

Years 5 & 6
2nd Place: Elana Beukes
Year 5, Dale Christian School

In the Shadows

“Everyone ready back there?” Dad called to the girls in the back of the car. “Yep,” they chorused gleefully as the car’s engine came to a roaring start and backed off the driveway. Luna and her family had long awaited their trip to the Willow Grove Nature Resort, where they would be staying in a small cabin. From what she heard, the resort was surrounded by a thick forest known for some strange occurrences that had supposedly happened a few years back. But whatever caused them should have been long gone by now.

Luna stared out at the empty world whizzing around her, only an occasional blur of a tree breaking the otherwise bland sight. Summer, Luna’s twin sister, had her nose buried in a book, and their parents were busy discussing some things that they could do during the week.

After a lengthy three hours they finally arrived at the resort at about 6:00pm and reached their cabin. It was made from a dark brown type of wood which was faded in some places and had miniature cracks on certain parts of the building. A verandah overlooked a meadow filled with an abundance of flowers ranging from bright yellows and pinks to rich reds and purples. They hauled their belongings up and opened the door. In front of them was a mini-kitchen which was connected to a room with a TV, couch and a dining table, with six chairs surrounding it. The floor was a beige colour, which made it easily contrast with the dark walls. They continued through the house and walked into a cramped hallway with the same dark type of wood and light floor. There were three light brown doors which seemed to be newly installed, two of them leading to bedrooms and one to a bathroom. Luna and Summer made their way to what they thought was their room and their parents went to theirs.

When she opened the door, Luna had to pause to take in everything she was seeing, in one corner of the room was a bunkbed with white wooden support beams and a tiny stepping stool in front of it, allowing them access to the top bunk. Then, in the little space that was left, was a closed window with a metal frame and shimmering grey curtains, looking out into the dense forest that surrounded them, and next to that was a door that led to what she guessed would be a cupboard. Summer gently nudged her aside and stepped into the room also seemingly appalled at its decorations.

“Well I guess this is where we’ll be sleeping for the week,” she sighed as she glanced over her shoulder. “Do you want the top or bottom bunk?”

“Umm . . . you can decide. I’ll go help with the rest of the unpacking,” Luna replied.

“Okay then, I’ll join you soon.”

She grabbed her bag and flung it onto the top bunk as Luna walked out of the room and to the car.

By now the sun had already set, so Luna swiftly grabbed some bags and put them on the floor of the living room. *Where is Summer?* she thought, growing slightly agitated, *it doesn’t take that long to unpack.* She looked behind her at the open door

as her parents were bringing in the last of their stuff. She sighed and shook her head while walking to her room. But when she got there and peered inside, it was empty with the curtains flapping freely in the night's breeze.

Luna stared at the scene before her. *What happened here?* she thought with a growing sense of dread, *Summer wouldn't just leave, something has to be going on.* She swallowed back tears and decided to look around for what she hoped would be evidence to where her sister went. She scanned the room searching for anything, even the slightest difference from when she first saw the room. Until it dawned on her . . . the window!

She rushed over to it and glanced outside, her only source of light was the faint glow coming from the bedroom. She studied the dim world in front of her, squinting to try and see through the inky blackness that shielded her vision. She looked down only to see a strange pair of footprints, they seemed human but they would morph into different forms, sometimes fully human or animal. Luna clambered out the window and landed on a rough dirt path that lead straight into the forest, the footprints staggered along it. She scanned a few metres ahead of her on the path, took a deep breath, and began to follow it.

The forest was hot and humid, with tall trees growing in all directions. Most of them were oddly twisted, their long branches blocking out the moon so that only a sliver of light could pass through. Beads of sweat formed and trailed down her forehead, her dark hair clung to her face and her heavy panting pierced the silence of the night. However, no matter how hard it was, no matter how much her body screamed for her to stop, she had to keep going, she had to find her sister above all else, even if it meant enduring the physical pain she beared right now. She knew it would be worse to lose someone who meant so much to her.

Time seemed to trudge by like everything was in slow motion. The world around her had begun to look familiar, and Luna was starting to wonder if she had been going in circles. Even the slightest thought of that made her want to kick herself, because every minute, every second that's wasted out here could mean Summer's life. Doubt had started to creep into her mind and overrun her, but just as she had lost all hope, she saw a dull light at the end of the path. A flare of energy burst within her and raced through her veins, willing her to break into a sprint toward the light. When she reached the end, what stood before her sent shivers down her spine.

