Dear Readers,

We welcome you this Halloween season to read though our submissions from our first Halloween contest. Within this edition of Concord’s creative arts magazine you will find stories, poetry, and artwork that deals with the strange, creepy, and even the supernatural. We are eternally grateful for all the submissions we received and would like to give a special congratulation to the winners: J. L. Harvey for “Grave Ideals,” Marty Perdue for “Mommy’s Little Devil,” and Ashley Meadows for “This is a Real Nail Biter.” If you survive Halloween this year, your prizes will be with you shortly.

And with that, we hope you enjoy these assorted tales and art from the wonderful and deranged minds of Concord’s finest.

Sincerely,

James Trent
Editor-in-Chief
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This is a Real Nailbiter!
By Ashley Meadows

“Shit!” Constance exclaimed as a deep red drop of blood began pooling around her thumbnail. She blushed shamefully as an older couple glared at her through her office window. She always forgot to close her sliding window, separating her from the dimly lit waiting area. She stared down at her thumb, momentarily intrigued by the way the blood traveled so gracefully around her nailbed.

“Watch your language,” a voice calmly instructed her from the other side of her office. She snapped out of the trance and started fumbling around her top drawer for a bandage before glancing up. Standing in the narrow doorway was her boss, an older gentleman, with thin gray hair and a stern face. His suit was pressed to perfection and his tie always matched his handkerchief. He was a kind man, always willing to help on a personal level, but a slave-driver in the office. His hardened look softened to a smile, which left Constance with an uneasy feeling. His smile was insincere and mechanical, but where most women would be fearing a sexual advance or misogynistic comment from a smile like that, she knew that smile meant more work. He winked at her as he casually added six more files to the growing stack. Her mother had warned her to stay away from attorneys.

She quickly wrapped the bandage around the gnarled nail she had chewed to the quick, wincing in pain, both physically as a sharp pain shot through the end of her thumb, and mentally as she stared helplessly at the stack of files. The office had really taken a hit after the housing crisis in 2008, and the market was starting to pick up again, in one way or another. She sorted the files into three piles: purchases, refinances, and foreclosures. She was happy to see the latter of the three was shrinking in comparison to the previous years, but she also knew purchases meant more work, and more work meant more time she didn’t have. Foreclosures were less work and more guaranteed money than purchases. She shuddered at the selfish thought and started chewing on her other thumbnail while she spent the rest of the afternoon sorting through the files.
“Hey Constance! Are you going home tonight?” Constance stood up behind her desk, raising her arms to the ceiling, listening to quick snaps as each vertebrae popped and cracked. She was face to face with Jane, a short, plump woman in her mid-forties, with a tan complexion and bleach blonde hair. She looked like she had spent the last forty years in a tanning bed and she sounded like she smoked three packs of Lucky Strike non-filters a day. Her smile was warm and inviting though, and Constance could appreciate her sincerity.

“I will in a couple of hours. I have so many new clients and the banks are wanting to close these deals quickly. With the mines being shut down left and right, we never know who will have a job tomorrow, so we gotta move quick.”

“A couple of us are going to the pub around eight and you look like you could use a drink. Whaddaya say? A girls’ night will do ya some good, and maybe you can meet a man to take your mind off all this work.” Jane chuckled at herself like an eighth grader who just told a dirty joke to his friends.

“I don’t think so. I have to go visit my mom, and then I’m probably gonna work from home over the weekend.”

“Oh, ok then. Well, if you change your mind, just text me. I’ll lock the door so a booger doesn’t get you. See ya later.” Jane walked out of the office, glancing back at Constance once before throwing her hand up and leaving the building. The building was pitch black, except for the bright, fluorescent lights in Constance’s office. She shivered at the darkness, imagining all the horrible things that hide in the dark corners of the world, and then laughed out loud at how ridiculous she was being. She worked diligently, making as much noise as possible to cut through the silence, and then, when she could no longer bear the uneasy loneliness in the building, she packed her briefcase with files, grabbed her purse, and left the building, locking the door behind her.

She carelessly flung the heavy bag into the passenger side of her car, cracking a pair of sunglasses in the process. She uttered a profanity and then slid behind the wheel, fumbling for her phone, silently praying her mother was either drunk or very understanding. She hit the speed dial and waited patiently.
“Where are you?” the voice on the other line asked. She could tell her mother was concerned, and why wouldn’t she be. Constance noticed it was 8:24 p.m. and she was supposed to be at her parents’ house at 6:00 for dinner.

