
Insanity By Increments Stories

ALARIC P CABILING



Foreword

I was 12 years old when I discovered literature. My first attempts at writing were influenced by literary classics. Reading Edgar Allan Poe proved exhilarating at the time, and as I discovered other authors like Mary Shelley and Nathaniel Hawthorne, I became infatuated with the pursuit of a career in creative writing.

Sure, as a child, I had already started reading books like *Choose Your Own Adventure*, but did not foster a love for the creative process until much later. After one of my teachers recommended Poe's stories as the subject of a book report, I became tantalized with the creative process, fashioning tales out of ideas and little else.

My early artifacts of writing were primitive in scope and plot, and showed a tendency to use large words and effusive language. Perhaps drawn to the world of Victorian Era England introduced by my early influences, I only succeeded in writing stories that fell short in comparison to them.

It took many years of getting panned and many years of quiet contemplation to realize that my first manuscripts were headed in the wrong direction. After much prodding from writer and editor friends many years later in the United States, my artistic vision took on a whole other dynamic—using simpler language when it was appropriate.

After streamlining *Insanity By Increments* in the course of eight years, I finally decided that it was ready for the mainstream audience. The road has been long and frustrating, but the satisfaction with the results has been rewarding.

Here therefore, are nine stories that best represent my evolution as a writer for eight years since the first drafts were written by me. I hope you like reading them as much as I have enjoyed working on them.

Cheers!

- Alaric

Once Found, Once More Forsaken

I drifted in and out of sleep throughout the night. The shadows danced across the white ceiling, cast against the radiance of a street lamp. The wind flailed the bare branches, battering houses, while rain fell in heavy torrents and running water surged through once dry canals. Along the empty streets, no one ventured through the storm.

At some point in the wee hours of the morning, I heard less of the rain and sweeping winds. The consistent thrumming of rain on windowsills softened into a sprinkling, and the raging winds became a soft chilling zephyr in the night. By first light, the clouds were still overcast, but the rain and winds collectively died out. Debris lined the roads leading into town.

My brother would arrive from Rhode Island that morning. He hadn't had a permanent address in some time, moving from one location to another. In spite of

the fact that I was the only family he kept in contact with, I had trouble keeping up with him. He had always been a rather mercurial sort, the more enigmatic of the two of us, despite being more physically gifted and more fortunate in either of our career aspirations. He was a nomad too frequently prone to finding himself bored with a place. He would show up on my front door one day and move to god-knows-where the next.

Being wealthy, he never came to me for money. He owned several properties, which he leased to business owners. He had a property management team doing his work, often making important decisions via his cell phone while he trekked through the woods, or while sipping a piña colada on the beach off the coast of Costa Rica looking absolutely incognito in long shorts and a dirty white t-shirt, or wasting away time in a derelict manse he had rented for the summer months

off the outskirts of Lyon, sipping a fine Chardonnay in a wine glass while he leafed through his favorite magazines and listened to his favorite records.

I kept a picture he had sent me from his heydays in South America, in which he looked like a local, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt tucked in a pair of khaki shorts, reminding me of a Banana Republic ad. His smile made an impression on people. In that picture, a portal into a tear in the fabric of time and space, he smiled like his soul had left him for somewhere, and he was still giving chase.

I can imagine the places Marc had traveled to throughout his nomadic solitary voyage in search of himself: an opium house in Calcutta, an after-hours bar in Rio de Janeiro, a red light district in Amsterdam. These were the places he was less likely to admit he had been to at least once, or worse, more often.

After driving some distance down Patterson Ave., I pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall. As I was walking up to the entrance of a store, I noticed a black BMW sedan, with a custom plate that seemed vaguely familiar. I tried to forget it.

I picked up a loaf of bread as well as some deli meat, knowing my brother would love them. Hard salami was, in fact, his favorite. It was one of the last items on my list. I had bought the rest of it before the storm passed through.

I asked the cashier if the storm had an impact on business, and he said no, business was running as usual. I was about to take my bags and walk out of the store when I noticed a woman staring at me from the service desk. I contemplated saying hello for a moment, but I didn't need to.

“Excuse me, but is your name Ronaldo, by any chance?”

“Yes,” I replied, smiling. “It is. My friends call me Ron. Ron Stevenson.”

She smiled and gestured to the service clerk to hold her purchase for a second. She turned back towards me. Her lips, once more, curled into a smile.

I remembered who she was at that instant. Her name was Lara. She was my brother's ex-girlfriend from high school. For the most part, Marc had seemed indifferent towards her, which wasn't unusual.

Marc would invite her to spend time with us during Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I remember our mom having liked her. She smiled a lot, and giggled at our dad's jokes. She took an interest in a few of my art projects in high school, telling me she was a frustrated artist. "I can't figure out how to do a decent painting if I tried," she'd said at the time.

She and Marc would often hang out at an ice cream shop after school, and spend time together working as clerks at an office during summers when school was out. I remember that the cheerleaders loved super-cool Marc, but Marc chose to date Lara instead. Lara was the theater club's best actress. She was also Miss Congeniality at a local beauty pageant.

She was an obvious choice for Marc. She was beautiful and kind but, in many ways, Marc appeared to be an odd choice for her. Marc might have gotten to school on a street bike and had backstage passes to the coolest rock concerts, but he was always cold inside. He took to staring at things in his junior year. Things like stained glass, calligraphy, and ornate patterns of ivy in the backyard.

The town's fascination with him went unreciprocated. Whatever unwarranted admiration people had for him went by unnoticed.

The same could have been said about Lara and her own admiration towards him.

"Hello, Ron. It's so nice to see you again," she said, her pale white cheeks blushing a little. "Are you managing well after the storm?"

"Yes, I am," I replied. "My house is fine; a few branches are scattered around the lawn. Haven't seen you in years. Are you back in town permanently?"

"Yeah. I moved back two years ago with my husband. He lived around here years ago, too, before we all went to college. His name is Francesco. Do you remember him?"

"Francesco Vidal?" I was startled. The valedictorian?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"Ahh ..."

I paused and looked around me instinctively, searching for Francesco. My brother had disliked Francesco very much in their high school days. He was always full of himself, Marc used to say.

Francesco used to date a girl named Francine back then, and I can remember everyone saying how Francine worked so hard to be popular. She and Francesco were two of a kind.

“Listen. I have to go. My brother should be arriving any minute,” I told her. “It was nice seeing you.”

“Your brother ... you mean Marc?” she asked. A sound of something splintering seemed to accompany the question.

“Yes,” I said.

“Ohh ...”

The thought occurred to me that she suddenly regretted running into me.

The moment seemed to last for an eternity. I might have known to say something about Marc’s arrival sooner. She began to look confused. Dazed, she looked at her watch, and then towards the bag of goods on the counter by the service desk. The clerk had left it there for her to pick up. She looked back at me, unsure what to say. I felt the same way.

“Tell him I said hi,” she said.

She smiled, picked up her bag of goods, and walked out of the store while I watched her, dumbfounded, still trapped in the awkward moment.

I quietly did the same. I glanced behind me to see if I had held up the line, but saw nobody. I walked out of the door at about the moment the black BMW drove past with Lara inside. I looked at my watch, put the bag in the trunk of the car and left.

* * *

The encounter brought a strange vibe to the drive home. I tried to forget about it and looked forward to seeing Marc for the first time. I hadn’t seen him in five months when he’d flown in from Australia. The air had an unusual odor, one that seemed to have followed the storm, with the rising waters replenishing the stagnant pools of the bog.

I rolled the windows back up due to the vapor. A twitch of my nose couldn’t do enough to dissuade the foul stench that drifted about an old plantation swallowed up by the rising floodwaters. I turned the radio on and flicked through several stations, eventually settling on one as soon as I realized that I was running out of options.

A short drive after I veered off the main road, I pulled into the driveway of my house and found Marc sitting at the front step. He wore a black leather coat with a blue denim shirt underneath. His

hair was slicked back the way it was in high school. He grinned at the sight of the Saab but didn't get up.

"Nice car. Is that new? You're five minutes late, by the way. I told you I'd get here by eight."

"Marc, lucky devil. Look at you. Nothing's changed. You said you were coming around eight, not at precisely that. I picked some stuff up for you."

"Ronaldo, I said I was coming at eight, not eight ten, which is when you decided to show up. You're starting to have an old man's memory."

"Where's your car?"

"Out back."

He pointed towards the backyard, somewhere beside the garage.

"Is that all you've brought?"

He was holding a duffel bag. He must have passed by our old house at Glenside before coming, where he would have packed a few clothes. I was under the impression that he would stay at my place for the duration of his stay in Richmond but, with Marc, anything was likely and everything was likely to change.

"Yeah," he said. "I pack light."

"Sure."

I opened the door and we went inside. Marc set his bag down by the steps to the second floor.

"By the way, Ronaldo, look outside the kitchen window."

"What for?"

"It's a surprise."

I peered out the window through the blinds and saw a black Lamborghini Murciélago. It looked magnificent. My backyard had never looked as good as it did at that moment.

"Wow!" I said. "That must have cost a fortune!"

Marc began to pour himself some whiskey from the flask set in front of the bar. He looked back at me as I took a glance up front towards my upstaged car.

"It did," he answered, "and it's a hell of a lot faster than your car."

"I bet."

I took my turn at the flask of whiskey and poured myself a glass. Marc: always the more fortunate, easily the more gifted. With Marc, everything comes in abundance. The way he's made it abun-

dantly clear every time he's come to see me that nothing was likely to happen as planned.

* * *

I found Marc outside in the garden sometime after I changed into some more comfortable clothing. He stooped over something that I couldn't see, as his back obscured my view. The sun never had a chance to shine, still covered by clouds trailing the eye of the storm. The clouds grew darker and puffier as time went on.

I finally decided to reel Marc in before the rains fell. I opened the glass door to the garden but didn't call out. Instead, I walked towards him quietly, without the intention of surprising him. He would have already known I was coming.

I then found him stooped over what seemed to be a lone dandelion flower amongst the grass, which hadn't been cut since a few days before the storm had passed. The lawn hadn't become overrun with the wildflowers. It was in fact the only one that I noticed. Marc cupped the flower with both hands and looked up towards me as I stood there, unsure of what I was witnessing.

"I have a soft spot for dandelions," he said. His smile looked sincere. He then opened his hands to expose the flower. It swayed gently with the breeze as he held it there. His eyes remained fixed on the flower.

"Strange," I said. But it wasn't. Not for Marc. I half expected him to spout off some imaginative explanation regarding its importance but, no, there was nothing. There was just the surreal moment, the smile, the hollow eyes, and the ever-present awkward silence.

He then cut the flower off by the stem, and held it between his fingers. He stood up and paused for a while. As he looked up into the sky, I suddenly felt the strange urge to follow suit, so I looked up, unsure of what we were looking at – gray clouds, what else? I looked back towards him and found that his eyes were now closed. Yet he was smiling, reveling in something arcane, something lost to me. I felt the vague notion that I had taken him too seriously. As usual, he enshrouded the most menial with a semblance of mystery. And yet, this was not a façade.

"Why did you kill it?" I asked him, unsure of what answer lay brewing deep

within him, not at all sure of what was happening.

His eyes flitted to mine, dancing at the absurdity of the question. He began to walk away, sniffing at the doomed dandelion in his grasp.

“It looks like it’s about to rain,” he said.

He pulled the sliding door open and went in.

Suddenly, the rain poured, and I was left standing there getting drenched for a few moments before I hurriedly made my way inside.

* * *

It was six in the evening, and Marc and I were having dinner. He seemed a little more animated, talking about his temporary lodging in Rhode Island, which stood by the coast. We didn’t have anything special on hand, except turkey breast and gravy, along with some wraps filled with the hard salami and prosciutto that he loved. He had promised me a drive in his Lamborghini. We would go in the morning, after breakfast. We planned on hiking up a trail in a woodland close by.

He began to take one of the wraps from the serving tray when I remembered running into Lara. I wasn’t sure what he would have to say.

“Is she well?” he asked, his eyes cast down, busy with the food on his plate.

“She seemed all right,” I said. “You know that she’s married now ...”

It was both a question and a statement. Marc took a paper towel and wiped the edges of his mouth. The paper towel seemed as clean as it had been prior to him doing so.

“Married to who?” he asked.

I was certain he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“Francesco.”

“Hmmm ...”

He carried on eating without making eye contact. I hadn’t entertained the possibility that he might have been in love with Lara, owing to my belief in the contrary, that he actually never loved her. His coldness didn’t baffle me. Periods of uncomfortable silence seem to find their way often into conversations with Marc. I thought it wise to break the cold silence with a more pleasant topic. He was the first to speak, however.

“I hope she’s happy,” he said. “Now then, what’s on TV?”

He proceeded to take his dirty dishes to the sink. I, on the other hand, still had some food left on my plate. “Anything you want to watch is fine,” I conceded. I was familiar with him, wasn’t I? He would grow restless if he hadn’t had a say. The final say, no less.

“Great!” he exclaimed.

* * *

Suddenly, Lara was running through the field. She lifted the train of her dress as she made her way towards a thinning patch of woods. Beyond this patch of dead trees, the swamp awaited. I wasn’t sure how I knew this, only that I did, without question.

She hurried through the trees; the train of her dress was visibly soiled. She looked sad. She slowly made her way through the swampland, and the stagnant pools rose up to her knees. With each advancing step into the heart of the bog she plunged into it further – further and further beneath. The waters now pooled about her waist, and she stopped there, deep in the heart of the murky water. She found her way to a certain spot,

as though she knew exactly where she needed to be. Her head tilted towards the clouds above. Her long blonde hair flowed about her shoulders. Her arms swept the black waters. She stood there in that pose for a few seconds, before she lowered herself down. The blonde hairs took on the color of earth. For a moment, they languished on the water’s surface, and in the next they disappeared into its depths, never to return.

The night passed, and I felt rather thirsty. First light was quietly breaking and the darkness was slowly dissipating. I gingerly made my way to the kitchen where I found my guest unexpectedly awaiting.

Marc was sitting on a chair, his hand cupped around a dark steaming beverage. He looked up at me, smiling as he did so, stirring his drink.

“Morning coffee,” he said, smiling sheepishly as though he had been caught red-handed doing something he wasn’t supposed to.

“I like to watch the light break through,” he continued, looking away. The blinds were parted. A hint of the fleeting darkness made itself known in a portion of the sky that had the color of ash.

“What are you doing up so early?” he asked, the smile becoming evident once more. He was almost treating conversation like a chess match.

“I had a dream,” I said. “A strange one. I dreamt Lara was running into the bog in a white satin dress.”

He turned his gaze from me that instant and looked past me with a puzzled expression. I turned around and saw only the smooth painted surface of the door by which I had entered. I looked back at him to find him staring at his drink once more, as though nothing had happened.

“Dreams are mostly strange,” he said, unflinchingly.

“Life,” he continued, “is sometimes stranger.”

* * *

The Lamborghini roared down Patterson, heading deeper into Goochland. Marc had let me drive as he had promised; it was my first time in such an exotic car. I held onto the wheel mightily with every tap of the accelerator. The car responded to each prodding with brute force, sending us careening down the open road. Marc didn't seem in awe of the car's power as much as I was. He

seemed content to enjoy it, though, as long as I did. We reached the trail further into the heart of the woodland. Tall trees lined the two-lane road. Their overcast branches devoid of leaves seemed unable to contain the loud roar of the car's exhaust note. The sound might have been invasive, but there was no one in close proximity to hear. As it was, this part of the county was deserted.

We stopped beside a clearing where the trail began. Marc didn't seem nervous about leaving the car. He led me into the trail, which snaked its way through the thicket. The sky was a pallid gray. Beneath our coats, the winter's chill made its presence felt just enough. The wind only succeeded to worsen it.

Two miles from where we started, we slowly began to inch our way into a large pond that lay in the heart of the forest. We couldn't see it from the trail. It wasn't the thin patch of trees that shielded our view. Instead, a mist densely coated the dank air around the pond.

We then chose to brave the elements and explore further. Marc was easily the more adventurous, as I merely happened to come along less than willingly. He looked back at me and smiled sarcastically.

cally. "If anything grabs you, just holler," he said. I smirked at him, and he carried on, vanishing into the thick damp fog while I strained to follow after.

We stood before the pond in the heart of the woodland, the heart of the trail, surrounded by a circular wall of mist. Once we cleared the mist, we couldn't see the trail from whence we came. Up ahead, I noticed Marc stooped down over something by the pond. The whole scene was awash with the colors of smoke and ash. The water was a pallid mirror of the wan sky above it. That was, until I noticed just what it was that Marc was stooped over.

"Who would do such a thing?" I asked Marc, coming up closer, bending down to get a closer view at what he was looking at.

Marc left me examining the first dead swan. He went ahead and inspected another one, which was located close by, along the edge of the pond. The scene stood in juxtaposition with a harsher reality: that anyone could ultimately destroy anything for any reason. Marc seemed to hold a respect for this fine line between order and absolute chaos.

"Someone who doesn't like swans," he said.

He proceeded to touch the lifeless body when I tried to stop him. "Don't," I said. "You don't know how long it's been here."

"They haven't been here long," he answered. "These wounds are fresh."

He waded his fingers in the pool of water, crimson with the bird's blood. Blood still spilled from its exit wounds, coloring the cadaverous pond. He stood up suddenly, then appeared to say something.

"Damn."

He stood there, surveying the landscape of barren forest and mist.

I stood there for a while and thought that I might possibly bury the poor swan, as well as the others. The deep crimson hue gushed from the black smudge that lined its wound. I thought to touch it then, somehow feel its rendition of injustice, its premature death.

"Let's go, Ron. Nothing more we can do for them."

I turned around to watch Marc disappear back into the mist. There was something more subtle manifesting, some-

thing revealing itself through this strange scenario of cold-hearted violence.

* * *

We aimed to stop by the store to replenish our stock of groceries. Marc had nearly finished off the deli meat, slowly eating each slice.

“You eat those strips of meat like they’re candy. Or like a dog going through a bag of treats.”

“Did I ever mention to you that you sleep too long?” Mark responded. “Like you have both feet in the grave.”

I said nothing.

“You take from Mom and Dad.” Mark didn’t seem to notice my silence. “Remember?”

I did. Marc was right. Our parents had been long-sleepers.

But neither of them made a habit of gorging on deli meat.

In the store, Marc and I went our separate ways. As expected, I ran into him at the deli section, where he appeared perplexed by his array of choices. I left him there, and headed to the canned soup section, when I happened by Lara. I thought running into her seemed like an

odd coincidence. She was holding a can, reading the nutrition label aloud to herself, and hadn't noticed me yet. I thought about saying hello but quickly remembered Marc, who was an aisle away from us, and thought of the possible awkwardness of a chance encounter, as I wasn't fully aware of the details that surrounded their breakup. She looked up towards me in a heart-stopping moment, though, and I was obliged to acknowledge her. Marc suddenly made his way along the corner of the aisle behind me, approaching us as we exchanged some pleasantries. I knew Marc was behind me by the expression on Lara's face.

“My, this is a small town,” I said. “I assume you both remember each other.”

“Oh yes, brother,” Marc retorted. “Lara, how nice to see you again.”

“How nice to see you, Marc. My God, how long has it been?”

“A long time.”

Lara clearly looked uncomfortable. Marc smiled contiguously, seemingly in his own natural element.

“So I hear you’re married now,” he said.

“Of course,” Lara replied to him, gesturing with the ring on her finger.

It was my turn to speak. “It was nice running into you again, Lara.” I hoped to end the awkward exchange as quickly as it had started.

“It was nice,” Lara replied. She flashed a smile, only for her lips to contort into a hapless, pained expression that sapped Marc’s air of confidence. She made her way between us further down the aisle. Marc said nothing more, however.

“Where are you guys headed?” she asked suddenly.

Puzzled, Marc and I exchanged a short meaningless look before answering her question. His eyes drew a blank expression, slyly obscured by his smile.

“We’re headed to the bookstore after lunch,” I said, finally. “Haven’t been there in a while.”

She smiled, nodded, and went along her way. Marc and I tried to return to the task at hand. I felt like prodding him further. I wondered about how close they’d been in high school, but I abandoned the thought altogether, realizing that it might have been awkward. I’d much rather Marc come out and explain it on his own.

Later on, Marc seemed rather cheerful at lunch. He had gotten himself more of his favorite deli meats. This time there was more of the prosciutto on his plate. He’d also gotten some country ham, which he shared with me. The prosciutto was off limits.

“Is that all you ever eat?” I asked. I watched him. He took the slices of meat and lowered them into his mouth slowly, piece by piece, devouring the short thin strips happily.

He smiled sheepishly, aware that I was watching him. He took another slice and went on with the routine, doing it again and again.

* * *

We had stopped by our childhood home at Glenside to pick up a few items before we made our trip to the bookstore. Not wanting to attract attention, we had parked the Lamborghini back at my place and decided on my Saab for our commute. Marc found going incognito agreeable, in sharp contrast to what ownership of such a vehicle like his Lambo would suggest.

The house in Glenside was larger than mine, but not by much. The lot was much larger, however. It also had a

larger property value, located in a more upscale subdivision without it screaming the word ‘upscale.’ He rarely came by there, and I couldn’t understand why he kept it, except that maybe he didn’t have the heart to put it up for sale. Knowing Marc, the places he’s been and the places he’s seen, this explanation seemed unlikely, but it was as viable an explanation as any.

I was waiting in my car for him to return. He should have been back, so I grew impatient and went in after him. I killed the engine, left the car in the driveway, and circled around back, knowing his back door would be open. He had left it open in case I wanted to use the bathroom or get something to drink.

There was a small vineyard. All that was left of the vines were desiccated stems that hung about the woodwork, and the fountain that stood below it was covered with mold. The bushes needed pruning and the grass was long, overrunning the patches of ground from which they had grown. The pungent smell of decay diffused all throughout the place, the way it had after the storm passed through the swampy areas of Manakin-Sabot. Everywhere it was dark-green and wet with grime and sludge like jungle rot. I quickly left the derelict scene.

I went inside the house and the only light to be had was from a window at the far end of the hallway. As I came closer, I noticed a room to the right with the door open. When I peeked inside, Marc had his back turned to me. He seemed to have focused all of his attention on an aquarium. A light emanated from deep within one of its ornaments – a lighthouse. I approached him, asking him what was taking so long. “Marc,” I said. “I thought we just had to pick some stuff up. What gives?”

The fishes were of a tapestry of colors that dazzled the eye, providing rich contrast to the seemingly monochromatic wash of light and shadow that filled the room. Marc, however, had his eye on his prize: a Fortune Lobster of a faded maroon color, small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand, poised at the bottom of the aquarium.

“You find most of them in Asia,” he said. “They bring you good luck.”

“They can live in your refrigerator,” he continued. “Should you feel the need to abandon them for a while.”

“All you have to do is feed them, or give them enough food.”

He had a smile on his face, watching the strange diminutive creature forage through the sand at the bottom of the aquarium.

It was all too weird for me. Too Marc. Yet, I preferred his choice of pets to some people's preference for snakes or wild animals. I wouldn't object.

"I just had to feed him," he said, finally. "We can go now."

And so we did.

* * *

The bookstore was located in the vicinity of a movie theater and large mall. Just like in the grocery store, Marc went his way and I went mine. We'd always had varying tastes in what to read, sometimes making recommendations to each other, sometimes making random choices on the spur of the moment, never quite reading the same things. Today, things weren't any different.

Marc went up the escalator to browse the literature section. I made my way to the music section to browse titles at random, not knowing specifically what I wanted. It was a while before I got through some of the new releases, without finding anything in particular to be interesting. I looked through the jazz

and classical sections and found that the albums I found most appealing were already in my collection at home. I decided to see what Marc was doing.

Marc was on the second floor speaking to someone I didn't recognize at first. Coming closer, I began to make out a vague resemblance of the woman. She threw herself at Marc and kissed him. Marc didn't appear thrilled with the gesture, his arms sort of jolting. But then, he appeared to just go along with it.

Eventually, he turned away from the woman, and she gave him a puzzled expression. Then, she turned away, apologizing. It was Lara. Her husband, Francesco, turned the corner behind them, just as I was about to turn into the aisle.

I suddenly turned back from the corner of the bookshelf, but stayed in earshot of the three of them. Francesco spoke first.

"Hello," he said to Marc. Lara interrupted him before he could speak further.

"Frank, this is Marc. Marc Stevenson," she said with a low voice, struggling to hide her embarrassment and surprise.

“Hello, Marc. I still remember. We went to high school together.”

“Of course,” Marc said. “Who could forget?”

“You and Lara used to date. I remember. I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“I’m here visiting my brother,” Marc answered.

Marc successfully managed to hide his embarrassment, unsure whether Francesco knew anything. Anyone who knew Marc would have known it was difficult to catch him off guard.

“We were just chatting,” Lara said. “Marc and I haven’t seen each other in years.”

This managed to spur another moment of hesitation from Marc, as he knew full well that he and I had just seen her at the grocery store, and we had informed her of our impending visit to the bookstore. I had no doubt that she hadn’t just bumped into him by coincidence. The lull in the conversation allowed me to jump in.

“We meet again,” I told Lara, entering the aisle behind them. “I suppose this is Francesco?”

“Yes, Ronaldo. This is Frank,” Lara said. Confidence completely shaken, she still managed a smile. Marc attempted to diffuse the tension.

“Francesco, here’s my brother Ronaldo. Ron, you remember Francesco Vidal, don’t you?”

Marc sensed that I understood. I took his cue and shook Francesco’s hand promptly. “How do you do?” I said. Francesco reciprocated my greeting by saying hello. I took a glance at Lara. She was fidgeting with the ends of her jacket, pulling it taut in a display of nervousness. We glanced at each other. The little cat and mouse game had come so far without gain, I thought. Marc, in turn, glanced at me as if to cue me in to say something, as I am frequently obliged to end all exchanges of pleasantries whenever necessary.

“It was nice running into both of you,” I said to them.

“Same to you both,” Francesco said. “Maybe you could join us when we go hunting up there in Goochland County sometime. We hunt game birds there. I go with a few of my friends.”

He then gathered himself in his long coat and proceeded to place a hand on Lara's back, ushering her to say goodbye to me and Marc.

"Are game birds the only birds you hunt?" Marc asked.

I immediately understood the connection he'd made, but made no attempt to speak further. Francesco's facial expression visibly changed for a moment before he attempted to conceal it by brushing it off with a smile and a casual laugh, saying he didn't understand what Marc meant.

"Oh, I was just curious to know if you hunt anything else besides game birds because that might get boring after a while. I was just thinking," Marc said in response.

"I know what you mean. Well, nice to see you both," Francesco said.

"See you guys around," Lara said, shyly.

We both wished them well. There was no change in Marc's expression. His blank smile appeared fit for any occasion, be it a most unusual one. This scenario seemed to qualify.

Francesco and Lara went their way while Marc and I went ours. We stood from a distance and watched them go down the escalator and, afterwards, exit the building. Still smiling, he turned away and began to lead me into another section of the store. He wanted me to say something, but words wouldn't come at once. Therefore he found it appropriate to clue me in.

"She's still in love with me," he said, almost blankly. "She kissed me over there."

"I saw."

"That plus our little discovery. It seems rather trivial at this point to know that the man she's married to has a great apathy for natural beauty – swans aren't exactly game birds, are they?"

"Do you think he knows?"

Marc shot a look at me suddenly. It was as if he hadn't quite realized the possibility. It only took a second for him to relax, and his taut facial muscles renewed their earlier symmetry of parts, lazily curving into an expression of innocence that seemed all too familiar with him. "I don't know," he said. "Does it matter?" He appeared uninterested with whatever possible response there would be.

“I was just wondering,” I answered.

“I hadn’t realized ...” Marc said, trailing off.

“Realized what?” I asked.

“That she still loved me,” he said.

* * *

The drive home was peculiar. We seemed to have reached a pinnacle in awkward situations with the last encounter. We were going down West Broad Street on our way home. I was to drop Marc off at my place and head to a meeting with my boss. I worked as a graphics designer and illustrator, and did most of my work at home. I didn’t quite have Midas’ Touch like my brother had, but I had been able to put together a nice living for myself. The meeting would last about half an hour at my estimate but, just then, I couldn’t quite leave the last conversation as it ended. It dawned on me that Marc himself knew this and, consequently, the awkward silence fell upon us both. I sought to change this.

“I wonder if we ought to stay away from her altogether.”

Marc laughed out loud, and quite appropriately so. He reached out to the console to turn the radio off. I might have interpreted this as an invitation to delve

further into his thoughts on the matter, but Marc was often the most distant at his most vulnerable.

“If she still does ...” I began my question.

“Does what?” he answered.

“Still does love you ...”

I felt his presence deteriorate somewhat, as if he were dissipating in consciousness, aware that I had found a kink in the armor.

“If she still does, did you love her then? Did you love her at all?”

* * *

The meeting went as well as could be hoped. I was assigned to a promotional campaign for a publication, to handle some of the design aspects of the proposal. My last project was a sound success and I found that this assignment would add to my list of accomplishments. I couldn’t wait to tell Marc, who was at my home, tasked with entertaining himself in the midst of boredom, perhaps playing the piano like he sometimes did in melancholy fashion.

I arrived at my house to find the Lamborghini gone. Marc must’ve decided to take a drive, I thought to myself. Having made the decision to start work early, I

headed to the kitchen to make some tea, which I would sip at my desk while brainstorming new ideas. As I was doing so, I found the note on the dining table, saying that Marc had left. He had packed his belongings and departed for god-knows-where, as he was prone to doing, having done so repeatedly in past visits. His note stated that he would call at a suitable time; he said he had some urgent business. I, like in so many other instances, refused to believe him.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. I wondered if Marc had forgotten something. This was starting to look like a botched-up attempt to once more predicate his impulses over his common sense, but it didn't seem like him. Marc was as unapologetic as one could be. Coming back to say he'd made a mistake must be a gravely difficult thing for him to admit so I mostly dismissed the notion he would do this. Who, then, loomed just beyond the front door? I wasn't expecting anyone.

"Hi," Lara said as I opened the door.

"Lara," I said. "What a surprise!"

But, it wasn't. The previous meeting wasn't mere coincidence. I hadn't lost my sense of hospitality, but it couldn't have occurred at a worse time. Marc had,

once more, morphed into an escape artist.

"Ron, is Marc home?" she asked.

"No. He isn't. Lara, he left. Suddenly. As he sometimes does." As he always does, actually. "I don't know where he is, or where he's gone. I'm sorry."

"No. That's ok," she said, fidgeting. "I shouldn't be here, you know? I just wanted to see him ..."

All I could do was nod in agreement. I'd never been much use consoling the disconsolate.

"Frank is waiting for me..." her voice trailed off softly.

"Are you and Frank all right?"

"Well, we're ok. I guess. I just wanted to talk to Marc. I mean ... I'm sorry. I have to go."

It was the last time I would see Lara. Shortly after, I heard that she and Francesco moved to neighboring North Carolina due to Francesco's business venture there. She neither said goodbye nor attempted to contact Marc or me again. I heard from a friend of theirs that she and Francesco were rumored to have had their problems through the years, Francesco being a rather volatile man be-

hind the mask of civility. Marc and I perhaps had witnessed a token of that, a manifestation of his grim personality.

