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Fiction Fix 05

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Editor's Choice Award

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Fifth Injection

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Contents

<i>The Dress</i> Erin Trauth	9
<i>Eastern Discipline</i> Troy Puls	15
<i>Nonperishables</i> Vicki Winslow	18
<i>Knife-Thoughts</i> Todd Kincaid	29
<i>Sea Dragons</i> Christine Utz	36
<i>An Orange Wedge</i> Ann Marie Byrd	44
<i>The Prince of Dreamers</i> Mark Fields	49
<i>Past Torches</i> Shane Horn	55
<i>Master of the Neighborhood</i> Joseph DeRepentigny	61
<i>“Van Gogh Complex”</i> <i>Editor’s Choice Award 2007</i> Kristen Iannuzzi	65
Submission Guidelines	71

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the founding members of Fiction Fix: Nate, Robert P., Robert O., Shannon, Darren, Robert, Melissa M., Melissa G., Michelle, Sarah, and Amy.

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Eastern Discipline

Just two traffic lights between the apartment and work. At each, I sit muttering, *Come on you fucker*. It seems like I've been holding my foot on the brake for ten minutes. I wonder how long I could hold it there before the muscles would freeze and fail.

I pull in, park behind the store, and enter through the bakery department's delivery door. The date on the time clock makes me pause as I punch in. It's the date I've been looking out for. 30 days clean and sober. 30 days sticking to the workout. A solid month of studying the Gita, Ouspensky, the Rig Veda and Gurdjieff. Finally a month of real discipline.

Back behind the cutting room the new dairy guy, a skater punk weighing in at no more than 125 pounds, has blocked off the ice machine with the pallets he's trying to move into the freezer. I watch the kid maneuver the pallet jack awkwardly. His name tag says Aaron. *Come on, you fucker*, I think to myself.

As I'm finishing loading the fish case with ice, Wendall comes out of the cutting room. He speaks fondly of last month's Indians post-season baseball games. I've lost track of them, and a few other things, since Jerry died in August.

"Well hippie," he says to me, "The highlights tape decided me. I'm going through with it."

"Through with what?"

"I'm getting a Chief Wahoo Logo tattoo. After work tonight. At the place by the Pro Football Hall of Fame where the players go. You coming?"

I think of the date on the time clock. Seems like an ideal way to mark the occasion.

"Absolutely," I say.

"I got a Wahoo picture right here," he says, pulling paper out from behind his apron, adding, "Cob is coming, but he won't get tattooed."

"I probably won't get a Wahoo."

“Why the hell not?”

“I’m moving back to the Southwest eventually. Don’t want to piss off the real Indians.”

“Indians don’t give a shit. Just white hippie liberal fucks like you.”

“Still, I’m not looking to get a mascot tattooed on me. What if they move away like the Browns some day?”

“Fuck off. Next year is already sold out. Tribe ain’t going anywhere. What’re you gonna get then?”

“I’ll figure that out later. Yoda maybe, from *The Empire Strikes Back*.”

“Fuck a Yoda, man. Get the Wahoo.”

“I’ll figure it out later.”

“Long as you’re coming along, man.”

“Oh, I’m coming.”

I get elected to drive to Canton. The party is up to five people now. Wendall, Aaron from Dairy/Frozen, Corn Cob, and Wendall’s cousin Matt. We get stuck behind a truck passing another truck on Route 62. *Come on, you fuckers*, I think to myself.

At Rockin’ Rick’s Sports Tattoo we end up waiting for hours, but it’s a lot of fun. Girls keep coming in to get navel piercings. Soon we’re all reciting the care instructions along with the guy after each one. At \$45 a piece it seems like a great gig. The piercing takes maybe 3 minutes and then going over the instructions takes another 2. One of the girls is spectacularly drunk, and doesn’t look a day over 14. She comes into the waiting area with her new piercing and puts her abdomen in my face to ask me how it looks. I take the ball at the end of the little gold hoop with my teeth and give it a tug, pressing my nose against the slick sweat on her stomach. She shouts and calls me “Fucker,” then wanders back into the clean room where her friend is getting pierced. A minute later she is back out, sitting on the arm of the leather couch beside me and running her fingers through my hair. I’m a bit worried she’s going to throw up, but still interested. Wendall and Cob are laughing hysterically.

“Whatcha got there hippie?”

“Don’t rightly know Wendall,” I reply.

“Gonna fuck it, you think?”

I look up at the girl, who stares blankly at the checkered tile floor.

“Not sure she’s going to be awake much longer. Also not sure I can buy the ID she showed the guy there. Hate to go to jail.”

The piercing guy pipes up from the other room.

“Girls didn’t have IDs, just notes from Mom. Jail is a distinct possibility . . . for you. I still got the notes.”

The girl stumbles out of the room indignantly, grabs her coat and heads down the stairs toward the street. After a brief chorus of the care instructions, her friend follows.

Wendall and his cousin are getting tattooed simultaneously. Aaron decided he was more of a piercing guy. I picked a piece from the flash on the wall to celebrate my month of Eastern discipline; a Buddah meditating surrounded by fire. Neither of the apprentice guys wanted to do it so I have to wait for Rockin' Rick himself. He's finishing up a gigantic orchid in the small of a woman's back. As he works, he's talking on a cordless phone to the guys at Z Rock Radio. One of the other tattoo parlors in town called them on air to say Rick was giving people AIDS. Now he's trying to get air time to defend himself. Ash from his cigarette falls on the woman's ass and he casually brushes it away. She giggles. *Come on, you fucker*, I think. I realize that I'll be holding everyone else up by the time I get worked on.

We came in before 6 and now it's almost 11. It doesn't seem like that long. This place reminds me of the places I hung out before I found Jerry Garcia. I miss those great anarchist punk clubs of my youth. There was always something funny-but-wrong going on. I wish I could work in a place like this instead of a fucking grocery store. I used to be really good at drawing and painting, actually, back when I was just doing the drugs instead of fighting with them.

Rick works on my leg for nearly an hour, fielding calls from other Tattoo shops and various worried customers who heard him on the radio. He uses a new needle for each color, and pours the paint into little disposable cups. I can't see how he could be giving me anything.

The burn of the needle is good. The intensity makes me grin from time to time, just from feeling alive with pain. Wendall sees the grins and tells me I'm a fucking psycho. I think about it and realize something about me really is off. The tattoo on my leg is about six inches tall and seven inches wide. If I work out tonight it will bleed like a bastard.

"Damn proud of that piece, I am," Rick says as he puts a temporary dressing over it. "Come back in 10 days and let me get a picture. I'll also brighten up anything that heals blurry—had to go real fuckin' deep to get that color."

Rick grabs a bag from the table behind him. It's a half ounce of rock star bud the girl with the orchid gave him in payment. Big sticky nuggets. Red to purple crystal hairs. He begins stuffing some in a big pipe.

"You guys wanna stick around for the end of day procedures?"

Everyone looks at me. *30 days*, I think. *And look how happy its made you*, a different voice from the back of my head adds, *so . . . Come on, you fucker*. I think about that phrase and realize I need a new mantra.

I'm not in any hurry, I decide. I repeat it out loud and let it echo in my mind, taking the pipe and the lighter from his outstretched hand.

Nonperishables

On the morning of my fortieth birthday, I woke up feeling as if something had fluttered loose inside me. I wanted to pin it down, catch it, figure it out. I read once that the hunger for something, the pursuit of a thing that we imagine can make us whole, comes from our awareness that we are, in fact, incomplete. I woke up feeling incomplete.

This was not expected, because I had already accomplished most of what I wanted to achieve in my life. I had graduated with a degree in business, married, divorced, launched my own company, sold it at a tremendous profit, and no longer had to work. I had traveled, spent long, pleasant hours in the company of friends and family, and bought a lot of silly presents for my niece and nephews. I dated when I felt like it, but wasn't anxious for a long-term relationship that might cause ripples in the pond of my peaceful life. It felt good to have everything settled and serene, but here—suddenly—was this feeling of needing something . . . more.

My friends, Helen and Jack, took me to dinner that evening for my birthday. Helen and I have been friends since high school, and Jack seems as if he's been around forever. I told them how I had felt that morning. "I think I need a project," I said.

Helen and Jack thought about this. They have neither children nor nieces and nephews. Helen often relieves her maternal feelings by mothering me, which works out well as far as I'm concerned.

"Why don't you take a class?" Jack suggested.

Hmmmm. Helen said, "Oh, that's a great idea, Tremain. You could take a foreign language, or sewing. Or you know what? They have memoir-writing classes at the high school as part of the community education program. You should write your memoirs."

Now *that* got my attention. "Yeah! I'll write my memoirs. When are the classes?"

“Oh, you know what? I think they start again in September. You can get a schedule at the library and find out. Can you wait a month to start your project?”

“Sure. I’ll go pick up a schedule and see what else they’ve got going on, too. This is great, you guys! I’ll get all proficient at something, and fill my time and learn to do new things. Hurrah!”

I went to the library the next day, and learned that the fall schedule for community education courses wasn’t available yet. “There may be a spring schedule left over somewhere,” the reference librarian told me. She pointed toward the section of the library where they kept copies of tax forms and lots of community service information. “That will give you an idea of what’s offered, and the hours. There may be a Web address on the schedule, too.”

I thanked her, and went looking. There were lots of publications available on newsprint, and they had all gotten kind of scrambled up together. I spent about ten minutes tidying up, stacking the women’s health publication on one side, and the car trader paper on another. Maybe my project could be to volunteer at the library, and keep things neat. Then I noticed a fresh stack of papers on one shelf with the screaming headline, “STATE FAIR ENTRY REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES.”

“Hi-de-ho,” I said out loud. “What’s this?” I tucked one of the papers under my arm, along with a women’s health one, and took them over to a table to review.

“You’ve got an enormous black smudge on your nose,” Richard said. He is my next-door neighbor. I had stopped at his house on my way home from the library because I couldn’t wait to tell someone my idea.

“Good,” I said. “That means I have probably absorbed some of the state fair entry regulations and procedures into my pores. Guess what? I’m going to win a blue ribbon at the fair for my pound cake!”

My success in business, as rapid and amazing as it was, never kept me from doing other things. I had spent time doing other things I enjoyed—listening to violin music, running on the trails of Cherokee Park, and baking. So when I saw that the state fair had a category for all-butter pound cake, I knew I’d found my project.

I waved the state fair newspaper at Richard. “Best of Show! That’s what I want to win. If I win Best in Show, not only do I get a blue ribbon, I also get a gilt-edged crystal cake plate with a cover, engraved with the state seal in the center. What do you think about that?”

I had several favorite pound cake recipes, and I made them in turns depending on my mood and whether or not I had the right ingredients on hand.

“I love your pound cake,” he said. “I say go for it.”

“Well, can I come in and sit down? I want to discuss my choices with you—I brought my cookbooks. Do you have any coffee? This is going to take some time.”

“Well, I guess I can make a pot,” Richard said dubiously. “Sure, come on in. Ignore the mess.”

He was being silly; Richard’s house is very feng shui and he puts both Helen and me to shame with his standards of cleanliness and order, which he apparently learned before he retired from the Navy. Richard and I have made a pact that when we’re both old and feeble if we haven’t married again we’ll move into one house and take care of each other. That would work out fine for me, but I think Richard’s hoping he’ll meet someone as clean as he is and marry her before it comes to that.

I sat at his slate-topped kitchen table while Richard brewed coffee. “I’ve got four or five different recipes. I’ll tick them off for you.”

“Go,” Richard said encouragingly. He poured water into the reservoir of his coffee maker, and pushed the “on” button.

“OK. Five-Flavor Pound Cake. That one has—surprise, surprise—five different flavorings added to it.”

Richard was silent for a moment, while he reached into the cabinet for two coffee cups. Then he said, “That sounds like too many flavors. Don’t they compete? Doesn’t it end up tasting . . . brown? Like you mixed too many colors together?”

“No, it turns out great. The recipe calls for vanilla, rum, butter, coconut, and lemon. I use vanilla, almond, rum, coconut, and lemon. It’s yummy.”

“I’ll take your word for it. What’s next?”

“Well, there’s one called Perfect Pound Cake, but I don’t remember it at all and so I’m wondering how perfect it could be. I’ll have to make it again just to see. I wouldn’t want to miss out on making the best one because my memory failed me. Then there’s your particular favorite—pound cake loaf.”

“Well, that’s the one,” Richard said. “That is a fabulous pound cake.”

“I know, but here’s the thing: It nearly always comes out of the pan ugly, and sometimes it comes out in two pieces. That would be a disaster. I’m just not sure I can count on it. And since I’m not absolutely certain that it *does* taste that much better than the others, I don’t want to settle on it without some testing.”

“I’m all for testing,” Richard said. “What else?”

“Chocolate pound cake. I’ve never been a huge fan of chocolate pound cake. But there are a lot of people out there who love it, and three of them may be judging the cakes at the fair this year. Finally—and this one is a serious contender, Richard—there’s this one called Heavenly Pound Cake. It has a heavenly texture, and a pretty darn heavenly taste. It comes out of the pan beautifully—most of the time—and it calls for an entire box of confectioner’s sugar.”

“Makes my teeth hurt to think about it,” Richard said. “OK, so make one of each, and I’ll be your tester. You should start right away, and then you can perfect the one you decide to submit to the fair. Make one a day for the next several days, and let’s see how they turn out. Come on,” he urged, “I need to try a little of each kind, to help you make this decision.”

“All right,” I said briskly. I stood up. “Let me borrow a piece of paper and a pen. I’m going to make a list, and get all the flour, sugar, butter, eggs, and milk I’ll need. Plus cocoa, flavorings, shortening, and maybe some bananas.”

“You’re going to make a banana pound cake?” Richard asked. He sounded like he hoped I would.

“No, I need them after I run.”

“You aren’t going to have time to run!” he said. “You need to be in the kitchen, perfecting your pound cake.” He handed me a cup of coffee, and fetched the cream.

Before I left, Richard had actually set up a matrix on his computer that showed the five different types of pound cake, and the ingredients each required. This would make shopping much easier.

