

SHADOWS AND LIGHT – A STORY COLLECTION

A THESIS IN

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by
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ABSTRACT

We lie and we are lied to. Why then does it shock us when those around us are never what they seem, what they expose for judgment, rather than the whole of what they are. We each seek to assure those around us that we are in fact something that they can understand, connect with, and ultimately, put into a box of labels. But in reality most of us strain against such a narrow understanding of ourselves and of the world. Society and any human being in it can't be so easily defined.

The individuals that live within these pages are as flawed as any human, yet they have fascinated me with their ways of perceiving the world around them, of fitting into it, or more often, living, as we all really do, outside the normal and always looking in.

Remember dear reader, that what you find here is not always pretty, yet in each experience there is an irresistible beauty in the layered understandings of the world around us, of a chance to see through someone else's lens. It is this value that I put before you and I leave you to make of it as you will.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Shadows and Light – A Story Collection,” presented by Acacia A. Gentry, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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MOLLY AND THE OLD MAN

Molly collided with the front door and banged her hip against the heavy metal frame. She raced down the steps. Blood rushed in her ears and her vision blurred at the edges like she moved through a dream. But it didn't feel like a dream. More the opposite, everything highlighted and hazy at the edges like someone tore the stuffing from a pillow and held it over her ears until she could only see her feet, pounding out on the pavement.

She moved quicker down the cement steps. One sock on. Her braid matted and her dress shabby for the early winter air, but she ran like she didn't feel the cold. She ran like she could run forever. Graceful, like prey in search of safer ground. When she couldn't run anymore, somehow she would fall forward and fly. She would fly away.

At least, that's how it happened in the dream. Instead, she caught her toe and stumbled, knocked her head on the pavement and skinned both knees. It looked like someone had rolled the skin back, bunching it at the top to expose the wet-red fabric beneath.

But it didn't stop her. She pulled herself up and stumbled at first. But she kept going as the blood ran down her leg and onto her sock. She'd made it several blocks before she finally slowed down, first to a jog, then a walk, then a plodding step. Coming to a large building, she stopped running as the burst of energy wore out, her legs tingling and fingertips reaching forward like she could pull herself further. Then, all at once, the burst was gone, and she fell, in a heap, boneless, whimpering, to the sidewalk.

The salty sweetness of a tear ran along her lip before she realized she was crying. She let her head hit the pavement with a solid thud and for a moment she saw lines and spots. She did it again, harder.

“What the hell is wrong with you girl?” a man's graveled voice asked.

Molly brought a hand up to wipe her tears, and she swiped the salty wetness against her lips, her little pink tongue darting out to catch the drop. She lifted her head and stared at the old man who peered at her over the rail. His gray hair troubled in every direction, rioting round a gnarled face. The nose was too big and it looked like someone had tried to re-shape it out of molding clay and it still bore finger marks at the edges.

Molly untangled herself and drew her knees to her chest. The man shuffled forward, around the rail, to look at her. He counted with each step when he moved and Molly tilted her head to listen. He stood there and looked at her for a moment, but she didn't look up. She sat quietly, with her head rested on arms that tightly held her knees to her body.

He knelt down, and the ancient knees creaked and cracked, threatening. When he'd crouched nearly to her level, he reached out like he would poke the tender flesh of her bloodied knees. Molly jerked and scrambled backwards up the steps of the building. She never took her eyes off of the man, and when her back hit the building, she dropped down to curl into a ball. The man took several quick steps back, counting down to match.

“Was only gonna look at it,” he said.

Molly whimpered and curled tighter into the corner she'd wedged herself into.

“You're a strange kid,” he said. He slowly walked towards the stoop again. “You live around here?”

Molly only watched his strange procession.

One, two, three, four.” He counted each step, his walk a struck gait, like he stumbled on each half step before righting himself for the final move forward. He sat down beside the stoop, out of Molly's view.

When she couldn't see him anymore, Molly crawled forward and peered out over the railing's edge. “What are you doing?” she asked the man.

“What's it look like, girl?” he said, settling himself down on an overturned milkcrate, one of several stuck in a jagged half-circle beside the porch. “I'm dying.”

“You don't look like you're dying,” she said and looked at him more closely. He appeared nothing like dying people on TV, thin brittle people, like they would break if you touched them. The man looked more sturdy than that. Old and wrinkled but filled with something that said there was hidden strength. “Don't most people do that at home or in a hospital?”

“We're all dying,” he replied. “No home to go to, and wouldn't go if I had one.”

“What's wrong with you?” she asked, staring up at the red lines outlining every inch of his exposed skin.

“Everything, nothing.” He tapped out a phantom rhythm with a firm palm against his thigh. “It's all wrong but it's alright,” he sang.

“You're crazy,” she said as she turned away. “You have problems.”

“Little girl. What you know about problems?” he asked, rubbing his hand against his pants like he's touched something he couldn't wipe away. The look on his face assured her that, like every adult, this one couldn't really see her. It was as if the look somehow paused, acknowledging her, then moving on in dismissal, unshaped, unworthy. She hated that look. “I know plenty,” she said and shook her head.

“Ha, you think a hungry belly is problems, then wake up baby, you got a lot to learn.” He rooted around in the grass with one hand, working a finger into the hard soil.

“You don't know anything about me,” she said.

Molly stood up and stared down at the top of his head. The hair was finer at the top and the tiny hairs stuck out straight, dancing above his head with every little movement. Molly thought he looked like a peacock, only without the pretty feathers to take away from the annoying sound it made.

“I know one thing,” he said as he got back up, “You're a strange one.” He turned to walk away.

Molly recoiled like he'd lifted a hand to slap her. She wasn't entirely sure that she was displeased by his observation, but the comment stung anyway.

On the first step away, he resumed his count.

“You don't know anything about me,” she said. Her face stained two shades darker and her breaths came faster than when she'd first run to the step. “You don't know where I've been.”

“You ain't been nowhere I ain't heard of,” he said, “How old are you, little? Ten? I got no time for nursery school. Go home and be a good kid, you ain't helping the world out here on a stoop.”

“I'm eleven and three quarters, thank you,” she said. “And why aren't you helping the world then?” she asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You said I wasn't helping the world out here, so why aren't you helping?”

“Well damn girl, you're a nosy critter.”

“My mama says I'm precocious,” she said and showed the shadow of a grin for the first time since he'd seen her. “So why aren't you?”

“Well, if you must ask. I tried, but the world wouldn't have none of it,” he said. He turned around and started out, walking north against the grain. “World didn't want my help any. But then the world don't want many people.”

“What do you mean?” Molly asked.

“World don't care 'bout nobody. Only people do that. And most of the time their too busy same as everybody else. World's got its own problems.”

“Where’s the hope in that?” the girl asked. She started to toe the earth, digging her shoe in like she could make a hole large enough to crawl into and hide.

“Hope? Now whoever said hope was part of the bargain? Gotta make your own way anyhow. Ain’t nobody gonna save you. Do it yourself, or it don’t get done.” He went back to slapping out a rhythm on his thigh, sighing at the way the cloth no longer gave back. It too had become a part of him just like each long mile.

“What’s your name mister?”

“None your business, now git home like I said,” he snapped. He started walking. “Five, four, three, two.”

“Crazy old man,” she said quietly so he wouldn’t hear. She headed home, not because he told her to, but because she didn’t know anywhere else. As she walked to her building, she wondered about the old man. She kept looking back over her shoulder at him, growing smaller and more distant with each of their steps. Every so often he would turn and walk backwards, then turn straight again to continue. Soon, she couldn’t see him anymore and she walked with slow steps until she came to her own building.

It was similar to the one several blocks down where she had stopped. Little cheer and little paint to go along. Every nook held dirt blown there years before and layered until, if some foolhardy soul had been brave enough to try, they never would have been able to remove the cemented grime without taking with the boards beneath. Molly walked up the jagged steps, weathered from generations of feet, and slipped quietly inside.

Voices hit her before she made it to the door of their cramped apartment. Raised, like the motion of a hand held to strike, the sounds lashed out into the hallway and carried down the dingy, dim corridor. Her mother's was shrill and short, and each attempt at reply was cut off by the deep rumble that followed. Similar sounds had filled the last two months of Molly's evenings and nights. The arguments got louder each week and lately her father stayed on the couch. Her mother would come home and find him in almost the same spot as when she left. At first she hadn't said a word, just tiptoed past and quietly went to work at the hospital like she had for the last five years.

Then Molly's mother stopped being quiet. She started banging things when she made breakfast, slammed doors, and raised her voice when she talked.

Molly's father swayed when he came into view around the sharp corner between kitchen and corridor. His dark hair stood on end, unkempt, and his clothes looked soiled and slept in. He teetered like he stood on uneven ground, yet the shaking came from within as he bore down on the small woman in front of him. Molly saw her mother shrink and she cower at the kitchen table. He raised his voice again, this time bringing his fist with it to emphasize his point, but he stopped when Molly caught his attention.

"So she finally decides to come home," he said when Molly edged along the wall towards her room. His words jumped upon each other like they tried to come all at once. "Thought you had run off this time," he said. He brought his fist around to shake at her, much like he had done to her mother, and with each word, he moved in closer. He stood large, loomed in the small space.

“Where you been the last hour anyways?” He looked at Molly and sneered. “You don’t know anyone around here, so don’t you try and lie about visiting or such.”

“Nowhere, I’ve been out walking,” she replied in soft tones that didn’t betray her pounding heart and sweat soaked palms. She knew what he would say next.

“You been out talking to boys, ain’t you? Just look at you, half dressed and out running the streets like a girl that nobody cares about. I ought to beat you till your bloody coming in here and telling such lies.”

“But I didn’t,” she began. He reached out and grabbed one of her braids and yanked hard. The move brought her head back towards his hand, and when he let go, Molly rushed to get away. She stepped to avoid his arm when he reached for her again and she almost lost her balance when she scraped a leg against the counter’s edge.

He heaved as if to come after her, but Molly’s mother grabbed his arm and tried to push him into a chair.

“Not the time for this, you and I have things to talk about,” Molly’s mother shouted and brought his attention back to her.

“Now don’t you tell me what to do,” he said. He swung a fist towards her, but the woman ducked, pushing him away from Molly again. She motioned behind his back for Molly to go on down the hall to her room. Molly took the shift in his attention to flee.

She tried to make it to her room without kicking something in the cluttered hall, . She tiptoed and tried not to break anything.

She made it to her door, and quietly as she could manage, she slipped inside and closed it behind. She didn't turn on the light, but instead she tried not to fall while she picked her way across the cluttered floor. She shared the room with her two younger brothers, and the floor was a thick carpet of toys, papers, and jumbled things. Kicking as she went, yet trying to make no noise, she worked her way over to the bed in the far corner.

She pushed out toys beneath to make a small space to curl into. When she had settled, secured between wall and pillow, she let out the breath she'd been holding and closed her eyes. She was warm and it was a familiar space. And she knew monsters never slept there.

Christmas lights reflected on Molly's face and shoulders through the heavy uneven glass of her bedroom window. The little girl peered out into the night.

She pulled her flannel robe closer when a draft shuddered through the house and the gust swelled around the window with enough force to rattle against the frame. She sat perched on the only chair in the room, pulled close to the window, so that she could kneel and press her nose to the glass.

People lined the streets laughing and shouting late into the evening, and even on cold nights, there would be people for Molly to watch. Some would walk hand-in-hand. Some would shout, acting angry and outraged at everything, and some hardly seemed to

move for anybody. These would sit on steps, just staring at everyone. There was always the feeling, if a person met their gaze, like they didn't belong no matter how many times their eyes had met on similar streets. Molly shivered from the cold and considered closing the window, but then all that would be left would be hers.

For some time, she'd quit sleeping at night. She often dropped off at strange times of the day, wherever she happened to be. She slept through morning classes, and finally the principal had called her mother down to talk. When that didn't solve anything, they'd called in the school counselor.

He'd written about her in a report and she had a good idea of what he'd said. That she refused to talk seriously. That she made up stories and filled the time with her aliens who taught humans to live in trees. He hadn't been amused and when they didn't leave her alone she realized that her attempt at humor hadn't worked.

Next there was a court hearing. Her mama went down to the courthouse and they told her that Molly had to see a doctor. Mama explained that the doctor worked on feelings, trying to find out why people were unhappy and then try to make it better. Molly didn't really believe her. No one really cared how other people felt. But Molly had gone quietly when her mother had asked, and mostly played along when the man had asked her question after question.

Why didn't they just ask anything directly? They always circled the point.

She knew what they were after, and she would never tell them what they wanted to know. It was none of their business. Molly sat at the window and watched a couple go

back and forth. They argued and then kissed. They repeated the process over and over. The woman's hips swayed when she talked and the man reached out to capture her in his big arms. Molly watched when the woman bent over and kissed the man on top of his head. Then the woman laughed, her whole body in the motion, before she pushed him, both arms straight out.

The man fell over a discarded bucket and landed on the pavement. Molly pressed her face closer to the window. The man's brows drew down and his fists clenched. The woman just continued to laugh. Then the woman seemed to lose interest and turned to saunter the other way. She wobbled down the street, the man close at her heels.

Molly just shrugged and looked around at the other people standing on the busy corner. There were several old men, huddled around the stoop. Some moved in and others out, but they seemed to keep a nearly constant circle around the space far below her window. Across the way, an old woman leaned out of a window and shook a vase at someone below like she would, at any second, throw the thing down upon an unsuspecting head. Molly smiled.

Then she saw the old man from earlier. He shuffled along the intersecting street, two buildings down, intent on crossing over away from the busy social hour in favor of somewhere else. Molly wondered what he would do.

Seemingly unable to stop herself, or more likely accustomed to doing as she pleased, Molly made her way downstairs and out the back of the building, intent on finding the man and asking him.

Molly struggled to put on the tennis shoes she'd grabbed without stopping. She hopped along the sidewalk on one foot, and no one gave her a moment's notice, even when she crossed over to other side.

She tried to make out where he had gone, but she couldn't see him. Molly looked up and down the street, guessed, and scurried along the road from shadow to shadow. She tried to ignore the chill, despite the goose bumps that lined her arms and legs. The air was much worse outside than it had been huddled in the blanket at her window, but she kept moving.

Everything held a faint shimmer of frost, yet the glitter did nothing to hide the ragged edges, dirt, and disrepair of the neighborhood. Her foot caught a puddle and she shivered as the icy runoff splashed up onto her leg under the nightgown. She'd covered the sleep shirt with a long coat which hung past her knees, but the wind raced through her clothes and she shivered again.

She kicked a can out of her way and the echoes were sharp, exaggerated, and they vibrated between the buildings close on either side. She kept walking, her head up, and looked for any indication of which way he'd gone.

Molly knew many of the people who inhabited the darkened windows on either side, yet with the night pressed in and the shadows overwhelming the familiar nuances, she started to wonder if she should have stayed at home. While she watched for

movement around her, in the hope that she would catch a glimpse of the old man, another man, young and ragged, peeled himself off one darkened corner. He took fast steps in her direction, and Molly hurried.

She was nearly running by the time she heard the highway ahead. The road here ran under the freeway, easy access for the industrial areas that lined her own neighborhood, and Molly realized she had gone much further than she had intended. The steps behind her were still there, and she considered cutting through the alley and running for all she was worth towards home. The highway overpass loomed overhead, and she looked right and left as the shadows from above engulfed her.

Molly tripped on an uneven sidewalk slab and she went down hard, crying out in pain and fear.

“Girl, every time I see you, you’re falling down.”

Molly looked up and saw the old man. He sat at the top of the sloped concrete that ran underneath the bridge. A large pile of what looked like old blankets stacked up around him, with only his head visible at the middle, but the hair that danced above the misshapen face was unmistakable, even in the shadows. Molly stood up slowly and brushed herself off.

A hand reached out and grabbed her wrist. The man who had been following her.

“Whatcha doin’ little girl? You shouldn’t be out this time of night,” the man said. He had crooked teeth and foul breath.

Molly looked up at him, her fear returned. She trembled and pulled at the arm he held, trying to get away from the heavy grip. His palm was sweaty but her arm didn't budge.

"Let go," she cried out and aimed one small foot for his shin.

"What would I be wanting to do that for? I thought you could keep me company a while," the crooked grin replied.

Suddenly the old man stood in front of them. "Let her go," he said. He didn't make a very convincing figure, especially one to be giving demands. The other man hardly paid attention, intent on Molly.

The man smiled and the effect was eerie in the ugly face. Molly could see him clearly now, the skin stretched tight over his features deeply pitted and marked. His eyes were red, slightly unfocused, and his breath came fast.

"I said let her go," the old man said, strangely calm for the situation. The words hung in the air between them, echoing loudly despite the windy night. The younger man just laughed.

He let go of Molly's arm and took a step towards the old man. Molly's unlikely protector just raised an arm from beneath his heavy layers of clothing and revealed an ancient pistol pointed in the other man's direction.

The old man held everyone's attention. "Now I know this gun don't look like much." He waved the gun a bit to emphasize it in the dim light. "But you really don't

want to try it out do you? Best be headed on your way, and we can both just pretend this here little bit never happened.”

The younger man looked like he wanted to argue. He rocked a bit on his heels, but finally, after seconds that felt like minutes, he stepped back and raised his arms slightly in mock submission.

“Look here mister, now I didn’t mean any offense, that’s right. Just wanted to have a word with the miss.”

“Well you had your word. On your way now,” the old man replied. He motioned with the gun to punctuate each word.

The grin was gone now as the other man started to walk slowly backwards, his arms still raised to show each dirty palm. He melted back into the night. Once he was no longer visible, Molly threw her arms around the old man’s padded middle and sobbed.

Her cries became hiccupping dry sounds, and the fierce rhythm of her heart pounded in her head, before she finally began to quiet.

The old man motioned her to follow and he made his way back to his secluded spot at the top of the underbridge. He waved a hand and she assumed that he was offering her a seat on the scraps laid out on the concrete. When she did, he laid blankets around her shoulders, rolling under the edges.

Windy gusts howled through the narrow space of the underpass, but with the help of the blankets, Molly stopped shivering enough to quiet her chattering teeth. The old

man sat down and arranged the remaining mound of blankets and old clothes around himself, until just his face and head were visible at the top. He sat quietly for a few minutes and waited for her stilted breaths to even out before he spoke.

“So what are you doing out this time of night anyway girl?” he asked. He said it loudly but only a whisper carried to her over the wind.

Her teeth began to chatter again when she opened her mouth to reply, so she shut it and took deep gulping breaths.

“It’s okay girl. Don’t have to say nothing if you don’t want to. No difference to me.”

“Don’t you ever want to,” Molly paused and reached up a hand to pull at her ear, “but just can’t.” Her look was expectant, like he’d somehow give her an answer.

“Well most people live their lives wantin’ everything they can’t have, and ignoring everything they do,” he looked off into the darkness and sighed, “I got nothing, and nothing’s got me. And you want to know the truth, that’s no way to be.” The wind had quieted and the cadence of his words echoed all around Molly. She tried to understand what he meant. But when she thought she had it, she tried to say it back to herself and it wouldn’t come out right. It kept mixing up until the only thing she got was nothing, or was it something, something’s got me.

It circled, coming closer, until she thought that she would scream with the pressure it built inside her head. The pounding returned, and she wished she could reach

up and pop her head off and let the steam out, something like the cartoons she'd seen on TV, except she didn't smile and giggle, but just wished for it to go away, leave her be.

She thought about smacking her head into the pavement. The pain would take over and the tears would come. And it would go for a moment, for the time it took to cry it away, to wash herself in the empty moment. Like the pain could open up a hole inside of her and let all the bad things slide out. She imagined it, small chasms along her body opening and pouring out the tar-like substance in slow streams until she was empty, completely empty. Then she'd gather it up in handfuls and stuff it down the throats of those who'd hurt her, feed it to them until they understood and ate it down. She shook her head and reached up a hand to smooth the tangled red hair that hung down in her face.

"I don't know how," she said.

"Course you don't." He took a quick drink of something under his blanket, only the small silver rim visible when he put it to dry lips. "Nobody does. You think anyone just knows how, specially the first time? And if you are ever going to learn, there's got to be a first or nothing'll ever change." He seemed to consider his own words. "Just careful how you change it, cause nothing will ever be the same."

"You don't make sense."

"You're just young, girl. Younger than you think you are, but too old to listen to me."

“No sense,” she said quietly, then at once sat up straighter and looked directly at him. “Why do you do that counting thing? I mean, when you were walking earlier? Backwards?”

“Nosey critter.”

“Quit calling me that. It’s not nice.” She frowned.

“Now lessons. You are a strange one though.”

She pulled the blanket closer around her neck. “Maybe so. The counting?”

“Habit girl,” he said. “We all run out sometime, a set number of steps, so I cheat and take a few back here or there. Equals out in my favor that way, which is more than most else can say.”

“Puzzles. You talk in puzzles.” She shook her head. “I gotta get home. Someone finds out I’m gone...” she drifted off, instead thinking about what *would* happen if he found she’d gone out at night. That she wasn’t where she was supposed to be. The shaking came back, just a tiny shiver in her fingertips that threatened to get bigger if she allowed it to.

“Not safe out here girl. You shouldn’t have been out at all.” He took another sip.

“Doesn’t matter. End happens all the same.” She scratched at a patch of skin on her leg until her fingernails left raw red marks.

“Stop that,” he said. “Why you want to hurt yourself? Everything matters. Don’t want to end up here. This is where it don’t matter.” He stood up and gathered the blankets and shuffled off. He came back empty handed. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

They cut through the back while the wind raced through the buildings and over dumpsters, carrying trash in small whirlwinds. The smell was too familiar to bother and instead they spent the time thinking their separate thoughts.

The man didn’t share his, but they were likely filled with the years that led up to the tattered clothes, endless moving, and the occasional hot meal. Or maybe it was simpler than that. Maybe he just wished to be back under the bridge, finished with yet another day and onto the next.

Molly didn’t speak either. She wasn’t thinking of the possibility of discovery, though this was never too far off, but instead she thought about the things he’d said. Did she have a choice that would matter? Did she dare to think of something like that?

She snapped from her thoughts when he reached out and smacked her shoulder. He’d walked between the buildings and they stood near the front corner of her own building. She wondered how he’d known which one, but she didn’t ask.

Her window was dark and so was her parent’s. No longer thinking of the man or their talk, she ran inside, without even a glance back at him.

Molly moved quietly through the halls to her own door. By the time she slipped under the bed in her own room, her heart pounded loudly in her ears. She was sure

someone would hear and she'd be discovered. Curled into the wall under the bed, she tensed, waiting for it. For the footsteps she was sure would follow her into the room.

Waited for the yelling to start. Or worse, the gentle murmuring. But there was only silence and she held that pose until her body gave up.

Her father was gone when she woke, but she didn't miss him when her mother sat by her side and ate.

There was a tiny difference, though her mother didn't notice. It wasn't apparent in the way Molly held her spoon, or the way she brought the soggy cereal to her lips. It was deeper than that, not even a glimmer yet, but it was there, brewing, and it grew bigger when she let it.

School passed much as usual. She'd learned to sleep through lunch and to hide behind a book for a quick nap in 5th period, so she managed for yet another day to play along, to act like everything was alright.

It was on the bus ride home.

“Get out of my seat.” The sweaty pudge who smelled like potato chips. He liked to talk, to make other kids do what he wanted, but he talked louder the more you stared at those glistening round cheeks. He stood in the aisle and loomed over Molly.

“Excuse me?” Molly replied. She looked at him.

Her eyes met his and she slowly stood up and planted her knees in the seat, giving her a firmer base.

“You heard me,” the boy said. He jumped from foot to foot and Molly almost giggled. He looked like he needed a restroom more than a seat. He turned red.

“You laughing at me?” He spit along with the words. He pointed a finger at her, then jabbed her in the ribs, grinding it in to the soft flesh between the bones.

“Yeah,” she said with only an edge of the pain in her voice. More calm than she felt. She held her breath. Then all at once she brought a leg up and kicked between his legs.

He fell back and she fell over him, landed on top. “You really want to try me?” She’d meant to hit him soft at first and say what she had to, quietly, but with each word, her voice rose until everyone on the bus looked at her. She stood over the boy, now holding himself, lying in the aisle.

She kicked him. “Want to get beat up by a girl? How would that look? You want a good sock in the nose? I got a fist right here for you, you just wanna try. How about you take some of what you dish out for yourself once in a while?” It felt good and she

stood over him, shaking a fist and yelling, until the bus driver came and carefully walked her off.

When they stood far enough from the bus not to be overheard, the woman stopped and shook her head. “Now, we all know how he deserves it, but can’t have you causing such a scene like that.” The woman, usually kind and pleasant, looked at Molly and frowned. “You don’t want to end up suspended over him, do you?”

“No, ma’am, wouldn’t be worth it, that one.” The bus driver shook her head and Molly followed the motion, shaking her own head slightly. “Now, we keep this to ourselves and you come sit up front by me. No more like that.”

Molly followed the woman back onto the bus and the kids quieted when Molly climbed into her new seat. One boy, who had never spoken to her before, brought her backpack to the front.

The bus stayed quiet when they pulled away from the school, except for the hushed whispers.

