

**Third place
Middle School**

Shades

by Kristen Hayden

Belief is a funny thing. It gives infallible, if possibly incorrect, reasons for actions, good and bad. It can turn men to beasts or beasts to men. It can fuel war or peace or the idea that there is a monster under your bed. Because if you believe it, there is one. At least in some places.

- Dishatka Rikishantaborinti, priest of The Temple

And this is how the story started. Belief. It actually started a long time ago in a land in which belief was raw and fiery and could be used to give ideas life, within a carriage drawn by two ill-matched horses over a pitted and weedy road. The torches on the sides of the carriage had long since gone out in the rushing wind despite the best efforts of the driver and so the carriage rumbled on in complete darkness but for small slices of moon peering through the flying clouds. The driver muttered angrily under his breath at this horrible wind that crept under his hat, and the way that nowadays torches never worked, now in *his* day they wouldn't go out even in a storm that rushed as fiercely as a thousand-pound tiger on caffeine... The single passenger in the small carriage was curled under her thick traveling cloak and was miraculously asleep. Her traveling bag was spilled over the floor, revealing a flowered cotton dress and the tips of yarn hair from a barely-concealed doll wrapped up in a petticoat. The mutterings from the hunched-up driver changed from complaints about the weather and torches to complaints about how the distance to the blasted carriage house was *always* longer when there was a storm... when suddenly a dark rectangle loomed up to the right. The horses stopped up short in the windless lee of the stables, their happy snorts matching the driver's fervent thanks to any gods who might be around as he swung down from his perch to open the carriage door. The small passenger had only woken up when the wind stopped whistling through gaps in the slatted wooden floor. The gnarly driver helped the girl down with her heavy bag and then pointed up a road glowing slightly in the fitful moonlight.

“Up there, miss, the house. Follow the road. The Master's expecting yeh.”

She merely nodded, then started hesitantly up the path that barely kept the wild weeds on either side from touching each other. Her long traveling dress and cloak whipped frantically around her knees like they would have liked to fly away. Locks of her dark hair flapped into her face, and she tucked them with a well-practiced and irritated shove back into her silver-worked snood. She

continued up the path as she squinted at another rectangle up the road, guessing that this was the house because of the moonlight flashing on the glass windows. Too busy staring up at the possible house, she didn't notice that her hair continued falling out of her hairnet from the whipping, snatching wind, until the net wiggled totally free of the pins. A sudden gust grabbed it and whipped it out of her hair and out over the low bushes. She turned her head and followed the progress of the silver snood over what could only be called a moor. It glinted in a long peep of the moon and she watched it until it was out of sight.

Minutes later, she reached the large oaken front door surrounded by curling vines. The ornate knocker with an indistinguishable animal was too tall for the girl. She looked around and picked up a stick, using it to lever up the heavy metal, and then let it fall to make a loud boom. She waited, and then was lifting it again when it suddenly opened silently. This door was made for creaking. It would have been impossible for it not to. The silence was therefore even creepier than it would have been had it creaked. Behind the door was a tall, thin, and dark shape. The girl started and stepped back quickly, but then the shape also moved back until the candlelight poured over a hollowed, hawk-like, sunken face that had seen too much, either real or imagined. *Oh goodness*, she thought, *that is my uncle.*

“Hello, Rosanna.”

He really does look like a nightmare.

After a brief meeting with her uncle and a cup of hot chocolate, Rosanna curled under the heavy, musty comforter, smelling the scent of old dust and ancient fur cloaks. She had her doll in her hands, hidden under the comforter that was still cold even after having her warmth under it for half an hour. Rosanna was already homesick and tears gilded with moon-silver slid down her cheeks. She was also shivering with cold, her thin nightgown made for the warmer southern climate where she lived. She wished that she had had more foresight when she packed, but it also didn't help that the windows leaked cold drafts across the room. Another chill swept the room, and this one felt different somehow. A hiss that didn't sound like wind swept across the floor, sending a cold chill shocking down her stomach, freezing her limbs and sharpening her hearing. Another hiss whispered closer to her bed, and Rosanna half sat up. There were shadows in every tiny corner, yet there was another, oddly deeper, shadow next to the closet. Rosanna's eyes suddenly could make out the edge of a cloak, the side of an arm, a nose. She gasped, feeling fear racing through her, and she flung herself all the way under the comforter, clutching the doll up close and sobbing as quietly as she could. She fell asleep, crying, shivering, and feeling very, very alone.

