

What You Know

Geoffrey Girard

It might have stopped with the lists they'd made.

But, Michelle had only glanced at them. Had they filled the page? Kept within the lines? Had Tess Barber put down anything at all? Was Brendon McCarty's writing still hopelessly illegible? She really hadn't looked at what they'd put down.

She pushed back, deeper into the kitchen's shadows, her body trembling. Buster barked somewhere outside, but the dog's voice sounded empty and distant, like a ghost dog. She eyed the counter above and thought again of grabbing one of the many knives there, one of the really big ones.

Her husband, Ryan, did not own a gun. He'd stepped outside armed only with himself. She'd known that would not be enough, and now she hated him for it. Moments before, he'd stared at her with his what-am-I-supposed-to-do-about-it look, his weak look, his little boy look. "What'd you think it was?" he'd asked.

How could she even begin to describe what she'd just seen, and did she need to when Katie Gibbemeyer already had, in the uneven handwriting of a third grader?

A monster so terrible and so ugly that it blinded or melted anyone who looked directly at it. This monster snarled, growled and croaked. It had tentacles with claws to move, 1 red eye, rows of 100 teeth with fangs. There were snakes in its hair. It went past by and it smelled so bad, it could kill a skunk.

Ridiculous. Moronic. And yet...

That terrible smell. *God help us.*

Katie Gibbemeyer with the tiny freckles on her shoulders and the Abercrombie t-tops and the white bows in her black hair.

Fuck Katie Gibbemeyer.

The creature had been mostly lost in the shadows, but she'd seen it just the same. Taller than any man, the long strands of wriggling snake hair, the tall row of tentacles pushing it across the concrete toward the house, the single red eye glowing in the darkness. Just five minutes ago, outside the window and moving slowly across the back porch. *Her* back porch.

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Then came the screaming, and the unanswered calls to 911, and the shouting at Ryan.

And the looking at knives.

Before all of that, though, there was just The List, and the ‘First Rule of Writing.’ *Write What You Know*.

She’d heard that one before, when one of the innumerable local authors, Mr. McCollough, had come to the school and given a talk in the auditorium. He’d done a whole half-day on where writers got their ideas, research for young writers and how to best use senses to describe things. The kids liked seeing a new face, while she and the other teachers had appreciated the breather of another ninety minutes filled.

She’d invited him to speak again, emailed a very professional request, but he’d not yet responded. Then, she’d tried four others. Rezer. Shelby. Matthews. Davies. None of them had responded either. Except one.

“*GO AWAYYM*,” Matthews had dashed back by email.

Fine, whatever. Truth be told, she didn’t need some two-bit fiction writer, one that few people outside of New Bedlam had ever heard of, to help her students with this one. It would have been nice—it was a simple enough exercise.

I am Writer, hear me roar. She’d just hammered the kiddies with a barrage of questions for fifteen minutes until they’d filled their sheets: Do you have a sister or brother? Are you the youngest or oldest in the family? What is your favorite restaurant? Do you have any pets? What’s the funniest thing you’ve ever seen? What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever seen? What is your favorite holiday? What hobbies do you have? What does your father do? Et cetera. Et cetera.

“See.” She’d smiled honestly at the end. “Look at how much you know.” The kids had seemed pleased too.

The answers running down the left side of one sheet read:

girl, daughter, sister, oldest, brown hair, I am a fast runner, I am tall, tonsils out, Florida, Baltimore, pet goldfish, riding bike, french fries, Opa’s boat, ghosts singing, piano lessons, babysitters are sometimes mean, dead people smell bad

Another read:

W.O.W. lvl 37 warlock (horde rules!), X-box, only child, eye patch, Colts, soccer team (Lizards!), guitar Hero, chapped lips, hermit crab (smelly), Mark is best friend, cub scouts (boring),

drums, camping, hiking, snakes, fire, girls screaming, the bloody pond, dad works at the Bank

She'd checked these only after the roughs were turned in. And by then, it was much too late. For any of them.

Michelle cowered in the dark, damning Katie Gibbemeyer and the others, wondering almost crazily what the 'Second Rule of Writing' was. She didn't know...didn't care.

It never should have gotten past the lists.

