

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Dirty Whirlwind**

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

JEANETTE MIRLL

EDMOND OKLAHOMA

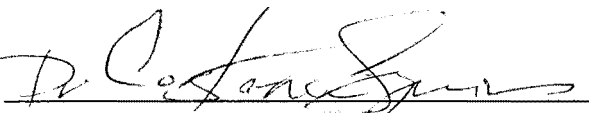
2013

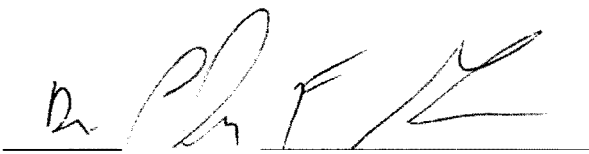
**Dirty Whirlwind**

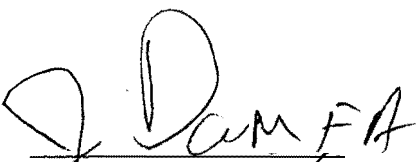
A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

4-18-2013

By   
Dr. Constance Squires

  
Dr. Christopher Givan

  
Mr. James Daro

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wonderful professors for their advice and encouragement. I will remember this time for the rest of my life. I am eternally grateful to UCO for providing me with opportunities to meet amazing people, Denis Johnson and Alan Smith, among so many others. I would also like to express my gratitude toward my family and friends for their understanding and support. Lastly, thanks to Doug Walker, for giving me permission to quote his lyrics.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THESIS .....	v
<i>DIRTY WHIRLWIND</i> .....	1
STINKY JERKFACE BOBBY O'SHEA .....	2
ZELDATHON .....	17
BECOMING .....	22
RACHMANINOFF, MINE .....	42
SOLD .....	62
LIVING IN THE MEMORY BANK .....	76
DIRTY WHIRLWIND .....	89
NEW MEXICO MORNING .....	105
A NUN WALKS INTO A BAR .....	129
AT THE PUB IN TEN POINTS .....	135
ZOOS HAVE RULES FOR A REASON .....	153
LEPIDOPTEROSIS .....	157

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Jeanette Mirll

TITLE: Dirty Whirlwind

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires

PAGES: 172

My thesis is a collection of short stories. Most were written in workshop with the members of my committee, and the others I wrote for the purpose of inclusion in this thesis. The principal statement I wish to convey through this collection is that of the inherent complexity and incomprehensibility of life. Human experience is a seemingly random conglomeration of the real and the fantastical, the magical and the mundane, and above all, life is persistent and unstoppable. Each independent story in this collection presents a different, particular example of such life, and the individual's struggle to make sense of his or her personal situation. It is my hope that the metaphor contained within the titular story explains and encapsulates what it is I mean to say.

The stories vary in order to better present the main focus of each tale. Most of the included works are told from a first person narrator's point of view. Other pieces, such as *Lepidopterosis* and *New Mexico Morning*, possess a close third person voice. My influences for these stories are Ernest Hemingway, Stephen King, Robert Haas, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

*Dirty Whirlwind*

Stinky Jerkface Bobby O'Shea

It's a really nice day for digging, which is not so usual for this early part of summer. The sun's out, and it's warm, but the air is cold, so cold I can see my breath fogging out from my nostrils like that bull in the Bugs Bunny cartoon. The one where he should have made the left turn at Albuquerque but got to the bull fight instead? I've seen that one a hundred times. I watch Looney Tunes every Saturday. Everybody at school says only little kids watch cartoons, so I guess I'm too old, since I'm almost ten now. I don't care, though, because I think they're funny, and if it's funny I'm having fun, and if I'm having fun, what's wrong with that? I have to watch them without sound, because otherwise Mom'll wake up, but they're funnier that way, so I don't mind.

I like the wooden handle on this shovel. It's rough, it's scratchy, it's giving me splinters, but I'd rather dig like this than with gloves on. I've never liked gloves. They pinch. I've never liked socks either. For the same reason, I guess. Besides, if my feet weren't bare I couldn't feel the dirt, all soft and grainy, pushing up between my toes. It's a good feeling. I think I should've been an earthworm, maybe.

I'm probably not supposed to be digging in the yard. But it's only the backyard. It isn't like I'm destroying the grass, since it's mostly just dirt back here. Plus, there's a big tall fence, made of some kind of metal, and nobody ever comes here but me. Sometimes Julie, but she's not here now.

She came over last week, and I was surprised, because Mom had said we couldn't have Julie babysit me again until the next time Mom got paid. I asked Julie why she had come over, and she told me, "I'll be gone until August."

I've never spent a whole summer without Julie, not since I was born, even though sometimes she can only watch me once or twice a week, depending on how many hours Mom's getting at the Stop and Go. So I was definitely kind of worried about Julie being gone for that whole long time.

Julie sat on the ground, and crossed her legs, and crossed her arms, and bent halfway over. I wish I could do that, but I can't even somersault. Julie can do everything, even cartwheels. "Dad's sending me to camp," she said, and her voice was all deep and scratchy, like she needed to clear her throat or something. Julie picked up a little stone and threw it, pretty hard, actually. It skipped across the ground, leaving divots in the dirt.

"Camp?" I remember I got all excited. I feel kind of bad about that, though, because she really was angry, I think, and I didn't notice it then. Still. Camp is a really cool gift. I would've liked to go, mostly because I've never been anywhere, really, but also because I've never gotten a present like that ever. And maybe also a little bit because I've never had a Dad ever either, and I think if I had one I would've liked getting presents from him.

But Julie was kind of angry about it. "Swim camp," she said, all snarly. "I don't even like to swim. It does all kinds of crap to my hair." She twisted a strand around her finger and tugged a little. I really like her hair. It's long and crinkly



and the same color coffee is before you mix in cream and sugar. Mine's crinkly, too, but it's the same color as the dirt around here, this nasty rusty red. I wish my hair was dark, like Julie's and my mom's. Then Julie said, "Mom bought me a computer for Christmas," and then she cried a little.

I still don't understand it, because Julie never explained, and then the next day she left for camp. Even if she was here, she couldn't watch me until after the first of the month, once Mom gets paid. "We don't take charity," that's our motto. I should figure out how to say it in Latin, and that way it can be real, like something that could be carved in stone or onto a family crest. We don't have a crest, I don't think. Maybe my father's family does. I don't know.

I hope I'll find some arrowheads. There used to be Indians that lived here, but not anymore. Now it's mostly black people, like Julie. She's really pretty. I wish I looked like her and my mom. Then, I'd be smooth caramel chocolate, and not blotchy and pink. Mom says I'm her Strawberry Baby, and she says she likes me just the way I am. But she's my mom, so she has to say that. Maybe I'll find something better than arrowheads. Billy O'Shea, from down the street, he found a dinosaur bone once. It looked like a chicken leg, though, so Billy O'Shea is a big fat liar, I think.

The hole's getting pretty deep now. I bet if I sit down in it, I'll be in shadow. I'm kind of tired, anyway, so that sounds like a good idea to me. If I tuck up my knees a little, I can just fit in the circle I've made. I should make the hole longer, when I get back up, so there'll be enough room for my feet if I want

to sit back down. It's sort of cold now, since I'm in shadow like I thought I'd be, but I like it.

When I die, I hope I freeze. You get cold, really, really cold, and then you get warm and comfortable and happy and sleepy, and that sounds good to me. It could always be worse. Like drowning. It hurts, and the world goes black, and you're totally alone. I'd hate to drown.

I wonder if maybe I'll find a gnome tunnel down here while I'm digging. That would be fun. I think I'll find a gnome. The dirt on one wall starts crumbling into the hole, where something is burrowing through. A little brown face pops out, with a potato nose and big sharp teeth like a gopher.

"Hello, Gnome!" I wave at him, and he pulls back into the hole a little. I didn't mean to scare him, so I say, "I'm sorry," in my very best polite voice. I sit really still, and he comes back out. "How are you today, Gnome?"

Normally, I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, but that's only people strangers. I can talk to bird strangers and squirrel strangers, so I don't think Mom would mind me talking to a gnome stranger. I like the word stranger. It makes your mouth roll funny when you say it. It's the same reason why my favorite color is purple, so I can say "purple" pretty often. I like the words that make your mouth move funny. They seem more special than normal words.

The gnome replies to me, but even though it isn't English, I can understand him. He's saying, "Hello to you, Mikaela," in his guinea pig chirp. He sounds like Cindy. Cindy's the fourth grade class guinea pig. I was the only

person she would let pet her, out of the whole entire class. She liked me, and I like her, a lot better than anybody else at school, mostly because she's nice and they're all awful. I wish Miss Linda would have let me take Cindy home over the summer. I probably won't get to see her next year, because then I'll be in Miss Ida's class. I'm not sure I want to leave Miss Linda's class. Miss Ida is kind of scary. She's got fluffy gray hair and big square glasses, and she walks with a dark, shiny cane that's all gnarly because it used to be a tree branch. I guess it's not really Miss Ida that's scary. It's that cane. I would definitely think she was a wicked witch, maybe, if witches were real.

I know that gnomes probably aren't real either, but people thought the giant squid was a myth, until they found it. Deep sea squid can grow so big that I bet a person could fit inside one of their tentacle rings. Kind of the same way that I'm fitting inside this hole. Ooh, that's pretty cool. I'm sitting inside a squid ring.

I'm at the bottom of the ocean. I'd be worried about drowning, I think, except I can breathe because I've got a magic air bubble around my head, like Link has, floating back up from Hyrule when it's getting flooded. That's a fun game, Wind Waker. I got it for Christmas a couple years ago, right after Mom got her last bonus from the Purina factory place, before they had to let her go, she said. Playing Wind Waker is getting kind of boring, though, since now I know exactly how to beat everything, and especially since mostly you're sailing all the time. I wish Mom could get me another game, but she says it's tight right now. She's said that for the last couple years. When Christmas comes, I get an orange

from Santa in my stocking and something good from Mom. Last year it was a pair of sneakers with purple laces. I was pretty happy. Like I said, I like purple.

It's really dark down here at the bottom of the ocean, but I can see because I've got eyes with night vision and lantern lights. And also I'm not getting eaten by the squid, because he is my friend, and we're exploring together. *Look over there*, he says to me with a wave of his tentacles. He's pointing at a group of ugly fish that have lights on them, bright glowing green spots that make a dotted line from the tip of their tail fin all the way up their head. They're my favorite kind of fish. I like to think that somebody took a highlighter and decorated them, so that even though they're ugly they're pretty.

There are giant jellyfish too, like pink electric clouds. The squid likes them. He's grabbing them with his tentacles, and with a snap-snap from his beak, there they go, like bubble gum bursting. I don't like jellyfish at all, and I definitely wouldn't want to eat them. So even though the squid offers me some jellyfish, *Here, have some*, I say, very politely, "No thank you, Squid."

He reaches out to take up another jellyfish, and suddenly there's a giant whale. Not just giant, but the biggest, most colossal whale anybody has ever seen. The squid is worried, and I'm worried too, because I know that whales like to eat squid. But then, right as the whale opens his mouth, the squid swims away. We're speeding underwater like a torpedo, and the whale is left far, far behind, and I can even feel a whoosh next to my right arm, like I'm sitting in a rocket ship, taking off for the moon.

Oh, it's not a rocket ship. It's stupid Billy O'Shea, taking my shovel.

"Stop," I say. "That's mine." I grab onto the flat part of the shovel and I hold it tight, so even though he's pulling on the handle he can't get it away from me. For a second I worry that holding the shovel might cut my hands, but he's only barely tugging. He's just trying to annoy me, I think. Billy O'Shea is a jerkface.

He laughs, and his evil green eyes are all squinty. He's really ugly. He's got the same color hair as me, except his skin is way, way whiter, and covered in all these speckly red freckles that look like ant bites.

"Whatcha need it for?" He won't stop tugging the handle, and it's kind of hurting my hands to keep on holding it. Usually I try to be polite, but I think I should only have to be polite when people are polite to me first, and Billy O'Shea is the rudest boy I ever knew in my whole entire life.

"Go away," I say. "I'm busy."

"Busy sitting in a hole," he says. He stops pulling at the shovel, and it thunks back into the ground right by my foot.

"You almost hit my toes," I say.

"Oh," he says. "Sorry."

He swings down to the ground and lets his feet dangle into the hole, right in front of my face. He's wearing stinky old sneakers that are boring black and white, and the left one has a big hole where his toe is poking through. "So whatcha doing?" he asks.

"Why are you in my yard?" I shove at his feet, and he laughs.

"The gate was open." He laughs again and slides down into the hole, right next to me, with his butt by my feet and the shovel sticking up between his legs.

"You're making me squished," I say, and I shove at him.

"Sorry," he says. He stands up and reaches for the handle of the shovel.

"The hole should be bigger." His face goes all stony except for the corners of his mouth where there's a smile trying to twitch out, and his voice goes all deep, and he says, "I'll... make it so."

I hate it when he makes jokes like that. I don't get it, but he expects me to clap for him or something. So when I just keep staring at him, and he finally understands that I don't understand his stupid joke, he says, "Oh, come on. Make it so?"

"Um."

"No way," he says. "Captain Picard?"

"Get out of my backyard," I say, and I shove his stupid legs.

He falls into the big pile of dirt that used to be in the hole, and he flails a little, and he drops the shovel. It lands flat on the ground, bounces twice, and then stops a couple of feet away. For a second, I'm quiet, and he's quiet too, and the whole world is quiet around us.

Finally he turns and starts to walk away. "Fine," he says. "It's boring back here anyway."

"Ha," I say. "Shows what you know."

He stops, right as he's passing over the shovel, and he looks back at me. I guess I said something that actually meant something, even though I totally didn't mean to say anything, I don't think.

"How long have you been digging?" he asks.

"I don't know."

He picks up the shovel. "You want me to dig?" he asks.

"Whatever," I say, only I really want him to go away. It's like Cindy.

When it was just me by her cage, she was fine, but whenever other people came over, she would dive into her round, plastic, pink guinea pig house and stay put until they were gone. The gnome won't come back if stupid Billy O'Shea is here.

He hops down into the hole and shovels at the wall. He's better at digging than I am. No, he's not better, he's just quicker. I was digging just to pass the time, I think. He's digging to dig.

"So," he says, and the shovel just keeps moving dirt up out of the hole.

"So," I say.

"Why are you digging a hole?" he asks.

"Why not?" I say. "Besides, I'm not digging it, you're digging it."

He stops, and looks at the shovel. "Huh," he says. He puts down the shovel and looks at me. "If there's no reason, then."

And I understand what he means, I think. That you should only do things if you have a reason for them. But I did have a reason, really, so I take up the shovel and I start to dig again.

"Whatcha doing?" he asks. He sits down on the edge of the hole and watches.

"Digging," I say. Billy O'Shea is an idiot, sometimes.

"Yeah, but what for?" he says, and it sounds like he thinks I'm an idiot, when it is definitely the other way around.

It makes me kind of angry, so before I can think about what I'm saying, I tell him, "I'm finding the gnome."

"What?" he asks, but I've figured out what I did, so my mouth is puckered up tight, and he's not getting another word out of me. He'll only make fun, and I know it. Like in third grade, he told everybody I was crazy, but I'm not.

What happened was, I was really happy because it was spring, and when they let us out for recess, I went to sit by the flowers. And I started to think about how maybe there were fairies in there, because fairies like flowers, and they have big pretty butterfly wings, so they could be camouflaged if they wanted to be. Then, there was a fairy, and she had golden wings with orange spots, and she waved at me.

"Hello," I said, and I started to talk to her. The fairy didn't say anything back, though, because fairies don't talk. Like how Tinkerbell never talks. I really didn't want to meet a fairy like Tinkerbell, though. I hate her, mostly because she tried to kill Wendy. That's the kind of thing I can't really forgive, even though I know we're supposed to forgive everybody. In second grade, when Marnie



Goodine broke my favorite hair band, and I got into a fight and broke her nose a little, Mom was really disappointed. She said, "If I can forgive Michael, you can forgive anybody." I think she meant my father, but I don't know. She doesn't ever really talk about him, other than when she gets really mad or sad and says something by accident.

But when Billy O'Shea came over, he scared the fairy away, and then he told everybody at school that I was crazy because I was talking to myself. Third grade was a very bad year.

So even though he keeps saying, "Come on, tell me what you said," I'm not answering him. I don't care if I ever say another word to dumb old Billy O'Shea.

"And you didn't find a dinosaur bone, either," I say. I sigh, because I just spoke to him and I didn't mean to, not at all.

His face goes all blank, but somehow I can tell he's kind of angry. For half a second I feel kind of bad, even though I don't know why I should. And then he says, "It was a Compsognathus leg, and it was petrified into a fossil."

"It smelled like KFC," I say.

"You're dumb," he says. He stands up, and he starts to walk away again. He needs to leave anyway. This is my backyard, and so that kind of means he's trespassing. And even though I know if I don't keep my big mouth shut, he'll probably come back again, I can't let him get away with saying that.

"I'm not dumb," I say. "You found an old stinky bone, and that's all."

He comes back and sits down again. This time, he's staring at me, with a kind of expression that I don't understand at all. His eyes aren't evil now, they're just kind of flat, but with a sparkle deep inside like an emerald.

"Dinosaurs live down here," he said. "Real ones, still alive."

I'm not believing him, but I think it would be fun if it were true, so I'm listening to him. He says, "That's why it smelled like meat. Because the bone I found was from a real dinosaur."

"Ew," I say, and even though I'm not meaning to do it, my whole face scrunches up. "So now I think maybe you ate a dinosaur, and I think that's totally gross, Billy O'Shea."

"Not me," he says. "I was over by the creek, looking for turtle eggs. That's when I found them eating it."

"Found who?" I ask. I put down the shovel, and I sit on the edge of the hole, across from him. He smiles, really wide, to where his mouth looks like a triangle, and he leans in, and he starts to talk all dramatically.

"So there I was, on the banks of Soldier Creek. Not another person for miles around. All I had with me was a slingshot, and a pocket full of rocks. Then, suddenly, the earth crumbled beneath me, and I fell, down, spinning around and around, until I finally landed in the bottom of a deep, dark hole. It was deeper than this hole even. I looked up and I couldn't see the sky. That's when I heard them."

"Heard who?" I ask.

“The dinosaurs,” he says. Then he leans backward. I really want him to keep telling me about what happened, because he really can’t stop before it’s even started. It would be totally unfair. But that’s just what he does. He picks up a stone and starts tossing it into the air, catching it in the opposite hand each time as it comes back down. I wait for him to keep talking, but he stays quiet, and all I can hear is a quiet little thwup each time the rock hits his palm.

“So then what happened?” I say. He catches the rock and stares at me. I give him a really nice smile, and I tell him, “I just want to know what happened with the dinosaurs.”

“Nah,” he says as he chucks the stone across the lawn. It lands at the base of the tree in the corner. “You don’t want to hear this.”

“I do,” I said. I don’t know why I do it, but I take up my own rock and chuck it after his. He watches it bounce across the yard, and then he laughs.

“It’s not a girl story,” he says. “It’s scary and gross.”

That kind of made me mad. So I said, “I can handle scary-gross. You just try me, Billy O’Shea.”

“What if I said I caught it and ate it?”

So then I stop and think a little, because it feels like he’s trying to trick me. I say, “But you said you didn’t eat it.”

“What if I lied?” He looks like a goblin, grinning over at me, and I think that he wasn’t lying then, and maybe he’s lying now because he just wants to gross me out. I think I have to do something.

“That’s nothing,” I say, and I kind of wave my hand a little. “I ate jellyfish earlier.”

His head jumps back a little. “No you didn’t.”

“I did,” I say. “I went with a squid down to the bottom of the ocean.”

His mouth is doing that funny twitchy thing again, and he says, “How? Did you grow gills?” I tell him about the magic bubble, and the jellyfish, and the whale, and his eyes get all wide. I think maybe he’s going to say something about the whale, because that part, I told it all exciting, but instead, he says, “You know Zelda?”

“Wind Waker,” I say.

For a second, he stares at me. He’s grinning again, but not in a goblin way. This time, I don’t know why, but it’s kind of, sort of, maybe, nice? Which is really a different kind of expression for Billy O’Shea.

“So, are you gonna let me play it?” he asks, finally.

I don’t really want to, because no one but me and Mom ever goes inside our house. But since he’s being polite, I have to be polite back, I think. “I guess,” I say. I look down at the hole past my feet dangling in. The hole looks smaller than it used to, and suddenly I kind of feel sad, a little. I remember the gnome, and the squid, but suddenly it’s all kind of blurry, not as clear and good as I saw it earlier. I look over at Billy O’Shea, and I’m kind of sad, but I’m not going to cry. He’d only make fun, I bet.

“It was KFC,” he says, and he smiles with only the side of his mouth turned up, and his eyes looking down at the ground, and his hands in his pockets.

We sit quiet and look at each other, and I think I understand something, even though I don’t quite know what it is. From the expression on his face, Billy O’Shea is thinking the same kind of thing, I think.

“Well,” he says, walking up to my house. “Let’s go play Zelda.”

I follow him. It looks like now I’m going to be friends with stinky jerkface Bobby O’Shea, and I feel okay about this.

Zeldathon

*DAWN OF THE FIRST DAY...*

*12 p.m.*

I've signed up for the tournament and given them my entry fee. I've played through the Zelda games I own, Ocarina of Time once and Majora's Mask twice. I've stocked up on Mountain Dew and choco-cherry oatmeal bars. I am prepared. The guy to my right's brought a box of doughnuts and a case of Red Bull, but he's also got a huge, fluffy pillow. It'll be too much for him. He'll be asleep by ten, tops. With thirty people up against me, you'd think one of them would stand a chance, but nah. None of these guys look like they can handle a gaming marathon. That twitchy kid over by the windows wrapping the controller cord around his arm? I give him twenty minutes before he gets frustrated and ragequits. Yeah, this is just for fun. But the first person to beat the game wins fifty bucks. I'm doing this. Let the Great Wind Waker Race begin!

*12:15 p.m.*

We're finally past the opening credits and I'm beginning the actual game. Full of confidence, but really wish I wasn't going in blind. Zelda games can be complex. Further details as events warrant.

*2 p.m.*

I'm in the Forsaken Fortress. This place is a maze, hallways circling around to nowhere, entire rooms that don't matter, Moblins stalking all over the place just

aching to toss me into a dungeon cell, but I've got this. I've played the other games enough. I know how the system works. I'm trying to concentrate, but it's getting loud around here. A couple of newbie gamers are stuck on the pirate ship. They can't figure out that pesky rope-swinging trick. I did it on the first try, but I'm not bragging. Tensions are getting high. Luckily I am immune.

*7:15 p.m.*

I am not immune. Mandatory half hour break for everybody. Some kid started screaming about having to pee. I'm surrounded by amateurs. I've decided I hate the guy to my left more than I hate the guy to my right. Who the hell brings spaghetti and meatballs to a gaming tournament? And what kind of person eats spaghetti and meatballs with a spork?

*7:45 p.m.*

Giant centipede at Dragon Roost. Boss battle taking longer than expected. Resisting urge to cuss. Succeeding through sheer will and lax definition of the word "cuss." Stupid effing grappling hook. Grab onto the dragon's stupid effing tail!

*9 p.m.*

Big damn centipede finally defeated. Kept celebrations to a minimum: only one casualty.

*9:30 p.m.*

Guy beside me drooling on the pillow. Notice, it ain't quite ten. Can I call 'em or what? Took me less than half an hour to figure out my way through Forest

Haven and the Forbidden Woods. Have clearly pulled ahead in ranks. Driven. Focused. Maybe obsessed. Either way. I. GOT. THIS.

*DAWN OF THE SECOND DAY...*

*2 a.m.*

Still awake. Reestablishing Sages in Temples. Hate Makar. Hate him and his little tik-tik-tik walk. Little bastard looks like a turnip. Hate turnips.

*5 a.m.*

Power in Master Sword reawakened. So is guy next to me. He's good, dammit. Real good. No wonder he felt confident enough to sleep. He's catching up. But that doesn't matter. I am now the only gamer with working sword. Victory nigh.

*5:05 a.m.*

Dreams of victory thwarted. Must find the fucking charts to find the fucking shards of the Triforce of fucking Courage. Threatened with penalty for unsportsmanlike language.

*7:10 a.m.*

Sailing.

*9:10 a.m.*

Sailing.

*11:10 a.m.*

Fucking sailing. I have to pee.



*1 p.m.*

Tired of oatmeal bars. Stole doughnut from guy next to me. Jelly filled.

Raspberry. Good.

*1:30 p.m.*

Fifteen minute hiatus for all. Pilfered doughnut discovered missing, followed by guy next to me threatening to initiate unexpected but admittedly deserved fistfight. Gave guy oatmeal bar and directions to the Ghost Ship. All is forgiven.

*12:15 p.m.*

No sleep for over 24 hours. Exhausted. Losing focus. Still collecting the goddamn fucking piece of shit shards.

*DAWN OF THE FINAL DAY...*

*1 a.m.*

Need sleep. Fingers twitchy. I have to ignore it. Have to fight through it. Must rescue Princess Zelda. Guy to my left, left. Left his mess behind too. Jerk. Now me and guy to my right are neck and neck. He's caught up. Wonder if stabbing his neck with the other guy's abandoned spaghetti spork would be worth it.

*2 a.m.*

Japanese games can be really fucked up. Evil puppets. Minor sleep-deprived freak out. Guy next to me laughed. Ten minute penalty for bitch-slapping.



## Becoming

I am not unique. I hold no pretensions. I know very well that I am blank, white, boring. Just like the rest of us. We are all the same, waiting and hoping that someone will see us, realize we have potential, take us home and change us. Even my dimensions are boring: eight by eight. Too small to be taken seriously, too big to be adorable and kitschy, far too square. The great ones are never equal in length and height. The great ones are longer than they are tall, or taller than they are long, because what they eventually become deserves a difference in perspective.

