

2022 600-Word Horror Story Contest

Winners

Second Place: A Fearful Lack of Mom

By Benjamin Lohr

One of the many rules in our house was to get out of the forest after dark. She never explained why. Mom rarely explained anything, but I knew she was serious the day I made it home a few minutes after sunset. There was always that look in her eye, that quiver on her lip, when she spoke that way. As strong of a woman she was, the night always made her uneasy. So why wasn't she home yet?

I checked the clock. It was past 7, and the ebony chased away by the light of our home was all-consuming. We were the only oasis of light through the darkness, an island in a sea of black. I pressed my ear to the window, listening for that familiar crunch of her boots against the leaves scattered across the brown, winter grass.

Nothing.

I reached for the cold steel that surrounded the grip of the flashlight, throwing a jacket over my shoulders that kept the warm clung tight to my chest, and stepped out into the darkness. A blustering, freezing wind surged through me, almost as if the universe was trying to keep me from going out there. Not even the universe would stop me. I had to find Mom.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

My feet pressed into the leaves and grass below, and the darkness of the night closed in around me, as the little boat that was my body sailed into the ebony ocean. The ocean was only conquered by my flashlight's tunnel of brightness. I reached a clearing, and a breeze of air carried – *ugh*. The air smelt of a terrible sweetness, something that made me nauseous...

"Mom?" Nothing. All I could think of was that scent, no matter how sickening. It was unignorable. It told me that something was wrong.

Crunch. Crunch, my feet spoke with unease, telling my brain of how awful this idea was, walking towards a sickeningly sweet scent such as this. My heart butted in, and it told them to *shove it*.

"Mom!" I shouted now, trying to listen through the echoes for her voice.

"Isaac!" a call came back. It was her voice, thank goodness, it was Mom.

"Oh, thank God, you're here. What are you doing out so late? What about... the sunset rule?" I swept my flashlight towards her to see her smiling, loving face. My mind scrambled to come up with possibilities before she answered.

"Oh, honey," she began, "I dropped my axe when I was walking, but don't worry, I found it now."

I froze.

She never used that nickname with me. Her nicknames were outlandish, they always had been. From “brainface” to the playful “punk...”

But *honey*? Something clicked, like a dog whistle in the back of my mind. This wasn’t right.

I stepped back, my feet crunching as I began to walk. I shined my flashlight forward. She was still smiling, but it didn’t feel as nice as it did before. Fear sunk into my stomach, and I looked down at the floor in front of me. Through the darkness, I noticed a terrible crimson sanguine, creeping across the leaves – peering up through the leaves was a bright yellow pattern; Mom’s scarf. It was on this bloodied mass, with matted brown hair. *They always said I had her hair.*

“Mom” wasn’t wearing it. Her smile widened – it looked like her cheeks would snap clean off if her grin widened further.

“Why don’t you give me back *my* scarf, and we can go home?”

Her axe glinted in my flashlight’s tunnel.

All I could do was run.