



H . M . J O N E S

**THE
LITTLE
GARDEN
OF
HORRORS**

"WHEN RARE PLANTS TURN INTO SCARE
PLANTS"

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**The Little Garden
Of Horrors**
By H.M. Jones

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Dedicated to the crew at Heronswood garden. Wish I could clone you, my favorite garden drones.

A Few Words for Our “brainiac” Plant lovers. H.m. Jones is an office nerd, also known as Hannah Jones, the development associate for heronswood and the Port Gamble S’Klallam foundation. This means Her plant knowledge is what co-workers might refer to as dunce level.

She has a garden, which mostly lives in spite of her neglect and ignorance. Any “planty” mistakes in this book are hers and hers alone. Her savvy co-workers had nothing to do with this nonsense. Carry on.

Dan tossed his keys on the counter of the garden shed, disturbing a layer of parking lot dust that settled on the surface over the course of the week. It was two weeks since he last set foot in the shed. Breathing in the smell of dirt, old coffee, cold cement and various cleaning products, he realized he'd missed it. His trip to visit South American rare plants ended only hours ago. It was a half hour before the rest of the crew would get in, and he wanted to surprise them with the find of his (and quite possibly their) lifetimes.

He set his carry on--a non-descript, tall black bag he refused to shove under the seat to the annoyance of his flight attendant--on the dusty shed counter. His hands shook in eagerness to welcome his new sarracenia home to Heronswood Garden. He was 98% sure it was of a variety not yet recorded. It's cup-like leaves were like none he had ever seen before, a blackish-red color, shaped more like a bowl than a proper pitcher.

It reminded him vaguely of the singing plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*, though he tried to push this thought aside. He knew the movie was supposed to be absurd, but he couldn't help be a little annoyed about their portrayal of carnivorous plants. Truly, pitcher plants were some of his favorite plants--usually very distinct in colors, they gave almost year-round distinction to the sunny pond near his office.

But that was what was so strange about this variety of pitcher plant; it loathed the sun. He carefully removed the baby plant he'd uprooted from the cluster of it's peers only two days ago. The cluster was abnormal, as far as pitcher plants go. It grew in the extreme shade of a grove of leafy trees, whose impenetrable branches kept even the most plucky of sun rays out of it's nesting place. It's deep crimson shade made it almost impossible to see under that shade. If not for the size of the largest plant in the cluster, he would have missed it altogether. The largest plant was almost as tall as he was in height, with leaves that formed a daunting bowl, big enough for a grown man to fall into if he weren't careful.

The smell from the adult plant was, unlike many pitcher plants which smelled a great deal like decaying insects, *alluring* in scent. Even this little guy, when he set it on the table, gave off a tangy citrus air. He imagined the scent was to lure prey to the plant's bowl.

The specimen seemed to wither under the bright fluorescents of the garden shed, its shade a disturbing blood red under the overheads. Dan

patted the little pot it sat in, "We'll find a shadier spot for you soon, little guy. But first, we show you off."

He sent out a quick text: *Staff meeting. 9 a.m. Garden shed. I'll make the coffee . Do we have cream?* He knew the staff would be interested in his find, but they'd be even more interested if coffee were involved.

His phone buzzed five unenthusiastic "Oks," one "I'll bring the creamer," and one "Do you need me to be there?" He texted Debby back, "Thanks" in regards to the creamer and texted Hannah, "Well, I'd like for everyone to try to be there." That girl could use a dose of enthusiasm. Coffee would help.

He set the little plant next to the coffee pot, hoping to hide it from view until he was ready to reveal it, and started making coffee. He wondered what Duane, Nathan and Ross would think of the specimen. He was certain they'd not seen it's like. This one would stump 'em, for sure!

He poured cheap coffee grounds into the filter, muttering about buying better coffee for the shed. He grabbed the coffee pot and turned from his treasure to fill the pot with water in the garden trailer. "Don't move a leaf!" He joked to the plant. The plant didn't listen.

After the tall, enthusiastic man left the plant dipped its head over the coffee grounds, opened its leafy mouth and let fall five honey-like droplets of citrus-smelling poison. When it raised its head once more and shut its crimson maw, it almost looked as though it were smiling.

Minutes later, everyone filed into the shed and crowded around the strange new plant. "Wow," exclaimed Debby, "It's big, even for a small pitcher plant." "It looks like it has a little bowl for a head," Berni cooed over the plant. "It looks like the plant from *Little Shop of Horrors* . Don't get too close, Berni, we'd hate to lose you." Hannah playfully shied away from the plant, cupping her coffee as if to warm herself.

Dan shot her a reproachful glare, and turned to Duane, Ross and Nathan. "Well, what do you guys think? The shade the group of plant-loving men created, leaning towards the plant, perked the specimen up. In the collective awe, the citrus scent grew in intensity.

Dan heard Joan whisper to Hannah that she agreed the plant looked suspiciously like it might eat someone if it grew big enough. The women smiled at each other and sipped their coffee. "This coffee's really good, Dan," Joan exclaimed. "Did you bring it back from Chile?"

Dan waved away the compliment, still annoyed that she and Hannah weren't more interested in his find. "No, same cheap stuff."

Nathan sipped his coffee over the plant. "Tastes citrusy."

Duane sipped his, "Could just be because the plant smells that way. It's definitely a pitcher plant of some kind, I agree."

Ross swallowed some coffee, "No, Nathan's right. Coffee's got a citrus kick. It looks to be a sarracenia, though I've never seen one like this before, either. Nice find, Dan."

"It don't smell like feet, like the ones by the pond," Jordan from maintenance added, sniffing the air over the plant, while pouring a taster cup of coffee. Usually, he didn't go for coffee, but he decided to see what the fuss over this brew was all about. He shot it back, like whiskey, and gave an appreciative shrug. It did taste better than most coffee, but that wasn't not saying much.

Ralph smiled widely. "Thank God!" He raised his cup of coffee as if toasting the plant. "Those other bug-eating plants make the compost smell." He drank from his mug, the smile lingering.

Dan took a long swig from his coffee and realized he never added creamer, a first for him. The crew seemed more excited about the coffee than the plant, but, overall, he was pleased by the responses and by his find. "What's really exciting about this species of sarracenia is that it grows in full shade. We'll be able to plant it under some of the trees, in the trickier spots where part-shade plants won't grow. Duane, let's go down after the meeting and find a good place for it."

Duane nodded, a sleepy, far away look in his eyes. It was strange to not be met with more enthusiasm from the energetic man, but Dan shrugged it off. Duane wasn't the only person that seemed to be lagging. During the rest of the meeting Dan was met with yawns, drooping eyelids and mopey shrugs. He felt himself losing his staff at the same time he felt himself losing consciousness.

Hannah's head hit the table first, her glasses crumbling under the impact. Dimly, that surprised Dan. She drank the most coffee; you'd think she'd be wired. Duane was next, followed instantly by the rest of the crew, falling out of their chairs like limp dolls. Dan tried to stand up in shock, a sick suspicion overwhelming him. His body wouldn't allow it. His eyes shot towards the plant, whose leafy head turned to greet his glare.

“You!” Dan choked out, grasping at the fiend of a plant with clumsy hands, before clunking to the ground, lifeless, next to his faithful crew.

Al was running fifteen minutes late to the meeting. He knew he wouldn't be expected, since it was last minute, but he liked to try to be present. Anyway, he was interested in hearing about Dan's trip. He was sure the man found something rare and wonderful, as was often the case.

He parked near the garden shed and got out of his truck, a strange feeling prickling the hairs on the back of his neck. He turned and stared out towards the garden, his arms tingling with goosebumps. It was eerily silent. The crew were probably all in the garden shed. But why, then, was it so quiet? No sound of laughter or conversation stirred the still air.

The shed door was not closed. He peeked tentatively inside and was confused to find that no one stirred in the garden shed. A shattered pot of coffee lay on the floor, the strong smell of lemons or limes or some citrus fruit hung in the air. A smudge of garden soil, overturned coffee cups, and the red splash of what looked like blood on the side of the table were ominous signs that something had happened here. Had someone cut themselves? But why was everyone gone?

“Nathan?! Ross?!” Maybe they were upstairs in their office. He waiting but no reply came.

He left the unsettling mess and quiet of the garden shed and listened for the sound of Ralph's tractor turning the compost or Jordan's weed-eater. Nothing. No! Wait...not nothing. He strained his ears and walked towards the sound of digging.

His heart rate slowed, he relaxed as the sound of gardeners muttering and digging filled the air as he neared the woodland trail. He lengthened his stride. He was just inside the woodland garden, not far from the pond when he saw almost everyone clustered in the shade of a huge cedar. Even Joan was over there, bending low over something Dan was putting into the ground. Ah! Dan *had* found a new plant to feature in the garden.

“Hey, guys! Sorry I'm late. I was on my way in anyway when I got the...”
The group turned as one at the sound of his voice. Their movements were

mechanical, twitchy, even. Their staring eyes looked at him and narrowed. The strange sensation that something was very wrong instantly returned.

He looked into their eyes one by one, and noticed the look for what it was: hunger. He backed away instantly, as they started moving jerkily towards him, Debby in the lead, drooling somewhat. Berni, Nathan, Jordan, Ralph, Ross, and Joan stumbled just behind her, mouths moving as if in hunger. Dan was the only to remain, hunched over a plant that was so dark Al could barely see it in the shade of the tree. Dan crouched low behind it, as if ready to spring, a low grumble issuing from his chest. It sounded like the protective growl of a junkyard dog.

The group moved on unsteady legs, as if they were toddlers learning to walk. Jordan bumped into Joan and sent her sprawling. They both grasped the air, still, never taking their eyes off Al, their prey. Al had no idea what was happening, but he was certain he didn't want to stay to find out. He ran down the path at a sprint, the safety of his truck held firm in his mind's eye.

Suddenly, a moan that sounded like the word, "Bloood!" sounded from his left. Al wasn't fast enough to dodge the great expanse of woman who launched her full frame at him from under a large Rhododendron bush. Al never remembered how tall Hannah was. It *always* came as a surprise to him. As she pinned him to the ground, drooling and uttering that one, frightening moan, "Blooooood," Al wished it'd been one of the shorter, smaller staff members who'd knocked him down. It was, alas, his last wish.

Celia had been trying, for the last three months, to not feel so glum about her leg. She couldn't help how slowly the healing process was going anymore than she could help having broken it in the first place, but she was eager to get back to Heronswood as soon as her doctor gave her the "go-ahead," which she hoped he would do soon. Sitting was not her favorite activity.

She opened her laptop to check her email, sipping a steaming cup of tea and adjusting her leg so that she was comfortable. She was hoping to get an update about Haunted Heronswood from Joan. Usually, she'd be helping prepare the garden for guests, assisting with a myriad of event-related tasks, and putting some parts of the garden to sleep. She wondered how the staff was getting on, and if they missed her. She missed them.

She refreshed the page she'd been searching last night, a local news site. She was hoping to find Haunted Heronswood advertised on it's main page this

week, but it hadn't been when she checked last night. She might be well enough to check the garden out next weekend, and see the work being done. Her heart jumped a little when, after the page refreshed, the bold title of the news page did, indeed, have the word Heronswood in it. But her excitement quickly fell into a sort of panic when she read the rest of the headline:

Heronswood Truly Haunted: Multiple Murders at Local Botanical Garden

At first, Celia laughed it off as Dan's dark sense of humor. He was hoping to lure people into the garden's scarier approach to Haunted Heronswood with a bait story. Clever, really. It'd certainly caused her to skip a breath. But as she continued to read, and the picture on the page came into focus after loading, Celia's stomach turned. In the picture, a plant the size of a tall child dripped scarlet liquid from its leafy bowl, crouched behind it, his clothing stained with what looked to be blood, his eyes narrowed in a protective glare, was none other than Dan Hinkley.

Reports of missing persons led Port Gamble reservation police to Heronswood Garden two nights ago. Staff members went in Thursday night only to never come back from work. When a cousin of one of the missing gardeners went to investigate and never returned, reservation police and Kitsap County police responded.

All but one officer returned, tattered, muttering and half-crazed with fear. "Zombie gardeners!" Robin Hallows muttered over and over again during an attempt to question her about what she saw when she responded.

A Kitsap county police officer, Bill Frankenfort, rubbed his arm where his uniform had been torn free of his body, "Blood. They feed it blood, then they get the rest! The plant...it grows. It grows on blood."

Philip Pottermeyer, Kitsap First Responder, commented, "It's not just the one plant. He's growing others. He won't stop. The gardeners won't stop. The plants need blood to live. The gardeners will get it. They'll do anything to get it, then they get the spoils..." When asked to clarify, he only shuddered, and said, "I won't go back. They can't make me."

Emergency SWAT teams are being assembled under the guidance of Ray Bellings of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Police Department. When interviewed, Ray declined to elaborate on what he'd seen in the garden saying, "You truly do not want to know. We are doing everything we can do to respond to this

incident. Enforcement from all over the state are arriving to contain the situation.”

Residents are being urged to stay far away from the gardens. A wedding this weekend was cancelled, and 288th Street has been blocked off two miles in both directions. Neighboring houses have been told to evacuate. Local residents not directly near the gardens are being strongly urged to evacuate.

Celia sipped her tea absently, her mind spinning. She looked down at the cast she'd despised for the past few months and heaved a great sigh. In that sigh, was both an abject sadness and extreme relief. If not for that stupid cast, she'd be a zombie gardener, too.

In the garden, *sarracenia zombiata vampira* nudged its younglings, thriving, after the many gallons of fresh blood her drones brought her. Her leader drone, the one they call Dan, was holding a green spouted can that rained scarlet blood over the ground over her baby's growing roots. He'd once called her, "Little guy." He'd been wrong about that. He'd been wrong about many things. But he was a good drone. He'd figured out what she needed to thrive instantly, and he was good at directing her lesser drones, utilizing their best skills--height, strength, cunning, speed, stealth, nurturing--to get what she needed to excel in her new environment.

Her new home was a beautiful one, well managed by the grasping hands of her devoted gardeners. Their loved ones would come looking for them, they always did. But they loved none but her now, and their companion's human devotion would be the means of her survival. Such is life and death.

Heronswood October Events:

Pumpkin Carving Contest (\$5)

Entry fee gets you cider, fall treats and pumpkin to carve. Little ghouls and goblins can paint their pumpkins.

Tea and Tarot, Family Event (\$15)

Why not step into our tent, sip some tea and have your cards read? Foretelling fall fun!