When she got off at her stop, Molly saw fingers pointed in her direction. The whispers turned into shouts and children clambered to the windows. Yet the faces didn’t seem unfriendly, only curious, and they watched her until the bus rode out of sight, fingers pointed, wagging like little flags.

She didn’t walk inside or go home. She ran towards the bridge while the words repeated in her head. The old man’s words mixed with the things she’d shouted at the

boy. Her father's words. Good and bad. She felt power, she felt shame. But she felt. And she was full with it.

She ran faster, her feet pounded out on the pavement beneath her, and she smiled. The day felt cool but she only pulled her coat closer. The overpass loomed ahead, but where fear had driven her final steps last night, something else pushed her on today.

He wasn't there. She walked to the top and looked around each pillar, but he wasn't tucked into any of the spaces and she found no sign of where he'd gone. Disappointment laced her tongue in acrid strokes and held it frozen like a block of lead. All of the words she'd held felt heavier when they slid back down. She'd waited, wanted, to open the pit inside her and pull each, hand over hand, like cold black water sliding up from a well.

Back on the sidewalk, she hung her head and turned for home.

“Girl don't pay much mind, do you?”

He sat under the shade of a large bush on the other side of the road. She'd barely glanced in that direction, so intent on where she'd found him before.

“Figure it's me you're looking for, or else you lost something. Either way, you shouldn't be back here. Just cause it's day don't make it safe.”

Molly remembered the other man from last night and looked around like he would suddenly appear.

“You need to relax, kid.” He grinned and the weathered face resembled a jack o lantern left too long in the sun. “At least you’re not falling down this time.”

Today he wore a battered wide-brimmed hat, but the rest was the same. The same tatted jacket and grimy pants. The indented nose she itched to touch, to see if it would squish the way she imagined.

“You tell me it’s not safe then to relax? You still aren’t making much sense.” She smiled when she said it and walked closer to him.

“Both are valid. It’s a mixed up world, so maybe what you should do is go home and put your feet up. Read a book or even watch some damned tv. Not out here in the wilds tracking something isn’t real. ” He gestured around him. “Not the place for answers girl, and I’m on my way out anyway. Nothing to see. Nothing to say.”

“What do mean?”

“Means I’m gone. Done here and time to move on.”

“But...I thought...” she sunk down to the ground, deflated like a balloon let go by a giggling child. Lost without its anchor.

“I’m not your pappy or whatever you think I am. Learn something, then good.” He stepped away from her, turned like he would leave. “What you need’s not me. You gotta do it yourself.” He looked down at her and the smile melted away. “Only reason

I'm here today's, I knew you'd be all stupid. What'd you do, that man came back? You think people like that just go away? Girl, bad is everywhere, and have to protect yourself cause nobody else gon do it for you. 'Nough." He scratched underneath the brim of the hat, then rubbed his neck. "I gotta keep moving."

She sighed. "I know you aren't...but I just thought." She took a deep breath. "Well I thought I could talk to you a little more. Been a long time since I had someone to talk to."

She hadn't meant to let it, but a tear slid down her cheek. She scrubbed it away. "I did something." She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "Today. I hit someone. Kid on the bus."

The man walked back. "Deserve it?" he sat beside her and it took several jerky movements before he settled down.

"I never did that before." She looked over at him then looked away. "They make me so mad. Always picking on me cause I didn't want to talk to them. Stupid stuff they talk about. Stuff they've seen on TV or some boy. Always just ignored it, well try to. But it wasn't even them." She let go of her legs and moved until she sat cross-legged in the dirt, looking away from him. The scene with the boy played over in her head. "Maybe. Maybe he did. But it wasn't him I was mad at."

"Can't bottle it up."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Means you have to deal with it. Can’t just bottle it away somewhere cause it’ll get shook up and then you’ll have a mess. You take it on headfirst and you deal with it your own way.” He stood up and shuffled over to the bush then came back with a battered duffle bag. He reached in and rifled around for something. “Look, I’m old and no good, so don’t listen to me. Git home and don’t come looking. I’m gone girl. Dying my way.” He reached down and held out something wrapped up in a scrap of cloth.

Molly took it hesitantly. Layer after layer of multi-colored string wound over cloth, until it resembled a tiny mummy wrapped up tightly in her palm. She was so engrossed in looking at it, that when she glanced up, she didn’t see the man anywhere. He was just gone.

She took the tiny package and slipped it into her pocket. Then she retrieved her backpack and ran for home. She wanted to open it in secret, where no one could possibly stumble onto her and take whatever lay in the folds. Whatever it was, it was hers.

By the time she reached her building, she was out of breath, panting. She stopped at the entrance and sat down. Her father’s truck was parked at the curb with a line of other similarly dented vehicles. She wondered how late she was. Her father didn’t usually get home until right before dinner and sometimes later. She didn’t think she’d been gone that long.

The lower levels of the building were quieter than usual and Molly ran through the halls without seeing anyone. It wasn’t until she left the stairwell on her own floor that she heard sounds.

Immediately she recognized it. Raised voices, and Molly worried that it was her they were yelling about.

She opened the front door quietly and prepared for the onslaught, but when the door closed, the sounds in the kitchen stopped. Her mother called out.

“Molly come in here will you?”

She inched to the kitchen and barely stuck her head around the corner, enough to see, but to still be shielded by the wall. What she saw was unexpected. Her mother sat at the table but across from her sat a woman that Molly had never seen before. Her father wasn't in the room.

“Where's dad?” Molly asked quietly from her hiding place, then jumped and looked behind her when she thought she heard a sound.

“He's not here baby. Come over and sit on my lap, and let's have a quick chat.” Molly didn't move, instead inched back and looked around the other corner, then moved to stand at the edge of the kitchen when she found no one lurking in the other direction. “Your brothers are down the hall with Ms. Anders, but we only have a few minutes.”

Molly looked at her, but didn't come over to sit. Instead she shifted to stare at the strange woman. Everything the woman wore was grey or black and her hair was brown. There was nothing interesting about the woman except for the fact that Molly had no idea what she was doing there. And Molly had a feeling that the answer to that was going to come whether she wanted to hear it or not. Did the school sent someone to complain about the bus? Had she hurt the boy that bad?

“Who are you?” Molly asked the woman directly.

Her mother spoke quickly, cutting off any response the woman would have made. “Molly, that’s no kind of manners. Be more polite would you, and hush a minute and just listen.” Her mother sighed.

For the first time, Molly noticed the bags stacked in a small neat pile near the door and the tired way her mother held herself.

“Molly, I know what’s been happening. Or at least I know now.” She shifted in her seat, then changed her mind and stood up, walking over to Molly. She kneeled down and put her arms around her daughter. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you come to me?”

Molly looked down at the floor, the shame written in every inch of her body.

“Oh baby, I’m sorry. You will never now how much.” Molly’s mother started to cry, but then shook herself and straightened her shoulders. She looked at her daughter, and reached out to stroke her face. “Moll we have to leave here, start over somewhere else, and this lady here is going to help us with that.”

“Is Daddy going too?” Molly asked.

“No baby, it’s just going to be us now. We will find a nice new place and you can find some new friends, and the four of us will start fresh. Now get the things together that you want to take with you, won’t you do that for me?”

Molly didn’t answer. Instead she walked in a daze to her room.

She looked at it in a new way. Her brothers' favorite toys no longer sat on the shelves and the empty places on the floor showed where things had been taken or moved.

Her own things were relegated to a small section of the closet, a drawer, and a box that she'd secreted in the corner where the two small beds butted up against each other. Her brothers often slept, on bad nights, holding hands at that corner, while she laid on her own bed across the room and watched over them.

When their breath had evened out and she was sure they were sleeping, she would slip to the window to watch the people who passed below.

She gathered up the few things she wanted to take. A few dolls, her pencils and small pile of papers, pictures and a poster. There were a few coins that she had kept for her brothers, when they were old enough to want them for something other than ammo for rubber band guns. A few pieces of clothing that still fit. Not that much when she packed it into her pink duffle.

She glanced out the window, out of habit and curiosity. She loved to watch people.

She walked past the window then stopped. That wasn't right. It looked like her father on the next corner.

Molly went back to look closer. Would he be watching? It looked like him, but the man turned and walked away. Anger filled her, white then red, but full and she breathed it in while she watched the man saunter off.

His fault they had to leave, had to start over again, like they'd been the ones to do something wrong. The man kept walking.

She couldn't stand it. It was his fault. He was the reason she was packing her things, her mother sat crying to a strange woman in the kitchen and that her brothers were down the hall with a neighbor instead of playing in their room with their cars. No one else's but his.

She didn't stop to think but rushed to the front door and threw it open. Molly rushed down the stairs to the street before her mother even realized that the front door sound had been Molly leaving.

The girl burst from the building and ran to the corner. She looked everywhere, but she didn't see anyone that resembled her father or anyone at all that she could have mistaken for him.

She'd been ready to throw herself at him. To scream and kick. To tell him exactly how she felt. But there was no one. She sat down on the sidewalk and stared at the even gray of the ground. Had she dreamed it all? Had the old man even been real or was he, and the things she thought her father had done, merely a dream? A very bad dream?

She remembered the package the old man had given her. The little multicolored mummy. She reached into her pocket, more to tell herself that it was real, and that she wasn't just crazy, than anything else.

But then the desire to know what it was, what it held, took over like it had before on the way home. She looked at it, wrapped up in her palm, and tried to find the end string.

She found a stray green one and slowly unwound it. When it finished, she found a red one, then blue. Yellow, pink, and so on, until she saw a hint of gold bound in the tattered cloth that wrapped around. She took string after string until there was nothing but the cloth and whatever lay inside, and she carefully unwrapped it the rest of the way.

Inside laid a tiny gold watch, larger than her own wrist, but small for a full grown woman. She turned it over and read the tiny words printed on the underside.

“To my dearest on her birthday. Everything matters, and you most of all.” The words were faint, like someone had rubbed at them until they were barely printed into the metal anymore.

She turned it back over and slid it on her wrist. He’d said everything he could in the few words he’d given her. It was everything he had and to Molly, it mattered. To Molly, it was everything.

She walked back to her building, wondering if the man she had seen was her father or if she had just wished so hard that she had just imagined it.

When Molly walked back to the building, her mother had just made it through the front door, and the woman wrapped Molly in her arms and held tight. It mattered, but Molly was stronger than that, and she looked forward to a future where she should could prove it.

CHARLIE'S BELLY

I knew that if I didn't slow down, Charlie, with his short legs in the hand-me-down boots, would never catch up. For a moment, even though I didn't want to, I waited until the rustling in the bushes let me know he would be tramping through shortly.

I hated to lose a second as night fell, since I had to make it to the traps before sundown or risk having nothing for supper. Once the sun went, I wouldn't be able to make out the complicated knots of the snare, and I didn't want to risk leaving anything I'd caught or else it would likely be something else's dinner before I'd make it back in the morning.

But I waited anyway. As soon as I heard the telling sounds, I ran on ahead, down the slope, and rushed to the edge of the stream bed where I'd hidden the traps. The snares near the creek might have a few squirrels or rabbits if I reached them in time. If not, it would be a can of beans and one of fruit for the evening, if we were lucky. I hadn't checked the stash today, but I was pretty sure what was in the cabinet was getting low again.

Four days this time.

Thank goodness I'd learned to hunt before he'd gone, even if it meant enduring endless jokes about how a girl shouldn't be on the hunt, but rather back home... At least there had been something useful in it. Who knew when Mom would make it home this

time, and there wasn't much chance of money for food, so we made due, just like she always said to.

Across the stream bed, a rustling movement in the leaves brought my head up like a deer catching scent of its hunter. But I wasn't the hunted when I caught sight of the long line of turkeys through the underbrush that edged the stream.

I heard the sure sound of Charlie making his way behind me, and I lifted the rifle from its place across my shoulders, quickly sighted in, crouching where I stood to steady the shot. You don't quite know where it comes from, the second between the squeeze and the moment of impact. My whole body squeezed along with my finger, breath in until that last moment, the tightening around the eyes, and the release of air and muscle along with each pull.

One. Two. Missed the third.

I got two off before the birds were startled, either by their comrade's fall, or even more likely, by the near elephant sound of crashing underbrush that preceded Charlie in the woods. I'd gotten much better at quick sighting after losing chances like this one before. I could have the gun from back to shoulder within moments, and my finger would be at ready to switch away from safety in only seconds.

The few lessons over dozens of her boyfriends had finally led to the comfort to hold the rifle firm, picking off cans and hedge-apples one after another. Just like the boyfriends. One after another. My mother picked those off, so I never really had to. Some of them were even nice to relieve the dreary world around here, but I never really knew any of them long enough.

Occasionally, I missed them in a general sort of way, in moments like this one, when I would rather be back to doing this for fun. But it wasn't really them that I missed, and that was just it. Not one of them would last, and eventually I quit caring and just set out to pick them for useful knowledge.

Mostly, it was knowledge to be used after the relationship had run its course, rather than while it burned its short lived path through our house. At least she came home more when she was in the middle of one. The last had actually taught me some rather nice snare techniques that he'd learned from an uncle. Useful knowledge. Before, I'd been proud of my skill, but lately it was more a matter of my stomach, and Charlie's. Somewhere along the way my attitude had changed with the shift to necessity. It wasn't fun the way I remembered. I never walked into town anymore with my gun and kill over my shoulder. It was something I used to do, trying to fit in with the boys. Bring odd animals in to talk over at the local gas station.

You could say the town was behind the times but then you would have to say that about a lot of small towns. The locals had computers, internet, and such, but some habits never died, and hunting was more than a habit for the local residents. It was often a matter of meat when money would only cover rent and utilities.

At all hours of the night, you could find a group of guys near one gas station or the other, huddled around a truck or the open end of a battered SUV. They'd argue logistics, the best spots, or field dressing techniques, worthless for the most part, but occasionally a good bit would get tossed out. Each man tried to sound more important than the last, a battle of wills or knowledge, and the conversations proved fascinating, especially when they ended in fist fights as happened at least a few times a month.

Hunting would give way to more general talk, and it often circled back to the who and why of the town we lived in.

The men actually listened to their wives more than any of the women would ever have thought, and the result was that once they shared their stories and put the pieces together, they usually came up with a better network of community intelligence than the local PD could ever have claimed. It was a game to the guys for the most part, entertainment. I'd quit going, despite my love of those conversations.

I hadn't gone out with shooting in mind, though I always took my rifle to check traps. I had really just hoped for a couple of rabbits or even a squirrel from the traps, though I preferred to skin something with more meat for the work. The two turkeys, even scrawny wild ones, would be a feast for the two of us.

Charlie burst out of the undergrowth and scrambled down the slope to where I stood. His dirty hair was too long again, and it fell into his eyes when he looked up at me. He pushed it back with an impatient wave and stamped his feet in agitation. His red cowboy boots were caked in thick Missouri clay, streaking red up all the way to his knobby knees, and his feet sank back to the ground with a smoosh as leg and shoe became an inseparable muddy mound. The boots had been given to him by a neighbor whose grandson outgrew them, but the red had started to wear off, leaving brown patches beneath. With the mud added to the worn leather, it gave the look of little red-brown tree trunks, as if he had sprouted from the ground.

His legs stuck out under the shorts, above the mud. The denim should have reached far below the knee if the pair fit as they were meant to, but Charlie's skinny waist made him a target for neighborly hand-me-downs, even if the boys who had

outgrown the pieces were far younger than Charlie. The result was most of our clothes didn't fit, but we had something to wear, so I counted it as lucky.

The boots had been a surprise, barely used and only a few sizes too large. Charlie had worn them for the last year straight, removing them for bath, bed, and little else. They were his prize possession, and I was sorry to see the shape of his toe was starting to peak through the sole. We'd somehow have to replace them, and Charlie would be hard pressed to give them up.

I quickly reset the traps, which looked like they'd held something earlier, but were empty by the time we got there, then made my way across the shallow creek to the clearing on the other side. It had gotten darker than I meant to be out in, and I had a hard time finding the spot where the birds had gone down. But as I stood and listened, and heard a noise, faint but distinct from Charlie's behind me. I moved towards it.

The light had fallen now so that it showed through the trees, almost at an upward angle from the horizon. The dying light caught the forest silhouette on fire and everything glowed scarlet. It found my legs and highlighted them too.

I stood out against the landscape around me, something different than the passive horizon, smoother than the damp autumn leaves left over from last season and scattered around like forest confetti.

I heard it again, faint, but from a direction not too far north of where I thought the birds had gone down, and I followed it, finding them only a little over a foot apart. One of the birds lay absolutely still, but the other struggled when I walked up, almost like he knew that I had come to seal my victory.

Charlie startled me by appearing close at my heels. I hadn't even heard him. But I didn't have time to worry about Charlie. The bird jumped when I moved in, thrashing its wings in an effort to get upright enough to dash away, yet the wounded animal couldn't do much more than pull itself sideways in a weak hop. The bird moved only a few inches for each strained maneuver, and I suddenly felt very sorry for the turkey, but I shut it off and I walked the final few feet to where it lay.

Before I could put my foot across the animal's neck to hold it still, Charlie moved in to gather up the wounded animal. He reached down, with sure swift motions utterly unlike the quiet, contemplative boy, and put his arms over it as if to scoop the bird up, almost as someone would a baby.

"No, Charlie. It's dinner," I stated, unsure of what to say. He froze, looking at me wide-eyed and unsure again. Often I had missed a shot, but rarely had I left an animal wounded. I'd spent several trips to the range in complete anticipation of beating the hell out of one of mom's new boyfriends, and this just wasn't what should have happened.

As I looked at Charlie, I wished I knew how to erase that question in his eyes without having to explain the harsh reality of this bird. Well maybe that was too much. Certainly we would survive without this particular bird, but it was too far and too late to go back now. This bird had no chance, and to leave it would be to let it suffer its way into being something else's dinner. That's just the way it was.

But I didn't know how to translate that into a 8-year-old boy's language. Especially one who seemed to carry the shame of every little unwanted boy around in his quiet stare. Only five years separated us in actual experience, yet it seemed a world of knowledge was missing from his gentle understanding of things, and I hated that

everything seemed to beat him further into submission. Lately he'd drawn even more into himself; each day that mom didn't come home.

The bird struggled, fighting for life, and I closed my eyes to straighten my thoughts. I knew what had to be done.

When I stepped up to the bird, I tried to lay my foot across its neck, but the bird jumped away in a shuddering half-hop, before it managed to right itself for another sudden dash. It barely missed landing in Charlie's outstretched arms when he knelt down. But it missed his arms, and half-running and half-falling, the bird finally dropped down about half a foot away on its side. Charlie grabbed at me and pulled me away from the bird, but I gently pulled my arm back. I wouldn't look at him.

I walked to where the bird had fallen. This time, when I laid my foot across its neck, the bird only stared up at me and breathed heavily. I tried to ignore Charlie's small noises while he tried not to cry, and I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment to calm the pounding blood that made it hard to see or hear. I looked down at the bird, still alive with my boot across its skinny neck.

I took a deep breath and held the rifle down towards the ground. I pulled off the shot.

Charlie jerked, as if I had shot him instead, and with a look similar to the one I'd just seen from the bird, turned and ran off into the falling darkness.

I grabbed both birds and stuffed them in the sack tucked at my waist, then ran fast in the direction he'd gone. We'd run this routine before, when he'd gotten upset with me, but it was never for something like this. Usually it was my inability to explain where

mom had gone or when she would get back, and sometimes it was when I just couldn't take it anymore and I screamed at him.

But when I saw the look, and the way his shoulders would fold in on themselves to shield him from the blows, I would sink down, and wait until his sad footsteps took him off somewhere in to wait out the storm.

But I'd always made it better, explain, hug, and trying in every way I could to show him that I hadn't meant it. I wasn't sure how to take this one back. How to show him I was sorry. Because I couldn't be sorry. I didn't have that luxury when I knew his belly had to be empty, sore, and gnawing at him though he'd never let me know until he couldn't hide it anymore.

I ran after him, stumbling often. I tried to move quickly in the familiar ground, but it became a minefield after dark. Even his sounds seemed swallowed by nightfall as insects and animals took up their song.

The droning song of the cicadas made it hard to hear my own steps. Night fell quickly in the shadow of the tall trees, and I knew that even familiar territory would be hard to move through after dark. My steps were unsure and I knew I should slow down, but I thought that at any moment I would hear the sound of Charlie moving through the woods, and I was even more afraid that I wouldn't. We often heard coyote calls at night, and I knew that a little boy like Charlie would have no chance if a coyote or bobcat happened to come down from the neighboring hills to soothe their own gnawing bellies.

Or Charlie could simply fall and knock himself out and I would never find him before morning.

I didn't hear Charlie. I only heard the rush of insects, and only faintly, my own crashing feet in the leaves. I ran as fast as I could for home, hoping to find him there, but at the least, I would grab a flashlight from the emergency drawer, and head out more prepared.

I was thinking about the flashlight and whether it had new batteries when I fell hard into a soft patch of leaves and hidden air. My legs gave out, and the move wrenched my ankle against a large rocky patch. I never saw anything in the foggy darkness, but I howled and tumbled end over end down a short hill. I never would have missed the drop in the daytime, or if I had just been paying enough attention to the path I took, but it was too late to think of such precautions when I scratched against every rock and branch on the way to the bottom.

The bottom was no better than the way down, and I landed with my lips touching dirt, my midsection wound sideways at odd angles. I slowly sat up, first tugging my legs around and setting them on the ground. I was aware of the pain shooting up my leg and it gripped my body in waves of agony. It reached to every fiber and I tried to separate that pain from any other so that I could figure out what else hurt.

I brushed off leaves and dirt while I examined my body with tiny movements, reaching out fingers and toes. Yet, other than cuts and bruises, the ankle seemed to be the worst. A moment of stupidity could cost so much, but I'd been lucky.

I thought about where Charlie could be while I lay there waiting to get back on my feet. I'd never worried like this, and I almost screamed again when I tried to put weight on the injured leg.

But I was determined, so pain and all, I started for home. Half-drag, half-stumble, and soon I saw the light of our house. Must have made it further than I thought in that first mad dash after Charlie.

I let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. His shoes were outside the front door, left out for the mud to harden in the night air, to be cracked off in the morning.

Bag slung over my shoulder, I never wanted to grab him up and hold him as tightly as when I found him sitting there at the kitchen table. I ached to run to him, scream at him, cry. His legs didn't reach the floor and he swung them back and forth like scissors, in opposite motions and just waiting to slice through the most stubborn of projects. Maybe I could take some pointers.

I'd made it home, and Charlie was there, but I still didn't have a solution to my other problem. I didn't know what I could possibly say to make it somehow better, somehow get him to let go of that accusing look.

So, I didn't say anything. I set about getting the birds ready, and he just sat there swinging his legs as I plucked, chopped, and eventually fried the pieces in batter. My ankle ached while I limped around the kitchen, but he never asked what had happened. He stared at me, saying nothing, boring a hole in my head even when I turned away from him.

The longer the silence stretched out, the bigger it became. Everything I thought to say was lost in it, too trivial to bridge the gap between us. "Charlie, I..." I dropped off, not knowing whether to leave it alone or somehow try to account for my actions. To me they were simple, but to him, I knew I had somehow gone too far.

He never asked for anything. Quiet as he already tended to be, our mother's absence just seemed to take what joy he had left him away with those stretches.

I pulled a hidden can of peaches from the back corner of a shelf and opened it alongside the plate of golden-brown misshapen bits. I sat beside him as he bowed his head, my own eyes down in deference to his need to believe. I piled peaches and most of the turkey on his plate, putting only a peach-half and a few bottom bits of the meat onto my own plate. He'd gotten used to this routine lately and had stopped asking why I didn't eat more after I'd told him for the hundredth time that I just wasn't hungry. He never looked like he believed me, but he also didn't argue. He was always too smart for his age.

Charlie picked at his food. I knew he had to be hungry, but he just sat there, taking small bites, but mostly pushing the food back and forth.

I nearly jumped when he finally spoke. I'd been staring at the pictures on the wall, and I had fallen so far into my own thoughts, I'd almost forgotten that he was beside me.

"When do you think mama will come home?" Charlie asked. He pushed his food around without really focusing on it and I almost winced when he mashed his peaches into his turkey. He put a bite in his mouth and chewed with his head to one side, staring at nothing in particular. The abruptness of the question shocked me. It was as if he'd pulled the thought from my own head.

I'd been wrong to think mama's absence wouldn't be as hard on him as it was on me. Like me, he just got better at hiding it, letting me think it might healing, that he may have moved on. But I should have known he would hold on to it tighter than those red boots. I kicked the chair across from me, setting it back onto two legs then rocking it

back and forth with my foot. I gripped my fork. He hadn't asked in two days. On this round, she'd been gone five.

I tried the only thing I could think of.

"Want to go fishing in the morning? I still have a batch of night crawlers from the ones I got this week, and I thought you might enjoy the time out." I wanted him to say yes, but more than that, I wanted him to get excited. I gently set the chair back on its legs and held myself rigidly so I wouldn't startle him. When he had that thoughtful look on his face, with the shadow of his old grin, I couldn't help but hope. I kept my face blank, examining the pictures on the wall.

"Do you think Mama will want to come?"

