

Des Moines Area Community College Open SPACE @ DMACC

Expressions

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2010

Expressions 2010

Amanda Rhoads

Lyndsey A. Wetzel

Fung Ming Ma

Michael D. Jeffries

Allison Cramer

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Amanda Rhoads, Lyndsey A. Wetzel, Fung Ming Ma, Michael D. Jeffries, Allison Cramer, Kevin Clark, David Geiger, Benjamin T. Rittgers, Michelle Gray, Caleb Nelson, Russell Luke, Christopher E. Lowe, and Steven Patrick Fisher



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Table of Contents

“Indecent” --Amanda Rhoads, Poem First Prize	3
“The Lottery” --Lyndsey A. Wetzel, Overall Winner	4
“Divorce” --Fung Ming Ma, Poem Second Prize	13
“With Dedication” --Michael D. Jeffries, Honorable Mention	14
“Crescendo” --Allison Cramer, Honorable Mention	17
“The Red Bird” --Kevin Clark, Story Second Prize	18
“A Masquerade” --David Geiger, Honorable Mention	21
“Parking My Fears”--Benjamin T. Rittgers, Story Third Prize	22
“Skittle Brain” --Michelle Gray, Honorable Mention	26
“Pink and Orange” --Caleb Nelson, Story First Prize	27
“The Nightside”--Russell Luke, Overall Runner Up	32
“Shadows Cast by Objects in the Light” --Christopher E. Lowe, Poem Third Prize	51

“Indecent” - Amanda Rhoads

Sexing dragonflies get right to the point

Chivalry flies out the window and

Lands on the top of your lemon meringue

It is a fool, sweaty and fumbling.

A bird, a bee, a lonely flea, the yard

Is a yoga mat. The girl in your class

On fire in the downward dog.

Parts, wrenches, wings, matches

A pair of old flames ignite and burn

Bonfires. Diseases die out, too much

Love. But love of the game, the hussy

The puppet, the few that can master his craft.

His doll. Ashes, bone, core revealing, proud and tall.



“The Lottery” - *Lyndsey A. Wetzel*

“What do you mean, ‘she quit’?”

Maggie’s boss stared down at Ian with brutal eyes. Ian sipped his coffee. It reminded him of filtered battery acid.

“She quit. Or, I assume she quit. She left town this morning.”

“Why didn’t she say nothin’ about it?”

“Doubt anyone explained to her a two-week notice,” Ian replied.

The Sunshine Diner was still swarming with the Sunday church crowd even though there was a blizzard outside. The door mat was drenched and useless on the floor; the linoleum was streaked with gray slushy footprints.

Despite the weather, inside, the diner was warm, cheerful. People were pleasant, smiling with sincerity as they ate with their families. The smell of browning pancakes, melting butter, maple and sugar was overwhelming. Too sweet for Ian’s mood, he inhaled his mug of battery acid.

“Damn! That little ‘tard was the best table-busser I’ve ever had,” Maggie’s boss shook his head in disappointment.

Ian smiled at the grumpy man, “I’m sure she was.”

Two weeks earlier, Ian had sat in the same spot.

“Is Maggie off yet?” he asked a passing waitress.

“Nope, as you can probably tell, the place is still a mess from rush. She’s still got about twenty tables to bus. Shouldn’t take her too long though,” the young brunette pointed to the far corner while balancing a stack of cloth napkins in her arm, “she’s over by table 50.”

“Okay, let her know I’m here?”

The waitress nodded and walked off briskly enough for Ian to smell her perfume, rose water and citrus, in the breeze she created. His teenage eyes couldn’t help risking a feast of her frame. She looked back just as his eyeballs had thoroughly devoured her cheeks.

Ian drove his focus to the pile of newspaper sitting on the counter in front of him. He hated the filmy feel the print left on his fingers but thumbed through it anyways. When he was sure the waitress had stopped glaring at him, he turned his head to find Maggie. He liked to watch her work; it was a time where he could look into her life without getting involved.

Maggie was bussing tables in her uniform. Today, she was wearing an old pair of Ian’s jeans, a sunshine yellow t-shirt, and a petunia-print grandma-sweater with her nametag pinned above her heart. A hat was mandatory at the Sunshine Diner, Maggie’s blue Cubbies hat clashed gracefully with her outfit. She had her fine blonde hair pulled through the back of the cap in a messy ponytail. Although Maggie’s round face looked perpetually childish, her blue eyes aged her. They were slanted and slightly scarred from two reconstructions, but they were wise and clear as glass.

Maggie was listening to her iPod. Ian could sense discomfort from some of the surrounding tables. She sang to herself which made a few of the tables stare. Ian liked when people felt uneasy around Maggie; she wasn’t hurting anyone, and they got a taste of the discomfort she felt every time that she walked into a room full of normal people.

Ian looked back down to the newspaper. A bolded box with the words “WIN \$5000!” caught his attention. In smaller print, the advertisement explained that by writing an essay detailing why you deserved the money, you could win \$5000 from a local, too-wealthy philanthropist.

Ian determined that he would write an essay about his trials and tribulations with Maggie. He would divulge his hardships in riding the short bus with her to school, the speech impediment he developed as a kid from mimicking her, his confusion in wanting to excel but not wanting her to feel lesser, and ultimately, his pride in having her as his sister.

Ripping the ad from the paper, Ian felt fairly confident. Who could reject a story about a disabled girl and her brother, Ian thought. He would split the money with Maggie; she needed it.

She was nineteen and had been working at the diner for over a year so that she could move out of their parents' house. They had offered many times to pay for an apartment for her, but Maggie, more than anything, wanted to feel independent.

Ian, currently, wasn't working. His parents paid for anything school-related, and extra chores around the house supplied him socializing money. He didn't see the point of having a job, but \$2500 would be nice.

Yes, an extra \$2500 would definitely help get Mags on her feet, and she wouldn't mind if it came from me, Ian thought. He folded the ad and placed it in the breast pocket of his plaid shirt. He smiled broadly at Maggie when she caught his eye.

The next day, Ian sat at his computer, face paled from the harsh white of the blank document in front of him. The essay was not coming along as easily as he'd thought it would.

* * * * *

When Maggie barged into his room, he had been working on a mind map, with the word "memories" circled many times. Lines extended from the circle, with phrases like "time I learned to drive—Maggie said 'my turn'" and "family game night—Maggie always won" highlighted.

Maggie walked in and marched directly to Ian's desk. She pulled open his drawer of art supplies.

"Uh... Mags?" Ian was annoyed.

She grabbed his box of high-quality PrismaColor pencils and began to walk away.

"Maggie! What are you doing?" Ian raised his voice.

"Coloring," Maggie replied.

"There's Crayolas in the hall closet. Those are really expensive, Maggie; put them back."

"But..." Maggie started.

"Maybe if you'd actually asked instead of just taking them. Put them back, Maggie."

She just looked at the floor. Ian treaded to her, snatched the box of colored pencils from her and put

them away. He sat back down. He could see her eyes brimming. She stormed out, slammed the door and stomped down the stairs. Ian could hear her complaining to their mother in the kitchen.

Ian just chuckled. She'd given him some fresh inspiration. Within an hour, he had the essay printed and waiting patiently in the mail box for tomorrow's pick up. The philanthropist also had far too much time on his hands; in just a week, Ian would know the outcome of the contest.

When they couldn't sleep, they would turn the TV on and off. If the other was still awake, he or she would do the same in return. This happened at least once a week.

* * * * *

In the mean time, life went on as normal. At 7:50, Ian arrived ten minutes before Maggie's shift was over. He sat, parked in the almost empty lot of the Sunshine Diner. Drumming on the steering wheel, he listened to the words of the song that spilled out of his speakers,

There is no reconciliation that will put me in my place

And there is no time like the present to drink these draining seconds

But seldom do these words ring true when I'm constantly failing you

He let his mind wander and walk 'til it was tired and empty. He dreaded the coming winter, hungered for a burger and yearned for a woman's body. He slept, dreaming of frantic free-fall and the panic of impact on the hard oncoming ground.

Knuckles on glass startled him awake. Bewildered, he saw Maggie's anguished face in the passenger window. He unlocked the door.

"Hey—what time is it?" Ian asked.

"Eight thirty."

"Oh, Jesus, Maggie I'm so sorry. I fell asleep. I've been here the whole time."

"Whatever," Maggie shivered from the cold, late-autumn air, "let's go."

Ian tried to put the car in gear, but it wouldn't budge. He knew that he'd stupidly fallen asleep with the car running. The music playing now was running on battery power.

"Oh shit," Ian said. He felt horrible.

"What?" Maggie asked.

"We're out of gas," Ian muttered. "We can try to call Dad for a ride or—"

"Call Dad," Maggie demanded.

"Alright," Ian said, pulling out his cell phone and dialing. The phone rang once then went straight to their dad's voicemail.

"It's Wednesday," Ian thought out loud, "he's probably working late. We're gonna have to go get a gallon or two ourselves."

Maggie groaned. "Okay. Let's go," she said.

It was only five blocks, but their walk was silent besides crunching leaves. Maggie listened to her iPod the whole time. She did not sing.

When they arrived at the gas station, Ian turned to Maggie.

"I don't have any cash on me. I'll pump if you pay?"

Maggie rolled her eyes, "Whatever."

Maggie walked into the gas station while Ian set up the gas can and waited for the "pre-paid" signal to flash on the monitor. He waited a minute, then two. It was taking too long. He peered into the glass door of the gas station. He could see vivid annoyance on the cashier's face and near helplessness in Maggie's body language.

Ian knew instantly what was going on. To the trained ear, Maggie was normally fairly easy to understand. But the girl refused to look strangers in the face, looking directly down when she spoke. That made it twice as difficult for an un-trained ear to comprehend what Maggie was saying.

Regardless, a few seconds later, the transaction was completed. Maggie walked out looking disheveled.

"You okay?" Ian asked sincerely.

Maggie nodded.

However, the glass door had a slight delay in closing. Ian heard the gas station attendant say to his co-worker, "Did you hear that freakin' retard?"

