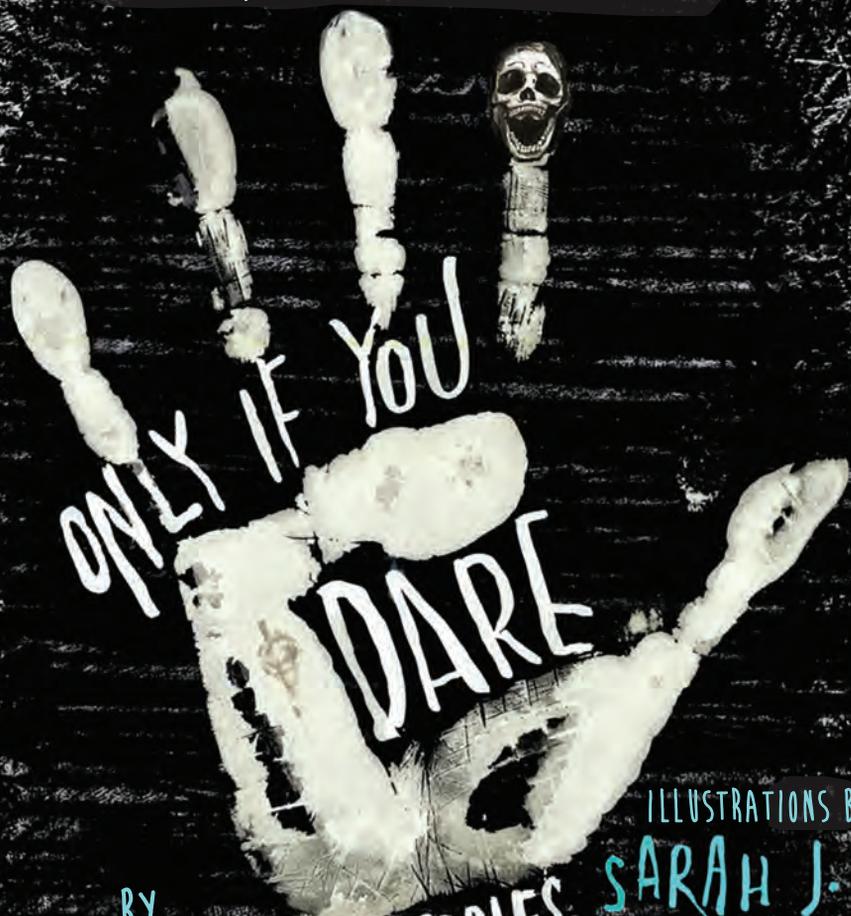


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BY  
JOSH  
ALLEN

13 STORIES  
OF  
DARKNESS  
AND  
DOOM

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
SARAH J.  
COLEMAN

ONLY IF YOU DARE





ART A SKETCH AND IS NOT FINAL

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FOR MOM AND DAD.  
AND FOR EVERYONE ELSE  
WHO IS BRAVE ENOUGH.



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# the Substitute.

IT was October 31, Halloween, and Hazel walked into life science class a few minutes early. Only, Ms. Jacobson wasn't in her usual spot next to the whiteboards. Instead, a thin man with a long black beard stood in her place.

"A substitute," Hazel whispered as she slid into her seat next to Ava, her best friend.

But she'd never seen a substitute like this before.

For one thing, the man at the front of the class was wearing a suit. A black one. With a black tie and shiny black shoes. None of the teachers at Tidewater Middle School, not even the substitutes, ever wore suits.

*Maybe it's a Halloween costume,* Hazel thought.

And then there was that beard. It went halfway down his chest.

The substitute didn't look up as students trickled in. He didn't say *hello* or *good morning*. He just stood there beside Ms. Jacobson's desk reading a dusty book.

Hazel shrugged at Ava and raised her eyebrows. Maybe, Hazel figured, all these things—the suit, the tie, the silent reading—had nothing to do with Halloween. Maybe they were substitute-teacher tricks to keep everyone from trying to get away with anything.