TEACHER:	Michelle Suter [Grade 3]
SUBJECT:	Language Arts/Writing, Computer Science
ASSIGNMENT:	What You Know
DURATION:	Five 30-minute sessions
DESCRIPTION:	Students will brainstorm list based on their own lives, then write creative paragraph based partly on list, proof, then type final draft in a word processing program. Post completed stories on the class webpage where students will then participate in a Venn diagram activity to compare any similarities and differences among classmates.
MATERIALS:	Paper and pencils, dictionaries, computers, class web page or bulletin board, scanner, Venn diagram worksheet [attached]

AFTER THEY'D MADE their lists, Michelle had each student pick just one of the things/people/places on the sheet, the one that '*you find the most interesting*,' the one that '*you feel the strongest about*' and then write a one page story based around that one thing. "We'll proof on Monday and then type them on the computers."

Proof.

A funny word, now that she thought of it. It had so many meanings.

Driving home on the day they'd made the lists, *The Car* had passed. Caps for emphasis. A proper noun.

The Car.

Proof. Right there on Main Street.

Nothing special. She didn't even recall the make, just a light blue four-door car. Its indistinctness horrifying on replay hours later. She was just passing the grocery store when it approached in the opposite lane. And then...

No driver.

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Just a glimpse. Surely not.

There was no driver.

Her mind repeated what her eyes had clearly seen. Tinted windows? A midget, perhaps. How very *Christine*. *The Invisible Man* maybe. A chill ran down her neck. Silly.

She shook off the notion and didn't think of it again until she graded the kids' rough stories the next afternoon after school. There, amid all the others, Sarah Walsh had written:

On a cold dreary day a little girl was riding her bike and a car came out of nowhere but the only problem was nobody there but the string wheel was moving. The little girl got off her bicycle and ran right next to the car. She saw no one inside. It drove away. The next day the little girl and her mom went to the park and the car was there. It was light blue and had 4 doors on it. The girl's mom was scared.

Michelle had flipped back through the other stories she'd already graded.

Alec Kathman had written something called "The House."

Once there was an ugly house that had never been touched by anything but ghosts, goblins, monsters, skeletons, and other creepy things. The house was on 1312 Rollingmeadows street and all the kids knew that address. The house had broken windows some were boarded up the lawn had weeds all over the place. NO GRASS! There was no grass at all. INSIDE there was something. One day a little girl was walking down the street and she went to the house. The door opened by its self and she walked inside and the door shut behind her.

An 'ugly' house on Rolling Meadows where, according to Alec's story, a dead woman played piano all day. Michelle knew the house. Had passed it just that morning on the way to work. She'd given the story a 9 out of 10.

Next down in the pile was Maria Whitaker's story about her mom's rose garden. But beneath that one rested Margie Ring's bizarre story, "Lake Babies," about small children who lived at the bottom of Barclay Lake.

They are very small. [present tense, she'd already noted on the side in a green pen] *They have funny bones and red faces. Their eyes shine when they laugh. Their breath is turning the lake black.* [Wonderful detail!, in green again]

She'd given the paper a 10.

She had walked Buster past the same lake just two weekends ago. It had looked dark, she recalled now. Oily, too still. Buster would not go near it.

This is 2008 in New Bedlam. I am a 28-year-old third grade school teacher making \$42,000 a year. I am the daughter of Patrick and Trisha, a wife of four years to a safe and kind man. I graduated from Purdue and still run 5k to keep in shape.

I still believe in God.

This is not happening.

She turned to the next, “Survivor” by Kellen. The boy who escaped the zombies. And the next, “Rabbit Man” by Sheilah. The giant dead rabbit, half rotted and smashed to the road behind the movie theater, the one who could talk and who could tell what people were really thinking and who knew about the past and future.

Just about every story. Twisted. Dark. Bad. Every fucking one.

There are trees that whistle and whisper to each other through the whole night, wrote Julia.

There is a town That has a worm that eats people and houses, imagined Zachery. It is 50 x 20, lives beneath Pickett Field and smells like a bunch of dead animals.

4:15 on Friday and the whole school suddenly felt unusually quiet and empty. She gazed out her room into the hallway. No one had been there.

