

“Whispers from beneath” By: Samantha Janney

(High school age group, Cedarburg resident)

In the small town of Eldridge, a sense of fright hung in the air like an ominous fog. Autumn leaves blacked out the streets, but the dull colors were overshadowed by an unease that seeped into the hearts of its inhabitants. It was in this town that thirteen-year-old Eleanor Langston had once played freely but now her laughter has been silenced by the cruel fire of bullying.

Eleanor was a normal shy girl, she had a love of journaling and baking. Yet in the eyes of her classmates she was an easy target. The whispers began in the beginning of middle school, growing to harsh taunts and cruel pranks. The “Popular Four,” as they called themselves, Jenna was the leader with a bright smile that hid her darkness, Ryan whose laughter echoed like a wolf, Tessa the mean girl with a sharp tongue; and Tommy, who enjoyed the thrill of tormenting others alongside his friends. They revealed in making Eleanor’s life miserable, pushing her to the brink until she found solace in the depths of despair.

One chilly October night, after a particularly brutal day at school, Eleanor ran away from all the taunts, seeking refuge in Eldridge’s ancient forest. The trees looked like giant sentinels, and she felt a pull to a hidden grove, a place where she believed she could forget her pain. But the shadows of the grove had other plans.

The darkness wrapped around her like a blanket, heavy and suffocating as Eleanor vanished from the world. Her disappearance sparked frantic searches, but it was never meant to end. On a fateful night, her body was discovered: while her physical self was lost to the

echoes of the woods, her spirit was set free—bound by anger and sorrow.

But this was not the end. Eleanor's spirit flickered like a candle's flame, restless and vengeful. She became a whisper in the night, a voice in the wind—soft, gentle at first, but bubbling with fury and betrayal.

As Halloween approached, the town's Halloween festival took center stage with laughter and excitement. The moon hung low in the sky, round and pale, casting eerie light on the town square. Jenna, Ryan, Tessa, and Tommy were all in attendance, reveling in the masquerade of costumes, unaware of the darkness lurking just beyond their vision.

The festival was bustling, and as the night wore on, Jenna suggested a game— a scavenger hunt in the very woods where Eleanor had last played. Her friends cheered, oblivious to the uneasy feeling that clutched at their hearts.

“Come on, it'll be fun!” Ryan said, confidence radiating from him like a shield. Tommy cracked a joke about “ghosts in the woods,” and the group laughed, the sound of mocking echoes against the trees.

Equipped with flashlights and a thin layer of fear, the four ventured into the woods. The laughter soon faded, replaced by an unsettling silence that wrapped around them. Shadows danced between the trunks, challenging their courage. They found the grove with its gnarled roots and a single dead tree twisted in agony.

“Let's split up to find the clues!” Jenna commanded, and despite their hesitation, the others nodded. The forest seemed to tighten its

grip as they ventured into the darkness, the atmosphere thickening with an unseen tension.

One by one, they began to experience the terror of their choices. Jenna felt a cold gust of wind that whispered her secrets, taunting her until she tripped over a twisted root, falling face-first into the ground. It was as if the ground itself was pulling her. She thrashed, feeling hands grasp at her wrists, pulling her deeper into the shadows.

Ryan wandered further and stumbled upon a clearing where he heard laughter—a haunting echo of his own. Drawn to it, he felt a presence behind him. An icy breath brushing down his neck. Panic ensued, and as he turned, he found no one, only darkness that enveloped him whole.

Tessa and Tommy were not spared; the trees seemed alive, shifting to bar their escape. Tessa screamed as roots coiled around her ankles, dragging her towards a void that appeared at the base of the dead tree. Tommy called for her, but his voice turned into a cry of despair as he realized his friends were being snatched away one by one.

Eleanor's laughter echoed in the woods, twisting in the breeze—a melody of triumph and sorrow. With each terrified scream, she seeped her way into their consciousness, turning their guilt into palpable fear.

With the dawn of the new day, the townsfolk gathered, searching for the screams that had faded into echoes of despair. They found only the scattered belongings, hints of terror painted against the backdrop of ancient trees.

But the forests of Eldrige held its secrets close. They whispered of a girl wronged, her name lost to the pages of time, yet her story lingered—Eleanor Langston, the girl who took back her voice from the shadows, set on a path of revenge.

And as the sun rose, casting a light onto the forgotten, the whispers continued to flow, binding Eleanor's presence with the wind. From that day on, Eldrige would remember. The laughter of the living would mingle with the whispers from beneath the trees, fueling a chilling reminder: revenge is best served cold.