As for Marc, I sometimes wondered whether to speak to him about what had transpired during his visit, and yet saw no need to question his feelings for I knew what they had been, or what they were. He felt nothing. As cold as he was, it wasn't my place to judge a man who hadn't wronged anyone. For all his composure, he certainly managed to make a splendid mess of things.

I visited his place at Glenside to care for his fish. He'd left the key underneath a stone in the path, and I let myself in. He'd obviously taken the Fortune Lobster with him and left the fish there, which had outlived their usefulness to him, like we all seem to do in Marc's universe –expendable unless we matter somehow, valuable until he deems otherwise.

The lobster depicted a rare example of Marc's capacity for kindness. The fish, once found, once more forsaken, held little value to him. Like I often did. Like Lara did, perhaps.

I remembered the conversation as it unwound between us before his last exodus from Richmond.

“Did you love her then?” I had asked him. “Did you love her at all?”

A breath of silence had swept the invisible air between us. A bond exists between disparate individuals who admit to the same singular truth and understand this within the same singular context. I realized, as was often the case, that neither of us could keep secrets from each other without the other stumbling upon them.

“Do you love her?” I asked him.

“No. I don't,” he replied finally.

“In fact,” he continued. “I never did.”

The Illusion Of Progress

Saul crept up from behind me in the hallway. His feet barely marked their steps on the soft carpet as he tiptoed quietly, but I was aware of him, and I was intent on surprising him myself. I reached the third room on the second floor, which was the last one before the hallway led to the terrace. This was where we planned to have breakfast that morning, overlooking the gardens; beyond them, the woods still cradled a slight tinge of the dissipating darkness. I turned around and lifted him up with a swoop. He squealed with glee. “Daddy,” he said. “You knew all this time.”

“But of course I did,” I told him. He smiled down at me, and something broke inside of me, like always. If the world were to be destroyed, I couldn’t think of anyone else I would rather have with me; that smile would give me hope in spite of everything.

I set him down and mussed his dark hair gently. He ran to his room to make his bed and get dressed. He was a smart

boy. Only eight years old, he didn’t need a word of Daddy’s advice on what to wear.

Our breakfast was ready. Saul sat at the table, prim and proper as expected, his hair combed back, his white shirt clean and pressed perfectly. He greeted me with a wry smile, widening at the sight of breakfast. “I’m hungry,” he declared.

I smiled.

“Ready for school, son?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Ready for work, Dad?”

I noticed how Saul had taken it upon himself to ask that question. His mother used to ask me that herself at breakfast. Back then, I would have thought him too young to take note of the question. They’d told us early on, though, that Saul was gifted. His aptitude tests provided the evidence. He was also gifted with a radiant personality. After his mother left us, he was all I clung to, all I had left in the world.

“I most certainly am,” I told him.

I speared a mound of scrambled eggs with a fork and ate it, glancing at him as I chewed. Breakfast usually came and went rather quietly. We often ate in near silence, smiling at each other intermittently around mouthfuls of food. Saul was a quiet boy, at least by my standards. He watched the Discovery Channel with me without ever asking if we could change the channel. Eventually, I noticed that he took to watching it on his own. Once while we were watching the Travel Channel, he began murmuring to himself, repeating sounds on the screen. A few days later, he practiced them for me: a few timid sentences in Japanese.

“No hurry, Saul. You have plenty of time.” Saul had begun to eat at a brisker pace.

Saul grinned and chewed his eggs more slowly. “You put cheese and onions in them this time.”

I nodded, understanding the significance of the comment. It was the way his mother used to make them.

“Will you ever find someone to replace Mom?” he asked me then.

My jaw dropped slightly. I was forced to swallow a mouthful of food before I felt ready to answer. His curious eyes were awaiting my response.

“No, Saul. I have no plans of replacing anyone.”

He resumed eating, seemingly content with my response. I wondered whether he was worried that I would find someone, having sensed perhaps that I was lonely. It was strange for a child his age to consider such a thing, no matter how true it was. On days when the loneliness was most palpable, it would seem like romantic love had found its way to everyone. Couples were everywhere – some happy and some merely content to have company. Romantic love, I speculated, had as much to do with true love as fantasy had to do with reality. Romance was grand while it lasted.

I couldn't imagine discovering that all over again. No, not me, I thought. Never again.

“Don't worry about me, son.”

* * *

Saul never liked to sit in back when I drove him anywhere. I sometimes wondered whether he found it lonely back there, with no brothers or sisters to ac-

company him. When he was younger I made him sit in back for safety, but we'd still have our conversations.

One day he asked me about his mother. "Do you miss her?"

"No, I don't. You'll see her again one day."

Saul was too young to know the truth about our marital problems: that she'd chosen wholeheartedly to be unfaithful to me, that maybe someday he would see her again when he was of the right age. His therapist had tried to make sure Saul was doing fine and reported back to me that my son was comfortable with our arrangement.

His question about finding a replacement for his mother, though, had scared me. He had asked me the week before if I still loved her, and I told him that I had once. "Once," I told him. "Once, a long time ago."

Breakfast over, school things in the trunk of the car, he buckled up while I did the same. I mussed his hair and made sure his seat belt was fastened properly. I asked him whether he had all the materials he needed for his assigned project that day, and he gave me a 'thumbs up' and a smile.

We were well on our way to the interstate when I thought to follow up on the question he'd asked me at breakfast. I wanted to make sure he was all right.

"Son, when you asked me whether I would ever find someone to replace your mother, did you mean you were worried I would?"

"I was just wondering," he answered.

I felt relieved to hear it. I stymied a chuckle at his remark and the mood significantly lightened.

"I don't think I'll be dating anymore," I told him. "I've had enough of love, maybe."

"It's just ..."

I waited. "Just what?" I asked him, anxious at his hesitation.

"Just that I'm all you've got," he said.

The school loomed ahead on the right-hand side of the road. Saul unbuckled himself as I came to a stop by the curb, right by the school's main entrance. Like every morning, Saul got out of the car and turned to face me, a hand on the door handle and a smile on his face. I gently shook his arm and smiled back at him. I watched him slowly grow smaller as he made his way down the promenade

and then disappear beyond the double-doors of the main entrance. The words echoed in my ears just then: “Just that I’m all you’ve got.”

* * *

“I don’t know, Maryanna. He just spoke of it this morning.”

“It’s not highly unusual for a child to sense these things, Grant. After all, Saul is a gifted child.”

“I did my best to reassure him, to tell him that I was fine.”

“I know you did.”

There was a pause in the middle of the conversation. I had to readjust the cell phone against my ear. A car cut in front of me and I cursed, hoping that Maryanna hadn’t heard it. She spoke anew.

“I’ll be glad to see him if you’d like, Grant.”

“I would, Maryanna. Thank you so much.”

“Grant,” she said. “Are you ok? I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“I suppose there’s legitimacy to Saul’s concerns, but I’m fine, I think.”

“Have you thought about seeing someone again?”

“No,” I said flatly. “The loneliness comes, but then it goes.”

“It isn’t healthy to deny ourselves our needs. The need for love is a human need, Grant. It isn’t superficial to desire love.”

I pulled up to my parking slot outside the building. I grabbed my briefcase,

locked the car, and proceeded to the main entrance.

“I’ll leave it up to you, Maryanna. Can I bring him in for a session with you this afternoon?”

“Yes, Grant. I have an opening at 4:00 this afternoon.”

“That’ll be perfect. As soon as he gets out of school, then.”

“All right, let me know if something comes up.”

“Will do. Thanks, Maryanna.”

“You’re welcome, Grant. Think about seeing someone about your own concerns, won’t you?”

“I will. Thanks again.”

I flipped the phone shut and there I was, standing at the lobby, facing the elevator doors. The lit number atop the elevator steadily moved downwards: 3, 2, and then 1. The doors opened and there was nobody inside. I walked in and turned around. My reflection greeted me. I took the time to fix my coat and adjust my shirt collar. Despite feeling out of sorts, I looked forward to another workday.

* * *

“Mr. Millstrom, you have a call on line one.”

I took the call.

“Hello, Mr. Millstrom. This is Ms. Hathaway. I’m the school nurse at Brook Road Elementary,” the voice said.

“Yes, Ms. Hathaway.”

“I’m afraid Saul’s been taken to the emergency room,” she said. “He ... he had a pretty bad fall. Down the stairs. You have to go and see him.”

White noise roared in my ears. I wondered if my next words were slow to come, or if it only seemed that way to me. “Oh, God! Is he all right?”

The voice on the other end of the phone wavered.

“The paramedics took him. They were working on him when they took him to the ambulance.”

“Is it St Anne’s he was taken to?”

“Yes, Mr. Millstrom.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

“I’m very sorry, sir.”

My heart raced. My chest heaved against a great weight. The sweat beaded on my forehead as I ran out of the office, telling

my secretary I had to leave on account of my son. Her eyes widened with shock and concern. I barely heard her reply.

I raced down the stairs and into my car. This can't be happening, I thought. This, most of all.

I drove to the hospital in near-shock. I had taken off my coat, oblivious to the winter chill. I felt numb to all sensations. There was only dread – the paralyzing fear that what mattered most in my life was on the cusp of being lost. I would give anything, I thought, anything for Saul to be well, anything at all.

* * *

“Grant, you know I love you?”

“And I love you.”

Marcela was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Certainly, the most beautiful I'd ever known. Her wedding dress was impeccably crafted; the silks were of the finest. It wrapped around her like a second skin. She radiated like a glowing ember in the night. Like the diamonds on her necklace, her eyes sparkled like jewels of the Nile. She would face me after twirling on the balls of her feet, leading me into the bedroom.

It was our honeymoon. I swore I'd never forget the way she looked that night. It never dawned on me then that our love was doomed. She was expecting, and I was jubilant with the news.

Saul was conceived shortly before our wedding took place. After the honeymoon, we went our separate ways. I returned to our home in the United States and she had urgent business in Paris that she needed to take care of personally. She owned a boutique, while I ran a firm offering financial advice. The trip was the first of many she took without me. Saul was born in March. I took care of him, taking some time off from managing my business while Marcela continued to manage hers. Marcela, I wondered aloud to myself, many weeks after Saul was born, as I stared up at the dark ceiling, alone and lonely, Have I lost you already?

* * *

One October night, Marcela came home late, close to midnight. Saul was asleep in his room. I'd spent the greater part of the day with him, looking after him in the afternoon, cooking supper and feeding him, reading to him before bed. The street lamp sent a hazy light through the curtains, and I watched Marcela un-

dress, ready to slip into her side of the bed, beside me. I waited patiently for her in the darkness.

“Where have you been?”

“Grant, I’m sorry. I thought you were asleep.”

She slid into the sheets quietly, facing the window outside, never once looking at me.

“I had something I needed to take care of,” she said.

“What was it this time?”

“Just work. Go to sleep, honey.”

She might have expected me to stop there, but I pressed further. She was lost to me then. She had been for a while, seeing the man she'd met on one of her trips to Paris. I had even seen them in my dreams, their naked bodies, their

smooth skin, making the kind of love that I had never known from her. She whispered sweet nothings to him and she had meant them, the way she never had with me, and never would.

“I know you’ve been unfaithful,” I told her, looking up at the ceiling, never once at her. She continued to face the window. She has resigned herself to this marriage, I thought to myself, eyes hot with anger and hurt. All she ever had to do was tell me she wanted out.

“Yes, I have been,” she said.

* * *

The divorce papers were signed and the agreements were made. Marcela had made her way to Spain to be with her lover. I had refused the possibility of a reconciliation. I didn’t once speak to her during the proceedings, staring at her coldly and blankly from across the table while my attorney presided on my behalf. In the end, she honored all I'd done for Saul, being both mother and father to him. She did not contest my claim for

full custody. She chose between her family and her liaisons with the other man, and she left.

Our friends had already chosen between Marcela and me. Even those who remained loyal to her couldn't fault me for the decision I'd made. A friend of mine from college, now a lawyer in Brooklyn, was a little more forthright.

"Enjoy your freedom," he said over dinner one night, inviting me to clink my glass against his. "You're a free man now. You can have anyone you like. Marcela always had her way with people, you know?"

"I'll be fine on my own," I told him. "Just Saul and me, a happy home."

"You'll change your mind. I know someone you might like if you're interested."

All I could hear was the faint sound of a violin, the chatter in the restaurant. And all I could imagine was Saul in my arms, the twinkling of his brown eyes, a baby's chuckle and tears in my eyes as I beheld him for the first time in the hospital nursery.

* * *

I arrived at the emergency room having almost convinced myself that Saul would be okay. My optimism faded quickly when I gave the receptionist Saul's name and watched her face fall. The Christmas décor hung about the waiting room, which was empty except for a few people huddled around a prettily decorated aquarium.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Millstrom," said the receptionist, getting up from her seat to lead me inside. "The paramedics tried their best."

"Where is he?" I responded. I struggled to breathe. A nurse took me aside. The double doors opened automatically as we walked towards them. I could feel eyes following us as we passed the nurse's station. She led me to room 15.

They hadn't moved him from the stretcher. He lay there, his eyes closed, his parted lips pale. His head drooped to one side against the stretcher, at a strange angle, showing no signs of life. There was a deep bruise where it appeared that a portion of his neck bone jutted out. I got lost in that deep shade of blue and black, staring at it, almost certain that Saul's death was instantaneous and paramedics were attempting the impossible by resuscitating him. I also

tried hard to believe that he was simply asleep. “Wake up, Saul,” I told the lifeless body of my son. “Wake up for Daddy ... please.”

The paramedics were still in the room relaying their sympathies. “We did all we could do,” said one of them. The nurse patted me on the shoulder as I bent forward towards Saul’s face. I was urging him to awaken, all the while distraught, disbelieving, denying reality as it presented itself.

Maryanna was the first person to arrive after me. I was seated in the waiting room, waiting for his body to be transported. She spoke little, respecting my need to grieve quietly. All I wanted was another day, another month, another year. A lifetime would not have been enough, but it never would have been, Maryanna promised me. A father was never meant to mourn the loss of his child. No one was.

* * *

“These pills ought to help,” she said. “Take them before bedtime and if you notice any side effects, let me know immediately.”

“I will, Doctor,” I said politely.

“Also,” she said, “I recommend that you seek therapy.”

I sat there, staring out the window of my doctor’s office, into space. The horizon was a bleak shade of blue, making way for darkness. Time stood still, and the words echoed in my ears softly. “These pills ought to help.” They certainly didn’t alter my cynicism about psychiatry. I still clung on to the notion that I would never be the same.

It’s funny how the world turns ever so slightly, how the tide makes its way ashore after an unfathomable distance, immeasurable in time. How a void left by someone you loved so completely will never be filled by anyone else. Surviving death sometimes merely preludes dying itself. You think that the world owes you as much ...

But the world owes you nothing.

Ms. Hathaway had described the accident in detail, shared by Saul’s playmate. Saul had been playing on the staircase, something he used to do at home before I caught him. He used to hop on every other step, something kids were bound to do on the floor, jump skip on squares lined with chalk. He was showing off.

I couldn't believe that he would attempt to do so in school, after I had made it clear to him at home that he stop. For a child so gifted, it was rather unexpected that he would not understand the consequences of such a risk, should the situation turn out for the worst. If nothing more, I was still thankful that his playmate had decided against emulating him, possibly multiplying the tragedy as a result. More parents were spared the turmoil of losing a child to an act so careless.

* * *

The sodden ground was still fresh with rain. The green grass had its luster. The headstones were clean.

The headstone before me read:

Saul Millstrom,

Son of Grant Millstrom,

Joined the Lord on December 16th 2008

I stared at Saul's picture, knowing I would never see him the same way again. In his grave, his remains slept soundly. I awoke each day, realizing that I would have to soldier on without him. Heaven help me, I thought aloud at times, for I had never been brave enough. I feared the worst. There would be no triumph over tragedy. There was

only a man standing before his son's grave, with a hand covering half his face with grief. Melancholy would follow all his days and all his nights; sorrow would taint his hapless smile.

In the wake of loss, and the subsequent ruination of it all, there spoke a truth that all men had to know. The world rises anew as man mourns its fall. But Saul? His death meant the end of everything I held dear.

He would come to my dreams sometimes. His face had a ghostly pallor, and his eyes were distressed. I didn't quite know how to tell him that life had ceased to mean anything to me. The house felt like a crypt. All day long, I brooded in the darkness. All these years, I've lived an illusion of progress.

Marcela had come and left for our son some flowers of her own. They leaned against his headstone, still fresh, two days since she'd left them.

Return To Desolation

I gradually learned to appreciate the daylight. The kitchen overlooked the vast windows that lined the walls of the sunken living room. Sunlight would come in at a certain time of the day, when shadows would fall away, and the furniture would sit somberly like tombstones in the glare of the sun. The blinds were raised, but they hadn't always been.

Some time ago, I had returned to my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, in the home I'd spent a portion of my childhood in, abandoned for a great length of time. Commercial development was occurring nearby, and the house was in the heart of a proposed construction site. I had no objections to the demolition of the house; therefore, had agreed to its sale. I had longed merely to see it one last time, ergo the visit.

It was a small house. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms, with a living room, dining room, and kitchen on the

first floor. I imagined its state of dilapidation to have advanced beyond tolerable conditions, making it uninhabitable without major repairs.

My parents were both deceased, and I had been an only child. Before his death, my father had contacted me through his second wife.

His second wife was a thin, waify creature. Her veins showed in her bony arms and legs, and her lips stretched across her face whenever she smiled at anyone. She was friendly in spite of my reluctance to associate with her. I couldn't get over the fact that she looked like a heroin addict, and repeatedly imagined her in my conversations over the phone similarly to how she looked in pictures sent to me over the holidays.

"He's ill," she had said over the phone.

She seemed distressed, but I wasn't in the least.

“Will you come?”

“I don’t know.”

My father being an abusive alcoholic, I showed much reticence to a possible visit, even on such an occasion.

Having remarried, my mother had children with her second husband, who coincidentally didn’t welcome a stepson. I could remember perfectly that day when she left me to the care of Aunt Lillian. The green grass on Aunt Lillian’s front lawn was damp, and her TV was on. My mother was supposed to pick me up after lunch, but never came. Aunt Lillian talked to her on the phone that evening, when my mother made it clear that I was to never return to her husband’s home.

Muffled voices could be heard through the darkness, the look of sadness on Aunt Lillian’s face still quite obvious.

The notification of my biological mother's funeral service came in the form of an invitation, a white card with special imprint. Her husband's last name was on the return address label, stuck to the upper-left-hand corner of the envelope. I stared at it with hot eyes, memories of his forced smile coming back to me every time I looked up at him and tried to call him “Dad.”

“Won’t you see her?” Aunt Lillian had asked. “Pay your respects?”

“I don’t think so, Auntie.

The past is the past.”

She walked away with head down.

My half siblings tried to get in touch with me, but I stayed away from them all. They might have been blessed to have a mother during their childhood years, but that same mother chose to abandon me at a time when I needed her most. No fault of any of them, I associated them as her family and, since my biological mother had effectively disowned me, I didn’t welcome any opportunity to get to know the family she had ostracized me from.

My success as an academe and entrepreneur would validate my feelings, even if I knew that pride was at the root of my stubbornness. The fact that my siblings weren't blessed with my degree of success was enough cause for me to hold them to a lower standard. Bastards even, I called them, what with my biological parents not having formally signed divorce papers.

* * *

By the time I had the book in my possession, I had waited a full week to get it.

The librarian mussed my hair when she saw me. I was a child, then, a boy who lived in books. I rarely missed a chance to visit the library.

The library was short on staff, and the librarian had to work the circulation desk without relief from her first shift. I thanked her for her dedication.

“Thanks for all the hard work you do, Ms. Renebacher.”

“You’re very welcome, Ollie.”

“I’ll gladly work here and help you guys out when the time comes.”

“Aw, Ollie. We’d love to have you aboard,” she said gleefully. “That’s sweet of you.”

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was past six o’clock. Realizing that I had lost track of time, I wore a look of shock, clutching at the book in sheer terror. My dad had been home since five and I should have already been home before then.

“What’s wrong, Ollie?” Ms. Renebacher asked.

“Nothing,” I replied. “I have to get home.”

Ms. Renebacher watched me run to my bicycle outside the library, nearly colliding with a couple coming inside.

I parked my bicycle by the curb and ran to the house. I came in through the back door and cautiously made my way inside through the kitchen area. The sound of the television set filtered through the quiet as I tiptoed through the darkness. After finally crossing the kitchen and dining area, I caught sight of my father in the living room, passed out in his chair, facing the TV. I stared for but a moment at the half-consumed bottle of beer on the side table next to him. My father’s mouth gaped open while his head tilted to one side. His shirt could barely contain his sizeable midsection, which rose and fell with the sound of his breathing.

I went upstairs, took my book out, and began to read. My hands and feet were cold. My heart felt as if it was about to explode.

* * *

I walked out of the airport terminal shortly after noon. An old friend of mine was there, waiting to pick me up. I had arranged transportation for the rest of my stay in Richmond, which would take the lesser part of the day. Having no plans to stay longer, I had slated my de-

parting flight for that evening. I didn't make accommodations in preparation for a possible delay. Needless to say, the visit would be brief.

Walking out of the tunnel, there was a moment of breathlessness. Richmond loomed large beyond the vistas. I felt like a foreigner in his own land.

My friend's name was William, but we called him Sal, without knowing just what the nickname's history was. He was a guy I went to school with and hung out with. It was one of those exceptions when guys named William weren't called 'Bill' by default.

He held up a sign that said 'Oliver' when we met at the airport because we weren't sure we would recognize one another, but we still did, even without the sign. He offered to buy me a drink at a bar he frequented, but I had to turn him down politely because I couldn't take alcohol.

"So, what's new?" he had asked, making conversation.

"Everything."

We weren't out for a good time, yet he tried in vain to make the occasion festive. We had decided, before I made the trip, that he would help me get to the car rental, and from there part ways so I

could finish what I had started, and he could do the same with his life after a momentary distraction. It wasn't hard saying goodbye, watching him drive away from the car rental's parking lot.

I was driving to the house in the rented vehicle, weaving through unfamiliar streets, and found that many things had changed since I had left.

Driving down the interstate, I decided to stop at a diner I had frequented as a youngster. Located a couple of miles from the house, the thought came to me in the midst of a maneuver, so I checked my side view mirror and drove into the parking lot.

The clouds above were a deep Prussian blue color, which was foretelling of a possible downpour.

That plan wasn't as simple as seeing a friend (which I did), or seeing to the exchange of information (which isn't actually simple). It involved the right setting, the right timing, and the knowledge of what reward was greater than the corresponding level of risk. In this circumstance, there was none.

I stopped at the diner, risking the bad weather, knowing the rain would only ruin my plans to visit the old house.

I sat at a table at the far end of the diner and waited, surveying the old view I had once known so vividly. I recognized a coin laundry but little else. There was a Chinese take-out place and a gasoline station that was empty. I thought to myself that it was a funny place for a gasoline station, the road never having been a busy one as far as I recalled. This residential area wasn't as congested as some other parts of town. Somehow, even after many years, it retained that same quality – traffic was nil and the neighborhoods were quiet.

The waitress, Jenine, brought me a cup of coffee to start. She looked like a nice girl, somewhere in her twenties, maybe working a part-time job to pay her tuition fees. She had bleached-blond hair that settled on her spare shoulders. She had a pleasant manner and an amusing dimple, which came conspicuously on her right cheek whenever she smiled happily at a customer. Her apron was only slightly smudged in light of the earliness of the day and her nametag said Hello. I'm Jenine. I ordered a ham and egg on rye and some corned beef hash.

Just then, a child walked into the diner accompanied by his parents. He had fine, black hair, eyes that looked keen, and skin so pale it made him look like a shut-in. He wore a sweater that looked hand-knit and a pair of jeans that ended messily on a pair of hiking boots, the kind I had worn as a kid. For a while, I thought he kind of looked like me when I was his age. But then, I remembered my parents, and so I was wary of his.

His father looked brusque. He wore a heavy plaid overcoat and a baseball cap. He was unshaven, and his hands had oil stains that made me wonder whether he might have been a machine operator or mechanic. He had a serious look on and didn't say much.

The boy's mother wore a blouse and jeans underneath a fall coat. Her lips had a taut expression, smudged with thick bright red lipstick. She did most of the talking. She had heavy eyeliner that seemed excessive considering the consistency of the make-up she had on, and she wore her hair in a bun fastened somewhere atop her head. Her eyes had a droopy expression. I was unsure just why I came to that assumption.

I smiled at the boy, and he just looked at me. His mother tapped him on the arm and asked him to come with her towards my direction to sit at a nearby table, and then it happened.

He yelled, "I don't want to! Leave me alone, damn it!"

So, I thought, he isn't a particularly nice boy. So what? The discrepancy sometimes shocks me. In comparison to my own childhood upbringing, it was a great dissimilarity that left me wondering what exactly could have been done about something that was doomed from its incendiary beginning. What went wrong from that point on? Everything.

But I had come to blame myself for not being strong enough to fight a man I was never meant to fight, never expected to stand up to, rise up against ... so what was the glaring truth of the present moment that I tried hard to deny?

That nothing could have been done then, any more that can be done now that everything was gone.

* * *

The fields were overrun by the dense growth. Long blades of grass often stood up to a man's waist. I liked to explore there when I was a kid, thinking that

there were strange mysterious things. I sifted through the high growth, engulfed in it, unable to see just what it was that waited to be discovered. I moved a few feet further, wading through the field into the heart of nowhere, unsure of what direction I had taken, or where I was headed. I stooped down and saw a strange pebble, which was white against the dark earth, and hard against the sodden dirt. I picked it up and examined its smooth surface, feeling it with my supple fingers. It had no jagged edges whatsoever, and was a strange artifact for a grassy field. I looked around the immediate vicinity for some others like it, but found nothing. I then put the pebble in my pocket.

I was about to look around some more when I heard a voice call out. "Ollie," it said. "Come back to the house."

It was Mom, calling me to come back inside. The sun was descending on the distant horizon. Smudges of amber and faded vermillion were coloring the landscape.

I was, for a time, unsure of where I was. Lost in the dense growth, I jumped to see what lay ahead, and saw more of the field. I jumped a second time, in the opposite direction, and saw my house at

some distance to the northeast. I ran towards the house, wading through the growth that finally thinned out along the boundaries of our property.

I met my mother out back, who was anxiously awaiting me. The look on her face wasn't inviting. "Get inside, Ollie, quick!" she said. "Your father just came home."

That was all that I needed to know. I dropped the pebble in my hand. I scampered through the door and took a wary look at my mother. The look of worry was all she could muster.

I began to ascend the steps towards the second floor when I heard the sound of my father's voice boom throughout the house. I wasn't sure what my father had said, only that my mother and father had begun to argue loudly. My dad's words were slurred by whiskey; my mother wailed desperately in rebuttal. I went ahead upstairs in the direction of my bedroom, flung the door open and closed it. The sounds of my parents' voices were muted momentarily. I put the blinds down, and quickly jumped into bed, diving into the warm sheets and blankets. The voices began to grow louder as my parents took to the steps.

The hollering grew louder outside my door. I knew that they were outside in the hallway. My father's rant reached a deafening pitch. My mother pleaded with him to calm down, reminding him that his rage was fueled by his drinking. The screeching continued as though he were assaulting her, threatening her with inflammatory curses. There was a thud in the hallway, and I feared the worst. That was when I heard my name belted with great consternation. My father refocused his anger. He was coming for me.

"Ollie. Where's Ollie?" he cried.

I hid in the sheets, shaking, fearing the worst for my mother, while having no courage to come out and intervene.

Suddenly, the door flung open, and the rabid, growling beast that was my father stormed through. I held myself tightly. The fear mixed with a hint of anger. I nestled in the sheets, hoping that I would not be found.

My father knew exactly where I was. He dug his large hands into the sheets and pulled me out of them, dragging me to the floor with his vice-like grip. I glared at him, shaking, crying, and trying to be brave.

My father began shaking me violently, his hands clutching my small shoulders. He then screamed unintelligibly at me, and I wondered whether my own father was going to kill me. My father's breath reeked of whiskey.

I saw my mother crying in the hallway, watching me and my father. I wondered whether she would stop him, and in the process put herself in harm's way. The moment seemed to last longer than expected, before she suddenly turned away.

Father pushed me down, and left me on the floor of my bedroom. I felt my young supple flesh bruise along my small shoulders. They ached, but not as much as my heart did, heavy with fear, pain and anger.

It was the last time I saw my father, who abandoned me and my mother after storming out of the house with some of his belongings. He left town with a woman whom he had been seeing adulterously. Mother knew better than to try to stop him. I remembered the room as it was then – dark, very dark. Like the ghost of a loved one, the light outside pierced through the curtains beneath notice. I shivered as though it was cold,

very cold in that darkness. My face was wet with tears.

* * *

I arrived at the house shortly. The dense growth had completely surrounded its perimeter. The house looked dilapidated from the outside. The shingles on the roof were peeling. The frames of the windows were splintering apart. A thin layer of mold sheathed the vinyl sidings. The large wooden door was chipped in places. The house looked to be an apt home for abandoned feral creatures and rodents. The mailbox had been stolen. It was easy to imagine snakes twirling through the long blades of grass, finding a decent home in its thickness. The house had to be demolished. It could no longer be used as it was intended – as shelter from the elements. Perhaps it had never served that purpose.

The storm door gave off a harsh wailing sound as though its hinges had long yielded to rust. I took the keys from my pocket, opened the front door, and was greeted by a veil of dust.

I entered the door and the wood planks sounded beneath me. The walls had cracks stemming from the ceiling, which leaked in places, and was stained by the rotting wood. Pools of water still stood

beneath some of them, not having dried completely since the rain last fell from the skies over Richmond. I ventured into the living room, which was empty, save for a few crumpled sheets of paper littering the floor. Next, I went into the kitchen, which was grimy in the place where the stove once stood. The smoke had left its stains along the walls leading from the old exhaust.

I climbed up the stairs and feared their collapse as they strained to accommodate my weight. They creaked with each step I made. The hallway was empty and dark. The carpet was still there, soaked with dirty water that leaked from the ceiling. After a few steps in the grime, I entered my room.

The bed was made. The desk was cleared. The closets were empty. The sheets were there, and so were the blankets, rendered unfamiliar with the strange sense of order. The cold air seemed to saturate the stillness. Despair hung in the dank air and – oh yes – there was the darkness. In my childhood, I knew its bleakness with a great clarity, having nestled into its nurturing womb. The darkness waited with open arms for me, and I walked into it with the look of a boy who'd just seen the forlorn face of his ancestry, walking into the

heart of nihility, with the stillborn joy of a man's return to his true origins.

Someone had taken great care to sort through the clutter, fix my bed and clear the dresser. I saw a picture of my mother when I was still a baby, and she looked delighted to hold me, smiling the way she never did after my father left.

