



The Bottom Shelf Review

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&
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And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

- William Shakespeare
(from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

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Short Stories

I Need Another Story



By
Alexandre Collette

I was born an adult. The lullabies never existed. Secrets were memorized nursery rhymes. They hummed in my searching eyes. Picture books were what I saw when I closed my eyes and saw life as it is; darkness and obscene colors flashing by. I will blink for the rest of my life. Each time I will be reminded. None will ever understand.

My shapeless body ran the streets barefoot. Our clothes made us different. You wore blue jeans and I wore purple shorts. We were just alike. Our veins shared the same blood. I climbed faster than he did. I was always on top first. His shapeless body climbed after me. I had been the better even though I was smaller in the same shapeless size. We were always in competition. We were too young to remember our bodies being the same. Before the sun burned freckles into our faces, our shapeless bodies, mine smaller, raced everywhere. It was our muse. I smiled into his eyes. He was my favorite. Before he touched him, we were equal. We were inseparable. I was just like him.

My legs dangled beneath me. They were bare beneath my clothes. My feet stuck out bare. My hands stuck out bare. My face wasn't bare at all. I stared into your eyes. His clasp was strong and tight. You wanted to see me cry. His anger poured into his fingers. I felt the anger inside him. It was holding me up at his level. I stared into his eyes, his anger, and his future. He wanted me to give in. I held my breath, just as this happened many times before, this time I was ready. I will not give in my eyes repeated. Bearing through his anger, my hands were clutched on the wall I hung. The sweat in my hands was red. I held the sweat perfectly still. Only one drop escaped. The wall wouldn't know what the floor felt. The wall was helping him. It was helping me. It was his support. It was my breath. It was a portrait of raging stillness. His body framed me in. The anger punctuated the picture. The colors were the only witnesses. They were perforated with rage. My own rage inside remained still; unable to come out.

The breath remained still. His muse, me, his contest, was my anger. His arm gave in, I won. My bare feet gave in. I fell to my knees. I was pleased that I had won. I bore hatred of myself. I wished to be like him. Like a man. He is not a man. I am. I didn't win, he did. He knew that. I was on my knees as he walked away in his shoes. The colors went away. My face became bare again. I wiped the sweat from my hands. The streak would remain. I was playing on the fence. My hands were caught. That's why. My head hurt. It screamed inside for air. I breathed heavily until my heart told me it was okay and my legs regained its strength. His body was forming. Mine stayed the same shapelessness. He was different. We were no longer equal. This wasn't the first time. He didn't make it the last. He will forget this.

My muse, my frog, did whatever I pleased. He was my puppet. He made me laugh; I forced his face, his hands, and his body to shapes that brought happiness like I didn't know anywhere else. My puppet and my happiness went with me wherever I went. It was my own. Her laugh at my puppet made me smile. Her laugh, my best friend, made me smile. She talked to my frog in the sweetest voice. Her angelic voice to the frog that I mangled funny with my own hand pleased my senses. Her blue eyes made me watch her every move. She was my best friend. How pretty she was. I wished to be like her. She was perfect in my eyes. I was perfect too; a perfect example of what not to be and what not to look like. I would do anything she pleased, she made me smile. She was my best friend. I became her protection. She will never suffer in front of me.

Together, we grew up apart. She loved me and I liked her. As best friends, we were nothing alike. I suffocated in her love. I played what she wished. You have pretty dolls; I will dress them for you. I will dress them as if I was dressing you. The dolls became sick in my hands; they became tainted with my thoughts. Their painted smiles were stuck. I manipulated them in front of her, this pleased my best friend. In my pants I sat awkward, it was comfortable. She was faultless in her purple dress. I wore that dress. It was mine before her. It was made for me but suited her best. The disdain for these dolls was kept hidden from her. She will keep me alive. I survived in her. She will never know. Everyone said how beautiful she was and how sweet her voice. I showed her off to everyone. She was my doll.

When my best friend wasn't there, I became someone else. I wasn't strong enough. I wasn't fast. I wasn't her protection. I hated her dolls. We fought for everything. I held fast to my strength. He held fast to his anger. His anger put on my face. I wouldn't recoil as he wished. He wanted to see himself in me. My back was against the door pushing it with my bare feet and bare hands sliding in against the sweat. He was standing over me. He was on the other side. The door was nimble. It bended with his strength. The door curved over me; the handle just above my

watchful eye. I saw myself in its gold reflection. The reflection angered me. It revealed my fear no one could see. My anger remained still as the door handle quivered above me. I felt his anger in the door. My body was shaking holding the floor down. If I get up quickly, he will fall. He will fall. He trained me well. I braced myself for a quick recovery. He fell into me. I failed. My still shapeless body failed me. I hated her dolls. My eyes were up at your level. You wanted to see me cry. I stared into his eyes as we played war. The window pane shattered. The bare sun came through the broken pane. No one heard it. No one cared. We were playing war. I spit a streak onto the floor. I stood there as he left me. I fell from the tree. A rock is next to the window. My cheek will heal. The tooth will come out naturally; naturally bruised.

My brother left. He left! I am the brother now. I am the protector. My sister's dolls are safe. I will grow to like them. She will know nothing. I made her run the forest with me. I taught them to be fast. They were too young to know why I thought this was fun. My girls saw me as their leader, their protector. I needed them to protect me. They would never know. I took revenge with my love. They would know nothing else. My eyes never rested watching them. I made sure only the stars watched them as they slept. Their bodies, like mine, were shapeless. We were not equal. I was not like them. I was never a girl.

I was twelve. My girls were ten, eight, and six. They belonged to me. I belonged to them. We knew nothing else. The creeks, the fields, and the places we called home were filled with our bond. I was their protector. Us against nature, nature against us; nature was our only friend. They played in the creek. I smoked stolen cigarettes while watching them in my black jeans. They didn't like the taste. It was too strong for them. My girls didn't mind, I was strong enough to handle anything. I took revenge on those who made them cry. I taught them to do as they pleased. That pleased me. They never saw me cry.

It was time for a visit. I had long forgotten what should have stayed fresh and dear in my mind. My body was still shapeless. My eyes began to rest. I was still shapeless. My eyes were at his level again. I felt his anger on my wrist. My clenched fists held my anger still. His breath raged in my face. I could taste his fear on my lips. His hand on my lips, I stared into his eyes. His body framed me once again. The portrait will be shattered this time. I hated her dolls once more. His muse, me, his revenge. I won't give in. I could breathe at least. Eternity passed me by. The pain will leave. I am not broken. You wanted to see me cry. He walked away. I will kill you. With my nod, his eyes tore into my soul. I remained there. Eternity became my friend. Tears fell for the first time. No one will know for years. He will never touch me again. I became old.

My sisters, my protection, I left them behind. No, they left me behind. Their mother didn't want me anymore. I became someone else. I do not exist in their memories, my loss. They forgot me. I forgot them. Apart, we grew together. One, two, three. Four does not exist. Four loves, four of the same love, four protected, four thousand miles. I began to hate. My shapeless body delighted in pain. Four years of pain. She, my idol, so beautiful, helped me in my pain. I suffered for her, to be like her, and to please her. We shared our name, mine was lessened, and hers sounded better in my eyes. I looked her in the eyes; I wanted to touch them. The elegant eyes of pain. Not her pain but my fear. I saw my fear in her eyes. I loved her. She became my passion's teacher. Her mother was my protection. She saw my shapeless body and liked it. It was eager for her.

Four years of pain. It betrayed me. I am betrayed. My thoughts betrayed me. No, I betrayed me. They will never know the truth. Their judgment, my fear. It is wrong; it is not an option. My love is not an option. We will never speak of it. Fear remained covered in dresses and black mascara. I was baptized in front of her, she was pleased. Her mother was pleased. Her father, my friend, was pleased. I betrayed them. My desire no longer existed. They will never know. God, who am I to be? I can no longer love. My love, my protection, everything is lost. I lost. My love is wrong. My love is lost. I pleased them with the man's hand over my mouth, the white linen between us. My mouth was tainted. The man pulled me under the water, a thousand eyes betrayed me. The white clothes I wore covered my bare, shapeless body. His hand pulled me down. Under the water eternity passed me by. How old did I become? Wet and weak from his grasp over my nose, he looked at me and smiled. A thousand claps approved me. The water dripped from my smile. The clean water now tainted by my smile. I began to drown.

I loved him; he smiled upon my shapeless body. He loved me. I was too young. Eleven years too young. I

counted the days between. I counted the days from when I loved him. It was right. I was right to love a man. Her mother said no. Put that book away. It is dirty. You may not read it. He loved me as an old woman. He stole my pain. It was replaced with desire.

The smell of flavors in every breath I still smell today. It haunts my dreams. My legs were in perfect position. His legs were perfect. We were four feet apart. I held the coffee as if it was your neck. Gently, I breathed into the warm steam. His eyes never glanced away. I watched them intently. We were not equal, he became my protection. My desired protection sat in front of me for hours. Careful words caressed your lips. I wanted to absorb each one. My thoughts swirled with the silky white milk softening the blackness I held. This was right. This was love. Love the right way. I held his hand; my eyes felt the endless words in silence. His strength, my pain, couldn't touch me, I was a man. I was a shapeless boy. Like father and son, I held his hand. In the middle of everything, we were invisible. We remained in sight of a thousand eyes. This was right. I thought how we're going to be, I will survive in you. I will only hold his hand. You will never see me cry. I will remember your every word.

The death, my death, was his betrayal. He, two thousand miles away, killed me. I killed him. Her mother killed him. They said it was an accident. They said a lie. They said it was painless. They said it was fast. His agony killed him. The betrayal killed him. His slow death became my endless pain. My tears fell like an ocean's floor; deep into itself, pushing into nothing. I kissed her mother, my mother, before I ran into the summer's run. I ran away from my betrayal. My love killed itself. It will never exist. The gravel became my fortification. My steps on the gravel pushed my fear further down. The gravel felt my pain. My legs felt my shapeless body collapse. They will become my protection; my support. My own legs will cry. The questions followed even more confused. Even more unanswered. My legs will desire suicide.

My mother, I found her. My mother, where were you all this time? Her blood does not run through my veins. I do not exist in her memories. I am in her heart. She loves my eyes. She found me broken. I am not broken. My mother, without judgment, wiped my falling pain. She became my protection. I became her own. I revealed my secrets. She held my fear. She holds my fear. My fear remains with her. She revealed the love left inside my fears. Hate me, you cannot love me. I am shapeless and broken. She will never know. I run away and she loves me back. My name became her own.

The pictures, the pain, and the years, I saw only a few. I saw the man smiling. I felt her pain. Her eyes became my truth. She revealed in me. I lay beside her; she loves me to protect my fears. The night had been my enemy and my friend. She is my eye's restful teacher. Her lullaby to me; their hatred burns in my soul. My love is gone. Their denial rips into my mind. Her body, while still shapeless, he ripped her fears apart. Like mine. I would never know. Her eyes disappeared. His anger on her face. Like mine. Would I have recognized her? So long ago, insincerity defined her shapeless body. His anger created her pain. Like mine. They did nothing. They will never know. My mother's pain. My pain. I suffered in those sheets, not quite white, that covered my shapeless body next to her. I will know sleep. She is my protection. My pain on the pillow, her betrayal so long ago, was falling fresh out of my eyes. I will become her protection. No one deserves her pain. They will never know the pain. My mother with all her own, holds my painful fears. She will see me cry. You wanted to see me cry.

They will never hold my hand. They will never deserve my eyes. My suicide will never become their muse. I am the man they will never be. I will love her. I have not met her. She will love my shapeless body. She will see my eyes as they are; with obscene colors amid the darkness.

I made a decision. You are right. It was a decision. I decided. You made me. You are not right. I was going to be this way. You made it easy. I wanted to be like this before it all. You stripped me of everything else. I decided it was natural. It is natural. You left no option. Do not say I am wrong. I disappoint you. You are wrong. You failed me. I don't remember being anything else.

A Lover's Affair



By
Aly Rice

Thanksgiving comes once a year, and it has finally arrived. The smell of fresh turkey, mom's home-made cranberries and wild rice always excites me. I go nuts for it. Mom made me set two seats at the table plus one more just in case my father shows up. Every Thanksgiving we set a spot for him and he never shows up. Why would any year be different?

As my mother and I bowed our heads down to pray, the doorbell rang. I looked at mom with confusion and said, "Hold on I'm coming!" A bald scruffy-looking man with an oversized suit was standing in our doorway and as I glared into his eyes I wondered why he hasn't died yet.

"Hello father." I said.

"Hello Lynn." "It's nice to finally see you." "It's been about two or three years since I last saw you." He said as I glared into his sappy eyes.

"Lynn, my darling, let's just focus on today. It's Thanksgiving."

As he walked in mom's house, I got a massive whiff of alcohol.

I shut the door slowly and mumbled, "This is going to be the best Thanksgiving ever."

I knew mom wasn't going to be pleased that her ex-husband showed up to her house drunk, especially on her favorite holiday. I waited about five minutes leaning against the door, just breathing, and listening to my parents talk for the first time in three years. They talked like nothing had ever happened between them.

"How have you been Jennifer? Thank you for having me." He said.

I leaned over the corner to see my mom's response as she smiled and said, "you're welcome anytime Bill." I felt like my whole world was spinning. I knew the cranberries and wild rice were getting cold and I hated that.

"Lynn dear, it's time to eat!" My mother said.

As I walked over with fear, I sat down next to my father with my hands nowhere near him. I didn't even want to look at him or even share Thanksgiving with him. My body began to feel numb and my hands became clammy and sweaty. I could hear my heart beat pounding perfectly as sweat began dripping from my forehead. I began to turn pale.

"Lynn dear are you feeling okay? Mother said.

"Yes mother." I lied straight to her face.

As we ate in silence, all I could think about was how good the cranberries and wild rice were. My mother asked how my father was doing, and she didn't even acknowledge that he had been drinking which is very typical of her.

"I am doing well. I published my fourth book." Father said.

My mother dropped her fork and jumped with excitement. I haven't seen her jump that high before since watching her cheerleading videos from high school.

"You published, My Girl?!" Mother asked.

"No. I put that one aside and wrote another one last summer called, Bluebird." He said.

My mother's face dropped and didn't seem amused. "I don't understand. I worked so hard on that with you for over five years." My dad continued talking about how that story was too personal and complicated. I felt sorry for my mom because "My Girl" was about her falling in love with my dad in high school. My dad is a famous writer. He won many awards, and he is the reason why I love to write and I hate him for that. The reason I love to write is because I can express my feelings onto paper instead of talking to someone about it in person.

"May I be excused?" I asked.

"Of course dear, just make sure you push in your chair." Mother said.

I violently pushed my chair half way and gave my father the devil's eye.

I ran upstairs to my room and decided to write down my thoughts and ideas. Maybe a short story would help. Sitting and looking out into the ocean, I breathed in and exhaled my negative thoughts. It was such a beautiful day. The sun was shining through my glass windows. I could hear the seagulls, and feel the sun's heat on me. I couldn't let my father ruin my Thanksgiving. I could still hear them talking downstairs, just like the old times and it made me sick. My father left three years ago to live on his own so he wouldn't have any distractions with his writing. My mother was so sad and couldn't bare the pain so she divorced him. Watching my mom being all perky and flirty with my dad makes me want to shake her and tell her what her husband has done to me. My mom is oblivious to everything. We don't communicate we live in the moment and don't talk about our problems. She

acts like everything is fine between Bill and her. When Bill left, my mom would lock herself in her room and sob for days. Sometimes I wouldn't see her for over a month because she was so heartbroken. Trying to keep my life on track, I normally would ignore her and focus on my writing and school. My mom made it up to me though by moving to a beach house. She knows I love beaches and I always wanted to live near one.

Lucky for me, I have a great lifestyle. Every morning I go surfing and go out on my jet ski. I enjoy writing and playing with my fox terrier Bentley. I live on the beach right on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina. I ride my bike to college every day and I major in writing. I am currently writing a story about lost love. I don't believe in love anymore. After dating so many guys, I realized they didn't love me, they loved my money. My motto is to avoid love at all costs. My mother is still in love with my father. Every night I watch my mother set a place for my father for dinner in case he shows up, which he hasn't until today. If love is setting a place at a table for someone who is never coming home, why even bother? Nobody lasts forever, and the perfect example are my parents. I could hear footsteps coming up the stairs, and I quickly shut my notebook.

"Hey, Hunny." My mother said.

"Hey Mommy." I replied.

"Is it okay if Bill crashes here tonight on the sofa?" She asked.

My heart stopped. I mumbled and replied: "Yeah, why not?" and as my mom walked away I shut my door and locked it bursting into tears.

I never had the courage or knowledge to tell my mother that I have been raped by my father since I was teenager. My parents were together for seven years and in that time period for three years he has raped me on and off. Seeing my mother happy makes me smile in a twisted, fucked up way. My father raped me when I was thirteen years old in one of our other houses in a tent in our backyard. My mother thought it was a good idea so that me and dad could bond and go camping. At that time I thought it was a great idea until he touched me in inappropriate places. At first when it happened, I thought all fathers did this with their daughters. It was normal, and it was bonding until I felt the pain in my vagina. I screamed. He put his hand over my mouth and forced me down until he was done. He swore to me if I ever told mom he would kill me and make it look like I was lying. I never talked about that day to anybody and now since I am twenty, it happened a long time ago. I need to let go of the past and forget that it all happened. If my mother found out the truth about my father, it would destroy her. I could hear wine bottles being tossed in the trashcan and knew that this night was going to be hell. Whenever my father drank that's when a lot of the sexual abuse happened.

Being almost 11:00 at night I decided to go to bed with a baseball bat underneath my bed and locked my door. If anything happened tonight, I would probably smack the shit out of him. With all the anger I have towards him I would probably end up killing him. I didn't even say goodnight to my mom. I normally do, but she seems too caught up with Bill. As I lay in my bed listening to the waves and smelling the fresh air, I calm down with a smile on my face. I had no idea what the time was, but I hoped it was morning because then I knew I made it through the night without getting raped by my father. I sighed and closed my eyes. I heard steps coming up the stairs, heavy steps. My skin and body were sweating and my mouth became dry and it felt like I lost my voice. I felt powerless just laying there like I was thirteen again. The doorknob jiggled a little and my heart stopped and I felt tingly everywhere in my body. I watched the door knob jingle some more. I heard something go in the doorknob and heard the door wiggle. It sounded like a key or a paperclip sliding in and somehow the doorknob turned and opened. A shadow came into my room.

I quickly got the baseball bat from underneath my bed, and swung it around to hit my father. I couldn't see a thing. It was pitch dark, and all I could smell was alcohol and his horrible cologne that he wears. As sweat and tears ran down my face I began to sob. I kept shouting, "You bastard!" and "Get out of here!" I yelled for my mom multiple times. I screamed so loud that my father lunged over the bed and put his hand over my mouth.

"Lynn baby didn't you miss me?" He said.

I kicked and screamed and began biting his hand. He smiled and whispered into my ear, "Oh how I missed this baby." He started undressing me and taking off my clothes. He licked my neck all the way down to my breast. I tried to fight back but his weight kept me down. Laying there I felt paralyzed. I haven't felt this much pain in forever and as all these memories came rushing into my head I didn't know what to do. He grunted and moaned until he was finished. He looked like he just won a gold medal in the Olympics. He reminded me not to tell mom

or he would kill me. As I looked up I saw my mother standing in the doorway just watching me suffer. My father stumbled towards the door. I closed my eyes and all I heard was a bullet. There was silence. I started to cry and looked at my mother. She had tears streaming down her face and there was a puddle of blood by her feet. My body was shaking because I was so emotional as I stepped over my dead father's body so my mother could hold me while we both sobbed. She whispered into my ear, "Hunny, I am so terribly sorry. I had no idea" and I began to hold her tightly. At that moment I felt like my mother understood me and actually cared.

All of the sudden in a blink of an eye, there were sirens and flashing lights surrounding our house. Someone was pounding on the door and yelling, "Police, Police. Answer the door or we will break it down." My mother and I froze as we held each other crying. The door breaks down and people started running up the stairs. As I closed my eyes I felt my mother letting go and trying to hold on to me. A police man was yelling at her to let go.

"Mommy, Mommy, please! I love you!" I repeated.

"I love you too, Lynn! I am so sorry, but now you can be free from him." She said.

"Ma'am, you're under arrest for the murder of this man and anything you say will be used against you in the court of law." The officer stated.

As the police handcuffed my mother, I didn't know what to think or what was going to happen with my life. I watched the police put my mother in the cop car from the porch. We kept eye contact until I couldn't see the car anymore. Tears kept streaming down my face. There I was, in this amazing beach house with my father in puddles of blood in my bedroom and my mother going to prison. The "whatever" you want to call it fancy people are coming over to pick up the body soon. I went upstairs to my bedroom and saw that the gun was way in the corner. I picked it up and pointed it at my head. I held back the trigger and...Gone.

Puppet on a String



By
Caitlyn Minelli

Nancy Farmer looked around the fair. So many sights and sounds and smells to take in. It had taken hours to get here and she was impatient to eat some cotton candy while watching the acts.

“Daddy, what’s that?” she asked, her blonde head bobbing up and down.

“That’s the puppet master’s tent,” her father responded, taking her hand.

“Can we go see?” she asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not.”

Nancy squealed in excitement as she dragged her father towards the black and red topped tent. As they reached the entrance, a midget in green pinstriped pants and a flowing red peasant’s shirt stepped in their way.

“No adults,” said the midget, eyeing them over his extremely long nose.

“What do you mean no adults?” asked Nancy’s father.

“No adults,” was the response.

“Is that all you can say?”

“No adults.”

“Daddy, I want to go in!” whined Nancy.

“Maybe not this one, sweetheart. I think we should go...” said her father.

“No!” Nancy screamed. She pushed her way past her father and rushed into the tent.

It was pitch black. Nancy screamed. A light turned on to reveal a set of stairs that led down to a single chair placed in front of a small stage. She followed the stairs and sat down as the curtain lifted.

Music started and a female puppet in a blue dress and petticoat appeared on stage. It began to dance and sing until a gentleman puppet in britches and a green tailcoat appeared on the other side of the stage.

The female puppet started to giggle as the gentleman started dancing toward her. The second doll grabbed the first and started to twirl. Nancy giggled. They stopped and took a bow as a third puppet came on stage. It was an ugly puppet. It looked exactly like the midget blocking the opening of the tent. He held a chain that led off stage in his left hand and gave it a tug. Nancy gasped. Out slumped a puppet that looked just like her father. The woman and two men proceeded to kick her father’s effigy until the thing was simpering in pain.

“Daddy!” she screamed.

The puppets started giggling with each other and at her as the midget puppet dragged her father off the stage.

Nancy ran out of the tent crying but stopped when she saw she was no longer at the fair. It was simply all gone. Only garbage littered the ground. She turned back and saw the tent was no longer there. Just the woman, the man, and the midget, all life sized.

“Your father belongs to us now,” said the midget. “Goodbye.”

No Place Like Hell



By
Caitlyn Minelli

Kira Lane looked around in confusion. She was in a closed cavern with huge stalagmites and stalactites jutting from the floors and ceilings. In some places they had grown to such an extent that each met to form pillars. Flames flickered behind the rocks and cast shadows along the walls.

Despite the fires, however, there was a deep chill to the place. Kira's attention was caught by the movement of a red curtain that was situated behind a tall podium. Screams echoed around the cavern in earnest.

"Where in God's name am I?" she asked herself.

"You won't find God here. He wouldn't set foot in this place," said a voice from the curtain.

"Who said that?" asked Kira.

"Thanatos is the name, and I'm the secretary to Beelzebub himself," said a blonde man walking out from behind the drapes. He adjusted his tie and looked down at her from the podium. The man was almost seven feet tall, give or take a few inches, and wore a navy suit.

"Beelzebub? Where in hell am I?"

"Right now, the atrium," Thanatos said.

"But I was in my car going to work," said Kira confused.

"You were. Until that semi took out one of your back wheels. You ended up swerving into that preschool just like you wanted."

"I never wanted to swerve into a preschool."

"Listen, sweetheart, you're here because you've had malicious thoughts all your life. Like the time you were babysitting little Billy Thorton and wanted to drown him in his bath. Or the time when you had the urge to push that woman off the side of the subway ledge in time for the nine o'clock blue line. And this morning, when you wanted to run over all those preschoolers and use the little blonde girl as a hood ornament. Just to name a few."

"I never wanted to..."

"Luckily for you, you've had the restraint not to act on your impulses. Which is more than I can say for the guys we usually get down here," Thanatos continued.

"Look, buddy, I've never done any of those things, nor did I want to," Kira said indignantly, getting to her feet.

"You're right. You haven't done them. Yet. But you have most certainly wanted to."

"Look, I don't know what you've been smoking..."

"Mostly brimstone."

"...but I don't belong here. I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Not yet, as I've been saying. But you will. Which is why you're here. The Big Man doesn't want any more people checking in, or, strictly speaking, checking out," Thanatos said.

"What does that have to do with me?" asked Kira.

"Heaven's getting too crowded, especially with all those wars recently. That President Bush was great for business. They've already added two levels and are starting on a third. All because some people with mental hang-ups are offing others left and right. That's where you come in. Mr. All-Mighty wants us to scare those who are fated to start bloodbaths and hopefully rehabilitate them. As soon as heaven can keep up with reincarnating people and build enough new levels, we can stop conducting therapy sessions. Albeit, terrifying therapy sessions that would probably get us arrested anywhere else."

"What if you can't rehabilitate the person?"

"They stay here and are tortured forever."

"And what am I here for? I haven't done anything and I'm not going to," Kira said angrily.

"Let's see...." He brought out an enormous book and started rifling through the pages. "Marker, Mitchell, Lace, ah, here we go. Lane, Kira. By September 2nd of the year 2015 you will have strangled three dogs, drowned four cats, and killed over one hundred spiders."

"What's wrong with that last one?"

"You'll capture them, place the poor things in glass jars and roast them over the fire place until they pop," said Thanatos gesturing with his hands.

That actually sounds like fun.

“That is exactly the mentality that will make you want a bigger challenge.”

“A bigger challenge?” asked Kira.

“You’ll want to start on people next. You know? Like all those other famous serial killers. Jack the Ripper. Charles Manson. Ted Bundy. Oprah Winfrey,” Thanatos explained.

“Oprah Winfrey’s a serial killer!?”

