We’ve sifted through the staggering array of submissions for our Weird Words 2 short-horror-fiction contest, and a handful of eerie tales have stuck in our psyches. Over the next several weeks, we’ll run the cream of the creep here at Fangoria.com. Eventually, we’ll ask you, our readers, to vote, and three winners will be published in the pages of our iconic magazine.

Let’s start with this matter-of-fact bit of fright…

By my count, Leslie did far more wrong by me than I did by her. I was mad at first but forgave her in the end, yet she seemed to be mad more often than not. I guess all relationships have their ups and downs and it did work itself out in the end, so it is all right now. But I can’t help thinking how things could have been different. She should have just gotten rid of the house in the beginning. If she had done that, then maybe she’d be alive today.

As it was, the house was worth next to nothing. The painting on the wood siding was peeling where it wasn’t rotting, and shingles were found up and down the street after every storm. Virginia creeper choked the front yard, squeezing out every blade of grass or flower like a playground bully. Leslie talked about the wonderful things she was going to do the house: the purple siding and the pink shingles with the black shutters. She was going to have silver curtains, and yellow stepping-stones leading to a sky-blue door. But Leslie liked the creeper, which she often called ivy, and she was gonna name the place Creeper’s Knoll.

If it wasn’t for the house, maybe we could’ve gone back to dating, like before college separated us. That was really the first thing that got in the way. The first time she abandoned me. But I couldn’t get too mad about that; I understand why she did it. She said long-distance was too difficult to manage, and I didn’t want to get in the way of her studies. I would have gone too, but

I wasn’t accepted to her school and I didn’t have the money.

On one of our last dates, we went to a winter carnival. Leslie was home for a few weeks over Christmas break. She didn’t want to go out because it was cold, but I finally talked her into going to the carnival. It was maybe a week till Christmas, and we rode the Ferris wheel because I told her the lights of the town would look really nice. When the ride moved slowly, still filling up with people, we didn’t talk. We watched houses and lights come into view as we rose higher and higher.

At the very top, I looked over at Leslie. She was snuggled tightly in a black wool coat with a matching knit scarf and hat. A crescent moon glowed beside her. It illuminated her ash-blonde hair, like silver threads that shifted slightly in the breeze. Her breath floated in the air like wisps of fog. It looked like her soul, the essence of her being, leaking from her, drawn out by the moon. I kissed her then because she looked so perfect, and I just wanted a little bit of that to seep into me.

She broke up with me in a letter in the New Year. She didn’t call or visit. It was so weird to open that letter, excited at correspondence, and see it was over. That really pissed me off. I’m not sure I forgave her 100 percent for that. I never lost track of her, though. She finished college and moved back to town eventually. I would run into her sometimes, but it wasn’t the way it was before. Not until her aunt died and left Leslie the house.

That damn house!

Then Leslie came ’round more often. She’d come and sit in my living room, drink whiskey and cola and stare at Creeper’s Knoll. I’d make us drink after drink until her words slurred and I’d call a cab for her.

Eventually, I gave her keys to my house in case she wanted to come over when I wasn’t there. One day, she was there before me. She was sitting in front of the window as usual, but she wasn’t staring at the house. Now she was watching a point on the floor. Her jaw was tight and her face stony.

“What’s in that locked room? The room where the utility room used to be?”

I said nothing; it was none of her business. Not until it was finished, anyway. Then I noticed the papers spread across the coffee table and sofa. My papers. My private papers. Anger flashed through my body, emanating from my stomach and heating my fists and face.

“Why were you looking through my stuff?”

“I didn’t mean to,” she said. “I just saw the picture and was curious.”

She didn’t look at me. Her voice was soft. A million images flashed in my mind, so many options for action that it was confusing. I wasn’t ready, though. Not yet, not quite. It was all arranged, just not quite ready.

“Leave, please,” I said through clenched teeth. “If I can’t trust you to respect my privacy, then just leave.”

She said nothing else and left. She didn’t leave anything behind. She had to have expected I’d get mad; I had every right to. I immediately regretted it, though. I just lost my temper for a moment. I was sure she would come back; she had to come back to watch Creeper’s Knoll.

She didn’t come back. She didn’t watch the house anymore. She started to watch me. She hung curtains—which were a nice, sensible beige, by the way, not silver—in the front windows and peeked out between the panels. During the day, workmen came with giant slabs of drywall and packs of laminate floors and tiling. At night, I saw her, shifting the curtains, sitting in the dark, watching me.

I couldn’t take it anymore. She was going too far, watching my every move. We were separated by a street when we should have been together. I decided to end it. Ready or not, the time had come. I called her at work, where I knew she had to answer the phone.

“Look, Leslie, I just wanted to say I’m sorry. We should get a drink and go back to being friends.”

“I don’t know, Jaimie. It’s just…things have gotten complicated.”

“I know, but it’s OK, we can sort it out,” I said. Things had changed, but I was going to end it. “Look, I’ll bring the wine and we can sit up in Creeper’s Knoll. I know you’ve had some work down. I want to see what you did.”

There was a wait, and then she agreed. We had a date at 7 p.m. All of the work I had done was coming to fruition. Tonight we could be together.

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She hadn’t come home that summer after she broke up with me, or the next winter. She took summer classes and attended winter sessions. She moved off campus and had an apartment there to help accommodate her new schedule. I missed her so much it was maddening. If I’d ever had real money, maybe I could have gone to college as well. I could have my own apartment and take classes. I could have been collegiate too.