I saw a picture of myself and my father when I was five, before financial woes struck my family and my father had begun to drink heavily. He carried me on his shoulders, laughing at the camera. He wore a white shirt, wool pants and suspenders. He looked happy, happier in all the years I could remember.

Winter's Eden

The plans had been finalized. Cody and Amy were going to stay with their aunt, Leticia Savant, for the winter. A former insurance executive, she lived with her husband, Henry, who worked as a foreman at a construction yard.

At first, Cody and Amy weren't really excited to go. Their parents had gone to Europe, and both teens had been given the semester off. Both were undecided as to what careers they truly wanted to pursue, and so were unsure of what courses of study they should take. During the time away from home, they were expected to mull over their career aspirations.

It was cold in New Hampshire, where Aunt Leticia lived. Cody preferred a warmer climate, where he could hike up nature trails and loiter around the beaches like he did in North Carolina, where they were from. Amy, on the other hand, didn't mind the prospect of getting snowed in every once in a while and, as

neither of them had been to New Hampshire before, she was at least curious. Neither of them knew what to expect from the excursion, but both agreed that there was one boon to the trip: having no parents around.

Both Cody and Amy were blessed with good looks. Cody, at age nineteen, had an exquisitely sculpted face. He was the type of guy who could wear any hairstyle and get away with it, looking great. He developed a six-pack with little effort. His green eyes were bright and full of life, always on the lookout for a fun time.

Amy, at age eighteen, was of above average height and had beautiful, perfectly symmetrical calves and thighs. She had a great complexion, and she never needed to apply too much make-up. Her soft, light brown hair flowed down easily atop her shoulders, complementing her relaxed personality well. Her arms were naturally athletic and, like Cody, her facial features were precise, sharp and an-

gular. She had soft eyes that glistened whenever she smiled.

Cody and Amy didn't really know their Aunt Leticia and Uncle Henry apart from stories their mother had shared with them. Aunt Leticia had become a paraplegic after getting into a car accident while driving to work. Since then, Uncle Henry had helped care for her. She worked hard to regain control over the activities she used to take for granted in her daily life. Through her wheelchair, she could operate a device connected to the wall of the staircase, enabling her to get up and down the steps by herself. She could get to the bathroom, with some effort. Using crutches, she could reach things on the top shelves. She could maneuver her wheelchair to get to the terrace whenever she felt like taking in some fresh air. Most of the time, though, she stayed in her room and watched TV as she waited for Henry to arrive from work. Her world dulled into a monotony of days and nights fashioned out of the predictable and the docile, and so she welcomed Cody and Amy's visit as a deviation from the stagnancy of near immutability.

The house was rather large for a childless couple, and served as a grim reminder of Henry and Leticia's failed attempts at starting a family. In a locked room at the end of the second-floor hallway was the nursery. Within, a crib cradled only space and years of failed expectations, dreams never to be fulfilled.

Cody and Amy would each stay in a separate bedroom while sharing the bathroom, all on the second floor. The master bedroom where Aunt Leticia and Uncle Henry slept was just down the hall from their quarters. A couple of interesting paintings lined the walls of the hallways: a still life of an avocado split in half, and a watercolor painting of a lake where a small boat was docked.

The house sat amid a lush bed of green grass. In the backyard, pine trees divided the property from the next one. In the front yard, a few barren trees stood guard over a sidewalk that cut through the yard, parallel to the street. The property had been well maintained through the years. The vinyl sidings and gutters were clean. The windows were free of smudges. The shrubs were pruned nicely. The lawn was free of fallen leaves.

Cody and Amy would arrive within a week. Uncle Henry didn't know what to think of his extended family. He decided he would show them around, cook dinner, and tell stories of past winters. He had some work to do in a garden plot out back, and some carpentry in the garage. He decided to let the recent high school graduates enjoy themselves and figure out what they wanted to do for their careers while he completed his chores around the house.

* * *

Leticia Savant was a resilient woman, in spite of being handicapped. She prayed a lot to help pass the time. She was a bony and frail ninety-six pounds, and she was no longer attractive to her husband, or, for that matter, to anyone. Still, she never gave up, despite the obstacles she faced, and friends of the couple marveled at her determination, her ability to cope with a reality that was difficult.

However, some things were beyond her means of coping.

"Where are you going?" Leticia asked Henry one morning, as he dressed to go out, putting on his outdoorsman jacket, the freezing cold and the icy roads failing to deter him.

"Just going to pick things up at the hardware store," he said. It was a familiar excuse. The trip was unwarranted, in light of the bad weather. Leticia knew he was seeing someone.

"Why don't you stay home this morning? I worry about you going out in this type of weather," she said. Her concern did not dissuade him. He turned his cheek and put the other sleeve on, ignoring her.

"I'll be back in a jiffy," he said, closing the bedroom door.

Henry Savant was having an affair. He drove a few blocks down the street to a house where a woman lived by herself. He had done some handyman work for her in the past, for extra money. She was a divorcee – a lonely woman with a lot of time to waste. She wanted a relationship with no strings attached. Henry came willingly, without thinking twice. The woman wasn't very attractive, but she had a slight figure. Besides that, she was thirteen years younger, and eager to please. They had never had a personal conversation in the time that he had known her. He didn't come to unburden himself to a stranger – not in that way.

Her name was Ophelia. The woman had no intentions of sharing secrets with him, either. They had their time together, agreed to meet at a certain time in the future, and parted. One evening, though, she mistook his kindness for genuine affection. She couldn't tell for certain whether she was feeling happiness.

“Why don't you stay the night? Just tell that wife of yours you had a few more drinks than usual with your buddies at the construction yard, so you decided to find lodging somewhere nearby, or something like that,” she told him, or rather, she asked him, nicely. Her hand crept up his thigh.

He looked at her, and she flashed a somewhat warm smile. He wasn't used to it. He shrugged it off.

“I don't think that's wise,” he said. “I thought we had an arrangement. Nothing personal. No strings attached.”

He looked at her rather coldly, and could see that she was disappointed. Being in bed together at that moment, anyone watching them would have thought that a warm sentiment would have at least been reciprocated, sincere or not, but Henry's apathetic response was a good reminder of how a situation like theirs

was never an ideal one for anyone prone to feeling emotionally attached. She might have left the door open for him, having done so from the start, or she would have never invited him into her life at all. She played second fiddle to a paraplegic woman he didn't love anymore, and that wounded her pride. She had missed a fundamental piece in the equation: he might have never given her so much as a glance, had he met a more beautiful woman from the very beginning. She wouldn't have stood a chance.

“You're right. We have an arrangement. We have sex and that's it. We're animals in the heat of the moment. There's nothing more to this,” she said, thrashing her arms around the both of them, naked beneath the sheets, the smell of scented candles masking the scent of lust and old sweat.

“Wait a minute now. What's wrong with you? Should I leave?” he asked confusedly. He was unremarkable at anything but fixing things that were broken, but not the heart, never the things that mattered most.

“You may,” she said softly.

He stood up and began to get dressed. That seemed like the end of it. He looked at her slender back, the smooth skin, the

lovely hair – even in a mess, it looked beautiful in the near darkness.

“But come back on Wednesday,” she said.

* * *

Cody and Amy arrived on a foggy Tuesday morning. While Aunt Leticia waited excitedly downstairs, Uncle Henry picked them up at the airport and drove them back to the house. On the road, Cody said he was a little dizzy. Uncle Henry asked whether there had been a lot of turbulence, and Cody replied that it had lasted almost the entire flight. Amy barely spoke, sitting in the backseat of Uncle Henry’s truck while surveying the countryside, which was comprised mainly of orchards. She marveled at the rows of barren trees that lined the fields on both sides of the road and saw windmills in the distance. As Cody continued to talk to Uncle Henry about the flight, Amy caught Uncle Henry looking at her through the rearview mirror a few times, perhaps wanting to know if she was interested in joining the conversation.

Amy looked in the rearview mirror to examine Uncle Henry and noticed that he’d brushed his gray hair. The lines on his face were still subtle. His eyes were gentle. He expressed himself prudently.

He wasn’t a man who liked to complicate things, she guessed.

They finally arrived at the Savant house. Aunt Leticia welcomed Cody and Amy as they walked through the front door. Uncle Henry followed with some of Amy’s belongings. Cody carried his own bags. Cody and Amy kissed their aunt and complimented her on her tidy house as they each had a seat with her at the breakfast table near the kitchen. Uncle Henry brought their belongings to their rooms.

“Our mom sends her regards,” Amy said.

“I’ll call her in a minute to assure her you’ve made it safely,” Aunt Leticia said.

“Can we use your car while we’re here, Auntie?” Cody asked.

“Why, yes, you can, Cody,” she said.

“Cool,” he answered. “We can check out the nature trails and see what’s there in town.”

“Your Uncle Henry will show you around first,” Aunt Leticia said.

“Okay,” the two kids said.

“Well, you must be either tired or hungry. Which is it?”

The kids answered simultaneously. “Hungry,” Cody said, while Amy said, “Tired.”

“Well, Cody, there’s stew on the stove and, for you, Amy, your room is upstairs. Follow your Uncle Henry.”

“Okay,” both answered.

Aunt Leticia pointed Cody to the bowls. He served himself stew while Amy went upstairs to take a nap.

When she got upstairs, she heard sounds from one of the rooms down the hallway and presumed it to be Uncle Henry fixing things. She decided to follow the sounds and ask him which room was hers.

She reached the open door at the end of the hallway and found Uncle Henry fixing an old TV set that stood on top of the dresser. Amy stood there for a moment, not wanting to disturb or alarm him.

“Oh, Amy. I didn’t realize you were there,” Uncle Henry said, stopping what he was doing for the moment. “Well, I’m done. Can you believe that this age-old thing has cable now?”

Amy chuckled a bit. She noticed how husky her Uncle Henry’s voice actually was, and took note of his easygoing manner. He was physically fit in middle age, and had a soft tan from years of working under the hot sun.

“I just wanted to rest. I’m tired from the trip,” Amy said, slouching by the doorway.

“Okay. I’ll get out of your way now,” he said, smiling once more.

Uncle Henry noticed how beautiful the two kids were. Cody was a good-looking young man, while Amy looked extraordinary. He saw how she liked to fling her hair across both sides of her face a couple of times just to settle it behind her shoulders, and how graceful that movement looked. She didn’t really look sixteen; she looked a little older, like a model would.

Uncle Henry went downstairs, where Cody and Aunt Leticia were busy chatting.

* * *

In the afternoon, Uncle Henry and Cody left for the grocery store in the nearby strip mall while Aunt Leticia and Amy stayed at home.

Amy felt refreshed after waking up from her nap. Aunt Leticia began heating a bowl of stew for her. Aunt Leticia had been watching a game show downstairs at the breakfast table, in her wheelchair.

The sight of Aunt Leticia enjoying the program put a smile on Amy's face.

"That show still on?" she asked, wondering if it was a rerun. Aunt Leticia nodded at her.

"Going strong," Aunt Leticia added. "One of my favorites."

Amy sat down and began eating her bowl of stew. She noticed that the kitchen was small, the cupboards were old-fashioned, and the TV was old, but the place was neat and clean. Amy said so. Aunt Leticia complimented Uncle Henry for the organization.

"He keeps things up well," she said, looking around to make sure she didn't find anything out of place, lest Amy notice it and point it out first.

Amy noticed that most of the pictures on the side tables showed Aunt Leticia when she had been younger and still able to walk. There was also a picture of a young man holding a fishing rod. Amy didn't recognize him.

"Auntie, who's that young man with the fishing rod?" she asked gently. Her Aunt Leticia turned around, as if startled by an unknown voice.

"Oh, that's your Uncle Henry when he was young," she said. "He used to go fishing a lot in the summers when he was growing up. I didn't know him then."

Amy thought that Uncle Henry looked much better these days than he had when he was a teen. Back then, in her opinion, he had looked emaciated, his bones jutting out too prominently. His fishing rod seemed large in comparison to his small body.

Meanwhile, Cody and Uncle Henry were just about done with the grocery shopping. Uncle Henry asked Cody what kind of food he typically liked to eat, and Cody thought twice about speaking in candor, being a meat-lover. Cody had sensed that the Savants were health-conscious, but Uncle Henry had guessed at his preferences perfectly, so he picked up some rib eye steak for the grill. He typically served Aunt Leticia a lot of fruits and vegetables, so he stopped by the produce section and selected a handful. Cody summoned up the courage to ask him whether they could get some bratwurst and Uncle Henry said yes, so they picked up a pack. They also picked up some supplies for the house and some biscuits for his aunt.

Uncle Henry was just about ready to push the shopping cart to the register when he remembered something. He turned towards Cody, who was walking beside him and asked “What about your sister?”

Cody looked like he didn’t have a clue what Uncle Henry meant. Uncle Henry tried again.

“What would your sister want?” he said, giving a half-smile.

The grocery was hardly busy that day, and traffic was very mild throughout the town. The lights began to glare, as the sun began to set.

* * *

The house was quiet, and so was the neighborhood. Flowers in enclosures wilted as the breeze only intensified the coldness. The streets were empty. Uncle Henry slept in the attic.

He woke up from a nightmare, and the cramped attic suddenly made him feel claustrophobic. He looked out the window and saw the barren trees covered by layers of frost. His heart pounded like a thundering band of wild horses. His forehead gathered sweat. Some trickled down his temples. More moisture ran down the back of his neck.

In his dream, he had witnessed a bizarre event. It was neither day nor night in the scene. There was a tree with a strange angelic face and two sets of branches. A lone apple hung on one of the branches. A woman stood on the left side of the tree, and a man stood on the right. As Henry watched, a serpent crawled down from a branch and whispered a few words to the woman. She responded by taking the apple, biting it, and sharing it with the man.

Although he had been raised Baptist, Henry Savant wasn’t a devout Christian. That aspect of his upbringing never made much of an impression on him. He took life as it came, and never apologized for doing what he felt was right – not under any circumstances.

* * *

That morning, Uncle Henry took Cody and Amy to town. Cody told Uncle Henry he liked his truck: a new Ford F-series. It was a red crew-cab, with beefy tires that had huge tread. Uncle Henry had specifically wanted them. He claimed to have driven trucks all his life.

“Well, almost,” he confessed. Noticing that Amy was being quiet, he asked her

what kind of cars she liked, glancing at her through the rearview mirror. She said that she liked luxury sport coupes. Cody jeered at her teasingly, telling her that she would need to graduate from college before she could get one. Otherwise, she would have to wait for one of their parents' hand-me-downs like he had.

"What kind of cars do you like, Uncle Henry?" Amy asked.

"Classic cars – an old Maserati; a Ferrari, maybe. Who wouldn't want one of those?"

He laughed. His shoulders shook a little when he did. Uncle Henry never laughed exuberantly. Cody usually laughed a little more heartily, but he truncated his laughter with a sigh that sometimes suggested boredom, as if the laughter was just for show.

Cody carried himself well. He walked with good posture. He always descended a flight of steps with grace and composure, never touching the railings. He ate with proper etiquette, holding his fork and knife with his hands and elbows at the right positions, even tilting his bowl at the correct angle when consuming the last of his soup like a well-schooled gentleman would. Born into an upper middle class family, Cody appreciated the

finer things in life. He had discriminating tastes. He purchased goods for the prestige that they typically afforded an exclusive clientele, and his short fair hair had just the right sheen. He wore a casual blue sport shirt beneath a navy blue Nautica windbreaker, and classic-fit khakis with boat shoes that complemented the look. He looked like he was ready to go sailing in South Carolina, as he sometimes did this time of the year.

"What kind of car do you drive right now, Cody?" Uncle Henry asked.

"My mom's Mercedes E320. Sweet. Would have been sweeter if it were a few years newer," he said.

"Mom-mobile," Amy jeered at him from the backseat.

"What you getting, sis? A Honda?" Cody answered. "Had to be valedictorian if you wanted a BMW."

Amy made a face at him.

Amy shared many traits with her brother, but there were still obvious differences. Whenever she laughed, she looked like she was restraining herself. Her footsteps were quiet in comparison to Cody's. She loved arts and crafts, preferring them to hiking or going camping in the woods. At times, she would live in

her books, allowing her fertile imagination to take her to other places. She didn't like the summer heat, despite her home's proximity to the beach. She liked to see the colors change. In New Hampshire, the landscape was like an oil painting with smudges of auburn, sienna and orange.

They arrived at a strip mall that showcased outlet stores for popular brands. It was their first stop.

"I just have to pick up a few things. I kind of packed light," Cody said.

Amy wasn't really excited to go shopping. For a teenage girl, she was uncommonly indifferent to the pastime.

"Why didn't Aunt Leticia come with us?" she asked Uncle Henry.

"She has a hard time getting around – even in the wheelchair," Uncle Henry responded.

"I'm going in here. I shouldn't take too long. I know what I want," Cody told them both, leaving them behind as he bolted into a store.

"So," Uncle Henry began, looking over to Amy, who was staring toward the horizon. "Your brother's into nautical gear, huh?"

"He's a frustrated navigator," she answered, smiling at him. He smiled back.

Their eyes locked for a moment. Amy felt like she could drown in his aquamarine eyes. She felt somehow spellbound by them. He noticed her own hazel eyes were shy, but inquisitive. She looked away as he did, at almost the precise moment it would have been too late to do it, and wandered off a bit. He stuck around the exit waiting for Cody, whom he saw leaving the register with a bag of items.

"Hold on," Cody cried to them after exiting the store. "I've got to go get some new shoes."

Cody continued shopping for the things he needed. Amy and Uncle Henry followed, stopping by the ice cream parlor to pick up some ice cream cones while Cody was in the Brooks Brothers store.

"Where do you plan to go to college?" Uncle Henry asked.

"Elon," Amy answered. "It's closer to where I live."

"And Cody's planning to attend the same school?"

"No. He wants to go to Duke."

"Are you excited?"

“I’m glad that I don’t have to live on campus. I like my privacy.”

“You do, huh. I understand. There are distractions. Especially these days.”

Uncle Henry nodded, smiling, looking at the door of the ice cream parlor. Amy turned her head to see if Cody was coming back from the store. Realizing that he must have still been inside, she took a sidelong glance at Uncle Henry, who was wearing a blue and white windbreaker and a gray t-shirt. His graying hair was wavy but groomed; his very lightly freckled skin was flawed but tan; his fingernails were small in comparison to his large fingers, but they were clean and well-rounded at the tips. She felt something bloom inside of her like a flower. Amy had always been a curious sort, but she knew that curiosity was sometimes dangerous.

Cody came out of the store with another bag. “Whew!” he said. “Aren’t you guys joining in?”

Amy had to keep herself from laughing at him while Uncle Henry shook his head, smiling.

* * *

They got home late that afternoon. Cody immediately set off for his room to try on

some of his clothes. Amy joined Aunt Leticia at the breakfast table for a snack. Uncle Henry told them that he had to repair something at the back of the garage. Apparently, the gutter on the roof had broken free.

Amy and Aunt Leticia ate apple pie. Amy asked her why she hadn’t come with them.

“I’m too slow, with my disability,” she said. “I didn’t want to spoil the fun. I trust your Uncle Henry was good company.”

Amy was a little hesitant, remembering when she watched Uncle Henry staring idly into the distance, when she ate ice cream with him.

“Oh yeah, he’s fun,” she said. “How come you guys never come to the Carolinas?”

“Since I got disabled, it’s been hard,” Aunt Leticia answered.

“Yeah, but, Auntie, why hasn’t Mom ever taken us here, then?”

“I saw you and Cody when you were kids, but you’re too young to remember,” she said. “All of you lived in Oregon before you moved to Carolina three years ago, and your mother never liked to fly, so it was up to you to do the visiting when you came of age.”

Cody and Amy noticed how Uncle Henry slept in the attic and merely tended to Aunt Leticia, like a professional would. One morning, the two siblings watched Uncle Henry help Aunt Leticia out of her bed and into her wheelchair. Although Uncle Henry did it carefully, they could tell that something wasn't right. They shared a look there in the hallway. Both were aware that it would have been intrusive for them to ask questions. They decided that whatever was left unsaid would stay that way. It was for the best.

Amy felt sympathy for Uncle Henry just then. She couldn't understand why she felt sympathetic toward him and not their aunt. Her disabling condition gave her far more suffering than Amy had ever known, more than she could ever imagine going through. Ambivalence struck her. It gave her further reason to keep her true feelings at bay.

"Auntie, I'm going to give Uncle Henry some apple pie in case he wants to take a break, ok?" she said.

"All right," Aunt Leticia said, hardly turning her eyes away from the television set.

* * *

Early in their marriage, Leticia had made a fine salary from her job while

Henry did his best to reel in his share. The turning point in the relationship came when the couple learned that Leticia couldn't bear children. Henry greeted the news with great disappointment.

Being old-fashioned, he refrained from displaying his feelings, but that suppression of his emotions only led to more resentment. His extended family advised him to stay with Leticia, and he did, but through the years, he contemplated divorcing her. Leticia's car accident helped put an end to all that. He felt he should do the only thing a decent husband would have done: take care of his disabled wife.

In hindsight, he regretted his decision. She would have found a way to go on without me, he thought. He didn't have to sacrifice his own happiness so the two of them could commiserate in despair. The love might have gone from Henry's heart, but he didn't realize that Leticia still cared for him.

Since then, Leticia knew, there were flings. As Henry grew older, women were drawn to him more. This hadn't been the case when he was younger, but the more physically robust, charming, uncomplicated way of Henry's middle age seemed to attract women of all types. There were

bored married women who were still quite attractive. There were late-twenty-somethings whom Henry met at bars with friends. There were trendy office women who liked rugged types. He seemed to attract an unpredictable palette of women – women from all walks of life.

Leticia heard whispers that weren't meant for her ears. Early on, they tortured her with the fear of losing him. He always came back with apt excuses, reassurances that came with a smile. But it was only a matter of time until those excuses began to seem a little far-fetched, the reassurances dated. The smiles stopped coming. His blue eyes would tell her he was lying, accusing her of doing this to him, trapping him in this lifetime of failed expectations.

Some years ago, the Savants had hosted a Christmas party. Henry and Leticia busily entertained guests. As the Clement family – Barbara Clement and her two kids, Sandra and Lacey – got ready to leave, a problem arose: their car was stuck in the snow. Henry was nowhere to be found.

Leticia spun around in her wheelchair, trying to look for Henry, not wanting to disrupt the crowd. She asked Sandra if

she had seen her mother, who was also missing.

Sandra shrugged.

“Last time I saw her, she was with Uncle Henry,” she said.

“Where?” Leticia asked.

“Outside.”

Just then, Henry and Barbara walked in the front door, laughing. For Henry, it was his familiar laugh: subtle, shoulders shaking, blue eyes sparkling. For Barbara, on the other hand, a hysterical one. They carried small shovels, frosted at the ends. Leticia watched as he came in, surrounded by the glow from the street-lamp, wearing his outdoorsman jacket, smiling. She remembered falling in love with him when he looked that way.

“What's wrong?” Henry finally asked. Leticia was in a daze.

“I suppose there's nothing,” Leticia said, embarrassed, knowing the man she had fallen in love with years ago thought nothing of her.

She felt like screaming at him. She felt like telling him that she was frustrated, too, but it was too late. He had given up on her. Perhaps he'd never even loved me, she pondered. She was his ticket out

of a difficult life, maybe. Perhaps, nothing about her actually mattered.

* * *

Amy came out of the back door holding a saucer with some homemade apple pie. She approached Uncle Henry, behind the garage.

“Uncle Henry, stop what you’re doing and eat for a while. This is still warm,” she said.

“Why, aren’t you sweet?” he said, seeing her through his goggles from the top of the ladder where he stood.

He got down in a few moments. She handed him the saucer, as well as a glass of water.

“Your Aunt Leticia still makes these pretty good,” he said to her, struggling to smile with a mouthful. “How you likin’ New Hampshire so far?”

“I’m having fun. No parents,” she said, glowing.

“Oh, yeah. That must be a thrill,” he said. “Assuming you don’t make your aunt and me chase you around.

“No, Uncle Henry,” she said.

Amy flipped her hair again. Uncle Henry finished the apple pie and drank the wa-

ter. She took the saucer and empty glass, and he smiled and nodded.

“I’ve just got to drive to the store and get some supplies for the garage. Tell your aunt that I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Okay,” Amy said.

Henry didn’t really intend to visit the hardware store. Instead, he drove to Ophelia’s. It was a Friday, and he wasn’t expected. Ophelia led him in, anyway. He’d looked pretty feverish when she opened the door. She guessed that he might’ve been aroused. She liked him in this mindset: it almost guaranteed a pleasurable tryst.

Instead, she ended up disappointed. He appeared excited but couldn’t quite rise to the occasion, so to speak. They lay there on the bed, side by side, not knowing what was wrong. She told him he was like bubblegum, and he had never been that way with her before.

“What’s the matter? Are you excited at all? Why did you want to see me?” she asked in a sudden blaze of anger.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I was in the mood a few minutes ago.”

He looked at the deep brown hues that colored her bedroom, the shades of sienna, the auburn paisley embroidery

that ornamented the sheets, the beads that circled the perimeter of the bed where they lay motionless.

“Think about what you really want, then,” she said.

“Can you push your hair back twice from each side of your head?” he said.

“Henry, I ...”

“Just do it.”

She did it, and that did the trick. Like a floodgate that burst open, desire rampaged through his nervous system. He wasn't finished.

“Turn around,” he told her.

“Henry, we've never done it there before. I'm not sure I ...”

She let out a deep moan as he entered her.

* * *

That night, Henry Savant had another dream.

The last dream ended with the woman on the left-hand side of the tree obeying the serpent, offering the man a bite of the apple. The man took the apple and bit into it, prompting a powerful wind to sweep through, carrying ash and burnt leaves. The sky was obsidian. Lightning

crashed. The tree bent on its flexuous midsection. The woman went down on her knees. The man covered his face with his arms. The apple fell from his grasp.

Again, Henry Savant's shirt was wet with cold perspiration. He couldn't understand the meaning of the dream. He didn't want to consult anyone, because he was afraid of getting laughed at.

So he asked Amy what it might've meant. He knew it was quite similar to the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge and the Fall of Man, but there were differences, too – things he didn't recall from the book of Genesis. He told Amy that he never had strange dreams that appeared so vividly.

“They sound similar to Hieronymus Bosch's paintings,” Amy said. “Does that ring a bell, Uncle Henry? He's known for a triptych that sounds similar to what you describe: The Garden of Earthly Delights. In the left panel of the painting is the image that could have inspired your dream: Adam and Eve.”

“Your aunt has a book filled with old pictures of religious paintings in her library. It's in the basement. My question is: why do I dream about it?”

* * *

Two days later, Uncle Henry took Cody and Amy ice skating in the park. The lake was frozen solid around that time every year, and Uncle Henry had told Aunt Leticia that the kids might have fun there. Cody and Amy were excited to go. Cody, lover of all warm places, couldn't wait to get to the skating rink, while Amy felt that it was a diversion that they needed. She didn't want to be snowed in all winter long.

Uncle Henry had had to shovel the snow that fell around the property on the previous night. Cody got a shovel of his own and helped him. Amy kept Aunt Leticia company upstairs in case she needed anything. The road hadn't been cleared, but Uncle Henry said the truck would manage through the two feet of snow that blanketed the side streets. Cody agreed.

"The main roads won't be difficult," Uncle Henry said. "They'll all be clear by now. Sanded at the exits."

Cody watched a car back out of a driveway two blocks away only to have its rear wheels get buried in the snow. Uncle Henry chuckled at the sight of the unfortunate driver.

"He should know better than to drive out with that much snow covering the ground. He ain't got the wheels or torque to make it."

The driver urged the car forward and its rear wheels spun in place for a bit. Finally, the snow gave way, and the car returned to the garage. Uncle Henry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whew. For a minute there I thought we would have to help the guy or something, carrying these damn things around." He gestured at his shovel. Cody nodded.

"Well," he said. "We better finish up here and get inside so we can get ready to go. I don't want to hang around here and be asked to shovel anyone else's driveway like I'm hired muscle."

"I'm tired, anyway," Cody said. They both cleaned their shovels and hurried inside to take hot showers and dress to go out.

After a twenty-minute drive, they arrived at the skating rink. The truck had plowed through the snow easily with its large beefy tires. The V8 engine had no problems providing the necessary power. Uncle Henry was happy to show off the

truck's performance. "That's what I bought it for," he told the teens.

He was wearing a light brown outdoorsman's jacket over a grey t-shirt. Cody wore a black down jacket and white athletic pants. Amy wore a black fleece jacket over a pink sweater, with tight jeans over her thermal bottoms to ward off the chill from her legs. She tied up her hair in a ponytail to keep it from falling on her face while she skated. She was scared to take a tumble on the skating rink and look silly, she told Cody.

Cody and Amy put on their skates and took to the ice. Uncle Henry stayed behind the railing, watching them. Cody tried to showboat, going fast right out of the gate, but had a little trouble managing the curve, barely able to stay on his feet. Amy laughed at him. Uncle Henry gestured with his hand at Cody, telling him to take it easy. Cody smiled, having slowed down drastically, only to watch Amy wave at him as she went by. He tried to go faster, but almost had a mishap again. Amy couldn't stop laughing at Cody. He had to slow down, trying to balance himself by flailing his arms in the air.

Amy tried signaling to Uncle Henry to put his skates on and join them. He

shook his head at first, but Amy insisted. She kept nodding and, when Cody joined in, Uncle Henry had trouble saying no, trying to tell the kids he was a little too old to skate. Cody and Amy wouldn't have it, so they went up to him and asked him up close, telling him it would be fun.

Uncle Henry looked around and saw that the skating rink was hardly full. It was a good time to start skating.

He put his skates on and stepped onto the rink gingerly. One slow gliding sweep at a time, he inched his way toward the two teens. Cody took off and tried daredevil moves one more time, spinning around and landing on his backside. Amy and Uncle Henry started laughing. They skated around the rink while Cody tried to go as fast as he could, telling them he was Apolo Ohno. Amy and Uncle Henry laughed along as they skated at a leisurely pace around the rink.

"Your brother can be somethin' else," Uncle Henry told Amy.

"Uncle Hen, don't you think I know that by now?" Amy replied, lightly chuckling at him.

He smiled at her. She turned around and looked at him. He stared into her eyes,

and she stared into his. Their smiles disappeared for a moment as electricity moved between them. They both looked away, suddenly aware of how small the skating rink actually was.

They skated in silence for a little while, until they smiled at each other again.

* * *

“What’s wrong, sis? Why do we have to go back home so soon? We’re having fun over here, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but we’ve got to go back. I’ve got something urgent to take care of back home. I can’t explain. If you want, I’ll go and you can stay. How about that?”

“No. I don’t want to be left here on my own. It won’t be the same. I don’t know anyone yet. Why won’t you tell me what’s up?”

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

“It’s not Uncle Henry or Aunt Leticia, is it?”

“No, no. It’s not them. They’re great. I mean ... why wouldn’t they be?”

“Is it Mom and Dad?”

“Not them, either.”

Amy tried to suppress her embarrassment. Cody couldn’t understand why his sister wanted to return home so suddenly. Amy was packing her things, making a mess of them in her suitcase. Cody could tell she was nervous. It was as if something was scaring her off. However, he had no idea what that might be.

