

Short Story Collection by Jacqueline Curry

## Table of contents

Pedro, Saint Francis, and the Angel

The Light Bearers

Young Woman Trying To Sleep

The Arrival

The Tall Blonde

Larry's Ride

Gutter

Brood X

The Sweet Life

You Can Call Me Mo

Losing Chloe

My name is Pedro Francesco Perez. My mother named me after my father, who is strong as a bull and just as temperamental. From working on our farm in Guatemala, he carries a dusty, grassy, animal smell. His eyes are dark, like strong coffee, and sometimes he has popped blood vessels from the shrapnel of wood shavings when he chops wood. If he asked me to do something, like get a haircut or milk the cows at four in the morning, I jumped to it right away, no complaints, no questions. *Si, Padre, si.*

When my father speaks, I do not say a word, only listen. He taught me that rule when I was three years old. Once when I was ten, he screamed so long and hard at me for spilling a bucket of milk that I peed my pants.

When I was sixteen, I woke in my bed in the middle of the night with my back flaming with pain and my face pressed into a lake of tears. Under my pillow, I was gripping a gun. I sprang back and shoved it away. It was the same gun I carried when I traveled, stuffed into the back of my jeans, protection against gangs and banditos. At first I could not remember how the gun got into my hands. But when I leaned over to put the weapon back under my bed, I groaned from the anthills of swollen knots my father's belt buckle had raised across my back. Slowly, slowly, I peeled off my t-shirt and bits of my bloody flesh tore from my skin. I had come home late from a dance.

If it weren't for my Angel that night I'm sure I would no longer be in this world. My Angel is not an Angel I can see with wings and a halo like a figurine which sits on my mother's dresser. He is a voice I can hear, sometimes gentle, sometimes angry, but always with me. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo-*" My Angel hushed into my ear that night, "Calm down. Take it easy-" until my heart stopped racing and my clenched fists relaxed and I no longer thought of a quick death to end my humiliation, but finally drifted off to sleep. It never crossed my mind to hurt my father. He is the man who taught me how to ride a horse, how to rope a steer, how to drive a truck. He is the man who gave me my

first Corona, the day I turned fifteen. With respect, he shook my hand and said, "Now you are a man-" I love him deeply. He is a part of my heart, like my mother and the mountains of Guatemala.

My second name, Francesco, comes from St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. He took a vow of poverty and believed a tiny sparrow was as much his brother as the Pope. I guess my mother hoped I would match his goodness. I try, Mama, please believe me, but sometimes I fall short, so very short.

In Guatemala, my father would not allow me to ride the bulls with my amigos at the annual rodeos. But the thrill of the ride was the only thing stronger than my fear of my father. I loved those glorious seconds in the saddle, the thundering hooves, the cheering crowds. Bull riding is in my blood. At nineteen years old, I dared to enter the competitions, riding bulls with names like Crazy Jack, Insane Asylum, Hellfire, Tornado, and Demonio. You sat tight, one hand in mid-air, the other glued to the burning ropes. When the bull bucked, you followed the bones of his dusty spine and adjusted to his wicked jumping and furious spinning and clouds of kicked up dust. Count yourself lucky if you didn't break your neck. Even luckier if you made the full eight seconds. There was much danger, yes. But how many men can say they had the courage to climb onto a two thousand pound beast and then hold on? I rode well for two reasons. Number one, I am very quick and strong, like a monkey: and number two, Saint Francis watches over me. Sometimes Saint Francis comes to me in my dreams, and his eyes are always full of compassion. He reminds me not to become distracted by worldly things and to treat coins like they are just pebbles in the road. Before every ride I kiss the medallion with his image, a gift from my mother, which hangs around my neck and never comes off. I won tall trophies and champion belt buckles, which I gave away to my friends, fearing a beating from my father if I took them home. My rodeo amigos called me El Pequeno Loco Hombre, the little crazy man, because there was no bull, no matter how terrible, that

I would not ride.

In a single day in Guatemala, I lost the two things I love most in this world. When my mother had a heart attack, dropping to our kitchen floor with her brown fingers and toes swollen with hard bumps from a lifetime of chopping, peeling, cooking, sewing, tending our garden, and working the fields, I was riding El Demonio. The bull's fur was black as the midnight sky on our farm, his eyes rolled like a creature possessed, his nostrils flared, and his black lips threw ropes of saliva into the hot air, as he snorted and bucked. I felt a single stab to my chest, like one of his horns had just pierced my heart. (Yet I knew it couldn't be true, because I was still on top of him!) I *felt* my mother go. And then I lost my grip and went flying.

El Demonio trampled my legs.

As the rodeo clowns dragged me off to a bullpen, the crowd gasped. For some time, I lay unconscious with a pillow of straw beneath my head, and when I woke, there he stood, having searched to find me, my father.

"*Su madre es muerto-*" he said. His brick-colored cheeks and lips were as stiff as if he himself had turned into a corpse. From the bench where they laid me out, shaking with pain and now fear, I looked up at my father. He was standing above me in the sunlight. He blinked and some dust and bits of hay swirled around his eyes, like fleas or mites.

He had asked me to stay home that afternoon and help my mother. But I begged her to let me go out with my friends. "Go on-" she said, wringing some clothes in the sink, "You can help me later-" I kissed her flushed cheek and ran out the door.

In the bullpen, the odor of sweat and manure was strong in the heat, and I felt dizzy and sick, knowing that I might have saved my mother.

"I will never forgive you-" my father said next, and then he turned away.

I couldn't speak. It was as if somebody had stuffed fistfuls of dry hay down my throat and set it afire.

I watched my father's muscular body stride off, kicking up a cloud of dirt, and my heart broke.

I passed out from the pain before the doctor finally arrived.

My Aunt Manuela, my father's sister, took me in and nursed me back to health. Frequently she picked up clothes, pillows, or toys to whack my little cousins to get them to listen. But other than that, she was okay. On both legs, I wore heavy casts for three weeks, got tired of the itching and not being able to get around and ripped the things off with my bare hands. I hopped around on crutches for a month. And not once did my father come to see me. My Aunt Manuela called him many times. "He is your son. Forgive him. How much longer can you punish him? It won't bring Guadalupe back-" Only because of her pleading did he allow me to go to my mother's funeral, but he still refused to look at or speak to me. At the funeral, from a distance, I saw my father cry for the first time. I tried not to look at him, but I couldn't help myself; it was like seeing a mountain dissolve before my very eyes. Like a razor slashing my heart was the pain of my mother's absence and my father's grief. It made the pain in my smashed legs seem like nothing. Sometimes at my Aunt's house, I thought I could smell my mother, a good garlicky kitchen smell, as if she'd just walked right past me. She would never send a bum away hungry, and always she fed the birds with stale bread. Somebody said that at the funeral.

The doctor ordered me never to ride bulls again. My legs wouldn't take it. One of my legs was worse than the other, and I limped some. A part of me died. Every night I listened to my rodeo music, ranchero music, my music, Caballo Dorado (Gilded Horse), Joan Sebastian (El poeta del pueblo/ Poet of the People), and Banda Machos (Gang of Men). Every night I felt an emptiness in my chest that reached to my soul, and every night I cried. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo*-" My Angel said, "Rest, Pedro, Go to

Mass every Sunday and don't forget your daily prayers. In time, things will get better-"

For five years, I lived with my Aunt Manuela's family, helping them on their ranch. Dutifully I went to Mass and said my prayers. But the whole time, my father never spoke to me. The pain of him no longer loving me ate at my soul, and I decided to travel to America, hoping to get a good job and send back lots of money, praying that he would some day forgive me. I could picture the smile on his broad face as he picked up the checks at the Western Union Station, telling anybody who would listen, "Hey, my Pedro, he's a good son-"

On a cool November night, wearing my best cowboy boots, a pair of Wrangler jeans, a professional bull-riding t-shirt, an orange cap embroidered with a bull's horns, and a belt with a rodeo buckle as big as a plate, I set out with my two friends, Rudy and Tito, for America. It was a fifteen day hike through the low plains, the high plains, some jungles, even over some mountains, and then into Mexico where we were to be driven to Baltimore where my aunt had some relatives. We carried bookbags packed with bottles of water, food, and blankets. My aunt had sewn three hundred dollars into the waistband of my jeans in a secret little pocket. We set off at a good pace. Often I felt for my lump of money, reassured by the snug bundle of cash. By the third day, climbing some steep and rocky roads, my feet burned with fat blisters, and my bad legs ached with pain. My amigos offered to trade their Nikes for my boots, but their tennis shoes were way too big for me, and even if I stuffed them with leaves, my amigos still could not fit their big feet into my narrow snakeskin boots.

"Why did you wear those things, Pedro?"

"I want to look good in America-" I said.

When the pain got really bad, I put my arms around Rudy and Tito's necks, and they carried my weight for me.

In the jungles, we got bitten by bugs and mosquitoes. Crossing the mountains,

we shivered with cold, and it hurt our lungs to breathe. In the highlands, we passed a volcano. We stopped to have a look. It was crusted over, quiet, sleeping. I put my hands to the rock to see if I could feel any heat from steam or lava inside, but it was cool to the touch.

On the tenth night, sleeping on the ground, with the moon as our nightlight, we woke to find ourselves surrounded by a pack of wolves. In the dark, they circled us, growling with hunger, and pawing the dirt. Their eyes shone like yellow stars, and their ribs poked through their shabby fur. Slowly, from my back pocket, I pulled out my knife. I could hear my friends panting almost as hard as the wolves. At twenty-four, I was the oldest. Tito was twenty-one, and Rudy only nineteen. "Get behind me-" I said.

Gripping my medallion, I prayed, "Saint Francis....protect us...-" It was not easy to pray with the snapping of the wolves' jaws and the low rumble of danger coming from their throats," ....Save us, please...-"

"They'll eat us alive-" Rudy moaned.

As the wolves closed in, we prayed faster and faster.

"*Tranquilo, tranquilo*-" My Angel said in my left ear.

"Don't move-" Saint Francis said in my right ear.

From church, I remember a story about Saint Francis talking a wolf out of eating some frightened town's people one time. "Brother wolves-" I said, "Go away now, and I promise Saint Francis will help you find some other food soon-"

I wanted to jump up and run. "Do not run-" I instructed my amigos.

The wolves were so close now, we could see the moonlight shining off their sharp teeth. I prayed if they ate us they would be swift about it. Then, as if hearing something we couldn't hear off in the distance, the wolves' ears pricked up, and I swear on the grave of my mother, they just up and bounded away.

I kissed my medallion over and over. We all kissed it.



On the fifteenth day, we squeezed onto a crowded, noisy bus in Mexico. It dropped us off about 40 minutes from the border. We walked fast, and when we snuck across, in broad daylight, running in the infernal heat, I half expected to hear the crack of rifles from Border Patrol trying to shoot us in the back. But thank God that didn't happen. For another hour, we continued walking, the sun burning our scalps, and with the taste of our own sweat and fear in our mouths, a salty metallic taste, until we saw the van which was waiting to drive us to Baltimore. The vehicle was the color of dirty dishwater, and a rope held the back door closed. But inside were smiling Guatemalans, friends of my aunt's who were taking us in. They kissed us and handed us cold drinks. It was a sweltering ride (no AC) from Mexico to Baltimore. And to avoid staring at the endless concrete highway, I slept with my cap pulled down low over my eyes.

My first job in Baltimore was working at a corner grocery store in Fells Point on Broadway Street, a two block stretch of Latino community with numerous boarded up windows pasted with ads for Corona, cheap cell phones, and phone cards. Bargain stores sold used clothing and furniture. All this right along side of a painted mural of the Holy Virgin Mary, her arms outstretched beckoning everyone to Mass at a church which had once been a Goodwill. Metal grates covered liquor store windows. Lotto lines extended down the block outside bullet-proof glass enclosed check cashing windows. Fly paper dangled from the ceilings of pizza joints. And fat mothers and grandmothers squeezed into lawn chairs on the sidewalks and ate snowballs or drank Inca cola, while keeping an eye on their little ones at play. At the grocery store, I stocked shelves, swept, mopped, and fixed things (unclogged toilets, cleaned up spills, scrubbed bathrooms). Twelve hours a day, Monday through Friday, for three hundred dollars a week. About the low pay, I did not complain, happy to work my way up to a better position and salary. I worked hard for my boss, Juan. He had a huge belly, like he'd just eaten ten hens, something he bragged about doing once, on his wedding day. He let me

eat from his store (burritos, tacos, and bowls of steaming hen soup with noodles his wife made). But when it came to paying me, he dragged his feet. Three weeks went by, and I never saw a peso. He kept promising to pay me and then didn't. "*Manana, manana-*" he bellowed, waving me off like a pest. But I couldn't report Juan to the police because I had no green card or Social Security card. Every day that passed without pay (always some lousy excuse) my blood heated up, like a pot of beans about to boil over. I chewed the inside of my cheeks to keep from cursing or hitting him. Because where else could I work, an illegal immigrant with no papers and very little English? I bit my cheeks until they bled, swallowing down the bitter blood.

Finally after six weeks of no pay and always a sour stomach, I came up with a plan. At closing one Saturday, I had Tito pick me up in his work truck. He delivered frozen chickens. Together we cleaned the store out. We took dry goods, canned meats, beans, rice, frozen foods (bull's tongue, my favorite), six-packs of Guyana beer (the number one cerveza in Guatemala), shampoo, even deodorant. When we finished, sucking down Juan's Coronas the whole time, not a single pea or a grain of rice was left.

Whooping and laughing and pounding the roof of his truck, we drove the load to Tito's casa, a chilly basement rowhouse apartment. Tito's place had no heat and smelled of charred wood from the metal trashcan kept burning with firewood in the center of his sparse livingroom. All Tito's little cousins reeked of scorched smoke when I picked them up to greet them, but I did not comment on it. Thanks to Juan their little bellies were kept full for months with his food and drinks.

After that, Tito got me a job at the chicken plant, an ugly shoebox shaped warehouse which belched foul-smelling clouds under a noisy beltway. I used a phony Social Security card I paid five hundred dollars for. Ten hours a day, six days a week, for minimum wage, I worked alongside other immigrants from Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Mexico, cutting chickens into pieces with a meat cleaver on

a long wooden block which dripped with slimy chicken skins, steaming blood, and stinking guts. The big white room was very cold, so we wore layers beneath our blood-stained aprons. But that didn't keep my bad legs from hurting like crazy. We wore paper masks across our noses and our lips to cover the stink. After a week, I ripped my mask away, tired of fooling with it, got used to the smell and the drops of blood and guts flying into my face.

With numb fingers constantly working in the cold, I cut myself many times. My hands are full of cuts, but not so bad as some of the others who are missing their fingers.

The first time I cut open a chicken and saw his stomach full of long, white, slimy worms, I jumped back with disgust. (My father did all the butchering back home). Everybody laughed, saying, "Toss it in the trash, *chica*-" My face burned, because I am not a little girl. As much as I hated to touch those nasty things, I grabbed a wet handful where they lay squirming on the block and slung them into a trashcan. Some days, there were no worms, and some days there were many worms.

On those days when I found many worms, I sometimes vomited into the trash cans. Then after work, I walked straight to the nearest bar, the Iguana Cantina, a gigantic place with three pool tables and always salsa and merengue playing to bust your eardrums and glah-glah-glah, down go the Coronas. I tried to work my nerve up to talk to the pretty American girls, but my English was still so bad, it really wasn't worth it. The girls just laughed at me and tossed their shiny Barbie-doll hair and strolled off, sipping their pink drinks. So glah-glah-glah, down go more Coronas. If they don't hook up by the night's end, my amigos took home the South Baltimore prostitutes for twenty bucks. But I can't do it. Even if I looked at the wall or the ceiling the whole time or got stupid drunk, I'd still see their sad, toothless faces and dead eyes. I want a nice girl, a shy girl, a pretty girl who cooks and cleans and smiles a lot and smells nice. Besides I have better things to do with my money. Like send it home to my father. I sent him my last three paychecks. I

know he got them, because the man at the Western Union office told me he signed for them. So I bought a cell phone with a two year plan just in case he decides to call me. I put my phone number on the checks. Every night I pray to Saint Francis and to my Angel that my father will call.

When I'm not working at the chicken plant, I listen to my English tapes in my rented room, sounding out the strange words until my head hurts. Yesterday I put up some curtains, peach colored ones (that's all the bargain store had). I took down the sheets I'd nailed up to keep out the sun. Then I used a length of rope I borrowed from the guy next door, worked it through the curtains where the rod goes, and tied the ends up with cowboy knots to the nails above my window. I stepped back to have a look, and it looked pretty good. I have a little refrigerator for sodas and a hot plate, too. But still my room is no Holiday Inn or anything. It is small and cramped and smells like dirty socks. Plus when I open my window, the smell of stagnant water from Baltimore's Inner Harbor mixes with the stench of diesel fuel from the big boats, dead fish, and garbage (unlike Guatemala whose clean streams you can actually drink from), and generally I just keep the damn window closed.

One day, at the chicken plant, my boss, a skinny gringo in a fancy suit, came to inspect our work. He wore a clean apron, and bundles of plastic covered his shiny shoes. His hands looked soft like a woman's, and his teeth were white as a shark's. He did not shake our dirty hands, just passed through our lines observing us and writing in his notebook. I stiffened as he walked past me, hoping he wouldn't stop, but he did. My cleaver was slick with blood and the sweat of my palms, and I prayed it wouldn't slip out of my hands as I chopped. Thwack-thwack. Thwack-thwack.

"Good work. Very quick-" he complimented me. This one didn't speak Spanish, just smiled a lot and nodded his head at us like we were well behaved school children. He almost touched his hand to my shoulder, but seeing the chicken blood smeared there,

he drew his lady's fingers right back.

"All right-" he said. "Very good-"

"Gracias, grande pollo-" I said. Thank you, Big Chicken. Very seriously, I stared up at him. And all the workers around me bit their cheeks not to laugh.

Like a dumb cow, the gringo just nodded at me and then walked out to inspect the next room. Behind his back, we smiled, laughing, and chopping. That was a good day.

The next day was not such a good day. It was the anniversary of my mother's death. And on top of that, I counted over twenty chickens with worms I had to clean up. The management tries to kill the worms with special chemicals, but sometimes there are bad outbreaks, and so I must deal with the sickening things. I no longer vomited. But I started to grind my teeth. After a while, my teeth started to ache every day. So I kept a pint of tequila in my locker and sucked down a shot or two on my fifteen minute break and during my half hour lunch to kill the pain. After lunch, I always checked my cell phone to see if my father had called. No missed messages, it always read. I keep the phone by my bed at night, just in case. Sometimes I have bad dreams where the long, slimy, white worms crawl into the cuts in my hands and tunnel their way into my guts, as I howl. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo-*" My Angel says. And two nights ago, he added a warning. "Be careful this week, Pedro. For a soul saved is a soul in danger. And that fallen angel, Lucifer, conspires against you day and night-"

So all week I kept to myself. No badmouthing the Mexicans who are quick to fight, no tossing dice out on the parking lot with the Salvadorans, no staring down or bumping the gringos.

Before leaving work today, I washed my hands at least five times with sanitizer and soap. After that, I went to a nearby Catholic church, prayed, lit candles, and made a donation to the poor in honor of my mother. I thought it best to skip the bar tonight, but I wasn't sleepy, and I didn't want to go back to my empty room. So I decided to have only

a couple beers and then go home.

At the bar, I watched the pretty girls with their shiny lips and short skirts and sipped my first Corona. One girl caught my eye. She was quieter than the rest who gabbled like a flock of turkeys. Her skirt reached to her knees, and she wore a soft-looking, pale blue sweater. She wore pearls and had a nice smile. After my second Corona, I walked over to her. My heart raced and my blood zinged, the same feeling I got when I used to sit on top of a bull and the gate was about to open.

“Hello-“ I said. “My name is Pedro-“

Up close, I saw some freckles across her nose, and I smelled her perfume, sweet as cotton candy. She just looked at me. Her eyebrows were two skinny moons above her green eyes.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it-“

“My name is Pedro-“ I repeated.

“Kiss off, Pedro-“ she said. I didn’t understand her, but the way she rolled her eyes, and then stuck a cigarette in her mouth and puffed some smoke into my face, I figured it wasn’t good. I don’t like girls who smoke anyway. In Guatemala, I had my pick of the girls. But in America, nobody cares that I was a champion bull rider. I am just a brown face in a sea of brown faces.

Tito was not around, so I sat at the bar alone. I missed my mother, and I missed Guatemala. The more I thought about it, the more I drank. It was like I had a mechanical arm, which kept lifting the bottles to my lips. I sucked down Coronas until my eyes were heavy and I felt like I was floating. After last call, when I stood up, I did not float, but dropped like a rock to the floor. It was slick with spilled beer, empty Corona bottles, and beer caps. Some gringos helped me up, and I staggered out.

I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. After a couple blocks, I

turned into an alley to relieve myself. A rat skittered across my foot, but I was too drunk to even care. With one hand braced against a wall, I held myself up, until a policeman grabbed me by the back of my neck, pulling me away, and swinging me around. He was at least as big as my father, towering over me. "I need to see your ID. Right now-" he said. His mustache was gray, and his eyes, too, were gray, like steel. I watched his face see-sawing up and down. "You got a green card, Taco? Let me see it-"

"No comprende-" I rocked as if I were a ship tossing in a storm and about to sink. I started to fall and grabbed the officer's uniform sleeve.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" he said and shoved me back.

Fumbling, I zipped up my pants and started to stagger away. But the cop grabbed me again. "Come with me, Taco-" he said. He clamped his big hand around my neck and dragged me to the end of the alley where we stopped in front of a port-a-potty which was being used by a construction site nearby.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Si.....El bano-" I said. "Bathroom-"

"Wrong-" he said with the hint of a smile now. "This is what in America we call a Mexican spaceship-"

"No comprende-"

The cop jerked open the door of the port-a-potty, and a wave of stink hit us.

"Get in-" he said.

I reasoned it out, calming myself. Maybe he just wanted me to finish my business in the bathroom, and then he'd let me go. So reluctantly I climbed in (even though I no longer had to go). He yanked the door shut behind me, and it was pitch dark in there, extremely unpleasant, just like I imagined a coffin would be. My stomach contracted with fear, picturing my mother locked in such a space, where her body would remain forever. My eyes stung from the strong odor of piss and shit. But the instant I reached for

some toilet paper to wipe some tears leaking from my eyes, the whole port-a-potty tipped over, knocking me off my feet. A wave of toilet slop hit me then, wet my jeans, my shirt, and the half of my face shoved into a hard metal corner. The impact jammed my neck, hurting like hell.

“Houston, we have lift-off!” I heard the cop outside howl. Then he kicked the potty over several times, rolling it with glee. “How’s the ride, Taco?! You reach Mexico yet?”

Rolling, I was covered in more piss and shit. It even got into my mouth, gagging me. I spit as much as I could, and then banged like a maniac to get out. I could hear the cop cracking up laughing. Somehow I managed to fling the door open and crawl out.

“How was your trip?” he wiped some tears from his eyes he was laughing so hard.

I struggled to get up. I stood as straight as I was capable, tears of fury and humiliation rolling down my cheeks now. “Me from.....*Guatemala*-“ My hands were balled into fists at my side.

“You wanna hit me, don’t you, *Guacamole*?”

I didn’t answer, just stood there, breathing hard, digging my nails into my palms.

“Me going.....*home*-“ I said and started to walk away, fast.

“I ain’t done with you yet, *Guacamole*-“ I heard him say, and then I felt a blow to the back of my head which dropped me to my knees. Next the cop planted his boot in my back, kicking me over, and the cement waved up to meet my face, where the concrete busted my head, and my blood flowed, like lava. I saw red, nothing but red. As he tried to handcuff me, I spun and kicked at him from the ground, flailing like crazy.

I saw his nightstick raised like a bull’s leg above me. When it struck my shoulder, I went for my knife. I stabbed him once in his leg to bring him down, and then I stabbed him again hard in his stomach to keep him down. The policeman was



groaning, holding his middle with both hands. His blood leaked through his fingers.

It happened so fast, I just sat there blinking stupidly across at him. He was as shocked as I was. Then I looked up at the moon, bright as an interrogator's light, shining down on the cop's blood, accusing me. *Santo Dios*. Holy God. The fear set in then. My heart punched wildly. No way did I want to be deported and thrown into jail. Quickly I snatched his gun before he could shoot me. I looked around for witnesses; the alley and the lot were empty. Then I pulled my knife from the cop's belly, and he groaned louder and his blood flowed faster, covering his white, shaking fingers. Fumbling, I folded my knife and shoved it into my pocket. I jammed the gun into the back of my pants. Then I pushed myself up and ran like crazy. It was hard, because Up seemed like Down, and Down seemed like Up. The whole world was a spinning top, out of control, beneath my stumbling feet.

Back at my room, in the shower, I scrubbed each body part five times, like I do for my hands after touching those disgusting chickens. I washed my hair five times, too. In the steamy mirror, I looked into my wild eyes and did not recognize myself.

After my shower, I wiped the cop's gun and slid it under my bed. Then, I fell onto my mattress, calling for my Angel. "Donde esta mi Angel? Donde esta mi Angel?" I cried. But I could no longer feel his presence. No matter how much I pleaded or called, he would not speak to me. I cried into my pillow, wanting my mother, her softness, her love, her understanding. But there was no sign of her anywhere. Never had I felt so alone. I held my medallion and prayed to Saint Francis.

With a voice full of sorrow, he whispered into my ear. "Beware that worm growing in your belly-" And then I heard him no more.

I would rather Saint Francis, too, were silent, then to bring me such news.

Kneeling on my mattress, I slammed my fist against the wall, punched many

holes, feeling the muscles work and burn. Only when my phone rang did I finally stop. I took some deep breaths. I picked up my cell and read the lit screen. It was from Guatemala.

Squeezing the tears from my eyes, I listened to the rough, but familiar voice on the other end, a connection crossing thousands of miles.

“Hola, Pedro. Comment estas?”

“Hola, Papa-“ I said. In a room no bigger then a rodeo stall, my heart was breaking and singing at the same time.

That Summer, after Henry died, a hot one, the asphalt streets perpetually scalding, the air limp and weighted with heat- when other eleven year old boys played and swam and ran, their thin, tanned arms and legs grown hard and solid with muscles, I stayed indoors, a pale, marshmallowy, alien creature (not fat, but soft, and distant, somehow boneless), sleeping, eating cereal, and watching TV.

Routinely, at six o'clock, my mother and step-father would hustle home from painting apartments. Still wearing their work clothes- hands and hair and faces speckled with dried paint- they'd order me into my room.

"Move it-" my father would command, plucking the TV Guide out of my hands.

Listlessly, I uncurled my legs from where I was anchored to the beer-smelling loveseat watching "Get Smart" or "Gilligan's Island", and straggled out.

But I knew what they did. I knew about boiling the water to cook the heroin and sterilize the needles. My mother adopted this precaution after one night inadvertently tuning in a TV documentary profiling heroin addicts with AIDS, the TV cameras closing in on gaunt "Auschwitz-like" faces, bony chests, twisted and wracked with pain. We watched the show together, our eyes glued to the screen. Several times, my mother swiped tears from her sunken cheeks, nervously tamping a pack of Camel Filters against a skinny-jean-clad knee. Before that, frequently, I'd find her blood-tipped needles wrapped hastily in a wad of paper towels and tossed into the back of a kitchen drawer with the odd silverware and electrical tape.

I'd lay quietly in my narrow bed while my parents had their fix. After an hour or so, I'd yank on my tattered Reeboks and climb out my back window down onto the roof. It was a five foot drop into the dirt backyard (a piece of cake, even for a couch potato like me). I'd wade through hip high weeds- dandelions and elephant ears- then out the back gate.

Through the darkness, I'd plow- ten blocks of cement sidewalk, asphalt streets, parked

cars, and smelly trashcans, to this hill.

To where Henry used to be waiting.

Sitting up here with me, leaning back on his elbows, Henry would smell of paint and hand cleaner and Marlboros. Even in the hottest weather, he wore blue jeans, never shorts, because he thought his legs were too pale, too skinny. At twenty four, he looked older, his face perpetually splotchy in places, tapered chin roughly whiskered. He was missing half a front tooth from fighting, and always needed a haircut. Sometimes he'd offer me a drag of his cigarette (never a whole one, because he thought eleven was really too young to start smoking).

Henry was my mother's youngest brother. Before he died, he, my mother, and John, (my step-father) had a painting business going (painting apartment complexes mainly, but also some houses) to support a two hundred dollar a day heroin habit they shared.

Henry and me first started visiting this hill on a Saturday back in May- the evening John come after me with a two-by-four for stealing two dollars out of his nightstand. He chased me through the livingroom, cornered me in the kitchen. Hunched against the broom closet, I could hear the thwacks of wood coming down on my back and shoulders, but I didn't feel the pain until later when Henry walked me over to our hill and we sat a while to give John some time to cool down.

"I like your step-father, don't git me wrong-" Henry told me, picking idly at a clump of dry grass, "but I think what he did to you tonight was common-"

"I don't care-" I said. Unconsciously, I rocked, concentrating on not crying.

A warm breeze lifted our hair slightly back, away from our faces, as we looked down on a thick and raggedy woods. To the right was a baseball field wafting occasional puffs of dry orange dirt our way; to the left, the community swimming pool, a rectangular body of chlorinated water secured with a twelve foot fence.

The mirrors in Henry's sunglasses were silvery, opaque. (I was with him the day he

copped them from the Rite Aid). His needle-swollen hands pressed back against the grass were purplish, like the week old hands of a drowned cadaver when it is finally dragged up out of the water.

“You can cry if you want to-“ Henry said. “I won’t think you’re a sissy-“

“I’m okay-“ But I could feel hot tears pushing to the surface.

“John’s a faggot-“ Henry deadpanned, and we both burst out laughing. Because John weighs over two hundred pounds, with solid, tattooed arms, and a bulldog marine’s face. He would eat a faggot for lunch.

“Fuck John-“ Henry added, putting his skinny bare arm around my hurting shoulders.

“Johnny the Faggot-“ he repeated, as I cried my eyes out in his arms, “Johnny the Faggot Sissy motherfucker who can’t pick on somebody his own size-“

After I stopped crying, we sat for a long time, not saying much of anything.

“Ain’t they pretty?” Henry remarked several times as first singles, then clusters of lightning bugs began flashing on and off, on and off in the pale twilight.

From our hill, we could see them everywhere. Tiny flashes of yellow light- the purest, most beautiful yellow imaginable. Like jewels. Tiny perfect jewels. Exploding yellow.

We watched how the blue sky changed slowly to lavender, to violet, and then on to a deeper purple, and finally to blackness, how with every passing minute the flashes of yellow became more beautiful, more beautiful. (Now they are sparks! Now flames! Now blazing torches!).

“Like stars-“ I said out loud, and Henry nodded his agreement.

I imagined each pulse of light I looked at erasing the throbbing pains in my back and shoulders.