Andrea had scribbled: *There was a zombie, cat, person who dressed like captan jack and spoke human and had a skeleton army. They tried to kill me.*

Marcus had ended his tale with: *But he went back upstairs but his was mom was there already but she said why where you downstairs? he said he was looking for the bad monster. she laughed and she says I'm not your mom! I'm the ghost. Your house is a haunted house now ha ha ha. So Marcus started to go CRAZY.*

Just like me, Michelle thought. Just like me.

GOALS:

(1) For students to develop a sense of pride about themselves through writing and sharing information about their personalities, families, and communities. (2) For students to appreciate that each person is unique. (3) To assess each student’s writing skills at the start of the year. (4) To introduce realistic and semiautobiographical fiction.

WRITING OBJECTIVES:

(1) Students will revise and edit their writing to improve content, mechanics, spelling, and clarity. (2) Students will write a paragraph describing themselves or something else familiar, including details. (3) Students will use a word processing program to type the final draft. (4) Students will complete a Venn diagram, identifying similarities and differences between them and another classmate.

THE MARKS LED AROUND the house to the back, but it was not footprints or tracks she followed. There was a long, wide trail of what looked like snot leading off the porch, past the broken hot tub and toward the other side of the house. The snot line looked slick and wet in the ashy moonlight glistening on the dead-brown grass beneath her as she followed it deeper into the darkness. The stink that she'd smelled even from inside the house, the same that Katie Gibbemeyer had written of, was something like vomit, and it grew stronger with each step she took. It had been at least fifteen minutes since Ryan had gone out to investigate—to *hunt down*—Medusa or Sigmund the Sea Monster or whatever the hell it was.

Katie hadn't named it either.

Michelle now carried the largest knife they owned. It was the big one she only used once a year, for carving the tops off pumpkins to make jack-o-lanterns. Now, as she crouched low in the night and moved slowly behind a long trail of grey snot, she felt just as ready to carve Medusa or Sigmund. Her quiet calls for Ryan had gone unanswered. She hadn't heard the dog bark either.

Michelle stepped carefully around the corner of the house. The cool night wind swayed the neighboring trees, and the Middlethon's flagpole clanged in the distance. She lifted the knife.

Ryan sat on the side of the house with his back against the brick wall. His head hung to one side and his mouth was open, with his lower jaw and lip protruding. He looked stupid, she thought at first, then, *he looked dead*.

But he wasn't, his eyes still gleamed with life. They looked right at her, in fact. Only the rest of him seemed paralyzed, frozen.

"Ryan?"

He did not reply and she crouched to put a hand against his face.

"Ryan!"

The mucous trail and stench led away from them toward the front of the house. Ryan would not move; could not, it seemed. Only his eyes could follow her.

Something flashed in the darkness behind them and she turned to it.

Almost at the street. It glowed red. A giant red eye that stared straight at her, unblinking, unmoving. Except for that single red eye, the whole world was lost in night shadows.

“Ryan,” she stammered, “what...” Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she looked toward the house next door, thinking of running. Of leaving him. The lights were all out and the whole street looked deserted. “I don’t...”

The red glow started moving slowly toward her.

“Ryan,” she tried again; her voice cracked as she said it. She was pulling at him now. He slumped over to the ground. “Damn you,” she cursed at his still form. She turned back and waved the knife at the approaching red eye. The shadow attached to it grew blacker and longer, still moving toward her.

Michelle grabbed Ryan’s arm with both hands—the knife lay dangerously against his arm—and tugged with everything she had. His heavy body moved toward her like a long twisted bag of concrete. She pulled even harder and managed to drag him to the back of the house. *If I can get us back inside*, she thought, *if I can...*

The shape moving toward her grew clearer. Michelle saw the thick cords moving atop its head and trailing down the hulking shadow of its tall, distorted body. She dragged Ryan another ten feet.

She thought suddenly of St. Louis, for some reason. What had his name been? A teachers’ convention she’d gone to two years before. Mike something... One of the other presenters that week. The first time she’d ever cheated on Ryan. The *only* time. She felt the strong hands on her waist and legs again. So much stronger. Why did she think of that now?

