

2022 600-Word Horror Story Contest

Winners

First Place: Inspiration

By Brian H. Robbins

I bought the deer skull to be a better writer. I know how that sounds, but just follow along with me. It sat on my desk for a week before I sat down to write a story in early October. I guess I thought it would be inspirational or put me in some macabre mood like Poe or Lovecraft. A little slice of death to prompt a story of terror. It didn't work out that way.

The first day went by, and I sat with the skull, staring at my screen, nothing coming to me. I wrote a few lines on the third day, but those were quickly deleted. My prop failed me each day. I had written before but was stuck asking, why wasn't it working? I read all the books, watched all the movies, even the bad ones. I bought the skull! I had surrounded myself with the trappings of horror but came up with nothing. The skull had been expensive. I expected more for my money.

Halfway through October, it started. I nearly hit a deer one night, the animal bolting across the highway. Nothing weird about that, especially on a curvy mountain road deep in West Virginia. Then it happened again —every night that week. Sometimes twice in the same night or the same place. Next came the sentinels, standing watch all night. It started with a scruffy gray deer, one antler shattered in some past battle, standing in my backyard, frozen. I spotted him near dusk. He just stood there, still as a statue. Only odd thing was when I checked out back a few hours later, and he hadn't moved. I went to bed and tried to forget about it.

The next night, he was joined by two associates, equally scruffy, all three animals staring at my house in silent judgment. I grew slightly concerned and found myself pacing the living room and kitchen, peeking between the blinds to see the court of antlers still in session. I barely slept that night, but the last time I looked before bed, all three deer were still there.

The following night was Sunday. Trash night. I lugged the bags out and pulled the can to the curb. I turned to find a line of deer waiting for me. They were like soldiers lined up to escort me to an execution, stern and without compassion. Towering dark beasts, closer to elk than whitetails. Their breath, thick in the chill autumn night, drifted in the breeze. I felt my chin wobble uncontrollably. My heart pounded, a deep pit taking over where my stomach had once been.

I took a step, my slipper touching silently on the concrete. The deer didn't move. They barely seemed to be breathing. I slowly made my way to the door, the deer never moving save to keep their dark eyes locked on my shivering form. Locking myself inside, I avoided the blinds that night. The deer were gone when I next checked at dawn.

The next day was Halloween. Fitting, I suppose. I returned the skull, perhaps just as surprised with the shop's return policy on animal remains as I was with the bizarre happenings. Leave it for some serial killer or amateur osteologist. I had no need for it.

Just as I was leaving, something caught my eye. A bear skull.

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.

Third Place: Razor

By Kit Decker

My father used to shave in style: in the steam-filled bathroom he would clear a face-shaped patch of condensation from the mirror, and with a badger bristle brush he’d whip up a head of foam on a Gillette shaving stick wrapped in gold foil, then set about his whiskers wielding a double-sided Wilkinson Sword blade. He would dab at cuts with a styptic pencil that I thought was a dry white lipstick then beat a tattoo on his cheeks with a scant drop from the same bottle of aftershave that lived on the top shelf of the cabinet. Each side of a Wilkinson’s blade was good for two shaves, never a third.

My shaving is less luxurious. Each morning, I’d drag three little buzzing, rotating heads over my lower face, miniature hay rakes floating under a microfoil, often before I was really awake. Every few weeks, I would empty out clumps of static dust that really didn’t look like hair. The more hair I removed, the more it grew – squirming hydra bursting out of every follicle. It wasn’t five o’clock shadow so much as eleven o’clock smudge, then it became a forest of bristles by nine thirty. I now wield a more clinical cutthroat razor, once a mere keepsake with a mother of pearl handle, kept in its original cardboard sheath.

In my early teens, a single hair sprouted upon my chin and grew two inches long before it had a single companion. It was, briefly, my pride and joy, a promise of deliverance from childhood; cutting it off was like the sorcerer’s apprentice breaking his broom. Hair grew everywhere, even where it should not – my face was obliterated, tusks flared out my nose. I was the first in town to turn into a rhinoceros but nobody else turned with me. Hair now wells up not just in but *on* my nose, on the outside, shooting

madly out of the alar crease: it reminds me of the samurai demon mask I used to stare at in my *Children's Encyclopedia of the World*. Stiff as straw, almost wooden, a thatched roof, even. Looping tendrils of keratin droop from my ears so I have hacked them to ribbons. I have shaved my ears down to bloody cartilaginous nubs, and now I've gone full-on Vincent van G with the straight blade, mother of pearl handle and all. I hacked off the philtrum with nail scissors.