"I think it will probably just be us," I replied. I still held half a breath, and only let it out when I couldn't hold it anymore and then sucked it back in. If I'd held it any longer, I'd have been gaping like a fish. "Do you mind if it's just you and me?" Maybe it centered in something selfish, but I enjoyed the time we had.

"I guess." He made sure I'd wonder which way to interpret that. Did he mind? Or was there just veiled acceptance after being disappointed so many times. His form of punishment for the turkey.

I tried again. "We can build a fire and cook whatever we catch. The spot down by the river?" It was a favorite spot, one where we'd be alone or at least ignored even if someone did happen to come as far upriver as we liked to go. Who cared about two kids? Especially if we weren't attached to one of the groups near the bridge where the teens huddled around cars, and the air hung heavy with smoke. I'd tried to make friends there a few times, before I had Charlie to worry about. Those kids and I didn't have much in

common, but we'd shared a few laughs and other fun. It felt strange to long for such moments when they'd had so little significance at the time.

Tomorrow, we'd relax, and I would keep trying to teach him the art of setting a line. Hopefully he could contain himself long enough to listen to my instructions. Not that I had much real conviction behind that hope. I rather wished he would get excited a hundred times, bouncing around until no fish would come near his spot. In the end, we would have to rely on my catch for a meal, but he would smile and be happy for the moment.

"If you want." That was it, all he would give me since I couldn't give him what he wanted.

I went to clean our plates, and I carefully put back the edible bits leftover from both dishes, though his was mostly a mushy mess.

After I put him to bed, I'd pack up a few things I'd been saving for either a special day or when my own skill and luck ran out and we were forced to eat the last of our reserves. It would almost be a picnic by the time I was done.

Tomorrow evening, we'd go to the neighbor lady's to have dinner. She'd been pestering me to come for a meal, each time she caught me slipping through her hedge row. Her yard bordered the field on one side and our house on the other. The wooded creek ran at the far edge beyond the field, and it was only a short way past that to the river where we would be fishing away the morning and afternoon. Maybe we could even bring her a fish or two. I knew she wouldn't mind the company, especially if I left a note on our way out in the morning that we'd be stopping by.

As I put Charlie to bed, I went through the normal motions, tucking the blanket under his arms and smoothing his hair before I kissed his nose. It was the same routine our mother had done for years, and it seemed to soothe him even on the worst days. Too bad I couldn't do the same for myself.

I crawled into my cold bed. My room was the newest addition to the existing trailer. The room had been added in the midst of a rather short-lived relationship, one that had lasted less time than the work itself, and the result was an unfinished room. The walls were plywood sheets hung on a wooden frame, and the insulation still sat in rolls, piled into a corner of the room.

Tonight, I wouldn't shiver long though. The pain in my ankle, and the scratches, which had stung all through dinner, even the turkey's stare and Charlie's reaction were no match for the day when I rolled into bed. With a few blankets piled on, my body quickly warmed the fabric and I slept.

I woke to thumping sounds. At first I thought it was only reminiscent of the dream; I'd been dragging people to shore from a sinking ship, the boards of the deck uneven as I scrambled around trying to find the crying child that I knew had to be close.

The dream evaporated as I realized that the crying was somewhere else, quite real, and that the sounds were coming from the front room. I pulled on pants and a long sweatshirt and hurried out.

In the middle of the small living room, Charlie shrieked and climbed mother like a tree. He grabbed at her arms and tried to pull himself up while she teetered on her high heels. She attempted to set down the bags in her arms, but Charlie didn't wait and they both crashed to the ground when she lost her footing. Her dark hair came half unwound from the sweep at her neck. The clothes she wore were elegant, a few steps above what I had seen her in before this disappearance, but her skirt hitched in an unladylike pose as she attempted to pull herself up on the arm of a nearby chair. Charlie sobbed and clung tightly.

I reached out a hand to help, and Charlie fought me when I tried to pick him up. I felt like crying too, but I couldn't as I looked at the well-built man standing quietly in the corner. The interloper stood near the front door, only a few steps forward from where he had walked into the room, and already he was halfway into the dining room. He looked too large in the small space, stooped just slightly to avoid knocking his head into mother's various plants, hung from ceiling hooks. His clothes looked out of place, slacks and a button up shirt in the middle of nowhere, and his face was clean shaved.

My mother looked up at me when I finally detached Charlie enough for her to stand. "You could at least say something, Annabelle. Aren't you happy to see me?" Her smile cracked a bit at the edges, but she looked genuinely glad to see us, and I wished I could throw myself at her as easily as Charlie did.

I stood back and just looked at her. "Welcome home Mama." I said it with the intention of smiling, but instead a tear slipped down my cheek and I hurriedly wiped it away, hoping she hadn't seen.

“Say hello to Gary, Bella. Don’t be shy now. He won’t bite.” She tittered at that and brought her hand up to hide her teeth as she laughed. She stooped down and grabbed bags, balancing Charlie on one hip and making her way to the kitchen at the far end of the room. Gary followed her and picked up the rest of the bags. I glared at him while he walked to the kitchen.

Mom walked over and started to load things into the refrigerator, pulling the groceries from the bag one at a time, organizing them on the counter first. She held up each item and looked it over, then slowly transferred them in the same manner to the fridge shelves. I just stood there and stared. I wondered if somehow I were still dreaming.

She was careful not to touch anything together and made sure each item faced forward like they were still on the shelves at the market.

The man waited for her impatiently. He began opening cabinets and peeked into the mostly empty spaces. He poked into the recesses, even pulled out the hidden box of crackers and few cans of fruit from the top corner with ease. “Not much here, looks like, Lila. Good thing you thought to stop for a few things.” He said it so casually that it burned me. He had no idea. And I didn’t think it his business either. We did the best we could and didn’t need him to tell us how we weren’t doing it well enough.

When Mom finished unpacking the groceries, she sent the intruder to the car to bring in her bags. Someone watching would have thought she just gotten home from a long trip, just in from the airport and happy to be home. Ready to put her feet up after a hard day traveling.

She chattered as she moved and I followed to her room while she lugged the heavy bag. She moved efficiently, putting clothes into drawers and talking about the

things she had seen like it all had been planned. I felt like I should have prepared for her arrival, like a movie star or a long-lost relative.

The fabrics that she pulled from her bag were nicer than those she left with and each one was a piece I'd never seen. "Where'd you get all that?" I asked.

"What Hun?" She said it absently before she continued unpacking. "Oh yes, I almost forgot. I got you a present. Well, Gary and I did really. You know how it is." I didn't. I really really didn't.

She reached into a pocket on the side of her suitcase and pulled out a silver-plated locket. She held it up to the meager light coming in through the small windows high on the wall, and the look on her face begged for me to admire it and stop my questioning.

One tiny jewel ornamented the locket, wedged like a tiny speck at the middle. You would have thought the tiny space inside contained plague for as much as I wanted to reach out and touch the thing. It hung between us, like the infinite space between our understandings.

She held it out to me, then changed her mind and undid the clasp.

"Hold up your hair," she said. I was caught. I couldn't just throw it in the bottom of a drawer somewhere and forget about it now.

It was exactly what I had wanted. When I was Charlie's age.

I bubbled over. "Where the hell have you been? You have no idea how hard it's been and no way to get ahold of you." You'd have thought I never said a word. She didn't blink, look at me, or even pause for a moment as she moved on from the trinket to finishing her unpacking. "Mom, we've been scared. Hungry. How could you just leave like that? We wouldn't even know if something happened to you. You wouldn't know if

something happened to us.” Something could have. So many times, something could have. But I had been there to make sure it didn’t. She had learned to rely on that and now she knew that she could.

“Look, I’m here now, Bella. There was food still in the cabinets, so you’re just being dramatic again, aren’t you? I knew you could handle it. And everything is going to be fine now. We will make sure, won’t we? You and I?”

“What about Charlie? Do you know what this has done to him? Do you even care?”

“Well, see it’s going to get easier to take care of Charlie now. He needs a good man in his life, someone to show him how.”

Oh no, not this speech again. I could probably quote it back better than she could. “I get it, but don’t you think time with you is what he really needs? His mother?” I looked up at the ceiling and tried to keep the welling tears from falling down my cheeks. What we both need, mother?

“We should go back out and join the boys. Don’t want them to miss us for too long now, do we?” By boys, she meant Gary. She didn’t really care what Charlie needed.

I don’t think she knew what to do with Charlie. She was bad enough with me, but where he came into it, as a boy with boy problems, she’d always been inept. She’d shuffled him from boyfriend to boyfriend, hoping that somewhere in there, something manly would grow, or maybe fester. Some image of what it took to be a man.

Problem was, she picked men for characteristics that had nothing to do with the things that she ended up expecting of them. Pick up a trucker and expect him to suddenly find a way to stay at home whenever she wanted him to. Yet, she was heartbroken each

time when they failed. I knew that I looked at her with a flavored sarcasm, but I figured it was my right. There was nothing new, nothing but the same scene played out over and over, like she'd gotten stuck in perpetual repeat.

Charlie sat at one end of the couch, perched as far away in the room as he could manage from the stranger sitting at the kitchen table with a book and notepad open, pen poised.

My mother walked slowly around the room, examining, cataloguing almost. She picked up a knickknack and turned it over a few times, staring at it without really looking at it.

I knew that look. She wanted to tell us something we wouldn't like. Big surprise since she showed up with 'Gary'. She glanced up and caught me studying her. Her face may have looked like mine, a larger and more elegantly cut version, but our thoughts had to be far apart. I hated her in that second, a white-hot ball clenched deep in the middle of my body, and I held on to it as I braced for what I knew she would say next.

"Belly, Charlie, we have something to tell you. That we need to talk about." She sat down on the couch, not touching Charlie but close enough that he could reach out and brush her with his fingertips if he tried. There was no motherly gesture, arm around his shoulders, or even a glance as she looked instead at Gary. "You guys are going to have a new daddy."

No big surprise, and I jumped at the chance to yell at her, just like she expected from the way she braced and raised her chin. "Just because he's your boyfriend doesn't make him my daddy." I glanced away when Gary looked at me. I didn't owe him anything.

“Annabelle Elizabeth, you watch what you say. I won’t have that kind of talk in this house.” She got up and walked to the window, staring out at the bleak landscape. “It just so happens that Gary here will be your new father. We went and got married and we’re all going to be moving to his place just as soon as we can get this place all squared away. Just a matter of getting the adoptions put through. One big happy family.” She said it straight-faced, like she wanted to believe it too. Something bubbled up in my stomach, threatening. “And just a few days packing and we can all have a new life together. Won’t that be great?”

I couldn’t say anything. I hadn’t planned for this. It wasn’t what she had done every other time around. Why was this one any different? Why should we have to change our life for him?

“Where?” That was all that I could manage.

Gary answered instead of my mother. “I live about twenty minutes from here.” He paused as if trying to decide what facts to give us, what could put him in the best light. “My house is about four times the size of this place and plenty of room for all of us. Big yard too.”

“In town then?” I asked the question and hoped for a different answer.

“Sure is. Right in the middle.” The pride in his tone as he talked about himself was nearly visible, it hung in the room between us. Excitement lined his words as he stood and walked to mother, reaching out gingerly to hold her hand. She let him. “It’s near the best shopping, great school, you name it. You should have plenty of friends there, soon enough. I even thought we’d sign you up at the ballet school down the road. Your mama just raved about your dancing.”

Yeah, I'd loved to dance, and I'd dreamed of being a ballerina. When I was like 5.

I backed up one step at a time until I hit the wall that separated the bedrooms from the hall. The trim dug into my back until the pounding in my head was too much.

My head got light and heavy in turns, and I almost fell as I tried to balance myself. It was too much.

I turned and I ran. Out. Out of the house. I ran through the yard, through hedge and into the neighboring yard. I passed the pond that bordered both and ran into the corn field at full speed, my feet only briefly touching the ground. Broken corn stalks littered the field and dug into my feet, but they didn't slow me. I couldn't feel them as the pounding in my head took over. How could she? How could I?

I didn't slow until I reached the forest. The familiar crunch of leaves under my feet soothed me in a way that nothing else seemed to. As I crashed through the first row of trees and brush, the urgency, the need to flee, was replaced by plodding steps. The energy left me, the need replaced by crushing thoughts. I walked, kicking up damp piles of leaves and watched the way they would cling to my foot like an anchor.

I felt at home here. How could I give it up? Who would I be giving it up for? I lashed out, kicking at the nearest tree, and I whimpered as the pain shot up from my wounded ankle. I fell over, more to save myself the extra pain than in necessity.

I laid on the damp ground, and threw out my arms like I would in snow, to make an angel in the leaves. I stretched, dug into the dirt, leaves, and the earthy smell of wet ground. And there, curled up in the dank leaves, I cried.

I sobbed until I couldn't anymore, until the only thing left were the hiccupping sobs and a numbness. Finally came the quiet. I steadied my breath and lay there, taking in

the mixture of decaying plants, fallen trees, and brush on the ground. I reached out and grabbed a handful, then brought it back to my face. The damp tickled my nose, but I breathed it in. I wished that I could somehow smother myself, take the choice away and replace it with this quiet moment. Just here forever. But I couldn't do that.

Charlie. What about Charlie? I was sure that they would do the best for him for a while, until they got tired of living out someone else's dream, but what then? What would happen when Gary finally tired of mama's neurotic ways? Or the temper that would strike with no warning? Had he even seen it yet? She was good at hiding it when she wanted to, at least for short periods, but at some point, mama would become mama again, and then where would that leave us? Was there some kind of annulment period on adoptions? Would he realize his mistake and run?

I stood up and brushed myself off. I thought about staying there, hidden, until they came to search. Charlie would be safe for now. At least there would be food for him tonight, even without a fish to fry up.

She could take care of him for one day. If I could reach the top, they would never find me. I propelled myself up into an old oak tree. It was one I often climbed, and it stood out from the others, even deep inside the dense patch of trees. It stood far taller than the rest, and it had been my favorite since I'd started exploring this forest when we had first moved to the area. One branch hung down, and it stood out like an invitation, easy to grab and swing up on.

My feet hung for a moment and I kicked at nothing in particular, just feeling the air against my skin. I sat there on the lowest rung and tried to make out the creek beyond, barely visible through the tree limbs. Then I reached up to the next branch and climbed.

I hauled myself up, hand over hand, until I could see only branches below me, no longer the ground or anything but the tops of neighboring trees. The lower branches were great to watch for animals, but I really loved to climb higher. To the top, until there was nothing keeping me from reaching out to the sky. I used to think that if I called hard enough, my dad might hear, when I stood on those top limbs, swaying, while I reached my arms out to the stars.

I reached until I thought I could grab one of the rays of sunshine and put it in a bottle for later, it was so bright. I closed my eyes but I could still see the light, bright red. I filled with it, breathed it in until I felt nothing else, nothing but that calm bright sunshine. Deep breaths and only the birds to fill the quiet. I'd kick something later, but for the moment I wanted to think.

I climbed down, back the way I'd come but in stunted movements, nothing like the climb up. I stubbed a toe and skinned both arms when I swung too far. My fingers reached for the next branch but I felt only air. My feet dangled and my hands threatened to lose their hold, but I reached further. This time my hand hit something solid. I swung over.

I'd come too far to go crashing to the ground. My foot found a hold and I eased my weight to that leg, away from the sore ankle.

When I jumped from the bottom branch to the ground, my leg reminded me that I should have swung down the last bit and carefully eased to the ground, but I still felt much better than on the way up. I still felt the sunshine on my skin and the warmth seemed to radiate from my clothes.

The river near the bridge always looked dirty and washed out, the kind of place you expected to see shanties pop up beside the weeds. Lately a few families had taken to living in the area, free range, choosing instead to set tents deep in the woods. I passed a group of them, as I had many times before, and I didn't even call out a greeting. They wouldn't have answered anyway. They were careful, setup after dark and tent gone before sunrise. During the day they seemed to travel from spot to spot along the river bank, searching for their next night's home, but generally looking to be left alone.

The group walked with eyes downcast, the mother and daughter nearly indistinguishable in their grimy frowning faces. I wondered if the dirt were a mask, saving them from someone who would reach out and take anything of value. There was likely a weapon, of some sort, secreted in the folds of their ratty clothes and layered rags, but there were so many ways to protect yourself, and their clothes were probably only the first layer.

Paths lined either side of the bank, trampled over with years worth of curious feet. I followed the marks until they ran out, but I kept walking to our own hidden spot. I made the mistake once in trying to talk to those people, offer them a bit of our meal or a hand, and what I got in return was a cold stare and the feeling that I had instead offered my pity. The families didn't take to outside help, and I stood forever an outsider to these people. I wondered how they ever hoped to move on, if they only relied on themselves when they had nothing else.

The ramshackle groups stayed separate from the teenage partiers, and I avoided both now. I walked further away from the noise of their meager civilization. The path I

followed didn't lie on the ground, pounded out by restless feet. Instead, Charlie and I had set up little signs, things most people would never notice or pay more than a second's glance. A carved out rut in a tree near the bank, the stump of a felled sapling, or the rocky pile that looked vaguely like a lion's head, set to roar at intruders. Best plan was to walk far away from that last sign, as snakes loved to sun themselves in the various crevices.

A copperhead poked his head up, and I slipped past with gentle unhurried steps. Sun glinted off the shiny head, and I felt the tiny eyes on my back until he laid down again, when I'd gone far enough to assure him I wasn't after what was his. The river bend was just ahead.

After several more signs, the forest widened away from the river in a rough half-circle and I slowed down. The best part was a tree that had fallen over the water but continued to grow. Its branches hung down to sweep the water and break the surface into uneven ripples that looked like the ripples of fish just below the surface. Life lived here in ways that it didn't at home. There were no unfinished edges and raised voices, only the river and its gentle roar.

We'd never seen anyone else at our special place. If anyone else did use it, they cleaned after themselves. Most of the places down river where the fishing would have been great held dirty remnants of past visitors. Bottles and trash alongside the rushing water. Our little bend was untouched except for what washed in from further up river, and we worked to keep the place nice.

Charlie and I had pulled up the newer saplings and cleared the brush away, planted flowers we moved from other parts of the forest. Once I'd even thinned the new plants our neighbor had planted so that I could bring a few to plant here. Most of them

had died, but the few that survived added something more to the place. After two years, the place had taken on the feeling of a second living room for us, like it was filled with family photos instead of rocks and trees.

The tree over the water spanned about three feet across and I could easily walk along it.

I climbed out to dangle my feet above the water. I sat down with a thud, and I almost slipped off into the water when my leg slipped faster than I had meant.

I caught myself and settled down to dip my toes into the water. I kicked and splashed, feeling my toes sink into the rush and pull of the current. Usually Charlie would have been with me. The forest stayed quiet here and the small roar of the water against the rocky banks provided a soothing sound. We both loved to sit for hours, and Charlie would often take my pocket knife and carve shapes in the tree beneath us.

I rubbed my fingers along the jagged marks. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we just stayed silent.

If I had believed in magic wholeheartedly, I don't think it could have prepared me for Charlie to walk out of the woods, exactly the way I remembered. He walked towards me, in his dented boots and scuffed knees, and I wondered if I'd finally lost it, the way the psychiatrists with all their clever, careful questions had always hinted would come, if only they watched me long enough.

I rubbed my eyes like an apparition could just be snuffed with the simple gesture. But I watched him walk, and I heard the crunch of each step. Charlie wasn't a dream, or a ghost, or even more frightening, my own hallucination. He walked to me, eyes down and shoulders hunched.

When he got to the tree, he pulled off the boots and tossed them to the side. He climbed out to sit beside me. I reached out to touch him, at first it was only a finger, but when I hit solid warmth, I grabbed his arm so tightly I thought I might hurt him. I wanted to shake him, but I didn't quite know why.

Instead, I put an arm around him and leaned over to put my head on his shoulder. I held myself rigidly until I thought that when I finally let go, I would spin out of control like a top loosened at high speed. Would I bounce, break? He curled in beside me. I spoke first.

“You shouldn't be here.”

“Figured you'd be.” He said it softly, almost under his breath and I had to lean in to catch it.

“Mom with you?” Had she let him come alone? “Waiting in the car or something?” Or was she sitting near the bridge, with her fingers tapping against the steering wheel, just waiting to let me have it?

“Nah. Wouldn't listen to me any. Yelled some after you ran out, kinda quiet like though.” Charlie looked out at the water. “Gary and all.”

“Gary get angry?”

“No, he told her to calm down. And she went and sat by herself until she did. You should have seen it.”

I reached down to scoop a handful of water and splashed him.

“Not funny,” he said.

“Was too.” I smiled while he wiped the water from his face, then reached out to tickle him, but he scooted away.

He frowned. “You want your present or not?”

I sat straighter then reached out my hands and closed my eyes. I smiled and puckered up like he’d kiss me, though I knew he wouldn’t. It was an old game between us. He would bring me anything except the kiss I asked for.

I peeked a bit and watched while Charlie reached into his pocket. He pulled out a sausage roll, then a small bag of cookies. When he placed them in my hands, my eyes were firmly closed. I opened them on cue, gasped and hugged him. Him feeding me. The sweet gesture spoke so much more. It reminded me of the night I woke to the blanket thrown over me and him curled at my side, fast asleep on Mom’s bed. I’d fallen asleep crying but thought he was long asleep.

“Hold on. One more.” He motioned for me to cover my eyes again, which I did with an exaggerated gesture and a sly smile. He reached into his pocket again and pulled out my favorite pocket knife. I’d left it in my rush to get dressed this morning in its hiding spot at the bottom of my dresser drawer. Charlie handed over the knife.

I smiled at him and he rewarded me with one back. I felt better immediately. The weight of the familiar blade in my hand. It was something about that and Charlie at my side. Like an old friend whispering encouragement.

I sliced off a large piece of the sausage and handed it to Charlie before I got my own. We nibbled, thinking more than actually eating.

“What do you think?” I’d started it and wished I hadn’t when the words passed my lips. But it couldn’t be held in forever. He looked down at the water and reached out his legs like he would scoot off his perch and jump in.

He shifted to glance at me. “Does it matter?”

I looked at his skinny legs, covered in scratches and bruises. “It does to me.”

“What difference does it make what I think? You’d still think the same.” He looked away, across the water. “Try to talk me out of it.”

I couldn’t say much to that. He kicked the surface of the water.

I sat there for a minute without a reply, but then he stopped and looked up at me.

“But,” he said. The word stretched out, like he didn’t want to let it go, like somehow saying it made it more real. Maybe it did.

“He seems well...he seems okay.”

My turn to be non-committal. “Hmm...” I wasn’t sure where I stood, but a burning resentment sat in my stomach when I thought about the man in our house, poking into cabinets like he owned the place. “What about dad?” I hated to think it. I hated to ask it. But I couldn’t let this man take the little thing I had left.

The silence was a long one before Charlie spoke. “It isn’t like he’s coming back.”

He’d said it. It hung there. It rolled back and forth between us.

“How can you say that?” I wanted to scream it but it came out in a whisper.

He shrugged. But it was full, shaped by memories. Of learning to ride our bikes down the old country road, with dad to help when we fell. Of sledding on the city streets on snow days, with dad at the wheel while the toboggan followed wildly behind. We’d gone home half frost bitten the last time and mom stormed while she warmed our fingers. Until he’d kissed her, and she’d giggled. He always had a thing like that, like he could make anyone happier just by being near him.

It felt like saying goodbye all over again. When our father died, I secretly thought it was my fault. Not that I could have stopped the tick that finally made his heart give out,

but I'd grown up on fairy tales. In the stories, if you loved enough and believed hard enough, miracles happened and they always came back, always made it through in the end. And I believed. Oh how I believed. I looked, for so long, for him to walk through that door, but he never did.

And the thought crept in that I didn't love him enough. Somehow, the times that I'd been bad, the times I'd been difficult had caused it. It became the secret I held, it was my fault. And when Mom's sharp glances and temper spun out of control and she stormed out, unable to handle us, constant reminders of what she'd lost, I'd thought that was my fault too. Sometimes I still believed it, but I tried not to. I tried.

He looked up at me.

I wanted to deny it. I wanted to make it untrue, but I couldn't, no more than I could save the turkey Charlie had wanted so badly to give a second chance. It just was.

I knew that I was caught. I'd stepped into a future already laid out, a web of overlapping pieces, where each tug shook the whole in unpredictable ways. When dad died, I tried to make it better, best I could. Mama needed me.

I reached out and hugged Charlie again, despite the burning comment that still hung in the back of my throat like bile. Charlie didn't deserve that. He deserved the chance at something better.

There would be food. And the chance at a father for Charlie.

I stared at the water and wished that a fish would jump out of the water and into my lap. Or some other sign that this was what I should do. Maybe a lightning bolt. A flash flood.

But the sign didn't miraculously appear, and I still sat there and stared at the water while I tried to decide what to say. Was it selfish that I still wanted to say no? To scream that I wouldn't, I couldn't. To run, to fight, to do anything but what they wanted of me, they, as if it was already done, and I had no say in the matter. But that was just truth. We had no say.

And Charlie thought it was okay. Could that be the answer? Somehow give in?