“Have you told Aunt Leticia yet?”

“I’m about to,” she said. “As soon as I talk to Mom.”

“What a bummer, Amy.”

“I’m so sorry, Cody. Trust me on this one.”

“How? You won’t even tell me what the problem is.”

Meanwhile, Uncle Henry was in a singles bar in town, sipping a whiskey. He was being careful not to get drunk. He needed to be away for a while. The snow was falling around his parked truck, and he knew he would have to do some shoveling when he was done. He ordered his second round and swore it was his last. He didn’t want Leticia or the two teens smelling the whiskey on his breath, so he thought about coming in through the back door instead. He thought about the teens and how wonderful they had been, especially...

A woman in her early twenties walked up to the bar and sat beside him. Henry thought she was beautiful, and just about every man would agree. Her name was Anna, and she was a college student traveling from Philadelphia. They exchanged hellos and began small talk. After she received her drink, they stopped for a moment and watched TV. She turned around and leaned against the tabletop, surveying the rest of the bar. Henry felt the whiskey make a warm spot in his stomach.

The bartender watched Henry closely. Two glasses of the whiskey had already made his ears and cheeks rather pinkish. The bartender relied on his instincts. He knew that Henry was in no mood for conversation. He was out because he was trying to stay away from something. That made a man prone to too much drinking.

The woman looked in Henry's direction again.

"Do you live anywhere close by?" she said, surprising Henry. It wasn't the kind of question he was expecting from a beautiful stranger.

"I live about forty-five minutes west of here. Why do you ask?" he responded.

"I was just curious. This town's so boring, and I don't know anybody. The only people I've met are those dudes over there ... see," she answered, pointing at a couple of guys playing a game at a pool table. Henry turned around and looked at them. They looked like a couple of drifters looking for a good time.

"I figured you to be a nice guy. That's all," she said.

Henry looked at her, hardly believing the situation he was in. He decided to call Leticia and tell her he wasn't coming home that night. He had an excuse – the truck got buried in two feet of snow, and he was too tired to dig it out.

"So," Anna said, "you wanna get outta here?"

Henry said yes.

* * *

He awoke in the motel next to her. She stirred a bit when he got up. He got dressed, and headed out to shovel the snow that had stranded his truck.

It was another night, and he'd had another dream curtailed at the point of relevance, or so it seemed. Whatever it

might have meant to Henry suddenly didn't matter.

In the dream, Henry remembered a hydra, a serpent, a creature who had once been a man, denouncing a false rendition of God – a man on a cross. Henry toiled at freeing himself from the sticky tar that bound his torso and lower extremities. He flailed his arms about, clawing at the ground, until the muck devoured him.

Henry came back home in the morning wanting a word with Leticia. A big decision had been made. In his heart, there was no turning back. He felt an uneasiness at home for the first time since he had started being unfaithful to her. Things couldn't stay the same anymore; he couldn't deny the truth that he was dying to leave her. Their enactment of a marriage had to end. He wanted a new start. He didn't know exactly what would happen next.

He climbed up the steps and heard Cody and Amy in their rooms talking. He wondered what was going on. He decided to ask them what they were doing after he was done talking to Leticia.

“Leticia,” he said, instead of “dear,” which was what he used to call her a long time ago. She noticed the disparity for the first time.

“We have to talk,” he said.

Leticia could tell it was serious. She predicted the worst, already suspicious of his overnight stay at the motel in town.

“What is it, Henry, dear?” she said, trying to sound affectionate.

She still wanted him to stay, in spite of it all. She knew no one would care for her without him. Worse, she'd lived all these years in his shadow. She couldn't throw so many years of memories away, no matter how unsavory they might have been. She couldn't leave them behind so abruptly.

Rather than feel remorse, or pity for her, he felt hatred. His thoughts ran amok. He shook his head, but he couldn't get around the feelings he was experiencing. He looked at her as she tried to beseech him with her eyes. Don't go, they said. I have no one. No one else but you.

“I want a divorce,” he said.

* * *

Uncle Henry was set to drive the teens to the airport that afternoon. They had just heard the news. Leticia had called them into her room and, when they had found her, she had been weeping. She told them that she had foreseen the end of her relationship with Uncle Henry happening for quite some time, but remained hopeful it wouldn't. She was powerless to stop it, like she had been powerless to stop the drunk driver during the car accident. Cody asked if he and Amy had played a part in it, and she denied it, saying that she and Uncle Henry had enjoyed their company immensely.

Amy felt bad for her aunt. Uncle Henry could start over. Unlike Aunt Leticia, he was able-bodied, mobile and unencumbered. He had freedom and, with the knowledge of that, he destroyed what was left of Leticia's hope. She would have no choice but to find a facility that catered to disabled adults and seniors. Henry, at the very least, had already promised to claim only his share of the assets, leaving Leticia with a chance to find reasonable care.

"It was my fault," their aunt said. "I tied him down too long. He was always discontented. I should have let him go."

The two teens could only sit there on her bed as she wept. Uncle Henry prepared the truck, loading up their belongings.

"I should have let him walk out the door a long time ago ... when I realized he didn't love me. I tried to tell him I didn't mean to saddle him with obligation. I didn't mean to become the deadweight that held him back from being happy. All I wanted was for him to love me ... love me like he once did."

Just then Uncle Henry appeared by the doorway, announcing that the truck was ready. He told the teens to say goodbye to their aunt and head downstairs to the truck. They both kissed their aunt on the cheek and told her they would come back to visit her. Perhaps at Christmas, they said. They all said goodbye.

Henry and Leticia were left there. Silence strangled the words left unsaid. Henry looked at her with cold eyes, as if he were displeased. Leticia asked what was wrong and Henry's forehead and eyebrows furrowed in reply.

"Love you like I once did? I never loved you, Leticia," he said frigidly. "Not one bit."

* * *

Uncle Henry took the teens to the airport shortly after. It was quiet in the truck, until Uncle Henry switched the radio on and sang along to the music. Cody and Amy began to sing along with him. They weren't quite sure of the lyrics, but they did their best to make up for it, slurring the parts that they didn't know. After several songs, Cody spoke.

"You and Auntie getting a divorce, Uncle Henry?" he said.

"Yeah," Uncle Henry replied. "Please don't think either of you had anything to do with it. I've been unhappy for a long time, and there's no use pretending that something still works when it doesn't, so ..."

"It's probably best for Auntie to go to an assisted living community anyway, right? You can't always be there for her," Amy said.

"Right," Uncle Henry replied. It was the only thing he could say.

Henry Savant reflected for a moment, feeling remorseful for what he had said to Leticia. He said it in the heat of the moment. Emotions were riding high. He shouldn't have said he never loved her, even though it was the truth. All the

years that they had spent together should have meant something.

Leticia didn't deserve to get hurt that way, not after years of his infidelity had caused her so much pain. He had driven one last dagger, his coup de grâce, into the heart of her, before he threatened to divorce her.

At the airport, Cody and Uncle Henry unstrapped the suitcases and carried them over to the baggage counters. Checking which terminal they needed, Cody decided to check the main display for the flight departures.

That left Uncle Henry and Amy alone at the waiting area, where some folks from a terminal had just begun streaming out of an exit. They were quiet at first, but Amy couldn't stay silent.

"Uncle Henry, what'll you do now?"

"Work. Live. Go on with life. Maybe meet someone. I don't know. It's a new start. It's what I wanted."

"I might never see you again," she said.

"That's probably for the best," he answered.

She knew what he meant. She didn't want to hear him say it, but she had to. They had to have closure. They had

come dangerously close to doing something that they would both have regretted and, in the end, both of them had made sure that neither of them would cross that line.

Amy hugged Uncle Henry for the last time. Cody returned and did the same. They entered Terminal 8 and waved goodbye.

Uncle Henry stood there for a while. After he watched the plane take off, he hung his head low, and turned around.

Frailty

I arose with the break of dawn, the sheets partly covering my nakedness. Undulations moved across the cotton surface like waves on water, the shadows contrasting with the swells. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the alarm clock on my side table. I sat there for a brief moment without thinking, allowing my mind to catch up to my body, which had risen before it was ready.

Mildly disoriented, I stood up and surveyed the room. I found a note on the other side of the bed and crumpled it without reading. I checked my safe in the closet and found it locked. Satisfied, I made my way to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror.

I studied the face in the glass – brown hair, heavy brow, square jaw and, in between those features, a vague emptiness. The mirror was supposed to tell me who I was at that moment, but I could only see the shadow of my former self, the insidious destruction of the man I used to

be. The mirror couldn't circumvent reality. I saw the blemishes, the sunken eyes, the black patches beneath them, likely to worsen with time. I wanted to see someone else in the mirror but, in that moment, all I could see was the face of death.

The woman had left hours before – I couldn't be sure when. The lingering odor of her perfume was the only evidence of her presence. It pervaded the bedroom, not quite masking the smell of her skin, a hint of my own scent barely perceptible beneath it.

I turned the shower on, seeking to escape the stagnant air. I bathed, washed my skin, scrubbed her memory from mine. I combed my hair and it cooperated meekly. The night before had been a diversion, a compulsion of the body, a desire for union that yielded no need for further course of action.

I folded up my sleeves and buttoned up my shirt. My trousers fell gently over my

shoes at the precise length. I flashed the mirror a parting smile, and the dying man smiled back at me joylessly.

Outside my apartment building, the concrete sidewalk was littered with salt, freezing rain having been forecasted for the week. A thick mist still hovered over the distant horizon. The street lamp outside my building emitted a lurid glow that combated feebly with the daylight. A girl on a bicycle hurtled past me. Behind the veil of mist that settled over the city, the waiting sky was a great, dirty patch of white. The street was empty.

* * *

I had breakfast in a place called The Clarion Lounge off Main Street. It was a bar frequented by bored thirty and forty-somethings come night, and was usually packed on Fridays, meaning you couldn't even get on the waiting list if you'd come late.

The banquet area of The Clarion was relatively small. There was more room along the bar and the café area, which extended to outdoor seating, where some of the patrons liked to meet for business and sip their lattes in the sun. There was a stage where performers could play music in the evenings.

The lone flower in its vase on my table was a day old by my estimate. The velvet draperies that hung about the windows facing the street added a funereal element to the scene. The wait staff was well dressed, and it was quiet despite the soft music drifting from the overhead speakers, making subtle conversation possible.

Deeper in the lounge where the sunlight couldn't reach, the walls glowed faintly. Lamps hidden in small alcoves sent licks of light up the walls toward the ceiling.

I recognized an older man sitting across the room. He was a local doctor, a psychiatrist who treated an acquaintance of mine. After meeting said acquaintance at a friend's party, I had spent the night with her. That was the last time I had seen her. She had been tactful enough not to expect a return call of any sort. She had taken the encounter at face value, I presumed, perceiving that little could be expected from something so brief, so trivial.

Just then, she strolled past my table towards the old man. She was young and bore an affectation of naiveté, but I could tell she'd long ago taken stock of her assets in the eyes of others: her smooth thighs, her flowing blonde hair,

her youthful smile. She used them to her advantage. She greeted the man warmly. It looked to be more than a casual exchange of pleasantries over breakfast. He laid his lecherous hand on her back as he helped her get seated and, with it, grazed her arm, a finger lightly touching the back of her hand.

What did I know about her? Beyond the aforementioned, I knew nothing. His desire for her was evident.

Her back to me, I watched him take her in, his eyes drowning in the fountain of youth before him. I wondered if he loved her. I doubted it. What was love in the eyes of a man who merely wished to replenish his own youth? What was she but a vessel through which to invoke the ghosts of his past?

Suddenly, the waitress came up to me. I smiled at her. I hadn't seen her there before. "You're new here," I told her, starting conversation.

Staring at an unfamiliar street, I remembered a line from a poem I had written in my youth:

Love: shapeless, formless, many-faced,

You come to many a heart on earth and above.

The chaos blossoms in my chest and I am one with the stars.

I may have been a romantic back then. When love comes at no one's expense, you dispense of it as much as you can. You spend freely, and get pure pleasure in return. But, all the while, a debt is mounting somewhere, waiting to come crashing down on someone. Your only hope of survival is to pay that debt and wash your hands of it. I am immune to love. In fact, I do not believe in it.

Just then, she emerged from the bathroom – the waitress I had met at The Clarion, wearing nothing more than a satin robe that extended to her knees. Her wet skin shimmered. She drew the curtains of her bedroom, leaving only the light in her bathroom and what light was to be had from the drawn curtains. She took off her robe and crawled up towards me in bed, wearing nothing more than a mischievous smile.

* * *

Chivalry is no virtue of mine. I've long stopped pretending that it is. That my preference for the simplicity of my less-than-chivalrous ways has brought me a lifestyle that suits me aptly testifies to the wisdom of my approach.

I do, however, acknowledge its purpose, place and importance. Sincerity be damned. I don't have to believe in chivalry to subscribe to it when it's advantageous to me. I am not a man of principle. I am a scalawag. An insincere gesture of gallantry has suited my end purpose at times. I've done worse things to help myself out.

It was a cloudy half-past ten in the morning. The gym was nearly empty.

I was drenched in sweat, pummeling the punching bag with vigor and something that mirrored contentment, even sadistic glee. Boxing had its therapeutic value, being recreational, rehabilitative. I came by as often as I could, but not often enough. I desired women less after each subsequent visit. It was a physical regimen that placated the demons of this strange disease of duress, a disease that holds you captive: my so-called weakness, my frailty of flesh.

I nodded to a couple of the guys who came in and headed to the locker room to change. I was meeting somebody at a bistro not far from the gym to discuss a job taking pictures for his private memoir. The details were sketchy. He had some ideas, but he was still wondering

whether I was the right guy for the job. By trade, I am a photographer. The money is bad, but it beats most of the jobs people resign themselves to.

I pulled my collar taut on both ends and exited the gym onto Main Street. The breeze from the factory district downtown carried a hint of smog. Meanwhile, the fetor of fish was swept in on the crosswinds from the east district's fresh market, and the smell of wet earth permeated the city.

As I walked down the street, I noticed a man and woman arguing by the steps of one of the apartments, yelling profanities at one another. The man grabbed the woman by the wrist as she attempted to walk away from him, but she returned the favor by hitting him squarely in the face. She followed it up by hitting him repeatedly. He tried to shield himself, squinting, cussing, telling her to stop. People walking up and down the street didn't seem to care, and neither did I, until ...

"Robbie," she said. "Finally, you arrive. I was just about done with this dirt bag!"

She looked back at the confused man, then took me by the arm, leading me away in a hurry. We got in her car and he followed, continuing to yell as the vehi-

cle pulled away. I glanced from him to the woman beside me, trying to make sense of my predicament. Despite the mad rush, she was noticeably beautiful. I began to examine my captor closely, drawing conclusions about her life. She had sharp eyes and her cheekbones ended in sharp angles. She was in her early- to mid-thirties. She took immense care of her complexion. She wore very little makeup; in this sense, she was a minimalist, and it suited her features. She had raven black hair, but she'd worn other colors in the past. She liked high-heeled shoes, and she liked them regardless of the occasion. She had no children, and she had no true desire for any. She was married to that man she was escaping, and hadn't been married to him long. Along the drive, she pulled the ring off of her ring finger and threw it bitterly out of the window and smiled at me.

"Cheating bastard," she retorted. I hadn't guessed at that precisely.

"Where to?" I asked her. I was still uncertain of my own intentions, and yet I had allowed myself to be swept up in the moment.

"My place is out of the question ... which leaves us with no other alternative but ..."

* * *

"There're about as many hotels in this city as there are ..."

"Dumpster dives? Or 7-Elevens? I'm a cheap first date."

"A motel, maybe?"

"Think real cheap."

She began undoing my trousers, and I was a little uneasy all of a sudden. She sensed this. She asked what was wrong, laughing a little, as if there wasn't anything remiss about the circumstances.

"Nothing," I said. "I just remembered I had to be somewhere." I took a short glance at my watch. I had twenty minutes until the appointment. "Or, that is, have to be."

"Relax," she said, smiling. "You might still make it."

* * *

I recall a conversation I had with a counselor during my freshman year of college. I was a weird kid. I had a thing for obscure music and strange art. I didn't care for school. I was blacklisted.

I didn't care much for extracurricular activities, either. I took up photography

but didn't care much for the school paper. I took up guitar but didn't play for the school band. I never joined an athletic team even though I was a natural athlete and I could run for miles without gasping for air.

Parties mattered. Parties had lots of alcohol, and lots of unsuspecting women.

My early photography reflected my youthful preoccupations: a flair for the dramatic, a keen eye for the unusual. I didn't start out photographing nudes or, worse – pastoral scenes like the kind that wind up in cheap hotel rooms. My first portfolio was a thematic collection of photographs taken of a disgruntled man's family crypt. He had taken an interest in my ideas, exposing his ancestral remains to me as a favor, finding my project amusing and pleasantly demeaning to the unlucky bodies of his estranged family. The project netted me some un-gainly notoriety in some circles, but the photos themselves served to put the art world on notice: there was the lighting, the scope, the architectural basis of the main objects of the photos, and the mathematical precision of detail.

The arrangement of vaults, bone fragments of arms precisely orchestrated to fall out of the open coffins, the fragile

arms crossed against one another against the earthly remains of a chest, the skulls, putrescent and sodden black. They made for a collage of photos that exhibited the ephemeral nature of the flesh, the loneliness that accompanies the individual upon death, the inevitable end of everything we once held sacred.

The conversation with my counselor might have irked him. I hadn't aimed to divulge as much as I did.

The counselor assigned to me was a man in his mid-fifties or so, nearing retirement age and already significantly bald. One eye had a cataract problem, which led him to look at you with his head slightly tilted when he was listening to you. His skin was pale and blemished in spots, and his fingers were short and stout, like a man who'd worked with his hands all his life might have had. He wore a pale blue sport jacket, the kind only old men wore and, as I examined it, I noted a few strands of cat hair clinging to its surface. He didn't wear a wedding ring and, I thought to myself viciously, I wasn't at all surprised at that.

"Some of the other students speak of you," he said.

"Highly?"

“No.”

“Too bad. Can’t get them all.”

“Apparently you try your darnedest.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“The girls talk. You’re popular.”

“Does that mean well of me?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“But surely ...”

“Tell me, sir. Won’t you?”

“Why so curious?”

“Just that you mention it, that’s all.”

“Ahhh ...”

Here’s where it gets interesting ...

“The girls say you’re a hit-and-run artist. Do you know what I mean?”

“Not sure.”

“It means you love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

“Ahhh ...” I said. It was my turn to say it.

“Not merely that.”

“What is it, sir?”

“You like to hit your target every single time.”

“I believe that’s personal. High school was so last year.”

“They say you’ve been at it since then. They’re well aware of your reputation.”

“Didn’t make them any smarter,” I said to him, coyly. He was not pleased.

He seemed eager to issue me his parting shot. “I’ll give you some advice. You’re a good photographer. Don’t screw it up.”

I smiled. I sat back. I waited. It was about to end.

“Life is far too important to see it simply pass you by and not give a damn about things. If this behavior of yours is indicative of bigger problems, there are resources available to you. Bottom line is: it’s self-destructive. Can’t you see how weak and vulnerable it makes you appear in the eyes of those who can recognize a man who acts compulsively out of fear? It’s the fear of finding out you’re less of a man than you ought to be underneath that veneer of bravado and strength. You have to face it. You are not a slave to your desire. You turn to it for fear of being less than you aspire to become.”

* * *

The bistro was packed for lunch. Luckily, the man I was meeting had reserved a ta-

ble for us. It was furthest from the traffic at the main entrance. The entrance to the bistro was located by the lobby of the Marriott Hotel, and got plenty of foot traffic, but our table was set back, away from the commotion.

The married woman I had spent time with earlier had already gone to her mother's, where she would presumably stay until she decided what she would do about that husband of hers. I had asked her about getting a room at the Marriott, for convenience's sake, but she had refused, saying it was far too late to check in, far too expensive, and far too plush for a one-time sort of thing. I told her I felt degraded. She smiled and told me that she felt the same way.

We did it in a public restroom in an empty movie theatre near Main Street. The smell of dank old saturated urine was repulsive, and only worsened as I took deeper breaths, my heart beating faster. She tried not to let it bother her, either, but I saw her nose twitch a few times. The tiles were yellowish and were lined with mold and mildew. A spattering of feces missed its mark along the outer rim of the toilet in our stall. It had been a long time since I'd done something of this ilk. Such encounters had

once seemed routine. Now they just seemed desperate.

In the bistro, I was worried I had carried some of the unpleasant scent in with me. I would sniff at myself self-consciously when no one was looking. I was worried my olfactory senses might become immune to the stench after some time. I had the notion of asking a waitress to give me the rundown so I could know for sure, but I was afraid of coming across as crude.

I examined my surroundings as I awaited my would-be employer. American pop culture mosaics hung on the walls of the bistro, lending a 1950s look that made the bistro appear really throw-back to anyone who remembered what that era was like. The wooden chairs and tables were spare but glossy with varnish. The tablecloths were old but clean by my judgment. The glasses were spotless. The busboy accompanied my glass of refreshing ice water with a smile and a nod. Although a friend had encouraged me to try their cod dish, the appetizers on the menu seemed more enticing than the lunch specials. The bar was unusually busy for lunchtime and the orders kept coming. There was still no sign of my potential employer.

It was twenty minutes past the set appointment time and I had begun to think that my business meeting was a no-show. I gathered my notebook and pen from the table, already planning my apology to the waiter when a man who fit my meeting's description walked in the door. I felt a warm wave of relief as I settled back into my seat.

The man spoke first, addressing the headwaiter. The woman who was with him scanned the room. She eventually caught my eye as I watched them. I smiled, but she did not reciprocate. They looked like a couple. The woman had hair that was bleached blonde and slightly wavy. She wore a long faux-fur coat and a shimmering ebony dress inside of it. I gathered more details as they drew closer. The man wore a sport coat and matching pants, a shiny purple shirt that extended the lapels of his coat, and a pendant on a gold choker necklace exposed through his open collar. The pendant looked like a small locket. His hair was thick and combed back. As he approached my table, he slid his sunglasses off and smiled.

"I'm a big fan of your work!" Sherman Dwyer exclaimed, holding out a hand, which I promptly shook.

"Please, sit down," he said. He did all the talking. The woman stared at me blankly, then lit a cigarette and looked out the window, almost impatiently, indifferently, as if she couldn't care less about being there.

"About this job ..." I said.

"Let's get right to the point. I like that," he answered back. "It's a job I think you'll like," he continued, "looking at your background."

"This isn't a wedding, is it?"

"No, no. None of that."

"Great. You know, of course, I'm not into conventional work," I told him.

"Of course."

There was a brief pause as we both sized each other up. I broke the silence. "What kind of pictures will I be taking?"

"They won't be difficult subjects. Once you get through to them."

I scrutinized him impatiently. The cut to the chase moment seemed to have suddenly lost its luster. "What do you mean by that?"

“I want pictures of five women who lived in Tucson, Arizona a few months ago. Beautiful, popular women. They were in a local beauty pageant about two years ago, but you’ll need to look them up all around Tucson. Don’t know their exact whereabouts now.”

“You want portraits? This doesn’t sound like my kind of job. What’s in it for me? What did you mean by lived in Arizona if they’re still around the Tucson area?”

A hideous smile grew from one corner of his mouth and ended at the other. The realization dawned on me then. I remembered news of a serial killer in Tucson whose pinnacle achievement involved five former beauty pageant contestants. Fixated, all I could do was stare at his smile and await the words that next escaped it.

“Yup. You’re right. It’s your kind of job, all right.”

* * *

I was restless that night in my apartment. I couldn’t sleep, despite the fact that I was exhausted. I had spent the rest of the day tracking down job leads and finally found a project that seemed worthwhile and interesting. I realized that I might have been looking for an ex-

cuse to turn down Sherman Dwyer’s offer. I made it a point to be thorough, so I carefully constructed Plan B, in case Mr. Dwyer’s proposed job hit a snag. Plan B involved taking photos of lab specimens for a clinical research project. It would be conducted at the site of a multinational, privately run firm. I thought the exposure would be an excellent addition to my portfolio, taking pictures of body parts pickled in formaldehyde, for example. Besides, the money was decent for work of that sort, and there were opportunities to travel should I be assigned to go.

Nevertheless, my anxiety worsened as the night dragged on, and I grew even more tired and restless. I felt vexed, unable to dislodge the memory of Dwyer’s proposal. I was ridiculous to even consider it. It was the sort of proposal that would only whet my appetite for the unusual. He had promised a hefty sum in advance and a hefty parting gift when all was said and done. I had already begun to envision how I would dress the corpses up in each unique setting, beautifying their surroundings to add the sharpest degree of contrast – death and decay amidst serenity and calm. They’d reportedly died violent deaths, adding to the project’s appeal.

I decided to call a friend who worked the graveyard shift in a local telecommunications company monitoring equipment, knowing that he wouldn't be busy. Charlie was his name. He was a scruffy techie-type whom I met in college who was into the same things. He worked nights and slept during the day, even on days he wasn't working, because he said it was natural to him; there was a lot more going on at night.

Once, in college, he and I had gone to check out a shop in Brooklyn that sold New Age products. Inside, he picked up a crystal and started rubbing it around his arms and neck, stating that the item was a healing crystal. It had medicinal qualities, he had said.

It occurs to me I might've believed in the esoteric to a greater extent if it hadn't been introduced to me by a guy like Charlie.

"Hey, Charlie, it's me."

"What the hell? What are you doing up?"

"Can't sleep. What are you up to?"

"Nothin'. Ain't you got another one of your bimbos with you?"

"Yeah. She's asleep."

"What's wrong? You too tired?" Laughter echoed through the phone line.

"As a matter of fact, I am, so shut up."

More laughter. And more. I can hear crunching sounds. Charlie liked to snack on Cap 'n Crunch on his shift.

The woman lying in the other half of my bed was named Rosanna, or Susanna, or something like that. It didn't matter. She lay on her side, her buttocks gleaming in the moonlight, presented to me so innocuously, as though I were the type of man who would never desire her. At that moment, I was that man. The sheets tangled and twisted about her nude body like a painting from antiquity.

"I had a long day."

"Who didn't?"

"Hey listen ... I got offered this job, man. The money's good ... for a change. And ..."

"And what ... you take it!" he said.

Crunching sounds accompanied his barely intelligible words through the line.

"Well, thing is, you remember the portfolio piece I did in high school that made me, um, notorious?"

“You mean famous? The Transmogrification of Life piece you did. Fucking awesome, man. How can I forget? It launched your career, didn’t it?”

“Well, I’ve been offered to do a project to shoot a portfolio of five women in the Tucson, Arizona area and ...”

“Five women, wait. What the hell does this have to do with your work, man? I thought ...”

“They’re dead, Charlie. I have to dig them up. That’s what.”

* * *

Nobody can say I don’t do my research. I tracked my subjects down quickly. Four of the women or, more precisely, the bodies of the women, were laid to rest in a cemetery at Oracle Road in the heart of Tucson. The last body was in a small cemetery outside Oro Valley. I was to procure a temporary workspace during my stay in Tucson. I prepared a map detailing a sequential pattern of where the graves were located and when I would reach them, making my exit much easier. I planned on which tools to bring with me, which photographic equipment would be best suited for the dry, hot and cold conditions that characterized the bi-

polar days and nights of Tucson, making catastrophic screwups less likely.

All my travel and extraneous expenses would be paid for by my employer, Sherman Dwyer. The bonus compensation was lucrative enough. I asked no questions, granting him the privacy I thought his generous compensation afforded, but he offered an explanation, anyway.

“Beauty pageant bitches, that’s what I call ‘em. I knew some when I was young, just a kid in Tucson. Same pageant, even. They were mean as hell to me,” he said. “When I heard about these killings, you know, I’m not gonna lie, I got it. I mean, I know why the guy did it in a way. Ever since then I wanted to know what they looked like in the end ...” he said with a wicked smile.

I simply nodded in agreement, not knowing what it was that I was agreeing to. His explanation felt flat to me, like a joke with no humor. But, like I said, I didn’t ask any questions. I realized that whatever was not being said to me couldn’t be pretty, so I kept my mouth shut.

“But I know your work and I know you’ll do them justice,” he said, laughing after he said the words.

Lying awake the night before my departure, I could still hear them echo in my ears, resounding like a broken record of listless, dissonant music.

* * *

Charlie was right when he said that I could use the money or, more accurately, that it would be plain stupid to refuse as much as was being offered so, I took it and I was off to Tucson, ready for the desert sun and for little else.

On the plane ride, I contemplated the task before me. I would have to dig up five graves and stash the remains in a house I had secured for rent for a couple of weeks while I fixed the photographs for Mr. Dwyer. I couldn't get his laugh out of my head. He was probably psychotic in some way. He had a tooth missing, as if he had lost it in a barroom brawl and kept the open space as a battle scar, though he could've gotten a replacement if he'd wanted. I had no doubt he could afford it. His payment to me was proof. To me, that black hole in his smile only fortified my suspicion that there was something deeply, inherently wrong with this man.

"How'd you get into this line of work?" he had asked me. "No, no," he had said. "Don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of yours. Just wondering. You're a smart kid. Genius with the camera. Coulda done just about anything else with that talent by my estimate. Coulda made about five times as much. Tell me. How come?"

"Cuz I didn't want to be stuck in some nine-to-five concrete hellhole all my life," I told him. "My job suits me just fine."

He smiled just then, tooth missing and all, thick sludgy hair combed back, and said to me, "I'll tell you a secret, I feel the same way you do, man."

* * *

The house I'd rented for two weeks had fading green paint that was peeling in a lot of places. A wooden fence guarded the perimeter of the vacant property, and the property next to it was derelict, as well. I chose it for that exact reason. For that reason, I should say, it suited the purpose.

The garden plots were littered with desiccated stems and the sand inched its way into every crevice of the house's exterior. The owner of the property had been concerned that a feral cat or dog might have

called the place home. "It might stink in there," he warned me.

It was a bungalow. The roof of the house converged towards the left wing where the kitchen was located. The windows were old and appeared to slide open. There were no drapes or blinds hanging by the windows, so you could see through to the inside if you moved close enough. To my surprise, I was relieved to note that the windows allowed ample light in. Was I really afraid of it being dark in the house, I wondered? Nothing in there could be worse than what I was about to bring into it.

* * *

Under cloak of night, I made my way to the local cemetery via a rental van. I brought a pick and a shovel, two essential grave-robbing tools. I wore a black long-sleeved shirt with a Chinese-style collar and black gabardine trousers. My pale skin stood in stark contrast to the rich dye of the seldom-used articles of clothing. It was hardly an ensemble that seemed worthy of the occasion, but the nights were cold here. I even smudged a bit of black face paint around my eyes.

The mist enshrouded me, feeling cold and damp, thick and penetrating. My clothes were wet. Shovel in hand, I dug

into soft fertile earth. The ground came easy to the spade. Muscles tensed, and I nearly convulsed on occasion due to the strain and fatigue, made worse by the cold. The pick shattered the ornate coffin lids and, one by one, my subjects were exposed. They were beauties once, forlorn forever. Corruption and decay had stripped them of their prized possessions. The vim and vitality had left them, and they were putrid and solemn. I had to shield my eyes from the dust and niter that rose into the night. I lifted each corpse from its coffin, like a newlywed on a moribund honeymoon.