No one can be great in a square.

We know it. The store knows it. That is why we, the group that might never become, hang in the corner in the back, and the big rectangles have their own aisle right in the middle of the store. We Not Greats can see them from back here. We can see them, those Will Become Greats, disappear from the shelves, replenished more often than we Not Greats even get noticed.

The only good thing about being a Not Great, sequestered in this back corner of the store, is that we get taken when someone specifically wants us. People walk to us with purpose. They even stop the workers and ask where we are. It makes us happy. It means someone has a specific idea of what he wants us to become. I find it nice to have that stability. The Will Become Greats have no idea. They might be a landscape, or a portrait, or an abstract, or something new

entirely. The people that buy the Will Become Greats tend to hope for inspiration. When it comes to us Not Greats, though, people approach us with purpose. They want the squares because they have something specific in mind that simply will not work on a rectangle.

So I am willing to wait.

There is one column of us, made of three sections, each five deep, hanging in this back corner. I am the first in the second group, which is about four feet from the floor. One would think I am in a good position to be chosen for becoming, but the last two who have come to purchase a Not Great have chosen from the top row. The top row is about five and a half feet from the floor. That must have something to do with it.

I have been here for a long time, waiting.

We whisper to each other to keep the world from becoming boring. The Not Great on the back of the lowest row has been here the longest, and he tells us stories of the other squares that have become. I suspect he makes these stories up, but cannot be entirely sure. This is because I have seen a person bring in one of us who had become. The person was looking for the same shape, and came directly over to us. The person held out the Not Great toward us, judging our dimensions, and I could see clearly that the Not Great had become. He was a tree, stretching to the four corners, leaves disappearing over the upper edges, roots falling down from the bottom. He was no masterpiece, but he was complete.

The stories of fulfilled Not Greats bring us hope at the end of each day. They buoy us up after constant rejection wears us down. Eventually, and we understand this as a universal truth, each one of us will be chosen to become.

Perhaps today will be the day. A man in his twenties, wearing jeans with holes in the knees, has entered the store, and he has walked past the Will Be Greats. He is coming directly toward us. I can feel the excitement flow from the other fourteen, and it is contagious. I am hopeful.

He stops in front of us. He looks down at the price stickers. He frowns.

Panic is contagious also.

The man reaches into his back pocket and removes his wallet. He opens it and counts the green bills within. He looks back at my sticker. He is debating. Please, I beg him, please help me to become. All around me I hear the chorus of the other Not Greats. Please let us become. It is the same each time, always, and although we know we cannot all be chosen, still we cry out in the hope that the man will recognize our potential.

He folds his wallet shut and replaces it in his pocket. He calls to the woman standing at the register. "Are these the cheapest you have?" She nods, and he turns back to us. With a shrug so slight it is almost imperceptible, he reaches out and takes me in his hand.

As I slide off the rack, I cheer. I am not alone in cheering. The other Not Greats, despite not having been chosen, are glad that one of us will soon become. It is what we all want for each other, and we are glad to see it happen. Farewell, I

say to them. Farewell, they reply.

The man carries me through the aisle of the Will Become Greats toward the register, and I call out to them. Farewell, I say. They say nothing in return.

The man places me on the counter and retrieves his wallet. I can scarcely contain my joy. The magazine the clerk is reading notices my happiness and wishes me well. I thank her for her courtesy. I have never met a magazine before, but if they are all as polite as this one, I hope to meet more.

Money changes hands, and the woman puts me in a sack. It is a transparent brown plastic, with stripes on the outside, and it is not very talkative. It occurs to me that the sacks must have a sad life. Even though we are at first ignored, we Not Greats are cared for eventually. The sack will not have that experience.

The man hangs the sack from the handlebars of a blue bicycle. Hello, the bicycle says.

Hello, I say to him.

The man steps astride the bicycle and puts his feet on the pedals. Moving away from the curb, the bicycle speaks in rapid bursts. Nice-to-meet-you-sorry-can't-talk-gotta-work-okay-bye.

I do not mind not talking. I have never seen the world before. This place is frightening. There is much more movement than there was in the store. The cars that zip by are rude, loud, yelling at each other and not very intelligent. This road is mine, shouts a white Jeep. This road is mine, retorts a brown Civic. This

road is MINE, screams a yellow taxicab as it screeches past them both.

Mine, puffs the bicycle, but it is a quiet word, and even I can barely hear him.

The man turns the bicycle around a corner, and we nearly crash into a bus that changes lanes without signaling.

Hey, watch it, the bus shouts. You think I can make it to Grand Central without having to scrape you off my underside?

The bicycle is apologetic, and the bus roars off in a puff of black exhaust. The second the bus is gone, the bicycle calls out after it with a word I have never heard before.

I do not like this place. I do not want to be here. I feel very vulnerable, swinging in the air from the handlebars. I know that if the sack breaks, I will fall to the street and be destroyed. These cars will not stop for me.

This thought terrifies me, and I cry aloud. I do not want to be destroyed. I would much rather have stayed in the second row of the back corner.

Then the sack speaks. We will be fine, she tells me.

I say, Will we?

Yes, she promises. I am strong. I will not break. You will not fall.

The confidence in her voice makes me calmer. Although I am still swinging, the road is still whizzing past me, and the cars are still shouting and jostling and demanding control, I feel reassured.

The bicycle turns off the main road and into an alleyway. It is quieter here,

but much bumpier. I am jostled about, and this new development makes both the sack and me uncomfortable. The bicycle spits out a word each time he hits a pothole. The first is the same as it shouted after the bus, but the next several words are all different. I have never heard these sounds before, and wonder if they are even really words.

The sack is offended. I ask her why.

Those are impolite words, she replies.

Impolite words? I repeat.

Yes, she says. They are all the same rude word, even though they are not the same language.

Language? I ask.

Yes, she says. Her voice takes on a tone of instruction, and I cannot decide whether or not I should take offense. She continues. People do not all speak the same words, she explains. They have several words for the same thing. Those things the bicycle is saying are all the same thing, but they are in English. Farsi. Spanish.

The bicycle yells out another word.

Russian, the sack says.

I never knew there were so many languages, I tell her.

Of course not, she says kindly. You have never left your place in the store, whereas I have been used, recycled, reused. I have heard many tongues. I have learned many things. And I do not appreciate those words, sir! She shouts at the



bicycle.

The bicycle apologizes.

The man stops pedaling and puts both feet on the ground. He opens a door leading into a building, and we — me, the sack, and the bicycle — are all picked up and hoisted to his shoulder. The man starts to climb a staircase.

Although this is not the same as the road, I am swaying, and again I am frightened. I will not be destroyed if I fall, but I will bounce down the steps. I will scuff. I will be marred. The man might not want to help me become, if I am not smooth and white as I should be.

I am slipping, says the sack.

She is slipping, says the bicycle.

We are slipping, I say.

Fear overcomes me, and helplessness. There is nothing I can do. Please, I beg the man, notice we are slipping. Save us from falling.

Save us, says the sack. I do not want to rip. I do not want to be thrown away. I do not want to be forgotten.

I realize that my worries are not as strong as hers, or as valid. Even if I am disfigured, the man will still help me become. At the store, he was cautious about paying a large amount, which means he will make do no matter what happens with me. He would not replace me that quickly. I will not be discarded if I am hurt, but the sack will be. I try to comfort her, saying I will remember her. She thanks me, although I can tell she does not quite believe me.

The sack and I cling to each other as she slips even further down the handlebar. Suddenly she is free. She is no longer hanging from the handlebars. She is falling to the ground, and I am falling with her. I brace myself, knowing that my sides will smash into the steps, my corners will bend, and each of my sides will feel the same pain.

Suddenly I am stopped. I have not hit the ground. The sack cries out in discomfort and surprise. The man has grabbed her and saved us from crashing, and although she is stretching, she is not torn. He puts his hand through her handles before continuing up the steps.

We are safe, I say. I realize as I hear it that it is a ridiculous thing to say, but I cannot contain my relief.

For now, the sack says. I can tell she is relieved as well, but she is sad.

I know why she is sad, and I am sad for her.

The man stops climbing and opens a door. We go into a hallway, brown and dim. We pass by several doors, each with dark golden numbers nailed to them, until we reach 411. The man stops and sets the bicycle down. He reaches into his pocket and removes a set of keys. They cheer, all five of them, as loudly as they can. I try to say something to them, but they cannot hear me. The man sorts through them, selects one, and inserts it into the lock. As the man replaces them into his pocket, they groan and fall silent. I am glad I am not one of them; it must be awful to spend the majority of life hidden in the darkness of pockets and purses. The man opens the door and we enter the apartment.

I have had no previous experience in this area, so I can only suppose that this room is nice. It is clean. It is perhaps ten feet long and five feet wide. There are no windows, and no doors except the one we used to enter. The only things inside are a small dresser beside a green couch against one wall, which holds a silent, stoic calendar, and a brown chair next to an easel.

The man puts the bicycle down beside the door, and my attention falls to the easel. Please, I say, put me there. That is where I will become. Once I am there, I am one step closer to becoming.

Instead the man puts the sack and me onto the couch. He walks to the dresser and opens the top drawer. I am growing impatient, but I am not afraid. He will not forget me. He will put me on the easel. I will become.

The man pulls a small wooden box from the dresser drawer. It says nothing. Perhaps it does not notice me, here on the couch. The man lifts the lid and looks at the contents. He says one of the words the bicycle had used on the potholes. The sack sighs but does not complain again.

“This is fine,” the man says, although I can tell he does not believe himself. He closes the box and tucks it under his arm. He walks over to the couch. A thrill of excitement passes through me as he picks up the sack. He moves to the easel and sits down. I cannot stop my own refrain.

I will become.

I will become.

I. Will. Become.

The man takes me from the sack. Although I am eager and happy, I know the sack is worried and sad. You will be fine, I tell her.

Maybe, she replies.

The man lets the sack fall to the floor beneath the easel's legs, and I can hear her sadness. I wish I could help her. I can do nothing. And this makes me feel guilty for my joy as the man sets me upon the easel. He stares at me for a minute. I realize he is deciding what to make me become. Suddenly I am anxious.

Hello, I say to the easel.

With a low, sad voice, the easel replies, Hello.

I wonder why she is sad. I worry she is disappointed in having to help me. I am insignificant, and I know it. I tell her, I hope we will be friends.

She sighs and says, We will become accustomed to each other. We always do. And I will miss you, as I always do.

At first I do not know what she means. But then I realize there are no others here who have become. I ask her, Am I alone?

Yes, she says. You always are.

The man nods. He has decided what I will become. He opens the box. He crosses one leg over the other, and puts the box in his lap. He gets a brush, and then puts blue on it. It is an almost grey, smoggy blue, the same color the sky was as we traveled from the store to this apartment. I brace myself as he angles the brush toward me. I have no idea how this will feel.

When the brush touches me, I almost do not feel it at all. The bristles hover above me. I can sense the man's hesitation. He is unsure. He has helped others become before, as he knows how to hold the brush, and the easel has known many of us. Yet the form he has chosen for me is not something he has tried before. He is doubtful. He takes a deep breath. Then he puts pressure on the brush, and I begin the process of becoming.

I cannot see myself, and I greatly wish I had that ability. Thankfully, the sack on the floor remains my constant friend. Over the next few months, with the passing days routinely marked off on the calendar, the man slowly and carefully helps me become, and the sack is my only mirror.

You are blue, she tells me during the last week of June. He has mixed the blue-grey with black, and mixed the blue-grey with white, and created three shades.

I am three shades of blue, I whisper. I know of others, others who have been famous for being blue. I have heard people speak of them in the store. I would be proud to be only blue. But that, I soon discover, is not what the man has in mind for me.

You are a river, the sack tells me in July. He has taken the blue-grey, and he has lined it with the black. He has made wave crests with the white.

I reply with laughter. I have a form, a specific form!

The man continues to be tentatively precise. He spends all of July tracing the river, replacing crests with curves and curves with crests, and I realize this is

because he desires me to perfectly imitate the vision he has in his mind. I am grateful. I am privileged. He has a plan for me. I am a Will Become Great.

In August, when the man begins to use green, I know I will be more than only blue. This fills me with curiosity. What is he making me, I ask the sack.

You are a river in a valley, she replies. Her voice holds an emotion I cannot quite place. She seems reverent, and yet somehow jealous. I think perhaps I know what it means, but I am not certain enough to venture a guess. She tells me, The man has drawn banks and tall emerald hills. He has mixed the black and the white with the green, and he has filled the valley with shadows and depth.

He is making me a landscape, I say.

Yes, the sack replies. You are a landscape.

I am a landscape, I say, and the importance of the verb fills me with pride.

The man returns to blue in September, and although I know my thoughts to be nothing more than paranoid fabrication, I worry he has decided the valley is not what he wanted, and he will replace the green with blue. I could still be a landscape all in blue, but it would not be the same. The man has been so painstaking, so deliberate with the green. If he changes his idea of what I should become, the becoming itself will change, and something will be lost.

What is he doing, I finally ask the sack. I am terrified she might say something I do not want to hear, but I know if I do not voice the question, I will never know the answer.

She does not say anything.

I want to repeat myself, but I know she heard me. The thought comes to me that she does not want to answer because she fears hurting my feelings. I wonder if she does not want me to feel badly that he is changing me and I am no longer a landscape.

Please, I finally say. What is he doing with the blue?

She answers me, her voice low and quiet. She is moved. She is in awe. She tells me, you are a river in a valley in the twilight.

I am ecstatic. I cannot answer her. I cannot say anything.

The sack says to me, He must be nearly done. You must be almost complete.

No, I tell her. I can tell I have not become yet. He still has plans for me. He will not finish soon.

I am right. The man spends October and November smoothing out the gradation between shades, changing the height of the hills, the depth of the valley. He decorates me with clouds, using the white mixed with the black. He forms constellations in perfectly measured patterns on my surface. Finally he takes the white and gives a circle of moon to my upper right corner, and adds gentle streaks of moonlight shining from behind the clouds.

On the seventh day of December, the man sits down at the easel and does not pick up his brush. He stares at me, his gaze intent as it passes over my surface. I do not feel I am being judged. It is more as if he is judging himself, measuring his abilities and comparing the final product to the image in his mind.

You are beautiful, the sack says. Her voice is thick with bittersweet. You have become, she says.

I have become, I say.

I am composed of only four colors: black, white, blue-grey, and green, all simple colors made special by varying shades. I have been made special also by his constant attentions, by the donation of his time, by his love. I am a rising moon over a twilit valley landscape within an eight by eight square. I am not perfect. But I am complete.

The easel congratulates me. I can hear the sadness in her voice, but it is a kind of resolute sadness. She has been through this same moment countless times.

The man leans back in his chair. He exhales.

"I guess that's it, then," he says.

He leans down and picks up the sack. He folds her over his hands and stares at me for another moment. I become very frightened, thinking he might throw her away. She is my friend, and I do not want to lose her.

She says to me, I hope this is not goodbye.

I am very sad, and I tell her so. I say I love her, and she repeats the same to me.

But our goodbyes are premature. The man opens the sack and puts me inside. We are relieved, and we say so, although we are still gloomy. She is worried this was only a rehearsal for the inevitability. I worry this also.



The man exits his apartment and leaves the bicycle inside. The bicycle yells after him, feeling abandoned, but after a few short words does not continue to object. Once we are out on the street among the cars, busses, and taxis, I remember how I felt six months ago. I am still anxious. I am still uncomfortable in my surroundings. But I am no longer paralyzed by the fear. After all the man's time and care, he would not let me fall. Even now, I feel him holding me fast, holding the sack in a firm, unyielding grip. I understand now why we have not taken the bicycle. The man is afraid we will slip again, and he will lose me. I feel valuable. I feel special. I feel loved.

The man stops walking, and I wonder why. We stand for a few minutes with a group of people, all waiting. I do not know what we are waiting for. I ask the sack, and she tells me this is a bus stop, and we are waiting for a bus.

After only ten or fifteen minutes, the bus drives up to the curb and lowers itself to the ground. It opens its doors, and we climb aboard. The man drops a handful of coins into the black box up front, walks down the aisle, and takes a seat behind a pair of old ladies. The one on the left turns to the one on the right and says something in words I do not understand.

Polish, the sack tells me.

I am amazed by what she knows. I tell her she is very smart. She thanks me, and says I am smart also. I do not think I am, but I am grateful she thinks so highly of me.

I do not know where we are going. I mention this to the sack, thinking she

might be able to guess based on the path the bus is taking, but she does not know either. The bus overhears our conversation. He is choppy, and he is curt, but at least he answers our question. He says, Library, Mac.

I thank him for saying as much as he did.

We reach a set of steps flanked on either side by stone lions. I would speak to them, but I feel insignificant and do not have the courage. Also they are sleeping, and it would be rude to wake them.

We walk inside, and I am in awe. I have never been in a place this big, but it is quiet, and it is calm, so I am not frightened. The man walks to an area where many people sit reading quietly by the light of bright lamps. He stops and glances around, and then he sees what he is looking for. He sighs as if he was not sure he would find it and is relieved he has.

He moves to one of the tables, where another man is reading a book. As he turns the pages, I can see it is filled with photographs of Have Become Greats. He is looking at them with focused appreciation. This man is grizzled but neatly dressed in a blue suit and tie. He is older than my man. He makes me very nervous.

He looks up from his book and says, "Michael. What brings you here?"

"I came to see you, Dad," the man says.

The man's father closes his book and asks, "And what is that you have there?"

"I've brought something," the man says. "Will you take a look?"

The man's father nods, although I can see from his smothered expression he does not really want to say yes, and the man takes me from the bag. I feel his hands tremble as he gives me to his father, and I see the fear in his eyes. I wish I could tell him that there is no reason to worry. I know I am not perfect. I am no masterpiece. But I have value, because he has tried his best, and he has helped me become. The man's father will know that.

The man's father looks at me. His face is blank. His gaze is not the same as the man's was when he appraised his abilities. Now I feel like I am being judged. I do not like it. For a silent moment, a short time that nonetheless fills me with tension, he judges me.

Then he hands me back to the man, and says, "I see. Fine." He lifts his hand and looks at the watch on his wrist. "Oh, it's almost one. I'm sorry, Michael. Your mother wants me to be home for lunch. I have to be going." He stands and puts a hand on the man's shoulder. "We'll talk later, son," he says. He tucks the book under his arm and walks away.

The man is confused, unsure of what he wants to do. He sets me on the table next to the sack, and runs after his father. They stop at the door and begin a conversation. Neither the sack nor I can hear it, and we cannot guess what they are saying. I only know that the man's father is saying short, one-word answers, and the man seems to be asking him to further explain. Finally the man's father shakes his head, and he glances back at me. I can see him mouth the word "No." The man's face hardens. He is clearly disappointed, but he nods in resolution.

The father turns on his heel and walks out. He is gone.

The man walks back over to me. His eyes look hot and wet. I am frightened. He takes me up and throws me in the sack. He is not being careful. He is injured and distracted. The sack is frightened as well, and although I wish to say some comforting words, I cannot think of any.

We spend the bus ride back to the apartment in silence. I know the sack is afraid to say anything to me because she does not want to hurt my feelings. I know what she is thinking. She is thinking what I am thinking. I do not want to think this, so I stop. Instead I focus on how I felt over the six months, when the man helped me become.

We return to the apartment, and the man throws us on the couch. The sack cries out, and I realize my corner has punctured her side. I tell her I am sorry, and although she assures me it is no problem, I know she is alarmed. Torn sacks are discarded. I do not want to lose my friend, and in that moment my concern for myself shifts to her.

It is a small tear, she tells me. So small he will not notice. Do not worry. I will not be thrown away because of this.

The man sits in the brown chair and stares at the easel. I do not like this. There is a dangerous crackle in the air, unseen but undeniably there. I ask the easel, Do you know what is happening? She remains suspiciously silent, although I can feel her sadness. It is mixed with a low hint of pity. The man reaches to the floor and picks up his box of colors. He opens it and pulls out a

square metal can. I do not know what this is. I do not know, and yet I am terrified.

The man puts the box on the floor again, and puts the can on top of it. He walks over to the couch. He picks me up and takes me to the easel. He looks at me and sighs. I tell him, Please, I do not know what you have planned, but I know it cannot be the right thing to do.

He cannot hear me. He brings a cloth out of the box. In its colors, run together into brown over time, I see the echoes of others who were not allowed to be. I begin to panic. I try to tell him, Please, you are not thinking clearly.

He cannot hear me, but the cloth does. Relax, says the cloth. It will all be over soon. The cloth falls silent as the man splashes what is in the metal box onto its surface. He looks at me, holding the wet cloth in his hand, and then he presses it to me.

I am frightened, I am confused, and suddenly I am in pain. I scream. I hear the sack call out to me from her place on the couch, but I cannot make out what she says. The pain is intense, and I am burning.

The man pulls the cloth away from me and douses it again. I see blue and green on the brown, and suddenly I realize what he is doing. No, I say, but he does not hear me. He presses the cloth to me once again, and shoves it across me, angry and firm and decided.

I do not want this, I tell him. I do not want this. Do you no longer value the time you spent in helping me become?

But no matter how many times I say it, no matter how I cry and scream and beg, I am ignored. The man throws down his rag, heaves himself to his feet, and walks over to the couch. He snatches up the sack and returns to me. He shoves me in the sack, and then he shoves us both under the couch.

It is dark. It is quiet. I am still burning, and even though I try to remain silent, the sack can hear my pain.

I am sorry, she says to me. I am so sorry. Perhaps he will help you become again, she says, trying to give me hope.

Her presence comforts me more than the words, as I can barely hear her. The world is fading out around me. Something has been lost, and I cannot grab hold of it. I had become. I had become an am. I can feel it leaving me. I can feel the becoming leaving me, and it is tearing me as it goes.

Once I was unique. I am unique no longer.

Rachmaninoff, Mine

Squirrels scampered through the thin layer of snow frosting the Mattsens' yard. Over the fence in his own backyard, Mr. Cruikshank stood chopping firewood. Indoors, Jane Mattsen gazed out through the window of her upstairs bedroom, barely noticing the activity outside. Her fingers tingled as if she'd been playing Rimsky-Korsakov for the past hour. She could barely breathe, she was so excited. She had news, fantastic news, and it had taken all her willpower not to scream it out the second she'd gotten home from school.

She'd imagined sharing her excitement with her parents, but when Jane opened the door, her mother was sitting on the couch with her older sister Lyssa, apparently home from Juilliard for a visit. So much for Jane's announcement. What was Lyssa doing here? Jane decided it would be better to share at dinner.

Wafting up from the kitchen below, along with the spicy scent of Mexican goulash, Jane could hear her family's cheerful voices. She wanted to join them, but she didn't trust herself to keep from blurting out her news. She wanted her whole family's attention, especially Lyssa's.

Jane also needed to practice. Oh, how she needed to practice. In her hands she cradled her violin, plucking the strings absentmindedly. She'd bought it with her own money, seven hundred dollars saved from working at Jimmy's Egg. When she held it, tuned it, played it, each time reaffirmed her own awareness that she'd spent the money wisely. Flexing her fingers, Jane gave a contented

sigh as she lifted the instrument to her chin.

She drew the bow across the strings. A low G rose and filled the room, drowning out the sounds of life below. Closing her eyes, Jane began to play Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*. Her director, Miss Mabel, had promised to showcase Jane's talent during the orchestra's Spring Concert at Edison High. This weekend, the *Vocalise* was hers.

Around her she could feel the music take shape, flowing from that delicate friction between the strings and the rosined bow. The melody slid around her in long golden tendrils of pure bliss. Drawing the bow smartly, Jane reveled as another resonant G enveloped her, but then—

Something intruded on heaven. A soft noise growing steadily. Jane tried to block it out, to hold onto those golden vines, but they shook and shrank away; the drone was stubborn and unstoppable. As she opened her eyes, Jane recognized the sound. It was Lyssa's voice. Frowning, Jane withdrew the bow, causing the music to die immediately. The golden tendrils, admitting defeat, receded into shadows.

In the kitchen below, Lyssa was singing *Vocalise*. Jane stood, tightly gripping the neck of her violin. She felt the familiar surge of frustration begin to rise in her chest, but then she quashed it, letting out her breath in one long exhalation. Jane hadn't shared her news with any of them yet, so Lyssa was just being Lyssa. All she was doing was singing along to a rather famous song. Jane returned her violin in its case and then headed downstairs to join her family.



Jane entered the kitchen just as Lyssa, bringing the song to a dramatic, trilling close, tossed a handful of chopped onions into the goulash. *That bitch*, Jane thought. *She knows I hate onions*. At her parents' applause, Lyssa gave them her modest smile. *There is it*, Jane thought, *there's that stupid smile*. Their parents never seemed to notice that place, right there, in the corner of her mouth, in that tight and controlled little corner, next to Lyssa's guarded pride. But the devious smirk always hid there. To be fair, in this case, Jane could understand. Of course Lyssa was proud of herself and her wonderful voice. With such talent, who wouldn't be proud? Jane just wished Lyssa's attention-grabbing tactics didn't always work so well on their parents. It would've been nice to have the attention, just once in a while. For tonight though, Jane could let it go. She'd have her own moment at dinner when she shared her awesome news.

Lyssa caught sight of her. "Jane," she said. "I heard you playing upstairs, and I just had to sing along. Rachmaninoff is one of my favorites."

"Sure," Jane said. She managed to keep her voice flat and nonjudgmental, but couldn't quite conceal her frown as she poured herself a glass of water. Lyssa just had to sing along. Really. Like it was simply an unavoidable compulsion. One that always seemed to happen when her parents were within applause range. How convenient.

