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How I Love You

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Eastern Illinois University

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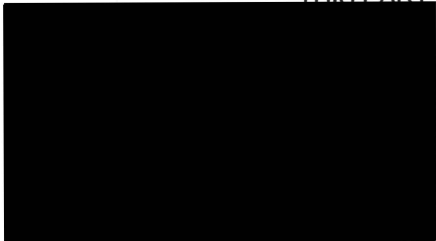
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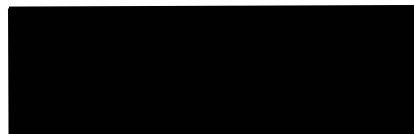
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Critical Introduction

I have loved. I have lost. The pain I felt from loving and losing led me to look for a distraction, something to fill the emptiness, and in that search, I found fiction. In fiction, one can step out of one's life into other worlds where there are resolutions, conclusions, and answers. I developed a fascination with horror, particularly short stories, as they entertained and distracted me. However, the more I read the more I realized fiction did not provide an escape, it provided a reflection. Ramsey Campbell (b. 1946), one of Britain's most influential horror writers, said that "When we come face-to-face with the monsters, we may find ourselves looking not at a mask, but at a mirror" (Castle 124). In the mirror of fiction, one can find representations of real people and real worlds that mimic real world experiences and observations.

The author I read most at that time was Stephen King (b. 1947). As I collected his novels and short stories, I found I wasn't drawn to rabid dogs, possessed cars, or telekinetic teens, I was drawn to something else that writhed under the surface of each of his stories. While I found these elements of horror entertaining, it was King's portrayal of people, relationships, and the complicated struggles of everyday life that kept bringing me back to his work.

In King's novel *Gerald's Game* (1993), Jessie Burlingame and her husband Gerald take an impulsive trip to their cabin in an effort to bring a spark back into their failing twenty-year-old marriage. Gerald tries to reignite the spark with sexual experimentation, but he takes it too far and Jessie kills him in self-defense and she becomes stranded in the isolated cabin, handcuffed to the bed post, alone and vulnerable. However, this novel is about more than a woman trapped in a room with her husband's

corpse; *Gerald's Game* explores questions of love, relationships, and sex. As Gerald takes his bondage game too far, Jessie is terrified of a predatory side of her husband that, after decades of marriage, she had never seen before. Alone in the cabin, Jessie is forced to confront her suppressed memory of the day her father molested her and the growing awareness of how that event shaped her life. In *Gerald's Game*, the events have the reader question identity, their perception of others, and ask what constitutes consensual sex in marriage.

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) claims we read fiction because we like it “and we like it because fiction, as an image of life, stimulates and gratifies our interest in life” (Warren 82). Fiction gives the reader a way to explore experiences and ideas from a fresh perspective, it gives a “heightened awareness of life, with all the fresh, uninhibited opportunity to vent the rich emotional charge... that is stored up in us and short-circuited in the drowse of the accustomed” (Warren 82). If fiction creates a mirror, it does so through narrative, an integral part of human experience, “For we dream in narrative, day dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair... learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future” (Hardy 5).

As I developed as a writer, I found that I preferred short stories over the loner novel form. In constructing a short story collection, a writer is able to compile a variety of styles and voices into a coherent whole in a way that would feel jarring in a novel. During my development I was disappointed to find that I didn't write horror. I often tried but the elements of the weird and macabre I tried to incorporate into my fiction were superfluous. Raw emotion lies at the heart of each story in this collection, in particular

love and mourning. Love and loss are as personal and individual as they are universal and this makes them ideal aspects of the human experience to reflect in the mirror of fiction.

The eight stories of *How I Love You*, explore love and loss as both universal and individual phenomena. Despite attempts to categorize the different types of love and loss, there are no simple explanations for why or how we feel. When one is told there are five manageable stages of grief, one is told what feelings to expect and when—denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Knowing what to expect gives one comfort, but when one's reactions don't follow the anticipated norms, one is often at a loss for what to do or how to cope. It is through fiction that “we enter imaginatively a situation of difficulty of estrangement—a problematic situation that... sharpens our awareness of life” (Warren 84). Contemporary authors such as Junot Diaz (b. 1968) explore concepts of love and loss in their writing. *This is How You Lose Her* (2012), a *New York Times* bestseller, has been described as “a frenetic, desperate struggle for love and connection, and to understand the human beings we so often Other due to our own insecurities” (Frangello). It explores love in all its varieties—illicit, fading, and obsessive love—and does so in ways that are moving and thought provoking.

Loss and mourning are common themes in *How I Love You*, but these are not typical tales of grief. For the realist, life is an “infinitely mysterious and complex thing... we must not be afraid of looking closely at its baser sides, its failures, its contradictions; because it is in them that the very secret of life lies” (Benson 821). The stories in this collection are realistic portrayals of characters unable to cope as they are haunted by the past. There is no attempt to veil these character's flaws or mute their failures as these stories follow the realist principles of presenting life “as it is, and to recognize that so

viewed it has a higher sort of beauty in it than any vague imported beauty won by suppression and contempt of what appears to be commonplace” (Benson 821).

Love and loss are common themes in contemporary literature. Authors such as Peter Ho Davies (b. 1966) and his collection *Equal Love* (2000) takes everyday people and events and weaves moving, complex tales of love and emotion. In “Small World,” the protagonist Wilson seeks out his high school love while on a business trip in his hometown. Wilson’s wife is pregnant and he can’t forget his father telling him that when Wilson was born their marriage died. Anticipating the end of his own marriage with the birth of his child, Wilson tries to find ways to feel love and loved, but realizes that his marriage is not the same as his parents and that it does need to end that way. The beauty of this story comes from the simplicity of the scenario and the complexity of the relationships between characters as it reveals the ripple effects that love has between family members, spouses, and lovers.

The stories of *How I Love You* offer a variety of depictions of love. In “She Tilted Her Hips in the Way He Liked,” Jenny must reconcile the different desires she and her husband have and decide if their marriage is worth keeping if they cannot reach this reconciliation. Dan’s desire to explore BDSM conflicts with Jenny’s beliefs about sex, and her desire to have children clashes with Dan’s unspoken decision not to have any. Mindy’s obsessive love for Jake in “How I Love You” turns deadly when she finds that her engagement ring originally belonged to Jake’s previous fiancé. Mindy realizes that Jake does not love her as he loved Sarah and that he never will, so she tries to cement their love in death instead of risk losing him.

The reader can also find familial love in “He Heard Her Moan” as Mother and Devon discover the mother-son relationship they both lacked. In searching for mannequin parts to rebuild the people missing from their lives, Devon and Mother find in each other the acceptance others denied them. However, when Mother tries to move away from their fantasy world Devon refuses to let her destroy his newfound family. Then there are the characters that embrace their love such as Martha in “Waiting,” those like the narrator in “Transfer” that deny their feelings, and then those that love from a distance such as the narrator of “That Fire.” We all love, and when we love, we always have something to lose.

Each character in this collection has also experienced loss: a fiancé, a sibling, a parent, and even a loss of self. It is inevitable that one will lose a person close to them, but how one copes with this loss interested me most in creating this collection. The way these characters cope with loss may be considered odd by some readers, but the realist has a responsibility to “grasp and express the fact that many people are wholly inconsistent, and that it is next to impossible to generalize—that, in fact, every individual is unique” (Benson 824). Characters such as Brian in “Evidence” and Curtis in “Because She Asked Him,” cling desperately to the past and the moment of loss but each has their own way of coping. Brian, obsessed with finding the truth, hunts the UFOs he believes hold the answers. He knows he is connected to Alison’s disappearance, but he does not know more than what the rumors tell him and his inability to find answers keeps him trapped in his hometown because without knowing if he is innocent or guilty, Brian cannot know who he really is.

In "Because She Asked Him," Curtis confronts the pain he tried to ignore for decades. The responsibility he feels for his sister drowning haunts him and, even though twenty years have passed, Curtis is so deeply rooted in that moment that he has developed a debilitating phobia of water. In attempt to find closure, Curtis returns to the public swimming pool to confront the past, but in doing so he has to directly confront the water that terrifies him and must decide which holds more importance confronting his fears or his keeping his family.

In addition to exploring love and loss, each of these stories contains elements of the surreal or subversive. In these elements, one can see my long-standing interest in horror merge with realism as ordinary events and elements are placed in a different perspective. These elements are also what lead this stories in this collection to cross over from realism into magical realism which "endeavors to show us the world through the eyes of others... it invites the reader to compassionately experience the world as many of our fellow human beings see it" (Rogers 1). In magical realism, these elements are not fantastical, instead, "magic realists use what the Russian formalists called defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often too present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity" (Simpkins 145). In her collection *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* (2011), Alissa Nutting uses this defamiliarization to illustrate the breakdown of a marriage in the short story "Gardener." The protagonist develops a fascination with her garden gnomes in response to her husband's neglect. She feeds the fantasy and tries to fill the hole of her loneliness by purchasing all the gnomes she can and, as they slowly come to life, her

husband becomes an increasingly inanimate object until the main gnome of her attraction comes to life and her husband becomes a garden gnome.

Drawing the reader's attention to the water in "Because She Asked Him" decreases the familiarity and invisibility of water and amplifies the extent of Curtis's phobia. Curtis becomes aware of "water in pipes that flows into drains that connect to sewers that run under roads and link every house and business and store. Water running up walls, under floors, through roofs. Water in basins and bottles and cups and cookers." This awareness makes the reader consider how much water surrounds them which turn reveals the all-encompassing nature of Curtis's pain and mourning.

In "Transfer," the narrator is haunted by strands of blond hair. As the story progresses, the hair takes on a life of its own and begins to interact with her. The slow personification of hair represents the doubts and insecurities she has in her current relationship, it is always present, always watching her, symbolizing the way the fear of loss constantly bubbles under the surface of her experiences. The title "Transfer" came from Locard's Exchange Principle in criminal forensics, "a theory relating to the transfer of trace evidence between objects, stating that 'every contact leaves a trace'" (Rankin). Hair is intimate but also easily transferrable and this defamiliarization of hair induces compassion in the reader as it acts as trace evidence of doubts and fears. Ultimately, the narrator and the hair develop a relationship of their own as she finds comfort in the familiarity of her suspicions.

These elements of the extraordinary are not the only aspects the stories in this collection have in common, as a number of these stories share common settings and characters. I first became aware of intertextual references in the works of Stephen King.

In the short stories and novels of King, there are a number of references to characters, objects, and events from his other narratives. For example, the novels *The Dead Zone* (1979), *Cujo* (1981), *The Dark Half* (1990), and *Needful Things* (1991) take place in the fictional town of Castle Rock, Maine, as do the short stories “The Body” (1982), “Uncle Otto’s Truck” (1985), “It Grows on You” (1993), “Mrs. Todd’s Shortcut,” and “Sun Dog.” These shared elements create an interconnectedness that solidifies King’s fictional world as the events and characters are not contained to one fictional world or moment as they impact other events and characters in King’s fictional universe.

The stories in *How I Love You* are set in a fictional version of Charleston, Illinois. Charleston provided an ideal setting to portray the intimacy of small town life where the character’s and events could interact with one another in a subtle and unforced way. Some of the stories in this collection make specific reference to Charleston or places in Charleston, such as the narrator of “That Fire” who “used to run the Smoke Shop up on Lincoln” and the Charleston Public Swimming Pool where Curtis’s sister drowned. Other stories make more subtle references as in “Evidence” where Brian travels on Westfield road on route to Fox Ridge, a road and state park just outside of Charleston.

These stories also mention events and characters from other stories in *How I Love You*. The narrator in “That Fire” claims that there are:

...plenty of stories in this town, and most of ‘em are true. Stories about Curtis at the public pool, about how it took the cops three hours to wait for the fire to die down before they could figure it was Jake and that girl from out of town who crashed into the propane depot. Not to mention what that Brian Hicks boy did when he was nine.

Curtis in turn thinks of Loretta from “That Fire.” As Curtis lingers in the first aid office at the Charleston Public Swimming Pool, he thinks of the story he heard “about a woman who’d caught on fire at a circus and imagined how delicately dry the charred corpse was.” When these characters refer to the events or characters from other stories, it creates a sense of community much like that in the real world Charleston and in the works of King. These intertextual references were created to cement the fictional world these stories are set in and to mimic the real world ripple effects events have on people in close proximity to them.

It is because fiction is a mirror that reflects real life that varying points of view reflect different aspects of the human experience. As each of the stories in this collection center around the emotions of love and loss, choosing the best point of view proved difficult. It is challenging to articulate different emotions:

In real life people do not and cannot say what they mean; the emotion is so infinitely larger a thing than any possible expression of it; what can be momentarily felt might take an hour to describe; and yet the essence of thought is the simultaneous blending of strains felt but not consciously or rationally expressed, which if analyzed lose their quality, as the spectrum loses the quality and effect of the total ray. (Benson 824)

The first person point of view proved most effective in “Transfer” because it allowed the narrator to address their ex-girlfriend in a way that conveyed hurt and denial without directly stating those feelings. The narrator’s attempted ambivalence and implied claim that, as a cheater, she cannot be hurt by infidelity reinforces the reader’s interpretation of her feelings. The first person point of view always carries a degree of unreliability

because the reader knows that the narrator's opinions and agendas influence the narration (Vogrin 84). The narrator of "Transfer" recounts specific moments in their relationship in attempt to explain to her ex that she never really cared. The first person point of view makes the narrator accessible and allows the reader to understand her reasoning and justifications because the "main advantage of first person is intimacy" (Vogrin 81). Other points of view would limit the access the reader has to her thoughts and would dampen the obvious denial of emotions.