"Let's go home Charlie." No fish to take home and fry. Soon no trees, no river, no stream and field beside the house. Take what I have. "Mom's waiting ." Despite our tiny house, there was so much to miss. The pond out back where I'd skated. The tree where I'd hung the prize from my first hunt. The garage where we'd flushed out a nest of baby rattlesnakes. The swing that hung from the tallest tree in our yard. When I got it going fast, the horizon felt like something I could reach out and touch. To rise at dawn and go wherever I pleased. To hop on my bike and ride away, with Charlie at my side.

Could I want her to leave us alone, to go away forever, at the same moment that I burned to hug her and cry in her arms? To feel her stroke my hair?

But it just was. I couldn't leave him.

As much as I wanted to deny it, I couldn't leave her either. There may have been a world between us, but somehow I understood. She had to, just run away, and climb as far from the things that hurt as you could go.

Charlie reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Love you Belly."

"Love you too Bug."

THE ACCIDENT

“You stupid bitch,” he said as I eased from the car. I staggered, trying to catch up while my feet ran out ahead of me. I felt drunk, like the world and I were out of sync.

I felt the bruises forming along my forehead and collar bone where the wheel embedded only moments before, but he ignored that. I tried to brush the hair from my face, but when pain spiraled up, I let the hand fall again, and the sensation slid away into hazy undertones. I tried to hold on to that feeling. Something real in the dusky moments, but the pain ebbed away, leaving only numbness in its place.

He and I stood at the edge of the scene. My hands stopped shaking as those seconds of disbelief began to fall off, to litter the ground alongside the explosion of broken plastic bits. His truck barely held a dent, but the car in front of it sat crumpled like a crushed can.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he asked, spitting his words like little daggers, and I imagined each one, its path straight, pricking with impact. “Just stopping out of nowhere,” he said almost screaming. “Two perfectly good eyes. Jesus woman, why couldn't you use 'em?” Fists at his sides, his face stained crimson, and his shoulders drawn up like a cork ready to fly. I'd been waiting for this moment, anticipating it, if only as the end to unbearable waiting. The moment before the storm hits and you can only hope that it will lose interest, turning away to strike elsewhere. I hated the brunt of rage, yet I loved the heat of it.

There was something real in it. That strained emotion creeping up. The kind that could strangle until it leapt from the throat and threw itself forward whether you liked it or not. When one had seen it, really seen it, it couldn't be faked.

I knew what he saw. I even knew what it was he would despise. What he would blame. I stared in the mirror often enough. I have a look, more girl than woman, and they always focus on the height, the delicate features. Mom had always called me her little china doll. On that day, I'd played it, the pen-spring curls around my shoulders and the clothes that hung on thin bones. The wide-eyed look was easy, the benefit of an uncaring appetite, but keeping my mouth shut if I paid any mind to his words was much harder.

This week my hair was dull auburn, the color of dirty copper on the street. When I saw this one in the motel mirror, I got this thought of pennies, the ones you don't pick up, worried you'll dirty your hands more than find a free treasure. Yet you see it. It stands out against the pavement, caked in grime that would only rub off if you took the moment. Instead it's undertow, trodden into forgotten remnants of the city street.

The contacts made my eyes darker, like the moist earth right after rain. The man never looked at my eyes.

"It's your damned fault. You hear me?" he said, stamping back and forth, his fingers worrying a pack of cigarettes. Sooner or later he was going to crush them.

"Yours, dammit. Nobody stops at a railroad crossing like that. Nobody but a goddamned bus, and that thing," he said pointing at the mangled compact, "is not a bus." The back end of the car sat at least a foot closer to the front. I thought of its gleam, only

hours before in that earliest morning light, like an Easter egg nestled in the garage. I really hadn't wanted to pick that one. If it'd been my choice, it would have been the pale sandy one. It reminded me of the beach.

“You were too close,” I said, but it came out more of a whisper.

“Too close. You were going under the freakin speed limit.”

“I'm sorry.” The first thing I thought to say. It kept repeating in my head. Only a little past 6 in the morning and already this day stretched on like a desert. I felt dry, a brittle husk.

The man kicked at the gravel, digging in. “I'm in a hurry. Now, I'm going to be late, damn it. My wife is going to kill me.”

I tried looked at him instead of the savage car, but all I saw was average. Not tall, or short. Straight, brown, and unremarkable. Slacks and shirt, no tie. Wrinkled. Middle aged, ugly plaid shirt. The most interesting thing about the man was the string of punctuating profanity. It gave him some color. And the angry eyes. The deep golden-brown of a barely lit abyss.

I liked the eyes.

“Look,” I said, interrupting him, “let's just exchange info and we can take it from there.” His mouth shut, in the middle of whatever he'd been spouting, and despite the widening around his eyes, he nodded.

I went to get the insurance information from the car and I walked slowly, stretching out each step.

When I got to the car, I sat in the driver's seat and reached over to open the glovebox. Couldn't do it right. Just couldn't. I should have made sure I never left the car. Would have been so much better that way.

I could barely walk back, but somehow I managed. Before I knew I'd taken a step, I was standing back at the spot, waiting for him to return as if I had never moved at all.

When he came back from his truck, he held a slim folder of papers. He'd already fished out his card and he paused to hand me a scrap of blank paper. I sat the torn sheet on the rail of his truck bed and copied from the card.

The tired grooves in the bed-metal poked up through the white surface of the paper, leaving an imprint as my pencil moved over it. "I called a tow truck," I said. "Be here soon, sounded like. Not too busy first thing on a Sunday morning, I guess."

"You call the cops?" he asked without looking up.

"No," I said. I wished we didn't have to do that part. "I guess one of us should."

He fished a cell from his pocket and called while I tried to get my fingers to cooperate with the pen. He paced down the shoulder towards the car, gesturing every so often with his free hand as if the person on the other end could see.

I stared at the gravel far below the road that lined the steep ditch running beside. I could picture my body lying there, mangled, beautifully silent against the still ground. If only I'd left off the belt.

But no. That would be giving up.

"They're on the way," he said when he'd finished several back and forth processions.

I hadn't written much. Only a few letters. "Insurance company won't be open today." I gave the line. "So we can call those tomorrow and get things figured." I knew neither of us would. "Your truck really held up, didn't it?" I asked.

I tried to keep my hand from shaking.

"Sure did. Don't make 'em like that anymore." The pause lengthened while I tried to think of something to say. I'd never been good at this part, and my tongue kept stumbling over any starting thought. But he surprised me by taking the pause as an opening.

"Had this truck for some time now, and she's always been good to me." He actually patted the truck.

"I should get something like that next time. Safer anyway."

"Something like this is safe as you can get, I figure. Those little cars just can't take anything." His anger seemed to evaporate in the sunlight. Keep him talking.

“Yeah, I never wanted that car,” I said as I looked out over the tumbling landscape. The still air was reverent and untouched in the early morning, and dew still hung like raindrops from the grass lining the road. No cars, no people, just him, me, and the scene. I sighed.

I felt outside of everything yet fastened to the spot. It was like a rip cord that held me in place -tying me to everything and everything to me – so that when the slightest tug came, it threatened to turn me inside out.

“Well, here's your chance for something different,” he said. “Don't think you'll be driving that one again, might as well go for something new.”

“I might just do that.” I dropped off and stared down at the sheet of paper. I tried to concentrate.

Marie F. Xavier

I wrote slowly, but my arm didn't want to cooperate. It kept trying to write other words.

The tow truck came rolling over the hills at our backs. Moments later, I heard the first faint wail of sirens. I concentrated on the landscape and tried to catch myself before I flew away.

The short mountain range inclined for as far as I could see, one topping another like children fighting for dominance, a crush of indistinguishable ends and beginnings.

The wind raced up my shirt. I took a deep breath, held it, then gave it back to the stillness outside.

We were soon surrounded by lights, motion, and noise. People murmuring as they milled around, useless until the prior claim finished their portion of the work. But step-by-step, the scene was secured, examined, and let go on its way again while we played our parts. The cop questioned and wrote down what we said. He copied down the words from my own small slip of paper into the fat folder at his hip.

“Yes, sir, I understand.” I tried to sound convincing, but I couldn’t concentrate on the words coming from his lips.

I stared at it. The folder in his hand. He kept flipping it open, referencing it for some fact or another, closing it again, and tapping it as he talked.

That folder held other people's lives. Their accidents, failures, and forgetfulness. I was in one of those folders somewhere, many months and states away.

You have to understand, though I don’t know if I can even begin to explain. The police don't deal in convivial currency. They are not the rescuers of small animals and grinning children. They deal in the death-makers, the deepest urges of our forgotten past. Theirs is a life looking at the dark with face forward. They know what the human mind is capable of. Our shod feet may no longer feel the soil, but we still know it’s there.

When the cop finished with his questions, an emergency man looked me over and declared that I would live. He recommended a visit to the hospital, and I was deeply sorry, but I couldn't accept.

So he cleaned and bandaged. And let me go.

The car was loaded and the tow truck waited to carry me with it. The man with the angry eyes had gone, then the ambulance, and finally the policeman shut off his lights and pulled away.

It was only us again.

I went to climb into the tow truck cab, and it took me several tries without the use of one arm. When I finally got settled into the seat and pulled the door shut behind me, I held my breath.

“Jesus, Selena, you really mangled this one.” I didn't bother to reply, reaching instead into my pocket.

“You did good though. You got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.” I handed over the sheet of paper and tried to ignore it as he stroked the edge. Something in his look reminded me of a gluttonous spider. Luring them in, and as they cringe, the knowledge of the inevitable sinking in, the spider's smile. And I was the one to spin his web.

I pulled out a thin blanket from behind the seat and pulled it around my shoulders. I settled back, and closed my eyes, breathing deep now. I tried to calm my beating heart.

It wasn't working. Each breath brought me back. The truck smelled stale. There was a shut-up smell of old cigarette and a faint hint of something else. I moved my feet, trying to find a comfortable space amongst the drive-through trash and plastic bottles, but I finally gave up, drawing my legs up to my chest. I wrapped my arms around and held tight.

We were both silent as he pulled the tow truck from the curb and we left behind the littered remains of the scene.

"You have to talk sometime, Selena."

"No, I don't," I said.

"But you just answered me."

"Answering is not talking. Talking involves a conversation." I stared out at the passing world. We were moving through some small town along the way. They all had long looked the same. A collection of buildings where people stayed behind their walls trying desperately to believe the world didn't exist. Truthfully, I wasn't sure we had a way. That would insinuate a final destination or an ending.

"Can we stop at a station?" I asked.

"Be a pretty poor life, with no conversation," he said and laid his calloused palm on the arm I had stretched around my legs. His thumb stroked the flesh.

“I could manage,” I replied. Damn my smart-ass mouth. It had always been a weakness. I didn’t say anything more, just concentrated on the passing horizon, a blur of green trees. They could have been Christmas trees, lit up with silver bells and tinsel, and I wouldn’t have seen.

“Do you really want me angry? When you did so well?” That agitated twitch in his fingers.

“Please,” I said. I wished that word hadn’t passed my lips so many times before. “That’s why I didn’t want to talk.”

“Maybe you haven’t learned after all,” he replied. “We’ll have to start again, and you know how much time it takes,” he said. He pulled his hand away from my leg and began drumming it lightly on the wheel. He had an air of confidence as he drove, his chin up, and his eyes focused. The subject had no effect on his concentration. “Maybe it can’t be helped.”

He looked so normal as he sat there. Jeans and a long-sleeved T, shaggy-brown hair concealing a mostly handsome face. Only the eyes leaked. They spoke of secrets and horrors, so he wore sunglasses.

I pulled the blanket tighter. “I don’t understand why all the trouble for a simple name. I mean I know we’ve talked about this before, but why not just a telephone book or something? Why do I have to look them in the eye and play like it’s just another day? Why can’t I pick a receipt from a trash can or something? Wouldn’t that be simpler?” I couldn’t breathe for a moment, the air sucked from the words I spoke. I realized how

ridiculous the question was. “What am I saying? Do you even know the meaning of simple?”

“Because, dear Selena, that would defeat the purpose,” he said in that flat tone that never failed to amaze me when he spoke of shattering lives. “That part *is* simple really.” It was his turn to take a deep breath, choosing his words carefully as I knew he did each step of this seemingly random journey. “People should have some hand in their fate. Don’t you think? It’s as if they bump up against it every day but they rarely even realize it’s there. Life, I mean, is like a trance that they move through, just going through the basic motions after a while. But there are little moments that stand out, where they actually touch real life.” Some of those bumps have sharp edges.

He continued on, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know anymore. “Those moments can even have the power to reach out and take everything, everything you ever thought or were, in a whole new direction. But you know that.” His voice changed, deepening. “The world is so much bigger than they could ever dream. The moment, only a hiccup in the relation to the whole. But someone’s life is changing, right now. So when we take that, especially someone else’s moment, then it’s bigger than yourself, making them into something else,” he said. He paused to take a cigarette out and touch a flame to its end. “So when you come into their lives, you are their angel. Redemption and destruction all in one. And they made the choice.” He glanced over. “They took the steps, in whatever sequence, to that place, to me, and so free will brings them to fate, and I am but the messenger.” I knew he was looking at me but I wouldn’t look back.

“You’re a devil,” I whispered. My hand shook as I tried to block out his words. I’d known I never should have asked. I didn’t really want to know.

“You may be right.” He looked over at me for a moment. “You made your choice, you know. More than the man you met today, more than the woman last week, or the ones before that. You made your choice. I gave you that.”

Had he? I almost couldn’t remember, as if the months had stretched out into endless tracts of lonely highway dotted by a blur of small town diners.

“We’ll stop here at the next exit.” His hands gripped the wheel, and he shuffled the map back into a half folded position. “You need anything?” I had almost forgotten I’d asked.

We’d established a strange kind of routine, and I knew the steps well enough, going through the motions as he put it. It would be the same as the last hundred or more stations. I went in, taking care to look away from people and walk straight back, following the sign for the bathroom.

I spent my few minutes scrubbing at the patches of bare skin I could reach around the edges of my clothes. It was actually a good deal of me with the wispy dress.

I moved quickly. I’d learned that early. If I took too long, he would get antsy and I knew I’d pay for his mood.

He waited for me near the front doors of the station. He’d picked up various supplies we’d need and somehow managed to go to the bathroom too in those few

minutes. He was always there waiting, no matter how hard I prayed that this time, always this time, someone would recognize him, call him out for what he was. But he would wait, his face away from the cameras, but casually unassuming and friendly. No one ever seemed to suspect the calm, smiling man.

So I finished my business, grabbed the drink he handed me as I neared him, and followed him to the car.

He spoke first. "I think another few miles or so this way then we'll head north again." I didn't act surprised, it was always something like that, one giant puzzle of intersecting lines as we headed back and forth, in a seemingly endless pattern of jagged lines. He reached out to touch me, laying his hand on my leg in the same spot that he had earlier.

"If you had a choice, what would you pick?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"If you had a choice, what would you do with your life? If you could pick anything."

That was a trap. I could never answer that question in a way that made sense to him. I searched for a way out. "End it," I said. The words sounded, even to me, more flippant than I'd meant. It was the only threat I had and I'd just given it up, cheaply.

“You mean kill yourself?” His fingers tensed. With his thumb, he started to draw jagged little circles until the skin burned from the motion. “Why? There’s only eight months left.”

I wouldn't look at him. “I don't know who I'll be in eight months,” I said.

He sighed and pinched the soft flesh of my thigh, “It's not so long.”

“What if I don't even recognize her?” I threw at him. I pulled my leg back just enough to let him know it hurt. “It *is* a long time. Enough to start a life, certainly enough to finish one.” Did he understand that? When my older sister had lost her first, nearly eight months in, I'd cried harder than I'd ever remembered. It had seemed like the ache would last forever, but in reality it was only days. I'd never understood how my feelings must have been only a sliver of it, how she must ache.

I knew nothing. Of course we all know that, but we don't really believe it.

“But you're young,” he said. He took his hand away as he turned onto another road.

“Am I? I don't feel like it anymore,” I said as I let the last sixteen months catch up. What happens when you don't know yourself anymore? I'd always known that what you see in the mirror is just an image. An outer self. On the inside, I was a writhing mass; I couldn't separate. I couldn't find myself anymore within it.

It was as if an alien slumbered under the surface of my own skin, and it threatened to unleash itself and eat me at any moment. It was about control, and he should get that. It was a fury under the skin, closest to the heart. It would writhe at the strangest of moments

and threaten to reach out and take me in hand, shake and strangle. It's about the choice he dangled in front of me like a carrot to a starving man. What would I do with it?

“You don't like that I won't let you go,” he said as if that was the answer to everything.

“Yes. No, there's more than that,” I replied. “It's supposed to be my choice. At least something. I kill myself a little each day.”

“What?” he said, glancing over.

“I've left myself behind.” I grabbed the edge of the seat and squeezed until it hurt. “There's something I used to think was me,” I paused. A little girl lost, a woman left. But with what? “I had this image in my head of what I was. Only an idea, what I wanted to be, who I thought I'd end up. And I just leave more behind.”

He sat up straighter, listening.

“I used to believe there were boundaries. That I'd never cross some line, but I'm further over the line every day.” I pushed my legs out, touching the dashboard in front of me. “I don't feel like me anymore. I don't know where I'll stop. Where the edge is. I haven't just changed. Haven't just bent those boundaries. They're gone.” I'd moved them like a train through a glass window, and I couldn't even find the slivers anymore.

“You've learned something.” He reached back out to touch me.

“Maybe I have. Your grand experiment and all, right? Everything is relative, and only that is absolute,” I said, mimicking.

“That's correct, love,” he said. He relaxed against the seat, and I laid my head back again, closing my eyes. He'd be quiet for a while now, while he thought about it. I gave him more in those few moments than I should have. But it felt good to let it out, and who else would ever understand.

The night that he took me, I thought it the worst possible thing. But that, I found, was only relative to the person that I'd been.

I've always loved the dark. Even as a young child, I'd take any chance to be outside after sun had fallen through the trees and cast the world in gray. The night he came, the sun seemed to set earlier than usual, pushing people into their homes to shut out the dark. I hated how everyone went home at sunset. It thought it was silly, that I shouldn't have to listen to such things. I was sixteen, and I thought nothing scared me.

I'd lived in a small suburb my whole life. It was a mostly quiet place, where the big event each night for the local cops involved tracking down curfew violators or an occasional domestic disturbance call. I'd kissed a few boys and drank a few beers, but for the most part, I was on the mellow end of the local kids. I didn't cause trouble.

My parents practiced their sleep religiously, more religiously than they did anything else, so when I shimmied from my window and dropped barefoot to the ground, I wasn't worried they'd hear. My shoes and such were strapped on my back, and I set out walking the half mile to the local pool hall.

I planned to meet a few friends. Many of the local teenagers, mostly the ones without interested parents, spent their late nights there, some playing the game, some just

playing each other. I'd stop between houses to pull on my shoes before darting down the street. Usually someone would have picked me up, and we'd meet beneath the old pine tree at the bottom of the hill, but that night, I'd wanted to walk. I'd needed to think, so I had set out to find an answer.

The night was warm, and not particularly humid for Missouri in June. I walked along an open stretch before I'd cut through the houses at the next block. The ground was soft, the grass a good cushion.

I'd worn cut-off jeans, the too-short kind that you secretly hope the boys will notice, while acting like you couldn't care less. I also wore my favorite shirt, cut low enough to show off the top of my new bra.

When I saw headlights, I didn't bother to hide. Cops rarely drove this road, and when the lights slowed, I figured it was my friends after all. The car pulled up, and a man rolled down his window. He looked slightly familiar.

"You need a ride?" the guy asked. His handsome face was reflected in the glow of a streetlight, but I only glanced over as I continued to walk.

"No thanks," I said, "Don't have far to go."

"Hey, this may sound silly but haven't I seen you around before?" he asked.

"Not sure, you from around here?" I asked, looking at him a little more from the corner of my eye as I walked.

“No, not really, just in town for a bit to visit family,” he said, shaking his head. “Hey, maybe I saw you down at the rec? My cousin took me there last weekend and maybe that's where I remember you from.” The rec pool hall was a popular place, and I spent a lot of extra time there.

“Could be. I'm there a lot on the weekends,” I shrugged, playing cooler than I felt, “during the week sometimes too. Probably head there later.”

“Come on, I'll take you, and you'll be there before you can blink,” he said. He had one of those easy smiles, like he smiled at everything and was used to everyone smiling back. The car idled in the dark, and I considered.

“Why would you want to give me a ride?” I asked.

“Been trying to do a few good deeds every day, and the day's almost over,” he said with another smile, “Nah, I was just thinking of heading there. Play some 8-ball and work on my angles. Not much else to do around here. So what do you say? Want to help me out on today's good deed?” he asked. The smile got wider.

“I don't know you,” I said, trying to remember who he'd been with when I'd seen him, but the thoughts were vague. Piling into the endless nights spent racking balls and looking for a straighter cue.

“How do you ever meet anyone new if you never give a stranger a chance?” Well, he certainly had a brain, and his wit in a town like this was something I could appreciate.

“You have a point,” I said smiling back for the first time.

“So do you want a ride, or should I go on, catch you later?”

“I don't know. Got a lot on my mind right now. How 'bout I catch you there?” His smile toned down a notch but stayed tight.

“Not a big deal. I'll go on, and you can act like I never asked. You don't even have to talk to me later if you want, I'll just leave you alone. Your choice.”

When he put it that way, I really didn't want him to go. I wanted to talk more. “I don't mind if you talk to me. How about I challenge you to a game, and you can collect when I get there?” I was starting to feel silly for not just jumping in the car.

“No problem,” he said smiling back, “That sounds great to me. So what's your name, before I go?” he asked.

“Selena,” I said.

“Nice to meet you Selena, I'm Aaron.” He gave me that easy smile again and mockingly put his hand out to shake mine. I laughed and he pulled it back grinning. “See I knew you had a laugh in there somewhere. Have to try for a few more of those before the night is done,” he said.

I was smiling and laughing to myself as he drove off.

We dropped the wrecked car thirty miles from the morning's accident. The building on the dusty spot was small, corrugated, and fronted mostly by windows. The wreck hit the dirt with a scrape of metal to accompany it.

The graveled lot left prints and by the time I finished helping him set the car down, my pants were mosaiced with handprints. I wiped them one final time and climbed back into the truck. Time for breakfast and to wait out the day. Even if someone got suspicious, we'd be on well our way before anyone could even start to figure it out.

“Ok, I’ve got a joke for you,” he said as we sat waiting for our food at a small country diner, “So a couple of hunters are out in the woods, right? One of them suddenly falls to the ground. His eyes roll back, and he’s barely breathing. So, the other guy whips out his cell phone and calls 911. He starts screaming to the operator, “My friend is dead! What do I do?”” Aaron stopped to take a bite of his omelet and a swig of coffee before going on.

“So, the operator, in a calm voice, says, “Just take it easy. I can help. First, make sure there's nothing to be done; is there a pulse?” So the guy goes to check on his friend. There's silence and then a shot. The guy’s voice comes back on the line, and he says, “Yep, he’s dead alright, now what?”” Aaron laughed like it was the funniest joke he’d ever heard.

I just looked away.

I couldn't laugh. Tonight, someone else was going to learn about fear. Another life for a policeman's folder. Another life rearranged. I almost wished I could laugh at it. Let it out somehow.

After breakfast, we scouted. The house sat in a quiet suburban neighborhood with trees lining the streets. Duplicate two-storied homes sat close around the cheery yellow house. A small fence ran the border, and mums grew in pots by the front door. My mother always grew mums in the fall and I remembered her telling me that it took strong roots to survive any part of a Missouri winter. Where were my roots now? Had I cut them off altogether or were they frozen somewhere beneath the surface?

An alleyway ran behind the homes, connecting them to the ones behind. This was a neighborhood full of flowers and children's toys, and I found myself praying to a god I didn't believe in anymore.

We waiting out the day like buzzards waiting for their meal, circling, slowly coming closer, until the moment was right.

"So do you think I could drive you home?" he asked, smiling at me when we finished what I'd declared would be my last game of the night.

“Wouldn’t want my friends to get the wrong idea and mistake you for my boyfriend, now would we?” I asked. I was grinning and bulletproof.

“Like you haven't ignored them most of the night already?” he asked, pulling the balls out of the pockets and lining them back on the tray to take up to the front. “What do you think they're going to say?”

“Well alright,” I said, “since my reputation is ruined anyway.” I laughed and grabbed my backpack from under a stool. “I'll run up and pay.”

“Since I'm driving, I'll let you pay this time, but next one's on me.” He grabbed his leather jacket and swaggered over to play a video game while he waited for me.

“What makes you think there will be a next time?” I shot back over my shoulder, not bothering to look back.

When we made it to his car, it was later than I'd expected.

“Can you just drop me a block up from where you saw me earlier? On Elm?” I asked.

I pulled off my backpack and slid it into the floorboard in front of me. I reached down to grab my phone to check for messages. When his arm came over, grasping a syringe, I didn’t even see it. I felt a jab, and before I could jump, he pushed the plunger and the world went misty. I had barely a moment to think how stupid I'd been before my head hit the dashboard. I never felt it.

When I woke up, it was bright. Every lamp was on, and my eyes wouldn't focus. My neck felt stiff. When I tried to move my arm up to shield myself from the glaring light, it wouldn't move.

