

Teen
Short Story
1st Place

Nicole A.M.

It was not unusual for girls to disappear in Sunfield. Every five or so years, a girl no older than twenty-three would go missing in autumn. By the time Sheriff Walker was appointed, he'd known just as well as anyone that when a girl went missing she'd stay gone. He'd grown up in Sunfield, you see—had watched his father try to find the missing girls, wasting his life away on nothing but dead-ends. Since he'd been appointed, every five or so years sheriff Walker would spare a handful of minutes to add a file to the cabinet of cold-cases gathering dust in the station's basement.

One morning in early spring, sheriff Walker gets a call from Gerald Hansen. Mr. Hansen got up at three every morning to prepare the dough for the day's bread and pastries. It was a 10-minute walk from his little blue house to the little brick bakery on Sunfield's busiest street, which was typically deserted when he arrived. This morning it was not. That last stretch of concrete was shared with another, though for lack of light he could barely make out his fellow pedestrian from where they stood across the street. Hansen stopped at his bakery; the other person continued on. And when they walked into the light of the street's solitary lamppost, Hansen swore he'd seen the face of seventeen-year-old Shelly Baker.

Sheriff Walker puts down the phone, pinches the bridge of his nose, and takes a deep breath before picking the phone back up. He takes his time reassuring Hansen that he'd look into it—an empty promise because Hansen couldn't have seen Shelly Baker. No one has been able to since last fall.

He gets another call in the afternoon from Carmen Acosta, the town's youngest librarian. Shelly Baker is in the library.

The outside of the library is abuzz with anxious townsfolk by the time Walker arrives, closely followed by deputy Wilson. He squeezes through the crowd gathered at the library's

doors. Strangely enough, when Acosta lets them in, none of the townsfolk bother to follow, instead whispering amongst themselves and exchanging nervous looks. Acosta admirably pays it no mind, ushering him and Wilson in with a smile that would be comforting if it weren't so strained. The library is quiet, empty too, and every step seems to echo off the walls.

"I evacuated everyone as soon as she came. Thought it'd be better if there wasn't... y'know, potential collateral..." Acosta trails off, sweating bullets. Her eyes are fixed to the floor.

"Christ, Acosta. She's a seventeen-year-old girl," Walker snaps, appalled.

Wilson lets out a nervous laugh. "You never know, Walker. And besides, it wouldn't do any good to have an audience, might-might be triggering."

The air was thick with dread, and it settled heavy in their lungs. It was not unusual for girls to go missing in Sunfield, but never before had a girl come back. This was entirely new territory, and here they were going in blind.

They find Shelly Baker poring over Camus at one of the study desks at the back of the library. She doesn't look up until their shadows cast themselves over the book in her hands, and even then it's more of a cursory glance than anything. "You're blocking my light," Shelly Baker grumbles.

Wilson clears his throat. "Shelly Baker, we're here to escort you to the station for some questions."

Shelly Baker puts her book down and rests her chin in her hand. "Don't you need a warrant?" she asks, leaning forward with a lazy smirk.

"We don't need one if we've got reasonable suspicion of you being connected to a crime," Wilson explains earnestly.

Shelly Baker bats her eyes. "What crime?"

"The girls," Walker grits out. Shelly Baker perks up then, her eyes zeroing in on the sheriff, searching. For a moment it feels as though his flesh is stripped away, his soul exposed to the light streaming through the library's tall glass windows like it was one big public dissection courtesy of Shelly Baker. Had—had she always been like this, her gaze so piercing, so terrifying?

Shelly Baker grins at him, positively preening at the growing paleness of Walker's face. "Oh Mr. Walker, you never had a problem with it before! Up until today you were satisfied with forgetting us in that dusty little cabinet, not that I blame you—really, there was nothing you could've done..." She stops, and something akin to frustration flickers in her like a candle before it's snuffed as quickly as it had appeared. "No sense in causing a fuss now, you silly flock of geese—a giggle if you will. Take me away if you'd like, it won't change a thing," she murmurs, a slight bitterness to her voice, and she's looking not at Walker but past him, eyes trained on some unseeable, distant thing, and suddenly she's the girl on the missing posters again, the thin paper drifting in the wind with the red and orange leaves.

There's an unspoken rule to all the girls that go missing. The whole town knows and is in silent agreement to never discuss it. Jessica Hill is eighty-nine percent sure that they'd have looked for Shelly longer if she'd been more outgoing, if she'd been smarter, more promising, but the girls that went missing never were. They tended to be quiet, easily overlooked. Most times only their family would notice. A few girls didn't even have that. It made Jessica sick how quickly the town moved on, not because they were used to it but because they never found the girls to be anything worth missing.

