

THE LITTLE MOMENTS

A collection of short stories

By

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Celestial Significance

A few days ago I came home from college for summer break to an interesting scene. My sister, Roxy, was sitting at the kitchen table, and Dad was standing over her. Mother was preparing dinner, trying her best to ignore the tension that was heavy in the air.

“Is everything ok?” I asked.

Dad looked at me, but returned his stare to Roxy.

“God, I know you want me to be more like her! You don’t even have to say it, Father,” Roxy yelled.

Mother dropped a metal bowl into the sink and the clang resounded through the kitchen. Dad crossed his arms and shook his head.

“I just can’t believe it. After all the help you’ve had. How could you just throw it all away?” Dad yelled loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. Roxy must have done something truly terrible to have Dad yelling. Mother left the room. I followed her out to the living room.

“What has she done?” I asked her. She was sitting on the floral couch that had been passed down from Dad’s parents to us. It was worn with the years of use, but loved dearly by us all for its memories. I sat down on the arm, next to where Mother was.

“We don’t know what to do for her anymore. She’s flunked out this year,” Mother said. She looked up at me and I could see the tears brimming in her eyes. It made my heart tighten with sadness. “I just wish your father wouldn’t yell like that.”

I went back to the kitchen and reached the doorway just as Roxy was on her way out.

“Get the hell out of my way,” she said, her eyes flashing blue behind her thin, black hair. I stepped aside. Roxy had always been good with school, and I wondered if there was something deeper going on in her life that had caused the change as I watched her disappear up the stairs.

“Why didn’t you guys tell me sooner? I could have talked to her,” I said.

Mother shook her head, and tears began to roll down her cheeks. Dad was standing in the doorway, although I didn’t know it until he spoke.

“There’s nothing you could have done Izzy. Besides, you need to focus on your own studies.”

That night I turned on the TV, the only way I knew how to diffuse Dad’s anger, to watch the news. The newscaster was sitting behind his wide desk, eyes glued to the camera with an air of indifference while he reported on electromagnetic activity from solar wind; eruptions of charged particles from sunspots. The anchor man said that the recent activity was heightened because the large opening discovered in the ozone layer thirteen years ago, in 2017, allowed more of the particles to reach Earth’s atmosphere. The Northern lights had never reached down to where we live in Connecticut before. Power had already been lost to millions of homes in New England that evening.

Dad and I sat transfixed on the television screen as newscasters scattered throughout Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts reported on small disasters that had been caused by the outage. We were lucky to still have our power. I had never seen the Northern lights before, and when a photo of them taken in northern Connecticut by a viewer was shown, I rushed to the window to see if they had reached us. Dad followed me to the window.

“Can you see anything?”

The night sky was tinged with the blue of the day, and there were no northern lights. I shook my head. We sat back down in front of the TV. The tone of the newscaster had lightened. He reported that thousands of people had flocked to local mountains, and impromptu night watches had been set up. The smiling faces of people looked cold, but glad to be out in the night watching the sky. My heart grew with hope that Dad would want to go out and see them too. I wondered if people had set up a watch on the mountain near us.

“What are you guys doing? Mother said from the kitchen doorway. “Bruce, I need some help. The microwave stopped working.”

Dad and I looked at each other. I got goose bumps. Just as he got off the couch, green light flashed through the living room, and our power went out.

“Bruce, where are you?” Mother said.

“I’m right here, Sherri, calm down. We’ve just lost power. Izzy, go look outside,” Dad said, his voice hovering near the couch.

My eyes were slowly adjusting, and I could see a fuzzy black shape where Dad stood. I felt my way to the window and pulled open the curtains. Sparks were spewing from one of the telephone poles near our house, and the town was empty. As far as I could see, up and down the street, houses were dark. In the sky, green haze coated the bottoms of the clouds. A purple wave of light hung near the moon. I grasped the curtains tighter.

“Oh my—guys—come look at this,” I called back to my parents.

“What the hell is going on?” Roxy said from behind me. She had been up in her room and had been forced to come down when we lost power. I suspected she was afraid of being alone in the dark, but she would never admit to it.

“Come see,” I said, moving over in the window to let her look. She sidled up close to me, but I didn’t mind. A chill was already creeping through our old town house. I wondered how many blankets I would have to sleep with that night.

“Ok, that’s freaky. What is it?” she asked.

“What’s happening Izzy?” Dad said from right behind me. He had snuck up without me noticing, and I jumped. “Hey, it’s just me. Let me see.”

“Scaredy cat,” Roxy said. I punched her arm and moved out of the way for Dad.

“It’s the Aurora Borealis,” I said, pointing above Dad’s head.

“The what?” Roxy asked.

“I can’t see very well,” Dad said. He went to the front door and opened it. The cool, autumn air crept in. Roxy and I went over to stand behind him. The view from the door was magnificent, but the light was already starting to fade.

“They didn’t last very long,” Dad said. Roxy wasn’t standing next to my anymore, and I suspected she was sitting on the couch, trying to turn on her iConnect and Blue devices. They were both the newest 2030 models and had come with fail proof guarantee.

“Those aren’t going to work,” I said.

“Seriously?” Roxy groaned from behind me. “What the heck am I supposed to do all night?”

“Shut that door,” Mother said from the kitchen. “Does anyone want to eat?”

Dad shut the door and found a flashlight nearby. It flickered a few times before throwing a strong beam out across the living room. The hulking shapes of the couch and chairs loomed in the dark like creatures of the night. Roxy’s head was down on one of the arm rests of the couch.

“Come on, let’s eat,” Dad said.

The kitchen was a little warmer, and Mother had already lit some candles. She was sitting down and helping herself to some food. Dinner was a mishmash of items: leftovers from other nights, some partially heated by the microwave before we lost power, and others heated in pots on our propane stove. I silently thanked the sellers of our house that they had not installed a fancy new electric one before we moved in.

“Dad, the reporter said that these storms were supposed to go on for a week. Can we go to the mountain to see it?” I asked, taking my seat at the table.

“Roxy get in here,” Mother called. Roxy was shuffling into the kitchen.

“I’m here, geez, you don’t have to yell,” she said.

“I think that’s a great idea. We all need some fresh air, and some family time,” Dad said, aiming the last comment at Roxy.

“Can’t it wait until we have power again?” Mother asked through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“Don’t know when we’ll get it again,” Dad said.

When we left a couple days later, we still didn’t have power. Provisions were packed in the truck bed, and we were headed south to live with some relatives. Dad had insisted, upon my suggestion, that we take a small detour to the only local mountain, to see the peak of the electrical storms.

The late fall sky glowed orange and purple as dusk descended on my family’s truck. We passed short, dark pine trees, and our vehicle bounced around on the dirt road up the mountain. My head kept hitting the cold glass window in the back seat, and I began to get a headache.

“Are we almost there?” I asked the back of my dad’s head. His white hair gave back a ghostly glow from the light of my sister’s iConnect. He didn’t answer, but looked over at Mother in the front passenger seat. Roxy had tried sending a message to her friend five times that night, but it still hadn’t gone through. She put her finger on the Blue device in her ear, and pressed the button to send it a sixth time.

“You should wait until we’re at the top,” I said to Roxy, “The signal might be better up there.” She looked over at me, and then picked up her iConnect again. It was a thin screen that could be folded up, but contained all the inner workings of the laptops that were used fifteen years ago. She could normally connect instantly to any network through the Blue, but tonight, with all the electromagnetic activity going on, it seemed doubtful that it would work.

“Don’t tell me how to use my stuff,” she said. I dropped the subject. Mother turned on a Christmas song.

“It’s too early for Christmas music. Why are we listening to this?” I asked Mother. She didn’t reply. We both enjoyed music, but very different kinds.

“This music is annoying,” I said to her.

“You guys are annoying!” Roxy said, looking up from her device.

“Don’t forget your promise Izzy,” Dad said. His eyes shifted to the rearview mirror, and the whites of them glowed momentarily before Roxy’s Connect screen went black. The cab was plunged into darkness. I looked over at my younger sister again. If she was going to be a brat tonight, it didn’t seem worth the effort to be nice to her like I’d promised. Her head was resting against the window, and she was staring up at the night sky. It was getting harder to believe that Roxy was ever going to change, or care about anyone but herself. I missed the timid younger

sister that she used to be. The smell of the warm vinyl seats mixed with fake pine air freshener permeated through the car. It reminded me of another cold, fall night, when I was about seven.

Dad had heard about it at work, and, of course, had wanted to check it out. At eight-thirteen exactly, Dad, Roxy, and I stood on the little wooden porch attached to our old trailer at the mobile home park and looked up at the red-orange moon.

“It’s an eclipse over the harvest moon,” Dad explained. “Only time it will happen in my life, I imagine.” He popped his head back into the trailer. “Are you coming out, Sherri?”

Mother was inside playing a computer game, and would not stop in time to witness the full eclipse. She didn’t like the cold air or craning her neck back to see the sky.

The proximity of the moon to the earth that night seemed too close. The red moon felt hot and imposing. I remember my sister had dropped her stuffed animal over the side of the porch railing, and had wailed for Dad to retrieve it. Her cries had broken my reverie of the impressive display of the cosmos.

“Don’t be such a baby. This isn’t scary,” I said. Roxy’s had fear won, though, and she took her dirty stuffed animal back inside to watch the stupid computer game Mother was playing.

The next stage of the eclipse shocked me. When the celestial bodies continued on their separate paths, the naked white of the moon was exposed as a thin sliver. The red color had been distorted, and a piece seemed to be hanging on by a hinge. It looked like the moon had been wounded. The eerie sight of a partially red, broken moon scared me. After that I noticed how dark and cold it was outside. The warmth of our trailer was welcoming, and the dark outside just seemed creepy to me as I opened the trailer door to go inside.

I shifted on the vinyl seat, trying to get comfortable.

“I know this is supposed to be fun, but my back hurts from sitting,” I said.

“Your back hurts? Give me a break, I just want service,” Roxy said.

“I still wish we could have taken two cars,” Mother mumbled.

Dad’s hands tightened on the steering wheel.

I had promised Dad that I would not argue with Mother when we had packed to leave. My college had lost power too, so I was stuck with my family until it was restored. I kept my opinions about what we were going to witness to myself, because I didn’t want to start a discussion with Mother about it. She had expressed her distaste for anything to do with science, many years ago after the Great Depletion, and it was a heated topic in our family. I agreed that the ozone layer could be thicker, but I didn’t entirely blame science for that. She claimed that science had messed around too much with the natural order of the planet. She always used this as an excuse to for many of her imagined ailments and increased laziness.

Mother looked back at me, and it was all I could do to ignore her. In the dark of the truck cabin, I could only see her prominent chin and the flash of her glasses in the light of Roxy’s device. Mother had not wanted to go to the mountain but straight down south, and I knew she blamed me as the catalyst for our side trip. She turned around to face front again, and the crooning Christmas music got a little louder. At least I knew that I had Dad’s support, I thought as I turned my eyes to the stars above.

Moments later I felt the truck slow. Red taillights shone through the night ahead of us. There was a line of cars stopped on the road.

“Come on, we’ll miss the show,” Dad said checking his watch. “What’s the holdup?”

It was nine-twenty at night. What scientists were calling the “Arian Dance” didn’t start for another hour. The Aurora Borealis activity would reach its peak tonight, but the weather was supposed to be clear enough to see the Milky Way and a possible meteor shower. I rolled down my window to look ahead of us. The cold air saturated my skin through my clothes, and I hugged myself to keep warm.

I had always loved the night sky, an interest I inherited from Dad. The show was supposed to be part of the natural system of the sun’s life span, but I found it difficult to believe that the astro-scientists didn’t have some hand in changing Earth’s atmosphere to make viewing of the phenomena possible. Messing with the balance of Earth was not a good idea in my mind, but if it was for entertainment, I knew that humans were not opposed to endangering the life on Earth.

We inched towards the cause of the holdup. A small white booth was placed in the middle of the road, and a young woman was hanging out of a window in the side of it. The driver in the car ahead of us handed the woman cash, and she handed back a ticket.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! It’s only been three days,” Dad said.

“Are they making people pay?” I asked Roxy.

She briefly looked up from her device and shrugged. I shook my head. Now that we had better reception on top of the mountain Roxy didn’t seem to care about anything else but her gadgets and social media sites. Mother turned down the music as we pulled up to the booth. Dim florescent lighting spilled over Dad’s tired face, but no further into the car.

“What’s this all about?” Dad asked. I turned around and saw another car approaching from behind. Mother adjusted her purse on her lap, and looked at the woman in the booth. She reached her hands towards Dad’s arm, but he moved it out of her reach.

The young lady smiled.

“Welcome, we’re so glad you could make it.” Her smile was forced and hurried. She was finishing up the last transaction that had come through.

I snorted at her. Mother gave me a threatening look, one that told me to mind my manners.

“Are you parking or dropping off?” the woman asked, giving her full attention to Dad.

“We just want to see the Northern Lights tonight,” he said.

“Well, you can park,” the woman said.

“How much does it cost?” Dad asked with a hint of caution in his voice.

She flicked her straight brown hair and said, “One hundred for tonight.”

“What?” Dad shouted.

Mother grabbed his arm as a signal to leave. “Bruce, we really don’t have the money,” she said.

“That’s crazy,” he shouted. We were all watching him, and a car in line behind us honked.

“Bruce, let’s go. We could have been to my sister’s house by now,” Mother said, pulling on his arm. Dad shrugged out of her grip.

“Dad, you don’t have to pay! The show is outside, in the whole sky. How can they charge us for that?” I said to him, leaning over the middle console and into the front. He looked from me to Mother, and then folded his arms in front of his chest. He looked up at the heavens through the windshield, which already displayed an impressive array of pinprick stars, for an answer. Dad’s lips were pressed into a thin line, and his round, unshaven jaw twitched.

“Don’t worry about it.” He turned and handed the woman a silver credit card from his wallet. She gave him back a couple of pamphlets. Dad took them and passed them back to me and Roxy. I took the one with the large picture of the Northern Lights on the front and gave Roxy the other one.

She looked at hers and then grabbed mine from my hands.

“Hey, I was looking at that.” I tried to snatch the pamphlet back. She held it out of the way, and handed me the other one. It was about the science behind the Aurora lights. Depletion of our ozone layer had allowed the electromagnetic waves from the sun to enter our atmosphere. The reaction between the waves and particles in Earth’s atmosphere caused the curtains of colors to dance in the late fall skies in the Northern Hemisphere. Blah, Blah, I already knew all of this. I had done my research, but now I just wanted to see the pictures.

“You can have it back when I’m done,” she said. I dropped the other pamphlet and gave up. Apparently not much had changed with our relationship; she just seemed to be meaner now.

A loud beep came from inside the booth.

“I’m sorry, but it was denied,” the woman said, handing Dad’s card back. He snatched it from her, and wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone. It felt like a stone had been dropped in my stomach. Dad jerked the car into drive and pulled a sharp u-turn around the booth.

Roxy’s Blue device went off; her message had been replied to, and she was wasting no time with a response. The pamphlet lay forgotten on the seat next to her. I looked back out the window at the vast night sky, and wished that we could have just one pleasant family outing. Dad looked back at us and sighed. The tension in the small cab was palpable. The show was predicted to start in half an hour.

“Do you want to find somewhere else, or should we just give it up?” Mother asked in a low voice.

“I think we can find another place. We just need a high enough spot,” I said quietly so that only Dad could hear.

“We’ll see,” Dad said.

We drove down the bumpy mountain road in silence, until Dad suddenly took a sharp left turn. I flew into Roxy and shouted. Mother gripped her door handle. Dad’s eyes were dead set on the thin tire tracks of the new, smaller road.

“What in God’s name? Bruce, you’re going to get us lost,” Mother yelled.

He accelerated. Tree branches hit the windshield and scratched the side of the truck.

“We’re going to see the light show,” he said. I caught his eyes in the rear-view mirror, and we smiled at each other.

“Really Bruce,” Mother said. She crossed her arms and wouldn’t look at Dad. Roxy leaned into me and looped her arm through mine. I was surprised by this, but relished in her momentary show of affection. The road became steeper the higher we climbed. Dad pushed the truck to its limits, until we came over a ridge to a small plateau. He slammed on the brakes, and the truck skidded towards the edge of a cliff. Roxy tightened her grip on my arm, and Mother flung her arms into the back seat, trying to get to us.

“Come on, stop!” Dad shouted.

The truck stopped with one wheel halfway over the cliff. We all sat very still. Dad shifted the truck into reverse, and slowly backed it up so that all four tires were on solid ground. He shut off the engine, and I could hear the wind whistling through the short trees nearby. The black night

closed in around us with the headlights off. Mother's dark figure was blocking my view through the front windshield.

"Is everyone ok?" Dad asked quietly.

Mother moved back to the front seat, and I could see a thin line of tears rolling down her cheek.

"You almost killed us," Mother whispered.

She was staring straight into the sky beyond the cliff. I was shivering from the adrenaline rush. Roxy was cutting off the circulation to my arm with her grip.

Dad climbed out of the truck and slammed the door. He took a few steps to the side, testing how much land we had available to stand on. I checked the time again. We had ten minutes until the show started. The night sky opened wide in front of us, the prefect view.

"Shit!" Roxy said, letting go of my arm.

"Roxy! Really?" I said. I had never heard her swear before, and it made me uncomfortable to think that my sister was traveling down a bad path in life.

Mother was silent.

"I guess we could have just watched it from the road," Roxy said, and got out of the truck, leaving me and Mother alone.

"Can you believe her?" I asked. Silence filled the cabin, seeping into the cracks in the seats.

"He's so childish," Mother said.

I knew this, but Dad had only been trying to make us happy.

"Well," I paused, trying to think of something to reassure Mother with.

"Your Dad really loves you girls." She wiped away her tears.

I felt myself blush. I knew that she meant he loved us more than her.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I didn’t even want to come, and I’m so tired,” she said and then closed her eyes.

“He thinks of you too, you know? We have five minutes until the show starts. Are you going to watch?”

“You go on and stand out there in the cold,” she said without opening her eyes.

She wasn’t even going to make an effort to watch with us, even after all that Dad had done to get us here.

“Fine,” I replied, and got out of the truck.

I slammed the door and walked over to where Dad and Roxy stood. Dad put his arms around our shoulders and squeezed.

“I’m sorry. That was stupid,” he said. I shrugged and adjusted my footing. Roxy sat down. Dad and I joined her on the hard rock bed. It was easy for me to forgive Dad for his actions, but as I thought through it, I began to understand where Mother was coming from. Dad had put us all in unnecessary danger for a light show.

“I’m cold,” Roxy said. It was too dark to see where Roxy was looking, but I felt as if she were just staring off into the deep, dark sky. I wondered what she was thinking, and how she felt about being here with us.

My conversation with Mother had left me feeling hollow, and I glanced back at the truck.

“Do you think Mother will join us?” I asked. The breeze blew across the exposed cliff, and a snaking cold slithered into all the openings in my clothes.

“Knowing her, I don’t think so,” Dad replied. “We should have let her go on ahead of us in her own car, like she wanted.”

“Seriously Dad,” I said. Dad stood with a sigh.

“Where are you going?” Roxy asked. I wasn’t surprised to light from her iConnect again as I looked over at her. She had a fine, small face; inherited from Mother’s sister.

“I’ll be right back. Put that thing away,” he said, and then headed back to the truck.

I watched the sky as stars began to fall. I felt something stir within me, and I knew that I was in the right place, even though my family felt like it was a mess. The sky lightened as brilliant hues of blue and green began to dance in front of our eyes. A purple haze moved through the sky, lighting the whole valley below us. I felt Roxy move closer to me and lean her head on my shoulder. I found her cold fingers with mine. Her electronic device was finally put away. I turned my head momentarily to see where Dad was, and I could see his silhouette against the side of the truck. He was standing at the open driver’s side door, but the interior light was out. I thought about the electricity in the sky above us and wondered if it had affected our truck. Hopefully Dad would come back soon.

I looked back out over the valley and could see millions of stars, some falling, others in brilliant clusters. There weren’t enough wishes I could make for every star I saw. The Milky Way, with its pink and purple hues, was, as always, a breathtaking sight. It was my favorite thing to see in the sky during clear winter nights. There was no moon, making the stars and Northern lights jump out brighter against the dark canvas of the night sky. They were blue and green, and melted in with the Milky Way lights. It was amazing that we could watch the magnificent power and majesty of the universe from a small cliff on Earth.

We sat in silence; only puffs of our breath clouded the night air in front of us. I didn’t hear them approach, but I felt Mother’s hand land on my shoulder. A shudder ran through me as I thought about the dark trees that surrounded us, but her hand was warm and reassuring. Dad sat

down on the ground beside me. The cosmos silently danced in front of us, and under the vast beauty of the universe, the problems in our family seemed to grow smaller for only a moment.

Green and Clear

The cabin of the train was warm and stuffy on the mild spring day that Rebecca Kendall was sent from home. Rich, red velvet lined the seats in the compartment. Her father's money had bought her the best ride there was, and she was enjoying the peace and quiet. She watched the green trees and small fields of her home state Tennessee pass by as the train sped towards the destination that was to be her home for the next five months. It was early in the morning and fog drifted over the fields, the shapes of cows moving silently across them.

The train had pulled away a few minutes ago, and Rebecca was just about to take out a book to read from her small suitcase, when the door to her compartment opened. A man came in. She didn't recognize him, and the ticket collector was not with him. He was dressed in an expensive looking suit, but wasn't wearing a hat. Rebecca watched the man sit down on the seat across from her. Half of his face was hidden behind a swath of glossy black hair, and he was wearing wire-rimmed glasses. He did not look at her, but down at the carpeted floor. She guessed him to be near his late thirties.

"Excuse me, this is a private cabin, sir," Rebecca said. The gentleman opened up a newspaper and hid his face behind it. The silence stretched between them, growing awkward, so Rebecca got up and went to the door of the compartment, hoping to find the ticket collector to complain. No one was in sight down the long, carpeted corridor that led to the dining car. The morning train from Tennessee to New York was not a popular trip, so the train had very few passengers on it. Rebecca wondered why the man had chosen to sit in her cabin, so she closed the door and turned around with all intention of asking him. When she saw his head buried in his

newspaper, she was reminded her of her father and lost her nerve. Rebecca sat back down and looked out the window again and to watch the passing fields.

She was going to prep school in the city, but she knew she was going to miss the smells and sounds of her country-side home. Rebecca placed her hand on top of her small, worn suitcase; the only one the crew men would let her keep with her. Her two trunks with clothing were packed away in the luggage car. She wondered if she would have to do her own laundry at the school or if they had servants. All her life the housework had been the responsibility of all the women in the family instead of servants. It was in this way that they saved enough money to be able to send three daughters to school.

Rebecca's father was a practical man, with a job at the local bank, and believed that he could give the family the best as long as they had earned it with hard work. Her previous schooling had been held in a one room building with all grade levels, where most days she had just read books on her own, because she was beyond the studies slated for her age. Three of her favorite books: *The Time Machine*, by H.G. Wells, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, by Jules Verne, and *Arabian Nights*, now took up about half the space in her suitcase.

The man across from her shuffled his paper, and Rebecca squinted to read some of the print across the cabin, although the poor lighting didn't help much. He looked at her around his paper, a bright green eye behind a thin rim of spectacles, and then continued reading. She adjusted her seating on the padded cushion, and smoothed out her hand-me-down traveling dress. Rebecca felt like every move she made mattered, because she was alone in a closed space with a man that she didn't know. Something about the man made Rebecca want to watch him, but her upbringing told her that it was rude to stare, especially at strangers. She noticed a thin silver band around the man's wrist, and wondered if he was rich.

“Do you like to read?” the man asked Rebecca. The question startled her, and Rebecca realized that the man had been paying more attention to her than she thought. Rebecca nodded, and then remembered that he was not looking at her.

“Yes sir,” Rebecca said.

She looked down at her shoes that had a few scuff marks from the years she had owned them. The man had not replied to her answer, but she heard him chuckle, which Rebecca thought was impolite of him to do, as she had not said anything funny. Rebecca fiddled with the hem of her dress sleeve, and thought about taking out one of her books again. She longed for the comfort of the familiar science fiction stories that she knew so well.

“Are you going to live in the city?” the man asked from behind the paper. His shoes shone black, and caught the lamplight and reflected it as he tapped his foot. His newspaper looked whiter than any newspaper she had ever seen before. It had small print that she could not make out as hard as she tried. Blount County was printed in the same familiar font across the front page. It was her father’s favorite newspaper to read.

“Yes, sir, my family has sent me. I will be attending preparatory school,” Rebecca said, thinking it strange that the man would ask a question like that of her. She wanted to ask him what edition of the newspaper he was reading, but he spoke again.

“Won’t you miss your family?” he asked. It was a personal question that, again, took Rebecca by surprise. She wondered if all the men in the city would ask her questions like this. If so, she wasn’t sure how much she would like living away from the comfort of her own town. The boys back home were familiar to her, and not yet men. Even though Rebecca was blooming into adulthood, she didn’t feel like she was ready to encounter any adult men yet. She was at least grateful that her family valued education over early marriage.

“No sir, just unsure about living in the city,” Rebecca replied in an answer that she thought would be appropriate. She tucked some of her frizzy hair back behind her ear. She had braided it earlier that morning, and it was now coming undone as it normally did during the day. A beep sounded from behind the newspaper, and Rebecca became curious, fighting against her better judgment to mind her own affairs. The man must have something strange with him. Maybe he was a magician. Rebecca stared at the newspaper as if she could see through it.

He lowered his paper onto his lap, granting her private wish, and she saw that he held a small, clear, rectangular object in the palm of his hand. The most startling thing was that, in the low light of the cabin, Rebecca could see a soft glow coming from it. The man was touching the object very quickly with both of his thumbs, and she caught herself leaning into the middle of the cabin to get a closer look. She thought about the futuristic objects mentioned in *The Time Machine*, and wondered if the man had one of those devices, although she knew it was impossible.

The man looked up and startled Rebecca back into her seat. He chuckled again, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked away. She heard another beep, and she could not hold back her curiosity any longer.

“What is that you have?” Rebecca asked, looking at the man, who upon closer examination was younger than she thought, probably almost near her own age. She blushed at her own forwardness, and instantly regretted her question when he smiled. He looked away and out the window at the passing green fields that were slowly turning into the valleys and mountains of Virginia. The train was on a wide bend, and a river ran deep below in a gully.

“It’s such a beautiful country, wouldn’t you agree?” he asked, looking back at her. She looked square into his face again and nodded, holding his green-eyed gaze. He was examining her, and appeared to be just as interested in her as she was in him.

The strange object made another sound, and the man looked back down at it. “I can’t believe such an old model still works. It’s almost impossible,” the man said to himself. He looked back up at Rebecca after tapping the surface of the object again a few times. “Do you want to see?”

Rebecca remembered her manners and knew she had to keep to herself while around a stranger, so was hesitant in her reply. The man didn’t give Rebecca time to think it through, though, and moved across the compartment to the seat next to her. He held out his free hand, and she moved away from him, pressing her back to the compartment window.

“I’m Elijah,” the man said with his hand hovering in the air. This wasn’t the normal way a man would greet a woman. Women only took a man’s hand when the man was courting her, not on their first meeting. Rebecca felt trapped and exposed. She grasped the buttons of the traveling cloak at her throat and felt herself blush.

The man looked at his hand and back at her and saw his mistake. “I apologize ma’am,” Elijah said. There was a slight blush at his cheeks. “You see, this is my first time here, and I’m not familiar with the customs. What’s your name?” Elijah added a smile for good measure, and Rebecca relaxed a little. His smile was pleasant, and caused a fluttering feeling in her stomach. Obviously he was not from here, and Rebecca felt pity for him as he sat there with his faltering smile, looking between her face and the passing country side out the window.

“You may call me Miss Rebecca Kendall, and if you will excuse me, sir, I will not take your hand, but we may exchange a courteous nod,” Rebecca replied, feeling good about her courageous manners.

Elijah’s green eyes widened and he promptly nodded his head at her. Rebecca nodded back, and couldn’t help smiling. He actually seemed like quite a charming character. He reminded Rebecca of the Italian boy back home that she had taught English to at school. While the teacher had been busy with the younger students, she had paired up the older students with some of the immigrant children that she hadn’t had time for.

Elijah lifted the clear rectangular object again, and Rebecca’s curiosity was back. She was enraptured by how fast Elijah’s finger’s moved across the surface and its strange glow and sounds. Elijah reminded Rebecca of someone, but she couldn’t place who it was.

“Do you want to see?” Elijah asked again and extended it out towards Rebecca.

It was even more enchanting up close, and Rebecca could not control her hands as they came up and touched the glowing surface. Letters, boxes, and a background of colors danced on its surface. She expected to feel all of the texture that she could see, but was surprised when she found the surface cool and smooth. All of the objects on the surface began to jiggle, and the motion made Rebecca’s eyes hurt. She looked at Elijah. He was smiling, obviously proud of his device.

“What is it?” Rebecca asked and looked underneath it to see where the glow was coming from. It seemed to be coming from all sides. Then the light and all the shapes were gone. “Oh my, where did it all go?” Elijah took back the magical object, and their hands touched. A spark jumped between their contact, and Rebecca withdrew her hand like it had been stung. The touch didn’t seem to affect Elijah, because he continued to interact with his strange glowing object. He

pressed a button on top with his finger, and then he slid his finger across the surface. A single click sounded when he did this, and then the light was back. Rebecca gasped at the magical power Elijah had displayed.

“This,” Elijah said, holding up the object again, “is called a cell phone.”

Elijah kept a steady gaze with Rebecca. She didn’t understand, but he looked so excited, that she just nodded, enchanted by his conviction. His accent sounded strange to her, though, and again reminded her of the immigrant children from her old school. Rebecca knew that she should be more cautious around him, though. The thing Elijah called a cell began to make a loud bell sound, startling Rebecca. It startled Elijah, too, and he fumbled with his so-called cell phone to turn it around and put it to his ear.

“Hello. Yes, I’m here,” Elijah said. Rebecca looked into his eyes. They were glossed over and staring straight through her; Elijah was not talking to her. “No, no one has seen me,” he said. His eyes came back to life, and he winked at Rebecca.

She felt a deep blush come across her cheeks again. The cabin was suddenly really hot, and Rebecca needed air. She got up and went to the window of the compartment to open it. Her glove got caught on one of the corners, and tore the fabric. This unfortunate mishap should have frustrated Rebecca, but at the moment she had bigger things on her mind than a simple rip in her glove. Elijah was still talking on his small box, like a crazy person, and Rebecca didn’t know what she, or he, would do next.

“Oh boy, am I in trouble now,” Elijah said behind her.

She stood still at the window watching the green landscape passing by, and made the connection in her mind that Elijah reminded her of one of the characters in her book *The Time Machine*.

“Look, Rebecca, you didn’t see me ok?” Elijah’s voice was tense, and it made Rebecca turn around. He had used her first name, which was inappropriate, but on his tongue it sounded right.

“Why?” Rebecca asked, now chilly from the cool spring air rushing in. Was Elijah in trouble with bad people? Who was he really? His voice had been tense, but his face held unanswered questions, and so much doubt. Rebecca felt a flutter in her stomach again. She noticed how the tiny wrinkles gathered around his temples and pulled at the corners of his mouth.

“I’m not supposed to be talking to you,” Elijah said. He avoided eye contact with her, but she continued to stare at his face, demanding his attention.

“Perhaps you should leave then,” Rebecca said.

Elijah looked up at her, and his green eyes reflected back the color from the passing landscape. The compartment was small, and Rebecca was close enough to him to see the flecks of gold in his irises. The fluttering feeling came back ten-fold. She put her hand over her stomach and sat down. Elijah picked up the paper he had been reading earlier and sat down next to her.

“What do you like to read?” Elijah asked, moving closer to Rebecca on the seat. She didn’t think she could handle him so close to her. He smelled warm, and the opposing forces of his heat and the air from outside confused Rebecca. She shivered. Why was this man still here?

“Are you cold?” Elijah got up and forced the window closed. The stuffiness was back in the cabin as soon as the window was sealed. Rebecca felt the heat in her cheeks. Elijah sat down next to her again and sighed.

“Look, I want to hide out here a bit longer, if you don’t mind? No need running into any other people now,” Elijah said.

Rebecca saw that the thing he called a cell phone was gone, and she began to wonder if it had even been real. Was any of this man for real? The story headline on the newspaper he held, along with a picture caught her attention, and her caution wavered. None of the papers that her father read ever looked as clean and crisp as this one did, and she wondered if it was even a real newspaper.

“What does that say?” Rebecca pointed to the newspaper. The picture was of what looked like a train, but smaller and shaped differently. “Is that a train?”

Elijah smiled again.

“I probably shouldn’t let you see this. The phone was a mistake, too,” Elijah said. “You wouldn’t believe me anyway, and it will probably mess everything up,” he said. His posture had sunk into a slouch, and the tone in his voice annoyed Rebecca. Why would he say such things? Why would he show them to her in the first place?

“Maybe I should leave then,” Rebecca said. She moved her hand over the seat where she had set her suitcase, and found the handle. She intended to use her case as a barrier between them to get to the door. Elijah placed his hand over hers and took the suitcase from her.

“No, I want someone to know. I can trust you,” Elijah said. His eyes were gleaming in the low light of the cabin.

Rebecca felt panic flutter at her heart for an instant, and her hand was warm where Elijah had touched it. She picked at the rip in her glove, and tried to avoid eye contact with Elijah. Rebecca wondered how much longer it would be before they reached the city.

