

**LI, RUOGE**

**Ruoge Li**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Vestavia Hills High School, Vestavia, AL

Educator: J

---

moonlight surges through the fractures, exposing the cottage, splintering wounds and splintered furniture. Dust swirls up like smoke.

Exhaling in short bursts, my vision blurs as tears and sweat pool over my lashes, fusing the moonlight with ominous flickers. I shudder, spider-like shivers creep up my spine up into my head where they scurry around trapped, as if in a cage. Their abdomens spit their threads onto my wispy lashes, weaving their black, hypnotizing strings that lace across my vision until I blink. They fade. My head throbs. Dazed.

I sigh, hurling myself into the corner of my bedroom, wrapping my slender arms around my legs, squeezing them against my chest until red streaks crease along my calves. I rest my cheek against my knees. My eyelids tug closer and closer together, but all I can see are red flashes of a furnace, a fire sprinting up the tattered pillars of the cottage as its flames roar over its windows until smoke swallows it all. "I'll do something next time," I promise the cottage. And then it all disappears as I fall asleep.

My eyes shut.

From that day on, I drape my window in ghastly dark curtains that ooze over the open frame, shielding even the summer sun. I enshroud myself in darkness, leaving only the remnants of a glow through the light of a burning candle. I stack books upon books, cluttering the empty shelves. I pour myself over their words, their yellow, cracked pages that drift up in flames when held too close to the kindling fire. I play with dolls and trivial toys; their colorful mechanisms dull me to sleep.

I still faintly remember the cottage, but it appears more of a child's imaginary place, like an immature fantasy. I did not care for it. I could not care for it. But I still want to see it.

I hesitate to swing aside the sinister black curtains. In the past, when I saw the crinkles of the curtain, the only things I heard were quiet pleas and my empty promises. I never answered. The voices faded over time, but my hands still feel clammy as I rub the dark fabric in between my fingers.

I lift the corner of one of its thick folds and scream when I notice a repulsive little creature stretching its eight, flimsy legs on the dusty, soiled ledge. I close my eyes, trembling, as I slam my finger onto its feeble body. I find my first