



DAYLIGHT SAVINGS

JL GREER

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This story contains scenes of domestic violence, opioid abuse, and other graphic depictions.

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Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1 (800) 799-7233

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Contact SAMHSA at 1 (800) 662-HELP (4357)

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November 1, 2024

“It’s spring forward, fall back,” Annalee told her husband as he walked into the kitchen to change the time on the microwave.

“I know, goddammit!” Jared replied, cracking open another can of Golden Light.

As the clock on the microwave turned to 12:01, he reset it back to 11:01 and wished there wasn’t another hour left in the day. He sat back down in the recliner, took a long, hard pull from his beer, and remembered he still had to take down the Halloween decorations. *Just kill me*, he thought as he had to get up *again*.

Annalee had insisted that they put the damn things up year after year: life-sized animatronic zombies and vampires, plastic graves with faux dug earth, and string-light spiderwebs. There were fog machines, hard-plastic skeletons that operated on motion sensors, and worst of all, electrical cords strung out everywhere. It was cute when they were younger, but by God, she was almost thirty now and ought to act like it.

“It’s Día De Los Muertos in México, y’know,” he reminded her. He had been there, once, on his senior high school trip, and had never stopped talking about it. Jared only knew a few words and phrases en español, but he used them at any and every opportunity. When he was able to escape the La-Z-Boy’s jaws of life, he noticed a slight wobble in his step. “Aye dios mio,” he slurred. After a long day of drinking beer, everything was doubled or at least a little blurry. The pills didn’t help, either, but goddammit, he still needed them. He scratched the end of his nose, then touched it with the tip of his finger to ensure he hadn’t drawn blood.

She was staring at him now. *What was that expression for?* he wondered, steadying himself and stumbling toward the front door.

“Where you goin’, now?” she asked him, warming her hands on the fireplace.

“Takin’ down those got-damn abominations o’yers.”

“The decorations?” she said, smiling. “Oh, leave them up for now. It’s fine.”

It was *not* fine. Annalee walked to the doorway, blocking his exit. She was smiling, laughing, even. She thought this was a game. How dare she, in his own house, which he may have to remind her of soon enough, try to obstruct his path? A volcano erupted inside him, a rage so powerful he knew he couldn’t contain it.

As she stood in the doorway, his heart raced, a frantic drummer pounding erratically against his ribcage, threatening an escape from its bony prison. His muscles cramped and his stomach churned like a rolling sea. Looking at her now, she disgusted him. He may well be constipated from the medication, but she was the one that was full of shit. She smiled at him. *Bitch*, he thought. *She’s enjoying this*. That was the final straw.

He smacked her across the face, back hand, but not *too* hard. Just enough to send a message she’s not likely to forget soon. He’d never done it before, but he’d never needed to. Home

correction. That's what they used to call it. That's what his father had called it, anyway. She looked shocked, and why shouldn't she be? He'd always been good to her.

"Jared!" she screamed in shock. "What the fuck?" She was trembling, the smile now departed from her face and replaced with a pit bull's snarl.

"Now, listen here," he told her, before hiccupping. "I been toleratin' your shit long enough now, woman. Who do you think paid for all them fancy decorations? That's right, I did." Hiccup. "Most of 'em, anyways. If I wanna tear 'em all down or hell, if I wanna burn the sons-a-bitches in the trash can, well I suppose that's my god damned right t'do so."

Now he saw something else in her expression and mistakenly interpreted it as simple anger. *Unbelievable*. He hadn't even left a mark on her pretty little face. *It could have been worse*, he thought, remembering his own mother's blackened eyes and swollen cheeks.

Annalee walked to the fireplace, turning away from him. She bit her lip to suppress it, but he saw a tear rolling down her cheek in the mirror mounted above the fireplace. Grabbing their wedding photo from the mantle, she slammed it on the ground, scattering shards of glass across the wooden floor.

She picked up the fireplace poker and turned to face him, a look of desperation flashing in her eyes. Swinging the poker wildly overhead, her frizzing hair out of control and her eyes full of murder, she missed him by only a few inches. The end of the poker stuck in the wood flooring.

He didn't need a fireplace poker to make his point. He *would* leave a mark this time. Oh, he was going to leave a mark, alright. "You god damned worthless, trailer-trash whore!" he cursed her. "The fuck y'do that for?"

“You are NEVER going to hit me again!” she screamed at him, sobbing. “You son of a bitch, do you hear me? I’ll take this poker, right here,” she motioned to it, still stuck in the floor, gaining her composure as she went. She seemed to be growing angrier as she spoke. “I’ll heat it up, right there,” she told him, pointing at the fireplace. Her rage intensified in the warm glow of the fire. “Oh, I’ll heat this motherfucker up until it turns just as bright red as your drunken, stupid face, and I’ll shove it right up your fat ass!”

He decided he’d had about enough of her mouth and would shut it for her.

Annalee was trying to remove the poker, lodged deep into the oak plank. She was focused on it, so he went for her. As Jared reared his fist back, ready to teach that bitch a lesson, she dislodged the fireplace poker, and completely by accident (she would later testify), it found its way through his chest, skewering his heart through the back of his rib cage like a shish kabob dripping with marinade.

September 1, 2019

“Do you think it’s too early to put the decorations out?” Annalee asked, hoping Jared’s answer would be ‘no’.

“Of course not! If anything, we’re late to the party. I think Augtober is the official start of the season,” Jared replied, already lowering the ladder to the attic. “I’m gonna get them down.”

