

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Third Place, Adult Short Story Contest

Scarecrow

By Jackie Jacobson, Rockville

To keep his arms hidden, the boy with the branches wore a sweatshirt too big for his body. The ends of the sleeves gathered in tight balls at his fists and when he needed to use his hands—which at the moment were soft, green ivy leaves—the other students noticed that they were always covered by gray wool gloves, even in the warmer months. *Weird*, they all thought but carried on since nothing had changed since he first moved to the neighborhood in fourth grade. His name was Jackson, but everyone at Spruce Tree Middle School called him Scarecrow.

“Maybe he has two extra fingers on each hand,” whispered one child.

“No, he has a wooden arm,” corrected another.

“You mean a *prosthetic* arm. Wooden arms aren’t real.”

“His sleeves are filled with stuffing, like a scarecrow, that’s why his name is Scarecrow.”

These were the day-to-day rumors that Jackson heard as he walked through the halls, head kept low and covered by the hood of his Boston Celtics sweatshirt. His mother told him that he was bound to live the rest of his life with neck pain if he didn’t stand up straight, which he decided was a fate worth accepting. Seventh grade was already hard, despite having plant arms. He rushed to the bathroom and locked the door. If someone else tried to come in after him, he only had a few minutes before they would go get the janitor to unlock it. In those few minutes, Jackson removed his gloves, pulled up his sleeves to his rough elbows, and dripped water from the faucet over the sprouting vines, his five spindly fingers curling around the knobs, and let a handful drip into his mouth as well. A few hours from now, the leaves would be a brighter green, but they would remain hidden beneath his clothes.

In the fall, Jackson’s arms felt heavy with the pumpkin vines trapped inside of his sleeves.

“What do ya got under there, Scarecrow?” the other kids would tease.

“I have a skin disorder,” he’d lie. “I’m supposed to keep my skin covered because it’s super sensitive.” Eventually, the kids would accept this with a confused look and walk away.

The hallways during this time of year were decorated with black streamers and construction paper pumpkins. Whenever Jackson walked into a room, he felt like the school was yelling at him, saying *I know what you’re hiding, Scarecrow. I know you’re a freak.*

At home, Jackson’s mother noticed that his leaves were wilting. She had purchased lamps with full-spectrum bulbs to supplement his body with alternative sunlight. His mom learned in her *Parents of Plant-Children* Facebook group that these lights were often used for indoor

gardening. Jackson removed his sweatshirt to reveal his plant limbs. Green skin peeked through, with vines protruding at nodes and twisting around his forearm, all the way to his fingertips and stopping near his shoulder. Beneath the skin, he was told by doctors, was an intricate system of xylem and phloem interwoven with his veins and muscles. They told him he was remarkable, though he never felt like something to be marveled at. His mother sat with him, spritzing his arms with water.

“Are there other kids like me?” Jackson asked his parents over dinner.

His father shot his mother a look that said: Do we need to get into this now? “Yes, there are, Jackson.”

“Can I meet them?”

“We don’t feel that that would be necessary, Sweetie,” his mother answered, picking up his plate to clean.

“Why not?” Jackson could feel his vines tensing as he grew angrier.

“Those children are all too far away for you to meet,” his mother brushed the idea aside, “besides, aren’t you happy knowing how unique you are?”

Jackson said nothing, he didn’t want to upset his parents and he was getting too flustered to say anything worthwhile. There must be dozens of other kids like him, at least. He would sometimes sneak onto his mom’s laptop and check her Facebook group to learn about these other people, then fall asleep wondering if the other plant-children he read about were happy, if they were able to live normal lives.

At lunch, Jackson sat at one of the picnic tables reading a book and eating a sandwich. “Hey, Scarecrow,” he turned and saw Rebecca coming toward him, a long brunette braid hanging over her shoulder. She took a seat across from him and placed her hands on the table. Jackson put the book down and stuffed his leafy glove-covered hands in the pocket of his hoodie. “Everyone is saying you’re lying,” she said bluntly.

“Lying about what?” Jackson gulped and waited for her to say something else.

“Your arms. But they’re all too afraid to ask you and Katie dared me to ask you if that’s really true or not.” Everyone knew that Rebecca wouldn’t turn down a dare. One time she knocked over the water cooler in the teacher’s lounge and while the receptionist left to check it out, she called over the loudspeaker and announced that all classes were canceled for the rest of the day. She earned an in-school suspension for a week. “Look, I don’t actually care about your arms or whatever. Everyone else is just nosy.”

Jackson stayed silent, took a bite from his sandwich, a little drop of mayonnaise sticking to his gloves. He could feel the vines tensing as he nervously thought through something to say that the other kids would believe and maybe then they could leave him alone, at least for a little while. Jackson learned to enjoy being alone, he didn't need the attention of anyone else. "You wanna mess with them?" Rebecca asked with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"How?" he didn't realize how tightly he was holding onto his sandwich. Another drop of mayonnaise squeezed out and dripped onto the table.

