

Diablo Valley College  
 San Ramon Campus  
 Fall 2020

# digging: a literary collection

A collection of short fiction  
by the students of ENGL-223 Fall 2020  
Diablo Valley College - San Ramon Campus.

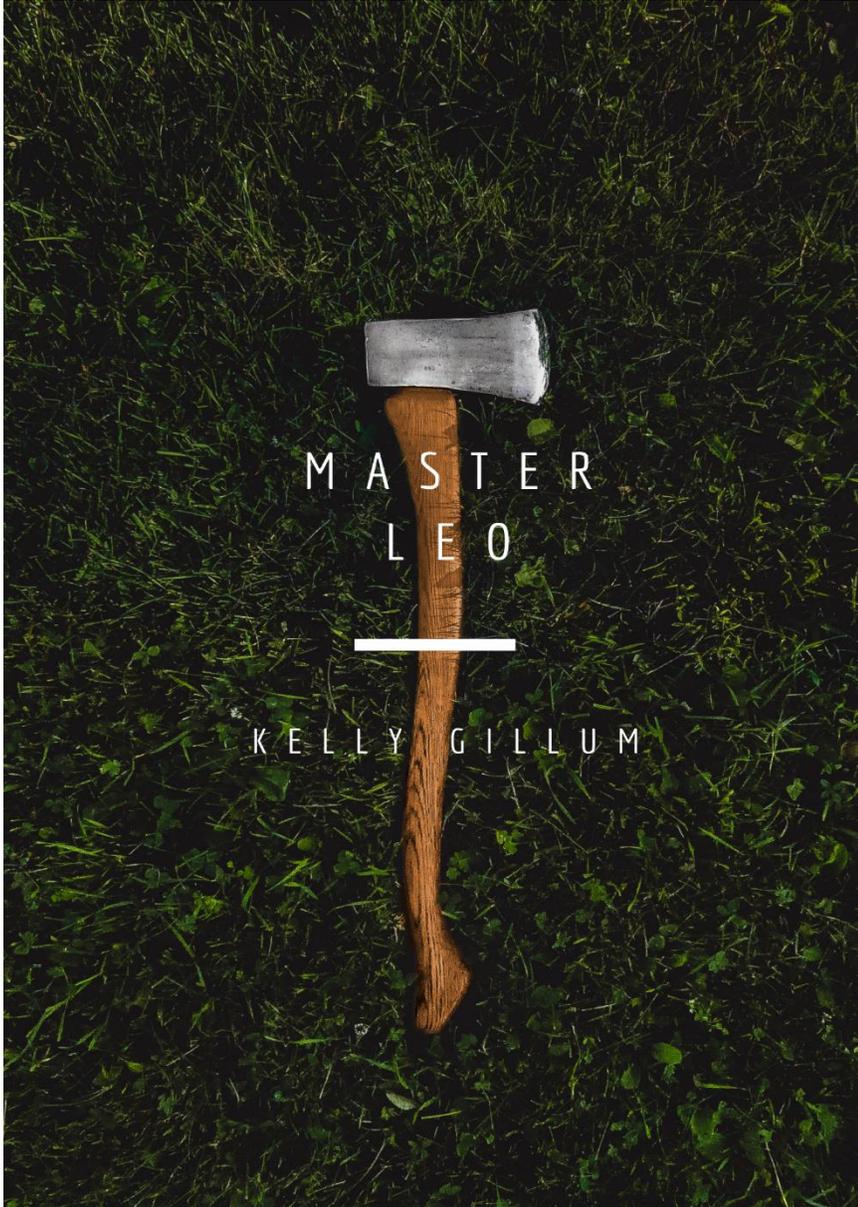
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Seamus Heaney

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Speeding down the long, twisty dirt road surrounded by thousands of conifer and poplar trees, the coffee brown Bentley kicked dust and dirt in its wake. Flicking on the headlights through the arriving dusk, the driver sat with both gloved hands gripping the steering wheel, unaware of the tension filling up the extra space in the back seat behind him. The woman gripped her white Prada purse with one hand, staring out the window, brow furrowed at the thought of finally arriving to the house at the end of the driveway. Her makeup was applied impeccably to her face, but her wrinkles cracked deeper and deeper at each sound of his voice. The man turned his head to look toward her, reaching up to fix his slick, grey hair. Reaching down to adjust his thick black tie, he whispered, "Are you ready?"

"Does it matter?" she responded, with a gulp in her voice, clearly refusing to turn around.

"You're the one who insisted we do this ourselves," he huffed.

Twisting her head around, the woman caught one tear halfway down her cheek, to screech, "I didn't want to do it at all."

Adjusting his tone, the man took a very quick breath and said, "I'm just saying we could have easily paid for this."

Turning her head back toward the window, the woman paused for a moment, adjusting her black feather boa, before responding, "If we have to do this, we have to do it ourselves."

The house now grew larger and larger in the windshield, and the partition between front and back seats creaked down. The driver exclaimed to the back seat, "Sir, are you sure you won't be requiring my services for the evening?"

"No, Bernard. You can take the night off. In fact, please take the morning off, as well. Enjoy the Westchester house."

"Very good, sir," Bernard responded before the man in the back seat reached over to his door handle and raised the partition back up.

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"Mother and Father shan't be joining you this evening, Master Leopold," Alfonse creaked to Leo as he pulled out his chair. The screeching of the chair against the imported marble floor echoed over the other 29 chairs and through the five crystal chandeliers.

"Where are they tonight?" Leo whined quietly as Alfonse returned with a large silver platter underneath its bulbous lid that exaggerated the young man's facial features in its sharp reflection.

"Never you mind, sir," Alfonse responded, tucking a white linen napkin into Leo's white buttoned-up shirt.

Having the platter opened up for him, the steam took its time dissipating before Leo could see what had been prepared for him this evening.

"Is it fish?" he drowned in confusion as Alfonse tapped his feet back toward the kitchen.

"You hate fish, Master Leopold," the dignified, ambiguously European man replied, keeping his face forward and walking through the swinging door. Leo furrowed his brow, noticing that the lights were off as he watched Alfonse disappear into the blackened kitchen.

Turning his gaze back to the mystery platter staring back at him, Leo wondered what it was. *Are those tentacles*, he wondered. *Unless it's pasta. I like pasta.* Darting his head back toward the kitchen, he hoped to now see lights popping out the circular window near the top of the swinging door. Seeing nothing but darkness, Leo could feel beads of sweat dripping down from his perfectly coiffed hair. He frantically turned his scrunched-up face back toward what he was desperately hoping was pasta.

Taking a deep breath, Leo squared his shoulders and reached for the fork closest to the platter. Picking it up, he took one deep breath before finally dropping one stab into the vaguely green meat-type object. Leo cringed and let the fork handle topple over. *Did it squeal?* he screamed in his mind, swearing he could hear a squeal or a squeak of some kind. He launched his heavy chair back and shot up.

"Alfonse," Leo yelled toward the kitchen.

Receiving no response, he dashed toward the kitchen, stopping just before pushing his hands into the swinging door. Slowly inching the door into the darkness, Leo saw and heard nothing as he slipped one eye in.

Wondering where all the help had gone, Leo's knees began to tremble. His thoughts began to get away from him. *They usually stay to clean up. Sometimes they make soups for the next day. Where are Mother and Father?*

"Why haven't you eaten anything, Master Leopold?" Alfonse's voice crashed through the dining room.

Leo shrieked as his legs were now quaking. Looking back toward the lead butler with his breath heaving in and out, he saw Alfonse standing next to the displaced chair with his hands clasped firmly to his hips.

"Where is everyone, Alfonso?" Leo gasped in a panic, beginning to sweat. "Where'd you go? What is that stuff?"

"You must compose yourself, young man," Alfonso commanded. "You have nothing to worry about."

"Where are Mother and Father?"

Sensing his charge's distress, Alfonso finally answered the stacking questions. "The kitchen staff has discharged for the evening. I was attending to personal matters. And your dinner is chicken with arugula-mint pesto linguini."

"Where are my parents?" Leo exclaimed, desperately hoping for answers to all of his worries.

"Your parents shall be returning sometime in the morning," Alfonso responded with a more reassuring tone in his voice now. "You mustn't worry yourself, Master Leopold. Now, if you would please return to your seat and eat your dinner, I may consider allowing you one scoop of parfait for dessert."

While Leo didn't actually like parfait, he did take solace in the assurance that his parents would be back home the following morning, as well as Alfonso's assuring tone and his offering of something resembling a sweet treat.

"Ok," Leo responded, his heartrate slowing a bit more now on his walk back toward the table. "I swear it squeaked though."

Holding the chair to push it back in once more, Alfonso responded with one eyebrow lifted into the air, "Your vivid imagination has always been your greatest adversary, young man."

Leo caught another look at his dinner and noticed that about a quarter of the dish had been cut into smaller pieces since he last saw it. Feeling his unease return, Leo felt Alfonso's hand come down on his shoulder, gently forcing him down into the chair. Once more, the chair screeched against the imported marble floor.

"Please eat, Master Leopold," Alfonso again commanded. "You need your strength. And I'll make sure you get something more to your pedestrian tastes for breakfast." He then picked up the fork and placed it in Leo's right hand before guiding it toward what he referred to as chicken with arugula-mint pesto linguini.

Taking two tries to speak past a lump in his throat, Leo's voice cracked "I don't think I'm hungry anymore."

Once again, Alfonso took control of the fork and pierced two of the pieces at once before placing it back into Leo's hand.

"I don't feel very good. I think I'll just go to bed," Leo exclaimed, trying to wiggle out of his chair, only to realize Alfonso's large feet planted firmly behind both its legs.

"It's very good for you, Master Leopold," Alfonso grunted out as he ripped the fork out of his hand and brought it up to his mouth. "It's good for the digestion."

Pinching his lips closed, Leo writhed his head frantically enough to gasp out, "Where are Mother and Father?"

Catching the last opening of Leo's mouth at the end of 'Father', Alfonso forced the forkful into his mouth. "They'll be here in the morning. If you eat a bit, you'll have strength enough to see them. I believe they said something about taking you out to a show and for lunch."

This promise of quality time with his parents was enough to trick Leo into instinctively chewing the food he was doing his best not to taste. Following the four hesitant chews, he felt Alfonse's hand forcefully grip his chin and launch his head back enough to induce swallowing.

"Very good, Master Leopold," he lurched out with a smile Leo had never seen before.

"What was that?" Leo whispered out, recovering from the gulp for which he was unprepared.

After a moment of looking Leo deep into his eyes with the same unfamiliar smile, Alfonse finally responded with a mesmerizing "It will help you sleep."

Alfonse's face suddenly became more fuzzy and then darker and darker. *Who's messing with the lights*, Leo thought. Hearing what sounded like footsteps tapping onto the imported marble floor, Leo didn't even have time to turn his head to confirm his assumption. Alfonse softly nodded repeatedly and smiled as Leo's head drifted softly down into the mystery meal.

"That took forever," Leo's father huffed, removing his raincoat to place on the chair next to Leo.

"He is quite fastidious about food," Alfonse retorted.

Gently lifting Leo's face enough to wipe it with his cloth napkin that had fallen onto the floor during the struggle, Leo's mother then placed his head onto the back of the chair. "What even was that dish you put it in?" she asked, wiping her fingers with the same napkin while turning around to exit the dining room.

"I don't know," Alfonse responded in a tone that insisted it wasn't important enough for anyone to question. Slipping his arms underneath Leo's armpits, Alfonse motioned his head toward Leo's feet for his father to get the hint of carrying him out of the dining room.

"How can he weigh this much? He doesn't ever eat what he orders," Leo's father grunted, straining to hold both his son's legs.

"Edwina thinks I'm unaware she feeds him that putrid boxed macaroni two or three times a day," Alfonse responded, able to keep his nose in the air while straining to keep his shoulders straight.

As the two men grunted toward the main entrance into the large dining room, Leo's mother returned, along with the squeaking of a large black cart holding a trunk big enough for someone twice her size. After twisting it around, she opened the large lid and helped guide her husband by the upper arm as he and Alfonse struggled to lift Leo into the trunk. As the two men struggled to fit him into the trunk in the right configuration, she held her son's head as they twisted his arms and wriggled his legs with the singular goal of closing it shut. As her husband released one exhausted exhale while reaching to slam the lid closed, Leo's mother threw her hand onto his wrist and stared at him with a look of frustration on her face. After a brief moment of stabbing her husband with her eyes, she leaned down and laid one single kiss on her son's forehead. Stopping one tear before it reached the bottom of her cheek, she threw one more look toward her husband and nodded. Leo's father then pursed his lips together, took one more deep breath, and in a motion slower than it seemed a moment earlier, closed the lid onto his motionless son.

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Reversing the large black van out of the old garage with both doors open, Alfonse leaned his head out the window with his suited elbow dangling out with him. Exiting the driver's side to meet Leo's parents standing behind the van with the black cart and trunk, he once again motioned with his head toward the other end of the

cart. Leo's father stood still in his raincoat, his eyes bulged, staring into space. Alfonse cleared his throat to break the spell. Making no headway, he exclaimed, "Are we ready?"

Leo's father blinked and shook his head to refocus and replied, "I don't know."

"What do you mean?" his wife responded.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this," he said after a pause.

Slapping his hand against the cart, Alfonse exclaimed, "Sir, we are, in fact, doing this!"

"Hold on a minute, Alfonse," Leo's mother bellowed.

"Madame, due respect, but we've come too far for us to have a change of heart. This is for Master Leopold's own good."

"Alfonse, please. Give us a minute. This is our son," Leo's father huffed, holding out his hand and turning to his wife. "Maybe you were right, dear."

"I will not give you a moment, God dammit!" Alfonse shouted at a volume they had only heard once before.

Both of Leo's parents could do nothing but stand in shock with their mouths open and eyes gaping as he continued. "I am not just some servant. I am the one who read to him, who made sure he ate, who made sure he received new trousers when he outgrew the rest. I was never gone nights as he wondered where I was that evening."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Leo's father growled. "We are his parents. You are our butler."

After a tension-filled pause, Alfonse retorted, "When is his birthday, Sir?"

"March eleventh," Leo's mother nervously replied in a hurry.

"I was speaking to your husband, Madame. What is his least favorite food?" he demanded turning back to Leo's father. Sensing no answer from either of them, he continued. "What is the only vegetable your son requires no convincing to eat?"

After another moment of silence, Leo's mother nervously exclaimed with a lump in her throat. "We have many obligations, Alfonse. We've done our best."

"Regardless of your rationalizations, Madame, I believe I have more of an idea of what's best for your son. I have always been here. You would not listen to me before. Listen to me now."

Alfonse straightened his tie and quickly swept his fallen hair back toward the side of his head, as Leo's mother began to weep. She turned back toward the large trunk. As she began clicking the latches up to open the trunk, her husband's hand came crashing down on top.

"Okay!" he exclaimed with his head held high. "We'll stick to the plan."

"Maybe we shouldn't," his wife pleaded through her tears. "Alfonse is right. We haven't been there. We made a lot of the same mistakes. This is our chance to change all that."

"It's too late for that. He needs this. Alfonse guide that side. I'll lift from here."

"Very good, Sir," Alfonse responded in his usual calm and obligatory manner.

Alfonse marched to the main house after he and Leo's father grunted and sweated to twist the full trunk into the van. Leo's mother approached and took her husband's hands in hers. "I beg you to reconsider this. He'll be alright. We can spend more time with him. We can help him. He won't be like Percy."

"My dear, I admit it. We have not done enough. But it's too late for us to jump in and change him. I can't just get him a job and make him a man. He'll have no choice but to change and grow out there."

As his wife began to weep once more, he started stroking her arm and added, "He'll be fine. He'll be safe. All he needs to survive will be there. But most importantly, he'll have to do it himself."

Returning from the main house, Alfonse respectfully interrupted, "Apologies, Sir. But I spoke with the pilot. He informs me that he is ready when we are."

"Thank you, Alfonse." Turning back to his wife, Leo's father took her hands in his once more. "Stay here. We won't be long. We'll make sure he gets out safely."

"How do you know this will work?" she cried out softly. "It feels like giving up."

He lovingly placed his hand on his wife's cheek and whispered close, "We were too late with Percy. We won't be with Leo. Besides..." Pausing to look back at Alfonse and smiling softly, her husband responded, "Alfonse knows best."

Alfonse threw his arms to the sides of his body and proceeded to nod in respectful understanding. "At your leisure, Sir."

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Silence endured in the 45-minute drive from the mansion and its dozens of acres, through the neighboring town, and now closer and closer to the municipal airport. Alfonse drove the van toward the gates leading to the runway with his usual perfect posture and his hands at ten and two while Leo's father bounced his left leg up and down nervously. As they approached the gate, Alfonse rolled his window down while applying the brakes. A guard dressed in black with a baton and a walkie-talkie secured to his belt came out of the guard shack and proceeded to wipe mustard off of his face.

Continuing his hefty chewing process, he addressed Alfonse. "Help you gentlemen?"

"Teddy is expecting us. He's delivering our cargo. Last name should be Salvatore," Alfonse responded while handing him an envelope.

"There you are. Go ahead," the guard responded, taking the envelope before reaching into the shack to press the red button for the gate.

As the gate slowly squeaked open, Leo's father whispered through a lump in his throat, "Do you think he can do it, Alfonse?"

"To what and whom are you referring, Sir?" Alfonse responded, now accelerating the big black van through the gate.

"Do you think Leo can make it? Do you think he can learn to make it on his own? Make decisions?"

Taking a moment to gather his thoughts while approaching a small, orange single-engine prop plane, Alfonse cleared his throat. "I believe Master Leopold has been conditioned for many years to enjoy all of the pleasures your vast means have been able to provide him, Sir."

After a few seconds and a look of wanting, Leo's father remained calm but added a sense of demand to his tone. "You didn't answer me, Alfonse."

Raising his left eyebrow while finally shifting the van into park, he raised both his hands to the top of the steering wheel and took one deep breath and turned toward his long-time employer.

"Master Leopold has been afforded much time to become lazy and fearful of life. But unlike his brother, he has not reached adulthood nor the attitude that led to poor Master Percival's... inevitable end."

Now beginning to cry, Leo's father turned his head toward his door to wipe his tears away before returning his gaze toward Alfonse. He shrugged his shoulders and threw his hands up toward the van ceiling.

Sensing his employer's need for more, Alfonse added, "Your son has become lazy and entitled, Sir. But the reasons for that are irrelevant at this point. What truly matters is that I see every day that he is not ignorant. He learned to read. He plays the piano beautifully. And he loves you both very much.

His eyes began to well up. "He loves me, as well, unless I am mistaken."

Clearing his throat and straightening his shoulders, Alfonse continued, "However, he has not left your home in some time. He may not possess some of Master Percival's more...concerning proclivities, but he must learn to be a respectful and self-sufficient man and I believe, with this unique opportunity, he will."

Leo's father took a deep breath and proceeded to nod several times. Fixing his greased-back hair while looking in the mirror, he paused. Looking back toward Alfonse, he looked him deep in the eyes in a manner Alfonse had never seen before.

"Thank you, Alfonse," he gulped out. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Sir. Shall we?"

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Dawn arrived. Fog rolled through the thousands of pine and oak trees while dew cascaded down their branches and leaves. The sun began to cut through the trees and then gradually over them before having a more open channel to the cabin and its accompanying bear cache towering almost twice as high. The sunray cutting through the window and piercing his left eyelid is what finally woke Leo. Next, he heard the birds, each more alive than he knew himself to be at this moment. Finally opening his eyes, he thought to move nothing but his head to evade the daggering sunlight. He then looked downward, realizing he was covered in something that reminded him of the rug that covered the floor in front of the largest fireplace in his parents' mansion. *Where's its head*, he thought, assuming it was the same rug placed on top of him. He began moving both his arms around to feel for the giant bear head attached to the rug he thought he recognized. Feeling nothing, he decided it was a new addition. His face brightened. *Mother and Father must have bought it for me*, he thought to himself with excitement.

Finally raising his body as quickly as he could, Leo looked around the room while realizing he had a splitting headache. It didn't take long for him to comprehend he'd never seen this room before in his life. His heart pounded. He began to sweat and take quick, uncontrollable shallow breaths. He turned his head and body around to examine the wall behind him, and his quick shallow breaths became even louder. Turning his head and body back around, a wave of nausea gurgled up from his pelvis, through his body, and up to the back of his cheeks. Leo proceeded to vomit all over the blanket of fur covering his lap.

Gasping for air in between coughs and contained screams, he placed his hands on either side of his body on the bed. His breaths slowed and his nausea began to subside. Leo raised his head, only to wince at the pain in his head he once again realized he had. He lifted the heavy fur blanket off of the right side of his body and then looked down yet again.

*I wasn't wearing long underwear last night, he thought to himself. "Alfonse," he bellowed out.*

After a pause and no response or sounds of clicking heels outside the door, Leo called out once more. "Alfonse. Hello?"

Taking one more pause, he began taking uncontrollable deep, shallow breaths once more. *You are not at home, he thought to himself. "No shit," he screamed out loud.*

He closed his eyes and balled up his fists. His breaths now becoming slower and deeper, he opened his eyes once more. Still feeling pain in his head, and now spreading through his neck and down into his back, Leo began taking slow and intentional looks around the dim, but comfortable looking room. *A fireplace, he thought to himself with cautious delight. Two windows, a small wooden table, and two wooden chairs were the next items he decided to take comfort in. The corner opposite his large, fur-covered bed seemed to be a kitchen, but certainly not like any he had ever seen before. "Where's the fridge?" he demanded to no one.*

Looking once more at the wooden table in the middle of the room he had finally realized was a cabin, he saw a small wooden box in the center. Nailed to the side of the box was a note with writing. Leo excitedly threw the large, vomit-soaked fur blanket to the wooden floor.

Thrusting his body out of the bed, he writhed in pain more intense than before. Once more he stopped. "Move slow," he said aloud to himself.

Slowly reaching the table, he saw that the note had "Leopold" written in flawless cursive. Lifting the nail hammered into the edge of the lid, he saw three envelopes, all labeled with his name in specific handwriting. The first he picked up was in the same handwriting as the note on the box, but with the word "Master" before his name.

Leo's eyes bulged as he began to breath quicker and shallower yet again. Throwing the envelope to the floor, he clenched his fists, as well as his entire face, and regained control of his breath. Reaching back into the small box, he noticed the other two envelopes simply said "Leo", one written in slender cursive and in pink ink, and the other in fatter, black letters. Excitedly ripping open the one he identified as his mother's, Leo found a tri-folded letter inside. Slowly opening it, he began to read:

*My Love,*

*I am so sorry we needed to do this. I'm sure you're angry. You have every right to be. But it became necessary. We didn't do enough. We've made mistakes that you've had to pay for. And I know being sent away never feels good. But I think you can do it. You're so smart. And you're a fighter. You just haven't had to fight yet.*

*I wish I'd been a better mother. I wish your Father had been a better father. But we've had to make hard decisions. Maybe I'm not strong enough to make the right ones.*

*Your Father and Alfonse have made sure you have what you need. Supplies, tools, food, and instructions on how to use them. Try to enjoy where you are. And I hope you can learn. I'm sure it will be hard. I know I couldn't do it, but I'm far too old for change of that measure. But I think you can. I know you can.*

*We'll see you again. Maybe not soon. But we will. And you can say and do whatever you need to when you see us again.*

*All my love,  
Mother*

The letter began to tremble and crinkle. Leo's teeth ground into each other. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but he made no sound. His head began to shake as hard as his hands. With his brow darting down toward his nose, he finally crumpled up the letter in his hand. Throwing it down onto the floor, he darted toward the door next to the barely open window that had awoken him moments earlier. Slamming into it, he realized it wouldn't budge. Looking down, he saw a type of lock he'd never seen before.

"A board!" he screamed. "A fucking board!"

Noticing it was latched onto two grooves nailed against the wall on either side of the door, he tried to slam it upwards. After a failed attempt, he stepped back and kicked up and slammed the board up and onto the floor. Instantly feeling the searing pain against his foot covered by only a wool sock, he once again launched himself toward the giant wooden door made of tree logs. Rolling over the small wooden porch outside and onto the cold, wet forest floor, Leo landed squarely on his back.

"Fuck!" he shouted once more, staring up into the now blinding sun.

Suddenly, Leo began laughing, remembering the mansion's groundskeepers as the only people who had ever heard him utter this vulgarity before. After all, they were the ones who had inadvertently taught it to him. "Fuck!" he once again screamed at the trees, followed by howls intertwined with belly laughs he hadn't experienced since the last time he left the mansion.

After another minute of laughing, and crying, and shouting various obscenities toward the sun to which his eyes had now become accustomed, Leo decided to get up.

"Oof," he said to himself, once again feeling pain from head to toe. Turning onto his stomach, and launching onto all fours, he felt the nausea return.

"Get up slow," he whispered before slowly rising onto his feet.

Taking deep, controlled breaths, his nausea began to subside as he took slow, methodical looks around his surroundings.

Looking up and around, he noticed various trees towering over the wooden cabin from which he had emerged. Past the deep right corner of the cabin, he noticed the tall bear cache and accompanying ladder overlooking the premises. Leo brought his head back down toward the cabin before looking at the slightly open window to the left of the door.

"Huh," he exclaimed to himself, followed by a chuckle, now realizing how he had been locked in from the inside.

Suddenly, his eyes bulged as his neck formed goosebumps from a cool breeze. Leo now realized he felt a wave of emptiness directly behind him. Slowly turning around, he saw it. Releasing a large, uncontrollable

exhalation, he saw the widest clearing of blue of his entire life. The sun washed over the lake not 100 feet in front of him. *I can smell it*, he thought to himself.

Closing his eyes, Leo now realized he could feel the sun on his face. He heard birds singing once again. Taking in yet another deep breath through his nose, he smelled the entire forest. In this moment, he decided he had never smelled anything worth smelling before.

Opening his eyes, he noticed a small blue bird dart down toward the water only to rise back up and out toward trees on the other side of the lake. This brought a small smile to his face. But just as quickly as it crept up, the smile slumped back down.

Turning around, Leo walked back into the cabin. Now brighter with the door open, Leo could see more of the interior. A large axe nearly as tall as himself was leaning against the wall underneath the window. A rifle was clipped into a case nestled into the corner next to the stone fireplace. Looking past the bundled-up fur blanket and under the bed, Leo noticed two large wooden boxes. Then he faced the table once more.

Slowly walking to the table, he picked up the other letter labeled in fat black letters now laying against the little wooden box. Reaching into the slit with his finger, Leo stopped himself. He placed it back in the wooden box before turning around and walking toward the open door. Stopping once more, he paused before looking down.

"Master Leopold" the envelope still read. Feeling the quick, shallow breaths returning, Leo stopped them dead with one deep inhale. Continuing to breathe normally, he reached down for the letter and opened it. He pulled it out, shrugged his shoulders, and asked himself "who cares?" before quickly unfolding it to read:

*Master Leopold,  
You had a brother.*

Leo stopped reading and could think no thoughts. After a moment, he looked toward the fireplace and thought of the times he would watch Alfonse start a fire in the large fireplace in the mansion. He decided to continue:

*Master Leopold,  
You had a brother.*

*He was sick. Sick in a manner in which you might not be able to understand yet. He died about five years before your birth. He made it to adulthood. But it was not to be. Your parents wanted better for him. But alas, they were ill-equipped. Unfortunately, parenthood was not their true calling. They know not what to do with their love, not in the same manner in which they handle monetary gain and the investments in which your father has so richly excelled.*

*Having said this, I believe they have finally come to the realization of their shortcomings as your guardians. They briefly discussed the possibility of my bearing the responsibility myself. However, I too, am ill-equipped. I am a man of a particular lifestyle and routines to which I have grown accustomed. And to put it bluntly, I happen to be moderately older than you might even assume.*

*However, what I do possess, Master Leopold, is faith. Faith in you, Sir. You have grown accustomed to the life of a child with unlimited means, but you have a heart and a soul not meant for what your parents believed was the counterbalance to their past mistakes.*

*But in the act of trying to keep you safe from the world they erroneously believed made your brother a victim, they ultimately repeated the gravest mistake of all. They ignored you.*

*In that modest yet relatively charming cabin is everything you require to become the man I believe you are fully capable of becoming. Tools, weapons for hunting, a decade's worth of stimulating reading material, enough warm clothing and bedding to last until you learn to create more size-appropriate effects. There are also certain foods located in that rather unsightly bear cache directly outside the cabin. Located in one of the larger containers beneath the bed are instructions and advice on proper usage of everything you have been allocated. And please, Master Leopold, do not use any of the weaponry without reading everything you need.*

*Eventually, your parents will return for you. I do not know when that will be, but it will happen. I will see to it. Whenever that is, be open to the eventuality of letting them back in. They will never be the parents you have always so richly deserved. But I believe they can be who you need them to be.*

*Your brother's name was Percival. You are not Percival. You are Leopold. You have compassion and strength in equal measures to which you cannot even yet imagine.*

*Please be safe and think methodically. Also, most importantly, trust yourself, Sir.*

*I could say so much more, Master Leopold, but as I have taught you, lingering is unbecoming of a gentleman. Whether you see me again or not, I shall always be your friend.*

*Alfonse Salvatore III*

The paper in Leo's hands began to weaken from the droplets splashing onto it. He began to think about all the brief interactions he had with Alfonse, always ending with a reason for Alfonse to depart to tend to other duties. *He did it so I didn't know*, Leo thought to himself. *But he was always there.*

"Oh, God!" Leo exclaimed, as the smell of warming vomit suddenly made its way into his nostrils.

He ran back to the table and placed Alfonse's letter on top of the little wooden box. He started back toward the door and stopped to look back at the rifle. Considering trying it out for a brief moment, Leo started to laugh, remembering Alfonse's concern over the weapon. On his way through the door, the axe leaning under the window caught his eye once more. Leo grabbed it and proceeded back into the sunlight. Seeing a stump and a stack of logs small enough to lift, Leo struggled to pick one up before positioning it on the stump.

Looking down at the axe once again in his hands, Leo paused, knowing he had just a vague understanding of what to do next. Shrugging his shoulders, he awkwardly lifted the axe above his head before nervously bringing it down toward the awaiting log.

Clipping the edge of the log, the axe came swinging down toward Leo's right leg and he felt the blunt bump into his knee. He threw the axe down into the dirt and started hopping around as quickly as the birds who danced in the morning light. "Fuck!" he screamed into the trees once more.

Pausing enough to take some deep breaths and let the tears finish streaming out his face, Leo reached down and lifted up the material covering up his right leg and found just a red scrape of skin on the side of his knee. "Aww, I just nicked it!" he exclaimed with a chuckle.

Rubbing his knee a few times and then letting his long underwear leg drop, he picked the axe back up. He looked down at the axe once more and positioned his right hand on the bottom of the axe handle and his left hand closer to the tope. He then looked toward the log still waiting on the stump and put his left leg in front of him and took one more try and lifted and dropped the axe once more.

The head of the axe slammed down into the awaiting log and the two proceeded to fall off the stump together, never parting ways in the process. Leo once again began dancing around in the dirt and weeds in front of the cabin. "Yea!" he kept screaming into the trees and sun, along with some more colorful expletives, and thrusting his arms into the air.

Suddenly, Leo heard a great crack emerge from deep in the forest beyond the cabin. He stopped dancing and his heart began to pound harder than his headache he had forgotten about moments earlier. As he stared out toward the trees, his mouth opened, and he smiled. Turning around, Leo put his foot on the fallen log, and it took three wiggles to pull the axe out. A smile still adorning his face, Leo marched out toward the thickening tree line to investigate the startling noise, wearing his long underwear and his wool socks, holding his brand-new axe.



# AFTER THE DELUGE

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BY DIANA COOPER



Renee engaged in this careful dance to avoid hugging or kissing anyone, she smoothed the folds of the black separates bought just two days prior at Kohl's. As Renee sat among but separate from her family, she tugged at the snug fitting elastic waistband of her black slacks that were cutting off her circulation. It all seemed so pointless, this level of pomp and circumstance for a woman who threw a temper tantrum every time she misplaced her keys and blamed Renee for ruining every holiday from Mother's Day to Hanukah. If only Renee could have gone AWOL from her own mother's funeral.

As people began to depart, Rabbi Weinberg announced that the family would be accepting callers at Bubbie and Zeydeh's house, and distributed flyers with a map and driving directions to Renee's grandparents' home. Renee then picked up her purse and offered a smile and a wave to some cousins on her mother's side

Rabbi Weinberg and those present stood in the hot August sun and recited the Mourner's Kaddish. As the maintenance workers at Gates of Peace Cemetery lowered Mama's casket into the grave, Renee was at first overcome with a sense of numbness, but then found herself breathing a silent sigh of relief because the abuse was finally over. There would be no more screaming, no more fights. The constant drumbeat from Mama that Renee would never be good enough was finally done. While Dad and her brother Freddy sobbed as though Mama's passing had left a hole in their hearts, Renee methodically recited the words of the Kaddish, clueless as to the meaning of the Aramaic words that escaped her lips.

After Rabbi Weinberg and the mourners let out an emphatic "Amen," Renee lowered herself into the flimsy plastic folding chair that could barely support her ample physique. While Dad and Freddy got up and accepted greetings from those seated around them, Renee sat in silence while maintaining a cautious distance and not making eye contact with those around her. While

whom she had not seen in years. With the way things went with Mama's relatives, Renee would probably never see them ever again. Despite being raised Jewish at the behest of Bubbie and Zeydeh, the only extended family that Renee had ever known were the Roman Catholic relatives on Dad's side.

The cemetery was now empty. Dad picked up a program off a nearby seat.

"You ready?"

Renee nodded and proceeded with her immediate family and grandparents to the fern-colored Plymouth Grand Voyager parked at the curb. Renee trekked across the recently watered grass, her high heeled shoes sinking steadily into the soft, muddy ground beneath her.

Freddy climbed into the third seat, immediately removed his necktie, and unbuttoned his collar.

"Dad, I hadn't expected this many people at the funeral."

"Yeah, there were quite a few."

As Bubbie stowed her purse under the middle seat, Zeydeh fumbled with the seat belt.

"Lois, I had no idea that Cheryl was such a popular person," Zeydeh said.

"Hal, it was just nice that she was remembered," Bubbie said.

"I can't believe our little girl is gone. She was only fifty-four."

"Hal, she's in a better place. She just wasn't herself at the end."

Renee fastened her seat belt and stared listlessly out the window. Why did it matter to Zeydeh if Mama was popular? Dad always said that all that mattered was being a good person.

As the family minivan sped off in the direction of Bubbie and Zeydeh's home in Kensington, Renee's thoughts turned to a conversation of sorts that she had had with Mama two days prior to her passing.

In the months before her death, Mama had become bedridden, spending most of her time covered with just a thin cotton sheet while either sleeping or staring vacantly at the ceiling. Once Mama lost the ability to speak, the fact that she did not have a lot of time left became imminently clear. It was Renee's final opportunity to make her peace with Mama before it was too late.

Renee entered her parents' bedroom and opened the drapes to a sky that was cloudy and forbidding. Renee forced a smile. "Isn't it a nice day today?" Mama nodded in response.

"Mama, remember when I was a kid how I always came home from day camp with just one pigtail and the rest of my hair totally undone?"

When Mama heard these words, she almost managed a smile.

"I was a weird kid, wasn't I? But you always said it was a cute kind of weird."

Mama nodded again, this time with an animated look in her eyes.

Renee sat down on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb the disposable bed pad intended to deal with Mama's inevitable incontinence. As Renee took Mama by the hand, their fingers and thumbs became intertwined.

"Look, Mama. We've got the same thumbs. Did you know that it's a genetic mutation called Potter's Thumb that only affects two percent of the population?"

Mama just lay there, looking eagerly into Renee's eyes while Renee's gaze shifted towards the rare summer thunderstorm that was brewing just outside the window.

"Yeah . . . you know everyone says I look like you. Remember that time Freddy found that picture of you from third grade and he thought it was me? Remember how upset he was when Bubbie told him it was actually you?"

Mama nodded in agreement yet again.

"Good looking like you only taller, huh Mama?"

Mama shook her head yes emphatically. Renee paused for a moment, swallowed slowly, and smiled until it hurt.

"Mama, I love you no matter what. Do you love me no matter what?"

Mama shook her head no.

"Is it 'cause I'm gay?"

With a fierce, angry look in her eyes, Mama shook her head. Yes.

Without even thinking, Renee dropped her mother's hand and departed for her own room across the hall. If someone had been passing by her bedroom door that afternoon, they would have heard a sad, distraught young lady sobbing silently into her hands.

As Renee cried as quietly as she could, one truth became painfully clear: spending the eleven years since sixth grade in the closet just to please Mama had not been worth it. Renee was now twenty-two and had not had so much as a date with another woman just to avoid that conversation with her mother.

It was hard to believe that that conversation happened just two days ago, and now Mama was gone. After more than fifteen minutes of Dad navigating the Plymouth Grand Voyager up steep, winding roads, he turned onto a tree lined street no wider than a cow path, and Bubbie and Zeydeh's home came into view.

Bubbie had given a key to her friend Suzanne, so the house was already filled with people paying their respects.

Once inside the door, Renee smiled to a few people before making a beeline down the stairs to the restroom at the other end of the house, swiftly locking the door behind her.

Once Renee turned on the fan, the din of people talking upstairs could hardly be heard.

Renee took her time attending to the call of nature. If she stayed down here all afternoon, would anyone really miss her? The thought of making polite conversation with everyone only reminded her of having her wisdom teeth pulled.

Just as Renee was beginning to appreciate the solitude, a knock could be heard at the bathroom door. With the number of people there, the upstairs half bath was most likely occupied, so Renee flushed the toilet and washed her hands as quickly as she could.

Once in the downstairs hallway, the first person who came into view was someone from Bubbie and Zeydeh's synagogue in Berkeley. Was that Harry Borowitz or Barry Horowitz? Whoever he was, he rushed past Renee through the bathroom door, all while mumbling something about his prostate and frantically undoing his belt.

The second thing that met Renee's gaze was the hideous, paisley printed carpet that Bubbie always said looked nice because it cost a lot of money. Freddy was right; it looked like something from a casino. Whenever

people asked Renee what her grandmother was like, she would merely say, "She has the kind of taste where a drag queen would say it was too gaudy."

After climbing the stairs, Renee entered the dining room and approached the buffet that had been laid out on the table where so many arguments had transpired between Mama and her parents. Renee grabbed some utensils and filled a plate high with generous portions of foods like pickled herring, noodle kugel, and a bagel covered with cream cheese and smoked salmon. Perhaps if she ate enough, she could stuff down her feelings in typical Jewish fashion. Just so the meal was not a total disaster in terms of calories, Renee topped off her plate with fresh fruit and green salad.

As Renee filled her plate, she avoided making eye contact with anyone, only for Uncle Mort to approach her with his usual friendly smile. Uncle Mort was married to Bubbie's sister Fran before she too died young from cancer, just like Mama.

"Renee! Have something to eat! You're wasting away!"

"I wish." If Uncle Mort had known Renee at all, he would have realized how much she hated people making comments about her weight—even in kindhearted jest.

Without another word, Renee departed for the kitchen, her plate of food in hand.

With the kitchen table to herself, Renee went about the business of eating her lunch, careful not to stain her new outfit.

Just as Renee was starting to enjoy the peace and quiet, she looked up as a woman of a certain age came into view in a black viscose ensemble, penny-red helmet hair and a press-on manicure. It was Leah Roth, who had volunteered with Mama in the Women's League at the synagogue that they attended in Pleasantdale. Leah Roth was the kind of woman who not only avoided washing her hands whenever she volunteered in the synagogue kitchen but was always first in line for the reception after Friday night services without so much as offering to bring anything. One time, Mrs. Roth phoned Mama as if it were a social call, and then asked her to bake a cake for an event to which Mama was not invited. Why did Mama bother not only with Mrs. Roth, but the people at Temple Beit Zahav in general? Dad was right about them; far too many of them were so supercilious.

Renee eyed Mrs. Roth's painted on smile with contempt from across the table.

Mrs. Roth sat down across from Renee and attempted to take her hand, only for Renee to pull it away.

"My dear. So brave. How are you holding up?"

"Uh, fine."

"I see you've found a nice, quiet place for yourself."

"Uh, yeah."

"You know, it's like they say, 'May her memory be a blessing.'"

If one more person said that, Renee was going to scream. The only blessing was that Mama was dead.

Renee had no further words for Mrs. Roth. After Renee sat in silence and gave Mrs. Roth a dirty look for a good five minutes, Mrs. Roth excused herself and escaped to the living room.

If only Renee could find words for how she felt. If only she could speak the truth, that Mama was sick, and not just with cancer. Underneath all of Mama's abusive behavior was the fact that she had untreated mental illness.

On the surface Mama just seemed a little high-strung or “wound up,” as Dad like to say. Even Mama’s oncologist, Dr. Sobieski saw how agitated Mama was and handed her a prescription for anxiety medication without her consent, which she refused to take.

As Renee sat alone over her plate of food in her grandparents’ kitchen, she felt the warm summer air entering the room through an open window. Memories came to mind of not being allowed to walk home from elementary school in the comfortable, middle class neighborhood where they lived—even when she was in the upper grades—because of all the horror stories about kidnappings that Mama watched on the evening news. When Renee asked why she could not just walk home from school by herself, Mama said with conviction, “It’s not you I don’t trust. It’s everyone else out there.” If Mama’s anxiety did not have the tendency to flip into paranoia that always seemed to land on Renee’s shoulders, perhaps Renee would not be so afraid to live her own life—even after all these years.

While Renee dumped the food scraps down the garbage disposal and deposited her paper plate in the trash, a summer breeze swept across the canyon just outside Bubbie and Zeydeh’s back door and caused the trees to sway in the wind. Renee thought back to the previous January when she reenrolled in community college after dropping out of two different four-year schools with the hope of transferring for the final time to Cal State East Bay. Every day when Renee would return home from school, Mama would be there to greet her at the front door before Renee could even take out her key. The situation would always replay like a rerun of a bad television show. Even when Renee rushed directly home after school, Mama would open the door with a wild, anxious look in her eyes and ask in a demanding tone, “What took you so long?” Knowing better than to reason with Mama, Renee would always make an excuse, like the bus running late or having to speak to a professor after class. The fact that Mama was basically unpleasable meant that Renee lived under a constant shadow that she would never be good enough—no matter how hard she tried.

Renee drank a glass of ice water from the kitchen sink. The crowd was beginning to thin out and Bubbie motioned to Renee from across the house. If Renee were to ignore Bubbie’s overtures, it would mean that her grandmother would come storming into the kitchen and ask in her familiar sing-song tone, “What are you doing in here?”. Against her own wishes, Renee found herself leaving the solitude of the kitchen in favor of sitting in an armchair next to Bubbie and Uncle Mort in the living room.

“Lemme tell you, Lois. The shul put on a really nice spread.”

“Well, the food *does* look gorgeous.”

“It reminds me of when you used to entertain.” Uncle Mort assumed a deadpan expression. “Lois, when you used to entertain, it was like an orgy!” When Uncle Mort spoke with his thick, New York accent, the word orgy sounded like “awgee.”

Bubbie began to laugh as she patted her brother-in-law on the knee. “Mort, you haven’t changed a bit since we were kids in Brooklyn.”

If only Renee had had a chance to get to know people in Mama’s family like Uncle Mort when she was a kid; they all seemed so nice. Between Zeydeh leaving home when he was fourteen because of his abusive stepmother and Bubbie having a contentious relationship with her sister Fran, that wish was not to be.

With Mama gone and no connection to her Jewish relatives, there was not much point in continuing to observe Judaism, especially without Mama here to enforce practicing it in her predictably over-the-top manner. As Bubbie reminisced with Uncle Mort about the good old days back in Brooklyn and what a handful her nephews Isaac and Saul were as kids, Renee checked out of the situation mentally and her thoughts turned to her and her mother's opposing viewpoints surrounding all aspects of their Jewish affiliation.

Renee reminisced about her bat mitzvah nine years ago and not only how Mama had a hand in everything. Renee's mind immediately conjured images of the dreaded trips from one mall to another in search of the perfect dress. After working on their third department store one afternoon at Stoneridge Mall, Renee reflected on a conversation with her mother as they were leaving Macy's.

"Renee, I can't understand why you're being so difficult. *Why* won't you just pick something?"

"Mama, why can't I just wear pants?"

"Pants? Uh uh. *You* need to look *appropriate*."

If Renee had known the word back then and Mama had been less emotionally volatile, Renee would have asked if she could have worn something butch. As Mama dragged her through both the misses and junior's section of one clothing store after another, Renee eyed with envy the suits in the Nordstrom men's department with their crisp, clean lines, and shiny, cap toe dress shoes to match. If only Renee could not only have worn something like that, but also exchanged the unflattering Dutch cut that her mother said looked "just precious" for something shorter and masculine, then she would have been in business.

If only there were a way to put the quest for the perfect dress to an end. Just as Renee and her mother were headed towards the exit, a certain women's clothing boutique came into view out of the corner of Renee's eye.

"Mama? Why don't we go look in Laura Ashley?"

The minute they entered the shop, Renee instinctively gravitated towards a rack of tea length sailor dresses in a blue floral print, only for a saleslady in a long, peach colored dress with an A-line skirt to approach her from behind. The woman smiled as Renee removed one from the display.

"Honey, that thing is a *little* too ugly for you."

"It looks *nice*, Renee. It's just that it's a little pricey."

The saleswomen directed Renee to a rack of floral printed dresses with square necklines, long, flowing skirts and puffy sleeves that were less expensive than their nautical counterparts. Without saying a word, Renee selected one in her size in mauve and blue-grey and headed towards the fitting room.

When Renee emerged from the dressing room, the salesperson tied the sash in a big bow around Renee's waist while Mama put her hands to her mouth as she gasped in awe.

"Oh. My. God. You look just lovely! So precious! So sweet and innocent! I should have brought my camera!"

Mama examined the price tag. It was almost as much as the family spent on a week of groceries.

"I better call Dad to make sure it's okay." Mama removed from her massive purse what looked like a large plastic brick with buttons on one side and an antenna on the end.

While Mama phoned home, Renee gave a rather pained look to one of the many full-length mirrors in the shop. Perhaps a Tournament of Roses Parade had barfed on her dress or maybe Renee had merely escaped from the set of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Five minutes later, Mama was off the phone.

"Should I wrap up the dress?"

"Oh, yes! Dad said yes as soon as I told him we were having trouble finding something appropriate. Wait till the people at *temple* see your dress!"

Renee entered the fitting room and changed back into her jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers while saying nothing. At least the perfect dress odyssey was finally over.

It was hard to believe that all that bat mitzvah nonsense went on nine years ago. Outside of refusing to be confirmed because it meant spending additional time with the kids from Hebrew school who would do things like call Renee fat, say that her last name, Smith, which she inherited from her Protestant grandfather, did not sound Jewish enough, and make it painfully clear that Renee's father was different from the other parents because he was, "a goy," Renee's full-fledged affiliation with Judaism ended there. There were a few times after that when Mama pulled the "What Am I Going to Tell Bubbie and Zeydeh Routine" when Renee refused to attend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, but by then both Renee and Dad would respond with the words, "Tell them whatever you want." Mama's funeral was the last time that Renee had had any formal connection with Judaism.

Bubbie and Zeydeh's house was all but empty save for Renee, her grandparents, and her immediate family. Zeydeh was saying something about how someone from the synagogue would be by in the morning to take the leftovers to the food bank. Dad was hugging Bubbie and assuring his in-laws that they would stop by for their usual visit next weekend. Within minutes, Renee, Dad, and Freddy piled into the minivan and headed back to their home in Pleasantdale.

As they passed Berkeley High School, Renee asked her father a question that had no answer.

"Dad? Why did Mama die of gastrointestinal stromal cancer at such a young age? Didn't the doctors say it was rare? You don't think it's genetic, do you?"

"Well, it could be genetic predisposition 'cause Bubbie, her sister and father all had cancer . . . but there was also the way your mother used to eat tomatoes."

"Oh yeah, it always seemed like she was running for the john 'because she had to stuff herself with tomatoes. And then there was the fact that Bubbie and Zeydeh used to live near the oil refinery in Richmond. Zeydeh said their neighborhood was called Cancer Gulch."

"Yep. And she also taught at Haight School."

"Wasn't there a huge cancer cluster there?"

Dad nodded from behind the wheel and then slammed on the brakes as another motorist cut in front of him.

"Dad?"

"Renee, not while I'm driving. We almost had an accident just now."

Renee sat in silence as she peered out the car window. They were passing the Ashby BART station, where on one side of the tracks someone had erected a sculpture of the word "HERE" in giant letters. On the other side

of the grass was the word "THERE" standing just as tall. In a way, the cause of Mama's death did not matter. Whatever the reason, for Renee it was the hand of God interceding on her behalf.

When Renee and her family arrived at their home in Pleasantdale, the first order of business was changing clothes into something comfortable. While Freddy tossed his dress outfit into a pile on his bedroom floor and Dad hung up the navy-blue suit that he only wore on special occasions, Renee departed for her room and dumped her black outfit from Kohl's in the clothes hamper in favor of some well-worn jeans, an equally ratty t-shirt, and a pair of broken in sneakers.

Renee briefly noticed the papers and books piled next to the laptop she had recently bought to prepare for transferring to Cal State East Bay. Renee was in her first quarter there, taking an upper division Geography course that was a graduation requirement, even though she was an English major. Renee could have spent the afternoon working on Geography homework, but that could wait. When Renee told Professor Williams that her mother had died, she told Renee to take as long as she needed to finish the last major paper for the class. Besides, Renee needed to clear her head before she did anything cerebral like schoolwork.

Renee grabbed the small Timbuk2 shoulder bag where she kept necessities like her wallet and keys and set her phone to a playlist of U2 songs.

Renee stuck her head inside her father's bedroom. "Dad, I'm going out for a walk."

Dad was lying on the bed, half asleep in a pair of holey Levi's 501s and a half untucked, faded blue sports shirt with buttons down the front. He just mumbled the words, "Have a good time," in response.

Once outside the front door, Renee found herself striding out of her immediate neighborhood as quickly as possible. She passed subdivisions where all the homes were painted varying shades of brown, then different hues of green and dark brown, then beige and yellow. With the shopping center fading into the distance, she approached a neighborhood of executive track homes that could easily be feature listings in the real estate section of the *Pleasantdale Gazette* with their three-car garages and at least one Mercedes or Lexus parked in the driveway. Was this the area where some of the kids from Hebrew school used to live? Even if it was, it really did not matter; it was all so long ago now.

As Renee got further and further from home, a cooling breeze became increasingly noticeable on the otherwise intolerably hot day. After Renee had been walking for a good half hour, the San Francisco Bay came into view as far as the eye could see. In one direction was the Bay Bridge; far off in the other was the San Mateo Bridge. Immediately before her was crystal blue water that refracted the August sunshine so that it glistened right off the bay.

