

The Diary of Shadows (1st Place)

By Rachael Montgomery

A chill whispered through the autumn air as Alice pushed the dilapidated barn door open. Mom and Dad had always told her to stay away from the old shed, probably because one good gust of wind could topple it. She'd only entered it once, during a game of hide and seek, and was sorely disappointed—it was just an old shed filled with forgotten knick-knacks. Still, when her father found her, she was grounded for a month.

Since then, she had avoided it, at first out of fear, then out of indifference. Until the dreams started. The first one was barely a memory—just an impression of an impression, a long-forgotten whisper of dread. But each night, the dreams became more vivid, more real, until she found herself jolting awake, heart pounding with excitement.

It was always the same: the book, its leather cover gleaming in the sun, holding a secret she felt she had always known but could never reach, never able to remember once she awoke.

She found it in a corner, buried under a moth-eaten blanket—the small book with a gnarled, aged cover and yellowed pages. Gently, she lifted it, fearing one wrong move might turn it to dust. She brushed off the dirt to reveal the faint, scribbled letters on the cover: *Eleanor's Diary*.

With a quivering hand, she carefully turned the first page.

October 3rd

I fear the worst. My skin is wan, like the silver of moonlight, and the warmth in my body has all but faded. My stomach churns, yet I desire no food. I have turned away the last five meals Mother has brought me.

I do not understand, but I feel it. There is something within me, clawing to be free.

Alice's heart pounded in her ears as a wave of dread washed over her. She wanted to stop reading, to throw the book to the ground and forget she had ever stepped inside.

But her fingers moved on their own, turning the page against her will.

October 10th

My eighteenth birthday is approaching. Father and Mother are busy planning my introduction ball, though I have expressed that I do not desire such a thing.

Mother asked me why, but I could not answer her. I knew that seeing the flash of fear in her eyes would shatter what little remained of my heart. Now, I avoid them as much as possible. When Mother inquires if I am feeling ill, I merely shake my head and hide my face. They can never know the truth.

At night, the hunger gnaws at me. I hear whispers from the village, though it is miles away. Most concerning, I can smell things I ought not—like the warmth of blood.

Alice shivered; her birthday was just a week away. She stared down at her hand as it hovered over the book. Was it a trick of her imagination, or was she paler than she had been the day before?

Her mind spun.

Last week, during English class, she swore she heard whispers from the hallway, even though the door was closed and Mrs. Turner was lecturing.

Now, as she sat in that barn, half a mile from her parents' house, she was certain she could smell cinnamon in the air. Was her mother baking her favorite pie?

She turned the page, trying to push the gnawing thoughts aside.

October 14th

I know not who I am anymore. I remain awake late into the night, bathing in the moon's silvery glow. I wander the woods, drawn to the creatures that hide in the shadows.

And tonight, as I strolled through the forest, I chanced upon a poor rabbit, torn to shreds by wolves. I scooped it up and cradled it in my arms. But then, in a frenzy, I lapped up its blood—every last drop, rich and dark and wonderful.

For the first time in weeks, I am full, and I hate myself for it.

Alice gasped, clutching the diary. She told herself it must be part of her dreams, but the words felt so familiar—just like the memory that danced in her mind: seeing her mother often slip into the woods, gazing up at the moon with an intensity that sent a shiver up her spine.

Alice knew she should run back to the house, to forget that this cursed book existed. Instead, she turned the page.

October 17th

Tomorrow is my birthday. I now know that I must confide in my parents; I cannot conceal the truth of who I am any longer.

What may come of it, I cannot say, but I am ready. I have transformed into something new, something greater. I am stronger, swifter. I can feel the buds of my wings beginning to form. I will belong to the shadows. I will be the queen of the night.

Alice's eyes widened. Her own birthday was tomorrow.

The pieces began to fall into place, but before she could move, she felt an icy hand clamp down on her.

"Mother," Alice whispered, her voice barely audible. "Is that you?"

Alice's mother sat down, her gaze piercing. Her eyes were serene, yet something ancient lingered within them, something Alice had never questioned until now.

"I found a diary. It is yours, isn't it?" Alice barely managed to choke out the words.

A flicker of sadness passed over her mother's face.

She nodded slowly. "I had hoped you wouldn't find it, that it wouldn't call to you. That you would be... like your father. But yes, it is mine. And yes, you will be like me, Alice."

"What... what happens now?"

"Soon, you will understand. You will feel the hunger, the thirst. But you are not alone. I will help you through it."

Alice's stomach knotted with fear. Yet, as she gazed at the journal, a strange sense of calm settled over her, as if the shadows had been calling to her all along.

