

CentralLit Magazine Presents

HAUNTED SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

2024

About This 'Zine

Illinois is filled with stories of ghosts, ghouls, and cryptids. From hometown urban legends, to the Chicago Mothman and the Enfield Horror, or the plethora of legends stemming from Alton, IL., home of a haunted hotel and paranormal museum.

As we celebrate “spooky season” - Halloween, Autumn, Samhain, or whatever you feel so inclined to observe this time of year - we hope you find an evening of entertainment exploring the works of local authors as they weave their own haunting tails inspired by our beloved home state.

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About *CentraLit*

CentraLit's mission is to promote the arts and literacy in Illinois, with particular focus on the Southern and South-Central regions. We believe Illinois is full of talented writers, poets, performers, artists, filmmakers, musicians, and everything in-between. We aim to both provide publishing and networking opportunities for new and seasoned creatives, but also to provide valuable info and resources to help aspiring creatives find their footing.

CentraLit accepts submissions on a rolling basis. We may occasionally put out a targeted prompt or contest, but we are always open to anything written by people with ties to Illinois or stories about our beloved home state. For more information, visit CentraLitMagazine.com/submit.

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Haunted Southern Illinois

The Winds and Eleanor

by Mike Warden

The wind howled around the house. Eleanor sat at her desk by the window and listened to the sounds it made. She often listened to it on blustery nights when she had tired of her books and her crossword puzzles. Her apartment was tucked away into the northwestern corner of the house so she could hear its dark music moving in the branches and walking among the rafters. It was a three-story Victorian house and once, she knew, it had belonged to a family with ten children. She wondered if it had been a happy house then, full of love and laughter. She wondered what kind of lives the children had gone on to live. She had heard once – she had forgotten how – that the youngest daughter had slept in the room that was Eleanor’s now. Or maybe she had dreamed it. But she wondered how the wind had sounded to that long-ago child. She wondered if she, too, had sat at this window and listened to its roaring. And she wondered into what words, what meanings had the wind shaped its sounds for that long-ago child.

The house had belonged to many owners since then. Someone had given it a name, “St Charles Place”, as if it was a hotel instead of a boarding house. The name always made Eleanor think of the property on that board game. It had been a boarding house for years and years and had been divided into ten studio apartments. She had lived there for seven years, ever since her mother had died, and she supposed that she would live there forever. No one knew her and she knew none of the other tenants. They were only names on the mailboxes in the downstairs hall. They were strangers, single people – widows and widowers mostly, she guessed, when she had occasionally passed them on the stairs or seen them peep out of their cracked doors. They

all lived quietly, secretly, oblivious to all else, as if each of them inhabited separate worlds, separate dreams. They came and went and left not a trace of themselves behind, not a footstep, not an echo. Sometimes, on other nights – always at night, it seemed – she would hear the siren and look down at the street and see the red lights and know that one of them had died. She never knew which one or what had happened and she would never have asked even if there had been someone to question. She only knew, when she thought to look, that a name on one of the mailboxes had been removed. She only knew that here was a token of the future, her future.

Sometimes, on those nights when she sat by the window listening to the wind whoop and howl as the hands of the clock moved past midnight and into the small hours, she would fall asleep and the dream would come. And in the dream, she knew that the wind had chosen her as if it was a sentient being that had seen in her a kindred soul. For in those strange memories that are given to us in sleep and that leave us upon waking, she could not remember when the wind had not been with her. It seemed that it had been whispering in her ear through all the quiet and lonely milestones of the years and keening like an Irish widow during her most grievous losses.

Tonight, the wind had shaken the house and she had awakened, turned on the lamp and pulled her mother's photograph album from the second drawer of the chest of drawers. And she sat and turned the pages of the album, looking upon all the lonely incarnations of who she had once been until she came to the picture taken in the garden of St. Bartholomew's. She had been twelve years old and she had been wearing the long dress that her mother had bought at Miss Elaine's for some occasion, for Easter or for her confirmation. She couldn't remember which, but the picture was not taken at Easter or after her confirmation. It was a black and white picture taken in late fall or winter. She knew because she had worn her long black coat over her dress and because the trees around her were bare. Had the wind been her familiar even then? She

thought so. In the picture she could see how it plucked and pulled at the ends and edges of her dress and at the sleeves of her coat, how it wound its icy fingers through the tendrils of her hair. It was a somber picture. She had not smiled. Above the branches, great dark clouds moved across the heavens, their forecast shadows imprinted upon the ground, upon the brown grass around her feet, a strange and brooding moment that had been captured forever in a photograph. Behind her image, far beyond the barren garden, she could see the rectory and the whitewashed Stations of the Cross.

As she looked at the picture, she remembered that day in brief flashes. She remembered how the wind had moved in the boughs that day, how it had roared high in the church steeple among the iron bells and how it had blown the withered leaves down the walk and later, when she had retreated upstairs to her bedroom, how it had piped its lonely tune among the attic beams. And down the years, it had haunted her sleep and her waking hours. There was no refuge from that wind. It had sounded through all the lonely sleepless nights. It had insinuated itself into her being. It was a part of her now. It had come in by the channels of her ear, had woven itself among her bones and sinews, had inhabited her soul. It was a part of the past and had accompanied her into the present. And it would blow forever, she knew, turning with the seasons of her life until the day when she knew no more.