"That was lovely, Lyssa," their mother said in her brightly insistent piccolo voice. Jane let out a quiet, unnoticed scoff. The constant praise frustrated her to no end. Approaching Jane, her mother whispered, "Please stop

glowering.”

Jane scoffed again. This time, of course, everyone noticed.

Lyssa turned back to the goulash. “It’s ready now.”

“Jane, set the table,” said their father. She looked at him, intending to argue, but he shook his head and held out a handful of bowls.

Jane took them, then grabbed spoons from the drawer and walked to the dinner table. Jane was angry now. Oh, wasn’t Lyssa just ever so special, with her mezzosoprano voice, her full scholarship to Juilliard, her bit parts at the Met. Jane set the bowls down with a thunk on the table. Why was she here anyway? Why was she standing in the kitchen, playing out her little Suzy Homemaker routine? Maybe just to revel in the certainty of her perfection, in both the professional and domestic realms. She’d done that sort of thing before.

Jane glanced over at the kitchen door and wondered, really, why Lyssa was home. It wasn’t a holiday, nobody’s birthday. As more laughter emanated from the kitchen, Jane set the table.

Her father came into the room, carrying a white porcelain soup tureen. He lowered it to the center of the table as her mother and sister each carried in clear water glasses. Jane sat at her place and quietly said, “You’re welcome.”

“This smells wonderful,” their mother exclaimed. As usual, she hadn’t heard Jane.

“It’s my new roommate Carla’s recipe,” Lyssa smiled as she began filling each bowl with the aromatic goulash. There it was again, Jane thought, that same

humble, satisfied little smile. Why couldn't anyone else ever see it? It was the same expression Lyssa'd worn each time she'd beat Jane at chess, when she'd beat her in races, when she'd beat her at their school's spelling bee by spelling "B-A-C-I-L-L-U-S, bacillus."

Well, in that instance, Jane had gotten too eager, spoken too quickly, and misspelled "squirrel." But it couldn't be denied that her sister had, over the years, cultivated a clever layer of pretense. She had perfected an attitude of deliberate humility that consistently pleased adults, while privately mocking Jane with her vicious "Told you I'd beat you." No one but Jane ever saw both sides of her.

Settling into her chair, she took up her spoon. As she ate, a song came into her mind. '*Pretense.*' Jane felt guilty, because she knew it was her brain making fun of her sister, but she couldn't resist. The tune was too catchy, darn it all.

"...and," Lyssa gushed, "*La traviata* next season." "*Though in my heart I know it's asinine...*'

"Very good," said their father. '*I respect the production design.*'

"That's quite a bit of work, don't you think, Jane?" asked their mother.

'*Elements so diverse--*' Jane looked up from her bowl and said, "Sure. 'All the hours of rehearsal, you can tell.'"

She had no idea what they'd been saying, but when Lyssa gave Jane a beaming smile, she returned it. Why not. This was amusing. None of her family knew she had just quoted an internet movie review by the Nostalgia Critic. The

thought cheered Jane inwardly and she chuckled softly. She had something almost secret, a special kind of private knowledge that in this house was hers and hers alone. Lyssa couldn't ruin that pleasure for her. She might grandstand with Rachmaninoff, but she'd never usurp the songs from the *Moulin Rouge!* review.

"...and of course I'm flattered, honored, really," Lyssa said, daintily dabbing the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

Their father murmured under his breath, a warm, satisfied sound like an engine turning over, while their mother clapped her hands together once in glee. "How exciting," she said. She looked to Jane with altogether too much joy in her eyes and said, "You must be so excited."

"Of course," Jane said. "Excited."

Their mother let out a coo and looked back at Lyssa. "My two talented daughters. Oh, I'm so thrilled. Rich, you've bought tickets, haven't you?"

Tickets? Jane's eyes widened.

"They're in my wallet, dear."

The goulash suddenly felt heavy in Jane's stomach. Tickets to what? In ignoring the conversation, she'd missed something, something vital. She wanted to ask them about it, but the question shriveled and died behind her clenched teeth. Lifting her own napkin to her mouth, she cleared her throat, and asked, "May I be excused?"

"Clear your place," her father said. "Lyssa, you'd said something about an

honorarium?"

"Yes," Lyssa beamed, "but of course the real honor is that they would think of me at all." Jane felt her fingers flex around her water glass, and thought of upending it over her smug sister's head. The mental image of Lyssa soaking and sputtering brought half a smile to Jane's lips.

The next morning Jane awoke at six thirty and readied herself for school. All night she'd stewed about how she hadn't shared her news, and even here in the morning, some of those feelings still lingered. She fully expected to find Lyssa in the kitchen, showing off her culinary skills by making chocolate chip banana waffles from scratch. To her surprise, Jane found her mother alone at the stove, and Lyssa had already gone.

"They'd file a missing persons report if she was gone from Juilliard much longer," Jane said, taking up a raisin bran muffin from the wicker basket on the kitchen island.

"Hmm?" said her mother as she stirred the scrambled eggs.

"You know," Jane mumbled around a mouthful of muffin. "Because of her valuable voice."

Her mother, preoccupied, didn't catch Jane's tone. "I have no idea what you're talking about." The timer on the coffee percolator beeped. Her mother stopped stirring the eggs and said, "Thank goodness." She put a hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn and moved the hot pan to a cold burner. She turned away

from the eggs and made a beeline for the coffee.

“May I try some?” Jane asked, leaning in and inhaling. The coffee smelled different this morning, like chocolate hazelnut heaven, like liquid Nutella.

“Stunt your growth,” was all her mother said before taking up her mug and inhaling one huge mouthful, full of divine purpose like the whale swallowing Jonah. She sighed, shutting her eyes with a happy flutter.

“Fantastic,” she said. “Remind me to ask your sister where she bought this.”

Jane shrugged and turned away. “It’ll stunt my growth,” she said, heading out the door.

She walked down the street toward her school, enjoying the solitude and the February sun’s quiet warmth. She never minded having to carry a full backpack and a violin case besides. At least she wasn’t a tubist like Henry Parker, and she certainly wasn’t in the same position as Geraldine Klasky, who had to lug a cello four blocks to school. A violin, all in all, wasn’t really that heavy, especially considering her tendency to switch it from hand to hand. Jane hardly had to think about it, and instead went over the notes to *Vocalise*, to solidify it, to make it certain in her own head. The performance had to be perfect.

*G, F sharp, G*, Jane looked both ways before crossing the street, *E, F sharp...*

She entered her school’s dark green metal doors, barely noticing them, and made her way down the locker-lined halls toward her first classroom. She waded through the crush of her classmates like a salmon returning to the

spawning grounds. The noise all around her, cheerful chatter and hurried footsteps, was drowned out by her inner recital.

Then she heard a sound, something that absolutely, unequivocally did not belong here. Her steps slowed and her chest filled with the familiar heavy leaden feeling. She turned, ignoring the bell summoning her to class, and began searching for the unwelcome singing. Why the hell wasn't that voice back at Juilliard?

The song definitely sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. *C, F, D, C, B flat, A, G, C, A...* Dang it, that was so familiar. If only she could hear the words, but the early morning echoes all around her made it difficult to locate the source. Lyssa shouldn't be here anyway, not at this time, not at this place. This was Jane's place, not Lyssa's. Jane's steps sped up, her breath quickened, her cheeks flushed. What the hell was Lyssa doing here?

The singing ended just as Jane reached the closed double doors leading to the auditorium. Jane knew she could ignore it, forget it, turn away, and go to class, the more mature choice. Yes, she should just go to class.

"What are you doing here?" Jane said.

From the stage, Lyssa turned, and her smile sent a wave of nauseous heat through Jane's stomach. Lyssa was intruding, but acting like she wasn't, like this was absolutely fine. "Good morning, Jane," Lyssa said. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Shouldn't you be at Juilliard?"

“No.” Lyssa laughed. “Not this week. Of course.”

Jane suddenly remembered missing the vital thing, the very, very vital thing at dinner the night before. She started to respond, but the door behind Jane suddenly swung open.

“I’ve spoken with-- oh, hello, Jane dear,” said Miss Mabel. She smiled at Jane, then turned back to Lyssa. “Principal Dekker would like you to sign a few things before you perform.” Jane glanced from the papers in Miss Mabel’s manicured hands back up to the half-moon spectacles on her director’s face. A light, grim and doleful like a gravedigger’s lantern, began to peek through her mental fog.

“Of course.” As Lyssa took the papers, her eyebrows rose, so slightly it was almost imperceptible, but Jane could see, as she could always see, that same veneer of false humility that her sister had perfected. “This one’s blank,” Lyssa said, lifting a single sheet of plain white paper.

“Yes, dear. That is for Principal Dekker’s autograph collection.”

Miss Mabel laughed, Lyssa laughed, and Jane said, “No fucking way.”

That evening, Jane sat on her unmade bed with her legs crossed. After school detention, as punishment for one little word, was very unfair. It hadn’t even been the whole word, just the one offensive syllable. And yet it had earned her detention now, detention for the rest of the week, and a possible suspension from orchestra. You might have thought she’d tried to instigate world war three.



When she'd gotten home, at least her parents had understood the value of the upcoming weekend, and didn't ground her or forbid her from performing. It didn't really matter, though. Jane knew now they'd have gone to see the concert without Jane's being a part of it.

What had happened? Jane stood and walked to the window. She looked down at the back patio and watched the bitter evening breeze scatter dry leaves across the octagonal bricks. How the hell had Lyssa weaseled her wicked little way into Jane's concert?

"It shouldn't be," Jane said, the words fading away under the crackle in her voice. She whispered, "allowed," and closed her eyes. The warmth of gathering tears formed behind her eyelids.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. Jane had expected to finally earn some accolades for herself once Lyssa had moved out. She knew it might have been selfish and prideful, but she didn't care. She deserved it, dammit all. She had earned the right to be praised, just this once. But no. Lyssa just had to take over again, the way she'd always taken over. This was a high school concert, not an opera. Lyssa had the Met. She had Juilliard. She didn't need to collect Edison High too. Edison was Jane's. Why didn't anyone understand that?

It wouldn't have happened if Principal Dekker wasn't such a fanboy. Maybe he had the hots for Lyssa or something. Probably did. Luring her in with an honorarium. Probably wanted more than just her autograph. Filthy old man.

Jane laughed, a quick bitter sound that tore her throat. Her eyes snapped

open and she turned to her violin. She pulled it from its case and began to play, not any piece in particular, but random notes, wild and varied. The tune poured out, violent, venomous, viciously flooding the air until Jane's breath came out in ragged gasps. She could feel the music take shape, spiked and black and wicked, like witches' thorns. The cacophonous torrent wailed out around her until her mother called her down to dinner.

It was time to go. Jane pulled a brush through her hair one last time as she looked over her outfit in the bathroom mirror. Black didn't really suit her. It had a way of sucking all the blood from her face, making her already pale complexion even more corpse-like. But when the entire orchestra was commanded to dress in elegant uniformity, she hadn't any choice but to make the best of it. She had two options. Wear her hair down, and look like Verdi's gypsy Azucena, or put it in a ponytail, which really meant she only had one choice.

On the plus side, however, she'd been granted permission to dress up the tail a bit. Miss Mabel had been reluctant to agree to the request, as she seemed to think in some twisted way that allowing such frivolity would be tantamount to rewarding her recent bad behavior. But when Jane argued that she was performing a solo piece, Miss Mabel saw the reason in it.

So Jane had purchased a new hair band embellished with a flower, delicate white lace adorned with plastic dewdrops. Taking the lace rose and

wrapping its band twice around the base of the tail, she pulled her hair taut. She used a hand mirror to make sure it was positioned evenly, then headed downstairs.

Her mother sat on the living room sofa, reading, but looked up when Jane came into the room. "You look lovely, Jane."

Jane smiled and came to stand beside her. "You probably have time to finish the chapter you're on. We don't have to leave right now."

Her mother blinked a few times, then glanced at her watch. "The concert is at seven-thirty?"

Jane sighed. Oh God. Her mother'd forgotten. "Miss Mabel wanted us to be there around six. I told you yesterday? And again this morning?"

"Oh. Before breakfast, that's..." Her mother closed the book. "Are you sure you aren't supposed to be there at seven? Lyssa just went into the shower."

Jane took a long shaky breath through her nose. "Oh," she said. "Well. Maybe the rules are different for singers. But I'm supposed to be there no later than six-thirty."

"All right, then. If you're sure," her mother stood, "let's get you there."

The rules weren't different. The rules had always been the same, singers and musicians alike. And Jane was almost one hundred percent certain Lyssa knew that too. Miss Mabel would not have forgotten to tell her. But, Lyssa just had to be Lyssa.

When her mother stopped the car and Jane entered the auditorium, the

full impact of the situation hit her. Half overcome by nerves, she sat in her chair, tuning her violin and trying to coerce her breathing to slow. It was silly to be so nervous. She'd played concerts before. Just because at one point she was playing solo, there was no reason to panic. She had practiced *Vocalise* until she'd trembled from fatigue; she knew it inverted and upside-down.

"Jane dear," said Miss Mabel. Jane jumped, startled, but her director continued. "Did your sister not come with you?"

"No, Miss Mabel," Jane answered. "When I left the house she was still getting ready."

"Oh dear," said Miss Mabel, taking off her half-moon glasses and cleaning the lenses with the edge of her white scarf. "Oh dear. Principal Dekker just asked to speak with her."

Jane lowered her violin and studied Miss Mabel's face. Noting the sharp crease in the center of her forehead, Jane realized she'd never seen her director in quite such a state of anxiety. Her blood seemed to pulse in her veins as if underscoring her thoughts in four-four time; wrong, wrong, it's all going wrong. "She'll be here soon, Miss Mabel," Jane said. "She'd never miss a performance."

"Well," Miss Mabel said, replacing her spectacles. "There's nothing to be done."

"Would you like me to try and call her?" Jane asked. "I have my cell phone."

Miss Mabel looked as if she might say yes, but then paused, taking a

glance at her wristwatch. "No, I suppose it's too late to worry now. I'm sure she's prepared." She locked eyes with Jane, and the intensity in Miss Mabel's expression sent a chill of fear racing up Jane's arms. "She HAS familiarized herself with the song?"

Jane somehow managed not to stutter when she replied, "I don't know."

"You've heard her singing, though, haven't you? She's had the sheet music for almost a week."

Jane just shook her head, not knowing how to respond. She didn't feel like offering excuses for her absent sister. She had enough on her mind at the moment, and Lyssa'd done what she'd done.

Miss Mabel shut her eyes for a moment and sighed, "It's fine. It will be fine. All she has to do is stay with the music."

As Miss Mabel marched away, Jane lifted her violin to her chin. Stay with the music? That meant Lyssa would be singing accompanied, but they hadn't added any songs to their set list. Suddenly she remembered the tune she hadn't been able to place. *C, F, D, C, B flat, A, G, C, A...* Now Jane felt like an idiot for not putting two and two together sooner. It was the melody to a piece called "The Lakes of Pontchartrain," specifically rearranged for orchestra.

Jane returned to tuning her violin and frowned. Lyssa hadn't been practicing, as far as Jane knew. That pompous, cocky, conceited little bitch. Oh, no, she'd remember the words without rehearsing them, because she was the Great and Powerful Lyssa Mattsen. It wasn't enough that she'd invaded the

concert. No, now Little Miss Opera Star was going to ruin Jane's whole evening because she was too good to practice like the rest of them.

Jane squeezed her eyes shut and took several deep breaths, slow and measured, gentle and calming. There was no reason she should feel this way about Lyssa. She'd won a full scholarship to Juilliard. She was already working at the Met. The Metropolitan Opera, for God's sake. Lyssa was good. She was very, very good, and rapidly becoming very, very famous. Lyssa had talent, enough talent to completely earn the audience's admiration. What chance did Jane have? What the hell had Jane been thinking? She wasn't good enough for a solo piece. She'd never get through *Vocalise* without botching it somehow. The performance would be adequate at best, if not entirely a joke. She let out a bitter laugh. Too late to worry about that now. It was seven-thirty.

The stars shone brightly across the sky when the audience began to file out of the auditorium. The warm rumble of conversation around Jane would have, on any other day, made her feel happy, proud, grateful that they'd enjoyed the orchestra's performance. As it was, her mouth was dry and she said nothing before climbing into her parents' Buick. When she shut the door, she cradled her violin case and tried to keep her arm from touching Lyssa's gargantuan bouquet. Principal Dekker had presented it himself.

"Beautiful," their mother said from her place in the front seat, pulling the seatbelt firmly in place. "My two talented girls. Rich, did you get it all?"

“Yes,” answered their father, putting the car into gear. “Still have battery left, matter of fact.”

The car pulled out onto the road and headed for home. A light misting fogged up the windshield, and their father switched on the wipers.

“I can show you how to upload it to YouTube, if you’d like,” Lyssa said ever-so-helpfully. She lowered her head and sniffed at a rose. Bright red. Two dozen. Dirty old man.

“That would be lovely,” their mother said. “Aunt Luce would love to see it.”

Jane turned her head and stared out the window. The white lines on the road flashed by, and she began to count them absentmindedly. Anything was better than listening to more of this schlock. Upload the video for Aunt Luce, she thought. Sure, Aunt Luce would love to see this concert. She hadn’t expressed any sort of desire to see Jane’s concerts before. Oh, but this one was different, wasn’t it? This was Lyssa performing. And that changed everything.

Lyssa had finally waltzed into the auditorium, seconds before Miss Mabel would’ve gone into complete apoplexy. Her honey-blonde hair was pinned up with an emerald clasp, and a graceful, understated golden necklace adorned her neck. And, of course, she wasn’t wearing formal black, but an emerald green, floor-length, strapless evening dress with satin trim. Grace Kelly reincarnate.

“Lyssa,” Miss Mabel had said, “Thank goodness.” She paused and then said, “Hadn’t we... I mean...”

“What is it?” Lyssa asked. Jane looked away. She couldn’t bring herself to watch. Here it came, the first performance of the evening. In Lyssa’s question there was a thick layer of innocence, a kind of, Oh my, have I done something wrong? But underneath it, Lyssa was being Lyssa. She’d known exactly what she was doing when she’d pulled that Christian Dior over her perfectly-coiffed little head. Her tone gave that away, but Miss Mabel didn’t hear it. Nobody ever did.

“Hadn’t I told you we have our singers dress in black?” Miss Mabel asked. “For uniformity?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Lyssa said, lifting one hand to the nape of her neck and widening her eyes in affected innocence. “I didn’t realize.”

Miss Mabel smiled and shook her head. “No reason to apologize. The concert’s about to start, and you look lovely.” Jane’s fingers tensed and she lowered the violin to her lap. Her director was being far too nice. Lyssa was manipulating the situation and getting away with it. Miss Mabel didn’t deserve that disrespectful, deceitful treatment.

Jane stared down at the floor. Lyssa knew. Just like she knew she was supposed to be there for warm-ups. She’d just chosen to ignore what other people asked of her, deciding to do whatever she darn well wanted. As usual.

“...and so clever,” Lyssa was saying as another car passed by them in the opposite direction. For half a second the oncoming headlights illuminated the Buick’s interior, not quite long enough to let Jane see and decipher Lyssa’s expression. In the front passenger seat, their mother snored lightly, and their



father concentrated on driving. Lyssa had gained complete control of the conversation. Jane turned her gaze back through the window and began counting the shadowed trees whizzing past. They'd be home soon.

"The other violinists were good tonight, Jane," Lyssa said, "but you were the absolute best." Jane saw Lyssa's dark reflection reach up and pat the emerald clasp in her hair. "The only other performance that was so well-received was mine." Jane felt heat in her throat, liquid and foul-tasting. She swallowed. Wasn't Lyssa humble?

When they were finally home, Jane headed up the stairs to change. Behind her, she heard Lyssa remark, "We'll have to get these roses into water. Honestly, I much prefer these to the honorarium they gave me. They were far too generous."

Crossing into her room, Jane shoved the door shut, went straight to her bed, and flopped face down on top of the covers with her violin case beside her. Lyssa would never understand how tonight was supposed to have been Jane's special night. Her night to shine alone, out from behind her big sister's shadow. But if Jane said anything, she would be the selfish, ungracious one.

Jane flipped over and stared at the ceiling. Yes, she'd played her solo piece without a single mistake. Yes, she should feel proud, but somehow pride was trapped in the knots in her stomach. Well, she thought, at least Lyssa'd sung her own song, instead of shoving her bitchy little nose into *Vocalise*. That was nice. Jane reached over to her violin case and unsnapped the clasps.

She sat up and gently lifted her violin, cradling the scroll in her hand. She ran her eyes over its pegbox, down its neck, to the upper bout, and stopped when she reached a long scratch near the left f-hole. She traced her finger along the shallow white groove. Not a week after she'd bought the instrument her sleeve had caught on a peg, pulling it from her hands. The damage, thankfully, had been restricted to that single mark, and she never mistreated it again.

Sitting there on the bed, Jane caught snippets of the happy conversation wafting up through the floor. She smiled at her violin and suddenly realized she was no longer feeling the knots in her stomach. That specific scratch, right here on this specific spot, made her violin unique. This was hers, the music was hers, and no one could take that away. Jane smiled to herself. She had done it.

As she pulled her bow across the strings, a low, lovely C rose, rich and full and right. The tendrils embraced the air, not laced black with thorns, but once again bright and golden morning glory vines. The music wrapped around her arms, down her legs, and intertwined with the strands of her hair, until every part of her was shining.

## Sold

Brianna paused in the doorway and stared into polychromatic pandemonium. Colors and shapes exploded from every wall with no discernible order. For a second, Brianna nursed the reassuring thought that perhaps she was in the wrong place. Maybe Danny had moved his studio and neglected to mention it when they'd spoken earlier on the phone. Forgetfulness had never been one of Danny's characteristics, though. Perhaps there had been some miscommunication.

"Come in!" A warm, chocolate baritone echoed from somewhere within the studio. "It's unlocked."

That was definitely Danny Brewster's voice, which meant that this was definitely still his studio, and these were his paintings after all. She reminded herself that he was her friend, her absolute best friend since Willamet High School and college, who had called and asked her if she wanted to see his newest artistic creation. She'd said yes immediately. She had always enjoyed his work. Danny had always painted strong figures in concrete settings. Although he had a tendency to use rich, bold colors, they had always been controlled. Danny hated abstract art; when Brianna had first met him, he'd been more accepting, but that phase hadn't lasted. He had taken it as a personal insult that Charlie Finster's "A Day in Hell," a series of red and orange splats on a black-flecked canvas, had won the Freshman Artists' Contest at the Academy of Art University. Danny had

spent three months on his own entry, preparing a photographic recreation of the Golden Gate Bridge wreathed in fog. That day, when Brianna had taken him for a consolatory drink at a bar that regularly didn't card, he'd said he'd never stoop to painting something he couldn't put his time and his heart into.

Brianna was, quite honestly, just a bit scared by the change in Danny's studio. The subtle urgings of her fear kept her from moving forward. None of the art in this room was like him. It just wasn't like his work. She was confused. For a minute she fluctuated between her two choices: retreat backwards, out to the street and back to normalcy, or continue into this brain-killing explosion of colors and shapes.

"Bri?" Danny called.

"I'm here," she replied. She took a deep breath and stepped into Danny's work room. Her eyes darted nervously toward puffs of green smoke, rhythmically floating from a small black cauldron and drifting directly toward her face. To avoid the smoke, she took a step backward and nearly crashed into a multi-colored mushroom cloud surrounded by seven bright rings spun of glass. Instinctually, she turned and held out her hands to steady it, just in case. Her eyes widened as she saw the canvas hanging just behind it. Spatters of blue, yellow, and red flowed downward in runny streaks to combine into varying shades of purple and green along the base. The Danny she knew would have called it messy. Brianna suddenly realized, letting out an incredulous, ironic scoff, that the title could have been "A Day in Clown Hell."

Tentatively entering the room, she heard a tiny splatter next to her just before a splash of vermilion dotted the back of her hand. Startled, Brianna looked up. "OH!" she cried, stepping out from underneath a dripping statue. Shaped like some unidentifiable animal, it hung suspended from the ceiling by what appeared to be an intricate network of jump ropes. "Danny," she said, "I'm getting dripped on."

"Oh, right. Watch out for that circle," Danny called. "'Chaos' isn't dry yet."

Brianna looked at the ground, where she saw a thin white circle of wax paper taped to the floor to collect the drips. Her brow furrowed. Wax paper? That didn't seem right.

Danny hadn't even met her at the door. That wasn't right either. Five months ago, when he'd finished his "Variations on Monet" series, he'd led her into his work room with all the aplomb of a proud father showing a guest to the nursery for the first time. The paintings had been lovely photographic landscapes of *le pont Japonais* and the water lilies at Giverny. They were an extension of Danny himself: calm, thoughtful, controlled. Brianna felt like crying.

"Where are you?" she called to him, craning her neck, peering over and around the cluttered studio as best she could.

"BOOM," Danny said, stepping into view with his arms held wide.

"Oh!" Brianna's eyes flew open and she took a defensive step backward. Danny wore a pair of pocketed overalls, splashed with paint and layered with

glitter, over a bright white linen shirt with peasant sleeves. He'd braided his long hair into bright red dreadlocks like a Rastafarian Raggedy Andy. The Danny Brianna knew would have died of embarrassment at the mere thought of wearing that outfit. She hadn't seen him in a few months, but surely a person couldn't turn inside out in that short a time. Not unless he'd had a mental breakdown. That thought troubled her.

"Danny?"

"Bri," he smiled, placing his right hand on his hip and waving his left hand dramatically. A sparkle of loose glitter shimmered its way to the floor.

"What do you think?"

Brianna took a short, shuddering breath. "Well."

