

Where Yellow Ends

by

Ellen Vickerman

Runner up:

*Body in the Library category
Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2016*

Winner:

*Young Writer's Awards
Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2016*

Where Yellow Ends

You probably don't deserve to die like this.

I'm not going to stand here in front of you, axe in hand, and try to pretend it isn't an awfully nasty way to go. From the look on your face, I can tell you know it too. Your eyes are so wide your pupils could be .22 bullet holes, and I can see your fight-or-flight reflexes begin to whirl behind your irises, long-buried instincts juddering into motion.

I watch it finally starting to click for you, as the shock begins to wear off. Now is the sweet spot: the terrible, vulnerable moment when you've worked out you really might die today, but haven't yet come up with any way to duck the noose.

I take a deep breath, and savour the components of this diorama of death:

- Your living room. Mostly plain, a couch, an outdated television hooked up to a gaming console, a framed photograph of a collection of people I can only assume are your family. The fluorescent lighting is unflattering for us both, but I do like the soft blue glow of the fish tank in the corner.
- You, with your back to the plaster wall, a towel around your waist and rivulets of water carving canals down your back like tears, your skin crying for your soul.

- Me, two feet in front of you, right up in your space. The wood of the axe's handle is smooth in my hand, the splinters worn away until it almost feels like bone, the whorls of my fingertips pressed white against the grain. The steel head teases gravity as I hold it aloft, and I feel the power in its weight, heavy with the pain it hasn't yet caused.

Then I move.

The axe comes down, but I've misjudged the window. You've recovered some semblance of cognition, enough to duck so the blow misses your skull, and instead catches on your shoulder. I hear your capillaries scream, scrabbling to hold on to their precious blood which now evades them, flowing recklessly towards the light. There is a dull crack that suggests I've struck some bone, and the sound resonates deliciously around the apartment for a moment.

I feel yellow.

To clarify: I realised a long time ago that I can't break down mental sensations into neat little emotions like most people, like you probably can. Instead, I found it efficient to designate my most common responses to stimulus with colours.

Yellow = the way it is when I'm killing someone. My senses are heightened and everything is sharper, brighter, in higher definition. I'm awake and burningly *alive* and the universe seems to reorient to centre on me like the focus of the zoom of a camera. As if this second will exist forever and nothing will ever change, and in a thousand years it will still be a room with you and me and death in the air.

It takes a moment to tug the axe out from where it is snuggled into your joint, firmly anchored in the muscle, but eventually I managed it. You've dropped to your knees at this point, which definitely makes it all easier.

Sometimes, people take this brief respite to bubble out a raspy *why?* That can mean a lot of things, but usually it boils down to one of these three:

- 1) Why me?
- 2) Why now?
- 3) Why like this?

We both know you don't recognise me; it's written all over your face. I'm not here for *you*, precisely; it's just that this happens to be your building and your apartment and your unlucky day. The truth is, I'm mostly ambivalent about whether people are dead or alive. I do, however, enjoy ushering folks from one state to another, and thus far, that's a trip that can only really go one way.

I heft the axe up in my hands again, and take another swing at your head. Your body doesn't flinch away this time – it's given up on you. It's survival of the fittest but you've been weighed at life's scales and found wanting. You're still locked away in there, though, I can tell. I've always been good at reading emotions in other people, but fear is the one that jumps out at me like the headline on a newspaper. It's carved all over the furrows in your face, right to the last second, when gravity is my accomplice, yanking the axe head down, just too much to the right of the scalp line to be a perfect mark.

I remember learning about conductors at school, how electricity can flow along a copper wire or iron rod. I can't help but wonder, now, if souls could be conducted the same way, buzzing through the blade and up the handle of the axe and into me, because I swear I feel the exact heartbeat in which you die reverberating through me, the final chord in a song. I stand there for a few seconds (minutes, maybe?) and languish in the saccharine embrace of victory. I review everything I know about you, because being sure that I'm the first person to talk about you in past tense makes me purple.

Purple = almost like happiness, but less bubbly than I imagine that to be. It is the sharp, pointed rush of reward following a great accomplishment, the confirmation of success and validation of ambition. It marinates my brain in satisfaction.

Your name was Eddie Pepper. You were twenty-eight, which means you were probably in the same graduating class as my older brother. You worked in sales at a small-time tech company. You were engaged to a girl named Melanie. You arrived home from work at 6.00 pm every weekday night. Your predictability got you killed.