The next afternoon I was whipping up a Five-Flavor Pound Cake when Richard called. “When can I come over?” he asked.

“You can come over anytime you want,” I said. I broke eggs into a small bowl and threw the shells into the disposal side of the sink. “I’ve finished the pound cake loaf this morning, so it’s ready to be tested. I think it turned out pretty well, but maybe just a tiny bit too brown. I’ve got the electrician here now, checking the oven. I think it’s running a little hot.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Richard said. “I like a nice firm crust on my pound cake. Don’t worry so much about perfection. Don’t treat it like a work project. You need to put in a lot of love to make a great pound cake, not a lot of chemical or scientific know-how.”

“Perfection is my goal!” I said. “I want a blue ribbon. I want to be the Mother Teresa of pound cake. She was a perfectionist, and now she’s a saint.”

“Mother Teresa was a kinder, gentler Type A personality,” Richard said. “You are just Type A, period. And very competitive. Why can’t you relax and enjoy the fair? Enter a pound cake, by all means, but why make it a do-or-die proposition? After all, some of those old ladies have been entering cakes for years. They know all the tricks.”

“That’s the thing about a pound cake,” I told him, beating my five flavorings into my creamy, fragrant batter. Mmmmm. “There are no *tricks* except the kind that . . . that an alchemist might use. You have to tweak the flavorings . . . and mix the hell out of the batter so that it’s smooth and glossy going into the pan and then it comes out with a crumb so fine that if you tore the cake apart with your hands, very few crumbs would actually hit the floor.”

There was a silence on the other end of the phone. I waited.

“Are you on crack?” Richard asked. “And by the way, Mother Tourettesa, you’re making a *heavenly* pound cake, so watch it with the swear words.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” I said confidently. “And if I’m going to make a heavenly pound cake, I guess I better beat the hell out of it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Terry said. “Go hard, or go home.” Terry was the electrician from Evans Electric.

“Gotta run,” I told Richard, and hung up the phone.

Terry was squinting at his special oven thermometer.

“How’s it looking?” I asked.

“Looking good,” he said, but now he was staring at the pound cake loaf that was under the glass-domed cake plate on my kitchen table. In my new role as Mother Teresa, I took pity on him. “You need a slice of cake,” I said encouragingly. “Or don’t you eat pound cake?”

“I eat all the pound cake I can get,” he assured me, and we sat together and ate pound cake and drank coffee while the oven continued to heat up.

The service call and calibration cost me \$95. “But I tell you what,” Terry said. Coffee break over, he leaned against the kitchen counter next to the coffee maker and watched, mesmerized, as I swirled my pound cake batter into the bundt pan. “I tell you what. I’m a little worried about your baking element. I think that, given you paid full price for a service call today, I oughta come back tomorrow, no additional charge, and recheck it when the oven’s cool. If you’re going to win this blue ribbon, you need a perfectly calibrated oven.”

“I certainly do,” I agreed. I knew what he was really after, but I was happy to give it to him to have my own personal electrician at my beck and call to keep my oven properly calibrated. “You come back tomorrow whenever you can stop by, and give it another look. I’ll have a fresh pound cake by that time, and I’ll hold off on making the next one until after you’ve been by.”

“That little old pound cake you had today was the best I’ve ever eaten,” he said, looking again at the cake plate on the table.

“Well, I hope this one is going to be good, too. Let me pop it in the oven. We’re preset for 350 degrees, right?” I maneuvered the bundt pan into the center of the oven, closed the door, and dusted the flour off my hands onto my jeans. Then I turned to the pantry and grabbed a box of Ziploc bags. “Why don’t you take a slice of that pound cake loaf with you?” I said over my shoulder. “I need to clear off the cake plate for the new one, anyway.”

• Terry was looking at me like I was his new best friend. “Why don’t I come about noon time tomorrow?” he said. “If it’s OK with you, I’ll stop by after my lunch break, check your calibration, and see how things are going.”

I watched as Richard and Terry sampled the Five-Flavor Pound Cake. “It’s a little more complex,” I said. “Maybe it’s too complex. But I really like it. Well? What do you think?”

They were sitting there chewing and not saying a single word. It made me crazy.

Terry said, “Ms. Clay, I thought that pound cake yesterday was good. But I’m here to tell you, this pound cake right here is the best thing I ever put in my mouth.”

Richard was frowning slightly at this. “What?” I asked him.

He had the last slice of the pound cake loaf and a fresher slice of Five-Flavor cake on his plate. “Well, I think I like the more delicate flavor of the loaf,” he said. “It’s elegant, simple, delicious. The Five-Flavor is very, very good, too, but I think you’re right—it’s a little too busy.”

“I never said it was too busy,” I snapped. “Personally, I like it very much.”

Richard held up a hand. His eyes were closed, and he had a patient look on his face that made me mad. “If you can’t take criticism, Tremain, then you better not enter the fair at all.”

Terry shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Ma’am,” he said, “as far as I’m concerned it would be a doggone crime if you didn’t enter these cakes in the fair. You sit up in here and make pound cakes like it’s easy as falling off a log, and they turn out like this! Of course it’s just my opinion, but I think you’re like an artist, only in cake instead of paint or pencil.”

I beamed at Terry and pushed the cake plate toward him. “Have all you want,” I said. “And you should call me Tremain.”

Terry checked the oven temperature again while he was there, and assured me that it was running right on target. “Thanks so much,” I told him, putting a hand on his arm. “Now, you stop by here anytime this week. I’ll be trying some more recipes, and you can help decide which one I should enter.”

He smiled at me, and nodded, and headed back to his truck. Terry and I understood each other perfectly.

I closed the front door behind Terry and returned to the kitchen.

Richard looked up. “Oh, wipe that Mona Lisa smile off your face, Tremain. It is not attractive.”

“It’s a Mother Teresa smile,” I corrected him. “I’m an artist in pound cake.”

Terry’s praise inspired me, and I set out to make a chocolate pound cake, a Perfect Pound Cake, and a Heavenly Pound Cake over the next two days. Richard gave up testing after day two. “My teeth feel like they’re coated in butter,” he said. “I really can’t eat any more, at least not until I’ve gone through a cycle of eating nothing but salads for awhile.” Fortunately, Terry was made of sterner stuff, and he was over every day around lunch time or just after lunch. He was very complimentary. He even loved the chocolate pound cake.

For the next several weeks, I was happy and busy, making pound cakes and having different people try them. It became clear that the Heavenly Pound Cake was the champion—my Best of Show contender. I had developed a nearly

fool-proof method of getting it out of the pan without bald-heading it (leaving patches of the brown crust stuck to the inside of the pan), and I had made several cake plates following the state fair suggestions: rounds of corrugated cardboard covered with aluminum foil. I was ready for the fair.

“Tomorrow’s the day,” I told Richard. “I’ll make my cake in the morning, and deliver it for judging early in the afternoon. The deadline is 5:00.”

“Are you nervous?”

I thought about that. “No, I’m really not,” I said. “I feel pretty confident. I feel like this was meant to be. I’m going to win Best of Show.”

That evening, I was ticking off my ingredients and making sure everything was in order when the phone rang. “I’m at the hospital,” Helen said. “Please say a prayer, Tremain. Jack has been in an accident, on his way home from work. They won’t even let me see him.”

I closed my eyes and tried to think. “I’m on my way,” I said. I was already shoving my feet into boat shoes.

When I rushed into the emergency room, Helen was nowhere to be found. The whole place was completely empty; even the receiving nurse had left her post. I assumed Helen had finally been allowed to go see Jack, and I slumped into an orange plastic chair to wait. Against the wall, underneath a bulletin board, was a large cardboard box. The sign on it read: “Deposit donations for the homeless here. Nonperishables only, please.”

Nonperishable was a nice word. I tried to concentrate on all the nonperishables I could think of—faith, hope, love, and joy.

When the receiving nurse finally returned, she noticed me and said, “Oh, are you here to be with Mrs. Knox?”

“Yes,” I said, jumping out of the chair.

“She’s in the chapel. I’ll show you where it is.”

“Thank you.” I was relieved. Helen had gone to the chapel to pray for Jack. Maybe she was already praying a thank-you. I followed the nurse through two sets of double doors, and down a short hallway. She opened the door for me, and allowed me to walk in past her. Helen was sitting on the back pew. Another nurse and a doctor stood over her. Helen’s eyes were blank and confused, and when she saw me she held up her hands, and I took them in mine. “I have to sign some papers,” she said. “Tremain, he’s . . . gone.”

Her hands twisted in mine, restless and sweaty, not wanting to be released, but not able to be still. My palms started sweating, too, but my mind was not working at all. I couldn’t comprehend what had happened. Finally, I said, “When you’re ready, I’ll drive you home.”

Back at Helen’s, we didn’t talk; we just sort of floated around. Helen was beyond words, locked somewhere in a place no one could reach, looking deep inside. She hadn’t spoken since she called her parents with the news. They were planning to come down the next day. Jack’s parents were both dead; Helen

had not been able to reach his sister. She told me she would wait and try the next morning. I wanted to set out walking and find them so they would know, but instead I walked through the house, with Helen.

Helen was so restless she walked through the house all night. As it grew darker, cold moonlight filtered in through the skylights, and she moved from room to room, from light to shadow. I tried to stay in the dark of the shadows, unobtrusive but near, and as I saw where she intended to go next, I acted as her guide. I created pools of light where they were needed, and I brewed cups of tea. Helen even drank some of the tea, from time to time. Her face was a mask of moonlit blankness.

I don't think she slept for a single minute that night. I dozed off on the couch from time to time, but each time I woke up, Helen was walking the floor.

She had not wanted the Ativan that the doctor had prescribed to help her sleep, and I had been glad she didn't want it because I was terrified of leaving her alone while I went to the drugstore. Now I wondered if she would ever let herself sleep again. I had that feeling again of being incomplete, of wanting something desperately and not knowing where to find it.

As the moonlight faded from the skylights, and the cold gray sky of dawn could be seen reflected in them, I slumped at the kitchen table, exhausted. I could drink no more tea. I was no longer needed to turn on lamps. What could be done? The fact is, I was terrible at times like this. Helen had always been the one to prop *me* up. I didn't know how to do a single thing that could help her. The only thing I knew how to do anymore was bake pound cake.

So that's what I did.

The kitchen table was tucked into a nook, and the nook had a built-in china cabinet. The glass-front doors had been removed, and the cabinet was used for cookbooks instead of plates. Helen, like me, had a copy of *Carter County Cookery*, and since it was familiar, I took it down and let it fall open.

Being Helen's copy, it fell open to a page with vegetable lasagna on it. Funny, when I opened my copy at home, it fell open to the pound cake section. I flipped to the index and looked up the pound cakes. Helen's pound cake pages were unmarked; the pages of my copy were crusty with dried batter that I had flung onto the pages when lifting the mixer from the batter bowl.

I checked the ingredients for the different pound cakes—as if I didn't already have them more or less memorized—and then I scouted them out.

When I opened the refrigerator door, the light inside hurt my eyes and my head. I was beyond tired. Still, I took out three sticks of sweet butter and five eggs. In the pantry, I found a Rubbermaid container full of flour, and it was almost certainly all-purpose flour; my recipe called for cake flour but I could fudge that by cutting back a little bit. Cake flour is just a little lighter than regular flour, so for every cup of all-purpose you can take out a tablespoon or so and have, more or less, the equivalent of cake flour. Helen had a full one-pound box

of confectioners' sugar. Heavenly Pound Cake was a strange animal—it only called for four ingredients, not counting the two flavorings. There was no milk in it at all. Maybe that was part of the reason it was called “heavenly”—the fact that it turned out to be a cake at all was a sort of miracle.

I looked through several cabinets without luck, before finally locating the spices and extracts above the stove. Helen had vanilla and lemon extracts. They would do nicely. I preheated the oven, dug a bowl out of the cabinets, and found the hand mixer, a spatula, and a bundt pan.

There is a rhythm to mixing up a pound cake, and moving through the measurements and additions, one at a time, beating well after each. Beating is so important if you want a light cake, with a nice crumb. I beat the hell out of that cake.

I greased and floured Helen's bundt pan, and poured the batter in, scraping the sides of the bowl with the spatula to get it all out. I was so tired that I swayed a little on my feet; holding the bowl with one hand while scraping seemed suddenly like hard labor. I put the bowl back down with a thump, and shoved the full pan into the oven. Closing the door on it, I felt like I had just completed the most monumental task of my entire life.

But I hadn't. I found that out when I turned around and saw the mess I'd made. Wearily, I began to wash up. I scraped batter off the counters and floor, put away the mixer, threw the rinsed spoons and bowls and measuring cups into the dishwasher, jammed eggshells down the disposal.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked. She walked into the kitchen. Her face was pale and puffy, and I wanted to cry when I saw how bereft she looked. Like a five-year-old who's just gotten out of bed to come tell you about a bad dream.

“Making a pound cake,” I said.

She nodded, as if that were normal. “For the fair,” she said, as if reminding herself.

“No,” I said. “It's for you. And your family, when they get here.” I rinsed out the sink, and turned off the water. “I hope it turns out okay.”

Helen sat down at the table, and put her head on her arms. I walked over and put my hand on her head. A glob of pound cake batter transferred from my thumb to her hair.

“I just got cake batter in your hair,” I said. “I'm so sorry, Helen.”

And we started to laugh, and realized we were so tired that we really should try to lie down. I was asleep as soon as I hit the guest bed, and didn't get up until I heard the oven timer letting me know the cake was ready.

At Jack's memorial service, the minister read from I Corinthians: “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.” I thought about the box of nonperishables at the hospital emergency room. Why do we give food and flowers to people when someone dies? They are terribly perishable.

After the service, Helen planned to go back to Indiana with her parents for an extended visit. I hugged her for a long time before she got into their car, and drove away. “Take care of yourself,” I said.

She nodded. “We’re taking the leftover pound cake with us,” she said.

“I’ll mail a new one to you in a week,” I promised.