The wind sounded strange and powerful and mournful to her tonight. It sounded like a chorus in the darkness. She let her mind wander, to indulge in a dark fancy. She thought about what kind of chorus might roar in the branches, might move along the eaves, might press its weight against the house and pucker the window glass. And she let herself imagine that a chorus of the house's dead tenants had come, a chorus of those who had been allowed, just this once, to come back, to come home to the place where they had lived only to discover that they had been

shut out, shut out of the house, shut out of living. And so, they wandered along the walks and in the garden, gazing up at the windows and remembering light, recalling all that they had been, what they had loved and lost or had longed for but had never possessed. And she imagined that the roaring that she heard was those lost souls speaking as one, a collective sigh of the departed for all the years and years of longing, expelled together, all at once.

Unpleasant Presents

by Jo Allen

As the moon dips beyond the horizon and the earth is engulfed in the pitch of night, a woman sleeps, buried under mounds of quilts and blankets. Her light, slow, rhythmic breaths are the only sound heard throughout the long hallways and dark rooms. With each breath, the breeze wafts in and out through an open window –Sucking the long, white curtains in gently, then blowing them back out, almost as if the house itself is breathing. The house inhales a chilly breath, making the woman shiver from under her covers.

Suddenly, just as the house breathes back out again, another sound joins the symphony. A low and delicate sound, enchanting but haunting, rings out from a closet ajar. Buried under many objects in the closet, a music box plays its tune. The teeth within the music box pluck against metal pins, producing a distant and fantastical sound.

Greta Caswell stirs in her sleep, disturbed by the sudden foreign music. She moans slightly and buries her face deep under the covers. A cold breeze wafts from the window and nips her nose. Then, just as Greta opens her eyes, the music stops.

Everything is quiet now. Even the breeze has died down. She lays there for a moment, trying to get her bearings. Everything is so dark she barely sees the outline of her furniture. However, the moonlight glints off the cotton of her white curtains, making them look like a pair of ghosts in the night. A light breeze picks up again, making the ghosts dance ominously. Greta sits up slowly, watching them. With a shiver, she gets to her feet to close the window. Approaching it, she looks out at her vacant backyard. Not even a tree is in sight, only the dark shadows of corn.

Greta can't help but wonder what woke her. The music from the closet seems like a distant dream. Shrugging it off, she reaches up and slams the window shut. The house's breaths

stop short, and the dancing ghosts fall flat against the window. The silence that follows is almost deafening. There is something eerie about it like the silence was created artificially.

Just as it becomes unbearable, the sound of a long and low *creeeeeeeaaaak* whines from the closet door. From the corner of her eye, Greta watches as the door lurches forward slowly, leaving a dark and gaping hole. Her breath catches in her throat, and her heart quickens. Unable to move, Greta urges herself to look away. With great strain, she succeeds and focuses her attention on the backyard. She watches as the corn sways in the wind like long and crooked fingers reaching for the sky. The sound of footsteps on the creaky wood floor approaches from the closet and sweat begins to bead on her forehead. She still does not dare look. Soon, a low moan begins, like an angry cat.

Greta shuts her eyes tight and clenches her fists, urging the visitor from the closet to leave. She knows if she does not acknowledge it, it will leave. But every nerve in her body tells her to run. The nerves burn her skin, and she lets out a shaky breath as the visitor steps closer behind her, making the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it turns and disappears, the steps fading down the hallway. Silence returns, this time accompanied by the comforting hums of the household appliances and the clicking of a wall clock. Greta lets out a shaky breath; she can't wait for morning.

*

Morning comes, and with it, the relief of daylight. Upbeat and rhythmic music fills the air, making Greta joyfully hum to the beat. Today is the day she finally rids her home of the unwanted visitor. As she listens and hums, she stretches out a piece of pink wrapping paper. Her fingers run along the creases of the glossy paper as she wraps it around a large box. Then, with a precision that can only be gained by experience, she

tapes it down with only a single piece of tape. Greta then reaches for a handmade gold bow and lays it atop the single piece of Scotch tape.

Looking proudly down at her work, Greta smiles. Gift wrapping has always been a happy little hobby for her, and in the last year, it has become a supplemental income. She loves how you can take any old junk and wrap it up in beautiful and intricate designs, making it feel new again. People on social media love her tips, tricks, and designs, and she loves sharing them. She has even started a blog, which has enhanced her writing portfolio and helped her land more jobs.

The music stops abruptly, and Greta looks up, perplexed. Wondering if she lost internet, she glances at her modem, which still glows green. Greta sets down the little pink package and walks into the kitchen where her stereo is. Surprised, she finds that it is unplugged, and she stares down at it with disbelief.

The house is silent again, just as it was last night. Not even the hum of her refrigerator. It is as if the electricity has been zapped from the house, except that the lights are still on. She looks up at the kitchen light and watches it flicker...

Once.

Twice.

It goes out.

Well, scratch that. There goes the lights. Luckily, the sunlight reaches fingers of light through her windows.

Still, Greta cannot help but feel uneasy. Usually, she does not mind being alone, which is why she doesn't even have a pet. But it's times like these when she wishes she did live with someone, even if it is just a cat or even a goldfish.

BANG BANG

Two loud bangs from the front of the house make Greta jump. She turns to stare down the hall to the front room, holding her breath.

BANG BANG

The sounds of knocking echo urgently down the hallway, bouncing off the walls and hitting Greta in the stomach, making her heart thump in her chest. This time, there is a longer pause, and Greta takes a few steps down the hall to investigate.