THE END

Visage (2nd Place)

by Susie Sato

October 18th

I finally moved out of my mom's house, into a fixer upper on the outskirts of Gillespie. It's not far from where I went to school. The house is modest, having been built over one hundred years ago. The place is in need of repairs, but any house of that age does.

The man that sold me the house told me that there were some antiques left over from his grandmother that used to live there. No one in his family had the heart to look through the basement when she passed. I know what that feels like, left in the wake a loved one passing. He assured me that he was okay letting those belongings go. Even if that was what he told me, his empty eyes said the opposite.

October 19th

Today is the day that I got settled into my house. It's still crazy to write that. My house, a space to call my own. Living with family is nice, but it feels amazing to be able to stretch your legs and just be alone. Of course that means doing everything alone as well, cooking, cleaning, repairs... Not to mention the fact I'm practically living out of boxes in an old, dusty house. But despite all that, I'm still happy to call it my own, flaws included.

October 20th

I can start to believe why people think houses like this are haunted. The wood of this house has shifted and warped so much over the years that it leaves gaps for the brisk autumn air to

get in. And don't get me started on the creaking!

October 21st

I had to run to the hardware store to do it, but I've started patching up the gaps in the doorways and window sills with expanding foam. It's not pretty, but it's better than letting in all the cold air. I've also gotten more of my belongings unpacked, even got an office set up. It's like home away from home in regards to my career, editing my photography and writing for the local paper. I just hope the foam keeps enough cold air out so I can finally get a good night of sleep.

October 22nd

I am writing this entry fueled by cold brew coffee and piping hot spite. I felt like I was going to freeze last night, despite the expanding foam I applied to the gaps in this house. I think the furnace is on its last legs, I really need to get a technician to check that out.

I picked up a space heater and some extra blankets for the meantime, since I'll have to make sure the basement is clear before I get the furnace looked at.

October 23rd

The space heater helped me get through the night, though I'm too paranoid to leave it running while I sleep. My bedroom is small and my blankets are warm enough to keep me safe through the night. I need a more permanent solution, since winter will be right around the corner. If not next month, it'll rear its ugly head come January or February.

October 24th

I finally got to cleaning the basement, despite my current workload. It felt like there was years of dust and cobwebs built up down there. Thankfully, I found a pull-string light with a bulb still clinging to life.

The man was right about the basement, the place was scattered with old furniture, porcelain dishware, the works. I even found a photo album in a dresser, from the family that used to live here. I don't know them, but photos can paint a vivid picture of a person's life. It seemed like they lived well all things considered, with photos of them with their grandchildren. But the earliest photo painted the most interesting story.

There was a picture of the couple, much younger and happier. The husband was dressed in military attire while she was in her wedding dress, both smiling with joy being newly-wed. But the next photo was from after the war, both had an unspoken sadness in their eyes, the husband scarred from what he saw in the war, and his wife mourning the loss of the light in his eyes. I never knew these people, but I choked back tears seeing a lifetime told in photos.

October 27th

I've been having nightmares as of late. I don't know if it's stress from work causing it, but I saw a life flash before my eyes, not my own, but of the husband and wife that lived here.

The still frames flickered in my head like an old projector, and I noticed something in the pictures. In almost every one, there was a mirror with a gilded frame in the background. What

was reflected in the mirror was unclear, dark and grainy like underexposed film. October 29th I found the mirror, tucked away behind a bed frame. It's exactly as I saw in my dreams, a tall and ornate gilded frame with slivered glass. I looked into it, seeing my reflection as usual. But, the light suddenly died in the basement. I turned on my phone for light, and was taken aback by what I saw.

My reflection had his eyes, cold, bereft of light. Silent tears fell as the horrifying visage washed over my mind. A darkness started to wrap itself around me, grainy like sandpaper as it crept over me. I ran and didn't look back.

October 30th

I'm still having the nightmares, something is in this house, in that mirror...

And now in me...

October 31st

The shards of glass cut and burned as I smashed the mirror, but it is done. That darkness is gone, but silvered scars remain.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to look at my visage in a mirror again, because I still have his eyes.

The End

THE LEGEND OF STRONGMAN MIKE (3rd Place)

By Michael Sue

Ever since Mike was a kid, he had always had a reputation of being a tough guy. He was never the school bully, but he was known as the strongest kid in the neighborhood, even stronger than most adults. At the age of nine, while other kids would pose in the mirror and pretend to be Superman, “Strongman Mike” as he was called, would flex his biceps in the mirror and you’d see giant tennis balls jetting from his little arms.

