policeman yells after me. I stop and turn back to see him, still balancing on the edge of the pavement.

“Come stop me,” I say. Their faces whiten and they stand there. Students are gathering on the sidewalk to watch. I nod at the officer’s lack of action, and turn back to the forest, anger fueling my movements.

I’m not sure why I feel so responsible to find Spencer, to clear his name. I woke up this morning completely set on skipping town after school. I had packed up my clothing and bedding, returned the house to how I found it, and came to school with the intention of never coming back. I was going to leave town and forget I’d ever heard of Spencer and the cannibal killings. But now I step into the forest. I am determined to prove the town wrong. There is nothing more sickening than grown men and rational adults behaving like children. There is not a cannibalistic child running about eating high-school football players. It is absolutely absurd. I power through the brush, duck under the tree limbs, and make my way blindly, without a thought of how I’d find my way back. I will spend the night, I decide, and go back in the morning. I will show these people that there is nothing to fear inside this forest.

The sound of charred wood beneath my feet makes me pause. I look around, realizing that I have stumbled upon a campsite. Looking down, I see a blue jersey. The white number 34 is

stained a rust color. I swallow hard, feeling panic rising in my gut. My heartbeat quickens and I focus on my breaths to stay calm. I look up.

That's when I see him.

The boy is tall, very lean, and obviously wild. His clothing is nothing more than rags, and his hair, which hangs below his waist, is knotted together and full of stray twigs and leaves. He watches me with wild eyes. He has the body of a man, but the eyes of a child. I have found Spencer.

I open my mouth to speak, but the words will not come out. He takes a cautious step towards me, and I hear a clinking sound. That's when I see the chain. A black collar is wrapped around his throat and attached to a chain that connects him to a tree about thirty yards away. My head is spinning, and I cannot wrap my thoughts around what exactly the chain means. Spencer begins making noises, backing away from me.

I take a tentative step closer to him. He begins furiously shaking his head back and forth. The heavy chain clashes like knives falling to the floor. Tiny bits of forest debris fly from his matted hair as he continues backing away, seeking shelter beneath the tree.

His eyes have lost their curiosity. I can see the fear in his eyes. I don't understand. I had made no sudden movements, no threatening sounds. But his eyes are looking past me, to something behind.

I turn and see what the man-child had been staring at so horrified. Eleven shattered eyes stare at me hungrily.

"I told you...I told you don't go in the woods...I told you," Dex mutters. Spencer whimpers behind me, and I glance at him. He hunkers in a tiny ball near the base of the tree. He covers his ears with his hands. His eyes are shut tightly. Bones are scattered in the dirt around

him. I swallow as I realize who those bones belonged to. I look back at the multi-eyed monster. Here, he doesn't seem so small. I notice how Dex favors the trees. His lankiness stretches him to the sky, parallel with the trunks that surround us. It lifts him higher, makes him omnipotent.

“I told you to stay out of the forest. You should have listened.” Dex says. His left eye is twitching, and in his hand he grasps a pistol. The long, lean neck of the suppressor protrudes from the butt of the gun and glints in what little sunlight filters through the trees. He lifts a shaky hand, and it is as if the gun is laughing at me, laughing at what is to come.

I close my eyes, but not before I see him pull the trigger.

Setting Fire to the Sky

Elodie sat perched upon the hood of her car in silence and watched the cupcake colored sky grow dark. The frothy pink wisps were scorched black as the sun descended behind the mountains in the distance. Dusk was her favorite time of day. She would drive every evening to the top of the mountain that overlooked her small town and wait to see the pastel pinks and oranges melt from the sky. It frightened her that recently the clouds resembled the likeness of the fire. She tried to ignore it, but each night the sky began to feel more and more like a ceiling, capturing the smoke of the burning clouds and trapping it in the atmosphere. There is no escape from the memories that came tearing through her mind like wildfire. No escape from that night.

The clear, open sky at the top of the lookout fell away and she was standing in the middle of Benji's room as he sat on the bed. The flickering candles cast dancing shadows on the walls like ghosts. His eyes were hungry and they slowly trickled up and down her body. Elodie stood more shy and self-conscious than she'd ever been in the two years they'd been together. Her eyes met his and she felt her face flush, blooming rose red from her neck up into her cheeks. She looked down and fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. Benji chuckled at her and got up from his bed. He stood in front of her and took her hand in his.

