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Strings

By

Willie J. Morris

Eastern Illinois University 2010

Submitted for the fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

Dr. Letitia Moffitt, director

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Abstract

“Strings” is the story of a teenager living on the streets of Chicago and a priest who have an automatic, uncontrollable empathic connection to everyone around them except each other. This connection manifests in strings that force the thought, memories, emotions and experiences of others into their lives. This story discusses their meeting and the lives they live as bearers of the strings. “Strings” uses elements of fantasy, as well as the realistic setting of urban Chicago. In “Strings” self, experience, memory and trauma come together to relate the story of reshaping lives.

Preface

The influences shaping the idea of “Strings” are many and varied. They have their roots in young adult and trauma-based literature that attempts to examine the powerful forces that create traumas in the lives of individuals and communities. The story of trauma is one that encompasses all races, colors, ethnicities, religions, and orientations. It is a human experience that embeds itself in the memory of individuals and communities.

Zakes Mda, Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, Uwem Akpan, Lois Lowry, Angela Johnson, and Pumala Madikizela-Gobodo are all authors who are in tune with Lawrence Langer's idea of “Durational Time,” the force within memory that resists and undermines the efforts of chronological time to erase or provide closure to the trauma of past memories.

Langer’s primary research focus has been in discussing the physiological, physical, and emotional effect of the Holocaust on communities involved in the tragedy. To be more specific, Langer focuses on individuals within those communities and their testimonies. In his book *Admitting Holocaust*, he notes that:

One response to this scenario might be to accept the Holocaust as a warrant for futility, a witness to the death of hope. But another, the one I choose to follow, is to regard the calamity as a summons to reconsider usual views of the self, its relation to time and memory, its portrayal in literature born of the Holocaust, its use and abuse by culture, and its role in reshaping our sense of history’s legacies from the past and bequests to later generations. (Langer 3)

Langer's conceptualization of the different ways to view the Holocaust struck a note with me. In fact, it struck a note that to my ear sounded as if it shared a tone with my own experiences. These are the facts that need no citation. I am an African American from a predominantly African American urban community. My community's name is Chicago; to be more specific, my neighborhood's name is Roseland. It is a fact that at this time of the year, summer is coming and in many communities, primarily urban communities, this means that people will die violently. It is also a fact that the sun rises there and the birds sing. It is a fact the people of these communities live, struggle, succeed, fight, die, love, cry, pray, forgive, and, most importantly, hope. There is knowledge there. There is power and, most assuredly, potential in these communities.

I asked myself at the beginning of the processes of writing "Strings" what, if any, significance Langer's quote above loaned to my own scenario, and I found it by simply re-writing Langer's quotation as follows:

One response to this scenario might be to accept urban life as a warrant for futility, a witness to the death of hope. But another, the one I choose to follow, is to regard the calamity as a summons to reconsider usual views of the self, its relation to time and memory, its portrayal in literature born of the city, its use and abuse by culture, and its role in reshaping our sense of history's legacies from the past and bequests to later generations.

In changing two words, I found a philosophy and understanding that mirrored my own thoughts on life in the city. I puzzled over why changing the subject of this quotation gave me a statement that I found true in my own sense and experience. Why could Langer's quote be reshaped in this way and still hold meaning for me? For me, it is

because it addresses trauma to the environment of individual experience and memory that is, in a philosophical sense, that space we call life. Literature that discusses the people must deal with their lives, and trauma is an ever-present force in life that must be reflected in literature as a part of the diversity of experience present in life.

Like works by Walter Dean Myers, Uwem Akpan, Zakes Mda, and Lois Lowry, my novella “Strings” views the world through the eyes of a young adult character. In the external, physical world, De Kevin is a homeless, teenaged kid living on the streets of Chicago. In the less tangible, internal world, he is the bearer and victim of an uncontrollable, automatic, empathic connection to those around him that manifests itself as strings.

I wanted to explore experiences at the intersection of trauma, young adults, and youth fiction. Trauma, in the case of “Strings,” can be defined as an emotional wound that refuses to heal. De Kevin's unhealed wound comes from the penetrating way that the strings bring other people's thoughts, memories, emotions, and experiences into De Kevin's life. The following excerpt outlines this penetration.

When I was young, I saw the strings hanging softly between us. My mother's string was red, my father's was orange. They spiraled down right from their hearts into my chest. I would feel my parents flowing in the cords when they held me close. I would feel their hearts and minds. Mama use to say I didn't want to let her go. Her mind was dark sometimes, like a room with the lights turned off. You know there is a lot in there, but you just can't seem to put your finger on just what it is, so you stumble through. I found myself sometimes, most times, in her short, warm daydreams of home in the south, her sandals turning over white stones on a

red dirt road. My father use to say I couldn't let him go soon enough. I would cry when I saw pieces of him in my mind. He never knew why, because he and my mama never could believe in the strings between us. I remember his mind was filled with gun fire and screams swirling in thick gray smoke around green trees. He would be dirty, gasping, and running hard, in the darkness of a jungle. I could smell the smoke and the blood and then his world went white and he was holding me with his good arm and there was just still and love around us. (Strings 1)

In this excerpt De Kevin remembers back to a time before his life on the streets.

This section outlines the earliest penetration of other's lives and experience into his memory and experience. The first experience with his parents has both a comforting and foreboding element that shows his connection is both consoling and, at times, horrifying. After the loss of his mother and father, the comfort factor is re-established with a new family group in the form of Shawnee and Theo. However, even within this new family group, De Kevin's connection is only truly linked to Theo. The strings have the paradoxical side effect of making him emotionally closed to others. Because of them, he does not have to go through the process of learning about others. This coerced empathy results in his trust only being given to the few whom he considers part of his family group. However, this enclosed sense of community, or "family," changes once he is presented with a character that he is not able to feel though his strings, Angelo the priest.

Angelo is a character who, like De Kevin, possesses the strings. In contrast, Angelo is outwardly emotionally open, but his openness conceals an inward fear of his strings. Angelo has built a world around himself that tries to fight against the responsibility that he knows is passed down though those who have the strings.

I place De Kevin and Angelo as the outcasts of the outcast. Even while they are members of a family group, their experience as members facing the intrusive force of the strings and the trauma they sometimes bring makes them unique. This uniqueness isolates them and exposes them to views of themselves and the urban environment of Chicago that cause them to struggle for understanding of an expanding list of questions. Why do they have strings? Why does a city look away from people like them? What made people start to look away? What must they do in order to be happy in the way that they want to be? What does it mean to be who they are? The intrusive powers of the strings cause De Kevin to face realities that some might consider outside of the realm of the young adult as readers and people. However, I believe limiting the discussion of experiences limits in some sense the honesty of the experiences. Life is not a utopia nor a nihilistic cauldron, but rather it is a space that understands honest experience lives in the spaces between these two extremes. It acknowledges that human beings are not fixtures in their current positions on this spectrum, but living beings capable of movement to and from any position along it. Literature like life must recognize, reflect, and disseminate this message. This openness to growth is the diversity of life and experience that De Kevin is forced to see—despite his age.

In “Keepin’ it Real,” R.D Lane suggests that children of different ethnicity, specifically African American children, may experience a “sense of realism that transcends their age” because of their “proximity to the harsh social conditions and injustices that exist in America, being systematically and painfully made aware of the reality of racism at younger ages” (Lane 128). Lane does acknowledge that this “realism” may not be true for every African American youth; he however also acknowledges that,

because of the present social climate and history of African Americans, their positioning to the issue can and does bring them into contact with these harsh realities (Lane 128).

If it is true for black children, it can also be true for every child. Although, for other children of all places the harsh “realism” that Lane suggests may be generated by gender, sexuality, religion, class, or ethnicity. The borderland from youth to adulthood is one that is often extended or shortened depending on the personal experience of individuals passing through it. This necessity for a premature end to adolescence and an all-too-quick arrival at maturity is true for Mda’s Popi Pule, Niki Pule, Viliki Pule, and Tjaart Conje in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. They each experience a youth that is rapidly moved into “adulthood” by the forces of rape in the case of Niki, of revolution in the case of Popi and Viliki, and of white supremacy in the case of Tjaart Conje.

Youth is also cut short for Lois Lowry's Jonas in her novel *The Giver*. Jonas becomes the bearer of utopian society’s past evils and present corruptions. He is moved very quickly into a role that involves him bearing the memories of his society, many of which some would consider far beyond the label of “young adult.” The same abbreviated period of youth is also present in my characters De Kevin and Angelo. These characters acknowledge that the line that we might call a border is a shaky social construction that is what all borders are, imaginary and self imposed. De Kevin and Angelo have experienced lives filled with the thoughts, memories, dreams, emotions, and experience of other people, leaving very little space in which they can define maturity for themselves. I chose to have them inundated like this to represent the penetrating influence that surrounds every child as they progresses into that amorphous land we call “adulthood.” Penetration is generally conceptualized as a type of entering into. Influence is a penetration of ideas

into a mind. As members of a society we are penetrated by the ideals, beliefs, morals, and sometimes obsessions of our families, friends, and societies. Their thoughts inundate us and it remains our choice to either assimilate the thoughts created by their experience and recalled from their memory to enact in our lives, or to choose to create our own experience divergent from the penetrating thought. This is only possible if we realize and are active in the application of choice. De Kevin and Angelo are both penetrated, but their choice to change themselves at first and then the city later on opens the way for the force of possibility.

In “Strings,” I try to place race, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality in the same area as the environment of Chicago. They are backdrops that should not be seen as the primary images, but as factors whose presence would be impossible and foolish to attempt to ignore. Race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation are backdrops to the person we build in front of them. It is important to see and to understand such combinations of descriptors within a person and how they interact with others and their lists of descriptors. However, these are portions of a person and not the entire being, just as De Kevin's strings are portions of himself. These portions interact constantly.

The first-person narrative structure was used to place a sense of immediacy and urgency in “Strings.” Rudine Sims Bishop in her book *Free within Ourselves* notes that Hamilton’s novel *Zeely* was published at a time when pride in African American heritage and ‘Black is beautiful’ [affirmations of identity] were important ideas embraced by many African Americans” (Bishop 202). Authors are often informed by and writing in response to the time in which they write. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, strengthening the African American social identity was needed and authors responded in overt ways like

the “tell-it-like-it-is” (Bishop 197) new realism authors who focused, according to Sims-Bishop, on “ problems popularly associated with Black people in inner cities, such as poverty, drugs, and violent gangs” (197). While tell-it-like-it-is authors chose to fight the external fight for honest literature portraying African American issues, Hamilton chose to address the more subtle inner conflict of an individual and an experience in *Zeely*.

Hamilton’s subtle emphasis on returning self and name to her protagonist Elizabeth/Geeder, by linking her to a past that acknowledges the black, individual, female through Zeely’s physical non-European beauty and mental ability to play with story, portray a character in Zeely who was built for the immediacy of her time: specifically, to support a positive black self image.

Hamilton’s subtle but powerful stance in the purposeful construction of Zeely as a character begs the questions of an emerging African American author like me concerning the purpose of my writing. In the tradition of Bill Martin Jr., I am left asking myself: “Author, Author, what do you see and what you need to let the communities that you are a part of see?” In the immediacy of me and in the urgency of my experience, “Strings” is a response to these questions. Just as *Zeely* was Hamilton’s response to a need for literature that looked at the internal, “Strings” is my look at the internal relationships among urban community, self, and experience.

The immediacy is to remind the reader of the present nature of the issues presented in urban environments like Chicago. Guns, crime, violence, and drugs are a residual part of American society’s choices to neglect urban communities, but they are not the only parts of urban life, just as they are not the only parts of rural life and in neither position are they necessarily permanent. Resting right next to these forces are the

people who move through and interact with the city and the country. People are the life blood of a community. Their indifference or compassion directs it and their lives, loves, hopes, dreams, struggles, failures and greatness should be incorporated into all literature that discusses them. In the world of urban literature, the author Walter Dean Myers is well noted for painting varied descriptions of life in New York City. His work reminds us that “the black urban landscape is not the mark of damnation that many banal representations tend to depict” (Lane), but rather a “ multi-faceted land of dreams and nightmares, happiness, and hardships” (Lane 130) Myers reminds us that an honest view of life in urban communities, or any community for that fact, is one that sees the multitude of experiences rather than narrow, stereotypical images that only portray continual self destruction or intellectual ascension past social issues and humanity.

I wanted the last forces presented in the novella to be the forces of hope, courage, and possibility. Hope and courage are the two most essential forces because, without them, possibility is hidden behind doubt and fear. During their final moments together, De Kevin and Angelo are aware of the results of their actions upon themselves, each other, and the community around them. Doubt and fear are present, but the choice to face these heavy obstacles, the choice to be brave, offers them a chance to reach freedom not only for themselves, but also for the city as a whole. They step out into the traffic to impose a new way of seeing through the empathic connections offered in the strings. De Kevin and Angelo make a way for everyone around them to tap back into what it means to be a member of the human family. Once the empathic connection moves from solely being a thing only De Kevin and Angelo experience to something the whole city has access to, the intrusive force of the strings becomes something different. It becomes a

“mirror” for the city and the people. The intrusion becomes introspection, and the only option left for them is to stop their actions. This empathetic confrontation with a previously denied common humanity is why the city stops once the connection is established. The city is now “forced to meet with people it would rather not meet” (Akpan 3).

Old forms of thought and action are no longer possible, and the silence of the streets and news herald a new time in which a new way of being is forming for De Kevin and the city. De Kevin is now a part of society that is forming an understanding of what Angelo and he have experienced. He is no longer the outsider but a member of his own community. The city and he are now free to write their history and to pursue a way of thinking that defines them in a new way.

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When I was young I saw the strings hanging softly between us. My mother's string was red, my father's was orange. They spiraled down right from their hearts into my chest. I would feel my parents flowing in the cords when they held me close. I would feel their hearts and minds. Mama use to say I didn't want to let her go. Her mind was dark sometimes, like a room with the lights turned off. You know there is a lot in there, but you just can't seem to put your finger on just what it is so you stumble through. I found myself sometimes, most times, in her short, warm daydreams of home in the south with her sandals turning over white stones on a red dirt road.