The first person point of view was also effective for "That Fire" because it allowed the narrator to tell the tale of how Loretta, the narrator's lost love, died in a way that expressed his long-standing love for her without having to explicitly describe how or why he loves her. Of emotions in realism, Benson claims, "the realist has got to express the emotion somehow, and to catch if he can, without lengthy analysis, that extraordinary fusion which comes at moments of intensely vivid emotion" (Benson 825). The narrator never says that he loves Loretta, but it obvious through his descriptions and the details he gives in retelling her death decades after the event. The way he clings to the idea that she died through spontaneous combustion is not evidence of his belief in the paranormal, it is an affirmation of his feeling that her beauty and uniqueness could not have let her died any other way.

Third person limited is similar to the first person in that the reader has access to the thoughts of the character, but events are untainted by any potential bias or unreliability of the character (Gingerich). In "Because She Asked Him," the reader needed to be close enough to Curtis that they had access to his thoughts and feelings, but not so close that they doubted his sanity or the reliability of the narration. Without access

to his thoughts, the reader would lose information vital to understanding this story, such as how deeply ingrained Curtis's fears and memories of his sister are in his psyche.

The third person omniscient point of view allows a writer to reveal information that the characters cannot show. In "Evidence," events in the present alternate with events in the past but these past events are what Brian cannot remember and thus are events that the reader cannot see through him. In "He Heard Her Moan," omniscience allows the reader to see both Devon and Mother's perspectives and thus understand why each of them were collecting mannequin parts. It also allowed the reader to experience the life Devon sees in inanimate objects such as Emma and later Mother. Without this technique, the mannequins risked appearing lifeless to the reader when for Devon and Mother they were very real, living entities.

In addition to point of view, some of the stories in *How I Love You* explore the effects time in fiction. During my undergraduate degree, I came across *Narrative Fiction* by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and her discussion of how time functions in narratives and this has stayed with me. I applied her techniques to a reading of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's (1927-2014) *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) in which an anonymous narrator returns to his hometown to uncover the cause of Santiago Nasar's death. As he interviews numerous characters, the narrator discovers that Santiago's murder was preventable as everyone but Santiago knew it was going to happen, and he was innocent. The repetition of the retelling of days before the murder revealed new information and the reader understands the complexities of this event as the novel progresses. A similar technique of retelling helped structure "Waiting."

In "Waiting," Martha Jones's murder and 'awakening' as a trapped spirit is repeated four times. With each repetition of her death, the reader discovers new details about Martha and her relationship with her husband Gary. This repetition revolves around Martha becoming a restless spirit that cannot move on until her husband, the love of her life, returns to the site of her death as she has seen many others do for their loved ones. However, when Martha does not find this closure, she is forced to relive her experiences as she waits. Magical realism creates other realities, and "in these other realities, time is not linear, causality is subjective, and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same" (Rogers 2). While the repetition is obvious to the reader, the progression of time is subtly hinted at in the change of seasons at the beginning of each section that move from summer, to early fall, late fall, and finally winter. While the first three sections are in present tense to situate the reader in the moment, the final and briefest section is in future tense to signal that there will be no closure for Martha, only an endless cycle of waiting. The challenges in writing this story came from balancing the degrading memory and sensory experiences of the character with revealing new and important information to the reader. Choosing which details to reveal when was difficult, as "The realist, in working out his subject, must allow things to appear before their significance appears" (Benson 831).

I've always thought of time as linear, where one event follows another and the past stays in the past. In representing events in fiction, I often take a linear approach where events succeed each other in time. However, this collection captures how even though the characters move through the world in a series of successive events, their experiences and "impressions of things as they happen are largely amplified by

recollection and inference” (Benson 825). The past haunts these characters and taints both their present and future.

In "Evidence," there are two narrative threads. The first follows Brian in his quest to obtain photographic evidence of UFOs that he believes will absolve him of the accusations that have followed him since childhood. The second thread takes place in Brian's past, but it is not a flashback as this thread links more closely to Alison's point of view. It runs parallel to Brian's experiences in the present giving it equal importance in the narrative. By alternating sections from each event, the tension of both builds and creates a momentum that moves the reader more quickly to climax. If separated, the two narratives would have created a divide that diminished the emphasis on how closely the past and present are linked.

One of the many challenges I encountered in writing this short story collection was deciding how to arrange the stories. In "Stacking Stones: Building a Unified Short Story Collection," David Jauss (b. 1957) describes how he used to read short story collections by picking stories out of order but in doing so Jauss realized he'd read the stories but not the *book* (1). Jauss explains this effect best when he cites Blaise Pascal in saying that "Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects (Jauss 1). In organizing this collection of stories, I found and combined the strategies of other authors.

When asked how he chose to order his short story collection *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), Daniyal Mueenuddin (b. 1963) said "The first story... should be bright and immediately appealing.. the last one should open the book out, and leave the reader floating free" ("Interview with Daniyal Mueenuddin"). *How I Love You* starts with

“That Fire” because it is one of stronger stories in this collection, and because it situates the reader in Charleston as both a physical location and as a place where the other stories take place. The narrator at the end of “That Fire” tells the reader that there are “plenty of stories in this town, and most of ‘em are true. Stories about Curtis at the public pool, about how it took the cops three hours to wait for the fire to die down before they could figure it was Jake and that girl from out of town who crashed into the propane depot.” Within a few lines, the reader begins the story of Jake and Mindy and this establishes the subtle connections running through *How I Love You*.

John Matthew Fox, author of the Los Angeles based literary blog BookFox, suggests placing stories with overlapping characters next to each other to “create connections by juxtapositions” (Fox). “How I love You” appears as the second story and “Because She Asked” as the third in this collection because they establishes a direct connection between the stories in their recurring characters and settings and reinforces the intertextual connections that run throughout *How I Love You*.

Fox suggests placing stories that stand out from others in the center of a collection as it creates “a nice change-up for the reader, and yet the reader will have a chance to see [the author’s] solid material and style again before they leave [the] book.” “Transfer” appears in the middle of the collection because the voice and style of the story differs from the others. This story contrasts well with the following story, “He Heard Her Moan,” as the two differ greatly in style and theme. The more subdued and distanced voice of “He Heard Her Moan” in turn compliments “Waiting,” which creates a sense of longing. “Evidence” enhances this sense of urgency as Martha’s waiting enhances Brian’s desperation as he searches for the truth.

How I Love You ends with “She Tilted Her Hips in the Way He Liked” because it provides readers with a conclusion based on compromise, an ending that is lighter than most in this collection. Jenny finds a way to reconcile her desire for children while allowing Dan to continue his sexual explorations and this shows the reader that there are always ways to cope with love and loss, that there are ways around obstacles, and that one can find happiness even if it is not the ideal one had in mind. In arranging the collection in this order, I feel that I adhered to Jauss’s claim that “...a short-story collection, when it’s really good, is a unified whole, one whose parts cannot be rearranged without doing damage to its unity” (1).

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That Fire

Not many people ask me 'bout Loretta. There's not many that remember what happened to her, and those that do are afraid of things they don't understand. I bet you've heard all the tales by now. I heard you've been asking around town for stories for that books of yours. Bet you heard some whoppers about those ghosts at Pemberton and Ashmore, but those are just college kids messing around. I've been waiting for you to come ask me 'bout her, but none of the tellers you spoke to were there to see it. None of them felt that fire. You see, there's a lot of ways that things can burn, but not all of 'em make sense.

I knew Loretta better than most. She was special. First woman in thirty years that caught my eye after my wife died. She didn't belong in this town. Followed her husband here 'cause of the college, but she was one of them city folk, so while her husband settled in just fine, Loretta didn't. You see, Illinois is, well, it's Illinois. Don't get me wrong, Charleston is a good town with good people. I've been here seventy-five years and it's the only place I'd call home, even though it's flat. That's what Loretta struggled with: flatness. Some people don't mind it, but others start itching for hills and mountains. Most people deal with it and go on vacations and such, but every now and then, the sight of that same flat horizon day after day after day scares people. It's the fear that got to Loretta, the fear of all that flatness and nothing to stop time just rolling by. Nothing to do but wait some days, so she waited.

Loretta had a good heart and a strong mind so she set that nervous energy to looking after their son. He was seven back in '95. Had blond like his father, a little sickly sometimes. Loretta struggled most with his allergies and asthma 'cause she was a

smoker, like me. That's how we bonded. I used to run the Smoke Shop up on Lincoln and we'd chat, her and I, 'bout most everything. Some days she'd stay for half an hour, others she'd be in and out with little more'n a thank you. Reminded me of my wife in some ways, but there was more to Loretta than other women, another layer simmering under her surface. The town wasn't right for her, but she loved her husband, so she stayed.

He was a strange guy, seldom home, always at the office or out of town. Odd looking too, one of those pale professor types that lives in his books. Now Loretta, she was a looker. Black hair, full lips, eyes like cinnamon. Her body curved in all the right places, and her skin... It's been twenty years and I'm an old, old man now, but I still dream 'bout what her smooth cheeks would feel like against my thighs.

You see, Loretta wasn't happy, not really, not on the inside. You had to look past the smile and the makeup to see the dark rings under her eyes. I think part of her wanted a little adventure, a little excitement. Despite all the boredom, that woman had a fire in her. She seemed like one of those people that was always looking for something she couldn't find. Ask me, I'd say the town just wasn't right for her. Nothing much happens 'round here, especially when summer comes and all those college kids leave. She was always looking though, and when the circus came to town that fall, I think she found something. Wasn't exactly what she wanted, but it wasn't routine neither.

Loretta came into the store same as usual Monday the week it happened. The circus had come an' we were all abuzz talkin' 'bout how they were messing up the sidewalks and storefronts with posters. As her and I were talking, a couple of clowns came by sticking more flyers under the wiper blades of all the cars. I remember 'cause Loretta had this look. She'd been quiet that morning, her eyes looked dried out and

dusted. When she saw the clowns, she smiled a skeptical smile and asked me if I thought they were the real deal. I said I didn't think the old time carnies still existed and neither did she, but we was both wrong.

I didn't make it to the show most of the week, but the stories came with the customers. Kids waving around stuffed animals they'd won, parents smiling and talking 'bout clowns and magic. Loretta came in on Tuesday with her son, Bobby. Stopped by on her way to the circus and that kid of hers was hopping across the store singing about clowns. When Loretta flashed her big, brown, desperate eyes at me, she looked like she was running out of steam. I gave her a shrug an' a pack of smokes and told her kid to make sure an' bring me a balloon.

Next day she came in, I swear she looked ten years younger. There was a spark in her eye and she was talking a mile a minute about clowns and acrobats. She told me how she'd never been to a real circus, only seen them on TV. She told me how it made her feel like a kid again, how it was just like she expected; ten clowns packed in a tiny car, little dogs in tutus, popcorn and candy floss and hotdogs on sticks. It wasn't cheesy or scary like the movies, she'd said, it was lovely. *Lovely*. I thought it was just the excitement of it all that got her wound up, but she seemed happy for the first time in months. She told me 'bout the fire jugglers and how't looked like magic to her. Beautiful, dangerous magic she called it.

When Loretta came in a few days later, that look still festered in her eyes. She had on a pair of jeans and what she called her 'fugly' boots. Damn near talked my ear off that day 'bout the circus and smoked cigarette after cigarette over my counter. She barely paused to greet customers that came in even though she was usually friendly. I think the

smoker in her was fascinated by the fire jugglers. Said she'd already seen their show three times. Said that it was like magic watching them play with fire and never gettin' burned. I couldn't get a word in edgeways and told her I'd stop by the next day and see what all the fuss was about.

When I went that Saturday night I wasn't expecting much. A large part of me didn't believe the stories. I didn't think the old carnies still existed, but those guys were the real deal. There's nothin' quite like a circus. Guess when you get down to it it's kinda like a county fair, but there's something more, something moving under the surface and tugging at your guts. Something that whispers anything is possible.

Before I got there, I could see the lights making this orange dome over the fairgrounds. I'd had to park away from the entrance and trudge through the mud and excitement. You could hear the laughter and music from the merry-go-round, the giggles and shouts as people popped cheap teddy bears off shelves and ran in and out of the horror house. Paid a pretty penny just to get in, but a little part of me felt like a kid again by the time it all sunk in. There's something enticing about those red-yellow lights and the smell of corndogs and animal shit.

I remember how I'd walked through the stalls and sideshow, watched the college boys tryin' to impress their girls at skeet ball. Seen them trying to shoot targets when they wasn't given enough of a chance to win, paying more than the prizes were worth but getting the real value out of showing off. I did the same at their age.

But underneath all that excitement, I seen the truth. When you look close enough at a circus, you can see where time has picked at the tent seams and flaked the paint off the stalls. There's grime on the rides and shit caked on the base of the stalls. When you

shade your eyes against the bright lights you see people doin' things in the shadows that shouldn't be done in public. And, if you ask the right guy the right question, you can get more than hard liquor without an ID. I was too old for all of that, but the allure of the late night show drew me in.

Oh sure, there's plenty for the kids and young'uns to do, but by the time they're in bed and the college kids have decided drinking in lovers lane would be more fun, that's when they bring out the real entertainment. Loretta had been telling me she'd seen a preview of it. Said she'd snuck a peak through one of the smaller tents and seen a glimpse of the special show. Seen the circus freaks, she said, the real live ones we all thought were gone. Loretta bubbled like a little girl when she talked about it. And still with the fire eaters – way she spoke about 'em made me want to see how they could do the things she said they did.