Breakfast was quiet the next morning but for the *hoooooosh* of the wind and the clinking of silver on china. Of course breakfast had to be oatmeal with slightly soured milk and lumpy sugar.

Rosanna *hated* oatmeal. It tasted like glue and had about the same texture. It would figure she would have to eat oatmeal in this odd, old, rambling house with her odd bird of a nightmare-haunted uncle. If the speed at which her uncle's spoon moved from the bowl to his mouth was any test of enjoyment, then her uncle was probably enjoying his mushy bowl of oatmeal much more than Rosanna. He wouldn't meet her eyes, instead staring fixedly at various objects on the table, such as the sugar bowl (shaped like something that could have been a rose, but could also have been a cabbage - it was probably an heirloom). The intensity and unblinking quality of his gaze put Rosanna in mind of a lizard attempting to outstare a pair of glass eyes. Rosanna was very glad when her uncle finished and told Rosanna that she was free to explore any room of the house but for his study. He still wouldn't meet her eyes.

Rosanna decided to explore the house systematically starting with the first floor, garden, and then each floor up after that. After an hour and a half of exploring, she still hadn't found anything interesting. She was rather disappointed that none of the intricately worked cabinets had fabulous jewels or notes to horrible a murder mystery that only a young and beautiful heroine could solve. None of the wardrobes, or mirrors, or bookcases were magic doors to hidden worlds. Wasn't that how it was supposed to go? Girl goes to odd relative's house, finds mysterious adventure, and returns, victorious. She had definitely read enough novels to know that to be true.

Rosanna saw in one of the halls a bright and hot beam of sunlight pouring through a dusty window. So, although disliking to leave a job so messily incomplete, Rosanna decided to start exploring the outside of this odd house before the sun disappeared. She decided to start with the stables.

Rosanna loved horses. She loved the warm, comfortable smell of horses and hay. She liked the smooth, wiry hair and long mane and tail, the soft dark eyes and velvety lips. She liked how horses were tidy in everything they did, with no wasted energy or movement. She loved racing along with a horse and she hoped that there would be a good riding horse here.

Rosanna was not disappointed. In addition to the two horses that had pulled the coach last night there was a tall black horse (making her guess that he was her uncle's), and a lovely grey-brown horse, just about her size.

"Aye, that 'orse is Flute. Smart mare. The Master got 'er when he heard you were coming because 'e heard you ride. Would 'ou like too go ou' now?" He had a very odd accent. It bounced from county to county and from peasant to gentleman. Rosanna looked at him carefully.

"E heard?" She inquired, raising her eyebrows. He grinned sheepishly, showing brown stained teeth and expelling a breath that smelled slightly of garlic.

“Yeah, you’ve caught me. It’s just that Master likes me to have a working class accent.”

“He told you that?” She said.

“No, but he kind of glares at you, if you catch my drift.” He was rather an odd man.

Flute was a wonderful horse. She was just about the correct size for Rosanna, and was hardly a bumpy ride at all as they cantered over her uncle’s property. Rosanna was very happy that she had decided to visit the stables.

Returning to the house, Rosanna continued her exploration. The second floor proved as uninteresting as the first, except she did find a family of mice living in an old sofa. She was on the third floor in yet another uninteresting room containing only a wardrobe and a rug when a clammy draft swept the floor, reminiscent of the chill in her bedroom. Rosanna turned around and stopped breathing. A man stood in the room, tall and clothed in black. His face was extremely pale, and there was something very odd about it. Most oddly, and rather dramatically in a ten cent novel kind of way, mist curled around his legs like a hungry cat, which, once seeing that the man wasn’t going to feed it, stretched itself toward Rosanna with damp paws. It seemed to mewl softly and urgently. It swept through her skin and paralyzed her with fear. She thought quickly of all possible exits to the room. Unless the wardrobe across the floor had a hidden door in it, there were no exits except the one behind the man. He stepped toward her, and in a voice that blew away any former fear of hers with even fiercer waves of terror, he said, “*Hello Rosanna.*”

