

CARDINAL COLLECTIONS

W R I T I N G J O U R N A L



CARDINAL COLLECTIONS

Spring 2024

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SPRING 2024



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Editorial and Standards Policy

Cardinal Collections features creative student writing. Students are encouraged to submit personal works of poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction.

The journal requires that submissions meet certain decency standards to be eligible for publication:

1. Students must be enrolled in grades 9-12 at Wayne County High School to be eligible to submit.
2. Submissions cannot use excessive explicit language.
3. Submissions may not explicitly describe or be gratuitous in describing violence.
4. Students may not submit anonymously to the journal, but they may publish anonymously after review and if accepted. All submissions must be emailed to the faculty editor by the submitting student.
5. Submissions must be typed when submitted. They may be shared through Microsoft Word, Google Doc, or Adobe PDF format.

The journal reserves the right to edit both form and content of submissions, if needed. Submission to the journal does not guarantee acceptance. Submissions are carefully evaluated by Faculty Advisors and other contributing staff.

The ideas and views expressed in *Cardinal Collections* are solely those of the writer and are not necessarily reflective of those of the Faculty Advisors or of Wayne County High School.

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Preface

Recently, our county has begun a transformation into a well-known arts community as so often associated with the Appalachian region. Artists can create and thrive here. Our little town, Monticello, has proven to be an energetic space for artists. Within that space, there are many types of art being produced. Photography, painting, drawing, mural work, and printmaking are mediums we are accustomed to seeing popularly represented in the county. There is, however, an emerging population of writers whose voices are also longing to be heard. Their art is the written word.

Cardinal Collections was created with the purpose to craft a focused space for young writers within Wayne County to have the opportunity to share their talents with their peers as well as their community. The journal was designed specifically for Wayne County High School students.

As you will see in this inaugural edition of the journal, the quality of submissions presented by our young writers is remarkable. Their talent in describing the personal, the abstract, the horrific, the beautiful, etc. is done with great care and attention to detail. Although young, through their writing, each individual clearly shows their maturity and ability.

The content of this year's journal is an excellent representation of just a small portion of the talented student writers learning and blossoming at Wayne County High School. In the coming years, the journal will continue to grow—so will our students. We welcome this growth as we hope you welcome the journal.

Cardinal Collections and NEHS would like to extend a special thank you to Mrs. Mikki Simmons for the design and creation of the journal cover. It is better than we could have imagined.

The Shadow

To anyone in need of comfort, this is for you.

DESCRIPTION

Based in the year 1989, a girl named Jessie and her friend Jeffrey stumble upon an abandoned home that is a memory of their childhood. When they explore the home, they discover dark secrets of the previous owner.

PROLOGUE

In the darkness, there is a face. Lurking in the shadows. But this face does not want to be seen. That is why it is hiding. If it's hiding, then why can I see it? Am I going crazy? Is this creature after me? I may have wronged, but I assure you I did no such harm to attract an animal like this. Does anyone else see what I see? Am I going insane over this figure that is following me, lurking in the shadows? Or maybe I am just overthinking. Yes, that is it. Overthinking. There is no face, no creature, nothing is following me, nothing is lurking.

It is all in my imagination. My imagination.

CHAPTER ONE

The sound of chains clinking leaked into the air as I pedaled to school. The rusty bike was older than me.

“Hey Jessie, wait up!”

I turned around as I heard a familiar voice and saw a boy on a bicycle: Jeffery.

Jeffery didn't grow up with a lot of money, sometimes he spent the night with me because his house was so crazy. I didn't mind, he was my friend. That brown hair and blue eyes always haunted me when I saw them. His frame was scarily tall. I always joked that he reminded me of a tree.

“Hey Jeffrey, heading to school?” I replied back to his greeting.

“You know it. ‘Study, study, study’ that’s Mrs. Homel’s favorite words,” he said as I laughed.

“Walk with me as I go.”

“Okay.”

Jeffery caught up to me as we began pedaling our bikes together. As we passed by, one particular house was boarded up.

“Woah what happened there?” the boy beside me said.

Mark Lertext’s house, the place we always ran around in the yard pretending was haunted as children. Lertext is an old man or was. He passed away last week. He had grayish hair, matching his beard. His brown eyes were so dark they looked black. Mom always said that when she was a little girl, he had gray hair then too, so who knows how old he was.

“I guess they're not selling the house after all.” I replied back to Jeffrey in more of a statement than a question.

I glanced at the house, then at Jeffery, telling him, “let’s go before we're late.” Before we left, I turned back and looked at the house one last time trying not to notice the one window that was not boarded up, with a shadow overlooking.

CHAPTER TWO

After seeing Lertext’s house, I had a weird feeling in my gut the next few days. Every time I would pass it, I had to force myself to look away. I don’t think I was scared of it. Was I? Was I afraid of the house? Or was I afraid of what's inside of the house? That's crazy. I'm not afraid of an old house. Then why was I forcing myself to look away...?

Ignoring these thoughts, I biked home. Jefferey stayed back at school to finish something and had the school newspaper, meanwhile I wanted to get home so I could work on my section of the newspaper. I wasn’t sure what to do yet, maybe something interesting around town might happen in a few days.

As I had these thoughts, I was pedaling into the gravel driveway. The breeze in the air was cooling. I got off my bike and walked in the house, going straight for my room which was where my old-fashioned typewriter sat. I thought about what to type, nothing came to my mind. Any dogs gone missing recently? Any people? Any news

about something someone might want to know about? *Mark Lerfect*. I'll write about Mark Lerfect. Nobody has yet, probably because he was a scary man. But I'm sure I can scrounge something up about him. His birthday. His family history. His age. If he did anything for the town. I don't know anything about this man. He was like a ghost.

CHAPTER THREE

A few days after I attempted to look for information about Lerfect, I decided to talk to Jeffrey about it.

