

The Telephone Booth
By Susanne Kowalska '21
Short Story, Honorable Mention

Only the single, wavering light of a broken lamppost illuminated the long-abandoned street, strewn with empty bottles and imprints of what once was - faded signs in cracked windows of buildings stooped over from years of neglect. Even the stars were absent in the black expanse of sky, as if, unthinkably, they were privy to the inner darkness of man; knew the rushed words spilling out into Finching Road's lone telephone booth. Inside the telephone booth, enveloped in shadow, sharp breaths fogged the icy windows. In spite of the chill, Peter Hill sat on the ground, shaking either from fear or the cold, or maybe both, as he clawed nervously on the tie that suddenly felt like the noose of a damned man, panicked in his last moments. He was well-dressed, his normally pale complexion flushed red against the fine grey of his suit. The phone, which he had knocked down from the receiver, lay deserted at his feet.

The day had started like any other, with the hours crawling by at a snail's pace. The hands of the watch Peter always wore almost seemed frozen, but slowly the minute hand would change its position, signifying one minute closer to the end of the day. He couldn't wait. The end of the day meant he was free to do as he pleased, unburdened by expectations and commitments. But now, he was stuck in the office, - trapped for another three hours - time he typically spent alone. It's not that he didn't enjoy the company of his coworkers, but he needed the time to breathe. He had always been that way. He remembered coming home as a child and locking himself in his room, letting his thoughts spill out into the empty space- though he was by no means a lonely child. When there were kids playing outside, Peter managed to find them, confusing his mother, who swore there were no children on his street. But by the end of the day, he had departed from his usual schedule, and had made his way twelve blocks from the office, desperate for something he couldn't pinpoint. He just knew he needed to save someone. A woman, who he couldn't remember, couldn't even picture. In the telephone booth, he picked up the discarded phone and punched in three numbers, angrily shoving the receiver to his mouth. Without even hearing it dial, he began to speak.

"Please. There's something wrong."

At 2 pm, Peter had seen her for the first time. She had been standing by the water jug, nervously twirling her hair around her finger as his boss introduced her around the office. There was something enchanting about the way she moved, drawing his eyes to her thin frame. Her hair fell onto her back in soft waves, framing her delicate face like a halo. She had turned to him, suddenly, and spotting his gaze,

had given a light smile. He had smiled back, ignoring the sudden fear shooting through his heart, fierce and unbending, leaving his blood simmering and hairs on end. Something bad was going to happen to her. He could feel it. He didn't know when or where, but she wasn't safe. Heart pounding in his chest, he had turned back to his desk, stunned. The buzz of the office began to fade away, leaving only a faint ringing in his ears.

"I can't remember what happened. But there's a woman, someone's going to hurt her - a man."

Throughout the day, all he could think of was the feeling he had felt looking at her, a confidence that she was already lost, and that there was nothing he could do. So at the end of the day, as she gathered her coat to leave, he did the same, and as she left the building, he slipped into the shadows behind her, watching her with the eyes of a hawk. He made sure to maintain his distance, giving her no reason to suspect anything was wrong.

"I- I think she was being followed."

He had watched her unlock the door of her apartment, expecting a feeling of relief to wash over him, but instead, all he felt was the same feeling of grief, all-encompassing and persistent, coursing through his body and dictating his movements. So he settled down on a nearby bench, committed to protecting her. From who, he still didn't know, but he knew if he left the bench she wouldn't live to see the morning. He sat and waited through the evening, nervously biting his nails down, expecting something, anything, to happen. The dull city noises only served to heighten his anxiety, with everything from the slam of a door to the buzz of the lampposts putting him on alert. She moved inside her apartment, the lights dancing of her face in strange ways. His eyes darted between her and the door, reluctant to take his eyes off her even for just a moment.

"She was okay. Nothing was happening." He let out a choked sob, startled at the sudden ferocity of his own emotions. For the first time he noticed the blood on his hands, the wet stains on his suit.

"I- I had to - she pulled down the blinds, I had to see her."

He had hesitated, at first, halfway off the bench, before standing and walking toward the door. He was suddenly calm, forcing the downstairs lock open with ease, and stepping into the threshold of the complex. He felt as though he was encroaching on sacred land, but continued on, undaunted by the stairs ahead of him. His eyes floated lazily over the apartment numbers as he walked. Hers was at the end of the hallway, facing the street, and that was all he was focused on.

"Someone, no, oh god, *I* knocked on the door."

She had opened the door, bleary-eyed and dressed for bed, completely oblivious to her fate. He smiled first this time, the deed over in less than a second.

Frantically, Peter grabbed for his pocket knife, scrambling to confirm what he already knew. Seeing the blood-soaked weapon, he began to wheeze, head spinning at

what he had done. The phone clattered to the ground, long ago disconnected, and heavy breathing filled the telephone booth, the only sign of life still remaining on Finching Road.