“Gosh,” she said, “I just love you, Jare-Bear. Please be careful up there.”

Jared started climbing the ladder, one step after another, until he was almost at the top, his head poking up into the dark attic. He slipped, or pretended to, and watched as Annalee’s eyes grew wide with panic. He laughed and she pretended to be angry. At least, he

hoped she was pretending. She smiled up at him, melting his anxieties like a wax candle left in the garage all summer.

He made several trips up and down the ladder, locating box after box of decorations and handing them down to her. While he searched the attic, she unboxed items, examining each for damage and placing batteries in the ones that needed them.

“Jared, look at this!” she called, holding up a motion-sensor vampire bat with red blinking eyes and flapping wings. “This is gonna scare the hell out of the neighbor kids!” Her eyes sparkled with mischief, her auburn hair bouncing as she darted to the next box of decorations.

“Oh, that’s messed up,” Jared teased, stepping down from the ladder. He wiped his hands on his jeans and grabbed a bottled water from the old fridge in the garage. “Scaring small children. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“Damn right I am!” Annalee shot back, plugging the fog machine into an electrical strip to test it. A thin mist curled around her legs. She ducked into the thickening fog and army-crawled toward Jared, rising and tackling him like a zombie after brains.

They both laughed, a sound warm and full. He folded the attic stairs and pushed the door back into the ceiling, then wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. Jared looked into her eyes, the smile never leaving his face. “You’re gonna turn our place into a haunted house darlin’. I love it. Te quiero mucho.”

She swatted his chest playfully, then kissed him on the cheek. “Yo también,” she whispered in his ear. It may have been the only Spanish she knew, but god damn if it didn’t sound sweet when she said it. “Help me with the spiderwebs, babe,” she beckoned him. “We’ve got a whole graveyard to set up before dark!”

They worked side by side, stringing up glowing spiderwebs from tree to tree, planting plastic tombstones on the lawn, and placing groaning zombies where they might scare children the most.

“Braaaaaiiiiiiins,” Jared grumbled, brandishing one of the zombies and chasing Annalee around the yard with it. She shrieked with laughter, dodging him until he caught her, both of them joyfully tumbling in the grass.

“Careful! You’ll break the vampire!” she gasped, holding up the bat decoration she’d nearly landed on in the fall.

They spent the evening perfecting their set up and playfully arguing over placement and whether the fog machine was needed (Jared maintained that it was too much, while Annalee insisted it was essential). Once the sun was set, they turned on the lights and stood on the sidewalk, admiring their work. The yard was alive with movement. Zombies twitched and groaned, eerie purple and orange glows darted around the yard, and thick fog curled around the base of the plastic graves.

“It’s perfect,” Annalee whispered, laying her head on his chest.

“You’re perfect,” Jared replied, pulling her closer. He’d never really liked Halloween before, but now he thought it might become his favorite holiday.

November 1, 2024

Annalee fumbled with her cell phone, typing 9-1-2 by mistake and then correcting the last digit on the second try. Her knees felt like bowls of Jell-o and tears streamed down her face. She glanced at Jared, then winced, turning away. She knew that image would stay with her as long as she lived.

When the operator answered, Annalee reported the accident, as she referred to it. She stood on the covered porch of their two-story home, her white floral top flush with crimson as the Silver Lake Police and paramedics (needlessly) arrived on the scene. The end of the poker had wedged itself between two floor planks, driven deep into the splintered wood by the weight and momentum of Jared's girth. As officers brushed by her and entered the home, he was impaled there, facing the front door, his mouth agape and his eyes full of horror. Another macabre addition to the Halloween spread.

She pleaded and she cried and she swore self-defense, but there were no wounds visible on her. As the officers placed her hands behind her back and read her Miranda rights, she insisted it was all a terrible accident. The State of Oklahoma disagreed and charged her with first-degree murder.

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“It wasn’t always like this,” Annalee told herself and Sheriff Sanders. She met Jared Hoffman nine years ago, like many couples in Silver Lake do, at the annual Fourth of July Festival at Memorial Park. She had two left feet, but he knew how to line dance, square dance, and most important of all, he knew how to slow dance. It was the latter of these skills that earned him his first kiss on the outdoor dance floor, lit only by the moonlight and the adjacent bonfire.

It was the summer before her junior year. Jared was a senior, and although he was a football player and she a cheerleader, the two’s paths had scarcely crossed away from the field. Their lives were quickly entwined after that night, and as far as anyone could see, they were the perfect couple. They really were, for seven and a half years, anyway.

Jared was the quarterback of the football team, and maybe the best since Jack Thompson back in the nineties, when the team was actually good. Only now they stunk and had to actively recruit players just to have enough bodies to field a team each season. Jared

had a strong arm and good throwing instincts, but his NFL dreams weren't coming true anytime soon.

After school, the couple moved in together—a small one-bedroom apartment in the old mining district. Those first few years would always be the happiest of her life, she thought, no matter how her feelings about Jared now. He was different back then. He brought her flowers, and she called him Jare-Bear and cooked him dinners that they would eat by candlelight.

They eventually married; a quaint little affair held at the Silver Lake First Baptist Church. While the honeymoon in México would have to wait for *algún día*, he told her, they took little weekend getaways to Tulsa, Oklahoma City, even Dallas and St. Louis occasionally. They were young and in love and had the whole world ahead of them, until the fall.