Looking at your body, it seems unlikely that I'll get my axe back – it's pretty deeply entrenched in your cranium. As curious as I am to see whether brains are really as pink in real life as they look in cartoons, I decide not to bother trying and instead pull out an antiseptic wipe to clean the handle. I don't like to wear gloves when I kill, even though it's smarter. It separates us, and the dissonance makes me uncomfortable; I've always believed

murder should be a deeply personal affair. Nevertheless, I slide my hands into a pair now for when I'm moving your body, because there's really no other way to entirely eliminate the risk of prints from such a hands-on endeavour. The police have such fancy DNA stuff these days, and science isn't as easily an evaded opponent as justice.

I slide my latex hands under your armpits and tug, the two of us staggering gracelessly together so I can lean you against the wall. People are heavier when they're dead, and that's something that's always messed with my head a little – shouldn't something become lighter when you empty it? That gets me wondering about ghosts.

Are you still here, Eddie? Disoriented and weightless, a corporeal corpse on the floor? Or a faint and whirring shadow, each of your cells vibrating like an agitated bee as you hover at my shoulder while I move what used to belong to you?

Here's the million dollar question, though, Ed – are you angry with me? By most accounts, you ought to be. You'll never marry Melanie; you'll never find out who won tonight's game; you'll never visit your mother this weekend. But hear me out. I spent a few days casing your world like a bank foyer, and let me tell you something, Eddie.

You were painfully unremarkable. All the numbers of your tiny universe add up to say you were dealt an ordinary life and would've died an equally average death.

I guess, in a way, you owe me, right? I've made you extraordinary. Your face will be on flyers and news reports and

tacked on boards at vigils and digitally displayed at police press conferences. By the end of the week, half the city will have memorised your name. So are we even, do you reckon, little ghost? Are you so mad anymore?

Once you're secure against the wall (the water and blood on your back already soaking mercilessly into the greying paper), I make sure the towel is covering you properly, before I sit down beside you. You weren't exactly a big guy, Eddie, but my arms are still tired from lifting you. I rest back against the plaster, and close my eyes, feeling our shared moment at the epicentre of a fresh tragedy pulsate around me. It's just you and I, my axe in your head and your blood against the wall, and the dull rush of oxygen in and out of one set of lungs.

It's peaceful.

I wish the rest of the population could be as calm and still as the dead. But no such luck. You're the best company I've had in a while, certainly better than you were ten minutes ago, when it wasn't just my breathing in this room.

I allow myself a minute or two, before I stand back up. A few quick steps down a narrow hallway and I'm in your bedroom, palming pairs of jeans you've left scattered sporadically on your floor before I find what I'm looking for. Your wallet.

I fish out your drivers licence. Ordinarily, I would tell you it's kind of an unflattering photo, but my mother always taught me not to speak ill of the dead. Instead, I just pocket it, my souvenir, my memento. You've not the first person I've killed, and you won't be the last, but Eddie, darling, I'd hate to forget you.

Before I leave, I snap a picture of your body on my old camera. It's hard to keep track sometimes, and I don't like to stage the same crime scene twice. Better the police think they're dealing with individual killers than a serial; an MO is just asking for the boys-in-blue variety of pestilence. As it stands, though, they're going to be poking around your whole life, soon, and everyone in it. I hope for their sakes that all the skeletons in your closet have watertight alibis. They're going to need them.

I know the best part of this is over, but that doesn't stop me from burning in anticipation for the aftershocks. Will your fiancée stumble upon you? Is Melanie the kind to scream, or freeze, or break down and sob? Or will nobody come looking, and in the end it's Mrs Flanders from 5B complaining about the vague and sickly smell that leads them to your body? That's why I'm leaving you out in the open, clearly visible from the doorway. Decomposition is frankly disgusting, and I'd like to do you a solid and spare you that.

Finally, I check my reflection in your blank television. A little of your blood clings happily to my cheek, but I rub it off with the same wipe I used for the axe handle. Other than that, I'm fine.

Here's probably the most unsettling thing about me: I don't look like a killer. At 5'4", I'm hardly intimidating in stature. The greyscale image the screen throws back at me makes my cheekbones stand out sharply, and I appear younger, more innocent, like someone has bleached my veins of all my sins. The only thing I've never been quite able to chameleon are my eyes. They're bright and green, and in terms of aesthetics,

they're effective. But they've always been just a touch too vacant, slightly *off*.

You had pretty eyes, Eddie. Did you know that?

They were so blue. They were open and brimming and I'm suddenly struck by the overpowering desire to take your eyes and swap them for my own traitorously empty ones.

I'd kill for eyes like yours, I think, as I turn to leave.

Here's something that's always frustrated me, Ed. You can never really control people, not properly, not all the time. Inevitably, there's a wild, volatile variable lurking inside them that ruins even the best laid plans. You can't wipe away thoughts and memories like you can fingerprints. Real life is messy and indecent and full of puppets without proper strings.