I went to the state fair with Richard, and we ate as many fair foods as we could—elephant ears, roasted corn, pork chop sandwiches. Fair food was therapeutic, and so seeing the rabbits, sheep, pigs, and goats. I felt the sadness of the past week lift a bit. In fact, I cheered up a lot when we passed the tobacco exhibit, and the men who were competing in the cigar-smoking contest.

“How do you know who wins?” I asked Richard quietly, but he didn’t know, either. The men sat there, very solemn, in straight-backed wooden chairs, puffing away. A small crowd—friends and family, I’m sure—watched them with great anticipation.

“Look, the miniature horses are over there,” Richard said, coughing a bit. So I let him move me along and never learned the secret of the cigar-smoking contest.

We saved the main exhibit hall for last. Some of the handcrafts were quite beautiful, and there was a simple beauty, too, in the way that the jars of canned goods were arranged on glass shelves, neatly labeled.

I felt depressed again as we got to the section of the hall where the baked goods were displayed. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Richard asked.

“Yes,” I said, and we moved down the first aisle. Rows of glass cases held everything from fancy decorated cakes to plates of chocolate chip cookies, plain biscuits, and cornbread.

And then there were the pound cakes.

Of all the items displayed at the fair—quilts, jam, aquariums, pumpkins—none of them had the short shelf-life of a pound cake. Already there was a fly inside the glass case, knocking against the sides. I pointed the fly out to Richard. “It’ll make you think about death, seeing that,” I said. He shuddered.

“I know,” I said. “I know. It’s disgusting. All that effort, time, butter, and flour, and for what? For a fly to land on and make maggots. These glass cases might as well be coffins.”

Richard looked as if he regretted the pork chop sandwich. “Shut up,” he said.

“I don’t think I will. I think I will see about closing down this fair as a health hazard. What’s the use of displaying food? For that matter, where’s the sense in displaying quilts and pumpkins and gourds and rabbits? People should be enjoying them!” Helen and her parents had declared that my pound cake, the one I made the morning after Jack died, was the best cake they’d ever eaten. That was better than getting a blue ribbon.

“Well, people are enjoying them. Maybe not the pound cake—not now.”

“Certainly not. No, three judges tasted a tiny bit of each one, and that was it. Show’s over. These pound cakes were sacrificed to the god of ego, because somebody wanted a stupid damn ribbon to display. What’s the use of pouring your love into a pound cake, and then having three bites taken out of it just for purposes of criticism? You should spread them around! You should give them to the poor, the bereaved, the sick, and the lonesome. And electricians, if you have them. And you know what? That’s what’s nonperishable, Richard! Not the cake, but the thought and the love that make you give it!” I looked at him, feeling as if I were hovering a couple of inches above the exhibit hall floor.

Richard smiled. “Mother Tourettesa,” he said fondly, and he took my arm and led me away from those awful glass cases. “You deserve . . .”

An announcement over the intercom interrupted him. “Ladies and gentlemen,” a pleasant male baritone said, “we have a grand prize winner for Artistry in Wood. George K. Mills is our winner, for his work entitled, ‘Saturn’s Moons.’”

We stopped and applauded with everyone else, although we had not seen “Saturn’s Moons” and couldn’t say if it deserved applause or not.

Richard took my arm again, and we continued to walk. “Mother Tourettsa,” he repeated—he was terribly pleased with himself for coming up with that—“You deserve Best of Show, for Artistry in Pound Cake.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I murmured. “I shall have to treat myself to a crystal cake plate with a domed lid. I don’t imagine I can get one with the state seal on it, though.”

“Oh, I bet there’s an artisan in this building who could engrave it for you. All these handmade handcrafts . . . Well, not all of them *handmade*, actually.”

“True,” I agreed. “After all, only God can make a pumpkin. But I’d like to see Him try to make a pound cake.”

Richard stopped, and gave the exhibit hall a sweeping look. “Is there anything else you wanted to see, do, or eat?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m satisfied.”

Knife-Thoughts

Morning sends a scalding light into my eyes to pry them open. For a while I resist, rolling in the dirt, but then the light leaks through the crease in my lids and burns like powdered cleanser. I twist my thumb knuckles into the moist sockets and after a while I can see through the burning and into the shrubs under the bridge where I live. Last night's sandwich lies tattered, and ants are at it, tugging, tussling and slapping the greenish meat with their antennas. I kick dirt, mumbling nonsense at the ants but they work around the dirt, dragging glistening clumps of meat off to wherever they go. For a moment I am there, upside down, tangled in moist roots with grit under my eyelids and in my teeth and ants scuttling into my mouth and ears and nose. I have to make myself stop thinking about it before the knife-thoughts come.

I always see the knives in a bouquet, tied together somehow at the handles, only they churn like pistons, ringing against each other and moving into my brain where they shred the tender, watery meat in my head until it oozes in clots down my throat and out of my ears. Sometimes I have to lie in the shrubs under the bridge while my head heals and all day I seem to be coughing up bloody hunks of myself and swallowing them. I wonder where the thoughts go when you eat them but if I think about it too long I can hear the knives ringing and have to lie down again. If they get too deep into me I won't know who I am and I won't be able to save Miranda.

When I think of her she stirs beside me and sits up, her mouth smacking, a sour smell blowing out of her and her eyes dull but peering somehow past the shrubs and into the workings of the world. I see a stained hand come up to slick back a shock of hay-colored hair. The hair falls lower than it was and she blows at it with a crooked mouth for a moment and then gives up. Her eyes jerk over to me and blink and she grunts and then closes her eyes, sleeping while she sits upright, it appears. I watch her mouth twitch and listen to traffic while

her eyes roll under her lids and then her mouth opens and she says, “Hungry, jeez,” and presses a thin hand against her gut.

I have cold soup in a canister and I pour it into two metal cups and watch her while she drinks, holding the cup with two hands, her pinkies raised, grunting when she swallows. Her throat seizes and releases and I can smell tomatoes and thin metal underneath that reminds me of the knives. Only now they don’t come because my head is full of Miranda and the smell of soup and I am making a plan for the day. I touch the money in the pocket of my jacket and try to think of where it is taking me but I know the place only as an idea and can only see a haze of warmth with no bridges and no ants and no cops.

For now, though, we’re here, even I can see that. I roll the canister and the cups wet with soup into a gray blanket and stuff it near the foot of the bridge where, for some reason, no one bothers it, not even cops. Miranda is still sitting in the bushes and is watching the ants. She looks like a dirty child except for her hands, which have swollen knuckles and short, chipped nails and slivers of dirt in the creases. She wipes her mouth a lot and leaves smears of dirt on her lips and cheeks and sometimes when she smiles or grimaces or yells I can see dirt in her teeth, like she’s eating it or passing out in it with her mouth open. I know that she suffers by the way her mouth works in her sleep and by the tired expression she wears even with the needle in her arm.

She wipes her hands on her white tank top, palms open, scrubs her nose with a knuckle and looks down the long hill to the highway where cars are glinting and roaring under the bridge. She walks down first and I follow her on the dirt path we have worn and from behind I can see her shoulder blades and thin muscles working in her back. Wedges of hip bone hold her dusty jeans at her waist, which is clogged with the tail of the shirt. At the highway she turns left to follow a band of sidewalk that glitters in the sun and I follow her silhouette, watching the blank faces in the cars as they stare everywhere that we aren’t. I have a wild urge to run into the road, to send them squealing and clanging into each other or into the concrete ditch under the bridge and when I think of it I see the knives for a moment, each blade catching the light as it churns out of the bunch to cut. But then they stop churning and hang in my head for a moment before they disappear and there is nothing left but the vague taste of metal and a tingling that circles my scalp and then snakes down through my head and settles in my back teeth.

Her jeans whisper and her cruddy sneakers rasp and she walks, arms swinging, toward the shadows of the park. She looks back at me and I see that her dull expression is gone, her eyes are sharp, whites burning under the pink rims of her lids. We wander in the park for a while as the wind moves the arms of the oaks and dots of sunlight crowd and then scatter on the ground. Joggers bounce by with their faces set and their eyes darting. Their bright clothes

smudge in my vision and when I swallow and can taste the colors like heavy frosting at the back of my throat.

As the day wears on, the heat comes up and after a while a heavy oily smell oozes out of my clothes. I can taste it on my fingers and in the air around me and I can see it burn the nostrils of people in the park if they accidentally get close enough. I move deeper into the shadow of an oak where the air is cooler and where the smell of my clothes burns less, although I can still feel it drifting out of my shirt in a sour vapor and moving through the wind, heavier and hotter than the other air.

I look for Miranda but she is gone, lost in the crowd, eaten up by the noise and the burning brightness of the day. I don't know where she went and can't think about it or the knife-thoughts will come. I settle inside myself at the base of the oak and listen to my own breathing and the wind in the leaves. I pretend not to hear the voices in the park, which is not hard to do with traffic roaring. I breathe deeply and think of my plans. They move in my head like pencil sketches being sorted on a desk and even though I can't make them still, I feel better watching them. I know I have money and that we can get away. I close my eyes and watch the drawings and the warmth of the day leaks into me and makes me heavy. Then the drawings start to swirl like mixed paint and after a while they blend into the darkness behind my eyes and I am asleep in a blur of my thoughts. For a while I am floating on the darkness on my back on a black lake that stretches everywhere. The lake is empty and there is no world beyond it and above me the sky is as black as the water. I know without looking that tiny waves in the lake reflect light from somewhere and when I try to think of where, I think of Miranda. And then I am thrashing and the lake is pulling me down, the water draining into my ears. My feet go down like weights and for a moment I am hung in the blackness with my arms spread and then the water comes up smoothly over my bottom teeth and into my mouth and I am choking and awake again in the park with the knife-thoughts churning in my head.

I open my eyes to see that the world is full of stinking green light. Sounds are attacking one another. Everything that moves smudges the air with its colors and pulses with poisonous light. I have to make a noise to breathe, a tiny growl that grows in my chest and rockets out of me in a coughing yelp. Everyone looks at me, their eyes blazing, tiny comets of fire circling their irises. I can smell rot on everyone, a meaty aroma on their breath and in the water on their eyeballs. A damp colorless paste of pulverized lunch is clinging to almost everyone's teeth. Tongues squirm and thrash in puddles of spit. When their clothes rub together, the sound attacks my ears, boils in my ear canals. I scream and the sound erupts in muffled bubbles as if I am underwater. I squeeze my eyes shut and the lids scald each other. They feel as if they are bleeding or melting and behind the lids I trap colors from the outside world that swirl in the darkness into steely

points that churn into my brain. Shreds of brain leak into my mouth and down my throat. Blood bubbles in my ears. I scream again and pull my hair while the knives go faster, ringing against one another and slinging droplets as they go.

Then I am on the people in the park. Sunlight seems to grip my head like a vice. Profanity pours into my ears and then out of my mouth. I call them names, spitting, swinging my arms. “Pig fuckers!” I shriek, but my voice is not mine. It is the sound of large cans falling on concrete, of hard things meeting other hard things and then crumbling, of vibrations that shatter bone.

The rest of the day is an explosion of shrieking color. I blaze through the city with rocks boiling in my throat and the knives squelching into what is left of my brain. I don’t remember who I am anymore. I gag on bits of brain. I can hear blood bubbling in my ear. But I can’t see people anymore. Everything spins in confusion and hums and sparks with electricity. My arms go limp and I drag them around the city looking for quiet and darkness. My throat whines and squeezes, but I am no longer certain I am breathing. When I inhale, light breaks like glass and passes into me, grinding in my teeth. But after a while the knife-thoughts are farther away and slowing down. I spit and whine and rock as I walk, and when I am sure I am breathing again the sky is darker and I am not sure what has happened.

I sit on a curb near a store I don’t remember and vomit into muddy grass. I retch in my own voice and my bile is laced with things I remember eating. I can breathe without chewing and when people pass I don’t bark at them or rush them or swing my arms. I sit quietly, my arms hanging, and try to sweat out whatever was holding me. The friction of the knife-thoughts aches in my teeth, but I can not hear them anymore. I don’t taste blood anymore and I can hear my own breathing.

A man moves like an embarrassed shadow to give me money and I use it to buy a tall can of beer from the clerk in the strange store and walk toward where I think I was. I can see our bridge close by so I haven’t gone far. I move toward it as traffic roars around me. Colors aren’t smeared anymore and sounds don’t attack me. I pour gurgles of beer into my mouth and swish before swallowing. Comfort eases up from my belly and moves slowly to my fingers. I want to shout for Miranda but can’t because I also want to stay invisible.

For a while I live in the blur from the beer, trudging through the streets with warmth in my fingers. No one notices me anymore. My feet throb and my legs are numb. I find my way back to our bridge and wander through the brush for a while before I settle in our spot. I can smell Miranda’s sweat in the blankets. I think for a while but can’t remember when she came.

The evening comes down like a mystery of the past, dark and fading, holding things from before but hiding them. The sky is pink and ribbed with purple clouds. Hunger claws at me but I won’t leave. I cross my arms and sit in the dirt, waiting for her. When she finally comes, she is dirtier than before,

stumbling, a corner of her mouth bleeding. She moves past me and sits in the dirt. Her eyes are pink and ragged, rolling in their sockets. There is a splotch in the crook of her arm from the needle. Her head rolls as if on a hinge and she smiles through me.

“Holy shit, man” she says, blowing out an antiseptic smell. Her fingers are blackened around the nails. One nail is broken, part of it bent but hanging on. She sways, swipes at her hair.

“Where did you go?” I say.

She points with her hand, her fingers hanging limply, and says, “To get the crud, man. To get it and to give it.” Her mouth splits open in a kind of smile.

“You were with them, weren’t you,” I say, my voice filling my throat. Knife-thoughts gather, glistening, aching in my teeth.

She looks at me, her head wobbling, and hugs her knees. She shakes her head and the bottoms of her lids glisten with tears.

“Don’t crowd me, man,” she says in a strained voice. “Don’t try to muscle me. Don’t blow it.”

I know it’s time; it always was. I take her face in my hands and stare into her pupils.

“I have money,” I say. “We’ll get away.”

“To where?” she says, her eyes rolling. She laughs and I see rotten teeth. Her breath smells like earth and kerosene.