“Time to go-“ Henry said after about an hour of peace and quiet.

Groaning he pulled himself up.

“Let’s stay a while longer-“ I pleaded.

“I got stuff to do-“ he informed me tersely, mysteriously. So I got up, too.

But he softened again as we walked home.

“We’ll come back soon though. I promise-“

After that night- frequently- Henry’d bring his composition book up to our hill and read to me poetry he’d written, mostly about girlfriends he’d been with. He’d ink in a new word here and there with a chewed up Bic pen as I leafed through my comic books.

Sometimes he’d work on a new poem, so I started bringing my school notebooks, full of lined pages I could sketch on. I’d draw Batman, Spiderman, Hulk Hogan.

“Where’s your father at?” I asked Henry one time.

“Split-“ he told me. “Same as your old man-“

“Do you remember him?”

“Not really-“ He passed me a bag of candy we’d bought earlier at High’s, and I separated a sticky red hot dollar from a glob of Swedish fish, chewing the candy, appreciatively.

“I remember my father. Sort of-“

“Oh yeah-“

“Yeah. He was tall and had real thick bushy brown hair-“

“Was he nice?”

I nodded, remembering my father some five or six years ago. He stood at the sink in a plaid shirt, rolled sloppily to his elbows, doing the dishes for my mom. It was cold in the kitchen. Somebody had tacked up bright lights and sprayed canned snow onto the windows. As he scrubbed, he belted out Christmas tunes.

“He did the dishes for my mom, singing Santa Claus Is Coming To Town-“

“Was he drunk?” Henry kidded.

“It was Christmas-“ I said, but Henry was right, he probably was drunk.

I showed Henry my pictures. Detailed pencil sketches. I liked to zoom in on the superheroes expressions- expressions of rage or determination as they stalked their arch-

enemies to save the girl or the whole country.

“Not bad at all-“ Henry informed me, turning my pictures this way and that.

“These are pretty damn good-“

A warm feeling of satisfaction would fill my body whenever he praised my drawings or offered a comment, a suggestion for improving my depth perceptions or proportions. I would work twice as hard to fix things, to try and please him.

And always, we’d watch our lightning bugs for a bit, just sitting, not writing or drawing, just enjoying the warm Spring air, each other’s company, and the beauty and tranquility of it all.

Once in a while Henry’d talk about straightening himself out. He called up Narcotics Anonymous from a payphone once, spoke with a counselor for over an hour, tears streaming down both cheeks as he confessed to dropping out of Lincoln Technical Vocational School four years ago to start painting full time with John to have enough money to buy dope every day. The counselor’s name was Derek. A black guy. “Clean and sober going on six years-“ Henry told me about Derek. Carefully, he penned Derek’s phone number on the worn flap of a match pack. But he never called Derek back after that night, claiming to have lost his number.

Henry always told me if he ever caught me sticking a needle in my arm, he’d kill me. “You can do anything you want if you put your mind to it-“ he’d say. “Go to college and git yourself an education-“

I’d look across at him. At his eye-lids half drooped from shooting so much heroin.

“Why do you do that stuff?” I asked him on more than one occasion.

“Because I’m stupid-“ he said. “Don’t you be stupid-“

Seven days a week we had people coming over to our apartment (four tiny rooms and a bathroom, walls of bare plaster and splintered wood floors, cut-rate furniture and giant screen TV compliments of Stan’s Budget TV) to drink and shoot up. *Get outa this kitchen! Don’t step foot in this livingroom! John wants you in your bedroom RIGHT goddamn now!* I’d lie on my

on my bed waiting for Henry. Usually, he'd finish shooting up, party for a couple hours, then come around to get me. He'd bring me leftovers: a slice of cold pizza and a can of soda, a half bag of party mix, or a hunk of cake.

Most time when he asked John and my mother if we could walk over to our hill, they'd be so high they didn't give a shit. John used to call me Henry's shadow. "Always gotta be stuck up the boy's butt-" he'd say. "Maybe if you wasn't such a goddamn *sissy*, you could find some friends your own age-"

What John said was true. In school, during the day, I coasted along in a daze of fear. I watched Mrs Cooper's lipsticked lips moving, not hearing her speak, dreading the sight of Erik, Steven, Shawn, and David (a pack of neighborhood boys who were always after me) huddled together on the school lot or crouched hiding behind some cars, waiting for me. I played hooky a lot. John said that's why those boys singled me out, because they knew I was scared. He said it served me right to get my ass kicked if I wouldn't fight back.

I got it good this one time. Eric snuck up behind me at my locker. He whirled me around, punched me repeatedly in the stomach as the others, yelling encouragement formed a tight circle around us so I couldn't escape.

The next day, a sun-drenched morning in June, I begged Henry to walk to school with me.

"Come on-" he said as we exited out the back screen door together, "-we're gonna settle this once and for all-"

Approaching the hundred year old red brick school, I immediately caught sight of Eric, Steven, Shawn, and David lounging on a bench inside the whiffle ball court.

"Over there-" Nervously, I stopped on the sidewalk and pointed.

Henry draped his arm around my soft shoulder, pushing me inside the court.

He shut the gate. I stood beside him.

Everybody got real quiet.



Then Henry picked up somebody's baseball bat that was lying on the bench.

They were all just watching us.

"Which one of you guys been messin with my little brother here?" Henry demanded. "Which one of you little *pissheads* been givin my brother a hard time?"

Nobody said anything.

"I ain't leavin this playground till I find out-"

Still nobody said a word.

So Henry swung the bat.

He sent somebody's lunch bag flying across the bench. It hit the asphalt, broke open, a baggie-wrapped sandwich and an apple skidding and cracking across the ground.

All four boys backed up against the fence with a jangle of rippling metal links; Shawn's Oriole's cap, set backwards on his partially-shorn head, slipped noiselessly upward, tumbling to the ground.

In chorus, quickly, helplessly, politely, they mumbled:

"Not me, man-"

"Nobody was messin with him-"

"We didn't do nothing-"

"He's cool-"

Henry walked right up in their faces with the bat. He stuck it up under Eric's nose. He tilted his head back. Henry said, "Next time I hear that one of you little bastards been botherin Greg here, I'm gonna *stick* this bat down your throats. And I ain't gonna stop till it comes out the other end-"

My body felt about as light as air: the inside of my head was screaming with happiness.

It was a rare occurrence for anybody to bother me after that.

That same week, up on our hill, Henry gave me my first sketch pad. A 11x13 tablet full of perfectly clean white pages just waiting to be filled up with drawings. He gave me a set of

colored markers, too. So I could color in my super-heroes.

“Thanks, Henry-“ I uncapped a blue marker, trying it out.

“Real artists draw on sketch paper, not notebook paper. Now you can be a real artist-“

“Did you cop this stuff?” I asked him, but I was thrilled, even if he did steal it.

“Don’t worry about it-“ he said. “And when you’re finished with this one, I can get you another one-“

I drew for a while, as Henry lay back on the soft ground, taking a nap.

I looked over at him, at his rough face, sweet and relaxed now, like a little kid’s. Instinctively, I picked up a pencil and started sketching his face. I worked hard, searching for his features, for the shape of his head, his cheekbones, for the texture of his skin. I erased and redrew and erased some more. But my pencil couldn’t find him. I erased until the paper was so thin, it began to tear in places. I started in on another page. Finally my damp fingers hurt so bad from gripping the pencil, from seeking Henry’s face, that I had to stop. But I kept looking at him, committing the contours of his face, the dips and angles of his rocky features, his blunt nose, his limp mouth, his delicately lowered eye-lashes to my memory. I studied him the way other kids would study a math book or their spelling words.

Two months later, I was looking down into his close-eyed face again, his heavy head cradled in the satin confines of a casket. I wanted to cry but couldn’t with John standing right beside me. A couple of the girls were sobbing, red-faced and hysterical, and my Mom, too, but none of the guys. So I just looked at Henry long and hard, putting all my energy into it. His bruised and puffy, needle-marked hands lay almost hidden beneath extra long suit sleeves. The suit was light blue, luckily perfect for August, I heard my mom tell a fat neighbor stuffed into black slacks and a black blouse. It was the only suit Henry owned, purchased and worn once to an uncle’s wedding.

Standing beside the refreshment table (donuts and instant coffee) I heard a friend

of Henry's say that the skin on his arm just burst apart, that you could peel the flesh right off the bone where in his hurry to get his last fix (he hadn't had one in over 24 hours due to a lack of funds), Henry pumped the needle until it was empty, OD'ing three days short of his twenty-fifth birthday. My stomach churned, and I fled outside, sitting down on the warm marble steps of the Burgee-Henss Funeral Home. I couldn't believe that I would never see Henry again; a stubborn, angry voice inside my head told me that this was all a lie.

For weeks after Henry's death, I made nightly visits to our hill. I wouldn't leave until early morning when the moon was ghostly white, like a phantom up in the sky. I didn't like that moon. Like a dead man's head. Like a bone. Like an old skull. I couldn't stand the sight of it.

Walking home- through those still August mornings weighted with heat- I'd stare down at the street. And think only of lightning bug tails, perfect yellow.

I'd climb back through my window and get into bed. For hours I'd lie perfectly still with my hands plastered to my sides so the walls wouldn't close in on me, crushing me to pieces; I'd keep my head perfectly straight, holding the ceiling back with my eyes.

During the day, I barely spoke. I stopped drawing. I barely ate.

"Poutin and mopin ain't gonna bring him back-" John would say. "He's just doin this shit for attention-"

I'd look across at John's fat, sunburned face and wish that he was dead.

"Try and eat your supper-" My mother's swollen hand would push my plate gently closer.

But I would be surrounded by yellow. Her words would float over me and away.

"He'll eat it if he wants to see his next birthday-" John would add.

I'd close my eyes. In my mind, I could see them. Their beautiful flashing yellow tails.

Night after night, I'd sit at the top of our hill and I could *breathe!* Everything would

be flowing through me, nothing trapped, nothing caught. And here were all of my beauties. Everywhere flashing. On and off. On and off. I'd feel the breath of the wind like a song circling about me and I would be wrapped up in it, caught up, nestled, suspended, coolly, warmly, safely inside a cocoon of golden yellow.

On this one particular night, after sitting for hours, I knew I had to take them back with me. I needed those lightning bugs to help me breathe.

So I started collecting them, pulled off my t-shirt and made a pouch for them. I got so excited I just kept on catching them and catching them, and I could feel those lightning bugs crawling around inside my t-shirt, the thin cotton pouch vibrating slightly in my hand with the weight of them.

After a while, I started for home. It was still dark out, early, probably only around one o'clock. But I had what I wanted, so I wasn't afraid to go back there.

I got so happy, I started to tingle.

I climbed back into my room and shut the window. I closed the door, turned out the light. And I let them go!

And they were everywhere!

Flashing yellow tails in the darkness everywhere, flying inside of my room. I felt such joy I wanted to scream. And fly with them!

I climbed on top of my bed and started jumping up and down, spinning and spinning all around with my beautiful yellow friends everywhere flashing and flashing!

And that's when I heard it. The click.

I froze. Like a statue.

Suddenly the light came on- sharp and hurting, pouring into my room- the darkness gone, the yellow tails vanishing, disappearing, my mother's bone white face hovering in the doorway. And me screaming, "No! Shut the door! Shut the door!", jumping up and down and screaming and screaming, holding my head as if someone were kicking it, killing me; my hands,

fists, and me squeezing them, squeezing them shut with all my might, hollering, “Shut the door! Turn out the light! Shut the door!”

My face got so red, so hot, I felt as if it would explode. My throat was on fire. I opened my eyes and I could see brown-winged bugs crawling all over those bare plaster walls. Some of the bugs were still flying. In the harsh lightbulb light I could scarcely see their lovely tails. My heart was pounding and pounding. I rushed across my bed, scooped up a handful of bugs off the wall and started eating them.

My mother screamed.

I could hear my step-father pounding down the hall.

I kept eating, faster and faster. The taste was bitter, like blood, but thicker, and slightly crunchy, crackly, like tiny bones-like blood- like nothing I’ve ever had in my mouth before.

I chewed and chewed. I swallowed.

I thought I could feel them, the glowing, way down deep inside of me like thousand yellow suns exploding in my stomach, spreading out to my hands, my fingers, my legs, my toes, my cheeks. I was light! Glowing. On fire.

My step-father knocked me down.

“What the fuck is going on in here? Where did all these bugs come from?”

“He was *eating* them-“my mother shripped. “He’s got them in his mouth!”

“Je-sus Christ-“ John swatted at the bugs crawling all over the walls. At the ones still flying around. He opened up a window and smacked them out.

“No! No!” I screamed. I lay as if dying on my bed. I could feel sticky gummy pulp and flecks of brown bug legs around my mouth. I held my stomach and moaned.

I got sick.

“Don’t just stand there-“ my step-father screamed to my mother. “Go in the bathroom and git a towel or something!”

But she just stood there. She could not move.

“Go!” he hollered.

And she did.

John tried to lay his hand on my back, across my shoulder. But I only shook him away.

“Don’t touch me!” I screamed.

My mother returned with a washrag. John took it and wiped my mouth. He handed it back to my mother, then picked me up like a fireman with an accident victim and carried me into his room, laying me in the center of his and my mother’s bed. He propped my head up on some pillows. My mother brought in a cold Coke, and John tipped the bottle to my mouth, with a swollen, ugly hand, feeding me sips. Exhausted, I let him, the sweet soda fizzing easily down my aching throat.

“Henry’s gone-“ I said out loud, listening to my own voice as if it were somebody else’s telling me this.

“That’s right-“ my mother said. “Henry’s up in heaven-“

Once I started crying, I could not stop.

My mother held me. And John sat on the edge of the bed with his back to us.

“He’s better off-“ John said. I thought I heard his voice break a little, which made me cry harder.

My mother rocked me for a very long time, and afterwards I slept.

I think John and my mother sat up in the kitchen talking and drinking coffee all night. Occasionally, I could hear their low, tired, serious exchange of mumbles, not really able to make out their words, but sure in my heart that they were both deeply scared, and sorry for their shortcoming as parents (in a way that they could probably never really communicate to me), or maybe I only imagined this, yet I felt some consolation in it; realizing also for the first time, in a hard concrete knot in my chest, that I was essentially

on my own in the world, responsible for myself. Henry wasn't coming back. It was just me here. Only me.

I awoke small and alone the next day (sometime late in the afternoon) in my parent's huge bed, and realized that they were both out painting (sleep or no sleep) to do it all over again, like slaves to the field, as if they had no choice.

I sat up in the bed not sure what to do next. After some time I swung my feet over the edge, got up, and started looking all around. I wanted to find my drawing pad.

After a long search I found it in a bottom dresser drawer, under a stack of comic books. My markers and pencils were there, too. I took them into the kitchen, sat down at the table. I selected a pencil, turned to a clean white page, and started to draw.

10:45

It started innocently enough, you think, turning over for the hundredth time on a skinny futon purchased last year from the Goodwill. A couple of awkward compliments from a man in a ski jacket and shades. *You have real pretty hair. I wish I had such pretty hair.* He'd buy something cheap and sugary. A pack of cupcakes. Or a can of Pepsi. Slowly and precisely counting out his nickels and dimes. Sometimes he'd stand for a half hour at the magazine rack flipping through Iron Man or Muscle Magazine, casting occasional furtive glances over at you. You remember seeing him once in an open field at the park, dressed in karate clothes, practicing kicks, turns, and punches. Nothing unusual coming from a customer in the 7-11 store where you work full-time: just temporary, you repeat to yourself daily.

You are twenty-two.

10:58

You burrow beneath a light sheet and two worn blankets, icy wind whistling through the bottom, top, and sides of the partially rotted window a foot above your head. Outside dark branches snap with cold. Black telephone wires swing. The moon is the size of a quarter; bright as a hundred watt lightbulb. A fierce wind wracks the decades old wood and cement foundation of the rowhouse where you have rented the top floor since you were sixteen. Your landlord, also an attorney, looked up from his littered desk the day you walked in inquiring about the FOR RENT sign, and said politely, "Why



not let's wait for your mother?" You took a deep breath, eyed him directly, and calmly informed him that your mother was dead.

Leukemia, you told him.

11:06

You cough. Hard. Then sneeze. Sit up. Reach for a Kleenex, knocking over your mace in the process. Mechanically, you upright the fist-sized metal container which carries "Uses and Instructions" on a silver rectangular sticker: DOG AND BEAR REPELLANT; for self protection; Aim at face of attacker and press down firmly using short bursts. Irritably you blow your nose. You rummage through several prescription bottles on the bottom shelf of your bookcase, loaded with Towson University textbooks: World Literature, Calculus, Psychology II, etc....-and just as you thought, the clear brown bottle labeled Amitriptyline HCL 75 MG, the generic version of an anti-depressant prescribed by a physician at your local health clinic to combat migraine headaches, is empty. The pills did not alleviate your headaches in the least; they did, however, help you sleep. You pick up your pillow and press it for several long moments against the ancient silver radiator at the head of your futon. Then tuck the heat satiated pillow beneath your head, luxuriating in its' warmth. It feels safe. Like somebody holding you.

11:32

*A sound like breathing wakes you. Your eyes flicker open. Darkness swathes your second-hand dresser, your hot color TV and VCR stacked in the corner. The floor creaks. A sound like combat boots purposefully shifting. And suddenly your heart races. You want to bolt up but can't, your blood turned to cement, pumping sluggishly like mud through your veins.. Your joints tingle with fear. You think you can hear time: the elastic tension-filled pull of a second, expanding like a taut piece of leather. And then he springs out at you,*

*drops like a bat from a dark corner, but heavy, with a man's hard body, falling on top of you. The cold steel of his crowbar jams against your throat cutting off air. His face bobs above yours. Head and ears covered with a dark knit hat. Struggling, you can smell the cheap fibers. His eyes are transparent blue, like an alien's eyes; his yellow hair, cut short and crispy. His whiskers smell like dirt and hay, the tips surreally shiny with moonlight spilling in through the curtainless side window. His breathing comes raggedly, in adrenalin pumped rasps, "Next time you'll pay more attention when somebody tells you something..." he hisses between clenched teeth, baring down now on the crowbar with all his might.*

11:34

Slowly you wake, recover, moving tense wood-like limbs testingly. Relieved that the nightmare is not real, you sit up. Determinedly resist the urge to click on the light. Concentrate on breathing. Slowly in and out. Relax. Marvel at how *real* the dream seemed. Like a master painting. A master production of your own making.

It's weird, but you don't ever remember dreaming of your mother. You try not to think about her. She is gone. Vanished. Erased.

Your grandmother, robed, silent, adequate, raised you for eight years of public school, too much TV, and bed at nine o'clock. Oatmeal for breakfast, baloney and cheese on Wonder bread for lunch, canned Ravioli for dinner. On your sixteenth birthday, wordlessly, she handed you a birthday card in a canary yellow envelope. Three weeks later, you packed up and moved out.

11:46

Straggle to the bathroom and pee. Then to the kitchen where mechanically you chew half a granola bar, dry and gritty as bricks.

12:00AM

Return to bed. Attempt to meditate. Imagine yourself floating in a sea of calm blue. A peaceful azure. A sea of gently undulating ripples.

Doesn't work.

Think back on your father instead.

You believe he was a paramedic. Or a security guard of some kind. A big guy in dark blue pants and a light blue work shirt. He called you "the little nigger girl". Sometimes he said it in fun and sometimes he said it really nasty.

Apparently, your mother, a long time heroin addict, had spent several years running with blacks. She dated several black men before hooking up with your father, who got tired of emptying his pockets to her every payday and hit the road when you were four.

"Look at the little nigger girl..." he'd taunt as you colored or played with your dolls.

"You're crazy-" your mother would slur from her chair. "She's as white as snow..."

It was the nicest thing she ever said about you.

12:10

Absently stroke the satiny edge of your blanket like when you were seven and sucked your thumb. Catch yourself. Decide you are touch deprived and need a boyfriend. Roll over and close your eyes thinking of Karen's boyfriend at work who routinely beats her when she won't have sex with him. Think of Jill's boyfriend who calls her fat, ugly, and stupid every day of her life. Think of past relationships. No matter how well they start off, always ending up feeling inferior because you're poor and have no family. Decide you probably need therapy.

12:28

Listen to the faucet dripping in the bathroom. And to the faucet dripping next

door. The walls are so thin, you can hear the neighbor's splashing around in their bathtubs. At night, you can hear them flushing their toilets.

12:46

Lean over and make sure the alarm clock is set for 6:30. You have to work at 7:00. Remember to return your library books tomorrow. And that Jill needs her typewriter back in a week.

1:16

Recall the pivotal incident. Elliot reaching across the counter at work and grabbing your arm, his thickly muscled body bulky beneath Winter layers: dingy thermals, infrequently laundered sweatshirts. He gripped your arm tight, held onto it as if he had a right. Shocked, you held his gaze. Then pulled away. Told him never to grab you like that again. That if he wanted your attention he could clear his throat or call your name. You felt like an elementary teacher reprimanding an unruly five year old. For a second, he looked wounded, hurt. You actually felt bad. He promised never to grab you again. So politely, you rang up his purchase, a Nestle Crunch bar, and handed him his change. He leaned in then, his lips white with anger. "Do you know any self defense?" he hissed. "Huh?"

Confused, you didn't answer.

"Whadda you gonna do if somebody decides to *take* it from you, *huh?*"

A prickle of fear started beneath your skin. Jumpy and hot. But you kept your face impassive as he glared across at you, a thick vein working frenetically at his temple, as he stalked out, his green military backpack thumping against his back.

1:30

*You lay drowsily, almost asleep. Outside a black gloved hand scratches briefly at*

*the window. You ignore it, tired of dreams, of everything. Distantly, it scratches again. Then disappears. You drift off a while. But a change in the air, a palpable feeling of menace wakes you. Before you can react, the black hand arches up from beneath your futon and covers your mouth. Stifles your cries. Feverishly working your own two hands, you try and wrench the hand from across your mouth. The glove tastes like cotton, dry, but damp in spots with your own saliva. Just as you pry up the thick strong fingers (ready to let loose an hysterical cry), a second hand emerges from the other side of the futon, clamping itself down over the first. The two hands together press down hard against your lips and nose, until faint, heart convulsing in your chest, face suffused with a fiery heat, you can feel darkness descending over you like a thick blanket extinguishing a flame.*

1:34

Sit up again. Once more concentrate on breathing slowly, rhythmically, in and out. Will your mind blank. Imagine the inside of your head is filled with blank tape. Patiently, listen to it unwind.

1:45

Stumble groggily to the bathroom and pee again. Rinse your granola sour mouth with mouthwash. Look at your face in a toothpaste spotted mirror. You look thin. Faint dark half-circles ring your eyes. You look like that first day when you were eleven and got your period; somehow profoundly disturbed, shaken.

2:05

Having succumbed to plugging in a small night light, you sit up, staring across at a secondhand copy of Picasso's "The Tragedy" hanging on the opposite wall. A somber study in blue. Man, woman, and child, huddled loosely in a small circle, yet all distraught,

shoulders sagging with unnamed misery, each face staring inconsolably into a different direction.

You imagine what Elliot's apartment might look like. The top or bottom floor of a nondescript and neglected rowhouse. Three or four chilly, sparsely furnished rooms. A mattress on the floor. A spray of porno magazines by his bed. No real family. No real friends. For a moment, feel sorry for him. Smile then, imagining how scared the kids said he was when he found out you went down to the recreation center where he lifts weights five nights a week, looking for information about him. His full name, address, any history. Just in case he kept harassing you, you wanted the court commissioner to know where to send the criminal summons.

At the park, everybody told you how crazy Elliot is. A certified black belt who talks incessantly about people trying to beat him up while he's sleeping, he believes that judo experts from New York are after him. Routinely, in the recreation center's work-out room, he beats a punching bag with a two-by-four to keep his enemies at bay.

You informed several police officers, regular 7-11 free coffee drinkers, of the situation. Gave them his full name you found out from the director of the park: Elliot Franklin Addison. Told them jokingly if you disappeared or turned up dead in an alley somewhere, Elliot would be their prime suspect. The director of the park, a beefy, red-faced guy who wore a chained whistle around his neck, had a talk with Elliot. He called you back and said, "Aw, the guy's got a crush on you. Him grabbing you was his way of flirting, of making a pass. Give the guy a break...." Woodenly, you thanked the director and hung up.

Elliot disappeared for two weeks after the grabbing incident.

But yesterday, walking down 36<sup>th</sup> Street past the Rite Aid, you looked up and saw him striding towards you. A red knit ski hat framed his pale, stiff face. His sunglasses shone bright yellow. Two feet away, in clipped tones, he challenged you, "What're you gonna do if I decide to snatch you up? *Huh?*" But he wouldn't look at you. He glared at a

spot just above your head. Caught by surprise, you busted out laughing. A perverse reaction. Like that time you saw a man at the library tumble down a flight of stairs. You watched with a mixture of fear and absurdity Elliot's straight, vaguely yellow tinted teeth snap tightly shut as he strode away.

He catches the bus less than a block from your apartment. You wonder if he's seen you walk inside. If he knows where you live.

Seriously think about buying a gun.

Your grandmother owned a gun. She kept it unloaded in the kitchen drawer, along with a handful of bullets in a small crumpled bag.

After your father left, your mother took up with a pack of neighborhood junkies: their scabbed, tired faces all looked the same to you. You and your grandmother would see her sporadically, usually whenever she needed some sleep.

The day after your mother died (at a friend's house) from an air bubble in her needle making its way through her bloodstream to her heart, your grandmother gathered up her few belongings: some second hand clothes, several pairs of scuffed Payless shoes, an imitation leather purse, a couple snapshots taken in Ocean City, and a set of keys with a pink rabbit's foot. She loaded everything into a cardboard box, offering to save them for you, to put them up in a closet. But you said no, insisting she set the box out for the trashman.

You were eight.

3:15

Wake with a jolt. Somebody outside is kicking a beer bottle noisily down the sidewalk. Wonder vaguely if it is Elliot. Position your mace so that picking it up quickly in the dark, it is set, aimed towards your attacker, ready to go.

3:29

*Rise. Open the top drawer of your dresser and read the socks. Several white pairs, stretched out end to end, line the drawer. In the center is a mosaic of unrolled dark blues and greens, overlapping one another, criss-crossed, over, under, over, like those weaved colored paper Easter baskets you made in the second grade. Decide the socks are telling you something. They are telling you to be careful. Close the drawer. Crawl back into bed. Doze warily.*

3:31

*Lie tensely in a bottom bunk, staring keenly up at the top, not a mattress overhead, but a thick loosely weaved mosaic of your clothes: pants, shirts, sweaters. Yank superstitiously at the fallen arm of a sweater. Nothing happens. Yank again. This time the sweater falls to the floor with a staticky tumble. Yank at other pieces: a jean's leg, a turtleneck. Nothing happens. Feel tension building as suspiciously your eyes monitor for telltale lumps and bumps overhead, finding nothing. Finally, frustrated, kick the entire layer of clothes, like a shabby roof, off the bed frame, an explosion of fabric light pieces that hit the floor with a surprisingly heavy thud. The old wooden floor groans loudly (as with the weight of a man rebounding from a fall). And just as you thought, he shoots up then, Elliot, rising from a confusion of clothes, solid flesh, a thick curve of bones and muscles closing in on you, bearing down, blocking out all light.*

3:35

An MTA bus thunders by, rattling your livingroom windows. Jerk awake.  
Instinctively, check your clock. Two and a half more hours left to sleep.  
And that's when you see her standing in your doorway.  
Your mother.  
She does not look like a ghost. But it is hard to say. Everything in the room seems



fainter, less solid, even the dressers glowy, edged with darkness. Are you sleeping? Dead or alive? You can think of nothing to say to her. Not one word. You can not speak. You feel sick, just watching her. Her red hair looks soft and freshly combed. But her blue eyes appear tired. She is wearing clean jeans. A tiny heart tattoo is visible on her right cheekbone.

“Don’t forget....-“ she finally says. She seems worried. “Don’t forget-“ she repeats, and is gone.

You start to cry without wanting to. You are not a “crier”. You cry until your face stings. You miss her, you miss your mother. Your mind is suddenly flooded with images of her, buried memories gushing to the surface. You cannot stop them. They will not stop. You see her bundled in an ugly blue parka, holding your small cold hand, the two of you leaning over a rickety fence to pet a grizzly llama at the SPCA. And on Easter fifteen years ago, you’re sitting in the kitchen in your ten dollar dress bought off the rack at the G.C.Murphy’s; one of your mother’s veiny hands grips your chin as shakily, with delicate strokes, her other hand feathers Cranberry Delight lipstick (an Avon miniature) across your skinny lips, opened wide and drawn taut over tiny teeth.

And on and on...

“Don’t forget-“ she said.

And you know she means don’t forget her face, her voice, her scent: Enjoli perfume mixed with Rave Hairspray #3, and fresh nail polish four layers thick on her fingernails.

Don’t forget don’t forget don’t forget don’t forget is the lullaby that eases you back into sleep.

5:40

Drift awake to the smell of bacon frying downstairs. Hear it crackle in the pan. Hear the old man’s deep crotchety cough below. He is deaf, and goes to bed at eight each

evening. "An old coot-" your mother would say. And then she would laugh. Low and secret and raspy.

6:15

Zombie-armed reach over and squash the alarm button off. Lay looking up at the rectangle of sky revealed beneath the old gray shade more than half covering your sooty window. The lit-up sky is a relief. A thin, pale, lavender water-color morning.

And could it be? Are those actually birds you hear chirping?

6:20

Listen to the fat single mother secretary next door, stridently screaming orders to her two small sons. *Justin, do you have your shoes and socks on yet? I want your beds made now, or no TV after school today! Pick up your pajamas and put them in the hamper where they belong! Eric, get out of bed before I get that belt!* Once a week she takes a cab over to Parents Anonymous. Feel glad about this.

6:25

Get determinedly up. Walk to the bathroom. Brush your teeth. Wash your face. Apply moisturizer. Brush your hair. Pull it up into a ponytail. Pull on jeans, a sweater, socks, tennis shoes. Pat on a light dusting of powder, a touch of lipstick, a swipe of eyeliner. Absently dab a spot of perfume on each wrist. Smile plastically at your reflection in the mirror.

6:45

Leave for work, hustle, walking fast, January cold fingers curled tightly about the smooth metal cylinder of mace tucked resolutely in your coat pocket.

