

LOVE AND LOW SEROTONIN

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Love and Low Serotonin

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LOVE AND LOW SEROTONIN

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The following is a novella that depicts a young man and woman in search of differing goals, but the essence of their goals does have something in common: each of their pursuits, if obtained, allows for self-control and recovered lifestyle. However, their lives are far from average throughout the story. Themes such as bulimia, drug use, loveless sex, voyeurism, lucid dreaming and emergency room healthcare are explored in the form of fiction.

Both of the main characters in this story explore their world with a measure of obsession, and like any worthy character, their obsessions transform into decisions and actions that highlight aspects of society and psychology; in this case it is American college culture and youthful minds. It is up to the reader to become an explorer also. S/he may turn the pages with an objective mind, or with a sympathetic one. Either will be presented with the same questions: questions concerning self-image, companionship, healthcare socioeconomics, and deviant behavior.

Butterflies and Wasps

Crystal placed her hands between her bottom and the chilled classroom chair. The lab table was cold also. The rooms were always cold in the science department no matter what time of the year it was. It was as if a new theory was at test: a reversal of the seasons simply to show off the might of science. Despite the room, it was mid-August.

Crystal appeared tall to most who would take a look, despite her true height. This was due to lean long arms and legs that naturally carried only muscle and bone. Her hands and fingers were long also—like a model's. It never occurred to her that these features allowed for a particular beauty. She focused only on the reality that without her arms, thighs, and buttocks as storage for fat to find a place, this left only her stomach and face—areas she was constantly in fear of.

The young woman coped with her demure posture while battling the chill; she imagined rolling up into a ball would be best. Her feet at the end of thin legs were freezing. While she imagined how inappropriate the ball-shape sight would come across in the classroom, she stared toward Lee's direction.

The young man had it best. At the beginning of the semester he decided on a seat near the reptile aquariums, close to the heat lamps.

If Crystal had it her way she would be next to him and the burning bulbs—warm.

“Holometabolous development,” Dr. Henley finally spoke. HO... LOW... MUH... TAB... O... LUS. Remembering the word holometabolous might be the toughest part of the lecture today. Really, the rest is easy because I'm sure all you guys remember the metamorphosis lessons you had in high school.”

Crystal stared at the fish she made the decision to sit next to on her first day. Their giddy tropical colors seemed like good reason for a place to listen and take notes. However, the warmth they flaunted was nothing but a bit of torture; it was confined within glass. *Maybe she could kick off her sandals and dump her legs over the edge and into the warm salt water as if it were a Jacuzzi for feet?* While she smiled at this, Dr. Henley continued next to the projector.

“Egg becomes larva, larva becomes pupa and pupa becomes adult. Remember? Here’s a favorite example... it’s like a Disney story: Caterpillar... LARVA... creates a cocoon... PUPA... and breaks free as a beautiful, winged butterfly... ADULT. However, not all insects designed for holometabolous development are cute then beautiful. There’s also the wasp.”

Crystal watched Dr. Henley switch one overlay with another so the projector would flash a new black and white image of yet another transmogrification that should have never been seen at such magnification.

“All right... here’s another example for you... the maggot. Larva or most likely Larvae—I’m sure you’re gonna see more than one—feeds on a corpse and then becomes a housefly and annoys the living... ADULT. It’s like some kind of torturous circle where—in life and death—humans are never free of the omnipresent fly.”

Crystal was surprised when she saw Lee chuckle at this remark. He was comfortable. She was not. But, to see him express himself so confidently gave her a moment of pleasure too. She pulled her hands free from beneath her bottom. They were pink and iced.

Lee asked with back straight, “So... like a dead dog or rotten food... would that

be a resource as well as a habitat, Dr. Henley?”

The professor side-stepped through the projected images of arthropod exoskeletons so he could see his student clearly, “That was well thought, Lee. What is a resource other than food? Arguably, all living things strive for one objective: to procreate—insects especially. So, a habitat such as a dead dog—as you imagined it—that an adult laid its eggs in could, in fact, also be a resource, and not only for the eggs that would become larvae, but for the fly that is determined to live on through its spawn. What do you think guys? No answer... well maybe it’ll be on the midterm. I guess you were still thinking about the Diptera, Lee?”

Lee raised his head from his notes, “Yeah, the fly.”

“Good,” Dr. Henley stepped back to the front of the room, “This reminds me of something else interesting about holometabolous development. The larvae and adults are two very different forms separated by the pupa state... COCOON. Right? Well, not only do their forms change, but in many cases the larvae and adults of the same class strive after completely different resources. In other words, they are not in competition at all. Entomologists appreciate this fact as *split* lives.”

Crystal’s small body shivered involuntarily. Dr. Henley’s lecture didn’t help matters a bit. She bent forward and tuned her eyes. She looked to a path that zigzagged through the science tables and chairs, ending with Lee and the heat lamps. If it were high school she would raise her hand in an instant and request to move to the young man’s warm lab table. But, it wasn’t—despite the average age of these students in an introduction to biology class.

A Left-Handed Serving

When Crystal enrolled in Kentucky Westland College she felt far enough from her home in Tennessee that her childhood memories would soon be forgotten. On her drive to her new home of Kentucky she punched the “scan” button on her car radio with a smile. The old hometown stations were fuzz, and she imagined her episodes with her family would turn to fuzz also. She could have driven over the hills of the Bluegrass State and up and into the Green Mountain State—no matter, the brain’s tunes are far reaching.

During a late April month, when Crystal was seven, her father left for work after yelling at the entire family. Crystal and her older sister Sam ran to their room despite the fact they were just as guilty in their father’s eyes. Their mother stood her ground during the offenses because she was protected. Whether the surroundings were in riot or peace, she fiddled and poked around the house as a good homemaker.

On a morning when the weather was warm enough in April to pop in the screens for a breezy home, a skillet flew across the kitchen as if it picked up the season’s wind and sailed on its own, but it was helped a bit by the throwing arm of the patriarch. It smashed a group of dishes that rested in a strainer after a wash. Crystal’s mom picked up the skillet off the floor, wiped it clean with a dry towel, then placed it in the rack with the broken dishes. After their father left, she removed it from the rack and placed it over a gas burner.

Sam sat at the kitchen table before Crystal. Sam was given a family name, short for Samantha. Crystal wasn’t. Her mother simply thought the name was pretty.

Crystal heard her father's car spin its tires in the gravel driveway—anger was still close from the sound of the rocks flying against the siding of the house. She waited until her father's tires gripped the street's pavement before opening her bedroom door to make her way to breakfast. At the age of seven, she was already practiced at taking deep breaths for a calmer body.

Katherine began cracking eggs over a bowl for a good whisk. She carried a family name also, and was never to be called Kathy.

Crystal sat down quietly and used one finger to poke at her perfectly placed fork. She never understood why it sat on the left side of the plate considering she was right-handed. Because it was like many things, and that was just the way it was, she never asked. Instead, she learned to eat with her left hand. The procedure involved deep concentration while holding the utensil properly. The method was slow despite how good she became with it.

“Crystal, honey, your sister will eat her eggs scrambled... as usual. How do you want yours?”

She turned to see the very same skillet that was hurled through the air at her mother just before she retreated to her room. If this scene had been a cartoon, the pan would've been red as a cherry atop the gas flame. Of course, they weren't cartoons, and the skillet was cast iron. It sat atop the stove as black as it started, “I'm not too hungry.”

“Don't kid me—you'll eat. So how do you want 'em? Otherwise, you'll get scrambled too.”

Crystal answered quickly (anything but what her sister was having), “No! I want 'em sunny.”

Katherine laughed as though it was any good time, “You mean sunny-side up. Ok, any way you wish dear.”

The girls sat to eat their eggs; they were served on small cake plates, china that was handed down the family tree, and were the last complete set of dishes.

Lucid Dreaming

Lee worked as an emergency room registrar at the smaller of the two hospitals in town. Obtaining the job was easy for the young man. His grades at the university were excellent, and he expressed to his interviewers a desire to become a physician. He provided his transcripts outlining a pre-med track and described how valuable a job in the health field would be towards his future career. The job was his.

Two weeks later Lee sat in front of the hospital CEO during an orientation. The CEO was an oratory master. Lee listened and felt sympathy. Then, the CEO used his words to jerk Lee free of that feeling and lift him to a level of swagger. When Lee realized the manipulation during one of the CEO's speeches, he took a moment, lowered his face into the employee handbook to glance at a few technical passages, then snapped out of the hoodoo.

Lee remembered only one of the many stories. The CEO revealed the truth about their hospital: that it would never be as big as the other. But, this gave them the advantage, he explained; it enabled them to focus on customer service. The administrator said, "you travel to another hospital town... a town with only one hospital, and you'll see just how many people are disappointed with only one choice. Here at Greenwood Regional, we'll give people a second option after a bad experience somewhere else."

Lee sat down at his desk to begin an early morning shift. Before pulling the computer keyboard over his lap he moved the palms of his hands over his khaki pants to brush out the wrinkles. Over his shoulder he felt his co-worker, Wendy, close. She worked all

night and awaited Lee's arrival as relief. Everyone who knew her spoke her name with a tone of endearment.

Lee looked for his reflection in the computer monitor. It was difficult. He turned to the glass divider to his right for a better glance where the staff communicated to the triage nurses. In the glass he saw his shaven face and combed hair. He was aware that Wendy caught all of this. This didn't bother him, they all did it. Lee looked at his nose, cheeks, and the evenness of his sideburns next. He did all of this without looking into his own eyes—that would be truly looking at your self.

Wendy held her words, but only for moment, "Lee... I can't help but ask you... only because I've been wondering... you look older than a freshman."

Lee spun his chair around lightly, "Yeah, I started college late. I'm 23."

"Oh, well that explains it. Most people that work here don't have the maturity or patience at 18... that's why I was wondering. Why did you start so late?"

"If I tell you, can you keep it to yourself?"

Wendy nodded with a bit of pleasure after the realization that she was about to receive a secret.

"I'm serious about this. I'm not proud of it, and I would rather it stayed between us only."

"Ok."

"When I came to school here I decided to withdraw before the classes began. It was never my idea to start right away—just get away from home. It wasn't that I didn't want to go to college; I just didn't want to jump into something without knowing my surroundings. So... let's just say I spent a lot of time exploring this town. Before I knew

it I was in a little bit of trouble. That took some time too... to work out.”

Wendy took a seat, “What did you do?”

“It’s not important... it’s behind me. I see all of this as a great second opportunity.”

Wendy took her eyes off of Lee for moment, “Well, it must not have been too bad. We do background checks here.”

Lee smiled, “They say they do. I wonder about that. Some people are hired here in just a week like myself. It would take longer than that to receive background info... don’t you think?”

Wendy was silent.

Lee turned back towards his computer to punch the internet “hotkey.”

Wendy pushed her wheeled chair a little closer to Lee to look over his shoulder, “This worries me a little.”

“It shouldn’t... it was nothing, really,” Lee concentrated as he pulled up a popular blog site he had subscribed to. He typed quickly; he knew that the ER would not stay calm for long.

Wendy took a slow, deep inhale. After releasing her breath she changed the subject, “What are you blogging?”

“Between work and studying I’ve been trying to experiment with my dreams as a past-time.”

“What does that have to do with blogs?”

“I’m recording my dreams on this website so others can give me some input. Have you ever heard of lucid dreaming?”

“I don’t think so.”

“The idea is, while dreaming it is possible to wake up and realize that you’re in the dream. If you can do that, then you can begin to react, manipulate events, and control your actions.”