Ian sat up in bed around midnight. He'd heard the instant chatter of sound and he'd seen the flash of light from under the door. A couple seconds later, with a static-buzz, silence and darkness returned. It was his and Maggie's unspoken secret signal. When they couldn't sleep, they would turn the TV on and off. If the other was still awake, he or she would do the same in return. This happened at least once a week.

Ian hit the red power button on his remote, saw a glimpse of I Love Lucy, then hit it again.

He met Maggie in the kitchen a few minutes later. She was armed with a gallon of milk, Hershey's syrup and a spoon.

"Want some?" Maggie asked.

"Nah, that's okay," Ian said, "I'll go find something to watch."

Ian got comfortable on the couch and surfed through the channels, looking for cartoons. Maggie entered the room with two full glasses.

"Oh—thanks, Mags," Ian said.

"You're welcome," Maggie grinned in reply.

Without spilling a drop, Maggie curled up on the couch cushion with her favorite blanket. It was gray wool, dotted in a pattern of white sheep, and it probably hadn't been washed for twelve years.

Ian tossed a pillow at Maggie that hit her square in the face.

"Ouch!" she yelped.

"Shh! You'll wake Mom," he said.

They let Scooby-Doo fill the silence for several minutes. Ian wondered if it would be the farmer or his wife that was haunting the village.

"Hey, remember when we were really little and we'd come down here at night?"

"Uh huh," Maggie nodded.

"We'd fall asleep in weird places just to see if Dad would still carry us to bed. Your favorite spot was under the coffee table but I liked to hide behind the armchair. I could peek out and see when he was coming, and when he'd lean back to recline the chair, he'd almost smoosh me."

"Yeah," Maggie nodded again. Her cheeks were a rosy-blue from the glow of the television.

"When Dad started sleeping on the couch, he told us we had to fall asleep in our own rooms. You would sneak into my bed for awhile, until one day, Mom said we were too old for that. When you tried to come in the next night, I had to kick you out, and you didn't understand why. You started crying. You were so mad at me."

Maggie was silent.

"You remember that, Mags?"

Maggie looked away but nodded.

"And, on my tenth birthday, Mom let me have some friends over. We were wild all night 'til Mom made us go to bed at like one A.M. They all brought their sleeping bags and set them up on my bedroom floor. You tried to

sneak into my bed in the middle of the night, and you scared the heck out of my friends. I started yelling at you to get out, and Mom had to take you back to your room. I was so mad at you.”

The credits to the cartoon started rolling, dimming the light in the room.

Ian searched for Maggie’s eyes in the dark. “I’m sorry ‘bout that, Mags.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie replied.

Ian stayed up a good hour with Maggie before he passed out with his head on the armrest. When he woke up, no one had carried him to bed, but he was covered up with the sheep blanket.

* * * * *

That morning Ian heard his parents discussing Maggie, their voices drifted into the living room like smoke.

“Is she capable of living on her own?”

“If the fire alarm went off, would she hear it?”

“Would she be able to find rides to work, to the store?”

“She wouldn’t be living all that far from us.”

“Maybe, we should tell her to stay.”

“Of course, we should tell her she’s always welcome.”

“But, we do deserve a break.”

“Ian will be moving out for college soon too.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Of course, she will, she’s a strong girl.”

The voices moved out onto the front porch. Ian wondered if Maggie could hear them, with her room being just above the kitchen.

**Ian had been forced to break the news to his parents.
They asked him why he didn’t physically stop her.**

* * * * *

Ian spent most of the afternoon on the front steps with a hood over his head and his hands in his pockets. His feet jiggled anxiously. The weather was indecisive, sprinkling half rain and half snow every few minutes.

When Ian saw the mailman from down the block, he hurriedly met the man at the mail box by the end of their driveway.

“Good morning,” Ian smiled brightly.

“It will be when I get rid of all this mail!” The blue-clad man patted his messenger bag. “Here you go, young man,” he said, handing Ian the pile of assorted envelopes.

“Thanks, try to stay dry,” Ian replied, walking backwards towards the house. He was already thumbing through the bills.

“Aha,” he said, finally finding his name at the end of the pile. He decided he would stay outside to read the letter; running through the door with the \$5,000 check would have a better effect. He sat down on the bottom step, putting aside the pile of junk.

He opened the envelope meticulously and pulled out the letter that was folded into perfect thirds. Uncreasing the page, he laid it flat on his knees. The words looked far too brief, he read them aloud,

“Dear Mr. Ian Johnson,

Your essay about you and your handicapped sister touched all of us at the McGriffin Foundation. We regret to inform you that it was not the type of story we were looking for.

We hope this letter does not discourage you in future endeavors, and if there is anything else we can do for you, please, do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for participating!”

* * * * *

While Ian grieved his loss in his bedroom, Maggie knocked on the door.

“Yeah, come in,” Ian said.

She peaked her head into the doorway and held out a slip of paper. It was Friday, payday.

“You wanna go to the bank?” Ian asked her.

She nodded.

“Alright, I’ll peel myself out of bed,” he followed her out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Maggie took the stairs one at a time, while Ian mimicked the bend of knee and repetitious footfall patiently, one step behind her.

“You know I almost won us \$5,000...” Ian spoke while Maggie listened.

* * * * *

Early Sunday morning, Ian again heard the instant chatter of sound and the flash of light from under his door. Just as quickly, it was gone. Looking out his window, Ian saw the sky as a faded, dark denim. It was very, very early. He considered feigning sleep, but resolved to go downstairs, get Maggie comfortable, and then go back to bed. He clicked the power button twice.

Maggie was sitting at the kitchen table, fully dressed and sporting an overstuffed backpack.

"Hi," she said, looking at him directly.

"Maggie, why are you dressed? It's too early to be up, go back to bed," Ian said, yawning.

She held out his car keys, mouthing the word "please."

"Why?" he asked, puzzled.

Maggie looked down at her hands that were on the oak table top. Her fingers were spread wide, as though she was getting ready to stand.

"Surprise," she said, shrugging and smiling at him.

Intrigued, and maybe sensing the importance, Ian agreed. He scribbled a note to their parents and grabbed his coat.

* * * * *

A few hours later, Ian was sledging through half a foot of snow. When he pulled his hat down over his ears, he could smell on his hands the waxy scent of Crayola's. Maggie had given Ian a picture before she got on the bus, a portrait of them. He liked the effect of the crayons, solid and childish.

Ian had been forced to break the news to his parents. They asked him why he didn't physically stop her. He didn't have a good answer.

Ian finally made it to the door, the trek from the parking lot seemed like miles. Inside, the Sunshine Diner was warm and bustling. Ian tried to wipe his snowy shoes on the drenched door mat. He looked around and found Maggie's boss at the front counter.

He made a dash for the only empty seat at the counter, leaving a trail of grey slushy footprints behind him.

He sat on the stool and waved at Maggie's boss to catch his attention.

"Maggie won't be coming in to work today," he told the grumpy man.

“Divorce”

- Fung Ming Ma

sour notes, malice laced deeds
carelessly fired
between the pull, sacrificing innocence
expendable
some believe

walls erect to silent truths
of sculpted schemes and defaming lies
efforts to avert, the rape of title
as reason to legitimize
entitlement supersedes

but for protection
follow steps in accord
to blinded scales
documenting deeds and recordings
of that which must not be heard.





“With Dedication”

- *Michael D. Jeffries*

The cold linoleum cut into Alex from just above the right ankle to his right knee. His right temple burned from the carpet. His glasses seemed to have wandered slightly upwards and leftwards from their usual perch, skewing his vision. His arms screamed at him, wanting to, perhaps, go to his sides or lay out straight in front of him. They wanted to be anywhere but interlocked across his chest, as a signal that he would get his way. He was a petulant child of 35 years.

“Get off of the floor, and put some fucking pants on; we’re going to be late.”

“No, Theresa, you’re going to be late. I’ll be absent.”

Alex felt this was a poignant way to let Theresa know that he wouldn’t be accompanying her tonight. He has the higher moral ground. He’s right; she’s wrong. This simple sentence that he let loose upon the world is pure poetry, witty as usual.

Theresa felt all the last statement deserved was a swift connection of her foot to his head, and that Alex was just being a little prick, as usual.

“Jesus, it figures you’d strike out against me when I’m trying to hold a non violent protest.”

“I would hardly call you throwing a fit over dinner a nonviolent protest.”

“It is when all that’s available is cruelty.”

“Oh, boo hoo, there isn’t a vegetarian meal, and little Alex gets queasy if he so much as looks at a steak. Man up.”

“I’m queasy from thinking of an innocent animal’s life cut short just to fill someone’s gut.”

“Yeah, because a cow has a lot better things to do than be someone’s dinner. I bet it had a whole schedule full of eating, sleeping, and shitting.”

“It’s still one of God’s creatures.”

“I thought you were an atheist.”

“That doesn’t make my argument any less valid.”

“Sure, it doesn’t. So, what if I said that you shouldn’t eat, let’s say, a candy bar because my friend, let’s call him, Randy—whom I told you earlier that I made up—wanted to eat it? By your logic, if I said that, my argument wouldn’t be the slightest bit invalid, let alone borderline schizophrenic.”

“No matter how much you belittle my opinion, I’m still not going.”

“Why? Why in the world can’t you just do this for me after everything I’ve done for you? You don’t even have to eat the steak, just eat whatever sides come with it, and if you’re still hungry we can get a pizza or something.”

“All you’ve done for me? Are you talking about all the art shows I invite you to? All the art shows I let you come to?”

“I’d barely call those make out sessions, with all of your bosom boho buddies, art shows. Art shows have tasteful music, maybe some nice wine, some hor dourves, oh, yeah, and most important of all—art.”

“Wow, I never thought you for someone who thought of art in such a narrow sense.”

“My definition of art isn’t narrow if it doesn’t include diapers stapled to the wall, or a naked man screaming gibberish at a teddy bear.”

“Wow, someone doesn’t know how to recognize an analogy for the Vietnam War.”

“Fine, I guess I don’t. I’m going to go warm up the car, and if you’re not dressed when I get back, I’m leaving you.”

“When you say things like that, I wonder why we’re even together in the first place.”

“You don’t remember? It’s because we had one drunk night together, and you threatened to kill yourself if I didn’t go steady with you. It’s so romantic; I just can’t imagine how you could ever—“

“I didn’t say I would kill my self; I said I might cut myself. There’s a difference.”