*I wake up this morning beneath the weight of a huge bird, surprised to find my head twisted to one side and clasped tightly in a strong beak. A suffocating warmth, the bird's giant belly, its monotonously thumping heart envelop me, pressing my size six body against crumpled sheets and blankets. The tips of the beak are sharp, two knife-points digging into the soft skin above my cheekbones.*

*Dumbly I stare across at a wall, breathing slowly, carefully, in and out. After several moments, gently, I attempt to move my head, but right away the beak clamps tighter threatening to crush my skull. For endless minutes I lay utterly still with my arms and legs as still as wood, until gradually the beak loosens its' grip.*

*My eyes dart to a nearby window. Outside is a pale purple dawn. The reflection in the glass shows clearly an enormous pigeon nestled determinedly on top of me. I listen to the bird's occasional weird bleating as it lays its' eggs. In the window I can see glimpses of stark white, can feel the eggs smooth curved weights settled in the dip of my back. My whole body aches from suppressing any inclination to move; every muscle, every joint is on fire.*

It is the middle of the night. I sit zombie-like at my tiny kitchen table. I can hear the clock ticking, a slight drip in the sink. A cup of tepid tea sits untouched before me. And my dream journal. I have spent the past hour randomly flipping through it; reading a section here, a section there. The strangest and most vivid dreams fill up the two month period following Ryan's departure.

I met him last year in a dim, crowded artsy bar on a Saturday night. A gigantic paper mache dragon spewing flames was suspended from the ceiling in a cloud of cigarette smoke several feet above our heads. Nervously, I sipped a second glass of wine as my black,

backless sequined dress attracted stares of interest at a bar lined with ponytailed men in black leather jackets and perfumed women with kohl-lined eyes. Billie Holliday was playing on the jukebox.

In the mirrored wall directly across from us, I caught glimpses of him sitting next to me: a long haired guy with broad shoulders and nerdy-looking glasses. His mopy locks concealed his razor-stubbed face, as he took deep drags from his Camel Filter and sips from his martini (straight up, three onions). I liked the fact that he was sitting alone, solitary (like myself), surrounded by handsome couples and chattering clusters of intoxicated friends. He was not my type, but a compulsion to see his face prompted me to start up a conversation.

“Excuse me-“ I said. “Could you please pass me a napkin?” (Not exactly a brilliant or witty opener, but convenient since there was a neat pile on the bar in front of him).

“Sure-“ He eagerly passed me the napkin, smiling somewhat sheepishly. His teeth were nice and white (orthodontic straight), a charming contrast to his otherwise grizzled appearance. His lips were wide-ish, not very full, but pleasantly masculine. He smelled like wet wood, old leather, and whiskers.

“Thanks-“ Stupidly I commenced wiping up a small wet spot beside my drink.

“Come here often?” he stammered, turned towards me now, nervously stroking his goatee-ish whiskers.

“Once a week or so. You?”

“Once a month...if I’m lucky-“ His eyes were bluish grey behind his glasses. Out of reach, difficult were my first impressions.

“You must be a busy man then-“

“Absolutely-“

“So what do you do that keeps you so busy?”

“Guess-“

His hair was just beginning to thin on top; it was brownish at the roots, turning

into masses of lighter ringlets that rested on his well-developed, leather-jacketed shoulders. His face was not handsome, but attractive in a craggy sort of way.

“A sculptor?”

“No-“

“A graphic designer?”

“No-“

I looked at his face long and hard. “A heavy metal drummer?”

He burst out laughing.

“A painter-“ he said.

“Houses or canvases?”

“Canvases-“

“Cool-“

“What about you? What do you do?”

“Guess-“

“An actress?”

“No-“

“A waitress?”

“Not exactly-“ (In truth I did waitress part time since I was 40,000 dollars in debt from school loans, but I wanted him to hear the good news first).

“A school teacher?”

“No-“ I took a sip of my wine. “A writer-“

“A writer-“ he repeated with pleasure. “What kinds of things do you write?”

“Fiction-“

“Novels?”

“Short stories mostly. I’m enrolled in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins-“

“Impressive-“

“I’m Michele-“ I extended my freshly nail polished hand.

“Ryan-“

His hand was twice the size of mine. Traces of paint rimmed several cuticles, and his handshake was firm.

We discussed books for half an hour. He admitted to not really being the “literary type”. The last book he read was the sci-fi novel 2010. And some comic books which he collected. But he insisted he would read more if only he knew what to read. I recommended two novels for him: Neuromancer by William Gibson (because he was into sci-fi) and Scar Lover by Harry Crews, a Harley Davidson author I thought he might connect with.

He was jotting the titles and authors down on a slip of paper from his wallet when my friend, Nancy, her pixie-ish face shiny from dancing at a new wave club next door, tapped my shoulder. “Ready to go?” she chirped.

I looked up at the clock. It was 1:30.

“Yeah, just let me say goodbye-“ I glanced pointedly at Ryan.

“Right-“ my friend said. “I’ll meet you outside in ten minutes-“ Quietly she departed.

“It was nice talking to you-“ I said to Ryan.

He nodded, then nervously cleared his throat.

“If you don’t think it’s too forward of me-“ he countered, “I’d really like to get your phone number-“

I scribbled the ten digits on a damp napkin, smiled, and waved goodbye.

That was our beginning.

For our first date, Ryan took me to dinner at a restaurant which specialized in Afghanistani food. The tables were small, covered with white table cloths, and elegantly set. A single white candle glowed at the center of each deuce.

We sat by a window, sipped red wine, and ate sumptuous heaps of lamb served over brown rice with slivers of sweet carrots. Our waiters, dark skinned and sleek, glided over

wooden floors burnished to a shine. Ryan was attired in a white dress shirt tucked into comfortable jeans. Black leather boots encased his size twelve feet, and he smelled pleasantly of cologne. I wore a simple vintage dress I spent hours shopping for the day before. My hair was freshly washed with salon shampoo. New earrings dangled from my earlobes.

Above the din of eating and whispering, some foreign music played. My cheeks were flushed, I was sure, from the combination of anxiety and excitement humming through my body, a golden liquid, warm and jangly, laced like a drug through my veins.

I had not dated anyone for six months. I was glad to be sitting here with Ryan. I was tired of returning home to a dark apartment after school or work, flopping into an empty bed, lying for hours unable to sleep, my body swollen with longing, aching for touch.

Throughout dinner, Ryan and I conversed easily. I learned that he grew up in a series of foster homes. He had no idea who his real mother was and no interest in finding or meeting her. He rented a studio in one of the seedier sections of downtown Baltimore, where he painted incessantly when he wasn't teaching over at the Maryland Institute of Art. I told him about my mom being a cop, about my father leaving us when I was six, about my determination to write a novel.

At 10:15 it started to snow. Huge, beautiful flakes tumbling with soothing monotony past our window. Amazed, we watched the lazy snow flutter and fall, our eyes as wide as children's.

When the check came, Ryan paid with his Mastercard.

A jazz station played on the drive home. He drove a battered Buick, which he playfully referred to as the "Hooptie". He insisted on walking me to my door, and I let him.

We stood facing each other on the cement stoop of the brick-fronted rowhouse where I rented the top floor. He was a head taller than me. It was cold. Our breath came

in smoky white puffs.

“Give me a hug-“ I said.

His leather jacket squeaked as we embraced. We separated, but still stood face to face. He grinned shyly, so I said, “Give me a kiss, too-“

He leaned forward, gracefully lowered his head, and our lips met. We exchanged several sweet kisses. I slipped the tip of my tongue into his mouth, our tongues mingling fleetingly. The inside of his mouth was warm and tasted slightly cigarette-y. After a moment, I drew back. I opened my eyes, and he was still grinning.

“So when am I gonna see you again?” he asked.

*Uniform blocks of purple and hot pink pass on a multi-leveled conveyor belt. There is a sharp smell of metal and the rhythmic buzz of steady uniform motion. Gradually the conveyor belt increases in speed, the purple and pink blocks whizzing along. The belt accelerates faster and faster, straining the machinery which rumbles and smokes. The line of blocks becomes chaotic, the belt stopping and starting, jerking blocks out of place. Two blocks explode into pink and purple cats with vicious pointy teeth. One cat arches backwards, attacking the other with rabid biting and clawing. There is soundless hissing and the tearing of more fur, as more and more blocks explode into cats, likewise savagely attacking each other in wild soundless dervishes of frenetic combat.*

Ryan and I dated for two months before we had sex. We went to smoky clubs to hear punk bands, held hands at the movies. We played pool with strangers for hours, frequently winning pitchers of beer. Once we even went bowling. Ryan scored 98, an average score, beating my 73, a terrible score (a grand total of six gutterballs).

“This guy needs bowling lessons-“ I told the senior citizen cashier as Ryan paid.

“Where can I sign him up?”



“Right here-“ the lady said, very serious, very concerned, handing Ryan a clipboard.

“No thank you-“ Ryan told her. He grabbed me by the neck like a scruffy alley cat.

“I’ll be taking this goofball home now-“

The cashier waved goodbye, all of us laughing, as Ryan dragged me out.

After our dates we usually made out in the front seat of his car. One time things heated to a feverish pitch as fully clothed we kissed and twisted and rolled, and Ryan slipped off the vinyl seat onto the floor. Surprised, a tangle of long arms and legs, he smirked up at me like a teenager, his glasses askew. Laughing, I helped pull him back up. Another time at his apartment, while a neglected Charlie Chaplin movie played, he rubbed ice cubes from our drinks all over my naked breasts, as I arched my back with delirium on his sofa. When Spring arrived and I started wearing sun-dresses and halter tops, his fingertips would graze my back continually throughout our evenings together. I liked to stand next to him in a dark bar resting my cheek against his warm chest while caressing a nipple to erection through his shirt. He would moan lightly with satisfaction in my ear.

The first time we did it, we were both nervous. There was some awkwardness as our naked, wine-warmed limbs intertwined, seeking mutually satisfying positions on his firm-mattressed double bed. As he moved above me with his eyes closed, I watched his face.

Several droplets of sweat dripped from his forehead down onto my mouth; I licked the saltiness from my lips.

As we changed positions, he elbowed me in the eye.

“Oh God. Sorry-“ He encircled me in his arms and held me tight.

“It’s okay-“ I grinned, pressing a palm against my slightly throbbing eye.

We made love for hours as warm Spring breezes wafted in through a partially opened window. Afterwards, we clung damply to each other, catching our breath. Ryan

gave me small butterfly kisses all over my face.

“I’m thirsty-“ I said. My body felt good, like a glowing coal which has exhausted its’ heat.

Still naked, lithe and rangy, he traipsed to the kitchen, returning with a plastic tumbler full of ice water. I sat up and he fed me sips.

I liked to watch him sleeping. The smooth firmness of his lightly muscled arms and chest and legs. He was here with me. Mine. He’d flop an arm or a leg around my waist or thighs, and we were like two snuggled bears, male and female, perfectly matched, warm and content.

I felt protected.

*I am eight years old, playing in a field of overgrown grass in front of a modern, red-brick church. My dress is flouncy, pink and white. My shoes are black patent leather with straps. The sky is a clear beautiful blue, spilling bright yellow sunlight over everything it touches. Brilliant green grass tickles my bare legs as I frolic, collecting dandelions and wild violets. I stop, stooping to scratch a skinny calf and find a trail of maggots ascending from the tip of my lace trimmed bobby sock up to my scuffed knee. I panic, swiping the moist white parasites away with disgust. But the more I smack at them, the quicker they reappear, multiplying frenetically on my leg.*

Except for an occasional unexplained disappearance and a couple bouts of extreme moodiness which I chalked up to his artistic nature, Ryan and I got along fine. He disappeared once for seven days, like he fell off the face of the earth. I couldn’t reach him anywhere. When he finally called me, he apologized profusely.

“If you have a problem, we can talk about it-“ I assured him.

"I will-" he said.

"I mean it, Ryan. Are you upset with me about something?"

"No-"

There was a long pause.

"I guess I just needed some space-" he finally said. "My last girlfriend freaked out if she didn't know where I was every second-"

"I'm not like that. I need some space, too, from time to time. I understand-"

We'd take turns cooking each other dinner on the weekends. He'd make spinach souffle or my favorite, jambalaya, a spicy Cajun dish chock full of shrimp, ham, tomatoes, and rice. I'd make him pot roast with potatoes and carrots, and bake a pie. We didn't see each other much during the week because school and waitressing ate up so much of my time. And he painted continually (when he wasn't teaching), from early morning straight through until dark at his studio.

I visited him at his studio only once. He occupied the big dank room with its' stacks of canvases, crumpled cloth rags, brushes of all shapes and sizes, and hundreds of messy paint tubes territorially, like Cro-Magnon Man in his cave among valued axes, bone tools, etc... He showed me some of his paintings. They were huge. And mesmerizing. My favorite was of a thick and muscular baby coiled up in a dark womb, its' features smudged to obscurity, two huge hands clenched into man sized fists and held close to a brawny chest.

I went to the studio to tell Ryan about a dream I'd had. In this dream I saw Ryan's face. He looked strangely like Jesus. A tired, suffering expression, as if the cross was too much to bear. And then I heard Ryan's voice speaking to me. There were two voices, both going at once, overlapping, like several tapes playing simultaneously. He spoke urgently. But the two voices so intertwined I couldn't make out the message.

"Really-" was Ryan's quiet response.

"Are you okay?"

“Yeah. Fine-“

I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Are you sure?”

“Let’s go out to dinner-“ he said. And I let it go at that.

We’d been a couple for only six months when Ryan informed me he was moving to Chicago. He felt stifled in Baltimore. He needed a change, wanted to give up teaching and paint full-time. He did not ask me to come with him. And I didn’t bring it up, naively hoping if I didn’t pressure him, he would realize how much he cared about me and ask me to join him at the last minute. He was packed and ready to go in a matter of weeks.

I gave him a hug and a kiss at the train station.

“It’s been fun-“ I said.

“Yeah-“ he replied. “I’ll write you as soon as I get settled in-“

I noticed one of his hands trembling as he picked up his suitcase. Maybe he wanted to ask me to come with him after all, but was too nervous, too afraid I might reject him. I felt a momentary lift of happiness, and a sharp stab of affection for him, a physical ache in my chest matching the dry sand papery ache in my throat, as I watched him go, his bony elbows jutting out from a dark t-shirt too big for his lanky frame.

“Good luck, Ryan-“ I added, waving goodbye like a dummy, my puppet’s hand jerking mechanically up and down.

As soon as he boarded his plane, I ducked into a bathroom and erupted into tears. I sat in a stall on a closed toilet seat crying for half an hour.

Afterwards, glumly, I went through the routines in my life- school, writing, visits to my mom, checking my mailbox twice daily for his letter which never arrived.

*My throat aches. With too thin arms, feeling dizzy and light-headed, I stand before a bathroom mirror, staring at my pale reflection. A bad taste fills my mouth. I swallow with difficulty. I lean closer to the mirror, opening my mouth up very wide. The moist*

*reddish walls inside where my tonsils had been removed when I was twelve are crammed with foul-tasting mushrooms. They pack my throat, so that I can scarcely breathe.*

One month after Ryan's departure I started experiencing an unusual vaginal discharge and bleeding between my periods which lead me to believe I had contracted a sexual disease from him. We had not used condoms because I was on the pill. With Ryan gone, life seemed suddenly harsher, uglier, more dangerous. The misty trance-like veil of shared affection had disappeared. I felt like a sucker in a tawdry magic show, a girl in a skimpy sequined outfit and high heels, standing alone out on a rigged platform, rigid with surprise as a trap door gives way beneath my feet.

Tight-lipped, stripped from the waist down, with my legs opened and nestled in cold metal stirrups, I gritted my teeth as the physician's assistant at Planned Parenthood took a culture.

It was a fifteen minute wait before she confirmed my suspicions and wrote me out a prescription for antibiotics. She also suggested that I might want to get tested for AIDS. Hollowed out, empty space inside a flimsy shell, I agreed. So she stuck me with a needle in my right arm, extracting several tubes of blood. Finally, I made another appointment to get the results.

For the next week, I cleaned my apartment obsessively between work and school. I vacuumed, dusted, and scrubbed, careful to keep my mind inactive, just a dead weight I carried around inside my head. I lined the kitchen cupboards with new shelf paper, tore up the old carpet on my stairs, replacing them with black mats. I repainted my bedroom with a four inch wide paintbrush. Anything to keep myself busy, no need to panic, just keep moving.

On September the 4th at 12:15PM I sat in a small conference room in a plastic

chair beside the physician assistant's desk.

"Well-" I said. My palms were damp with sweat.

She shook her head grimly, nervously chewing her bottom lip.

"I'm sorry-" she said.

She shrugged helplessly and looked away from me, up at a stupid framed picture of some tulips above my head. Her eyes were wet, as if she was about to cry.

And I just sat speechless, instantaneously exhausted, dizzy, like an oxygen deprived marathon runner in my chair.

I took a temporary leave of absence from school, and most mornings lay in bed until late in the afternoon, a pathetic log of human flesh, inert, between layers of rumped blankets. Whenever I picture myself stick thin, my face lesioned with fungus-like cancer, too weak to lift a spoon, I imagine smashing Ryan's face with a brick over and over, until it is unrecognizable pulp, screaming FUCK YOU! again and again, a million times FUCK YOU!

In the evenings I write him letters incessantly. I cannot stop. I vow to find him and make him pay. I spend hours on the phone with a Chicago operator trying to get a phone number or address for him with no luck.

Yet, conversely, like a small child who has been doused in gasoline and set afire by a crazed mother, will wail for her continually while lying alone in agony, bandaged from head to toe in a sterile hospital room, so I find myself sometimes in a daze, involuntarily repeating Ryan's name inside my head like a mantra, craving his touch, needing him, numb and pathetic, until I hate myself for it, and shake off his name like an evil thought, flinging it far away from me, a black and deformed bat, ejected, hurling outward at infinite speed from my heart.

I'm going back to school soon. I think. I should try and live my life as normally as possible. I think.

But to be perfectly honest, I don't really know what to do, how to feel, or how to

act. I really don't.

Locust Point, in Baltimore, has a bar on every corner, where the locals and longshoremen congregate after work to drink beer and shots of rock and rye, a sweet bourbon. Al's Place is clean and patriotic, with an American flag billowing outside. Inside, one whole wall is decorated with framed photos of soldiers from World War One, World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Iraq. A sticker of the French flag is adhered to every seat in the place (right where your ass goes) in reaction to France not supporting the United States in Iraq. Military hats from the Navy, Army, Air Force, and Marines hang behind the bar.

In one photo on the wall, Al, the owner, and Big Jim, a regular, embrace each other, tanned and shirtless, with the wide bright smiles of teenagers who'd never heard of Vietnam before a judge gave them a choice: Army or jail. Lifelong friends, Al and Big Jim grew up together in the poor, mostly black projects of Waverly called Ward Ten. On the playground, Big Jim earned his nickname because of his six feet frame and three hundred fifty pound girth. Al was a pretty boy, already six feet three inches tall at seventeen, blonde haired, blue eyed, and lithe as Jim was wide. The only white boys in residence, they fought blacks every day; fought them to keep their pocket change, their tennis shoes, and their dignity.

At eighteen, Al and Big Jim hit the road together, looking for adventure and opportunities to make money. They became "lumpers" at truck stops. Lumpers ride with the owners of big rigs, and when they reach their destination, they help them unload whatever they're hauling: furniture, lumber, sheet rock, sacks of concrete for a couple hundred bucks. In this manner, Al and Big Jim traveled the country. Growing up surrounded by concrete and metal fences, they were thrilled to pick oranges right off the trees in Florida, to squish the sand between their toes in the Nevada Desert, to touch the palms in California. But trouble came to them when one unscrupulous trucker refused to pay them after two gut-busting days of labor,



unloading huge steel pipes until the muscles in their arms and backs burned. So Al and Big Jim did the only reasonable thing two eighteen-year-olds could think of. They stole the guy's rig and headed South to taste the peaches in Georgia. Then they headed to New Orleans for Mardi Gras.

When the law finally caught up with them in Louisiana, an acne-pocked, scrawny-necked sheriff threw them into a prison so bad, they swore never to step foot in lousy, scorching, mosquito-infested Louisiana again. As Northerners, Al and Big Jim were forced to do all the most difficult and dirtiest tasks, like digging rocks out of the hardest ground and scrubbing toilets. For breakfast, they were given shallow pans whose contents were a hard slice of fat-back and a crust of stale bread; lunch was a handful of rice and black-eyed peas in a thin oily brown gravy; and dinner was two slices of white bread with jam or pickle relish and a glass of watery iced tea. It cost 34 cents a day to feed them. The following year, the Viet Cong fed them better.

In Vietnam, Al and Big Jim lasted three weeks before getting separated from their platoon and lost in the dense bright green jungle. Within hours they were captured as POWs and tossed into a dirt pit, dug six feet down into the ground. A bamboo cage covered the top. When they tried to escape one night, they were recaptured, and the soles of their feet were sliced open with bayonets to deter further escapes. The broiling sun blasted down and baked their heads. Their feet festered, stank, and throbbed. Occasionally, for sport, the Viet Cong would toss a rat into the pit and laugh as Al and Big Jim screamed. But eventually, they were rescued and returned home where Big Jim's feet healed completely. But Al, whose cuts were deeper, lost a foot and part of one leg to gangrene. The poison got into Al's bloodstream so badly, it nearly killed him.

Angry at the apathetic and sometimes even hostile reaction he got from Americans (including two of his own sisters) protesting the war in Vietnam, Big Jim hit the road again, but alone this time. The first bank he robbed was in New Jersey. Then he spent the next 20

years robbing banks across the country and doing time from Florida to California whenever he got caught.

In a Mississippi prison, Big Jim befriended a refrigerator-sized black man everybody called Bronco. Bronco was a lifer, in for double murder. He caught his fiancée in bed with his best friend and shot them both until his shotgun was empty. But Bronco's mother refused to give up on her son. She kept sending him Christian tracts, loving letters, and comforting prayers written on cards and plaques, until Bronco got saved and turned his life over to the Lord. Bronco carried his King James Bible everywhere. He and Big Jim met one afternoon when Big Jim was attacked by a gang of punks, intent on proving their toughness by taking him down. The punks clung to Big Jim, pounding him, like rabid monkeys on an elephant. Big Jim's face was bloody, one eye swollen closed.

"Get off the man-" Bronco said. He didn't even have to raise his voice, because he was deeply respected throughout the prison. He always tried to settle any disputes with words first. But when words failed, and he did have to swing his bowling ball sized fists, he threw one punch, and the fight was over.

"No problem, Bronco. Sorry, Bronco-" Quickly, the punks backed off.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I didn't need no help. I was getting the best of them. But thanks anyhow-" Big Jim smiled and spit out his front teeth.

After that, Bronco worked on Big Jim like his mother had worked on him. He called Big Jim "Moses" because of his thick white head of hair. (Big Jim's black ringlets turned to pure white almost overnight twenty years ago when he hit thirty). "Jesus loves you, Moses-" Bronco crooned to him every day for a year until Big Jim started to believe that maybe it was true. So he started going to the prison church with Bronco on Sundays and Wednesdays. Bronco made him a cross necklace out of yarn, and the preacher gave him a Bible with a soft white leather

cover. In his cell that same night, Big Jim started reading the New Testament. And the words of Jesus touched him deeply, and he accepted the Lord into his heart at 3:30 in the morning. He actually felt God come in. The love flowed through him, and he sobbed with joy. It was only the second time he could ever remember crying in his adult life. The other time was in the pit in Vietnam, with his feet flaming with pain and crawling with maggots.

The following year, to celebrate 365 days of walking with the Lord, Big Jim had Bronco tattoo the ten commandments across his chest. "So I don't forget-" Jim said. It took Bronco six weeks to complete. Bronco had perfect handwriting, and he rendered every letter with a beautiful script. In return, Big Jim tattooed a cross right over Bronco's heart. Inside the cross, it said JESUS LIVES HERE. He made the outline extra thick so you could see it clearly against Bronco's skin which was nearly eggplant black.

On his release day, Big Jim hugged Bronco long and hard. "I just wish you were coming with me, Brother-"

"Peace, Brother. I'm where God wants me. So you have a good life-"

After his release, with his record, Big Jim had a hard time finding a job. He was homeless for a spell, ate in soup kitchens, and slept behind an inner city church with a dried-vomit spattered blanket he found in the trash. He decided to rob one last bank. He should have known better. The guys he went in with were a bunch of pipe heads with maybe a dozen brain cells between them. At the last minute, Big Jim purchased a 99 cents bottle of liquid make-up and covered his numerous tattoos: an eagle, an American flag, and Jesus with a crown of thorns, which adorned his meaty arms. Inside the bank, one of the pipe heads shot a guard to death. There was a stand-off, hostages, and then the SWAT team stormed the place. Big Jim managed to escape and hauled ass down a back alley.

But a cop caught up with him and stopped him with his gun drawn. "Did you just come from that bank?" the cop wheezed.

"I don't know what you're talking about-" Big Jim replied. But the cop took him in

anyway.

Day and night in his jail cell, Big Jim prayed for a miracle. He vowed never to rob another bank again if God would have mercy on his pitiful soul. His freedom ended up costing him 99 cents. His public defender, a plain-faced Ivy league lesbian, looking to do some good in the world, argued that the man on the bank tape had bare arms, but her client had numerous tattoos. Yes, he *resembled* the bank robber, but that didn't mean he *was* the bank robber. Everyone was convicted, earning life without parole. Except for Big Jim, who was released that same day. He picked up his skirted lawyer and twirled her with glee.

A changed man, Jim returned to Maryland and started driving a truck for the UTZ Company, delivering potato chips and other snacks to convenience stores and super-markets. He met his wife JoAnne, a 7-11 cashier, on his route, wooing her with free super-size bags of Doritos for her brother, Adam. Adam was a thirty three year old man with the mind of a four year old child. But rather than put him in a state home, JoAnne chose to care for her disabled brother.

"You don't do family that way, just give them up-" she said to Big Jim. Her worn face was devoid of make-up, but more beautiful to Big Jim than any painted up super-model.

Before JoAnne, Big Jim lived off bagged snacks, fast food, beer, and a meal he learned to make during a stint in the Maryland Penitentiary called the "hook up". The hook up consisted of Oodles of Noodles, canned tuna fish, mayonnaise, mustard, and crushed Cheese Curls, all tossed into a plastic bread bag and shaken together. Big Jim would spread the resulting orange paste over crackers, eating it like a jailhouse pate. The first time he was invited to JoAnne's for dinner and feasted his eyes on her table, loaded from end to end with good country cooking: perfect fried chicken, glazed ham, homemade macaroni and cheese, navy beans with a huge ham-hock, buttered biscuits, and sweet cornbread, Big Jim sat open-mouthed and wide-eyed in wonder, like Hansel before the gingerbread house.

A dozen meals later, when Big Jim and JoAnne married, Adam was their "ring boy".

He took tiny, tiny steps the whole way down the aisle, afraid the precious ring might slide off its satin pillow. When five minutes later he and the ring finally arrived safely to the preacher, Adam said, very loud and very grave, "Here is your ring-" And everybody smiled and clapped.

While Big Jim was robbing banks and doing time, Al worked for the police force, as a desk cop. A relative got him in, and subsequently Al altered documents and pocketed cash evidence for the next 20 years. When he retired, he opened Al's Place with all the money he stole. Big Jim visited frequently. On Friday and Saturday nights, he'd drink twenty four beers, ordering them three at a time, and keeping them cool in insulated foam sleeves. Al's favorite drink was the house specialty called a Tall Blonde. In a glass barrel fitted with a spout and filled with imported Estonian vodka, three whole fresh pineapples, cut into wedges, soaked and flavored the alcohol. It was five dollars a shot.

One Saturday in May, after a bull roast, a grim Big Jim lumbered in, followed closely by Al who limped only slightly. He'd grown used to his artificial foot and had little trouble dancing, mowing the grass, or tending bar. Al's wife, Margaret, agreed to tend bar so her husband and Big Jim could go to the bull roast together. Margaret was tall, nearly as tall as her husband, and her long blonde hair was cut into a Farrah Fawcett style hair-do. She was the jealous type who would stop by the bar routinely, tracking Al, like a Golden Retriever, her nose constantly sniffing the air for signs of infidelity.

"Don't be a crybaby, Jim. A toad's a toad-" Al insisted.

"I work with him, Al. He's a friend of mine. And you didn't have to insult him-"

"I didn't call *him* a nigger. I just said "nigger" in general-"

"Blacks fought in 'Nam, the same as you and me. They bleed red just like we do.

And they didn't pick their skin color. God did. You gonna argue with God?"

"You don't even go to church no more. So don't preach to me about God-"

"That's right-" Big Jim admitted. "I'm a back-slider-"

From a nearby barstool, Arthur McMurray, 72, who had terminal cancer with only

weeks to live, croaked, "Yeah, Jim, you toss *back* the beer, and it *slides* down your throat--"

"Hey, Arthur, don't start reading any long books--" Big Jim advised. And that broke the ice. Everybody started laughing, with Arthur hooting the hardest of all, his bony shoulders quaking and tears of mirth rolling down his gaunt, whiskered cheeks.

"Here, Jim, have a Tall Blonde on me--" Al offered. He started to pour but stopped when Big Jim said, "No thanks, I'll stick to my beer--"

Big Jim should have known better than to expect diplomacy from Al where a black person was concerned. Al never forgot the hardships they suffered in Ward Ten, the rough treatment from the black kids. On Al's jukebox, there were several songs not listed on the official selection cards. But the locals knew the secret numbers by heart. Some of the lyrics included, "Some niggers never die. They just smell that way--" sang in a very deep Southern twang, scratchy bootleg recordings made 50 or 60 years ago. Displayed beside the bar's framed liquor license were several ads for fried chicken from the 1930s depicting a big-lipped, poppy-eyed black man licking his swollen red mouth. Nearby was a small wooden plaque showing a black country boy sticking his pecker through a hole in a wooden fence, jerking off. On the opposite side of the fence, a goose bit into the black boy's privates, wringing pops of sweat and tears from the boy's pain etched face, as he pulled one way, and the goose, the other. The caption read: "Done got caught".

If a black person happened to wander into Al's Place for a beer, it was Al's policy afterwards to discard the used glass which had touched the black person's lips or to throw it out into the middle of the street. Big Jim had seen this done on numerous occasions. But it was a flaw he overlooked in his friend of thirty years. As teens, Al and Big Jim used to rummage through Al's father's basement, through his World War Two German hats and uniforms with their swastika armbands, Nazi memorabilia, white power literature, and authentic Civil War Confederate guns, bayonets, and flags. Big Jim reasoned Al was brought up that way, and that was that. But he hoped that one day his friend might change.

The front door swung open then, letting in a blast of sunshine and warm air into the cool, dim bar. A black woman with a thick neck and a bright smile stepped inside. "Pardon me, sir, may I please have a cup of water? I'm diabetic and need to take a pill-" In her arms she held a stack of Watch Tower magazines she'd been distributing at rowhouses up and down the block. All conversation ceased.

"No water here-" Al said.

"Give the lady some water-" Big Jim moved his beers around with his puffy, fidgety hands.

"A soda costs a buck fifty-" Al insisted.

The lady's smile grew strained. "I'm diabetic, sir-" she said. "I can't have the sugar-"

"I can't help you then-"

The lady eyed a nearby faucet. "I'll pay for the water-" she offered.

