

Life

“The Widow”

Winner of The Herald’s Halloween Short Story Contest!

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SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

Deirdre felt her age more than ever as she slowly sat up in bed. The house was quiet, as it always was with Seth having long since moved away to the big city. Her eyes couldn’t help but be pulled to the other side of the bed. It was empty. Cold. As it had been for months since Samuel passed away. She didn’t let that usual throb settle in her chest today. She stood up, letting out a soft groan as she moved towards the kitchen.

The smell of coffee grounds greeted her as she padded across the cool, wooden floor. She checked that there was enough water from last time before pressing the “On” button. As the machine sputtered and began to heat up, the sun was just peeking through the blinds. She nudged them aside, just enough to see the view. The yard was still covered in a soft sheen of dew. Ms. Mara’s house, a young divorced woman who had proven to be a kind neighbor, sat small against the sun where it lay closer to town.

She tore her attention away as the machine finished with a final grumble. She reached up, finding her favorite mug. It had been a Christmas present from a coworker a long time ago, its lettering long since faded. She reached for the full coffee carafe, ready to pour herself a cup when something caught her eye outside, just behind the old shed. Her eyes had been failing her more recently, but she could have sworn she’d seen something.

The coffee forgotten, she moved to the back door. The cold air greeted her, and she paused long enough to take her jacket down from the hook where she’d left it and slip it on. The porch stairs were their own struggle as she clung to the railing, moving down even as her knees protested. She was careful of the small rocks in the grass as she moved, not wanting to risk a fall.

“Hello? She couldn’t help but ask, even if she didn’t expect an answer. She turned the corner and found nothing but the other shed wall. She was being silly. It could have been an animal, maybe a deer. It was common here. That, or the neighbor kids from about a quarter mile down the road were messing around in her yard again. She’d caught them a few times before, shuffling around in that shed or messing

