

THE WOODEN GHOST

Written by

Haley Makowski

Michigan State University
makows47@msu.edu

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The walls are covered in horror movie posters: A Nightmare on Elm Street, Halloween, The Evil Dead, IT.

RUBY ELWOOD (24) lounges on her couch, feet propped on a coffee table with a BOWL OF POPCORN in her lap. She wears an oversized hoodie and baggy bohemian pants. Comfortable and endearing.

A blood-curdling SCREAM erupts from the television in front of her. Ruby barely flinches and laughs with amusement. The glow of the TV flickers about the darkened room.

Ruby stuffs a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

A sharp TAP-TAP, TAP-TAP sounds at the door.

This time she does flinch. Carefully, she rests her feet on the carpet and places her bowl on the table. While she finishes chewing, she brushes stray popcorn kernels onto the floor.

RUBY
(calling to the closed
door)
Go away, Jonah.

Another TAP-TAP, TAP-TAP.

Ruby bites her lower lip, glancing around the apartment as if searching for someone else to answer it. She is alone.

She sighs and stands.

EXT./INT. HALLWAY/RUBY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

In the hall, JONAH LAWRENCE (26) waits with a hand braced against the door frame. He is tall and lean with jet black hair swept back. He wears veterinarian scrubs, a pawprint tattoo peeks out from under the cuff on his left bicep.

A large rectangular PACKAGE sits at his feet, and a PLASTIC BAG hangs from an arm.

JONAH
(cheery)
Ruby, open up.

He moves to knock on the door again, but hesitates.

Ruby cracks the door a couple inches.

JONAH (CONT'D)
 Surprise! A gift, for you.

Jonah gestures down to the package.

Ruby stares at him with a blank expression before peering out down the hall. Jonah follows her gaze.

JONAH (CONT'D)
 Don't worry. No furball today. He was pretty worn out after the park earlier.
 (nodding to the package)
 Don't you want to know what it is?

Ruby inches a step out to examine the box. She frowns and disappears back inside her apartment, but the door remains cracked.

Jonah scratches the back of his head, perplexed. He glances to his right and left down the hall, shaking his head with uncertainty.

Ruby returns with a pair of SCISSORS in hand and kneels to lay the box flat. Jonah watches with furrowed brows as the young woman cuts the box open in erratic swipes.

When she lifts the lid, she shoots up and stumbles into Jonah. He attempts to steady her, but she shrugs away. Jonah peers over her shoulder, almost as surprised as Ruby.

JONAH (CONT'D)
 A ghost.

Within the box, a GHOST about 3 feet high lays on a bed of tissue paper, really just a stuffed head nestled atop a wooden skeleton with a sheet draped over. Two sharpie-colored eyes match the black toddler sneakers poking out the bottom.

Ruby whirls on Jonah.

RUBY
 Where did you get this?

Jonah raises his hands in defense, gaze jumping between Ruby and the ghost.

One arm wraps protectively around her stomach while the other points accusingly at the open box.

RUBY (CONT'D)
 Who gave this to you?

JONAH

Okay, Ruby, I swear I was just messing with you. It's not mine. They delivered it to the wrong door. Look—

Jonah kneels and lifts the side of the box to reveal the shipping label, which reads RUBY ELWOOD along with her address. He taps a finger on the return address.

JONAH (CONT'D)

Know anyone from Caledonia?

Ruby presses her temple to the edge of her door, eyes avoiding Jonah.

RUBY

(mumbling)

My parents.

Jonah's expression brightens.

JONAH

Oh, that's nice!

Ruby grimaces. She leans down and drags the box through her doorway. Jonah watches with slightly parted lips, pondering what else to say.

JONAH (CONT'D)

Hey, are you going to the Halloween party tomorrow night? They've got the Rec Room all set up.

Once the box is past the threshold, Ruby grips her doorknob.

RUBY

I don't think so. Goodnight, Jonah.

He fumbles with the plastic bag on his arm, almost forgetting.

JONAH

W-wait! I do actually have a gift for you.

He reveals a box of GLAZED DONUTS and holds them out to her, a nervous blush creeping up his neck.