“Fine, sure, there’s a difference. Just meet me in the car, or you can pack you’re shit and leave.”

“Fine.”

It wasn’t fine. It never was fine, never is fine, and never will be fine. The way she treats him is abysmal; Alex had been diagnosed with manic depression. It made no difference to him that the diagnosis came from browsing Wikipedia when he was supposed to be looking for a day job. He got up despite the pins and needles jabbing him all over the right side of his body like a heart attack that had lost its way. He needed to show her—needed to show her that it wasn’t fine.

Alex picked up the shaving razor and examined it, entranced by how ragged it was from disuse. It was soon to be a learning tool for Theresa, to show her how wrong she was and always has been, to make her feel bad, in general, really.

He placed it upon his neck.

“Wait, no, that’s too far.”

His forearm.

“Shit, no, that would be nuts.”

It wanders from hand to cheek. Bicep to chest. Temple. Back. Knee.

Knee.

“All right. Quick and Easy. Needs to be clean.”

Eyes closed tight. Teeth Clenched. Arm jerked. Flailing. Screaming. Tears welling up in eyes. All that good stuff.

Alex then opened his eyes to a disappointing lack of viscera upon viscera but simply the learning tool had somehow flung into the wastebasket next to the toilet, dry and covered in knee hair. Nonetheless, he was now exhausted and so decided to once again take up his non-violent protest. Now, though, his hand cradled his head. This led to his glasses remaining un-askew. This led to him seeing it, lodged in the gap between the sink cabinet and the wall—a package of blood capsules from last year’s Halloween costume. Or was it this year? Two years ago? The thoughts of which Halloween and even trying to remember what costume it was, or how the capsules ever even got there were worthless though, discarded on the floor as Alex bolted to his bedroom closet. Dress shirt. Tie. Watch. Jacket. Different socks. The black ones. Oh yeah, Pants. Shoes. Back to the bathroom. Alex pocketed the capsules as he started to bolt to the car, thinking up sincere apologies while images of what was to happen that night popped up in his mind. Women in fur coats. The disgusting dinner. The Blood capsules.

All that good stuff.

“Crescendo”

- Allison Cramer

The melody plays

Drifting along its melodic ways

Yet it is alone

It is a pretty little tune

But is not yet a song

Until the new notes gently join

Different, far from the same

If these new notes were alone

They would sound wrong

Sometimes pretty, sometimes not

But the new notes wrap themselves around

the melody

Higher, lower, they twist and glide

Joining the melody

Harmony

They flow, beautiful now

A song

Delightful

Mournful

Meaningful

Alive

It builds and builds

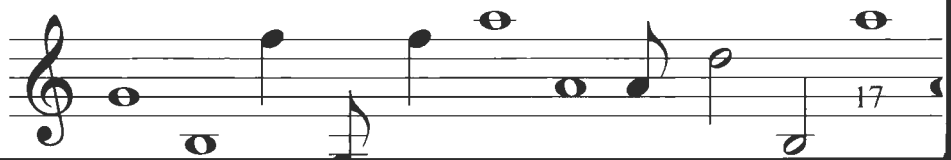
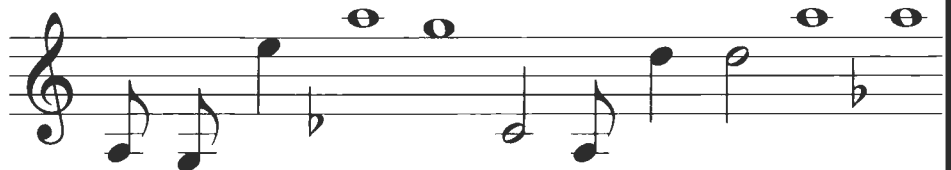
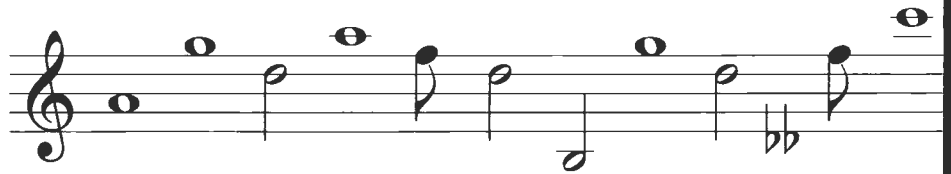
But suddenly it stops

A rest

The music aches to go ahead

Move on, let us continue to make our song

But the master musician waits





“The Red Bird” *- Kevin Clark*

My grandmother’s skin is as black as wet coal. It’s as if the sun that beat down on her grandparents’ skin, as they toiled in never-ending fields, had reached forward in time to sear her skin as well. Toothless and sagging, her face was a portrait of hard times that I will never know.

My mother told me that in her day, my grandmother was very pretty and many a man pursued her. Today, I can’t tell. I found her beautiful simply because she is my mother’s mother, though I wouldn’t expect you to agree.

It was a warm Sunday morning in rural southeast Arkansas when she awoke for her daily routine. She sat up in bed and lit her first cigarette in the five o’clock darkness. In a few short drags, it was done, and she was in the kitchen. She put two pots on the stove to boil. One for her morning coffee, the other for the rice she cooked every morning with her eggs.

From the living room, my great-grandmother called from her bed.

“Sister,” she called to my grandmother. “Uh, sister?”

“Ma’am?”

“Come take me to the pot.”

Ellen sat at the edge of her bed, making a feeble attempt to rise to her feet. I heard my grandmother’s heavy footsteps stressing the floorboards of our small shotgun house as she headed toward the living room. Ellen’s face was beaded with sweat, and her two long, grey-black braids dangled to her knees as she tried to push herself up.

Looking at them from across the room, I wondered how these two women could be related. My great-grandmother could have been the daughter of Sidney Poitier and Pocahontas-- my grandmother the daughter of Marcus Garvey and Harriet Tubman. The only thing that gave away their relation was the long faces indicative of native-American blood.

"You know, Mr. Pace comin' by here today?" My grandmother asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You should have the food ready by then."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, have him a plate ready too, sister."

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

They finished the business in the bathroom, and my grandmother went back to the kitchen. She slaved for hours in the heat, sweating and humming gospel songs to herself.

"You need any help grandma?" I asked.

"No, baby, I'm alright," she would say in her sweetest cadence. "Now, get out of my kitchen." This was said with a little more authority.

As I look back on those days, I have come to believe that that kitchen was my grandmother's place to escape. Even though we were fairly secluded in the farthest reaches of Chicot County, in that kitchen, she was truly alone, and that's how she liked it.

My great-grandmother was very superstitious. She told me that when a red bird landed in our yard, someone would be paying us a visit. Being that we lived so far away from everything and everyone, I jumped for joy whenever a cardinal blessed us with its presence. I imagined that my mother would return from her wonderings to take me up in her arms. She would tell me that she loved me and wanted me to come live with her in Little Rock or maybe even St. Louis. Often, I was disappointed.

The cardinal usually announced the arrival of people like Mr. Pace, an old white man who took pity on my grandmother after her husband died. He felt it was his duty to bring her the things she needed to survive in the boonies. We would trade the vegetables from my great-grandmother's small garden and the slop from our meals for his hogs, and he would give us deer meat, bread, and anything else he had in his freezer that he wouldn't be using anytime soon.

The cardinal also harkened the arrival of my aunt Minnie. I could tell the sight of her would hurt my grandmother to her already bruised soul. Her oldest daughter was lost and hoping to find herself in the hot glass of a crack pipe or at the bottom of a cheap bottle of wine. Skinny and scared from the hard life of a drug addict, she would slink through our house

like a gold toothed snake, waiting for the opportunity to strike an open purse or a unguarded piece of jewelry.

"Hey, mamma," she would say. Her red eyes bounced around the room. "What ya'll cookin'? Smells good in here." She smiled a pained, forced smile. I was only nine at the time but I remember thinking that she was sober and didn't like it.

"Chicken. Dumplins'. Greens. Whatever else I feels like cookin'."

"Oh, Ok. Make sure you save me a plate now." She moved around the living room peeking behind dusty pictures and nonchalantly digging through the couch cushions. "I was just stopping by to say hi. You know, I'm goin' in to town in a bit? Ya'll need something'? Kevin, you want some candy?" I had fallen for this trick before. The last time I gave her money for a Snickers bar, I didn't see her again for three months.

"No, thank you, Aunt Minnie."

"Are you sure? I'm comin' right back." She smiled that painful smile again. I think it hurt me as much as it hurt her.

"No. I'm ok."

"Ok. Ya'll be good. I'll be back later."

She was gone for another three months after that. She lived like a nomad with her boyfriend, a pimp from Kansas City, in his old pick up. Eventually, he was killed in a bar fight, and she got stranded in Michigan for three years.

I never heard my grandmother complain about her lot in life. The abusive boyfriends and husbands, her sons in prison. Her drug addicted and wondering daughters. She just took care of me and her mother, retreating to the kitchen to cook and perhaps meditate. But there was pain and prayer in the songs she hummed. I think she prayed for the cardinal to proclaim the arrival of some kind of savior. Some form of relief, but relief never came. Just more days in the kitchen with me standing at the door, watching her and wondering how much strength it takes to endure sure hardships and maintain a belief in God and love for a family lost.

“A Masquerade”

- *David Geiger*

A fire is burning, for months at a time.
I see a massive blaze, thirty feet tall!
Within the depths of a dry, crackling fall.
There are no charges of arson, no crime.
It leaves lasting impressions, simply sublime.
With varying shades of yellow and red,
Colors burn like a passion left unsaid.
The flames wrap up the wood, a searing shawl.
Torrents of heat, the bark is lightly browned,
As air passes through this flickering fire
Blowing through the branches with a rustling sound.
A smokeless blaze like a faithless desire.
Leaves fall, inciting sparks ignite the ground,
Only briefly, as winter comes around.



“Parking My Fears” - Benjamin T. Rittgers



Steven Patrick Fisher Photo

I see him behind every bush or dark shadow and everywhere I go. The cold, gray eyes still stare at me with hunger from behind a black ski mask. I am afraid to walk to my car tonight because I know he is still out there.