“Can I trust you?” Elijah said. His tone had softened, and Rebecca allowed herself to look at him. His black hair was sticking up, as if he had run his hand through it. The disheveled look fit him nicely, and Rebecca grabbed at the cloth around her neck again. Why did he make her feel so exposed? She wasn’t sure she wanted to be entrusted with the secrets that this man had. Elijah took her silence as an affirmative to his question.

“What year are we in?” Elijah asked.

“1905,” Rebecca replied. She crossed her arms in front of her. Who wouldn’t know what year it is?

“Good—I made it—now don’t freak out,” Elijah said holding up his hand up.

Rebecca narrowed her eyes, unsure of what he was saying. She nodded at him to continue, and explain himself. It would be his last chance, she decided, and then she was leaving if she didn’t like what she heard.

“I’m from the year 2105,” Elijah said. Rebecca turned away from him. He was crazy. Her mind couldn’t comprehend his fantastic claim to be from the future, but in her heart she felt something nagging at her. She wanted to believe him, but where was the proof? Was he just a magician playing a trick on her? Rebecca looked out the window at the world passing by, and hoped that the answers would come from the normality that the landscape provided.

There were fewer trees outside the window, and more houses grouped in clusters. The land was flattening out. Soon she would be able to leave this compartment and all of the nonsense behind. Rebecca heard the crinkle of paper, and Elijah’s newspaper landed on her lap. The date in the upper left corner said Wednesday, September 21st, 2105.

She blinked, and then turned her head away again. There was no way she was going to believe this trickster magician. He had already used his good looks and charm to affect her. She

was ready to leave, and sever the connection she had made with him. Rebecca was scared that there was something out of her control going on around her, and no matter her actions, the outcome couldn't be good with Elijah around her.

"I thought I would get more of a reaction than that," Elijah said. He sounded hurt.

She looked back at him, unable to continue her study of the land passing outside. Elijah was curled up on the seat, his back against the opposite wall. His feet were up on the seat between them. Rebecca felt pity again. It was just so hard to understand what he was saying, and she knew that she could have believed all of it in her imagination, but never thought that any of the things she read in her books could be true.

"Would you kindly remove your feet from the seat?" Rebecca asked.

Elijah sighed again and moved his feet back to the floor.

"I don't know what other proof you need," Elijah said, leaning forward and clasping his hands together. His hair hung in his face, blocking his eyes from view. Rebecca could only see the frame of his thin glasses.

"I just don't understand," Rebecca said.

She looked down at the paper on her lap. It was folded over to the second page.

Rebecca read the first line under the headline: *The last Amtrack train to run across country will make its final journey, and come to rest in New York City. Plans are being made to convert it to a model to be used in the Museum of Technology.* She couldn't believe that they would stop using trains. Rebecca almost forgot about what Elijah had said about the future as she read more of the story.

"Flying is your future," Elijah said.

Rebecca threw the paper to the floor. She didn't even understand what Elijah was saying, and her upbringing had told her to avoid men like him. The stuffy air was too much for her and she felt the urge to faint. She imagined she didn't look so well, because Elijah picked up the paper and began waving it in front of her to create a breeze. When that didn't work, he gave up and opened the window again. The fresh air blew through the compartment, and took up a couple pages of the paper. They whipped out the window before Elijah could react. He held the rest of the paper in a stacked mess. With his foot, he opened a small door under the seat and shoved the wreaked newspaper in. He closed the door and put his hands on his head.

"God, I've ruined everything now. I shouldn't have even talked to you. Who knows what I've changed now," Elijah said.

Rebecca was feeling better now that fresh air was moving through the cabin, but she felt sorry for Elijah. He might be crazy, but who's to say that Rebecca shouldn't believe him? Rebecca opened her trunk and took out *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells. Elijah looked up at her with a question on his face.

"I guess it could be true," Rebecca said. She grew excited the more she thought about it and allowed herself to believe. "Do they actually figure it out?" She looked at Elijah. He turned his head to the side.

"Figure what out, flying? Yeah, that's old history, right around this time actually," Elijah said.

Rebecca turned to the first page of her book and held down the thin paper so the wind wouldn't tear it.

"No, time travel. The main character in here goes to the future. Why would you come back to the past?" Rebecca asked.

Elijah sat down next to Rebecca, and she was acutely aware of how close he was to her. A faint smell of cologne came from him that she hadn't noticed before. Why did his presence have to affect her so?

"Well, Rebecca, I don't think I can tell you that. I can only tell you that I have stayed too long in this time," Elijah said. "Your book sounds very interesting, do you mind if I look?" Elijah held out his hand.

Rebecca closed the book and hugged it to her chest.

"I'm not sure. It's one of my favorites."

"I won't have it long. I just want to look through it," Elijah said.

His glasses reflected back the low brick buildings that the train was now passing through. They were getting closer to New York City. Rebecca had to decide if she wanted to trust Elijah or not. She plucked up her courage and took a chance. Rebecca handed him the book. Their fingers touched, and her bare skin tingled through the rip in her glove. Elijah's hand lingered over hers. He never broke eye contact with Rebecca, but she had to look away to swallow the lump in her throat. She knew that their time together grew short.

"Thank you," Elijah whispered. He took his hand away with one of Rebecca's precious books. Rebecca looked back at Elijah and he said, "I will take care of it." He put two fingers to his forehead and tipped his head forward slightly. Rebecca wasn't sure if it was a play of the light, but Elijah looked like he was becoming transparent.

Rebecca didn't know what to say, but was scared. Elijah didn't open the book, but hid it in his coat. The wind from the window blew some hair into her face. She struggled to get it out of her eyes, and when she did, Elijah's face was closer to hers. Every fiber in her body was standing at attention.

“You have been a great help to me,” Elijah said and then kissed her gently on the cheek.

She barely felt the contact, and could see the compartment walls through Elijah’s face. There was a strange tingling sensation traveling over her skin, and Rebecca blinked. When she opened her eyes, Elijah was gone. She hadn’t even been able to say good bye.

Rebecca slumped back against the seat. So many emotions were coursing through her, anger at being lied to about her book, interest at her own desire to have Elijah stay with her a little longer, and still a little confusion about his claim of time travel.

Rebecca stuck her head out into the hallway in hopes that he had not really disappeared, but she knew she wouldn’t find anyone. If he was really from the future he was probably back in his own time already. She went back into the compartment wondering what Elijah was doing now, and remembered the newspaper he had stuffed under the seat. Its pages were crumpled, and almost as thin as the paper in her book. She smoothed out what she could. Rebecca read the date on the front cover again. She had to read it several times to understand that the paper was really dated two hundred years into the future, but for the same exact day. She felt faint and wondered if she was crazy. She stuck her head out of the compartment again, but only the ticket collector, an old man, was there.

“Excuse me sir, but what is the year?” she asked the man.

He wore a red coat with brass buttons. As he frowned at her question, the wrinkles on his face became more pronounced. She mused over the fact that Elijah had just asked her the same question, and now she looked like the crazy one.

“1905,” he said, and then moved on down the hallway, obviously in a rush to get somewhere important. In her heart Rebecca knew that Elijah had been telling the truth, but her mind still had trouble thinking about the possibility. Rebecca went back into the compartment

and picked up the paper. She wondered how the newspaper could exist here. A headline on the front page said, *First Habitable Community on Mars Collapses*, and Rebecca had to read it a couple times to believe it. She couldn't understand, or even imagine that humans would go into space, land on another planet, or want to live there.

Without knowing why, Rebecca's eyes began to water and a lump formed in her throat, and she almost wished that she had never spoken to Elijah. What right did he have to come into her life and present these fantastic, futuristic items to her, and expect her to understand it all, and then to disappear? Rebecca wondered how her mother or father would have handled something so strange. She missed her family suddenly, even though home was only a day's travel away.

She thought through her encounter, and wondered how time travel was possible. The printed words in front of her indicated a future that existed two hundred years from now, and Rebecca wanted to learn more about it. She began to dream about what the world could be in a different time, but kept getting stuck on the impossibility of two places existing at the same time. She knew it was possible in Wells' book, but wasn't that only fiction?

"What is time anyway?" Rebecca asked the window and the figures of people walking about the city. She felt a slight change in the speed of the train, and a pain in her head. She rubbed her forehead with her fingers to try and ease back a headache.

A quick, sharp rapping sound came at the compartment door three times, and she heard the old ticket collector call in, "Five minutes to New York City." Rebecca hid the paper behind her back. She brought it out slowly after she was sure the ticket collector was gone. Some of the pages blew back in the wind. Rebecca had forgotten the window, and got up to close it, clutching the paper to her chest with one hand.

Large brick buildings that made up the city of New York passed by, and all the apprehension that she had about finding her way in the city seemed smaller with the new knowledge she carried from the futuristic newspaper. The maturity she felt she gained from her encounter with Elijah lifted her spirits too. Rebecca wondered if she would ever see him again. The window went dark momentarily, and then the train was moving through a massive marble hallway. Never before had Rebecca seen such a large, beautiful building, but the lights that danced on the walls appeared dull compared to her memory of the glow from Elijah's cell phone.

Rebecca folded the paper so that it would fit inside her suitcase. She held her case on her lap and waited for her turn to exit the train. Steam was filling the air on the platform when Rebecca stepped down. She was supposed to have someone meet her at the station from the school. The noise of the train settling, people calling out, and the unloading of luggage was disorienting for Rebecca after the quiet of the cabin she had been in. Her mind was still reeling from her encounter with Elijah, and without really knowing she was doing it, Rebecca kept a watchful eye around her as she moved to where she was told to meet her escort. She was looking for him, but in her heart she knew he wouldn't be there.

A man in a suit suddenly stepped into her path and stopped. She almost crashed into him, but managed to stop in time. Rebecca was embarrassed, and as she tried to step around him, she looked around her to see if anyone had seen. The man turned around to face her and stepped in her path again.

"Excuse me, sir," Rebecca said, and then looked down at the ground, remembering her place as a woman. She felt another person standing behind her, and then her arms were pinned by her sides by a pair of large hands.

“What’s going on here?” Rebecca said. She knew she should have screamed, but she wasn’t thinking straight. The hands shoved her forward and she was forced to follow the man that had stopped in front of her. They walked to an empty hallway in the train station and pushed her in. Any light that had filtered in there was blocked out when the two men stood on either side of her, stopping any chance of her escape.

“Where is it?” The first man, Rebecca could now see that he was the shorter one of the two, asked. He grabbed and twisted her wrist in his hand and it hurt. Rebecca’s eyes watered with the pain. The man behind her squeezed her shoulders.

“Please, what are you doing? Who are you?” Rebecca said. She could see people walking by and thought about screaming. The shorter man anticipated this and put his hand over her mouth. His hands smelled like oranges, but Rebecca gagged on the sweet smell.

“We are not at liberty to tell you what we are doing, or who we are,” the man said. “I’m going to let you speak, but you will only be telling me where the newspaper is, nothing else. No more questions. Understand?” His hand was pressing into her mouth and Rebecca wanted to gasp for air. She knew coming to the city had been a mistake. Rebecca looked into the eyes of her captor and saw that he had secrets. He looked like a man who took whatever he did seriously.

“Well?” The man demanded again as the man behind her shook her.

Rebecca nodded and the man took his hand away.

“The paper?” she asked, trying to ignore the urge to move her hands to wipe her mouth, but he still held her hands.

“Don’t play dumb with me.” The man’s black pupils got smaller, and the blue color looked almost white.

Rebecca thought about the newspaper in her suitcase. How had these men known about it? Rebecca shook her head and her frizzy curls tickled her face.

“We should go somewhere else,” the man behind Rebecca said. She looked over her shoulder and saw that there was a man pointing down the hallway. A cop was standing there trying to see who was in the dark space.

“Please, someone help me,” Rebecca shouted down the hallway. Her captors shoved her back out the other end and hurried her through the station. Rebecca was afraid, but she knew that only she had the power to save herself.

“Help, help me!” She struggled against the men’s hands, kicking her feet and refusing to move where they were forcing her to go. People in the moving crowd stopped to stare, but no one made a move to help Rebecca.

“What’s wrong with you people? Can you help me?” Rebecca was nearly sitting on the floor with the men dragging at her arms.

The cop from earlier came running up to them.

“Stop, you there. Unhand the young woman,” the cop said. Rebecca’s captors let go of her and she fell the rest of the way to the floor. She brought her hands up to her face and began sobbing.

The men did not run, but faced the cop that had ordered them.

“We are here on official government business officer. If you would please, is there a private room we might use?” Rebecca heard one of the men say to the cop.

She took her hands away from her face and stood up. Rebecca knew she had to face whatever trouble she had gotten into, and was hoping that the officer would help her. The two men that had grabbed her were tucking something back into their coats. Were they cops too?

“Why did you grab me?” Rebecca asked. The three men looked at her like they hadn’t expected her to say anything.

“Ma’am, we had to do anything necessary. Now, officer is there a room we can use?” the shorter captor asked the cop.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Rebecca said. The cop turned to her, and she could see concern in his brown eyes. He looked sharp in his uniform, and Rebecca was sure that this professional man could help her. She gathered herself together and stood up straight.

“Please, sir, do I need to go with these men? I’m here for school and was supposed to meet someone,” Rebecca said. The shorter captor tapped the cop on the shoulder and held up a piece of paper.

“We have our papers here. Miss Kendall cannot resist arrest,” the man said. They were close to the exit of the train station, and Rebecca’s eyes for the first time since getting off the train took in her surroundings. The cop took the paper and began looking over it. Rebecca saw the glitter in the marbled floors of the station. The sun filtering in through the large, many-paned glass was bright. People in traveling clothes rushed past Rebecca. No one paid attention to the men standing with Rebecca, or to even Rebecca herself.

She saw a cart nearby with her two clothing trunks on it, but the escort she had been told about was nowhere to be seen. A man dressed in a suit was near her suitcases. She could see out to the sidewalk, and a horse-drawn carriage was waiting with more men in suits. They all looked like the two men that had grabbed her.

“Ok, young lady. The charges here are clear. You need to go with these men. Let me walk with you. May I take your suitcase?” the cop said to her. Rebecca looked at him, and the

earlier concern was still on the man's face. She gave him her suitcase and walked with them out the doors of the station.

"My name is Benedict. If you need anything during your stay in New York, please remember me," Rebecca heard the cop behind her say into her ear. She nodded yes as her reply.

There was no comprehension in Rebecca's mind of what was happening, but as she climbed into the carriage and settled in, she knew that the trouble she was in was due to her encounter with Elijah.

The door was closed and the shorter man who had grabbed her climbed into the cabin with her. He handed her a piece of paper after he sat down.

"What's this?" Rebecca asked. The man didn't reply.

Rebecca looked down and saw that it was reprint of a page of newspaper. She read the title.

Missing Link discovered. Time Travel to Future Possible.

Rebecca's heart jumped to her throat. How was this possible? This was from the same newspaper that Rebecca had in her suitcase. She searched through her fast growing faint memory of her encounter with Elijah, but she couldn't find an answer.

"This is—How?" She stopped and continued to read the reprint.

The Time Machine, recovered by Elijah Green from Rebecca Kendall, has provided science with the key to future time travel.

Rebecca got goose bumps. She looked up at the man, who was now smiling at her. Rebecca was only faintly aware that the carriage had started moving.

"Why am I in trouble?" Rebecca asked the man.

“My commanding officer is very interested to see what you have to say about this issue. For now it’s highly classified,” the man replied. He took the paper from her and left her empty hands hanging in the air. Rebecca didn’t know where to go from here, but she knew that she had to keep the rest of the newspaper hidden. She looked around her for her small suitcase. It was missing.

“Where’s my case?” she asked the man. He shrugged and pointed to the roof of the carriage. Rebecca hadn’t seen it handed up to sit on top with her trunks. She remembered handing it to the cop back at the station.

“The cop has it, my case. We need to go back,” Rebecca said. The man shook his head no.

“I will have my men collect it, it will be safe,” he said.

Rebecca’s mind went numb. She was out of options. The best thing she could do is keep her mouth shut.

That was just what Rebecca did. She didn’t say a single word after that moment. When she was interrogated by the old man who claimed to work for a secret force of the government, Rebecca said nothing. After they recovered her case, she found that the newspaper was missing. Rebecca was released eventually and sent to school. The government had no solid evidence, other than the one piece of newspaper that had blown out the window of the train with which to keep her. Neither did they exactly know why the recovery of the rest of the newspaper was important.

Shortly after Rebecca was released, she received a package at school. The newspaper was tucked neatly inside with a note.

Rebecca. Thank you for your great contribution to science, Benedict.

She stayed up late that night to read through the whole newspaper, and then took it down to the furnace of the boarding house and burned it. The secrets of the future stayed with Rebecca her whole life, and she never told another soul.

Soggy

Winter was approaching in the little town of Lebanon and the days were getting shorter. Night closed in around Cat's car as she drove from work to meet up with a friend, and the rain made it seem even darker outside. It was hard to see out her windshield, and the headlights of oncoming traffic hurt her eyes. The route she was on would take her past the main hospital of the area, and into one of the more crowded cities.

The stoplight turned red just as Cat's car reached the intersection, and she had to slam on the brakes. She was tired after a long day of work, and the sudden stop woke her out of her driving daze. Icy rain pounded her windshield, and she was glad her father had told her to get her snow tires on early, or she would have skidded on the thin ice forming on the road. Cat caught her breath after the jolt against her seatbelt, and to the right of her car she noticed a blurred shape. It was as if she saw it happen in slow motion. The object saw the red light too late also and stopped short. She saw what looked like a man fly through the air. A flash of metal continued into the intersection and then disappeared to the ground.

"Oh my God!" Cat said, peering over to her right. She couldn't tell where the man had landed, and wondered if he was hurt. Cat put her flashers on and her car in park. She could see the stoplight for the intersecting road changing to yellow and knew that the one for her lane would soon turn green. She didn't want to move over because she couldn't see the man, but she wanted to help. When she stepped out of her car, the vehicle behind her car honked. The sound made Cat jump and the chill of the cold rain penetrated through her jacket.

The rain had soaked through Cat's hair by the time she reached the other side of her car. A man lay in a crumpled heap on the pavement. A shape that looked like a backpack was a

couple feet away from him on the ground, and some papers were strewn about it. The man moaned and tried to sit up, but couldn't move one of his arms. Cars were honking behind Cat's vehicle and pulling into the left turn only lane to go straight through the light that was now green. This upset Cat, and she yelled at them.

"Can't you see there's someone hurt here?"

Cat got down on her knees. "Are you ok? What can I do for you?" she asked the man, blinking rain out of her eyes. He was wearing a black, hooded sweatshirt that was tight around his waist. His dark jeans had a rip in them, and he was cradling his arm.

Cat's coat was soaked through, and she could feel rain creeping down her back. She looked at the man's face through the dark and saw confusion in his stare. "Sir, do you need help?" Cat shouted again.

The man seemed to come to his senses, and looked up at Cat. He had dark eyes, but the whites of them were a little blood shot.

"Where's my bike?" he asked. They both looked towards the intersection and saw that a car had run over it and was dragging it away. Why had he been riding a bicycle in this weather? The man groaned and fell back onto the pavement.

"Are you crazy? You can't ride that anymore. It looks like your arm is hurt as well," Cat said. She was still yelling to be heard over the rain and the cars, and was beginning to shiver in the cold. The man began shaking violently too.

"I need to get to the hospital," he said, trying again to move and stand. Cat grabbed his other arm and helped him to his feet. Cat felt the man tense with pain. With his good arm draped over Cat's shoulder, they walked over to her car. The rain and the cold made the pavement slippery with black ice, and they had to be careful with their footing. Cat felt how much the

man's soaked clothes were getting her dress pants from work and her jacket wet, and the extra cold made her shiver again. The man's body was surprisingly warm, though.

Cat noticed that the light for her lane had turned red again, and she knew she had a couple minutes to help the man into her car. He grabbed the side of Cat's car as soon as he was within range, and leaned against it while Cat opened the back door. A small woman was approaching from a car that had parked behind. She was wearing a large, yellow raincoat with the hood up.

"Do you guys need help?" she asked, while holding her coat closed at the neck.

Cat nodded and moved to the man's side again. She tried to help him into her car. He had been limping a little, but he was able to use his legs to hop in without much of Cat's assistance.

Cat turned to the woman in the raincoat.

"Could you move his bike out of the road please?" Cat asked, pointing to the bike that the car had dragged a couple feet down the intersecting road. It was still in the way of traffic, but the woman didn't have to put herself in danger to move it. The woman nodded, and Cat walked back to where the man had landed. Cat stopped at the man's backpack and picked up the scattered papers the best she could. Some of them ripped, and pieces were left behind. Cat only hoped that they were not important. The woman had moved the bike further off to the side of the road and was headed back to her car. Cat thought it was nice that at least one other person had stopped to help.

"Thank you!" Cat shouted, and received thumbs up from the disappearing figure of the woman. The light had changed from red to green a couple more times, but now it was red. Cat got in her car and took her flashers off. She could hear the man breathing heavily in the dark of her backseat. She blasted the heat, and hoped to warm up soon.

“How are you holding up?” Cat asked. She flicked on the interior light and looked behind her. She was a little nervous having a strange man in her car on a dark rainy night, but the adrenaline coursing through her cold body gave her the strength to get over the feeling.

He held up his hand to block the sudden light, and then lowered it to look at her.

“It’s green,” he said. He was still shaking violently.

Cat thought about hypothermia. She had no way of knowing how long the man had been out in the rain before his accident.

“What?” Cat asked.

“The light,” he said.

“Oh, right. Let’s go. Can you make it the short trip?” Cat asked, turning her attention back to the road. Luckily, the hospital was right up the road. Traffic was known to move quickly in that area and Cat hated driving through there, because she was always forced to go faster than ten miles over the speed limit. Now she had a reason to. She got into the passing lane, and stepped on the gas. Soon she was going fifty up the wet hill. Cat focused on the task at hand, and all of her silly thoughts about work and her friend went out of her head.

“Thank you for helping me,” the man said.

Cat still had the interior light on and could see him in her rearview mirror. She smiled at him, now that she could see his features better. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead, and his brown eyes looked out from a sharp face. Stubble lined his chin and cheeks in the sexy-two days since shaved look. She wondered again why he had been on a bicycle out in the cold rain, and where he was going. Cat thought about how lucky he was that he had only hurt his arm.

“Why weren’t you wearing a helmet?” Cat asked him.

He pushed himself up higher and winced. A car was riding on Cat's bumper, even though she was going fifteen miles over the speed limit. This pissed off Cat again. She let her foot off the gas a little, and her vehicle slowed down, causing the car behind her to flash their headlights. They wanted her to move over, but she was sticking to her lane.

"I'm surprised you only hurt your arm," she said over her shoulder, ignoring the car right on her bumper.

"Yeah. Me too. Hey did you get my backpack?" he asked. She glanced back at him for only a second and saw that he had dimples on both cheeks when he smiled. Dimples were a turn on for her. She wondered how old the man was as she turned her attention back to the road and bore left into the turning lane. The light was red and cars were already lined up to turn.

"Yeah, it's right here," Cat said, passing his wet backpack over the console after she had stopped. He took it from her with his good hand and zipped it up the rest of the way. Cat turned off the dome light because she didn't want him to see her blushing. It felt good to have something exciting happening to her, not to mention, the man was handsome. The situation was a little bizarre, but Cat had been so bored in her life lately. She had broken up with her last boyfriend three months ago and had been lonely.

"Thanks," he said from the backseat. "I'm Thomas."

"My name's Catherine," Cat replied. "Everyone just calls me Cat."

Thomas didn't reply and Cat imagined him trying to deal with the pain of a possible broken arm.

The inside of Cat's SUV smelled musty from their wet clothes, and she wrinkled her nose, trying to ignore the fact that her car seats were probably soaked. The light turned green and

Cat followed the road to the Emergency room. She pulled up next to the curb in the drop off lane. Thomas already had the door open when Cat came around the car.

The rain had lessened a little, and the lights around the hospital gave off a welcoming glow. Thomas was poised and ready to jump out of Cat's car. She stood next to him and he used her shoulder to leverage himself out of the seat with his good arm. She felt his warm, muscular arm through his sweatshirt, and she couldn't ignore how her own body reacted to his touch. Cat noticed his jeans were too tight from being wet and looked away, embarrassed that she might be caught looking at his "package". She could still feel her cheeks burning with color, and hoped that Thomas wouldn't notice.

Cat shut the car door and walked with Thomas towards the Emergency room entrance. As hard as she tried to ignore it, his body next to hers felt good. Thomas wasn't a large guy, but big enough that Cat was struggling to walk with his weight on her shoulder. They avoided eye contact with each other the whole way to the door. Her hair was starting to dry, and Cat caught a reflection of a wild looking woman in the doors as they opened. She wondered if Thomas noticed her hair was a mess.

"I'm fine from here, thanks," Thomas said, moving away from her. Cat released him and stepped awkwardly to the side. She took the opportunity to try and smooth down her long hair.

The warmth that greeted them through the second set of doors was wonderful. They both walked up to the counter and Thomas spoke with the receptionist. He was still shaking, and one of the ladies behind the counter came around with a large wool blanket to drape around his shoulders. He nodded with thanks, and then glanced at Cat again. She knew from his look that he wanted a little privacy. Cat didn't want to leave yet, and needed something warm to wake herself up because she felt like it would be a long night.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” Cat said. Thomas just nodded and took a clipboard from the receptionist. She saw him unzip his backpack and take out some soggy papers. There were only a couple other people in the small waiting room, and Cat figured Thomas would not have as long of a wait as was expected for an emergency room. The lights overhead were strong and lit every corner of the large emergency waiting room.

Cat wandered into the hospital until she found a coffee vending machine. She searched for change in her pockets and decided to buy two cups. While she waited for the coffee to drip into the first Styrofoam cup, Cat’s phone rang. It was her friend Amanda that she was supposed to have met at the movie theater.

“Hey, where are you girly?” Amanda said.

“I’m at the hospital,” Cat replied.

“What? Are you ok?” Amanda shouted. Cat pulled the phone away from her ear. The first cup of coffee was done and Cat struggled to hold the phone and put a lid on the cup of scalding liquid.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry. It’s not for me—there was a guy—he,” Cat started to say.

“A guy! Oh my God Cat. Are you serious? It’s only been three months since Ralph. Are you looking for some rebound action? What are you doing in the hospital?” Amanda rambled on.

“Amanda! Be quiet and listen. He was in an accident. I stopped and helped him,” Cat said. She was trying really hard to keep her voice down, but her patience always wore thin when she talked to Amanda.

“Oh, well, is he cute?” Amanda asked.

Cat pressed the button for the next cup of coffee. She watched the black stream of liquid spew into the cup and thought about the way Thomas looked sitting in the backseat of her car.

“Well?” Amanda demanded. “Oh my, you think he’s cute!”

“Amanda, I don’t even know him,” Cat replied. The coffee was almost done. “Besides, I think he’s more handsome than cute.”

“Oh my God. You have to get his number Cat!” Amanda shrieked. Cat had to move the phone away from her ear again.

“Ok, we’ll see what happens. Amanda, I have to go. I got coffee and I want to carry it back without burning myself,” Cat said.

“Well, what about the movie?” Amanda asked. Cat could hear the cold wind rattle over the line, and she shivered thinking about how miserable it was outside in the winter rain. “Never mind, you’ve got your hands full tonight.” Cat pictured Amanda winking as she said this. She shook her head at her silly friend.

“Amanda, he’s going to be in the hospital. He broke his arm. I don’t think he’s going to come home with me tonight or anything,” Cat said. Between the two, Cat had always been the more practical one. Amanda loved to live in her fantasy world, and sometimes it had gotten her in trouble. Cat allowed her imagination to wander sometimes, but tonight probably wasn’t one of those cases. Amanda made Cat promise that she would give her a call again later that night.

On her way back, Cat wondered if Thomas even liked coffee. The hallway she walked through was lit with ambient lights, and a few large paintings hung on the walls. A smell of clean carpet, and alcohol hand sanitizer wafted through the air. The smell of a hospital never changed. Cat remembered the many times in the Emergency room with her parents for her sister to get stitches after some accident she had had. The hospital they had gone to had smelled the same.

Cat got back to the Emergency waiting room, and found Thomas still at the front counter. He was just done filling out his papers. She noticed that he was wearing flip flops and it

surprised her. What sensible person would be wearing flip flops this time of year in the Upper Valley?

“I got this for you,” Cat said, handing him the coffee.

“Thanks, that’s just what I need right now. I have a feeling it will be quite a wait,” Thomas said. He shrugged his back pack on and slouched a little. Cat knew the pack wasn’t heavy, and the slouching made him look a little strange. A man with a build as nice as Thomas’s should stand with his shoulders back. Cat wondered if Thomas had some confidence issues.

They looked around the waiting room. Cat thought that it was odd he would say it would take a while. He would probably be in to see a doctor in about twenty minutes.

“Would you like to sit?” Thomas asked her. Cat was tired, and figured that it wouldn’t hurt to sit for a little bit.

As soon as they sat down, Cat got a text message. Amanda wanted to know if Cat had gotten Thomas’s phone number yet. Cat didn’t want to give Amanda a play by play, so she turned her phone to silent.

“Who was that?” Thomas asked.

Thomas’ hair was drying into little curls that Cat couldn’t help finding attractive. A little color came to his cheeks, and he looked down at his hands as if embarrassed for asking Cat a personal question. Cat was okay with it, though, and held her composure.

“It was just a friend. I was supposed to meet her for a movie,” Cat said with a shrug. The waiting room chair was digging into her back, and she got up to adjust her heavy coat that was still damp enough to be uncomfortable. Cat saw Thomas watching her, and there was a glimmer in his eyes that she had seen before from other men. Usually the men that looked at her like that were not ones that she wanted attention from. She wasn’t sure about Thomas yet.

“Oh, I’m sorry you missed her. You should still go meet up with her,” Thomas suggested. He fiddled with the zipper of his bag, and looked at Cat with a sexy look. Cat nearly burst out laughing at the ridiculous attempt Thomas was making at small talk. She had a feeling she knew what was on this man’s agenda. For some reason, Cat’s red hair had been irresistible to the men of her past.

“It’s okay, I really don’t feel like hanging out with her now,” Cat said as she stretched her arms up. Thomas’s eyes grew a little wider.

“Hey, thank you again for helping me,” Thomas said. He let out a large sigh and adjusted his arm. Cat watched the muscles on his good arm as he lifted himself up with it to adjust in the seat. She felt heat in her cheeks and her pulse quickened. Cat rarely encountered men in her daily life, but when she had in the past, she had always had the upper hand in flirting. Cat was seeing more and more things in Thomas that she liked. She sat down again next to him and was acutely aware of him watching her.

“It was no big deal,” Cat said and looked over at him. She saw something glimmer in his eyes again, but they were tears. “What’s wrong?” Cat shifted and turned towards Thomas. She set her hand on his arm.

Thomas sighed again, and Cat felt his arm twitch under her hand. She quickly moved her hand back to her lap and stuck it between her thighs. It was a nervous habit she did when she felt uncomfortable. Cat wasn’t sure what to think about Thomas, but felt that there was a lot Thomas wasn’t telling her. Did she really want to involve herself with this handsome stranger?

“Thomas Dow,” A nurse called out into the waiting room. Thomas stood up too quickly and put his good hand to his hip. Cat wondered what else Thomas had hurt in his accident. She stood too and reached over to help him. He waved her away. Cat knew that he was trying to act

like a brave man in front of her. It was impressive, but Cat didn't like to see people in pain. She let her hands fall limp next to her and watched Thomas walk away.

"Well, it was nice meeting you Thomas," Cat said.

Thomas turned back around and looked at Cat. In a sudden moment of decision, Cat grabbed a pen from the table next to the chairs.

"Here," Cat held out her hand. Thomas took a cautionary step towards her. Cat could see the nurse tapping her foot. "In case you need anything, call me," Cat said. She took Thomas's good hand and wrote her phone number onto his palm.

They both blushed. She knew she couldn't go in with him, even though she wanted to, but she had to move her car and get home to her cat Oreo.

"Bye," Thomas said as he turned and walked to where the nurse waited. She waved to him, and then lowered her hand. Cat walked back out into the rain. Her heart was beating fast, and her face still felt warm. As Cat climbed into her car she began to wonder if Thomas would actually call her. It had been a bold move on her part; maybe it would have been better for her to get his number instead.

When Cat unlocked the door to her apartment, she heard the familiar thump of Oreo jumping from some counter or table he wasn't supposed to be on to come and greet her. She scooped him up in her arms, despite her wet coat. His fur would stick to her, but she didn't care. Cat wanted something warm to calm her chills and shivers. A bath was in order that night.

"Hey, handsome. It's nice to see you. I met someone today. Well, helped him," Cat said to Oreo. He struggled against her arms, and Cat released him. He meowed at her. It was supper time. Cat shrugged out of her coat and hung it on the back of one of the two chairs at her small

kitchen table. The light overhead was a damp grey color, and didn't give much life to the white kitchen. Oreo hovered near his food dish which he had cleaned dry during the day. Cat gave him a scoopful of dry food from the bag. He sniffed it and then looked at his dry water dish. She filled that for him out of the tap. Hopefully he would drink at least the water, Cat thought as she walked through the living room and into the bathroom. She knew her small, under-furnished apartment well enough to navigate through the dim rooms.