“Yes. When she’s not making people sob uncontrollably she’s out back on her estate hunting down baby pandas. Then she hunts down the baby pandas’ handlers. Maybe she’ll give you her autograph when she gets here.”

“Oprah is a profound speaker. She’s touched the hearts of people everywhere with her advice. There’s no way she’s that kind of person,” Kira said defensively.

“I don’t understand why you humans worship her. She makes people cry for a living.”

“You... you...you’re just a...a...”

“Rank ass bastard not fit to spit upon?” he asked.

“Exactly!” she said.

“Yes, well, you and the high reining king of evil are on the same wavelength in that respect. Anyway, would you like the tour?”

“Tour?”

“The tour of where you’ll be staying. That is, if you fail to be rehabilitated.”

“I guess...”

“This way then.”

Thanatos held the curtain back for her and led the way down a long set of stairs that led deeper into the bowels of hell. The stairs spiraled down along the walls of a circular chasm which was deep enough that Kira couldn’t see the bottom. The screams she heard earlier got louder with every step she took.

“So what exactly are the ‘bowels of hell?’”

“Hell’s nothing but bowels, dear. You realize that when you stay here long enough.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Well, Luci has never been good at keeping secretaries for extended periods of time. He ends up sending them to one of the rings before too long. Currently, I hold the longest record of not getting roasted.”

“How long’s that?”

“Oh, two...three hundred years? Honestly, I’ve lost count. When you live somewhere where there’s nothing but sorrow and misery, you tend not to count the days, or years, that you’ve been stuck here. It’s just depressing.”

“Oh.”

They traveled in silence until they reached the end of the staircase. By this time the screaming had become so unbearable Kira had to cover her ears.

“How do you stand it?” she screamed over the clamor.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Thanatos apologized, handing her a pair of ear plugs.

Kira placed them in her ears and immediately the screams of the damned receded.

“This way, please,” he said, motioning to the first door on the left.

“What’s up with the ear plugs?” Kira asked following him.

“They’re specially equipped to keep out the screaming but still allow you to hear everything else.”

“Really? Cool.”

Thanatos opened the door, which led to a catwalk that oversaw a ring surrounded by fire. Below were hundreds of people on racks. Some were being dangled from the ceiling by chains attached to their thumbs. Demons with hideous horns, cloven feet, and jutting fangs rotated wheels that slowly stretched the sinners’ limbs apart. The prisoners’ faces were contorted into soundless screams as they were manipulated like Gumby. The ones hanging from the ceiling eventually fell and left their thumbs. The severed nerves and tendons that were left reminded Kira of streamers.

“Brings a new meaning to pride cometh before the fall, don’t you think?” Thanatos asked.

Kira watched as one of the demons became overzealous, alleviating the poor man of his limbs. “That’s so gross!” she said.

“Keep in mind that your fate will be just as gruesome.”

“I don’t mean the limb popping. I can handle that. I mean the demons! They’re so gross!”

Thanatos sighed. “This is going to take longer than I thought. And I don’t even make over time.”

“Whatever. Just get me out of here,” Kira demanded.

Thanatos opened the door for her and led her to the next one. It led them onto another catwalk. Here demons looking somewhat canine were pushing people into pools of ice water. There they thrashed about trying to get to the surface while the overseers pushed them back under with paddles and staffs. By the time the prisoners were fished out their limbs and expenditures were black. The demons weren’t exactly being gentle when removing them from the tanks, which was evident as one of the damned smacked against one of the tanks and lost a couple of digits.

“Proof that envy is a cold emotion,” Thanatos said.

“Will they grow back?” Kira asked as the demons picked up the appendages and dragged the man away.

“Yep.”

“I guess that’s good.”

“Not really. It’s so they can relive their torture over and over again. If they couldn’t regenerate they wouldn’t last too long. And we wouldn’t want that now, would we? It’s supposed to be a punishment after all.”

They went back to the hallway and went through more rooms, each more gruesome than the last. Yet considering all that she saw, Kira felt perfectly at ease. Enlightened even. She had no ideas there were so many ways to hurt people. She would have to write them all down before she forgot. Damn it! Where was a pen when she needed one?

Finally, they had made their way to the last room when Kira realized something peculiar. “Hey, why are all the doors on the left?”

“Because the left isn’t right. You know? Like how sinistrality is the act of being left handed? People used to think the left hand was unclean. Not really a surprise, considering what they used to do with it.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You know how in some cartoons when they’re trying to decide whether or not to save the person they’ve been messing with the whole episode? Like Bugs Bunny and Yosemite Sam. The little guy with wings and that ridiculous halo is sitting on his right side, and the one with the horns and the pointy pitchfork is sitting on his left side. The left side represents all things evil. El Diablo can’t stand anything to be on the right side. Honestly, I think it’s a waste of space. He could put in a spa or something, but noooooo. Everything has to be all kinds of ‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here’ type of crap.”

“What if you turned around, then wouldn’t the doors be on the right?” she asked.

Thanatos gave her a stricken look. “Well, damn. I guess you’re right. I never thought about it before. Too busy cursing my fate to notice, I guess. Just don’t tell the boss man,” he said as he led her through the last door. This room had a pit that was full of men and women looking confused. There were no demons. No screams. No instruments of torture. Just a bunch of people sitting or standing. Some were even playing Texas Hold Em.

Kira looked down into the pit in confusion. “I don’t understand. Where’s the torture? The misery? What’s their punishment?”

“Currently, there is none. We haven’t had time to think of one. These are the people who would sometime in the future cause a massive decline in the population. Not that I think that’s a problem. You humans breed like rabbits.”

“So this is where I’ll go?”

“If you don’t decide to behave, and I suggest you do. This place is the ultimate time out.”

Kira looked back into the pit. This is so boring. Could they have at least put in some kind of animal? Maybe with rabies? Yeah. Rabies sounds good. She made a note to tell the owner. They turned to leave and Thanatos led her back toward the atrium. By the time she climbed up the mountain of stairs Kira was all but ready to pass out. “How...are you...not...dying?” she asked, panting.

“Technically, I’m not alive. But to answer your question, I was floating a little bit off the ground. That’s one of the perks to being an immortal,” Thanatos explained with a shrug as he removed his earplugs.

“You cheater!” Kira said peeved as she did the same.

“THANATOS! WHERE ARE YOU!?” bellowed a disembodied voice.

“Shit,” Thanatos muttered, “In the atrium!” he said louder.

An imposing man materialized into the room. His hair, which reached his shoulders, was black and he wore black leather pants with a red silk shirt. He was ruffling papers and muttering to himself. “What to do... what to do... THANATOS!” the man yelled in an English accent.

“Yes, Oh Great King of Evil?” asked Thanatos.

The man looked up from his papers and looked around. “Oh, there you are,” he said when he spotted Thanatos. “I have no idea how to torture these new sacks of shit. And I don’t have anyone to oversee the torture down in that new ring. Honestly, if I was in charge of the world, I sure as bloody hell wouldn’t be down here. He’d be down here instead!” The man sighed. “What’s my schedule for the rest of the week look like?”

“Let’s see,” Thanatos said as he pulled out a date book. “7:00 AM torturing. 11:00 AM lunch. 12:00 PM more torture. 12:00 AM sleep. And it’s pretty much the same for the entire week. Hades also wanted to know if you were coming to that Lords of the Underworlds conference. He said to RSVP. Persephone needs to know how much baklava to order.”

“I knew it! When will I have time to do my regular rounds on top of adding all this new shit?” He sighed again. “Tell Hades I might not make it. Unless I can find someone to oversee the new ring while I’m gone on top of finding a mode of torture, I’m staying here. And I really wanted baklava,” he pouted then materialized out of the room.

A horrendous scream ripped through the atrium moments after the man’s departure. Then, as quickly as he left, he reappeared.

“Ah, nothing like a good execution to soothe the nerves,” he said, stretching his shoulders.

“Did you kill another one?” Thanatos asked disapprovingly.

“Well, if I don’t kill one every now and then they forget who I am,” the man said shrugging.

Kira watched this exchange in confusion. Here was this guy—she assumed the Devil—who had challenged God himself and landed the worst punishment known to man. Somehow she expected him to be a little more...a little more...doom and gloom. Instead he acted like an overworked business man.

“And who might you be?” he asked, giving her a once over.

“Kira Lane,” she said. “And who are you?”

“Snippy, isn’t she?” he said to Thanatos. “I am Satan, Beelzebub, The Devil, etcetera, etcetera. Basically the excuse people use when they do bad things.”

“Really?”

“Pretty sure. Cause if not I’d like to know why the bloody hell I’m doing all his work!” he grumbled. “Why isn’t she down with the others?” he asked Thanatos.

“She’s one of the special cases, Lord Lucifer,” Thanatos explained. “She’s here for judgment.”

“If she’s here, then she’s past judgment. That’s why they call it Hell. So you might as well put her with the others,” Lucifer said with a dismissive wave.

“How do you know I haven’t changed? You’re just gonna send me down there without some kind of trial?” Kira asked indignantly.

“Well, why not? I’m too busy to deal with you. I have places to be, people to torture, and new systems to set up. I don’t have time to babysit a silly little chit such as you. Besides, I am a bad man. Why wouldn’t I do bad things?” he asked tauntingly. “Furthermore, how do you know you have changed?”

“Cause I haven’t had one evil thought since I set foot in this shit hole. That’s why,” Kira said, striking a proud pose.

“You were more disgusted with how the demons looked than the man getting his limbs ripped off. You laughed when you saw the ring of gluttony when they were forced to eat rats, toads, and snakes because it reminded you of Fear Factor. And you wanted to make sure you wrote down all the new and improved ways to torture people. I think that’s grounds for damnation, don’t you?” Thanatos asked.

Kira sputtered. “Don’t tell him that! Whose side are you on? I thought we were bonding a little!”

The Devil laughed. “You’re right barmy, you are. You think he’d lie to me? Ha. He knows what’ll happen if he doesn’t obey,” he said darkly.

Kira stared at him in confusion. "What does barmy mean?"

"Really, you are thick. It means daft. Loony. Mad as a hatter. Christ, you Americans need to get educated. Don't even remember your native tongue, do you?"

"I still don't understand."

"It means you're crazy. It's all right. I don't understand him half the time either. He's British," Thanatos confided in her ear.

"I'm not crazy!" she shouted indignantly. "My thoughts might be a little more colorful than most, but that doesn't mean I'm crazy."

The Devil gave her a thoughtful look. "How would you like a job?"

"What?" Kira asked.

"A. Job. Good Lord, you're dumb. Does that mean you don't want it?"

"What does that job entail?" Kira asked.

"Well, for starters, you'll be the overseer for that new ring. You'll be able to maim, slice, dice, and deface to your little black heart's content," he said, making it seem splendid.

"Okay. What happens if I refuse?"

"You'll be tortured forever, of course," he added, looking at her as if she were stupid.

"I accept!" she said hurriedly.

"Wonderful! Thanatos, get the lady a uniform. And tell Hades I'll be able to make the conference. Baklava, here I come," the most evil entity on earth, or rather under it, sang.

"Before you go, are you going to supervise her?" asked Thanatos.

"I suppose I should. Make sure she knows what she's doing. Like where to inflict the most pain. We'll have to give her some tools."

"Tool wise, I'd like a gun and a knife," Kira requested.

"That's all? You don't need any whips? Thumbscrews, presses, iron maidens?" Lucifer asked perplexed.

"Nope. Just the knife and the gun. Probably an air rifle. Always wanted an air rifle."

"Well, Thanatos, get her what she needs. And get her some demons to assist her."

"I don't need any assistance. But in the meantime, do you have any rabid animals?"

Lucifer materialized back into the atrium of Hell and stretched. The Lords of the Underworlds conference had gone well. Persephone was as lovely as ever and the baklava was even better than he remembered. Now it was time to check on the new trainee and see how she was doing. But before he could leave, his secretary burst in from behind the curtain.

"Lord Lucifer, we have a problem. She's having fun," Thanatos said flustered.

"So what? She's enjoying her work. There's nothing wrong with that," said Lucifer dismissively.

"No, you don't understand. She's having too much fun! She's giggling and laughing and ruining the despairing vibe of the place."

"All right, all right! Don't get your knickers in a knot. And stop being such a pansy arse," the Devil said, not understanding his employee's antics. She was just a woman. How much trouble could she be?

He teleported himself to the new ring to see for himself what all the fuss was about and looked over the railing connected to the catwalk that allowed him a bird's eye view. Lucifer expected it to be the usual misery and woe, but this? This just took it to a whole new level. Kira was slicing it up with that machete Thanatos had found for her. Every which way she was severing tendons and muscles, whistling while she did so as if she were on a Sunday morning stroll through Central Park.

He found it odd, though, that she would let them run after she carved them like Thanksgiving turkeys. Then she pulled out the air rifle she requested and started hunting them down. She aimed for the legs; he supposed to completely cripple them. When the poor victim couldn't move she'd jump them and slice their abdomen open. And she was indeed giggling. While Kira was taking care of her individual targets, little rabid animals took care of terrorizing the rest. Skunks, squirrels, and chipmunks launched themselves at the inmates left and right. Some would fling themselves at faces and some would latch onto pieces of vital anatomy no one should have a rabid little animal attached to. It made him want to cup himself.

It wasn't until Kira cut out a man's stomach, popped the sac and spilled acid over his face did he think that maybe, just maybe, things were going a little too far.

He pulled out a cell phone and hit a number on speed dial. It rang for about three seconds before someone picked up on the other line.

"Hey, Michael, put Gabriel on the phone. I need to speak with him," Lucifer said into the phone. "What do you mean who is this? Who else has a 666 number?" he said peeved. "Well, tell him to put the bloody horn down and come to the phone. We have a situation down here."

Kira was bored. She looked around at the cloudy, puffiness, and brightness of Heaven. They had taken her big knife and her air rifle. Worst of all they put her in a stupid white robe with a dangly new halo. She missed her black leather and horns. And her rifle. And her big knife. Worst of all they put this stupid tickle belt on her whenever she had thoughts that were "not appropriate." All she wanted was to go back to the darkness and misery but apparently she was too violent. And now her punishment was a permanent stay in heaven.

"How are you enjoying your stay in heaven?" asked one of those stupid archangels.

"I hate it. I hate this stupid peace and harmony theme you've got going on. I hate that there are no weapons of mass destruction and I hate this stupid dress," vented Kira.

"Now, now, we've been over this. It's a robe," corrected the archangel.

"Like it matters," Kira pouted.

"Well, if you would at least try to be a little more productive it might not be so bad. We have arts and crafts over by the big cumulonimbus cloud near the Pearly Gates."

"Yippee," she said sarcastically.

"If you're not an artsy person, then maybe you'd like to play bingo?"

"Arrrgh! Enough!" Kira screamed. She stood up and began to tap her ankles together while reciting "There's no place like Hell, there's no place like Hell, There's no place like Hell." She opened her eyes only to see she was still in this awful, happy place. "God damn it!"

Creation



By
Casey Beidel

It is cold again today.

But my workshop is fine. It always is.

I feel each fleck of liquid tension patter against the knotted wooden door's window pane as if each light drop is chipping away at my skin instead of the aged dark glass. Maybe someday the rain will stop, but I doubt it.

I linger on an airy sigh and permitted the percussive tings on the roof to take over my mind. That thin layer of protection had guarded me for so long, and without it I would have likely died much earlier, but I hate it. It is the membrane separating me from what is death, from what is real, from what is easy. I need it, and I hate myself for needing it.

Today I want to make something new—something that has not been made before. I think of my other works. They are all good thoughts—every one of them. But they lack something vital that I am unable to grasp. There is a missing ingredient that my tongue cannot taste; a harmonizing tone out of the range of my ear. If only I could find that spark. It would make sense. I would have purpose.

But nothing is ever new. It is just an idea that I have already thought and forgotten. There are only so many pieces to put together after all. Maybe the only way to make something entirely new is to take apart what is old and start again.

I walk over to the shelf where my prized creations rest. From the shelf I gather my first masterpiece. In my hands I hold a swirling brown ball of dust and wind. Lightning cracks across invisible specks and fire shoot from pores in pebbles within its vast shroud of gritted rock. I look deep into its core, at its very heart and see nothing worth saving. Holding it in my grasp for the last time, I lift it above my head, contemplating my decision. Then I make up my mind. I release it and it falls to the hard floor where it shatters. Jagged edges and smooth fluids hiss as they fuse into hot sand. I fall to my knees and paw at the broken elements that I know I could not repair. A tear drops onto the new sand and immediately disappears. What had been alive is now a desert on the workshop floor. I wipe my eye and humbly stand up.

The wind rattles the walls of the room, shaking my mind out of its sleep. My heart pounds as I find my next creation on the shelf. A series of sporadic blue lights fires in random beauty against the backdrop of a violet sea. There is a distinct dissonance between the quiet of the workshop and the brilliant radiances popping between life and death. The galaxy of light splashes against the floor and spills over the sand, gathering in metallic pools. A faint smile is born on my face.

Then there is a red cluster that has stood still as a statue on the long shelf since its creation. It is my favorite—it is different than all the others. It solemnly stands watch as the others cycle through existences; its core glares with a swallowed intensity at globes that refuse to turn. The majestic sphere dissolves into the boiling sand and turns the gleaming oceans to white steam. I try to contain my giddiness as I reach for the next ball.

I shove the next cloud off the shelf with delight as the concoction bubbles and spits. The one after that hits the mixture and produces a wondrous humming sound. I pull the next from its perch and watch the solution try every color before settling at an impossible golden blue.

I close my eyes in ecstasy and wildly slide my arm across the rest of the shelf, knocking countless existences to the floor in a single motion, carelessly shepherding each of my cherished treasures to their deconstruction. The last of my creations struck the ground. My rampage stops suddenly when my arm touches the end of the shelf. I allow my breath to become steady again before I open my eyes. The thunder beyond the roof roars at me in rage, but I ignore it.

Then I realize something: the shelves have never been empty before. I cannot even recall what I did before my first project—it had all happened so very long ago. Those pieces have become a part of me. No matter how fragmented or dusty my work was, I would always save it. I remember a time when each piece was new and meaningful, yet the worlds I thought were testaments to my successes were actually reminders of the goals I had forgotten or the constructs I deemed too impossible to perfect.

The pile of matter on the floor of the workshop is made of everything I had ever collected outside in the rain. It is everything that exists or will ever exist, but it is missing that one intangible thing. I look down at the sheer, reflective silver surface of matter. Then it hits me. It all makes sense. It is missing me. I pluck a long, grey strand of hair from my head and let it fall into the mixture.

This time things will be different.

Guardian



By
Jenna Kauffman

Brightness flashed behind my eyelids. As I slowly opened my eyes, the light only got brighter. My scream went unheard as a car rushed towards me. I shut my eyes again tightly, still screaming as there was a “whoosh.” I slowly opened my eyes again only for there to be...nothing.

I looked around me. The distant sound of cars passing underneath me let me know I was on a bridge. I was alone.

I didn't know how I had gotten there, or even why for that matter. The only thing I could make myself do was analyze my surroundings. I had no idea what time it was, but it was dark out so it had to be late. And another thing that I noticed right away was that it was cold. Extremely cold.

I stood up, looking over the ledge of the bridge. The traffic was slow, only one or two cars passing every five minutes, if that. I waved my arms at the on-coming cars but none of them seemed to notice me. I was still trying to grasp exactly where I was.

“Hey!” I shouted as loud as I could through the gate on the bridge as another car passed beneath. But they drove on, not having the slightest inkling I was even there. I sighed.

“There's no point,” a voice said suddenly next to me. I jumped and turned my head to see a guy now here with me.

“Where did you come from?” I asked. “Do you know why I'm here?”

“I woke up just over there,” he said, pointing. I looked to where he pointed and noticed the end of the bridge where it dipped down onto its own road. “And you're here because... well, look.” He then started to walk further down the bridge, toward where he claimed to have awakened. Just before the bridge ended, he stopped and pointed down. It was where the underbrush was, I assumed, but it was too dark to see anything.

It took me a moment, but finally my eyes adjusted. And once they did, I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I slowly backed away from the edge of the bridge. The guy noticed this then looked behind me. “Hey, you better...”

He didn't get to finish his thought as I heard the whir of wheels behind me. I quickly turned around to see a car coming right at me, but I couldn't react fast enough. As it got closer all I had a chance to do was put my arms up before suddenly feeling a gust of wind. The next thing I knew, the car was just continuing down the road, having no signs of hitting anything. It was then that I realized that it went right through me.

“I... wait, what's going on?” I asked the guy, beginning to freak out. It was then that I thought about what I had seen in the underbrush. “What was that? That couldn't have been me down there, if I'm right here. How did that car go through me? Oh my God, am I.... am I dead?”

He frowned a little at this, and my eyes widened. He was quick to speak once noticing my reaction. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly,” I repeated, deadpan. “Then what's going on? Why can't anyone see me, and how did that car go through me? And why did I just look down at my own body?”

He didn't answer any of this. Instead, he started to make his way off the bridge and down the slope of the hill towards the underbrush. I furrowed my eyebrows.

“What are you doing?” I asked, and even though I didn't know, I chose to follow him anyway. He was my only hope of understanding any of this.

“Showing you,” he stated. “I suppose we could have just jumped off the bridge. It would have been quicker, plus it's not like we can get hurt anyway.”

“So why didn't we?” I asked. He shrugged.

“I figure you're already freaked out enough. Plus, you probably still think you can get hurt even though you just had a car pass through you with no more than a gust of wind being evidence that it did. Correct me if I'm wrong.”

I didn't say anything, mainly because he had a point. But in my defense, I still didn't realize what was going on.

As soon as we got to my body, however, I had more of an insight as to what was happening.

“I knew it. I'm dead,” I said, looking at my slumped form. My body was either covered in bruises or dirt—I couldn't tell which. I had a feeling it was both.

"No you're not," he said, not accepting my statement. I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Then what? Will you please tell me what the hell is going on?" I asked, getting frustrated now. I wanted to cry. This was just too much at once. Why couldn't I remember anything?

"You're in a coma," he clarified. "You're still technically alive, but... your soul has left your body. Considering that those guys nearly beat you to death, it's not surprising. But it could be worse."

"How?" I asked, but he didn't answer this question either. All he did was sigh. "Okay, look, there has to be some way we can get help. I don't want to die. While I may not know how I got here, I at least know that much. Isn't there something we can do?"

He mumbled something, but I couldn't catch what he said. It took him a moment before he spoke coherently.

"Help is probably on the way. You've been missing for three days now. And you had a cell phone, so..."

"Wait, how do you know all of this?" I asked. Then I thought of another question. "Do I know you?"

"Personally, no," he said. "But..."

Suddenly, I remembered something else he just said and interrupted him. "Hey, wait. Did you say I have a cell phone? I can call 911! Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"Wait, I don't know if you can," he started, but again, I didn't wait for him to finish. I got closer to my body and started to dig into the pocket of the jeans I was wearing. After searching three pockets, I began to lose hope when all I had found was a stick of gum and a scrap piece of paper but upon searching through the fourth pocket I found it. A cell phone.

I quickly looked at it, noticing it was still on and still had some battery left. I quickly punched in the three numbers that everyone in America knew by heart. I then held the phone up to my ear and waited.

The guy's eyes widened and you could tell this clearly came as a shock to him. I sighed in relief once a person came on, asking about the emergency.

"Hello, this is..." I trailed off, suddenly realizing I couldn't even remember my own name. "Look, we need help! There's a body on the side of the highway in critical condition and we need an ambulance right away! Please, I don't know where I am but it's on the side of a highway somewhere..." I trailed off, looking around for some type of sign before spotting one. "Highway 52! We're on Highway 52 and we need help!"

This is the time where I should say that the person on the line heard me and responded with a "Help is on the way!"

But sadly, that didn't end up happening. Instead, all I heard was the person asking what my emergency was again. And again, and again, and again. Then they said "Hello?" a final time and when they got no response, they hung up the phone.

"Wait, what? No! No! We need help! Please!" I was screaming out everything I could, hoping they were still there. But soon enough, I heard the beeping on the line to tell me that they were officially gone. Soon after that, the phone went off. The battery died.

I gasped, pulling it away from my ear in shock. The guy was still looking at me, but now his expression changed from surprise to sympathy. I didn't make eye contact.

"This can't be happening!" I exclaimed, throwing the phone to the ground. I slowly got off of my knees and lay down on the ground, feeling hopeless. "This can't be happening."

"They couldn't hear you," the guy stated, breaking his silence only to point out the obvious. "I have no idea how you were able to pick up and dial the phone, but this is for sure—people can't hear ghosts."

"So I am dead then?" I asked, repeating the eternal question. He shook his head.

"Still in a coma," he said. "If help doesn't come soon, though, you will be."

That sentence is what broke me down. That's when I started to cry.

Or, well, I guess I should say tried to but then soon realized that I couldn't. The guy soon informed me that we weren't able to cry real tears.

"I don't understand," I said. "I didn't deserve this. No one deserves this. Even the most horrible person in the world doesn't deserve this. I want to go home. I don't know where that is, but I want to go home."

The guy sighed, sitting down next to me, and held out his hand. "Well, at least you're not alone."

I looked at him, only to find him looking down at the ground. When he looked back up, it wasn't at me but

instead at my dying body. "If there was something I could do to get help or bring you back, I would. If anything, though, you have more power to do that than I do."

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up. When he stayed silent, I sighed, "Okay, look...I've realized you're not big with answering questions, but can I at least ask you a simple one? One that you should know since you know more about what's going on than me?" When he nodded, I asked, "What's your name?"

He finally looked at me then, not at my body but actually at me, before answering. "Nick."

"Nick," I repeated. "Well, Nick, even though I have a feeling we already met, it's nice to meet you. I'm..." I trailed off. I still couldn't remember my name.

"You're Ashley," he said for me. I raised my eyebrows at him but he just shrugged. "We have met before. But look, while I can't tell you everything now, you'll find out soon. But now is the time that I have to say good-bye."

"What? Why?" I asked. That's when I first heard the sirens. They were very low, meaning they were still a good distance from here, but I could still hear them. "Wait, is that..."

"Yeah," he said, standing up then holding a hand out for me to do so as well. "There's the help you called for. I'm guessing the person who answered tracked your call and well, they've found your location."

"But wait...this is good, isn't it?" I asked, smiling even though I could tell something was wrong. "They're going to help us, Nick! Help is on the way!"