“I’m sorry mom. Mr. Tomlinson needed…”

“I know what he needed! That asshole! He is always using you, overworking you, and then promising you these bogus positions that mean more work for the same pay. Has he ever offered you health insurance? What about that raise he’s promised you for six months? Do you have that?”

“No mom and I’m really tired and stressed right now. I do not need a lecture from you. Please understand this is important to me.” And it was. Not only was there a potential raise, but also the promise of him paying for her tuition to law school. There was no way she could pay for it herself, and she had dreamed of being a corporate attorney since she was a child. Her mother never took her seriously. Constance chewed at her index fingernail unconsciously as she waited for the next damning question.

“Well, are you still coming? I cooked for you.” And there it was. Her mother had to be sober as a judge because she also managed to throw in a side of guilt. Constance knew she was about to stir the pot more.

“No mom. I told you. I’m tired. I have a lot of work to do and…hold on…I have another call coming in.”

“Who is it? Is it that asshole? Are you coming or n…” Her mother’s voice faded as she switched calls.

“Hello?”

“I just want to tell you that you are doing such a great job. I am proud to have you at my firm. You are as hardworking as I was and you’ll make a damn fine attorney.” It was Mr. Tomlinson. She could tell by his giddiness that he had been drinking and was well on his way to drunk.

“Thank you, sir.”
“Don’t call me sir or Mr. Tomlinson. You call me by my first name. We are going to be really close. We need to be on a personal level. Especially if I’m gonna invest in you. And I want to invest in you. You are a go getter. By the way, can you have the Stevenson and Roberts purchases ready for review tomorrow afternoon?”

“Mr. Tomlins…I mean Joseph, tomorrow is Saturday.”

“I know, I know. And I hate doing this to you, but the loan officer has agreed to meet with us, and the realtors are really biting at my heels. Please.”

“Sure. No problem. I’ll have them ready tomorrow. Just call and let me know.” She hung up before he could express his inebriated gratitude, briefly convincing herself that he was a nice man and wanted to help her, and then she turned up the volume of her radio, taking her wet, mangled index finger out of her mouth long enough to belt out the words to a song she remembered from high school. Although she sang and for a moment was carefree, she was quietly working on a new habit she had unconsciously picked up to accompany her obsessive nail biting: she chewed the inside of her cheek between the lines of the song, until a metallic taste flooded her mouth. She glanced into her rearview mirror quickly and saw the same deep red liquid that had so gracefully wrapped around her thumbnail begin to spread on the side of her tongue. She really didn’t mind it though. The taste of blood had never bothered her.

She eased her car onto her street, watching for the untended children that lived at the bottom of the hill. She wondered if they even had parents because they were always running the streets well into the night, screaming and yelling with no sign of supervision. As she topped the hill, she saw a car sitting in her driveway. A silver sedan with a sunroof and a sticker on the back window that read “My Husband Says I Beach Too Much” with a floppy, red sun hat on it.

“Shit!” She said, as she saw her mother sitting in one of the wicker chairs on her front porch, holding a paper bag she had saved from a restaurant. Constance didn’t even have to look in the bag to know her mother had driven all the way there to give her that plate of food she was keeping warm. She habitually stuck her middle finger in her mouth, chewing rapidly as she thought of ways to politely dismiss her mother. There was an eerie glow surrounding her mother, almost ominous, as she sat there calmly, under the glow of the porch
light, while the rest of the porch was surrounded in darkness. Constance shuddered as her anxiety grew. The closer her car got to the garage door, the harder she chewed.

“Argh!” she exclaimed as she felt the corner of her finger split and the rush of warm liquid drip onto her hand. Her mouth was filled with a strong iron taste, and the bitter taste of her Cognac nail polish. She abruptly shifted the car in park, turned on the light, and stared at her finger. There was a lot of blood, and it was hard to tell where the nail polish ended and the plasma began. The corner tip of her middle finger was split open and the red liquid kept flowing. She jumped out of the vehicle before her interior got stained by her habit, and quickly wrapped an old, greasy napkin she had found in the floor around her hand. Her mother never moved. She just sat and stared, blankly, as Constance fumbled to get her briefcase and lock the car door. Although her mother was sitting only ten feet away, she felt more alone than she had ever felt. Her mother always ran up to hug her, or offered help, but not tonight. Constance looked up at the sky, noticing it was much darker than it had been five minutes earlier. Anxiety and fear were boiling over inside her as she slowly stepped onto her porch.

“Hey mom! You really didn’t have to bring me food. I have so much to do and I’m not really hungry.” Her mom just stood up slowly and looked directly in her eyes, showing no emotion, no anger, no happiness, no disappointment, just a blank, cold stare.