I hung around the circus that night and waited, eager, excited. As I walked through the circus, I saw a woman walking through the crowds and watched them part around her. I followed the sway of her hips through the carnival lights, my feet falling in time with hers. I bumped into carnies and brushed shoulders with men twice my size, but I didn't care, I needed to be close to her. She was pure, alluring, the only unmarked beauty in the place. I realized it was Loretta but before I could call she slipped inside the tent and a pair of gray flaps flopped closed behind her.

I remember creeping inside the tent, gently parting those folds to find it dark inside, with maybe room for thirty of those wooden folding chairs an' most of 'em were full. I crept down a side aisle, about halfway to the stage and took a seat. I recognized most of the people from town, but it was different, hushed, quiet. I caught the eye of a

few people and we exchanged brief nods. The fire-eaters were up on stage already and they'd transfixed most of the crowd, including Loretta. She was three seats across from me and the chairs around her empty like the crowd sensed what was comin'. Almost everyone in that place was staring at the stage with mouths open wide and eyes starin'.

Those fire guys were on the small wooden stage juggling their flames. They'd toss burning rods between them, two men and a woman. Good-looking people, half-naked bodies slick between the rolling flames, they bent and twisted around each other as their torches flipped between them. I could smell the smoke, hear the fluttering of fire as it sputtered through arcs of air. The fire-eaters danced off stage, leaving us all hot, flustered, breathless.

Then came the first of the freaks, the first of the grotesqueries we wanted to see. They gave him a name, Toby the Half-Boy, I think it was, and, man, was he ever. Nothing below the waste but a bulge at his crotch. No feet, no knees, no nothing but a rounded pelvis. His muscles rippled as he pulled himself across the stage. Ropes and drapes descended from above and he was swift as he climbed hand over fist and swung between them. He rolled and tumbled over the stage, fluid and graceful like he could never be on the floor. It was hypnotic, watching that guy flying around. It makes sense when you think about it; he didn't have legs to weigh him down when he was up there. You'd think he'd be clumsy and slow, but between those ropes he was elegant.

After Half Boy, they brought out a guy hunched over under a cape. You could already see he wasn't right, that he was leaning to the side and bulging in all the wrong places. When he flipped off the hood, I couldn't figure if he was rotting or melting or turning to stone. He looked like a barnacle but somehow... soft. The crowd was silent as

he shuffled across the stage, only when he moved did we whisper and groan. His limbs creaked and crackled like paper tearing. It was painful to watch, painful to listen to. We shivered in revulsion and thanked God that we didn't have to touch him, just in case it was catching.

The fire-eaters were there between every performance though. I know what they do ain't magic, just training, but it still looks like some sort of magic when they're spitting fire out their mouths. The way they moved and contorted between the flames, the way their bodies bent and writhed and glistened like they too were burning inside. I'd glance at Loretta and her face was calm but she hung on the edge of her chair, enraptured. We're all bathed in an orange glow that twisted and broke our shadows and the fire made Loretta's skin look alive. It was just before the legendary Ostrich Boy came on stage that it happened.

I know what I saw, so I'll tell you what I've told everyone else. Loretta enjoyed the performance, but when it came to the fire, I doubt goosing her on the fleshy inside of her arm would've got a reaction. I remember that I couldn't stop looking at her as she shifted in the heat of the tent, she pulled at her collar and fanned the air in front of her face. It was hot getting hot as hell in there when I saw Loretta rubbing her left hand on her trousers and looking at it, like she had one of those itches that gets under your skin. For a moment, she relaxed and leaned back in her chair. She looked over at me and smiled and I saw an innocence, a youthfulness in her I'd never seen before. She looked beautiful and, well, vibrant, alive. She looked... lovely. That's how she'd've said she looked. *Lovely*. And then it happened.

Loretta's body twitched and she shook her hand like you do when you realize a spider's sitting on it. I saw a wisp of smoke come out of her hand and hang in the air a moment. I thought she'd lit a cigarette, but she hadn't. Instead, she looked at me with the oddest expression, like it was the first time she'd ever had a question and she didn't know what she needed was an answer. Those big eyes of hers found mine and they sparkled too bright. And then... I just... I don't know how else to say it but that woman went up like a stack of hay in late summer.

Her whole body started burning and I felt my arm hairs move and my skin shrink even though she was a few seats away. Like I was standing right close to a bonfire but more so. It was so hot and Loretta was screaming. I tried to reach for her, tried to get her on the ground so we could roll out the flames but I couldn't get near her. The crowd started yelling and gagging with the stench of her burning. It was sweet but bitter, like peaches and pork burned black. And that scream of hers... I bet the ones that heard it all those years ago still hear it in their dreams, just like I do.

They say it was negligence on the part of the staff, that the wooden chairs and hay-covered floor were to blame, but I knew better. I know what I saw and just 'cause I don't have the words or the know how to explain it doesn't make it any less true. Thing was, as she went up nothing else was touched. Her body'd hit the floor in a smoldering, spasming lump but the chair she'd sat on was only scorched. Loretta'd burned up in no more'n ten seconds with nothing but her shoes left and not a thing else'd started burning.

It was those performers what set the whole place a fire. Them eaters on stage lost control of their magic. What no one seemed to say is that it all went up after the fact. I sat there, I watched Loretta die, and so did everyone else. It was after she'd stopped

screamin' and the flames dropped off her that we saw the stage curtains burning and we all high-tailed it out of there.

In the end I'd run out the tent like all the other cowards. Left what was left of Loretta behind and didn't look back 'till I was a safe distance. I remember how it took forever for the fire trucks to get there and by the time they did the smoke was rolling up in the sky and bits of ash were falling like black snow. I watched the tent burn and wondered if bits of Loretta were falling too.

I don't know how to explain what I saw in the science way that everyone seems to want. I tell it the way it was and that fire came straight out her body. Sometimes there just ain't no real explanation. There's plenty of stories in this town, and most of 'em are true. Stories about Curtis at the public pool, about how it took the cops three hours to wait for the fire to die down before they could figure it was Jake and that girl from out of town who crashed into the propane depot. Not to mention what that Brian Hicks boy did when he was nine. You'll hear all these stories and more if the locals warm up to you, and they're accurate for the most part, but I knew Loretta. Knew her like none of the others did. Knew her and saw it and felt that fire.

How I Love You

Jake wonders what it would feel like to have the steering column of his Mustang impale his chest, if he'd hear his sternum snap or the wet hiss of his lungs deflating. His friend Mike smashed his Chevy into a brick wall last year and the paramedics had to hack their way through twisted metal and empty beer cans for four hours to get all of Mike out of the wreck. Jake fingers the steering wheel as he thinks about Mike and waits for Mindy.

He knows Mindy is cleaning up after her shift at Friends. He reminds himself that's all she's doing. It's probably taking her some time to count the tips she gets too. Guys round here tip well at the bar; there's not a lot of eye candy without a ring on it. Jake won't let himself think about Billy Bob. Or his muscles. Or his faded tats and god-awful mullet. Billy Bob's not Mindy's type, just her boss. When she gets in the car, he won't ask her about work or why, every night, she takes a little longer cleaning up. Why Billy Bob can't clean up on his own. Or if it's a two-man job they're doing. He won't do that. Billy Bob is a no-good, small town bartender and want-to-be drug dealer. Mindy is a lady, the only real woman in town.

Jake thinks about turning the heater on, but it chews up gas that he can't afford. He wipes off the dash even though it's clean, then arches his neck to look at the sky but it's the same dirty grey that's it been for weeks now. He looks at the empty, snow-covered road but it doesn't matter if it's winter or summer, the street's still faded and dirty.

There's movement in the bar window, two shadows walking behind the shades, reminding Jake of "Silhouettes" by The Rays. But then the shadows stop, they're

merging, moving, heads and arms joining. The shadows are close but their bodies aren't. They can't be. Jake won't let them. Mindy would not cheat on him. A state appointed therapist once told him, he invents scenarios to fuel his anger, but that was in juvi, and he's learned a lot since then. He clenches his teeth and honks the horn. The shadows skitter and Mindy scampers out the door towards his car.

Jake turns on the heat and stretches to open the passenger door. As she gets in, her blond hair and navy coat are dusted with snow, and Jake promises himself, he'll make her happy. He puts his hand on her thigh and leans in to kiss her, holding his breath to stop himself sniffing the air close to her for signs of another man. Instead of a kiss, she gives him her cheek and a can of Pepsi. Jake puts his Mustang in gear, makes a jagged U-turn, and heads west down Broadway.

Jake shifts in his seat as the silence thickens. He won't get angry. He won't yell. Billy Bob is a nobody, just like every other asshole in this town. He swallows hard and asks, "So how was work?"

She sighs and looks out the window.

He gazes at her for a moment then focuses on the road. He grips the wheel and cracks his neck, each pop of his vertebrae releasing anxiety. The Mustang slows to a stop at the light even though Jake saw the sheriff stumble out the town hall half an hour ago and knows there's no doubt he's sleeping off the aftermath of the Methodist's annual potluck dinner.

Mindy sighs again and crosses her arms. "It's green."

Jake ignores the city girl tone she saves for when she's pissed. She didn't always have that tone. They went to grade school together; she was born here but went to high

school in the city. Jake never really noticed Mindy, even though she'd always been around. When he looks through his mom's photos, Mindy is in most of the birthday party or school play shots, but always in the background looking at the other kids. He only started paying attention to the slim, pale brunette when she came back a curvy, tanned blond.

"Jake? I said the light's green."

Jake pauses a second longer then hits the gas. The tires slip on the frosted road and the rear end drifts a little to the left.

"Dammit, Jake, what's your problem?"

"Nothing," He grips the gear lever and forces a smile. "Just driving."

He can't figure out if he wants her in the car right now. Half an hour ago, he'd planned on taking her home, having a few drinks, and getting laid. But now it's late, the fatigue of a double shift at the factory making his head pound. He sighs, sips his Pepsi, and looks forward to getting in bed. He turns the radio on.

Mindy turns it off.

"Jake? We need to talk."

"I know." He doesn't really know, but he doesn't want to talk.

"I spoke to the guys at the bar today." Her voice is cold but it fires Jake's irritation. "They told me about Sarah."

"Babe, you know about Sarah."

She still won't look at him.

"They told me it was this time two years ago that she died."

He doesn't slow down as he approaches a stop sign. Instead his car jostles over the train tracks, rattling the loose change in the cup holders.

"Are you listening to me Jake?"

"Yes." No, he couldn't care less right now.

"Two years to the day, Jake."

"So?" Jake feigns ignorance even though he knows where this is going. Any excuse will do for girls when they get tired of a guy.

"Today's our anniversary."

"I know." He blocks it out. Focuses on the car, wonders how fast he can push it in the thickening snow.

"You proposed to me today a year ago."

"Yeah."

"You gave me a ring, Jake."

"Yeah."

"I saw a photo of her. One from the Daily News. Your engagement announcement." She finally looks at him. "Have you ever noticed how similar we look?"

"Where'd you get the photo from, Mindy?"

"Billy Bob brought some in. The guys... They were having a sort of memorial tonight. You know, remembering friends they'd lost. He showed me some photos and there was the one from the day you two got engaged."

Jake fights to keep his mouth shut. Trust Billy Bob to go and stir up the past.

"I'm not her, Jake."

"Wait, what?"

“I knew we were similar, but Jake... Same blond hair. Same blue eyes.”

Jake doesn't know what to say. He looks at her and tries to see Sarah. They had similar features, similar clothes, but such different personality that he couldn't think of them as the same. It didn't feel right though, with Billy Bob getting involved.

“It's not healthy, you trying to make me her.”

“Hey, wait, I'm not.” He struggles to control his words. “When I have I ever tried to make you do that? You're the one who dyed your hair.”

“Honestly, that doesn't matter. What does is the ring.”

“What about it?”

“The ring you gave me, Jake, that was her ring. You gave it to her when you proposed.”

Jake tries to pay attention, but all he can think of is Billy Bob and how the two of them should have a chat. A long chat, in the alley behind the bar. Or maybe out in the fields. Jake's hands like to talk.

“Jake?”

“It's *your* ring.”

“No, it's not. You gave it to her.”

“And then I gave it to you. It's yours.” Jake pictures the simple diamond ring, gold with one stone, but beautiful in its simplicity. He'd found it in his apartment a week after Sarah died. She hadn't worn it the night she died.

“No, it's hers.”

“No. I don't get it. It's not her ring,” Jake takes his eyes off the road to look at Mindy. He tries to see if she's wearing it but her hands are in her coat. “I gave it to you.”

Jake sees sadness and anger in her eyes. He kind of gets it, but he doesn't see what the problem is. It's a good ring, a symbol, it doesn't matter where it came from. And it was expensive, he couldn't afford another one.

"But Jake," Mindy pauses. "She had it first."

"So? It's just a ring."

"So? What do you mean 'So?' Didn't it mean something when you gave it to me?"

"Yes, of course but..."

"And it meant something when you gave to her?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"That's not right Jake. You gave me your dead girlfriend's ring."

Jake doesn't want to hear this. He's tired and his head won't stop pounding. He gets the concept but he doesn't understand why she'd so upset.

"Jake? Dammit Jake, talk to me."

Sweat moistens the back of his neck and turns his heated frustration clammy in the hot car. Jake turns off the air and sips at his too sweet Pepsi.

"What's the big deal? You knew we dated, you knew we were engaged."

"Dammit, Jake, I'm talking about her ring."

"It's your ring now."

"But it was hers!"

