

2020 Horror Story Contest

First Place: "Sleep Paralysis"

Karissa Stevey

Your eyes sink into the back of your head and your body is pressing deeper and deeper into the mattress. Your body is falling asleep, but your mind remains awake. Everything around you is like still waters, but your thoughts race from the day before. Your eyelids flick open and you feel a presence there. No one else is in the room, at least none that you can see. The trees are whistling and the wind howls, but the air is still outside. A shadow takes an appearance of a claw in the corner of the room and it looks like it just might grab you. Just as quickly as it appeared, it disappears, and you want to feel relief, but your heart continues to pound in your chest. You're afraid to look across your room because you know someone is there. Your head turns to see a lady sitting on the opposite side from you on your bed. Her back is turned and the only thing you can see are her dark, wet curls that fall alongside her back. The curls are mostly matted and water drips from her ringlets. Her chest is shuddering, and you feel her laugh weighing heavily in the space around you, but you hear nothing. The air sits on your chest in a way you've never experienced before. It's a struggle just to breathe and you want to claw at your chest, but your arms don't move. She turns her head slowly and you begin to see her decomposing skin with cracks that split her face into sections. You could easily peel her skin off like it was softened butter, her whole body and face is bloated, and you can smell the malodor of putrefaction wafting towards you. Her eyes are sunken in and they are dark and merciless. She sees right through you and she smiles with teeth that are rotten and caked with dirt. Panic sets in because you can't move or turn the light on. She knows how vulnerable you are, and she continues to cackle with fluid filled lungs, and somehow, you know she wants you to meet her same demise. You try to scream, and nothing comes out, your voice is nothing but a hoarse whisper and no one will hear you. There's a glow of light that suddenly appears, a light that could save you from the darkness, but you can't reach it. You turn on your side against your will and her arms begin to wrap around you. She squeezes tightly, compressing your lungs and it feels like ages until she lets go and until she's gone. You begin to breathe, and you feel like you're awake now, but your reality and your dreams have morphed together somehow. You don't know what to believe at this point. But it was all a dream?

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Second Place: "The Necromancer"

Nathaniel Fraticelli

It wasn't out of the ordinary to see June Kovacs digging through the custodial closets of Baylor Street Apartments. There she could be found on her hands and knees, rummaging in crowded, dusty corners, looking for something. Nobody paid much attention, because nobody cared. June was uninteresting to most of the other residents, even unsightly. Her unkempt, salt-and-pepper mop of hair, her bland wardrobe, and the unfortunate, lingering scent of urine that followed her everywhere she went made sure of this. Yes, everyone steered clear of June, and that suited her just fine.

Some of the more imaginative residents suspected that June wasn't quite right. They couldn't decide if it was in a pitiable, 'bless her heart' kind of way, or whether she should be hospitalized for her own safety. Some wondered if she was an obsessive hoarder; that given the right circumstances, an unsuspecting pizza delivery could end in tragedy with a landslide of old newspapers and cat feces. The police would be forced to cart June away for criminal negligence and manslaughter. Others thought more conventionally. "Old people can be crack addicts, right?," they would say. "Then she's a crack head."

Like many curiosities in life, this one would remain a mystery for the gossips of Baylor Street. In the coming weeks, June had failed to make appearances at her usual haunts around the complex. Additionally, the third floor was beginning to host a peculiar smell that only grew stronger as time passed. "Finally consumed by her own filth," said one. "Snorted your last line, crack head," said another. The rumors circulated, but the general consensus was that June Kovacs had finally keeled over, and it was time to call the police.