“I figured you would be busy so I’ll leave you alone.” And with that, she handed Constance the paper bag, turned her back to her, and walked to the silver sedan. She was gone, without saying another word. No “I love you” or “Have a good night.” Just silence, and that word: alone. That’s how Constance felt. She stood on her porch, a briefcase in one hand, a bag in the other, and an old napkin wrapped around her injured finger, as she watched the glowing red taillights get smaller until they looked like two evil eyes, and then they disappeared.

When she could no longer see the lights, she snapped out of her funk and remembered all she had to do. She unlocked the front door, flipped on the light in the foyer, and dropped the bags on the floor, tripping over her cat, but managing to catch herself on the wall with her bloody hand. She gazed at the handprint, half amazed by the perfect red picture on the wall, and half disgusted by the same red portrait.
“Bacchus! You stupid cat! Look what you did,” she scolded as she walked into the hallway bathroom for a wet rag to clean up the new plasma painting on her wall. Bacchus wrapped his chubby, gray body around her ankle, making lazy circles, until she pushed him back with her foot. She cleaned up the mess and threw the rag down the laundry shoot, and then carried the bags into the kitchen. It was so dark in there. In fact, it was dark all through the house, much darker than she ever remembered, and it was cold, like the air was one, but that couldn’t be because it was late fall and she could hear the heat running. She could even smell it, even though the air was chilled. She put both bags on the counter and wrapped her arms around herself as she turned on the light and checked the thermostat. She confirmed the heat was on and proceeded to unwrap her finger. By this time, the blood had clotted and dried, and the napkin tore a bit as she pulled it away from her finger. It made a disgusting RRRIIIIP! as it separated from the skin, leaving a thin, white shard of paper still attached. She rinsed her hand in the sink before putting a bandage over the gash. She laughed out loud as she looked at her hands: a bandage on her thumb and one on her middle finger. “Two down, eight to go,” she thought, amused by her own joke, laughing loudly to drown out the silence.

The thick, brown bag was much larger than the contents, leaving large amounts of empty space on all sides that she had to navigate around blindly with her hands. She felt a warm, hard container and lifted it straight out, careful not to tip the contents, and set it on the counter, gently removing the lid. Seriously! Spaghetti! Her mother had made a fuss out of spaghetti, knowing she wasn’t a fan? Those slimy, nasty noodles always reminded her of worms, and the chunky, red sauce looked like a crime scene. She returned the lid to the container, the container to the bag, and placed the bag in the trashcan. Instead of spaghetti, she grabbed a two year old Cabernet Sauvignon she had hidden away for hard times and a long stemmed glass. She poured the dark, red wine into the clear glass, the liquid almost reaching the rim, collected some files from her case, and retired into her office, knowing the small room with bad lighting and ugly maroon carpet would be her bedroom for the night.

The hours dragged on, and the bitter taste of the nail polish had become sickening when mixed with the fruity flavors of the wine. She laughed out loud again, thinking how the beef carpaccio she had tasted the previous year at the caterer’s would have been a much more appropriate pairing. Her laughter shattered the silence for a moment, but thinking of the caterer, and the wine, and the red etching in the wine glass that simply
said “Mrs.” gave the silence a stronger, almost physical presence, and the loneliness enveloped her as she realized she was alone, just like her mother had said: alone. As hot tears formed in her eyes, the moment was stopped by a sudden THUMP! coming from the sitting room down the hall. She was chewing the sides of her fingers now, frantically scanning the room, hoping to see she was entirely alone so she could assume Bacchus knocked something over. A lump formed in her throat, and tears burned in the corners of her eyes as she noticed the fat, gray cat sitting nonchalant on a pile of laundry in the corner of the room. Bacchus showed no concern as he licked his paw and then fell over in the soft mound. Constance stood up slowly, heart pounding, hands trembling. She felt her chest jerking as her insides shook from fear and anxiety, and a wave of nausea swept over her.

She chewed the inside of her cheek frantically, paying no attention to the blood in her mouth as she exited the room and stared down the hallway, half expecting to see an intruder prepared to rape and kill her, and the other half expecting to see some horrible, ghastly figure from a movie she had watched as a child. Nothing. Nada. The hallway was so empty that her voice echoed when she asked if anyone was there. She took small, quiet steps down the hallway, wishing she had left her shoes on as she felt the cold, hard floor under her bare feet. She slowly opened the door at the end of the hallway, exposing the unused spare bedroom. A cold, musty breeze hit her in the face causing her to break into a fit of coughs for a second. She cautiously reached inside the doorway and flipped on the light. Scanning the cold, dull room, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary other than the closet door was cracked open. She walked over, slowly pulled open the creaky door, and then screamed!