I shave further and further up my cheeks. I am closing in on my eyelids. I shave my eyelashes, and this is not easy, believe me. The angle of the blade is so awkward. But no, I will not have hair on my eyelids. I shave them, too, and they bleed, they bleed copiously. I snip them right back to the zygomatic. It reminds me of bearding mussels. I trim my eyebrows, I want them gone, no snipping or shaping - I dig them out of my forehead tweezing out great clumps at a time. 'Corneal dermoids' - hairy eyeballs are real - I saw it on the internet.

I shower in nigh on boiling water, open the pores, have the hairs standing up and out and waving, ready to be plucked, ripped away, but they are still in there, so I will carve right through the stratum corneum, lucidum, granulosum, spinosum, basale - remove the roots.

With the edge of my palm, I clear a face-shaped patch in the steam on the mirror; pinkish water beads and runs down in little jagged rivulets. I have a cutthroat razor in my hand, steel honed to a wicked edge.

Honorable Mentions

Escape

By Michael Gauss

Blocked on Snapchat. Quietly evicted from the group chat. Muted, then removed from the school discord after a series of angry outbursts. So aggressive that people cross the hallway just to avoid me. But none of it's my fault. Right? No. I am more than certain something is going on here. Something big. Against me. Everyone I know plots against me. "You need help I can't provide. Please get it." The final text from my loyal girlfriend who has joined the endless ranks against me. I hear my heart pounding. I take one last look at my phone and hurl it against the wall.

Fast forward. It's the fourth night I've sat brooding till morning. The heart beats beneath my floor and in the walls. Slowly speeding up. Impending doom approaches. I'm obsessing over when they will come for me. All of them drag me to a fate worse than death. I slink into the bathroom, gripping my knife, forced to satisfy that need. I catch a glimpse of a monster in the mirror. Just like me, but pale white with black sunken eyes. Maybe it's ok. I start to relax my grip on the knife. Then I see the other monster. Sent from my enemies to drag me to hell. I break into a sprint.

I'm out into the pitch black night, running as the icy wind cuts me into a thousand pieces. I can't see it, I can't hear it, but I know the monster's there. My feet sink slightly into the muddy forest floor. And then

I'm running through a cemetery. Sprinting without noticing the chiseled names racing past. Until I collide. I'm sent sprawling. My leg hits the ground hard. My knee hits a tombstone harder. I crumple and feel warmth in my pants. Then I notice something. My phone is in my pocket. A realization hits. That must be how they're tracking me. My uncut fingernails finally have a use besides shredding the flesh hanging from my face. I pry my phone open, rip out the motherboard, and snap it in half. A tiny victory.

But the monster still comes, silently stalking me. Adrenaline numbs the pain as my mind rushes to formulate a plan. Now I'm dragging my mostly limp leg as I scale the railway bridge in the center of my town. It's just a waiting game, right? I slowly walk, just fast enough so the monster can't get me. By now a heart is beating on every surface. I lose track of time. It's all meaningless. Everything is meaningless but taking that next, painful step. One step is ok. The next is agony. Rinse and repeat. Then the plan pays off.

I hear it and am washed in light. I turn around. I face the monster every person I have never known has sent to face me. I see it for a soul chilling split second. Then time gets really slow . . . or really fast. I'm diving through the air and the train is howling and clanging and then I'm in a ditch, battered and bloody. I cover my ears and curl into a ball as the mechanical nightmare races past, assaulting every sense. Then it hits me. I won. I drag myself up the drainage ditch I landed in and wander onto the highway.

When the cops find me, I'm eighteen miles from home. One quick interview and I'm locked in a cop car bound for the hospital. Another and I'm tied down in an ambulance, bound for an institution. But I'm laughing. Laughing the whole way. Why? Because I won.

Losing Grip

By Erica Edwards

As the night grew colder, so did I. I always despised chilly October nights; they made me feel less of a human. Every year on Halloween I fight this beastly feeling, but this year the force of the creature was stronger. My veins pulsed spite throughout my body. My heart ached and burned like I was internally set on fire. My muscles and ligaments tore with every movement. I felt the last strain of my humanity dissipate into the wind as I stood there howling at the moon. But I wasn't even outside. I was staring out the window from the comfort of my bed. The bed that belonged inside of the home that I shared with my family. My "perfect" family might I add, white picket fence and all. But I wasn't perfect. I tell myself this otherworldly being is just one small part of me. It doesn't determine my whole person. But that's just a lie I tell myself. I am a beast. I am the beast. This was my nightly routine, contemplating my life up until this point. If there was a god, why would he make me different than the rest of the world, I thought. And why do I need to fight my urges to find a sense of normalcy. I'm tired of living this way and hiding my true self. That night I closed my eyes and opened a new pair. This new pair only sees red in a black and white world. I tore through my sheets and jumped through my window in order to find this new world. A world where I belonged and a world that finally revolves around me. I'm no longer compared to my perfect family. I live how I please because I am the beast.