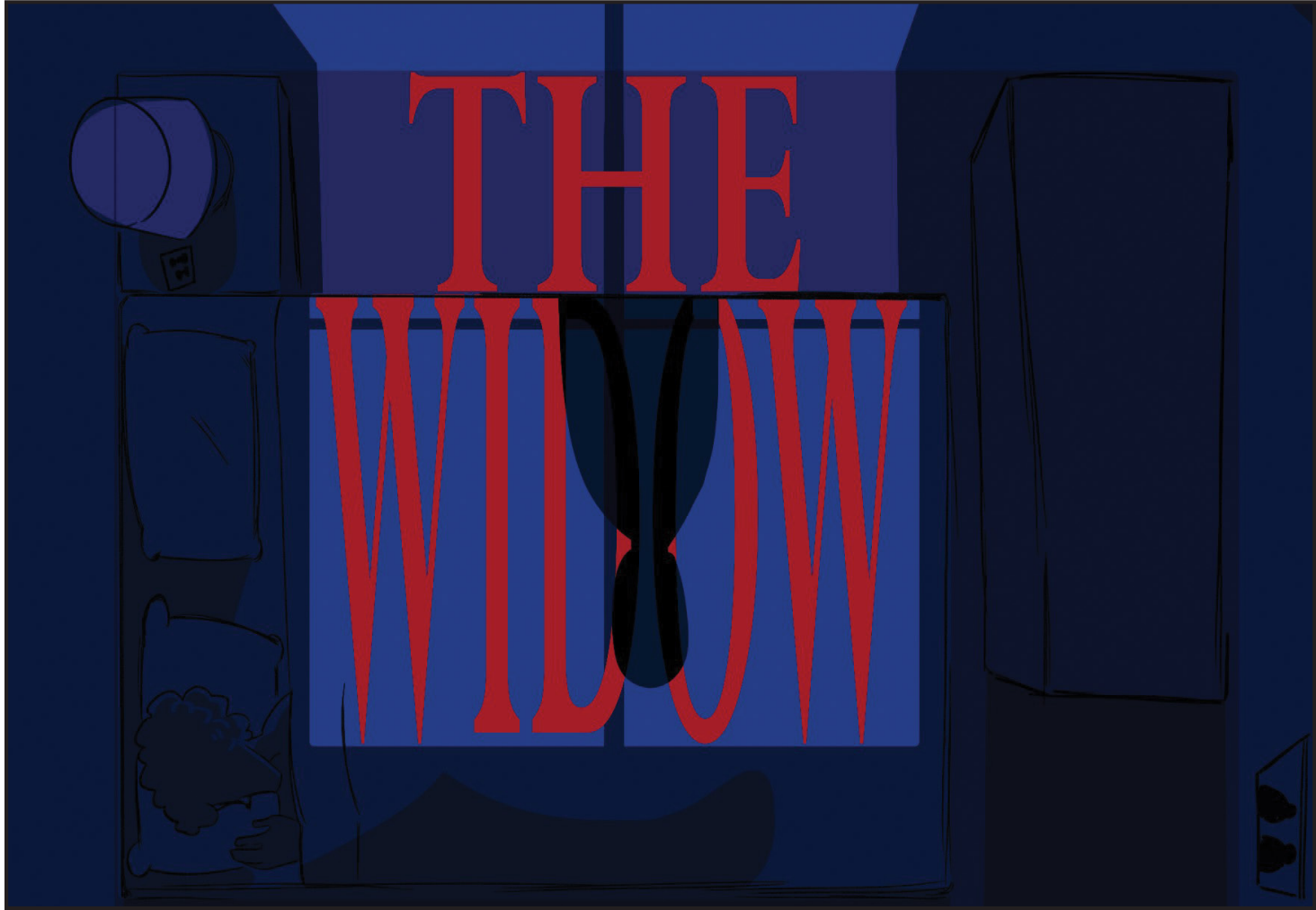


ILLUSTRATION BY IVORY ROBERTS OF THE HERALD STAFF
A bespoke illustration for The Herald’s winning entry in the Halloween short story contest, “The Widow” by Emily Grommet.

with her flower bushes. But when she found the door still lodged just as she’d left it, a small concrete block ensuring animals couldn’t squeeze underneath the gap in the door, she sighed. There was no one here. Perhaps she really should get those glasses like Seth had suggested.

Ignoring the sting of the cold morning and its quiet, she moved back towards the house. She reached for that freshly prepared coffee with shaking hands, her cheeks flushed with exertion and the cold, when she paused. The coffee pot sat empty. It wasn’t even warm. She couldn’t help but stare for a moment. She had been certain she’d made coffee. Almost entirely sure. But when she reached for the pot and found it neither warm nor wet inside the pot, she almost wanted to laugh at herself. She must have mixed up what she’d done yesterday with today. That must have been it.

She filled the water reservoir to the line. The slow tap tap tap of the faucet dripping long after she shut it off made her smile. She would call Seth to come down here on the weekend to fix it. He would only make the trip when there was something for him to fix. Her phone was already ringing when she remembered what she’d said before about not calling him while he was at work. Then again, he hadn’t called her for some time. She

let it ring. You’ve reached Seth Hepburn. I’m away from the phone right now. Please leave a message after the beep.

Deirdre pressed the button to cancel the call quickly. He must be busy. She hoped he’d call her back later, when he had time. She took her mug, moving down the hall towards the living room. The hallway was darker, hidden from the light without windows. She sat in her plush armchair, letting her hand reach down blindly for her crochet bag on her right side, but she only grasped the soft fabric on the side of her chair. She leaned down, looking now, confused. Her bag wasn’t there. She looked around, and instead found it on the other side. It was strange, but not necessarily unusual. She could have just placed it on that side when she finished yesterday.

She shakes off the feeling, reclining back as she settles in for another day of crocheting. She’s mid-stitch, struggling with trembling hands but still determined to finish this blanket despite the way her fingers fail her, when the blaring of the phone interrupted the quiet so suddenly that it made her almost drop her crochet hook. She set down the half-formed blanket on the arm of the chair to pull her phone from her nightgown pocket. It was Seth.

