

## Scary Stories

**Liv Schlosser**

The book is hidden on the far side of the school library, a room always smelling of dust and an anticipation for childhood nostalgia hidden in that green carpet. It is on the fourth shelf, only reached by the heights of the older kids. I am tall, though, so Mia drags me to the corner, whispering that if we use the stepping stool, I can reach it. She will check it out and keep it until our weekend sleepover.

I don't want to touch the book. It won't bite, nor will it burn my fingers. The spine is black and tattered. It's far older than many of the plastic wrapped novellas populating the shelves. Mia says it's because it's been passed through generations. Everyone who's ever owned it has perished suddenly and without explanation. I don't doubt it, but the publication date would disagree. I can barely bring myself to grab the thing, much less open it to start searching. When I grab it, I catch a glimpse of the cover.

There's a clown on the front. Or something like that. It's ballooning head sprouts from the earth, a pipe clenched between teeth revealed by peeling gums. The illustration looks at me, and I look away. It's a non-sensical picture. The head has no body. It's larger than the little shack beside it. It's scary for the sake of itself. It angers me. I hand it to Mia like my fingers have been singed. Mia calls me a *big baby* when I go look for another book without her. I fall asleep in a struggle that evening. I close

my eyes and I see the clown. He sees me.

Mia keeps her promise that weekend. We squeeze into the crawl-space beneath the stairs. I sneeze from the dust and ignore the thought of creepy-crawlies populating the corners our little, pink flashlights can't reach.

Mia sits cross-legged, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She sets her light in her lap. It illuminates her face from below. I'm sure I've seen a DVD cover like that in the horror aisle of the Blockbuster on Maine. She opens the book. The cover faces me and I don't look at it. I stare at the thin line of light peeking through the door instead.

"Have you ever heard of the curse of Bloody Mary?" Mia says.

I shake my head. She's not reading from the book. Mia is a storyteller. The book is her prop. I know what Bloody Mary is, but I indulge her.

"The curse of Bloody Mary is centuries old, passed through generations of tortured families. The legend goes—" Mia starts to read from the book. She's found an expert that explains the rules of the game. Then she ignores the rest of the pages and makes her own story. Later we end up in the second-floor bathroom, whispering to not wake her mom in the room over, and holding each other like something might jump out of the dark corners of the creaking house. The bathroom closet is ajar. I want to close it, but a gnarled, rotting hand might reach out and grab my own. Neither of us can convince the other to say the words *Bloody Mary* three times in the mirror. I picture Mia with blackened, bloody eyes anyway. She'd scream for me to help her. Then Mia grabs me with a little *BOO!* and runs back down the stairs. She laughs when I join her in the crawl space, glad the darkness hides the tears in my eyes. I don't look at her much for the rest of the night.

Mia says we should check out the book again. We only read one story in it last time.

"What about the poltergeist story? I saw another one about someone getting buried alive, isn't that scary?" Mia waves her fingers in my face like it might scare me. My stomach flips but I'm too embarrassed to admit it.

I check out the book but tell Mia to keep it in her locker. I tell her my parents would be mad if they found it in my backpack. In reality, I don't want it anywhere near me, like the musty old pages would curse me in I laid a finger on one of the ghastly illustrations. I have nightmares

every other night, now. It had them before, but it's been harder to fall asleep. When I close my eyes I see that clown looking at me. I see it opening its mouth and laughing. It's laughing at me because I'm scared.

The next sleepover ends early because I'm sick. I feel sick, like hardened hands are twisting and strangling my guts, tearing them apart hungrily. My dad picks me up in his white truck and asks what's wrong. I snap at him and I have a stomachache. He asks if I'm going to spend the night on the floor of his and mom's bedroom, curled up in the corner by the dogs where no monsters can get to me. I tell him no, but it ends up being a lie. Dad does not laugh at me, he just shakes his head. I think he's disappointed.

Mia and I don't talk for three years. We fight one day and that's finally the end. I feel relieved.

I spend the rest of primary school in a group of girls who wear crosses around their necks and go to the optional morning prayer services. I spend middle school with them, too, but struggle. I sleep too much now. I can barely get out of bed. I can barely look myself in the mirror. I don't look at anyone, hoping they don't look at me. I start wearing as much black as my private-school uniform allows. I wallow in what the grown-ups around me call teenage angst.

One night alone in the basement I pull up a sketchy, pirating site on the old computer and I watch a scary movie. The featured clown doesn't scare me. I go back for more. I eventually get in trouble for the long list of slasher, splatter, paranormal, possession, and psychological horror flicks I'd become familiar with. I sit with my arms crossed while my parents asked why I've become so obsessed with all that scary garbage.

"I thought you stopped looking at that stuff when you stopped being friends with Mia. Trash like that isn't good for your faith. This isn't going to help you feel better," mom says. She's right, I guess. Lots of it wasn't making me feel better, but everything else had a similar effect.

Dad was more sympathetic, but he warns, "There are just some things you can't unsee." He's right too, I know.

I talk to Mia again in high school. Then I lose her again with a fight right before I leave for college. I collect horror books now. I watch every horror flick that fits my taste in spooky trash I've refined over the years. I hold the controller during game night while the rest of my friends cover their eyes waiting for the jumps care. I still get nightmares, but they're dreams about spilling a cocktail on a fussy regular at the restaurant or

sleeping through a final test that bug me.

It's only recently that I sit down to watch the movie adaptation of that little, black book I used to check out at the elementary school library. It's PG-13 and a buzzkill, but I recognize the illustrations in the CGI. I smile at the thought that a decade before I'd toss and turn until my dreams were filled with frights for weeks.

I go searching for the book, finding a used copy online. I almost buy it, but decide against it. I don't think I'd want to touch it, if only out of respect for the wishes of my younger self.

**Liv Schlosser** is a senior at the University of North Dakota majoring in psychology and English, with certificates in creative writing, forensic psychology, and Spanish. She plans to pursue a graduate degree and continue writing. She enjoys doodling, spending time in the mountains, and enjoying the company of her cat, Frankie.