Jared was old-fashioned and insisted that no wife of his would ever have to work outside the home, so she didn't. With no football scholarships on the table, as he naively expected, he got a job as a sub-contractor for Silver Lake Cable installing and repairing TV, phone, and internet services.

The money was good, but the benefits were nil. Because he was not a direct employee of the company, he wasn't offered health insurance or benefits. He even had to pay \$50 to file a waiver to his right to workman's comp. Big deal. He was young and he was healthy, but his job was also dangerous at times. The technicians that were employed by the company took paid days off when weather was inclement, but as a contractor, he could not. He had an excuse not to climb the utility poles if there was lightning in the area, but otherwise, rain, sleet, or snow, he worked six days a week.

It was one of those days, two years ago, that Jared slipped on his extension ladder, eighteen feet in the air, and fell to the ground. He wasn't wearing his safety harness as he ought to have been, so even if he had workman's comp, the injury wouldn't have been covered. He didn't let this fact stop him from complaining about the god damn insurance companies and their racketeering and colluding with the State. He had broken his right tibia, had a compound fracture in the same ankle, a severe concussion, and two ruptured discs in his lower back. That was when he got the damned prescription for Lortabs.

Jared, like most good-ol-boys in the Sooner State, liked to down a few cold ones from time to time, but *that* was never a problem until the accident. In fact, she used to drink with him on occasion, but never as much as he did, she admitted. He wasn't ever a mean drunk, either, she told the sheriff. However, when he mixed the two—pills and the booze—he became volatile. Never physically, until now, she told him, but she noticed that whenever his nose was itching from the opioids, he changed. He *was* being truthful when he swore that he had never laid a finger on her (until the end), but it was also true that there are other kinds of abuse.

He would fly off the handle when the Thunder lost. That was one thing. Luckily for her, they had been pretty good the past few seasons and those occurrences had been infrequent. He started comparing her to women on television programs and telling her that she would never be as beautiful as they were. This, from the guy who had once hired a violinist to play for her, while he sang *Baby, I Love Your Way* (off-key). He had gained forty pounds since he stopped working, which on its own was fine. It happens, but anytime *she* undressed, he let it be known that she was “gettin’ up there.” By the end, she was one snarky little comment away from joining a convent.

Annalee got her first job when she was twenty-six years old at the IGA grocery store, running the cash register. Jared was pissed at first, but with no other way to pay their bills, he eventually got over it. The hours were long, and the pay was barely enough to starve, but she still loved her man and wanted to help him get back on his feet.

But Jared wasn't getting better. He refused to do physical rehab, choosing instead to drink cheap beer and pop pills all day long, watching *SportsCenter* in his underwear, dozing and sweating and growing fatter by the minute. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she believed this was just a phase he was going through, and he would eventually find his way again. Back to being her sweet, kind Jare-Bear.

When that didn't happen after a year, she started saving money. She socked it away in the only place he would never look for it, her tampon box. With rent prices out-of-control since Covid, she still needed to smuggle away parts of her next few months of pay before she could afford to leave him.

Before that could happen, Daylight Savings time ended, along with Jared's life. She told her story the exact same way, intelligently and truthfully, full of emotion and remorse, first to the arriving officers, then to the county sheriff, her lawyer, and finally to the twelve members of the jury who ultimately convicted her of second, not first-degree murder. Jared's funeral was held in the same church they were married in. If "til death do you part" was the hallmark of a successful marriage, then she could count this one among them. Good deal.

She would be sentenced to ten years and eligible for early release with good behavior after six.

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The trial and sentencing were quick enough. *Jared would have been impressed with the level of government efficiency*, she thought as her ankle chains clanked with each step toward the courtroom exit. It was the beginning of March when she signed a long-term lease on a 6x8 studio apartment in Worthington Correctional Facility.

Annalee could enjoy the burgeoning warmth of spring when she got her time in the yard, but inside, it was hard to tell whether it was day or night. They kept the inmates on a routine though, through pig trough feedings and prison jobs. She knew how to sew and was assigned to mend laundry garments. It kept her mind and her fingers active, and both ached at the end of the day.

It was a cold morning in early March, the eighth, if her scratches on the wall were correct. Daylight Savings started again today, but she had no clocks to turn back, and wasn't permitted an extra hour of sleep, either. She was sewing the armpit back into a shirt, the result of a lunchroom scuffle, when two CO's summoned her.

"Come with us, inmate," one shouted, devoid of expression.

“Hurry up!” the other chimed in, pushing her in the back before she could process the command.

They never gave an explanation when they took someone, and sometimes they didn't come back. That's what she feared. One girl, and Annalee called her a girl because she was only eighteen, and looked too young even then to be *here*, was raped by two of the CO's just weeks before Annalee arrived at Worthington. Both were fired but were likely replaced with carbon copies.

They led her past the mess hall and into an elevator, which they operated by keycard. When the number on the elevator stopped at 4, they got out. They poked and prodded her as if she was refusing to walk, which she wasn't, and one of them had tried to cop a feel. She was sure of it. When they stepped out of the elevator, it didn't seem like a prison anymore. The hallway was well lit, there were portraits and motivational posters hanging on the walls, and butterscotch candies sat in a dish on the warden's desk, where her journey ended.

“Sit down,” the warden said without looking up from the file on his desk, ”Annalee Hoffm—“

“It's Simpson, actually. Well, not legally...yet,” she clarified.

“Well, I don't quite know how to say this.” The warden paused and looked up at the ceiling, as if the words he needed were floating mercifully above. They weren't. “You're being released, Annalee.”