I got on my bike and headed over to his house. Jeffery lived nearby Lerfect's old home, in the same neighborhood. He didn't like when people came over much, so we usually met up at the nearby memorial park.

Soon, I arrived at Jeffery's house, while knocking on the door I repeated, "Jeffrey, are you home? Jeffrey?"

After some time, I heard footsteps, but they weren't ones I would normally hear. They were quiet ones, almost as if it was like someone was tiptoeing, or slightly levitating. Feeling somewhat creeped out, I turned away thinking I would catch him at some other time. As I did so, I heard a door open. I slowly turned my head around to see Jeffrey's front door standing wide open.

"Jeffrey?" I called out. "Is anyone home? Anyone at all?"

I repeated the same words, no answer. I got in a better angle so I could glance inside his home to see if anyone was messing with me, but as I did, I saw a shadow. A face. Standing in the darkness, watching me. I ran to my bike but as I turned around to run, I bumped into a large figure.

"Jessie? What are you doing here?" Jeffrey said.

"Jeffrey! I think someone's in your house! I saw someone just staring at me!" I warned him.

"What do you mean Jess? Someone in my house? That's crazy. It was probably my shadow."

He didn't believe me. He didn't believe me? How could he not. "I swear I did. Go look!"

I pushed him inside his house while I stayed standing outside. He came out minutes later, looking annoyed.

“Nothing there, Jess, go home.”

How did he not see anything? I saw it standing right there.

“Jeffrey, wait, I swear I did see something.”

“Well, whatever it was Jess, it left. Go home.”

He went inside of his house and slammed the door in my face. Why would he be mad at me for seeing something? Was it really because he didn't want me at his house? I guess I had to figure more about Lerfect myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Newspapers after newspapers, I still hadn't found anything about Lerfect. Maybe I should have just given up. No, I wouldn't. I could still ask Jeffrey.

It was Sunday, which meant he was at the park. Every Sunday since I'd known him, he always went to the park on Sunday. He never gave me an answer as to why he did, but I think it was because he didn't want to be at his house any longer than he had to. So, when he got a chance to leave, he did.

I hopped back on my rusty bike again, going to the memorial park where he should be. Thoughts ran through my mind as I was on my way there. It still made no sense why I couldn't find anything about Lerfect. I knew many people hated him, but you would have thought there would be at least a picture or even an obituary.

I saw Jeffrey in the distance as I pulled into the park.

Making my way to Jeffrey, he saw me and smiled softly.

“Hey.”

That's the only word that came out of my mouth. I wasn't sure if he would want to see me or not.

“Hey Jess, I'm sorry about yesterday, it was just a long day.” he said. “It's completely fine, I understand... Oh yeah, I have a question for you.” I replied.

“Shoot.”

“Do you happen to know anything about Lerfect?”

“You mean that dead dude that lived in the creepy house?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you tried looking in his house?”

Looking in his house? He really expected me to have looked inside of a dead old man's house? Wouldn't that be illegal? And it was boarded up anyway.

“Why would I?”

“I can come with you, and we can find whatever you want. For the newspaper, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, come with me then.”

Jeffrey dragged my hands as we grabbed our bikes from the parking spaces and left towards Lerfect's house. As we began on the road, I had a bad feeling in my gut, and, usually, the gut feeling was always right.

CHAPTER FIVE

We arrived at Lerfect's home after riding in silence. I like the quiet sometimes, but other times it got annoying. I stepped off of my bike waiting for Jeffrey to do the same as we walked together on the sidewalk leading to the home.

“How are we going to get in?”

“Hammer, Jess.” he said as if it were obvious.

Where did he get that from? He used the hammer to pull back the nails that were holding the board to the door. As he did so, a glass door began to appear, it was a red door with multi-colored flowers on the glass. He opened the flowered door, and glanced back at me, suggesting I follow him.

I did.

As soon as we walked in, the first thing I noticed was the smell—dusty, dirty, musty. The second thing I noticed was the lights. There were none. I saw a small candlestick thanks to the small sliver of light coming from the open door.

“Got a lighter?”

Jeffrey handed me his lighter as I lit the small candlestick, only giving a small portion more of light. I looked around. Small picture frames lined the walls and the fireplace. One photo stood out in particular. It was a family of five. Two females—one an older woman, and the other a young girl. Then there were three males—one older man, and two

smaller boys. One boy was a toddler. He was around four maybe. The other was just a baby being held by the mother. The young girl looked older than the rest of the children but was still young. The photo was black and white so I couldn't tell much about the color characteristics of the individuals, but it looked like the older woman and the youngest boy had darker hair. I stared at the photo before my eyes landed on the older man. He looked oddly familiar. Who was this family and why was their picture in Lerfect's home?

"Jess, come here."

I followed Jeffrey's voice to a small room, a closet.

"Look at this."

I looked closely at what he was showing me. It was more pictures of the same family. Many pictures.

"Who are these people?"

"I have no clue. I think maybe they are related to this creepy old man."

When he said that, we heard a noise. We both looked at each other. After a moment, Jeffrey went to investigate what happened; meanwhile, I looked at the pictures. The pictures were different every time. The baby was now a toddler, the pre-teen girl now looked to be in her mid-teen years, and the parents looked older. But where was the oldest boy? There were five family members but now there were only four. I heard Jeffrey screaming my name seconds later, over and over. I ran out of the room, but there was nobody there.

"Jeffrey?"

I walked outside to see if Jeffrey was there, but his bike was gone. Did he really leave? I looked down and saw the photos still in my hand. These would be good for now.

I got on my bike. As soon as I was about to leave, I looked back up at the house, the window specifically. A shadow. This time it was a different one. The past two times I saw a shadow, it was a slim short figure. This shadow was taller, broader. It was different.

It was all in your imagination Jessie. All your imagination.

