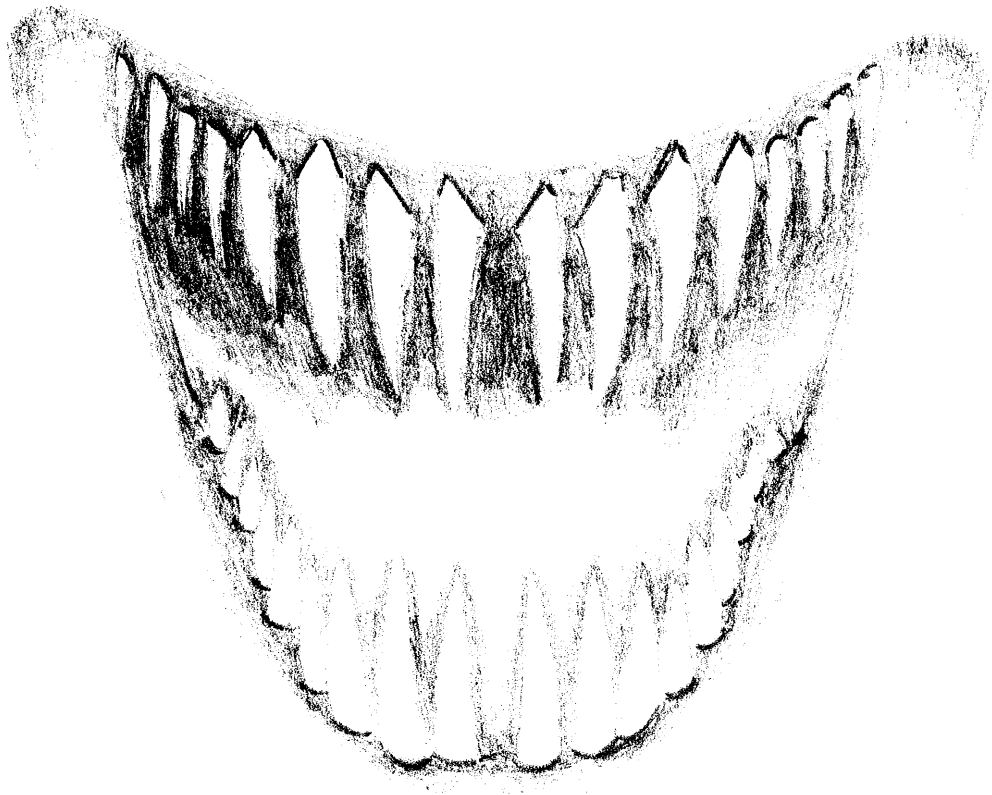


Welcome to my
Nightmare



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Story and Illustrations by

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I

“C’mon Al, what’s taking so long?” Jimmy yelled down the quiet lifeless road.

“Don’t call me that,” replied Alfred, but Jimmy didn’t hear him.

Jimmy was Alfred’s so called “friend.” He wasn’t fond of Jimmy but he took what he could get. The two boys had known each other for years. They were each like the brother neither of them wanted.

“Would you stop talking to yourself and get your butt over here? We’re gonna be late!” Jimmy hollered.

Alfred had finally caught up when he saw the sky. He always kept his head down when he walked and he knew Jimmy was way too oblivious of his surroundings to ever notice what was going on.

“What are you looking at?” asked Jimmy.

Jimmy followed Alfred’s gaze and finally saw the dark looming clouds above them.

“C’mon, I know a shortcut to my house from here.” Jimmy grabbed Alfred’s scrawny wrist and dragged him through a small gravel path between two houses and into the woods.

The dry leaves crunched underneath their feet as they walked deeper and deeper into the forest. As the young boys mindlessly continued their journey into the woods, they hoped to find some shelter from the cold rain that had begun to pour.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” asked Alfred, who was positive they had just passed that same mossy tree stump about six times before.

“Of course I know where I’m going; I’ve been this way a thousand times before,” answered Jimmy.

“You have no idea where you’re going,” Alfred said, matter-of-factly. He pushed Jimmy out of the way and started walking on his own. Jimmy was so baffled by the way Alfred treated him; he tackled him to the ground. The two boys wrestled around, rolling over each other until Alfred worked up his courage and threatened to punch Jimmy in the face, but before he could strike, he looked up and saw something in the middle of the woods.