She started breathing, but just barely, feeling her stomach knot and her back go sweaty. His face, now near enough to see, didn’t stay the same. It was like watching a cloud, seeing it change so slowly that it was hard to tell that it had shifted at all. As his features melded Rosanna’s eyes watered when she tried to look at him. A slight hiss slipped out of his lips, sending new ripples of chills down her spine, and she realized why he looked so odd. His eyes were swirls of colors racing, blending, melding, and there was no expression behind them, no flicker of life and no soul. There was a word to describe them, but what? She couldn’t think. If she found that word though, he would go away, right? Rosanna’s eyes were drawn to his, and she couldn’t look away from the swirling... the swirling... whatever that word was, and she felt her self move toward him, and he began to stretch out a hand, pale and spider like, reaching, and she could hear him hissing under his breath as he stared into her eyes, “*Yes, it is whole and pure, the whole to save my half, to bring down the enchanted walls-*”

CRREEEAAK! His head turned back at the horrible sound, breaking the spell, and he vanished, leaving a hole where air should be that pulled the breath from her lungs. The door continued to open with a shriek like, well, a rusty hinge. It was odd. Rosanna hadn’t remembered a shriek when she had come into the room. She suddenly realized that the mist was gone as well.

“Sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to scare you. Apparently I’ll need to oil those hinges.” The figure in the doorway looked at the offending hinges speculatively, then shrugged. “Actually, probably no bother. This room has never been used. The Master wants you downstairs for lunch. He says that meals are to be regarded strictly and horse riding isn’t a suitable excuse.”

Rosanna’s eyes grew accustomed to the backlighting from the window behind the figure, and a boy in cotton overalls came into view. He had thick, windswept hair, a crooked nose, and a smattering of freckles across his nose. His eyes were blue-grey, and they shone, full of all the things that those oddly colored eyes of the specter had not had. She had never been so glad to be burst in upon in her life.

The boy walked her down to the dining room, talking all the way. Rosanna felt relieved that reality was returning after her encounter with the specter.

After the dinner eaten in an irritated silence on her uncle’s part, Rosanna returned to her room again. The dark seemed deeper than before. It took her breath away when she blew out her candle, bringing out sweat on her hands. She hurled herself under the covers, pulling her doll up close and squeezing her eyes shut, willing herself not to listen. There was no sound, and she began to relax, telling herself not to be silly, when the hiss came back, bringing the chill, but now there were other voices with it, just on the edge of hearing. The dread solidified into a solid seed in her stomach, a seed that grew icy tendrils of terror that filled her arms and legs, trapping her muscles. She flew up against the invisible bonds, and fumbled at the matches, trying not to look, but a glow caught her eye and she turned, the matches tumbling unlit from her fingers.

There was the figure in her doorway, tall and black, but now she could see that the black of the clothes was really swirls of deeper, unnatural colors that twisted through each other and gave off a glow. It was very beautiful in a wild way, and she felt her back muscles relax as it mesmerized her. This was nothing to worry about it was just, just, just... a terrifying creepy specter that glowed colors and could send mist that leapt like spirits and could twine up her arms and legs, and hold her so still.

Rosanna opened her mouth to scream out her terror, but the mist filled her lungs and choked her, making her cough for all she was worth. When she looked up, her stomach clenched again when she found herself now face-to-face with the gaunt man with that word she couldn’t remember clothes. He hissed between his pointed teeth, and the noise resolved itself into words. “*-It is the perfect one, innocent, it will whole my half and then, then, THEN we shall see who has power, yes, POWER! THE WALLS WILL FALL!!!!*” He reached for her, stretching out his fingers like cold cobwebs and Rosanna’s ancient instincts, handed down to her from generations of cave-people who didn’t get eaten by the tiger, took over. She slapped the thin hands aside, flinching slightly at their clamminess,