CHAPTER SIX

Looking at the photo with the family of five, I turned it over. I saw a date. How did I not notice this was there before? It said, “*The Lerfect family, 1942.*”

Mark Lerfect had a family? I looked at the back of the other photos. They all had letters written on them too. Some only had dates, some full dedication letters.

“To my loving, sweet wife, I hope you know I love you, that’s why I’m writing this. I miss you every day. I promise I will take care of Stephanie and Jacob. If you see Bentley up there, tell him we say hello.

-1955”

Mark Lerfect had a family. He had a family. Not only that, but his wife had died. His wife? He had a wife? Someone could handle his angry temper and his mean attitude? Not only had he had a wife, he had three kids--the girl and two boys. The toddler boy, Bentley, had died. Then his wife died. I had to tell Jeffrey. I made my way to his house, this time walking instead of riding the rusty bike. I knocked on his door when I arrived, seconds later he came out.

“Jess? What are you doing here?”

“These photos I found yesterday in Lerfect's house? Look at the back, there's letters. He had a wife and kids, a family.” I said while showing him.

“What are you talking about Jess? I never went anywhere?”

“Yes, you did. You told me to go to Lerfect’s house for the newspaper and you came with me. We both heard a noise, and you went to investigate.”

“Jess, I never went anywhere.”

“I went to the park where you always are on Sundays and...” He interrupted me by saying, “I wasn’t at the park yesterday, Jess, I was working on the paper.”

What? He wasn’t at the park? Yes, he was. He was. I talked to him. I saw his bike. The little black bike that he had since he was six. He was at the park, I know it. I’m not going crazy. He was there.

I walked away without saying anything or showing him the pictures I had found. He was there with me, he walked into the house with me.

As I started walking away from his house, I saw Lerfect's house. I wanted to go back, I didn't know why, but I did. I started walking to the house avoiding looking up at the window, knowing what would be there if I did. But even though I knew the outcome, I looked anyway. There stood the same shadow that had been there the past few times I'd been. Watching me, watching my every move. But for some reason, I felt comfort in seeing the shadows. It was like someone was always there for me. I wanted to go back inside the house and hopefully see the faces of the creature watching me, but as I stepped closer, they were gone. It was like they wanted to stay hidden, hidden from the world, hidden from me.



CHAPTER SEVEN

I avoided Jeffrey for the next few days, not because I didn't want to see him, but because I wanted to find out more about Mark Lerfect and his family. Was it really because of that though? Or was it because I didn't want to see that face again? The face I had been seeing for days, the face that had been following me, watching me. I always told myself it was my imagination, but was it? I began typing on my old-fashioned typewriter my story about Lerfect and how he had a family. I still didn't know what happened to them. Nobody did. Maybe

I should go back to the house and see if there was anything else. I wanted to go back.

I picked up my bag, and got on my bike, heading over to Lperfect's house.

As I turned down the neighborhood road, I saw Jeffrey standing outside of his home. I looked at him and called his name, but he never said anything. He didn't even glance my way. He might've just been upset that day, so I didn't stop.

I kept going until I finally arrived at the boarded up home. As I walked inside, the air was different, colder. I found the small candlestick from the other day and lit it with Jeffrey's lighter which I never gave back. I guess it was just from where nobody had been paying the electric bills. Looking inside the home, I decided to go up the staircase. Maybe there were books or more letters. I made my way up the somewhat dry rotted steps in the dark with only a small amount of light leading the way.

The upstairs was colder than the downstairs, and darker. There were four rooms upstairs. I assumed one was the parents' due to the king size bed in the middle of the room. The other room must have been where the two boys shared a room due to two small beds in both corners, and a small crib pushed to the side out of the way. That meant the last bedroom was for the oldest child, the girl.

I attempted to open the last door in the hall, but it wouldn't budge. Most likely it was a bathroom. Making my way into the room with the king-sized bed, I glanced at the messy dresser near the sleeping spot. It was strewn with notes. There were so many notes, letters after letters. I read a few, and my heart sunk.

"Vanessa,

My love, I didn't mean to do what I did. He came my way and I had to protect myself. I didn't know what else to do. Believe me, my love.

- 1952."

What did he do? What did he do that Vanessa didn't like? I dug through the notes finding a later date and kept reading.

"I'm so sorry, Vanessa. I never meant to hurt you or Bentley. I was only trying to help. I promise I will always take care of our kids. I love you forever.

-1954.”

I wanted to stop reading, but I couldn't.

“I'm all alone now. I was only trying to help my family. There is a curse that haunts this house, and it won't go away. I was trying to protect them from this demon. That's all it is. I promise. I miss you every day. I hope you see them up there with you. Tell them I love them too.

-1958”

He killed his family. Lerfect killed his family. I am standing in a house that belonged to a killer.

I turn around to leave the house and I saw it again. The shadow. Only one this time. I had never been so close to it before. I had only seen it from afar, but sometimes I had sensed it watching me, not wanting to be seen. I closed my eyes hard, blinking many times to see if what I was seeing was real or my imagination. The creature wouldn't go away. It stood lurking in the corner, staring at me, not moving one inch. I didn't move, I didn't say anything, I didn't do anything. I was afraid if I moved at all, it would come after me. I stepped away slowly, scared. But for some reason, I wasn't as scared as I thought I would be.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I heard a voice calling out my name.

“Jess?” I turned around slowly, facing away from the shadow. “What are you doing here Jeffrey?” I asked with hardly any emotion, confused.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Are you the things that are following me?” I asked.

He looked at me confused.

“What are you talking about Jess?”

“Oh, don't act so dumb. You're that shadow that keeps following me everywhere. Watching me. You are the shadow!” I screamed at him.

“Jess, I have no clue what you're talking about, you're going crazy.”

“Liar!” I started screaming louder at him.