"There's some hay over there." She gestured toward the stairs behind the cafeteria where some new grass was being planted and spindles of straw lay spread out on the ground. "We can show them why you're named Scarecrow."

This game seemed like it could be fun. Jackson wondered if Rebecca knew that "Scarecrow" wasn't his actual name. Did she think that he wrote "Scarecrow" at the top of his homework assignments? He wondered if he went by "Jackson" if people would leave him alone, but he had been called "Scarecrow" for years. Besides, he could see the resemblance: a human appearance with puffy clothes and disturbing features.

Rebecca began to gather armfuls of pointy yellow hay, and Jackson left his lunch on the table to join her. "It's poking me," she giggled. Jackson faked a smile. He wouldn't know how it felt on his arms. "OK, let's stuff this in your sweatshirt so it pokes out of your sleeves, and your hood too!"

Uncertain about this, Jackson said, "I can do it myself." He didn't want to risk Rebecca seeing the green vines. Especially not Rebecca, so far she was the only person that talked to him and Jackson didn't want to jeopardize that.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I can do it." Rebecca dropped the load of hay in her arms. Jackson scooped it up and walked behind the cafeteria. He picked up a handful with his gloved right hand and pulled his hood back with his left. He reached over his shoulder and stuffed what he could against his neck. The hay poked the fleshy skin at the top of his back and rested under the leaves that curled by his scapula. Carefully, he took more handfuls and placed some more in his hood. He turned away from the rest of the students to make sure no one saw any vine while he was stuffing his clothing. "OK," he said walking back to where Rebecca sat waiting at the table.

"It looks good," she said, observing his creation. The longer she looked the more uncomfortable Jackson became. He looked down at his wrists to make sure there weren't any leaves poking out between the stalks of hay. "Now go over to Katie and everyone else and jump up and scare them! I mean that's what scarecrows do, right? Scare?"

“OK,” he responded. He wobbled over on uneasy legs to the group of kids huddled on the basketball court. He didn’t know exactly how to approach them; he wasn’t the kind to just jump in and draw attention to himself. But he figured if he did something like this that maybe the other kids would leave him alone for a while. It wasn’t much of a jump, not the burst into a crowd that he pictured in his head. He instead slowly made his way into the circle of kids, arms stretched out in front of him like Frankenstein’s monster.

“What are you doing, Scarecrow?” Katie asked, her face twisting in confusion.

Rebecca appeared next to him. “Look at him, his arms are made of hay. It’s coming out of his clothes!” She was saving him as he stood there unable to find any words.

“That’s funny, guys,” someone else in the group interjected.

“No, seriously look at him. He’s made of straw!” She grabbed his arm, lifting up his wrist to show it off to the group. Jackson tensed; the orange flower buds on his vines closing a little bit tighter under the cotton.

“She’s right,” he said meekly, taking his hand back and crossing his arms over his stomach, ready for this little show to be over. He tried to half-smile, to fit in with the regular kids.

They snickered and whispered and continued to eye Jackson. Soon enough, their chatter drifted to other things. One of the kids, Jared, brought up how his mom’s friend had a child who went to the high school down the road whose hair was made of grass. Jackson’s ears perked up, he wanted to know more. He hung around and listened to Jared go on about how when the high school guy, Matthew, took off a hat, the grass underneath would be brown and dry since it needed sunlight. Part of Jackson felt warm, like there was a blanket around him, his heart beating a little faster. He knew exactly what Jared was talking about. But he wondered if Matthew walked around every day showing off his grass-covered head, if he didn’t mind when people stared.

So Jackson slipped back to his table and finished his lunch in silence. He hoped Rebecca’s tactic not only earned her some cred among the other kids but also helped to keep them satisfied about his secret for a little while until some new convoluted theory arose. Part of him was glad to finally be left alone, but it also seemed that Rebecca used him as a toy, a doll.

The rest of the day Jackson spent twitching uncomfortably underneath his sweatshirt. The remaining hay was scratchy and poked the skin on his neck, above where the vine morphed into flesh. Once he got home, he tore his hoodie and gloves off and ran to the bathroom. His mother helped pick shards of straw out from under his leaves while he leaned against the tile wall. “Am I human?” he looked up to ask her. He thought of Matthew with his green head, of his own vines that seemed to weigh him down.

“Of course, you are, Sweetie,” she said, like she always did. It was getting later into the season and his leaves were growing large and his buds were looking like they’d be sprouting tiny pumpkins any day now. Jackson asked his mother if he could stay home for a few days. She patted his head, spritzed his vines, and kissed his forehead before leaving the room.