The old run-down house was surrounded by a series of small piles of broken, chipped glass. The dark windows were boarded up with planks of decomposing wood. The only possible entrance seemed to be through the rotten, dark blue door. The heavy rain continued to pour down harder and

the boys were getting soaked. Alfred got up, brushed himself off, and walked toward the abandoned house but stopped about 20 feet away. Jimmy scrambled to his feet and stared at the building, carelessly walking towards it. Alfred quickly flung his arm out to stop Jimmy from going any further. Jimmy bumped into his arm, automatically snapping out of his fixed gaze. He turned his head to Alfred who said, with slight sarcasm in his voice, "You don't actually want to go in there, do you?"

"Are you kidding? Of course I do! Think of all the cool stuff that could be in there," he paused, thinking of the extreme horrors that could be in that house.

"There could be like, umm, I don't know cool stuff!" Jimmy was practically screaming by this point.

"Shhh! If anything is in there," Alfred said, gesturing towards the house, "we wouldn't want it to know we're out here, now do we?"

Alfred spoke to Jimmy as if he was a small, incompetent child; which, to Alfred, he basically was.

"Ugg, c'mon let's have some fun! Follow me." Jimmy strolled up to the front porch without a care in the world. He waltzed up the creaky steps but stopped when he came to the door. He turned back to look at Alfred. Alfred

lifted his hood up onto his head but kept his distance from the house. He had a bad feeling about this. There was silence until Jimmy turned back around to enter the house.

“Wait!” yelled Alfred. “I don’t think it would be very smart to go in there. Haven’t you ever seen a horror movie before? An old abandoned house in the middle of a forest on a rainy day; doesn’t that seem just a tad suspicious to you?”

“You worry too much,” Jimmy boasted.

Jimmy hadn’t yet taken another step before he heard the thunder. He gave Alfred an “I’m sorry buddy but I don’t want to get soaked; I’m going inside” look... and stepped inside. Alfred could no longer see him, but there was a dim light coming from the door.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Alfred murmured, breaking the invisible barrier between him and the house. He cautiously walked up the steps and into the house. The dim light flickered on and off giving the house an even creepier vibe.

Alfred quietly called out, “Jimmy? Where are you?” The interior of the house was covered in mustard yellow, floral wallpaper peeling off at the tops with ripping on the sides in straight even rows as if somebody had

scraped their nails into the wall. The carpeting on the floor was thick and shaggy and had been mashed down by footsteps, Jimmy's, Alfred assumed. He stopped midway and called out, still trying to keep his voice down.

“Jimmy? Uhh, Jimmy this isn't funny anymore.” He heard quiet laughing and footsteps. The lights flickered once again but Alfred was used to this by now. The lights stayed off for longer than usual this time. Alfred saw a dark shape come out in front of him. He held his breath and didn't move a muscle. He couldn't even if he wanted to. A noise from behind him caught his attention. He quickly flung around right as the lights came on.

He saw Jimmy standing with several very deep, lined up cuts going through his shirt and into his abdomen. The blood poured out of the cuts at a nonsensical speed. Tears streamed down Jimmy's dirty face. He fell to his knees and vomited up blood, coughing and choking. He raised his scraped arm and pointed to the figure, now behind Alfred. Alfred quickly shot around.

II

Alfred saw the white painted face with rosy red cheeks and a big red nose. Its lips were crimson red and oozing with blood. Its smile grew and revealed two layers of sharp pointed teeth. The big, red wiry hair that surrounded its head was quite similar in color to the handle on its blood spattered butcher's cleaver. Its fingernails were pointed like its teeth and looked razor sharp. It wore only a white apron that was tied around its neck and waist displaying blood smears that appeared nearly black in the dim light. On its feet were freakishly large, red shoes.

Alfred gasped. Hundreds of thoughts buzzed through his head. Should I save Jimmy? Should I save myself? Why did it have to be a clown? I can't just leave Jimmy here. I have to save him, right?

Alfred thought it best he save Jimmy and try to get him to safety. Unfortunately, while Alfred was taking the extra time to think this through, the clown had already decided to lunge forward at him, bringing the cleaver even closer. Alfred stumbled back and felt for Jimmy's shaking hand while continuing eye contact with the thing. He grasped Jimmy's hand and

dragged him along. They staggered through the halls as Jimmy was in no condition to walk on his own, nevertheless run.