BANG BANG

Just as she makes it halfway down the hallway, realization dawns, and Greta's eyes light up.

Someone is at the door.

With a sigh of relief, Greta picks up her pace and walks to the front door. Just as she reaches for the doorknob, the lights flicker back on, and the house returns to its usual hum.

"Greta Caswell?" a man with a long white beard and wrinkles etched into his features asks when Greta opens the door. The man is wearing brown overalls and a white, discolored shirt underneath. He holds a black case in his right hand and a flashlight in his left.

"Yes, that's me." She nods.

"I am here for the home inspection?" It sounds almost like a question, almost as if he is unsure if he is in the right place or not.

Greta's eyes light up, "Yes!" She steps back to let him into her home. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you so soon."

The man nods, "Sorry, am I intruding?"

"No, not all." She smiles, delighted that he is finally here.

The man takes a step inside and looks around the small but cozy living area. He sets down his black case and holds a hand out to Greta, "The name's Ozzy." His blue eyes twinkle when he introduces himself.

Greta takes his calloused hand in her softer one. "Nice to meet you."

Ozzy drops her hand and begins peeking around the house, looking at the ceiling and walls. "I'm guessing your home was built in the fifties?" He asks.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I've seen a lot of houses in my time," he chuckles. "Well, I'll go ahead and get started with the inspection. Let me know if you have any questions."

Greta takes a step back and points down the hall, "Okay, I'll just be in the kitchen if you need me."

Ozzy nods and turns to get to his work.

*

For quite some time, all is normal as Ozzy conducts his inspection. Greta stays in the kitchen, leaving her stereo unplugged as she does the dishes. She listens carefully to Ozzy as he enters every room in her house. Having a stranger in her home feels awkward and invasive, but she chooses to trust his professionalism.

Soon, Ozzy walks into the kitchen and gives her a perplexed look. "I'm not sure how to tell you this, ma'am, " he scratches his head, "but I haven't been able to find anything. After everything you described in your email, I was sure I would."

Greta looks at him with disappointment. She was sure he would find something as well. What else would explain all of the strange happenings?

"Oh," she says simply.

"How long have you lived here?" he asks.

“Almost ten years now.”

He nods, she can almost see the wheels turning in his head. “And this all began just over three months ago?”

“That's right.”

“Well, I usually only specialize in houses, but during that time, when the...” he hesitates for a moment, trying to find his words, “when the haunting began, did you bring home any new objects?”

Greta is taken aback by this, “Of course, I shop all the time. Can you be more specific?”

“Well, I once heard of a spirit attaching itself to a damn shampoo bottle, so it really could be anything.” His eyes chuckle as he talks, but he tries to be serious for her sake.

She thinks for a moment, then it clicks.

“The music box,” she whispers.

“A music box?” Ozzy runs his hand through his beard, thinking. “That's one idea.”

“It went off last night, waking me up before she... *it* came out from the closet,” Greta explains.

Just as Ozzy opens his mouth to speak, the electricity goes out. The two of them look up at the kitchen light with surprise. Within moments, the room grows cold, and the natural sunlight fades a bit, almost as if a dark cloud covers it up. But as far as Greta knows, the skies are clear.

“Uhm, well, that's definitely gotta be it.”

Ozzy chuckles nervously; Greta, however, does not think this is a laughing matter. “She knows we are talking about her.” She warns in a low voice. Her heart beats like a rabbit's foot in her ears.

“Where is the music box?” Ozzy asks.

“Follow me.” Greta abruptly turns and heads back down the hall.

She stops short at her bedroom door and peeks inside, scared to see what might be inside. After finding the room clear, she opens the door and enters, Ozzy following close behind.

“In here?” He looks around the room.

“In there.” Greta points to her closet door, which is still wide open from the previous night.

The closet is a dark gaping hole, and Greta hesitates to enter it. Ozzy raises his flashlight, The beam of light illuminates the walk-in closet, revealing mounds of wrapped presents.

“Having a birthday party?” He tilts his head curiously.

Greta blushes, “No, it's just a hobby.”

His shoulders slump with realization, “Please don't tell me it is in one of those presents?” His eyes beg her to tell him so.

She gulps down a lump in her throat.

“It is.”

“Do you remember which one?” He looks like he's about to lose himself.

“Nope.”

A loud bang rings out from behind them like the back door slamming closed. They jump, and Ozzy curses out loud. The pair give each other a desperate look just as something comes running down the hallway, footsteps hitting the hardwood floors hard and fast. With urgency and fear, Greta turns and slams her bedroom door. Ozzy jumps on it and holds it closed as something on the other side begins banging on it with such force and violence that it makes the room shake.

“Find it!” Ozzy's eyes practically bulge out from his head as he screams at her.

Greta jumps into action, diving for the closet as a scream so feral and primal it turns her insides to mush rings out from outside the bedroom door. She reaches into the closet and grabs at a handful of presents, ripping them apart with shaky hands.

She opens the first present; it's only a slinky.

Another, some socks.

Another, a roll of toilet paper.

The screams intensify, and Ozzy lets out one of his own deep and horrified screams.

“Huuurrryyy!” She can hear his fear.

“Fuck this.” Greta takes a large armful of the presents and throws them from the closet and onto the bedroom floor, and in a panic, she begins stomping on them. Knowing the music box will be a harder object, she ignores the presents that give out from under her feet and quickly investigates the ones that do not. With each footfall tears well up in her eyes. Despite the urgency of the situation, she cannot help but feel an overwhelming sense of loss for her magnificent creations.