Wendy moved her chair closer to Lee’s to see the monitor, “You know, some people say that when you die in a dream that’s it—you never wake up.”

“That’s not true. I’ve died several times in my dreams... especially when I was a kid. It happened all the time. There was fear, dread, disbelief, then a calm blackness. Afterwards, I would either start dreaming something else, or wake up.”

“Do you remember your first death here in the ER?”

Lee finally felt amused by his co-worker and swung around in his chair to face Wendy, “Yeah and I’ll never forget it. I bet I worked her for four months before it happened. I guess it was because I don’t work as much as you guys, but it was driving me crazy that I hadn’t had one yet.”

“Would do you mean?”

“I had so much anxiety about what I didn’t know. The ER rooms, nurses and doctors are so calm and quiet at times that I wondered if there would be this sudden breakout of chaos. I wondered about the family that would be around and what we would do. But, most of all, I didn’t know what I would feel. I tried to guess how I would react, and that was my problem. I was anxious. I *wanted* it to happen so I could finally feel whatever it was that I would feel.”

“And...”

“Someone rolled in DOA. He was old and didn’t make it here in time for a damn

thing to be done other than pronounce. It was hours before family made it here too.”

“So... how did you feel?”

“The ER staff remained quiet as usual. There was a moment when I caught the doctor laughing about something. It was as if nothing had even happened. The guy’s death was simply a couple words that were exchanged between everyone here and there so that everyone knew. When a nurse told me, I looked to room two, the room where everyone goes to die, and I saw his body flat on the bed like it could’ve been anyone... like it could’ve been someone alive, only there was no attention given to him. The door to the room was eventually closed and I was relieved. It was over. I had my first death and now I could tell people. I felt what I felt and that was it.”

“It’s different for everyone.”

“Yeah, and I’ve found that it’s more intense when a person rolls in here that’s near death. It doesn’t matter if they die or not. That’s when the emotions begin to show themselves.”

Wendy straightened up with excitement, “That reminds me... last week this lady walked in alone and sat down in the waiting area. She was the only person out there and it was quiet, so I heard her come in. Because she didn’t present herself at our desks for check-in I could see her in only one of our mirrors. The others here in registration were laughing and talking because there was nothing going on, and I just stared at her in the mirror wondering what was up. For a second I thought she was just a visitor waiting on a patient in the back like anyone else, but I called out to her anyway and asked if we could help her. She said she wasn’t feeling well. I called a nurse to come out, and she checked her blood pressure—it was really low. The next thing I know the staff has her on a bed

right here in the hallway and the doctor is on top of her doing compressions! If we were busy like any other day and she walked through those doors, sat down and never walked to our desk, she would have died right in that chair.”

Lee smiled, “Damn, I always miss the good ones.”

“I tell you, it was intense. But, that isn’t what gets me. It’s when there is a lot of blood... I mean *a lot*.”

“How did you get hired then?”

“I had no idea what I would see. I mean... a little blood is ok, and I can see blood getting drawn, but when it is all over the place, I begin to freak out. It all started when this guy came in that had been kicked in the face by a horse. His face looked awful. His lips were split open, teeth missing, nose broken, and one of his eyes looked like it was about to fall out. There was so much blood in his room that when I walked in to do the registration, I nearly slipped. But it wasn’t the sight, it was the smell. When there is enough of it, there is an odor. I got sick, and now when I see blood I can’t forget the smell.”

Lee pulled at his shirt to straighten it, “I know the smell you’re talking about. The last guy I had in here with a lot of blood had cut off three of his fingers somehow. When I walked into the room there were tiny droplets all over the floor and computer. I did my thing and was out in just a couple of minutes. When I got home that night and changed clothes I noticed there was blood all over my shirt. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed until then. It was like I was used to it or something, enough so that I could work all day with it on me and not even realize.”

It was 7 a.m. before Wendy finally gathered herself and left for home, leaving Lee alone in registration. She stayed an hour later than was necessary, chatting. Now, Lee could be by himself with his blogs for a couple of hours, until 9 a.m. showed itself along with the rest of the day-staff. Lee relaxed his arms and let his wrists and hands bear their weight so his fingers could move across the keyboard numb. His first entry into the dream-blog was a childhood experience that popped into his head the night before—he cared less about his boyhood age and more about the message. What the dream meant was beyond him, but he was sure of one thing: he would never find out anything unless he could figure out a way to become aware during REM.

Blog 1

Lucid dreaming. It almost sounds like an oxymoron, but I'm on a journey to reach such a state. I wish to dream and snap a finger while dreaming... because I can. To accomplish this I have decided to blog some of my dreams and explore the possibilities that might come from the control narration offers. If my dream recollections become words then I'll have taken one step towards manipulation of those dreams. However, a problem remains: my dreams as recordings (blogs) will be after the experience. My goal is to react while asleep, take control, and reach enlightenment each night.

My first dream entry is cloudy enough. Reaching a lucid state during this one seems like impossibility. Anyway, here is how the first one goes...

I see my father's tall body and bearded face the way it must've been, and I see this because I surely can't see myself. The moment is really a feeling rather than a sight—like being thrown. I couldn't walk despite the overwhelming desire to; it was a

toddler dream, a waking dream within a dream much like I've hoped for. But my baby legs wouldn't work for me. I desired a grip that would carry me, and it seemed as though this occurred at one point, or I could be mistaken and it was all the movement around me which created a feeling as though I were moving. The need was so strong I remember using all my senses to try and mimic the power everyone else had and showed off with one passing breeze after another, then it became a sensation of its own. The movement that hurt the worst was Mom's. Her smell came with it. So, I'd try and try and hold my eyes high thinking that my legs would start moving any time now because I finally figured out the spell. Look, forget all this speculation on movement and movement within a dream because what is important was: there was Dad before the cold air hit us from an opened door, and I wanted him. Whether my body moved or my spirit I'm not sure. That is that. Cold as cold can be before it brings itself entirely.

Lee pulled his hands from the keyboard after his first entry. He looked around the registration for a glimpse of anyone that might be lingering: a stray nurse searching for a cup of coffee or a patient that had slid through the front doors without his knowing. The latter was his biggest fear. He quickly looked at the convex mirror in front of his desk to survey the lobby. *Good*, he thought, *there are no dead patients*. He stared back at the monitor and realized that he needed to enter more for his fellow bloggers, but the dream he offered was the only one he could recall since his new hobby of lucid dreaming began. Lee located the time on his Microsoft toolbar. He had much of the morning left before the others arrived. He searched his mind for something to blog next, then it occurred to him that an old memory might do. *What did it matter if it wasn't really a lucid dreaming*

attempt? What did it matter that it wasn't really a dream? My goal is to spark responses, right?

Yes, he was cheating, but it was research, and he had something from his childhood that would follow the first entry nicely. So he began...

Blog 2

I met a buddy when I was six and here he was walking around in my dream just as I remembered him. I still can't recall his name, but I do recognize the hill we were walking up during the dream. It was a paved country road that remained between our two homes, and I walked it for the first time while asleep. It was the farthest I had ever walked without a parent by my side, and I felt panic beginning to surface like the feeling blood gives when it rushes to your face during a blush. We went up and over the hill away from my home. I bet I remembered the hill and not this pal of mine because I rode down the hill for the first time without training wheels on my blue bicycle. That was a day of fear and excitement all rolled into one—the way fear should always be accompanied. Anyway, we walked the middle of the road and then on the edges because we talked too. Who can stay straight when all that is going on? I'm sure if our conversation had been recorded it would be like listening to another language. What could we have possibly said to one another? He lived on the other side and down in the thick of the woods—far away. I remember walking farther then farther guessing his home would be soon, but it wasn't. I began to feel as though he had broken an unspoken agreement. As we continued, my pal stopped and held a grin I didn't understand at first. There was a silken pod at his feet. I walked over for a better look and he asked me if I

was ready. I didn't answer; I wasn't sure what was about to happen. The boy bent his knees so that his body was crouched, ready to spring. After he was sure he was on target he hopped on the pod and a dozen premature spiders spilled out in a tiny hurry to live. The boy then stomped on as many as he could catch like there was no better game. I didn't step on any. I stared at the split pod and the many scattered splatters. Some of them had a little life left in them to wave a solitary leg at me. We walked on and I thought about the mess of spots we deserted on the pavement. I hoped that rain would come and erase all, in due respect. My hope wasn't enough to make it happen though.

When we finally made it to the bottom of the hill on the other side, I saw honeylocust trees in the boy's yard (which aren't as sweet sounding as the name implies; their thorns can drive deep). When I saw the windows to his place from the outside they lacked the glare any good window will reflect. Instead, they were black as the asphalt we walked on. It was like someone had hung garbage bags in place of curtains. Maybe they had. Now that I write this, I'm sure I ran from that house in a later dream. It was the sight alone that did it to me. Damn it when fear is unaccompanied by excitement. Who could possibly live in there I thought. Damn the dream for how it lingers, like whatever it was that lingered in those windows—black as bags. Why can't I do something, anything while dreaming? Just a simple command would work. I'll settle for a single word as long as I've decided it instead of my subconscious.

The young ER registrar took pleasure in the last sentences most of all. Yes, his mind congratulated itself. *Who doesn't want to extinguish the fear they suddenly feel in a dream?* A bit relieved, he lifted his eyes to the mirror and the heavy front doors swung

open loudly. It was as if he had commanded the next arrival just by taking a look at the empty lobby. Lee pulled a blank triage coversheet from the stack, wrote down the time and date, and asked the person through the reflected image, “Can I help you.”

The patient presented herself by placing her palms on the flat surface of the desk for stabilization, “I’m... I... It’s hard to breathe.”

Lee wrote quickly under “reason for visit”: SOB. He then dialed the nurse.

After the nurse checked the patient’s breathing, he asked for her to wait in the lobby for just a minute, then handed Lee the coversheet back.

The nurse’s name was Carl, and he was often assigned to the most difficult patients due to his restraint and business-like bedside manner, “Don’t worry about that one, she’s just making a big deal out of congestion. I thought I would also let you know about writing down SOA for short-of-air instead of SOB, short-of-breath. SOB doesn’t always translate to visitors as it does to us. And, don’t worry about it... there are several nurses back there that do it too.”

“Ok,” Lee scratched out his original acronym to write the other, “I think I need a break.”

Carl let out single “ha!” as is his best laugh, “Don’t worry, someone will be here in thirty minutes, then you can take a break, then we’ll *really* get started.”

Sex, Sleep and Insecurity

A midnight party finally placed Crystal and Lee together outside of class. The spot just happened to be on a corduroy couch. Circumstance had played as chance. When people talk of romance and architecture, one might imagine an American citadel built of white stone walls on the corner of an old neighborhood. When people talk of romance and couples, one might imagine Crystal and Lee. But, between the two, Crystal was the dreamer. Her brain frequently offered a memory of a walk across town hand-in-hand; the truth was quite different. Lee had never held her hand. He had never touched her.

Crystal imagined many different scenarios with him that ended with her wishes. Some of them were delicate. Some were unlikely. They were all loving as she knew it.

While the couple sat and watched partiers, they also watched each other. She made guilty glances while he stared blankly, and when there was a short moment he stole the time to scan her figure. She took slow sips from a beer while he looked at her waist and stomach. She inhaled deeply through her nose, then looked to the side; when she did this she was sure to pull her long shiny hair over her shoulder. She hoped he would take pleasure in the honeysuckle aroma, but he used the opportunity to preview her breasts during the inhale so that he might catch them at their peak.