She couldn't believe what she'd heard and asked him to repeat it.

“Misses Hoffman,” he continued, again using her married name, “the State dropped all charges early this morning. Your exit paperwork is being processed as we speak, and you will be free to go afterwards.”

“I-I don’t understand. Why?” she asked him, taking a long look at the gift in the horse’s mouth.

“Ma’am, I’ve been the warden here for forty-seven years, thought I’d seen everything, ‘til today. The State can’t very well charge you with murder now, Misses Hoffman. Your husband is alive.”

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MARCH 8, 2026

In the early hours of the morning, shortly after Daylight Savings time began, Jared Hoffman began walking northbound on Silver Lake Road. He became aware of his surroundings all at once, and for the life (or death) of him, he couldn't remember what he had been doing only moments before.

Wearing the remnants of the suit he'd purchased for a wedding last spring, he felt disconnected from reality, like he was walking in a dream. The gritty taste of dirt rolled over his tongue. After pinching himself to ensure he was real and conscious, he exhaled a sigh of relief. *Ow, fuck!* Breathing hurt. *Had I been breathing before I thought about it?* He didn't think so. As Jared vomited up amber colored fluid, he lost control of his bowels. *Breathing optional. Got it.*

Images started appearing to him, not in his direct vision, but curled just behind his periphery, where he was almost a part of them. A fireplace. A girl. *She's hotter'n hell*, he thought. String lights. A margarita. He vomited again; this time chunks of gravel mixed with that same scent. It smelled like... He couldn't place it, at first. Then he remembered everything.

May 24, 2016

Sunlight glinted off the turquoise infinity pool where Jared lounged, slurping the icy backwash from a plastic-fishbowl margarita. The air smelled of chlorine and sunscreen, and the chatter of his classmates mixed with the reggaeton beat from a nearby speaker. Jared still carried the swagger of a high school quarterback, but he could already feel it slipping from him. He hadn't gotten any scholarship offers, yet, and likely wouldn't. Once this trip was over, he would have to find a job.

His classmates were scattered around—girls tanning topless, face down on loungers on the deck, guys chugging beers and tossing a football that kept landing in the pool. It was supposed to be the trip of a lifetime, but to Jared, it felt like a glossy postcard, not the México he imagined. He wanted street tacos, dusty markets, cock fights, and the chaos of real life, not this sanitized bubble. The problem was, his Spanish was limited to “una cerveza por favor,” and “¿Dónde está el baño?” The thought of navigating beyond the walls of the resort excited but also terrified him.

Across the pool, Tony Castillo leaned against the bar, his lanky frame draped in a faded blue t-shirt and board shorts. Dark hair draped over his eyes as he spoke in rapid-fire Spanish with the bartender, who laughed and slid him a fresh beer. Tony ran in different social circles than Jared at school, preferring the company of the stoners and art-geeks over the popular crowd.

With his letterman jacket and homecoming king crown, Jared had barely registered Tony's existence until this trip. But that was high school, and now, having graduated, they were adults. Jared and Tony had shared a bench seat on the bus from México City to Cancún, occasionally exchanging friendly banter and finding some common ground on the subject of

classic hot-rods. Jared thought their interaction had been enough to bridge the gap between cliques. Apparently not.

Last night, Jared overheard Tony at the hotel bar, his voice slurred and loud: “Pssh, Hoffman? He’s a fucking joke. Walking cliché. Thinks he’s hot shit ‘cause he can throw a football.” The words hit Jared like a blindside tackle, leaving him with a severely bruised ego (no expected timeline for recovery).

Still, Jared needed someone who could speak the language; someone who could help him see the México he’d been dreaming about since he booked this trip. Tony was his ticket out of this resort trap. Jared weaved through the crowd toward Tony and casually ordered a beer from the bar next to him. The other kids around Tony—hipsters who wore black cut-off t-shirts for swimming, their piercings glinting in the sun—went quiet as Jared approached, their eyes darting between him and Tony. Jared flashed his best quarterback grin, the one that usually got him out of trouble. Tony looked up with an eyebrow raised, his expression caught between amusement and suspicion.

“This resort sucks,” Jared told him, a perfect icebreaker.

“For once in your life, you’re not completely full of shit,” Tony replied with a laugh. “So... What’s up? You lost, Hoffman? Your fan club’s over there by the hot tub.”

A few of Tony’s friends snickered, but Jared kept his smile plastered on, ignoring the jab. “I uh, I heard you speaking Spanish. That’s cool as hell, man.” Jared leaned forward, took a sip of his beer, and continued. “You know, I’m kinda over this place. Feels like a theme park. I wanna see the real México, but I don’t speak a lick of Spanish. Figured you might know the lay of the land. If you’re bored too, maybe we could check it out. Maybe find some old hot-rods to gawk over or something.”

Tony's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Jared thought he'd misjudged the whole thing. Tony took a slow sip of his beer, letting the silence stretch out to make Jared squirm. "So, what? You think I'm one of your little lackeys now? Your personal translator? Tour guide? Is that it?"

"No, I—"

"You what?" Tony asked, standing up.

"Forget it," Jared said, dejected. "I just thought you might know of some good places to go." His gut twisted. He could still hear Tony's voice from the bar last night, cutting him down like he was nothing but a washed-up jock. Trusting him felt like stepping onto the field without calling a play first. Maybe it was better this way. But then Jared pictured another day here, trapped in this faux paradise. He wanted more—needed more.

"Please," Jared pleaded, "I need this."