ripped her legs out of the covers and flung herself out the door. She was shaking and still terrified, but now that she had something to fight with, she could do it forever. She ran to the second floor, with some hazy plan of jumping into a room and hearing the specter run past. That's what always happened in those heroine novels, right? Or somehow they found a magical sword and turned with brave fire in their eyes to slay their enemy, becoming a much more assertive person in the process. Except, somehow, Rosanna felt that if a magic sword appeared in her hand right now, she would just drop it and keep running. She didn't remotely feel brave fire kindling in her soul. She just wanted to escape and remember that word that described that man. She knew her mother had told her that her bookcase was the word all the time; she just couldn't remember it now. She felt another thrill of horror in her heart as the feeling of a draft dragging on her legs told her that the mist had caught up, and she looked down to see it glowing around her legs in the oppressive darkness, the corridor only sporadically lit by cloud-ridden moon. How far behind could that horrible specter be, then? She tried to run faster, but she was tiring quickly. The adrenaline was draining, and she still wasn't free of the monster. Her dread deepened again, making her feel weak and helpless as in a nightmare, when a darkness in front of her warned her that she was very quickly running out of hall. She darted sideways just before she hit it, but instead of the new hall that she thought would be there, there was a door, mercifully unlocked. She dragged it open, whipped inside and slammed it on the mist gathering behind her. She could hear it whispering as she leaned, breathing very hard, against the door. "*This is the one-*" "*We will be FREEEEEEEE!!*" "*The walls will be torn-*" "*WE WILL BE FREEEEEEEEEEE!!*"

Then, as if it could get any worse, she felt the mist creeping in around her ankles, lighting the area at the bottom of the door in a sort of silvery glow, still whispering, "WE WILL BE FREE!" It flowed up around her, pinning her to the door, solidifying slightly. She struggled, trying to rip through it, but to no avail.

This is ridiculous, she thought, mist can't pin things down! Immediately as she thought this, the grip loosened, and she pulled herself out of the filmy bonds. Then, although she had thought her terror quite used up for the night, she froze again. The mist creeping now under the door was thicker and darker, full of swirling colors. It solidified until it became the gaunt man, his eyes now angry.

"*You shall not run! We will find you wherever you go....*" There was one more possibility for Rosanna's escape. She could see that, but was wondering how much it could hurt. The window was throwing moonbeams across the room, backlighting the specter. If she could just inch around like *this*, and sort of turn like *that* against the wall, drawing him away from it. He was chuckling wheezily to himself now, muttering. Suddenly he reached out, hissing, "*You are MINE!*" And Rosanna bolted. He grabbed at her, holding onto her thin nightgown, which ripped in his claw-like grip. She

wrenched open the sash, squeezed out of the unfortunately narrow window, and jumped as it slammed shut behind her. She fell hard, but had managed to jump into a path of garden, and then she got up and ran in the freezing wind. If she could just reach the stables... But then chill behind her made her realize that it was too late and she felt the horrible bone-dry hand close over her arm, spinning her around. He was angry again. She really had to know what that word was and she asked,

“W-who are y-you?!” Although the word was solidifying in her mind now. And he told her, drawing her ear to his mouth and hissing,

“I am Chaos, locked from your world with walls put up by your gods. ‘Your twisted soul shall never rule the human Earth, and it is that soul which shall build your prison for evermore,’ they told me. They enchanted me into a prison of my own halved soul. But I found a way to fight. If I could find a soul whole and beautiful, and take the whole and connect my half, the walls would fall and I could again rule this Earth! And yours is perfect. Innocent... Beautiful... MINE!”

“But what of my uncle’s or the chore boy or coachman’s? Why not theirs?” She was hysterical now.

“Hah! Theirs are hardly beautiful, now are they... And your uncle. He is the one who dreamed me into this world with his sheer belief of the terror of Chaos. But now your soul is mine, and we shall be free!”

She pulled away as quickly as she could, but he was faster, grabbing her arm and pulling her closer to him. Suddenly something flashed in the moonlight, hanging on a tree behind the specter. Her beautiful silver-woven snood, lost last night in the wind! Her mind was pulled away from the beast grabbing her, and he flickered, the pressure on her arm dissipating for an instant. He reappeared, looking frightened. Realization and relief bloomed in Rosanna.

“Hah! You are just a shadow, aren’t you! Dreamed into the world on sheer desperate belief! You can be sent back with belief!” As soon as she said that, he began flickering more and more. She pulled away again, concentrating with every ounce of mind on her belief that he wasn’t really real. The spacing between his reappearances lengthened, as did the gaps in his horrible screams of rage and fear. The mist tried to creep out of the flickering vortex, but suddenly everything disappeared, leaving a garden free of everything except for one exhausted girl and the howling of the ever-present wind. She swayed a little, going cross-eyed. Thinking muzzily, *hah! This may be worth it’s own ten-cent novel*, she collapsed onto the path.