He was lying. He had been the one following me the whole time! The whole time he had been haunting me, haunting my dreams,

ruining my life. I looked at the ground near the bed and saw a rustic, sharp knife. I took it in my hands and held it up to his face.

“You did this to me! Look at me! You’ve been haunting me for days! Go away! Go away!”

He dropped to the ground as the sharp object went through him.

He was dead. I killed Jeffrey. No. I didn’t. I didn’t kill him.

There was a demon in this house. It was haunting us. Watching us. Inside of us. The demon killed him. I was trying to protect him from the creature. Yes. Yes, that’s it. I’m protecting him.

Jeffrey laid in a pile of red liquid as I stared at his body. I looked over at the corner of the room, and the shadow still lurked there. Why is it still there? I killed it! Go away! Go away! I killed you! I killed you, go away! I wasn’t going insane. I wasn’t. Jeffrey was the shadow. The creature. I know he was. I know it.

CHAPTER NINE

ten years later..

I’ve been trapped in this place for years. I did nothing wrong to be here! I am not insane! I did nothing bad! The soft walls lined with foam block out my screams. I did nothing. I was protecting Jeffrey from the creature. But wasn’t he the creature? Yes, he was! He was haunting me! I was trying to save him from the demon inside of him! Yes, that’s it!

In the darkness, there is a face. Lurking in the shadows. But this face does not want to be seen. That is why it is hiding. If it’s hiding, then why can I see it? Am I going crazy? Is this creature after me? I may have wronged, but I assure you I did no such harm to attract an animal like this. Does anyone else see what I see? Am I going mentally insane over this lurking figure that is following me in the shadows? Or maybe I am just overthinking? Yes, that is it. Overthinking. There is no face, no creature, nothing is following me, nothing is lurking.

It is all my imagination. My imagination.

Abigail Heatherly

Nonverbal

Nonverbal
does not mean silent.
It is not defiant.
Talking is not an option,
but personality shines through like light
—an inspiration.
Listen very close
but not with your ears.
See them clap?
See them snap?
Their smiles sweeter than honey,
personalities brighter than the sun,
always having fun.
Independent young women
making a difference.



Abbygale Humphrey

Pink Blossoms

i love you,
you don't know.
you have zero clue.
i let it flow—
my feelings for you.
i told you i didn't
because the power in me didn't believe,
"i do."
but if i got a penny for every-time i lied,
that would be a penny.
because you're not reading
this, i know.
so in this bliss,
i'll be saying he loves
me, he loves me not
with pink blossoms.



Abbygale Humphrey

Imperfections of Life

i'm not perfect.
who is?
it's something everyone accepts.
everyone has struggled,
but some just wash their worries away.
they let the tide roll
in and out.
we all need that.
just wash away the doubt
and be happy we're alive.
i'm trying to do that for me.



Abbygale Humphrey

My life

i want my life back.
i spent summers and days
with you.
now i feel clammy,
i feel like an actor,
trying to bend over backwards for you.
if my life was a book—a chapter—
it would be about you
and it would be blue.
i feel like Amy
going back to black.
but that's okay.
it's a big change in my life,
like a crack.
i'm taking my life back.



The Things We Attach Ourselves To

“Why must we move here of all places, mother?” asked a young girl appearing to be the young age of eleven. “You know exactly why we must move. Believe me, if I had a choice, we wouldn’t,” the young girl’s mother replied while angrily glancing at her husband. “Well, how much longer do we have to wait? I’m getting bored, and Steve wants to go play,” the young girl directed her question at her father who was driving them to their new home. “Not too much longer Hailey, just be patient,” Hailey’s father responded to her complaining with a somewhat tired expression on his face. Hailey looked over to her four-year-old brother who was sitting there playing with his toy airplane, probably imagining he was flying it outside their car if she had to guess. She eventually grew bored with asking questions and began to look out her window. All she saw in this small town in the state of Kansas was trees and houses far smaller than what her house used to be like.

Eventually, the family of four reached their destination of a two-story house with almost two acres of land on the property. The house looked kinda rundown, like no one had even been near the house in years. The closest neighbor to them was about 2 miles down the road, as their parents wanted them to be as far away from people as possible. As they walked up to the house, the floorboards of the porch creaked beneath their feet like they could give in with just the drop of a pin. The house could have been considered white long ago, but now all that remained was the color of the old, mismatched wood. As they entered the house, a sudden smell that only death could contest hit them.

“We have got to do something about this awful stench,” Hailey’s mother, Mary, said, holding her nose with a frustrated look on her face. “And we will, as soon as the movers arrive with the rest of our things. Until then, we will crack a window,” replied Hailey’s father, George, like he was stating something she already knew, which, knowing her, it was not far from the truth most times. Hailey’s parents continued to sit downstairs and argue about the topic for a while. Eventually, she got bored with hearing the back and forth arguing and

decided to go and explore the house, leaving her little brother to play outside on the porch with his toy plane.

As she was exploring the upstairs, she came across a room that was kind of separated from the rest. Curiosity got the better of her, and she decided to go and explore the room. As she went into the room, she noticed it had more of a childish look to it with scribbles on the wall, which appeared to be drawn by a small child. When she went into the room, she got this sudden feeling like she was being watched. She did not see anything when she looked around though. When she looked around, she saw a shelf at the top of the room in front of where the bed was. On the shelf were six baby dolls that looked so realistic that they were creepy. None of them looked the same, but it was like they were all based on a different person.



While she was inspecting the dolls and trying to get a closer look, she noticed that they were all holding something but none of them were holding the same item. When she went to reach the one on the far right, she noticed it was holding a small ragdoll. Before she could fully reach for the doll, she heard the most awful scream coming from outside.