"Don't serve water here-"

"Giddy-giddy-giddy!" A high pitched sound, like an aboriginal call, erupted from Big Jim's throat. It was a nervous habit, an unconscious tick he developed years ago. "Giddy-giddy-giddy!"

"No. Water. Here-" Al repeated.

Tears shimmered in the lady's eyes, as she surveyed the regulars' rigid stares. "Thank you anyway-" she said to Al. Then she walked stiffly out the door.

"That was common-" Big Jim said. "And by the way, if you're such a big history buff, Al, how come you never heard of Civil Rights?"

"I heard about Civil Rights. That's why we got Martin Luther Koon Day-"

Again the handful of regular customers laughed, and Big Jim swallowed a big chug of sudsy beer to keep himself from saying anything more.

The next day was a beautiful Sunday. Al shut the bar early so he and his wife and two kids could barbeque at Big Jim's place. Jim's rowhouse was at the end of the block,

and he had a nice backyard and a four feet deep swimming pool. A halo of sweat ringed Jim's sunburned brow as he flipped meat on a smoking grill. He whistled happily. The pool water was still cold, didn't really warm up until June, but the kids begged to swim anyway, and Al said okay. Al's kids were twelve and thirteen, a boy and a girl, both long and lean with butter yellow hair and clear blue eyes like their parents.

One of Adam's favorite things in the whole world was a ball to play with, any kind, rubber balls, baseballs, footballs, as long as he could throw and catch it. Once he caught a baseball at an Oriole's game and Big Jim had the ball mounted for him and sealed in a protective plastic box which sat on Adam's dresser, along with a collection of baseball cards and football cards.

"Hey, buddy-" Al said to Adam. Al had his hands behind his back.

"It's Al! Hi, Al!" Adam said.

"Guess what I got for you?"

"BALL! BALL! BALL!" Adam screamed. And Al tossed him a blow-up beach ball he'd brought for him.

"Thanks, Al!"

At three o'clock, everybody sat around a wooden picnic table and devoured barbeque chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad, corn on the cob, cole slaw, watermelon, and cantaloupe. The adults drank cans of Budweiser and Coors Lite, and the kids (Adam included) drank Kool-Aid. JoAnne and Margaret smoked Virginia Slims.

"My Tammy made the Honor Roll-" Al boasted and ruffled his daughter's hair proudly.

"Shut up, Daddy. You're embarrassing me-" But Tammy beamed, showing a mouthful of silver braces.

By five o'clock the ice had melted in the cooler and only a six-pack of beer remained. So Big Jim and Al climbed into Big Jim's battered station wagon and headed



to a nearby convenience store.

It was still warm out, and a nice breeze blew in through the open windows.

“We’re so damn lucky-“ Big Jim said. “We got our families. We got our health. God’s been good to us-“

“You got that right-“ Al agreed.

They were both mellow and happy from drinking beer all afternoon, full of good food and good cheer.

But a sudden damp and rank smell of stagnant water ruined their momentary reverie. They were passing by the Jones Falls, a long stream of polluted brown water that snaked for miles through Baltimore City. Big Jim slowed to watch three little black kids splashing in the Falls. “Get out of there!” he yelled. “That water’s dirty!”

The black boys flapped their arms wildly, and Jim realized they weren’t playing. They were in trouble. The current looked strong, and Big Jim knew that under the dark murky water ran long sanitation pipes that could suck up a child. One kid went under, choking, then bobbed back up, panicked, eyes bulged with terror, and screaming, “Help! Help me!” The other two kids were being dragged relentlessly by the strong current, closer to the mouth of the serpentine pipe.

Braking hard, Big Jim jumped out of the station wagon and charged into the water. He stumbled across slippery stones but managed to grab one little boy. The boy was gasping with fear, unable to speak.

“Put your arms around my neck and hold on tight-“

The kid did as he was told.

Then Big Jim lurched over to a second kid, grabbing onto him with his padded fingertips just as the child was being inhaled by the hungry water. It was like a tug of war.

“Don’t let go of my hand-“ Big Jim commanded. But his large hand was slippery,

and the kid's small dark hand slid away, and the boy was sucked beneath the murky water, feet first into a large pipe, like a baby being born in reverse. His wide open emerald eyes streaked away from Jim, wavering like headlights in a downpour.

A third kid hollered several yards away, and instinctively Big Jim reached out to him, grabbed his bony wrist and hauled him up into one of his fleshy arms. The two kids smelled like copper, like new pennies. With both kids clinging to his neck, Big Jim hustled to safe ground, dropped them off, then rushed back in to try and retrieve the third child. He dove under, again and again, into the nasty water, feeling with his big hands inside the long pipe. But the boy was gone. Finally, exhausted, Big Jim gave up and waded out, like a gloomy hippopotamus. It was twilight now, and the sky turned the color of a bruise, a wound. Jim huffed with exertion. And the two drenched black boys, shabbily dressed and shoeless, maybe eight and ten years old, sat crying nearby in a patch of dirt.

"Where's Michael? Mommy's gonna kill us-" the older of the two sobbed. Both boys needed a haircut, and their afros were wilted, sopping with dirty water, and flecked with what looked like bits of twigs or straw.

"Sit tight, guys. I'm gonna call for help-"

When Big Jim reached the station wagon, he found Al sitting and sipping a cup of take out coffee. While Big Jim dripped water from head to toe, Al was as dry as a bleached bone in the Sahara. Like a lizard, Big Jim thought. A stupid, blinking lizard. Wordlessly Big Jim snatched his cell phone off the dashboard and strode back to the boys.

"Giddy-giddy-giddy! Giddy-giddy-giddy!" Big Jim shrilled, pacing, as the distraught boys just looked up at him with stupefaction. Nine-one-one had him on hold.

When Big Jim finally fell asleep that night, he dreamed that he and Al were

stuck up to their elbows in a mucky, stinking swamp. They couldn't move at all. They stood for hours, days, weeks it seemed, until one day a rescue team arrived and hauled them out with cranes. Their skin hung in loose flaps that slapped their bones as they walked. Worms slithered from Al's belly-button. A paramedic split open Al's stomach with a scalpel, and inside he found a cavernous space, as enormous as Grand Central Station. Big Jim peered in. He saw dragon-like creatures of all sizes and colors, flying around. Some were small as the palm of his hand, and some were monstrous, bigger than busses. They were blue, orange, red, purple, green, and brown. Their iridescent scales glittered like polished silver, and their faces were demon-like, sharp-toothed, hungry-eyed predators. Big Jim's heart fluttered and seized with panic when a pale white dragon unlike the others, luminescent and beautiful, with wings as splendid as an angel's, floated majestically by. Instantly it was attacked and torn apart by the rest. Big Jim screamed as shreds of white silk fell burning to the ground.

The next day, after finishing his route, Big Jim stopped by Al's Place, as usual. He sat with his three beers in front of him, wordlessly watching TV. By the time the eleven o'clock news came on, he had drunk dozens of beers. Al wiped the bar with a rag and sipped a Tall Blonde. There was a short piece about the little black boy who drowned in the Jones Falls. Big Jim wasn't mentioned. Al glanced briefly at his best friend and saw Big Jim's beefy face deluged with tears. Big Jim's chin trembled, and his face worked with emotion. Al cut the TV off. Streams of foamy beer dribbled from the corners of Big Jim's lips, as he chugged a whole beer down in one long shot. Then his buttons flew apart as he ripped open his UTZ work shirt and beat his fleshy breast with rage. "GIDDY-GIDDY-GIDDY! GIDDY-GIDDY-GIDDY!" Big Jim tipped his head back, and the sound exploded from him like a primal lamentation. The Ten Commandments Bronco tattooed across his chest were unrecognizable in the dark bar.

"Go home, Jim. You're cut off-" Al said, calmly scrubbing ashtrays. But a muscle worked at the side of his face, and his neck flamed a hot red.

“GIDDY-GIDDY-GIDDY!” Big Jim hauled himself up from his bar stool. And with stunning agility for so big and intoxicated a man, he leaped across the bar, picked up the glass barrel full of the Tall Blonde vodka, hoisted it up over one shoulder, and lugged it outside. “GIDDY-GIDDY! GIDDY-GIDDY!” Not one of the regulars tried to stop him.

“For Christ’s sake, Jim!” Al followed him out.

Before Al’s astonished eyes, Big Jim hurled the Tall Blonde down onto the sidewalk, smashing it to pieces.

The two men watched, as the loosened spirit snaked through the cracked, tombstone-colored concrete, slithering out into the city.

Then Big Jim hurried away, and he never returned.

Larry's breath comes in rhythmic puffs. The fifty anti-depressants he inhaled after a week long coke binge have pulled him under once more, knocking him out cold. At twenty-five, he looks thirty-five, his brow furrowed with parallel lines, crows feet at the corners of his eyes, his mustache overgrown and scraggly.

I must watch him carefully. Earlier the nurses and a doctor left him lying unattended on an examining bed in the Emergency Room. Moments later he had a "flying seizure", his whole body shot up into the air, flopping manically. When he hit the floor, his head cracked loud as a ten pin bowling ball. Me and Laurie scrambled to Larry, encountering a flock of doctors and nurses already on him, stridently directing us back to the Family Room.

"But we're his sisters!" Laurie screamed.

"He shouldn't have been left by himself!" I added, panicked by the bright splashes of blood I caught a glimpse of sprayed across the floor beside Larry's bed, right before the door was yanked shut in our faces.

We sat on some itchy sofas and wept. We thought that the seizure would kill our brother or cause permanent brain damage. Later the doctors informed us that the seizure was a side effect of all the anti-depressants he took, and that he might have another one. The restraints on Larry's ankles and wrists, white straps tied to the metal sides of his bed, were put in place for just this reason.

Right now Larry's eyes snap open. He sits part way up, looking out the window with a burning intensity.

"Hey, there's Gino! Go let him in, Melinda!"

He's hallucinating again, I know, but my eyes dart to the window anyway seeking out Gino's monkey face in the colored lights splayed across the night filled glass.

"He's not there-" I say.

“I thought I saw him-“ Larry says quietly. And I release a small breath of relief that he doesn’t pursue the issue.

Several months ago, when Larry broke into Talbott’s Pet Shop, he stole two three feet tall white cockatoo birds, several cases of cat and dog food, and a pint sized monkey he immediately named Gino.

After the burglary, the monkey sat on Larry’s shoulder and went everywhere Larry did. Larry fed Gino grapes and bananas and potato chips and Oreo cookies. He taught Gino how to clap and dance to rap music, how to hold a lit cigarette between his black lips like he was actually smoking. He even took Gino to the neighborhood swimming pool.

Larry’s eyes grow heavier. So do mine, as his IV drip-drops, drip-drops.

*I’m walking along a city street. It’s dark, but shop lights and bar lights lend a sinister clarity to the sooty buildings and cold raw cement sidewalks etched in sharp lines so vivid they hurt. Men and women hustle past me, darting into alleys, doorways, apartment entrances.*

*Across the street a big man in a trench coat snatches a smaller man close. His strong fingers grip the man’s hair, wrenching his head back, exposing the pale flesh of his neck. The bigger man’s teeth sink into the soft flesh, puncturing it swiftly, sucking the blood, lapping it with his tongue.*

*In front of me, a woman is yanked into an alley. She does not have time to scream. Bulky figures in long coats lurk behind cars, mailboxes, corners. I stride forward, my peripheral vision glimpsing a man bent over a girl pushed onto the hood of a car; the man sucks ravenously at the girl’s taut neck, a small puddle of deep red blood pooling on the car, matting her flowing blonde hair*

*Quick whistles of air mark the snatching of more and more bodies as I keep walking, a zombie sleep walker, waiting my turn.*

My eyelids flutter open about the same time as Larry's. "I fell asleep-" I mumble.

"Where's my ride?" he demands.

"What ride?"

"He's picking me up-"

"Who is?"

A curtain of secrecy falls across his worn face. "Don't worry about it-"

"You're in the hospital, Larry-"

"I'm going soon as he gets here. Nobody's stopping me-" His lips are rigid with determination and checked anger.

"You're in the hospital-"

"Quit telling me that! I know where I am-"

"Where?"

"Tina's house-"

Tina is his cougar, bottle-blonde girlfriend. She collects welfare, works under the table as a barmaid, and has a ten year old son. Her boy is the one who found Larry face down on the livingroom carpet. For the past couple weeks, Larry has crashed at her Section 8 rowhouse, having worn out his welcome sleeping on the floor of my efficiency.

Suddenly Larry grins, showing a mouthful of strong teeth, attractive except for the hint of several cavities. "Don't fuck with me, Melinda-" His body relaxes now, as if he's decided I'm just joking with him. "Wake me up when my ride gets here, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay-"

"Thanks, Sis-" He winks at me, then falls instantly back to sleep.

Earlier, when his hallucinating was worse and he saw baseball sized spiders crawling up the walls, he screamed like a kid trapped in a nightmare. I held his hand. He squeezed back tightly, wouldn't let go. His thick wristed, blunt fingered hand was heavy, like a plaster hand, like the cement knot in my stomach.

Part of the reason he overdosed was anxiety because of a warrant out on him for the pet store burglary. He spent a Summer or two in Baltimore City Jail before and had afterwards told anybody who would listen that he would rather blow his brains out then go back.

It is now two o'clock in the morning. Outside the hospital window, tiny yellow and red and blue lights shine from homes and cars and traffic lights all over Baltimore City. The normal ebb and flow, the routine of life, seems eons away.

A pretty brunette nurse with nice legs pads into the room.

"How's he doing?" A blood pressure sleeve is draped across one arm.

"Not too good-"

"LARRY-" the nurse speaks loud and clear to my brother's close-eyed face.

"LARRY, CAN YOU HEAR ME?" she repeats in his ear, and he startles awake.

"DON'T SCREAM IN MY EAR, BITCH!" He glares at her, then softens when he sees how young and pretty she is, lamely mumbling, "I was trying to sleep-"

"Blood pressure time-" she says, wrapping his tattooed arm in the cuff. She squeezes the grenade shaped hand pump.

Larry's eyes flicker shut like a baby's.

"LARRY-" the nurse commands.

He blinks furiously at her.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Yeah-"



“Tell me-“

“My girlfriend’s. Tina’s-“

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

Larry looks, silently counts, somehow knows this is important.

“Four-“ he tells her quietly.

“That’s right-“ she nods. “And who is this?” She points at me.

Larry’s eyes fix on me as if he’s just now noticed I’m in the room. He shrugs, looks to the nurse for some help.

“This is your sister, Melinda-“

“He knew who I was two minutes ago-“ I tell the nurse.

“He’s still got some of those pills left in his system-“ She jots something down on Larry’s chart, then heads out to the next patient.

Again Larry dozes.

For a while I watch the red digits flash back and forth on the machine measuring Larry’s heart rate. I feel the need to pick up the phone and talk to somebody. Can’t think of anybody to call. Not Brittany, my youngest sister, because I don’t want to wake up her seven year old daughter, Nicole; it’s a school night. Not Laurie; she’s vegg-ed out on Xanax. Not my parents; I know he’s got the phone unplugged; it’s a ritual with him; the phone gets unplugged at ten each evening so it can’t ring and wake him up, making him tired for work the next day.

Monday through Saturday, my father is the caretaker for two small cemeteries. He mows the grass, rakes the leaves, digs the graves. Strong as a bull, he barely speaks since the doctor put him on lithium eight years ago.

One Winter night when we were little kids, he woke us up out of a dead sleep. He ordered us outside still in our pajamas. Quickly our bare feet skipped down the icy concrete steps, over the hard packed dirt lawn, into the prickly carpeted interior of the station wagon.

We sat up straight, rigid as clothespins, in the back seat.

Hunkered behind the wheel, our father smelled of Seagram's whiskey, nicotine fingers, underarm sweat, and a sharp bitter smell like danger.

"They need coats, Donald- " Our mother stood outside the car in her nightgown, twisting a thin cotton bunch of it in her white-knuckled hands.

"I'll be back in a while-" he told her.

"Where you taking the kids this time of night?" Our mother looked frantic.

"For a drive-" he said.

We sat quietly, too afraid to speak, until Larry choked out, "Mommy-" in his eight year old squeak, which catapulted our mother into action. She wrenched open the passenger door and planted herself in the front seat.

"Get out!" he stormed at her, but she only glared straight ahead. He ordered her out a dozen times, but she wouldn't budge.

Finally he started up the car, drove us deep into some woods, skidded off the dirt road, ordering our mother out again.

"No-" she said. Her face was stiff as a paper mache mask, cut with lines of misery.

He jerked her from the car, threw her to the ground, and started kicking and stomping her. From the side window, we could see her sprawled in the dirt. A slither of blood snaked across her forehead. Then he lumbered to the trunk, opened it, gathered up several items: a rope, a piece of garden hose, a shovel. We didn't look at one another. We didn't breathe.

Our mother dragged herself up off the ground. Dry leaves and streaks of dirt clung to her nightgown. Quickly she stumbled to the passenger door, wedged herself back inside. Methodically she locked the doors, rolled up all the windows.

He tried to open our locked door. He clawed at it. He kicked a dent in the metal below the handle. Then he came around to the front, glared at us through the windshield. He cursed and spat and pounded the hood of the car with his fists, foaming at the mouth like a rabid

animal. Then he disappeared into the woods. When he returned, deep purple circles of exhaustion ringed his eyes. Quietly he stood on the driver's side until our mother opened up the door for him. Then he got in and drove us home.

The next morning, he cooked oatmeal for our breakfast. I rolled the first bite around in my mouth, testing for any signs of bitterness, rat poison, or Clorox. But there was only the sweet creamy buttery flavor of the sugared oatmeal with hints of evaporated milk. After that, the rest went down smooth, quick, and easy.

"Keep us informed-" Our mother said to me earlier, as if there was a storm watch and not her only son convulsing in an emergency room.

Mechanically I glance over at my brother and see that he is watching me.

"You look good in that blue hoodie-" he offers. A rare compliment. He's a clothes horse, got to have Nike, Guess, only expensive name brands. "Is it mine?"

"Nice try-" I tell him. "It was Brittany's. She gave it to me-"

His eyes dart around the room.

"Do you know where you are?"

He looks lost, confused. But he says with confidence. "Home-"

"Whose home?"

"3922 Roland Avenue, dummy. I know where I live-"

"You're in the hospital, Larry-"

"For what?"

"You took a bottle of Tina's pills-"

Our eyes collide, lock.

He chews his full bottom lip then, a nervous habit.

My throat stings. A raw pain. Brittany tried the same thing twice last year. I went with her in the ambulance both times. Three years ago, Laurie slit her wrists, still bears the

jagged white scars. And now Larry. I have dreams of finding them hanging from ropes, bloody in bathtubs, face down in swimming pools.

Soon Larry dozes some more. His fingers twitch involuntarily. I listen to his rattled snores, familiar since he's crashed at my apartment many times. Between Laurie, Brittany, and myself, we've housed him for years. He pulled a knife on me once. Threatened to stab me to death because I asked him to leave. I was tired of feeding him on my waitress' salary, tired of no privacy and no help with the bills. Finally Larry just stormed out, beating holes in my walls with his fist as he went when I snatched up the phone to call the police.

Even though he later apologized to me, I swore I'd never take him in again. But a year later when he came knocking on my door, cold and hungry, with no place to go in the dead of Winter, eyes jumpy and anxious, I couldn't turn him away. He rambled, stuttered, a habit he developed as a child, terrified of our father, of saying the wrong thing and setting him off. His eyes looked like they belonged to a dog that's been beat his whole life. It tore my heart out.

This time I kept on him to find a job, and he started working for a moving company. He gave me one hundred dollars a week out of his pay to put up for him towards getting his own apartment. Plus he chipped in for groceries. At 6:30 AM when the alarm clock shrilled, he got up with no problems and no complaints. His chest swelled with pride every payday when he handed me cash. This lasted six weeks, until he grew tired of hauling furniture, tired of sore muscles, long hours, and mediocre pay when his friends were riding around in fancy cars, selling dope, lazing about all day, and raking in the dough.

In my kitchen, hidden in a spaghetti canister, the bundle of cash I was saving for him disappeared. Larry blew it all on drugs and partying in a single day.

A few days later, a gang of thugs with baseball bats attempted to kick in my door at one in the morning looking for Larry and some drugs he stole from them. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Because Larry blazed out my back window, fled down an alley

and took up residence at a friend's house.

When the hospital phone blares, I jump for it, not wanting it to disrupt Larry's rest.

"How's he doing?" It's Tina's redneck twang.

"Who's that?" Larry's gruff voice startles me.

"It's Tina--"

"Lemme talk to her--" His hand reaches for the receiver, but is jerked short by the restraints.

"What is this shit?" he bellows.

Furiously he tries to wrench his hand free, straining the IV needle lodged deep in his skin.

"Stop it, Larry! Cool off. Here--" I put the receiver to his ear.

"Tina! Come pick me up--"

"You can't leave--" I interject.

Larry bites his lip, listens intently to Tina, "Bring me some Newports. Yeah. See you in five minutes. Bye--" He gives me a triumphant stare, hands back the receiver.

"Tina--" I say.

"Don't worry. I ain't coming for him--"

"Okay--" And we cut it short.

When I look back at Larry, he's assembling an imaginary something in his hands. He works with precision, like a scientist. When he's finished, he cups the thing in both hands, pulls it as close as he can to his chapped lips, sucking eagerly.

"What're you doing?"

Cagey, like a hungry lion bent over a piece of meat, he darts a look up at me.

"Stop it--" I say gently. "There's nothing there--"

He sucks with frustration.

“Stop it-“ I repeat. And he does, looking into his hands now as if the thing has disappeared right in front of his face.

“Where is it?” he growls. He gives me a hard look. He thinks I don’t know about his habit. But I found a crude crack pipe made out of a plastic Tylenol bottle, some rubber bands, silver foil, and the shell of a Bic pen in his jacket pocket a while back.

“I’m thirsty-“ he says quietly.

“The doctor said no food or liquids-“

“Please, Melinda. Come on-“

I pick up a half full cup of watery Coke.

“Just a sip-“ Carefully I put the straw to his lips. And he sucks greedily.

A new nurse bustles in, an older woman, scary skinny, no make-up, a gray bob. She has the blood pressure cuff.

“Blood pressure again?” I ask.

“It’s a pain, I know-“ she says, friendlier then she looks. She fastens the cuff, pumps the pump. “How you feeling?” she asks Larry.

“Fine. Great-“

“Can you tell me your name?”

“Larry-“ he says straight out.

“Larry, do you know where you’re at?”

“The hospital-“ He says it with a bitter edge.

“That’s right-“ she says. “And who is this here?” She points to me.

“My sister-“

“What’s her name?”

“Melinda-“

“When’s your birthday?”

His face freezes. It stays frozen as the seconds tick past.

“May the tenth-“ I remind him gently.

The nurse scribbles some numbers down on his chart.

“I’ll see you later, Larry. Behave yourself-“

“I will, Ma’am-“ he promises, drained now, as she exits.

“You okay?”

“You should have just let me die-“ he mumbles. “Yous fucked it up-“

“You can solve your problems, Larry. We can help you. It’s not worth killing yourself over-“

“Yous fucked it up-“ Then he falls back to sleep again.

Fifteen minutes later, his eyes fly back open. “Where’s Gino?” he blurts.

“Who’s watching him?”

“I gave him back to the owner of the pet shop-“ I confess. I look straight at him, tired of putting off the inevitable.

“What the FUCK did you do that for?” Larry explodes. “He ain’t YOUR monkey. He’s MINE-“

When Gino bit Tina’s son, Larry begged our mother to keep the monkey in her basement. Larry came to feed him and give him water every day. Whenever Larry was chasing drugs, we knew exactly when because he’d stop showing up to take care of Gino. Grudgingly our mother fed Gino when Larry didn’t, but our father hated the monkey who chattered and scabbled noisily in the basement at night.

“I can’t believe you gave him back to the pet store-“ Larry repeats, shaking his head with despair. “Now he’s gonna be stuck in a cage 24 hours a day-“

“He wasn’t any better cooped up in Mom’s basement-“

“I guess it ain’t your fault-“ he admits. “If I would have took better care of him, I would still have him-“

When the Puppy man came around, he had his usual litter of pups for sale. Today he had five German Shepards, squirming and sucking on a dirty blanket, in his red wagon. Ten bucks a piece. What I really wanted was a Pitbull puppy, but those cost 20 dollars (when he had them) which was way out of my league. At 11 years old, my only way to earn cash was to help old ladies carry their grocery bags at the A and P to their cars for spare change. But it wasn't easy since this guy Mooch was always there, chasing me off his turf. Not hard to do since he was a full grown man and I was a puny girl, weighing in at about eighty pounds tops. Mooch was half crazy, too. He had pumped up muscles and wore bifocals. His skin was always red with agitation. Two sheathed knives were on display, one on each of his hips. And sometimes when he was off his medication, very early in the morning, he raced up and down the streets clanging metal trashcan lids and howling like a demon, cursing nonstop threats. He wanted to kill everybody.

Once in a while, I got lucky though and Mooch would take the day off at the A and P.

I had been planning to buy a puppy for weeks.

Some other excited kids and a few adults were petting the German Shepard pups, too. Three got sold just like that to a father and his three sons who were taking them to live out on their farm. Then a teenaged boy whose fingernails were painted black picked up the fourth one. This boy's eyes were rimmed with black, too, and his wallet was hooked to a long chain at his beltloop. I was hoping nobody would buy the last two pups so I could haggle over the price. Because I only had seven bucks. My heartbeat quickened, and my palms grew moist. This was all happening much faster than when I'd rehearsed it in my head.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" the Goth teenager asked. "I want a boy-"

"It's a boy-" the wagon man replied, and that quick the fourth pup was sold.

I was petting the fifth puppy when a woman with tattoos and a mohawk snatched it away from me.



“Hey, he’s mine!” I protested.

“You’re just a kid. Do you have the money to buy his food and pay for his shots?” The ends of her hair were as sharp as tacks.

“No-“ I whispered, instantly deflated.

She passed the wagon man a crisp ten dollar bill and strode off, cradling her new puppy.

I just stood there. I held back tears.

The wagon man said, “Sorry, little girl-“

While he rolled up the puppy blanket, I spotted something in the corner of his wagon. It was a lump about the size of a baseball, damp and covered in wet leaves. It was wobbling but trying to move.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Runt-“ the man said.

“What’s runt?”

“The last puppy born and the smallest-“

“Can I buy it?”

“It’s too weak...He ain’t gonna make it through the night-“

“What are you gonna do with him?”

“Drown it-“

“Wait! No! I can nurse it. Please! -“

“His momma crawled up into the attic of an abandoned house to give birth because it was raining so hard, and I found this one had wandered off, somehow tumbled out a window and got stuck in the gutter. He’s probably got pneumonia-“

“How did you find him if he crawled off?”

“I heard him yapping-“

“See. He wants to live. I can give you seven dollars. Please please please-“

The Puppy man stared down at me. His normal poker face softened some. “Just give me

five since he's the runt. That away you can buy him some milk--"

Carefully I counted out three one dollar bills and two dollars worth of loose change from the plastic baggie in my pocket. When I handed it to him, he scowled at the pennies mixed in. I scooped up my new puppy before he could change his mind. The poor thing trembled some and I could feel his faint heartbeat through his wet fur, so I turned up the bottom of my t-shirt and made a pouch to warm him. "I'm gonna call him Gutter--" I said.

"You might not wanna name him until you see if he makes it through the night--" The wagon man's face was gruff again, as he stuffed my bills into his wallet. "And no refunds--" he added, as he pulled his wagon away.

Walking home, I began to see black specks all over the bottom of my t-shirt. I squeezed one and some blood squirted out. Fleas. Gutter was crawling with them. I only had two dollars left so I dashed into a nearby corner store.

"No animals allowed--" A lady cashier shrieked.

"I just need some milk for my hungry puppy, ma'am--"

I grabbed a pint of milk from the cooler which left me enough money for a small bottle of Johnson's baby shampoo. I figured if it was gentle enough for a baby then it wouldn't hurt a puppy.

When I got home my mom was still at the bar with her latest boyfriend. How anybody could read a dozen Harlequin romances a week and still date drunks, drug addicts, and unemployed losers was a mystery to me. My mom saw every man through rose colored glasses. She weighed about three hundred pounds and had a scar under her left eye from a fracture my father gave her. After that dear old dad fled the state. Sometimes when my mom made terrible choices I remembered how often she got beat in the head by my dad, which probably gave her brain damage.

With an eye-dropper, I fed Gutter who lapped it down. Then I filled our grimy bathtub with warm water to bathe him. He didn't like it. He clung to my hand, yapping like crazy. Gently

I rubbed the baby shampoo into his fur. The fleas on his body started running to his little face, since that was the only spot on him not lathered up. His eyes looked frantic. It was like something out of the Amtyville horror. I almost dropped him. With one hand, I rooted in the medicine cabinet for this special comb my mom bought when I was sent home from school with head lice. Very carefully I combed the fleas away from Gutter's face and rinsed my comb in the sink, washing the fleas down the drain with hot water.

"Easy, Gutter. Easy, boy--"

When he was properly deflea-ed, I dried him with the cleanest towel I could find. I carried him to my room, sat in my busted bed, and petted him. "You're a good boy, aren't you?" He fit easily into the palm of my hand. A fluffball with ribs that felt like bendy toothpicks. His tiny teeth gnawed at my thumb which made me laugh. I prayed he would live through the night.

I fed Gutter every few hours. And for me, I spread some pb and j on stale crackers, which is all I could find in the kitchen to eat. My mom wasn't much of a nutritionist. When I was four, I got pin worms. At the clinic, the doctor asked me if I ate fruit. "What's fruit?" was my honest reply. Boy that doctor gave my mother a *look*. He prescribed some liquid vitamins for me which needed to be refrigerated. I couldn't say vitamins so I called them Nummy Noms. I had to remind my mother twice a day to give me a spoonful of the sweet thick syrup.

When my mom and her boyfriend finally staggered home from the bar, it was dark out, way passed dinner time.

"Miranda, you home?" my mother brayed.

"I'm in my room, mom--"

They stood in my doorway together, like Mutt and Jeff. My mom was about 5 feet tall and her boyfriend towered over her. He was nearly 7 feet tall. All the neighborhood kids called my mom's boyfriend "Lurch". His real name was Clay. He had a deep voice and a creepy face.

Just like Lurch in the Adam's family.

"Is your homework done?" My mom asked. She swayed a bit in the doorway, and her eyes were glazed over.

"Yes-" It wasn't. But she never checked.

Gutter crawled out from under the blanket where I hid him.

"What's that?" Lurch asked.

"He's mine-" I said.

"I don't want him pissing and shitting all over my house-" My mom slurred.

Not that it would make a difference since she kept this place like a pigsty.

"I'll train him-" I promised.