My father use to say I couldn't let him go soon enough. I would cry when I saw pieces of him in my mind. He never knew why. He and my mama never could believe in the strings between us. I remember his mind was filled with gun fire and screams swirling in thick gray smoke around green trees. He would be dirty, gasping, and running hard in the darkness of a jungle. I could smell the smoke and the blood and then his world went white and he was holding me with his good arm and there was just still and love around us. When I could talk I tried to tell them what I saw, but they just smiled and asked "where did you get that imagination?" I told them this was for real and they smiled that kind of simple, accepting, parent smile, so full of love and empty of understanding.

I have taken people's ashes to two separate seas in my life. They all blow in one gray puddle in the wind for me. My dad is ash when I turn ten. He is burning in the fire that takes our home. The thin little strings loop around my wrist and pull me into his crisping skin. I felt him feel himself fall apart into little flakes and embers. The fire strips his skin away and fills his lungs with the smell. He is wondering about me and mom. He remembers our home, now a red, orange, and yellow smoky blanket around him; the way

it was, happy with us in it. He is worried, afraid, and alone. I am there inside of him as he dies around me. Crying tears he cannot hear. The strings came again when my mother slipped away in the hospital later that year. She is holding my hand in hers; her fingers are like sticks in mine. The doctors couldn't help, the chemo couldn't help, and I couldn't help. I hate to see her thin and bald sinking further away from me. We talk about me mostly. Her family is dead and my dad's family is no good. She wants to know how the foster home is. She asks if they feed me enough, take care of me, or hurt me. I tell her about daddy and how I felt him burn. She squeezes my hand and looks a little worried. I never saw her cry. No tears came even when I sat next to her as she slept and the many slinking strings pulled us together so briefly; I barely felt her slip away. She is a small constant pain that never leaves me. I feel her dig harder and harder into me the older I get. There are no relatives stable enough to take me in after mom passes. The state puts me in foster care, I don't stay. I move. I walk. I run. I ride where ever I can. I put three thousand miles in between there and here and I'm glad for it. My mother and father are three years behind me. I am sixteen years old now. Yesterday is today and both can happen now inside of me. I have had these strings for as long as I can remember.

Today, my world is in pieces and I am alone except for Theo. I pull the edges of my jacket close around me. The sun is pushing through my covers and my eyelids. A truck hits a pot hole and shakes so hard my ears sting. The breeze hits me in my face, and the smell of the grilled onions at the Maxwell's on the corner makes my stomach hurt. I wish Lynn was here. I feel the cool, sticky, sick on the side of my face. I must have thrown up again. If I keep this up I'm going keep losing weight, pass out, and wake up in hospital again, maybe. Jesus, it's a little chilly this morning. It always seems like it's a

little chilly in Chicago. I swear even in the summer it just seems a little cold. Even when the sun is coming up like it is now at the start of fall it just feels cold here. The car horns blast over and over in my ears. I like to call that the Stony Island alarm clock. I hear it going off, but I don't want to open my eyes today. I don't want to see. I just don't not anymore, not like this. God, I don't want to see. I don't want to know them or their families or their friends or their dreams. I don't want them. Damn it. I don't want them. I don't want to be this close. I don't want to wake up inside their heads, not anymore. They don't care. They don't. Maybe if I just stay here. Maybe if I just lay here.

“De Kevin! De Kevin! Get up.” Something falls on my chest.

“Damn it Theodore.”

“Theodore if you don't get off me!”

“Stop whining, get up!”

“Get off me Theo. I don't want to get up.”

“Come on, fold the mattress and get up. Kev, did you throw up again in your sleep? We got to take you to the clinic again.”

“I don't need the clinic, I'm fine.”

“You've been throwing up for a lot.”

“I'm fine!”

“I'm just saying man. Nestor started the same way.”

Nestor's face pops into my head. His eyes are squinting. He is laughing. I can't remember the joke but he is laughing. I see myself standing next to him with a lying smile. The string that runs between me and Theo pushes the memory into me.

“Stop thinking about what's gone Theodore.” I push the blankets away from my

face and keep my eyes closed. The sun lights up the insides of my eyelids turning them orange. I squint; the shiny wet pavement looks back at me.

“When did the rain stop?”

“Two hours before sun rise.”

“Why you up so early Theo?”

“Couldn't sleep. You're still tossing in your sleep a lot. ”

“I always toss.”

“Yeah, but it just looks like it hurts you.”

“Na man, it's just bad dreams.”

I crawl off of the mattress and made it up into a tight, little, flower covered, brown, and black roll. I pushed it in between the pillars of the skyway. The traffic was building up thicker and thicker around the little island of concrete where we had slept underneath the sky-way. Two streets ran on both sides of us, and the sky way ran above us. They are noisy streams that block out all the other strings tied to me. They killed for a moment most of the voices in my heads. Here on the concrete island it was just me, Theo, and sometimes Shawnee remembering inside of my head. I could find my thoughts here. I could see me underneath everybody else. Theo moves down to the far edge of the concrete island and twists his head from left to right.

“Do you see Shawnee?” He yells over the cars to me .

“Why the heck are you thinking about Shawnee?”

“Why not? Nobody else does.”

I liked that about Theodore he always cared about the stuff that nobody else cared about. He could have been bleeding and he would have been worried about getting

his blood on you. That's the kind of person he was and that was why I could trust him. So many people out here could hate you just for being; not Theo. He took me as I was, or at least he took what I let him take. That was a lot was more than anyone else ever got to see.

"I saw her heading back towards Cottage Grove before I laid down. She was tweaking kind of hard" I say. What I don't say is that I seen her before a whole lot better than he ever could if she was standing right in front of him. I've seen what Theo can never see. I like the fact that Theo cares about her, but her insides can't give back what he gives out.

Shawnee hasn't spoken since she took to the pipe and I don't blame her. I see inside her every now and then. In her mind her memory plays back to me over and over. She is in a corner and a fist is coming down hard on her cheek a little blood runs down the side of her eye and the room goes blurry. She is crying, screaming "I hate you daddy." Her voice cracks behind the tears. Her mother is on a couch curled up inside little clouds of smoke, her eyes rolling in the back of her head. Her father's feet dig into the floor and move the world between him and Shawnee's mother. He takes the little glass pipe from her hand and travels like a giant back to Shawnee. His body presses down on her while he pressing the hot tip of the pipe into her mouth. "Suck it in" he says. "Suck" I feel the glass blister her lip and the smoke fill her lungs. The little stones inside the pipe smolder gray, and her eyes roll and flutter as she leans back into her bloody little corner.

Sometimes after seeing her thoughts I want to tell Theo that he cares too much, or that he has to let her go, but how do you tell someone their love is pointless? How do you

tell them what they want will never come. I know he probably wouldn't listen or wouldn't want to hear me. I guess he needs to feel, but I don't. I don't need to. I already know Shawnee and every person tied to the end of my strings better than Theodore could ever hope to. I walked up behind him and pushed his head with tips of fingers. He kept scanning both sides of the street for her.

"I don't even know why you keep caring about that girl man she's a freaking crack head. I keep telling you, you should stop thinking about what's gone."

He doesn't listen and Shawnee rolls into my head again through the string that runs between us. I want him to stop thinking about her and filling up my head up. The string plays his thoughts out in front of me. He is holding her, crying. Her eyes are empty circles watching clouds of smoke dancing inside of a little glass tube. He is crying and Shawnee is breathing in the cloud and disappearing from her own eyes. Glassy, still eyes look back at him, eyes that don't remind him of her.

"There she is," Theo murmurs. His mind drops the thought and I fall back out of him. He is across the street following Shawnee in the crooked line she travels. Every now and then she turns back to him and shouts something that I can't hear over the noise of the cars. They stop at the edge of the sidewalk just under the bridge. A train rumbles by slowly just above their heads. Shawnee steps out onto the street with a cardboard sign in her hand. It read PLEASE/ NEED MONEY FOR FOOD/ THANK YOU/ GOD BLESS YOU/ PLEASE. She walks dragging her left leg up and down between the thick lines of cars stopped at the red light. I don't need the strings to tell me Theo is thinking about her and I think they know that for some reason I don't understand. The red lights on Stony Island always seem too long to me. You could think of a way to change the world in the

time it takes a green signal to flash. We use this time to ask for money. “We” meant Shawnee. People feel sorry for women faster than they feel sorry for men. Her face is still swollen. The infection in her lip sits fat next to her gums. She passes between the stopped cars going window to window. They like to look straight ahead like no eye contact means there's no one to see. I don't know why Theo still cares about her, but at least he sees her, and so do I.

We spent the day hanging out on Stony Island. Now and then Theo would look over to see where Shawnee was. He replays his memories of her inside his head, and they roll down his string into me. The street rumbles next to them near Chinatown's red and gold. He is holding her as rain rolls hard from the tile roofs. The rumbling C.T.A bus avoids the narrow roads of the city inside the city. Shawnee and Theo have their arms around each other. The place shifts and he is speaking something softly in her ear and the sky is clear. They are up on Michigan Avenue and the crowds are walking fast around them. They are a rock in a river of people and the whole city bends away from them. A few stare right at Shawnee for a moment and snap their heads back to some point far off down the street. Shawnee cries, Theo touches the side of her face where the swelling rises hard between his fingers, and kisses it. She tries to talk to him over the sound of the city, but her voice is pressed flat under a million foot steps. Theo can only see her swollen lips move drowned out words into the air. God, it seems so long ago that I heard her talk. Theo's string goes quiet and I slide back out of him to the sound of my name.

“Kev” Theo poked me hard in the arm over and over.

“You got a match?”

I reached in my pocket and handed him a small box of matches. Theo lies on his

back looking up at the sky way and striking a match between his fingers. He watches it burn down to his finger tips and tosses it away.

“Don’t go wasting those smoke a cig or something.” I say to him.

He pulls a thin cigarette from the inside of his jacket, strikes another match, and puts it to end of his cigarette. My mouth went wet for one. I pull the last loosy I bought at the gas station a few days ago out from my pocket and light it on the edge of his cigarettes embers.

“I’m not wasting ‘em. I just want see something.” His words are muffled from holding the cigarette in place between his dry lips that curled inside his mouth so that they barely showed.”

“It’s a match. What the heck are you looking for?” I say to him as I watch him play with the flame.

“Life” he tells me and I can’t help but find it a little funny.

“Look around you, this is it, enjoy it, and stop wasting my matches.”

“I’m not wasting ‘em.” He flicks the burnt stub of the match onto the ground.

“Are you going tonight, Theo?” He strikes another match. The black smoke spins softly from the yellow flame. It hangs in the breeze made by the cars around us and slips up thought to the only patch of blue between the concrete gray pillars.

“Angelo will be there around seven. I think you should go, Kev. You need to. He’s pretty good at helping people with anything.”

I pretend to ignore him. I need a moment to think about the room and the faces I would have to see and all the memories and thoughts that would come with them.

“Kev!”

“What?”

“I asked if you were going to go? There was blood in your vomit this morning.”

“I’m fine, Theo.”

“To tell you the truth that worries me Kev. I look at you sometimes at night and the way you look, in your sleep, it’s like, I don’t know what it’s like, but it makes me think it’s your mind Kev.”

“You saying I’m crazy?”

“I’m saying whatever it is-”

“Theo, I’m not crazy. I talk to you every day. I can put together a sentence. I can take care of myself. I’m freaking sane! ”

“I’m not saying you’re crazy. I don’t know what I’m saying. Kev, you and Shawnee are the closest thing I got to family. I need you to be ok. We need to get you some help.”

“You’re saying I’m the crazy one and I’m traveling with a cracked out mute and the only person crazy enough to be with her.”

“Keep her out of this. We’re talking about you. I need you! We need you to be ok. You need to talk to someone, anyone.”

“I talk to you!”

“You talk at me? I don’t even know where you’re from and we’ve known each other for so long now! They can help you at the shelter Angelo, somebody, can help you!”

“What does it matter if anyone there helps me?”

“It matters to me!” Theo is like my family, like my brother, and I love him for

that, but he does not know my strings. I know he will run if I tell him. I know he'll leave. So just to keep him, I'll lie to help him stay.

"Fine, I'll go."

"Thank God, Kev! By the way you're out of matches."

We check the clock at the White Fortress Burger almost every two hours. At five o'clock the manager walks out from behind the counter and tells us not to come back in again unless we buy something. Theo says we might as well go then. I get Theo to leave Shawnee resting against a stop light pole with a little convincing. He may have liked her, maybe even loved her, but I knew her insides and there was nothing left in there to give back what Theo was giving. I felt a little sorrow, my own sorrow, for Theo.

"She's not going to move for a while, I don't think." He said knowing that she never did. He knows this is her pattern. We all had patterns. Patterns are the things that help you get through. Theo's pattern was to watch Shawnee, to think, worry, and remember. Mine was to wake up and deal with every little string that drags me off into some else's head. That's why I liked sleeping on the concrete island under the sky way. I could be as alone as I wanted to be there, as alone as you can be in a Chicago. It was noisy, but only until midnight. After that the families are home and the streets go still. The island had been the only place I ever found where the strings go silent. I can sleep here without a hundred different lives running into my dreams. This thin little sliver of concrete is the only place I ever found peace. We started walking toward the St. Marquise Church with each string pulling a little harder on me the farther I got away from my little island.

Thursdays before seven are always for the youth at St. Marquise. We watch them

play through the honeycomb mesh of the wire fence. They speed from the small jungle gym to their parents. They passed us one by one in car windows, each as different as the face that occupied it, and each with one or two other faces that looked like some part of theirs.

St. Marquise's wasn't like the parks. You weren't exposed; there was a fence, food, a roof, and folks who would look out for you. I had been in Chicago only a few weeks before I meet Theo and he took me here. We meet Nestor, George, Lynn and Shawnee here. That year, we watched out for each other. We had called ourselves a family. We were a family that fell apart.