I remembered Aaron, the pool hall, and then the moments before I'd blacked out. I started thrashing, trying to get loose.

"You can't get out," he said. The warm voice held a hint of amusement, and it scared me to know it was at my expense. I couldn't see him from my side, tied as I was, my hands at my back. It probably wouldn't have mattered anyway since I couldn't see straight. "Time for us to talk, Selena," he said.

My brain was working slowly, and I couldn't understand what was happening.

"It's the drug," he said, "it will be the last time you'll have to feel like this, if this goes well. In the end, I want you to make me a promise." He reached out and stroked my leg. I couldn't see his hand but I felt the fingers circling my flesh. "But this is only the beginning, so I'll start slowly."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I wanted to promise him anything, if only he would let me go.

"While you were sleeping, I went through your bag. I found your license, Selena. I know you. I know where you live," he paused, "Do you love your family, Selena?"

"What are you talking about?"

“Answer the question Selena. Do you love your family?” I hated that I couldn't see him. Somehow it made me even more exposed. Vulnerable.

“Of course I do,” I said. I shivered and he pulled a sheet up over my legs.

“I know you don't understand sweetheart, but you will. Just be patient.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, my voice cracking like ice in hot water.

“I'm going to make you a new person. You're going to be my great experiment. You're going to make me a promise, and I'm going to make you one.”

“What kind of experiment?” The words were coming too close, running over each other.

“Who's at home, Selena?”

“At home?” I asked. I was having trouble keeping up.

“Yes. Who's at home, right now? Who's sleeping in their bed, unaware that you're here, with me?”

“My mom and dad,” I said. He didn't need to know about Emily.

“Is that all?” he asked, his voice soft. He reached out then, touching me again, his hand stroking under the sheet, one finger tracing a line up my bare leg. He settled his hand on my thigh.

“Yes,” I shrieked.

“Selena, I want you to think about this very carefully,” he said, stroking my leg now, “You really don’t want to lie to me. Who else is at home?”

I thought of the family snapshot in my wallet. God, I was stupid.

“My sister.”

“That’s right, Selena. And do you love your sister?”

“Yes,” I said, trying not to break open and let the weakness pour out.

“It’s ok, Selena. Go ahead and cry. You may need to,” he said. He took his hand off my leg and walked around the bed to stand in front of me. “I won’t touch your mother, your father, or your sister, if you promise me one thing,” he said, taking off the sunglasses he’d worn all night. He dangled them in one hand so the only thing I could see were the glasses taping again the leg of his pants.

“What do you want?”

“First, you have to know I’m serious. If you don’t obey, I will hurt them. In ways you can only imagine right now. Do you believe me?” He moved down to kneel in front of me, and for the first time, I could clearly see his eyes. They were black, nearly the color of midnight, with tiny flecks of gold, and despite the shiny specks, I felt cold just looking at them. There was something very wrong in those eyes, like standing at the bottom of a well where the light doesn’t go and you’re afraid of the things that come slithering in the dark.

And I believed that he would hurt them. I believed that he would hurt me. “Yes,” I said, not only to give him the answer he wanted.

“You give me two years,” he said, still staring into my eyes. “Two years in which you do everything I ask you, without hesitating, without thinking about it. You do what I tell you to, and I won't touch them,” he said.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. I didn't want him to see me cry. I didn't want him to know he could make me.

“You see, Selena, you're going to be my prodigy. My legacy. I'm going to make you a new woman.” He walked away from me, where I couldn't see. I only heard shuffling. “Why?” I sobbed.

“Because I can,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“What do I have to do?” I asked.

“Everything, my dearest. Absolutely everything I ask.”

That night I learned about fear. That night I learned about pain. And I was afraid. He'd been so easy going. “I'm going to untie you Selena. And you are going to do everything I ask.” The lazy grin that couldn't match the horror of the words. His hand moved further up my leg.

When the dark finally settled, and people would be in their beds, Aaron turned the headlights off and we pulled into the alley behind the house. We sat there with the windows down, listening and watching the night around us. When no one stirred and he gave me the sign, I eased my door open, and followed him on the narrow path. The slightly overgrown grass tickled my bare ankles.

I almost tripped over a bicycle thrown down near the steps. It was a young girl's bike; so much like Emily's, and I had to shut out everything to keep walking.

He had a gun. Usually, he kept it locked in the safe in his trunk, but on nights like this, he'd have it ready. I knew that it would find its way into his hand, and that before we reached the door, he would be a different person from the one who had sat and smiled through the day. Earlier at dinner, he'd laughed just like anyone else.

The back door wasn't locked. He didn't even have to pull out the tools that I knew were rolled somewhere under the leather coat. I hated that they hadn't felt the need to lock their doors. That they trusted enough that no bogeymen really lurked in the dark. Not that it would have kept him out, but the glass bowl was about to shatter around them, and there was no way to prepare. I knew when they went to piece it back together, nothing would ever fit again.

The child was my job. I knew it was the only way to make sure she stayed safe. He made sure I knew. So I crept through the house with him in front, to find the room with the stickers in the window.

He would go into the parents room, always taking the man first. There would be a needle in his hand, much like the one in mine, and he would thrust it into the neck, quietly as he could, pressing down the plunger. He expected me to do the same.

The little girl's room was pink. Even in the night's shadow, I could tell that frothy shade of pastel that touched almost everything. The carpet was a pale shade; the curtains, the same. The nightstand, lined with pink ruffles, was littered with nail polish bottles and magazines. The walls were plastered with posters to cover almost every inch of the flowered wallpaper print. It was a room where a young woman was beginning to push out the girl. Plastering her over to form something new and exciting of her own.

I glanced at the bed and I realized there wasn't anyone in it. The cover had been thrown back, and the pillow lay empty. I let out the heavy breath I'd held since pushing the door open, and almost sat down on the bed as my body let go of the rock at my center. I wanted to curl up on the floor and cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to jump from the window. But I turned around to continue the job.

Before I'd taken two steps into the hall, someone screamed. A high-pitched shrill sound that echoed in the still house. I ran towards it.

Down a short hallway to the last room on the left. In the few short steps it took to get there, the scream stopped. Only a short one, but it had startled me so much that my hands were shaking.

The room was dark, but when I peered in, I could make out two forms huddled over a large lump at the middle of the bed.

Aaron stood in the far corner, the gun in his hand pointed at the women, and he glanced over at me as I entered.

“She’s in here,” he said.

He was shaken. I could see it. It was there in the way he closed in. The barely distinguishable hunch of his shoulders and the way he held the gun. He couldn’t hide it from me.

“I see that,” I replied. The room loomed dark, furniture barely distinguishable against the walls. I walked slowly, kicking something out of my way to avoid stumbling. Despite being already accustomed to the lack of light, the room appeared darker than the rest. Only a thin slice of moonlight found its way into the room and fell across Aaron’s face to highlight the tense set of his mouth. He’d taken off the sunglasses as he left the car earlier, but I couldn’t see his eyes in the shadows.

“The mother’s a light sleeper.”

Someone sniffled. Probably the girl.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked, hesitating to do anything.

“Pull back that curtain just a bit, then take these,” he said reaching into the back of his jeans and pulling out two sets of plastic cuffs, “and get the mother first. She’s a damned hellcat.” For the first time, I noticed the bleeding scratches on his face. Lucky he hadn’t shot her. I shuffled over to the window, kicking things as I went, until my foot

snagged on something and I staggered. I caught myself and pulled the heavy curtain so that the moon highlighted the room.

Lucky for who, I wondered. The woman? Aaron? Me?

I couldn't tell where the line fell anymore, so as I grabbed the cuffs from him and walked towards the women huddled over the man; I just did what I was told.

“I won't hurt you,” I said.

I didn't know what else to say.

“Please,” the little girl said. I saw her face then, streaked with tears. Her red hair was pulled back into a pony tail and there were cartoon figures on her shirt. She couldn't be more than twelve.

I closed my eyes and took another step towards them.

“Stand up,” I said to the woman. She hesitated, looking at her daughter, and then down at her husband.

“Get up, bitch,” Aaron said, stepping towards us with the gun.

“Please, don't fight him,” I said, “it will be over quickly if you just don't fight him.” I wished there were tears on my own cheeks, some way to let out the pressure.

“Do it. Or I'll make your daughter pay for it,” he said, taking another step towards us, waving the gun like it could force her to move. He got real close, and I could see the

shivers of anger and excitement warring just under the skin. He grabbed her arm, trying to twist it up and under in that horribly immobilizing move. I knew that one and it hurt.

But she pulled her arm out in time, twisting her body under and away. She dodged him, ducking when he swung at her. She moved off to the side, and he followed her, his body twisting to stay in sight.

And she swung at him. Her fist contacted with his face with a solid thud. I caught the tinge of blood as he stepped back.

Something on the floor tangled him up and he lost his balance, falling to the side. He grunted and threw out his arms to catch himself. The woman jumped back, scrambling to the other side of the bed. She pushed her daughter behind her back, making motions to the girl to go for the door. But the girl only stooped behind the older woman, clutching handfuls of her mother's sleep shirt, trying to bury her face.

Aaron grabbed for something to stop his fall but only managed to turn over a small table beside the bed, sending a lamp and other things crashing to the floor.

He sat on the ground for only a second it seemed. But I saw the shock. The surprise. I wished I could make him look like that.

He lunged, from sitting to standing in moments, fury in motion. He grabbed her again, hands around her neck, pushing, until they both contacted the wall, her back hard against it. He shook her, the force coming from his shoulders, and his hands tightened on her neck, squeezing. He began to beat her head into the wall, over and over, harder with each motion. I just stood there staring.

The woman swung at him again, a wild throw to the side of his head, but it contacted. Her knuckles met his ear, and he threw a hand up for cover. She sprang back, and a kick landed on his shoulder, sending him to the floor again.

He hit the ground hard, dropping the gun from where he'd wedged it in his belt as I heard it clink against something. I could see his determination for blood, taking over where cold logic had been; he was going to make her hurt. He lunged at the woman and grabbed her by the hair, dragging her back across the bed. The little girl screamed as he picked the woman up, almost above his head, and threw her against the wall.

She slid down from where she'd hit, halfway up, and didn't move from where she landed. He stooped to grab her again. The little girl hurled herself off of the bed and onto his back. He screamed.

He reached back to pull the girl off and managed to loosen her enough to swing her over his head, ripping her hands from around his neck.

He hurled her onto her mother, who laid still on the floor, and took a step towards the girl. Then looked back at me. The idea was in his eyes before mine, but I was closer. He tried to get to me and stumbled again when his foot got caught. He lunged forward, and crawled towards me like a prone hunter, but I lunged too and grabbed the gun while he grabbed my legs. I twisted my body and leveled the barrel at him.

“Let go,” I said, “and don't ever touch me again.”

“Selena, what do you think you're going to do?” he asked. “You don't have it in you. I know you better than anyone.” His hand crept slowly up my leg, inch by inch.

“You're wrong. You don't know anything about me.”

“You know you'd miss me, baby,” he said, flashing that famous smile.

“I'm not your baby,” I said. I was shaking, my finger tight on the trigger. He moved back, still holding my ankles at first until he finally let go and stood up. I scrambled up, only about a foot from where he stood.

I looked at the little girl, huddled over her mother, and found her staring at me. “Close your eyes,” I said. “And everything will be alright.” She did, burying her face into her mother and sobbing.

“Where do we go now, Selena?” he asked. There was a light in his eyes that I'd never seen before. I wondered if there was one in mine that he wouldn't recognize. Maybe.

“You go to hell,” I said. Just pull the trigger and put him there. Just pull the trigger. He smiled at me. The edge of that crooked grin I'd come to know so well. The night he'd come, I'd seen that smile.

I remember the first time I saw it. Make this the last. Make it.

“Selena, give it to me now, or I swear your sister will cry harder than you ever have.” His hand reached out towards me, and he took a little step forward. I shook harder, and the gun seemed to rattle against my hand. I tried to hold on tighter, but it only made it worse. I looked at him, the smile still there but wary now. He stepped further, but instead of grabbing for the gun, he hit me, hard across the face. My head snapped back and I

dropped the gun, knowing he was right and I didn't have what it would take. Even now, in this moment, I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. As the gun hit the floor, I knew I had lost. I'd gotten my chance, and I'd given it away. There was nothing left, an empty shell. I felt myself being thrown backwards to the floor. His hands around my throat now. He squeezed, and I couldn't pull in a breath. I felt it bottling in my chest; it burned, and his fingers tore at the fragile flesh as they squeezed harder. So this would be my end. Would he go now for Emily? Would she feel the fear? I didn't even fight, my hands limp as I begged for this to be the end of it. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't save myself; how could I possibly save her?

An explosion, and his hands released. My eyes had been down, tracing the tracks his boots made on the carpet, and they leveled to stare up at the girl. He slumped to the side and she stood there, the gun nestled in the fold of her small grip.

She never looked at me, in that space of moments, her glare steady on his form, watching for some small movement. Absolutely ready to shoot again as the tension of her body gave way to small shudders. At first it was just in the arms, but when she tried to hold steady, her body fought.

Her arms fell back in a move that left the barrel wedged beneath her chin. I stared at her, unable to compel my own tired limbs into movement.

I stared up at her. Minus the gun, you would have thought she was praying, her slender fingers curled round, intertwining.

You picked wrong Aaron. I was never the angel, and I knew it with certainty when I saw her, in the fierce gaze of the girl. Despite the trembling, I saw it, in the set of her shoulders, in the stance, and most, in the steely eyes. You can't make something when the seeds are just not there. She still watched him while I laid my head down on the carpet, blocking her out of my vision.

He didn't move. He laid there, bleeding out onto the dark carpet, and I curled in on myself until his head nestled near my ribs. His body was slack yet warm.

I closed my eyes again and could feel tears on my cheeks, though I didn't really remember when they started. Crying now, but for who?

Her. Him.

Me?

Was it for me? Was it for the girl who would never be a girl again? Or was it somehow for him? For the thing I had known these past months, the only semblance of life? I curled at his back and shivered, cried, while the girl held the gun trained on both of us.

I closed my eyes tightly as I could, until I saw the roaring fireworks dance against my eyelids. I wondered if there would be a moment when I could ever be outside of this again. I wondered a lot of things as my mind ran ahead of me.

I wondered if my mother would recognize me.

WINDOWBOXES

“Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life, we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Nathan never much cared that people thought he was strange. It wasn't a secret, like the whispers about the protestant minister's wife who visited the local butcher late at night or when the dark-skinned couple had been run out of town. In the seventeen years he'd lived in the town, people had gotten used to seeing him about the streets, keeping quietly to himself, and lately, pedaling that contraption from sun to set.

The quivering mass, at best, looked rickety. Nathan rode through the still dawn with a look of a one-man-band. Or maybe he more resembled a vagabond as he struggled to make it home with his latest find. The lanky seventeen-year-old tightened his grip on the massive street signs fastened to either side of the peculiar bike, and he barely looked while he fought hold on to his load.

He struggled along the dusty road and the metal slipped a little more against his damp palms. Two thin straps, which had earlier been suspenders, held a no-crossing sign to one side, while his belt held a 25 MPH one close on the other. At each bump in the

country road, Nathan winced. The winding path drifted off into the distance long before he would finally reach the edges of town again, and he was already tired despite the early hour.

The road, once a crackle grey, gave way to gravel in this area, and it sprayed him with bits of stone as his tires tore at the deep ruts in the road. He winced as a sharp bit came up, and for a moment he loosened his grip.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Nathan rubbed his face on the edge of his collar, and he grasped again for the bottom edge. He strained to hold on.

His feet sought to keep balance while the bike's already precarious weight fought him, and he struggled to keep everything from slipping out of his grasp.

The two-wheeled wonder, as he liked to call the bike, had been his project the summer before. He'd poured over books, acquired welding supplies, various metal parts, and other miscellaneous objects in the bike's construction. In a little over a month, he'd finished the project, and in all, the lumpy-grey contraption was his own. It sat heavy upon three thin wheels, two welded box frames and his small seat above in an attempt to save room at the back for his collection crates. His legs hung through the frame to reach the pedals at either side of the front wheel. In all, the bike was ugly but workable, and he managed to peddle up and down the city streets, if not in style, at least in the world of his own.

Frost coated the autumn hues in shiny ripples, but he didn't take time to notice. His jacket collar stood up against the wind but icy currents of air ran down the front of his shirt anyway.

Nathan stopped the bike and tried to get one of the signs wedged back under his arm. The thing just wouldn't stay. With a quick glance at his watch, he knew there was no choice, he had to go. And he couldn't bear to leave them now.

A half mile on, he rode into the driveway. He dug his heels in, pushing his weight backward, but the signs carried the momentum and he struggled to jump off without crashing to the ground as they heaved forward.

He was unstrapping when the thin brunette woman came roaring out of the front door.

"You've lost your damned mind," she said, slapping the white church gloves against her hand. "Where the hell where you? I get up and can't find you anywhere. That bike of yours was gone or else I'd have had an attack. And just look at you....you....," she said as she looked at him for the first time since he stepped off the bike.

He stood before her, eyes downcast, just taking it in without a word in defense.

"What do you want those bullet-ridden signs for? Where could you possibly put them in that mess you call a room? And to do this to me on Sunday?" she said without waiting for an answer. "What would the lord say about your lack of respect? What is wrong with you, Nathan? How could you do this today? You had better be dressed in ten minutes and in that car, or I swear..."

She let the thought drop, leaving unsaid what she wouldn't any other day of the week. He knew it would begin with how lucky he was, that she had kept him at all, that he hadn't gone to an orphanage. She always made sure he was clothed, had food in the cupboard, and a warm bed. But sometimes he wondered if that was enough.

Before she could throw out another word, Nathan ran up the stairs. The plan was to pull on a pair of slacks, replace the lost suspenders, and drag a comb through his hair. Instead, when he raised the khaki pants over his knees, he suddenly stopped and he slunk to the bed. He buried his forehead in his lap and breathed deep, just lying there for a moment in the silence.

He lifted his head and looked at the person staring at him from the mirror. What was it about that image that made people believe him to be something? To be somehow what they expected, without the chance of taking him at what he was.

Nathan looked at the boy in the mirror and he tried to see himself as others did. His mother had once said that if cleanliness was a sign of god, then Nathan was son to the devil. He knew the old accusations. To her, he appeared morose, somber, silent; his hair unwashed, unruly. His button down shirt stained, unkempt, wrinkled. It hung loose on a hollow frame; so loose it looked as if purchased for someone else, a thrift store find, a hand-me-down.

His look was gaunt, tall in a way that emphasized the elegant bone structure and the heavy-lidded stare. If spoken to, the boy would reply only with downcast eyes and a sigh, and to his mother, he often gave no indication that he had heard at all.

To him, he looked like Nathan, and this room, and no other, was his semblance of home. And his home overflowed. Everywhere you looked there were things, to look at, to read, and to just admire. It was part museum and part child-like wonderland of the macabre. In one corner, there were Spanish cedar cigar boxes; beside, a rack of weathered felt fedoras. Crates of tattered LP's stood up against the grey of the interior in such a way that they overshadowed every movement in the room.

A small unmade bed lay opposite a short-drawered vanity. Beside that, the LP crates were stacked floor to ceiling in a pyramid shape. A small space at the middle of the stack, half the size of the window behind it, brought in the only light for the small room. The effect cast the room in pewter tones, grays spun out in swirling hues of drabness as if the room had been torn from an old black-and-white photo album.

The walls themselves were lined with newsprint and jagged photos ripped from magazines; each piece pasted atop another in a wild mosaic. In one spot, a tattooed rock star shared half a nose with a fierce-eyed Brazilian model, and nearby, a ladies lingerie ad shared a space with a cartoon character.

Everywhere the room was filled, spilling its contents. The few bookshelves were neatly divided between books and still more boxes. Some stood open with little pots of paint, one puddled out with scraps of felt and bits of string, and yet another held the sloughed husks of long-gone cicadas. At some point years before, Nathan had scoured local pawn shops for secondhand guitars and other instruments that caught his attention. He'd resurrected the art of bartering at fifteen, and the result had been a dented drum set, three guitars, and a tambourine piled along one wall. In another corner stood a saxophone

and a clarinet. He'd ridden a bus for hours to purchase them from a shop over a county away.

The only shelf in Nathan's room with empty space held his Balalaika, an elaborate 3-stringed guitar-like instrument. He'd bargained the unusual piece away from an old Ukrainian woman in late winter as she roamed the city streets. It was his treasure, and he'd gotten it for a few strands of shells and half his hard-earned cash.

He'd worked odd jobs, bartered a buck here or there, and generally scrounged to save everything he had, and he'd always thought the instrument worth the trouble. He'd taken to strumming it when his mother worked late and the house was his own. It was like him in a way, different in little ways that matter, little ways that set him so far apart.

Since then, he had saved much more than that meager hoard and the instrument was still his favorite.

Nathan looked one last time in the mirror and bowed his head, murmuring, and before the watch alarm warned him of the minute, he was at the door and ready to go.

The incense at mass had always bothered him. The pungent smoke was cloying, blinding. It made his eyes water, and his throat burn. He would often struggle to suck in air, knowing the look his mother would give if he fell to the floor in a fit of sneezing, as he had twice before. He would often pray as he entered, "... mea culpa, mea culpa,

Blessed Virgin spare me her shame." The look his mother would give, the same look she had given many times; as if this moment would be the one to confirm her fears. One moment to condemn him for eternity.

The congregation's priest entered from a side door and walked towards the people quietly waiting for his guidance. The church had lost members over the years, as most small town parishes such as his had, which resulted in many open seats between the families scattered around the large room. But the believers remained, and those who were brought here by the believers. Nathan had often struggled with his faith yet it remained the thing he knew the best, at the heart of long nights filled reading holy books and everything else he could get his hands on. The result was that he could talk to few people, not that he often lamented that loss, but it left him with even more time to study and wonder.

The priest was splendid in a bright red chasuble running almost to the floor, majestic as the people expected a man of the lord's own wisdom to be. He paused to dip his fingers into a basin of water and made the sign of the cross near his heart. He bowed his head, and Nathan caught a few words as he strained to match the motions to what he could hear from his place two rows away.

Nathan only managed to hear a short phrase before the man moved on: "and thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow," before the bright man walked to the center podium.

The congregation fell silent as the priest knelt before the altar, starrng up at the ornate cross hanging at the back wall. Nathan looked up at the man, transfixed, and he forgot the sneeze building in his throat.

Nathan saw that today there was no celebrating in the priest's eyes. There was no smile for the room, only a thick stare, a heavy breath, and a sigh.

“My brothers and sisters. I beseech god to give us light to pierce this deepest dark,” the priest began.

“We must give our thanks for what god has done, but we must yet ask for more. With the strength of god's light at our back, we push our steps to the precipice and bring back the world's unwanted children. Little happens in this world without a context, and today I ask you, my brothers and sisters, to join me.” On this day, the priest spoke not of love or charitable virtues. This day, he spoke of darkness. He insighted on pain. “There is much dark in the world. Much pain, suffering. There is lovelessness, for oneself, for one's brother. For life.” He stood before them, growing louder and more intense with each intonation. Many people moved, fidgeted in their chairs, but Nathan sat up straighter, listening closely.

“We must not stay here. The need for human charity, the light in this dark abyss, is real,” the priest boomed, and the words sank in, as if he spoke only to Nathan with each breath.

The sound vibrated through the room. “This great gift I offer you is not for securing power over your consciences or to even to relieve the strain on your troubled

souls.” The man towered over his congregation, utterly unlike the solemn man Nathan had spoken to only days before. “It is the survival of our society. It is the very thing that binds us together, that makes us great, that divides the human from the animal.”

He paused, looking around and taking a deep breath.

When he began again, it was softer, solemn. “Man can give, or instead take the easier route and turn away. Ignore, forget. Look past those in need around us. But we can't. We are the examples, the lights in the dark that lead others. We must seek the pardon of those we have forgotten, those we have walked past, those we have chosen not to help.”

“Repeat after me,” the priest asked as the people sat around the room, wide-eyed and staring at the unfamiliar landscape. This was not the man they were used to. Many of these people had known the priest for a lifetime, brought by their own parents as babies, baptized within the stone walls. But this man was unfamiliar, and Nathan, as well as every other person in the room, listened intently.

“I confess to almighty god, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and most, in what I have failed to do, those I have failed to help; and I ask you all, my brothers and sisters, to pray for those in need, for you, and for me.”

The congregation was struck. Silent.

Nathan broke the still, speaking out, "In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit." Heads turned, bodies moved, the sound distinct in the silent room.

All eyes turned to Nathan. He froze, realizing that he had spoken aloud and prayed that the look on his mother's face wouldn't mirror his own.

The priest saved him, answering, "Lord hear our prayer." The words brought attention back to the front, breaking the tension in the room, as the congregation intoned as one voice.

After the service, Nathan walked with his mother through the front doors. He looked up at the cross that had brought him both comfort and pain on so many nights. How many nights had he sat and studied it against the night sky? How much comfort mixed with pain could one symbol give?

