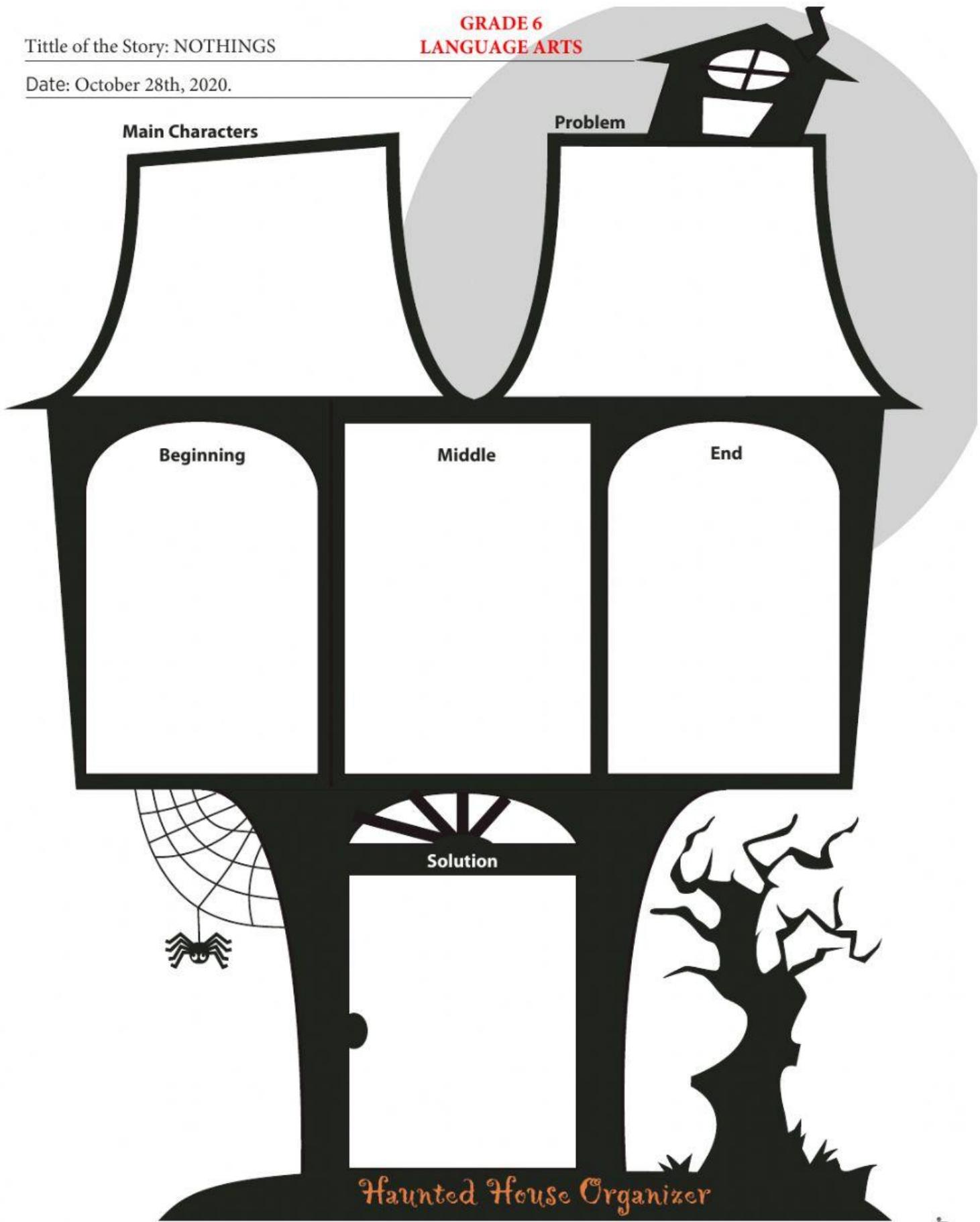


Title of the Story: NOTHINGS

Date: October 28th, 2020.



## GRADE 6

AGES 13-17 THIRD PLACE:

**Nothings**, by *Mounira Aboellail, age 16*

There is something in the dark.