Lurch said, "We're ordering pizza. You want anything? I know you like mozzarella sticks, Miranda-"

I didn't like him saying my name. It made my skin crawl. "No thank you-"

A week ago I found several pairs of my panties, two dirty magazines, and a large butcher knife stuffed behind the radiator in my mom's bedroom. My panties were all cut to shreds. For weeks, I'd told my mother I thought my underwear were disappearing, but she didn't believe me. When I showed her the sick things I'd found, she was sitting at the kitchen table reading one of her Harlequin Romances and eating junk food, several tastycakes and candy bars she washed down with a boss of RC cola. "That's just how he gets off-" she said unfazed, "Clay wouldn't hurt a fly-"

"Mom, this is serious. You need to ask him to leave-"

"He pays our rent on time, so give the man a break-"

For sure, she was nuts. One time her face and body blew up like a bullfrog, her skin turned bright green, and her eyes turned sickly yellow. I begged her for days to go to the hospital. "I feel fine-" she said to the doctors and nurses. They did blood tests. When the results came back they asked me to please leave the room. But I stayed close enough

to hear the doctor tell my mother she had this disease called Hepatitis.

“Mrs Haddieshell, have you had unprotected sex with any IV drug users recently?”

“No-“ I heard her lie, just like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

That’s when I marched back in there. If you don’t tell the truth the doctors can’t help you as good. “Mom-“ I spoke up, “What about that guy Robbie who did heroin? Remember he kept his needles in the kitchen drawer?”

The doctors looked over at her, a giant green ball beached in her bed. Her eyelashes fluttered for a bit, like she was confused all of a sudden. “We only had sex the one time-“ she finally replied.

“That’s enough-“ a nurse said curtly.

My mom sipped some juice through a straw. The nurse’s comment flew right over her head.

I can’t believe they didn’t ship her off to the funny farm right then and there. They just treated and released her.

The morning after buying my new puppy, I woke to find Gutter snuggled in the crook of my arm, breathing steadily. Thank you, baby Jesus.

For some reason, my stomach hurt, so I went to the bathroom to see if that might help. I noticed a splotch of blood in my underpants. For the past year my mom had told me that if I ever found any spots in my underwear to let her know. I looked constantly, waiting for something to appear that resembled black leopard spots. I wanted it to happen just to have my mom’s full attention for once. So one day I got tired of waiting and told her that I finally saw the spots in my underpants. In the bathroom she squatted beside me. When she saw nothing, she said “Wipe yourself-“

I did.

“Do you see any spots on the toilet paper?”

“No-“

“Then why did you call me up here?”

“I thought I did-“

She huffed and went back downstairs.

She never told me to look for spots of BLOOD. Two girls in my sixth grade class had got there periods recently so I kind of knew how to take care of myself now. I just reached into my mom’s tall box of maxi-pads under the sink and stuck one on. The week passed and I didn’t tell her that I had got my period. She only found out because her pads were disappearing so fast. It was quite a gory business. The pain and all the blood. I looked at the lady in a flowing dress standing blissfully on a beach with a breeze blowing through her hair which was front and center on the maxi-pad box and I could not see the connection.

For advice about my passing into womanhood, my mom just said, “Don’t forget, Miranda, if you play, you pay-“

Clay added, “If you go camping, you gotta watch out for bears now because they can smell the blood. Dig a hole and bury the bloody rags-“

I didn’t know we were still living in the 1800’s.

To my delight, Gutter grew stronger as each day passed. I kept him in my room in a cardboard box lined with newspaper while I was at school. He yelped up a storm the first time I left him in the box without me, and Lurch complained. So I started leaving one of my shirts with my scent on it in the box for him to cuddle. Also I bought him a stuffed dog at the Dollar Store so he wouldn’t feel so lonely.

Outside of the box, Gutter followed me everywhere, nipping at my heels. He was full of energy and joy. I could see now why people say that a dog is man’s best friend. Gutter was ready for solid food, so I risked a visit to the A and P.

When I got there, I saw Mooch and I ducked behind a parked car. He had white stripes painted onto his face, and he wore a bandanna wrapped around his forehead, like he was

Tonto. He started helping an old man with a walker lug his bags down the street towards the old folk's high-rise about ten blocks away. When Mooch was out of sight, I braved it and darted out. Almost Immediately I spotted a pregnant woman struggling with her grocery bags and a fussy toddler.

"Need any help, Miss?" I asked her.

"Yes. Please-"

I loaded the back of her SUV with grocery bags, as she buckled her kid into his safety seat. She quieted him with a fruit roll-up.

"You are a life savor-" she said, then fished into her wallet bulging with credit cards and coupons and handed me a five dollar bill.

"Wow. Thank you-"

I marched into the supermarket, spent ten minutes picking out the right dog food for a puppy. I didn't want to buy Gutter the wrong thing.

On the way out I saw Mooch. My stomach flopped.

"I told you to stay away from here, you little bitch!" He unsnapped both his knives.

"I am the White Wolf, and this is your last warning!"

I raced home as fast as my skinny legs would take me.

That night, while sleeping with Gutter close to my chest, I heard somebody sneak into my room. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It was Lurch. I could smell him, a raw paint smell from his work clothes and a sour beer smell from sitting on a bar stool half the day and night. I squeezed my eyes shut. Slowly he started kissing my arm, from my elbow up to my shoulder. He slurred, "Miranda...listen to me...I don't really love your mom...you know that" His nasty cigarette and booze breath was way too close. "...I'm here for YOU, Miranda...it's YOU I want..." His lips left a trail of slime on my arm.

I was so afraid he'd hear my heart pounding like crazy.

“Miranda, I love you....Miranda, hey?.....okay, you’re tired, I guess....I’ll talk to you later, baby girl-“ He stared down at me for a while (I could hear his breathing), and then he finally crept out.

I didn’t sleep all night. Thank God tomorrow was Saturday, no school.

Spring was in full bloom and the mulberry tree in our back alley filled the neighborhood with a fragrance sweeter than honey. It blew right in my open window. Lurch was gone all day at work, cleaning out dead people’s apartments and hauling the belongings they left behind and nobody wanted to the dump. He repainted the empty apartment after that. I was sitting out on our sagging front porch playing with Gutter when he came home with a big stuffed chair on the back of his truck.

“Get outa the way-“ he ordered me.

I scrambled, but watched him lug the chair up our broken steps, a gift for my mom to sit in. Her stomach seemed to grow bigger as the months passed. She was ripening just like those mulberries. She was queen of our street. Everybody called her “Mom”. Bums for miles around knew that they could squat at our crummy rowhouse and not be turned away. She mixed up pitchers of vodka and Kool-Aid and even let the underage kids drink. The older guys smoked pot and crack. She fed them packages of generic cookies and bags of cheese puffs bought with her Independence Card. For sport they fought each other bare knuckled in the street until the loser bled and gave up. Sometimes I watched from the safety of our decrepit balcony. Once somebody brought a tazer and every male over the age of 12 was lined up like soldiers and tazed to prove their manhood. They were allowed one swig of tequila first. Lurch did the tazing. Small flashes of blue lightning crackled in the night. The guys leaped, squealed, and cursed like maniacs. A smell of burnt flesh and smoke floated up to my nose.

Before I got my puppy, I stayed at the Enoch Pratt Free Library every day after school until it closed. I really liked to read. Now I went straight home from school because I needed to feed Gutter. I dreaded walking across our porch, packed with ex-cons, bullies, and drug addicts.



I held my books up to my chest, like a shield.

“Hey Miranda, you wanna party with us?” My Aunt Pam asked me. She stumbled around in her pajamas and bare feet year round, the town drunk, begging for change. Sometimes she shit herself.

“No thanks-“ I tried to push my way through but some high teenagers blocked the door.

“What are you too good for us?” One snickered.

“She’s just a stick in the mud-“ My mother cackled. “Come on Stuck-up, have a drink!”

“Just let me by-“

Clay strode out the front door then, and a smart aleck said in a real deep voice, “You rang?”

While they all cracked up laughing, hooting, and carrying on, I slipped inside.

In the kitchen, I washed two bowls from a stack of dirty dishes in the sink.

Cockroaches scampered everywhere. If I made slits of my eyes, it looked like the whole room was pulsing, alive. If I hit the counter, roaches would scatter, like a splash of water. Stacks of food crusted carryout boxes were roach hotels. I’d clean but a week later it all looked the same.

With one bowl of water and one bowl of puppy food, I hurried into my bedroom.

“Gutter, here boy, where you at?”

I searched but he wasn’t in his box or under the bed or in the closet. “Gutter! Here, Gutter!”

I heard him whining and yipping, a high-pitched sound I’d never heard from him before. Then I nearly stepped on him, sprawled at the foot of the wall beside my overflowing clothes hamper. He looked funny. Somehow oddly twisted, misshapen. Oh my God, he was hurt! I screamed for my mother.

“Mom! Mom!”

She didn’t come.

“Mom!!!-“ I wailed. “I need you!”

She didn’t come.

“MOM! MOM! MOM!” I was going to keep yelling until she came.

It was Lurch, the freak, who finally showed up.

“What’s wrong, Miranda?” He was already ten sheets to the wind.

“I want my mom-“ I was sobbing now.

“She sent me. What’s the problem?”

I looked down at my deformed puppy.

“Shit. He don’t look good-“ Clay observed.

“I think he’s hurt-“

“You wanna take him to the vet?”

“Yes-“

“Come on then. I’ll drive you-“

“You’re too drunk-“

“Let’s go-“ He scooped Gutter up with a dustpan.

I didn’t want to go with him, but I did it for Gutter.

“Doris, I’m taking Miranda and her puppy to the vet. He’s hurt himself-“ Clay informed my mom who just waved us off.

I held Gutter, who whined and yelped from the bouncing truck. I tried to keep him still the best I could. Lurch drove fast to the nearest open Vet’s which happened to be in the ghetto. With my window cracked, warm air hit my face and tangled my hair. We raced past iron grated liquor stores and Chicken Shacks. Yo’s were dealing drugs and hustling hot merchandise right out in the open.

Inside the Vet’s was just closing. But Clay barked to the assistant, “Tell the doc we’ll pay cash-“

I could tell the assistant smelled the booze on his breath and really just

wanted to get rid of us. But when Clay stuck a 50 dollar bill in her hand and she saw my tears besides, she hustled to get the vet.

We sat in the waiting area while the doctor took care of Gutter. Clay bought me a coke from a vending machine, and he sipped on a Sprite. "I'm not really a bad guy, Miranda-" he assured me.

An hour later, the vet emerged with Gutter whose middle was wrapped with beige bandages. He held onto the sedated puppy while he questioned Clay. "What happened to this puppy?"

"The little fellow must have fallen off the bed or something, Doc-"

The vet stared hard into Clay's bloodshot eyes. "This animal has seven broken ribs. There's no way he fell off any bed-"

I stared hard at Clay now too.

"It looks like somebody *threw* him against a wall-" the vet said.

Clay just shrugged, peeled off two more 50 dollar bills, and slung them in the vet's face. "I'll be out in the truck, Miranda-"

The vet looked shocked, then angry, then stumped, in quick succession.

"Is your mom at home, Miranda?"

"No, sir-" I lied. "Her sister has cancer, and she's at the hospital with her-" I didn't want him to call her and see how crazy she was. I was embarrassed enough by Lurch.

"Who's at home then? Just you and "him-" He said "him" like he wanted to puke.

"Yes, sir-"

"Is everything okay at home?"

Lurch honked the horn.

"Look, I don't want to disturb your mom. I'm sure she's got her hands full-"

Another longer honk.

"I gave Gutter a shot to ease his pain, but you're going to have to be real careful when

you get him home, okay, Miranda. Can you make sure he has a nice soft bed?"

"Yes, sir--"

Quickly he scooped up Clay's money. He turned it over in his hands, like maybe it was counterfeit. But seeing it was real, he folded it up and palmed it into my hand. "Can you please give this to your mother for me?"

"Yes, sir--"

"Pinkie promise?" He smiled down at me.

I smiled back, and we looped pinkies and we shook on it.

A third honk sent me scampering out the door.

On the drive home, nobody spoke, until we pulled up at home and Lurch said, "That doctor was a quack--"

Back in my room, I slid my pillow into Gutter's box and carefully arranged him inside. I wanted to pet him so bad but I knew I probably shouldn't in his condition. So I talked to him, "You're gonna be okay, buddy, you're gonna be just fine...--" I sat up with him all night, wondering if it was Lurch who hurt him. But then why would he try to help me? Nothing made sense. My eleven year old head hurt. I jammed a chair under my door and went to sleep.

The next morning, after hand feeding Gutter, I went to the kitchen to get my school books from where I left them on the washing machine. Lurch was sitting at the table, puffing a Newport. "You ain't gotta go to school today--" he said.

"Why not?"

"Your mom's in the hospital having a baby--"

"What?"

"Her water broke at about 5 this morning and I drove her to the ER--"

I was dumb-struck.

"The doctor said it'll be a while for the baby to come so I drove home to grab some shut eye. What do you want? A brother or a sister?" He seemed pleased

with the whole situation.

How could my mom be having a baby? She never even went to the clinic for checkups or vitamins or nothing. I thought she was just getting fatter. And it couldn't be Clay's baby because they'd only been together for six months.

When Clay returned to the hospital, I spent all day cleaning the house for my mother, as a surprise for her when she came home with the baby. The more grease I scrubbed and trashbags I loaded up, the more excited I got by the idea of a little brother or a sister running around. The cash the vet gave me was safe in my pocket. I couldn't wait to give it to my Mom to buy something special for the baby.

But the next day when Clay returned with my Mom she was not holding any baby.

"Where's the baby?" I asked.

Lurch pinched his mouth shut, shook his head, and gave me a grave look.

"What happened?" I persisted.

Clay's eyes bugged, shooting daggers at me.

Neither one of them even noticed how nice the house looked.

"Where's the baby?" I wouldn't let up.

"Stop-" Clay said.

"What happened?"

"Shut it, girl-"

My mother shuffled into her bedroom and shut the door. She stayed in there in her same nightgown for a few days, and I brought her scrambled eggs and canned soup.

After that, it was back to her chair on the front porch, like usual.

Everybody was extra nice to her, hugging her and rubbing her back over losing the baby. I sat out there, too. It was way too hot in the house. In Baltimore even May can sometimes be a scorcher, and we had no AC or even fans. Drunk kids were playing Red Rover in the street. The older ones were getting hammered on the porch. I had Gutter in my lap, but

I wouldn't let nobody pet him because of his broken ribs. Lurch passed me a dixie cup full of spiked Kool Aid and I don't know why but I took a sip. Instantly fire lit my throat and chest. I coughed my head off. And everybody laughed.

"You're okay, Miranda-" One kid offered.

It felt sort of good to fit in for once. After some more small sips, I felt flushed and a little dizzy. This stuff wasn't half bad. I felt held, like I was safe for once, no worries, sitting right in the palm of God's hand. "Mom, what did you name the baby?"

"Shut up, Miranda-" Clay said.

"I'm not talking to you-" I told him

"Was it a boy or a girl?" I persisted.

My mother's face looked grim, and her eyes watered.

"Shut up, Miranda-" Clay again.

"Did I have a brother or a sister?"

My mother's lips tightened into a knot, and she jiggered her foot.

"Get in the house, Miranda-" Clay ordered unbuckling his belt.

I fled inside but I took my drink with me. Me and Gutter laid in my bed with my second floor window wide open, and I finished the drink. I stayed up all night to guard Gutter from Lurch, just in case. Somebody had removed the chair I used to jam the door. It was just GONE. In the morning, I snuck two more cups full of the spiked Kool Aid from the refrigerator and drank it right before school. It settled my nerves.

I dozed during first period math. Our teacher, Mr Smith, a cat-eyed black man with a wild afro bound up with a scrunchie, snapped his fingers in front of my face and said, "Hey? Miss Haddieshell, can you wake up from your siesta long enough to tell us what the lowest common denominator is?" His t-shirt had the symbol for pi in the center of a pie.

I opened my heavy eyes and just stared up at him.

"Earth to Miranda-" He was pissed.

I could see part of his hairy nipple through a small hole in his t-shirt.

“WHAT is the lowest common denominator?”

“Who cares?” I said. Then I busted out laughing.

Have you ever seen a black man’s face turn red?

After school I decided I wanted more vodka. The pitcher in the fridge was empty but I still had the money the vet gave me. I knew I couldn’t buy it myself so I went looking for somebody crazy enough to buy it for me.

At the A and P, I found Mooch. He was taking a break, smoking a cigarette. No war paint today.

“I’m not here to work-“ I said, just to break the ice.

“All right...all right-“ he sing-songed. Lucky for me he was in a good mood.

When I told him I’d give him 10 bucks to buy me some vodka at the liquor store right across the street, he just cocked his eyebrow at me and snorted with disbelief. Until he saw the cold hard cash in my hand. Without hesitation, he took it.

“Watch out for Five-O-“ he said and dashed across.

A few minutes later he handed me a heavy brown bag.

“I got you five half pints of Popov for two bucks a piece-“

I inspected the bag, then handed him the cash I promised. Mooch smiled so big that for the first time he didn’t seem so scary to me. “Thanks, shorty-“ he said. “If you ever need my help again, just come find me-“

“Okay-“ I said. “I will. Thank you-“

Mooch’s real name was Earl. Over the course of the next few weeks meeting him at the A and P so he could buy booze for me, we became friends. When his disability money ran out is when he had to hustle bags at the A and P. He rented a cheap room somewhere. I knew he had some kind of a mental problem, but I never asked him about it. I didn’t want to hurt his

feelings. And Mooch never hit on me. He was cool.

On weekends, he'd swing by and we'd sit in my backyard, quietly drinking, away from the crazies out on the front porch. We always had Gutter. In just a few weeks, my puppy healed. We loved watching him run around and play. Our backyard wasn't as crummy as the front. Some wildflowers grew: violets and daisies and even a few sunflowers somebody must have planted long ago. There was a huge kids' plastic playhouse out here, too. Lurch dragged it home for me to use as a fort but I didn't want nothing to do with the thing. Gutter liked to run in and out of it though. He'd find shade in there if it was real sunny. It became his doghouse. When Mooch was good and drunk he'd squirm in there and sleep it off right beside Gutter. When they were both in there, I'd read the books I picked out at the library. I didn't like Harry Potter or Judy Blume like most of the kids my age. I liked The Bronte sisters, Emily and Charlotte. My favorite book so far was Jane Eyre. I read that one over and over.

Somehow I passed into the seventh grade by the skin of my teeth. I showed Mooch my report card out in the backyard and he said, "Congratulations, Shorty-" We celebrated with cold cans of Natty Daddy Beer. It was 8% alcohol, stronger than normal beer. One full can made my head swim more than the cheap vodka did.

We drank until we glowed and the June sky turned pretty colors. We sat in the grass cross-legged. I watched out for the first lightning bugs of the summer. Mooch's boots were dusty, and his underarms stank. Gutter chased butterflies and grasshoppers. When Mooch was on his third half pint of Popov, his head drooped some, and he mumbled to me, "You know I was there at the hospital that night-"

"What night?"

"The night your mom lost her baby-"

Instantly I sat up straighter. It felt like time stood still for a few seconds.

"I had a broke arm and got a cast put on it, then I took the elevator up to the maternity



ward-“

“You know my mom?” I was sort of shocked.

“No. Just Clay. Me and him worked construction together a few times-“

A big bright moon lit up Mooch’s glasses.

“The baby was stillborn-“ he said.

“What’s that?”

“The doctors couldn’t pry the umbilical cord from around the baby’s neck...so he choked to death-“

”Oh-“ A lump of emotion clogged my throat. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy-“ he said.

I swallowed a chug of my beer to wash the ache down. But I couldn’t stop a few tears from welling up. I finally knew that I had a brother.

“What did she name him?”

“Ben-“

“Ben-“ I repeated the name softly. “Whatever happened to him?”

“Do you really wanna know?” Mooch tipped his head to the side, breaking eye contact with me now. He seemed upset.

I took a long pull of my warm vodka, bracing myself.

“Yes-“ I said. I was sort of holding my breath.

“Your mom sold his body to science-“

“For what?”

“Medical research... Lurch told me she got paid a hundred bucks-“

“Fuck-“ I exhaled.

Mooch sucked his bottle dry then tossed it away. We didn’t look at each other. But out of the corner of my eye I could see a single tear gliding down his cheek. “He was a pretty baby....so small...so cold-“

“You *saw* him?”

“Yeah...Clay let me hold him for a minute-“

“I wish so bad I got to see him or hold him, too-“

A few stars glittered in the night sky. I prayed baby Ben’s soul was up there in heaven, too, far away from this world, with angels to hold him and sing to him.

Mooch lifted a new pint of vodka high in the air. He tapped my bottle lightly with his.

“To Ben-“ he said.

“To Ben-“ I said.

Then he tipped his head back and howled. We both did.

After Mooch left, I fell asleep with Gutter in his doghouse. Because it was still just too hot to sleep in my bedroom. At least here some breezes blew in the pink plastic, heart-shaped windows.

I dreamed that I entered Gutter all grown up in a fancy Dog Show, the kind where each owner runs their dog in a circle past the judge’s table. Gutter was big and strong, his ears stuck perfectly up. His nose was moist with health. His coat was lustrous. I stood beside him, a skirted lady. Gutter won the blue ribbon. I waved to the adoring crowd, radiant and proud. Me and Gutter shone.

In New Orleans, off Bourbon Street, there is a nine feet high wall where my father and other muggers would lay flat, waiting for the oblivious tourists with their fat wallets and traveler's checks. At five years old, I watched even a two hundred pound man go down from that height. But I tried not to watch at all, busied myself picking dandelions at the park across the street. I would make long chains until my father's pockets were full of cash. This was after my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, after we moved to Baltimore, where her sister, my Aunt Margaret took care of her. Aunt Margaret lived in a rowhouse on Beech Avenue and worked at Giant Foods in the deli department. Her red smock was adorned with rows of gold pins, for her eight years of outstanding service. She'd cart home platters of cold meats, cheeses, pickles, olives, and rolls so we didn't have to cook. My father and I slept in the club basement on sofas while my mother occupied my Aunt Margaret's queen-sized bed, and Aunt Margaret slept by my mother's side in an overstuffed chair.

Aunt Margaret didn't like my father, who was fired from the New Orleans Police Department for corruption and excessive use of force. As he brooded and drank Seagram's 7 whiskey and coke in bed all day, my mother and I walked on eggshells. Nothing my mother ever did was good enough for him. She'd cook him a perfect steak, and he'd complain. "A dog wouldn't eat this shit-" The house was never clean enough or quiet enough. He'd snort an eight-ball of coke then beat my mother unconscious while I hid in a closet or under my bed. He called her the "goat" because her face was no longer pretty, but worn and hashed with scars. "The goat is the sign of the devil-" he'd rant. "Olivia, your mother is fucking Satan!"

Having not seen my mother in years, my Aunt Margaret gasped at her sister's changed appearance. In private she begged my mother for the truth, "Did he hurt you? Tell me so we can call the cops and put him in prison where he belongs-"

My exhausted mother just hung her head and said, "No-" My father had cop friends

wherever we went. We knew they would cover for him. They always did.

Aunt Margaret swiveled her head in my direction, "Olivia?"

I shook my head no, too, like Mama. But my Aunt Margaret knew the truth. Shrewdly she made my father promise to grant custody of me to her should my mother die. Otherwise my aunt wouldn't help him, and he was lost, unsure how to care for my mother, himself, and me, so he agreed.

Our first week at Aunt Margaret's, the Brood X cicadas emerged from their seventeen year hibernation and infested the neighborhood. Their frantic hum filled the night, like aliens communicating, and I was terrified of them. Like bats, they clung to every leaf of every tree. Their stepped-on bodies, murdered into the sidewalks, made me sick to my stomach, and I cried for my Aunt Margaret to hold me, to avoid the sickening crunch and pop beneath my sandals.

After chemotherapy, lying sick in bed, my mother liked for me to read to her. Even at five, I could read the newspaper fairly well. And my mother would laugh (a glorious sound) whenever I mispronounced a big word. While my aunt was at work, I'd feed my mother vanilla pudding with a plastic spoon. My father spent most of his time drinking at Griffith's Tavern, a local bar. At closing time, he'd stagger home, red-eyed from weeping. He didn't want my mother to die. Because who would ever put up with him like she did?

It took my mother only three weeks to pass.

After the funeral, my aunt found two one-way tickets back to New Orleans in a suitcase belonging to my father.

"You'll take Olivia over my dead body-" she swore. "We had a deal-"

My father robbed my mother of her will to live, and ultimately we believe that's what killed her so fast. I think my father wanted to keep me as his penance. So my aunt took him to court. I was left in a playroom with blocks and coloring books while the adults figured everything out. I found a newspaper and sat reading it while some other kids played with baby

dolls, fake food, and a pretend oven. My aunt had dropped me off and promised to return for me. But to my surprise, it was my father, smelling of Old Spice, Juicy Fruit gum, and Marlboros, who showed up to collect me.

He won custody of me primarily because none of the alleged abuses to my mother were documented.

“I want my Aunt Maggie!” I howled, as my father carried me out. My aunt chased us down the hall. They tugged me back and forth, until security stepped in, handcuffing my aunt. I wouldn’t see her again for eleven long years.

My father softened a great deal after my mother died. He stopped doing drugs, stuck to beer, no whiskey, and took care of me the best he could. Back in New Orleans, he assumed his career as a mugger on the nine feet wall. Mostly he did it while I was in school or at the library. But sometimes he had to take me when the library was closed on holidays.

On the weekends, we’d splurge on diner food and Shirley Temples for me at whatever bar we landed in. The bars were always fun. I’d play shuffle bowl, pin ball, and pool while eating chicken tenders or fried shrimp, as my father flirted with the barmaids. He taught me how to eat a raw oyster, squeezing the lemon and then topping it with cocktail sauce and slurping it off the shell, along with the ice cold, sea-tasting juices. He was proud that I could eat a dozen all by myself. He would buy me scratch off lottery tickets and let me pick some of his Keno numbers. He paid the monthly rate for us at a cheap, but clean motel. He never left me with strangers. We stayed out late on the weekends, but school days we were home by nine o’clock for my bath and then bed. Until I was ten years old, he wouldn’t let me have more than a few inches of bath water, afraid I might drown somehow. I learned about periods from a barmaid named Katie, a 24 year old redhead my father dated, who I adored. She bought me my first box of tampons and a single real pearl on a thin gold chain to celebrate my reaching womanhood. Every couple years we switched bars and my father found a new girlfriend, which I got used to. My father taught me how to run a rack of pool balls, and when I got real good, we hustled for

years in bars all over New Orleans. Nobody expected a ten year old girl who could run a table like me.

When I pocketed pool balls, one after the other, clack-clack, clack-clack, the world made some kind of sense to me again; there was order, not chaos. On this eight feet long table I was in control. "Fast" Eddie Felsen got it right in the movie "The Hustler". The pool stick did have nerves in it. I *felt* that.

At sixteen, I competed in pool tournaments across the United States. My father drove me in a stolen van. He hit me for the first time in a trash-choked parking lot after a national tournament in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He said I lost because I didn't listen to his advice. But the truth is I was just plain scared. My hands trembled like crazy the whole time. Guys twice my age were running back to back racks. I felt like a baby chick in a room full of strutting cocks.

"I let you quit school to pursue a dream and THIS is how you repay me?" My father thundered. A white substance frothed at the corners of his lips, and I realized he was back on drugs again, which explained why no matter how much I won, we were always broke.

Later that night, my eye blackened, I sneaked out of our shabby hotel room to find a phone booth with a telephone book and called my Aunt Margaret. A nearby pawnshop light blinked on and off, keeping time with my thudding heart. As the phone rang, I prayed she still lived at the same address. I was disappointed when a man picked up.

"What?" he said gruffly, clearly in a bad mood.

"Can I please speak to Margaret Myers?"

"Who's this?"

"Her niece. Who's this?"

"Her boyfriend-"

We both paused to digest this information.

"She's in the hospital-" he said, and I thought I could hear his voice break a little.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Cancer-“ he said softly, like he hated to even pronounce the word.

“I’m so sorry-“ I felt sick with worry and guilt. I was embarrassed to be calling her only when I needed something, a place to stay. I could have called her years ago, but I knew my father wouldn’t like it, so I didn’t.

“Do you have a message for her?”

“Yeah. Tell her Olivia’s doing fine, and I hope she’s okay-“

“Do you have a number where she can reach you?”

“No. Just tell her I’m okay-“ Then I hung up. I didn’t want her to worry about me on top of everything else.

So I stuck it out with my father. I went through four bottles of Mylanta a week and started sneaking pints of Jack Daniel’s my father bought for me to stuff into my purse and sip in the bathroom at competitions to kill my nerves. I won a good deal, but I lost some, too. I dreaded losing, facing his slaps, kicks, and punches. This lasted for a year, until my drunken father passed out at the wheel late one night (driving to a 24hour liquor store for another bottle). His car flipped over a guard rail, killing him instantly. His blood alcohol level was six times the legal limit. With Child protective Services hovering behind me, I tried calling my Aunt Margaret one more time. I’d sent her several get well cards with no return address, so I really didn’t know if she was dead or alive. A woman answered this time, with a husky voice that didn’t sound familiar. “Aunt Margaret?” I said.

She screamed with joy. “OH MY GOD! IS THIS REALLY OLIVIA?”

I explained to her what had happened, and she immediately arranged to wire me money for a plane ticket to Baltimore. I packed a plastic bag with the few clothes I owned and grabbed a five hundred dollar pool cue in a leather case I’d won this year. But at the airport, I dumped the pool stick into a trashcan right before I boarded my plane.

With her hair growing out under a dew-rag, my aunt hadn’t changed much,

except she was paler and smelled slightly medicinal, like she brought some of the hospital home with her. “Like my new Yo girl look?” She rushed right over, instantly recognizing me.

I was not sure if I should hug her or not. But she threw her arms around me and embraced me tight. The skin on her arms was slack, as if she’d drop a good deal of weight recently. “Don’t worry, I ain’t gonna break-“ she said, and we shared a laugh.

My aunt got me a job cashiering at the same Giant she still worked at. We lived happily together for two years, until she beat cancer and got married. Then she helped me find a place of my own, which we fixed up with stuff we hunted at thrift stores and yard sales. Two dollars for a toaster. Five for a set of dishes with only one plate missing. You can’t beat that.

From ages nineteen through twenty-one, I earned three gold pins from the Giant, drank a lot of beer on the weekends (I had a fake ID), and burned through a couple of bum boyfriends.

Partying at a neighborhood bar with friends from work, on my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, I met Joe, a thirty year old roofer. He wore a baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes while shooting pool with skill and confidence. Underneath his hat, he looked just like Paul Newman in “The Hustler”. His eyes were that same incredible blue; they seemed almost inhuman they were so beautiful, an alien perfection. He moved like a tiger, languidly, his well developed arm muscles and strong upper body on display in a tank top. My heart hammered. Numerous girls were staring outright at him, even the married ones. Many tried, but nobody could beat him on the pool table. So I put my quarters up.

