

Community Theater

by CJ Johnson

Lizzy stood pressed into the corner of one of the newly constructed rooms of the old church basement, surrounded by corn stalks that had been hung and dried—props, all of them. The wood smelled fresh-cut, the scent invading what was normally stale air, like a colorful dress on a doll whose paint has worn away. She was pressed into the stalks as deep as she could go, the rustling in her ears louder than a jet engine as a few dried leaves fell to the concrete floor. She hoped that if someone glanced at her, she might be mistaken for a scarecrow, something inanimate, easy to dismiss. Securely tucked into the tufts, she tried to still her movement, every twitch and breath causing what felt like a cacophony of noise in the otherwise quiet hum of the room, the only other sounds a mechanical whir from the rooms surrounding her and her best friend's breathing.

Kasey sat in a rocking chair in another corner of the room, one that the guests of the haunted house would need to scooch past to gain access to the adjacent room, which was empty of people but filled with disorienting disco lights. Lizzy couldn't see her friend from her position in the corn, but she could picture her: head hung with her chin touching her chest, dark hair teased into frizz and draped over her face, both hands gripping the soft wood of the armrests, feet planted firmly on the cement ground so she could slowly rock back and forth, back and forth, the creak of the old chair calling out in an imitation of every horror movie ever.

The church basement they were stationed in wasn't really a church basement—not anymore. Lizzy's mom liked to say that the congregation left with her dad, though she didn't know where her dad went—no one ever told her when she asked, just acted like the question hadn't even been spoken. Since then it was a community center, then a community theater. The company director, Brandon, built a proper stage where the pulpits used to be and turned the sacristy into the dressing rooms. Mirrors hung on every wall, makeup brushes littered every counter, and sturdy clothes racks held costumes from performances past and present.

Lizzy had performed at the Ridgewater Community Theater for two years now. At only nine years old, she starred in *The Wizard of Oz* and then *Arthur and Guinevere* at ten—consecutive fall seasons. Starred as three different extras in each play along with all the other kids who couldn't wait to get their careers started, but starred all the same. Who was to say that a flying monkey couldn't also be a citizen of Oz? And who was to say she wasn't the *best* of all the extras? She was playing the little sister in *The Nutcracker* in December—a much bigger role than the ones she'd had before. She beat out four other girls for it. Even if she was still playing a mouse—rat, according to the script—in the second act, she still had a solo in the first act. Lizzy knew that she had talent. She knew that one day she was going to be a star; everyone told her so—her grandma, her mom, even her older brother. There was a beauty mark just like Marilyn Monroe's on her left cheek to prove it.

Every year, Brandon constructed a maze of rooms in the church basement and decorated them in horrific themes. It was the only haunted house in town, and the theater's last effort to fundraise for their upcoming production. There was a banner hanging over the arched entrance of

the vestibule claiming this was the "Ridgewater's Own 10th Annual Haunted House!" One of the teens named Gabe (there was more than one) told Lizzy at play practice last Thursday they'd never had preteens working the house before, so he expected a lot of their regular customers to scare easily when they reached her room.

Footsteps sounded from the room before them, heavy in their faltering trepidation. Lizzy held her breath as she heard the tell-tale rocking of Kasey's chair begin. She closed her eyes, keeping her breath as shallow as she could, but she could feel the corn stalks brushing against her cheeks, picking up pieces of her hair, and with every step that sounded closer to their room than the one before it each breath felt tighter than the last, like her lungs were losing capacity, the ribs in her chest closing smaller. This was the moment, exactly what she and Kasey had been waiting for.

She could tell it was a couple making their way through, four-legged and shuffling. She hoped her brother was one of the pair; he'd said he would come tonight. Said he'd bring his girlfriend.