"Yeah," he agreed. "They're going to help you though Ashley. Not me."

"Why not?" It was then that I realized something. "Where's your body, Nick?"

He gave a small smile. "They'll find it, don't worry. Look, they're almost here, so...everything will be explained fully to you soon."

"Wait. Nick," I said as he started to walk away. He turned back to me. "Will you be the one to explain it to me?"

I could tell he didn't want to answer, but he gave me a small smile anyway. "Maybe."

I closed the distance that he had made between us and gave him a hug before kissing him on the cheek. "I'll see you on the other side."

He didn't say anything to this and instead surprised me by giving me a tender kiss on the lips. I smiled once we both pulled away before watching him walk away. He walked back up toward the bridge where we had both came from.

I saw him give me one last smile before everything went black.

Beep. Beep. Beep. That's all I heard as I opened my eyes—the same continual round of beeping. I was almost as clueless as I had been upon waking up on the bridge. But this time, I knew a little more, like my name...and Nick. And I knew for a fact that the woman sitting to the left of me happened to be my mother.

"Mom," I whispered as soon as I came to. She had been looking out the window, a distant look in her eyes. But once I spoke, she immediately looked at me and started to tear up.

"Oh, thank God," she said, standing up from the chair she was sitting in to lean over and hug me. I started crying too, her sadness getting to me. "Thank God you're alright. I was so scared that you weren't going to wake up."

"What happened?" I asked once she pulled away from me and sat down again. She grabbed my hand to let me know she was there with me and looked into my eyes.

"You were kidnapped," she started. "You went with your friends to the mall and went off by yourself to go into your favorite store, and you never returned to them. They called your father and told us what had happened. They knew something was wrong because you hadn't tried to call them to let them know where you were. When they checked, your car was still in the mall parking lot. They called the mall security and couldn't find you anywhere in the mall. Turned out a group of men had kidnapped you for ransom but when your father had someone take it to them, they were there without you. And when we asked them where you were, they said they...t-they dumped you on the side of the r-road somewhere..."

I could tell that it was getting hard for her to go on, so I told her she could stop. I could figure things out from there.

"We looked for you everywhere, had a search team come and help, but no luck. Then, we got a tip that someone called 911 from your cell phone but didn't say anything. When they tracked the call, they found the location of your phone and when the police got there they found you as well."

"Oh Mom," I said, leaning up to give her a hug but realized I couldn't because it hurt too much. She shook her head at my actions.

"Don't strain yourself," she said. "You have a few broken ribs and apparently sprained your ankle. Along with having a few cuts and bruises."

I nodded, knowing not to test her. A few moments after she finished explaining things to me, a doctor walked in.

"Ashley. It's good to see you that you're awake," he said. "You put us all in a scare. You were in a coma for around a week."

"A week?" I asked, not believing this. It seemed as if I woke up not too long after I had spoken with Nick. But the doctor nodded.

"Yes. Can you tell me what month it is?" he asked. I thought about it for a moment before I remembered.

"It's... June," I said, not really sure about the answer. But I soon realized I was correct when he nodded.

"Yes, that's correct. Now, are there any questions you have for me? I'm sure your mother filled you in with what happened. But after having a few tests done we noticed you had a concussion and some head trauma. Is there anything you need help remembering?" he looked up at me then, a serious look on his face. I looked down at my hands which were lying on my lap in front of me.

"I... I think I'll remember things after a little while," I said. "I mean, I recognized my mother and since she's told me what happened, it's slowly coming back to me. But...I can't really remember what happened when I was kidnapped."

I decided to refrain from telling them I was somehow outside of my body during my coma because the last thing I wanted them to think was that I needed attention from the psych ward.

"That's completely normal. When someone goes through a traumatic event like you have, the brain goes through a mechanism to keep the person from remembering it," the doctor explained. "You may remember it as time goes on, though, if you allow yourself to. But Ashley, I must ask you one serious question. Do you remember anyone else being kidnapped with you?"

I was hesitant with answering this question. "No... why?"

The doctor then walked over to my bedside.

"Does this boy look familiar to you at all?" he asked, taking out a picture. Once I looked at the picture, my eyes immediately began to water.

"Ashley, what's wrong?" my mother asked me after a few moments of silence. I shook my head. "Have you seen him before?"

"No..." I croaked out, pushing the picture of Nick away from me. He couldn't be. He just couldn't. Nick couldn't be dead.

"The police found him some distance away from you," the doctor said. "Near the bridge above the highway."

"They think he was taken as well, honey," my mom said, clearly knowing more about the situation than I did. "Was he?"

"I..." I started, but then thought back to what Nick had said to me when we were invisible.

"You're in a coma," he clarified. "You're still technically alive, but...your soul has left your body. Considering that those guys nearly beat you to death, it's not surprising. But it could be worse."

It could be worse. Meaning, I could have been dead.

And then when he mumbled something afterwards, it had been in response to if there was anything we could do. And there wasn't—at least not for him, anyway.

"Wait... how do you know all of this?" I asked. Then I thought of another question, "Do I know you?"

"Personally, no," he said. "But..."

But what? He was probably about to tell me that he had been kidnapped as well, but I didn't let him finish.

I quickly looked at it, noticing it was still on and still had some battery left. I quickly punched in the three numbers that everyone in America knew by heart. I then held the phone up to my ear and waited.

The guy's eyes widened and you could tell this clearly came as a shock to him. I sighed in relief once a person came on, asking about the emergency.

It had come as a shock to him because he hadn't been able to pick up the phone because he was dead. I was still technically alive so I could still touch and handle things.

"If there was something I could do to get help or bring you back, I would. If anything, though, you have more power to do that than I do."

Because I could pick up the phone, I had more power. He didn't because he was dead.

"Yeah," he agreed. "They're going to help you though Ashley. Not me."

"Why not?" It was then that I realized something. "Where's your body, Nick?"

He gave a small smile. "They'll find it, don't worry. Look, they're almost here, so...everything will be explained fully to you soon."

And that's why they couldn't help him. They found his body, like the doctor said, but they couldn't help him.

He was already gone. That's probably what gave him the courage to kiss me.

Nick was wrong, though, when he said I had more power. Because really, he did. He knew what had happened. He remembered the kidnapping. He remembered me being there with him. He remembered everything.

"Yeah, I may have helped you remember but you helped me with something too," I suddenly heard. Coming back to reality, I realized my mother and the doctor had gone out into the hallway to discuss something. Looking to where the voice came from, I spotted Nick sitting on the windowsill in my room.

"What was that?" I choked out. He frowned at me, clearly not liking my sadness. He stood up and walked over to me, placing his hand on my cheek.

And then suddenly I had a flashback.

I was in a dark confined space, and it took the roar of an engine to make me realize I was in the back of a car. Or a van, more like it. Once my eyes adjusted more, I noticed Nick was there with me. And he was crying.

"Hey," I said. "It's going to be okay."

"How do you know that?" he asked. I couldn't really comfort him physically seeing as my hands and feet were tied together, as were his. But I could mentally.

"Our parents will find us," I said. "Knowing my dad, he'd give them above and beyond what they're asking for us just to have me back. The same with my mom. And if your parents really love you, they would do the exact same thing."

He didn't say anything to this, but I knew this meant that he agreed with what I said.

"Just stay calm," I said. "We'll be out of here before you know it."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. But things will get worse before they get easier," I said. I then looked at him. "Are you prepared for it?" Suddenly, the van stopped. "Because it looks like it's coming sooner rather than later."

"What are we going to do?"

"I have no idea," I said honestly. "But I'll go first, okay? And then while I release my kung fu fighting moves on them, you make a run for it. I'll be right behind you."

That got a small smile out of him.

"I'm Ashley, by the way."

"Nick," I heard him say just as the van door slid open.

That's where the flashback ended. I was then back in the hospital room with Nick still there, looking at me.

"I was pathetic, I know," Nick said. "But you were a real comfort to me. You gave me strength when I needed it."

"What happened after that?" I asked, not really wanting to know. But I went ahead and asked anyway.

"Well, you went first, like you said you would," Nick explained. "But after a few minutes of watching the three people that took us beating you, I couldn't take it. I somehow escaped from the ropes they tied me up with

and jumped on one of them. That distracted them from beating you. You were lucky, though, because their beating got a lot worse with me. And they lasted a lot longer too. After about ten minutes, that's when the gun shot rang out."

"They shot you?" I asked. He nodded.

"Yeah, but I mean, it was better me than you," he said. I shook my head.

"Why would you say that? It's not fair! Now you're dead and I'm not. I shouldn't have lived," I said. "If you hadn't jumped on them then you might still be alive."

"Hey, hey," he said, wiping my tears away. I had just now taken realization that he was able to touch me.

"Wait...how are you doing that?" I asked.

"I honestly have no idea," he said. "But I came back to visit you one last time. I had promised you that maybe I would see you, and...I couldn't let you down."

"Where are you going?" I asked. He laughed.

"Believe it or not, the big guy up there wants me," he said, pointing up. "But what I want to know is, will you be okay here now?"

"No," I said, being honest. "Why would I be? You're leaving, and you clearly don't deserve to."

"Well, I need you to be Ashley," he said. "I can't leave until you say you will be. But believe me when I say I can get awfully annoying after a while. I'll annoy you in order for you to give the okay if you don't."

I laughed sadly. "I know I hardly even know you, but it feels like I won't be able to make it here without you."

"I'll always be with you, Ashley," he said. "Just in spirit. Ironic, huh? You won't be able to see me, but I'll be here."

"Promise?" I asked. He nodded.

"Promise," he said. "Now, will you be okay?"

I smiled sadly. "I'll be okay."

"Good," he said, wiping away another tear from my face. "Don't cry, please?"

"I can't make that promise," I said. "But I said I'll be okay, alright? Now go. I'm sure He's expecting you."

"He can wait," he said, leaning down to me. He gave me one final kiss. "I'll see you, Ashley." He then walked toward the door, before turning around again, "Actually, I'll be with you."

"I'll be with you, too, Nick," I said.

Like he had done before I had woken up here, he gave me one last smile before leaving the room and my sight for the last time.

A Real Ghost's Story



By
Jennifer Dodds

“Do you really think it’s haunted?” Bonehead-One asked, tiptoeing into the foyer.

“Suzy Anderson came here with Mike Leiber last week and they said they saw her,” Bonehead-Two answered, chomping down on her gum as she followed Bonehead-One.

“The Witch of Todd Mansion?”

Bonehead-Two nodded and whipped her flashlight around, almost catching me as I ducked behind the wall. Hiding my laughter took some effort.

Witch of Todd Mansion. HAH!

I busied tables at Ruby Tuesdays when I was alive. Shouting obscenities at messy eaters was pretty much the extent of my cursing experience. It’s not like they hand out secret ghost manuals after death. There’s no Mr. Miyagi waiting on the other side, just years of stupid humans trespassing on your land and the frustration that came with being called a witch when you weren’t one.

Seriously. It’s offensive to witches worldwide.

When Bonehead-One reached the entrance to the dining room, I prepared for my best performance yet.

They thought I was a witch? Well, I’d give them exactly what they came for.

Using all the energy I could muster, I threw a nearby vase across the foyer and jumped in front of them, sputtering gibberish that would be misconstrued by the Boneheads as Latin. “Bah rah em, babla lo medly! The Witch has cursed you!”

Bonehead-One screeched and dropped the flashlight, tripping on her own two feet as she turned to run out of the front door. Bonehead-Two froze in her spot, her brown eyes wide and her mouth hanging open, gum falling out of her mouth.

“Get out!” I shouted. Still, the idiot didn’t move.

Didn’t she hear me? The witch had cursed her. She should be making for the hills by now. Why was she still standing there?

“I cursed you! Get out already!”

Her head tilted to the side and she raised an eyebrow. “Hey, aren’t you the girl that went missing a few years ago?”

What a stupid question. Lots of girls go missing every year.

Before I could tell her just that, Bonehead-One came back for her idiot friend and dragged the girl out the door behind her, not even bothering to shut it afterward.

Now, that’s just plain rude.

Once I stopped laughing and pulled myself together, I made my way to the back window to wait for Soldier Boy who’d be along in precisely ten minutes. Maybe today would be the day I broke him out of his cycle. Fat chance! He’d probably just carry on like he always did.

They said ghosts stick around because of some unfinished business, right? Patrick Swayze wanted to avenge his own death, Bruce Willis wanted to fix the unfixable kid, and Casper wanted a friend in Christina Ricci.

Well, that’s great. I wish they’d told me exactly what my unfinished business was before I died. At least then I could get started on some of that.

To be honest, I found being a ghost pretty boring. I hated it. No one to talk to, no one came to visit (except the occasional tween looking for a cheap thrill), and nothing ever changed. I’d gotten the idea to dye my hair purple a month before I died. Biggest mistake ever. Now, I was stuck with purple hair for the rest of eternity, and as far as ghosts go, nothing says “don’t take me seriously” quite like hair the color of Dimetapp. I figured this was why people thought I was a witch. Crazy colored hair must mean crazy brains.

The biggest thing I did this week was chase off a stray dog digging around in my kitchen. Thank my lucky stars those girls came by. That startled, pee-my-pants look on Bonehead-One’s face would keep me entertained for weeks.

Strange that Bonehead-Two recognized me, though. That had never happened before. Here I’d been thinking I only died months ago, but according to her I’d been missing a few years. I must have lost track of time somewhere along the way. Not like I could go out and buy a wall calendar or anything.

Nope. No going outside for me. We ghosts pretty much got stuck wherever we landed.

Take Soldier Boy, for example. Everyday at three-fifteen he showed up dressed in complete Confederate

garb and marched across that field beyond the trees, calling out for someone named Martha.

I'd grown accustomed to sitting at my window and waiting for him, hoping that eventually he'd give up on Martha and accept that he was a ghost like me. After all this time, he still hadn't gotten the message.

Right on cue, he appeared, his gray cap hanging sideways on his head and his musket slung across his back. "Martha!" he called. "Martha! I'm here! Where are you?"

"She doesn't want you, Soldier Boy! She ran off with a Yankee!" I shouted, but he didn't hear me. He never heard me, and Martha never came. He trudged halfway through the lawn and stopped, alarm tightening the features on his face.

"No! No, please, sir! I only came because I'm in love with your..." He gasped and fell to his knees, grabbing at his chest like he'd been shot. I often wondered who killed Soldier Boy originally, and despite my repeated attempts at asking him, he never finished that sentence. Did he lust after the rich married woman of a Yankee sympathizer? Was he infatuated with some wannabe Scarlett O'Hara until things took a turn for the worse? The theories never ceased, and I'd probably never know.

No, there's no Mister Miyagi on this side of the realm but I'd learned a few things on my own. Soldier Boy was what I called a repeater. He just kept doing the same thing over and over again no matter how many times I tried to communicate with him or get him to forget Martha.

Thank the good Lord I wasn't that kind of ghost. What a miserable existence that must be. Me? I was an intelligent haunt. I knew what was going on around me and I interacted with the people who came to investigate the Witch of Todd Mansion.

Even though I believed myself smarter than the average ghost, I couldn't figure out how to get out of this hovel. Every time I tried to break the barrier of a door or a window, some invisible force field pushed me back inside. I feared that whatever kept me here would continue to keep me here until the world ended or the apocalypse began.

Would there ever be any peace for me?

Something crashed in the kitchen. Instantly, I teleported my molecules to the sound only to find that same stray dog digging through trash in a lower cabinet.

"Boo!"

Startled, the dog jumped and yipped, tilting its head toward me with a snarl. Hackles rose on its back as those lips stretched over big yellowish teeth.

"Go on and bite me. I dare you. Want to know why? 'Cause you're in for the biggest surprise of your life, Buddy. You. Can't. Touch..."

"Dogs can see you, too?"

Holy crap!

I gasped and jumped and completely lost track of staying corporeal. If I had a heart, it would have skipped about fifteen beats.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph!

Bonehead-Two stood in the entrance to the kitchen, her skinny, scrawny arms wrapped around a book practically as big as she was. When did she get here? How did she get here? Why didn't I hear her when she came in? Did... Did a human just scare me?

"Hey!" she called out, big brown eyes looking left and right. "Where'd you go?"

Still, I didn't bring myself to focus again. What was she doing here? What sort of book was that? Why had she come back?

"Look, I didn't mean to scare you or anything," she said. "But I know that wasn't Latin you were speaking. I also know who you are, Charlie."

Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.

It echoed in my ears like a beautiful song, a soft poem. It had been a long time since anyone called me that. I'd almost forgotten it was my name.

"You went missing two and a half years ago in July. They never found you." She took a step closer, tugging that book monstrosity tighter to her chest.

I figured she couldn't be that bad, right? She knew who I was and what happened to me. At least she wasn't

calling me the Witch of Todd Mansion anymore. I focused as much energy as I could into making myself visible again, sending little vibrations down my arms and legs to keep myself appearing as normal as possible.

“That’s because I ended up here.”

“Obviously.” She was tall for her age probably. I guessed her maybe twelve or thirteen, all knees and elbows and skinny limbs too big for the rest of her. She pushed her blonde hair behind an ear and glanced at the horrid decay of my surroundings with big, brown eyes, slowly taking another step forward.

The wallpaper peeled, exposing great holes in the drywall that molded and crumbled with age. Dust and dirt blanketed every surface and looters had long since wrecked the furniture. I couldn’t smell a whole lot anymore (that sense went away quickly after I died), but I imagined the place probably reeked of animal excrement and old mildew.

Just because it was one of the oldest properties in this town didn’t mean it was particularly well maintained.

“So, what do you want?” I asked, already frustrated with her presence.

She shrugged. “I guess I wanted to help you.”

“Help me? Help me with what?”

“I don’t know. You’re a ghost, right?”

Stupid question. “Well, I’m certainly not a witch.”

She smirked. “Sorry about that. Ashley made me do it.”

“Do me a favor. Stop listening to Ashley. She’s got dumb ideas.”

The girl nodded and tucked her hair behind one ear. “I’m Rebecca.”

“Okay, Rebecca. Nice to meet you. Now, why don’t you take your dog and scamper on back home? I’m not in the mood for visitors.”

“That’s not my dog.” Though she denied ownership of said canine, she reached out and scratched him behind his ears. The beast melted into her hand, craning his neck in different directions to get just the right spots. “How did you die?”

“Fell off a cliff.”

“Really?” Rebecca snorted a laugh. “Which cliff?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know or you don’t remember?”

“Pick one. Why does it matter?”

“Not a lot of people have a chance to talk to a ghost. I’m curious if all of your memory is intact or if you really don’t know how you died.”

What kind of psycho-babble was that? Who the heck was this kid, anyway? Sigmund Freud? My eyes narrowed on her. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” she answered with a big smile, almost proud to be so young. Or maybe she had recently had a birthday and the dreaded thirteen was now behind her. “So, do you, you know, remember how you died?”

“Yeah, I fell off a cliff. Wile E. Coyote style. I didn’t even start to fall until I looked down.”

“And then you woke up here?”

“Pretty much.”

Rebecca hummed an inquisitive sigh and looked down to the book in her arms, her eyebrows creasing together on her forehead.

I tried to hold in my response. I tried not to encourage her but that look meant something. I had to know what. Despite the fact that I wanted her gone and out of my house, I couldn’t help asking, “What?”

“It’s curious. That’s all”

Waiting a moment, I hoped she’d elaborate without my telling her to do so. The little smart-ass held out, drawing me into the conversation against my will. “Go on.”

“Well, you didn’t live here. You graduated from the high school down the street from me so you had to have lived in my area, not the Todd Mansion. Why are you haunting it?”

Which was a good question—one I hadn’t thought about before and one I didn’t want to think about now. Something evil churned in my stomach and cold crept up my spine, twisting over my head like fingers on my scalp.

Why am I here? Why am I here?

Shaking my head and rolling my eyes, I let out a long, aggravated sigh. I wasn't in the mood for visitors and I definitely wasn't in the mood for prolonged conversation. I could already feel my energy starting to drain. Pretty soon, I'd have to start drawing from her to keep corporeal and that could get ugly fast.

"Look, kid..."

"Rebecca," she corrected.

"Whatever. I don't know why you came here or what you want from me, but I've got important ghost stuff to do and I'm sure you've got important teenage girl stuff to do. So what do you say you take a freaking hike already?"

"Is your anger part of being dead? Are you mad at the person who killed you?"

"No one killed me. I told you. I fell off a cliff."

"Did you kill yourself?"

"Stop asking me questions or so help me..."

"What?" she said with a small chuckle. "What are you going to do? Throw another vase at me? Yell at me in your made-up language? I'm not afraid of you."

At last. The reason she wouldn't leave. At least twenty or thirty people had come through here since I'd been haunting it and I'd sent them all packing. Some screamed, most just ran, but Rebecca... Rebecca wasn't scared.

"You're probably the first little girl in the history of the world that wasn't terrified of ghosts."

"Well, most little girls don't live with the ghost of their dead mother."

Oh, now it made sense. She'd dealt with a ghost before. This was familiar territory for her.

"I'm not your dead mother."

"I know that," she retorted. "I helped my mother move on. I think I can help you, too."

I stared at her for a moment, long enough to determine that she meant what she said, and then I burst out laughing.

"Move on?" I managed in between breaths. "Move on? Kid, there is no moving on. Believe me, I've tried."

"You need help moving on. If you could move on by yourself, you would have done it already. Duh." She plopped the book down on the dining room table, a plume of dust mushrooming to either side of it. "Now, let's try to figure out how you died and then we can figure out how to help you die the rest of the way, okay?"

"What if I don't want to die the rest of the way?"

Rebecca paused for a moment, then made a show of closing the book and giving me an incredulous glare. "You like being a bitchy ghost stuck in a crappy mansion with no one to talk to? Fine, I'll leave you alone. Sorry to have bothered you."

"Alright, alright!" I yielded. "It sucks. It absolutely sucks. What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me what you remember about the last day of your life."

After struggling to recall any memory whatsoever, the only thing that came to mind was my mother's face. Bright blue eyes. Weathered tan skin. She'd given me a kiss on the forehead and brushed a hand over my hair.

Where was I?

The smell of lemon floor cleaner permeated my nose and the prism of our chandelier danced across the beige walls of our foyer. I was at home. I was talking to my mother, telling her I'd be back soon.

"I think I left my house and I went for a walk."

"Yup." Rebecca said. "That's right."

"That's right?" How could it be right or wrong? Did she already know what happened to me?

"Your parents said they saw you wander down East Street and that you turned right on Elm. But after that, they don't know where you went. Do you remember?"

East Street? Where the hell was East Street? Did I live on these streets? Maybe. A bright green sign reading "East Street" flashed through my mind, so real and visceral, as if I'd seen it everyday of my life. Perhaps I had. After that? Nothing. The memory dissolved and swirled into a dark cloud and no matter how much I tried to pull it back, nothing came.

I shook my head. "I don't know, Kid. I sort of remember that, I guess, but there's nothing afterward."

"Okay," Rebecca said, flipping over another page in that enormous book.

"What is that thing anyway?"

"When I was trying to help my mom, I collected everything I could find about ghosts. I even added some things myself."

"Are you a Ghost Whisperer or something?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. I used to see my grandfather when I was a child. At first, my mom didn't believe me. Then I called her Betsy, which is what her dad used to call her. She believed me after that."

I paused, debating whether I should ask the next question. As much as I didn't want her here, I certainly didn't want her to start crying. I decided to ask anyway.

"How'd she die?"

"Cancer. She knew I could see ghosts so she hung around for while."

"How'd you get her to move on?"

"I found out the reason why she was hanging around and I solved it, just like I'm going to do with you."

Rebecca looked up at me and pushed her hair behind her ears again, her eyes red and cheeks flushed.

Abort! Abort! Tears in T-minus ten seconds. Time for a subject change. "Have you seen my parents?"

She nodded and glanced back down to the book. "Your mom's obviously having a hard time. Your dad pretends like nothing's wrong. And your sister..."

My sister...

Oh, God. Oh, God!

A slice of panic cut into my stomach and fisted my insides until they threatened to explode. Why did it hurt so much to think about my sister? Where was my sister? What had happened to her?

"Is she okay?"

"She's recovering."

"Recovering? What the hell does that mean?"

At the curse, Rebecca's gaze snapped back to mine. "Calm down, Charlie."

No! No! I didn't have to calm down! She was in my house. I didn't ask her to come here. I didn't want her help.

"Charlie..." Rebecca said again, her tone light and musical, as if she were trying to coax down a wild horse. "Your sister is okay. She took your death the hardest, I think. She was in my grade, you know. That's why I recognized you. We were friends for a little while."

"Were friends?"

Rebecca shrugged, a simple bounce of her shoulders. "She doesn't really talk to anyone anymore. I tried to keep in touch with her, but she missed a few months of school and she had to repeat a grade."

My heart broke just imaging it. Little Jessica with tears in her eyes, looking for me and waiting for me to come back, and here I was, stuck in this stupid place, screaming at stupid Soldier Boy and scaring Boneheads.

Ugh! I didn't want to think about this. Still, I yearned for more information.

"Bring her here. I want to see her. I want to tell her I'm okay."

"No." Rebecca shook her head. "I can't do that."

"What? Why not?"

"Not everyone can see ghosts, Charlie. Not even Ashley could see you and I think Mike Leiber was lying when he told me he did. Ashley only got freaked out because of the vase, not because of you. Even if I brought Jessica here, she wouldn't believe me. Most likely, she'd think I was teasing her and then she'd hate me."

"She'll believe you! Just ask her, okay? Just bring her here. Just bring her." Desperate as I was to see my baby sister again, I didn't care about the possible repercussions of my demand. I didn't care that seeing me again might negatively affect her. All I cared about was mussing her hair and giving her a kiss and telling her I loved her. She didn't need to be so upset about me.

Rebecca gave me a small smile and nodded. "Okay, I'll try. Tomorrow. I promise."

Something in her eyes made me doubt her, but a small glimmer of hope blossomed deep inside of me anyway. If I could tell my sister I was here, she could come visit me and we'd be just like we used to be. I wouldn't be alone anymore.

"Let's keep working, okay?" Rebecca said.

I tried to focus, but all I could think about was Jessica. I hoped Rebecca kept her promise to try to bring

her here. Even if my sister didn't initially believe Rebecca, there are things I could tell her to say that would make Jessica believe. Secret things. Things only the two of us knew.

Christ! Could I even remember those things anymore? Where had we gone when we snuck out that one Fourth of July? What was the name of her favorite stuffed animal?