JONAH (CONT'D)

Gluten free. Consider it an apology for...startling you.

Ruby rolls her eyes but accepts the treat.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Don't forget to put them in the
freezer!

His feeble wave goodbye is cut off by the door closing in his face. The lock CLICKS in response.

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Ruby plops the donuts on the floor by the door. She pulls the wooden ghost out of the box and walks it into the living room, standing it up in the corner.

She crouches so that they're eye to eye, and lifts the white sheet, revealing the wood-carved skeleton underneath. She runs a finger down the short spine and scoffs. The sheet falls back into place.

RUBY
You don't scare me anymore.

She rises and disappears into her bedroom.

The ghost is left alone.

CUT TO:

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - MORNING

Ruby leans against the counter, munching on a GRANOLA BAR. She stares with narrowed eyes into the living room.

INSERT: The wooden ghost sits in the corner where she left it last night. It seems to stare back at her.

Ruby tosses the half eaten granola bar on the counter and trudges to the entertainment center in the

LIVING ROOM

She yanks a STORAGE BIN out from under her television set and pulls out a DSLR CAMERA.

Fiddling with the device, she sits cross-legged in front of the wooden ghost. SNAPS one photo, then another.

Ruby holds the camera close to her face so as not to miss anything as she CLICKS through the image display.

IMAGE DISPLAY: The camera flicks back and forth between the two photos. Nothing appears to be amiss.

Ruby sighs and tosses her braided hair over a shoulder. She sets the camera on the coffee table and heads back to the kitchen.

INT. APARTMENT LOBBY - LATER

The DING of an elevator.

Doors slide open. Ruby emerges with a full TRASH BAG in hand. Her eyes jump around the lobby in a hyper-observant manner.

She makes it a few steps before a JINGLING sound rings out ahead. She halts and begins to turn back when Jonah rounds the corner.

His giant Bernese mountain dog, POE, half drags Jonah in Ruby's direction, his metal nametag CLANKING against his collar.

JONAH

Hey, Ruby!

Jonah's face reddens as he wrangles with Poe's leash, forcing him to slow down. The dog huffs and strains against his harness, tail wagging as he fights to get to Ruby.

RUBY

(alarmed)

Um...

Eventually, Poe gains too much ground. Ruby drops her trash bag between them as a makeshift barrier and shuffles backward.

Poe gets distracted sniffing the bag.

Jonah grins in amusement, but schools his expression when Ruby scowls at him.

JONAH

C'mon Ruby, he likes you.

RUBY

No, he knows I'm the only one in this building who doesn't give him attention.

Jonah's brows raise.

JONAH

Well, why don't you? You seem like the type who'd enjoy a furry friend.

Ruby blinks down at Poe like the answer is obvious.

RUBY
You're wrong.

JONAH
Maybe seeing him in his Halloween costume will change your mind. Took me forever to find a waistcoat his size, but he'll be one distinguished gentleman.

Ruby watches Poe like a hawk. Poe watches her in turn, tail flopping back and forth. He cocks his head.

Jonah waits for a smart remark, but none comes.

JONAH (CONT'D)
So, have you thought more about the party tonight?

RUBY
I gotta go.

Ruby lunges to precariously snatch her trash bag. Jonah holds Poe by the collar so he doesn't pull after her.

The dog WHINES as Ruby scurries through the lobby and out a side door. Jonah pats Poe's head.

JONAH
It's okay, buddy. We'll make a man out of you yet.

INT. RUBY'S BEDROOM - LATER

Ruby enters her bedroom and closes the door behind her. In her hand is a steaming MUG OF TEA.

She sits at her desk and sets the mug on a coaster.

INSERT: Next to the coaster and mug lies a TAROT CARD depicting a figure rising from the ground, arms outstretched toward an angel in the sky, who plays a trumpet. The text at the bottom reads JUDGMENT.

Ruby places a set of HEADPHONES over her ears and opens a JOURNAL. She writes and hums softly. The faint sound of MUFFLED MUSIC comes from the headphones.

Her phone VIBRATES. Ruby picks it up and taps the MESSAGES icon.

DAD (TEXT)
*Happy Halloween! Hope you're doing
something fun tonight??*

Ruby ponders for a moment before responding, tongue rolling over her teeth.