“I’ve been keeping it for later,” I say, unable to hold the secret, hot with relief that is still far away. I tap my jacket pocket and stare at her and I see her eyes twitch and then focus. She laughs again and strokes my hands, her calluses bumping over my knuckles.

“You gonna save me?” she whispers. A laugh hiccups in her chest. “You gonna save the princess?”

“We’ll both go,” I say. “There are better places.”

She lies back and watches the brush with vacant, watery eyes.

“There’s worse too,” she says. I try to say something back but she is already asleep.

I watch her sleep as darkness leaks into everything. I can feel my heart pumping in my chest and in my joints from the thrill of confession. Miranda lies as if dead, one dirty hand resting on her belly and the other limp in the dirt. I start to think of places, seeing cleaner sidewalks, small baskets of food, new clothes. There are no cops in the new places, and now I know I have to find them. I close my eyes and see us walking, me in the lead this time. She is smiling and cleaner, her hair blowing in the wind.

“Somewhere,” I say loudly. The street lamps whine and traffic roars on the overpasses. “Anywhere but here,” I say just to hear my voice. Sleep comes as it always does, in a moving cloud at the edge of a storm—full of dark things and half-hidden sounds. I pull my coat around me and lay beside her and before long

I am in the darkness with lumps of the ground aching even into my flickering dreams. But I wake to her face, frantic and focused. Her hands crawl around, tug at my trousers. She swipes her hair and blows a breath. Then she bites at my cheek, kisses me, pulls at my clothes, panting. I feel a pinch on my thigh.

“Hey, no pinch,” I say.

“Shhh,” she says, tugging, fumbling with clothes. “We’ll go. I’ll go with you. You wanna save the princess?”

She struggles for a long moment with my jacket, wadding it and tangling her hands in it before she tosses it aside. Then she envelops me, grimacing. “I’ll go with you,” she says, her voice somehow sweaty. She moves frantically, pinning me down, her head lowered, shocks of greasy hair over her eyes. She leans back with her mouth open and seems to be yawning or moaning. Inside, she is hot and slippery but hard with bones. The friction is abrupt, almost painful. But after a while a color I’ve never seen blooms under each of my eyelids and covers the whole world. I feel mild jerking in my pelvis but now I am removed, floating inside my body. She is still moving on me when I see the flash in her hand.

“You stuck me,” I say, watching her turn to mist and reform. “Why?”

She puts a rough dirty hand on my mouth.

“Shhh,” she says. “We’ll go. I’ll go with you.”

I wake in a clamor, my mouth full of web. For a while my arms won’t move. A steel rod seems to anchor my neck. I strain against myself and flares of numbness sting my fingers. I can feel that she is gone. The side of my body she was on is cold, number than the other. I breathe deeply, coaxing blood into my hands, and after a while I can sit up to look around. Her footprints mark the dirt in all directions. Some of the limbs in the shrubs have been snapped. Our stale bread is gone. My jacket is thrown across a bush as if to dry and when I check my pocket for the money my shuddering hand closes on nothing.

I flutter the jacket, look under the bush and check the pocket again, but I can feel how far away the money is. I destroy our spot, throwing dirt, cutting myself on the shrubs. I slobber into the dirt. My breath feels like hot smoke. I want to scream but my throat is making its own sound—a rattle, a boiling sigh.

The sky drops a stinging mist that tastes like metal and blood. The overpass is a giant toothless jawbone salivating into the shrubs. I trudge down the embankment, going nowhere, my arms pin wheeling for no reason, hands bent into claws. Near the road, I spit and roar at traffic. This time, I will the knife-thoughts to come. I squeeze my head between filthy palms and think of blades—churning, scraping, aching in the ears and teeth.

The knives churn into my brain but now there is no pain. I can touch the handles. They bump my palms and slip through my fingers. I seize a handle and the knife stops for a moment while the others churn around it. They are mine; I can control them. I gather my thoughts into a meaningless knot, a muscle in my brain. Then I grip the handles and turn, straining on the inside, my eyeballs

vibrating. Halfway around the knives grip, but then an imaginary tendon snaps and they are loose. I can swing them now, point them where I want. I think of them, watch them. They are free of blood now, clean, glistening, flashing light. I whirl them around, but now they do not go into my brain. They leap and scrape just before my eyes. They are completely mine; they always were. I take the handles in my hands. They are warm, as if I had been holding them all along. I turn the blades away from myself again, utter an unrecognizable shriek, and go out into the world.

Sea Dragons

The first thing he noticed was my hair, I'm sure of it. Mother and I had curled it into loose spirals that fell to my shoulders and bounced when I walked or shook my head. I was sitting alone at a lunch table and staring down at my food to avoid the hundreds of teenage eyes studying me. He crept across the linoleum floor like an oil spill and positioned himself just in front of me. Slapping his palms down on the table, he dropped his name.

"Hi, I'm Icky. Just move here?"

I didn't ask him about his name. I finished chewing my sunflower seeds, then raised my head to answer.

"I'm Windsor, and yes."

I moved here from a small town where garden parties were more important than attending school and debutante balls were as necessary as church service. A town in Northeast Florida with trees as lavish as the people. We lived on oceanfront property that inflated as investors scoured the east coast for new areas to build high-rise condos. My parents sold the two-story memory of my childhood for more than it deserved and we migrated north.

Icky sat down across from me on a grey plastic chair.

"So, Windsor, what's your poison?"

I was a bit unnerved by his morbid shift in the conversation. I leaned forward, crushing my feathers beneath me, the quills bending where they met my skin at the base of my tailbone.

"What?"

He was indifferent to my ignorance. "You know, like, what do you like to drink?"

"Oh, well," I looked at the eight ounce carton sitting by my lunch bag. "I like orange juice I guess."

He laughed.

He put his elbows on the table top and rested his chin on his hands, his muck colored bangs fell across his eye and he blew them away by directing air through the corner of his mouth. He studied me with tadpole eyes, two unformed frogs swimming in bright blue bubbles.

“Windsor, where did you come from?” He smiled and I was assured that he was just teasing. The bell rang for the end of lunch.

“Hey, meet me out front after school.”

I must have looked at him like I thought he was going to throw a black bag over my head and shove me into a white van.

“It’s nothing bad, I promise. I just want to show you around Boston.”

My feathers stiffened at his forwardness and the barbs started tickling the back of my thighs. I gathered my trash, responding with my eyes focused on the empty Ziploc bags.

“Thank you for the invitation, but my mother wants me to come straight home after school.”

I had a perfectly legitimate excuse. Icky looked at me and the baby blue house dress I was wearing.

“I’ll take you to the aquarium,” he said, lowering his voice.

The words of my mother and the matron of my etiquette class floated into my head: *Refusing an invitation because you have “better” things to do is a surefire way to get dropped from all the guest lists.* I considered this and decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

“I guess I could tell her I’ll be back later.”

Victory marched across his face, “Wicked. I’ll meet you out front.” He got up and crossed the lunchroom with smooth confidence, joining his group of friends at the door.

#

I managed to doodle my way through the rest of the day. When the last bell rang, I gathered my books and notebooks and found my way to the front doors of the school. Icky was waiting outside on the steps, standing with a mixture of younger girls in pig and pony tails and older boys in baggy pants. He saw me standing at a distance from them and made his excuses to the group as he came over to join me.

“I knew you’d show.”

I looked over his shoulder at the group he’d left and they were all staring at us. The girls put on scrunched up pouty faces while the boys exchanged one word commentary with each other. I asked,

“How far is the aquarium?”

“Twenty minutes if we take the T.”

I didn't ask what he meant by T, I just followed him down the rest of the stairs and out onto Fenwood. We walked in silence, him springing off the balls of his feet ever so slightly with each step, making his head bob up and down as he walked. I kept up, marveling at the trees that grew out of tiny squares of dirt in the middle of the sidewalk.

"The station's down here." Icky stopped at the mouth of a descending staircase and handed me a dirty golden token. "Here's a T coin" he said and I watched him drop it into a slot in the turnstile.

I repeated his movements and followed him down more flights of stairs and out onto a platform. There were people waiting across from us on a separate bank and two sets of tracks, littered with fast food wrappers and napkins and Styrofoam cups. We sat down on a bench near the wall and Icky turned to me.

"There's a bunch of seals right out front, and there's this big thing of penguins once you get inside, and there's this huge tank in the middle with like five sharks in it," his face glowed as he described his favorite exhibits.

"Wow," I smoothed out my dress and my quills jabbed into my bottom, "I went to Sea World once, but my parents thought it smelled bad so we didn't stay very long."

"Cool," he said and looked off down the tunnel.

We were in the depths of the earth, hundreds of feet below the street, and the muted light threw strange shadows across Icky's profile. I noticed that he had dark moles on his cheek and a few along his hairline. They weren't the gross hairy ones that stick out like giant pimples; they were nearly flat and perfectly round. I tried to play connect-the-dots with them, forming first the Star of David and then some sort of animal. Then a roar came from the tunnel he was watching so vigilantly. Everyone around us got up and hurried towards a yellow line near the edge of the platform. Icky got up too and I followed. We boarded the train and there were no seats, so I stood next to Icky and held onto the silver bar.

"We're getting off at Government Center, its right after Park Street." he said.

"We have a Park Street where I'm from," I said, rather excited to hear a familiarity.

"Then we have to get on the Blue Line." He was watching the grimy walls of the tunnel fly by through the glass.

We didn't say much for the rest of the ride. When our stop came and we disembarked and climbed up the stairs back into the open air, I realized just how cramped I had felt underground and I could feel the soot clinging to my plumes. We walked for a couple blocks and then I smelled it, something that was so recognizable to me. It reminded me of my old house, the fragrance of the marshy breeze that greeted me every morning when I came down the stairs. As we walked, I felt the ocean coming closer. Then I saw it through a gap in the buildings, glittering in patches of sunshine that broke through the clouds.

“There’re the seals,” Icky pointed up ahead to a large glass tank where brown torpedoes were darting about under water.

We walked up to the glass and watched them. Some of the seals were doing underwater acrobatics, twisting and tumbling for their spectators. Others were bobbing at the surface, dozing with understandable indifference. We watched them for a while, then Icky pulled at my arm.

“We should go see the other stuff.”

I nodded. His tone had an urgent ring to it and I wondered what he wanted to show me. We entered the main building, paid our admission, and headed for the penguin enclosure at the very front. Most of the birds were perched atop giant rock formations in the water and they were paired off, quiet couples snuggled against each other, playfully kissing their lovers with their beaks. Their mannerisms were so human that I felt a sort of connection to them. I glanced over at Icky, but he didn’t look like a penguin.

“Wait for it,” Icky said pointing at a penguin that had stood up and was flapping his wings. Then the bird defecated all over the rock.

He smiled at me, “They’re always shitting.”

“Gross,” I covered my mouth and turned away.

We walked down a hallway lined with tanks built into the walls. I had never seen so many terrifying fish. All the tanks were dark and menacing faces would suddenly appear in the dim light and I’d jump back and Icky would laugh.

The hallway continued on and we came up to a tank that bowed out into the room. Bright, wild colors danced around inside it; deep red, fiery yellow, luminous green. “Sea dragons,” read the plaque on the wall. I peered through the thick glass and saw only colored seaweed and kelp fronds. Then the seaweed twitched. It bent forwards and moved on its own towards the glass and I saw it had eyes, tiny conical ones that were striped and nearly blended into the brilliant colors. It had an elongated snout, rounded torso, and curling tail. Each of the leafy branches sticking out from the creature’s body were the devices that gently propelled him around the tank. He was an indescribable wonder disguised as marine plant life, a stranger trying to blend in with the rocks and coral. I couldn’t take my eyes off of his deception.

Icky tapped loudly on the glass, “Pretty wicked, huh?”

I’d forgotten he was there.

“They’re amazing . . . so beautiful.” I said.

It happened so unexpectedly, I wasn’t even aware of the change in sensation coming from beneath my dress. The tingles of awareness ran down my neck, through my shoulders, the length of my spine, and into the nerve bundle at the base of my tail bone. Before I could rush to the bathroom I felt the back of my dress rising, lifted by the eager feathers beneath it.

With my muscles unable to control the reaction, my plumage burst out from under its cloth covering and snapped to attention, each quill erect and quivering.

I saw the brilliant white reflecting against the glass, distorted by the curvature of the tank; the snowy eyes staring back at me from every direction; the shafts supporting the feathers were rigid and imposing, extending three feet from my body on all sides. I was framed by a hundred or so shooting stars all escaping from the base of my spine and leaving a trail of fine white dust.

Oh God, I thought. My dress was hiked up in the back, exposing everything.

I saw Icky's eyes blink once, then again. I thought he would run, I thought he would say something nasty, point me out to everyone, and then security would take me away. But he just stared, the hair on his arm standing on end. Then he reached out and touched one of my feathers with the tip of his finger, ever so delicately, and I pulled away.

"Damn, Windsor. Now I see why you are so beautiful," he said.

It was a cheap line, I knew that. But I was so relieved that Icky didn't see me as an albino monster, that he was able to look past my abnormality, that he'd discovered all that was a part of me and found it beautiful.

"You mean it?" I asked.

He nodded as he took my hand and held it in his dry palm. The distinctive smirk perpetually on his lips had faded into a quiet smile.

My senses began to relax again and the feathers behind me sank down and down until I felt them brush the backs of my legs. I pulled my dress back over them, Icky watching the whole thing like a child who'd just discovered where his mother hid all the Christmas presents.

We walked around the rest of the aquarium, and when it was time to go, we rode the T back to Fenwood. Icky saw me to the door of my townhouse and released my hand as I climbed the front steps. He said goodnight and dug his hands into his jean pockets as he turned to head home. Later that night, I lay in my bed in a stuffy room on the third floor of our brownstone and stroked the feathers splayed out on the bed around me. Icky had touched them.

#

"My real name is Icarus," Icky was explaining the next day as we were standing in front of the school before class began, "My parents are into Greek mythology and all that crap. So I decided to piss them off and shorten it to Icky," he grinned at his own ingenuity and the girls around him giggled like they were hyenas. I smiled, standing at the edge of the circle, watching Icky perform. He had adopted me into his group of friends and they'd seemed obliging enough to accept me. The girls were always trying to out-compete each other for Icky's attention and the boys were focused on undoing bras with one hand through the girl's shirts. I stuck to myself. Sometimes Icky would single me out and direct his questions at me.