After four of the bodies had been disinterred, I started on the last. I could feel the soft earth turn to mud in my hands, mud on my face as foul earth mixed with my sweat. Foot by foot, inch by square inch, the grave was unearthed. I took the pick and began to destroy the coffin lid. The heavy mahogany splintered beneath the sheer force and weight of the blade. Soon, there was my prize: a woman by the name of Esmeralda. She lay there within that coffin, asleep and waiting in a bed of soiled white satin, her mouth gaping open, the worms squirming within the small orifice.

Suddenly, she thrust her arms open and pulled me down into her. I felt the disin-

tered earth retreat back into the grave. I squirmed and fought hard to free myself from her, but it was too late.

Then, abruptly, I woke up.

I got up from the sheets, detecting the scent of ripe sweat as I rose and made my way quickly to the bedroom at the end of the hallway. As I hadn't had the time to clean the place up, there was a musty smell. The wood planks creaked as I rushed down the dark hallway. The doorknob almost gave way when I twisted it open.

Inside, five skeletal remains stood erect in makeshift boxes, grinning at the sudden absolution that had freed them from their cells. The smell was putrid, but I was used to it. My olfactory senses were once again immersed in the pungent glory of death. It pervaded the house, commingling with other odors in other rooms. Here, though, it was all consuming.

And there was Esmeralda amongst them, safe in the bosom of her dour wooden casket, hands along her breasts like a queen of ancient Egypt without the bandages, staring with her hollow eyes, her mouth, black as night, empty, cavernous as the grave from which she had risen.

* * *

The coffee maker made its annoying whistling sound. The blender whirred and the anchorman's voice coming from the television set was dulled by all the noise. The scent of death was everywhere. Its wetness soaked my clothes, the tablecloth I had laid out the night before, the curtains.

I preferred to keep it cold, owing to the smell. It would have only been made worse by the warmth of the radiator. Whatever was left in the spaces between those bones would rot faster than you could imagine.

I cracked the eggs and tried to build an appetite. I couldn't risk being seen around town. I had chosen the house because of its remote location and the promise of a pre-existing odor that might make my subjects less noticeable. The owner had forewarned me and, sure enough, when I got inside, I found a dead mink and two large dead rodents.

A long day lay ahead of me so I had to work fast. Take the photographs, dump the corpses and move on. Out of Tucson. Out of Mr. Dwyer's twisted sociopsychotic universe.

I worked silently, methodically. The news droned on in the background, no doubt mentioning a bizarre grave robbing the night before, but I ignored it. I lost all track of time until there was a sudden rapping at the door.

* * *

I peeked out of one of the front windows to see who it was.

It was a woman, dressed in a white blouse and skirt with matching white hat and matching white shoes. What the hell? I thought to myself.

It was the visage of an angel, down in the valley of darkness.

I knew if I opened the front door the smell would pour forth, so I ran to the back door and circled around to investigate and drive her away quietly, without arousing suspicion. "Hello," I said. "What seems to be the problem?"

The woman jumped at the sound of my voice. "Oh," was all she said until I recognized who she was.

She was Sherman Dwyer's wife. She took a moment to gather herself. "You startled me," she said, which was no mystery to me. "Why didn't you open the front door?"

"Aren't you aware of the type of business arrangement I have with your husband, Mrs. Dwyer?"

"Oh, please. Call me Sherry," she said, walking up to me, extending a hand.

I politely obliged with a light handshake. "What's going on? What are you doing here?"

"Well, my husband doesn't know I'm here. I was kind of ..." she trailed off.

"Kind of?"

"Kind of curious to know what they looked like."

* * *

Sherry sat in her chair sipping the coffee I'd made for her, waiting for me to get done cooking my scrambled eggs, not once minding the sharp smell of exhumed corpses I had brought in or the general state of decay the house was in. I found it almost peculiar that she was so relaxed. How could she tolerate it?

"Are you sure you can stand the smell?" I asked her in disbelief.

"Oh, it's awful," she said. "But it's okay. I've come so far."

“The waste can’s right there,” I told her, eyeing the trash bin to her left. She seemed hardly interested to know.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“How can you stand it?” she asked.

I shrugged. “It stinks, you know. But I’ve smelled worse. Fresher ones.”

“You’ve done this more than once.”

“More than twice.”

“Too infrequent to be a hobby, too often to be a healthy occupation,” she said. I had to turn around and smile at that one.

“Why do you ask?” I asked her.

“Because I’m not the one who’s eating, you know?”

I laughed. She was showing a sense of humor that hadn’t been there when we met in the restaurant. She seemed so normal, sipping coffee, laughing. She didn’t look like someone waiting for a glimpse of rotting corpses. Why does she want to see a bunch of dead bodies? I wondered. Why is she here at all?

* * *

“What exactly did you want to see?”

“What did you have?”

“Don’t play games with me. The photos aren’t done yet. I just got here. Remember?”

“I know.”

I didn’t know just how twisted she and Sherman Dwyer were, but I intended to fulfill my end of the bargain and get out as neatly and cleanly as possible. I didn’t need her curiosity jeopardizing me.

“Listen, if something goes down, I’m taking you two with me. Hell, I could walk out right now and leave you with these fucking corpses to deal with, okay? How does that sit with you? So, how about this? We’ll do this as Sherman and I agreed or I’m out of here, all right?”

She smiled, contented, and agreed. Her pupils sparkled at me, hectic, obsidian, like black holes set in pools of white. Her lips looked like moist cotton candy after you’d had a taste of it. “I know,” she said. “But Sherman didn’t agree to giving you this.”

She undid the buttons of her blouse and her breasts popped out.

* * *

Frailty is mankind’s incurable weakness. All of life is fragile to its core. Death is

the culmination of life's incessant illusion of progress. Desire breathes ferocious wind powering the wings of death. In my life, love has meant nothing but a misconception, a great stepping stone to unhappiness.

My own frailty works twofold: first, I suffer from a starvation for life, a libido with an insatiable appetite. It is a mundane fascination, one that seeks comprehension only through the great consequence of gratification, made meaningless by the repetition of the act and therefore rendered useless.

Secondly, I suffer a fascination for the beauty of death. It is the aspect of mortal flesh and its unfathomable quandary that I have spoken of that, next, drives me to become ever more stricken with the beauty of mortality. It is this aspect of my fixation for death that manifests in my work.

I called Charlie, hoping he was home from working the graveyard shift. Things were happening too fast, and I was beginning to worry I'd gotten too far ahead of myself.

The phone rang.

"Hello."

"Charlie, it's me. I'm in Tucson."

"Hey, man. You're in the fuckin' news. Woo-hoo! Bravo. Where the chicks at?"

"I got more problems than that."

"They catchin' up to you?"

"No. The cops don't know it's me. It's Dwyer. Or, rather, Dwyer's wife. She's here, in Tucson, at my place, in my bed."

"What the ...?"

Loud cuss words followed. He hollered into my ear. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Charlie asked.

"She got to my head," I told him.

"Yeah, it looks like. Why didn't you use your other one? The one that's supposed to think?"

"Okay! Okay! I screwed up. Everything's under control. She's getting dressed. She just wants to be around for the photo shoot."

"How twisted are these people you're into?"

"Don't know," I told him, shrugging my shoulders.

"We'll see what happens."

Suddenly, Sherry walked out, dressed in my clothes and coming towards me, smiling salaciously. It appeared as though

she wanted more. I could hardly believe it.

She undid my trousers as I listened to Charlie murmur about work. She began to perform fellatio, even as I stood there, phone in hand, a little busy at the moment. Don't care. What the hell? On with the show, I thought.

“Uh, Charlie, I'll have to call you back.”

With the press of a button, Charlie fell silent.

* * *

We started the photo shoot first thing that afternoon. I dressed up the corpses in evening gowns and set up the rooms. The house was spacious enough to accommodate the concept of the collection. For some photos, I propped them up on antique chairs. For others, they had glasses of wine in hand, the glasses wired to the ceiling so they wouldn't fall on the floor. For some pictures, they wore hats. For some, they posed seductively on beds of velvet and crimson, which aimed to prove irresistible to starved necrophiliacs. Esmeralda was the crown jewel; she was the trump card. She lay in a garish bed, surrounded by white drapery, dressed in a white evening gown made of fine silk, her arm ex-

tending down the side of the bed, hovering over a spilt vial of liquid. The scene aimed to imply that it was poison. I thought it was an original concept.

Through it all, Sherry hovered over my work like a vulture, occasionally giving me oral sex or fondling my ear or something of that nature, touching me inappropriately just when I was about to shoot a picture so I'd have to yell at her to cut it out. She'd smile and back off and let me do my thing, but then she'd start at it again just as easily. I finally figured out how to get her to knock it off. I decided to let her join in the fun.

I took pictures of her. She sat on a chair naked. She wore her high-heeled shoes and she threw her bleached blonde hair back at an angle, just as she did whenever she was about to come. I had her split her legs open to show herself and had her pour some brandy in between her large breasts so it would run down into her navel, down into the heart of her, where it ought to be forbidden, where it was warm.

Poor, poor girls, they were meant for so much more than this – so much more than the violent deaths they'd suffered, or the defilement they'd endured at my hands these past two days. They were

meant to be remembered for their beauty. The beauty that got them so mercilessly slaughtered. I'd pay them that honor with my photographs. It was the least I could do to atone for what I did to them.

Who was I kidding?

I planned to keep a copy of the photos as part of my personal collection, which I tentatively called Wine, Women and Sin. Yet my nameless subjects were as dispensable to me as one roll of film could have been; they were replaceable objects within the frame of the concept.

Sherry went back to her husband and I remained to finish the job, which meant dumping the corpses without getting caught. I did, in a ditch I dug up in the middle of nowhere off Oro Valley where the ground was hard. It took more than a day to get it deep enough. Content, I ditched whatever evidence could link me to the crime and cleaned the house up. When I was finished, I took the first flight out of Tucson and looked forward to my compensation, my regular work, the normalcy of my routine and the comfort of my home. I was eager to forget about Tucson even though everything had worked out splendidly. I'd decided it

was the last time I'd do a job of that nature.

Sherry had told me before she'd left that her husband, Sherman, was a necrophiliac who'd inherited a good sum of money. His private memoir was his personal porn registry. She reiterated what he'd told me: that he'd had a rough time with some beauty pageant girls when he was in high school. He'd been a tormented youth, and a couple of knockout beauty queens had made fun of him, spurned him or, worse, failed to notice him at all. "It's a shame," Sherry had said. "Sherman's really not that bad ... except in bed."

* * *

Days removed from Tucson, I was in my apartment with this woman named Erika, whom I had just picked up at a club. We were having drinks. We were making small talk, lounging on the sofa. She had one hand on my shoulder and another undoing my pants. Then, the unthinkable happened. The doorbell rang. "What gives? Charlie, this better not be you," I said aloud.

I opened the door, ready to preach a sermon to whoever it was. But I stopped short. My mouth fell open in surprise.

It was Sherry. In a robe. In high heels. Wearing a smile, cupping her fake boobs. “Hello,” she said. “It’s me.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“Can I come in?” she said, walking past me without waiting for an answer.

“No,” I told her. “I have company.”

Sherry looked at Erika. Erika looked at Sherry. Sherry told Erika to get out. “He and I are about ready to fuck,” she told her.

* * *

Sherry and I were having the sex of a lifetime. She fought to get on top, and I would regain control, then we’d roll around the bed looking for more room, nearly falling on the floor. She scratched me with her long pointed fingernails and bit me at the neck. I squeezed her hard, penetrating her, bruising her flesh, desecrating her. I rendered her as helpless as a marionette, limp and tangled beneath my own strength.

I paused on top of her at one point and I saw her smile, her eyes lighting up like lanterns, all her wrongdoings laid bare before me. Suddenly I was certain of the compensation she was offering me: my

own useless pleasure in exchange for something I’d given up long before meeting her or Sherman Dwyer or the lifeless beauty queens – my soul.

Her laughter resonated in my head.

I saw a shadow rise from the bed, and with it went all that I had ever known.

I fell back on the bed, not moving, wondering what it was that I had been missing, or what it was that had left me behind.

Hope Leaves

As I remember it, the day was foggy. Smoke hovered over the twisted steel. Flares burned. Broken headlights glinted towards the woodlands. People huddled together, looking on as emergency personnel worked feverishly to free Megan's battered body from its steel trappings.

Although I recovered within weeks, the accident left Megan in a coma. Both of our families rallied around us, but there was little improvement in Megan's condition, and we were faced with the notion that Megan might never fully recover from her injuries. Days and weeks went by, and the same snags in her treatment kept recurring, making all hope that she would awaken one day a fleeting prospect.

The corridors of the nursing home were always so cold. Crowded elevators took us to the fourth floor where her unit was located. They were the main elevators that led to the heart of the nursing home. Our unit was in a seldom-visited corridor on the northwest side, which seemed

even colder in temperature. The building was made of red brick, which no doubt helped retain the coldness of the air.

The corridors in this wing of the nursing home were almost empty. There was a waiting area for guests. Sometimes, people prayed together there, often holding hands as they did. At other times, the silence seemed deafening. Immutable objects, like the cup of coffee one of them would have held in their hands, might have been silently trembling. I sat amongst them, waiting for visiting time, stunted by helplessness.

I wished that I could take her home with me, the home where we had promised we would start a new life together. The house was new, spare of furniture. It lacked a woman's touch. I used aluminum blinds to use as shades. There were no plants, flowers or pets. The bed we were supposed to share had a white sheet, white pillowcases and a navy blue duvet. The décor was minimalist. The walls lacked color. It was as though she'd

never stepped foot in it, never left her mark on things.

* * *

I was an aspiring racecar driver when I met Megan a few years ago. At the time, she was dating a young doctor named Roderick Petro. She was just 23 years old and he was about 30. He was European, but grew up in South Africa, and had come to do his internship and residency here in Richmond when he met Megan at the university. She was a fine arts major and a budding local talent, having done a few local exhibits and a couple out of state. I met her while I was at a local restaurant having dinner with a few friends and she was there with him. I was instantly drawn to her. She didn't feel the same way, seemingly enjoying the company of her date.

Megan was wearing a navy blue top and a grey skirt. Her hair was fastened at the top of her head with a few tresses winding down. She wore light makeup. Her arms were athletic and honed and you could tell she worked out. I watched her walk into the restaurant before we were all shown to our tables and she walked on her high heels with deft ease. Best of all, her eyes hid waterfalls of sweet joy-

ous laughter. Her smile lit up the restaurant.

My gaze restlessly found its way towards her throughout the conversation with my own companions, and one of them took notice, looking behind him, following my eyes, glancing at her direction.

“Nick, all this time, you've been checking out that girl over there and you've been mum about it. What's eating you?” he said.

My friend's name was Wiley. It was a nickname for Wilhelm. He was a crewmember on the club racing team I was on and a good friend of mine for the past seven years running. He's a happy-go-lucky guy on the outside (hence the nickname) but, in spite of being that way, was a deeply loyal and trustworthy guy who I'd learned to trust when circumstances were less than ideal. Every crew needs someone easy to like and easy to trust. For that, he was my guy.

“I've got to meet her,” I said. “Don't know. Just have to.”

“Can't you see she's got somebody? He's not bad looking,” he continued, still looking behind him in her direction.

Everybody called Dr. Roderick Petro “Dr. Roddy.” He appeared to be easygoing. He was a pulmonologist and new to private practice. He had a pale complexion and cheeks that had a touch of pinkness, deepening in hue when he smiled. He had blonde hair that was cropped short and always looked well groomed. He had a good nose and narrow eyes that provided a contrasting seriousness to his casual demeanor. He was wearing an oxford coat with patches on the elbows and dark cotton trousers that looked somewhat mismatched at first glance. Having been part of the rowing team in his college days, he kept in impeccable shape by habit. Wiley sized him up with a glance and told me it was unfortunate that I had picked a girl he was seeing.

“She looks great, I mean, Nick, but ...” he continued. “Just you’re out of luck.”

“What do you mean?” I replied to him absentmindedly, hardly listening, still looking at her, hoping she’d return the favor somehow.

“Nothing,” he said. “Have a beer.”

He passed a fresh bottle to me and started laughing, and I finally figured out who it was he and our other friends were laughing about.

* * *

It was a Tuesday in July. Outside, it was hot but, inside the nursing home, the air conditioning was at full blast and, as soon as I stepped into the lobby, I felt like I was walking into a large freezer.

As I expected, the elevators were cramped. I huddled in a corner knowing the crowd would disperse by the time the elevator reached my floor. Someone thankfully asked where everyone was headed and I waited my turn to say “fourth.” Silence presided momentarily as the machine made its ascent up the cavernous passageway that tunneled through the heart of the nursing home. The doors would open on every subsequent floor and empty just a little each time, leaving me alone to climb up to the fourth, staring up to where the number 4 was about to light up and signal my arrival was underway.

I got out of the elevator and made my way through the main corridor to my left, which was where Megan’s room was located. The glass panels filtered the sunlight until all that remained of it was a lurid glow. Empty from end to end, the corridors snaked into the bowels of the facility. My footsteps were muted by the soft thick maroon-colored carpet.

The rooms were unmarked and the walls were bare. The rooms looked identical throughout the fourth floor of the left wing. Uniform heavy wooden doors stood in stark contrast to the white painted walls, giving no indication of who might be inside. I knew which room was Megan's, but went through the drill of telling the receptionist who I was visiting and then being escorted to the room. We were allowed to come in two to three hours at a time, but we weren't allowed to crowd the patient because there wasn't enough room in the treatment area. I gave her the sweetest 60 minutes I could muster, but I couldn't quite bring myself to sit there and just stare helplessly for the full allotted time, either.

I opened the door and there was my sleeping bride, waiting for me. After three years, I still grew teary-eyed at the sight of her lying there, helpless and motionless, in a still frame of life and death in juxtaposition. I told her how my day went, no longer pausing in anticipation of an answer. I often wondered whether she was still listening.

* * *

"Sounds clichéd, but have we met before?" she asked me.

"No, I don't believe," I said, doing my best to pretend, not wanting to give myself away, but she looked down and laughed and I suppose she remembered, anyway.

"Were you at the Blue Bacon last Tuesday? I thought I saw you there."

"Yes, I was," I said, trying to look puzzled, not knowing whether I looked convincing. Drop the act, I thought to myself. She's blown your cover!

The gallery was bustling with sophisticates, art lovers and critics alike. The walls were whitewashed. Pillars stood here and there as accents. Everyone was dressed well. Hors d'oeuvres were served on silver platters. Lit spotlights, designed as torches, sent beams of light licking the walls up towards the ceiling. Chatter resounded through the hallways, and glasses of wine passed hands soon after the first half hour when the artwork had been properly appreciated and the crowds began to relax.

Megan looked stunning in her black evening gown. She was the only woman in the room I noticed, just like the very first night I laid eyes on her.

I'd solicited a significant number of opinions on just how good or bad I looked in my tuxedo. Ranging from bad to great, I fared pretty well by an honest estimate.

"I noticed you look at me a couple of times back there," she said, smiling at me in a way that suggested she'd been aware of my intention to meet her. Then she checked herself: "I'm sorry. That was rude of me. My name is Megan," she said.

I noticed that she offered an apology, instead of waiting for mine. Not bad, I thought. Keep going.

"My name's Nick. Nick Hodges. I was just checking out your exhibit."

"Right," she said, big smile on her face. She wasn't fooled. Not one bit.

"Do you like paintings, Nick?"

I said, "Sure."

A voice interrupted us. "Excuse me," a man said. It was the man I'd seen her with. Dr. Roderick Petro, I would learn. He approached us easily, appearing neither standoffish nor defensive. He had a subtle way about him that reminded me instantly of the heroes in old films.

"You haven't introduced us, Megan. Who's your friend?"

"This is Nick Hodges. We've just met. Nick likes art," she told him. She smiled at me. Sorry, that smile seemed to say, I'm taken.

"Nick, this is Roddy," she said. He extended a hand. The moment drifted in suspense.

I shook his hand, remaining optimistic. Nonetheless my bravado was in check; two's company, but three's a crowd. I immediately started scanning the room for an exit. I couldn't give up just yet, just maybe, maybe ...

"Maybe you'd like to show Nick around, Megan," said Dr. Roddy.

Maybe I ought to stick around, I thought.

"Perfect," I said aloud.

* * *

In the waiting room one day, I noticed that one woman was missing. Her name was Filomina, and she always prayed the rosary. She always greeted me with a smile, and we got to talking once. I learned that she was visiting her daughter, Heidi, who occupied the room next to Megan's. Six months ago, Heidi had

been involved in a serious car accident. Filomina narrated Heidi's story, and her emotions tugged at my own heartstrings as I realized how similar our experiences were. Filomina seemed like a very kind woman, saying she would include Megan in her daily prayers, and I, in turn, thanked her. After that, I joined her for prayer a few times when I felt like it. I looked around the room, but she nowhere to be found. She was never late, and she never let a day go by without seeing Heidi for visitation time.

There was a young man at a far corner of the waiting room who was visiting his father in room 21. He was often here for long hours at a time, and the cups of coffee couldn't keep his vigilance up as he lay uncomfortably sleeping in his chair, limbs twisted and arms contorted to cushion his head at the far end of the set of chairs I was sitting at. He was snoring away to the quiet chagrin of the rest of the visitors.

I noticed one of the guests eye me as I looked around. He was one of the regulars. His daughter had been in a coma for a year and a half now, but he had come a long way from how devastated he had looked when he was new to our little club of unfortunate family members. He had made his round of support groups

and shock therapy just as I had, I supposed. Suddenly, he started to make his way towards me.

He took a seat next to me.

"Do you know the woman who used to sit there? The lady?"

"The one who prays the rosary?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," he said back.

"Yeah. We exchanged a few words. She's the quiet type," I told him, fearing the worst, knowing what he was going to say next.

"Yeah, her daughter died. This morning. She held on as long as modern medicine could let her, but she couldn't, you know? It wouldn't last forever."

"I know."

"I'm telling you. The time will come for all of us. Makes you wonder."

Arnold's words trailed off and his eyes shifted to gaze into the sombrous distance, where dusk cast melancholy shadows at the far end of the corridor. His eyes were glassy, his mind transported to its own private world of grief. I studied him. He had lost a lot of weight since he'd first arrived some months prior. His cheeks had become gaunt; the black patches beneath his eyes had grown

deeper. His hair was longer now, messier. Grief manifested in his outer appearance, transforming him. I could almost see the despair accumulating inside him, quietly mounting strength, as if this were the calm before the storm.

It was then that I realized that I'd been there the longest of anyone in the group, coming and going for three years, wondering whether I was doing the right thing, holding on needlessly, selfishly even.

* * *

Megan and I had begun a friendship when she invited me over to a party she and Dr. Roddy were hosting at his house over at Breckenridge, an exclusive lakeside community in a nearby county off Richmond City. Having lost all hope of dating her but nonetheless afraid of disappointing my new friends, I went. I didn't have a date so I decided to look for one. Wiley was suspicious about the whole thing, saying it was something akin to espionage.

"You want to know if they're breaking up, don't you?" he asked.

"No," I said, a hint of exasperation making itself evident. "I just want to go because I was invited. I won't stay long."

"Eat and run? That sort of thing? Why bother?" he said, prying me for answers as I fixed my tie.

"Chat a while. Scan the crowd. Maybe there's someone interesting ..." I told him.

"Like Megan?"

"Screw you, Wiley!"

"Who's your date?" he asks, unwilling to stop.

"Miranda," I answered.

"Isn't she that shrink who wanted to see you back in college? God, Nick! You can do better than that!"

"It was short notice and, besides, what's wrong with Miranda?"

"For God's sake!"

"She's pretty, at least."

"Pretty Miranda if you know what I mean!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Ok, forget about it! You want to marry a psychoanalyst who's gonna dissect everything from your screwed-up sex life to your hygiene habits, Nick, be my guest!"

“Did you screw her, Wiley?”

“Long shot, Nick! Tell you what. I’m not the racecar driver, ok.”

“Wish me luck!” I said, closing the door behind me while putting on my cuff links.

* * *

I was a racecar driver but my skills couldn’t save her. The truck driver ran the red light and hit us at full speed, plowing our sedan at her side. The car had flipped over and there’d been a ricochet at some point. It was useless to remember. It happened so fast.

Daily driving brought a host of distractions. Grocery runs were sometimes a chore. I felt fidgety whenever trucks came by, inches from the car. I would momentarily lose my focus while switching gears, forgetting something I’d gotten so used to even while driving through rush hour traffic.

On the circuit, the pressure to win mounted. Sweat would trickle down my arms and neck, despite being so used to the protective suit. I shook sometimes as I sat there inside the car, waiting for the light to turn green during the start of the race. More and more, I slipped to the end of the starting line, finishing at the

podium less. I was making myself a liability to the team, in spite of the encouragement from my teammates. The countdown was on. I was running out of chances. I had to face the prospect of giving up racing for good. I tried dedicating a race to Megan, telling Wiley that I was going to do my absolute best.

But it backfired. I realized how I had already dedicated every race to her, even if I didn’t tell anyone. In the heat of the moment, during the race, I was prone to making mistakes. Those uncharacteristic mistakes cost me. Throughout my career, I had developed the reputation of exceeding expectations, in spite of our cars rated lower than competitors. Now, I was exiting a majority of the races early. The media labelled my performances amateurish.

Today wasn’t just any day. It was my birthday. It was the anniversary of the accident. I was driving home from my daily vigil and knew I had an empty house to look forward to, some TV maybe, and some alcohol.

I parked my car in the driveway and got out. There was still a little light in the sky, surrendering a little at a time as the darkness diffused throughout, like a splash of ashen gray was coloring every-

thing, washing out all the colors that shone brightly in the daylight.

I turned the knob on the front door and total darkness greeted me. I set down some of my things and turned the lights on.

“Surprise!” they all shouted. My sister Lizzie, my parents, my friend Wiley, and some close childhood friends, Adam and Cassie, greeted me jubilantly. “Happy Birthday!” they followed up, each coming up to me with either a hug or a kiss.

“We wanted a small party. We didn’t know what to expect,” Wiley confessed.

“We didn’t think it was appropriate to blow the roof off the joint,” Lizzie said, shrugging her shoulders at me, hoping I would find their surprise party agreeable.

“Wow! Wiley, I knew you were up to something,” I said.

“Lizzie! Adam! Cassie! I haven’t seen you guys in a while. How’s everything been? Who else is here?”

“Mom and Dad are coming,” Lizzie said.

“We couldn’t miss your birthday,” Cassie said. The rest of them nodded along.

“Thanks, guys. You’re the greatest!” I said. “C’mon. Where’s the damn cake?”

* * *

I went with Miranda Singer and the room was electric with her. She’s great conversationalist. She’s a man-eater. She’s incredibly smart and self-confident. She even got Dr. Roddy’s attention when she steered the conversation towards the university’s budget shortfall for medical research the next fiscal year, suggesting that a move towards the private sector wouldn’t be such a bad move, after all. It wouldn’t have been such a big deal if not for the fact that Dr. Roddy and most of his friends relied on government funding to keep their programs going. It wasn’t that I hadn’t done my homework on her. I knew she’d get all the attention to herself sooner or later.

“Who did you bring here?” Megan asked me. “She’s just drawn this whole party into a debate like I’ve never seen before. Even Roddy is into it.”

“Do you mind walking with me?” I asked her.

“Sure. It’s a nice night for a stroll. I’m sure they won’t mind now.”

Safely outside, I proceeded to ask her,
“How are you and Roddy?”

“I dunno, really. The same. Why?”

“Well, nothing. I’m concerned. I really want you to be happy.”

“He’s into his career.”

“Like he’s always been,” I continued for her.

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“How are you and ...”

“Miranda?”

She nods.

“We’re just temporary.”

“Ahh. How’s the racing going?”

“I’m at the club level right now, but they got me hooked up good. The bosses are cool, and I just want to reward them for the faith they show in me.”

“I hear you’re coming along. Moving up the ranks.”

“Progressing nicely. Yeah,” I told her, nodding. “How’s the artist’s life treating ya?”

“Not bad, except for the money,” she said.

We shared a laugh at that. Apparently, she worked a part-time job doing data entry to help out her finances.

She looked at me timidly, and then began to ask the question I suspected had been on her mind for a while back then. “Why were you looking at me at the Blue Bacon?”

“Because I liked you, Megan.”

“Do you like me now?” she asked.

“No,” I answered matter of factly.

We were turned to one another on the two-lane road, the breeze mussing our hair gently.

“I am in love with you now, Megan.” I told her.

* * *

Despite the dinner party being small in number, it was intimate and fun. I’d known Adam and Cassie since we were kids and my parents used to invite them in to stay for lunch or dinner, after a friendly game of softball or badminton. Wiley was his exuberant self, and my parents had gotten so used to his antics that they now laughed along with the rest of us. I hadn’t seen Lizzie in months as she lived out of town and drove down to see us only on occasions. I have to say that

she looked nice. She had lost some weight despite having a nightly ice cream fix. In spite of her job being fast paced, she liked her work at an advertising firm in DC because it made more money than she'd ever made before.

"It doesn't matter," I told her. "You thrive on the pressure."

She nodded. "I took that job in Arlington. Do you remember that one? It was so slow paced. It was so boring. I wonder why I even took that job to begin with," she said.

Wiley snickered.

"You took it because of that insurance executive guy you were seeing in Arlington. What's his name? Kenny ..."

Wiley got an elbow in his ribs for that.

The party was jubilant for the most part. My parents laughed. So did I. Adam and Cassie had a good time. They were both married now.

"Do you have kids?" I asked the both of them.

They both answered "yes," simultaneously. Adam had twin daughters. Cassie said she had a boy and a girl.

"Wow!" I said. "Time flies."

The room went silent for a moment.

"I'd like to visit you guys," I said.

"You're always welcome to come and see us," Adam said. Cassie beamed and nodded her head.

The silence swept the room for a moment and it must have been a little awkward because Wiley had to try hard to get the conversation moving forward again. I tried my best to follow what he was saying and smile. I didn't want them to feel sorry for me. I'd done my best to cope with what had happened. At some point everyone wants to turn back the clock and change things.

I kept telling myself that life hadn't passed me by, that there was a reason to hope. I didn't want to lie still while everything changed for the worst. I was blessed to have friends who cared, and family who were supportive. What more could I want from life?

Megan here with us. A son, maybe a daughter or two. The life we'd planned to live together. The life that seemingly escaped us.

Instead, we'd have our usual get-togethers. See-you-laters at the nursing home at 5:00 sharp, the tears, the I love yous, the farewells.

I read poems to her when I got a chance. I held her hand and recited them to her, the way I had envisioned I would do. Her eyes didn't move much. Her eyelids were poised just above her cheeks and her beautiful lashes poised to sweep her stale tears, ever so ready to begin her never-ending sleep. I'd begun to think she'd already started without me, leaving me this last vestige of herself for me to hold on to.