A low rumbling sound begins as the visitor on the other side of the door growls low and menacingly. Again, it reminds Greta of an angry cat, but this time, the growl is deeper and more urgent.

Seconds that feel like minutes pass, and finally, Greta's foot stomps down on a hard object that rings out as her foot makes contact. Falling to her hands and knees she rushes to pull back the green wrapping paper. She holds up the gold-plated music box with both hands, and just as she is about to throw it against her wall, the lid pops open, revealing a dancing fairy.

The enchantingly haunted music rings out, and the house goes quiet. The visitor stops trying to break down the door, and the walls stop shaking. Ozzy and Greta look at the box with

dumbfoundment and amazement. The song rings out mesmerizingly, casting a spell on them both. Greta blinks, recognizing the music from her dreams. Then, just before the music comes to an end, it is cut short as Greta smashes it hard against the wall, breaking it into bits and pieces and putting an end to her three-month-long nightmare.

*

L ater that evening, when the sun sets on the horizon and the world is engulfed in the pitch of night once more, Greta makes her way back to bed. The hum of the household fills the air with a sense of liveliness this time. The windows are closed and sealed, and the closet door shut. The heat kicks on as Greta wraps herself up in her blankets, making the two ghosts at her window dance once more. She watches them as she drifts to a peaceful and uninterrupted slumber, where a beautiful and haunting song plays in her dreams.

Green Eyes

by Skylar Neil

“Welcome back, folks! That was 'Elmwood Error' by the notorious former local band, Sentinel. Many of you remember the trouble those boys caused around town, and, honestly, L.A. can keep ‘em! Still, they knew how to bring some fire to the scene. It was nearly twenty years ago that they won Battle of the Bands and were discovered—and they haven’t stopped since. Speaking of, I’m sure you’re eager to hear the results of the latest round of this year’s contest! Tomorrow night, the contenders will be Kanji Cannon and Something X! The winner will be decided by local judges and, of course, the audience. The winner will perform at the grand stage at the annual Halloween festival, in front of thousands of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins! Up next, we have...”

The garage was nothing special—cracked cement floors and walls covered with tattered posters of rock bands from the past twenty years. Garret, Ryan, J.B, and Alex unpacked plastic containers around the room, working around a van parked in the middle.

“I can’t believe they said our name on the radio,” said the bass player while he set up his bass amp.

“I still think ‘Something X’ is a stupid name. What does it even mean, Garret?” asked another boy, trying to tune his electric guitar over the thunder and random drum fills.

“‘Something X’ was Sentinel’s first band name,” Garret explained, setting up the mic. “The name came from this time I bought a guitar at the music shop off Broadway. The owner mentioned the band used to hang out there and shared the name with me, so I just ran with it. It’s better than ‘Orphan Balloon.’”

The boys’ chuckles and banter were interrupted by a loud crack of thunder.

“Are you sure we should practice with this storm going on?”

“We don’t have a choice. The show’s tomorrow, and we can win if we keep at it. If it gets too bad, we’ll pack it up. Just remember rule three: if something happens during a song, *never stop playing*. Recover and finish.”

“Which guitar are you using for the show, Ryan?” asked J.B. over the drum kit.

“The red Gibson, for sure,” Ryan replied, miming an air guitar solo.

“The one you got in town or your uncle’s?”

“My uncle’s. He actually used to play with a few bands around here.”

“You guys ready? Let’s start with ‘Mama Monical.’” Garret raised his hand, switched on his microphone, and suddenly a blinding flash lit up the window. The shock jolted Garret’s entire body, cramping his hands and causing his eyes to burn. Ryan watched as Garret’s hazel eyes glazed over blue and he collapsed against the car hood.

“Hey! You okay?” Ryan asked. Garret opened his eyes and tried to steady himself, but his trembling hands couldn’t grasp the mic stand. The boys helped him to his room and called it a night. Later, Ryan mentioned the strange look in Garret’s eyes to the rest of the guys, but the others hadn’t noticed.

✱

““G”ood morning, C-Town! Quick update on last night’s gnarly storm: multiple homes were damaged, and several stores were broken into, though not much of value was stolen. It’s spooky season, but let’s keep it together, folks! Tonight is the Battle of the Bands! For those about to rock, we salute you here at KZ96.4.”

✱

“Are your hands okay, man? Can you even play tonight?” Ryan asked while packing up his guitar. “And did you hear? The singer of Kanji Cannon’s mom is gonna be one of the judges! How’s that fair?”

“Not much we can do about it,” Garret said, “My hand will be fine.”

“First up tonight, we have ‘Something X’! Remember, the judges will be watching for originality and performance!” The packed café gave scattered applause as the band started. During the chorus, Garret noticed a girl walking past the window. The sound of rain grew louder as she entered, and the wind brushed Garret’s face. He performed energetically, trying to stay focused, but his mind filled with static when he met the girl’s glowing green eyes. He felt electric, dropping the microphone and grabbing the speaker for support. Ryan signaled the band to keep playing and took over the vocals. *Never stop playing...*

“You okay, man?” Ryan mouthed after the song. The cheering crowd seemed confused. Garret nodded and began packing up, eager to clear the stage for the next band.

“What happened out there?” Ryan asked.