Falling back on the floor, she grabbed her foot and pulled it up toward her face. Plunged inside the ball of her foot was a silver thumbtack. She jerked it out with what was left of her fingernails, coming to the conclusion that the thumbtack in her foot didn’t hurt nearly as much as her raw, exposed nail beds. Embarrassed by her outcry of pain, she stood up and looked in the empty closet.

“Get your shit together, Constance. You have lived here for years and you have never been afraid of anything,” she said aloud as she walked back to the office, taking extra care to watch her step.
She worked tirelessly for hours, checking numbers, checking language, checking names and addresses, making sure everything was perfect, taking an occasional break to take a swig from a glass of merlot. It wasn’t as good as the cabernet sauvignon from earlier, but it would have to do. As she wondered when it would be appropriate to switch from wine to coffee, her phone vibrated on her desk.

“Who would be calling at 3:54 in the morning?” She thought as she flipped the phone over to check the ID.

“Hello, Mr. Tomlinson,” she answered.

“I thought I told you we’re close enough to use first names,” he slurred over the phone. He had been drinking, a lot. In fact, she would not have been surprised to smell the alcohol on his breath over the phone.

“Sorry, Joseph. What do you need at four in the morning?” She feared he needed a ride from whatever wall he was holding up.

“Jus check-ing your pro-gerss shtweetheart. Wanna make sure you’re ok.”

“I’m fine and I’ll be ready tomorrow.”

“I’ll come and get, you a-round noon.”

“No need, Joseph. I’ll just meet you all at the office. Thanks for the offer though.” With that she hung up the phone and cut it off. She knew he wouldn’t even remember the call tomorrow, and she did not want to be in a vehicle alone with him. He was taking care of her professionally and was very kind, but the more she talked to him, the more uneasy she was with his pet names and accidental touches. She would just drive herself.

Time was passing, deadlines were coming closer, and she still had so much to do. The house had grown so quiet that she heard every noise in the neighborhood. She could hear dogs barking, some kind of loud, annoying bird, and then, the sound of small footsteps running and a tiny laugh.

“I heard that. I am not going crazy!” She yelled as she stood up and slid on a pair of old flip flops.
“I hear you! I know you’re here! You knocked something over, and now you’re trying to run to the door! I’m really not in the mood to play games! If you just let me know who you are, I will let you out!” She was talking to a child now, knowing that an adult couldn’t run that softly and laugh that innocently. There were a lot of kids in the neighborhood, and they were ornery as children often are. One, or two, must have snuck in earlier and now they wanted to sneak out for fear of getting in trouble. She just knew it, and now she would have to coax them out and let them out of her house.

“Come on out. I promise you won’t get in trouble,” she said softly, like calling a cat out from under a building. She listened carefully, chewing at the skin surrounding her fingernails and the tips of her fingers in anticipation, and heard the softest breathing coming from her bedroom. She walked back there, careful not to startle the children she expected to see, and turned on the light. Nothing. She walked to the closet, stepping over the clothes she had taken off earlier. She opened the door quickly and turned on the light. Nothing again. “I know you’re in here. I hear you breathing. I can hear the thumping of your feet.” She looked under the bed, and then behind the curtains, becoming obsessed with this entertaining little game of hide and seek. She checked every corner of the room, never seeing anyone other than her own reflection occasionally, but still hearing the breathing, thumping, and now small giggles from the children. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. An hour had passed since she started this game, and she had work to do. The children would have to wait.

“Fine! I’m going back to my office. You can come and find me,” she said impatiently to the open air. And with that, she returned to her office, again working and chewing, alternating between her fingers and the inside of her cheeks. If she had someone else’s hand, she would probably chew their nails too. She worked until the sky changed from black to a bluish-gray with hints of pink and orange. She hadn’t heard the children in over an hour, and the silence had become more of a friend than a painful reminder of her loneliness. She had worked so hard, making sure everything was perfect, that she didn’t even need to look at the documents. They were perfect and she knew it. Mr. Tomlinson would be so proud that he would promote her, or make her a partner, and he would definitely pay the tuition her parents never offered to pay.
She thought back to the night before and how her mother just left without saying a word. Just left her alone, and then never called to check on her. Constance wasn’t sad; she was angry. How dare her? she thought. She would do one better – she wouldn’t call her mother, for a week, or maybe a month. That would show her! Her bitterness was interrupted by the little giggles from earlier. She jumped up, laughing, ready to find the little friends she had made.