I’d hoped Leslie would come home when my mom passed. I’d hoped she would come to the funeral. We were supposed to be friends, at least. But she didn’t come. She didn’t send a letter. I still missed her. But she came home early from college; because of all her extra classes, she got to graduate early. But that didn’t change anything, either. She had her 9-5, and she didn’t visit me. So it was good what I did.

After her aunt died, she came back to me. I should have thought of that the first time. But I never counted on that house. I didn’t really think she would get it, much less like it and move in. I mean, I would have lit it up, if I’d known Leslie would invest all her time and attention in it instead of me.

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Leslie was at Creeper’s Knoll right on time, which was surprising, because she was usually late. Especially when it was important to me, like the night of the winter carnival. She was wearing the same coat she had that night, too. We went inside together. Leslie was very quiet.

“Well, I’ve got some wine and glasses,” I started. I opened the top of the bottle. “I didn’t realize it was so expensive. I couldn’t afford those ones with the corks.”

I tried to sound jovial, but Leslie’s attitude was making it difficult. She kept moving back from me, practically jumping. She used one hand to move her hair, constantly putting it back behind one ear. The other hand she kept firmly in her pocket.

“Creeper’s Knoll is looking nice. Very sanitary, at least. When are you finishing the outside?”

I tried to hand her a glass, but she made no effort to take it.

I sipped the wine. I still held Leslie’s glass too.

“Everyone always whispered about you,” she said. “Suspected you of…various things.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Have you already been drinking?” I laughed.

I had to force casual now, as the situation was out of my control. I couldn’t help that she was still angry, that she kept talking when she should have just been quiet.

“When your mother died. And then went around moping about me, asking where I was. Asking about me. Talking about me. And every birthday, every holiday, you sent me cards…saying it was OK to come home, how you had arranged everything. I thought it was a joke. Just a sense of humor. You were so weird sometimes.”

My eyes were locked on the wine glasses in my hands.

“But you had those boxes with my picture on it. All those photocopies of what you sent. Everything I sent…and some stuff…I don’t know how you got it.”

“I had arranged it, I was all ready. You just wouldn’t come back,” I said.

“And so you killed her, right? You killed your own mother first and then my aunt, right? Arranged it all so that I would come back to you?”

“You were away for so long, when you should be here with me. I love you. And you need me.”

“You’re f**king nuts.”

The glasses slipped from my hand. The shattering startled me. When I looked at Leslie, she was gripping a revolver in both hands, pointing at me.

“I’m going to call the police now, and you’re gonna stand right there.”

I stepped toward her. Each step forward, she stepped back.

“Why would you do that when I’ve worked so hard for us to be together? Despite whatever I did, it worked, didn’t it? You’re here. You’re with me. One of your plans is finally coming true; you’re turning this place around. We could be happy together. You have to love me now.”

I didn’t see a phone behind her; I don’t know where she was trying to get to.

“You’ve always creeped me out a little, Jaimie. You’re nice…you were nice, but you’re deranged. You need help, Jaimie. I don’t love you.”

I didn’t listen to her. What she said didn’t make a difference. I loved her. I was going to have her. I was going to have her completely to myself. There was no point talking anymore; she was angry, like always. It was definitely the lowest point in the relationship.

Her finger jerked near the trigger, but she didn’t fire. I just kept moving toward her. Maybe she was expecting me to give up. For me to just say I was joking. I was never one for practical jokes, though; she should have known that. She should have fired. If she had shot me, I probably would have stopped. I was determined, but not insane; I couldn’t follow through with my plan with a gunshot wound. Instead, she tried to run past me. I stopped her by grabbing ahold of her silvery hair.

She yelped. It was a funny-sounding little cry. It made me laugh. She struggled harder against my grip. A few strands came loose, but she wasn’t getting away. She might have fired the gun. I couldn’t hear very well then. Only the sounds of her frantic breaths were of any interest to me. She still didn’t get me, though. I think she was just trying to make noise. Maybe she was screaming too. I really don’t know. I pulled her within reach of my other arm until I got a hand around her neck.

Then I was able to get her against a wall and use both hands to strangle her. I can still hear her choking and those little yelps she made. Then I laughed until her struggling legs kicked me. Then I was really angry. I pushed her against the wall. I pressed harder against her throat. The gun fell to the floor. Leslie’s fingers scratched at my hands.

I waited for that moment. Tears fell from her eyes. I didn’t know if she was crying or if that was an involuntary reaction. Her eyes still moved rapidly, like she was searching for an escape. The moment was getting closer.

She moved less and less. She sputtered. Her eyes were still. She was petting my hands more than trying to get away. Her eyes became more glazed.

Then I made my move. I kissed her. Only our second kiss ever, and this time I got what I wanted. Her final breath, the last exhalation of her being, the perfection of her soul.

She shouldn’t have kept that house. If she had just thrown it all away and sold the property, she wouldn’t have found those papers. And maybe she would have learned to love me. I was making her a room. A special room just for her to be happy in. I bought her that backpack she wanted—a really big one with flags of all different countries. I painted ivy trim once I knew she liked it so much. I even got her a dollhouse with the colors she wanted for Creeper’s Knoll. I think, if she gave it a chance, instead of being mad, she would’ve liked the pictures of herself. She looked most alive, smiling and happy in them. I cut out the other people; they didn’t matter, I wanted just her.

I’ve done my best to make her look the same, but her eyes clouded and her face stiffened before I could get the expression right. The smell should go away soon; my mom’s only lasted a few weeks. I hadn’t expected to have to learn taxidermy. But I think I’ve done fairly well in the short time I had. I wish I hadn’t bought all those chains now, or reinforced the walls with steel beams. That’s money I’ll never get back.