Both Events Held Jointly:

Saturday, October 20th 10 am to 3 pm
Heronswood Gardens

Haunted Heronswood & “The Trail of Terror”

Friday October 27th, and Sat. October 28th 5pm to 9pm

Bring the whole family to Heronswood Garden to celebrate the Halloween season! Fun includes:

- “Spirits and Spirits” beer and cider tasting in the event tent! Ages 21+ in Spirits tent. Tarot reading also available. \$5 single full cup or \$10 sample flight.
- “Trail of Terror” Scare walk in the woodland garden. Jump right into the terror of “Little Garden of Horrors,” where zombified gardener drones will attempt to capture and feed you to their queen plant, the sarracenia zombiata vampira.
- Halloween walk through garden. Less scary stroll through various Halloween scenes set up throughout the garden.
- Food tent—brat/hotdog, bag of chips, and drink \$5.
- Last week of S’Klallam Garden Structures. Our Slapu, Wild Man, Crow and Raven will be taken down for the winter months. See these larger than life structures created from fibers found right here in our garden!
- Pumpkin walk! Lit pumpkins will line the drive and some of the path! Check it out!

For more information about Heronswood Garden’s events and hours, visit www.heronswoodgarden.org.

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tiptoe
through time



H.M. JONES

Tiptoe Through Time

A Halloween Short Story and Uncanny Romance

by

H.M. Jones

“ On All Hallows’ Eve, a Haunting Love Forms,
One that Obeys No Bounds”

“Tiptoe Through Time”

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Dedicated to a roommate, bridesmaid, and friend, Tanya, who has braved most of my storms. You still manage to tempt me out of my hermit shell to play, once in a while, and for that I thank you.

Tanya pulled into a parking spot along a dark, rain-slick street in Port Gamble. The small town's limited parking was packed with the cars of thrill seekers and ghost enthusiasts. Bright yellow signs indicated where she should park, since the town had closed off on-street parking along the main stretch. Her friend, Harriet, hinted there was a chance they'd have a horse-drawn carriage running through town later. Tanya hoped so. If the rain let up, that might be the highlight of the trip.

White picket fences running the length of the entire town of Port Gamble were strung in white lights, their beams reflected in puddles along the sidewalks. Black light posts resembled iron lamps of old. Rows of Victorian-style homes gave the town a romantic but spooky atmosphere this time of night. Whitecap waves crashing against one another in the distance, and the rush of the fish-heavy breezes off the bay increased the creep factor. It reminded her of a pastel version of Salem. Tanya felt a nervous stirring in her stomach. She was not a ghost person. Why had she let Harriet talk her into this tonight?

Her nerves were so on edge she jumped when her phone chimed the Harry Potter theme song, *Dooo, dooo, dooo, dooo*. It was the perfect solemn accompaniment to her anxious mind. She had to unbuckle her belt and remember where the pockets were in the black Victorian bicycle riding jacket she'd borrowed from her friend Leslie, who had a closet full of Victorian clothing.

Leslie was a devout member of a local group, called the Victorian Ladies Club. It was a cluster of old friends who'd met at WWU in a Victorian Literature class two years ago. They held the tradition of weekend high teas ever since. Tanya had joined them a couple of times, even though she was a nursing student. Leslie and Harriet had been her roommates at WWU and they were both a part of the club. Leslie's generous curves, however, allowed Tanya to feel more comfortable in her borrowed clothing. They were both busy ladies, and Harriet was, well, not.

Tanya fumbled for her chiming phone to quiet its call. The somber song was too eerie in the dreary confines of her car. She

finally located the correct pocket under an elaborate buttoned flap on her side, and felt her fingers slide over the hard her cell. She pulled it out and sighed in relief. It was a message from Harriet. Harriet was always a little earlier than Tanya, and was usually impatiently waiting for her in the wings.

Tanya! I'm SO SRRY. My dghtr is throwing up. I think she ate 2 much Halloween candy, but don't want u 2 catch Nething. I know u'll hate me for this, but I asked my friend to meet u @ the green and yellow house, where they start the ghost tour. I know u didn't want 2 do it alone. I hope u don't mind I have 2 duck out. I was RLLY looking 4ward to seeing u.

"Damn it, Harriet!" Tanya cursed, smacking her steering wheel. She really didn't want to do this now, but she'd taken a ferry from Edmonds to get here, and she didn't want to drive right back. She was starting to pound in a slightly annoyed but, hopefully, understanding message when her screen flashed another message.

Oh, my friend's a good looking, SNGL man. He's blond and will be wearing a tall hat. He told me not 2 ruin the surprise by telling u his name, so we'll just say it starts with M. Have fun 2night. No bailing or Mr. M will be soooo sad!

Tanya's stomach turned even more. Scary ghosts and hot men were a really horrid combination for someone who was not good with people, dead or alive.

"Awesome," she mumbled in a flat tone. "Now I have to worry about whether I look decent or not. Harriet, if this is super awkward, I'm going to kill you. He better be worth it." She decided not to text back. *Let her sweat it out. I know I will be.*

Even though she told her body not to be excited, her heart thumped. Maybe this guy *would* be nice...maybe they'd hit it off. She pulled down the mirror in her sun visor and fluffed her unnaturally curled dark brown hair under a petite black wool hat, all by the LED glow of her sun visor lights. She sighed. Her face was nice enough, she supposed. Pretty green eyes, a mouth that pulled up as if she were always about to smile, well arched eyebrows. But her nose was

too big for her to be considered a beauty, and she'd always been on the plump side.

She shut the visor and looked down at her outfit. Her large bust was contained in a ruffled white blouse, over which was buttoned a pocketed short, black riding jacket. It was actually very flattering. It drew her waist in. The Victorian riding shorts could have fit better. They were too long, even on her 5 feet 8 inches, but her ruffled cream colored socks were cute. It'd have to do. She wasn't going to look any better, sitting in the car, wishing she'd worn a corset, jeans and high heels instead. This was the less sexy but more period authentic choice. Hopefully Mr. M was a nerd who would appreciate authenticity over sexy. She like nerds.

She breathed deeply, gathered all the social courage she had, which would fit neatly on the tip-top of a pin, and got out of her old maroon Camry. The wind picked up and tickled her cheeks with cold fingers. Up the hill, towards town, a grey shop nearby played creepy Halloween instrumentals. The rustle of leaves sounded like ghostly footsteps gliding across the sidewalks.

Goosebumps accompanied that unpleasant thought. Tanya took a deep, calming breath. She opened her black snap purse and pulled out the thin, paper brochure she'd printed off. It had a map of the small village. Each stop was numbered, and the first stop looked to be ahead and to the right. There was a bold number 1 next to the picture of a black and white outline of a three-story Victorian home.

When she looked up, she realized she'd found a good parking spot, a short walk to the three-floored green and yellow Victorian home, labeled as stop 1. She skipped over some shallow puddles in her riding boots and walked towards the home, holding her hat to her head as the wind tried to lift it. The hill she trudged was fairly steep, so she stopped next to the house to take a few deep breaths, and collect herself. It would be no good to greet Mr. M panting and out of breath. He'd get the wrong idea.

She looked the house over as she rested. It was carefully painted in a two-tone pattern, yellow and green, with white trim and elegant wooden embellishments hanging from every rafter. The porch was large and proud, and trimmed in similar designs.

She stared up at the top floor of the house, and her heart skipped a beat. Something had moved in the top floor window! She stopped walking and peered hard at the window, to make sure she wasn't mistaken . *Yes! There !*

In front of a dimly lit window stood a tall man in a red silk vest and tall black hat. Tanya's heart started beating over-time, pounding so hard she heard it in her ears. Was she seeing a ghost? The tour hadn't started and she was already scared witless. But she immediately felt stupid when the man motioned to her with a bend of his hand. He was waving her inside. It took a moment for her to register the fact he was handsome and blond.

So that's Mr. M. Impressive. Maybe I won't give Harriet the silent treatment after all.

She waved timidly at the man, who smiled as if greeting an old friend, and beckoned to her again. Her blood raced faster through her body, and she felt damp under her arms and bust. Thankfully, the man didn't look disappointed or surprised. Actually, he looked to be eagerly awaiting her. She chided herself for being frightened by his appearance in the warped glass window.

There are tons of cars here, Tanya. There are probably a lot of people waiting for the ghost tour inside. You're going to see people in windows tonight.

She gathered her courage and walked up the stairs of the house, illuminated by more twinkling strands of lights in orange and white. She stepped gingerly onto the wet porch, leading to an elaborately carved front door. When she stooped to get a better look, she could see the carvings along the side were ol' timey bicycles. *Oh! Perfect.*

She was suddenly very happy about her choice of outfit. Maybe the ghosts would leave her alone, since they were clearly a bicycle loving

family, and she was a modern kindred spirit, more comfortable on two wheels than her own two feet.

The interior of the house was more sinister than the well-kept, recently painted exterior. Dark scarlet wallpaper was caked in shadows, crown molding decorated in figures that looked like gargoyles about to pounce. Ancient floors groaned like zombies, protesting hundred years' worth of footsteps marring their surface. A gloomy violin solo, played over an unseen speaker, greeted Tanya when she opened the door. The minor tones gave her the willies. Candles lit the windows in wavering flickers, sending shadows scurrying up the embellished wallpaper. Oil lamps sat scattered on ornate mantle pieces and antique tables.

This house looks like it jumped out of old world America, maybe even England itself, Tanya thought. She quickly surveyed the dark home, trying to imagine what it might look like under direct light, but not wanting to linger in the gloom by herself.

A chill went up her spine when she heard muffled voices and creaking above her. Until she realized she was about ten minutes late to the tour, thanks to the texts and her own misgivings about the evening. The tour must have moved upstairs. The voices belonged to *living* beings. That thought didn't really put her at ease. Talking to strangers rated almost as high on her discomfort scale as meeting ghosts.

She made her way past two mirrored fireplaces and a few tall windows, facing white cap waves on the dark bay. Leaves danced and strings of lights swayed on maple trees outside of the windows. Next to one of the fireplaces on the far side of the wall was a winding, cherry wood staircase. Tanya made her way quietly up the stairs, shrinking at the creak of her footfalls. She made her way into a hall lit only by a few candles. At the right of the hall, Tanya heard the voice of a woman, low and solemn.

"We can't be sure how many spirits this home has. It's one of our more active houses. Last year, someone said they heard the voice of

a woman. Other people have spotted a young man. A little girl walks the staircase early mornings.” The woman paused dramatically.

Tanya made her way past ornately papered walls and closed, dark wood doors to an open door on the right. A woman with grey hair, accented with purple stripes, stood in front of a wide-mouthed group of people, all dressed in various period costumes.

An oil lamp held in one hand, the woman swept the room with a gesture and spoke in dreary tones. “We respect you, spirits. We are here to commune with you. We come with peaceful, open hearts to learn from you.”

The people clustered next to each other looked more scared and tense than ready to commune. Tanya scanned the faces, looking for the blond Mr. M. Her skin crawled when she realized there was no tall hat or blond man in the group of strangers, huddled together, awaiting the response of the spirits.

Who was the man in the window, then?

“Do not be afraid to show yourself, spirits. We are guests in your home.” Suddenly, the oil lamp in her hand flickered and puffed out. Several men and women drew in breaths, creating a loud hiss that bounced off the walls. One man called out, “What was that?”

The woman holding the lantern shushed everyone patiently. “A spirit hears us. Playing with light is simply a way for the spirit to make his or her presence known. Please be calm. This spirit is good natured. I have a sense for these things.”

The only light came from a lone candle on the window sill, but it flickered dangerously. A shiver went up Tanya’s spine. She wished she were squashed in the middle of the huddle of fakey Victorian strangers. Every hair on her head stood at attention and her heart thumped so violently she was sure it moved the lapel of her black jacket.

A hand brushed her shoulder and she wailed a blood curdling scream. She didn’t want to look, but couldn’t keep herself from turning

around. Twisting, her face drawn wide in lines of terror, she let out a long, relieved breath when she met the ruddy face and golden shining hair of a man in a ridiculously tall hat.

“Sorry, madam. It was not my intention to frighten you. I only wanted to introduce myself, and see what the fuss was about.”

The woman in the main room re-lit her oil lamp and glared at Tanya. “Young lady, your screams do not make the spirits want to speak. If you’re too frightened to act neutrally, can you come back when you’re calmer?”

Tanya moved her mouth to speak, but she didn’t like being the center of attention. She numbly motioned to the man next to her, who looked slightly abashed but winked. “Sorry...I just...I’ll go.” She turned away from the room and started down the hall.

“Wait! Madam, please! It is my fault you were startled.” He removed his hat as Tanya turned to him in the dark hall. His blond hair shone like a lantern in the dark hall. He bowed low to her.

“Please. We do not need that motley crew of strangely dressed people to have fun. I know all about this house. It belongs to my family.” He refused to slip from his old world accent.

Tanya smiled shyly and put a drooping curl behind her ear. “That depends. Who are you? This is your house?”

The man shook his head. “Not mine. It belongs to my father. My name is...”

Tanya, feeling oddly at ease with the good-looking stranger, broke in, “Mr. M?”

The man was either astonished or was good at feigning astonishment. “How could you have known that? Are you, too, supernaturally inclined, like the bossy gypsy in the other room?”

Tanya laughed loudly, but shrunk back when it echoed off the walls. Her voice always carried farther than she was comfortable with. “Um, no. My friend said she wouldn’t be able to come tonight and

suggested that a tall...um..." She left out the handsome part, not wanting to be too forward with someone she didn't know. He might not be interested, and it would be embarrassing to put him on the spot, "blond man called Mr. M might keep me company. I'm not good with scary things."

The man walked to her and extended his arm. "Well, madam, you are in luck. I am not sure who this friend of yours is, but it is my good fortune you are in need of a person to accompany you, for I am in need of a fair lady on my arm. Come, let us leave this dreary stairwell, and I will give you a personal, guided tour of the town. It is my home, after all."

He smiled at her, and Tanya blushed as she wound her arm into his. She was grateful for the dim light hiding her scarlet face. For a moment, she wished they weren't play acting. His fake accent was spot on and the Victorian mood was pretty romantic, now she wasn't so frightened. The man had a languid air about him that put her at ease. His coat was a little cold under her tentative hand, but his arm was firm and strong underneath the wool fabric of his long tailed jacket.

As they made their way down creaking steps, the man turned his face to her, his eyes sparkling in the dim candle light. "You never told me what I should call you, and I think madam will grow tiresome."

Tanya laughed awkwardly. "Sorry. I'm not good at socializing. I always forget to do polite things like introducing myself, and refraining from screaming in people's faces. My name's Tanya."

The man laughed at her joke. His laugh was throaty and deep. "The screaming was entirely my fault. I should not sneak up on a lady in a dark hallway. Any Gothic book would warn me against it. Tanya is your Christian name or your last name? It is very exotic."

Tanya chuckled. "Yes. My Christian name. I suppose if I were to go along with proper customs, you would call me Ms. Williams."