I hadn’t picked up a pool stick in years. When my turn came, tentatively, I reached for a bar cue. The cool, glossy wood felt good to me. It hummed in my hands.

“Goddamn-“ was all Joe could say when I beat him in two innings. He shook my hand and bought me a beer. We sat across from each other in a booth, and his long black eye-lashes fluttered like a schoolgirl’s. He was so shy, it was hard for him to look up at me. I’d never



met a guy who was so bashful. Joe was different, reserved, mysterious. And I liked that.

That night, he drove me home in his truck, and many Budweisers brave, I leaned in for a kiss. His eyelashes lowered again. His mouth was narrow, but full, bee stung, pretty as a rosebud. For a moment I thought of Cathy Ames, that evil vixen from Steinbeck's "East of Eden" with her sweet, bow shaped lips and cunning ways. (I read the book in New Orleans at the library) Joe's lips stiffened at first. But when I slipped my warm tongue into his mouth, he relaxed some, pressed his lips closer, and lightly tasted me, like a finicky cat. He tasted fermented from drinking so much beer and cigarette-y, but I was used to that, even sort of liked it, the familiarity of a bad boy. He pulled away before I did. "Goodnight-" he whispered.

The next day I returned to the same bar, hoping to see Joe. Just when I thought he wasn't coming, I felt a gentle tug to the back of my long hair. "Hey, beautiful-" he said. And instantly a light turned on inside of me, warming me. We played eight games of pool, and I beat him seven times. Each time he lost, his face and neck flamed.

"I'm just letting you win because you're so pretty-" he said, twisting his cool fingers through the back of my hair.

That night he came home with me, and we drank Southern Comfort straight from a pint he kept in his back pocket. We listened to rock music on his cell phone: Skid Row, Metallica, Journey, Firehouse, until five in the morning. Drunkenly we sang along. "Music saved my life-" he confessed, playing air guitar. But he did not explain why.

A few week's later, we made love for the first time. The brush of Joe's fingertips made my body hum, the same high I got from shooting pool. And he whispered my name Olivia, Olivia, Olivia, over and over, as I explored his beautiful body. I delighted in the gentle quiver of his sculpted muscles and his soft moans of appreciation. He spent the night with me like it

never occurred for him to leave. He spooned close to me and clasped my hand until morning.

In bed he crooned, "I love you with all my heart and soul, Olivia, and I would never do anything to hurt you-". I snuggled against his strong body and felt so safe and happy.

After a month of dating, I bought Joe a pool stick at a local flea market because he didn't have one. It was only twenty bucks, and the case was a little banged up, so I bought some black shoe polish and dabbed at the rough spots until the case shone like new. That same night, I presented it to him.

"Surprise-" I said.

As he opened the case and took the stick out, his cheeks flared, like those cheap plastic Santa pins where you pull the string. "What's it weigh?" he asked.

"It's an eighteen or maybe a nineteen-" I guessed.

He rolled it across the pool table, and it wobbled a good bit. Suddenly I felt embarrassed, like maybe the stick wasn't good enough for him.

"I prefer a twenty or a twenty one-" he said.

"Just try it-" I wanted to take it back now, but I didn't want to argue. So we played a couple games. When I beat him four in a row, Joe huffed, jammed the stick I bought him back into its case and clicked the lid shut.

"I can't play with this thing-" he snapped.

For the rest of the afternoon he played with a bar cue but he still lost every game. Afterwards we ate lunch, and he just picked at his food.

"Don't you think I'm being ungrateful about the pool stick?" Joe finally asked me.

In a moment of clarity, it occurred to me that he might have actually wanted to make me feel bad. "It's no big deal-" I said.

"You're not mad?"

"No-"

I thought of the photo of a sapphire-eyed super-model he cut out of a Victoria Secret magazine and kept in his wallet. She was his “dream woman”. He kept it there the whole four years he was with his ex-girlfriend and never once put her picture in there. The rest of his plastic photo sleeves were empty.

“Did it bother your ex-girlfriend that you wouldn’t put her picture in your wallet?”

I asked him.

“Yeah-“ he admitted.

Like me, Joe grew up in a house surrounded by violence. His father was a fireman, an alcoholic who beat him and his mother for years. (His firehouse sent him to rehab a few times, and always covered for his outbursts. I guess he belonged to the “good old boys’ club”, same as my Daddy)

“Once my father beat me with a wooden yard stick so hard that the metal edge popped off and sliced my knee open-“ He rolled his jean leg up and showed me the jagged white scar.

At 17, Joe started working out at a local gym where he discovered he was a gifted boxer. He trained for years and boxed at Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas a few times. The last time his father hit his mother, Joe knocked him out. He was disappointed that he only got to hit him that once. In his revenge fantasies, he pummeled him over and over.

But Joe had a tender side, too. One time I visited my mother’s grave and found her plot was neglected, overgrown with a dense tangle of crabgrass and weeds. With my bare hands, I tried to claw them away, but they just tore my fingers up. I mentioned this to Joe, and a few days later when I returned with clippers and a rake, I found that somebody had done the job for me and left a supermarket bouquet of flowers on her cleared headstone. None of the other plots were tended, so I knew it wasn’t the caretaker. And when I called my aunt, she said it wasn’t her. When I asked Joe, he just shrugged. “Must be a ghost-“ he insisted.

The first time we argued seriously was in the middle of a brutal November cold snap. We were pretty lit and staggering home from the bar, trying to avoid patches of ice on the

sidewalk. I walked faster than Joe because he had bad knees from roofing for years. Plus I couldn't wait to get home to my warm apartment.

"Slow down-" he complained.

"Come on, Old Man-" I teased him.

"Am I gonna have to beat your ass?" He lurched several yards behind me. He'd said this to me before, and I'd let it slide. But this time, my blood flowing with booze, it really pissed me off. I pictured my mother holding a washcloth to her swollen face after one of my dad's beatings.

"Don't you ever threaten me-" I hissed at him.

"What's your problem?"

It was hard, but I told him about my father's history of assaulting my mother.

"I'm sorry-" Joe said. "I won't say it again-"

But back at my place, he grew surly. "You know I was just kidding-" he said. "I've never hit you. You hurt my heart, Olivia. This is bullshit-" Then he stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

For three weeks, we didn't speak. At the bar, whenever he walked past me, my breath hitched. But he didn't apologize, so I just kept right on walking.

Two weeks before Christmas, we ran right into each other again, outside of the bar. He was smoking, and I was leaving. Some sparse Christmas lights winked up and down the block. "Wait, Olivia-" he stubbed out his cigarette and hustled to catch up to me.

"I miss you-" he finally said, grasping my arm lightly and turning me to look at him. A thin tear trickled down his cheek. "Can I walk you home?"

I was satisfied that he gave in before me. "Okay-" I said.

Our footsteps on the pavement crunched a thin layer of ice, like it was broken glass.

"You know I have some experience with that shit, too-" Joe mumbled. "That's why

it hurt me so much that you accused me of it-

107

"I never said you hit me-" I corrected him. "I just said don't ever threaten me...I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings-

"I'm sorry, too-

As soon as we reached my place, a warm oasis, we headed to the bedroom.

"Can I get naked?" Joe asked. Tentatively he tugged at his belt.

"Okay-

He stripped down and crawled into bed with me. Our bodies entwined, and he felt like warm silk. We didn't make love until morning, content just to be back in each other's arms.

But a week later, he stormed out on me again. I was straddling him, kissing him.

"Take your shirt off-" he said.

"Not yet-" I just wanted to kiss him some more. But suddenly Joe bucked me off.

"Get away from me-" he commanded.

"What?" I was shocked.

"Why do you have to be such a *bitch*?"

"What are you talking about?"

"STAY AWAY FROM ME-

"What's wrong with you?"

"You know what you just said-

"I didn't say anything-

"You're a fucking liar-" He got up and quickly dressed.

"Are you crazy?"

"You said, *You don't do it for me, Joe*. I heard you loud and clear-

"*What?* I did not-

He blazed out the front door, and I just let him go.

That night I dreamed Joe and I were race cars hurtling toward one another and

crashing at top speed. There was metal grating, crunching, smashing, glass popping, and sickening black smoke billowing. Gasoline, like tears, leaked to the ground from our Siamese car wreck. I strained and busted my guts to unravel my hot metal body from his. But the heat from a smoldering fire melded us together, burning us, human cars, alive. As the whole wreck exploded, the pain flared, past excruciating, and I jolted awake, panting.

Again we didn't speak for weeks, until fate intervened and we ran into each other at an Irish Pub. Towards the end of the evening, he ventured over. "How was your Christmas?" he asked.

"Good-" I replied. "I had dinner with my aunt and her husband and their new baby and exchanged gifts and everything. How was yours?"

"I drank a bottle of rum-" he laughed it off. But I felt bad for him, that he was alone on the holidays. So I gave him a hug. Then we played some pool and later shared a cab to my place where we made love for two days.

But he disappeared again after that. I returned to the Irish pub hoping to find him. He wasn't there, but a thick black guy in an Armani suit strutted over to me. "Hey, pretty lady-" he said. Diamonds the size of sugar cubes winked from his caramel colored earlobes. "You seen Joe around?" he purred. His puffy lips sipped at a snifter of brandy. "He owes me-"

Stupidly I stared into his eyes, as flat and hard as onyx.

"I haven't seen Joe in weeks. I'm looking for him, too-" I admitted.

"He don't care about you, lady. He too busy chasing rock-"

I was speechless.

"Co-caine-" he broke the word down into syllables for me, like maybe it would help me understand him better. It hit me then. I was talking to Joe's drug dealer.

Suddenly Joe's paranoia made sense. How could I have been so blind, so stupid? His binge drinking was bad enough. But how could I be sharing a bed with a man who ingested

the same poisonous drug as my father?

A day later, when Joe reappeared, knocking humbly at my door, I confronted him about his drug use. He begged for another chance. He actually got down on his knees, like actors do in the movies. He swore he would never disappear or do drugs again.

“You don’t love me-“ I accused him. “If you did you wouldn’t lie and hide things from me-“

“Remember last month when somebody cut down all those weeds and left flowers on your mom’s grave? That was *me*. Why would I do that if I didn’t love you?” Tears wickered his face. “I love you, Olivia. I’ve never loved anybody as much as I love you. I have nothing without you. Please don’t leave me-“

So I gave him one last chance.

For months we got along fine. Except for last week when Joe accused me of flirting with another man at the bar. The guy, an ER doctor, unwinding after a long shift, still in hospital scrubs, resembled a soap star. “You’re a shark-“ he complimented me. “Can you show me how you did that three rail bank shot earlier?”

“We’re leaving-“ Joe strode over from across the room, yanking me out.

Back at my apartment he went on a rampage, smashing holes into my bedroom walls, splattering plaster and paint chips until his fists were swollen and bloody.

“Stop, Joe-“ I pleaded, trembling. I could not run out because he was blocking the door.

“How could you disrespect me like that?” he wailed. “When you know how much I love you. You keep hurting my heart, over and over, Olivia, how could you do that to me?”

“That guy came up to *me*. Just calm down. I love *you*-“ I rubbed his back, trying to soothe him.

“I’m sorry, baby-“ he sobbed into his hands now. “I’m so sorry-“

In the morning he made a trip to the hardware store. He labored for hours,

repairing the holes he punched into my walls. He even painted my room for me, pale pink, the color of sweetheart roses. Afterwards he drew me a huge heart which nearly covered one whole wall. He wrote our names inside in a beautiful cursive script. It read: Olivia and Joe, forever.

May came, Spring warming the ground to a perfect 68 degrees, and the Brood X cicadas began to stir after their long seventeen year slumber. Tiny holes appeared in the dirt, like a mass resurrection, tiny creatures rising from tiny graves. The first one I saw thudded against my bedroom window, with its whining whir, the night Joe realized the photo of his dream girl in his wallet went missing. I'd snuck it out while he slept, tore it up, and flushed it down the toilet. When he noticed the photo was gone, he flapped his wallet in my face. "Did YOU do this?"

"It was a stupid picture-" I mumbled. We were both pretty drunk.

"Don't you EVER touch my personal belongings!" He bulldozed me onto the bed, choking me with one strong hand. Shocked I fought wildly as he climbed on top of me. "If you ever touch my things again, I will kill you!" His face was puffed up, spittle flew from his mouth. His eyes tilted crazily, like a demon's. He was no longer my Joe.

"Stop-" I begged.

Then he smashed his hand across my mouth and nose so I couldn't breathe.

"I will kill you! DO YOU HEAR ME?" As he was suffocating me, I heard several more cicadas plop against the window just above my head, and their low, soft whir filled my ears, as I started to pass out. Joe lifted his hand then, and quickly I sucked in as much air as I could get.

"Please-" I gasped.

"Say you're sorry-" he demanded.

"I'm sorry!"

But again he smashed his hand against my face, as I hit, kicked, and clawed at him.



“Behave-“ he said. “And I’ll stop-“

I ceased struggling. But he didn’t stop, even when I lost consciousness. When I woke, my jeans were bunched around my ankles, like shackles, and he was fucking me. He kissed my lips and face as I sobbed. “You’re okay-“ he said, stroking my hair. “I love you-“ he said. “I love you so much-“

All through the night, he held me, kept his arms, corded with muscles, wrapped tight, like ropes, around me so I couldn’t get up. The words rape and kidnap jostled around inside my head. And the cicadas never stopped their humming, a mournful tune.

At daybreak, Joe got dressed and kissed me goodbye. “I’ll see you after work-“ he said.

In my bathroom, I stared across at my face in the mirror. My eyes were slits from weeping, but Joe left no fingerprints on my face, no red marks, no bruises on my neck, no proof, my word against his.

I lay in bed most of the day, listening to the buzz of the cicadas outside my open window grow steadily louder, an operatic wail. I was no longer afraid of them like when I was five. I thought of my mother and her painful, wasted, and destroyed life. It was as if the cicadas were singing about her now and all of the women like her, stepped on, murdered, gone. I listened to their garbled messages for hours. A half hour before Joe was due back, I went to the kitchen where I chose the sharpest knife I could find. Then I climbed out my bedroom window onto a small roof about ten feet above the ground. Clenching the knife, I hunkered down with my belly flat to the roof, the way I’d seen my father do it so many times.

The cicadas, like a choir of lost souls, howled, reaching a deafening crescendo, as Joe approached, and I sprang from the roof, bringing him down. I pressed my knife hard against a fat, throbbing vein in his neck, and his face and lips drained of color. His blue eyes bulged with alarm. “Whoa. Olivia-“ he said. “Whoa-“

I felt a hot rush, a powerful thrill, looking into his panicked eyes and seeing pure fear. I pressed the knife still harder to his soft flesh, as the cicadas screamed now, like hysterics.

It was broad daylight. Vaguely I wondered if anybody seeing us would call the cops.

“Olivia, don’t-“

“Apologize to me right now, fucker-“

“I’m.....I’m sorry-“ he stammered.

But the tip of my knife dug deeper, as if I had no control over it. A thin stream of his scarlet blood flowed across his taut neck, and he gasped, as the cicadas shrieked.

“I want you out of my life-“

“Okay. God. Please-“

“If you ever touch me again, I will kill you-“

“I won’t. I’ll leave. I promise-“

In a second I could puncture his fat vein and slit his throat. I pressed my blade and watched his eyes open wider. I listened to the trilling cicadas, calmer now, satisfied. So I pulled the knife away from Joe’s neck, let him up, and he bolted away. “You’re fucking crazy, Olivia!” he hollered back.

Alone in my bedroom, I lay quietly, spent, at peace. Even the cicadas were silent. Tomorrow I would buy a new pool stick and begin entering tournaments again. But I’d play it my way this time, make my own choices. My hands hummed faintly with anticipation. Hours later, I woke to find a single cicada resting on my pillow, by my cheek. It whirred softly, and I listened with contentment to its gentle lullaby.

Dylan and I meet late one night at The Rendez-vous Lounge, a refuge for punk rockers, Goth chicks, ravers, artists, writers and other fringe personalities who come for the dollar Natty Bohs and cheap pool games. I watch him murder three guys in a row, shooting eight ball. The last guy he beats, a rock-a-billy guitarist friend of mine, murmurs to me, "Listen, doll, do me a favor and kick this guy's ass--"

Dylan smirks at me, a college girl with her own pool stick. He stares me up and down, seems unimpressed by my Johns Hopkins t-shirt and make-up free face.

"Save me one shot-" I advise him, as I chalk my cue.

With an unlit cigarette poised between his perfect teeth, Dylan smiles openly now. Barbed wire tattoos ring his well developed biceps, and skinny boomerang shaped sideburns frame his bad boy face.

Dylan breaks, a sound like the crack of a rifle. The balls spread evenly across the table but nothing drops. Next I shoot in three low balls, one after the other, with ease. My fourth shot is a difficult triple combo which I call off the bank, and it falls precisely.

"Nice-" Dylan mutters laconically.

When I sink my next three balls, Dylan stops smiling. My final ball, the eight, sits two inches from the side pocket, a straight cut and a scratch. I can make it if I hit it very softly. But my adrenalin is pumping because the "cool" crowd- leather clad rockers and smokey eyed pin-up girls- are watching me now, impressed. A hush falls over the room, as I take aim on the eight. There is a soft clack, and a dozen pair of eyes follow the black ball which rolls slowly down the scarlet felt. It hovers for the fraction of a second beside the side pocket, then dips

in. Everyone cheers, wanting to see the hotshot get beat. I am jazzed up, tingling with excitement. But then the cue ball, still rolling, thunks into the corner pocket, like a stool pigeon with cement shoes. Groaning with disappointment now, the hipsters all return to their drinks. Damn it!

“You want to play for ten bucks?” I ask Dylan, to save face.

He saunters over, leaning in so close I can feel the heat rising off his white t-shirt. His warm lips brush my ear, and he whispers, “You want to go out sometime?”

My heart somersaults. He smells outdoorsy, like lakes and trees, an expensive cologne. Normally I date academic types: physics majors who write poetry about “string theory” or English Lit majors double majoring in Poli-Sci to write novels about child soldiers and revolutions. But Professor Watkins is always berating our class, goading us to: Step off the beaten path! Take a walk on the wild side! Get a life! On my last short story, he scribbled, in red ink, “Good writing, but quite boring”, which stung for days.

So I accept Dylan’s offer.

The next evening, a sultry June night smelling of cherry blossoms and melted roof tar, Dylan picks me up in a gleaming white Lexus. It glides to the curb, like Cinderella’s coach. I sink into my leather seat, as soft as butter. The pricey ride surprises me, but the child seat in the back surprises me more.

“You have kids?” I ask him. He doesn’t look any older than me. I’m twenty-three.

“One-“ he replies.

“Are you married?”

“Divorced-“

A sound like the Emergency Broadcasting siren fills my head.

“What do you do for a living?” Wow. Did I really just ask that predictable and elitist crap?

"I used to sell motorcycles. But I have investments now. So I just get up every day, scratch my balls, and play with my kid. It's real sweet--"

He definitely *talks* like the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. But he is also underwear model sexy. So I let his trash mouth slide for now.

His cell phone, an ultra thin, sleek one, pings. He checks the number, but doesn't answer it. "Sorry--" he says, switching the ringer to vibrate. (How polite!)

"What kind of investments do you have? Like the stock market?"

"You ask a lot of questions--" He yawns elaborately (a tell maybe, for when he's nervous or lying?) "What do you do?"

"I'm a writing major at Johns Hopkins--"

"I went to Hopkins, too, once, for like three weeks--" But he dismisses the experience with a shrug, tapping a Camel Light from a fresh pack. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

I shake my head. But he glides open the tinted windows anyway so the smoke won't bother me. (Again, how polite!)

"Are you Peruvian?" I guess about his exotic looks.

"Hell, no. Greek--" He cranks up some Metallica. His dashboard twinkles and glows with neon lights, switches, and buttons, like some high-tech UFO. Dylan bobs his head to the beat, mouthing the words, which he knows by heart.

Suddenly it starts to pour down rain outside, silvery ropes which slam into his car. But Dylan doesn't slow down even a fraction. He actually speeds up. Alarmed, I watch the needle quiver past eighty to ninety. My seatbelt holds me snugly, but Dylan's isn't even strapped. I feel sick to my stomach, like when I force myself to get on crazy rides at the amusement park. Is this a test, like "Chicken" to see if I'll freak out and get scared? Torrents of water smear the windshield. My God, it's so dark out, how can he even *see*? I observe Dylan's face, criss-crossed with colored lights from the dash. He resembles a painted up Aztec warrior, primitive, dangerous. The needle wavers at one hundred. And the Lexus feels pushed to its breaking

point, like it's about ready to fly apart. My heart hammers. Clenching soft leather, I white knuckle the sides of my seat. But I say nothing.

When we pull safely to the curb outside of the Rec Room, a pool hall in Towson, I emerge from the car, planting my legs on the sidewalk with relief. But I walk a little like Bambie, fresh from the womb. Dylan gives no indication that his driving was anything out of the ordinary. So I play it cool, too.

Inside, the preppies treat Dylan like a celebrity. They flock to him, eagerly shaking his hand. Immediately the bartender sets us up with Coronas and generous shots of Patron. "It's on me, man-" the bartender waves away Dylan's money.

I'm glad I decided to wear my one little black dress. Doubly glad I took the time to apply some mascara and lip-gloss. Dylan's hand encircles my waist, guiding me around, and I feel special. Some flat stomached girls in hip hugger jeans, their colorful thongs on display, like peacocks trolling for a mate, eye me up.

"This way, baby-" Dylan leads me to a nine foot pool table. I never had a guy call me "baby" before. I sort of like it. Suddenly I feel invincible, like a gangster's mol.

We play four racks of nine ball, and each time I use one of my object balls to sink the nine early, winning. A stone-faced Dylan says, "You are really starting to irritate me-" But I can tell he likes the challenge, is even proud of me. Because a small smile slips through his tough guy mask, and then he kisses me, just the whisper of a kiss, a brush of silk across my lips, as he sidles past me to refill our drinks.

The next four games, he kills me. When I choke on the nine, he purrs in my ear, "What's the matter, can't think straight?" I toss him a cold glare. Because he's right. Just having him near is making me lose my concentration.

At the pool hall, he checks his phone three times. And twice in the car on the way home, he checks it again. Secretly I'm jealous. Are they girls calling him, sexting? Am I dating a player? A bookie? A drug dealer? A rock star?

Back at my apartment, Dylan pokes through my stuff: alphabetized CDs (Cowboy Junkies, Gypsy Kings, Pink Floyd), piles of neatly folded jeans and t-shirts, and a stack of white pages covered with mathematical formulas, my Calculus homework. Then he squints up at a large poster of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo which hangs above my bed. I like her small fuzzy mustache, with its hint of testosterone and passion. On my desk, he finds some framed photos of me with my Mom, "Life is an aquarium-" he announces, "You can learn a lot about a person by the room they sleep in...Is this your mom?"

"Yeah. She works in Accounting at Hopkins so I can get free tuition-"

"Where's Daddy?"

"Split. Right before I was born-"

"My Dad's a bum, too. Fuck 'em-" He flips through some of my books: Djuna Barnes, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, Flannery O'Connor, John Steinbeck.

When he's finished, I ask, "So what did you find out about me?"

"You need some work-" he replies. "But you've got potential-"

Then he climbs into bed with me, kissing me with just enough warm tongue (not invasive and full of saliva like some frat boys I know). His hands are unusually large, like a pianist's. They roam, stroke my thighs, sliding up to the edge of my lacy boy shorts. "Boy shorts. My favorite-" he exclaims, eyeing them with delight.

"I thought you'd be a thong man-" I kid him.

"Thongs are trashy-" he declares. "But boy shorts have class-" Then his big hands change direction. One of them tugs at the top of my dress. He peers inside at my green satin bra. "Hi-" he says, which makes me laugh. Then he parks his hand on my stomach, satisfied to just lay in my arms and doze a bit.

But, unlike me, he is soon wide awake and full of energy at 4 AM. "I don't sleep much-" he says.

“Why not?”

“Insomnia-“ He starts pulling his shoes back on. “I’ll sleep when I die...besides I’ve got a deck to build for my grandparents today before my kid comes over later. Call me in the morning when you wake up, okay?”

“Okay-“

All night long I bask in the exotic smell of him on my sheets.

For our second date, Dylan says, “Wear something cute and girly. We’re gonna hustle pool-“

“I really don’t have the money to gamble-“ I confess.

“Don’t worry. I got plenty of cash-“

That night, I wear a pink sundress and high heeled sandals. Dylan whistles his approval. At three different bars we play some warm up games (but not for money yet). Only each time I see him collect cash from numerous people. Sometimes they slip the wads of cash into his hand during a handshake, and sometimes he follows them into the bathroom, emerging stuffing his wallet into his back pocket.

“I thought we weren’t playing for money?”

“We’re not-“

“What are you then, Greek mafia, collecting your protection payouts?” I’m only half teasing.

“You have a very overactive imagination-“ he scolds me. “Really. You need to get out more-“

His comment makes me feel pretty lame, so I just drop the subject.

At a crowded sport’s bar, Dylan chats up the locals, lawyers and accountants mainly, in Brooks Brothers shirts and khaki pants. He buys them round after round of Red Headed Sluts and Liquid Cocaine, powerful shots, made with high octane liquor. While he negotiates a



doubles game for money, I sip an amaretto sour, twirl my miniature umbrella, and giggle. But when he whirls his head around looking for a partner, I hop up. "Me-" I say. "I want to play-"

"Not this time, honey. This is a money game-"

"I'm leaving if I can't play-" I pout. "Please. Please. Just one game-"

"Okay. I guess I'm picking my girl for this one, guys-" he groans, chalking his stick with small, irritated flicks.

"Pussy whipped-" one drunk asshole in suspenders and a bow tie snickers, swirling the ice cubes in his Jack Daniel's high-ball. Dylan shoots him a look, but he lets the insult slide.

Our opponents have shiny pennies wedged into their loafers. They swill martinis with jumbo olives, watching with interest as Dylan pockets five balls consecutively.

"Ringer-" somebody chirps.

Next, his opponent sinks four balls. But when my turn comes, I struggle with the stick, holding it awkwardly, until Dylan jumps in to help me. "Your fingers have to form a tripod-" he counsels.

"But I can't do that-" I whine.

"Make a V shape with your thumb and first two fingers. You can do this, baby-"

I manage to sink both of our remaining balls, but just barely. Some ladies clap.

"Now call your eight in the corner, honey. It's a straight in shot-"

Shakily I stroke my cue, but I miss hitting the eight ball completely. Some men snicker. "Do I get to try it again?" I ask innocently.

"Focus-" Dylan murmurs, "You can do this-"

I fumble with my stick, jab at the eight, send it rolling down the table toward the pocket. It just makes it in. Joyfully I start jumping up and down. Dylan hugs me. One local gripes, "Do you believe this shit?"

"Great job-" Dylan hugs me again. The guys we beat fork over one hundred bucks each from their money clips. "Same game, same partners-" Dylan says. "We're on a roll-"

We proceed to win eight games, losing two to make it look good.

But outside, on the parking lot, the guys we beat, ruddy faced with booze, like Kennedys, are waiting for us. "Hold it-" the guy in the lavender colored shirt says. "I believe we just got hustled-" His partner, in mint green, adds, "Yeah...and we want our money back-" They are big, well fed fellows, like football players. I'm reaching for my cash when Dylan pivots coolly in front of me, shielding me, and says, "Guys, you don't know who you're talking to-"

"A pool hustling jack ass is who I'm talking to-" Mint Green says. Some white froth speckles his lips.

Flipping open his wallet, Dylan presents an authentic cop's badge, "I don't really feel like arresting anybody here tonight, so me and my girl are going to be on our way. Goodnight, gentlemen-" Firmly he clasps my hand and leads me to the safety of the Lexus.

"This is bullshit-" I hear one of the guys complain, as they shuffle away. Their shirts are untucked, and their dispirited backs are soft and sloped like porpoises.

At the car, I ask Dylan, "Are you really a cop?" I'm delighted with the subterfuge.

"What do you think?" He gestures to a small gold and blue police sticker I never noticed in the corner of his windshield. From his wallet, he pulls out a stack of cards embossed with the official Baltimore Police seal. But when I inspect them more closely, I see the cards have many different officers' names on them, none of them his. "Where did you get all this stuff?" I start laughing.

"The dark web...they get me out of traffic tickets-" He yawns elaborately. (Yes, it's definitely a tell for when he's lying. Because I'm pretty sure he uses those cards for more than just traffic tickets. For example, like impersonating a police officer which I believe is a felony offense...)

No doubt Professor Watkins would approve.

Back at my place, we tumble around in my bed, kissing, rolling, and grinding. Until finally Dylan leaps to his feet, hands raised in the air, surrendering. “This is torture-“ he says. He hops around, rearranging himself in his confining jeans. “Don’t laugh. I should go now. Because I’m reaching the point where I’m not going to be responsible for my actions. –“ His unbridled passion thrills me.

“Can’t you just stay over and sleep?”

“I won’t sleep tonight....I got too much on my mind-“

“Like what?”

“My grandparents took me in and raised me. They depend on me now. My son, too. I got to take my grandfather to the VA hospital in the morning-“

“You need to slow down and relax-“

“I *can’t*. Because that’s when *shit happens*-“ He starts pacing, really getting amped up. “What if something happens to my grandfather?....He’s not going to *die* on my watch...My mother died of an aneurysm when I was fifteen...And I wasn’t *there*-“

“You were a kid...How could you know? You can’t do everything for everybody, Superman-“

“I should have *known*-“ Dylan’s eyes are blazing now, almost feverish.

“Calm down. Everything’s okay...Just come to bed and sleep. Please-“

“Let’s go empty some cans-“ he suggests, clenching and unclenching his big hands.

“What?” I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“Never mind-“ he heads for the door.

But I jump up and block his path.

“I *can’t sleep*-“ He is beyond frustrated.

“We’ll play some poker then-“

He relents, and we play a couple hands, until I notice bright mulberry stains which have bloomed across his knuckles.

“Oh my God. What’s this?” Softly I touch one of his colored knuckles.

“Stress-“ he admits.

We play cards until morning when the sky is the palest blue. I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Go to sleep-“ he says. “I’ll call you later-“

At the door, I hug him. “Goodnight, Superman-“

“Goodnight, Lois-“

The following week, at a 24hour diner, while Dylan and I wait to be seated, a couple of gay guys start critiquing my “look”.

“Great dress. Great bag-“ one quips about my vintage halter dress and straw purse.

“But, honey, get rid of those Payless shoes-“

I laugh it off, because they probably *did* come from Payless. But standing beside me, Dylan bristles. He is seriously pissed. “Apologize to her right now-“ he demands.