The snowflakes turned into wet chunks of fluff that stick to the windshield. Jake tries to tune Mindy's voice out. She's being stubborn and won't try to understand from his point of view. She's making him feel dumb and he hates that. He turns on the wiper

blades and watches the way the snow seems to appear out of nowhere when it falls in front of the headlights.

“You can’t give someone a used ring, Jake. Billy Bob says...”

“Fuck what Billy Bob says!” The words erupt from Jake as he raises his right hand and swings it at Mindy. The back of his hand stops an inch short of her face. He sees how big her blue eyes look in her pale face as she shrinks away from him. Jake shakes as anger races through his veins, he looks at the road and says nothing until the shame creeps up on him.

“Mindy.” He can see out the corner of his eye that she’s still pressed against the door, her forearms all but shielding her face.

“Babe, I’m sorry.”

“Take me home, Jake.”

“Mindy...” He doesn’t want to drive to the other side of town. The weekend off will help him catch up on sleep, but for now he’d rather have her sleep on the couch and worry about this in the morning.

“Home.”

“No, Mindy, I’m not taking you home. I’m sorry, okay? I got angry but I’m fine now.”

Mindy sniffles and looks out the window.

“Dammit, Mindy, I got anger problems, okay? I’m not perfect. It won’t happen again”

The road's a white blur, and he knows he should slow down but he wants to get home and get her out the car. He contemplates stopping right there and kicking her out, but he knows he can't really do that.

"Do you even know what perfection is, Mindy? Cause I'm not it."

"Don't care. Take me home."

"I said no."

The car feels too hot and his eyelids too heavy. It looks so quiet outside, peaceful. Jake knows if he pulled over and turned off the car, all he'd hear is his engine ticking over and the patter of snow. Instead he tries to explain.

"Perfection. I see it every day, Mindy. They call me a 'quality controller' but I'm not. I stand at the end of a conveyer belt in that goddamn jerky factory and check the packages. Nearly every one of them is perfect."

Jake sees Mindy's reflection sneer. If he pulled over now, he thinks he might hear the town holding its breath in the night, dying. But snow muffles all sound. Even screams.

"Machines are perfect. Not humans. Day in and day out, me and the guys work at the factory, but we're nothing, Mindy." He needs to make this make sense. "The machines do all the work and they do it better than we ever could. So what do I do? I dream. At the end of the day, we're dog-tired and go home to our women and beer and TV. We think that we're lucky, that we have a job, something to live for. But we're not living, we're dead inside."

"What are you talking about? You're not dead, Jake."

“No, but I might as well be.” He can feel he’s not getting through to her, that it’s not making sense.

“Jake, I don’t understand.”

“I’m dead, the town is dead, and everyone in it is dead. There’s nothing here. I gotta get out. Maybe you could come?”

“You should take the ring back, Jake.”

“You don’t want a ring from me?”

“Of course I do, but I want a ring that’s mine.”

“But it *is* yours.” He tries to calculate how much cash he has in his bank account, but he he’s still paying off that first ring and knows he can’t afford another. Besides, it’s a perfectly good ring, and he doesn’t get why she needs another one.

“I don’t want it. It was hers. She didn’t love you how I love you.”

“Why don’t you want it?”

“Because it was that girl’s.”

“That girl?” Jake shakes his head. He winds the window down and tosses out the Pepsi can. The fresh air doesn’t clear his thoughts like he hoped it would.

“Yes, *that* girl.”

“She was more than just ‘that girl’.” He tells himself to breathe. He can’t afford to get angry. Not again.

“Oh please, she was just a small town bitch who got herself killed boning a local.”

Jake gasps and the pounding in his head grows. He’s struggling to stop the anger.

“She wasn’t good enough for you Jake.”

“What the hell? I loved her, that’s good enough for me.”

“Oh please, that wasn’t love.”

“How the hell would you know?”

“Cause she got herself killed doing drugs.”

“That’s bullshit.” Jake’s starting not to care anymore. The snow is getting heavier, shortening his line of sight.

“That idiot was using meth. What kind of girl does that?”

Jake tries to process this. Mindy can’t know these things. Only the Sheriff, himself, and Mindy’s parents knew but they left town pretty quick after. He wonders how Mindy can know these things and then he figures it out.

“Did Billy Bob tell you that?”

“No.”

“That guy’s been trying to get in your pants since you got here.” Jake wants to yell but it takes so much energy to shout and keep the car on the road.

“Billy Bob? Dammit Jake, don’t you change the subject. *I’m* the one who loves you.”

“How’d you know those things, Mindy?”

“I love you *so* much.”

“How’d you know about the meth?”

“Everyone knew Mike was cooking that shit in his garage.”

“That was him, not her.”

“Oh Jake, you really had no clue, did you? Do you know how easy it is to mess with their stash when they’re high?”

Jake’s trying to figure out what she’d getting at.

“A few choice ingredients added and there goes their usual high. Do you know how often those idiots smoked?”

“Mindy, stop it.”

“They liked to fuck while they were high. And the things he’d do to her, it’d make you blush, Jake.”

“Stop it! She was clean!” Jake thinks of all the times she didn’t answer her phone in the weeks before she’d died.

“Don’t worry, Mike couldn’t get it up half the time.”

“Stop lying! Why’re you doing this?”

“Idiots like that deserve what they get. She was easy to kill, died right there in his bed. But Mike tried to drive himself to hospital.”

“Mindy...” Jake doesn’t understand why she’d lie like this to him. “That’s not what happened.”

“How would you know? What do you think she was doing all those hours you spent working double shifts?”

Jake desperately tries to put the pieces together. “You weren’t even in town when she died, Mindy, so stop lying.” But Jake can’t help but think about Sarah in those last few weeks. She’d had problems with drugs in the past, but she wasn’t an addict. Jake would’ve known.

“Oh Jake, you never noticed me, did you? I’ve always been around.”

“Shut up, you bitch. You couldn’t of.” He’s struggling to keep his eyes open and he can feel Mindy reaching for him. Her hands on the wheel. Her voice soothing.

“She didn’t love you like I do, Jake.”

Mindy edges closer; he wants to push her away but he can't. The air is so thick, and he wants to get out the car "Mindy... Don't."

Her leg. He can feel her leg between his.

"I've always loved you. Since school. I went away for a while, but I kept visiting."

"Liar." Jake gasps, his chest tightening and thoughts slowing. He vaguely remembers Mindy from school, but they didn't have the same friends. She was always just there, like an extra on set.

"Just because you didn't see me doesn't mean I wasn't there, Jake." She's reaching for something on the floor with her foot. "She couldn't love you like I do," Mindy croons. "I wouldn't let her."

"Wait?" It's so hard to move, to focus on driving. "Please..." Jake tries to make sense of it, it couldn't be true, but Mindy knew things she shouldn't, couldn't know. Those last few weeks Sarah had been distant, she'd asked him to work more so they could save for the wedding. He never knew where the money went when he checked his account after she died.

"But you shouldn't have given me her ring."

Jake groans. He feels like he was underwater, his thoughts muddled and his movements sluggish.

"Come on honey, just relax." Mindy brushes his hand off the steering wheel and he can see she's struggling to keep the wheel straight. She's pushing on his right foot, edging the accelerator closer to the floor.

"Just let go, Jake. I did what was best for you. For us."

“Stop it, please. I just...” Jake fumbles for the wheel, but Mindy bats his hands away. Jake gags on the too sweet aftertaste of Pepsi, struggles to breathe the too hot air.

“I did it for you, Jake. She didn’t love you how I love you.” Mindy kisses Jake as she presses down on the gas. “This way we can keep loving each other. This way you can’t ever give me something that belonged to another woman.”

Jake squints at the propane depot that sits just off the sharpest turn on the country road. He thinks about Sarah, about how things went wrong when Mindy showed up. He remembers now how Mindy had always followed him around, always blended into the background.

“Relax, Jake. This is good, it’s right.” She pushes down harder until the accelerator touches the floor. “This way you’ll keep loving me Jake.”

“Mindy. Please.”

“Just lay back, Jake.” She fights to keep the wheel straight as they enter a curve in the road. “And remember how I love you.”

Jake stops fighting the lethargy that sucks him down into darkness. He never feels the explosion that rips him apart.

Because She Asked Him

As Curtis waits in his blue Chevy Impala, he asks himself the question that's haunted him for twenty years: How did she drown if her lungs stayed dry?

The smoke from his cigarette drifts out an inch of open window and turns a deeper yellow in the sodium arc lights. It's close to midnight when the rain stops. He taps his cigarette against the rim of an empty Coke can, listens to the ash fizzle in the bottom. The rain tapers off with only sporadic drips posing a threat.

He closes his eyes and thinks of Anna back home, in bed, several hundred miles away, asleep. He ponders the odds of being caught lurking outside a public swimming pool. He doesn't think about the consequences of that happening again.

Curtis drops the smoldering butt into the can. He pauses, lights another smoke, and counts the raindrops. Two drops in thirty seconds. He's good to go. Curtis yanks his black anglers' hat over his head and cinches the neck chord before cracking the door open. He resists the urge to count again. The raincoat will provide protection against stray drops. He tries not to think of how a drop of water feels slithering down his neck, tickling the fine hairs on his skin as it leaves a moist trail. He shivers, his breath thins. He knows how that one drop could grow, spreading across his back, moving up his armpits and smothering his chest, neck, and head until the weight of all that water crushes the air from his body and forces its wetness inside him. The doctors say it can't happen that way, but he knows it can. Showers are a rarity and baby wipes work just fine.

Curtis cringes, takes a last drag on his smoke, opens the door, and sprints across the parking lot. He keeps up his momentum and hits the chain-link fence with a stumbling leap. The wire diamonds are slick but a "No Parking" sign gives him leverage.

Curtis holds his breath as he swings his leg over the top because he can't ignore the dampness seeping into his jeans. If he breathes, he'll scream, so he lets his body drop over and stagger against a wall. He counts down from ten until the flash-fire panic lessens to a smoldering roar.

Waiting to catch his breath, Curtis listens for any sounds – barks, yells, sirens – but the night is silent. His hands shake as he fumbles a Kleenex from his coat pocket. He wipes the rainwater from his hands, fitting the absorbent fibers into the tiniest crevices and folds of his skin. He tries to pat his jeans dry. The small overhang with leaking gutters restricts his movements as he edges towards a window. He rams his elbow into the windowpane. It cracks. He jabs it again, one more time before it breaks. A trail of sodden tissues marks his climb through the window, a sign that a coward surrendered here.

The room is familiar. It has the same musty smell of antiseptic ointment and soggy Band-Aids as it did two decades ago. He lights another cigarette to counteract the dampness. The warmth soothes him and the smoke diffuses the smell. His wife always says that if he can't quit for her then he should for the kids, but Anna's not here. She'd asked him to come here and Curtis did because he knew she would leave or stay based on his actions.

Curtis looks around the room. It's still the first aid office. It still has a thick maroon blanket hugging a too thin mattress on a rusted metal bed. He knows how the deceptive softness of that blanket will scratch the back of your thighs and make them itch. He turns to the side and assesses his reflection in the mottled mirror above the browning sink. His face has aged, lines prematurely furrow his brow, but his eyes are wet

with fear. The patter of rain lulls him into the past and he sees a wiry fifteen-year-old in wet shorts, shivering, the grey of shock muting his summer tan just two days before his birthday.

Twenty years ago, his sister drowned. Suffocated under three feet of water, her larynx clenching shut against the chlorinated, piss tainted water of the Charleston Public Swimming Pool. He still remembers the parade of adults that floated through this room that day. Some in uniforms, others in damp t-shirts and swim trunks, those who rushed in from the office sweating through long polyester sleeves. The remembered faces are vague, shadowed by anger and pain. The police officers looked grave and the lifeguards uneasy as they mumbled condolences and squeezed his shoulder. He remembers those details. He remembers the fear. He remembers the wetness of it all, but he can't remember the sound of his sister's voice.

A pleasant warmth heats his fingertips as the filter of his cigarette smolders. He lets it linger. Sometimes he wonders what it would be like to burn to death. He heard a story once about a woman who'd caught on fire at a circus and imagined how delicately dry the charred corpse was. He throws it in an empty trashcan and opens the door. Curtis steps into the hall; he takes a left towards the main desk, then another left, choosing the men's room out of a sense of duty. The door squeaks, every sight and sound bringing him closer to the past. Two drains squat in the bare concrete floor, wooden benches line three walls and four cubicles clutter the fourth. Puddles from the day stain the floor and Curtis can almost hear the slap of wet, fleshy feet. He crosses the room, skirting puddles and damp spots. He smirks at the "Shower Before You Swim" sign, then suddenly he's at the door, closer to a real swimming pool than he's been in years.

He pauses and lights another smoke with jittery hands. He looks at the ceiling, the walls, anything but the light coming from around the corner. He listens for rain, yearns for an excuse not to go outside, but hears nothing. He steps through the door into thick silence. There's the pool, waiting, shrouded in sound muting mist. He sucks chlorine deep into his lungs to cleanse the dampness inside. He looks up at the diving board, forward at the pump house, down at his cigarette. Finally, Curtis looks at the water.

The hypnotic effect of the wetness fills his body. His muscles clench as they did two weeks ago when Anna came home and found him frozen in the garden. He didn't want to get a pool, but she bought a small inflatable one for their toddlers. The babysitter left when Curtis came home, she was new, she didn't know better. She'd left his three-year-old daughter in the pool because daddy was home to play with his girls. His baby girl had cried for him to take her out, her chubby arms and legs unable to pull her body weight over the slippery edge, her wails hurt his ears but couldn't break through his panic. Anna got home an hour later, she didn't yell, she didn't scream, instead she wept quietly as she treated their daughter's sunburned skin. Curtis cried too. He'd tried to hug his daughter, felt heat radiate from her angry-pink skin when he got close, but she wouldn't let him touch her. He'd known then something had to change.