The man smiled as they took the final step off the stairwell and turned to her. "We are modern people, are we not? Let us throw old customs to the wind, *Tanya* ." The way he said her name made her shiver pleasurably, like speaking her first name was an act of foreplay.

She felt the heat in her body rise. "And I should call you?"

Mr. M leaned in as if he were divulging something private. "Milo."

She spoke his name, just above a whisper, trying to mirror his sexy tones, but probably failing miserably. "*Milo* ." The word felt wonderful in her mouth. Not Matt, Chad, Aiden or Alex. Milo...so different. It felt old, like this home, only more comfortable. As clumsy as she thought her attempt, Milo seemed to enjoy it immensely. She could swear the grown man blushed like a boy. She felt uncomfortably warm, herself.

Now she could process something outside of her companion's deep blue eyes, she realized the home actually felt ten degrees warmer, like she had her back to a roaring fire. When the sound of crackling logs met her ears, she thought she might be going crazy. She turned from Milo, certain, now, she heard the cozy sounds of a steady fire, and was surprised to see dancing orange flames in one of the intricately decked fireplaces. The fireplace sported fancy green and floral tiling and brownish-red trim. A mirror sat over the mantel. She could see shock come over her features.

"But this was just cold, only minutes ago! Who started it?" She turned back to Milo, who was smiling conspiratorially.

"I thought my home would appear at an advantage, if it were less clammy and dark." His eyes sparkled as he offered her his arm, again. "Can I give you the short tour?"

She nodded, now enthusiastic to see his family's home. It was silly, really, to be afraid of the dark, but the home was so much more welcoming now both fires were blazing in the hearths. The room that once looked like a spooky horror flick waiting to happen, now glowed. Scarlet wallpaper sported sprawling roses, dark trim set off the red

tones nicely, and she even noticed a few things impossible for her to see in the candle and lamp light. The tall windows, for instance, were adorned in golden tapestry with tassels hanging from the ends. There were comfortable, high backed chairs next to each fireplace. They were goldenrod yellow, plush and trimmed in the same dark stained wood as the fireplace.

Opulent designs were carried throughout the room in figurines, vases, delicate hanging crystals by the mantle mirrors and old world furnishings immaculately recovered. Small tables by each chair designated this as a sitting room, a very comfortable one.

Milo removed his tall hat and set it on a coat stand by the staircase. Tanya had failed to see so much in her rush to be upstairs. He motioned with his arm at the beautiful room. "This is our main sitting room. It is lovely in the morning, with the view facing the bay. We often take our tea here and watch the water."

Tanya nodded. "It's perfectly situated. I usually take coffee in the morning, but not because I like it better. Just quicker."

Milo frowned. "Is it? In my estimation, a coffee press takes a much longer time to brew and the result is often too grainy for my tastes."

Tanya giggled. "Oh, right, sorry. I'll play along. If you have a coffee press and not a coffee maker, I suppose tea would be quicker."

Milo shook his head, as though she were the one being silly. "Coffee maker. No, we have no such an invention here. We are not as advanced in the rural villages."

Tanya laughed loudly at his joke, then covered her mouth. She didn't want to get grumped at by the spiritualist. She listened for the steps of the people upstairs, but they didn't seem to be moving around a lot.

That's strange. It was so loud before. Maybe the lady with purple hair is doing a séance or something. That thought gave her the chills, so she cheered herself by turning back to Milo.

“Can you give me a guided tour of the rest of the house, then? I’d love to see if it’s all as magnificent as this room. That is, if it’s not too dark in the other rooms.”

“We have lamps in every room.” So he guided her through the downstairs dining room, which housed a long oak table and sturdy wooden chairs, cushioned in green velvet. An armoire showcased an impressive set of china on one end and beautiful oil lamps decorated the walls at even intervals. It was all so elegant when lit up.

The kitchen was amazingly period accurate, as far as Tanya could tell. It contained iron wood burning stoves, probably terribly illegal but very charming. A woodblock island and various old world kitchen gadgets were stored in stained wood cabinetry. The entire house was lovely. Tanya couldn’t even imagine how expensive it was to be so historically accurate. She even noticed the carvings on the crown molding, which had seemed so grotesque in the dark, were actually carved angels, reaching their hands out beatifically. The difference was vast.

When they’d made it back to the sitting room, Tanya sighed happily, and took a seat in one of the high backed chairs near the blazing logs. “Your family must be very serious about this place, to keep it decorated so nicely.”

Milo took the other seat, facing her. Wind gusted outside and heavy rain spattered windows. “It is not the grandest house in town, but we do fairly well for ourselves. You must have noticed the engravings on the door?”

Tanya nodded. “They are lovely. I love riding my bike around the city. That’s why I chose this outfit.” She gestured to her riding outfit.

He smiled, and she noticed his eyes crinkled at the sides. His whole face lit up when he grinned, as though it was naturally suited to the expression. “A girl after my own heart. Bicycles run in my blood. Perhaps that is why I was so drawn to you. Well, partly why.” He looked at her with mischief in his eyes, and she dipped her head, embarrassed by his honesty. “My father and I run a local

transportation shop in town, across the street. Maybe you saw it on your way in?"

Tanya shook her head. "No I didn't. Actually, this is my first time here. I was in a rush to get inside. I don't get out of the city much. It's too big a hassle. It was too dark to really see the town, but it sort of reminded me of Salem from what I saw. But that's probably because it's Halloween and the houses look similar."

Milo's eyes widened. "Salem in Massachusetts? You must be a great traveler. I am sorry to say I am not well traveled. This small sphere of the world encompasses the scope of my life. I do not meet new people often, so my manners might be rusty. In fact, I believe I ought to have offered you tea by now and asked if you had appropriate accommodations for the night." He leaned in, his strong shoulders bent towards her.

She tried not to stare at the way his jacket hugged his body in just the right way. He was much too handsome to be flirting with *her*. "Oh, I haven't gone too many places. I have family in Boston, so I took a day trip out that way by train. And, as far as accommodations, I have none. I figured I'd just drive to my friend's house in Poulsbo after the ghost tour. She'd let me stay." Tanya shrugged.

"A day train trip? Their transportation must be much faster than what we have here. As to your accommodations, I refuse to allow you to travel so late at night. It is not safe in weather like this and the distance is too great. My mother and father will be returning home soon, and I am certain they would wish to offer you our spare room. I would certainly be happy to have you stay, *Tanya*."

There it was again. Her name like a caress. Her knees grew weak. She felt like breaking through her shy barrier and sitting on his perfectly pressed lap, a very improper lady. The way he spoke her name, as if it were a naughty game, made her think his thoughts tended the same way.

Milo shook his head, as if he had to clear it. Perhaps his thoughts *had* been drifting. He stared into Tanya's eyes and made her

feel like an entirely different person. She felt...desirable, for the first time in her life. The way he leaned towards her, with purpose, made it look as though he wanted to jump into her skin and be her, so he could know what she was thinking.

She'd never met anyone who moved like him. She was starting to think his manners act wasn't actually an act. She was beginning to see he was, deep down, a very charming man, something she didn't know existed in the 2000's. She was sure every last Mr. Darcy had died and been replaced with unasked for facebook hookup attempts. She knew he was playing up the vibe a bit, with the accent and outfit, to enhance the feeling of the night, but maybe only a very little bit.

"I am an abominable host. My mother would be ashamed, truly. But I am a terrible hand at tea and our cook has gone out for the night. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to a little teahouse down the road? I know the rain is uncomfortably cold, but the teahouse stays open late on All Hallows'. They even go so far as to decorate. It is amusing, and they prepare wonderful food."

Tanya didn't even know how to accept such an amazing offer. She was sitting across from her own Mr. Darcy, or Mr. Milo, at any rate, and he wanted to treat her to tea and offer her a spare room in his immaculate house.

She was never singled out in such a way, so she didn't even hesitate before saying, "Yes, please. I love tea, and I don't mind a little rain. It sort of goes with the territory in this state. If you don't mind leaving the ghost tour behind?"

Milo waved his hand. "Let us leave the ghost tour to the serious gypsy. I think they will find the high spirits have departed. Anyway, I would hate to worry about the dead when I feel so alive." He stood and offered his hand, and Tanya took it. She fully agreed with his sentiment. She was feeling more alive than ever tonight.

Near the doorway, Milo drew a very funny looking umbrella out of a fancy, heavy floor vase. When he opened it the black fabric fell down around the frame. It looked like a little covered dome rather than

an umbrella. He smiled when Tanya looked confused about how to use it.

“My mother hates getting her hair and garments wet, so she fashioned a longer drape to the fabric. She is a remarkable seamstress, when she puts her mind to it. Ingenious, really, though she has almost been hit by a carriage several times. It is hard to see anything but the ground in front of you, when you are using it, as you can probably imagine. But not to worry!” He plopped his hat on his head, which he must have grabbed on their way past the staircase. “I will lead you.”

He offered her his arm and she took it, ducking under the funny umbrella. He wasn't wrong about only being able to see the ground, so she had to trust the charming man to not lead her astray. What surprised her most, though, is she *did* trust him, which was abnormal for her. She didn't really get on with people that well, and she certainly didn't implicitly trust strangers. But, for some reason, Milo gave her a different feeling, as if he reached beyond her anxieties, into a deeper part of her being. His arm under her hand made her feel steady and strong. It was a foreign but lovely feeling.

Her heeled boots were unsteady, walking the ground to the teahouse. She'd not remembered the road was cobbled when she drove in. As a matter of fact, she could have sworn it was paved. Not that the cobbles didn't make sense. They added tremendously to the allure of the town. She must have been very nervous about the ghost tour to not notice she drove on a cobbled road.

As they walked, Milo greeted passersby cheerfully. Tanya could not see anything but petticoats and polished black shoes, but she didn't mind. Actually, she kind of wanted to meet Milo's mom so she could convince her to make her one of these umbrellas. It was the perfect design for someone as perpetually socially anxious as she. Milo seemed the sort who liked to greet people, and would happily do the talking. That put Tanya at ease.

Most of her friends were good at small talk, yso she did not have to. But she'd never met a man who seemed so at ease with himself and others, who had such an open and inviting manner. Most men her age were sulky and jaded, and while she thought maybe she was a bit sulky and jaded, at times, too, she needed to have someone around who would draw her out of it. She was starting to allow herself to hope she'd found such a person.

In no time, they came to a covered porch, trimmed with wood trappings painted white. Milo opened a door with a square stained glass window, and motioned for her to come in out of the rain. He took the umbrella from her, folded it expertly and stored it in an umbrella vase by the door. He shuffled his feet over the rug, politely removing excess rain, and removed his tall hat.

A woman in an old fashioned white apron over a black dress greeted them at the door, taking their coats and Milo's hat.

"Good evening, sir and madam. A fine All Hallows' Eve to you. Come for high tea, have you?"

Tanya nodded and Milo chimed, "We have, thank you."

The woman hung their coats on some pegs across from a woodstove, warming the hallway. "This way, then."

Tanya loved how authentic this town was. Even the local tea house was decorated in period specific finery, the hostess dressed up to play her part. It was lovingly bedecked in lace curtains, rose-pink wallpaper, white trim and crown molding. The hostess led them to a table near the fireplace, which was white-washed brick with a white mantel. In contrast to the whites, pinks and golds of the teahouse, however, were black lace table runners settled upon cotton tablecloths.

On the runners sat somber figurines carved of ebony—scary gargoyles, ghouls and foreign figures. It lent the little parlor an uncanny, autumn atmosphere, especially with rain pelting the window

and a handful of late-night tea drinkers sporting black and black lace ensembles, each as authentic as Milo's.

None of them sported mish-mashed steam-Victorian garb, like the ghost tour group. She figured those who were authentic must live in the town, must understand the atmosphere was important for tourism, and they played their parts well. Tanya would have to thank Harriet for suggesting the trip. It was like stepping back in time.

A server with high cheekbones and mild green-brown eyes welcomed them. "Mr. Walker, welcome. Will you be having your usual or, perhaps, something *special* tonight?"

He smiled at the cheery woman, then looked to Tanya. "What is your favorite tea, Ms. Williams?"

She bit her lip, thinking. "I like bold black teas that are just a little sweet, and I'll need something sweet to compliment it."

Milo chuckled. "I would not dream of bringing you for tea and not ordering something sweet. May I order for us, then?"

Tanya nodded, a little worried. It was very old fashioned for a man to order for a woman. She wasn't sure how she felt about it, other than interested to see what he chose.

"Alright, Mrs. Meyers, we will have the Star of Persia high tea, with almond scones and plenty of cream." He winked at the older woman, who visibly blushed.

"Anything for you, cheeky." And she swayed off to collect their drinks and food.

Smells of sugar, flour and bold tea combined with the heady smell of wood smoke made Tanya's stomach grumble a bit. She put a hand to it, embarrassed.

"Sorry. I didn't eat dinner tonight. I guess I was a little worried about the ghost tour. I hate to be scared, but I promised to come."

Milo leaned forward in his chair. "I have to say I am happy your nerves did not prevent you from coming, and elated you decided to

trust me enough to leave the tour. I would have prepared you tea myself...”

His face fell momentarily, as if he were in pain, then brightened just as suddenly. “Only I am hoping to show you everything I can, before the night ends. I have a plan I hope to carry out, with your permission, and it may very well take the entire evening. Mrs. Meyers will be sure to fill us with rich food and bold tea, so our energy does not wane.”

Tanya felt her stomach flutter. He wanted to be with her all night? Storms spattered the window, the fire popped loudly and, for a moment, Milo look unsure. She realized she hadn’t answered him, so shocked she was with his announcement.

“Sorry. I’m just...I’m shocked. I barely know you, but you seem determined to spend time with me. It’s...things like this don’t happen to me, often. I’d love to, of course, I was shocked you asked.”

Milo frowned. “Well, it is all a bit forward of me, but I thought we settled upon being modern. An exciting All Hallows’ tour of my little town here is not the primary object of my attention. I think I should be forthright about that, now, so you can make an educated decision to leave or stay.”

It was hard for Tanya to breathe for a second. Was this man trying to seduce her? He didn’t seem the type. Her enthusiasm waned, a bit. She was not the kind to jump into physical intimacy or, really, any type of relationship. But the warmth of the tea room, the sparkle of fire reflected in Milo’s eyes and the promise of adventure tugged at her, so, instead of changing the subject she said, “I hope you don’t have any dishonorable intentions, good sir. I am a lady.”

She decided a little play acting could be fun, and she could pretend to be an untarnished lady for the night, as big a lie as that was. Milo nervously ran a hand through his hair and his cheeks turned scarlet.

“Oh, Ms. Williams, no. You mistake me, my dear. I was not talking about...” he cleared his throat, fumbling to loosen his red silk ascot, “about...” he leaned forward and whispered, “*physical* amusement.”