“Chill out, tough guy-“ the first gay guy’s hair is a carpet of perfectly trimmed blonde hair, gelled into even points the size of tacks. “I bet you have a really big cock-“

“He does, and it belongs to me-“ I intervene. The gay guys crack up, loving it, and I drag a sullen Dylan inside before he can punch the guy.

As we discuss, over the noise (it’s packed in here) whether we want pancakes or omlettes, I notice that I can’t read Dylan’s lips, something I’m usually pretty good at.

“You know your lips barely move when you speak. Do you do that on purpose?”

“What I talk about is my own business and nobody else’s-“ he whispers.

I’m dumbfounded. It sounds like some trick they teach in the CIA or NSA. “Don’t you think that’s being a little paranoid?”

He shrugs moodily. “That queer is so lucky-“ he says.

“He was just joking-“

“Well it wasn’t funny. I’ve had more money in my life than that guy will ever see. Millions. I’ve flown to Belize, to Bermuda, to Iceland, paid for all my friends to go, just on a whim. I own a brand new truck, two Harleys, and a race car. My ex-girlfriend, Dana, I bought her a Jaguar for her last birthday. Fuck that little prick-“

Maybe I *am* dating a drug dealer. The thought spins through my mind like a kite lost in a powerful storm. And I’m just drunk enough now to push the issue. “Are you a drug dealer?” But I don’t have the guts to look into his face when I ask, so I stare down at our formica tabletop.

“Keep it down-“ he hisses. “Ears-“ he scans the crowd with suspicion. “Look I ain’t going to lie to you. I did some crazy things in my past. I was young and stupid. But not anymore. I have investments now-“

“Then who are all those people calling you and giving you cash?”

“They owe me from before. Even my Dad owes me like 50,000 bucks-“

“I thought you didn’t even like your Dad?”

“I don’t. But he was going to lose his house-“

“What’s the most important thing you hope to accomplish in your life?” I want some truth from him, some meaningful conversation.

“Raise my son up right, make sure he’s taken care of-“

A bloated waiter interrupts to take our order.

Waiting for our food, Dylan grows more distant. “This is never going to work-“ he says. “We’re too different. Salt and pepper-“

“We’re not that different-“

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done in your life?” he counters.

Through high school, I cashiered at a gift shop. The owner, Louise, mannequin thin, in her mid 40’s, was always on a diet, always grouchy with hunger, and filled with anxiety, afraid her Cuban husband was cheating on her. The skin under her eyes shone with wrinkle reducing

serum. It was her policy to hire only ugly girls. She hired me on a day when my cheeks were puffed up like Dizzy Gillespie's after having four wisdom teeth extracted. When I showed up a few days later, slim and attractive, she glared icily at me. After that she kept me busy every second, always bitching at me, hoping I might quit. She made me dust shelves, wash windows, mop floors, pair thousands of cards with the right sized envelopes. Nobody else had to do the extra work. So I started under ringing purchases to pay for stuff my Mom couldn't afford for me: a prom dress, a class ring, school trips. The meaner Louise was, the more I stole.

"Embezzlement-" I tell Dylan.

"How much?"

"Thousands-" It was probably more like hundreds.

His face dips with approval. "Cool-" he says.

After eating, I suggest we go back to his place.

"My place is a mess-" he protests.

"I let you into my aquarium, it's only fair that you let me into yours-"

Reluctantly he agrees, paying the check. His signature looks like graffiti art.

"You do graffiti?"

"Yeah. Don't you remember the other night when I ask you to empty some cans?"

Oh. *Spray Paint cans*. Right. I am such a nerd.

Ten minutes later, we pull up into the driveway of a standard middle class home, and Dylan leads me to a side door where we descend a few steps down into his apartment. It's a wreck. I really expected something better. It looks like somebody had a massive party and never bothered to clean up. Empty wine glasses and beer cans clutter every surface, along with ashtrays overflowing with butts. Take-out containers with left-over crusted food. The floor is a jungle of tangled newspapers, sneakers, dirty socks, junk mail, unpaid bills, and kid's toys. Dylan owns a record player and hundreds of albums stored in milk crates. A stripped down racing bike frame is mounted on a wall, looking unused and forlorn, like a horse put out to pasture. In the

middle of his kitchen is a plastic tub filled with unopened matchbox cars. The fridge is cluttered with photos of Dylan's three year old son, Conner, an adorable blonde, and some others of a red race car.

"Your son doesn't look like you--"

"His mother's a blonde model type--"

"Who lives upstairs?"

"My grandparents--"

I didn't expect that either.

Conner's miniscule room consists of a thin mattress on the floor, smothered beneath a confusion of tiny clothes, shoes, and toys. Child Protective Services would have a field day.

In the livingroom, Dylan slides "The Hustler" into his VCR, and we watch it from a cigarette burn scarred velvet sofa, and drink warm chardonnay in front of a giant flat screen TV. Paul Newman plays Fast Eddie Felson, a pool shark and chronic underdog struggling to find his self worth. It's a gut wrenching tragedy which holds me spellbound.

"This is my favorite movie--" Dylan confides.

Once when he emerges from his bathroom, no bigger than a broom closet and sloppily painted garish purple (like in a dive bar), I think I notice a white substance sticking to his full lips. But he seems calm and mellow, not wired at all, so I don't mention it. He even cuddles with me, quietly watching the movie.

"The night we met, I came home and wrote you a letter--" he says shyly.

"Can I read it?"

He hands me a black composition notebook, the kind school kids use, and I read very tender words about me, full of the hope and wonder that comes when you meet someone you truly connect with. He notes he likes the fact that we're similar to the characters in the "Hustler", a pool shark and a writer. It surprises me and touches me, and that and the wine are enough to make me forget about the disaster area he lives in, and we start kissing and

then progress to the bedroom. His futon is big and billowy, with the texture of a parachute. Racks of designer clothes surround his bed, and Italian leather shoes and expensive sneakers are strewn all over the floor. Things heat up pretty quickly, and once I'm down to my boy shorts and bra, I stop him with one word: "Condom-"

He stumbles to the bathroom to get one, and during that sixty seconds I come to my senses. I'm drunk and in way over my head here. My gut tells me he's still selling drugs, probably using, too.

When he returns I ask him point blank, "Dylan, did you do some coke tonight?"

"DO NOT DO THIS TO ME-" Suddenly he's furious. He leaps away from me, like an electric current reacting to a puddle of water. "NO, I DID NOT. AND I'M SICK OF HEARING THIS BULLSHIT ALL THE TIME. IT'S A BROKEN FUCKING RECORD. I LOST MY LAST GIRLFRIEND OF TWO YEARS, A GOOD GIRL, A DECENT GIRL, BECAUSE HER FATHER CHECKED ME OUT, BUT HE GOT ME MIXED UP WITH SOME OTHER GUY AT THE CYCLE SHOP, AND SHE CHOSE HER FATHER OVER ME-"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know-" I placate him. Nobody knows I'm here. This guy could flip out and kill me for all I know.

"I thought something good was finally going to happen to me. That you would accept me for who I am. I've been honest with you. I'm an insomniac. I *want* to sleep, but I *can't*. But I guess I was wrong about you-" He pulls on a pair of jogging pants and a baggy shirt riddled with small holes, like he's been shot a dozen times.

"I can't drive you home right now. I'm too drunk. Go to sleep and I'll wake you up in a couple of hours-" Then he saunters away.

I try to sleep but I can't. It was wrong of me to take it that far and then reject him. So I shuffle into the livingroom where Dylan is watching the Dow Jones Stock Exchange on TV and recording rates in a composition book full of names and companies he owns stock in. But he pays me no attention, so I pick up his other notebook to reread the letter



he wrote me. Instead I open it to a page where he's written a goodbye letter to his son and grandparents, the sole people in this world he cares about, in the event of his death. I'm not sure if it's a suicide note or just in case his lifestyle catches up with him and he takes a cop or a thug's bullet. It's a solemn farewell which brings the start of tears to my eyes. But I brush them quickly away when he glances over and sees what I'm reading.

"I wouldn't kill myself-" he says softly. He no longer seems mysterious and powerful to me, just lost and sad. It occurs to me that he enjoys my company so much because I don't do drugs, and I don't ask him for any, like everybody else must. Even his answering machine message is cynical: "Leave me a message and tell me what I can do for you-"

"You're a smart guy, Dylan. Why do you choose to live this way?"

"I'm the stupidest person I know. All I have to do to fuck anything up is to show up-" He's working on a second bottle of wine. His jogging pants are too big for him, and his legs are curled beneath him, like a kid would sit. It's five in the morning.

His front door rattles then, the knob turns. "Stay here-" he whispers, instantly alert. He yanks on a hooded sweatshirt, pulls up the hood which covers most of his face, picks up a piece of steel pipe from under his sofa, and agile as a panther, creeps outside. "Thug life-" flashes into my head, and silently I curse Professor Fucking Watkins.

I sit "tharn", like those terrified rabbits in "Watership Down", until minutes later, Dylan returns. "My place's been robbed a couple times this month. I was hoping it was those same sons of bitches, so I could take care of them-"

Suddenly my mouth is dry and metallic-tasting, like it's stuffed with dirty coins. And my head aches. So I walk into the kitchen, pick up the cleanest glass I can find, a wine glass spiraled with a single thick strand of gold, fill it up with tap water, and drink it down. On the way back, I trip on something and the glass slips from my hand, exploding into a hundred sharp little gold flecked pieces, like shrapnel from a grenade, when it hits the floor.

"Hey, Dylan, sorry, I just broke a glass. Do you have a broom?"

“Go back to sleep-“ he calls from the livingroom. “I’ll take care if it later-“

I sleep restlessly, dreaming I’m at a party where everybody is drinking and passing around drugs. A guy hands me some small sticks which impale brightly colored balls, like molecules, the newest party drug. Surreptitiously I slide them into my pocket, but moments later, I find my mouth is crammed full of them. Panicked, I spit them out. But already a bar I’ve retreated to is starting to glow, its edges melting, the bar stools dripping like a Salvador Dali painting. Lurching, I sway, taking a few awkward steps, and then a giant snake made of newspaper juts from my crotch, and two naked and ghoulish men walk by me, leering. “Help me-“ I beg the bartender who only washes his glasses, dripping rainbows, and snickers at me.

But Dylan’s shouting wakes me, “WHY??WHY?? WHY DID SHE HAVE TO PICK THIS GLASS?? FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!”

Dylan strides in then, and shakes me, feigning sleep, “Hey!” he says. “Hey!” He has collected all of the shattered pieces of the gold inlaid glass I broke and put them in a small cardboard box. “This glass you broke, it’s real crystal, and the gold swirl is 28k gold. I had two of these made three years ago in Italy when I proposed to Conner’s mother, and we drank champagne from them-“

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a sadder person in my life. He looks like somebody just broke his heart. “I’m sorry. It was an accident-“.

“Maybe it was meant to happen-“ he says softly, all the fight suddenly drained out of him. “Maybe it’s symbolic-“

We stare down at the glittering shards of glass and gold. The high life from a drug dealer’s cash can only last so long. We both know it. It invariably ends in jail or death. Then he leaves and returns with another box full of little treasures he wants me to see. He holds up a Rolex. “Three thousand bucks. It needs a new battery though-“ He shows me silver dollars and gold pieces his grandfather gave him, worn smooth from a century’s worth of fingertips, and a

set of dog-tags from when his father fought in Vietnam.

I'm so tired, my eyes burn, as Dylan chatters. "Go back to sleep-" he finally says, pulling the covers up for me and returning to the stock market.

When the next day's sun bleeds through a grimy window, Dylan climbs into bed with me. He stays on his side. And I stay on mine.

I wake before him and stare at his face. In repose, his features don't relax or soften. He doesn't live an easy or a good life, and the conflict is written all over his face. I want to erase that discontent with my fingertips, but I don't want to wake him. So I just spoon close to him, draping my arm lightly around his waist. He surprises me then by clasping my hand firmly, holding it close to his heart. We lay like this for hours.

When I wake I find Dylan back in his livingroom watching a motorcycle race on TV. I sink beside him, and he scoots closer, cradling his head in my lap. When I stroke his hair, he shuts his eyes and almost relaxes. If my hand ceases moving, he says, "No, don't stop-" I feel really close to him.

But a week later, neither of us has phoned the other like we promised. We know we're better off without each other. In the middle of the week, I miss him so much, I dial his number just to hear his voice on his voicemail, so full of messages you can't leave one. That night, I start to write Dylan a letter: *You and Eddie Felson are kindred spirits, one a drug dealer and one a pool hustler, playing for the money and the glory. Who was the Burt (Eddie's exploitive manager) in your life who made you feel so worthless, a born loser? Was it your father you told me you used to fist fight with because all he wanted to do was drink and beat on you and your mom after the insanity of Vietnam?*

*In the end, Eddie found enough character to give up the thing he loved most for a principle, to do right by the woman he loved. Dylan, you've already paid a steep price, and you keep on paying: addiction, stress, paranoia, violence, and the loss of at least three women who care about you. Will you pay with your life one day? How long will it take you to find enough*

*character to walk away? Dylan, only you can make that broken crystal and gold glass symbolic.*

But I never saw Dylan again after that, never gave him the letter. I wrote a story about him for school and got an A. But the grade brought me not one iota of joy.

A few years after the destruction of the twin towers on 9-11, many Baltimore-residing Muslims named Mohammad, from pizza delivery guys to cab drivers to college students, started abbreviating their names to the more friendly, less ethnic sounding “Mo”. Almost every time I climb into a cab, I get asked out by a guy named Mo. Even with their headsets on, gibbering away in Arabic, they try to pick me up. But I just watch their strawberry or coconut scented air fresheners twirling from their rearview mirrors draped with prayer beads and say, “No thank you. I’m taken-“

“Too bad-“ they sigh, flashing me a look of disappointment with their chocolate-colored, bedroom eyes. “He’s a lucky man-“

In a sub shop in my neighborhood, a cashier from India, who resembles a Bollywood movie star, always takes my order personally and ferries it to my table for me. “Thanks, Mo-“ I say, and he flashes me a dazzling smile and a wink. In my apartment building, another Mo, a tall refined gentleman, lives upstairs. At precisely six in the morning and six in the evening, I can hear him dragging his furniture around to clear his prayer rug and say his prayers. His son, an adorable six year old (half American) named Ali knocks at my door in the Summertime for popsicles. I give them to his sister (same mother, different father) too, when she visits. She’s eight. Once I was eating pizza and offered them a slice. They got real quiet and just stared nervously down at the greasy pie. Finally the sister cleared her throat and whispered to me, “He can’t have pepperoni....He’s *Egyptian*-“

The two kids shifted from side to side, unsure how I would react to this very un-American news.

“It’s okay-“ I said. “I understand-“ Then I gave them each a popsicle instead.

But it wasn’t until meeting a “Mo” named Mohammad Toulabis two weeks ago,

at a neighborhood social club, that I suspected I may have met an actual terrorist.

The Elmwood Social Club has a shabby pool table, a jukebox full of Hank Williams tunes, and a plywood bar, along which some prankster has glued several quarters, to see if any drunk fool might try to pick them up. Frequently the place smells like a dirty mop, but the canned beer is cold and cheap, and the pool is free. This particular "Mo" is ordinary looking, usually dressed in a plaid shirt and Wrangler blue jeans. He wears a baseball cap. His skin is the color of a worn saddle. Maybe 26 or 27 years old, he seems older because of his propensity not to smile and some fairly dark circles which horseshoe his eyes. He has small hands and small feet, but his eyelashes are a foot long. He's a sharpshooter on the pool table, but I'm a bit of a hustler myself. Pool earnings pay for my school textbooks (I'm a creative writing major at Johns Hopkins, in my third year). Of course, I let Mo beat me a couple of times, then I suggest we play for ten bucks.

"No thank you-" he says. "I'm just looking for a friendly game-"

"How about we play for a beer then?"

"Okay. No problem-"

I beat him this time, but just barely, still trying to hook him. From beneath the brim of his baseball cap, his dark eyes watch the table solemnly.

"Miller Lite-" I say, turning to shake his hand, and all my buddies laugh, knowing I'm setting him up, that I was Captain of the club's pool team for five years in a row.

While Mo trudges downstairs to get my beer, I ask around about him. He seems out of place in this redneck joint. I've never seen him here before. You have to know a member to get a key to the door because the place has no liquor license. A paper sign tacked to the entrance door reads: DON'T OPEN THIS DOOR FOR NOBODY!!! And pretty much all newcomers are suspected of being cops until proven otherwise.

“Who knows him?” I ask.

Miss Bonnie, a shapely fifty year old shoe-horned into blue jeans meant for a thirty year old, takes a drag of her Pall Mall and twirls the cocktail straw in her plastic cup of Seven and Seven. “He’s all right-“ she says. “He works construction with some of the guys-“

“How long’s he been coming in here?”

“Couple a months. He’s a nice boy-“ She waves off my concerns with a puffy hand, her fingers tiered with imitation diamond rings.

“Bobby knows him-“ Jamie, a regular adds, rolling a joint. He still has his paint clothes on from work, and his paint spattered fingers work deftly, eager for a toke.

“Don’t smoke that shit around me-“ Miss Bonnie pipes up.

“Sorry-“ Jamie sidles into the tiny bathroom, and we all laugh when smoke starts pouring out the cracks of the door. Miss Bonnie flaps her hand in front of her powdered nose then promptly huffs off to sit at the bar.

“Thanks-“ I say to Mo, as he delivers my beer.

“What’s your name?” he asks me.

“Samantha-“ I tell him. “You ready to play for ten bucks now?”

“Samantha-“ he says, pinning me with a direct stare, “It’s really not polite to insist on playing for money when I already told you I didn’t want to-“

Ouch. “Okay-“ I say. “Let’s just play for fun then-“ No sucker here.

While playing (winning three each), Mo divulges to me that he learned to speak English listening to Hank Williams whom we both love. Also he’s studying nights for his GED at a nearby community college, and recently he returned to Baltimore from a trip to Germany.

“What were you doing in Germany?”

“Just traveling-“ He says vaguely. Then he hands me a rolled up poster. I unfurl it, and it’s a photograph of a sand colored Jerusalem City spread out beneath a gorgeous turquoise sky. Underneath there is a stretch of smaller photos depicting lush gardens, gold domed

mosques, stained glass windows, and other miracles of ancient and modern Arabic architecture. "Keep it-" he says.

When a motley group lopes outside to the back alley to light up, Mo tags along, apparently not averse to a couple hits off a Blunt. He's an amiable, low key kind of guy, seems to get along with everybody. He's not handsome, but he carries himself with a quiet dignity and intensity which appeals to me. Sadness trails him like an invisible mist. I always go for the brooders.

When he returns, I buy him a beer. "Thank you immensely-" he says. He's so high, his eyes look like road maps.

We drink and shoot more pool. I let loose my skills, and he struggles to beat me, but he can't.

"You're very good-" he says with admiration.

"I know-" I say.

He looks disappointed with my response, as if I'd just broken some international rule of etiquette.

"I'm just kidding. Don't look so serious-"

"What do you do?" he asks me.

"I'm a student. A writer-"

"What do you write?"

"Short stories mostly-"

"Have you read any Arabic writers?"

"*A Thousand And One Nights*-"

"I like smart girls-" he says.

*And I like sad boys.* But I don't say that, just rack the balls again.

We play more pool and listen to old country music until six in the morning when they finally decide to close the bar. Even though it's only the end of February, it's fairly warm and



smells like Spring outside, a ripe earthy smell of dew and grass. We're both surprised by the pale blue morning sky.

"Oh shit-" he says, listening to some birds loudly chirping.

"Do you have to work today?" I ask him.

"No-" he rubs his whiskered face. "I didn't realize we'd been playing for so long-"

"Pool can be addictive-"

"You're right-" he agrees.

For the five minutes it takes for him to drive me home to my apartment in his truck, he doesn't say another word. I study his pensive face. He has a gruffly masculine profile and nice full lips. I think about kissing him. I'm pretty buzzed, so when he pulls into my parking lot, I just lean in and go for it. I'm not disappointed. As taciturn as he is, I didn't expect him to be such a sensual kisser. Fifteen minutes later, he's nearly sitting in my lap, sprawled across two thirds of the front seat with me pinned against the passenger door handle which jabs my back. "Touch my face-" he begs.

When I brush my fingertips across his cheekbones, he closes his eyes and basks in the attention, like a soul lost in the desert encountering a patch of rain. I trace his forehead, his somewhat hooked nose, his whiskered chin, his thick eyebrows (black and lustrous as paint brushes), and finally his generous mouth. He springs for me then, trying to stick his hand down my shirt. "Take it easy-" I say, moving his hand.

"I want your nipple in my mouth-" he whispers breathlessly.

His other hand grips the top of my thigh and when I slide it further down, he exhales a small huff of exasperation. "Look-" he insists. "I'm not trying to have sex with you, okay?"

"Okay-" I say, not liking his tone. "I should go now-"

Sighing, he separates himself from me. He sulks like a petulant little boy, like somebody just took away his toy. "Can I call you?" he asks.

"I'll call you-"

He scribbles his number and the letters MO on a scrap of paper for me.

“Goodnight-“ I say.

The number sits on my dresser for two weeks.

On a Saturday night, I head out early to find a pool game, wearing a silver halter top, snug blue jeans, and black boots with stiletto heels. (Because the sexier I look, the more suckers I can reel in, the more school books I can buy). But it’s slow everywhere I go. So I decide to waste a couple of hours at the Elmwood Club. Every head turns, checking out my outfit when I saunter in. “Hey, baby-“ Ray, a regular, wearing his jean’s jail style, nearly around his knees, calls out. Somebody else wolf whistles.

“I love you, Sam-“ one of the older coots, a scarecrow on a walker, croaks. The corners of his lips bleed tobacco juice.

“Hi, guys-“ I say.

Then I see Mo, sitting quietly at a corner table by himself, smoking laconically. His dark eyes skim my Studio 54 halter top just for a second, then quickly plummet to the floor. He stubs out his cigarette.

“Hi, Mo-“ I say, settling down into a metal folding chair next to him.

“Hello-“ he says. If he’s surprised I chose this spot to sit, he doesn’t show it. He plays it cool, not remarking on my not calling him, which makes me like him a little more.

“How’s school?” I ask.

“Fine. Good-“ he answers politely.

“When do you finish with your classes?”

“One month-“ he says. “After that, I’m moving to Boston-“

“What for?”

He shrugs, noncommittal.

“Do you have family there?”

“No-“ he says, lighting up another cigarette. “Would you like a beer?”

“Sure. Thanks-“

While he’s gone, Miss Bonnie, in a fringed dress and cowboy boots, says, “Mo’s a real good guy, Sammy. You should go out with him-“ Her Loretta Lynn styled hair is swept back tonight with two sparkly combs.

“He’s moving to Boston in a month-“

“So what?” she says, munching potato chips. “You could still have some fun-“

When Mo returns, we hit the pool table and play with the seriousness of Russians playing chess or Asians playing ping pong. Neither one of us likes to get beat. We trade wins back and forth. Above us, a haze of cigarette smoke rolls and stretches, writhing like a slow-moving dragon. As soon as it gets too crowded, bumper to bumper elbows, I suggest to Mo that we go somewhere else.

“Sure-“ he says. “Let’s go-“

We head across the street to a much bigger bar with more pool tables. The nicotine stained walls are lined with shelves displaying old Natty Boh ads, tin beer trays, signed photographs of pin-up girls, foreign beer coasters, sports bobble heads, and antique beer steins. A faint smell of mildew wafts up from the carpet. During the day, old folks dine on the Early Bird pork chops or liver and onions. They like the pickled beets and the cucumber salad, too. But after dark, the whiskey swilling hipster crowd takes over.

Sitting at a long oak bar, Mo and I decide on two glasses of red wine.

Another couple, not far from us, is also drinking cabernet. The woman is an exotic, sultry beauty in a black tank top and low rise black jeans which showcase a spray of roses twined with barbed wire tattooed across her lower back. Head lolling, she is pretty lit. Her snaky body wraps around her companion, a short homely guy with a single gold earring whom I’m sure she will regret publicly tongue kissing in the morning. When she sees me, she slithers over. “Oh, wow, you look just like Betty Paige-“ she slurs. “You’re so hot-“ Her warm garlicky breath

caresses my cheek, as she leans in and whispers, "What are you doing with that guy? Get rid of him-" A sterling silver ring adorns each of her long, slim fingers.

Mo hears her. "Where are you from?" he asks curtly.

"Same as you-" she answers. "I was married to a Pakistani guy just like you for twelve years. Leaving him was the best thing I ever did-" Then she turns back to me. "Muslim guys are all alike.....Trust me and walk away while you still can-"

Mo stares away, ignoring her. He grinds his cigarette out like he wishes it was her head.

"He's okay-" I confide to her, as she drapes her arm protectively around me and glares at Mo now.

"Where did you get this long beautiful curly black hair?" she asks me, stroking it with unabashed sensual pleasure.

"My mom's Jewish-" Nobody ever guesses that I'm Jewish. The rest of my features I inherited from a beauty queen grandmother of Irish descent.

"Come back to my place, Betty Paige, and we'll make out-" she pleads with her hot breath.

I toss her companion a look, and he hauls himself dutifully from his seat and unwraps his date's octopus arms from around me, soothing her like he's done it many times before.

"Come with me, baby. Come on. Let's walk-" Reluctantly she goes. He holds her up like a fireman with a rescue victim, leading her to a lounge chair where she curls up in his lap like a sleepy cat and promptly passes out.

"Sorry-" I apologize to Mo for her behavior.

"She's crazy-" he says dismissively, shrugging her off with a look of distaste. "A drunk-"

"You want to go someplace else?"

"Not yet. Let's shoot some pool first-"

In a close game, I have a near impossible shot on the six in the side. We both assess it, shaking our heads. "No way-" he says.

“If I make this shot, you have to give me anything I want-“

He nods without hesitation, “Okay-“

I line up the shot, taking into account that friction will push the ball a little further than I expect, and that the shot itself is somewhat of an illusion because in order to pocket the ball I have to shoot it parallel to the side pocket where hopefully it will catch the worn spot in the middle and just tip in. Gently I stroke the cue and the six ball rolls about ten inches, stopping directly parallel to the pocket. We watch it quaver for a full second before gravity and a worn pocket do their job and the ball topples right in. I jump up and down, whooping, and Mo just shakes his head. “I can’t believe it-“ he says.

“You owe me a wish, buddy-“

“I know-“ he concurs. Then he checks his watch, a bland Timex. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you come to my place, and I’ll make us some food?”

His rowhouse is the third one down in a long block of pastel-colored homes. There is a black tin mailbox rimmed with rust. And two slabs of cracked marble for a stoop. Many of the neighbors’ windows have flower boxes or silk screens. But his doesn’t. His place doesn’t have curtains either, just shades pulled all the way down to dusty window sills cobbed with spider webs. Pale white eggs stick to the complex nets of mossy gray strands.

Inside Mo’s livingroom is empty, except for some iron bed slats piled like pixie sticks in one corner. The dining room contains only a desk, an expensive looking computer set up, and two chairs. The kitchen has no table, just appliances. While he heats up some food, I check out some objects I find laying in an ashtray. The first is a heavy black rectangle which fits smoothly into my palm. It has a silver button which I press, and a six inch lethal looking blade pops out. The other is a compact gold knife, which appears to be just as deadly, harboring numerous blades, some serrated, some curved. Quietly I fold them back up and replace them. Most men at the Elmwood Club carry knives, either strapped to their ankles or on the sides of their belts, so the fact that Mo possesses these weapons

doesn't really bother me.

140

In the brightly lit kitchen, we eat standing up, some left-over chicken and rice he cooked earlier which smells heavenly, fragrant with foreign spices. Under the harsh lights, Mo's complexion resembles dirty dish water, like even at his young age he is somehow soiled, used up. I can see every short black bristle on his narrow face, even the ones between his cheerless eyes. Intently, we scarf down the food, sharing a can of Molson beer. Then he puts some music on his computer, and we dance for a while in the dining room. He stumbles some, tripping over his feet, and I realize he's a good deal drunker than I am. It's still fun though. I like the exotic beat of his music. But finally he tires out and pulls me down into a chair where we kiss, our lips sealed at first, then tentatively dispatching our tongues, which glide and lick and taste.

"You're a good kisser-" I say.

"You are, too-"

He has two shirts on, a cotton t-shirt under a sweater. "Touch my chest-" He clasps my hand and slides it inside his clothes, but it's difficult to maneuver my hand around his layers.

"Take your shirt off-" I don't have to ask him twice. He peels them off. His chest is silky smooth, like a boy's, his arms spindly for a construction worker. Directly over his heart is a fist-sized, colored tattoo. Mesmerized, I stare at it. A man's keen eyes peer back at me from behind a Palestinian scarf which wraps completely around his face, concealing the rest of his features. He holds up a militant fist. Bands of green, red, and black stripe the background.

The word "jihad" pops into my head then, like a scary puppet springing from a jack-in-the box. But my writer's curiosity (and liquid courage) supercede any fear. I take an extra long pull of our Molson.

"What do these colors mean?" I ask.

"They're the colors of the Palestinian flag-"

"Cool-" I say, hoping to find out more, maybe there's a story here I can write about for

school.

“I got the tattoo when I was twelve years old-“ His eye-lids droop then, and his crescents of silky black eyelashes fan his cheeks giving him the appearance of a napping child.

Next I notice a long swatch of pink scar tissue extending from the top of his shoulder down to the crook of his brown elbow. The scar is shiny and knotted in spots, like some kind of burn.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Fucking torture-“ he says in a soft voice. A flicker of disgust briefly contorts his face. His eyes close now. As if he can’t bear to look at these ugly scars and remember.

“Oh my God-“ This sobering news completely deflates me. “That makes me feel like crying-“ It’s one thing to read about torture in the news, but confronted with the flesh and blood evidence of such human depravity is absolutely chilling.

“I’ve cried so much in my life....I have no more tears left-“ he says.

His head sags back now, as if unable to bear the weight of all it contains. Gently I caress his troubled face with my fingertips, his hair, too.

After some time, his eyes re-open, bloodshot, and with a far away expression. “Samantha, you really shouldn’t get involved with people you don’t know anything about-“ he warns me, like I was the child now. Through a fog of alcohol, it occurs to me that I told him earlier that I was Jewish. And most likely it was Jews who tortured him.

A knot twists in my stomach. But I play dumb. “Miss Bonnie knows you-“ I say. “She really likes you-“

He stares at a blank wall. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

I start to get up, but he holds me tight in his lap.

“Stay here-“ he says.

*Curiosity killed the cat*, I hear my sister say in the back of my beer addled brain. Whenever I do something foolish, she lectures me. She is two years older, a Catholic school

teacher. But real writers must sometimes take risks to get the best stories. Didn't Professor Warner say that in his lecture just last week? (He won a Pulitzer, infiltrating a violent biker gang, the One Percenters, and writing about their crimes and exploits.)