Because you’re saving his fucking life, she told herself and staggered backward. *Because now you’re EVEN again.*

She felt warm.

No, she thought, *it’s because you feel both alive and dead at the same time. That’s what you remember.*

She’d cut him, she found. The blood dribbled down his arm and over her hands. Michelle dropped the knife and fell back onto the ground. The approaching shape was veiled by her tears, and it had gotten so much closer already.

Fuck Katie Gibbemeyer, she thought again and started screaming. The sound carried over the rooftops and probably halfway across all of New Bedlam for all she knew. She wondered what any

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of the assholes would do if they heard. The scream echoed back and she stopped.

She heard another sound. The wet swish of the thing moving closer to her; she could actually hear it now. It slithered across the lawn with slow, long slurps. She closed her eyes and the sound moved still closer in her new darkness. Its reek enfolded her like strong hands.

An explosion shattered it all. It sounded like a gunshot, and she opened her eyes again.

The large shape had already moved over to the neighbor's lawn. Three men were now crouched around it. They moved unnaturally in the shadows, each brandishing what looked like a spear. They looked *odd*. They looked *crooked*. Their shouts and curses were garbled and rough.

Another man stepped into the scene. He was taller than the others and he brought up his hand so that the gun and his straight arm were briefly, perfectly, silhouetted in the moonlight.

Michelle cringed at the sound of the shot. The shadow thing retreated deeper into the shadows away from the others. She stood, letting go of Ryan. She'd taken a step toward the others, ready to run to them and thank them, but something about the sounds they made, the way they almost staggered after the thing, gave her reason to pause. Instead, she looked to where she'd dropped her knife.

The man with the gun stepped fully into the moonlight for the first time. Nine-year-old Andrea had left out much of the detail, but the main idea was there.

His face was triangular and unnaturally small, and there was a black patch over one eye. The other eye shined gold. The hair on its face was light brown, the whiskers rough...like a cat. It stood in breeches and high boots, a bandolee of bullets across its chest, and two holsters hanging low on its hips. It spoke and the tiny sharp teeth glinted like tiny diamonds in the moonlight.

She'd thought it'd sounded French.

Michelle felt as paralyzed as Ryan behind her.

"Laissez celui-là pour plus tard!" the shrill voice shouted after the others. "Il y a viande fraîche ici."

Michelle found the knife again.

"Venez ici, petite souris," said the figure now walking toward her. "Oh. Cette souris a des griffes."

The three men behind it also appeared more clearly for the first time. Their clothes were frayed and dirty with age and dirt. The grey skin on each sagged or hung loose in half-furled strips in some places. On one, the gleam of a slick jawbone and half a row of teeth shone clearly in the moonlight. On another, a wide flap of skin and hair and ear had been ripped from half of its head and wagged against the side of its face and neck. The last, something squirmed in the gaping black sockets of what had once been eyes. Each carried a long metal bar honed to a sharp point at both ends.

Michelle had not yet moved. *Blue screen. Crash.*

Her legs were set and she looked down to see that she'd cut herself.

The ghost dog barked again. It was a sound, it was something that she almost recognized as reality, and she looked up dreamily toward it.

Buster stood to the left of the "men." His woofs were deep but still unsure, interspersed with whining. His shoulders and back were hunched low and bristled. Michelle pulled herself forward.

"Parfait," the cat creature purred. "La meilleure amie de la femme." It lifted the gun and fired once.

Buster spun backward with a piercing yelp, and then crashed to the ground. He whined, rolling over to his side, and tried to lift his head.

The other three quickly descended upon the dog's struggling form. Stabbing. Playing. While Buster growled and tried to snap at them.

One tossed its spear aside, and then drove its head down onto her dog's neck, pulling back with a long strand of something in its own mouth. The dog snapped down onto the thing's ear as the others dropped too, digging in with their hands. Buster yelped again as one tugged something long and dripping into the moonlight. They stretched it out over the shuddering dog to share.

Slurp, crunch. Slurp.

Onomatopoeia.

Michelle found she'd actually moved some.

The cat thing stood over the scene, reloading its pistol, as the other three continued their feast.

Lights appeared down the street behind them.

Headlights!

The police or...an SUV.

It was help. Whoever it was, it had to be help.