Winter eventually blew in and Jackson woke up to the smell of pine in his room. His arms this time were thinner with sappy branches coated in tiny cones and needles. As he sat up in bed, he had to peel the sheets off of him, the sticky sap loving the fabric. Jackson hated winter most of all.

The sweatshirt that he chose for the day was his dad’s old gray Red Sox one, his needles stiff beneath the sleeves. When he went downstairs for breakfast his mother made a face that said, “poor thing,” while he knew she didn’t really understand. Although, she enjoyed the fresh pine smell that permeated the house. There was no need to buy seasonal candles with Jackson around.

Other families spent Sunday mornings crowded around the living room fire, wood crackling with heat while the day outside was briskly cold. Not Jackson’s family. His parents were worried that his leaves might catch on fire if he sat too close, no matter what plant he grew into. Instead, he draped a blanket across his legs and sat in the bay window facing the backyard to give his branches some sunlight on weekends. He pictured himself climbing trees, as most kids his age do, and feeling comfortable among the spiky branches. Up in a tree, he’d be hidden enough to show his arms. Up in the trees, no one would ask questions. No one would look at him like they were trying to figure out if he belonged. Up there he could place his bare-branched hand—muscle running within the interior chamber pith—on the bark and feel that the tree was more of a home than his house was.

When Jackson was born, it was summertime and his arms sprouted yellow perennial buds. His parents were shocked, doctors were startled but knew of the condition. Jackson’s great-great-grandfather had feet that changed every season, according to his dad. In Maine, a child was born with sugar snap peas for hair. Apparently, those peas were delicious and the child would pop off a bud and offer them to strangers. Jackson’s parents knew that he’d be fine, but it might be easier to hide his flora and hope for a normal life.

At school, Rebecca began to sit with Jackson regularly. He never invited her, she just took a seat, opened her lunch box and began to eat. It’d been a few weeks since their prank on the other kids and everyone seemed to have forgotten all about it. They sat mostly in silence, every few minutes she’d ask a question.

“What’s your favorite sandwich? Do you have any pets? I have a guinea pig named Jeff. Have you ever been to a Red Sox game? How many sweatshirts do you own?”

To her questions, he’d answer shortly, “Peanut butter. No, my mom’s allergic. Once, when I was 8. I’ve never counted.”

He liked her company, even if they didn't say much. She was nice to him, and never asked anything that he wouldn't give some sort of answer to. The silence was usually filled with jabber about herself; how her older brother got into trouble for sneaking out, how her math teacher assigned a quiz on geometry that she had a hard time with, that her family was making plans to go to a tree farm to chop down the perfect Christmas tree. That one made Jackson feel stiff, his branches seemingly able to snap at the thought of an axe colliding with wood. He never understood the need to cut down a perfectly good tree and put it on display.

For the rest of the semester after Rebecca's pestering questions, Jackson tried his best to stay home from school. He'd come downstairs in the morning, coughing furiously, claiming there was a tickle in his throat or that strep had finally gotten to him. His mother handed him a mug of steaming tea. Some days he'd say he was weak from all of the cloudy days; there was no sun to feed off of. His father gave him vitamin D supplements. Only once was he able to stay home when schools closed due to ice on the roads and inclement weather. He went on a walk with his mom instead, bundled up tightly in scarves and hats. The salt that coated the road made his pine needles itch.

Once winter break arrived, his family stayed home. Before school had let out for the rest of the semester, he had listened to Rebecca blabber on and on about her planned vacation with Katie's family to go skiing in Colorado. "My mom says the sun is still strong, even in December so she's making me and Katie pack extra sunscreen. I think it's stupid." Jackson wanted that sun to hit his cones. Instead, he'd be holed up like usual, the same fake fire flickering on the TV that no one watched. He looked at the Christmas cards from relatives, other kids his age smiling in plaid sweaters and beige pants with their human hands in their laps. Every photo that hung in his house pictured Jackson in the same outfit he had been wearing for as long as he could remember: a big sweatshirt and faded jeans. The only thing that changed among the photos was his growing height and which sweatshirt he had been wearing that day. When he opened his Christmas presents, he wasn't surprised to find a spray bottle of Miracle-Gro nestled in with a new black Boston Bruins hoodie.

In the spring, Jackson woke up to the sound of his dad sneezing violently down the hall. He looked in the mirror to see that his pine tree arms had been replaced with green juniper stalks dotted with small pale green buds of berries overnight. Once his berries began to ripen, he would have to wake up earlier to pick them off before school. His parents would never cook with them, though. They cringed at the thought of eating the flesh of their only son.

"Take an allergy pill!" Jackson heard shouting from his parents' room.

"We go through this every year!" was the response. Jackson pulled on a fresh red Boston University hoodie and got ready for the day.