But what walked through the door was a pair of adults, a man with pale skin and a dark beard and a woman with the curliest hair Lizzy had ever seen. She wished she had hair like that. The couple was fidgety, having walked through two-thirds of the house already, and when they saw Kasey, they shuffled as quickly as they could towards the exit, flashing lights shining in from the other room with every pulse of the music. They were moving so quickly they couldn't see Lizzy, only the stalks that surrounded her. They were so focused on Kasey they didn't think there could be another child.

With a quiet rustle, Lizzy stepped from the corner. The woman quickly turned to her, and, seeing the powdered death-white face of a child, gripped her partner's hand, causing him to turn, see Lizzy, and breathe an expletive. It was the only word spoken. Kasey, noting her momentary invisibility, stood from her chair and began walking towards the two. Lizzy did the same. The woman, overwhelmed, pulled her partner to the next room at a brisk pace. Lizzy and Kasey followed slowly, meeting in the middle of the room, linking their arms. They followed until they reached the doorway, the couple already on the other side of the next room, risking a glance back at them before stepping into what horror lay behind the next doorway.

Lizzy wanted to follow them farther, a haunt that kept coming back, but couldn't—they were instructed not to leave their own room except to use the bathroom. Safety reasons.

Most of the night continued like this—a pair or group of people would intermittently enter their room, and, seeing children in a place that had never had children before, humor the girls until they became so unnerved they had to leave. Once, a large group of teenagers came through and laughed right in Kasey's face before going to the next room. Lizzy didn't even have time to make her big entrance.

Still, the flow of customers was slow, a few rushes at the top and bottom of every hour, and Lizzy wished more people would come. A large part of the night was spent poking at props in their room and laughing at all the jokes Kasey made, finding entertainment in the slow procession of customers they had.

"Do you think if we talked to them they would be more scared?" Kasey asked, standing from her chair and walking to where Lizzy was adjusting her corn stalks.

Lizzy shrugged. "Maybe. I never know what to say, though."

"Me neither. I've never done this before. I usually just want to growl at them."

Lizzy laughed, loud and sharp, surprised by Kasey's words. "I think you did growl at that one guy, actually."

Kasey grinned and clamped her hands over her mouth, then quickly pulled them away, careful of her makeup. Lizzy loved Kasey's makeup; her face was painted white and one of the teenage girls working in the vampire room had used a sponge to blend shadows below her eyes and cheekbones, effectively hollowing her face into a gauntness that hid the babyfat still holding in her cheeks.

"I was trying so hard not to!" she said, reaching out to touch the frills of the short-sleeves of Lizzy's dress. "He just looked so freaked out already and when he saw me—Lizzy, you should've seen his face!" She did her best to mimic the man's expression, dropping her grin into an open-mouthed frown of horror, like the tragedy mask that hangs on the white paint-chipped sign over the entrance of the theater, eyes wide and eyebrows raised. Lizzy let out another peel of laughter.

"Hey, you two," the androgynous twenty-something from the room before theirs said, poking their head through the door. "Shut up. We have another group coming through."

Lizzy covered her mouth and waved at them. The girls took their marks.

The twenty-something rolled their eyes, all the more obvious due to the heavy eyeliner contrasting their pale eyes. "Fucking kids," they muttered, turning back to their room.

Lizzy, after stepping back to her position, let her face go slack and her eyes unfocused, hoping that this would make her look unsuspecting, doll-like. It was the same look she had practiced in case she was ever cast as a zombie, once she made it to Hollywood. She'd used her mom's cam-corder, because with her eyes blurring the world around her, she couldn't see herself in the mirror.

When the pair entered, the girl immediately gasped upon seeing Kasey. "Jesus Christ. Mike, I want to go. Fuck this. They did not get a real child to do this." Lizzy smiled, then quickly schooled her face back into stillness. It was her brother. She was starting to think he wouldn't come.

His date was hunched, looking at the ground while gripping Mike's arm tightly, one hand in his and the other locked to his bicep.

