

THE DIARY OF ALIZA SCHULTZ HALLOWEEN SPECIAL 2022: “A SINGLE NIGHT IN WOLFORD” BY RAFAEL MUSLANI

“The thing about Wolford is that it has been abandoned for more than 150 years. The ghosts here are probably getting bored, waiting for anyone to show up.” Elijah looked up at us with his big brown eyes, scanning our expressions for a response. “Or, they have been until this weekend. There are no records of anyone offering ghost tours through Wolford, much less letting guests stay overnight in the old inn like we’re doing. I hope that you are all prepared for the fright of your lives.” He made an attempt to say this in a sinister tone, betrayed by his youthful features and youth pastor demeanor and shoulder-length light brown hair. Elijah was supposed to bring us somewhere dangerous. That’s what we all paid him to do. But, looking at him, I couldn’t help but think that he wasn’t capable of harming a fly. I tried to be scared that he was too meek to protect us if something did happen, but I failed at that, too. Elijah was harmless.

During the day, we wandered through the town hall, through the empty town center, through the abandoned households where people had been living peacefully one moment and disappeared or dead the next. It was assumed that most in Wolford died, though it was hard to confirm anyone’s re-emergence in a new town in the 1870s. Elijah told us breathlessly about the disease that ravaged the town and the mass panic that resulted from being unable to contain it. It is unclear what all of the symptoms even were. Every ailment exhibited by anyone was considered all a part of the same disease. The most alarming symptom was spontaneous and rapid ankylosing spondylitis, resulting in bones fusing together, leaving people aching and hunched, until they were eventually frozen in place, unable to move at all. Elijah told these stories in a bright and comforting tone that he was unable to shirk, in the daylight, about a time impossibly far in the past. The disease, then the panic, then the violence, the quiet once all had died or vacated one way or another— it was all too far away, bleached clean by the sun. We were interested, not scared. Fear would have to wait for nightfall, when our senses left us more vulnerable.

The sun had almost fully set when Elijah ushered us into the Wolford Inn for the evening. The inn had been quasi-faithfully restored in anticipation of the ghost tour revival of the town. It looked as though most things had been replaced with modern furnishings with a rustic aesthetic, rather than repaired. “Since we’re the first group, we have run of the entire place,” Elijah explained. “Pick any room that you want. Pair off, or hell, all six of you can have your own rooms at different corners of the inn. There’s more than enough room. Whatever you want to do. And feel free to explore as late as you want. I don’t think anyone here will mind. I’ll leave you all to it.” Elijah vanished behind an employee door and the six of us were left to ourselves.

Nobody knew each other before coming to Wolford. We had all found the tour through different places: Craig from Instagram, Allison from word of mouth, Madison from some ghost hunting facebook group, and so on. I lived one town over and saw flyers promising a thrilling and inexpensive vacation. We all looked around, trying to decide whether or not to engage with the other strangers we were now supposed to be friends with.

Madison was the first to take charge, approaching me with kindness. She was younger than me, in her mid-20s, with short blonde hair. She seemed to have a lot of specialized gear with her in a large camping backpack.

"Dorian, right?" she asked.

"That's me," I answered.

"Wanna pair off for tonight? I've got an EMF reader, a ghost box, a thermal camera, all kinds of stuff." She motioned behind her to her backpack with her head.

"I don't know if I believe in any of that," I said.

"All the more reason to hang out with me tonight," she said. "Between you and me, I haven't gotten any of these gadgets to respond the way they're supposed to. Maybe I'm becoming a skeptic, too." She winked at me.

I looked around at the others, who were already following our lead and pairing off. I sighed. "Fine," I said. "I'm in. But we better get haunted. I wasn't impressed by the town hall."

Madison scoffed in solidarity. "I know right? Scarier things happen every day in every major city on earth. C'mon, let's get one of the good rooms before Craig or Allison find them."

The rooms appeared to be mostly the same, but we did find ourselves in a lavishly furnished room with a view out into the dirt streets of Woldford. It was already too dark to see anything. The lights from the inn were the only lights on in town.