Without so much of a thought, she ran outside the room and started running towards the front door as fast as she could. When she got there, she saw her parents already there helping to calm down her little brother as he was the one that was screaming. They were trying to figure out what had happened to cause him to scream, but he was still not the greatest at talking, which did not prove to be helpful in this situation. All her brother could do was point towards the woods to the right side of the house while he was in their mother's arms. His toy plane was long forgotten on the ground beside them.

She turned around and looked in the direction her brother was pointing, but she was unable to see anything because of it getting closer to night. "There's nothing even there," their mother Mary stated frustratedly. "Let's just go back inside, so we can calm him down," their father said. While Hailey and her parents were going back inside, she had the feeling that she was being watched again, like how she felt

when she was in the room upstairs. She looked around again and saw a figure this time in the woods staring at her. She looked away for a second, and it was like the figure vanished. She hurriedly grabbed her brother's toy plane and ran inside the house.

When she returned inside the house, she noticed her parents had her little brother sitting on one of the old wooden rocking chairs and were looking at his leg. "How did this even happen?" their father, George, asked his son, even though he knew he probably wouldn't get a verbal answer. All her brother did was continue to point in the direction of the woods. She decided to get closer to him and saw that he had a scratch going down his right leg in the shape of a claw mark. "Wait here, I'm going to go and get some stuff to clean this up," her father stated hurriedly as he rushed off to get the stuff to clean and wrap the wound before it got infected.

Later in the night, they decided that they had stayed up long enough waiting for the truck carrying their belongings and decided it was time to go to bed for the night. After what happened earlier in the day, the children were not very comfortable separating from their parents, so they all decided to sleep in the living room where they had already set up an air mattress. Halfway through the night, Hailey awoke to a strange knocking noise coming from upstairs. Being scared, she chose to ignore the knocking. Eventually, the knocking developed into a banging like a ball hitting a wall. She tried to wake her mother and alert her of the banging. "Mom, there's something knocking upstairs," Hailey said to her mother, scared. "Just ignore it and go back to sleep Hailey," Mary told her while still mostly asleep. "But mom it's keeping me up," Hailey said to her mom like it was one of the most obvious things ever. "Fine then. If you're so worried about it, you can go and figure out what it is yourself," Mary said to her daughter starting to get annoyed. "I don't care what you do, just leave me alone. I'm going back to sleep," Mary added.

As Hailey walked up the stairs, the knocking died down until there was not even a whisper left. All that could be heard was the snores of her family downstairs. When she arrived at the top of the stairs, the once shut door that she had explored earlier had been opened and a light was pouring out of it into the hallway. When she walked near the door,

she pushed it the slightest bit, just enough to barely see inside. When she looked inside, all she saw was the room as she had left it. The only difference was that one of the dolls had fallen off the shelf. She walked into the room with the dolls and went to pick it up. When she picked it up, she noticed it had a name tag on it that read, “Richard”. She noticed that there was something lying on the ground with the doll. As she bent down to pick it up, she noticed it was a doll-sized small wooden baseball bat, but it was split in most parts and the top of the bat was missing.

She tried to put the doll back on the shelf, but when she tried, she was unable to reach it. She saw an old rocking chair sitting in the corner of the room, so she went and grabbed it to use to reach the shelf. She noticed that the wood was starting to chip in some areas, making it look unstable. She decided to attempt to stand on it anyway. After she confirmed it would hold her full weight, she climbed on it until she could reach the top of the shelf. As she got closer, she noticed that the other dolls were holding different objects too. When she looked toward the end of the shelf, she saw that a doll was missing, and she assumed that was where “Richard” went. She noticed that when she put them back, each doll appeared to be a different age, as there were even some that looked like toddlers. When she was done, she put the chair back in the corner and went back downstairs.

The next day, Hailey was woken up early by her parents because it was the first day of school for her. She ate breakfast and was then quickly on her way to school. When her father eventually dropped her off, she was one of the last kids to arrive. At recess, she made a few friends, and they were all gathered around, in a circle. At some point the topic of her house got brought up. “So wait, you really live in that old house on Elm Street,” said one of the girls. “Yes...” Hailey responded unsure of why they didn’t believe her. “Don’t you know that house is supposed to be like crazy haunted?” the girl to Hailey’s right asked. Hailey had learned earlier that the girl’s name was Becky. “What happened in the house?” Hailey asked Becky. “Well people don’t really like to talk about it much, but not too long ago a family moved in there and then moved out not long after. Some people say that their kid died in the house, but no one’s really sure of that. Not only that, but this

wasn't the first time someone said that happened," Becky said to Hailey with a more serious tone than before. "The only strange thing that I've seen so far is these creepy dolls that look real in the upstairs bedroom," Hailey responded. "Well, the original family that built the house were also doll makers, so it would make sense to find dolls," the girl sitting on Hailey's left responded.

When Hailey was walking back home, she had the feeling she was being followed. She looked behind her but didn't see anything, so she turned back and kept looking around her as she walked. As she turned back around, directly in front of her there was a shadowy figure. She screamed, and it looked like it had opened its mouth to scream at her. The next time she opened her eyes, the creature was gone, and Becky was running up to her. "Are you ok? I heard you scream," Becky asked her worriedly. "I'm fine, I just got scared. I thought there was something in front of me," Hailey responded still shaken up. Becky hesitated before replying. "Listen, I feel the need to tell you that the stories about your house are not myths. The family that was originally there haunts the house now," Becky said seriously. "How would you know that?" Hailey questioned. "Because I used to live there," Becky told Hailey. "Now I gotta ask, are there any children in your house other than you?" Becky questioned Hailey. "Just my little brother," Hailey responded. "Then we must hurry and get to your little brother before it's too late."