Sometimes, if I'm honest with myself, I don't like to count Shawnee. You have to be here to count. She had stopped being here a long time ago. I mean to really be here, to be alive; you have to deal with stuff. She spends most of her time too high to be here, too high to deal. So she can't count, at least not to me, not outside of the strings. I can't tell Theo this. I keep my thoughts inside me. Once you put a thought out there everyone can rip it apart, break it down, destroy it, but thoughts can't be killed if you keep them.

When the playground empties out me and Theo climb the fence and take turns pushing each other till we get sick on the tier swing. The bell on the church rings seven low, familiar, crashes that roll across us. We look at each other, climb off the swing, and start walking towards the shelter. I am so far away and so close to the faces that wait for me in its basement. They are dark and light faces with voices that laugh and cry. They are faces with minds, minds with memories, memories with hearts, and I know every part of them.

The doors of shelter are open. Room twelve's white metal door blocks me and

Theo from the circle of kids on the other side. The white walls bounce back little halos of light that shine on the tile floor of the room. In the center of the room his face sticks out from them all. Angelo is a small man with straight short black hair and brown skin. He gets up from his seat and unlocks the door.

“You two are a little late.” He says with a smile on his face that dulls the seriousness of his voice. I only see Angelo every now and then. He is in charge of managing the activities of the shelter, but we've never been this close. Usually, if I come to the talks I'm shuffling in with everyone else and finding a seat that seems far enough away.

“I thought you weren't going to check in tonight,” Angelo says extending his hand. We let it hang lonely there between us for a moment until Theo grabs it and weakly shakes it. I can tell he is looking right through Angelo to the empty seats in the circle. Theo made Angelo into a ghost and blocked him out. I look at the hand and every part of me knows that the strings would loop around him and give me one more mind around my neck. I don't want to take it. I don't want another mind in my mind. I don't want another string locking onto another person and pulling me into to them. I have so many, so many pulling at me all the time, so many crying for me to come into someone else's pain. I don't want his memories or any of the others.

He reached for my hand and gripped it in his. I looked for the string that would wrap around him and tie us together. I waited on his memories to come into me, but the hand was silent. I looked at him amazed.

“Would you like to sit down?” he pointed across the room to two empty chairs. Theo was half way across the room before Angelo had the chance to finish his sentence.

Angelo frowned a little when Theo blew past him. I stood for a moment looking at this man. I touched him again, but no string jumped out from me. Angelo looked at me strange.

“Are you ok, De Kevin?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.” My mind raced. The strings have tied me to everyone who came near me, but Angelo broke every rule I knew.

“De Kevin, would you like to sit down.” His voice breaks my stare and I walk over to a seat next to Theo. The room, the faces, and the circle are all familiar. I know too much about this place, about these people, about this circle. I am with them so many, too many, nights and days. The strings that hang between them and me jump to life from time to time. Those times some part of them runs into me with flashes of life, slivers of worries, and pieces of ideas. It's not as clear as when I'm sleeping, but they jump into me still. My head is throbbing. I feel Theo thinking of me. His voice breaks his thoughts and freed me to listen to him.

“You don't look good, Kev.”

“I'm alright. You know these talks always make my head hurt.”

“Why were you feeling up the priest?” he whispered under his breath

“Shut up, I wasn't doing that.”

“Then what was that?”

“What was what? Never mind that.”

Angelo started to close the door and a young light skin boy wearing a hoodie jumps though it just before it closes. I feel Theo's string turn into a screw and twist its deep, rough, edges into my head. Theo's mouth is tight and his eyes are locked onto the

boy.

“Hey, is this where we come for the talks?” the boy’s voice cuts into Theo’s memory and it runs down his string and cuts into me.

“I didn't think we had anyone else signed up for the class here. What's your name?” Angelo asks.

“Robby.”

Theo is breathing heavy. His string is digging deeper into me. No memory flows out of it, just a hot pierce of pain. I cover my face and the tears roll into the wrinkles of my palms. They slide down my arms and wet the inside lining of the elbows of my jacket. I pull my hood over my head and try to block out the pain.

“I see it now, Robert Hugh?” Angelo says.

“ Just Robby, just call me Robby.”

“Alright, Robby it is, go have a seat.” Angelo points him to the seat near me.

I lean forward in my chair and bite my lip. The only empty seat is on my left side. Theo's string is screaming to me like I never have felt any string scream before. Robby sits down next to me. He is a little taller than I am and has a small curly beard growing under his chin. I wiped the tears from my face, took a deep breath, and tried to focus away from the string ripping at me.

Angelo's voice was calm and for some reason it helped. I focused on him and tried to think about why the strings had not wrapped around him. A thin rough hand tapped me on my left arm and a dark purple string slipped out from me into the fingers of the hand. I felt Theo's string burn white hot. The purple string was like ice and around it happiness like I had never felt coming out of anyone before. I feel just a little bit of

Robby and that little bit, his happiness, I hate. His happiness is like a twisted knife when I feel it inside of me. His happiness is empty and wrong.

“What’s up man? I’m Robby. What your name?” Robby thin hand rested in mine. I feel something cold and round press down hard on my palm.

“De Kevin,” I said hiding the pain inside of me and Theo.

“What's that on your hand?”

“Oh, I found it a long time ago. Sorry, it's a little big on me. It slides so much I just decided to let it stay like that.” He opened his hand and showed me a silver ring with a smooth sky blue stone.

“It's kind of cool isn't it? I think it could be worth something, but I don't want to sell it you know. It's like emergency money for me; you know what I mean.” I nodded my head a little.

“So are you from Chicago?” he asks

“No not-”

“Listen, if you ever need anything just come to me I can help you out. I was born and abandoned here I like to think. We'll watch out for each other.”

“Yeah, we'll do that,” I said half heartedly. I let go of his hand. The others in the circle are joking with each other laughing and talking in between shaking hands and saying hello. I looked at Theo for the first time since Robby had walked through the door. His eyes are focused, cold, little circles today. They are looking through me. They are looking right through the side of my face and into Robby.

“Theodore,” I whisper, extending my hand.

He takes my palm in his. I start to do our hand shake, but his grip is loose and

cold. He slides his hand back to his side before I can loop our thumbs together.

“You ok man?” I am ask him

“I’m fine cuz.”

“Fine? What are you talking about; you’re ugly as hell man. That lady we saw on fifty first she was fine. You’re ok looking I guess.”

“Better looking than your ugly butt,” he murmurs under his breath.

A smile cracks a path along his mouth, but his eyes still look right through me.

The gripping hands break apart around us as Angelo asks us to sit down. I lower my head. I want to be small today. I want to be so small I fall though the back of my seat. I want to be so small I can fit in crack in the floor. I want to be so small I’m not here anymore.

“Ok, well first let me welcome all of you to our circle; for those of you who don't know me my name is Father Angelo. I am in charge of managing the shelter. Everything that goes on here is pretty much managed by me. This is a safe place for everyone and I am the one who makes it that way.

There are only three rules here.

1. What we say he stays here.
2. Everyone is treated with respect.
3. Everyone counts.”

“Do you just think it’s that easy man? You think we just going to open up to you? We don't know you.” A voice breaks in between the words on Angelo's lips. It is Alex. The piercing above his eye is frozen in the wrinkles of his forehead. It always jumped out when he talked. I always wanted to pull it out. I looked at Angelo and for the first time I

didn't know what was moving behind a pair of eyes. He looked as if he was stopped for a moment like a toy whose battery just ran down. He turned to Alex with a smile nodding his head

“You're right. I can't expect you to share anything if I'm not willing to give you anything. So, you want to know about me, let's start where you guys and I know each other the best. In June of 1990 I was eighteen, and I had spent most of my life in an orphanage. I had a family and I didn't have a family. Families are people who care about you, mine was what they were. I don't hate 'em I let that go a long time ago. After I left home I spent the next eight years on the street bouncing from place to place. I started heroin when I was nineteen.”

Angelo rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and turned around in the circle to show us his forearms. They are spotted purple and brown, thin, twisted, arms. I looked at my arms and counted the shadows of healed cuts and the memories that came with each of them. I wondered what the cuts between the speckled marks on his arms made him remember. Angelo told us about how he made it to Chicago and how he stopped the drugs and changed his life. The room was quiet when he finished talking.

“Man I been trying and trying to stop for the longest. I just need some way away from it man. The needle's sweet to me.” said Alex.

“The needle's sweet to everybody,” said Angelo.

“In fact it gets sweeter the more you use it and even sweeter when you need it. I mean when you really need it. When it's so sweet it makes you sick and then you need it again. It's never going to stop being sweet, you just have to stop being sweet on it.”

“That sweet tooth is hard to lose, man.” said Alex.

“Yeah, but it’s harder to lose the street tooth.”

“Street tooth?” Alex laughed.

“It’s what makes living out on the streets taste so sweet some days. It’s what kept me out there. I had all that sweetness and nothing to fill me up. In my case, there was nothing but space inside after I left home and the street was so sweet. It filled up some space, but it never stayed that way and it never filled me up. I wanted to fill it with something different. I wanted to fill it with something real and happy. We can help you. We can help you get clean. We can help you stay that way. All you have to do is want it. Alex, talk to me afterward I can help you.” Alex leaned back in his chair.

The circle started to talk and all the while Theo’s string and eyes dug into me and right out the other side trying to get to Robby.

“Would anybody else like to share or ask a question?” Angelo asked

“I got something” said Manuel

“Go ahead Manuel.”

“Yeah, so, I was out on Fifty Third and State at like two on Monday night. This nice Lincoln Town car pulls up next to me and stops. The driver’s side door opens and this guy in the driver’s gets up, you know dark suit, shades, black tie, and all that. He gets out and gets right to it. He’s like telling me that his boss in back would give me fifty if I suck him off. I thought about it. Shit man, I needed that bill man. I hadn’t eaten man and I needed it bad. So I head to the back of the car and the driver opens the door and I get my fifty.”

“You gay man!” Cecil shouted

“Hey, I’m gay and fed. Freaks out for us any way, might as well make ‘em pay for

it, look at your hungry frail looking ass Cecil!”

Cecil is rocking in his chair. The legs are scraping back and forward slowly on the linoleum floor. They stop, his body is moving across the room. I don't need to feel him to know his mind now. Manuel's chair is screeching against the floor he is on his feet. Fast, so fast, Angelo is between them. Manuel's fist is flying and finds Angelo's in the temple.

“Stop, stop, sit down!”

Angelo is pushing Cecil back to his seat and turning his head to Manuel.

“Manuel, sit down, sit down, sit the hell down!”

Angelo's face is twisting up into light brown wrinkles. A small bloody cut just above his eye drips red across his face. The room is loud. My head is louder. Anger runs inside of me and my stomach turns.

“Listen!” Angelo voice kills the noise. We are quiet.

“Manuel. I was lying every night under the viaduct on Stony Island. I had my mattress folded tight between the pillars. I was hungry and I was you. Yeah I had sex for money, so I could eat, so I could survive. I hated it; just like I know you do deep inside. Cecil rule number two. Everyone is treated with respect. Remember it! You, all of you, have got to stay away from them. No matter what they offer! You've got to, you've got to, you've got to, I don't know how many times I can say it. The right one comes along and we are going to be putting another one of you guys into the ground.”

“But what if I need it,” the circle said.

“You don't need what they have. You have what they need.”

“Yeah so I can get more for it. “ A little laugh broke out.

“But what if I need food.” a voice came out into seriousness.

“There's a better way,” said Angelo.

“You say that now priest. You got a bed every night. You haven't been living like us for a long time.” said the circle.

“The world looks at us like we're nothing, right. We don't have to put that hate inside of us. You guys are worth something, something real, and something beautiful. The best way is to not need, to get out of the situation, and that's what we're trying to do here. We're trying to reduce the number of you guys on the street.

“You didn't help Lynn.” A piece of the circle jumps out and cuts Angelo. They are all silent on the outside, but inside their strings are alive and Theo's s burns hotter than most. Their pain pulls Lynn's name out of the same urn as my mother's. My hands are wet with the tears they can't cry. They are pouring out of me. The circle is too tough to cry, made too strong, by too much.

Lynn is in my mind because of them. Maybe whatever God gave me these strings always had me tied here to her. Maybe we were always falling towards each other, losing pieces on the way so that when we finally came together we would fit. We took care of each other, taught each other, fought for each other, lived for each other. I never told her about the strings, I regret that now. I think about it sometimes at night. Maybe it would have made it easier for her when she died to know that she wasn't alone.

I put my hand in my pocket in-between waves of other people's pain and pull out the plastic bag where I kept the wrinkled pieces of newspaper from six months ago out of my pocket. I passed my hand over the slivers of paper reading back to myself the worst parts of Lynn's life. I wonder how many people had thumbed past her on page sixty two.

The second piece of paper is from the front page of the paper where I found Lynn.

The ink is spreading and smudging against the gray newspaper. When I first picked it up two days after they found her it read, "*Protests Rise over Twentieth Public School Child Killed in Gun Violence This Year.*" I blotted out the words on it so that it made real sense, my sense, not the kind that everyone else seemed so happy to enjoy. I replaced the twentieth with a question mark and ripped out public school and gun. At night she breaks apart. She is so thin, and scared. She is nestled on page sixty two. She melts into my gray puddle of ash from the hands of twenty-year-old killer. I don't know how many have slipped away, but I knew Lynn.

I like to keep the paper with me now tucked away in my pocket. I couldn't help her. I cried with her when her blood turned dark and sticky behind the dumpster where the cops found her body. As Angelo talked I put my hand in my pocket and passed the wrinkled paper between my fingers. I had hoped they would protest Lynn and any else who needed it, but as I sat there with Angelo's voice I knew the protest had only been meant for twenty. I lost track of time and Angelo. The group talked about their week and I floated in between their words, remembering. I was trying to care about what Angelo and the others were saying, but the truth was today I just didn't. I didn't have the space in me. Today there was only enough for me and Lynn.