"What has gotten into that man?" his mother remarked, more to herself than to Nathan at her side. "I've never heard him speak like that, why...did you see the way he startled the old Jensens? They looked ready to up-and-leave. Just walk out in the middle of a sermon."

Nathan failed to hear her, lost instead to his own thoughts. He too wondered what had bothered the father. He considered the man a friend and he worried that he had laid too much upon the priests shoulders lately in his search to say goodbye.

As it was, many nights Nathan would slip from his bedroom window, dropping from the rail to the ground. Long after those still awake believed that everyone else was asleep, he learned the flow of the darkened streets. He enjoyed the way the lamplight poured one to another in an endless stream of golden light, but most, he liked the dark that fell at the edges. He would walk along in those patches, skirting the edges of light, as he studied everything. Some nights he would sit near homes, outside windows and just listen to the night movements of people in the town. Other nights he would bring a book and sit beneath the old cross hung high in the night sky above the church. He never caused any trouble, and so the few people who had seen him on those walks saw very little reason to bother to investigate further. They preferred to move on. And so he kept up his walks, sleeping only in patches and hours borrowed from his studies.

The air often had a heavy quality in these low Missouri mountains and would swirl around in smoky rings of cumulous air. He often imagined that the rings were made of tiny arm-linked skeletons, dancing at the edges of everything, just waiting to add him to their night waltzes.

On many nights, his pulse matched the gentle ebb of the neighborhood devoid of people as they slept soundly in their beds, and the young man would fold himself in the mantle of the silence as he strolled through the streets. Nathan first followed the priest late one night he sat near the old stone church. Nathan stared up at the long arms of the giant cross atop the building. Somehow the symbol was both beacon to the weary and a warning to the wary. He was fascinated by the way it outlined against the violet night sky

and had almost missed the leaving shadow as it slipped from a small side door. But Nathan had seen him.

Nathan had followed him, at a safe distance, and often sought to follow him since, observing the holy man and reveling in the shared but separate experience of the night walks. Nathan would never speak, never approach closer than necessary to keep the priest in sight, and he often would slip away and move further up the priest's path just to secret himself to watch the man walk by again. Nathan felt a power in that moment that he never had before. This man, who had been a spiritual anchor throughout his life, guiding him as his mother pushed from behind, into all that he was supposed to be. Some days he felt it, the calling, the only security and warmth he could muster in his assurance of its set-down rules and lessons. He knew where he stood in the pages of the book. It was his mother who always made him unsure.

Only the week before, the priest had stopped during a walk, tilting his ear to a mellow wind and calling out for the first time on one of his midnight treks.

"I know you're there," the priest had called. "Please come out."

When there was no reply, the man had continued, "Who are you? Obviously you mean no harm or else you would have done it already." He took a step toward the shadows concealing Nathan. The young man sat huddled against a tall stone wall which surrounded an apartment building beyond. The priest walked slowly from the lamplight to the dark pools that always left the question of what lurked in the unknown.

The older man took small steps, reaching out a hand almost as if to an unknown dog that might bite or run depending on a moment's thought.

“I've believed you needed the darkness. You've followed me for a reason, but it's time to end this. If you need help, I will do what I can. But I can't do anything if you won't ask.”

Nathan hesitated. He thought about turning to run. He thought about dashing under a bush and crawling until he surely wouldn't be seen. Instead, he'd stumbled forward from the shadows at his back as if he'd been pushed.

“My son,” the priest whispered as Nathan stepped towards him instead of whatever he'd been expecting. “Why are you here?” Nathan stopped a few feet from the man as both age and youth were highlighted in the tint of an overhead light. The priest was plainly dressed, his long grey chasuble touching the pavement, and the crucifix at his neck reflecting none of the light from above.

Nathan also blended with the night. He wore all black except for the small silver crucifix at his throat. One of his hands reached up around it as he stood before the priest.

“It's a comfort,” Nathan said.

“Why would you need the darkness, Nathan? Why aren't you at home?” the priest asked, catching the boy with the use of his name. The address made him uncomfortable, as if again separating him from the shadows.

Nathan's lips trembled, and he tried to speak but the first sounds he made were incoherent. The priest waited, only weathering the edge of his robe between two fingers.

Nathan tried again. "The dark can't reject, it can only add to itself."

The priest paused, stopping suddenly in mid motion and looking at the boy closely as if the answer he sought might somehow be written there in the shadows of the boy's face. "I don't understand," the priest said as he ached to reach an arm out to the boy in comfort. But a priest could no longer touch someone in comfort. It was almost always misunderstood and he had no time for such nonsense in his endless battle to regain footing for his belief in the minds of the world. He was, at heart, a man who only wanted to help those around him. To provide a way to ease their passing through this world. He knew it was truly an endless battle, yet he tried.

"It's the only thing that understands," Nathan said. "Everything else is a show, but at night, no pretensions. No one to expect."

"Has it been so bad for you my son?" the priest asked in gentle tones. When the boy didn't answer, he continued. "You know, I've known your mother since she was a little girl."

Nathan said nothing. Even from this distance, over a mile away, his mother overwhelmed him. He feared to speak, not sure if he wished that the priest would stop, or that he would go on.

"I was so young," the priest said, "I had just received care of the church." He

paused, sighing again heavily. “They all went here, her parents and her sister, your aunt and grandparents. Your mother, she was only 16, so young, when she went to live with her aunt,” he said.

“Why did she do that?” Nathan asked before he realized that he had spoken aloud.

“She never told you?”

“She doesn't tell me much of anything. She doesn't believe in the past.”

“But the past makes us who we are today,” the old man said, drawing in his age like a mark of a war hero, like age and intent somehow made him different from other men.

“Will you tell me?”

“I'll tell you what I can, but not tonight. It's very late, and you should be at home. Promise me you'll go straight home, and get some sleep. I'm ready to head in for the night and get some myself. We can talk soon.”

Nathan wasn't sure what he had expected, but some part of him was let down, and another relieved. He had waited so long to know the answers the priest said he had and would even give him. Yet he wondered, was the knowledge the same no matter the source? He just wasn't sure.

Nathan walked inside after church and went straight to his room. He walked inside and locked the door, then sat down to unload his pockets.

There were walnuts and shells from the church lawn. Beside that fell the oddly shaped rock he had found in the parking lot. A church flyer. A pilfered candle stub. A small wooden disk found on the restroom floor. A hem of embroidered fabric. He took each item, and placed them in boxes before he sat down at the small desk, removing and relocating several large items from the top of his workspace, before getting to work on his newest project.

The agile thinness of his fingers helped rather than hindered here, moving over the small box in front of him as if set to music. Each movement was sharp and precise, as if he didn't have to think at all as his fingers just made each leap. But his eyes weren't shut, only half mast, as he squinted into the recesses. Today, his Sunday project was to carve up several small wooden blocks from the row lined up in front of him. His shoulders hunched over, as if reading from a book set on the desk before him, but he straightened every so often and took in the whole before moving on, satisfied.

Nights when his mother was home from work, they had dinner together. On Sundays, she never worked; it was the one consideration her job gave her without threat of taking it back again, and her routine took the same plodding steps on each of these days regardless of month, weather, or personal inclination. He dreaded these dinners, wishing instead he could have heated something quickly from a can and take it back to his room, in peace, to continue his work. Instead, he walked down the stairs at the given hour, with heavy and unhurried steps. He walked in at the normal time.

The room was nice enough, though it never quite made him comfortable. He would never sit here to work on homework, not that there was room amongst the formal placement of dishes and other junk. Six plates laid out in neat lines, though they only ever used the two. The others, she made him wash once a week, and he resented the empty chairs that only emphasized the empty room.

Pictures hung one to a wall, and the grandfather clock stood perfectly center the far one. The unadorned oak table took center over a simple rug, with its formal setting as the only burst of extravagance in an otherwise simple setting. The effect tended to remind him of a strange shrine, and these meals immediately set against them in expectations, long before they had even begun. He sat and waited for her.

The meals consisted of plain food. Tonight: boiled chicken, rice, peas, and fruit. Sometimes a pudding or such for dessert if the week went well for her, but he learned not to expect or even hope for such treats or else it would be longer until he saw them again. They both ate sparingly, like birds, and they picked, took long moments to chew. It may have been an attempt to decide what to say. Words should be uttered at meals, whether he wanted to or not, and mostly he got away with saying very little. She could take one idea and ramble on for minutes before lapsing into long silence again, and he was occasionally expected to give some kind of thoughtful response, an indication that he listened to what she said. In reality he would listen for short moments, just enough to get the gist of what she was saying, and let her go on for a bit before coming back to find some point to make a useful suggestion or helpful comment. And of course there were the pauses, where he

would usually just shake his head, and she would continue on as if she only needed the tiniest encouragement to be secure in her belief of the subject once more.

He ran as soon as she took her last bite. He would gather the dishes and quickly and without complaint wash the dishes, dry them, and reset the table. Then he ran back up the stairs to get a few moments of sleep.

When the night had spun out its drab sunset and settled into a reverent violet, Nathan slipped out of his room and to the street outside his window. The dark unfolded and wrapped him in its blanketing touch. The church loomed, no comfort like the shrouding blackness, and like the aphotic depths of the ocean, he took it in, giving nothing back.

Nathan hadn't sought out the priest since the night he'd been called from the shadows. But he had waited long enough for the answers, and Nathan couldn't get the priest's startling outburst of displeasure with his congregation out of his head and he wondered if his own confession could have caused the outburst. Nathan had spoken to the priest quite directly in his longest outpouring ever, soon after they had finally spoken on the streets earlier in the week, and the young man's harsh estimation of the situation shook the priest's composure enough that his hand trembled as they grasped each other's fingers only enough to give the illusion of a greeting. Then the older man had turned away and walked to his own study to think. Nathan went home with only more questions.

On this night, for the first time, Nathan entered the door the priest often left from. He followed the dim hallways, his footsteps loud on the marble floors.

The air felt heavy with spent incense but not overwhelming, only a sift as the years of his life fell through. He passed the confessionals, the gilded monuments of pain, and he knelt before the sanctuary alter to pray. The priest found him there, having heard the side door in the otherwise quiet church.

“Do you need to talk?” the priest asked, stepping to kneel beside the boy.

“Father. There is little in my life that I feel anything for. I feel so empty,” Nathan whispered.

“There must be brightness somewhere.” the priest said, asking really.

“Is there a time when it gets better? I need something other than what I have here but it feels so connected to everything else. When I go it has to be on my own terms or I don’t think I can make it. And it will be. I’m already halfway there. But I hurt. I want her to know what I’m feeling and reach out a hand to try to make it better but she never does. It’s like I’m invisible. I feel it, even if she doesn’t think I do. Or maybe she doesn’t. Because she doesn’t seem to need it. She doesn’t seem to need anything. And I just wait, for some little bit, something to be sure. I’m so tired of waiting,” Nathan said.

“Nathan, our suffering is but a fraction of our father’s, in our names. Our own pain, once we use it correctly as a guide for how to fix what is wrong, is but a reminder of our holy father’s love and sacrifice in our name.”

“Father,” Nathan spit through clenched teeth as pain passed through him like a hurled dagger. “What do you know about it? You know nothing of the world outside your walls. You bring comfort, celebration, but you’re on the outside. You think your walks teach you about the real world, but you can’t understand. You don’t know real pain.”

Nathan got up, and paced away from the priest.

“Do you really think no one can understand? Feel as badly as you do?” the older man asked.

“How could you? No one understands, and I don’t really want to try to make you. No one really cares or wants to know, it’s a wasted effort. The supposedly good people just want to walk on by and forget that such things as hate exist in their world of shining golden bowls.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the priest said as he shook out a sore leg, trying to keep his focus on each of the boy’s strange words despite the late hour and his own aches.

“It’s like we all live in little glass bowls, always trying to get over the sides, but something keeps washing you back. You can’t ever get there, no matter how long you try, but you keep trying anyway. Because you believe, really believe that some day will come, and you’ll make it. Something will change and it will all be right. But it’s not.”

The old man straightened up, looking at the boy closer now, thinking carefully about each word, each second of advice he had given in his long career. “You can’t just wait for it to come to you. You have to take life in hand sometimes and give it a shake,

work to make it what you want of it. Or else wait for someone do it for you, which just never seems to happen until it's too late. But, you know God only gives us the burdens that he believes we can take. It's what you do with them that counts.

“In the early days, I started my walks.” The priest got up and paced away. “One evening, on my way out, I found a bundle on the church steps. Nothing like that had happened in the time I'd been here and I was curious.” The priest paused as Nathan looked at him. “I wasn't afraid, and it wasn't heavy. So very light, but I never thought...” The priest stared up at the crucifix which dominated the sanctuary. “She was so small. So still.”

“What was it?” Nathan asked.

“It was a child, a baby. A stillborn, I imagine,” he looked down, grabbing the cross at his chest, “She was so silent, still as porcelain, and perfect. Not a single mark on her,” the priest said.

“I don't understand.” Nathan asked.

“You're right I've experienced little of my own pain. But I've spent a lifetime taking in other people's. Maybe someone left her here to ease their own pain or guilt. I don't know. I can't ever know can I?” the priest sighed heavily. “She was perfect, just like a little doll, and that tiny little still baby will always be there inside me. Her tiny fingers, that face,” he trembled, “I wonder what color those eyes would have been.”

“I can't imagine,” Nathan replied, open disbelief written in his wide eyes.

“I couldn’t believe it either. Thought I must be dreaming. I didn’t know what to do. So I brought her inside, and I came to this spot.”

“What did you do?” Nathan asked.

“I prayed, and held her,” the man spoke in lighter tones now. “When I couldn’t find the words anymore, I cried. I didn’t know what else to do, so I cried. The lace and the little uneven stitches. That proves someone wanted her, right? Someone cared.” The priest looked up at a stained glass window, far above the altar of Mary and her infant son.

Nathan started to shake, a slow tremble.

“She came to me. To this place. I couldn’t turn her away.”

“I don’t understand,” Nathan replied, echoing himself.

“I blessed her,” the priest whispered, “and I buried her.”

“Buried her? Where?”

“Here. She will stay here, safe, and no one will change it.” He let out a long breath, and sat down a few feet from the young man. “Nathan, did you ever wonder if I would tell your mother about your walks?” the priest asked, “What am I saying, of course you have,” he said looking directly at Nathan, “I couldn’t be the one to make you a prisoner.”

“But I am a prisoner,” Nathan whispered. “And besides,” he said, his voice getting stronger, “I don’t have to take it much longer. There is nothing keeping me here.”

“It could be so much worse. I wish you could understand that. People failed you. People did less than they could have, but it could be worse. It was the same with that baby. I couldn’t let someone take that bundle and make her a number in a police file, a case.”

Nathan looked away.

“I know it’s not the same,” the priest said, “but it’s my pain. Was it a test? A punishment? Whatever God intended, it was mine to make the choice. I did what I had to, by what I believe. Each of us does the same. Your mother never meant to hurt you.”

“Life is punishment for other people’s sins,” Nathan breathed, “We are all as damned as Jesus was.”

The priest said nothing. He got up from his place before the altar and moved to light a long ivory candle. He touched a long match to the wick and it flared up, one bright spot in the cavernous darkness.

“I remember when she came to talk to me, your mother that is, years ago. When she found out she was pregnant with you,” the priest sighed, transferring the flame to the rest of the candles lining the altar. The priest looked down, the lines on his face deeper in the flickering candlelight.

“Her aunt took her in but never really wanted her. After she lost her family, her aunt was all your mother had left, but it wasn’t enough to brighten her again,” the priest said, bringing Nathan back. “You have to understand that. Your mother became so quiet,

never seemed to laugh anymore. Until she met that boy anyway. You know, I never understood why he was here; he never seemed to really talk to anyone. He would sit in the back row and he didn't take communion. He never came to class, and he always left before the end of mass. Always gone before anyone could talk to him. But he came every Sunday for a while."

"One day," the priest continued, "she wasn't in her row with that aunt of hers. I saw her later, in the back row, giggling with him. She actually looked happy for a moment, so I didn't say anything. I left it alone for her aunt to take care of. But the woman didn't deal with it. Instead, she turned her back on the girl, and by your mother's seventeenth birthday, she was pregnant."

"Her aunt wouldn't have anything more to do with her after that. And the boy refused to marry her." He paced, then turned, looking at Nathan as if to study the darkly outlined features for something familiar he'd never seen before. "We never saw him again. I don't know if she did, but he never came back here." The priest shifted his weight and looked around the room, "I offered to help her where I could. I helped her get a job, I gave her the names and helped her with references; the congregation helped her get the house. But she never seemed to come back. She's here, too often I think sometimes, but the girl I knew never came back. When you were born, I hoped that she would love being a mother, take to you, and learn to love again. But it only seemed to get worse," the priest said grasping Nathan's hands.

Nathan sighed in a long breath that seemed to pull him even further into himself. "We live in the same house," Nathan said quietly from a chin to chest position. "It's like

we're on different planets," he said. "Revolving, but never quite touching." Some days he wished for a collision. He brought his hands up around his face, squeezing, as if it could relieve the pressure building there. "Something, just something," Nathan stopped, realizing that he has never said these thoughts aloud, never shared them. "This morning, there was something different. For a moment, I thought she was genuinely afraid, that maybe somewhere in there she was afraid to lose me, that maybe she really cared....."

"I'm sorry," the priest whispered, "I know it's not enough," he said, his hands clenched at his sides in his robe.

"It makes no difference," Nathan shook his head, trying to push back the flood of with only a pile of sand. The grains kept slipping through his fingers as memory after memory washed him in the swirling gray waters. His mother kneeling beside him to teach him his prayers, clutching her rosary and repeating the latin words to ward off demons and devils. Later, his mother praying at his bedside. He'd had a fever and the doctor had said he might not survive the night. He'd seen the relief that passed over her at the thought. Or there was his mother at each birthday. Nathan would sit there as he had many times before. "But when mom? When will you tell me about him?" The wax from each tiny candle, still hot from the distinguished flame, pooled, carving out a space as it fell.

"I'm sorry, my son, I've failed you. I failed," the old man looked down the long marble hall that led to the study where he had spent much of Nathan's life.

Nathan paused, looking down at their hands, his smooth flesh and long fingers contrasted with the rough skin of the priest. "You can't save everyone," Nathan replied.

He pulled his hands away and walked across the room. Nathan's first steps were slow and weighted, but as he reached the shadows, it was like the air's caress on the heavy ground as he slipped out into the November night.

“God save us from the dark of the deep,” the priest whispered, bowing his head.

Nathan bowed over a lone candle, burning in his dim room at early dawn. He prayed quietly, only a hush. When he had finished, he was ready to finally go through with his plan. He crept across the hall and paused as he laid his hand on the knob. He took several moments to calm himself before he turned. Her room was dark and the open door gave the only spare light across the small bed.

“Wake up,” Nathan said, nearly laying a hand on his mother's slack shoulder. He was close enough to feel the heat of sleep but his hand rested in the air, not quite close enough to touch the heavy thread of her nightgown.

Nathan stood above her bed and realized that the room was completely unfamiliar. He had never come running to this room to escape a nightmare. He had never thought to rummage through her drawers, or find out what was hid in the depths of her closet.

He just had never thought.

“Nathan? What’s wrong,” the heavy voice came muffled from beneath the pillow covering half her face. “Is the house on fire?” she asked, sitting up. She nearly jumped from the bed before Nathan put his hand to her shoulder and pushed her back.

“No, no fire,” he said, “I need to talk to you.”

“What in the world, Nathan? You nearly gave me a heart attack and you just want to talk? Can’t this wait until some civilized time of the morning?”

“No. I’ve been waiting a lifetime for this. There are some things that I have to say, whether you listen or not.”

“What are you talking about?” she said her voice lifting at the end as the anger seeped in to replace sleep.

“I know you never wanted me. I’ve always had some idea, but I’m sure now. You never wanted me, and I’ve spent my whole damned life looking for the one thing that you don’t have in you to give. You’re ashamed of me, and all I’ve done is tried to make you proud. Tried to make you love me.”

“Nathan,” she started.

“No, I get to have my say first. I’ve never told you these things, and I’ll never tell you again. You’ve made me think it was inside me. That it was me that you hated. That you despised. I couldn’t keep the words straight enough. But I always thought that if I just tried harder, one day it would come,” Nathan paced back and forth at the end of the

bed, nearly hitting the dresser each time he turned to walk the length of the small room.

“Does it even matter to you?” he said softly, “Do you think that it’s been enough?”

“Nathan, I’ve done everything I could...”

“No, you haven't, mother,” Nathan spit at her, erupting, “I’ve never asked for much, and even that’s been too much. I can’t do it anymore, and I don’t have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t love me” he paused, his voice set down a notch, “You don’t love me. I think I’ve always known, but I just hoped....Oh you loved me as much as you could I guess, but that’s empty. And I’m sorry for that, that you just don’t know how to love someone, can’t reach out and take someone by the hand. Don’t you ever wonder what it would be like? I know you’re afraid, always afraid, but damn it, we all are. I never would have left you, if only....” he stopped, resting his eyes for a moment, only the tips of his fingers betraying him with a tremble. “I hope you miss me. But I wanted you to know that I wouldn’t miss you. I’ll never miss you. Only what you aren’t.” Nathan set down a small package on the end of her bed. His face was dry but the look on it wasn’t as he walked out of her room, down the stairs, and out of the house.

He looked back one final time from the front yard, wondering briefly what she was thinking.

He looked up at her through the window and wondered what she would think of the empty shelves. The Balalaika no longer lay in its place of honor, instead it was carefully packed away in one of the boxes strapped to either side of his bike. What would

she say as she realized that he had been planning this for so long. First the tentative letters to her sister, then the phone calls. When he'd turned seventeen, it had all been set and he could leave whenever he wanted. He had tried to find a reason not, but in the end he left for her. He decided that it was her that needed it most, to find out what life was, without him, and all the memories that must be attached to the years of his life. He'd left her the present. The reminder of him and what she could have had, or some part of it anyway, if she had only tried. The tiny world inside the cedar box.

A miniature family by a tiny flickering fire. Each figure was hand-carved and painted in detail. A woman and two children, laughing and reading a tiny book at a table. The man reclined beside, stretched out and staring into the fire. A wooly dog curled up on a tiny rug.

He jumped onto the bike, and wheeled off towards the bus station with his boxes. It would be easy enough to replace the bike and other possessions, but he wasn't she he would ever replace her. Despite everything, she was the only family he'd ever really had. He would miss something, even if it wasn't her, only the idea of what he was missing. Perhaps something better was ahead, and this was the only way to find it. That was the thought that filled his head while he peddled off, when she finally made her way to the porch and looked for him. But he was almost beyond sight, and she didn't run after, only watched as he rode out of view.

Better days ahead. And then silence. Only himself and the still morning, and the bumpy road.

NO ONE TO CARE

Chris wondered if God had a sense of humor or if he's always just been a sick son-of-a-bitch. There was something twisted in a world where Chris lived on and his foster mother, who probably had never talked out of turn in her 81 years, could be smashed under a falling boulder on her way home from bingo.

Chris drove along the bustling streets and asked himself for perhaps the hundredth time in an hour if God had it in for him, or if somehow he deserved the parade of shit that he had gotten. If wishes were horses, then he'd not only fallen under the hooves, but the horse had backed up and taken a steamer on its way out.

Okay, so maybe Frieda hadn't been completely perfect, and if she'd chosen to take the occasional nip when no one was looking then it was none of his business. She'd raised four boys of her own and just because each died unexpectedly over the years, due to various degrees of stupidity, didn't mean she hadn't tried her best. Just meant the whoreson she'd married had been a damned idiot, as she'd told anyone who would listen over the years. At first there were aunts, wives and then widows of the sons, but over the years even they had dropped away, to their own lives, or to their own personal hells, and Chris hadn't much noticed the loss. For so long it had just been the two of them, Mama Frieda and Chris. Though Chris rarely noticed that either.

Okay maybe the occasional nip would be a bit of an understatement, but surely a good pull here or there never hurt anybody.

Mama Frieda. The only woman who never hurt him, who would have given anything for him. His own mother couldn't claim that. Hell, she'd done everything in the world to hurt him. At least that's how it felt.

Then again, if Frieda had been just a bit more sober then maybe she wouldn't have left the car to check to see what the little bump had been, and maybe she'd have moved a bit more quickly when the rock slide came charging down the hill. Or maybe God just really did have it in for him. Some form of punishment.

So Chris found himself in an odd place on the eve of his eighteenth birthday—no one to care and no one to please.

The subtle crush of his shoulders when he walked into the building where Marcello lived hinted at his discomfort in the otherwise easy stride. Yet, the crush didn't connect to his heart. Regret never colored Chris where simple desire and choice would suffice.

It was the room itself. The atmosphere held a rankness, almost a stale odor, and the tiles covering the floor had long since exposed gray in dusty-arid patches. A sea of muted-mustard tile and flashes of scabrous highlight. The entry belonged to a degenerate project house lost somewhere in the government budget of the last century. It had once been part of a sparkling community project where officials gathered to cut ribbons and

pose, but a bureaucratic turnover had refocused everything and this building, like many others in the area, had fallen into twenty years of neglect.