He frowned, clearly upset his intentions had been read as ignoble. He looked so distraught Tanya laughed.

“Calm down, Milo! Okay. I’m sorry. Of course you didn’t mean it that way. I’m not reading it that way, okay? Take a breath. What, then, did you mean?”

He took a deep breath, still unhappy he gave her the idea she was a one night stand. He leaned forward, again, reaching his hands out to her. Without thinking, she put her hands in his warm, firm grasp. His muscles were strong underneath the skin, firm from manual work, probably in his father’s shop. She liked that he had a worker’s hands and a gentleman’s demeanor.

“It is not my intention to treat you like anything other than a fine lady, Tanya.”

She shivered again, loving the way her name sounded in his accented tones. He whispered it, like he were nervous that the quiet pair of older women dining not far from them might hear him and be shocked. She stifled a giggle. He was really into this period acting. She loved it. It made her actually feel like a Victorian lady, instead of an awkward modern woman who couldn’t choose a man who was as interested in her as he was his computer game worlds. Oh God, she hoped he was not *that* kind of man! She seemed to have a gamer magnet attached to her somewhere.

He took a deep breath and brushed her hand with the tips of his fingers. Shivers cascaded down her body. Milo’s touch was an amplification of all the best caresses she’d ever had. Maybe it was because he had no ulterior motives, at the moment. He simply wanted to touch her hands, and didn’t plan on touching anything else tonight. Or maybe she wanted his affection more than she’d ever wanted anyone else’s. That thought scared her, but in a thrilling sort of way.

“No, my dear Tanya,” her name was louder, bolder on his tongue. She thought she saw one of the grey haired women in the black bustled dresses turn her head sharply, out of the corner of her eye, but Milo had eyes only for her. “My goal tonight is not to win your very sumptuous person.” Tanya blushed. Sumptuous! She’d never been described that way before. She decided she liked it.

“My goal tonight is to escort you to some of my favorite places in town, show you the splendors of Port Gamble, in hopes, by the end of the evening, you will not wish to return to the city, and will, in the future, come back to me.” Milo squeezed her hands tightly.

Tanya’s logical, modern head was screaming warnings . *Tanya, he’s just acting like this for the night. In the morning, he will be himself again, and what if you don’t like that person? He’s just about said he wants you to be around for the long haul. Who says that on the first date? Is this even really a date?*

Tanya tried to remember a time when anyone had ever confessed to wanting her to stick around for good. Her parents? That was the end of the list. Even she and her friends needed long breaks from one another, sometimes ending in permanent breaks.

She didn’t know how to answer, and was thankful for the return of Mrs. Meyers, a steaming floral china teapot and tiered tea tray, filled with finger sandwiches, fresh fruits and two plump scones accompanied by generous heaps of fluffy cream. Tanya’s mouth watered, her stomach grumbled loudly enough to make her blush, and she stammered her thanks to Mrs. Meyers, who was asking if she could get them anything else.

Milo thanked Mrs. Meyers saying he had all he’d ever need, looking to Tanya as he did so. His eyes were dancing playfully as the woman left them and sighed, “To be young and in love...”

Milo grinned. “Let us eat, drink and be merry. Your decision about stooping to accompany an undeserving but charming stranger can wait until after the victuals.”

They had a pleasant meal, barely talking except to “mmmm” and “ahh” about the way the scones melted when they hit the tongue. Tanya was head over heels in love with the slightly sweet, vanilla tones of the Star of Persia tea Milo ordered. She felt her heart stir when he waited for her to sample it, as if waiting for her opinion on his favorite show. It was a little adorable he cared so much what she thought of his order.

When she “mmmed” her agreement, he looked almost giddy. “It’s my favorite,” he admitted. She confessed, honestly, it was her new favorite, too.

He winked. “See, we are already making memories and connections.”

She shook her head playfully, and ate a salmon finger sandwich that burst in her mouth with a subtle smokey tang. Everything was so good she had a hard time deciding what food was her favorite. Nothing tasted pre-packaged or stale. It all had the homemade taste of ingredients measured by eye and mixed by hand.

By the end of the meal, they were both sitting back in their seats, overfull and glowing from the warmth of the fire. She sighed and finished the last taste of tea from her delicate, hand-painted cup. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll have to accompany you for a little bit longer, if only to walk off everything I just ate.”

He chuckled. “Well, it will be a wet walk, but down the road the local theater is putting on a special All Hallows’ production of Irving’s short story turned play. I have read it and have to say it is one of my favorite scary stories—a touch of romance, mystery and, most importantly, unexplainable, possibly supernatural elements.”

She leaned forward in her seat, “You mean *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* ? That’s one of my favorites, too. Scary, but not too scary.”

He smiled. “Precisely. I know you said you are not keen on ghosts and scary happenings, but will you give them a try this

evening? Have you decided to entertain my notion?"

Tanya had no fight left in her. Milo was so sweet, with his short blond hair, freshly shaved rosy cheeks and too big smile. His blue eyes were never serious, and his conversation was light but interesting. Her entire person wanted to spend the evening with Milo, even if, in the morning, the play acting was set aside and the man of her dreams ended up being an apparition.

After Tanya marveled over how the payment was settled, with old fashioned looking coins in varying sizes. *How funny this town is*, she thought. The cash register was gilded and clanged noisily when opened by the press of a button.

Harriet should have told me they used coins. If not for Milo, I'd be going hungry. Only, I'm sure you can use cards, too. They probably just hide it. She hated to ask people she didn't know questions, though, so she questioned Milo as they were walking.

"Milo, can you use credit in this town, too? I don't have any change. Harriet didn't tell me I needed different money."

She couldn't see him under her draped fabric, which was the one disadvantage of the umbrella. She couldn't see the spooky town with twinkling orange lights along the fencing. She could only see drenched cobbles below her and Milo's wet shoes.

But she heard him laugh as if she were joking. "Some stores do take credit, yes, but I did not think the city was so different they do not take the same money we take. Do not worry. I am not so modern as to allow for a lady to pay for herself when I have the money to treat. Unless she insists, but few do." She could hear the tease in his voice.

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she lightly slapped his arm, which made him chuckle more. "I don't usually allow men to pay for me, but I will have to tonight."

His reply was drowned out by the sound of hooves and wooden wheels on the cobbles to the right of them. She felt the night, apart from the rain, was working out perfectly, if the horse-drawn carriage

rumor was true. Milo guided her across the street and towards the carriage, which she couldn't see apart from the horse's hooves.

When they'd left the teahouse, the rain was coming down heavily, but the sound against her borrowed umbrella was softer now, and she still wore her little black hat. She lifted the umbrella off her head and folded it as best she could. When she looked up from the umbrella, she gasped. She was standing in front of a covered carriage made of curved, stained wood, complete with windows and lacy drapes. It was one of the most beautiful vehicles she'd ever seen.

She almost didn't realize they also stood in front of a very large building with a wide porch and large double doors. There were attendants dressed in black with white usher gloves, greeting men and women in some of the most beautiful costumes she'd ever seen. And the fashions all mirrored one another. The effect was amazing.

Not for the first time, Tanya felt transported to a vastly different time, and extremely underdressed. She imagined she looked like a child playing dress up, standing among these beautiful women in extravagant evening gowns, stepping out of ornate carriages.

She looked to Milo and plaintively. "I should have brought my nicer dress. I know it's not exactly period specific, but it's much finer than my bicycling outfit. I feel pretty underdressed."

Milo put his hand on the small of her back and guided her up the steps, shaking his head. "I like a woman who is prepared to move, prepared to do things. It is a horrible night for satin, and your beauty needs no adornment. Besides, I quite like a lady who enjoys a cycle. I think it says something for her willingness to adventure."

Tanya dipped her head. She didn't know how to take so many compliments at once. "Well, if you think it's okay. There's not a dress code?"

Milo shook his head. "If you lift your chin and walk proudly, you can wear almost anything anywhere. It's all about how one holds oneself."

Tanya shrugged. "I think that's truer for a man than a woman."

He scrutinized her, as they walked up the steps and out of the light rain. Finally, he said, "Perhaps you are right. I suppose men and women are held to different standards."

Tanya thought he was kidding, at first, but he looked genuinely thoughtful. *He's probably acting, again. It would have been different in late 1800's America.*

Tanya hoped he made a point to get on stage. He was amazingly real in his interpretation of an old world gentleman. Then a thought occurred to her.

As they made their way past groups of men and women walking up a grand, wide staircase and into a small-ish theater, paneled in wood, she overheard snippets of conversation about the play, and she was, again, more than a little astonished at how well people played their parts in this funny little town. It was actually a bit unnerving to be the only person around without a slight accent and prim English. She did hear a less dressed up couple speaking, and they had a more clipped, less proper way of speaking, but it still sounded old to her ears.

I wish I'd studied more history, so I could know if all this is authentic.

But she was a nursing student, one who felt she was being a little over anxious about the whole night. So, she let go and took in her surroundings. What she witnessed was delightful.

A small stage was about four feet off the ground from the main floor and was decorated in grim trees, real and fake, and several real pumpkins, scattered throughout the makeshift forest. She guessed the scene would open, then, with Ichabod traveling.

She could hardly wait for the play. It was one of her favorite Halloween stories because it was supernatural but also very human, and it had an authentically old America feel to it. She couldn't put her finger on why. It simply felt that way to her.

Wind howled outside. Oil lamps smoked and lit the entire room in wavering light and disturbing shadows. She clung heavily to Milo's arm, who seemed to be enjoying the tension that allowed her to seek his solace. He patted her hand and led her to seats in the front middle. They took a seat, and faced the stage.

Townspople spoke in hushed whispers, finding their own chairs, their tones animated.

Tanya turned to Milo. "There are few things I love more than waiting for a play to begin."

Milo raised a brow to her, curious. "Is that so? Why?"

Tanya shrugged. "I'm not sure. Everyone is excited but quiet, expectant and a little unsure. It sets such a particular mood, you know? Like we're all preparing for an adventure. There's nothing else like it. Instead of reading *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, we get to be in it, but not so much a part of it we are not ourselves. We are away from the danger. We are safe but affected and changed. The play is part of that, but really the mood a play sets is the most important part."

His stare was so intent, his body so tuned to her, she forgot to be embarrassed by her passion. In forgetting herself, Milo found her. "Why, Ms. Williams, you are a poet. That is precisely right. That is how I feel right now and every time I step into a theater. And All Hallows' is particularly ripe for atmosphere, do you not agree? The wind, the rain..."

"The feeling of eyes around every corner and ghosts just around the bend?" Tanya supplied, getting caught up.

Milo chuckled. "Oh what is a ghost really? I am not frightened of spirits, Ms. Williams. And do you want to know why?"

Tanya had been terrified of bad spirits ever since her big sister forced her to watch *Poltergeist* with her one Halloween, so she nodded, truly wanting to know how anyone could not be afraid of the possibility of ghosts.

“Well, I am flesh and blood. I am my eyes, my smile, the work I do.” He gestured to himself. “But I am also spirit, that intangible element no one else can claim, and I am anything but frightening. All my ghost would be is me, without the shell. That which makes me me, but less substantially in the world, correct?”

Tanya bit her lip before answering, a sign she was digesting a thought. After a minute, she answered, “Well, yes, but you have a wonderful spirit. Not every person does. As a woman, I know that better than most. I’ve met my fair share of men with truly terrible spirits. If they die, I want all of them to go.”

Milo’s eyes were wide and impressed. “You are very astute, Ms. Williams. Mother is going to love you. She and father are sure to be home, after the play, if you would like to be properly invited to stay. If my *spirit* has not scared you off, that is...” He waggled his fingers at Tanya and made lame “wooooo!” ghost sounds.

It was so ridiculous that she lightly slapped his hand. He pulled it back, faking a wounded pout. “Ah, see, you are a fighter, unlike our poor Ichabod, who’s fear of ghosts and ghouls will soon give us an hour’s worth of entertainment, at least.”

Almost directly after his words, the jarring sound of clacking horse hooves sounded throughout the theater. Tanya’s blood raced for a moment before she realized the sound was loudest from the right hand corner of the theater in front of her. A man wearing a fake horse, constructed of a frame and fabric hanging on the lower half of his body, had taken the stage. The play was beginning.

She looked to Milo only to catch him looking at her. For the first time, Tanya really looked into Milo’s eyes instead of ducking her head shyly. The smile in them remained, even when his face took on a serious aspect. They stared at each other, locked in an intense moment, before turning back to the stage. It was stupid, but in that one stare Tanya felt herself spiral out of control and into love.

The play was a bit campy, but it was wonderfully acted, so much so Tanya left the theater with a spooky feeling, but not a sick-to-the-stomach frightened feeling like she got when watching that awful movie with her sister years ago.

The more she stayed in this town and next to Milo, the more out of her own skin she felt. It was not a bad feeling. She'd spoke more, laughed more and let go more than she'd ever done in her entire life. Milo seemed to tease her spirit free, and while it felt a bit unsettling, even scary, she thought it was the perfect way to feel on a dark Halloween night in a ghost tour town.

She and Milo walked out of the dark-wood paneled theater with ridiculous smiles and excitement in their steps. They put their hats and jackets on, but were happily surprised to find the wind had died down and the air, while crisp, was no longer heavy with rain.

Milo's eyes danced. He removed a silver pocket watch from his jacket and clicked it open to read the time. He gave Tanya a tentative look. "It is a little past eleven o'clock. Is it too late for one last adventure before bed? You can tell me if you would rather rest."

Old Tanya would have hemmed and hawed, but this freer version smiled. "The night is young. What do you have in mind?"

She and Milo walked down the stairs, out of the theater and into a pitch black night. Streetlights lit their immediate surroundings, but nothing else. The twinkling orange strand lights must have been on a timer, since Tanya could not see their glow on the fences anymore. Everything was in shadows, and the streets were beginning to clear of people, horses and carriages.

Tanya squinted in the direction of her car, but could only just make out the outlines of Milo's house and the general store next to it. Lights were on in the windows of his house and figures moved within. The air smelled heavier than it had when she'd first stepped outside of her car, too. It smelled like a mixture of smoke, manure and fish. She guessed the cleaning crews would have their work cut out for them in

the morning. New smells mingling with the pitch black made her feel even more out of her time and a little out of her mind.

Milo lent her his arm, and she put hers through his, treasuring the feeling of his muscle tensing under her hand. "I was hoping to take you on a nighttime carriage ride, but the drivers are occupied for the night, so I thought something more fitting of your garb and interests might be fun. Come, it is down this way."

They walked not far left of the theater and stood in front of a little green shop. Milo walked right up to the door, dropped Tanya's arm gently and rummaged through his pocket. He produced a large brass key, which he inserted into the lock and twisted with a click. He opened the door and gestured for her to go in.