The two took more sips of beer and their brains thought less about how they would attract each other and more about drinking. Everyone was aware that with less thought and more alcohol their bodies would take over the flirtations.

Crystal and Lee eventually took each other's hands and walked into a room filled with bright flashing colors and music to fit. Someone played the *Violent Femmes* and the

gripes of the lead singer Gano had compelled everyone to sing along,

Why can't I get... just one fuck!

But the crowd wasn't griping; they sang the lyrics by means of a cheerful yell. They celebrated. And they drank some more.

It was night to some and morning to others, but the hour was the same and the plastic cups that were once in neat sleeves now littered the house. Some of them were a quarter full. Some were used as ashtrays. Some had been both but were turned over and changed into a gray mess.

The couple stepped outside and into a large group, all of which were on the porch escaping body heat and cigarette smoke. Crystal and Lee were drunk, and holding each other was a little easier despite the small collection of words that were exchanged. They kissed, and he groped. They broke from the pleasure to say a few words only to begin again. The interludes were his and he used them to simply lighten the mood between long periods of the make-out which might've, otherwise, turned her off.

Lee guided Crystal to his attic apartment a short distance from the party. As they walked up the stairs and into his place, Crystal used her eyes to follow the many angles of the ceiling which dipped then climbed, eventually leading to the opening of a bedroom that looked like an entrance into a funhouse. She sidestepped, then ducked to make her way.

The two began kissing once again while shedding clothes. Lee removed the comforter and then lowered her onto the bed. She wished he hadn't done that. Beneath the covers was more her approach—especially for the first time. The good news: she was able take a good look at his body. The bad: he could see her mediocre form as well.

There, uncovered, they had sex while very drunk. She was constantly reminded by a chill of air that they were not only naked, but exposed.

Crystal slept for a short period in the morning and left Lee with a kiss before leaving. She felt a bit ashamed, but maybe the kiss would remove that. At home, she spent the day napping. Her waking moments were preoccupied by sips of cool water and recalling any one event she could muster a memory for. She was surprised by the number of times she couldn't remember what Lee's face looked like. The images of the sex came in flashes, and she was often reminded by her existing pain stemming from episodes when Lee was too rough.

That night, when he pushed hard and shifted his body into a position that added an intolerable amount of weight upon her hips, Crystal opened her eyes. She looked away from the bare, overhead bulb so she could keep from seeing spots. But, there was one spot of light she noticed that wasn't a trick her eyes were playing. It was the tiniest of red dots that never moved (quite unlike the spots and floaters someone's eyes will offer), and it appeared to be pointed right at her. Once the sex began to feel painful she used the opportunity to test the power of the red light by gently pushing Lee so his posture would change. While they both shifted, the red light remained—pointed, witnessing.

Over the Kentucky Hills

Crystal never forgot the hills of Kentucky after her family first visited them. Her father's car climbed them as quickly as it descended them. At twelve years old she was mesmerized by the thick foliage that intruded on each twisted turn. It was as if Tennessee was hill-less, but for all she knew it was; she didn't live close to the mountains.

Sam sat in the front seat next to her father, and Crystal sat in the back alone. She often pulled her seatbelt off so she could slide to the opposite window as the car's shifting force pulled her there. Their father drove fast, but he took many detours within the state for his own pleasure.

"We have a long drive, girls, so get some sleep if you feel like it. I hope you brought with you everything you need. You'll be staying longer than I will."

Crystal was certain she had. All that she had left behind she could easily do without, even if it meant she would never see it again. But, it wouldn't be long before she did see home again.

* * * *

Crystal's aunt handed her the phone, it was her father on the other end calling from the hill-less state.

"Honey, I've paid for a ticket so that you can fly out of there on Thursday. You'll be coming back... ok?"

Crystal held the phone's earpiece close and looked around to see if her father was

actually in the house somewhere. She wondered if her father had seen all that she had done in his brother's home the last three weeks. Had she done something wrong?

"But why, Daddy?"

"Look, I know you've been having a good time up there... the house is nice isn't it?"

"Yes..."

"But, I need you here. You're my smart girl, and I'll be honest with you because you're so smart... In the time the two of you have been gone, your mother and I were trying to get things straight, and she's been to the doctor, but things are going kind of slow. The things she used to be good at are now going bad. I need you to help us... little things like writing a check for bills here and there, and stuff like that. I'll teach you."

"What about Sam, can't she do it?"

"No. She's going to stay there and go to school. My brother and Sheryl... they can't... just listen, ok? I need you. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes."

"I was hoping you would say yes. I love you, and I'll see you on Thursday night at the Nashville airport."

"Bye Daddy," Crystal didn't bother placing the phone's headset back on the base; she left the line open and ran to the bedroom she shared with her sister.

On the bed, Sam sat cross-legged with a suitcase open and all of their clothes placed in neat stacks, "Richard and Sheryl said we needed to get all our stuff in order."

"So you *are* coming with me?"

Sam rolled her eyes, "No, didn't Dad tell you, I'm staying here and you're going."

“But why are your things out too?”

“Because, I’m staying a lot longer and we need to decide which clothes I’m keeping of yours. You have more at home. This is all that *I* have.”

Crystal stared at a pair of jeans and one of her favorite t-shirts that her sister had resting next to her side, “You can’t just take whatever you want. Those are mine! That is all mine!”

“Sheryl said I could do this! And so did Dad!”

Crystal grabbed the closest shirt to her to stake a claim. She wasn’t even sure if it was hers. Her eyes turned red just before she ran back to her uncle’s study where the phone’s headset rested off its base. She picked it up, “Daddy, Sam has everything of mine... it’s not fair.”

A closed line was the response, in addition to a beep, a beep. She stopped talking to listen—another beep.

The Video

The entertainment center at Lee's apartment was anything but sophisticated, but his makeshift abilities, lots of coaxial, RCA, and s-video cables managed to provide for his needs. Some of those needs were listening to music while he watched local news on mute. He liked that. He also liked his old VHS movies that needed the tracking set each time he popped in a tape. But most of all, he prized his digital camera that plugged directly into an auxiliary input on his nineteen-inch TV for instant playback. The picture he received from the direct line and expensive recorder was better than all of his other inputs, even better than local cable services lines.

Lee pulled a stool from his kitchen area to place in front of his TV, then attached his camera. This way he could watch close, and handle the controls of his camera at the same time.

He lived there alone now that his roommate was gone. It was for the best. The guy picked fights in an attempt to be included into Lee's solitary lifestyle. One evening his roommate walked casually towards another room, stopped in front of Lee, stared at him, snatch from his hands whatever reading material he held, then dropped it to the floor without a word. The guy eventually accepted a bid to one of the school's fraternities. The guy would get all the attention he needed there.

The digital camera's play-button flashed green and the bedroom adjacent to his living room became a surreal, colorful image on his TV screen. The light in the room on the night he slept with Crystal was bright enough for the recording, but Lee wished there was a light behind the camera for the best image. But, that was hard to do considering his

deceit.

As their recorded figures began to take their clothes off, he became more confident about the picture. It was good, despite his displeasure with the lighting. He watched himself pull the bed's coverings off just before kissing Crystal so that she wouldn't be alarmed by his actions. He laughed at this, a moment he didn't remember, even though he behaved at the time with complete awareness of the active camera.

Lee watched closely as his image mounted Crystal. While viewing, he used his hand to feel for the camera's controls. Its menu screens allowed for many visual effects: black and white, antique, foggy, negative, moonlight, etc. Lee pressed the black and white option. Their bodies looked nice under the feature, but not dream-like. He chose "negative." They looked nameless, which was also nice. Crystal had a welcoming figure despite her thinness. Her breasts were small, but poked upwards, even though she lay flat. Her arms and legs were long, and they reached entirely around his body as if she held onto a large piece of driftwood in the open water.

Lee looked closer at the negative effect he opted for. Crystal's face rested to one side with her mouth open. The colors and shades allowed for an unusual black hole to appear where her teeth and relaxed tongue should've been. Lee chose "moonlight" next. Everything turned blue while their eyes remained dark. Then, he noticed Crystal had kept her eyes open during much of their session. She looked directly into the camera. It was very attractive, but that didn't take his mind off the fact she may have known. He quickly switched the recorder back to the native picture. In color, he looked into her eyes for a clue. It was just a coincidence, he thought. He switched the settings back to "moonlight," pulled a pipe and small bag from his pocket. With two fingers he pinched a

bit of marijuana from the bag and loaded the pipe, but before lighting the weed he pushed the playback button on his camera, and the session began again, from the beginning. *Yes, he thought, that's dreamy.*

Puberty and Fast Food

Crystal's childhood home sat on a flat country field with young trees. There was little cover for the large open spaces that led to their doors, and it often felt like any wanderer (or worse, neighbor) could see everything that unfolded at the house.

Her father worked, and Crystal spent most of the day with her mother. She felt like a babysitter. Her mother went from remoteness and indifference to opaqueness and delusion. The home was a mess of dirty floors and clothes. Crystal was just fourteen and became tired of doing all the chores. Sam was still away, enrolled at a private school. That was all she knew about her sister, but she imagined the rest: glorious summer adventures with new friends, homemade meals at a quiet dinner table, and a father that did more than complain about the house when he came home.

The young girl held a broom bigger than herself, and brushed the hardwood floors of their living area while her mother sat on the loveseat staring at her daughter's strokes.

"Mom, if you want, you can finish what I've started, then I can get the kitchen done before Dad gets home."

Her mother lifted her head after the broom strokes stopped, "Ok. Anything for you Sweetheart."

Crystal felt relieved and laid the broom handle against the loveseat for an easy reach.

After wiping down the kitchen counters and table with her small hands, Crystal walked back into the living room, "Mom! What are you doing!?"

While Crystal was gone her mother stood the broom upside down and against the

fireplace mantle—with bristles up. She also moved all the furniture so the pieces faced the front windows, just inches from the panes. The sides of the center rug were pushed up, supported by two end-tables so it looked like an open burrito. Her mother stood in the middle with the blades of their overhead ceiling fan in her hands. She somehow broke them free without Crystal hearing.

Crystal grabbed the broom and turned it right side up, it was the easiest to correct first, “You did all this, but couldn’t sweep a thing?”

While holding one of the ceiling fan blades, unfazed, “Honey, take your paddle, we have a long trip down stream.”

* * * *

Crystal’s body took its shape as a woman. Puberty had its way at fourteen. Boys took notice of her figure; she was no longer a torso the same width as her arms and legs. Her breasts were noticeable, her bottom pushed outward, and her height completed the prediction of her long hands. She was certain the changes were due to the takeout food her father brought home each night in place of a real meal. All the fried chicken, microwave hamburgers, greasy fish, and boxed Chinese did her body wrong. Her mother complained about the food too, and those were the sanest evenings in Crystal’s memory, because she agreed. Nevertheless, despite her skepticism of the boys’ sudden engrossment, she used it to her advantage and managed to draw the attention of a young man outside of her high school.

The boy was eighteen and still lived with his parents. Crystal wanted to pretend she was still a little girl that hadn’t changed, and he wanted to have sex. She obliged, and

they spent many nights and mornings in his room.

The boy's parents were kind to Crystal. They heard rumors about her family and felt as though they could give her a new one. Their graciousness was so self-aware, the night Crystal was deflowered, they sat in front of the television, preening, oblivious.