“I’m gonna find you!” she called out to the tiny intruders. She searched all over her house, in the cabinets, under the furniture, in the closets, listening closely to hear the exhausted breathing of the hiding children, and following the sound of laughter. Even when she heard the breathing and the laughter right beside her, she never could find them.

“What clever children?” she said, hoping to coax one out. She decided to sit and listen, and maybe one would run past her. She sat down in the floor, her legs crossed close to her body, and she listened. She never moved, just sat and listened, chewing excitedly on her fingertips, paying attention to nothing but the sounds hiding in the silence. She would not move until she saw one of the children.

It was 12:05 p.m. and Mr. Tomlinson sat impatiently in the conference room with a large man from the bank and two realtors. The banker kept checking his watch, rolling his eyes, as each minute passed. One realtor let out a huge sigh of frustration.

“Are you sure she is coming?” the banker asked.

“She works hard and she was probably up all night with these files,” the old attorney replied. He was having his doubts as 12:05 turned into 12:30. As he was about to apologize to the other men, a car raced into the parking lot, hitting a parking block in the process.

“There she is! I knew she wouldn’t let me down.” The attorney sat down, content that he had been right. Constance ran in, files and papers in hand, apologizing desperately for being late as she dropped the mound of papers on the table. The four men gasped in terror, one turning to vomit in the floor, and the other three paralyzed in disbelief. Mr. Tomlinson pushed the bloody pile of papers off the table, and they landed with a SPLAT! as the soaked wad hit the floor. Blood spattered on the carpet, and the legs of the spectators.
Constance’s once beautiful straight, black hair was pulled into a ponytail, matted with dried blood. Her olive complexion was stained reddish-brown, and her high cheek bones sat on top of holes where her cheeks had been. Her perfectly straight, white teeth were visible through the holes, and they were stained red. Crimson stains covered her clothing, all the way down to the worn flip flops on her perfectly manicured feet. The fingers that had so diligently typed every word the old attorney ever spoke were nothing more than red mounds of clotted blood with bone peeking through. Constance laughed and attempted to smile at the men

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said, right before collapsing onto the floor.
Grave Ideals
By J. L. Harvey

I grew tired
of being cold
Down
to
my Bones.
I saw the lights on
in the pits of hell,
and I wonder
how
it's going
Down there.

They say
I sit in cemeteries
to keep the dead company.
but they know
I'm the One
that's Lonely.
Eyeball Pumpkin
By Megan Ferrell
Spider Poem  
By J. L. Harvey

Today,  
I killed a spider  
with my fingers.

As I pinched,  
Its appendages… lingered

in the oils of my skin,  
in the folds and crevices  
of my finger print,

mixing and molding  
as I rubbed its life away

over the bubbles  
of a burning bowl –

Parting, leaving  
Nothing but the bulb  
Of its body  
On the tip of my thumb,  
Now detached from  
The brain,  
Hopelessly numb –

The only proof of  
Death  
Being,  
Not the anticipated brown or blue,  
But an obnoxious purple residue  
Forever etched  
in the teeth  
of the pages  
it creeped and crawled across,

invading and interrupting  
like an uninvited ingredient in  
the striking red sauce  
of an ancient stew,  
a self-indulgent witch’s brew.
Of Teeth
By Hannah Seckman

I died last night in a dream.

…

It’s nothing more than a shadow, a shallow heartbeat stuck to my ribcage, throbbing behind my own. My pulse burns red, heat on my skin like a fever, and my eyes reflect the sickness building there, never stopping to rest on any certain object but constantly shifting.

Still, my eyes are too slow to catch it. It remains a step ahead of me, just beyond my line of sight but always there, nonetheless. Just watching.

Under the bright lights of the convenient store, I can feel it. A quick inhale, a footstep that follows alongside my own, but nothing shows. I circle around again, walk down every aisle, look over my shoulder every fifth step, and when I’m sure that it’s only the clerk with a bored expression on her face and myself in the store, I see it.

Just a blur of hastily painted neon colors and a flash of gold-rimmed eyes. For a moment, the second heartbeat that does not belong to me beats louder than the oldest drum, charging upwards to get lodged in my throat, swelling so that when I try to swallow I can’t, and when I blink to clear my watering eyes, it’s gone.

The coke I had in my hand is shoved back onto the shelf, the $1.50 safe in my back pocket.

In the car, my hands dig into the steering wheel, eyes peeled back to try and see beyond where the headlights meet the pavement, because that’s where it lives- just beyond the light. Rain falls gracefully from the sky and lands like pearly stars on my windshield, doting orbs that seem to contain the entire Milky Way. It’s calming, and I force myself to breathe, to physically feel my lungs contract and expand.

