

HONORABLE MENTION

The Visitor

by Alicia Stankay

Kelly Gardner stared out the kitchen window, observing the odd segmented cloud formations and the curious yellow light. Night was still over an hour away, but a late summer storm was brewing, and the static electricity in the air made the hairs on her arm rise up. She wanted to walk away from the window, but the view kept her mesmerized, and she felt again that prickly sensation of eyes watching her from the trees. They'd lived in this house by Greenleaf Forest for six months now, but sometimes she wished they had closer neighbors.

Sudden banging on the front door startled her, awakening her worst fears. She crept into the living room as images of witches and werewolves flitted through her mind. She knew it wasn't Dale; he'd already called to say he wouldn't be home until tomorrow because he was still needed at the construction site. As she reached the door, the knocking started up again, and her heart somersaulted in her chest.

Hesitantly, she stepped forward and looked through the peephole. At first she couldn't see anything, but then she shifted her gaze lower and spotted a figure in a hooded sweatshirt. As the head tilted upward, Kelly saw hair framing the face of a terrified young girl. Quickly she unlocked the door and pulled it open. The girl stumbled inside and fell against Kelly, begging, "Please help me! He's after me!"

Kelly locked the door and helped the girl into the living room, sitting beside her on the sofa.

"Why don't you take off your hood and gloves and tell me who's after you?" The girl just pulled her jacket closer and tried to push her booted feet out of sight.

"I'm sure you're safe now--" Before Kelly could finish, she heard the sound of glass crashing in the kitchen.

"Oh, no!" the girl screamed, jumping up. "I'm in so much trouble!"

Kelly ran to close the living room door, but it was too late. The wind whipped through the kitchen and into the living room as the storm broke and rain splashed onto the kitchen tile. The lights blinked and went out, leaving them in semi-darkness. She whispered to the girl, "Who's chasing you?"

"You know—the giant man who lives in the forest. Hide me, please!" She cowered against Kelly.

"We have to move." Kelly grabbed the girl's arm and pulled her toward the back hallway.

When they reached the bedroom, Kelly slammed the door and ran for the bed. She pushed it toward the door as the girl stared out the window. "Come help!" she shouted over the pounding rain. The girl hesitated and finally joined her, pushing until they had crammed the bed against the door. Then Kelly rushed to the tall dresser and shoved it against the lower window.

Panting, Kelly slipped to the floor, hugging her knees. "What's your name?" she asked in the sudden silence.

"Tetty." The girl stared around the room before whispering, "Where is he now? It's too quiet!"

Before Kelly could say anything, thunder boomed and rocked the whole house. Tetty screamed again and cringed behind the bed's headboard as lightning shot across the sky and smashed into a tall oak tree. When Kelly heard an ominous crack, she stood up to peer over the dresser through the upper window into the twilight darkness. A huge hairy man stared back at her from, outside.

Kelly gasped at his face seconds before she saw the top of the oak tree sway toward the house. "He's right outside where the oak tree was hit by lightning!"

Before she could say anything else, they were knocked backward as leafy branches crashed through the roof. Kelly banged her head on the floor and almost lost consciousness. Tetty lay beside her, begging, "Don't die, please. Don't leave me alone!"

Kelly stared at her, confused for a moment, and then whispered, "Be quiet! He's out there somewhere." The branches above their heads shifted slightly and wet leaves rained down. The heaviest branch formed a leafy cage of green around them.

Putting her fingers on her lips to remind Tetty to stay quiet, Kelly inched herself up into a sitting position. But when Tetty tried to sit up, her right foot was jammed under the branch. No matter how she twisted, it wouldn't slide out. She yelped in pain with every move.

Kelly tried to push the branch off her foot but couldn't budge it. Tetty stared at her with panicky eyes, and Kelly hurried to whisper, "Don't worry; I'll figure out something. Let me try one more time."

But the branch was jammed, and nothing Kelly did could shift it. She directed quick peeks at the shattered window, hoping the hairy man had been knocked out or frightened away. When she reached down to give Tetty's boot another tug, her foot slipped out partway.

"Yikes, it's hairy inside your boot!" Kelly exclaimed just as the huge branch began to rise, releasing Tetty's foot. The branch was pulled up and away and someone asked, "Is everybody okay in there?"

Kelly stared at Tetty's furry foot before she slowly gazed up into the man's furry face. Then she scrambled back away from both of them. The man knelt down by Tetty and said, "See what happens when you run away from home? Now apologize to this nice lady here."

Tetty whispered, "Sorry." Her father picked her up in his long, hairy arms and walked through the broken wall. He turned around to say, "Don't worry. I'll be back to help fix the damage."

Dazed, Kelly sat on the floor. She hardly noticed the rain had stopped and a quarter moon brightened the night sky. At least now she knew she had neighbors nearby.

Alicia Stankay, "The Visitor"

Alicia Stankay is a fiction writer and photographer. She has written short stories and novels, along with an occasional poem when the poetry muse guides her fingers. Visits to local state parks allow her to enjoy hiking, taking nature photos, and using those surroundings as settings in some of her stories. She is thrilled that many of her photos and stories have appeared in the *Loyalhanna Review* over the years. Her photography also graces the covers of her books, including *Cathi and Katrina: Adventure in Old Economy Village*, a teen story featuring the living

history museum in her hometown of Ambridge, and *Summer of Secrets: A Stonecliff Mystery*, the story of a young woman who discovers a family secret as frightening incidents spiral out of control. Her nature photos have been exhibited many times at the Merrick Art Gallery in New Brighton. Contact her at aliciastankay@gmail.com.