Ephedrine

A fourth, straight day of bright spring sunlight during the second semester encouraged hundreds at KWU to change along with the weather. Crystal's desires were the same as many other women. Her body carried an extra ten pounds as an afterthought, and it found its way around her waistline and stomach. And, worst of all, her jaw line began to disappear beneath the chubbiness. The lose-weight-by-the-pill-fast commercials were trivial until she noticed the changes. Things had to be different for the young woman: eat little... run... work harder... pill... drink water... tan... pill... no carbohydrates... pill. She managed this routine with a precision that eliminated time for college courses. She dropped out. Besides, Lee never called.

Crystal looked into the mirror and there were inches everywhere—inches around the waist and on the labels of shorts; inches seeped out from under the striped bikini bottoms Crystal wore last year, in vogue. Ounces too... everywhere ounces. Restaurants were most difficult. There were menu items her tongue tasted by the numbered dishes alone. Near the heading was a plate of Favorites (appetizer #2). Under Specialties there were fajita's (#17), and she couldn't forget the stuffed filet served along with asparagus and cheesy potatoes (#2). It was enough to send her into a panic while her stomach begged for the chastising smells around her. *Take pill*, her mind's voice spoke.

When the food arrived she hardly realized she had ordered it; the restaurant lights were low. She sat in appropriated peace, alone. Crystal stared at the empty chair across from her and imagined a handsome man in its place. As an apparition, he sat with a loving

look while admiring her flat tummy and square hips. She ate.

“Everything all right?”

Crystal looked to her plate for an answer. There were smears of colors where she used the last piece of bread to swab across the dish: reds mostly.

“Would you like dessert,” the server spoke, and a grin ended her suggestion.

“Yes,” Crystal said—Crystal said yes.

Again, she saw colors, but this time it was in the toilet. Her back made long, exaggerated motions as her esophagus and mouth widened to release everything her intestines and stomach held. *That’s it*, her mind assured her body.

The next journey was one of moderate pleasure: window shopping. Through the glass she saw attires accompanied by salespersons’ smiles and (maybe) laughter. When she let out a breath of relief a burn from her insides made its way into her throat like a backwards whiskey shot. *Soon... not long... the weight will be gone.*

“Miss... can I help you?”

What! Can’t they just wait until the fat is gone? Can’t I let a little go first?

“We have your sizes if you would like to try something on... with your long arms and legs I know of a loose skirt-blouse combination that would be great!”

Crystal swayed like a falling leaf.

The saleswoman rubbed her elbow and walked back into the store. Crystal stared at the glass-glinted dresses and bathing suits for awhile longer before moving on.

At home she felt more comfortable about her progress; she found herself on the couch accompanied by a television and small foods. After eating she stepped into the bathroom. She was always sure to take the pills afterwards, and with the familiar fire in

her throat the drug's influence was as quick as a single syllable lie.

Rohypnol and the SUV as Dowry

Lee and Wendy worked together on Saturdays. They were the only two registrars in the ER working ten hour shifts. It was 9 a.m. and a number of patients were already arriving by EMS and automobile. Some were accompanied by family and friends. Some were alone, treated and departed alone. Some walked right off the street. The walk-ins turned walk-outs held their prescription slips in their hands and asked where the closet pharmacy was. A low inpatient census equaled a cut in cab vouchers—for now.

Lee grabbed a piece of paper left on his desk by the ER clerk. It was a direct admission from room two. The room everyone goes to die. This guy made it, and would go to the CCU department. It wasn't the first direct admit from the ER. Lee was certain that when the census was low patients from the ER and everywhere else were sent to the floors more often than usual. But, room two was for real, as always.

Lee handed off the direct admit to Wendy without explanation. It was her patient and she could send the poor fellow up, but his freedom from duty was short. A young woman holding an infant was escorted by EMTs past his window, out the ER door, and into the lobby. Lee waited for the woman to take a seat with her child before sliding the glass window open. The EMTs whispered to each other next to his partition. One was male and the other female. They spoke so intimately with low voices and mouths next to ears that Lee imagined them as a couple.

“What’s going on with the lady you guys just escorted out here?”

The female EMT spoke first, “Her baby has a fever, and she needed a ride to pick up some Tylenol... it’s her second trip to the ER in two weeks for the same thing.”

Lee turned to look at the mother through his mirror, “So, she doesn’t have a car?”

The male EMT took his turn, “Yep, and we have several rooms back there, but we thought it would be better if we let her sit out here for a short time first. Maybe she’ll get the picture. After the baby’s treated, we’ll surely give her a lift to Rite-Aid next.” They both laughed at this.

Lee spoke with a tad of distaste, “You know we aren’t giving out cab vouchers right now?”

The female EMT answered ashamed, “Oh, sorry.”

The mother and her child waited longer than the EMTs joked about. More patients arrived, and her baby’s folder in triage was pushed to the bottom.

At the end of the hour a trio that included two young women and a man in his forties presented themselves in front of Lee’s desk. The shorter of the two women wore a KWU softball sweatshirt and sported long hair, a twisted mess of auburn curls. She was the first to speak, and it was evident by the way she stood in front of the other two that she didn’t care about her hair. Her build was short and strong, “We called the police last night and this morning because she was missing,” the softball player gestured towards her friend.

Lee turned his attention away from the speaker and looked at the other girl. She was beautiful, and stood with a smile, “I’m sorry... I don’t understand. Do you or someone here need to see the ER doctor?”

The softball player spoke again, this time more loudly, “Yes. None of us could get a hold of her all night. She woke up in her neighbor’s apartment with no clothes on, and doesn’t remember anything.”

Lee never turned his attention away from the other girl, even when her friend answered for her with urgency; he waited for her to speak for herself. She didn't. She was only twenty, thin, long black hair, faint freckles, healthy complexion, and lips as red as red can be without lipstick. She held onto her smile, a smile that wasn't exaggerated, but a smile nonetheless. Lee guessed there wasn't a day that passed she didn't smile. Maybe she decided now was the time before the recollections began.

The coversheet was out for the triage nurse and Lee had recorded the patient's arrival time and date, but his pen tip rested on the blank line that was preceded by the words "reason for visit." He gave up on a response and looked at the older man, the only other person left for further explanation.

The man wore a KWU sweatshirt also, "Look... she said she was drinking late last night and now she doesn't remember anything. Her friends called the police because she wasn't answering her phone, and the officer said we needed to come here... so here we are," his words came out so logically that skepticism sat on the back of his tongue, waiting.

Lee turned to the pretty girl, but it was her friend that spoke again, "She only had TWO beers... not enough that you would wake up somewhere else, naked, and not remember anything. Plus, she always answers her fucking phone."

Lee looked at the clock and then to his coversheet. Two minutes passed and he didn't call the triage nurse. *Damn it*, he thought. He picked up the phone, dialed four digits, waited, and simply spoke, "First desk please." Lee took his pen and made one big wavy line across the space that required an explanation for the visit. He did this, not out of ignorance, but it was protocol not to "advertise" a possible rape. On the big board in

the ER that showed all the patients' names next to their room numbers, the clerk did the same. She made one big wavy line—no name, no nothing, but everyone who worked in the department knew.

It was eleven o'clock and Wendy walked into registration holding a clipboard.

Lee watched her, "Did you just come from room ten?"

"Yeah."

"Good, our ER doctor is a male today... the last thing that girl needs is me, another guy in the room asking a bunch of questions."

Wendy plopped down in her chair with the clipboard to finish the rape case, "I don't think it would've really mattered."

Lee looked surprised to hear her say this, "What are you saying?"

"Just look at what the triage nurse wrote for her reason for visit."

The reason read: *No memory X 18 hours*

Lee looked at the words unconvinced, "So."

"Well, her father out there in the waiting area gave me her Anthem insurance card and that's who I billed, and when I went to register her she was sitting on the bed with a gown on over her jeans as if an exam was the last thing on anyone's mind. We don't know anything other than that right now."

Lee became stern, "For one thing, that guy out there is not her father. He's just some guy, and I'm pretty sure he is their softball coach or something. I'm also pretty sure he's a jerk. I told the girl's nurse to be sure not to let him back to her room because of the way he was talking. It turns out that I didn't need to do that because she spoke to

him too, and came to the same conclusion. And, just because she was wearing her jeans means nothing... she could have already had the exam by now and felt better about putting them back on.”

Wendy looked at the photocopy of the Anthem card, “How did that guy end up with her insurance card?”

“I don’t know... he’s controlling or something. He may have asked her for it in an attempt to look as though he was helping her out with our insensitive billing, but what he was really doing was making her the guarantor of the co-pays. And, what if her insurer sees that it *was* a rape and declines payment because of the state’s resources to handle all of this...I don’t know... but what I do know is you better edit that Anthem and plug in the Kentucky Victims Fund for billing because I’m telling you a social worker will be here from Hope Harbor any minute, and then the police—you just watch.”

Wendy didn’t like being wrong, but she knew that Lee had seen more than she had, “All right, I’ll change it.”

Lee’s computer screen flickered after he pushed his quick link to the blog account he subscribed to. He typed in a few words for a header, but his words meant nothing. No phrase worked. No synonym he searched for could convey today’s patients. He suddenly became aware he would have to come up with something else. He decided to write about Crystal. He couldn’t think of any dreams he had of Crystal, and today’s events were not dreams, but reality, so he pushed this to the back of his subconscious.

Anything will do, he convinced himself. If he considered his actions in reality as the same as his actions while dreaming, then possibilities of lucid dreaming would become second nature. With this in mind, he typed away, and as his mind began to

search for surreal moments (what's expected of dreams). He remembered an image that crept into one of his slumbers a couple of nights previous. He decided to use this and simply plug Crystal's name in as one of the characters. He also decided the last successful lucid dreaming attempt was too long ago. Maybe he could manage all of this in one entry.

Wendy finished her rape case registration and used her feet to push her chair over to Lee's cubicle. She looked at his screen without his knowing and saw Crystal's name among the many other words despite the same font they carried. She gave Lee a nudge on the arm that was just forceful enough that he could take it either way: a platonic desire for a moment of attention, or a love punch. The latter was closer to the truth.

After quickly minimizing his internet window he looked at Wendy. She had blonde hair. He wasn't sure if it was lightly colored or not. He did know that he wasn't initially attracted to blondes. Sociologists theorize whether male or female, a person is most attracted to the same hair color of either their father or mother, depending on the child's sex and the opposite sex of the parent. Lee's mother had dark hair. Wendy's father had the same color as Lee's, brown. It laid much the same also.

Wendy grinned with a bit of unconvincing indifference, "Who's Crystal?"

"She's nobody... just a name I made up for the lack of a name—just a dream."

"Ooooh... dreaming of girls, huh?"

"Yeah."

The two could speak only for a moment before the ER waiting area was occupied by another family. Lee became aggravated once he saw them in the mirror headed towards his desk. Between Wendy and the ER flow, he would never finish his blog for

today.

A fourteen year-old boy was holding his right arm, and his lips were shivering. His father walked with him and spoke casually, "My son thinks he broke his arm after he wrecked his four-wheeler."

The boy dissented, "It *is* broke!"

The father visibly held back a chuckle, "We need to check him in."

The triage nurse was already in the waiting area checking on a separate arrival when he saw the boy come in. He headed their way for a quick look, "I heard everything you guys said... can I take a quick pulse on that arm that hurts?"

The boy's eyes widened, "You'll have to cut off my jacket... I can't take it off."

The nurse carefully pulled the boy's jacket cuff up and past his wrist, "We'll certainly cut that off of you if you want."