“Hey Winnie, wanna come to a party this weekend?”

“When?” I saw the girls crouch into attack mode.

“Friday at 9, Vince’s house, I’ll give you directions.” He pulled out a sheet of paper from his friend’s backpack and scribbled some street names and a number. He handed me the slip and met my eyes.

“Are you gunna be there?”

“Definitely,” I said, and then he went back to telling a story.

#

I wanted the days to pass as quickly as I could tear their pages off of the calendar. Friday was where I wanted to be, but I had to get through Wednesday and Thursday. Icky would talk to me at school, but there were always other people around. He had personally invited me to Friday night’s party. I remembered my mother had told me once: *personal invitations admit only the guests to whom they are addressed*. This somehow reassured me that I was privileged. When Friday finally came, I laid out my pink evening dress on my bed and practically ran the ten blocks to school.

Icky didn’t speak to me until the end of the day when everyone was filing out of the building.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he winked and slung his back pack over his shoulder, walking next to his friends as they headed home.

#

I groomed myself for hours, adjusting and readjusting, my mother curling my hair and doing my makeup simultaneously. She took pictures in the foyer of our townhouse and my father kissed me on the cheek and told me he’d pick me up at midnight.

My mother dropped me off in front of Vince’s house a little after nine and we saw cars lining both sides of the street. I got out of her Mercedes and waved as she rolled down her window and kissed me on the cheek saying: *Honey, don’t forget to thank your host before you leave*.

My dress kept hiking up as I got closer to the scene and I had to hold it down while I rang the doorbell. When Icky opened the door, I let out my breath.

“Come on in,” he said, a plastic Solo cup in his hand.

I stepped through the door, meeting his wide, glassy eyes and feeling the heat that emanated from his body. He sipped anxiously at the liquid in his cup and led me through the house. I was surprised to see that the place was quite empty.

“Everyone’s out back,” he led me through the kitchen and out into a small yard fenced in with huge wooden planks. They were all sitting in a circle in

plastic lawn chairs under the second story deck. A few seniors were out in the grass smoking, friends of Vince's I assumed.

"You want some orange juice?" Icky offered, laughing.

"Sure" I laughed with him. He disappeared through the back door.

I started talking with Vince, who I'd found standing near one of the thick wooden posts supporting the upper deck.

"Is this your parent's place? It's pretty big."

"Yeah, but my parents are in New York for the weekend," he started to tip over but caught himself, "I didn't wanna walk around a bunch of fuckin' museums."

Icky reappeared beside me and handed me a plastic cup full of orange juice. I took a sip and nearly choked.

"What kind of orange juice is this?"

He started laughing again and then Vince looked at Icky and started laughing too.

"Chill, Windsor. I just put some vodka in it," Icky said.

"Jeez, it's so strong," I took another sip and forced the burning citrus liquid down my throat.

"Hey, I'll be right back," he waved at me and walked over to the circle of boys and girls. He started talking to them in a soft voice that I couldn't overhear. I looked over at Vince and he was staring out across the yard. Every couple of seconds he'd throw his hand out for support against the post, as if the earth was unexpectedly shifting beneath him. I stepped clear of the overhang and looked up at the sky. I couldn't see any stars. While I had my head up towards the sky, I felt a quick sting, right on my rump, and whirled around to see Icky, dashing to the circle of chairs holding one of my feathers above his head triumphantly. I twisted around to examine the spot where he'd plucked the quill, finding a little red drop of blood seeping through my dress. I rubbed it with my finger and felt the tender skin cringe under my touch.

"Look at this! I told you!" Icky shouted from the circle, displaying the feather in front of their faces; it was intensely colorless under the porch light, "I told you she was a peacock!"

Icky ran around wildly, dangling the feather just out of reach as his friends tried to snatch it from his hands.

"You can't touch it! You can't touch it!"

• They all degenerated into a band of greedy thieves, chasing Icky around the back yard. He possessed a prized jewel and they wanted to look at it, to feel it in their hands, claim it for themselves. Then some of the bandits got wise. They turned upon me like I was a case of diamonds, first asking if they could see them and then demanding I give them a feather too.

"You can't see them," I tried to be firm, to stand taller than them, intimidate them, but they pressed on me, backing me up against the side of the house.

“Give us a feather!” They all chanted, their greedy fingers reaching for my dress.

Vince was at the front of the group, his hand was already close enough to touch me. I bolted. I felt the sharp sting again and knew Vince had seized a feather as I’d pulled away, but I didn’t look back or think about the throbbing empty space. I found the back gate against the fence in the yard, flung it open and slammed the door behind me. I ran up the street, not knowing where I was going, not knowing how late it was. I put six blocks between me and the others, veering into a convenience store to call my parents and wait for my father to come pick me up.

I pushed open the tinkling door of the store and went straight to the counter where a tired middle-aged man was reading a comic book.

“Can I use your—”

I stopped. In a metal rack on top of the counter there was a brochure for the aquarium. A bright blue fish swam across its cover.

“How far is the aquarium from here?” I asked the man behind the counter.

“Bout five blocks.” He said, flipping the page of the comic, not even looking up.

“What street?”

“This one,” he dismissed me by burying his face in the book.

I snatched a brochure from the rack and went out onto the street again. The man hadn’t told me which direction, so I let the salty air lead me to the water.

My steps were hurried and anxious, bringing me to the wharf quicker than I’d expected. Everything was dark, except for the street lights, and the aquarium was closed. I knew it would be closed. It was quiet and I could hear the waves gently rocking against the sea walls. I walked up to the entry doors and put my face against the glass, cupping my hands around my eyes to see inside. The lobby was dimly lit by security lights along the ceiling. I noticed something affixed to the wall behind the information desk, a palette of reds that shimmered in the muted light. My eyes focused on the poster and my feathers trembled in recognition. A weakness swept through my body and my heart sank like an anchor. There was the stranger with his rippling fins, the charlatan of the ocean: my bright red sea dragon.

An Orange Wedge

It was a beautiful day in the neighborhood when Floyd took a bullet to the brain. Under the sharp February sky his luck turned as dry as the oak leaves scattered across the lawns.

Maggie Bruce called 911. George, outside planting flowers, looked up at the shouting in Floyd's front yard—You stupid bitch, shut up, Floyd yelled and punched his young girlfriend over and over. Her face reddened, puffing with each blow.

Floyd, George called, Floyd, stop that! Stop hitting her. Stop!

Old George couldn't do anything. In his prime he had hands the size of hams. Even fifteen years ago when he fell and broke his leg, George just hauled himself into his pickup truck and drove two hours back to town. But on this day, George stood helpless because Floyd was too crazed to hear.

The incident occurred on a neighborhood cul-de-sac facing the creek. A tree-lined, dead-end street, with an asphalt circle. Floyd's house sat at the very end. It was the newest home on Laurel Court, and that had been a bone of contention.

Years before Floyd came, the neighbors enjoyed looking at the lush vegetation down on the vacant lot. The tangle of ferns, palms and pines gave a feeling of wildness and peace all balled together. Vines dangled from trees and a moss carpet crept towards the creek. Most important, the neighbors agreed, it was wetlands and so narrow that no house could fit on it.

The wedge stood empty for years. Neighborhood children climbed its magnolia tree, kicked through the underbrush, and squished across the muck. Everyone was content until the day a big work truck appeared on the lot.

Parked overnight, just like that. Not every night, but often enough. The neighbors wondered about it while Maggie phoned the City. It's illegal to park this big a vehicle in a residential neighborhood, she said. And the City sent people to issue tickets each time it happened.

It turns out that Floyd's daddy owned that wedge and Floyd needed a place to park his truck. Too bad, not here, the neighbors chorused.

Floyd had a temper. Young and bullheaded. He didn't like it one bit that someone had turned him in to the authorities. So he posted a sign on the magnolia tree:

I'm going to find out who the fuck told on me.
Mind your own fucking business and
stay the fuck out my way. FJ

Well, Maggie and Grace Wheeler ripped that sign down as soon as they saw it. Children live in this neighborhood, they said, and the young ones don't need to read such trash. Maggie told folks that Floyd drove by the next day and cursed at her. She was just standing in her front yard and he shouted terrible words at her.

But things settled down and went on as before.

Decades earlier, Maggie's daddy owned all the land. He gave Maggie and George their acreage when they married. They're retired now and still remember when wild country surrounded their house, with raccoons, armadillos, and deer roaming about. That was before the developers tamed the land into a city subdivision. Somehow, years ago, Floyd's daddy acquired that wedge. He used it to dump trash, just once in a while, deep in the underbrush. Maggie would call and report it.

On this brisk blue day, Floyd stepped out the door one last time. He held the girl, with his gun at her throat. They stood in the sunshine. I'm gonna kill her, he kept shouting. A police officer, lying on his stomach two lawns over, squeezed the trigger. A bullet exploded through the back of Floyd's head.

The idea of Floyd building a house stunned the neighbors. They began to buzz when a land surveyor's marks appeared on the empty pie wedge. Small orange flags highlighted the property boundaries of the sliver sitting between Maggie and Grace Wheeler's yards. As if that weren't bad enough, a considerable number of trees, including the great magnolia, had a white "X" on them.

What does this mean? These trees—will they be cut down?

Sure, that's what it meant. Somehow Floyd figured out a way to put a tidy bungalow on that pie wedge, up front near the street. The land wasn't as narrow as everyone thought. Construction commenced.

The families milled and muttered but followed Mrs. Wheeler's example. She was the most Christian. It's not what we want, she said, but he's moving in with his family. We need to welcome them.

People were cordial to Floyd and his two children. His wife didn't seem interested in knowing anyone on the street. A couple of neighborhood boys found their way over to Floyd's trampoline out back. AJ and Michael, both in high school, laughed at Floyd's jokes and irreverence. Mom, said Michael, you should see Floyd and his buddies jumping on the trampoline after they've been

drinking a bunch of beer. His mother said, I don't want you over there when Floyd has guests. And I certainly don't want you in his house.

Floyd lived in his bungalow for five years, being treated cordially. He gave the loudest parties and his friends parked all helter skelter around the cul-de-sac, so it was hard for folks to back out of their driveways. But they just looked the other way. They were trying to be neighborly. And it was nice that Floyd threw the football around with his son and the neighbor boys. Floyd was the youngest daddy on the street. That happens when you become a father at 15.

His little girl took dance lessons and owned a white dog that looked like a fluffy snowball. And Floyd wrestled his backyard jungle into submission. He planted his orange trees, hibiscus, and elephant ears. In fact, he did a fine job landscaping. Floyd's teenage boy moved away for some reason. Grace Wheeler knew that it had to do with breaking the law, but she didn't say anything at the time.

A big old fishing boat showed up in Floyd's yard. He'd take it out at night and catch fish to sell. He worked during the day for periods of time, but he changed jobs a lot. He liked to tinker with that boat, though. The problem, once again, was that the boat was too big for a residential street. Maggie and Grace Wheeler said, Floyd you need to rent one of those boat slips, but he just ignored them. So they called the City and tickets started appearing again. Floyd finally sold the boat.

This past Christmas, Floyd's wife moved out of the bungalow, taking the little dancer and the white snowball with her. When AJ and Michael came home from college, Floyd told them that he'd been in a rehab clinic but was better. Things were quieter, he said, now that the wife was gone. She had too many rules. When she left, he yelled after her, You can have everything in the house, but I'm keeping this land.

Sure, they nodded, with the air of worldly men.

And I have a new girlfriend, Floyd told the boys. Met her in the rehab clinic. Twenty-one years old and wanting to have my baby. He winked and said, She's wearing me out. Floyd was between jobs just then but things were looking brighter.

Over the next month the rescue unit and police visited weekly. The new girlfriend suffered from panic attacks, Floyd explained. She's all right. Sorry for all the screaming going on over here, but everything's fine. That wasn't all. Sounds of things smashing against walls echoed down the street. Folks opened their front doors and stepped outside, wondering what to do. Some called the authorities. A few neighbors asked if they could help Floyd somehow. No, no thanks, he said.

Maggie, George yelled, Call 911, call 'em now! When George reached the front door he grabbed the phone. There's a man beating on a woman here, he hollered. Send a patrol car quick.

The woman's shrieks soared as Floyd dragged her back into his house, pulling her by the feet, yanking her body across the grass, sidewalk and threshold. When the police car arrived, the officers heard the screaming and smashed down the door. Police, they shouted.

Get out, bellowed Floyd, or I'll kill her. I will! The officers inched out and called for backup.

A SWAT team arrived on the scene. All the police knew was that a man had a female hostage and he owned a gun. Silent and quick, the sharpshooters scattered through the yards, on the roofs, and around back by the creek. Negotiators were setting up, but not ready yet.

A few houses up the way, Debbie looked out her front window and saw Elizabeth's newspaper still in her yard across the street. Now, she thought, Elizabeth always has her paper by this time of day. What in heaven's name is going on? She opened her door and stepped out. As she crossed the street she saw a police car down by Floyd's house. She picked up the paper and walked to Elizabeth's front door. No answer. Strange, she wondered. Is she all right?

Debbie turned around. Standing in the middle of her street, she looked up in the other direction. That's when she saw the pack of police cars at the end of Laurel Court and red tape stretched across. Lady, one of the men yelled, get out of the street and into your house. Debbie hurried home and positioned herself at the window.

Floyd must have been out of his mind by then; he was probably back on those drugs. He stumbled out the front door holding his shotgun to the girl, pressed against her neck. She was screaming enough to make neck hair stand up. Floyd yelled his head off, and the SWAT guys marked their target.

Floyd dragged his new girlfriend back in the house. In that moment, there was a chance he could turn it around and move away from the edge. Maybe he knew it; maybe he was already past that point. Maybe he had passed it a long while back without him or anyone noticing. How could the neighbors know? He seemed affable much of the time, a decent guy when he was clean and sober. They didn't want to say or do anything that would set him off. They just wanted the neighborhood quiet again, the way it used to be.