Every day, I lost more of who I used to be. Maybe I didn't really remember how I died and I'd completely made up the cliff story. Maybe my memories would continue to slip away from me until nothingness consumed me. Would I invent new memories or would I simply lose my mind altogether?

Of course, I'd only been dead two and a half years. In another fifty or a hundred, I could only guess how I might think or feel. Maybe I'd become like Soldier Boy, mindlessly reenacting my own death until the end of the world.

Well, at least then I'd know how I died. Silver lining, I guess.

"Do you know where your body is?" Rebecca continued.

"Wherever my parents buried me. Duh!" I mocked her earlier tone.

She took a deep breath and pursed her lips. "They never found your body, Charlie."

Oh. Right...

"Well, I guess my body's at the bottom of whatever ravine I fell off when I died."

"You didn't fall off a cliff," she said, giving another shake of her head.

"And just how do you know?"

"Because you wandered off one day and never came back. There are no cliffs around here within walking distance. Besides, your soul is attached to Todd Mansion for some reason. As you can see," she gestured out the window to the back yard. "No cliffs."

Huh. "Well, I distinctly remember falling."

"Try to think really hard."

"I am," I grumbled, draining more energy in my frustration. Rebecca crossed her arms over her chest and tucked her hands under her elbows. When she exhaled, I saw smoke pouring out over her lips, her shoulders wiggling in a violent shiver.

Aw, crap!

I'd already sucked the atmosphere dry of its energy and now I'd begun to pull on hers. If she didn't get away soon, she'd end up right here next to me. While the idea of a companion appealed to me, I'd never been a big fan of children and being stuck with one for the next million years literally sounded like hell.

"I think you should go, Rebecca," I told her. "I can hurt you if I get too tired."

She must have decided I had a valid point because she closed her book and stood, gathering it to her chest like before. "Try to remember where your body is. Most of the time, a ghost is attached to their remains. If you're haunting the place, your body is probably here somewhere."

Was my body still here? And if it was, why hadn't I come across it yet?

I tried to think of the first time I'd realized I was a ghost and found that I couldn't remember. When had I first called out to Soldier Boy? When I had I first scared an intruder? Had it really been over two years that I'd been stuck here?

I'd been through every room in the mansion, upstairs and downstairs and through the corridors. I'd jumped on the ancient, rotted mattresses and rifled through what little possessions had been abandoned by the last owners. Though the basement freaked me out, I'd still explored as much as I could and found no evidence of my body whatsoever.

The sun set and rose again before Rebecca returned, carrying the same heavy book as yesterday. I was sitting at my window watching for Soldier Boy when she appeared from around the corner. She walked to one end of the yard and back again, eyes studying the grass.

What the heck is that girl doing?

"Hey!" I shouted, banging on the window. "Rebecca. What are you doing?"

She only looked up and smiled before continuing to browse. The stray dog walked at her side, nose down to the ground as they strolled. They reached a spot about halfway between Soldier Boy and me before the dog abruptly stopped and began digging, his little front paws chucking dirt out behind the back.

“Smell something, boy?” Rebecca asked, kneeling down to pat the dog on its head. Her features dropped and her eyes slowly rose to meet mine.

Something about seeing her there set off a screeching alarm in my head. Something about that spot seemed familiar. I looked at it every day for over a year, but only now that Rebecca stood there did it finally hit me.

“I hate her,” I shouted to no one in particular, crossing my arms as I trudged up the crumpling steps into Todd Mansion. “I just hate her. She gets whatever she wants and I get diddley-squat!”

Jessica had stolen some of my clothes and gotten away with it. Again! My parents didn’t even care! The assholes. It’s my stuff. Just because she’s my little sister doesn’t mean she has free rein to my bedroom.

Maybe tomorrow, I’d go out and buy a lock for my door. That would show them all, wouldn’t it? No one goes in my room but me.

That’s if I made it out of this storm okay. In my anger, I’d called Jessica a sneaky brat and stormed out. Forty-five minutes later, the sky opened up and dumped buckets on me, as if the weather sensed my mood and wanted to make my day even worse. Thick water droplets bounced off the ground in tremendous thuds, releasing the pressure of the stifling, humid day. I passed the Todd Mansion every day on my way to school, but I’d never been inside before.

Now, it seemed like the best place to wait out the storm.

The whole place reeked like mildew and an inch of dust coated every surface. I remember Riley Miller telling me this place was haunted, that her sister had gone in here on a dare and “almost didn’t make it back out alive.” Whatever that means. Riley’s big sister always embellished her stories, and I hardly believed in ghosts. However, standing there in the foyer with my only light the brief illumination of crackling lightening outside, it was easy to see why she’d been so freaked out.

This place could be the setting for Stephen King’s next novel.

I clutched my hands into fists and took a step forward, forcing myself to breath evenly.

“Ghosts aren’t real,” I told myself. “Ghosts aren’t real.”

A sudden boom of thunder roared right over the mansion and I jumped, eyes searching the area for any kind of threat. I’d been so focused on ghosts, but the more likely scenario involved homeless people or wild animals.

“Hello?” I called out. “Anyone here?”

No answer.

“Hello?”

“Martha!” a voice rang out, scaring the living crap out of me. I gasped and jumped and clutched at my chest and prayed I didn’t have a heart attack in such a dreadful place.

“No, I’m not Martha.” I crossed into the dining room, ears straining for the source of the voice. “I’m Charlie. Where are you?”

“Martha! I’m here! Where are you?”

Was that coming from outside?

My gaze narrowed on a figure standing about fifty feet out in the backyard but with the rain falling so hard, I couldn’t quite make him out.

Surely, wandering around in the rain couldn’t be good for anybody so the better part of me wanted to call out to him to seek shelter in the house with me. The other part of me, however—the smarter part—wondered why this guy was just wandering out in the rain, calling out for Martha. Seemed a little crazy. Was he off his meds? Of course, prior to finding myself in front of Todd Mansion, I had been wandering around, muttering to myself about my sister.

Who was I to judge?

“Hey, buddy!” I shouted, crossing into the kitchen so I could go out the backdoor. “Hey! There’s no Martha here! Now, why don’t you come inside and wait out the storm?”

He didn’t even stop walking. He just kept marching closer and closer until he reached the midpoint of the field where he stopped.

“No! No, please, sir! I only came because I’m in love with your...” He gasped and collapsed to his knees, gripping at his chest like he was the one having a heart attack.

“Hey. You alright?”

No answer.

Did he just die? Holy crap! Holy crap!

“Hey, Buddy! Are you dead?”

Damn it! Now what do I do? Do I go out there and check on him? Or wait here until the storm clears? Of course, he could be really dead by that point and, if I got to him now, he might only be mostly dead and I could call 911. Maybe I’d save his life.

Okay. Okay. Am I doing this?

I’m doing this.

The rain was a thick, grey curtain separating me from this stranger, and even though I couldn’t really see him, I marched down the stairs and slogged through the blanket of water flooding the overgrown grass anyway. The sky looked angry tonight, dark grey clouds fuming into huge puffs that spoke of how hot it had been earlier today. I trudged to the spot where I thought he’d fell and looked around.

Nothing. No one.

What the... Where’d he go?

I’d definitely seen someone, right? A tall guy dressed in grey, with something slung over his back.

“Hello?” I spun around in a circle, looking in every direction I could for this mystery dude, but he was gone. Just gone!

Like he’d disappeared into thin air.

“Rusty! I said give me the rifle! You’re not doing it right!” came a voice from somewhere behind me. I twirled around, expecting to see the same guy I’d seen just moments before.

“Shut up, Jeremy! I’m doing it fine!” another voice shouted, high pitched and whiny. A child’s voice. Both of them.

A loud boom echoed over the field, so piercing that, at first, I thought it was thunder. When I realized it was a gunshot, I tried to take a step forward to yell at Rusty and Jeremy for shooting in the field. This wasn’t some goddamn gun range! Except... my legs wouldn’t move. They wouldn’t work. In fact, I couldn’t feel them at all.

What the...

A warm, sticky substance trickled over my stomach and down my legs. Not water, not rain. Thicker. A coppery scent filled the air, coated my tongue, and slithered down my throat, made me want to gag. Eyes moving slowly, I glanced down and noticed the growing maroon spot on my white tee shirt.

Now, how the hell did that get there?

Oh... Oh, no!

Agony ricocheted through me, arching my spine and buckling my knees under me. Every nerve in my body was alive and struggling to alert my brain to the damage done to my torso, but my brain couldn’t comprehend it all. The ground rushed up to meet me, my head slammed hard against the mud. Eyes heavy and throat closing, I focused in on two sets of feet rushing closer.

“Oh shit! Look at what you did, Rusty! I told you to give me the gun!”

“You’re the one who said Todd Mansion was safe! ‘No one ever comes here,’ that’s what you said!”

They bickered amongst themselves as my muscles relaxed and my vision darkened. Every molecule gave into the inevitable situation. I was dying. This was it. It was over.

“Charlie,” Rebecca said, suddenly right behind me. She must have come back inside while I stumbled my clumsy way down memory lane. “Are you okay?”

“Is it my body?” I asked even though I already knew the answer.

“I think so. I’m going to call the police, alright?”

“Yeah. Sure. Police.” At least, I think that was what I sputtered at her. My mind was still trying to catch up on everything I’d forgotten. Who were Rusty and Jeremy? Why had they left me here? That’s when I remembered my first day as a ghost inside Todd Mansion. Sitting at this window, watching those two kids dig a hole and shove me into it.

Rebecca pulled out her cell phone and talked to the operator on the other end of 911 for a few minutes. They said they’d send out a car right away if Rebecca would wait.

“I remember how I died, Rebecca. Two kids were out in the field playing with their rifle. One shot me by

accident.”

“Kids? What kids?”

Rusty and Jeremy. It would be so easy to say their names. But would it really matter? Rebecca wouldn't be able to prove it was them, especially not if they got rid of the gun after I died. Part of me wanted to see them rot in jail, the little shits. The other part of me, the part that wanted to be the bigger man, realized that they probably didn't know any better. They were kids, probably no older than Rebecca, and they made a mistake. No sense in ripping open old wounds. It would only do more harm than good. Deep down, all I wanted in the world was to see my bones returned to my family. I just wanted to be free. That was more important to me.

“It doesn't matter,” I told her. “Just get me home, Rebecca. Promise me that.”

“I promise,” she said with a nod, tucking her hair behind her ears. “It's okay, now. Your family will get closure. Everyone can move on.”

Move on. Was that what I wanted them to do? Move on? Forget about me? Had they already forgotten about me? From what Rebecca said, my sister hadn't.

“Did you try to talk to Jessica?”

Rebecca shrugged and tucked one arm under the other elbow, which I took as a negative.

“Yeah, I suppose it wasn't a good idea after all, was it? She probably wouldn't believe you.”

A few quiet moments later, a police officer arrived and Rebecca showed them to my final resting spot. He gasped and covered his mouth, bending down to get a better look. When he convinced himself they were, in fact, human bones, he said something on that little radio thing on his shoulder. Rebecca stood next to him, petting the stray dog behind the ears. After that, some other people arrived and they carefully extracted each of my parts from the ground, digging and dusting with little archaeology tools.

“Wait a second,” one of them said, brushing and rubbing at a spot next to me. “What's this?”

“Is that a second body?” the cop asked, walking closer with his hands on his hips.

A second body? What the hell?

“Looks like it,” the guy with the tools said. “Here, let me go deeper.” A few more moments passed. “Holy shit! Johnson, come take a look at this. This one's older. A lot older.”

Older?

The atmosphere cracked right next to me and I jumped, gasping and clutching at my chest.

What the heck was that?

“Soldier Boy?”

“Hello,” he said, his tone deep and thick with a southern accent. “I'm Phillip.”

“Charlie.”

He extended his hand toward me, which I hesitantly took and gave a firm shake.

Wow. The sensation of touching someone again shot through me, jolting a shiver up and down my arms. Could a ghost get goose bumps?

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” I told him. “But Martha's not here, either.”

He smirked and stepped forward, coming inline with me to look out the window. “Martha's run off with a Yankee, right? Or was it the milk man? It changes everyday.”

“You heard all that?”

“I wanted to talk to you, too. I wanted to break the cycle,” he said. “But I could not stop. I did not know how.”

“They found our bodies,” I said, nodding to the window.

“I think that is what finally shook me out of it. I guess I have you to thank for that.”

“Hey, don't thank me. I got shot and the Boneheads who did it just happened to bury me next to you.”

“You got shot, too?”

“Yeah,” I groaned. “Long story. Wait for the movie.”

“Movie?”

Oh. Right. Guess Soldier Boy wasn't really around for silents and talkies, huh?

“Never mind. Hey! We both got shot, how about that? Who shot you?”

“Martha's father. He did not want his daughter marrying a rebel.”

“Figures,” I said with a chuckle. “Damn Yankees.”

“So, what happens now?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You tell me. You’ve been a ghost a lot longer than I have.”

He didn’t answer, just glanced at me with those green puppy dog eyes that begged for my kindness, whatever little I had left. I decided I’d be lenient, considering we were ghosts together and all.

“I suppose I’ll be taken to my family and you’ll be put in a military cemetery somewhere.”

Phillip frowned and didn’t seem to like that answer very much, so I grabbed his hand again and took a deep breath. “We could try to move on, if you wanted.”

“Move on?”

“Yeah. To the next... whatever.”

He raised an eyebrow with an inquisitive look. “Do you mean heaven?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know. Wherever it is that ghosts go when they move on.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, giving my hand a tight squeeze. “Yeah. Okay.”

Something about having Phillip by my side made leaving easier, maybe even less frightening. Sure, I’d only just officially met him, but I felt like I knew him personally. Fate had buried us next to each other and that told me we were supposed to face this together. We’d make it through whatever else the afterlife had to offer... together.

Rebecca chose that moment to glance back toward the window, making eye contact with me. As if she knew precisely what was happening inside, she gave me a small wave and a wide smile, which I returned with my free hand.

Tingles radiated over my skin, seeming to sink into my very soul. A weight lifted off my chest—a weight I’d never even know was there. I had no idea where we were headed or what we’d find when we got there, but I hoped for hair dye and a hot shower.

So Cold, So Dark, Melissa Collins



By
Jennifer Liggett

It is so cold, so dark, and I'm not sure where I am. I remember walking out of work to my car and hearing a noise behind me. That's it. That's all I can remember. Now I'm somewhere unfamiliar, somewhere cold and dark. I'm not sure what I should do. Should I panic, yell, scream or cry? Are my friends playing a joke on me or could this be the things we see in the news and think how horrible? This could never happen to me. So this is my story; this is how I, Melissa Collins survived the unimaginable.

For weeks I was in "zombie" mode. I'd get up go to work in my cubical punching numbers and then I'd leave later in the evening, order some kind of take out and watch TV for about two hours then head to bed. Then I'd just repeat the same routine the next day. I was a stickler for sticking with the familiar. I parked in the same spot or at least close to it, I left work at the same time and I call the same exact place for food each night. While I lay on this cold floor, I think to myself, "Wow, how easy did I make it for the person or persons that took me." I basically mapped out my entire routine to anyone that would want to know.

Who would want to do this? What is it that they want from me? I can't hear anything around me. I'm not sure if I'm in a sound proof box or a room. I am still laying on my right side with my upper body slightly off the floor on my elbow. I decided that the best thing to do is to try and stand up, feel my way around and see if there is anything in this room or box with me. The problem with this is that it is completely dark; I could not see my hand in front of me. I felt my body, I still had all of my clothes, and nothing appeared to be injured. I slowly walked forward with one arm stretched out in front of me and the other out slightly to my right. Within minutes, I ran into a cold wall and then with one arm still touching the wall I turned myself 180 degrees to face directly parallel to the wall.

From this point I began to walk and count each step from the wall. I wanted to see how big of a place I was in. As I began my 12th step my toe stubbed the wall. I began to walk along the side of the wall feeling for anything I could use for protection or a way out. I reached the end of the wall and a corner, but the wall seems to turn into bars that are evenly placed to the other end where the parallel wall begins again. Is this a cage? Am I locked in a cage? I reach through the bars and I can barely touch what is on the other side. I now can hear someone walking around outside of this wall. I don't know if I should yell or if this person is keeping me here. This person may hurt me if I yell.

By now I feel hungry which tells me it has to be close to the normal time I usually eat. So I have only been locked up for close to an hour or two, which means I have to be somewhere close to my work or home. Who could have me here? Who sees me daily, knows my routine and could have access to me without me knowing? I'm usually the last one out from work, and I don't stop anywhere to pick up food. I have it delivered. "Oh my God," that's it! This has to be my delivery guy. He is the only person who knows where I live, what kind of car I drive, and who would have access to follow me. But, why?

I began to cry out,

"Please, please open the door! I'm so cold."

I hear a rattle, a bang, and then see a glimpse of light. The door begins to swing open. There he stood, my delivery guy, still dressed in his work clothes. He just stared, not saying anything. I ask him

"Why are you doing this?"

He smiled slyly and said, "I'm doing this for you." I was taken back at first, not knowing what he meant. So I asked him. He came closer and I noticed the keys hooked on his belt loop. As he got closer he leaned into the bars and whispered, "Because you need some excitement in your life and I'm about to give you some."

At that very moment I grabbed his head and smashed it into the bars. He fell down unconscious. I frantically reached through the bars grabbing the keys! I stood up, found the key hole and unlocked the door. I ran looking around as I noticed I was in an abandoned warehouse. I reached the main road, finally free and was able to get help. I told the cops everything and they later came back and said that they found the warehouse, but no one was there. As they investigate further they told me that the delivery guy never worked for the restaurant and that the actual delivery guy said he was always met outside of my building by security who would take the food to the apartment. Still, even today I don't know who or even why, but what I do know is I, Melissa Collins, survived and learned to never be predicable and to enjoy life!

Life Goes On

It's been a few months since the indescribable horror that I was subjected to by the nameless stranger that

abducted me. Every day is different. Sometimes, I find myself obsessively changing my daily activities and routine just to ease my mind. Life has become harder. It is tough to hold jobs, keep friends and trust anyone. Every man I pass on the street I see him. I see his unshaven face, tall lanky body with shoddy tattoos of random symbols and the sly smirk on his face.

Today is Tuesday and I have to be at work by eight am. Since I keep my routine unpredictable I have to leave at different times in the morning depending on which route I drive to work. Unfortunately, this way of doing things has led me to be late a good bit and to lose jobs. So things have been tight, financially. Keep my hair up or down. If that was the hardest decision I would have to make each day life would seem so simple. I like my new job because it is peaceful working in a pre-school with youngsters and seeing their smiling faces carefree and alive with energy gives me a sense of peace for the few hours a day that I'm there.

I have done my best to make friends with a few coworkers so that I don't feel so scared and alone. They are nice but I know I don't open up completely, and because of this it's hard for them to understand me. I often wonder if maybe I should change my name, move far away from here to start a new life. Then, maybe I would be able to relax and enjoy life. I struggle with the fact that I don't know where my captive is or if he is still out there watching me and waiting for an opportunity to finish what he started.

Tonight some friends from work invited me to go out to the local club for drinks and dinner. I've never been out like that before and never really drank, but I knew it would be good for me to get out of the house and be around people. Sarah, one of the girls from work, said she would pick me up by seven.

"Wow!" "I mean what could happen, especially since I'm not driving alone."

I stand in front of my full length mirror in gray dress slacks and a white knit sweater with my hair pulled back in a bun. What am I going to wear! I look through my barren closet and I start to think this is a bad idea, but I have to do this. It's good for me.

"Oh my god it's already six thirty!" "I'm not going to be ready in time."

After finding something to wear, which was a pair of overly tight blue jeans that I haven't worn in years, and a light blue v neck T-shirt that my grandma sent me a few years ago for my birthday, the doorbell rings. Sarah is here to get me.

"Hello Sarah" I awkwardly said.

"Hey Melissa you ready to go?" Sarah said excitedly.

"Do I look ok for the club" I nervously said hoping for a good response.

"Umm... ah... yeah sure, you look fine." Sarah said in a very uncertain voice.

I grabbed my purse, which I now I keep a small 22 pistol in for protection, and off we went to the club. I was nervous. What would I see or how would I act in a club? The club was only about twenty minutes from my neighborhood which helped put my mind at ease. We got there shortly after seven and the place was packed, so we sat in the dining area first so we could eat. With our backs against the wall I could feel the vibrations of the loud music next door. I was getting excited to go to my first club and night out with friends.

It was now almost nine o'clock and we had just paid our food tab. I had one drink at dinner although I never really drink. My friend ordered me something she called a screw driver. It was good and tasted mostly like orange juice. I stood up to get ready to go over to the club and found I was a little light on my feet. We walked next door and the music was so loud that I didn't even hear Sarah ask me if I wanted another drink. Sarah turned around from the bar and handed me another orange juice drink thingy. Sarah and the other girls started venturing out onto the dance floor, but I was hesitant to join because besides dancing around my apartment alone to music I've never really danced in front of people.

"Come on Melissa, come dance with us." The one girl shouted.

Sarah was waving her arm as if to say come out. I shook my head with a slight smile as to say no thank you. Apparently, I didn't know that it wasn't really my choice. Next thing I know Sarah is dragging me and my drink out onto the middle of the crowded elbow to elbow people on the dance floor.

"Let's party!" Sarah yelled.

"Have you ever been to this club?" said Sarah questionably.

"No, I've never been to this club." I responded.

Obviously, I know I've never been to any club but I didn't want her to know how lame I am. We danced and

danced for what felt like hours. I probably had three more drinks during this time. I was so relaxed and so carefree that it was like I hadn't a worry in the world. I almost forgot that just a few months ago I was in a cold metal box waiting for my freedom. As I twirled, dipped and waved my arms around, I looked towards the back of the club near the restrooms, and I lost my breath.

There he was, standing in the far back of the room just staring at me. His eyes were black as coal, his hands were in his pockets, and he wore an old ratty baseball cap on his head. I froze, my body stiff, unable to catch my breath as I had locked eyes with him. I did not know what to do. The girls I was with had no idea about what happened to me and they would think I was crazy if I tried to explain it now. I was afraid to take my eyes off of him and worried I'd lose him in the crowd, but the feeling of his eyes on me was disturbing to the point I wanted to vomit.

"Melissa why aren't you dancing?" shouted Sarah from the dance floor.

"Ah... oh... sorry I got tired." I shuddered.

As I turned back to where my captive had been standing I noticed he was gone and out of my sight. I was panicked, but couldn't let on to the girls that I was scared. I thought maybe it was not him. Maybe I drank too much and it was the alcohol getting to me. I pretty much talked myself into the fact that I was losing my mind and that there would be no way he found me here. I turned back to the girls and said that I was going to go to the restroom because I needed to wash my face and pull myself together.

As I saw the Neon ladies sign flashing above the door, I pushed my way in through three giggling women coming out of the bathroom. I sat in the stall staring at all the funny things people had written as I tried to shake off the eerie feeling I had. I heard the bathroom door swing open, but I didn't hear anyone talking or giggling, just footsteps walking passed my stall. I paused, mid pee. There is no way this could be. He could not have just walked into the female bathroom with no one seeing him.

I slowly stood up, pulled my now sweat dampened pants and buckled them. Gradually, I reached into my purse and retrieved my gun, hands shaking, and barely able to hold the gun still long enough to take the safety off. I had only shot this thing a few times. Little by little, I turned the door knob to the stall and crept out looking side to side holding the gun out. Trembling, I turned my back to the sinks, facing the stalls and pointed the gun at the last stall where I could see his shadow.

The door slowly crept open and the squeaky door hinge was all I could hear. The silence was spine-chilling. The door was now wide open as I slowly started to back towards the bathroom exit when he stepped out of the stall, not saying a word. He just stood there staring at me.

"If you ever come near me again I swear I'll kill you" I shouted sternly.

"No you won't. Look at your hands, your shaking." he said with a grin on his face.

"I swear to you, don't come near me" I sneered at him.

BANG! BANG! The gun suddenly went off.

"Oh my god! What did I do?" I thought.

The sirens, the screaming, and the flashing lights of the club's fire alarm are all that I heard. Someone pulled the fire alarm when they heard the gun shots. I sat down on the cold floor crying, just staring at his limp dead body while blood soaked through his dingy shirt.

"He lunged at me. He would never had stopped." I murmured.

"I had to do it. I would have never had a life." I kept repeating as I sat rocking back and forth.

Predator



By
Lydia Grove

The sun beat down on the earth, pummeling it into sweltering submission. It was the dead center of July. All of the animals were taking shelter from the sun's harsh rays. I couldn't even see the song birds of summer or hear their beautiful voices. They must have hid away in the dark recesses of their homes where the heat couldn't reach, safe and comfortable.

Using the back of my hand I wiped away the sweat that was rolling down my brow. Today was a good day to stay inside and enjoy a tall, cold glass of tea with ice clinking off the rim. I pictured the watery condensation leisurely sliding down the sides of a cup and the sharp aroma of mint that my mother always added to our tea. The idea to hide away in the house was tempting; however it was also a perfect day to go out to a beloved pond, known as "Salamander Heaven," with your best friend. Planning to do just that, I bounced impatiently from foot to foot waiting for Emily to arrive. We have been planning to hangout for weeks now, but with both of us being high school juniors we could never seem to find the time. But, today we finally could and I couldn't wait to spend a day relaxing out in the woods.

A few minutes passed before I heard the crunch of tires traveling down the dirt road that lead to my house. Emily was finally here! I ran out to greet her.

"It's about time you got here! Where've ya been?" I said jokingly.

Emily smiled brightly and laughed. "I'm like..." she glanced down at her phone, "a minute late!"

"Whatever" I teased, "Let's get going! There are salamanders to catch!" Emily nodded enthusiastically and we headed towards the woods behind my house.

The path we took was a familiar one. We've traveled it hundreds of times over the many years Emily and I have been friends. The shade the leaves offered as we entered the woods was cool and inviting. They protected and offered us some relief from the harsh rays of the sun. The birds chirped cheerfully, fluttering from branch to branch and all around the croaking love songs of the peepers could be heard. I inhaled a breath, the rich scent of the forest reaching my nose. All the worries of high school dropped away and I finally felt at home. I looked over at Emily as we walked in comfortable silence; her expression showed she was feeling same. Nothing could have been more perfect.