"No, there's no need to do that. Suck it up son and take that jacket off," the father now spoke without humor.

Lee looked towards Wendy with a face that he had used on her often.

Wendy grabbed a triage coversheet, "I'll pre-register them. Sir, what's your son's name and date of birth?"

Lee clicked the internet bar to maximize his blog page and began typing:

Blog 6

I think I may have done it! There was a small part of me that knew I was dreaming last night! I feel encouraged, hopeful, excited.... I believe I know why this happened too. During my dream there was a sense of dread that began to take a shape other than a

simple feeling. The dread caused my body to shiver, and because of the setting I couldn't let the people around me see this. There was no other choice but to take control, and I did. The sequences of the dream were too unbearable, and it was either let the torture continue, wake-up, or act out within the dream. I did the latter. Of course, my dissent didn't occur until the ending, so although I woke up pleased with my final actions, the whole thing left a bad taste. I hope I can take control and begin the lucid dreaming process earlier next time.

I guess I can let you in on the dream. I've titled it "Crystal":

I won't lead you on here. I'll get right to the heart of the scene. It was a summer gathering of my family who were all arranged on a deck of a home, both of which were unfamiliar to me. There was grilled food that had already been consumed, and decorations that were one step below modest, not to mention many of the balloons and streamers were in the kids' hands by the time I was thrown into this situation. The reason for the gathering...? I was awaiting the arranged marriage that was about to take place, and I was the groom. It just occurred to me that it is strange that the reception took place before the marriage, but dreams don't have a bit of respect for tradition. Besides, these commencements that had already taken place added to my sense of dread. Everyone had upheld their commitments, now I had to do the same. Another aspect of the dream that I have to tell you about that intensified my place in the proceedings: The family around me was my own, but they were the people you only see once a year on holiday. My immediate family was nowhere. I felt comfortable enough with the people around me to understand the dream as real and pacified, but they were

just distant enough that I knew they wouldn't give a damn about saving me.

Anyway, I spent the whole time at one table while my family-o-strange ran around talking about everything but the wedding. They joked, talked about football, moved about the food poking around for seconds, and choosing the right moments to check my bearings. As I stated before, I was beginning to get shaky. Then, it happened. I was presented to the bride at the table where I was sitting. I didn't see her for the first time like one would imagine (being escorted down a carpeted aisle by her father). I saw her for the first time at my unclothed table, which would've looked more suitable next to a pool than on a wooden deck. It had a frosty, plastic see-through top minus the umbrella.

The girl's name was Crystal, and she was accompanied by her father; I didn't mean to mislead you on that one. He sat her down next to me so we could meet. And, when I say he sat her down, I mean this in the most literal way. She was no more than seven years old. The father looked at me with hope that I would give him a nod of acknowledged pleasure or, in the least, agreement, but I didn't. My expression was one of aloofness, as it had been since the dream began. It was the only way I knew how to fight the fear that was resting just beneath my ribs and atop my lungs making it hard to breathe. The father saw this and began to remind me about the dowry. It was a silver SUV only a couple of years old. He was more than pleased to give it to us, and was proud to offer it without intimation of setback, as if there could be more if needed. But the gift spoke for itself, as all gifts do.

There I was, with a little girl named Crystal, and a 4WD for my taking. Everyone looked at me even though they were trying not to, and this is when I knew I was dreaming. It was as if the bait had been set and everyone was a little too obvious while

they waited for me to take it. I would not bite, I thought. The muscles of my face felt as though they were still, and the expression I held was no expression at all. My head was bowed, raised, and again bowed. These motions were voluntary. I hoped that if I kept lowering my head and then looking up again the setting and people would change. It and they didn't, but the attempt I was making was felt among everyone there except my bride. People began to grumble while others smiled as though they had just won a bet. Crystal remained as happy as the moment she sat next to me. It was a party to her and she was caught up in everyone else's pleasures. I looked at her after I realized that my desire to escape had actually materialized into an escape. I smiled and she smiled because of me—even at the very end I was director.

Let me know if anyone out there has any comments. I feel like I'm on a journey now. Sorry if this last entry has any mistakes, I just needed to get it down as quickly as I could before I forgot it. Plus, I can't wait for the responses. Back to work I go... it looks like the rain outside might turn into a real storm. I hope the weather is terrible enough to create a slow down here in the ER. It will separate the real emergencies from the not-so emergent (i.e. car wreck vs. earache with Medicaid).

No Chemistry

Crystal was often shocked by what she decided was obviousness. She once heard a DJ rave about the brilliance of a band's drummer; it was his simplicity. She didn't believe episodes like those were brilliant. In fact, if she were to supply a word, it would be *contrived*.

The new woman placed a lot of importance on perfection. There were day-to-day routines that enabled the ideal, and then there was the pinnacle that could only be reached by the culmination of many, many proficient arrangements in a week's time. Her shape was coming along. She understood this to be a process that wasn't pretty in the beginning. Often, she reminded herself of Dr. Frankenstein. However, there was a difference: she was both creator and monster, and instead of sewing new parts, she removed them. However, her story was most like that of the gothic horror because she realized there was a little of the doctor in the monster, and a little of the monster in the doctor. Eventually, the regurgitations became less frequent as her body began to self-medicate by not eating at all. It was frighteningly good at it.

Crystal decided to enroll at the university part-time during the new fall year. *Let's ease in*, her mind spoke. By choosing a couple of science courses she imagined she would find Lee again. And so it was. Unluckily, it just happened to be a chemistry course. She hoped he wouldn't have attended, and then she could've simply dropped the difficult course after the first visit.

Crystal's face flushed after seeing him. She recognized Lee from behind, despite

his ordinary polo shirt and jeans. He arrived early, and already the usual classroom tools were spread across his desk table.

As Crystal navigated the desks she became aware of the smaller sizes she was now wearing. The printed dress she wore trailed behind her rather than falling on her frame. She imagined that with a few more weeks she could attempt even smaller sizes. This was her second chance in a new room with a new professor and a new subject, whether she was ready or not. She decided it to be fine.

Before sitting next to Lee she caught a glimpse of his narrow forearms which led to equally narrow wrists. He looked like he could escape handcuffs if given the opportunity. While he twirled a pencil between his fingers she noticed just how clean and trimmed his nails were.

Crystal swept beneath her bottom and thighs the long length of her dress as she took a seat directly across from him, “Hi... how are you doing?”

Lee looked back at her, “Ok... considering there is a quiz. Our professor wants to see just how much we have retained since high school. I hope it won’t count for much. Do you think you’re ready?”

Crystal opened her book-bag and pulled out all sorts of materials, “Yeah... but I’m not sure what I’ll remember. Sometimes I think I’m in some sort of stasis. I’m not sure what I know or hear. Do you ever think that way?”

“Sometimes... I think. Maybe not exactly the same way you might.”

She sat straight, now that she was comfortable with her supplies and texts in front of her, “Maybe it is more like a feeling of metamorphosis I’m thinking of. You know... like what we learned last session in Dr. Henley’s class? Maybe I’m a pupa right now.”

“As in a state of not feeding,” Lee tried to hide his grin. Clever speech didn’t always come his way, so it was difficult to pretend he didn’t enjoy the moment no matter how harsh the statement.

Her eyebrows lifted and she smiled in a way that could sweep any imagined statement under the rug, “You say funny things sometimes. But, you may have a point there... it’s as if my mind has chosen to forget even the simplest of routines that would keep it functioning.”

“That’s something to think about,” Lee bent his body over his desk table as an only escape from such awkward talk.

“Maybe we should do something sometime,” Crystal asked with a smile.

Lee looked up towards the doorway as their new professor made her way into the classroom, “I don’t know *what* we would do exactly.”

Crystal imagined many things as a response to this statement, but their instructor entered into a full rant of proposals, announcements and technical speech that entered into her ear as insect buzzes. After class, there was too much time to think about their conversation and she didn’t say a thing to Lee.

Everyone stood and stretched their legs to let the blood flow before making an exit. Crystal’s blood pressure was much lower than the rest, and as she stood, hypotension made an effect. She felt dizzy and imagined her figure was a blur—much like the images of the students around her.

Room 3: Where Crazy People Go

The Greenwood emergency department was calm for a time on an early Saturday evening, that is, until a single EMS visit changed the mood of everyone. Lee was taking a short break in the ED lunch room. He sat in front of the small, wall-mounted television. His fingers had turned orange after he spotted an open bag of Doritos, and indulged. Just before the overhead announcement of a Dr. Atlas came, he realized why he had been so cold to Crystal since the last time he saw her. He spoke hateful words because she had changed so drastically. It was a sudden response stemmed from disappointment by the way she had been treating herself. He had surprised himself. What must she have thought? Often, the hospital administration reminded him, as well as the entire staff, to be empathetic, not sympathetic. The staff must truly feel for the patients and family, because even though they are nasty at times, it's because they are hurting. Lee always debated this because he believed there were truly hateful people out there, and when they were in pain, they were doubly hateful. But, he needed to erase his cynicism and remember empathy, because recently, he was the nasty one.

Then, the Dr. Atlas page came, and his reflections were replaced by the significance of the call, which was repeated three times loudly: *Dr. Atlas, ER room 3, Dr Atlas, ER room 3, Dr. Atlas, room 3!*

A Dr. Atlas may be reacted to in many different ways considering the personnel at any given hospital. Greenwood Regional was a small hospital, and because the call was for an immediate security response, the maintenance men were expected to do the duty, and so was every other man who worked there, despite their training or job description.

Of course, Lee was expected to be there—he was male, and one of the closest.

Lee jumped from the break-room table knocking over his cold drink, “Shit, shit!” His hand shook while twisting the handle of the door leading out to the ER.

A nurse ran past him, then stopped, “Lee, get to room 3! It’s just the doctor in there now.”

Lee started to walk fast with the nurse by his side. He was afraid to run, “What the hell is going on in there?”

“Some guy just came in by EMS... he’s all screwed up on something.”

Lee approached the open doorway to the room and the doctor stood in front of it with arms outstretched, and his back to Lee.

The doctor made himself big, and seemed calm by this approach, “Look, you’re not leaving here. I don’t care what you say. You need to be treated for whatever it was you decided was a good idea tonight!”

Lee looked beneath the doctor’s arms to see who he was talking to. The patient was a stout man in his thirties. He stood with his legs perfectly parallel with his shoulders, and hands of fists.

After Lee received a glimpse, he decided that a bending position, with head beneath the doctor’s arms wasn’t the best posture for intimidation. He stood straight and tapped the doctor’s back so that he knew he had backup.

The physician relaxed one of his outreached arms so that Lee could accompany him in the doorway.

The patient saw this and stepped forward, “And who the hell is this,” he took another step forward, “Do you think *you* can stop me? Do *you* think you’re big enough?”

It was obvious Lee was the new target, and the only thing he could think of as a response was wider eyes than he was already offering.

That was all the patient needed as justification. It wasn't exactly provocation. In his mind, it was just an unanswered challenge that needed answering. At his stomping grounds, the best attack was the first attack. The overdose of cocaine the man was undergoing gave him an understandable advantage when swinging a punch. It came fast and powerful, straight into Lee's chest. Neither Lee nor the doctor could move fast enough to block it.

Lee bent forward in response to his escaped air. He refused to let his feet slip.

The doctor dove onto the patient, and they both hit the ER floor hard.

Lee blinked his watery eyes and saw the doctor wrestling the man while shouting something that sounded like, *fuck you I'm big enough*. Only, Lee couldn't believe he had just heard that.