The talk went long, they always do. Angelo always made sure that the cooks kept more than enough food set aside for us. I'm glad to be out of the room away from all of their faces and strings. Theo and I sit opposite each other at the same table. He is empty now. His string is silent. He is keeping something deep inside in a place so close to him my string can only feel a dull echo of it crying out. I didn't want to deal in why. I have stopped dealing with why things are what they are. Why makes you crazy. It takes away

so much time from dealing with the issue right in front of you. If I'm going to hurt I want to hurt now, deal with it, get over it, and go on.

Living with these strings let me know all the whys had answers. I can't survive on why, but they come back into my life with every string and every life that I'm pulled into. I get to see their answers and that is enough to make me never want to ask why again.

I can see why creeping all over Theo's face. Every now and then he looks past me like he did to Angelo in the room.

"You looking kind of mean, Theo. Something wrong?"

"No, nothing"

"Is it that kid Robby?"

"He's looking at me"

"You know him?"

Theo looked down at his plate and shoved a spoonful of peas into his mouth as he got up from our table and walked across the dining room to where Robby sat by himself. I couldn't hear them speak, but I could see. The way they sat across from each other. The tension that stayed trapped in the wrinkled lines of their faces, and the quick hushed way their lips moved. Their conversation was for them.

It made me sick to think that Theo was so open to Robby and so closed to me. I could see Robby. I could see deeper into the cold little places in his smile and eyes. They spoke to me and yelled the sickness of Robby. Theo spoke to him for what seemed like a long time and I sat quietly trying to hear the words my strings could not bring me.

I don't know who this Robby kid is, but I know I hate him. I didn't know who

had walked up to the table without me knowing, but his shadow rested gently on the bench next to me. He spoke to me and again Angelo's voice offered me nothing. No joy, no love, no fear, no closeness, no presence. I don't need any string to tell me what is moving in the back of Angelo's mind towards his mouth. It is the same old stuff about getting us of the street and into a program to put us in a home where people don't know how to wipe their asses let alone take care of me or anyone else. One of them puppy farm foster homes. Homes filled with people trying to fill up the holes in their lives with kids who are missing just as many pieces as them.

I don't have missing pieces. I keep telling myself I tied myself together with these strings. They forced me to walk the way I walk and live the way I live. I keep chewing to let the sound of the food in my mouth dull the sharp softness of Angelo's voice. It pierces my ears and I can't help but listen.

"Look, De Kevin it's been a year since you started coming to our program. You're an interesting kid, you know that? You talk but never say anything."

"How do you know I talk? How do you know I do anything?"

"Your face talks even when your mouth is closed. Did you know that? It's a fact. People are funny; we think we can hide our inside by changing our outsides."

"So what? What does my face say?"

"I didn't come here to fight. I just to give help."

"You can help me by telling me what you think you see. Then you'll let me know how blind you are."

"You think you've seen De Kevin? I've seen more than you could ever want to."

"I see everything I need to. I see you and everybody just like you. You don't know anything Angelo, just like everyone else, you just don't know."

Angelo is ignorant, but I am ignorant of him, or at least my strings are. He is a blank space, an emptiness I want to fill up with something, anything. We sit silent, in ignorance of what we really want to know. Just over Angelo's shoulder I can see Theo. His eyes are gone, and I see the same emptiness that sat across the table and called itself Angelo.

I did not know what thought rested in space where Theo had faded away. Whatever he held so close to him had jumped out into the room invisible to my strings, but not my eyes. I saw hate in him and around him, deep, real, hate that smothered the Theo I had known and stood in his place. He came back to the table where Angelo and I sat.

“Everything good, Theodore?” Angelo noticed my face when he asked Theo. We both knew that the next words out of his mouth would be a lie.

“I'm fine,” he said to us in empty words standing in front of his feelings. I am so full and so empty. Our table eats in silence while the room around us explodes with conversations that did not know what was in the room with us.

After dinner we crossed the courtyard and headed towards the beds. The shelter housed the older folks, but Angelo organized it so that all the kids younger than sixteen would be kept in the old Rectory. I liked it that way; I didn't like to look at the older folks. They look too much like me. My eyes hurt with sleep. I brushed passed the others on my way up the stairs to the beds. Theo had been right next to me, but when I looked beside me he had dropped back to the end of the line and walked next to Robby.

My life is one of moments that don't belong to me. They are moments that come into me from other people who never know they give them to me, but in that moment on

the stairs I knew that it belonged to me. Life said that I was supposed to hurt and as I saw Theo sink a jagged piece of wrought iron down across Robby's face and into his neck I knew that I would lose him.

Robby held a bloody cheek. The smile he had in the meeting room was gone and all the pleading had left Theodore's eyes. I could see Angelo running hard towards us. Theodore is fast. Jesus, he is quick. He moved across the courtyard to the fence, climbed up, and pressing his sneakers against the barbed wire. He stood perched between the courtyard and the concrete for a moment until he jumped. His feet meet the pavement hard. I saw Angelo's body hesitate away from Robby for a moment. His eyes ran with Theodore into the darkness. His feet brought him next Robby. I looked at the wrought iron wrapped in a shirt sleeve sticky with blood.

Angelo took Robby to the hospital and left the rest of us to go to sleep. I rolled in my bed hoping to get some rest. All around me were beds filled with sleeping little bodies. We lay there in the old rectory surrounded by large windows that looked out onto the shelters window. Theo stuck in my mind and would not let go. My stomach turned a little at the thought of him. I wanted to sleep, but sleep was slow for me. I lay down on the bed watching the moon blend together with the stars until they were one blurry sheet of white. Sleep held onto me.

I felt a pain inside of me. It leaps across me, cuts into me, hard, and deep. I woke up and the pain hit harder.

I saw them spreading from me. I could see strings so many colored stings steaming from my toes, fingers, ears, lips, every hair on my eyelids, and every one of my teeth. Some went down my throat. I could feel them twanging like guitar strings inside of

me tugging on their anchors. They made me lurch forward as they moved. They spiraled from the center of my eyes and coiled deep into my ears. I felt them moving through me. There were knots, bundles, and piles of string making multicolor mounds of thread on my chests. I tried to scream, but fat purple and white strings pushed down my throat into the center of me muffling the sound. I tried to break them, but they held me close.

"It's a dream it has to be it just has to be. Just wake up De Kevin, just wake up. It can't be. It can't be real. It can't." I say to myself, but it always was the realest thing in my life. I hurt worse now. The pain rumbled through me. Every bit of me twitched.

"Stay calm De Kevin, think, there is a way out of this." I felt it hit hard inside of me again. I could barely breathe. It was different from the first hit. It felt like I was under miles of water being pressed from all sides. Where the strings pierced me there was no blood. I never felt the piercing only the pain coming like electricity through them. I felt different bolts of pain tumble down each string. Some pulsed hard and slow towards me. Other strings were like live wires that whipped inside me.

My mind raced at me screaming. I pulled at everyone of my muscles, useless. I could see the others sleeping peacefully around me. I lay there in the half moon light looking at strings threaded through me. It was a soft feeling at first but something was familiar about a few of the pieces of pain that worked their way down the looping strings to me. I closed my eyes and tangled the strings that pierced my pupils with the ones on my eyelashes. I felt the string that punctured my right hand pull tight. It burned so hot that all the other strings went dead to me. I felt him wash over me; I knew it was a him. I knew he was angry. I couldn't see him, but I could feel everything about him. He was breathing hard, furious, short breaths. His stomach rolled and turned inside of him. I

wanted to throw up. It was so familiar. All of it was so familiar. I felt the coolness of the steel at my neck. There are hands here. Two big hard hands touching me and two small hands holding me face down. I felt him hurting, wanting to scream, trying to scream and trying to fight. I felt his hope fall away. I cracked inside. He laid there the pain entering him over and over. I was sick now, so sick, and angry. I heard something rip. His arm went cold. I felt his mouth fill with some sort of fabric. I tasted it in the back of my throat. The pain departed then entered and remained for longer than it had done before. I felt his body fill up with sickness. The cold crawled down his arm onto to his chest and fell inside of him. We were frozen together. I started to cry. I hadn't cried in so long.

Tears cooled my face while the silent sharpness of metal left his neck. The big hands let go. The small hands remained griping his wrist hard. I felt something round and familiar poke a smooth, cool, hard, stone into his wrist. My mind filled with Robby's face and his ring. I felt the string in my left palm fall limp and I fell away from him, weightlessly drifting. I floated downward into the darkness, falling in long round circles. My foot snagged on something and I flew blindly through the dark. I can't feel the wind, but I knew I was speeding faster and faster into the blackness. The darkness evaporated instantly around me. I fell hard onto the bed in the rectory, exhausted, as the sun came up.

Sweat crawls from the end of my nose, dripping softly on the bed sheet. My pillow is a puddle. The thought of Theodore in the darkness dimmed the daylight to a sharp gray. The beds around me are empty. The ones in distant corners are not. I run to them tripping over my feet and scuffling hard back onto them. They are sleeping, familiar, undesired faces resting silently in the sun light. I want to see the deep jagged scar on any of their faces so that I can beat it off. Did he ever come back? A prayer walks

softly out of me and lays low in my chest.

I kneel down between tears and prayer listening to the peaceful breaths around me. Theodore is still inside of me, silently screaming. I want to stop from ripping hard at my gut. He rolls up into my chest and out through my mouth onto the floor. Vomit hangs onto my face in little sticky lines. A dark green string wriggles helplessly in a pool of last night's dinner. It flaps in the sun light and fizzles like a dying firecracker. I clean myself in the bathroom and wipe the vomit from the bedroom floor. My head is hurting so bad. I sit on an empty bed and the sun beats down hard onto the mattress as tears for Theo and Robby move down my chin.

I stay behind in the corner of the big room as the others head out into the city. I try talking a few times, but the words stay in my throat. They kept ramming themselves hard against the back of my teeth, but I couldn't free them. I hear voices outside the window and the rush of water hitting concrete. I stand up and look down. Just below me Angelo stood with a hose in his hand washing Robby's blood from the concrete. Little rivers of red sparkle in the sunlight and run down over the edge of the walkway into the grass. I wonder if the grass could taste the bitterness of his blood like I tasted Theo's sour tears.

Angelo's face is cold only his lips are moving. They are saying words I cannot hear. In his other hand I can see his rosary. He moves his fingers through each bead rolling them between his fingers over and over until he held his small wooden cross in his hands. Prayer, prayer never stopped God from giving me these strings. I figured he owed me the right to interrupt any one talking to him if I needed them. I head towards the steeps and the sound of water. I walk down to where Angelo is. He notices me and turns

down the hose.

“I thought everyone had left for the day. Why are you still doing here, Kev?”

“I got to have a reason to be at church?”

“No, but, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine, just, it’s just, and I’m fine.”

“You don’t like to give up too much ground I see.”

“What?”

“Your friend, the cops are looking for him. He killed someone last night and you’re not even batting an eye.”

“Well, what the heck are you doing washing it all away like it never happened? You’re not even asking why. You’re just washing and washing till you feel clean enough.”

“I’m not washing. I’m remembering. Even if I wash these stones a hundred times it doesn’t take away the fact that Robby died here! I’m praying for both of them.”

“Praying is not going to change anything, Angelo.”

“It changed me.”

“I use to pray too. I use to hope that when I did things would change. Look around me, you see any results? What else can I do pray, hope, and pray again that I get to stop watching while people die around me?”

“At least you watch, Kev.”

“It doesn’t matter if I watch! I get to see it, too much of it!”

Angelo couldn’t know what I knew. He couldn’t say that it was murder so quick and be sure about it if he did. He would have pushed that iron into Robby’s neck too. The

water trickled from the hose. Each drop sounded a hollow boom against the stone. I wanted Angelo to see. What could he see if he just washed it away? Would he see if each drop rubbed a little more of Robby in the dirt and made him invisible? What could he see? What could anyone? This is why I don't deal with whys and just take the world for what it is blind, deaf, dumb, and cripple, only because it wants to be.

"I need it stop. I need all this feeling to stop, Angelo."

"We can't. We can't stop feeling, De Kevin. We never can. Real feeling never stops."

"You don't understand. I'm not like you!"

"You're a human being aren't you?"

"Sometimes."

"We're all kinds of sometimes, most people are. We're sometimes kind, sometimes good, sometimes right, and sometimes wrong."

"So, that means that right now you could be wrong about sometimes."

"Yes, I could be."

"So, maybe some of us are all the way one way."

"Maybe, but at least they're not alone. Maybe, one person understands."

"I need you to understand and as much as I need you to, I know you can't!"

"That's a hard place to be, Kev."

"Life's hard, but we make it that way. I see a lot, Angelo"

"I've seen the same."

"No. You saw something like it. What I've seen is new, and new or old now or then it still makes no sense, and every kind of sense."

“Are you talking about what happened between Theo and Robby?”

“Not just that, all of this. I get to see all of it and I get see nearly every eye turn away from it.”

“You can’t expect people to pick up the world, Kev.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody’s that strong, Kev.”

“Of course nobody’s that strong. Nobody ever will be, but everybody could be.”

“You talk like you’ve tried it before.”

“You talk like I’m not doing it now, and you talk like you’re not. Is that why you’re not telling me the truth, Angelo?”

“The truth about what?”

“You.”

“Forget me.”

“You have two emotions, Kev happy and sadder than I’ve seen anyone in a long time. There’s no place in between, no middle, no full, no content.”

“Are you freaking blind, you think anyone of the kids in your little circle has any of that? You’ve been away safe in little bed to long. Look at the ground, there is a reason why that blood is there and it’s deeper than Theo just wanting to put it there.”

“You trying to say just because Theo had a reason that made it right?”

“No, but washing it away just so everyone except the dirt can forget it ain’t right either. It needs to be more than just you. It needs to be more than just me. It needs to be this whole city, this whole state, this whole country, this whole freaking world! They need to see it!”

Angelo looks at me funny. I can feel my eyes rolling towards the back of my head. I try to move them, but they keep rising. I lift my chin and my body takes control from me. I am falling head first down the stairs. I am falling towards the watery, bloody, mark and for a moment I hope that I leave one just as big. I hope that my blood rolls out of me and never stops, like one of those Madonna and child that you hear cries blood. I wondered if she was crying for me or anyone like me. I wondered if it is our blood that comes out of her eyes. I wondered why people would come and stain themselves with hers, but never see the sticky, deep, red, dried, mounds already on their hands every time they just let us be, here, alone, forgetting that we cry too. My thoughts flash in a moment and in that moment Angelo is moving to catch me.