“No idea,” Garret said, shoving his hands in his hoodie pocket. “I just blacked out. My hand cramped, and everything went white. Thanks for stepping in.”

“Rule number three,” Ryan replied, turning to watch the Kanji Cannon take the stage. Despite trying to be respectful, it was clear the Kanji Cannon was out of tune, and everyone felt they were off on their timing. The crowd, except for a few classmates near the stage, was disinterested, but a middle-aged female judge smiled giddily as they played – the singer’s mom. After the mess of mismatched notes ended, it was clear Something X had won the crowd’s favor. When the judges announced Kanji Cannon as the winner, a roar of boos erupted in the cramped café.

*

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?” Ryan asked Garret. “We could grab some of my dad’s beer tonight.”

“I’ll meet you there. Need to cool down after that,” Garret replied, rubbing his hand.

He walked down Broadway toward Ryan’s, the image of the girl’s green eyes lingering. He decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery. He passed the graves, remembering his many visits here with Ryan trying to find a good space to smoke and drink, until he reached the large bronze monument depicting a teenage girl holding a cello. Garret had always dismissed the stories of the statue; supposedly, if someone heard the cello playing at night, it meant trouble was near, and it served as a warning to stay away. The girl buried under the statue was said to have died tragically, but the details were murky at best—rumors spoke of an overprotective father, a mysterious illness, or even a cult sacrifice. The statue itself was striking: the bronze had darkened over time, giving the girl an eerie, almost ghostly appearance in the moonlight. Her expression was serene, yet haunting, as though she was aware of secrets beyond the living. The cello rested against her side, her fingers frozen mid-note.

Garret had always found the statue fascinating, despite dismissing the eerie tales surrounding it. He would often come here to clear his mind, and tonight was no different. He walked toward the statue, planning to sit on the low stone base for a while before continuing on his way. But as he approached, he heard something unusual—soft, melodic humming. It wasn’t the cello sound the legends spoke of, but a low, gentle tune carried on the night breeze. It was unmistakably human, and it was a melody he knew well: the chorus of the song they had played at the show earlier.

His pulse quickened, and he moved closer to the statue. Rounding its base, he saw someone sitting there—a figure with a hood pulled up, obscuring their face. They were smoking a cigarette, the butt glowing bright in the dim cloudy light. The figure looked up, revealing a young woman's face. Her green eyes caught his attention, though they no longer seemed to glow like before. "Hey, is that my song? I think I saw you at the show tonight," Garret asked, his voice hesitant.

She seemed surprised for a moment before giving a small smile. "Oh, hey! Yeah, I was walking down Broadway from the music shop and happened to see you guys play. I was really drawn in by that guy's guitar, I love that deep red color on guitars. I was looking for one just like it." She scooted over, patting the ground beside her. "Are you okay? I saw you almost lose it on stage."

Garret hesitated before sitting down beside her. She offered him a cigarette, which he accepted, lighting it with the white BIC lighter she handed him. "Yeah... I don't know. Ever since the storm last night, I haven't felt right. I think lightning hit a pole in my yard, and I got a small shock. My hand's been killing me ever since," he said, flexing his fingers.

"Probably just a cramp," she replied casually. "I wouldn't worry about it." She took a drag on her cigarette, glancing at him sideways. "So, what kind of show was that anyway? I saw the judges and stuff, but I didn't know the occasion."

Garret explained the Battle of the Bands, going on about the history of Sentinel, their local notoriety, and how the band had put their small town on the map. She barely was able to meet his eye when he mentioned the band, as if she was pained by the thought of it. He continued to speak with excitement until he reached the part about Kanji Cannon's singer being one of the judge's sons. His expression soured as he mentioned it, and she nodded knowingly.

"Sounds pretty rigged to me," she said, putting out her cigarette on the stone base. "So, like, what's the point of winning? Just to play a big show?"

"Well yes, but the real prize is that it gives us a chance to get noticed. A show like this is how Sentinel got scouted when they were starting out," Garret explained.

"I gotcha." She thought to herself and said, "If you guys had won, is there anyone in particular that you would've wanted to come to see you all play? You know, besides the whole town."

"Well, some of our families would've come up. Our bass player has a girlfriend from out of state, and Ryan's uncle—who almost made it into Sentinel—would definitely have been there," Garret explained.

"Interesting," she said, her tone contemplative. She stood up suddenly, brushing ash from her hoodie. "Well, I need to get going. I'm sure there's someone out there wondering where I am." She gave him a small smile. "My name's Cameron, by the way. I really did enjoy the show. Who knows, maybe I'll see you again soon, Garret."

He watched her walk away, lighting another cigarette as she passed through the ornate cemetery gate. Garret sat there for a moment longer, letting the night's events sink in. When he stood up, he noticed a large black scorch mark on the back of the statue's head – as if it had been struck by lightning recently. He thought back to the news report mentioning lightning strikes around town and shivered at the coincidence. With a deep breath, he turned and made his way toward Ryan's place, the rain beginning to drizzle once more.

*

“**B**reaking news! Last night's Battle of the Bands winner, Kanji Cannon, won't be performing. Jeremy Brewster, the group's lead singer, is wanted for the brutal

murder of his parents and younger brother. His sister escaped the massacre and was able to report it to the authorities. Jeremy is considered dangerous. That means our runner-up, Something X, will perform tonight on the main stage! Be sure to dress up and bring more treats than tricks, also be careful out there, folks!”