At the shoreline there was also a small park, complete with a well-manicured lawn, picnic tables, and benches where people could sit. On the left the ferry had just arrived from San Francisco and a sea of commuters was pouring out of the terminal. Was it already past five o'clock? On the right, pedestrians and cyclists passed by on dual walking paths that snaked the perimeter of the entire island. On the edge of the grass, one man stopped with his dog to snap a photo of the view while a squirrel approached in hope of a handout.

Renee crossed the walking paths and sat down on bench situated just beneath a cypress tree that provided her with ample shade. As Renee leaned against the back of the bench, she tried to adjust the music on

her phone, but the glare off the bay was too strong. While Renee sat at the shoreline enjoying the view, the U2 song, "Beautiful Day" came streaming through her earbuds.

Renee sat at the edge of the shoreline, admiring the view while entirely losing track of space and time. As a freighter and a ferry passed under the Bay Bridge it dawned on her: now that Mama was dead, her destiny was entirely up to her. There would be no one to go to the university bookstore and buy a t-shirt bearing the words, "Proud Parent of a McGill Student" just so that she could wear it everywhere. There would also be no one to berate Renee over the phone when she constantly phoned home from places like UC Davis with the hope of receiving emotional support. Now that Renee had transferred to Cal State East Bay, she just might be able to get through college without Mama's detrimental presence setting her up to fail.

As Renee sat at the shoreline while the sun slowly disappeared over the hills along the Peninsula, her thoughts turned to the future. She only had two more years to go to complete her bachelor's degree in English, then what? Who knows? Maybe she would go on to graduate school and earn a master's degree. She no longer had to listen to Mama say repeatedly, "You're going to become a teacher, I just know it," simply because she had enjoyed that profession. Whatever Renee did, the decision would be entirely up to her.

Without so much as consulting her father, the following quarter at Cal State East Bay, Renee enrolled in her first creative fiction course with Professor Art Munoz. It was in this class that she learned the basic tenets of writing a short story. After she completed Introduction to the Writing of Short Fiction, she took and two intermediate courses in the same discipline, then two advanced ones. In two years' time, she had earned a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing.

While Renee continued to sit on the park bench, daylight was turning to dusk as the lights began to come on in the skyscrapers in San Francisco. The sunlight was beginning to disappear in favor of a sky filled with brilliant hues of pink, orange, and purple. Perhaps she should start heading home; at the same time, it was not like she had class the next day. As night began to fall, the thought entered Renee's head that she needed to become a writer. Writing was always her way of processing difficult emotions, to the point where putting words on the page was cathartic. When Renee wrote something, even if it were a term paper for school, her thoughts lived on the page as an irrefutable truth that no one could deny, not even Mama.

Between Renee's love of literature and the written word, after college she went on to earn a master's degree in English, completing comprehensive exams in twentieth century British and American Literature. The compliment that she always received along the way was that her papers were well-written. By the time that Renee completed her graduate degree, she found that she enjoyed writing papers, even when the classes were less than interesting.

Now that it was nearly dark, Renee could see her phone screen clearly. The time in the upper left corner read ten minutes after seven o'clock. Had she really been sitting there for two hours? The shoreline was now empty, and the streetlights were beginning to illuminate. If Renee stayed out much longer, Dad would wonder if she were okay. Renee rose from the park bench and began the half hour trek back home.

When Renee reached her front door, Dad had left the porch light on in preparation of her arrival. Renee unlocked the door, entered the house, and turned off her phone. Dad was sitting on the living room couch watching a PBS documentary on the Statue of Liberty. In a rocking chair opposite the television, Freddy was there

in shorts and a t-shirt while playing on his phone. Renee put her keys back in her bag and set it on the dining room table.

"Dad, I'm home."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Everything's just fine. Did you see the sunset? I shoulda taken a picture of it on my phone."

"I saw it out of Freddy's window. Like a picture postcard. Something like that doesn't come along every day, does it?"

"Nope."

Renee removed her bag from the table and headed upstairs. As she entered her room and turned on the light, the school materials scattered next to her laptop became a reality. After a quick trip to the restroom down the hall, Renee turned on her laptop and shuffled through her notes for the paper that she had to write for Geography class. The assignment was just a question of compiling a bunch of statistics into a research paper, but Renee went about it with relish because it had to do with writing.

If her mother had been alive and well, there would have been the usual kindling for an undue amount of stress in terms of completing the assignment in a satisfactory manner, either from Mama herself, or at the very least inside Renee's head. There would be the constant pressure to submit a paper that epitomized perfection, or at least one that came relatively close because Mama's standards were high and would therefore settle for nothing less than the absolute best. As Renee opened Microsoft Word, thoughts of the all too frequent battles with Mama regarding her schoolwork entered her head.

As these thoughts reached the forefront of Renee's brain, she managed to push them aside in favor of the task at hand. Mama was finally at peace, resting six feet beneath the earth's surface where she belonged. Gone were the days when her mother was standing over her—either literally or figuratively—demanding the impossibility of perfection out of Renee just so that she could live vicariously through her daughter's good grades.

Renee paused for a moment to reflect on the past. Attempting to achieve perfection on the assignment was useless, so all that she could do is put forth her best effort while completing it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The Microsoft Word document had loaded, and Renee typed in the heading at the top of the page. Her feet firmly planted on the floor beneath her, Renee went about the business of writing her paper.



# No Rain in San Diego



by Robin Choudhury

He was coming today.

Marina hadn't been able to think about anything else. When she woke up, it was the afternoon, judging the way the sun beamed into her room. Too anxious to eat, she decided to sit herself down in front of the TV and watch cartoons. Her mother slept another two hours before getting in the shower- a little later than usual, Marina noticed, which made anxiety grip her stomach for a moment. She didn't want today to be a day her mother runs late, and risk her being here when he came over.

It was three o'clock when her mother finally showed herself- hair wet, wrapped only in a towel, she barked "Get off your ass. Go do some of the dishes." Marina nodded quickly and got up, padding over to the sink. As she scrubbed the dirty dishes from last night's dinner, she watched her mother through the kitchen window. She stood on the porch, looking off into the fog, cigarette in hand.

Marina always wondered why she stared out so much. It's not like there was anything to look at- they lived in the middle of nowhere, on the highest point of the town. The nearest house was at least a

seven-minute walk, and there wasn't even any vegetation up here, besides some long, scratchy grass. And most of the time, it was so constantly rainy the sky and surroundings were an ugly, dull grey.

After a few minutes, her mother walked back into the house to get ready, the flimsy screen door making a racket as it swung close. She'd spend an hour or so in her room, drying and straightening her hair, putting makeup on. Marina continued cleaning the dishes, listening to the muffled music that now trickled through from her mother's room. Once the sink was empty, she looked at the oven clock- 4:32. She exhaled, feeling a lump of anxiety begin to form in her stomach again. Only two more hours. Hands suddenly starting to feel a little shaky, she quickly dried and put the dishes back in their cabinets. She wondered what she was going to say to him when he arrived.

When they met in February, it wasn't for very long. "Just stopping by to visit family," he had told her mother, who had not been expecting him at all and was pretty pissed at his presence.

"I wasn't expecting company today," she hissed through the screen door, arms crossed tightly over her bathrobed self. "If you're expecting a place to stay, I can't give it to you."

"S fine, I just got myself a place nearby. That's why I swung by, just wanted to say hi. Let you know I'm in the area."

Marina was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, too shy to say anything. She didn't get a very good look at him, but she noticed when he made eye contact with her. His stoic, expressionless face broke for a second- his eyes widened in surprise, nostrils flared.

"Can I see Marina?"

After she had reluctantly stepped outside, Daniel talked to her on the stoop. Asked her how old she was now, how Mom and Dad were. Too shy to make eye contact, Marina had just shrugged and told him. He gave her his condolences when she told him that her father had left a few years ago, though it didn't sound sincere. He asked a few strange questions: How much time she spends time with Mom, if Mom has a boyfriend, what time she leaves for work, if Marina likes living here. She didn't really know how to answer them: not a lot, usually, six o'clock, not really. Daniel had been silently listening the whole time, but he suddenly leaned in to ask her in a hushed, low tone: "Do you want to leave?"

Marina's heart had seized up in that moment. She stayed silent, unsure of what to say. That seemed to be answer enough for Daniel. "I'll come back for you," he told her, before giving her a pat on the head and heading back to his green pickup truck, parked to the side of their gravel driveway. Marina watched him go with a lump in her throat.

Now it was the day. He had called the home phone last week. After her mother gave her the phone, he told her simply, "I'll swing by on Saturday at six. Make your decision." And with that, he hung up.

Unsure of what to do next, Marina spent the rest of the time in her room, curled up under her sheets, staring at nothing. Thinking. She'd already made her mind up a few days after she first saw him, but that didn't get rid of the pit forming in her gut. Things had gotten... better in the past month. At least since her mom's last boyfriend left. But how long would this last? Never long enough, in her experience.

Once she heard rustling in the kitchen, she got up again and sat at the table, watching her mother quickly shovel a Lean Cuisine down as she swiped on her phone.

"Have a nice night," Marina said quietly.

"You too," her mother replied through a mouthful of food, not looking at her. "Remember to shut all the lights off before you go to bed this time."

"Okay," she replied, swinging her legs nervously as she looked at the oven clock. 5:46. This was cutting it close for sure.

Luckily for her, her mother made quick work of the microwave dinner and promptly set off, high heels in her left hand and purse in her right. Hearing her car drive off, Marina let out a sigh. She realized, clutching her hand to her heart, she wasn't sure if she wanted Daniel to show up or not.

He did.

He knocked twice on the screen door, which made Marina jump. He was a little late- 6:14, but good enough.

Opening the door for him, Marina steeled herself and finally got a good look at him. He was tall, really tall, with a solid frame. He looked down at her, a strange expression on his face- his jaw was set, and thick eyebrows furrowed over his eyes. What had he been expecting?

"Hey kid. You ready?"

Marina stared at him blankly. She never noticed before, but freckles spattered all across his face, shoulders and tattooed arms. She resisted the urge to rub her own arms, which sported the exact same freckle pattern. Somehow, this eased her worries. Family. He's *family*.

"Do you needta... bring anything? Or..."

"No, I don't have anything. Jus' gonna get my shoes," she interrupted, turning around to slide her sneakers onto her feet. This was it. She wasn't going to mess this up. Turning around to face him again, she balled up her fists and crossed the threshold.

"I'm ready to go."

"Okay, then get in."

Marina obeyed, dragging her feet through the gravel of the driveway as she padded over to the passenger side of the green pickup truck. Opening the door and clambering onto the worn leather seat, she realized she was only tall enough to see a sliver of land through the car window. The rest was that gloomy, grey Washington sky. Marina crossed her bare legs under her and waited.

Daniel opened the driver's side door and stepped in, rocking the truck with his weight. The small, cramped interior of the truck felt even more oppressive with him inside. He sat there for a moment, staring at the house before turning to Marina.

"You ready for this? This is your last chance to opt out."

Marina nodded. "I know. I wanna do this."

Daniel stared at her for a few more moments which made her want to squirm. Was he mad at her? Did he want her to say no?

Just as Marina opened her mouth to ask, he closed his eyes and let out a sigh, turning back to the wheel. "Alright then," he said, taking his car keys from the dashboard and putting them in the ignition.

As the truck rumbled to life, Marina shifted onto her knees and craned her neck to look over the window. She really was leaving for good. The house sat as it had for all these years, rusting and in shambles. The tin roof, rough from rain and hail, and the faded, ugly blue walls. So many awful things happened here. She'd miss her Barbie Dolls... but not her pink comforter. Her sparkly blue toothpaste... but not the pastel green tiles that made her feel sick. But despite it all, despite everything, this was all that she knew. And now she was leaving it.

Daniel seemed to notice her looking. "Don't worry about it, kid. This place was nothing but bad for you."

"I know," Marina replied quietly. "But still..."

"And neither was that mother of yours," Daniel continued. "Trust me. You're better off far away from that lunatic."

Marina frowned but said nothing. The truck started to back out of the driveway, and Marina took this time to look at the yard- an empty, wide place, with dead grass and one dilapidated plastic slide that had tipped over. She hadn't played with that thing in years, and it had blown over in a storm. No one bothered to right it again.

"Hey, sidddown. Put your seatbelt on."

"Mom will get worried," Marina told him hesitantly as she did what she was told. "I'm still going but... I feel kinda... bad."

Daniel's eyebrow twitched. "Don't be. Knowing her, I bet she won't even notice you're gone." Marina's heart sank.

"She's probably not gonna get home until three in the morning, and she's gonna pass out on the couch, and by the time she notices you're not there, we're gonna be a million miles away from here," he rambled, rolling his eyes. "It's too easy. Honestly, it's her fault." He laughed coldly. "I can't believe you hadn't been taken by one of her fucking *boyfriends* before now."

"Yeah." Marina said dejectedly, sinking down in her seat and picking at the fraying threads in her shorts.

Now backed out of the long driveway, Daniel straightened back in his seat and started down the dirt road. "Things are gonna be better for you," he said, not taking his eyes off the road. "You'll see."

"I hope," Marina replied. After what Daniel had said about her mother, her stomach had tied itself in knots.

There were a long few minutes of silence before Daniel spoke up again.

"So, kid. Uh... have you eaten today?"

Marina shook her head. She usually ate whatever she found in the fridge, but today with Daniel coming over, she completely forgot.

"Tell ya what. I'll grab you something, anything you want. Just tell me."

Marina thought for a moment, putting a finger on her cheek. "Uhm... could I have ice cream?"

Daniel raised an eyebrow but gave her a small smile, the first one she had seen on him all day. "Sure thing."

Once they got into town, they swung around to a dilapidated Dairy Queen. Daniel let Marina order for herself, after she had insisted on it by unbuckling her seat belt and clambering over him to get to his window. They sat in the parking lot for a moment as Marina went to town on her newly acquired Oreo Blizzard. Daniel thankfully didn't say any more things about her mom- instead, he asked her about herself.

"First time I saw you, you were just a little kid. It was hard to believe we were related, 'cept for the freckles. ..Did'ja remember me, when I showed up the first time?"

"A little," Marina said through her ice cream. "I remember being kinda scared of you."

"And you're not now?" Daniel said sheepishly, scratching the back of his neck.

"Not really, no," Marina replied, shrugging. "I mean, I was nervous, but once I saw you, like, *really* saw you... I dunno."

"Not sure if I should be flattered or worried by that," he said simply, before suddenly sticking his own spoon into Marina's Blizzard, claiming a big chunk of ice cream as his own.

"Hey!" Marina cried as Daniel completed the move by putting the plastic spoon in his mouth. "Not fair!"

"Be afraid of the ice cream thief! And besides, I paid for it," he replied, grinning. Marina puffed her cheeks and threw him a lopsided punch to the arm. "Not nice. Ask before taking things."

"Aw, I'm sorry, I will next time," he said in mock remorse.

Marina sighed and started eating again. He gave her a small, warm laugh as he pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the street. It was starting to get dark, the sky now a deep navy blue. Marina wondered if the sky in California would look any different. As she put her head against the door handle, Daniel asked her, "Can I have another bite?"

-----

It was completely dark when they finally reached Daniel's house. It was very small, tucked away on a secluded street off one of the main highways, illuminated by only one flickering streetlight. The house seemed to sag into the ground, the pine trees in the front yard obscuring it somewhat. The white mailbox was rusted and looked like it would fall over any second.

"This is it," Daniel said after he opened the door on Marina's side. She stepped off and took in a deep breath- despite the drab look, the yard smelled like damp soil and pine needles, which was definitely a step up from home.

"Do you like it here?" Marina asked as they walked up the dirt path to the door.

"For the most part, yeah," Daniel said as he fumbled with his keys. "It's really small, but it worked for what I needed it for. I'm a little sad about leaving it." He finally got the door open, and it swung open with a push from his shoulder. "Only a little." He added quietly, stepping in the dark house and flipping the lights on. Marina... didn't know what he was talking about.

He was right- the inside consisted only of a kitchen and living area, with a side room Marina assumed to be his bedroom. It smelled faintly of cigarettes and a heavier scent she recognized as pot. It was incredibly plain- not a single picture on the wall, or knick knacks on the countertop. Even her mom had silly little figurines she balanced on the kitchen shelves.

Daniel shifted awkwardly, putting a hand on the back of his neck. "Uh, I don't exactly have a bed for you so... you can go steal a blanket from my room and sleep on the couch."

Marina looked over to the couch- it looked old, secondhand, and not very comfortable.

"We have a long day ahead of us, and we're getting up early, so you should get to bed soon." Marina just stared at him, waiting for him to finish speaking. He noticed and seemed to be lost with what he should say. "Yeah. I'm... gonna eat now. So, knock yourself out."

With that, he turned around and stuck his head in the fridge. Unsure of herself, Marina turned on her heel and gingerly walked over to his room. She had never really been in another person's house like this before, and she was nervous about messing anything up, or going anywhere she shouldn't. She looked at his bed- it was just as normal and boring as the rest of the house, though it was unmade. She grabbed the fleece blanket from the bottom and considered stealing a pillow from him. As she did, she noticed a picture on the bedside table. Curious, she padded over to it.

It was Daniel, with sunglasses, smiling, with another man. The other man looked nice- his smile was closed-lipped, while Daniel's was wide and full of teeth. Marina giggled, recalling his stoic, sullen expression that never seemed to leave his face. She'd have to crack it sometime soon.

When she got back to the couch with the blanket and pillow, Daniel was sitting on the counter eating a cup of ramen with a pair of plastic chopsticks. Marina realized, suddenly, that he didn't have a table. He probably ate all his meals on the couch. Guilt swam through her head as she reluctantly laid her bedding down.

"I think I'm just gonna go to sleep," she announced.

"Suit yourself."

Marina settled down awkwardly and stared at the ceiling, remarking that it was low. Daniel could hold his hand up and touch it, easily.

After a few awkward minutes, and after hearing the sink run for a few moments, Daniel began to flip the lights off. "Night," he said dejectedly, about to walk off into his room.

"Wait!" Marina piped up. "Come over here for a sec,"

Daniel did so, an eyebrow raised. Marina moved her legs up and patted the end of the couch for him to sit. "What," he asked, deadpanned.

"Tell me a story," Marina said defiantly, wriggling under her thin blanket. "I won't go to sleep till you do."

Daniel sighed. "I don't know where I'd start, kid. I'm not exactly the creative type.

"Just make something up!" Marina replied. "It's just like lying, you're good at that!"

"Fine," Daniel said reluctantly. "I don't know how your mom's were, so if mine aren't great-"

"Mom didn't tell stories," Marina interrupted, her voice dark. "Oh." There was an uncomfortable pause as Daniel shifted awkwardly.

"Well. I'll tell you a story about...a seal."

"Ooh, seals are cute!" Marina cooed, instantly intrigued. She sat up quickly, propping herself up with her elbows against the flat pillow.

"Yeah," he replied absentmindedly.

"So..." he started, audibly unsure of what he was going to say. "There was a seal. He lived with... his parents."

Marina listened intently, big brown eyes wide with interest.

"Uh... one day, the seal decided to leave. He didn't know where he was going- I guess he was going on an adventure. On the way, he met lots of people."

Marina's brows furrowed. "People? Is he on land?"

"Shit, no-" Daniel caught himself before continuing. "He met lots of other seals, is what I meant."

Marina sat back a bit. She was starting to get skeptical about her cousin's storytelling skills. "Anyways, he met lots of seals. But he was mean to all of them. Some wanted to be friends but he... got scared and ran-- swam away. Soon, the seal got in trouble. He... he was surrounded by sharks."

Marina frowned.

"A-and, the seal didn't know what to do. He saw another seal and cried out for help, but she recognized him. He had been rude to her earlier, when she had offered him help and he didn't thank her. So, uh... she didn't save him. 'Cause he was mean to her."

Marina blinked.

"And then the sharks ate him. The end."

Marina was silent for a few moments. "...That sucked," she said flatly. She didn't expect much, but that was...

"Well, I warned you!" Daniel exclaimed exasperatedly. "Moral of the story is to be nice to other people 'cause if you're an asshole, you won't be worth saving."

"I already knew that," she said darkly. Daniel was dumber than he looked if he assumed as much.

Daniel shrugged and crossed his arms. "Whatever. Don't ask me to do that again, I'm not good at it," he told her gruffly.

"Fine, I won't," Marina told him, settling back down onto the couch. Her mood was sullied from the story, an ugly feeling pit starting to form in her stomach.

"Uh, goodnight, I guess. We're leaving early tomorrow, so... yeah." Daniel said, standing up and walking to his room.

"Okay," Marina mumbled.

"Good girl," he said quietly before stepping off into his bedroom. Marina threw the blanket over her head and curled her knees under her chin. Stupid... Daniel's stupid. He doesn't know how to talk to people at all.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She imagined how her mom would react when she got home, when she saw Marina wasn't in her bed. It probably wouldn't be until the next day, when she would yell at Marina to do the dishes, or clean the bathroom, and get no response. Will she freak out? Marina remembered the last time she had a meltdown. At least this time she wouldn't be there to get her hair pulled.

But the flip side almost seemed worse, just like what Daniel said:

"Bet she won't even notice you're gone."

Marina grimaced and pulled the covers around her tighter. He kept saying those stupid things. Why wouldn't he just stop? Why would being forgotten be good? He was *lucky* he took her, otherwise Marina wouldn't have given his existence a second of thought. Yeah. He was lucky she depended on him now.

-----

Marina woke to the sound of a man coughing sharply and Blondie on the radio. Panic seized her gut as she shot up, realizing she wasn't on the couch she had fallen asleep on anymore-- instead, her legs clung uncomfortably to the faux leather of a car seat.

"Shit, kid, didn't mean to wake you."

A large hand reached out and turned the car radio off. Marina's eyes followed up the arm to see Daniel's face, which was marred with a guilty expression. The window next to him was all the way down. Did he feel bad about waking her?

Marina sniffed. "Were you smoking?"

Daniel groaned and turned back to the wheel. "Maybe. Yes. Fuck, sorry. You were sleeping, I didn't."

"I don't care," Marina shrugged, stretching her back as she settled into a more comfortable position..

"Mom smoked all the time."

"In the house?"

"Yeah?"

Daniel didn't say anything for a moment. "Still. Not... good to do that shit in front of a kid."

Marina shrugged again. "I guess. I never really thought about it. One of Mom's boyfriends would give me his cigs as a joke."

"Jesus," he muttered. "Stop being so unbothered 'bout that shit, I'm trying to be a role model here! My parents smoked in front of us all the time, so y'know what I did first thing I turned 15?"

Marina shifted uncomfortably, not knowing how to respond. It sounded more like he was talking to himself anyways.

Daniel didn't say anything after that, so Marina craned her neck to look out the window. The sky was grey and cloudy, and the dark pavement was still wet. Pine trees stood in the mist, turning into green blurs as they drove by. Now that she noticed, the air smelled on rain and pine as well. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply for a second, only to open them in irritation once she heard the sound of Daniel closing the window.

The silence felt smothering. Daniel hadn't turned his music back on, and Marina was too shy to ask him to. She just picked at a small hole in the upholstery, mind swimming for a question, joke, anything, to say.

"Sooo... where are we going? I don't think you ever told me."

Daniel didn't take his eyes off the road. "San Diego. I used to live here."

"Where's that?"

"California, right next to Mexico. It gets really hot down there."

"Does it ever rain?"

"Nope, never. Dry as dust."

Marina sat back in her seat. "Good. I never liked the rain."

Before another stretch of uncomfortable silence threatened to begin, Marina blurted out another question. "Who was that guy in the picture frame?"

This time, Daniel turned his head to look at her. "What guy?"

"The one in the picture by your bed. I saw it when I took the blanket."

"Right, right." Daniel turned back to the wheel, and Marina noticed his grip on it tighten slightly. "He's... he's my boyfriend. Yeah."

"Cool!" Marina said, intrigued. "What's he like? He was cute in the picture, I guess. When'd you guys meet? Did you like, kiss him and stuff, or--"

"We used to live together in San Diego, before I moved up here for work." Daniel interrupted quickly, eyebrow twitching. "He's a nice guy."

Marina slowed down, noticing his irritation. "Do you miss him?" She asked, quietly this time.

"Yeah, I do," he said, voice softening.

"Can we visit him when we get to San Diego?"

"That's the plan, kid," he sighed.

They fell into another silence again, but this one was almost comfortable. Daniel seemed to notice.

"You can go back to sleep, if you want. When I woke you up this morning you were barely conscious, so I ended up just. Carrying you out." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Shit, that sounds weird when I say it. I meant that you were like, still asleep--"

"Wow, I don't even remember."

"Don't mention it."

Marina put her head on the side of the door and stared at the glove compartment's keyhole.

"One more thing," she started. "Can I call you Big Brother?"

"No." He said flatly.

"What? Why? You can call me Little Sister..." Marina whined, frowning.

"I'm not your brother," he shot back, more irritated than Marina had expected. Her heart sank.

"Cousins are... uhg, fine, I won't..."

She bunched up her shoulders and closed her eyes, pretending she had never asked. Besides, she'll get him next time.

-----

The rest of the day was a blur. Daniel had turned his music back on after a while, which Marina was grateful for. It was strange music, or at least, strange for Daniel. She had expected him to play the same rock music that most the men she knew listened to. Instead, it was light songs with weird basslines and even weirder vocals. She'd have to ask him what this kind of music was later.

They drove for hours, stopping at a crappy rest stop in the afternoon to eat. The burger Marina ate was slightly soggy and way too salty, but she didn't complain. Daniel seemed nervous outside of the car-- constantly looking around, almost as if challenging people to say something. Marina just rolled her eyes at that.

Once night fell, they had driven into a town off the highway and looked for a motel. Marina was grateful, because she had been nervous that Daniel might've just made her sleep in the truck again. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd be locked in a car alone for a night.

Daniel was still anxious after they parked and locked the truck, rubbing the back of his neck as they walked over the damp pavement towards the motel lobby.

"You still nervous?" Marina asked.

"Course I am, why wouldn't I be?" He replied, looking over his shoulder. "We look nothing alike, it's suspicious. I think you know that this," he gestured at the both of them. "...looks kind of bad."

Marina mused over that idea for a moment before replying. "I don't know... I mean, I get what you mean, but--"

"Quiet," Daniel cut her off as he opened the lobby door. "Act natural."

Marina wrinkled her nose at that but walked in without saying a word. If he kept acting like he was doing something wrong, people were going to notice.

As Daniel talked to a tired looking woman at the front desk, Marina wandered around the small, dingy lobby, swinging her arms.

"Is she your daughter?" The woman asked suddenly, leaning to the side to look around Daniel at Marina. Daniel looked like a deer in the headlights, eyes wide and mouth open slightly. "She's, uh...--

"Nope, not my dad," Marina said cheerfully, skipping over to the desk. "Brother!"

"I see," the woman replied, looking back at Daniel over her glasses.

"We-- We're half siblings."

"You don't have to convince me," the woman said, now typing on her computer. "You both have the same eyes, that's why I asked."

"I think that too!" Marina piped up. "He thinks we don't look alike at all, which is crazy."

"That is crazy," the woman replied, turning around to rummage for a room key. "She's a sweetheart," she mouthed at Daniel before handing him the room key. Daniel made a face that looked like it was supposed to be a smile, but it came across as more of a nervous grimace.

"C'mon Mari, let's... go."

Marina followed him out the door and tugged on his arm. "Man, she almost got you there! You panicked!"

"I wasn't expecting her to say... that. Or for her to even believe us." He said as they walked up a rickety wooden staircase to the 2nd floor of rooms.

"I dunno, it's not like we lied! Not really!"

Daniel just scoffed and looked at the room key again, making a beeline down the left hallway.

"So," Marina started, darting under his arm. "Where to, Dad?"

Daniel threw his hands up in the air and shook his head vigorously. "NOPE, NO, stop, don't even joke about that." Marina giggled mischievously as he finally found their room and inserted the key.

"Guess that means I can call you Big Brother now... right? Because if you say no, you know what I'm gonna start calling you..."

Daniel sighed. "...Fine. you win this time. But only 'cause the other option is... unbearable." He smiled at her, small but genuine, and Marina's heart swelled.

"Say it..." she teased, tugging on his shirt.

Daniel ducked his head in embarrassment as he laughed. "You win... Lil' Sis."

-----

They woke up early again, though not as early as the day before, and got breakfast at a cafe in town. Daniel even let Marina try some of his coffee-- she was not a fan. He still looked nervous, but Marina felt better today. Sleeping in an actual bed had been nice. Daniel had taken the couch this time-- after he showered, he fell asleep almost as soon as he flopped down. Marina had watched him as he slept, just for a little while, memorizing

his face. He had long eyelashes, she remarked, and he looked almost cute, with his expression relaxed and lips parted. Marina hoped he'd scowl less tomorrow as she burrowed into the fresh motel sheets.

Daniel was quiet as they drove. The weather wasn't foggy anymore-- instead, the sun shone through, casting wide shadows into the car. Watching the farmland speed by the window, she guessed they were somewhere in California. Daniel was playing his music louder this time, and he was actually talking about the music.

"Talking Heads," He would say, pointing to the radio. "One of my favs. Tina Weymouth was the bassist, I was obsessed with her. Helped convince my dad I was into girls."

Marina would nod, or ask small questions, just glad to see him in a good mood. But whenever he'd stop talking, trail off and focus on driving again, he would sigh, heavy and sober. Marina wondered if he'd always been like that.

Once the scenery started to get more urban, however, Marina perked up.

"Hey, where are we?"

"We're heading to San Francisco. I'm meeting a few... old friends, and getting some money from them. Don't worry about it."

Marina brought her arms around her knees and cocked her head to the side. "Do we have to? Go? I thought we were going straight to San Diego."

"We are, but I have some personal business to do. Has nothing to do with you."

Marina frowned, uncomfortable with the tone he used. She decided to change the topic. "Old friends... Did you use to live here? I thought you were from Washington."

"Yeah, I was. I came down here when I was a teenager."

"You ran away from home?"

"More or less."

Marina thought for a moment. "Is that why you helped me?"

"I guess, yeah."

Daniel bit his lip, as if he was deciding whether he should say something or not. "I... I left when I was like, sixteen. I was alone for a long time. It was..." He ran a hand through his hair. "Hard. But I made it."

"Did your parents miss you?"

Daniel scoffed. "Doubt it. They didn't give a shit about me. Think my dad wanted me out of the house anyways."

Marina frowned and put her head against the door handle.

Daniel looked down at his lap. "Left my siblings, though. Always felt bad about that. The younger ones don't really know me now, not really."

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Five," Daniel said. "I'm the oldest. I guess the more kids they had, the better they got. I got the worst of the genetic lottery," he laughed.

"Wow," Marina said breathlessly. She had always wanted a sibling. When she'd ask, her mother would always say "*one's already too much.*"

"Is that why you didn't want me calling you Big Brother?"

Daniel shrugged. "Yeah, kinda. It's just... weird, because they used to call me that. But I was kinda a shitty older brother for just leaving like that, huh?"

"I dunno," Marina said, wrapping a hand around her wrist. "Depends on why you left."

-----

Daniel's grand plan was to have her lie in the truck bed, in the shady alley lot, as he went into the shady looking building, with (probably) shady looking people. "Can't bring you in," he told her. "Can't risk you being seen."

Marina just looked at him, eyes wide. He groaned. "Kid, look, I don't wanna do this either. But sometimes we gotta do things that suck, okay? I won't be too long. I'm gonna cover you with this tarp, got it?"

He lifted it up- it was a shabby blue color, obviously heavily used. "If anything happens, uh, just scream real loud. Yeah."

"You sure this is a good idea?" Marina asked nervously as she climbed up into the truck bed, sitting down at the back.

"Sure," Daniel said unsurely.

Marina frowned at him, lying down on her side. "This good?"

"Yeah, that should..." He flung the blue tarp over her. Whatever kind of tarp it was, it wasn't as thin as Marina thought-- the truck bed immediately went dark, and Marina's mouth went dry.

"I'll be right back, okay? Stay low, be quiet." She heard the sound of him slapping the side of the truck, heard his footsteps over the pavement, heard him knock on the door. Someone opened it, said "Right on time," and it swung shut once again.

As Marina lay on the cold plastic bed in the total dark, she began to tremble. She couldn't stop. She brought a shaking thumb to her mouth and bit down on the nail, screwing her eyes shut.

It was fine. She was just hiding in the truck. A truck bed. Daniel will be right back. He'll be right back.

Nails digging into her scalp, dragging her by the hair, the carpet burning her thighs as she was dragged over it. To the hall closet. The pitch blackness she was thrown into, the light of the hall being snuffed out as the door slammed shut. The walls closing in on her. her mother's venomous words seeping into her pores.

Marina curled her body up even further as she felt herself begin to hyperventilate. No, she left that. That's why she's here. She left that. She *left* that.

Her mother's face had terrified her. It was almost expressionless, except for the wide, betrayed eyes that bored into Marina's soul. She tried to defend herself, explain that she didn't know what to do, he just wouldn't stop. She spoke slowly, as if in a trance.

"You're lying."

Marina bit down harder on her thumb and let out a whimper. Remembering what Daniel had told her, she immediately clapped a hand over her mouth. "Stay low. Be quiet."

"Be quiet," he had told her, sitting next to her on the bed with a cold hand on her bare shoulder. "Or she'll hear." Marina stared at the wood grain of her floor, not daring to look up, wondering that maybe, if she could count every knot in the wood, every stripe, this would be over quicker.

She screamed till her throat went raw. Begging her mother to let her out, scratching at the door, turning the knob to no avail. Sobbing, over and over, *please, please, I'm sorry*. She fell asleep in there, on the itchy, dusty carpet, and woke up with ugly red marks all over. Her mother told her she looked awful. Told her it suited her right.

Marina bit her thumb again, and her tongue suddenly tasted copper. Her tears were white hot, and she wanted to scream again. Leaving was never an option, was it? She was never going to get out of here, not really.

"Shit, SHIT! Kid--"

In a flash, the world was suddenly white again, and Marina grimaced. Daniel had flung off the tarp and was grabbing her by the arm.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Marina screamed, wrenching her arm away from him.

"Get in the car," he said hurriedly, tone deadly serious. Marina clambered over the truck bed and almost fell onto the ground, vision blurred by her tears.

"Let's go!"

She obeyed and staggered to the passenger door, fumbling with the handle for a moment before opening it and clambering inside. As soon as she did Daniel hit reverse, throwing her over the seat and causing the door to swing shut.

"What's... what's going on?" Marina croaked, rubbing at her eyes, still breathing heavily.

"Things got a little tense," Daniel said through gritted teeth, quickly switching gears and swerving around back onto the road. Marina was almost thrown from her seat as he shouted "Put your seatbelt on!"

"What happened?" she asked, her voice small and trembling. Daniel wouldn't look at her, instead glancing from the road to the rearview mirror every few seconds.

"The boys weren't as excited to see me as I thought. I got the money, but..." He twisted his body to look behind him. "They wanted me to hang around for longer. When I said I had to get going, they got suspicious." He grinned slightly, turning back to the wheel and slapping it. "That was a rush I haven't felt in a while! Those suckers, haven't seen them in years and yet they're still the same--"

He looked over to Marina, still grinning, as if he wanted her to laugh along, as if she understood anything that was going on. Instead, his face fell. "Kid... you okay?"

"I..." Marina started, voice cracking and faltering. She looked at her left thumb, which had been bitten so hard it was bleeding all over her hand, and sequentially, her clothes and now the pleather seat.

"Shit, what happened?!"

Marina opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out. She tried again, to no avail. Hot tears began to prick at her eyelids, making the crimson of her blood blur and warp her vision. "I, um..."

"Fuck," Daniel cursed, turning his eyes back on the road. "Hold on, lemme, lemme find somewhere to stop. Hold on."

They drove for a few more minutes before Daniel pulled the truck over, turning his body to fully face Marina.

"Marina, what's..."

"Why," she started, voice trembling. "Did we do that? Why did you... do that?"

Daniel looked genuinely bewildered for a second before responding. "Kid, I'm sorry if you're upset, I don't know--"

"I thought we were going to San Diego," she whimpered. Daniel's words faltered for a moment.

"We-- we are, Marina."

"Then what are we doing here?! What's this... 'personal biz'?!" She cried, her sudden burst of emotion shocking both Daniel and herself.

"It's got nothing to do with you," Daniel said firmly. "I told you that."

"Then why," she choked out. "I thought... I was so scared..."

"You're not making any sense, kid," Daniel said, his tone betraying the concern on his face. His words felt like needles on her skin. "And what did you do to your hand?!"

Marina stared at her thumb, mouth empty of words. She couldn't believe this. He didn't *know*, he couldn't possibly know.

"What are we going to do when we get to San Diego, Daniel? For real."

Daniel didn't say anything.

"Please tell me the truth..."

Daniel sighed, loudly, and dragged a hand down his face. "Fine. I don't know."

Marina's gut dropped. "You don't..."

"I still intend to take you there, Marina. But okay, I lied about us definitely staying with Anthony."

"Anthony?"

"Fuck," he cursed, leaning back to sit in his seat, looking out the windshield. "My-- boyfriend. I don't know if he'll let us."

Marina balked. "You don't know." She whispered.

"Yeah."

There was an uncomfortable silence before Marina unleashed all hell.

"Doesn't sound like a boyfriend to me."

"Yeah, it doesn't, does it," Daniel snapped. "When I left, I told him..."

"What," Marina said darkly.

Daniel put a hand on his forehead and leaned against the driver's window. "I broke up with him. I ended stuff with him. Broke his heart, I saw that, but I thought, I've been *telling* myself, that if I ever came back, if he sees me again, he'll..."

"He'll just what, take you back?!" Marina cried. "You called my mom delusional, that's just..."

Daniel stared into the distance, eyes cold and jaw clenched. "Yeah. Whatever. But I didn't want to tell you that, didn't want you to freak out--"

"Freak out?! You didn't want me to *freak out*? Are you even taking this seriously?" Marina questioned, voice starting to shake again as she felt tears threaten to spill over again. "I can't go back. I *can't* go back, I need this to work..."

"You'll live, kid. I'm not abandoning you, not now, but if it doesn't work out, you'll figure something out."

"If it doesn't work out?!" Marina cried. "You're saying... would you give me back?!"

Daniel didn't say anything, just pressed his lips into a thin line.

"Please stop lying to me," she pleaded.

"I'm not planning on it," he said quietly. "But I did have a backup plan. In case you weren't up for it. Or you..."

"I what," Marina said weakly. "Became too much of a responsibility?"

"Don't start that shit," Daniel said darkly. "Don't put words in my mouth."

"But you just admitted it, you didn't care about this at all!"

"That is not true," he growled. "I did this... I did this because I know what you're going through, this shit sucks, but you're going to get through it. You're so young. I'm doing this for your sake."

"*I'm doing this for your sake*," his words echoed through her head. Marina put her hands on her face and ducked her head. "You don't get it," Marina sniffed. "I can't, I *can't*,"

"I do get it," he said through gritted teeth. "My parents never gave a shit about me either, it hurts, I know it does. But I dealt with it, I left and I was alone, I had to fend for myself. But it made me who I am."

It was sort of amazing how Daniel managed to say the exact worst thing to say every time he spoke. Marina felt like her whole world was shattering, as again, again another adult had failed to protect her. This was all for nothing if he was just going to let her go back to that house again.

"It's not that she doesn't *care*," Marina sobbed, tears starting to fall down her cheeks. "I wasn't *safe* with her..."

Daniel froze, looking like someone had just doused him with cold water. "You... Marina."

She didn't respond, only curling her body inwards even more.

"*Marina*," he repeated.

Marina's lower lip trembled.

"Why... why did you really leave?"

Before Marina could process what he had said, or what she was going to even say, Daniel suddenly stiffened, shifting his gaze to his rearview mirror, then twisting around to look out the back window.

"Shit," he cursed.

"What is it," Marina asked miserably.

"Trouble, looks it. Uh," he put his key in the ignition and turned it, the truck rumbling to life. "You, get on the floor. Under the glovebox. Do not let anyone see you, do not get out of the truck, do you understand me?" His tone was deadly serious.

"But..."

"I'll handle this, don't worry about it. Don't let yourself be seen. I'm gonna lock the doors, so if anyone comes up to them, don't move. Just wait for me to come back, okay?"

Marina simply nodded and got on the floor, the plastic cold on her legs.

Daniel took a deep breath, steeling himself, before opening the door and stepping out with his hands raised. Marina stared wide eyed through the windows, seeing nothing but the cloudy orange sky.

The sound of cars came around the truck and she crouched even lower. "Whatever you guys want, we can work it out," she heard Daniel say.

"You've always been tricky, O'Connor," she heard a rough voice say. "You've grown, I'll give you that, but you're still just as slippery as you used to be."

"What, is that an innuendo?" Daniel said dryly, before swearing as Marina heard a loud thud on the truck's hood. "If you keep talking shit, it might not be."

"Point taken," Daniel hissed. "I told you guys, I've got places to be. I'm not about this shit anymore."

"Didn't seem you felt that way six years ago, boy. You don't just get to decide you're above who you used to be."

Marina could practically hear Daniel rolling his eyes. "If you could get me off the hood of this thing, maybe I'll think about negotiating. Okay?"

There was silence for a moment as Marina sat frozen in place.

"Can you put your guns away? You're making me nervous."

Marina's eyes widened as she felt panic rush through her. Guns? They were in danger, real danger right now? Shaking, Marina slowly raised her head just enough to see the road out of the window. Daniel was being held by the collar of his shirt by a shorter, dangerous looking man, in front of the truck. He held a handgun in his left hand, and looking around, she bet most of the other guys did too. Marina's heart beat a mile a minute as her mind raced, trying to figure a way out of this.

Daniel was in the middle of the road, while the shorter man was closer to the truck. If she was lucky, if Daniel had good reflexes, maybe she could...

"You have one option right now, O'Connor. You're going to come back with us, give us our money back, and everything else you've taken from us."

"Or what, you'll fucking shoot me?"

Marina heard the sound of a gun cocking and she knew what she had to do. Not caring if she'd been seen, she climbed over the console into the driver's seat. She stared at the gear shift for a second, recalling the time Stanley, the only boyfriend of her mother's that she had ever liked, taught her how to drive a car. In theory.

Grabbing the shift she rammed it into second gear and, extending her body as much as she could, stepped down on the throttle. The truck revved and shot forward, careening towards the two. Marina could barely see over the dashboard but heard them both yell, and heard an impact on the far right side of the truck. Marina stepped off the gas in a panic, scrambling to see who she had hit-- but before she could, the truck door was opening and someone was clambering inside. Marina almost screamed before she saw a freckled hand grab the wheel and shoulder her out of the way. Looking out the window, she saw the shorter man on the grass off the highway, clutching his shoulder in pain but looking relatively okay.

"Daniel--"

"YOU'RE CRAZY!" He shouted as he stepped on the gas, lurching the car forward and speeding off. "LIKE, THAT WAS INSANE, AND I SHOULD BE REALLY MAD AT YOU FOR THAT, BUT--"

He was cut off by the sharp sound of a gunshot.

"MARI, GET DOWN!"

She did as she was told, curling up into a ball on the seat as Daniel crouched down in his. They drove like hell until the gunshots faded, and Daniel looked behind him and stuck out his tongue.

Marina sat in her seat, arms around her legs, still trying to process everything. Daniel seemed slightly giddy with adrenaline.

"Shit, Marina, that was... See, I pulled stunts like that all the time, you're really following in the family footsteps..."

He trailed off as she seemed to recount the conversation they were having before the interruption.

"Oh... oh man. Marina, look--"

"I don't wanna talk about it right now," Marina interrupted quietly. "Can we talk about it when we stop driving?"

Daniel sighed. "I... Okay. Good call."

He went quiet, though breaking it once to gently ask Marina "...Wanna listen to some Talking Heads?"

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"You... you don't have to bring up any details if you don't want to."

Marina and Daniel sat in the truck in another motel parking lot, lit only by one lonely street lamp. It was dark now. They had eaten at an In-n-Out, which Daniel said was a big deal. "You're gonna be eating a lot of this in San Diego," he had said with a wink. Marina could only muster up a small smile. He also said, as he wrapped her thumb in the gauze he bought at the first drugstore they came across, that it wasn't the first time he'd eaten here after a highway shootout getaway. But by that point, Marina wasn't listening anymore.

"Okay," Marina said, her voice small.

"Do you want me to... say things, and if any of them are right, you can nod?"

Marina nodded. "Yeah, I like that."

"Alright," Daniel said, his voice and expression the most tender she's ever witnessed it. "Your mom, did she ever hit you?"

Marina nodded.

"A lot?"

Marina shrugged.

Daniel pressed his lips together. "Your mom... you said she usually had boyfriends. Did those boyfriends, did they ever hurt you?"

Marina nodded again, this time slower.

"Shit. Did they ever..." Daniel looked to the side, knitting his brows together in worry. "Ever hit you?"

Marina shook her head, staring at the floor. She felt numb.

"Fuck," Daniel muttered, rubbing his mouth with his hand. "Fuck. Fuck, that bitch, I was about to-- fuck." Marina didn't say anything. Daniel looked back at her in a panic.

"Marina, I-- I had no idea. But that's not an excuse." He looked down. "I should've never said those things to you. I should've never assumed your situation."

"S okay," she mumbled.

"No, it's not," he sighed. "I... I was a shitty brother. I thought... I thought I was doing the right thing. Turns out I was just screwing things up again."

"Why... why'd you even take me in the first place?" Marina blurted out. "Like, for real, this time. The real reason."

Daniel shifted uncomfortably and ran a hand through his hair. "Honestly... I did it more for myself. I know, that's awful, but it's the truth."

He made eye contact with Marina for a split second before looking away, grimacing. "I thought, maybe, by doing something like this, I could redeem myself. Do a good thing for once." He laughed hollowly. "But that's all just a load of crap, isn't it? You don't give a shit. You just wanted to get out. You *needed* to get out. And I didn't even care."

Marina was at a loss of what to say. Daniel's words hung heavy in the air, the truck too small to contain it. It was too small for all of this. She put her hand on his wrist, softly. "I..."

"This isn't a pity party, Marina. I'm just being honest." He finally made eye contact with her again, his blue eyes standing out even in the dark. "I've never done an honest thing in my goddamn life. Not even this."

Marina swallowed. "What... but what about..."

"I'm not abandoning you. I know I've screwed up, hell, I probably still will, but I'm not giving up on us. Not ever." He leaned down and took her hand in his, calloused hand enveloping her own. "We're gonna make it to San Diego. We are." He shook their hands, once, before letting go, straightening up and turning back to the wheel.

"He's gonna be pissed at you, you know," Marina told him, smiling slightly.

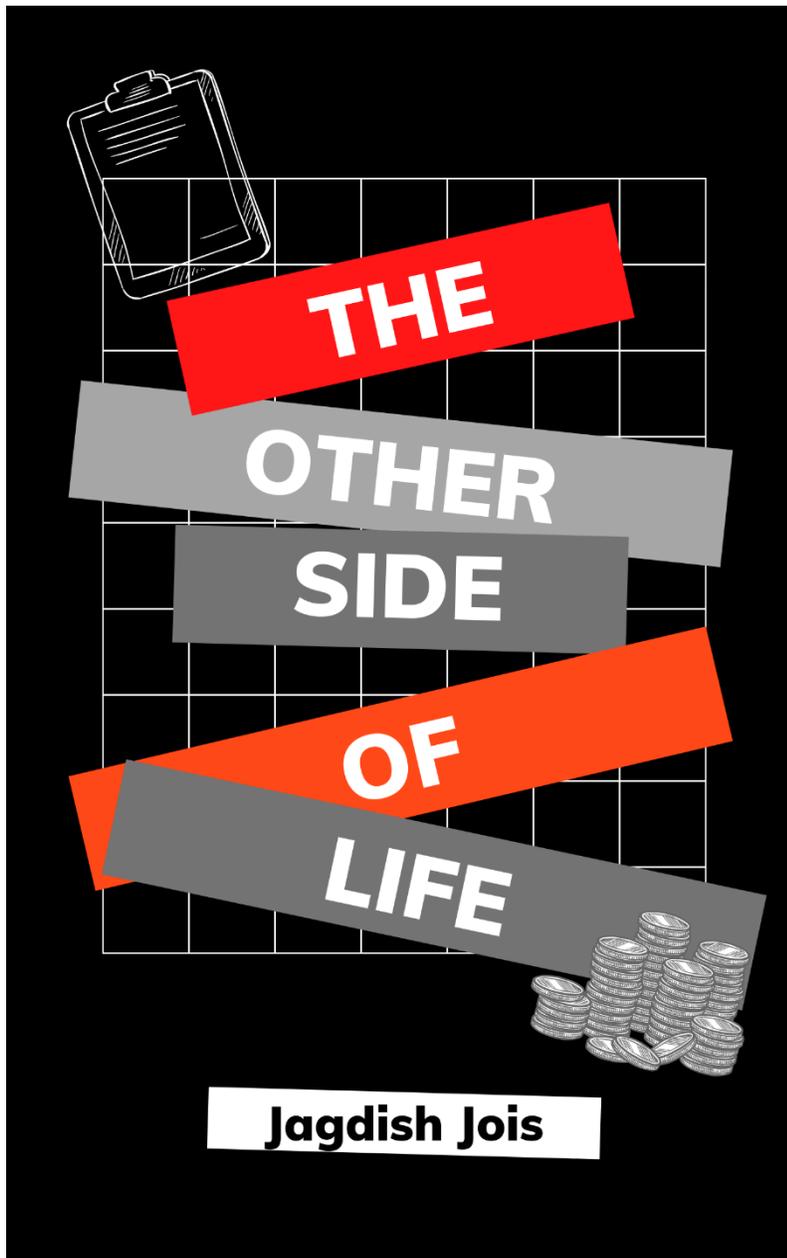
Daniel's expression broke as he chuckled. "Oh man, I know."

"And if he doesn't take you back?"

"We'll figure something out," he said, smiling softly. "Let's get some sleep, okay? We have another long day ahead of us."

Marina nodded, closing her eyes. "Okay. I'm ready for it."





"Baby, baby, baby

Let's investigate

The other side of life tonight."

The Moody Blues

Not one to be mistaken as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at the sound of his radio alarm, Edgar dawdled and slowly opened his eyes. Fortunately, it was not too loud, and playing *The Other Side of Life* from one of his favorite bands - *The Moody Blues*. He was fully expecting to feel tired and hungover, the aftermath of a six-pack of beer, numerous shots of tequila, and almost three bottles of cabernet consumed with his wife and close friends - Daniel and Becky - the previous night. Yet he felt light, almost clear-headed, and no sign of a headache as he raised himself to a sitting position. He turned to his side, placed his feet on the floor to get off the bed and glanced at the pillow to attend to his daily habit of fluffing it up, and did a doubletake. He rubbed his eyes and peered intently to make sure what he was seeing wasn't a figment of his imagination.