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The lights slowed and turned into the driveway to her left. The Wiedwald family. They could...what?

Michelle watched as the SUV inched forward and the opening garage flooded new light down the driveway and onto the approaching automobile. Inside the car, she could see the whole Wiedwald family. Maria driving, tall Dave at her side. Nathan, Aaron, and baby Laura in the back. Aaron's eight-year-old face was pressed against the window, looking out directly toward her.

The SUV, with its promise of rescue, vanished into the garage, and the light and sound started fading again.

The cat thing stood directly between Michelle and the house. It, too, had watched the family's return home. Lights popped on in the Wiedwald kitchen, then the upstairs hallway. He turned to look back at her and then again at the other house.

"Please," she said aloud. Michelle wasn't sure, though, what she'd meant.

Please don't go there, leave that family alone.

Or...please do.

She didn't have time to figure out which she'd meant. The decision had never really been hers anyway.

The cat thing said something French again and gestured to the Wiedwald house. The other three lifted their heads and turned to its insistent gestures. Their faces were dark and dripping before the moonlight vanished suddenly and the four dropped back again into the shadows. They stood, clumsily retrieving their spears from the ground, before moving slowly toward the other house.

Michelle moved back to grab hold of Ryan. Her tugs were stronger now, more violent. She knew she was hurting him as she dragged him, cursing, over the porch. She saw where she'd ripped skin off his elbows and the back of his head as a faint trail of blood appeared behind them. The stink of the other creature still wafted in the air as she got him over the stoop and into the house. She slammed the door shut.

She pulled into a ball on the floor between the couch and table, arms tight around her knees, her back against the front of the couch. The whole house was dark except for one light in the hallway.

She heard a muted gunshot from next door.

Then another. She thought she heard screams.

"Here we are."

Michelle shrieked, jerking away from the sound, and banged

her face on the table. It felt as if her whole cheek had opened up, and she brought her free hand to her face.

“Easy, momma, easy now.” The voice came from behind her and she turned to where a man stood silhouetted in the hall entrance.

“Don’t be scared,” he said. The voice was rough and sounded a touch southern. “Just gonna turn on a light now.” He did so and the room flashed with light. “So as we can get better acquainted.”

He grinned in the light. A jack-o’-lantern grin. He was tall and too thin, maybe forty, his face creased with deep-rutted lines and a thin goatee. His hair was oily and thin and hung to his shoulders. He had on worn fatigue pants and a faded black Iron Maiden concert tee.

“Who are you?” she managed.

“Soon enough,” he said. “First, how ‘bout you put down that knife.”

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

He smiled again. And his teeth were too long, stained brown. Two were missing altogether. “That ain’t too friendly now, is it?”

“I’ll...”

“Nah, ya won’t.” He brought out his own knife. “This is going my way tonight, lover. Better get use to that idea right away.”

“Why? Why are you...”

“You ain’t read the story yet?”

“What...what story?”

“Ah, hell.” He stepped into the room. “Ain’t no fun if you ain’t read the story.”

“You mean...” She looked at the pile of papers. The uneven, misspelled, tense-challenged scribblings of twenty-four children.

“Yeah. Now you get it,” he said and nodded toward her school-work. “You and I can wait.”

Michelle would not move. He stepped right past her, stinking of b.o. and smoke. She thought of stabbing him—she still held her best jack-o’-lantern knife—but didn’t.

He turned to watch her, and then looked down again to thumb through the pages. “Here ya go, momma,” he said and forced over one of the sheets. “Go on, now.”

She took the sheet and tried reading. The page shivered so badly, she could hardly read it:

Once upon a time in a little town called happyland there was this guy that every night on Wednesday he would come to a different house. But he would just kill the men. But one time he went to the last house and the man was pre-peared. He took his sword and

hid behind the the door. Wants he walked in he stabbed him in the back of the head. Finaly He was DEAD.

“You’re...”

“The ‘Wednesday Killer.’ Yeah, seems so.”

“How does—”

“Beats the shit out of me,” he said and laid his knife down on the table over the other papers. “Never even fucking heard of—” He reached forward and took the paper back. He read, “Justin Ferro. It just...who fucking knows.”