I look into the dark parking garage. “You can do this, Sadie,” I tell myself. I continue onward in search of Rusty the Car as my heart beats with each shaky step. My knocking knees do not make walking easier.

The place smells of oil and car exhaust. This is student parking: each parking spot marked by the drips of

older and poorly maintained vehicles. The Ford beaters and peeling-paint Chevys outnumber the few shiny BMWs and Hummers of the rich students. Rusty the car is a Mercedes, but she is hardly new. Her seats, bandaged with duct tape, and her rust-trimmed fenders leave no doubt that her glory faded long before I received the keys.

Tires squeal on the level above; engine noises fill the darkness. I think I hear footsteps behind me. Is it him? I shudder at the thought, pull the collar of my too-thin jacket around me, and walk toward the stairs. The stairs hide in the corner of the garage, next to the elevators. Above them, a florescent light flickers on and off in pace with my thumping heart. It affects my ability to watch for an attacker. The flickering lights give me a headache.

I wonder why I agreed to take a class at night. I remember when I registered for classes; I complained to the advisor: "The two classes I need to graduate meet at the same time."

She flipped through the class schedule. "This class meets at night. You can take both the night course and the other course you want and still graduate."

So, here I am in a dark parking garage. I like the class and some of the other students. I am doing well, but I never feel safe on the walk back.

When I arrived here before class and parked my car, the sunshine lit the parking garage. Now, darkness shrouds the ramp. Worse, shadows move among the cars in the flickering lights. If there are muggers and attackers, I cannot tell.

As I walk by the elevator, the door dings open. A male student stands inside. He holds his backpack in one hand and holds the door open for me with the other. "You coming in?" he asks.

I turn and run up the stairs. The pound, pound, pounding of my feet will give me away, but I think I can outrun him. I have gone up three flights before I chance a glance backwards. No one down there. He probably did not even follow me. I stand holding the handrail until I catch my breath. My behavior must puzzle him, but I do not go back to the elevator to check.

That last time I rode a parking garage elevator, a man got on with me. I couldn't see his face because he was reading the school newspaper. He was built like a football player, strong and tall. I smiled at him as he tripped

over the threshold onto the elevator. When the doors closed, he dropped the newspaper and knocked me to the floor. I don't smile anymore.

After a short pause, I force myself to go on. I park on the fifth level, so I have two more flights to go before I reach safety. I take slow steps up the stairway and listen for others. I don't want to be in such a remote area if someone else comes along. I won't be able to call for help.

The narrow stairway smells. With each step I climb, my shoes stick to, and un-stick from, the soda-pop someone spilt on the floor. At each landing, a dim light only partially illuminates the stairs. Most of the students use the elevator, but I don't want to be closed in that steel box. If trapped with an attacker, I can't escape.

I will always remember his hands on me as I lay on the floor with my eyes squeezed shut. Paralyzed with fear and unable to move, I could not protect myself. I tried to scream, but it was like in a nightmare where the mouth makes the motion and you feel a scream coming out, but it was only empty air. The elevator doors hid my suffering.

In truth, I never feel safe.

Since that day, I take the stairs. I have two avenues of escape and I get exercise. Not that being fit matters; I still can't bring myself to date since the incident.

The doorway leading from the fifth level landing, identified by an orange number five in big, eighteen-inch letters, is darker than the stairway. I look out the door until my eyes adjust. The rows of cars mark ambush points where an attacker can be hiding. I spot Rusty the Car; her silver peace-sign logo glimmers like a beacon in the dimness.

I take my key, hold it between my middle and ring fingers, and walk toward my car. I walk slowly, stopping to glance between the parked cars as I pass. I prepare to turn and run, but I see no crouched assailants. My car is only three spaces away. I see the shadows move again, and I spin around, but no one is behind me.

I walk another few car lengths and hear a rustling noise. I freeze and look at the source of the sound.

Nothing but shadows. I grip my keys with a grip so tight my hand hurts. I put my other hand on the strap of my backpack, ready to shed it if I have to run.

Finally, I make it to my Mercedes. Before I open the door, I check the back seat. I press my face against the window and hold my hands around my eyes, so I can see into the dark shadows at the floor of my car.

I see a flurry of movement through the window and step backwards into the BMW parked next to me, setting off its alarm. I scream and look into my back seat to get a better look at him this time.

The light shines into my car where a Mylar Happy Birthday balloon floats against the glass. I am convinced it is not an attacker. "Stupid balloon." My mother had it delivered to me on my birthday two days ago. The singing telegram had been a humiliating experience. I had shoved the balloon between the front and back seats and had thrown a coat over it, so it wouldn't float up and distract me while driving.

I open the door, grab my tormentor by its pink ribbon, and shove the silvery demon into Rusty's trunk. Satisfied, I get into my car and shut the door.

My heart still thumps as I put on my seatbelt, and I have to wait a few moments until I am calm enough to drive. I hit the door lock. "I'm safe," I say aloud.

In truth, I never feel safe. They haven't caught the guy who attacked me. I had to move three states away to my current campus, and I live in fear despite the distance. I dread the remaining fifteen weeks of class, but I am strong. I plan to graduate and he cannot stop me.

I back up my car and drive around the student-parking ramp until I reach the exit. As I drive away, I park my fears until my next class.

“Skittle Brain” – Michelle Gray

Certain way I do things

Sift through them one by one

Separate the colors two by two

Eat the odd skittle quick, there can't be three!

Now evens is all you see

Certain way I do things

Lock the door once before

Again on the way to get a drink

Just In case one more check through the house

I am quiet as a mouse

Certain way I do things

Arrange the clothes hangers all in line

Blacks then blues then greens to yellow

Reds fade to pinks and eventually white

Isn't it perfect? My Rainbow neat and tight

Certain way I do things

Brush my hair soft and slow

Up in a bun or pony tail close on my neck

Hairs never obey the first time don't you see? But three times they sit!

Nobody appreciates my effort, nobody understands it

The Certain way I do things.



“Pink and Orange”

- *Caleb Nelson*

The years progressed, and the people aged; the park stayed the same. Nothing about Paradise changed, ever. Paradise Park was a collection of trailers located on the outskirts of Oklahoma City that had been created in the early '60s as an alternative to the state-funded slums for the impoverished denizens of the southern state. Paradise found a strong contingent consisting mostly of single mothers and those mentally incapable of succeeding in the capitalist country. My mother migrated there in the Nineties after a failed common-law marriage (as if there was any other kind) and numerous attempts at bettering herself, via various community colleges. She brought with her the makings of a baby boy in her womb and a stack of un-cashed welfare checks. My sister was my mother's real pride and joy and her entrance into the world would soon follow mine. Paradise was the only home my sister and I ever knew.

My sister and I had spent our childhood under the wing of our mother and under the shadow of Paradise. Being a resident of Paradise meant that we belonged to a social caste that was separate from the others; there were the wealthy Southern belles and Brahmins, the comfortable but immobile middle class, the poor, and those who lived in Paradise and its ilk. The public school my sister and I attended knew of where we belonged and treated us with the appropriate caution. There was no integration. Our teachers proceeded with more caution when dealing with us than they demonstrated to those with mental and physical handicaps. The teachers tried to care. “Excellent job,” they would tell me for a project that was scrawled in ballpoint on the vinyl seat cover of my mother's beaten station wagon on the way to school. They wouldn't ask my sister or me for donations during the holidays; they knew we would be on the receiving end, and when it came time for me to graduate, they didn't

ask for the deposit for my gown; the school board had already prepared themselves to never see either me or it again.

I was two years my sister's senior, so by the time she dropped out, I was already long gone. Around that time, shortly before I left Paradise, my mother took sick. Her feeble lungs prevented her from crying as I walked out of the park. She tried to choke out parting words, she tried to explain that she had done all she could, she tried to explain that the world was simply too much for her and she tried to get my forgiveness for the life she had given me; a shallow cough was all that she could muster. I kept walking.

I spent the next seven years proving that I could survive the world outside of Paradise. I tried hard to forget where I had come from. I would lie about my past to whoever tried to get close to me; sometimes, I'd even deceive myself. But, every morning, I would look down at my naked body in the bathroom and see the disfigurement on my torso—a protruding, almost vestigial lump where my navel should be, a reminder that I was born in a trailer and severed from my mother with scissors instead of a scalpel. I felt like Cain, marked by God as an outcast to prevent the outside world from finding him a home. So, I never forgot.

I kept very little contact with my sister, and when the letter came in the mail, I regretted this. She had never left Paradise, and it had killed her. The letter was in a lazy scrawl, written in pencil on a legal pad, and it described her death without expression. It told of how she had taken sick months ago and how she had refused to find treatment. She just wasted away. The letter came from her husband (a state awarded title that he fought for after my sister's passage). He expressed condolences using words that I could imagine him flipping through a dictionary to find or copying from a similar situation that he had seen on television on a daytime drama. The last time I had spoken to my sister was over the phone the previous spring. It was late autumn now.

"How is it?" I said.

"The winter is breaking, and everything is beginning to turn beautiful. You should see your niece; she put on one of her grandma's old dresses from when she was a little girl; she looks pretty as hell."

"I hope to soon," I said, speaking over the click of her lighter as she fumbled with a cigarette. The receiver hissed as her lungs sucked in the thick smoke. The conversation went silent as we both breathed in the phone, and we tried to pretend that we would actually see each other again. The tranquility was only punctured

by her deep breaths, the sharp intake and the lazy exhales as she let the smoke leave her body of its own accord.

“Andrew,” she said, “make sure they burn me. I haven’t spent any part of my life underground, and I don’t think it’s appropriate to put my body there.” She paused after that, and I pictured her stabbing her cigarette out, watching the last embers fight the moist, new spring air until they eventually succumbed to nature and were blown into non-existence.

“I have to go,” I said. Then, my life went on, and hers ended.

I paused a moment after finishing the letter. Then, I responded with a letter of best wishes to him and his daughter, now half orphaned, and I expressed my intent to attend the funeral.

So, the residents of Paradise had nothing else to do but watch as the one place in the world where they belonged was eaten away by flame.