For the greater part of three years, life had stood at a standstill, and I had refused to let go of something that I thought I would never find for myself. I'd thought to myself that maybe, just maybe, if life were to somehow go on without her in it ... she would have to let go of me, because it couldn't possibly happen the other way around.

"How's the career doing, Nick?" Adam asked.

"Stalled," I told him, stealing a glance at Wiley, who was merely looking down at his food. "Can't put enough time in. That's all."

"Hope it all works out," Adam responded.

"It will, hopefully," I said.

Wiley nodded. Lizzie did too.

Wiley got upbeat all of a sudden. "Well, who wants some cake?" he said.

* * *

Back inside the house, the music was playing. Partners were slow dancing. The lights were swirling towards the center of the room and the torch song plucked the heart-strings of the frail of heart.

Megan stepped forward. Dr. Roddy emerged majestically from the crowd of dancers. He knew she would come. She walked into his arms. I swallowed hard, and my heart skipped a beat, watching my love leave me stolid on my feet. I could barely speak.

Miranda quietly emerged from the shadows of the left wing, forgotten by the crowds. She asked me where I'd been. I told her I was around. We took to the dance floor, but I was unprepared. I hadn't danced in years.

We tried, anyway. I refrained from looking her in the eye. I watched Megan from afar. I caught her glance at me. She looked at me again, then broke away from Roddy and left the crowd of dancers. Roddy didn't follow. I left Miranda, as well.

She was at the balcony, crying. “I love you,” she confessed to me. I dried her tears with a handkerchief. I peered into her eyes and saw happiness, not sorrow. I smiled at her sudden innocuous fit of laughter. I took her by the hand and told her to come away with me. We had been together since.

The nursing home visits. The prayers. The vigils.

* * *

Wiley had gone and so had Adam and Cassie and my dad, leaving me, my mom and my sister Lizzie to clean up the remnants of the dinner party. My mom volunteered to wash the dishes while Lizzie and I stored the leftovers and put them in the fridge. It was surprisingly quiet considering the celebration that had taken place. I welcomed the silence, though I could tell Lizzie wanted to say something. She had never grown too accustomed to long, drawn-out silences. She always found them awkward.

“How was the visit?”

“It was fine,” I answered.

“Are there any improvements?” she asked.

“Same,” I said, shaking my head.

“It’s been the same for the past three years.”

My mom briefly turned around to smile. She looked deeply saddened in spite of it. She’d resigned herself to that answer for a long time now. I had a feeling we all had.

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine, Lizzie.”

“It’s just that ...”

“Just that, what?”

“Just that it’s been three years.”

An awkward silence filled the room. It was just the type Lizzie couldn’t stand.

“What about Megan’s family?”

“They come and visit,” I said.

“I mean ...”

“They’re not too hopeful, either.”

That kind of sucked the air out of the room. Nobody wanted to say it. Not that way.

“I’m sorry, Nick. I just wanted to ask how she was doing. How you were doing. I mean ...”

“I understand.”

But somebody had to say it. After three years, I figured, it was about time somebody did.

I just didn't think that somebody would be me.

* * *

Maymont Park saw its fair share of visitors the next day. Megan and I were married there in a banquet hall that had a lush garden and large reception space that was accessible by the Hampton Street entrance. It was a beautiful place. There were flower gardens of varying kinds and the fields were always well maintained. There was also a wildlife reserve in the vast premises. I wanted to get as close as I could to the spot where we had been married but there were ceremonies being hosted at that location, so I couldn't. I didn't want to interfere and look like a brash interloper, a party-crasher. You could easily spot me out of the crowd in the jeans, oxford shirt and leather jacket I wore that day.

I stood on a terrace that overlooked the venue where the ceremonies were taking place. I could still see her there, walking down the aisle, her gown as white as porcelain, glimmering in the daylight, and

her eyes glowing softly like pearls, smiling like she did the first time she told me she loved me.

The chilly November morning seemed perfect for reminiscing. I could still remember the image of us both there on the ledge as we posed for photographs. Her smooth complexion reminded me of flower petals. She held a purple umbrella, which matched the deep hues of the flora. Her smile was golden. I would never forget that smile.

Neither will I forget the way she looked at me the first time we met, or the way she twirled on her heels that first time we danced together, that first time she brushed her hair aside the first time I made love to her; it's all that I live and breathe, part and parcel of me. How could I leave it? Never!

At times, resistance is futile. Death is inevitable. Megan was leaving sooner than expected, and yet, after three years, I wasn't ready just yet, even though it was a long time coming. Everyone walked life's brisk pace knowing that death was just around the corner somewhere, and being trapped in the moment was a luxury no one can afford.

Suddenly, my cell phone rang. It was Lizzie telling me to come to the nursing home. I knew it could only mean one thing. I turned the phone off and quietly made my way back to the parking lot. My car was waiting for me there, gathering heat in the mid-day sun. I didn't bother to turn the radio on. Some tears fell. The time had finally come.

Wiley, my parents and Lizzie were already there when I arrived at the lobby of the nursing home. We exchanged hugs and kisses quietly, knowing the three years had ended abruptly, but every single day of those three years was a long agonizing wait that felt like a deluge spanning the length of eternity, nearly drowning us in its wake.

Omens Of Winter

I live in Roanoke, Virginia now, far from the town of Scuttlefield, a town in Iowa, in a great valley surrounded by hills, guarded by its ancientness, its unwillingness to bend with the times. Roanoke is a small city, and I live in a quiet suburb in a row of old Victorian houses that were fully refurbished by a local developer. The trees in the front lawn tower over the wide two-lane road, lending a melancholic air to the neighborhood.

There's a church close by. It's open to visitors during ten to five every day except Sunday, when services are offered to the public. I go there sporadically on Sundays, preferring to attend Saturday afternoon services, after I've had sufficient time praying before the blessed sacrament.

During winters here in Roanoke, when temperatures drop into the teens on most days, winters pale by a great magnitude to those in Scuttlefield. Enough for some to remark that most places visited

by the four seasons, compared to the latter, only see the ghost of Old Man Winter.

In summer, Scuttlefield basked in the sun and open space. The wheat would grow well above waist level, thick and dry in the heat. In spring, the seeds were sown in soft fertile ground. In summers, the fields awaited harvest, the first of which usually occurred during the summer solstice. When the cold season would re-emerge, the leftover stalks would be used for compost pits and the hardened soil would be tilled.

As a child, I lived in Scuttlefield with my parents and brother, Ralion, at our family home. My father had hired two people to help us – a gentleman named Aaron and his wife, Melinda. They were nice people. Aaron helped in the fields while Melinda helped my mother around the plantation house.

When I was seven years old, Ralion enlisted in the army. We were all very

proud of him. although we all wished he hadn't gone away. In his absence, change came rapidly, as opposed to the slow turning of a season.

Shortly after he left, the limbs of the trees shed themselves bare; the streams slowed to a trickle; the lakes fell unusually calm. The fields were desolate as the autumn months braced us for the winter's chill. The days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, and Mother and Father grew ill. Within a year, my mother passed away, and it was evident my father wouldn't last the following winter. Ralion had to come home.

* * *

Aaron tended to the work in the fields while Melinda took care of my ill father. I watched her place a warm towel on my father's forehead even as he shivered, the chills overcoming him as he lay there in bed. The doctors came and went and the times weren't so progressive in the field of medicine. They didn't know what to do with his strange disease.

Melinda said later on that she wasn't as troubled with the physical nature of my father's ailment. Instead, his disease of the will accounted for more of her concern.

"Here," she told him, handing him a bowl of soup. "You have to eat. Stay strong."

He took a few sips, then shook his head, refusing to finish the soup. Melinda put the bowl aside but sighed sadly as she watched him cough into his basin.

Melinda did her best to care for Father, but Father grew distant, watching the barren trees out the window, perhaps remembering Mother. She had died similarly, to our distress.

Melinda and Aaron would speak of him privately. Increasingly, Melinda cared less if one of us were to hear.

"He'll follow her to her grave," she'd say with a brush of her hand, having done more than her share for both of my parents. "I don't know what more to do, but pray," she would tell Aaron.

Aaron would come back from the fields and ask if Father was doing better, but Melinda would say the same thing.

"No. He isn't going to get better. We'd better start looking for other jobs because he's not going to last the winter and Ralion isn't ever coming home."

Aaron, the quiet type, would sit down and sip his coffee while Melinda would bake some bread in the oven on afternoons when he would take his break. He hardly ever said a thing, but would light up like a child when he saw me coming into the kitchen.

I was hiding behind the door when I heard Melinda say that Father was as good as gone. The ancient door still made a ratcheting sound at a point in its arc, and I was careful to not let it alarm them, sliding from behind it as I escaped into the hallway and up the stairs towards my room. I stole a look at my father through his open bedroom door and saw that he was sleeping. He'd lost color and weight. He'd become so frail through the course of his illness, and his eyes were dull, like he'd already resigned to leaving and just hadn't told us yet.

* * *

Ralion always had notions of going to far-off places. He never entertained the idea of staying in Scuttlefield to continue working the farm. Father and Mother never restrained him for it was pointless to do so. Ralion was a carefree spirit. He ventured out of Scuttlefield into places like Minneapolis up north. Father had lived in Philadelphia when he was a

postal worker before he and Mother settled down in Iowa and neither had liked the city. They had both decided to escape the violent hustle and bustle of the urban life, the growing congestion, and the apathy that characterized society in the city. They settled for a town enclosed in a barricade of hills, in the heart of a valley, cut off from civilization, a narrow, two-lane dirt road that was seldom traveled connecting them to the nearest major highway. The small population of Scuttlefield grew smaller as the generations passed, dying out, leaving behind what would eventually become a ghost town.

Ralion and I were two of the few children in town and, as Ralion and the other young people his age grew up and left, it was clear the town wouldn't survive for long. Its last generation stood steadfast against the winds of a coming storm. The dust stirred in the fields of Scuttlefield, the winters grew more frigid, the clouds darkened, and farmers, wives and laborers looked towards the darkening sky and saw the arrival of the end.

Ralion was a charismatic young man. He was charming, and he had a very subtle sense of humor. At home, he was relaxed. In matters of business, he was calm and collected, methodical and pre-

cise in judgment when need be. He was edgy at times when he didn't have all the answers, but he often pretended to have them.

Of course, the town loved him, in spite of and maybe because of his free-spiritedness. Mr. Fisher down by the reservoir always asked him whether he'd done any hunting recently. The Baumgartens who lived on the next property used to pay him for work around their barn so he could make some extra money, even though Father didn't always approve, owing to how much work there was on our own property that needed tending to.

Ralion wrote home when he was in the army. He was stationed in Europe and said he liked it there. I gathered that he liked the women, of course. There were hardly any girls his age in Scuttlefield. Therefore, he loved Europe, and would have preferred Paris over his station in Germany, but that was not to be.

He learned of Mother's passing with much distress, and now Father's illness meant he was faced with serious responsibilities. Those responsibilities required that he leave his life behind and resume the life he'd ridden himself of, shouldering all of its simplicities, raw hard work and sacrifices. He would also be saddled

with my care and supervision, which could not have been more inconvenient to a man of his age and spirit.

We were to meet him on a Sunday along the two-lane road coming into town, where the bus would drop him off. He would be walking, wishing the circumstances had been different for his homecoming.

* * *

The oval frame that held Mother's picture in my parents' bedroom was slightly tarnished. The curtains were starched white, having been taken down twice that past month and washed clean. The dresser was neat and the closet was half-empty, owing to Mother's things having been given away to charity as Father had requested. While delving into heirlooms and possessions with sentimental value, I unearthed a picture of the two of us when I was just four years old, and her proud smile made an impression on me, recalling to me her simple sincerity, her satisfaction with an uncomplicated life.

Father convulsed daily now, and Ralion was not due till Sunday. We feared Father would not make it until then. We called the doctor and he arrived on Thursday morning with only a worse prognosis than he'd last left us with. Fa-

ther was fading. He would not last until Friday. He was too weak, the doctor said.

After the doctor left, my father picked up the picture of my mother at his bedside and wiped the dust off. He brushed a tear from his eye, disguising his alarm at my invasion of his private grief. He smiled at me and coughed, spit fresh blood into a basin, and collapsed back on the pillows in his weakened state, watching my helplessness, doing his best to assure me that things would be okay. "Ralion will come," he said.

It was the last thing he'd said to me. He died that morning. Melinda arrived to watch him suffer his death throes. She told us that he had made a last request.

"Take care of Petey for us until Ralion arrives. Promise ..." he had said to her.

Melinda said that she had cried and couldn't say anything. She recalled merely nodding her head.

Aaron and I came up from the kitchen and he was dead when we arrived at his bedside. Grief rendered us speechless. Aaron took his hat off and held it against his chest as Melinda wept. He put a hand on my shoulder to ease my trembling. She told me not to touch him. "It's important," she said.

"Your mother and father were almost inseparable during all those years they spent together. He couldn't simply leave her alone," Melinda later said to me, mussing my hair as she led me out of the room.

Mother and Father had done their best, despite the hardship that came with salaries too small to live on, with work too tenuous to last for long. I was growing up to be the man of the house someday. Ralion was coming, but doubtless Ralion would leave. It was never a question of whether he would; it was only a question of when. The obligation to care for the farm and act as my guardian was only temporary. It was only a matter of time. That meant the plantation would be mine.

The funeral was private. The priest said mass at our house and a few of Father's good friends from the town paid their respects. The burial ground was a cemetery that stood on a hill, right along the edge of Scuttlefield, facing the mountains. The priest and gravedigger accompanied Aaron, Melinda and me to the gravesite. After the last rites were read, the priest left us standing there, watching the hardened man bury my father's

coffin beneath the rich fertile ground, the same fertile ground that had nurtured Scuttlefield for generations. After the funeral mass, I'd heard Mr. Fisher, a longtime friend of my father's, tell Aaron that Scuttlefield was cursed. "We pour our sweat and blood into this land," he'd said, shaking his head. "And, in turn, the land decides we belong to it. More folks than not end up in an early grave, and those of us who stick around don't ever escape."

The scene was picturesque in a melancholy way. Aaron held his hat against his chest with his left hand and did the sign of the cross with his right. Melinda held flowers, dropping a few into Father's grave as it was being filled. I stood there with my hands clasped, remembering Father during better days when he would hoist me up with a swoop of his arms after a day's work in the fields. Tears flowed down my cheeks, brushed pale by the cold winter's breeze.

Beyond the hill, the road that led into town was long. The pavement stretched out of Scuttlefield and into the plains where there were cities and airports and bus terminals leading out of Iowa to far-off places. I was suddenly struck by the possibilities before me. What did I dream of doing? Did I want to hold fast

to my parents' farm and dream, laboring in the monotonous simplicity of Scuttlefield? Or did I want to do as Ralion did, and follow my own dream?

That Sunday, we stood by the roadside, waiting for Ralion. Fields of barley, golden brown during the summers, were desolate in the month of February. Over the horizon a bus appeared in the lone intersection, and a man in uniform jumped off. The bus turned onto the diverging road that would carry it away from the seclusion of Scuttlefield. The man was taller than I remembered – and he was still far off – but, as he drew closer, his features came into focus, and they looked similar to my own. I tugged at Aaron's arm in excitement and relief. Ralion was finally home.

* * *

"You're so tall."

"You don't look so bad yourself. How've you been holding up?"

"You took so long. I was sure I'd lose you, too."

"Sorry I've taken so long. I'm here now, slugger. I won't leave you."

I looked at Ralion. I was a boy then, but already I knew him well enough. It was

just a matter of when he'd leave or how long he'd stay home.

"How's the house holding up?"

"All right, I guess."

Ralion's features hadn't changed much. He was still the dashing, good looking lad he was when he left. His physical shape was more pronounced, his hair cut much shorter. He had a scar at the back of his neck.

"That's nothin'," he said. "Don't pay no attention."

He and Aaron talked about the work that needed to be done in the field. Ralion took the lead in the conversation, and I was glad he did. It gave me reassurance. There was always a sense of order with Ralion's steady hand guiding a plan. It explained Father's confidence in him. That his mercurial spirit could rise up and undermine his best plans was something I chose not to think about right then. For the moment I was relieved that my brother was home and all was in good hands.

* * *

Ralion was unpacking his suitcase in his bedroom as I looked on, asking him about his army adventures, listening to stories that amounted to little action, no

doubt carefully screened for my ears. Ralion might not have completely adjusted to the fact that I was a couple of years older than when he left. To him, I was still a kid, but that was entirely okay with me. I quizzed him happily all the same.

Most of his worthwhile stories involved girls, I was certain. He made sure to omit those stories, except to say that he liked to hit the town and the girls liked to come along. While he talked, he fished through his closet, choosing from clothes he still found acceptable to wear. He grimaced here and there as he did so. In the end, he said that he needed to get some new gear.

I nodded in agreement at his proposal.

That afternoon, Ralion decided to drop in on the Baumgartens next door to let them know he was back. I went with him. We pulled up alongside their house and a car with out-of-town plates was parked in their driveway. We hopped out of the truck. Apparently, a girl was visiting them for the summer. She wore a dress with embroidered flowers; the flowers had the color of a dusted carnation. Her headband and matching dress helped create an impression of innocence.

Ralion kept smiling long after he shook her hand. I could tell that he found her beautiful.

“Wow,” he said, when we were in the truck again, heading home. I was tempted to laugh at him, but a sinking feeling in my stomach stopped me.

* * *

Later that morning, I stayed at home with my books, waiting for lunchtime. Aaron was taking Ralion to the cemetery where Mother and Father were laid to rest. There was a mist that pooled around the hillside so Melinda urged them both to be careful. They wore their protective overcoats, checked their flashlights and headed for the hills. They were due back to have lunch with us afterwards. Melinda was preparing turkey and cornbread stuffing. Ralion was almost somber, having taken the reins of the household. I knew Ralion was grieving in his own way. He wasn't an emotional guy. His self-refusal was in its own way his mourning garb. I tapped him on the shoulder before he walked out of the front door, and he responded with a nod of his head and a smile that looked fitting for a man who was pensive.

I imagined the stone crosses on Birch Tree Hill, which was named for its single

birch tree standing on top. I imagined the gravestones and the mist pooling in the valley, obscuring Scuttlefield as if the world had swallowed it whole, consuming what was left of the town. And I imagined Ralion standing on top of that hill like the last remaining survivor of Scuttlefield, mourning the loss of everyone, returning to the Apocalypse he'd fought so hard to get away from.

Ralion and Aaron came back shortly after eleven and lunch was ready by then. Ralion invited Aaron and Melinda to have lunch with us. They accepted the invitation.

Ralion sat at the head of the table and said grace. It was the first time grace had been said at that table since our parents had passed away. We were all pretty solemn about the occasion. Melinda ended the prayer with an enthusiastic, “Amen,” and Aaron repeated the word three times.

“Ralion, we need to discuss something,” she began to say, glancing at both of us as she waited for us to finish chewing our first mouthfuls. Aaron was happy to eat, content to listen as Melinda did the talking.

“We have decided to work at a plantation closer to home,” she said carefully, fret-

ting over Ralion's disappointment with their decision.

"I see no reason to keep you here against your wishes. You've given us several years of faithful service. You will be missed," Ralion answered without looking at their faces. I watched him as he spoke in between eating, looking down at his plate in a way that suggested he was concessionary, however disappointed.

"Aaron will only have to show me what work is left to be done," he said, still somber, reflecting on what would appear to be a difficult winter ahead of us, without help tilling the fields.

"You are welcome to stay should you change your minds. If not, Petey and I will wish you a safe journey to your new destination."

"Thank you for caring for my mother and father in their time of need," he said to them, finally looking up, smiling.

Aaron and Melinda both smiled, albeit sadly, having experienced the kindness and generosity of my parents through a time of financial difficulty for both Aaron and Melinda's families. They were thankful, and so were we.

Melinda cleared the dishes for what seemed to be the final time. Aaron took Ralion out to the fields to go over some things before he and Melinda prepared to pack up and leave. I went upstairs and looked outside my window at the fields stretching to the foot of the mountains. Somewhere out there, I thought, was a world Ralion had run away to, only to return here with little of his choosing.

With Mother and Father gone, I was dependent on him. He was tasked with raising me, leading me through the next nine years to adulthood. He had ahead of him nine long summers of laboring in the hot sun, and nine long winters of tilling the cold hard ground in preparation for spring.

Ralion would try to find the time to enjoy himself in some form or fashion. My job was to prepare for school. A proper education would be my only means to the choice that Ralion had given up – the choice to live life on my own terms.

* * *

The next town was a rather long drive from Scuttlefield. This came as no surprise to anyone who ventured there, most of whom considered Scuttlefield's seclusion to be its strongest characteristic. It was known as "the town in the

heart of the hills” to some travelers. To the neighboring towns, it was simply known as “the farms way out there towards the mountains.” After a long drive in the afternoon, we arrived at the next town, a town called Danville. Ralion pulled up in front of the shop that sold hunting gear and work clothes. They had a large selection of outdoorsman gear that he liked more than the apparel he could find in the regular clothing stores. The streets were quiet, and Ralion said we could leave the truck unlocked there.

“The town’s too quiet,” I said.

“Why do you think that?” Ralion replied.

“I don’t know. Something around that shouldn’t be.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But we’re the only ones around right now, slugger,” he added, chuckling a bit, slapping my shoulder, unperturbed.

I followed him inside and looked over the magazine section while he browsed the aisles. The store was cool and dark inside. From a rush-seat chair in the corner, an old radio played the Leonard Cohen song “Suzanne,” the one about a girl who leads you to the river, and she’s crazy, but she charms you into following her anyhow. I picked up a copy of Life

and leafed through it, gazing at the glossy photos.

The shop owner emerged from the back of the store – a man by the name of Mr. Fox. He seemed genuinely happy to see me when he called out my name. He relayed his condolences for Mother’s and Father’s untimely passing.

Then he spotted my brother. He called out to Ralion and Ralion, in turn, responded with a bright smile, telling Mr. Fox he was glad to be back. Yes, it had been a long time, he said. No, he wasn’t married.

They had a good conversation. Mr. Fox was an amiable man, and Ralion had been a loyal customer. Ralion was asking him about his son, who was away at school, when something out the window caught his eye. I followed his gaze, my eyes landing on the passerby outside.

Antonella Baumgarten walked by in her white summer dress, long raven-black hair flowing on her spare shoulders. She turned towards us as she passed the window, smiling, and her eyes and Ralion’s seemed to move together in perfect symmetry. Already, my brother had been captured by her unmistakable beauty but, right then, he was stricken, and he stood there, barely able to speak.

Mr. Fox followed his gaze out of the window at the sight of her walking past the store, before entering a dessert shop a few doors down. When Ralion left to resume his shopping for new clothes, Mr. Fox gestured for me to come closer.

“And I thought I was a fox. You get it, Pe-tey?” Mr. Fox told me, laughing hard.

I smiled at the joke, but my eyes stayed on Ralion, counting the seconds before he finally turned back around and noticed that I was still in the room.

Upon arriving home, Ralion surveyed the field as I followed him around. The cold biting wind penetrated my jacket and my nose began to run. Ralion expressed his wariness at my coming, but I huddled deeper in my thick coat and reassured him I was fine. A pat on the back from my brother proved encouraging. It was the coldest day in the year and the desolate fields needed tilling. The ground was hard, dry and dark, but fertile, and Ralion said he would start first thing the next morning – pick up where Aaron had left off.

We climbed atop a mound that we used to survey the farm and gazed out over the barren fields stretching from one

side of the property to the other, the stalks from the previous harvest preserved under a layer of winter frost. There was work in the barn to do, and the work on the fields had already been delayed due to Father’s illness. Ralion said we would need some additional help eventually, like we had with Aaron, but we simply couldn’t afford it right away. I offered to help fix the barn but he flatly refused. It was my job to finish my schooling, he said. No matter what the cost.

* * *

“Your textbooks interesting, any?” Ralion asked.

“Sometimes,” I said.

“What’s your favorite subject?”

“History.”

There was a brief pause as we continued eating supper. Ralion had just finished working in the fields and I’d come home from school in Danville. We were having meatloaf that wasn’t quite as good as how Melinda prepared it.

“You made it yourself?” I asked him. I couldn’t quite suppress the grin on my face.

“Uh-huh. Horrible, ain’t it?” Ralion said, playing along.

“Better than boiled potatoes or somethin’,” he said.

Ralion and I always had a good relationship. He was my only sibling and I suppose that meant something. Besides, he’d always been good natured. His willingness to accept the responsibility of raising me wasn’t a surprise, though it was a last resort, a compromise.

“I like liver,” I told him.

“Yuck!” he replied, grimacing. “They used to serve us that when I was in the army. Hated it so much, but I couldn’t not eat it, you know? Besides, how am I supposed to cook it? Fry it for you or somethin?”

“Fried liver?” I exclaimed. “You’re nuts!”

We resumed eating after we both stopped laughing.

“What’ll you do when I go off to college, maybe?”

“That’s looking too far ahead, Petey. Don’t you worry about it. You need to finish your education so you can be the kind of person you want to be. Not have to be stuck here because it’s all you’ve got ...”

“But ...”

“Now, hold on, let me finish. Mom and Dad never finished college and never had the choices some other people had. They had to come here, in the middle of nowhere, work real hard to get so little. You can do better, and I’ll do the best I can to get you there, okay?”

I nodded my head in agreement, not voicing the thought I had been forming when I interrupted him.

But what if I want to stay here?

* * *

Another night passed and so did a school day. The school was in Danville, and the trip back to Scuttlefield took a great deal of time. I would hitch a ride with Mr. Fisher, who traveled to Danville daily to do business, making our way home by dusk. I’d have to wait for him outside the school library, thank him for the ride and arrive at home hungry, hoping Ralion had prepared supper. It had been a few weeks since Ralion’s return and I’d noticed some unusual behavior from him. He had been coming home late the past few nights and blamed it on getting more work done in the field, but I knew it hadn’t been that. Spring was approach-

ing and the field was barely tilled. I knew it amounted to one thing.

He had found himself a pastime.

I hadn't wanted to spy on him, but I felt it necessary. I followed him as he went out to plow the field on a Saturday morning and he instead led me to his true destination: the Baumgarten Plantation, with Antonella waiting outside her home, wearing a blue summer dress, fastened at the waist by a cloth belt. He reached her and lifted her up, laughing, carrying her into the house. I sat there for a long time, a cold knot growing in my stomach.

I knew I had to confront Ralion, but I had to be tender. I didn't want to aggravate him. I should have known better. We were behind schedule tilling the fields and Ralion was busying himself with a distraction. But even worse was that we weren't sure whether Antonella was staying in town for good. There was a possibility that she could leave. And what would Ralion do then?

He came home that Saturday claiming to have gotten more accomplished than he had believed possible that day.

"Did you, really?" I asked him, forgetting my intention of going easy on him.

"What's wrong, Petey?"

"I know what you've been up to, Ralion," I said. "If we don't get the field ready soon, we won't be ready to plant when spring comes."

He examined me carefully, realizing that it was too late to offer excuses. He had shown on more than one occasion his propensity to put his own aspirations ahead of his family, so what was there to say now except that he'd done it again? I burned hotly under his resigned gaze, wanting to tell him he couldn't act like this anymore, not after all that had happened. But I couldn't say such things to Ralion.

"I won't let you down, Petey. There's nothing to worry about. Antonella and I are just having fun, that's all. Besides, you're wrong about her."

There was a brief pause as he struggled to clear his throat.

"I'll quit seeing her as much if that sits well with you, lil' brother, ok?" he said. The smile on his face looked earnest and, yet, I couldn't be sure. I trusted him, but it seemed too easy – too willing a proposition to be likely.

I studied him, not wanting to be appeased, but seeing no choice. There was nothing more I could do but capitalize on the guilt he was feeling, his desire not to disappoint his only remaining family member. Beyond that, I could only hope that Ralion would realize how disruptive his behavior was, to his life and mine. The right path seemed so simple to me at the time.

“Trust me,” he said. “I’ll do what’s best.”

* * *

Another school day passed and dusk rolled in. Mr. Fisher dropped me off at my house and I waved goodbye to him at the roadside, cautious of not letting my textbooks fall from my grasp from under one arm. I made my way inside.

Ralion was nowhere around. Supper wasn’t ready, and I was starving. The only solution was to somehow improvise with what bits I could find. I managed to find some leftover jam and the last bit of bread so I decided to make myself a sandwich. I was thankful for the food, but didn’t say grace. The habit had fallen off in recent weeks.

It was late and the darkness was looming throughout the sky. Had Ralion been working, the tools would have been leaning against the walls of the barn with the barn doors open. After I ate, I climbed up the mound outside and surveyed the field for signs of Ralion, but he was nowhere to be found. Then, finally, I caught sight of the truck, making its way along the road back to our house.

“Hey,” he said, parking the truck next to the barn. “Slugger, get down from there. We’re eating in town tonight. I’m treating you to a nice dinner.”

“What for?” I asked him. I saw that he’d come from the Baumgarten’s direction once again. I was suspicious from the beginning.

“I worked on the Baumgarten’s barn for some instant extra cash,” he said. “C’mon down. Get dressed.”

“Well, all right,” I said in reply. I didn’t want to argue with him.

I worried about him just then. I should have told him what I wanted to tell him. Why don’t we leave Scuttlefield? We can get a place somewhere where you can get a job, without working as hard as you do on the farm. I could have told him it was okay with me if we left. I could have

begged him to leave. But instead I just climbed into the truck and we rode in silence to the restaurant. He was all I had left of my family, and I felt him slipping away.

* * *

“Well, was it Antonella’s idea to hire you for the bit job?”

He hesitated a bit, looked down, looked me in the eye, and spoke.

“Yeah, the Baumgartens are out of town, and she’s all alone back there, and they had some stuff that had been left undone, so she asked if I was interested.”

“What about Danville? Any girls you might like over there?”

“Nah. Seen some of the girls there but no one’s interesting. Hey, how about school, Petey, how are your grades holding up?”

“Great, I guess,” I told him. “I’m fifth in my class and ninth overall in my batch.”

“Awesome! Petey, that’s great! This dinner is well deserved. That is cause for celebration.”

“I used to be second in class and fourth overall before Father passed.”

“Not to worry. Still proud of you. I’m homeschooled, remember? I don’t know what that feels like.”

The waitress came with our entrees, a full rack of barbecue baby-back ribs with some steamed vegetables on the side for Ralion, and a T-bone steak hot off the grill for me.

“You wouldn’t just run off with her, would you, Ralion?”

“With who?”

“Antonella?”

“For God’s sake, Petey, no. Never. How could you think that?”

“Just worried.”

“Well you’ll worry yourself sick, so stop it. I ain’t havin’ it. It’s irrational. I know Mother and Father are gone but, slugger, I ain’t leavin’.”

“I’m sorry,” I almost tearfully said to him. Ralion was doing the best he could, the best he knew how, and I doubted him.

“It’s okay. Eat. That T-bone sure looks good. You can have a bit of my ribs here.”