There was a massive mansion. It was about three stories tall with a broken roof and boarded up windows, vines climbed all over it and brown-green paint had begun to peel from its misshapen walls. Tall, black fences stood all around the house, with a gate taking over a section of them, and a dilapidated fountain stood between them in a small courtyard with overgrown, wilted rosebushes trailing around the edges of it.

Luna walked up to the gate and gave it a firm push, causing it to swing open. She took an anxious step forward into the courtyard, the gravel path crunched underfoot, it had the same type of footprints she found at her window, all leading to the front of the house. So, she mustered up all the courage she had, walked to the door, and reached for the handle.

When Luna opened the door what she saw put her in awe, there was torn-up furniture everywhere, pieces of shattered glass dotted all over the place and a broken chandelier barely managing to stay hanging onto the roof. The only thing that seemed to be untouched was a grandfather clock that stood against the only wall that wasn't damaged, the other walls were mouldy and had holes in them, ranging in size. She thought she could hear eerie whispers echoing around the walls of the house, but she wasn't sure if it was real or just in her head. She took a step forward, fragments of glass crunching under her weight, the only light she had available was mainly blocked by the wood planks that covered the windows. She carefully walked towards one of them and ripped off the decayed planks, and, just as she did, an ear-splitting screech rang through the house.

She froze, she could hear her heart beating in her ears, she peered around the place but nothing seemed to be different. She whipped around just in time to see a shadowy figure appear out of thin air and then disappear just as quickly. Her heart skipped a beat at the ghostly sight. *What was that?* she thought with a rising panic, her eyes frantically darting around. Nothing in the room seemed to be different. *It was . . . probably just my imagination,* she reasoned, trying to reassure herself.

She walked to the centre of the room and felt a strong gust of wind fly by her, like someone or something was moving past her, she whipped around only to see darkness staring back at her. *I have to get out of here,* she thought, as she raced to the door, but just as she was about to make it out, the chandelier came hurtling down to the ground, almost crushing her in the process.

Luna gasped and fell back in shock, she looked up at where it was previously dangling, only to find glowing eyes looking down at her, belonging to the same creatures she saw just a few minutes ago. She flung around and ran in the opposite direction, but when she was just about to escape, the door slammed shut in her face and locked, trapping her there. She scanned the room in dismay for any type of exit but she couldn't see anything. The whispers just seemed to grow louder as her mind flooded with stress and worry. The world around her had begun to spin as she backed against the wall, and strange shadows started to surround her, glowing eyes stared at her accompanied by wide, ominous smiles that glittered brighter than the moon.

She shuffled over to the side, hoping that there would be a way to escape if she did so. As she moved over, she felt an object in her way, and looked over to see it was the grandfather clock, but something about it was odd, a part of the wood had an abnormal lump in it. So, with no other options, she pressed her body against the clock and, without warning, it slowly moved out of the way, revealing a secret passage, descending into the earth.

Luna looked back at the creatures then ran down the stairs. At the bottom she found darkness except for a little bit of light that showed yet another figure, but this time it was different, with a closer look she discovered . . . it was Summer!

"Summer, you're okay!" she cried.

"Luna, there's no time," Summer replied, shooting a glance up at the top of the staircase. "We need to run."

Before Luna could reply she ran to her and grabbed her arm, then dashed up the stairs into the living room, and then out into the courtyard. Luna looked back and saw a wave of shadows chasing after them, she turned back and ran faster than she had ever run before. Both her and her sister ran non-stop to the edge of the forest, the sun had already awoken and shone brightly over the open flower field, making the early morning dew glisten on them elegantly.

It was the final stretch until they would be out of the forest, but the shadows were already managing to get a grasp of the girls' ankles, only for their cold, bony fingers to immediately be kicked off. But when they reached the end of the forest and stepped out into the light, a deafening shriek filled the morning air, making the earth shake. Luna and Summer risked a glance behind them, only to see a black cloud of smoke drifting up into the atmosphere. They shared a glance and then continued to the bedroom window and climbed in.

“So, we’re in agreement,” Summer said, sitting cross-legged on the ground. “We never speak of this to anyone ever again.”

Luna nodded in agreement. They might never talk about it but she knew they would both remember their trip to Willow Grove Nature Resort.