“But, how did he—Justin? Katie? Those, those things.” She shook at the memory. “Tonight, I...”

“Yeah,” he looked out her back windows. “Yeah. There’s some weird shit out there for sure. Man can’t be too careful these days. But, like I said, lover, I don’t know. Did they make us or were we already here anyway and they just wrote it down or...” He shook off some thought. “It’s a whole fucking chicken-egg thing. Ya know? Only thing I know for sure is that I’m here now and I know what I like. That’s enough for me.”

“But why me? I didn’t do...I didn’t do anything. Those,” she weakly lifted her free hand at the paperwork. “Those aren’t mine.”

“I dunno.” He scratched his chin in thought like a lame movie character. “Maybe ‘cause you had ‘em write it all down. Brought it out of them. Whatever the hell ‘it’ is. Maybe ‘cause all the papers is here. Maybe it’s just your turn. But, whatever the reason, you’re some kind of beacon now. And you is burnin’ bright tonight, momma. So like I said up front, here we are.”

“It’s Friday,” she blurted.

“What’s that?”

“It’s Friday,” she said again, hopeful. “You’re...you’re the ‘Wednesday Killer.’ You...that’s what it says. That’s what—” It made sense.

He laughed. “Not bad, but I ain’t here to kill, momma. And you already know that, don’t ya?” He smiled again. “Besides, that sorry son of a bitch looks like he’s been dead his whole faggot life anyway.” He gawked down at Ryan’s still body. “Poor fucker. But you already known that, didn’t ya?”

“Please,” she said. “You can’t. You were killed. The story says you’ll die.”

“Last house,” he agreed. “Maybe. If that’s how it all works. Maybe in the last house. But that won’t be for awhile longer now. Seems things are just getting started around here.”

“Please,” she tried again. “I didn’t...it was just a stupid assignment. This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Take your shirt off.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“No,” she brought up her own knife. “You can’t—”

“It’s not a request, bitch,” he retrieved his own blade. “Take your fucking shirt off.”

“Why?”

He laughed.

“You can’t.”

“I’m gonna, lover. The shirt, then we’ll do the rest. And you’ll probably cry some like all the others, but I’m still gonna put it to you real good. All night, too, if we got the time. Like this guy here never done once. Like you want. Like that other guy gave you, your fuck buddy in St. Louis. It’ll be kinda like that.”

Michelle touched the couch to steady herself. “I...”

“Yeah, I know all about it, momma. Know lots of shit. I seen things.” He tapped his knife against his lips.

“You couldn’t...”

“When we’re done here tonight,” he said, moving forward, “I’ll introduce you to this new friend of mine. Maggot-plump rabbit lives behind the picture show. Fucker’s messed up bad but he knows some shit. You know? He fuckin’ *knows*. Told me plenty about the people I wanted to see. Told me about you too, momma. How you like to—”

“Stop!”

“The shirt,” he repeated. “I won’t again ask nicely.”

“Then kill me,” she said. “We’re not going to do this your way.”

“It’s all my way, momma,” he grinned. “Truth is, I was kinda hoping we’d have to tussle some. You never know—”

She lunged forward and stabbed out with the kitchen knife. She’d already closed her eyes when it sank into something. The man grunted. Cursed. “Bitch!”

Michelle felt her body lifted and tossed through the air. She landed hard on the floor. Literal stars flashed in her eyes, just like in a story.

When she chased them away and looked up, the man stood above her, staring at his own arm. There, her knife protruded from the back of his skinny bicep. Blood ran out from the sleeve of his

black T-shirt onto the carpet. “Goddamn,” he chuckled, holding his elbow out for a better look. “That fuckin’ hurts.”

He pulled the blade free and blood streaked out over the auburn couch. The splashes looked like rose petals—simile—then he flicked his wrist at her so the warm blood speckled her face too. “Pretty, pretty,” he laughed.

Michelle scrambled backward again, looking for something else to use as a weapon. She’d suddenly decided to live, or to die killing this monster. Whichever.

And just maybe, someday, someone would write it all down.

Michelle stood and found herself next to one of the end tables. She grabbed the lamp there and threw it. It smashed off his shoulder. She threw the Pottery Barn candle too.