In a short time Emily and I made it to Salamander Heaven. The pungent stagnant smell of the pond was strong, but inviting. As we walked towards the edge salamanders streaked to the center of the pond and frogs jumped into the water, taking refuge in the mud. Electric green algae floated at the surface of the water, hiding unsuspecting creatures from view.

"There," I whispered, pointing towards a streak of bright orange floating close to shore in the dark water.

Emily nodded and quietly stalked toward the unknowing salamander. She got into position, her body leaned out over the water, arms outstretched, and her hands formed the shape of a cup. She was ready to pounce. I watched Emily prepare for the catch, but something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Something was in the woods, swiftly moving between the trees—a dark shadow just at the edge of the woods.

When I turned to look, whatever it was had gone. But, I could still feel it watching. I scanned the forest, sure that it was still there. What was it? I was so focused on what could be in the woods I had forgotten about Emily and the salamander until...Splash!! My feet were about two feet off the ground. A squeal, very similar to that of a pig, escaped my lips in a whoosh of air. I turned breathless, my chest heaving. I exhaled a sigh of relief and calmed my nerves. I'm being too jumpy. It was probably just a deer or squirrel. There's nothing in the woods that can hurt us. I turned to see Emily pulling her hands out of the pond.

"I got it!" she shrieked. Emily ran over, her hands cupped out in front. Water and slimy algae dripped from her fingers. Her open palm revealed a small orange salamander, a set of black spots raced down its back in linear rows. The creature was unconcerned as it leisurely gazed up at Emily and I. Gently I reached out and traced a pinky finger the whole way down to its tail; it didn't seem to mind.

"You wanna catch one," Emily asked as she slowly released the salamander in her hand. I followed its movement until it disappeared in the murk.

"You bet!" I said excitedly. I dismissed the "shadow" and made my way over to the opposite end of Salamander Heaven, closer to the woods. Almost immediately there was a noise, a twig snapping. The sound echoed through the trees. I looked to see if Emily had heard the noise. If she did she didn't let on.

I dared to look behind me into the shaded forest. What in the world? There was a man, just standing there

staring at us. I couldn't look away; it was like a famous actor walked right off the screen and into the woods. He was gorgeous, built like a Greek god, muscled and lithe and just beautiful. My mouth hung open as I gawked, I couldn't help it. My eyes traveled up to his handsome face, where I was greeted with an attractive smirk. The man lifted his head, his sandy blonde hair falling away from his face and met my eyes with his. I recoiled instantly. They were too intense. His cunning blue eyes traveled between me and Emily, waiting to see which one would run... and he knew we would.

We have to get out of here. I turned to get Emily, who still hadn't noticed what was happening,

"Emily," I whispered, barely audible to my own ears. The man cocked his head to the side, listening like a dog, his ears picking up my words. I knew he had heard even though he was well out of range. His lips peeled back into a snarl revealing sharp pointed canines. Wait. What? This is so wrong! I thought. I was done trying to be cautious. I wanted to be safe from whatever that man was.

"Emily! Run!" She didn't have time to respond. I grabbed her arm, hauling her away from the predator. Our feet pounding the ground, my heart thudded in my chest and I could hear the roar of blood and adrenaline in my ears.

"What's going on," Emily asked breathless, her eyes wide with panic.

"Just don't stop running! Get out of the woods and don't you dare look back!" I demanded as we pushed aside underbrush that seemed determined to slow us down.

I didn't have to look to know that the man was gaining on us. I could hear his panting breaths, his feet slamming against the dirt and crushing dead leaves. He was gaining ground with every stride. I couldn't help it; I had to look. It would only be a second. I turned my head and saw that the man was no longer there, but we were still being chased. In his place was a wolf. Its sandy blonde fur shone in the sun along with its sharp bared canines. I caught a quick glimpse of the wolf's eyes. They were way too intense, staring after them with the cunning and calculation of a predator. There was something about its eyes. The too intense blue gaze was all too familiar. This isn't right, I thought. Wolves don't live around this area and they definitely don't resemble mysterious men that roam the forest!

It didn't matter; we just needed to run. I kept an eye on Emily as she ran in front of me. At least one of us needed to make it out to go get help. I quickly glanced behind us to see how close the malicious animal was. To my horror, a tree root snagged my foot and sent me crashing to the ground with a yelp. I struggled to gain purchase on the ground, but it was too late. I felt the pressing weight of the wolf on top of me. Its hot breath sent chills up my spine and its coarse fur scratched at my bare legs. There was a searing pain in my calf and a scream tore out of my throat. I thrashed, my foot connected with the wolf's muzzle and was followed with a satisfying whine. The animal let go of my calf long enough for Emily to help me to my feet.

We continued to run, my side burning with every step. The pain in my calf made me nauseous and all I wanted to do was stop. Emily wouldn't let me and together we reached the electric fence that marked my property. We rolled under the wire, hoping it would slow the wolf down long enough to get away.

"Mahlia, your leg!" Emily pointed. Her face was full of panic and concern.

"Oh, gods," I didn't want to look.

I tentatively inspected my left foot, too afraid to look at my calf. My once blue sneaker was in shreds and what was left of the material was turning bright scarlet. My stomach turned as my eyes traveled up to my calf. I was bitten alright, neat rows of deep puncture wounds oozed vivid red blood that dripped into the grass below. I was mesmerized by the slow drip-drip-drip of the red liquid until Emily whispered my name.

"Mahlia..."

I looked up to see her staring past the fence and I followed her gaze. The man from the woods was straightening out of crouch. His feet tucked underneath his body like a feral animal. He glanced down, nodded in approval, and disappeared back into the forest with that gorgeously sinister smirk on his face. Emily and I stared down at the bite wound, both of us thinking the same unimaginable thing.

"No. No, it's not possible," I whispered as a single tear raced down Emily's cheek.

Falling



By
Mallory Sunderland

The water rushed around them. It was hard to hear Horace shouting at her. The roaring water simply drowned out everything. But that was good. Very good. They needed this. She remembered the plans from last night. Horace had told them what to do. He was always the one in charge, but this was the best option, and the quickest.

She saw Winslow and Alice gliding slowly through the mists of the falls. It was a shame they couldn't move any faster. She felt so wretched watching them, unable to do anything. She was so useless. The slippery rocks made her feel as though she was constantly grasping at nothing; her body kept slipping. She had climbed down at an odd angle, and right now it made her worried. If she fell, she would only hinder the group. That's all she was. A hindrance.

How many days had she wanted to cry? Every day that she existed. That she could remember at least. Anything past two days ago was a blur. A very painful blur. That's all she could remember though, pain. She shifted slightly, trying to find her balance again. She didn't realize what was happening until she clung to the rock, her fingers slipping, trying to desperately find a niche to grasp, anything at all. Her mind never panicked, but her body did.

"Mira!" Horace shouted, instantly worried. She could actually hear him over the falling water. He had been going down slowly, able to move better than anyone else in the party, excluding Alice and Winslow, but they didn't count. They floated by manipulating the gravity around them. She could see his arms and hands had taken a rough, claw-like form. He was ramming his hands into the rocks, coming down as fast as he possibly could. It was funny that she could simply watch and rationalize all of this as she hung there, losing her grip on the rock that moments ago had been below her, but was now above. Her body acted on its own, her mind just drifted.

"Don't you dare fall down now." He was panting hard. His face was disheveled and worried. He also looked frightened. Horace never looked that way; he was usually laid back, calm. Horace was close enough now that she could make out every word he said. "Damn it, Mira, you're the most important person here. I can't lose you." There was a certain panicked way he stressed that last bit. Mira began to wonder if he truly cared, but at that point she felt the rock slip completely beneath her hands.

As her body fell, she wondered if the fall would kill her. She knew water from over fifty feet killed a person. The law of gravity stated that a fall from that height would flatten her. Could she really die, though? Could it really be that easy? No. It would never be that easy.

The water seemed to be right in front of her face when Mira suddenly was gazing into a dark blue shirt. Winslow. Somehow he had managed to catch up. His body tipped backwards as he stumbled from her weight. Mira felt water splash up around her. She almost wished... no, she shouldn't think that way. Best just to be glad that she was fine.

Winslow stood up, looking sort of comical in his soaked clothes and flattened dark brown hair. He pointed to the shore where Mira saw the two they had just brought down, Mark and Lily, looking wet and cold. She swam slowly through the water, looking back up at Winslow. He was getting Sierra and Megan from the rocks. She hadn't even said thank you. Well, they hated her anyway.

She watched as Alice took Horace down, dropping him with a splash into the water. He turned to Mira. He looked angry.

"What were you doing? Were you even paying attention?"

For a moment, Mira felt a spark of anger at his words. He was yelling at her, splashing through the water with a dark look on his face. She found herself spitting out the venomous words before she could stop herself.

"Yes, I wanted to fall and die." She let the sarcasm drip down her tongue. It felt nice, to show emotion. She liked it then. The real world crashed into her as she felt him strike her. Hard.

It burned, pain and awful tingling all across the left side of her face. Her body immediately went to heal itself, but curiously enough, she stopped it. It felt good, the pain. It was like a subtle pleasure coursing through her. She had missed it. She just stood there, then reached up and touched the side of her burning face gingerly. A shot of pain jolted through her again. Yes, it felt good.

Horace was cursing, moving away from her and yelling for the rest of them to gather together. She turned, setting her face back into her typical blank look, and made her way to the shore of the lake. It was hard to focus. Horace hit her. The way he had done it, so harsh and violent, she had felt a slight rage towards him for it. He

cared for her though. He was the only one who didn't despise her, or turn away. But why? He cared for her, showed compassion, and gave her comfort—something no one else ever would do for her. It didn't make sense though. Why would one person care for her when everyone else shunned her? No, it made no sense at all to her.

Mira glanced at the faces before her. No one made eye contact. Nothing's changed. She wanted to cry. To break down. To just—lose it. She couldn't, and it wouldn't change anything if she did. Even if she wept, they still would have the same look. Only Horace didn't give that look to her. He cared, or seemed to. He kept her away from the rest of them. She was special, or so he said. She felt special, but not in a good way. She felt hated.

"We need to move on. There's an old ruin up ahead, probably a mile away. We can make it there before sunset if we hurry."

They all began to file behind Horace. Their band had gone from eleven to eight. The trackers had lost them a little while ago thanks to Horace's quick thinking, or perhaps his experience. Running through water, going down the falls, all helped clear the scent from the area.

Mira followed behind Horace. Anywhere else in the pack was unacceptable for her. He said that she had to run behind him. Nowhere else. Period. She didn't question him. Why should I? I have no reason to doubt him. Yet, even as she thought this, she couldn't push out the dark feelings that swirled in her mind.

There was something wrong with Horace.

It took them a little after sunset to reach the "ruins" that Horace had told them about. It was more like an old stone home. Mira just gazed ahead at the building. It looked sturdy. At least the base wasn't crumbling down, and only the vines creeping up it made it seem ruined. Looking up, she saw that the roof was pretty much gone. Hopefully, it wouldn't rain while they slept.

It took them awhile to set up camp. Mark and Sierra went off for dry kindling, Alice and Winslow scouted for edible food, Lily and Megan were rigging a structure to serve as a roof—apparently Lily sensed that it was going to rain, it was her gift—and Horace went off to hunt for game. And she was left to sit there. Doing nothing. And Horace wondered why she felt useless. She had managed to start a fire with the random sticks lying close to the brick building. It was all she was good for, making a pointless fire. It wasn't even that cold out. At least it was something she could do.

After about an hour of just gazing into flames that threatened to sputter out, everyone started trickling back in. She didn't really look up. She was afraid she might catch their eyes on her. She hated seeing their hatred, especially since even though they hated her, she liked them.

She could see the affection and bonds they had formed together, and just seeing that, well, it made her sort of happier. She could see it in the way Alice and Winslow fought, she making snide comments and he simply shrugging. She could see it in the way Lily and Megan laughed with one another, and the way they curled up next to each other during the long nights. She could see it in the way Mark and Sierra always held hands when they were alone or whispered to one another when they thought no one would notice. Mira always noticed. She couldn't help it.

Horace always told her they were pretty much useless—that only Winslow and Alice were of any use on this trip. She couldn't believe it. Without Lily, they would never know when to seek shelter from the weather. Mark could smell really well, like a bloodhound, and he had managed to keep them on track many times. Megan could feel those behind them. She had warned them when they had first started their journey that they were being followed. Without her, they would have been caught by now. Sierra, well, Mira didn't know what Sierra could do. But altogether, they were family. Even if it didn't include her, it made Mira have a small bit of hope in her life. Just a spark.

When Mira finally saw Horace return, everyone had already come back, and was eating. No one had said anything to her; they made their own fire in the room across from hers with matches from Horace, shooting her furtive looks and talking with one another in a spirited manner. Horace had with him two rabbits and a pheasant. At least no one would go too hungry. He brought the pheasant over to Mira, skinning and cleaning the bird. She didn't really want to watch; for some reason it reminded her of something unpleasant, even if she couldn't quite put her finger on what that foulness was.

The whole group finished their meal fairly quickly. Horace ordered the second fire put out, but left the small

one Mira had made burn. He gathered them all around it, giving news to them.

“We are almost clear. There are a few more stops, but then we will be in a territory that is safe.” He paused. “Since I am able to shape shift, I will scout the next location. I will return as soon as possible. I want all of you to rest well and prepare for a long journey tomorrow. I know most of you are worn out from such an extended use of your abilities, but we wouldn’t be where we are without them.” Horace turned around, giving Mira a small smile and lightly touched her shoulder. “You stay here while I’m gone.” He smiled at her. And then he did something unexpected. Horace took Mira’s hand in his own larger one and raised it to his lips. He kissed her. It took Mira a moment to fully register the situation, but by then he was gone.

He disappeared into the darkness, no doubt taking the form of a wolf or mountain lion to find his way. Mira shivered and wrapped the small blanket she had tighter around herself. While the fire warmed her, it couldn’t keep out the cold that she felt from within. She heard the shuffling and shifting of the others, but took no notice until a stick cracked right in front of her. She expected maybe Lily, or Megan, but not the two who stood before her.

Alice and Winslow.

Why would they speak to her? She knew from the expression Alice wore when she looked at Mira that she loathed her, more than anyone else in the party. Why is she here? Mira didn’t understand. There was no reason for her to be here. The smoldering glare from Alice made Mira look away quickly; it unnerved her so.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mira saw Alice look away, hesitance written on her face. Alice didn’t look angry anymore; instead she had let her face slip into that of annoyance.

“So,” Alice paused. Mira was tempted to answer, but kept quiet. Alice let out an irked sigh of frustration before continuing. “I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to be near you, or even look at you. I hate you.” Another pause. “But we,” she gestured toward the others sitting back at the fire. They were speaking in hushed voices and glancing over at Alice and Winslow, “need you.” She dropped her hands to her side and then sat down abruptly on a small log. Winslow followed suit.

Mira sat there, unable to fully grasp the situation. The words were confusing. She needed her, yet hated her. It made no sense.

“Why?”

Alice looked shocked for a moment, as if there was no reason for her to be misunderstood. Her answer was a question as well. “Why what? Why we need you, or why I hate you? Both should be fairly easy to understand.” Her voice grew bitter as she choked at the last statement.

“I can’t remember.” Mira hated this. She didn’t know why she couldn’t remember. All she knew was that she couldn’t.

“Geez...” Alice sighed again and then cupped her hands around her face and gave Mira an exasperated look. “You really don’t remember?”

Mira shook her head. She remembered all of them, but not from before the journey. Not before she saw Horace’s face and felt him drag her from where she had been. Hell.

Alice just glared at her for another moment. “Fine. Then I’ll tell you. The answer to both questions is the same thing. You’re a monster. Something that shouldn’t exist even among people like us.” Alice looked at Winslow. He just kept staring at Mira though. “You killed us,” Alice said as she turned back to look at Mira with a fierceness. “Anyone who they thought was too minor, something not worth keeping they sent to you. You killed our friends. Lily’s, Megan’s, Winslow’s...all of our friends. We can never forgive you for that. I don’t care if you were drugged, abused, whatever. You had no right. None.”

Mira looked at the ground. There was nothing she could say. She had killed people. Innocent people. She couldn’t understand why though. She didn’t like hurting people, at least as far as she knew. Perhaps they had tortured her. She did remember something of pain.

She still could not look up at Alice. She had done too much to her in the past.

“Can you even speak now? Do you remember what you are?” Alice stood up, and Winslow followed. Both towered over Mira as she continued to look down, shamed over the things she could not remember.

“It doesn’t matter if you do or not, but we still need you. We can’t survive with just our small group. We have no abilities that are offensive. The damage we could deal would be minor, like a fly buzzing in someone’s ear. There

is no hope if we cannot fight back.” Alice paused and seemed hesitant.

“We have Horace.” It was all Mira could think of to say. Alice merely laughed.

“Horace? We have Horace.” She laughed again, but it cut short and her mirth vanished. “Haven’t you guessed it yet? No?” Alice gave a wry smile. “Horace is a betrayer. A turncoat. He wants nothing more than to sell us to another group. He steals from the government and sells to the black market. How much do you think freaks like us go for? He knows we cannot survive without him. It’s why he chooses those with minor powers. He took a chance for you, though.”

“No. Horace...” Mira trailed off. What was Horace? He cared for her, like today. He had touched her, kissed her. “He cares for me. I know it.”

Alice laughed. “You think a touch and a glance means anything? No, he cares for none of us. We are business. His freedom. You are someone he needs to control. How better to control you than through emotions like love. He manipulated you.” Alice was angry. Her voice was hard. “He knows we hate you. So he pretended to care. To be your only crying shoulder. You are so gullible.”

Mira stiffened. How dare she say such horrible things? Horace was kind, he was good to her. And then she thought about it. He was only kind to her. Did he care?

“Do you really think someone like him, well dressed and obviously well off, would care about rescuing us? No, he got free, joined a group and spends the rest of his days risking capture again to bring us to his bosses. He is nothing more than a hound sent to fetch the prey. We need to leave him. I would prefer tonight if possible.” Alice turned to Winslow as he began to speak.

“No, he left tonight, I believe, to fetch them. He has never left before, has he?” his voice was soft, yet deep, a very different sound from Alice’s.

“You may be right. Then we shall leave now.” She turned back to Mira. “Will you come with us? Or would you rather stay with Horace? Will you hunt us down with him?” Her cold look had returned. Mira felt strange. Yes, she wanted to go with them, but they still hated her. They would never have anything but cruelty for her. Yet...

“I will go. I have no love for Horace.” Mira stood, letting the blanket fall from her shoulders. She couldn’t concern herself about what they thought of her when she already knew what she felt for them. She loved them. Even if they would never love her back, she wanted to protect them, to be with them. It didn’t matter what they thought of her. For the first time, Mira felt alive.

Midnight Clear



By
Marybeth Richards

*Still through the cloven skies they come
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains,
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.*

-Edmund H. Sears

It was Christmas time. Michael could tell by the strand of silver bells that lined the doorframe between the foyer and the living room of his childhood home. The electrical strand was softly tinkering the melody of "I'll Be Home for Christmas," a feat those bells had not done since the Christmas of 1994. Whenever he went to visit his parents during the holidays he never understood why his mother insisted on displaying the bells because they were broken. The familiar tunes they once played now seemed to skip notes and sounded haunted. Now they sounded light, airy, and joyous. Putting thoughts of the bells aside, Michael let his gaze scan the contents of the living room. He noticed that his childhood dog Dakota's bedding was not snugly nestled between the fireplace and the front wall of the house. That explained the bells incessant jolly ringing. Dakota had chewed through the electrical wiring during the Christmas of '94. He had only been a few weeks old.

Driven by curiosity, Michael stepped out of the doorway and into the living area. His old boyhood home was not as it existed in the present time. Instead of the chic modern ceramic tile in the foyer and contemporary paint colors in the living room, Michael found the original 1970s burnt orange shag carpet that was original to the construction of the house. The soft red and green glow the Christmas tree lights emitted danced off the wood paneling on the walls creating the ambience of so many great Christmases of his past. The floor was littered with presents of all different shapes and sizes. Santa had been well trained through the years learning how to organize, plan, and adjust the blueprint of the floor plan with the addition of each new child. There were five this year. The room had always reminded Michael of an ant colony. There were trails that divided each child's loot. In the middle of the room a sort of island of carpet was kept empty. It was the place where mom and dad could judiciously sit and lend an extra hand as the kids tore through their gifts.

The scene laid out before him told Michael it was Christmas Eve...obviously before December 4th, 2009. Even in his sleep, the grief of losing his brother haunted him and now the universe was conspiring to invade his happy memories and fracture those as well. Since the accident, Michael had never been pulled through the sands of time more than a year. His dreams normally replayed the week leading up to that fateful phone call and the anguish of the days that followed. These feelings of heartache that he felt himself being overcome by now collided with those feelings he had about this boyhood memory. He could only sum them up as love and safety. They conflicted with each other, and it felt as if he were a magnet with ends that were repelling each other. The memory felt cruel. Not merely a staircase away slept four brothers, himself included, and their baby sister. Michael willed his feet to move. He wanted to wake up his family and warn them of the tragedy that would befall them, as if the realization could somehow make the remaining years that they had together as a whole more precious...but his feet would not obey.

The bleak, black chasm inside of Michael widened, crippling him. Somewhere in this illusion Michael knew that no one was asleep upstairs. He knew that if this dream would allow him to move, he would wake himself up and the feelings he longed to have again would be gone with it. He loved to hate his childhood now that his brother was gone. To Michael, the memories felt like a deep wound that was constantly festering. As soon as he thought it was beginning to heal, his brother's face would surface in his mind and the scab would be flayed off violently

leaving him bleeding and defenseless. A part of him did not want to let himself heal. His little brother was dead, lying in the ground somewhere. Cold and unfeeling. There was no healing from that. To heal would be to betray his brother's memory. To heal would be to forget. Every time his brother's voice echoed in Michael's mind, every time he summoned a Christmas, a birthday, or any reflection of the boy in the cowboy boots, Michael allowed himself to unravel a little more.

Michael reached down and traced the smooth contours of a gift in Jonathan's pile and instantly knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was 1994. His brother had been four years old. His uncle from Arizona had mailed the package overnight. It had been crafted by the Hopi Indians. The leather was dyed a brick red and it had black stitching keeping the brim secured to its base. A pheasant feather jutted out the side for aesthetic effect. Michael found himself sinking to his knees, tears spilling out of his eyes. He allowed himself to remember how much Jonathan had loved this hat. Somewhere in this pile was a pair of cowboy boots as well. Jonathan's first pair. Some things in this world were just made to go together. This Christmas had sparked a trend that would span the next sixteen years. Not a Christmas passed from this year on that Jonathan did not receive a pair of cowboy boots.

Michael was jostled out of his nostalgia by the silence that suddenly filled the room. When he looked at the silver bells to see why they had quieted, a figure stood in the doorway. "Richards Residence. You kill 'em, we chill 'em!"

Only one person ever answered the phone with that awful greeting. The irony of the saying wasn't lost on Michael. The figure's nasally twang ripped through the stillness. It could only belong to one person.

"Jonathan." Michael choked out.

Jonathan stepped across the threshold, leaving the foyer and entering the living room. In the countless dreams that Michael had had since Jonathan's death, none of them let him actually interact with his brother. Michael found that he was always overlooking the scene, watching from a place that allowed no one to see, hear, or recognize him. But now his brother was regarding him, clearly seeing him with his warm, hazel eyes. Jonathan extended his burly arms toward Michael, waiting to embrace him. This time Michael's feet moved when he willed them. The two brothers hugged with such gusto that the air whooshed out of Michael's lungs when Jonathan hugged him.

Michael studied his youngest brother, trying to memorize every detail. He noticed that Jonathan's skin was not cold and dead as he had imagined it earlier. It was the same recognizable bronze color just as it had been in life. Now it seemed almost as if it had captured some of the sun and he was radiating it through his pores. Gone were the few remnants of adolescence that Michael remembered when he last saw him. His face held all the sharp angles and plains of a young man. The pockets of baby fat around his cheeks had vanished. The same went for his hands. While Jonathan had always been the shortest of the brothers, he had always had a strange asynchronicity. His hands had always been huge. Now Michael noticed that not only were they sledgehammers, but they fit the rest of Jonathan's young adult body perfectly. Jonathan was standing before him, whole. Two years of anger, guilt, denial, and resentments toward whatever God had allowed this to happen bled into the background with Jonathan an arm's length away.

"Ya' look like hell brother," Jonathan said, his devilish grin never faltering. "This was a great Christmas huh?" Gingerly, Jonathan used his arms in a grandiose gesture that seemed to sweep the width of the room. "This ain't even the year I get my four-wheeler!"

"How are you here?" Michael managed to ask still awestruck.

Jonathan chuckled and bent down to retrieve the red cowboy hat Michael had dropped, gracefully trying to put it on his own head. "It's a little small now, ain't it? Man I loved this hat. I'm here because ya' needed me to be. I'm here to tell ya'll that I'm okay."

Emotions slammed into Michael like a baseball bat connecting with a ball. It's okay? He was okay? Immediately, all the moronic acronyms people spewed to comfort their family after Jonathan had passed flooded Michael's brain. He's in a better place now. God has a reason. It was just his time. Time will heal. These sayings didn't bring comfort. Or they were said to try to somehow make up for the horrible, terrible car accident that ripped his family apart. As if these words somehow mattered or somehow made the gaping hole in his heart a tiny remote of a fraction better! They didn't...and to see his brother standing before him radiating happiness and contentment infuriated him.

"That's it? You came to tell me that you are okay? That you enjoy being...gone? That it's somehow water

under the bridge?"

Jonathan took a seat sprawled out on the living room couch and letting his black leather boots dangle over the arm. He laced his fingers together, cracked his knuckles, and then raised them over his head, looking up at Michael with amusement.

"Would ya' rather me be caught in the great in-between? Spend my existence in limbo? Do ya' want me to tell ya' that I felt every second of the accident? That I was confused when I realized I could see myself separated from my body? Do ya' want to hear that I haunt the places that I love? 'Cause I don't."

Michael ran his hands through his curly blonde hair trying to process what his brother had just said. All the unsaid conversations that he'd mentally had with his brother. He had a list of things he wished he had said. Things he wanted to say if he ever had one last chance. They evaded him. He could not remember a single one. Defeated he took a seat on the loveseat adjacent to the couch Jonathan was on.

"I guess I want to hear that you miss us as much as we miss you. Don't you feel every bit of the longing to have us back as we do?"