Seeing as you're dead and all, I figure you haven't kept up all that well with your case. Let me catch you up and explain exactly how a frankly unbecoming police sketch of me ended up all over Channel 9.

It turns out someone saw me, three days ago, when I was at your building.

Normally, I wouldn't care, you know? I don't have any personal connection to you, so I don't seem too relevant, and I've worked hard at being so ordinary I'm difficult to recall.

But this witness, this guy carrying grocery bags that I passed in the stairwell, I'm branded onto the back of his hippocampus, because it transpires he brushed by me on another day, in another lobby, in another building.

The day his wife died.

Six months ago, I hadn't seemed important enough to mention to the police – what's one unfamiliar twenty-something when you're trying to avoid a conviction for uxoricide? He was only in your building visiting his grandmother, but when he heard about you, I guess it threw him for a trip back down memory lane to revisit traumas past. You'd be surprised what can stick in people's heads other than axes, and I guess my face is one of them.

This guy, I can imagine him thinking: *What are the odds of seeing you twice? Two murders, and both times I passed you in the building. What are the chances of that?*

Looks like the boys at the precinct did the maths, because I'm officially a person of interest. Frankly, it's a little offensive – I'm not even a suspect. I can picture the detectives listening to his description of me, their eyebrows raised. I can taste them writing me off: too short, too young. She's *just a girl*.

You know better than them, don't you, Eddie? I taught you to never underestimate a princess with a blade instead of empathy.

It's been a week and they've identified me from the sketch artist's drawing.

I use the term 'identified' quite loosely. They're calling me Emily Cross, a version of myself I'd almost forgotten about, but apparently the most recent one to get a drivers licence. The last time I used that name, I was twenty-one. I wore Emily on my face like lipstick when I killed the Davis twins, and Mrs Hurst

from the kindergarten. Emily learned the hard way that using a gun brings the Crown Victorias swarming like ants to crumbs. I liked myself as her. Eventually, though, I'd needed to get out of Connecticut, and Emily had needed to stay. I'm much better at ending lives that aren't my own, so it was tough to get rid of her, but I managed to become Jamie. Then Penelope. The list goes on. I could fill a yearbook with the people I've been.

Did I mention they've changed lead detectives on your case, Eddie, sweetheart? They got rid of Wesson. This new one, she's got these bright, burning eyes, and she *sparks*. It's not so much worrying as it is exhilarating. I've done some research on her. Allison Evett, twenty-six, hotshot new primary for your local precinct. Top of her class in the Academy.

I wonder if she'll be the one to catch me. It's exciting, isn't it? Most people don't realise it, but it's just as fun to be the mouse as it is the cat. It helps when you're a mouse like me, with big teeth and rapid thoughts and a long-standing friendship with the proverbial ferryman.

I'm certain the only reason I'm still a POI is because of her. If it was still Wesson, I'd be at the bottom of a stack of paper by now, a meaningless footnote in a juggernaut of justice with no time for the truth. But Allison Evett, she's kept me close. I'm sure I'm tacked to that murder board of hers, a face on her Rubik's Cube as she tries to lock me in place. Violent murder is as much a boys club as the police force can be, so I'd like to think we get each other, her and me. And since your case will be declared cold in a week or two, I can't resist leaving her a present

before I head for Chicago to put down some roots in the dirt with the dead.

At 2.00 am, I leave a body in the library, for Allison.

He was ten. It wasn't fun. I don't think I'll go after kids again. They aren't the same. Instead of yellow, instead of purple, I got red.

Red = too aware of my body. I can feel the blood in my veins and the silt in my stomach, and the thoughts in my head chirp loudly, like crickets, but when I try to plug my ears, it just makes them echo louder. I could count the teeth in my mouth, and my knuckles are too harsh under my skin.

Still, it'd be a shame to waste a good idea, and once I got started, it was too late to stop. You know how I said you owed me a favour, Ed? Well, I'd like to cash it in now. Look after him, would you? His name was Charlie Ren, he had two sisters, and he loved basketball. Maybe you can talk to him about the playoffs, or, well, I don't know – I've never really clicked with kids. They're like dogs, kind of, the way they can sense if you're rotten under your ribcage; that's why I had to leave that kindergarten. Adults like to ignore things, to pretend they don't notice when you're just colours and impulses, but children can see it swirling around you, inside you, and they always step away, afraid it's contagious.