She looked up at him. "I'm scared."

He pulled her closer. "Don't be. I'll take care of you."

Elodie rested her head on his shoulder. She always felt safe with him, but something felt strange about tonight. It was as if there was a wall between them, one that had never been there before. He led her to the bed. Elodie sat down on it. She looked around the room that she'd been

in a dozen times, ran her hand over the sheets she'd felt many times. Everything was different tonight. Everything that was familiar to her took on alien properties. Her world felt askew.

"I'm not sure about this, Benji," she said. "Something doesn't feel right."

"We don't have to do this. We can wait," he said. He cupped her face in his hands and rested his forehead against hers. Their eyes were inches apart. She found strength in his words.

"No," Elodie breathed. "I want this. I want you."

"Are you sure?"

She responded by pressing her lips against his, and all her thoughts and worries were quieted by touch, by body pressed against body. He kissed her lips, cheeks, and neck, working his way down to her collarbone. Her face flushed again, but she did not feel embarrassed. Beads of sweat formed across her forehead, and her clothes stuck to her skin uncomfortably.

"It's so hot," she whispered.

"I know," Benji whispered in her ear. He nibbled it teasingly.

Elodie began feeling smothered. She pressed her hands against his chest, pushing him up off of her. "No, Benji, it's too hot."

That was when the fire reached the blanket, draping off of the bed. Benji threw the blanket away from them and drew Elodie close to him. The curtains were blazing up the wall, and the fire illuminated the room in an orange glow.

Elodie jumped up, her mind still hazy. She ran to the door and grabbed the handle but jerked her hand back, the metal too hot to touch. The flames were rising around her. She screamed for Benji, but could hear nothing but the laughing cackles of fire. The door fell loose from the wall towards her. She held it off with her hands. The heat scorched her palms, and she screamed at the pain.

Suddenly Benji was close to her.

“I’ll protect you.” He whispered into her ear, and Elodie felt the weight of the door being lifted from her. She coughed from the smoke, and her world went dark.

As the amber glow waned and left the sky smoky blue above her, she pushed thoughts of fire out of her mind and laid back, staring up into the sky. Elodie had always believed that if she looked into the sky at night it was the same as looking into the ocean. She had never seen the ocean, though, and her only dream was California. She was tired of the country, tired of small-town gossip and knowing the names of everyone she saw. She was tired of memories that wouldn’t burn to ash.

She watched the stars emerge one by one; perfect and frozen in place to keep them from falling to the Earth.

“There’s my California dream,” Benji said, breaking into her thoughts.

Elodie jumped, sitting straight up and placing her hand over her heart. “Benji, you scared me!”

Benji laughed and jerked his head, throwing his shaggy dark locks out of his eyes.

“Don’t laugh at me, you jerk!” Elodie said, and punched his shoulder. He didn’t even flinch. He hopped up onto the car beside her and draped his arm around her shoulder.

“How was your day?” Elodie asked, leaning into him and attempting to feel his warmth. Instead, she felt him shrug.

“It was alright. Lonely. The only part of my day that matters is when you’re with me.” Elodie wrapped her arm around him and squeezed him. She hated it when he acted so cold. He never used to be this way, before that night.

“It’s getting late,” he whispered.

“I don’t want to go home,” she whispered. “It means leaving you.”

“I know, but we’ll meet again tomorrow night.”

They slid off the hood of her car and Elodie looked up into the sky to survey the stars once more. Then she turned her gaze to Benji. “I keep thinking about that night.”

Benji’s face turned hard. “Don’t.”

“We need to talk about what happened.”

“You need to go home.” Benji opened the car door for her. “It’s late and your mother will be worried.”

Elodie stared at him for a moment and sighed. He would never talk to her. The wall she had sensed that night just continued to rise higher between them. She slid into her car and began her journey home. When she looked into the rearview mirror for one final glance, he was already gone. She pulled into her driveway thirty minutes later and saw the glow of the living room light illuminating the front porch. Her heart dropped; they had waited up for her. With a heavy sigh she climbed out of her car and trudged up the steps. She closed her hand into a fist and pretended she was interlocking her fingers with Benji’s.