RUBY (TEXT)
*We'll see. I got your package, very
spooky ^*~*^*

She sets her phone down and continues journaling.

Behind Ruby, a shadow looms beneath her bedroom door. Ruby is oblivious while writing.

She lifts her mug to her lips. The moment she takes a sip she flinches, fingers pressing to her mouth in shock. She licks her lips and glares down at the tea.

The mug is no longer steaming.

She hovers her hand over the rim tentatively, pokes her finger in the liquid.

As if hearing a noise, Ruby yanks her headphones off and lets them fall around her neck. Her gaze flies around the bedroom before landing on the closed door.

The shadow underneath is gone.

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER

A microwave WHIRS. Inside, a gluten free DONUT defrosts on a plate, rotating in a mesmerizing fashion.

The instant the timer BEEPS an eager hand reaches in and plucks the plate out.

Ruby sets her snack on the countertop and hovers her palm over it like she did with her tea. She leans down to get level with the counter. Before her eyes, thin trails of steam rise from the donut.

She smirks with satisfaction.

Ruby turns around to grab a PAPER TOWEL from the holder. In the background in the living room, her TV flashes on and BLARES a scene from a horror movie at full volume.

Hands clench over ears. Ruby stumbles into the

LIVING ROOM

She fumbles around for the TV remote. The wooden ghost watches from its corner.

REMOTE in hand, Ruby presses the volume down, her other hand pressed to her chest, rattled. Her nerves dissipate as she gets distracted watching the film that had appeared onscreen.

Slowly, her eyes slide to the corner, to the ghost.

RUBY
(disgruntled)
What?

Remembering her donut, she scoffs and returns to the

KITCHEN

The donut is gone. No plate, either.

Ruby stares at the clean counter, mouth slightly agape. She peers behind her, then double checks the microwave, and finally the freezer. She pulls out the DONUT BOX and the plastic container within.

One donut is missing - she had indeed taken one out.

Not comforted by this finding, Ruby runs her hands over her face. Twists her braid between two fingers. She stares at the ceiling as though trying to rationalize what happened. She paces the length of the counter.

Once again, her eyes find the wooden ghost in the corner.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WOODEN GHOST POV

Ruby stomps over and glares down at it, cheeks flushed with both determination and bewilderment.

END POV

She sits on the floor in front of the ghost, bringing knees to her chest. Raises a steady hand, extending her pointer finger in an almost jocular manner to the ghost's forehead.

Poke.

The wooden ghost wobbles, and she snatches her hand back expectantly. Nothing happens.

Ruby grumbles, this time pointing an accusing finger at it.

RUBY
You don't make sense...

A beat. Her expression softens a little.

RUBY (CONT'D)
Kind of like me.

Ruby's brooding is interrupted by a soft THUMP outside her door, followed by Jonah's muffled cursing.

Ruby grumbles, aggravated, and trudges to the door, peering through the peep hole on tip-toes. As she sinks down onto her heels, her face contorts with apprehension.

INT./EXT. HALLWAY/RUBY'S APARTMENT

Ruby cracks the door only to be met with a FLUFFY MASS leaping toward her. Poe.

Ruby yelps and keeps the door mostly closed, half of her face blinking down at the spectacle of Jonah wrestling around Poe on the floor in the midst of a flurry of black faux feathers.

Empty plastic packaging and a smooth black MASQUERADE MASK lie by his knee.

JONAH
This is really embarrassing but I promise there's an explanation.

Jonah sheepishly sweeps the fake feathers into a pile and starts shoving them back into the packaging.

Poe's giant paws clomp around the mess as he licks Jonah's face.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Poe, sit. C'mere.

He pulls the dog by the collar to one side, glancing up at Ruby, who is silent and motionless.

JONAH (CONT'D)
You have an artistic eye, so I thought I'd get your opinion on my costume, but then...well, I don't really know what happened.

Ruby inches the door a little wider.

Poe lies with his head on the ground, but perks up as he glimpses something further within Ruby's apartment.

POE POV

Between Ruby's legs, the wooden ghost's head pokes above the armrest of the couch, still in its corner.