He saw his head still on the pillow, eyes closed, and the rest of the body still in the prone position. He turned quickly looked down on his hands, and his feet on the floor. To his horror, he could see in the faint outline of his sitting form a translucent facsimile of the sleeping Edgar. He rose, quickly turned around and looked in the mirror attached to his wife's chest of drawers. He could see the photographs on the wall behind him through his transparent shape, faint and a little hazy, perhaps because of his being in the middle or just not wearing his glasses. Next, this rather ludicrous thought came to his mind - *how could I possibly wear my glasses? Wouldn't they just fall right through to the floor?*

As he was contemplating the unusual nature of his situation, Janice walked right in, pulled the curtains

open to let in the morning light, went up to the sleeping Edgar, and said, "Wake up, sleepyhead, we are due at church for the baptism. Yeah, yeah, they know you are a heathen, but you get to be his godfather anyway and enjoy the spread after the services. Let's go!" With no response from the sleeping form, she playfully tweaked his nose, found it unnaturally cold, realized something was wrong, and ran out the bedroom door, yelling for Justin, their older teenager.

He heard both Justin and Melissa run upstairs, clearly recognizing the urgency and fear in their mother's voice. All she could do was point to the bedroom when they come up the stairs, and Justin rushed to the prone Edgar's side, while Melissa hesitated at the bedroom door, reluctant to enter. Justin felt for a pulse, even as he fished out his phone, and said quietly, "Mom, I'm calling 911. Not sure what they can do, but they can tell us what to do anyway." In that instant, Edgar realized his sixteen-year-old, forced by circumstances, had crossed the threshold into adulthood and taken charge. After the call, Justin in a soothing voice, beckoned Melissa to come in, and as she did, put his arms around her, and let the thirteen-year-old rest her head on his shoulders. He was now the man of the house, and Edgar felt a certain pride, as any parent would for their offspring.

Edgar reflected whether to laugh or to cry at his situation; and so, he laughed, not that there was a sound that anyone could or would hear, accompanying it. *Ah! the sheer absurdity of it! The absolute rich irony of it! Me! a self-proclaimed born-again atheist proved completely and utterly wrong! Me, a confirmed non-believer who posited that God didn't exist must deal with Him now! I was now a ghost or apparition or whatever in the afterlife! I could have my pick of what I wanted to be called - as all the ancient civilizations had a name for this - Ka in Egypt, Hungry Ghost in Asian belief, Chochin in Japan, Bhoot or Chudel in India, Jin in the Middle East, or just be a plain, old western ghost.*

Just the previous evening, the four of them had been hotly debating religion and its effects, all of which started with Daniel eyeing his copy of *Hitchens' God is not Great* on the coffee table. Edgar, being a mathematician and a theoretical one at that, had maintained there was no "proof" and that the body was just a collection of chemicals that would disintegrate or disperse - *dust to dust, ashes to ashes* - he had said mockingly. Daniel, a believer of sorts, had ignored his bait, but Becky, a born-again zealot, had adamantly argued and maintained the existence of a soul, an afterlife, Judgment Day, etc. The discussion would have turned rancorous, had Janice not intervened in her usual inimitable self and changed the subject, explaining away Edgar's intransigent behavior on the effects of alcohol in play.

He figured, now, comes the embarrassing part - how was he going to explain he was so wrong? He was never any good at it. Janice (and Becky, of course) would have a field day with this, and he would never hear the end of it. Then, he realized he didn't have to, what a relief! They would find out in their own sweet time, and hopefully not for a long while, and perhaps have forgotten about his opinions on the matter.

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The first few days were a hive of activity - starting with the ambulance and the police coming in, phone calls being made and received, the trip to the funeral home, the hard-sell of the coffin and associated services, the bevy of sympathetic visitors, the hushed conversations, people crying for real or otherwise. And then there was the wake.

Hovering in the different rooms, as he overheard the visitors, he had a sense of being a voyeur and even felt a little ashamed of it. But what the hell, who knew how many times he had been overheard; it was definitely interesting to hear candid opinions about himself and others not in present company! He learned that he was not as liked; to the contrary, considered argumentative, know-it-all, and a bit of a verbal bully, always wanting the last word; people wondered what Janice saw in him.

"Weeeeell, wouldn't we all like to be an itty-bitty fly on the wall right now," Bob had started the conversation with a smug smile.

"What are you talking about?" his wife Jane responded.

"When Edgar faces his Maker."

Both his wife and the pastor replied in unison, "Let's not talk ill of the dead!"

Jane, visibly annoyed, continued rhetorically, "Bob, where are your manners?" while the pastor said diplomatically, "God understands all people. He will, Edgar, too."

"Well, y'all know, Edgar didn't have much use for Him. Just about had an answer for everything, right? So, I am just sayin' what would he say to Him now, huh?" Bob persisted defensively, spreading his hands, looking at the pastor, who just politely smiled.

Jane scowled at him and abruptly changed the subject as she saw Janice approaching, "Poor dear, so sad. Wonder how she's holding up?"

Listening in, his first reaction - what did these people know? He was the one with a doctorate in mathematics, and it just so happened he knew a lot about a lot of subjects. Then, a seeming reality hit him, as he saw Janice work the room, and saw the people genuinely sympathize with her. Perhaps, there was no need to win every argument, have the final say; so, what if he was right? *Lesson learned - a little too little, a little too late*, he reflected ruefully. He was just glad Janice had overlooked this aspect of him.

And even as he amassed material that would be ripe for gossip, if only he knew how to and with whom. He learned of impending divorces, unplanned pregnancies, exotic vacations, and the proverbial comparison of material possessions. He wanted to yell at them - none of these mattered in the final analysis! Time with the family is what mattered the most, not that he would have subscribed to this when he was in their state. On the other hand, there was a good spread, and neighbors and friends had brought a lot of food over, more so in sympathy for Janice and his son and daughter, rather than respect for him. There were a variety of casseroles, pasta, sandwiches, salads, deli meat trays, etc., but what made him smile were the two pecan pies. He knew these were baked at home by Mrs. Harrison - nobody called her or her husband by their first names out of respect for their age. This had been one of his favorites, especially a la mode, and he figured either Janice had made it a point to ask her to bake them, or more likely she remembered. *She was such a sweetheart and had helped out when the kids were young!*

There was even a display focused on him - pictures from his childhood and younger days, his wedding album and photos, and some of his more interesting woodworking creations, the one hobby he had actually enjoyed and been good at, or so he thought. At the center of it all was this one photo he detested - a photo of him formally dressed taken at his daughter's 16th birthday, looking like an over-dressed clown. Perhaps, this was Janice's way of taking revenge for the Christmas family newsletter, where he had included an unflattering photo of

her parents, or his daughter for his attempts at being cool on her special day and embarrassing her! Well, at least there was no one paying attention to the display, and his ego stabilized.

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After the funeral, and the out-of-town guests had departed, the family got back to a familiar routine, and he seemed lost with all of them away at school or work. He had stayed at home, watching helplessly, as Janice went about taking care of things, the teenage kids not making it any easier. He wished he could be of more help - strange, when he could, he didn't and now he wanted to and couldn't.

He decided to take a walk - more of a float actually - his first outdoor foray. As he exited the house, he turned left and went down the lane towards the park. He looked towards the Conner family's house and thought he should go in and take a peek - they had never invited him and Janice - but decided against that. He was getting antsy and bored, all at the same time.

As Edgar drifted towards the park, he was startled to see another translucent figure sitting on the bench and recognized him as old man George from his neighborhood. Nobody knew his full name, and he had passed away just a week earlier.

Ever observant as was his nature, he studied George's form. He looked at it intently, and the form, while still shimmering, was barely transparent, as though made of frost-colored jelly, and seemed to take clearer shape the more he focused on it.

He approached him, pointed at the empty part of the bench, and enquired, "May I?"

Old Man George looked at him, shrugged his shoulders, to indicate a yes. *Aha, at least, one ghost or whatever could communicate with another of their ilk!*

"So, what's next?" Edgar said as he settled on the bench.

"Beats me, I am as new to this as you are. You the one with the boy and girl down the street? Rather young to be here, no?" George queried.

"Yup, wasn't by choice," Edgar responded.

"They had a good spread in there the other day. Too bad it's no use to us now."

"How do you know?"

"Don't need an invitation. Plus, doors don't hold us back, my friend," George replied.

"Anyway, do we get to see Him?" Edgar asked, not really looking for a positive response to this - the less he had to discuss or explain his beliefs, or lack thereof, the better.

George looked at him not comprehending who Edgar was referring to. Then suddenly realizing, replied, "Who? God? You crazy? He doesn't have time. Thousands of people die every day. He can't be meeting each and every one," George responded grumpily.

"So, what do we do?" Edgar said curiously.

George once again shrugged his shoulders and remained thoughtful.

George finally broke the silence, "Been asked to wait, though. Some kind of going back option, I believe. Not that I care much for going back."

"Reincarnation?" Edgar's eyes lit up as he prompted him.

"Not good with words, sounded something like that."

"Why don't you want to go back?"

"What for? Work your ass off all your life to take care of everyone? Then they all leave you to die alone."

George sighed.

Silence ensued as both stared off into the distance, one anxious, the other peaceful, both deep in their own thoughts.

"Where do we sign up?" Edgar interrupted the reverie.

George looked at him blankly.

"For reincarnation, the going-back thingy?" Edgar clarified.

George shrugged, smiled mischievously, and continued, "What's the hurry? Stop and smell the roses. Just kidding, I can't smell anything for nuts."

The sky turning dark, he bid goodbye to George and headed effortlessly down the street towards home, to see if his family missed him, especially, at dinner. He most certainly did, and the conversation with George had offered a glimmer of hope. However, his mood alternated between elation - looks like there was a way back through reincarnation if George was to be believed - and dread - not quite convinced it would put him back in a state that could actually help Janice and the kids. From his extensive readings on religion, especially the Hindu concept of reincarnation, it involved a new form - but that wouldn't be of any help in his quest!

As he approached his home, or what was his before all this transpired, there were a pair of translucents (he had settled on that as a moniker) - their appearance seemed so natural now - standing, as though waiting for him. Looking closely, he noticed that they seemed to have on some kind of uniform giving them official status. The clipboard held by the man, and the woman's binder, along with their peaked caps further confirmed his conclusion and provided a ray of hope. He hurried thinking, *now, things would start moving!*

"Polanski, Edgar?" queried the man, peering into his clipboard.

Edgar's face brightened and replied, "Yup, that's me! You guys from the reincarnation...", and here he was lost - was it referred to as a department, division, section, or some other name? Or maybe it was outsourced, just like most other services in the real world! He almost laughed out loud at this thought.

"Nah. Just the transport coords," the man responded, further reinforcing Edgar's perspective of the outsourced operations model. He continued, "Have a couple of questions before we confirm the arrangement. OK?"

Edgar nodded in consent.

He rattled off a series of questions - full name, date of birth, family history, etc., to which Edgar responded as expected. Edgar did notice a bit of hesitation at his response to the query for his date of birth, as the man turned to the woman companion and said something. She flipped through her binder, before half-heartedly giving a go-ahead to continue. He thought - *she must be new at this and didn't want to cause waves!*

The man concluded with, "Your lucky day. There's a transport coming through tomorrow. I have put you down for it."

*Lucky day, you guys must be crazy!* - thought Edgar, but merely replied, "Will it take me to the reincarnation, er," again leaving out the organizational term.

"That's up to the processing center. My job is to get you to the campus. Remember, be ready tomorrow, early morning 6am sharp. You don't have all the time in the world!" He laughed as he said this, she joined just a

tad later following his cue, and the two flitted away. *He must have used that line a million times before, thought Edgar.*

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The next morning just before daybreak, he was speeding towards the campus in the early morning darkness, along with quite a few other translucents, each lost in his or her own thoughts. He looked around for George and didn't see him; perhaps he was on a different transport.

As he looked out, fuzzy shapes and images appeared, and at the first stop they made, he could make out a house. It reminded him of his childhood home, and right next to it, was the tree on which his father had fashioned a tire swing; he remembered playing with his brother and sister, Robbie and Janet, on that. He was close to Janet, even though she resided on the east coast, while, sadly, there seemed to be very little attachment left between him and Robbie, who lived in the same town. That had not always been the case - his older brother had been his protector in high school, and they drifted apart when Edgar went off to college. Robbie had joined the workforce and built his own small construction business. Somehow, Edgar's intellectual pursuits (and ego) and Robbie's practicality in the pursuit of family and life held little common ground. He decided that should he make it back, albeit a remote probability; he would amend that. On the other hand, Janet had taken increasing responsibility - coordinating their parents' health and activities - and she had stayed in touch, especially as Edgar had contributed to their care. This had helped maintain the closeness of at least this sibling relationship.

As they approached the next stop, he could see a red barn, and when the farmhouse came into view, he recognized it instantly - it was his grandparent's farm in Iowa - where he had spent many a happy, lazy summer. He had always thought it was weird that they had dinner at the farm around two in the afternoon; although there was a small meal, they called supper, just before going to bed at eight. Except for him, they were all up at the crack of dawn, or so he was told, not that he had been motivated to confirm it.

There was a series of stops after that - his high school, the restaurant he worked at during the summers, where he had met Janice, the college on the East coast, his in-law's apartment in the city, and his children's school.

The high school memories didn't hold much interest for him, same as when he attended.

On the other hand, the restaurant scenes brought back fond memories and made him recall the incident that brought him and Janice together. In his stubbornness, he had not backed off a fight with a well-built high-school football player, and his older brother Robbie not there to have his back. Janice, who was the hostess at the restaurant had walked by and managed to intervene and extricate him from a probable beating. The adrenaline rush from his foolhardy venture had helped, as he managed to finally ask her out, and she had agreed. He reflected - *that has been my relationship story* - Janice had always stood by him and saved him from himself. And now, he was not there for her.

It dawned on him that this must be what people talked about when they referred to life flashing before their very own eyes!

He looked around every one of his fellow travelers engrossed with the view outside, each conceivably reliving their own past, with a mixture of happiness and sadness. Edgar thought from his mathematical perspective - perhaps in an exact inverse of the feelings they had when they were earthbound.

It now seemed to sink in that it was all over for him, and he just hoped that Janice and the kids would be

alright. He had learned early on in life, that no one was indispensable. Time marches on, life goes on for the living, just it always has been, and will always be.

Deep in these thoughts, he failed to notice they were almost there, as they slowed down at a gate that led to a cluster of buildings. The buildings looked like they had been built in the fifties and had received little more than infrequent coats of paint, and nothing else.

As he stood in line to be checked in at the gate, Edgar thought to himself sarcastically - *this was bureaucracy at its finest. You couldn't escape it, even when you passed away! You could add it to death and taxes as one more certainty!* The line was long, but it moved fast, and soon enough, he was face to face with a large, black woman with a bored look on her face, standing at a Formica counter, well-worn and faded at places where entrants must have placed their hands, with the edges still showing the original design and color.

She went through almost all the same information - name, date of birth, family history, and didn't bat an eye at his responses. He thought this place needed the techies from Silicon Valley with their fancy startup ideas and mobile apps to drag it kicking and screaming into this century. Perhaps, they were too young to make it here yet, or were being ignored by the bureaucracy, even if they had prematurely made it here!

As she was noting something on the screen in front of her, Edgar inquired rather nervously, "Is this Heaven?"

To which she replied, "Excuse me, you say something?"

He repeated the question, to which she blinked, shook her head, turned to her co-worker, a mousy, older woman, and said, 'Lordy, Lordy, Lordy! He asking if this Heaven! Next, he wanna know where is Peter and them be-yoo-tiful pearly gates?' emphasizing the word beautiful with her body and voice.

Both laughed loudly and the co-worked piped in with her attempt at continued humor on the subject, 'Peter is on his lunch break and the gates in the shop being re-painted!'

She stamped and handed him a slip of paper and said, "Next!" and that was that.

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Grasping the slip of paper, Edgar headed towards the Processing Center. Housed in a large, circular building with a nondescript concrete façade, the only adornment was a dome. As he approached it, there was a sign that stated "Processing Center, Western Hemisphere" with "Welcome" under it, to which someone had crudely added 'to Paradise - Not!' and no effort had been made to clean it up.

As he entered the double doors, he saw he was in a cavernous hall, and looked up at the impressive inside of the dome, now streaming natural light through the built-in skylights, and soft elevator music playing in the air. He was ushered in immediately to the left to join a line in motion. This was a single line of translucents snaking left to right and back again, following a path to the front, all designed using posts and belts, as might be seen in any major commercial airport. The line seemed to be in constant motion, and Edgar recognized that this queuing mechanism had been well-designed, perhaps by someone who understood both the psychology of the people who wait in lines, as well as the mathematical foundations of queuing theory. *Maybe, there was hope after all!*

Pretty soon, he was facing the official - almost like an officer at an immigration counter, continuing the airport analogy - furiously typing away at his computer, glancing at the slip of paper occasionally, that Edgar had handed him on arriving at the counter.

Suddenly, he stopped typing, scratched his head with a quizzical expression, and glanced in sequence at the paper, screen, and then Edgar. He raised his head and started looking around, as though for assistance. He caught the eye of someone, whom Edgar surmised was a supervisor, as he had been walking up and down the line of counters, scanning the operations, to ensure it was all running like clockwork.

The supervisor came over, stood behind the official, took off his glasses, bent down and peered at the computer screen. He confirmed something on the paper, looked at Edgar, and back again at the computer. He took the slip of paper, indicated to the official that he would take care of the issue, and told Edgar, "Follow me, please." and briskly walked towards a set of offices.

Walking behind the supervisor who held the door open for him, he found himself in a small windowless room and took a seat, while the supervisor closed the door, took his seat behind a desk, and started typing into the computer.

Edgar hesitantly broke the silence, "Is there, er, a problem here?"

"Well, Intake has been having some issues recently. Mind you, they don't come under my department. Wouldn't stand for their sloppiness," he said disdainfully.

"What's the issue?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. We are good. We'll sort it out," as he rapidly typed into the computer. After reviewing what he had typed, his fingers tracing the lines as he read them silently, and then hitting one last key with a flourish, he leaned back and said, "OK. Done."

He continued, "We'll have you go to the Bureau. I have put some notes in, they will take care of the details. If they have any questions, have them call me," he said, pointing to his fancy desk nameplate, which showed him as Sidney D. Holster.

Edgar queried, "Bureau?"

"Sorry, meant Bureau of Reincarnation. Building R, the green building. As you exit, first path to the right leads you all the way. Can't miss it." He pointed to his left side but didn't make much sense to Edgar as there was no window to orient himself.

Before Edgar could inquire any further details, the supervisor had picked up the phone and started dialing.

He left the room, headed to the exit, then turned right towards Building R.

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He straightened his shoulders, steeled himself, pushed open the door and stepped in. He was determined to go back as fast as feasible and was planning to make a case for it. On the walk, he had deduced two facts - Intake, presumably the group responsible for initiating the demise, collecting and bringing them in for processing, had made an error, and maybe he was not supposed to be here yet! Secondly, Mr. Holster had written up instructions, or the very least, recommendations to the Bureau for fixing that lapse.

As he stepped into the harsh blue-tinged fluorescent light, a matronly voice boomed out from the right, "Welcome to the Bureau of Reincarnation, how may I help you?"

He looked to the right and saw her, a skinny, frail woman with a pair of reading glasses perched on her thin nose, eyes raised above it. No hint of a smile, completely inconsistent with the voice that preceded it. He

glanced around, restrained the urge to laugh loudly, as the first thing that came to mind was - *Hell, this looked like the DMV office in my town. The same grey metal desks, filing cabinets from the Nixon era, perhaps, mismatched chairs, old CRT-style computer monitors, my God, the staff.* Looking at the staff, he could picture them in his DMV, and thought - *perhaps when they pass away, they get assigned to this bureau, as they seem to fit right in!*

He stammered, "I wa-want to go back as s-soon as possible, Ma'am." A little more confidently, he continued, "Intake has made a mistake in my case, and need to be sent back ASAP." He had added the last word for good measure.

She ignored his request and continued, "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but," he replied with a smile, hoping to moderate the unfriendliness.

She interrupted unsmilingly, pointing at the token container and clipboard next to it, "Then, please take a number, and watch the monitors for the counter you need to go to." She went back to doing whatever she was doing before he had stepped into the office.

He put in his name, grabbed a token, number 42 - aha, the meaning of life! - and took a seat, which creaked loudly as he sat on it, and decided to move one over for a less noisy one. As he waited, he studied the token, one side showed an embossed image of an old man with a flowing beard and a walking stick, and around the top edge were the words - Bureau of Reincarnation. The other side showed a baby with a flag that had the token number - in this case, 42 - and the words at the bottom edge - Please return before leaving.

He rehearsed the case he was going to make. He was barely forty-two - was the number I picked a coincidence? - his kids were still in high school, Janice was struggling to manage her job and dealing with a couple of rebellious teenagers. Moreover, his parents were getting older, his sister was on the other coast, he was needed back on Earth, and as quickly as possible. Yes, reincarnation involved a new body, but surely, they could figure to get him back as his original self or in close proximity to assist, especially since they had messed up. He couldn't wait to be born, grow-up, by then it would be too late. He had to get back and pronto!

Wallowing in his thoughts, he must have missed his number scrolling by on the monitor, as he heard the booming voice again, "Token 42, counter E, 42, Edgar, to E."

He hurried to counter E, and immediately recited all the reasons he had rehearsed to make his case, to the woman - Dorothy, based on the name tag - who waited till he was done. She responded, "You do know, we cannot assign you to a living person. You have to go as part of a new -"

He interjected, "No, no, I have to! I need to! How will they manage otherwise, without me? Intake made a mistake. It's all in there," pointing at the computer. Dorothy peered at the screen, presumably reading the notes from Mr. Holster, and then looked up.

She responded kindly, "Sir, you seem like a nice person." She looked around, as though to make sure she was not being overheard, and continued, "We all think we are indispensable, but let me show what is happening right now." He scooted to the side, and angled his head, as she turned the monitor, as far as it could go, towards him. While he became engrossed in looking at the screen with the images of his family going about their daily life, she said quietly, "I will be right back," and left.

Edgar looked up and saw Dorothy talking animatedly to another woman, but not loud enough for him to make out any details of the conversation. They both walked over to an office, presumably that of a manager, and closed the

door behind them.

He turned back towards the monitor. The kids were getting ready for school with the inevitable clash regarding the bathroom occupancy duration. Edgar could see in Justin, the tussle between the trials of adolescence and premature demands of being the man of the house. Janice was busy getting their lunches ready - usually his chore in the morning - while trying to calm them down from downstairs. In all of this, she needed to get ready for work herself. His resolve deepened - I have to get back, one way or the other!

Finally, Dorothy exited the office and made a beeline for her desk.

She settled down, took a deep breath, looked at Edgar, and said quietly, "We have some good news, I think!"

Edgar looked at her attentively but did not want to interrupt.

"We are going to send you over to Building X - experimental section." She cupped her mouth as she quietly said the last part. She continued, "They are working on some new stuff. Ways to send back, reverse an intake."

Edgar breathed a huge sigh of relief, and asked, "Where is Building X? How do I get there?"

Dorothy replied, "It is quite far, you have to take a campus shuttle, shuttle F, right outside this building." She looked at her watch, and continued, "You better hurry, you have less than 30 minutes to get there. I will put in the notes. Go!"

Edgar said, "Thanks!" and rushed out the door.

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Fortunately for Edgar, he didn't have to wait long for shuttle F, and soon he was speeding towards Building X. He ruminated over his journey so far - from his conversation with George, the transport to campus, processing center to the Bureau of Reincarnation - and now a final step separated him from his family. As he settled back and thought about being back, he pondered the age-old question, was it the journey or the destination that had driven him, and for once, he had no ready answer. And before he could delve deeper into this conundrum, he heard the call for his stop.

Building X was a low slung, all metal and glass seemingly new construction that stood out from the natural environment it was in. At the same time, it seemed to recede into it, as the reflections of its surroundings seem to superimpose on it as though laying its imprint and claiming as its very own.

He hurried in, glancing left and right, looking for the reception desk, and before he could do so, he heard his name being called, "Mr. Polanski, welcome."

He approached her, a woman in a white lab coat, and she quickly turned around with a "Follow me, please." Soon they were headed down a quiet hallway in a clinical setting, especially as they passed a few others dressed similarly in medical attire.

She stopped at and pushed open the door to a small room, and quickly sat behind the desk, and started typing into a flat-screen monitor. Edgar settled in across from her. She stopped for a second, to pull out some forms from the desk drawer, and pushed it towards him, "standard waivers, please sign. And, by the way, thanks for volunteering!"

He pulled the papers towards him, and said, "I volunteered?" and thought better, than trying to debate

her assumption.

"Oh yes! Not a lot of people want to go back as themselves."

"Why?" Edgar was curious.

She shrugged her shoulders and made a face to indicate a I-don't-know, and I-don't-care-either. She continued, "We need to go over some things before your journey back. Ok?"

"Sure, I have already shared all my information several times. Should all be in there," Edgar replied pointing to the screen.

She smiled, and said in a superior tone, "No. We are interested in different things - like after you left your body, not before."

"Oh! Why?"

"That's the process, sir," emphasizing the word 'process'.

With her hands typing away at the keyboard, she probed Edgar about all the events since that fateful morning - his family's interactions, visit by the EMTs and the police, visit to the funeral parlor, the wake - especially all the people that attended it, and friends and relatives that did not. She continued with queries of his and Janice's workplace, friends, neighbors, even the fitness center they attended somewhat irregularly, Justin and Melissa's school and their acquaintances. As she went through this, Edgar's mind was racing trying to understand the significance of these questions, and the only thing he concluded was - these were the people who would have known about and reacted to his passing away.

Ever curious, he enquired gingerly, "May I ask, why you need all this information?"

"Dr. Alder will be here, and he can explain better than I can." With that, she quietly collated the waiver forms, put them neatly in a new folder, marked his name, and said, "Please wait, he will be here soon," and left the room.

Without a knock, Dr. Alder strode in confidently, looking young, decisive, and efficient, also in a white lab coat, and sat down behind the desk. With a perfunctory, "Hello," he lapsed into silence as he previewed the contents of the screen, occasionally typing a key, perhaps, to scroll.

Edgar waited till he found an opening in Dr. Alder's concentration on the screen, with a 'What happens next?'

Not receiving an answer, he waited till he saw another break, and tried to initiate the conversation, "She collected a lot of information. How do you use it?"

Finally, Dr. Alder looked away from the screen, smiled at Edgar and said, "Well, very simple, you will be sent back. The timeline will kinda replay from that morning, and the information you provided, will help us reprogram memories so no one remembers. We call it the Alternate Timeline Replacement process. Am I making sense?"

Edgar, the ever-sceptic, "What about other people, you know, the ones who may have heard from these people and not in my list?" pointing to the screen.

Dr. Alder smiled, "You are a smart man. We have ways. Let's just leave it at that"

Edgar nodded. While not a heart-warming answer, he let it go as he didn't want to cause any waves. Rather, he smiled and said eagerly, "What's next?"

"It should take a couple of hours to do the tracing and programming. They are working on it and will get to you soon." He picked up the folder, stood up and went to the door.

Turning around, he smiled with a final, "Relax," and he left the room.

This was it. Things were in motion, and his mind returned to the thoughts of the journey so far and the anticipation of being back. He had clearly learned a lot, and knew he had changed hopefully for the better, but the biggest question in his analytical mind – would the alternate memory management or whatever allow him to retain them? It would be really unfortunate, if he reached the destination, but the journey was forgotten.

As he was contemplating this, a soft knock on the door, and an older gentleman – of course in a white lab coat – sauntered in, smiled expansively at Edgar, and sat down. In a soft tone, he said, "Heard you had some interesting questions for Dr. Alder?"

Edgar, not wanting to derail the plans in any way, replied apprehensively, "Just curious, that's all."

Dr. Oakley – Edgar gathered from his name tag – continued, "It's okay, selective memory erasure and management at scale is a difficult process. Sometimes, bits and pieces remain. Heard of déjà vu?"

Edgar, a little more relaxed based on Dr. Oakley's tone and demeanor, answered confidently, "Yes, of course. The sense of having previously experienced..."

Dr. Oakley interrupted, "Exactly, have you ever thought how they may have come about? Loose ends, my dear fellow, loose ends. Can be triggered by anything, see something, hear something, whatever."

Edgar smiled and nodded, as he felt the token from the Bureau still in his pocket.

"That's why we call this the déjà vu machine! Unofficially, of course." He laughed loudly as he said it and got up to leave the room.

As he opened the door, he looked at Edgar, winked and said, "Thanks for volunteering. All will go well. You have my word!"

And it did. The return process was straightforward and equally as uneventful. He was taken to a room, and he stepped into an elevator-like cab. Outside, the console operators seem to be entering information and pushing a series of switches and buttons, and then it was all dark for Edgar.

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Janice walked right in, pulled the curtains open to let in the morning light, went up to the sleeping Edgar, and said, "Wake up, sleepyhead, we are due at church for the baptism. Yeah, yeah, they know you are a heathen, but you get to be his godfather anyway and enjoy the spread after the services. Let's go!" The radio alarm was still on, and had moved on from *The Moody Blues* song, and his throbbing head, from the previous night's carousing, would not let him decipher the current song, nor did he have any desire to. Edgar moaned, and tried to cover his head with another pillow, but Janice had other ideas, and he struggled to sit up.

"I need a shower," he groaned, with his head in his hands.

"Use the kids' bathroom. Need to wash my hair and will be a while," Janice responded as she quickly walked to the shower.

He got up, slowly made it to the toilet, relieved himself, back to the sink, brushed his teeth, grabbed his towel and headed towards the kids' bathroom. As soon as Justin, who was standing outside the bathroom, saw him, he complained, "She's been there over an hour. I need to get ready too. Tell her, Dad!"

"Not now, son! Got a major headache. Just wait, she'll be out soon," he replied as he headed to the backyard to have a peaceful shower in the cabana - they had just added new showers this summer.

At least no one would bother him here, as he pulled the shower curtain across, stripped off his shorts and balled them up. Imagining himself to be a better basketball player than he really was, he lobbed it towards the hamper in the corner, next to the bench, and spun around to face the shower. It missed, not a surprise, and he heard a clink. He turned around and saw a coin roll from the shorts towards the drain at the bottom of a gentle slope. His reaction slowed by his state of lethargy, meant he did not reach the coin in time but managed to recognize the one side of it, as it navigated the slot in the drain and disappeared.

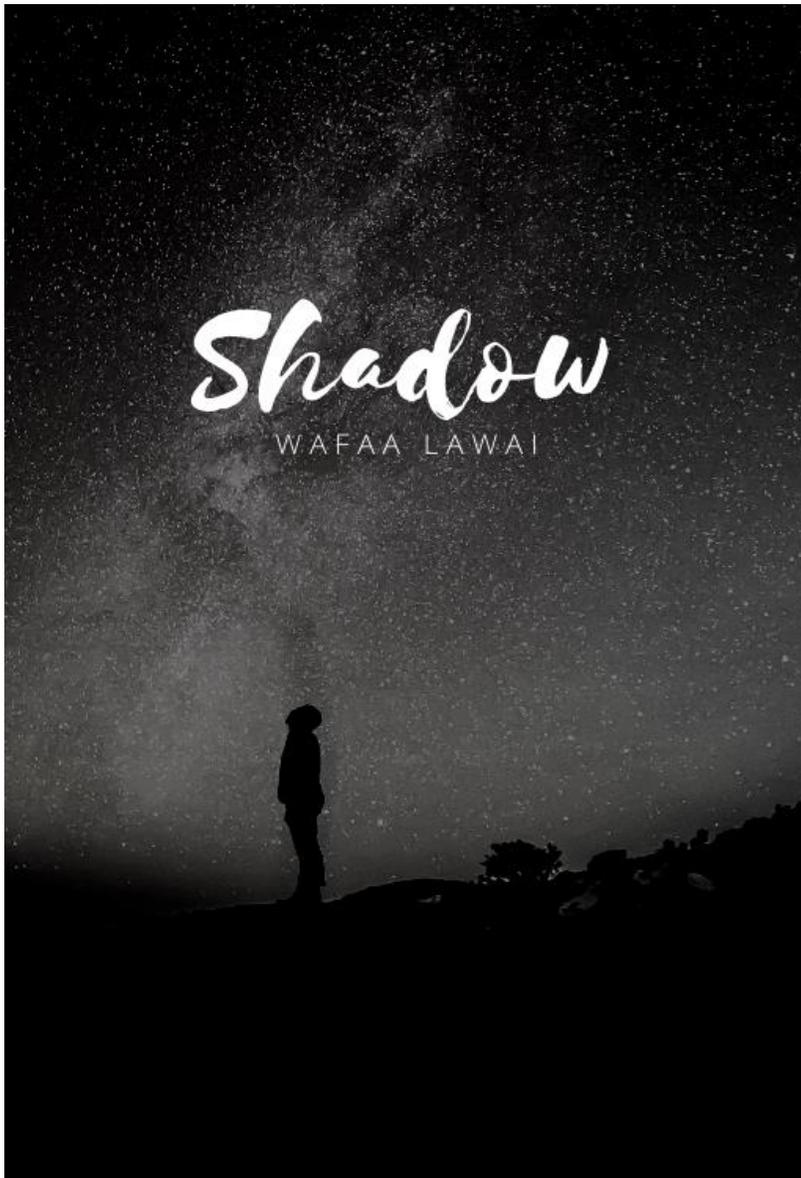
At that instant, Edgar eyes widened, his pulse quickened, and a rush of memories enveloped him. He looked at his hands, flexed his fingers, and then felt the wall just to make sure. He was indeed alive. He took a slow, deep breath to calm himself and his analytical nature took over. He knew he had to record the details of his journey, before those memories became distant, hazy, and unreliable. His initial reaction was that he would share them with Janice. Ironically, she would just think this was one more of his silly atheist pranks, and he decided not to at this time.

Finishing his shower, Edgar dried himself, went back into the house, and upstairs to his bedroom. Janice had laid out his clothes - a colorful Hawaiian shirt, tie, and suit - all more appropriate for a fancy party. He hung them back in the closet and quickly changed into a more sedate pale blue shirt, conservative tie, and dark-blue suit. He went across to the sink, put some hair-gel on his hands, ran it through his hair with wet hands, and started brushing his hair.

Janice walked in, looked at his clothes, and remarked, "Something wrong with my choice of clothes, honey? Trying to impress someone at church!"

Edgar responded evasively, "Nah! Just hedging my bets, dear!"





After some time, his feet found a natural path of sorts which wound through the growth and seemed to know where it was going. So he followed it, aimlessly, glad to be on solid ground once more.

Round a corner, he could now see clearly in front of him and knew he was coming to the end. An end which would hopefully explain more than his frayed memory could.

Winding past shadowed trees, he entered a grove softly illuminated with the glow of living things. Thousands of tiny waterfalls rushed down from the rocky face, combining briefly to form streams before scattering once more into individual threads. Luminescent blue and green moss clung to the damp surfaces.

*At least I had the sense to pick a nice place,* he thought, relaxing despite himself. The flowers and flowing water filled the air with mist and soft fragrance. He followed one of the silvery streambeds for a short while, then slipped away and approached the edge of the precipice.

Here the rock was damp and trickling with rivulets; one wrong step might prove to be fatal. Nevertheless, he approached the edge and stood looking out into the starry night, wondering which of those distant lights were

familiar to him. Below, water dripped slowly into darkness.

It was the traveling which had confused his memory, he had decided; meddling with time and refusing to acknowledge past experiences never helped either.

Unfortunately, this place – beautiful as it was – was nothing more than a grove. Nothing here gave him any clue as to what he had spent so many years chasing.

With a sigh, he sat down on a lump of rock and turned to look back at the waterfalls.

It was then that he noticed he had a shadow.

Dark against the glowing moss, it lay draped over a small section of rock and mimicked his smallest movements.

“Shadow?” This was strange. He didn’t think he’d ever had a shadow before – few people did – but the way his memory was serving him, he may have been wrong. However, that still didn’t justify this shadow’s existence when there was no light he could possibly be blocking.

*Shadow*, the patch of darkness agreed.

It received only a blank stare in response.

"Glowing fungi and now a talking shadow. Why did I choose this place, of all others, to come to?" Some fifteen minutes away, his ship lay silent and silvery-pale against the darkness. He was not sure how he could have owned such a thing.

*Good place*, the shadow assured him.

"It *isn't* a place. It's just a rock – one more rock floating in space. Fungi doesn't make it that special."

*Quiet.*

"Most places are quiet."

His shadow hummed a little and shifted direction. Its owner turned to face the grove again. "Have you been with me all along?" he asked.

*No.*

"Is that how everyone gets shadows? Do they just start existing then?"

*No.*

He swiveled on his rock again, so he now faced the open sky. "If you'd been with me earlier," he said sadly, after a moment had passed, "you could have reminded me why I'm here."

*Here.*

"I know you're here."

*Here.*

"Yeah." His interest had already moved on. He watched a rivulet of water snake past, the motion of the liquid fluid and fascinating. "How can I leave until I know what happened?" His finger touched the water. It was cold, but oddly warm at the same time, so the air stung after he pulled it out again. He wiped it dry and turned an introspective gaze on his shadow once more.

"Why do you exist?"

*You*, it replied.

"But I'm not blocking any light."

*No*, it agreed. After a contemplative moment, it added, *Place*.

"Odd place." He drew up a knee to rest his chin on it and eyed a glowing circle of small mushrooms not a foot away from him.

*Odd*. This time there was something distinctly questioning in its tone, and reluctantly the owner answered it.

"I wish I knew. But the journey's been too long."

*Journey?*

"Years."

*Old.*

A smile flitted across his expression. "I guess you could say that."

*Wise?*

"Unfortunately, no."

*Sad.*

"Who, me?" he asked absently. "I can't remember."

*Forget.*

"That's served me excellently in the past, my friend."

*Shadow.*

"All right – my shadow. Why can't you be my friend, even if you are a shadow?"

*Small.*

"You're just as big as I am."

*Small.*

"Comparatively, what's not small?"

*Silence.*

He gave his shadow a bleak look. "Why are we having this conversation again?"

*Memory,* it told him.

"If you're hoping to jog my memory, I don't think you'll succeed."

The shadow lay quiet for a few minutes, humming impatiently. Several times it seemed that it was on the verge of speaking, but nothing was said.

"Have you forgotten a word?"

*Word,* it mused, blurring at the edges. Its owner turned his attention back to the empty space in front of him, leaning forward to get a better look. He sat down and swung one leg, then the other, over the rock, so they hung over eternity.

By his side, the edges of the shadow suddenly came into clear focus, darker than ever against the surrounding moss. *Place,* it said. *Welcome.*

#

"Welcome to Sitara." They had emerged from their first building out into the night. Their guide was short-haired and smooth-voiced. "It may take several weeks before you are fully-fledged citizens, but here we are."

"What do you think?" his sister asked him.

"Cold." He shivered and pulled his jacket around him. They were walking on slick black rock with veins of silver which caught the sparse moonlight at intervals. "Are there trees here?"

"We have forests," their guide said, directing her beam of light at the groove which marked their path. "The tallest trees you'll have ever seen."

He doubted that. On the same visit to Earth in which he first heard what was now his official name, he had also seen the giant sequoias there – and they were colossal.

"And what am I to call you now?" his sister whispered to him as they approached the second building, a looming structure.

"My official name, of course." He grinned. He'd picked it up just months prior, during their visit to Earth. It was from the first sentence he'd understood after landing there – heard from the open window of a passing car, spoken by a young voice: "Mama, I want Hamza Wobin!" After that, he simply had to take it as his alias.

"Be careful of the water," their guide warned.

Small Hamza Wobin skipped over a tiny stream and looked with interest at some shadows looming up on their left. "What are those?"

"More rock. We have some weird formations here." At the outskirts of the building, their guide came to a stop by a squat pole. "We wait out here for someone to get us."

"I'm sleepy," Wobin said.

"You'll be going to your quarters first thing," she assured him. "No need to worry about the tests till tomorrow."

"And how long will those take?" his sister asked.

The guide looked over them carefully. "Maybe a month."

"A month?"

Switching off the light, their guide allowed night's darkness to envelop them. "We have to be careful with inhabitants of blue systems."

"A month," she repeated flatly.

"You may get let off earlier if things go well." Looking to break the awkward silence, she pointed north. "See that thing flashing up there?"

Wobin followed the finger and squinted into the darkness. "No."

"Watch for a minute."

Halfway through another shiver, he caught it. A brief shimmer of light against darkness, then stillness once more. "What is it?"

"It's how we communicate between cities. They're all separated by wide stretches of land – often difficult to get through. We use this system in the interest of speed."

"Can't you use a phone or radio or something?"

"Well, now we can," she admitted. "This was for before we had that. We still do it, mostly for tradition."

Wobin thought that a little odd, but he kept quiet and stared at the structure which would house them for the next month, trying to stifle another yawn.

"How old are you?" Their guide made another attempt at light conversation.

"Ten," he said.

"So you were born in the seventh year?"

His sister spoke up abruptly. "Yes, he was." Wobin thought she sounded annoyed, but at the moment he had more important things to worry about – such as the slug crawling by his feet.

Their guide switched on the light again, suddenly businesslike. "We had an unlucky comet that year," she said quietly. "But look – someone's coming. We'll be in soon."

#

"Who would have thought," said an older version of the boy, staring over the precipice, "that the presence of a fickle comet could have such a large impact on the life of someone born countless light years away from it?" The worst part of it was that even the comet wouldn't have meant much if he wasn't from a blue system. Turning to his shadow, he looked at it consideringly. "I remember now. My sister had a shadow, but I didn't."

It was now pulsing, winking in and out of existence with a slow and steady beat. *Here*.

"Now, see," he added with a small smile, "because at this moment *that* star appears in a certain position relative to *that* star –" he pointed out the small lights, uncaring of whether the shadow could see them or not. "And you appeared just now, I can conclude that you are going to be deceptive and untrustworthy."

To his annoyance, the shadow actually seemed intrigued by this. *Deceptive*, it mused.

"I'm joking, I'm joking." He sat back down with a defeated sigh. "It doesn't mean anything."

The shadow abruptly stopped blinking. *Comet?* It seemed puzzled.

"No," he said. "The comet isn't the reason I came here. My mind isn't clear just yet, although the air helps a great deal." He leaned back and took a few deep breaths. "I wish I could remember. My sister–"

He cut off, staring at the ring of mushrooms again. "That is really very odd."

#

The first time he ever saw a ring of mushrooms was on the night in which he was kicked out of his home.

Of course, those mushrooms had been very different. Instead of being small and slender, white tainted with grayish-purple luminescence, they were large and unwieldy. Their pale yellow color was splattered with darker orange, and the shape reminded him a bit of one of the caves he worked in.

Their presence also scared him off to find another spot where he could spend the night. Fungi was not trustworthy.

The light of his torch was strong, but as he stumbled past the forest outskirts, he realized that there was no finding a better spot this night. Not only was it cold, but a dense mist was rapidly settling over the area.

So instead of looking further, he dropped his bags by a pair of twin trees and began looking through them. He hadn't bothered to check the contents earlier, but now he was wishing he had.

He appeared to have left his bottles behind.

"Fantastic."

Aiming his light on the floor, he swept away dead leaves and twigs. All he had to sleep on was a blanket. This wasn't ideal, but when your community decided they no longer cared to have you living among them, they rarely gave you much choice regarding where you *did* live.

They had at least the decency to come up with an excuse – ridiculous as it was. A disease was sweeping through the planet, they told him. It affected only the newcomers, because anyone born on Sitara had inbuilt immunity. The community wasn't safe for him to live in for the time being.

But the stores from where he bought his food? The mines where he worked alongside others? No danger there. He could continue associating with all he met there, apparently.

He was sure that this plague would magically clear up when his sister returned. Until then, he was stuck without a home, wishing he'd taken up something like carpentry for a living. To be fair, as there weren't many saws sitting around in the forest – the only ones were kept strictly in reserve for people who worked with them – that may not have been much more useful.

Wobin wrapped himself in a jacket and leaned back against a tree trunk, listening to the noises all around him. Rock humming. Animals screeching. The wind whispering among high treetops.

"Oh sister," he whispered, "wouldn't it have been better to just leave this place?"

#

"I never saw her return," he said with sudden panic. "I don't know where she is."

*She?*

"My sister." He gripped a shard of rock in his hand painfully tight, feeling the erratic vibrations against his skin. "I don't think she returned."

*Left.*

"She just went to visit our home planet – and I couldn't go with her. I had to stay behind because they wouldn't have let me back on Sitara otherwise . . . she wanted me to stay there. And look how well I did that." His laughter was oddly breathless.

#

"Hey Wobin! Here's your chance!"

Wobin straightened from his work and squinted at the yelling figure. "What?"

"Pay a visit to Echeon! Nothing you're not used to, right?" It was too dim to make out who the speaker was, but Wobin thought the voice sounded familiar.

He went cold. Echeon was where they dealt with toxic waste. "No, I'm very sure I'm immune," he said politely, bending back down.

"Coming of age this year, aren't you? You know what's coming tonight?"

But Wobin had already left.

At the headquarters, his overseer frowned and asked him where he had heard about the job from.

"One of the other workers," he replied briefly. "Where does it have to be taken?"

"Echeon. One system over. Short flight. What, you're volunteering?"

"Why not?" he asked. "Someone has to take it, don't they?"

"Yeah."

"And it's dangerous, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well I'm already born under a comet and in a blue system. I can take more."

He received an uneasy stare. "No, you can't."

"Yes I can," Wobin snapped.

"You're certified risky. If you go out with that stuff, you're not allowed back on this planet."

Wobin stared at him for a long minute. "Do you really think I'm deranged somehow, because of when and where I was born?"

"I don't make the rules. Any *regular* person would have to quarantine for a while, on the moon."

"And who's willing to do that?"

"No one, yet."

"Sign me up." Wobin jammed his hat back on his head. "You know, I've heard something about falling stars and sanity."

"Do you know what it actually *is*? It's going to damage your memory."

"All right," he said calmly. "What else?"

"It messes with your brain – I can send you a report with the full details. Isn't its location enough?"

"I'd like that report."

"Where are you going to go? I doubt any planet will welcome someone who spent so long in proximity with such dangerous waste."

"I'll go to a place where I don't need welcoming."

The overseer stared at him. "You're insane."

"Took you long enough to figure that out." Nodding to the irritated man, Wobin picked up the papers and left the building.

#

"So." Releasing the stone from his nervous clutch, he propped his chin in his hands. "I took the stuff to Echeon. And now I have nowhere to go."

*Place. Here.*

"I came here because I was curious about what they accused me of." He laughed. "I think it's something about the air – it's supposed to make you go crazy."

*Quiet.*

"I wonder how long I have before it affects me?" Lifting his head, he regarded the shadowy trees curiously. "There's one thing we have to do before that happens." His sister deserved to know what happened to him.

*Stay*, his shadow said quietly as he got to his feet.

"You know what? Maybe I will. You make for fine company after all." He waited for an answer, but upon receiving none, started walking.

His shadow lagged behind him as he picked his way back to the grove, careful to avoid the dark pools of water and slippery patches of moss. The rockside came into view again, glittering with veins of starlit water, the way rocks on Sitara glittered with veins of silver.

*Wait.*

"I'm just sending a message."

*Look.*

He swung around to face his shadow. "What?"

*Stars.*

Looking up, at first he could make out nothing unusual. Then he noticed the tiny smudge which wrapped every star, as if they were visibly attracting stardust.

"Wh-"

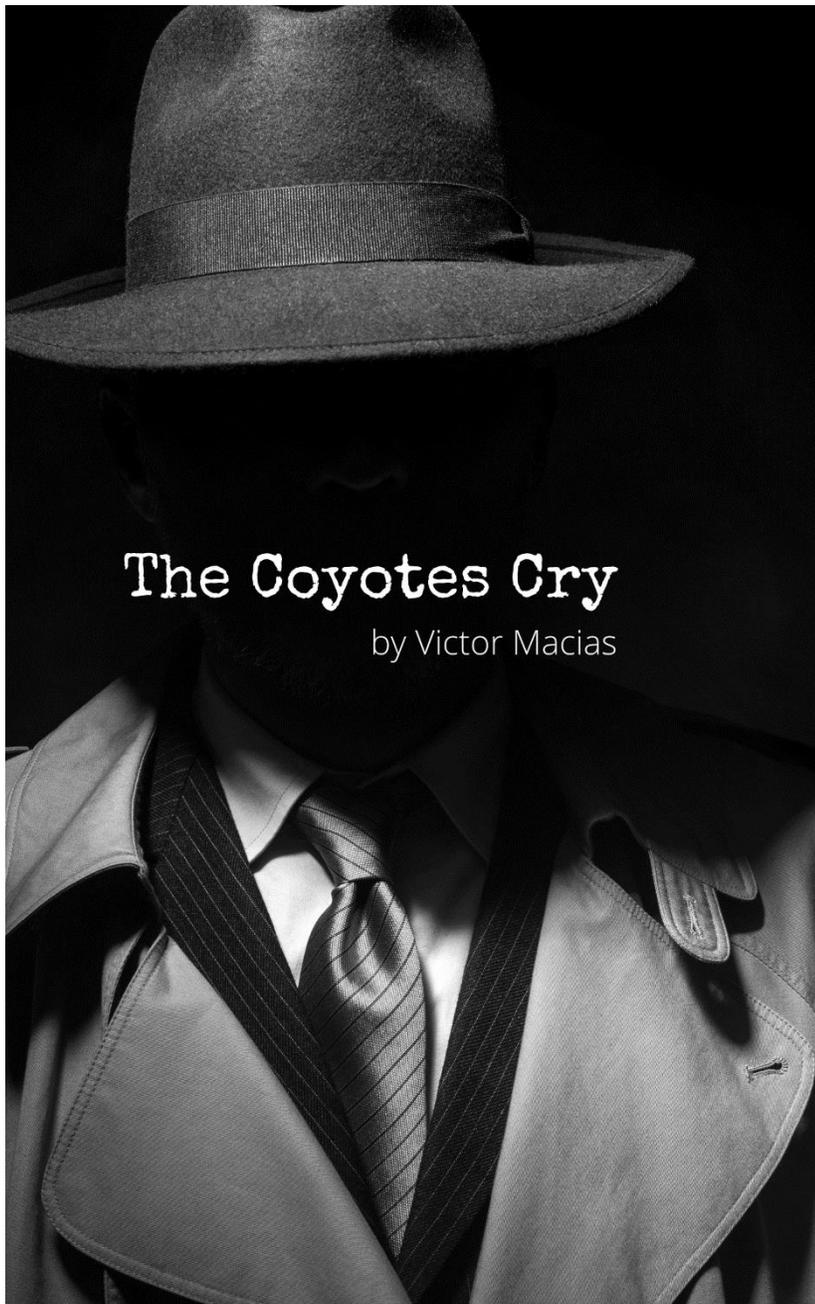
And just like that, the stars began to fall. They streaked out of the sky in tiny trails of silver, leaving a deep black behind them. One by one the gaps were overcome with more stars, dropping endlessly to eternity.