As they staggered through the house, its halls seemed as though they twisted and turned, much like a maze. Alfred's heart was beating at an unfathomable rate. Trying to calm his breath was no use, for it had become too heavy and overpowering as he gulped for air. He stopped, took deeper breaths, listened for any sign they were safe, and then stared at Jimmy, whose face was ashen white and clothes were soaked the same crimson red as the clown's mouth.

Alfred knew he had to use his brain to escape, for his legs were weak and he could not go for much longer. The sounds of the clown echoed all around him.

"Where are you?" the clown's voice was soothing and slow and gravely. Alfred heard stomping footsteps getting louder and louder.

"Think." Alfred said to himself. "Think!"

He wracked his brain for ideas of what to do. Glancing around the small, thin hallway, he searched for something that could save both he and Jimmy's lives.

III

The clown peeked its head around the corner, staring with wide eyes at Alfred. Alfred grabbed a small painting off the wall from behind him, smashed it on the ground, and grasped the biggest chunk of broken glass he could find. Holding the pointed end toward the clown, he watched it carefully, noting its every move. The clown chuckled and its laugh grew more and more powerful. It clung to its stomach as it screeched its high-pitched laugh.

“You think you can hurt me with that? Well, think again, little boy.” The clown slowly drew the butcher’s cleaver to his throat then quickly jammed it in, without losing eye contact with Alfred. Blood sprayed out of the severing cut and gushed onto the floor.

Alfred sunk to the floor and buried his face in his knees, not thinking he could bear that image any longer.

The clown said, “Oh, come on. It’s not that bad.” Alfred didn’t look up. Instead he gripped the piece of glass harder and drew a thin stream of blood from his hand. It was painful, but not as painful as witnessing what he just saw.

It flaunted, "Well, since you can't kill me, what do you suppose you're going to do?"

Alfred panicked. There was nothing he could do. He was trapped with this_thing, his killer.

Maybe he could reason with it... no, you could not reason with a thing who had just taken a cleaver to its throat and survived. Nor could he fend for himself, as he saw no possible way to defend himself if a cleaver to its throat did nothing. Nor could he run, he was cornered with no door or window in sight. He had no idea what to do; he panicked, his mind went blank, and he blacked out.

IV

Alfred slowly opened his eyes. His vision was blurry but he could vaguely see a figure gliding towards him. He rapidly blinked and his vision soon cleared. The figure heading toward him was a creature, which looked most like a girl with a light red skin tone and a tapering tail coming out of the bottom of her black and white skirt. Her long legs sashayed one step at a time. A black, pinstripe blazer covered her chest. Her belly-button showed between her shirt and skirt. She carried a dirty silver pitchfork with her left hand and tapped it on the ground with each step.

Upon reaching Alfred, she extended her hand. Alfred hesitated as he took a firm grip on her palm and pulled himself up. He gazed at her long flowing dark brown hair and looked into the blackest eyes he had ever witnessed. Her smirk was gentle and a bit confused. Alfred realized that he had been staring at her for quite some time and looked away with feelings of anger and frustration building up inside him.

In a quiet voice, he whispered, "Where am I?"

The girl had already started walking away when the slight murmur of Alfred's ear-straining mumble caught her attention. Turning her head gently, she motioned for him to come beside her.

Alfred quickly caught up and repeated his question adding, "Who are you?"

"Well, I am known as Satan, Beelzebub, and Lucifer."

"This," she said looking down at her body, "is my vessel."

Frightened and feeling that he was hallucinating, Alfred said, "So where are we?" he repeated, getting more impatient.

As Lucifer was about to respond, Alfred gasped. "What are they?"

He pointed to the people chained to the wall by their wrists. They flopped around lifelessly, jerking to the left or right every few seconds. They wore dirty, loose-fitting rags that were ripped and torn. Their bodies were covered in bloody scrapes and bruises. Although they looked lifeless, their moans and screams started to flood into Alfred's ears like a broken dam. Alfred gaped and stumbled backwards, tripping on his own feet in the process.

"What's wrong with them? What are they doing?" Alfred's voice was shaky and uncertain.

“You ask too many questions,” answered Lucifer. “First of all, we are in The Underworld.”



“So I’m in h-,”

Lucifer cut Alfred off. “Shhh!” she hushed him, firmly pressing her finger to Alfred’s lips. “The demons don’t like it when you say that word. I will teach you everything you need to know about The Underworld.”