The light in the bathroom had more yellow in it, but the color looked sickly to her. She shivered again and turned on the faucet to fill up the tub. As the bubbles formed in the water, Cat allowed her thoughts to drift back to Thomas. It still felt like her shoulder was warm from his touch, but the rest of her body seemed frozen. Her feet and hands were always cold, and she thought about how nice it would be to have someone to warm her feet in bed with her. Oreo came to the door of the bathroom and pushed it open. He sat at the threshold and watched her undress and get into the bath. Her feet tingled as they were submerged in hot water. Oreo meowed at her again.

"Enjoying the view, my man?" Cat asked him. She sank into the soothing effect the water had on her body, and closed her eyes to study the image of Thomas's face behind her eyelids.

She was roused out of a sleep that she didn't realize she had fallen into by a chill coming in through the bathroom door. Cat looked around her at the small bathroom bathed in yellow light and wondered how long she had been out. Oreo was gone and Cat felt the loneliness of the empty room as she got out of the bathtub. She wrapped herself up in a towel and went in search of Oreo.

Cat found him asleep on the couch in the living room. She saw that it was almost ten at night, so she hadn't been asleep as long as she thought. Cat went into her bedroom and got

dressed in some warm pajamas. Oreo came in and meowed at her again. He wanted more food, and Cat was a sucker to her only companion so she followed him back out into the kitchen. After she filled his dish again with a little dry food, Cat saw her phone on the table. There was a blinking light coming from it that told her she had some missed calls.

She had forgotten to call back Amanda.

Cat picked up her phone and scrolled through the messages.

So did you get his number?

Hello? Are you ignoring me?

Cat, where are you? I want to hear about the mystery man... Call me please.

There were three more after that, each a little frantic than the last. Cat sighed and dialed Amanda's number.

"Oh my God! I thought you were dead!" Amanda shouted at Cat. Cat held the phone away from her ear.

"Amanda, I'm fine. Relax," Cat said. She sat down on the hard chair at the kitchen table.

"That's good. So, how did it go? Spill girly, I want all the details," Amanda said.

"Well, I gave him my phone number..." Cat said.

"Okay, that's good. Has he called you yet?" Amanda asked.

Oreo was done eating and began to rub up against Cat's legs. She leaned down to pet him and sighed. Amanda was giving Cat a headache. She didn't want to get this involved with the whole situation until she knew exactly how she felt about Thomas. Cat was tired and just wanted to crawl into her warm bed.

“Amanda, I’m not sure. He seemed different then other guys, but, he’s in the hospital tonight and he might not have a chance to call me. Do you really think he would want to go out with someone like me?” Cat asked.

“Oh, come on Cat, sure someone would love to go out with you. Don’t be so down on yourself honey,” Amanda said.

Cat’s phone beeped in her ear. She was getting another call in.

“Amanda, someone else is calling me. Talk to you later?”

“Oh, maybe it’s him! Good luck,” Amanda said. Cat hung up with her and answered the other phone call.

“Catherine?” a male voice said.

“Speaking, who is this?” Cat said. The dim bulb over her head flickered.

“This is Thomas. I have a favor to ask you,” he said.

Cat watched Oreo trot away into the living room. The gloomy night pressed in at the windows. Cat had forgotten to pull down the shades, and the black glass reflected the light from within her apartment.

“Yeah, what can I do for you?” Cat said.

“Can you give me a ride?” Thomas asked.

It was ten o’clock at night, Cat was in her pajamas, and it was darker than hell outside. She felt a chill creep in through the cracks in the old building of her apartment. Cat shivered.

“Um, you don’t have anyone else you can call?” Cat asked.

“No I don’t think so. I left a message with someone, but I’m not sure if they’ll help me,” Thomas said. “The hospital let me go, and my bike is gone.”

Cat let the silence hang between them while she thought about what she wanted to do. She barely knew Thomas, but she had given him her phone number and an offer to help if he needed it. He needed it now, but why did Cat feel hesitant about helping him?

“Cat?” Thomas asked. Cat thought about what Amanda had said on the phone, and wrestled with the idea of picking him up.

“Where are you now?” Cat asked.

“I’m still at the hospital. I must have lost my cell phone so I’m using a phone here,” Thomas said. “Look, I appreciate the offer for you to help earlier, but it sounds like I’m disturbing you. So, I guess I’ll just let you go,” Thomas said. He sounded disappointed, and it made Cat feel terrible.

“No, wait. I can help you, but it’s late, so just this once,” Cat said.

She got up from the kitchen chair and walked to her bedroom to get dressed.

“Thank you so much, you don’t know how much this means to me, babe. I will wait for you by the ER doors okay?” Thomas said.

Cat got goose bumps when Thomas said “babe”. Why was he calling her that? They didn’t even know each other. The term sounded strange, and she wondered if he had said it to her before, and she had just missed it, or if it was something new. What sort of man would say babe to a woman he just met?

“Um, sure. I’ll see you soon then,” Cat said and then hung up. She dressed quickly, and made sure that Oreo was ok before stepping back out into the night. The rain had stopped, but the wind was fierce. Cat had an apartment on the second floor, and the landing that led to her door was exposed. She pulled her coat tighter around her as she made her way down the stairs. As she

opened her car door, Cat remembered something Amanda had told her shortly after she had broken up with Ralph.

Be careful of those men that try to smooth talk you, girly. They're only after one thing.

Cat took a deep breath inside the dark cabin of her SUV. Was this really something that she wanted to do for a man she didn't even know? Cat saw the glow of her cell phone through the fabric of her purse on the seat next to her and wondered if she should call Amanda back.

Cat rubbed her forehead and tried to think for herself. She hadn't realized it until now, but she had been living so much of her life by what Amanda had told her. They had been friends since high school, and Amanda had been more popular, so Cat had naturally been drawn to her. She was almost thirty, and it was probably time for her to start thinking for herself.

Cat started up her car and pulled out of the driveway. She had a short drive back to the hospital, and Cat tried to convince herself that she was doing the right thing along the way.

As Cat pulled into a parking spot in the Emergency room lot her phone rang again.

"Thomas?" Cat answered the phone.

"Yeah, it's me. Hey, I have a question for you," he said. There was noise in the background, and it was hard to hear him.

"Where are you? Are you ok?" Cat asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need some papers," he said.

Cat was silent on the line as she got out of her car and into the crisp, autumn wind. It whipped through her coat as she walked to the emergency room doors.

"Are you still there?" Thomas asked.

Cat was inside, and walked over to a map of the hospital on the wall. Nearby, one of the tall potted plants had a sign stuck into the dirt: *Please do not water our plants; they are cared for on a schedule. Thank you.*

“Yeah, I’m here,” Cat said. She turned around and looked down the hall both ways. Thomas wasn’t there.

“Did you pick up some of my papers on the night of the accident?” Thomas asked. Cat thought about the crinkled, dry papers that were still sitting on the front seat in her car.

“Yeah, I have them in my car. Are you at the hospital?” Cat said.

“Great, I need them as soon as possible. No, I started walking down the road to meet you. Turns out that my cell phone was in my backpack, haha, funny right?” Thomas said.

Cat realized that the sound she heard in the background was traffic. Where was he walking to at ten-thirty at night? The nervous laughter he had added onto his comment didn’t sit right in Cat’s mind, either. She left the hospital and started walking back to her car. Cat wondered if this was going to be wild goose chase that she should just give up on.

“Yeah, so do you even need a ride anymore?” Cat asked. She was growing impatient, and was tired. The handsome man she had met earlier that called himself Thomas wasn’t worth the trouble that he was causing now.

“No, actually I just need my papers if you don’t mind,” Thomas said. His voice had a tremor in it. Cat wondered what was really going on.

“Ok, so where am I supposed to find you?” Cat said.

“I’m walking along the main road, just head towards town,” Thomas said. The matter of fact way tone that he had in his voice irritated Cat.

“Fine,” Cat said and then hung up. She shivered before turning her car on. The dome light came on, telling her that she had her door open. Cat looked over on her seat and saw Thomas’s papers that she had kept by mistake. She picked them up carefully to examine them.

One was a bill for Verizon that was due yesterday, and had a missing chunk out of its corner. The paper behind that was a letter from Hypertherm, one of the local big businesses. Cat didn’t read it, but guessed it was also important. The last one was smaller, made of heavier paper and folded three times. It had stood up the best to the rain. She carefully unfolded it and revealed Thomas’ birth certificate. Why had he been carrying around all of these important papers? Cat folded it back up and put them back down on her seat. She slammed her door shut again and the dome light went off.

Cat pulled back onto the main road and traveled down the icy pavement. It was so late that there were very few cars out. Cat came around a corner and was blinded by flashing blue lights from a cop car in front of her.

The color turned round and round, lighting everything in sight, including Cat. She slowed her car down to a crawl. The cop car was sitting on the side of the road in her lane and Cat had to go into the other lane to pass. Cat looked over to see who the cop had pulled over. There was no car in front of the cop car, but a man standing there talking with the cop. The blue lights highlighted the face of Thomas. Cat shook her head in disbelief. Of course a man walking at night down a main road looked suspicious. Cat wondered if she should interfere. She had never had a run in with the law before, so the idea of approaching Thomas while he was talking to a police officer made her nervous.

Cat looked over at the papers on her seat and pulled over in front of where the two men stood talking. She saw the cop look up at her vehicle, and her palms began to sweat. Why was

she nervous? She wasn't in trouble? She was just there to return Thomas's papers. Whatever trouble he had gotten himself into, she didn't want to be involved. She didn't get out of her car because she could see the cop approaching in her rearview mirror.

"Ma'am?" the cop said after she rolled down her window. He was dressed in the black uniform, and only his face, hands and badge stood out against the night.

"Yes, officer, that man, I have something for him," Cat said. She looked at the cop and waited for him to say something.

"Do you know him?" the cop asked.

Cat sighed and shook her head yes.

"I picked him up earlier after he had gotten into a bicycle accident and took him to the hospital for his arm. Is there a problem?" Cat asked. Her legs were trembling, and she was glad the cop couldn't see them.

"Well, we can't have him walking along the road late at night for safety reasons. Are you his ride?" the cop asked. He looked back at where Thomas stood with his arms crossed, leaning up against the hood of the cop car. His pose was relaxed. Obviously he wasn't afraid of the cop.

"Actually, no. He told me he didn't need a ride anymore. Here are some papers that he left in my car," Cat said. She picked up the three papers and handed them to the cop. He looked over them briefly and nodded.

"Thank you ma'am. Is there any other information you can tell me about this man?" the cop asked.

Cat thought about it for a minute. There was really nothing else she knew about Thomas. She thought it was best to get out of this situation while she could. Something about the way Thomas looked, even with his arm in a sling, didn't seem right to Cat. It looked like his hair was

greasier, and his face was splotted with acne that she hadn't seen before. Thomas saw the cop looking at him and waved. He managed to make it look cocky. There was definitely not something right about him. Cat wondered how she had been so blind to what he really looked like. He had been nice enough to her, but wasn't that always the case? A man wants to impress a lady so he smooth talks her. It was the typical situation that Amanda had warned her about.

"No, officer. Like I said, I just met him today. I know nothing else about him," Cat said.

The cop nodded again. The wind blew in through the window and made Cat shiver.

"Ok, ma'am. You have a safe night," the cop said. He turned and walked back towards Thomas. Cat heard the cop shout something and Thomas put his hands in the air.

Cat hugged her arms around her and rolled up her window. Cat hoped that Oreo wasn't too mad with her for being gone so long and so late at night. She shook her head in disbelief at her own stupidity and then pulled her SUV back out onto the road. The image of Thomas being patted down by the officer disappeared in her rearview mirror. Cat couldn't believe that she had almost gotten herself involved with that man. A warm apartment with a loving cat awaited her back home. She couldn't wait to call Amanda tomorrow and tell her what had happened. Cat was happy that Amanda had been wrong about something for once. Even though Cat was almost thirty, she knew that it would be better to wait for the right guy to come along for her then to get involved with the wrong one.

The Necktie

I get out of bed while it's still dark outside. My morning routine has been the same for the past ten years; shave, shower, dress, drink a cup of coffee, get in the car. I don't read the newspaper because I just don't care. The morning sun lightens the horizon in pale blue when I back out of the parking spot at my apartment building. There's nothing worth listening to on the radio, so I shut it off and ride my half-hour commute in silence. When I hit traffic in the city, I open the mirror on my visor and adjust my tie. The color reflects my dark mood, and the grey day. The pavement outside is charcoal from the exhaust of millions of cars traveling over it, day in and day out. It is worn, and I have to avoid several potholes as the traffic speed picks up again.

My drab, little cubicle is in the corner of the office floor I work on. There is already a pile of papers on my desk for me to sort out. As well as writing the obituaries for one of the local papers, part of my professional title is file clerk for the company. It's the most mindless part of my day. That and watching the people walk back and forth on their way to the bathroom. Most days they just flash by, and I only see the colors of their outfits out of the corner of my eye. I don't really know what any of them look like, except for George, the only guy in the office that actually stops to talk to me.

I would call myself an average guy with an average life. In high school and college I was handsome enough and have dated some. My last girlfriend had said that I was too boring, and then left me. I had honestly not felt anything for the young brunette woman, but as I watched her walk away I had begun to wonder if there was something wrong with me. Everyday felt so slow and uneventful, but the years were disappearing quickly. I will be thirty-eight soon.

There are many nights I sit in front of the television with my microwave dinner watching shows from the fifties in which everyone is in a perfect family and has a perfect life. I wished for

that happiness, and the ache ate at my heart as I slept. I would always wake up feeling like I was missing something.

I had the papers divided into three piles when George came by. He leaned on the flimsy wall of my cubicle and shook his head. I glanced up at him, wondering what sort of trouble he was up to today.

“You’re really sad,” George said.

“What do you want George?” I asked.

“You’re looking good today, Tom. Is that a new tie?” George asked with a grin. George had red hair, freckles and green eyes. I had asked him once if he was Irish and he had been quick to correct me. He had told me rather forcefully that he was not Irish but a proud Scottish descendant. It takes every type, I suppose.

My tie was not new, and George knew it. I buy new ties twice a year, and had owned this one for four months already. He saw me every day and probably knew my tie schedule as well as I did. There were fifteen in all, and each one matched perfectly with any shirt and pant set that I owned. I made sure that I had an array of colors. It was the only way to add any excitement to my life in a way that I felt comfortable with. I had carefully planned my life around small details like this since I can remember. My own mother had stopped dressing me by the time I was ten.

I continued to sort the rest of the papers while George waited for a response.

“George, you know it’s the same tie from last Monday. Thanks for stopping by,” I said finally, because I couldn’t stand him watching me while I worked.

“Well, have a good morning, Tom. I’ll see you at lunch,” George said, then turned to walk away. I watched him go, and finished my filing. I turned to the dim glow of my computer screen to check my emails. Every morning my boss would email me my projects for the day.

While I was reading the list of seven deceased individuals I was supposed to write about, I heard the ping that indicated a new email. After I read the rest of my e-mails, I opened the new e-mail from George. The blue background of the invitation to an art show tonight shimmered from my dull computer screen, and stirred within me unexpected excitement. Why had he sent me this? George had never invited me to anything, so why start now? I would ask him about it later at lunch.

I returned to the task of writing the obituaries. It's always depressing work, though, because I have to write positive things about people I'd never met or known. The phone calls to the families to verify the deaths were the worst part of it.

Sometimes the women of husbands broke down on the phone, and I had to get them calm enough to talk to me. Other times when it was the husband I had to talk to, I wouldn't even be able to tell my purpose in calling before they hung up. Once they heard that I was calling from the newspaper, they didn't want to hear anymore. I would never understand the mentalities of old people, and hoped it would be a long time before I became one. It was exhausting talking to them, and I couldn't imagine being one of them. Sure, I felt sorry for them and their loss, but I was just trying to do my job.

When lunch time rolled around, I was tired and hungry. The flight of stairs down to the kitchen was a dark forest green, and my footsteps echoed off the bare walls. I had not brought a lunch, but there was always a bag of chips or a candy bar in the vending machine that would fill me up until dinner. George was not there yet, but a few people were already gathered at the tables. Two attractive young women that worked as field journalists were sitting together and leaned closer to each other to continue their conversation when I walked in. The blond kept giving me dirty looks for some reason, but the brunette pretended to ignore me. I passed by their

table on my way to one of the soft armchairs against the back wall and nodded at the blond. She wrinkled her nose at me and then looked down at her pasta salad, which she stabbed over and over with her fork. I shook my head at the follies of women.

My bag of chips crinkled in the silence of the lunch room as the minutes ticked by. The door to the kitchen was thrown open just as I was about to get up and toss out my empty bag. George and a group of four other men filled the kitchen with their howls of laughter. They were all watching George as he continued to make faces, impersonating our overweight boss. When George saw me approach the doors he stopped.

“Tommy old boy, good to see you down here,” George said pounding me hard on the back.

“Yeah, well, I need to eat, too,” I said. “Hey, I have a question for you.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest because the other men were still standing with us and listening. George nodded for me to go on. I paused and looked around at the other guys. Two of them looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember their names, and the other two were as foreign to me as strangers on the street. George grabbed my arm and pulled me aside, out of the group. The guys took the hint and went about their own business of getting coffee or searching the community fridge for something to eat.

“Yeah, what is it Tom?” George asked. He had his typical grin on his face, and the mirth from his joking around was left glimmering in his eyes.

“Um, about this art show,” I said.

George’s smile disappeared. It was just as I thought.

“What are you talking about—I sent you that?”

I nodded.

He ran his hand through his hair and looked at the floor. “Christ—well I guess you could come, if you wanted to,” he said. He raised his eyes to me and his playfulness was back. I felt slightly hurt that he had sent it to me by mistake. How many other people had he invited? Why had he never invited me to anything before now?

“Well, I don’t know,” I said.

George nodded and clapped me on the back again. I was really confused.

“I understand, it’s not really your thing anyway,” he said.

How did he know what my thing was? Did George really expect me to just forget about his mistake?

“Actually, I think I would like to go. Time for me to find a new girlfriend I guess,” I said, and gave him a shrug.

George narrowed his eyes at me. I looked over at the group of men who had gone silent and were watching us talk. What was with them?

“Sure, ok,” he said. “Well, I’ll see you there then!” He smiled and shook his head at me.

I left the lunch room and went back to my cubicle, wondering what George really thought of me. Did I look that desperate? Was the invite just a joke?

I liked to shock people every once in a while with my actions, but I’d surprised myself by how much I really did want to go to the art show, even if it was only a gag. I figured it was time to start looking for another woman for a companion anyway. Lately I’d felt lonely, and the art show would be a good place to find someone. Plus, I needed to start thinking about settling down and starting a family.

I followed the directions to the gallery, stopping on the way for a quick meal of Chinese food. The traffic and parking were horrendous, so I was running a little late. I was antsy and sweaty by the time I got out of my car. I began to wonder if I should just go home because I was so late, but pushed away the thought with how shocked I knew George would be to see me there. The black jacket and pants I'd worn to work seemed appropriate for an art show. I still had on my purple, swirl patterned tie that I always paired with dark colors.

The art gallery was lit up inside and alive with activity. I checked my reflection in a window before I went in. The sound of murmuring voices hit me when I walked in and then settled down into a curtain of background noise. Bright LED lights shone down from the open air concept ceiling and made the gold-flecked floor sparkle with movement. There were groups of people standing together, and as I walked into the room a few looked at me, but then went right back to their own conversations. Being ignored was something that I was used to.

I meandered towards the first painting hung near the door, but before I could reach it a smiling woman approached me. The purple color of her tight dress matched my tie, and she looked to be close to my age. This could be good, I thought as I smiled back. She offered me one of the champagne flutes she was holding.

"Welcome to my art show, Mr?"

"Martin, Tom Martin," I said. I held out my hand and she shook it. Her perfume reached my nose and made it tingle. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, but was too heavy.

"Welcome, Tom, I'm Charlene. Do you know someone here?" Charlene asked. She looked back into the crowd and winked at someone.

I looked around and spotted George. Charlene was still holding my hand and I could feel the heat radiating from it. The room seemed to sway slightly as I looked across the bodies of so

many strangers. Accessories such as hats and scarves adorned many of the men. The women were bedecked in jewels and all sorts of sparkling attire. What had I gotten myself into? This was no place for a man like me.

“Yes, George invited me,” I said, and I waved over to where George stood, hoping to catch his eye. He was surrounded by a group of people and hadn’t seen me yet. Charlene’s intoxicating perfume was making my head spin. I took a sip of the champagne she had handed me. It was fresh and crisp as the bubbles traveled over my tongue and hit the back of the throat. The alcohol momentarily cleared my senses.

“Would you like to see some of my artwork?” Charlene asked. She was still holding my hand, and her fingernails lightly scraped my palm. Her nails were painted a dark purple color with metallic swirls. She held herself upright, but kept glancing over at another person. I wondered why she was still standing with someone like me when she clearly wanted to be next to someone else.

“I like your nails,” I said, looking at the hand she held the champagne flute with. The overhead lights shone through her glass, making her drink and the air around her sparkle. She was enchanting, and I was still confused that a woman as beautiful as her would want to greet me personally, even if this was her own art show. I had never been to an event like this and didn’t know how to act. I felt as if my attempt at conversation was pitiful.

“Huh? Oh, this is nothing. Just a little something I got done for today,” Charlene said with a giggle in her voice. It was a pleasing sound, but it also didn’t sound genuine. She led me to where the first giant canvas hung on the wall. The paint had been put on in thick swirls, but the blue colors melded together, and the piece had no point that I could see. Charlene’s dress was more interesting than her painting.

“Well, what do you think?” She looked at me with expectant eyes.

“Um, it’s great. I like the colors you used in it,” I commented, raising my eyebrows to emphasize my lame remark. She bought it. A giggle bubbled out of her throat, and she pushed her shoulder into mine in a playful way. She looked back over her shoulder again at someone across the room. I wondered what she was playing at. Something flashed and caught my eye, and that’s when I saw the diamond ring around her left index finger. My face grew hot, and I looked around quickly to see if her fiancé was near. Would I be in trouble if the man came over? Maybe her betrothed was the one she kept looking at. Why had he not come over then? Was I not enough of a threat, or was Charlene just joking around with me?

Charlene was nudging me towards the next painting, and on the way, I finished my glass of champagne, not knowing what else to do. I began to think that coming tonight was a mistake. I hadn’t even had a chance to see George yet, and he was the one who had invited me.

“Tom, you made it,” George said as from somewhere behind me as if he had been listening to my thoughts. He startled me so that I jumped a little. I stepped away from Charlene, using the interruption as an excuse to put some respectable distance between us.

“Why yes, it appears I did make it,” I said turning around. George had brought over a man with him, who moved over to Charlene’s side and whispered something in her ear. It must have been the man that Charlene had been glancing at. My face grew warm, and I blamed the alcohol. George didn’t look surprised at my appearance at a social event, and I was disappointed that I had missed his initial reaction to seeing me here.

“Tom, I see you have met Charlene already. This is Adam, Charlene’s fiancé,” George said. The man next to Charlene was handsome, with a strong build under a dark suit, and a purple tie similar to mine. Adam’s bright, blue eyes flashed under his peppered black hair when

he glanced at me. A large smile broke across his face, and I squirmed a little under his stare. Confidence radiated from Adam, and I was intimidated by him.

“Nice to meet you, Adam,” I said holding my hand out to him, trying to keep it from shaking. He took a step towards me. Charlene’s perfume clung to him and mixed with a warm cinnamon smell. I blinked a couple of times to try and clear my head, and found my hand incased in Adam’s warm, firm grip. It felt like my senses all suddenly snapped into focus. Charlene shuffled from foot to foot behind Adam, stepped forward and laid her hand on his shoulder. Specks of dust floated down from the high ceiling, and every color I could see from where I was standing took on new meaning in my eyes. It was as if I was seeing everything in slow motion, but the laughter from people nearby was too high pitched. Had there been something in my drink?

“Pleasure to meet you too, Tom,” Adam said. I saw him wink in slow motion before he pulled his hand away and stepped back to Charlene. These people seemed awfully too interested in me for some reason, and I puzzled over why as we all stood there looking at each other. Conversation halted to an awkward pause. I stared at the pocket on Adams jacket, the light purple handkerchief folded up inside seemed to wave at me. What was wrong here?

“Come get a drink with me?” I asked George, with another glance at Adam who was whispering into Charlene’s ear again. They were making me uncomfortable, and I wanted to get away from the two strangers. I had a feeling that something was going on that I didn’t want to be involved with.

“Why, Tom. I didn’t know you drank,” George said.

I grabbed his arm and steered him towards the mini-bar where a sharp looking waiter was serving drinks.

“Two Jack’s please,” George said to the man and slapped a twenty down. “This one’s on me,” he said. The bartender placed two short glasses on the bar filled with a couple of inches of alcohol.

“Thanks,” I said. I grabbed the glass and took a sip. The whiskey was strong and set my throat on fire. I coughed and George slapped my back.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said.

“George,” I said.

“Yeah Tom?”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

George shrugged his shoulders and avoided eye contact with me. Normally George was all smiles and talkative, but now he seemed secretive.

“What’s up with those two?” I asked, jabbing my thumb back at where Charlene and Adam stood.

“Look, Tom. I don’t know what their game is—but,” George said. He stopped and sipped his drink. I took another drink of mine and felt the fiery alcohol slide down my throat. It was a more pleasant burn this time, and I swished the drink around in my cup like I had seen George do with his drink. I was waiting for George to continue what he was saying, but he looked like he had forgotten I was standing there.

“George,” I said.

He turned to me, but had a glazed look over his eyes. Contemplative George was a different kind of animal, and I wasn’t sure of what to make of him. Something was on his mind that he didn’t want to tell me.

“Well, what is it?”

George sighed and grimaced. He took another drink and after swallowing, he replied.

“What do you think of Adam?”

“What?”

“Adam. He’s looking at you,” George said, and then finished off his drink. I turned and looked over my shoulder. Adam was still standing with Charlene. She was talking to him, but he wasn’t paying attention. He was looking towards the bar. My clarity from earlier was beginning to get foggy again from my drink, and it was hard for me to think of a reason that Adam would be looking at us.

“Well, why would he do that?” I asked, turning back to look at George.

George set his glass down on the bar and licked his lips. He studied the pattern on the wall for a bit. What was his meaning in asking me a stupid question about a man I didn’t even know?

“Look, George. I don’t even know why I’m here. There’s no one here that’s my type anyway,” I said.

I leaned against the bar and forced myself to scan the room for other women. There was no one very interesting: old women or women already clinging to the arms of other men.

“Isn’t there?” George said. He looked at me and winked. Why was everyone winking at me tonight? There was obviously something I was missing. George leaned in closer to me. “I would stay away from Charlene though; she’s a little crazy.”

“I see someone I have to talk to,” George said and walked away, leaving me to digest what he had told me. George thought there was someone here that was my type? I had only met two people though, and he had told me to stay away from Charlene.

I looked back over to where Charlene and Adam were standing and noticed that their body language had changed. Charlene had her arms crossed and was faced away from Adam. Adam was looking at the floor as if he were trying to think of something to say to Charlene. He looked back up at me and I could see a smile playing on his lips.

Did George think that Adam was my type? That couldn't be possible.

I closed my eyes to still my beating heart and racing mind. I remembered the way Adam's hand had felt in mine. It had been warm like Charlene's, but contained a little more electricity. I had attributed that spark to his confidence, but was there more to it? What was my body doing to me? Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder and smelled Charlene's perfume next to me.

"Are you okay?" a male voice asked. Of course it was Adam, not Charlene. I took a deep breath to fight back the slightly sick feeling in my stomach and opened my eyes. Adam's hand felt like it was burning a hole in the shoulder of my jacket. I took another deep breath, trying to calm down. Adam's sharp face took on a look of concern. I had never paid such close attention to another man's actions before, and it was amazing what I saw when I looked at Adam. His eyebrows were perfectly trimmed. There were a few grey hairs mixed in with his black hair. I could see a couple lines of muscle in his neck that moved when he turned his head. The lights overhead seemed to dim as I looked at the tiny details that made Adam a model example of a man. I gripped the bar, wondering what was wrong with me.

"Dude, you don't look good at all. Let me get you some water," Adam said with a motion to the bar-tender.

His smooth voice broke through the fog of my muddled senses. I smiled tentatively at him. He returned the smile, and I saw his perfect white teeth. What this all just a joke, or was I drunk?

“Thanks,” I said. A writhing nervousness bubbled up inside me; it was all mixed with an acid that threatened to burn out my stomach. Adam stepped back and looked back over at where Charlene stood with a couple other women. They were all watching us with looks of distaste. What was their problem?

“Sure.” He lifted his drink to his mouth and gazed off at wall behind the mini-bar.

The silence stretched between us. I could not stop staring at Adam, as hard as I tried to look away. His coat was stretched over strong arm muscles. As he lifted his drink I noticed the expensive watch on his arm. Was I jealous? Maybe that was it. I took a small sip out of the water that the bartender passed to me. My whisky glass sat in a small ring of perspiration on the bar, forgotten and unfinished. Adam peered cautiously over at me, and we locked eyes. I shifted from one foot to the other and glanced between the gold-speckled floor and Adam’s face. This was really awkward, and I would have loved to know what Adam thought of me.

“That’s a beautiful tie,” Adam said. I looked down at my old tie and saw it with new eyes. I glanced back at Adam, and the backdrop of people behind him faded into a fuzzy mass. Every detail of this man stood out to me, and it was confusing. Was I actually attracted to him? Adam moved closer and slipped his hand into my coat pocket and out again. My pulse quickened. Had he really done that, or was I just imagining it? I looked over at Charlene again. She had her arms crossed in front of her and was red in the face. Uh oh, it didn’t look good. These people were definitely crazy.

I looked back at Adam and tried to read his expression, but he had already moved away and was leaning casually on the bar. He glanced over at me, and winked again. I looked back down at my water, embarrassed, and unsure of how to proceed when I felt another, slimmer hand on my shoulder. Charlene was standing close behind me. I felt my body tense under her touch. What were these two strangers doing to me? This was too much stress. I had to get out of here.

“Adam, what’s going on here?” That was just my question. Charlene stepped around me and narrowed her eyes at Adam. She had had too much to drink and leaned into the bar, knocking over my unfinished whisky. The glass crashed on the floor at our feet. Charlene swayed a little and drew back her arm as if she had been stung. A few people nearby stopped to watch the scene unfold. The women Charlene was standing with earlier were behind her. One of them grabbed her arm, but Charlene tugged it free.

I didn’t know what was wrong with her, but I didn’t want to stick around to find out. Thinking about George’s warning about Charlene, I began to walk toward the door, but Charlene noticed. I saw George huddled in his group of friends, all of whom wore a mixed expression of curiosity and horror as they watched us. When I passed them, I tried to smile and muttered, “Time to go.” I could feel someone on my heels, and I turned to see Charlene following me like a little puppy. She had a look in her eyes that scared me; it was a mix of fake adoration, and spite. This was the kind of freaky crap that happened in movies, not real life. I was so confused.

I stepped out into the cool night air. Inside beyond the door Charlene gave up the chase, and stormed back to where a composed Adam stood. Everyone else in the room seemed to be immobile now. I was suddenly the outsider watching a scene unfold that I had nothing and somehow everything to do with. It had been the strangest interaction I had ever had with any two people.

I walked back to my car at a quick pace and tried to gather my thoughts. The cool, night air helped clear my head a little, but the details of my two encounters with Adam stuck. What were all of these emotions running through me? I had never felt so alive, yet so completely miserable at the same time. It was as if I'd been born again inside the gallery, only to be locked in a glass container once I had left, allowed to watch everything go by me without chance of interaction. Was this the way I'd been living my whole life? My senses had gone mute again. What was it about Adam that had unlocked them? Surely I wasn't attracted to another man?

I reached my car and climbed in. My mind was numb as I rested my head against the steering wheel. I loosened my tie and then took it off all the way. My shirt was sticking to my armpits. I put my head back and waited for my breathing to steady. The tie I had removed was in the corner of my vision so I picked it up. What had I been doing with my life before now? I hadn't really been living. This stupid tie had defined me and my days. The purple swirls moved as I held the silk fabric. It was depressing. I rolled down my window and threw the tie out into the road.

I remembered that Adam had put his hand in my pocket so I reached in to see if he had left something behind. The little white piece of paper was torn from the corner of a napkin, and had the seven digits of a phone number scrawled on it. I choked out a couple of rough laughs of disbelief. I didn't know what to do or what to think, so I folded it up and put it back in my coat pocket. Maybe I would call him, maybe I wouldn't. There was no way that I was admitting I was gay, even if I really was. I wondered what George would say to me at work the next morning, and then decided that I didn't care. What was the point of work anymore? I was ready to really live my life. The cool night air was cleansing to my senses. Maybe I would move and start a new

life. I looked out at my crumpled tie on the pavement next to my car. Tomorrow morning, I would move tomorrow morning after I give my notice at work.

Opening the Lid

He lay there in bed watching the firefly flicker around in the glass jar. The lid was on tight so that the bug could not escape, thus giving Henry White the pleasure of keeping the little nightlight with him until morning. His mother tucked him in and turned out the lamp next to Henry's bed.

"Good night, sweet. I will see you in the morning," his mother said.

"Night, Mama. Thank you for letting me keep the lightning bug," Henry said.

"You keep him safe until morning. Then we can release him, okay?" his mother said.