He stepped out one final time.

Officer Moore took a clean shot. The girlfriend kept screaming as two officers grabbed her and ran her up the street. Debbie said later that she only wore a tee-shirt, nothing else. They put her in a police car and took her to the hospital for anxiety.

The quiet was sudden that day and the chill kept everybody inside, waiting. The rescue unit hustled down the street to find Floyd lying in his yard, blood seeping into winter grass, his oranges ripening all around. Then they were gone and the neighborhood quieted down, like it used to be.

Floyd was 36 and died that evening at the hospital. His mother sat with him, held his hand, and whispered, It's all right, Floyd, mama's here. He squeezed her hand once and then let go.

George's winter flowers bloomed over the next few weeks. His white open board fence provided a background for their yellows and lavenders. Floyd's orange trees dropped their fruit into the silence while the sky held fast to its pure winter blue.

The Prince of Dreamers

The wind inhaled birds, mailboxes, tricycles and anything that did not have the good fortune to move faster than backwards rushing air. And as quickly as all it was sucked in, it was exhaled with a bruising cough. Around the house you could hear small objects hitting the side of the Debro's modest home. Whistles and bang and then a thud just like the sound of a rotten watermelon that was dropped, only a hundred times the volume. Something big hit the front door. If Edna did not know better she would have thought it was the knock of the grim reaper, cause not only was she scared but she was in pain.

"This can't be happening now. It is too soon." The angry wind kicked the door harder this time, just as she felt the kick inside of her stomach. The pain dropped her to her knees as she tried to get to the foot of the stairs to call her husband. Outside trees were bending like Nadia Komanich doing her parallel bar routine. Branches snapped and the dead crunch of limbs falling only made Edna's pain worse. While Hurricane Michael battered the door of the brick house to get in, Edna's baby shifted and struggled to get out.

Hurricane Michael moved up the east coast like a football player. This storm was the thirteenth storm of the season. It was already more powerful than any storm in recent history. Winds were blowing in excess of three hundred miles per hour. Michael started near Dominican Republic crippling the entire island. It moved north to Cuba where after it was finished the sign from a house on the south end of the island was found over two hundred miles away embedded in the side of over turned sail boat. By the time the storm reached Miami the winds were already beyond what the meteorologist could read on their instruments. This was the worst hurricane in the history of the United States, and now the one eyed Cyclopes was looking for the Debro's house.

By the time Edna reached the stairs she wasn't sure if she could scream. She was afraid any exertion would cause her baby to move lower. Edna held her stomach and in a voice that sounded part wolf and part human she called her

husband. “James . . . Jaaaames hurry! Something’s wrong.” She was not sure if James heard her. He had gone upstairs because he heard a window break and wanted to see what damage had been done. A pine cone the size of bar of soap was pushed almost all the way into the wall. James kept low and away from the window as he eyed the room to access the damages. It was painted baby blue and decorated with little airplanes. Red ones blue ones and green ones. Each airplane was connected by a little chain of clouds that made the room look like it was moving. Just above the crib sticking half way out was the pinecone. All of the work that he and his wife had done on the room would have to be done over. The good thing about the situation was the baby was not in the crib. In fact he would not be there for almost another month.

This baby was a miracle. Edna was not supposed to be able to have children. After a few years of trying and listening to her family asking why they had not had children yet, she found out she was pregnant. The doctor said he did not know how but shrugged his shoulders and said she was pregnant. Like Grandma Clara would say, “God has the plan and all you have to do is follow it.” She told Edna not to listen to all of the others, cause she had a dream that Edna was kneeling next to a stream washing a calabash squash and when she put it back in her basket it turned into two squashes. No matter the doctor had told Edna that she was barrier. No matter what the test said. Grandma Clara said she saw the plan and if it took her last breath the plan would be followed.

The hole in the window groaned each time the wind blew. James thought the wind was teasing him, calling him to the window. “James! James! Hurry!” He could just barely make out his name being called with all the sounds darting around the little room. “James . . . James.” He heard it clearly this time. It was Edna his wife of seven years. He could tell something was wrong. He had only been upstairs for a few minutes. He hadn’t heard anything break like he had heard upstairs. Then the words “the baby” rang out over the sounds of freight trains, volcanoes and steam boats the shoved each other around the room like bullies.

In five easy steps James moved from the top of the stairs to where Edna lay curled on her side. She was holding her stomach and panting just like they had learned in Lamause classes. But, why was Edna breathing like that it wasn’t time. It couldn’t be time because Hurricane Michael was squeezing the little house tighter than Aunt Mae Bell’s “I haven’t seen you in years” type of hug. “I think the baby is here!” Edna told her husband. “I think it’s time!” James did not want to hear those words. He had checked the phone only fifteen minutes ago and there was crackling and hissing coming from the earpiece. There was no way to call for help. They would have to do it by themselves. They had practiced it in class but they had always expected to be at the hospital with doctors, not at home in the hallway. James remembered the book about how to deliver a baby. So he ran to the kitchen to get the book and the things he needed to help Edna.

By the time James returned to his wife's side the only thing he had to do was hold her hand and watch the miracle happen. As a matter of fact, it happened so quickly that Edna still had her eyes closed and was panting when James told her to look at the little squealing baby boy in front of her.

He was small but he was beautiful. They counted each tiny finger and toe. He had a fine dusting of black curly hair and little puffy eyes that already questioned the world. His nose was definitely from her side of the family. He was here and he was early. The Debro's miracle had arrived. He came during the worst part of the storm. Even though they had decided to name the baby something else they both knew that his name would be Michael. The hurricane dropped off its' gift in the middle of the night and moved off shore into the Atlantic Ocean. The next morning the stormed was down graded to a tropical depression.

It wasn't until the next day they were able to get to a hospital and the doctor noticed the strange marks running down the center of Michael's back. They weren't bruises or scratches. It wasn't something that happened when he was being born. This was visible just under the skin. Very faint but you could see it without straining. There were three very fine squiggly lines running from the baby's shoulder blades to the small of his back. It looked like the work of a tattoo artist who had a little too much libation. Each line flowed continuously down his back in no real order or pattern. They were just there and the doctor said it was just an unusual birthmark and not to worry about it. He said it even might fade away with time.

Three days later James and Edna took their baby boy home. The pinecone was still holding court over the little crib when they lay Michael in it.

* * *

Michael was a little smaller than the other twelve year olds that he knew. The doctor said he was smaller because he had been born almost a month early. He never really had any medical problems to speak of, maybe a cold or a cough and sometimes the "I don't want to go to school stomach ache", but nothing that would cause a mother to worry. Nothing ever bothered him. So, why now? Why was he starting to feel different? His dad joked about him becoming a man . . . "puberty". He explained the whole sex thing. Michael smiled inside a couple of times when his father was not sure just how to explain something and Michael would explain to his father for him.

This though, this was something else. Michael started feeling something on the inside. It wasn't pain and it did not hurt. It felt like stretching only it was not his arms or legs that were stretching it was more like his mind. He talked to his mother and she said maybe he was nervous because he a lot to do. Michael would be starting a new school next year and he was turning 13. Michael knew his mother could tell he was nervous about the new school, but that did not

explain his feeling. This feeling was like the last stretch when you are exhausted and you are about to fall asleep where ever your head lies down.

Mrs. Kron tapped on Michael's desk with her finger nail. It was her way of saying his next stop would be to the principal office. She tapped three more times. Each time testing the strength of her talon like nails.

On the third tap Michael opened his eyes just enough to see a four inch claw painted deep gold like the color of one the pharaoh's cats from a mummy's tomb. As his eyes opened wider he saw two great columns in black stockings. His eyes trailed upward to see Mrs. Kron's waist which was small but the rest of her was large . . . in fact Big. By the time he was fully awake he saw the expression on her face. It was pure concentration like a great cat stalking it's prey. He could have believed he was being stalked by a lion because Mrs. Kron's hair was fire red with streaks of blonde. She stood nearly 6'4 without shoes but she always wore high heels for the additional effect.

"Young Mr. Debro do you find English or me so boring that you have decided to sleep in my class?" Mrs. Kron purred with just enough emphasis to let Michael know that her next words would be the end of the stalking. Next would be the pounce for the kill. "I'm sorry Mrs. Kron, I tried to stay awake. I just can't help it". Michael lazily spoke. Michael knew he was in trouble because this was the forth time he had fallen asleep in Mrs. Kron's class this week. And, nothing was going to stop her from calling his parents this time. Michael's plea for mercy would have no impact. Mrs. Kron and Michael's parents had been friends since they were in high school. In fact Edna and Sherry Kron were best friends.

Edna was one of a few people who befriended Mrs. Kron when she moved to Jacksonville Florida. She was tall and spoke with an accent. Sherry Kron also had the gift of seeing into people. She could read spirits. When Sherry met Edna she knew they would be friends for life. So it was her duty to call and she did.

After Michael had fallen asleep during school several times and he could not explain his sudden tiredness Edna decided it was time to take Michael to see a doctor. "So Michael, tell me why your are here today?" the doctor quipped. "Your mother says you have been falling asleep in class. Is there anything you want to discuss?" Michael could tell the doctor was patronizing him. He could see on the physician face that he did not want to see Michael any more than Michael wanted to be there. "I get real tired while I am at school." Michael said in a defending tone. "I try to stay awake but nothing seems to help." The doctor cut Michael off mid-sentence. "What are you doing up so late? Are you watching television or playing games on your computer? That would cause you to fall asleep during class," said the doctor. Michael tried to explain that he did not have a computer or television in his room. Not because he did not try but because his parents did not believe kids should have all of those distractions in there personal spaces. It really did not matter because the doctor had already

made is diagnosis. Sneaky teenager syndrome. The symptoms are hanging out late, playing video games too late into the night, not studying and blaming it all on something else. The doctor told Mrs. Debro that none of the test should anything abnormal. He said Michael needed to find better ways of spending his nights. He also suggested the she monitor his time better. Mrs. Debro wanted to believe this was some childhood growing issue but she knew Michael. She knew that Michael was a good kid and that he loved school. Michael had been on the honor roll for most of his years in school. Edna thanked the doctor and told and made up in her mind that if this continued she would take him to see someone else. The next Monday he fell asleep in class again and Mrs. Kron made Michael go the restroom and splash water on his face. It did not make him feel better. He splashed water on his face and his neck like his father taught him to do when they were playing sports and it was hot outside. Not only did the water not help is seemed to make things worse. His started to feel dizzy and his back started to sting. It felt like an allergic reaction. By the time he was back at his desk he had just enough energy to tell Mrs. Kron how sleepy he was. Michael drifted off to sleep to the giggles of some of his class mates.

* * *

Corbius . . . Corbius . . . great one! Come to us. It is time. A faint chanting sound of hidden inside the sound of calm rolling waves. The whispers exposed themselves with each bubble that burst on the shoreline. Michael open his eyes when he felt the cool water on his hands. He looked around and recognized the place. He was at the beach. He had been there many times fishing with his father. He sat in that very spot only three weeks ago. This beach was in a secluded area of Hannah park. It was a long walk from the parking area to get there, but it was worth the walk. To the left you could see the navy base. Large war ships and helicopters pepper the distant coastline. To the right Jacksonville beach pier danced on the horizon. Michael startled to his feet when he realized that surrounding him were a legion of crabs. The clicking sounds of their claws sounded threatening. Each claw clapped together in unison. Michael sensed the danger. If it were just one crab he could kick away from him, but there were too many of them. Sand crabs, ghost crabs and rock crabs all pushing together to form a column around him. Even the blue crab had left the sanctuary of the water to join in on the apparent feast. Michael was trapped. He had no where to run. He felt the first tiny claw pull at his ankle. He knew if he fell to the ground he would be eaten alive. So he started kicking. He kicked anything that looked like it was moving. He cried out when the pinch penetrated his pants legs. His leg smarted from the claw holding his skin. He shook his leg but the crab held on. Michael stumbled to the sand and was on one knee and one hand. The army of crabs all moved into position. The column rose to over six feet preparing to

drown him in the middle of tiny eyes and claws. Just as Michael was about to give up the sky above him blacken. Hundreds of seagulls and pelicans appeared overhead. They swoop in eating all of the crabs.

Mrs. Kron spoke softly. "Michael, wake up." She patted his shoulder gently. Michael eyes slowly focused on the classroom. He could see all of the other student staring at him. Wanda Griffin sat with a smirk on her face. She chimed in that he was in trouble for sleeping. She finished her pronouncement with a very sure nod of her head.

"Mr. Debro I think you need to go to the office and call your mother." Mrs. Kron was more sympathetic to him this time. She knew that after her warnings about sleeping in her class that even the most defiant student would try not to blink let alone sleep. Mrs. Kron knew something was wrong.

Past Torches

Clad completely in black, the Visitor walks with a determined cadence despite the low level of visibility at this hour of the night. He is frailer than I had imagined and requires the aide of a cane, which is silver-tipped, though it does not slow him down. His face is purposefully shrouded beneath the confines of a darkened fedora. I strain to get a better look at him and am surprised at the agility of such a hunched figure. A light level of mist plays at his footsteps, clinging to his heels as he navigates a quick path through the graveyard. He knows exactly where to go, and we know exactly where he is going.

I realize I have forgotten to breathe.

As noiselessly as possible, I draw in deliberate puffs of air and risk a glance at those surrounding me. All eyes are affixed upon this man, the Visitor, and the annual ritual we are eavesdropping upon from across the street. There is a heaviness spread unevenly throughout the chapel; I can feel it pressing us against the stained glass windows that currently serve as paned portals into the mystery man's movements. Occasional wisps of vapor ascend the hallowed corridors from the mouths of onlookers, revealing that it is caustically cold even within the comfort of the indoors.

I rejoin their collective gaze, returning my attention to the darkened figure just as he slows in unveiled reverence before the specific slab of concrete that is the purpose of his visitation. As the Visitor arrives at the tombstone, somebody huddled beside me mumbles excitedly—her meaning incoherent under iced breath—and I panic for a moment thinking that our already obstructed view will become fogged over in the exhilaration of this moment. The aged windows graciously withstand the power of our heightened condensation.

