

2019 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Third Place/Honorable Mention - Fiction Category

"Satan's Passage" by Rachel Showers

Her eyes wandered up from the base of the ashen trees to their leafless branches that swayed like giant claws in the sky. How did she end up here? The last thing she remembered was sitting on her couch and now she's in this mildly ominous forest. Her breath was visible in the air and the cold wind nipped at her slightly exposed skin. She didn't remember putting this jacket on, but of course she wouldn't have gloves to go with it. Oh no, she was never that lucky.

A twig cracked under the weight of her shoe, sounding like a gunshot in the empty forest. The wind died down and everything was silent. She swore she could hear her own heart beating. She took another hesitant step and a cacophony of whispers rang out from the trees—no that was the wind again. It had to be. Even if a collective voice seemed to be whispering, “turn back.”

Her legs quickly carried her deeper into the forest, a bioluminescent green fog settling on the ground. Odd, she had never seen anything like it before. Perhaps it was like those mushrooms that glow, even if she had never heard of such a phenomenon before. Drawn out of her musings by the sound of running water, she glanced over at a pond next to her that she hadn't noticed before. She stared down at her reflection. A flash of white followed by ambient ringing consumed her senses, completely disorienting her. A list handwritten in ink appeared in her hands.

- 1) Travel in numbers.
- 2) If the fog is green, he is listening. Don't speak about him. If the fog is red, he is coming. Don't move.
- 3) If you feel like you are being watched, you are. Keep walking. They lose interest quickly.
- 4) Listen to the trees' wisdom.

A desire—no, a need to break the rules came over her before the vision ended. Where had that come from? She was back in the forest, staring into the murky water. She felt like a million eyes were trained on her form, unmoving, predatory, hungry. The list said to move, right? Then again, was she really going to adhere to some obscure vision that was probably a result of her inhaling this weird fog? No. She wasn't stupid...most of the time.

Green eyes appeared all around her, vertical-slit pupils focused on her. The fog climbed ever higher above her and before she knew it, she was surrounded. Fear, panic, anxiety, they all clawed at her chest, keeping her captive in her spot. The trees cried out “run” and that was all she needed to get out of dodge.

She sprinted as fast as her body would allow. Growls and snarls sounded off right behind her ears. She could feel them gaining on her, snapping at her heels. Her stamina was failing; her legs were burning, begging her to stop. She tripped over a stray tree root, smacking her face hard in the dirt. Again, her vision went white.

“You’re really buying into this?” Her voice said, but she wasn’t speaking. Not really. “Dude, it’s just superstitious garbage to scare people away from some guy’s woods.”

The list flashed in her head yet again.

- 5) If you see dead relatives, do not approach them. They will lie.
- 6) Mirrors are forbidden. They will expose the ugly truth.
- 7) If you see a man dressed in black, be still. He will come to you if he is interested.

Her eyes opened wide and she sat up, noticing that a backpack had fallen by her and a camera lay broken on the ground. In her hand, she had a cracked mirror. When did she pick it up? She had always had it with her, didn’t she? Yes. Yes, she had brought it out of spite towards that list. That’s right.

Once she stood, she noticed a man dressed in all white sitting on a stump up ahead. Finally, another person. Hopefully, he could guide her out of here. If not, it would be nice to have some company. She approached him with a smile and her hand landed on his shoulder.

“Oh god, I’m so glad to see—”

Her grip on the mirror tightened.

“Dad?” Her voice shook as the man turned to face her. “How-how are you even here?”

“Because of you, sweetheart.”

“Me? What?”

“It is your fault that I’m dead after all.” He stood to his feet. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

She shook her head vehemently and hugged herself. There goes years of therapy. “No, it wasn’t my fault. It couldn’t be.”

“But it was, Liz, and I will never forgive you.”

She looked away from him and down into the mirror in her hand. Her father’s flesh was now rotting and falling off the sides of his face, sclera of his eyes red while the iris was bright yellow. His mouth looked like a gaping hole ready to consume her, sharp teeth pointing in every direction. When she looked back up at him, she no longer saw her father standing there but instead the monster in the mirror.

He lunged at her, slashing her left arm as she jerked away with a cry. Again, she ran. The fog around her turned red as she moved through it, but her mind was racing so fast that she had forgotten all about the rules. She was so panicked that she hadn’t realized the monster wasn’t even following her anymore.