Over the next few days, I waited patiently for a response to my correspondence, expecting an invitation to her funeral, at the very least, expecting her husband (who was at that moment filling out the necessary paperwork to receive this title) to send me a message requesting money for the ceremony. When nothing arrived from him, I tracked down the phone number of the pastor who would most likely preside over the makeshift funeral. He was the one who had bent down to his knees and shaken his fist in the air and begged God to let my mother into paradise at her proceedings (my sister had called me in disgust to relay the happenings), I had been in the real held in October, and she was to be buried in Paradise.

On my sister’s big day, I woke early. I packed a few provisions into a rented truck and began the drive. I had been living in Texas since I left Paradise, finding work at a newspaper. I began the drive as the sun rose, and mile by mile, I could feel Paradise coming closer. I had avoided going so far this direction for the extent of what I considered my new life.

The drive gave me time to think about her. I had time to regret how I had hated her for staying. I relived my fondest memories of her, when I had felt the most camaraderie, when the bond between us was palpable;

these were when we talked about leaving but hadn't yet constructed a plan. When our future was all talk and she would play along for me. She would fabricate extravagant plans that she would pass off to me as her lifelong goals, she made me believe that she wouldn't rest until she was thousands of miles away. She pretended to have dreams for me. As we got older she grew tired of playing pretend for my benefit, which led to bitter arguments that would forever fortify the rift between us. Unfortunately, we had learned to hold grudges from an early age.

My stomach started to tighten, and my knees began to shake once the park could be seen on the horizon. It was painful to return. I made a stop at a 24 hour convenience store that was only a mile away from the park to purchase gasoline. The filling station had been around in my youth and had provided the main staples of my diet, microwave hotdogs and canned soups and other food of that nature. I would go there with my mother when it was time to restock our kitchen. It was one of the rare glimpses of the outside world I was given access to in my youth, and I relished it. I even volunteered to go, despite the shame I felt when my mother would argue with the clerk about why he should accept food stamps as payment for wine or cigarettes.

I pulled out of the gas station, coasted the remaining mile, and rolled into Paradise. Night had come already, and it was now in the darkest hours of the rotation. The funeral had long been over. I parked my truck and climbed out carefully, so as not to catch my clothes on the jagged edges of the door. I had changed into a suit at the filling station and spent a long time in the bathroom combing my hair, just the way she liked it; I looked the best I could. I made my way over to the field where the deceased residents were buried. The park was surrounded by bare prairie on every side, and the practice of burying residents in the adjacent field had become commonplace. I found her plot freshly dug and not yet covered. It was bare of flowers, bare of everything except a stone marker and a crumpled box. I stooped to pick it up and found it to be a beaten-up pack of smokes that someone had left in crude tribute to my sister. Involuntarily I picked up the pack (phantom muscle memory from my days of smoking, I left the practice at Paradise) and shoved it hastily into my breast pocket, nervously peering around but not finding anyone watching me. I knew the park was asleep.

I sat next to her for a while and let myself go; the façade of reserve that I had put on the day I walked out of Paradise had crumbled. I broke down and began talking to her, asking her to stick it out, asking her to find help, asking her to go with me. Each time, she just told me how pretty her daughter looked in that dress. Each

time, I countered with the same empty promise. And then, there was just the silence of the telephone, and the cold hiss of the embers fading out.

Once the sky began to soften into color, I stood up, wiping my eyes dry. I marched to my truck and retrieved the cans of gasoline I had filled at the convenience store. Pulling off the caps, I began tracing her name with the liquid in the dry prairie grass. Walking slowly, I wrote her name around the streets of our childhood, wrote it on the spot where we had laid and she had promised me that she would always go with me, spilled it in sloppy cursive across the place where she told me she was no longer going to follow. I pulled the crumpled pack from my pocket and lit a cigarette. I breathed in slow, and it was almost as if she was with me. When the flames were an inch from the filter, I took one last deep drag and flicked the butt into the grass.

Paradise erupted. The flames traveled everywhere, licking up the dried-out walls of the aged trailers. Those with stashes of anhydrous ammonia were the first to explode, but the others soon followed. The residents ran from their homes to the outskirts of the park's boundaries, all stoics despite the destruction of their lives. The fire department was called when the clerk at the convenience store saw the smoke, but it was a doomed and half-hearted attempt at saving Paradise (the nearest fire station was over a hundred miles way). So, the residents of Paradise had nothing else to do but watch as the one place in the world where they belonged was eaten away by flame. I stayed only a second with my people to watch it burn before I got back into my truck and drove away.

As the distance between us stretched on, I glanced in my rearview mirror and watched as the smoke ascended into the early-morning Oklahoma sky. The chalk colored smoke contrasted vividly against the dull pink and orange of the sunrise. In the rearview, I could almost just make out the people of Paradise, resigning themselves to wander the world like the earliest tribe of Israel--walking the desert; holding on to life only because of God's promise to deliver them to the holy land, and after that, to the paradise that can only be found beyond life and in the sky.



“The Nightside” - *Russell Luke*

To her credit, it can't have been an easy thing to say.

I know it wasn't easy because, see, normally, she'll like have water or juice at dinner. You know, nothing hard. Not that there's anything wrong with that; my dad had a beer with dinner every night and never became an alcoholic. Or, at least, he never went to any meetings. But she was drinking wine that night. Red wine, which was probably another clue that I completely failed to pick up on. I mean, I ain't the world's most intuitive male or nothing, but I like to think I know when my wife of fifteen years has something on her mind.

So anyway, we're eating. Beef stroganoff, not that it's important. The kind you get in a box, and you add hamburger to. It's completely quiet, just like it's been ever since the great eating-in-the-living-room-with-the-TV-on battle of 2003, which I was on the losing side of. I was feeling pretty good, though; it was a Saturday, so I didn't have work. I've got a contractor business, nothing too big, but I pull in enough work to keep a roof over our heads and pay Darryl's orthodontist. Oh, Darryl wasn't there. I should mention that. I don't want you to think we talk

about sex with the kid around.

She pours her third glass, and I'm eating, and then she slides her hand across the table and puts it on mine; I look up, and I swear, as long as I've been married to this woman, I've never seen a look on her face like that. And you'd think it'd be, like, shame or something, but it wasn't. She was smiling. I'm not shitting you, she was like giddy or something, like she's about to let me in on this great secret. Which, I guess in a way, she was. Not that I had any idea what I was getting into at the time, mind you.

"Bill," she says, "you know I love you a lot, right?"

"Well, I've always hoped so, yeah," I say. "What with the marriage thing and all."

"We've been married a long time," she said.

I didn't say anything then because I couldn't for the life of me figure out where she was going with this. Did I forget an anniversary? Was she warming me up, so she could tell me she was calling it quits? Had she been with another guy? I tell you, my heart was doing some jumping jacks in my ribs for that few seconds. It's like when you know the next thing you hear is gonna be really important, but you're just not prepared, like, mentally, to handle it.

"I want to be honest with you," she says, "about how I feel."

"Okay," I say.

"And about...about what I want."

Alright, well, at this point, my brain was screaming lesbian because that's all I could figure on. Me and Stacy, we don't exactly leaf through the Kama Sutra or nothin', but we ain't strictly missionary either. I mean, don't tell my kid this, but I have at least two very distinct memories involving that same kitchen table that were not dinner-related, if you know what I'm saying. So, you know, what else could she want?

"You can tell me anything, Honey," I said, hoping to Christ she wouldn't. I don't know, I was a little excited, I guess. I mean, everybody's got fantasies, right? And it's cool that someone you love – and I do love her, no matter what you think about long-term marriages – wants to share something that personal with you. And, plus, maybe it would be hot, right? Like, she wanted to, I don't know, pretend she was a cheerleader or something. Whatever, I don't usually get into these things. Garden variety sex is still pretty neat to me.

"You know I've been reading those books," she says, "and the movies."

It takes me a minute, but I remember. "Oh, yeah, that Morningstar shit. Sorry, those books. The ones with the witches and the vampires and stuff." I shook my head and laughed a little bit. I don't like to deride another

person's interests, but I'd been in the room while she's had those movies on (she watches them pretty much all the time, when she's not reading) and I never really got the appeal. The three main characters are like this beefy vampire that's shirtless every other scene and this skinny, pale warlock who acts like his dog just died all the time, and this regular high school girl that they're like fighting over, even though she's about the most annoying kid I've ever seen. I guess they're supposed to be romances but with like werewolf-fighting and magic amulets and stuff. It's never seemed that interesting to me, and I've questioned Stacy a couple of times about what she sees in it.

"That's right, Morningstar," she says, smiling. "Well, I was wondering if you'd be interested in..."

"Yeah?" I say, not liking where this is going.

"...being my Simon," she said.

"Oh, well, sure, Stacy," I said. I didn't particularly like the idea, but if she wanted to role-play to her books, I didn't see that it would hurt me any. I like to make my wife happy when I can, alright? We ain't super-rich, and I'll probably never grow a full head of hair again in my life (but I'm keeping my fingers crossed anyway), and God knows she's put up with a lot of my bullshit over the past few years, so whenever I can, I try to do little things to let her know I still, like, appreciate her or whatever. "Whatever you want. Er, is Simon the werewolf?"

"He's a Magikin," she says. "Born into a world he doesn't understand, forced to live outside humanity, growing ever colder to the world of men until he sees Donna and knows suddenly, and without doubt, that he is, now and forever, in love."

I ain't no literary critic. The last book I read was about Hayden Fry, and that was ten years ago, and truthfully, I never even finished it. But, to me, everything she just said sounds like complete shit. And I don't know what a Magikin is. My mind tells me maybe it's like a magic napkin or something, which is why I don't usually listen to my mind that much. Still, the way she says those words...I mean, you shoulda heard it. There was more passion and just, you know, pure lust in those words than, well, then she ever seemed to have about me.

I set my fork down, which, admittedly, I probably could have done earlier in the discussion, and I go, "Well, okay, Stacy. I mean, you know I don't know too much about them books, but if you tell me what to say and stuff..."

"Well, see, that's the thing," says Stacy. "I want you to, you know, like it as much as I do—really get into it."