It’s calming until I see the raindrops like pearly stars forming my name on the windshield. My mouth instantly goes dry and opens to form an o, but the scream that intended to climb out my throat gets stuck in the
middle. I slam on the brakes so hard that my head jerks back into seat, eyes forced tightly closed as the car skids to a stop in the middle of a lonely stretch of road.

When the inky blackness bleeds away from my eyes as I open them, the raindrops that spelled my name are gone. In fact, the windshield is dry. I hold my head in my hands and force myself to breathe again, sharp breaths that exit as a wheeze. My hands are gripping my hair, on the verge of ripping every strand out one by one until I can’t feel anything anymore.

A soft chuckle comes from the back seat. “So messy when you’re afraid.” The voice that sounds like a penny scraping down a railroad track chuckles again.

The second heartbeat that does not belong to me goes silent. That’s because it’s in the back seat now. Every muscle in my body tightens, like a cord drawn back, inches from snapping off completely. I turn my head slowly, mechanically, as if I don’t know the thing with teeth that lurks in my room at night isn’t in the backseat behind me.

When I turn around, gold-rimmed eyes meet mine, and I feel an invisible hand squeeze around my neck, choking off the scream that once again tries to rise from my throat. It has a face, I think. It’s not supposed to have a face. Neon colors outline every wrinkle, every crack that appears on it’s skin, now flaking and smeared along the edges. The thing’s mouth is split up the left side of it’s face, skin bleeding in blotches of red, blood tinting the rows and rows of wet teeth red. I can see pink muscle move where it’s jawbone has been ripped back and forced upward; it twitches, and a tongue slithers out to run along the edge of the sharpened teeth.

I can hear the second heartbeat in the heavy silence of the car, coming now from the thing with a mutilated face, beating wildly until it turns into a hum, and it opens it’s shredded mouth even wider, tearing the skin open past the temple. Small tendons break loose and hang limply like wet strings of red ribbon, and I force the vomit that threatens to move past my throat back into my stomach, even if it leaves an acid taste on my tongue.

The thing with half a face leans forward, and my nose is flooded with the overwhelming metallic smell of blood. I jerk back, hand fumbling behind me blindly to try and reach the door handle, but the thing’s claw-
like hands, fingers stretched long and bent in awkward angles like they’d been broken every morning, snatch a hold of my jacket, dragging me back toward it.

This time, the scream that’s been burying itself in my throat tears free, shrill and deafening in my own ears. It pays no mind, and the top of it’s mouth by it’s temple twitches like it’s smiling, teeth glistening with spit and blood. *This is the part where you wake up*, my mind screams. *Just wake up!*

…

I died last night in a dream. I dreamt of teeth, of death, of a thing without a face. This isn’t a dream this time, though. A thing with half a face, full of teeth, swallows me whole.
Lake of Blood

By Daniel A. Smith

The Landon Castle has a dark history to it and the surrounding countryside. It has been 700 years after a gruesome war that ravaged the countryside. The ruins now stand with a never-ending horror from the war haunting every part. Even The Lake, a body of water resting in the forest that covers the countryside, has a bloody history to it.

Dating back to the war, victims were slaughtered, along with knights from the other side. Their bodies were disposed of into the dark, grimy depths of the lake to decay. One after another, the bottom of the lake was covered completely in human bodies. They all eventually decomposed until all that covered the bottom of the lake was human bones. Legends always told of the lake being haunted by the spirits of those killed and cast into the lake. The locals always warn occasional travelers of the spirits that wander at night. They also tell of how the spirits try to grab random travelers, and drag them down into the lake that is filled with human blood at night.

Don Landon, a great descendent of Lord Landon, decided to visit the ruins of what his ancestor had ruled during the war. Don had also been curious to explore some of the trails that wind through the forest. He was aware that these trails led through such a grim place. His belief however, was that all legends are fictional stories forged from the strangest of imaginations.

As the sun shined ever so bright in the evening sky, Don began to hike through the forest. When he made it to the lake, he stopped to admire the scenery. Soon after, he gets back on the trail to explore some more. The trail leads out to an open field. There the grass swayed slowly from soft wind, and the flowers dazzled with their entrancing hues. Don feels relaxed by the soothing presence of the environment. Slowly his eyes close, and he drifts into sleep.
When he wakes up, the sun is going down. Don grows nervous and scurries to get the flashlight out of his backpack. He leaves the field the same way he came in. Strangely though, the forest path is not there. At this point, Don’s mind is racing with thoughts. He thinks to himself, “I know the path was here, unless my memory is fuzzy from just waking up.” Don turns and races across the field to the other side. There’s no path there either. He starts to panic, wondering how he was going to find his way out of the forest. Instantly he runs back to the other side of the field and starts through the forest. On and on he runs, breathing heavily while the flashlight jars in his hand.