*

Garret called Ryan and the others to tell them the news, and they decided to make a quick stop at the music shop before the show. When they arrived, police officers surrounded the shop. In the crowd, Garret saw Cameron.

“What happened?” he asked.

“That one kid from the band last night broke in and tortured the owner. They say he grabbed his father’s taser and just shocked him repeatedly. I think they say he was looking for something,” she mentioned, then abruptly changed the subject. “So you’re playing tonight, right?”

Garret nodded, though something felt off about her. He said his goodbye and rejoined the band as they headed back to the garage to practice.

The festival was packed with a macabre collection of costumed townspeople that filled the main streets. The other boys met up with their families while Ryan and Garret met up with Ryan’s uncle. He started showing them the familiar red Gibson Les Paul. Garret stepped away to check on his stage equipment and bumped into Cameron again.

“Good luck tonight. Hey, is that who Ryan got the guitar from?”

“Yeah, his uncle gave it to him a few years back. Why?”

“I need you to hear me out. I recognized that guitar, the same way I recognized him tonight. I knew he was in Sentinel; I knew them all and Garret, they were wild back then.” She

spoke in a rushed cadence. Garret stood there blankly, trying to comprehend where this was coming from. What did she mean she knew them? “Did you know they even killed a girl once just as they started to get noticed? It was hushed up by their manager. The town eventually forgot all about it, but the girl’s father made that statue in the cemetery before they shut him up. Ryan’s uncle was a part of it, Garret.” Cameron paused and gave him a sincere look when the other guys in the band pulled him away. “I hope you guys have a great show,” she waved before heading away from the crowd.

The band started playing, the night crisp and the crowd excited. During the second song, Garret’s hand cramped, but he fought through it. When he turned back to face the crowd, he saw everyone had the same glowing green eyes as Cameron. He blinked and saw Jeremy, covered in blood, not unlike most of the crowd, approaching the area where Ryan’s uncle stood. Garret tried to shout, but the mic was suddenly dead, and Ryan immediately took over singing once more. Jeremy reached out, grabbed the man that was twice his size by the head and squeezed the life out of him in seconds. Garret was frozen in shock on the stage, but the band kept playing, sticking to the rule, a rule that Garret regretted ever creating. Garret was the sole witness while Jeremy tossed the body aside, proceeded to look up to meet Garret, and revealed his glowing green eyes. Jeremy walked backwards through the crowd, maintaining eye contact as he walked away and then fled the street.

Garret finished the set, trembling with each song. Afterwards, he ran from the stage, searching for Cameron.

He found himself back at the cemetery, where a line of cigarettes spelled out "THANK YOU" behind the statue. In the distance, he could swear he heard the low hum of a cello.

*

“G”ood evening, listeners. Tonight, I bring you some deeply troubling news. It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that several members of the band Sentinel have been found dead in their homes across Los Angeles.

All five, past and present members, were discovered with chilling notes describing a shadowy figure—a figure with glowing green eyes that had been haunting them for days before their brutal deaths. In one of the homes, a gruesome message was scrawled on the wall, written in what appeared to be blood: *'Never stop playing...'*

*

A few days later, the boys gathered in Garrett's garage for band practice, this time, a sense of loss clung in the air. Ryan remained silent for most of the night, lamenting the loss of his uncle.

The amp crackled as Ryan plugged in his guitar, the familiar weight of it resting on his shoulder, the reminder of the loss. Garret hadn't told him or anyone about Cameron and her relationship to the members of Sentinel. The others were chatting, trying to shake off their unease.

Suddenly, Garret's phone rang, the sharp sound cutting through the chatter, a number he didn't recognize—Saint Louis area code. Curiosity piqued, he answered and put the phone on speaker.

"Hello, is this Garret?" the voice on the other end asked, gruff yet eager. "I happened to catch you guys at the Battle of the Bands last week. I loved your sound. I'd love to get you up here to Saint Louis for a show—think you could make it?"

The boys exchanged surprised glances, excitement slowly spread across their faces, masking the awkward dread that lingered in the room. This could be the break they'd been

waiting for. Garret rested his cramping hand on the amp and flexed his fingers slowly. The ache that had been bothering him for the past five days seemed to have vanished, replaced by a strange sense of calm.

"We'd love to," Garret said, his voice steady, almost distant. The others silently agree, the tension seemingly lifting from the room.

But as Garret hung up, he noticed something—just a flicker in the corner of his vision. He turned his head sharply, but there was nothing there. He shook it off, attributing it to fatigue or stress. But deep down, an uneasy feeling gnawed at him, a feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Outside the garage, unnoticed by the boys, the streetlamp flickered, casting long shadows across the driveway. For a brief moment, in the dim, erratic light, a figure seemed to linger—just at the edge of the yard. It was still, almost blending into the darkness, but two faint green glimmers caught the light before vanishing completely.

The night air grew colder, and Garret shivered, his hand cramping once more.

Cry Baby Bridge

by Jo Allen

Small rocks crunch beneath Ramona Estrada's new sneakers as her feet pound the old country road. Her breath comes shallow and rhythmic as her long, dark ponytail bounces behind her head. She can feel the heat rising to her cheeks as she jogs.

Ramona retreats into her mind as she runs, hiding away from the pain in her legs and chest. As she does, a chilled breeze blows in, making the forest around her come alive. Red, yellow, and orange leaves on the massive oak trees that dominate the landscape around her dance in the wind, filling the air with an incredible sound. That same wind trickles up her sweat-covered spine, making her shiver.