"C'mon, babe. It's just a kid." When his girlfriend didn't look up, he whispered, in a voice Lizzy could only hear because of how close they stood to her hiding place, "If it comes to it, I'll take her down, WWE style. You're safe with me." Lizzy broke character and rolled her eyes. She knew how to beat Mike in a real fight—his armpits always ticklish. She would never just let him win.

"Mike," his girlfriend—what was her name?—whispered back. "There's nothing fucking normal about a kid being in a haunted house like this. This used to be a church, y'know?"

Lizzy's mom told her that her dad used to attend services in the very same pews that were still upstairs when he was her age. Just rows of pews with a foldable kneeling stand for prayer. Whenever she was waiting for her turn to rehearse whatever play she was in at the time, she liked to kneel on them, fold her hands, and pretend to pray.

"It's okay, babe. Just look up. It's just a kid in a room with some corn. *Ha!*" His volume increased significantly. "Oh! Like *Children of the Corn*, I get it!"

"Fucking hell, Mike. I swear," the girlfriend muttered.

Lizzy smiled. "Shouldn't do that in a church."

The girlfriend's head raised, and she immediately locked eyes with Lizzy, standing between the corn.

"Mike," the girlfriend said, patting Mike's arm rapidly. "D'you think that's real?"

Mike seemed to begin a question before his eyes caught on Lizzy as well. Slowly, maliciously, Lizzy grinned, her head bent down towards the floor, looking through her lashes, eyes trained on the couple.

Mike rolled his eyes at his sister. "Yeah, I'd say so."

Mike's girlfriend started to walk forward, but he was rooted to the spot, staring at Lizzy. She tugged hard on his hand before giving up and dropping it with a, "Damn you, Mike," and walking on to the next room alone.

After she was gone, Mike sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Pick you up in an hour?"

Lizzy blinked. Stood straight up again. "What time is it?"

"Almost 10."

"Yeah, that should be good." Her voice sweet as sugar, she called, "Thanks, Mike!"

"Yeah, yeah," Mike said. Then, jogging a little to catch up with his date, he shouted, "Hey, Mackenzie! Wait up!"

Lizzy looked at Kasey again, and they both erupted into another fit of laughter.

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Mackenzie never wanted to go to this stupid haunted house in the first place. What haunted house runs itself out of a church basement? Her family's church would've never allowed it; they would've called it demonic, would've sprayed the place with holy water. The haunted house didn't even have any church-themed rooms, which Mackenzie regarded as a wasted opportunity. There was the one with the coffin, but that was only there because there was a vampire lying in it, some teenager in dark makeup and scarily realistic teeth. She felt her skin crawling as she stormed out of the church, theater, whatever it was now. She felt like she could have been struck down for stepping foot in the place.

"C'mon, babe," Mike had said that day at lunch, sitting in a booth at Burger King, surrounded by his friends. Tyler and Garrett were standing in front of the booth, tossing a half-full soda cup back and forth, trying not to spill a drop. "It'll be great. It's five bucks and you can hold my hand the whole time." He leaned in but didn't lower his voice when he said, "We can fool around in the parking lot afterwards if you want." She heard Garrett snort, and knew he only said it because his friends were within earshot.

"I don't."

He slipped his arm around her shoulder and touched his nose to her cheek, his forehead to her temple. "Okay," he said, voice gentling, lowering. "But can we still see the haunted house?"

When she turned her head and kissed him, she knew she was going to regret it.

She gets scared easily, always has. When she was eight her mom took her to the doctor because she kept waking up with night terrors—men in black ski masks sneaking into their house to take her away, their home unmooring in a summer storm the force of a tsunami, and always, throughout all of her various nightmares, no matter where she was a dark figure loomed over her,

following. The doctor talked to her parents, and they started giving her medicine, little pills she'd take every night, and the dreams went away. When she was eleven, the medicine went away, too, and the dreams never came back with any frequency.