When the bell rang, the substitute closed his dusty book and set it on Ms. Jacobson's desk. Then he ran his fingers through his beard. Finally, he spoke.

"Did you know," he said in a high, quiet voice, "that octopuses have three hearts?"

Hazel blinked. Around her, no one said anything. Everyone's faces were scrunched. She turned to Ava, who'd begun tapping her pencil on her desk.

"And snails have teeth," the substitute said. He walked back and forth across the front of the room. His polished shoes made light tapping sounds on the floor. "In fact, snails have thousands of teeth. Some of them, as many as fourteen thousand."

There was a pause. Students started to whisper.

"What's going on?" said Miguel Rodriguez.

"Who is this guy?" hissed Sheryl Jones from the back row.

"Is this a Halloween thing?" said Noah Haight.

Hazel turned again to Ava and saw that her best friend's eyes had narrowed. Ava, Hazel knew, hated Halloween. Haunted houses, spooky movies, scary pranks. She didn't like any of it. She called Halloween "the worst of all holidays." If this was a Halloween thing, Ava wasn't going to like it. Not a bit.

"Bats," the substitute continued, "are the only mammals that can fly."

*Bats, Hazel thought. So this is a Halloween thing.*

She raised her hand.

“Excuse me,” she said. “But who are you, exactly?”

A few kids chuckled.

“I’m your substitute,” the bearded man said. “My name is Walter Fernsby, but I guess you should call me Mr. Fernsby.”

*Walter Fernsby, Hazel thought. That’s an old person’s name.*

But the substitute didn’t look old. He had smooth pale skin and straight white teeth.

He lifted a blue binder off Ms. Jacobson’s desk and held it up. “I see here,” he said, wagging the binder, “that Ms. Jacobson would like me to teach you a lesson today on the different parts of cells.”

He put the binder down.

“But,” he said leaning forward and dropping his voice, “I’ll bet you’ve had loads of lessons on cells before.”

He smiled.

Hazel tilted her head. It was true that she’d probably sat through dozens of lessons on cells, or hundreds, even. But what was the substitute’s point? Where was he going with this?

Hazel looked up and down the rows of her classmates. Around her, there was a buzz in the air. An excitement. It was Halloween, and *something* was happening. *Something different.* A few desks over, Miguel Rodriguez was actually smiling. In the front row, Noah Haight was sitting

up. Even Mari Kuniyuki had switched off her cell phone and set it in front of her.

Next to Hazel, though, Ava was still tapping her pencil on her desk. Last Halloween, she and Ava had gone to one of those haunted corn mazes, and Ava had started crying after five minutes. She'd ended up sitting on the ground with her eyes shut tight and her hands clamped over her ears.

Hazel had put her arms around Ava and walked her out.

And sometimes when the two girls watched movies together, Ava would close her eyes in the middle of a scary part and say *Tell me when it's over*.

Hazel would always make sure everything was safe before she'd say *It's fine now, Ava. You can look*.

"Well, since I am a substitute teacher," Mr. Fernsby went on, "I thought that today I might teach you a substitute lesson."

In the next desk over, Ava raised her hand. "Can you please just teach us about cells?" she said.

Hazel thought she heard a slight quiver in Ava's voice.

The substitute didn't answer. He took a few steps across the front of the room. He seemed to be waiting for something.

"What's the substitute lesson about?" Noah Haight asked. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his desk.

Mr. Fernsby looked around the room and made eye contact with a few students.

"The substitute lesson is about . . . *Them*," he said, and the way he said the word *Them*, slow and looming and with a bit of a growl, made Hazel open her mouth slightly.

She turned to Ava. "It'll be okay," she whispered.

"Who are *Them*?" said Sheryl Jones from the back row.

"*Them* are the biggest mystery in all of life science," Mr. Fernsby said. "*Them* are creatures, stranger even than the three-hearted octopus, the thousand-toothed snail, and the flying-mammal bat all put together. *Them* are much more . . . monstrous."