Tony looked at Jared, then to his friends who were pretending not to eavesdrop, then back to Jared. "Fine. Okay. Just wipe that stupid lost puppy-dog look off your face. There's a mercado a few miles from here. Real shit—vendors, al pastor spinning on pits, some mezcal. I was gonna check it out today. You're welcome to come, but I'm not babysitting you."

"Deal," Jared said, locking eyes with Tony. "I'm in."

"Don't make me regret this, Hoffman."

After a quick trip back to their rooms to change clothes, they headed out, in search of the *real* México. Things were older outside the resort—the buildings, the roads, even the people. They toured a local agave farm and distillery and had their fill tasting mezcal. Eight hours seemed to disappear in an instant. They ate tacos and elote, drank guarro, and sang

along as best they could with the live, outdoor music. The assembled crowd seemed to know every word to each song. Whoever was on stage, they must have been a big deal, in México, at least. It was now approaching two a.m., and the outdoor party, whatever it was for, was dying down.

“You want to head back?” Jared implored, trying to keep his right foot in front of his left. He was more than a little drunk, and he missed Annalee’s voice. A sense of unease came over Jared as the streets grew darker and the crowd began to thin out. The resort seemed like it was a million miles away, and he knew he couldn’t find his way back on his own.

As soon as Jared mentioned wanting to go back to the resort, Tony started referring to him as something he couldn’t pronounce, but he thought it had to do with female genitalia, based on Tony’s gestures and snickering. Insisting that the night was young and he would only live once, Tony finally convinced Jared that the *real* parties didn’t even start until now. If that *were* true, and it probably wasn’t, neither of them knew where to look.

“It’s fine,” Tony insisted. “We’ll talk to a cabbie. The dayshift guy was a square. Night shift sees all the action. I promise. One more stop. They’ll know where to go! Don’t be such a pussy, Hoffman.”

“One more stop? You promise?” Jared asked, shuffling his feet in the dirt.

“Si, pues claro! One more stop, then you can go have phone sex while I’m having real sex. Sígueme, gringo huevón!”

And off they went again, deeper into the unknown and the wilds of the moon’s eye.

“¿Adónde van?” inquired the cab driver.

Tony and the cabbie spoke briefly before the car started moving. Jared didn’t understand a word they said, but both were laughing, so he assumed that was a good thing, for Tony at least. They drove for close to forty minutes, by his diving watch’s account. The

roads were bumpier outside of the city, and the view was probably scenic, if it weren't pitch dark in the middle of the jungle. It was 2:45 a.m., and it had been at least twenty minutes since the tires had seen pavement, when the car stopped.

"Where the hell are we?" Jared asked, staring through the beams of the headlights into the dense jungle ahead.

"Okay," Tony said, flashing a smile that was meant to be charming but wasn't. "I didn't wanna tell you. It had to be a surprise, but check it. We... are going to trip... with a shaman!"

"What? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Trip... Peyote... Shaman... Dumbass," Tony said, pointing to Jared as he gave his final word of explanation.

"¡Bienvenido!" a voice rang out, sharp and warm, slicing through the musky night air. A woman emerged from the dense wall of jungle foliage, her voluptuous form outlined by the pale, silvery glow of moonlight. The faint scent of night-blooming jasmine clung to her woven shawl, its fibers glinting faintly as she walked toward Jared. Her dark eyes caught the lunar light, flashing with a quiet authority that seemed to command the shadows themselves. She introduced herself as La Jefita. Two younger women stepped forward behind her, their bare feet silent on the cool ground. Their movements were cautious, almost deferential, as they hovered on each side of La Jefita. All three shared a striking resemblance—sisters, no doubt. They had sharp cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes, though La Jefita's sagacious confidence clearly marked her as the one in charge.

They called themselves Brujas de la Oscuridad. Tony told Jared that it meant Sisters of the Night, and he made a moaning noise that was supposed to be sexual but sounded more

like a sheep being castrated. It was only weeks later, once they were back home, that Tony confessed that brujas were witches and oscuridad meant darkness.

There was a bonfire—that much reminded Jared of Silver Lake. Nothing else here did. People were lying on the ground, face down, murmuring. They were all naked and drenched with sweat. One of the younger Sisters approached Jared, took her clothes off, and then started to remove his. He recoiled, thinking of Annalee.

The woman rubbed paint on Jared's forehead and around his eyes, chanting something else he didn't understand, then spat into a coconut gourd. She poured liquid into the gourd, then handed it to him, praying again, this time to Santa Muerte. The gourd was half full. He drank. It was bitter and tasted like rotting flesh, but it smelled like—

MARCH 8, 2026

“That god damn peyote!” Jared thought, as he walked towards town. That's what his vomit smelled like.

A thought occurred to him. Maybe, Tony, that son of a bitch, slipped him some peyote yesterday. He'd blacked out, and Tony had played another prank on him. *Yeah, that makes sense! He probably dug a hole in his front yard, threw me in it, and then for good measure, piled a few shovels full of dirt on top.*

Jared laughed, then coughed again, tasting that godawful peyote tea in his mouth. There was something wrong with his leg, too. *Damn, if it isn't always something!* His right leg was dragging limply behind him. He could feel it, but it wasn't cooperating, exactly. The left side of his face felt funny, like it was melted putty. His words would almost certainly slur if he spoke. He thought he might have to pay Tony a visit, after going home, of course.