Mackenzie was homeschooled most of her life. When she reached high school age, her parents decided that it was time for her to learn from people other than them, especially when they considered they had five more young children to teach, and a seventh on the way. Her mother taught most of the time, with their dad jumping in to teach them financial math when they reached middle school age. He was an accountant at a marketing firm in Green Bay, and considered this sort of math to be the only kind that was really important. During each school lesson, their mom found a way to incorporate a lesson from the Bible, and every Sunday they would go to a small church in Suring, forty-five minutes away, to be with their congregation. Once, when she was very young, Mackenzie asked her mom why they didn't go to the church in Ridgewater since it was so much closer. Her mother responded, "That church is hardly Godly enough to call itself a church."

It wasn't until she started high school four years ago that Mackenzie realized life could be lived without church. She still couldn't tell if she liked it or not.

This whole haunted house ordeal probably wasn't helped by the fact that Mike had just shown her *The Exorcist* last weekend. She hid in the crook of his sweatshirt the entire movie—probably what he wanted, now that she thought about it. He thought the little girls in the house were *funny*. Mackenzie thought it was disturbed.

She sat in Mike's truck for two minutes before he exited the building, the light seeping out the doors behind him and casting him in shadow. When he got in the driver's seat, he laughed a big guffaw like he had never seen anything funnier in his life. "Macs, you should've seen your face, babe. It was *priceless*," he said, putting his fingers together in the air to emphasize each syllable. "Those little girls really got you, huh?"

Mackenzie stayed quiet, her arms crossed over her chest. Mike started the car and turned out of the parking lot. Mackenzie's vision remained purposefully cast out the passenger window.

They passed the last stop sign in town and then turned onto the county road. Mackenzie didn't turn her head from where she pressed it into the cold glass when she said, "Maybe if I'd had someone who didn't just stand there like an idiot—"

"Hey—"

"Or someone who could just *hold my hand* through the whole thing, I would have been fine. That's what you said when I agreed to go. That you would hold my hand."

She knew that he knew that this sort of stuff freaks her out. She hadn't told him about how church-y her family was yet, they'd only been dating for a few months, but she thought he might know anyway. Some of the stuff that she heard kids whisper around her at school freshman year told her most people had *some* idea that her family wasn't normal. Whatever that was. It wasn't important now, anyway.

He'd *laughed*.

From her periphery, she saw Mike take a deep breath and then shrug his shoulders emphatically, holding them at his chin, a deep frown creasing the lower half of his face. She rolled her eyes. Everything he did was emphatic. At least he wasn't laughing anymore.

She turned to look at him. "So you're really just not going to say anything?"

Mike shrugged again, fanning his fingers over the steering wheel.

“Seriously.”

“What is it I can say? You’re not going to like it no matter what.”

She scoffed. “You tell yourself that, Mike.”

He shrugged again, smaller this time.

It always ended like this, whenever they fought. Or spat, she preferred to call it. It never ended up being an actual fight, because Mike would never fight back. She would tell him how she was feeling, he’d dismiss her in some way, she would yell or snap, and he would clam up. The same thing over and over again. She didn’t think it would ever change. She didn’t know how to make it change. How to get him to share.

Sometimes she had to reach to remember why they started dating in the first place. She felt like she should be able to recall easily—they only started dating at the end of last school year, when he asked her to go to prom with him—but thinking about it was never easy. She’d said yes to him because she wanted to know what a school dance was like. She couldn’t drive, and her parents never would have brought her. Before that night, she thought she’d said yes for the convenience of it, but Mike had been sweet. He gave her a corsage and took her to dinner in Green Bay and didn’t get handsy on the dance floor like how she saw some of the other boys did.

After the dance, though, the kids at school started to ask if they were dating. Kailey Caulers once stopped her in the middle of the hall between classes just to ask when she was going to “seal the deal.” It was too much attention—her sister, Melanie, was a freshman that year and would find out she’d been on a date, tell their parents, if she didn’t do anything to assuage people’s interest. So, she asked Mike to be her boyfriend. It felt like the only way.