Her foot plunged into a puddle, but it didn't stop. She fell into what seemed like a bottomless pit of ice cold water that not even light could pierce. Onyx hands took hold of her from all angles, dragging her deeper and deeper into the depths of the lake. As she kicked and fought, she saw the last part of the list in her mind.

8) He will try to trick you. Speak wisely.

9) Do not turn your back to him.

10) Politely decline any offers he makes. Wait for him to leave before returning down the path you came.

11) After rejecting his deal and leaving the woods, never return. He will not be merciful next time.

She tried to scream, but no noise came out. Her lungs were filling with water and her struggles were growing weaker and weaker. This was it. She was going to die in this forest with hardly any recollection of why she was here. Maybe she deserved it. Maybe what her father said was true and it was her fault.

A hand latched around her wrist and the others let go, dragging her farther and farther upwards. Her head broke through the surface and she was dropped on the ground with only the tip of her shoe in the now normal puddle. She coughed up water and took in greedy gulps of air, shivering as the wind blew against her wet skin.

She looked up to meet the eyes of her savior. He was incredibly tall and dressed in black from head to toe, hands tucked into the pockets of his suit jacket. His irises appeared to be black as well, mischief swirling inside of them as his wavy, charcoal bangs fell in front of one eye. What really caught her attention were those white teeth of his, displayed by his wide grin.

She clambered to her feet, legs threatening to give way from the oxygen deprivation. She couldn't believe she wasn't sleeping with the fishes, honestly. Maybe she wasn't so unlucky after all. Paying no mind to the fact that she was soaked, she threw her arms around him. Her body, almost acting on instinct alone, threw herself away from him as soon as she touched him. She noticed she hadn't gotten his suit wet.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you," she confessed. "Thanks, by the way."

"My pleasure." His voice was deep and smooth, nearly calming her worries.

"Are you lost too?"

"In a way. Isn't everyone blindly stumbling through this life like children learning how to walk?"

"I guess?"

Something about him seemed just a little off. It wasn't something that was glaringly noticeable. It was so subtle that it could almost slip under the radar, and yet it still lingered in the back of her mind. The confidence he had, the way he held himself in a place like this, it didn't add up. Why wasn't he scared?

"How are you so calm right now?"

"I haven't broken any rules. This place isn't dangerous if you play the game right."

"The rules," she echoed.

The list came to mind, the clarity of it almost making her head throb. A man dressed in black. Trickster, liar, charmer, devil. Where did those names come from?

"Who are you?"

"I have many titles, but to you, I can be your guide to safety."

"Really?"

"I promise." He smiled. "All you have to do is take my hand."

"Politely decline any offers he makes. Wait for him to leave before returning down the path you came."

The rule rang clearly through her head, followed by one collective "no" uttered from both the trees and the wind before both of their voices were cut short.

"Okay." She placed her hand in his, a pulse of electricity shooting up her arm as soon as his fingers closed around her hand. He shook her hand briefly before letting go.

"Follow me." He walked past her, taking a few steps before stopping once more. She looked up at him as he glanced over his shoulder at her. "Stay close."

Her eyes were drawn to the ground at something shining by the puddle. It was her mirror! She saw the man staring down into it at her, but like that thing imitating her father, he looked much different. The muscle underneath his face was showing, but it was onyx and stringy like it was trying to pull itself apart. His grinning mouth was full of sharp white teeth and his eyes were completely black with glowing, red irises. When she looked back up to him, his face was as it had been before.

The man walked forward with confidence, fog parting out of his way as he traveled down a leaf-strewn path. He wasn't kidding when he said he could guide her out. She was back where she had entered in what felt like only a few minutes. She could even see her car parked off to the side of the road. She stepped out of the line of trees and into the open, a smile of pure relief on her lips. She was saved.

He placed his hands on her shoulders, leaning down next to her ear and whispering, "I'll see you soon, Elizabeth."

As soon as his hands touched her, she remembered where she was and why she was here. Satan's Passage. A dare, a stupid dare had sent her here. She wanted to prove her friend wrong, wanted to prove that there was nothing here.

She practically ran to her car and jumped in, turning the key in the ignition. She looked back to where she had been standing, finding that the man was nowhere in sight. Had she imagined him? She couldn't shake the feeling of dread weighing down on her shoulders. If she was free, why was her mind telling her that she had made a terrible mistake?

She ignored the feeling while she sped away from that dastardly forest as fast as she could. She was going to forget this nightmare and move on with her life. Glancing up into her rearview mirror to watch the forest fade away from her sight, she saw the man sitting in the back of her car with a wolfish grin on his face.