The police advised the occupants to vacate the area while they conducted their search. They had seen this before, and what experience told them was that no one wanted to be around for the stench. As the door was pried open, the smell of death filled the halls of the third floor. What was found was beyond explanation. Red, incandescent light shone through a thin haze of dust, clouding the cramped entryway. Ruinous stacks of leather-bound books inscribed with strange characters and

symbols climbed to the heights of the ceiling. Cages and traps were discovered, filled with the decaying corpses of rats and skinks; typical dwellers of apartment broom closets. Last was found the body of June Kovacs, nearly unremarkable, save for the large maw opened at the base of her neck. She was resting on her kitchen floor, surrounded by extinguished candles. Eldritch text and hieroglyphics were scrawled on the walls in what looked like charcoal and clay. Next to her body was a smaller biped, about the size of a child. Its pallid skin was interspersed with scales and fur. Upon second glance, a small tail could be seen sprouting from the back of the homunculus creature. Its body was cold, and to the casual observer, it died of natural causes. In the corner, surrounded by more candles, stood a framed picture of a young mother holding a new-born baby.

The death was ruled a homicide, but the case went so far up the ladder that the local police never heard about it again, let alone the residents of Baylor Street. In years following, it was said that voices could be heard from the condemned apartment on the third floor; a crying baby, the reassuring voice of a mother. Most residents considered this ridiculous. June and her creation were as dead as anything that ever died, and they didn't make a peep.

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Third Place: "Mosquito Bites"

Hazel Rose Hubbard

Along the edges of the shrouded bathroom slithered the unearthly creature. The wretched thing, hexed with the sinister desire for blood, hunted for survival. Dark, glimmering, and slick; its eyes, which were large and unblinking, rolled over every inch of the room. Its spiked ears lingered on every flutter of the wing. It was searching. The creature slinked across the cold tile, staining the white walls with its shadow. Then, it heard it; the sounds of a dying centipede, writhing in the drain of the tub. An ugly thing, the centipede begged for a merciless death, but it found none in the glowing eyes of the creature. The beast was unusually sadistic; it relentlessly battered the centipede until it no longer moved. An Imperial moth pressed itself against the cold glass of the window above. The sole witness of this crime; not even the moon peeked inside that window, perhaps out of fear of the beast.

The creature slipped away, back into the arms of the darkness. It resurfaced under a cast of moonlight. It had found its next target. Two masses, sleeping soundly under the false pretense of safety. The next victim laid peacefully, her arm hanging over the bed, gently caressing the dark. The creature ascended the bed, and loomed over the head of the sleeper, listening intently to the rise and fall of the sleeper's breath. The victim laid limp and unaware as the monster advanced upon her. Slowly, it peeled back the sheets of the bed, revealing the sleeper's bare ankle. Porcelain against the wash of light from the window. Without hesitation, the monster latched onto her ankle and began to drain blood from their victim.

Outside the window of the sleeper's den, the wind whistled on the gutters of the house. Morning dew was starting to gather on the mums and pansies. The familiar sounds of crickets filled the air. The sleeper roused herself from sleep, rubbed her eyes, and saw the devilish silhouette of the monster burning in the dark. Its sinister eyes gleamed. The sleeper felt no fear, however. She reached her hand out to the beast.

"Coco," said the victim. "Come here, baby." She beckoned the scaly-tongued creature.

Coco emerged and sat upon her victim's chest. The sleeper gently stroked between the creature's ears, and she purred, a low soft roar beneath her chest. Peace fell over the bedroom. The girl went back to sleep.

The next morning, as the dew upon the flowers dried under the morning sun, the two sleepers rose. The girl stood to stretch. She felt suddenly weak, and steadied herself on the heavy dresser. She looked down to see her bloodstained nightgown.

"Ack—" the girl winced at the stain. "I scratched my mosquito bites in my sleep again." Dried blood was smeared across her leg. Two coagulated bumps formed just above her ankle. "We need to buy some bug spray, Coco; this happens way too often." Coco purred in agreement.

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Honorable Mention: "Eat, Love, Praying Mantis"

Kit Decker

I have never had a pet. I have never much cared for the humans that I assume I must resemble, and I have long and flatly rejected the possibility of liking other creatures that have fur or feathers, paws and claws, scales or tails. Or whiskers and fins – there are all manner of indescribable textures and awful appendages that I have spurned. They are dangerous and dirty and they must not come near me.