He began to portion his ribs and place the pieces on an empty plate. I, too, sliced a portion of my steak and put it on the plate. We were family. The last of it. We made sure to look out for one another.

At least, at the time, I thought we did.

* * *

Winter was fast fading. Soon the ground would be soft enough to be plowed and fertilized. The seeds would then be scattered about the plots and all you could do was watch them grow. Sunshine would feel warm again. Rain would come in lieu of snow or hail. The barren trees would become green once more. The streets would come back to life in town. The roads leading to Scuttlefield would be as deserted as they'd always been through all the listless years we'd lived there.

It was a beautiful day. I rose early that Saturday to welcome the sunshine coming in through the windowpane. I looked outside, half expecting to see Ralion on a tractor in the field, but there wasn't any sign of him. The lone tree that stood outside our backyard in front of the barn seemed to move ever so slightly, indicating the presence of winds blowing northeast. I took my kite out of the closet and

dressed in warm clothing, knowing the air would still be crisp. I headed down the hall and found the door to Ralion's room open, the room empty, the bed made with military precision. I trotted down the staircase and searched for Ralion in the waiting room, living room and kitchen, but there was no sign of him. The silence was deafening.

Our truck was parked outside, so I guessed that Ralion was around there somewhere. He couldn't have gotten far. Time passed and boredom overcame me. I continued to sit in the day room, monitoring the view from the window, which showed the front lawn and the stone pathway stretching from the road to our front door. I got up and preoccupied myself with anything in the house that seemed remotely interesting. I turned to my textbook to read, but my anxiety over Ralion's sudden absence was too distracting. I did a few chores, trying to stay busy but, when lunchtime came and went, I felt my pulse quicken, my stomach churn, my hands and feet grow cold. I ended up sitting by the window facing the Baumgarten property, on the lookout for his return.

Evening came and darkness settled over the plantation. I prepared dinner even though I wasn't hungry. I sat by myself

at the dining table, saying grace before the meal. I also prayed for Ralion, worried that he might have wandered off somewhere beyond the plantation, for reasons I couldn't think of.

As I chewed my food without tasting it, it dawned on me that Antonella might have picked him up in the Baumgartens' truck. They could have left for good. Ralion had promised me he would never desert me. He was a man of his word. I needed desperately to believe him.

The phone rang suddenly later that night. I picked up the receiver and heard his familiar voice. Ralion was on his way home. He had spent the day with Antonella in Charles City, and he was sorry for leaving me without saying anything. I felt a slew of sensations uncomfortably jostle inside of me. I was angry, relieved and sympathetic all at once. I asked him about her just then.

"Where is Antonella now?"

"She's gone, Petey. She left for New York to be with her family. You don't have to worry about her anymore."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"I'm on my way home. I'm just a few towns away now. I'll be seeing you," he

said before the phone went dead. As I hung up the receiver, I felt a spine-tingling chill. He was coming home from Charles City, he'd said, a truck-stop town four hours to the north. My mind groped for a reason for him to have gone so far away without telling me. But the only thing I could figure was that he hadn't planned on coming back.

Years later, that period in our lives still haunts me. Besides, something changed in Ralion soon afterwards. Other people noticed, as well. I thought to myself that I would confront Ralion, having known all that time that he intended to abandon me, yet I didn't. When he finally dragged himself through the front door at close to midnight, the look on his face was too tired, too defeated. He laid his weary bones down to bed shortly after I served him leftovers, and I went to my own room, unable to rest.

He continued to smile, and laugh at the casual joke, but the light faded from his eyes. His charismatic ways fled with the onset of dysphoria, and I later realized what I should have known sooner: Ralion would never be the same. He brooded in the Plantation House, a shadow of himself.

For whatever reason, he had chosen to stay. I was relieved, but I couldn't shake the feeling of guilt that came over me whenever I watched Ralion lacing his boots for a day's work in the fields. He moved more slowly now, as though he were suddenly older than his years. Had I been able to care for myself, I would have set him free, but I couldn't. Somebody had to tend to the farm. Somebody had to manage the house. I was just a kid.

The years went by in this way and I did eventually go to college. Ralion stayed home to tend the farm, and he sent me money for school when he could. Then, one night when I was away at school, Ralion died. I received word that he'd been killed in a fight at a poker game in Danville. When I heard the news, I was devastated. I was also possessed of the strange knowledge that, for the first time in my life, I had no family to go home to in Scuttlefield. We buried him on Birch Tree Hill where our parents were laid to rest. Then I returned to the Plantation House to settle our affairs. There was never any question in my mind that I would sell the place. I started hating our home the night Ralion returned to it. I told the man who bought it that the land was cursed, but he just laughed.

I once thought that I could persuade Ralion to move with me, to leave Scuttlefield behind but, when I did ask him, he refused. I guess a person can only run away from a place so many times before he just stops trying. As for me, I never went back. Sometimes on late summer nights, I'll lie awake in my bed in Roanoke as the breeze rattles the trees outside, and I'll imagine the autumn wind sweeping over the mountains into Scuttlefield. On those nights, I'll wonder if Ralion would have been better off running away with Antonella and leaving me behind – if maybe, he'd still be alive somewhere, and happy. In hindsight, I would have forgiven him.

Dulcinea

The bar was half full or, perhaps, half empty. Either way, it made no difference to Edward, who sat in nonchalance to his surroundings, even sipping his gin and tonic in silent acrimony. Glasses tinkled. The walls were lined with velvet. A rich crimson carpet covered the floor of the establishment.

It wasn't customary for most people who frequented the bar to sit in close proximity to one another, unless the bar was full. An elderly gentleman sat at the very end of the bar; a party of three enjoyed drinks at a far table; a couple sat close to the piano across the room. The lounge was empty save for a few patrons, lingering after a private party had ended. Edward sat by himself at the bar closest to the door, the second seat in.

He stared at his glass. He took out a notebook and jotted a few notes down. His hair remained well-groomed despite the pouring rain. He looked younger than his 47 years. In particular, his hair main-

tained a youthful tone and color, brushed up only sporadically by patches of soft ashen gray hair along the temples.

Edward was an affluent man, 16 books into his long tenure as a writer. Literature was his first love. In his youth, he spent many years hiding behind the tattered pages of his grandmother's editions. His mind's capacity reared itself most keenly in the midst of his passions. He found success at a young age, being one of a few authors to garner a sweep of the most esteemed accolades.

That was before everything seemed to come easy. He took things for granted. He became a malcontent, drowning his disdain regularly in a gin and tonic.

The bartender was a young man in a white dress shirt and black trousers. He was a fan of Edward's. When he started bartending, he was a student at the university where Edward used to lecture. Edward chatted with him every so often, the short conversation assuring that the

bartender would serve him well in the future. The bartender served Edward his gin and tonic capped by his incorrigible sense of humor. Edward took his name down and told him he'd keep tabs on him – see him rise from the obscurity that marked the inception of any great writer's career. The young man often mixed Edward's last drinks at the bar free of charge. The young man's name was Danny.

Danny approached Edward, who stooped over his gin and tonic, slowly looking up towards him, while Danny in turn wiped a clean glass with a tablecloth. "Last round, Mr. Hanneman?" Danny asked.

"Sure, thanks," Edward replied.

He loosened his tie and smiled at the young Danny. Last round signaled that closing time was drawing near. Edward would have to drive back to his flat, which was located just a couple of blocks from the bar. Edward could have simply walked, but he liked taking the short drive, having been assured of a parking spot by the bar's owner. Besides, he never drank too much, and Danny always looked out for him, Edward being one of the regulars. He'd never had to call a cab for the man yet.

Suddenly, the door opened. A woman stepped inside. She slid the hood of her raincoat down, her radiant hair shimmering against the light. All the guests stopped to look at her, including Danny, who was wiping another clean glass with a small white towel. He looked at her curiously.

"We're closing, ma'am," he said to her.

She focused her eyes on him and self-consciously grappled at her purse, which had started to slip clumsily off her shoulder.

"I won't be long here," she said. "Thanks, bartender. Can you give me a gin and tonic?"

The request prompted Edward to look at her and, afterwards, at Danny, who motioned her over. She sat on the very first seat at the bar, right next to Edward. She smiled at him, and took out a cigarette. The guests all went about their own business. Danny began to mix her drink.

The guests in the lounge area streamed out of the exits. Some of them were near-intoxicated. Laughter broke forth here and there as they muttered along, tipping Danny generously at the bar before leaving the place. They were all well dressed, as were most of the clientele,

which had always served Edward's sensibilities well. In here, he was anonymous. He blended easily in the throng of sophisticates without rousing attention. Amongst his own, there would be no questions. Knowing most of them, he said hello to some, and exchanged views with an apathy that suggested boredom. He ended the exchange of pleasantries cordially, if only for the smile signaling the welcome end of the brief conversation. Edward was a fine example of a gentleman who typified the bar's regular patron. He came for the same reasons that most of them did: they hated being alone.

He chose such bars carefully and, when he traveled, his itineraries always took them into account.

The woman smoking her cigarette examined the bar's mosaics and ornaments. The walls were grey behind the spirits that decked the shelves. Each of the tables and chairs had a smooth lustrous finish. Across the bar, the old man glanced at the woman intermittently, gauging interest. She refrained from looking at him; she was mildly annoyed by the unwelcome attention. Edward, seated next to her, tried not to be noticed, either, fixated on his own gin and tonic, his last. She herself was entitled to one drink, her

first and only. Danny handed it to her. "Enjoy," he said.

The piano playing had stopped, and the only music now was the faint tinkling of glasses and empty bottles. Edward listened to the familiar closing sounds, staring down into his nearly empty glass and the only love he'd been able to salvage out of those 47 years.

The woman continued smoking her cigarette. Some of the guests close to the piano were preparing to get up and leave, and so was the old man across the bar, putting on his long wool coat, a sleeve at a time. Suddenly, the hand with the cigarette stopped mid-journey and the woman looked sharply at Edward. "Hey," she said. "I mean, pardon me, but you're that writer, aren't you?"

Edward returned her inquisitive stare. He didn't smile, didn't so much as concede that she was worth the while. He held her gaze blankly for a moment, then looked back at his drink. "I am a writer, yes," he said. "Whether I'm the one you have in mind is anyone's guess," he added coldly. He hadn't aimed to put her off so candidly, but did so nonetheless, wanting nothing of her — her understated elegance, her youthful features, her tasteful manner of dress, her de-

meanor suggestive of a good upbringing. He'd noticed all these things, but women like her were typically a dime a dozen in his world.

He might have felt bad about it, the gin having warmed his stomach, realizing how needless his apathy towards the woman was. He'd grown into it, having become the recluse after building walls around himself, shunning his inner circle of family and friends.

"You'll have to pardon my bluntness," she said. "I'm a big fan of your work. I've read all your books. It's amazing to be sitting right next to you."

Edward took a sip from his drink. He was still a good-looking man, fit beyond his years. He took care of himself, keeping in shape, eating the right food. He applied equally meticulous care of his writing, even though the product so rarely thrilled him these days. Although he was blessed, he'd begun to compare his life to that of a dull knife. The only thing the guiding hand could perceive was the knife's inefficacy to achieve the desired result – it ceased to slice with aplomb.

Yet, he remained indifferent to the woman next to him. Danny took quick sidelong glances at them, curious of the woman's interest in Edward. He'd seen

other women show an interest in him, but they never approached the author. They reasoned that he seemed aloof, too aloof, in fact.

"I just wanted to be out," she continued. "My apartment seemed too familiar, like I'd grown tired of it somehow. That's why I came here. I've never been here before. My name is Isabel."

Edward looked at her for a very short instant, and nodded in acknowledgement. He felt his guard relax a little. Anyone who likes my work and can be this frank can't be too bad, he thought to himself.

Edward could have stayed to chat longer. Instead, he took out his wallet and proceeded to motion Danny over to tip him. Edward handed it to Danny, and Danny smiled as usual, thanking Edward and wishing him a safe trip. Edward walked out the door, seeing his BMW in its usual space. He got in, and turned the key in the ignition, but saw the silhouette of a woman hailing down a cab without much success, preventing him from leaving.

Isabel was flagging a taxi cab down. One by one, they drove past. Isabel saw an empty slow-moving cab approaching. Suddenly, the cab sprinted past, splashing her with standing water from the

street. She took a little time gathering herself before looking for another cab, but every single one seemed to be occupied. Edward suddenly felt a wave of compassion come over him. She almost looked like a woman he dated a long time ago ... someone he had loved and lost. It stung to have remembered. During that relationship, love hadn't been enough.

He called out to Isabel. "I'll take you home, if it's ok?" he asked her, his offer stunted by another splashing of the standing water.

She hesitated, but the downpour wasn't getting any better. He seemed trustworthy enough. She weighed the pros and cons of letting her favorite author take her home in the midst of bad weather. He might have been her favorite author, but he was also a total stranger, a handsome articulate one no less.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make. "Sure. That would be wonderful," she said with a smile.

The rain was pouring. The moon couldn't be seen. In the daytime, kinetic life abounded – joggers ran along trails next to the river; there was incessant traffic; horns blared, people flooded the streets at rush hour. At any time during

the day, life never slowed to a snail's pace. As loneliness mysteriously followed the onset of evening, some of the motion just moved indoors, beyond windowpanes, into the shadowy terrain of bedrooms and sitting rooms, where anything might happen.

* * *

In the car there was an awkward silence, but silence never seemed that way to Edward. Silence was a necessary juncture in every conversation. It bordered on a way of life.

"So, what's a girl like you doing in a bar during last call?" he said, implying more than asking. She looked at him with surprise and tenderness. Despite his success and handsome features, he seemed lonely. He had shutters in his eyes, skin that was cold to the touch, and walls around his heart.

"A moment or two with someone like you," she answered, groping for her seat belt. Once it was fastened she composed herself, turning to offer an appreciative smile, having forgotten to do so when the car was started.

"You seem a little less wound up now that you're out of the bar. More relaxed," she said, smiling at him.

“Sure,” he replied, while disagreeing. He felt tense, unsure of what he was doing, or why he was doing it. “A gentleman would be concerned. That’s all,” he said to her. She noticed that he had a dimple on his right cheek when he lifted his mouth in a half smile on that side. She found it attractive.

“My apartment is on the next turn,” she told him, much to his surprise. He had assumed her place to be much farther off. “It’s just enough of a walk to warrant a short trip on the metro,” she answered, before he could speak.

“Ahh ... Quite nearer than I expected.”

Silence swept over them both momentarily until the building came into sight. She wondered whether he would come inside.

He stopped the car by the entrance to the building. He got the impression it was an expensive place to live. The doorman recognized her through the window and smiled at her. She bid Edward to come with her. “Come inside,” she said. “Warm yourself by the fire.”

“No. I can’t,” he said blankly. “I have to get back.”

“Are you married, involved? Did I cross the line?” she asked, her forehead creasing with concern.

He wasn’t, and perhaps she did push the envelope. His ambivalence tipped the scales to and fro. He wasn’t the type to let his emotions prevail, but they seemed poised to. Cautiously, forcefully, he summoned them back.

“No. I’m not, but I can’t. I can’t explain. I’m sorry.”

She smiled at him and got out, perhaps ready for her own apology.

Edward didn’t know why he was about to do what he had in mind, but it didn’t matter. He surprised himself, even.

“Wait, Isabel. Of course I’ll come. Maybe we can sit and talk for a while, but I will have to get back at some point.”

“Sure, Edward. We’ll make some tea,” she said in turn, surprised. She didn’t expect him to change his mind again. Twice now, Edward had flipped the coin and let fate step in. The floodgates broke open, and something akin to love tore loose from the weir.

He looked so good to her just then. He parked his car by the curb and she waited in the lobby for him. The door-

man said hello, and he promptly let him in.

* * *

They went up the elevator to the fourth floor, sporadically glancing at each other in the quiet. A ringing sound ended the elevator's quiet ascent. The doors opened. They both got out of the elevator and walked down an empty corridor flanked on both sides by small lamps. They stopped at a door marked 415. She searched her purse for her keys and found them, smiling at Edward in doing so. She turned the knob and flicked a switch just beyond the doorway. Darkness surrendered to light. Edward and Isabel walked inside.

"Please, Edward. Have a seat," she told him. "I'll make us some tea."

Edward obliged, finding his place on one end of a love seat. The furniture blended well with the fixtures. The blinds extended horizontally and shielded them from the world outside. The windows loomed large behind them, spanning the entire length of the living room. The view must have been panoramic.

He examined a set of pictures on a side table close to him. Her family photos suggested that she was single and childless,

revealing only her parents and a young man and woman whom he presumed to be siblings. No boyfriends. No complications. No loose ends. She came back with a teapot and some cups, served on a silver tray. "I like tea," she said. "I hardly ever drink coffee."

"I'm the same way," he replied to her, warming up to her after the indifference he'd displayed at the bar.

She sat in a chair close to his, moved her hair from one side of her head to the other with an elegant swoop. Edward's fingers tapped his knee absentmindedly. He hadn't any idea what to tell her, except to compliment her taste in furniture. He was curious about her – what she did for a living, what she liked to do on lazy afternoons when she was alone and the city seemed so unsafe. She took some books from beneath the living room table and fiddled with them, seemingly in search of one in particular.

"Ah," she said. "Here's one. Can you sign it for me?"

He did. It was his first book, and it was in pristine condition. He asked her if she'd just purchased it. She said no, she'd acquired it a long time ago. She had others, but she wouldn't bring them

out that instant, she said. “What’s it like?” she asked.

“What’s what like?”

“To be a writer with your talent,” she said, taking a sip from her cup.

“Great, sometimes. I wouldn’t trade it for any job in the world.”

“Good to hear it. I’m a biologist, by the way ...” she said. “Wouldn’t trade it for any job in the world.”

There was a pause as she read his dedication, and then a chuckle. “You’re so funny, Edward,” she said, lightly throwing her head back as she stifled a laugh.

Edward’s dedication read:

To Inquisitive Isabel,

Never cease to show a writer kindness and curiosity. Thank you for making my acquaintance,

Edward

She took a long look at the note, smiling faintly to herself. She put the book away.

“I love your apartment,” he said.

She gave him a sidelong glance and a smile and decided his remark to be sincere. “Thanks,” she said. “I pay close attention to details.”

Edward wasn’t sure what those details were, exactly, but did acknowledge that everything made sense in its own place. Her refined taste reflected her mental acuity. He looked around and sipped from his cup. She turned the fireplace on and warmth radiated from it.

“Are there any loose ends you ought to tell me about?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said rather bluntly. She tried to keep from looking down at her cup of tea self-consciously, disappointed. But she’d already known. She second-guessed herself then. He hadn’t attempted to mask his intentions as she had hers.

“But,” he continued, “she left me. I’m still not over her, you see,” he said. “Forgive me for any implications.”

She looked up from her cup of tea and didn’t smile, didn’t make it too obvious that she was happy to hear it. She wore a pained expression as she asked him, “Pardon me for asking, but how long ago was it?”

“It’s been a while,” he answered.

Their conversation would last another hour, focusing on his travels, her work, his adventures. They talked about the bar, about Edward's indifference to her and his sudden decision to drive Isabel home that night. Isabel, in turn, saying, "I think it was rather bold of me to sit next to you in the bar when it wasn't really crowded."

Edward hadn't considered that Isabel might have done it on purpose. He smiled and said, "Well, look how that's turning out ..."

* * *

Edward was already beginning to look like a changed man. Isabel turned the music on, and they cleared some of the furniture to dance. The song was a sad one – a number called "I'm Through With Love" by Arthur Prysock. The song struck a chord in each of them. The voices moaned to a gentle swagger: "I'm though with love, I'll never fall again, say I do to love, don't ever call again." Isabel rested her head gently on Edward's shoulder as they swayed softly to the tender music. It was a song they both loved.

They kissed gently at first, prodding each other's lips intimately, each groping for the other's loneliness. The record fell si-

lent and, with a flick of the switch, the lights softened to a mild glow.

They made love that night, knowing little about one another, assured only by the loneliness they both felt, shared intimately by two random strangers.

* * *

Edward awoke to the sound of his favorite talk show, just as he did every morning. He surveyed his surroundings in shock. His last recollection was lying asleep in Isabel's arms in her apartment. He was fully dressed and felt a splitting headache coming. First, he took a hot shower. Next, he thought it best to do something about his hangover before he felt the full brunt of its discomfort.

It was the first time in years that he'd allowed himself to get that drunk. He couldn't remember just what had transpired after leaving Isabel's apartment. Did he drive? Did he upset her? He was scared that she might have had to jettison him back here. That would be quite embarrassing. He felt like panicking. What was he going to do?

He planned to apologize.

There was no turning back now. She barely knew him and he'd worked himself into a drunken stupor in her own

apartment. Perhaps, he had even made a mess of things. He couldn't just assume, though; he couldn't surrender to the conclusion that she would disregard him in the face of an honest, heartfelt apology. Not after last night ... last night meant something, didn't it?

* * *

Edward made a note to himself. He had to drop his suit off at the cleaners. Right now, he was going somewhere else – Isabel's apartment. He had to explain himself. The thought of approaching her without remembering all the details was intimidating, but not going through with it was equally unacceptable. He couldn't sort out what he was thinking, or what he was feeling. His confusion was only exacerbated by his throbbing headache. He tried to think of what to say, and how he would go about saying it, but all he could think about was the flood of passion that seeped through the cracks in his heart when she said his name in the midst of euphoric ululation.

Edward asked the concierge to hail a cab for him. He had found his space in the parking building empty, apparently arriving home without his trusty black BMW seven series. He sat at the bar of the condominium's bistro sipping a cup of tea,

still recovering from the headache. The hot shower had helped a bit, as did an aspirin. He topped it off with the black tea he'd come to rely on whenever he'd had a few more drinks than usual. Edward, after all, had a high tolerance to alcohol.

The bistro was nearly empty, owing to the time of day. It was occupied mostly by patrons who liked to meet for breakfast. Power lunches were often the norm; the place would become crowded. Edward sat by himself, thinking of Isabel.

When the cab arrived, Edward thanked the concierge and got in. The driver asked, "Where to?" and Edward replied, "South Fifth Street, I think." The driver responded to Edward's unsureness by frowning, and muttering unintelligibly at the notion of embarking on a short drive towards a less than distinct location. Edward thought to appease the man with the wrinkled forehead by saying, "It's a large apartment building down Fifth, just not sure exactly where. Can't miss it."

They drove down Fifth Street until Edward saw a building that looked like Isabel's up ahead. When they arrived, Edward told the driver to stop. The driver took his money and left Edward staring up at the building. Judging Isabel's floor

to be the fourth, he proceeded towards the doorman, who looked nothing like the man he remembered seeing the night before.

* * *

Edward stopped short of the building's entrance and greeted the doorman, who eyed him warily, murmuring a reluctant reply. Edward asked to see Isabel.

"What floor?" the doorman asked. His authoritative tone rankled with Edward.

"Fourth floor, I don't remember her last name," he confessed, trying his best to remain polite.

"Sir," the doorman said, eyebrows contorting and then meeting at the center of his forehead in annoyance. "There is no one in this whole building with that first name."

"You must be mistaken. I was here ... last night. We had drinks. I ..." Edward stopped himself short, not wanting to embarrass himself. However difficult the doorman was, his response seemed to be genuine. "Thank you," Edward responded, leaving, heart pounding, angry at failure more than at the unfriendly doorman.

He decided to stop by the bar to see if anyone there knew her. She might have gone by a false name, perhaps. Or maybe she hadn't wanted him to come back and see her, ever. He was willing to honor that if he only knew the truth about who she really was.

* * *

Morose and cold, Edward found his BMW parked by the curb some distance from the bar. He'd driven Isabel to her apartment, but there was his car, where he always parked it. He had to get to the bottom of this. The scenario seemed strange, but a plausible explanation had to be behind it somehow. He got in his car and drove to Danny's other job, a deli in the busy downtown district close to the university.

Danny was cleaning a tabletop when Edward strode inside. Edward took his sunglasses off, his eyes adjusting to the change of light. Danny looked up and smiled at Edward, clearly glad to see him.

"Mr. Hanneman, nice to see you again. Want some tea or juice? I can make a sandwich for you. Drinks on the house!" Danny announced to him.

Edward smiled. He liked Danny. He was a good kid. He wanted to be a really good writer, and he certainly worked hard at it, but his work lacked something: something that successful writers had besides big publisher marketing – the Midas Touch.

“No, Danny. I’m good. Listen. About last night ...”

Edward could see in Danny’s eyes that Danny wasn’t about to lie to him.

* * *

“Mr. Hanneman, there was no woman with you last night. We called a cab for you because you had too much to drink. Your car is parked right outside the bar. Didn’t you find it there? You didn’t leave with anybody.”

“But, Danny. I remember it so vividly. Her name was Isabel. She came in when it was raining. She ordered a gin and tonic. It was last call. You served her drink.”

“Mr. Hanneman, I can’t serve any drinks to new clients after last call. I can’t let them in unless they know another patron who’s already inside. I think you’re well aware of that.”

“I was drunk?”

“I’m afraid you were.”

“Did I pass out?”

“You slumped over the bar. Listen, Mr. Hanne ...”

“Please, Danny,” he interrupted. “Call me Edward.”

“Edward, it’s my fault, too. I didn’t think you had too many. I swear it won’t happen again.”

Edward still had his doubts about what had transpired, but he’d begun to process the distinct possibility that what had happened that night was all a reverie. He would do his best to forget the unforgettable somehow but, how?

He couldn’t give up just yet, though. There was one more place to try.

His concierge staff kept security event logs. If Danny had called a cab for him, one of the staff would have had to help him upstairs and unlock his condo unit for him. Unless he was still conscious. They’d also have surveillance. He could request to see that.

Why all the fuss over something that seems to have explained itself?. Because he couldn’t accept the ramifications of the explanation – that Isabel was a working of his subconscious, a trick of his

imagination that preyed on a vulnerability he hadn't realized could be so fully exploited. A flame had been ignited in the dark.

The concierge backed up the story as Danny told it. Edward had come home in a cab half conscious, and they assisted him to his quarters as a courtesy. After all, the concierge had said, somewhat embarrassingly, he'd known Edward for a long time and he was one of their best patrons. He offered to send for the security tapes, but Edward flatly refused, stating that it was no longer necessary. Until then, Edward had clung to the unlikely conclusion that Danny was lying at Isabel's request to keep her identity a secret, but the concierge was telling the truth. He and Danny both were. Edward was halfway in denial, but his memories could not outweigh the evidence. He held on to the sensory details he fought so hard not to squander: the tender touch, the sweet scent of cocoa butter, the sound of soft, subtle laughter.

Isabel was a dream.

If only he could relive it.

* * *

There was only one recourse in Edward's mind: trace back the steps to when it all

began. That night, he arrived at the bar at half-past twelve. The chatter didn't subside when he came in. The music played on. The drinks passed hands. Edward was glad that Danny wasn't working that night. Danny would certainly be too cautious to serve him the drinks he desired, and that would derail his plans. He took his seat at the end of the bar and signaled to the bartender, whose name was Marlon, and ordered a scotch on the rocks.

There was a band playing, but Edward paid them no attention. The banquet hall was emptying; the near-drunk sophisticates in their dresses and tuxedos exited loudly and loquaciously. Edward recognized some faces. He turned around to greet them. He ordered two vodka shooters next. He anticipated that the band would stop playing soon.

The last of the banquet hall attendees streamed out of the exits and Edward realized it was raining. A forlorn smile formed on his lips. He ordered a whiskey and the bartender, Marlon, eyed him carefully. "Last call, Mr. Hanneman," he said, handing it over warily. The whiskey should just about do it, he thought, gulping it down hurriedly instead of slowly savoring it, knowing what was about to happen next.

The door opened, and a woman entered the bar. “We’re closing, ma’am,” the bartender called out. The band stopped playing. Conversations were drowned out by the howling wind and rain. Suddenly, everywhere, silence descended, as if time stood still.

Edward knew who it was.

“Isabel,” he said, turning around to face her. “I’m glad you came ...”

Insanity By Increments

Alejandro looked around him and marveled at the sparkling lights, the chandeliers, the elegant drapes. He sampled hors d'ouvres as he sipped fine wine, scanning the crowd of sophisticates. An artist, Alejandro was an invitee to Poplin's party by way of their business relationship. Alexander Poplin was an art dealer and gallery owner; Alejandro was his protégé.

Poplin was nowhere to be found. Alejandro continued to scan the crowd, searching for Poplin's daughter, the beautiful and articulate Contessa. Alejandro swore his tuxedo looked just a little sloppy in large part to his hastiness to get ready for the party.

Somewhere in one of the banquet rooms, Poplin must have been entertaining guests. Alejandro stiffened at the sight of his furrowed forehead as he glanced at his own reflection. He straightened his back, tugged at the ends of his tux, and smiled in approval.

There was still no sign of Contessa. Left to fend for himself, he had managed to find a couple to chat up, a young man and woman, both clients of Poplin's who lived in upstate New York and seemed friendly enough. They had commissioned Poplin to decorate their home after the young man had come into an inheritance, and they had become regular invitees to Poplin's parties since.

"We aren't the types you would consider regulars to these sorts of things," the young woman confessed to him.

"Yeah," the husband added. "We're just average folk. We did just open a boat rental business in the Keys, though. We're excited about that."

A woman's image flashed in the corner of Alejandro's vision: lush blonde hair fastened atop her head in a meticulous fashion, a few strands flowing down, calculated to enhance the look of controlled freneticism. Her piercing blue eyes made

their impression. The curve of a cheekbone revealed a grin in lieu of a full smile.

She stalked towards Alejandro. The young couple watched her as she came closer, seemingly knowing who she was. They smiled at her knowingly. “Hello, Contessa,” they said.

“Welcome to the party,” she announced to the three of them.

* * *

Later that night, Alejandro found himself alone on the balcony. Worn out by the party, he found time to himself on the ledge overlooking the lush gardens that glistened with the water from the sprinkler. He loosened his bowtie a bit and took a sip of some wine as he breathed in the cool spring air.

Contessa found him on the balcony staring into nothingness, almost smiling at the infinite darkness before him. Her gown flowed about her so elegantly that Alejandro thought she was a vision of ethereal beauty. She wore a pendant around her neck made of a large round pearl and a diamond. The former, a hint of shiny alabaster, and the latter both shimmered at Alejandro for a moment as the light caught its exquisitely cut lines

so beautifully, radiantly, like the sparkle of a still sea at sunrise.

“Found some time by yourself?” she asked, conscious of the fact that he’d been wonderfully civil the entire evening but, for the most part, less than comfortable.

“Yes, I have,” he told her. A smile showed his sincere thanks for her concern. Her remarks seemed genuine, spoken by someone more used to the discomfort than he was. She had shown none of the awkwardness that he’d felt during the party – he never felt he truly belonged in a crowd of sophisticates. On the contrary, she had epitomized elegance, grace and stateliness the entire evening.

“It’s a wonderful night,” she told him. Her eyes sparkled. Her skin was satin smooth, as was the texture of her dress. He envied it just then, cradling the whole of her.

“Yes, it is. Your father must be delighted to have such a wonderful daughter.”