She paused on the top step and turned around to look up at the stars one last time, but all she saw was shadow-blackened leaves. Her father had turned their yard into an orchard. When she was five she had happily helped him pull the apples off of the young adult trees. But four years later, at the age of nine, she realized that the trees had not stopped growing and would eventually block her view of the stars. She had cried and begged her father to cut them down, but he would not. Elodie had not helped her father harvest since then.

“Where have you been?” her mother asked Elodie when she stepped inside the house.

“Just at the lookout.”

Her mother's lips pulled down at the sides. "Oh, okay. It's just later than usual. I was getting worried."

Elodie nodded, "Goodnight." She attempted to duck upstairs, but her mother called her back to the living room with a quick, "Hold on!"

Elodie turned towards her parents.

"Did anyone join you tonight?" her mother asked.

Elodie shrugged. "Just Benji." She watched as her parents exchanged a look of concern.

"Look, can I go to bed now? I have school in the morning," Elodie said. Her mother nodded absentmindedly, and Elodie ran upstairs and crashed into bed the way waves crash into the shore. She fell asleep with all her clothes on, face buried in the pillows.

While dusk was her favorite time of day, nighttime meant a recurring nightmare. In her sleeping mind her bedroom grows red hot with dancing flames engulfing everything. The walls fall down on top of her, and she throws out her hands to catch them before they trap her. She would wake up screaming for Benji, but no matter how hard she tried she could never see his face through the clouds of smoke.

The next morning Elodie rose early, not wishing to fight her way back to sleep through the flames. She decided she would walk to school. It looked like it might rain, but she was willing to take the risk. When she went downstairs she grabbed an apple from the table and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Where are you off to so early?" her mother asked.

"School. I think I'm going to walk today," Elodie replied.

Her mother stiffened, "Walk? But you love driving!" Her mother added fake enthusiasm to her voice to mask the fact that she didn't really want Elodie walking.

“I do, but I think it’s a good idea today.” And with that, Elodie walked out of the door and began walking towards the high school. She walked briskly until she made it to where Benji used to live. The pitiful grass near the edge of the road was a dull brown color, and the further into the yard, the darker the grass became until it was nothing but ashes. The brick framework of the house that once stood two stories tall was the only part of the house that still stood. Broken glass scattered around the yard glittered in the sunlight as Elodie walked by. She could see clear to the backyard, where the tire swing still stood. She blinked, thinking that she saw someone sitting there. But when she looked again, the tire swing was empty. It swayed slightly in the breeze, but as Elodie looked around there was no evidence to suggest that anyone was with her. Elodie blinked hard, and took off at a run towards the school. *Maybe mom was right.* She thought. *Maybe I should have driven.*

At school her steps slowed as she made her way to class. Her first class every day was AP Biology. She hated science. It was the dullerest thing, and could cause the happiest people to want to throw themselves off of a bridge. She stepped into the classroom and her gaze fell onto a student she had never seen before. He was tall, lean, and his smooth skin looked as though he had been placed inside of an oven and baked to golden-brown perfection. And his eyes were such a light sky blue that they made Elodie wonder if they were painted porcelain. He was seated at her lab table, in the seat beside hers.

There was a stirring in her stomach as she took her place next to him. The room suddenly felt too hot, and she felt nauseated. The open window caused a breeze to blow his golden hair, and she caught a whiff of salt, water, air, and tanning lotion. It was the smell of the ocean. A sideways glance told her that he was looking at her, too. When their eyes met he smiled a

sideways smile at her. It was the kind of smile that made you have fun, even in the middle of biology class.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was friendly, carefree. Everything about him was laid back, natural. He was leaning back in his chair, his long legs stretching out from the lab table into the aisle. He had his right hand resting on the table and his left hand in his lap. In his left hand he held a lighter, and was repeatedly flicking the cap open, lighting it, and shutting it out. She looked from the lighter to him.

“H-hi,” she stuttered. She watched as he summoned the flame once more, and then she said, “We aren’t allowed to have lighters in school.”

He looked down at the lighter in his hand and snapped the lid closed. “And do you always follow the rules?” he asked.

Her lips straightened into a hard line, her mind fighting off the flames that always simmered at the edges of her conscience. Mr. Cunningham called the class to order. Elodie leaned toward the new boy and whispered, “Only when I don’t want to burn.”