Long ago, my father forbade most everything that a normal child might expect to enjoy and he did so with apocalyptic fulmination; I despaired over the prohibition of comic books, television or candy but I was openly relieved that he banned all animals from being admitted across the threshold. Most relatives were banned, too, at first by individual excommunication and then broad injunction such that our once infrequent visitors dwindled to none. Two legs – manageable of necessity but acceptable in only a few particular instances; four legs - deeply troubling, to be shunned at all costs; no legs - unspeakable; six legs, ... no. No.

Yet, after all, it seems that I have acquired a sort of pet. She is a praying mantis, a svelte torpedo of a bug with delicately hinged hind legs and triple jointed forelegs ending in tiny weapons, a kukri perhaps or a scimitar, that flash out at flies like an exquisitely miniature knife and fork. She says a patient grace before meals and gives serene thanks when sated. She lives on the rim of the small compost bucket that I set on the ledge of the kitchen window. The compost draws the flies naturally, but I think they come to her, wanting to be chosen, willing to sacrifice themselves on her altar. She skewers the flies with a subtle, almost imperceptible flick like a hieratic conjuror, works them through fast-moving pincers of her curved jaws, then clasps her hands in prayerful contemplation and bobs gently. Normally brown against the wood of the bucket, she may flush green with satisfaction, and I cannot look away.

I watch her through the window. I press my face up close against the glass. I forget the dishes in the sink as I watch her in repose and wait for her to perform her rituals. I watch the long, tubular abdomen balance on the rim, swaying on the overlong legs. I watch the perfect triangle of her

head cock robotically as her wispy antennae respond with a quiver to the tiny vibrating current of a bluebottle's wings; the huge jeweled, glassy eyes rotate at the sides of her head, and I am initiated into the timeless mysteries of her insect religion. The cult of the high priestess-hunter, the blood sacrifice and post-coital cannibalism, the shaman-chameleon who performs the animatronic choreography of worship, a sorcerer's mimesis of wood, leaf or flower; I am absorbed, I am utterly entranced.

I leave her a daily offering – a few strawberry hulls, carrot parings – then retreat inside behind the glass. My elbows rest on the sill and my forehead leans against the pane so that I am slightly stooped - that is the orthodox position of reverence that I must assume. I while away a morning, a whole afternoon, days at time. There is nothing else beyond this communion. There is no glass. I sit on the edge of the compost pail and fold back my serrated forelegs, my green fades to gray once more and I bow my triangular head to rest. In my insect half-slumber, I toy with the idea of a mate...

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Honorable Mention: "The Bleeding Portrait"

Hannah Dietzel

I was visiting my grandparent's house for my grandmother's 85th birthday. The house was nice and big, and it has housed many of my family members. But I would come to discover it had also killed one of them.

You may be familiar with the idea of decorating the wall next to a staircase. It's a nice idea so that you can look at pictures as you walk up the stairs. All the pictures on the wall next to the staircase in my grandparent's house were portraits of our family members. There's one for everyone, including me. Mine was just recently done as I had turned 18 and my parents thought it was a good time for it. In fact, everyone who was on the wall must have been at least 18. Except for one portrait. One of a little girl.

This little girl was apparently a beautiful, bubbly little girl. The stories my grandparents told of her made her out to be an angel. Maybe she was an angel, but the girl in white in the portrait was not an angel to me. She was a ghost.

When I first got to my grandparent's house, I said my hellos, gave my hugs and asked where to put my bags. My grandmother directed me up the stairs and to the left. I headed up the staircase and couldn't help but notice the portraits. The odd one out was that of the little girl. But it wasn't the odd one out just because of her age, the frame was the only frame which was red. Quite the contrast from the other golden frames. But now I know why it was red.