Jared became disoriented as he walked. The world, once sharp with edges of clarity, blurred into a kaleidoscope of fractured hues. His mind was unraveling, fraying the threads that bound thought to reason. Something ancient pulsed in his veins, a venomous rhythm that twisted his thoughts into jagged, violent shards. Memories of her—her smile, her voice, her betrayal—flashed like lightning in a storm, each one stoking a fire that burned hotter with each step. Thoughts clawed at his skull, whispering that he was no longer just Jared, but something more, something unstoppable. Violent urges welled up as laughter overtook him. The sound of his own voice startled him, his laughter now a cacophony of mayhem and destruction that felt foreign yet thrilling.

“Anna...lee,” he groaned, giving a name to his developing rage. His fists clinched as he remembered her face in the firelight, the poker in her hand, the pain that ended him—or should have. Something wouldn’t let him rest, wouldn’t let him forget. It demanded retribution, and he was its vessel. With a singular focus, his anger bloomed into determination. Nothing could keep him from her.

He was almost to town now, and despite how awful he looked and the stench that followed him, he felt fantastic. Something inside of him thrummed with power, making his decayed body feel alive, invincible. *And look at that, he thought, a police officer was being so kind as to flash their lights for me. Why, I bet he’d be just skipping to give me a ride home! What luck!* But then an unseen force twisted his amusement into something darker. *And if not, that’s okay, too. I guess I’d just have to rip off his happy little arms and beat him to death with them. What a shame!* The thought made him cackle, a sound that echoed through the streets, as if darkness itself laughed along with him.

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MARCH 8, 2026

It was nearly three p.m. before Annalee was discharged. The reunion with family and friends would have to wait. She needed answers.

Annalee caught a ride share to the police station, panicked as the day she was arrested. The officer manning the front counter quickly ushered her into the sheriff's office, likely afraid she would make a scene if left unattended. Prior to recent events, she'd only seen Sheriff Sanders on the local news, and once last year during the search, when two teens went missing. Now, it felt like they were close to being on a first-name basis. He was tall, black, and his calm demeanor was immediately disarming. His commanding but gentle voice lulled her panic, and she softened with only his cordial greeting.

“Welcome, Misses Hoffman. I’m sure—“

“Sheriff—”

“Please... call me William. I’m sure you have a *lot* of questions. I wish I could answer them. I do.”

“Was it him? Was it really Jared?”

“Well now, that one I can answer. I don’t know how, but it *was* him.”

“What the hell? The coroner’s report seemed pretty definitive.”

“I don’t know. It’s rare, but I have heard of people being buried alive by mistake. Don’t think it happens much anymore. They used to put bells beside the headstone attached to a string inside the coffin so that a person could ring it if they were buried by mistake. Don’t think that happens much anymore, though. Sure as hell never heard of it happening after four months.”

She paused for a moment, collected herself, and asked, “How was he? What did he say?”

“I’m not gonna lie, he looked rough. He was in desperate need of a shower, too, I’ll tell you that much. Stunk to high hell, he did! I’m sure he’s cleaned up by now, though, don’t you worry. He was clear about exonerating you. Was one of the first things he said when the deputy picked him up. Said it was all a horrible accident and he wanted to make sure you could come home to him. Swore it was all a giant misunderstanding.”

“Where is he now?” she demanded.

“Well, I don’t know. Might be home. Your mom kept paying y’all’s rent, assuming you’d get released at some point. Was s’posed to be a surprise, I reckon. Anyhow, he’s probably there now. You normally leave a key out somewhere?”

“I have to go.”

Their old house wasn’t far. With her head chalked full of confusion, she ran. Past the EZ Mart and the IGA, left onto Mayweather, and finally, home on Bryant Street. Just two blocks left to go. She was winded, but adrenaline allowed her to push through it. The lights were on in the living room.

She snuck around back and hid in the bushes, waiting for motion inside the house, when she heard the aggravating crack of a beer can opening. Even in death, Jared was predictable. He

was in the kitchen now but heading back to the living room. She decided to sneak in the back door and gather more information before confronting him. The thrill of the hunt was exhilarating, if that's what this was. She still held on to the quixotic hope that the man she would encounter inside would be her wonderful Jare-Bear, and not the addict that had taken over his body.

“Hello, darlin.” He surprised her from behind, digging his meaty paws into her arms, drawing blood, and spinning her around to face him. She screamed, her eyes bulging at Jared's inhuman appearance. His skin was festering, hanging loosely off the exposed skeleton of his face, and one of his eyes dangled from his protruding cheek bone, aimed at the floor. The other was fixated on her breasts. Typical.

He open-handedly slapped her across the face, so hard it felt like a punch. Immediately, she saw stars and her vision blurred. She feared if he hit her again, she would lose consciousness. They would find her body, what was left of it, anyway, dismembered across the back yard. He tried to caress her face now. Why? She couldn't say. She bit his pointer finger, and it detached from his hand. The digit tore right off like a tender piece of chicken from the bone. She spat it out, gagging and nearly vomiting from the taste of rotted flesh. Something that wasn't blood poured from the wound. It was amber colored and smelled like chemicals.

He was angry now. With his clothing in tatters, she could see right through him. He wasn't transparent, but where she had accidentally impaled him, a fist-sized hole exposed a cavity she could see all the way through. Jared flipped her off with what used to be his middle finger, clinched his fist, and swung at her. He was drunk, of course, and missed, falling to the ground.

Annalee kicked him in the ribs as hard as she could, then ran through the back door into the kitchen, hoping to find a knife. Apparently, her mother had paid the rent but pilfered her

knife set. Looking out the window, she saw he was still down. Annalee ran out the back door to finish him off once and for all, but he was gone.