END POV

Poe WHINES.

Jonah shushes him with a hand over his snout, tossing Ruby a charming smile.

Ruby's fingernails dig into the edge of the door.

RUBY

Put the dog away. I'll help clean up.

INT. RUBY'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

The house is dark.

A porch door is framed by sidelight windows, where the wooden ghost sits. It is shrouded in darkness, a shadowed figure silhouetted by the glass backdrop of night.

A young Ruby (8) painstakingly peeks around a corner, only allowing half of her face to emerge into the ghost's line of sight.

She stares for a beat.

The wooden ghost stares back, black eyes barely visible in the darkness, like the small figure is warping in and out of existence.

Ruby disappears behind the safety of the wall.

Silence hangs in the air, save for the faint WHISTLE OF WIND outside.

Slowly...Ruby's face inches around the corner once more. Tiny fingers come up to scratch at the wall paint.

Wide, unblinking eyes sharpen in concentration, partially fearful and partially curious, determined. She bites her lip.

RUBY
 (soft, but with
 conviction)
 Do something. I dare you.

The wooden ghost doesn't move. It never does.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. STREET - LATER

The sky is cloudy and dim with the setting sun. A breeze ripples through barren tree branches and sends shriveled leaves SKITTERING on the ground.

The city street is decked out in Halloween decor from locals and small businesses: CARVED PUMPKINS, PLASTIC ZOMBIES, SPIDER WEBS, WITCH CAULDRONS.

Jonah and Ruby walk side by side, the latter keeping a generous gap between them. She eyes the sidewalk wearily, where in front of them Poe zigzags back and forth, clad in his waistcoat with a fake MONOCLE clipped to the small breast pocket.

JONAH
 So...what do you think?

Jonah tilts his chin to the Bernese mountain dog, pride glowing in his expression.

Ruby stares at the dog and thinks for a moment.

RUBY
 Poe. Edgar Allan Poe.

JONAH
 You got it. I minored in English Lit. My parents got him for me when I was accepted into vet school, and Poe was always my favorite, so the name seemed appropriate.

Jonah clenches his jaw and clears his throat, giving Ruby a chance to speak again.

She picks at her fingernails, but a small smile graces her lips.

RUBY
 So you dress him up like this every year?

Jonah puts an affronted hand on his chest and nearly trips when Poe yanks him toward a patch of grass.

JONAH

People love it, okay? Poe's big news around town, even if you don't think so.

RUBY

N-no, I mean it's genius.

Jonah's eyes widen.

JONAH

Just wait 'til you see my part of the costume. The *finished* costume.

Ruby purses her lips and falls silent. They continue down the street back to the apartment complex. TRICK-OR-TREATERS begin to dot the city-scape.

A LITTLE BOY dressed as a BANANA shrugs past Ruby, earning an awkward flinch from her. She inches closer to Jonah.

RUBY

Are there a lot of emergencies at the vet on Halloween? With chocolate and everything.

Jonah chuckles.

JONAH

Oh yeah. Especially since candy gets dropped outside everywhere.

RUBY

Why aren't you at work then?

Ruby cringes like the words had come out wrong.

RUBY (CONT'D)

I mean, don't they need you there?

Jonah shrugs and sends Ruby a sidelong glance.

JONAH

I requested the day off, since Poe loves all the attention and partying.

RUBY

Oh...so you have friends coming for the party, then?

JONAH
(nonchalant)

No.

The trio halts in their stroll. Directly across the street from them, the apartment building sign ARENA PLACE APARTMENTS is lit by orange spotlights.

Somewhere along the way Poe acquired a STICK, and he presses it to Ruby's thigh, tail wagging. Ruby sidesteps out of the way, but Poe follows thinking she is playing. Ruby yelps as she and Poe circle Jonah, who gets tied up in the leash.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Poe, knock it off!

Ruby giggles but her laughter abruptly cuts off when she looks up at the apartment windows. Her face pales.

RUBY
(hushed)
Oh my god.

Jonah is busy unwinding himself from Poe's leash.

JONAH
See? He's not that bad. Just a little gremlin someti-

Poe drops the stick and erupts into alarmed BARKING, straining on hind legs in the same direction of Ruby's gaze.