Ramona ignores it.

Instead, she keeps running, pushing her muscles to endure more of her heated exercise. This goes on for some time— her burning muscles, the shiver on her back, and the sound of roaring oak trees, until Ramona reaches a bridge crossing over the little muddy creek.

There she slows, then rests.

Kneeling over the metal railing of the graffiti-covered bridge, Ramona pants loudly, almost uncontrollably. Never has she reached this far on her evening runs, and she has been running most of the year.

A smile plays at her lips as the sweat drips from the tip of her nose and drops to the murky water below.

She felt accomplished.

As Ramona's breaths begin to calm so does the forest around her, allowing her to take notice of new sounds. Such as the trickle of the low-lying creek and the sound of rustling leaves as woodland creatures scurry about, in a hurry to prepare for the impending winter.

Ramona also has anxieties and worries in the back of her head about the impending winter. So much needs to be done, Halloween activities to plan for, Christmas presents to shop for, and children to entertain. She is a mother after all, and the holiday season looms ahead like a steel mountain: unmovable, and unavoidable.

However, under the golden sun of a late afternoon fall day, in the midst of the swaying oak trees, along an old county road, Ramona finds some peace.

She eats up that peace, soaking its rays into her skin, warming her bones, and calming her spirit.

The wind begins to pick up again and she lets out the first steady breath since she stopped her jog.

Then, just as the breath parts her lips, a faint noise catches her attention.

The noise begins as a weak whistle, like the high-pitched noise of a train in a faraway distance. Ramona listens intently for a while, trying to discern its distance, trying to understand its origin, but the more the noise draws out, the more puzzled she becomes.

Soon, the noise picks up. As the wind blows hard and steady against the bridge, she can feel the vibrations of the wind hitting the steel in her fingers as she grasps the edge. That's when she hears it: the cry, the cry of a baby. It's high pitched, needy, distressed; it makes the hairs on her arms stand on the edge and her heart quicken. For a moment her breasts even ache, a reminder of her instinctual obligations from years ago.

Wha... where is that coming from? Ramona's heart quickens more and she pants as she looks around frantically. She would recognize that cry anywhere – it's a cry of desperation, pain, and fear.

Then just as soon as it begins, it fades away as the wind dies down.

Still looking around, unable to locate the origins of the baby's cries, Ramona begins to feel a newfound dread fall over her like a wet blanket.

All she can think about is the unbearable need to help the helpless babe but first, she needs to figure out where it is. She tries to discern the direction the cry came from, but all she remembers is that it sounded like it was all around her.

Ramona takes a step back from the railing and looks to the Northeast, down the long and winding road. In that direction there is nothing but trees and beyond that a field of wheat that glows golden in the low-lying sun.

A new sound catches Ramona's attention, the sound of gravel crunching and something metal clinking.

She gasps and turns just in time to come face to face with a teenage boy with wide brown eyes. They lock eyes for a moment, both seemingly confused. Another boy chirps up.

“Did you hear the cry baby?” A boy with red hair and more freckles than there are stars in the sky.

“What?” Ramona stammers, “Wha... yes, yes, did you hear it?” She is desperate to know what the two boys know.

“Yeah,” the boy laughs, “It's the bridge.”

Ramona blinks, confused.

Both the boys start laughing, their joy-piercing needles into her chest. Ramona feels a new kind of heat rise into her cheeks. How could these boys be laughing? What is wrong with them?

Then just as soon as the anger and frustration begins to rise, it falls again as Ramona realizes what they are talking about.

It is the bridge.

“Cry Baby Bridge,” Ramona whispers.

A common occurrence is when the wind hits a bridge just right and it sounds like a baby crying, it's the source of many cultures' urban legends. Ramona just hadn't ever bared witness to it before.

“Yeah, did you believe it?” The first boy laughs.

Ramona gives the boys the best stink eye she can muster; however, they seem unfazed, only amused by her gullibility.

“Cry baby, cry baby!” They yell and laugh in unison right before they run off down the road, “Cry Baby, cry baby!”

Ramona watches as they leave, feeling like a poor little bullied schoolgirl.

She brushes it off with a roll of her eyes.

The boys run off to the Southwest, the direction towards home where the sky is beginning to darken as the day ends. She decides to stay a bit longer to give time for the boys to gain some distance, God knows she does not want to talk to them again.

Returning to the rail, Ramona leans once again on the graffiti-covered railing. For the first time, she pays attention to what it says.

*Cry Baby Bridge, here its wails, a mother seeks, a mother leaps,
this is where the cry baby weeps. Fear the mother who seeks.*

It's entirely a stupid poem, clearly written by youth – possibly the youth she just encountered – but it still leaves a haunted feeling in the air after Ramona reads it.

A mother seeks, a mother leaps. They must be referring to the story of a mother who leaped over the bridge with her baby, one of the many versions of the Cry Baby Bridge legend.

Ramona closes her eyes for a moment in an attempt to calm her mind, her heart still racing from the surreal experience.

Then it cries again.

Ramona gasps.

The cry sounds so real.

She listens for a moment, willing for it to stop, but it doesn't.

The wails pick up, more desperate and needy. Ramona's heart beats hard against her rib cage. She opens her eyes and looks at the treetops, trying to distract herself from the unbearable need to save the helpless child. She stares for a moment. Distracted by the cries, she does not realize something is amiss right away, but the longer she stares the more it begins to dawn on her.