When they arrived at Hailey's house, her little brother was nowhere to be seen. They searched everywhere in the house, even the room upstairs with the creepy dolls except this time the dolls were gone. "That's weird—the dolls are gone," Hailey said. "Oh no, that's not good. Quick! Do you remember what any of the dolls were holding?" Becky asked worriedly. "Yeah, a little but not very well. I don't see what that has to do with anything," Hailey responded confused. "Ok, good. I only remember three," Becky told her. "Ok... Richard had a broken wooden baseball bat, Brayden had a teddy bear, and Elizabeth had a small ragdoll. I still don't understand why the dolls had names," Hailey said to Becky. "That's the thing. They aren't just dolls. Each one represents a kid that was killed in the house, and they are numbered from one to six to represent what order they died in,"

Becky said to Hailey. “Now we must hurry and find the objects they were holding. Let's check the attic first,” Becky said with a hint of urgency in her voice.

When they arrived in the attic, they found the baseball bat first, then found the ragdoll and teddy bear sitting on a toy doll bed in the corner of the room. Becky ended up finding an old, small key and said it was one of the objects. They were only able to find four of the six objects, leaving them to have to find two more later. “Now we must hurry before it's too late, and bring the objects you found,” Becky urged her new friend.

They finally found a trail of where Hailey's brother could have been. The trail eventually led them towards the woods where they saw her brother sitting with a blank face in the middle of small, circular clearing holding his toy airplane. Suddenly, four of the ghost children appeared around the circle. They appeared to be the oldest of the group. “GIVE ME MY BROTHER BACK!” Hailey yelled at the four ghosts. They all just stared at her, unmoving from their original positions. Becky too stood staring but it was at one of the ghost children on the far right of the group. “No, we need him more than you do,” one of the smaller ghosts of the group said to her, holding a small ragdoll to her chest.

“Just give us the boy back, or we will start destroying these,” Becky said finally snapping out of her trance as she held up the small ragdoll, the key, and the broken wooden baseball bat. That finally got a reaction out of the children as some of them now almost looked scared. Hailey finally realized that these children looked nearly exactly the same as the dolls that had been in the house. She finally put the pieces together. The oldest looking one had to have been the one named Richard, and that meant the girl to his left was Madison. Then the girl on his right was Cierra, and that would mean the final boy on the far right was John. Elizabeth was holding the small ragdoll as Becky told Hailey she would be earlier on the way there. She did not recognize the other boy; however, she did remember his doll. “Fine, take him, we're done with him for now, anyway,” Richard responded with a hint of hostility and worry in his voice.

After taking Hailey's brother back to their house, their parents were finally home, and Becky's parents had arrived with them. "Looks like your parents are here," Hailey assumed. "Yeah. Listen, be careful and don't mention anything. The less people who know, the better. Don't even mention it to your brother as he won't remember. And don't say anything about my brother. My parents don't need to know," Becky told Hailey while giving her a small hug. "Don't they already know that their son is missing?" Hailey questioned Becky. "I don't know why, but right after he disappeared, it was almost like they had lost all memories of him. I seem to be the only one that remembers other than the few friends that he had," Becky responded upset. "Ok, I'll be safe and try to keep an eye on my brother," Hailey responded to her newly acquired friend.

Later that night, Hailey's family ate dinner and decided to go to bed. Her little brother had gone to bed with their parents while she was sent to the room across the hall from them as those were the only rooms they had set up. The moving truck had arrived earlier that day and her parents set up a few of the rooms while she was at school and outside in the woods. She went to bed that night thinking about what had happened throughout the day.

While she was asleep, she had the strangest of dreams. She dreamed she was in the woods again in that clearing, but this time the little ghost girl wearing the key was standing in front of her. "You'll have to excuse the actions of my brother, he's just worried about the rest of us," Madison said softly. "Why are you in my dreams, what do you want? Why did you try and steal my little brother?" Hailey, questioned. "We need him so that we can be free," Madison responded. "Free from what? I don't understand," Hailey asked, confused as to what she was being told. "I will warn you now, this is a very long and sad story, but know that I am only telling you this because I need something from you," Madison told her seriously making her sound much older than she looked.

"It all started a long time ago. I cannot tell you how long exactly because I myself do not truly know for sure. But, originally there were only 4 of us. It was me, my brother Richard, Cierra, and a boy named Brayden. We were all adopted by a couple named Henry and Charlotte

at different times who had no children of their own. We found out later that the only reason they had even done so was to be able to receive government benefits and to look good to other people for adopting children in need of homes. When they decided they no longer needed us, they simply got rid of us, some in more violent ways than others. My brother tried his hardest to protect us while he still could. He was one of the first to finally die, but that's because he fought back, which did not help him in the long run as they definitely didn't make his time left alive any easier," Madison said sadly while reminiscing. 'That would explain why the baseball bat was broken,' Hailey thought to herself.

"Our parents were also doll makers at the time and would turn us into the dolls so that we could control them. Then they attached our spirits to objects that held significance in our lives." Madison continued. That last statement made Hailey wonder what kind of significance an old metal key could have to the young girl even though it didn't go to anything in the house. "We later found out that when the villagers had discovered what our parents were doing in secret, they hunted them down and chased them into the woods and killed them," Madison finished although Hailey could tell she was leaving a lot out of the story.

"But wait, that still doesn't answer why you need my brother and why you killed those other two kids," Hailey asked, confused. "For us to finally be free of this place, we have to get four children to replace the four of us, and we all have to leave together, or we can never leave," Madison responded. "So, you killed the other two kids and now all you need are two more" Hailey asked to confirm her suspicion. "Yes, which is also why we were getting your little brother, and we have finally found the fourth person we need to leave this place" Madison said looking at Hailey and smiling. "Well, that's not going to happen because I'll never let you get near him again!" Hailey raised her voice at the ghost child. The child just looked up at Hailey and laughed while holding something behind her back.