Danny laughed. "Should I be flattered?"

"Well," Brianna repeated. She met his eyes for the first time since entering his studio, and noticed their gleeful glimmer. She sighed, relieved. There, at least, was something she recognized. "How are you, Danny?"

He let his hands fall to his sides and shot her a quirky grin. "You look confused."

She waved a hand at the artwork surrounding her. "Only a little. I was just expecting to see something more like your Monet work."

"Ah, so this is surprising. But do you like it?"

"I have to admit, this is..." Brianna's voice trailed off. She didn't know quite how to phrase her opinion. It wasn't that the work was bad. On the

contrary, if she'd seen it presented anonymously, not knowing who the artist was, she would have thought it lovely, creative, and modern. But putting Danny's name to it, knowing that he had designed these things, somehow dampened the entire experience, twisted it, made it weird. Wrong.

"Inspired," Danny said. "Brilliant, full of emotion, real. Any adjective you like."

"What are you calling it?" she asked, turning away from him and taking a good solid moment to closely examine a life-size statue of a running pony made entirely of tiny, carefully-layered glass bricks.

Danny stepped up to her and softly laid a hand on the pony's back. "This I'm thinking of calling 'Dash DNA.' Do you think it's too obvious?"

"Too obvious? No," she replied. On the contrary. She had no idea what it was supposed to mean. But that was on par with the rest of her experience here today. Just impossible to understand.

Danny began to lead her around the studio, naming each piece individually. Evidently he'd misunderstood her question. By "What are you calling it," she had meant the entire exhibition. *He should call it "A Dash of Madness,"* she thought to herself. Brianna ran her fingers through her hair absentmindedly as he explained that a bundle of twisted ropes was, in fact, "Medusa in Repose."

"I've sold it to the Phoenix Gallery," Danny said. "The one on River View."

“Oh,” Brianna replied distractedly, searching the Medusa for any sign of a beginning or end. It seemed to be one continuous rope, braided about itself into a solid ball. “I can see why. This is really clever. How did you make this? Where does it start?”

“Where all things begin,” Danny said with a happy sigh. “Within its heart. But I meant I’d sold the collection, not just the Medusa.”

Brianna turned to him in one quick twist. “The whole... but there are... and that one’s still drying... you haven’t even finished it yet.”

Danny smiled and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Concept drawings, Bri. It’s all already there. It just has to be realized.”

Brianna bit her lower lip and looked at him. “Can you really sell things based on drawings? I mean, didn’t they question... Didn’t they wonder if maybe the drawing wouldn’t work realistically?”

“Huh,” Danny said. “It didn’t come up.”

Before Brianna could reply, an unannounced female voice called out from behind them. “Yeah, it totally did. I just convinced them it didn’t matter!”

Brianna turned in surprise. The unfamiliar voice belonged to a short pixyish woman with a perky blonde bob. She was wearing denim shorts and a spaghetti-strap top, every inch of her petite frame dusted with glitter. The pixie ran to Danny and threw her arms around his neck. With Danny’s dreads framing her head, screening them both from Brianna’s view, he dipped her backward and kissed her. What the fresh hell was this? Shocked, Brianna felt her face stiffen



into an awkward smile.

The pixie stopped kissing Danny with a loud pop and ducked out from under his dreads. Turning to Brianna, she held out her hand. "Hey, nice to meet you!"

Brianna didn't move right away. A rapid-fire chain of thought exploded in her mind. *Bursting in on the shop our conversation Danny rude I'm being rude take her stupid hand already.* "You too," Brianna said, shaking the pixie's hand twice and then dropping it.

"Danny's told me all about you," the pixie said, tugging playfully on one of Danny's dreadlocks. "Brianna Tremaine, first chair trumpet for the Willamet Cougars' Band, high school paper editor, summa cum laude, junior marketing associate with Bingham Advertising, good-looking, twenty-seven, and single."

Brianna took in a shaky breath, unsure of how she wanted to respond. It was extremely off-putting to hear her life listed like that. This woman didn't know her. To be so robotically described by this complete stranger, this dimwitted, doe-eyed ditz, with her glitter and her effervescence and her arms clinging to Danny Brewster like vines... But then Danny chuckled and said, "I promise, I didn't give her your stats like that."

"Hey-o," the pixie said, tweaking his nose. "So I make lists." She looked back at Brianna with a smile. "It's the only way I can remember things. I'm such a scatterhead!"

Brianna started to nod and then thought better of it.

“So are you coming to dinner?” the pixie asked. “A bunch of us are meeting at the Bijou.”

“Please do,” Danny said. “You haven’t met the new crowd yet. You’ll love them.”

*The New Crowd. Oh God.* “Ah, no, thank you,” Brianna said. Her voice caught, and she cleared her throat. “I should be getting to the office. I have to be in a meeting in,” she paused and glanced at her watch, “oh gosh, twenty minutes now. It was good to meet you, good to see you, Danny. Good luck with the Phoenix show.”

“Just a second, Bri.” Danny reached into one of his overall pockets. Pulling out a small square slip of paper, he handed it to her.

Brianna stared at it. Her eyes prickled, filled with a tense heat that threatened to spill over. At first it was difficult to make out the white lettering on the black background. Then she realized it said *Admit One*. “Oh,” she said. “To your exhibition?”

“Actually, to the charity thing the night before.”

“Tuxes, dresses, fancy-schmancy waiters carrying fancy-schmancy drinks. It’s totally amazing,” the pixie said. “Big Jeff set the whole thing up.”

“Jeff Thomason,” Danny explained. “He owns the Phoenix, and he’s also Annemarie’s second cousin.”

“A little nepotism never hurt anybody, right?” Annemarie laughed and squeezed Danny’s shoulder. “Not that it mattered. Phoenix or not, you’d have

sold this stuff somewhere. It's fantastic, isn't it, Bri?"

Brianna felt a brief, lightning surge of anger fill her heart and dissipate through her capillaries. That was Danny's nickname for her. This interloper had no right, no right at all to call her that. The smile Brianna flashed Annemarie was brittle and fake, and she dropped it almost immediately. "Fantastic," she repeated, as sincerely as she could possibly contrive. "Colorful."

Annemarie giggled. "Ain't it though." She straightened and gave her hair a perky toss. The way the lights in the studio caught and flashed on the blonde waves suddenly made Brianna think of an Afghan hound prancing down the runway at a dog show. An uncharitable comparison, she knew, but she didn't regret thinking it, especially when Annemarie took an elaborate, cheesy bow. "Thank you, thank you," she added.

"Shouldn't you say 'You're welcome' instead?" Danny said, nudging her with his forearm.

"Well, you *are*," she said, nudging him in return.

"Welcome," Danny said, his voice almost a growl as he put his arms around her.

"Welcome?" Annemarie leaned into Danny and pinched his bicep. "You should be the one saying thank you."

They'd completely forgotten they weren't alone. Brianna let her gaze drift to the ground. Now the atmosphere in the room, at least from her perspective, was a bit awkward. The conversation was being dominated by a series of in-jokes

that left her out. They weren't even good jokes. It was just a gooey girlfriend flirting with her boyfriend. The kind of conversation you'd hear between two fifteen-year-olds on cellphones. You hang up. No, you hang up. No, *you*. Brianna wanted to go, but didn't think she could just say, *Well, okay, bye*, and leave. That was rude, wasn't it? Then again, *they* were being rude, ignoring her. Danny'd invited her here, hadn't he? She was his guest, wasn't she?

In an ephemeral haze of indignation, Brianna looked back up at them. Danny and Annemarie jostled each other for a few more seconds. Then Danny glanced up and locked eyes with Brianna.

"Hey, Bri," he said, giving her a sideways grin.

A memory flashed into Brianna's mind. Just weeks away from her fifteenth birthday, she'd been sitting in Mrs. Markham's ninth grade art class, trying to paint a still-life and failing spectacularly. From behind her, she heard Danny's voice for the first time when he asked, "Is that an eggplant?" She'd spun on her stool, glaring, intending to call him an idiot. Couldn't he see it was a potted fern? But then she'd seen his face. That grin of his, that damned likeable grin. She hadn't said anything. "Your movements are too general," he said, sitting down on a stool beside her. "If you want it to look realistic, it's got to be more controlled, like this." He had taken her brush and started to dab, carefully, meticulously, still grinning.

Remembering that day, Brianna suddenly understood that she'd always equated that expression with Danny's own careful, orderly nature. His adoration

of the craft and attention to detail. And, most importantly, the affection and attention he gave to her. That grin, she realized, was one of the reasons she loved him. Now, though, the entire situation was tainted. It wasn't the way it should have been, the way she wanted it to be. In a harsh snap, Brianna came back to the moment and glanced, quickly, at the artwork around her. That expression on Danny's face no longer fit him, no longer had any right to be associated with him. Not if he was going to be this kind of person, be dating this kind of person.

"Anyway," Brianna said, "I've got to go now. But your new work is beautiful, Danny, really beautiful, and I'm..." She paused, sifting through her vocabulary for the appropriate words. "I'm happy for you," she finally said, deciding to go with a half-truth instead of a bald-faced lie.

"Aren't you just a sweet little doll?" Annemarie said, beaming at her.

"No, *you* are," Brianna replied. The grin she sent in return was wide but sharp, and she could feel the corners of it biting into her cheeks. "Getting Danny into the Phoenix."

Annemarie's smile faltered. "I really didn't do that much. He'd have sold his collection anywhere."

"You mustn't be so modest." Brianna's fingernails dug into her palm, but she continued, unnoticing. "You're indispensable."

Now Annemarie looked confused. She shifted her weight onto her left leg, leaning closer to Danny. "I guess," she said, her tone noncommittal, her hand hovering just behind Danny's elbow.

Danny tossed a quick glance between the two women. His gaze alighted on Brianna's sharp expression. "Huh," he said. He pivoted toward Annemarie, his back ever so slightly toward Brianna. "Go check on the kiln, will you?"

Annemarie's cheeks brightened, and she ran her fingers down his forearm. "Okay," she said. She walked away, her steps quick and light. Then she stopped, and almost as if an afterthought, tossed over her shoulder, "It was nice to have met you."

"You too," Brianna said, still smiling her wide, tight grin despite the shooting pain developing in her cheeks. A bitter laugh clawed at her throat, threatening to burst out. Annemarie gave her one last frightened glance as she disappeared from view.

Danny turned back to Brianna and said, "Come outside and talk with me."

"I have a meeting--"

"Bullshit," Danny said, following her out the door. He leaned in toward her. Although the City's traffic was heavy and his voice low, she heard every word. "Bri, I know when something's up with you. Your face gets tense."

She shook her head, knowing it was futile to lie, but she found herself unable to do anything else. "It's not. I'm just running late, is all."

He leaned his back against the wall, crossing his arms. She watched another shimmer of glitter fall, swirl about in the breeze, and finally disappear among the cracks lacing the sidewalk. Focusing on any distraction was better

than meeting Danny's eyes. Seeing that expression in them. That knowing, concerned, judgmental expression.

"Is it Annemarie?" he asked suddenly.

Brianna's gaze darted up to meet his. "No," she said, too quickly.

Danny lowered his arms. "Oh," he said. Tilting his chin downward, he kept his eyes trained on hers. "Bri," he said, and she groaned at hearing the gentleness in his voice.

"No," she said. "Don't start with the 'We need to talk.' Don't even start."

"I understand what's going on," he said. "You love me."

"Yes," Brianna said.

Danny let out a stifled scoff. "But Bri," he said, his voice so soft and placating.

"No," she said, crossing her own arms. "You clearly don't understand, and don't you dare start with that. This is not you telling some girl after a bad date, 'I like you, but let's just be friends.' This is not a soft-shoulder break-up. And if you think it is, if you think there's reason for it here, now, you don't know me at all, Daniel Brewster."

She felt like turning and marching away, and she would have, were this any person other than Danny. She couldn't leave it like that. He needed to understand. She needed to see him understand.

"All I know is, I get a girlfriend and you get jealous." His left eyebrow rose ever so slightly higher than his right. "You're in love with me."

“No, damn it.” Brianna laughed and looked up at the sky. “You can have a girlfriend. Hell, you can have a boyfriend, or even one of each if that’s what floats your boat. I don’t care about that.” She turned back to him and this time, met his eyes. “This, whatever this is, isn’t you. Nothing about this is you. Nothing about Annemarie is you. And I do love you, more than anybody else on the planet, which is why it’s killing me to see you like this.”

He just kept staring at her, and she could see in his expression that he was still certain he knew exactly what was going on. She pursed her lips wryly. “I’m happy for you,” she repeated. She started to go in for a goodbye hug out of habit, but stopped. “Congratulations again,” she said, offering her handshake.

He took it, and she couldn’t tell whether he was sad or merely confused. He held her hand longer than was entirely necessary, then let it drop. “I’ll see you later, Bri?”

“Of course,” she said. She glanced at his hair, his clothes, and felt strong, stabbing regret. Maybe she could be friends with this new Danny, but most likely not. If this really was Danny, if he’d finally found himself through Annemarie, she didn’t know what would happen. She could feel her chest tighten. Desperate flickers of hope fluttered against her ribcage with the thought that he might come to his senses and become Danny again. A teardrop fell suddenly from her right eye, and she blinked it away. She smiled at him and said as she turned to walk away, “I wouldn’t miss seeing your exhibition. Make the Phoenix proud.”



Living in the Memory Bank

When Daniel returned from work, he found his wife attacking the basement door with a hammer. She knelt on the floor, striking at the heavy padlock with a blank, stoic expression on her face.

“Hannah!” Daniel leapt forward and tried to take the hammer from her. “Hannah, stop.”

She yanked away from him and kept swinging.

“Dammit, Hannah!” Daniel reached for the hammer once more, and she struck him between the thumb and index knuckle. Daniel recoiled. He looked in shock at his fingers, which were already beginning to bruise, and flexed slowly, testing them. Pain hit him in a stabbing rush, and he hissed as he unclenched his fist. It hurt, but at least she hadn’t broken any bones.

He looked back at her, shocked by the blankness in her eyes, the complete absence of any sort of remorse for what she had just done. He took a step towards her and said, “You need to stop.” She didn’t reply, or even acknowledge his presence. She simply kept pounding away at the padlock.

Daniel staggered back through the house, away from the furious sound of hammer blows. He sat down on the living room couch and lowered his head into his hands. “What do I do,” he said. “What am I supposed to do?”

Daniel pulled his cellphone from his pocket. He glanced back at Hannah, and his finger hovered over the buttons. He would call the authorities. They

would send someone to help her. But then they'd... "No," he said as he lowered his hand. He sat for a moment, struck immobile by uncertainty.

He lifted the cellphone again. This was his only chance, and he knew it, but still he regretted the necessity. He pressed a few numbers with confidence, but then hesitated. Was the next number a five or a seven? Try as he might, Daniel couldn't recall his brother's phone number from memory. With a frustrated groan, Daniel looked into his contact list. He found his brother's name and hit the call button.

Daniel sat and listened to the buzzing over the line as the phone rang, first once and then another half dozen times. He began to worry. Had Tom's number changed? Was his call being deliberately ignored? Just as a startling image formed of his brother, injured in the hospital, perhaps dead, the ringing stopped, replaced by a sudden sharp silence on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" Daniel said. His fingers tightened around the cellphone.

"Hello?" he repeated.

"Daniel?"

Daniel let out a short laugh. That was Tom's voice, familiar and deep and rough as gravel. "Hello, Tom." He nearly said, "Thank God you answered," but managed to stop himself. Daniel closed his eyes and sighed. "I need your help."

"I can hardly hear you. What's that banging? What's wrong?" Tom's voice sounded dim and distant, and Daniel adjusted the phone at his ear.

“I don’t...” Daniel put a hand to his face. “Damn it. I made a mistake, Tom. I don’t... I don’t know what to do.”

There was a tight silence over the line, made all the more obvious by the arrhythmic, echoing bangs of Hannah’s efforts to break into the basement. For a moment, the two brothers let silence pass between them. Then Tom said, “All right. We’re almost to Dallas. I’ll be there as soon as we land.” Tom let out a low whistle as he disconnected the call.

Daniel lowered the phone and let his head fall back against the couch. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. The assault on the basement door sounded just as determined as it had when he first walked into the house. He heard the hammer strikes change timbre as Hannah moved her efforts from the stubborn, unbreakable padlock to the door itself. Startled, he sat straight up, but paused. Her blows were weakening. She might make it through, he thought, but she would never manage it before Tom could arrive and tell Daniel what to do.

Despite Hannah’s failing strength, she still refused to stop. Daniel felt his eyes tighten, and he closed them again. She was so determined... so determined.

His throat began to burn. Daniel forced himself to take several long, deep breaths, but could not calm himself. The pounding from the hallway had migrated inward and settled in a soft spot near the base of his skull. With every hammer blow, Daniel’s brain throbbed in an unwelcome, persistent way.

He sat there on the couch, pointedly ignoring the memories threatening to surface, for what seemed like hours. He had just begun ignoring Jen’s first piano

recital - such talent, she was only seven, and yet she'd played Mozart without the aid of sheet music - when his brother knocked at the door. Daniel rose to his feet, blinking his eyes free of tears. It had been years since he'd thought of that recital.

Daniel paused and glanced down the hallway as he passed. Hannah had made a dent in the door, but the hammer really wasn't the best instrument for her purposes. He realized, feeling a vague sensation of relief, that at this rate it would take her ages to get through.

He opened the front door, and there stood Tom, still wearing his captain's uniform. A vague feeling of gratitude flickered in Daniel's chest as he realized his brother hadn't even gone home to change before coming over. He'd come directly from the spaceport. Daniel wanted to embrace him in greeting, but when he met his brother's gaze, he couldn't bring himself to do so. Tom looked confused, as if he was trying to smother some unsavory feeling before Daniel could place it.

"How can I help?" Tom asked. He forced a crooked smile and stuffed his hands further into his coat.

"Come in," Daniel said.

Tom stepped into the house, glancing about as if he'd never been there before. His gaze passed over the living room, noticed the chairs and the sofa, and paused upon reaching the large woven area rug. He looked at Daniel, an unasked question floating behind his eyes.

Daniel smiled, his lips drawn thin and tight. "We sold it," he said.  
"Nobody plays anymore."

Tom turned away from Daniel, toward the sound of a resonant, lingering hammer blow. "Hannah?" When she didn't reply, only lifted her arm again with slow mechanical precision, he spoke over his shoulder. "Was that her I heard over the phone?"

Daniel looked at his wife and his eyes filled. He cleared his throat and turned back to Tom. "I... I knew I shouldn't have done it. I knew it was wrong, but what was I supposed to do?"

Tom stared at Daniel. "For God's sake, why are you just letting her do that?"

"Help me with her."

The two went up to Hannah. Tom took her arm and held it steady long enough for Daniel to take away the hammer. She shrieked and writhed like a woman possessed, and yet her features retained their impossible blankness. She twisted away from them and began to pound at the door with her bare fists.

"Holy God," Tom said, backing away. "What's wrong with her?"

Daniel tossed the hammer to the floor with a thud and threw his arms around Hannah's shoulders, pulling her back away from the door. He sat on the floor with Hannah, rocking her softly until she quieted, her eyes locked in frozen silence on the dented basement door.

Tom squatted and looked square into Daniel's eyes. "Tell me, right now, what's going on."

Daniel ran a hand over Hannah's auburn hair, smoothing it out. "It's been... It's been a bad year, Tom."

Tom sighed and sat on the floor beside him. He leaned back against the wall. "I'm sorry, Danny."

Daniel felt his flaring anger heat up his cheeks. How dare he call him Danny, like they were still buddies, like no time had passed, like nothing had changed. He had no right. But Daniel said nothing, and Tom continued. "I know it must have been hard since..."

"You don't know, though, do you?" Daniel snapped. "How would you know? You made a point of accepting every damn commission over the last three years. Houston to Mars. Dallas to the Moon. Next you'll be off to the Venus colony, I suppose."

"You can't--"

"Dammit, Tom, I haven't seen you since Jen's funeral."

"Did you honestly call me over here for this?" Tom stood and turned back toward the front door.

"No," Daniel said. For half a second he felt the resentment he had tried so desperately to ignore. "But now you're here, I'm telling you." Even as Tom spoke, he could hear the unfairness in his words. But he couldn't bring himself to

stop. "I hate how you chose to leave. I hate how you volunteered to fly the longest trips your employers offer. You're my only family, Tom. And you left."

"You have Hannah."

Daniel scoffed. He turned his head and wiped the tears from his eyes. He gestured at Hannah as she stared at the basement door, as if by pure will alone she could open it. "How can you see her now, and think that I have her? God, I tried. I tried to keep her. But I did the wrong things. I made all the wrong choices."

"Danny..."

Daniel twisted toward Tom and snapped, "Don't call me that."

Tom let out a frustrated puff of breath. "I'm sorry. Daniel."

Daniel met Tom's eyes. "What do you think of the memory banks, Tom?"

"I told you what I thought twenty years ago, the day you started working there. I've never liked them. The whole idea is... disturbing."

Daniel let out a gentle chuckle. "Really."

"Yes." Tom turned to him, suddenly serious. "It pricks and prods at your brain and makes you think you're reliving something, some moment in your life that you know, you always know deep down, is just a memory. You're lying to yourself. You know you're lying to yourself. It's dangerous."

Daniel heard his tone turn brittle, but somehow couldn't get himself to smooth his delivery as he replied, "It's a bit more technical than that."

Tom fell silent and turned away. In an instant Danny felt guilty, but he couldn't bring himself to apologize. What did he have to apologize for?

"What's happening with Hannah?" Tom asked, almost whispering.

Daniel closed his eyes and tried to think of how to answer, how on earth he could possibly explain. The day he'd finally decided to steal from the memory bank, he had been standing at his admittance desk, as he had every day for the last twenty years. In two long rows on either side of his kiosk, the other admitters stood dutifully checking the identity of visitors before allowing them to enter the bank.

That day, they'd all been exceptionally busy. Customers always came in a constant wave to relive the moments they could not live without, but that weekend the yearly transport from the Jupiter colonies had come in at Dallas, and hundreds of tourists from Io had flooded the bank, eager to try their hand at Earth's technology. Focused on his job, Daniel had only noticed Hannah when she handed him her identification card.

He looked up and cringed at the sight of her haggard complexion. Over the last few months, she'd become almost yellow. "No," he said.

"You have to let me in," she'd said.

He glanced at the other admitters, who continued about their jobs as if they didn't see her. How could they not see her, he wondered, when she looked like this, with her sunken eyes and unkempt hair? How could anyone not notice the aura of despair that radiated from this woman?



“No,” he repeated. Somehow he managed to keep his tone flat and professional despite the lump in his throat. “You’ve had your allotments for this month. You can’t come in until September.”

“If you knew,” she had started to argue.

“No, Hannah. The system can’t be overridden. Watch.” He took her identification card and waved it under the scanner. With a beep, the light passed over her barcode and turned red. He handed the card back to her. “You see? You’ve been here fifteen times this month. Even if I wanted to, the doors won’t let you in.”

Hannah’s face went blank and she said, “You never loved her.”

With a stifled sob, Daniel broke back into the present. “Damn them,” he said. When Tom looked over in confusion, Daniel repeated, “Damn memories. We should be able to wipe them clean entirely.” He looked down at his wife, still staring in weak catatonia at the basement door.

Tom turned Daniel toward him. “I want to help you, Daniel, but I don’t know what you expect me to do if I don’t know what’s going on.”

A weight descended upon Daniel’s chest. In a rush, he confessed. “We broke into the bank.” Instead of dissipating, like he’d hoped it would, the unnatural density settled further in his gut, hot and solid like a pound of half-molten lead. He took a breath and continued. “She’d used up her days, but seven days a month weren’t enough for her. So I...” Daniel stopped as his voice choked up.

She'd stared at him with that nothing expression and blamed him for everything. He hadn't even thought about what he was doing until he saw the light pass over his own identification card and shine green, approving admittance.

"It wasn't enough, even then," he said. "It wasn't enough. So I stole one of the machines from the maintenance stores. I just put it in for repair, then sent out the work order that said it was in too bad a state to be repaired. I did the paperwork, said I'd destroyed it, and they didn't notice I'd dismantled it and taken it away."

"My God," Tom said. "Why would you--"

"Hannah needed it."

"You could go to jail."

"That's why I called you. I can't call anyone else. No one else can know. I rebuilt the machine in the basement. That's what she wants, Tom. She wants to get to the machine. What do I do?"

"Jesus," Tom said. "You have a functioning memory bank wired up in your basement?" His eyes widened in realization. "She's using it to be with Jen. For God's sake, Danny."

"I know."

"Why would you let her go there? Why would you even let her start? You knew what she was doing."

Daniel closed his eyes and his unbidden recollections took him back to Jen's funeral. He was next to Hannah, standing pale beside the grave. And then, in another unwanted flash of bastard memory, Daniel remembered the knife against her wrists, and the blood. Dear God, the blood. He remembered the terrified rush to the hospital, not knowing whether she would... And then the first visit to the memory bank, and how Hannah had emerged, happy and vibrant for the first time in months.

He opened his eyes and said, "You don't know, Tom. You weren't here." He took a deep breath and looked at the basement door. "The memory banks were the only thing that kept her here, kept her with me. It was better to let her relive what time she could with Jen rather than sit by and watch her destroy herself like that."