"Be careful. There are many tools lying about haphazardly. Mother says it is a man's den, but I think you will be impressed. One moment, I will get us some light."

He walked through the dark as if he could see much better than she could in the pitch black interior of the shop, but she guessed that was because he'd spent so much time in it. Eventually, after a loud clank and a muffled curse that made Tanya giggle, Milo struck a match and lit a lantern on one of the wood-slab work benches of his father's shop.

"And here we are! *This* is where I spend most of my days. What do you think?" His voice rose in nervous excitement. Tanya could tell he was sharing something sacred with her, so took extra care to really see what he was showing her.

Everything the lamp touched was gears, tools, metal and wooden parts, and wheels. It illuminated fully completed bicycles, a unicycle, a carriage that looked like an early car, and a long two person bicycle resting on the far side of the shop, against two wood slatted doors. The doors looked like they were able to open to the alley, probably to allow the vehicles an easy exit and entrance.

“It’s fantastic! It all looks so…” she went to say “period authentic” because it did. I was all being newly constructed but it looked so old, compared to even her ancient maroon Camry. “complex. And really fun. I bet you love to work here.”

Milo’s voice rang throughout the shop. “It *is* fun. Father and I are trying to make our own carriage, one which runs without horses, but we sell a lot of fancy carriages to city folk, bicycles to independent men and women who want to go from here to there and not worry over hitching the horse, and other funny little specialty items, like the unicycle you see there.” He pointed to the tall wheel in the corner with a sturdy seat placed high above the floor.

“We do well. I think through the engineering and balance issues and father is a wonderful mechanic. We are close to trying Buggy out. He is pedal powered.” He nodded toward the carriage-like car.

“Buggy?” Tanya questioned, amused.

“Ah. Um, yes. You see, father comes up with very amusing curse words in the shop, since we employ young children to help clean and he does not like their mothers to come calling about his colorful language. The first time he grew frustrated with our progress on the pedal carriage, he kicked the wheel, but he was wearing the wrong boots and stubbed his foot. He cried out, “Oh, bug..”, looked around at the young boys who are our apprentices and finished ‘Buggy!’”

They both laughed at the absurdity of it, and their voices echoed back to them. Milo walked past a half constructed bicycle and over to the two person bicycle that looked to be an early prototype of the tandem. It was a little different, in that the frame was not solid. It looked more like two bicycles, connected at the back and front. “I know it is dark, but are you up for a ride?” He turned to her and the lamp reflected the eagerness of his eyes.

She jumped at the chance to stay awake and close to Milo, and she did love a good bicycle ride. “Well, I’m dressed for it!”

Milo chuckled. “That you are. This one will fit out the front door.”

He wheeled the bicycle out the shop's front door and Tanya followed behind, stepping over grey objects on the floor she couldn't see without the aid of Milo's lamp. He lay the bicycle against the shop wall, extinguished the lamp flame and put it back inside the shop, locking it as he left.

"We have not had the chance to try this one out, yet. Father thinks it looks a bit strange to have two fellas hop on and take off, though I was willing. We are constructing this for a newly engaged couple who are soon to be married. They met bicycling through town. Her brakes went out, she ran into him and, well, it was love."

He laughed. "I thought it sounded romantic, if not a little painful, but father insisted it was a business opportunity. He approached them with the idea of a couple's bicycle, and they jumped at it. Would you like to see if it works with me?"

Tanya was in love with his story, which was both silly and romantic, but she was even more in love with the chill in the air, Milo's ruddy cheeks and the way he hand-picked activities he thought she'd enjoy.

She knew he showed her the shop and the bikes because she was interested in such things. He wanted to create connection wherever he could. It was sweet and endearing, and there was no way she was not going to ride on an old-timey bicycle with a handsome, boyish man.

"Yes! I've always wanted to try a tandem, but I've never had the opportunity, and, honestly, I'm a bit nervous to do so now." Tanya wanted to kick herself. Why'd she say that?

"A tandem? What a delightful name for it. Yes. I like it. But why would you be nervous? There is nothing to it. It is like riding a regular bicycle, only we must communicate where we wish to turn, so we can move that way together." Milo reassured her, lifting the bike from the side of the shop.

She decided to be honest. “No. Riding doesn’t make me nervous. Riding with another person does. Because I’m always the bigger person, and I don’t want to be a burden to the other rider...”

Milo put the bicycle against the shop and strode to Tanya. “But you are perfect. I love a woman who is more concerned with eating right than corseting herself to oblivion. Besides, you are not *big*, you are curvaceous, and I happen to like your curves.” He swept her up, then, in a hug that lifted her from her feet. For a moment, she felt miraculously weightless.

She giggled and smacked him lightly. “Okay! I consent. Now put me down.”

He obliged and set her on her feet, next to the bicycle and the shop. She righted the vehicle and took up residence in the front seat. “But I’m taking the lead.”

Milo laughed. “Of course you are.” He jumped on the back of the bicycle. And put his feet to the pedals. And they rode off through the slick streets, over puddles and past houses dimly lit from the inside.

Controlling the bicycle was much harder than her modern ten speed. It jolted and jarred her, shaking her teeth, as they made their way down the dark streets, the streetlights growing dimmer as the night wore on. She could make out very little at the speed they were going, and most people had made their way indoors, since the rain begun to pick up again. It splattered her cheeks in icy bursts.

Milo laughed behind her and shouted out directions. “Over there! To the right is a hill, if you are not afraid.” It was the hill she’d first walked up, after parking.

“Ha! That hill is nothing compared to the ones at home!” She yelled back. But she didn’t factor that the tires on older bicycles were made of some sort of solid rubber with no tread to steady them. They started going so fast it was difficult to steer, the wide handles wobbled under her grasp. She tried to steady the bike, her knuckles white from the effort.

The front tire caught in an unsteady cobble. Tanya squealed, steering hard to the right, while Milo pulled to the left. The effect was disastrous. The bicycle bucked as if it were a stallion and Tanya went flying over the handles and onto the uneven cobblestones ahead of her.

She tried to fall to her side and roll, as she'd been taught to do in one of her drama classes, to soften the blow, and it was sort of successful. After she rolled the rest of the way down the hill, she felt bruised, scratched and very wet, since she'd landed in a deep mud puddle, but not broken.

Milo had fallen off the bike higher up, a short distance behind his own home, where she remembered parking her car, earlier. She shook her head, to clear it, sure the fall from the bike had rattled her brain. Because she was definitely seeing things. When she looked to where she parked only hours before, there were no white parking lines, no yellow parking signs, and no cars. Her maroon Camry was nowhere in sight. In its place was a small stable and a covered area that housed a single carriage. In front of the stable, Milo stood unsteadily and rushed to her.

"Tanya, were you harmed? I should not have suggested the hill. It is much too slick tonight. Oh no, you are drenched! I am so very sorry." Milo helped pull her to her feet, but she was still in a daze. She realized his hands were ice cold, and she dropped them.

"Tanya? Ms. Williams? I am very sorry. You are not cross are you? Not that I would blame you..."

"Where's my car?" Tanya looked at the stable and shook her head. *There* ! For a moment her car was back where it used to be, but it looked like a negative placed over a picture, and when she looked again, it was gone.

"What? I'm sure I saw it again! Milo, what's happening?" She turned to Milo whose eyes were wide with concern.

“Ms. Williams, you are confused. Did you bump your head? Let me take you inside. Leave the bicycle where it lay. We will get you into some dry clothes and warm you by the fire.”

But she shook her head. “No! My car. It was there and then it wasn’t. Like the lights, only I thought the lights were on a timer or something. And the cobblestones, and the signs!”

She knew she wasn’t making any sense, but the entire night suddenly looked different to her. She turned to Milo, frightened. “Where am I?” But when she saw him, it was as if she was looking through him for a moment, like he was a malfunctioning hologram.

“Milo!” She held her arms out to him, and he felt solid enough, though ice cold.

She turned her head left and right, taking in her surroundings and a chill shook her body. Everything looked strange still, like a double exposed picture. On the filmy surface sat a more modern, brighter, lighter version of the town they’d been walking, and underneath sat the darker, dirtier, more romantic version of the little town.

Her stomach twisted in fear. Her eyes focused and unfocused and the twin towns swam together in a dizzying pattern before her eyes. She turned to Milo and it was like she was looking at a ghost of the man she now knew she loved.

“Milo don’t leave me!” She reached out to him and he reached out to her, but touching him was like running her fingers through a waterfall.

“ *Tanya !*” He said it the way that drew her wild, drawn out in a fervent whisper like a secret, before he was gone.

The towns were a whirlwind around her, images racing by her and making her dizzy. Her eyes drooped closed and she fell to the ground.

“Young lady, are you alright?” Tanya felt gentle taps on her cheek and she sat up, abruptly.

“Milo!” She gasped, feeling the ground below her, expecting cobble stones. She was confused to be greeted by peeling burgundy wallpaper. Her hands met the smooth texture of wood well worn.

The woman with partially purple hair looked concerned. “Did you come with a friend? I thought you were alone. You screamed and passed out, but everything is fine, dear. There was a spirit, a friendly one, but he’s gone. I’m afraid you might have scared him off, actually. Do you feel like you can stand? Can someone come help this young lady, please?”

Tanya scratched her head, deeply confused. She stared around her and was shocked to find the ghost tour group encircling her. She shook her head, “No. No. Where’s Milo?”

People around her whispered to each other. Words made it to her ears, “fainted,” “hit her head,” “concussion.”

She was about to tell them her head was fine, that she’d never hit her head, not even riding the bike, but her pocket vibrated and her attention was drawn away. She pulled her phone from her coat, which was caked in mud. She frowned at the drying mud, her stomach fluttering. She unlocked her screen with trembling fingers.

OMG. I’m so srry, Tanya. Matt called and said hes not there yet. I hope ur not 2 scared by urself. He said he’d be there soon. Plz don’t be mad @ me. I’m srry!

Tanya leaned against the wall to get a foothold, steadied herself and stood. The woman with the purple strands put a hand on her arm. “Are you alright, honey? Did you hit your head?”

Tanya muttered she was fine, she didn’t hit her head, just passed out. When she stood, a clump of mud fell from her bicycle shorts. She apologized.

“Don’t worry about it, dear. Do you need me to call you a cab?” The woman asked. Tanya felt like laughing or crying. The woman

thought she was drunk.

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. I’ll just...sorry. Continue your tour. I’m fine. I have a friend waiting for me outside. She just texted me. Sorry about everything.” Tanya hoped the lie would keep any of the strangers from pestering her.

She stood, embarrassed and confounded. She walked the length of the hallway to the stairs, pausing at the bottom, to wipe a tear from her eyes.

Milo had to be real, or you are crazy. It had to have happened, or you are not loved.

She brushed another clump of dirt from her bicycle shorts and looked around, at a loss. If it wasn’t real, why was she damp and dirty? She stared at the room that had been so bold, elegant and beautiful hours before. Or was it years? Decades?

It was hard to see in the dark, but the furniture was ancient, the fireplaces stopped up with crumbling bricks, unusable. Trim and molding were tarnished by age and the wallpaper was water stained and bubbling up.

“No.” She put her hands to her cheeks, wiping away the tears that now streamed down her face.

She stared at the almost empty, mirrored mantle that once housed a display of dainty figurines and noticed a slip of folded paper, yellowed and out of place, lying on top of an inch of dust. It looked old but not worn. She stumbled over to the mantle and picked up the paper. It had a hard, starchy feel, like an aged library book. She worried if she unfolded it it would fall apart, but her curiosity got the best of her. She had a strong feeling the paper was meant for her. It drew her as much as Milo himself drew her.

She gently unfolded it, taking care not to tear the paper. It was covered in black ink, large and buoyant cursive.

My dearest Tanya,

I am very sorry our time together was so short. There is only one day a year I can cross the time between yours and mine. I know I cannot expect you will wait for me, a full year until next All Hallows' Eve, but can I be so bold as to invite you back in a year's time? I know not what I am when I come to you. I cannot say I am a man, but I can say you make me feel very much alive. I hope you get this note, but, even more, I hope your life in between our next meeting is a lovely one.

Yours Forever in Your Time and Mine,

Milo

Tanya folded the note gently, placing it in her breast pocket with a sigh. "Milo?" She asked the chilled air of the home that was once his. The cold room only echoed his name.

The End

Port Gamble Halloween Happenings

Ghost Tours: Sept. through October. Get your tickets at <http://www.portgambleparanormal.com/>.

Port Gamble Theater Production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* . Oct. 5-21st, 2018 .
<http://www.portgambletheater.com/>.

And be sure to visit local shops, including having a cuppa at **Mrs. Muir's** tea house. Tea at Mrs. Muir's is as close to tiptoeing through time as one can get.

A Few Historical Notes about Port Gamble, Washington

Port Gamble, Washington was, before its founding and naming, one of the main villages sites of the Nəxʷsəl'ay'əm people. In the 1850's Josiah Keller induced the Nəxʷsəl'ay'əm to settle their main village across the water, promising trade in jobs, lumber, firewood and gifts. Afterwards, Puget Mill was established and the town was a working mill town.

In 1868, the new director, Cyrus Walker, had an upgraded mill installed. He encouraged workers from the Nəxʷsəl'ay'əm reservation to work the mill, and the town grew to be fairly prosperous under his guidance. A church was added, newer housing implemented, and a general store was built.

In 1907 Puget Hotel was constructed. It was a place where enjoyments like gambling and alcohol prevailed over the restrictions put upon the rest of the town. By 1910, the mill operation, not as advanced as competing markets, started to lose money. In 1925, the mill was purchased and upgraded by Charles McCormick, who owned the mill and the town and increased the workforce from 100 to 1000 employees. However, the Great Depression put a stop to the progress of the mill. In 1940, the mill transferred ownership and names and became Pope and Talbot, Inc. WWII allowed for increased productivity for the mill. From that time on, the mill was fairly successful, and the town grew.

In 1966, Port Gamble was added to the National Register for Historic Places. It now houses a museum and is fastidiously well groomed. It is known, locally, as one of the prettiest places to visit on the Kitsap peninsula. Guests should come see the dahlias blooming late August/early September

The mill in Port Gamble ran up until 1995, when it was closed for business, but the town remains a historic attraction. Weddings, festivals, theater, high teas, fairs, car shows and, yes, ghost tours are some of the local attractions that bring people to Port Gamble today.

While my love story is supposed to span time, I have changed the historical reality of old Port Gamble for romantic purposes. Historical Port Gamble would have been a smoky, dusty working class town, and is only recently known for its Victorian style beauty, though many of the homes are original to the town and are immaculately cared for. I hope readers will forgive my creative license. For more information on Port Gamble, visit their website at www.portgamble.com. My historical information comes from www.historylink.org.