"They *are* falling." His voice was breathless with excitement. "Just like everyone said. This is the place."

*Place.* Its tone echoed his own excitement. Yes?

He smiled a little, taking in the black sky threaded with vanishing silver. "Yes," he said. "I think this is a fine place." And turning his back to the stars, he left the precipice.





## The Coyotes Cry

by Victor Macias

### Cry Baby

Big town cop in a small town. It didn't used to be that way I was one of the best investigators the big city could have. But you know how they always tell you that there is that one case that'll stick with you for the rest of your life? Well, that case finally found me. It was a dark and rainy night, cold enough that you could see your breath. I pull up to a scene with multiple uni's hovering around the scene of the crime. Some talking to civilians, a few more setting up a perimeter. I take a drag of my Camel and exhale. I find the door handle to the car, open it, and set a leg on the pavement. I stand out from the car and close the door. I see another uni puking his guts out. I yell to get him out of there and to stop contaminating my crime scene. I take another drag, throw it on the wet ground, and step on it to make sure it's out even though the ground is full of water from the rain. I make my way to the scene. A uni comes up to me, looks like he came fresh from the academy. He starts talking to me about the situation but in truth I'm not paying attention to what he is saying. I turn into the alley way and I find a pair of legs sticking out from behind a dumpster. Female, I can tell.

The uni taps me on the shoulder "Sir, is everything alright?" I look to him, nod, and ask him to get me a coffee. I look up for

moment and let the pitter patter of the rain refresh my cold face. I take a breath and put my latex gloves on and kneel by the girl. She looks to be in her early twenties; her neck sliced open, blood no longer flowing from the wound. Poor girl she didn't deserve this. Another tap to my shoulder. It is the young uni with the coffee. I stand up and look to him and take the coffee and take a drink. He says, "I can see why they call you Cry Baby"

"Pardon me?" I respond grabbing my handkerchief from my pocket with my free hand to dry my face.

"Nothing sir."

"Alright, get back to perimeter. We don't want the press getting any of this."

## Smokes

"Detective Kelly what do we have?" I turn to and look up from the body.

"We have a female looks to be in her early twenties cap." I look back at the corpse of the poor young girl. "She got sliced in the throat looks to be from a serrated blade." I stand up and dig into my pockets looking for the pack of Camels I had hidden away. I find them, pull one out and light it. I take a drag and exhale.

"Kelly, I thought you quit that habit" says the captain.

"I dunno, cap, sometimes it's all I've got for an escape from this heavy shit you got me investigating" I add with a salty tone. "This is the fifth body this month with a similar pattern serrated blade behind a dumpster wearing nothing but a coat and lingerie underneath.

"I take another drag of the cigarette feeling the hit of nicotine rush through my body and exhale. But it's not enough. I'm tired of seeing these poor women dead and torn up before they even get the chance to enjoy life. If only I could be given the chance to meet this weak being of a man and bring him to justice. No, how about I give the justice that is rightly deserved. I want to have him squeezed between the hood of my squad car and my 1911 .45 ACP pistol just waiting for him to reach for something. I don't care anything to have an excuse to put a bullet in him that he rightly deserves.

"Detective Kelly...Bruce?" the captain calls. "Are you alright?" I take a drag as the butt meets the filter, it burns my fingers and I flinch, snapping back from my thoughts as I toss it to the floor and extinguish it with my shoe.

I exhale. "Yeah cap let's get the coroner in here to get the body collected and get a rape kit on her." I kneel back down and take a look at her one last time. I move her hair and tell her, "Don't you worry, baby, I'll find him. Whatever it takes I'll find him."

## Coyote

Sitting at my desk are five files of five women gruesomely murdered and potentially raped. I sit looking at all the pictures of the crime scenes going over the evidence in hopes of trying to find a connection. Something that connects these girls so we know what this sick killer is looking for in his victims. I lean back in my chair to take a moment to myself as silence befalls the precinct. It's late; people are headed home. Another day lost to the sands of time. I feel unproductive, no movement forward had been made on the case and everyone has that eerie feeling that he'll soon strike again. I dig in my coat pockets for a smoke, find a Camel light it, and take a drag. A memory comes to mind as I stare at the ceiling. My father yelling at me when I was a kid.

"You can't just lay around and do nothing all day! You're a man you need to start working on the farm."

"But I don't want to work on the farm. I want to work in the big city and be a big city detective," I protested.

"Boy, I don't care what you're thinking in that head of yours but you better get that ass to work before I give you a whippin' from the coyote. My father takes off his belt and on the leather is an engraved coyote howling at the moon. I get up and run out to do the work my father wanted to; I was only fifteen.

The door to the precinct slams open, it snaps me back from the memory. The M.E. runs to the Captain's office; I see them both talking. The Captain points to me and I take my feet off the desk, put my cigarette out, and straighten up. The M.E. b lines it to me still winded from running in.

"I found a connection between your five girls."

"Easy there, my man, take a minute. They aren't going anywhere." I lean back on my chair as the M.E. takes a breath.

"I found a connection between all five of your victims." He pulls out a file from under his arm which contained photos. "All five of your victims have the same tattoo of a coyote on them."

I straighten up and take a look at the file of five photos. All five of the tattoos are exactly the same; could they be done by the same artist. I close the files stand thank the M.E. and grab my coat.

### The Red-Light Girl

The evening is early on these city streets. Dreary with fresh rain that have left the streets moistened but the skies look like they are ready to give more rain. I drive my unmarked squad car easily through the wet roads, happy to take my time. I need to think what I'm about to say to her. It's been several years. I wonder if she will hate the sight of this scoundrel back on her turf. I make a left, getting off the Main Street area and drive into the Red-Light District. There are a few girls in high heels, fishnet leggings, and tight little outfits leaning into johns' cars offering their services to them. In all honesty, I don't know whether to pity them for what they have to go through or respect them because they enjoy the work that they do. As I continue further in, the outfits begin to change from tiny bikinis, booty shorts and knee high fluffies to more sensual burlesque outfits and the rougher B.D.S.M. latex looks. I must be getting close; I pass an alley way and find three girls beating up on a man on the floor laughing with one keeping lookout. Our eyes meet as she nods at me, another laying blows on the john, and the third digging into his wallet. I turn away and continue down the street. Don't let these small outfits fool you. I have seen some heavy machinery come out when these cats bear their claws. These streets might seem like a guy's wet dream with all the beautiful dames but, in reality, these girls are a gang, and no other gang has ever tried to step foot in these streets. Cops don't even venture down here unless they are on the take. But it's the norm for me.

I drive up to the cat house and park my car. I grab a cigarette and light her up. I take a drag. I look to my left and two girls come out from the shadows across the street and they stare at me, one branding an UZI, another a Tech9. Yup, this is the place. I open the door step out of the car and close it. I begin to make my way to the building with two girls now behind me. I knock on the door and an Asian girl with long hair and a streak of blue colored hair answers. She wears a kimono with a samurai sword on her hip.

"Where is she?" I asked she looks at me then looks to the two girls behind me and nods them off.

\* \* \*

*It's a been a wet night so far and business has been slow all night. This rain always has the habit of keeping the clients away. I bet they are with their significant others cuddled on a couch watching tv or maybe in their bed together keeping each other warm. I see the mistress seems to be lost in her own thoughts as she looks out the window. It's as if she herself misses her own significant other. But who that is she never talks about. I also choose not to ask her because I feel it isn't my place. I pace the room, always aware the mistress has many enemies. Sukie places a hand on her samurai sword - and I must be ready to defend her. The mistress finally speaks*

*"Sukie have you ever loved someone?" I look at her, perplexed, at why she would ask such a question. I turn to look at her, "I was once many years ago"*

*The mistress continues 'There was this guy I met, and everything was perfect He was perfect.' I tilt my head wondering why she was telling me this.*

*"I don't know what happened though. Maybe it was my change in profession. I admit it's not one most guys would stay with you once they found out. I mean, after all, he wears a shield now." A car pulls up as she continues to look out the window. A man steps out. The mistress looks to me.*

*"Sukie, we have a special guest please go let him in." I nod and take the elevator down to meet the man at the door. As I open the main door, I'm met with a detective. Could this be man she was referring to? I look him up and down and look*

*over the shoulder to see the other two guards stepping up behind him. I nod them off and they go back to their positions. The man speaks "I'm here to see her" I stare at him for a moment and I let him in.*

\* \* \*

She doesn't say a word to me as usual. Her name is Suki. She nods me in and points at the elevator as I step in. She hits the Penthouse button and smiles as she watches me the elevator doors close. I take one more drag of my cigarette before putting it out on the elevator floor. The door dings its way up as it finally gets me to the penthouse. The door opens and I step out into a huge room. In the middle is a heart-shaped bed and a lady sits with her back turned to me.

"Well, look who it is," she says "I thought that you would never come back. Is this for business or pleasure? Or are you coming back for something more serious between you and I?" She stands up and walks towards me. She has purple straight hair, about shoulder length, and gorgeous ocean blue eyes. She wears a red skimpy one-piece swimsuit corset with her hugely generous bust looking ready to pop out, and black fishnet leggings. She gives me a hug and a passionate kiss. After she pulls away from the kiss then bites her lower lip. I pull out the file and hand it to her. "We need to talk."

### **A Girl's Pestilence**

I look to her and see how beautiful she is but I have to keep focus on the job. After all, it's her girls that are being killed. I wonder if she knows or if she will even tell me the truth, but this is the first major lead and hopefully it will give fruit. I look at her.

"We need to talk." I hand her the files. "Did you know that someone has been hunting down your girls?" She keeps her flirtatious gaze on me, eventually realizing that I'm serious she opens the files and sees the five murdered girls.

"Why do you care if a couple of my call girls get killed? Did you fall in love with one of them?" She replies sourly.

I look at her then I pull a cigarette out of my pocket. "No, I just noticed that they are your girls. I have a feeling that something is brewing maybe; a turf war between you and whoever is challenging you."

She laughs, "So now you still care for me and now you worry for me...do you still love me baby?" I take a drag of my cigarette.

"I told you this is a business visit no games. Seriously these five girls are your girls and you ladies are a pretty tight knit group here and nothing happens without your say so."

She sighs, "I know about these killings, but I haven't been able to find the bastard." She walks to the window she was gazing out of before when I walked in from the elevator. "The three younger girls were newbies and are so young it breaks my heart to see them like this."

I cross my arms "Well, maybe if you didn't welcome them into the life, they might still be alive."

She turns to me glaring. "It's hard out there to make a living this way you think it warms my heart to send girls out to turn tricks, move supplies? These girls come to me looking for help I bring them in, give them a roof over their heads. What do you and your people do just throw them into the system give them a job that pays next to nothing."

I take another drag of my cigarette and exhale. "Look I didn't mean to come here to argue about the life. I'm trying to find the killer that killed these five girls and that tattoo which led me to you is the only lead I got."

She walks up to me and hugs me her huge chest pressed against mine, and I still can feel her heartbeat. She kisses me and looks deep into my eyes.

"Find this killer" she smiles. "You know baby, I still love you, always have always will." I look deeply into her deep blue eyes and say,

"I know."

### **The Unknown Man**

As I head out the building, I pass Sukie at the door. She smiles. I don't think I have ever seen her smile before. Standing out on the steps, I pull out my smokes pull one out and light it. As I close the lid to the Zippo lighter, I see a man approaching the building and he begins to make his way up the steps. He seems like a suspicious character but, then again, everyone in this area is suspicious. It's a hard neighborhood. But this guy seems different, like he doesn't belong, not because he's got money but something different. Something is just wrong about it and I can feel it in my gut. So, there he was and in he walked. He was dark and I don't mean dark-skinned. No, this was different. It was as if he was always walking in a shadow. I mean every step he took towards the light, just when you thought his face was about to be revealed, it wasn't. It was as if the lights dimmed, just for him. I make my way back to the car as it starts to rain. I look up and I see him talking to Sukie before she finally lets him in, and the door closes behind them. Scoff, typical client of hers. I start the car and flip a U turn and start making my way out of the Red Light, wondering about the man that walked in. Her words still dance around in my head in thought. It's late, I take a drag of the cigarette and throw it out the window all the while still thinking of her.

I make it back to my place. Once I get inside, I grab a glass and some whiskey in an attempt to ease my restless mind. As I make my way past the kitchen table, I see the files of the cases that I'm working on. I try to pay no attention to them, but the images of those poor girls seared in my mind keeps me up. After finishing the glass, I set a metronome and make it to the bed and just crash onto the mattress. It is a restless night of sleep tossing and turning. As the metronome ticks away, I lay there thinking of the cases trying to see a connection trying to rationalize what is going on through the killer's head. Another thought creeps in of the beautiful purpled haired blue-eyed beauty - and, yes, if you haven't figured it out there is history between us. Her name Amethyst - why did she still care? Am I her one and only still? But the life she is in, how can she love when she is paid to love? Then the thought of the suspicious man that walked in to see her. Is she in trouble? An image of her throat being sliced open. Then the phone rings and I'm jolted me awake. I look outside to see the sun barely coming up. The phone impatiently rings again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I heard you. Hello?" Heavy breathing comes through. "Hello?!" More heavy breathing fills the receiver. "Hello? Who is this!"

Finally, a response from a dark, cold, creepy voice comes through and says, "I have gone and done it again!" then the line goes dead. I look at the phone as the dial tone starts to chime and I hang up.

### **Big Town Cop in a Small Town**

I stare at the rising sun for a moment and race to get cleaned up to head to the office. I race to the precinct. I call the captain to tell him what happened and to get my phone records to track the number that was used to call me. This is the lead I am looking for. Finally, the killer made a mistake. I arrive at the precinct and am met with the two other detectives as I walk into the lobby. I pass a man in a coat that tries to get my attention, but I ignore him as I continue talk to the detectives. As I get halfway up the stairs, I hear the man yell "DETECTIVES!" Everyone in the lobby freezes and looks at the man who continues by taking his coat off saying "I've gone and done it again." The coat comes off to reveal his arms soaked in blood. All the Uni's in the lobby instantly draw their guns as do I and the fellow detectives. I yell "no body touch him! Get on your knees and put your hands on your head right now!" I run down the stairs gun still drawn in one hand and a pair of cuffs in the other. I holster my Wilson Combat .45cal 1911 I grab the guy and slap the cuffs on his left hand.

"Did you like my works of art?"

"Shut up!" I respond. Then I bring his arm back from his head to his back and move right into position and close the cuffs.

He continues, "There is one I did just for you." He laughs. I stand up and turn him around.

"What do you mean? What the hell do you mean?"

"Oh, I have a card for you Detective. It's in my front shirt pocket." I reach into his front pocket and pull out a bloody envelope and open it.

Inside is a lock of purple colored hair. Shock sets in like the whole world is about to fall on itself. Could this be the guy that I saw in front of her building? Did he kill her? I pull out my phone and call her.

"You won't reach her she's not with us anymore," he laughs. I kick him in the gut, "shut up" I look up and see the Captain. He knows the look and he nod I see that he is yelling instructions but all I can hear is the ringing of the phone and the man's maniacal laugh. I un holster my .45 as the phone goes to voice mail.

"I was so looking forward to meeting you, Detective Kelly. I have been a huge fan of your work."

I stare at him with a look of blood lust "Shut up," I pistol whip him across the face. "You don't deserve to speak" I look up to the captain and I see him on the phone with a uni that is checking Amethysts place. A grim look overtakes him, and he shakes his head. A tear runs down my face. I turn to the man, kneeling and smiling at me. I put my .45 to his head and squeeze the trigger, a heavy click of the hammer hits the striker. Big town cop in a small town.



# RETRIBUTION

BY FLOYD MCCLUHAN

"A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire"

-James 3:5

The first lesson Pops taught me was to never value anything. *Cinis in cinerem. Pulvis in pulverem.* Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. No one knew where Pops learned his Latin, his family is full of illiterates, and hell, he couldn't read any English himself. The only time I ever saw him smile was when he got the chance to speak Latin. He'd always be eavesdropping in on everyone's conversation, waiting for his chance to cut in. When he found his moment, he'd grin so wide he'd reveal his missing teeth he lost from fighting with his brothers. It was the only time he'd let anyone ever see them. Then he would speak slowly so that he could articulate every syllable, showing off that he knows something you didn't. It was the happiest he'd ever be. That smug son of a bitch. If you asked him to translate, he would say that was a matter between him and God.

Pops was the most religious in our family, attributing everything he had to his faith although he never did read the Bible or go to Sunday church. "God already told me everything I need to know," he'd say. He met God and the Devil himself out in the forest behind our house. When he was about four years old, he stumbled out into the woods and made himself lost. He

survived by curling up in a shallow cave and waited there for three days. He was never alone, he'd say, God and the Devil waited right beside him through those cold spring nights. For three nights he fought off the Devil to stay with God. Everyone thought he was dead. It was cold and rained constantly for those three days. His folks didn't find him until Sunday morning, and when they did, the son of a bitch was smiling. He said he didn't fear anything anymore. He conquered the Devil and could do it again.

Pops deemed himself as righteous as a pastor. Not being able to read the Bible didn't stop him from teaching us the verses. According to him, God and the Devil created the world in seven days. On the first day, God formed the seas and birthed land. On the second day, he filled the earth with forests, plants, and fruit. On the third day, he gave life to the seas, and on the fourth day, he made life on land.

The first thing God made was a rabbit. He told them "be fruitful and multiply," and that's exactly what they did. By the end of that day there were rabbits everywhere, all living in harmony. No predators, no nothing. Still there wasn't any light in the world. They lived in blind bliss.

The next day, the Devil came and made light and sliced one of the rabbits' heads clean off its body. Now with the light, those other rabbits started thinking that the blood looked mighty tasty, and all the rabbits started hunting each other. All of life then was either chasing or being chased. Seeing this, the Devil added more life, creating humans after his own image. God, being the pure soul he is, still loved all life equally. But humans? The Devil loved humans. After waiting a day, the Devil created fire and taught humans how to harness it. Humans quickly dominated all other life on earth with that fire, and then they looked at themselves and wanted to be the rulers of one another. Fire was too powerful, so God made rain.

When it came to be Judgment Day, Pa would tell me, the Devil would try to kill God by drowning him, and God would try to kill the Devil by burning him. God and the Devil are both brothers and hate the other. The world for them is just their chessboard.

\* \* \*

Pa always liked me much more than my brother. He said he saw himself in me, and that my brother was like my mother, weak. "You're always running in this world," he'd say, "the difference if you can either be the one chasing, or the one being chased." I just turned 16 then, and I hated Pa for saying that. He never gave anyone a chance. "If you ever see a rabbit give birth, the damn thing won't ever hold still. Second those suckers pop out, they're off running somewhere. They live their whole life looking over their shoulder knowing they're too weak to fight off anything bigger than them. Hell, even a bird can take it out. Don't be a rabbit."

The old man was batshit about his lessons. Before grade school, I was terrified of the dark. Ma knew this, so she stitched together a plush bunny rabbit for me. When I was scared, I'd just cling on to the old thing. When Pops found out, he took that rabbit from me, leaving me alone in the dark. A week later, I peeked my head into our wardrobe. Sure enough, there was that rabbit, scorched, fur burned off leaving a puddle of ash. Its plastic eyes only melted, left staring at me. Value nothing, he said... *Cinis in cinerem*.

Pops built the wardrobe in woodshop back in his day, his proudest accomplishment and most prized possession. He did it all himself, even chopped the wood. He made the wardrobe from an apple tree, and the stump is still there in the backyard. The wardrobe is a dark reddish-brown wood, glazed over a few times for a polished look. It stands almighty like a coffin. It's a large wardrobe with two doors that could fit two children or one full-size man.

Two years after pops passed, Ma finally decided to get rid of the wardrobe. I saw it Sunday morning as I pulled up to her house. It was standing timidly on the driveway with a humble "free" sign taped onto its bold doors, hiding my Pa's etching, *Deus ex machina*, God from the machine.

I believed God lived in that wardrobe. That's where he waits while the rest of mankind goes on hunting, waiting up until he'll go and fight the Devil. That wardrobe became my confession booth. I'd go in to pray for my Ma's safety while my father's God still lived inside me. There's a large deep crack that crosses each door inside the wardrobe. I would run my finger across the crack and pray it like the rosary.

I thought the thing was ancient, and that following the cracks would be to follow my family's lineage. The farther down I traced the crack, the warmer it would get. As far as I knew, the wardrobe was built from my chopped down family tree. With my left hand, I would run my hand through my baby brother's hair, wondering where our place was in this world. Every so often I'd have to cover his mouth when he got to feeling claustrophobic, and then his ears when he got too scared. We'd stand for hours patiently, hearing a slap followed by a thud, followed by Ma crying out.

I believed I could fix everyone, and I would utter Hail Mary's until I would get dizzy from a lack of breath. I don't regret the hours I spent in that dark stuffy wardrobe though, it gave me the resilience and strength I needed to be a hunter in this world. I came face to face with God.

\* \* \*

One night after Ma was beaten black and blue, I woke up to the sound of three gunshots. I was getting to be 13 years old then. I crept out of my bedroom, hoping not to wake up my baby brother, and went to find Ma and Pa. Their bed was empty and cold. Three more shots rang out. I fetched my coat and went outside.

It was April. In the north that means constant cold and rain. For forty days, it has been raining. The sky was stitched together by clouds, hiding the sun from the world. That night, the seams must have dissolved since the clouds have scattered, revealing the big full moon. It was much too warm for a regular April night. The crickets were chirping, happy that they were no longer drowned out by the heavy patter of rain. The stars were shining clearer than day, eager to pounce on their first opportunity to present themselves.

I went out to the backyard first with my flashlight, but I didn't walk too far. Standing right outside the door, I could see by just the moonlight that there was something on the stump of the butchered apple tree. A few careful steps in, I could make out it was a jack rabbit. A few more steps in, I felt my breath escape my body. The rabbit laid dead, crucified, with its head cut off from its body. Its tiny legs were tied together with a little piece of twine, and a nail pierced through its right foot's paw. Its arms were stretched out in the shape of a cross, with each of its ears pierced through with a nail, keeping its decapitated head in place. Blood was trickling out its decapitated head, staining the tree stump red. Its mouth was stitched shut with what looked like the same twine that held together its feet. It had a secret it was keeping to itself. Right above its head, there were cuts made into the wood, "*Rex Iudaeorum.*" Jesus, King of the Jews.

The crickets stopped chirping and silence suffocated the world like a fire smothered from dirt. Total silence. I was standing right in front of that rabbit. If you listened closely enough, it seemed like you could still hear its heartbeat, or maybe that was my own heart beating in my throat. I didn't know what to feel or think. I wanted to question it, but I didn't know where to start. I heard gunshots go off and ran back inside.

The rain started up again that next morning. It was raining so hard that it seemed like it never stopped. Ma and Pa were sleeping inside their beds when I woke up. It was getting close to 9 o'clock and the whole house was still sleeping, so I went out to the stump. Everything was gone, both the rabbit and the inscription. Yet in the daylight, you could see the cut left behind from the decapitation. It wasn't a clean cut. The force of the chop was hard enough that the wood cracked around the cut, like it was struck by lightning. I put my finger on the top of that crack and felt the path. My finger got warmer the further along I followed the crack, and when I got to the end, my fingertip was coated in warm red blood.

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When I was 18, my baby brother died. He was three years younger than me. He first went missing for three days before we found him. We searched across the forest in our backyard, but he was nowhere. We just woke up and he was gone. We found him curled up inside the wardrobe, starved and shivering. He said he just "wanted to go somewhere where he didn't have to listen to the damn rain."

It was only a week later that he ran off again. This time we couldn't find him. We all hoped he ran off and hitched a ride somewhere, maybe some place like California where the sun is always shining. They found him when the sun was out. It was the first time it showed itself in 6 months, and they found him floating in a lake, drowned. What no one could understand was why his hair and clothes were scorched.

Pops passed when I was 22, it became just me and Ma. I lived alone, only a few minutes down the road. It rains the same at my place as it does Ma's house, but it feels different. I'd go over every Sunday to check up on her. It was the sabbath, and there wasn't anything I could think of more fitting than coming over to see her. She'd say I was her sunshine every time I came. We'd mostly go on to talk about the weather, before struggling to make conversation. For most of my time there, we would sit in silence in front of the fireplace, watching our little fire roar while feeling the heat. We didn't need to talk, we both knew what happened.

Pop was a lot of things throughout my life. He was a father, he was our religious savior, he was our torturer. God and the Devil lived inside that man and they must have been fighting each other the whole time. We never knew who won in the end, by that point he was mostly a delusional drunk, but he is back to being ashes.

Pops got caught in a fire and the flames burned him like holy water burns a devil. He never screamed he never yelled. He looked down and saw his foot catch and saw the flames crawl up his leg. He was holding a bottle at that time, and took one long gulp. Ma and I were watching. He was outside in the driveway, staring at us. He looked at us with some sort of understanding; he knew it was his time. He fought God and the Devil before and won, but now the Devil would take him back. He was working on his car at the time. He ruptured a pipe and gas was leaking out all around him. The only mystery is where the spark came from.

Seeing the old wardrobe on the driveway, I knew Ma must have never opened it. She probably got the neighbors help to go get it out. I parked my car along the street and walked up to the old thing before she knew I came. That free sign was a sin to the wardrobe, I took it off revealing the inscription. *Deus ex machina*.

God didn't live inside that wardrobe anymore, that was a duty for the spiders. The whole thing was littered from cobwebs and dust, but that made no difference to me. I found the crack on the inside of those wooden doors. Silently, I traced it with my fingertip while whispering my old prayers. The warmth of my fingertip radiated with each prayer I finished. After I finished following that crack, thick red blood was left coating my fingertip. *Redemptio per sanguinem*, redeemed by the blood.

The matches were still left in the inside of that cabinet, right where I left them. There's enough spark left to light the world on fire.

Pa was many things, but he was never wrong. He's right that fire is great at killing devils. That night, I would watch the wardrobe burn. I wanted to see my family tree go up in flames.

*Cinis in cinerem. Pulvis in pulverem.*



# Savannah

BY JENNIFER ORME



I swear he loves that cat more than he loves me. She certainly claims more of his attention than I ever did.

She was the most adorable kitten, a Chinchilla Persian – all fluffy white fur and dark-rimmed green eyes. It was love at first sight. She was supposed to be my kitten; it was my idea after all. But I didn't have a chance. He took over and they became a couple. He decided to call her Savannah. I don't know why but the name stuck and it suited her.

I remember when I first met my husband. It was on a blind date set up by my friends. I'd been divorced over a year and they thought it was time for me to get back into circulation. He arrived smelling of Old Spice after-shave and clutching a bunch of flowers he'd just picked up at the supermarket. He was so touching in his eagerness to please. Short and muscular with a nice smile, he had parked an expensive sports car where I couldn't miss it. He'd borrowed it from his sister. I couldn't have cared less what kind of car he drove. Flashy cars have never impressed me. But the flowers touched me. That was the one and only time he gave me flowers. He still doesn't know it's the one thing he can do that really makes me feel special.

One thing led to another and we married a year later. He was good to my

young kids and they liked him, at first anyway. I was able to ignore his occasional fits of temper. Mostly we were a peaceful household.

"Savannah didn't eat her dinner. I'm going to the store to get something else," he said worriedly as he rushed out to the pet store. I rolled my eyes. He's so patient with her, and yet he can flare up at me, out of the blue when I'm least expecting it. She brings out the best in him.

He came back from the store with several varieties of canned food, plus fresh meat, a scientifically formulated dry food, cat sausage and some raw frozen briquettes. He used to spend a fortune on cat food, and most of it went into the trash.

"There's gotta be something here she likes," he fussed as he laid down several dishes. Savannah deigned to take a few nibbles at the fresh ground hamburger meat, 85% lean. She ignored the dry food and the canned Albacore tuna.

It went on like this for years. He obsessed. I got bored with the subject – the same scene every mealtime. Savannah got fussier and fussier.

She became a one person cat. She ignored me and everyone else. If he went out, she waited by the window for his return. If I went on vacation, he stayed home with Savannah, or else they both came.

Maybe it was because her loyalty was absolute. She never talked back. She agreed with everything he said. When he moved about the room, her emerald-green eyes followed his every move. I'm not like that at all.

"I'm his number one. You know that, don't you?" she purred as she lowered her lids to half mast, her eyes glinting greenly at me.

I woke with a start. I must be hearing things. Was that a dream? I wonder if it's the new anti-depressants; did I take too many Ambien? I am a bit more spaced out and dizzy than usual. I looked across at Savannah who was sprawled on top of his legs looking at me. Was that a triumphant gleam in her eyes?

It couldn't be that I was jealous of a cat. Ridiculous. On the contrary I was relieved that some of his intensity was directed away from me.

Sometimes it was almost comical. I had to laugh the day he came in with Savannah draped on him like a fur collar. As usual he was unshaven and wearing a faded T-shirt, with this elegant cat around his neck. She was wearing the new rhinestone collar he had just bought. Really, it was too much. I briefly wondered if he was going around the bend. Oh well, it's better this way than getting a girl friend like some of his friends – like my first husband.

"Hi precious," he used to say in the early days of our marriage as he gave me a hug when he came in from work. "How was your day? How is Savvy?" I didn't respond to his affection as warmly as he wanted.

And there was always Savannah nearby, eager to give him what he wanted. She rubbed up against his legs in welcome.

"I know how to give him what he wants," she whispered.

Then they'd run downstairs together to the garage and he'd work on his model train layout until dinner.

"You're so secretive," he would complain. "I never know what you're feeling."

He didn't know my feelings were a secret to me too. What happened to them?

Feelings are so painful. I'm not angry but I don't know if I love anybody anymore.

He picked at me over trifles, often flying into a temper. He didn't approve of my kids' spouses. So critical of everything they did. They no longer felt welcome at our house. It wasn't a safe place for them.

I admit I played my part in the change in our relationship. I was pretty once but I let myself go and put on weight. I spent more time in my room alone doing crosswords and reading magazines. Short episodes of depression lengthened into days, then weeks. The drugs helped me to function but I was emotionally dead. No wonder he turned to Savannah for love and affection.

It was endless; a new medication, a few years of relief, and then down into the black hole again. I cycled through many period like this. But each time I managed to drag myself back into functioning mode. And then, it happened.

It was the day after the huge fight he had with son from my first marriage. I froze when I heard them yelling at each other from the den downstairs. Savannah ran and hid under the bed as she always did when there was fighting in the house. Too often now there was strife. My son came bounding up the stairs.

"Fucking asshole!"

I cringed as he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

Early the next morning I had a stroke on the way to the bathroom. It claimed some of his attention but not as much as I would have liked. I don't remember much about it. I must have blacked out and fallen as I stumbled along the hallway in the dark.

He called 911 and they came within minutes. I was one of the lucky ones being transported to hospital and getting treatment within three hours of the stroke. I was given blood thinners and other emergency treatment which restored circulation to my brain. The clot which caused the stroke lodged in my left brain and paralyzed the right side of my body. My body was now as frozen as my emotions.

When I regained consciousness I couldn't move or speak. I was practically helpless, unable to feed myself or go to the toilet without help. Half of my body refused to work. I was told that, in time, if I worked at my physiotherapy, I might regain speech and some of my former mobility. It was too much to take in.

Having the stroke was a welcome distraction in a way – physiotherapists, occupational therapists, doctors, nurses, more medications. Visitors traipsed in and out of my hospital room all day long. Friends I hadn't seen in ages stopped by. I had a nice routine going with physiotherapy exercises in the morning followed by lunch with my fellow stroke patients. Trivia games, visiting musicians and singers kept us entertained. My room was filled with flowers. For three months in rehab I almost felt happy again with all the attention and love. No smothering cat hair to put up with. I was almost sorry to come home.

When I came home from hospital I was almost entirely dependent on him for meals, bathing, toileting, house-cleaning, grocery shopping. And yet, to my confusion, I almost enjoyed it.

He's always been highly emotional, alternating between affection and rage. But since the stroke it got worse. He was terrified I'd have another stroke. I was exhausted by riding the roller coaster of his emotions. I just wanted some peace.

The holidays came around and we went on our annual family vacation. In the excitement of seeing everyone, I tripped and fell flat on my face coming in the front door. His violent outburst frightened us all.

"You clumsy idiot," he screamed and burst into tears. His tears were never hidden; mine, always.

Out of control, he picked up a chair and was about to throw it through the glass door. Thank God my brother was there and managed to restrain him. I was terrified. He didn't even think to help me up – just let me lie there while he had a tantrum. It was hard on him, and on me. The young kids started bawling. Savannah hid under the bed and wouldn't come out.

It was Savannah who brought him back to sanity. He was so worried about her hiding from him that he calmed down and spent hours on the floor trying to coax her out.

"Here, Savvy girl, come on out. I won't hurt you. I'm so sorry I frightened you." This went on until she deigned to emerge from under the bed. She forgave him. I'm not sure I did.

I was relieved that he was so preoccupied with her. I had time to calm down and recover from the turmoil. My brother took me to the hospital to be checked for concussion. I had two black eyes.

He was under a lot of strain after my stroke. All the housework, as well as my personal care fell onto his shoulders. He even offered to cut my hair. I wondered why he wouldn't hire a cleaning person? But he wanted to do it all. He was in charge.

"I've got it covered," he kept saying,

"There's cat fur on the rug. Can you vacuum it up? It's making me sneeze." Savannah's hair is everywhere - on my clothes, in my bed, in the air I breathe. As I sat in my Lazy Boy all day with little to do, I couldn't help but see dust and dirt and cat hair everywhere. It was getting on my nerves. I felt a rush of power when he ran to the closet and got out the electric broom. Swoosh. Cat hair all gone.

And then, a few months later I hit the wall. Wham. Just like that. The monotony of my days got to me. I couldn't get up - no - not one more time. I began staying in bed all day. I had a good excuse - I was recovering from a stroke, wasn't I? I lay in bed all day, almost catatonic, wondering what's on the other side of that wall? That wall. It became an obsession. Sometimes I thought I was losing my mind.

I tried to summon the strength to scale that wall. It was too high but it beckoned me.

Who could help me climb it?

Suddenly, somehow, invisible hands lifted me up to the top, effortlessly. I could see over the wall. I could see what was there!

It was light, full of glory, and peace. I desperately needed rest from this weary aching world. I glanced back and didn't see anything I wanted; I saw only pain and sorrow.

I stepped off.

It felt like taking off a tight shoe! I was free. As I soared further and further from the earth plane I dared to look back again. This time the sky was painted with stars and the earth was the most beautiful star in the sky. Perhaps one day I'll be back. Now, at last, I was going home!

Savannah got her way. Did any one ever get the better of a spoiled cat? I died from the effects of stroke, mental illness and the stress of living on a volcano – so they said. But I know I simply I lost the will to go on. I was just too tired.

I'm in a better place now. He didn't need me anymore - I was a burden. I see now that we loved each other the best we could, but it wasn't good enough. His anger was too big for me. I didn't understand it, couldn't understand it. Maybe next time around we can do it better.

Now, as I look down on them, I see they are quite happy together after they got over the shock. Savannah brings out his tender side.

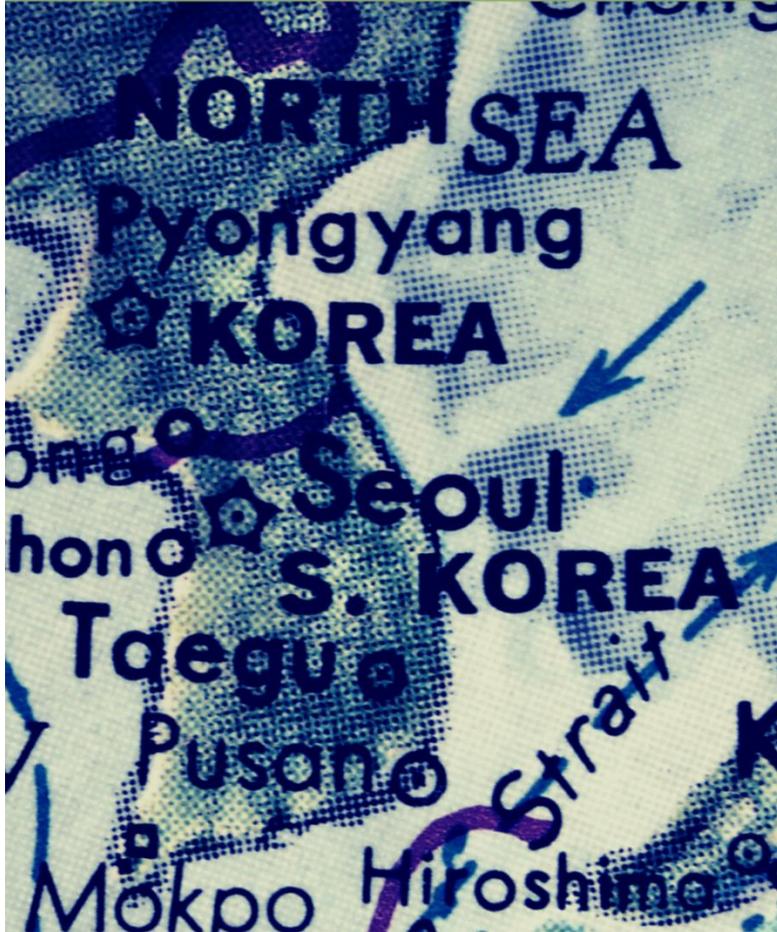
He has resumed his old hobby, spending the entire day in the garage with his model train layout. His friends come over every other Friday night as they always did before I had the stroke. They play trains and tell yarns deep into the night. I see he has mastered the art of making cakes and puts on a pretty nice supper, all without my help. Of course there's Savannah right by his side as always.

The perfect couple.



# Elusive Life

by Jess Pawlak



as determined by the needs of the State.

#

They came for Myung when he was seven years of age and took him from his Elementary School on the first day of the New Year.

"We are here for the selection of the boys who will attend Master Kim's Military Academy," said the tall, rough soldier to the meek School Administrator. Myung and one other tall boy were taken. Each boy's parents would get the document explaining that their respective boys were selected for the North Korean Military Academy and would complete their Elementary through High School studies as cadets.

"Please tell my parents that I am at Master Kim's Military Academy" and there were some tears that Myung wiped away.

Goal! He did it again, Nam, the star soccer player of Kyong High School in North Korea, is their leading athlete and has passed his entrance exams to enter Pyongyang University. "I am ready for my last report teacher," said Nam.

"Okay, please proceed" said the Teacher, Nam did a beautiful job except when he spoke about the differences between the two Korea's standards of living according to United Nations statistics.

"We are not ranked as high in our standard of living compared to the South," said Nam. After this statement, there was a deathly silence throughout the classroom. The teacher stood up and castigated Nam with an angry rise in his voice.

"Why do you bring the Capitalist Propaganda up in your final report?" Nam was confused since he had only taken what was considered straight facts by a neutral organization- but in North Korea the facts are given to you by Master Kim.

In fact, Master Kim determines many things for a child of the North including what they may be doing in life

"We need to go," said the soldier abruptly to the boys and the School Administrator. So, the boys were pushed to the door and assisted into the back of the truck that would take them and other seven year old boys seated inside from different schools to their new Military Home and School. A boy's failure to complete the Military Academy within ten years, unless caused by "accidents," was not a pleasant option to ponder.

There were sad faces in the truck, some crying and sobbing, but all the boys had been told by their parents this could happen to them. To be selected as a cadet was considered an honor to some and a horror to others. Over time the cadets who survived the Military Academy training would be assigned various positions in the Military establishment. The positions eventually assigned were based upon the State's needs, taking into consideration the cadet's physical and intellectual abilities along with evaluated loyalty to Master Kim.

#

It was during a cave tunneling training exercise during the 5th year when Myung lost his schoolmate. "Get into the cave and start tunneling with the small flashlight and digging equipment," said the cruel Military Trainer. The cadets were taught to dig tunnels and to move swiftly through them in case they were assigned DMZ tunneling duties. Myung was working deep in a training tunnel with his elementary school classmate, Diyong, when they both heard the rumbling.

Myung cried out, "What is happening Diyong?" All Myung heard in reply were the screams. Myung experienced thick dust, darkness, and fetid air that caused him to panic and scurry out of the tunnel. Myung found the Military Trainer enjoying a cigarette on the outside of the tunnel. Myung, panic stricken, told the Trainer what had happened. Both of them went into the tunnel and the Trainer could see there had been a cave-in and Diyong was buried in the rubble. The Trainer said, "Myung put on this gas mask with oxygen back up and go back into the tunnel to excavate in search of Diyong." Myung found the body and cried out, "Diyong, I am sorry," as he pulled Diyong's body out. The body was mangled and the face of Diyong, if you could call it a face, was concave with eye fluid oozing and no sign of a nose. Most of Diyong's bones were broken with multiple compound fractures and wet blood was all over the body. Myung took off his military issued jacket and placed it over Diyong. The Trainer approached as Myung held back the tears. The Trainer sniffed and gruffly said, "Oh, this happens once in awhile so just get used to it."

Diyong's death was listed as a training accident. That night as Myung lay in his bunk in the cadet barracks, he was in shock and vowed to get through the Military training by persevering, even though he wanted to grieve for his dead classmate. However, Myung knew the cadets were watched for any weakness which was annotated in the cadet evaluation reports.

#

The soldier came again to check on them while they work the field. The soldier is Myung, and he was selected for field sentry duty because of his hatred of the South and his above average height. Myung was indoctrinated at the Academy to believe that the North was the champion of all Koreans. He was taught at the Academy to hate and ridicule the South Koreans.

Working as a farmer in the Master Kim grain field has made man stronger in his arms and shoulders. The grain field is meant to trick the southern soldiers into thinking everything is well with people in the North. Nam, in his mid-40s, has been secretly observing the South for decades across the barren landscape. "Why do you always

look to the South across our (Demilitarized Zone) DMZ?" asks Myung. Nam, who is hunched down and sweating profusely, pauses and says to Myung, "I am curious to see if the South has any fields like we do? Myung responds angrily as he haughtily hovers over Nam, "I have told you more than once that we are the only ones who have the Communal Dream Field and the South will never have this glorious piece of land."

Nam pauses for a moment as he gathers his thoughts. He responds to Myung with a question. "Have you ever wondered why the people who escape to the South never come back?" Myung sneers and screams at Nam, "you filthy wretch, I read Your file and know you disgraced Master Kim while in school presenting a report about what you need not mention about us (North) and them (South). That is why you are working in this Field instead of having a glorious life in our capital Pyongyang."

Nam is silent and wipes the sweat from his brow as he sadly continues to work the field. Nam knows Myung is right and that his transgression during his final report caused an abrupt end to his studies. The Kim government ordered Nam to forfeit his Pyongyang University education, and he was forcibly assigned to train as a farmer for Master Kim's precious grain field.

The field workers are the lucky few with extra rations who work the propaganda grain field of "Communist Dreams" on the North Korean side. The field looks like something from a fairy tale. The secret is the fertilizer which is put on this field of golden crops by the farmers multiple times during the growing season. There is piped irrigation water that has been carbon filtered and necessary minerals added to compliment the fertilizer. Another luxury is a colorful pond in the field where the guards do some fishing since the North Korean Military stocks the pond with healthy fish from a drinking water reservoir.

#

Myung has a yearning to understand why the people who flee across to the South never return. He dare not say this to anyone since he would lose his status he fought so hard to achieve. He gets to live in nice barracks, eats produce from the golden grain field, and enjoys healthcare and recreation opportunities only provided to the Military. He wonders, "What if there was some truth to the Capitalist Propaganda?"

#

Nam is always dreamily thinking about life in the South. Master Kim tells the North Korean people that life in the South is no good. However, Nam wonders how life in the South could not be good when so many people try to cross the DMZ to go South. Nam has never heard of anyone risking their life trying to cross to come North.

However, most people do not get past the guards or make it through the land mines. People that do make it to the South will put shame on their Northern families left behind.

These families are then harassed and put under intense surveillance more than usual, and they never get any extra rations.

Nam listens illegally to the forbidden radio station regarding life in the South. He always hears the announcer say, "People in the South are happy, well-fed, well-clothed, and have free public education with good medical care." This potential life in the South seems elusive to Nam but inviting, and he dreams about potentially living a fulfilling life of beautiful possibilities.

Nam thinks he could try to make it across since he still has stamina from extra rations, and he used to be a star soccer player with a good body. Nam realizes that information about the South maybe correct since he heard, on the prohibited radio station, a positive commentary given by a Northern defector who made it across the DMZ.

Unfortunately, Nam believes his dream may never happen since when recently seeing a Doctor after a year wait because of pain, he was told in a voice without pity, "You have a wasting disease called Cancer, and it is inoperable.

Nam asks, "What is this Cancer you speak about?"

The Doctor responds, "The Cancer you have is bone related and has spread throughout your body. There are no medicines in the North for farming people only enough medicine for the people living in Pyongyang because of the American embargo."

This was devastating news for Nam; however, he wanted to make an attempt to cross because to continue living and suffering for a statistical ranking truth was fundamentally not right.

#

After returning from the Doctor, Nam went into the field and tilled the soil while adding fertilizer. Nam speaks to himself when Myung is not around, "I did nothing wrong, and I believe this life I live in this field is not justified. I will bide my time and put my plans in place since I have memorized the soldier's routines and the land mine locations of danger."

Myung walks past and screams angrily, "Nam you are getting slower every day. I will have to write you up once again for poor productivity," Myung knew about Nam's pain but did not care.

#

After a few weeks, Nam has decided to risk his life and cross tonight since today is the North Korean Military Birthday celebration. The guards will be partying and drinking liquor.

Nam thinks to himself, "I am ready and have the map I made of when guards change shifts and how I have seen and marked where the land mines are located on our forbidden zone North side." Nam waits for the night and hears the music and laughter from the guard barracks.

#

Myung, on the other hand, was not interested in the same party year after year with the same people he lived and worked with on this solitary piece of grain field. He walked out of the barracks in the night and saw a shadow of a figure moving toward the mine field. Myung went in and grabbed his weapon and ran out to where he saw the shadow enter the forbidden mine zone.

#

Nam was lucky because it now started to rain since it was the beginning of the rainy season before the intense cold.

There was only a small sliver of a moon, but he had to use his crude map to walk slowly and carefully in the night. He was able to use the small flashlight he used when fixing the farm implements that necessitated light

during darkness. He suddenly heard footsteps behind him and a voice he thought he knew saying stop. The soldier yelled, "Stop whoever is moving, or I will shoot!"

Nam just kept going and hoped for the best. He used the rain to help mask his whereabouts as he gingerly trudged ahead into the forbidden mine zone. Nam found some animal tracks and followed them, always spot checking his crude map until he was beyond the map line of sight he had used. He kept moving gingerly, stepping on animal tracks which seemed to follow a safe trail. Nam saw in front of him a large rodent walking. The rodent kept going South and Nam followed, hoping the soldier who had called to him had stopped and gone back. He went on and on and the rain came down harder and harder. Nam lost sight of the rodent and then lost the ability to follow the animal tracks because the rain was washing them away.

Nam suddenly heard voices in the distance and was elated since they were not voices speaking Korean. They were foreigners, and he thought probably Americans. He started running toward them and thought, "I am going to be free" when he stepped on the "bouncing betty" antipersonnel mine. As soon as he tried to take the next step the mine bounced up on a spring and blew his right foot completely off. He screamed and went into shock as the blood spurted from the severed artery. The American Ground Surveillance Radar Crew came out of their bunker and had a large search light right on the spot where they had placed the land mine. An older American soldier ran up to Nam and started to hastily design a field tourniquet using his belt to try and stop the blood loss. The other younger American soldier had a radio, and he called his South Korean Army bilingual counterpart in the adjacent bunker to come and help interpret what Nam-in between painful cries was saying. The interpreter arrived and the younger American soldier who had called and placed the mine was nervously shaking.

"What is the poor bastard saying?" the older American soldier asked.

The South Korean soldier responded, "He says his name is Nam, and he is a farmer who was escaping the North."

Nam was slowly losing his grip on life, and he started mumbling in Korean.

"What else is he saying since it sounds like the same Korean words over and over?" asked the older American soldier.

The South interpreter says, "It sounds like he is asking if it is true what the announcer says about life in the South?"

Then, Nam was suddenly silent the moment he heard the gruff voice of Myung, "I give up please do not shoot." Myung had followed Nam using Nam's muddy footsteps. Myung had clandestinely listened to the forbidden South Korean radio announcer a few times and decided to take a chance after entering the forbidden zone and seeing Nam walking slowly South during a brief lightning flash. Myung had dropped his weapon before being seen by the enemy soldiers and said, "I am requesting asylum" with his hands up. Nam closed his eyes and exhaled his last breath.



# Honeybee

by Austin Quintero



Donna always loved roller skating. It helped her meet new people and relax when she needed a break from the stress of the chaos that was her home and school life. As she always did on Saturday nights, she put on her denim bell-bottoms and her favorite rainbow-striped camisole. Her look would never be complete without her signature butter yellow skates. Everyone at the rink knew her by those beautiful sunny skates. As she looked in the mirror, she noticed her hair was looking a little flat. It took her a solid 15 minutes of teasing her hair to finally get her afro looking perfect. Diana Ross has some stiff competition. She packs a water, yellow matching platforms, and her lucky hair pick. She switches out her skates for her platforms.

After rushing out of the house, she hops into her 1969 Volkswagen Beetle. It was a gift from her parents on her 16th birthday. Her car was a pale yellow that perfectly showed off her personality. She even had

matching yellow dice hanging from her rear-view mirror. His name was Bert. Bert started up in a gurgling whir and she was off to the rink.

She was greeted by the neon lights and the shimmering disco ball as the night was in full swing. Donna knew all the staff members by name and rose in popularity among the locals as she would never miss a weekend. She was known as "Honeybee." Nobody knew who she really was. She was a completely different person when she entered the rink. She wasn't the shy, quiet girl that her friends and family saw her as. She was electric and had a commanding presence out on the rink. Unfortunately, this particular Saturday was The Couple's Skate. Donna didn't really date, let alone be in a full relationship. She usually sits by herself during the slow songs. Ironically

enough, "Tired of Being Alone" came on. One of her favorites! Too bad she had no one to skate with, or so she thought.

"Care to join me?" His voice, deep and smooth, put Donna into a trance. She looked up at him, curiosity filling up in her amber eyes.

"Yes, I would." Donna says, as he leads her out onto the rink.

Both Donna and her skating partner were together the whole night. They quickly became the center of attention, as they were skating together in the center of the rink.

"What's your name, sunshine?" He asks, needing clues as to who the girl is in front of him.

"Honeybee." Donna says, staring directly into his eyes.

It was as if everything stopped around them. The other skaters didn't matter. The music, lights, and rink didn't matter. He was the only thing she could focus on. He kissed her underneath the shimmering disco ball, taking her chin into his large, soft hand. The lights on the rink came up, signalling the end of the night. She knew this moment couldn't go on for much longer. She had to hang Honeybee up and go back to being plain, shy Donna. Hopefully, she'll see him again at the next Couple's Skate.