The silver surface reflects mist diffused lights, but it's dark beneath that shimmer. He can sense movement in the water, a million drops swarming into one. He thinks of all the bodies that have been in the pool, all the skin cells and hairs swirling beneath the surface. The filters can't get it all. He wants to give up, to run, to get back inside his car with the heater cranked up high all the way home. It's too much. All that water. Water in the pool, water in the pumps, swirling and gurgling beneath his feet. Water in pipes that

flows into drains that connect to sewers that run under roads and link every house and business and store. Water running up walls, under floors, through roofs. Water in basins and bottles and cups and cookers. Water that he can't escape. The wind stirs the surface into gentle lapping sounds like muffled giggles.

Panic curdles in Curtis's chest. For years he's been haunted by the image of his former self, the boy who lost his sister. She was younger than him, he was responsible. He puffs on his smoke, ignores his tremor. After years of searching, of wondering, of trying to understand, he's finally back where it ended, where it began.

Curtis unbuttons his raincoat and loosens the cord on his hat. He takes a step towards the pool, hesitates, lights another smoke off the butt of the last. His lungs burn and eyes clench as he forces the smoke deep into his lungs and exhales through his nose, relishing the smell, the warmth, as it clears out the dampness moldering inside.

His sister was the one that wanted to go. His parents made him promise he'd watch her. He lied because she asked him. His friends were there, and so were the girls. He'd met them at the pool, eager to show off his skills on the diving board in front of the girls and their unfamiliar pubescent beauty. Curtis's skin tingles in summer sun and he can smell suntan lotion and candy and sweat.

As he floats in the past, he removes his clothes, dropping them in a heap around his feet.

Curtis stands on the edge of the pool; he remembers the anticipation, the crisp chill of water that would linger on his swim trunks. For the first time in years, he wants to feel his body glide through water, feel carefree and fearless as he did as a child. He

hadn't been in a pool since his sister drowned, hadn't dealt with the increasing fear. By twenty, it was a phobia. By thirty, it was debilitating.

He strips down to his underwear.

At his sister's funeral, Curtis heard their whispers. Aunts and uncles nattered about the pain and strangeness of it all. The tragedy. The doctors said it was shock, but Curtis knew it wasn't. He couldn't wrap his mind around it, couldn't understand how his sister drowned if her lungs stayed dry.

He edges towards the water, the forgotten cigarette smoldering in his hand, his breath shallow. Curtis watches the water lap the gentle incline of the shallow end, a gust of wind ripples the surface and the water suckles at his toes. Curtis ignores the dank panic. The water reaches for him and he's no longer standing in the shallow end, he's up on the diving board feeling the heat of the sun.

He's twelve again. Happy, ignorant, and jostling his friends as they pretend they don't see the girls watching them. He flicks his eyes towards his sister. She's laying on her towel, leaning on her elbows while she plows through yet another book. She's nine, with dirty blonde hair covering her shoulders where her modest blue swimsuit doesn't, a bag of books beside her. He looks at the girls, they're rubbing lotion on each other, giggling, looking back at him. Curtis hollers as he launches himself off the board. He tucks his knees to his chin and relishes that brief moment of free fall before gravity kicks in. He's feeling this memory, feeling the splash, as his body wades deeper into the water. There's a tickling behind his knees as his shivers stir the water. The mist cools his sweat and fogs his breath.

In the past, he comes up from under the water, smoothing back his hair and flexing his arms as he climbs the ladder. He pushes his chest out as he dries off next to the girls. He takes Mary Vorhees behind the pump house because she asked him. His ego flares. He struts a little, confident that she noticed him looking at her, knowing what he was in for. But Mary just wanted to talk to him. She wanted to ask him if Greg liked her because she'd heard from Sally that Greg liked her but she needed to be sure. Curtis carries his bruised ego to the top of the diving board and passes on the message. He smiles and jokes and fights the urge to just go home. Then the whistle blows for the adult free swim.

His feet keep moving. He knows where the memory is going but he's helpless as that maddening thought drives him forward. He wants to know what it's like; he wants to understand.

Young Curtis waits on the diving board, watching Mary talking to Greg as the water glistens on her skin and her bikini clings to her curves. Curtis doesn't know there's a problem until a scream pierces his jealous haze. He watches a lifeguard dive towards a listless figure on the bottom of the pool. He recognizes the swimsuit.

Inch by inch the water climbs his thighs. It pulls him in like a receding tide, drawing him closer in waves. His feet and knees strain against the pull. He's transfixed by the shifting, shimmering water. He barely recognizes his pale reflection.

Curtis wades in deeper still, hating the wet slither against his body. His skin prickles as he thinks of Anna. He knew she was going to leave him, and she would take the girls. He couldn't bath the girls, couldn't wash the dishes, he couldn't even fetch his wife a glass of water. He'd come here to confront the past because she'd asked him to try.

Curtis tries hard to think of Anna, of their children, but he can only see his sister, hear her garbled laugh as she waits at the bottom of the pool.

He realizes there's something in the water with him. He finally hears the sirens' call that been sounding for twenty years, the sirens' call that's now reeling him in.

Curtis sinks to his knees and flails forward to meet the gush of reaching water. There's something calling him. Something calling, calling, luring, yearning, laughing. Curtis glimpses his sister at the bottom of the pool. Her dirty blonde hair sways like seaweed across her face and shoulders, it hides and reveals her eyes, the straps of her blue swimsuit, her smile. But that smile is hungry as it mouths words he can't understand. Then her body turns and swims deeper under water. Curtis opens his mouth to call her back but only the water fills him.

Transfer

I hate running my fingers through your coarse hair but I love to wrap it around my fists when we fuck. You can't do that with my shaved head but at least I don't have the emotional baggage of your ex. You're still learning all the ways girls can screw girls, which is like what guys can do but better. Anyone can drive an automatic, but girls are like stick-shifts and you gotta learn to work that clutch for the smoothest ride.

First time I see you, I'm smoking outside the DVD store where I work with your sister. She's inside, arranging new titles, and you're standing outside by the ATM. Your sister is petite but wiry, pretty in a workhorse sort of way, one of those girls you know will win a fistfight. But you're the type of girl who has others do the fighting for you. I make conversation, you ask me out for a drink. I can't resist your confidence and the way you know I've been looking at you. It's only when I'm in the club watching you work your hips to the music that I find a Sparknotes copy of Macbeth in your handbag and realize you're underage.

A little while later, we're at your parents' place. Your sister's in the bedroom with some guy and we're in the lounge. I can hear them fucking but it's okay because we're making out. I know you're nervous because I'm only second girl but I also know how bad you want me. Your desperate hips press against me, your hands rush across my body, you breathe hot delicate moans in my ear. When you hear the bedroom door open, you shove me off. Your sister doesn't notice as she gets another beer from the fridge, but as soon as she shuts the door your hands are down my pants. It's only after I'm shuffled out the front

door like the cheap fuck your sister just had that I get in my car and see a strand of hair on my shoulder. It's long and blond; not mine, not yours, not hers. I shrug, drive home, and wonder if you pushed me away because you know I fucked her.

We spend a lot of time together the next few months. You've finished school and I've got a real job shuffling papers and sending mail. We've gone from fucking to making love and that makes me uneasy. I want to lose myself in you, let myself love you, but when emotions get involved, it gets complicated. It's not about the wet slap of sweaty bodies or salty skin between teeth anymore. It's about eye contact and tenderness, about feelings and futures. It's the difference between fiery street salsa with its humid cross holds, turns, and throws and the calculated repetition of the fouetté, fermé and effacé of ballet. In the bathroom, I hold the sink's edge like a ballet barre and practice in the mirror until it comes naturally. I'll learn the measured moves, I'll learn to say I love you.

One morning, as I head to work, I weigh the pros and cons of falling in love. As I think about how I feel obliged to give up the ass I get on the side, I see a strand of blond hair curled on the passenger seat like a viper. I look at it every time I stop at a light and it looks back at me. I almost ask it how it got there but I know it won't give me a straight answer. I try not to think about where you might go on the days you drop me off at work and use my car.

The first chance we get we head to the coast with your sister. The three of us share a bed because there's no couch. As I lie there waiting to fall asleep, I think about a

threesome but that'd be incestuous, so I pinch your nipples how you like but you push my hands away. We haven't had sex in a week but I guess now isn't the right time. I crawl out of bed and wait for you to come with me but you don't. I wrap your hoodie around me and go smoke on the balcony. The faint light from my cigarette tints the hair on your sleeve red. It quivers in the late night breeze and I wonder how far hair travels on its own, if it moves in the wind or slips through drains.

We carry on as usual for a month or so then, you get a place of your own. You tell me it makes sense to live closer to work and I go against my gut and believe you. The next time I see your ex's hair, it's nesting on a hairband around your bed post. I hear it slither while we sleep and think about taking it off but I leave it there and watch it while we fuck. After you fall asleep, I creep into your bathroom and practice in the mirror. I've gotten quite good and saying I love you, my eyes light up and I can't stop the smile, but when I look into your eyes they're blank.

Sometimes I think of what I'll say if you ask me about your sister. There's really not much to tell. We hooked up on a weekend and a few days later, she's crying because I kissed another girl.

I haven't seen you in a while when I'm sitting in my apartment. You suggested a break and I've kept myself busy. You ask me where I've been but I can't tell you because I don't remember their names. There's another hair watching me from the couch. I almost ignore it but then I pick it up and take a closer look. I measure it against my forearm,

check if there's a root attached like they do with transferred evidence in CSI. I roll it between my fingers, hold it up to the light, then set it aside while I light a smoke. I pick up the hair and put it in my mouth. I run it through my teeth, slowly, because I can. I hold it close to my cigarette and watch it sizzle and curl. Then I rinse with Listerine. Sometimes I think you're cheating on me. Some days I wish you would.

When you tell me you're in love with your ex, I'm relieved. I'm sitting in the tub as we text, watching another blond hair snake across the water. I dip my toes under so they don't get in its way. One end rises and nods a thank you so I tip my head in its direction and wish you luck.

But now that you're gone I don't want anyone else. I use the broom for under the bed and behind the couch. I check my bookshelf and behind the microwave. I pull out the sink trap in the bathroom but I can't find the hair. I use tweezers to pluck out one of my own. It's black. I rest it in the palm of my hand, breathe on it, whisper I love you, but it doesn't move.

He Heard her Moan

It was simple, really, how Devon came to fuck Mother. He'd answered an ad in the paper: "Wanted: spare parts female mannequin. Petite models only. Pays cash."

If his dad hadn't found him naked in bed with an armless dressmaker's dummy, Devon wouldn't have considered selling the odd assortment of arms, legs and torsos he'd collected over the years. But Dad had. So Devon called the number in the advert and told the female voice on the other end of line that yes, he had a variety of parts available. Three days later he hefted a duffel bag onto the Number 16 bus and met Mother in a coffee shop downtown.

From the seductive but raspy sound of her voice Devon had expected her to look like an educated hooker, but the spotless grey power suit, manicured nails and shark like sheen in her eyes pleased him. Their meeting was initially awkward. Devon's ripped jeans, ruffled hair and irrational dislike for older women had activated his defense mechanisms. He started the meeting off by being abrupt and callous, but Mother soon had him talking freely and feeling at ease.

After the required amount of small talk they got onto the topic of mannequins. Mother was looking for a variety of parts, but she needed the left hand of a Bernina 1700 model in particular, preferably from 2009. Devon told her that he had just such a hand, but that it was a 2010 model, though she needn't worry because he could easily replace the wrist locking mechanism. He had, he told Mother, become quite proficient in refurbishing model parts.

When she asked how he came by such a skill, Devon told her he was an artist. He lied. Devon learnt to fix mannequins out of necessity. All the parts in his collection were

salvaged from dumpsters and he had mastered the art of filling cracks, smoothing out scratches, and knew which brand of latex paint felt the most like skin.

He couldn't bring himself to tell anyone about the shopping trips with his dad that had started it all. Since he was a child, he knew that some things were better left unsaid. Besides, Dad would never understand. Unlike most boys his age, he used to look forward to going shopping, especially for clothes. At the slightest opportunity, he would sneak away and run through the store looking for the dress department. Often it was only for a moment or two, but sometimes it could take his dad and the staff half an hour to find him nestled beneath the skirt of a mannequin, his cheek pressed against the cool smoothness of her thigh. He would run his tiny hand up the inside of her legs, entranced by the smooth blankness that he'd never seen on humans. Someone would inevitably notice the small sneakers sticking out from under the display and he'd be rudely yanked away from the vacant hardness.

By the time their coffee cups were dry, Devon had offered to go with Mother and attach the part she'd wanted to buy from him. As they travelled through the city, neither of them noticed the passage of time as they passed from grey urban streets into the lawn sprinkler suburbs. Devon found himself talking about his overbearing dad, how his father tried to control his life and didn't understand him. Devon's mom had died when he was six, and since then it was just Devon and Dad. Mother understood and consoled him. Soon she pulled her car into a driveway that barely slipped through the thick, overgrown bushes. As Mother led Devon down the forbidden path, he felt himself engulfed in the humid overgrowth that no outsiders could penetrate.