The door swung shut and it was deafening to be shut up in the musty foyer, with only himself as company. He hurried across the tiled floor, and though his hair obscured the already dim room, he didn't bother to push it from his face. He knew the steps well as they led to the stairwell beside the elevator.

Always the stairs.

He'd been born in one of those creaky boxes, and he figured it would be tempting God beyond reason were he to ride in one—in a fit of irony the old man might just decide to take him out the same way. Chris knew all about God and irony. And he only liked to tempt god when it was sure to benefit him.

Four flights of stairs and not a bit winded. He gained the top step, devouring the ground with an impatient stride. Discolored carpet ran along the hall and the crush was back. What could be lodged in those stains? Only a month ago someone was shot in this very building. He walked over a particularly large and putrid stain, and it crinkled underfoot. Would brain matter get harder when left unguarded on a dirty floor? Would it solidify in death, change its very consistency and become utterly unlike the soft complicated tissue when left to dry in the humid heat? Even people become raisins when left to dry.

His steps led to a door lodged in the disgruntled neighborhood of the fourth floor, obviously in need of repair like many others along the hall—so many times patched but never painted. How far did that philosophy go in the minds that lived here, he wondered.

Before Chris touched the door, Marcello was sliding from the apartment. He didn't say a word while he quietly closed the door. The young man gently secured the lock. His fingers flew over it like two fine-boned birds, spreading out to encompass the whole with the illusion that nothing had been touched at all. Gentle quiet motions, which betrayed none of the anxious waiting beneath the surface. Marcello had always been good at hiding what others had trouble with, and it served him well in a neighborhood that neither cared nor really wanted his existence.

Marcello often complained about being smaller than others, more than half man at seventeen, but short in stature and small-boned. His hair fell jaggedly across his forehead like he'd taken a razor blade and drawn the locks over it, severing the unmanly curls, and leaving behind a tangled I-don't-care mess. Beside Marcello's dark complexion, delicate stature, and generally timid nature, Chris looked like a crude white giant.

"She isn't feeling good today," Marcello whispered. He'd eased from the door and a woman laid half-visible in the room beyond, reclined on the couch with an arm thrown over her eyes. She hadn't moved or made a sound when the door swung shut, yet both boys knew Marcello's aunt wouldn't have let Chris in. That was the real reason that Marc had watched so closely for Chris' arrival.

Lucia, Marc's aunt, was well known for her smiles and good-natured appeal around the building. Some people may have theorized that it was at least partially due to the small bottle she would pull from the cabinet when she believed no one was looking, but people generally didn't look down on her for the lapse. Many drank heavily at this notch of life, and Lucia found a way to lighten the burdens of many around her.

When Marcello showed up on her stoop one day, she'd never thought to turn him away. She's just ushered him in and folded him into the routine of their lives as if there'd never been a moment when he hadn't been a part of it. Lucia may once have considered the same treatment for Chris, but not since the *incident*. Chris has been a regular in their house until that night.

Chris never forgot the things he'd heard, ear pressed to the bedroom door with Marcello at his side. "Jesus Frank! He gone and tried to roast the cat!" she'd screamed. She'd screamed earlier too, in confusion, sleeplessness, and frustration, because it was happening at all, because it was her kitchen, because she had no other way. Frank had come running, tripping over things and naked as the days when his mama bathed him in the kitchen sink. It was Frank who found the animal, peppered and potted, tucked but unharmed in the warming oven. The cat had gone underground for about a week, coming out eventually unscathed, but Lucia couldn't let it go. And Chris never forgot the things she'd said.

"Frank, the boy has problems. Serious ones. Do you remember the time he hit Marc with the shovel? In the head? The scar from that one, I tell you. All I could ever get was something about that heathen's mother, like he got one. Jesus, thirteen stitches. I

know there's something, some reason, but I just don't want that boy here. You hear me? That boy needs help, not free reign in my house!” In the end, it was decided, as she put it. Be better for everyone if Chris didn’t visit.

She also thought that Marcello ought to find better friends. Ten years since the incident, and still she held on to that night. The result had been their third, Vinnie. He was neutral territory in Lucia’s book.

Marcello locked the door and walked down the hall in a more cautious step than Chris had adopted, but the slow pace vanished when they emerged from the decrepit building. He gulped the spring smog air and raced down the sidewalk to pass Chris. The sidewalk was plagued much like the foyer of the building. Dandelions grew freely, yet neither boy paid attention while they headed to the car.

Marcello had grown here, and as a child, blew the tufted spheres in fat fisted bunches. The ragged children of the neighborhood spread the seeds, blew until they were out of breath. The children helped what nature would have freely done, ensuring another year of weeds amongst the sparse grass.

Both boys quickened their steps as something inside them grew, and they were nearly howling when they reached the cars in the south parking lot. Marcello made it to the car first and pulled at the handle, even though he knew it would be locked. “I can’t believe it, Chrissy. I figured she would find some way to keep me from going. Like seventeen is too young for a concert. This is snipe!”

Chris glared at Marcello over the top of the car.

“Shut up and get in. And don’t ever call me that ridiculous fucking name again. We need to get outta here and grab Vin. We don’t have time for your bullshit.” Chris discharged the words fiercely, but Marcello didn’t seem to notice. His chatter continued as Chris drove rapidly down Seventh Street to the edges of a marginally better neighborhood.

This one had small scant houses, in diverse shades of neglect and disrepair. Vinnie’s yard stood out with its neat little gardens, full of cheerful, vivid flowers. Chris never liked those flowers. He felt assaulted by those few good blooms. Somehow it appeared false, impure or insincere. Beauty was fleeting in a world like this, and Chris’s comfort waited in its fall, in its destruction.

Vinnie waited on the porch when Chris drove up like a stout-faced gargoyle perched to ward off intruders. The pudgy boy he’d been just a year ago had begun to give way, to make room for the burly man that he would become. The Italian ancestry showed in the jet hair, heavy frame, and wide shoulders. Where Marcello’s skin glowed like warm chocolate, Vinnie was a dark cream, and both stood out against Chris’ Irish white.

Chris and Marc got out and walked up to the house before Vinnie could get to them.

“Got something to drink? Hot out today,” Chris said to Vinnie when they reached the porch. Vinnie’s scowl deepened, but he just turned and led the way. He held open the door while the other two filed inside.

Vinnie stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted, “Mom. Marc and Chris are here. Gonna get them a drink then we’re going.”

The floors creaked overhead, then footsteps on the stairs. “Vin, where are your manners? Let me say hello and get you boys something to snack on real quick, then you can be going.”

“Don’t have time for that mom,” Vinnie said and shook his head though she hadn’t come into view yet. She was the kind of woman that immediately took over a room. Male or female alike would be caught staring, but the graciousness kept most people from hating her for the power. Vinnie moved to stand between Chris and his mother when she walked into the living room.

Chris moved around him and reached out a hand to greet the woman. “How are you doing, Mrs. Rigoti?” He shook her hand and grinned at her. Then they walked to the kitchen, chattering like old friends.

Marcello fidgeted when Vinnie looked at him for help. He hopped from one foot to another and scanned the room. He looked anywhere but towards the kitchen.

Vinnie’s mother had been a beauty queen some time in her youth, or maybe it was the prom queen, but no matter. She still held that something, that spark of femininity that made men notice. It may have been the slender sturdiness, the elegant composure, or maybe it was more than that. But regardless, it was something that always made Vinnie uncomfortable. He often caught Chris ogling, staring outright, and it infuriated the

otherwise steadfast supporter. In most things, Vinnie worshiped Chris' quiet confidence and uncaring attitude, but not when it came to his mother.

When they returned from the kitchen, she held a tray. Vinnie starred at Chris but Chris' eyes were all for the woman in front of him. Heavy lidded, intruder.

Chris took the tray and put it on the table, then sat down on the couch. Only then did he look at Vinnie.

Vinnie rushed across the room and grabbed a drink. "We have to go, or we won't make it in time, Mom." It wasn't really the truth, but Chris couldn't contradict him or else expose the lie that had gotten Vinnie the pass.

Chris just grinned at Vinnie and stood up. The devil's grin, just asking for the fall. "Thanks again Liz," Chris said, "I'll have look into that."

When they emerged from the house, no one said a word until they made it to the street. Then Vinnie blew.

"What the fuck is your problem? Don't look at my mom like that. You don't have to be such a dick," Vinnie yelled when they got to where the car was parked.

Chris didn't respond at first, not so much as a blink as he stopped where the words left him. Then he started to turn, slowly, forehead glistening with sudden sweat, and looked evenly at the other boy. For a second, Vinnie saw a rabid dog in the Chris' face, the blank stare and bristled stance.

Suddenly, Chris was moving. He ran towards his friend. The second before he reached Vinnie, Chris lunged and propelled himself to strike the center of Vinnie's chest.

He hit hard and Vinnie went down. The two landed, tangled at the legs, with Vinnie sprawled closest to the ground, while Chris sat on top of him.

Chris grabbed Vinnie by the neck, lifting his head up close to his mouth. Chris whispered something into Vinnie's ear, and then dropped him. Vinnie's head fell against the pavement with a heavy thud.

Then Chris' left fist shot out. He hit Vinnie, then hit him again. When that wasn't enough, he hit him again, one after another. Marcello stared at first, unsure who to help. Then he also lunged, caught Chris' side, and knocked him off Vinnie.

Vinnie rolled away. He dragged himself slowly off the ground and grunted in pain, before he staggered back onto his feet. An eye swelled and his lip held a drop of blood at one corner, but he held his tongue, not from a lack of words, but because he knew that anything he said would turn the rage back on him. The eyes would glaze, Chris would be gone, and that empty hollow space behind his eyes would fill in, like water rushing in to fill the emptiness. Only the liquid was never the right, causing a closer look, trying to find the source of the bloody tinge. Chris' stare reflected the world around him, in a way that put people ill at ease. Like the copy based on an original, a skewed picture and a distorted perception. In went a tree and out came tinder.

Marcello moved away quickly after his interference. He looked at Chris and braced himself.

Vinnie laid quietly on the ground, cradling an arm near his midsection, but he seemed mostly unhurt.

Chris muttered something under his breath, then walked to the car and got in without a glance at the other two. Vinnie pulled himself off the ground in slow exaggerated movements, but he followed and slipped into the car.

Vinnie was the first to regain use of his tongue. “So it’s yours now? No shit? And no one is going to fight you for it?” he asked, regaining some of his previous excitement. He silenced the anger, but the tightness in his shoulders suggested he didn’t forget.

Chris never looked away from the road. “No one wanted it and she pretty much left everything to me anyway. They said she’d signed something that made me next of kin or some crap, so I guess when they are through, whatever’s left,” he answered. He had a strange way of talking that gave the impression he was only half listening, half in the world with the people he talked to. “Not that there’s much. Rent’s nearly up, so only a few weeks before that’s gone. Account was nearly empty.” He drove the car onto the highway, flipped his lights against the budding dark, and only half listened to the conversation that started when he dropped off.

“So, you guys ready, or what?” Vinnie said. He thumped the back of Marcello’s seat in front of him.

Vinnie sat in back by himself. An agreeable thing for everyone since he rarely sat still and could make other people nearly claustrophobic from his bounding energy and constant movements. In school, Vinnie was often sent to the principal for talks about his

behavior but it rarely did any good. After repeated warnings from teachers to settle down, sit down, and even once, shut up, the boy had mark after mark on his record. Though his record looked like mere boyish behavior compared to Chris' extensive one. Where Vinnie would bounce and generally have trouble controlling himself, Chris took delight in making other people miserable, exploiting weaknesses, and often drove people to tears.

The Hall for the concert was a large limestone affair, a memorial for a lost generation of soldiers. There was something irreverent in that. The memory preserved in its walls defaced by the screaming crowd amassing at the entrance. From all directions people came and blended, valuing non-conformity in their sea of black t-shirts. The lines moved slowly, as lines often do, and Chris became visibly agitated as the clock stretched out and they had barely moved.

His look and manner were openly hostile, yet no one took him up on the apparent offer. The three made it through the line in a snail but steady approach, their only contact with the security guard who had made them lift their arms while he patted their bodies. The guard barely looked at them, and any of them could have secreted a sawed-off shotgun or worse with such a thorough search. Not that any of them owned something like that.

They gave the man about the same level of scrutiny before rushing through the gates to find their seats. Chris had purchased the tickets for the three of them, with the

little money that he had saved from his part time job at the local feed lot, and the other two boys handed him cash to pay for their tickets.

Their seats really weren't seats. Instead they got standing room in one of the balconies that overlooked the stage and main floor of the large auditorium. The crush was intense, and the general din numbed coherent thought, despite the fact that the opening band was still a half-hour from taking the stage. Vinnie and Marcello sat on the concrete floor beneath a no-smoking sign. Chris paced back and forth in front of the other two.

A lone woman made her way onto the stage to catcalls and plenty of booing. Chris took up the chant with the rest of the crowd, booing and shouting in turn since anything short of the music starting was less than acceptable to the impatient spectators. Chris turned to his friends. "Is it time? Damn I thought we'd miss the show standing there out front."

The woman found a microphone and told the crowd there'd been delay and that they would get things started soon as possible.

The entire room groaned and things were launched onto the stage in her direction. Chris laughed. The woman swerved to avoid a water bottle thrown with particularly good aim and slipped sideways on her high heels. She fell hard and laid there in a heap.

A man ran from the wings and helped her limp away, trying to avoid the objects that came even faster when he appeared. Chris's laughter got the best of him and he slid down the wall to sit beside the other two while he cackled.

“Hey at least there’s entertainment,” he said. The other two just groaned and looked away. “What’s up with you two? Best of the night so far.”

Vinnie stood up and brushed himself off. “I’ve gotta find the bathroom. Meet you all back here in a few.” He didn’t give them a second look and was swallowed by the crowd after only a few steps.

Chris stood back up and glanced down at Marcello. “Be back man. Got an idea that might make this night actually worth it.”

He walked to one of the many concession areas along the long hall at the back of the building. He didn’t get in line, but instead stood back and watched the people who did. How does a mark get picked? Chris glanced around casually, and tried to discern who would be amiable to his scheme. One man stood out. Perhaps it was the sway in his step, the sure sign that he’d already had a few too many, or maybe it was the ratty hair and old military overcoat. Whatever it was, Chris thought this one would be right. When it was the man’s turn in line, the cashier set several beers in front of him. The man struggled to pick up all three and he nearly dumped one down a woman’s shirt when he turned to leave.

A few feet away from the counter, Chris walked up to the man, almost bumping into him. “Wow, sorry, almost made a mess there.” Chris offered the man a hand, and when the guy accepted, Chris grabbed the front beer while the man steadied the other

two. “Hey, got it. Almost a spill. Would have been a shame,” Chris said with an easy smile.

“Thanks man. Wasn’t sure I’d make it back without losing ‘em and at seven bucks a pop, that just wouldn’t be right.”

“No problem. Want me to carry this back to your seat for you?”

“That’d be great, but I’m down in the lower level. Had to come up here cause I already hit my limit downstairs and they seem to remember me for some reason. Damn bitches try to take all an old man’s fun.”

The man didn’t really look that old, maybe a bit hard traveled and worn, but he probably hadn’t hit fifty yet. There was something in his manner that gave Chris the impression this wasn’t a man to cross, despite the laid back attitude and swig every few steps. Something dangerous just beneath the surface. Reminded him of staring in the mirror for hours on end, only more wrinkles and a better reason. Chris followed the man.

The opening band came on stage and tested equipment with a mealy-metallic whine. When Chris and the man came to an area where entrance required a ticket, Chris walked away, down the railing a ways, then set his drink on the floor. He reached down to re-tie his shoe and glanced to see if anyone watched him.

He made sure no one was looking directly, and jumped, in one stealthy, practiced motion, quietly over the rail to the floor below and retrieved the beer he’d set down.

Chris found the man near the security entrance, looking left and right, most likely in search of him. The guy reached out and patted Chris on the shoulder when he walked up, splashing beer across Chris' jacket. "Hey man. Thought you'd run off with my beer. Grabbed my ticket and you weren't there anymore."

"Sorry bout that. Thought I'd get through quicker if I just went down to the next one." Chris shrugged and smiled at the man. "Any extra seats in your row? I'll just chill for a few and see what these guys can do before I head back to my group."

"No problem, there are lots of empty seats down here, think we can manage."

They found one, and when they sat, Chris realized the three beers were all for the man, who seemed to be there alone.

Chris offered to buy one of the now half-full drinks. "I'll help you bring down your next round," he said with a smile.

"Alright just tell me straight. How old are you?" The man smiled when he said it, and his eyes glinted with some hidden secret.

"Eighteen," Chris replied without looking the man in the eye, "Yeah I know."

"Hey don't sweat it kid, I was drinkin beer with my daddy a few years fore that. Just don't get me in trouble, cool?"

"Not a chance." Chris took the beer the man handed over and relaxed into his seat. They listened to the warm up band, trading comments about its high and low points until the man had finished his two beers.

“Another round?” They got up and headed up to the open admission areas where the bars were, but the man led him instead to a tiny alcove off the end of a small service hallway. The man sat down on the floor and rifled through his pockets.

He pulled out something that looked more like a toothpick than what Chris knew it likely was. The man lit the end from an ancient zippo, pulled from one of the many pockets that lined the front of his coat. He held it out to Chris. “Want some?”

Chris slid down beside him and took it. He puffed for a second, and thought of how long it had been since he’d tried the stuff. Frieda, his foster mother, had once caught the smell of it when he came home, and it was the only time he’d ever thought she might be done with him. It had never happened again. Not that he hadn’t tried again, just that he never came home with even a vague hint of the skunky smell on him.

Chris relaxed, but he also thought there was something strange in the taste, unlike anything he had tried before. He couldn’t place it and figured it was just some better stuff than what he and his friends had managed to pick up here or there.

When they had nearly finished, they heard heavy footsteps coming down the hall. Chris hurried to put it out and the man stashed it in a cigarette pack. Then the two got up and walked casually back down the hall. Near the middle, they passed a security guard who barely glanced in their direction.

“Whew, that was close,” Chris said and let out a long breath once they were far enough from the man not to be overheard.

“You really think they even want to mess with us? More paperwork for them. Long as things don’t get out of hand, they probably couldn’t care less.”

Chris and the man repeated the trip to the bar, except this time they chose a different one. Chris hung back and the man ordered. This time the man bought the limit, four beers, and he stuck a grimy thumb into the top of each in order to balance them.

“Here man, grab the front two,” he said to Chris when he was far enough away. “Take em to your friends and meet me back up front?”

Chris had told the man their basic story, about how three had come together and that a few beers would turn such a fun outing into a great one. The man had been easy going and Chris had offered to pay \$10 per beer. The man declined the extra money.

“Stick it the man, anyway you can.” The guy laughed, nearly spilled his remaining beers, and walked off.

Chris found Vinnie and Marc near the sign where he’d left them.

“Look what I got,” Chris said. He handed Marcello a beer then took a long drink from the one in his hand. The main act took the stage and figures moved against a myriad of tinted darkness and pornographic pageantry. Curvaceous silhouettes danced behind back-lit screens as upraised fists joined the spectators by a common element. A flash of adrenaline, energy, and defiance pierced the followers. All three bowed their heads in vigorous appreciation. The frenzied opening gave way to a recurring strike of bass, somehow primal and uninhibited.

Chris slammed into the man next to him, unstable through a combination of beer and balance, and whatever else. The man fell back and got a beer dumped on his head by a girl in the group behind them. The girl yelled at Chris, and Chris moved to hit her, raising his hand to strike, but a man at her side moved to stand in his way. The man shoved Chris and then plowed a fist into his gut.

Already doubled from the blow, Chris plowed his head into the older man's midsection. The man swayed but didn't move, and it looked like he would crush Chris' head as he reached out and squeezed until the veins on his arms stood up and Chris started to feel faint. Chris, however, dropped down to put his arms around the man's ankles and pulled back sharply to dislodge the weight.

It worked, and the man let go and fell backwards into the seats and people behind. Then Chris went offensive, pummeling fists into the man's face, chest, neck, and even hitting a few people unlucky enough to land under the fray, pinned in their seats beneath the struggle. A security officer had somehow been alerted to the scuffle, and both fighters were hastily divided.

Chris and the man walked, half-dragged, down to the front doors. Vinnie and Marcello trailed behind and tried to gauge the situation.

"Shit, Man, they're going to kick him out! What do we do then?" Marcello said. "I don't want to miss this, damn it. If they do kick him out, we should leave his ass until after the show."

“What the hell are you talking about? Don’t you understand? Chris is probably going to jail. The show is over ‘Cell. Bigger things to deal with,” Vinnie yelled. His voice echoed in the mostly empty front hall and combined with the dim echo of the concert through the doors they’d just walked through. Marcello settled into a sulk, and Vinnie went to talk to one of the officers near the circle around Chris.

Before Vinnie could find anyone to talk to, the group parted, and Chris and the other man were conducted, an officer each, out of the entrance doors. A large sign overhead, in dark black lettering, stated clearly NO RE-ADMITTANCE.

The officers led the two out, threw them on the front sidewalk, and walked back inside the building. Chris fumed. He muttered under his breath and violently brushed the dirt off his clothes.

Vinnie was likewise incensed and he shoved Chris when they got to the parking lot. Marcello trailed behind, brooding the lost crush of sound and body.

Chris threw off Vinnie’s advance, and pounded on in the general direction of the car.

“Damn it Chris, *what* is your problem?” Vinnie yelled. “How could you ruin this for us? You know how long...” Vinnie trailed off when he realized that he was getting angrier with each word, and that Chris had stopped moving, looking in Vinnie’s direction. Chris looked vicious in the dark of the streetlights.

“Don’t ever touch me again,” Chris said, almost too quiet to be heard. He reached the car first and pulled the keys from his pocket. He didn’t speak again, or hurry, but smoothly unlocked the door and got in.

Chris then put up his middle finger, a greeting when his friends reached the vehicle. Vinnie ignored it, and instead motioned Marcello to climb into the front, and he slid silently into the backseat. Chris gunned the small engine and scratched rubber when he pulled from the lot.

He drove fast, pulling around turns and twists in the road as if he were Mario Andretti at the wheel of a Hudson Hornet Stock Car, instead of Christopher Cosimo in a 1984 Ford Escort.

“Assholes think they have all the power,” Chris muttered. He threw the car around a curve and the tires fought to stay on the ground.

“Hey man, slow down,” Vinnie called from the backseat.

“Shut up,” Chris replied. He sped up, until the needle didn’t climb when he punched the gas pedal to the floor. “No one’s telling me what to do anymore.”

Around one particularly compelling curve, he slowed, and pulled onto a small wooded road, Frost, according to the sign mostly hidden by overgrown trees.

Vinnie reached out a hand and laid it on Chris’ shoulder. With a violent shrug, Chris dislodged it and glanced over at Marcello.

Marcello sat up in his seat and screeched a shrill sound that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than his small body. Chris whipped his head back towards the road in time to see the truck that barreled at them. The driver swerved from his side of the road then back over again. In response, Chris jerked the wheel to the right to avoid the truck, but the move sent the car up and over and down a sharp embankment.

Trees tore at the sides of the car and the shrill sounds filled the air around them. The car flew down the slope and Chris gripped the wheel. The moments stretched out until they seemed almost infinite, yet it only took seconds for everything to change around them. The flash and roar that started black and turned red, rushed in around them.

The windshield shattered and sent slivers of glass flying in every direction. Then, all at once, the car slammed into something solid. The car came to a sudden stop, yet its occupants still moved, impacted and imprinted upon the interior of the car. Vinnie flew, for a short and violent while, striking Marcello as he went.

Then there was silence.

In the dark and disorienting moments after, Chris moved first. He slowly shook his head and attempted to focus. There was something in his eyes. It scalded and obscured his vision.

He pulled up his shirt and scrubbed at them. His vision returned enough that he could reach up and switch on the dome light. Chris looked down at the scarlet stain that ran the front of his shirt. It took him a second to understand that it was blood, his blood, saturating the shirt.

He glanced up and saw a large hole through the window in front of him, one foot and partial pant leg visible at the opening. Chris stared, and made out Vinnie's body smashed into strange angles, pinned between the windshield and the dark foliage that the car had come to rest against. Broken glass, blood, and jagged flesh filled his vision and Chris struggled to overcome the disorientation that gripped him.

Marcello stirred next to him, regaining consciousness. He jerked a little and Chris watched as his eyes fluttered then slowly opened. With a vague, vacant look, Marcello seemed to be taking in the scene around him.

The idea seemed to come to both of them at once and both men struggled to open their doors, but it was difficult, wedged as they were between small but sturdy trees. Chris pushed at his, and inch by inch he managed to get the door open enough to slide out.

The air was cool outside, a sharp contrast to the interior of the vehicle. Chris struggled to drag himself out fully. There was smoke in the air and a heavy oily scent permeated everything. It seemed to cloud the air around him. He dropped onto his arms and dragged himself free.

The ground was harsh, prickly, and it tore at his arms when he struggled to pull himself free. His legs were still in the driver's seat and the door kept trying to close before he could get them out. He grasped for something to pull himself, an anchor.

Marcello couldn't open his own door so he crawled to the open driver's door after Chris. He pushed from the inside. Chris slid free and out of Marcello's view.