Heronwood Garden will soon be installing a stumpery dedicated to the S'Klallam tribal members who worked at the Port Gamble mill. This aspect of the garden is

currently in production. Anyone who wishes to donate old lumber or mill tools/machinery can contact garden staff at info@heronswoodgarden.org.

A short story from the award-winning author of Monochrome

"COME AS YOU ARE BUT NEVER LEAVE..."

ZOMBIES IN ABERDEEN



Come As You Are

H.M. JONES

Zombies in Aberdeen

By H.M. Jones

“Come as you are, but never leave.”

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*Dedicated to all the authors/filmmakers of the B+ horror I've
read, watched and loved.*

By the time the zombie hordes chewed their way through the lobster-flavored humans of the East Coast, gnawed the brains of the cushiony corn fed Midwesterners, and snacked on the sturdy calves of panicked Mountain folk, the people of Washington State had a lot of time to prepare for the horde's arrival.

Wealthy yacht owners bought warehouses full of preserved goods and filled their stores. Zombies can't swim, after all. Seattle's elite took to the sea, or to the Puget Sound and Pacific inlets, rather. Bomb shelters weren't as prominent in this state as others, but there were bomb shelters to be had in Gold Bar, Spokane, and Eastern Washington. Those individuals stocked up and hid out.

Many took to living in the frozen cold of high elevations. Zombies weren't great with inclines. Though they persistently tried to stumble up steep mountain sides after the fit outdoorsy portion of Washington's REI elite, zombie avalanches were frequent in the higher altitudes. They'd roll comically down steep mountainsides, foiled by gravity, their greatest foe.

Others took to the trees. It turned out that Washington State was lousy with treehouses: Mt. Rainier, Fall City, Seattle, Whidbey Island, and many other places hosted treehouse bed and breakfasts, treehouse resorts, treehouse suites. Local citizens organized builds to add to the existing structures, to accommodate more people.

All the zombie hordes came, full force. Food ran out on the ships, treehouses, mountains and bomb shelters. Scouts sent for supplies were often eaten or turned. Those who made it to stores, warehouses and residences and returned didn't have much to show for it. Too many desperate people already raided the city stores. Zombies were everywhere, and they were fairly settled in the far West Coast, having nowhere left to go.

People were soon starving, left as ravenous as the zombies they feared. Some humans even fantasized eating their fleshier companions in times of weakness. Ironically enough, starvation took the lives of many of these survivors, who then woke and preyed upon

the same friends they'd ashamedly dreamed of munching when alive. The horde was hungry, too, and would eventually die without sustenance, but they could starve for much longer than humans, could live long past their ability to move.

Desperation and hunger were the survivor's constant companions. Until the day the signs appeared—nailed to trees, taped to poles, held under rocks and cans of precious, scarce food. The signs all said the same thing: "Aberdeen: Come as you are. Be as you were." A sentient, non-shambling being was sending the remaining citizens of Washington a message. *Sanctuary*. There was a place where people are as they were, and that place was Aberdeen.

"Are you sure, Stiles?" Milly questioned her third husband, her voice thick with doubt.

Stiles was her second post-apocalypse marriage. She had a habit of marrying men not as sturdy as she. Life in zombiland was bound to be short, so she left very little time for mourning after her first post-apocalypse marriage ended in a shambler's awaiting maw. She had many mottos she flung about, when people asked why she married again so quickly.

"You only get to live once," or "Don't wait when it's true love." Lately, her motto was less romantic, "There's strength in numbers." Truth was, having a husband made life seem more normal, and any semblance of normalcy was worth clinging to.

She hoped Stiles lasted the journey. She knew her voice sounded plaintive, possibly whiny when she questioned his decision to move on. Even if moving from the relative safety of their colony's treehouse to pursue a life in the most downtrodden town in Washington state was their only course of action, she didn't have to pretend to like it.

"We need a community. Here, it's only you me and the Martin family. And we're all starving." Stiles' white blonde brows furrowed in worry.

She nodded in a resigned way, but didn't voice her concern that Stiles wouldn't make it as far as Aberdeen. She hoped she was wrong. Good men were literally hard to find these days.

She took a deep breath before standing. "Okay. Well, let's go talk to the Martins, then. I imagine it will be hard to talk Martina into it, but Carl can't wait to get out of here."

Carl was a hulk-like man, who was comically afraid of everything. On top of his long list of fears was the fear of heights. Living in the treehouse colony had been harder on him than on his family. His fear served him well in the post-apocalypse; caution kept him alive. Whether that life was worth living...

Milly and Stiles made their way across the sturdy swinging bridge to the Martin's tree home. The Martin family had been the owners of the treehouse resort before it was expanded into a treehouse village. As such, they occupied the largest, most enhanced home.

Martina was the brains of the operation. Despite her husband's objections with heights, she used their savings to construct a cedar-shingled treehouse airbnb on their large lot. People went nuts for it. She added smaller treehouse additions to the lot, and erected a centralized bathing and cooking station on the ground, around the covered pool. She made so much money from the venture she was able to quit her job as an attorney.

When the apocalypse hit, she immediately sent out an announcement: "Help us extend our treehouse resort. Build your own home and survive."

Milly rubbed her face, staring absently towards the Martin's large beehive-shaped home, decked out in cedar shingles. Living here would be a dream come true, without the persistent groaning of the horde of zombies that slugged around at the foot of the trees. Milly refused to look at them. Some of the zombies were sure to wear the faces of her neighbors.

Many of them died going on secret kitchen raids. They still had food, after all. The people who attempted it were like skinny fish lured to fat worms wriggling from a hook. They were always caught. Zombies weren't fast, but they were many, and they were growing increasingly hungry.

They'd broken down the gates surrounding the kitchens and pool area on the third day. The community was trapped high above their food. Starvation took some of them. Trying not to die of starvation took the rest.

Milly tapped politely on the woven branch door to the Martin's home before announcing herself. "Martina, Carl, it's me, Milly. Can we come in?"

Suddenly, an immense weight slammed against the door, toppling Milly backwards onto the wrap-around deck. The familiar sound of guttural growls—the attack mantra of the undead—played on the other side of the open door. She heard Stiles curse, but the door blocked her view.

Did I lose another husband ?

"Hey! Over here! I'm over here, you undead piece of shit," she bellowed.

Martina poked her buzzed head out of the window nearest Milly. "Milly, please watch your language! Curtis is inside, and that's my husband you're talking to." Milly was too preoccupied to argue. Martina was the sort who didn't feel like any situation deserved a curse word, so any argument would fall to deaf ears.

Instead, she sprinted the length of the wrap-around porch, almost colliding with Stiles, who was backing away from a massive, rabid Carl. He didn't yet look like a zombie. That's the thing the movies got wrong. He looked like an ashen version of Carl, the muscular giant. But where Carl would never have attacked a spider (would have, in fact, probably run from a spider), zombie Carl had no such qualms,

and was making impressive use of the size and strength human Carl left him with.

They were coming upon the rope bridge they'd just left, when Milly got an idea. "Stiles, go down the rope bridge. He's a stumbler now."

Stiles didn't need to be told twice. He was a pale flash as he skipped across the rope bridge and away from zombie Carl. Zombie Carl, however, had a short attention span and didn't seem interested in shambling after a fast moving target down a precarious bridge. Why bother when a snack-sized treat stood before him, looking decadent with her dark chocolate hair and delicious caramel skin. Pink drool dripped from Carl's gaping mouth.

"That's right, Carl, I'm a delicacy. Follow me, big guy. I taste as good as I look."

Slobber pooled under his chin as he stumbled toward Milly, swinging his slow lummoX arms towards her. She skipped backward, looking for the "last resort" escape rope tied to an adjacent limb next to the Martin's dwelling. She caught the thick white boat rope in her peripheral, and leapt over the side of the treehouse just as Carl lunged for her. She swung a wide arch away from the treehouse. Unfortunately, the rope swung toward the toppling body of zombie Carl just as he flipped over the side after her.

Damn it!

One minded, zombie Carl flung an arm out and grabbed ahold of Milly's boot. Milly felt her right arm disconnect from its shoulder socket as Carl's huge frame pulled it beyond its limits. Thankfully, her boot could not stand the weight either and fell off just as she was sure her left arm couldn't hold their combined weight any longer. She watched as Carl tumbled to the earth, chewing on her shoe like an idiot puppy, towards a group of gawking, drooling zombies, all waiting for her to drop. He took out about five of them out as he landed with a sickening *thunk*.

Thanks for that, Carl.

Her right arm hung at her side, limply, and her left arm still shook from taking her weight. She swayed her body as much as she dared, trying to reach the side of the treehouse deck with her be-socked foot. The bottom of the rope swung frantically, but she didn't make a whole lot of progress with the section that held her. She tried to ignore the hungry growls and the eager dumb faces below her.

"Milly! Over here!" Martina swung something over her head with such speed that her dark brown arms were a blur.

"Milly, do you have the strength to stick your legs out? Both of them?" Martina's face was a stoic mask of concentration. Her arm was still spinning so fast it made Milly dizzy.

Instead of wasting energy with words, Milly grunted, gripped the rope as tightly as she could with her flagging grasp and lifted her legs up with her abdominal muscles.

Thank God for fifteen years teaching yoga, she thought, though she couldn't figure what Martina was up to.

When Milly's legs were parallel with her stomach, Martina let loose a "whoop" and released the lasso she'd been spinning. At the same time, Milly's wet grip slipped and she felt herself fall. For the briefest of moments, she was airborne and flipping backwards, her head pointed directly at the slobbering maws of at least ten zombies, just waiting for their next meal to fall like mana from heaven.

Then, suddenly, she felt a forceful tug around her ankles. Her flight abruptly halted. The zombies just two feet below her growled in protest, mauling each other to reach her first, but she was just out of reach of their clumsy hands. She heard Martina and Stiles grunt with the effort of pulling her up. She would have complained, if she didn't have to focus on not passing out from the pain in her dislocated shoulder and burning ankles.

I'm 105 at most, wimps.

Once up, Martina asked for her good hand, which she willingly gave. Her ab muscles miraculously worked still, and she was able to

help pull herself up to sitting. Stiles grabbed her around her ribcage and lifted her to safety. One quick look at her arm, however, made his pasty complexion pale even further.

“Your arm looks terrible. Did it pop the socket?”

She chose not to answer and looked to Martina, whose tall son, Curtis, stood beyond her, staring down towards the zombie horde. His face held a sad sort of disgust.

“I’m sorry, Curtis. That wasn’t your dad, though. Your dad wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Curtis rolled his eyes. “Not a fly, maybe, but he was dumb enough to hurt himself and put us in danger. I’m *glad* he’s gone.” But his voice broke at the end and weighty tears tumbled down his cheeks from eyes more sad than angry.

Martina turned to him, and Milly almost interjected. *The boy is just upset*, she was about to say. But she needn’t have bothered. It turned out that Martina understood his outburst all too well. She gathered her lanky son into her arms and they sobbed together.

When they were finished, Martina’s large brown eyes were bloodshot with grief. She mumbled something to her son and kissed him on the cheek. He nodded and turned back toward their home. He walked as though the air around him weighed upon his broad shoulders.

Martina wiped the moisture from her cheeks and knelt down by Milly. “Thank you for what you did. I couldn’t think right. I didn’t know what to do when I woke to him...like that. I slept near Curtis in his loft yesterday, after Carl and I fought. I brought up leaving, heading for Aberdeen because of the signs. Carl didn’t want to, was terrified of the horde, though it’s a much smaller one than it once was. I thought he’d want to go. It’s been harder on him than on us, living so high up. In the end, the horde scared him more than the heights.”

She paused as if the next sentence took all her energy to say. She stared at Milly’s dangling arm, rather than meet her eyes. “He was a

botanist before all this. Did I ever tell you that?" She didn't wait for an answer before continuing.

"He'd been collecting poisonous plants this whole time, without having to leave the trees. It seems many poisonous leaves grow right here, where we made our home. I don't know how many he ate, but it must have been a lot. When I woke, I woke to a grunting corpse with Carl's face. Around his mouth was bloody foam. Plants were scattered all over the floor, along with vomit..."

She took a ragged breath. "It's not that I don't understand the urge. He's always had problems with depression, and the added anxiety didn't help. But I can't figure out why he did it the way he did it. I'm angry about the fact he did it, but I'm madder that he didn't do it in another home. What was he thinking? Why did he put us through that? He could have killed us."

Milly shrugged. She wouldn't say what she was thinking. Martina was hurting, and she didn't want to make it worse. Carl wasn't thinking. The whole situation had driven him off the edge. When he poisoned himself, it was in a sick state. His personality, his brain, processed things differently than Martina's. Martina had the type of personality that rose to the challenge, that hardened with each blow. Carl was strong, physically, but he was soft and sweet on the inside. *Maybe he didn't want his family to have to live through it...*

Milly couldn't say any of that. Not with pieces of Carl splattered next to the swimming pool. "You were right. We need to move on. I'm sorry about all of this. I really am. But I still want to survive. I think you do, too. Or, you will. For Curtis."

Martina sighed. "Lay back. We'll go after I push your arm back in place."

After the excruciating return of her arm into her shoulder socket, the remaining survivors huddled with their few belongings and preserved goods in Milly and Stile's abode.

“I’ve been preparing for our inevitable departure for a few days, now,” Stiles was telling the woe begotten band. “And I’ve managed to capture a couple live squirrels. I made a cage, I can lower it down, just out of reach of the horde. There’s a latch that I think the rodents will eventually figure out, but until then it might distract the horde long enough that we can sneak down the opposite way. I’ve checked the perimeter around the third bathhouse and it’s pretty clear. They are gathered here because that’s where we, the food, are. But we all know they’re just as likely to eat other mammals, especially if they’re easier prey.”

Milly nodded along. He’d told her this earlier. She scanned the faces of the other two, but found only resignation. It wasn’t a great plan, but it was the only one they had. After a few minutes of awkward silence, Martina stood.

“Okay, then. We die if we stay. If we go, we have a chance. It’s still early. Let’s just go.”

And go they did. To everyone’s surprise, the squirrel plan went off without a hitch. The zombies stared dumbly above at one uninterested mammal busily playing with the easy release latch stick on the cage, while the other happily snacked on a nut.

The undead reached and grunted and mowed over each other, trying to nab the tasty squirrels, while the bigger prize snuck away down the backside of the treehouse. No one breathed in relief or said how easy it was to foil the monsters. Since zombies were now a reality, they’d all grown decidedly more superstitious, and didn’t want to jinx themselves.

Though Stiles did smile in a smug little way, once they were a mile down the main road. Curtis mumbled about how the main road was always a problem in zombie movies—people dead in their cars, abandoned vehicles, confused zombies hanging out in hordes around places where no living person roamed. It turns out that was not the case in reality, however. Zombies had no interest in places void of food.