Madison immediately set to unpacking. "I do have a confession to make. I couldn't help myself," she said, before pulling a stuffed teddy bear out of her bag. "When I was buying all this shit online, I found the dumbest thing. Meet ScareBear. He is an EMF reader, a temperature gauge, and a vibration detector. And a stuffed teddy bear. Sold right alongside all of the stuff that we are supposed to use to determine if the spirits of the dead are walking among us. Treated like a legitimate tool to uncover the paranormal. It's like... do they even want to be taken seriously?"

"I think they'd rather make some money," I replied. The teddy bear looked insultingly average, completely at odds with its function, an expensive children's toy.

"If we get killed while a teddy bear is telling us that there's a ghost nearby, I'm pretty sure that we'll be entitled to be ghosts here, too," she said.

"Ugh. I don't wanna sit around and scare tourists forever," I groaned. "I'm gonna go freshen up a little bit. I feel caked in dirt after walking around in the dust all day today."

"Fair enough. I'm gonna draw the blinds, turn ScareBear on, and get this party started. I brought some spellbooks just in case the ghosts don't wanna come out and we wanna try to drag them out," Madison said. "And I brought *The Shining* if we decide to give up."

"Sounds like a plan," I said and entered the bathroom. It was claustrophobic, with just enough room for a toilet, sink, and shower. Indoor plumbing had clearly been added to the inn after the fact. I took a quick shower, changed into a fresh set of clothes, and brushed my teeth. It was while I was brushing my teeth that I saw the door begin to swing open slowly.

"Not funny, Madison," I called out with a mouth full of toothpaste. "We don't know each other and I could've been naked in here." I didn't hear a reply. I looked through the crack in the door and only saw darkness. Maybe it wasn't Madison. Maybe the door just didn't shut properly. I wouldn't put it past this place to have issues like that. I spat out the toothpaste.

"Do you want me to get this light, too?" I asked, referring to the bathroom light. Again, she didn't respond, but I assumed that she did want the light out. We had been waiting for darkness all day and it was finally time to deliver it. I turned out the light, swung the door open and took a step into the darkness of the room.

I was immediately caught off guard as I felt myself take a step *down* into the room, when there were no stairs there previously. I looked around but saw nothing. Pitch dark. Not normal dark with the blinds drawn. More like being in a cave. I was still within arm's reach of the door and reflexively reached back and grabbed the doorknob, trying to get my bearings. This was a prank. Madison was pranking me. Or Elijah. But how? I couldn't figure out yet.

"This isn't funny. What'd you do?" I called out. My voice echoed much more than it should have. I strained my eyes in the dark. Then, as though it popped into existence in front of me, I saw an illuminated form, bright white. I squinted. A bright white form as though perfectly cut out of the darkness around it, shoulder length hair. Elijah? He slumped forward unnaturally as he moved. I didn't know where I was supposed to be seeing. Suddenly, he turned and looked at me, hunching even further over, brown eyes the only feature I could make out on his face. I couldn't tell how far away he was in the dark. It felt like he was gliding closer to me. I held onto the doorknob until suddenly I couldn't feel it in my hands any longer. Maybe I was the one gliding towards him. I couldn't feel my feet on the ground anymore.

"Howdy doo! There's a temperature change in front of you!"

"Get out of the way, Dorian!" Madison said. "You're the temperature change, standing in front of it. Stupid ScareBear. We're never going to find a ghost like this."

I looked around. I was standing in the middle of the room.

"Silly question, but... how long have I been standing here?" I asked.

"Just a moment," Madison said. "I thought it was weird how you didn't say anything. You okay? The blackout curtains make it really dark in here. I got a little disoriented myself."

"You didn't see... anything... right?" I asked.

"I wish," she said. "You were just in the light in the bathroom. Spots in your eyes?"

"That... makes more sense than what I thought I saw," I said.

"Don't tell me the skeptic is already coming around," Madison replied.