I am moving weightless across the floor and out onto the gray marble front stoop of the church. The sun hits my eyes. I can see Angelo looking at me. I can see my face in the edges of his eyes curling next to the bloody pink angles of their corners. I blink and when I open my eyes the world is a blur. I am on my back looking up into the layers and blue, white, and gold in the sky. The sun burns my face. I can hear footsteps rushing near me. Angelo is above my head. His face is gone and only a wriggling ball of thread stretches like a web against the gap that his face once filled. The cords of wriggling wire fall in on themselves and tumble over each other in a spinning oval.

“Who are you? I don’t know you” I try to say, but the words get stuck.

There are faceless shadows around me blocking out the sun. They hold my arms and legs. I rise up then fall and then rise again. The shadow’s hands and blurry faces pull away from me. I breathe deep when I see what hangs onto them. Long indigo strings crawl out from my body and grow through their hands.

“No, no, no, no! Not you too. I don’t want to know! I don’t want to know!” my words come out as silent breath that echoes in my head.

“Hold him down he’s hallucinating.” A voice I don’t know yells.

“De Kevin, stay with us, stay with us, I’m here.” A familiar hand holds mine.

My words finally move. “Who is calling me? Who are you?” I say back to the empty face.

“It’s Angelo, De Kevin?”

I kick and try to sit up, but a strap of rough cloth holds me down. The shadows sit next to me. The indigo strings hold tight to them, and the longer they do the more the shadow fades. I can see their faces and bodies. I can read the names on their uniforms. They are paramedics. They talk softly to the thing with no face in minister’s robes. The woman’s name is Cynthia. The man’s name is Allen. The thing with no face looks at me. It has no eyes, but I feel it look at me. I can’t tell what its thinking.

It shifts towards me on occasion. The indigo strings hang around Allen and Cynthia. They had filled up every spot in the back of the ambulance, every sting connected to another, except the ones in the sunken gap where it once had a face. I could not feel it and for the first time I knew. I could never feel this thing. I could never know it unless it wanted me to know. My face is wet. Tears roll down it. A memory of Allen’s grandfather passes through my mind, but my tears are not for him. They are for this thing alone in the corner looking at me. I could only cry. I cried thick, wet, fat, tears that blurred Cynthia, Allen, and the thing in the corner in preacher’s robes.

“Look, he’s crying,” a voice I thought I knew said.

“Is he hurting?” Allen says.

“I don’t know, everything looks normal. Blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration are all normal.” Cynthia’s voice is low and little rough it my ear. Shawnee’s voice use to rub into my ear like hers.

I didn’t feel normal. I don’t know normal. I closed my eyelids and a wet blackness took over my world. When I opened them again I could barely keep them open. They felt like weights. I could make out the outline of a hospital room and nurses, standing over me murmuring. I blacked out and woke again to my weighted eye lids. I turned my head and there it was with its head hanging off of the edge of the couch near the wall. Its chest moved softly in the darkness of the room. It had taken its black shirt off and made a pillow out of it. It was breathing. It was alive. It was there, waiting like me for morning. My eyes close. I can feel them resting, relaxing, they fall back into sleep, and when they wake the sun is shining through a gray sky at them. The weight is gone from my eyes, and I look wide at the room. The thing is gone and only Angelo sleeps with his head on a makeshift pillow.

The sun shines though my eyelids. For a moment, I think I’m back under the sky way and the cars are rolling off in all directions of the city. I try to smell the onions in the air, but only cold empty air fills my lungs. I open my eyes. The flat, pencil lead, gray, ceiling of the room looks back at me. Angelo is already awake. He tells me that I blacked out and they don’t know what’s wrong. He says they are going to watch me for a day and observe my condition. I nod my head and Angelo keeps talking. I am not listening. I keep my focus on his face. I want them to boil out of his face, but his skin stays like mine. He can pretend, but I see his real face.

A doctor comes to speak to me. We talk. I tell her about what happened or at

least everything she might believe. She throws back up what Angelo had just puked out, they would watch me, they would watch me, they would watch me, but I would feel them. I would know, and they would be ignorant like they always are.

The doctor rests her hand on my shoulder and walks out of the room with one of my strings. I lay back down against the pillow. Angelo is standing near the window. I say nothing to him. The silence is obvious and sticks uncomfortably between us. He decides to break it

“Are you doing ok, De Kevin?”

I shake my head yes. He palms the side of his head and rubs his short hair though his fingers. I know two things about Angelo. What I see and what I feel. I know those two things about everyone, but I only see him and what I feel is not what I feel from everyone else. I have only felt him in the way I guess everyone else feels each other. It is a brief and empty way to touch another person. Eyes, mouth, hands, nose, tongue they are all closed off, all limited to what someone else can offer. Angelo offers me nothing but a few words. The conversation died between us just as soon as it had started. The air is stiff. Angelo and I breathe in and out in this little sun filled room. Silence all around us and inside us. It is repetition. I start to think I'm breathing in Angelo's breath. I can't help but wonder if what I saw was really what I saw. Did Angelo have strings? No one is like me. I need to press him; I need to break him open. I have to know if I'm not alone.

“De Kevin, is there anything you need.” He breaks the silence again.

“I'm, fine, stop worrying about me.” My stomach makes hard left and right turns inside me, sick.

“I thought I was going to lose you. Sorry, I know it sounds selfish but I can't lose

two of you guys so soon.”

“I'm not going anywhere. What about you, you got something to do back at the church don't you?”

“I do, but.”

“But?”

“You, for a while there, you didn't know me.”

“Do I know you now?”

“Come on what kind of question is that, Kev?”

“The kind that hasn't been answered yet.”

“Course you know me.” Angelo is liar. I want to push him. I want to push him so hard he breaks open and that empty pit inside his head spills out strings onto the floor.

“Kev, Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“What did you see in the ambulance?” My stomach stops moving and I know inside of me that Angelo is just like me.

“Why do want to know that?”

“No, I just, it's just, what did you see?”

“I didn't see anything.”

“What do you mean you didn't? You were screaming something like “*I don't want to know you.*”

“Can I ask you something, Angelo?” He looks as if I have seen him naked, like I had found him all of sudden. He sinks down onto to the hospital couch.

“Have you ever been alone?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, absolutely, positively, alone, by yourself, without anyone?”

“Everyone has.”

“Angelo, do you know how I live? Do you know what my days are like?”

“Probably, a lot like mine were.”

“I’m never alone; I’m always close, so close, too close. That’s my problem. I’m so close to someone else and so far away from myself.”

“Well then Kev you got to start making time to take care of you. You can’t just keep giving out everything and not get anything back.”

“Look, we both know there’s nobody making things equal.”

“You think so?”

“I know it and I think somewhere inside you, you know that’s true too.”

“You got all the answers don’t you, Kev.”

“I got as many as I need.”

“You think they’re right?”

“Who’s to say I’m wrong? Nobody lives my life but me. I got an answer for you too, Angelo.”

“An answer? What are talking about? I didn’t even know anybody asked a question.”

“I been asking myself questions about you since I meet you.”

“Somehow I don’t believe you, Kev.”

“Why?”

“Who’s to say you’re telling the truth, Kev?”

“You trust that book you read. Trust me. It’s faith, it’s the same thing. Why did I meet you? Why am I here with you?”

“You were hurt so I came.”

“Why do you have to lie to me, Angelo?”

“Why can’t you just trust me and have some faith, Kev?”

“I got faith in some things, just not you.”

“And why’s that?”

“Angelo, you remind me too much of me.”

“So you don’t trust yourself? You know yourself, how can’t you trust yourself?”

“You want to put words in my mouth? I trust myself. I just don’t know what I am.

So I must not know who you are. How can I trust you then?”

“Nobody should have to spend time wondering what they are. You just are.”

“Shut up, Angelo”

“I want you to trust me. I want somebody to know me. Everybody deserves that.”

“You ever think of asking me if I want to carry your drama around with me? You ever think I got my own stuff to carry?”

“I just think we might be caring a lot of the same things.”

“Who the heck are you, Angelo?”

“Oaxaca”

“What?”

“It’s in Mexico. It’s where I’m from.”

“So you some kind of illegal?”

“People aren’t illegal, Kev, but I guess if you got to put me in category I’m not.

My mother was and my father still is.”

“Why aren't you with them now?”

“It’s just better that I'm not. When I was younger they couldn't take care of me, they fought, they separated, they tried to keep it together, they failed, and it got to the point that my mom by herself couldn't take care of me. She left me when I was five at The Church of the Blessed Virgin in Tuscan. It was an orphanage.”

“She abandoned you?”

“No, she could never do that.”

“I got to see her every Sunday. She told me not say anything about her to anyone else. She would say, shhhh silencie mi amor. El mundo no compromete. Silencio en tu y mis vida es un amigo. Silence my love. The world does not compromise. Silence in your and my life is a friend. I shut up until I was eighteen and I had to leave. I remember she picked me smiling about a block away from the orphanage. I held her with these arms that I had pushed heroin into the day before.”

“So why'd you start the heroin? You had her, you had a place to stay, so why the drugs?”

“ I, it, it's ..”

“What?”

“It's not important. You need to be getting some rest, Kev.” I have to take a chance; I have to know that I am not by myself. He is trying to change the focus. He is trying to break the lenses I have on him, but the crack I started I poke at harder. I want him to break. I have to take a chance.

“Sometimes, you are going through your day and all of a sudden everyone is so

close to you it feels like they're in your skin doesn't it?"

"What, are talking about, De Kevin?"

"I'm talking about you, and me and what we see."

"All I see is what everyone else does."

"You don't have to hide it from me ,Angelo!"

"I'm not hiding anything!"

"When I looked at you I didn't see you. All I saw were these--"

He moves toward the door. I get up and slam it before he can leave.

"Listen to me, please, Angelo"

"I have been, I'm going to go get the nurse to get you some help."

"Why are you running away?" I grab him by the arm and push him back on the bed.

We wrestle and he puts my face against the floor. The smell of cleaner fills my nose.

"De Kevin, calm down!" His voice echoes. I don't want to stop. He has to listen to me. I can't be alone. He can't be alone, and he has to know that.

A nurse rushes into the room. She yells down the hall. The small room is filled with people.

Hands pull Angelo and me apart.

" You're a liar! You're a god damn liar, Angelo. A god damn liar!" I scream at him.

"What's wrong with him?" The doctor yells over the scuffling and pulling of the nurses on my arms and legs.

"I don't know he just jumped at me." Angelo lies and it turns my stomach

“Nothing’s wrong with me. What the hell is wrong with you Angelo, you know what I’m talking about!”

“Hold his arms tighter and put him on the bed, strap him down. De Kevin, De Kevin listen, if you don’t stop we’re going to have to sedate you, calm down,” the doctor yells. Three hard straps clinch down around me. Angelo is standing against the back wall, his lip is bleeding a little stream of red trickles down his jaw.

“Just get him the hell out of here!” I scream. The small crowd around me looks at Angelo. He is already storming out into the hall dabbing his lip with his hand.

The room slowly clears, but the doctor stays close to the door of my room. She walks next to me, her name is Alexis. She cannot see the white string going up and around her left arm. The image of her son calms me down as I feel his ten little toes in both of my hands.

“Son, Son, Son, De Kevin!” I jerk my mind from the baby, his name is Colin. Alexis is standing next my bed. She is dark skinned. Her hair is in a short curly afro that catches sun and turns brown at its tips. Her eyes are soft, but her face is that same tight kind of serious I remember my mother has.

“What happened, De Kevin?” she asks.

I keep my head turned away. I am looking up at the lumpy cottage cheese ceiling above the bed. I am hot, so hot, god damn liar. Alexis grabs my face between her thumb and forefinger and makes me look her in the eye.

“Christ, your lip is bleeding.” She says to me.

I can smell peaches on her skin. She touched me and I wanted her to do it again. I suck my lip and it tastes like licking a penny. She lets go of my face, but her fingers leave

themselves invisibly on my skin. She is back a moment later dabbing my lip with a wet cloth. Alexis puts her fingers back into the spots they had carved out from themselves on my face. She is very beautiful and she is touching me.

“Son, whatever happened between you two you need to tell me. If he hurt you just let us know.” Her smile is kind and serious. Her hand is soft and warm on my cheek as it slides across it and back to her side. Alexis turns and walks out of the room and for the first time in a long time a memory that is just mine runs back into my mind. My mother and I are in the park and people are riding past. My head is resting against her chest and her heart beat is in my ear. Low and quiet my heart matches hers, and the heat inside me stops.

I am back in the hospital. The room is empty, but Angelo’s strings are still in my mind turning silently in a circle. I can’t fight the sleep that falls over me. The day fades into my dream and the hospital room disappears in the world outside my eyes. I am in the darkness, but I know I am not alone. I feel them, so close, brushing my arms. A stiff, cold, breath hits me in face. It is an empty kind of breath, a breath with nothing in it no smell of coffee, or toothpaste, no odor of cigarettes, or lunch, no smell and no warmth. I can hear it all round me, hard empty breaths in the dark. I put my hand out and touch a nose, eyes, cheeks, lips, and skin. There is a face here with me, an empty face, tilting up into the darkness.

I reach out to the left and to the right. There are other faces with different skin, lips and eyes. Their hard, cold, breath and faces glide beneath my finger tips. I turn to the body in front of me and push. It is heavy, stiff, and cold against my fingers. I push harder. I feel it fall, and I fall with it forward into other bodies in the darkness. Their breath hits

my neck and face on the way down. It makes my skin crawl.

In the darkness shines a small honey colored light. It weaves through a forest of standing bodies. Their backs are turned to it. It sits on a patch of rough ground just in front of me. My eyes are burning when I look at it. It shines out onto little pieces of faces, arms, and bodies. There are so many, thousands, millions, maybe the whole damn world. I am standing in the half honey colored darkness with the whole world.