Anyway, you've only got the part of Charlie I couldn't see. The rest of him is here with me, loose and weighted as I carefully arrange him in the junior section. I place him gently in a

beanbag, his head lolling awkwardly despite all my attempts to make him presentable. I slide a worn copy of *Peter Pan* into his quickly cooling fingers. I don't know if he ever read it, but it's a great book, and I want him to have it. He and Peter have so much in common: red hair, innocence, an inability to grow up.

To be fair, though, that last one's on me.

I delicately loop a red ribbon around his neck (snapped), securing the white gift tag with a neat bow. I tried to find a generic one, but the store only had *Merry Christmas* and *Happy Birthday*, and seeing as it's not even December yet, I went with the latter.

I flip the tag so it's facing upwards, the message unmissable, before slinking back out of the darkened library and onto the street.

Dear Detective Evett, it reads. I couldn't find a sitter.

I've drawn a little picture of your axe underneath it, along with the brand and number of the model. The trick, Eddie, is to include details they've never released to the public, so they know you're for real.

I hate when people don't take me seriously.

The next time I see her on TV, Allison has invested in some concealer. I can still make out the inky crescents under her eyes, though. She's thinner. It's no wonder, really – even I'm prepared to admit that the whole Charlie thing was pretty tasteless. But the red feeling has left, and I can only hope she moves on from his death as quickly as I did. But, I guess, despite our similarities, that's where she and I differ so greatly. She'll never

get over your unsolved death, Eddie, but I had to take your licence to even remember your name.

Here's something I didn't expect: Emily helped to solve your murder.

Not literally, of course. She's just a name and a dress I put on. She doesn't exist. But she still left an imprint, and the negative space around where she had once lived is what gives them the clue they've been so thirsty for.

Emily worked at a kindergarten. In that skin we shared, the one we lacquered with cute skirts and smudges of finger paint, that was when I met Mrs Hurst, and perhaps more significantly, when Mrs Hurst met me. It's not every day you shake hands with someone who'll kill you.

It's been years since Emily set foot in that school, but Allison knew to look for remnants, not ghosts. Eddie, you didn't know me back then, but the janitor of that place, Harvey, he used to be real sweet on me. I liked him, too. Not the way he wanted, but I did see something kindred in him. We both liked cleaning messes, we both felt most at home in empty buildings where the light was thin and the halls were silent.

And Allison, with her clever words and delicate fingers, she coaxed the embers of half-decade-old memories back to life, and let it flicker in Harvey until he remembered that Miss Emily Cross used to read her class *Peter Pan*, that she loved JM Barrie and she used to joke about all the lost boys she knew.

I'm pretty sure Harvey at the time thought I had an immature brother or something, but really I was talking about the twins I'd set in concrete in Jersey, my only set of bodies to never be found.

Anyway, this little fact is enough to bump me from a person of interest all the way up to prime suspect. It's funny how the details will get you.

I tried writing you a letter today, Eddie. I had a therapist once who encouraged me to write things down when they were bothering me. I tried it for a while, until I realised that it didn't help dissolve my urges, and only succeeded in producing several very incriminating documents. So, obviously, I burned them and then killed my therapist (fake suicide – long story – don't ask).

But I thought I'd give it a shot, seeing as this whole thing with you and Charlie and Allison has been getting under my skin pretty badly of late. After writing *Dear Eddie* and scribbling it out a few times, I realised there was no point doing this, because I had no idea what to tell you.

The truth is, I don't know what to feel, and I don't like that at all. I'm caught between colours. On one hand, Allison makes me *feel*. Turning on the news and seeing her face, with the little by-line of *Detective Evett*, is green.

Green = little thrills rolling in my tendons. The burning adrenaline of running across a bridge as it collapses behind you, of trying to weave a fuse faster than the flame can eat it. The race, the chase, blazing into the future as if it might go on forever.

She is the first thing other than death to make me feel alive, and it puzzles me, but I like it too. She's focused on me and nothing but me, the volatility that lurks beneath my skin, and I can't get enough of it. It makes me wonder about getting caught, about having the whole world shudder, make society curl into a foetal position when I show them my collection of drivers licences, of photographs. My little black book of names now on gravestones.

But on the other hand (the hand that wiped fingerprints off that axe, the hand that wrote the note on Charlie), the embrace of Johnny Law is too tight for my taste, and I'm not entirely sure I could wriggle out of it. Not that minimum security isn't basically a convenience store for victims (so many users, with bones like birds, weak and porous from addiction, and don't even get me started on white-collar criminals), but what if they throw me in solitary?

I'm afraid to never feel yellow again.