####

"Sandra! Sandra! I met the most amazing guy on Saturday!" Donna's eyes are practically bulging out, closing the distance between her eyes and glasses.

"What do you mean? Wasn't Saturday the Couple's Skate?" Sandra asked. She was the only person that knew about her alter ego at the roller rink. She secretly wants to join Donna out on the floor, but she always doubted herself. Donna wanted her to get out there, too.

"He was so beautiful, Sandra. All night, I couldn't take my eyes off of him!" Donna took out her food and began to eat her mother's egg salad sandwich she had packed away for lunch.

"Did you get his name?" Sandra asked, looking to Donna for answers.

"No, I didn't. But I could recognize his face anywhere." Donna stares off into space, drifting into last night's memories.

As she was eating her less than satisfactory lunch, that's when she saw him. Instantly, everything in her mind clicked. She chokes on her sandwich as her eyes widen. "Sandra, we need to go. Now." I pick up my lunch tray and Sandra follows me out of the cafeteria and out to the sports field.

"Donna, what is it? Why did you just freak out?" Sandra asked.

"I figured out who he was. How on earth did I not recognize Evan Peters at the rink?" Donna pushes her glasses up and puts her hands in the pockets of her bell-bottoms as far down as they can go.

"You were with Evan Peters and you didn't even know it? How?" Sandra looks at Donna with a glimmer in her eye.

"It was dark in the roller rink and I had my tinted aviators on. It was hard to see much!" Donna's face begins to turn red.

"You like him, don't you?"

"I do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"Donna, you're impossible!" Sandra laughs.

Evan Peters was the entire school's heartthrob. He was the star player of the football team. Him and Donna have gone to school together ever since the 4th grade, when they were both in Ms. Flanagan's class. Over time, Donna has developed somewhat of a crush on him. There's a reason why he's so popular. His hazel eyes sparkled. His boyish grin and defined facial features made him look just like Andy Gibb.

*There's no way he would go for a girl like me. He knows Honeybee, not plain old Donna. I can only be Honeybee at the rink.* Donna says to herself. Honeybee is Donna's best kept secret.

"Why don't you go talk to him?" Sandra asks.

"Sandra, are you kidding me? What am I supposed to say? *Hi Evan. I'm Honeybee. You know, the one that skated with you over the weekend.* He would never believe me, especially with what I'm wearing." Donna looked down at her outfit, consisting of an orange chevron minidress, matching orange tights, and brown Mary Janes. That's a far distance from the bell-bottomed vixen at the roller rink.

"It's obvious that you like him. Maybe he'll recognize you! You never know until you try." Sandra nudges Donna's shoulder.

"Hopefully, he'll be there this weekend. Would you want to join me?" Donna asks, secretly hoping she says yes.

"I guess. But in return, you have to talk to Evan." Sandra giggled.

"Fine!"

####

The dinner table was quiet as Donna's mother brought out the food. Pasta Primavera and Jello Salad. *Great*, Donna thought. Donna can't stand the sight of Jello, let alone the *texture*.

The tension at the dinner table was obvious. *I guess there was another fight*, Donna sunk down in her chair. Her parents have been fighting recently and the screaming has only gotten louder and more frequent. Both of her parents sat at opposite sides of the dinner table with Donna in the middle.

"How was school, Dee-Dee?" Her mother asked, trying to ease the tension in the room.

"It was fine, Mom." Donna asked, trying to finish her food as fast as possible so she could escape to the safety of her bedroom. Her bedroom was upstairs next to the bathroom. She knew every nook and cranny of her room. It was her only safe haven to escape the yelling at home.

Donna closed the door. Silence filled the house as she sat down on her bed and she started on her homework. Donna is incredibly smart. Even though she feels the pressure from her parents to do well in school, it helps her tune out the rest of the world. The best feature of her room was by far her very own landline! Out of anyone she knew, she was the only person with a telephone directly in her room! Sandra was always super envious every time she came over to Donna's house.

There were only two places that Donna and Honeybee coexisted: her bedroom and Burt, her Beetle. Her bedroom was a project space for Honeybee's outfits. The shimmery golden jumpsuit she was currently working on was hanging in pieces next to her closet. When she comes home from school, the afternoon sunlight strikes the sequins, giving off a disco ball effect in her room. Her closet is split in half: Donna and Honeybee each have sides.

After homework, she calls Sandra.

"Hey, Sandra."

"Donna, did you hear?" Sandra asked, piquing Donna's interest.

"Hear about what?"

"Well, here's the story..."

####

"Do you know what happened over the weekend?" Sandra's classmate, Shirley, asked.

"No...?" Sandra asked, with a look of confusion and intrigue plastered on her face.

"Evan went roller skating after football practice over the weekend."

"And...?"

"He was spotted with a girl!"

"Was he?"

"Yeah! He's been talking about his Honeybee all-" An audible gasp could be heard throughout the classroom.

"Are you okay?" Shirley looked at Sandra, whose eyes were as big as saucers, trying to suppress her urge to say who it *really* was.

"Yeah. Totally cool." Sandra sticks her hands in her lap as her hands begin to sweat. Shirley turned slowly around and faced the messy chalkboard once again.

####

*He's looking for me? He's really looking for me??* Donna's thoughts danced around her head and her cheeks turned red.

"Are you going to tell him?" Sandra pushes once again.

"Donna...?"

"Donna!"

"I don't know if I can do it, Sandra."

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"I already have all the attention on me at the rink. I can't handle that at school."

"Donna, you need to take risks in life! Don't let love slip through your hands. Give him a chance." Sandra's voice became softer. She knew that Donna could be sensitive.

"I'll think about it. Don't forget: You're coming with me Saturday night. It's another Couple's Skate, but we can still skate together." Donna's face lit up.

"Why don't you come over tomorrow night? I can get an outfit started for you."

"Yes please! I would love an outfit from the legendary Honeybee!" Sandra laughed through the phone.

"Alright. After school tomorrow, we'll head to Foxy Fabrics and pick up some stuff. Then, we'll head over to my house to figure out what we want to create for Saturday.

"Okay. Catch you later!" Sandra said.

"Bye!" Donna hung up the phone, loneliness consuming her whole once again.

She immediately grabbed her sketchbook from her bed and began creating Sandra's outfit as the sun set. *This is going to be perfect*, Donna smiled as she sketched.

####

Sandra and Donna are sitting at their corner lunch table, like usual. The center table that all the football players sat at had many of its occupants missing. They were going from table to table, talking to any table with girls sitting down. Evan Peters led the boys around the cafeteria with a glint of determination in his eye. *I'm going to find her. I need to find her.* Evan thought.

Donna's heart began to race and she broke sweat.

"Sandra. Turn around." Sandra's head slowly swivels around slowly and she chokes on her food.

"Donna, you can't keep Honeybee locked away forever. You need to tell him."

"Just give me a second! Geesh!" Donna fixes her mustard yellow turtleneck and wipes her skirt clean of crumbs.

"Hello, ladies," One of Evan's fellow meatheads bent over our table, flexing his vascular arms on the table. Sandra was ogling over him, turning beet red.

"Evan here is looking for his mystery girl from the roller rink last weekend. Were either of you two ladies there?" He asked, looking towards Sandra.

"N-no. I can't skate to save my life. Maybe my friend here could tell you where she was?" Sandra eyes me, telling me to look up at the football team.

Their eyes met. He couldn't take his gaze off of her glistening honey-colored eyes. Her glasses reflected light, giving even more life into Evan's eyes as they shone in her lens' reflection. A loud bell rang throughout the cafeteria, signalling the end of lunch.

"Saved by the bell?" Evan laughed.

"You could say that." Donna smirked, leaving Evan with so many questions. Her hair bounced as she walked with a newfound energy. *Maybe Honeybee was making herself known at school.* Donna had a confidence boost, hoping that Evan would not recognize her. It looks like her overall outfit was able to disguise her for the time being.

Evan saw something in that girl. He's not sure if it was the shimmer in her eye, or her shy demeanor, but he felt a sense of familiarity to her. Who really was Donna?

####

School is over and Donna heads out to the parking lot, with Sandra following behind her.

"You got off too easy." Sandra scoffed.

"I got off? Are you kidding me? I totally bugged out! He probably thinks I'm going bananas!" Donna says as she gets into Bert, burying her head in the steering wheel.

"Would you just sit on it, Donna?" Sandra half-yelled at her.

"I'm scared, Sandra. What if he doesn't accept me for who I am? What if I'm not enough for him?" Donna gets frustrated with herself, hitting her hand on the steering wheel.

"Donna, get a hold of yourself! You are a stone fox. Both you and Honeybee alike are beautiful in different ways. Evan would be a total idiot if he can't see your inner beauty. Donna, I love you and I want to see you be happy. Get your guy, Donna." Sandra hugged Donna as a single tear rolled down Donna's cheek.

"I have to get a hold of myself. We have some shopping to do."

####

"Do you see anything that you like?" Donna asked.

"I'm not sure. What do you think would be the best option for me?" Sandra eyed the different fabrics throughout the store.

"Would you say that you have a set color? Like a signature color you like or one that makes you look good?" Donna eyed her best friend's outfit. "My color is usually yellow. What is your go to?"

"I like red or green. My mother says they make my red hair stand out." Sandra fluffs out her hair. Donna's eyes sette towards the corner of the store where a small shimmer can be seen twinkling against the beige colored wall.

Donna basically drags poor Sandra towards the shimmer. "This is it, Sandra."

The emerald green sequin fabric nearly blinded both the girls. Donna held it up to Sandra just to make sure it would look perfect on her.

"By looking at the dark green on your fair complexion and red hair, you'll look hot out on the rink!" Sandra's cheeks matched her fabric as Donna complimented her.

"Don't you think this is too much?" Sandra asked.

"You've seen what I wear to the rink. Nothing is ever too much for Honeybee to handle." The girls laughed as they approached the checkout counter.

"Let's head back to my place and we can begin on your outfit." Donna said, almost running to the car.

"Do you think that Evan will recognize you?" Sandra pushes as she gets in the car.

"I hope so. I don't want to tell him it's me." Donna starts her car and he springs to life.

"I don't understand why you are worried about him. He should love you for who you are, both Honeybee and Donna." Sandra pries her eyes off the groovy fabric on her lap and at her best friend. Donna was usually the one to give the best pep talks, not Sandra. But Sandra knew she had to be there for her best friend.

"You know what? You're right, Sandra. Let's get home!" Donna smiles.

####

The house was eerily quiet when she opened the door. Mom and Dad probably ate in different rooms. Donna did not have to be at home to know that. She knew that her parents sat down to eat only when she was there. Donna easily saw through her parent's display of fake love. The girls raced up the stairs into Donna's room.

"Wow, you never cease to amaze me!" Sandra looked up at the piece Donna was working on for this weekend. It was a similar idea to what she had planned for Sandra, except instead of emerald green, it was a beautiful golden color. She spent numerous days sprawling the aisles of Foxy Fabrics to find the perfect shade. It complimented her dark complexion and brought out her eyes.

"Well, I'm glad you like it because your outfit will be the same!" Donna's confidence increased as her friend fell in love with her gold jumpsuit.

"I'm so excited!"

"Alright. Set your stuff down so I can get all your measurements." Donna's hands move around the drawer to find her tape measure.

"Did you happen to retain anything from the last time I taught you how to roller skate?" Donna asked, thinking back to the chaos that happened the last time Sandra tried to roller skate. Sandra was sore for a week after falling so many times!

"I try not to think about it." Sandra sucks air in through her teeth, feeling the pain she felt that day.

Silence filled the room, then a burst of laughter erupting from both the girls.

"Don't worry. We'll do better next time. Do you at least still have that pair of skates I gave you?"

"Yes! They are still in my closet. Will white skates look nice with the outfit?" Sandra hasn't taken them out of her closet since she last "skated".

"I think that you'll look stunning." Donna says as she jots down Sandra's measurements.

Silence fills the both of them. Her parent's footsteps can be heard going throughout the house. Donna dashes around the room to gather any of Honeybee's outfits laying around, knowing that her parents would never let her hear the end of it.

The door opens to reveal her parents standing at the door, trying to keep their image of a loving family.

"Hi Sandra! It's so nice to see you again!" My mother hugs Sandra.

"It's nice to see you two, Mrs. Williams." Sandra could feel the awkward tension between my two parents.

"Sandra and I were just about to start homework." Donna says, trying to push her parents away through a conversation

"Well, we'll let you girls get to it." Her mother says as she shuts the door.

"Has anything gotten better between them?" Sandra moves closer to Donna.

"No. If anything, it's gotten worse." Donna looked to Sandra and gave her a hug.

"I'm sorry, Donna. If there was something I could do to help, I would." Sandra and Donna sat down on the bed in silence, just enjoying each other's company.

"I should probably head out. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay. Bye Sandra. I'll see you tomorrow." Donna led Sandra out of the house. Donna was all alone once again.

Donna didn't feel right anymore. Her and Honeybee began to blur together too much for her liking. She knew it had to be done at some point, but she never thought it would be this soon.

####

"I stayed up to make some real progress on our outfits for Saturday." Donna sat at their corner lunch table across from Sandra. The day was Thursday and the weekend was fast approaching. "Would you like to come over for a final fitting? I just have to finish up some of the finer details."

"Totally! I'll come by after school." Sandra smiled.

Things had seemed to calm down a bit since Evan and Honeybee met last week. He's been making his rounds, trying to talk to any of the girls that looked familiar to his Honeybee. Evan has not been able to put a face to the name, so she remains a mystery to the student body. He hasn't made an effort to go back to Donna's table, but he still has it out for his mystery girl. The student body's loud chatter has become a quiet murmur surrounding the topic of both Evan and Honeybee.

"Look at him, Sandra. Isn't he just the most handsome guy you've ever seen?" Donna stared at him with a glazed look of affection. Sandra just rolled her eyes.

"Look, I have to get to the library. I'm drowning in homework and if we are hanging out tonight, I want to get as much done as possible. I'll see you later!" Sandra heads up from the table to throw away her food scraps and takes off for the library.

Donna looked around awkwardly as her best friend dashed out of the lunchroom. Trying to finish her food as fast as possible, Donna makes eye contact with Evan. Her face turns bright red as her mouth is filled with the sandwich she just stuffed into it. *Wow, Donna. Really smooth move there*, Donna's embarrassment was noticed by Evan with a lopsided smile. Donna picks up the rest of her food and shoves it back into her backpack and races out to the back of campus.

Donna was perched underneath her favorite spot-on campus: the large pine tree. She finished the rest of her lunch with only the breeze to keep her company. It was peaceful. No one really came out to this spot-on campus because it's so far away from everything else. Her silence was interrupted when she spotted a certain someone headed towards her.

"Hey!" Evan called out, "Mind if I join you?"

"Are you sure? Aren't all your friends still eating in the cafeteria?" Donna asked, looking up at him.

"Yeah. But, I just wanted to apologize for what happened in the lunchroom. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. You seemed really upset when you ran out." Evan said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"It's fine, really. Thanks for coming out all this way." Donna's eyes closed slightly as she gave Evan a bright smile. Her eyes shimmered and caught Evan off guard. He sat down on the grass next to Donna, getting lost in his own thoughts.

"Do you ever just wish for things to be easy?" Ethan asked, breaking the awkward silence between the two of them.

"What do you mean?" Donna turned to face him.

"Like, when you're falling for someone that you don't even know, don't you just wish that you could just be with them?" Evan asked, eyeing Donna as if he's trying to see right through her.

"Yeah. I totally get what you mean, Evan. It sounds like you're still looking for your girl?" Donna asked, pushing to get answers.

"I haven't been able to get her out of my head. Her hair, her face, her eyes, everything. She's burned into my brain; an itch I can't seem to scratch. Honeybee is my Queen Bee. I am just her loyal servant." Evan said and Donna chuckled nervously. She took a deep breath and made up her mind. It's time.

"Evan, there's something I have to tell you. I-" Donna was cut off by the warning bell, signalling the end of lunch. *Again!? Are you kidding me!?* Diana huffed, once again getting cut off.

"I guess we better head to class." Evan said, dusting off his pants.

"Yeah. See you around." Donna gets up and trudges off to class with a sad slump in her shoulders.

####

Once again, Donna and Sandra were walking out of school together. Evan was trailing behind them. Something from this afternoon has shaken Evan up. His mind keeps drifting back to lunch, seeing the look of embarrassment on Donna's face when she was eating her sandwich, to their shared moment underneath the pine tree. *What was she trying to tell me?* Evan thought to himself.

Donna and Sandra get into Bert and begin to drive away. *A yellow Beetle... Huh.* Evan smiled.

"So did you finish up all your homework?" Donna asked, throwing her stuff on the bench seat behind her.

"All my morning class work is done. I just need to finish math and english." Sandra sighed.

"Let's get that taken care of first, then we'll finish the outfit afterwards." Donna replied.

Donna and Sandra were coming up on a red light, causing Bert to come to a complete stop. With Donna's luck, Evan pulls up next to her in his new Dodge Challenger. *Even his car is hot!* Donna thought.

The girls made eye contact with Evan and just smiled and waved slightly. He smiled back, his eyes burning themselves in Donna's brain. After the light turned, Bert roared to life and sped off ahead of Evan.

"Have you spoken to him at all?" Sandra asked.

"Yeah, actually. It was nice!" Donna recalls her time with Evan and spills all the details with Sandra.

"Again? You were cut off *again?*" Sandra huffed.

"I know. And I finally built myself up to tell him, too!" Donna's hand hit the wheel in frustration.

"Well, at least he'll for sure know on Saturday. But if another time comes up, try to just force it out. You can't keep Honeybee a secret anymore." Sandra said as silence filled the car.

"Okay. I will." Donna says monotonously.

####

With Donna's help, homework was a breeze for Sandra. Donna really wanted to speed things along so she could show Sandra her outfit.

"Okay. Close your eyes." Donna put Sandra's hands over her eyes. She ran over to her closet and pulled out the jumpsuit she'd spent the past few nights working on. It was still missing the belt and hair band, but it was just as Donna had imagined it would be.

"Open!" Sandra's eyes nearly popped out from excitement.

"This is beautiful! What did I do to deserve this!?" Sandra hugged her best friend.

"Try it on!" Donna turned around as Sandra changed. She looked in the mirror and tears threatened to push out of her eyes.

"I-" Sandra is speechless as she has never felt more confident in an outfit. She began to understand why Donna and Honeybee were two different personalities, trapped into one body.

"I love it! I feel so strong and confident!" Sandra declared.

"Do you get it now? Why do you think I like wearing clothes like this? Why Honeybee even exists?" Donna asked, hoping her friend would finally get it.

"Yeah. You have to make me more clothes in the future. You have a gift!" Sandra said, hugging her best friend once again.

"If only my parents could see that." Donna sighed.

"Your parents don't know about any of this? Donna, are you kidding me?" Sandra's eyes grew big.

"They would kill me if they found out about all this. They want me to be at the top of our class and go off to law school. Meanwhile, I just want to make clothes and live my dream of being a fashion designer." Donna said as she stared Sandra down for any alterations that needed to be made.

"Sandra, we aren't going to be in high school forever. Your parents will find out sooner or later. Why don't you just tell them?" Sandra asked.

"I've thought about it, but I don't know. I don't want them to be disappointed in me. I'm the only child they have. Even though their relationship went downhill, I am one of the few positive things to come out of their marriage. I can't let my passions get in the way of my parent's wishes." Donna's said, with her head hanging in shame.

"You have got to stop doubting yourself! Also, the only person who knows what's best for you is you. The only happiness that you should be concerned with is your own. You can't let your parents live vicariously through you like that!" Sandra held Donna's shoulders while she spoke from the heart.

"We'll see. I'll have to tell them when they are both in a good mood." Donna let out the air she had subconsciously held in.

"I'll always be here for you, Donna." Sandra looked at her best friend with so much love and adoration in her eyes.

"Let's get back to the outfit." Donna pivoted. She always hated talking about her parents, "I was thinking that the head band would be made with the same fabric as the jumpsuit and the belt would be a thick, white pleather."

"Yes! By the way, what does your outfit look like?" Sandra asked with a glimmer in her eye.

"My outfit will be almost identical to yours, except the sequin fabric is gold, not emerald green." Donna smiled.

"We are both going to look so good! This'll knock Evan's socks off." Sandra said, giving Donna a high five.

"Let's get to work on finishing these looks!"

####

Donna could not focus at all in class today. Her thoughts seemed to swirl around Evan all day long. She was mentally preparing herself for whatever was to come tomorrow night. She avoided Evan at all costs. After tomorrow, everything will be different.

She quietly pulled into the driveway and saw that both of her parents were home. Donna didn't have to open the door to hear the muffled shouting. They tried to keep their arguments away from their daughter, but they could no longer stand the sight of each other.

"God, Frank, you're such an idiot! I can't believe that I married you! My parents were right. You were only looking for trouble!" My mother yelled.

"If I never knocked you up with Donna, we wouldn't be in this mess!" My father spat back.

"Don't you dare drag our daughter into this, Frank!" My mother closed the gap between both of them.

"Get your finger out of my fa-" My father started to yell as he made eye contact with me. My mother soon followed. Both of them grew very quiet.

Tears welled up in Donna's eyes. "I'm sorry that I was a mistake! Why do you both have to scream like that? Don't you care about your only daughter? Stop throwing me in the middle!"

Her screech bounced around the house and attacked her parents' ears with a violent force. Donna ran up the stairs and into her room, slamming the door. She couldn't even make it to her bed. She collapsed on the floor and cried. Her sobs racked through her body as her mental breakdown manifested itself through her entire being. Donna had known for years now that she was born before her parents were married. Donna was the main reason why they were still together. Their fights have not escalated that far for a couple years, which was the last time she was involved. Donna shook as her body could no longer hold the weight of her tears. She always hated when her parents made her feel unwanted. It broke her. *If my own parents can't fully accept me, will anyone else?* Donna thought as her sobs grew louder.

Donna reached for her phone and called the only person who could help her calm down.

"Hello?"

"Sandra..."

"Is everything alright?" Sandra was immediately concerned.

"My parents..." Donna croaked. Her voice was ragged after her breakdown

"Don't say anything else, just pack your toiletries and come over to my place. My parents would be more than happy to have you over." Sandra said softly over the phone.

"Ok, bye." Donna hung up the phone and grabbed everything she needed to and raced to Sandra's house. She had to get out of here.

After a 10-minute drive through the city, she made it to Sandra's place. Donna's best friend answered the door, and she was immediately wrapped in a hug. Donna couldn't bring herself to cry anymore. She was numb and needed her best friend to be there for her.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that." Sandra mumbled into Donna's ear.

"Thank you for being there for me." Donna murmured back. Sandra brought Donna back into the house, where they sat down to watch *Grease*.

"Do you want any popcorn?" Sandra asked. Donna just nodded her head.

Both girls sat on the couch and watched movies for the rest of the evening, enjoying each other's company. Sandra knew exactly what Donna needed, and that was a night away from home.

####

Donna woke up first. She slept on the couch, while Sandra was on the recliner. She went to the bathroom to freshen up. *Today's the day*, she thought. She took a quick shower. Ever since the drought of 1977 two years ago, Donna made sure to save water where she could. She changed and finished getting ready for the eventful day ahead of her. By the time she was out of the shower, Sandra's mother was downstairs making breakfast for the girls.

"Thank you so much for letting me stay the night on such short notice Mrs. Perkins. I really appreciate it." Donna gave Sandra's mother a hug.

"Anytime, sweetie. You're always such a pleasure to have here." Mrs. Perkins said.

"Do you need any help with anything?" Donna asked.

"Just sit back and relax. Breakfast is almost ready. Is Sandra awake yet?" Mrs. Perkins tries to see if her daughter has gotten up from the couch yet this morning.

"You know how she is, Mrs. Perkins. She can sleep through anything." Donna and Mrs. Perkins laughed, "I'll go and wake her up."

Sandra was awoken by a slight shove from Donna. "Breakfast is ready! Get up sleepyhead!"

Sandra threw a pillow at Donna as a response. As breakfast was getting finished, the girls gathered around the table.

"Mom, Donna and I are going out tonight to the roller rink. Is that okay?" Sandra asked with a pleading look in her eye.

"Of course, dear. Just be careful. I don't want any boys coming home with you." Mrs. Perkins replied.

"Thanks Mom! I'm so excited! Donna made me an outfit and everything!" Sandra's eyes sparkled just thinking about the outfit.

"I still need to finish the accessories. Is it okay if I take Sandra over to my house to get ready early?" Donna inquired, not wanting to intrude on any of her family's plans for the day.

"Go ahead. You guys are going to look so cute tonight! Take lots of pictures for me, okay?" Mrs. Perkins said. The rest of breakfast was filled with conversation about roller skating.

####

Bert pulls up to Donna's house. Both girls get out of the car and quietly make their way into the house. Shutting the door behind them, they both tiptoed up the stairs to avoid Donna's parents. After getting into the safety of Donna's room, Sandra pulls out the emerald green jumpsuit and puts it on as Donna adds the finishing touches.

"Is it too tight? I had to bring it in a little." Donna admits

"It's perfect." Sandra smiled.

"Where is your outfit?" Sandra asked.

"I still have to make sure it looks okay. The neckline looked a bit off when I tried it on yesterday." Donna said.

Donna took out her record player and began to play the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. Both her and Sandra got up and danced around the room. They were so happy. Donna hadn't really felt this way since meeting Evan last week. Both of the girls were just enjoying the moment, forgetting all the stress of the world. They sat in her room and just enjoyed each other's company, talking about nothing in particular.

####

Donna and Sandra were both getting ready for the rink. The sun was low in the sky, meaning that time was running out. Donna was sitting at her vanity, teasing her hair before leaving. She made sure to make her afro stand

out larger than usual. Her makeup tonight matched the gold in her jumpsuit. It shimmered just like she did. She looked up at her reflection in the mirror. She finally felt like herself again. She felt empowered. Nothing could get in Honeybee's way.

"Are you almost ready?" Sandra asked. Her hair was tied up with the head band. Both girls looked at each other. They didn't even recognize each other. They were both stunning. The remaining sunlight peered into her room and reflected off of their jumpsuits, casting an explosion of green and gold to dance across the walls.

"Yes. Did you bring the white go-go boots?" Donna asked.

"Yep! I'll go put them on." Sandra said.

Donna rummaged through Honeybee's closet to find her pair of white go-go boots and her roller skates.

"Okay. Is there anything else we need before we take off?" Donna asked, taking one last look at herself in the mirror.

"Nope! I'm all ready to go." Sandra smiled.

As the girls began to head downstairs, they came to a sudden halt.

"Dee Dee, could you come here for a second?" Her mother called from the kitchen.

Donna's heart began to race. Taking a deep breath, she goes towards the kitchen. *I guess this is how they find out about Honeybee.* Donna thought to herself, mentally preparing for whatever waits on the other side of the door.

"About yesterday, we are so-- What the hell are you wearing?" My father turns towards me.

"It's a jumpsuit I made. Do you like it?" Donna asks quietly.

"I think it looks great on you." Her mother chimed in.

"Take that off. I will not have my daughter walk around looking like that." Her father said with a cold tone in his voice.

"No. I spent a lot of time making it and I think I look good." Donna spoke up.

"I did not raise my daughter to look so cheap!" Her father shouted, "That outfit is showing off way too much. You look easy. Take that slutty thing off now!"

"Dad..."

"Frank, let our daughter live! She deserves to go out and have fun for once!"

"Why? So, she can get busy with a guy at the rink and end up like we did? Absolutely not. Donna, go up to your room and take that disgusting thing off!" Her father made his way towards her.

"Frank, she's only 17! She has a good head on her shoulders! Leave her alone!"

"Shut up!" Donna's father roared and struck his wife across the face. The sound of impact rang throughout the house like a fire alarm. Their fights had never gotten physical like that. Donna's eyes grew wide with fear and anger.

"AHHHHHHHHH I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!" Donna's scream can be heard throughout the house. She ran out of the kitchen and grabbed Sandra's hand and rushed out of the house.

"Donna, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I should've gone in there and pulled you out while I could." Sandra hugged her best friend as the shouting match between Donna's parents raged on inside the house.

"I-I can't do this." Donna sobbed, sounding defeated.

"Donna, if there is anyone out there that needs to have fun, it's you. You work so hard to stay at the top of our class. You have persevered through so much throughout your life and still manage to prosper amidst the chaos. The most popular guy at school has spent the last week looking for you because he has fallen so deep in love with

you. You have grown so much as a person since I first met you. Do you know how much I look up to you? You are so talented in everything that you do. You have been the best gift the universe has given me. I love you so much, Donna." Sandra rubs circles into her back as Donna's breathing begins to even out again.

"Thank you, Sandra. You have no idea how much you mean to me." Donna wipes her eyes.

"Are you ready to go get your guy?" Sandra asked, nudging Donna slightly.

"Let me just get myself fixed up first." Donna says as she begins to pull out her makeup.

After a solid ten minutes of touch-ups, the girls take off for the rink.

"Let's do this." Donna said.

The girls get out of Bert, skates in hand. They enter the rink, and all eyes are on them. Donna looks out over the crowd but doesn't see the one guy she's hoping to see tonight. Meanwhile, Evan is racing to get ready for the rink. He has spent the last twenty minutes perfectly curling his hair away from his face so he would look perfect for tonight. He's been waiting for tonight since last week's Couple Skate. He needed to see her again. Looking at his watch, he needed to leave the house ASAP. He tells his family he'll be out tonight and heads off to the roller rink. Upon arriving at the parking lot, he backs in right next to a yellow VW Beetle. He stared at the car for a moment and his eyes got big. *Is Donna... the one?* He thought.

His mind went back to all the different encounters he had with her over the past week. Her eyes never escaped his mind. Her glistening amber eyes were starting the gears in his brain. He rushed out of the car and ran towards the rink. *It has to be her.* Evan smiled as his body pushed forward. He was running on autopilot. Evan needed his Queen Bee.

Donna and Sandra were having a great time out on the rink. Sandra fell a couple times, but Donna helped her up and got her to roller skate like a pro! The lights went down as Couple's Night was in full swing. The rink's door bursts open. Donna turns towards the opening. Evan was standing there, examining the crowd for any sign of Donna. Then, a spotlight on the dancefloor shines directly on Donna, expelling a cascade of gold across the rink. Her smile begins to fade as she locks eyes with Evan. His jaw drops. The rest of the skaters fade away in a blur. The only ones in the rink were Evan and Donna. Time seems to stop

*~Voulez-vous~*

*~Take it now or leave it~*

*~Now is all we get~*

*~nothing promised, no regrets~*

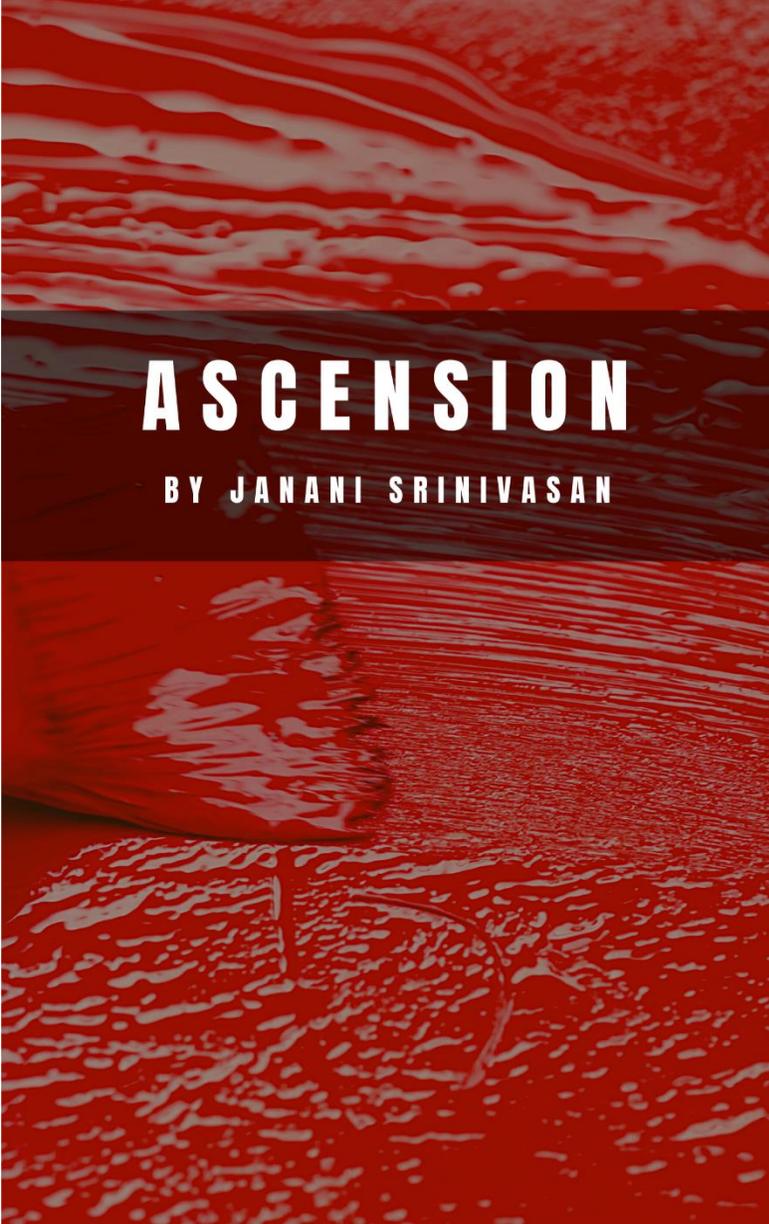
*~Voulez-vous~*

*~Ain't no big decision~*

*~You know what to do~*

*~La question c'est "Voulez-vous?"~*





# ASCENSION

BY JANANI SRINIVASAN

It was almost midnight and it showed. Low murmurs floated across the low-lit chamber, the soft orange glow of flames casting ominous shadows across the dark marbled floor. The blood red glow of the moon illuminated a circular spot in the center of the oval meeting room from the skylight above. Velvet drapes covered the walls, silent hands waiting for the order to draw them back and reveal the maps and drawings hidden behind.

A dozen black-brown wooden chairs, cushioned and adorned with various sigils, circled the chamber, many filled with robed creatures of the night. Hoods and cloaks had been left outside the chamber, the members of the meeting forgoing anonymity amongst those they could trust.

It was almost midnight on the night of the Blood Moon. The first of the two annual nights on which the Order of Higher Bloods gathered to discuss vital affairs of their race. And unfortunately, the first meeting in five hundred years where the seats would not be filled.

From behind a magenta curtain on the far side of the room, a tall and slender vampire approached, gliding

across the floor towards his seat. His appearance quietened the mutters of his siblings in all but flesh. As his robes swept across the floor as he sat on his chair, a quiet trill of anticipation swept the room.

Midnight had arrived. And at last, the meeting could commence.

It was Lord Karius who first spoke, standing elegant and tall. "Greeting my fellow leaders of High Blood."

A low murmur of acknowledgement swept the room, sombered by the lack of one of their members.

Lord Karius continued, a painful grin twisting his lips, exposing smooth white bone, "As you all know Dark Karios, my sibling since birth, is no longer with us. He was slain by beings unknown while travelling through the Silent Forest." Lord Karius raised his hand, sharply twisting his fingers. A tall, thin glass of crimson liquid appeared in his grasp. "Let us drink to their memory in hope that we find their murderers before the next Silent Moon."

Ten other translucent glasses filled with harvested blood were raised, and the thick liquid quickly drained from its confines.

"For those of Our Blood. May their Soul find Glory." A smattering of assent flowed through the room.

A low, rumbling voice huffed, banishing the mood of mourning. "Lord Karius, you have my condolences for your loss."

"Thank you, Esteemed Lord Midnight." Lord Karius, still standing, turned to face the most powerful member of the Order, the vampire who had arrived last, and bowed, "It is assuring to know you have personally invested in finding these murderous fiends." There was a silent, straight faced nod in response as Karius finally sat.

A beat passed, the ten members of the Order waiting for a possible response. When none came, a vampire dressed in multicolored robes stood, gesturing to Karius.

"I do not mean to insult, but I must ask why our Esteemed Lord Midnight himself is joining the hunt of Dark Karios' killers. Surely his focus must be taken by the unusual events at the Library of All. Rumor has it that the raider was in the older sections containing Blood Being events."

Lord Karius narrowed his eyes at Lady Basreth, the vampire who had just spoken, lips twitching to hide the frown as several others of the Order voiced similar concerns. It was Lady Salin who came to his rescue.

"Is Dark Karios' murder not of equal, if not higher, importance as this foolish raider. And as far as we know, Bastoth took care of the raider before they could do any harm. We all know how aggressive that cat is when it comes to its precious books."

"That is true Lady Salin. But Lady Basreth makes a good point. Dark Karios' case should have been easily solved. They passed through the Silent Forest during the most active night of the decade. How do we not know who did it?"

"Dark Gavain, you underestimate the case. There is too much information to parse through. And there are hints of Poltergeist involvement. Tell me that doesn't warrant our full attention!"

"Are you suggesting those lowly psychos are responsible for the death of someone as powerful as Dark Karios?"

"Enough!" The arguing members of the Order fell silent as Midnight stood, dark eyes sweeping across the room.

"Lady Salin speaks truth. There are Poltergeists involved. Both in the murder of our dear sibling Dark Karios and the break-in at the Library of All."

Silence suffocated the room before Dark Robhis spoke up, "But it is said that an upstart Raider simply invaded the Library? Those knowledge hungry creatures do it all the time. Did this loon do it for those pathetic excuses for Blood Beings?"

Lord Midnight sighed heavily, "Unfortunately not. It is rather the contents of the text that the raider saw at the Library of All that involved the Poltergeists. It seems knowledge of the Ascension has leaked."

At that statement, a feeling of doom swept through the members of the Order.

"Are you saying the Poltergeists are trying to prevent the Ascension, Lord Midnight?" Lady Heiden whispered, shocked.

"I wish that were the case dear Heiden. No, it is worse." Lord Midnight stood, robes sashaying behind him as he walked to the center of the room, towards the light streaming down from the Blood Moon.

"The Poltergeists themselves are fated to be involved in the Ascension."

A gasp of incredulity swept across the room. "That cannot be true!" Dark Gavain exclaimed, horror painting their sharp features, "Those unintelligent savages being involved in this holy rite would taint the new Blood Goddess! Lord Midnight, we must take action."

"Indeed we must Dark Gavain." Midnight thrust a hand forward, the billowing sleeves of his robes falling back to reveal dark skin which gleamed something dangerous in the red moonlight, "And I know exactly how to do it."

\*

Lirac peered around the thick branch of the snow tree, hoping its albino bark would conceal her from the Corrupt Creature pacing menacingly in the frosted clearing a few bounds away.

'*What is a Corrupt Blood even doing here?*', she wondered, silently casting a charm to cover her scent with the powdery snow at her feet. As the white flakes fluttered around her milky skin and pearl-shaded dress, Lirac lifted her weight off the snow and erased her footprints in case she needed to run without leaving any tracks. The morbid bloody creatures only hunted Poltergeists, and Lirac would have heard through the grapevine if there had been any wandering around her perpetually snowy forest home.

The dark wine blood of the creature twisted into a canine shape for a moment, before the lines blurred into a mass of red once again. Lirac stared, drinking in the color that pleased her dreams and waking moments, wishing she could touch it, feel it, wanting to throw away her fate as a Snow Elf trapped in an empty canvas of white and paint her world in the blood red she had desired since the first moment she laid witness to the grisly death of Snow Wolf pack's prey.

Shaking her head to escape the potentially deadly daydreams, Lirac focused on the Corrupt Creature- '*Blood Hound*' her mind supplied, recalling its transitory wolf-like shape- at how it had stopped pacing, crouching in a position familiar to the Lirac-who-temps-fate-by-stalking-Wolf-packs. Body close to the ground behind a tree, its vermilion tail stilling, its reappeared snout twitching at an oblivious Flake Faery twittering at a soft patch on the ground.

Within seconds, the pale red blood of the Faery splashed onto the snow, combining with the sanguine paws of the Blood Hound. Lirac gaped in shock. A silent 'why' sped through her mind before her thoughts turned to the Faery's blood on the forest floor. Questions regarding Blood Hounds killing a light creature and taboo actions fled her mind as she scrunched her nose in an attempt to taste the smell of blood wafting through the air.

Lirac had never had the chance to feel the blood of a Snow Faery before, let alone the blood of any light creature that inhabited a forest that despised the color of life because it symbolized death.

As Lirac inhaled once more, a fluttering sounded from a tree nearby. Schooling her face into one of fear, she whipped her head around to meet the eyes of a group of Ice Faeries, who barely noticed her in favor of glaring at the Blood Hound who'd killed one of their cousins.

Lirac almost rolled her eyes. '*Typical Ice Faeries. Lightists, the lot of them.*' Her repeated encounters with them while on her secret adventures cemented her belief that they were the worst of the Snow Faeries who condemned the sight of blood. Even though Lirac knew it was necessary and needed in this world.

Lirac lips nearly split in manic glee. Maybe the Blood Hound would slay them like it did the Flake Faery. She watched, somehow still hidden, as the gaggle of Ice Faeries twittered angrily over to the Blood Hound, tiny icicles forming from thin air and piercing the crimson coat of the Corrupt Creature to no avail. With a snort, it pounced, scattering the group of Faeries who shrieked indignantly. One by one, they were brutally snuffed out, the last of the group flying towards where Lirac hid, screaming in fear.

Lirac's sanguine-seeking mind stuttered to a halt as she realized the foolish Faery was now leading the Blood Hound right towards her. As panic and desire fought for her instincts, she froze in place, mind numb as red coated the hem of her dress.

She barely noticed the prone form of the Ice Faery by her feet, how its dying blood had splattered across the pale fabric and frosted toes. Because by her side, the Blood Hound's terribly beautiful scent of copper and rust twitched with its crimson nose, almost making her swoon. But she couldn't. She couldn't reach out to touch that garnet goodness that she craved. She couldn't move as something within her, something deep as creation itself told her to stay still, to contain her magic as though it would show the world what she could be. And if that happened, she would never get what she longed for.

The Creature of Corrupt Blood that sniffed her side would make sure of it.

A moment that felt like a lifetime passed and Lirac could feel her control slipping. Her desire to plunge into the desecrated swirling wine next to her had long since disappeared as though it would lead to her death. But now she could feel the minute vibrations that shook her bones. Soon, Lirac would move, and the Blood Hound that was still circling her would pounce.

Lirac didn't know what would happen once she was within the confines of its maw. She had a feeling it would be worse than death.

Behind her, the Blood Hound had stopped its movements. Lirac heard a deep growl, and silently gaining some courage (or maybe it was control over what guided her) she sent a silent plea to the powdery snow at her feet, begging for information so she could figure out what to do next.

She didn't expect the howl to disrupt that process. Eyes wide, Lirac swung around, fingers twitching to command snow to form a loose but strong barrier around her upper half, snow hardening to form a tower around her legs and waist.

But the claws of crimson didn't come. The teeth that could sink into her flesh didn't come. Only a splash of viscous vermillion that painted her snowy shield a picture bloody war with her face its surviving soldier. The upper half of her dress was more red than silver, and before her held the answer why.

The Blood Hound, the same foul creature that had spilled the cold blood of the Ice Faeries in front of her eyes, the same impure beast that had stalked her ivory, forest home lay in a growing puddle of blood in between the trees beyond where she stood.

A sanguine gas rose from its body, making Lirac drunk with sudden reappeared pleasure. So lost in the sight of blood from the Hound, she had quickly forgotten her fear of it. Lirac almost didn't notice the black that distorted the monochrome of red and white that surrounded her world. She looked up, trying to school her face back into a semblance of elegance typical of Snow Elf's like her, trying to look like an innocent Elf who was at the wrong place at the wrong time, just trying to defend herself from the vile stench surrounding her.

She didn't need to. Because as the body of the Blood Hound bubbled and boiled and returned to nature, the black blur became clearer. The hunched body covered in coarse fabric and fur, the face made of slits and slips and pointed ears, the clawed and bent legs. And the massive black wings made of transparent membrane decorated with small circles and never-ending swirls tucked into the being's side.

Before Lirac stood a Winged Warlock. A magical being of old with power that rivaled the Immortal Witches. A powerful being that always remained neutral in any worldly conflict. And it was looking right at her.

The crimson coating her features grounded Lirac as her mind sped through her lessons on conduct and manner in the presence of other magical beings. With a twitch, she lowered her barrier of snow, breathing in quick

and lowering her hands to her sides. She placed her right foot forward, bending her knees ever so slightly, eyes lowering respectfully to the snow between the great magic user and herself. She just hoped it wasn't angry enough to kill her too.

The Winged Warlock let out a low rumble, a tone of amusement permeating the air. Lirac let out a breath at the significance of act.

"It seems you know yourself well, young one." The reverberations of the Warlock's voice made Lirac shiver, as she took the cue to look back up at the one who had probably saved her life.

"I-I suppose so?"

The Warlock chuckled, its bat-like head bobbing up and down, taking in Lirac's blood-stained form.

"Indeed. It will serve you well soon enough."

And with that cryptic statement that made Lirac wonder if she wasn't hallucinating with pleasure, the Winged Warlock spread its beautiful carved wings and flapped. The wind kicked up loose particles of snow that made Lirac raise her arms to her face.

The Warlock took to the sky, leaving a sanguine soaked Snow Elf wondering what fate warranted praise from someone so powerful, that the very air stilled in its presence.

\*

The metallic scent of blood mixed with a rotten odor that permeated the large chamber; the smell of decomposition rising up to the rounded dome of the Holding Room. A Corrupt Blood Creator stood on a balcony that ringed the upper levels of rotunda, looking down at the various creatures stalking across the circular arena below. The long and opaque white eye-shields that tapered down into pointed triangles on both sides of their face pulsed with crimson veins as they pushed their non-physical senses to take in the condition of the beasts in the room. Their crimson robes swished on their hips, betraying the bloody ribs and lungs on their chest that beathed an air of dominance over their creations. The eyes that didn't exist behind the thrumming red and white swept over swirling masses of black and red blood that shifted into shapes of hounds and beasts found only in nightmares.

The Blood Controller shifted slightly as they caught sight of their master entering the balcony from a hidden door on the opposite side of the rounded chamber from where they stood. His robes shuddered as his face pinched.

The smell of so many Corrupt Blood was not pleasant to anyone but a Controller, after all. Their master's derision never left his stance as his face flattened into a more socially acceptable expression; at least, socially acceptable for this stage in time, when Poltergeists still lived and roamed the lands. The Controller knew the Higher Bloods' malevolent attitudes towards those psychotic beasts would turn to their kind- the kind those Higher Bloods' created to serve- once their purpose was fulfilled.

'Do not make a mess if you are not willing to clean up.' the Controller thought, 'That was the saying wasn't it?'

As their master made their way around the balcony towards them, his faster than normal pace betraying the apathy he tried to exude to protect himself from the vile odor rising up from below. The Controller nearly snorted. If their master and his kin really thought the smell was the worst part about managing them and their kind, they had no idea what they had actually created.

In an attempt to steer their thoughts away from the secret meeting they had attended last night, they raised a hand, drawing a stream of bubbling hot blood from a giant, twisted rabbit shaped beast below their

position on the balcony. The creature had been infected with pure elf blood a few weeks ago, and had just returned to the Holding Room from the Mixing Chamber. It was still on the watch list, and there was no way the Controller was going to allow any other of their creatures to be rendered useless by a drop of stray pure blood.

Their master approached just as they finished surveying its crimson particles for things that didn't belong. He huffed, eyeing the descending stream of thick puce liquid with a hint of fear barely covered by disgust.

"Controller Sain," he intoned, the false name the Higher Bloods had forced on them leaving his lips like a universal truth. They forced themselves not to react, as impassioned rants of rage mixed with the scent of confusion filled their senses, the dramatic events of the previous night rising to mind.

"Yes, Master?"

"There is word of some of your...siblings gathering for meetings of a rather scandalous nature. Anything you've heard of this blasphemy?"

Below, a few Blood Hounds growled lowly. The Controller tilted their head in the creatures' direction thoughtfully.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

Their master snorted in derision, "Don't get smart with me. You lot were made for one purpose and one purpose alone. To serve us Higher Bloods. Now tell me what you know Sain."

"Nothing much."

"And what is included in this 'nothing much'?"

"An innocent soiree, if I'm not wrong. A little discussion and exchange of Blood and Mixing Techniques. Nothing quite as scandalous as Master makes it out to be."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. These little meet-ups have been going on for quite a while now," the Controller smiled softly, letting a hint of amusement slip into their tone, "Nothing for the higher ups to worry about, certainly. I'm sure an exchange of knowledge would improve our efficiency to their liking."

Their master's eyes narrowed in annoyance, "That is none of your concern."

"Of course, Master."

The smaller Blood Hounds had begun playfully teasing their bigger counterparts. The Controller huffed in amusement, subtly nudging a Tracker Blood Snake out of their rambunctious path. Besides them, their master froze just for a moment.

"I shall leave you to your duties then, Controller Sain. You must have much to prepare for the upcoming Hunt."

"Indeed I do Master. Your concern is, as always, appreciated."

He snorted, "Of course." Turning a little too swiftly, the Controller's master began a fast-paced march to the exit.

The Blood Controller watched their master disappear behind the slowly closing door on the opposite side of the chamber, scanning its sleek dark wood for a moment. Below, the playing hounds stopped, looking up, sensing their creator's hidden wish for freedom. The Controller intoned their head at the Hounds, subtly influencing them to share the same wish, but only for their creator. Never for themselves.

The Controller huffed. The irony was palpable. They were using these creatures of blood much the same way the Higher Bloods were using themselves and their kin. At least the Controller had enough sense to not make their creations sentient.

But it didn't matter. The time for change was coming.

\*

The Library was silent.

Massive wooden shelves of books and tomes and scrolls betrayed not a hint of movement as a pair of shadows moved amongst them, silently squeezing between a pile of fallen quills and a stack of thick grimoires.

A short person who looked to be a dwarf but for their wiry body halted their movements, raising a hand and tilting their head to the side. Their clothes were light and airy, clinging to their body at the various straps and bindings around their wrists, waist and ankles. A thin tan pack was strapped around their chest, its volume hiding the magical Copy Paper and Matcher Quills inside. The tall wire-thin elf behind them stopped, huffing silently, struggling to maintain a façade of patience. He held a scroll with frayed edges that just screamed 'map' in one hand, the other circling around a short dark wooden staff.

Apparently done with their routine check, the Raider twitched their fingers, motioning forward. The pair began their slow crawl around a group of especially thick shelves, reaching a rope ladder that led down into a hole in the ground underneath a low table piled with parchment.

Following the signs of the Raider, the elf moved to one side of the table, gently removing stained pieces of parchment from the overflowing table and placing them beside a short stack of stone tablets. He snapped his head to the resumed rapid signs of the Raider opposite him, quickly translating the silent language. Nodding, he slid his hands under the surface of his side of the table, lifting it up and softly setting it aside.