Jonathan reached into his Levi jeans' pocket and pulled out a can of chew. A Styrofoam spit cup appeared out of thin air with a flick of his wrist. "I love every last one of you's. I love ya'll more deeply than ya'll can possibly imagine. But bud, I don't have any regrets. I didn't in life and I sure as hell don't now. The accident was just a transition for me. I mean look at me!" He extended his arms heavenward. "I'm the freakin' best Richards. I could take you, Mark, and Matthew all at one time now!"

It seemed that the genes responsible for his, Mark, and Mathew's height had passed over Jonathan. In order to make up for the difference, it was a regular occurrence that Jonathan, without warning, would grapple one of his older brothers to the ground in what turned into a wrestling showdown. Usually, Jonathan was left pinned on the ground. Sometimes, even their dad was challenged. Although Mark and Mathew saw this as fun—as their little brother trying to get a rise out of them—Michael saw it as a little boy trying to establish himself from the shadows of giants. Like David and Goliath.

"You don't miss us? Michael asked in bewilderment. "You wouldn't undo this if you could?"

"Michael," Jonathan began, his tone turning serious. "I don't miss ya' because I never left ya'. I still see yous. I saw Aislynn go through her first day of school. I saw ya'll take Joshua back to Ride-Markerz on vacation and build him a mini-Chevy truck in my name. And I gotta tell ya', Serafina is a hoot! That little girl is after my own heart. She's an ornery little bugger just like her uncle was at her age. I was right there next to ya' in the funeral home parking lot when it started to snow. I had ya' in my arms brother."

The tears came again at the realization that Jonathan was talking about events that had transpired concerning his children and himself after his brother's death. "I just want to know why. I want to know why this had to happen to us? To our family? To you? Why did this have to happen?"

"Why not us? Would ya'll rather see this happen to someone else so ya'll wouldn't have to feel it? Best to leave the pain on someone else's shoulders to bear? See, ya'll are asking the wrong questions! In fact, ya'll shouldn't be askin' any questions. The answers wouldn't change what happened to me. My rodeo was over. I had a good life. I knew love. I mean, come on! Just look around this room...there is love here. There is family here."

"I want my baby brother back," Michael choked through clenched teeth. "I want my kids to know their red-neck uncle. I don't want to feel like one is missing and that time will fill the hole. I just want you back."

Jonathan spit into the plastic cup, mulling over his brother's words.

"What kind of life is that for you then? Ya'll didn't cross over with me, which means ya'll still have more to learn on your soul's journey. Michael, ya' got three little kids depending on you to be their daddy. You're a great father. Maybe that's why your number didn't get called when you wrapped that jeep around that tree. I don't know, but ya' gotta start livin' and know that I am alright. I wouldn't come back given the choice. I like it here ya' know? Retired at twenty, they got every kind of Chevy truck known to man both past and ones that haven't even come out yet!"

"How am I supposed to move past this?" Michael laughed bitterly.

"Maybe ya' aren't supposed to move past it. Quit being all dark and stormy all the time, that's Mark's job. Maybe ya'll are supposed to live with it. You've always been so in touch with your feelings—the sensitive brother. So maybe ya' should let yourself actually feel 'em instead of building a wall around them and callin' it love for me."

Honor your grief.”

“You’re not alone? You seriously wouldn’t come back?” Michael asked, his voice questioning as acceptance of his brother’s death crept around the corners of his consciousness.

Jonathan reached into his mouth, pulled the dip out from his lip, and spit one last time into the cup before answering.

“Not lonely...your damn dog is still a pain in the ass out here. Come to think of it, so is Pap Action...and Crystal is here. You know how she likes to talk.” He reached out and set the can of chew on the coffee table. He took off his Fox baseball cap to reveal his familiar mop of unruly brown curls. “I don’t want to come back. Imagine knowing every answer to every question you’ve ever asked? I’m literally in heaven!”

“You always did think you knew everything you cocky S.O.B.” Michael chided his brother.

“That’s the spirit! No pun intended,” Jonathan said, fluently maneuvering from the couch to his feet in one fluid motion.

“You’re leaving again aren’t you?” Michael asked joining his brother in the center of their childhood living room.

Jonathan reached out and put a beefy hand on his big brother’s shoulder. “Serafina is about to start having a party in her crib. You’re a good dad. Ya’ remind me of our dad.”

Michael swallowed hard, emotion sitting heavy in his throat. He knew his brother was about to disappear again. “I miss you Bubba.”

Jonathan started to blur around the edges, but his crooked little grin was still plastered on his face.

“I love ya’ Michael. Tell everyone I love ‘em. I’m still around. I got a thing for balloons, watch out for ‘em! That’s how ya’ll will know I’m around.” He gave Michael a wink, and then vanished just as suddenly as he had appeared.

Whether it was minutes or hours before Michael woke up, he didn’t know. What he did know was just like Jonathan had said—his one-year-old daughter was indeed awake and cooing happily in her crib. When Michael went to check on her, he couldn’t help but notice the smiley face balloon in the opposite corner of the bedroom which was tied to the post of his oldest daughter’s bed. The bright yellow balloon smirked at him in the darkness, reminding him that he was not alone.

Three Buzzes



By
Nicole Zuleger

She looks down at her phone as it buzzes three times to signal a message. It's her boyfriend. Again. She shouldn't be annoyed like she is, but she's getting sick of the constant hounding from him and the rest of the world. She wants nothing more than to lie down and sleep and ignore every paper that must be written and club that begs for help and friend that demands attention. Reluctantly she unlocks her phone and stares at the message.

Hey, how are you?

She sighs at the unoriginality of the text and how this is slowly becoming a waste of her valuable energy. *Hey, how are you?* How was she? Did he actually want to know? Did he want to know that she was an inch away from screaming her lungs out? That she was a second away from throwing herself onto the floor and kicking and screaming like a young child throwing a temper tantrum? That she hadn't slept for the past week due to a mixture of school, family, and friends? She hasn't eaten all day or had a moment to herself. She's a week behind in reading for Sociology and has not even touched the equations she must balance into perfection for Chemistry. Three more buzzes. Another message, this time from her mother.

You haven't called in awhile. Still remember us back at home?

Of course she remembers you. Every time she has to make a decision about her life she turns to ask you and then remembers that she no longer needs opinions and permissions from you. But then she remembers something else:

"Mommy?"

"What's wrong, Liz?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

"I had a bad dream. I was drowning again," she whispers, and before she can say anything else, comforting arms are hugging her and warm blankets are wrapped around her. A hand is smoothing her hair and her ears pick up on her favorite lullaby being hummed. She closes her eyes, the fear from the nightmare fading away.

"I'm right here, Liz, everything will be alright."

But everything isn't alright. Everything is falling apart around her. College is too much. Nothing is going right. And she feels like she is drowning all over again. She knows her mother doesn't want to hear that, so she doesn't call. It would hurt too much. She will call once the world stops crashing in.

You seem off. Is everything alright?

She was so absorbed with her thoughts she didn't even notice the three buzzes revealing a new message from a semi-concerned friend. Of course, the friend doesn't care enough to come find her and ask in person. The friend is either too afraid of getting an honest answer or too busy to actually give a damn about what is going on in someone else's life. She doesn't want to add to the friend's stress. Everyone is stressed. So she doesn't answer. But why would someone ask a question like that if they didn't really want an answer? Don't they want to know that she is close to tears? That she is avoiding everyone so no one can add to her already-too-much work or throw their drama into her personal soap opera. Three more buzzes, another friend wanting something from her.

I have to go to the store? Wanna come?

She glares down at the phone, as if her expression will reach the friend who never has any responsibilities and is always free. Maybe she should change her major to the same as her friend's. At least then she'd manage to get sleep instead of staying up until mere hours before dawn so that she doesn't fail out of college. She doesn't even really want to take her major classes anymore. The little girl who dreamed of saving animals for the rest of her life

has long ago faded away and now she clings to that memory of a dream merely out of lack of knowing what else she could possibly do with her life. As she stares down at her friend's text, she wonders what it'd be like to have such a simple major and breeze through classes. Another three buzzes. She is very close to throwing the damn phone out the window. Why must everyone text her at once when all she wants is to be alone or to not have actual human interaction.

I'm having a bad day, can we talk?

Not this again. This friend has kept her up late at night while she should be studying, sobbing over boys and drama that only exists in the friend's head. She doesn't want to talk to her friend. She doesn't want to listen to the friend's issues. She wants to talk about her own! About this feeling of not being able to breathe and how she feels like she's in a glass tank that just keeps filling up with water and no matter how much she tries to scream she cannot find her voice. There is too much going on and not enough support and she can't do this anymore. She's going to explode. She's not even joking at this point when she considers running into the woods and hiding away so no one can ever find her again. She wants to leave and never come back. She wants to disappear forever and make it all stop. She...

Are you there? Are you sure you're alright? I'm worried...

It's her boyfriend again. He didn't even wait for a response, and now he's bothering her again. He demands her time. Professors demand her time. Friends demand her time. Clubs demand her time. Family demands her time. She doesn't have any more time to give! She can't be everywhere at once and talk to everyone at once and help with everything at once. She's sick of all these people piling on and on and never helping her or actually seeing if she's okay. They are always hiding behind their technology. She starts to type back a message for the sake of getting him to leave her alone. As she pauses to choose the words that will mask her true annoyance, a voice other than her own interrupts her thoughts.

"Elizabeth? You missed dinner, so I came looking for you," a quiet voice says and she looks up to see her best friend standing in front of her.

"I missed dinner?" she echoes, looking at the time on her phone and shaking her head. How had she managed to sit here and waste time for so long? "I'm sorry, I lost track of time and I've just been so busy and..."

"Elizabeth, relax, I know you're stressed." Her friend smiles and takes a seat next to her in the mostly abandoned library. No one else is here on a Friday night. They are all out partying and having fun. They don't have the worries of families and friends and stress and school piling up and suffocating them.

"I brought you a sandwich," her friend says, reaching into her bag. Elizabeth smiles sadly, tears falling down her cheeks. In the middle of the world crashing down, someone is concerned about whether she has eaten dinner or not. Someone sought her out and actually made sure she was okay. Not just with a text—with actual human contact. For a moment at least, the world stops crashing.

Washing Harleys Ain't Always Good



By
Anonymous

Washing my new Harley brought about a new high/low in my life. After visiting the third car wash, each with all bays filled and a line at each, a thought came to me which I, a few minutes later, regret ever having. Each trip from one car wash to another took me past a Sheetz store. I noticed and then remembered I had washed my truck at the Sheetz car wash.

Could I wash my Harley there? I began thinking just how I might do this. The car wash would not touch the motorcycle if I parked it where the middle of a car might be. The spray would not be any more powerful than the hand washer spray I was going to use. So, after reasoning it out, I was sure the bike would be safe.

Next was just how would I get it in position and then get out without getting wet myself. I timed a few cars. It took more than a minute from the time the money was inserted and the program selected before the actual carwash began. I practiced a few times outside the car wash and was very confident I could park the bike and get outside before the wash actually began.

Satisfied that I had it all figured out, I was going to get my bike washed with very little effort and without getting wet. There were no cars in sight, so I drove to the “put your money in here” spot and did just that. I selected the program and now I had a full minute to get my bike in place and leave. In I went, and was I in for a surprise. I had forgotten about the undercarriage wash. Maybe my bike needed an undercarriage wash, but I am sure I did not.

I wish I had been wearing chaps or even maybe something more to help protect my undercarriage, instead of loose-legged pants!

No name attached to protect my identity...

Drifting Through Life



By
Stephanie Walker

Jimmy looked out from the curb at the sea of people, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets. He felt Emily hesitantly place her hands on his shoulders and whisper in his ear, "It's going to be fine. Now I have to get to work, so have a great day and I'll pick you up after school at three, okay?"

Jimmy barely nodded, still taking in the throngs of teenagers like himself talking, laughing, and weaving through the crowd. Except that they weren't like him, they belonged here. Jimmy adjusted his navy blue tie and rotated his shoulders, trying to fit them into the stiff starched shirt that had been lying on the bed when he was shown to his room. Emily—no, mother—had obviously bought the school uniform as soon as the papers had been signed and he had become theirs, instead of a ward of the government.

Taking a deep breath, Jimmy walked towards the large white pillars at the front of the school and up the two-tiered stone stairs packed with students. He walked calmly and easily, neither hurrying nor dragging his feet as the crowd pushed and shoved him like a boat lost at sea. There was almost a sense of fluidity about the movement, as if Jimmy was absorbing the flow of the crowd and its energy was directing him towards the front office, instead of hindering him.

When he arrived, he put a firm hand on the tall wood and glass door whose view into the office was obstructed by heavy white blinds. Pausing a moment, Jimmy sighed, then slowly pulled the large brass handle and slipped into the office so quietly that the receptionist didn't even lift her head of full blond curls.

Jimmy stood there a moment before taking a hesitant step forward. As he lowered his sneakered foot to the ground, a dry squeal from the wooden floorboards caused the receptionist—her name tag said Maryann—to raise her head. Her forehead creased momentarily, and then Maryann smiled broadly and asked in a warm tone, "Hi, how can I help you?"

Jimmy looked down at the ground, then mumbled, "I—I'm new here." He slowly looked up, his head still tilted down and eyes not quite reaching Maryann's bright green ones.

"Good, good, so I see you've got the uniform," she said, voice lilting up to almost turn the simple statement into a question. "And what is your name?"

"Jimmy," he said softly.

"And your last name?"

"Greenfeld."

"Umm..." Maryann trailed off. "I don't have any record of a Greenfeld..."

Jimmy looked up sharply, words stuck on the tip of his tongue.

Maryann's fingers clicked away at the keyboard on her right for a few more minutes before she looked up. "I'm still...not finding you. If you want to wait over there," she motioned to a half-circle of rigid armchairs, "I can go talk to Mr. Smith and get this straightened out right away."

Maryann had lifted her bulk halfway up out of her chair before Jimmy finally pushed the words out. "It's...it's Bernard, miss," Jimmy quavered, looking back at the ground.

"Oh, Bernard, I have you right here," Maryann said, sinking back into her chair and opening a manila folder sitting open on her desk.

Maryann preceded to hand Jimmy form after form after form to sign, or take home to his "parents," or simply to hold onto. After that, Jimmy was walked down the long hallway, some books were shoved into his thin arms, and a gaping blue locker was presented to him. Jimmy had barely set the books inside the tan interior before the door was slammed shut, a combination was rattled off to him, and he was dragged to a classroom where he was left standing inside the doorway with thirty sets of eyeballs trained on him. Although in reality most of the students turned back to their work after realizing he was just the "new kid," Jimmy felt as if the weight of the students' stare lasted for much longer. Mr. Anderson took his time making his way over to Jimmy and five minutes must have passed before he was done with his long-winded introduction. And still it felt like the eyes were picking Jimmy apart—his tie was crooked, his shirt was slightly baggy under his too-large trousers, his backpack had a layer of grime no one else's did—the list could go on forever.

Finally, Mr. Anderson gave Jimmy a pat on the shoulder and pointed him to an empty seat in the back right corner. Jimmy took his seat slowly, trying not to attract any more attention, and carefully pulled out a notebook and pen. By the end of the class, Jimmy wouldn't have been able to tell a soul what the class was studying because he hadn't even tried to listen. They were in the middle of some discussion of a book everyone had read except

Jimmy, so he quickly tuned out. Mind wandering, Jimmy's pencil began scratching at the page and before he knew it he was sketching the roof line of a somewhat rundown house. Before that was finished, Jimmy moved to a corner and absent-mindedly drew his name in a graffiti-styling. Then he sketched a portion of chain-link fence before his pencil wandered back to the center of the page and he added a sidewalk with grass in the cracks, withering and dying.

Jimmy's forehead creased as he became more engrossed in his work, shading it and only glancing up at the board occasionally. His side pictures grew in number, however Jimmy kept returning to the center of the page. He added a short chain-link fence keeping in a yard of dead plants and broken plastic toys before his hand skittered away to draw the face of a pit-bull terrier. Then he added the porch with a few caved-in boards and one of the railings missing, his face darkening and eyes growing blank.

Jimmy's foot started bouncing uncontrollably against the carpeted floor of the classroom as he filled in the solid door and windows in the front of the house. Then his shoulders sagged as he moved to the blank spot on the porch steps. He tenderly sketched the rough outline of a young girl. Jimmy's hand kept inching towards it and then quickly moved away, suddenly fascinated by the lone flower on the corner of the house or the siding that was crumbling. From the sketch she looked to be about six with messy hair and dirty hands, but it could have been the lack of detail, the purposefully rushed lines, that generated that effect.

When the bell rang to signify the end of class, Jimmy slowly closed his notebook and carefully set it in his backpack. Then he took out one of the folded pieces of paper the receptionist had given him and read the small text. Zipping the bag closed, Jimmy moved slowly through the full hallways, stepping aside for a broad-shouldered guy here and sidestepping to avoid a clique of chattering girls there. As Jimmy traveled through the corridors, hearing snippets of conversations and passing a multitude of faces, the only details he paid attention to were the small black numbers above the classroom doors. And sometimes he couldn't see one, but it wasn't a big deal; he would catch the next. As a result, Jimmy was three doors past his next room before he realized it and began to turn around. But it seemed that he was going against the tide now, having to stand his ground as the students came towards him in an endless rush, and Jimmy wasn't moving. For every step forward he took one back to let a tall girl through and then a quiet guy with thick-rimmed glasses.

When the bell rang, the students seemed to just disappear as they ducked into their classrooms and slid into their seats before the sound ended. And Jimmy was left alone in the hallway. He stood there for a moment, leaning up against the unforgiving white-washed wall. When the ringing in his ears had faded, he took a shallow breath and walked in large, slow steps to the classroom, head down and shoulders sagging. He rested his hand on the heavy door a moment longer before pulling it open and stepping into the doorway.

Immediately the eyes were on him and Jimmy ducked his head instinctively.

"Ahh, and you must be Jimmy, right?" the teacher asked enthusiastically, hands flying about in useless gestures as he bounced over to where Jimmy was standing.

The teacher's bright orange and brown vest matched his attitude and when he clapped his hand on Jimmy's back, it could have been ice on Jimmy's bones.

"I'm Phillip. Class, this is Jimmy. He's new here." The teacher stared at Jimmy for a moment then gazed back at the cluttered room full of students. "And I'm sure he would appreciate you going back to your work and promptly ignoring him, but we couldn't do that." He looked back at Jimmy with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Jimmy." Again turning to the class, Phillip said. "Since this is a rare experience for us, I want everyone to draw Jimmy, just as you see him. What impression do you get of him? How do your impressions differ? Clear?"

The class nodded and Phillip turned back to Jimmy.

"Welcome to art class. You can sit up front here and sketch whatever you like. I hear you were in art at your old school so show me what you know, okay?"

Jimmy nodded slowly then turned to take the stool at the front of the classroom. The gazes felt like pin-pricks and Jimmy kept readjusting his tie. He ran his sticky hands down his thighs and picked up the pencil three or four times before it stayed in his hand. The lines he drew were shaky and dotted as his pencil bounced against the thick paper. Jimmy had selected a medium drawing pencil from the collection beside him, but after a few moments he laid it down and fingered a few shakily before grabbing a hard charcoal. He played with the weight of the pencil, moving it like a teeter totter between his thumb and forefinger for a moment before he set it down hard on

the paper and drew a severe line.

Jimmy's movements were rough and jagged as he marked the page mechanically. When he finally set the pencil down, Jimmy no longer felt the burning eyes upon him; he was so engrossed in his work. He slowly grabbed a medium charcoal and added detail to what could now be identified as a portrait with long, tousled hair. When Phillip called the students to a halt, Jimmy's portrait was far from complete. The detail in the hair made it life-like and the neck and cheeks stood out in brilliance, but the eyes above them seemed hollow, barely more than an outline. The nose lacked dimension and the lips were thin and flat. The image had been left blank, giving it a commonality. The figure was unrecognizable by age or feature, the gender only suggested by the long hair.

Phillip's voice interrupted the little bit of concentration that Jimmy had. He announced, "Now let's share our work with the rest of the class. So, who wants to go first?"

A girl near the front, wearing a short pleated skirt and large plastic-rimmed glasses, raised her hand. Phillip nodded in her direction, and the girl stood with a toss of her shiny black hair and marched to the front of the classroom. She slid her page under the bright light of the projector and it appeared on the mostly-blank white wall beside the door. She had drawn a figure that roughly resembled Jimmy sitting under a tree reading a book. Phillip thanked her and the next student was up.

There were drawings of Jimmy standing in the hallway and sitting at the front of the class drawing and others that barely resembled Jimmy. One showed a boy dressed as if he were ready to go to a comic book convention and another tried to transform Jimmy into a slick leather-clad dude. After a while, Jimmy stopped paying attention to the multitude of images that time after time failed to capture anything remotely resembling him.

Jimmy looked back down to add a few lines of life to his portrait's lips. When he glanced up again, trying to feign interest, the picture on the projector was of a featureless boy playing soccer. Sighing Jimmy started to duck his head back down to focus on his work, but the next picture caught his eye. Jimmy looked up and stared for a few minutes.

It was of a boy leaning against a cinder block wall. His right foot rested on the surface while his left stood on the cracked ground. He was wearing a light hoodie compared to the darkened surroundings. His head was tilted down, barely revealing the tip of a nose and a nondescript mouth. But that wasn't what caught Jimmy off-guard. It was the graffiti on the wall, partly covered by the boy's shoulder. He would recognize those letters, that styling, could imagine the green and yellow highlights anywhere. Brow furrowing, Jimmy turned to look at the artist and his mouth fell open a crack.

The girl's hair may have been short instead of long, but it still had that tousled look. And now she wore spikes in her ears with her preppy school shirt and knee-length skirt, but the green eyes, the curve of her lips, and the dimple in her cheek were unmistakable. She was still Alice. She was still undeniably his little sister. She smiled at Jimmy then whipped her paper off the projector and swept back to her seat.

Jimmy blinked, and then looked back at his drawing as a sharp pain hit his chest. He felt like he couldn't move. He was trapped in his own clothes. The air was thick and searing as it slowly crawled into mouth and down his windpipe, falling heavily into his lungs. Jimmy's face became a blank mask and his shoulders crumpled down, making him look small and frail.

When the air began to thin again, Jimmy glanced up cautiously, looking at the students for the first time. There Alice was, sitting in the center of the classroom—no surprise there—staring unabashedly at him. Jimmy quickly looked down, picking up a random charcoal pencil and adding more lines to the bottom of his portrait's hair. His hand quivered and the pencil touched down on the paper so infrequently it was impossible to tell that he'd made a mark. He willed himself to focus on the actions, trying desperately to block out the past that was catching up to him.

He jumped when Phillip clapped his hand on Jimmy's back and said, "Fair is fair, now go ahead and share yours with the rest of the class."

Jimmy looked up uncertainly at Phillip, scanning his face briefly as if delaying it would force Phillip to change his mind. Phillip's expression remained unchanged, and finally Jimmy glanced back down at the table. He slowly rose and walked over to the projector with his head down and the paper floating after him. Jimmy cautiously slid his picture under the light, creating a blur of pencil lines before it resolved into the image. The class looked at it, tilting their heads in befuddlement, before turning towards Phillip.

“So,” Phillip said. “You chose to draw a portrait, albeit an unfinished one, which begs the question: who is it?”

“It...it’s,” Jimmy softly cleared his throat before whispering just loudly enough for the class to hear. “It’s Alice.”

Just then the bell rang, saving Jimmy from further embarrassment. As one the students arose, slung backpacks over shoulders, and burst from the classroom into the empty hallway. Phillip started to say something in Jimmy’s direction but gave up, instead pushing through the students to get closer. After glancing briefly at him, Jimmy ducked his head and disappeared into the crowd, letting them carry him out into the hallway and back into solitude.

Jimmy moved in a daze as his past rushed up and threatened to drown him. Shaking his head, he couldn’t rid his mind of the image of Alice standing on the porch, a look of betrayal painting her face. His mom was standing in the doorway of the house, her hand balled into a fist and shaking threateningly as the words rolled over Jimmy. He had pulled the duffel bag farther onto his shoulder and slowly walked down the crumbling sidewalk, only glancing back once.

It was that image that was seared into his mind. Alice had been sitting on the porch steps, staring blankly out across the street and wiping tears from her eyes with small fists. He had wanted to go back—to bring her with him—but knew he couldn’t. She was his little sister and as much as he felt the need to be there for her, Jimmy knew that his efforts to protect her had only made it worse.

He shook his head. He knew he shouldn’t have gotten messed up in it, but at the time...

Jimmy flashed back to a few weeks prior. They had sat down for dinner and all there had been was a stale loaf of bread. As he and Alice had gnawed on the hard crust, their mother had been passed out in the living room, the sickly sweet smell of alcohol drowning her breath. That feeling, it was something he just couldn’t shake after all these years. It wasn’t the tight knot of hunger trying to claw its way through his abdomen that stuck, but rather the anger and disappointment directed towards his mother. Looking at his sister with tears in her eyes had felt like a sharp pain in his chest, constricting his breathing.

Jimmy’s muscles had strained to draw in yet another breath, and a sense of relief had washed over him. After that he no longer had to lie in bed and wonder what to do or whether any of this was his responsibility. The look on his sister’s face had been his call to action. Jimmy had lain in bed that night without the usual conflict that plagued him, causing him to toss and turn his bed into a knotted pile before exhaustion finally hit him a few hours before the alarm clock shattered his shaky sense of peace. Instead, Jimmy had spent the night staring at the ceiling, searching desperately for a solution. He had thought about it a thousand nights before that, but now the excuses that his idea was “too much work” or “might get him in trouble” didn’t seem adequate.

Jimmy had drifted off to sleep without the faintest idea what he was going to do, but that hadn’t allowed the issue to stray far from his mind. A few days passed before Jimmy had finally pulled himself together and decided that he had to do it. That day he stayed late after school to catch up with Franco Romero. The name still brought shivers down his spine. By the end of the week he had a few bucks and some stories he wasn’t in any hurry to share. He had snuck through shady alleys and scurried behind dumpsters at the echo of a water droplet striking the pavement. But Jimmy had never felt prouder than he was that day on his way home, Ramen in hand, even if he had felt the need to hide it beneath his coat and watch over his shoulder as if someone would come and swipe it from him.

