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## Dead of Night

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### Author Bio

Jackie McMahon '21 is an English major with a creative writing concentration and a history minor. In addition to The Mercury, she writes for The Gettysburgian newspaper. You can usually find Jackie reading a book or in the proximity of the nearest cat.

## Dead of Night

JACKIE MCMAHON

As she lay awake in bed, her mind too filled with terror to relent to sleep, Cora clutched the kitchen knife even tighter under her pillow. The handle of the knife felt too large and heavy in her small palm, but she would rather bear its weight than the possible repercussions of being without it. The air felt too quiet, too still, and she could only hear the sound of her shallow breathing. Her body tensed as headlights floated behind the window shades, but the car passed without stopping, and Cora shuddered. It was after two a.m. and the world rested, but she did not. Could not.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face. Lying there in the utter darkness, she could almost feel his hot breath on her face as he leaned over her, stinking like an overripe fruit. She hated him like she had never hated anyone in her entire life. She hated his fat fingers and his bad breath and his beady eyes and his yellow teeth. She had not known her small body was capable of containing so much visceral dislike. She wished she had a time machine, like a character in a book, so she could rewind the clock seven years and have never met him. Every bad thing she had experienced in her life, every fear, every nightmare, originated in that moment, when he had walked in their front door and smiled his stupid smile, patting her on the head. *Hi*, the monster had said to her. *I'm Gerard*.

Cora felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. Someone was coming. For a moment, terror seized her heart, but she forced herself to sit up. She knew she had to be brave. She could not spend her life cowering in the dark. Cora stared at the doorknob as it twisted, and she lifted her knife.

"Whoa, whoa," A familiar voice whispered. "Are you going to stab me?"

She exhaled, and her knife clattered to the mattress. "May."

Her sister's body was cast in shadow and she stepped inside the bedroom, the door closing behind her. "Where did you get that knife from anyway?"

"The kitchen," Cora said like it was obvious.

She could tell without seeing that May was rolling her eyes at her smart ass remark. She sat down on the edge of the bed, one slim

leg tucked under her body, seeming poised and beautiful even in such a simple gesture. Cora looked at her elder sister the way one might examine a Caravaggio or Van Gogh. May was twenty-two and she seemed like a sophisticated adult. She studied at the local community college and waited tables at a bar frequented by the rowdy trucker crowd. She dyed her hair in the kitchen sink, read poetry from her battered book of Sylvia Plath that she once dropped in the bathtub, and drank cups of five-dollar wine from corkless glass bottles. She had lips pink as oleander, eyebrows that always seemed arched in displeasure, and Cora worshipped her.

They had been the best of friends once. It felt so long ago now. Even though May was nearly ten years older, she had been a good big sister. Cora's earliest memory was of being carted around by May like a baby doll, her silent shadow wherever she went. May's name was her first word. At three, she rubbed her lip gloss all over her face in an effort to look like her. At six, she cried when May got her first boyfriend and told her she couldn't go to the movies with them. She still remembered how May used to roll her eyes and kiss her. *You're annoying*, She'd say. *But I'd do anything for you. I'd help you hide the body*. At the time, she hadn't understood what that meant, the weight of it.

That was the year Gerard came into their lives. He was husband number four. May's dad had been one, Cora's three, and they'd supposed Gerard would stick around as long as the others had. *Gerard is different*, their mother had said over their TV trays one night. *You'll see*. And Gerard was different indeed. Their mother's friends told them they were lucky to have a stepfather who seemed to care about them so much. *How sweet*, they crooned in high-pitched coos. *What a good guy*. Their mother framed their wedding photos over the fireplace, his arm around Cora's slim waist, his mouth against May's cheek while she stared down at her bouquet of plastic flowers.

Slowly May became more distant, moody even. She drifted in and out of Cora's life like a phantom. Sometimes Cora wondered if she had even been there at all, or if she'd imagined it all like some kind of hallucination, a mirage in the middle of the sweltering desert.

Now, May's hands grabbed her shoulders, her fingers suddenly seeming impossibly frail. Her black nail polish had chipped to the point of almost nonexistence. May always bit her nails when she was afraid. "Are you all right?" She asked, voice breaking. Cora tried to speak but found that her voice was failing her. She could not think of a time she had been farther from all right.

"I'm better now," she settled on.

May's hug was strong enough to take her breath away and

Cora burrowed her face into her hair, inhaling the smell of her, more welcome than Gerard's stench. May smelled like smoke and earth and home. Her lips on Cora's temple were soft as a whisper. "I should've killed him years ago. I should've driven a knife into his eye the first time he looked at me like..."

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. Cora wondered if it was the police and where they were going. *Not here*, she thought. Until tonight, he had been one of them.

"May?"

"Yeah?"

"I never realized. How much blood is in a person."

They told her in school there were five liters of blood in the average adult human, but she didn't realize how much that really was, or how hot and sticky it would feel when it covered her body and her clothes and her bedspread. It seemed so odd to her that someone like him still had flesh and veins and a heart, and that she could make it stop beating, just like that. She hadn't even expected to do it. She thought the knife would make him finally leave her alone. But then he was there, stinking of alcohol, and the knife had wedged between his shoulder blades as easy as if she were cutting a cake, and his body had collapsed on top of hers in an entirely different way.

She didn't think it would be so easy. To kill the big bad wolf.

May was looking at her through the dark, and Cora feared that she would see revulsion on her face, but there was none. "I'm sorry," her sister said. "I should have protected you better. I didn't think he would..." She swallowed. "I didn't think."

Cora shifted in bed and she almost felt like the blood was still there, despite how long she had scrubbed and scrubbed waiting for May to return. "Am I a bad person now?"

"No, Cor. He was a bad person, but you aren't."

"He said no one would believe me."

"I believe you." Three words, and yet they were everything she needed to hear. It could not take back the events of tonight, or the past seven years, but with her sister's arms around her, she felt comforted. She felt safe. Cora wished she could wrap herself in this moment, wear it like armor, to be protected when the fear and the pain and the loss returned. She did not know what was coming when the sun rose in a few hours, but for now, in her sister's embrace, she could pretend they were the only two people in the world. That they had never been hurt. That evil had never touched them.

"Come on now," May's voice was quiet and light, full of tenderness she had never known. "Go back to sleep. It's past your bedtime."