He finally comes out onto some sort of dirt trail. He starts to feel some relief and progresses down the trail. By this time, nightfall had set with a black sky and the stars shining. Don makes it to the end of the trail. He is shocked to find The Lake in the opening.

Catching his breath, Don looks up at the sky and says, “None of this seems normal.”

A quick gaze at the lake is abruptly ended when some trees start rustling behind him. Turning in surprise, he flashes the light to see two red eyes gleaming from the darkness. Don is frozen from the glare of the eyes, and can hear a faint growl.

Suddenly, something clasps onto his wrist. He flashes the light to see the hand of a human skeleton grabbing him. Don jerks the hand, turns, and shines his light. What he sees strikes him cold with horror. Standing face to face with Don is a human skeleton that has bright red lights in both eye sockets. It then screeches while extending it’s hand towards Don. Don grips the arms of the skeleton, and shoves it off the bank of the lake. He hears a splash and glances down at the lake. As he looks upon the surface however, he doesn’t see water. What should be a liquid surface instead appears to be nothing but blood.

Don gasps and starts rushing towards the trail. Then he sees another skeleton coming from the forest. This time Don goes over to a tree where a broken sapling is lying, and snaps it in two. Picking one of the broken halves up, he sees blood dripping out of the end of it.

“What kind of hellish place is this?”, Don yells.
The skeleton starts to approach slowly. As it does, Don swings the sapling and knocks the skull off of it’s torso, and runs down the trail as fast as he can. He turns around to see if they caught up with him. Nothing could be seen in the darkness.

Before Don could catch another breath, a skeleton clasps it’s arms around him. Then two others instantly lock shackles onto both of Don’s legs. The skeletons then start to pull the chains, dragging Don down the dirt trail. Struggling, Don tries to grab ahold of a tree, or something. He is unable to do anything at this point. Hopelessly sinking his fingers into the ground doesn’t even work. They only get dirty along with bloody scratches. The skeletons keep dragging him until they get to The Lake. Don turns and looks as doom lies right before his eyes. Now he resorts to screaming at the top of his lungs,

“Curse you! All of you God-forsaken demons!”

He squirms as his feet are submerged by the bloody lake. When he reaches his hand out, he feels a rock in the palm of his hand. Quickly he grabs it, and throws it at hand of one of the skeletons pulling him. The rock knocks the hand off, causing the chain to drop. Don pulls the chain and jerks the other one out of the other skeleton’s hand. He stands as one approaches him. Don puts both hands on the skeleton’s head and pulls it off. As more approach, he starts punch at them. They fall each time and try to get back up. So Don starts to quickly stomp on the skeletons.

Stomp and crack! Stomp and crack! He keeps going on and breaking the bones with full force.

Screeeeeeeech!!!

The skeletons scream so loud that echoes are heard throughout the place. Don had immobilized the skeletons completely.

All that lies on the ground were fragments of their skulls and various broken bones. Don is motionless from all of the shock for a moment, and then he says,

“I’m need to get out of here.”
He takes one step and suddenly feels a piercing pain in his torso. A broken femur going through his back and into his chest. A skeleton had sneaked out of the lake as Don’s back was turned and took a clean stab at him.

Nothing but a look of pain on Don’s face as his eyes are wide open. He falls to the ground dead. The sneaky skeleton grabs his wrist and pulls his body into the lake. As the skeleton goes further out, it and Don’s bodies are slowly submerged by the human blood.
Late Night
By James Trent

It was about 1am now. John figured he might as well stay up all night at this point. He didn’t have anything to do tomorrow, so why not. It was Friday, he had made it past midnight already, and he might as well stay awake and enjoy the night.

All night he had stayed up watching videos and listening to scary stories. ‘Tis the season. He had watched videos talking about all sorts of things. Old nasty fish that lived at the bottom of the sea, folklore from cultures all over the world, unsolved murder mysteries. Some stuff was surely fake, but some was real enough to hold his attention. The fake stuff was all of those killer clowns hiding in basements stories, or similar nonsense. The real stuff were stories like Hinterkaifeck.

Hinterkaifeck was this place out in the farmlands of Germany back in the 20s. This family, basically alone on the edge of the woods, had been seeing strange things all over their farm for a few weeks. The father of the family of 5 or 6 had been telling whoever he came across about weird footprints in the snow that led to his house with no footprints leading away, or newspapers appearing in his living room that he was sure he didn’t buy. He had seen the lock on his toolshed one day had been banged up, like someone was trying to break it off entirely. Then nothing happened for a while.