The patient surprisingly gave up after the tackle. He laughed while the Dr. relaxed his grip. Lee's only explanation: there was a sudden respect the patient gave to the doctor who so quickly transformed from physician to brawler.

Last Blog:

I have to admit, I believe I've lost my touch with my ability to lucid dream again. Things are back to the way they used to be. I have no control, my real life is taking turns I didn't expect, and my behavior seems like it surprises me too. And, it takes me a day before I even realize it. Anyway, here is another dream blog for you, one that I was lucky to come out of with any respect. It could have easily turned into one of the many dreams that

popped into my head as a child, and the next thing I know, I've died with eyes closed.

My fists felt like the largest parts of my body after I swung them. I think they were. I was fighting a man beneath the long limbs of a Kentucky coffee tree. Although the base of the branches rose, the weight of the leaves pulled their ends towards us. There was a crabapple tree somewhere near also, because there were little red fruit scattered about our feet as we shifted during our bout. Now that I recall this, there were small crunches while we moved and stepped atop the small apples. The crunches began to become indistinguishable from our punches, and the blood that began to fall from my nose landed next to the fruit—their colors matched so well it was hard to tell fruit from fluid, like looking at a night sky and separating the stars from planets.

To maintain my balance during the fight I slowed down and chose my punches instead of swinging wildly. The man fell several times and each time he rose from the ground he stood a little taller. His persistence and new height became unbearable. I must have been tossing in my sleep because I felt unease in each muscle. My knuckles started to bleed to match my nose. The man fell again, and after pulling himself up, his head reached the bottom of the lowest branches of the coffee tree. Leaves brushed his hair and he took one of his palms to swipe them away before throwing his body towards me again.

He was fat with strength, and his arms created a drag in the air as he sent them around. I gave up my attack for a defense. I held my forearms in front of my face and blood began to cover my long sleeves as though I was caught in two minds: one was trying to block as the other was trying to clean myself up.

We remained alone. There was no referee. There was no person outside of us to witness the man's unfair transformation. Because of the inequality, I believe this is why I transformed myself. I became a tree. I was rounded and wide. The man was frustrated with my arms-as-limbs, which must've reminded him of the limbs of the first tree. I'm not sure what kind of tree I was, but let me be a little imaginative here, assume some sense of control, and act as though I was lucid dreaming: I choose the musclewood.

Egosurfing

The term “Egosurfing” wasn’t in Crystal’s vocabulary, but in her free time she searched with the best of egomaniacs. Long before today’s attempts she started with the obvious: Googling her name. The results were nil. Since then, she subscribed to self-Googleing, blog sites that included many who shared her desire. That is, the desire to see themselves within the context of the web; however, everyone’s reasons for looking were particular. Crystal, like many others, had three images: the shape of herself she imagined, the shape she saw in the mirror, and the shape everyone else saw. Each was different. She believed in the possibility of chat about her online, and she thought her image would become clearer through that chatter—a third perspective might help with her pursuits and goals.

The self-Googleers Crystal spoke with on the blog site often sent out fruitful avenues of research by means of email, or within the context of their current research. They were devoted, and so was she.

Her present attempts turned out disappointing, with the exception of a message she received about a local archive within her college e-zine titled *The Zoo Story, Revealed!* It gave her a new hope.

There were hundreds of opinion pieces, editorials, and individual student ramblings accompanied by wonderful photos. When she initially signed on to selfgooglerhelp.com, she downloaded the suggested search engine that used her name and its impressive techniques to scan a group of archives so she could avoid the tedious amount of reading that would’ve otherwise been required. After pulling up the e-zine’s

archives, Crystal fired up her search engine and plugged in her name. Several minutes passed without a single hit. *Oh well*, she thought, *maybe the next time a student decides to blabber*. She saved the e-zine's site under "favorites."

With school now on her mind, Crystal thumbed through her course notebooks. It was a moment of dithering. While she perused, she noticed Lee's name on the margin of one her pages. She wrote his name down because it was followed by his surname during a roll call. Lee Ingham. She quickly grabbed her laptop and clicked on *The Zoo Story, Revealed!*, started her search engine, and typed Lee's name.

Although Lee hadn't initially subscribed to the e-zine's blog site, one of the staff members had discovered his entries and sent a request to post them. Lee agreed without hesitation.

Crystal used her computer cursor to click on Lee's dream-blogs. There were more than fifteen, untitled—with the exception of one. Her name sat at the top. It wasn't discovered by her search engine because it had been set to respond to her full name only, considering the countless hits it pulled up otherwise. "Crystal" was not only a name; it was also a mineral.

Lee's dream about the arranged marriage amused her to no end. She was delighted by every word, especially her name. Finally, it wasn't a reference to a rock, a city, or Billy Crystal. It was her, and to her delight, it was her at a wonderful time of her life. She was beautiful at age seven, small and all smiles. She remembered that without concentration, and Lee's words were confirmation, as if he knew her then.

Crystal laughed out loud, *Oh... I wouldn't have chosen me either... I'm worth more than a SUV!*

She read further, *Poor Lee, what a mess of a situation. He just met me. How could he make a decision to marry in such a short time? Maybe one day though, a little time first. Anything's possible.*

Crystal read the last words of the blog, *Soooo... you are director until the end huh? Well, we'll see about that in the real world... hee, hee.*

Before closing the webpage, the word "director" floated around her mind a bit, then she was frightened, *Surely he didn't write about their evening of sex?*

Crystal began from the top of the page to read all of Lee's blogs. After she finished she rested her back against the sofa a touch relieved, *Ok, he was mean the other day, but his dreams are sweet. He's just a little scared like me, and he was smart enough to keep our lovemaking private. He's off the hook for now.*

Syncope

Days came and went for Crystal as they do for many people, but she had trouble remembering them. However, one particular day moved a bit slower for her which enabled a recollection of the events. It began by waking in an ambulance rather than in her bed. She didn't remember calling the service or where she had been picked up. An EMS attendant sat by her side and rubbed his knuckles back and forth across her upper chest. She opened her eyes and felt the rock of the vehicle.

“We'll be there shortly... you just lie there and relax Sweetheart.”

Crystal felt the stiff pressure of a neck brace, “Was I in a car accident?”

“No. You fainted in the food court at the mall on Maple Circle.”

The doors to the emergency department slid open (just like the primetime television programs on any given night) and a nurse intercepted the gliding stretcher. The area was quiet. In a low voice the EMT pushing the cart explained to the nurse, “Witnesses at the mall saw her fall... possible syncopal episode.”

The attending doctor walked near, en route to another ER room. He hesitated for a moment to give orders, “She's dehydrated. Set her up on some fluids and call the lab... I want a quick x-ray also, to rule out any breaks so we can get her off that back board.”

The nurse touched Crystal's hand lightly, “Honey, what's your name?”

“Crystal Ward.”

“What's your birthday?”

“The first of March... 1988.”

There were plenty of needles—which the nurses apologized for before

administering—and a long wait in radiology before the staff began to remove the stiff board and neck brace. Despite her expectations of an ER room, there was a small television which was controlled by a bed-side remote a nurse gently handed to her. Crystal didn't hesitate to push the power button and begin flipping the stations with the up/down arrows as her only option given the simplicity of the device. As the stations flashed, the TV made an unusual popping sound. Its sound was just enough of a reminder that she was not in front of her own TV or anyone else's.

Crystal's room door opened and closed often as one staff member after another entered. It happened with enough frequency she became comfortable with the occurrence and didn't bother to give a look at who entered, that is, until a young man walked into her room in plain clothes with only a name badge to acknowledge he was staff also.

“Are you Crystal Ward?”

“Yes.”

“Good... I'm in the right room then. My name is Lee and I'm with registration. I have pre-registered you already with a name and date-of-birth, but I need to ask you some more questions for medical records.”

She looked at the man's name badge a little closer and saw an accompanied photograph. His picture was unusually flattering. It was definitely the very same Lee. Despite the many thoughts that could have entered her mind that very second, she couldn't help but wonder if he had asked for more than one photo to be taken so that he might choose among the best for his badge.

Lee held his clipboard loosely, and after a click of his pen he began the questions, “What's your address and phone number?”

“Is that really you? Lee?”

Lee wasn't surprised. He knew she was here. His surprise came just a few minutes earlier when the nurses gave him her name. Lee had many emergency room performances (usually depending on the patient's reason for visit) and he had chosen for this visit a mood of indifference. He had decided that, if executed correctly, it would come off as a professional “right to privacy.” It was the wrong decision.

“Yes, it's me.”

Crystal used the palm of her hands to lift herself in an upright position, even though her bed currently remained flat, “What are you doing here?”

“I work here. It gives me a little experience with the health field. I'm pre-med, you know.”

“No. I didn't realize,” Crystal began to feel better at once, “my address is 154 West Adams... and you should know my phone number by now.”

“I'm sorry... I don't have it.”

“It's 454-2178.”

Lee scribbled across the paper with his most stern face, a face he mimicked from the many doctors he witnessed, “I hope you don't get upset, but I have a lot of questions here that are standard for many patients.”

“Ok.”

“Do you have a family physician?”

“No.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“I don't think so.”

Lee hesitated, breathed deep through his nose, “Do you remember when your last menstrual period was?”

Crystal lowered her body back down to a resting position, “No... uh... not really.”

Lee stared with the same look of doubt he gave to all women that couldn't answer this question, and then moved on after a quick note, “I won't ask you if you've had a baby in the past six weeks.”

Crystal turned her head away from him, “Thanks for answering that one for me.”

“I'm sorry I have to ask you these questions. I'll come back a little later for the rest of registration.”

After the door closed, Crystal looked to the empty space Lee had just occupied, but it wasn't long before another man took that spot in the room with plain clothes and a clipboard also.

“Hello Miss Ward, I'm Doctor Reynolds. What brings you here today?”

Crystal rose again to see a man with a thick beard, not yet grey, and big hands which looked less than delicate, “What does syncopal mean?”

“Syncope? It means that you passed out.”

“Oh... I don't remember anything about today, other than coming here.”

“Do you remember when you ate last and what you had to eat?”

“No, not really. Probably pizza or something... probably yesterday?”

“Well, it's about 7:30 pm right now. You haven't eaten today?”

Crystal laid flat once again, “I don't remember.”

The doctor wrote quickly, “Has this ever happened before... is there anything

stressful going on in your life right now?”

“No I don’t recall passing out, ever. I do get dizzy a lot though. I feel stressed like everyone... school... students talking about me.”

The doctor kept his head lowered—casual, “Talking about you how?”

“Oh... I don’t know exactly. The usual stuff I guess.”

“I noticed that when you spoke to Lee you didn’t remember your last menstrual period. Are you irregular? Is your flow heavy or light?”

“I don’t really know. It happens whenever, and it’s usually light... I guess.”

Doctor Daniels stood, placed the clipboard down and began to wash his hands at the nearby sink, “Your lab levels were quite abnormal... your PH was abnormally high, serum protein low, hypoglycemic,” he reached for one of her hands, “how has your nail growth been? Have you lost any hair at all?”

“No,” Crystal gently pulled her hand away from the doctor’s.

“You know, we can help you feel better, get you to a stable state again, but it’s up to you to stay that way. Open your mouth please.”

Crystal obeyed with a wide response.

“There’s some epigastric tenderness. You’re treating your body poorly right now, you realize that?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? Well, we will be keeping you overnight for observation.” The doctor’s pen had a weighted click—it was stainless. “We’ll draw some more labs later, keep you on fluids to raise your electrolytes, and before you leave us the admitting physician will be setting you up with a nutritionist. I hope I don’t see you here again...”

alright?”