Henry nodded and his mother turned to go out the bedroom door. He could feel the wet mark on his cheek from where his mother had kissed him and he rubbed it off with the back of his hand as his mother closed the bedroom door. That evening had been fun filled, with a cookout, and fireworks, and firefly chasing, but exhausting. He rolled over in bed and thought about when he had caught his first firefly.

The bug had landed on his nose, and he had shrieked before he cupped his little hand around it. He had squealed with delight until his mother had come over and offered to take it from him. When he had opened his hand, the bug had flown away into the night air, and he was off chasing it again, laughing the whole way.

Henry knew his mother would join his father in their bedroom now, and he had to get himself to sleep. He rolled over in bed again and watched the firefly flicker in the jar as his eyelids got heavy.

It was nearly dawn when Henry woke up again. He blinked his eyes a couple times before remembering that he had the firefly next to him in the jar from last night. Light filtered

into his room, casting a bluish haze over his bed, bureau, and rocking horse. Everything was silent, and Henry shivered in the cool air that filled his room from his window being left open all night.

Henry sat up in bed and reached over to pick up the jar that housed his firefly. Something rattled inside as he pushed the covers back and brought the jar close to his face.

“Mr. Lighting Bug, time to wake up now,” Henry said, peering through the glass. The jar was so large he had to wrap both of his hands around it in order to hold it. He moved one of his hands out of the way and rested the jar in his lap. The little black body of the bug lay at the bottom. Henry shook the jar.

“I said wake up!”

Henry couldn’t understand what had happened to the bug. Why was the bug so still? Then Henry realized that the bug must be dead. He let out a wail of anger. Why had the bug died? Henry gently picked up the jar and moved to the floor. Hot tears began streaking down his face, and his head began to hurt.

“I’m sorry Mr. Lightning Bug. So sorry,” Henry said as he sat on his bedroom floor and cried over the dead bug.

When his parents burst in through the door they saw Henry balled up on the floor with the firefly jar grasped tightly in his arms. His mother kneeled down beside Henry and pulled him into her arms. His dad stood in the doorway of the little room swaying on his feet. He looked like he was still half asleep and unsure of what was happening.

“There, there. What’s wrong, honey? Are you hurt?” his mother asked Henry.

“No—no, but the light—lightning bug,” Henry choked out between sobs.

“Come on boy, what’s wrong?” his dad asked, after finally waking up completely. He crossed his arms and took a couple steps towards where Henry and his mother sat on the floor.

“He’s dead,” Henry said.

He looked down in his lap at the glass jar that had the dead body of the firefly. The tiny black legs were folded up and stood out against the white belly of the small black bug. Half of a wing stuck out of the shell, as if it had died mid-flight. A tear landed against the glass and his mother hugged Henry tighter. His dad left the room, muttering something about coffee.

“It’s okay dear. You see, I know what we can do so that he may live on in a better place,” his mother said.

“You do?” Henry said with a wide-eyed look at his mother.

“Yes, it’s simple. All we have to do is open the lid of the jar so that the bug’s spirit may get out and go to heaven,” she said.

“Well—okay. I can do that,” Henry said, suppressing his sobs, and wiping his eyes.

He scrambled from his mother’s lap and went to the windowsill, where he set the jar down and unscrewed the metal lid off the top. He stood back and surveyed his work. Tears had dried on his face, leaving behind trail marks, but his eyes felt tired from crying. His tousled bed hair stood out at odd angles, but Henry’s head began to feel a little better. He felt the pride swell in his chest. There was actually something good he could do for the little dead bug. He was glad that his mother always knew what to do.

“That’s really great Henry. Now we just have to leave it there for a while so that his spirit has time to find its way out,” his mother said to him.

Henry thought about what his mother said as she led him out of his room to get him washed up for the day. It was still summer, so there was no school to get ready for, but his

mother liked to keep him on a schedule. Today his dad would stay home with him while his mother went to get groceries. He forgot about the little dead bug until he checked his room later before lunch and the jar was gone. Henry wondered if the bug's spirit actually did make it up to heaven. He went back out into the kitchen, and his dad handed him a sandwich.

They sat on the couch, ate their bologna sandwiches and watched T.V., an act that would have irritated Henry's mother if she knew they were doing it.

"Papa, where's Heaven?" Henry asked. He was enjoying the sandwich, and was making a mess of himself. His dad grinned at him, and leaned over with his napkin to wipe Henry's face.

"Now why would you ask that question?"

"That's where Mama said the lightning bug's spirit went after I opened the jar," Henry said. He bounced his heels against the front side of the couch cushion.

"Did she now? Well, you had better ask your mom about Heaven since she told you about it, don't you think?" His dad looked back at the television screen.

"Sure, I'll ask her when she gets home. How long is she going to be gone?" Henry asked through a large bite of sandwich. These were not polite manners, but he knew that his dad wouldn't scold him like his mother did.

His dad still didn't look over at Henry. "I think soon. Are you nearly finished with your sandwich?"

"Almost. Do you think the bug's spirit made it to Heaven?" Henry asked, talking with his mouth full of his last bite.

"Henry, if you're done, please put your plate in the sink. I'm sure it did. You should really ask your mom," His dad said with an attempted sincere look at Henry. This didn't surprise Henry, because his dad never went to church with them and didn't like to talk about anything

religious at home. Henry left the living room to put his plate in the sink. He had to stand on tip toes to drop it in, and he waited until he heard the clang that it made. Henry went down the hallway to his room. He knew that his dad didn't like to play with him, but Henry was fine playing in his room alone.

As he got to his room, Henry heard the phone ring. His dad answered the phone. A few moments later, Henry heard a crash. He put down the stuffed dinosaur he had picked up and ran out into the hallway. He rounded the corner to the kitchen and saw that his dad had dropped his plate on the floor.

"Papa? What's wrong?" Henry asked. His dad held up his hand to tell Henry to not come in. Glass covered the floor and Henry was barefoot.

"Thank you," his dad said into the phone and then hung up. "We need to go to the hospital, Henry, to see Mom. Can you go find your shoes for me?" his dad said and hurried into the hallway to get his own shoes and coat.

Henry stood in the way. "Papa? Is Mama okay?"

"We'll see, boy. Let's just go. Now," his dad said, and gave Henry a gentle push down the hall towards the door. Henry heard the panic in his dad's voice and it scared him. His dad helped Henry into his shoes, avoiding eye contact. Henry wanted to cry because he didn't know what was going on. He had never been to the hospital before, and didn't know why it was so important that his mother was there. Henry had so many questions, but as his dad pushed him out to the car, Henry held his tongue because he sensed that something was wrong.

When they got to the hospital his dad almost forgot Henry in the car. Henry jumped out and followed as closely behind his dad as he could. They walked down a long hallway that was

full of people rushing about. Henry was overwhelmed. He stopped and looked up at the ceiling. It was impossibly high and made up of all windows, so the grey light filtered in and gave everything a hazy glow. Henry could see many floors balconies above the one they were on. He felt dizzy looking up, and the main reason of why they were there went out of his head as he stood there. It was eerily quiet despite all the people walking by.

“Henry!” a woman’s voice shouted down the hall. Henry turned around and saw that his grandmother was walking towards him quickly from the entrance. She was wearing a fur coat and looked like an outraged mother lion chasing her wandering cub. Her dyed auburn hair moved about her head like angry snakes. If Henry didn’t know her, he would have been terrified. Henry looked around him to see where his dad had gone.

His grandmother reached him, took hold of his arm and dragged him to one of the seats in the hallway.

“What are you doing here?” his grandmother yelled at him. She was gripping a black purse in one hand and squeezing Henry’s arm with the other. “Where’s your father?”

Henry shook his head. He felt tears coming to his eyes, but his grandmother had never had pity for him before when he had cried, so he tried to hold them back. A single tear trickled down Henry’s face before he could wipe it away. His grandmother’s eyes softened and she let go of his arm. She got down on her knees and pulled him into tight hug that smelled like moth balls and licorice. Henry couldn’t breathe while she squeezed him and shook with what Henry assumed were sobs. He had never heard his grandmother cry and didn’t know what to do. His arms were pinned by his sides so he couldn’t even return her hug.

“Henry?” his dad’s voice called out this time. Instead of rage and astonishment, his voice held fear and uncertainty. His grandmother released Henry and was headed towards his father before Henry could even get his breath back.

He saw his dad throw his hands up in the air as Henry’s grandmother intersected his dad’s path. Henry couldn’t believe that his dad had left him behind. Henry’s grandmother apparently had the same thought.

Even though she was a small woman, standing next to his dad, Henry thought she looked twice the size of him. Henry’s dad seemed to cower away from her.

“What were you thinking, bringing him here?” His grandmother pointed at Henry. People were walking by and tried not to stare at his yelling grandmother.

“He was right with me a moment ago,” Henry’s dad said quietly.

“That doesn’t matter now, David, he’s here and has to be dealt with. Do you have any idea how to take care of a child?” Henry’s grandmother said. Her voice was quieter, and it scared Henry even more then when she was yelling.

She moved a step away from Henry’s dad, and Henry saw his dad release a breath he had been holding.

Henry couldn’t quite hear what his grandmother said next, so he moved closer to where they stood and caught the end of her question: “Have you seen her yet?”

Henry knew they were talking about his mother because his grandmother was his mother’s mom. He remembered that they were here to see his mother, and wondered what was wrong. Henry’s father and grandmother were being really quiet now, and it scared Henry. He stood there wide-eyed trying to hear what they were saying. Then Henry’s grandmother looked

over at Henry. She took a couple steps towards him, and he was frightened that she would squeeze his arm again, so he moved towards his dad.

“I need you to go with your grandmother, Henry,” Henry’s dad said. He looked up at his dad and thought he saw tears in his eyes. Henry didn’t understand why he couldn’t stay with his dad.

“Come along Henry,” his grandmother said. She took hold of his hand this time and held it firm, but didn’t squeeze. She looked back over her shoulder at Henry’s dad and said, “I will take care of him, and you better take care of my daughter or so help me.”

“Why can’t I stay?” Henry said as his grandmother pulled him towards the exit of the hospital. She looked down at him, and Henry imagined that in the place of her nose there was a long beak. He was not very familiar with his grandmother, and only knew her from church and other holidays. Today was not a holiday, so why was he going with her? She didn’t answer Henry’s question so he tried a different one.

“Where’s my mother?”

At this question, Henry’s grandmother looked down at him. They were outside on the sidewalk. She stopped and looked like she was thinking about what to say. Finally, after looking around, as if the passing people had the answer to Henry’s question, she replied.

“We will see her soon. I promise Henry.”

They walked to the little, old station wagon that Henry’s grandmother drove. As Henry climbed into the back seat, he hoped that by the time he saw his mother he would be able to tell her what a good boy he had been for his grandmother.

The church was large, dark and cold. The downtown Main Street Baptist Church that he and his mother had always gone on Saturday nights was where they were holding his mother's funeral. Henry and his dad were sitting on a hard church pew in the front, next to Henry's grandparents. The black veil over his grandmother's mother's face quivered as she silently cried.

"Papa, are you ok?" Henry asked, leaning onto his dad's lap. Henry's elbows dug into his dad's thigh and he saw his dad make a face. His dad didn't reply, but held a finger to his lips to let Henry know that it was time to be quiet. Henry's grandmother shot a stern glance over at Henry and his dad.

The service was long and Henry kept glancing around. He was out of tears, so he wasn't crying like most of the people were.

When Henry had heard the news that his mother had died in a car accident, he hadn't understood at first. He had stayed up for three days in a row, waiting for his mother to come home, refusing to sleep. After thinking about it, and crying for one night straight, Henry understood that his mother wasn't coming home. As he sat in the pew, Henry thought about the way his mother had looked the last night he had seen her. He remembered that her hair had smelled like the summer heat. Henry looked up at the large stained-glass window with the painting of Jesus on the cross, and saw that the day outside was grey. Through the rest of the service, Henry tried to think about all the little details he could remember about his mother.

After the service people got out of their seats and a large crowd pressed in around Henry and his father. Henry was scared of so many people being around him that he didn't know what to do. He looked around and saw that his grandmother and grandfather stood aside from the crowd. Henry broke out of the circle of legs clad in pressed pants and dark skirts and headed

towards his grandparents. They didn't see him coming and a few older people stood in front of him and blocked his path to his grandparents.

Henry lost sight of them and then tried to look for his dad. When he didn't see anyone he knew, Henry turned again and saw someone walk up to the casket where his mother was.

Looking at the closed box, Henry had an idea.

"Mama's spirit is stuck," Henry said to himself. Henry walked up to the casket and dug his little fingers in underneath the lid. Henry didn't know why the lid was closed, but he knew that if he could just get it open, his mother would be free.

Henry could only lift the lid a little bit.

"There Mama, now your spirit can be free to go to Heaven," he whispered into the casket. Henry imagined his mom's spirit coming out of the casket and floating up into the sky. She had a smile on her face, and Henry imagined that he felt her hand on his cheek. He thought he saw something disappear into the high ceilings of the church. Henry wasn't very strong so he couldn't hold the lid very long. He held it up a couple seconds longer to make sure that his mother's spirit was really free. The sun came out from behind a cloud outside, and shone into the yellow colored windows, adding a warm glow to the sad funeral group.

"Henry! What are you doing?" Henry's grandmother shouted at him from across the church. It startled Henry so that he dropped the lid, and it landed on his thumbs. He began to cry from shock. The sun disappeared behind a cloud again. Henry's dad was quickly next to him, and he took hold of the lid and lifted it enough for Henry to get his fingers out. Henry could feel tears streaming down his face and his thumbs each had their own heartbeat. His dad dragged Henry off of the podium and down to the pews. Henry's grandmother worked her way through the crowd to where they were. The talking in the room had stopped, and everyone was watching.

“What were you doing?” Henry’s dad asked him as he held his small shoulders.

“Yes boy, please tell me why you decided to defile my daughter’s memory by opening her casket! How dare you,” Henry’s grandmother said as she leaned into his face. She grabbed his shoulders from his dad, turned him around and drew back her hand to slap him across the backside. Henry’s whole body was shaking.

“Mama’s spirit—Heaven,” was all that Henry could manage to say.

“Don’t you dare hit my child, woman,” Henry’s dad said and grabbed her hand before she could spank Henry.

“Let me go,” she shouted. Henry’s grandfather was at her side by then, and he nodded sternly at Henry’s dad. Henry’s dad dropped her hand and looked back at Henry.

“I don’t ever want to see you again,” Henry’s grandmother said quietly. She turned her face from Henry and his dad in a display that spoke of disownment and walked away.

“That’s just fine. You won’t see Henry again either,” Henry’s dad shouted at her retreating back, ignoring the stares of everyone in the room. Henry didn’t understand what was happening and was scared again. He wondered why they were saying they wouldn’t see each other anymore. They were family, and family always saw each other again, right?

His dad took Henry’s hand and led him to the church door.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” Henry’s dad said. Henry sniffled as his tears began to slow. Together they walked out of the church. Henry was pleased to be leaving the crowd of strangers behind, but wondered what would happen to his mother’s body. The place on Henry’s cheek that he had felt his mother’s spirit touch tingled. Henry looked up at the sky and thought he saw a cloud that looked like her face. He was going to miss her so much.

“Mama loved me,” Henry said.

His dad sighed and his shoulders sagged as the church doors slammed behind them. Henry wondered if his dad was mad at him for lifting the lid of the coffin. He had only done what his mother had told him to do. His dad looked lost, and Henry was a little worried, because his dad had always been the one to know what to do when there were problems. Henry knew this was one of the things that his mother loved his dad for because she had told him.

“Don’t worry Papa. You will fix it, right?” Henry said, looking up at his dad. His dad looked down at Henry. He saw the tears in his dad’s eyes. Henry let go of his dad’s hand and hugged him around his legs as hard as he could.

“Okay Papa, I will try to help you fix it,” Henry said. His dad leaned down and picked Henry up. Henry clung to his dad’s neck as they walked down the steps of the church.

Henry looked to the sky to see the sun breaking from out behind the clouds again. The blue afternoon sky reminded Henry of the night before when they had eaten their dinner outside and caught lightening bugs together.

“I love you Henry,” his dad said into Henry’s ear. Henry felt his dad’s hands hold him tighter. Henry wondered if he would ever see his grandparents again when his dad said something else.

“I will need you to be strong for me later when we go to the burial, okay?”

Henry leaned back and looked at his dad’s face. He saw many deep lines near his eyes and on his forehead that he had never noticed before. Henry was only four, but he knew that his dad needed him, and Henry felt like he was old enough help. He nodded at his dad, and got a big smile in return.

I Never Knew

It was Saturday night and I was house-sitting for my parents. They left for a vacation down in Florida with my younger brother this morning. I decided to have my friend Emily over to hang out. We were supposed to do some writing together, but we watched a movie instead. It was not often that I got a chance to hang out with Emily, and it was usually taxing on my mind, depending on what was going on in Emily's life at the moment. I was often the sounding board for Emily because she didn't have a supportive family.

Lying in my parent's bed I can hear my friend Emily making a funny sound out in the kitchen. It's a mix between a burp and a hiccup. Throwing off my covers for the third time since I got into bed at ten, I get up to make sure she isn't puking into the sink. My eleven p.m. clarity is beginning to affect me despite all the alcohol I had drunk, and I'm steadier on my feet than I imagine I should be. We had been mixing drinks since five that night.

Emily looks up from her small computer at me as I come around the corner. "Are you okay?" I ask with a quick smile because I'm glad that she's not throwing up.

She grins back.

"I have the hiccups," she says. Her glasses are sliding down her nose, so she pushes them back up and wiggles her face to make the fit comfortable. "You're beautiful, Lisa."

"Thanks. Have you had any water?"

She grabs the bottle of vodka next to her. "I've got *shum* water," she says as I walk towards her and take the bottle out of her hand. Emily started as my younger sister's friend, and when they had a falling out, our friendship grew. She had come to view me as an older sister as well as a friend.

“That’s not water. Let me get you some,” I say. I place the bottle, which is emptier than the last time I saw it, on the counter. I grab a red Solo cup and fill it with ice.

“You’re beautiful, even *wifout* pants,” Emily says from the table. I’m filling the cup with water at the sink, and turn to look over my shoulder at her.

“Thanks, but I have a big butt.” I grab one of my butt cheeks and squeeze.

“No, it’s not big,” she says.

I barely hear her. She’s had a lot to drink, and now she needs water and sleep soon. I need sleep too. I hand her the cup and sit down in the chair next to her.

“Here’s your water, drink up,” I say, finding myself using a voice that I would speak to a young child with. I laugh at how funny it seems to me to be speaking like that to my drunken friend. The kitchen chair is hard and uncomfortable, and it makes me think about the soft bed that I want to be in. I’m just out here for my friend, playing a part that I thought I would never be mature enough for.

“What?” Emily wants to know what I laughed at.

I shake my head.

“Drink more water,” I say, pointing to her cup.

“You know what, Lisa? It’s not even about the water. It’s about you. You’re so great. You bring life to people. See these flowers?” She reaches her hands towards the small arrangement of snowball flowers that I had picked earlier that day. “You know they’re alive. Even after they die, they will be alive. You see that? See the little petal? It’s so beautiful. Do you understand?” she says with a glance at me.

“Sure, yes,” I say quietly. I’m not sure what to say. Part of what she’s saying and how she’s acting seems hilarious to me, and I’m having a hard time keeping a straight face as I listen to her stereotypical drunken rant.

She takes my hand in hers and pats my bare thigh with the other.

“Don’t think I’m just saying this because I’m drunk. You, and your mom—your family. You bring the life. It’s beautiful, so beautiful,” she says. Tears begin to stream down her face. She pushes up her glasses to wipe them away. “Do you see it? Here, feel the flower. Do you see the life you bring to it? You know it will be beautiful even after it dies,” she says.

I touch a delicate, white flower petal of one of the clusters. It is soft and beautiful; this I know. The white flower, as it dies, will turn a tan pink color that will eventually become transparent. Yes, these flowers are beautiful in life and death. I didn’t realize me knowing it meant I brought life to people. I’m trying to make sense of everything Emily is telling me as we sit at my parent’s kitchen table. She has only taken three gulps of water, and needs to drink more before we go to bed.

“Yes, I know,” is all I can say to Emily about the flowers, even though her comment wasn’t all about the flowers. “You need to drink more water now.” I’m choosing to try and ignore what she said about me bringing life to people, because I can’t seem to make full sense of it. I still have alcohol in my system, and I attribute my slow mind to that. Normally I like to think about what I hear before I really reply. Although, I’m not sure if I can come up with a reply for what Emily is telling me.

“Mmmm, water.” Emily grabs the straw and gulps down some more. She stops and lifts the cup slightly. “You know, it’s not even about the water.” She brings her hand down and the

almost full cup of water flips off the table. Water splashes the wooden floor boards and the plastic cup clatters after. “What just happened?”

I laugh out loud because I can’t believe that I actually have to deal with everything my drunk friend is doing and saying. Every other time I had been drinking with friends, someone else had taken care of any problems or mishaps that the rowdy, fun drunks had gotten into. It makes me sad, because I’m just a tired drunk, and I wish I could have more fun like a silly drunk does, and then I could have someone else take care of me. I’m the oldest in my family, and have always watched out for my younger siblings. It would be nice for someone to do that for me.

“It’s ok,” I say. I get up and rummage through the kitchen drawer that the rags are kept in but I can’t find any. I remember that my mom had dropped and broken a juice container that morning, and they had used all the rags on that spill. The water is soaking into the nice floorboards my dad spent so much time putting down while I stand there and decide what to do, so I grab some regular towels instead.

As I begin to sop up water, Emily is sitting in her chair saying, “It’s okay. I’m sorry.” I can hear that she’s crying. I laugh again because I’m on my hands and knees under Emily’s chair, and everything just seems absurd.

“This is ridiculous,” I say.

“I’m sorry. Did it get on my computer? No, its okay,” she says through snot bubbles coming out of her nose.

I can’t take her word for it, so I grab her small laptop and use my sleeve to dry off the water on the keypad. She has five internet windows up: various chat rooms and Facebook. I type in good night to the two people she had been messaging. She has the caps lock on, so I actually end up yelling it at them. Emily is playing with a book up on the table. There is a large wet spot

in the new tapestry I had covered my parents table with. I soak it up the best I can with the already wet towels.

“It’s okay, bedtime now,” I say to Emily.

“I wanted to write with you tonight,” she says.

“Uh huh,” I reply. I need to get her some more water to drink; in a closed container this time. I look in the cupboard and find a pink tumbler that has a lid and a straw. Once I have it filled with ice water, I hand it to Emily and sit down beside her again. It’s eleven-thirty, and I’m not even tired anymore. I try to think of what to say to her, about writing, and what she had said to me earlier. Understanding Emily’s drunken revelation about how I influence people would be good for me right now, because lately, my life hasn’t felt like it was making much of a difference in the world. I had been going through the motions of work and college, and felt like I had been waiting for something significant to happen in my life. It didn’t seem like one drunken night with a friend would bring me to that moment, but I had never heard anyone talk about my life like Emily had before. It was intriguing to me.

“I really wanted to write with you. *Shee* the skyline here? I wanted Jessica and Kyle to live there,” Emily says, pointing to a picture in one of her writing books.

“In the city?”

“Yeah, Lisa and Kyle,” she says. This makes me smile because Lisa is my name and she’s obviously confusing herself.

“Drink your water. We need to go to bed,” I say. She sets her chin on the lid of the tumbler and grips the sides with both hands, making the ice clatter within. She sucks from the straw, but too briefly for my liking. If she drinks eight ounces of water for every alcoholic one

she had, the chances of her being hung-over in the morning will be less. It had always worked for me in the past. I didn't want to deal with a hung-over friend in the morning.

"I wanna wait for Lisa and Kyle, I'm gonna punch Kyle. He stole Jessica. I miss my friend. He stole her. I want her back," she says as she tears up again. Her voice gets louder. I point to her water, and she sips at it again.

"You know, you're so beautiful. I think you're going to *shave* someone. Can I tell you something?" she says.

"What?" I rub my forehead with my hand. Did I hear her say that I would "shave someone"?

"Don't tell Jessica, but you're really my best friend. She doesn't care about me or alcohol poisoning. You care about me," she says. Her back is straight and she looks me dead in the eyes.

I try not to stare at the mess crying has made of her face. Jessica's my younger sister, and it's ironic that she is bringing her into the picture. If it weren't for Jessica, I wouldn't be sitting here worrying about whether or not my friend will get alcohol poisoning.

"Thank you, drink up. We need to go to bed. Kyle and Jessica will be home soon," I say. It's pushing eleven-forty five, and I don't think they're coming back soon, but I need an excuse to get Emily to bed. I'm just doing what any friend would do, and it baffles me that someone would not care enough about another person like Emily thinks. Looking back on all of my friendships, I had always been the one to sacrifice for the friend. I just want everyone to be happy. I hate making people upset or disappointed in me.

"Yeah, I think you'll save someone," Emily says and then takes a sip of water. She stops and pushes the tumbler out with both hands still clasped around it. What does she mean by

saying that? How can I possibly know what she really means with all of her jabbering? “Yeah, you’ll save someone,” she says again. I suddenly feel warm and tired.

“You won’t save me,” she says placing her hands on mine. “You’ll touch someone. You’re so beautiful,” she continues.

I look past her to the living room. It makes me uncomfortable when people compliment me, because I never know what to say back. Something about what she says rings true with me though, even though my tired, sluggish mind cannot keep up with Emily’s alcohol soaked one. I try to force myself to think, and shift my eyes back and forth, trying to make a connection. In order for Emily to be saying these things to me, alcohol or not, she must have thought of them before, either knowingly or in her subconscious. Maybe I really have made an impact on someone’s life in my past relationships.

“It’s time for bed. Come on,” I say.

“Don’t you see? I want you to understand. You’ll *shave* someone. Why can’t you *shee*?” she sobs. I pull her into a hug as a way to get her out of her seat.

“I don’t know what to say,” I say. I break our hug, but still hold onto her shoulders to keep her steady on her feet. She snaps to attention and looks at me as if she finally realizes everything she has been saying to me. Maybe she thought I hadn’t been listening or taking her seriously. Her eyes are red from crying.

“You don’t have to say anything, just understand,” she says. I lead her past my chair and walk behind her, offering direction as we go. The ice clacks in her tumbler as we wobble towards the bedroom. It is awkward directing someone who’s stumbling as they walk, but I manage to hold my focus on the end goal of getting my friend safely in bed.

“I do. I understand,” I say. I never realized how much Emily had thought about this before. Why was she telling me all of this now? I hadn’t been the best of a friend to her. Some of the times when she had rambled on about past events over and over, I had to be patient and offer my advice. She had never offered me any type of advice that I had taken seriously before.

“Let’s go to bed,” she says. We stumble into the dark bedroom. She puts her water on the dresser next to the bed. Ava, my cat, is in a box with her kittens and looks at us. Her wide eyes always speak to me, and they tell me that we are making her nervous.

“*Shh*, Ava, it’s okay,” I say. Emily falls straight across the bed and then rolls diagonally. It’s an awkward struggle getting her into the right position, but we finally manage it by working together. I walk around the end of the bed and get in next to her, pulling the blankets over me.

“Ava’s such a beautiful cat,” Emily says.

“Yup, do you have your drink?” I ask.

“Yeah, of course, I need to drink that.” She reaches for it, but teeters dangerously on the edge of the bed.

“Don’t move. I’ll get it,” I say, sitting up and reaching behind her for it. She sits up and sucks on the straw for a long time. I can see that the water is more than half gone, and I’m relieved. At least she will not be totally hung over in the morning.

“You know, you’ll save someone,” she stops to say. I move back to my side of the bed.

“Okay. You can’t say anything else to me until you finish your water,” I reply. She sucks on the straw until the tumbler is empty, and then discards it onto the floor. She settles down into bed, dragging the covers with her. I am left with just a thin sheet over me. I pull some more covers back over myself.

“Don’t tell Lisa but she *shaved* me,” Emily says. “You’ll *shave* someone, you *shaved* me. Don’t tell Lisa,” she continues through small sobs. I stare off into the dark. There’s a white reflection on the ceiling from the small lamp next to the bed. Emily points to the small circle of light.

“Do you *shee* God’s *fache* up there? It’s *bootiful*. You and your mom, you brought me to Him. Oh, it’s *sho* beautiful. My mom—a prostitute, I don’t want to be, you *shaved* her,” she says. Her speech is even more garbled and slurred than before, and I realize she must be getting tired.

I feel hot under the covers, and I’m even more confused than before. “That doesn’t make sense. How could I have brought you to God, because—because I don’t know him myself?”

“You *shave* people, but you can’t, because you save people. You won’t know him yet. He doesn’t want you to, because you won’t save people,” she replies.

Surprisingly, this makes sense to me. I guess even if I don’t feel like Christ is in my life, I can still be used as a vehicle for His good works. There has never been a coming to Christ moment in my life like some people have had. I’ve always gone to church and its different functions for the community aspect. I liked making friends and being part of a strong congregation of believers. I’m beginning to understand what Emily is trying to say as I lay in bed next to her, and it makes me really glad that we are friends at that moment.

“You saved me.” She rolls into me, bunching up the blankets and making me warmer. I straighten the sheets and nudge her back over to her side of the bed. She raises her arms over her head and sees her Cape Cod bracelet. We had taken the trip down to Cape Cod about a month ago. While our other two friends had waited in the car, Emily and I had both bought our own genuine Cape Cod Screwball bracelets together. Mine is gold and silver, and hers is all silver.

“I saw this bracelet. My dad, you know. Don’t tell Lisa. He keeps a loaded gun by his bed, every night he loads it. I’m scared,” she sobs again.

I had closed my eyes and opened them again to listen to her and stare into the darkness of the room. What is she getting at by telling me this? The tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I turn to look at her.

“It’s okay,” I say, “Are you scared for your dad?”

She nods. I reach over and pull her close. She turns her head, and I hold her with her hair in my face. I smooth it down with my hand because it tickles. There’s no way I’m getting sleep tonight, because everything that Emily has told me is rattling around in my mind.

“You *shaved* me, Lisa, don’t tell. My dad keeps a loaded gun. I almost did it. I almost killed myself. Our bracelet, it meant more to me than just standing in line. You saved me,” Emily says through more sobs. She tries to pull away from me, but I hug her tighter for a moment before releasing her. She lies still on her back for a while and then sighs heavily, sinking into sleep.

I think about alcohol poisoning again. It makes me sad what she told me, and I wonder how much of it is true. As I lay there and look into the dark, I remember a Youtube video I had watched of Emily. She had posted it as a response to a question from another friend. The question was something like, what does being a Christian mean to you? In the video she had revealed that in the past, before coming to Christ, she had cut herself. At the time of watching the video, I didn’t know how to respond. I never thought that she was someone who would do that, and it was hard for me to understand the mindset that someone has to be in to commit a crime against their body like that. I had never mentioned it to her because I didn’t know what to say or how to bring up the topic.

I decide to stay awake and listen to her breathe. The white spot on the ceiling wavers as my tired eyes begin to water. It's all my fault in the first place that we had drank so much, so now it's my responsibility to keep her alive through the night. It seems like the least I can do for my friend.

Karisa Maynard

Be Happy

Clover takes the phone call while she is working on the teller counter at the main branch. It's a busy Monday morning, and the line is forming three people deep. The head teller tells Clover that it's the school, so Cover has to take it.

"This is Clover," she says into the receiver, turning to face the back wall for privacy.

"This is Jess, the school nurse. I have Annabelle here. She has a fever. Are you able to pick her up?" Clover slumps against the counter next to her. She's tired, and it's only ten in the morning. The bell at the door rings again, signaling the entrance of yet another customer. Clover feels someone tap her shoulder, and turns to see her head teller, Tanya, there.

"Jess, can you hang on a second?" Clover asks. She covers the mouthpiece and gives her attention to Tanya.

"What's wrong?" Tanya should be on the teller line running her own drawer, but Clover is actually blocking the seat to her desk where she stays during the day, even during busy times. Clover steps aside and Tanya plops down into the seat, ignoring the stares of the two waiting customers.

"Annabelle is sick. The school wants me to pick her up," Clover tells Tanya. Perspiration begins to form between Clover's palm and the phone.

"That's too bad," Tanya says, clicking through e-mails on her computer.

"Hey, Jess. Look. I've gotta go back to work. Have you tried calling Andrew?"

"No, Clover, I can do that if you'd like," Jess replies.

Clover tenses her shoulders. Of course she would; she would love Andrew to take more responsibility. Maybe he would agree to taking care of Annabelle if the nurse asks him.

“Call me back if he can’t pick her up, please. Thanks for taking care of Annabelle,” Clover says. She sees Tanya watching her out of the corner of her eye. The strong perfume Tanya is wearing makes Clover eyes water. Another customer comes in. The other teller has been working her butt off, and Clover thanks her before taking her place back at her own window.

Noon comes shortly after that, and the rush of people has slowed down.

“Tanya, I’m going to lunch,” Clover says.

Tanya looks up, and then back down, “Sure,” she replies.

“I’m going to get Annabelle from school,” Clover says. She has already shut down her computer and put away her drawer, but still needs to run her plan by Tanya.

“Andrew couldn’t get her?” Tanya asks. She looks back at Clover and crosses her arms in front of her chest. Clover shakes her head no, and tenses, waiting for Tanya to say that she can’t go. Jess had called back an hour ago and said that Clover needed to get Annabelle.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be,” Clover says.