Mr. Fernsby stroked his black beard with one hand. A Halloween eeriness filled the room.

Hazel checked Ava again. Her pencil-tapping had become faster.

*Did Ms. Jacobson arrange this?* Hazel wondered. A Halloween prank didn't seem like something she would do.

Hazel squinted at Mr. Fernsby.

"Are you talking about snakes or something?" said Miguel Rodriguez, smiling wider than Hazel had ever seen him. "Is this some lesson about . . . like . . . reptiles?"

"I am not," Mr. Fernsby said, "talking about reptiles. I'm talking about creatures. About real-life monsters. *Them*! They don't have any other name. They probably did once, but they're incredibly old. Ancient. Even they, it's said, have forgotten what they were once called."

Hazel's neck grew hot. Beside her, Ava pursed her lips.

Around the class, the whispering started up again.

“I love Halloween,” said Sheryl Jones from the back row.

“What kind of substitute is this?” asked Tarek Haddad.

“Do you think Ms. Jacobson knows about this?” said Miguel Rodriguez.

Hazel looked at Ava. “There’s no such thing as monsters,” she said.

She’d meant this only for Ava, but Mr. Fernsby must have heard because suddenly, he was staring at her. He took a few steps down her aisle.

Everyone fell silent.

Mr. Fernsby raised his eyebrows.

“No such thing as monsters?” he said. “Are you . . . certain?” He moved back to the front of the classroom, where he smoothed his suit and his tie. He ran his fingers through his beard once more.

A cold wave seemed to wash over the class.

“Best class ever,” said Miguel Rodriguez. “Already, this is the best class ever.”

Next to Hazel, Ava unpursed her lips. “Can you *please* just teach us about cells?” she said again.

But Tarek Haddad spoke. “Forget cells,” he said. “I want to hear more about these monsters. What do they want?”

Other students nodded.

Hazel looked at Ava. *It’s fine*, she mouthed.

“*Them*,” Mr. Fernsby said, “want the same thing that every creature on Earth wants—to stay alive. For a long,

long time. Which *Them* do. They live on and on for thousands of years.”

Hazel couldn't believe what she was hearing. In her own life science class.

“How?” Noah Haight asked. “How do they live for so long?”

Mr. Fernsby nodded.

“They touch you.” He lifted a finger. “That's all. They touch you, and when they do, they drain away the life you have inside you.” He began to walk back and forth across the front of the class. “Say, for example, that you are going to live for another fifty years. When one of *Them* looks at you, it knows this. It can see it. And if this . . . *thing* . . . touches you, it can steal away some of those years. Maybe ten. Maybe twenty. Maybe more. For *Them*, it's like drinking. They swallow your years up, and then they use those years for themselves. Your life gets shorter. And theirs gets longer. That's how they—how *Them*—are so old.” Mr. Fernsby looked back at Noah Haight. “They've taken so many years from so many people for so very long.”

Hazel turned to Ava again. Ava's eyes were closed as if this were a scary part in a movie. Hazel could practically hear her saying *Tell me when it's over*.

From the back row, Sheryl Jones said, “What do *Them* look like?”

Mr. Fernsby raised a finger.

“An excellent question,” he said. He took a few steps down Sheryl Jones’s row. “*Them* look just like you and me, young lady. That’s one reason they’re such a mystery. We can’t track *Them* down. We can’t study *Them*. They blend in perfectly. They look like men, women, and children. There could be one in this classroom right now.” He opened his arms wide. “And you would have no idea.”

Everyone shifted and looked around as if they were checking for suspicious students among the rows of desks.

Hazel kept her eyes locked on Mr. Fernsby.

“Mostly, I’ve heard that *Them* like places where young people gather,” he said. “Places where there is much life left to be lived. I’ve heard they spend their time in parks . . . or playgrounds . . . or schools.”