Crystal closed her eyes, “Alright.”

QMP and Fourth Floor Flowers

Wendy hesitantly switched off six overhead lights in the area, “How is the light now, Lee?”

“That’s just right. Don’t you think they are too bright? Besides, I don’t think any of the staff will really notice the difference. It isn’t like we’re doing sutures up here... as long as I can read the due co-pays, right?”

Wendy smiled in agreement, “Yeah, as long as the hospital gets its money.” She didn’t like the lights out. Someone would disapprove. Maintenance would often mistakenly comment on the need to replace the bulbs, and the ER clerk would complain when she came up front to organize the physician’s billing contracts.

Wendy leaned over Lee’s chair to take a look at his work, “Who are you registering?”

“That toothache back there.”

“You know you shouldn’t do that until the patient is escorted up here by nursing? We still don’t know if the doctor is going to treat him or send him up here for us to refer somewhere else.”

“Yeah, well either way we have to register the patient no matter which spill we end up giving them. I’m just trying to get a jump on the eventual disappointment I’m about to dish out.”

“Ok... if that’s how you want to go about it.”

Lee typed fast, “Yeah, I’ve got something to do after this, and I’m relying on a bit of instinct and past patient behavior.”

Wendy turned away and reluctantly took a seat at her own desk, “That’s your deal then.”

While Lee finished up the patient’s billing records, an ER nurse brought Mr. Lindsey to the waiting area so that he could take a seat in front of registration. She handed Lee a folder that when opened revealed a cover-sheet that read “QMP.”

Lee never remembered what the acronym translated as, but he was well aware of what it meant. He motioned to Mr. Lindsey, “Please, have a seat sir.”

Mr. Lindsey sat, “What is this exactly? The doctor looked at me for only second and now I’m back out here?”

Lee opened the patient’s registration account so that he could make some quick edits if necessary, “I’ll be happy to explain everything in just one second, but I have to verify some of your info first. It looks like you were here recently... has any of your billing info, address, phone numbers, contacts changed since your last visit?”

The patient shifted in his seat, “No. Look I’m in a lot of pain here... can you let me back there so I can get some medicine?”

Lee stared straight at his monitor and avoided the question as well as eye contact, “Are you still self-employed as well as uninsured?”

“Yes,” Mr. Lindsey felt he was beaten by that question, for the moment anyway.

After hearing the info Lee anticipated, he realized it was time to look his patient in the eyes, “Sir, when you came into our ER today the triage nurse classified you as a non-emergent patient. At that point, it was up to the doctor to either reclassify you or confirm the status. Unfortunately, the doctor—in fact—confirmed you as non-emergent. In many cases the non-emergent patients may continue to seek treatment by our ER

doctor, but they are required to wait as emergent patients are treated first. However, if a patient is uninsured as well as ineligible for state aid or charity, he or she must make an up front payment of 300 dollars to continue treatment.”

Mr. Lindsey reached for his jaw with an open hand, “I can’t eat or even think straight right now because of the pain, and you are asking for money. If you are asking me if I want to see the doctor again... then my answer is YES! I want to see the doctor!”

“Well... how will you be making your payment today?”

“I’ll be damned if I’m giving you any money. This is the emergency room... you have to treat me.”

Lee pulled an acknowledgment form and alternative resource guide from a stack of papers, “Sir, our staff will continue their treatment if you can make our one-time payment. If their treatment exceeds the 300 dollars, you will not be required to pay any more than that, and if it is less the hospital will reimburse you. You have to understand, you are not an emergent patient. Here is a resource guide to other facilities that may help you, and an acknowledgment form you must sign stating whether you are going to stay or not.”

Mr. Lindsey stood, “You can stick those papers up your ass, there isn’t a single place open on a Sunday that will treat me, and I don’t have three-hundred dollars on me.”

“Sir, may I mark this box here on the acknowledgment form that you verbally understand your decision to leave us today?”

“Hell no! I didn’t decide to leave, you are refusing treatment. This hospital can go fuck itself... I’ll just go to another ER.”

Lee gathered the papers as Mr. Lindsey walked away. He took his pen from his

pocket and after a click used it to mark “verbal understanding.”

Wendy came around to Lee’s cubicle and clicked her pen as well, “I heard it all. You did well explaining our policy. I’ll witness it for you.”

“Thanks, I need to head upstairs to get some inpatient consents signed.”

“All right... I’ll see you back here in a bit.”

Lee walked in circles around the hospital gift shop with a patient’s face-sheet in hand. The name read, Crystal Ward. He didn’t have any inpatient consents to be signed, only a desire to pay a visit to a small girl on the fourth floor.

The gift shop clerk handed Lee change from the register and gently pushed a bouquet of flowers across the counter, “I’ll say, you picked the best arrangement here.”

“For a hospital gift shop, they’re not bad.” Lee grabbed the flowers along with the accompanying blank card and made his way to the elevators. As he stood in front of the closing doors, the stems and blooms stretched across his face blocking his sight. He couldn’t help but use his nose to sniff for a scent. He inhaled deeply, searching, but the arrangement was odorless.

The fourth floor clerk lifted her head from a magazine as Lee quickly walked by her desk, “Hey Lee, where are you headed?”

“To room 405.”

“Hang on just a second. You know she opted for confidentiality?”

Lee stopped his walk, “Yeah, it’s right here on the face-sheet.”

The clerk was pleased by the sight of flowers, and the possibility of a confidentiality breach was easy to dismiss, “Well then, who are those from?”

Lee placed the arrangement in front of the clerk as a bargaining tool, “How about we say they are from all of us and you put something down on the card?”

The clerk clicked her pen with enthusiasm, “I like that idea very much. I’ll put down ‘Just thinking of you and wishing you well... from the fourth floor and registration.’”

“That’s great. Thank you.”

Lee used his knuckles to knock lightly on the room door even though it was left open. There wasn’t an answer, so he peaked around the corner of the room wall to hear a television whispering while Crystal slept. Lee walked to her bedside and sat the flowers down in front of the window.

After he walked out, Crystal sat upright and reached out as far as she could with her nose to take a whiff of the flowers. She smelled nothing. She decided she was too far away from the aroma and gave up easily in favor of the television volume control.

Serotonin = Melancholic

A week's worth of ponderings, procrastinations and duties passed before Lee decided to look up Crystal's patient status. While at work, he surveyed her discharge as an observation patient which was a mere eighteen hours after the emergency room visit. He wondered if this had anything to do with her status as an uninsured patient. While staring at the monitor's Medi-Tech software, Lee painted a picture of Crystal having spent the week couch-ridden, studying a nutritionist's hour-by-hour meal chart that included meals with high carbohydrates such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for breakfast, barbecue ribs with mashed potatoes for dinner and granola bars and ice cream as mandatory snacks. He wasn't far from the truth.

The meal chart was a reality, but Crystal let it rest beneath a stack of class notes, unopened junk-mail and billing paperwork from the hospital. She kept the billing and copies of consents on top—they had Lee's signatures as a witness on most of the pages. She would frequently peruse the papers just to see his name. It was her way of feeling good about looking over the financial agreements and explanations of uninsured assistance programs without truly understanding them.

Among the papers were also some scribbled notes she wrote down after speaking to an attending psychiatrist, Dr. Morisot. She was sure she had misspelled the word "serotonin," one of the "big four" he called it. He jokingly referred to them as "our era's version of humorism." Crystal scrawled this phrase down also, and later looked it up. She was surprised by his comment. She tried her best to imagine which, of the four,

serotonin fell under: blood, phlegm, black bile, or the yellow one. Crystal figured it to be black bile—yes, it was most definitely melancholic. Regardless of what she thought, it was certain her brain-batch was out-of-balance, and that wasn't her fault.

Crystal took out a pen and Post-It. She wrote down the phrase, “tryptophan is my friend—man might make it, but so can my brain.” She stuck it to the refrigerator door as a reminder of what she starved herself of above all else: the amino acid that produced serotonin. If the brain chemical was too high, her hunger would subsist. If it was too low, she would be depressed. A correct balance was crucial. Crystal opened the refrigerator door after scrawling her motto; inside was next to nothing.

All's Well in Leeland

Crystal held the handset of her phone to her ear as if it were a small radio playing her favorite song. She smiled, then turned her wrist so she could hear best the sound of Lee's voice as he asked her how she was doing. She was certain he would ask her over, what she wished for most of all—more so than tryptophan. And so he did.

The young girl made way for her closet in search of just the right clothing. Something baggy, yet sexy. *Sure, that could be done*, her mind spoke. Her mind also spoke of the foods she was supposed to respond to as written word in her monitored meal-chart, which had lately read, “dizzy, headache, full.” So she didn't eat. The ill responses ended, and the calm came back.

Over the phone, Lee had suggested a movie and a warm throw. The movie: *The Graduate*. The throw: a thick, faux-fleece. Crystal had never seen the movie they intended to watch, but he described it as “a classic...chicks love it.”

Lee opened the door at the bottom of his stairwell, the only entrance to the apartment, and held out his hand to Crystal, “I don't know if you remember your first time here... when we walk up, you have to watch your head. The ceiling is slanted enough that you might have to stoop when you first enter—the shitty drawback to an attic apartment.”

Crystal took his hand, “And what are the advantages?”

“At the top... I'm confirmed. I'm king-of-the-castle. Hence, the bow required by everyone before they enter the room.”

“Such a responsibility could be a burden as well, you know.”

At the top of the stairs Lee ducked first and Crystal imitated, “My serfs are in good order. They tend the fields and make fine breads. All is well in LeeLand.”

Crystal surprised herself by the sound of her own laugh, “So that’s what you call your empire... LeeLand? It sounds more like an amusement park for children.”

“Careful now... I leave all jests to my jesters.”

“I’ll be good,” Crystal said this with as much insincerity as possible.

Lee whispered into Crystal’s ear, “Right here, this is one of the more popular scenes in the movie.”

Crystal shifted her body so that she could lay one of her hands onto his chest, “That’s what you said about Mrs. Robinson’s legs.”

“Yeah... well, that scene too.”

Dustin Hoffman banged against the glass and yelled at the wedding procession while Lee’s VCR churned and the picture flickered. Crystal wondered how many times the movie had been viewed.

“I’m glad Dustin Hoffman’s character went after Elaine. She’s the pretty one.”

“Oh come on, don’t you think Anne Bancroft is a knock-out?”

Crystal made a face similar to the one a child has when served green peas, “No! She’s old... and has fat thighs.”

Lee laughed because it was the only response he was able to offer that was the least offending, “I think you’re a bit crazy... but that’s ok.”

Crystal was silent before the credits began to show themselves, then spoke with a bit of retaliation, “So, why—exactly—do you like this movie?”

“Because, it’s an example of how men can be sensitive and vulnerable too.”

Crystal leaned towards Lee for a kiss, but before giving him the pass, “That’s bullshit.”

Lee smiled in response to her playfulness, but then prepared Crystal for a more serious conversation by turning his face gently away from her, “When I was at work, I saw that you went home pretty shortly after the observation admission.”

Crystal didn’t lift her weight off of Lee, despite the question, “Yeah, they didn’t keep me long.”

“Do you think it had anything to do with insurance?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I mean, they have set me up with a nutritionist and other appointments. That all costs money you know, but they do it anyway. Oh, that reminds me, was it you that brought me flowers?”

“Yeah, I felt bad for... sort of... blowing you off.”