I'm terrified that she's gonna make me read those books. They're thick as bricks and, as I said before, I ain't exactly well-known at the Kensington Public Library. But like I said; I love her. So I go, "Just tell me what to

do, beautiful.”

She takes this folded piece of paper from her back pocket, and she slides it across the table to me. “I got this off the Internet. Go here. Tell them you’re a Simon.”

I take the paper and put it in my pocket without opening it, like I’m worried someone will see me with it and make judgments about my lifestyle. I push my chair out and grab my keys off the desk. I don’t bother finishing my dinner. The way she was talking made me want to hurry up and do whatever it is she wanted, so I could come back and do something we both enjoyed. And anyway, I was too excited to eat.

* * * * *

I drove for 45 minutes to get to the place on the note Stacy’d slipped me. All the way there, I was running through my head all the possible things I was going out there to buy. I remembered reading a story when I was in high school that I read out of some smut mag the guys were passing around...well, not a story, like one of them letters to the magazine where everything’s probably fake, but you read it like it’s real anyway ...about this guy who had a date with a quiet, mousy girl; I think she was an accountant or a librarian or something. And anyway, he walks her home, and she invites him in, and suddenly, surprise, she turns out to be this crazy sex psycho with like whips and handcuffs and stuff. Well, that shit scared me when I was a teenager, back when I’d have gone through anything to get to the sex. So I didn’t find the idea too appealing 20 years later. What if it was something like that? Like, she wanted me to spank her or be, y’know, forceful? I didn’t even know if I could, you know? Like, I can’t imagine doing that without feeling like a total bastard.

But I calmed down because there’s nothing about any of that in any of Stacy’s movies, or at least not the parts I was awake for. The Morningstar books are written by this woman who’s basically writing out all her unfulfilled issues and wants, and they’re not about kinky stuff; they’re just about, you know, romance and desire and that crap. It’s weird, but it’s like make-love-on-rose-petals type weird, not we-need-to-get-you-to-the-emergency-room weird.

The address Stacy gave me was really hard to find. I wished I’d had one of those GPS machines that you see in the newer trucks nowadays, but if I had one, I probably woulda been too weirded out to punch in the address, incase somebody at the GPS company was keeping records on where I was driving to. Like I said, I didn’t mind doing all this for Stacy – I have no shame where that woman is concerned – but I’d rather not have the whole neighborhood knowing what we did with our weekend, if you get me. I’m sure that Mrs. Clark would be a bit put off to know what I was doing with some of the money she paid me for installing that vent in her attic.

When I finally did find it, I was pretty relieved. I pulled up to this warehouse-looking place out in a really shitty part of town, and it occurred to me that Stacy'd played a prank on me. A pretty good one, too! Well, I'd get back at her; I'd stop at a toy store on my way back and get a pair of those Halloween vampire teeth and put 'em in and chase her around the house and act like I'd found the place after all.

Except, it turned out this really was the place.

I didn't realize it until I spotted the kids hanging out near the glass doors of what I figured was the entrance. They were all dressed up weird in like old-timey clothes, but not quite. It's hard to explain. This one girl, and she couldn't have been more than 19, she was wearing a lady's corset, but she didn't have any shirt over it, and she had on tight, shiny pants, and her face was all made up with pancake. I'm ashamed to say it, but the first thought that came to my mind was 'dead hooker.' The second thought was about how weird that first thought had been.

The guy with her wasn't much better. He wore a black overcoat with white, lacy frill-type things coming out the sleeves, and under that, he had on clothes like you'd see in a poorly-made movie about the Victorian era over in London. They were all smoking tiny black cigarettes that looked like twigs, and they all seemed to be having a real miserable time.

But their clothes weren't what really freaked me out.

when I was a kid, we didn't celebrate our nights out by dry-humping each other beneath some strobe lights. We had cars for that.

When I pulled into the parking lot, the headlights of my truck went over them, and they lit up. I'm not kidding you, they glowed. Strangest damn thing I ever saw. Every part of them that was exposed, all the pale whiteness of their faces and hands, just lit up like an overexposed picture for just the few seconds the headlights of the truck was on them, and then they faded back into darkness.

Well, I'm not gonna lie to you, that unnerved me. I've been around quite a few years now, and I've seen some things that maybe other people haven't, and I've taken it all in stride, but I have never in my life seen glowing, teenage loiterers. I just about called the whole thing off then and there, but then I remembered a bit Stacy'd explained to me about the Morningstar books.

"The Magikin," she'd said, "have to stay out of the light. Not because it'll burn them up, but because they

glow. It happens in any light, really, but it's especially bad in bright sunlight. It's how they know each other, but it's also their curse, see? Because they have to keep themselves secret; it keeps them separate from us."

Well, I didn't think Dead Hooker and Fancy Jacket needed that much help standing out from the crowd, but at least I felt better that they weren't some new breed of slacker that has radioactive blood or something. They were just, I don't know, dressed up like in the books, I suppose. Maybe, they were going to a costume party or something. Or Hell, I don't know, maybe they just liked dressing that way. I know it takes a small man to make a big leap to judgment, and I try my best not to cast stones.

Well, especially not when I'm out shopping for sex toys.

Anyway, so I parked the car and pretended that I wanted to hear the rest of "Lovesick Blues," but really, I was sort of prepping myself. Getting psyched up and all that. You ever get one of those feelings, like you know you're headed into someplace that, well, ain't exactly made for people like you? Like you're a cow that somehow made its way into a pig pen, and you know that all the pink squealy things that are staring at you have every right in the world to do so. Like, cosmically speaking, you've landed out of bounds.

I'll tell you the truth, I got as far as putting the keys back in the ignition. I figure if the motor had caught on that first revolution, I'd have just driven home, told Stacy I couldn't find it, and fallen asleep watching TV like usual, and hopefully by morning I'd have forgotten any of this ever happened. That was my plan, anyway, and I got as far as the part about lying to Stacy before I realized that I couldn't do it.

Let me tell you something about my wife; six or seven years back, I had a job selling feed corn to livestock producers. I was out driving around all day long, shooting the shit with guys that get calluses on their elbows from prolonged fence-leaning. It wasn't good work, and I didn't like it. The feed we sold was overpriced and under weight, and the company I worked for (I won't say their names, but I'm sure you know which one it was) was making a mint ripping off guys who were having trouble just keeping the banks off their backs. See, this was before corporate farming took over the whole damn state. Now, you got guys with white shirts and power ties running a farm from a shiny desk in Atlanta. But that's a whole other story.

Anyway, so I'd been at this job for a couple years by then, and I came up for this promotion. Regional sales manager. Good money. I mean, good like you almost never see good. So good, in fact, that it ate at my conscience a little bit. Hell, a lot. Basically, I was being rewarded for helping rip off these family farmers. The money was coming out of their pocket and into mine, and it made me feel like absolute dog shit.

Well, by then, Darryl was four years old and growing like all get out, and his teeth weren't coming in right,

and we'd just moved into the bigger place out in Cedarville, outside of town there. Money was getting tight. So this promotion was pretty much a Godsend.

When I told Stacy about it, she was washing dishes. I guess she must have heard something in my voice because she set down the plate she was scrubbing, pulled off her yellow gloves, and took my hands and looked right into my eyes.

"Quit," she said.

"Honey, I..."

"Listen to me, Bill," she said, squeezing my hands. "You hate that job. It makes you miserable, and seeing you miserable makes me miserable. I know it bothers you, and I know you don't want this promotion. So don't take it."

"But the money..."

"Screw the money," she said. "We did fine before that awful job, and we'll be okay now. Even if I have to sell my body on the streets."

Now, she was smiling when she said that, but I kind of think there was some truth in it, too. I think Stacy would have done anything to get me out of that awful job, just because she knew I wanted out. And when I did quit, she got me set up on the computer making fliers and business cards for my contracting company, and she read books on starting a business, and for awhile there, she was my secretary. And, you know, it did turn out all right. In the end, I mean. Like I said, we aren't rich or nothing, but I haven't got any complaints. I'm my own boss, I do work that I believe in, and I like my life a lot.

But it could have gone bad. And, the truth is, she was the only one of us that didn't expect it to. She believed in me, believed that it was worth it for me to be doing something that I cared about.

She loves me.

And I love her. More than she can ever really know.

So I took a deep breath in, checked myself in the mirror to make sure my baseball cap was pulled down low enough to hide some of my face, and I got out of the truck and headed for the Morningstar shop.

* * * * *

I got a lot of looks when I walked up to that front door where the glowing kids were hanging out. I knew I was going to, though. I thought to myself, They're staring at you because you're not like them. Hell, that's something to be proud of, Billy boy.

One of the guys, though, was really scowling at me. He was Fancy Coat's friend, but he was dressed just in all black, everything from his shirt to his shoes. He maybe could of passed for normal, or Amish, if it wasn't for his face being all painted up like it was. He was wearing lipstick and eye shadow and all sorts of other stuff, but the really impressive bit was a sort of curly design that ran down the side of his face to the back of his neck.

The girl he was with was blonde with similar, but not quite as elaborate, designs on her own face. I will say that she wasn't dressed like a hooker, but if I had to classify what Wal-Mart department she'd bought her black clothes from, I'd have to say 'evening wear.' It was as though she'd decided a negligee was fine to wear out, what with it being so humid lately and all.

Well, you can probably tell this, but I was staring at 'em a bit. But I figured the fact that the guy was scowling at me like he was made us sort of even. And also, come on. Have you ever gone to the zoo and refused to look at the zebras out of politeness? Like I said before, everything about these people was designed to make other people notice them. So I obliged.

Turned out, that was a big mistake.

I was walking past, not really minding my own business but willing to pretend I was, when the guy with the face paint grabbed my shoulder. I turned around, and now, I was about half a foot away from all that makeup and stuff. I started worrying that he was gonna try to kiss me, which probably says bad things about me, but you have to understand, this was a lot of makeup we're talking about here.

"I think you're lost," he said. "Sir." He added it like the finishing touch to a finely-built insult. Fancy Coat and Dead Hooker snickered a little bit. The blonde just continued to look bored although she did flash her eyes at me just long enough to convey the impression that I was a clueless jerk.

"Uh, no," I said, taking the piece of paper out like it was a hall pass. "This is the address. This is the Morningstar place, right?"