When Shelly goes missing at the tail-end of november, the officers don't even bother to look like they're searching for her. The town moves on. Fall turns to winter turns to spring. It takes a week for Shelly's family to give up. They hold a funeral. The casket is empty.

Somehow Jessica isn't quite surprised when Shelly turns up in the middle of spring. She'd always been fond of the season. Shelly's mother and father cry into her hair, and the town that had forgotten Shelly is now so acutely aware of her. She's taken to a therapist. Shelly returns to school three weeks later.

A week into Shelly's grand reappearance, Jessica is called to the principal's office where she is not-so-subtly questioned about Shelly. There's a desperate edge to officer Walker's voice when he asks if she's noticed Shelly behaving strangely since she came back. Jessica shakes her head, tells him, "No, Shelly's always been like that: a little strange, sure, but no more than her usual." She's certain he hasn't noticed, even Shelly's parents haven't, the whole town so focused on her miraculous return that they've missed the fact that the color of her eyes don't match the posters from five months ago.

Most of the fanfare dies down a month later. Shelly still gets weird looks when she goes for a walk or shops downtown, but she's never been one to care for what others think. Jessica doesn't mind either, not as long as Shelly's back. They have a sleepover for old time's sake at Shelly's house. Jessica paints her nails while Shelly rants over the movie they've put on. They eat pizza for dinner and fall asleep at ten, tucked side by side in their sleeping bags on the floor. It's nice, like no time's passed at all.

"Hey, Shelly," Jessica calls out to the darkness. They had laid their sleeping bags out next to each other. Jessica only needed to shift to feel their elbows brush through the cloth, but when Shelly's voice comes, it sounds so far away.

3-8-4

“Yeah?”

“Where did you go when...” *you were missing? you disappeared?* “...got lost?” she settles on.

“I wasn’t lost, silly.”

Something cold fills Jessica’s chest. “What about the other girls? Judith and Chelsea and all the rest? You-you were the only one to return.”

“If they wanted to come back, they would’ve.” And here, Shelly sighs dreamily. “Oh Jessie, you’d have loved it. It was the most wonderful place, truly. So much better than Sunfield.”

“If it was so great then why’d you leave?”

Shelly laughs, and the sound reminds Jessica of rolling waves and distant thunder. “I thought it’d be nice to visit, just for a little while.”

Teen
Short Story
2nd Place

Nicole A.M.

You steal your father's keys and drive to the first open diner you see where you are led to a booth that gives you a full view of the parking lot. There are six cars in the parking lot, not including your father's gray cressida, and three people in the diner, all of which are occupying separate corners, two at the counter and one in a booth. A man walks out of the bathroom and settles across the woman in the booth. Four people, six cars. Assuming the man had arrived in a separate car, this still leaves two. They don't belong to the staff: you caught a glimpse of a separate, secret employee parking lot behind the diner.

The waitress taps her pen against her notepad, impatient. You smile apologetically and quickly recite your order: two eggs (overeasy), a stack of pancakes, bacon, and hash browns. You watch her disappear and turn your attention to the parking lot. Four people, not including you, six cars.

Your food arrives after thirty minutes, during which the man and the woman in the booth link arms and enter the same car, completely upsetting the already fragile balance of the world. Now there are two people and five cars, not counting the lone waitress and whatever number of people are lurking in the kitchen. Whatever. Better eat now while the food is warm. You shove the pancakes down your throat and easily devour the hash browns and bacon, but when you finally sink your teeth into the eggs, you feel like throwing up. It's not that you hate eggs, you're fine with it most days. Sometimes though, the taste is too loud, too egg-like for you—as if eggs were supposed to taste like anything else. Sometime between your first bite and your last, one of the men goes to the bathroom and a different man comes out, as if he'd been hiding the whole time.

Afterwards you get into your father's car and drive to the lake. Your father used to take you swimming here. It's funny because you never really liked swimming in the first place. The scenery is nice enough. You take the shovel from the trunk and start digging.

Your father once told you that you had a responsibility to bury the things that you loved. This was when your cat was run over by a sunny yellow Volkswagen, her organs smeared across the road in a way that reminded you of a Pollock painting in its violence, and your father took you to the backyard and handed you a small gardening spade. Obediently, you dug a hole that was at first too small, so you dug it a little wider, a little longer, until it was big enough for Penny to lay comfortably—with just enough extra space for her to stretch out. Then you cover her in dirt and for the next few weeks, you'd shovel breakfast into your mouth while outside the window the worms were having theirs.