Tanya shrugs. “You gotta do what you gotta do. We’ll take it out of your earned time. Let me know if you can’t get back in today and I’ll make the adjustments,” Tanya says. She slides across the floor in her rolling chair to get something out of her purse under the counter. When she comes back to her desk and sees Clover still standing there, Tanya puts down the tube of lipstick she had taken out.

“What are you still doing here?”

Clover shakes her head. She thought that Tanya had been grabbing something out of her purse for Clover. When she realizes her error, Clover's feels her cheeks flush warm. She leaves quickly. The sidewalk outside is slick with ice, and Clover's high heels don't have good tread. She tries to be careful, but when she steps off the curb, she hits a patch of ice and twists her ankle.

Clover curses and climbs into her car. This day has not gone well so far, and there's still a sick kid to deal with. Clover sits in her car for a moment before starting it, taking deep breaths to calm down. She had hoped that Andrew would have been able to get Annabelle and stay with her for the rest of the day, but it's probably better that she's the one leaving work. He normally works a job that allows him flexibility, but Clover hadn't seen much of Andrew in the last two months. When he wasn't out with his friends, he was holed up in the spare room watching his sports games. Clover starts up her car with a sigh and heads for the elementary school.

The fifth time Annabelle asks why, Clover slams on the brakes and pulls over to the side of the road. She sits there in the bucket seat of her Subaru and peers back at her daughter in the rearview mirror. Annabelle looks like any normal four year-old girl. Her straight brown hair is put up in pigtails, and her cute button nose is turned up. The puffy pink coat she has on hides the top part of her body and crowds her neck. She looks pretty well for having a cold.

"Mommy, why stop?" Annabelle asks.

Clover sighs and looks down at the steering wheel. Her foot is still on the brake, and cars pass by close enough to slightly rock the car. The day is grey and overcast, and it seems highly unlikely that the sun will ever show its face again. Clover pulls out her cell phone to call Andrew, but as she's dialing his number her phone dies. She doesn't have the charger in her car.

Clover wonders if Andrew would even care if she were to call him and tell him that she's on her way home with a sick child. She throws the phone back into her purse.

"Mommy just needs time to think, honey. It's okay," Clover says in a sing-song fake voice to her daughter. She turns around to look at her daughter. Annabelle's car seat is strapped into the middle part of the bench seat in the back of the car, so Clover can reach her easily from the front.

"What's wrong Mommy?" Annabelle kicks her heels against the seat under her. Dirty snow goes flying off and splatters against the side of Clover's arm and the back of the front seat.

"Oh, honey. Don't do that," Clover says. She puts the car in park and reaches around to grab Annabelle's bag from the backseat.

"Why?"

As Clover opens the front pocket of the bag she notices the light outside begin to fade more. She blinks a couple times to allow her eyes to adjust and sits back in her seat with a wet wipe. The paved pull-off that they're sitting in has a little glass house that bus riders can wait in for the free shuttle to pick them up. No one's there. Across the road, two tan, squat apartment buildings are nestled behind a small, open lawn. Clover's seeing it all for the first time after driving past the same place for the last two years on her way to and from work.

As she looks at the apartments, she thinks about her life: stuck in a dead end job as a bank teller, living with her fiancé in a rented apartment because he doesn't want to commit to a place of their own, and raising a daughter with little support from Andrew, despite the engagement ring on her finger. Clover looks back at Annabelle and the car seems to suddenly lengthen and move her daughter out of reach. Clover feels dizzy, and she hopes she hasn't caught Annabelle's cold. She looks over at the apartment buildings again and sees two figures moving slowly across

the driveway of the complex towards her car. She knows she should probably leave, because the bus would have nowhere to park, but she doesn't feel like driving again. Clover remembers what she had been doing and uses the wet wipe from Annabelle's bag to clean off the seat and her own arm.

"Mommy, those are for me!"

"Come on, Annabelle, let's get out maybe?"

"Why Mommy? I don't want to," Annabelle says.

"Fine, stay here. I'm just going to get out for a little bit." Clover swings open her door, and the cold air hits her bare legs. Wearing a dress that day had not been a good choice on her part, and her pea-coat only reaches down to her knees. Annabelle screams from the back seat in protest.

"Why, Mommy, Why?"

Clover slams the door shut. She walks to the front of the car and sits against the hood. The engine gives off warm air that feels nice on the backs of her legs. Her ankle throbs slightly. The calamity in Clover's heart is startling to her. She only wants to be the best mother that she can be. Her mother had told her before that she was too young to have a kid, and perhaps she was right. Why is she so irritated today? Clover tries to imagine the future that she wants with Andrew and Annabelle. She would love a house of their own, and more support and interest from Andrew would be wonderful. Above her head, the dry paper leaves that still cling to some trees rattle in the wind. The figures she had seen appear to be an elderly couple walking to the bus stop. A woman is holding an older gentleman's arm as they cross in front of Clover and step up on the curb next to her car.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” the man says. His white hair is slicked back business-like, but his sweat suit speaks of retirement and he walks with a straight black cane. He has a pleasant smile, but his eyes linger too long on Clover’s face. It has always made her uncomfortable when older men look at her like that. She thinks about Annabelle in the car, and her dead cell phone. The woman attached to the man’s arm wears a stupid smile on her face, and Clover guesses that she’s happy being beside this man. Maybe he’s not as bad as she quickly judged him to be.

“Mommy!” Annabelle says.

Clover turns and sees that Annabelle has climbed out of her booster seat and has her head stuck out the window she has rolled down. How did she manage to do that all on her own? The last thing Clover needs today is Annabelle falling out of the car. She had just wanted a moment of peace; was that too much to ask?

“What are you doing?” Clover shouts at Annabelle. She goes over to the door.

“Ma’am, do you need any help?” The woman is at Clover’s side and is smiling at Annabelle. The older man is watching from the curb with intense interest.

“Hi, I’m sick. Mommy’s taking me home. Why you out here?” Annabelle asks the strange woman. The strange woman continues to wear a stupid smile on her face, and Clover can only guess at what sort of mental illness she has. Clover opens the door and grabs her daughter before she falls out. As she puts her back in her seat, Annabelle protests. “I wanna talk!”

“Annabelle Grace. What have I told you about talking to strangers?” Clover says and looks over her shoulder at the woman who has rejoined arms with the man. They are standing on the sidewalk watching Clover.

“What a nice day out here, huh?” the man asks Clover when she gets out of the back seat. It’s not really that nice, but it is one of the milder winter days of the season so far. The man’s eyes are still lingering too long on Clover’s face, and it’s really making her uncomfortable.

“Yeah. We’re just stopping for a minute. I have to go now,” Clover says as she walks around the front of her car and gets back in. She shuts the door against the cold. Clover puts her blinker on and waits to pull back out into traffic. Annabelle is watching the elderly couple. The older man raises his hand and moves a little closer to the car. Clover scans her rear view mirror, looking for a break in the line of cars, so she can pull out and leave the bus stop behind.

“I hope you feel better, young lady,” the woman says to Annabelle through the still open window.

“Thank you!” Annabelle says. The woman waves at her and she waves back. Annabelle has a large smile on her face when she looks back up front at Clover. Clover puts up the window as she shakes her head. They watch the couple as they begin to wave at passing cars. One car honks, startling Clover.

“Mommy, why are they waving?” Annabelle points.

“Shh, it’s not polite to point. I don’t know what they’re doing.” Clover steps on the gas when there is a break in traffic, but can see the couple in her rearview mirror. They continue to wave and smile at the passing cars. They are out in the cold, just waving, and suddenly it hits Clover. They are doing more than just waving, they are sharing their happiness. On a cold, grey winter day, people are actually happy enough with their life to perform such a crazy act. Clover watches as they disappear from sight. It seems that even if the woman and man are not perfect, they can still be happy.

Clover feels herself smile a little, and she looks back at her complacent daughter. They had a positive effect on Annabelle, and some red color has come back to her cheeks. Clover looks between the road and her daughter in the back seat and sees Annabelle's eyes slowly start to droop and her head begin to fall forward. Clover turns her focus on getting home safely, thinking the about how she will talk to Andrew when he gets home.

The dishes are piled high in the sink and the smell of stale water hits Clover's nose as soon as she opens the door to their small rented apartment.

"Hello?" Clover calls out. She doesn't know if Andrew is home or not. His car wasn't out in the parking lot, but he has often left it at work and hitches rides with their next door neighbor. He must still be at work.

"Mommy, help," Annabelle says.

Clover turns around, closes the front door and helps her daughter take off her coat and shoes. Annabelle is sniffing the whole time. Clover wonders if they have any medicine left from the last time Annabelle was sick.

"Why don't you go lay down in bed Annabelle?"

Annabelle goes to sit on the couch and looks at her bare feet. Her socks had come off inside her boots. Annabelle is fighting hard to keep her eyelids open.

"T.V.," Annabelle says, pointing to the box television set. The stand it sits on has seen better days, but every time they had moved in the past, Andrew had insisted on keeping the piece of junk.

Clover crosses the living room after taking off her own shoes and coat and picks Annabelle up off the old couch that Andrew had acquired from his brother. The frame of the

couch had been repaired long ago with zip ties. Clover was always afraid of sitting on it for fear of it breaking.

“Let’s put you to bed and get you some medicine, okay?” Clover says carrying Annabelle down the small hallway to her bedroom. She looks down at her daughter and sees her eyes close with exhaustion. Well, now I can’t give her any medicine, Clover thinks. She gently places her sleeping daughter down in bed and covers her.

The front door slams, and Clover stops moving in hopes that the sound hasn’t woken Annabelle. She watches the chest of her daughter move up and down slightly as Annabelle sleeps on soundly.

“Clover?” Andrew calls down the hallway. He steps into the bedroom and blocks the light from the doorway. “What are you doing home?”

Clover stands and puts her finger to her lips. Andrew looks past Clover to where Annabelle lays in bed. Clover takes Andrews arm and pushes him out of the bedroom. She shuts the bedroom door gently behind her. The fake wood grain of the manufactured door stares at her as she gathers her thoughts about what to say to Andrew. Clover turns around and sees Andrew walking back down the hallway towards the living room. Clover follows him and waits until they are standing in the kitchen to speak.

“She’s sick,” Clover says to Andrew who is standing at the counter scooping out some leftover food for his lunch. Clover’s stomach growls at her. She had forgotten to eat lunch herself.

“Is she really?” Andrew asks.

Clover sighs. “Yes, she really is. She has a fever and fell asleep while we were driving home.

Andrew licks off the fork he's using and waits for the microwave to finish heating his food. The spicy smell of taco meat wafts through the air. Clover looks at the kitchen floor and sees the splotches of dried on food that had been dripped in various places.

"Okay, are you staying here with her?" Andrew asks. He leans against the counter and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

Clover sighs again, she has a headache forming, and doesn't want to argue with Andrew right now about him not being able to stay with Annabelle and watch her.

"I guess I am," she says.

Andrew turns at the beep of the microwave and pulls out the steaming food. He pulls out one of the taco wraps and piles the meat into the middle.

"Good," he says. He wraps up his taco and takes the plate with him to the spare room. Clover hears the television turn on. She can't believe that he just walked away from her when she was talking to him about Annabelle.

She walks to the door of the spare bedroom. "Andrew, do we have any of her medicine left?" Clover asks.

The room is dark, with the curtain pulled tight over the window, and the television is casting a flickering glow over the small couch that sits in the room. Andrew's in the middle of a large bite of taco.

He shakes his head. "No, I think it's all gone," he says with his mouth full.

"Why?" Clover shifts on her feet. The cold air in the apartment is making her bare legs prickle. Her stomach rumbles again. She really should get something to eat for lunch.

"I had trouble sleeping one night," Andrew says. He doesn't look away from the T.V., but picks up the remote and turns the volume a little higher.

“You drank the rest of her medicine!” Clover shouts. She moves from the doorway and stands in front of the television screen. Andrew stops the program with the remote and looks at Clover.

“I’m sorry. You can buy some more, right?” he asks. He takes another bite and Clover can hear the spit sounds in the silence of the room as he chews. She’s disgusted.

Clover throws her hands up in the air and stomps over to the door.

“I could use a little more help than that sometimes, you know?” she says before she slams the door for the spare room closed. Clover goes down the hallway to the tiny bathroom, while her heart pounds away madly. She yanks open the medicine cabinet looking for the bottle of cough medicine that was left over from the last time Annabelle had been sick. The empty bottle stares back at her from the shelf. He hadn’t even thrown the damn bottle away. She grabs it off the shelf and throws it into the metal trash can next to the toilet. It makes a loud clang because there’s no trash bag. Clover sits down on the closed toilet seat and puts her head in her hands. The smiling kids on the medicine bottle grimace at her. She feels tears come to her eyes.

“Mommy?”

Clover looks up and sees Annabelle standing in the doorway of the bathroom. Her hair is messy and she is rubbing her eyes.

“Oh, Annabelle,” Clover says holding her arms out for Annabelle to come to her. Her daughter takes a couple steps into the room and then turns as if she is looking for someone.

“Where’s Daddy?”

Clover drops her arms and gets up. She walks to Annabelle and pushes her into the hallway.

“Are you hungry?” Clover asks. She feels her own stomach growl again. In front of her, Annabelle shakes her head. “You’re not?”

Annabelle turns around and looks up at Clover. “I guess so. Maybe crackers?”

They make their way into the kitchen and Clover finds a package of saltine crackers for Annabelle. She sits her down at the small table and gives her a glass of water. Clover finds a container of yogurt in the refrigerator and peels open the cover. She sniffs it to determine if it is good enough to eat, and then shrugs her shoulders.

Clover sits at the table eating her yogurt and watches Annabelle munch on saltines. The crumbs stick to Annabelle’s face, some falling to the small wooden table top. Andrew comes out of the spare room.

“I thought you were sick?” Andrew comes up behind Annabelle and messes her hair with a hand. He walks past and puts his plate in the sink. Annabelle shrugs and takes another bite.

“What’s wrong with you guys?” Andrew asks. He takes out the milk from the fridge and drinks right from the container. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Why were you guys yelling before?” Annabelle asks, looking at Clover.

“I wasn’t yelling, that was your mother,” Andrew says. He comes by Annabelle’s chair and lifts her out of it. She squeals as he lifts her above his head.

“Daddy! I’m eating,” she says. Andrew lowers her onto his hip. He looks over at Clover whose heart had skipped a beat when Andrew had lifted Annabelle up. Andrew’s hands are dirty from work and Clover is worried about Annabelle’s clothes getting smeared. Clover glowers at Andrew. He looks between Annabelle and Clover and then sighs.

“Come on, time for bed,” Andrew says to Annabelle. She stuffs the rest of her cracker in her mouth and nods. Andrew grabs her cup of water off the table and winks at Clover before he

walks down the hallway. Clover shakes her head at him. He can be such a fool sometimes.

Clover sits still at the table listening in on Andrew and Annabelle talking. She can't make out any words, but it makes her heart soar when she hears Annabelle's laughter.

Had she been blind before to how good Andrew was with their daughter? Clover sits back and lets her spoon sink into her yogurt. Tears prick her eyes. Life had been moving by so quickly and the days had been blurring together. She couldn't remember the last time she had actually noticed that Andrew and Annabelle got along fine. Maybe things were really better than she thought. Why was there bitterness living inside her then?

Andrew comes back into the kitchen, his boots clunking heavily on the linoleum floor.

"I've gotta go back to work. We're short a few men today, and I've had to pick up their slack," Andrew says. He takes his baseball cap off of the hook by the door and shrugs on his heavy winter jacket. The jeans he's wearing are filthy, and from where Clover is sitting she can see the dirt under his fingernails. Creases on his forehead are deep and caked with a fine dust. Bits of grey hair stick out around his ears. When did he get so old?

Clover stands, making the chair scrape across the kitchen floor. She winces at the sound. Clover moves to where Andrew stands, looking expectantly at her. Hesitantly she takes one of his hands and traces the nail on his pointer finger with her thumb. He leans down and gives her a rough kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks for putting her back in bed," Clover says, feeling like her voice is catching in her throat. Her heart aches because she wants to say so many other things to Andrew. To apologize for yelling, or for anything else that she had done wrong in the past. Andrew moves his hand to her cheek and brushes away a single tear that had escaped from Clover's eye. She breathes in and it sounds ragged.

“Go get some sleep, you’re tired,” Andrew says. He kisses her again, this time on the lips, and Clover wants to fall into the smell of him. The dirty, earthy smell of the working man somehow always turns her on. Now that he’s pointed out that she’s tired, Clover feels it in her legs, and leans slightly into Andrew. She nods at his request. Perhaps he should stay home and take care of both of them.

“Bye, Love you,” Andrew says. He leaves before Clover can reply. She is left standing at the closed apartment door wondering what had just happened. Clover never remembered Andrew acting like he just did, or it had been a very long time since he had been romantic like that. Maybe Annabelle said something to him? Or had she? What could a four year old say to a man to make him realize that he needed to show his love for his partner? Clover shakes her head. She can’t imagine that Annabelle has the right words for that.

Clover thinks again about the clarity she had experienced at the bus stop and wonders if she is still experiencing it. As she walks down the hallway to her bedroom the walls seem to bend in towards her. She puts her hands out to the side to steady herself. Maybe she really does need some sleep.

“How are you feeling, honey?” Clover asks Annabelle the next morning. They had both slept straight through the night and it’s now seven o’clock in the morning. Clover has to figure out if she can go to work that day or if she has to stay home again to take care of Annabelle.

Annabelle stirs in her small bed. Her hair is a tangled mess, and she’s still wearing her shirt and pants from yesterday. She rolls over to face the wall and keeps her eyes closed. Clover holds her hand to Annabelle’s forehead and feels that it’s still quite warm. It seems her fever had gotten worse overnight.

“Oh, Annabelle. I’m sorry. Go back to sleep, honey,” Clover says and gets up off the bed. She closes the bedroom door behind her softly as she leaves. Andrew’s still in bed, because he doesn’t have to be into work until nine. Clover opens the door to their bedroom and sneaks in quietly. She sits on the bed next to where Andrew is still snoring under the covers.

Clover reaches out her hand and places it on her fiancé’s shoulder, and gently pushes him. He stops snoring, but doesn’t open his eyes.

“Andrew,” Clover says.

He groans and turns away from her.

“Andrew, Annabelle needs someone to stay home with her today.” The dark blue light of morning is beginning to filter in through the window, and the sky looks like it might be clearer today.

“What?” Andrew says, rolling over, rubbing his eyes. He grabs Clover around the waist and drags her down for a kiss. His breath smells like stale water and makes Clover’s stomach turn. She still has to eat breakfast, and her appetite is almost ruined. Clover struggles to sit up against Andrew’s muscular arms. He turns towards her and curls his body around hers. She can feel that he is aroused through the blanket; as men always are right when they wake up, but she doesn’t have time to mess around this morning.

“We need to figure out what to do about Annabelle,” Clover says, managing to break free from Andrew. He puts his hands to his forehead and rubs.

“Is she still sick?” he asks.

“Yeah, and I can’t take today off,” Clover says, placing her hands on Andrew’s chest. He sighs and sits up. His dark hair is getting thick and tufts are sticking up around his ears. Clover laughs out loud.

“What’s so funny?” Andrew says. He grabs Clover’s sides and begins to tickle her. She screams and squirms away from his hands. Andrew’s alarm clock begins to buzz and Clover sees that it’s already seven-thirty. Clover grabs Andrew’s hands and looks into his eyes.

“Andrew, can you please stay home with Annabelle today?” she asks. She needs to know that he’s ready for the responsibility. Clover can’t afford to miss another day at work, as much as she wants to stay home with her daughter instead.

“Yeah, I guess I can. Screw the other guys; I’ve been covering for them for too long. My body could use a break too,” Andrew says, releasing her hands and laying back down. “Aren’t you going to be late for work?” He pulls the covers back up around him and faces away from Clover. She feels her heart swell with joy that Andrew has agreed to take care of Clover, but there is still a little doubt nagging at her mind. Andrew works in construction, and he’s been working on a big job for the last two months.

“Are you sure?” Clover asks.

She watches as Andrew nods and rubs his eyes.

“Call me at work if you need anything.” Clover stands up and picks out an outfit from the basket of clean clothes that she hasn’t put away yet. Her shirt is a little wrinkled, but it will have to do. She puts on a necklace and a small chain bracelet. There’s no time for makeup; she would barely have time to stop at the drive-through to get her coffee and bagel.

“We’ll be fine. Have a good day at work,” Andrew says through the blankets.

“I love you,” Clover says. In that moment she realizes that she really does. She had been saying it for six years without meaning it.

Andrew mumbles back his reply. It’s his typical reply, and Clover guesses that he’s already falling back asleep.

Clover closes the door behind her as she leaves the bedroom. She stops in to check on Annabelle one more time. Annabelle sits up in bed as the hallway light comes in through the door. Annabelle has a panicked look on her face. Clover sits down next to her and pulls her into a hug.

“Shhh, it’s ok. Mommy’s gotta go to work now. Daddy’s going to stay home with you. You’ll be fine, honey,” Clover says. She can feel Annabelle nod against her shoulder. Clover holds her out to inspect her face.

“How are you feeling?” Clover asks. Annabelle shrugs and pushes her hair out of her face with the palm of her hand. Some strands are still stuck to her forehead with sweat. Annabelle’s eyes droop again. “You get some more sleep, and call to Daddy if you need anything. Okay?” Clover says. Annabelle nods again. Clover lays her back down and covers her with the blankets. She brushes the pieces of hair off Annabelle’s forehead.

“Mommy?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you wave to those people today?” Annabelle asks. Clover doesn’t know what her daughter means at first.

“What?”

“The people by the road. I liked them. Can you wave to them?” Annabelle asks. She’s smiling, but looks tired.

Clover remembers their encounter with the elderly couple yesterday and nods. “Sure I will. If they’re there today, I’ll wave to them,” Clover says. She kisses her daughter’s forehead. “I really have to go to work now, honey. I love you. Be good for Daddy,” Clover says as she stands up from the bed. She hears Annabelle sigh, and knows that she will be asleep again in a

few minutes. Andrew is still not out of bed either, and as Clover steps out into the cold morning, she cannot help herself from thinking about how the day at home will be for Andrew and daughter. Would he have enough patience for her questions? Clover would like to crawl back into the warm bed with Andrew, but she has a promise to keep for her daughter to wave at the stupid happy people on her way to work. They probably won't even be there, but Clover is feeling a lot better about today.

Her car is cold when she gets in, but she cranks the heat, and it is soon pouring over her face as she drives, heating her cheeks. Tuesday at the bank will be slower, and she will have to pick up some more medicine for Annabelle on her lunch. Clover can't help thinking about what there is in the house for Andrew and Annabelle to eat for meals, and if she had gotten enough food at her last shopping trip as she passes by the tan apartment buildings. The elderly couple isn't out there, but a group of kids stand by the road in the cold, waiting for the bus. Clover waves to the crowd, and gets a few waves and smiles back. While she drives the rest of the way to work Clover thinks about how lucky she is to have a place to live, a loving daughter, and a partner that provides for her.

Henley

The hum of the wholesale store reverberated quietly through the cavernous ceilings. Large white fans spun at a leisurely pace to fight away the heat from outside. Toni's shirt was sticking to her skin, and her jeans felt constricting. Brian was waiting in the car for her while she picked up some groceries. She had just checked out and was on her way to the exit.

Brian met Toni at the door and looked through the cart for his cereal. Toni had of course forgotten to buy it for him.

"Uh, Toni, you forgot my cereal," Brian said. He was standing at the end of the cart, blocking Toni's path to the car. They were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and people had to walk around them to get by.

Toni was tired, and just wanted to go home. She felt her shoulders begin to burn in the hot sun. Brian's face was already red from being out in the car. Toni sighed.

"I'm sorry. I forgot," Toni said. She looked at her receipt to avoid making eye contact with Brian.

"Why didn't you get it in the first place?" Brian put his hands on the cart, and Toni saw where his wide fingers gripped the metal basket. She missed the times when he would run his fingers over her shoulders and back. It had been so long since she had seen any affection from him. Toni felt like every day she stayed with him, there were just more things that she did to displease him. She wasn't going to let a simple mistake ruin her day though. Toni sighed.

"Can you bring these to the car, please? I'll get you're cereal," Toni said as she released the cart.

"Fine, but make it quick, though," Brian said. "Don't forget to get the right kind of—."

She walked away from Brian before she heard what type of cereal he wanted. The florescent lights overhead reflected off of the polished concrete floor as Toni made her way back into the store. Toni wished that Brian would just appreciate the good things she does for him and not always focus on the things she does wrong.

Toni turned down the aisle that held the boxed cereal. At this store, they had a long row of dispensers that were filled with no-name brand cereal. Toni decided that Brian deserved the cheap cereal.

Another man was standing in the aisle staring at the row of dispensers. He was wearing tan khaki pants and the red shirt that all of the employees of BJ's Wholesale store wore as their uniform. His medium length hair hung straight and covered the side of his face in the front.

"There are a lot of choices here, huh?" Toni asked. It was always awkward being next to a stranger, and she was trying for casual conversation to break the silence. She could hear the voices of others throughout the store, and the occasional squeal of a child, or the bad wheel of a shopping cart, but they were alone in their aisle.

He turned his head towards Toni, but she could see that he still held eye contact with the wall of cereal. The Plexiglas that was covering the labels of the cereal threw back the reflection of the overhead lights and whoever was standing in front of them.

"I personally like the chocolate cookie crisp kind," Toni said reaching for a bag to fill up. She walked over to the cookie crisp dispenser but stopped at the imitation cheerios instead.

"But this isn't for me, it's for a friend," she said. The man had not replied to any of Toni's conversational starters, and she felt foolish that she had even tried. She felt a deep blush creep across her cheeks, and she tried for one more glance at the stranger as she was filling up the bag. He was looking at her. There was something beautiful, but haunting in his stare. She got

goose bumps, even though it was summer. Toni vaguely heard the scatter of the cereal as it started to pour out over the top of her bag and onto the floor.

The stranger smiled. Toni fumbled with the lever to stop the flow of cereal, but by the time she got it unstuck, there was a small pile at her feet. She sighed as she thought about how this was just another thing to add to the list of what had gone wrong that day. Toni knew Brian would scold her with the same tone used for speaking harshly to a child. She decided she wouldn't tell him.

"I'm so sorry," Toni said to the guy. He would probably have to clean up the mess. "Do you have a broom? I can help clean this."

He was still smiling at Toni, and she could see his perfect teeth. She crinkled the full cereal bag in her hand and looked down at the floor.

"Maybe I should just go?" Toni asked.

The man shook his head no then held up his finger to tell her to wait. He walked towards the end of the aisle that intersected with the wall, not the main floor, and disappeared around the corner. Toni shuffled away to avoid stepping on the individual cereal pieces and creating more of a mess. She wondered how long she should wait for the man to come back. Brian was probably getting impatient, and there was some ice cream that she had to get into the freezer before it melted. She would feel bad if she just left this mess for that man to clean up, though, especially since he saw her make it.

There was a pile of boxes stacked up on the floor across from the cereal, and Toni sat down on one of them to wait. She clutched the overfull bag of cereal tight to prevent more spilling. It must have been at least five minutes that passed before someone even walked by the

aisle, and they didn't even look down Toni's way. She decided she would have to go find the man again, so she walked to where he had disappeared around the corner.

A toilet paper display was on the end of the cereal aisle, and to Toni's surprise the man was sitting on top of a short stack of the paper products with his head in his hands. A pang of sympathy rang through Toni's heart for the man; it seemed she had ruined his day.

"Um, hi there, it's okay. I can find a broom or someone else to help us, if you want," Toni said.

He didn't move. She wondered if she should just leave, but an impulse pulled at her to stay. She sat down on the toilet paper next to him. He looked up at her and she could see curiosity from earlier still on his face. Again she was attracted to his eyes, and they held each other's gaze for a minute.

Another employee walked by in a flash of red. She stopped, and then retraced her steps back to where Toni and the young man sat.

"Toni, what are you doing here?" the employee said.

Toni looked up and saw that it was her friend Allie. Toni stood up quickly as if she had been caught doing something wrong. She held up the crumpled bag of cereal to show Allie what she was getting. She nodded, as if that was an acceptable answer and then looked at the other employee. He still had the smile on his face and Allie caught it from him. She turned to Toni again and said, "I see you've met my friend Henley."

"Henley, this is Toni," Allie said to the man. He held out his hand for Toni to shake.

"My full name is Antoinette, but everyone calls me Toni," Toni said and grabbed his hand. It was warm and the light brown color of his skin extended to the soft skin of his palm.

Toni felt the blush creeping into her cheeks again. They had locked eyes and were still shaking hands.

“We got a call that some cereal needed cleaning up,” Allie said to Toni. She peered around the end of the aisle. “I don’t suppose you had anything to do with it?” she said with a knowing smirk.

Henley let go of Toni’s hand, but she could see his hand hovering in the air out of the corner of her eye. Next thing she knew, Henley’s fingers were brushing Toni’s cheek over and over again.

Toni didn’t move her head, because it actually felt really good, but shifted her eyes to look at Henley again. His eyes were fixed on Toni’s face and were full of concentration.

“That’s a very beautiful name,” he said.

His voice surprised Toni. He was a skinny guy, but he had the deep accented voice of a foreign man. She wondered why he hadn’t spoken before.

“Um, thanks,” Toni said. His nails were beginning to scratch her, and she reached up to stop his hand. Toni glanced over at Allie and saw that she looked a little worried, but she forced a smile at Toni.

“Henley loves anything beautiful. Too much sometimes. I would take it as a compliment. I’m going to clean up the mess now. I’ll see you later Toni,” Allie said and then walked towards a door in the warehouse wall that Toni suspected was storage for cleaning supplies. She wanted to call out to Allie to not leave her alone with Henley, but let Allie go. Henley was still staring at Toni’s face, but she avoided his eye contact. She wanted to ask him something, but couldn’t think of what to say. The man was intriguing, but it was strange that he had caressed her face on their first meeting. Toni wondered what Brian would think about it if he found out.

“Toni, what the hell’s been takin’ so long?” Brian said as he came storming down the side aisle. He looked at Toni, and then over to Henley. “Who’s this clown?” Toni was standing close to Henley and took a couple steps away. Brian looked frustrated, and his face was even redder than before.

“Brian, calm down. I got your cereal. Henley here was just helping me with the mess I made,” Toni said to Brian. At that moment Allie walked by again with a broom in her hand.

“Hi, Brian. Henley, do you want to help me?” Allie asked. Henley looked from Toni’s face to Allie’s, shook his head once, and then began to back away from the group. Henley seemed scared because Brian was glaring at him. Toni wondered if Brian had seen Henley touch her face. She felt herself blush again as she remembered how Henley’s fingers had felt.

“Let’s go baby, this here’s a freak show I don’t want you hangin’ around with.” Brian grabbed Toni’s hand and started to drag her away. A few people were walking down the aisle nearby and were trying not to stare. Toni pulled her hand out of Brian’s and stopped. He looked back at her. She could see the veins starting to pop out of his neck. Toni looked back to where Henley and Allie stood. They were staring in disbelief at how rude Brian was acting.

“You know what?” Toni said to Brian. He widened his eyes, waiting for what Toni had to say. She shoved the bag of cereal into his chest. It exploded, sending bits of imitation cheerios flying through the air and cascading down onto the floor.

“Get your cereal yourself!” Toni walked past him and towards the door. She had the other groceries already in the car and needed to get them put away. Brian would just have to find his own way home that afternoon.

A few days later Toni picked up Allie after work and they went out clothes shopping. They had just finished and were sitting at a traffic light. It turned green and Toni hit the gas. Allie was thrown into the back of the seat beside her. Toni was still frustrated by how Brian had acted at the store, and she hadn't spoken to him since. He had not tried to contact her, and she suspected that he had called one of old high school buddies to get home after she had left him at BJ's. No doubt it was the female friend that he had called too. Toni gripped the wheel and pushed down the pedal harder.

"Whoa, Toni, are you ok?" Allie asked. Toni merged onto the highway to take Allie back home after their failed shopping trip. Summer was disappearing in the Upper Valley and Toni had wanted to get a couple of new fall outfits, but her mood had turned the trip sour. Toni hoped that Allie wasn't too disappointed with how she had acted all afternoon.

"Sorry, it's just this mood. I'm so confused by what's going on, with Brian and all," Toni replied. She let off the gas and got the car down to normal highway speed.

"Screw him, you deserve better," Allie replied, adjusting her short skirt. She had a bag of her work clothes at her feet. Toni worked at one of the local bookstores, and both of them had unstable retail hours, so the shopping trip had been carefully planned.

Dusk was falling, and the sky was turning dark blue. Toni could see red taillights of cars in front of them as they traveled through a construction zone.

"Yeah, I know. But we've been together for two years! That would be awful to leave him now," Toni replied. She didn't feel like talking about her problems anymore. "What about you? You've been with Ralph for four years. How do you guys solve problems?"

“Well, we talk, a lot. Actually we talk about everything. Sometimes I just want to do other things, but talking is a good way of working things out. If you’re meant for each other, it will be okay,” Allie said.

Toni sighed.

“What if we’re not meant for each other?” Toni asked. She looked over and saw that Allie was texting someone on her phone. The glow lit up her face and her black bangs hid her eyes. “Who’s that?”

Allie snapped her phone shut and looked at Toni.

“It’s Henley. He wants to come over tonight to hang out. I told him that Ralph is at work right now, so he probably shouldn’t come over,” Allie said.

“Like, the Henley I met at BJ’s? He was interesting. How have I not met him before?”

Allie shrugged. “He was Ralph’s friend first, and then became mine.”