I see it moving slowly. A thin body sways under the honey color sun. He twists his body dancing to his own music. I push the bodies. They do not push back, but gaze out into the darkness. They look up with round mouths and eyes open like sewer lid covers. The man dances in the light of his own sun. He stumbles, shaking, dancing to a song I can't hear. I stand outside the golden circle looking in. He turns and looks at me. I can hear his feet scuff hard over and over on the ground. His old, thin, body throws his silver hair over his face. His skin is like Angelo's, a dancing golden brown. I can see the tears running down the side of his face meeting the drops of sweat on his neck and falling tired to the ground. His muscles twitch beneath his skin. His breath is hard, hot, thick, and alive in a dead world. I steep into the light of his sun. He spins on his heels and wraps his fingers around my arm.

"De Kevin," he says to me. "De Kevin."

I am next to him, but I cannot see him he is like blotted out smudge. Like someone rubbed him between their palms.

"You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone," he says three times in two voices that I hear sometimes in my memory.

"Mama. Daddy." The words are in my mouth with no sound.

“You are not alone, De Kevin. Remember that the time will come when we are whole.”

My face is wet in the light of the little sun. I look at the old man; there are no strings tying us together. I feel me, and I can't help but cry. These are my tears. My tears and no one else's but mine running down my face. I feel me, my insides, and my tears all alone for the first time. The old man is stepping away. He turns to edge of the circle and reaches out into the dark. He holds on to something I cannot see and brings it into the light. Theodore is looking at me from the other side of the circle.

“Theodore!” He does not respond. His eyes are like the bodies that stand around us. They are cold, black, sewer lids.

“Damn it, Theodore say something!”

The voices die out, and the darkness twists around us harder and harder until the little sun dies out like a match, and I am back in the hospital room. Alexis is standing over me.

How are feeling today, De Kevin?

“I'm fine.”

“You sure?” She says to me

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Well, De Kevin, we've kept you for as long as we can, and you seem alright.”

“I'm always alright.”

“Look, it's like I said; if you need me.”

“There's no reason. I'm not going to need you. You just think I'm crazy right?

It's what I'm supposed to be, crazy or high. I got news for you I'm not.”

“You don’t act like it De Kevin, not one bit.”

“What!”

“I said. You don’t act like you’re sane. I know you are; you just don’t act like it.”

“You think you see me!”

“You love to fight don’t you?”

“I don’t love anything that don’t love me.”

“You keep swinging at everything you never going to give anybody a chance to love you, not even yourself.”

“You don’t know anything do you? People use that old line and never think to ask somebody if they love themselves. I love myself. I love me. ”

“What do you want, De Kevin. I mean what do you really want?”

“I want you to leave me alone. Can I get that?”

“That’s not an option.”

“Why? What kind of doctor are you?”

“It’s got nothing to do with what kind of doctor I am. It’s got everything to do with what kind of person I am.”

“What kind are you?”

“Stubborn and tired of seeing kids like you coming in and out of this hospital. I know you’re going right back out there again. I’m tired, and I don’t know how to stop being tired.”

“Don’t think about it. It works pretty well for people on both sides of that. What’s funny is if I was little older and smelled a little more you would’ve just put me out with a clean bill of health and no little speech. You want to let me out of these straps?” She

loosens the straps and my legs welcome being free.

“You really think that I would just turn you away like that?”

“I know it. I know what I see. People know what they see and they don’t see anyone like me.”

“You want to know what I see when I look at you, Kev?”

“Did I ask?”

“I see a person. I see somebody that needs to be treated like a person. De Kevin, nobody is going to treat you like a person on the street.”

“Why not? Why does everybody else get treated like person? If I be, then I be wrong in their eyes and I ain’t human even though I am and everyone like me is.”

“I know you may not want to, but I think you need to go back in to foster care at least till your older.”

“So, I got to be off of the streets in somebody’s house to be a human? You already know nobody is going to take somebody as old as me. Why are even talking to me?”

“At least you’ll be protected.”

“I’ve been protecting myself for a long time now. What do you think a foster home can protect me from? I tell you what, you can stand in front of me and block the sun because that’s all you or a foster home can protect me from.”

“That’s just the thing De Kevin. It doesn’t have to be.”

“No, but it is and has been. I know you want to say it doesn’t have to stay that way, but whether I leave or stay it stays the same. The only thing that changes is where I’m at.”

“What do you want De Kevin?”

“Stop asking me that!”

“What do you want?”

“I want to be happy ok! Just for a day, a damn moment. I want to be happy! You think I want to stay here. I hate this. I hate it. I don't feel like I'm here there's just everybody else, ain't no me it's just them!”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“Talk to me De Kevin, listen to me, don't shut up, don't stay quiet, just talk to me, please! I can help you.”

“I wish you would get it that you can't. When are you going to let me out of here?”

“I don't want to.”

“Lady, let me out of here.”

“I am. I just want you to know I don't want to. If that's all I can do for you I can tell you I don't want to.

“I want you to stay in the system, but I can see it in your eyes that you won't, will you?”

“You asked the question. You know the answer.”

“Yeah I do, but I want you to take my card. I don't know what has been going on with you and that priest, if he has hurt you-”

“Look, I know where you're going. Angelo wouldn't touch anyone.”

“That little wrestling match we had to break up didn't come out of thin air, De

Kevin.”

“You going to tell me what’s wrong with me, or you going to let me out of here?”

“I want you to tell me, De Kevin. There’s nothing physically wrong with you.”

“There’s nothing I can tell you that you could handle.”

“Try me.”

“No. I’ve tried enough, lost enough, and always get too much of what I don’t want in the end. Can you tell me why I’m like this Doc?”

“Like what, De Kevin?”

“Like this.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I guess if you want to know why you are you and I am me. I guess I would have to say that we have to be.”

“I don’t have to be shit!”

“You have to be you! No matter how hard you run away from yourself, you have to be you. Are you going to lie to me and say you’re not going be you?”

“What the hell kind of Doctor are you? I can’t believe your Colin’s mother.”

She is frozen, still, beside me. She looks at me with eyes that see something they had never seen. I feel her string come alive her son fills my mind. He is laughing in her arms, crying, sleeping in a car seat, and murmuring quietly in the night. He is with her in the locket tucked underneath her shirt. He is there in the room with us and so is fear. I feel her fear me. Her mouth is dry. Her nails are digging into her palms. There are tight clinched fists at the ends of her arms. In her mind

“*Who is he? Who is he?*” sings to me and the string pull tight, tight, tight.

“How do you know my son’s name?” she asks me.

The room has no air. It is crushing me down against the bed. Alexis is so close to me now. Her heartbeat is running harder and harder in my ear.

“De Kevin, How do you know my son’s name?”

“Do you know what it is to touch? Do you think it is that thing you do when you hold onto to something with those ten little things at the end of your hand? Do you think that is it? You don’t feel? You don’t feel. You never feel.”

“What are you talking about?”

There is no choice, no way. I am moving now like an animal. Alexis is in my hands. I push and she falls to the ground. I am in the hall running, sprinting, disappearing. The pearl white floor shines the sun back into my eyes. I hear Alexis screaming behind me. My feet yell up to me faster, faster. The hospital is looking at me. Heads whip round to look at me. Memories, Memories pour into my head. They push up against my eyes all of them pushing against my head. Jesus, I want to die now. A guard appears in front of me. I duck down a hall. The stairs are there. I am out the door, in the air running with the concrete beneath my feet. The stones dig into me. I dig back into them. I turn into an alley looking for a place to hide. My fingers press against the edged of the dumpster lid pushing it up far enough for me to slide into the foul smelling dark. The smell sticks to my face and almost makes me throw up. I hold back my sickness and wait for the sun to go down. The last remaining thoughts of the hospital spill out of me, slowly until they are like all my other strings, pulling, calling out to me constantly, like the old man’s words burning in the back of my mind telling me I am not alone. I can’t help but talk back to them

“I know I am not alone, I have Theo. I have Theo I have Theo,” I murmur to

myself rocking in the dark little dumpster. I don't sleep; I just rock until even the smell seems as far away as the hospital. My mind finally trips on the idea of Theo and holds onto him long enough to make me remember I had not seen him since the stabbing. There he was standing in front of me while the whole world looked out into nothing with the same blank stare they always gave us.

The string that ties Theo and me together is quiet. I felt my own lonesomeness crawl out and curl around me. I wish Lynn was here. I know Shawnee's next to Theo. I know Theo's next to her. I know they are probably sleeping now even though the sun is shining. The smell comes back to me for a moment and I can't help wondering if this is what Lynn smells like now? Robby must, at least by now he must, he has to, because he already did. He smelled likes us so this has got to be what Lynn smells like now, or at least what we smell like now. This trash is rotting. This dumpster is rotting. Am I? When Lynn was around I don't think I was or at least I didn't feel it in me. I didn't smell it on me. She had a way of changing little things. Sometimes, I don't think she was a human. I like to think she was maybe one of them angel's that people like Angelo keeps going on about. She could be my proof that there is a god then, maybe, or at least somebody who sees me here, better yet, somebody who sees me everywhere. I wish he would do something though. Although, he didn't help her so why would he help me? What makes me special? Why do I get to keep going carrying all these strings for people who don't know and don't care? I am stuck in the center of this alleyway, stuck to the concrete, alone. I can't stand the rotting anymore and climb out of the dumpster.

My feet beat against the concrete. I am running. Running to the only place where the loneliness can leave me. I see it at first from the end of the block. A fire flickers in the air as cars stream by on both sides of the little concrete island. A short man with a handkerchief around his face and hoodie sits poking at the flames in the bucket. He throws in little twigs and pieces of paper that make little yellow embers jump up into the wind to die out. The small fire lights the curves of his face not covered by the bandanna hugging them in gold, yellow, and black. I know his eyes no matter how he tries to hide. I know my family.

Shawnee lies pressed to our mat. I walk down the block under the bridge and across the street to the concrete island. He stops poking at the fire, looks at me, and stands pulling the bandana away. The naked face that I had seen so many times over the last two years looked back at me colder than the lake breeze that pushes into the city and grinds against my thighs.

“Theo!” I yell to him.

He doesn't respond with a word but just looks at me. I walk closer and wrap my arms around his neck and hug him close. He is warm and familiar against me. I couldn't feel the fire burning in the bucket but, but I felt Theo. You would never think that a hug could push away so much, the engines stop, the voices die, the squeaks, and wails of thousand tiers rolling on and over a city of dry cracked asphalt fall off into nothing. The street goes quiet in my ears. I am glad to be back with my family, but I don't feel Theo's arms move to hold me. They are stiff, tense pieces of someone else, not my Theodore's, not my brother's, not my family's.

“Where the hell you been, Kev?”

His voice is shaky and I can't help but feel the pushing of his heart against my chest speed up until I thought it would break through his chest and into mine. In some little sick lonely way I wish for a moment that it would so that we could just be connected with our hearts and not my strings.

"You've got to be crazy asking me questions, Theo. Where the hell have you been? What happened man? Why did you stab that kid in face and run away like that?" I spoke softly. His body went limp against me. He pulled away. I thought for a moment he would smile at me and tell me the whole story that I already knew. Inside myself I want him to. I want someone to give me something of them freely even if my strings had already taken it from them.

"That's not important, Kev."

"You stabbed him in the face, that's freaking important!"

"No it's not. It just is. I needed to do it, Kev. Alright, I just needed to do it."

"Why?"

"Look Kev, something's I don't want to give out."

"Theo, after all the stuff we been through."

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"It's got something to do with me doesn't it?"

"Stay the hell out of my business, Kev."

"We've been through so much we are each other's business! You think you can just run away from me of all the people in this city?"

"I never knew how little I could keep from you, Kev."

"What are you talking about?"

“Angelo told me some stuff. I don't know what to think. It's crazy it don't make no sense at all, but he knew things about me that I never told anyone. He knew me better than I know myself and he told me you were just like him. There are things I don't want you to know, Kev!”

Theo looks away from me. The things that I know, that I always know, the things playing at the end of every string I have, the deep things that should stay deep, but that I see in the shallow parts of my mind, the things that he and everyone else could not hide from me. I have to know them like it is some absolute truth of the world. I have known them and everyone else has to hurt if they ever find out I do.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Theo asks me

“Tell you what!”

“Don't lie to me, Kev. I can look at you right now and see it on your face!”

“He's a lie Theo? My whole damn life nobody has been like me! Like hell he is. He's nothing like me. You don't know him Theo. He hasn't been through what we been through.”

“You weren't there Kev. You didn't hear him. I don't believe you.”

“Would it have changed anything between us if I did, Huh? Would it have made you accept it, pure and simple, just like that, or would you be backing away from me like you are now? It doesn't make a difference, Theo. It doesn't make a freaking difference!

“It makes a freaking difference to me. How many times have you been inside of me? “How many times have you seen my dreams or memories or whatever the hell it is that you see?”

“I don't know!”

“What do you mean you don't know? You get wired to every person around you and you don't know?”

“I don't know, Theo, alright I don't freaking know. I get so many all at the same time sometimes. They come crashing into me and I don't know what to do with them alright I just don't know! I don't know how to handle everyone else's crap. I don't want it. I don't want them.”

“And I don't want you in me or in her.” he points to Shawnee.

“Theo, I-”

“You need to leave, Kev!”

“Leave? This is my home, Theo!”

“We don't have a home, Kev. This ain't a home no matter how many times we want it to be, and we ain't blood no matter how many times you say that we are.”

“So you're just going to end this friendship from what that priest said to you.”

“I can't trust you, Kev.”

“Why not?”

“Because, I was there Angelo took me to you. Do you remember under the sun in the darkness? I know that you're lying to me.”