"It's funny you think you have a say in it," Madison responded, revealing the object behind her back to be the toy airplane her brother always carried with him everywhere. "NO, LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

Hailey yelled. “Bye, bye now.” Madison said to her condescendingly. As that was said, Hailey started to wake up, but she soon felt worry and panic consume her. As she woke up fully and opened her eyes, she saw one of the dolls hovering above her with a broken knife in hand. She then saw the ghost of Cierra standing behind the doll at the foot of the bed with her hand raised like she was controlling a puppet.

Hailey screamed and then...

The Vow

Prologue

16-year-old Warren Ryker was on his way to the market when he came across the King and greeted him. The King was enraged by Warren's casual greeting and told him that there would be consequences for talking to him so informally. Warren was surprised as he did not expect this to happen. While he was lost in thought at what to do, the King told him that his consequence would be taking part in a battle against one of his men. If he lost, everyone in his family would be executed, and he would be sentenced to 20 years in Prison.

The King noticed the fear in Warren's eyes and told him that he must show up at 4 o'clock the next evening, and if he did not show up, his family would certainly be killed. The King walked away leaving the fearful Warren to journey home. When he got home, his family asked him what was wrong as he had never looked so frightened. He explained what happened the best he could. Around 3:30 the next evening, they realized they would have to be at the battle soon. They quickly got ready and set off, arriving at just the right time.

The person chosen to fight Warren was none other than the top Knight, Sam Sora. The two of them took swords from the rack, and the referee soon announced they could start their battle, clashing back and forth in the small square arena with neither competitor giving in easily. Warren barely kept up as he'd never been taught to use a sword, but he started to attack more aggressively. Warren started to tire and was knocked to the ground. As he rose to his feet, Sam attacked, sending him out of the ring and ending the match. Warren's family was then executed, and Warren was thrown in prison, sentenced to 20 years.

The Vow

As he sat in the cell, he began to cry—the tears streaming down his face with no sound. As the days passed, he was given a small portion of food every day. He was still immersed in sorrow until he remembered something his dad told him: if he or any other person in

their family were to die, do not cry. Push through and move forward. Warren held on to this. He began doing pushups, sit-ups, pullups and other exercises as his sentence passed.

The 4 years passed, and he turned 20. A guard came and told him that he was being released early due to good behavior and no resistance. They gave him some common clothes and sent him off to the King to officialize his release. Two knights took him to the palace, and he was placed in front of the throne to kneel. The King then began to say that he would be released and would be allowed to go anywhere he pleased if he did not speak again as he did four years ago.

Warren gritted his teeth and said, “My lord, I will do as you wish.” The King was pleased with his answer and consented to completing the release paperwork. As Warren walked out of the throne room, a woman pulled him and led him to the side of the palace where she gave him better clothing and a sword. She revealed herself to be named Aria and informed him that his family was not killed those many years ago. The Knight Sam Sora had replaced them with decoys and taken them into hiding. She told Warren that Knight Sam Sora wished for him to go to the Swordsman Village, where Sora grew up, and to present them with a letter giving him permission to train there and the right to an instructor. She then handed him the letter and told him that he did not have to go, but he could do it if he wished.

Warren responded in disbelief. Aria informed him that he should be on his way before anyone heard them or saw them, so he set off to the Swordsman Village taking minimum supplies—a few rations, water and the sword and letter Aria had given him. As he made his way to Swordsman Village, he came across many creatures, fighting all of them off while he made his way towards the Swordsman village. When he finally arrived, he met two swordsmen in front of the gate blocking the entrance to the village.

The two men asked him to state his business in their village. He told them that he was there to learn swordsmanship to which they laughed and said, “You know not just anyone can enter Aurorium.” In response, Warren said, “Then maybe this letter will change your mind,” and rolled it towards them. They picked it up, and as they began to read the letter, they were shocked. Finally, one of them opened the gate and

ran into the village returning with a man that looked a lot like Sam. The man said, “So, Warren is it? My name is Shinjo Sora, I will teach you on the condition that you don’t use my teaching for revenge but for peace above all else. No hurting the innocent nor will I allow you to be cocky and think you’re above everyone else.” Finally, he asked, “Warren, will you accept these conditions?” “Yes Mr. Sora, I will accept. I will train diligently and work hard,” Warren replied.

“Wait, Warren. Which path did you take to get here?” Shinjo asked. Warren told him that he had gone through the forest and then onto a straight road leading him to Aurorium. Shinjo Sora then said, “I see you are worthy of my teachings if you can make it through that treacherous forest.”



Warren began his training. He went through treacherous training doing several types of strengthening, endurance and speed training and, most importantly, training in swordsmanship. Warren trained hard for two years, enduring the training and getting stronger and stronger. At the end of his training, Shinjo gave Warren a special sword as part of his training completion—a reward for his hard work. Warren then set off to find the King. He entered the city and made his way towards

the palace. He was greeted by Sam and led to his family whom he had thought dead before his release from prison.

Warren and his family were reunited and were happy and excited to see each other again. Word made it to the King of the family’s reunion. He came after them once more, but this time the King was brought down.

Following the King’s downfall, Aria revealed that she was the Princess of the kingdom. As one of the new leaders of the kingdom, she decided to take her father to the dungeon, and there was soon a new King—Aria’s brother. Warren began training again and spent time with his family now that they were reunited.

Epilogue

Aria slowly began to like Warren, and after a while, they got married. The two had a baby boy named Loki and a girl named Maria. Warren became the leader of the knights after Sam retired, and the group was as powerful as ever. Things in the kingdom were peaceful, but there were many threats outside their borders. Warren and the other knights worked to ensure that peace was upheld. Warren trained his son and daughter in swordcraft and ensured that they were well taken care of their entire lives. The Kingdom lived in peace for many years.