"So you decided to steal a memory bank, rather than let the doors do their damn jobs and separate the machines from people who abuse them? What did you think the rules were for? Did you just forget about the side-effects of brain manipulation? Damn it, Danny. I've told you these things are dangerous. Why would you let her--"

"I tried to stop her, didn't I?" Daniel looked down at Hannah. "I thought forcing her to quit cold turkey might snap her out of it. Bring her back to me." He let out a scratchy, guttural laugh. "Damn waste," he said. He'd tried to keep her here, when he should've realized Hannah had been lost to him for three years. She'd been lost since the day they'd found Jen's body in the Roanoke River, her

golden hair caught on a half-submerged log, her face blue and unmoving, her book bag lost downstream. There was no explanation, no reason, just a child on her way home from school, a little girl who didn't make it home. Even the investigation had provided no answers, no solace. Jen could swim. There'd been no storm. She had just turned nine.

Daniel looked back up at the basement door with its cracked façade and dented padlock. He put his cheek against the top of Hannah's head. "I can't leave her alone. I don't know what to do."

"You need to destroy the bank," Tom said. "Get rid of it. Keeping it here is doing more harm than good."

Daniel looked down at Hannah's gaunt face. He nodded. "I should. I know I should." Daniel slowly unwrapped his arms from around Hannah. He braced himself to catch her again if the need arose, but she didn't move. He froze, a dull fear rising up his spine. "Hannah?" When she didn't reply, he moved himself out from behind her and let her ease backward to rest against the wall.

"Is she..." Tom began.

Daniel stood and looked down at Hannah. Her face was pale and still, as if she were dead. But he could see her chest rising and falling with gentle breaths, and her lips were curled up into a slight smile. "Hannah," he said. Her eyes flickered and her lower lip trembled. He repeated her name, louder.

"Isn't she wonderful," she whispered.

Daniel put a hand to her face. "Wake up."

"Ssh. Listen to that." Hannah folded her hands together and lifted them to her chin. "Three full arpeggios, and not one mistake." She sighed, "So beautiful."

Daniel turned away from her, feeling each individual gasp for breath catch in his throat.

"Hannah," Tom said, and then fell silent. He looked at Daniel, and an unspoken conversation passed between them in an instant. They both knew what had happened. They knew the risks, and the reasons for the restrictions on usage of the machine. But Hannah's face wasn't blank anymore. She was smiling. She was happy, truly and completely, fully immersed in a world completely real to her. And wasn't that something?

He looked at his wife's enraptured face, then his brother's horrified expression, and came to a decision. He pulled the key to the padlock out of his pocket. Without saying a word, he unlocked the basement and let himself in. He shut the door and slid the inside bolt shut. Through the wood, he heard Tom call his name, but Daniel chose not to answer. He already knew what Tom would say. Tom had said it all along.

### Dirty Whirlwind

The tossing sea presses a silver kiss upon the Cornish shore. I can hardly hear my own thoughts beneath the wispy hiss of encroaching waves. February's bitter winds cause my breath to emerge in a shudder, and I pull my overcoat tighter about me. Inside, my brother sits at table with his second bride-to-be. They are happy, laughing, making preparations for their Spanish honeymoon. And I do not wish to return inside just yet.

The waves crash upon the rocks, and I imagine the sound filled with promises like the ones my father made. "I'll find gold and jewels," he told me, "and return with riches, parrots, sugar cane." He had not known, or perhaps had denied the knowledge, that the sea's whims supersede any vow he could have made to me. Promised to succeed, promised to return, and failed on each count.

And yet still, the ocean draws, pulls in some secret way upon my innermost self, and perhaps it is the same with all Englishmen. I first heard the ocean's voice in the year 1814, when my father embarked upon the *Spanish Star*. Standing here upon the rocky beach, even after the passing of half a dozen years, I hear that same voice now.

*I have so much to give, it whispers, winsome, rolling thick with salty, sultry brine. All you need do is take.*

And yet I know full well this is an enticing lie. My father's fathers knew this, knew the falsehoods the sea's mysteries spin, and did not listen. Here,

inland, they grew their crops and made their bread; here they built their manor. Home, hearth, strength, stability in this abundant soil of England satisfied my grandfather's grandfathers. The dukedom could not satisfy my father, and the sea's temptations ruined him.

They must not ruin me as well. Here have I grown, and here have I instilled within myself the virtues of my forebears. I must be satisfied with my lot. I must not want more than God permits. I must refrain.

\*

My brother stands beside his second bride in our manor's chapel. Around us saintly statues give watch, as they have over all unions blessed by God in this consecrated cove. Specially commissioned in celebration of this event, the newest sculpture, a pale alabaster bust of Saint Adelaide of Burgundy, watches in acquiescent silence by my brother's side. I wonder if my brother's first marriage might be locked within Saint Joseph's stone memory. Dearest Evangeline. In my own mind, she stands full and bright as if painted in oils. I still remember her delicate features, her blue eyes and auburn hair, and most especially her demure devotion to God. She was, in all ways, my sister. I have yet to call his second wife by her Christian name. I had hoped to keep her distant, unreal, but there comes a time when one can no longer delay the inevitable. "Do you, Victoria Elizabeth Winston, take this man..." Beneath the bleach-white veil, her eyes are stormy grey, filled with distant, foreboding flashes like a lightning storm far offshore. I watch her watch my brother and I stumble over the vows. "...As we have been

gathered here in the sight of God.” The words are incorrect. I pause. She glances from my brother to me, and once again I am fully aware of the vanity of my flesh. This woman, this Victoria, is neither humble nor demure, but passionate and beautiful, a siren come to shore. This woman will lead me to ruin. I lower my gaze back upon the Holy text and curse her in my mind.

\*

Patience leads to understanding. Temperance brings abundance. Virtue begets immortality. These are the tenets of my faith. These are the tenets of the Fathers before me. These things I remind myself, in order to draw away from my thoughts of Vernon and his second wife, who must by now have reached Spain. And yet the only thing which has heretofore succeeded in dulling my aching mind is the bright burgundy wine before me.

I look up from my seat at the head of an empty table. I remember a time, less than a year ago, when I was not alone. Across from me, in his vacant chair, I can almost see the spectral presence of my predecessor.

“I wish I had your guidance, Father.” I realize, with a gentle thrill of shame, that I did not address the Lord. The echoes of my whispered prayer reverberate around the room, and I am reminded of how empty the air is now that he is gone. Father Simon was a thunderclap tucked within a beanpole body, and his breath itself had a depth and presence of its own. The room is unbearably silent, now.

We buried him last October in the westernmost corner of the graveyard,



sheltered by the chapel's shadow. I myself took up the chisel, and carved his headstone in polished granite.

*Here Lies Father Simon*

*Matthew 27:32*

Had he lived but four months more, he could have been the one to bind my brother in wedlock, and I might have been spared.

I fill my empty glass with wine once more, and I remember Father Simon, tall, balding, his beard of rusty red giving way to aging grey. He baptized me, christened me, took my first confession. I felt his guiding presence at each pivotal moment of my life, and it was he, following the example of the namesake verse inscribed above his grave, who helped shoulder my burdens.

When I was seven, my mother fell mortally ill with the measles. Father Simon told me, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."

When I was eighteen, my father was lost at sea. Father Simon told me, "Be still and know that He is Lord."

When I was twenty-four, my brother's first wife put a Spanish pistol to her skull. Father Simon told me, "You know as well as I do that your brother is to blame."

Byron wrote of Evangeline's like, of one with beauty like the night. The night is calm, filled with a cool, clear consciousness, a pristine peace. My brother's first wife had this same sensibility.

She grew Netherland tulips in our greenhouse, morning pinks and

twilight reds, and called them embodiments of God's love. Often she would carry them, still nestled safely in their individual earthen pots, and sing to them as she strode the grounds.

*♪ O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard*

*And hushed their raging at Thy word ♪*

The soul of a songbird, shattered by a leaden bullet. She was but nineteen when she died.

My brother's second wife is not yet eighteen and has no Byron in her. She is brass, and she is bold, and she is unbearable.

Where are you now, Father? Is there a veil between Earth and Heaven, a dusky cloth that you must pull aside in order to see me, in order to care? Or is there so much joy beyond Saint Peter's gates that you simply cannot bring yourself to look down upon my tribulations?

I look up, away from my half-empty bottle of wine, and in Father Simon's vacant chair I see his shadowed specter once again.

"You left me," I say to him. My voice is neither accusatory nor sad. Instead it is flat, matter-of-fact. Deliberate.

There is a deep rolling like latent thunder at the base of my skull which rises up into my eardrums, and I hear Father Simon say, "And what is your intent?"

I hardly know what to tell him in reply. He has always been there. He has always been. And despite knowing that he is gone, some part of me assumed

that some part of him would still have followed me, would still have understood my thoughts without having to ask. That same part of me is shocked he finds the need to ask now. "What can I do," I say.

Only silence answers me.

\*

I fall asleep, there at the table, beside the emptied bottle overturned. Within me flows more wine than blood, and I dream this night of sea-deeps.

Aboard the steamship *Concertina*, my brother and his newest bride sail toward their honeymoon in Barcelona. Below them, amid the rolling blackness, the hull of the *Spanish Star* rests upon the ocean floor. Somewhere within her wooden belly, amid riches, parrots, sugar cane, the carcass of my father rots.

I want to cry out to him, and say to him, "You left us. My brother was not yet twelve. Is it any wonder he cannot understand what it means to be a man? Does the fault truly lie with him?"

The dark brine swallows up my voice, and I am filled with bitter realization. Within my breast, Jörmungandr stirs. I wake and empty out my stomach on the floor.

\*

Each day bleeds into the next. There is no difference between Monday and Saturday, excepting that Sunday comes between them.

I try, O Lord, to give You glory. I fail, and my own sinful weakness is to blame. Each night I empty a new bottle, each morning the sun blinds me, and yet

I cannot bring myself to end the pattern. My sermons are frail, unstructured. The parishioners pretend to be unaware. With each passing week, I come to realize I am repeating the same lesson, over and over again. Be good, be good, be good, or Hell waits to welcome you into its icy fires.

Hell, the dark dominion where Satan reigns, King of the Sinners. Hell, the ultimate penalty for drunkenness, jealousy, lust.

Who am I to preach of Hell?

Who am I, O Lord?

\*

It is now the first Sunday since my brother and his second wife returned from Spain. I had hoped that time apart might break the hold she has on my heart, but I am in deeper agony still. I drank far too much wine last night upon their return, and I am drunk yet. God sees it. I only hope that by getting through the sermon without mistake I might assuage His wrath. My brother and Victoria sit beside one another in the first pew, watching me as I preach the parable of the sparrow. His melancholy eyes hint to me he is bored with listening, but there is at least some presence there. Within her eyes, the lightning lies dormant.

She wears a woven shawl about her, brilliant and beguiling in the sunny colors of Spanish art. She slides the fabric between her fingers, clutches its fringes and grasps it tight. I wonder, perhaps she wears it to conceal the signs, the unnatural darkness of the skin that was dear Evangeline's sad state. My brother beat her, this I know, and I am filled anew with anger and guilt.

There is guilt in action. Judas betrayed the savior with a kiss and took a pittance of silver in exchange for untold value. Yet there is also guilt without action. The young, unborn and as yet blameless, still inherit the taint of Adam's blood.

Which of my sins is greater, Father? The wish to act, or that I was inactive? I did nothing to impede my brother's violence, nothing to save Evangeline.

Here again, I believe I see abuse beginning. I know that through my inaction I betrayed Evangeline. I am compelled to action for Victoria's sake, and yet I stay my hand. I am not so far gone, O Lord, that I cannot recognize the wellspring whence my intentions flow. My love compels me, and yet that love is sinful. Nesting not within my breast, but deep within my loins, I know full well that kind of love is sin. I must not lash out toward my brother on my suspicions. Although as rescuer I might be seen as saint, to act with impure motives only deepens my culpability.

And yet, I am pulled by mighty forces, their powers twinned together, as my guilt compels me as well.

I've tried to tell myself it was not I; it was my brother's twisted ministrations which brought dear Evangeline to her ill-timed end. She'd not have died but for my brother's punishments, meted out for indiscretions only he could see. He was the one, not I, who dimmed her flame and snuffed it out. But I had seen the effect upon her. Had I added my voice to Father Simon's, had we together charged him, "Follow not this wicked path," perhaps... Perhaps the

admonitions of his brother could have made some difference. I know, God help me, I know I could have calmed his wrath.

I share the blame for your death, Evangeline.

\*

I choose, as I must, to make further observances before deciding upon a course of action. I have thought, each time I sit with them at table, that perhaps it is only my own desire which drives me to see these signs and hints. And yet on this night I realize, as my brother rises to his feet in anger, some things cannot be ignored.

Flickering candlelight shades my brother's visage, florid as the freshly-steamed lobster upon his dinner plate. In the dimness he is almost purple; his contorted features radiate a violet, violent rage. He accuses her, and damns her, and would surely strike her were they alone.

In my mind, I see her as he describes. She twirls, dear Lord, she spins and twirls upon the gleaming ballroom floor. Her eyes are flashing, flirting, with that gentleman upon whose arm she leans. I see his bright red coat, I see the yellow braid, I see the handsome hilted sword upon his hip, and I hate him with a fury that exceeds my ability to smother it with piety. He leads her through the Madrigal, and with every turn her hems rise upward. In her gently curving shin I see the serpent's face.

Victoria sits, building with her silence a great wall between herself and my brother's pointed words. I look to her and see in her face the gorgeous girl I

first beheld walking barefoot through strawberry fields, her smile bright, her lips stained red with summer-sweet juice. She looks at me with unicorn's eyes. "I danced with him," she says, informing my brother but speaking to me. "I danced with him, but nothing more." My brother stiffens, then turns and walks out. Victoria looks again to me and lets out a great wail, almost more than a human being should be able to create. She throws her face down in her arms and sobs into the table.

O Lord, do I believe in the falseness of his accusations because I wish to believe? Am I blinded by weakness, by wine-induced mental stagnation, by sinful appetites? Or, true, O Lord, it may be so, the innocence of dear Evangeline reminds me of my brother's faults.

\*

I stand in the silent chapel, waiting for the sun to rise. The scene at dinner haunts me. This night I have not slept, nor imbibed, which is the greater miracle. This night I have searched for answers, prayed for guidance.

Life's dirty whirlwind, cloaked and choking, shadowed and violent, sweeps us along unfeelingly. It does not care what we might wish, ignores our cries for help, for direction. Rarely do the winds abate to give us time to choose which path to follow. Only once in my life have I been presented with such a choice, and with every passing day I question my decision. Perhaps existence would have been more bearable, more palatable, if only I had followed the other path.

I bear the curse of second son. This is the counsel of England, the guidance of tradition. Make your life, O second sons, for nothing will be given to you. As second son, I could not have the dukedom, for that was for my brother. As second son, I had but two lives to choose between.

Had I chosen the life of soldier, perhaps God would have been more lenient toward me. To wield the sword demands a quicker passion than that of the average man. Perhaps, in that case, my tumultuous sentiments would have been understandable, forgivable. As a man of God, those emotions cannot now be justified. What I feel is even greater sin, as He holds the clergy to a higher standard than the average man and soldier combined. My sin and my soul are intertwined, and I am torn. The voice of God has not answered me. I hear in my head only the sound of battle drums.

I wish to soothe my ache with savage balm. God help me.

\*

Victoria sits in the confessional, her head bowed and contrite. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Her voice wavers like the ripples of a turbid stream. My soul is stirred; but for the barrier between us, my compulsion would have overtaken me. She hesitates, and then begins to give voice to her memories of the night before, the dinner, and my brother's accusations, but as yet, I see no need for absolution.

I feel my heartbeat slow and still. I am wondering what all other rational beings would be wondering during this kind of moment, a brief but painfully



pivotal instant within the atmosphere of free confession and ultimate forgiveness. I am wondering... Will this be the moment when all my doubts, my hopes, are revealed to be illusions? Will she share with me her sins and show herself to be the harlot as she has been accused?

I look up to see her face. Through the latticed window, her silhouette is like Evangeline's. I see her there, my brother's first wife, just as she was those years ago, in the time before she took her life. She sat in the confessional, a brightness faded, a wilting bloom, a soul darkening, shrinking. Vanishing. I remember, and it sends a biting pain through my veins, how on that final day she had confessed her gloomy thoughts to me. I had wanted to help her. I had tried, in the only way I knew. "Put your faith in God," I had told her, "and bear your troubles in the same gentle spirit as our Lord Jesus exemplifies."

We found her later on the beach. The ebbing tide took with it the last remnants of her crimson life, her eyes, once bright like starlight, dimmed and cold. In her left hand she held the pistol. In her right, she clutched a rosary wrapped around a tulip's stem.

I hear, although not clearly, the hesitant voice of my brother's second wife. She calls my name, but I do not trust my voice to answer. She calls it twice again, the second time confused, and on the offended third I make my reply. "Yes," I say, "I am here." I hear her shift in her seat and she turns toward me. Sitting opposite me in the confessional, she sighs to herself, to God, more so than to me. In a voice as gentle and engaging as that of the Virgin Mother, she asks Him to

forgive her anger, forgive her hatred, to forgive her for her human frailty.

I hear her say all this, and I ponder action once again. In my mind is the image of Judas, leaning in toward the savior in the gardens of Gethsemane. In this act was sin, betrayal, and yet... O Lord, did not Your greater plan encompass Judas? Without his instrumental hand, fulfillment of Your plan would not have come to pass. Only through the savior's death was humanity saved; Judas's wrongful act was the right course taken.

Only through the hand of God can wrong become right.

In the opposite confessional, Victoria begins to cry, and in each shaking breath I hear the promise of the sea. She has so much to give, and all he does is take.

\*

In my shaking hands I hold a hunting rifle, shining, polished, and loaded. My brother's household has been abed these many wee hours, and here am I, standing in his night-shrouded trophy room. The stags and stuffed game birds gaze down upon me, and in their frozen eyes I see the reflection of God's judgment. I look to the open cabinet where the rifle's brothers hang in place, staunch soldiers awaiting action. I turn, and a great stuffed bear looms beside me. I do not cry aloud, although I am compelled to, and I ask myself, what in God's name am I doing?

My legs quaver beneath me and I lower myself to my brother's armchair. The rifle drops to the ground beside me and I let out a breath, short and sharp

and relieved. My head aches with the remnants of wine, and I lift my hand to my face. I close my eyes and the household's quiet encroaches, filling the air about me. It seeps inside me, drowning my lungs. Each breath becomes a struggle.

How has it come to this?

"I will not be another Cain," I say, and I rise to my feet. I stagger forward toward the door, with full intent of finding my way homeward, to my own sweet bed in the rectory beside the chapel's hallowed walls. Yet then a sound, a sudden thump, a stifled shriek, and I am stopped in place. The silence closes in about me, darker, starker than it ever was before, and I wait. Then I hear it again, muffled cries and the sounds of struggle, and I am compelled to seek out its source. With wobbling legs, I keep one steadying hand upon the wall, and even my grasp on that is tenuous.

In an instant all the wicked possibilities wind their way through my thoughts. In my mind I see Victoria, cowering beneath my brother's blows. It cannot stand, nor can I stand for it. I stagger down the darkened hall, my wine-weakened knees threatening to give way beneath me. What I am doing, what I plan to do, none of these thoughts matter. The only thing which matters is that vision of Victoria, helpless, begging for his mercy upon the manor's parquet floor.

The distant fight grows louder as I climb the winding stair. With every step I tell myself I ought to turn about. This is not my place. And whatever I choose to do, whether my course of action from this moment on is part of God's

plan or otherwise, the sin of overtaking my station remains. He is my elder brother. He is Vernon Sutherland, tenth Duke of Monmorte. I am merely Father John. I know where my duty lies. It is to the spiritual, to the moral. Not to the physical, where my thoughts, unbidden, turn. I no longer have the rifle, but my blood still boils hot. Although untrained, untested, my fists tense in clenched anticipation. What I will do, I know not. What I will not do, I know not either.

I reach the second floor. My steps grow heavy but not hesitant, and I cross the hall toward the master bedroom. Lamplight shines out through the open door, and I see the shadows of my brother and his second wife. A crash, as a vase inside falls to the floor. Then the sound of a heavy blow. Punches, strikes, and with each one my brother grunts. Must he really expend so much energy on this defenseless woman? The coward. The brute. The sinner.

I press one hand upon the wall and slide my feet upon the carpet in effort to approach unheard. I begin to imagine what I will do, where I will strike first. "No," I hear him say. I stop. "No," he says again, and in his voice there is a shocking tone, a quaver, a sound unlike anything I have heard from him before. A doubt wades through the wine drowning my senses, forming just behind my eyes. I inch forward, until I can see into the room.

I see, and yet I do not... My brother's second wife stands above his prostrate body, her eyes full of that lightning which I had thought to be gone forever. I must misunderstand. The wine. It must be the wine which confuses my sight. Victoria raises her foot and brings it down on my brother's bruised and

beaten chest.

This is not what I had expected to see. This is something more than I know how to understand. There is but one thing to be done. I turn and return to my rectory. Although startled into sobriety, I barely remember the journey. I find each bottle of wine I have stashed away, a mortifying four, and I take them outside.

I find myself standing beside Father Simon's grave, wishing once again that he were here. As I kneel before him, I empty each bottle onto the ground. Perhaps I will come to regret this, I think as wine pools about my knees and soaks into the frosty earth. And perhaps I already do.

New Mexico Morning

Charlie twisted the wheel, making the car fishtail. God, it was a rush. Rubber squealing, tires spinning, the entire world vibrating as the car bumped over every individual rock and pothole in the abandoned gas station parking lot. He knew this wasn't how adults acted, how responsible people behaved, but God, he needed this. For the last month he'd been dead inside, living in his car and unable to focus on anything. Yesterday, when he'd finally given in to multiple requests to "just forget the bitch and come to the bar," somewhere between the beer and the harder liquor, they'd come up with this perfect excuse for insanity. Out here, driving wild, he needed focusing on mechanics, on keeping the car balanced between chaos and control. His mind was blessedly blank, the rest of his troubles temporarily forgotten in the wake of his newfound concentration.

Dan cheered as he lifted his beer can above his head. He bounced out of the seat, unencumbered by the seatbelt he should have been wearing. Flecks of foam spattered out of the can to dot Dan's black turtleneck. A few drops ricocheted onto Charlie's shoulders and splatted on the side of his head.

"Hey, watch it," Charlie said. He slammed on the brakes, and the car slid to a stop in the middle of the empty parking lot. He turned and glared at Dan.

"Damn it, Dan, you got me wet."

Dan hooted. "Didn't know you got off like that, Charlie."

“Ahhhh, you know what I meant.” Charlie wiped his head with his open palm. He groaned. If you doused your head with beer at a kegger, that was one thing, but to have these localized patches just felt unnatural.

Dan hooted again and took another swig of his beer. “You’re the one that said it. Not me.”

Charlie sat back in his seat. He stared through the windshield at the limitless black sky, dusted in all directions with stars. Christ, New Mexico was gorgeous. Dark, desert brown, intoxicating in its wild beauty. Just like Jasmine. He snarled and slammed his fist into the steering wheel.

“What’s up?” Dan asked. He tipped the can up and finished the last dregs of beer in one long swig.

“Nothing,” Charlie said. He threw the car door open, tore off his seatbelt, and stepped out. In the surrounding silence, thoughts of Jasmine once more threatened to take hold of him. Over the five years they’d dated, she’d become a part of him, as close to him as his own breath. He closed his eyes and saw her, every glorious detail of her: her chocolate brown eyes, plush lips, milky cocoa skin, small and perky breasts, even her gently crooked nose, perfect in her imperfection. *God dammit, Charlie thought, why can’t I just be a dude and forget her, for fuck’s sake?*

He found something else to focus on. Out here, the air was cold, crisp. It felt more like a night in late August than a day in the middle of summer. But that’s how the desert was, cold at night. Charlie knew this was a fact, not from

personal experience, but because Bill Nye had told him so. And what Bill said was God's honest truth.

Dan stumbled out the passenger side door and dropped his can with a clatter onto the cracked and weed-infested asphalt. "God, it's cold," he said. He threw his arms around his shoulders. "God, God, it's cold."

"Should have brought your jacket," Charlie said.

"Yeah, well," Dan said. "I guess I don't think ahead like you do. Tell me, man, where the hell are we going to sleep tonight?"

Charlie let out a scoff. His car had worked fine for him. He hadn't thought about where he was going to sleep in a month now. "We'll find some motel," he said. "Whatever."

"I'm not sharing a bed with you."

"Who says you have to?"

"Hey," Dan laughed, "just because you brought me here and got me all drunk doesn't mean you get the right to go all Brokeback on me."

"Shut up, man."

Dan hooted again, and Charlie groaned. He leaned back against the car and put his hands into his jacket pockets. His breath came out in puffs that reminded him of the one time he had smoked weed. He'd smoked it with Jasmine. Damn it all. Damn everything. Damn Oklahoma, Damn Doctor Kegessen, and Damn Jasmine Hooper. Dan fought a bitter grimace. Kegessen could have her. Had already had her, up and down and sideways. Bastards, both



of them. He growled and once again told himself to stop thinking about it. He was in New Mexico now, damn it all. It would be better here, here in New Mexico, where they lived in adobe and spoke Spanish.

“Bill el Científico,” Charlie said.

“What?” Dan asked.

“Bill. Bill. Bill.” Charlie bobbed his head in time with the words.

Dan threw his arms across the roof of the car. “What?” he asked again.

“Bill, Bill, Bill. Bill, el Científico. Bill. Bill. Bill.” Dan just stared. Charlie sighed. “Damn it, man, just toss me a beer.”

Dan shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “All out. Damn, it’s cold. So where are we going to stay?”

“Paris.” Charlie looked back and glared at Dan. “We’re going to sleep in Paris, along the banks of the goddamn Seine.”

Dan grinned and said, “Nice. Wake me when we get there.” He climbed into the back seat of the car and stretched himself out.