As the lead suspect, my face is plastered everywhere. People are more interested now there's a kid involved, too. You alone couldn't make us superstars, Ed. Honestly, seeing my own face reflected on pages and screens throws me right back to when I was sixteen, and the *me* I was born as (Wendy Parker) went missing. Really, I'd just skipped town, exhausted by choking on the unbearable greyness of nowhere, Ohio, but I'd taken the care to smear some blood, mess up my room, and leave almost everything behind. Being a runaway was alright, I guess, but

I thought Wendy Parker deserved an extraordinary fate, and besides, living as carefully sculpted versions of yourself is much easier when the original is buried.

See, Eddie? I'm a ghost of sorts, too.

Anyway, all the press coverage has left me swimming in nostalgia, but it's quite inconvenient, too. There's no way to book a plane ticket like this.

I've been moving around for years, though, and I'm more than accustomed to using other methods. I hitchhike, mostly, to avoid detection, until I'm out of New York. I'm a little fuzzy on jurisdiction, so I'm not sure if crossing state lines means Allison's still on my case. I hope she is.

The city watches carefully to see if I'm found, but as I elude the reaching fingers of the police, my fifteen minutes of fame becomes half an hour. It's not enough, though. I don't think most of them really believe it was me – they're still waiting for the violent boyfriend to come to light, or some stalker drawing inspiration from the literary taste and life of Emily Cross.

I get bored after about twenty minutes in Vermont, and leave another body (Mandy King, thirty-two, interior designer, too trusting of strangers) for Allison because I kinda feel like I left part of me back in Brooklyn, and I'm almost sure that part is somehow tied to her. I'm also worried the trail will go cold and the city will forget about me, which makes my blood heat up. At least in that dusty tractor town in Ohio they still whisper about the girl who disappeared, how they found her bloody clothes in a ditch by the interstate. They still tell stories

at summer camp, coating their marshmallows with theories about what happened to little Wendy Parker all those years ago. I want to be as hard to let go of now as I was at sixteen. I want the brownstones and their people to think of me.

Somewhere along the way, the Feds get involved when they start to suspect this might be bigger than even Allison realised. They still let her tag along as their pet detective, but they don't take her seriously. There is no place for her bright, determined eyes and city-issued badge among their shiny SUVs and buzzing phones.

If anyone gets me in the end, I don't want it to be them. I want Allison. She's the first person I haven't felt ambivalent about in my whole life. It's not that I care about her, exactly, it's just that I prefer she be okay than not. I'm going to call that feeling blue, just so I know what I'm dealing with on the off chance I should ever encounter it again. It's probably an unnecessary precaution, though.

Detective Evett is one of a kind.

I finally reached for a star too hot, Eddie. I went after this young guy, scrawny, probably nineteen or twenty. With his baggy hoodie and hung head, I thought he was a sure thing.

When I was younger, I used to wish I could see through things. Mostly, it was because I wanted to see blood move around the body, and muscles stretch and compress together. I'd taken apart enough animals to realise things behave differently

alive than dead, but to this day I've never found a way to have the best of both worlds. Anyway, I could've used x-ray vision right then, so I could have stayed the hell away from that kid and the knife hidden in his front pocket. When I grabbed him by the truck stop, he snapped his head back into my nose and shoved the blade into me, right into my side. He took off before I could give it back, so I guess I have a knife now. It hurts like a bitch, but I'm not mad at him. I quite like pain. I prefer it in other people, but I'll settle for myself. I found a motel, after a while, and I suppose me and this lumpy mattress will be best friends until the bleeding slows. Don't worry, though, Eddie, you're still my best friend, too.

It's dark when the door is smashed down and torches bore into my eyes. I can smell vanilla conditioner and hear Miranda rights tumbling into my aching head. The bed is covered in red – I'm bleeding out slowly, gracelessly. It takes a moment for everything to click into place – it's Allison and a hive of Feds, and she's smiling as her cuffs snick over my wrists, but it's not a happy smile. I realise she's purple. Catching me makes her feel the same that I did after killing you.

Who would've thought it would wind up this way, back when it started in the glow of your fish tank?

That it would be just my detective and me, the flash of her badge and the tang of your ghost. That it would be at 3.28 am in Room 214 of the Sunnyside Motel, that yellow ends.

Alright, Eddie. I'll let you go, now.

Ellen Vickerman

17 year-old Ellen Vickerman currently attends Brisbane State High School, and intends to study Creative & Professional Writing at QUT next year. Fascinated by psychology and criminology, her interest in crime writing has been fostered by previous Scarlet Stiletto competitions and the Roly Sussex award. She is an aspiring novelist, screenwriter, and producer, who hopes to one day write psychological thrillers and political dramas for cable television. Last year Ellen won the Clan Destine Press Award for Cross Genre.