We've almost reached the end of our WEIRD WORDS 2 short story contest. Once the deep red ink dries, we'll be calling on our readers to vote on their favorite tale… But until that day comes, cuddle up and enjoy this nasty little hot mess, a scrappy and sexy little nightmare called…

"WAIT FOR ME"

By M.E. Girard and Melissa Silva

A strange empty feeling settled in the place where Taylor's heart used to be as she stared at her pencil drawings laid out on the office desk. Miss Mackenzie had her counselor face on, betraying no reaction, but there had to be a hint of disgust or shock hovering right behind her eyes, even if Taylor couldn't see it.

"Is this all you have?" Miss Mackenzie asked, gathering the pages and pushing them toward Taylor. Taylor shrugged and her eyes found those of the girl in the drawings—CJ's eyes. Miss Mackenzie sighed and lowered her head to Taylor. "I know you like drawing, Taylor, but a journal typically includes some writing. In order to move through your grief, you need to acknowledge it, explore those feelings."

"I just mostly wonder where all the water went," Taylor said, bringing one ankle up over a knee and slouching back into the office chair.

"Water?"

Taylor reached a hand to the first drawing, lifting it like a teacher presenting something for the class to see. She pointed to the representation of a swollen CJ, skin bluish, tongue protruding, and the eyes—CJ's perfect brown eyes—unfocused and obscured by heavy lids. "When somebody drowns and they're not found for a long time, they fill up like puffer fish. Like a fucking sponge. I read about it on the internet. Anyway…where does the water go? Do they have to let the body dry? Does it leak out of every pore and make puddles?"

"Taylor—"

"Maybe this is the kind of shit you wanted me to journal about? But it feels like you're trying to turn this into some kind of extra credit assignment—which would be fine if I was getting actual extra credit. My parents already think I'm some fucked-up sociopath looking at drowning victims online just for kicks." Taylor raked her hands through her "faux hawk" with shaky fingers that nearly yanked her eyebrow rings off her face.

"How often do you think about CJ?"

Taylor ran her sweaty palms against her jeans. "All the time."

“And how often do you think about CJ as a dead person?” Miss Mackenzie asked, folding her hands together and angling her body forward.

Taylor’s black eyes narrowed and she cocked her head. “You’re pretty hot for a high school guidance counselor.”

Miss Mackenzie shook her head and her lips stretched into a thin smile. “We’ll leave it at that for today. But, for our next meeting, I expect actual words in your journal, Taylor.” She rose, smoothing her blouse over the simple black dress pants she always wore. Always tight in the ass and flared at the feet. “Get back to class.”

Taylor bounced up, swiping her drawings off the desk, and headed for the door. Through the window, Ashton’s face hovered with his lazy grin. Taylor pulled the door open and hitched her chin up at him.

“Did you ask her yet?” she asked, closing Miss Mackenzie’s office door behind her.

He balled his fists, making his biceps bulge, the way he did whenever he felt like a douche. “Working on it. But, the three of them are like, stapled together. I tried to ask her after hockey practice, but she looked too busy with prom ballots and shit.”

Taylor reached into her backpack to glance at her cell phone, then dropped it back inside. “You could pretend to be some hard-core homework junkie and join Danielle’s study group. But then I’d make fun of you.”

He sucker-punched her in the arm. Taylor tried to retaliate but he ducked. She gave him the finger and took off down the hall.

“So…how’d it go in there?” he asked, falling into step next to her.

“It was so therapeutic, Ash. I think I might be cured.” She uttered a twisted chuckle and swung her backpack over her shoulder as they wove through the bodies crowding the hallway. “Whatever. At least I get out of class, right?”

“What do you think she’d say if she heard you talking like this?” Ashton asked, his casual attitude having faded into an uncomfortable solemn vibe.

“She’d probably ask me to journal about it.”

“Not Miss Mackenzie,” he said, grabbing Taylor’s sleeve to make them both halt, “I mean CJ.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ash—CJ’s can’t talk. She’s a little dead right now.” Taylor ripped her arm out of his grasp.

Ash released a sigh. “Look, Taylor—”

“Don’t.” She plodded down the hall, keeping her eyes aimed at the floor. All around her, the walls and lockers were plastered with prom posters. Who would be King? Who would be voted for Class Idiot? How did any of that petty high school shit matter when CJ was dead? When Taylor was still here, remembering every single second of CJ straddling the guardrail, looking over the retaining wall; of the carefree giggle escaping CJ’s lips as she threw her hands up…as she toppled over the edge and…just fucking drowned.