There, in the center of Ruby's window, the wooden ghost peers down at them.

RUBY
It's in the window.

JONAH
What? Poe, *quiet*. What was that, Ru-

Ruby bolts into the street, nearly getting hit by a car that swerves and HONKS at her.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Jesus, Ruby!

Poe continues to bark and yank against his harness. Jonah wrangles him down.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Poe, enough.

The two of them watch Ruby scramble onto the opposite sidewalk and disappear inside the building.

Jonah's cheeks puff and deflate as he releases a long sigh.

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Ruby BARGES into the apartment, front door SLAMMING BACK on its hinges.

Her eyes go straight to the window where she saw the ghost from outside. It isn't there.

It is, of course, in its corner of the living room.

Ruby SLAMS the door shut.

RUBY

N-no. You were—I saw you.

She breathes heavily, hands on top of her head, and paces in front of the ghost.

RUBY (CONT'D)

I saw you.

A hesitant TAP-TAP sounds at the door, then:

JONAH (O.S.)

(voice faint on the other side)

Ruby? What happened...is everything alright?

Ruby slowly, quietly, takes a seat on her couch. The TAPPING comes again.

JONAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Ruby?

RUBY

(choked up)

It's fine. Everything's fine. I-I just forgot I need to make a call.

She doesn't move, and Jonah's voice doesn't come again. Ruby covers her face with her hands. When she puts them down, tears line her eyes. Her lips tremble in anger.

As if on cue, her phone VIBRATES softly in her back pocket. She pulls it out and opens her messages, where she reads over her last text to her dad and his new response:

RUBY (TEXT) (CONT'D)
*We'll see. I got your package, very
 spooky ^*-*^*

DAD (TEXT)
*What package? We didn't send
 anything.*

Ruby stares at the message, rereads it. Swallows. She slowly places her phone on the coffee table.

Her body is frozen as her eyes slide to the ghost in the corner, then to the closed front door over her shoulder.

RUBY
 You ruined it.

It is unclear whether she is referring to the ghost or herself.

She stands suddenly, expression blank...then resolved.

She sniffs, nods.

RUBY (CONT'D)
 Okay.

EXT. APARTMENT ALLEY/DUMPSTER - NIGHT

The alley door CREAKS open on metal hinges.

Ruby trudges outside with the wooden ghost thrown over her shoulder, marches to a big green dumpster.

She slings the ghost up and holds it out in front of her.

She bites her lip and tosses the wooden ghost into the dumpster, jumping at a sharp SCREECH as a BAT flits out from the void.

Ruby watches it soar overhead and disappear into the blanket of the night sky. She turns with confidence and takes the first few steps back toward the building. Stops.

With her back to the dumpster, Ruby's gaze becomes downcast. Almost with uncertainty. Almost with guilt.

EXT./INT. HALLWAY/JONAH'S APARTMENT - LATER

A tentative hand KNOCKS on Jonah's door.

After a brief moment, Jonah opens it with a big BOWL OF CANDY hugged to his chest. He wears a black button-down shirt patterned with dark feathers.

Jonah's face lights up with surprise.

Ruby stands in the doorway, her nose dotted with black eyeliner and drawn-in whiskers on her cheeks. She wears a cat-eared headband.

RUBY
(bashful)
Hi, Jonah.

JONAH
(shocked)
Ruby, hey. You look—

RUBY
Horrendous, I know. I didn't have a costume planned, so I improvised.

She swallows.

JONAH
No, it's cute. I like it. Poe, on the other hand...

Ruby smirks and plucks a SNICKERS from Jonah's candy bowl, fiddling with the wrapper.

RUBY
Well, he *better* like it because I'm not just any black cat. I'm *The Black Cat*.

Jonah's grin widens.

JONAH
Great minds think alike. Come on in.

Jonah leaves the door ajar and disappears inside.

Ruby follows, ripping the candy open.

INT. JONAH'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Jonah plops the candy bowl on the kitchen table where his now-feathered MASQUERADE MASK lies.

Ruby trails behind him, chewing on the candy and glancing around Jonah's home with nervous eyes.