His mom, in a rare bout of sobriety, had been surprised, then ecstatic, followed quickly by curiosity turned into anger. Jimmy had been reluctant to tell where he had gotten the food, but when his mother accused him of stealing, he had rashly defended himself, boasting that he’d earned it fair and square from Romero’s boys. His mother had become angry, the bottle of whiskey disappearing down her throat and her fists meeting the table with an impact that had smashed into Jimmy’s ear drums. She had been a whirlwind around him and all Jimmy could do was stand trapped in the eye of the storm as Alice huddled in a corner, hands wrapped around the jutting fridge handle for shelter.

Jimmy had survived that episode, but knew that Alice would never forget. And that was just the beginning of his mother’s rage. It was a few weeks later that she had thrown Jimmy out of the house. She had been calm and collected as she chucked a few of Jimmy’s shirts into a bag and tossed it out the door, shoving him after it. Alice had

been bewildered, unable to comprehend what she had been caught up in and why Jimmy had to leave. At eleven, she was still blind to the dark side of the city that Jimmy had become acquainted with years earlier.

And burned in Jimmy's retinas was that image. It started to flash back into his mind and Jimmy gave his head a violent shake, forcefully dragging himself back to reality. Whatever horrors this school and his new life held, Jimmy could face them, surpass them and ignore them, so long as he didn't have to face down the past.

Moving to the edge of the hallway, fidgeting as people brushed into him and knocked him against the cold steel lockers, Jimmy reached into his bag and pulled forth the small, folded piece of paper listing his classes. Reading quickly, he then shoved the paper away and slowly made his way through the crowd. As he walked, Jimmy let a portion of his mind stray from the uniform black numbers above the numerous doors. He watched the students as they moved quickly past him, around him, and over him, but saw no signs of Alice. He wasn't sure whether he was relieved or sad about it.

The rest of the day, Jimmy studiously took notes and listened to the teachers drone on as if knowing the derivative of a polynomial might fix everything. During lunch, Jimmy drifted through the cafeteria with his tray of still-frozen mashed potatoes, sickly-looking peas, and a congealed chicken patty. Not happening to catch sight of Alice's effortless smile, he found a rickety table abandoned in the corner of the harshly-lit, echoing hall and softly rested his tray on its surface. Jimmy's fork swirled his potatoes and rolled his peas while he flipped through the notebook and worked out practice problems on a page torn from the back.

The clanging of the bell was music to Jimmy's ears. He slammed his notebook shut and went to his next class with some amount of joy to be escaping lunch. The last bell of the day was somewhat less exciting as Jimmy walked out of the school building and into the bright sunlight. Kids were milling around like ants, stopping to talk with a friend here or waiting in the shade near the building's corner for a ride to arrive. Other students were unlocking expensive cars and flying off campus with a full backseat.

Jimmy walked slowly, studying the changes in texture of the pavement as he moved past the other students. He glanced up from time to time to scan the crowd, but when he didn't see what he was looking for, his eyes gravitated back to the gritty surface with its small flecks of black here and shiny metal twinkling over there.

Jimmy was interrupted by a stiff voice breaking through the ambient noise, calling his name. Looking up, Jimmy saw Emily standing a few hundred feet away in her dark gray, pinstriped business suit. Her naturally brown hair was done up in a bun behind her head and the highlights made her head match the differing shades of gray in her striped suit. Jimmy moved towards her without hurry, glancing away and suddenly feeling his skin itch beneath the stiff buttoned shirt he wore. While trying to take a deep breath against the constrictions of the wrinkled tie, Jimmy heard a familiar laugh. Turning his head and squinting his eyes to bring the image into focus, Jimmy's jawline relaxed slightly. It was the way she still flipped her blond hair when she laughed that convinced Jimmy it was Alice, even if her bob-cut didn't produce the same effect.

Like a magnet, Jimmy was drawn towards her, even as his brain told his feet to keep tracking towards Emily's waiting car. When he was ten feet away, he finally caught Alice's eye and saw her brow furrow tightly then relax as she almost imperceptibly shook her head and turned away to the boy standing beside her.

Jimmy stood there awkwardly, not ready to make a move. And Alice seemed in no hurry to acknowledge him, instead grabbing the boy's hand and leading him away. A hand on Jimmy's shoulder frightened him, causing him to spin around quickly, his hands balling into fists. Seeing that it was Emily, or mother—whatever, Jimmy forced his fingers to slide away from his palms and lay in a gentle curve. She was the first to break the silence.

Turning Jimmy's face towards her own with a gentle finger on the side of his chin, Emily asked, "Who was that?"

Jimmy drew in a sharp breath and looked harder at the ground. Emily waited patiently, unfamiliar and uncertain around Jimmy. Finally he muttered, "Alice."

Emily cocked her head slightly and her brow wrinkled. After a few seconds her face relaxed and she asked softly, "And how do you know Alice?"

"She's my sister," Jimmy said softly with a shrug.

Emily drew in a sharp breath then looked back down at Jimmy with a small, "Oh."

Jimmy fidgeted uncomfortably, moving his toes back and forth on the concrete with a scraping noise and tapping his fingers against the smooth material of his navy blue slacks.

After a minute, Emily gathered herself together and said slowly, "We could invite her over for dinner...so the two of you could catch up."

Jimmy didn't respond, his mind distant from the conversation and only hearing her voice as a foggy distortion.

"Jimmy?" Emily asked hesitantly, giving his shoulder a small nudge. "Are you still with me?"

A small shiver ran down Jimmy's spine and he looked over at her quickly, eyes slightly wider than normal.

"I'll invite the Handelsons over this week, okay?" When Jimmy didn't respond, Emily continued. "I know Sarah, Alice's mother, from our church group. I'm sure she'll be happy to come over. Okay?"

Jimmy stood there for a few minutes, looking blankly at the ground as his eyes clouded over. Drawing in a breath he said, "Yeah, sure," and turned to head in the direction Emily had come from.

Emily opened her mouth to speak again, but instead closed it and followed. When Jimmy began to lag, his toes dragging against the rough concrete, Emily moved ahead. Jimmy settled into a loping pace not too slow, but not quite up to the brisk tempo that Emily was setting. He followed in her wake, the path becoming cluttered with students as Jimmy fell behind. Not trying very hard to keep up, Jimmy moved at his own pace, weaving his way lazily through the people and only glancing ahead occasionally to correct his drifting.

When Emily reached her sleek black Lexus, she unlocked the doors with the press of a button on her keys and then waited outside for Jimmy to reach her. He moved to the other side of the car and slipped into the passenger seat with a certain resignation while Emily efficiently landed in the driver's seat and turned the key to release the comforting purr of the engine.

She backed out slowly, watching like a prey animal as students passed unaware behind her, touching the car's bumper as if that would stop it from tapping into their legs. Putting the car into drive, she navigated the slightly less treacherous waters with a stiff movement, jerking the car from side to side. Meanwhile Jimmy had collapsed into his seat, shoulders slumped down and knees raised uncomfortably. His jawline was set and his breath came out in shallow puffs as they wove through the traffic.

Avoiding looking out the window at the passing cars, Jimmy instead glanced around the clean, impersonal interior of the car. A black leather purse sat atop the center console and an air freshener swung gently from the rear-view. The only other objects in the car were a tidy manila folder shoved beside the center console, a phone charger, and deep pink lip gloss slid into a compartment in the dash.

Above the compartment was a slot for a CD and a radio with ice blue LD lights outlining various buttons and knobs. Coming from the speakers was a soft mix of old rock and eighties pop. As much as the car made Jimmy uncomfortable in its rigidity, the music was more his speed. Taking a deep breath, Jimmy watched as Emily flew down a tree-lined street and pulled into the drive of a large two-story gray house with severe white trim. The garage door cranked open in time to clear the car's low roof and Emily came down hard on the breaks as she reached the end of the garage. Cutting the engine, she emerged from the car and waited by the door for Jimmy to finish lifting himself from the low bucket seat.

She closed the garage door, cutting out the warm rays of sunlight, and then held the house door with its cold blast of air conditioning open for Jimmy to step through. They both removed their shoes, placing them in a neat row by the door, her elegant black heels contrasting with his worn down sneakers. Emily led the way into the kitchen and Jimmy stood awkwardly in the doorway, unsure of where to place himself amid the stiff-backed furniture and pristine tile flooring.

Emily looked up from the folder she was flipping through on the center aisle and caught sight of Jimmy. "Would you like a snack?" she asked with warmth to her tone that didn't match the severe quarters or the formal attire.

Jimmy stood there awkwardly, shoulder leaned against the cold wall but not pressing into it, as if afraid that he might smudge the wall if he got too comfortable.

Taking the lack of response as an affirmative, Emily pulled a blue and white china cookie jar from the corner of a cabinet and opened it on the center aisle. She drew shortbread from the jar and took a small nibble, turning again to look at Jimmy.

He ducked his head down slightly then moved awkwardly over to the center aisle, backpack still thrown over one shoulder, and reached a large hand into the narrow mouth of the jar. Pulling out the cookie, he rested the

tips of his other hand on the counter and held the cookie uncomfortably in front of him.

Emily had gone back to studying the papers, and Jimmy slowly took a bite of the buttery shortbread. After a few minutes, he slipped his backpack from his shoulder and awkwardly coaxed the bag open while holding the cookie and the bag's strap in one hand. He drew out of it a small sheath of papers, having to bend them to get them through the opening that had closed in on itself to form a rounder hole. Jimmy held them for a few moments before Emily glanced his way. Seeing the papers, she placed her black fountain pen down on the folder's contents and asked, "Are those for me?"

Jimmy nodded and moved the papers slightly closer to her, unsure where to place himself.

Emily grabbed them firmly, pulling lightly on Jimmy's hand before he could release his grip. As Emily studied the papers, Jimmy finished his cookie in small, quick bites. After a few moments she glanced up again and said with a smile, "Well, I will fill these out for you to take in tomorrow. In the meantime, why don't you go up to your room and start on some homework or something?"

Jimmy nodded slightly then turned and headed down the hall in long strides. He climbed the wooden staircase somewhat more slowly and silently closed the heavy wooden door to a white-washed bedroom. Once the door was closed, it was as if the air had been expelled from Jimmy's lungs and he took a deep breath. Laying his backpack haphazardly on his bed, Jimmy pulled his unfinished drawing from within and settled into the rolling desk chair comfortably.

He pulled an obviously used set of charcoal pencils from the otherwise empty center drawer of the desk and fingered one with familiarity. Turning back to the drawing, Jimmy ran his fingers lightly over the face, feeling the warmth of the flesh as if it were real. Shaking his head, he gripped the pencil tighter and his foot began to tap a senseless rhythm against the chair's casters.

The lines he drew were efficient and sure of themselves now that he was alone, bringing life into the eyes and a dimple to the left cheek. The right cheek was darkened and a seemingly out-of-place streak was made against the jaw bone. The right eye was also darkened, and the eyelid thickened, giving it a slightly drooping appearance.

A knock on Jimmy's door for dinner sometime later caused him to hurriedly flip the page over and stand up formally, straightening his tie before the door crept open. Jimmy was quiet through dinner, offering small nods and shakes of his head as the conversation rolled around him. Marcus—father—expressed his disappointment in a case he was assigned to take. Then Emily entered the conversation with a client who could not be pleased, first complaining that her decor was too formal, then too relaxed, and now it was too authentic—whatever that even meant.

When the conversation turned to Jimmy he didn't offer up much except to duck his head and chew more slowly. Marcus was excited at the prospect of meeting Jimmy's sister and Emily announced that she had made arrangements for Thursday. Since that was still two days away, she reasoned it gave them plenty of time to decide what to cook. Jimmy didn't offer any suggestions.

The next day at school, Jimmy still had no friends and there was little indication that he would be making any in the near future. He played the role of a good student and kept an eye out for Alice, but he didn't run into her. There was a moment in the hallway when Jimmy thought he saw her disappearing around a corner, but he hadn't been sure. When he got to art class, he was sure that he would see her, but she was absent.

On Thursday Jimmy was impatient to get the day over with. All through his first class his fingers were drumming on the table and his toe was tapping wildly. A few people turned to look at him as his drumming began to overtake the teacher's droning voice, but Jimmy couldn't still himself. He was quiet for a few minutes, then his toe slowly started up again, followed by his fingers beginning their drumming, picking up speed on their own accord.

When the bell rang, Jimmy sprang from his seat and hurried to art class, hoping to catch sight of Alice before class started. He lingered outside the door, waiting to enter and take his seat until after the bell had begun to run. Alice slipped in a moment later, taking her seat calmly in the nick of time. During class, Jimmy kept glancing over at Alice instead of focusing on his acrylic landscape. By the time they were required to turn the piece in, Jimmy's was still mostly splashes of unrefined color.

He slung his backpack over his shoulder early, intent on getting to Alice before she slipped out of the classroom and back into the crowded hallways. When the bell rang again, Jimmy sprung from his desk, waiting at the

door for Alice to pass him. When she did, he tried to grab her arm, but in the rush of people, she evaded him. Jimmy followed her, trying to keep up, but he wasn't tall enough to see over everyone else and she steadily wove her way through the crowd, putting more distance between them until Jimmy could no longer see her.

Jimmy's shoulders slumped and he walked slowly to his next class, now certain that Alice was avoiding him. The rest of the day seemed to drag on. Jimmy couldn't invest himself in any of it and the thought of dinner made his skin crawl. If Alice was putting this much effort into avoiding him, would she even show up? And if she did, what would he say? She obviously couldn't forgive him for what had happened that day.

Jimmy was quiet on the ride home from school and went straight to his bedroom when Emily pulled into the garage. He pulled his sketch out of a desk drawer with a renewed sense of urgency. Yesterday he had wanted nothing to do with it, but now Jimmy felt as if he needed to finish it, as if that would somehow make everything better.

In his own twisted way, Jimmy couldn't move past the event until he made himself really look at it. As Jimmy shaded in the face, a black eye faded in on the right side and a slightly oozing scar showed up running from the girl's nose to the corner of her jaw on the left. Her entire face was bruised and battered, destroying most of the resemblance that had been present yesterday. Adding a final drop of blood dripping from the girl's misaligned nose, Jimmy sat back and stared at it.

A mixture of emotions flitted across his face. His eyes began to moisten and the line of his mouth became wobbly. Then his brow furrowed and his nostrils expanded as Jimmy inhaled sharply. When he finally let the breath out, his shoulders sank and his chin dipped to his chest. Jimmy's fingers curled into a fist and an eyebrow rose, turning one side of his frown up slightly as his fingernails bit into the flesh of his palm. Then he bit the corner of his lip and his eyes filled again, this time leaking over slightly before Jimmy roughly brushed the beginnings of tears away.

That afternoon—the afternoon that his mother had kicked him out—was the source of everything Jimmy was feeling. He had been late getting to his sister's elementary school from the high school, and when he finally did arrive, Alice had been standing alone by the flagpole, looking lost. Her disappointment had been written in her crumpled face and teary eyes. As soon as she had seen him, Alice had begun babbling about how she needed to get home soon, something about a friend swinging by to pick her up; they were going to the mall together.

In order to appease his little sister, Jimmy had told her earnestly that they'd get there in time—he knew a shortcut. Instead of taking the main roads home, Jimmy had ducked into a side street, tracking diagonally through the run down houses and unkempt yards. Alice had followed, skipping every now and then to keep up with his fast pace. The streets were silent except for the claps of their footsteps against the sidewalk and the occasional dog barking in the distance. It was a pleasant day with a clear sky and a gentle breeze rifling through Jimmy's short hair.

They had been walking for some time when a group of boys appeared around the corner, walking slowly and talking loudly. Seeing Jimmy, the boy in front had called out, "Hey, I have a message for you guys, stop selling in our turf!"

Jimmy had slowed down, looking at the group of boys quizzically.

When he hadn't responded, the boy had called out again. "You're guys have been selling on our turf, and we aren't okay with that, are we boys?" he had asked, turning to the group following him.

They had all looked between each other and Jimmy, nodding, and a boy in the back had said, "No we aren't!"

Jimmy still hadn't responded, instead shifting his weight from side to side and glancing at each of the boys nervously.

Tired of not getting a response, the boys had covered the rest of the distance between them and Jimmy and the leader had said, "I think you need some help remembering."

The rest of it had happened quickly as two kids grabbed him by the arms and held him. They had turned him around to face his sister, who was similarly restrained by two boys. Jimmy had watched as a fifth boy had taken careful aim and swung at his sister, again and again. He had felt each punch at it made contact, as if it had been him. Jimmy had pulled frantically, trying to get away, but he was no match for the two holding him. One had taken his spare hand and socked Jimmy in the nose to quiet him, sending a shot of pain up his nose and a warm stream of blood down his face.

Then it was all over, the boys had released their holds and walked away. The leader had turned back only once to call out, "You make sure you tell yours guys that, alright?" Then they had gone, disappearing around the corner as quickly as they had come.

When Jimmy and Alice had made their way home, their mother had been waiting. After seeing Alice and his story, she had put two and two together, directing her wrath at Jimmy. And she was right, it was all his fault.

Jimmy was startled back to reality by a knock on the door and Emily's voice saying, "The Handelsons are here!"

Jimmy quickly shoved the picture back into his desk drawer, slamming it shut as he got up and walked out of his bedroom. Standing in the spacious foyer was a thin blonde woman standing next to a tall man with an angular face and slicked back hair. Both were dressed in semi-formal wear. Standing slightly behind them was Alice dressed in a knee-length puffy yellow dress. Marcus was shaking Mr. and Mrs. Handelson's hands and directing them into the dining room.

Jimmy walked down the stairs slowly, placing each bone of each foot down individually on the stair step and then lifting them individually off the step as the other foot went down. He walked down the corridor slightly on his toes, arriving in the dining room as the Handelsons were sitting down in the antique wooden chairs. Jimmy carefully moved to the empty chair next to Alice as if nobody would notice him.

As Jimmy was lowering himself softly into the chair, Marcus said, "And this is Jimmy," motioning towards him.

Mr. and Mrs. Handelson nodded politely while Alice purposefully avoided his gaze, instead looking out the window at the evening sky beside her. Jimmy sunk deeper into the rigid chair.

"So," Emily said, coming into the room with a wooden bowl filled with a fresh spring salad and a carafe filled with a creamy blue-specked dressing. "Tell us about your childhood Jimmy." She laid the dishes on the table and began passing them to the left, towards Mrs. Handelson.

Jimmy glanced down at his lap, his right hand fiddling with his spoon. Feeling the weight of eyes on him, Jimmy finally moved his eyes up and said softly, "It was a long time ago."

"Well, did you have as much fun as Alice seems to have had?" Mr. Handelson asked with a smile on his face. "When did you get separated? Alice never really mentioned you."

"It was a long time ago," Jimmy said with a small shrug. "It was alright though." The salad reached him and he served it slowly with a slight tremor in his hands. Jimmy put down the dressing carafe and picked up his fork in one movement. He had a mouthful of lettuce in his mouth before anyone else could ask him a question.

Marcus turned towards Alice, who was twirling her lettuce around her plate with a look of boredom. "So," he said cheerfully, "Do you remember Jimmy?"

Alice's eyes slid over to Jimmy then back to her plate. She muttered, "Yeah, we weren't that young."

"Were you guys close?" Mrs. Handelson asked, looking from Jimmy back to Alice.

Jimmy looked at Alice, brow furrowed, and Alice again just slid her eyes over. Then the two looked back at their respective plates. Jimmy nodded slowly while Alice shook her head. The adults all paused, looking at Jimmy and Alice with confused expressions on their faces.

Jimmy stared into his plate, drawing his shoulders down and closer together to make himself smaller while Alice opened herself up, sitting taller and straighter, though still glancing down. The tension in the room grew, making it feel as though any sudden movement could cause and shatter thin layer of civility. Alice's brow furrowed and her hands tightened on her knees. Suddenly, she slid her chair back and stood up quickly. Alice banged her leg against the hard chair as she left the room.

Mr. and Mrs. Handelson looked at each other, raising their eyebrows. Meanwhile Emily and Marcus looked after Alice, equally confused by the events. Then all the adults turned to look at Jimmy, who was still staring into his plate, as if he would be able to explain.

Feeling the eyes on him, Jimmy sank farther into his chair, trying to disappear into the tan fabric of the seat. The silence stretched on longer and Jimmy's toes began drumming silently against the cold floor. Then he stood and slunk out of the room. Nobody made any effort to stop him.

Jimmy peered around the corner and walked down the long hallway. He turned to go up the stairs, running into Alice. She was sitting with her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. Jimmy stood awkwardly at the

foot of the stairs, wanting to go up to his room but not sure how to gracefully pass Alice in the narrow corridor. He cleared his throat softly.

Alice ran her fingers through her short hair then slowly looked up with her eyes. Seeing that it was Jimmy, she looked back down, unwilling to hold the eye contact.

Jimmy slowly sank to the step below Alice, on the same level as her feet. He licked his lips a few times and his eye began to twitch. Finally, he spoke, using slow, even words. "I'm sorry," he said with a look of pain on his face. "I never meant for it to happen."

After a long pause Alice snapped, "I know!" Drawing in a deep breath she retorted, "Do you think that means anything to me?"

Jimmy allowed his head to fall to the side, eyes cast down at the grain in the wood. His breaths were shallow and few. After another long moment he said, choosing his words carefully, "I tried to come back for you, you know? I was stuck in a group home nearby and ran away to go back. But they tracked me down and caught me before I made it to the door. They dragged me into a police car and drove me back."

Alice nodded imperceptibly. "I saw," she whispered.

"And you still can't forgive me?" Jimmy asked, anger starting to creep into his voice. "Was what I did so wrong? I never meant for anything to happen!" Pulling in another breath, he continued. "Is it really that bad to take a detour on the way home?" He stared at her accusingly.

Finally Alice looked up, wiping streaked eyeliner away before turning to Jimmy. "No, no it's not that bad," she said in a broken voice. After swallowing hard, she continued, "But you were supposed to be my older brother. And you were supposed to look out for me." She glanced over at the wall then back to Jimmy. "And instead you stood there and watched. Because big brothers are supposed be there. And you got yourself into a situation where you couldn't be."

"I did what I had to do," Jimmy said firmly, no longer caring who heard him. After another moment had passed he added on, "And I did it for you."

Another long moment passed before Alice wiped her eyes dry and turned her entire body towards Jimmy. "Look," she said firmly. "I know you didn't mean for anything to happen and you were trying your best to protect me, but I found a new life, okay? I just don't want you messing it up." Her eyes began to water again. "I finally moved on from this stuff. That's why I was ignoring you. I don't want to be stuck in the past, I want to move forward."

Jimmy was speechless for a moment, and then he looked up from his lap and met her bold gaze. "I just need to know that you don't hate me," he whispered mournfully.

"I don't hate you," Alice said without any quaver in her voice. "I don't think I could ever hate my brother."

With those words, color filled Jimmy's cheeks and a brightness filled his eyes. The nervous tic had disappeared and a smile spread across his face. Finally he nudged her shoulder and said, "Shall we go back to dinner then, sis?"

Alice gave him a small smile and allowed him to help her up. They walked back into the dining room with content expressions on their faces. The tension in the room melted like ice and the adults sat back in their chairs, expressions of worry blooming into smiles.

As the families ate, they laughed and smiled, enjoying each other's company and the stories their children told about each other. Mr. and Mrs. Handelson learned that their daughter used to spend hours combing her plastic horses' manes only to knot them while trying to braid the manes and put them up into cool buns. In return, Alice told Emily and Marcus about how Jimmy used to play with her Barbie dolls.

The families ate heartily, digging into the food between talking. The whole table laughed for a solid five minutes as Alice and Jimmy tried to explain how they used to rake the leaves in their yard onto an air mattress in order to jump from the tree down into the leaves. Jimmy reasoned that they always saw kids jump into leaf piles in movies, but never got enough leaves to cushion the fall.

The candles set in the windows of the dining room were burning low by the time Mr. and Mrs. Handelson finally stood up, starting to make excuses for them to leave. When the door finally shut behind them, everyone was exhausted but pumped from the dinner, promising to organize another one soon.



Poetry

Smitten Jo

By Alexandre Collette

The violins screeched high, covering the room with notes like rain.
Beautiful music. If one is lucky to be deaf. But the lies remain and
acid poured through, poisoning the minds who heard
the legend that killed in symphonies.

It is not the legend himself,
but this woman who set fire to his spirit.
Believe in me, he said. She refused.

He led the weak on, giving them false strength,
something to believe. The liar spoke to the pathetic
and the rich.
To the frail in faith he offered false kingdoms.
The challenge accepted by idiots,
to seek power in pretending.
Sing, like everyone else, the songs created to cover the lies.

He lied to his brothers and his sisters while singing.
Behind the notes, he took what wasn't his.
He made the rules as he went. Manipulations were his specialty,
promising eternity and hope.

Worship me as your god, his actions revealed.
Sing my rules into your brain, dissipate your identity
and be like me. Only you aren't me, of course.
"I am the martyr you will praise."
Believe in me, he said.

You shall rule forever your own world, he offered.
Relinquish your values with a joyful heart
in return. It is for the choir. And for pockets.
You will receive the higher rank
the more you give, but none are equal to him.

None will be as glorified as his staff and voice.
His face shall be placed in honor
like a vulture that killed his prey. Pray,
pray a note of belief in my name
every day and believe I will live forever.
BELIEVE!

The gun he used against the crowd will tarnish itself
in shame. It will hide and cover below the dirt
His hands poisoned the trigger. This has been forgotten.

His happiness is venom melting the souls of all who follow.
“There is no happiness without my law.”
The weak and wealthy wish to be a god like him.
Trumpets echo the imagined truth,
resounding the wolf’s call
hiding under the wool blanket.
He said, “Believe in me.” I am Smitten Jo.

This woman sought for answers that Smitten Jo crafted.
His followers well versed for his defense.
He is not the lowly person you sing about!
This woman poured into the records washed away by his admirers.
HOW?
Flames raging inside her mind as questions
of disbelief fall to the rain.

She is the strongest to defeat his hundred old lie.
Their hatred is sealed into the music. The only music they listen to.
One million innocently cheerful. Ignorance.
They don’t know of his true identity.
Ignoring the truth, some continue playing the instruments
to praise the lies abound.

“I will not lie to myself,” this woman stated. “I will love whomever I wish and
this life of yours will have nothing to do with me.”

This woman knows her history,
his life was a lie and Smitten Jo knew it.