Mo reaches around me for his cigarettes, lights up, and we drink in a thick quiet. I watch his curl of smoke rising slowly, like a basket serpent, until it dances above his head.

"What do you want to do with your life, Mo?" I ask him.

"This life isn't what's important--"

"Don't you want a career, a family?"

"The after-life is all that matters--"

The MTA bus I ride to school has a sign posted by the FBI which advises passengers to be alert for suspicious persons or packages. SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING. And Mo does fit the terrorist profile. Traveling. Living alone in a sparsely furnished house that's way too big for him. Plus he's a torture victim (motivation), and he has the jihad tattoo. I don't believe in witch hunts, but my gut tells me I'm onto something here.

A weak blue light filters through some blinds. Somehow it's morning already.

"I'm tired--" I mumble.

"Me, too--" he yawns. "Let's get some sleep--"

Crashing here is probably *not* a good idea. But I want to see his bedroom to look for more clues.

"If I sleep here, no sex, okay?"

"No problem--" he agrees. And bone tired, we shuffle upstairs together. The paint on his banister is chipped and cracked. The dingy walls could use a paintjob, too. Intricate spider webs cling to the corners of his steps. Several small brown spiders lay in wait,



motionless for the next bug to get tangled in their sticky trap. (Shit, can't some brown spider bites even kill you?) I follow Mo, wondering vaguely how I got to be this insane.

Upstairs are three bedrooms. One is his, and two are completely empty. (How can he afford a whole house for just himself?) There are no family photos anywhere, just anonymous looking walls. On his mantel, a shrine is set up, a copy of the Koran and some small candles on a long purple silk scarf. While he's brushing his teeth, I open the leather bound Koran and find it's written entirely in Arabic. I can't read a single word of the strange symbols, the keys to his soul. The absolute foreignness of the letters spook me. They look nothing like our alphabet. I'm intruding into a stranger's world. A stranger who has suffered things like torture. I shouldn't be here. But it's too late now. His bed is a Spartan mattress on the floor with a colorful blanket. There are some piles of clothes nearby and a few shirts hanging in the closet. I yank off my shoes and crawl into bed. When he returns from the bathroom, he does the same. In less than ten seconds his hands are all over me.

"Hey-" I protest.

"I'm sorry-" Immediately he backs off.

But I'm glad he's given me an excuse to leave. I don't trust him now. And I'm really stupid for getting myself in this deep.

"Can you please drive me home?" I'm already tugging my shoes on.

"Come on. I'm sorry-" he implores. "We'll just sleep-"

"No. I want to go-"

"Okay. Fine-" he mumbles. He flings his covers off and gropes for his shoes.

With a surly expression, he knots the laces.

Quietly I trudge downstairs behind him. I hold onto the rail because I'm still a little drunk.

When he goes into the kitchen, turning his back on me to find his keys, I palm his switchblade, sliding it deftly into my purse. I snag a book, too. For evidence. Just in

case the FBI would need his fingerprints. And besides, didn't he say if I pocketed the six ball earlier shooting pool that I could have anything I wanted?

Jingling his keys, he returns. "Let's go--"

In silence, we drive home. The sky is leached of color, ghostly and sad. I've yet to see Mohamed Toulabis smile. And now I understand why. He's not smiling now. As we pull into my parking lot, I say a silent prayer to God for my safe return then bolt inside.

"Goodnight--" I call back.

"Goodbye--" he says.

When I wake with a hangover later that afternoon, I tally up my actions from the night before and feel pretty ill. While my sister makes eggs and bacon, I divulge my exploits to her.

"Oh my fucking God--" she says. "He was tortured by Israeli's, and you told him you were a Jew?!" Although she teaches at a Catholic school, my sister is not a church goer. Catholic schools just pay more. The first time she attended Mass she watched everybody cross themselves first, so she could mimic them. She has an array of sensible shoes, drab slacks, modest blouses, and a set of imitation pearls she calls her "Catholic School Teacher Disguise". After the school day ends, she heads straight to the bar for Happy Hour, just like most of us.

"I told him that *before* I suspected him of being a terrorist--"

"And you were going to spend the night in his *bed*?" She bangs a frying pan into the sink. "You're lucky he didn't slit your Jewish throat while you slept--"

"He wouldn't do that--"

"How do you *know*? You don't know him--"

"That's what he said--"

"Stay away from him--"

"I will--"

"Promise me--"

"I promise--"

“Do you think he remembers where you live?”

“He was pretty drunk...Maybe he knows the building, but not which apartment-“

In silence, we scarf our eggs.

“Anything else?” My sister knows me better than I know myself. I can’t hide a thing from her.

“Well-“ I say. I rummage through my purse for Mo’s knife. When I press the button and the six inch blade flicks out, her eyes flash with real fear.

“Sam, please tell me you didn’t steal his fucking knife-“

“Well-“ I say.

“Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph-“

“You’re fucking crazy-“ she says. Then for some reason, we both crack up laughing. “You and your writing bullshit are going to get us killed one day-“

“He owed me a wish from a pool game, so I took the knife-“

“Did you ask his permission?”

“No. But technically I didn’t have to...because he said *anything*-“

“Does the name Daniel Pearlman mean anything to you?”

I chew the edges of my fingernails, remembering the grisly details of the Jewish journalist’s fate, a beheading that shocked and horrified the world.

“Did you actually see any concrete plans in writing or on his computer to indicate that he was planning an actual attack on American citizens?”

“No-“ But my gut tells me he’s up to something.

“Then stay the fuck out of it-“

“You don’t think I should find out more?”

“NO!”

“But what if he’s planning some 9-11 bullshit?”

“That’s the FBI’s job-“

“But should I report him to the FBI as a suspicious person?”

“And what if you’re *wrong*? They could ship an innocent person off to Guantanamo Bay and the CIA could torture him some more-“

“Good point-“

“Those terrorists chopped off Daniel Pearlman’s head just for being Jewish. They don’t care if we were raised Christian and have never eaten a matzoh ball or seen a menorah. In a war, where you come from is everything-“

“I know-“

“*Promise* me you’ll stay away from him-“

“I promise-“

Three days later, I call him. “Hey, Mo-“ I say.

“Who is this?” He doesn’t sound at all friendly on the phone.

“It’s Samantha-“

Dead silence.

“Can you play some pool tonight?”

“I’m in class right now-“

“When do you get out?”

“7:30-“

“Maybe after class?”

“Maybe-“

More empty silence. Then, as if he’s suddenly remembered his manners, “Thank you for calling-“

For several hours, I wait at the Elmwood Club for Mo. But he never shows.

That night I research the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I learn that Israel is the only

country which has legalized torture. Of the 600,000 Palestinians incarcerated by the Israelis, 95 % were tortured. I imagine what I would do to anybody who tortured my sister. I'd probably want to kill them, too.

"Hamas" means "zeal" in Arabic. The group, Hamas, is well loved by the Palestinians for its social programs, for feeding the poor, building schools and churches. Even the suicide bombers are revered, for their ultimate sacrifice to the Palestinian cause, defending their homeland. Their terrorist cells spread across continents, a vast network hiding out in inconspicuous nooks and crannies, plotting destruction against Israel and its allies. It's a conflict dating back three thousand years whose solution doesn't appear to be coming anytime soon.

Later that night, when I try to sleep, I just toss and turn. On the evening news there was a story about a Palestinian suicide bomber about Mo's age who walked into an Israeli seminary in the Gaza strip, killing eight students. Normal people were committing abnormal attacks of brutality every day. In the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq, Paris, everywhere. Violence like a plague. Inescapable. I squirm in my covers, which twist around my legs, making me feel entangled, trapped. Finally I just sit up, wrench my covers off. I flip the light on, then prop a pillow behind my back, and begin to read Mo's book, "The Time and the Place", a collection of short fiction by the Arabic writer Naquib Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. Halfway through it, I doze off, and in a dream I see Mo, peering in through my window. He sticks his middle finger up at me, glaring with his dark eyes like he truly hates me. It jerks me awake. I sit back up, read another story, doze a second time. And again I dream I see Mo in my window. He smiles this time. "Hello-" he says. I watch him unlock my window now, as easily as Houdini, and he crawls inside my home. He carries a black box, about the size of a toaster. His eyes, too, are ebony hued, as stygian as empty space. "This will hurt you a lot-" he informs me. His eyes start to glitter then, as lustrous as obsidian. "This is better than

sex....better than anything-“ And next his shirt dissolves right off him, revealing his jihad tattoo, and he appears puffed up now, with an arachnid’s fanged face, bigger than life, phantasmagorical, like an evil genie expanding from its bottle. His box starts to exude a cloud of gas which spreads out, in slow motion, creeping closer and closer towards me. But I can’t run, I’m frozen, paralyzed. My stomach clenches with fear, roils with nausea, my muscles begin to ache and contract. Sweat breaks out across my forehead, and the sour taste of vomit rises in my throat. As the venomous cloud swirls closer, I feverishly chant The Lord’s Prayer from the Bible. *“Our father which are in heaven...hallowed be thy name-“* Mo and I stare across at one another, a Palestinian and a Jew, trapped in a cycle of hatred and violence three thousand years old. My eyes water and my muscles twitch harder and my skin stings as if seared by fire. *“-he maketh me to lie down by the still waters-“* Just when I feel like I’m about to pass out, the cloud suddenly ceases moving, as if held in a parameter of safety by God’s own hands. Astonished we watch the cloud begin to dissipate, too. *“I’m sorry, Mo-“* I rasp, wanting to make this all right somehow. When the cloud disappears altogether, and I can see Mo clearly, he no longer resembles a giant spider, just a pallid little boy with two thin trickles of tears leaking from the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen.

Heartsick and drained, I lay in my bed, remembering the words of Naquib Mahfouz: *“Food, drink, money, women, sky, earth, all were absorbed into heavy clouds; all sensation was confined to the aching state of being ever ready; the only thought to enter his mind was that of vengeance. No love, no stability, no leaving one’s wealth untouched, for everything disappeared in preparing for the dread day. And so the bloom of life melted away in the furnace of rancor and painful hatred-“* I imagine such is Mo’s life. If he is a terrorist, then I’m stupid to have wasted my wish on only a knife and a book. I should have wished for him to heed the Arab maxim: *“An evil is not warded off by something worse-“*. I should have wished for him a long and happy life, full of love.

*There is no time to cry. You just run. The water is coming. By inches, by feet, by miles. It doesn't have a heart. It kills without conscience. It will be Christmas time. Cold. People will be out buying gifts. The water will turn from brown to black. It will creep at first. Then come faster. You will run, looking back at a black tidal wave, hundreds of feet high. It will take your breath away. You will think, "How horrible-" and "What an amazing world-"*

As a pre-teen, Chloe woke every day with a smile on her face, as fresh and sweet as a morning glory, with warm hugs for me, her Aunt Jenny, who loved to hear her pure laughter. But thirteen surges with such force and hormonal power, kidnapping my sweet Chloe and replacing her with a changeling: curses on her lips, a metal ring piercing her navel, Kool Aid pink hair, over-plucked eyebrows, sneers of derision for adults, and a constant look of distaste on her pretty face, like the whole world smells of rotting garbage.

In school, Chloe went from straight A's to failing and cutting classes. She started smoking, back talking. And why should she toe the line, do the right thing, when most of the adults in her life are such fuck ups, hypocrites telling her one thing and doing another? Both Chloe's mother and step-mother smoke two packs of cigarettes a day, chase rails of cocaine and heroin, pop Percocets and Xanax like candy. Chloe's mother's breakfast of choice is a shot of tequila and a Natty Boh beer. Chloe's step-mother sold Chloe's two hundred dollar Raiders jacket I bought for her tenth birthday for twenty bucks for crack. Periodically, the cookie cutter fiends get thrown into jail for prostitution or shop-lifting or passing bad checks, leaving Chloe to care for her obese five year old brother, Gregory, after school. Gregory throws tantrums, cries and eats, eats and cries. And what can Chloe do but cook for him, week after week? Easy stuff. Piles of scrambled eggs, pots of Oodles of Noodles, tuna

sandwiches by the dozen. “Quit crying, Fat Ass-“ she taunts him, but she can’t see the boy go hungry. And who has time to do homework when they’re cooking for a hysterical elephant boy and a drug dealer father as big as a line backer?

Chloe used to love spending time with me. We’d bake cookies, watch movies (The Wizard of Oz and Mulan, our favorites!), play Spades and Gin Rummy for hours, kick a soccer ball around at the park, swim at the local swimming pool. She used to love the water, but now it’s too “boring”. At night, we’d trade funny stories, trace shapes on each other’s backs with our fingertips and try to discern the words or pictures. Then came Newports, cell phones, shaggy haired boys with skateboards, pot, Ecstasy, E and J brandy, and rainbow colored condoms. She started stealing from me: my thong underwear, razors to shave her legs, tampons (all of which her father thought she was too young to use), plus any cash she could get her hands on. Where is my sweet Chloe? A strange soul inhabits her familiar body. I look deep into her aqua-colored eyes, and she’s gone. Two clear blue pools have frozen over. I can almost see tiny glaciers drifting languidly by.

She hangs up on me if I call her and tell her to get her ass to school. I have only one purpose now, and that’s to give her money. (She knows I make good tips working at the Café Hon, a popular local restaurant where the waitresses wear beehive hair-dos and cat’s eye glasses). When I cut her cash off, she cuts me off, too. I don’t see her for months at a time. If I run into her on the street, she hides her face under a hood. The last time I saw her, a stocky teenaged boy with a twirled bandanna half covering his eyes and a gold necklace with a giant dollar sign dangling from his thick, pimply neck, pointed me out. “Hey, there’s your Aunt-“ he informed Chloe.

“Who cares?” Chloe said and rolled her eyes.

“Hi, Chloe-“ I greeted her cordially anyway. But the words dissolved like tablets of acid in the back of my throat when she turned smugly away from me.



*You think you would hear a tidal wave coming. Like a hundred freight trains or a class 5 tornado. But oddly you hear nothing. Your body shuts down any unnecessary functions. You can see, and you can run. Nothing else. People don't scream like you think they would. They move fast, climbing to higher ground. When the water hits you, you can't feel the cold. Your fingers don't hurt as they claw desperately for wooden ledges, brick edges, any solid thing you can find to help you stay afloat. Some people cling to the tops of light posts, trees, buildings. But even more people are sucked into the roiling water. They flail, mouths opened. But still you can't hear them. You just keep moving.*

I let months go by without seeing Chloe, tired of fighting with her. But rumors that she's now chewing morphine pain patches (a neighborhood trend for the kids), as well as taking a hundred bucks at a time from her mother's new sugar-daddy, a toy store owner with a bad toupe, false teeth, and an appetite for young girls, spurs me to action. When I call her a week before Christmas to go shopping, Chloe accepts, surprising me.

"Okay. Yeah. I guess-" she says grudgingly. Like she's doing me a favor. But this is a mission of peace. I'm hoping to reconnect with her in some way, exchange a couple of pleasant words, maybe even have a civil conversation like we used to, maybe address the issue of her taking drugs and money from a pervert. But she doesn't make it easy for me. When I pick her up, she's wearing Gangsta' attire: flashy gold earrings with her name spelled out like lace between the hoops, spotless Adidas tennis shoes, a brand new white t-shirt, and over-sized white silk shorts which billow around her knobby knees. Her blonde hair is slicked back with hair grease into a bun which sprouts spikes of hair in a stiff fan, like a peacock or a porcupine.

"Going to Florida?" I kid her about her shorts.

"I ain't cold-" she says, plopping into my car. A metal bar-bell pokes through the cartilage of her small ear, like some primitive token earned in a tribal ritual. She smells like an ashtray. And multi-colored plastic bracelets ring one of her skinny arms, up to her

elbow, which makes my stomach knot. Because I saw on Oprah that girls wear these kinds of bracelets to indicate how many times they've given boys sexual favors. Yellow for a hand job. Blue for a blowjob. And red for "going all the way".

"Nice bracelets-" I remark. But she just fingers her numerous plastic tokens with a bitten down fingernail and tosses me a smirk.

At Baltimore's Harbor Place, we stroll into the Pratt Street Pavilion and climb the stairs to the vendor carts and shopping stalls. Chloe drags herself behind me, flipping through designer sunglasses, 24K earrings and charms, and shiny expensive boxes of perfume.

"It ain't fun to shop if you don't have no money-" she says. So I give her 20 bucks. (I waitress part time now and attend the College of Notre Dame full time. In exchange for free tuition, I have agreed to spend two years teaching English in the public school system.) But Chloe just huffs, pocketing the cash. "What am I gonna do with twenty lousy bucks?"

She never used to be so greedy. At seven years old, she'd divide her Halloween candy, making a pile for me, a pile for both her grandmothers, and a pile for herself. Even at ten, Chloe saved the money she made doing chores throughout the year, and we'd take her fat pile of ones to the Dollar Store at Christmas time with a list of a dozen loved ones. For her aunts and grandmothers, she'd buy ceramic knick-knacks and scented candles. For her boy cousins, army men or a toy truck.

"Don't come down this aisle-" she'd say to me as she carefully picked out my present. Last year, it was a glazed statue of the Virgin Mary holding a baby Jesus. Chloe goes to a private Catholic school, the first child in our family to be lucky enough to do so. (I split the cost with her father). She is very intelligent, scoring high on school IQ tests and years above most students in standardized testing. She deserves better than some shitty public school with lead in the water, substandard teachers, and too few books. All kids do. (That's why I want to work in the public schools, to help kids who don't have

family who care deeply about them, their education, and their future.)

When Chloe was six years old, her drug dealer father was released from prison. Since she was a baby, Chloe visited him two or three times a year at the Hagerstown Correctional Facility with her mother or grandmother. The neighborhood teenaged thugs called her father O. G., for Old Gangster, even though he was just 26 years old. He'd been shot seven times, bearing the puckered scars like badges of honor. Three inch letters tattooed across his chest declare: FORSAKEN. His hero is the outlaw Josey Wales. He is six feet two inches tall and hefty but handsome with the same electric blue eyes he passed onto his daughter.

The minute Chloe's father got home from jail, Chloe's mother, my sister, was at his door. She thrust Chloe's little hand in his. "I kept her for six years. Now it's your turn-" Chloe's mother skipped quickly away, taking the concrete steps two at a time and jumping into the back of a hack car, packed with similar soulless junkies. All Chloe had was the dirty, ill fitting clothes on her back and a broken heart. That day, seeing his beautiful young daughter so distraught, her father made her a pinkie promise that he would never sell drugs or go back to jail and leave her again. And to my astonishment, he did just that for five long years. He worked construction, hung sheet rock, and even tarred rooves. But it was hard on him with an old bullet still lodged in his hip. Chloe used to wake up at 6:30 every morning just to tie his work boots for him. Now you have to beat her with a stick to get her up at 8:15 to be to school on time. Recent rumor is her father is back on drugs again, dealing boy (heroin) and girl (crack), and breaking knee-caps when the desperate junkies get fronted and then can't afford to pay.

"When did you become so selfish?" I ask Chloe, who's flicking through sunglasses, trying to find a pair she likes.

"So what? All my friends are, too-"

"That doesn't make it right. When somebody gives you something, you should be

grateful, say thank you, and not complain-“

“You are so gay-“ she sneers.

And that does it. I lose it. “Listen, you little bitch. I’m sick of your smart mouth. So shut it-“

She is shocked at first. “Aunt Jenny, you just called me a bitch-“ Her Arctic eyes water for the fraction of a second, hurt, like the first tentative drops of a Spring thaw. But quickly, they frost right back over, barring the windows to her soul. “Whatever-“ she says.

Then she picks up something from a vendor cart which truly excites her. “Oh my God. A pointer! I always wanted one of these-“ It’s a small metal contraption where you press a button and a tiny red light, like an assassin’s aim, appears which you can flash across onto walls or people, to trick them, playing hide and seek with the red light. She buys it and adds the new pointer to the key chain on her beltloop, already weighted down with Beanie Babies, mood rings, and a single flimsy key which unlocks a gold etched diary I bought her last year. After that her attitude improves, and she actually helps me, suggesting gifts that some people on my list might like. But she bores easily, and the sulking soon sets in again. “I’m tired-“ she says. “And I’m hungry, too. I want a cinnamon pretzel from Auntie Anne’s and a strawberry smoothie-“

“Give me fifteen more minutes-“

“But I’m hungry *now*. And I’m getting a headache-“

Waiting downstairs in line for food, we notice some frantic people running outside.

“What’s going on?” Chloe asks.

Post 9-11, I’ve been to Harbor Place before when it has been evacuated because somebody finds a suspicious package. So terrorist attack is the first thing that flashes into my head, but I don’t say it, don’t want to scare my niece. And suddenly icy brown water splashes across our feet. By the time I drag Chloe out the front door, the water has reached our knees.

Something crazy is happening. The Chesapeake Bay is heaving, the way it rose six feet during hurricane Isabelle, only there's no hurricane this time. Nothing makes sense. Quickly Chloe unclasps her keychain and new pointer from her beltloop, shoves them into a plastic bag, and pockets it. It's hard to run with the water rising so fast, tugging at our hips now. "Oh my God-" Chloe's face is as white as her t-shirt, and her eyes are huge and liquidy in her small face. In a single instant, all the brassy sassiness drains out of her, leaving just a very scared kid. She clutches my hand so tight, her fingernails dig into my skin.

The muddy water surges to our chest now. People are swimming into buildings, climbing up stairs, sprinting to higher ground. But there's no time for us to make it to the nearest building for shelter, the water's rising too fast. Instinctively I bundle Chloe into my coat, letting the rushing water snatch my packages away. Then I pull Chloe toward the Constellation ship, a restored 19<sup>th</sup> century schooner, a popular tourist attraction. It is already packed with people. The water is over our heads now. Some people are drowning. Instinctively we tread. The sky has darkened dramatically, to a tombstone gray, and the air is eerily still, as terrified seagulls, squawking loudly and shitting on our heads, fly above us. "Swim to the Constellation ship and grab onto the side-" I command Chloe.

We're both good swimmers, but we barely make it to the boat because the water is growing choppier by the second. Harbor Place is entirely covered by muddy water now. And the Constellation ship is floating, drifting, packed (inside and out). Hundreds of different hands- black, white, young, old, jeweled, and plain- including our own, ring the perimeter of the wooden boat, all of us hanging on for dear life. There is a single donut-shaped preserver right below me, and I snag it and loop it around Chloe. "Don't let go of this no matter what-" I tell her. Our teeth chatter, and Chloe's small lips have become blue worms.

Fuck! The Constellation lurches, tipping badly to one side, jerking our bodies, and

threatening to roll over from the weight of so many desperate people clinging to it. And the sky is growing darker by the second. "We got this-" I assure Chloe. Then I point to the nearest building, the Bank of America, a forty feet column, maybe a quarter of a mile away, and only partly submerged in the brown deluge. "Swim to that bank building. Right now, Chloe. Fast as you can. Go!" (Vaguely I recall reading some article that warned it takes just 15 minutes for hypothermia to set in and kill you in very cold water).

We start swimming and kicking away from the leaning boat. Halfway to the Bank of America, I start to tire and choke. So Chloe pulls up alongside me and I grab onto her life preserver, to rest. We look back and see the Constellation ship and most of its inhabitants have disappeared under a blanket of brown water now. We start swimming again. We are nearly there when a black plane appears up in the sky, dropping a huge metal cylinder into the Chesapeake Bay. Stupidly we stare up at it, and a moment later the sky vanishes and is replaced by a black wall of water hundreds of feet high. We take a single deep breath, and then it hammers us, splitting us apart.

When I wake, shivering and surrounded by strangers, I'm sprawled on the top floor of an office building which is almost completely submerged in black water. It's very dim in here, no working lights, only the moon reflecting our numb eyes in the windows. "Chloe! Chloe!" I call out. "Has anybody seen a little girl?" But she's gone. My clothes are ripped, and a fist-sized lump throbs on my forehead.

When a man appears with a flashlight, somebody helps me up, and we all follow him through some rooms to a long row of metal employee lockers. "Look for food and water-" he says. And it is pure relief to have something, anything to do besides stare out the windows at a disappeared world, an apocalyptic, watery graveyard. The strongest use opened locks like stones, caveman style, bashing the secured locks to get at any lunchboxes, snacks, or bottled

water inside. A diamond bracelet I find is now worthless. But a pack of crackers and a roll of mints has become priceless.

Crashing through glass, black water suddenly floods our feet again. Like guppies, we wiggle out of the windows into the bay. More people are drowning. Out of nowhere a guy yanks me into his small fishing boat which whizzes by. There is no room for the others. Bunched inside are a very frightened family: a thick-set husband and wife and two pudgy children. Wordlessly the woman offers me a blanket, and I hunker beneath it for warmth. "Thank you....t-thank you so much-"

"I wish we could do more-" the man shrugs helplessly, "-but I'm afraid if I stopped, they'd all just capsize my boat-"

Grimly I nod my agreement.

"I'm Murphy and this is my wife Sandy. My kids are Teddy and Tabrina-"

"Hi, everybody-" I say.

"Mommy, is this the end of the world?" The girl, younger than Chloe, is so pale it looks as if her lips have evaporated. And her freckled face is so fat, she's got golf balls for cheeks.

"I don't know, baby-"

The Dad says, "Cell phones are DOA. TVs don't work. Even the radio's out. We just got to try and make it to dry land somehow. We got a full tank of gas and a backup can. Let's hope that's enough-"

The wife squints hard at her husband, as her frightened daughter burrows closer to her side. "We'll make it-" she insists. The mother is built like an ostrich, all bottom, but she is pretty and smells freshly showered. Gold rings gleam on each of her fingers, and wild stray hairs frame her determined face.

Silence engulfs us as our tiny boat wedges a frothy path through the ubiquitous water.

The slightly foul and briny smell of the cold bay water pinches our nostrils. It is almost pitch black out. There is no longer anything called a light bulb or a light switch. It is all submerged and inoperable. The Dad uses an emergency DeWalt flashlight, battery operated, big as a toaster, to guide us. He navigates for hours, but there is no sign of land anywhere. I drift off to sleep, lulled by the dark and the hum of the motor and sheer exhaustion. I wake to excited yips from the boy. In his meaty hand, he clutches a granola bar, a treat his mother finally relinquished to him from her purse to quell his constant whines of hunger. "Look! Lights! Lights!" And the boy is right. Up ahead, we see small flashes of yellow lights, dozens of them, like Bic lighters at a concert.

Only when we draw closer can we see that we are approaching the Statue of Liberty, buried up to her eyes in black water. Somehow we have made it all the way to New York City. Our boat putters, the engine running on just fumes now. Some weary people cling to the spokes of Lady Liberty's crown. They hold lit matches and lighters, hoping I guess to attract a rescue helicopter or boat.

"Howdy, folks-" Murphy greets our fellow survivors with a big frozen smile. "Does anybody have a fucking *clue* what is going on?"

Sandy cuts a look at her husband for his use of profanity in front of the children, who don't even seem to notice his offense. With awe, we just look up at all these people hanging onto green metal.

Some guy with a Bronx accent pipes up first. "Atom bombs hit the water. First near New York. Then Baltimore-"

Then another guy adds, "Yeah....that's what I heard, too...The bombs triggered tsunamis-"

A third man adds, "Fucking terrorist bastards-"

Softly a black lady sings "Amazing Grace".

On the small boat, we all elevate our feet to avoid squelching our shoes in several inches



of frigid water. The boat developed a leak about an hour ago. The grown-ups had to start taking turns bailing water with a plastic pail.

The Bronx guy says, "Well...I guess we're about as close to the Almighty as we ever will be hanging way up here...But, God, if you want to come down a little closer to help us out, we wouldn't mind it-" And then he laughs. And a few join him. Such a miraculous sound, that laughter! How incredible it is to be human! The Bible says we are higher than even angels in importance to God, more complex, our souls more valued. God and all his angels pray for us daily, empathize with us when we hurt, worry over our decisions and our fates. I never could understand this until now. Because here we are clinging to life, blindly, heroically, miraculously, our muscular hearts still beating stubbornly with hope.

"We've been waiting here for a long time-" A woman hollers down to us, "I'm not sure how much longer we can hold on. Could you send your boat ahead for help?"

But Murphy rubs his jaw with consternation. "I'm sorry, ma'am. My boat's just run out of gas, and it's sprung a leak. It won't last much longer-"

"Damn it-" the lady says.

"You and yours are welcome to climb up here and take your chances with us-" the Bronx guy offers.

"Thank you-" Sandy stands now, corralling her children, readying them to climb onto Lady Liberty's spokes and temporary safety. Our small boat is already starting to list. With trembling lips, Tabrina, the chubby little girl, stares up at the perch overhead like a terrified school girl about to climb the ropes in gym class.

"I can't, Mommy-" the child weeps.

"You can do it, sweetheart. Me and your daddy are gonna help you-" the Bronx guy croons.

Murphy cups his hands together and Sandy helps Tabrina step into them. Then

her father hoists her up some and the Bronx guy reaches down with his muscular forearm and hefts her safely up, nestling her in a spot that doesn't require much strength to hold on.

We all clap for her, and she smiles through her tears. Then we all take turns climbing up with the New Yorkers' help.

Once settled into our enclaves, cold but solid and reassuring steel, we rest quietly. In less than an hour, our abandoned little boat sinks.

Trying not to fall asleep (I'm afraid I might slip off into the frigid water and perish), I think about Chloe. When she was a baby, she used to suck at her bottle so hard that it made me laugh. I couldn't pry it from her, her life force was so strong. At five, she danced with a black plastic cane, with wild abandon, like Jiminy Cricket, and I'd clap for her. At her eighth grade graduation, her junkie mother crashed it, knowing full well that Chloe was embarrassed to have her there. Chloe had her hair specially done in a French braid and got her fingernails painted in lime green to match her silky cap and gown. She looked beautiful. But, as her class sang, she caught sight of her defiant, sharp-faced mother striding in. Gaunt as a scarecrow, with nasty scabs on her face, my sister didn't even try and hide the track marks on her arms or her disfigured hands. A few nuns tried to escort her out, but she wouldn't budge. Chloe's lips started to tremble and tears slid down her cheeks. Dignified, she continued to sing with her class, instead of making a scene and ruining it for her classmates. I caught Chloe's eye, and she smiled bravely at me. But her chin wobbled and dimpled with grief, which made me cry, too, like I'm crying now, thinking of her.

"I see a light-" Somebody says, pointing, and we all look. Suddenly there are dozens of yellow lights just like ours flickering way off in the distance.

"Praise the Lord. More survivors-" the black lady exclaims.

And then I see it. A tiny pinpoint of blinking red light. It is faint, barely perceptible. But I can see it there. A red light. I'm sure of it. My heart seizes. Could it be Chloe? Chloe

and her pointer we purchased from our Harbor Place trip? The red light floats across our faces, then somehow stops on mine. I can't see her, but I close my eyes and imagine Chloe's pale young face, full of anger and grief and love. But there is so much water between us. God, how will I ever get to her before her light goes out?