Mother took Devon under her wing. She gave him the converted loft above the garage to live in and he worked for room and board. The garden needed landscaping and Devon spent his days sawing through branches and trimming hedges. He would find himself kneading the damp soil, relishing the feel of sweat on his skin and the stink of manual labor. His hands became calloused.

Every evening Mother brought him dinner and they sat on the couch watching muted sitcoms, at peace in one another's company. At nine o'clock she'd take his head in her hands and kiss him gently on the forehead before pulling back the covers and tucking him into bed. Devon fell asleep to the sound of her footsteps leaving his room.

I have someone I'd like you to meet, Mother said one day. Her name is Emma, she's my daughter. Devon followed her into the house for the first time. His sweat was slick on his palms as nervous anticipation simmered in his gut. He followed her through the still house and out onto the back porch. Then he saw Emma and his breath caught in his throat.

She was seated in a wicker armchair on the porch in a floral blue summer dress, a Bernina 1700 model from 2010. This particular mannequin was rare, top of the line and pricey, even by a connoisseur's standards. She was coveted for the lifelike look and feel of her skin. While a white sun hat shaded her face the sunlight gave her flesh-toned chest a seductive glow. Devon paused for a moment then bowed slightly as he kissed her hand. From the moment that his lips touched her firm grip Devon was hooked. The afternoon passed in a series of smooth transitions between comfortable silence and heated glances.

Mother invited him to join them for dinner the next night and soon the three of them were sharing every meal. Emma was quiet and demure. She listened to him speak with rapt attention and would make eyes at him across the table when Mother wasn't looking. Devon found himself making excuses to work in the back garden so he could watch Emma as she sunned herself on the back porch in the afternoons.

A week later Mother called Devon into the kitchen. As he entered she lifted a roast chicken from the oven.

"I'm glad that you're here, Devon." She'd said. "It's been so long since Emma and I've had company."

Devon smiled and thanked her for taking care of him, happy that his presence was appreciated.

"Do you like my daughter, Devon?"

"Yes, I do. Very much."

"She likes you too, you know." Mother said as she eased a carving knife down the length of the chicken's spine, splitting the carcass in half. "It's been so long since she's had anyone to love." A deft flick of her wrist separated the drumsticks. "I nearly lost her once. A car accident." Mother was quiet as she sliced slivers of white meat from the chicken's breast. Devon watched each piece of steaming flesh sag away from the whole like a soft, living thing and shuddered. "She was gone from me for a while, Devon. It nearly broke me, but I brought her back from the brink." Mother pulled the leftover meat from the bones. Her fingers mashed themselves between the bones and her movements

sounded like suckling puppies, wet and eager. “Don’t break her heart Devon, she’s a special girl.”

A month later Devon carried Emma over the threshold of their bedroom and life had never been as sweet.

A week after that, Mother announced that Devon should begin work on the renovations she had been planning. She gave him the designs and the tools and those summer days were long and peaceful. They would breakfast together as usual, and when Mother locked herself in her study; Devon worked outside while Emma lusted after him from the porch. In the afternoons, he would work on Mother’s bedroom: first stripping wallpaper, then sanding and painting. Emma wore overalls and held the paint can or supported the ladder as he worked.

In the evenings, Emma watched over the cooking dinner while Devon freshened up. The bathing ritual was the same every night. Devon would sit on the edge of his bed, remove his shoes and strip the rest of his sweat stiffened clothes from his body. He would cover himself in a fresh bathrobe then make his way to the bathroom where the water was already drawn. In the humid mist he would pause, waiting for the touch of those familiar hands as they removed the robe. Her hoarse whisper forced damp air into in his ear as Mother muttered silent words.

Devon would climb into the hot water, his muscles relaxing as Mother massaged them clean. She would start with his hair, fingering the curves of his skull and working her way towards his shoulders. She would stare as she washed him, like a wife

memorizing every inch of her husband before he goes to war. Slowly, gently she would wash his back and chest, tracing the newly flattened plateau of his stomach and the increasingly defined muscles in his arms. Then, as happened every night, her hand would stray too low and she would drop the washcloth with a start. It was as if she had forgotten he was there and was horrified to see his cock rising from the water from like a monstrous amphibian. She would rise quickly, flee the bathroom, and slam the door as if she were afraid it would come chasing after her. Neither Mother nor Devon spoke about their nightly ritual; it was an unsaid pleasure of which could not Emma hear.

On the day that Mother told Devon she wanted children, he had found damp rot hidden in her bedroom wall. Emma was taking a nap in the bedroom when Mother came to talk to him. Mother had walked up behind him as he was using a claw hammer to pull out the rotten wall panels. She'd found a girl, she said, someone who looked just like Emma, someone who was willing. Devon's ears burned at the thought that she would pimp him off to some warm, fleshy slut when his wife was next door. Devon stormed from the room and Mother followed.

Think about it, she had said, they could be a real family. Fuck you, he'd said, how dare she suggest that in front of Emma. Ungrateful bastard was what she called him, ineffectual boy who couldn't bring himself to do the manly thing. Devon felt his lungs crushed by fury. He turned away from Mother, and, clenching his jaw, he took Emma's hand. In the smooth tenderness of her touch he felt his heartbeat pounding in his fingertips. Her slim wrist and elegant fingers reminded him of all he had to lose, so he gripped her arm firmly and in one savagely calculated movement he jerked his arm

backwards. A slight twist and Emma's arm popped out of the socket, that metallic click that Devon had avoided for so long thrilled him almost as much as the wet crack that spilt Mother's scalp.

Mother slumped to the floor and, as the red anger in her face drained to a pale grey, the pink slit that gaped in her hairline pulsed maroon. Devon paused, his body numb as he watched the blood slide down Mother's face; the wetness caressing her features like a lover's tongue. Her left eye twitched, then sagged. It pulled the side of her face towards her chest like softened wax. She shuddered and groaned like a cheap whore.

Devon lifted the sleeping form of Emma from their bed, being careful not to wake her. He carried her into the spare bedroom and slipped her between the covers before reattaching her arm.

He walked into Mother's room and fetched a clean drop cloth. With his foot, he rolled her limp weight into the center of the plastic, aware of the subtle, erratic shuddering of her chest. Devon dragged the flaccid form of Mother into her bedroom and hurriedly tore out the rest of the wall. He swaddled her in the drop cloth, secured a rag in her mouth, and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders to fend off the late night chill. It took an hour before Devon could fit her into the wall. He was annoyed that the panels he used to seal the wall would leave edges where it should be smooth. But once he finished painting, placed the headboard, and hung a few pictures, no one would notice.

He'd let Emma sleep through the night and by morning he'd managed to lift the stained carpet, paint the undercoat in Mother's bedroom, rearrange her furniture and bring the Hetty Watson 2004 mannequin up from the basement.

It's resemblance to Mother was striking. Once Devon freshened up her makeup, he'd laid her on her bed. Temptation solidified and became a tangible throbbing thing. All those nights of incomplete touches and frantic solitary fumbblings in the lukewarm remains of their ritual created a pent up sexual tension that was too strong for him to control. Mother didn't speak as Devon's desperation pounded the bed against the wall, but he thought he heard her moan.

The weeks continued to pass by much like they had before. He missed Mother's nightly bathing ritual. It wasn't the same as before their argument. She was quiet now, a voyeur. But Devon made up for it by spending the afternoons kneeling naked behind her, sweating and poised for action as she lay face down on the bed. Emma didn't know about this, but she had confessed to being a morning person, and so they changed their nightly couplings to the slow extravagance of early morning sex. It worked out well and Devon was happy.

He had become the man of the household with two women dependent on him for their wellbeing. He was strict husband, and a forceful son, but he slept alone at night. The thought of choosing one over the other was too much for him; spending the night with one would mean he cared more for her than the other. But he loved them both, he loved his mother and his wife equally, as a good son should.

Three months after their fight, Devon told Mother that Emma was pregnant. Mother was speechless with joy and the three of them celebrated. The late night didn't bother Devon because he woke early the next morning to begin work on the nursery. At

Mother's suggestion, he emptied out Mother's unused study and stacked the dust covered books and computer in the loft above the garage. Two weeks later, as Devon hung the homemade mobile above the single bed, the doorbell rang. He took one last glance at the mobile, admiring his own handiwork and the artfully crafted images of Mother and Emma.

The girls were ecstatic with anticipation as Devon flew down the steps on feet lightened with joy. He signed for the delivery, rushed the box upstairs, and dressed Peter in his finest new outfit. The Tommy Boy Child Model's skin was a little darker than Devon would have liked, but it was always hard to judge exact skin tones when buying off the internet. Besides, parents never knew which of the pair their child would look most like. Devon thought that Peter had his nose and eyes, but he was sure that their son would have Emma's personality.

When Devon walked Peter downstairs, he could feel the air electrified with excitement. In that moment, when the four of them were together for the first time, Devon knew perfection. Peter was a little shy and smiled at the girls, Emma made eyes at Devon, and Mother smiled silently at the sight of her first grandson.

The family was whole now, complete in their staid lifestyle.

A week after Peter's arrival a letter came in the mail. As it slipped through the slot in the front door; its silent tap on the floor was akin to the sound of a guillotine slicing home. Devon approached it like a serpent in the grass, weary of any danger that could come between him and his family. He opened the lilac envelope, read through the

letter once, twice, then rushed off to the porch to tell the girls the good news. Mother's niece was coming to visit and she would arrive just in time to see the loft renovated.

They all agreed it would be nice having another woman around the house.

Waiting

Martha Jones dies thirty minutes before midnight on the seventeenth of April, two days before her 24th birthday. That morning, when she picked black trainers, grey sweat pants, and a blue Sigma Tau hoodie from her closet, Martha prepared for a long day of classes and a late night in the library. The young blond never questions her safety as she walks home on the Panther Trail in the brisk summer night. Instead, her thoughts drift between questions of what to cook for dinner, if those red pumps are worth the fifty-minute drive to Champaign, if her husband would prefer Gary or Gareth on their customized return address stamps.

Her high spirits and the fresh night air distract her from the night. Light bookends a small stretch of trail and, because Martha travels this route so often, she barely feels the darkness thicken around her. Almost every day she walks across campus, and this familiarity stops her questioning a soft plea from the thicket of trees next to the trail.

The delicate moan catches Martha's attention because it reminds her of mewling kittens. She acts on instinct when she takes two steps off the path and parts the branches of the overgrown bushes. When she hears a rustle, she leans in closer but a bony fist rushes from the darkness, grabs her hair, and pulls her forward. Martha gasps at the unexpected pain; her harsh intake of breath a scratchy precursor to a scream cut short by her fall. She lands awkwardly and her assailant's knee jabs her throat just before he fumbles his scrawny arms around her. She tries to fight back but desperation fuels the grizzled addict's struggle as he pushes her to the ground. Martha gags on the stench of his teeth as he straddles her and grinds his bony fingers into her sternum while he holds her down. Martha never sees the junkie pull a crooked steak knife from his belt when she

tries to hip-flip him off her body like she'd been taught. She never knows how much danger she is in until the tarnished blade slices through her thigh and punctures her femoral artery.

After the junkie tumbles off her, he paws at her handbag. It's trapped between her body and the ground so he yanks the knife out of her groin to see the straps off her backpack. Martha's scream sticks in her bruised throat and her hands grope at the wound, push hard against the pulsing wetness. If she just lies there and waits until her attacker leaves, she can use the phone in her pocket to call Gary. Then Gary would call 911 and they'd take her to hospital and she'd be up and about in time for graduation. After that, Gary would buy her that car he'd been promising so she wouldn't have to walk home from school anymore. She'd told him to wait until after the wedding, but now she'd changed her mind.

Martha never doubts she has a fighting chance. She is young, fit, and only a hundred yards or so from houses where she can find help. It isn't until the junkie forces her hands away from the wound to grapple with her slippery jewelry that panic curls around her toes and slithers up her legs. Because he'd struggled with the blood-covered clasp on her watch, he wastes no time with her engagement ring. The faintest glimmer of doubt only creeps into her thoughts when she feels him take a knife to her finger.

After Martha hears her attacker stumble out the bushes, she waits to make sure he is gone. She shivers and knows from TV that it's either the cold or shock or both. She lies still in that darkness, and ignores the rustles and snaps from the trees. To avoid settling into shock, she forces herself to think of how good Gary's lips taste on hers, how comforting his leather jacket feels around her shoulders. Martha lets herself drift in

memories of the day he'd filled her bedroom with roses and proposed, that night he'd tried to cook lasagna and smoked out his apartment, the way he'd bought the test and paced outside the bathroom when they that pregnancy scare. She lies there, alone, on her back with her cheek against the ground. Patience has never been one of her virtues, but Martha waits because she doesn't have a choice.

The chalk-pink morning light seeps through Martha's thoughts of Gary's stubbled jaw. It draws her attention away from his slender hips and dark brown hair and lets in the clammy cold that coats her body. Damp mulch does little to soften the pebbles and branches that poke the fleshy parts of her back and her left cheek. She struggles to move but can still feel the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker pushes against her. The sour smell of his body lingers in the tight space beneath the bushes and the whirring clicks of insects heighten her panic. She takes and a deep breath to calm herself, because she knows Gary will be there soon. A twinge of guilt seeps into her thoughts as she imagines how stressed Gary will be that she isn't home yet. She pictures him pacing his small apartment, frantically calling their friends as the hours tick by. But Martha knows he must have heard by now because she sees a pair of boots a few feet from her face.