“Well, we could all hang out together right?” Toni asked. It was Allie’s time to sigh. Toni had invited herself over, and she knew it wasn’t right to do, but she wanted to see Henley again.

“I guess we could watch a movie or something,” Allie said. She took her phone out again and texted Henley. The reply came back sooner than either of them expected. Toni was excited, but she couldn’t understand why. She should have been worrying about fixing her relationship with Brian, but she welcomed the distraction of a new guy. The rest of the car ride Allie was close to silent with only one word answers to Toni’s unfruitful attempts at conversation.

Allie’s driveway was empty when Toni pulled in.

“When do you think Henley will get here?” Toni asked.

Allie was collecting her things before getting out of Toni’s car.

“Hang on, I want to find my phone,” Allie said. She was always losing her phone and it annoyed Toni every time Allie did.

“We should just glue it to your hand,” Toni said with a laugh so Allie wouldn’t take it the wrong way.

“Then I’d lose my hand,” Allie said. She got down on a knee outside the car to look under the front passenger seat. “Got it,” she said, holding up her small black phone. It vibrated in her hand. “That’s Henley. He’s wondering where we are.”

There were no lights on in the house, and Toni wondered where Henley was. She followed Allie. Standing in the front door, Allie turned on the light to the living room. Henley was sitting on the couch and covered his face when the light hit it.

“Shut it off, it hurts!” he shouted.

Allie quickly turned off the light again. Toni and Allie stood in the doorway and let their eyes adjust to the dark. It was close to nine now, and already dark outside. Toni was a little confused that Henley was already there and hiding in the dark living room. She looked over at Allie, but couldn’t see much of her expression.

“Henley?” Allie asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just so nice in the dark right now, don’t you think?” Henley said.

Toni moved into the room after Allie, but left the front door open to let in a little light.

“Sure, I’m going to the kitchen. Toni, do you want anything?”

“Do you have any Coke?”

“Sure, Henley, are you thirsty?” Allie said.

Toni saw Henley’s figure shift on the couch, and got a little cold chill. Allie walked into the kitchen. A square of florescent light was thrown onto the carpet of the living room, and Toni

could see the place a little better. It was a small apartment that Allie and Ralph shared. Toni hadn't been inside in a while, and felt like the stranger. Henley was settled into the couch like he lived there.

"Hi, Henley, I don't know if you remember me. My name's Antoinette," Toni said to Henley. He was staring down at the carpet, and lifted his head when Toni spoke. A smile played upon his lips.

"Of course, the beautiful one. How's your boyfriend?" Henley asked. His black hair hung in his eyes so Toni was spared the intruding green color of them as he looked at her. She blushed at his comment. Toni didn't think she was pretty. Her thick, brown hair was always frizzy, and she had a lumpy body with large, curvy hips. Her skin was not quite brown enough to be black, and not light enough to be white. She was stuck in a phase where dark spots liked to show up around her hairline. They drove her nuts. As every day went by, Toni felt less and less deserving of any kind of attention, from Brian, friends, or even new, handsome guys.

"Umm, well. We are sort of on a break," Toni said.

"Good, he was a jerk," Henley said. He smiled bigger. "You deserve better." Toni wondered if he had spoken to Allie about it. She shifted back and forth on her feet and looked at the open space on the couch. "Would you like to sit down?"

"No, I've been sitting in the car. I think I'll stand for now, thanks," Toni said. She put her coat and bag down on a chair nearby and looked to the kitchen door. Allie came out with a couple of glasses. She handed Toni one and then sat down on the couch next to Henley. "There's a little something extra in there for you," Allie said with a wink.

Toni sniffed her drink and smelled the sweet rum Allie had added. She knew she really needed it, and took a large swallow. The burn and fizz of the drink was pleasing and made Toni feel less anxious. Allie turned on the TV. The bluish light cast large shadows around the room.

“What do you guys want to watch?” Allie asked. Toni wandered over to the nearest wall and began to look at the pictures in the dim flicker of the television screen.

“Whatever you want,” Toni said. She looked over to the couch and saw Henley shrug as if he didn’t care what Allie chose to watch. Toni walked along the wall. Most of the pictures were of Allie and Ralph. They looked happy. It made Toni sick. Near the corner of the wall Toni came upon a different item. It was a large black frame with butterflies pinned up behind the glass. Normally it would have been creepy to Toni, but she felt there was something special about this collection. She moved closer to inspect the wings of each butterfly. There were blue, green, brown, and even red butterflies. Some were large, but most were small.

“Do you like them?” Henley said over Toni’s shoulder.

Toni jumped and spilled a little of her drink. It dripped down her hand and arm and left some small brown spots on the white carpet. How had Henley snuck up on her like that?

“Yeah, they’re beautiful. Allie, I spilled a little, I’m sorry,” Toni said.

Allie waved her hand to dismiss it.

“It’s no big deal. We will get it with the deep cleaning we do every month,” Allie said, and then went back to watching a show about people living in their own junk. Henley was so close to Toni that she could feel his breath on her neck. Toni didn’t dare turn around.

“It took me five years to catch them all. The small one here,” Henley said, reaching over Toni’s shoulder and pointing to a small butterfly near the corner that Toni had not seen, “I caught when I was six.”

Henley drew his finger away from the display case and ran it along Toni's cheek again. It sent shivers down Toni's spine. She wasn't sure how to feel about his apparent obsession with her face.

"Are you two coming back over here?" Allie called from the couch.

Henley left Toni's side and sat back down on the couch next to Allie, and Toni took a seat in the single chair her stuff was in. The show wasn't very interesting to Toni and she kept looking over at Henley. Henley kept glancing over at her too. The show went to a commercial break, and Toni realized that her drink was gone.

"Hey, Allie. I'm going to get another drink. Do you want any?" Toni asked, standing up and stretching.

Allie shook her head and went back to watching the commercial. Toni looked at Henley.

"Would you like something to drink?" She asked him. He shook his head yes, but stood up and walked towards the kitchen. Hesitantly, Toni followed him.

The light was still on in the kitchen, casting an eerie blue glow over the perfectly clean counters. Toni set her glass down and the clink sound reverberated off the walls. Henley opened the refrigerator door and peered in.

"Look, Henley. I'm sorry about the scene in BJ's a few days ago," Toni said. She wanted to reach into the fridge and get the bottle of coke. She started opening the cupboards though; looking for the stash of rum that Allie kept tucked away. Henley took out a can of orange soda and popped the tab open. He looked at Toni and shrugged.

Toni had found the rum, and poured some into her glass. She looked at Henley and waited for him to say something. Toni had so many questions running through her mind, but she didn't want to just bombard him with them. He didn't break eye contact with her, even when he

took a drink from his soda. It was a bit unnerving. Toni searched for words. She crossed her arms in front of her and leaned against the counter.

“So, Allie said that you like beautiful things,” Toni said. She glanced at the door to the fridge behind where Henley was blocking it.

Henley nodded. “I guess you could say that,” he said. “It’s hard to explain, but—” he stopped talking and just stared at Toni’s face. Henley took a step towards her, and even though she was already leaning back against the counter, she felt herself instinctively push back harder so that the edge dug into her back. He raised his hand, and when it touched her cheek she felt the cold of his skin from holding his soda can.

“This line here.” He traced his finger down Toni’s face, from her earlobe to her chin, following her jaw line. Henley’s hand dropped to his side. Toni could hear the fizzing bubbles of the soda he held in the other hand. “I can’t resist,” he said. He brought his hand up again, and Toni was expecting him to touch her again, but he covered his eyes instead.

Toni wanted to reach out to him, but felt glued in place. Who was this strange man, she thought. She could feel where he had touched her face, and brought her own fingers up to trace over the same line. The sensation sent shivers down her spine. She relaxed against the counter. Henley was standing really close, and she could hear his breathing. It had been rash at first, but was becoming steady.

She didn’t know what to say. Had she upset him?

“Umm, can I please get the coke from the fridge?” Toni asked. Henley looked up at Toni. He smiled at her and stepped out of her way. She moved past him and brushed his shoulder with hers. The feeling it gave her was good, but the look Henley had on his face made Toni wonder if she wanted to talk to him anymore.

“Do you ever look in the mirror?” Henley asked. He had moved to lean up against the counter opposite the fridge, and was almost blocking Toni’s path to her cup. She moved next to him and poured some coke into her rum. Toni could feel his eyes on her face again. It was warm in the small kitchen, and Toni felt her cheeks grow hot. Why did she always have to blush around men? She had stopped blushing long ago around Brian, and she knew it was because she didn’t find him attractive anymore. Did she think Henley was attractive?

Toni looked up at Henley as she put the cap back on the soda bottle. “Yeah, of course I do. Do you?” Toni said. She put the bottle back in the fridge and picked up her cup. The bubbles tickled her nose as she took a sip. It was a perfect blend of soda and alcohol. She wrinkled her eyebrows as she looked at Henley. She was trying to make sense of his question.

“Do you ever see a face you are unfamiliar with?” Henley asked. Toni lowered her glass and stared at Henley. His features were all perfect. A swath of black hair falling softly over his forehead, perfectly smooth skin, and deep green eyes. He was taller than Toni, but not too tall, and had a slim build. He was very much the opposite of Brian, who had bulky muscles, short hair, and brown eyes. Brian’s face was smooth only when he shaved his rough goatee off, which wasn’t too often.

Henley waved his hand in front of his face and the motion broke Toni out of her reverie.

“I’m sorry, what was your question again?” Toni asked. Henley was about to speak again when he was interrupted by Allie shouting.

“Are you guys coming back out here?”

Toni hustled past Henley to the safety of the living room. It wasn’t that she felt threatened, just a little uncomfortable. She thought about Henley’s second question, which she did remember, just didn’t know how to answer. There had been times in the past where the face

staring back at her from the mirror didn't seem like her own, like she had been seeing her face the way a stranger might see it. Why had Henley asked her about that, though?

Henley was following behind her, and they all took the seats they had been in before. Allie was texting with someone on her cell phone, and not paying attention to the television. It was too quiet in the room.

"So, Henley, what was that question again?" Toni asked, looking over at Henley. Beyond where he was sitting on the couch, Toni saw Allie look up from her phone with interest planted all over her expression.

Henley shrugged. "It was nothing really. I don't know if you would understand," he said and looked down at his hands wrapped around the orange soda can.

"Well now I'm curious," Allie said.

"Henley asked me if I had ever seen someone different in the mirror before," Toni said.

Allie wrinkled her nose and looked at Henley. "Why would you ask something like that?" she said.

Henley's head sank to his chest. The soda in his hands began to slip. Toni could see his hands trembling from where she sat.

"I told you, you wouldn't understand!" he said, suddenly standing. The soda fell to the floor and exploded in a shower of orange fizz. Allie's mouth fell open, and Toni shrank back into her seat. She hadn't meant to make him upset, but it was scary how quickly his mood had changed. Henley put his hand over his mouth and ran down the hallway. They heard a door slam.

Allie turned to Toni. The soda on the carpet seeped in, and Toni wondered if Allie even cared.

“You should go talk to him,” Toni said. Allie shook her head. The television set blared out an obnoxious jingle from a commercial.

“You go talk to him. You’re the one who brought up the topic,” Allie said, getting up off the couch to pick up the now empty soda can. “God, Ralph is going to kill me,” she muttered and then walked into the kitchen. Toni was stunned. This night was not turning out how she had expected. She sighed and heaved herself off the chair. Her rum and coke was gone again, and Toni felt light headed as she stood up. She brought the empty glass with her as she walked down the hallway.

Toni stood at the closed door and wondered why she had to be the one to talk to Henley. She barely even knew him. As she turned the knob, though, she knew what she could say to him. He would certainly listen to the truth, and hopefully he wouldn’t feel as bad about asking her the question anymore.

The room was dark and chilly. Toni suspected that a window was open, and for a moment she hoped that Henley hadn’t jumped out of it.

“Henley?” Toni said. She heard the bedsprings move and reached for the light switch.

“Don’t, please,” Henley said.

Toni dropped her hand. “I do see a different person, sometimes, in the mirror, and it’s strange. I didn’t know it was possible, but if you’ve had the same thing happen before, then I guess I’m not weird, right?”

Silence met Toni’s statement. It felt awkward, and she wondered why Henley hadn’t replied.

“I’m sorry about bringing it up again. I didn’t know Allie would act like that. I’ll leave you alone now,” Toni said and turned to leave.

“Wait,” he said. Toni heard the bed springs creak again, and as her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could see Henley’s outline move closer to her. She wanted to move away, but she remembered the last time he had touched her, and ached to have that feeling again. It had been so long since Brian had touched her in a loving way. Sure enough, Toni saw the outline of Henley’s arm come towards her face, and she closed her eyes. His fingertips gently brushed against her cheek, and a tingle of pleasure went down her spine.

“Toni?” Allie called down the hallway. Henley’s touch disappeared, and Toni’s heart ached for it as soon as it was gone. As she stood in the dark room with a man she had just met, a picture of Brian formed in her mind. This is wrong, she thought. Didn’t she still love Brian?

Allie appeared in the doorway. She flicked the light on and Henley threw his hand up against the light. Allie put her hands on her hips and gave Toni a fierce look.

“What are you guys doing? Aren’t we supposed to be watching T.V. together?” Allie said. She came into the room and grabbed Toni’s arm. “I need to talk to you,” she whispered in Toni’s ear. They left Henley behind in the room and made their way back down the hallway to the kitchen. Toni wanted to refill her glass, but wasn’t sure if Allie would let her have any more of her alcohol.

Allie released Toni’s arm and grabbed the soda from the fridge. She poured herself another glass, complete with rum. Toni offered her glass and Allie refilled it with the same mixture. Allie leaned against the counter and sipped her drink.

“What are you doing with him?” Allie asked.

Toni looked into her drink and watched the little bubbles pop on the surface. She shrugged and then looked up at Allie.

“He’s a nice guy, right?” Toni said.

Allie squinted at Toni and took another sip of her drink. "Sure, but what about Brian? Don't you want to work through things with him?"

"Screw Brian. Tonight I am a free woman," Toni said. She took a large swig of her drink and leaned against the kitchen counter.

Allie laughed and shook her head. She stepped forward and grabbed Toni's hand. Toni was surprised that Allie was just going to let the topic go.

"Come on, let's see what kind of crap we can find on T.V.," Allie said. They sat down on the couch together because Henley wasn't there yet. He joined them later, silently, and he had a dark drink with him this time. Toni suspected that he had poured himself straight rum. She tried to avoid looking at him, but when they caught each other's eyes, Toni felt her cheeks flush. She wasn't sure if she was embarrassed, or shy. Toni had never encountered an individual that she was so fascinated with before, and she didn't even know why she was. As the night wore on, she tried to convince herself that she should focus on fixing things with Brian, but seeing Henley out of the corner of her eye was too much of a distraction.

It was nearing eleven o'clock by the time their show was over. Toni was feeling tired and wondered how she would be able to drive herself home.

"Well, guys, I gotta go home," Toni said and stood from the couch. She wobbled on her feet a little and had to hold onto the armrest to help her stay steady.

"No, I don't think you can drive like that. You're staying the night," Allie said. She got up and took Toni's hand. She led her to the extra bedroom in the back of the house. Toni lay down on the bed fully clothed and on top of the covers. She wasn't that drunk, but mentally exhausted. Allie closed the door so that only a little light came in through a crack.

Toni was asleep before she could even think about anything else. Henley paraded through her dreams as she slept. The one dream that woke her in the early morning was of him scratching her face with his fingernails so much that he drew blood. He hadn't stopped even then. Toni's cheeks felt like they were on fire as she lay in the bed. She crept out to get some water from the kitchen, and in the living room she stopped when she heard someone stir on the couch. Henley had spent the night too, and even though Toni had been quiet, she had woken him.

She couldn't see him, but could feel his eyes on her face. Toni had always wanted Brian to pay attention to her and at least give her compliments. Henley was doing what she had always wanted, but it was too much. She felt her skin rise in goose bumps. Neither of them spoke. Toni moved into the kitchen and got some water out of the tap, all the while keenly aware that Henley was listening to her every move.

When she walked back into the living room Toni saw that Henley was sitting up on the couch with his head turned in her direction.

"Sorry I woke you up. You can go back to sleep. Good night," Toni said, trying to keep her hands from shaking. Even though it was summer, the room felt cold, and her body and head ached.

"Are you lonely?" Henley asked.

Did he mean tonight, or in general?

"What do you mean?" Toni asked. She moved closer to the hallway that would take her back to the spare bedroom.

"Do you want some company?" he asked. Henley stood from the couch and took a step towards Toni. Both of them stood still waiting for the next move. Toni's phone began to vibrate in her pocket. It startled her, but she had a clearer mind than before and managed to not spill her

drink. Toni took her phone out and saw that Brian was calling. Her heart jumped into her throat, but she wasn't sure she wanted to answer it. Just as she was about to flip it open, it stopped ringing. Toni looked up at Henley. He had moved a step closer to her, so she took another step towards the bedroom. She wasn't sure she wanted him to follow her to the bedroom.

Her phone began to vibrate again, and when Toni saw that it was Brian, she knew something was wrong. She answered it, turning to face Henley directly. Maybe he would get the hint.

"Hey baabby! I wuvv you and misss you show much. Please come home," Brian said over the line.

"Are you drunk?" Toni felt betrayed. Brian had never gotten drunk around her. "Where are you?"

"At Nicole's place. She's real nice, but I miss you. Come back pweease," Brian said. There was a lot of background noise.

"What are you doing?" Toni's heart was writhing with jealousy. Nicole was Brian's best friend in high school. He had told her that they had tried dating once, but it hadn't worked out. Toni wasn't sure who she trusted less, Brian or Nicole.

"Guitar Hero and we're going to watch a movie later," Brian said. He wasn't slurring, and Toni wondered how drunk he really was. Brian never did anything like this with Toni, and she couldn't understand how he could be two completely different people. She felt like she didn't even know the man she was speaking to on the phone.

"Call me back in the morning when you're thinking straight," Toni said. She wasn't even thinking right herself, and she didn't want to agree to something she would regret later. Toni snapped the phone shut and looked back up at Henley who was still watching her. She walked

towards him, took his hand, and led him back to the guest bedroom. Toni decided that she just wanted someone warm to lie with. Henley didn't fight with her, but followed along peacefully. This would be just the right amount of revenge to get back at Brian for being such a dick to her, Toni thought.

Once they were both settled under the covers, with their clothes still on, Toni moved closer to Henley and laid her head on his chest. It was weird being close to someone who wasn't Brian, but her earlier apprehension was gone. She was just so tired, and the arms of a nice man around her were all she needed.

Fair

Christian and I enter the fairgrounds for the Solstice Summer festival. It's a lazy Sunday afternoon, perfect for enjoying an event outside. I'm so excited that I run down the path marked out through the woods that leads to the field where a small building and some tents are set up.

The warm summer breeze moves my colorful skirt. Christian follows behind me, but my mind is not on him at the moment. I am captivated by the sights and the sounds that greet me when I break out of the woods. A group of people in the middle of the field are singing folk songs, and the sweet, twanging sound of the guitar drifts towards me. People everywhere are dressed in flowing skirts and tops from the Renaissance era. I can smell warm yeast as I move past a crowd gathered at a stone oven. There is a small sign posted in the ground that tells me I can make my own bread.

I stop and breathe in the scent of the oven and bodies around me. A hand lands on the small of my back and pushes me gently away from the crowd.

"Keep moving, Alana," Christian says in my ear. I turn and lock my eyes with his green ones. The wind ruffles his light brown hair, giving him a disheveled look.

"Aren't we here to enjoy ourselves?" I take a step back towards the bread oven crowd. "I want to make some," I say.

He steps past me, and some dandelion puffs catch on his shirt. I study the movement of the tiny white fibers against the dark T-shirt Christian is wearing. My throat feels tight, and I can't seem to swallow. I wish he would just try to act like he wants to be here, for my sake.

"We can come back," he says, pulling at my hand. The crowd of strangers makes him uncomfortable. Christian is into sports and video games, but the Renaissance Fair doesn't

interest him. I take my hand back, but still follow him through the crowd to a clearing between merchant tents. The once green grass in the area we stop in is trampled down and mixed in with patches of mud. An unpleasant smell occasionally wafts up from the ground.

Christian turns to me and crosses his arms in front of him. He looks at me as I make an exasperated face at him.

“Well, what do you want?” he asks.

“I want you to enjoy your time here,” I say, mimicking his stance. A few people walk by and glance curiously at us.

He looks around and shakes his head a few times. The sun beams down, baking my already brown summer skin. What once felt nice, the heat of the sun now makes me uncomfortable as I wait for Christian’s reply. I know he doesn’t even want to stay here. A slight tinge of disappointment aches in my heart. I really wanted this to be a nice day.

“Come on, let’s get some shade. Maybe I can find something I like at one of the merchant’s tables,” I say and walk towards the nearest line of booths. I hear Christian’s feet shuffling through the dead grass behind me. He grabs my hand again, and we continue into the crowd.

I, Kitsune, have traveled far to get to the festival and am tired when I arrive. The last spot that’s available for my booth is outside, next to one of the buildings. This summer is hot, and the thin green tarp I have doesn’t help much to block out the sun. I set up my booth quickly so that I can get to work selling. Each piece of jewelry I have is wrapped up individually in three trunks. As I un-wrap my least favorite pieces, the sun begins to glimmer through spots in the tarp, and throw around the colors within the stones. I keep my more precious stones hidden.

It's hard for me to keep up my disguise because the air is so warm. It makes my head spin, and it's hard to focus on the energy I need to keep working. Men are already taking notice of my rounded figure, and I'm especially proud of my large breasts. I had never imagined that I would come to this Fate of travel and seduction. In the end, the result of each encounter is never what I need, though, and I know I will continue on my way, looking for my next victim. As I'm rearranging my jewelry, I pause and smell the air. A slight breeze blows in from the West, and I feel something change. I think about Him for only a second; dwelling too long on His face only brings back the pain and disappointment. Will he ever call to me again?

I finish setting up my booth just as the breeze stops. Even though the fairgrounds are noisy, I can still hear the buzzing of the summer grasshoppers. I close my eyes and let the sensations of the day wash over me. My skin is rough from dirt blown into my face during my travels, and I'm thirsty for a cool, flowing stream. Instead, I get sprayed by a squirt gun from a passing child. I shake out my curly, orange hair and the water droplets that land on my jewelry gleam in the sun. A few people stop by my booth, and I give them only the minimum amount of attention needed to get through their transactions. With every piece of stone jewelry that I sell, I feel the loss in my heart. It is my Fate, though, to create love and sell it.

I have always been able to feel things that others can't, a secret that I've kept since my early days as a woman. I feel the couple enter the fairgrounds, and know instantly that they will change my life. I can sense that the man is unhappy and uncomfortable. When I focus on the woman, I'm amazed at the will within her, pulling her towards her destination. They come around the corner, but I'm not ready for them. My pulse quickens, and I can smell the sweat from the man's back. The woman has her head turned the opposite direction, but the man's eyes scan the crowd nervously.

I let my disguise fall and throw out the emergency black blanket over my wares. The magic is momentarily stifled. My booth becomes invisible to everyone. The man looks back at the woman, and they move past, so close to my booth that I am holding my breath in hopes that they won't notice me. I begin shaking, but I can't figure out why. I'm tired, so I sit down in my wooden, folding travel chair, behind the counter of my booth. Out of sight of people, I'm able to regain my strength; the strength I will need for my next journey. When the couple returns, I will be ready for them.

Christian grimaces as we make our way through the crowd. I pull him over to where it's less crowded.

"Are you ok?" I ask him.

He looks around and lets out a strained laugh. People are prancing around us, shaking tambourines and singing. Off a little way, some kids are playing with wooden hoops and sticks. They use the sticks to fling the hoops into the air, and then they try to catch the hoops on the sticks again.

"This is stupid," Christian says. "Alana, I'm sorry. This just isn't my thing. Can we leave?" I take a deep sigh. I knew that he would say this eventually, and I'm surprised he let me drag him this far into the fair.

"Let's go find something to drink, maybe." I guide Christian towards the only building on the fair grounds. I guess I won't be able to look around at the merchandise tables. We get lucky because there's a bar inside. It's just as packed with people as the outside had been, though, and we have to fight to get a seat in the bar area.

“Can we have two waters, please?” I shout over the din of laughter and talking that echo through the small building. The waiter nods and sets two bottled waters up on the counter. Christian opens his and chugs it down until it is empty. He looks at me and belches loud enough for me to hear over the din of the room. I nurse my water until it’s about halfway gone.

“I need to find a restroom,” I shout to Christian. He just nods. His eyes are wide, as he takes in the scenes around him. A group of men nearby sit at a table while one plucks a guitar. They begin to sing in harmony. Women at another table are busy braiding strands of wool into each other’s hair.

I stand up but stop at Christian’s chair to rest my hand on his shoulder for a moment. He glances up, and the look in his eyes hurts me. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to drag him to this festival. “I’ll be right back,” I say. I look back at him as I walk away, and he has his head down on the bar. I feel really guilty for forcing him to be at something he doesn’t like. The guilt is quickly replaced by frustration, though, as I move further away from Christian. Why is it so hard for him to try and enjoy or accept the activities that I like?

Finding and getting to the bathroom is harder than I thought I would be. When I get back to where I had left Christian sitting, he’s gone. I try to reassure myself that he’s just wandering around looking for me, but a nagging voice inside tells me that he has left the festival all together. My heart sinks as I look through my purse for my cell phone to call him. The frustration from earlier bubbles up again as I dial Christian’s number. My hand begins to shake as I think about being left by him.

I feel refreshed after a few moments of rest. I lost the connection I made with the couple after I watched them enter the only building on the fairgrounds. As I’m uncovering my wares,

though, I can sense the man again. He shuffles along in the crowd alone. Now I have my opportunity to do what I'm good at.

"Oh young man!" I call out to him. He looks lost, but stops when he hears me call out. "Over here."

The young man stumbles over to my table and gazes down at the jewelry. He is handsome enough, with light brown, curly hair and bright green eyes. Discomfort is written all over his face, and I can't help feeling sorry for him. Men like this young one have never done well at these types of festivals. I know just what he needs, though, and am prepared to offer it. I gather myself up and focus on keeping the small details of my disguise intact. My hair is easy, but the body form, flawless skin, and the tight clothing are hardest to maintain. The man looks up at me and his mouth falls open. I feel pride flow through my body, giving me strength. The power feels even better when it happens at the first look. Seduction of the young man is successfully underway.

"Do you like anything you see?" I purr.

The man doesn't look down at the table again, but he also doesn't respond.

"Are you ok?" I ask.

Anger suddenly flashes through his eyes, and I'm taken aback. He reaches into his pocket and answers a cell phone that I hadn't heard ringing.

"Yes, I'm leaving," he says. His expression is guarded, and even when I fling my curls behind my shoulder, the man keeps his face straight. I wonder what's different about this man. Usually they would be slobbering all over me by now. The man nods as he listens to whoever he's on the phone with. I wonder if it's the woman he walked in with.

“Well, you shouldn’t have dragged me here in the first place,” he shouts. I take a step back from the front table, to try and hide my interest in the young man’s conversation. He reminds me of someone I knew long ago, and my heart aches as I think about the trouble He caused me when we had first met.

“Right, look, I don’t know. Can we talk about it later?” the young man says. He scowls at the phone and hangs up. He looks up at me again and then back down at the table before I even have time to bat my long eyelashes at him. I see his eyes skim over my jewelry, but can tell that he’s not really looking. He shakes his head and mutters something. He takes a step back from my booth. With a sinking feeling that I’m losing him, I see the guard go up on his face. It tells me that he’s not only preparing to leave my booth, but also the life that he walked into the fairgrounds with.

“Sorry ma’am. Not today, thanks,” he says, and then turns and pushes his way through the crowd. I watch him go, and feel my façade slip. My heart breaks for the woman that he came here with. I slump back down into my chair and stare at the dirt at my feet. How had he gotten away? There must be something affecting me today. The wind howls through the fairgrounds again, picking up dust and bringing a familiar scent that makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I let my mind wander dangerously close to memories of Him. Could He be here today?

I listen to the silence on the line after Christian hangs up. I can’t believe him. He didn’t even want to talk about it. I stand there as people bump past me, and I stare at the dark brown stone floor. Anger mixes with panic inside my chest, and it’s hard to breathe. I need to get outside, so I start to work my way to the door. Maybe I can catch him before he gets too far. A thin cloud of dust has been kicked up and lingers over the crowd. Even with people constantly

touching and brushing up by me, I feel alone. This festival was supposed to be a nice outing with Christian. I hope I haven't messed things up too badly between us. How could he just leave me here? He was supposed to give me a ride back home. I should just accept the fact that he doesn't share my interests. Maybe I should stop seeing him all together. Tears form quickly in my eyes at the thought of leaving Christian, and I wipe them away before they can fall. I must not cry in public.

The people are thinning out as the majority of them move further out into the fields that are still thick with grass. I can see a small gathering in the field already. The faces pass by me, and each are blurred only in the way stranger's faces can be. Each one is indistinct, and eventually I stop seeing them all together. Out here on the fields for the festival, I was hoping to leave all the stress of life behind. It has followed me even here. Anger bubbles up and tightens my throat as I think about Christian leaving again. I cross my arms and move over to the merchant tables.

There are many things to look at, and I allow myself to get lost in the wonderful items for sale. Any distraction from my present problem is a good one. I enter a tent and follow it to the other end. Everything is for sale: CD's, T-shirts, jewelry, leather belts, dyed skirts, and any other craft that the traveling folks who have set up can make. Some of the work is really nice, and I'm forced a couple times to buy small items that I'll never use. It feels good to keep my mind busy, even if it means that I'm spending money I should be saving. When I step outside again, the sun breaks through the only cloud in the sky. The warmth feels really good on my skin. I put my hand up to my forehead to shield my eyes and notice one more table set up on the side of the building we had gone into earlier. Muffled sounds of the other fair goers and their activities drift from around and over the large tent I had just left.

The world around me becomes muted for a moment. When the woman approaches my booth, I'm so attuned that I can hear her breathing. I sense there's something wrong with the woman, and guess that it's from the fight she had with her man. I know the cure to her troubles. A little piece of my jewelry will make the woman forget about the man that broke her heart.

"Oh, lovely dear. I'm so glad you're here," I say as I use my powers to pull my disguise back on in the shadow of my tarp before I stand and the woman sees me. The woman wears so much of her emotions on her face, and I know the look that her face shows. I come out to the edge of my booth.

"What's your name dear?" I ask.

The woman is thin, and has shoulder length light brown hair. Her clothing is modern, but hints at second hand wear. I know that the woman won't be able to afford a single piece of my jewelry, but we could probably come to a bargain. The woman looks surprised that such a creature as me would care about her name, but I put on the friendly smile I save for women.

"I'm Alana. This jewelry is beautiful." She looks down at the table with the greatest fascination that I've ever seen displayed for my work. I feel humbled for a moment. Alana puts her fingertips to the surface of one of the stones and it quivers. Her touch resonates through the stone and into me. Each work of stone is a part of me. I'm in awe of the way Alana displays her power to me, but I'm also suspicious. Does the young woman even know of her effect on me? What forces are at work today where I had lost a prospect and meet a woman who affects me?

I see and feel at the same time a dark figure come around the building to the left of my booth. A shudder passes through me as if some ancient power has awakened. Only once before in my life had this happened, but I'm afraid this time. I focus my energy back on Alana. Maybe

she's the answer to the question I've carried with me for all the years after He left. Is there a way back to my old life?

"How do you make the stones like this?" I ask the woman behind the booth. She is wrapped in a tight orange sarong, and it hugs her curves nicely. Jealously bubbles from within me as I see how large her breasts are. Perhaps Christian stopped by this booth? I snort at how pitiful his reaction would have been to this woman who looks like she stepped out of his fantasy role playing video game.

"Ah, a learner. I can show you," the woman says. Her smile is kind as she turns her back to retrieve a large flat stone. The sun gleams off of the stones again, and the colors inside swirl and sparkle. They're the most amazing stones I've ever seen. She gently places the large stone on the table, right on top of the pieces of jewelry.

"Won't you crush them?" I ask.

"They're fine. Now, if you want to learn you must be prepared to listen," the woman asks.

I stand up straight again. The woman's pulling out items from baskets behind her stand. There are all sorts of instruments that I would think could be used to bend, cut and form metal. The woman puts a sheet of silver on the table next to the tools, along with some strands of silver wire. Excitement bubbles up inside me. She turns back towards the boxes and then produces an armful of different colored stones.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

I nod.

“You want to make something beautiful and truly unique?” She purrs. She sways slightly on both of her feet before opening her arms and letting the stones fall to the ground. To my amazement, some of them do not fall, but continue to hover in the air in front of her. A strange hum is vibrating through the air. She calmly picks out two stones from the five suspended ones. Her grace and gestures remind me of a small animal, and I can see her ears twitching under her hair as if she is listening to all the sounds around her at the same time.

“How do you do that?” I ask. I look around me to see if anyone else has stopped by to watch the woman’s magical tricks.

“I am Kitsune, these are my secrets,” the woman says and then pauses as if she is thinking about what she just said. “I need your strength for a moment.”

I step up to the table, and she grabs both of my hands and presses two stones, one a deep blue, and the other a deep purple, into my palms. “Now you must focus. Close your eyes and think about something close to your heart,” Kitsune says. The skin on her hands is impossibly soft and feels good against mine. The only thing I can think about right now is the fact that Christian has left me. My heart aches as I close my eyes and see Christian’s handsome face in my mind. I had planned so much of our life together already, and now I wasn’t even sure I would ever see him again.