She leaned away from him and turned her attention to the lecture. She opened her notebook and carefully wrote down everything that Mr. Cunningham wrote on the whiteboard. She never took notes, but she wanted to make a point to the new boy that their conversation was over. The entire fifty minutes of class, Elodie was hyperaware of his eyes examining her.

When class ended, he stood and lingered by the table. Elodie looked up from gathering her books.

“I’m Shane,” he said.

“My name is Elodie,” she replied.

He flashed her another dazzling smile. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Elodie.”

The next day, Shane began writing her notes on pieces of paper during lecture. Through their written conversations Elodie learned that he was from California, and he had moved to Tennessee with his father after his parents' divorce. She learned about his dreams of owning a surf resort on the beach. He told her that he thought her name sounded like a song, and his favorite color was the ocean.

Each day when she walked into class he would be there, playing with his lighter, but he always put it away the moment she entered the room. Each day they would pick up on their conversation where they left off.

On Friday she revealed to him her dreams of running away to California, and that she didn't feel so lonely when she looked up at the stars and saw the millions of souls who'd made their second life celestial.

What do you mean? He had written in response to that.

I believe that stars are the souls of special people who have left us here on Earth. Once she wrote it she froze in panic; she'd never told anyone that but Benji. She could only imagine the ridicule that would ensue. But Shane nodded his head pensively and wrote: *You could be absolutely right.*

That night at the lookout, Benji came to her underneath a cloudy sky. Not a single star could be seen.

"How's my California dream tonight?" he asked, brushing her hair out of her face as gently as the wind. When she did not respond, and he noticed that she was looking at the ground instead of her beloved sky, he placed his hand under her chin and tipped her head up.

"Tell me," he whispered.

Elodie looked up at the starless sky. Clouds rolling through the atmosphere reminded her of billows of smoke in a tiny room. It made her feel claustrophobic.

“I can’t see the stars,” she said. Her voice came out sounding desperate. Benji turned her head to look at him.

“The stars are there even if you can’t see them. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Elodie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I met someone.”

Benji dropped his hand from her chin and took a step back. He swallowed hard, as if taking a pill that wouldn’t go down.

“Benji…” Elodie started, but he held up a hand to silence her. He smiled, but it was an empty smile.

“We both knew this would happen eventually,” he said.

“Benji, I love you,” she said.

His eyes met hers. “And you always will.”

“But…” Elodie started but wasn’t sure what to say.

“But it’s time for me to go,” he finished.

They stood there a few minutes in silence, just looking at each other. Then, Benji stepped forward and bent his face to hers. Her eyes closed instinctively and felt the warmth of his kiss wash over her. And then he was gone. Elodie held back tears. It was the first time he had ever left her standing alone at the lookout. She took one last look at the sky before climbing in her car and leaving.

The road home snaked in front of her, winding around trees and weaving in and out of the shadows. The car behind her kept their headlights on bright, and every time she glanced in the

rearview mirror it blinded her like the sun. She was relieved when she was able to turn off onto her driveway and the car kept going. She made her way to her bed quickly.

That night she woke with a start. The fires in her nightmares woke her up sweaty with her pajamas sticking to her skin. She threw the covers off. She got up and went to the window and looked to the sky. Instead of seeing stars she saw smoke. She quickly pulled on her coat over top of her pajamas and ran outside. She rushed through the orchard, between the apple, pear, and peach trees. Her lungs stung, and each gasp of air felt as though she were inhaling knives. Finally she saw the orange glow shining out from between the trunks of the trees. She stepped through into the small grove that contained the flames. She felt the heat of the blaze warm her skin. A lump formed in her throat and she swallowed convulsively. Her eyes never strayed from the fire. The trees seemed to get smaller as the fire grew larger.

“Elodie?” Shane’s voice broke into her consciousness. She looked away from the fire and at his face.

“Shane?” She gasped, finally able to breathe. “What are you doing here?”

“Just having a bonfire,” he said. “What are you doing out here?”

“Out here? This is my yard,” Elodie said. She took a few steps away from the fire and leaned against the trunk of a tall cherry tree. Cherries were her favorite fruit. Shane stayed by her side.