It happens when you get sick. It could happen to anyone. Right? It's nothing. Figments, figures, failures of the mind to conjure reality. It's supposed to be nothing. But there's something in the dark.

Something unknown perches on my windowsill and watches through the blinds, eyes fixing only on me, unmoving. I always try to ignore it, always try to ignore the stares from outside the bedroom, from outside the living room, from through the bathroom door.

There is something in the dark. I can feel it slide through spindly black shadows, a sickening surge of air slipping against my legs, the sensation of something slithering in the silence. There is something in the dark, something that makes my temples pulse in my head, something that sends my clenched up heart palpitating wildly. I lie in bed and sweat, turning this way and that as I am assailed by the soft fall of something against the carpet all around me. There is something in the dark. I can feel it lurking low, slinking past, circling me.

There is something in the dark. When I wander out of bed in the quiet hours of a soundless night, I can feel it standing behind me in the kitchen. There is something in the dark. At three in the heavy morning, it pauses behind my turned back. It waits somewhere beyond my feet, the glint of glazed eyes gleaming just past my thin socks on the too-cold tile floor. There is something in the dark. But it's nothing. It's always nothing. It has never touched me, never been more than that—something in the dark.

There is something in the dark. I can feel it by the door, scratching quietly at the frame, can hear the breathing, soft and measured, the signature of something poised to ravage. There is something in the dark, and sometimes I catch a glimpse of its outline: grisly, morbid, a harbinger of something foul, a shadow pressed against the light just before it flickers out. And then there's nothing.

There is something in the dark. I know it's nothing. But when I hear the soft, inevitable progression of its measured footsteps padding down the hallway, drawing nearer, unaccompanied by the sound of breathing, I run, feet tearing down the carpeted hallway, seeking refuge in my bed.

There is something in the dark. It's nothing. It's nothing. I tell myself, remind myself, constantly and forcefully and without fail. But my own desperation rises in a tide, a swell, choking off my air, smothering me beneath tarlike black tendrils, climbing me and pulling me down, down, down, there with the thing in the dark. There is something in the dark. The air is filled with screaming and shrieking, filled with the thrashing of legs in defense against something that will

never touch me, but will always watch. There is something in the dark. It's the sound of a heart thump-thump-thumping in my pillow, beating angrily against my ears, it's the tapping on my window, the whispers of my name just beyond the glass. There is something in the dark. It calls me softly, an inhuman voice, broken and creaking, something impelling me to come closer, closer, closer still.

There is something in the dark. It's nothing. It's supposed to be nothing. There is something in the dark, something inside me. Something invites itself in like a creeping cold; I can feel it squirming between my ribs, can feel it pounding angrily in my head, coiled around my throat. There is something in the dark. But my thoughts are a forcible reminder, drumming in my skull, a high pitched whirring in my head: it's nothing. It could happen to anyone.

I found something in the dark. I found something in the distant, unkempt reaches of my sickly and suffering mind, something that will not stay hidden, will not stay quiet. I found something I cannot put back, cannot shake off. I try to remember that it's nothing. I try to swallow it down, force it down my throat, the idea: I found nothing.

There is something in the dark, something among the gnarled and bloodied hands that reach forward from the pools of inky murk around me, grabbing at my chest. There is something in the dark, its grip like iron clenching around my foot. Touching me. It was supposed to be nothing, a nothing that would always watch—only watch—and never touch. It was in my head, not on my skin. It was the sickness, the mind. There was supposed to be nothing in the dark.

But there is. There is something in the dark.

There is something gripping my ankle. There is something in the dark, something crawling up my legs, something clawing its way up my body. There is something in the dark, something cold and hard pinning me to the bed, something I can't strain against. There is something in the dark, something cutting off my air, something leaving me paralyzed and breathless and wriggling, wide eyed and caught. There is something in the dark, a twisted face, crunched and malformed, sunken in and split, looking down at me. There is something in the dark, a hair's breadth from my nose. It's not nothing.

It could happen to anyone.