The woman forces my hands against one another with the stones in between. I open my eyes and see a brilliant glow of red and orange shine from between my hands. Its magic; the woman does magic. She takes her hands away slowly, and begins to bend and form the piece of silver. Once the silver is in a slightly concave round piece no bigger than a quarter, she picks up several silver wire pieces and molds them together in a strand. She bends the strand into a circle,

and motions for me to come closer. The grace with which she uses her tools amazes me. She must be an expert jewelry maker.

I'm standing really still, trying to focus on the light between my palms. Kitsune gently takes my wrist, but doesn't disturb the process between my palms.

"Oh," I say.

Kitsune looks into my face and smiles.

"Nearly ready, here try this," she says and slips the circled piece of metal onto my wrist. I cannot even feel the weight of it as she turns it and bends it in a few more places. She leaves it dangling on my wrist. Then Kitsune clasps her hands around mine, and slowly peels them apart. The glowing dies down, and a small black lump lies in my palm.

"What is it?" I ask, looking at it while I furrow my eyebrows together.

Kitsune gently picks up the rock, and rolls it between her fingers a couple of times. I can smell a faint odor of sulfur in the air as black dust rises from the lump.

"It's not done yet," she says with another kind smile.

"Now." She holds up the quarter-sized piece of molded silver in her hand. "Place it in here, and hold them together."

I close my eyes but can feel Kitsune's hands clasp around mine. When I press my palms together again, there is warmth between them this time. The vibration hums through the air again. I let myself go to all of the senses around me. The voices of people passing seem muffled, but I can feel every part of my body. Tiny blades of grass tickle my ankles. A small insect lands on my arm and begins walking through the fine hairs. Everything makes me want to squirm, but the warm contact of Kitsune's hands keeps me in place.

"Ok, it's done," I hear her say after nearly no time passes.

I can smell deep rich dirt. There is a tint of fresh rose mixed in with the scent too, so I open my eyes to see where it's coming from. A cool blue stone lays flat in my hand. There's a small lining of silver around the edge to indicate where the setting of the stone is. Swirling, and dancing colors of light blue, light purple, with the occasional shimmer of red and orange swim within the stone on my palm. I'm speechless. I had seen the glow with my own eyes, and had felt a shimmer of power flowing from Kitsune the whole time I'd been near her. I hadn't realized until now, that her magic was real, and she'd given it to me for a brief time.

She gently plucks the stone from my palm, twists a few more wires around the bracelet she had fitted to my wrist, and I'm left wearing a complete piece of jewelry.

Kitsune takes a step back. An errant breeze blows through the fairgrounds and flutters my skirt. Kitsune goes rigid and I see the lines of her shapely form grow fuzzy. Orange, fur covered ears pop out of her head. I gasp and put my hands over my mouth. I can't take my eyes away from the mysterious woman and her transformation.

He has finally come for me. After all these years, his presence still calls to me. I know I must leave here, but how can I leave my duty?

The blue stone around Alana's wrist glimmers in the sun and begins the dance that tells me Alana has more power than I had imagined. I can feel it within the young woman. I can also feel the sorrow still eating at Alana's heart from the man who left her, but I know that Alana will get something better out of her life.

"Do not be afraid," I say to Alana.

Alana looks around at the passing people. No one stops at the booth while Alana is here. I've made it so. My business is only with Alana now. My Fate must be passed on. The only thing I need to do is convince Alana to stay so I can go.

"Do you know what I am?" I ask. I'm not expecting an answer, but I give Alana a little time to think.

Alana leans into my booth with her eyes wide in astonishment and whispers.

"Magic?"

I feel a rush within my blood. Never had anyone's mind been clear enough to understand while I had been dealing with them, what was actually going on. I nod. The shadow of my old love comes closer. He's waiting for me. I let myself go completely. Alana will just have to accept me as I am.

Alana gasps again, and I hold out my hand, which has soft white fur growing out of the palms. It feels so good to have my true self back. Alana lays her hand down in mine, and I lead her around the side of the booth to stand beside me. The sun is sinking lower in the sky, and the afternoon light floods the whole festival grounds with an orange glow. Twilight is when I will leave, but I have to convince Alana to stay first. Alana lets go of my hand and twists her new bracelet around her wrist.

"You want to see something wonderful?" I ask her.

Alana nods. She looks scared, but also curious.

I brush back my hair and my pointed, orange ears poke through. Alana opens her mouth and then looks behind me. I know she's searching for my tail. One of the things I'm the most proud of is my beautiful tail. It tickles when Alana, brave soul that she is, takes my tail in her hands and runs her fingers through the fur.

“Beautiful, how do I get one of those?” Alana asks.

I laugh, but it's cut short by a sudden nudge in my heart. The time for me to leave is growing closer.

“My dear, you might not have one. Mine was given to me long ago, in another life,” I explain while holding my tail out to the side. Alana looks out into the thinning crowd of people. It's close to twilight, the time when everyone gathers together to sing and dance the last one of the night. I feel Alana's reluctance to stay in my booth.

“Alana, if you choose this,” I indicate the small booth and the festival, “You could sing and dance every night.”

Alana looks at me and bites her bottom lip. The doubt inside Alana has to be erased by something. I realize that I have to show her something to convince her, so I pull out one of the trunks that contain the rarest stones I've ever made; stones made from hard, messy affairs. “These will be yours if you agree,” I say, as I take out the most precious stone from its wrapping and hand it to Alana.

Alana cradles the deep purple stone, and I can see her future life reflected back in her eyes. “What can I say?” Alana says, looking back up at me. He is looming out of the corner of my eye. I see the shape dismount from the building and head towards the forest at the edge of the field behind the fairgrounds.

I'm relieved that Alana is ready for instruction. The time for me to rejoin Him is drawing even closer, and I can feel his impatience. I pull out the black sheet and hang it on the open part of the booth. Three dark, green walls and one black one make up the small room we stand in. My booth will be invisible again to passerby eyes.

“You don't need to say anything but yes,” I say.

Alana looks down at the stone again and then back up at me. I can feel a surge of power flow through Alana's body. She's gaining more strength even now. I only wonder if she's aware of it.

"Yes," Alana says.

I feel the pull of long lost love again. It's so hard against my heart that it hurts. I have just enough time to instruct Alana on her Fate before mine is completed full circle, and I will be able to go back to my old life with peace and forgiveness in my heart and soul.

"You are very powerful, young woman," I say to her.

Alana becomes my willing student, and stands wide eyed, taking in everything that I have to offer her. I talk to her no longer than necessary, not even giving her time to answer questions. It's more than He offered me when He first bound me to my Fate. Alana's face twists with anxiety and uncertainty. I place my hand on her shoulder to reassure her, and can feel her draining my magic into herself.

The time comes at last when I can no longer ignore His call, and I step out of the booth. Twilight lights up the sky with light blue and dark purple colors. I can see Him near the woods, and my heart swells with the joy of being reunited. I can wait any longer and begin running towards the woods. I pause for only a moment before I leave the grounds of the festival completely and turn back to see Alana standing beside the booth with a glowing stone in her hand. I feel the last of my Fated magic leave me, and I transform the rest of the way into my old soul. With a wave of my tail, I turn and leave Fate in the hands of the lucky young woman, Alana. I only hope that in the end Alana will find what she is searching for.

Imagine

The sun rises in the desert. Young men seek pleasure and relief from the heat. Sultan Oman has the answer to their cravings. Deep inside of a blazing white palace, there is a refuge for the young men. Collected over the years, the girls are obedient. Each one of them is unique, but all know their purpose.

Shimmering heat follows a young man into a dark archway. Yellow stones line the path. Bright green vines crawl up the stone and decorate in a way pleasing to the eye. The façade must be attractive to avoid the criticism of city officials.

Three years ago in this same city, The Choosing was eminent. Some mothers want their daughters chosen; it is a form of high honor in their eyes to have a daughter beautiful enough to be chosen. Other mothers hold their heads high and deal with the grief of losing a daughter. Everyone knows what the Sultan uses them for, but no one speaks of it.

Men were to be absent that day, sent on trips across the desert or to family in other towns. It was the order of the Sultan. He was not cruel, he just wanted privacy. Gossip spread, and people were afraid of his power over their lives, so no one ever stopped The Choosing.

Young Abra was only just fourteen on the day of The Choosing. Sultan Oman came out himself and picked only four girls. Anyone found hiding a girl would be severely punished by the Sultan's rule. Most understood that the women in Oman's harem were needed in order for Oman to maintain his political power and status. The bigger the support system he had, the better he performed in his duties.

Abra didn't understand. She knew that it would be a dreadful place where her body would be used; she would never be loved and her mind would never be called upon. When the

day came, she tried to make herself the smallest person there. She hid in the back of the crowd on the street. Oman still saw her. Her natural auburn highlights in the little bit of hair that showed from the front of her *hijab* caught the sun and gave her away. She knew she was pretty, but never dreamed that she would be chosen over some of her more beautiful friends.

“Mother, I don’t want to go,” Abra said, clinging tightly to her mother. The Sultan’s men pushed through the crowd and pulled Abra away from her mother. Tears streamed down Abra’s face. She tried to catch her mother’s hand. The men were strong and pulled Abra to where the Sultan stood. Abra got to her knees and bowed in front of Sultan Oman as was expected. Her body shook, racked with crying. Abra’s mother had fallen back behind the crowd.

“Rise, my girl. Now, this is a happy day. Why the tears?” Oman asked Abra.

Abra was afraid to speak.

Oman grew impatient. “Well?”

Abra kept her head bowed. “Sultan, I am too young to leave my mother,” Abra replied, waiting for the hard hands to come down on her shoulders and drag her away to the palace. When she didn’t feel them she raised her head and glanced at the crowd. It was parted and the Sultan was standing next to Abra’s mother.

“Well, I’m not a cruel man. I want all my women to be happy,” Sultan said. He held out his hand to Abra. Abra stepped forward and put her small hand in his large one. He pulled her to her mother. “You may have time to say a proper goodbye,” Sultan Oman said.

Abra was relieved. Fear still ran through her body, though, as she fell into her mother’s arms.

“Oh my young Abra,” her mother said.

Abra didn’t want to say anything; she just wanted to stay in her mother’s arms.

“I need you to be brave, but never stop being who you are. Honey, make me proud.”

With these last words, Abra’s mother released her.

The Sultan’s men grabbed her again. By now, Abra’s head covering had slipped, and her auburn hair was ablaze in the sun. The guards turned their gazes away out of respect. Sultan Oman came over and took the *hijab* out of Abra’s hands. He studied the rough fabric that had been Abra’s finest. A few women rushed forward from the caravan that traveled with the Sultan as he made his way through the streets. They gently took Abra’s hands and led her back to the protection of the covered caravan.

Inside, they gave Abra a new head covering, one made of fine silk. Two other young girls sat inside as well. They turned their heads away in disgust at Abra’s dirty hands. Abra knew she was better than the two girls because she actually had it in her mind to hatch an escape plan. Instead of living the rest of her life as a slave to some random man’s lust, Abra longed for love. The other girls seemed to only be concerned about the rank that their families would receive from them being chosen for the Sultan’s harem, because they sat there whispering to each other about the wonderful life that they thought lay in front of them.

Azul’s simple white shirt flutters in a hot breeze as he pulls the door open. It’s dark inside to keep the temperature down. The jingle of tiny bells reaches his ears and then he sees the woman’s eyes flash in the dark. She’s holding a lantern, lit despite the day, and it casts a warm glow of orange on her blue outfit.

She sashays her hips as she leads him down the long, dark hallway to the room where he will wait. She does not speak. She doesn’t need to. Both parties know the reason for Azul’s visit. Azul had waited long for this experience. He will be considered a man after he leaves the

Sultan's palace today. His father and older brothers had often talked of the pleasures available to them through their high family status connections with Sultan Oman. They had always talked in private, though, and the only way Azul had learned of it was from eavesdropping. Now that he was eighteen, he was ready for his first time in the harem. He will be accepted into the family employment with the Sultan in political affairs if all goes well today.

The room is decorated as is expected of the Sultan. Square banners of deep colors only the rich can afford hang from the high ceiling. The gold sconces on the wall hold low flames. The windows are high, so that the light that comes in through them is filtered dull before it reaches the floor where the men sit. Azul is only slightly impressed, because he has seen these similar furnishings in his own house.

About thirty men are in the small room, waiting. Murmurs resonate around the room, and are softened by the pillows underneath them. They wait for the women.

After some time, a woman passes the threshold and the whole room is brilliantly lit upon her presence. She's an Arabian beauty, with caramel tan skin covered in transparent purple silk. The bells on her feet shake as she walks to the center of the room. The smell of sweet oil follows her. Azul is instantly taken with her. Never before has he seen such a creature.

The beautiful woman, the Matriarch, as Azul knows she is rightly called, stops in the middle of the floor. She waits while many other girls file into the room and line the walls. Some are carrying bowls filled with fruit, others carry wine jugs. The men in the room don't know where to look, for all the beauty around them is stunning. The offerings of food and wine are placed on the floor, and Azul stares with lust at the display.

"Gentleman, welcome," the Matriarch says louder than the men are used to hearing a woman speak. Her melodic voice rings out over the space. Her black hair hangs down in a braid

past her waist. A silk scarf is wrapped once around each of her hands and held taught in-between. She holds this up over her head.

“Prepare for the time of your life,” she says with a sly smile that is detectable underneath her face cover. The other girls around the room hold up similar scarves. Azul lets his imagination go wild. He can’t sit still; he’s so excited about what will happen to him in here.

The girls move into the crowd slowly, and they carefully chose a companion. Once they find a suitable man, they tie the scarf around the man’s eyes, blinding him. Once the man is blindfolded, he is lead by the hand down the passageway. More men leave.

Azul begins to get nervous that he won’t be picked. The men and women are silent as they leave together. His nervousness turns to frustration that he has not been chosen yet. Azul wonders if he should approach a woman himself and declare his family name, and demand to know why he is being ignored. The silence of the other men press in on Azul, though, and he remembers his status as lower than the Sultan, and he finds his patience.

When there are only four men remaining, a small woman approaches Azul. She doesn’t have a blindfold, but leads him by his hand toward the hallway. The first men that had been chosen are already coming back down the hall. Their cheeks are flushed as if they had been running through the sands outdoors. Wide smiles are planted on their faces.

Abra was running late that day. She had been in the gardens within the walls of the palace, picking flowers and talking with the gardeners. It was forbidden for her to do this, and she knew it, but it was the only thing that gave her any sort of escape and joy in her life of servitude. She had not heard the bells chime for the Friday night pleasures. One of the younger girls found her walking in the garden still, and had told her to hurry.

She was not prepared, and even after three years of living here, she almost lost her way getting to the selection room. Even if Abra had heard the bells, she would have taken her time. Some of the more seasoned women always chose the most powerful and older men first. It was their own way of making their status worth anything among the other women in the harem. Abra was usually left with the youngest men who came out of curiosity more than anything. She always got done with them quickly, and was then released from duty for the night.

When she entered the selection room, there were only four men left. One of them looked like he was only just a man. She selected him and led the young man to the hallway. One of the women they passed on their way into the pleasure room handed her the blindfold that her man had been wearing.

The men are allowed to see the women only when being selected. The rest of the time, they are required to wear a blindfold. Sultan Oman insisted that this be for the protection of his own women, but Abra knew that the Sultan had his own agenda. The blindfolds represent the power that he has over the men of the city.

Abra hated it. More than anything, she would love to actually see the men's eyes. She believed that the soul lived in there.

When the young man she was leading refused to wear the blindfold that had been used by another man, Abra didn't know what to do. She knew there would be trouble later, but perhaps it wouldn't be to her disadvantage. There were more scarves inside the room that could be used. Sultan Oman would certainly have a word or two for the young man. Abra didn't fight his refusal, as it was not her place, but simply led him into the pleasure room.

The pleasure room was not what one would expect. The white walls that blazed around them were punctuated by brightly colored blankets, tapestries, pillows and other various

furnishings. The contrast to the first dark room was deliberate. One of the main pieces of the room was a large, red reclining couch, in which The Matriarch was on. Her long hair now hung over her shoulders in loose waves. The Sultan was standing beside her, supervising the room. He was holding her hand and gently kissed it before releasing it and approaching Abra and her young man. The young man and Abra bowed as he came upon them.

“Where is your blindfold?” Sultan Oman asked. Abra bowed even lower hoping to remain invisible, and let the young man take all of the blame.

“This girl offered me a spoiled one, I would not take it. I come from a respectable family, and demand to be offered the best,” the young man said.

Abra flinched at his accusation, but a tiny flutter of hope mixed with fear went through her heart. What would this defiance bring? Would the Sultan refuse to keep her?

“Well, we must correct that wrong done to you, young man. Do remember, though, that this is a special service I offer the men. Do not defy my rules again, young man, or you will be denied access in the future,” Sultan Oman said. He signaled to one of the women standing near the Matriarch’s lounge, and she brought over a fresh blindfold for the young man.

“As for you,” Sultan Oman said turning to Abra, “first step station.”

Abra released her tense shoulders. The movement was invisible to the Sultan. She led the now blindfolded young man over to the corner of the room that they called the “first step.” Newcomers, such as the young man, started their experience here. Five other men and women were already in the corner. Abra was surprised at how many new men there were. The women with them were already far into their own sessions, and ignored Abra as she led her man to an empty spot.

Long ostrich feathers tied to sticks, small carved stones held in hands, more silk scarves, and a variety of other items were being used on the men. None of the girls had undressed; only the men had their shirts off. The sight of each man's sex bulging from their pants was common in this stage of the affairs. The Sultan followed Abra and her man over to inspect the activities along the wall, and was smiling with satisfaction at what he saw.

Abra tied the man's hands above his head to a large wooden peg in the wall. Two pillows were stacked under his feet to ease the pressure. He was to stay in this position for the remainder of the time. Abra would use only what was in the trunk closest to her. Four items were to be used, for only about five minutes on each man. Other services were offered in smaller rooms off of the main room with men and harem women of higher status.

Abra didn't mind working at this station, and she feared the time when her five years of experience moved her to the next level. This part was quick, mindless, and easy. She couldn't imagine what she would have to do behind a closed door, and hoped that she could escape before the time came when her duties called her to give her body.

Abra removed the man's shirt and then tied him up. She smiled at the good knot she had tied the man up with. Abra noticed his sex begin to grow. This session would be quick. He tried to move his wrists, but Abra placed her hands gently on top of his to stop his struggle. Heat radiated off of his body. The fierce spirit of the young man tingled through Abra's fingertips. She removed her hands from the man's and took her first item out of the trunk.

She held it up for Sultan Oman to see. It was a carved wooden contraption that had four balls attached to a handle. She rolled it on her palm to demonstrate. Sultan Oman nodded his approval and then moved away. Abra gently rolled the massager across the young man's chest.

She finished going over his chest with the massager, and began to move down his legs. Her face came level with the young man's sex, and she averted her eyes. She knew she did her job well, and didn't need to be reminded of the mindless lust that ran through the bodies of the men she waited on. Many of the women found satisfaction out of this sight, knowing that they had the power to bring out men's weaknesses. Abra thought that it was ridiculous she should be exposed to it. She had been raised to respect her body and those of others.

The young man's body began to quake as she ended her use of the massager. Abra placed the massager aside and picked up a long ostrich feather. She rubbed it across his cheek to show him what he would receive next.

"What's your name?" the young man asked.

The women on both sides of Abra stopped what they were doing and stared at her. She shook her head no. She wasn't allowed to speak. The man had disobeyed another one of the rules of Sultan Oman. Abra paused with her feather hanging in the air in front of the young man's face. She looked around her and saw that the Sultan was gone; he must have been in another room. No man had ever spoken to her before, and Abra wondered if it was how people fell in love. She leaned in close to the man's ear and whispered her name. The women next to her were still staring, but Abra didn't care, the rush of defiance was tingling at the base of her skull.

"That's beautiful. My name is Azul. Thank you, Abra, for your service," the young man said.

Across the room, Abra saw the Sultan come out of one of the small rooms, and knew that there would be trouble to follow, because his head snapped to the direction of her and Azul. Abra began moving the feather over Azul's body. Out of the corner of her eye, Abra watched The Sultan move slowly toward them, as to not raise alarm. He reached Abra and stood behind her

watching for a moment. Abra could feel him behind her, and was doing a poor job with the feather.

The Matriarch also approached the scene, careful to move between the pillows as the Sultan had done. She stood behind Oman and gave him a little scare when he looked around. Abra jumped too, her nerves at an end with both of her commanders standing behind her.

“Dear, why do you stand here now?” Oman asked the Matriarch. There was a fake sincerity riding in his words.

Abra went back to her box to find the next tool to use on her young man, she was halfway done with him and then she could leave. The Matriarch of the harem moved past Oman to Azul. Abra stopped with a new object in her hand and bowed to the Matriarch. The Matriarch took the small bag of cool stones from Abra, and dumped them into her own hand. Abra didn’t know what to think, because she had never seen the Matriarch partake in any of the activities left for younger harem girls.

The Sultan looked furiously at his Matriarch. He reached out and grabbed the Matriarch’s arm. She swung around, and the some of the stones slid free of her palm and skidded across the marble floor. She held her ground. Abra sat down and put her head to the stone in a bow. She hoped that they would not notice her, and maybe she could sneak off for the rest of the day.

“I’ll take care of him,” Abra heard the Matriarch say to Oman. The Matriarch had the authority of experience in her voice. Abra peeked up at them.

Oman held onto the Matriarch for only a moment and then dropped her arm. Abra couldn’t imagine how furious the Sultan was. She had experienced his wrath only from afar, never had he been this close to Abra while he had been angry. It was scary. His face was red, and his hands trembled. The Matriarch turned back to Azul, and rolled the stones between her hands

a few times. Azul was shaking again with anticipation, for he had no idea what was to come next. The Matriarch leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“You’re mine now.”

Abra stood up slowly, unsure of what to do. She was wondering if the Matriarch would be punished later for disobeying her master, when she felt a large hand on her shoulder.

“You girl, you’ve been here long enough. Perhaps I can have some fun with you,” Sultan Oman said to her. He pulled her towards one of the small doors that led into a private room. Abra’s heart began to race. This wasn’t at all what she wanted. Abra knew she had to do something now or live in this place, miserable and unloved, until she was outcast as an old woman. Then she got an idea and stopped walking. Sultan Oman pulled and then released her arm. She fell to the floor and forced tears to her eyes.

“What’s wrong with you girl?” Oman said. The pleasure room was almost empty now, and his voice bounced off the walls.

“I—I love him,” Abra said.

“What?”

“The young man, Azul, back there.” Abra motioned towards where he was still tied up. “I love him, so you can’t have me.” Abra’s legs were shaking, and she was glad she was sitting on the floor already or they would have given away her lie. The Sultan came over and grabbed her arm again. She was small, so he lifted her easily and stood her on her feet. Abra could smell the lunch he had had on his breath, and it repulsed her.

“My dear, what have you done?” Sultan Oman said. He studied Abra’s face. “Fine, follow me,” he said as he walked back to where the man was tied up. The Matriarch was just

finished with the stones, and was untying the man. Abra wondered what The Matriarch was going to do with Azul.

“We have something to settle here, my dear,” Oman said to the Matriarch. The man stood ready for instruction, still blindfolded and the Matriarch moved a step away. “This young woman claims that she loves this boy. You,” Sultan said to Azul, “is this true? Do you love each other?”

Azul straightened up and tried to locate where he should direct his speech.

“You may remove your blindfold,” Oman said. Azul reached back and untied the scarf covering his eyes.

“Oh great Sultan,” Azul said with a low bow. “This girl, I’ve never seen her before today, and do not love her. This love she speaks of might have happened recently, but only to her, I can assure you that. No disrespect to you Sultan, she is beautiful, but my heart belongs to someone else.” Azul looked at the Matriarch who held a steady gaze with him.

The Sultan’s face turned so red, it was almost purple. Abra sensed that he was about to explode, and tried to make herself blend into the wall nearby.

“Young man, tell me who sent you here. Are you a spy? What is your purpose in coming today?” Sultan said to Azul.

“Sultan, I only came seeking pleasure like every other man that comes to you for this great service. I have truly received more than I expected, and I thank you,” Azul said and bowed again. Abra’s heart felt like it had stopped beating. It seemed that there was no way out of her life here. She hadn’t been dismissed, but wanted to leave, so she began to shuffle away. Abra saw the Sultan’s head move in her direction, and the anger in his eyes pinned her in place.

“Everyone out! I can’t believe the level of disrespect shown to me today. You girl!” Sultan Oman shouted.

Abra fought back thoughts of being chained up and forced to do what she didn't want to. Oman made a motion to the two guards that were standing by the main entrance to the room. They came up to Abra and picked her up by her arms on either side. She didn't struggle because she knew she didn't stand a chance.

"I have no need for you anymore. You have tainted today's experience, and I shall always think of it every time I see your face. Guards take her out back and leave her," Oman said. He turned back to Azul and said, "Young man, you try my patience, and are certainly not welcome back here ever again."

The Matriarch glared at Oman.

"Nothing from you. You grow older every day, remember that," Oman said to the Matriarch. She swung her hair over her shoulder and turned to leave. After three years of living under her rule, Abra could sense when the Matriarch was bored, and the whole affair with Azul was now boring to her.

As the guards dragged Abra out of the room, she watched the Sultan go to the lounge that the Matriarch had lain in earlier. He put his head in his hands, but Abra felt no pity for him. She was dumped out behind the palace. Abra was finally free, and the only thing she wanted was to find her mother and return to her old life.

Azul left the palace with disappointment writhing through his chest. He entered the street and instantly recognized Abra because she still wore her clothes from the harem. She had only pulled on a plain *hijab* over her red hair.

"You there, girl, stop," Azul called out when he saw her. She stayed where she was. He approached her and grabbed her shoulders. People around them stared, but Azul didn't care. He

squeezed her shoulders tight and put his face close to hers. Tears formed in Abra's eyes, but Azul didn't care, he had been embarrassed and disgraced and wanted her to suffer for what she had done.

"You got me thrown out. You will never be accepted anywhere in this city, I will make sure of it," he said. The girl just gazed at him with a blank look. It infuriated him more that she did not appear afraid.

His breath on Abra's face was sweeter than the Sultan's had been, but the smell still turned Abra's stomach. She turned her face away from him and stepped back. His eyes shimmered with revenge.

"As much as I can see, you did it to yourself," Abra said. She knew this was not the right thing to say, but it felt good to stand up to someone. The man was small, and she was not intimidated by him. People had formed a small path around them, and Abra felt like everyone was watching them, but really only a few people were. Azul released Abra's arms, and she felt her heart begin to pound with the thought of escaping yet another man. Azul's face got red and he balled up his fists. Abra began to run.

"Stop! Someone stop that girl," she heard Azul shout. A man stepped into her path. She moved quickly to the side and ducked under his grasping arms. His hand caught her *hijab* and pulled it off her head. She kept running, her wild hair flying about her face.

She looked back a couple times to see Azul following her, but she was able to lose him among the crowd. Once she felt she was safe, she sat down in the dirt in an alleyway, not caring if she spoiled her clothes. Her mother would have some for her when she got home. She sat in the alleyway and tried to steady her breathing. A group of people ran by and Abra held her

breath. She pressed herself into the rough wall, and felt concrete scratch her through her thin shirt.

Abra waited in her hideout until it was close to dusk, and by the time she reached the door of her small, familiar house, the lights inside were turned on. Abra opened the door and found not her mother, but another family sitting down to eat dinner. She was bewildered and took a step back to look at the outside of the house, making sure she hadn't walked into the wrong one. When she saw that it was the right house, she stepped back into the door.

"Can we help you?" the oldest woman said to her.

Abra looked around the small room and saw nothing familiar. Where had her mother gone? "I—I'm looking for my mother," Abra said. She continued to look around. Five strange faces stared at her from the low table. Panic gripped her heart, and she tried to steady her chin as it quivered. She could not cry in front of these strangers.

"Sorry, dear, but she isn't here. The woman that lived here before has moved away," the woman said to her. She walked to where Abra stood in the door. "Now if you will excuse us, we are about to eat dinner. Good night," she said as she gently nudged Abra out the door and shut it in her face.

Abra stood staring at the grain pattern in the wood of the door. She felt numb. There was nowhere to go now. Her best hope was to try and find some of her old friends. She was too tired to search now, so she walked over to the nearest alleyway to hide if Azul came looking for her. There was a cart with a few rugs in it parked in the alleyway. She lifted one of the rugs and discovered a small woman lying underneath it.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just looking for a place to stay for the night. My apologies," Abra said. The woman sat up and inspected her.

“Dear child, do not be upset. This isn’t my cart. I was just settled in. There is room for two. Come,” the woman said. She moved over to one of the sides, leaving the other half free.

“That’s really kind, but I don’t even know you. I can’t stay here,” Abra said with tears forming in her eyes. She hadn’t been shown any kindness for three years, and the effect it had on her now was unexpected. Abra collapsed onto the cart and began to weep. The tears that had been dammed up during her stay at the palace were finally free. Abra felt a blanket being put across her shoulders, and a small hand began to rub her back.

“I’m Mage. You stay here tonight, child, with me, and I’ll bring you to our village in the morning,” the woman told Abra.

“What village?” Abra asked.

Mage smiled. “You’ve come from the harem right?”

Abra nodded.

“Well, I’m from there too. Only, I was thrown out a long time ago, when I got too old,” Mage said.

Abra knows this already because she had heard the rumors of what getting old brought upon the harem girls. While she had been trapped there, she felt like she couldn’t grow fast enough to be considered too old. She feels the momentary relief of being free pass through her before she remembers that she’s alone in the world now. Her mind cannot process why her mother would leave the town.

“I was alone. I had to find odd jobs to support myself. Sometimes people just paid me in food. After a while, a few of us women got together and formed our own village, where we would be accepted as the people we were, not by what had happened to us in the past,” Mage said.

Abra nodded again. She was so worn out, and decided to lie down. Abra could see all the stars overhead. She watched the sky and remembered all the times in the gardens at night she had dreamed of being free. So much had happened to Abra that day, but as she watched the sky and felt the warmth that Mage's shawl gave her, Abra tried to convince herself that life would go on, and that she was actually better being out of Sultan Oman's harem. She fell asleep before she could think about too much of her past in the harem, though.

Abra was roughly woken by small hands shaking her.

"Get up, get up! We have to go," a woman's voice said. Abra opened her eyes to the blaring sun of a new day. Her head hurt, and her neck and shoulders were sore. She didn't know where she was, and it took her a moment to realize what was going on.

"Are you awake?" Mage came into focus in Abra's vision. The floor underneath her suddenly moved. She sat up rigid, and scrambled to push the heavy rug off of her. Mage grabbed her hand, and the soft, old skin was cool.

"Ready? Jump," Mage said and jumped off the cart, dragging Abra with her. Abra fell to her knees in the dirt and Mage rolled into a ball next to her. Pain shot through her legs and she hoped that they weren't broken.

Mage began to laugh, her small body shaking. Abra was confused. The sun overhead was already hot, and she knew her thin clothes wouldn't protect her very well.

"My dear," Mage said standing and brushing dirt off of her dark, heavy clothes. "That was the most fun I've had in a long time."

Abra stood and winced as pain went through her upper legs. She was just sore, and nothing felt broken. Her house stood set into the line of other residencies, and Abra remembered

that her mother was gone. She wanted to sink back down to the ground and stay there. Mage put a hand on Abra's shoulder.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Abra shook her head, and felt like she wanted to cry again. Mage pulled her into a hug, and Abra let her tears flow freely. Only a small question nagged at her mind as she stood with the strange woman. Who would show this much kindness to someone like me?

Abra was getting the front of Mage's shirt wet, and when she pulled back to wipe her nose, she decided that she needed to stop feeling sorry for herself. Mage's eyes sparkled in the sun as Abra looked into them. They were a brilliant blue, and Abra felt safe as she saw the unspoken kindness in them.

"Hey, you!" a man's voice called from down the street. Abra turned and saw a guard walking towards them quickly. Abra moved to stand behind Mage. Mage turned to face the guard.

His white clothes shone brilliantly in the sun, and he looked angry for some reason.

"Are you the young woman named Abra?" the guard asked Abra.

Mage put her arm out behind her and around Abra. She held eye contact with the man, which was highly offensive for a woman to do. Abra watched Mage closely. Her grey, curly hair was not covered with the traditional *hijab*, and her mouth was held in a hard, thin line.

"There is no one here by that name. I suggest you conduct your search somewhere else," Mage said at the same volume a man would speak to another man. The guard looked down at Mage. Abra braced for him to hit them both. He reached for the sword at his side, but then withdrew his hand, as if rethinking his decision.

“Fine. Rif-raf like you isn’t wanted here, even for information. Get to where you belong before I report you,” the guard said and then turned. He walked with a quick pace away from them, and Abra stared at his retreating figure with disbelief. Mage shook her head, but Abra heard her laugh again.

“That was close, young one,” Mage said, her eyes taking stalk of Abra’s shocked face. “I’m assuming he was looking for you?”

Abra nodded.

“Well, why don’t we go home then? You look like you could use some new clothes,” Mage said. She grabbed Abra’s hand and led her back into the alleyway. Abra followed behind in the darkness, with her hand in Mage’s soft one. It was as if she was walking through a dream; her senses were dulled, and her mind was not thinking. She was not watching where they were going, but was only slightly aware of taking several turns that a regular alleyway wouldn’t contain.