The man in black stands for some time before plucking a bottle from his long coat. I cannot see it clearly but know it is expensive French cognac. A deep swig tosses his head back enough to reveal that he is elderly, though I must squint to see this while the details of his face remain largely obscured.

After wiping his mouth, the Visitor drops to a knee and produces three roses colored of burgundy wine. They contrast so sharply with the dismal surroundings and lightly scattered blankets of snow that it looks to me like an old black and white movie that has been colorized in appeal to modern sensibilities; here, however, only the roses have been touched up for the scene. The Visitor places all three long-stemmed offerings at the foot of the grave, just as he has done nearly fifty other times in as many years. Standing over the marker in silent tribute, he scrapes still crystallizing frost from the headstone and reveals the name etched beneath.

Edgar Allan Poe.

The Visitor pauses, extends his bony arm, and lightly traces the infamous name. This is done with such tenderness that it affects me despite our considerable distance. Before I can react, he turns on his heels, forcing his cape to whip up a cloud of wintry fog that effectively obscures what I imagine as a rapid, graceful exit.

He is vanished.

* * *

“It happened so fast, but I felt like everything was moving in slow motion . . .”

The voice belongs to my girlfriend, Alexia. We have been selected from a group of English majors at the University of Richmond to attend in silent non-participation from within the confines of the crowded church. While some hopeful spectators align the walls outside the grounds of the graveyard (the cemetery is officially closed at this hour), the caretaker allows select invitees to pile inside the holy edifice for an ample view of the grave and its mystifying yearly guest. As my professor, Dr. Blackstone, wrote a widely published work last year in defensive praise of Poe’s overriding talent—a reaction against recent academics who delight in asserting otherwise—he received a coveted invitation with space for ten of his brightest students as reward for his scholarship.

I am quite surprised to be selected among the privileged few. With a fledgling grade point average indicative of my aversion to math and science, I have only recently been removed from academic probation and cannot reasonably be considered a good student. Yet I was fortunate enough to find acceptance as an understudy into the competitive creative writing program, largely by way of Dr. Blackstone’s insistence. Alexia—who is an outstanding student—often advises that she, like our professor, perceives more in me by way of raw potential than I may ever allow myself to accept.

I realize her emerald eyes have been shooting at me through their pointed black-rimmed glasses (halfway obscured by playful tufts of scarlet and ginger hair) as they impatiently await a reaction. I do not know what to offer. My

experience feels so far removed from the others that no appropriate vocalization would carve common ground, encouraging the same looks of misunderstanding and confusion that have plagued my existence. I know this is unfair to Alexia, who has not once regarded me in such a manner, and yet the other students are choking me by way of proximity. I watch in silence as she begins to comprehend the impetus of my hesitation.

I am relieved when Dr. Blackstone approaches, expertly maneuvering his way through the dense crowd. He rubs his salt-and-pepper beard with a grin more appropriately belonging to a five-year-old on a playground and slaps me on the back, hard, once within arm's length of where Alexia and I have been standing.

"Well, Sean, what do you think of *that*?" and I am thrust back into discomfort.

I search my mind for the appropriate answers that would flow naturally from other students, all now chattering excitedly and replaying the experience as though it were a televised sporting event (there are, in fact, several reporters from local and national newspapers canvassing the room hungry for interviews). These fellow invitees have memorized countless facts, figures, and statistics of Poe and his writing; they can quote portions of his poetry, stories, and criticisms verbatim; they know about his rhyme, meter, and mechanics; they credit him with the creation of modern genres; and, they filter all of this through a long-limbed history of complex literary analysis.

I am not nearly as well versed. Yet, when I read Poe, I feel his words ricochet in my spine. I want to tell Dr. Blackstone that I felt a connection, that when the Visitor touched that name carved into stone, it struck electrical currents of understanding.

I want to say that I think the Visitor is a similar sort of creature.

"Awesome," is what I mutter. "It was just . . . really very awesome."

"Awesome, indeed," Dr. Blackstone confirms with his booming baritone. "*Awe* some, and *awe* inspiring." There is playfulness embedded in his deep-set eyes, now regarding Alexia in an exchange that has something to do with how they know I elected to stifle words, leaving them unsaid. Dr. Blackstone and Alexia often share such glances, and I find myself wondering what they talk about when I am not present.

Tonight I will not know, for the professor is announcing to his students that we will invoke an ancient tradition: going to a tavern and indulging in spirits.

* * *

The bar is called *The Raven*, and this makes me groan. I am displeased with the conversation and the lighting, both of which are above me. The only time I enter the discourse is when it turns to a heated debate pitting Poe against his French counterpart, Guy de Maupassant. One particularly bold student

kickstarts the controversy by asserting that Maupassant is equally as brilliant as Poe, which naturally incites a mutiny against him. Many are surprised when—now one full hour into the fray and filled with reddened wine—I side with the asserter. When I am asked to provide empirical evidence in support of my justifications, all I can say is that I base my position on the strength of one story alone, which I read in junior high. It is called “Am I Insane?” and, as a lone work, I would pit it up against anything Edgar penned with flicks of his rotating wrist.

Challenges abound. A redheaded boy with acne matching the color of his hair accuses me of something short of a boldfaced lie. He boasts loudly that his major is focused on nineteenth century literature capped by a minor in French, thus he firmly believes he has read everything Maupassant has written. He has never heard of this story. I try to explain that I have been searching in vain for the evasive tale since that initial reading nearly a decade ago, but am met with an influx of inflammatory reactions exclaiming a *faux pas*. The consensus is that the story does not exist, that I must be mistaken. Dr. Blackstone also endorses this, having never heard of the tale himself.

I want to tell them that I can describe the story in perfection—not quote it, but retell it in immaculately shaped detail. Instead, I excuse myself and say I am going to the restroom, then immediately head for the exit.

* * *

Outside the bar, the wind is far more biting than before. With head downcast, I am awash in solitary thought, wondering if Alexia and Dr. Blackstone will understand why I absconded from *The Raven* rather abruptly without explanation. As I ponder, my ungainly legs decide to explore the back alleys of this sister city.

Having been born and raised in Richmond, I am familiar with the longstanding rivalry with Baltimore in laying claim to Poe’s legacy. Thankfully, this has stayed friendly, though I must confess I favor Richmond in the contest. Living in the cobbled alleys and Victorian architecture of the historic Fan district, it has been many a night that I stumbled home from the bars breathing in Edgar’s residual ashes. With each clip-clapping step resounding off cobblestone, I have felt Poe’s ghost swoosh past in hurried stagers, rushing home in a similar state of drunkenness, exciting tales running through his head and begging themselves to be written by fountained pen. It is on nights such as these, I am certain, wherein he wrote his most macabre and fantastic of tales.

Although I would reject a full comparison to Richmond, I delight in the similarity of street names. While I live on Monument Avenue back home, I am walking on Monument Street here in Baltimore. Saint Mary turns into Madison Avenue and I find it interesting that Centre Lane retains its British spelling.

Richmond does not possess a Druid Street, though perhaps we should, and I ponder how appropriate the name is for a district accommodating the decayed corpse of the world's greatest slinger of horrifically imaginative prose. Without warning, my feet stop moving.

In all this random meandering, I have somehow returned to the cemetery. I immediately hop over the locked gates.

* * *

I'm not sure how long I have been asleep, curled up against the historical tomb and relying on the affects of Edgar's errant soul to provide warmth through six feet of packed earth, but it must not have been too terribly long for the sun has not yet negotiated the obstacle of the horizon. It does not seem as though it will wait much longer to do so. Five inches from my cracked nose, slowly coming into focus, is a very nice leather shoe.

Looking up, I am startled to find that it belongs to the Visitor, who is peering down at me with a keen interest. I slowly prop myself up on my elbows.

"I slept here, too—the first time, before anybody knew of the tribute." His voice is the sound of two paper bags rubbing together. "Did you dream?"

"I did . . . must have seeped through the soil," I reply. I've somehow shed the insecurities plaguing me throughout the night and am possessed of warming confidence. Yet I am amazed at how instantly I feel comfortable speaking to a myth.

"You're a Richmonder, right?" he asks as wrinkles push his mouth into the shape of a grin. Then, by way of answer to a perplexed look I was unaware that I was wearing, the Visitor adds, "The accent, lad . . . The accent."

A long pause allows us to regard one another in silence.

"You're right about Maupassant, you know," his breath finally airs out like a sigh. "He's the only one who could've given Poe a run for his talent, far as I'm concerned. If I was French, suppose I'd be doing something akin to this for Guy in a graveyard in Paris. Course, I'm not. So I give him a taste of a tribute, mixed in with Edgar's . . ."

". . . the cognac," I deduce, and he is returning my perceptive understanding with another smile, wider this time. A chill of realization suddenly courses through me.

"Wait, how did you know . . . ?"

"I've become quite talented at not being seen, young man. It takes work, but you'll learn how in time," and I am far from understanding the implications contained within this last statement when the Visitor takes me by the hand.

We disappear, together, into the swallowing blanket of night.

* * *

On the ride home, as Alexia's head rests against my lap, I run the edge of my thumb along the tattered paper tucked inside my coat. It is a copy of Maupassant's "Am I Insane?"—a recent gift proving that I am not. As the bus bumps down the highway, I consider the need for a new selection of clothing, perhaps a costume of some kind. It is the last thought that enters my imagination before slipping into a brief, comforting sleep.

* * *

Factual Note: A mysterious visitor has frequented Poe's burial marker very late at night on the anniversary of his death since 1949, leaving a half-bottle of cognac with three red roses. His identity remains unknown and the event is shrouded in mystery. Recently, the visitor left a cryptic message behind declaring, "The torch will be passed."

Master of the Neighborhood

David ran his neighborhood with an iron fist and everyone knew it. At six feet tall and a lean two hundred pounds with a light coffee skin tone, he was a good-looking man in a tough sort of way. As judge, jury and executioner of anyone and everyone who lived or worked in this little corner of Atlanta he maintained a ruthless approach to all matters brought to his attention. He had to because he got to this position through ruthlessness. In fact, it took killing his own father to get to where he was and to show any weakness now, meant inviting someone else to take over in the same manner. Therefore, when he learned that a meth head called Skinny Jack was talking trash about him he decided to act appropriately.

The next day, David sat on a bench outside the grocery store. The old people were here buying food and the predators were waiting in the vacant lot across the street for any who wandered by alone. The situation was almost laughable to David. A predator would jump out and make a threat with a knife or a club. The oldsters or prey as he called them would hand over the cash and waddle on down the road poor but healthy. Unfortunately, a few of the old people would put up a fuss and get a knockdown a notch for their troubles.

David smiled watching the scene play out as he felt it should. When he first got here, he spent his days and nights hanging out in the lot waiting for a chance to score some quick cash. Those days were spent waiting, watching, and then fighting the other hoodlums for the cash he took. It was there that he learned that the top dog got the meat. Soon he ran that lot and collected a tax from the other thugs. From there he used his muscle and took control of the rest of the neighborhood.

However he wasn't here to watch this and reminisce, he was here for business and he didn't have long to wait. A shout drew his attention to his left. Just outside the store, a skinny white dude was wailing away on some old lady. He held her purse in one hand and smashed her face with the other. David

knew immediately that this was Skinny Jack. Like most meth heads, he had a long drawn face with rotting teeth. Extremely thin, he looked more like a corpse than anything.

Standing up David asked. "Yo Jack, what's the deal?"

"What's the deal?" Jack asked with a snarl. "Is this your mama?"

David stopped and smiled. No one knew for sure who his mama was but everyone knew this was a subject that could set him off in an instant. Some speculated that he killed her when he was a kid. Others thought that maybe he saw his old man kill her. Whatever the reason talking about her in front of him could cost you your life. True to form, David's eyes went wide with murderous rage. Stepping forward with his shoulders back he roared. "No, she ain't anything to me!"

"So what's the deal?" Jack asked with an irritating smile. "Are you being a hero? You become a cop now?"

"No, I run this neighborhood!" David answered through clenched teeth. "That's the deal!"

Jack laughed and spit on the bleeding old lady lying at his feet and said. "Not for long, I hear we may have a new boss soon."

"You think you are tough enough?" David shouted. "Then come and take it!"

"I think I just might!"

That did it as far as David was concerned. Skinny Jack needed to die and soon. Smiling he pulled a straight razor from his pocket. Flipping the silver steel blade up, he said. "I'm going to gut you like a fish."

Jack stared hard at David and licked his lips. He tried to keep his face emotionless. Yet no matter how hard he tried, a twitch erupted over his left eye betraying his fear. Then without another moment's hesitation, he turned and ran.

David leaped over the old lady and chased after Jack. He wanted this guy bad. Chasing him down the road, he saw Jack turn down an ally between two old warehouse buildings. David smiled at this. There was nothing down here and the alley was a dead end. He had him now!

Stopping at the entrance of the alley David shouted. "You just made your last mistake! My old man and I used to come here and steal pipes out of these buildings for liquor money!"

"You aren't your old man!" A voice shouted back. "You're his little boy!"

"All right," David bellowed back. "You are going to wish I was a little boy!"

Holding the straight razor in a ready stance, he trotted down the alley. Trash and the smell of rotting garbage filled this place. He remembered his first night after his old man tossed him out on the street. They argued over something what he could not remember but in the end, he was homeless. He spent that night in this alley huddled in a corner for warmth.

A few yards down, he came upon a pile of trash in the center of the alley. This made David stop. The heap was normal enough looking. A dozen black green trash bags and some crates all covered with flies. To the untrained eye, it was nothing but to a street-smart man like him it was a danger to avoid. This was a bum's roost. It was a place to ambush anyone that followed him in here.

"Nice try," David said with a grin. "Unfortunately I know this alley better than you."

Jack didn't reply. Instead, he stood up, smiled and threw an empty bottle at David. He then leaped through an open doorway to the left.

This last bit didn't faze David in the least. These buildings were a hangout for the trash people. Addicts, hookers, and dealers with a taste for their own product hung out in these buildings. Moving up to the door, he saw the dark room dimly lit by filthy and cracked skylights. The sounds of pigeons cooing and the flutter of wings in the distance, he saw Jack standing his ground.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought." David said walking toward Jack. With each step, his anger grew toward rage.