They glanced around, Alfred staring at the bodies hanging from rusty chains on the walls and the blood stained cobblestone floor. Alfred began to panic while Lucifer reveled in all her glory. As he looked closely, his eyes narrowed and took in the grotesque, transparent faces of the demons as they inflicted their inhuman torture on the pitiful, chained beings. Alfred didn’t want to know, but he asked hesitantly, “W-why are they chained to the wall? What did they do?”

Lucifer turned toward Alfred and said, “My demons are everywhere. They work for me and I tell them to punish the people that deserve it, so I can bring their souls here. Those hanging have behaved most heinously.” A wryly demonic smile crossed her lips as she said this.

Confusion and reality floated in and out of Alfred’s mind. “Will you please tell me how and why I got here?”

Lucifer paused. "You really don't know why you're here, do you?"

"No." Alfred quivered.

Lucifer thought about this new information for a while, plotting something cruel.

"Alright. You want to get out of here?" she asked.

"Please...yes," Alfred wailed.

"Then I'll make you a deal. I'll release you and you can go back to The Over-world, but I will not tell you how and why you got down here and you will never, ever find out. Or, I will release you and also tell you what happened, but you will have to live with this knowledge and its consequences for the rest of your life."

Alfred was speechless. After all he had been through; he now had to make a crucial decision. If he chose leaving and never knowing, he would never have the satisfaction and relief of discovering what brought him to The Underworld. If he chose leaving and knowing but facing the aftermath, he could be mentally scarred even more than he already was. He didn't want to have to constantly have the memory floating around in his head, but he also wanted to know. He needed to know. He must know. He couldn't live without knowing.

“Tell me!” Alfred said.

Lucifer sighed sweetly, “Are you sure?”

Flinching, Alfred said in a small, uncertain voice, “Yes.”

“Do you remember Jimmy?”

“Of course, Jimmy is my best friend.”

“Do you remember the last time you walked home from school together?”

“Yeah, and he took me on a shortcut which wasn’t a shortcut at all. It started raining so he went into this house and then...”

Alfred began to remember. He remembered the clown and what it had done to Jimmy and how he had tried to drag him to safety but it wasn’t safe anywhere in that house. He remembered the unforgettable image of the clown thrusting the cleaver into its own throat.

He was starting to regret his decision of finding out what happened when Lucifer continued speaking.

“You smashed a painting and had a piece of glass from the frame in your hand. You were going to use it as a weapon, yes?” she smiled.

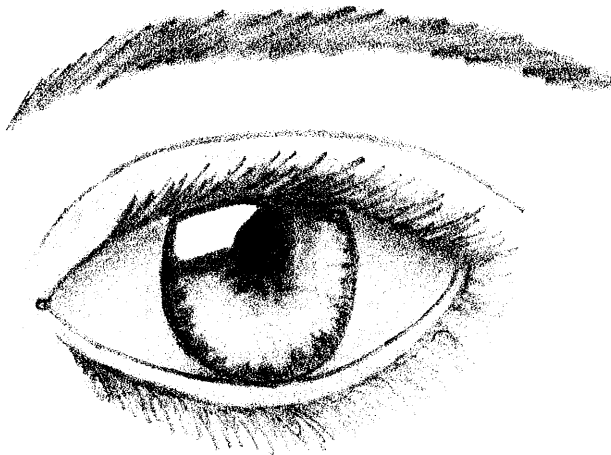
“Yes,” Alfred began to replay it in his mind. Over and over and over again.

Lucifer gushed on, "You did use the glass as a weapon. You could have saved Jimmy but instead, jammed the razor sharp piece of glass into his head. YOU killed Jimmy!" she bellowed and laughed.

Alfred turned away from Lucifer, walked away a few steps, fell to his knees and cried uncontrollably as he felt the vomit rise in his throat. Only one thing came to mind, one word.

"Why?" Alfred tried to choke out.

Lucifer muttered, "Ask yourself. Only you can answer that question Al... only you," she purred. As Alfred's screams of insanity echoed in his own head she whispered, "Don't worry, Alfred. I have a special place on the wall just for you."



About the Author...

Jasmine Heroux-Skirbst is the author of *A Curious Journey* and *Annoyed* (and soon many other works!) She has traveled throughout the United States and visited England and France. She aspires to have a career in music or writing. She currently resides in Eastern Pennsylvania with her two cats, two Hermit crabs, a horse and her two parents.