She knew he hadn't really left. He would be watching her, even now. Any second, he would pop out of the bushes or drop down from the roof. Annalee had seen enough horror movies to know that's how it happened. After creeping inside the house and locking all the doors, she searched through every cabinet, behind the shower curtain, the attic, and the basement. The house was empty.

She didn't sleep the entire night. Instead, she was on guard duty. She walked the perimeter of the house, the interior at least, checking and rechecking cabinets, looking through every window, and into every shadow. Still, nothing.

Once her breathing retreated from its marathon pace and her heart adjusted to a baseline level of anxious alertness, she sat in the corner of her dark closet and wept. As the closet's shadows enveloped her like a funeral shroud, Annalee's mind reeled from the grotesque revelation that Jared wasn't just alive, but undead, a mockery of life that defied every law of nature and reason. Her body trembled uncontrollably, her heart pounding as if trying to flee her chest while bile rose in her throat, the lingering taste of Jared's rotting finger.

How could this be? She wondered in a whirlwind of terror and disbelief, her thoughts fracturing like the glass in their wedding photo. Perhaps it was God's punishment for skewering the son of a bitch with a fireplace poker, or some twisted side effect from the pills and booze that poisoned his soul long before his body. Then another thought occurred to her, one that seemed to click into place like a puzzle piece. He'd always bragged about that damned trip to Mexico and some ancient voodoo he'd seen. Now, she wondered if there wasn't something to his bullshit.

May 25, 2016

About thirty minutes after drinking the tea, Jared began to feel ill. It was a good thing the word for “normal” was almost identical in both languages, because everyone was petting him and repeating it over and over. His body threatened to spew from both ends, and even in this deep state of euphoria, he needed privacy for *that*. He shook his head back and forth, attempting to slosh away whatever was distorting his vision. The trees were dancing, he could have sworn it. Not just waving in the wind, either. One palm tree performed a lopsided version of the running man while another twerked in front of a smaller tree that was swaying in the breeze.

Jared stood mesmerized for what felt like hours but was only minutes (if the wavy dancing hands on his trusty diving watch could still be trusted), staring at the palm fronds. When his bowels reminded him of his earlier, and much more pressing commitment, he slithered away from the group and into the jungle. He didn't want to walk too far in, especially alone at night. There was no telling if there were jaguars, monkeys, or man-eating snakes crawling around out here.

The glow from the bonfire was still visible when his bowels began to betray him. Ducking behind a large rock, he relieved himself at once. As soon as he did, he heard his name. Jared spun to meet the voice, his pants around his ankles, and before he could wipe himself with a palm frond, Tony was there, with two of the three sisters. They spoke in Spanish and were angry. Apparently very angry, judging from their aggressive gestures and furrowed brows.

“We have to go, now!” Tony commanded him. La Jefita emerged, now fully nude and perhaps angrier than even her sisters. She blocked their path, spitting at their feet. She pushed Tony aside and grabbed Jared by the wrist. When she revealed a dagger, sheathed in a garter on her upper thigh, Jared pleaded for mercy.

She cut Jared's wrist, drank the blood, and spoke directly to him: "Habéis profanado nuestra ofrenda impía a la Santa Muerte."

The words were gibberish to him, but he saw it now. The rock on which he had projectile-vomited and defecated on was the base of a very large statue. It was at least twenty feet tall, a Baphomet with a woman's body.

The older sister, the one who called herself La Jefita, looked into Jared's eyes, muttered something in Spanish, and then translated to be sure he would understand. "You will be cursed to walk the earth... the shadow of death beside you... forever."

NOVEMBER 1, 2026

Annalee swore that life would never be the same after what she'd seen, but after six months, a sense of normalcy began to slowly creep in. She still looked over her shoulder in public, still neurotically double-checked every lock, and still peered into every nook and cranny each night before turning in, but she no longer expected to find him.

Now officially Simpson again, Annalee met Danny Chisolm while working at the IGA grocery store. He was funny and handsome, masculine, and he was kind to her. Most importantly, he made her feel safe. There was chemistry between them, but so far, she'd been reluctant to label it. *Anyone who thinks people can't change has never married an addict*, she often said. Annalee was hesitant to jump into a relationship after the catastrophic way her last one ended, but she also couldn't deny the warmth she felt when Danny was near.

A Nightmare on Elm Street was playing on the television, but Danny wasn't paying the slightest attention to the movie. He had been not-so secretly trying to unhook Annalee's bra for the better part of the movie. Finally, mercifully, she did it for him. Before he could round the proverbial second base, the doorbell rang.

“Did you order a pizza?” she asked.

“No, you didn’t?” he replied, his muscles tensing up. She shook her head. Danny got off the couch, grabbed his pistol off the table in the entryway, and peeked through the door. “There’s no one there. Probably just some stupid kids with a sugar hangover from too much Halloween candy.” He set the pistol back down on the table, where she insisted he keep it in case Jared ever came back. She had told Danny the outline of her relationship with Jared and that he was the reason for her paranoia, but the relationship was new, so she had kept the details to a minimum, for now.

As Danny turned away, the door burst open behind him. The LED porch light he’d recently installed backlit the intruder, the blinding light obscuring the intruder’s features as he hit Danny over the head with something, knocking him out. The intruder became visible as he stepped through the doorway, grabbing Annalee by the hair and throwing her on the floor. She gasped, seeing him, then attempted to scream, but no sound came out. It was Jared. Of course it was, but you couldn’t tell by looking at him. There was no skin left on his face, except for a small patch in the center of his forehead. His left eye, previously dangling from the socket, was now gone entirely, an empty void its replacement. His remaining eye furled in anger.