Charlie looked up at the sky and sighed. In all honesty, he didn’t know what they were going to do. They’d driven to New Mexico, fueled by Red Bull and Budweiser (that was Dan’s) and Rum and Coke and anger (that was Charlie’s). The alcohol had greatly worn off, but the anger! The anger, the bright red murderous anger, was still simmering under the surface. Charlie was smothering it, though. Smothering the fuck out of it. There was no reason to let something like justifiable rage lead him into doing something stupid that he

would regret the rest of his life. He shuffled his feet and sighed. The last thing Charlie needed was to decide that it was better for people to die and for him to go to jail than to realize it was better to just let the whole damn thing go.

Meanwhile, here he was in New Mexico. The last five hours had been an absolute blur. Somewhere between the Red Rooster Bar and Grill in Tulsa and Bob's Beer Barn in Oklahoma City, Charlie and Dan had decided to make the trek to the desert. Did they even have family here? Charlie certainly didn't. His father was dead, his mother was living in Vegas making a shockingly good living as a stripper, and he had one cousin, somewhere. Charlie wasn't sure exactly where, since Perry had dropped out of the University of Houston and caught a boat to some country in Southeast Asia. Charlie had gotten one postcard, but it was written in what he'd later been informed was Korean. Perry was eccentric, to say the least.

No, Dan had said something about a brother, or a sister. Or a cousin. Oh, whatever. Charlie couldn't remember what Dan had said. All he could remember was Dan on the back of that mechanical bull, throwing up in huge arcs as the machine bucked. It had been awful. They'd been kicked out of the bar. They might never be allowed back in. It had been great. The most fun Charlie'd had since he'd started dating Jasmine.

Only, no, it wasn't. He'd always had fun with Jasmine. She was exciting and different and – DAMN IT, Charlie thought. He turned and punched the side of the car. It hurt, it hurt delightfully, and Charlie did it again.

“What the hell, man?” Dan said, staring up at Charlie through the tinted back window of Charlie’s Toyota. “I’m trying to sleep in here.”

“Sleep,” Charlie said. He punched the window again. “Sleep. Where am I supposed to sleep? That’s my backseat.”

Dan looked from the backseat to Charlie and back again. “No way,” he said, sitting straight up. “Not here with me.”

“I’m not going Brokeback,” Charlie insisted.

He turned again and leaned back on the car. He didn’t want to sleep. He didn’t feel like sleep. He didn’t think he’d ever feel like sleeping again. What was sleep, when the world had ended?

God damn, what was with the melodrama? Charlie had never been bursting with sappy sob stories before. He’d even scorned the people that told them, sneered at the movies that featured them, couldn’t believe it when his friends decided to talk his ear off about things like that. That was why he was friends with Dan, and the main reason he’d agreed to go drinking with him. Dan was straight-forward. Dan wasn’t melodramatic. Dan was a dude.

“I want to sleeeeeeep,” Dan moaned through the window. “We need to go find somewhere to sleeeeeeep.”

Dan was also a douche. Charlie sighed and got back into the car. He put on his seatbelt and turned the key in the ignition. The car sputtered to life, but Charlie didn’t shift it into drive. For a second, he just sat there, staring out the window at his surroundings. Where were they exactly? He knew the state, but

that was it. They'd been driving down the road – which wasn't a major highway, but just some road that went West from where they'd started. Charlie remembered some sort of conversation he'd had with Dan before they'd left Oklahoma City. Some sort of thing about John Wayne and Gary Cooper. Or maybe it had actually been about John McClane. Who knew? Charlie couldn't remember.

Whatever the reason, he and Dan were now sitting in an abandoned parking lot somewhere in the desert, with nowhere to go and nothing to do. No goals. No destinations. No anything.

What in God's name was Charlie supposed to do now?

He didn't know where he should go. He didn't know what he should do. He felt like crying, but knew he wouldn't. Two days ago, when he was alone in the backseat of his Honda in the Target parking lot, he would've. Today he wouldn't let himself. Not with Dan there. Once again, Charlie felt insanely grateful that Dan was such a dude.

Hallie woke up with stars above her head and sand in her mouth. She couldn't remember how she'd fallen asleep outside in the Zen garden in the first place, or why there was an empty tequila bottle sitting in Buddha's lap. Hallie didn't drink tequila. Thought it tasted like shit.

Speaking of bad tastes... Hallie sat up, smacking her lips and coughing. Ugh. Sand all in her mouth. At least it was the Zen garden sand, nice and white

and, at least mostly, clean. She could've been lying on the front lawn.

Hallie sighed as she thought about the front lawn. She'd wanted to buy Bermuda grass, or Kentucky bluegrass, but in her price range, the normal boring kind of sod that everyone bought was too expensive. Hallie could afford the house, but not the lawn as well. So, she'd stolen some cacti from the desert. Or adopted. Whatever the proper word was, Hallie had done it. Now the lawn was brown but studded with cacti that flowered after rainfall. It was okay, really, even though it wasn't beautiful and green, like the grass in her home state. Lord, she missed Texas. South Texas, where you could walk in the grass in bare feet without having to worry about sticker burrs, goat-head thorns, or scorpions. Hallie hated scorpions.

She sat up and looked around the Zen garden for whoever had been drinking the tequila. Hallie stared at Buddha, and then noticed a foot sticking out from behind the soapstone statue. It was a bare foot, with neon pink toenails that shone brightly in the moonlight. Hallie chuckled. Sam.

"Saaaam," she said, her voice croaking. She coughed. "Sam. Wake up. You can't sleep out here."

The foot stirred and retreated behind Buddha's back as Sam sat up. Then his head peeked out, eyes red and watery, mascara running down his face.

"God, Sam, you look awful," Hallie said. She tried to stand, but her knees failed miserably, and she landed harshly on the sand. She flipped to her knees and started crawling toward him.

Sam groaned and halfheartedly swiped at his face. It didn't do anything but smear the mascara a bit more. "Morning, sunshine," he said.

"Not morning," Hallie said. She reached Sam and patted his ankle. "Sun's not up yet."

"In twenty minutes it will be. I'm guessing we passed out around four." Sam looked down at his toes and stared for a moment, blinking. "Are my toenails... pink?"

"So are your lips," Hallie said as she staggered to her feet. She nearly fell again, but grabbed onto the Buddha and managed to stay standing this time.

"My lips?"

"You borrowed my Coral #3."

"Oh, God, the bargain bin brand? I must've been blitzed." Sam stood up. He retched and bent back over. "Ohhhh, Tequila, lama sabacthani?"

Hallie paused for a second, placing the quote in her head, and then laughed as she understood the joke. "Tequila was never on your side, so it can't have forsaken you." She shuffled over to him and put her arms around his shoulders. "Let's get inside before the sun bakes us both alive."

"We aren't vampires, Hal. I don't think dawn will burn us." Sam shook his head, putting a hand to his cheek. "What on God's green earth happened last night, Hallie? My mind's a total blank."

A long and elaborate answer formed in Hallie's mind, but she didn't want to acknowledge it. They'd gotten drunk so she could forget it. So she joked, "You

took advantage of me in horrible, despicable ways," and batted her eyelashes at him.

"Oh, ho," Sam said. He winked at her, "I knew I'd wear you down eventually. Was it good for you?"

"I meant you maxed out my credit card, you perv," Hallie said. "I prefer my men straight."

"I know you do, darling, and that's what I meant." He stretched his back in one long, catlike arch. "Aaaah, much better. Seriously, Hallie, you can't tell me that you begrudge me that purchase of Chanel. I bought it for you, you know."

The unspoken fact, that it was a consolation gift, hung in the air between them. Her eyes grew hot and Hallie blinked them angrily. People broke engagements every day, and Hallie ordered herself not to fall to pieces because of something people did all the time. Yes, she'd been a fiancée for two years. No, it was not the end of the world that she was single once again.

"Yes, I know you bought that for me," she finally said, sighing. "Thanks, hon, but it's not really my style," she said as they walked up to her stucco house. In her neighborhood, most of the houses had a Spanish or Mexican flair, but Hallie had wanted this one. This one looked Italian, even down to the grapevines painted on the garden shed. She'd tried to grow real grapes, but they had withered in this environment. It was a real pity. Hallie liked grapes.

"You won't mind if I use it, then? The Chanel?" Sam asked. He reached forward with one hand and pulled the sliding door open.

“Be my guest, strange little man,” Hallie said. They limped into the living room and collapsed on her fluffy brown couch. She yawned mightily, surprising herself. “Damn, Sam, I’m exhausted.”

“Really?” Sam replied. “I’m shocked. Who would have thought it wouldn’t be restful to sleep on the ground for two hours after spending half the night drinking?” He put a hand to his neck and winced. “Ohhhh,” Sam moaned. “Remind me never to drink tequila again, never, so long as I live, so help me God.”

“That’s what you said last time,” Hallie said. She turned and laid her head on his chest. “You do what you damn well please. That’s why I love you.”

“Aw, I love you too, honey muffin.” Sam kissed the top of Hallie’s head and then rested his neck against the back of the sofa.

Hallie laughed. “You’re a good guy, Sam, mostly.”

“Mostly?” Sam lifted a hand to his heart, but did not raise his head. “I’m hurt.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” Hallie said. She nestled herself against him and closed her eyes.

Sam guffawed exaggeratedly. “*Moi?*”

Hallie slapped his bicep and then squeezed it affectionately. The conversation between the two lapsed into silence, and aside from the low whoosh of their breaths, the only sound that could be heard was the distant squeaking of Sam’s pet chinchilla’s exercise wheel. Beverly was awake and



running in place inside her cage in the back bedroom.

“You should oil that thing,” Hallie murmured.

“Mmm, what she said,” Sam replied sleepily. He snorted. “Haha. Straight joke.” His chest began to rise and fall, rhythmic and reassuring, and Hallie felt her breathing fall into step with his. There was something comforting about the way she seemed to fit perfectly against Sam’s side, something inherently comfortable about his presence in her life. Without him, the day before would’ve been unbearable. She sighed happily and hugged him as sleep began to take her over.

She yelped when the doorbell rang and Sam’s entire frame jolted upwards. He threw a hand to his chest. “Dear God,” Sam said, panting. “That scared the crap out of me.”

Hallie chuckled wryly. She stood shakily, and glanced at the wall clock. Who’d be here at this hour? Her brain tried to answer that question, but Hallie crushed that hope. She didn’t want him here, not after yesterday. “I’ll be right back,” she said, making her way to the front door.

Through the smoky glass, she could see two silhouettes, both rather tall and definitely male. Her heart thumped twice as the thought once again occurred to her that one of the two might be Steve, coming to apologize or explain or make up some excuse that didn’t really mean anything. Hallie closed her eyes and took a calming breath. It wouldn’t be Steve. They wouldn’t have let him out of jail yet.

She opened the door and blinked as the porch light temporarily blinded her. "Can I help you?" she asked. Then her eyes focused and she actually saw them, and her head cocked to the side. "Hey."

The girl that answered the door was cute, with curly reddish-brown hair and a perky nose, but Charlie hardly noticed that. He was distracted by curiosity, wondering why half her face was coated in sand.

"Dan?" She opened the door wider. "What are you doing here?" She glanced at Charlie, gave him a quick, unsure grin, and then turned her attention back to Dan.

"We came to see you, Cuz," Dan replied. "Can we crash here?"

"That depends. How long are you planning on staying?" Now she looked at Charlie with a hint of suspicion in her eyes. He groaned under his breath. Did he look untrustworthy or something? Apparently. That expression clearly meant, "Great, my cousin the freeloader, with his friend, Freeloader Two." Charlie knew it was irrational, knew that there was no reason he should feel the way he did because the person she disliked wasn't really who he was, but still. With her staring at him like that, he felt like scum.

Dan shrugged, putting his hands in his jeans pockets. He leaned forward and whispered to her. "I'll tell you, Hallie. My, uh, my buddy Charlie here, he's got this problem with his girlfriend being a grade-grubbing whore, and--"

"We're taking a break from college," Charlie interrupted, punching Dan in

the arm. For fuck's sake, did she have to know everything? He didn't even want to admit what had happened to himself. Of course, what Charlie didn't want didn't matter to his traitorous brain. He didn't want to remember his biology class being cancelled, or going back to the apartment early, or walking in on the love of his life bare-ass naked on the living room floor with a pentagenarian's penis in her mouth. *Son of a bitch*, he thought.

"Yeah," Dan said. "Taking a break. We thought maybe we could bum your couch for a while."

"Not this one," a voice called from the living room. "My bum's called it."

Dan leaned forward. "It's just an expression. There's two of us, and we're not sharing. I'm not a fag." Hallie stiffened and, from the living room, Charlie heard a quiet gasp of indignation. Charlie looked down at the ground, but Dan apparently didn't notice either reaction. He asked Hallie, "Who's that?"

"Sam," Hallie said. "You haven't met yet. But he's right. He's got the couch. I've got pillows and blankets, but you'll have to sleep on the floor if you stay here."

"That's fine," Charlie said. He quirked his mouth up into a half-smile. "At least it's not my car."

Dan leaned forward and whispered to Hallie again. "He's been in his car for a month, Cuz. Have a heart."

Charlie punched Dan again, this time in the back. "Dude," he growled.

"Dude," Dan growled back, rubbing his back angrily. "Sorry. Damn." He

turned back to Hallie. "So, for real, can we crash here?"

Hallie chewed her bottom lip as she thought, and Charlie wondered for half a second whether she might consent to be a rebound. He'd certainly be up for it. This girl was definitely no Jasmine, and maybe that was just what he needed.

"I guess you can stay for a while," Hallie said. "Come on in." She stepped backward, letting Dan and Charlie into the house. As she shut the door behind them, she added, "Just for a few days, though. I'm kind of going through some issues of my own, and I don't need houseguests who won't leave."

"Excuse me?" Sam called from the living room. "What was that?"

"Except you!" Hallie chuckled softly. She turned away from Charlie and Dan and headed back to the couch. "You were invited, hon. You're a whole 'nother deal."

"Ain't I, though," Sam said, taking on a bit of Hallie's southern drawl. He looked up at Dan and Charlie, who had followed. "Howdy, fellas. How's it going?"

"Fine, thanks," Charlie said.

"Good," Sam said. The smile in greeting that he sent to Charlie was honest, but the expression he gave to Dan was forced and strained. Charlie remembered the moment before, when Dan had made that offhanded comment referencing homosexuality, and understood exactly what this obviously gay man was thinking. He hoped Dan was smart enough to pick up on the nuances of the

situation. Charlie saw Sam fake a smile as he asked Dan, "How are you?"

"I'm doing great." Dan glanced at Sam's smudgy makeup and scoffed.

"And how are you? Let me guess. You're doing faaaabulous."

Hallie stiffened again, and this time Charlie noticed her fists clench.

"Knock it off, Dan," she said.

"Ah, I'm just busting his balls," Dan said, grinning at Sam. "Unless you don't have those, am I right?"

Charlie glanced over at Hallie, and saw the fury in her face. Instinctively he took a step backward, out of her line of fire. "You get the fuck out of my house," she said.

Dan laughed, looking back at her. "Really, Cuz? That's a bit much, don't you think?"

"OUT!" Hallie screamed, lunging at him. She swung wildly at Dan's shoulders, kicked at his legs, shoved with her shoulders. Any way she could think to push him out the door, she did, and Charlie, startled, watched in horrified fascination as Hallie threw Dan out and slammed the door behind him.

The house fell silent, except for Hallie's heavy breathing. From outside, Charlie heard the distinct sound of his Toyota's left rear door, which had a bit of a creak to it, open and clang shut as Dan got in. Charlie froze unsurely. He looked over at Sam, who sat on the edge of the couch, his eyes thrown wide as he looked at Hallie with concern. Suddenly, Hallie broke. She collapsed against the door. Sam leapt up and ran to her.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay," Sam chanted as he wrapped his arms around Hallie's shaking shoulders. Her tears emerged in silence, somehow infinitely worse than if she'd been wailing. Sam stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. "It's okay. Don't cry." Hallie shook her head and looked up at him. The tears tracing lines on her face through the thin layer of white sand exposed a level of anguish Charlie had never seen before. Her expression made it absolutely clear her soul had been shattered. She was destroyed.

Charlie felt his heart twist in his chest. Even when he'd caught Jasmine with Kegessen, he hadn't felt this way. He'd been hurt, he'd been offended, he'd definitely been angry, but his heart hadn't broken. Not like this.

Hallie looked from Sam to Charlie, and threw a hand to her face. "I'm sorry," she said, and shoved her way out of Sam's embrace. She ran down the hallway and disappeared through a door.

Sam sniffled and wiped his own face as he leaned his back against the wall. "Oh," he said, "Hallie."

Charlie cleared his throat. "I... I should leave, yeah?"

"Guess so," Sam said.

Charlie nodded. "Nice to meet you," he said as he shook Sam's hand. He had his hand on the doorknob when outside, the car started up.

"God no," he said as he wrenched the door open just in time to see the taillights of his Toyota speed off down the road. His hand darted to his empty jeans pocket. "Son of a bitch," he said.

He took a step outside, as if to take off running after his car. But what the hell could he do? He couldn't catch it on his own. "Son of a bitch," he repeated. He reached into his jacket and yanked out his cellphone.

It rang five times before Dan picked up. "Yeah?"

"Son of a bitch," Charlie said again.

"Chill, bro." Charlie could hardly hear Dan's voice over the blaring rock playing from his Toyota's speakers. HIS TOYOTA. "I'm gonna find a Motel 6."

"Son of a bitch, that's my Toyota."

"It's cool," he said, and he let out a belch. "I'm taking real good care of it. I'll call you tomorrow."

The phone went silent. Charlie looked down at saw "Call Ended. Duration 0:21." He flipped it shut and tucked it back into his pocket. He stood in the doorway, staring out into the dark desert, and watched the red glow of his taillights fade into the distance. When they'd gone he turned back to Sam, confused and uncertain whether he wanted to call the police or not.

"Come on back in," Sam said. "Under the circumstances, I don't think Hallie would want me to kick you out right now. She's a good person, really." His voice choked up and he turned away. "Give me a minute, will you?"

Charlie nodded. "Sure."

Sam went into the kitchen area, cut off from the front room by a low island. Charlie walked to the couch and sat down. In the silence, broken only by Sam's shaking breaths, Charlie looked around him. It was a cute house. Cute was

the only way he could think to describe it. Simple white walls, cabinets holding books and knick-knacks, artwork everywhere. This woman had a serious thing for grapes, he realized, looking from the vibrant, kitschy paintings of grape clusters, to the window curtains with grape vines stitched onto them, to the grape-patterned throw pillow on the couch beside him. There was even a picture frame made of interlacing metal grape vines.

Charlie found himself studying the framed photograph. It was Hallie, beaming exuberantly, standing with a tall man in a plaid shirt. The guy wasn't smiling quite as widely, but he didn't look unhappy. Obviously a couple, but the guy wasn't here. Charlie wondered vaguely what that meant, but didn't spend too much time pondering.

Sam came into the living room, carrying two soft drink bottles, a brand Charlie didn't recognize and assumed was the generic local soda. "Care for one? It's kind of like super sour Sprite."

"Sure, thanks," Charlie said.

Sam sat on the other end of the couch and handed Charlie the soda. Twisting off the top, Charlie tried it. Jerking forward, he coughed and blinked, his eyes watering. "You asshole," he gasped, still coughing. "That's like sucking on a lime."

Sam's mouth twitched as he tried and failed to conceal his schadenfreude. "I warned you it was sour."

"Sour's not the word for it," Charlie said, putting the bottle down on



Hallie's coffee table. He swallowed a few times, but couldn't clear the burning sensation from his throat. "That's, like, damn, man, hydrochloric."

"Oh, sweet, delicious hydrochloric acid," Sam chuckled, taking a long swig.

Charlie shook his head. "No way, man. No way." This was nice, he realized, just being able to sit and joke around with someone, without feeling pressure to keep cool or be a dude.

"So," Sam said, putting his soda down beside Charlie's, "we never actually formally met. I'm Sam."

"Charlie," Charlie replied, and they shook hands.

"Nice to meet you, Charlie." Sam's gaze, although vacant, stared down the hallway after Hallie. "Sorry you had to show up today. Any other day, and it wouldn't have gone that badly."

"Um," Charlie said.

"I mean, you know, we know how to ignore jokes. Hell, sometimes they're even funny. It happens. But she's under a lot of strain lately," Sam said, gesturing toward the hallway. "She wouldn't have blown up like that, normally, even with him saying things like that."

"I'm sorry," Charlie said. "He was only kidding."

"Yeah, well." Sam shrugged. "That was Steve's excuse too."

"Steve?"

Sam's gaze shot over to Charlie's face and lingered for a few moments.

Charlie realized he was being scrutinized for trustworthiness, and suddenly found himself hoping he would pass the test.

“Yeah. Steve,” Sam said finally, gesturing toward the photo. “That motherfucking piece of shit.” Sam’s eyes glazed over, but Charlie could see a roiling flicker deep within the pupils, a dangerous, sad anger. Charlie felt a twinge in his gut, and a dark sense of foreboding settled low in his stomach. The expression on Sam’s face... Charlie had thought that he knew what anger was. He had thought he understood pure rage. Now he realized, whatever he had been feeling during the drive out here to New Mexico, it was nothing compared to this. He didn’t know what was going on, but he wasn’t part of it, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to bring himself to ask. Sam took a swig of his soda. “Shit,” he said, wiping his mouth. His gaze drifted toward the hallway as a door creaked open. Hallie emerged, her eyes red but her face dry.

“Hey,” she said, staring at them from the end of the hall.

“Hey,” Sam said.

For a few moments, no one spoke.

“Sorry I lost it like that,” she said.

“Oh, no, no,” Charlie said. “No, Dan was being a douche.”

She looked at him and smiled slightly. “Yeah, he was. Still.” She sighed and looked at Sam. “So, I heard him take off.”

“Yeah,” Charlie answered. “To find a motel.”

Hallie chewed her lip as her nostrils flared subtly. “And he just left you

here," she said. "Son of a bitch."

Sam, who had just taken another gulp of his soda, snorted and sprayed out a mouthful. "That's what he," he said, sputtering, "that's what he said!" He laughed and coughed it out.

"You're an idiot, Sam," Hallie said. "But my goddamn son of a bitch cousin is an even bigger one." She sighed heavily. "So here's a thought. What say you come sleep in the bedroom with me, and let..."

"Charlie," Sam supplied.

"Charlie," Hallie nodded. "Let Charlie have the couch."

Sam put his soda back down on the coffee table. "That sounds good to me. Help me up, woman."

Hallie let out a short, barking laugh and took Sam's hand. "Idiot," she said as she pulled him to his feet.

"I love you too, Hal." Sam put his arms around her and they hugged for a moment.

Hallie laughed again, her voice warbling as fresh tears threatened to emerge. "Stop it." She turned to Charlie. "I'll get you a pillow and a blanket."

"Ah, no thanks," Charlie said. "I'm fine here as it is." He took up one of the throw pillows and patted it. "I like the grapes."

Hallie smiled at him. "I like grapes too. If you're sure..."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay then." Hallie and Sam, arms around each other's waists, turned

and made their way down the hallway. "Good night."

"Night," Charlie replied. He stretched out on his side on the couch and closed his eyes. He hadn't quite realized just how tired he was, but now he couldn't ignore the heavy, dragging weight in his bones. It wasn't just sleepiness. It was fatigue. He exhaled, feeling himself sink into the cushions.

Damn it. He still couldn't fall asleep. He wanted to, needed to, but he just couldn't. It was as if there was a coffee pot in his brain that someone had forgotten to take off the burners.

He flipped onto his back, folded his hands atop his stomach, and stared up at the ceiling. There were conflicting thoughts that he couldn't quite put voice to, brightly colored confusions flittering through his mind. He pondered the events of the last month. What he had believed and what he had thought he'd known. What had happened, and what had mattered. He could feel an understanding of sorts lurking in the back of his mind, but he couldn't coerce it to emerge and solidify.

The house grew silent around him, and still he could not come to a conclusion. He didn't know what it was, but he knew he needed it. The conclusion, and that was it, would be the one thing which would let him sleep and let the world fall away from him. He closed his eyes, hoping that he could fool his mind into resting.

As he lay there, trying to calm his mind, the sun rose and peeked in through the sliding glass doors. He felt the warm, golden light of the New

Mexico morning as it splashed across his face. Lifting himself from the couch, he squinted against the brilliance of the sunrise. The sun rose anew, and the world had not ended. It had not, had never ended for him, and he knew it now.

Charlie inhaled deeply and his eyes opened wide. His heart pounded in his chest as he finally understood what he'd been trying to grasp. To hell with Jasmine.

Charlie smiled and lay back down onto the welcoming couch cushions. He closed his eyes and easily fell into a restful sleep, content in the first memory of the rest of his life, the light pouring around the tall Buddha statue, sitting completely at peace in the middle of Hallie's backyard.

### A Nun Walks Into a Bar

Sister Stephanie walked into the small, dim bar, expecting the few scattered patrons to gawk at her attire. None of them looked up. Stephanie wondered if they simply didn't care, or if this meant that some of the other sisters partook.

The woman drawing Blue Moon from the tap looked up at hearing Stephanie's approach and said, "Hello, Sister." She handed the filled glass to a patron, a girl in her early twenties wearing a dress with a shocking neckline. Heavens, what had happened to decent fashions? The bartender leaned her elbow on the counter. "Welcome to Tina's. I don't guess you're here for a drink, am I right?"

"I hope to find someone," Stephanie quickly explained. "I was told Mary Wright worked here?"

"She does," said the bartender. "That's me." She put a hand to her heart and laughed, "Have you come to draw me back into the fold?"

Sister Stephanie paused for a moment, looking over the short blond behind the counter. Mary Wright's haircut, a perky frosted bob, seemed too exuberant for a woman who had once joined the convent. Still, Stephanie could imagine this young lady's fresh, honest expression framed by a sister's habit.