“That was sweet of you. I accept.”

“You accept what?”

Crystal playfully shoved him, “The apology.”

“Oh yeah,” Lee withdrew once again for more seriousness, “Look, I have something else I wanted to say.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve been preoccupied with classes, and other stupid things, and I must’ve let it all get to me. Today, the hospital fired me.”

Crystal didn’t offer a supportive reply or a manner of outrageous disbelief. Instead, she offered an amused word, “Really.”

“Yeah, it was a bunch of bullshit. See... up front the registrars have to call back to the ER staff each time a family member wants to go back to see a patient. We keep the doors locked, and many times they tell us that we can't let anyone through for one reason or another... they just have to wait. Well, this one lady got furious. She started yelling at me and calling me a bunch of names. I was like, don't kill the messenger here. But she just kept going and I lost it. I started to yell back. One of the nurses heard me and mentioned it to the ER doctor who just happened to be the Chief. He ordered me to the lab for a drug test right then and there.”

“And...”

“I tested positive for marijuana, but it wasn't like I was high at work. I never do that.”

Crystal was still amused, “I didn't know you smoked.”

“I do, and to top it off, this is the very same thing that got me in trouble in the past. I got caught with a bag on me several years ago while driving. Now I'm back to where I started. Everything has gone to shit.”

Crystal laid her hand back onto Lee's chest for comfort, “I wouldn't say that. It was just a stupid job. You still have classes.”

Lee was relieved his firing was finally out, “Speaking of smoke, do you want to share my pipe?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh come on, it makes you see things a little differently for a short time.”

“It only makes me paranoid.”

“No, it shouldn't. It's like, when sober, you see a straight line, but when high that

line becomes wavy.”

“Yeah, and that makes me paranoid.”

“But it’s not. You have to wonder which is real. Maybe the straight line is truly wavy and you are finally seeing it for its truth.”

“I see things just fine... but you go ahead. It doesn’t bother me.”

Lee had unknowingly removed his pipe from his pocket during the conversation. He looked at it amazed. His smoking habit went through the motions without his ever realizing, “You know, I can skip it tonight.”

“Whatever.”

Lee placed his pipe on the coffee table, “Talking about weed got me to thinking. You know I’ve been writing about my dreams for awhile and placing them online.”

Crystal was amused once again, “Really, am I in them?”

“No, I don’t think so. Anyway, I gave up on that too.”

“That’s too bad.”

“But I did have a great dream recently that I really wanted to write down. It left me frightened, as my dreams often do.”

“Well, tell me about it instead.”

“I was in the ER, as usual, and this lady presented herself to me with the complaint of not being able to cry.”

“That’s weird.”

“Yeah, and it doesn’t stop there. I checked her in, and then one of the nurses asked me to come back and watch the procedure. She was excited. I followed her into the room and the whole staff was there, all dressed with protective clothing, masks and

gloves. The doctor that was there was actually one of our ER docs at Greenwood, and people say he's the worst on staff. Anyway, he had the woman's skull cap cut off and was fiddling with her brain. I was horrified, and asked to leave, but the nurse insisted that I stay considering the procedure we were all lucky enough to witness. I stayed, and I wanted to put some covering on over my clothes as well, but I didn't. Without my knowing, a whole bunch of blood ended up all over me."

"Gross."

"And that's not all. After a time, the doctor seemed pleased with his fiddling and asked his nurse-aid to hand him some sort of tool that I don't remember he named. It was a short rod with a big rubber finger on the end..."

Crystal interrupted with delight, "Let me guess, the doctor used it to poke the lady in the eye!"

"Yes! And a single tear formed, then rolled down her cheek. Everyone applauded and congratulated the doctor."

"Yeah, you should really write that one down."

"Maybe I will."

Lee lightly moved Crystal's arm away from her body so that he could slide his hand along her figure. He kissed her. While holding the kiss he moved the same hand along her knitted sweater, and then beneath it for a better feel. He then pulled away from her lips and spoke with the lowest tone he was able, "You're definitely thinner since we last did this."

"I could lose a little more."

“Why don’t I be the judge of that?”

Crystal leaned in for another kiss, “Because, I have a sneaking feeling that you wouldn’t be the only judge.”

The couple pulled each other’s clothes off while trying to keep the throw over their bodies. It became a game that they giggled during while frantically removing pants and underwear, then halting after they realized the throw had fallen to the floor again.

Once Crystal began to realize that this was turning out to be the spot where they were about to have sex, she began to hold Lee’s head toward her small chest so his kisses would be directed away from her face. While he kissed her stomach and then moved for her breasts (where he spent a considerable amount of time) Crystal surveyed the living room walls and ceiling. She then focused all her attention on the entertainment center. There were many flickering lights there.

“Hey... don’t you want to move into the bedroom?”

Lee moved his kisses to her neck and below the earlobes before answering, “I say we stay right here.”

“Ok then,” Crystal consented.

The sex was as normal as she could have imagined it. Lee was gentle. She didn’t feel ashamed or regretful. This was not her expectation. The couple fell asleep, but Crystal’s moments of rest were never very long. She slid away quietly and didn’t bother to dress herself before deciding to walk down the hall towards the bedroom. The hallway floor dipped down while the ceiling remained flat in the old attic apartment. As she walked it felt as if she were growing shorter; she liked that. The door to the bedroom was closed, and the space between the top of the door molding and ceiling was a strangely

perfect example of a scalene triangle. It was official; Lee's apartment was a funhouse. She tried the doorknob slightly; it was locked. Crystal bent her naked body so she could peek through the skeletal keyhole. After a huff, she walked back towards the living room to make her way into the tiny kitchen area in search of a key.

The drawers were full of hardware and silverware mixed, but no key. She grabbed everything her small hands could hold and moved her bare feet back down the bedroom hallway. After several attempts with pliers and then a small knife, the lock turned. She opened the door only to close it again as soon as she stepped into the room. The light switch was luckily on the wall next to the opening where she instinctually placed her hand. The lights were bright and her eyes focused on the bed first. The bedding was ruffled and looked much the same as it did the first night the couple slept together. Before making her first move, she was suddenly frightened by the possibility of the door behind her having opened by some mishap or intrusion. She swung around to find it was—in fact—still shut tight, but it was also a support for a full length mirror. Crystal looked at her naked body. She looked at her visible ribs, long skinny arms, and thigh-less legs. She looked at herself for what seemed like ten minutes, but never looked at her face, which was always hardest. She was afraid of the chubbiness; the hardest fat to remove.

Crystal walked towards the bed and yanked the top sheet easily from the unmade coverings and wrapped it tightly around her body. It was white and long on her body. She walked back towards the mirror for the new view. The sheet was thin, and she saw her body beneath. The nipples of her breasts were visible, but the rest was well hidden; it was simply a light shadow. She turned to survey her profile, then stuck one foot forward

for a pose that caused her body to look less like a rail and more triangular—wider. With her feet spread apart, the sheet also looked like a dress, *It would be light, but a wedding dress like this would be nice. I could handle my figure looking a tad fuller for such an occasion some day.*

Obviously amused by her new look, Crystal conveniently forgot about why she was in Lee's bedroom, *It would be easy to forget about this, wouldn't it? Now, where was that red light?*

It had sat high, atop an open closet, and there was only one closet. Crystal moved towards the closed door, then opened it slowly. There were clothes hanging as well as thrown in a bundle on the floor. On the top shelf there were more clothes in large piles. She grabbed a handful from the shelf and threw them to the floor revealing a small digital camera set fixed to a wooden plate that allowed it to rest at an angle for the best recording. She lifted the camera and its base from the shelf and rested it on the floor, grabbed a pile of dirty shirts from the closet, and laid them over the top of the recorder. She then searched for a pair of sneakers (which she found easily) and placed them onto her bare feet. Lee was a size eleven; Crystal could hardly keep the shoes on. But, she only needed them to hang on for the moment—just long enough as she lifted her leg and bent her knee. The big shoe dangled on her foot high in the air, and Crystal clinched her toes for a grip on the insole before she brought down her foot with as much force as her body was able. The smash was loud, but the noise didn't stop her from raising her leg again, her toes gripping the bottom of the shoe, and then stomping again—then again. She kicked the sneakers off her feet and walked towards a nightstand next to Lee's bed. It was no surprise to find a pen and notepad resting there considering their conversations

of his dreams. On the top page was scribbling. She couldn't help herself and gave the words a quick read,

The marks looked
pushed, rubbed:
a mess of motion,
an artist's pencil
marks taken back,
a dream stenciled
with one less line.

Truly, it was skin snagged,
then scarred.

A result of one of Dahl's
nighttime children who
dared to cross the fence
and found himself hung:
another drop over the
quicksand moat that
encircled the Black Castle.

Crystal smiled while holding the pen. She wrote beneath Lee's words, "A poet too, I

didn't know it!" After she finished, she carefully pulled a piece of blank paper from the backside of the pad and wrote, "Call me." She walked back to the pile of clothes and smashed camera, and let the note fall, floating to a rest atop her handiwork.

Lee was still asleep on the couch and fully covered by his throw. He had the blanket stretched to its fullest so that it reached every part of his body—neck to toes. His penis looked as though it was about to perform a pornographic puppet show—it was at an all anew zenith.

Crystal let the sheet drop from her body and searched for her clothes that had fallen to the floor next to the couch. She found everything but her underwear. She was certain they were beneath the throw. *Oh no, her mind spoke, I'll have to get past that penis for those. There's no way I can have sex again this soon... Oh well, they aren't going anywhere. I'll pick 'em up some other day.*

Before descending the stairs she turned again to see if Lee was awake. He wasn't. His face held a slight smile as if sleeping alone was just fine. Crystal didn't like that idea, but what did she know?

She continued down the staircase and opened the door to the hallway of the complex. As she stood in the opening, a pungent aroma of Indian curry filled her nose. Someone in a nearby apartment was cooking a late night meal. There was a smell of cloves, cumin, garlic, pepper, and above all things, cinnamon. Her throat made an involuntary reflex. She was instantly reminded of her meal-chart responses at home: "dizzy, headache, full."

Crystal looked to her watch. It read 11:27 p.m. Her mind spoke, *remember: once at home, fill in meal-chart with late-night craving of fish curry—4 ounces. Response:*

sleepy.

Before closing Lee's door, her mind spoke again, *ahhh... variety, Dr. Morisot will surely believe an entry like this. Who would bother with such creativity when lying?*

Crystal held the doorknob lightly. She turned her wrist so that the doorjamb wouldn't click when put back in its place, but before she could do this she heard a set of feet descending the stairs. They were heavy and loud, as if they were skipping a step on the stairwell only to pound the next one. Crystal let go of the doorknob.

"Hey, I caught you. Where are you going?"

Crystal was relaxed and spoke her lie with ease, "Out... I'm hungry. I thought about grabbing some Indian."

Lee was perplexed, "What? There aren't any Indian restaurants open this late."

"Oh... well, I guess I'll get some Chinese then. That's close enough."

Lee laughed, "Ok, I'll put some clothes on and join you."

"Oh no... there's no need. I like to eat alone."

"I don't believe that. We'll go together, I'm hungry too."

Crystal thought for a moment, *ok, this could be nice... the two of us sharing a meal.*

"I'll get my clothes in just a second... you wait there, I'll just be a minute. Ok?"

"Ok," Crystal was nervous, *please grab the clothes in the living room... let the bedroom scene come later.*

Lee smiled, "I've got my eye on you."

She smiled back, "I know... I bet you've got more than one."