The Raider looked around once again, raising their hands, cocking their head to one side. A minute passed before they nodded, smirking and gesturing to the rope ladder that would lead to their waiting treasure.

The elf took a deep breath, tucking his staff and map into a hoop on his belt, and began to descend. The rope ladder swayed, the visible fraying light enough to relieve some of his anxiety. As he slowly lowered himself, the darkness of decreased as the width of the tunnel increased.

Focusing on the swaying ladder, the elf pursed his lips, pushing down his excitement. When his bare feet finally touched the ground, he spun around, drinking in the sight of the poorly hidden chamber.

Pinpricks of low light circled around the small round room, illuminating the thin volumes lining the low bookshelves against the walls. Several glass cases atop a cylindrical pillar of stone were scattered around the center of the chamber, a soft glow emanating from within. The elf approached the nearest glass case, peering in to find a cluster of colored gems, each with a foggy cloud twisting within.

A wide grin split his face as he turned excitedly to face his Raider guide. Reaching for his map, he carefully unfurled the scroll, looking at the set of instructions on the bottom right.

'Crimson like Old Blood but with a hint of the Hidden Moon'

Red and Black.

He turned to the Raider, frantically signing. His companions nodded, silently shuffling between cases on the left side of the chamber. The elf wandered between two small glass cases, green eyes piercing as he searched for his mark.

A hardly perceptible tick from the direction of the rope ladder made him freeze, looking towards the Raider. They pointed towards the tunnel they had descended from, a finger moving up to their lips.

Five minutes passed in blessed but nervous silence.

Judging them safe, the Raider nodded, returning their gaze to a large glass case glowing a soft green. The elf let out a breath and stepped towards a particularly small case with purple satin lining its insides.

He froze, almost letting out a gasp.

Because within sat a large round Opal, a bright red cloud pulsing violently beneath a sheen black surface. Reaching out, the elf placed his hands on the cold glass, gently removing it from its stand and placing it on the floor. He smiled triumphantly. After all this time, he was finally here, the proof of all his suspicions right in front of him. He heard the Raider shuffling towards him and ignored his guide, one arm rising towards the red and black Opal in fervor.

And then the world turned white.

And the elf saw- no felt- what came before his time.

*A goddess stood atop a summit of blood. Her simple robes and hair swirled around her, glowing as dark as her eyes.*

***My time will come.***

*The words permeated the air like static, crushing the soul of any who dared come near.*

***When a Poltergeist ignores their calling past their time.***

***When they succumb to what they are meant to be, I will save the one who is worthy.***

***When the one who is worthy fails to slumber for another.***

***I will rise once again.***

***For the love of blood.***

***My time will come.***

*Darkness crept along the white space in which the goddess stood, cracking the world.*

And he- gasped, heaving large breaths as his mind sensed the real world. The red Opal lay on the floor at the elf's feet, glowing softly as though at peace.

The elf giggled hysterically. This was it. This was the answer to everything. All his theories and warnings. Once he took this gem and showed it to the world, no one would brush him aside ever again.

No one would ignore the rise of the cataclysm known as the Blood Goddess. The one who would allow those bloodlings to gain ancient power.

Taking in a shuddering breath, the elf whipped out a piece of enchanted parchment and quill, writing down his message. What was written on the parchment would appear on a hidden tome at the cave he dwelled in. All that was left was to get out of this creepy library of doom.

A large smile splitting his face the elf turned around and froze.

The Raider was on the ground, blood pooling around the bases of various pillars. And above them stood a beast. Its eyes glowing a toxic yellow, maw open to release a low growl, long deadly knives for claws digging into the Raider's back.

Bastoth. The Giant Cat Guardian of the Library of All.

The elf gulped. At least his death wouldn't be in vain.

Seina sighed as she looked around the ballroom from her partially hidden corner. The chamber was chock full of all sorts of beings from different races. Faeries of all kinds, elves, morphs, magicians, warlocks, vampires, dullahan. If you could name it, there was probably one present. Seina could even spot a crow up above, its dark feathers blending into the curtains that hid the servants' walkways near the ceiling.

Pursing her lips, she leaned against the wall. This was the perfect place to teach her new charge the ways of the social world. It would do well to learn them even if her kind were not appreciated at any events. One could never predict when it could come in handy. Like right now, when Seina- a beautiful and powerful Poltergeist- was disguised as a lower vampire, albeit a rather asocial one. Not uncommon amongst her cousin race.

Seina glanced up towards the hidden rafts, wondering if Lirac was paying attention as instructed. Her charge was a breath of fresh air amongst some of her brethren who tried to hide their bloodlust at all costs when around strangers, unwilling to discuss those implications even in private with their sisters. Lirac was more...open to sharing that interest with others. Admittedly, that was only a small step above suppression of desire, but at least she was willing to talk about it.

Seina allowed a little smile to grace her features. Hopefully, this world wouldn't beat her down and break her before she had the chance to grow. Her charge deserved to be free. Lirac had something Seina couldn't put a finger on. But it was something special.

She wouldn't let it be snuffed before it had a chance to shine.

\*

Dark Gavain stood on the balcony leading to their chambers, gazing up at the night sky. It was a Silent Moon, the weakest night for any type of vampire, and wisps of dark clouds stood ominously as feeble guardians of the sky.

Their thoughts turned back to the night of the Blood Moon, that haunting premonition and Midnight's chilling words.

*"We create a new creature of blood. It has been in the works for a while. Now we can finally put these new servants into use. They will track every Poltergeist in existence. And we shall monitor them. So we have control when the Ascension occurs."*

Only the Blood Goddess could create a new race. Anyone lower than her doing so would result in- No one knew. There were no rules in the old texts warning against such a course of action. But Dark Gavain was uneasy. They had only tentatively agreed to this plan of action. The need to control those psychotic beasts overpowered any qualms they held. But as the days passed after the Order met, the unease only grew.

*"We will create a new creature of blood....we have control"*

Dark Gavain hoped it would work. They feared for what would happen if it didn't.

\*

Sain walked into the wide meadow right outside their designated chambers. The Blood Moon hung high and full in the shimmering night sky.

Today was the day.

Sain recalled the words one of their peers had spoken a few weeks ago.

*"The only way to be free is to rid the world of those we are bound to. The Higher Bloods or the Poltergeists. And we do not have the power to go after those who created us. And so the path forward is clear is it not, my fellow brethren?"*

They smiled, walking into the shadow of a nearby tree, face nearly splitting apart when several of their Blood Creatures walked into the clearing from the woods. Their faithful creations. Ready to do Sain's bidding.

But first, they must rename themselves.

*"The first step towards our Rebellion for Freedom is removing the shackles of the names unwillingly given!"*

The Controller raised their hands, an ominous chill coating the clearing, and unconsciously their creatures knew

Sain was no more. But Reindel would step forward to join their siblings in a war for their continued existence.

\*

Lirac stumbled on a broken gravestone, cursing her lack of appropriate footwear. It wasn't like she could choose what to take with her when fleeing her latest hiding place.

Not that a shack next to a graveyard was good for staying out of site. But she had been desperate. And needed a temporary location to take a breath and make a solid plan. Something that had become a luxury ever since her siress' brutal mauling ten years back.

At least Seina had managed to complete Lirac's education. Just when she had hit the young adult equivalent age for Poltergeists. It was a miracle she had survived a decade after.

Choking back a howl of pain, Lirac jumped over another battered and word down grave marker, her bare toes just barely grazing the dark stone. She muttered charms of protection and forgiveness as she stepped over the ground that contained dozens of undead who were probably very angry for having their ceilings being stomped on.

Panting, she glanced back to see the raging bear like Blood Beast that tore through the stone and marble that blocked its path to its prey, uncaring and unaware of the danger that ignorance bred. Lirac swept her hands through the air, sending out a wide range message to any undead being in the cemetery, explaining the situation along with a very flowery apology. Maybe one of the creatures would be curious or mischievous enough to interfere and give her a chance to escape.

As if reading her mind, a raised marble coffin five feet beside Lirac exploded, pieces of black alabaster shredding the air, leaving a thing cut as one streaked past her cheek. And from withing emerged a giant cackling ghost. Its floaty foggy body twisting into a spiral as multiple eyes blown wide surrounded a large mouth with pointy white knives somewhere in the center of its translucent mass.

Still emitting that piercing wail of a laugh, what Lirac quickly identified as a Waking Ghost- an undead being that loved to cause chaos- began swirling even faster, causing a random boulder that appeared out of thin air to whip around the area with no clear goal.

In another bout of good fortune, the boulder smacked into the Blood Bear's snout, throwing it back and making it snort in displeasure. Grinning, Lirac sped towards the edge of the cemetery, vaulting over a low, rusted metal fence and running to the woods beyond.

She didn't look back, casting concealing spells to disguise her tracks. She reached into a pocket within her dark cloak and withdrew a gnarled looking root, rubbing it over any exposed skin she could reach without stopping.

She could get away this time. For now, that was enough.

For now, she could live to see another day.

\*

Lirac glanced at her favorite painting in the mansion that was her most long-lasting safe house and wondered if she could one day roam free like her ancestors once did. When the skies that painted her world's ceiling sang of freedom in gentle blues and fluffy whites. When the dark streets that twisted around her world's feet didn't house the creatures of corrupt blood that hunted her and her kind.

The large mansion she had somehow, mercifully, acquired felt more like a prison than a safe haven. A haven that she shared with a younger cousin sister. The charge of her siress' sister. A half century younger than her. And so, her days and nights spent erasing her scent from the streets around her house lest the creatures of corrupt blood finally find her.

And find her they will.

It wasn't a question of 'if'. It was a question of 'when'.

Perhaps her only solace during these hours of anxiety ridden wakefulness was the painting that reminded her of times past. The white-robed figure that reminded her of a head mother of a coven- demented in appearance but loving in their race's own odd psychotic way- followed by a close-knit group of women. Sometimes Lirac's lips would twist upwards as she recalled the tales her siress whispered to her between lessons of magic and lectures on conduct; of the silent screams emanating from the coven members' lips as they performed their rituals.

How she missed Seina. How she missed roaming free of fear.

How she missed the calm of her centurial slumber.

Sleep was a necessity for Poltergeists. Lirac knew they needed to sleep at least once a century lest their minds wilt and cause unstoppable destruction and horror. She knew other races and beings viewed them as demented soulless psychopaths that killed with reckless abandon because of that sleepless madness.

She didn't hate that prejudice. Seina had told her so, so many times that it had existed for as long as life existed in this world. What she hated the most was that she and her sisters couldn't sleep in fear of being killed. Lirac was lucky enough last century, and the century before that, somehow finding secluded locations to enchant and hide and sleep for a decade. And now, with nearly 300 years of age under her belt, the time for her next centurial sleep was fast-approaching. But she couldn't sleep. Not now.

Not when any slip of her spells and charms could reveal her location to those who hunted mercilessly in the dark.

Not when her older cousin sister depended on her for protection.

And certainly not when Lirac was soon to become an aunt.

She wouldn't sleep. Not even if it drove her mad when she was another half century older.



the

one

by keyan foroodian

\*RINGGG\*. Thank God school is finally over. I've been praying nonstop that Chelcey, the annoying blonde that sits next to me in my statistics class, would stop staring at me, but my glares were never too obvious enough of a symbol to her that I was uncomfortable. She's liked me for so long, at least that's what Aaron's told me, but her company just makes me feel so... so, *empty*. I grab my hipster Bon Jovi themed bag from the floor, toss the one strap over my shoulder with my head down, and make my way to my car. I hear a slight beep in my right ear (the only working one) as it's probably time to change the batteries in the aid but I can't get to that now. Frantically walking, I see my group of friends all with their girlfriends, so I don't even bother to stop by and say "What's up." Aaron notices my strides being unusually long while hurrying to my car to avoid contact, so he decides to yell, "Hey Johnny, come over here would ya?" I pretend I didn't hear him, while my fast walk turns into a light jog. If I ever got pressed by him, I

could just simply tell him my hearing aid went out.

\*RINGGG\*. My phone's ringtone is going off. It's Aaron. I really want to answer, but I just stood him up out in front of the parking lot; there's no way I'd answer now. I tuck my phone into my ripped jeans, pop the trunk to my 2007 Toyota Camry, and reverse as fast as I can. I didn't even get the chance to look behind me, but there she is. Never before in my life have I ever laid eyes on someone as pretty, with those wavy blue eyes and silky-smooth brown hair. Rebecca screams, "Hey! Watch where you're going dipstick!" and aggressively walks to her car parked twelve spots over from mine. I make sure to count how many spots and figure it takes seventeen seconds to walk from my car to hers if I were to ever build the courage to go and talk to her. Just the six seconds of recognition is all it takes for my day to be made, and for me to continue calling myself a hopeless romantic.

Many of my friends look to me as the girl magnet and I never know how to respond. I never want to make things awkward, so I just say "thanks" and brush it off like it never happens. Girls left and right throw themselves at me but I just don't have the same interest as guys like Aaron do, to constantly pursue the prey presented on a silver platter from Cupid. I have a 2-hour commute to get back home since Ma moved in with her new hubby and left pops, so she helps pay for gas money the best she can.

I'm at the home stretch pushing forty-two on the backroads, knowing that the speed limit is twenty-five, but after talking to Rebecca for a record high ten seconds I'm feeling a little bit rebellious. A right turn at the stop sign, going straight at two stoplights, and another right spits me right out to the main road home. I don't even see it until it's too late. At this point, I'm going around forty-six in the same twenty-five zones and the colors of freedom are flashing behind my car, but this is no freedom call. Red, white, and blue are supposed to symbolize the hardiness and valor, the purity and innocence, and the perseverance of justice in this country. It's a completely different story in this circumstance. As I pull over to Dale's house, I see his oldest daughter (a year younger than me) walk out the side gate. She goes to the high school across the street from mine, the all-girls one.

"Oh, boy Johny. What did you get yourself into this time?" is what it looks like she's mumbling across the yard. I can't help but fantasize about how perfect life would be if we were together, but I'm gonna have to let that thought slip my mind as a more pressing issue is about to arise. I preemptively reach in my middle console for my wallet to get my license and squeeze my core really hard as I reach to my glove box to grab my registration. I lower my window and can only expect the worst for the situation I'm in.

\*CLACK\* \*CLACK\* The sound of the officer's boots are louder than I expected. A sudden wave of fear rolled over me as I've never been in this adverse situation, but there's always a first for everything. When I was younger my parents always tried to enforce the modern-day term ACAB (all cops are bad) but I never had any interactions with them, so why assume they're all evil? The cops at my school are nice and the boys and I always mess around with them. Always nod when I walk by, always give a little salute as a joke for their service. Nonstop thoughts are rushing through one ear and out the other until the clacking noise gets closer to my car than anticipated.

"Sir, do you know how fast you were going right there?" the lady police officer asks, while ferociously looking through my car for any probable cause. She immediately calms down after not seeing anything and awaits my response. Her name is J. Orinda, according to this rectangular copper pin on her uniform. It might be rude to think, but a little bit on the overweight side, big thighs, straight brunette hair, and arms bigger than my Pop's. A stance that asserts authority, representing the flashing red, white, and blue that I can still see in my peripherals from my rearview mirrors.

"No officer I didn't even know I was breaking the speed limit." A classic line that I am basically forced to respond with to avoid self-incrimination. As I respond, Dale's daughter walks behind the officer in an attempt to jaywalk and get the attention off of me from the officer, but it is no use. Thanks for trying though.

"Ok, well I caught you going forty-six in a twenty-five zone, ya got any license or registration?" the officer asks while reaching into her back pocket. I get a bit timid as she could be reaching for anything, but I notice it's just a note pad. Is it a notepad? Nope, it's a ticket. She starts writing in my basic details as she takes my license and registration and slowly walks back to her car. While she makes the slow trek back, almost wobbling like a penguin due to her puffy legs, I quickly pull out my phone to text my parents.

\*VROOM\* \*VROOM\* A car is speeding by, pretty much doubling what I did, but the cop has me, and not the other driver. The first thing I see is three missed calls from Chelcey. Why am I not surprised at all? She reaches

out like it's nothing, and I almost respect her courage and persistence for it, but it could not be more overbearing or obvious that I'm not interested at all. She sent a text along with the calls asking if I could help her with the stats homework but now's clearly not the time. Scrolling through my phone with the important seconds before the officer comes by my windows to give me the verdict, I scan to see what else I missed while driving. I see Aaron also decided to call me again, making me today's most popular person. He's probably hung up on the fact that I've been ghosting him recently since I didn't talk to him at school earlier, but it's nothing I can't talk myself out of once I get home.

The sun is starting to set when the lady officer waddles her way back up to my window. I had it only rolled down approximately four inches, so she knocks on the window and does a motion with her hand, signaling for me to roll my window down all the way. At first, I couldn't understand what she was doing but got the message once she did the motion one more time (but a little more aggressively).

"So where were you headed off to?" she asks, prompting for an answer by making another hand motion.

"Well I was driving to a friend's house, and then thought to head home first to tell my parents the good news. I was just recently admitted to UCLA's honor program for computer science!"

She snarks, "Yea doesn't get your head too high and mighty that you're going to a good school, but that is a great accomplishment." There's a slight pause in our dialogue, almost an awkward moment of silence, as I didn't know where to really take this conversation to. After all, I was getting pulled over.

This engagement almost reminds me of how stiff and stale my conversation is with Chelcey. Damn. She lives in my head rent-free, and there's almost nothing I can do about it. I quickly snap out of it as I'm in a current crisis that needs to be handled. The lady officer turns around, but this time with a softer face. She looks at me and grins a little bit, but seconds later the grin slowly fades to a frown.

"I don't want to do this, but I'm obligated to fulfill my duties as an officer. I will be citing you for speeding, going thirty-five in a twenty-five. You are required to go to court on the listed date on the ticket. If you are to..."

I kind of blur the remainder of what she says as it was useless. I'm getting a ticket. There is no sweet-talking my way out of it because the damage is done. Dale's car pulls in as the lady officer is finishing her spiel of what I need to do with this ticket, but as he pulls in, she slows down her words significantly. It almost comes to a point where she was just staring at Dale's car. His hot red Camry pulls up, as Dale busts open the door. His leather boots shine from the setting sun, as a small breeze pushes his hair past his ears (slightly majestic, but I promise I'm not a fanboy) as he slowly approaches us.

"Hey what's going on here?" Dale softly yells from his car while approaching us.

"Mr- Mr. Hockenson! What a pleasant surprise?" the lady officer responds.

"Hope this little man isn't causing too much trouble! What are you guys conversing about?"

Now's probably the best time to add, Mr. Hockenson (who I refer to as Dale) is also my godfather. He was the local sheriff of Windymeere County for almost twenty years and ended his tenure by arresting the most renounce criminal in a fifty-mile radius. He's a key piece of holding this community together, as he tries his best to know everyone in the department, even training the lady officer who has me, hostage, now.

The lady officer is still astonished to see her mentor so casually pulling up while giving a mischievous kid a ticket. She looks at the ticket that she wrote up and then back to me. She crumples up the ticket and places it in her back pocket in a violent manner, looking annoyed with the current situation. After stuttering a few times, the lady officer is finally able to spit out some words.

"I-I pulled over the little guy because hi- his tail lights were out! Haha, such a small inconvenience but had to let him know somehow"! She's almost sweating at this point but we'll pretend we don't see it. It's odd because there aren't many times that officers are in the "wrong" and the detained feel powerful.

"Good, good. He should be free to go on then if you've already told him what's wrong" Mr. Hockenson calmly says while walking over to my car to tap on the back. "Have a good one kid." Mr. Hockenson and the lady officer both slowly drift away to their respective spots and that is the end. I yell out my window one last time to ask if I am free to leave but no response. I start my car, back up, and move up 200 feet to make it home. I don't even realize it but Dale's daughter actually made it to my front door before I did. She's talking to my mom on the porch as my mom welcomes me as I walk up.

"Hey, Johnny! Have you met Darla?" my lovely mother yaps while I still haven't taken my school bag out of my trunk.

"Hey, and, no Mom I haven't, nice to meet ya, Darla." Such a cliché conversation but I guess any communication with a girl is better than none. She approaches me and kisses me on the cheek. I'm stunned.

- -

There is no Darla. This is exactly how it *should've* gone, but it didn't. I was laying on the pavement with 12 bullet holes in my chest imagining how the rest of the day would have gone if I didn't get shot. Every ring, every clack, every vroom flashes back through my mind of what I experienced earlier today, wishing I would be able to hear those noises as I slowly fade away. It's almost as if I could hear my phone ringing in my pocket as Aaron is calling me, the officer's boots clacking while taking shots at me, or Dale's car speeding by in that split second of my life flashing before my eyes. My eyesight is getting blurry, as the six police officers standing around me each got their turn to put a hole in the person of color. No one's helping me, so my time might be up. I don't hear any more sirens. They didn't call an ambulance because I don't look like I can afford the medical bills. They stand around me with power, that they did justice for the service but I'm only a seventeen-year-old boy, can't even call myself a man yet. My mom's gonna wonder what went wrong, so let's now try and remember how it actually happened.

I got pulled over for only going forty-two in a twenty-five zone. I preemptively reached in my middle console to get my license and registration, but both are missing. I'm staying calm though, not much I can do in this situation. The officer bangs on my rolled-up window trying to get it down because I forgot to pull it down before she walked up. I tried to read the officer's badge but I couldn't see it, my contacts fogged up and this never happens. We discussed the current situation, it was all going by so fast and before I knew it I was being asked to go outside my car. The movie in my head is three times speed, and the pause button must be busted.

"Are there any weapons in the car" the officer announces as I snap back into consciousness. I was given maybe four seconds to answer before I'm forced to hear the

"ARE THERE ANY WEAPONS IN THE CAR"! But this time, with a little spit in my ear.

"No sir, there isn't," I'm forced to say, as I see Dale's daughter across the street. I give a little smirk cause I know she's watching me in this tense situation, but this was a right move wrong time approach to get her to like me.

I semi blackout, and before I know it I end up on the ground in handcuffs because they found one of the custom knives that I kept in my trunk. I must have been slammed to the ground as I see my hearing aid 3 ft away from me. My vision blurs, progressively getting worse until one of the last things I can see in my peripherals was Dale running from his car. I'm scared and I don't know what to do. I wiggle around and my ears go numb; I can't

hear anymore. Supposedly in the autopsy, they list that the officers were screaming "Stop resisting, or we will shoot" but I'm not sure what I was resisting? Was I ever resisting?

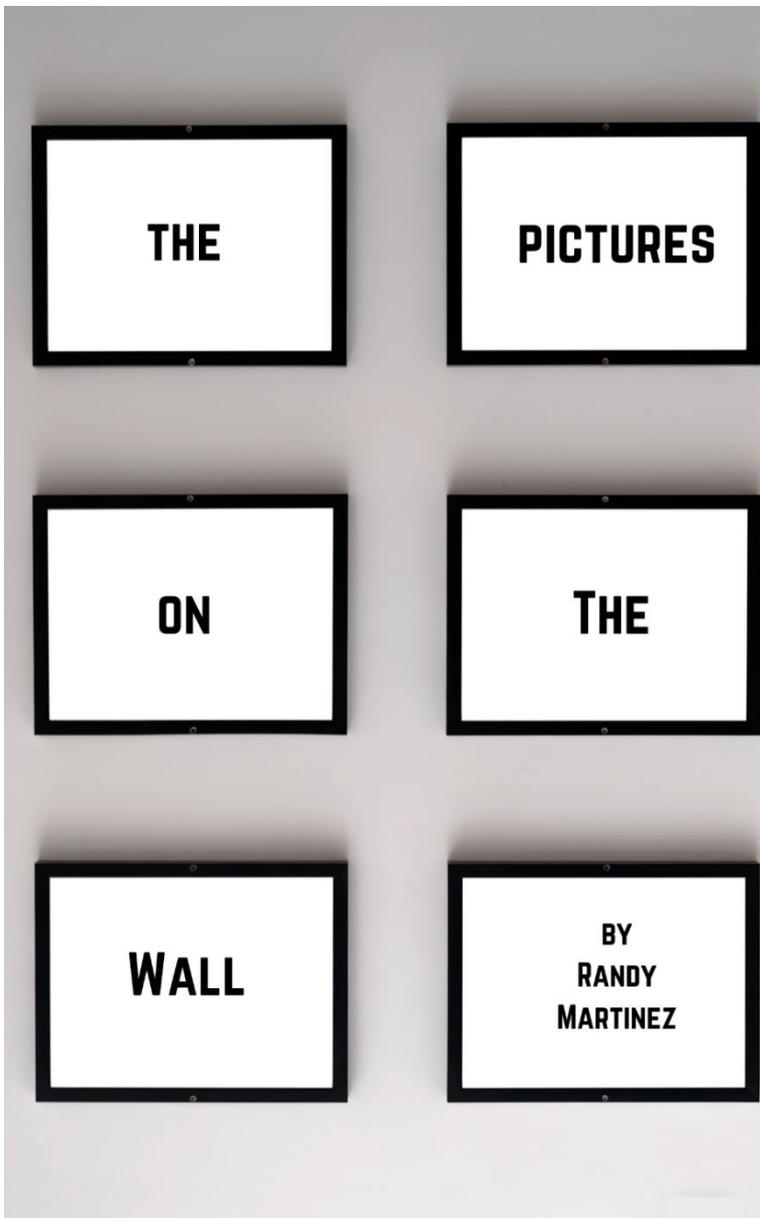
\*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\* \*BANG\*

The last noise I hear before my right ear isn't the only one that becomes numb. I take a long blink and roll on the other side.

\*BANG\* \*BANG\*

Those were for good measure. Also listed in my autopsy report. Rebecca walks into my sight but she's no longer 12 spots over. Her car is parked right next to mine, and the pain disappeared; I'm now complete, having found *the one*.





I awake naturally. The same time I do every day. It's nothing new, nothing unexpected. It is just another dreamless night that gives way into the next day. When I open the curtains I'm greeted by the faint radiation of the city sun. It's cold, but I don't feel any of its effects, I never have. I look back onto the bed where I expect to see your sleeping face, but shake myself into reality. A light slap and splash of cold water to the face quickly anchors me into what is real. I sigh heavily in an almost ritualistic fashion. Déjà vu hugs me like an old friend and reminds me of who I am.

The studio apartment before me is as immaculate as the day before. My effort in its upkeep can be seen as something obsessive, but to me it's an uncompromising necessity. I'm not flashy by any means. All across the walls you can see my art. It's all done by hand, through various mediums ranging from, pencil, paint, oil paints, and watercolors. They can't be taken from here, from me, not like on the Internet. Art isn't respected when it's in the artificial world.

Every morning, I awake to the same

scene, but fuck it, I do what I do every morning. I move on. I get dressed and go through the motions of my average workday. It's time to go forward and put in work for clients that have no understanding of what art is. It's time to deliver the bottom-line message of corporate America. "We care! But not really."

I step out onto the city streets of the early morning. My destination is set and I walk on autopilot. The peak of night has long since passed since I awoke, and the fiends of the night have slipped into the crevices of society. Nevertheless I am aware. I can see the subtle movements of the less fortunate dip and duck out of sight. Their eyes settling upon me bother me less and less as the days go on, but I never let myself forget the dangers that lurk behind those eyes. The familiarity of my face on these city streets offers some protection, but nothing is ever certain. The writing on the wall can be erased and rewritten.

I have learned to expect anything. I can hear the monorail screech to a halt above me and a distant voice announce the destination. Thankfully, I don't have to make a journey to reach my place of work. I see someone

rushing to catch the train. They're desperate and distraught, but I feel nothing for their endeavor. They should have gotten up earlier, it's their own fault. I think this in passing as I near my destination. As I turn the corner, I see the lonely coffee shop come into view. It's one of the few in the city that remains independent. I see it as a safe harbor for people who prefer to remain anonymous. It's quiet, and out of the way of main city streets, the hole in the wall of coffee shops.

My coffee is ready for me within minutes of entering the shop. That's how my day really begins. That's how I come to see you for the first time. Chelsea greets me silently with her usual smile as she's wiping down the counter. Becky, meanwhile, is ready at the register and on the little digital screen it displays my total a firm \$5.15 with an extra 70 cents for the soy milk. It's always worth it. As I'm unfolding my wallet I see on the counter a plastic sign holder displaying a missing poster. I take a moment to consider the girl's face, taking in every detail, absorbing into memory all of her features: her hazel eyes, the curls in her hair that hang down to her jawline, the pale skin, the small nose, and genuine smile. Her name is printed just below the photo, Julie Luxton.

"It's scary to think that someone can just go missing like that," Becky says to me as she holds out my change. Her pudgy round face frowns at the thought, as I struggle to make eye contact with her. She continues, "You always hear about things like foul play and I get scared that it'll happen to me, you know?"

This is one of those moments that I wish another person was behind me in line, I feel rushed to stuff my money into my wallet and move on with my day, but that day isn't today. "Yeah, the world's a crazy place sometimes," I say, hoping for an end to the conversation, but I know that I fucked up by not sending a clear signal. I can't leave open ended sentences with Becky. Her big brown eyes widen so much that I think she's going to explode. I never say more than two words to her on any given day, and today I just opened Pandora's box.

"Seriously! I mean it's a shame that we can't walk to our car without feeling like you'll be abducted! It's just too much nowadays. Like I was walking with my sister the other day and some guy had the nerve to call out 'hey sexy' and we're like 'ew fuck off loser'," she suddenly covers her mouth in horror, "Oh I'm so sorry I really shouldn't curse in front of a customer!"

I see Chelsea shoot her a glare. This isn't the first time, won't be the last, but I don't pay any mind to it. "It's okay Becky, have a good day," I snag my coffee and dip into my corner of the shop. It's the best spot, wide viewing angle, near the bathroom, and close to an easily accessible power outlet. I begin to set up my office while watching Becky trap other regulars into her mindless rants about nothing important. A moment of inspiration strikes me and I retrieve my sketching pencil and a napkin.

Becky's round figure isn't difficult to sketch, what's difficult is her hair. It's a mess of a mountain, put together in a sloppy manner with bobby pins and hair ties as if done by the hands of a child. I go for a caricature look, one of her speaking loudly with one hand in the air and the other on her hip. She's looking up at the ceiling as she speaks, and all the while a faceless customer is standing there holding his money out patiently. I giggle a little as I finish it up.

"Now, that is hilarious," Chelsea catches me by surprise. She's wiping down the tables now and is at the one next to me. "She's something else. We've talked to her a few times about being too casual with customers. Sorry about that."

Chelsea is tall and thin, hair always in a ponytail. She never says much to me, and I'm not sure if it's professional courtesy, being an introvert, or just being a balance to Becky. Her face is serious. Becky once commented on this

out of earshot of Chelsea by saying it is "resting bitch face", but this morning is different. "Thanks, it's okay," I respond. "I've gotten used to her antics."

"That's what I was afraid of," she sighs, "May I see?" She gestures to the napkin and I oblige. I always leave them behind out of habit so she would've seen it at some point and if Becky came across this one she may never speak to me again, which wouldn't be the worst thing. I see a smile form on Chelsea's face and even hear a small chuckle escape her. "Probably your best one yet, a close tie between that and the one you did of that psycho Paul who orders that insane latte."

I laugh, "Yeah that guy really did a number on Becky, what did he say again? Something like 'how hard is it to make a latte you ditz!?!'. What a jerk."

Chelsea stifles another laugh, "Yup a jerk, Becky can be much at times but no one deserves that kind of treatment. Do you mind if I keep this?"

"Be my guest," I say, "if I kept them all I'd have to rent a second apartment for storage."

She doesn't seem surprised at all by this, probably because I've been coming here for a number of years doing the exact same thing, although this is the first time I've spoken more than a few words to Chelsea. "Thanks, let me know if you need anything, or when you're ready for your next coffee." She carefully stows the napkin in her apron pocket and resumes her daily tasks.

I plug myself into my laptop and tune out the world as I set to work. The screen displays a complicated looking program used for digital design. I set my stylus to the tablet and begin to sketch out a design for some random eco-conscious company. It's a mishmash of trees set to the backdrop of some mountain type landscape with a lake reflecting the mountain scenery. I feel myself becoming bored as I near the end of the first draft, and after feeling satisfied that it would appease my client I close the file and open up a personal project.

I look at the clock and see that four hours have passed, which reassures me that I spent enough time on the client's request. The file, titled "Levitation's Brood," is an intricate design of a lime green creature jutting out from a mess of flesh composed of smaller creatures each with jaws of jagged teeth. All about their bodies are hooks embedded in their skin, tagged with numbers, and connected by various chains and ropes. The main creature is tethered by a massive crossbow and is being reeled in by a winch. I get to work adding more details, and playing with the colors. It's a far cry from the work that the corporate clients usually assign to me. As I explore my own interests I feel a sudden change overtake me. The details of my art awaken something dark, something that I expect to take hold, and like the common affliction of addiction I begin to spiral.

I can feel myself slipping into another reality. I can feel my eyes receding up into my skull as my subconscious takes control. All of the darkness, the evil, the nefarious thoughts that invade my being and consume what's necessary to be satiated. After all this time I have given up hope of controlling my unconscious desires. I open a new file, so that it isn't left behind, and I begin to sketch a familiar face. With each stroke of the stylus I feel a ping of guilt, the curls form, the eyes, the lips, but then I stop. My hand suddenly becomes strapped down to the cheap wooden table below my sketching tablet.

The shop is full now, and I'm never more alone than when I'm surrounded by people. It has been flooded by the usual plebes of our society. I note the typical girls engrossed in their phones posting nonsense to social media, the businessmen holding their phones to their mouths exclaiming nothing important, and everything in between usually involving their phones, laptops, and social media.

I see Becky on her break, and her finger motions on her phone indicate the endless scrolling. The light from her device reflects off the oil on her skin, but that never shows up on her photos. I've seen her posts via my work

account. Somehow she found me and friended me, so I see all of the photos. Each one is taken with care, each one is done at a certain angle, with a specific filter, specific light, and a dab of photo shop.

I see a notification pop up on my screen. She has liked another one of my work projects, this one being for a client that runs a composting business. I refuse to look at Becky, because I know she's looking for a response, a morsel of attention. *No thanks*, I almost say aloud. It is a pile of ridiculousness after all. I make my best attempt to not engage with any of them.

After six hours of work and several coffees later, I am feeling fatigued, and thankfully no one approaches me about anything, not that I was expecting them to. Watching all of them offers me some material for what comes next, but it's nothing substantial, just more of the same. I want to slam my fist into the table in frustration. *I need something new, something different*. My subconscious convinces me that I am still dying inside, which is technically true, but not something to focus on.

I consider going home, but there's an itch. The same itch that makes me twitch. I need a new face to sketch, but that undertaking is great, complicated, and needs the perfect candidate. I push aside the urges as best I can and plot out my day. There are things to be done, tasks to complete, lists to check off, etc. But you didn't care about any of that did you?

I take my leave, mulling over my thoughts, and as I leave I hold the door open for what I assume to be another regular, but I am mistaken and wonderfully so, because that is the moment. You stride past me, offering a polite thank you, and I am struck by your presence, entranced by your smell. You walk in the shop and stand in line, but you don't produce a phone. There is no idle screen scrolling through worthless and stolen content. You just stand there, with a resting smile, gently swaying back and forth as if you're listening to music. Your thick curly hair covers your ears, and I find myself wanting to see underneath, to touch your soft looking skin, to sketch what lies beneath.

"Excuse me." A voice snaps me out of my trance, just before I can trace the contours of her face with my eyes. "Can I get through?"

I realize I'm blocking the doorway and offer my halfhearted apologies to the faceless person trying to get in. I return to my spot much to the disappointment to those who covet it, but I have no time for them. I know the routine, they'll call your name when your order is ready. I just have to wait. I need to know. I keep myself busy, or at least appearing to be. In my peripherals I can see Chelsea. I can tell that she is confused by my behavior and I do my best to appear normal. Hopefully she just moves on with her day, only a couple of hours till her shift ends. My laptop is open with nothing on the screen but my desktop. You place your order, I watch you move from the register to the other end of the bar, your walk being elegant, slow, deliberate, your hair bounces with each step.

"Order for Mia!" Chelsea announces your name. "Large green tea latte!"

You walk over with an ever-present grace and, to my dismay, you take it to go. I swiftly pack my things and wait for just a moment as you exit and walk down the street. Distance is key for these sorts of things, but soon enough I'll have the details I need. The streets are cold, with a thick overcast that blankets the city with a perpetual gloom. The winter is harsh and dim, but you seem so unfazed by it all. It's not the ditsy optimism of Becky, a girl who savagely edits every photo she takes of herself. It's unique, it's powerful, and it has me under a spell. I need to see your face, but it's almost impossible... almost.

I know these streets. I know how the city works, how to maneuver through its veins. So I slide into an alley whilst anticipating your route in hopes of heading you off. Hoping for a passing glance unencumbered by the faceless. My feet splash the puddle of the recent rain as I quickly jog through the shadows of the concrete trees. When I

emerge on the other side I jog up to the end of the block where I suspect you will turn the corner. Then you came, walking in long strides with a steamy latte in one hand and a phone up to your ear in the other.

It really didn't take much for me to become captivated by your presence. At times, I think about how it could have been something easily explained. Perhaps it's the crowd I keep, which is to say that it isn't any crowd that pays any mind to me. I attempt to gather the courage to speak to you, the girl who brings the sun, yet of all the words in existence I can't even string a few together to bother you.

As we pass each other I see the parts of the whole. Your face is beauty. Your pale skin contrasts against the red flush of embarrassment on your cheeks as I watch you nearly collide with some featureless pedestrian. They aren't paying any attention to you, which strikes me as impossible. I do my best to subtly about face, and continue to follow you. I watch from a distance in the cold like a lonely, abandoned dog.

When I cross the street I can see your profile as I slide between the cover of the shadows. Fuck, it's intoxicating to see your lips move as you speak on your phone. They're perfect just like the long and tone legs you walk on... on your way to somewhere... it must be on your way home; how stupid can I be? You're in a dress in the cold. You must live nearby! I briefly debate continuing this journey. Then it struck me that I had forgotten what I was doing. I should be home doing something, but my plans just vanish as quickly as the image of your exhaling breath as it succumbs to the cold winter air.

I continue as if your beating heart exists only for me, a gift from God. You should know that I want more, that we want more. It just won't do either of us justice, I mean, I know that you can see what I see, or at least you will. Each step I take mimics your own, street by street, block by block. I need time, planning, to establish your routine, but just as I am about to leave, I see your key enter your front door.

Home. I'm here, standing outside with your garbage, feeling lost without you. Some would say that I don't belong here, but the tea leaves have aligned for us to meet. I can't make this up, it sounds absolutely insane, but so is this world we're living in! You turn in my direction before entering, and I am quick to dip into the artificial light of my phone. My boots crunch into the icy snow as I take pause to feign catching a message, and you are trusting, you are good. I can feel myself longing to ring your doorbell.

I can see us being face to face for the first time. Maybe that's why I ended up here, in front of you. I only hope that you can understand what I am telling you, and that you listen to every word that I speak to you. The first and last words I will ever speak to you. Because they are the only words that can truly explain... exactly how I ended up inside of your house.

"The fire escape window was unlocked. It's often overlooked. I don't blame you. You're still innocent. Pure. So trusting." I answer your question. One that isn't asked. I can see it in the terror in your eyes. Terror that follows confusion.

"Please," you say with trembling voice, "take anything you want, just don't—"

"Hurt you? Mia, how could you? How could you think that I'd do anything to hurt such an immaculate beauty?"

"I have money, I have jewelry, and a laptop. Take it, just please—"

"Stop!" You recoil and I feel guilt. "This isn't about hurting you, Mia. It's so much more than that." I pause awaiting further questioning, but you remain frozen in fear. "It's about immortalizing you. Preserving the perfection that you are."

I see your eyes glance at something and I follow its gaze. Your phone, so close but not close enough. I take it and tuck it in my back pocket for safekeeping. I'm frustrated now, and impatient. My deepest and darkest desires begin to manifest. What little humanity within me screams in sorrow, but I ignore it. Nothing beats the feeling I'm

about to experience, nothing is as satisfying as feeding the insatiable beast that is bound to my soul. I approach you, knowing full well that I am the reason you take your last breath.

Your face is engraved in the contours of my memory. The photo of you gives no justice to your beauty in the latest missing poster and much like the previous one I'm annoyed by whomever chose that photo. It's dated, clearly one of you from years past. A part of me wants to submit my own rendition of who you are...were. It doesn't matter now. I order a green tea latte.

"Well that's different." Becky says. "I never took you for a tea guy!"

"Just thought I'd shake things up." I say quietly.

I pretend to take a call, denying her a chance to pry further, and walk away. When my order is called I am greeted with two drinks.

"I made your usual, but was surprised to see that you ordered something new." Chelsea says. "You can have them both, no sense in letting it go to waste."

"Thanks, sorry for throwing you a curve ball there." I reply.

She nods, and I take that as her accepting the apology. It's going to be a long day so I welcome the extra caffeine. My next project is for a startup company that facilitates book deliveries for local libraries. They asked me to create something that illustrates the joy of receiving a book from the library. I can feel myself sigh as I take up the task, I need the money, but how can I convey such emotion? What is joy really? And how can I display that on someone's face? I think about your face, I remember your smile, but I can't remember your laugh. I never heard it so that makes sense. I never saw you in a true moment of elation, and this thought makes me feel unsettled. I shake it off and tear a sheet of paper from my sketch book. I need a distraction to help me move forward, so I sketch.

I look for inspiration and land on Chelsea. Oddly enough, I haven't sketched her before. She's at the bar making drinks and her focus is admirable. Her movements are fluid and calculated as she references each order carefully and selects ingredients with care. It's almost like watching a machine perfectly calibrated to perform a task. So I sketch. Her features remain the same except for her eyes. They are blank, no pupils, to illustrate a trance. The rest of her arms are a blur, switching between various actions: pouring hot water, scooping coffee grounds, pouring the condensed milk, blending the frappes, etc. All the while, Becky is gabbing in the background with someone who is faceless and staring into their phone. I become entranced in my sketch and the world around me becomes blurry and distant.

"Am I your next victim?" Chelsea's voice rips me from my world in a sudden shock. I am continually impressed with how often she catches me off guard, but this time I am anxious at the question presented.

"Huh, wait, what?" I stammer.

"The drawing," she points. "It's me right?"

"Oh, yeah but not in a bad way. I promise it's a compliment." I hold it out to her as a sign of confidence in what I am saying, feeling a sense of relief. "You're just good at what you do."

She reaches over, takes the sketch, and cracks a small grin of appreciation. "Nice, I think you captured the ambiance of this place."

"Well, yeah, after so many years it's almost like I live here," I nudge the sketch to her, "please, keep it. It feels good knowing that you have it."

I see her blush briefly and quickly attempt to hide this from me. "It's almost like we're roommates or something right? Since you practically live here." She says this in a rushed tone and an uncomfortable silence follows. She breaks this silence by saying, "So I'm leaving early today, if you need a refill or anything just wave my replacement

over, I already told him about our regulars. His name is Charles and he's that goofy looking kid over there," she points at a young man with mismatched clothes and giant red rimmed glasses.

She's already walking away before I can respond, and I find her behavior odd. But I ignore it, and figure that it's just an off day. I feel a bit of frustration because I cannot remember the name of the guy filling in for Chelsea. I see Becky and the guy being chummy with one another. It's difficult to tell which one is more talkative as they're both caught in a stalemate with each talking over the other. Chelsea must be losing her mind having to deal with such useless energy.

Needless to say, I don't stay too long, maybe an hour or so more. Chelsea acts as the perfect buffer to the shenanigans of Becky, and this replacement guy seems to be nothing more than a catalyst to everything I despise. The fact that I can hear their conversation through my headphones is enough to make me want to scream. Luckily it's a slow day for me, and I don't need to work a full day, the perks of freelance work.

I decide to call it a day and pack up my things just before the lunch rush. I slip out of the shop and take my time returning home. All the while I remember bits and pieces of the day I saw you. Much like the many before you. My heart breaks for the countless time. How long have I been doing this? My memory is unreliable, they always say that you remember your first, but that's a load of shit. I struggle to remember her face, the one that you and the others replaced. Time and time again I grasp at the details that have long since faded.

Just as the small feature of your dimpled smile returns to me I find myself standing at my building door. Fuck. Just like that it's gone, this fucking world robs me once again of what I desire. Whatever. I retrieve my keys and enter my home.

It doesn't take long for me to notice that something is off. I shut my door and lock the deadbolt when I see the inner doormat is askew. Never. I would never allow that. I carefully lower my bag to the ground and retrieve my switchblade from my back pocket. My mind races through the possibilities. Is it sprinkler inspection day? Fire alarm inspection day? I cannot generate any reason for someone to be in my home. The lights are on in every room. I step forward cautiously, knowing that there are not many places for someone to hide.

When I enter my bedroom, I am caught off guard. The wall that I hung my college artwork had been emptied and replaced. The wall is now filled with familiar sketches arranged in a grid pattern and varying from napkin drawings to torn notebook paper. They were all of people I had seen in the coffee shop, and even a few from places I had visited. I am dumbfounded and without words. The grip on my knife relaxes as my brain struggles to grip what is happening.

"I didn't think you'd be home so soon," Chelsea's voice comes from the darkness of my unlit bathroom. She walks into the light of my bedroom looking at the wall of my sketches. "I've kept them over the years, like a scrap book. A montage of our city."

I feel violated, and wronged. She has no right! How dare she penetrate my world!? My hands shake in the violent rage I'm all too familiar with. "What the fuck is wrong with you? What's going on here, Chelsea?" My body goes on autopilot and I step to her with the knife in hand.

"Easy now killer!" She produces a snub nose .45 and points it in my direction. I stop my advance. "I'm not your average girl you know."

I stay my hand and attempt to diffuse the situation. "Why are you here? How did you—"

"Fire escape," she says, "you left it unlocked, I made a copy of your key while you were sleeping. As for why, well, that's a little more complicated."

I drop the knife and hold out my hands at either side as a sign of surrender and ask calmly, "What do you want?"

"I don't know, Mordecai," she says. I flinch at the sound of my name, a name I hadn't heard aloud since the early years of me visiting the coffee shop. "I hadn't thought that far ahead yet. You weren't supposed to be here, but I guess I have to expedite my planning now."

"You won't get away with this Chelsea. Whatever you have planned is—"

"Is what? Crazy?" Her grip on the revolver shakes with rage. "Don't play stupid with me, I always knew Mordecai. Don't take me for an idiot."

"Okay, don't be hasty now. What do you know Chelsea?"

"All those missing girls!" She trails off in thought but continues, "I can recall all of their orders, every drink linked to every name, and after each disappearance you would happen to order exactly what they drank! How twisted is that?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about Chelsea, now please lower the gun and let's talk about this?"

"Bullshit! Stop lying! Just be honest with me Mordecai, please, I understand what you're feeling, I know what it's like to feel so alone, too long for something that's real when everything is so fucking fake! I know this because I've followed you, just like with all those girls. I've watched you all these years, and you've never once noticed."

I'm taken aback, and even more confused than I was before. She's not just some lunatic, she's speaking to me on a level that is adjacent to my thinking. I'm cautious as always, but hopeful at the same time. It could be out of self-preservation, but it could also be something else.

"Chelsea, I'm being sincere right now, please understand," I sit down, cross legged with my hands on my ankles, in hopes that she'd loosen her grip on the gun. "I'm sorry for overlooking you, we clearly have so much in common, but I was too blind to see that."

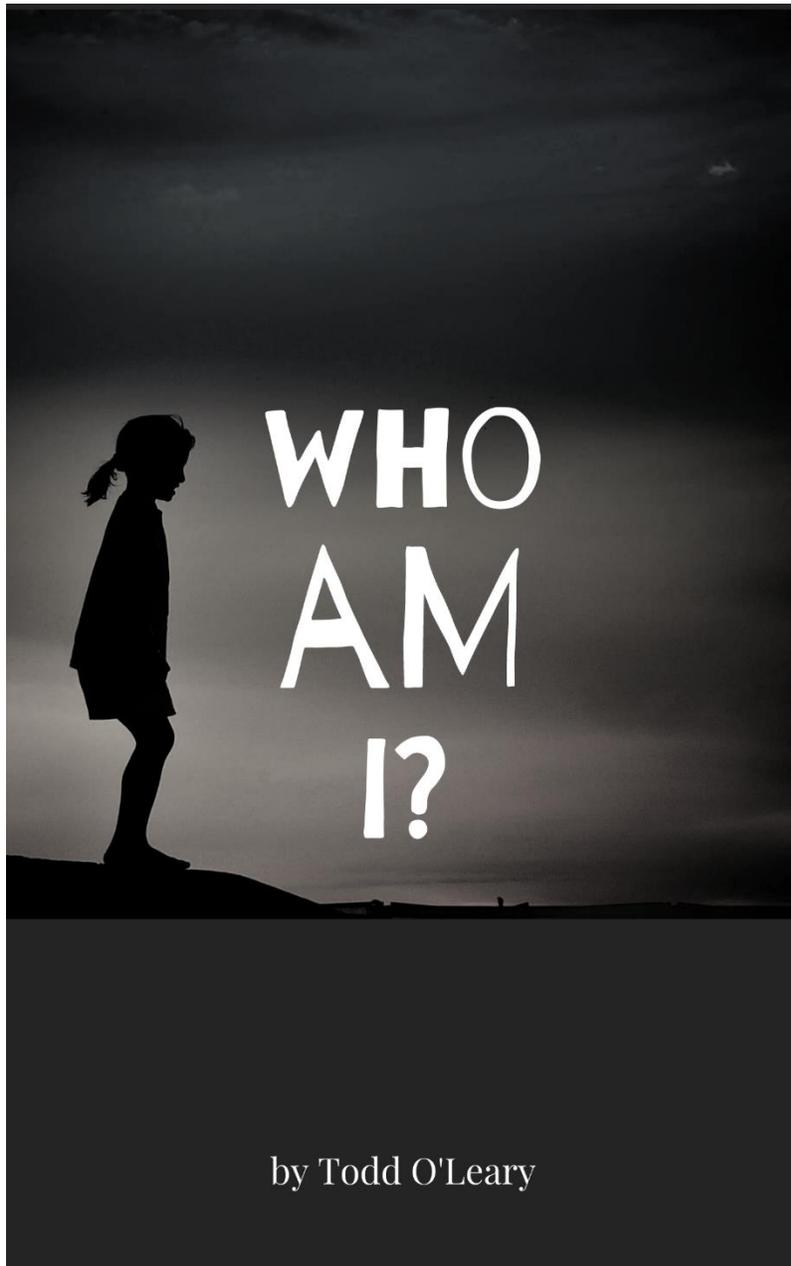
She relaxes slightly and avoids eye contact with me. "How can I trust you when I've watched you lie to yourself and others all these years? Your obsession has become my obsession. I mean, I have been trying to figure you out for such a long time and have wasted years overanalyzing your every move. It's just not—"

"Fair? Yes I know, and understand. I'm sorry you've gone through that and no one gets it more than me, believe me," I slowly rise to my feet and greet her with open arms.