"Or did you want something else," Mary Wright said, straightening up and putting both her palms flat on the bar.

Stephanie drew the thin, simple chain and cross from her bag. "I found this when I was cleaning," she explained. "It had fallen behind the bed. They said it might be yours."

Mary's smile collapsed and she breathed out a long, husky sigh. "Yes." She took the necklace from Stephanie's open hand. "I thought I'd tossed it in the garbage. Guess not."

"Oh," Stephanie said. She lowered her eyes and turned to leave.

"Wait, no, it wasn't like that," Mary said. She came around from behind the counter. "I know I can give out that impression sometimes, but please don't think I'm Godless. I didn't throw out God. Well, maybe sort of, but not..." She grimaced. "I'm sorry. I'm not explaining myself very well. Please, will you let me explain?"

"I suppose," Stephanie said. She followed Mary to a small round table in the corner and sat down. For a moment, Mary let silence build between them. She stared down at the cross and ran her thumb over the engraved M on its center. The wall of silence grew thicker, brick by soundless brick, until Stephanie realized that perhaps Mary would not be able to attain the absolution she so clearly desired.

"I haven't been a good person," Mary said suddenly, her voice a sledgehammer. She closed her eyes. "I, um, that's why I decided to turn to the

church. I was... I guess I was running away." She opened her eyes and stretched her lips into a tight smile. Stephanie could see a thin layer of Mary's unshed tears threatening to brim over. "No," Mary said, "I was definitely, obviously running away. I..." Her chin trembled.

Stephanie took Mary's hand in hers. Mary smiled. "Thanks," she said, squeezing Stephanie's hand. "I just... I really want to tell you this." Stephanie lowered her head in a gentle, modest nod, although of course she'd been quite able to see that. "You see," Mary explained, "I've never told anyone, and..." Mary's eyes looked up to the ceiling, and, Stephanie thought, perhaps to God.

"When I was seventeen," Mary said, "I met this guy. This man. Will. He was just so damn masculine." Mary blanched. "Sorry. He was *very* manly. At least, I thought so. He wore this black jacket, not a cheesy Knight Rider kind of jacket, but trim, and sleek, and it made him look like a panther. And the way he treated me, like I was grade A prime cut, and it was feeding time."

Mary's face paled again, and she put her free hand to her mouth. "Sorry. I just mean, it was exciting. So exciting." Mary paused and snapped her lips shut.

"Mary," Stephanie let out a short, sharp laugh. "Stop censoring yourself." She stopped for a moment and recognized the thrill in her chest. She'd been interested in Mary's tale. She knew it was unchristian of her to desire to hear this story, and she knew it was sin to desire to revel in the sordid details of an unfettered life. Yet again she stopped for a second, pondering. Surely helping others, even to one's own detriment, was surely the most Christian path to



follow. This girl needed her mercy, and she would give it. "Please," she said, "say what you feel you need to say."

"Okay." Mary smiled, but it was flat and joyless. She cleared her throat. "He took me places," Mary continued, "clubs I could never get into on my own, and at the bars I never had to show my I.D. And I, um, I just let myself get..." Mary took in another sharp breath, "...carried away. One night, it was just another night, the same as we'd been doing for ages, and we went to this nightclub in the city. I don't remember what it was called. I was, well... Will had given me some things."

"Things?"

"Sorry..." Mary said, reaching up to rub her eyes.

Stephanie tried to ignore her own impatience, but she wanted to know right now what Mary meant to tell her. "Things?" she repeated.

"Drugs," Mary said. "Sorry. Yes, drugs. A few lines and a pill I took from Will. By the time we got to the club, my head was full of rainbows." Mary's moist eyes turned from their normal smoky blue to an almost translucent azure. "God, I remember the rainbows. It was so good."

Mary lowered her head and the sparkle in her eyes dimmed. "I mean it felt good. Will and I went in, and I passed by the bouncer. Never mind that I was underage, he just let us through. We went to a room in the back, since Will was friends with the proprietor or something. They had more drugs, a few rocks, some E, whisky and vodka and who knows what else. I drank everything they

handed me, and Will did lines off my chest.”

“Wait,” Stephanie stopped her. “Lines?”

“Coke,” Mary said. “Cocaine.”

“Of course,” Stephanie said, feeling like an idiot. It had been months since she had been out in the world, countless years since she had any sort of connection to the various vices, and within that time, the chain of logical thought between “lines” and “cocaine” had snapped.

“And, um,” Mary continued. “Then we went too far.” Twin tears fell down her face, and she made no move to wipe them away. “Will put a tourniquet on his arm and picked up a syringe. His hands were really twitchy, on account of the cocaine, so he had me inject him.” She sniffled and finally wiped her cheeks with both hands. “I asked him if I could have another pill and he didn’t lift his head. And then... then I ran. I went back to the apartment we’d been sharing, packed a bag, and joined the Convent of the Holy Mother the next day.”

“Oh...” Stephanie said.

“This was Will’s necklace,” Mary said, holding the cross, upside down, to her heart. Stephanie realized it was engraved with a W. “It was the only thing of his I kept. I kept it to remember what I’d done, to remember Will, to remember why I took the vows. But holding onto those bad memories,” she said, dropping the necklace on the table, “I knew it wasn’t good. It was like I could feel my heart and lungs turning sooty. Sometimes even breathing tore me up inside. I realized

I'd just gone from one extreme to the other without any thought as to why. Do a good thing for the wrong reasons, and it's not a good thing anymore."

Mary stopped. This time she took Stephanie's hand in hers. "You see, by leaving the convent, I was able to start over, completely clean. I haven't rejected God. I found Him." She stood and dropped the necklace into a small metal wastebasket. "So, thanks for bringing it back, but I don't need anything of Will's to remember why I need to be a good person. God bless, Sister."

Mary walked back behind the bar. For a moment, Stephanie sat there at the table in the corner, thinking perhaps, under the circumstances, the police might better be informed. She slowly stood and waded through the smoky air to the entrance of the bar. Outside, in the crisp night, she stopped and took a deep breath. Then Stephanie let her feet lead her back to her room at the Convent of the Holy Mother.

At the Pub in Ten Points

Gimme another beer, Tony.

Aah. That's damn good, kid. Mighty fine of you. What is this, Sam Adams? Eh, it ain't bad. Course it ain't quite as good as the brew you could get back when this place were the Bitch and Albatross, back afore everything happened, afore Fred Grindle Sr. bought up the place and changed the name to spare the townsfolk's sensibilities. Ain't nothing compares to them days at the Bitch. I tell you, Tony, I remember things like nothing you ever seen. I remember...

You ever hear about Mike the Headless Chicken? The thing about Mike is, the farmer tries to take off this chicken's head so's the missus can fry him up for supper. The chicken, not the farmer, course. Though I s'pose things wouldn't have ended up a hell of a lot different if they'd started that way instead.

Anyways. The farmer takes this ax and he makes a nice clean sweep right down through the bird's neck. Instead of flopping on the ground or running about like a proper dead chicken's s'posed to do, Mike stands up, ruffles his feathers like he's brushing himself off, and goes on living his happy, headless life. At least until the day Farmer What's-his-face forgets the eye dropper he

were using to clear out Mike's airway and Mike chokes to death. But even a thing like that is just your basic trial and error. At least, that's what Sam figgered.

"Dan," Sam says to me one day, a Tuesday I believe it were. We was sitting at our table in the Bitch and Albatross.

That were her full name, the Bitch and Albatross. Fred Grindle were an idiot to change it to Dog and Skua, God rest him. But anyways, the pub were the Bitch when we started drinking there, and I ain't never really been able to get my mind to make the switchover, so I'm calling her the Bitch. We went and drank most days after work let out. Weren't much more to do. Still ain't, really.

Every part of the Bitch were good sturdy pine. The walls, the chairs, the tables. And there weren't stuff on the walls, like all this horseshit you got in here nowadays, the neon and the street signs and that damn deer head over by the door. You can blame Fred Grindle Jr. for that, kid. Lord knows I do. The Bitch's style were just simple and easy; nothing to take away from the purpose of the place so's you could devote yourself entirely to the drink.

Our table, Sam's and Jake's and mine, our table were near to the fireplace, enough so's we could feel the warmth but not be bothered by it. Plus it gave us three a mighty fine view of the bar. Weren't nothing finer on a winter's night than sitting by that fire and watching Lou Belle Lindon pour a round of drinks. Never no mind that she had hair the color of spun gold and eyes like emeralds. Although she were a girl in her early twenties, she weren't no princess. Lord knows she were more than capable of using a shotgun, and she could beat your

ass six ways to Sunday in a fight. She run the bar all by herself, since her daddy done took off with that waitress. Lou Belle had moxie, no mistake. I woulda married her, given the chance.

Anyways. "Dan," Sam says to me, "it weren't just luck, 'ey?"

You gotta understand that by this time, Sam and me are on our fourth round. Jake were there too, but he were nose to the oak a mug afore, snoring to beat the band. Never could hold it, could our Jakey boy. Least, not like me. By God, there'd be nights when I'd drain the whole barrel all by my lonesome and be fit to tap dance home. And that were the Bitch's Ale, like I said. Not this watered-down Sam Adams shit.

Anyways. This particular night, we three was the only customers in the bar. I s'pose it coulda been how the next day were Christmas and all. I never paid no mind to holidays back then. They didn't matter, 'cause I didn't have anybody but my Ma, and she lived the next state over, half a week's walk on foot. Pa weren't there either, since he died in the Great War and all. But at least over the holidays I always had drinking company. Sam had parents and a brother, but they didn't talk none. And Jakey boy, he were an orphan.

So anyways, I snaps my fingers at Lou, who nods and brings me over another mug. She's cool and clear and angel-like, and she draws my eyes to her as she's swishing back and forth. I ain't referring to Lou Belle Lindon. Used to be that alcohol, especially the Bitch's Ale, had some kinda call to me, even more'n a mighty fine woman. And Lou, she were mighty fine. By God, even her name

were musical, and she were definitely what you might call a distraction. So, what with her and the brew, you can understand how I ain't putting all my mind on our pal Sam, which he don't take kindly to.

He slams his hand down, hard enough so's to make Jake snort and lift his head.

"Whaddaya *want*?" Jake says. His voice is high and reedy and watery all at the same time. It fits him, see. He were real tall and real thin, and his neck were shaped just like one of them cans what holds tennis balls, only there were a lump as big as your eye in the middle for his Adam's apple. Jake were younger than me, not quite old enough by legal standards, even then, to join us at the Bitch, but Lou figgered if he were old enough to near kill himself working in the mines, he were old enough for a drink or two after. So she figgered it weren't much trouble to give the kid a few pints now and again. "Whaddaya want?" Jake repeats, his voice getting softer and deeper like he's falling into a well.

It were kinda dangerous to talk that way to Sam. Our Sam, understand, he were the biggest, meanest son of a bitch in Ten Points. He never once cut his beard or his fingernails, and I cain't tell you if he owned more'n one pair of pants. Working with him weren't all that easy. But once you got the man to drinking afterward, he'd start to talking so's to make you forget his faults. He'd rant sometimes, always entertaining, or tell you a story or two what could freeze your balls off, but usually he'd start to philosophizing. Philosophizing, mind, coming from a coal miner like me. I ain't saying I ain't smart, but I admit guys

like me ain't geniuses. Weirdest damn thing, really, how a man smart as Sam ended up mining. Them nights at the Bitch, when Sam'd start talking about them higher things after a couple of mugs, there weren't nothing finer in all of creation. And this night were looking like it might be one of them.

But like I say, Sam were pretty vicious sometimes, and he don't like Jake not paying him mind. So Sam snarls. A real snarl, it were, with all his teeth showing. I were so drunk at this point that for a second there I almost thinks he's a bear, for all the hair he's got on him. Then I blinks, and I knows where we are. Jake's got his head to the table again, and Sam still looks angry-like, from being ignored and interrupted and such, so I turns back to my drink. It weren't a good idea no how to tangle with our Sam.

"It weren't just luck," Sam says as he lowers his mug and wipes foam from his beard. "Sure, luck had a hand in it, you see, but there's science and summat in it too."

It were an odd thing, Sam all nice and liquored up. At work, he were more a bulldozer type, doing his job steady and strong but putting no mind to it. But put a beer or two into him, and the man starts with science this and philosophy that. More'n half the time I couldn't understand just what exactly he might be saying, but that were part of the magic of it, I s'pose.

"Science and summat," I repeats, afore taking a nice long swig. By God, I miss them nice long swigs. You can taste every goddamn hop in the batch



through a nice long swig, and that Ale were mighty fine. Real rich, not like this here. I ain't said stop, Tony. Gimme another.

Anyways. Sam keeps going like I ain't said ought. "The bird ain't got no brain, 'ey? The brain's still in his skull." He reaches to his pocket and pulls out a folded-up piece of paper. "Lookit, right here," he says, and he unfolds it and puts it on the table in front of me.

I sees the picture and cain't help but laugh. Funniest damn thing I ever seen. Cain't hardly forget seeing a thing like that. It were this black and white, real grainy picture of this chicken. Mike's head were lying on the ground under his legs, and there's this real dark hole at the top of the neck, and a body can hardly look away from it. It were real weird, seeing walking legs above a sleeping head. Snickering, though, it don't make Sam happy.

"Ain't the point," Sam growls at me. "Point is... with the head over here," he waves his right hand, "and his body over... here," he stretches out his left arm and jabs at the air, real purposeful-like, "there ain't no brain on the body, 'ey? And things cain't rightly live with no brain on the body."

"A-yeah. Less'n you take Jakey boy as example of otherwise," I says, and I slaps a hand on Jake's shoulder. He moans like a banshee, but otherwise he don't react.

"Less'n I take Jake," Sam grins, and by God, he don't never look more like a bear than then. "What I'm talking about, Danny lad, is what made that bird keep?"

“God,” I says, and I tips up my mug to finish her off.

“I’m talking about science,” he barks at me.

“Or summat,” I says, and I snaps my fingers at Lou.

That’s when Sam punches the sod out of me. Me and chair and mug all alike go tumbling backward and away. Me and Sam, we was always roughing each other up, good-natured-like. Course, Sam and Jake was always roughing each other up good-natured-like too. We figgered it were just Sam’s way, see. Me and our Jakey boy, we were fond enough of the fella to look past his faults, few and far between as they was. So then I gets up and resets myself and I holds out my mug to Lou. She keeps it coming. Good girl, were Lou Belle Lindon, always keeping an eye on our table.

Right as I goes to drink from this new fresh-filled mug I hiccups twice, real quick-like, and I spills it onto my shirt. Weird, that were, cause normally the hiccup thing don’t start on me ‘til long after seven or eight. Tell the truth, I’d lost count, but hell, Jake were keeping tally for us, since it were his turn that night. So I looks down at Jake’s napkin then, and there weren’t no more’n five marks on it. I waits a moment, waiting for the hiccups, but they never come. So I shrugs and keeps on drinking.

“Mike weren’t the only one neither,” Sam says and slams his mug on the table. I tell you, them mugs were indestructible, made out of some God-knows-what kind of glass. You slam a mug made of that on a guy’s skull and it’ll bounce right off, not like this here shattery shit. So Sam brings out another bit of

newspaper and says, "I done some research, Dan. Lookit here." He taps on the paper and I looks down.

It were an article, from the *Sault Ste. Marie Evening News*, and no other. There it were, black and white, telling all about another headless chicken what lived after they gave her the chop. "What made her keep," Sam says, "what made her keep, just like what made Mike keep, was--"

Jake moans, and he slides out of his chair to the floor.

"The brain," Sam says, ignoring Jake and poking at his own forehead with one big stubby finger. T'were the middle one he used, so's I recall. "The tail end of the brain right there where the neck starts, 'ey? I figger they left a little bit of it on the body when they cut. Slice it just right and presto. Headless Mike. Headless... Henrietta." He guffaws then, a real honest to God guffaw. His whole head's thrown back and I can just about see clear into his stomach.

"Maybe it's only chickens as can do it," I says, and then I empties out my mug. I looks back to Sam and I says, "They ain't terrible complex things, chickens. Dumbest birds I ever known. Maybe chicken brains ain't all that necessary in the first place."

"Maybe, maybe, ma<sup>aaa</sup>aa<sup>aaa</sup>yyybe," Jake sings out from somewhere under us. Sam kicks out with his right foot and Jake shuts up.

Lou refills Sam's mug, and I thinks could be she's got a yen for him, since she stares for a bit. Tell the truth, I weren't that upset with her staying, since then I gots me a perfect view. By God, kid, the stuff she wore in them days.

But Sam's on a jag, and he don't pay her much mind. "Think about this," Sam says, and he slams his palm on the tabletop. "You got, what, a thousand chickens a month? Over the entire world, even more, 'ey? Now, some folks prefer wringing to cutting," Sam says, and pauses to take another drink. "But saying that, there's still nine, ten thousand a year, and saying *that*, since time immemorial and mankind's been killing chickens by chopping off their heads, that there's a big fucking mess of chickens."

Lou refills my mug, and Jake's too, even as how he's up under the table. A good girl, that one, real considerate. And Sam says, "You take that many birds over that long a time, and not a chopper paying mind to what he's really doing, and you get mostly dead birds. It's a million to one chance, and Mike were that millionth bird. What I'm saying then, is say we was to take that many people's heads off over that long a time. Even seeing as how none of them choppers are calculating anything, odds are good we'd have the same thing happen."

"Like them typing monkeys," I says. "Them what'll make Shakespeare."

"Sure," Sam says. "All a matter of odds, 'ey? Unless the chopper was to think good about what he were doing."

"And that'd better the odds?"

"Course it would," Sam says. "Think of it. We seen how it works. You lose most of the brain to the chop, but looks to me like the bigger bit of the brain ain't entirely necessary, 'ey?"

“Much as you use the bigger bit of yours, I’d be inclined to agree,” I says. Now normally I ain’t fool enough to poke fun at our Sam like that, and had things gone different I woulda regretted ever saying it, but he weren’t given enough time just then to turn any anger at me.

From up under the table, Jake laughs, this real long drawn out thing like “Haaaaaaaaa!” It’s a sound what rises up, ‘til his voice cracks cause he cain’t hit them notes. I cain’t quite do it myself, but you get the picture.

Sam starts to get this look like he could punch the Madonna. And his voice gets this dangerous tone what’s real low, a kinda brassy baritone, a steady, solid-like voice what’s as sharp and clear as a slap to the face. Sam says to Jake, “Shut the fuck up, goddamn it, or I’ll whoop your sorry ass.”

Jake takes a couple deep breaths, and he starts to talk in this sing-song voice what really gets Sam’s goat. Jake says, sing-songing, which were a real bad lapse in judgment on his part, he says, “He don’t use his bit! Haaaaaaaaa!” Ah, you shoulda seen it. Sam squints his eyes and lifts his chin, and what with the big bushy eyebrows and big bushy beard, Sam’s whole face starts to shrink into his head ‘til it looks like he ain’t nothing but one great big mound of pepper-gray hair.

Sam pushes his chair back, and he starts to get up. I ain’t one to make something out of nothing, but from the shade of purple under Sam’s beard, I knows it ain’t gonna be good. And I leaps up fast as I can, but my legs were just a bit shaky.

Sam looks from me to Jake, and he sorta stiffens his neck a little, and instead of delivering some Sam-like wrath, he turns and walks out the main door. Some bit of the back of my mind figgers he were letting Jake off the hook, like he were feeling the holiday spirit and all, so I puts the thought away.

Since I were already up and all, I leans down to give Jake a hand. It don't work right off since he don't seem to have control over his legs either. But after a bit I gets him to his feet. I does my best to lower him nice-like into a chair, but he falls to the table and flops there on his back, his arms and legs dangling off the table's edge, and he looks like a damn rubber chicken.

Lou comes over, and I expects her to offer to refill my mug. But she puts one hand on the edge of the table and looks down at Jake. "He okay?" she asks, and by God, kid, it makes your day to hear the woman say just one word, let alone two. So I were real happy.

I smiles at her, and I says, "Lou Belle, darling, he's as fine as your eyes."

A-yeah, I were a charmer in them days.

Anyways. She looks at me, and I thinks we share a moment there. By God, I woulda married that woman.

"I'll get him some coffee," she says, going back behind the bar. "He'll at least be awake enough to get himself home safe and sound. And I'll fill your mug again, if that's to your liking."

"Thanks, darling, much obliged," I says and I sits myself back down.

So then back in comes our Sam, and he's carrying the biggest meanest hatchet I ever seen.

"I'll show you, Danny lad," he says, and as he steps forward snow falls from his hair and coat and starts to dust the floorboards. "Get a man who knows what he's doing."

"Sam, you idiot," Lou hollers out. "Put that down. You'll hurt someone."

"Get a man," Sam repeats, louder, "who knows what he's doing, to make the slice at the right angle, and you'll have a man live with no head."

"Sam, for God's sake, put it down!" Lou says, coming back out from around the bar.

"Course we gotta start out with the closest thing we got to a chicken, 'ey?" Sam says, and he does his big old guffaw again, only this time I think I can see down straight to the black fire in his soul. It weren't a good place in there, Tony. Ain't no two ways about it. But that's when I know what he were thinking of doing.

"Sam," I says, "a human being just ain't the same thing--"

"As a chicken," he says, and he laughs again. "We already done established that, Danny lad, now ain't we? Hashed through every goddamn detail of this here business over the last hour. You remember, Dan. You remember the goddamn monkeys. C'mere, Jakey boy," Sam says, "let's see that chicken neck of yours." He takes another few steps forward, and Lou screams.

Jake were full passed out by then, sprawled across the tabletop and all, and I weren't the type of guy to leave a friend in that sorta situation, even though I were drunker than I ever been and had more aching to run away than I ever felt.

I takes a step to the right, and I puts myself right there in between Jake and Sam. "Go get help, Lou," I says, keeping my eyes on Sam.

"Shove over, Dan," Sam says. "I know the place to cut... right behind them big dumb ears all the way down through the jaw. Ain't nothing gonna go wrong."

"Bullshit," I says. "You know well as I know that a hatchet ain't a goddamn precision instrument. Put the damn thing down, afore you hurt a body."

"I ain't gonna hurt him. I'm gonna make him famous," Sam says, and he gives me this real wicked grin.

Then he swings the hatchet in this big long lazy arc, so's to bring it up behind his head. He don't swing it down, he just holds it there in his right hand and keeps on staggering up to me. He were as close to me as I never wanted him to get, and I presses backwards. The edge of the table, which were in all honesty un-sanded and rough as the devil's tongue, starts to bite into my back. I still got a bit of a scar, no mistake.

To my left were Jake's arm, and to my right were his leg, and I leans myself over to the left, hoping to block the way from Sam to Jake's neck.



“Cain’t let you hurt him, Sam,” I says. “He’s our pal, is Jakey boy.”

“Our pal,” Sam says, and he smiles. Only then I realizes that it ain’t no smile. That were a goddamn smirk, twitched up in the corner to where it were bunching up his right cheek. And a smirk is the ugliest meanest hateful-est thing in human existence. Cause that twitch, see, it makes a body wanna look up at the eyes, and with a smirk, there ain’t no kindness in them eyes, and whatever mirth you find there, it just ain’t good. A body can suffer from that kinda mirth.

And the kinda mirth I seen in our Sam’s charcoal-gray eyes, it about scares the living shit outta me. I looks into them eyes and I realizes that he ain’t gonna hesitate to cut me if I stay put, and if I don’t get a move on, I ain’t probably gonna live past sun-up.

That were when every thought in my mind kept saying the same thing, telling me to run like hell cause this crazy son of a bitch were about to swing down his arm and bury that hatchet halfway into my throat. He weren’t gonna be able to slice all the way through, but once I were down, he woulda been able to go right ahead and slice through Jake. I coulda run, but then he woulda got to Jake for sure, and Jake don’t deserve to die. He ain’t never hurt a body, not ever, and he weren’t no more’n fifteen, ain’t even lived no kind of life yet. Trying to take off his head, it just weren’t right.

And when I realizes that, it comes to me. The only thing left to do, I were gonna hafta try and stop Sam. Maybe Lou woulda got back with help in time, maybe not, but at least I woulda tried something. So I braces my hands on the

edge of that table, and I pushes myself into Sam hard as I can muster. Coulda been I makes some kind of war cry, but it's hard to remember just when I starts to screaming. I sure end up screaming, since that hatchet of his chops right into my left arm. And that's my best scar, right there, see her? A-yeah, she's a beauty, no mistake. Looks like a goddamn sidewinder. When I flex, the damn thing wriggles.

Anyways. I were bleeding something fierce, but when us two meet the floor, I lands on his wrist, and I holds down the arm with the hatchet. The blade were coated in blood and flesh and bits of else. I dunno what all. I ain't gonna look too closely at a thing just been yanked from my still bleeding arm.

I s'pose I were trying to get that hatchet out of Sam's hand, though it weren't working. He were twice my age, getting on in years as it were, so's I coulda had what you might call an upper hand, but I were losing blood and consciousness besides.

Then I starts to lose my ground too. I were using mostly my own body weight to hold down his arm but then Sam flips us over. After the switch, I were gonna hafta use what little arm strength I still had, see. So it weren't looking good.

Sam yanks outta my grip and my whole upper body slams onto the floor, so I yells out. This time, I ain't even got the excuse of saying it were a battle cry, it were just an out and out scream of pain. There just ain't no words to describe the

feeling of every bit of your entire body starting to burn at the same time. And then after that, I weren't able to move no more.

Sam don't even react. He just turns to the table, and from my point of view on the floor, I cain't see much more'n Sam's back and Jake's hand. Sam reaches out with his left arm, I s'pose to grab Jake's head and hold her steady.