It takes four hours of digging for the hole to be deep enough. By then, you're sweating through your coat despite the winter chill still present in the air. You have to heave yourself out, thankful that your friend allowed you to borrow her ladder with no questions asked. You'll make sure to clean it for her once you're done. You stand over the hole, surveying it for faults. It's a good size, and eight feet is plenty deep. So, without delay, you pull your father from the truck and deposit him into the hole.

You do your best to arrange the body. Unfortunately, it's a tight squeeze, the narrow walls force him to curl in on himself instead of laying flat like you know he'd prefer. Briefly, you wonder if you love him enough to re-dig the hole. Not really, you decide. In fact, you can barely say you ever loved him at all. Maybe it's because you've never quite known how to love anything, much less people, or maybe it's because you're too self-absorbed to be able to foster a worthwhile connection like your father. You don't know, and you probably never will. And for

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that, you might die alone like him. Or not. There is still time for you. Him, not so much. What you do know is that you harbor something for your father, and though it's not love, it is enough for you to bury him somewhere nice, to spend hours creating a hole deep enough for him to rest without disturbance even if it is too narrow. Maybe that can be enough. You lay him down, climb out of the hole, and stand over him, waiting for catharsis or something like it to wash over you. When it doesn't, you begin filling the hole. It only takes an hour, and the dirt settles in nicely. You want it to look neat, for the ground to seem undisturbed, and except for a few tell-tale patches of uneven dirt, it mostly does. Then you wipe the dirt from your hands, get into your father's gray cressida, and watch the lake shrink in the rearview mirror.

Teen
Short Story
3rd Place

Mia V.

When I closed my eyes, I was in bed at home. When I opened them, I was on a bus.

I couldn't remember why I was on the bus, or how I'd gotten there. I couldn't remember the year, the date, or what my address was.

But most importantly, I couldn't remember myself.

"What's happening?" the kids around me shrieked, holding their heads in their hands. "I can't- I can't- how-"

I sat, frozen, in my seat. *It's fine, it's fine, everything's fine, it's me, it's me, Come on, what's my name, what's my name-*

"Sarah!" the girl in front of me screamed through tears. "I'm Sarah!"

"James!" "Hope!" "Amelia!" The names echoed shakily around the bus.

A thought bounced suddenly throughout my brain. *MJ. Your name is MJ.*

Hmm. What a name.

"Landon," the kid next to me whispered. I felt a jolt of realization suddenly and turned to look at him. He was hunched over, holding his head in his hands. His cold blue eyes and buzzed blonde hair were unfamiliar. But something about the way looking at him made me feel wasn't.

He stared back at me like we shared an unknown understanding. "MJ," I said slowly.

"I'm MJ."

"Landon," he said, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. "Got anything else?"

"Nope, not a thing," I said. *It's okay, it's okay, it's gonna be okay...* "Any idea what's going on?"

"I wish!" he said. "You think we agreed to this?"

"Doesn't seem like the type of thing I would agree to," I said. "But then again..."

The bus stopped suddenly. The door opened. I leaned over to look out the window, but all I could see was miles of snowy hills. Kids rose from their seats, cautiously, carefully, peeking out their windows, and slowly, one by one, started filing out.

It was snowing too hard to see.

Trembling slightly, I stepped out into the wind. I heard Landon shivering beside me. We huddled together in little circles, maybe thirty of us in total. I surveyed the group. It was a pretty even split, boys and girls. But nearly everyone seemed to be about the same age.

Who would target so many teenagers at once?

From behind the curtain of snowfall stepped out a tall man dressed in a long coat. "Hello, friends," he said with a smile that gave me a chill. The group quieted. "Welcome to Evaluation."

I looked over at Landon. He shrugged, casual, but I noticed the concern in his eyes.

"You all have been chosen today for a very specific purpose. If Evaluation goes well for you, then your future will be very bright. If Evaluation does not, well..." the man trailed off, amused. *This is not okay, you are not okay, something is very wrong, you are never going home, where is home?*

"Why can't we remember anything?" one brave kid called out.

The man chuckled lightly. "Oh, my young friends. All will be explained in time. For now, simply follow my lead. Your test awaits." He turned and walked away.

"What?" Landon whispered. I could feel my heart pounding underneath my winter coat.

"Does he expect us to just follow him?" someone asked.

"Yeah, I'm not going anywhere!" someone else cried out.

The crowd grew angrier. "I want to know what's going on!"

"Someone take me home!"

Landon leaned over. "I don't know about you... but I think we should get out of here," he whispered in my ear. *Don't go, follow the man, no don't follow the man, escape, go with him, no I can't, yes you can...*"

"Okay," I agreed slowly. "Let's go."

