

2020 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Second Place - Creative Non-Fiction Category

Based on the Case of Riley Gaul

"The Night Stalker" by Brooke Hopkins

Walking out of the Knoxville Wal-Mart, crinkling white plastic bags in hand, Riley Gaul begins to go over his plans for the night in his head. *Once I send her the last text, I'll lay down in the ditch with my hands strewn about, one under my chest and one above my head. Yeah, that'll look real.* He reaches his car, clicking the unlock button before opening the driver's door and tossing the bags into the passenger seat. Crawling in, his bushy, neutral-toned hair brushes against the ceiling. Black fabric spills over the tops of the stuffed bags and Riley shoves his hand down into one, digging for a piece of cardboard encasing one of tonight's tools.

A shadow in the night, he drives his car away from the supermarket chain and onto the street, picking up speed. His deceptively warm eyes anchor on one house: the home of a local student and exactly where his ex-girlfriend, Emma, is tonight. After pulling the smooth phone he purchased at the store out of its box, he begins poking at the small buttons, shaking all the while. "I have someone you love," he types. *It won't take her long to connect the dots and realize it's me who's been kidnapped. She cares so much. This will be easy.* On a discreet side street, he parks his car, snuffs out his headlights, and retrieves the dark clothing he purchased moments ago. Just change your outfit, grab the burner phone, and walk over there. No one will know.

The car stays put, empty and exposed as Riley leaves it unlocked, wary of any beeping noise that may reveal his lie. In sweatpants and a crewneck, the star athlete strides smoothly toward the thump of speakers in the center of town. The beat becomes clearer as he approaches the standard brick home of another All-American family. A squeaky pop singer serenades him with a ballad of heartbreak as he army crawls into the damp ditch at the front of the yard. He spots his past teammates through the illuminated windows at the front of the house. They're adorned with red Solo cups and girlfriends, dancing freely.

Pulling out the disposable phone, a single ray of light bursts through the screen and Riley's boney, pale face is engulfed. Visible stubble pokes through his skin; it's after midnight and he was awake before the sun this morning. *Tell her to come alone. No witnesses. Or else.* The phone slides back into a soft cotton pocket of his pants and he reminds himself to turn his body just so; looking amiss takes precision.

His muddy irises blend into the darkness along with his obsidian uniform. Any unsuspecting neighbor could easily assume he is a piece of trash that never made its way to the dump, a theory that may not be far off. Only the whites of his eyes are visible in the faint light of the moon. Blades of grass interject his line of sight, cutting cracks into the carefully laid blocks of the house. After minutes of perfect stillness, Emma emerges from the dwelling and the faint music blasts until the door closes again. Multiple figures now stand on the front porch.

“It says to come outside alone,” Emma explains. The blonde beauty, normally accompanied by squinty eyes, a result of a smile so wide that it covers the entire bottom half of her face, is somber as she looks toward the driveway.

Another member of the group reassures her. “It’s okay; this is safer than going by yourself.” Even his two hundred pound muscular body has a voice that waivers.

*She’s right. I said to come alone. Emma, you know better. I told you, nobody will look out for you the way I do.* As the ensemble of party members approach the end of the driveway, flashlights in hand, Riley knows his time is up. Slowly leaning forward, he places a strong hand onto the back of his head and groans, as if he has just been whacked by a baseball bat.

“Riley? What the hell?” Emma is struck with a mixed look of confusion and concern. “What happened?”

“I don’t know what happened. They hit my head and I don’t remember anything after that,” explains Riley. The pair are standing close enough for him to gaze at the reflection of his face on her blue eyes. If only she had done as he said and come alone.

“You’re lying,” Emma says defensively. “There’s no way that happened.”

“They hit me real hard.” He pauses. “Emma, why would I lie about this?”

After quickly scanning his body, Emma looks briefly at his face, careful to avoid eye contact, then turns around. Her short stature is towered over by members of the high school’s football team. Within seconds, Emma is back in the house and Riley is left standing unwelcome in a stranger’s yard.

Once he arrives back at his car, he uses the light of a streetlamp to change back into his tee shirt and jeans and returns the black clothing to their original bags. This time, he pops his trunk and tosses the sacks in. Riley stares for a brief moment, watching them land adjacent to the final tool he thought he would be using tonight. The loaded handgun waits patiently in the back of his run down car and Riley shuts the door.