The small group was hoping to find cars abandoned, full of gas, along the road. That's something that happened in movies, right? Alas, no cars were to be found, no fast escape to be had.

"It makes sense. Most people stockpiled gas when they headed West. And I'd certainly stay in a fast moving vehicle, too. I suppose we could head back to Olympia and get our cars, but that sounds like a death sentence. It's probably a day or two of foot travel to Aberdeen. I say we steer clear of cities, since we know the hordes gathered there early on. Let's travel with the road in sight. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a car." Milly looked at her group, waiting for other suggestions, but none came.

Curtis looked sad but determined. He clutched a heavy black Taser at his waist—one of the remaining weapons the group had. Martina's eyes were distant, focused on a sign on the road that read "Aberdeen 50 miles."

Stiles just shrugged. Milly knew that her husband was probably pretty happy to be on firm land, walking again. He was rigid about keeping in shape, and helped her stay fit and ready to flee, too. His motto was burned in her brain, "Strong bodies matter more than strong brains. We have devolved." It was pretty strange, actually, since he was a rather heavy-set computer programmer when they'd met, and she was a career yoga instructor. Pasts didn't matter anymore. Only present mattered, only surviving.

After a few hours of skirting around skinny hordes of slow witted and snail-paced zombies, they made it to a little town called Elma. Elma was a commercial town, pre-zombies. Much of the commerce centered around the limber and farm trade, but there were a couple gas stations, grocery stores and shops, too. They managed to hit up a gas station on the outskirts of town, where they picked up a few meager snacks and drinks. There were about three corpses trapped in the station, but they'd been too long without sustenance.

They'd melted into decayed body pools upon the floor, but attempted to clutch Milly as she stepped past them to grab whatever

was left on the shelves—strange seed crackers. There were a few cans of seltzer waters left, as well, so she grabbed them and the group continued on. They walked, out in the open, past tiny hordes for many miles. Once in a while they broke into a weak jog when the undead attempted a lame pursuit.

By nightfall, they found some good climbing trees—in an apple orchard behind an old farm. They were able to climb to the top and pick some fat apples that had yet to be claimed. They did this out of sight of the undead, so they were left to sleep on precarious branches without the sound of groans and growls accompanying them. Since they'd all grown used to the groans, the absence of them made for a night that was almost too quiet. Like growing used to traffic, the noise was now their lullaby. They slept restlessly, afraid they might fall from the limbs if they slept too soundly.

The next day, they were able to climb right down from them trees and continue on their way—easily avoiding the sluggish hordes they encountered. By that time, Stiles grew brave enough to joke about the zombie in lingerie, not far outside of Satsop.

“How'd you like to be the poor sucker who woke up to that?” Stiles pointed and everyone chuckled. The comment might be insensitive, but one became a little less touchy during the apocalypse.

By the time Stiles stopped walking and threw himself down on an empty hillside, everyone followed suit.

“Is it just me, or is this whole avoiding hordes thing a lot easier than we thought it'd be?” It was funny that the silent, brooding Curtis was the first to speak this awful realization.

Martina bit her lip, looking as though she was trying to hold back tears. She clutched the tall grass of the hillside in clenched fists. The group was discomfited by her vulnerability. The only time Milly had seen her cry was just after Carl went over the rails.

Milly's throat felt tight and dry. Her stomach clenched and she blinked slowly a few times. She felt wetness upon her cheek and

started as if she'd been slapped. She wiped the wetness away in a daze, stared at it for a moment. She looked up, confused, trying to locate the answer to what was happening inside her in Stiles' steady face. But, at that moment, his face wasn't the steady determined mask she'd grown used to. It was drawn into heavy lines, bright red and damp with tears.

Milly went to him and cried, loudly and heavily, into his sharp, riby embrace. She heard Martina and Curtis sobbing loudly, too, but did not turn to them. They'd stayed in the treehouse, in fear of the hordes, rationing, almost starving, going slowly crazy.

And for what? The hordes were slow, stupid, easily distracted and wasting away. Did they ever have reason to be afraid? Were the hordes always like this? She tried to locate an answer, but she could only find pain. Not that pain was bad. The release felt...amazing, really. They'd all become so hard, all except Carl. And he'd gone out of his mind, like the other sensitive ones.

They cried for a few minutes when, abruptly, Curtis stood. His arms were tense, his eyes wide, his hand hard around the black Taser at his belt. He stared off to one side of the tall hill they occupied. "Holy shit!"

"Curtis Ryan Warren! Watch your mouth, son," Martina scowled, her cheeks flushed in anger or grief. She stood, though, and followed his gaze, authority radiating from her body. Until she saw what made Curtis curse, then the authority leaked out of her as if she were a balloon deflating.

"Holy shit," she whispered in reverence. It was the first time Milly had ever heard the woman curse. It sounded like a prayer.

She stood and turned reluctantly away from Stiles' warm embrace to meet a sight that sent her blood running cold. The largest horde of skinny, desperate zombies she'd ever seen was shambling toward their pitiful group several feet from where they were gathered.

“Why didn’t we see them? Where’d they come from?” Stiles’ voice was strained, but not terribly frightened.

“The trees, to the left, down the hill...” Curtis voice was whispered awe. He started backing away. “They just keep coming, too. I mean...I thought...I thought the hordes were dying off.”

He wasn’t wrong. This horde was massive. It was like those ridiculously organized zombies from the TV shows aired pre-apocalypse. She’d always laughed at how the giant hordes snuck up on the show’s unsuspecting heroes and heroines. *How can they not hear them? How can a group of hundreds of zombies just sneak up on you?* Now it was happening, to her. And it was terrifying. So it surprised even her when she started laughing hysterically, as if she were watching the horror from the comfort of her bed on her tablet.

“Uh, oh. I think it all finally broke Milly,” Martina mused, backing away, too. “Come on. They’re zombies, not marathon runners. If we jog for a bit, we can put some distance between us and them.”

It was hard to continue the hysterical laughter and the running, and Milly *wasn’t* actually broken, just worn, so she forced the hysteria down. The severity of their situation grew as they neared Aberdeen. Zombies were on every side of them, except for ahead, which seemed strange.

The jogging did, indeed, distance them from the first horde. But other hordes had joined, and the mass of shamblers had grown so thick behind and to the sides of them that it was all any of them could do to keep out of the hungry mouths of crazed, starved zombies.

So it was that the small group, limp-jogging after the tenth mile of their run, were doggedly pursued by a deafening horde of rotting people eaters. Their hunger made them shuffle faster, but the size of the horde made it difficult for them to get very far without tripping upon one another, growling in frustration all the while. In this fashion, the bone-tired survivors dragged themselves the last mile to Aberdeen, all four of them intact but barely able to trot.

When the telltale sign came into view—Aberdeen: Come as You Are—Milly felt like breaking down into another bout of hysteria. She might have, if she had breath left for laughter. The eleven-mile jog took everything from her though, except a nagging sense of irony.

“Come as you are.” And they did. They ran past the white and green sign exactly as they were: dirty, ragged, wheezing, sweat dried up miles ago. Curtis shot his Taser at the zombies in their path pacing, strangely, just outside the city limits of Aberdeen. Martina swung a heavy bat at others. Aberdeen was eerily devoid of zombies, so, hearts too tired to ask questions, the group heaved themselves into the cracked streets of their new haven.

Unfortunately, it was hard to tell the zombies apart from the people from the vantage point of the posted sentry, which is probably why the man hunkered behind the giant welcome sign shot Milly in the shoulder.

The shot was drowned out by the hungry growls of the horde. But it needed no accompanying noise to feel like a burning dagger fresh off the blacksmith’s coals. No other shots followed Milly’s agonized wail. She fell to the ground, almost too dead tired to hurt. Almost. She clutched her shoulder with a shaking hand, biting her lip to stave off the howl that bubbled up inside her. The zombies would come for her without the aid of her screams. Stiles kneeled down beside her, removing his t-shirt and pressing it to her wound. The pressure felt like hot water running over a new burn.

“Stop! Run, Stiles! The horde’s not far behind, and someone is shooting at us. You have to keep going!”

Milly pushed at her husband weakly, but he ignored her and doggedly wrapped her arm tightly with his dirty t-shirt. She kept trying to push him, but her attempts fell lightly upon his frame. She looked past him, her heart beating frantically, and noticed that a man with a rifle held at his side ran toward them.

But what she didn't see running toward them was even more astonishing. The massive horde that had doggedly pursued them for miles was lingering just outside the sign welcoming them to Aberdeen. They walked along the road, staring at the meal that was so easily laid out before them, but they made no move to approach. A few brave ones swiped the air past the sign, only to pull their grubby hands back as if they'd been slapped.

Milly blinked her eyes. Her vision was blurry from blood loss, but her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. The hoard was still howling, but their howls weren't hungry. They sounded desperate, frightened, and heart-broken. Milly would have felt bad for them, if they hadn't been trying to eat her for the last several miles. They were distraught. It was amazing. She'd never before seen a zombie acting in any way other than ravenously hungry.

Her arm throbbed painfully, but she could tell the tight knot Stiles fashioned from his shirt had slowed the blood. The man with the rifle jogged into view, but his rifle was pushed back over his shoulder, and his face was distraught.

“Oh, man! I’m so sorry, lady. You guys were really limping, barely moving faster than the dead ones, and you...well, sorry, but you look pretty ragged. I was sure our luck had run out when I saw that massive horde coming. You all looked like zombie ring leaders or something. I’m really sorry. Let’s get you up and over to medical.”

The man with the rifle was younger than her, just past his teenage years. Twenty at most. He had long brownish-blond hair that fell over stormy eyes. His mouth was a thin line of worry over a stubborn, cleft chin. Milly’s heart skipped a beat over the deep introspection of his intense gaze, like a swooning eighteen-year-old. But that made her feel like a dirty old woman, so she looked away from the dreamy, slouching youth.

Milly examined Stiles’ dirt covered face and worn clothes. Not a patch of his pallid skin shone through the road dust that caked it. His eyes were knitted in worry, but he smiled weakly at her. She looked past Stiles and noticed Curtis and Martina scanning the depressed

line of zombies outside the city limit. The Martins limped as they walked the length of the invisible border between the undead and themselves.

While from this close it was clear to her that they were human, she could see how their ashen skin, dry cracked lips, dirty clothing and persistent limps gave them a zombie-like quality. If she looked any worse—and she was sure her hair was a wild rat’s nest compared to Martina’s neatly shaved head—then she may have shot her, too. She instantly forgave the dreamy youth for gunning her down.

“Honest mistake,” she tried to say. It sounded a lot more like, “Hoest milkshake.”

She blinked her eyes dumbly several times before attempting to stand. It was the wrong move. She couldn’t manage to get blood to her brain or her limbs. Her surroundings spun. Stiles’ deep frown lines merged with the guilty pout of the young man holding her good arm. The sad horde and the stalking Martin family danced together. It looked like a hellish merry-go-round. She fell backwards into the youth’s awaiting arms, but she was not awake to appreciate it.

The next two days were a blur of faces staring down upon her in a mixture of worry and boredom. Though she was too weak to say it,

she was a little annoyed with the fact that Stiles looked bored watching over her.

You're alive and unshot, asshole!

But she didn't have the energy to say that, so she stored it inside for when she was fully functioning, which happened to be only a couple days later. She opened her sandy eyes and smacked her dry lips together. She looked about the room to see who was sitting with her, but found herself alone.

Guess the threat of my death is over, and they've found something more interesting to occupy themselves with, she thought bitterly.

She attempted to sit up and failed several times. The pain in her shoulder was excruciating. She looked down at her cleanly bandaged wound and bit her lip over the pain as she forced her abs to pull her up. You never know how connected all your muscles are until you're shot in one of them. The movement sent a searing pain up her entire arm and through her chest.

"You could just relax, you know."

The voice startled Milly into turning too quickly, which she immediately regretted. Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, jeez. Bad choice."

"Oh, God. Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." His voice was a warm, deep tenor. He stood by an open door in what appeared to be a small clinic. She looked down and noticed that she was sitting on a flat medical bed.

She wished she could smooth her hair or look like less of a windblown, dirt caked mess, but that wasn't happening. She gave up her mini crush on the stunning mopey youth who shot her, and decided she was too old and too hurt to care. "It's fine. Being post-apocalypse makes one jumpy. Probably the same reason you shot me. Where's my husband? The Martins?"

The young man came into the little clinic room, walked to her bed and adjusted a lever on the back of it, lifting the bed up so she could relax against it while sitting. "Is that better?"

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Your husband is on patrol duty. The Martins are setting up apartment, but Martina said she'd be back to check on you soon."

"Oh, okay." She was too dizzy to come up with anything more intelligent to say.

"Are you feeling good enough to eat? We have you on fluids," he pointed to an I.V. stuck into her limp arm, "but you will probably feel better when you can eat. I brought applesauce."

The shaggy haired youth pulled a packet of applesauce from his over-large grey zip-up. He shook his long bangs away from his stormy eyes for a moment, and Milly finally figured out why she was so dumbstruck over the young man.

"You're not that much younger than me, are you? You just look it. I'd put you at about 20. I think it was the eyeliner that did it. Or maybe your posture or outfit. I don't know."

The young man shrugged. "I don't know how old you are, so I'm not sure. I'm 27."

Milly's eyes grew wide and her heart pounded in her ears. *Just like Kurt...No. It couldn't be. He's dead. The only dead that come back to life are zombies, and this guy is no zombie.* But another thought battled her reason. *If zombies are a thing, why not this?*

But she said none of that, only held out her hand for the applesauce packet. The uncanny youth frowned over her expression, but handed her the packet. He didn't say anything when she made sure to touch his rough fingertips—calloused as though worn from plucking taut strings. But he grinned, a pull at the side of his mouth, as if he knew what she was doing. His fingertips were as solid and textured as any real person's. If she felt a little weak from the contact, it was only because she was dizzy from loss of blood. Or so she told herself.

“Uh, sorry. I didn't catch your name before I passed out. You know, after you shot me for looking like a zombie.”

The man smiled for real this time, and it was a beautiful smile. His cheeks creased in a pleasing and familiar way, his eyes brightened, though they still held a vivid sadness. “I really am sorry about that. Your husband took the liberty of cleaning you up, and I can see I was badly mistaken. My name's Colby. Yours is Milly, right?”

Milly clasped his hand a little too eagerly, her small hand shaking inside his grip. She was thankful, at that moment, for her caring husband, who'd thought to clean her up. “You don't look like a Colby.”

Colby shrugged. “You don't look like a Milly. Milly is an old white lady's name, and you're not old or white.”

Milly laughed. “Good point. I'm originally from Hawaii, the island of Lāna'i. Milly was my white grandma's name, so you're not far off.”

Colby nodded. “Ah. Why did you leave Hawaii for the rainy Northwest?”