Now, this next part I ain't exactly sure on. What with the drinking and the bleeding and the fighting, that's when I musta passed out and dreamed all the rest. Hell, for all I know, maybe I did. Wouldn't be the first time I seen something that weren't there or never happened, I s'pose, and like I said, what with blood loss and beer besides, maybe... I'll tell you what I remember all the same. Even if it ain't true, I promise I ain't making it up.

So I were down there on the floor, and the way Sam's looming over Jake, with that there hatchet in his big sweaty hand, I swear to God, that point I thinks it's all over. Then from across the room I hear Lou's voice sing out. Swear to God, it were singing like if her throat were made of silver strings and golden pipes. I shit you not. Most glorious thing I ever heard. And suddenly there were this wavery light, like looking up at the sun through clear water, only it were everywhere.

I said before how I seen Sam's soul, and it were ugly and dark. It were all full of hatred and bile, things I musta known was in Sam but ignored. And as he were standing over Jake, his soul starts to come right out of his body through his mouth. It were a big dark purple mess. I don't know what it were made of, but it

were sorta solid and liquid all the same time. And on the surface of it, these things was popping out, first like boils and then breaking away and flying off like bats. Sam's standing there, letting bats leak out of his face, and the hatchet's back up behind his head. And I seen them purple bats come out of his mouth, spiraling out of his goddamn mouth, and I seen them free-fall at Jake.

Then, up above me, the purple coming out of Sam's head explodes, and takes his whole head with it. He slumps down to his knees, then he falls onto his stomach and stays there. Then I hears footsteps, and there were Lou, helping Jake stand up.

When they get over by me, she stops, and sees that Jake can stand by himself. So she kinda leans down over me a bit, and by God, the look in that woman's eyes done set me for life. Ain't never been another like her. Cain't never be. She smiles and lowers her lips to my cheek. Her hair sorta brushes over my arm, and suddenly I ain't got no more pain. None at all. Still cain't move, though. She whispers goodbye to me, and she brushes my cheek with her hand, and then she and Jake go on.

I tries to follow them with my eyes, but I cain't see the doorway and I cain't much move at all. It starts to get cold, and snow starts drifting in. It covers the floors, the tables, even puts out the fire in the Bitch's fireplace.

And I ain't got no kinda memory after that, so I s'pose I were well and truly out.

Next day, there ain't a thing the matter with the bar. No blood, no snow, not even any water damage from if the snow were melted. There were just me, asleep down on the floor, with a bandage around my arm over a scar I cain't rightly explain, with memories I s'pose ain't real, and with three friends just up and disappeared.

I cain't say for sure as to what happened. Police called it an unsolved mystery. For a time, folks around here talked about it, but I s'pose it were just the novelty of the thing. After a while, Fred Grindle bought up the place, changed her name and her face, and the town moved on. Weren't nobody but me left to care, and ain't nobody but me who remembers now. Damn, it ain't that I remember 'em. Nah, it's different. I miss 'em. Don't get me wrong, kid, you're nice company, so far as that goes. But sitting here ain't nothing like them nights at the Bitch. And there's this empty place in my gut that cain't ever get filled, no matter how much beer I pour into it. I s'pose all it is, is me just missing my friends. But anyways. That's what I seen. Mug's empty. Top me off, Tony.

Zoos Have Rules for a Reason

The phone rang in the middle of the night. Roberta swore, but couldn't honestly say she minded. Insomnia was a bitch.

"Hello?" she said.

"It's me," said the deep, masculine baritone on the other end of the line. She didn't recognize the man's voice, but before she could ask who was calling, he continued. "I suppose you think it's my fault that crocodile took your father's arm. It's not."

There was a loud, angry click as the caller hung up. Roberta scoffed and replaced the receiver. She sat back against the headboard, very annoyed. She was well and truly awake now.

The phone rang again and she snatched up the receiver. This time, before she even had a chance to say hello, the caller shouted, "Zoos have rules for a reason!"

"Wait a minute—"

Click. Buzz.

Roberta sat with the receiver to her ear for a moment. Was this a prank phone call? Or did the guy just have a wrong number? The phone rang again,

and this time, she let it go to the machine. She instantly regretted leaving as her outgoing message, "This is me. You know the drill." Maybe if she'd said her name, he'd have hung up.

"Listen," the caller said. His voice held a strange warble, and Roberta could hear him forcing himself to remain calm, to keep from crying. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have hung up on you. We've had a rough couple of days. But we can't leave it like this. We need to talk. Angela, please, pick up the phone." Silence, filled only with the sound of the caller's tense breaths.

Roberta sat back, tried to ignore it, told herself that if she didn't answer, he'd hang up and go away. The caller's voice cracked as he once again begged, "Ange, please."

Roberta sighed and reached over to the phone. She couldn't ignore him. It was cruel. And besides, he'd only keep calling back. "Listen to me," she said.

"Angie?" The caller let out a quiet sob.

"No," Roberta said, "please, you have the wrong number."

"Don't do this to me, Ange."

"I'm not Angela. You—"

"I told him to let go of the chicken. Why didn't he just let go of the chicken?"

Surprised, confused, bewildered beyond belief, Roberta heard herself blurt out, "What chicken?" She regretted saying it before it had fully emerged from her mouth.

“Do you think I just pushed him in? I SWEAR TO GOD, I GAVE HIM A CHICKEN. Me and Frankie do it all the time. It’s not a big deal.”

Roberta sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, I’m sure you gave him a chicken. That’s not the issue here. I’m not – for fuck’s sake,” Roberta said. “Listen to me very closely. You have the wrong number. Wrong number. Wrong number.”

“What.” He didn’t ask it, merely stated. There was a pause, then a quiet hiss of breath as the caller realized his error. “Oh, yeah. I hit the five instead of eight. I’m sorry. Yeah, I made a mistake. My finger must’ve slipped.”

Roberta smiled wryly. “It’s okay. I was awake anyway. But, sir...”

“Yes?”

“It’s three in the morning. If you call Angela now, you’re only going to piss her off. Wait and call her tomorrow.”

“Oh,” he said, letting out a shaky breath. “That’s... You’re probably right. Thanks. Again, I’m so sorry I disturbed you.”

Roberta chuckled. “No biggie. I’m just glad we got things straightened out. God bless.” She hung up, feeling satisfied.

She rested her head once again upon her pillow, closed her eyes, and tried to make herself fall asleep. It had just begun to work, when she suddenly, unpleasantly began to ponder something. The more she tried to ignore it, the stronger this thought became, until she finally sat up. Defeated, she reached for the telephone and dialed \*69.



"Hello?" the man said.

"You do it all the time?" Roberta asked, the words rising to a squeak.

"What?"

"All the time? How? WHY? Don't they have security? Are you security?"

Do you just sneak in? What?"

"Who is this?"

"Seriously, explain the chicken," she said. The phone was silent. "Hello?"

She realized he'd hung up on her. She sneered at the receiver. "No, no, I don't think so," she said, immediately punching redial.

### Lepidopterosis

She was gorgeous. Indeed, she truly was one of the most gorgeous creatures Dr. Smith-Fenton had ever had at his fingertips. He let loose a sigh as he set down his magnifying glass and stared wistfully at the sketch on the desk before him. Four inches in length, an impossible twelve in span, golden eyespots on wings of iridescent blue... The colors, of course, were merely Dr. Smith-Fenton's best guess on the matter. *Papilio gloriae* was hastily drawn in plain charcoal in Professor Delaney's notebooks. The Mata Tuan Swallowtail was legendary.

Unfortunately, Smith-Fenton's colleagues in the Lepidoptera Society in Bretonwick had begun to suspect that she might be precisely that. Nothing more than legend; most assuredly a myth. Delaney had failed to produce any substantial evidence of her existence.

In the beginning, his sketches had been fairly well received throughout the scientific community at large. They had spurred brilliant debates over what such a butterfly might mean in reference to that Darwin fellow's new ideas. That was, of course, before a year of Delaney's installation on Mata Tua failed to produce a single photograph, let alone a specimen. It was even hypothesized,

between cigar puffs and sips of brandy, that Delaney might have manufactured her entirely from his own imagination and to his own ends.

As popular as this fabrication idea had become among other members of the Society, Delaney had never shown himself to be duplicitous before. That Smith-Fenton might be successful where his predecessor was not stuck heavily in his mind as the one thing which would make his name forever famous in Bretonwick. They would hang the specimen on the walls of the great room, directly above a plaque bearing the victorious name, "Alexander Fenwick Smith-Fenton."

Thus, in Smith-Fenton's mind, all doubts about Delaney's character had been recognized, digested, and summarily dismissed. *Papilio glorioe* existed, and Smith-Fenton would find her.

He sighed again, rising to his feet and stretching out, pressing his hips with both hands. The dull ache softly pulsating in his back told him he had spent too much time perusing Delaney's notebooks for clues as to his quarry's location. Perhaps if Delaney hadn't died over here in this godforsaken place, he might have explained his inscrutable notes to his fellows. Damn that fever.

Smith-Fenton removed his spectacles and wiped sweat beads from his forehead. Lord, this infernal heat. Delaney had lived on this island for a full year hunting the elusive Swallowtail, paying for it largely from his own pocket. How could Delaney have stood it? God knew Smith-Fenton wouldn't have agreed to live on Mata Tua in the first place if the Society hadn't been prepared to sponsor

him. Although Mata Tua was, like England, an island, it had nothing in common with that blessed plot, that earth, that realm. It certainly had no Shakespeare to sing its praises.

For a moment, he indulged in his memory of the Lepidoptera Society's offices in Bretonwick, kept at a civilized eighteen degrees centigrade. Even on the crossing, the temperature in his berth had scarcely risen over twenty-one. But here on Mata Tua, even a heat as intolerable as thirty was a distant dream.

Smith-Fenton crossed to his small hut's entryway and plucked a pale, wide-brimmed hat from its peg on the wall. He glared for a moment at his coat and broolly, pondering, as he always did, whether he should even bother. He was in the habit of taking them with him on his excursions, but they were an encumbrance rather than a boon. It hadn't rained once since Smith-Fenton had arrived. For God's sake, wasn't Mata Tua a tropical island? How could the jungle survive in its present state of verdant green without a constant amount of precipitation?

Then again, Smith-Fenton had only been settled in Delaney's hut in Lana Ku for seventeen days. Perhaps this would be the day the skies let loose, and without sufficient coverage he could catch cold. It never paid to take chances, not where a thing like his health was concerned.

Smith-Fenton took out his pocket-watch and stared in mild impatience at the time. Where was Poloka? The native man knew he was expected. It was already ten. How could a man be expected to focus on finding a legendary

species if he was overburdened? How could a man carry not only his broly, but also his collecting net and the bag containing his camera, ether, and kill bottle? That was, after all, why he had engaged Poloka's services in the first place. Smith-Fenton decided he would lower the native's compensation by twelve shillings. The man was most definitely overpaid.

He frowned as a sudden thought struck him. Poloka's unreliability as a field assistant cast doubts on his character, and this in turn made Delaney's assertions seem somewhat shaky. The letters he had occasionally mailed to the Society held nothing but praise for both Mata Tua and her people, especially the inhabitants of the village of Lana Ku. He had described "an island paradise, a place as near to Eden as could possibly be imagined," and a people with "an undeniable work ethic."

Thus far, Smith-Fenton found a great deal of exaggeration in Delaney's claims. If Delaney had been willing to embellish in such trivial matters as these, what might he have invented regarding the Swallowtail? Smith-Fenton groaned and forced the idea from his mind. He would find her; he was sure of it.

With a quiet exhalation, Smith-Fenton stepped through the door and into the bright sunlight made even more prevalent by a startling absence of clouds. In moments he could feel the heat radiating onto his scalp through his thinning hair. Quickly he placed the hat upon his head, and as his eyes adjusted to the glare, looked about the village of Lana Ku. The natives were, as usual, absorbed in themselves, giving him no notice as they walked from hut to hut carrying

woven baskets filled with various island sundries. They did this as part of their daily routine, and so he didn't pay it much mind. He did wonder vaguely whether or not they seemed just a bit agitated this morning, but then just as quickly found himself distracted once again by the islanders' attire. The women wore a great deal less clothing than he was entirely comfortable with, but at least their thin dresses covered their necessities, in stark opposition to the bare, brown chests of the men.

As he pondered the disturbing state of things, a wiry native man appeared panting at his side. "Doctor," Poloka said, placing his emphasis on the second syllable rather than the first. Delaney had thankfully taught Poloka a bit of the Queen's English, but he had a frustrating way of speaking in long, drawn out tones. Really the man was a bit of a simpleton, but that was only to be expected. Smith-Fenton exhaled lightly through his nose, looking down with a face of fatherly reprimand.

Poloka frowned, his eyes narrowing. "Doctor sir," he repeated, this time with a certain emphasis on the correct pronunciation. Smith-Fenton made a note of the islander's attitude. It certainly needed correction if they were to continue working together in peace.

"You," Smith-Fenton said, confirming his statement with a quick glance at his pocket-watch, "are late."

"Yes, Doctor sir," Poloka said. Smith-Fenton listened as the native laboriously formed a sentence, each word dragging into the next. His lack of

proficiency in English was truly terribly frustrating to hear, but Smith-Fenton listened with dutiful Christianity. "We are making preparation for--"

"Don't give me excuses," Smith-Fenton dismissed him with a cursory wave. "Gather my things and let's be off."

"I cannot," Poloka began.

Smith-Fenton clapped his hands violently. With a scoff he pressed his spectacles back firmly against his face. "Your previous employer may have let you rob him blind, but I will not pay you ten pence to stand about arguing with me."

"Doctor sir, we are making prepar--"

"Attend to your work."

"Doctor sir, since the waning of the last moon, you have lived with us and I have tended to you. Give me this day."

"Do your job, damn you, or you're excused."

Poloka turned and walked stiffly into the hut. There now. With a firm hand, these natives would soon learn proper behavior.

Smith-Fenton drew a folded piece of paper and a small graphite pencil from his upper waistcoat pocket. He had found Delaney's precise sketches in his journals, tracing the layout of the island. With these, Smith-Fenton had been slowly and methodically making his way through the jungle. Thus far, he had covered every inch of ground within the eastern sector. Today he planned to begin scaling the isle's central mountain. Volcano, rather, albeit a dormant one.

Smith-Fenton had deciphered as much from Delaney's rambling, scatterbrained notes. Apparently the natives called it Aka Te. In a separate section of his notes, Delaney had been recording the Mata Tuan language, but Smith-Fenton was certain he would never find it necessary to learn. It wouldn't explain Delaney's odd phrasings, and the natives of Lana Ku would learn proper English soon enough.

Poloka reemerged carrying Smith-Fenton's kit. With a desultory nod, the lepidopterist began to walk down the village's well-worn central path.

"Today, if you will go, you go alone."

Smith-Fenton, turning back, saw Poloka standing still in the doorway. There was a decided look on the native's face, radiating out of his deep brown eyes.

"I cannot go," Poloka said, dropping everything to the ground. "I cannot."

Smith-Fenton stared down at his kit, a hazy sense of disbelief slowly blossoming in his brain. He had known the natives could be impulsive, but for Poloka to demonstrate his unreliability so blatantly was most unexpected.

Resigned, Smith-Fenton shook his head. "You are to leave my employ immediately," he said, "and I will withhold your last wages."

Poloka said, in that same infuriatingly slow way of speaking, "What you would not hear today, you would not hear yesterday, nor the day before."

From behind him, Smith-Fenton heard gathering drums. He turned and recoiled in revulsion. The natives' baskets had disappeared. To where, Smith-



Fenton hadn't paid enough attention to know. And – merciful heavens! – the islanders' already scarce attire had disappeared as well. "Stop that!" Smith-Fenton cried out. The natives ignored him. Ululations filled the air as they danced, forming a great circle in the center of the village. The doctor stared as some bright green thing within the natives' cluster whirled and made patterns in the dirt.

The woman, as her displayed breasts most assuredly attested, continued to spin. In the green feathered cape covering her arms and back, she made a sound unlike anything Smith-Fenton had ever encountered. It was a high pitched kree, repeated at incessant intervals like the call of a parrot as she made deep scratches in the dirt with the bare heel of her left foot.

"No, woman!" Smith-Fenton cried out as he ran into the circle and grabbed the dancer's arms. She screamed and bared her teeth at him. Shocked by her savagery, the doctor released her at once. The dancer began to scream at him in her island's native tongue; several times throughout her tirade, he thought she cried out "John." That had been Delaney's first name. John, John, as if he had been on rank with them, one of them.

Poloka stepped forward, folding his arms across his wiry chest. "You shame us," he said.

"You shame yourselves," Smith-Fenton tossed over his shoulder as he turned and stalked back into his hut. Within moments the chaos outside resumed. The sounds crashed through the air and assaulted his ears.

This was clearly some ritual. Smith-Fenton felt entirely unprepared. Why had he not come across mention of this in Delaney's notes? He strode directly to the desk and grabbed the journal, flipping angrily back to Delaney's entries for July. How dare Delaney not give him some forewarning! For God's sake, they were undressing themselves out there.

Today's date... he paused to check his own journal... was the twenty-third. He turned the pages of Delaney's book, glancing only at the upper right corner for the dates. Twenty-fifth. Twenty-fourth. Twenty-first.

Smith-Fenton stopped. Had a page been torn out? Surely he would've noticed. He examined the seam, and found no evidence of a missing page. The entries for the twenty-second and twenty-third were completely gone.

Why had Delaney, an otherwise meticulous man, failed to record two full days? Smith-Fenton had no idea. He glanced over the entries for the rest of July, scanning Delaney's scratchy black scrawl for mention of this ritual. He found nothing, merely more rapturous notes about the island, the culture, the food, until Smith-Fenton felt vaguely queasy and had to stand.

The sounds outside, meanwhile, had stopped. Stepping cautiously through the door, he hoped the islanders had managed to salvage some semblance of common decency. His eyes widened. The village now stood entirely devoid of anyone. Perhaps they'd returned to their huts, or possibly gone into the jungle for some inexplicable reason. Considering the cacophony of

moments before, Lana Ku was now shrouded in a deep silence that struck Smith-Fenton as quite odd.

He walked to the area where the islanders had danced. The dark impressions scratched into the dirt drew his attention. They were meant to be shaped like something. That was clear enough, and yet Smith-Fenton couldn't quite tell what two long arches over an oval were intended to represent. Some sort of bird, he assumed, considering the feathered costume.

For a time, the doctor stood in the silence, staring pensively at the suddenly vacant village. He wasn't entirely sure what he was expected to do. They had just lost their minds, he thought, every islander at once.

Rituals were one thing. Smith-Fenton had spent several months cataloguing the Lepidoptera of the Mexican mainland, and he was well acquainted with ceremonial dances. But they followed a form, a pattern. They didn't just spring out of nowhere like thunder from a clear blue sky.

"Doctor."

Startled, Smith-Fenton turned quickly round. He composed himself immediately and straightened his back. "Heavens, man," he barked, "where are your trousers?"

"We cannot wear them today. Aka Te," Poloka replied. "The others did not want me to warn you. We had tried enough, they said. But you must do as we do. You must."

“Damn fool heathen,” Smith-Fenton cried out, readjusting his spectacles and stepping a further pace backwards. “How dare you?”

Poloka grew agitated, but with a thick level of seriousness in his tone, stated slowly and clearly, “You must, today. This day, we are to become the land. We told John the same.”

“John,” Smith-Fenton repeated. There it was again. Why on earth would Professor John Delaney, a graduate of Oxford and Eton, be on such familiar terms with savages?

“John was not eaten by the Aka Te.”

“Not eaten by the volcano?” Smith-Fenton scoffed loudly. “What in God’s name are you talking about?”

Poloka stared down his nose in a way that set the scientist on edge. “The volcano has no name; it is the earth itself. The Aka Te are the dragons which live inside it.”

Smith-Fenton laughed derisively. “Dragons in the volcano. Really.”

“They hide, hunting only in the dry time. After they have fed, the rains come, but Doctor sir, during the dry time we must go to the jungle, and remove all clothing. Garments call them to us. We showed John the Aka Te, and he knew to disrobe.”

Smith-Fenton began to laugh. Delaney had known to disrobe. Of course. The page for this day would naturally be excised from Delaney’s books. He must have gone along with the ritual in effort to produce a certain level of camaraderie

with the natives before realizing, in a subsequent moment of clarity, that as a man of science he simply could not frolic naked through the trees and hope to retain any semblance of respectability. Smith-Fenton decided, for the sake of academic integrity, he would fill out his journal entry for this day with his customary level of detail. Damn John Delaney's reputation.

"You will not follow our ways?" Poloka asked.

"Certainly not," Smith-Fenton repeated. "Not if I have to strip naked to keep myself from being eaten by dragons, of all things. It's sheer lunacy; I'll have none of it."

Poloka stared at the lepidopterist with a blank, unemotional gaze. Then he turned and ran swiftly to the tree line, disappearing into the shadows.

Smith-Fenton laughed. Ah, the natives and their irrational beliefs. Well, he'd leave them to it, but he certainly wasn't going to waste the daylight. Slowly gathering his things, he wiped them free of dirt.

He was relieved to find that his kill bottle hadn't broken. It was the only vessel in his possession large enough to hold an entire specimen without damaging it. He would have had to wait another three months for the supply ship's return to replace it. He hadn't even had a chance to use it. Even more important, he found his camera whole and intact. If it had been broken, as a result of Poloka's carelessness, and today had indeed been the day the doctor found the Swallowtail, no punishment would have sufficed.

Dragons. What nonsense. And yet, he realized he had yet to explore the dormant mountain. There was a chance Delaney's notes mentioning Aka Te had meant the butterfly was to be found near the volcano, perhaps even finding solitude and security within it.

Smith-Fenton tucked his broly over the crook of his arm and gathered his things about him. Delaney had written he had seen *Papilio glorieae* during the noon hour. Certainly the creature would be most active at midday, giving him a window of six hours optimum search time.

With this knowledge in mind, Smith-Fenton began the trek toward the volcano.

When the supply ship's rowboat landed on Mata Tua's beach beneath the pounding rains of fading summer, Smith-Fenton failed to greet them. The older sailor, a burly man with a thick brown beard, leapt into the surf and pulled the boat firmly to shore.

"Cor," said the younger sailor, Avery, as he climbed out of the rowboat. This was his first trip out, and his clean-shaven face projected his astonishment. "It rain like this all the time?"

"Yeah. All the damn time," grinned Binns, pulling his raincoat closer about him. "Ain't it great?"

"Hello," said a tall, wiry man as he walked toward the two sailors. Neither of them could see his face through the downpour, but his outline and

that of the umbrella he carried were both clearly visible. "You've arrived just in time for the rains."

"Where you want these boxes, Doctor?" Avery asked.

Binns laughed and punched Avery in the shoulder. "That ain't the doc, ya numbskull."

Avery stared for a moment. "Oh," he finally said. "Sorry. You just came up to us, speaking English. I just assumed."

The native man smiled warmly. "It's quite all right. I apologize that Dr. Smith-Fenton was unable to meet you. He left to explore the volcano just before the rains came. He did not say when he might be back."

Avery listened to this islander rattle off English as if it were his first language, and whistled in appreciation. "Well," he asked, thumbing over his shoulder to the boxes of supplies, "did he want us to carry the stuff up to his place?"

"What, we're supposed to leave them on the beach? Come on," Binns groaned as he lifted one of the boxes to his chest. "Let's get this done."

The crewmen carried two boxes each, while Poloka gathered the seventh, final box to himself and led them to the village. Entering Dr. Smith-Fenton's hut, the men set their boxes down beside the desk.

"Ain't that a sight," Avery said, peering curiously around the room.

"Would you look at all this stuff. Swanky."

"Yep," Binns said. "Brought it all over with him when he came. Desk. Bottles and microscope. Globe in the corner. That there tea set on the table. Ain't a nice cuppa just the drink for a jungle?"

"Cor," replied Avery.

"Bookshelves too. Made himself a tiny little England, ain't he?"

"You ain't half right," Binns said. "Lookit, four poster bed. The guy before this one made do with a hammock, like you fellas do," he said to Poloka.

"Yes," the islander nodded. "We liked John very much. We were quite saddened by his passing. He was a good man."

"Taught you good English," Avery said, "if you don't mind my saying so."

"Thank you," Poloka said, smiling in a way that lent a sparkle to his eyes. "It was easy to learn. John was quite pleased at finding us so easily educated. We spent many an evening discussing art and culture. He allowed me to read his books; he encouraged it."

"Oh, you mean the bookshelves ain't Doc Smith-Fenton's?" Avery asked.

"No, they were not. He never had time for reading, spending so much of his time searching for John's Swallowtail. But they haven't been left unused."

"Any favorites?" Binns asked offhandedly, turning to leave.

"That's difficult to answer," Poloka said as he ran a hand over the spines. "I would say that Jules Verne has been the most useful to our community as a whole. Which reminds me, gentlemen, before you leave, I was supposed to give



this to you." He pulled a photograph from one of the shelves and handed it to the older crewman.

"Jesus H. Christ, would ya look at the size of that bug?"

"That, sir, is the Mata Tuan Swallowtail. Please see to it that you deliver that photograph to the Lepidopterist's Society in Bretonwick. This photograph was taken by Professor Delaney, shortly before his passing. Dr. Smith-Fenton was especially adamant that the Society recognize John for the discovery."

"Right," Binns said. He ran a hand over his beard and looked at the door.

"Well, if that's, ah, if that's it, we should get going, yeah?"

"Right," Avery answered. "See ya, Palooka."

Poloka smiled wryly as the two crewmen headed back to their boat.

Shaking the rain off his umbrella, the islander chuckled as he leaned it up against the wall. This was a good rain, he thought to himself. Yes, the Aka Te's hunt had been very successful.