"I don't like the way he says that word," said the blonde. Her voice was strained and flat like she'd just woken up.

"What word?" I asked.

"Morningstar," said Fancy Coat. He was coming in closer now, sort of floating in. "That's our word. It belongs to ussss."

About then, I was starting to get a bit mad. I don't know why exactly—maybe just embarrassment. But I think it also had something to do with being hassled by what were, as near as I knew, the four biggest freaks in

the state, if not the whole region (excluding Omaha). It was frustrating, like arguing who the faster runner is with a guy that's got no legs; there's a way you can win the argument, but not without feeling like an asshole.

"Look, I didn't come over here to get into, like, a trademark dispute or whatever," I said. "You don't want me to use your word; I won't use it. But I'm going inside now, and I'd appreciate if you'd take your hands off me, partner."

Face tattoo did, but now instead of sneering at me, he was smiling, like he'd just played a joke on me that I was too stupid to get.

"Ooh, he's a lively one," said Dead Hooker. "Fire in his blood. I wonder how he tastes?"

"You're not welcome here," said Face Tattoo. "This is our place. A realm of eternal darkness where we can be ourselves, far from the judging eyes of short-sighted mortals who fear what they cannot possibly understand."

I didn't really understand a lot of what that meant, so I just said, "Huh."

"Run away, friend," said Face Tattoo. "Seek the daylight, and the false safety it gives you. You tread in a strange world, now."

"Gerald, just leave him alone," said the blonde.

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO CALL ME BY THAT NAME!" he shouted at her.

She acted pouty. "Sorry, Master Sanguis," she said. "Can I have some more wine?"

They went back to where they had a paper bag sitting on the concrete, and Dead Hooker and Fancy Coat snickered at me a little more, and I promise you that if I knew then how this was all going to end, I'd have turned around right there. Probably, I should have, too. But I'd gone this far, and I figured, hell, it can't get much weirder than this.

Of course, you know it did.

* * * * *

I don't even know how to describe what was inside.

Think of a haunted house, okay? Then, imagine it's got a bar and a clothing department in it. Now, imagine the whole thing is being run in a laboratory with the purpose of testing the effects of shitty music at high decibels on the human brain, and the scientists have found that the main effect it has is that it makes teenagers dress like freaks and prostitutes. Then scatter around a bunch of pictures of the guys from the Morningstar movies, and you've just about got it.

Just about. The real thing was weirder.

I stood there, gape-jawed, trying to take the whole thing in. I mean, an ordinary person has no concept of what was going on in there. Most of the warehouse stuff was untouched or made to look even dingier than it did normally. There was red and black cloth draped over everything. Girls with bright red and green hair were sipping drinks out of goblet-looking things and sneering at everyone. There was this big, open spot in the center, which I suppose could have been a dance floor, except it was full of people having a fully-clothed orgy, instead of a bunch of drunks trying to shuffle along to Boot Scootin' Boogie. Yeah, I know, I'm a redneck, but when I was a kid, we didn't celebrate our nights out by dry-humping each other beneath some strobe lights. We had cars for that. Half the people there were wearing clothes out of a pirate movie, and the other half were dressed like Parsons who'd fallen asleep in a tattoo parlor owned by an unscrupulous and anti-religious tattooist.

But I'd gone this far, and I figured, hell, it can't get much weirder than this.

Anyway, I guess it must have been pretty obvious that I was lost and out of my league because suddenly, this woman was in front of me. Now, like I said before, I'm happily married. And I also don't really see the appeal of today's modern fashions. But, then, I never saw anyone wearing them the way she was. She had jet black hair and dark lovely eyes, and her body was wrapped up in leather and spandex in really creative ways. But, all that considered, it wasn't her figure that I was happy to see, it was the warm smile on her face.

"Greetings, dark traveler," she said. "Welcome to the Nightside."

"Uh, I'm not really a dark anything," I said. "I'm in construction."

She smiled again. "I'm Rebekah. If you desire, I will be your slave while you're here."

"Is that a fact," I said, for lack of anything better.

"What does my master wish?" she said.

"I...look, do you have to talk like that?"

She looked a bit surprised, but she got back into character again quick. "I don't understand, my lord."

"I'm not, you know, 'In the Life'," I said, making the quotes with my fingers. "You probably noticed that I'm not dressed up or anything. To be honest, the word slave makes me really nervous, and I'm sort of starting to think this was a huge mistake. So, okay, I'm gonna go now. And it was good to meet you, Rebekah, and I'm sorry that I couldn't be your slave master, but I don't want you to think it's personal. Okay? Right."

So I was turning to leave, but then she grabs my sleeve with these dark red fingernails, and she's grinning at me, not in a sexy seductress way, but more like I just said something really funny, and she goes, "Come with me."

So I do. Reflex. Pretty women have that effect on me.

She leads me through the crowded bar area, through a bunch of dressed up kids and one lady that was probably older than Stacy but still made up like a hooker, which was more sad than sexy, and we go past the bar, and past this pale kid with a spiked haircut and fangs sticking out through his lips who was pouring a red drink into one of those goblets, and through the back, through the kitchen area with the dishwasher and the Asian guy running it, and out through a propped-open fire door in the back. And then, we're standing in an alley, and she whips her wig off and takes a pack of cigarettes from the ledge of the building and lights one with a match, and she goes, "Okay, what is a guy like you doing here?"

I was gaping again. "I...uh..."

"Oh, sorry, is it cool that I drop the act?" she says.

"Oh. Sure!"

She takes a deep drag. "You have no idea what hell is until you get a job as a fucking vampire. They make us go through these; they're like acting classes where we have to learn to slink and grovel, in a sexy way."

"Really," I say, because I still have nothing else.

"And the way they make you talk!" she says, rolling her eyes. "You know, you'd think like most people would react the way you did to the whole slave thing, right? No! They get off on it. And not just the guys! The girls all like the idea of a pretty girl vampire slave, which, to me, says a lot about us as a culture."

"It is a bit..." I manage.

"Yeah, well, you're tellin' me. I swear to God, working this job has been like an express train to losing all faith in humanity. And it wouldn't even bother me so much if it was over something, you know, worthwhile, you know? Look at all the novels that were released in 2004, okay? And people latched on to the worst fucking book, so they made it into the worst fucking movie, and these guys eat it the fuck up."

She put the half-smoked cigarette into a coffee can that was filled, to overflowing, with butts and held out her hand. "I'm Katy," she said.

"Bill," I said, shaking. She had a good grip.

"Bill," she said approvingly. "So, why are you here wading through this sea of self-delusion?"

“My, uh, wife...” I say. “She, ah, likes the books.”

She stares at me.

I take a deep breath. “And.” I say.

She lifts an eyebrow.

I clear my throat. “She, well, asked me...”

Katy laughed. “Okay, man. I’m sorry to put your nuts in a ringer, I just wanted to see if you’d say it.” She closed one eye and regarded me. “Are you a Bernard, or a Simon?” She looked at me curiously. “You’re not a Donna, I hope.”

For a long second I can’t remember. “Simon!” I say.

“Huh. I’d have figured you for a Bernard.”

“Is that bad?”

“Well it’s all bad, Bill,” she says. “No. Bernards are usually bulkier, more masculine. That whole ‘hunter of the night’ thing. Simons are usually scrawny, effeminate guys who like to mope.”

“Which are the ones with the face tattoos?”

She laughs. “They’re Bernards, and those are ritual clan tattoos. They just happen to be drawn on with Sharpies. I can’t imagine how any of these guys can mark up their faces like that and then go to work the next day. Oh, you want to see something really fucked up?”

“Uh, no, I think I’m good for right now,” I said.

She shoves her wig back onto her head. “Nonsense, Bill. You’re a pilgrim in an unholy land, and I’m your Virgil, and we must persevere.”

* * * * *

She drags me back inside, and we go to the boutique part of the floor, and Katy leads me to a rack of rubber pants and instructs me to hide behind them.

“Okay,” she said, “see that couple there at the third table on the left?”

I looked. They were two people, dressed in black, both with face markings. He was a bit chubby and at least a decade older than his companion, who had short hair dyed to the color of fake movie blood.

“You see how her marks are derivative of his? Same pattern, but smaller, right?”

It was true. I hadn’t noticed it before, what with the general lunacy occurring everywhere around me, but now that she pointed it out, it was obvious. “What’s that mean?”

"He owns her," Katy said, sneering. "Seriously. For all intents and purposes, she's property. Look, he's acting like she's not even there. See how she keeps her head down and her eyes up? Vampire submissiveness. She has to look that way all the time. So, you want to know what's fucked about that?"

"I think that's what's fucked about that," I said.

She shook her head. "It gets worse. See, chances are, this arrangement was her idea. Do you understand? Her idea of a good time is to pretend to be owned by a guy."

I wanted to say something like, yeah, it's weird, but who are we to judge and all that, but the more I thought about it, the more seriously screwed up it seemed. Was this romance? Was this what people thought love ought to look like?

"You sure you want to be part of all this?" Katy asked.

"No," I said. "But my wife..."

Katy looked at me, expectant.

"I love her," I said.

"Aww," said Katy, beaming. "You're too cute. Alright, don't worry, Bill. I'm gonna hook you up. You're going to be the best Simon your old lady's ever seen."

"Yeah, can't wait," I said.

* * * * *

For the next hour, I was Katy's project. She brought me clothes with frills and unnecessary buttons and velour, and I tried them on like I was told to. Now, the Nightside doesn't carry much in the way of big and tall, so some substitutions had to be made. But Katy went to bat for me, at one point, taking needle and thread to a pair of pants that looked like she'd swiped them from Prince's closet, and in the end, she worked miracles. Looking in the mirror in the dressing room, I didn't feel sexy, and I sure as hell didn't feel like a Magic Napkin. But I also didn't look like myself, and that ...look, I'm not weird or nothing...but it was kind of fun.

"Oh, you're hot," said Katy. "If I wasn't gay, I'd be all over you."

"Really."

"Well, it'd be sort of a looking-for-Daddy's-love type thing, but sure."

"You're too kind."

"Okay, get that crap off," she said. "And fold it, Bill. Don't just shove it in the bag. And hurry up because we still have to do the unpleasant part."