I made my way up to my room, dropped my bags on the floor and headed back down the staircase. As I passed the little girl's portrait going back down the stairs, I noticed it seemed stained. Like the red from the frame had gotten onto the picture. I attempted to wipe it off with my fingers, but just got the color on my hands. I wonder now why I thought that was a good idea.

I continued to descend the stairs with my now red stained hands and made it to the bottom. Later I'd thank God that I was the lucky one. I

found the bathroom and decided to wash the red color off of my hands. As I lathered the soap in my hands the colors of the white ivory bar mixed with the red from my hands and I suddenly felt very unclean. Like I had dirtied something pure. So I dried my hands and left the bathroom only to be told to go back up the stairs to wait for dinner.

As I passed it again, the portrait of the little girl now looked like my smears had covered her face and I didn't dare to tell my grandmother. But then I saw something on the ground under the portrait. A puddle of red. Blood maybe? Is that what the red stain I had touched was? Is that what I had had on my hands? Surely not. But oh how I was wrong.

The little girl's portrait was finally explained to me a few years later after my grandparents had died. The girl had fallen down the stairs and broken her neck. She died in that house and that's where her ghost remained. Her ghost had said hello to me and I didn't even know. That little girl had remained bubbly even in death and just wanted someone to play with.

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Honorable Mention: "Eggs And Then Toast"

Sarah Gressett

You wake at 9:30 AM on a Saturday and your morning is normal. For breakfast, you fry two eggs and top a piece of toast with some strawberry jam that's been in your fridge longer than you can remember. Your eggs squirm in your throat, but after pairing them with an excessive amount of water, you finally get them swallowed.

You spend half an hour reading before you stop. Despite the massive amount of water you drank earlier to swallow your eggs, your tongue is heavy and dry in your mouth. As you walk to your kitchen, you glance in the large mirror on the hallway wall and pause. You can't exactly place it, but something doesn't appear normal. Your tongue feels scratchy and reminds you of the reason you got up. You shiver and move on.

It takes you seven minutes to notice the itch on your left arm, and only a few seconds after that to notice that your veins are far more visible than normal. You peer at them, watching as they pulse strongly, large and dark, barely under the skin. You have the urge to scratch them.

After five minutes of the itching sensation growing stronger, you move to your bathroom sink to rinse off your arm in hopes of relief. The water does nothing, the scrubbing only making the itch worse. You see your face in the mirror. Your tongue is black, the same black that now flows through your veins. You hold open your mouth and stare. Without the light directly above you, you would have thought your mouth was empty. You shut your jaw immediately and turn away before your eyes are drawn back to the black veins visible through your skin. The reminder of the itch is unwanted.

You don't know how much time has passed as you lie in your bed, hand in constant motion, unable to gain reprieve as the itch grows sharper and sharper and your fingertips ache around the edges of your nails. You wonder if your blood will spill black when your skin finally breaks. You think it probably will. You've never thought of black as an itch—that is reserved for red—but you've never had an itch like this before. You wonder if there is something inside that is seeking its way out. Like the chick in an egg, you wonder if it will crack open your skin...or die trying.

You don't think you could stop scratching, even if you wanted to. You've realized that the choice has not been one you could make since your tongue turned black and your hands moved without thinking to the veins along your arm. You realize that your fate is no longer in your hands.

When your blood finally spills from the gashes you have bared into your skin, it is black. This does not surprise you. Neither does the sight of the creature that crawls out from your veins. You take in its trembling limbs and piercing eyes. It shakes itself free of the black liquid that spills from your skin, and you are so glad to not be scratching anymore that you barely question it. It steps forward, and the feeling of claws on raw skin vaguely registers in your brain. You inspect it warily, numb with exhaustion. The creature inclines its head towards you, and a rough croak falls from its beak. You see it lean down and rip off a chunk of your blackened flesh with its beak. You do not feel it, but your head falls back, and you see no longer.