A few days had passed without anyone hearing from the family at Hinterkaifeck and eventually someone came to check on them. They looked all over and found most of the family members out in the barn, murdered and in a pile on top of each other. The father, the mother, the old and young sister. They looked like someone had tried to smash their skulls over and over again with a shovel and then had drawn strange symbols all over their faces in different colors. The youngest daughter had claw marks on her eyes and blood under her fingernails. They got inside the house and saw the maid’s throat had been slit from ear to ear. The baby had been smothered and beaten in its crib. The real kicker though was when police asked anyone who had passed the place if they noticed anything wrong, everyone said it looked normal. They thought the murder took place on Friday and the bodies were found on Monday. The whole
weekend the chimney still had smoke coming from it, the cows and dogs had been fed, but not a single drop of blood was cleaned up. The only conclusion they came to was that whoever had killed the family at Hinterkaifeck, if they were some kind of Satanist or lunatic, had lived there the entire weekend as if nothing happened.

That was the kind of story that Tyler liked and kept him up all night. He finished a story about a guy who plucked his own eyes out, then decided he was thirsty. His house wasn’t so big, he would just walk into the kitchen and get a drink of water or something. He got up from his computer chair, quickly turned on the light in his room, and walked out the door into the hallway.

He could see the kitchen light from there by the doorway. Did he leave that on? He must’ve. He didn’t remember leaving it back on, but he must have. He hadn’t heard anything. Surely he would hear something. He must have left the kitchen light on even though he didn’t remember doing it. He stood there in the doorway for a while, then after a deep breath, walked into the kitchen. There was nobody there. Of course. He opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water. He leaned up against the sink and started drinking it in small, then large, gulps.

Damn water. What was with all the freaky fish in the ocean anyway? What kind of God would make something, or even let something, like a 100 pound fish with human looking eyes and jaws bigger than the rest of its body swim around in the darkness? Or Goblin sharks, those demonic things. Their noses were so damn huge, but the way their mouth expanded and lunged of its own accord at whatever it could snatch up was the real threat. They had to be some kind of alien, monster, supernatural blight, something. Evolution couldn’t be that cruel.

He lowered the bottle and screwed the cap on. Then, out of the corner of his eye, in the living room and through the doorway, there was something standing there. He could see it. It was tall and thin and had no arms. It was just standing there looking at him. He took a deep breath and turned towards it. Of course, it was nothing. There was nothing in the living room at all. He walked into the doorway and flicked the light switch. It was just the light from the window messing with him. There was nothing at all in the living room and he knew that. It was late, that’s all. He stared into the room and flicked the light switch off. Whatever he had seen wasn’t there now that he was getting a good look at it. He went back
and put the half-empty bottle into the fridge, then went back to the hallway after turning the kitchen light off.

The hallway was so dark. It felt like if he dared step past the light coming from the monitor in his room, he would fall off into some abyss. But that wouldn't happen. There was a hallway there with nice, clean hardwood floors waiting for him. He slowly crept down the hallway, with his hand against the wall. He took a step past the doorway, for no reason. He was fine. He took his hand off the wall and went inside the room, then closed and locked his door.

It was about 3am now. He didn't think he had taken all that long in the kitchen, but apparently he had. Maybe it would be a good idea to go to bed after all. Nights are so long, after all. And tomorrow, he thought, he should really start on that paper. It wasn't due until Sunday, but if he got it done early he wouldn't have to worry about it all weekend, and that'd be nice. He went to shut his computer down and heard the bells.

He lived down the road from a church, and they would ring their bells at every hour on the hour to announce the time. He heard stories about how it used to be done by hand, that someone would be up at every hour to ring the bells and announce the time. But they had long since automated them, and he could hear it ring. Once. Twice. Three times. It was 3am now. No reason to stay awake any more.

He went to his bed and laid down, getting underneath the covers and the top sheets. It was really dark in his room, just like the hallway. But the bed was nice and comfy. Soon he'd be asleep. Any minute now he'd close his eyes, and when he opened them back up, there'd be sun coming in from his window and birds chirping, the whole nine yards. It was dead quiet in his room too, but that doesn't matter. Any minute now. It was like 3:30am by now, he bet. His phone was still over by the computer, and there was no reason to get up and get it now. He would fall asleep, soon, and wake up in the morning to make breakfast and work. Then he heard it.

“J O H N N Y …”