She swung her fist at him, connecting with his jaw, and his lower mandible crashed to the floor, a few teeth still attached. He moaned with what was left of his mouth. Swinging at him again, she dislodged the other eye, leaving it dangling and bouncing against his cheek as he jerked away. He fumbled to put it back in. After grabbing the pistol from the table and turning the safety off like Danny had shown her, she emptied the clip into Jared’s chest and the wall behind him. The rotted remains of him lay motionless on the floor. She tried to wake Danny, but he wouldn’t move. She slapped him, hard, and kept doing so until he came to.

He squinted, shaking his head and wiping a small line of blood from his forehead.

“Wh-what happened?” he asked, disoriented.

“Help! Danny, please!”

“Woah, what the fuck?” he said, looking at the carnage. Lamps were broken on the floor, the TV screen smashed, and pools of strange fluid stretched out across the hardwood floor.

“We need to get rid of the body,” was all she could think or say.

“Oh my God, you killed him,” he whispered, the words barely escaping his mouth.

“Was that... Jared? Maybe we should call the police? I-I don't know about... covering up a murder?”

“Danny, meet Jared,” she said, motioning to the bullet riddled, rotted corpse on her living room floor. “That file cabinet over there...I have seven copies of the son-of-a-bitches death certificate from last year. Sooooo... it's not murder. Not really.” She forced a smile, hoping it would convince him.

“How? I mean... What the fuck?” Danny looked around with wild eyes, like prey pinned in a corner. Annalee watched as the options in his mind dwindled to one. “So, wait. You're telling me your ex that you've been worried about has been dead this whole time?”

She fidgeted with her hands, looking down at the floor. “Yeah... You don't believe me. It's okay. I don't blame you. I probably wouldn't either.”

“No, it's just a lot to process. Would you mind if I looked at the death certificate? Not that I don't trust you, it's just—”

“No, I get it,” she replied, walking to the cabinet and opening the top drawer. She thumbed through the folders until she found the one marked ‘legal docs’, then found the certificate almost at once and handed it to him.

He looked the document over, his lips moving silently as he read. “Wh-what do you need from me?” he said when he was finished.

“Are you sure you want to help?” she asked him, pouting her bottom lip. “I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to run for the hills.”

He smiled, his eyes locking with hers. “I’m sure,” he replied, rolling up his sleeves. “Where do we start?”

“Help me get him to the garage and grab a saw. This motherfucker’s not coming back again.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” he told her. “My dad works for waste management.”

“So? It’s not like we can just put his body out with the recycling in the morning.”

Danny smiled. “What would they recycle him into, exactly? Wait... don’t answer that. Don’t you know if you want to get rid of something evil you have to burn its body? Pssh, amateur,” he playfully teased her. “I’ll be back in twenty with the keys. This time of night, no one will be at the plant. We can use the incinerator. Then we dump the ashes in the lake. Problem solved.”

She smiled at him, lines deep and true forming in her cheeks, the kind she thought were surely lost forever.

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MARCH 14, 2027

In the early hours of the morning, shortly after Daylight Savings time began, ashes began clumping together at the edge of Silver Lake. The gentle tide pushed them to the shore, where they sizzled in the dewy grass. First, drops of blood hydrated from the ash, forming a small spot of crimson in the grass. Next, the blood began to boil and then form into solids—first a set of ears materialized, then bones from a leg, one of them still fractured. Body parts formed into neat stacks on the shoulder of Silver Lake Road, impatiently waiting for portions of organs and a finger that might never show.

When it became clear that some parts would remain absent, the bits of Jared Hoffman that were present slid across the blacktop, reassembling his body. The bottom portion of his right leg fused with his knee, already attached to his thigh. Once both legs were formed, they joined with what was left of his Swiss-cheese torso. Bullet riddled with a fist-sized hole punctuating his frame, it fused with arms and clinched fists on both sides. Jared's lower mandible rattled back into place, minus several teeth that may or may not rejoin him later. Finally, the top of his skull fused to his jaw, completing his corpse.

As soon as his parts were gathered, he began walking northbound on Silver Lake Road. His naked form exposed massive weight loss. *Seriously, I haven't looked this good*

since high school, he thought to himself. Images were starting to flood his mind, confusing him. His feet were leading him north, but he wasn't sure why. He thought about it for a second and scratched his forehead, accidentally removing the last patch of skin. Something clicked inside of him as he fully reassembled—his anger became focused and he was able to direct it, putting it in its proper place. He turned about face, and started walking south, angrily muttering “La Jefita. La Jefita. La Jefita.”

This story was started on April 13, 2025 and completed on April 16, 2025.

No peyote was harmed in the making of this story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JL Greer is an Oklahoma author whose roots run deep in the small-town charm of places like Silver Lake, the fictional setting of his debut novella, *The Replacement*. A Tulsa-area native, he lives with his wife, daughter, a Himalayan cat, and a revolving cast of human strays.

As a student at Oklahoma State University, he earned early recognition for his award-winning short story, *Mystique*, displaying his knack for blending heart and horror. By day, he masquerades as an IT professional, but under the cover of night, he becomes a vigilante, rescuing empty pages from a plotless fate.

He believes this condition is terminal.