Dark Things

Good things are passed away,
dark things lie ahead.
Good tales have been told,
dark things are yet to be said.
The moon is gone, but there's still no sun.
The music has stopped
but there's still the beating drum.
Here it grows bitter cold.
Dark things haunt you until you're ancient old.
No man, no might can break down this dark spell's door.
Here you wander in the darkness forever more.
In this darkness, you're only sad
and dark things drive your weak mind mad.
You are stuck there all alone
searching for a light to take you home.
Here you only feel pain,
looking for light all in vain.
If you're ever looking for me,
in this darkness is where I'll be.



Wishes

Wishes are just words you say.
They are just thoughts you think.
Often they are gone the next day
then all your hopes will sink.
Wishes often do not come true.
They are often things you cannot do.
There are wishes around every bend
but all things have an end.



Thomas Severt

Remember

In your darkest day
when you feel all alone,
you do not know what to say,
looking for a place to call your home.

Remember when life was full of love.
Remember your blessings from above.
Remember when you were full of gladness.
Forget all the madness.



A Body for Two

The quiet howl of the wind echoed through the deteriorated forest. The snowfall collected on the hair of the unfortunate crowd. In the clearing, a priest tapped his fingers into the coffin, the tapping accompanied with the weeps of the dead twin's mother. Cobwebs hung on the branches of the old, yet sturdy trees that stood with such pride. It was almost like a statue of great triumph—something alive amidst death. The half alive, cold and famished wildlife sought refuge in the dying forest. It was the depths of winter, one that was so cold, the frigid sensation snared onto the skin. Amongst the clearing, there stood a girl, 10 years of age, counting the seconds that added to her name.

Josephine was never the most talkative. Her dead, empty green eyes stared at the brown coffin in front of her. She fiddled with a lock of her golden curls, a long stripe of white streaking through it. The idea wandered in her mind, the question of what sin she had committed to receive such a punishment—a punishment to take away her counterpart. Her eyes were glued to her twin's corpse, and despite Josephine's being as pale as the body's, Genevieve's skin looked as if it were leather. From the long golden curls, the white bangs, and the same green eyes, the bond they had was something that could never be broken, even if one was dead.

Josephine drew in a small, sharp breath through her nostrils, her eyes beginning to dance around the surrounding scene. Everything was so dull—the quiet murmur of the priest hovering over her twin and the muffled cries of her mother. Josephine started to take notice of how still things were becoming. The color in everything was lost, and she only recognized her mother's face. Blurs replaced the heads of the guests, her mother's face twisted and turned with the lifelessness of grief. When Josephine robotically turned her head to her father, she watched her father's tight expression fade into nothingness.

Scrunching up her nose and furrowing her eyebrows, something started to itch within the lining of her throat. Letting a few coughs and gasps escape her throat, she covered her mouth, her eyes widening with

terror. Scanning the people around her, every person's expression twisted and melted away, the words slowing down, the forest became engulfed in a dark mass. Beads of sweat began to form, her breath stuck in her throat. Thoughts that didn't belong to her spiraled in her brain, and the world around Josephine spun with such intensity that she felt sick. Josephine hunched over, her skin tingling. "NO!" she blurted out, her hoarse and quiet voice escalating into an angered and frantic cry. The priest choked on his words, followed by the soft growl of the wind.

The snow seemed to fall at a quicker pace, the eyes of the crowd turning and looking at Josephine as if she was a performer. One by one, eyes questioned her. Josephine covered her mouth, a nauseous sensation crawling up her body. A hushed gag was pushing its way out of her, and her angry eyes kept switching from distraught to frustration. Her mother's wet hand left her handkerchief and tugged at Josephine's ear to which Josephine groaned from discomfort. Josephine grasped onto her mother's bony wrist which only elicited a sneer from her mother.

The onlookers watched her as the ill-intentioned, skeletal witch—her mother—took Josephine behind some brush. Josephine dragged her eyes, watching her mother lean into view. Pinching her eyes closed, her mother gave Josephine a look filled with such malice that it was like she was trying to steal her youth. "*What could possibly be wrong with you, Josephine. You're sullyng your sister's memory. Grieving is for all, yet you're disturbing the peace.*" Josephine's mother dismissively flicked her hand towards her living daughter who was attempting to snag another look at her twin in the coffin.

Yes, Genevieve's soul was no longer inside of her body. From a distance, the carcass gave an aura of emptiness. Josephine's cheeks were pressed together, forming a pucker between her mother's fingers. Suddenly, her head was jolted forwards, her heels leaving the snow. "*I will not feed into your delusions, Josephine. I am tired of your disrespectful behavior.*" Her mother snarled, flexing her slim fingers into Josephine's cheeks. Her mother's voice was strained, filled with impatience and disgust, her lips twisted. Josephine's breathing hitched and she could feel herself nodding a complacent response. Josephine could hear the faint pop of the old lady's joints, her bones cracking into

place as Josephine fell back to her feet, being released from the harsh grip.

A moment of uncanny silence passed through the air, quick to be cut with a pat on Josephine's head. "*Good girl,*" her mother spat venomously, dusting off her charcoal dress and striding back to the self-loathing fueled funeral. Josephine flinched with memory—memories that came from a different point of view, memories where she saw herself—*Genevieve's memories*. Her dark eyes slowly fell content and half-lidded. Josephine knew she was not the one who caused Genevieve's death, but she internally beat herself up for not being able to protect her dear twin.

She still desperately held on to what little sanity she had left and the sliver of virtue in her body. Her hands slithered up her own forearms, pulling herself into a tight and warm self-embrace, battling against the cold. Josephine's eyes threatened to flood, tears pricking at the corners, her throat tightening. Josephine nodded to herself, muttering inaudible, slurred apologies and moans. The discomfort could only be described as if she were drowning, her lungs filling with water. Tears trickled down her cheeks, clinging to her nose and chin. She could feel her sister's presence inside of her, their bickering and shared experiences echoed in her mind. So in response, she sobbed out, "*You will always have a place with me, Genevieve.*"



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