She spreads her knowledge to anyone who would listen.
As if she were defiling their gold
symbol with reality.
Those who listen to her will never see the singing believers
the same ever again.

Dressed the same, say the same thing,
they believe the same deception
and judge all who don’t.
Why don’t you join us, they persist. The same note and key. Black and white.

“What a boring life you’re leading,”
to this women they tell her. Smitten Jo is a liar and a fraud!
Anything different is to be admonished
and controlled. Even you, women.
“You have one role and one role, only.”

“It’s the life to lead, isn’t it?” Ha, ha. Not for me.
This woman lights the fire piercing the hearts
in women who find her brilliant. This is without the lies telling her how to act.
This woman is the ideal bastard the world loves.
The men can’t have her— nope, she doesn’t want them!
Their controlling deceptions are the foulest notes in her eyes.
They are the deceived without knowing or the deceivers despite the truth.

To marry the righteous man just to receive the godlike rank
The women could never achieve alone.
The women desire the tall towers that cast the biggest shadows.
Attain this trickery they oh-so-love dearly. Children, ok?
Man and children. The destructive melodies of the women.

This woman angers the men.
She believes the same without the lies.
Oh, it’s not the same at all. It is better, morons. Her thoughts ready to strike them.
Limited control-
different-
loving-
without judgment.
They hate her because she represents a wholesome life.
Her happiness is the honey spilled on their violins,
Sweet, tormenting, powerful, real.

I beg to know why. Could I pretend to believe in that liar?
“Pray, tell me the truth,” I pretend.
The lover said to feel the power of the legend and spirit,
that is the truth, she said! And I should feel it, too.
It’s so perfect, the lover said.

“It’s impossible; the smiles are disrupting my peace.”

One year of uncovering the truth
painfully eroded my soul to despair.
Smitten Jo is consuming me
and I still refuse. He is winning more hearts to devour as I lay here.
One voice against the multitude. One by one. Or helpless
Eighteen months to believe or leave
LEAVING!

The sheep will follow the wolf that follows the vulture.
The hubris of Smitten Jo is smitten with defiance
and I am smitten with mockery.
Sing your melodies, I say, sing
the loneliness and misery from your hearts, I say

I say I don't care. I laugh
alone.

Believe me, I am not the frail and surely not wealthy.
I question bravely
the malevolence of his passages.
Thousands of corrections, not so perfect, eh?
But the multitude obliviously recite
how perfect it is.
I smile
at wicked thoughts
testing the faith in its music and heinous shadows.

Keep your book. Keep your slate of notes that sliver your soul away.
I'll have a slice of life.

Let the violins screech high and cover their lips
with notes of acid rain.
Their choice
to sing a symphony bleeding a sickly sermon
of false kingdoms and fantasy worlds.
Let them, I say. None for me
I command.

Two years I've forgotten the poisonous passion of my pathetic pursuit.
I am the strongest to defeat his hundred lies.
Keep your seals, I say.
The rain can't wash the blood away. The instruments are grateful.
They have no mortality.
The notes they create are controlled carefully for a craft in consuming souls
and spreading his works for deliverance of the feeble.
Keep your words,
they're for you-
not me. My strength will scare you.

Smitten Jo, you foul con of truth, I say
I'll see you in hell.

A Cup and Two Packs

By Alexandre Collette

My feet scuffle across the floor,
Shoulders leaning like Pisa,
Slow and awkward.
A little bit of eye shadow,
No one will notice the four hours of sleep.

First class over,
What did we talk about?
A palm mark on my cheek
My backpack slung over my shoulders
Thirty two stairs downward
The elevator was broken
Can I just roll down?
The warm sun was not helping.

Walking into the café
The smell was like Peter Piper's whistle
I walk over and hear the gurgling goodness pour
A dollar and fifty-two cents
Or was it forty-eight?

Black, two sugars. Real sugar.
Like the aurora lights at my feet.
Warmth and caffeine,
Yummy little black beans.

Class in five,
I'm at full throttle,
They will see it in my eyes,
The smooth-roasted scholar.

Feline Pal

By Alexis Ankro

This cat sweater is awesome.
It's pretty damn cool.
I love it so much,
I wear it to school.

It has a large kitten head
with its mouth open wide.
The kitten's large eyes
almost reach to my sides.

Its head floats in a galaxy
far, far away,
against a bright colored sky
I could stare at all day.

With a look of surprise
its whiskers reach out
about a mile each side
from its adorable little snout.

The insides are warm and fuzzy.
It's perfect for cool weather.
This sweater makes everyone smile.
It's a pretty rad sweater.

The Life of Man and Wildflower

By Cherish Noel Brown

We are brought. We are brought beneath the surface. With a burst of a seed, we are born to the world, naked, and vulnerable. We grow, hidden.

We are brought. We are brought beneath the surface. With a burst of a egg, we are born to the world, naked, and vulnerable. We grow, hidden.

We are born. We are born as we break the surface, out of the dark and into the light.

We are born. We are born as we break the surface, out of the dark and into the light.

Our lives are made in seasons.

Our lives are made in decades.

We are young. We are young, small, frail. Again, we grow. Taller. Stronger. It is our Spring.

We are young. We are young, small, frail. Again, we grow. Taller. Stronger. It is our childhood.

We adore. We adore the heat of the sun, the cool of the shade, and the cleanse of each rainfall. We adore life. As we experience it, we adore it. We live.

We adore. We adore the heat of the sun, the cool of the shade, and the cleanse of each rainfall. We adore life. As we experience it, we adore it. We live.

We dance. We dance to the flashing lights and drums in the nights of summer. There is music and dancing. A thunderstorm. We continue to experience it. We live more. We adore more.

We dance. We dance to the flashing lights and drums in the nights of summer. There is music and dancing. A party. We continue to experience it. We live more. We adore more.

We sink. Suddenly it takes all we can just to keep our balance. To keep our flowers from sinking down amongst the lingering rain. Life has become too much. It is our April.

We sink. Suddenly it takes all we can just to keep our balance. To keep our heads from falling off amongst the lingering questions. Life has become too much. It is our adolescence.

We wait. We wait for her to come along. The one who can pluck us from this ground and take us into the air and let the breeze carry all of our wishes away. To be admired, adored, kept safe, and cherished. To be kept forever in the pages of her book. We plead for love.

We wait. We wait for him to come along. The one who can steal us from this place and take us into his arms and let love carry all of our wishes away. To be admired, adored, kept safe, and cherished. To be kept forever in the chambers of his heart. We plead for love.

We thrive. We thrive with tall stems and full flowers. We live, and we create life. We follow Mother Nature's orders. We pay the bees the fruits of our labor. It is our Summer.

We thrive. We thrive with tall body and full mind. We live, and we create life. We follow God's orders. We pay the government the fruits of our labor. It is our adulthood.

Our work is done. We let our seeds go. It is our Autumn.

Our work is done. We let our children go. It is our decline.

We dwindle. We become weak, our stems begin to droop. Our leaves wrinkle. Our flowers lose their brightness. It is our Winter. It is our death. It is the end.

We dwindle. We become weak, our backs begin to droop. Our skin wrinkles. Our eyes lose their brightness. It is our aging. It is our death. It is the end.

Beneath the ground we retreat. We decay.

A Death Has Occurred

By Francesca Giustini

This is a requiem— though, you're not dead.
It's solely the version of you in my head
That's no longer breathing - life into my veins;
Yet, sadly the notion of you still remains.

This is a lament- though, you're not gone.
It's only from my life that you have withdrawn
All sense of endearment - that I held so near;
Yet, your resurrection is something I fear.

This is an elegy— though, you're still alive.
It's simply my vantage that I should revive
So I cannot see you - in every view;
Yet, I cannot conjure strength to erase you.

Books Never Read

By Francesca Giustini

He has literary tattoos
of books he's never read
He'll never admit it
but I know the truth
His words are too polished
when he speaks of them
and His eyes lack
all traces of pure passion

I cannot comprehend
how he can commit
to a dozen inked lies
But not to the only one
willing to love him
Despite them
And I fear myself
for letting that love exist

Sheen Heard Some Voices

By Francesca Giustini

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who were duh, winning!
Sheen heard voices who were an army of assassins.
Sheen heard voices who were battle-tested bayonets, bro.
Sheen heard voices who were tired of pretending they weren't total bitchin' rock stars from Mars.
Sheen heard voices who were bringing him Dr. Clown shoes.
Sheen heard voices who were runs in his underwear before his first cup of coffee.
Sheen heard voices who were fools and trolls.

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices with an F-18.
Sheen heard voices with poetry in their fingertips, you know, most of the time, and this includes naps.
Sheen heard voices who had veins filled with tiger blood.
Sheen heard voices who unlearned 22 years of the fiction called AA. It's a silly book written by a broken-down fool.
Sheen heard voices who picked a fight with a warlock.

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who are defeating the naysayers.
Sheen heard voices who had diseases and he cured them with his brain, his mind.
Sheen heard voices who he loved violently.

Sheen heard voices who effortlessly and magically turned their tin cans into gold. (what the fuck does that mean?)

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who are bi-winning. They win here and they win there.

Sheen heard voices who probably took more drugs than anyone could survive.

Sheen heard voices who don't live in the middle anymore, that's where you get slaughtered, that's where you get embarrassed in front of the prom queen.

Sheen heard voices who are not Thomas Jefferson because he's a pussy.

Sheen heard voices who mistake his passion for anger.

Sheen heard voices who lay down with their ugly wives and their ugly children and just look at their loser lives and then they look at his and say "I CAN'T PROCESS IT."

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who have a different constitution.

Sheen heard voices who made Sinatra, Flynn, Jagger, Richards, all of them look like droopy-eyed armless children.

Sheen heard voices who know resentments are the rocket fuel that lives in the tip of his saber.

Sheen heard voices who gracefully ignored this folly for 177 shows

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who work for the pope, they murder people.

Sheen heard voices who have the right to kill him, but do not have the right to judge him. Boom. That's the whole movie. That's life.

Sheen heard voices who say hope is for suckers and fools.

Sheen heard voices who, like his goddesses, have completed the three parts of his heart, it's a polygamy story.

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices who have defeated a earthworm with his words.

Sheen heard voices who wish him nothing but pain in his silly travels.

Sheen heard voices who are on a drug-- it's called Charlie Sheen. It's not available because if you try it you will die. Your face will melt off and your children will weep over your exploded body.

Sheen heard some voices.

Sheen heard voices he believed.

Sheen heard voices he denied.

These were the same voices.

The Misfits

by Katie Lacko

We are the misfits
The ones that society looks down upon
We are the misfits
The ones that don't want to be found
Because being different is bad
Because being everything is the fad
I'm sick of it all
The hate and nasty calls
Vile words from the crowd around
While I sit tied and bound
So what if I'm different and gay
Is hate all you can say
I'm stepping up and standing out
Listen to the words I'm shouting out
I'm different but so are you
Shout out the things you hold true
For I am the misfit
Unwanted and called out
I am the misfit
Against the world I stand and shout
Pick up and carry on
Before your sanity is all gone
To those like me, listen to what I have to say
So maybe I can help you one day
It's time to put down your razor and blades
Even though the scars will never fade
You can't change who you are
So be the best you can be by far
Follow my lead and chose to say
That it's okay and you'll live another day

The Devil of the Seas

by Melanie Przybiski

Edward Kenway
Welsh-born man
Turned Privateer
Is most feared of all.

Making a better life
By taking those of others
Stalking from the shadows
Sailing the salty seas.

Traveling across the Caribbean
Battling the cerulean seas
Dueling the trailing pirate hunters
To survive another day.

Captain of the Jackdaw
The crew follow on
Through thick and thin
An unbreakable bond.

Cutlasses in hand,
Settling the score of old enemies
And sinking Spanish galleons
Plundering cloth, sugar and rum.

Drawn to liquors' dangers
Earning reales through drunken games
Causing raucous bar fights
Rambling on singing sea shanties

Forging fellowships with
A bond stronger than most
To unite as a family
Raising the notorious black flag!

Limericks

by Jenna Kauffman

A beautiful girl in my town,
Had a face always covered with a frown.
Suddenly we realized she wasn't beautiful at all,
She always kept up a wall,
And had a face covered like a clown.

A tree,
A bee,
One who sings,
One who has wings,
And then there's me.

Cold

by Marissa Feldberg

It is cold.
The blustery wind has
forced inside your lungs,
obstructing your every breath.

You walk faster,
the cold intensifies.
You slow down,
the cold lingers
on your frozen fingers
and tingling ears.

Your every step is laced
with pain
of a cold that offers no kindness.

It is cold.
The gust of frigid air
is a cruel punishment.

You shrug your shoulders
and clench your hands tightly
inside your shallow jacket pockets.

Your neck aches
from slouching and the hair
on your covered arms and covered legs
bristles upright.

The muscles in your chest and back
twinge
from the tightened posture you hope
will conserve precious body heat.

Your toes and fingers are stark white,
icy to the touch.

It is cold.
The bitter sting
of the Northeast wind has
frozen your heart.

The sunny spark
within your core
has frozen over
like the parking lot pavement.

Now a void fills the space
where passion and purpose once lived.

Icy tears fall down your icy cheek,
failing to thaw your frozen soul.
It is cold.

Fickle with Flowers

by Nicole Zuleger

A rose is beautiful.
A rose is a kiss.
Everyone loves Rose.

A daisy can cause just as much of a smile.
A daisy is proud without boasting.
But Daisy is never good enough.

Tulips and lilacs and daisies are abundant,
but they are never the chosen ones.
Everyone wants Rose.

Roses are not so damn perfect.
Roses have thorns.
Yet everyone loves Rose.

Roses can't decide on one true color.
They don't last long once they are captured.
But everyone loves Rose.

Tulips are bright.
Daisies are steady.
Lilacs are calming.
Still everyone wants Rose.

What is so perfect about Rose?
She doesn't deserve the attention or praise.
She is not the bloom she was named for.

Memoirs of a Caged King

by Megan Schaeffer

Oh the day has finally come
I jump up and get ready in a hum
today is the best day of all time
today is the day I've waited for and it's just sublime

I waged war for many years on the unruly serfs and barbaric trash
always ahead of them one step just like the flash
and for all my efforts I am getting the best outcome I could hope for
they are making me king and I feel tickled to my very core

ah speak of the devil, here comes my guard
up to my protective cage he walks while handing me my royal meal of lard
today is the day I'm free of this safe haven cage and any potential head hunter
oh yes, I feel like I'm at the world series and the team's best bunter

I can't help but pace back and forth across the floor
as I wait for the guards to come and escort me from my door
finally I can see the guards coming and I can't help but be cross
they took far too long and I'm their new king, the head boss

as they finally release me from my protective hole
I swear and curse at my guards that for their impudence they will pay the ultimate toll
as we walk down the path to my throne
I can't help but to see the peasants gazing upon me with awe, as if I were a precious stone

the glee I feel by their slovenly looks of envy and desire
makes me feel like I'm on cloud nine, no perhaps much higher
oh and look at them they even are wearing my kingdoms colors with pride
the lovely sea of orange clad peasants makes me smile wide

but enough of the poor and destitute peasants for they keep me from what I seek
I need to hurry to my throne and crown for I am now one of the gods of Greek
here we are finally we have made it to the throne room
oh yes I can feel it, I feel like I'm going to be reborn again from my mother's womb

everywhere around me I see my loyal subjects who have come to watch
why look there is even my sworn enemy who I once kicked in the crotch
as the guards guide me to my seat on the throne I look around the room some more
and see the captain of the guard and his lady whore

I turn and turn some more and what do I see to my side
guards have wrapped luxurious gauntlets and bracelets around me and have them tightly tied
they think the same thing I do, they do not want me to slip or fall from my beloved seat
for I do not want to lose my crown the pinnacle treat

finally I see the pope come in dressed from head to toe in religious frock
the crown is put on my head, and I can't wait for the rite to start that I constantly eye the clock
the holy man begins to read from his queer little book
and I was so excited that I trembled and shook

with the last word out of his mouth he motioned to the fool to push the celebratory peg
I can't wait, this is my crowning although I think we'll have to celebrate with ale, at least a keg
the peg is pushed and my crown shines for all in the room to gaze upon
I hear a crackle, like the sound of electricity and feel a jolt but soon that feeling is gone

Trela Rebma

By Megan Schaeffer

It's amazing to see all the pain and destruction that can happen in an hour
when your community becomes the new front line in this brutal war
and those that caused it run away and cower
leaving everyone in tears and afraid of what could be lurking behind any door

but what happened in this horrid hour that caused so much strife
to know the answer to this question we must rewind the clock
and start before the war claimed an innocent life
leaving one community in a numbing shock

the morning air and sun brought the loving community out for fun
but just beyond the shadows was a drifter that would soon turn life upside down
for this drifter had mission and wanted to hurry and run
lest he stay in the sun and brown

just a couple of feet away were two little lights
both lights vibrant with glee and smile
when who should see them than our stranger who seized them up in wide sights
and walked closer with a plan so very vile

the drifter walked up striking a conversation with the little lights
both too naïve and pure to know what would transpire
the stranger spun tales of the many fun adventures and tricks one could do with kites
and too soon were both lights caught in the tales of one good liar

for you see this was not just any liar
this liar was a doctor in fact
but not a doctor that you would ever want to meet now or prior
for this doctor was sick with inhumane tact

and possessed a gross amount of charm
easily stealing the two little lights away with no one aware
until a slightly bigger light raised the alarm
causing the keepers of the little light to drop down sobbing in prayer

a little while later came the guards roaring in
people from all over the community came trying to lend a hand
unaware this war would soon be over and they would not win
for they were too late to win the first or last stand

by now the doctor had already turned the lights from a once bright white
to a dirty color resembling fear and pain
those poor little lights had no chance to win this fight
as the doctor set out to erase these lights and remain sane

by now the community was frantic looking for the lights in a hurry
at the very same moment fate decided to become cruel
and the two small lights dimmed and went out, leaving behind any feelings and worry
leaving the town behind to find the doctor the ghoul

only a short time later did the guards find the remnants of what the lights left behind
eyes full of tears and hearts torn apart
they brought back to the community the horrid news they did find
and with sadness in the air a community swore this was not the end of the war, it was start

you may be wondering what happened to this so called light thief
well he was caught by the guards and held accountable for these crimes
put in jail to spend time for the unimaginable amount of grief
only to come out a few years later with little lost time

the little light's guardians and community seethed with rage
but the prisoner of war was done with the sentence
left out of the safe iron cage
and seemingly on the straight path to repentance

those who were too ignorant and stupid to waste time on cheered the release
they claimed the doctor had atoned for the crime by turning a new leaf
that this doctor now only sought to live in peace
they believed this coward, executioner, and thief

but just like the saying a tiger does not change its stripes
so does a light thief not change
for there is no way to change these types
and by now this thief has devoured another light, causing more pain left by this sad exchange
in a war that seemingly has no end while this enemy still lives and the enemy support still gripes

The Moon's Love

by Nicole Zuleger

At night I watch a raven-haired girl.
She leaves behind her classmates;
always strolls alone.

She is not afraid of the darkness,
but still welcomes the light I bring.
She welcomes the night,
so unlike many others.

I notice everything about her.
How she stares up at me,
how she hums while she walks,
how her eyes soak up my light,
how her lips curl into a half-smile.
I wonder if she cares for me as I care for her;
providing light so she does not trip on the slick black ice,

keeping my raven angel out of harm's way.
She must care for me. She must,
for when she reaches her destination,
she looks up at me one more time and smiles,
as if she knows I have been watching and
I will now miss her as she vanishes behind stone walls.

I am envious of my brother who will see her again as
he rises
and I fall asleep.
My beautiful distraction must look lovely in his light,
but
she will always look better in my beams that break the
night.

To David: Love, Goliath of Goth

by Michael G. Cornelius

Sapling champion of the Israelites:

I am Warrior God of the Philistines,
Slayer of the Hazimonians,
Annihilator of the Assyrians,
Canker in Pharaoh's Eye.
I have crushed nigh
ten thousand men
in my bare, calloused hands.
I am giant;
I am king of all I survey.
Earth Shaker.
Killer of beasts and sea;
sovereign of storms;
ruler of every domain.

David, meet Goliath, your master.

I stare into your black unblinking eyes.
In them I see myself.
They are strong eyes
for a weakling boy—
obsidian, volcanic glass,
unflinching, unyielding, unusual.

Your tunic, maroon and gold;
your hair dark and wind-
tousled, sweeping curls
that catch at the back of
your neck. Your limbs are
small but supple, your
muscles well-rounded as your
flesh curves over your young
skeleton. The body smooth, not
yet touched with the down
of manhood. The will of youth,
a kindling in your flesh, shines
like a tumescent opal
against hot buttressed sand.

Thusly, we gaze into each other's eyes.

We neither move nor breathe; we only peer,

your eyes staring but not seeing. My eyes
look no longer into yours but scavenge
your flesh, ranging over you—your skin,
your form, your sinew and smoke—and my heart,
my heart, beats rapidly, flushed, pounding not
for battle but for something else, something feral,
something wild. I am lost, powerful, confused, aroused.
I am conspicuous. I am found.
Uncertainty pierces my chest; my eyes dazzle
at your fire. I am your champion, but not your
killer.

Goliath, meet David, your master.

'Tis true! So help me, 'tis true!
You will be my prize, David,
young Mithra, fire god,
you will be my reward for victory this day and
we will be together in the eyes of all men
and gods! As you walk towards me with small,
unhesitant steps, your legs taut and sun-darkened,
I choke a happy laugh. You level your spear
at me, portrait of a man, facsimile warrior,
and I must use all my will not to rush you, to
grab you and cover you with thousands of
kisses. I will feed you sugar dates and
sweetmeat with my warrior hands. I will be
your king, and you mine. We will rule together,
warrior and page,
Achilles and Patroclus
Hercules and Iollas
our brothers in the spirit and the flesh.
You will be conquest and conqueror.
It will be said that neither
Ra, nor Jehovah, nor wicked Inanna
could defeat the great warrior;
only boyish Eros, with
fools' weapons, is strong enough to
bid the mountain to bark, to swoon, to
die a thousand deaths at your feet.

As you raise your sling, I rush forward for
our first embrace.

Damn Door

by Nicole Bodulow

The key's in the lock.
The handle won't turn.
The metal doesn't click.
The lock doesn't budge.
And the damn door won't open.
The outside is damaged,
chips and rust cloaking its shine,
bits and pieces of grey
cover the ground, dust of the past.

What happened?
Wasn't it brand new just the other day,
paint all in place, lock working just fine?
Always open and welcome.

What changed?
Instead of letting me in,
It's shutting me out.
In the cold.
In the rain.
In the dark.
By myself.
The dark that's now empty,
No one to see me,
No one to help me,

No one to tell me what I did,
What made the lock stick,
And the damn door not open?

I've tried everything,
but nothing will work.
This job was never meant for one,
instead it needs two.
Two people to meld it back into shape.
Two people to make it turn the right way

Two people to make this damn door open.

I can't do it alone, but
no one will help.
I must not be welcome,
not anymore.

The key's in the lock.
The handle won't turn.
The metal doesn't click.
The lock doesn't budge.

And this damn door needs to open.

Be a Man

by Patrick Fox

"Stand a little taller, boy.
You're gonna have to
be a man some day."
He said it with such
resolution that I could
not even ask what that
was supposed to mean
to a kid by the age of
sixteen. I just thought
I would some how know
but to this day I can't
tuck fingers to palm and
strike out the sound of
cracking bones and leave

bruises or love the way
doors close with such
resounding conclusion.
The way he showed my mother
with color in her cheeks
that would stain wine and
fear at heart that turned
sheets into stifled cries,
hell into being too
Exhausted by grief and
pain to desire heaven.
To this day, I have never
wanted anyone to know
what it means to be a man.

Youth

by Patrick Fox

Terrible youth:
we trembled, but
discovered truth;
beaten, broken, bruised,
we never made it without
scars but we learned
to wear them like jewels.
Each and every one of us
played a part, not just in
imagination.
(Because pretending was
holding your insides)
We never lost our fascination
with breathing
and getting old never looked
like falling apart, but
coming back together;
every moment a fresh start
in the land of never

give up
lose hope
or surrender.
Back then
we were dissevered,
ties cut long
before we could
remember.
Beaten, broken, abused youth;
never had a chance to be a child,
how to color, when to smile.
(We survived for a while)
Bed time stories were
grumbling stomachs and
night lights, late stars
(They hit you, mine left
never got far but we did
our best)

Adventure

by Patrick Fox

I've never felt more like
a vagabond, a wanderer,
a seeker, a watcher:
gnarled staff in mangled hand,
crooked and creaking
by every strike staving
off the soft, damp, petrichor;
stepping deeper into the bleak
mist thick with the dark dank
of leaves unvisited by the sun,
whispers of wind and ghosts on
the strained limbs of tired trees
whose lives are marked by rings of sleep.

The White Dress

by Jamie McCauley

blank canvas
 massacred by a hundred year's sleep.
consummation brandished with a scarlet kiss.

young, sweet, and simple,
just a finger prick.

 injured belly, a wound between two thorns,

baby crying
 mother bathed in red

a princess of all but nine months.

A Banshee's Cry

by Jamie McCauley

a long leering stair,
muscles made from earth,
an arrow, a bow
an aim straight and narrow,
a leader condemned
to a crown,

a roar cry

that bends the air.
walk strong, walk honored.
a rebellion in the wake.
take their purpose,
let them speak,
a wound upon
my shoulder.
deep rivers of red

a broken cry

demanding all I am,
a bloody arm to cease
the battle.
Their day complete,
Equality met.
And I prove my point.
It's never-ending

a woman's cry

another obsolete defeat.
I fought for the cause,
And now,
marriage and dishes.

pick-pocket prince

by Jamie McCauley

an apple that sinned before, sins again,
that fallen fruit—sleep induced poison.

lips red as daggers dripping expulsion from a flower.
hungry thieves that bite the rim
tastes of sweetness that binds her bones
again.

a queen esteemed for
screaming crowns
that bend like rubber bands,
cowardice corrupted.

enlists seven thieving men,
pick-pocket servitude at its best
and a prince for a princess.

a dulcet sound for a docile ending.
seven pairs of socks
to wash, claim, amend.

she plucked them from their beds one by one.
needle shaking in hand tied to paradise.
oh, to kiss a prince, to kiss a murdered toad.

to pick-pocket apples from the throne,
to die by ill-fated factions.
preserve her sinner's hands.