I run bare foot though the alleys. The concrete and my feet sing along as they come together. St. Marquise, St Marquise, St. Marquise, they move me south to the foot of the church steps. The church is not the same in the streetlight. It is bent and crooked, faded into shadows and the light. It is breathing now alive in the night. I can feel it breathing, tingling, and moving. In the half-light I can see them all looped tight like rope around each other in my mind. The strings wrap around my arms and legs. They are

silver and gold thin little strings pulled tight all leading through the doors, all pulling me. I can feel each string one by one loop tight around me and pull hard towards their anchors. Memories, memories, and memories all their memories pour into me. Some ask to fill me up with their joy. They wait at the ends of my fingers warm, familiar, and happy. Others push into me, right up next to me, they break open like spoiled fruit and their insides spill out tears and blood onto my lap. I feel them all in St. Marquise sleeping and dreaming in the light and shadow. I feel them all, but the one who I am looking for can't be felt. I can't feel his memories or his emotions. I can't feel him roll in the night to a dream or a nightmare. I can't feel his heartbeat, or his eyes cry, or the way a breath fills his chest, and for the first time I see that I know so little of him. The gate is locked. I don't care. I search the fence around the church. The wire is still bent down where Theodore had stood. I repeat him in reverse and move across the courtyard. The rectory is still; except for the dreaming. I can feel exactly where everyone but the one I need is. He has to be in the place where none of the others are.

I find him in the only room no string pulls me to, where no memory waits for me, where no part of his inside is a part of mine. My hand rests unsteady on the handle and I twist and push. The door sighs just softly enough to make me worry if he will hear me. I slip in though the crack I made into the room. It is a simple room; a bed, dresser, wardrobe, and chest. His rosary taps softly on the door as I close the last crack and push out the dark behind me. It is twilight in Angelo's room. A streetlight light burns outside his window glowing right beneath the moon.

I see him lying shirtless in the light with his blankets pushed together at his feet. He is breathing slowly. I can hear him fill up and empty out. I am afraid to move. No

string pulls me to him so I move myself step by step closer. The strings all call to me to let myself fall into each one of their memories, but I pull back against them. I keep myself moving toward him and the noise of the hundreds of strings falls silent. I am at his bed side with silent strings. Why are they silent? Is it Angelo? Is it being close to him? They don't tell me. They do not speak only hang there in the gold light quietly. It almost scares me to hear nothing but myself wondering.

Inside of me I feel something that does not come thought the strings. It is light and wide and deep. It is like I am filled and there is no place it does not fill. It is joy. I am at Angelo's bedside with quiet strings filled with something I never thought would come back to me. I am near tears; he is peaceful, calm, and quiet. My mind can only ask me why, and I can only let its voice echo back to me. Is this why the old man needs him? It must be it has to be? On his chest right above his heart is a scar. I am not sure if it is the light or if its real but his chest looks like a pit. Inside one single glowing string is wriggling softly. It is stretching towards me wriggling to reach me. I feel a pull, but it is not my strings. This pull came from me. I wanted to touch it. I wanted to see if it would pull me or if I would pull it. I stretched out my hand and the string stretched hard towards me. I felt it in my hand and pulled. Angelo screams in bed and looks at me wild eyed.

“De Kevin , De Kevin! No. Why?” His face is twisting in pain, and then it twists past pain, past hurt. It twists until the corners of his mouth bend up to his forehead. It twists, cracks, and curls up like it is burning and melting away. It falls in pieces until there is nothing but the thing that rode with me in the ambulance. It is crawling toward me looking at me with what should have been a face, screaming where there should have been a mouth.

Clear blue strings struggle to climb out of pit in his face. He is bleeding them out on to the floor. They spill out in piles and shoot like they are alive across the room, past my feet, under the door, through the walls, and out onto the street. They wrap around telephone cords and shoot off far where I can't see them. They spill out like water into the room and in an instant the room is filled and I am pressed against his door. Angelo's rosary digs into my back and I can't help the small prayer that leaks out my mouth, the door groans with the weight of Angelo's stings. I can feel a few dig into my skin down into my bones and pull me like I had never been pulled before.

There are so many memories, faces, names, quiet nights, silent moments, weepy funeral tears, so much boredom, love, hate, deep endless peace of lifetimes of success and moments of silence. They dig into me and I can't believe that he is just like me. Angelo is screaming harder and harder and my ears trickle down little streams of red onto the blue strings that fill up the room. They keep tumbling out like there is no end to them. I can't see the thing that was Angelo any more. I can't help but think he is drowning underneath these strings gasping like I am gasping as the blue strings cover my mouth, my nose, my ears, my eyes. I am drowning in Angelo. So many people fill up my mind. There is a city living in Angelo's head, maybe even a country. A million voices and memories cry out all at once for me to take them in and be with each one. I want to scream the pain of every one of the hurts that lived in Angelo's strings. They hit just as hard as every strand of happiness lifts me up. It is insanity, painful up and down insanity that stuck inside of me and would not let go.

I am hurting, but Angelo's screams told me about something far deeper than pain something realer than what I had. I finally understood what the old man had told me.

Angelo was the knot, the center; he was tied into so many people so much of what they were was him and none of them knew that he could feel for them. He and I were drowning in them. My eyes fluttered and the world went dark around me.

“A voice speaks to me. You've got to stop passing out like this, De Kevin.”

“I'm glad to see you're alive. It's been two days. I didn't know how I was going to explain a dead kid in my room. You got to admit that would have looked more than just a little bad.” Angelo says to me. I am lying face up on his bed. The sun creeps in across the room from the open window. It laid itself against the lumpy cottage cheese ceiling of Angelo's room. Angelo is standing over me. The sun lights up his face and it makes me sick that it made him look like some kind of Angel standing there in the sunshine.

“Last time we were in a room like these both of us ended up with bloody lips.”

“Yeah and last time you wanted to lie so bad you fought me for it, Angelo.”

“You lose as many people as I have to these strings and we'll see how open and honest you are; but then you were never open or honest were you?”

“This isn't about me.”

“You're right it's about both of us and everyone before us, and dreams and fears and all those memories from everyone else, poking at you to pay attention.

I have strings just like yours and they let me know the things that I and you know we don't want to know.”

“What you do to me!”

“I didn't do anything Kev, you did everything. You touched one of my strings. Think about it. You already have so many people tied to you. How many more do you

think I have? You had the weight of the whole city on your mind. You aren't strong enough to handle that kind of burden just yet."

"I knew you knew, Angelo. I saw it in your eyes at the hospital."

"Did it hurt you?"

"What?"

"Did it hurt you when I lied to you? Did it hurt when Theo pushed you away?"

"What you think? Don't you know?"

"No Kev, I don't. You are the only person in this city who I am not tied to. So when I ask you did it hurt I need you to tell me if it did."

"Yes, it hurt like hell."

"Good. That's your hurt, your emotion, your memory not anybody else. You better love it. First thing you are going to learn from me is that people like us can't keep. We can't have what we want so you might as well let go of it. Your dreams are just as dead and gone as your friend. It's better if you don't keep to many people like him in your life."

"You can't judge Theo on what he did to Robby."

"What about you? Could I judge him on what he did to you? That's the trick with these strings. You're inside someone else so much you forget that you need to take care of yourself. You forget that you matter. No I can't say he didn't get back what he gave out, but it's not because of what he did to Robby. It's because of what people like that can do to you."

"I just want to know why you told him."

"I told him to get him away from you, Kev. The less you have to do with this

world the better.”

“You think you understand me just because you have strings?”

“You know that I do. If I didn't you would have never tried to reach out to me at the hospital.”

“Theo told me you showed him what we see. You know a lot more about these strings.”

“I know what you know, Kev. I know that for some reason we can't get rid of them. The whole world walks around thinking they feel. They think they really care about each other. If they could feel like us you think they would just look over so many people?”

“I don't care about the world. I have it in my head every day.”

“Is that why you're hiding in this church?”

“Everything has a way in this world. We get to see everything. There is no filter on our minds. We see everything, we lose everything.” Angelo walks to the door and takes his rosary from the hook that had pressed into my back.

“When I was in the orphanage I use to pray so hard that whoever gave me these strings would take me away; every night I would pray, just take me away; take me away, so I don't have see all of their memories. Do you sleep well at night, Kev?”

“Sometimes.”

“You're a lot better off than I was at your age.” Angelo smiles weakly at me curling the rosary around his thin fingers.

“When I came in you seemed to be sleeping pretty good.” I say to him. His body moves with little shakes that signal a smothered laugh.

"I wasn't sleeping. You really are a lot better off than I was. Do you have them at night, the little tugs from other people's strings?"

"No, not really, only a little."

"They'll get stronger. If they don't pull on you in the day they pull on you at night, the longer you live the more there are, the more they pull you in every direction. Until there's not too much of you left up here." He points to his head and rubs the flat of his palm across the thin wrinkles of his forehead.

"You start to fade away from here and move to there to let the old man go so he can travel on and you can take his spot. That's what's waiting for you, and me. One day we're going to be sitting under that little sun with whole world looking away from us."

"Who is he? The old man I mean?"

"His name was John Grace. He was a father of three in Cincinnati. He's the old man that stands in-between here and there in between the way people act and what they do. He is the one who told me what I was, just like I am going to be the one to tell you who you are, he's just like us. He said that there are always two here and one there."

"Where's he now?"

"He was here, and now he's there, simple."

"What? Why do we have to be the ones? Why can't the rest of the world carry their own strings? Who set it up this way?"

"I don't know, Kev?"

"Well who does?"

"Nobody, not even the old man. It's always been this way."

"He was here and now he's there. We don't get to stay here, Kev one day I'm

going to be there and you're going to be there. That's why you are better off alone, trust me. Family, friends, whatever, it's just a whole lot easier and better that we don't get to keep'em . It makes it that much easier to leave when we got to."

"What if I want to stay? What if I don't want these strings?"

"You know they don't go away, Kev. You can try to run from it if you want , but eventually, one day, it will be too much for you to carry. You'll have too many strings. You felt the weight of mine and that's why you can't stand now. One day it's going to be too heavy for me and those strings are going to pull me apart right out of this city and this world. They will put me back together in that place. That will be me one day, and it will be you one day."

"Who the hell are we?"

"We are the reason the rest of the world gets to go on not feeling. We are the only ones who really get to, Kev. We get to really feel."

"I never wanted to feel like this."

"Nobody ever does. This ain't easy!"

"John use to tell me once upon a time all humans had strings. He said we all were connected. We all were tied together and my heart beat just for you and your heart beat just for me. He said we were one blood and one body. He told me that together we could not die because if there was a sickness that could kill you, me or someone else surely had a cure. He would sit with me after church sometimes and say look at me I'm old and I will die, but when we were together we could not die. We could only live, strong, and happy. We weren't held together by money, faith, or family. We were held together one to the other with knots called love that were so intertwined we thought we could never

break them but, we are not together any more, are we? We could not stay together. We could not keep the knots tied and so we fell apart. We looked around and said you you're yellow, and you you're paler than the others so you must be white, and you the pieces that look like you landed there so you are lesser and you you're this and the you your that began. We divided and cut each other down with our eyes and our minds to little pieces and we hated what we saw; we hated, and we cried. The knots were gone and the strings were broken. We forgot about them and each other, but there are a few of us who the knots hang onto. We can feel the way humans are meant to feel."

"It's a nice story, Angelo."

"It's more than a story, Kev."

"You think that's the way it really happened?"

"No, but it's all I got. Maybe that's enough to make it a little bit more"

"In your book maybe."

"That's the only one that matters sometimes. What if we could give the strings back? What if we could make that story real? What if we made everyone else carry the strings like they were suppose to?"

"How are you going to do that Angelo?"

"I already started one string at a time, one person at a time. Your friend was the first person I've done it to. I've been with him for a long time now, since he first came to the shelter. I experimented over and over trying to break the strings. Let me ask you something; have you been able to feel him since you saw him in the other world?"

"No."

"Exactly, No, No, No, one less voice in your head and it's because of me that you

can't hear it."

"Don't play with me Angelo how do you do it? How do you break the strings?" Angelo lifts up the mattress I'm laying on. My body curls and moves as he digs under the bed.

"What the heck are you doing?" He doesn't respond he just keeps digging until I can hear him groaning and a rattling. He come back from beneath the bed holding a stained cardboard box that looks like it should have been thrown out a long time ago.

He brings the box next to where I am laying on the bed and opens it in front of me.

Inside the box is filled with pieces of books, keys, car parts, pens pictures, doorknobs rings and pieces of everything.

"You're out of your mind! Your crazy aren't you?"

"You can leave if you want to Kev, but you know I'm the only other person like you, so you will just come back."

"Each of these is something in this world that holds onto a string. Maybe, I explained it wrong before. I don't really break the strings themselves, I just break them off and move them from a person, like myself, to an item that means something to the person whose string I want to break."

Angelo says memories hold emotions and it's the emotions that tie them together and make them important to each person. What you have to do is break that emotion and the best way to do that is break their hope. Hope is in every emotion. He tells me even in sadness there is the hope that it will end. You break the hope and the string will fall apart

and then you can tie it to something else. He says it has to be an important

something to the person, a something with just as much meaning.

The first string I ever break is a thin little one that seems to want my attention. I hold it softly in my mind and it pulls me in. All around me an open clear summer day moves in the still of its own peace. In the distance a little girl rides a horse. Next to me sitting on ground is the owner of this memory. He is a man with a heavy face covered in hard lines carved out from years of work. He seems out of place with so much peace around him that the pain he carries is obvious. It seems to hang around his neck and make him hunch over onto himself. He holds a locket with a picture of woman who looks so much like the girl on the horse. His name is Jonathan, and today I have to break his hope.

The string lets go of me and I follow it across the city to the police station where he works. I watch him move from home to work for a week to learn his schedule. He moves with a limp in his uniform in the mornings. I wonder if it had been that leg that kept him seated in his memory so far away from his little girl. I wonder where she is now as he shuffles from his car, to his desk, and around the busy station.

A loose window lets me in to his world. His family pictures covering the walls remind me of my home, the way it was. Their face smiles back at me clutching the locket in my hand as I climb out the window. A day later I cannot feel him. The string is broken and his voice falls out of my mind. Angelo tells me that I have to remember them at least. He says even if they may have dug into our lives we should at least remember them and what they are going through. I tell Angelo that I have remembered too much of what other people go through. He tells me never to forget it. He says if I try to some part of me will always make them stay.