She looks to me with tears in her eyes and lets her guard down as she approaches me. We embrace, and in that moment I stab her with the knife I had hidden in an ankle holster. She coughs up blood over my shoulder as I hold her close, and for a brief moment I feel some regret. This feeling is amplified as a cold foreign sensation enters my neck.

I didn't see it coming, and perhaps, she knew it all along. How can you ever trust a murderer like me? She surprised me though and as we die in each other's arms, we lock eyes from within our slumped bodies. I can feel the denial within me, the narcissist who always believed himself to be above others. This brief moment of self-reflection is confusing and rage inducing. I feel the need to act out violently, but I am helplessly holding onto my neck in a futile attempt at self-preservation. Above us the city is illustrated in my sketches like some story board in the writer's room and it dawns upon me in that moment. With the irony washing over me, in my final moments of life I smile madly at Chelsea who has already expired, with her sketch resting beside her.





I shut off the car and sat quietly with my thoughts. Coach sent me home from practice early because he could tell that my head was somewhere else. It had been for weeks. I knew I had to do say something about it but the unknown of what could come next terrified me.

As I crawled out of my tiny Jetta, locking the steering wheel with my knees, the cold, night desert air sent a shiver from my scalp down my spine. I blew my curly red hair out of my face as I grabbed my backpack and track bag from the trunk and headed towards the house, my stomach starting to fill with snakes.

Slowly, I opened the door and let the screen close behind me.

"Hey sweetheart," Dad said as he glanced over towards my general direction, then gluing his eyes back to the Utah Jazz game. "You gonna close that door?" he said, not realizing that I had already passed him on my way to the kitchen.

"Sorry, I'm heading back out in a second," I said, lying. I spoke quietly enough that he hadn't noticed the tremble in my voice.

"Well, hurry back before you need a snow plow to get you back out there," he laughed.

"Mom in the kitchen?" I asked, ignoring his ridiculous attempt at a joke.

"Yes," he said as he turned towards me, his serious face starting to crack. "She's making her meatloaf. Have mercy on us!" he hollered.

"Oh, shut up you," my mom called out giggling from the kitchen. "How was practice Jamie?" She asked as I walked into the dining room table and put my backpack down. "How's your ankle? You took that pretty nasty fall at the meet last weekend," she said, continuing to prep the salad.

"It was alright," I said softly, my hands starting to shake. If either one of them had bothered looking over at me they could tell that something was conflicting me and ask what was wrong. Should I just blurt out what's been on my mind? How will they even react to it anyway?

Before I knew it, my entire body was twitching. I felt like I had to stop hiding all of the skeletons in my closet and the words spilled out of my mouth, causing my mother to screech in shock as she dropped the plate of meatloaf she had just pulled out of the oven.

All of the commotion got my dad out of his chair as he walked into to the dining room. "It's okay honey, did you burn it again? We can always just order a pizza instead," he joked, trying to ease the tension that to him purely came from their home cooked meal splattered across the floor. He thought that it was pretty funny, but my mother wasn't having any of it.

"Did you hear what your daughter, Jamie, just asked?" she said angrily, her eyes wide as if she were trying to look through him. "Jamie, why don't you repeat your question to your father, then we'll see how funny he thinks it is.

My dad looked over at me, the smile now wiped off of his face. "Jamie," he said in a worried, somber tone, "what did you ask your mother?"

I looked down, scared to say it out loud again. I could feel my mother's eyes burning a hole in the side of my head as she waited for me to answer dad.

"Will I get in trouble," I asked, my body still shaking. My dad slowly put his arm around me and sat me down at the kitchen counter.

"No sweetie, we won't be mad at you," he said, trying to reassure me. *Were mad and trouble really the same thing*, I thought to myself. I looked up at my mother, standing in clumps of meatloaf and shards of glass scattered all around the kitchen floor, still fuming with anger.

I looked back at my dad, who still had a concerned look on his face. "Can you tell me about my real parents?"

I waited anxiously looking at my father for an answer. His face was now white and pale. He looked over at my mother, then back at me.

"Jamie," he choked out before clearing his breath. "What do you mean *real parents*?"

I sat there, wondering what I should say next. Do I spill out everything that I know? Would it drive my mother even more crazy. She didn't even know about my first boyfriend because to her I was and still am too young to date.

"Well," I said glancing back and forth between my mother and my father, "I know that you are my adopted parents, but I want to know about my birth parents. The ones that were in the paper for doing experiments on me as a child," I said nervously. "Are they my parents?"

There was a moment of silence. My father was trying to gather everything that was just said as well as process what he was going to say next. My mother exploded, "Who the hell told you about those people? They are not your parents. We are!"

"Now Rose, honey, calm down now," my father said as he reached his arms out and walked towards her, trying to calm her down.

"No, those people did nothing but horrible, horrible things to you. They tried to make you more than just the kid that you were with all of those experiments," she cried out before sobbing into my father's shoulder.

"There, there, sweetie," said my father as he did his best to try and console her. He turned over and looked at me. "Why don't you head upstairs. We'll talk about this another time."

"I still have more questions though," I said.

"Jamie, please," he said directing his eyes to my sobbing mother before nodding his head towards the stairs, "Head up to your room."

Reluctantly, I got up from the kitchen counter and marched upstairs into my bedroom and plopped onto my mattress. As I laid on my bed, I thought of all of the questions that I had finally gotten answers to. Those people were my real parents, and the experiments really did happen. At the same time, I still had so many questions left, like how something this enormous was this hidden from me for so long?

As all of these questions and ideas ran through my head, one thing that became clear to me was I wasn't going to find any more answers here. Quietly, I went into my closet and stuffed my backpack with as many clothes I could before tossing it out my front window onto the lawn. Then, I stepped up onto the window sill and glided down to the lawn effortlessly.

When I landed, I grabbed my bag and hopped into my car. As I drove off, I know that there was only one place that I could go if I wanted to get more answers: my birth mother, Kate Hutchinson's house.

While driving down the highway, I started to feel guilty about how I had told my mother and father about my real parents. I had known for weeks already, but didn't want to say it without knowing enough and let them make a fool of myself. Was it better startling them like I had though?

As my thoughts jumped back and forth through my head, my heart stopped when my phone started ringing though the car. I looked over at the clock on the dashboard in front of me before looking to see who called. It was only 6:15 p.m. My mother shouldn't be going for her walk for a couple more hours and wouldn't notice my missing my car yet. My father may have taken out the trash or stepped out for a joint.

I peeked over at my phone after it had rung a few times and breathed a sigh of relief to see that it was only my friend Stacey from track. She tried to wave me down after coach sent me home, but I didn't let her catch up.

"Hey Stace, what's going on?" I tried to ask in a normal voice but she could hear right through the awful tremble that I was having from anxiety.

"Hey, I saw that Coach Yorton had you leave practice earlier. Wait, is everything ok? You sound kinda funny. Are you driving right now?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice starting to soothe out, "I told Eric and Rose about the Hutchinsons."

I could feel Stacey processing what I had just told her. She was the one that showed me the newspaper in the first place. *'You look just like her'* she had said as she pulled it out of her backpack during our lunch break. The woman had curly red hair and bright green eyes. She seemed to tower over everything in the photo except her husband, who made her look like a mouse to a bear.

After a few more moments, Stacy finally broke out into a burst of questions. "So then, where are you going? I mean, it's obviously not home right? Or whatever you want to call it now. I'm sure you could stay here, I could go talk to my mom." Although she was trying to seem encouraging, it was clear that Stacy was uneasy with the suddenness of this news. "I mean, are you sure that we are even right about it?" she asked nervously.

"They didn't tell me that I wasn't. Besides, it doesn't matter," I said both assuring her and trying to reassure myself from her doubt. "You've seen the Hutchinsons. An artist couldn't do a better job putting their faces together than me. We've read all of the stories and matched up the timelines to when I was taken away from them and

brought to Las Vegas for adoption. Also, their freakish heights are in perfect resemblance to mine." I was practically yelling in the car at that point. "It's a match made in heaven, Stace!"

"I know that, but there's still a lot more to find out," Stacy said with optimism and worry in her voice. She didn't want me to get carried away with this and go too far.

"I know, and that's where I'm going."

"Wait, where?"

"To find answers. I'm going to talk to my mom, Kate Hutchinson.

There was another long and drawn-out silence on the phone. Through the silence, I could hear Stacy's head trying to wrap around the words I just said. *Talk to her mom? How is she going to do that?*

"Do you even know where she would be?" Stacy said in an almost rude, sarcastic voice, like she didn't approve of what was happening but knew there was nothing that she could do about it.

"She was released last year and is living in Mesquite, only an hour outside Vegas. Apparently, she confessed and spoke in court to get a reduced sentence. Fred got the needle for it."

"Jesus, Jamie. Why don't you be more morbid about your new parents?" Stacy said with disgust. "What are you gonna do if she turns you away?" Stacey asked with a harsh tone that might've come from what she said before, but it still made me upset.

"Do you not believe in me? In any of this?" I said with anger.

"I didn't say that, but there's still a lot of missing information that we need. We can't just go on looks and the time of your adoption. Plus, Rose and Eric really might not know the names of your real parents." Stacy said. She tried to sound sincere with her words, but they only hurt me more.

"I gotta go, I'm getting off the exit and I'll be at her house any minute. Bye," I said and hung up the phone before she could say anything else. I felt betrayed by one of the only other people that I thought knew the truth.

As I pulled off the highway, I made a right turn and followed the signs to the motor home park. When I pulled up to the site, I could see people laying in sleeping bags and tents rather than in RVs. The smell of booze and the burning of fire made me scared to get out of my car.

I drove to the back and parked in front of the small motor home. It was the same motor home that Kate and her husband were pictured in front of on the newspaper cover that I had seen of them sixteen years ago. It hadn't changed besides the old bright blue paint that was forty years out of style and chipped at.

As I slowly crawled out of the car, my stomach started to fill with snakes again. Before I knew it, I walked up to the porch and knocked on her door, not knowing what I should say. Blurting things out hadn't gone too well for me up until that point. *Plus, she may not exactly be the safest person to know who I am*, I chuckled to myself to try and ease my tensions as I could see the doorknob turn.

When she opened the door and showed her face, I was taken aback. It had seemed like the smell of booze that lingered in the park came from her small little motor home. Her eyes were barely open and her slouch made her much shorter than she actually was, although she still looked tall. In her hands there was a clear bottle she held almost like a baby.

Before I could muster up the courage to say any words, she blurted out "One of you again?"

I looked around dazed for a couple of seconds. Did she recognize me somehow already? Were there any surprise siblings waiting inside?

"One of *me*?" I asked, pointing a finger at myself, confused.

"Yeah, you. FBI. DIA. CHS," she slurred as she took a gulp out of her bottle, scrunching her face and wincing at the taste, before drunkenly continuing on. "Whatever you are, the one that checks in on me about my daughter. It's alright, she's dead. I already was told."

I sat there speechless. My hands started to shake once again. I didn't know what to say. Luckily, Kate started back up before I could think of something.

"So, what do y'all want now? Here to ask if she's still around, cause she's not," she repeated again. "You tell me every time. Ask if I've seen her, get my hopes up that she still might be out there, then tell me I can never see her anyways before you go. So, she's dead," Kate shrugged as she started chugging down half of the bottle in her hands.

"Whoa easy there," I said as I tilted the bottom of the bottle back towards the ground where it belonged. Not the first words I expected to say to my real mom, or the first thing I would've done for her.

"So," she said before burping in my face, "who are you with again anyway?" she asked as she leaned her whole body against the doorway.

"CIA," I lied. "I'm sorry but we still have a few more questions about your daughter, then I promise not to waste your time anymore."

"Alright, well, I guess we gotta get this over with," she said regressed with her head down. Her eyes looked up at me after a few silent moments, "C'mon in, we'll get it over with," she said as she swished the bottle one last time before walking back into the motor home.

As I walked inside, I realized that the smell of booze was indeed not just her breath. The stench made my eyes water the way my mother's would when she cut up onions for dinner. I sat down across from her chair on the couch that was covered in what I could only hope was clean laundry.

"So, what else do you need to know about her," Kate said begrudgingly.

"Well," I said nervously as I tried to adjust myself into a spot where I couldn't feel the buttons on her shirts and jeans, "just to confirm, you are Kate Hutchinson, Jamie's mother?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm her mother, the wife who let her husband do experiments on their girl, blah, blah, blah," she gestured a mouth with one hand as she went back to drinking her bottle with the other.

"Yes," I said as I could feel butterflies in my stomach again, but this time from excitement. "And what were those experiment's effect on the child?" I asked as I leaned closer towards her, early awaiting for her answer.

"Nothing," Kate said.

"Wait, *what?*" I said shocked.

"Nothing," she said again as her voice and face almost felt sober. "I turned my husband in before he could ever test anything that he did to our daughter. They killed him in the chair before he ever told anyone what he ever did to her," she said as she lifted the last of the bottle up to her lips again with a tear falling down her face.

"It looks like I need another one of these," she said after sucking air out of the bottle for a moment then getting up to get another one. I sat on the couch with my jaw dropped to the floor. I didn't know what else that I could say. I popped up and turned towards her in the kitchen, where she was now transitioning from hard liquor to beer.

"So, you don't know anything about the experiment or was might've happened to her?" I asked with sorrow in my voice, though she probably didn't notice it as she cracked her beer.

"No, this is what I've already told you. I thought you would say something about seeing her again. This was a waste of time," she said waved me off. "Why don't you go back to wherever you came from if you're gonna ask me these old questions."

"Wait, didn't you say that she was dead?" I asked.

"I don't know. That's just what I tell myself. One of you suits come every now and then to make sure she hasn't come looking for me, or me her. I haven't, and if she is alive then I know that you people will take her and do worse things than my husbanded to her, so I just pretend that she's dead now," she said as she lifted her drink as if to cheers me. "Oh, would you like a drink too?"

"No, thanks. I'm too young," I said without thinking. My eyes widened as the words came out of my mouth while a look of concern came over her face.

"Not old enough to drink but in the FBI? This training for you or something?" she asked with a dazed and confused look on her face.

"Yeah," I said nervously ask looked up at the ceiling.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. "Kate Hutchinson. Agent Morris, FBI. I have a couple more questions for you about your daughter," the agent shouted through the door.

Before I could think of anything, Kate shouted back "I'm already talking to one of you suits, I'll let you in in a minute," then looked back over at me. "I knew you weren't one of them, you got jeans on. Who are you and what are you doing here before I let that woman in here to deal with you?"

My hand started to shake as the words poured out of me, "I'm your daughter, Jamie Hutchinson." I didn't know how my mom was going to react to the news. Was she going to throw me to the FBI agent that was standing outside? Would she tell me to get lost and never see her again?

I looked over at my mom, her face looking sober once again. "You need to go out the back. She can't see you or she will take you. If you can run, Jamie, run. If you can fight, fight. And if you *can* fly, then fly far, far away from here," she said as she gestured towards the back of the trailer. I locked eyes with her for a moment as another tear fell down her face. "It was good to finally see you again."

I turned and headed towards the back of the trailer, I could hear my mom open the front door for Agent Morris.

"Where's the other agent, Mrs. Hutchinson?" Agent Morris asked with a concerned tone.

"I didn't say anything about an agent," my mom said to her, once again picking up her drunken slur. "I said I had a suit in here," she said trying to lie her way out of it as I closed her back door and rushed back to my car.

When I started to pull away from the old motor home, I could see Agent Morris turn back and point towards my car, as if to ask who I was and what I was doing around. She started gesturing, asking to stop, but I knew that if my mom was telling me the truth I couldn't. Instead, I slammed on the gas and pulled out of the trailer park before jumping on the first road I could find to get me out of there.

As I drove, the road got more and more narrow until there was only one lane on each side of the road. It was too dark for her to see anything that was out in front of my headlights but I felt like Agent Morris wasn't going to be following me down this road. *She probably didn't think twice about me after I drove away.*

Then, I started to think about the conversation that I had with my mom. I trusted her when she said that I should run, but why did she say fly? Why would Agent Morris take me in if she found me?

All of a sudden, I could see a light shine on my car from above. It was a helicopter flying above the trees with sirens flashing on it.

Panicked, I slammed on the gas and drove faster until I was out of the light for a second, before pulling over and jumping out of my car. I ran into the rows of trees and found myself at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the narrow Colorado river a mile below.

As I looked down at the jump, I could hear the whir of the helicopter scattering to find either me or my car. I started to think about what my mom told me again. *Was she telling the truth? Do I really have the choice of finding out?*

I could hear barking and shouting from behind me. They must've found my car and were now looking around for me. The helicopter zoomed back and forth along the bottom of the canyon. I knew that I had to make a decision. I started to creep towards the edge before a brisk blow of wind forced me back. I pushed out a screech and a tear fell from my face.

I turned around and saw flashlights shining from the tree line as people started to point me out, yelling "Over there, by the cliff, we've got her." The dogs pulled them, charging towards me. I looked back down the cliff and stepped towards the edge once again.

"Wait," shouted a distinct voice behind me. I turned around and saw Agent Morris standing in between me and the agents with lights shining at the both of us.

"Don't you want to see what you're capable of? Sure, you might be able to survive this, but what if you could do more," she said as she walked towards me on the edge, reaching out her hand for me to grab. "You still don't know the full answer." Her face was dark from all of the lights flashing behind her, the whirring of the helicopter blowing the wind in both of our faces.

"What are you going to do to me? Torture me like my father did to me before my mom did anything about it?" I screamed back as I started to inch away from the ledge of the cliff and towards her. I felt just as hesitant to go with her as I did to jump.

I was in reaching distance of her when I could finally see her face through all of the lights behind her. "I can promise you that I won't be the one torturing you," she said as she lightly smiled and gestured her hand out towards me once again. I started to reach back but hesitated when I heard the words come out of her mouth. Then, without thinking for another second, I turned and ran off of the cliff.

I flew through the air towards the ground as I could hear Agent Morris screech in anger. I turned my face back towards the cliff and saw the lights shining over the edge, but none following me off. I never felt more free for the first few moments. At any second, I thought that I could change my trajectory like a plane and take off towards the sky. It seemed like in a moment I could turn and glide along the bottom of the canyon like a bird soaring above the water.

When the ground inevitably got closer, I tried to thrust myself forward to take off away, but I continued to fall. My eyes started to water as my whole body shivered. I tried to reach my arms up toward the sky to give myself a general sense of direction, but it didn't work. I started to scream thinking that my voice would be able to initiate me into launch, but it seemed like the louder my voice was the faster I went. *Could I really do this?*





# Full Color

by **Tristan Villasenor Ray**

"Come on, just let go! You'll love it—trust me!" Sven's voice echoed from below, reverberating off the cliffside before inevitably being drowned out by the steady roar of water crashing into the crystalline pool below.

"Oh, to hell with this!" cried Nira, as she relinquished her grip from the safety of the entangled tree roots some thirty feet high up the rock face.

The sensation of her feet leaving contact with the wet rock. The sound of his cheer. One last glimpse of his chiseled physique, dark tan skin, messy auburn hair, and gleam of his smile before fixing her eyes on the nearing blue surface of the water. A rush of wind billowing up all around her. Long, midnight locks asunder. A deep breath. The thrill of anticipation. Impact. Cold, engulfing waves surging up around her. Complete immersion. The muffled, boisterous laugh of her lover above sent a tingling warmth

coursing through her.

The sudden, stark touch of a bitter cold hand on her shoulder brought her jolting back, as reality came roaring into view as quickly as the pool's water had engulfed her that bright summer afternoon several weeks prior. She started to her feet and whirled 'round, meeting her handmaid Zelda's eyes with a tempestuous glare before catching herself—anger quickly subsiding to guilt.

"I'm sorry, my lady! It was not my intention to startle you-- It's your father. He's on his way and he's hell-bent on 'making a woman of you yet,' as he puts it," stammered Zelda, with her hands withdrawn and her gaze upon her feet.

"No! No, my precious little pet. You needn't be sorry-- I am," Nira quickly replied, coming to her senses and embracing the short, golden-blond young woman. "You know me. I was just.. elsewhere."

In a matter of minutes, Zelda had snuck away and Nira's father, accompanied by a handful of other servants, already had her trying on a myriad of dresses and gowns.

"And what of this one, my hertis rote?" inquired Gausfel, almost wringing his hands as the servants brought forth and displayed yet another of the seemingly unending assortment of dresses that he had bid them to find for the young mistress--so that she may yet find her place among the proper social circles of high society.

"It doesn't make any difference what I wear," Nira replied without giving the long satin red dress the privilege of her gaze. She was too busy dusting off her old arrowheads, since the last of her most recent hunts had consumed her final stock. The pointy, labored ores had gradually bewitched her attention since she was just a little girl, unattended by any servant nor her own father, leaving her all too busy to care or worry after her sickly mother.

"It does indeed matter, my dear. How could anyone but yourself know what is more comfortable to wear?"

"That is a naive question, Father. They are all unbearable just the same. It is like asking a prisoner to which torture they are willing to be submitted next."

"Darling dearest, do you remember the great Balls we would have back in the day?"

Your mother's favorite was a dress precisely like this one; as it happens, this is an even more elegant copy, she would have died to--"

"She did die," Nira interrupted, with words sharper than the arrow she had just crafted. Her eyes were greyer than the darkest corner of the room, and yet her face was pale and sculpted like a muse, each curve and arch of her lips brilliantly sharp.

"Nira... please." His already defeated tone gave way to a mumble.

"I really must be going," was all Nira could bring herself to say, unable to make eye contact with her father as she donned her favorite, tossed her quiver, brimming with the last arrows of their kind over her shoulder and made for the chamber door.

"I love you, dearest! Please do be home by a decent hour this time," Gausfel called out, as Nira cleared the room and rounded the bend.

The night air was crisp, and the moon freely cast its brilliant glow across the kingdom of Elwynn. The light reflected off of the silver and golden banners hung from parapets and ramparts as they snaked their way around the cliffside atop which the city sat. The resplendent beauty of the moonlit visage only seldom and briefly interrupted at odd intervals by a handful of stray cumulus clouds spackled across the night sky. It was only eight o'clock and the night was still young, which meant that there were many servants still milling about the town, on various errands for Nira's father, as they were every night.

On any other occasion, this information wouldn't be of any significance to Nira, but this time her destination was one which she could not afford to have a single untrustworthy, loyalist soul under her father's charge spot her: The Blue Recluse Inn. At least, it was called an inn as a matter of formality and official title. In reality, there wasn't a fool among any of the seven races--not even a giant--clueless to the infamously shady goings-on at "The Drunken Spider," as it was more commonly known. If one of her father's henchmen so much as caught a whiff of her headed into the Dwarven District in which the "inn" resided, she'd be dragged back and be subjected to far worse than the mere few bright red marks on her rear end. She would have to endure one of her father's lengthy and circular lectures, and she couldn't afford to have so much precious time wasted. *Not now*--not

with Sven awaiting her below.

Carefully and nimbly, she crept her way across town—flitting amidst shadows, low to the ground and perceptively surveying each subsequent alley and back road along the way from around the sides of street corners, assorted machinery and wooden cargo containers. The hardest part was keeping low, considering the amount of horse piss and shit that had been packed into the crevices of the cobblestones over years of neglect. After all, only the Trade District could afford to pay for luxuries such as street cleaners or law enforcement to ensure that the damn fools carting their wares to and fro actually cleaned up after their gargantuan pack mules.

It wasn't that the city of Elwynn itself spanned a large distance—it didn't—but what it lacked in width, it made up tenfold in depth. Down along the cliffside atop which the Trade District and the Royal Quarter sat, nestled in the side of the mountain rests tier after glorious tier of the finest feat of engineering in all the Seven Kingdoms: the Dwarven District. It consisted of three layers bored deeply into the cliffside, one upon the other from the base of the mountain until about two-thirds of the way up, above which a thick slab of rock divides the two distinctly different worlds. If one were to gaze in the direction of Elwynn after nightfall, the only thing that they were sure to be able to make out were the three incandescent stacked tiers—a glorious symbol of Dwarven ingenuity, instead attributed to the human kingdom that governs it.

The only way down to the Dwarven District was by one of a series of pulleys in a row on the Eastern side of town known as "the descent." Fortunately for Nira, she'd spent her whole life disobeying her father's curfews and knew not only the city's every last twist and turn like the back of her hand, but every last good soul in the city. She'd always had a knack for sussing out people with a noteworthy kind heart and particularity of character about them, and no race among the kingdoms fit such a description as consistently as dwarves. It followed that Nira had grown to get to know all of the crew responsible for manning the pulleys and had eventually become so close that she was freely granted entry to the Dwarven District, which normally required a writ of passage given exclusively to traders and went for a high price on the black market.

Baltis was working the graveyard shift at the far corner pulley when, out from the shadows behind a hay bale, casually sauntered a hooded, slender young woman. Her sudden appearance would have been unnerving for any normal citizen, but the groggy old dwarf simply let out a guffaw, leaning against the wall and slapping himself on the knee hysterically.

"My poor wee lass.." he said, fighting back laughter and wiping a tear from his eye, "Ye've really ought to work on that shadowmeld. Been gettin' rusty in all yer time away! I'm lucky no one else were 'round to witness that!"

"And you, my wee friend, are lucky that I love you more than I love the idea of kicking you in the groin so hard your beard recoils back up inside of you," retorted Nira, smirking while tossing her hood back and letting her long dark hair fall freely as she made her way up to him. He wore standard dwarven work attire, fully clad in taut hides with protective metal pads covering his joints. He most distinct bright blue admiral's cap from the navy of some far-off country, with a giant white feather plume thrown back over his shoulder.

"Lucky indeed!" chuckled Baltis, grinning heartily and extending his arm to meet hers, gripping tight just below the elbow and pulling her down forcefully 'til her forehead rested against his. The embrace signified a bond of kinship among dwarves, and to any who did not know Nira, the sight of the two of them in this very moment might very well be the most unlikely thing one could imagine laying their eyes on.

"It's about damn time ye came and paid an old dwarf like me a visit! But I imagine ye've got somethin' just eatin' ye right up inside if yer 'ere. Go on then!" he said, loosening his grip on her and winking before reaching up and giving her a firm smack on the ass. She stumbled forward into the rickety, cage-like wooden

contraption he had been standing in front of. Then, with the agile yank of a lever and the pulling of a crank, the metal gate snapped shut behind her and the whole thing began to suddenly lurch downward. For a brief moment Nira could make out one last glimpse of Baltis giving her a tip of his hat before the floor rushed up to meet him and snuffed out all light completely.

There were no artificial light sources in the compartment, but Nira had become accustomed to this after so many visits. She calmly held fast to the metal railing as her transport noisily creaked and groaned its way down into the abyss. Before too long, beams of light came streaming up through the cracks between the boards below, slowly becoming more and more vivid still, as the elevator neared the vibrantly lit opening below.

The rickety contraption of wood and metal eventually burst forth from the rocky chasm, engulfing Nira in a sea of light. This top tier of the Dwarven District was known as The Foundry, where all of the smithing and metalwork was done. She was met with a rush of sensation—the sweltering humidity and heat arising from glowing forges; the thunderous chorus of hammers clanking against malleable metals; the uproarious hiss of the steam billowing forth from the foundries where molten metal met with cold water; the rough smell of sweat and dirt permeating and violating her nose.

All around her in every direction lay an expanse of brightly illuminated, roaring fires of magnificent forges. Tending to these massive forges were hundreds of shirtless dwarves covered in a combination of sweat and soot, yelling obscenities at one another as they heaved and hauled materials and expertly maneuvered the dauntingly large instruments.

Despite the stifling atmosphere, the sight of the half-naked, swearing dwarves never ceased to leave Nira in a fit of hard-fought snorts and snickering on her way through. Her light-heartedness proved to be a helpful distraction from the otherwise stifling atmosphere until it too was already being swallowed up by the floor and she found herself on her way to the next level, her gleeful snorting beginning to echo. The distance between The Foundry and the next tier, Old Town, was thankfully much shorter, and before long Nira was once again being plucked from darkness. This time, however, the lights were much more tame and emanated from fixtures lining the ceiling of the cave-like expanse, as well as from the entanglement of mostly-wooden buildings and odd mechanical streetlights. Elaborate clockwork machinations lay sprawling, entwined betwixt the steampunk architecture—serving God-knows-what purpose—as far as the eye could see. The view was so wrought with chaotic disorder that it posed the question of whether it had been built intentionally or was born of some organic will of its own.

In the distantly far reaches of the cavern, a world apart from all the hustle and bustle of the busy goings-on below, Nira could just easily make out the bright red, gnarled rooftop of her destination towering above its dilapidated shanty town neighbors.

#

Down here, Nira didn't have to be so wary of the prying eyes of strangers. She walked openly and at a brisk pace down busy main streets, poorly lit and winding back alleys, and so on with the comfort and confidence of a lioness simply patrolling her domain. As she drew ever nearer to the place she felt most at home, the unofficial meeting place between herself and *him*, a wave of utmost serenity washed over her.

The last time she had seen Sven, he had propositioned her to finally be done with Ellwynn—with the unwitting oppression of her father—and to come away with him on the adventure she'd always ranted of so eagerly. After weeks of making him wait, she finally had her answer.

Before long she was within earshot of the tavern's tattered old front door, creaking and groaning on its

hinges, open and closed, as the roaring laughter from within rose and fell along with it. A wafting scent of Chef Ban's cooking struck a fleeting chord with Nira's nose, and she stopped for a moment to throw her head back and sigh with pure delight.

Nira hardly had any time to process what was going on. One moment she was sauntering along, and the next, everything went dark as a damp, foul-smelling rucksack was pulled fast over her head. A hand covered her mouth tightly as she felt three sets of muscular arms grabbing her every limb, hoisting her up and binding her wrists behind her back and her ankles together with a crude rope before carrying her off. She could tell they were moving very quickly, and in a matter of seconds they let go and she tumbled hard onto the cobblestone ground with a start. It was obvious that they had only just carried her down a small dead-end passage away from passersby.

"And to think we sat through that lecture about her being a proper rogue, for this!" scoffed a raspy older-sounding voice that had the distinct tone that could only belong to one of the races. *Fucking orcs, of course*, Nira thought to herself as she vigorously thrashed her head from side to side to shake the bag from her head, glaring up at her captors. Being orcs, they all looked and sounded the same. Two simply looked down at her smirking, while another opened his mouth and in the same chillingly grating tone said, "Nothing personal, missy. Just following orders," as he pulled a long, sharp, jagged blade from its sheath at his side and took a step toward her, kneeling down to her level and raising his arm to the air, about to strike.

Then, she heard it. A resounding *crack* of someone snapping their fingers echoed all around them, vibrating ominously as it slowly faded out. The advancing orc froze, his smirk slipping to a blank stare, and then—his head was no more. Blood, brain matter, bone fragments galore, splattered every single direction with what looked like the detonation of a bomb having gone off in his mouth. All that remained was a little, less-than-menacing twisted and gorey stump where his smug orc face had just been. For the brief moment afterward, his allies were dumbfounded. Naturally so, as this wasn't something that any reasonable denizen of the realm knew to just happen suddenly. One reached up, patting and feeling the sides of his own head as he looked to his companion, who was frozen with horror to the point where all he could do was look back to the other. Two more cracks rang out, and one of them hardly managed to let out a cry of horror just before his voice was cut short and the two now headless bodies crumpled to the floor, joining the bolder of the group.

From the moment that she heard the first snap, Nira's face had settled into a mischievous little smirk with a curl in her upper lip, her eyes fixed upward on a particularly dark patch of enshadowed rooftop above. She didn't need to watch as the orcs had all been dispatched, and once they had—down from those shadows leapt what appeared to be an old man, landing effortlessly on the hard stone. He was tall and thin, with lightly tanned skin and long, wild ivory hair that fell down around his shoulders, and a ragged beard of equal length. His eyes were those of a piercing, vibrant blue that emanated a presence of immense gravity. The old man walked up to Nira, clicking his tongue disappointedly, and with each click the ropes binding her were sheared clean through. As he stepped nearer he came more clearly into focus. He was no old man at all, despite his hair having given him that appearance—his skin was healthy. He held out a long, strong hand which she took and pulled herself up. He was Rayleigh, the proprietor of The Blue Recluse, and he had a serious no-nonsense policy when it came to the goings-on around the neighborhood—especially concerning his regular customers.

"You know Rayleigh, seeing you do the things that you do just isn't something I think I'll ever get used to," sighed Nira, springing to her feet and dusting herself off. "I had that situation entirely under control, for the record."

"Hah! Of course, I believe you," chuckled Rayleigh. "Now, any idea why they did that?"

"Oh, you know. I may or may not have *borrowed* a particularly valuable shipment of their boss' ore and leather to finish a few pet projects of mine."

"Ah, misappropriating the property of some unsavory characters. That'll do it. Hopefully the projects turned out well enough." said Rayleigh, beaming from ear to ear as he reached down and patted her head as if she were just an innocent little girl. "Let's get you a drink then, shall we?"

#

"Now why is it that every time I get to finally see you, you've always got some terribly exciting, death-defying story to share with me?" inquired Sven teasingly. He sat hunched over the bar, cradling his third drink of the night and eyeing Nira with an intense curiosity.

Taking her time with a deep sip from her own flagon of mead about half the size of her torso, Nira eventually slammed the tankard down onto the dark lacquered wood, letting out a heavy sigh before leaning back in her seat and stretching out both arms as far as she could muster before settling with wrapping one around Sven's neck and leaning into him. "Now why is it that you're still surprised by this?" she asked, locking eyes with him and reaching up with her free hand to flick his forehead sharply, right between his eyes with a loud *thwap*.

"You know damn well that life up above, under father's dull, restrictive rules and curfews is no life at all. For the standard nobleman's even more standard-minded little princess, perhaps—but not for me!" she had raised her voice, still able to avoid slurring her words, but Sven could tell that the dwarven stout was finally getting to her and knew what was about to happen. Nira didn't have anyone to confide in when she was up in the Royal Quarter with only Zelda and her father as her only consistent, shallow company, and so every time she and Sven were reunited she would always start off with a grand speech to unleash all of her bottled up thoughts from their time apart.

*Go on, beautiful. Let it all out,* Sven thought to himself with a wholesome smile as he gazed into her eyes of dark jade green. Out of the corner of his own he admired the gorgeous contrast of the gentle mousiness of her nose with the sharpness of her smile and dimples. He particularly enjoyed the lone, bouncing tuft of bangs that hung on the side of her face, askew from the rest of her black mass of wild hair that currently hung down behind her shoulders, tapering most of the way down her back.

"I watched mother wither away after having lived no real life at all. I've read her memoirs, her diaries--her dreams and wildest fantasies that she once wished to embrace and live to the fullest that never truly had the slightest possibility of ever coming to pass. The life she was given by her own doting, overprotecting father—the life she so naively accepted and took at face value, unquestioningly and trusting in it wholeheartedly as if the man offering it to her truly knew what it meant for her to live and be fully alive." In the middle of her passionate speech she had taken her arm down from around Sven and was brandishing and gesturing wildly as she spoke, her eyes still completely locked with his. He had rested his chin on his fist and was just taking it all in with utter fascination.

"If I were born into a cave, and my parents, as reasonable cave-dwellers, offered me the same life that they knew, and if I were to then blindly accept that life, then.. I would be living a life that I can safely say, from this perspective I instead possess, to be an absolute travesty. One of the biggest shames that a life can commit, for such potential of life to be deprived of a chance to feel and experience all that one might. The reason we all fetishize adventure while only the few act upon and viciously fight for it is because as living creatures we can all acknowledge that life's value is only gifted its truest gravity by contrast of its opposite—death. For fuck's sake, it's

our dance with it—the rolling of the dice, the taking of risk, the potential loss through which all of life’s vibrance, beauty and meaning are painted in full color! I’m just one of the few honest enough to say it aloud!” with this final declaration she had risen to her feet, half-yelling and brandishing her now-empty flagon around, fully immersed in her fit of alcohol-aided passion.

“If only you’d heeded your dear dad. You might’ve been a poet! Or a philosopher!” laughed Sven boisterously, his voice carrying freely in the hall despite how loud and rowdy all of the other patrons were. “It sounds like you’ve done quite a bit of thinking in all that time that you asked for..” his laughter subsiding and his grin reduced to a peaceful, relaxed smile. “Think it’s about time we left this cave and gave those dice a whirl?”

She hesitated for a split second, suspended as all of her thoughts and considerations from the past weeks flooded her mind. Images of mother’s illness; father’s unrelenting, exhaustive efforts to save her; mother’s inevitable death, and father’s protective eye turning upon her, the girl who had finally begun to learn to live without him. *I know, daddy. I can imagine how this will rend your poor, sweetheart. I’m so terribly sorry. But..*

“That’s my line, idiot!” she laughed, grinning widely. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”



# True Love

BY ESTEFANIA ALMAGUER MUNIZ



It was a bright warm day in May, and the birds were singing in the forest of El Valle de Lozoya. There, Princess Tiffany, from the castle of Buitrago de Lozoya, was hiding from the troops of her father King Conrad, who was an ambitious and powerful person. The old king had a tuft of grayish-white hair around his bald, mottled head, which he covered with a heavy and delicate crown made of gold decorated with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and amethysts. It was the form of a circlet surmounted by ornaments and eight arches. A globe surmounted by a cross rested on the top of the crown. He had a wizened face and a back slightly hunched. His twinkling eyes were framed by thick white eyebrows and on his unshaven chin were white whiskers. His bright brown eyes shone in the bright day light as his dazzling teeth shone with a fresh white gleam.

Since he was beginning to have health problems, he had arranged his only daughter to marry Price Noel, who was irascible, intolerant, violent and tyrannical. But also, one of the most popular Princes for his intelligence, energy, wide knowledge and curiosity; he had dark brown hair, which was thick and lustrous. His eyes were a mesmerizing deep ocean blue and he had dark

eyebrows, which sloped downwards in a serious expression. Six feet tall, powerfully built, and a tireless athlete, huntsman, and dancer, he had the perfect qualities for inherit the crown.

Queen Mary disagreed with the King in that decision. She was a beautiful queen. Her skin was soft and dark as the as the chocolate foam. Her sparkle eyes were big and dark brown. She had a long black hair that she loved to braid and then drawn it back into a tight coil at the back of her head. She was gentle and soft-spoken and with a noble heart. She enjoyed riding horse every morning to admire the beauty of nature. Queen Mary was strong enough in mind and spirit to hold on to her dreams and she raised Princess Tiffany on the same path.

"Everything is your fault!" King Conrad angrily told Queen Mary, who was crying in her bed for her lost daughter.

"My fault? You're the one who forced her to run away", said Queen Mary getting up from the bed and wiping her tears with a firm voice.

"Loyalty, my Queen!" said King Conrad leaving the room indifferently. King Conrad walked down a long corridor to his huge office, which Queen Mary had no access to.

"Any news?" said King Conrad to Prince Noel in his office.

"No yet, your majesty! Today we will go deep in the forest. I promise you that I will bring the Princess back!" Prince Noel replied, kneeling in front of the King.

"I trust you!" said the King and respectfully gave the exit signal pointing his hand at the door.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Prince Noel replied, bowing his head.

Prince Noel rode off into the forest with the troops behind. Unbridled anger could be seen on his face as he whipped the horse hard to force it to go faster.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the large forest far away from the castle, Princess Tiffany was living near a well-conducted little stream, where a headlong brook in the middle of the woods reached the back of her little cabin, which she had made with wood. Every evening, before the sunset, she would sit next to the brook on her favorite rock, which was heart shaped.

Princess Tiffany looked at the brook and saw the reflection of her face with a big smile. The sunlight on the water reflected back her bright round eyes, her long curly black hair that delicately touched the surface of the water, and her smooth skin that glowed with her dark complexion. She was no longer wearing the tiara or the precious gold necklace that Prince Noel had given her as a token of his love. Suddenly, her reflection faded as a shoal of fish gently shook the water.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful!" Princess Tiffany said, overjoyed to the little fish on the brook, whom she had named the Sparkly family, waving her hand comprehensively at the beauty of nature around her. "Don't you feel as if you just love the world on an evening like this? I can hear the brook laughing. Have you ever noticed what cheerful brooks are? They are always laughing, even in wintertime. You are so lucky to live on the water of this lovely brook."

The colorful fishes were swimming around as if they happily agreed with Princess Tiffany. She dipped her hands in the warm water and gently shook it, then got up, walked over to a peculiar pine tree and stroked one of its branches.

"And you, kind Mr. Ron, with your long-curved branch always welcoming the colorful birds that sing the loveliest melody every day. We all should be glad Ms. Warmly, our blue bright sky and always remembers the immense love she has for us," said Princess Tiffany with a big smile looking at the sky with her arms open.

Singing and dancing with immense joy, Princess Tiffany stopped in front of a special tree that she had named Prince Eduardo. She stared with lovely eyes to the trunk of the tree.

"Oh Prince Eduardo! Your face is the most delightful thing I can see every day, your big round eyes, wide lips shaping a charming smile and pointed nose, it's...it's just magnificent. Your fresh and resinous smell and your strong long curved branches full of vivid green leaves are the most exquisite gift that my nose and eyes can appreciate with a valuable sensation. Oh my! ...My heart is full of excitement!" said Princess Tiffany hugging the tree with a big smile.

She delicately placed her palm on the tree trunk and closed her eyes, and without saying a word, she stayed for hours to listen to the nature around. She could clearly perceive the sound of the birds flapping to the beat of a relaxed melody, the water running gently and the small fishes splashing. She loved how the sound of the air gently touched the leaves of the trees, and how her hands felt the texture of each line drawn on Prince Edward's trunk. Her body was there but her soul seemed to be outside of it. Her spirit could travel on time due the strongest connection that she had with the magical tree. Taking care of the forest was her principal mission as it was her sacred and valuable home.

That night, when she was about to return to the cabin, Prince Noel intercepted her. He quickly jumped off his black horse and stood right in front, while his troops surrounded her with their swords pointed.

Princess Tiffany dropped a bouquet of flowers she had collected near the brook. Her eyes widened and her upper lids rose, as in surprise.

He was outraged. "How could you dishonor your father and your duty?"

"No please... Don't take me back to the castle. This is my home, I belong here!" replied Princess Tiffany sobbing with a broken heart.

"It's not optional, Princess! You must return and do your duty" said Prince Noel.

"No, you will have to leave me here and go back alone," Princess Tiffany replied bravely.

"You cannot stay here! I will marry you no matter what!" Prince Noel protested

"You don't understand I love Prince Eduardo." said Princess Tiffany looking behind her shoulder and pointing to the special tree. "He is the light of my heart,...he..."

"You have been bewitched!" Prince Noel said, pointed his sword in her neck and forced her to kneel. "How can you be in love with that nasty tree? You will pay for this betrayal!"

"Don't you dare touch me," replied Princess Tiffany with tears in her eyes and a firm voice.

"Take her to the castle and lock her in the tower!" Prince Noel furiously ordered to his troops.

Two men from his troop escorted her. Princess Tiffany was devastated, she couldn't defend herself. She mounted the horse with resignation and did not say a word during the long way to the castle.

Prince Noel stayed with the rest of the troop. He pointed his sword at the tree trunk. "Prince Eduardo... This is ridiculous," he mocked.

The sky turned black, the brook water seemed stagnant, the fishes were gone, the birds flew away and the leaves of the trees started to fall.

"Go to the closest town and bring some ax to take this place down! I am going to break the spell, cutting this nasty tree," he commanded maliciously to four men of his troop to the closest town.

"Yes, Prince Noel," they replied, and rushed to obey Prince Noel's orders.

"Let's destroy this place," he commanded to the rest of the troops.

"Aaaaah," he yelled, cutting the branches of the tree with his sword in ruthless anger while the rest of the troops were destroying the little cabin.

Prince Noel could feel his heart rate and adrenaline surging as he destroyed the place. And when the four men returned, desperately, Prince Noel took the ax and with a heartless anger start to cut the rest of Prince Eduardo.

"You will burn in flames nasty tree. Princess Tiffany belongs to me and you won't be on my way" he said maliciously, and he stabbed his sword into the tree stump.

After cutting down several trees, destroying the cabin, cutting down the flowers and polluting the water with oil from the lamps to get rid of the fish, Prince Noel proceeded to light the place on fire with a torch. He watched it burn with malicious eyes until there was nothing left of it. In that night of darkness, the only thing that could be perceived was the great glow of fire in the sacred place of Princess Tiffany.

Prince Noel headed to the castle with his troops to break the news to the Princess, but when he got to the castle; he found out, that where Princess Tiffany was locked, there were just ashes spread over the room.

"Your Majesty, what happened?" Prince Noel, bewildered, asked the King Conrad who was in the Princess's room comforting the Queen Mary.

"What did you do?" King Conrad said, turning to Prince Noel with his sword in hand pointed at his chest.

"I ... broke the spell, your Majesty. She should be here!" Prince Noel said fearing that the King Conrad would kill him, and slowly moved the hand to take his sword ready to counter the king.

The King lowered his sword and turned to the Queen.

"Nooooo!" shouted Queen Mary, seeing how Prince Noel inserted the sword into the King's back through his chest. The King fell at the feet of the Queen, and crying in pain, she drew the sword and with her hand tried to stop the bleeding.

"Help, help" the Queen yelled desperately

"My queen," Prince Noel said indifferently taking the bloodied sword and inserting it directly to the queen's chest.

With the death of the King Conrad and the Queen Mary, Prince Noel took command of the castle and threatened the inhabitants with death, if they did not recognize him as King.

El Valle de Lozoya became a place of fear among the inhabitants due to the new dictatorships of King Noel. He had cut down all the trees in the village, seized the villagers' lands, and everything was strictly controlled through the violence of his troops.

Suddenly, Princess Tiffany opened her eyes, they were terrified and her hand still touching the trunk of Prince Edward was shaking. She started to perceive everything just as her vision. In a hurry, she saw that the sky was getting dark, the birds were flying away, the leaves of the trees were falling down and the fish were gone. She knew it, Prince Noel was close and quickly she climbed up the tree and stay quietly.

Prince Noel arrived at the place and searched meticulously, he could smell the Princess nearby.

"Keep looking!" Prince Noel ordered the troops, kicking a basket of flowers.

Trusting his instincts of smell, he stood right in front of Prince Edward, looked at the trunk in detail and could perceive the shape of a face. He looked up and decided to climb. As he busily climbed, his face smiled wickedly at the sight of the Princess in the treetop, among the leafy branches that covered her completely, except for one end of her dress. But before he could reach her, the branch he was leaning on broke and Prince Noel fell from the top of the tree. His head hit the heart-shaped rock. And his blood spilled into the brook, which had a strong current and carried away the blood.

Princess Tiffany came down from the tree and with tears in her eyes hugged Prince Eduardo. She took the horse of Prince Noel and went with the King's troops to the castle.

Riding out of the forest, the princess could see, from far away, the castle at the top of a mountain. The castle walls were the strongest thing for miles around. It was built of stones of varying sizes and shapes, each one unique. From a distance it was uniform grey, from up close it was a mosaic of humble rocks. It had numerous towers, turrets, pediments, battlements and sculptures, and from the balcony of the highest tower, the most amazing views of the land and the surrounding lakes could be appreciated.

"Mom, Dad!" shouted the princess running towards the entrance of the vast and resplendent castle, crossing the high doors with fine drawings in the wood.

"I love you so much" Princess Tiffany said with tears in her eyes and with a great sigh she kissed and hugged them tightly.

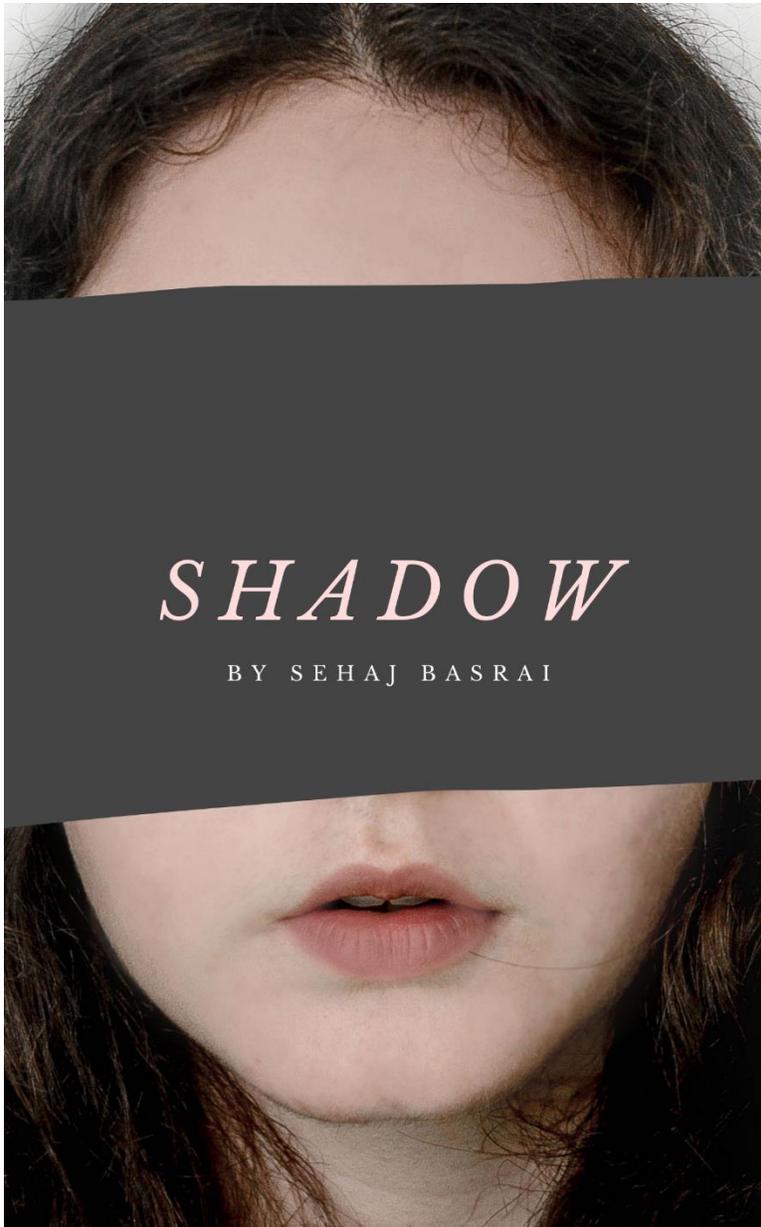
In the great hall full of windows on one of the long sides, with a large bay window, and an amazing minstrel's gallery above the screens passage; Princess Tiffany explained to them about her sacred place, Prince Edward and what happened to Prince Noel.

"I promise to support your dreams and never put you in danger again" said King Conrad kissing her on the forehead.

"I am so proud of you, my darling" said Queen Mary taking her hand warmly.