Chris struggled to understand what had happened and his thoughts came hurriedly and out of order. Free. Wrong. Pain. Blood and Vinnie's broken body. One headlight and the horn he hadn't realized blared, drowning out everything else.

There was still time to turn back, but he couldn't, compelled to the horrible thought that kept circling his head. Can't be blamed. Can't be blamed.

For all the decisions and revisions that can never be reversed, Chris made his choice, and lifted a heavy limb that had been broken off by the car's crash. He brought it up, over his head, and when Marcello crawled into view, inching out under the door, Chris swung.

The first one missed and thudded against the door enough to bounce back, but Chris didn't change his mind. Marcello stopped for a moment, stunned, then began to struggle faster to free himself from the car.

Again, the limb came roaring near his head, and he scrambled out the rest of the way. Marcello tried to gain his feet, yet another blow came, slamming him against the car. He looked up and saw Chris wielding the heavily gnarled branch.

"Why?" Marcello gasped.

"I can't. I just can't," Chris said before swinging the branch at Marcello again. This one caught Marcello near the temple, finishing his vision, and leaving him with only reverberation and a roaring noise like an angry tempestuous ocean. Marcello may have

heard his friend's steps on the brittle ground, but he didn't feel the blow that caught the back of his neck.

Chris grabbed, dragged and pushed, until the body was sitting slumped over the wheel, in the driver's seat. There were no breaths, no sounds over the blaring horn that he no longer heard, only his own pounding blood in his ears as he looked over the scene.

He turned away and began to climb back up the sharp incline that separated the car from the road. He grasped a sturdy root and pulled himself up to grab a higher one. He never looked back down.

He knew he couldn't go home, not that there was much home left to him now that Frieda was gone. Cops would want to talk to him, and almost certainly blame it all on him. He wondered for brief second what his real mother had thought when she'd resolved to leave him forever. Had she thought anything of him or had it been all her. The only way she knew to save herself.

He took his remaining money, and bought a bus ticket to the farthest city he could afford. Milwaukee would be cold compared to what he was used to, but he knew how to get the things he needed, and now it was just a matter of moving on.

When he got off the dingy transit bus, he walked across the city and terrorized a woman for her car and money. Almost as an afterthought, he tied her up and put her in the trunk. He figured that he would need company for the time ahead, and she could fill a few sweet hours before he had to get rid of her too.

He was lonely, and he did not blame himself for the things that he had to do.

SHADOWS IN THE LIGHT

For the first time in months, Anna smiled. The clock on the dash glowed a dim reminder that it was 3:30 in the morning, and she couldn't help but think that she was headed away from the plane that would take her best friend three thousand miles across the water. Anna's feet ached, her back was sore, her skin tight, but she felt perfect. Perfectly alright.

It felt odd to be driving something other than her own car, and she remembered countless trips in the passenger seat of this vehicle, but she had never been the driver. Anna gripped the leather-wrapped wheel and stepped harder on the gas.

The car jumped. She stepped a little harder and her pulse sped up with the racing line of trees. Anna rolled down the window to feel the wind. So this is what it was like.

Her chest tightened when she pulled off the highway onto her exit. Gravel crushed under the tires of her friend's cream colored Lexus, and Anna pulled the car down the narrow lane that led to the driveway.

Catherine's home sat outside the limits, and to Anna, it had always appeared both rustic and elegant, a modern imitation of southwestern living. The driveway wound around, through endless patches of trees and underbrush until the car neared the house.

Then suddenly, the trees gave way and the lush lawn with its manicured gardens swept Anna into the illusion of endless abundance.

This early, the grounds were dark and heavy, laid in shadow, but she could still tell when the forest gave way, before the lantern lights could point up to the house.

Nothing moved when Anna parked the car close to the entry and walked to the door.

She unlocked and opened, but before she could put a toe into the foyer, music startled her. The blaring dance music shook her. Should have known. The house was set to her friend's tastes and a part of Cat lived for the motion of things.

Cat's favorite moments: a party late into the night, a tall scotch on the rocks, treasure, winning. *She* never had to spend those late moments alone. Instead she ran, constantly refusing to be silent. The fear that one day it would catch her. Beauty and wealth couldn't save her from that eventuality, and Anna knew it would be harder on her friend when that day came than it would be for herself.

Never slow down. One of *her* mottos. Anna often sat quietly and watched as her figure danced across the gleaming wood floors. Watch the dance of some tribal beat, the moves like fluid drops of rain, sliding, unless aimed to be caught.

Anna wished she could. She wished she could stand, dance like that. Act like no one was watching and just give. To let herself hold the beat, let it grab her, the rhythm and drive taking hold.

But she couldn't just get up and move. Anna couldn't just let go. She walked in quickly and shut off the stereo, passing several dim rooms as she went. Her steps were fast and impatient since she knew the way well.

Once the noise stopped, she breathed deeply, sighing in the same comfort as on the drive back. Several deep sighing breaths. And she looked.

She took it in as if she had never been a guest there before, searching it all out as if a stranger had stepped into her shadow and whispered of things she'd never dreamed of. Somehow, this time was different. Empty, it was somehow new.

The house was more. It was full, brimming with shadows she'd never seen, places she'd never looked. Like the room off the entry, which she usually walked past in favor of the kitchen. She stood there and flipped on the lamp. The heavy shade in the center threw the light down, casting the room in its rich glow.

The room woke with the light. It was a room meant to embody home, earthy in cinnamons, pumpkin, hazelnut, on cushions, on the walls. Both exotic and comforting furnishings played for attention, inviting her into the spacious yet cozy set-up. Anna plopped down on the couch with her legs thrown over the end. It was an empty gesture, defiance for a missing audience, and it counted even less since she never would have done it with anyone around.

The room sank in around her like the chair. Soft leather and other subtle scents wove themselves into the dream of gleaming mahogany aside deep cushions. Her favorite

piece in the room was a taxidermied frog playing a miniature accordion. The odd piece sat beside her on an inlaid ebony table.

She thought of the endless trips to antique shops. So many trips over the years. Her friend would walk the aisles, shift things to the side, peer behind. Most trips, they left empty-handed, Anna trailing as the flame-haired woman chatted and explained plans to visit yet another shop.

Anna stared around the room. She glared and wondered in turn. She looked at the ostrich eggs they'd gotten in the painted desert, a few beautiful pieces of polished amber, and all the other strange items lining the walls of the room. Somehow the colors kept it from feeling like a museum, but it never would have been a room she would have put together. It was comfortable, but it wasn't somewhere that could ever be home.

Anna felt the need to touch something, a grounding gesture, in salute of her sudden freedom. She leaned over the long chocolate couch, and stared down the hallway that led to the back of the house. The hallway looked dark and inviting, yet she jumped up and turned on every light switch she could find.

She flipped them on. Off. On again. She smiled at such a silly gesture, yet she did it a few more times before moving on.

She walked to the kitchen. This room invited her like no other, perhaps because of her own childhood spent huddled in a cramped kitchen, learning to cook. She'd dreamed of owning something like this, with the gleaming gadgets and open counter space, but

even after years of working her way to the top of the small but respectable restaurant kitchen staff, she still couldn't afford anything nearing this space.

Anna pulled down a Waterford, just like *she* would have done, and fixed a tall one. Anna set it on the counter several feet away and made a second one. This drink she gave less ice and an extra splash, then as an after-thought, she added a cherry.

Anna grabbed the second drink and continued to wander, walking back to the hallway where the light beckoned. She strolled through the halls, her drink in one hand, the other touched everything. She ran her fingers along the walls, reaching out to stroke anything that called out to her.

She tripped over the edge of the heavy carpet-runner as she caught the eye of a young girl tied up in red silk. Heavily swathed in traditional markers of her class, the girl had a forlorn look. Wouldn't want to be her, but don't really want to be me. What does that leave?

Anna's steps didn't make a sound as she walked down the hall. Only her breath against the heavy silence of the house. Pausing, Anna stopped in the doorway of the master bedroom. Here, as in the rest of the house, she was drawn in. A four-poster bed in rich cherry wood dominated the room. Heavy curtains framed the length of the bed.

Drawn closed, they left the inner area concealed like the interior of a tree house, far above her gaze, and something more private and personal than she had ever known. Slipping silently across the room, and feeling like a thief, Anna slid into that private

space. Sighing, she bounced across the firm mattress and stroked the satin that covered it. She laid face down and stretched out.

She slid her cheek back and forth, inviting the caress, and she stroked her own skin, reveling in her warmth against the cool satin. She stretched like a cat, extending each limb until it ached to be let go and then folding in on herself, curled into a ball. Then she fell asleep as she let the exhaustion of the last few months pull her under.

When she woke, the clock on a shelf read 9:00 p.m.

She couldn't believe that she'd slept the whole day, but she'd known it was coming. You can only go so long without sleeping until the body just shuts down, refusing to go on.

Anna stretched out and realized suddenly that the bed was too big to be her own. She rolled onto her side, and slowly focused on the room through the gauzy curtain. It wasn't until several luxurious minutes later that she realized exactly where she had fallen asleep.

She crawled to the edge of the bed and poked her arm through, drawing the curtain back over her shoulder so that she could look around more easily. The walls were a soft golden color and they appealed to her even now as their dusky patterning stood out against the pale evening light.

The dressing room door stood open across the room, inviting. She crawled out of the bed and walked over to peek in. Moonlight reflected from the bedroom windows and fell onto the mirrors along one wall. It played into fanciful designs as Anna tried to trap the moment for her own, like a photograph.

She stepped into the long dark room and ran her fingers along fabrics. She sighed at the heavy sensation and she slid her arm further into the rack. The sheer amount of choices was overwhelming. Anna tried to touch them all as she slid her fingers along the different fabrics and patterns. Fingering a racy silk number, Anna pulled the dress from its hanger and held it up to herself.

She swished a little in front of the mirror, imagining the feel of the material on her bare skin. Seemingly unable to stop, Anna began to undress. She pulled the heavy sweater off and tossed it to the ground, then stripped off the rest. The air was cool on her bare skin, but she rubbed the silky fabric against her skin and imagined what it would be like to belong in a dress like that. To have a place to wear it to.

Anna owned few extra clothes. Her wardrobe mostly consisted of things for work and a few comfy items for lounging at home. Over the years, Cat suggested various pieces when they were out shopping, and had often purchased them for her friend, but mostly those things stayed hidden in the depths of her closet. Even when she borrowed a piece from Cat, she never chose anything so revealing.

She pulled the thin sheath down, tugging here or there to get it in place. She smoothed the dress and looked up, her breath catching in her throat. The dress took an

average body and emphasized in a way that no piece of Anna's wardrobe did. It molded and lifted her breasts, and without a bra, her nipples tightened with the cool of the room and the caress of the silk.

The fabric pulled at her waist and flowed down her back, all coming together in a slight flair of a skirt that swirled when she spun a quick circle. Feeling far from sophisticated, and more like she was seven again and sneaking around in her mother's closet, Anna stepped out and into the main room.

Drawn to the jewelry box, Anna lifted the lid. Her fingers ached to capture the dazzling burst. Always a lover of pretty and shiny things, Anna owned little of that sort, and had worn even less. She pulled out a pair of dangling earrings that flashed when they caught the moon. She put them on.

Feeling less like a seven-year-old girl, and more like a stranger, Anna pulled down her auburn hair and smoothed it with her hand. She reached out to touch the woman in the mirror.

A matchbook on the nightstand caught her attention. Its cover was red glitter and black letters. She lifted the tiny book and read the cover.

There was only one word.

Pyro.

The room was long, dark, and had ceilings that seemed to go on forever like the night sky. Torches lined the walls and the dancing flames reflected in the long mirrors, casting everything in a red glow. A long ebony-lacquered bar held flames inlaid on its surface and it ran the length of one wall with its display of colored glass. Dark booths, some already holding couples, lined the far end of the massive room.

Anna's black sheer dress popped against the crimson tone reflected on her skin, and she felt alien and out of place in the wildly exciting atmosphere of the club. She hurried across the room and slid onto a stool at the bar, sure that everyone in the club stared at her.

A burly man at the door had checked her id and asked for money, and she'd paid him from a small stack of bills she'd found secreted in the jewelry case. He'd said the show started in another thirty minutes or so, and that she was lucky to have gotten there early. Tonight looked to be a real treat, he'd said, and she was lucky to have gotten a seat. She took another one of the bills and set it on the bar in front of her.

"What can I get you, kitten?" the bartender asked and he slid his way to her. The red light on his black hair looked like blood, and Anna thought he looked like a devil would. Handsome, but still a devil. Could the devil be handsome? She couldn't help but look when he walked past to grab two chilled glasses, and the black-leather pants molded him like a second skin. She wished she could reach out a hand and squeeze, like Cat would have done after a few drinks.

He grabbed a bottle of something icy blue and poured a drink, tossed it back with an easy air.

“I’ll have one of those,” she said. She had no idea what she was ordering.

“You’re new here,” he said and poured both her and himself a round.

“Slainte,” he said. He held the glass, swirling the blue liquid, then poured it down in one fluid motion. She picked up her own and took it in one swig like she’d seen him do. She was happy that it didn’t burn, that she didn’t have to suppress a cough like the few times she’d tried to drink in high school.

She felt more at ease having mastered something so basic as ordering and swallowing a drink.

“Nope, never been here. I’ve heard the commercials, like everyone, but never thought to come,” she said.

“Well, it’s a great place. Should really pick up in the next hour, then you’ll really get a show,” he said, smiling. “This one’s on me,” he said as he poured her a second drink. “Relax and try to have a good time,” he added. Another customer settled herself at the far end of the bar, and he flashed a grin at Anna, then made his way, with that casual swagger, over to the woman at the other end of the bar.

Anna picked up her drink and swirled it in the glass. She breathed it in, then flicked out her tongue to touch the icy liquid, trying to get a taste of the sweet, fruity alcohol.

“Try to have a good time,” she muttered under her breath. Music had begun to pulse, heavy and rhythmic, and she had barely noticed until the vibration started to creep up her chair like a gentle massage. She turned around on the stool, faced the room, and realized that something was being set up near the center of the dance floor.

She watched and sipped her drink, while two men set up a circular platform. When they walked away, presumably to get some other piece to their puzzle, she turned back to study the bar and the bottles behind it. She thought of a question, but before she could raise a hand to wave at the bartender, a man slid into the seat next to her, and lifted his own. The bartender moved down, and without a word of exchange, filled a glass with a deep red liquid from an unmarked decanter. She watched the man beside her. He looked the perfect angel to the bartender’s devil. He took the glass and smiled.

“Fire and ice,” he said, this time smiling at her.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Fire and ice. Your drink and mine,” he replied.

“Oh,” she said.

“Sorry, I have a habit of talking to people before introducing myself. My grandmother used to have a fit. John, John Walker,” he said, extending his hand.

“Though many people like to call me Johnny.” He grinned at her and she smiled back.

“Catherine,” she said.

“Nice to meet you, Cat.”

“You too, Johnny,” she said. She smiled and relaxed slightly.

He lifted his hand again and the bartender slid down. Without a word, he refilled both Johnny’s glass and her own. “So what brings you here? Never seen you before,” he said.

“You always here to know?”

“Well, yes.” His grin reminded her of the Cheshire cat, somehow slightly mocking yet friendly at the same moment. “From the time the door unlocks to when it’s locked again,” he said, grinning.

She smiled too, feeling foolish but somehow at ease. Maybe she should have learned from Alice and stayed away from dark and unknown things like rabbit holes. It had never been a problem before. “Then what are you doing here, talking to me? There must be work to be done somewhere.”

“Ah yes, always, but that is the best part about being the boss then, isn’t it. I’ll always have time for you,” he said, winking this time. Anna knew it was a well traveled line by the ease of his smile and the way he threw it so casually. But she couldn’t help but feel pleased at the shiver it sent through her.

“Me, Johnny? You don’t know anything about me,” she said.

“I think you’re more than what you seem.” Intuition or simple deduction? Wasn’t everyone?

“Bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Once or twice.” An employee walked over and whispered something in Johnny’s ear, and his smile turned into a frown. “Excuse me, Cat, it looks as if I spoke too soon,” he said and stood. “I need to go handle a call. If I make sure my staff takes extra good care of you while I’m gone, would you dance with me when I get back?” he asked grinning yet again.

“What can I say to an offer like that? But what if I’m meeting someone?” she asked.

“I have a feeling. You were perched on that stool, waiting for me, you just didn’t know it yet,” he replied.

God, he was cocky. But she couldn’t deny that she was having fun. Smiling foolishly, she realized that she wanted him to come back. “Perhaps it’s just your lucky day,” she said, unsure of where the playfulness came from.

“Good,” he said. He lifted her hand and kissed it gently, then strolled away. She couldn’t help but admire. The blonde hair was short and well styled, wide shoulders and long legs. She thought about the strong hands that had held his glass, the power, unsettled and right beneath the surface.

She turned back to the room and saw that the platform now held a circular mattress, covered in shining black satin, raised several feet above the dance floor. The room had filled in, and there were people everywhere she looked now. More came in the door.

As she watched, three women in jewel-toned satin robes, a dark-haired woman with ebony skin, a sun-kissed blonde, and a fair-skinned redhead, walked to the center platform. They spread out around the circle and slowly took off their robes. Each woman's outfit was elaborate, yet completely revealing. The first's costume was wrought of finely-linked gold chains, falling in waves to reveal full breasts and crimson painted nipples.

The blonde's body had been painted to resemble flame. She shimmered in layers of red, orange, and gold that seemed to lick its way over her long slender body. The redhead dropped her robe to reveal silver dust and jewels claiming her narrow hips, small torso, and long legs so that she resembled a moonbeam when she moved.

The three climbed on the bed and posed, layering themselves in an erotic tableau. As they held their poses, everyone in the room erupted into applause, and the room began to pulse again as the music climbed. People began to dance, moving together with the heavy rhythm. Anna was transfixed. She didn't know what to say and was glad there was no one to speak to. She stared at the women, then at the people moving on the floor.

Some stood talking, watching.

Then she saw Johnny. He leaned in a doorway and watched her.

He smiled when he caught her look. When she lifted an eyebrow, he grinned and strolled towards her.

"What do you think?" he asked when he slid into an empty seat next to her. She knew what he meant but decided to ignore the question for now.

“A man named for a whiskey, with a face like an angel. What is a woman to think of you Johnny Walker?” she asked more smoothly than she felt. She looked down the bar and lifted a hand to signal the bartender before she turned back to Johnny, smiling.

“I didn’t think you cared, sweetheart,” he said laughing.

“What makes you think I do?”

“And when I thought I had an inch, I loose a mile,” he replied as he took her hand and kissed a fingertip. “How about that dance you promised me?” he asked.

As he held out his hand, she slid from the stool. Still holding her outstretched arm, he led her to the dance floor. The women had changed places, now separate, arched into graceful poses on the black satin platform.

The shimmering moonbeam was closest to them, and Anna wished that she could reach out and touch the woman, just for a moment. Johnny slid his arm around Anna’s waist. He pulled her close, his leg between her legs and she arched her back against his arm, throwing her head back.

She tossed her head to the side and slid her arms up around his neck and moved to the beat. He kissed her neck and she shivered, drawing him in closer.

When the song ended, she laughed and kissed his lips. He slid his hands down her waist and settled them on her hips, nearly naked under the thin threaded silk.

“How about another drink?” she said, already leading him back to the bar.

“How about something quieter?” he asked as he raised a hand for the bartender.

Anna felt the heat of the question start in the small of her back, and it quickly radiated through her entire body.

“What makes you think I would do such a thing?” she asked.

“The eyes,” he said, unsmiling this time and staring at those telling features. She looked away and lifted the drink that had appeared in front of her.

“You are so sure of yourself,” she said.

“Would you like to dance some more?”

“No, I think I’m ready,” she said. He led her again, this time to the stairs in at the far corner of the room that she had overlooked when first coming in. Another couple walked through the door at the top as they made their way up.

They walked down the hall before he chose the last door and turned the handle. They stepped inside the dark room.

He didn’t give her time to think or even look around. He slid his arms around her waist and kissed her, harder than he had downstairs, biting her lips and stealing her breath. She landed on a bed as he fell with her, tumbling on top and pulling her skirt up around her hips.

“Slow down,” she whispered. She wasn’t sure if she talked to him or to herself.

He kissed her, down her neck, shoulders, and between her breasts. He sucked at her nipples, through the fabric, before sliding the straps down, leaving the dress bunched around her middle.

She tried to pull away but he slid his arms around her and brought her to his chest.

“Relax,” he said.

His belt buckle ground into her stomach. The alcohol seemed to have lost its edge and she glanced around at the mostly empty room. She hadn’t been able to make anything out when they first came in, but now she saw that the room only contained the bed and a small table beside.

He kneeled down and kissed her stomach. When he tried to reach up her dress, she jumped away. “Wait,” she said and covered herself with her hands.

“I can’t wait all night.” He likely said it out of frustration but the words spoke more to Anna. One night.

“This was a bad idea.” Anna pulled up her dress and slid the straps back. She fumbled with the zipper he’d started to slid down. “This isn’t me. I have to go.”

She stumbled, trying to find her purse and the money that she’d slid into her bra at the beginning of the night. She looked everywhere but at him.

He didn’t say a word, but handed her the purse she’d dropped on the floor beside the bed. He took a last look in her direction and left.

When the door closed, the click finalizing, she sat on the bed and let out the breath she’d held.

She shivered from the cool air in the empty room, then stood to find a light switch. A single bulb, attached to a cheap floor lamp, illuminated the room enough to find the money and her shoes.

She quietly made her way back but this time the other rooms were obviously occupied from the noises coming from either side of the hall. She walked faster, before one of those doors could open and she got a glimpse of what went on inside.

Downstairs, almost everyone had gone home, or to the rooms, except for a few couples still curled around each other in the darkened booths. The flames had been dampened and the platform stood empty. She made her way out, unheeded, and was glad to leave without seeing anyone she recognized. She wondered if Johnny watched while she walked through the room, but she didn't see him if he did.

The Lexus stood in the parking lot where she'd left it. She climbed in and just sat there for a minute before she started the car. When she felt steady again, she reached a hand into the purse she'd borrowed from her friend's closet and pulled out the matchbook from Cat's nightstand. Anna lifted the cover and looked inside the flap.

Johnny Walker

213-858-2620

Pulling out of the parking lot, Anna headed for the city limits, ready to put the night behind her.

HELL IS A TRAILER PARK

She was the kind of woman who drank her coffee before her morning piss. Her word, by the way, not mine. She was always kind of rough like that. As if she had ridden every mile too hard, laughed a bit too loud, and had gotten here with only a broken down Cadillac, a boyfriend she didn't like, and a crummy twelve foot by sixty box-on-wheels to show for it. No one meant to end up here, though people were strangely proud of their little trailer world, as if outside scorn couldn't touch them here. They drove in through the front gates, two steel barrels and strung chicken wire, and they were at home, happy; greetings were thrown from the windows of passing trucks to people in lawn chairs. Giggling swarms of children of varying ages ran between homes, their legs and bare feet the same dull shade as the brown bare ground.

She didn't understand these people. She knew that she would never belong, never fit in. When greetings were called out to her in passing, she walked quicker, without even a nod. Eventually, after her first two years here, the hellos and how-are-yous had stopped. And now it was only quiet disapproval, wondering, and pity. But she didn't want those either.

The creases around each knuckle deepened as she griped her coffee cup; wild auburn hair, and those moonstone blue eyes. It was the eyes really. Yes, yes. She could

rightly blame them, couldn't she? How many men -years ago, mind you- had stared in those eyes.

All her life they had been a leash, as if that first look could flare out, take shape, and chain her to the woman they wanted her to be. She had a weakness. She knew that. But she was ready to take them back; those moonstone blues.

She set her coffee cup back on the counter and picked up the gun she had placed next to the coffee pot. She thought, for a second, about turning it on herself, but she didn't have it in her. Instead, she tip-toed, as much as one could in a creaky box, and made her way to the sleeping form in the back room. Vern, her current boyfriend, befrienders. Oh how she hated Vern, and all the others over the years. But she couldn't help it; she hated being lonely.

She wouldn't be lonely where she was going; so much better than the little hell she had made here. Surely they wouldn't let her out. No, they would take care of her.

Now just one last thing to do.

Vern mumbled something and pulled the covers closer. She smiled for a second before she turned her eyes away, leveled the gun, and felt the answer in the pull at her hand.

Acacia Gentry is a Kansas City, Mo. native. She currently lives in Raytown with her husband, two children, and all their pets. In 2000, along with graduating from high school in the top ten percent of her class, Mrs. Gentry received a technical degree in Advertising and Graphic Arts from Herndon Career Center. Due to her love of learning and the insatiable urge to challenge herself further, she then entered Southwest Missouri State where she eventually chose to become an English major after brief stints in the communication and pre-veterinary departments. In 2004, she transferred to the University of Missouri Kansas City, and in 2006, Mrs. Gentry graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelors of Arts degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and a minor in sociology.

This combination of interests then led Mrs. Gentry to go on to enroll in graduate school at the University of Missouri Kansas City, where she taught English composition for a number of years as she completed her Masters in Fine Arts in the field of Creative Writing and Media Arts in 2011.