She chuckled a bit – sweet innocuous laughter. It wasn’t the type that scoffed at its intended party. It spoke quiet amusement – like a blush of the cheek without giving itself away so candidly.

“I’m ecstatic to have a father like mine. I love him with all my heart.”

They paused briefly as she looked out into the sky and appeared to be astonished by its beauty: the crest of the moon, the glitter of the stars and the absence of clouds.

Afterwards, she reached out a hand and led him to the center of the balcony to dance. They could hear the music playing. The couples inside were slow dancing. Alejandro’s heart raced as he held her delicate form, moved by her genuine liking for him, her kindness, and her delicate manner of expressing herself. They swayed softly to and fro as the music lulled them with a gentle crescendo.

* * *

Central Park was teeming with all sorts of activity that morning. There were joggers along the trails and children on the playgrounds, dogs catching Frisbees, birdwatchers with binoculars. Alejandro had his sneakers laced up as he proceeded along the trail that led northwest of the park, where a favorite café was located a short walk from the exit. The day was sunny but cool and the trees in the park were beautiful this time of the year.

Colors of auburn and burnt sierra edged the park as the trees marked the turn of the season into early October.

Alejandro decided to enjoy as much of the bright shimmering daylight as he could. He walked for two miles and stopped at a bench to pause and reflect. A stranger reading a newspaper was seated at the other end. He didn’t say hello to Alejandro. Alejandro didn’t say hello either, thinking it wiser not to, feeling as though he was simply minding his own business by doing so. He allowed his thoughts to wander, looking at an oak tree, which was slowly losing its crown of yellow leaves. He watched a squirrel climb it with an acorn in its mouth. He watched a biker hurtle by. He glanced at the sky to see clouds in white streaks briefly cover the sun.

“Good morning,” came a voice. It startled Alejandro. He wasn’t expecting the man with the newspaper to start talking to him.

“Good morning,” Alejandro answered. The man wore a beige suit and a grey hat. The lines furrowing his forehead and declining features made Alejandro guess that he was probably in his fifties or early sixties, but not younger.

“Nice day for a walk in the park, isn’t it? I’m sorry I didn’t say hello to you sooner. You look like a nice chap, after all,” he said. Alejandro wasn’t sure what he meant by the comment.

“What I mean is that the park can have its share of crazy people, that’s all. At night, there are folks who are totally insane. There are nicer folks during the day, but some are just a little crazy.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Alejandro said. “I don’t know anyone who comes here at night. I was just taking a break from a long walk. It’s a nice day to be out.”

“It sure is,” the man said.

“But the park is relatively safe during the daytime. Nothing to worry about. Just have to be on guard.”

“I know what you mean.”

The man started laughing. A tingling sensation went down Alejandro’s spine. He saw rows of black rotten teeth, a tongue stained purple, eyes that widened imperceptibly to the sound of Alejandro’s heartbeat.

Alejandro said goodbye and rose from his seat. He kept walking, well into the north gate, out of the park, away from an old man who’d shown him much more than he was willing to see.

He got a latte from his favorite café on the north side. Afterwards, he decided to return to his loft, taking the subway for the rest of the journey back. During the trip, he noticed a flyer for an underground club and decided he would check it out. He wasn’t sure what had piqued his interest, except that he needed a deviation from his routine. In the meantime, there were more pressing matters to be dealt with, such as work. He couldn’t afford to waste precious time.

* * *

Alejandro arrived home eager to settle into his workspace. The answering machine light was blinking. Hoping it was Contessa, he grew excited. He paced to and fro in the hallway, wondering what was coming over him. It had been a while since Alejandro had felt that way about a woman – and Contessa, he concluded, was indeed no ordinary woman.

He had just about finished his latte when he pressed the button on his answering machine and settled into a lounge chair. The contraption began beeping loudly, announcing that the first message was about to be played shortly.

The message was from Alexander Poplin, thanking Alejandro for coming at his behest to his party. He mentioned that he

was back to doing business, and business was running like usual, with the highs and lows one would come to expect. He asked Alejandro when the new paintings would be finished. “Keep in touch,” he said.

Poplin was about to hang up when he thought to mention Contessa, who said that she had enjoyed Alejandro’s company immensely. “Come back to the manse this weekend. Call if you can come. Contessa will be thrilled,” he said finally, then hung up abruptly, ending the call as quickly as it started.

The answering machine beeped, signaling the transition to the next message. A man’s voice spoke gruffly, and background noise made it sound as if a breeze was blowing through the receiver, suggesting that the caller was in an open area. The voice didn’t register in Alejandro’s mind until later, when the winds died down a bit and the voice became just a little clearer with the decrease in static. The man on the line was Fyodor Petrovsky. He was a distinguished professor of psychology at Columbia University who was also an old friend. Alejandro was in the fine arts program and Professor Petrovsky had just taken the position at the university after having moved to New York City. Professor Petrovsky was

a renowned clinical psychologist, having just published clinical research in the modern applications of philosophical psychology towards the treatment of mental illness. He had asked Alejandro to simply address him as Fyodor.

Fyodor asked Alejandro if they could meet at a bookstore at Main Street, between the restaurant and the department store. Alejandro juggled a pencil with his pointer finger and thumb, twirling it around, dropping it, turning it over haphazardly, listening to the voice crackle through the speaker quietly while nodding in approval, deciding that the time Fyodor proposed they meet would be satisfactory. Alejandro made a mental note to call Fyodor to let him know that he would meet him in a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown instead. A change of venue was desirable for the occasion.

He examined the flyer he had picked up at Central Park. It was a flyer for a club. The club’s name was “Mystic.” An archaic symbol stood on the top right-hand side. There was also a robed old man holding his open palms over the symbol. Alejandro got the impression that Mystic’s modus operandi was drug dealing, that the robed old man represented an alchemist in olden times.

He decided to visit the club. He had plans to meet a potential subject for his next project there. First, he would meet Fyodor in the early evening and then proceed as planned. The Chinese restaurant where they were meeting was reputed to serve the strongest tea in the city. Fyodor and Alejandro were both fans of exotic tea, but Alejandro was eager to know what Fyodor would think of this spare little restaurant's own signature brew.

* * *

Alejandro spent the morning roaming the city with his sketchbook and pastels, finding interesting subjects for his artwork. He would later take the best of his impressions and transpose their lines onto the canvas, thereby capturing their beauty and essence on the larger medium. He drew things like intersecting points between transits and freeways, sheds near derelict lots, old broken-down cars where ravens might have roosted or in which a casual night of sex might have occurred.

Early evening came in a heartbeat. Alejandro was in the Chinese restaurant on a side street in the heart of Chinatown wearing a casual button-down shirt and dark trousers, looking outside the window as vendors sold dim sum on the

streets. Shop owners negotiated with their customers. The concrete roads were broken in areas tucked away from the eyes of the faring traffic, and the streets were generally well lit by neon signs. The smell of Chinese food and gunpowder was an addictive mix, a sensual aroma that seduced and charmed each visitor. The colors were alive in Chinatown, vibrant and full of life; hues of red, yellow and blue stimulated and entranced the wandering eye.

Fyodor came in five minutes late. He was wearing a camel hair sports jacket and a smooth silk shirt with dark brown trousers. He wasn't wearing a tie. In fact, Fyodor loathed the things. He wore bow ties whenever the situation called for it.

He had a patch of cropped black hair that stood out in front. His ears seemed rather small. He had magnetic eyes that were disarming. His etched lines told the tales of 52 years, 52 years' worth of brazen accomplishments, many accolades, and few relationships with women.

He said hello, and sat at the table, let out a breath, looked around, smiled at Alejandro, and quipped that the place was cozy enough for a final stop before the inevitable end. Fyodor formed a pistol shape with his hand and placed it

against the side of his head, pretending to pull the trigger. Alejandro didn't get it at first, looking at him confusedly, so Fyodor shook his head. It was perhaps the pale green haze of light in the restaurant and the rickety chairs and tables that inspired the gesture or, perhaps, it was the poor condition of the linoleum floors or the grave expression on everyone's faces.

The waitress came and went so suddenly that Alejandro had to assure Fyodor she would return. "Just a quick thing she needs to get," Alejandro said.

"Better be quick," Fyodor said in return. "I'm thirsty."

"You won't be. You'll need to sip this tea gently."

"Believe me," Fyodor said. "I've had every tea in the world and nothing's made a crying man of me yet. What is it comparable to anyway? Snake's blood from Thailand?"

"Maybe not, but this tea will keep you going for hours."

"Childish games you play, lad. You're an amateur."

Alejandro laughed.

The waitress came with a teapot and two small cups. The two men smiled at her as she began pouring them their tea, smiling back at each of them. Fyodor looked at the vile liquid in disgust as he saw the mixture of leaves that swam in the tiny container. Alejandro took his and raised it to his lips, already a veteran, taking a sip.

"Let's get high," he told Fyodor, drinking his cupful, twisting away half-heartedly without as much as a pained expression, ending it with a grin that broke from ear to ear.

Fyodor took a sip and declared it too strong, spitting out the dark leaves that he had nearly swallowed. "What is this?" he asked. Alejandro was too busy laughing. Fyodor looked around self-consciously and found that most of the restaurant's clientele had ordered the same pot of tea without the faintest reaction.

"Now," he said, trying to divert attention from his sputtering reaction to the tea. "My friend, what I came here to say was that ..."

Alejandro knew Fyodor well enough to take his dissertations rather half-heartedly, or else inspire the revolutionary in his friend and ally.

* * *

“I am often asked about the great divide between the sound and the afflicted mind. I tell them that I don’t see a categorically distinct disparity between the two. Increments of both sound and afflicted mind are both present and inherent. The differences vary by increments. We all vary by degrees of sanity or, conversely, degrees of madness. There is never the presence of one and the absence of another fully.”

He paused to look at the unsavory brew before him and called out to the waitress. “Excuse me,” he said. “Can I just have a Diet Coke, please?”

He continued his conversation without a pause “Genetics plays a key role in proving this theory. I believe that the Human Genome Project will reveal that mutated genes can cause random individuals in the hereditary hierarchy to possibly develop any mental illness, without encompassing the full range of symptoms that are typical of all mental illnesses.

“If a person exhibits one type of behavioral pattern that leads another person to believe that he or she is symptomatic with a type of condition, that individual would still have to qualify from a range of factors. Even if the individual doesn’t

qualify, you therefore can’t reasonably state that the patient is completely rational by default. This is true despite the behavioral pattern being an isolated case.”

Fyodor was rambling on, and this was a clear case of Fyodor’s ruminations: substantiated, believable somehow, on the edge – but Alejandro wondered whether to take his arguments at face value. Measure sanity and madness by increments? It was the abolitionist in Fyodor that desired a radical restructuring of the establishment. He was still a revolutionary at heart.

They parted ways at 7:30 that evening. They left Chinatown and Alejandro proceeded to the Yonkers area to visit Mystic.

* * *

A duet of wailing guitars ripped through the smoky air while the drums thundered throughout the club, reverberating off the thick walls as though a jackhammer created the stampeding noise. Onlookers pumped their fists and crowded the stage, leaving the bar and the rear portion of the club empty save for a few listless faces, drug-dazed and indifferent to the music.

Alejandro made his way through the back of the club. Curious onlookers stood against the wall bobbing their heads to the music as he passed them. He reached the bar and listened to the band perform while surveying the room for its particulars, hoping to catch details that he could use as inspiration for his art. The reddish glow seemed oppressive, like the color of an inferno. The chains that the clubbers wore had the luster of hard metallic polish. Their leather jackets were as black as sodden ash fresh from a fire extinguished in a downpour. The faces were, collectively, an allegory in the heart of darkness.

The bartender asked Alejandro what he wanted, and Alejandro asked for a gin and tonic. "Nothing too exotic," he said.

"Do you want anything else? Something maybe to help make the good music feel even better?" replied the bartender.

Alejandro noticed that the bartender was missing a tooth, and his ponytail was tied behind his head with a mere rubber band.

"I'm not here to get high, thanks," he replied.

"Everyone wants to get high. Just the drug of choice that's different," the bartender said, as a somewhat deranged smile suddenly flashed across his face. And then he left.

Alejandro was left alone at the bar.

He spotted a woman eyeing him from a distance. She was wearing thick makeup and her hair seemed to have a burnt texture, as though she had tried to straighten it but had overdone it. Her black garb made her look Wiccan. Her black boots had long spiked heels.

Otherwise, she was young and somewhat attractive. Pity, Alejandro thought. He looked away for an instant but was surprised to see that she suddenly got out of her seat and walked towards him. He didn't know what to say.

"You look lucid, for a change. As you can see," she said to him, eyeing the crowd, "most of the guys here aren't."

"You lonely?" Alejandro asked. She smiled at him somewhat, glancing around one more time to see if anyone noticed them.

"I come here when I like company, let's just say," she said. "What's your trip?"

“I don’t understand.”

“Cocaine? Heroin? What are you on? No wait. You look a little out of place. You’re not a cop, are you?”

“I’m not that out of place,” he answered.

“Good,” she said. “I was beginning to think you were just sniffing at the air a bit.”

“Sort of ... but, no, I’m an artist.”

“Really? Whew!” She lit a cigarette, blew out smoke the opposite direction and smiled at him.

“I like artists. Have a few friends that are. I’m Christina, by the way.”

“Alejandro’s the name.”

“So,” she asked. “Do you want to show me your work? I’m curious.”

“Sure. Here’s my card,” he said, extending one with a flick of the wrist, a twist of the forefinger and thumb, a move he had practiced and perfected. “Just because you’re nice,” he concluded.

“Uh, you’re not gay, are you, Alejandro?” Christina asked, grimacing somewhat.

“No. It’s just that I’m emotionally involved, let’s say.” Alejandro was laughing as he said it. “Besides, I’m a gentleman. I

wouldn’t simply pick you up and drag you back into my cave.”

“Oh, a romantic. You’re a rare one. You are out of place,” she said. “But I knew that. Before coming over, I knew there was something about you.”

“I have an idea. How about you model for me? I have a splendid concept for this club scene that I want to paint, and I want you to be the subject for it.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” she said. “Well, maybe. What’s the concept going to be like?”

Alejandro explained his vision to her, and her mouth gaped open, unable to mask her surprise.

* * *

The first thing Alejandro noticed as he stirred the next morning was the sound of rain clattering on the rooftop. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was a good hour and a half past his usual time to get up from bed, perhaps due to the amount of gin he’d had the night before. He hadn’t gotten drunk; he’d only had two drinks, just enough to warm his insides. The gin’s coddling warmth was soothing; it was just enough to dummy down the fleeting thoughts of ignominious desire, the random thoughts of pre-

mature heaven – Christina there, too easy for the taking.

He almost didn't notice the answering machine's blinking light. He had gotten a bowl full of cereal, filled it up halfway with milk and started munching his way towards the dining table. The blinds were drawn everywhere around him, and the grey skies seemed unusually low. It was cold in the loft that morning, evidenced by the mist, which settled along the windows.

The message was from Contessa. Alejandro was more than a little surprised to get a call from her, having confirmed that he was visiting them at her father's home upstate. There would be no such visit. There had been a change of plans. Contessa wanted to meet him at Riverside Park to discuss it. It was urgent, she had said.

He picked up the phone to call her. Suspicions briefly raced through his mind as he listened to the phone ring. She answered then asked him how he was doing. She apologized for the inconvenience, without giving any hint of what motivated the meeting, except to say that the matter was of serious consequence. She didn't elaborate how.

It remained mysterious to him how his involvement might matter in any case. His friendship and support were perhaps his only commodities of any grave importance to the Poplins. As it was, how else would he explain it? He knew little beyond what was apparent to him – that their world was hidden by a veil of aristocracy that was sheathed by their kindness and generosity toward him and his work. In the past, they had helped him along and he had always respected them for that, respected them enough not to probe further than what was acceptable.

Therefore, he knew little about them. Little that would make matters better or worse. He decided to look at whatever the situation was with an open heart and mind.

* * *

When he arrived, Contessa was already waiting inside the gazebo where they had agreed to meet. She wrapped a soft blue shawl around her more tightly as the winds picked up, showing a subtle sign of vulnerability that somehow indicated that despair had struck her poised self-assured stature. She wore large sunglasses despite the bleak weather. Alejandro noticed that she looked frail against the wind and rain even as she stood un-

derneath the covered area. She looked dazzling even though she looked equally as fragile.

Walking up to her made it seem more obvious to him that something was wrong. She didn't immediately sense his arrival. She realized only after he'd come closer.

"Alejandro," she said. "There you are. I'm so glad to see you. Thank you for meeting me at such short notice."

"Make no mention of it. It's no problem at all. Do you want to talk here, or perhaps go somewhere else?"

"I have an umbrella. Care to take a stroll?"

"Why not? Are you sure you won't catch a cold?"

"No," she answered, smiling as she did so. "Thank you for asking, though."

Alejandro grew silent, walking arm in arm with Contessa, already infatuated with her, allowing her the chance to speak her mind without any interruptions until she said what she intended to. They walked for some time along the trail parallel to the river before she spoke again, then began alluding to objects in view of the park that she remembered from childhood. Alejandro listened and smiled. He never had to feign interest in

Contessa, the way he had with other women.

Besides, there was a deep cavernous space in Alejandro that was shifting in the midst of his infatuation with her. He was unsure of what would cause her to be so close to his heart at such a premature juncture in their knowing one another. Still, he fought that great awareness with a sense of urgency, believing in the spirit of adventure and romance, and believing that love was a treasure to be relished when found, not thwarted at the moment of its stupendous discovery.

"Alejandro, it's my dad. He's in the hospital. I'm afraid he's ill."

"Is he gravely ill? Will he be okay?"

"I'm not sure, Alejandro."

Alejandro looked into her eyes even as she shielded them with her sunglasses and understood why she wore them. Tears began to flow down her pale cheeks. He offered her his handkerchief but she refused, taking one out of her purse.

"What did the doctors say, Contessa? Is he dying?"

There was a short pause as she tried to regain her composure. "No, Alejandro. It's not that at all."

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not like that.”

There was another short pause. Contessa briefly looked out past the waterfront.

“They say he’s going mad.”

* * *

Alejandro agreed to meet with her father the very next morning. In the meantime, he had work to do. His process was truly a difficult one, involving hours of idle frustration while nothing would get done until an epiphany would form. That was the only time when things got exciting.

That meant countless hours of emotive music, crumpled sketches, and brooding, which sometimes led nowhere. His work area revealed a whole other side of him: he would often listen to loud extreme metal music, often making strange poses as he struggled to manifest his idea onto the canvas in front of him, smudging paint everywhere. The result sometimes looked like a kaleidoscope of angry antinomic colors.

But this time, it was slightly different. He knew exactly what concept he wanted. The canvas didn’t just stare back at him without stirring his imagination towards this amalgam of colors and brushstrokes he had captured in the

brooding moments. Caught in the crosshairs of inspiration, he circled the room for but a moment and turned the music off, seemingly reveling for an instant in the idea that this latest line of paintings he had been working on could bear a greater significance for his young career. He touched the paint tubes lightly, grazing them with his fingertips, gently prodding the easel next, and then his brushes.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Christina had come to pose for the painting. Alejandro jumped up in excitement, trotting downstairs to greet her and escort her to his studio via the lift at the back of the building.

* * *

Memories of his conversation with Fyodor returned to him while walking by Central Park that afternoon, sometime after he’d met Contessa.

“The two are alike. Increments of both sound and afflicted mind are ever present. The differences vary by increments,” Fyodor had said. “We all vary by degrees of madness or, conversely, degrees of sanity.”

“What of the boundaries?” Alejandro had asked. “Without a societal morality to justify the righteousness of an act, we would sate our impulses as we wished without guilt. The world would spiral into chaos. Laws are meant to preserve the rights of all concerned. Societal norms and morals also act as our bastions. Therefore, there are clear distinctions as to how other persons can justify a person’s actions as being in the spectrum of sane or otherwise.”

“But laws and morals vary by culture. The legal system is fundamentally flawed. Factions demand that each be tailored unto their beliefs. The sound mind is flawed just the same. Affliction is hinged on aberrancy, on deviation. In the wrongdoing, morality is defiled at will. Therefore, in essence, a clear disparity of definition does not truly exist, but is discernable merely by degrees of sanity, not merely an absence thereof.”

“My dear Fyodor, even if I were to subscribe to the idea, what would be the point of such a belief?”

“That all are equal. That all of us have the capacity to hurt one another. That all of us are capable of the same injustices, depending on the circumstances, that all

of us are essentially the same,” he had said.

Alejandro walked by a musician just then, playing a classical piece on an acoustic guitar. It sounded like Cavatina. The melody was light and beautiful; the weather was a grey wash against the pallid light. Joggers went past. The usual life of the park was kinetic.

Alejandro had done the initial sketch of his painting of Christina that morning, depicting her in her black leather and fishnet, bound in chains, screaming, the background reddish like the afterglow of the inferno, and smoke rising from somewhere like hot volcanic ash. The painting was divided into geometric segments, lines crisscrossing at strange angles. He’d read somewhere of an idea that strange angles could bring about fits of hysteria or, perhaps, madness. This idea proved to be attractive for the piece.

“There’s this other side of you, Alejandro,” Christina had mentioned. “I just can’t make out what kind of guy that is. You defy stereotypes. You’re one of a kind.”

“A rock in the midst of a flawed diamond,” Alejandro said, reaching out to kiss her hand.

“But, who cares, as long as you’re charming,” said Christina, and off she went, browsing his other works. “Your work’s rather dark, Alejandro,” she said. A grin took the place of the cheery smile, like she understood something illicit. “I like it,” she finally said.

“Yours will be another in a fine line. I assure you.”

“Glad to know. Hey! I like this one, too.”

She was staring at a painting of his that was faintly familiar: a woman’s body twisted on the ground wearing a garment soiled by bloodstains and patches of mud. There were no signs of an executioner, only the signs of a painful violent death, rendered with such startling visual clarity and precision of detail.

The woman appeared to be Contessa.

* * *

Night fell and Alejandro was back in Mystic. The crowd was a rather inattentive bunch, predisposed to drinking at the tables and at the bar rather than taking in the loud music from the featured band. Alejandro observed a few diehard fans camped near the stage, but most of the crowd tonight was intent on getting high or drunk. Women knew better than to let strange men buy them drinks for free

here. The restroom was littered with used syringes and cigarette butts, graffiti covering the walls. The smell inside was far too atrocious for most. Alejandro literally gagged at the foul odor that greeted him once inside. The pungent stench had the mixture of old body odor, urine and unwashed excrement.

At the bar, Alejandro ordered his whiskey straight, on the rocks. Whiskey hardly differed much in quality or taste, he assumed. Besides the fact that it was cheap, it worked fast, warming his tonsils within a few gulps from his glass. Alejandro listened to the band, which sadly was quite a good bunch. It was just the wrong club, wrong time, and wrong crowd. The group gathered in Mystic didn’t intend on staying sober for long.

Suddenly, a woman sat beside him at the bar. Startled, Alejandro smiled at her, and she smiled back. She reminded him of Christina, dressed in the same type of clothing, just a little older, her hair also frizzled; she had a sober look to her, but he assumed himself to be an awful judge of sobriety upon a first encounter. The woman turned back to him after lighting her cigarette and ordering a drink from the bartender.

“Hello,” she said. “You’re not a regular. I noticed that you looked different.”

“Uh-huh,” he answered. “What gave me away?”

“You’re wearing a nice shirt inside your jacket. Plus, your jeans aren’t tattered, and you don’t have any chains on.”

Alejandro examined himself more closely after what she had said, realizing he could have done a better job blending in with the crowd.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said with a laugh. “Here to listen to the band?”

She nodded towards the stage.

“Here to soak up the atmosphere. I like the counterculture.”

“Counter to what? Bars where people come to be seen?”

“The generic and derivative we’re bombarded with and told is normal.”

She took a puff of her cigarette and turned back to face him. “My name is Maureen. I’m a palm reader,” she said, her head tilted to the side somewhat, eyeing him with a closer inspection, but smiling as she did so.

“My name is Alejandro. Nice to meet you,” he said, hoping to perhaps end the

conversation at that. He didn’t come for company that night. He didn’t know why he’d come at all.

“Let me read your palm,” she said. “I think you’ll be interesting.”

“No, thanks,” he replied. “I don’t believe in all that.”

“I won’t charge you this time. It’s just for fun, you could say. You might learn something about yourself that you would have otherwise never known, in the present ... and beyond.”

“Deliberately suppressed incriminating knowledge, you might say?” he said cheerfully, still refusing to believe in the woman’s claims.

“Maybe.”

He thought about her offer for a second and decided on the spur of the moment.

“Okay. You’re on, Maureen.”

“Let’s go somewhere without distractions.”

* * *

They decided to go to a diner on Riverside Avenue to do the palm reading. Alejandro offered to buy Maureen coffee and she accepted, thanking him for doing so, telling him that she didn’t make much in her line of work. Loud 50s mu-

sic was playing from a jukebox, but at least they had privacy. The few other customers were busy eating, which was a welcome relief. They got settled in and both sipped their coffee before getting on with what they had come for.

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Are you going to predict my future?”

“We’ll see what’s likely to happen. I’m not promising anything specific.”

“That’s rather unusual.”

“What is?”

“I thought palm readers were supposed to tell you what you wanted to hear.”

“If I told you that, and it didn’t happen, how are you supposed to believe in me and keep coming back?”

“You’re not like other palm readers,” Alejandro said with a smile.

He reached out and gave her his palm, and she immediately traced the lines on it, examining it thoroughly, in the end closing her eyes and then opening them. Seemingly dissatisfied, she looked at his hand again. Alejandro thought that if she wasn’t a quack then at least she wholeheartedly believed in the legitimacy of her line of work.

“There’s a broken line here that diverges into two separate lines. One is longer than the other. It almost suggests that there are two sides to you: one in complete control, while the other brews beneath the subconscious. It seems as if that one is still latent—that this hidden side is a polarity of the dominant side of you, slowly scratching the surface, making its presence felt, though not entirely, only bit by bit.”

“And you say you’re a palm reader? You sure you haven’t had too many drinks over at Mystic?”

“I swear I’m completely sober and that’s what I see. Does it make sense?”

“Fascinating ... but no, it doesn’t.”

“I tried.”

“It does seem to reflect a conversation I had recently, though...”

“Really?” she said, hope’s wings fluttering ever so slightly.

“But still, what does that have to do with me?” Alejandro said.

* * *

“The biggest discoveries in world history have begun from the strangest ideas, Alejandro.”

“None could be stranger than yours, Fyodor.”

“Think about it. Normalcy is a barometer teetering on a scale that differs greatly by personal opinion. Some abnormal phenomena, deemed inexplicable, merely denote a deviation from reality. The same idea holds true for the sound mind. A sound or afflicted mind can't be gauged by an aberrancy, lest it be trial by heresy, in my opinion.”

“Fyodor, what hope do you have for this idea of yours?”

“I hope to publish my research on the subject this year. I've just been throwing ideas at you, but I've been organizing my research steadily over these last few months. I hope to change the way cognitive therapy is done, focusing more on the individual instead of on a model being used as a common benchmark.”

Alejandro and Fyodor continued their walk on Columbia University grounds. Alejandro felt the conversation stray a bit from what he'd planned on discussing with Fyodor, but he was ok with this.

“How can a man have both a sound and an afflicted mind, Fyodor? We have only one mind, after all.”

“Listen, my friend,” he began. “An afflicted mind may have certain behavioral functions that are either impaired or irrational. These behavioral patterns will likely cause a person to exhibit impaired or irrational responses to stimuli. However, not all of the behavioral patterns of that individual will be impaired or irrational, per se. We must therefore create new methods to better illustrate the capacity of an individual to respond rationally as opposed to simply concluding that an individual's capacity for rational response is impaired due to a perceived abnormality. We are all capable of responding irrationally, I'm afraid.”

“That's somewhat comforting,” Alejandro told him. However, he appeared uneasy.

“What's wrong?” Fyodor asked.

“Nothing.”

* * *

Alexander Poplin was sitting in his chair in the waiting room when Alejandro arrived to the hospital ward. He was wearing his hospital gown with his pajamas underneath, a somewhat hard expres-

sion on his face. He glared straight ahead of him into the two-way mirror, where security was watching. Alejandro thought this resembled an interrogation chamber in a police station. He pitied his friend and mentor, wondering what he'd done to deserve his confinement there.

Alejandro was shown inside and immediately after, Alexander Poplin greeted him with a sigh of relief, a smile, and a robust handshake. Alexander sat back down, his guard down this time, obviously more at ease.

“What are you doing here, Alex?”

“I’m afraid,” he began to say, but then trailed off—fidgeting, scratching his bald spot, somewhat embarrassed, having trouble finishing what he wanted to say to Alejandro.

“... I’m afraid I’m ill. Alejandro, I have been ill for a long, long time. I even kept it from Contessa,” he confessed.

“But why keep it secret? You know she loves you dearly. Did you think that she would be embarrassed by you?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking. I thought I was doing my best to manage this horrible disease. You know, I

haven’t been hospitalized since Contessa was born.”

He paused for a few seconds before he spoke again.

“It must have been pride that kept me from saying something, Alejandro. I felt like there were almost two sides to me, at war with each other. I kept it under wraps for years and years, until those last few nights when I couldn’t sleep. They said I was a raving lunatic, making absurd claims that the shadows were moving and that letters were jumping off the pages of whatever books were within view ... then I started dancing wildly around the room. Contessa saw me. Obviously, she was in shock... and in tears. I asked her not to cry, but it was useless.”

“Forgive my bluntness, Alex,” Alejandro began, softly prodding with the delicate question he had been meaning to ask. “But why are you telling me all this? Our friendship has never taken an interest in such deeply personal matters.”

“The truth,” he started saying—and Alejandro detected the sincerity in his tone—“is that Contessa and I have always been deeply fond of you. Contessa has only recently met you but thinks highly of you, nevertheless.”

Alexander paused a moment to smile and establish eye contact once more. He then continued.

“I, of course, have known you for awhile now, and I value your friendship as if you are family. I trust you, Alejandro. There is not a bad bone in your body.”

Alejandro swallowed hard, then collected himself.

“Are they giving you medication?” Alejandro asked.

“Yes, they are. The drugs dull the symptoms a little. I’ve been taking medication for years now, but they’ve given me a stronger dose to work faster in my system, to stabilize me sooner.”

“Once you get better, you’ll be yourself again. You’ll see, and Contessa will see that, too.”

“I just don’t want to worry her.”

“Maybe she can help keep an eye on you. That may help.”

Alexander Poplin gave his friend a quick glance and nodded his head. “I suppose,” he said.

Alexander’s hand passed over his forehead, rubbing it lightly. He seemed anxious.

“But do you know what I mean? It’s like there’s this stranger deep inside of you, sharing space in your mind, whispering, sabotaging everything—and if he gains a foothold, it could mean the end of everything you hold dear. Surrender an inch, and he takes half an inch more than you are willing to give him. It’s a constant struggle. Can you imagine what this feels like?”

Alejandro took a sideways glance at him, caught off-guard by the question.

“More than you think,” he confessed.