RUBY

Um, so I'm sorry about earlier.

Across the room, Poe leaps off the couch and runs to Ruby, who freezes at the sight of him.

JONAH

Ah, ah, ah. Poe, sit.

(to Ruby)

Don't worry about it, really.

The mountain dog obeys, though his butt wiggles with the sweep of his tail. He is ecstatic at Ruby's arrival.

Jonah sighs.

JONAH (CONT'D)

Thank god. I promise you, he does listen most of the time.

Ruby's gaze shifts from Jonah to Poe. She shuffles a step closer to the dog and leans down. Poe WHINES, hardly able to contain his excitement.

She pats him on the head. Once. Twice.

RUBY

Good boy.

Satisfied, Ruby steps back and wrings her hands out. Jonah crouches down and ruffles Poe's fluffy head, adjusting his costume.

When he stands back up, he snatches the mask and holds it over his face.

JONAH

Okay, here it is.

He flaunts his other arm out in a grand gesture.

Ruby takes in the ensemble: feather-patterned dress shirt, mask gilded with gems, sequins, and black feathers. The silver-tipped beak is what gives it away.

Ruby hums.

RUBY

Oh, I get it! A raven.

Jonah lowers the mask, eyes glowing.

JONAH

Not just any raven. *The Raven*.

Ruby laughs, flattered.

RUBY

You'll have to start teaching Poe how to recite. "Once upon a midnight dreary..."

Jonah gives Ruby a once-over as if analyzing her sudden change in character.

Under his gaze, Ruby's demeanor shifts again.

RUBY (CONT'D)

So...are we going to the party or what?

She doesn't look thrilled about the suggestion. She continues to wring her hands, eyes glued to the ground.

Poe nudges her leg with his snout, but she doesn't budge.

Jonah crosses his arms over his chest, thinking. He turns the mask over in his hands for a moment before setting it gently back on the table.

JONAH

How would you feel about staying here and watching a movie? Just the three of us.

Ruby perks up.

RUBY

Oh, er-sure. Are you sure? You were so excited for the party.

Jonah nods to himself knowingly, like Ruby's assumption is amusing.

JONAH

I was. But I like this idea better.

Ruby's face scrunches in confusion. Jonah leads her into the living room to the couch. He sits and powers the TV on with the REMOTE, pats the cushion next to him.

Ruby sits, leaving a comfortable gap between them once again. Poe jumps up and clumsily scrambles over Ruby, giving her a face full of fur. He settles between them, massive paws draped over Jonah's knees and tail thumping against Ruby's.

Jonah hisses with embarrassment.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Sorry, he's not used to sharing his
couch.

Ruby laughs again but runs her fingers through Poe's fur
while Jonah clicks through movie options.

Silence hangs in the space between them.

JONAH (CONT'D)
"There is no exquisite beauty
without some strangeness in the
proportion."

RUBY
Huh?

JONAH
It's my favorite line by Poe. From
a piece called *Ligeia*.

RUBY
Oh.

Ruby blinks and distracts herself by looking at the TV, but
she ponders the words. A bashful smile curls at her lips.

RUBY (CONT'D)
I like that a lot...But I'm more of
a *Tell-Tale Heart* kind of girl.

Jonah chuckles.

JONAH
Ah, that's right. You're a horror
enthusiast. Is that why there's
always screaming coming from your
place?

Ruby playfully punches him in the shoulder, rolling her eyes
before realizing her brazen behavior and tucking her arms
over her stomach.

JONAH (CONT'D)
Should we watch a scary movie,
then? Any good recommendations?

Ruby mulls it over.

RUBY
No. Let's watch something else. I'm
tired of horror.

JONAH
(light-hearted)
Yes ma'am.

The two of them sit in the dim lit room, the glow of the TV eclipsing their forms on the couch.

INT. RUBY'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Nothing is amiss in Ruby's apartment. Her various posters still line the walls. Her CAMERA sits on the coffee table where she left it.

Her window is open, though, and the sound of eager children cheering "Trick-r-Treat!" echoes into the night.

And, in the corner, stands the wooden ghost. A plate with a donut rests at its feet, steam rising from its glazed surface.

THE END