They broke out into small stone courtyard that was lit by the sun. The houses blocked out the courtyard from the main road of the city. Abra had never seen this place before. Women were gathered around a small well in the center of the courtyard. Abra searched the faces for a familiar one, but with disappointment sinking into her heart, Abra realized that she knew no one, except for Mage.

Mage and Abra walked to the well and the women looked up. Their faces were plump and looked happy. The smiles that they wore only expanded when they saw Abra. A lump caught in Abra’s throat.

“My ladies, this is Abra. Please welcome her as a daughter. She was thrown out yesterday, and although I do not know her offenses, her innocence has been stolen, a crime

against her, for she comes from the harem,” Mage spoke with confidence, and turned every few words to look at Abra’s face. When she was done, she pulled Abra into the circle of women.

Suddenly hands were touching her everywhere. The women were reaching out to her, and fingertips brushed her hair away from her forehead. Her skin was warmed in the sun, and she felt sleepy. She was only half aware of the women leading her into a house. Abra was put into a chair, and several of the women worked over her for a while. When their hands came away, Abra was washed and in new clothes. Her hair had been brushed so that it was silky and her body didn’t ache anymore.

“What have you done to me?” Abra asked a woman nearby, who upon second look, Abra realized was Mage. She had changed her clothes and now wore a light green outfit that looked comfortable.

“My dear, we have taken care of you,” Mage said. She handed Abra a small mirror. The face that Abra saw in it when she held it up was not the one that she had seen the last three years. It was as if the women, while washing her, had stripped away the scared, and frustrated Abra, to replace her with the carefree girl she had been before the day Oman had chosen her.

“It’s me,” Abra whispered. “I’m back.” She closed her eyes in relief, and for the first time in three years, Abra felt like she was in the right place.

Duffled Diamonds

It was nearing the end of summer, and my family was planning one last vacation. My mom's ambitious idea was to climb and camp along The Presidential Range ridge in northern New Hampshire. The summer day we left on was warm, but a slight breeze with the smell of fall on it passed through the valley our house sat in.

We had packed everything we would need for the week long trip. My mom had her old navy duffle bag stuffed. She was always bringing extra supplies along whenever we went on vacation: food, clothes, flashlights, band aids. She packed anything that might be helpful if we were to lose one of our own bags. I lugged the bag into the back of our station wagon and slammed the door closed. It was somewhat of a joke in our family we always had too much of everything. Preparedness for the unlikely was Mom's specialty, while not being able to handle a single situation in the conventional way was how she operated.

"Are we ready?" Dad asked from the driver's seat. His hand was hanging out the window, and the black flies were swarming around it. He waved his hand in the air at Mom and me to get in the car. We were already a half-hour behind schedule, and Dad was nervous about getting there on time. A train would take us to the top of Mt. Washington, and we would hike along the ridge to our camping site. I knew we had missed our chance at getting the first train that would depart at nine. We pulled out of our driveway, leaving behind our black cat rolling around in the cool sand.

"Why's Elsa still out?" Mom asked as she looked back at the disappearing driveway.

"Don't worry, she'll go inside when Casey comes over to feed them," Dad replied. His mood seemed to be lifted a little since we were on our way. My brother Joshua was squeezed

between my sister Jessica and me, and his elbow kept touching my arm. I moved over as close to the door as I could get to avoid the sticky contact. The wind from Mom's rolled down window blew my hair back and stung my eyes. The car felt entirely too small.

"Can you put that up a little please?" I asked over the noise of the wind. Mom put up the window a tiny bit, but then leaned over to turn on the air conditioning. I rolled my eyes and muttered thanks. Mom was always hot. Dad and I agreed that it was due to her weight, but she had started blamed it on menopause, which she was too young for.

My sister had her nose stuck in a book like it always was. Even in the car, she could read. Most nights, Jessica fell asleep with her glasses on and a book covering her face. We shared a bedroom in our trailer, so I always had to take care of her when she fell asleep like that. Jessica would often disappear into whatever fantasy world her books were set in. I could only read in the car at certain times, and today certainly wasn't one of those times. I was always too interested in what was going on around me to get lost in a book, as well.

I settled in, and as I watched the maple, spruce, and birch trees pass by I tried to get excited about spending a week with my family. The summer had not gone well; most of my friends were away on vacations with their families, and my best friend had stood me up several times. I was looking forward to actually doing something, whether or not it was with my family. We were two hours away from our destination; that was all the time I would need to spend in the car with them. Mom chewed away on some gum in the front seat, and my brother moved his arm into mine again. I nudged him back. It was going to be a long car ride.

"What? You're messing me up," Joshua shouted at me. His voice pierced my ears, and reverberated in my head. It was so annoying how he always had to yell.

“Joshua,” Dad warned him. Dad’s blue eyes appeared in the rearview mirror several times to ensure that no else would have any problems. *I’ll give it five more minutes*, I thought. I reached down to take out my source of escaping my family from my bag. My ipod shuffle didn’t hold very many songs, but it would be enough of a distraction for at least half the trip.

I was only vaguely aware that I had listened to the A-teens song for the fourth time as we pulled into the parking lot. My mouth felt dry, and I clucked my tongue a few times to get the saliva flowing again. Joshua elbowed me in the side. I took out my ear-buds.

“What?” I asked him.

“You were snoring,” he said. “And stop doing that, it’s annoying.”

“So what?” I said. I felt groggy, and knew that I had dozed off during the trip. “Are we there?”

Dad was already out of the car and unloading the back. After I put away my ipod, I opened my door. Mom walked by and bumped into my door, forcing it closed on my shin. She was always accidentally hurting us, and today was apparently no exception.

“Hey,” I yelled through the window. Mom looked startled, and pulled the door open. Her dark curls were being blown around by the wind, and I knew my hair would look like that when I stepped out. She probably had some frizzy hair serum packed away in one of her bags.

“Sorry, come help. We have twenty minutes before the next train goes up,” she said as she walked around to the back of the car. Dad had taken off towards the check in center carrying two bags in each hand. He had taken mine, but had left Mom’s emergency one behind. I grabbed it and shrugged it onto my free shoulder. My small knapsack swung off of the other one. I cursed my tiny shoulders for not being able to hold anything.

The wind whipped my hair around and bit through my T-shirt. I should have put my coat on before getting out of the car, but had left it behind on the seat. It was doubtful that someone would grab it for me either. There was no time now to turn around for it.

The walk to the entrance was long because the good parking spots were already taken. It was our own fault for being late. I could hear Jessica shouting at Joshua, and I turned to investigate. Their typical squabble was taking place, so I shifted my focus to the scenery instead.

I had been up to Franconia Notch before, so I had seen the mountains of the area. Up near Mt. Washington, though, it was different. The land was surprisingly level around the six-thousand foot monster that rose up in front of me. I stood there a moment in awe as I surveyed the other mountains that were attached by a ridge line to Mt. Washington. I wondered what adventure awaited us at the top.

I heaved the bags up onto a secure spot on my shoulders and covered the distance left to where Dad stood with our five tickets. Sometimes I was amazed at how fast my short dad could get things done, and I knew how tired he would be after what was supposed to be a relaxing vacation. I decided I would try and help him out in any way that I could.

“Are we on time?” I asked Dad. The shoulder strap from Mom’s emergency duffel was digging into my shoulder so I dropped it. Dad leaned down and tied a bright orange tag onto the bag’s handle. He then stuck one around the strap of my carry-on bag.

“We still have to get all these bags inside on the cart,” he said, and then took off back towards the car. I turned and saw my family trudging along after me. As Dad met each one of them, he put a similar tag on their remaining carry-on bags. Dad had run out of the maximum amount of allotted tags for bags when he reached my mom. She slipped off her purse and took out a few items, which she stuffed in her pockets. Dad carried the discarded bag awkwardly by

the straps in his fist as he raced to the car. I saw him place a bright orange paper inside the front windshield.

I lugged my bags inside and found the cart that had our four duffle bags on it. I tossed Mom's onto the cart, but kept my own backpack on my shoulders. Jessica had caught up to me, but didn't have anything to contribute to our pile. Her backpack sagged off of her shoulder, heavy with the weight of more books. She was still reading, and seemed uninterested in what was around her. It was a little ridiculous how much my family was unaware of what we were really doing here. Somehow I felt as if we were all in for a wake-up call up on the mountain.

The whole building we were in was made of dark wood. Hammered tin shapes of typical New Hampshire animals hung about the walls, along with old portraits of distinguished looking men. Tiles of black, white, and blue squares made up the flooring of the entryway. It was all very New Hampshire backwoods décor, and it made me anxious to start our adventure. Joshua fell in through door and swung his heavy bag onto the cart. No doubt he had brought along a lot of unnecessary items as well. I rolled my eyes, and thought about how unprepared we would look getting onto the train.

Mom followed Joshua in and threw one more, smaller bag on top of the pile. I think it contained snack and entertainment items, and counted as Dad's second bag. My family had been camping several times, and had always been able to bring what we wanted. This was a different experience though.

"Do we really need all of this?" I asked Mom. She snapped her gum in her mouth.

"We have to be prepared," she replied.

"Are you prepared to carry all of this?" I asked. She shook her head and began moving the bags around to make them fit on the cart better. I sighed and walked further into the building

to find where we were supposed to load onto the train. Joshua was on my heels, practically tripping over me.

“Would you back off?” I said to him, holding my arm out to push him away.

“Where are you going?” he asked. The pants he was wearing were too small on him and I could see the tops of his socks. His shoes were not tied, and he would probably trip over them later.

“To find the train,” I said, taking a stance in front of him with my arms crossed at my chest. “Where is everyone?”

“How about there?” he said, pointing to a sign on the wall that marked the way to the train. I looked back at where Mom and Jessica stood. Jessica was still reading and Mom was rifling through the snack bag for yet another thing to eat.

“Hey, do you think Mom will be okay on the hike?” I asked Joshua.

He furrowed his eyebrows and pushed his wire glasses back up his nose. “What do you mean? Are you saying that because she’s fat?” he said. He had a grin on his face, and I couldn’t help grinning back. It was mean to say it, but I didn’t want to be dragged down because Mom couldn’t keep up on the hike.

“Whatever, we’ll be fine. You shouldn’t say things like that,” I said, pushing past Joshua on my way back to Mom and Jessica. Dad burst through the doors and started herding us all to the other side of the building.

A lady’s voice came over an intercom. “Five minutes to boarding, last call for luggage and passengers,” she said.

We all broke into a run. Dad handed us each our tickets. I gripped mine for all it was worth, even though I didn’t know what the trip had cost my parents. The last thing we needed

was to lose our tickets. We reached a door that was marked in big red letters, “Cog Railway Entrance,” and pushed it open. The platform was deserted, and the train sat beside it, waiting, puffing black smoke out of a small pipe on top of the engine car. My heart swelled with joy for the trip ahead. I had always wanted to go up this railroad.

We stepped up to the train, and a lady leaned out, checking for last minute passengers, meaning us. I saw a young man further up the tracks loading our luggage onto the front car. The lady took our tickets, and we all climbed aboard. The train was small, only three cars. The engine was in the back, preceded by the passenger car, and then the luggage one. We found our seats quickly, because they were the only empty ones left. I was in one row with Mom and my siblings, while Dad had to squeeze in on the end of another bench across the aisle. No sooner had we settled then a man’s voice came over the speaker in our cabin.

“Folks, welcome to the Cog Railway. We apologize for the delay. Our trip will take us about an hour and a half. Please sit back and enjoy the view,” he said. The speaker crackled off. We felt a jolt as the train began to move. I looked around at the other people. It was quite a mixed crowd. Some of the passengers were old, and bundled up in winter jackets, although it was still summer. The short run here had made me warm, so I didn’t need my jacket, but knew I would miss it later. Mom had packed an extra one in her emergency duffle bag, but it would be two sizes too big on me, and covered in cat fur.

There were other people on board that looked like normal families, like ours. A group of young men were all sitting together, and they looked like they had climbed the mountain by foot before. I wondered if they were our guides for getting us to our campsite. Two of them were handsome, with dark features and tanned skin. One had long black hair tied back in a ponytail; the other had short hair covered in a bandanna. I decided that the one with the ponytail had the

more pleasing facial features between the two men, which included five o'clock stubble the same color as his hair. My sister nudged me with her shoulder.

"Whatcha looking at?" she said. She had finally put her book down, and had been people watching along with me. Mom turned to look at us, wondering what my sister's tone had implied. I blushed. The boy I'd been dating during the last school year was okay to be with, but wasn't much of a looker. I was waiting for the day when I would find a handsome man to be my own.

"Nothing," I said.

"Girls, why don't you look out the window? This is a once in a lifetime experience, and you're going to miss it," she said. Her tone felt forced, and I wondered if she really believed what she had said herself. We all looked out past our mom. The green mountain side was speckled with jagged pieces of dark rock. Interspersed with them were short trees that looked like pine. I was surprised at how far up the mountain we already were.

The sky ahead was dark grey, threatening rain. I wondered what kind of weather we would encounter. Maybe our guides would wait before taking us along the ridge. That would give us more time with the handsome men if they were our guides. I was handed a brochure by my brother, and got startled out of my thoughts. Where he had picked it up from, I didn't know. He had opened the brochure, and then folded it closed the wrong way. The page on top had a colorful map with the trail along the Presidential Range marked out.

I opened up the brochure all the way in what little space I had in my hard, wooden seat, and started examining it to pass the time. My sister leaned in over me, breathing on me with her bad breath.

"Did you brush your teeth this morning?" I asked her.

She turned her dark brown eyes to me and furrowed her eyebrows. Hygiene had always been a problem for her. Some days I could tell that she just didn't care about her appearance, which I thought was strange because she was always trying to make friends. I had tried to tell her that if she took care of herself, she would be more likeable to be around, but she had been deeply offended. It apparently wasn't my place, even as her big sister, to tell her how to take care of herself.

"Yeah, I did. Thanks for noticing," she said, rolling her eyes. She turned her face away from me, and I was left alone to read the rest of the brochure in peace. When I was done, I folded it up as it was supposed to be and handed it to Jessica. She was opening a piece of gum she'd taken from Mom. *That* was one of the things Mom had chosen to take out of her purse? I shook my head and passed the brochure to Mom instead. Jessica was chewing gum in my ear, and I leaned over far into my brother's space to get away from the annoying sound.

"Hey," he said, and then shoved me back into Jessica. How was I the one being jostled when I wasn't even the middle child of the family?

"Joshua," Dad warned. Strain was evident in his voice. There had been so many times that Dad had lost his temper with Joshua and it usually had ended in tears and yelling. On a train packed with people, Dad's parenting style wasn't an option this time. Joshua shrugged and settled back into his own seat. I nursed my arm where he had shoved me. Mom reached around and grabbed Joshua's shoulders to hold him in place.

"It's only for a little time, just try to get along, please," Mom said to him. She was not forceful enough with her tone, and the second she turned around again, Joshua faked being exhausted and leaned his head on my shoulder. It boiled my blood that he was purposely annoying me, and the best I could do was to shrug his head off my shoulder. He rolled it around

and landed on me again. I pinched his side, hard, and he jumped in his seat. Tears formed in his eyes, so I grabbed his hand and squeezed.

“I’m sorry, Joshua. Just leave me alone, please,” I said to him. He turned his face away from me and watched the scenery move by. It never worked out when I tried to discipline him myself. In fact many of the methods our parents had tried never seemed to work out either, for my brother or sister.

The train kept chugging along at what felt like a snail’s pace. No wonder it took an hour and a half to reach the top. I went back to admiring the two potential trail guides. Then the train jolted. I saw that we were in an area where no trees could grow. Only light grey stones littered the surface of the mountainside. They were mixed in with small patches of grass and color that I assumed to be flowers. The sky was darker then it had been before. As I was looking out the window, a flash of lightning lit up the clouds. Why would they let the train go up if they were expecting bad weather?

Then I remembered what I had read in the brochure; the weather on Mt. Washington was deemed the worst in the world, because it could change in seconds. We seemed to be caught in one of those instances. It was both exciting and terrifying at the same time, and would make a great story to tell my best friend later. The train shuddered again and came to a screeching halt. Raindrops began to pelt the windows of our little cabin. People were murmuring, and the noise level in the car began to rise. I listened to the chatter, trying to make out what each person was saying.

“Folks,” the voice over the speaker returned. “It looks like we won’t be able to make this trip. I apologize, but we cannot play with Mother Nature today,” he said. His little stab at humor to lighten the mood was overlooked. People began to yell, even over their families that were

sitting next to them, just to be heard. The man with the bandanna stood up and shouted over the noise.

“Calm down everyone,” he said. His deep voice cut through the roar, and silenced it for a few seconds. The heavy rain drops hitting the window was almost deafening.

“Are we going back?”

“Do we get a refund?”

“How long will this take?”

People were asking questions to no one in particular. The bandanna man was about to yell again when the door to the cabin flung open. A man in a drenched, white, button-down shirt climbed in and shook himself off. The water dripped off of his bangs and into his eyes. He blinked, and then seemed to remember where he was.

“I got a report of trees down on the track below so we cannot get down by train until they are cleared. Folks, we need to evacuate,” he said.

I realized the man was the conductor. A chill ran through my arms and I grabbed them to keep warm. A sharp, cold breeze blew in through the open cabin door. Chaos broke out among the passengers. My family was stunned. Dad had his fingers stuffed into his ears. We met eyes and I nodded at him. He took out his fingers and waved at the air around him while shrugging his shoulders. I began to laugh, and I think I saw him chuckle a little too.

The conductor stepped out of the cabin, and the noise died down again. With no one to yell at, people couldn't find a reason to complain. We were all curious about what was going on and watched as the conductor traveled to the car in front of us. He disappeared, and then opened the door that connected the luggage train with the one the passengers were in.

“We have vehicles on their way up the emergency road to take you safely down the mountain. Please leave through this door to pick up luggage if you brought it. Elderly are first,” he said while rain still dripped into his eyes. The conductor looked to be in his thirties, but his shoulders slouched forward from his frame. All the passengers were silent as the shuffle began to get the elderly people out of their seats. The train was secured on the tracks, but was held at an upward angle. It wasn’t so severe that people couldn’t stand, but was still sharp enough that the elderly that made their way to the front had to be assisted by the adults sitting in the aisle seats. I gasped a couple times watching a few old men and women stumble.

Once the first people disappeared into the luggage car, I heard a motor rev outside. Three, small four-wheelers had pulled up beside the train, and the first elderly man was helped onto the back seat. I leaned back in my spot, allowing myself to relax now that I knew people were going to make it to safety. My body shivered from the cold being let in through the door, and from the adrenaline that was rushing through me. It was all very exciting. The three vehicles left after being loaded with two elderly people each. With the conductor still in the luggage car, the rest of the passengers gained back a little courage.

“They should have a better response team than that.”

“We’re going to be here all day.”

“It’d be faster to walk.” Several people around the man that made that comment nodded their heads in agreement. They were all men around my father’s age, each with a family much like ours. Four of the men in the group stood up and walked to the luggage car.

“We want to hike down,” I heard one of them say to the conductor.

“I’m sorry. I can’t let you do that. Against policy,” the conductor replied.

“Bullshit, we could walk up here. Why can’t we walk down?” a second man asked. At this remark the group of three young men that I had pegged for trail guides stood up in unison and walked to the luggage car. All of them couldn’t fit, so some of them were left standing in the aisle. Everyone else was silent as they watched the drama unfold.

“Excuse me, sir, but we could lead a team down,” said the ponytail man.

My hero, I thought, as I listened for the conductor’s reply. I guess I had been right about them being hiking guides. Another motor sound roared to life outside. A small truck was trundling its way up the mountain on the emergency access road. People stood in their seats to get a better view.

“Can we all fit?” someone asked. Another person shook their head no. The noise grew again, and the trail guide group filed out of the train to stand in the rain. The fathers that wanted to hike down were out with them too. One of the wives waved at her husband and yelled something in French. She had her camera out and took his picture through the window. *Did she really just do that?* I shook my head. Tourists are really dumb sometimes.

“I’m sorry for the delay, everyone. This is not a common occurrence, I assure you. We are doing our best to get you all out of here safely. There’s room for sixteen people on the vehicle we have. I would like for children to leave first with their families,” the conductor instructed from the doorway. A bolt of lightning shot through the sky, and I felt scared for the people standing out in the rain, exposed to the elements. Their method of evacuation didn’t seem very safe.

The woman who’d taken the picture of her husband was the first one out of her seat and headed towards the door, dragging her two young sons behind her. She had three bags hung on her shoulders and was bumping them into people’s heads as she walked past. More families

followed her, all with children younger than Joshua. It was fair; we would wait. Dad was being jostled as the families walked by. Bags kept hitting him in the head, and he was leaning into the person next to him. I watched his leg bounce up and down. His smile from our earlier sign language exchange was gone. I could feel the tension in the cabin grow as more people made their way off the train. It seemed like they were actually starting to take the dilemma seriously.

I counted out sixteen people and then leaned back into my seat. About half of the passenger car was empty. The loaded vehicles headed down the mountain. Once they were out of sight, the conductor came back into the cabin and pulled the connecting door shut against the rain. The luggage area was only used for the families that were supposed to have taken the trail at the top to the camping portion of the trip.

The conductor sat down in one of the empty seats and lowered his shoulders even more. I was surprised at how calm my family had been. Like me, they'd all been observing the movements around us. Now, with nothing to watch, my family came to life.

"Wow, what a great way to start a vacation," Mom said to the cold, rain splattered window. Dad got out of his seat and walked back to where the conductor sat. They began to speak in low voices. My siblings and I craned around in our seats to eavesdrop. I couldn't hear anything, so I turned back around. Jessica had her elbow resting on my shoulder, and it was annoying me. I stood up and pushed past Joshua to the aisle.

An empty seat beckoned me, and I sat down heavily. I looked out the window and saw that the men from the trail guide group were still standing in the rain, trying to prove their manliness, no doubt. Water gathered in the creases of their heavy duty rain jackets. Wouldn't it have been better if they had just waited inside the train for the rain to stop, and why couldn't they clear the trees below for us to pass by train? The rain began to hit the window with a sharper

sound, as if there were ice mixed in with it. I said a silent prayer for the people heading down the emergency vehicles.

Another jolt shook the train. The conductor and my dad jumped out of their seats. There was a collective gasp among the leftover passengers, and then worried voices pierced through the small space in the car again. The conductor opened the door that led directly outside, and hopped down into the icy rain. He was going to check on the engine car. As he stepped off of the train a shrill squealing rattled the air around us. The car began shaking and sputtering backwards violently as the metal of the wheels ground along the tracks. *The ice must have caused the wheels to lose their grip*, I thought, as I felt my heart move up into my throat. I gripped the back of the bench in front of me and felt my fingernails dig into the wood. My mind was numb, and my legs were shaking.

The conductor jumped back into the cabin and shouted, “Everybody off right now!” The men from the hiking group rushed over to the two exits and started helping people down. My family had moved into the crowd, and I lost sight of them. It was my turn to jump off the train, and I slipped when my feet hit a wet patch of grass. The man with the ponytail grabbed my arm and pulled me up. I blushed and thanked him with a murmur. He nodded and pushed me along so that the next person could jump out. In a time like this I shouldn’t be thinking about it, but I couldn’t help imagining the man holding onto me for longer. I shivered in the rain as I stood there watching the evacuation. The train had stopped moving for the time being.

I looked around for my family. My dad and Joshua were standing together, and Jessica came running up to me. We met up in a small huddled group. Several people were pressed in around us, and we were slowly being herded further away from the train. The sound of grinding metal rang out again. I looked around for Mom. The last of the people were just coming off the

train, and I realized that she was still on it. Why was she taking her time in an emergency like this?

The door to the luggage car was still open. I saw the flash of Mom's glasses and shouted. My voice was lost in the wind and the rain. I pushed my way through the crowd towards the train. No one stopped me; everyone was busy helping someone else. The men had moved away from the train because they thought everyone was off.

"Mom!" I shouted as I stumbled over rocks to the luggage car. She leaned out the door just as the wheels slipped again. The door swung closed in her face but didn't latch, and opened on a back swing. Her glasses were skewed on her face, and I could see that she was weighed down with something. She was holding her denim duffle bag. "Mom, drop it and jump out," I ordered as I reached up. She looked out again and shook her head. Jumping had never been her strong suit because she had weak ankles. At that point I didn't care if she broke her legs jumping; she needed to get off the train.

"Here, take this, and then I'll come," she said as she swung the duffle bag out the door. The weight of it knocked me down, and I could feel the wet grass soak through my pants. Rain stung my face as I struggled with the bag. A screech of metal on metal rang out again, and the train slid further down the tracks. I screamed and pointed towards Mom's face hanging out the door. A heavy hand came down on my shoulder, and a man helped me to my feet. Other men in the group began to run down the slope after the train. My heart beat faster as I watched them trip over rocks and the train slip further away.

Shrieks rose from the crowd behind me, and I saw Dad break away from the crowd to join in the chase. The train was moving impossibly fast. My tears mixed in with the rain and

muddled my vision. I wiped my eyes and saw men falling and slipping down the side of the mountain after the disappearing train.

The screeching metal sounded distant, but I could still see the luggage cart. I ran after the train with the man that had helped me to my feet. The stones underfoot were loose, and I tripped. Pain shot through my ankle, and I clutched it tightly as I sat on the gravel near the tracks. The man I'd been running with flew past me. Rain dripped into my eyes again, joined by more tears as I saw the men and the train finally fade from sight. *How were they going to stop the train?*

I sat there and clutched my ankle while I thought about why Mom had not jumped. Did she have a death wish? Why was that bag so important? I crawled my way back to the duffle bag Mom had thrown me. In a heat of rage I tore into it, breaking the zipper. A black sweatshirt tumbled out, and I put it on to try to stop my shivers. I was vaguely aware of my brother and sister running to me, followed by the remaining crowd of people. Tears pooled in my eyes again and blocked out my vision. When I felt hands on my shoulders, squeezing and shaking me, I curled my body up around the duffle bag and its contents. It was the only thing Mom had left behind and I wanted to hold onto it as long as I could.

I was still holding the duffle bag when they carted everyone off the mountain. By the time we reached the bottom of the access road, they had the loading area for the train taped off and a couple of ambulances sat in the parking lot. Dad jumped down from the truck before it could even come to a full stop. He ran up to the police tape and ducked under it. An officer stopped him with a hand on his chest. It wasn't stopping Dad, though. I was helped down from the rescue truck, and limped over to the tape line.

"Where is she? Where's my wife?" Dad demanded.

“Sir, please calm down. This is an unsafe zone, I can’t allow you in here,” the officer said. I gazed back towards the train station. Everything looked fine, until I took a step to the side and could see around the building. The walls that were facing the tracks were torn in; with the luggage end of the train sticking out like a child had picked it up and thrown it. I sucked in my breath and could feel the cold of the passing storm in my nose.

Dad looked back at me, and then back to the officer. “My wife was still on the train when it came down the mountain. Have you seen her?” The panic was evident in Dad’s voice, and I felt hot tears begin to run down my cheek again.

“What’s going on?” my sister said from behind me. I had almost forgotten about my siblings. Jessica and Joshua were both standing in the middle of the parking lot.

A young man from one of the ambulances came over to us. “Are you guys okay?” he asked. He was wearing a tight black shirt, dark pants, and heavy combat boots. His face held a gentle expression, and as he got closer I could see that he was actually quite handsome. He waited for us to respond.

I sucked in my breath again. Dad was still discussing something with the officer past the tape, and their voices were rising higher with each comment. Even though they were speaking clearly, their voices suddenly became muted. I could hear something rushing through my ears, like floodwater broken from a dam. Then the sound ended in a loud pop. I hobbled over to my siblings, and the EMT saw me limping.

“Ma’am, did you hurt yourself?” he asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I turned to him and blushed. I nodded.

“Ok, can we get you over to the ambulance?” he asked.

I nodded again and moved to follow him. To my surprise he slipped his arm around my back and put my arm over his shoulder. I leaned into him, and we walked over to the ambulance. My siblings followed us. They were quiet, and I suspected that they were as shocked as I was.

The EMT looked down at me and noticed the duffle bag clutched in my hand.

“Is that heavy? Wouldn’t you like to put it down?” he asked.

I shook my head and grasped the bag tighter. The bag was a little lighter because I was wearing the sweatshirt that had taken up most of the space. I could feel the other items bumping against my leg as we walked.

The EMT sat me down on the bumper of the ambulance. A small group of people was gathered around, and were silent too. I would have almost preferred that they talk; it was eerie that everyone was silent. The EMT’s radio on his waist crackled while he was wrapping my ankle up.

My sister was standing next to me, and she grabbed my hand. “Do you think Mom will be okay?” The wind blew her hair back from her face, and I could see the damp trail on her cheek that her tears had left.

I shook my head, and tried to swallow back the lump that was in my throat. Joshua moved closer and shivered in his sweatshirt. Dad was stomping across the parking lot towards us. I guessed that he had lost the argument with the officer.

“Field to base, we need the stretcher as soon as possible over at the crash,” a voice from the EMT’s radio said through static. He finished the wrapping on my ankle and helped me to stand up. My sister caught my arm and my brother took my other one. I gently set my foot down, and winced with the pain. We watched as the EMT, with the help of another man who was probably the driver, took out the stretcher from the back.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. Why was it taking so long for them to respond? I turned to look back at the building and saw a few men walking into it. Dad's hand landed on my shoulder, and it felt like he wanted to turn me away, but couldn't do it. We all stood still watching as they rolled the stretcher into the building. The only sound was the wind whipping through the parking lot and the occasional shuffle of someone's feet on the pavement.

The silence was deafening, and it felt like we waited forever for the EMT's to reappear. When they did, they were rolling the stretcher back out, and the white sheet over it looked blurry in my vision. I realized I was crying again. My body shook and I took in a deep breath. I turned to Dad and hugged him like I was five years old again. He held me tight and I let the tears soak the front of his coat.

The duffle bag was still in my hand, and for the first time since taking out the sweatshirt, I let it drop to the pavement. I don't remember hearing anything but my cries after that. When I felt a small tap on my arm, Dad released me and walked over to the ambulance to look in. I saw my sister standing beside us with the duffle bag opened in front of her. She had a look of surprise on her face.

I wiped my tears away. "What is it?" I moved closer to my sister and saw what was in the bag. Staring at the contents, I began shaking my head.

"Can you tell me why? Why did she save this stupid thing?" my sister asked. She let the bag drop to the concrete. A bottle of pills rattled in the bottom when it struck.

"Don't do that!" I said and bent down to retrieve the duffle bag.

"Well, you tell me what was so important about the bag that Mom chose to save it over her life?" Jessica said as she pointed first at the bag, and then over to the ambulance that they were loading the stretcher into.

Dad came back over to us. “We need to follow the ambulance to the hospital,” he said. His words were tight and stretched thin in the air before the harsh mountain wind blew them away. I glared at Jessica and tried to close the duffle bag with a broken zipper. We followed Dad silently to the car. He moved Mom’s purse off of the driver’s seat, without a word, before climbing in. I took the front seat next to him and held the duffle bag to my face after I buckled my seat belt.

Everything was happening too fast now. The silence in the car was scary. I watched the trees fly by as we followed the ambulance back to the highway. Its lights weren’t on, and we weren’t going very fast. My emotions, except for fear and sadness were dull. My mind couldn’t process anything. I pulled open the duffle bag and took out the pain medicine and a bottle of water. If anything in the bag could help me now, it would be to reduce my pain. I wouldn’t mind having my senses dulled even more, so that I wouldn’t even feel sad or scared.

Dad reached over and took the pain medicine bottle from my hand before I could dump out more than two pills. I glanced over at him and saw him shake his head. The pills almost got stuck in my throat when I took them, and it made my eyes water.

On my lap the duffle bag felt warm. I thought about how not even a few hours before Mom sat in this very seat. The annoyance I had felt with my family seemed so far away now, and every push, pinch, and harsh word was insignificant. I stuck my hands inside the open bag on my lap and felt around. One by one, I felt the familiar items Mom had packed in the bag: The hard, cold handle of a small flashlight, the smooth, rectangular package of extra band-aids, the flexible tube of anti-biotic ointment, a crinkling package of animal crackers. When my hand came to a small, smooth piece of paper I pulled it out and stared at it.

It was a photograph. Mine and my sister's face peered out at the camera from behind painted on whiskers. It was the Halloween that we both dressed up as cats. Mom had made both of our costumes. In my hand I held the stiff purple tail that Mom had sewn together, filled with stuffing, and pinned to my butt. My sister had a matching pink one. In the background, I saw a man dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans. It was Dad. He went as a scarecrow that Halloween.

As I sat there and stared at the picture, I couldn't remember what Mom had dressed up as, or if she had even dressed up at all. A horrible feeling grew inside my chest as I tried to remember. It would all be okay if I could, right? My mind was blank. The only thing I could remember from the Halloween was walking down a path the ring the doorbell of a mobile home in one of the local trailer parks. I took a shuddering breath in as a realization came to me. Everything we did as a family was always done for us. I could never remember Mom doing anything for herself; it had always been for me and my siblings.

Deep down in my heart I knew there was more about Mom's relationship with us that I was not seeing, and I hoped with every vein in my body that we could eventually be grateful for her sacrifice as a mother. Wherever she was now, maybe she could forgive us for not being the best family we could have been. God knows we would be trying harder now.