After that, if anyone bothered her about her love life, which still happened more often than she thought it would, though not in as great a quantity as post-prom, she could tell them she had a boyfriend in a condescending, don’t-talk-to-me voice, and, usually, they would leave her alone. Simple.

But Mike? He wasn’t anything special, not to her. An objectively cute boy, wavy dark hair, spare pimples, but usually only during wrestling season. He was fine—a safe choice. Sometimes she thought that no one was anything special, that she would never get that sparkling experience of first love. She wasn’t even sure she wanted it.

And thinking about it that way, she felt like a bit of an asshole. Mike was a nice guy, even if he didn’t know how to treat someone he was in a relationship with. She could tell that he cared, even if he didn’t show it the best. So what was she doing here? How was that fair to him? If he cared about her and all she cared about was what he could do for her, what foundation was there to build on? They were uneven.

Mackenzie dragged her hand over her eyes, pressing until white specks appeared in the darkness. She clenched her jaw until all she heard was the sound of her own inner ear straining against the pressure. She didn’t want to think about this anymore.

Several minutes like that, uncomfortable silence. Mackenzie wondered how long it would take her to get out and stay out of Ridgewater. She still had a year left of high school, but she didn’t want to wait that long. She could drop out and move into town—Green Bay—if she really wanted to, but she wasn’t sure. Maybe she could try and go farther—Milwaukee. Or maybe even

Chicago. Just somewhere new, somewhere big. Big enough that no one would recognize her from one day to the next.

She used to be invisible in this town. Homeschooled, living out in the country, there wasn't anyone else to see her. And if there was, her parents were always there to block the view. Ever since she started school, she'd felt scrutinized. At first as a mystery, then as an outcast, then a pretty girl, and now as Mike's girlfriend.

The kids at school would probably just assume she got pregnant if she left suddenly. Even though she and Mike hadn't had sex. If she just moved away with no explanation, they would certainly create a story to tell amongst themselves. She'd become nothing more than a perverted folk tale muttered at girls' sleepovers and boasted about in boys' locker rooms, a different version depending on whoever told it.

Her parents would be beside themselves if she left. Especially if she moved to a city. Asking what they did wrong. Texting her day and night. She could hardly get away from them *now*—they didn't even know she was on this date. Hell, they didn't know she was *dating* Mike. It would just be endless pointed questions if she told them, like how it always was. *How was school? Your grades? When are you going to start looking at colleges? Shouldn't you get a job? You know, we pay for everything for you, it'd be nice if you started doing some of it yourself.*

She knew they meant well, and that they were stretched thin with all her siblings. But God, it wasn't her fault they decided to have six children.

"I had a really nice time," Mike said, startling her from her thoughts.

She was home. The garage doors dented just like they always were; a tricycle tipped over in the walkway to the front door. There was a soft light shining through the living room window, it looked like it was coming from the kitchen—Mom must have gotten up for her night shift at the gas station already. Hell.

When she turned to look at Mike, Mackenzie thought he looked sincere. And wasn't that just the thing. Of course he'd be sincere, even after being an ass.

She shook her head, looked back at the light on in the kitchen, already gearing for the talking-to she was about to get, and slammed the truck door shut behind her.

* * *

Mike dropped Mackenzie off at her house and started to drive home. She didn't kiss him good night—didn't even look back at him as she walked away—and he thought he might cry. He didn't want to cry, though, so he turned the radio up and hit the steering wheel once, twice, and drove farther out of town. Down County Road E until the road ran out, then turned right, traveling even farther from where his sister was going to be done scaring people in about 45 minutes.

Mike wasn't the sort of guy who *felt* things. He laughed, he joked—he never cried, never apologized. Everyone knew what he was like, what was expected of him, which wasn't much, so whatever he said didn't matter. He didn't feel the need to surprise anyone.

His coach once told him that if he wanted to, he could pin anyone in under a minute with all the anger he had stopped up inside him. Mike hadn't thought he was angry, but he supposed he maybe was. He didn't want to be, but he didn't really know how to let it all go. Didn't know what it *was* that was holding on to him.