A cool breeze crept up, making the posters rustle, riding up Taylor’s back.

She stopped, letting all the sounds around her fade away. She reached into her bag again and pulled out her phone. Through the display screen, a smiling CJ stared up at her. Looking the way she always had. But soon, the image warped under Taylor's gaze. The golden skin fading to a bluish grey, the thick black hair thinning into a web of something you'd find at the bottom of a bathtub drain. And the eyes—always the eyes.

Taylor threw the phone in her bag and marched right out the door.

#

One week later, college student Jenna Morrison stared at her boyfriend, Samir, through her computer video chat screen. He filled her in on details from back home but Jenna was preoccupied with the sudden itching spreading through her skin.

The nerve endings switched gears, giving way to sharp needle-like pains. She stared at the screen, mouth hanging open, a scream poised to burst out. It was as though every single cell of her body suddenly needed space, needed to split apart.

And they did.

Like her heart was the bomb and it went off.

A shower of bloody tissue bits rained all over Jenna Morrison's room, obscuring the tiny lens of the camera so that all Samir could see was red.

#

Taylor doodled in her journal through Math class while Mr. Savino taught everyone else how to

isolate to find the value of "x". When something awful happened to you, you became this translucent body that people stared at and felt sorry for, or whisper about. Taylor could've written about that, but instead, all she could come up with was one sentence: *CJ and me—that was real and now it's dead*
.

The bell rang and Danielle sauntered by, flanked by Leah and Allison. Danielle hesitated and whirled around, sending her posse off without her. Taylor shoved her things in her bag and eyed her.

"We want to have a memorial page for CJ in the yearbook. I just figured…I mean, would you like to write something for it?" Danielle said, clutching her books to her chest, tight ringlets falling across her eyes.

CJ was real and now she's dead, Taylor thought, as she pushed to her feet. Instead, she said, "Not really my thing. But you know who you could ask? Ashton. He knew her pretty well."

"Oh," Danielle said, eyebrows going up in surprise. "Yeah, okay."

On cue, Ashton appeared, bending to the side with the weight of his hockey bag on his shoulder. Danielle glanced at him with an awkward smile, rushing by during her escape to the door. Taylor kicked her chair in place and sidled up to Ashton.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"Just hooking that up for you, dude." Taylor wiggled her eyebrows. "You're welcome."

"She just looked at me like I have herpes and ran out of here," he said, shaking his head.

They walked to Taylor's locker. The hall emptied as everyone rushed to get the hell out of there for the weekend. Ashton dropped his bag to the ground and leaned a shoulder against a nearby locker. "You might not be the only one skipping prom."

"Who says I'm skipping prom?"

Ashton shrugged.

"Just because CJ's dead doesn't mean I'm not going to prom." Taylor shoved things in her bag, then slammed the locker shut. "She picked my outfit. And she had the tackiest '70s baby-blue dress. I'm gonna go, and drink some punch, and wear my cheesy-ass tux."

Ashton looked ahead, like none of what Taylor had just said made it into his ears. But Taylor knew he'd heard. He probably didn't know what to say.

No one ever knew what to say.

#

Raven Morales padded to the diving board, staring at the glassy water below. She was alone. The rest of the swim team was still in the locker room. She's been feeling off all morning but she couldn't skip practice. Raven inhaled a gulp of air and dove.

She surfaced, gasping.

The water ate at her skin. She reached up to wipe the water out of her eyes and they came

back slick with warm blood. Raven thrashed toward the ladder. Her organs tingled like they were expanding, and her skin rippled like it couldn't contain her insides.

The pain sliced through her, making her see white.

And then there was no more Raven.

Only a large red stain spreading below the surface of the water that had once again returned to glass.

#

Taylor stood next to the punch bowl in her cheesy-ass tux, staring out at the dance floor. A dateless Ashton stood next to her, gaze zeroed-in on Danielle as she twirled with her two clones. The spotlights threw colors over the dancing bodies and Taylor imagined CJ out there, that blue dress flowing.

Mark sauntered over, exchanging a handshake with Ashton. "Hey man, did you hear they found another dead girl? They're saying it might be some amped-up flesh-eating disease. My aunt works for the coroner and she says the biggest piece they found is the tip of a nose. It was just goo and shit."