*Schools*, Hazel thought.

“Can you please tell us about cells now?” Ava said, trying one more time to change the subject. She’d opened her eyes, but her voice came out quiet. “We have a test coming up.”

Before Mr. Fernsby could answer, Tarek Haddad spoke.

“Tell us more,” he said. “Tell us about how *Them* drink your years and use them for themselves.”

“Ah,” Mr. Fernsby said. “You want an example.”

He walked up and down the aisles. His polished shoes made light tapping sounds on the tile floor. The furnace kicked on, and Hazel wondered what Mr. Fernsby would do next.

Then he stopped—Hazel couldn't believe it—right next to Ava's desk. He pointed at her.

"How old are you, young lady?" he said.

"Eleven," Ava said, and her voice came out barely louder than a whisper.

"Eleven," Mr. Fernsby repeated. "So young."

Hazel could see what Mr. Fernsby was doing. He was picking on Ava. Probably, she figured, he'd stopped at Ava's desk because she'd been the one who'd kept asking about cells. Or maybe, Hazel realized, he'd chosen Ava because he'd seen the way she'd been tapping her pencil and hunching her shoulders, and he knew he could get a reaction out of her.

"Let's imagine that you're going to live to be"—Mr. Fernsby studied Ava for a second—"ninety-one." He nodded. "That's eighty years of life you have left in you, young lady."

Ava didn't look up.

"Excuse me," Hazel said. "I also have a question about cells."

The substitute ignored her.

"When one of *Them* looks at you," he said, leaning down to Ava, "it knows you have these eighty years. It can see them. And to take them, all it has to do is touch you. Maybe it offers to shake your hand." He reached out a hand and let it hang over Ava's desk.

Ava shifted to the other side of her chair.

Tarek Haddad and Sheryl Jones in the back row chuckled.

Hazel glared at them.

“If you shake that hand”—Mr. Fernsby kept his hand hovering over Ava—“that’s all it takes. You go still, and then this thing that looks just like you or me—the biggest mystery in all of life science—drinks some of your eighty years away.”

“And you shrivel up like a raisin,” Miguel Rodriguez said, and he laughed.

“No,” Mr. Fernsby said, turning. “When one of *Them* is done with you, you look the same as you always did. Only, you have fewer years left. You’re closer to . . . the end.”

Hazel began kicking one of her desk’s legs.

“Wait a minute,” said Noah Haight. “You said they drink *some* of your years. They don’t take all of them?”

“They do not,” Mr. Fernsby said, turning back to Ava. His outstretched hand was still hovering over her. “They always leave you something. Maybe one year. Maybe two. Maybe ten. These creatures don’t see themselves as murderers. Not really. They think they’re just thieves, and what they steal is time.”

Finally, Mr. Fernsby dropped his hand and walked back to the front of the class.

Hazel could hear Ava breathing quickly. She remembered the haunted corn maze from last year and the trembly look on Ava’s face as she’d guided her out.

She had that same trembly look now.

Hazel narrowed her eyes.

“You’re pretty good at making things up, Mr. Fernsby,” said Tarek Haddad.

“Am I?” Mr. Fernsby said, raising his dark eyebrows. “Am I making things up?”

“Maybe he’s not,” said Mari Kuniyuki. She raised her cell phone. “He was right about the octopus. I looked it up. They do have three hearts. And he was right about snails too. They have thousands of teeth.”

Mr. Fernsby didn’t speak. He let the question of whether he was telling the truth hang in the air like his hand had hung over Ava.

In the next desk over, Ava put her head down.

There was nothing Hazel could do for her. She could ask about cells again, but everyone would ignore her.

The chance to change the subject was gone.

“You are of course free to make up your own minds about what I’ve told you today,” Mr. Fernsby said. “You are free to doubt the life science lesson I have taught you. Or you are free to open your minds to a new possibility. The decision is yours.”