The hope Martha feels as the boots come closer quickly turns to fear as they pause, turn, and walk away. Her stomach churns when she can't move her head to see them, can't force a scream out of her swollen throat. The boots cross her line of sight again and Martha sees a man bend down to pick up a stray numbered marker. As waves of pain break across her body, Martha realizes those whirring clicks aren't insects but the sound of men in uniform taking photographs of the ground. She wonders where the

paramedics are, she tries to move, tries to get their attention but her limbs are heavy, weighed down with the tide.

Martha watches the two men as her cheek presses against the ground. One of them wheels a gurney into her line of sight, then helps the second heft a body bag on top. She watches a leg slip out the unzipped bag, sees a wet sock studded with leaves dangle beneath the leg of grey sweats. Martha hears the body bag zipped closed as she watches the other bag and tag the last piece of evidence. A shoe. Martha doesn't need to wiggle her toes to know the sock on her right foot is damp. She doesn't need to look at the label to know that it is the right shoe from a pair size seven Nike Air Max's, \$180 online, free shipping on orders over \$75. She already knows how it blisters her ankle if she runs more than a mile. She doesn't need to watch the news or look at the evidence or open the body bag in the back of the coroners van. Martha knows then that all she needs is Gary because he's the only thing she has left.

But even though she knows these things, even when it is too cold to ache anymore, Martha doesn't lose hope. She yearns for Gary, remembers how, one night in the city, they'd seen a bundle of flowers on the street corner. Only it wasn't a bundle, it was bouquets that framed the picture of a young boy. An attached newspaper clippings recounted bland details of his death, but the flowers were wilting and the candles lit in his memory long burned out. Martha knows Gary would help her build a memorial if that was their child. She knows he'll visit her, see the place where his wife took her last breath. Gary will bring flowers, perhaps even a memorial bench inscribed with her name.

Martha is alone. She watches the daylight fade and thinks she might be crying but can feel no tears. Her heart aches as she thinks of Gary in pain, the knowledge that she

caused it and isn't there to console him. The longer she waits the more her anxiety grows until she screams and thrashes while pebbles and branches poke the fleshy parts of her back and dig into her cheek. Martha never doubts she'll see him, but then the witching hour comes and she feels the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker presses against her.

Gary didn't come today but he will tomorrow.

#

Martha Jones died thirty minutes before midnight, two days before her birthday. The young blond never questions her safety or the soft plea from a thicket of trees next to the trail on that warm fall night. She acts on maternal instinct and, when she hears a rustle, she peers deep inside the bushes. Martha gasps as a fist rushes from the darkness and grabs her hair. She tumbles awkwardly and slams into her attacker's knee, the blow crunches her larynx and she bites deep into her tongue. She pounds her fists against him and spits blood as he clutches his wiry arms around her, but he pins her down, straddles her, and grinds his claw like fingers into her sternum. His fetid breath forces itself in her nose and she chokes as he fumbles at her straps. Martha doesn't see the junkie slip a gnarled steak knife from his belt, and, when she tries to hip-flip him, the rusted blade carves a jagged hole through her femoral artery.

Martha's scream comes out a gurgle as he yanks the knife from her groin. She gropes at the wound as hot blood pumps between her fingers, knows she just has to lie there and wait until he leaves so she can call Gary. Then Gary will call an ambulance.

After that, she'll tell Gary they need to save money for that car he'd been promising. Martha never doubts she has a fighting chance but then the junkie forces her hands away from the wound and fear clamps her body. Martha forces herself to think of Gary, of his wiry strength and protective arms, the way he always keeps other guys away to protect her. She loves being with an older guy, even if he's unemployed. She almost loses herself in the memory of Gary's body but her attacker takes a knife to her finger and the jagged blade grates against bone.

As Martha hears him leave, she tries to press on the bleeding with jittering hands while her body shudders in the darkness, jostling the rotting mulch into whispers. If only she could kiss Gary, feel him gently lift her off the ground and carry her to safety. Martha wanders through memories of their first date. How he'd taken her to his local hangout, the seediest bar in town, but he'd acted a gentleman and even walked her to her door before stealing a kiss. Martha knows she'll never forget the first time she'd kissed the mole on the tip of his left earlobe. He didn't rush her, didn't force her, so she didn't mind picking up the tab when he was broke. He waited until she was ready, that was worth the world to her.

The chalky morning light seeps through Martha's thoughts of Gary. She struggles to move but can still feel the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker pushes against her. The bitter smell of his body fills the dense space beneath the bushes. She tries to shift her weight, tries to find some small comfort, but waves of pain break across her body and she hears the hollow flap of wings. Panic tightens her chest because maybe Gary hasn't heard yet. She hates the thought of upsetting him, knows how much he hates it when she does. She hopes he won't be angry.

Martha hears footsteps crunch across the gravel of the trail and her heart pounds because it has to be Gary tracing her steps to find her. He was smart like that. He knew so many facts about the world. Before the start of the semester, they were driving down I-70 outside of Martinsville when they saw two white crosses on the side of the road. They were only a few feet high, clearly home made, but placed with precision. When they saw the crosses, Gary had told her how they weren't just about remembering people who died there, they were also about warning others. He told her how in the 40s and 50s, the police in Arizona were the ones who put the crosses up, but now everyone has to do it themselves.

Martha strains to see Gary; she wiggles and shouts, but can't force a scream through her swollen, copper tainted throat. She glimpses neon green running shoes jog across the path but they're too small to be Gary's. Martha sees another flutter of movement and realizes that flapping isn't wings but a short strand of crime scene tape snapping in the wind. She's too tired to cry but she wants to so bad because she can't stop thinking about damp socks. She doesn't need to look to know she is missing one of her size seven Nikes. Instead, she thinks about blisters, coroner-black boots, an unzipped body bag.

Martha thinks she might be crying but can feel no tears. Her heart clenches as she thinks of Gary's agony and wonders how upset he is with her. She worries about missing work, about failing if her grades drop any lower. She thinks of all the money they'll owe if she can't get overtime, especially after the new life insurance policies and phone contracts they signed last month. It is too cold to ache but Martha still hopes because it's

just a matter of time. He'll come see her and bring her flowers, maybe even a trinket or two from her dresser.

Martha is alone. The longer she waits the higher her frustration builds until she screams and thrashes while pebbles and branches poke the fleshy parts of her back and her dig into her cheek. Martha never doubts she'll see him but then midnight settles on the night she feels the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker presses against her.

Gary doesn't come today, but he will.

#

Martha Jones died thirty minutes before midnight. On that cold, fall night, she trusts in the familiarity of campus to keep her safe from the thickening darkness. She acts on instinct when she fights the addict that lures her into the bushes. She kicks and spits and gags on familiar breath but he has desperation and a junkie's luck on his side. Martha never sees the knife; she's too busy trying not to choke on the blood from her tongue to notice until it bores a hole through her femoral artery.

Martha never doubts she'll survive. She knows enough to force herself to keep thinking, stay conscious long enough to get help before shock shuts her system down. Martha tells herself that if she waits until her attacker leaves, she can call Gary, but she remembers that Gary went out with the boys and probably wouldn't answer his phone. She tries to imagine being with him and almost loses herself in the thought but her attacker takes a knife to her finger and she can feel the jagged blade that grates against bone.

After Martha hears her attacker stumble out the bushes, tries to shrink against the ground. She'd learned from Gary that when men got riled it was better to stay out of the way and not draw attention to yourself. She tries to quell her hands jittering because there's not enough pressure to stop the bleeding. Martha clings to consciousness, slips between memories of Gary's brown eyes and body bags, his favorite Panther t-shirt and clammy feel of a damp sock sticking to her toes.

The pallid morning light oozes through Martha's thoughts of Gary. She struggles to move but can still feel the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker pushes against her. The smell of his body lingers in the stale air beneath the bushes, mingling smells of cigarettes, Guinness, and Axe body wash. Pain waxes and wanes, distracts her from the panic that swells every time her thoughts drift away from Gary. The year before, he'd taken her to her grandmother's grave because Martha missed her funeral. She remembered how sweet he'd been that day, how he'd driven her there then waited in the car as she'd knelt next to the headstone. Someone left a single purple dooryard violet at the base of the stone and the power of that simple gesture moved Martha. She'd cried a little, then a lot. She didn't know how long she spent pondering that flower, but when Gary cranked up the music in the car she let the thumping base draw her back to him because she'd kept him waiting. Martha thinks she might be crying but can feel no tears.

Martha waits alone, with her only her thoughts of her husband. She worries about paying rent because she'll have to take time off work but she can't afford to with Gary's dentist bills to pay. She wonders how long it'll take him to find a job and how much working overtime will impact her already poor grades. It is too cold to ache but Martha

still hopes because it is just a matter of time. He'll come see her and bring her flowers, maybe one day even a plaque on a bench.

Martha is alone. The longer she waits the higher her frustration builds until she screams and thrashes while pebbles and branches poke the skin of her back and her dig into her cheek. Martha never doubts she'll see him but then midnight descends and she feels the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker presses against her.

Gary didn't come today, but he will.

#

Martha Jones died. The young blond will never question her safety that bitter winter night. She'll act on maternal instinct when she hears the delicate mewling. She'll try to fight a man that will clutch his arms around her and hold her down as she gags. Martha will never see the corroded steak knife that hacks at her straps before it severs her femoral artery. She will never force a scream out of her swollen, raw throat or stop the bleeding with groping hands. She'll lie there and force herself to think of Gary and then a man will take a knife to her finger.

Martha will wait in the darkness; she will cry but feel no tears. Her thoughts will drift in memories of proposals, doubts, accusations. In thoughts of evidence, damp socks, and body bags. She will shiver; feel the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker pushes against her. Faint whiffs of the cologne she bought him will saturate the tight space beneath the bushes.

Martha will be alone, she will be cold, she will wait in the undergrowth while pebbles and branches stab the fleshy parts of her back and gouge her cheek. She will feel the grab, the shove, the pressure as her attacker presses against her, but she'll never doubt because it'll just be a matter of time. Perhaps Gary will bring her flowers.

Evidence

Brian thunders out of his trailer and races towards his pickup, untied shoelaces flailing in the dust. He flings his gear in the passenger seat; wheelspins across the gravel, and clips his mailbox as he cuts the turn onto Westfield Road.

He dips his head and checks the sky to the east. Brian keeps one eye on the road and the other on the bright orange speck zig-zagging across the sky. He pushes his pickup over seventy as oily waves of anxiety churn in his gut. This could be it; this could be what he's been hunting for thirty years.

Alison giggled as she ran in the field of wild flowers. Her pollen-dusted palms stirred the lazy end-of-summer bees. She twirled and pranced and sang a new song she learned in school. She chased crickets and danced with butterflies until she almost collided with the boy who'd been watching her.

Brian's truck bumps over the rutted road, jostling his view and forcing him to focus. He flies through the stop sign by Harold Gardener's house and glimpses the old man glaring from his window. Gardener doesn't like Brian, neither does the rest of the town, but Brian can't leave. He wants to but the need to prove their accusations wrong keeps him rooted in his hometown like overgrown ivy. He doesn't care what the locals think anymore and, aside from running a stop sign, there isn't much he can do to make them hate him more. Brian peeks at his phone, glances at the road, then fixes his eyes on the light in the sky as his truck thunders through country roads.

Alison played with the boy all afternoon. He taught her to make daisy chains, helped her climb a tree, and when she slipped off a branch and skinned her knee, he helped wipe away the drop of blood that oozed like a slug down her shin. She watched the blood blossom through the white of his t-shirt. She watched him lick his lips as he said he didn't mind.

Brian's truck clatters across gravel as the tarmac gives way to a dirt road, rattling the rusty hinges and bearings. He grips the steering wheel as the truck fishtails into Fox Ridge. When he nears the pond, he skids to a stop, grabs his gear, and runs. Brian searches the sky for that skittering light and, when he finds it, he whips out his camera and starts shooting.

By the time the two children watched the sun change colors in the sky, Alison was hungry. The boy pulled a crumpled sandwich from his back pocket, purple jelly oozing from the folds and staining the wax paper covering. She giggled with him as they ate, his finger sticky when he wiped a drop of jelly from her chin. Alison had always wanted a big brother.

Brian stops in the middle of the field, kneels down, and braces his elbow on his leg to steady his shots. He takes a deep breath to calm his shaking hands. He will get a picture this time, incontrovertible evidence for the laughing skeptics.

Brian tries to be patient while his camera fires off five frames a second. The pale orange specks flit in and out of the viewfinder. He risks valuable seconds to check the

settings, tweaking the ISO and shutter speed to make sure his images are sharp, indisputable. All he needs is a picture or two to prove those lights are more than solar flares reflecting on weather balloons. With this proof, he'll show the local families they have no need to fear for their children in his presence. With this proof that binding ivy will wilt.

It was so dark by the time they started walking home, but the boy held her hand as they crossed the field. It was only after she felt his hand tug against hers that she realized he'd stopped. She looked at him and saw him staring at the sky, eyes wide and jaw slack. Alison looked and saw two orange stars dancing in the night. They were brighter than the rest, moving faster than fireflies.

Brian gasps as the light winks out. He scans the sky, frantic for another glimpse, but the longer he searches the heavier the sky becomes. Its vastness weighs on him and shrinks the grown man into that scared boy the search party found stumbling alone down Route 130 at midnight. The boy's jeans were stained with mud and the hem of his shirt smudged with blood that wasn't his. His eyes burn with stagnant tears. The memories are so close but he can't see them, like the blind-spot in his pickup's side mirror that so dangerously hides other vehicles. No one believed the little he could remember of that night and the accusations grew fast and fierce like a pack of rabid dogs.