The princess now had two sacred homes, she had become a free-spirited soul.





# SHADOW

BY SEHAJ BASRAI

Slouched over in a chair, Ricky gradually began to gather his five senses again. He struggled to make sense of where he was, like a newborn getting a glimpse of the world for the first time. Alas, the similarities end there as he wasn't cradled in the arms of a tender, nurturing mother. Instead, the harsh sunlight was in the midst of frying his skin to a crisp. He sat up, cutting off the steady flow of drool from his mouth, and found himself sitting on a scalding steel chair. Just as he was getting used to the fierce southern light striking his baked skin, two hands entered his vision and let out an ear-splitting clap. This sudden shock kickstarted his brain and allowed him to make sense of where he was, surrounded by nothing but rippling sand dunes and a crystal-clear sky. In any other situation, the desert would be a freeing place but he never felt so trapped in his life.

A man sat in front of him wearing a loud smile immeasurable to any Ricky had seen in his past life. He felt a sudden, primal urge to wipe that grin off his face and tried pouncing on

him. His arms and legs never left the chair, however, due to the manila rope restraining him to the chair. The silhouette laughed as Ricky wrestled to break free.

"You snug as a bug in those ropes, ain't you," he said in a sing-songy cadence. Figuring it was the only thing he could do, Ricky gathered whatever spit he could in his already dry mouth and hocked a loogie at the man's face. The man's laughter didn't cease but roared into a thunderous cackling in reaction.

"So you know who I am then?" the man asked callously, not matching the laughter that still didn't break away.

"You're all the news has been talking about for weeks," Ricky's voice gave out like a resurrected mummy talking for the first time. The man blushed as if Ricky was complimenting him. "They've been calling you The Blinder." The man's smile instantaneously disappeared.

"The Blinder. What an absolutely shitty name, don't you think? 50 news stations covering me and they couldn't think of anything better?"

"Yeah, I prefer cunt."

"Even that's a little better. The cunt. I could get used to that, don't you think? Tell me what you've heard about me. Don't spare the details now."

Ricky was repulsed by the demon's eagerness to hear of his deplorable actions. "You ripped them kids out of their homes and did God knows what to them. Put them right back where you found them but not the same as they were. They say you took away their eyesight. They couldn't stop wailing and screaming for weeks. Something tells me you've graduated from the youngun's which is why I'm here."

"Right you are sugar!" he said with an emphatic voice, rising from his chair. His demeanor changed in double-quick time as he sulked, "It's horrible what happened to those kids. But it had to happen," he said as if he wasn't the one responsible.

"If it's so horrible, then why'd you do it? I mean, what sort of a thing could tear a child away from ever seeing their mother again? You had my wife sick to her stomach for days on end just dropping our daughter off at school-"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! You think I wanted to do any of that? That I could do something like that willy nilly? But I needed to see if my findings were true."

"What," questioned Ricky.

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you. Why do you think they still haven't figured it out yet. Nobody on the message boards online either." "I'm probably dead already, right? So just tell me."

"Ding-ding-ding! Right you are again! Hoo-hoo, if this was Jeopardy, you'd be on fire!" The Blinder thunderously clapped as if cheering Ricky on.

"It probably won't make a lick of sense to you anyway so might as well. Been killing me to keep it a secret too, so I see this as a win-win! Gosh, where do I even begin? Well, you ever notice that bright, yellow speck in the sky all the time. We've been told never to look at it for too long or else you'd go blind. In fact, practically from birth. And the whole world listened to their mommies and daddies without a hum."

"Ok, let me make sure I'm getting this straight," Ricky said scoffing at the beast in front of him. "You trying to tell me not a single person has gone blind from staring at the sun too long? For fucks sake, please don't tell me you've started on this path of lunacy without doing some bit of research at least." Ricky saw the dark silhouette stop in his tracks and flinch at the word "lunacy." He thought he was done for but the dark man simply began chuckling.

"Lunacy. I'll show you lunacy." The chuckles ground to a halt as he resumed pacing. "Lunacy is when an entire species born with the beautiful gift of rational thought act no better than gorillas at the zoo!"

"Well, what's the problem then, people or the sun? Pick one."

"You think you're so clever, huh pretty boy? Believe me, I've spent years on my hypothesis-"

"Hypothesis," Ricky muttered to himself, smiling. The shadow stopped again.

"What," it growled.

Ricky held his head up high, calmer than most would be in the face of lunacy. "Nothing, it's just you said hypothesis like you're a scientist."

"That, I basically am. I scoured the internet in search of at least one local news story of some person wise enough to go against the grain. To stand up against the deception we've been led to believe is true for all these years. But nothing. Not a single goddamned story. Don't you think that's a little odd?" This time, Ricky didn't have anything to say. But in the split second before his response, he realized this was his way out. If he could somehow befriend the devil, tame the beast in front of him. That's my ticket out of here.

"You're right. That is sort of odd. Now say, what are you getting at here?"

"What I'm getting at is this. You see, I think they're hiding something up there. I've come to learn over the years that the best hiding spot is the one in plain sight."

Ricky could feel a laugh coming on. There's no way someone could be this loony...right?

"You know, I've realized that, too. Every time I'm looking for something, where do I find it? Back in the first place I went searching for it."

The Blinder laughed but not in his usual way. Ricky felt this one was more genuine.

"That's exactly right, ain't it? No matter how hard I look the first time, I always come crawling back and find it where I thought it would be." Ricky made the first contact. He planted the seed in the man's head and now he just needed to ride this out, no matter how hellish it may get.

Ricky played along with the laughter, matching the Blinder's beat. "Now where was I? Oh yes, well, I've got only theories of what could be up there. I've thought about aliens for a long while but it's too predictable ain't it?"

"Yep, sure is predictable..."

"So I've been thinking hard and long about this and, gosh how do I go about saying this without you thinking me a fool," the Blinder asked himself.

"You've got me intrigued thus far. Ain't no way I'm not letting you complete your story. Try me, I can handle it."

"Ok, here it goes. I believe we're some sort of simulation." Oh brother. "That none of this is real. You're not real, I'm not real. Whatever I'm saying right now, it's all fugazi and -"

"Stop right there. Now, I don't know if we're glitches in the program, but I've been getting those same exact thoughts too," Ricky uttered through his teeth.

Up until this point, Ricky hadn't thought once of the nature of his existence or the world in which he was residing. Sneaking out to the local diner with his daughter to sip milkshakes behind his wife's back, building a model airplane using toilet paper rolls, watching *The Princess Bride* with her way past her bedtime, Ricky's love for his daughter never once let his mind wander to such far-flung ideas. God, she isn't worried about where I am, right? I'll be home soon, baby I promise.

A wave of relief flooded over the Blinder's face. Mouth agape, his hands rushed to his face like a little boy stumbling upon Santa in the local mall. "Really? I've been waiting for years to find someone else who thinks the same way. Well, someone in real life at least. Message boards are flooded with others like us. You've seen them too?"

"Erhm, yes, I have actually. There's this one blog I frequent called the... what was it again? Oh yes! It was called the Free Man Society," Ricky said in hopes of sounding authentic. "I thought I've seen all the popular websites on the topic but I guess not."

"Well, my friend runs the site actually. He's all about spreading awareness and getting others to uncover the truth about our world. Or their world, am I right?" Ricky asked, winking at The Blinder. Ricky, feeling as if he

didn't convince him, quickly changed the subject. "Say, you never told me what happened to those kids then. What'd you do to them?"

"Something I'll never forgive myself for. But I had to know. As you mighta saw on the news, I didn't get just any kids. They were methodically chosen, going from 4,5,6, and so on until age 10.

"If you didn't want to do it, why'd you have to use the kids?"

"Kids can see things that we can't. Minds ain't stuffed with mindless advertisements or filled with the blasphemous propaganda. They're more attuned to the "real" world, not with other people."

He paused for a brief moment and took in a long inhale as his voice began cracking ever so slightly. "So I hooked 'em up to this horrible contraption I made. I put tiny prongs in between their eyelids to prevent them from closing. Positioned them so that they could see nothing but the sun. Their screams, oh it was just horrifying." He broke down into a wailing sob.

Ricky clenched his fists, almost sending the ropes flying off. He thought about what would've happened if his daughter was taken instead of him. He probably would've gained some innate super-human strength and sent the Blinder to meet the sun face to face.

The Blinder picked himself up and wiped his drenched face with his sleeve. "I sent them back home, didn't I." It wasn't a rhetorical question. "DIDN'T!" His voice resembled the image of a demon already etched into Ricky's head.

"Yes, you did and that was a great thing. I understand completely. You had to know. Sometimes you just need the answers to your questions. Like... why are oranges called oranges but bananas not yellows?"

This launched the Blinder onto his knees in a fit of laughter that petrified Ricky more than anything the man did before. He didn't know whether it was the firm ropes on his hands or the deranged man in front of him, but all he did know was that he needed to get out of here soon. Back to his home. Back to his daughter again. Ricky tried his best to match the man's laughter. The Blinder wiped away tears from his face and let out a relieved sigh.

"Gosh this is exciting isn't it? It's like I've been an E.T. all my life here on Earth and I just found another of my kind." The Blinder, still on his knees crawled towards Ricky and leaned on his legs, almost as if yearning for a kiss. Ricky fought off the vomit churning inside him as he got a good look at the man for the first time.

It was a face that resembled almost no human qualities other than a usual eyes, nose, and mouth. But even then, it was cloudy where the pupils should be, the nose looked as if it could come off at any second, and lips that Vaseline couldn't even begin to help. The visage that lay before Ricky was drier than the desert surrounding him, with blisters galore and skin peeling off throughout. He could see right through to the bone on his cheeks and couldn't tell if this was an extra from a George Romero movie or an actual human.

"You got some value, don't you? You ain't like all them other sheeps blindly listening to what the television man says. I can see us working together for the long haul. You can't just be the subject of the experiment. No. No, you need to be helping me. Like a partner. Yes, I quite like the sound of that."

Ricky couldn't contain his excitement. He fooled the shadow and now he could get out of here. "As do I. We could save the world together. Rid the world of all the unnecessary pain and suffering. Together. It's just you and me now."

"Yes, Yes! I'm going to untie you now. Get the blood flowing back to your hands and feet all good and well." The Blinder grabbed the knife from his side boot and cut the ropes that shackled Ricky for so long. Ricky was expecting to jolt up and tackle the Blinder. He sprang out of his seat but landed straight on the sand as the blood

still hadn't reached his dry feet. As he began to get up, he felt a strange poke in his back. Then another one. And another one. The orange sand turned blood red around him.

The Blinder stabbed him 6 times in his back. The movies Ricky had seen oversold what it felt like. It only felt like a few papercuts.

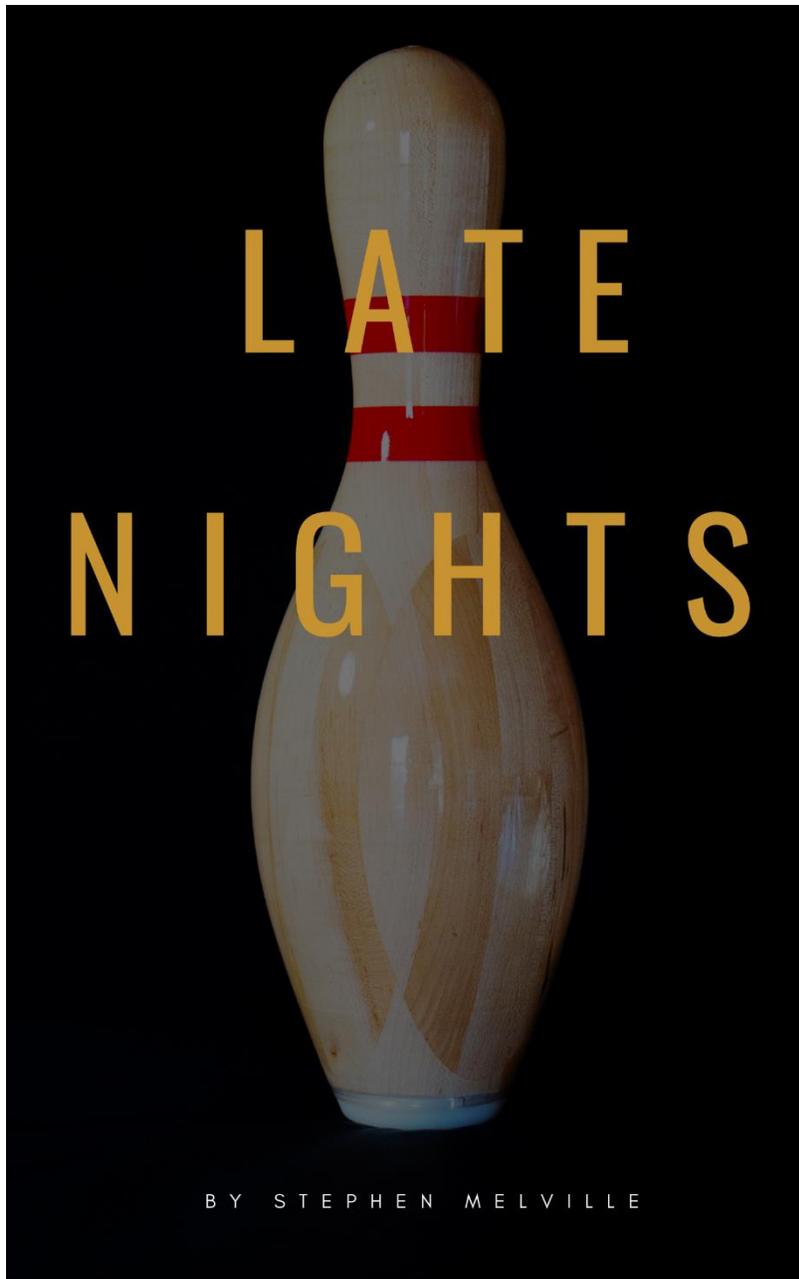
"You didn't think I was that stupid, did you? Goddamn boy, you really thought you were getting out of here alive. I saw right through your lies from the start. You ain't a good liar, that's for sure. I-"

Ricky exhausted all his fuel reserves in pulling the Blinder down to the ground. The impact on the sand launched thousands of tiny granules straight into the Blinder's eyes, effectively blinding him. The knife dropped from his clutch as he clawed at his eyelids like a cat and its scratching post. With Ricky feeling his last breath coming, he lodged the knife firmly into the Blinder's forehead, killing the shadow once and for all.

Ricky left the knife in the Blinder's head as he turned to face the sky. With no one within a 200-mile radius to come help in up, it was the only thing he could do. He wished he could be with his daughter watching the everchanging clouds morph into snakes or dragons. At least she doesn't have to see me like this.

And as the last of the clouds drifted away, his gaze turned towards the sun shining bright in its alluring way. Gosh, it's a beautiful thing ain't it? He used the last couple seconds he had to stare at the dazzling spectacle, thinking *All this over a ball of light, huh?*





It was another late night for David Brooks. He lay on the couch in his apartment with one foot on the ground and the other perched on the armrest. His head was facing the tv which was playing 'Top Gun' although he wasn't really interested in it.

David looked around the room. His little apartment that he shared with his roommates was quieter than usual mostly due to his roommates being gone. David didn't mind the silence too much but it did leave him feeling alone.

The cool temperature made the hairs on David's skin stand up. He hadn't noticed that the window right next to him was open. He thought about closing it for a second but the way the couch was positioned would mean he would have to make a great effort rearranging, and David couldn't be bothered.

He had to warm himself up somehow so he decided that getting a blanket from the closet just a few feet away from him would be better. He lifted himself to a sitting position. He yawned, and looked at the closet, then back to the window, and back to

the closet. Letting out a grunt he stood up and moseyed on to the door.

Inside there were a few blankets and towels David grabbed the closest blanket and brought it back to the couch. He lied down with it and looked up at the ceiling. His mouth dropped and he began to daydream.

Laughter woke him up from his daze. He tilted his head towards the front door. It unlocked and he saw his two roommates come in with smiles on their faces. He quickly pretended to fall asleep even though he feared it was too late.

The laughter turned to an eerie silence. Then a large force landed on David's chest. He grunted and opened his eyes. Russell, sat himself on David's chest. He was short and bulky and wasn't the most polite of people.

"Oh sorry didn't see you there." Russell said without even looking at David.

"Yes you did," David squeezed out.

"What are you watching?"

"I don't remember."

"I look like him don't I?"

David peered around Russell to the tv. "Tom Cruise? No you don't. Where's Hugh?"

"He forgot his money, we're gonna go back out and get sushi if you wanna come."

"Uh no thanks I got stuff to do."

Just then Hugh came walking in. He was tall and slender most even keeled out of the two. "Alright I found my wallet."

Russell launched himself up which allowed David to breathe out a heavy sigh. Hugh nodded at David as if to apologize for Russell. The two then headed to the front door.

David's head turned back to the tv. "Alright well have fun." He called out to them. He expected to hear some sort of reply and the door open and close but he didn't hear anything for about five seconds. He checked back to make sure they had actually walked in the room and he hadn't hallucinated. David saw them whispering to one another, he turned his head back to the tv. He knew what was coming next.

"Hey man you sure you don't wanna come with us?" Hugh called out.

"Nah I'm good I've got stuff I have to do."

"Yeah, well we might actually go *bowling*. If you know what I me."

"Yeah, that sounds like fun but..." David didn't finish his sentence. He didn't even fully hear what Hugh said they were doing. His eyes stared glazed onto the top of the tv bezel, and the rest of his face was motionless. If he hadn't spoken, you probably could think he was dead.

"Alright." The door then opened and closed.

David remained still and then suddenly his phone alarm started buzzing. The easiest way to stop it from ringing would have him get up to reach it since it is in the middle of the coffee table. Instead, he chose to make things difficult. He turned over on his belly and put his arm furthest from the table on the ground. He pushed his upper body toward the phone while still keeping his lower body on the couch and one leg on the ground for support. His pinky reached the edge of the phone where he pulled it towards him and then picked it up.

He checked the reminder, it was a call to action for him to study for a chem test that was scheduled for tomorrow at 3:00. This was important because he wasn't interested in chem and didn't pay attention. He had a C and needed to do well on this assignment in order to pass. Although he needed to get a good grade on this test, he didn't feel any urgency.

He decided he could get away with sleeping a little and then once he would wake up, he would study. His sleep schedule was all over the place and usually he would wake up in the middle of the night around 4 that would give him time to wake up, study a little then go back to bed, wake up before the test and study some more.

He thought it was a foolproof plan. To be fair to David he had done this before but with subjects that he was familiar and interested in. He knew next to nothing about chemistry he didn't even know what chapters he would have to study for.

So, he lay on his couch with his phone on his chest and 'take my breath away' playing in the background he fell asleep.

He woke up at one o'clock in the afternoon. *Nah that can't be right* he thought that he could wake up at four to study, his biggest mistake was that he never set an alarm. Also when he went to bed last night it was already

four o'clock. He believed it was much earlier than that but accepted his situation and began to scramble. He checked what would be covered on the test and frantically tried to teach himself all of this new material.

At 2:30 he put on some clothes and speed walked to class. His mind raced in a million directions and his heartbeat pumped faster as he made his way into the classroom.

After the test was over David walked out of the classroom tired and unsure. He felt like he knew most of what was on it but since he had only just learned the section an hour ago, he wasn't confident. He wasn't down necessarily but he was worn out slightly. As he got to his apartment and opened the door he crashed on the couch.

He woke up lightheaded at five o'clock. *Damn it's only been 30 minutes?* He had woken up from a nice dream. He didn't know what the dream was about, but he felt pleasant and that was about all he could ask from anything in his life.

However nice the dream might have been, his head started to throb with great violence. He stood up and slowly walked to the kitchen. He looked at the drawers trying to remember where the Advil was. He had just taken some a few days prior and knew there was enough left.

*Pain Pain Pain.* Each second felt like someone was trapped inside his head banging a club against his brain. *Fuck this is annoying.* David in his infinite wisdom instead of looking through each cabinet one at a time stood in the middle of the kitchen trying to guess which one contained the Advil bottle.

He looked at the two below the sink and opened them. As soon as he opened it, he realized it was stupid for Advil to be below the sink and closed them again. He stood back up and resumed being a detective. His mouth dropped, his eyes were red, and the pain kept him from thinking properly. He felt stoned but unfortunately, he didn't feel high. He opened the top drawer only to find plates. He began to open the other drawers one by one.

*Nothing no Advil anywhere.* He felt rage for a second and banged his head against a wall lightly enough to not cause serious damage but heavy enough for someone else to awkwardly leave the room after witnessing it, luckily for him his roommates weren't home. Funnily enough the thump gave him clarity on the Advil's location.

His room. *You gotta be fucking kidding me.* the first thing he saw was the red bottle of Advil on his nightstand. David hadn't been in his room in a couple days, so he forgot he left it there. He opened it, swallowed three and went back to lay down on the couch.

He looked at his phone. It was now 5:30. *I've spent thirty minutes being a dumbass.* There was a text from his mom right under the time.

*How did the test go?*

*It went alright.* He replied

*Just alright?*

*Just alright. I won't know the grade until a few weeks so idc.*

*Well, you should care. How are all your other classes?*

*They're good.*

*Okay you know I had to go to Whole Foods last week and by the way could you order the list of groceries I sent you on Amazon, so I don't have to go there.*

*Right, I forgot sorry I gotta go do homework and stuff.*

*Alright make sure not to forget about the groceries for next week and I love you.*

*I won't and I love you too.*

*Oh, wait is there anything you want for your birthday?*

*Oh right*

David forgot that his birthday was coming up. *Idk how about you surprise me.* He didn't like getting gifts on his birthday.

He Doordashed food and turned on the television. He reminisced over what it was like being back home. His carefree childhood was very different from what his life is like now.

He had optimism and hope over the future back then but now it seems that was just naivety. The days felt longer, the tasks felt harder and he did not have any hopes for the future. The only time he ever felt the happiness he used to feel was in the dreams in his sleep. He didn't remember what he dreamt of during that nap he took earlier in the afternoon, but he knew it was of home.

A few days later.

"I believe it was Marie Antoinette who said let them eat cake."

"I don't like cake." David said as he watched a giant chocolate cake presented to him by his roommates.

"And today's your birthday so today you're gonna like it." Hugh said.

"Plus we paid forty bucks so don't be a dick," barked Russell.

They both were very energetic and optimistic. They complimented David quite well who was the nihilistic pessimist.

"Hey wait." Russell looked David into his soul. "Hugh, I think we forgot something."

"What did we forget Russell?" Hugh said worryingly

"Oh no." David cried he knew Russel was talking about the most important celebratory birthday punches.

"Nineteen, right?" Russel smirked as he strolled over to David's side. Rolling up his right sleeve he began wailing into David's shoulder. David remained sat down scowling at Hugh who avoided eye contact at first.

"Ya know we're gonna go bowling tomorrow night." Hugh said, trying to look back at David. "You should come."

"Yeah, you should come *Bowling* with us." Russel said still hell bent on making sure David's shoulder felt his wrath.

*Bowling? Who the hell wants to go bowling on a Friday night?* David glared at Russel. His few remaining punches were harder, and his smile got bigger. *Oh, they're not bowling.* Russel and Hugh had tried to get David to go to parties and other functions with them but to little success. Smaller things such as getting stuff to eat David was much more willing to do.

"Yeah I don't know I've got homework to do so--"

"I've never seen you do homework." Hugh replied.

"Ye me neither." Russel said admiring his muscles for the work they did.

"Well, that's just because you don't see me that often. I'm always in my room."

"Actually, you're always in front of the tv right there." Hugh pointed to the butt print on the couch. Even from the kitchen David noticed it was very prominent.

"Huh," David replied

Russel now approached David "What's up man? Do you think we're not good enough for you? Are we not what you desire?"

David backed up "Uh no it's definitely not that- "

Hugh now confused also chimed in "Actually I think our friend here is just a bit of an agoraphobic."

"So *that's* why don't hang out with us?" Russel curiously looked at David. "You're afraid of spiders?"

Hugh thought about correcting him but before Hugh got a chance David answered, "Yes that's why i don't hang out with you."

Russel nodded his head as if it made sense. Hugh continued "Yes since our friend is so very afraid of spiders and since he'll clearly have homework tomorrow, I thought we could do something here tonight." Hugh opened the fridge to a huge assortment of alcohol.

"Nice" Russels eyes opened up and went to the fridge.

"I gotta go do something for my mom, uh it's about groceries plus I don't drink, I'm afraid." David said, turning his body towards his room. He walked up to the door and put his hand on the doorknob. "Goodnight." He said as he leaned into the door, he turned his head back he noticed Hugh had a sly look about him.

"Yes, you do." Hugh said "we've drank before remember."

*Shit* David forgot about all the times they had hung out when they first moved in. It seemed like every night they had fun. David leaned his body away from the door and walked back towards the kitchen. "What the hell," He said, throwing his arms up in the air concedingly.

"Excellent!" Russel smashed the empty beer can against his skull and put his arms on Davids shoulders. "We're gonna have a great night."

David looked down at him and winced. "I'm sure that we are."

"Also, we have yet to sing happy birthday." Hugh called out

"Great."

The next afternoon David woke up on the sofa his head hurt, and his body ached. He looked around the room trying to remember what had happened. The cake was still out however it was smooshed in the middle. The lamp that was behind him was now on the ground. And there was a pillow fort just right next to the tv.

He laid his head back down. He stared up at the ceiling, just then the pillow fort came undone. David looked back down to see Russels head pop up. David couldn't help himself but laugh.

"What's so funny?" Russel demanded.

"Nothing man." *Well at least I know what happened with the cake.* David watched as Russel finally noticed the icing all over his face.

"Ah damn." They both started laughing. Russel then got up to go to the sink and wash his face. "Does your head feel like shit?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Do you want some Advil?"

David looked at him for a second before answering. "You know what, I'm good."

"Suit yourself." Russel began opening cabinets. "Where the hell is it?"

"I don't know," David replied. "Hey, do you know where Hugh is?"

"I'm right here." David looked behind the couch he was laying in. He saw Hugh there lying face first on the ground. "Why are you there?"

"I'm not sure." Hugh then got up and stretched his arms. "Some night huh."

"Yeah, some night."

"Haven't seen that in a while."

"Seen what?"

"Mr David you are smiling. And not the sarcastic type of smile you usually wear but a smile of *genuine* happiness."

"Hmm." David got up and headed towards his room.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to do homework."

"Actually?"

"Yes actually."

Russel slammed a cabinet door "Where the hell is the Advil?"

"Check that one." David pointed to the top cabinet then walked into his room.

He sat down on his desk chair and rolled it over to his backpack. He opened it up and whipped out his history textbook. Grabbed some paper and started studying. An hour in he got a text from his mother.

*Did you get the list I sent you?*

*Yeah, mom sorry I forgot.*

*Ok that's fine I need it by Tuesday so could you order it today? If you don't, I'll just go to the store tomorrow.*

*Kk I will after I'm done studying.*

David put away his phone. It would *probably be easier if I just gave her the account*. He sighed and put the history textbook away and brought his chemistry textbook out. For about 5 hours he sat there tinkering away at his studies.

He opened his phone back up and ordered the groceries from amazon. Afterwards he walked outside his room to find something to eat. He walked out of his room to see Russel and Hugh both put on jackets.

"You guys going out?" David asked

"Yeah, we are." Russel replied

"You're free to join us if you want to." Hugh chimed in.

"Yeah, I don't really know I've got some stuff I need to do I think."

"Well alright we don't want to force you into anything anymore."

"Hmm." David crossed his arms "What was it you said yesterday you were doing? It was *bowling* right?"

"Yeah, we're gonna go *bowling*."

David looked at the ground. "Yeah, you know what I guess I could come." He looked back at them "Just as long as we're only *bowling*. Right?"

"Yeah, let's go bowling."

Walking towards the coat closet David thought of the dream he had a few days ago. It was still fuzzy, and although David swore, he dreamt of home he was wrong. It was something unfamiliar to him, something that he hadn't experienced yet it seemed real, *something attainable*, David put on a coat and walked out the door. He did not know where his friends might take him, and he was alright with that.





## The Twentieth of April

by Arthur Cabral

Thinking back to that night, it was the one and only time I ever cried in front of Benny. He came into my life when I moved into the Heartbreak Hotel, an apartment complex where all the recently divorced parents move for the cheap rent and good schools. That Friday afternoon, I decided to go down to the pool to listen to some music. I felt dejected not only for starting a new school but also because I couldn't afford a Discman, so I hid my Walkman under the towel from prying eyes. My plan was to wait for the pool to clear before committing to jump in. Sure, the water would be cold, but so what? The swimmers stopped wading to stare at a bronzed boy wearing baggy shorts with a blue tank top as he walked past them. Soaking wet, the kids gathered their clothes, wrapped themselves in towels, and exited the cabana in haste. I came out of a hypnotic musical state and saw what everyone had been staring at: his hands. There were numerous empty lounge chairs to choose from, but of course he laid his towel down next to mine.

"Yo, waddup, I'm Benny," he said, tapping his chest.

"Hey, I'm Denver." I was slightly taken aback by his gesture.

He peeked at my yellow Walkman nestled in my towel, gave me a grin, and asked whom I had been listening to. Not in the mood to converse, I answered curtly.

"Red Hot Chili Peppers."

"Oh, snap! I saw them at the Free Tibet concert at Golden Gate Park. I was practically hallucinating off pot brownies during 'Under the Bridge.' It was epic."

"Cool," I said.

I reminded myself that I wanted to be alone, but I was a little excited and astonished that he named the exact song that played in my earphones. It was as if he knew.

The sun was roasting, so he invited me to jump into the chlorine rich pool to cool off, but I declined. Exhausted from his unrelenting asking me why not, I reluctantly agreed. Within about an hour of meeting each other, he asked me if I wanted to go behind the clubhouse to smoke a bowl in celebration of 420. And, so we went.

"Dude, can you light the bowl for me?" mumbled Benny. He was able to hold the pipe against his lips with only three fingers from his left hand. I flicked the Bic, and the bowl began to cherry. I did my best not to scorch his elongated fingers.

"You're from L.A., but your name is Denver?" he asked as he passed me the pipe.

"That's right." I managed to say as I exhaled the smoke.

"That makes no sense."

"Exactly. I hate my name. My parents named me after some folk singer."

"Your parents are fucked up."

I started to get a head change, and that is when I noticed Benny's eyes were completely bloodshot, and I wondered if it was from the chlorine or the chronic we were smoking. I took a quick glance at his palms, and then my own, opening and closing them like a time-lapse video of a blooming flower.

"So, are you staying here with your mom or dad? No one lives with both of their parents at The Heartbreak," he wondered.

"My mother. My father divorced her for his personal trainer, Natalya. Then he moved her into our home while we were still living together in the house! My mother went postal, and things got crazy. The cops said that I shouldn't stay in the house any longer, and since my father didn't have to pay alimony (he bragged about having a prenu) we relocated up north because it was the only place where my mother could find work."

I must have been stoned, because that was the first time I had spoken to anyone other than a therapist about it, and the expression on Benny's face led me to believe I said too much. Irritated, I grabbed my wrist and checked out Benny's hands again, only this time he noticed.

"I have this thing called Ectrodactyly. Basically, they're lobster claw hands." He snapped his fingers together, then showed me his right pinky. "This hand is pretty fucked up. They had to amputate all my fingers except for my thumb and this little dude."

I didn't know what to say other than, "I'm sorry, man."

Benny laughed. "I'm not trippin. You're the fucked up one. At least my dad sends my mom a Western Union every Friday. Hey, you got plans tonight? Me and my boy Trunk are going to smoke a honey blunt for 420; you should come."

I knew Benny wouldn't take no for an answer, so I agreed and went home to get ready. It had been a while since I had gone out on a Friday night. I was excited but also nervous about smoking a blunt for the first time. Benny seemed super chill and liked to smoke weed often, so I was apprehensive to bring him around my mother. I yelled at my mom that I had no clean clothes, but she could have cared less. Per usual, she kept drilling me about the details for the night: who, what, when, where, and why? Eventually, I called 4-1-1 and found a movie that was playing late to get her off my case.

Benny, who lived in Building D, walked over to pick me up. He wore an Adidas tracksuit with a matching White Sox cap that read "SEX" because he had blacked out part of the "O" with a sharpie. He rang the doorbell, and I warily let him in to meet my mother. She was caught off guard when he apologized that he couldn't shake her hand properly and hoped he didn't offend her. My mother instantly changed her perception about the boy that

had her son acting neurotically ever since he returned from the pool. She was so polite to him; you would have thought he was the Mayor.

"Oh, please, you must eat something before you go. The meatloaf will be ready in ten more minutes. I insist." She gestured at Benny to enter the kitchen.

"You're too kind, Ma'am. It smells delicious, but my friend Anthony is already on his way to pick us up in front of the fountains. We had planned to go to the new In-N-Out after the movie, well as long as it doesn't interfere with Denver's curfew?"

Now Benny, too, was acting strange.

"No, that is understandable. Let's call for a rain check, but please come over one night and join us for dinner. And, thank you for inviting my Denny out to the movies, ever since he had that episode at his father's..."

"Mom!"

Benny gave me a curious look.

"Sorry, sweetie, I'm just excited for you, that's all. Let me go get my coin purse to get you some extra spending money." She walked back into the kitchen, and Benny pulled me aside.

"If you don't want to get clowned, go change out of that shirt."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Anything but a turtleneck, dude."

I quickly returned in a plain white tee with a red, hooded flannel. Mother surprised me when she gave me a twenty-dollar bill and told me to buy Benny's meal too. I kissed her on the cheek and adjusted my watch before we walked out into the duskiness.

A battered two-door Camry with a cockeyed headlight pulled over, clipping the curb before coming to a complete stop. The car was clearly here to pick us up, yet the driver still honked the horn.

"Shotgun!" claimed Benny.

Feeling uneasy about the night, I was comforted to know I'd be sitting in the backseat. I attempted to squeeze in, but my foot got caught on the seatbelt, and I fell in. The husky boy wearing a Sherpa-lined denim jacket eating a nuked frozen burrito told me, "Watch out for the speaker wires, bro. I just installed some new six by nines."

Benny hopped in the front, and the car drove off. "Aye, this is Denver who moved into The Heartbreak. Denver, this is my boy Trunk."

They greeted each other with an innate head nod. Trunk proceeded to show off his handy work and cranked up the volume. With a mouthful of food, he sang along to "Come Out and Play" by The Offspring. Benny removed the overstuffed CD holder from the visor, then clipped his beeper to it, and asked, "Any word on who has dub sacks?"

"Nada, bro. I don't know anyone holding," said Trunk, tossing the cheesy bean-stained paper towel out the window.

"I paged Jimbo Baggins and Burn-a-Bowl Becka, but no one's paged back yet."

Benny grabbed the Discman, which was connected by a wired tape adapter, and swapped out the CD for Sublime. The windows were rolled down, and I could barely hear them talk over the whistling wind and blaring music. I was content with being ignored by them because I was surprisingly vibing to the music. In between songs, I heard them talking about buying alcohol.

"Wanna go down to the Circle K to shoulder tap?" suggested Trunk.

"Nah, that spots a bust. Let's first hit up The Wall to see if we can score a twomp," said Benny. He checked his beeper and, through the visor mirror, saw me trying to keep up with their conversation. "You down, Denver?"

"I'm down, homeskillet." *Dang it!* I prayed that the music was loud enough to drown my voice.

"He's a buster, bro," sighed Trunk.

Benny chuckled. "Nah, he's cool. It's just how they talk in Hollywood."

"You're from Hollywood?"

"Los Angeles, but..."

Trunk rolled up the windows and lowered the volume, and asked me, "Have you met Mel Gibson? He's the shit in *Braveheart*."

Watching me through the rearview mirror, he waited for my response, and I knew then it was not a rhetorical question.

"No, homesk... No, man, but I did meet the chihuahua from the Taco Bell commercials."

"The *Yo quiero* Taco Bell dog?" he asked.

"*Yo quiero* Taco Bell," Benny said, pronouncing the rolling "r" perfectly.

"That's the one," I confirmed.

We kept the conversation going all the way until we entered the Deerborne Shopping Center. We parked in front of a wall of payphones with a "No Loitering" sign posted above it. Benny received a page on his beeper.

A vagrant wearing a tie-dye shirt with dancing bears on it scavenged the coin return for any forgotten change. Benny plucked silver coins out of a sea of pennies from the car's ashtray to give to the homeless man - so it had seemed. The man saw the car and walked over to the driver's side. Trunk cursed as he rolled down the window.

"Trunk. Benny. What's up, dudes. Just the two bros I was looking for. Do you think I can ride with you guys?" said the disheveled young man, pulling back his long blonde hair behind his ear.

"Sorry, no hippies allowed in my whip. Plus, you reek of patchouli oil."

"Fuck you, man. That's bad karma, Trunk. It's cool if I cruise, right, Benny?"

"It's not my rig, Brother."

"Who's the Narc?"

"That's Denver from Hollywood." Benny twisted in his seat for the introduction. "This is Brother Broseph. If there is a party somewhere, Bro knows about it. He is technically a senior. As a matter of fact, he has been a senior ever since I started at Deerborne High, isn't that right, Bro?" he explained, snickering.

Flipping off Benny, he introduced himself to me. "What's up, Hollywood. Don't listen to these two fascists. Call me Bro, bro," said Broseph.

I scooted up on the seat, "It's Denver, but..." then sank back down as they continued with their conversation without me.

Broseph told them that he heard Madison was throwing a Spaghetti Dinner kegger for the jocks, but they all quickly shot that down, suggesting the party would have been lame. He suggested hitting up the skatepark to see if anyone was selling dub sacks. Benny explained he first needed to return a call from a page he received with #420-911. Benny hopped out of the car to use a payphone while Broseph continued to beg Trunk to let him ride with them. Trunk wouldn't let him in the car unless he had gas money or a joint to smoke.

"C'mon, bro, I'm broke."

"Don't care."

"Alright, bro, what if I can get you a sandwich from the deli next door? A sophomore scrub who works there owes me for buying him a pack of smokes."

Trunk looked at the advertisement posters on the window and then back at Broseph. Licking his lips, he said, "If you can get me a Hot Pastrami with..."

"Deal."

"With mustard, or we have no deal."

"Deal" could be heard as the doors closed behind the determined hippy.

Benny returned to the car, excited to tell them that it was Burn-a-Bowl Becka that paged him. Her older sister had returned from a retreat in Humboldt County with an ounce of White Widow and had an extra gram she could sell. I noticed they both used Visine and began to straighten out their outfits. Trunk stopped rubbing his hands with excitement when Benny mentioned they were at the Spaghetti Dinner party. This time, I asked Benny what exactly a Spaghetti Dinner is, and he explained it was an exclusive party hosted by girls for the jocks.

"Basically, unless you have tits, you can't get in without a letterman jacket," Trunk educated me.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"We're crashing the party," said Benny.

"That's what's up," said Trunk.

Today hadn't worked out as I planned. If we had to fight with the jocks, I doubt that Benny would be able to fight back, plus I had never been in a fight. I panicked. I feverishly checked my wristwatch for the time. I told them, "I don't know guys, it's getting kind of late. What if these guys don't let us in?"

"Calm down, Hollywood. This isn't L.A. with drive-bys. We're just going to say what's up, score some dank, and leave," said Trunk.

"Are we waiting for Bro?"

Just then, Broseph came out of the deli doing a hippy dance while whistling "Casey Jones" by The Grateful Dead. He took three steps forward and one step back while he spun the bagged sandwich like an orb. He presented a Hot Pastrami sandwich to Trunk in exchange for a ride.

"Here you go, man. With mustard, just as you ordered."

"Thanks," Trunk accepted the sandwich and furiously rolled up the window, "and go take a shower, you dirty deadbeat Deadhead."

Trunk kicked the car into gear and skidded out of the shopping center, chased by a cursing Broseph, who lost his Birkenstocks while running after his lost ride.

"Uncool, broooooo."

We parked down the block and threw our hoodies over our heads to remain incognito. We entered through the backyard gate, avoiding the horde of Polo shirts and crop tops inside the house who were swarming a keg of beer. They were relieved to find the two sisters exactly where they said they'd be. Echoes of "Happy 420" rang out of the shadows of the unlit gazebo as Benny shushed the danky duo. We sat next to them in a semi-circle, and on the wooden table laid a bottle of Jägermeister, an opened bag of chips, and a Graffix bong. Becka expressed her excitement to see her friends with hugs for Benny and Trunk.

"Dude, this party is lame. We had to move our session outside because The Meatballs are total buzzkills and won't let us smoke inside the house. Who's ready to celebrate?" said Becka.

She unsealed the jar of weed and packed the stem with a nug. The scent of skunk wafted through the crisp, night air. Trunk scooted closer to Becka to ensure he got a fresh green rip.

"Who's your friend?" Becca's sister asked Benny.

"This is Hollywood. He just moved to Deerborne."

"I dig your name. It's nice to meet you, Hollywood. I'm Skylar."

"Ditto." *Ugh!*

"Whoa, I just got some serious douche chills," said Becca.

"It's like you're in my head." Trunk stared at her with wooing eyes.

"Alright, who's ready to try a menthol bong rip?" Becca opened a red tin can of Altoids and offered a mint to everyone. "They complement the Jäger quite nicely."

We sat around that table passing the bong and the bottle around for a few rotations. Trunk somehow weaseled an extra few rips than the rest of us and finished the bag of chips. I didn't converse much as I kept watch on the sliding door. A few kids would come outside to smoke a cigarette or I would find a couple making out every so often. One guy barfed all over a planter box only to return inside the house a few moments later. Luckily, we continued to be inconspicuous in the gazebo, hidden in the safety of the darkness. Benny and Skylar both exchanged each other's beeper numbers. Trunk had begun to make out with Becca. Benny elbowed me to look and mouthed, "Oh, snap!"

"Do you have a curfew? You keep checking the time," Skylar asked me.

Before I could respond, the sliding door opened, and a penetrating voice cut through the thick blackness, "Where are they?"

A little beacon of blond hair followed by five walking monoliths headed right towards us. I cowardly yelled for Benny to look, and he quickly kicked Trunk to grab his attention; Trunk kept sucking face with Becca.

The saucy blonde stepped onto the gazebo and was still a foot shorter than her entourage. She held her red solo cup with an elitist pinky high in the air. She stammered, "Becca. Skylar. Not cool."

Becca pushed Trunk off her. The host of the party had our full attention.

"As if I would have these weirdo's come to my party. Sorry, boys, but you weren't invited and must leave."

"Fuck you, Madison," Trunk said, sharply.

"Whoa, there buddy," said the throaty Orc in a letterman jacket. He picked up the swaying girl by her waist and set her to the side. "You can talk to me like that, but you can't talk to a lady that way."

"She called us fucking weirdos. We're not bothering anyone back here, and were staying," said Trunk.

Benny and I tried to convince Trunk that we should leave, but he wouldn't move. The gigantic goon offered one last warning.

"Listen to your pals, before you embarrass yourself. If not, we can do this the hard way. Your call."

"Fuck you, Meatball. I'm squattin'."

He took a giant step up onto the gazebo. We gathered our belongings and pleaded one last time, but Trunk sat with his arms crossed, not budging an inch.

"Times up."

With the velocity of an F5 tornado, he dragged Trunk out of his seat, and with his arm behind his back, the impromptu bouncer led him towards the back gate. The girls all argued, but it sounded more like a competition of who could say "bitch" and "whatever" the most. The rest of the oafs made sure Benny and I followed. He was thrown onto the cement driveway, and we picked up a cursing Trunk off the ground.

Raging with liquid courage, Trunk tried to chase after them as they walked back into the party, but Benny held him back. I was paralyzed with fear; I didn't know if I should help or run to the car. Benny finally talked some

sense to Trunk, who eventually cooled off. From where I stood, it looked as though Trunk had been crying. Benny patted his shoulder.

"You good, now?" Benny asked.

Trunk didn't respond. He just wiped his eyes with his sleeve. On the lawn, there was a four-foot bunny left up from Easter. Benny looked around and came back with a stone painted like an Easter egg. He handed Trunk the stone.

"What would William Wallace do?"

Puzzled at the question, Trunk just held onto the stone.

"What would William Wallace do?"

Benny directed his eyes at the lawn décor. Trunk understood then. He clutched the stone, took aim, and tossed it, hitting the wooden bunny right on its cotton ball tail while bellowing, "FREEEEEDOM."

Benny called out, "Freedom," and threw a powder blue stone that completely fell short of any intended target.

Trunk continued to yell "Freedom" while he tossed pastel-colored stones at the bunny. Benny gave me an orange egg. Powerless, I held it in my hand. Benny could tell I felt conflicted, so he nudged me by telling me, "For William Wallace."

*He was right.* I tossed the heavy egg, hitting the bunny's protruding ear, breaking it off. I yelled, "Freedom," and my voice cracked from the adrenaline rush.

Trunk grabbed this large green egg and lobbed it so far up in the air, it flew over the tattered bunny and right through Madison's living room window. Trunk laughed hysterically. We all turned and ran towards the car to get the hell out of there before someone called the cops.

Back in the car, we were freaked that the police would have caught us leaving the scene of the crime. Inebriated, Trunk drove aimlessly, but had enough sense to stay off the main roads. He asked where we would go while he concentrated on holding the steering wheel at ten and two. It had gotten close to midnight, and I suggested that we head home. As much fun as we had so far, I still had an uneasy feeling. That is when Benny divulged his master plan.

"Guys, I still have that twomp I bought off Becka, plus a souvenir from the party." Benny unveiled a small clear baggy of weed and a half-drunken bottle of Jägermeister. Benny asked if Trunk still had that Swisher Sweet on him.

"Check my glove compartment. I should also have some packets of honey in there."

"But we have nowhere to go?" I contested.

"Benny, are we going to nitch and hotbox the car somewhere?"

"Nope, we're going to The Fiddy," insisted Benny.

Before I asked where that was, Benny played "Three Little Birds" on the stereo. The car had made a never-ending amount of turns as if it were Pac-Man. Benny's arm stuck out the window and swam in the wind's current like a serpent. Bob Marley serenaded me with his song; he tried to talk me off the ledge, and by the time we got to the high school's football field, I was in a better mood.

We slipped through a chained gate near the parking lot entrance. We trekked across the dark, empty football stadium and plopped down dead center on the fifty-yard line. While they rolled the honey blunt, I laid on my back and admired the breathtaking view of the stars, something you cannot see in the LA smog. The longer I

stared, the more the stars multiplied. Trunk lit the blunt and proceeded to teach me the puff, puff, pass rule as he handed it to me.

"Yo, Madison is a certified bitch," said Trunk. "She didn't have to call me Chunk in front of Becka."

We reiterated that we didn't hear her say that, but there was no convincing him.

"What bothered me the most was that I finally hooked up with Becka and was so close to getting to second base with her. I've never felt up a chick before."

"What bro, no. We totally saw you grab her tits. Isn't that right, Hollywood?"

"Oh. Yeah, man. You had a handful of breasts."

"Seriously? Fuck yeah! I'm mean, I was pretty fucked up, but I thought I felt something soft, or maybe it was firm?"

We continued to recap the night's events while taking swigs of Jäger until the blunt morphed into a roach and scurried off into the blades of grass. The stars began to swirl like a Van Gogh painting, and it was utterly intoxicating. Trunk got up to go piss behind the snack shack. We watched him walk across the field like a newborn fawn. With Trunk gone, I just had to know.

"Did Trunk get to second base with Becka?"

"No, man."

"I didn't think so."

"I didn't have the heart to ruin his night."

We both laughed, then Benny's face began to sober. I could see he tried to find the right words, and I was afraid of what he might ask.

"Why are you always checking the time?"

I didn't know how to answer his question. Not because I did not know the answer, but because I had never confided in a friend before. I began to unbuckle my watch, the watch my father gave me after the incident, the watch that he thought would help hide the shame (not mine but his) that his son could ever do something like this; I flicked the Bic and held the flame over the pink, jagged scar that ran horizontally across my wrist. Benny had no words, but his facial expression said it all. It wasn't of judgment or disgust, but more that he understood that life isn't always easy or fair.

"Earlier at the pool."

I winced.

"If you hadn't walked in."

Unable to hold it in any longer, the remorse silently rolled down my cheeks. Benny scooted over and put his arm around my shoulder. We sat alone on that empty field, under a universe of infinite stars.

After a few minutes, the soothing cool air dried up my tears, and I regained my composure. I thought I heard my stomach rumble.

"You know what, Benny?"

"What's that?"

"I'm starving. *Yo quiero* Taco Bell."

He laughed. "Me too, dawg. Let's get Trunk and hit the drive-thru on the way home. Where is he anyway?"

We stood up, pulled our hoodies over our heads, and looked around. That is when we saw Trunk near the snack shack... getting arrested! At that exact moment, flashlights spotted our location. I heard a squelch, followed by, "We found them."

"5-0! Run," said Benny.

My gut sank, and we ran toward a bright orange security light at the far end of a soccer field - I knew that had to be where we escape. I followed Benny under the moonlight, doing my best not to trip and fall. Even though we had a big head start, it felt like the cops were just a few feet behind us. I could hear the keys jangle, the chatter on their walkie talkie's, and them yelling at us to stop - everything amplified in the dark. We made it to the chain-linked fence together, and I hopped it, scraping my body over the jagged teeth on the top rail. I didn't care about the pain; I just wanted to get over as fast I could. When I made it over, I turned and saw Benny struggle to grip the thin wired fence, and just past him, I saw the cops closing in on us. I yelled at Benny to hurry, but he just couldn't climb over.

"I can't!" yelled Benny. "Don't you see? I can't grip the fence." He showed me the red wired marks on his hands.

"Then I'll climb over and give you a lift."

"No, you'll never make it in time - Just bail."

"I'm not going to leaving without you."

"Go, before it's too late. Don't worry, I promise, every little thing is gonna be alright."

He winked at me, and I believed him. He had never given me a reason not to. I ran into the tree line, and I turned around to watch him surrender. The cops instructed him to raise his hands and turn around. As soon as he did, the security light casted a razor-sharp silhouette of a monstrous Praying Mantis. The cops called out.

"HE'S GOT A WEAPON. HE'S GOT A WEAPON."

Every year on that day, I take that long drive to visit my mother in her apartment at the Heartbreak Hotel. In the afternoon, I slip away for a few hours, and I'm still amazed to see kids standing near the fountains waiting for their every-other-weekend parent to pick them up and take them out for pizza and ice cream. Firstly, I head to The Wall, where the payphones are now gone, but the "No Loitering" sign remains. When I enter Mary Jane's Deli, which is named after Trunk and Becka's firstborn daughter, I order the infamous Hot Pastrami sandwich, and we sit down and catch up on the years passed. Not wanting to miss it, I take off and cruise past the high school where they have yet to take down the note from its electronic message board "Happy Easter." Once inside the Deerborne Cemetery, I rest my watch on his headstone and wait for the time hands to strike 4:20 p.m. before I flick the Bic.