“Hang on,” said Miguel Rodriguez, and the smile he’d worn all class faded. “Is that what this is really about? A lesson about opening our minds?”

Mr. Fernsby combed his beard with his fingers.

“This has been a lesson about *Them*, young man,” he said. “You can do with it what you want.”

Slumped on her desk, Ava wasn’t moving.

As far as Hazel could tell, Mr. Fernsby didn't even notice. He talked on and on, and the other students seemed to love it. They peppered him with questions.

*What do people who are getting drained look like?*

*Do you know anyone who's ever met one of Them?*

*How many Them are there in America right now?*

It went on for forty-five minutes. Finally, the bell rang. Everyone stood and began to shuffle out of the room. Everyone, that was, except for Ava and Hazel.

"Best substitute ever," said Noah Haight as he passed Hazel's desk.

"Halloween rules," said Sheryl Jones.

Ava still hadn't moved.

"Are you all right?" Hazel whispered.

Ava shrugged.

"It was only a story." Hazel touched Ava's shoulder. "It was a dumb Halloween lesson about opening our minds. You don't need to worry about it. I promise."

"I just don't like that feeling," Ava said. "The one I get when I hear those things."

"I know," Hazel said. "But you're safe. Trust me."

At the front of the class, Mr. Fernsby picked up his dusty book from Ms. Jacobson's desk. He started reading. He was probably getting ready for his performance in the next class.

Hazel could barely look at him. He'd made Ava slump and cower.

*Somebody, she thought, should do something.*

“I’m going to talk to him,” Hazel said.

“Don’t,” Ava whispered. “He’s just a stupid substitute.”

“He picked on you,” Hazel said. “He did it on purpose.”

And that was true. But for Hazel, there was something else hanging in the air. Something else she needed to do.

“It’ll only take a second,” she said. “I’ll meet you at lunch.”

She pulled Ava up, and as Ava shuffled through the classroom door, Hazel checked to make sure she and Mr. Fernsby were really alone.

She walked to the front of the class. She flexed her fingers.

She didn’t quite know how to start. She wanted to say something to Mr. Fernsby about what he had done. About how he’d picked on Ava and how afterward, he’d chosen not to notice her.

He was one of those adults—she’d seen so many of them—who think they’re being funny when they’re really being mean.

But she couldn’t find the words to tell him this.

So instead, she walked up to Mr. Fernsby and asked him a question, one that had been on her mind all class.

“Where did you hear about *Them*, Mr. Fernsby?” she said. “Where did you learn it all?”

Without looking up, Mr. Fernsby wagged his book.

“I read a lot,” he said. “I like old books. The ones most people have forgotten about.”



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Hazel nodded. She knew the books he meant.

“My friend Ava,” she started to say, and then looked down.

She didn’t know how to go on. Maybe it didn’t matter. Some adults never learned anyway.

“I guess I just wanted to say thank you for the lesson, Mr. Fernsby,” Hazel said. “And happy Halloween.”

She reached out her hand.

Mr. Fernsby looked at it for a second. It must have seemed strange to him, Hazel realized, being offered a handshake by someone who was one-third his age.

Or someone who he thought was one-third his age.

Hazel smiled innocently.

*You’re a twelve-year-old girl, she told herself. Just a twelve-year-old girl at school.*

And Mr. Fernsby must have believed that. Because despite his own story and all the old books he’d read, he smiled and said, “Happy Halloween to you too, young lady.”

And he took Hazel’s hand.

At once, she started drinking.

It was true, what Mr. Fernsby had said. *Them* weren’t murderers. Just thieves. And Hazel had always been generous. She’d always left people at least ten years. Or fifteen. Usually more.

But as she drank, and as Mr. Fernsby’s body went still and his mouth fell open, she remembered the way Ava

had slumped in her desk, the way she'd closed her eyes at Mr. Fernsby's words, the way she'd become so silent and so afraid.

So afraid of . . . *Them*.

And so this time—for the first time—Hazel took everything.