“I know. I followed you home,” he chuckled.

Elodie gasped. Her mind searched for something to say but she couldn’t form any words. Her eyes looked warily towards the flames as the minutes ticked by, “Why would you do this?”

Shane looked toward the bonfire. “It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

“Beautiful?” Elodie scoffed. “It’s a disaster! One wrong wind and the whole orchard will burn.”

“Why are you so afraid of fire?” Shane demanded. He stepped away from her and looked her straight in the eyes. “There is nothing so beautiful, so representative of the human experience than fire. It glows in love, it dances in life, it burns with passion...”

“And it rages in hatred,” Elodie interrupted him.

“It is the essence of life,” Shane finished. He motioned to the fire blazing behind him with a flourish of his hand.

Elodie narrowed her eyes at him. “Who are you?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Me?” He stepped closer to her. His perfectly sculpted face was inches from hers. She could feel the warmth of his breath hot on her face. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. They were hot, and sweet. She pressed her lips back against his, returning the kiss. Her heart simultaneously swelled up with feeling and broke in agony. Feeling for this new, strange wildfire of a boy. Agony for what she has now lost in Benji. His lips left hers too soon, and he strolled away from her without another word, disappearing into the trees.

Elodie sank to the ground staring into the flickering flames. She reached up with her fingers and gingerly ran them across her lips. Her thoughts swirled like the smoke rising up from the bonfire. Shane, Benji, the fire, the stars, and the orchard all swirled together. She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and then ran home. The fire in her dreams was especially bright that night.

The next night, on the drive to the lookout she told him about Benji. Her throat grew tighter, and it was difficult for her to speak about it aloud, but she made it through the story without any tears. And for her that was a step forward. Shane listened quietly without interrupting much, and when she was finished he remained quiet. Elodie was afraid it was too much information on a first date.

When they made it to the lookout they climbed out of Elodie's car and sat on the hood, the same way she and Benji had dozens of times. She wasn't sure how long they sat there without saying a word, but soon she felt his hand search out hers. Their fingers intertwined and he felt unfamiliar skin. Looking down, Shane peeled his hand away from hers and examined the palm of her hand in the moonlight. Instead of the creamy, ivory colored skin and spider-web fingerprints, there was a smooth deep pink surface covering the entire palm of her hand, reaching up through her fingers and ending in the lack of fingerprints. Shane took his finger and ran it gently across the rosy skin of her hand. It tickled, which surprised Elodie since she had lost most of the feeling in her palms. He grabbed her other hand too, and turned it palm side up in the darkness. He found matching pink palms. He looked up at her. "Is this from the fire?"

Elodie nodded. "It started out with just a candle. How fires that big can grow from flickers that small...that's what I'll never understand."

Shane let go of her hands and slid off of the hood. He walked towards the edge of the lookout, where the guardrails separated ground from cliff. He stared up into the sky for what seemed like the longest time. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his lighter. He felt the weight of it in his hands, turned it over several times, examining it.

"You know, Elodie, you're the best thing about this town."

Elodie smiled, and felt a stirring in her gut that she couldn't distinguish between butterflies of a blossoming romance, or the anxiety that precedes a disaster.

"I could say the same to you," she said. And she meant it. Her world changed when he entered it.

He was still turned away from her, looking out over the town. He flipped open the lighter and ignited the small flame. He held it up. "What say you and I take a little trip, Elodie?"

She swallowed and slid off the hood of her car, but she did not approach him. She liked the way he said her name, like it was something secret. "Where to?"

Shane half turned toward her and his lips twisted up into a crooked smile. "California, of course." His eyes never left hers. He turned completely towards her and threw the lighter, tiny flame still lit, off the edge of the lookout.

"I'd love to go. How about this summer?" She said.

"No," Shane said. He started walking towards her car. "Now."

All the thousands of reasons not to go halted on the tip of her tongue. She knew she couldn't go to California. There was her family, friends, school. But she couldn't bring herself to say any of these things. There was money and the fact that they were underage. But all of these reasons disappeared from her mind in a puff of smoke.

"Get in," Shane whispered.

Elodie staggered to the passenger side and slid into the car. The car door shut behind her with a deafening thud and she looked at Shane, who smiled at her as he started the ignition.

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