We glanced around. No one was paying attention, Quickly, we slipped off, the opposite way than the man had gone. There wasn't much to see. Just more and more snow. I was thankful for the coat and hat I was wearing, even if I didn't recognize them.

We walked in silence for a while, both too shaken to put words together. I had finally opened my mouth to say something when I heard screams. Landon and I looked at each other, wide-eyed. The other teenagers.

"You will all get what you deserve!" I heard the voice of the man through the storm. More screaming. *You don't stand a chance, this is your last day, you're done for.*

Landon's face was filled with worry. "Come on, he said. "We've got to go."

I reached out to find him in the snow, and that was when it went dark.

I opened my eyes. I was sitting on a bus. The same bus. I was next to Landon again. He was staring straight ahead. *Oh no, oh no, what happened, what's going on...*

"Hey, Landon, you good?" I said, my voice shaking. He bent down, clenching his head in his hands. He didn't acknowledge me at all. I heard kids shrieking throughout the rest of the bus.

"What's happening? I can't- I can't"

"Sarah," one crying girl said. "I'm Sarah!"

I froze. I already knew I was MJ.

"James!" "Hope!" "Amelia!"

3-5-9

"Landon," Landon whispered. He looked up at me with those cold blue eyes.

He didn't recognize me.

"I'm...MJ," I said slowly.

"Landon," he said with a grin. "Got anything else?"

I didn't answer. I did have something else.

Something was wrong, and I was the only one who knew it.

Teen
Short Story
Honorable Mention

Shrigauri H.

Red

When he died, all I could see was the red.

God, it was *everywhere*. Flooded over the hardwood floor, soaking into the carpet, splattered on the furniture.

Drenching my hands.

And I could still see it, could still see the red, long after I'd scrubbed my skin until it was raw. After I'd hid the body and scoured the floors and burned the carpet and stopped just short of burning the whole house down—

The red was *there* like a scar, like a rot. I couldn't get rid of it. It colored the back of my eyelids when I closed my eyes. It tinted my vision every time I looked at my own hands. I could see it, dripping off my palms and gathering in the crevices of my fingernails.

I had to do it, I think desperately over and over. *I had to, I had to*, as if it could finally clear the red that haunted me. But even the words in my mind were stained with it.

Oh god, oh god, it's happening again.

The red, it's there, it's really there this time, I can see it, spreading across my windshield like a cruel blanket and seeping into the cracks in the glass.

I can feel tears running down my cheeks, but I swear my eyes are leaking red, why else would my hands be covered in it? It's not like I'm holding the body, it's not like I'm bundling the woman into my trunk or taking her to the depths of the woods in the dead of night and cleaning the car until the metal *glitters* because that *red*, I can *still see it*—

3-8-7

I didn't mean to, I plead to myself, it was an accident, she was just there all of a sudden and I couldn't swerve, couldn't do anything. It doesn't work, it never works, and I can't so much as look at my car without seeing the red, dripping over the dented metal and splattered on the rearview mirror.

I can't turn on my phone or all I'll see is news of them both, missing persons reports and then searching parties and investigations, and all of a sudden my hands are covered in it again, covered in red. Because it was *me*, it's me they're trying to find and they just don't know it yet, but it's only a matter of time before they see the red that appears wherever I go. I've been hiding it; I rarely leave the house because it appears in my footsteps, sticking my hands in my pockets if I do need to step outside, keeping the doors and windows shut and covered so nobody can see the red stains I leave on everything I touch. But I know, I know they'll see it, they'll find me, and then what? I can't plead innocent, my hands show my crimes.

I just, I can't take it anymore. It's *everywhere*, it's *following me*, it coats my walls and the streets and the sky. I see it every time I look in the mirror, creeping out into the whites of my eyes. I see it around the fingernails that I've bitten down past the quick and on my arms where I've dragged my nails over my skin countless times. Every time I breathe I smell iron and my mouth tastes like metal no matter how many times I wash it out. No matter how much I beg and beg and beg, it remains, a burning red fog, clouding my brain and my vision *and there's no way to get rid of it.*

Unless...

Maybe if I carve deep enough into myself, I can scrape it out.

Drop by drop.

3-8-7

I start with my hands.

I stab again and again and again into my left hand, my right holding the knife.

It doesn't work.

There's just *more red*, covering my fingers and the edge of the blade and the kitchen floor.

I can still *see* it, filling every corner of my vision—

I know what to do now. My only solution.

I hold the knife up to my face.

I keep my eyes wide open.

I bring the knife closer, until the tip nearly touches me.

And I *push*.

And the last thing I see is—

Red.