At lunch, Rebecca sat with Jackson as she had been doing for months now. "Something smells sweet," she noted.

Jackson balled the wrists of his hoodie into his fists. His arms felt slender, not as puffy as the pine had been but not as flimsy as the pumpkin vine either. His shoulders were sore where his juniper arms met his human skin, his body adjusting to its new flora. The branches coming out of his skin were short and stiff, he wasn't used to them quite yet. His arms wanted to fling to a straighter position, but he fought against the pressure, keeping his foliage-coated elbows tucked by his sides.

"Flowers are blooming now," he said, looking out the window at the small square garden by the stairs to the cafeteria. Most of the plants were dead except for a few baby blue hydrangeas.

"Yeah, but that's outside. I smell it in here," her eyes darted across the cafeteria tables. "I bet Katie's mom packed her a flower or something. She usually leaves notes and Katie hates it! It's so funny to see her annoyed."

"Must be," Jackson mumbled. He opened his green lunchbox to find a BLT wrapped in foil, an apple, a bottle of water, and a small packet of orchid food that his mom had snuck in.

After they were done eating, Jackson and Rebecca threw out their scraps and walked outside for the last 15 minutes of lunch. Some kids were playing basketball, some were throwing a tennis ball against the wall of the cafeteria. Jackson and Rebecca wandered down the hill toward the track. The painted lines and numbers were almost completely faded, but they each fell into their own lane as they walked a lap.

As they walked, a carpenter bee got too close to Rebecca's head and she jumped over two lanes. This made Jackson laugh. "It's just a bee."

"They sting!"

"Not those ones." He watched her tuck her arms in and hop around on quick feet. "Carpenter bees bite, they don't have any stingers."

"How do you know that? If they bite that might even be worse."

"They burrow in my mom's flower beds and she's been trying to get rid of them for years." A few landed on the back of his sweatshirt as he walked but flew off once they realized there weren't any accessible flowers.

"It's weird that they don't bother you," Rebecca said, swatting at ones near her face and throwing a concerned stare toward the ones that flitted around Jackson. Other people jumped when they got close but he felt comforted. He swatted his arms in front of his face lazily to satisfy Rebecca.

They walked in silence for a full lap. The bugs seemed to double. There were flies and gnats and tiny beetles that tried to rest on Jackson's shoulders but he kept brushing them off. At home he'd lie on his back in the grass in the backyard and take his sweatshirt off so he could give the critters their chance at enjoying the sweet smell of juniper.

"Scarecrow!" Rebecca shrieked. "A bee flew in your sweatshirt! Ugh, get it out!"

He felt tiny legs tickling his neck and crawl down toward the juniper buds. With a gloved hand, he dug into the neck of his hoodie and reached down, wiggling his fingers between the leaves. He grabbed it, the fat carpenter bee, and pulled his hand free. A now dead black and yellow lump and several green leaflets lay in his open fist.

"Why are there leaves in your sleeve?" Rebecca said, confused.

"Uhhh..." he pulled his hood up higher around his neck. "There's not." A few leaves floated out from under his sleeves and softly landed on the track. They both stared for a moment before Jackson stomped his high-top Converse over the plant on the ground.

"You don't have a skin disorder, do you? Are you one of those plant kids? Like the guy Jared was talking about? Like Matthew?" Jackson couldn't look up at her right away. When he did, Rebecca not only looked confused, but also concerned, and a little bit scared. "Scarecrow, you can tell me. It's OK, really."

He couldn't. All his life he had been hiding this secret every day. He wanted to tell her, to tell someone, to alleviate the burden of hiding who he was. *Deny, deny, deny*, he told himself. "Lunch is almost over, maybe you should head back. I'll meet you there." He was continuing to walk, hunching his shoulders up higher, hiding within himself.

"I won't tell anyone," he heard her say. Rebecca took a few steps toward him.

"No, go away," he yelled. Jackson was another freak to her, he knew it. Finally, she walked back toward the cafeteria. He believed that Rebecca would go and tell everyone about what she had seen, what he really is, that he's a real scarecrow after all. He'd never be able to finish seventh grade. He'd be far too humiliated. Jackson finished the day by spending as much time as he could locked in a bathroom stall until the final bell rang. He sat on a bench alone on the bus. When he was finally dropped off, he ran through the front door of his house and let the door slam behind him.

He was crying, hot tears falling down to the neck of his sweatshirt. His mother sat with him and rubbed his back until his hiccupping sobs calmed down. Over the weekend she didn't know exactly how to comfort him. She left bowls of cereal outside of his door every now and then, sometimes a note of loving sympathy was attached.

The following Monday, Jackson's berries ripened to a beautiful dusty blue color and he ate his lunch alone.