“Hello, darling. I was just calling earlier to—” she greeted

him warmly, happy to see he’d finally called.

“Mama,” Seth’s voice came through the phone, quiet and curt as it usually is when he was at work. “I’m busy. Why would you call me when you know I’m at work? I specifically asked you not to.”

“Oh, I know. I only thought... Well. The sink is leaking again, and I was hoping, if you aren’t too busy, that is, that you could come take a look at it. You know I’m no good with these things. And with my knees the way they are these days, I can hardly get down there anymore.” She said, her other hand fretting with the hem of her dress.

“Yeah, yeah. Got it. The sink. Anything else? Maybe something more emergent?”

He sounded upset with her. She hadn’t meant to be a bother. “Well, no. Not emergent. I just missed you, is all. It’s been a while since you’ve come down here, and I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m doing fine, Mama. Really. Just real busy with work.”

She sighed. He always said that when she asked. “Alright, well, don’t work too hard. I’ll see you this weekend, right?”

“Yes, Mama.” He responded. She could hear muffled voices in the background. “Sorry, Mama, got to go. Talk to you later.”

He hung up the phone before she could say goodbye.

She put the phone back into her pocket, lifting her project back up, the weight of the already done stitches settling in her lap as she continued where she’d left off.

A few hours had passed; the house was filled only with the small metallic creak of her chair as she rocked, working through each row. It wasn’t long before the day began to grate on her. She’d grown tired of crocheting and the suffocating quiet. She moved towards the kitchen, setting her project back into its bag and to its place on the right side of her chair.

As she moved around in the kitchen, readying food for a late afternoon lunch, she heard the wind chimes twinkle insistently on the porch. A storm was coming. The dark clouds that slowly edged closer to the house now cast the house in a shroud, making the pits and falls where the light from the windows couldn’t reach feel longer and fuller. The walls sighed as the wind blew against them from outside. She could hear the floor sharing its burden, creaking upstairs.

She finished up with lunch, cleaning the pot she’d used to heat soup from last night’s supper, when she suddenly felt weary. It could have been the change in pressure from the storm, causing her bones to feel more achy than usual. It could have been the weight of the quiet, the house much

too still. She waded through the dark beyond the windows of the living room, letting her fingers trace the textured wall of the hallway as she moved towards her room. With this little amount of light in this part of the house, it was hard to see anything more than fuzzy outlines, and the wall helped to steady her.

She paused at the bathroom in the hall, deciding it’d probably be best to do her business before going to lie down. It’ll be harder to get up if she had already laid down and had to go. After she finished, she moved to wash her hands. She was clumsy, only trying to grab the bar of soap from the dish when she accidentally knocked the toothbrush holder onto the floor. She bent down, ignoring the twinge in her back as she reached. She picked up hers, a pink toothbrush, then a green toothbrush, once Samuel’s before he passed.

She suddenly dropped his toothbrush like it had burned her. The bristles were wet. It was impossible. She certainly hadn’t used it. Honestly, she should have thrown it away months ago but kept it there anyway. Her mind raced with possibilities. It stopped suddenly on an answer closer to reality, quickly satisfying the pained throb in her heart that had come with her fear. She must have knocked it over a few days ago, wet from the sink bowl when it had fallen in. Yes, that was it. Why else would it be wet?

She put them both back into the toothbrush holder, moving it to the other side of the sink to be out of the way. She shut the light off, shutting the door before she could think about it a moment longer. Her head throbbed, and all she wanted was to go lie down. Her bedroom was cool, the sounds of twigs outside her window scratching at the glass as the wind tangled with them.

She sighed, lowering herself down slowly against the mattress, lifting her feet as she slips beneath the sheets. The handmade blanket, one of her own, was soft against her face as she curled on her side. As the sounds of her settling subsided, she felt the empty weight of her husband’s side of the bed like an open wound. She couldn’t help but let her hand reach across, needing to convince herself again that he was long gone. That she was truly alone here.

She felt the lightning bolt of terror as it shot through her. His pillow was warm.