Mike was so tough, when he was just eight years old, he used to bang the front of his teeth against his bedpost in the hopes that some of his teeth would fall out so that he could then have a tooth or two to put under his pillow for a little Tooth Fairy money.

He wasn’t scared of anything either. He had watched all the scary movies growing up……. Nightmare on Elm Street, Hellraiser, Halloween, even Faces of Death, but nothing phased him. When he was just a little boy, he would sneak into all of the haunted houses at Halloween, even Spook Hollow, hoping to be scared, even just a little, but he never even flinched or blinked an eye.

Over the years Strongman Mike kept trying to find the ultimate experience that would put a little fright into his bones. He kept searching and searching, until one morning Mike woke up on a hot summer day in Springfield after working security at the Illinois State Fair the night before.

”Dad?”

“Dad, where are you?”

Mike slowly opened his eyes tiredly. Normally, he liked to sleep in after working security the night before, but he was awoken by his daughter’s voice.

“Huh? What is it? What is it Lydia?”

Mike could hear his words and his thoughts, but it was as if he was talking to himself and he couldn’t actually hear the words come out of his mouth.

“Dad? Dad?!!!”

Mike’s vision was a little blurry, but Lydia slowly came into focus. He recognized his eleven year old daughter from her Godzilla t-shirt she always liked to wear whenever she went out in public.

“Hey Lydia!!! Lydia, I’m right here. You don’t have to shout. Geez....”

“Mike!? Mike?!!!”

Now he could hear his wife nearby too. Sarah’s voice got louder and louder as she got closer to Lydia.

“Mike? Mike, where are you?” shouted Sarah.

“Dad!!! Dad!?”

Mike could see Sarah and Lydia stand right in front of him now, only about 20 feet away. Behind them was an old white wall with a giant banner that said, “Farmer Owned: Prairie Farms.”

“I’m right here Sarah. Stop messing around. I’m right here guys.”

Sarah and Lydia didn't even turn their head. It was like they couldn't even hear him.

Concerned that maybe he had lost his voice from the night before, Mike tried to raise his voice a little louder.

“Very funny guys! I'm over here! Stop messing around.”

“Should I call his phone again Mom?”

“No, it just goes straight to voicemail,” replied Sarah.

Mike could sense that something was wrong now, and that this was no charade. He tried again. He tried to physically move toward his family, but it didn't work. It was almost as if his entire body was encased in concrete. All he could do was see and hear. All he had was his thoughts. He couldn't even feel his body.

“Sarah! Right in front of you! Look over here!”

Mike shifted his eyes to the right and could see the clock wall adjoining the side wall. It was almost 9 am.

Suddenly, a door opened and Mike could hear the sounds of little footsteps walking up to him.

“WOW! This is so cool!” said a little boy.

“Everybody file in please. And hold hands. I don't want anybody to get lost,” said a teacher.

Just then, a classroom full of kids, all holding hands, surrounded Mike and gawked at him with ooh and ahhhs.

Several adults trickled in and took out their cell phones and began filming him as if he was a celebrity.

“Sarah, what’s going on here!”

Mike kept trying to move, but nothing happened. Although he had his inner voice, he had no outer voice. He couldn’t make a sound. It was as if he was stuck in a coma with his eyes wide open.

More and more people began to trickle inside the building. A young couple in their twenties began taking selfies right in front of him.

“Can anybody hear me? Somebody say something right now!”

“Dad! Mom, I’m worried!” cried Lydia.

“Isn’t he so lifelike?” said a wife to her husband.

“Whoever made this must have been a genius. This must have taken at least 100 hours” said one little girl.

Just then, two men wearing Illinois State Fair t-shirts came inside and walked right in front of Mike. They were carrying a giant plastic cow that had a mirror attached to its side so that people could pose and take pictures next to it.

“What the?”

Mike managed to catch a reflection of himself in the mirror.

“This can’t be possible! THIS IS NOT REAL!!!”

Sarah finally diverted her attention to Mike and looked straight into his eyes.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” screamed Sarah right before she fainted.

“Mom!”

Several men and women rushed to Sarah’s side.

A little boy who saw Sarah scream began to chuckle away.

“What’s she scared about?” the little boy said out loud for all to hear. “Ain’t she ever seen the butter cow exhibit before?”

Mike wasn’t Mike anymore. He had somehow transformed into a lifesize butter statue of himself. From his wrinkles to even his hair and teeth, everything was just butter. All that remained was his thoughts.

It took a minute, but after assessing the situation he was in, Mike quickly gained his composure and his senses. He was Strongman Mike after all. He wasn’t scared of nuthin.

THE END