"Why?"

"Because, I know this building better than my apartment, in fact my old man's bones are buried somewhere in here." David said between with an evil smile.

"I know." Jack said with a grin. "I found them and with some help brought him back."

"He's dead," David said with a sneer. "And you ain't Jesus."

"I don't work for him." Jack replied. "I serve someone else."

"What kind of voodoo crap is this?" David asked. "You ain't got any powers. You're a dumb white trash junkie and you're all alone and you're going to die that way."

"No he won't." A familiar voice said from behind.

Spinning around he saw a man with a misshapen head walking toward him. A big hulking man he looked like a cross of a bear and a man. Dressed in clothes from a decade ago he almost didn't recognize him.

"Pop?" David said in a whisper.

"You waste of a man!" Pop replied in a hollow voice. "You let a junkie lead you into a trap!"

"You're dead, I killed you myself!" David said standing up.

"You forgot who and what we are." He replied with a smirk. "We can't kill each other."

As his father got closer, he saw that his eyes were just dim sparks in deep empty sockets. The light in them somehow drew his attention away from his danger and made his mind wander. He saw a deep cold in these pits in this skull. Cold lonely places worse than the rat infested alleys and the damp cellars he

slept in as a kid. Then he felt his arms fall to his sides and the razor slip from his fingers. His father reached out and grabbed David's shoulder.

He felt the coldness of his grasp. Then like a popping bubble somewhere in his head, memories rushed in. He remembered his home on the gulf. Living and feeding on the people who trespassed on their land. Then the storm came and the people were gone. He and Pop made their way here where the eating was good.

"See I brought you back to your senses." Pop said with a grin. "Now you can rest in peace and I will run the neighborhood."

"Rest? How can I rest? We have a neighborhood to run." David replied.

"What about me?" Jack asked. "I thought we had a deal? I lure your son here and I get my due!"

"I don't make deals with food." The old man replied taking hold of Jack's shoulder.

A few passersby heard the high-pitched scream in the warehouse. They assumed that Skinny Jack was getting some street justice for his stupidity. Some assumed David was getting his. Whatever the event most felt that tonight would herald great changes for the neighborhood and that a new day was coming. Unfortunately they would soon learn of the new night that was about to fall on them.

“Van Gogh Complex”

This story was originally written in blood. The plot, the characters, the anger—all of it. A knife was the pen and the scars marked the chapters.

I lived in a snow globe. It was beautiful. Serene. Exciting. Calm. A sanctuary. But from inside the glass, I peered out at dangerous hands; hands that at any minute would set off the serenity creating a turbulence in my world that would produce a chaos I handled with a knife on my skin. The physical pain made the emotional storm tolerable, and sometimes overrode it completely. Eventually the snow would settle again, and I would go on with my life, half-heartedly waiting for the next flurry that I knew was only a handshake away.

I was classified as SI, Self Injurer, which made me uneasy. First to be classified as anything at all, and then with those initials. The Sports Illustrated that was tucked tightly in my backpack carried a whole new meaning, and I couldn't open it anymore without feeling at least some animosity towards the completely innocent periodical.

I was in a room. The kind of room that attempted to be welcoming, but wasn't. The magazines were ones of educational value and served only as the backdrop to the more domineering rows of pamphlets. The pamphlets, which came in an array of colors, listed almost any disorder you could think of. I found it amusing that anyone would attempt to find meaning or a solution in something so sterile, so generic.

There was a guy across the small room, undoubtedly waiting for his counselor. He was in the office the last time I was there, too. He dressed normal and scribbled down answers to what appeared to me as math homework. He seemed alright. His yellow LiveStrong bracelet supporting Lance Armstrong and the cure for testicular cancer matched mine. I guess I never imagined a rubber bracelet could have been so bonding, or maybe so condemning. I was tempted to ask him what *he was in for*, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Counselors scurried in and out; they smiled at me as if I was an abused dog they felt they had to be nice to. The look in their eyes told me they felt sorry for me. It made me ornery. They shouldn't have felt sorry for me, I felt sorry for them. Little did they know, I was analyzing every one of them. They were my project as much as I was theirs. They were humans too, which meant the only thing that set us apart, besides a degree, was I saw them for who they were and who they were pretending to be. They saw me as a file.

I watched a student leave the office and conjured up ideas about why he was there.

It was 4:00 p.m. and the guy that waited with me was collected by his counselor for an hour of "therapy" for a reason I decided to be left undeclared by my own imagination.

I felt abandoned. Like I was being tested. It was now three after. My hands were in my lap and I looked down at the scars that covered the outside of both my forearms. It was probably a mistake to have worn short sleeves there, so I folded my arms under my chest and waited another three minutes until my counselor was fashionably late. In her business, that could probably be traumatizing to some people. I just found it to be unprofessional. It was better I kept reminding myself that I was sane.

We walked back to her office and I sat in a chair of my choosing. She took the other one. She probably felt this was less formal than her sitting in her own chair and may have made me feel more welcomed.

I wondered what she knew and what I would have to say again. I wondered how they assigned "patients" to counselors. I imagined it to be like the NBA draft or something similar. A group of counselors met around a table with a bunch of new names.

Someone asked, "Who wants the girl from the Peace Corps with a fascination towards sharper objects and masochistic tendencies?" After several counselors toyed with the idea, one picked me and before the meeting ended, traded me for a severely depressed alcoholic who was afraid to ride on elevators.

Maybe it was less dramatic. Maybe it was more simplistic. White/female, okay. Obviously, this person should be matched up with a white female.

I had a slight prejudice against myself. There was something slightly more degrading about admitting your problems to your own kind. This, coming from a person who found admitting one's problems to begin with, was, in itself, degrading.

The talk between us was awkward. She tried to feel me out and I tried very hard to be open but something was different than it was last time—other than the fact that I had been reassigned to a different counselor. Last time I was heavily sedated on prescription cold medicine. My body again yearned for the calming effects of the liquid concoction spiked with Benadryl.

I mentioned where I came from—where I had been in the Peace Corps before going there.

“What is that?”

“A deliberate attempt to destroy civilization as we know it.”

It put me on edge. Explaining the place, hell on earth, that would forever remain nameless. But the look on her face told me she was looking for what it was in actuality—not my metaphorical interpretation of the place.

“It’s an island. Impoverished, filthy, and . . .”

“And what?”

“And nothing.”

She followed my facial expression with every question she asked—hers would inevitably match mine. It was uncomfortable, the conversation, but I remained emotionless.

“Hailey, have you ever thought about killing yourself?”

“My name is Hanna, and no—never.” *Have you ever thought about learning your patients’ names?*

“Why do you cut?”

“It takes away the pain.”

“What pain?”

“Any pain.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“It puts me in control.”

“Control of what?”

“Control of every feeling that passes through my body.”

She readjusted herself and shot me a cold, heartless glare before focusing her eyes on the yellow notepad sitting in her lap. I sat in silence as she wrote something down on her yellow paper.

When she finally looked up, she asked, “Is the island what made you start doing this?”

“Probably not. It’s just a place.”

“What about there . . . that was the first time you sought help for the mutilation. Why?”

“I was forced to. The psychiatrist was an asshole.”

She smiled at me, a forced smile because she felt she had too. Maybe so she appeared more friendly, but it was fake and extraordinarily troubling. She wasn’t a good listener, which was fine because I was not really comfortable talking to her.

“Why did you come for help here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“I guess.”

In actuality, I went to make my twin brother feel better. We joined the Peace Corps together immediately after graduating high school. He worried about the cutting, and when I left the island, (and him for the first time in my life,) he made me promise to stop.

The rest of her questions were mundane. My answers were short, and most the time incoherent even to myself, but she pretended to understand and nodded her head. She was lying. Pretending to understand. I didn't like it. I said things that were completely off-kilter, ramblings really, that honestly had no coherency. Then I looked at her with knowing eyes, and gave her a fake, semi-desperate look of, “*you understand, don't you?*” Of course she did. She understood, understood nothing. But she nodded.

“Perhaps you should come up with other ideas besides cutting, so when you feel the urge to cut you can do one of those things instead.”

Yes. Perhaps. Perhaps I could have done that. Perhaps instead of feeling the rush that followed my addictive behavior, folding origami into the shape of a swan would have provided the same feeling of passion through my veins. Or perhaps not.

I tried it her way though, and at three in the morning and after creating 82 origami swans in every possible color and pattern, I placed a knife to the inside of my forearm and created a landmark for the occasion—perhaps something for the swans to swim in. Then I slept.

I found myself back in the same room. I was going to cancel the appointment—but I am not sure what drove me back: utter curiosity or the desire to have something to challenge.

I guess in the grand scheme of life, the reason I went was not of crucial significance. Nevertheless, I sat in their unwelcoming welcoming room and dreamed of how it would end.

I thought back to the week since I had last been in the office. My biggest accomplishment was not in the lack of cutting, as I only did it twice, drawing an insignificant repercussion from my skin both times. Once you cut enough, I think you become immune, scar tissue is far stronger than your skin and thus breaking through it is tough and becomes tougher when a web of scars replaces your flesh. So, as I said—it was neither an accomplishment nor a failure. It was just an emotion. It was me making something intangible, tangible. I gave birth to the feeling, making it reality so I could destroy it. That's all cutting was, land-marking.

Anyway, the bigger feat for me had nothing to do with knives. The bigger triumph clearly over shadowed my severe decrease in blood drawing penetrations—and that was my ability to overcome the fear of opening my Sports Illustrated. Finally.

The visit would be my last. The last time I would look at the color pamphlets. The last time I would analyze everyone to enter and leave the office. The last time I would see myself as disturbed in any way. And why? Van Gogh.

She was late again, this time by mere seconds—yet forty-six seconds, to me, is enough time for a sane person to advocate suicide to himself under the right circumstance. But I got over it. Professionalism seemed less of a necessity in this world. She brought me back to her office. The seats stayed the same as they had been the visit before. She started asking questions, and I would answer her at a lesser intellectual level than I was capable of. Intelligence is a weapon, when people think you are less intellectually sound than you truly are—it is an atomic bomb. So as I half-heartedly fed her what she wanted to hear mixed with some fictitiously honest feelings of remorse towards the cutting, I looked around the room for some sort of inspiration.

Ironic it came from a framed painting of an artist who cut off his ear. Self Mutilator.

Van Gogh.

That was it. The end of my visits to the shrink. Between my good friend, Mr. Van Gogh, and an Anthropology lecture the day before that focused on the purposeful self inflicted knife wounds of Native American Warriors on a Vision Quest, I decided I was somewhere in between the two—a vision quest and a brilliant expression of inner turmoil.

They say that the brilliant mind often fights with the most demons. I believed this to be true, the thoughts that lurked in my head. On the other hand, I wondered who “they” were or was. Was it the brilliant who claimed their own brilliance was diminished by the voices who said “cut off your ear”? Poe. Poe was a good example, too. Hemmingway was a drunk. Who knows what Doctor Seuss was on, but I imagined it to be extreme. Princess Dianna cut, so did Johnny Depp. Van Gogh cut off his ear and Indians cut themselves so their spirits talked to them.

I guess that was the beginning of my vision quest.

It was months before I would cut again. My life was generic. The whole thing.

At least up until that point.

I had these dreams. They scared me. Many times, they were so real. Sometimes I woke up still angry, still hurt. Sometimes I couldn't separate reality. The part that would forever be untold.

It was 2 a.m. and about two months later when I cut again.

The flesh on my left arm, which by that particular night was already too tough to penetrate with my normal blade, made the blood seem less precarious.

Yet, there was a certain freedom in letting go. And I did. At 2 a.m. after crying myself to sleep and reawakening to the nightmare that was currently my

life, I did the equivalent to someone pinching you to make sure you were not dreaming. Except I was awake, and it was a knife, and a true nightmare—not a dream.

It was 2 a.m. and I gripped the knife firmly in my left hand and brutally attacked my right forearm in a series of slashes that ended with a furious array of regret dripping from the shallow incisions in the form of my own blood.

When it was over and all that was left was a bloody knife, I laid on my back and let the burning sensation of my arm decrease before putting on a long sleeve shirt and rolling over and falling asleep.

And this is how things went over the next few months. Sometimes the marks would be worse than others. Sometimes people would notice. When the winter ended abruptly and short sleeves replaced jackets, I started cutting my thighs in between the “dog scratches” that frequented my arms. It was an addiction. Many medical professionals believed a self-mutilator became dependent on the endorphins his or her body would release when it sensed pain. This is probably pretty accurate. I figured it was a phase, though, and I would eventually get over it. I was right.

On the last occasion, I was sprawled across the floor and watched the blood spill out of the trenches and pour down my arm until my silver watch was covered by the red of my own blood.

For the first time in three years, I took it off. Time didn’t matter anymore. I tilted my head towards my closet and made eye contact with myself in the full length mirrors. That’s the last time I saw myself alive.

It was an accident. I was angry, I just cut. Blind. Not paying attention. Too Deep. Too much blood. I went to wipe it away like I had done so many times before, but it kept coming—an angry cascade of red.

I would die alone in my room in a pile of my own story. I hit a vein, but I didn’t know it until the funeral.

It was eerie, seeing myself in a wood box, my family crying. I wanted to console them, but I couldn’t. I just stared at a body that I knew so well, a body that I had seen in the mirror every day for my entire existence. A body that looked cold and bloated and sad. It was wearing a dress, long-sleeved, ugly—if I were still alive to voice my opinion, I would not have been caught dead in it. Yet, that was the irony in my life.

On my death certificate, the coroner scribbled suicide. Compulsively misunderstood—for eternity. I was never suicidal, I loved life. I cut to feel it, feel something. Bury the numbness. It was just too deep this time.

Submission Guidelines

For information on submission guidelines please email us at
fictionfix@hotmail.com

I didn't ask what your problem was, but why don't you tell me a story...

"I would die alone in my room in a pile of my own story. I hit a vein, but I didn't know it until the funeral."

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Van Gogh Complex

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