Her attacker shielded himself again and the Apple Cinnamon candle thudded off his wounded arm in a splash of dark blood. He leaned back with the blow, and she charged.

Their bodies collided and she found herself crashing to the floor again. He fell with her.

Hands scrambled; she felt fingers on her leg. She found the knife. Grabbed and stabbed out. Crawled away.

He, the “Wednesday Killer,” lay half on the floor, one arm and his chest over the living room table, which had spilled over when he’d used it to lift up. He held one hand just below his chin. Blood trickled down his fingers.

“Now what?” he said.

Michelle stood above him. The blade in her hands was his, a hunting knife. Sharp on one side and serrated on the other.

“I’m going to cut you,” she said. “I’m going to hurt you.”

He smiled his crooked Halloween smile. “Come on then, momma,” he waved her forward.

Michelle took one step, and then stopped.

Something...what the hell was that?

Her whole body felt chilled suddenly. The trembles latched onto her spine and skull. It felt almost like an orgasm. Almost.

Something so terrible.

And close.

“What the hell?” her voice shook.

“You felt it too, huh?” He pulled himself to his feet. “Fuck yeah! ‘What the hell’ sounds right.”

“What...what was that?”

“No, no. Gotta split, momma,” he looked past her to the win-

dows. “Shit. Thought we’d have some time tonight. Sorry it didn’t work out.”

“What was that?”

He moved away from her and back into the shadows from which he’d first appeared. “Best finish your homework,” he said.

“Wait.”

He stepped fully into the darkness and she heard the front door slam shut. He’d left but...

She heard screaming again. A man screaming.

It was a voice she almost recognized, almost southern, and this time it was not muted or ghostlike. It was from her front steps.

She looked toward the back porch, kitchen. The basement? No. Never go to the basement. Her eyes moved upstairs.

What was it? What is out there now?

She looked at Ryan, still lying in a heap on the floor. *I’ll never get us up the steps in time.* His eyes were open, had been since the beginning. They were black and wide with fear. *We’re even.* She knew there was nothing more she could do for him now.

She started for the steps, then stopped.

Something about...

She looked back to the pile of papers. The last stories left unread; what had she missed—what else had she become a ‘beacon’ for?

She grabbed the papers and ran for the stairs as something heavy collided with the door.

The whole house shook.

She stumbled halfway up, holding tightly to the papers in her hand.

Upstairs, she slammed the bedroom door shut and locked it. She screamed as she pushed the dresser over to block the doorway.

Downstairs, the front door had opened.

She moved down past the closets and into the bathroom and turned on the light.

Screams came again from downstairs, Ryan’s screams. A moment later, it no longer sounded like her husband at all. In fact, the sound was no longer human.

She was thankful for that.

She tried blocking the noise completely as she flipped through the creased pages. She’d started making strange sounds too.

No, she looked. No. Another. Not that one...

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Then, she found it. And read.

“The Worst Thing” by Stephanie Burton.

She read, hearing it move up the stairs, so heavy, so slow.

It was “old,” she knew, and it had always been there. It was “blacker than black.” She knew the others were afraid of it. And, thanks to Steph, why.

The paper shook and tears smudged some words. They ran like grey blood down the lined page.

She finished and laid Stephanie’s paper onto the sink.

Her hands found the light somehow, flicking it off.

The bedroom door trembled once. Then opened.

Michelle heard something moving slowly over the dresser and into the room. It slid.

She backed against the sink, stilling her tears, her breathing thunderous in the total dark. Willing somehow that it would not hear or find her. That it could not see her in the dark or smell her fear.

But she’d just read little Stephanie’s story. Knew every word.

And she knew exactly what was coming down the hall toward her.

Coming to finally join her there in the darkness.

Christ, she knew.

If only little Stephanie had known how to kill it.

ASSESSMENT:

(1) How well did students behave during the brainstorming process? Did they respect each other’s ideas? (2) Assess each student’s final draft—all aspects of the story do not have to be correct, but did students take time to develop their ideas and turn in a quality piece of work? (3) Assess students’ Venn diagrams to see if students understood each section of the diagram. (4) Have students successfully demonstrated the capacity of combining real-life experience with creative writing?