

# 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.