“I wanted to live in the pines, where the sun don't ever shine.” Milly raised an eyebrow at Colby.

Colby didn't seem shocked or bothered by the comment. He simply smiled and said, “A woman after my own heart. Anyway, you better try eating. I'm up to take over for Stiles, anyway. See you around, Milly.”

“Wait!” In her shock over Colby's uncanny resemblance to her favorite grunge heartthrob, Milly almost forgot to ask the most obvious

question. “Why did the horde stop? Why won’t they come into Aberdeen?”

Colby’s laugh was a forced, angry chuckle. “Would you come to or through Aberdeen if you didn’t have to?”

Milly frowned. “Well, no, but I’m not a zombie willing to stumble around for miles after a warm-blooded meal, either. I doubt zombies care about how lame Aberdeen is.”

Colby shrugged, resigned. “There doesn’t seem to be any other reason. Those who started out in Aberdeen, like me, have been watching them. The moment they near the city limits of Aberdeen, they back off. Their groans change, even their faces look different.”

Milly remembered thinking the same thing when she scanned the undead before she passed out. “Yeah, they seemed sad.”

Colby shook his head. “Not just sad. Depressed. Aberdeen depresses the shit out of the undead. Honestly, it’s pretty depressing for the living, too, but the zombies won’t come near it, not even to eat. The zombies that hang around—staring at us on the other side—are changed, somehow. We sit sentry not because we think the hordes will change their minds and come across. I mean, we are prepared for that, but really it’s more of an experiment. The dead that hang out near Aberdeen lose their zombie instinct. They wail and wither, and die, waiting for us, I think. Or maybe not. I really don’t know why they stay.”

He leaned towards Milly, who suddenly realized her mouth was hanging open unattractively. She closed it. He continued in an intense whisper. “An old woman died last week from pneumonia. We tried to get her the right antibiotics, but we were running too low, and she told us to not waste them on her. She refused to take them. She was a good woman.” Colby’s shoulders fell, as if he was carrying the weight of her death. “She changed, like we all do when we die. We knew she was going that night, so we put her in a house near the border of the city and handcuffed her to the bed, to keep her secured. Zombies aren’t real nimble with their fingers, as you know.”

Milly nodded. “What happened?”

Colby frowned. “When she turned, she went crazy. We heard her scream. Have you ever heard a zombie scream?” He shivered.

Milly shook her head, her face horrified.

“Well, you don’t ever want to. She screamed for at least an hour then the sentry watching the house heard glass break. The guy ran down there to subdue her, keep her from making a shamble town out of the only safe place left in the U.S. When he got there, he stood only feet away from her. He pulled his rifle out and waited for her to run at him. He said the hunger was evident. She stared him down, licking her lips, just before she cried out. That’s what he said, ‘Cried out.’”

Colby’s storm-cloud eyes were distant. “He said it was the most haunting sadness he’d ever heard. Then she turned from him, a perfectly good zombie snack, and ran across the border, wailing until she was past the limits. She stays there, just outside of Aberdeen, a handless zombie, staring forlornly at every sentry who sits watch. But she doesn’t seem to watch us out of hunger. Or, I don’t think she does...I don’t know how to explain it, but she seems to be worried about us. She was so serious about getting out of the town that she tugged until her hands separated from her body.”

He stood to leave, “It’s safe to say zombies hate Aberdeen.”

Over the next two weeks, it was clear to Milly that Colby was right. It’d taken her a couple more days to heal enough to carry a rifle, but when she did, she had to take position along one of many posts along the wall. So she got her turn playing zombie watch.

She wasn’t sure which was more depressing—watching zombies waste away to nothing, or being in a town where even the houses frowned. She’d pointed this reverie out to Stiles when he’d shown her their new apartment. It was situated in an old house along the main residential stretch in Aberdeen. She’d stood at the foot of the house

and stared at it for a couple of minutes before figuring out why it gave her the creeps.

The white porch sagged in the corners and bowed in middle. She eyed the house along the street, and found that they all dipped in the same familiar way.

The houses are frowning. Even the houses are sad here.

The ones that weren't sad, the nicer houses of Aberdeen, were stuck in the 70's and garishly painted. They were the first ones to be taken up by more established residents. Many of the houses weren't complete enough to frown—those were falling apart, rotting, faded or boarded-over. Even the boarded-over meth houses had to be used as more and more people came for sanctuary.

Many of them still functioned as meth houses, in fact, for as long as the ingredients to brew the smelly shit lasted, anyway. Milly was just thankful she didn't live too closely to one of those places. The people living there weren't undead, but they might as well have been. They were rotting in much the same way, their teeth and hair falling out, their skin blistering and scabbed, their body fat burning up.

The residents weren't the only desperate thing about Aberdeen. The local stores, restaurants, bars, and homes had all been combed over. The town's supplies were brought to what used to be a farm store and were divided out evenly among families, every week.

The fresh fruit and veggies had been eaten long ago, and the gardens in Aberdeen were miserable little affairs, stifled by a lifetime of industrial air, surrounded by hot pavement. Some survivors spent their time trying to perk the unhappy gardens up—watering, de-weeding and feeding them fertilizer from the farm store. But they remained spindly, drooping crops no matter what. The residents of Aberdeen would not be eating fresh food anytime soon.

Milly had driven through Aberdeen before the apocalypse, and supposed that the browning grass and lack luster gardens stemmed from a lack of funds and time to tend yards, but now she wasn't so

sure. Time was an abundant commodity, now, and money was a thing of the past.

It was as if the air in Aberdeen was bogged down, even without the dead smokestacks clogging the air. She could feel the air weigh on her, as she stalked cracked sidewalks and paced potholed streets. The town wasn't desperate because of the people who lived there; the people were desperate because of the town.

Unfortunately, the only way to survive was to become accustomed to living life in a town that dragged—from the skinny brown trees to the broken shop windows. The ocean roared several miles away, but you wouldn't know it from the confines of this stagnant town. You couldn't smell it on the air. The air was trapped in a concrete bubble. *Milly* was trapped. Sometimes, when sitting watch at the outskirts of town she daydreamed about shooting a path through the horde and running until she reached the frigid rolling ways of the Pacific. She'd run a marathon before, and it had to be a shorter distance than that.

But the horde was too massive, and they stayed firmly glued to the outskirts of Aberdeen. They were probably hoping that the people inside would eventually do just what *Milly* thought of doing every day. Their woeful faces and glazed eyes looked, just as *Colby* relayed, apologetic. Not so much for themselves but for the sentries inside of the city. The zombies seemed to feel bad for her in the same way that humans feel sorry for too cramped chickens and cows living in their own feces in farm factories. They'd still eat her if she ran for it, but she was sure they'd feel happy she got a chance to stretch her legs first, free-range style.

Milly saw the no-handed zombie on her fifth watch day. Most of the zombies walked back and forth, stumbling along the border looking somber, sometimes reaching out toward the city limit, and drawing their hand back as if stung. But not that zombie. She just stood and stared, as her skin melted away, and her bones became exposed. She stared and wailed, and looked so forlorn that *Milly* almost wanted to hold her. Only that would be disgusting. And eventually painful.

She knew she wouldn't run, for the same reason she hadn't tried leaving the treehouse before Stiles suggested it. She wanted to live.

Even so, she stood on the edges of Aberdeen most days, looking past the pacing undead towards the wild, furious Pacific. Stiles had grown used to his wife's obsessive routine and had, for the first two weeks, collected her from the edge of town and guided her back to the frowning porch in the middle of the anguished city. Not tonight, not for a few nights, actually.

Lately, he'd chosen to visit the Martins instead, leaving his wife to wonder home when or if she wanted. Some nights, she'd stumble home in a daze and Stiles would not be in their room. She'd ask the other residents where he was, and they'd look away, embarrassed. They'd mumble that he'd left earlier in the day and hadn't returned. *He's with Martina* was the unspoken response.

Milly wanted to care. She wanted to worry about losing her husband. But she found herself too preoccupied with plans of zip-lining off the highway signs, over the mass of starving zombies waiting for her to break free of the tired town.

"It might work. If I could catch something on the other side of the zombies...a tree. Maybe Martina could lasso a pole. She might help..." Milly mumbled her plan out loud, pacing down the row of sagging houses on her block under the lone light of the moon, and forgetting that Martina was probably sleeping with Stiles at this moment. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but leaving.

"Might help with what?" A voice from behind her prompted. A delicious tenor voice. The only voice holding her back.

She turned to Colby, a blush coloring her cheeks. Colby's brows were drawn down over his stormy eyes. His perfectly cleft chin sunk in a little more when his lips were pursed in worry, as they now were.

"Oh, I was just..." She trailed off, embarrassed.

"Thinking about leaving again? Yeah, I thought about a zip-line before. But there's really nothing to attach it to on the other side, or

nothing that I could reach, anyway. I don't think that any of our trucks would make it through the horde, even weakened as they are. Most of the gas has run out, anyway. Used it for the generators to keep the frozen food fresh."

Milly's heart fell to her stomach, and frustrated tears fell down her face. "I can't do it, anymore, Colby. This place...it's not a haven. It's hell. I can't stay her with the meth heads, my cheating husband, the Martins who are sure I've lost my mind, and the living scraping by in a town that's already dead. I can't live here. If I'm not mad already, I will be within days."

"It's either that or the zombies, Milly." Colby put a warm hand on her trembling forearm. "Come back with me, for now. You don't need to make any decisions tonight."

Milly swallowed hard. Her stomach felt fluttery and her face flushed. A ravenous feeling crept over her, a feeling she'd not felt since even before the apocalypse. Certainly not something Stiles brought forth, with his cautious touch and stony face.

Stiles was a choice made in the throes of survival. This feeling was not about survival, this feeling was entirely animalistic. For a moment she wondered if she were dying, turning into one of the nameless horde. But when she met Colby's deep eyes, full of unvoiced sorrow, she saw the same hunger. And when their lips met and their hands searched each other, it felt as though they were finding something the apocalypse had taken from them.

They gave over to their desperate feelings that night, in plain sight of the scrambling, moaning undead on the border of Aberdeen. Their grunts of passion didn't sound much different than the moaning of the horde, so no one came to investigate.

When they fell apart, exhausted and spent, an hour later, Mill felt at peace for the first time since the apocalypse stole all normalcy. She lay in the crook of her young lover's arms and stared at the curve of his jaw, the five o'clock shadow, the way his sandy hair fell in angles over his careworn face. And she was sure, regardless of the

improbability of it, that she was being held by her first grunge love, though his flannel had been replaced by a worn zipper jacket and sturdy farm store blue jeans.

She wished they could have stayed naked and entangled for a little bit longer, but summer was giving way to fall and the night was growing chill. Anyway, new sentries might happen upon them soon. She didn't really care if Stiles found out about Colby, since she was sure he and Martina had moved past caring about her, but she'd rather not be found with her pants around her ankles, literally or figuratively. She pulled her clothes back in place, and they fell asleep to the lulling moan of the dwindling horde.

The sun broke through the ever present gloom of Aberdeen long enough to shine on their groggy morning faces, and the dumb faces of decaying shamblers. Milly blinked open her eyes and immediately met the accusatory stare of Stiles and Martina.

"Milly? What's going on here?" Stiles did not even attempt to conceal the hurt in his voice.

Meanwhile, Martina looked down at Milly and Colby in complete shock. Milly was immediately offended and defensive. As if Martina and Stiles hadn't been doing the exact thing for days, if not weeks, now.

Milly stood and crossed her arms, putting herself in between Stiles and Colby. Stiles was leaning toward her lover in a way that said he was ready for a square off.

"Oh, come off it, you two. I might have been out of it lately, but I know you've been seeing each other. And I didn't say anything. You do what you have to do to survive this hellish place, and I'll do what I have to do."

Stiles rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Milly, that's not what's been going on. Yes, I've been going to the Martin's house. We've been working on a new plan. We don't like it here anymore than you do, but we haven't given up. I tried to get you involved, but you've been shut

off since we first got here. You didn't respond when we talked to you, when we asked you what was wrong. We were sure that you were going off the deep end. Martina, Curtis and I have been planning a way out. I see you staring of toward the Pacific. You talk about it in your sleep. We were working on a way to get out, while you've been acting just like them." He waved a dismissive hand at the interested zombies peering at the arguing snacks with great interest.

"And now you're talking again, but waking up in the arms of a kid? Milly, you're thirty-five years old, almost thirty-six. Colby is nineteen. He's barely friggin' legal!"

Martina hissed over his curse and put a steadying hand on Stiles' arm. Milly shook her head, pointing to Martina's hand.

"I'm not crazy! See how she's touching you. Whether you're together or not, I know you want to be. And Colby is not nineteen! He's twenty-seven. He told me so when I was in the hospital. Just ask him. He'll tell you." She turned to Colby, then, who was standing a little off, his head bowed sheepishly, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his sweater.

He spoke to his zipper when he finally spoke. "I'm sorry, Milly. I didn't know how old you were. You look so young. I thought...I thought you were like thirty, or something. I liked you and I didn't want you to treat me like a kid. But...I'm eighteen. I thought you knew I was lying, and you didn't mind."

Stiles glared at the youth. "We had a flippin' birthday party for him last week, Milly. You were off talking to yourself and staring past the horde, like always."

Milly's looked from Stiles to Martina and back again. Their faces were a mixture of anger, disgust and pity. Any remaining love they held was either gone or was hidden inside the stronger emotions clearly displayed on their faces. She turned to Colby, uncomprehending. If what he said was true, then...

She put a shaking finger under his chin and tilted it to the rare sun. She wished she hadn't. Had it been the shock of being shot? The painkillers in the hospital? The bad light last night? Her own broken brain? How had she ever thought Colby was older than twenty? In the bright morning sun, his eyes held no great wisdom, no crow's-feet from laughing or crying, and they were...green. A dark, hunter green. Not the stormy blue of the Pacific. His face was rounder, less angled than she remembered. In the bright light, it was clear that his hair shone more brown than blonde.

She backed away from him and knocked into Stiles, whose face was filled with unspoken pain. Stiles had blue eyes, but they were not the color of the Pacific on a cloudy day. The only good thing about Aberdeen was the fantasy she'd created. But her fantasy died in 1994. Aberdeen was nothing but a slow death. Kurt had known that all those years ago. Colby probably didn't even understand her references, the poor kid. He'd just wanted to have a little fun in this dead man's town.

Milly backed away from the awkward group—her husband, her only remaining friend, and her silly tryst. She turned from the hurt and desperation on their faces, turned away from the frowning, dying town, and ran past the city limits of Aberdeen.

The smiling faces of the decaying horde greeted her. They extended their arms in welcome. Their melting skin was a beautiful brackish blue, the blue of the Pacific, which she could just smell over the decay. And even decay smelled better than Aberdeen.

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