“That wasn’t the unpleasant part?” I shouted after her, but she was gone.

Well, folding a frilly shirt and pants was a new experience for me, and I’m fairly certain I somehow screwed up putting my jacket on a hanger, but when I had everything squared enough away to where I thought Katy wouldn’t yell at me, I came out. I wandered into the thumping music, through the crowds of Bernards and Donnas and my fellow Simons, and I found Katy waiting for me by the bar.

“Bill,” she said, slapping her hands on the countertop. “Have you ever gone suntanning?”

“No.”

“Do you use shower gel?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I don’t suppose you ever swam competitively.”

“If you’re hinting at something, I have to warn you, I’m nowhere near getting it,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. She took a thick tube of something from beneath the counter and slammed it onto the counter. “This is Soulight. It’s a disgusting petroleum-based cream that soaks into your pores and gives you blackheads if you leave it on for more than six hours at a time. And you are going to put this all over your body.”

I pick up the tube. The label is the company logo over two glowing people writhing with each other.

“All over,” said Katy. “That includes your bathing suit area, Bill.”

“Yeah, Stacy talked about the glowing thing,” I said. “You don’t really think she’ll care if I don’t...”

“Bill, you have to,” she said, grabbing my wrist. “You must. It’s the final touch to your wife’s fantasy. It’s the piece de resistance. It’s the fucking cherry on the sweet sexy sundae that is you, man.”

I’m reading the back of the label and wondering what prickly rash is.

“Hey,” says Katy. “Love is sacrifice, right?”

I hit back. It wasn’t my proudest moment, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it.

* * * * *

I’m checking out, and Katy’s telling me about the future.

“I give this whole retarded meme about six more months,” she’s saying. “Then we’ll all move on to something else, and I can go back to temping and getting my dissertation finished.”

“What do you study?” I asked.

"Sociology," she says. "Can you believe it? Maybe, someday, I'll write a paper about all this."

"Well, I'd appreciate if you keep me out of it," I said.

"Nonsense," she says. "I'll say, 'One man, I'll call him "Phil," wanted to dress up for his wife. He was reluctant at first, but later began to embrace his dark side...'"

"You're scaring me," I said.

"Okay, you're all set. Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Let me see her picture," she says.

I take my wallet out. "How did you know that I had a picture of her?"

She shrugged and took the photo from me. "Guys like you always do. Oh, she's pretty."

"Hey, she's taken, Rebekah," I said.

She smiles. "Not my type, though. It was really nice meeting you, Bill. Thanks for not making me be your slave. I hope you and your hot wife will be very happy."

We shook hands, and I started to leave. I took a last look around as I left, hoping that my experience here would make me see all of this in a different, kinder light. It didn't. I could still only see sad kids afraid of being themselves, escaping into something that, though exciting, was wrong at its core. I'd come here, so I could pretend. If these people were pretending, I doubt they let themselves realize it.

I was only four feet or so from the door when it happened.

I'd been holding Stacy's photo in my left hand as I walked, my bag of Simon gear in my right, and pretty much keeping my eyes on the door. I didn't see Master Gerald, the guy from the front door, until he'd already snatched the picture away.

"Hey!" I said, spinning.

"Well, look at this," he said. He was slurring a bit more than last time, and I guessed part of it was the goblet he held in his other hand. The rest of it, I figured, was because of the fangs he'd somehow sprouted in the last half hour. "Farmer John's best cow."

He'd brought a little entourage with him, all Bernards like himself, all with intricate drawings on their faces and some with what I now recognized as slaves in tow. The lot of them tittered at Gerald's joke, and he smiled broadly at me, showing off his teeth.

"I'm just on my way out the door," I said, grabbing for the picture.

He yanked it back away from me. "You people," he said, "make me sick. You come here, you treat this like a game, and you use it to trick yourselves into having sex with each other despite your old, disgusting bodies. You have no respect for what this is, for what it means."

"Look," I said, getting a little annoyed now. "You've had a little bit too much to drink, and you obviously weren't that bright to begin with, so I know you don't know what you're doing right now. I'll make it simple. You give me back my photo, and I'll be out of your hair forever, I promise."

"Do you know," he said, making a slow circle around so he could smile on his following, "why'd your wife make you come here? I assume that's what a sheep-fucker like you is doing at the Nightside. She sent you here, am I right?"

"Watch it, friend," I said. I dropped my bag. Past the crowd, I could see Katy staring at what was happening, horrified. I made a gesture to show her it was okay, but I doubt she believed it any more than I did.

"Your wife sent you here because she doesn't want you," he said. "She's tired of you. She wants to pretend you're someone strong and dangerous and sexy. She wants to pretend that you're me."

He took a step closer to me.

"Your wife wants to fuck me," he said. "What do you think about that?"

I wanted to hit him. Jesus Christ, I wanted to lay him out. It wouldn't have been hard, either. He wasn't exactly Hacksaw Jim Duggan. But I saw Stacy's face staring at me from the picture as he clutched it in his hand, and it occurred to me that I was done here. I'd performed my labor, and it was time to claim my reward.

So, I calmly reached forward and took the photo from him. He let me. Then I stood and we stared at each other.

"I'm gonna go now," I said.

"Coward," he sneered.

"No," I said. "It's just that the smell of the marker on your face is givin' me a headache."

And then he hit me.

* * * * *

As far as punches go, I've had better.

Much better, actually. Worst I ever got hit was 1974, by my brother Glen. Loosened a tooth that still wiggles, sometimes. Every hit I've ever taken since then has sort of paled in comparison. Master Gerald's haymaker wasn't even close, but as I felt around my jaw out of reflex, I could see it didn't much matter to him. He

was already cocking his fist back for another shot.

I hit back. It wasn't my proudest moment, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it.

Master Sangy, or whatever, landed on his back, knocking over a couple of his followers like bowling pins in face paint. I should have snagged my clothes and made for my truck right then, and maybe it wouldn't have ended like it did. Well, we're all geniuses in hindsight, I guess. I had to have my moment to gloat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Katy. I figured that she'd be glad I knocked the guy out, but instead, she looked even more concerned than before. She literally had her hand to her mouth, which I thought made her look sort of quaint. I might have told her so, but about then Grand Master Jerry rose from the dead and pointed an accusing, long-nailed finger at me.

"In the name of the dark ones," he says, his voice cracking a little, "I call upon all my brothers and all those loyal to the clan. Fall upon this creature and spill his blood, in the name of all Feratu kind!"

Just before they all closed in on me like a tidal wave of black clothes and press-on nails, I heard Katy call my name.

* * * * *

So, that's pretty much how it happened.

They say there's strength in numbers, and I suppose that's probably true, but if you ever get the chance to pick sides between two dozen wanna-be vampires and a group of six normal guys, go with the unpainted ones.

In retrospect, it figures. Vampires are, especially in the Morningstar books, not just suave sex machines with interesting ideas about alternative lifestyles; they're super-strong, super-fast and super-confident--the top of the food chain. Well, people that really are bruisers don't generally get their jollies pretending to be strong. Fact is, I got attacked by a large gathering of the types of kids that always got picked last in gym.

I don't really know who took the video. Could have been anybody, really. You know most of the cell phones nowadays have cameras on 'em. So there's me, swatting at these guys as they come at me with their fake teeth bared, scratching at me with their Lee Press-Ons. I took a few scratches, but I think that I got the better of 'em. At least, it sure looks that way on the video.

Well, the cops showed up soon after that, and the Nightside ended up getting shut down for not paying sales tax about a week later. I guess Gerald got arrested, and sometimes when I'm having a bad day, I think about him sitting in lockup with that marker all over his face and one broken fang hanging out of his mouth. It cheers me up.

The rest of it, I couldn't tell you. I figure somebody uploaded it onto the Internet, and some local newscaster was having a slow news day and figured it'd make a good color story. If the author of those Morningstar books hadn't gotten herself into legal trouble right about that time, I bet the national news networks wouldn't have even bothered with it. But she did, and they did, and soon everyone was watching "Bill Dunn, Vampire Slayer" on CNN.

The neighbors, when they talk to me about it, never really ask what I was doing there, which makes me think maybe I'm not the first Pilgrim to that particular Unholy Land, maybe not even the first in my neighborhood. Well, everybody's got their something, I suppose. I try not to judge.

Oh, the outfit. Well, after I told Stacy what happened, she started to cry. And I said, I'm sorry, hon. I didn't want this to happen. I would never have embarrassed you like this.

"No, that's not it," she says, sniffing. "Did you really do all that for me?"

"Well, yeah," I said.

She smiled at me. "That's so romantic."

Anyway, long story short, I never did wear that costume again that night. I guess Katy would have been a little disappointed, but then, maybe, she would have approved.

And anyway, it's not like I never got my chance to play Simon.

But afterwards, we both agreed that we preferred me as me.

“Shadows Cast by Figures in the Light”

- Christopher E. Lowe

We said we'd watch each other's backs
As bullets hailed from both sides
Like raindrops caught in a gusting wind
And as corpses covered the ground
Like shadows cast by figures in the light.
Gun smoke hung in the air like a fog
And stung my lungs like cold winter air.
Bullets howled and sang
Like instruments in a violent symphony
And they tore through everything.
They tore through the trees,
They tore through the sky
And they tore through you.

After the firefight, I found you there,
Dead on the ground—
A trait we should share.
Your sky blue eyes were bloody pools,
Your strong, steel chest was stomped in,
And your short blond hair was charred by flame.
You were no different from the others,
A shadow cast by figures in the light



I said I'd make it back from the war
And live for your sake,
But I just sit on this stool like a corpse
Under bright lights that loom like ghosts.
I try to drink the memories away—
I try to forget the pain—
But the cigarette smoke
Hangs in the air like a fog
And stings my lungs like a cold winter air
And the pool balls thud and crack
Like bullets tearing into trees.

I keep seeing you sitting next to me
With those brilliant blue eyes
That match a cloudless spring sky,
But then they turn into crimson pools
And your blond hair chars black like ash
And your steel chest caves in.
You're not the man I knew anymore—
You're just a shadow
Cast by my figure in the light.



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Steven Patrick Fisher Photography