"Dude," Ashton said, his tone sharp.

Taylor rolled her eyes, turning her back on the guys to pour herself punch as Miss Mackenzie moved up to the table. She smiled like Taylor's presence was some sort of therapeutic move. Taylor sipped, avoiding her gaze. She thought of earlier, of sitting on CJ's grassy blanket, and staring at the headstone. Of draping the blue dress over the marble. But her mind wouldn't stop making CJ's skin turn the same color as the dress. It wouldn't stop stealing the sparkle out of her eyes and replacing it with the half-open, unfocused glare.

On the floor, Danielle folded over. She heaved but nothing came out of her mouth. Leah and Allison jumped back but recovered quick, grabbing Danielle around the waist and dragging her toward the bathrooms.

“Your girl’s drunk,” Taylor said, smacking Ashton’s arm.

He stared around until he noticed the girls disappearing through the banquet hall exit.

When they returned, Danielle seemed shaky on her heels, ankles buckling under her. But she stared at Taylor and Ashton with a wide grin. She strode over, leaving her girls behind.

“Holy shit,” Ashton muttered, straightening his tie and clearing his throat.

Taylor watched as Danielle moved closer, looking pale and coated in perspiration.

“I wanna dance,” Danielle said, but the words were aimed at Taylor. Taylor glanced at Ashton, confused looks mirroring each other. Taylor’s mouth opened to protest but Danielle held a hand up. “I wanna dance like now, Tay. You promised and it took me forever to get here and I don’t know how long I can stay, so let’s go.”

Taylor’s breath caught as her feet sprang into action, following Danielle. They stopped in the middle of the dance floor, other couples parting to make room for the girl who would likely be crowned Prom Queen. She grabbed Taylor’s hands and placed them around her waist.

“Danielle?” Taylor asked, staring into the blue eyes of the Prom Queen, but the irises seemed to be darkening.

"Danielle's just the dress I'm wearing, Tay." It was Danielle's voice but it was all wrong. She cleared her throat. "This is messed up, I know. I've been trying to find a way to tell you I was coming."

Taylor reached up, running a thumb along Danielle's lower lid where a drop of blood had spilled over.

"Shit. I suck at this," Danielle said, bringing her hands up between them where the fingernails were oozing and peeling off. Her eyes, even filling with blood, were the same eyes that stared back at Taylor from her cell phone screen. "Okay, listen, I fucked up, acting like some psycho hippy and falling off the rail. It's not your fault. I'm the one who wrecked us. I love you so much, Tay."

"I love you, CJ." Taylor wiped at the blood stringing down Danielle's cheeks but more kept coming.

Danielle brought her hands to her head, fingers pressing at her temple as her face contorted with a grimace. The remaining fingernails ripped off and landed in her hair and on her shoulders. "Dammit! This is worse than drowning. Oh, shit. I'm sorry, Danielle."

"CJ, what's happening?" Taylor grabbed the sides of Danielle's face, locking eyes with her.

Danielle wheezed and gurgled. Little red lines formed under her skin and they filled with blood, pulsating to break free.

"Just a few more tries and I'll get it," she said. "Wait for me."

“Oh my god!” Leah howled, backing away and bumping into dancers. The rest of the crowd shuffled around Danielle and Taylor. Screams broke out and feet hit the floor running.

Danielle stood there, little fissures of blood ripping open.

Taylor took a step back, then another. Warm droplets sprayed Taylor and whoever was running by Danielle.

The puddle that was Danielle landed to the floor with a splash. Gold dress stained red, pieces of raw insides making the dance floor slick. Making those running for cover fall and land on their faces. Some didn’t get up again.

Taylor stared at the floor until a hand wrapped around hers.

“Come on,” Miss Mackenzie urged, pulling her toward the kitchens. Taylor followed. Screaming and crying rang out around them but none of it was reaching Taylor. They snaked through the prep tables, and shelving units. Others were running wild, trampling whoever kept them from getting out. Miss Mackenzie burst through the back door, still holding on to Taylor. They ran to the back, through an alley, down a sidewalk, until they slowed their pace in a quiet residential street.

Taylor looked down at herself, at the pieces of Danielle soaking into her cheesy tux. Then, she looked up at Miss Mackenzie.

At those eyes that weren’t quite Miss Mackenzie’s, but that were so familiar…

THE END