"No, just my squishy little brain trying to turn patterns into people." I replied.

"Okay, then. Sit! You're in the way of ScareBear," she said. I sat down cross-legged beside her.

"If there is a spirit in the room with us tonight... show yourself," Madison called out to no one in particular. "We're bored, Elijah says that you're bored, we have a lot in common. You probably rode horses a lot if you were alive 150 years ago. I was a horse girl growing up. Dorian, horses?"

"Never ridden one," I replied.

"Ignore them," Madison said. "We can put them on a ghost horse for their first ever ride. How does that sound?"

"Whoopee! The magnetic field is shifting for me!" ScareBear said. I heard mechanical arms shift in the darkness as it did a celebratory dance, but I couldn't see it.

"Well, now I'm anxious about riding a ghost horse," I said. "What if I try to get on its back and I fall right through?"

"We're the anchor to our form," I was startled by Madison's voice taking a different timbre. "Feeling is a shadow of the real. The universe cannot be real and local at the same time. Action at a distance. A fragment of an idea from a future textbook." I looked over at her. She was glowing white, a cutout like Elijah had been. She did not illuminate anything else in the

darkness. I could not see the beds, our bags, the ScareBear. She leaned forward toward me or I leaned in toward her.

"We synthesize a structure to hang the anchor onto. Being and becoming. A ghost is a key. It is a form. It is a key again. And then it is gone. And then it never was. And then it's 150 years. And then 80,000 years. They talk about us like they talk about rocks. Because we are rocks. A key and then a form and then a key again. We used to slip under doors until there were no doors. The houses were demolished. A key in a lock, a lock on the ground, a door in the earth. Do you understand? Do you understand? Do you understand? Do you understand?"

[ScareBear] "Do you understand? Do you understand? Do you understand? Do you understand?"

I tried to stand up but Madison was holding onto my arm. "Dorian? What's the distance? Halfway? Halfway to halfway? Halfway to halfway to halfway? How are we getting there?"

"Spooky spooky! ScareBear's Moving!"

"Dorian, you are the worst at this," Madison said. "You kicked it and now it thinks that a ghost is moving it around."

"Madison, something happened just now," I said.

Madison sat quietly for a moment. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"What do you mean? Talk about it? Do you know what happened?" I asked.

"Data collection can get really rough at a distance, Dorian. Calibration is supposed to be completely stealth. Odorless and colorless and all that. But the reason we all had to get you out here alone is because it's so far away. The signal is too broad from all the way out there, ya know? It took six of us just to focus the damn thing."

"You were glowing white and saying strange things," I stammered.

"Ugh. Typical. Of course I was. And now you've got all kinds of ideas about ghosts and stuff. Do you want to remember this? I guess you can. It would be poor hospitality to not let you decide, I think." I sat, stunned at how she had returned to normal.

"You're the one that did that," I said.

"Well, we all did. I'm just the one in the room. You weren't supposed to go anywhere. Elijah's gonna get in trouble."

"What are you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm Madison. Nice to meet you," Madison said. "And we're sort of like what you are in relationship to that teddy bear, I guess? I don't mean to condescend, but you're just as likely to understand as ScareBear here is to understand you."

"What did you do to me?" I asked.

"Nothing. There's... more of you now? In a different time and place, I guess. But you're fine. We didn't do anything at all to you," she said.

"I'm having a break with reality," I said.

"Nope," Madison said. "Quite the opposite. Are you scared?"

"Of course I'm scared," I said.

"Okay, that's fine. That's normal. There are beings who can scare us like that, too, but at least we know about them. How about this? We start over, give up the ghost tour shtick, and just go back to normal. How does that sound?"

"Impossible," I said. "I'm getting the hell out of here." I made a break for the door.

The rest of the evening was a bust. We laid on the hotel beds opposite each other and watched *The Shining* on the room's TV. It was difficult to find it scary. The ghost hunting had been such a wash that it felt completely out of the question that anything of that nature could possibly exist. I fell asleep before the movie was over. I think Madison did, too.