The trees do not sway.

The crying stops abruptly, like someone pulled the plug on a radio. Or worse.

The wet blanket of dread returns again, this time draping over her head and shoulders, weighing heavily on the top of her head.

Oh God, there's no wind.

Without a moment of thought, Ramona's legs spring into action almost as if they had minds of their own. She runs the length of the little bridge and leaps over the edge just as the ground rises high enough to land safely.

Making her way down into the creek, Ramona looks around frantically. The babe has to be down here, it's the only explanation. At first sight, there is nothing there, just a muddy flow of creek water, some big rocks, and dead foliage.

If Ramona was in her right mind, perhaps she would have noticed that there was no wildlife under the bridge, not even a sapling, or snake, no bird nor toad. But she does not. Instead, she wanders deeper under the bridge, where deep shadows are cast over the water and the air grows cooler.

Despite her brand new sneakers, Ramona steps into the ankle-deep water and makes her way into the dark, her feet sinking into soft mud.

A few steps into the void a silence falls, a silence like Ramona has never experienced before. She was told if one were to experience total silence, they would then hear their own blood flow in their veins. She did not even hear that.

She opens her mouth but is reluctant to call out, she did not imagine her voice being the only noise to occupy the space would be welcomed by whatever is down here. Because there is something down here. She may not be able to hear it, but she could feel it. And *it* does not make her feel welcome.

A few more steps in, and Ramona realizes that the water around her feet makes a deafening noise, giving her the courage to speak out.

"Hello?" she speaks out desperately, but there is no response.

She travels deeper into the abyss. "Hello?"

“Hello?” her voice echoes back at her.

It startles her, hearing her voice echo back at her so. Ramona gasps and jumps, when she settles again she stands poised and ready like a startled deer just before it catches sight of a predator.

It's just an echo, she tells herself.

Looking into the dark Ramona sees looming shadows from the rocks, small dead trees growing from those rocks, reaching out to her with dead, bony fingers.

“Hello?” she tries again.

“Hello,” her voice whispers at her.

Ramona blinks, that was not an echo, just merely a whisper back at her in the wind. Except there is no wind.

The color drains from Ramona’s face when she realizes the meaning of the last part of the poem.

It's a trap.

Ramona turns, ready to run. She has not caught sight of the predator yet like the deer would have, but she senses its presence and that is enough. Her legs spring into action but are slowed by the deep mud. She yanks hard at them, willing herself to move faster but her right foot slips from the shoe, then the left.

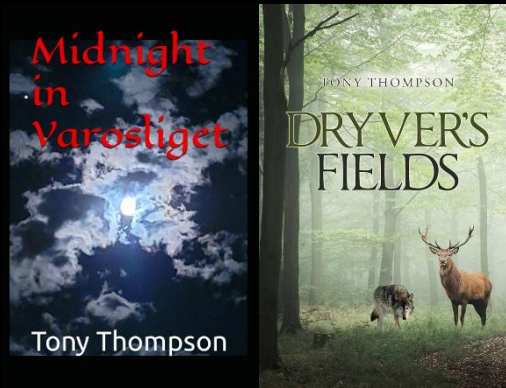
Just as she loses them both, the dead finger branches reach from the dark, wrapping around her shoulders gently, tickling her bare skin. She moves her body away, as fast as she can, but the mud around her feet holds her like drying cement. The branches wrap around her neck, reaching around her carefully as Ramona struggles to free her foot from the cement-like mud. Her gasps of fear grow more and more desperate.

She pulls her foot free just as the finger branches wrap completely around her soft neck. She propels herself forward in fear and, like a frightened rabbit in a noose trap, the finger branches tighten and she falls back, her gasps and sobs cutting short as the wind is taken from her throat.

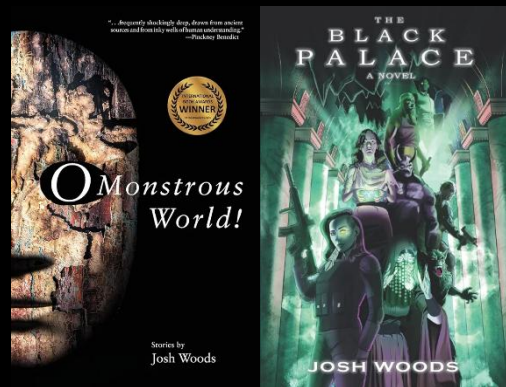
When she falls, the poor mother's cries are even further drowned out by the mud and water which envelopes her face. Ramona is engulfed into the landscape, taken with merely a whisper and small sob. Barely audible for anyone to hear if they had been close. Except no one was close, the boys were long gone on their way home as the sun set upon the horizon. No cars came down the road, no tractors in the fields. No hunters in the woods. Just silence as night fell and Ramona was no more.

Years later, when the graffiti on the bridge faded, and the forest grew smaller and the fields larger, after the children were grown and the creek became sour, a story was told of a crybaby and a mother who sought it. How their souls haunted the bridge. Many speculated how the spirits had reached that destination, some say it was a murder, others say a suicide. No matter the circumstances, it is always tragic, a poor demise. It is a mystery left unsolved, a speculative legend, but of course you can go to the bridge, listen closely on a windy day, and you just might hear the cry baby. Now if you do, listen closer, because there is something else there as well. It's light, just a moan, but it's there, just under the sounds of a traumatized child, is the sounds of a desperate mother.

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