He supposed he could have told Mackenzie that his little sister was volunteering at the haunted house, and that's why he wanted to go, but he wanted it to be a surprise. He'd forgotten she didn't like kids. He knew she had a bunch of little siblings, but she never seemed very interested in talking about them. He'd never ever seen her talk to her sister at school. And she was so upset afterwards that he didn't want to tell her it was his sister hidden behind the corn in that room.

All that passed in the light of his car's headlamps were rows of corn stalks, flashing by so fast it became a blur of muted gold. The gravel occasionally spurred up a cloud of dust whenever he lost focus or his grip on the steering wheel, always veering to the right, the wheels misaligned. Far off on the horizon, the blinking red lights of wind turbines. Thick clouds that rolled over the moon faster than the waves of the bay, reminding him of werewolf movies and how Lizzy howled at the sky whenever she saw a full moon, even though tonight's moon was only half-full.

As the tires crawled up a long gravel drive, Mike saw the house that he had come this far for. It was run-down—paint all peeled away, leaving a dark, warping wood and gaping windows edged with broken glass. As close to a real haunted house as he'd ever seen.

He liked to come here when he felt like this—like the whole world was welling up inside him. It was away from everything. And it was so old, so abandoned, that he knew no one would find him here. The kids at school hadn't learned about this house yet, or they would've started making expeditions to test the ghostliness of the place already. It made him feel like he was in a movie whenever he stepped out of his truck and walked up the rickety front porch steps.

The floors of the house were littered in magazines. Old *National Geographics* and *Forbes* and some porn magazines he'd never seen outside of this house. He never knew why magazines. What they might have been for. Why they covered the entire first floor, with not a single glance of wood to be seen. Maybe someone put them all there as part of their own weird, secret stash of reading material, and the draft that constantly blew through the structure sent the magazines scattering one day, and they gave up, never tried to clean them up. Christ knew that the wind got strong enough come springtime to make it happen. Maybe some teenagers or drunk middle-agers found this place once and threw them all in here in the hopes that it would one day catch fire. Bit of excitement for the town, even if this place was a good fifteen minutes out.

He walked down the long hallway, careful of his step, until he reached what used to be the kitchen. It was the same clearly trod path made visible by the mud and dirt caked on certain magazine covers. The sink was rusted and heavy, the bottom not blocked by any cabinet doors, pipes exposed for anyone to see, newspapers filling the empty space, crowding around the pipes. There was a gaping emptiness where Mike thought a fridge might have been, an orange stain that wasn't rust running down the wall. The gas stove didn't click to light, disconnected from its supply. He always checked it whenever he came here, just to see. To make sure no one had turned it on accidentally. Though, he always felt a small sense of disappointment whenever it didn't light. Maybe *he* was the teenager the fire department should be keeping an eye on.

He'd been here before, so many times, but tonight felt different. Like an end. Or maybe a beginning.

He knew Mackenzie was going to break up with him, if she hadn't already. He didn't know what to do about Lizzy, who was weird and liked to scare people for fun. She had

delusions of grandeur he didn't want to squash, but also didn't want to encourage. His father had left before Lizzy was old enough to remember him, and now it was up to Mike to be that person for his little sister. He didn't know how to be that, though. The only thing he knew was how to stay.

His mother was probably asleep at home, with no idea of what kind of person her son was. He hardly knew what kind of person he was either. He scared himself—all that anger he couldn't even see. Where did it come from? What was he supposed to do with it, when he couldn't do this? What was he supposed to do with himself? Where would he go when the time came for him to leave? What if he never left? What then? Who would have him?

There was nothing left for him in the house to look at again because he'd seen it all before. Nothing left for him to wonder after if he didn't want to cry. So, Mike did what he came to do.

He took his mark in the center of the kitchen floor, breathed deeply, opened his lungs, and sang, long and low, his voice filled with all the things he didn't know how to say with words.