Alison and the boy watched the flying stars. She smiled as they came closer, and then closer still. A flicker of worry crossed her mind but the boy held her close, so close,

as the lights grew. She felt heat in their pulsing brightness and waves of hot air rolled across her skin. The boy held her close and squeezed and squeezed until there was no light at all.

Brian wails in frustration when the faint orange lights don't come back. Those oily waves of anxiety solidify and he feels sick as he grabs his camera and flips through the shots he's taken. He zooms in on the images, jabbing the buttons, scanning every pixel for some shred of evidence, but frame after frame is black.

She Tilted Her Hips in the Way He Liked

Their house looked different in the rain. Jenny imagined coming home in the spring sunlight, the rays brightening the dull white paint, revitalizing the shrubs. But, in the downpour, the house sat like an angry child, hunched, sullen, and brooding. In her mind, she had not been alone. Dan walked her up the stairs, her suitcase in his hand as he guided her to their bedroom where the sex would be slow and sweet. Instead, she came home from the hospital in a taxi she couldn't afford and in a storm that drenched her clothing.

As Jenny picks up her worn suitcase, she ignores the sting on her thighs where her too tight jeans rub against the tender pink flesh of cigarette burns. Six weeks of stodgy institution food at The Pavilion in Champaign and her tendency to overeat during her depressive episodes added flab to her skinny frame.

At the front door, she stops, turns, and appraises the vacant street. The droning whisper of rain is the only sound that reminds her the grey day is not a photograph. Jenny sighs. She won't let this inconvenience change her mood, the doctors said she was better now, that the little things wouldn't get her down. She had looked forward to coming home and now that she was here, she felt she could finally breathe. Jenny can't wait to see Dan, feel his strong arms around her and listen to his 'I love you' as his beard tickles her cheek.

As Jenny slides a key into the lock, she touches a finger to the ceramic sunflower that hangs off the doorknob on a yellow ribbon. She smiles. She'd bought it at a flea market months ago because it reminded her of growth, fertility, the children she'd one day have. Jenny walked inside, set her suitcase down, then paused a moment to listen for

the frantic clatter of paws on hardwood floors but none came. Faint barks filtered through the house, a sign that Trixie, their Labrador, was out back.

When Jenny opens the coat closet, she finds the black leather bomber jacket and army surplus boots Dan never leaves home without. Her mood wavers; she wonders why he didn't fetch her from the hospital. He could be forgetful, but he'd promised the day before that he wouldn't forget. She ignores her creeping unease, tells herself there's a reason why Dan wasn't there, and heads towards the kitchen.

Jenny finds a half smoked pack of Marlboros on the kitchen table. She takes a deep breath, ignores them, and opens the back door. Trixie scabbles up the stairs and bounds into the kitchen. The yellow lab almost bowls Jenny off her feet, then runs back and forth in excitement between the food bowl and Jenny. Jenny crouches down and laughs, reaching out and rubbing Trixie's ears. Trixie settles down and Jenny pulls her close. She sits on the kitchen floor and hugs her loyal pet; she rubs her fingers as deep as she can into the short fur until Trixie grows restless. Trixie was a present from Dan. Their marriage counselor suggested a pet would help cement their commitment and serve as a stepping towards children, but Jenny worried the children would never come. She gets up and opens the backdoor for the dog that's just as excited to go outside as she is to come in. Jenny locks the door, fetches her suitcase from the front hall, and slowly makes her way towards the back of the house.

Jenny cautiously approaches the closed white door to their bedroom. The Ativan the doctor gave her this morning helped dull the sharp edges of her anxiety, it smoothed the hurt, but it didn't stop her thoughts. She told herself it was a work emergency that stopped him from coming or calling, but she couldn't stop thinking it was something

worse. The doctors suggested her low self-esteem exaggerated her speculations about her husband's infidelities, but they didn't tell her how to fix that.

Jenny had always doubted herself, always waited for Dan to find someone better. They'd met fifteen years earlier at a church social and married two years after that. Dan was outgoing, charming, a business man who believed that wining and dining customers was just as important as giving them a good deal. Jenny was quite, a part time accountant who worked from home. She'd always wondered what Dan saw in her, but he always said that since the moment he'd seen her tilt her hips in the way he liked, he'd known she was the woman for him.

As she stands in the hallway, Jenny hears faint sounds moving under the steady tock of their old grandfather clock. She presses her ear against the door and the noises sound a little louder. No, not louder, they became clearer, more defined in tone and deeper in pitch. Jenny feels the room tilt as she touches the handle. She can already see Dan, bare skinned and sweating, that vacant look in his eyes and a smirk spiking the corner of his mouth. He would be in bed, she knew, with a blond. It was always a blond. He'd have her spread eagled or on her side or worse yet on all fours as he played that disgusting video over and over, pausing only to rewind his favorite fifteen seconds. *Yeah bitch, ya like that dontcha? Yeah... Ooh. Ya like it like that, I know ya do. Ooh.*

She snaps the handle down and pushes the door open, rushes into the room only to find nothing but the idle sheets of an unmade bed. As Jenny stares at the empty room, guilt seeps into her thoughts. She keeps looking at the bed, waiting for the white sheets to move, for some sign that she was right. She decides they need new sheets; they're too cold, too clinical, too orderly. White reminds her of the institution.

Jenny leaves the room defeated, but again aware of those sounds. She follows the dull murmurs down the hall and towards Dan's study. It was where Dan did his work, typed the bills his clients paid so they could have the lifestyle they wanted. The couple lived comfortably, Dan made sure of that, and Jenny never questioned it. He was a private man and Jenny had learned what boundaries she could push. The study wasn't off limits per se, but she never had a reason to go in there.

Sweat tickles her armpits as she opens the door. The last time she'd been in here she'd tried to use his computer. His password protection kicked her out after three tries and she'd spent three hours waiting for him to get home. Three hours waiting for the anger she knew that she deserved. When he'd calmed down, he'd unlocked his computer and left alone to look for what she thought she'd find. There were no photos of other girls, no emails, no evidence that he'd been cheating. Those moments of guilt after he proved her wrong lingered for months and she let him have his way, didn't push for what she wanted.

The sounds are louder in the study, still muffled, but louder. She crosses the room slowly, walks quietly towards the basement door. Jenny didn't really want to go down there, she disliked the windowless dark but she wanted to know, wanted to confirm her suspicions so she'd stop doubting herself but wondering all the same if maybe doubt wasn't better. Those noises sound like groans and giggles, and Jenny prays to God to just let it be porn.

She wanted to back up, go to the kitchen, and call a cab to take her back to the hospital where she'd sit and phone Dan until he came to pick her up. She'd wait there and

pretend like nothing happened so that everything would be better, just like the doctors promised. But she can't not descend the steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jenny faces the room that is mostly bare except for Dan's man cave. He'd walled off half of the basement for his own use. Poker games with the guys he'd said, a gym or space for a gaming console. Somewhere he could keep his TV, somewhere he could be a man doing manly things. She'd wanted to save money for a nursery, but Dan said he needed a space of his own. Jenny walks slowly, trying to keep her emotions in check. Trying to use evidence to assess the situation, just like they'd taught her, and not letting her imagination run wild.

She passes a pile of open boxes. Boxes she'd so carefully packed and labelled. They're filled suburban junk—a snorkel, microwaveable slippers, the large wicker basket Dan brought Trixie home in. Poking out of a carton is something Dan brought home one night: something black and shiny, shaped like a mask. For a month she'd had to wear the PVC facemask, choking back the plastic smell as it forced its way into her nostrils like rude fingers. She wore it knowing that if she puked, the holes designed for air would clog with chunks of whatever she cooked for dinner and she'd suffocate. She'd also known every night of that phase that if she had puked, Dan would've kept on plowing into her until he snapped out of his sex induced hypnosis.

Jenny could never understand why he couldn't make love to her. They always had to fuck. It didn't used to be that way. As newlyweds, they'd spent weeks gently exploring each other's bodies. He was tender, thoughtful. At first, he'd just needed a little hair pulling, some light spanking, but then came the roleplaying, the outfits, the toys. And the

porn. Jenny didn't want those things, and Dan called her 'vanilla'. She guessed that was his way of calling her boring.

Her shrink once told her that every couple has their secrets. And this was theirs. As revolting as it was, it was something they shared. His dark secret made her feel dirty and defiled, somehow violated even though it was consensual. His secret that she bore because she loved him and wanted to please him and if they sinned, Dan always said, they should sin together. But that was just a small part of their lives together. If Jenny breathed deep, she could still catch a whiff of firecrackers on the Fourth of July decorations and the salt they forgot to clean off their skis. Those other things didn't matter in the long run, only the happy memories did. Jenny took one last look at the mask and shuddered. She reminded herself that they sinned together.

But Jenny had sinned without Dan. In the institution, she was lonely, vulnerable. The orderly was younger than she was, with dark hair and blue eyes. He'd come to her in the night, so gentle, so tender. He let her lie on her back the way it was meant to be done, and she'd smiled as she watched the cross around his neck sway back and forth, back and forth until he came inside her.

As she neared the door to Dan's lair, the sounds stopped. She froze, waiting for him to come rushing out, apologizing, angry, ashamed. Perhaps she'd catch a glimpse of blond hair and tanned skin as the whore came rushing out after him. Or maybe they'd keep quiet and hope she'd leave if the noises stopped. A mechanical sound, a whine, and then that southern drawl of the voice from under the cowboy hat. *Yeah bitch, ya like that dontcha? Yeah... Ooh. Ya like it like that, I know ya do. Ooh.*

She breathes deep and waits.

Silence, rewind. *Yeah bitch, ya like that dontcha?* Jenny hears over and over again. Her heart racing in Pavlovian anticipation. *Yeah... Ooh.* His pleasure was hers. *Ya like it like that.* His sin was hers. *I know ya do.*

As the words repeat, the monotonous, seductive images of that film merge with the memories he'd made for her. She knew how bruises and carpet burn looked like stains on her body. How it felt to wear raw patches of skin worn away by straps and buckles like badges of shame. How tears dried salty on her cheeks and cum crusted on her ass. Years of being forced to agree that while no meant no she really meant yes because if it was consensual it didn't matter how you did it.

Jenny called to mind the painful memories she'd repressed so she could act in the present and she opened the door to Dan's secret place. The light bulb in the ceiling cast everything in a red glow. The 90-inch TV rested on a knee-high table that was just the right height for Dan when he kneeled.

Jenny was wrong, it wasn't a blond.

The younger woman's dark skin glistened under the red light. Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades as Dan held her head against his crotch. His other hand held the remote but every few seconds he had to reach up and tilt his cowboy hat to make sure it didn't fall off. Neither Dan nor the girl saw Jenny peeking through the doorway. Dan's eyes flittered between the television and the handcuffs that pinned the woman's arms behind her back.

Yeah bitch, ya like that dontcha? He drops the remote and the video keeps on playing. Jenny doesn't need to look at the screen to know what comes next. The camera is positioned behind a cowboy clad only in boots, a hat, and a belt. He kneels behind a

girl chained to the back of a horse stable. The handheld camera shakes ever so slightly, making it look real enough for Jenny to wonder if the blood and tears really are fake.

Jenny hesitates in the doorway, overrun by guilt like she felt as a six-year-old when she walked in on her parents having sex on the dryer. She felt like she'd done something wrong but knew that she hadn't. She turns and creeps up the stairs, tiptoes through Dan's study like a thief in her own home. She's witnessed sin, but it was meant to be *their* sin.

She walks towards their bedroom, her mind set on the straight cold edge of the razor that she knows Dan keeps in the cupboard above her sink. You could almost call it an antique with its bone handle and handcrafted blade. Dan liked to tell people it was ivory. Her wrists tingle in anticipation where old wounds have barely healed. As she steps through the doorway, she avoids looking at the cool, unmade bed. Instead, she sees her reflection in the dresser mirror, and realizes she looks too real, too plain, too broken. She walks towards the mirror, squares her shoulders, straightens her neck, and tucks her hair behind her ears. Jenny turns to the side and pushes out her stomach, she runs her hand across her belly and thinks about the children she'd never have with Dan. Then Jenny puts her hands on her hips and tries to tilt them in the way he likes while she wonders what he sees in her

It's when Jenny enters the bathroom that she sees the pale pink post-it stuck to the corner of the medicine cabinet mirror. 'Jenny – 30 Apr 10:00' it says. A note Dan wrote for himself so he wouldn't forget to fetch her. The only problem was that he'd used military time and first of the swooping zeros had a tail that made 10:00 look like 16:00. Jenny pauses, feels her body torn between the razor, the door, and the woman downstairs.

Dan loved her, he cared for her, and she loved and cared for him. She could leave, walk away from the life she'd built with him, and try start over, but really it was just a case of different desires. She wanted children and he wanted things in bed that she couldn't keep giving, but they could reach a compromise.

Jenny sighs, collects her bag, and begins the long, wet walk back to the hospital.

* * *

Their house looked different in the rain. The spring rain tinged the white paint gray and darkened the budding shrubs, but Dan looked handsome as he walked up the stairs with her suitcase in one hand and a bunch of yellow roses in the other. Jenny knew that after she cooked dinner he'd take her hand and guide her upstairs to their bedroom. As Dan opened the door, Trixie came bounding down the porch steps. Jenny stooped and cuddled their dog before they went inside. In the kitchen, Jenny watches Dan watching her and she tilts his hips in the way he likes. She can see he thinks he's getting some tonight, and she'll give it. She'll indulge his sin for a week or two so he won't ask questions when she tells him the news. And then she'll have her children in an orderly fashion.