I notice it in little things like the way somebody loads the parking meter, the way people breathe when they sit near each other at the bus stop, the way the cars rumble, the way the birds fly, and the way the breeze dies. People don't realize that a city can move. They don't see that it has arms, legs, and sometimes, sometimes it has a heart. When I break my strings the city always moves different in little ways that show me the heart is going out of everyone and everything. I'm at the church more than ever to talk to Angelo. We talk about our families mostly. He says to remind him not to cut their strings. I tell him mine had been cut for me. He tells me we never have a choice. I hate him for a moment when he tells me that. I know we have a choice; with every snap of these strings we have a choice.

In the quiet of my days and nights I learn to like the closeness of myself and the echo of my own words in my mind. The stiffness of my own body waking in the middle of the night, and the thinning patches of strings all over me. I mark each one as a day closer to me being, just being, single, standing on my own like everyone else. Sometimes, it seems a little odd to be close to myself in the silence of your own mind, but the quieter I get the louder the city gets. Sometimes, I can't hear my own thoughts in my head. I can feel them pressing up against each other and I wonder what they could ever really do there pushed between my skull and the noise. Sometimes, I want the voices, the memories, the feelings to come back, and I feel alone in the streets swollen fat with cars and people talking in a thousand different words. They make one language that I don't know. It blurs all the noises together and I am left out. My voice feels so little in my throat.

Angelo breaks so many of his strings in a few months that he tells me he feels

human for the first time in more years than he wants to think about. I don't want to tell him I feel a little less human and little more than nothing. It makes him happy to be free of the strings and his spot in that other world. I can't blame him for his happiness, but I already am in another world, a world without my strings.

I am on the corner of 69th and Cottage Grove. The voices of kids getting of the C.T.A heading home in the thick crowd of black and brown faces stings my ears. The bus blows a thick black cloud of exhaust that spreads into a million pieces of black specks that fade in and out of the wind. Theo comes into my mind and I think it is the first time I put him there myself. There is no pull from his string; there are only the dead pieces of my memory that blink in an out. I play with the order of our time together. I move his face around to different places in my memory and each time it is a little harder to remember the little things about it. I forget what his ears look like and the ones I can remember make me sick with their out of place curves. My gut turns over and over on itself the more I think of Theo. I need a space to forget him in, like the city's bodies and buildings made me out of sight and mind. The quicker my stings go quiet and the longer they stay that way. I know this place and these people never knew me.

Another week slides by. My days are so long and quiet. A part of me hates the dullness of my life now. Chicago is a different. I never thought quiet could just hang over a place. It presses down on my head reminding me I'm making myself forget the noise underneath, but no matter how silent I make the city to myself with every broken string the circle at St. Marquise's gets louder.

"Anybody else noticing how crazy it's getting out there. How many has it been this week?" Cecil's voice breaks in over the murmurs of the circle.

I can only feel a few of their strings now. I have cut so many of them off from me. I have to look at them to see the worry rolling around in Cecile's blue eyes. It seems so long since I looked at the people in the circle. I know they are close to my age. I know they are from all over. I know some of them speak three languages, some are loud, some are quiet, but all of them sort of look like me. I know they dream big, stupid kind of funny dreams. I know they wake up to live in the real. I've stopped dreaming. My mind is slowly getting empty and I don't know if I like my empty dreams. I know all of them had always been there. It's just I never really look at them

"Twenty by last count," says Alex trying to count the number again on his fingers.

"Twenty! Dead in a week! Stuff is getting bad." says Cecil

"What are you talking about? Stuff has always been bad, it stays that way" I say.

They look a little shocked when I speak and for a moment the conversation hangs in a brief moment of silence that Alex quickly breaks.

"Not like this. This is different I'm telling you!"

"He's right you know It stays this way. This ain't nothing new"

"It don't matter if it ain't new or not. Twenty murders is twenty murders. It's like folks don't care no more."

"Did they ever?" says another voice.

"I don't care they need to!" says the circle.

"Somebody want to keep it this way." another voice from the circle calls out.

"Oh, here we go again with this again. Somebody's always keeping you down." another responds.

"You think I'm crazy because I think it's that way, but you're crazy if you don't.

You know they never gave a damn about us and never will.”

“I hear it’s so bad that even the north burbs are having trouble.”

“Really? Wow, Hell is freezing over I guess.”

“City can’t stop it, major can’t stop it, cops can’t stop it, and hell Obama can’t stop it.”

“You make it sound like we shouldn’t even try.”

“Should we? I heard some politician on T.V. say they working to solve the problem. We always working, and nothing changes nothing moves. You think it’s ever going to get better for folks like us? We don’t matter. We got to matter to everyone first then things will change.”

“That’s no reason to not. If you want to just die you go find a place to. I don’t plan on dying yet.”

“I don’t know. The people seem like they got less going on, inside them, you know?”

“What you mean?”

“It’s more than when they look past you. Sometimes, I get the feeling as of late that it’s more than that.”

“It happens all over. Don’t matter what the neighborhood is, folks don’t care.”

Angelo lets the conversation spiral on. I stop trying to throw in my voice. The circle bounces ideas around about why life here is stuck. I focus my attention on Angelo. He seems happy despite the stories of weeks of life the circle gives out. He sits back and lets the words roll together until the circle is arguing with itself. He lets the arguing go on until dinner time. I see him briefly walking though the cafeteria. I can see the emptiness

creeping in his eyes. His face looks like mine. Most of my strings are gone, but I can still hear their stories in my ears cutting just as deep as their strings did. Maybe, it had all backed up like a sink and spilled over out of their mouths. Nobody had seen their dreams or felt what they felt. Nobody knew them. Things had just piled up. Now, I can hear it all spilling out of every open mouth; every mouth saying everything I worked so hard not to see.

“They got Theo” a voice breaks out from the doorway into the cafeteria. The room shifts, chairs and tables scratch on the linoleum floor, and footsteps fall over each other out into the hallway. They rumble until they reach the small T.V. perched in the corner of the janitor’s closet. We press together around its flickering, discolored, pink and blue gray screen. It made the reports look like aliens blinking blankly back out at us. Voices raise, people shove, I don’t need to, and the words come to my ears easily. My body stops working like it needs every part of me to pay attention and understand what the newscaster is saying. The words bounce against the walls of the closet and out in to the hall and echo back to me.

Tonight on the lower south side at the intersection of 74th and Stony Island police fired and killed a homeless man and woman. The man, believed to be responsible for the murder of seventeen year old Robert Hughes at the St. Markees homeless shelter earlier this month was reported as being violent toward officers who then quote “ had no recourse but to fire” resulting in the accidental death of the young woman.

The story changes and the newscasters begin to talk about a new city park project in the same stiff voices. I look for Angelo. He is nowhere to be found. The little crowd around the T.V shouts about the lies from the T.V. I don’t yell, I don’t cry, I just keeping

pushing through the raised voices and red eyes until I get to the stairs that lead to Angelo's room. His room is empty and the rosary that normally hangs on the back of his door is gone. I move toward the church. The lights are out, but the door is open. I press my hand to the knob. The light tries to follow me in and falls short a few feet in front of me. I see him face down at the altar rolling the beads through his hand. Angelo doesn't move. He just keeps his face pushed into the floor rattling through each one of his beads. I walk over next to him and sit in the pew just short of the altar.

"You get an answer yet? He's never in when I call him." I say to him. He jumps a little when he hears my voice, but doesn't get up.

"Theo and Shawnee are gone. I know I should care Angelo. I know I should give a damn that they're gone, but if I was going to tell you the truth right now, I don't."

Angelo stops rolling the beads and looks at me. The white of his eyes clear in the dim light of the church.

"I use to be able to cry for people like them. I use to be able to find it sad, you know, I use to be able to remember the faces of everyone who was suffering at the end of my strings. I use to be able to feel every little part of them, good or bad. I knew them, all of them. It use to really mean something to me that I could. It meant the most to me when they died and could say the whole rest of the world left them alone in whatever place they were, but I was there with them."

"The more I do the more I wonder if he really is up there." Angelo says back to me in a voice that stuck in my ears with the tears that I knew were falling quietly with them.

"Stop wondering. We have to live, not wonder Angelo."

“You know all of this. It’s because of us, and I know it all has to be. Way of the world, right? Somebody’s always got to suffer, right? Somebody’s always go to hurt, right? If it’s not us it’s everyone else and if it’s everyone else we suffer anyway.”

I remember, I had a string pull me into it once. It belonged to a man who is 103. He is praying for death and right next door he knows that his family is praying for him to live. They say desperate men pray the best and on the floor of the church at St. Marquise Angelo prayed even better. I watch him whisper to the air a heaven full of “Hail Mary” and “father forgive,” that I hope go farther than me.

The sun breaks out from St. Peter’s upside down, stain glass, face on the cross. Angelo murmurs little prayers from a dry mouth and I fight to pull the words “*This is because of us*” out of the corner of my mouth. The night is gone and my body doesn’t even feel the hours that it never rested. Angelo fidgets on the floor and twists his body for the first time in hours to look at me as I stand up from the pew.

“You running away?” he says to me.

“You know I got to get out of here during the day.”

“You know, we can’t run from this, Kev.”

“Praying or walking, either way we both been trying to get away from what we know we have to do Angelo. It’s just I’m a little more ready than you to do it.”

“I know. Maybe you’ve been ready this whole time and I been the one helping you run.”

“I wouldn’t have cut my own strings if you were helping me run. I did that myself, Angelo.”

“For a moment, we were like everyone else, weren’t we?”

“Way of the world, Kev. Nothing lasts. Some things are never the way you want them to be because for some reason, no matter how unfair, they have to be, Kev.”

“I got to be and you got to be, but we don’t got to be the same way.”

“No we don’t Kev, no we don’t.”

“So how are we going to do this? How are we going to set this back to the way it needs to be?”

“Simple, we cut them so we got to put the strings back.”

“Can we do that?”

“I don’t know, but like you said we don’t got to be the same way, not like we were before. That means all of us even the folks outside of here, and I don’t plan on just letting them sit back.”

Angelo flips the mattress up against his window and digs an old box.

“Every string has something solid, something meaningful, that it ties itself and its memories to. I’ve never let go of them, De Kevin. I’ve kept every string, every memory, every person, right here in this room. I’m sure if either one of us were to reach in this box those strings would hold onto us just as tight, and all this would just go back to the way it was, but that’s not good enough. It never was, and it never is.”

“We just can’t be the only ones, I don’t care if it’s the way of the world or God or anybody, and we can’t be the only ones this time.”

“No we won’t be, that’s why we are going to give them a chance to feel, that’s why we are going to give them each other’s strings, and each other’s memories, and just plain each other. Maybe that will help.”

“I’m sick of help. I just want this to change, all off this, every part of my life. I

just want it to change.”

“There is project lost coin.”

“I told you before I’m not going into your program, Angelo.”

“What else do you got at this point, Kev. I know you may not believe this, and I know you have a heart load of reasons, but I care about what happens to you. After I’m gone I don’t want to just leave you struggling out on the street! You have to promise me that after I’m gone you will go into the program. It’s worthless if we give this whole city its heart back and you’re in same spot.

“I won’t be, Angelo because the city will be in my spot.”

I know what waits for Angelo if we do what we know we have to do. The dark world with the little sun dims the brightness of the thin smile that he tries to throw at me from across the room. I know when people try to dodge their emotions and put pity in the place of pain or joy in the place of fear. I think that is one of the craziest things people do. I watch the pigeons sometimes on The Mile. Birds fly away when they are scared. They make all the sense in the world and people, we laugh.

“You afraid, Angelo?”

“I use to know everything about everyone and I was afraid then. Now, I got nothing but this quiet sitting around me.”

“ Angelo, I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know what’s going to happen to you and me when we do this.”

“ Kev, you know. I know you know, but this is all we can do, this is all I can do, but when we do it, it’s going to be in our way. I don’t know why or how we are the way we are, we just are.

“You ready?”

The box rattles with sound of the city’s memories, dreams, loves, and fears as we carry it down from Angelo’s room. Angelo’s arm is shaking, I look at mine and it is moving back and forth vibrating against the side of my body. We carry the city out onto the street and walk towards the close-set buildings and smell of onions, and the scream of cars, and the cracked concrete and bullet marks, and the old spots of blood that won’t wash off. We are standing on the concrete island with the city in a box. The rivers of cars flow around us just like before.

The first steps onto the crosswalk feel like I am on glass, slick, fragile, glass. Angelo is next to me looking up at the red signal. We do not cross all the way; we are standing in the middle of Stony Island Avenue as the green signal flashes. The horns blast at us and for the first time I feel like somebody sees me. Even if they are cursing at me at least they see me and even if it is just for this moment, if it is just long enough to do what we need to do, I love it. I can smell the onions in the air and the smoke as traffic crawls around us and chokes itself off until it can’t move and a piece of this city has to look at us. Angelo looks at me for a moment and I know he is saying good bye. We set the box on the ground and both put our hands into it. Angelo grabs my hand. He is shaking as the strings grab on and dig into their familiar deep places in both of us.

I see it at first in truck driver’s wide eyes. It is fear. He can see the strings moving through us. The noise of horns and voices slowly dies and they are silent watching the strings for the first time. I look at Angelo and he is no longer there. All that I can see are the strings that wrap themselves against what I know was once his body. Angelo is gone but the strings stay behind, a whole city of strings that holds on to my hand like Angelo

did. I have everyone around me, a whole city in my hand. The city looks back and has no idea what I'm feeling, but I will make them feel it. I will let them know what we carry for them. I am, but I am the way I want to be. I grip the strings that were Angelo's hand and throw them at the crowd. They spread everywhere stretching off into the sky off, falling short to the people in front of me, and twisting through the crowd of cars and bodies to find a single person to dig into.

I notice it at first in voices, in faces, in silence, in news reports, and in the lake breeze. Chicago has changed. I watch the news for the first time since Theo died. I don't think the news was longer than ten minutes. They see each other now and they will never be able not to. I don't know if Angelo's story was real, but I made it real. I do not know what is waiting on me until the day the strings pull me away, but I know I will be the way I want to be.