

“Blind Man’s Dance”

(a collections of stories)

by

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“Eye See You”

“You are such an asshole, Tony.”

“You aren't so nice yourself, Sandra.”

“Fuck you. You think you can come here, after you’ve been out sleeping with someone else, and refuse to sign the goddamn divorce papers? What the fuck is wrong with you? I was married to you for seven long years and what do I have to show for it? Trust me, Tony, this was the last thing I wanted to happen to us. We've been through a lot of shit together, but this is too much. I've had enough of your bullshit. You said you'd sign them today!”

“I’m only saying that I can’t sign them now on account of the taxes comin' up. We gotta file together or I'll lose my goddamned truck. I need that money, Sandra. You file with me and then I'll sign whatever you want.”

“So you want me to cover your fuckin’ debts to the IRS with my tax return? Get the fuck out, asshole! I’ll find a way to handle this shit without your useless ass. Get the fuck out!”

Sandra pointed with a long icy blue painted fingernail at the door to the trailer home in which she lived. There was a quaint sign hanging on the door that said “Good Day!” and she regretted having it there to face him as he left.

“Sandra, why the fuck are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to you that was so bad, huh? What?”

“Nothing! That was the fucking problem! How many times do we have to go over this?” She was almost screeching. “You never paid any attention to me! You ignored me so much it

was like I wasn't even there! I got to the point where I would fucking cry with happiness whenever someone so much as looked at me, I was so fucking lonely! I used to make friends with fucking characters from TV shows because you wouldn't let me have any goddamned real ones! You scared them all away with your white power Nazi bullshit. I swear, you just try to act tough - you're really just a fucking child!"

"Don't push me, Sandra, or you know what will happen." He was clenching his fists. She did know what would happen, she knew from the pain of experience. She was silent for a long moment, giving him smoldering look.

Finally, he broke the silence. "So you're leaving me...That makes no fuckin' sense, Sandra. Now you'll just be even lonelier."

"Not if I find someone else I won't," she said through her teeth. She'd never said anything like that to him before, never alluded to wanting someone else. But she didn't care anymore. It was over for her, that she was sure of. She didn't need to worry so much about hurting his feelings anymore, especially after this stunt.

Tony stormed out, slamming the door behind him as best he could, it was too cheap to get a proper slam out of it, and it simply quaked and shuddered and bounced back open rather than shut tight. Sandra could hear him peel out in his truck, peppering the outside of her trailer with pebbles from her driveway.

She clenched her fists tightly and closed the door securely. Then she went about cleaning up the coffee she had been about to serve him. She thought she would have it done today. She thought she could move on and not have to deal with him anymore. Now she would. She swore under her breath and wiped her wet hands on her faded torn jeans. Ripping off her flannel shirt in a swift motion, she grabbed a towel and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Sandra unbuckled her bra and began to unbutton her jeans. She was down to just her panties when she noticed something strange was coming out of her shower drain. It looked like some kind of growth, like a strange moss of some sort. There were tiny bulbs at the end of each little stem that grew from the holes in the drain, at least ten or twelve or so of them.

“Oh, gross!” She wondered how they managed to grow there so fast. She had taken a shower the day before, in the early morning, not even 20 hours before. She threw on her towel and went out into the kitchenette to grab some cleaner and a rag. When she returned, she sat down and got a better look at the strange plant.

It was a very strange plant indeed. It had a black stem, or black stems. She couldn’t tell if they were connected underneath, and the strange bulbs on top were much too large to have pushed their way through the holes in the drain. They must have grown once they were exposed.

‘What the heck is this?’ Sandra thought to herself. She grabbed the rag. She didn’t want to touch it. It was creeping her out. But she had to take a shower; she had to go to work at the night shift soon working as a desk person for the local motel. She had to look presentable. It was a relatively new job and she was trying to establish a better reputation in the neighborhood than she’d had in the past. She leaned in closer to the growth, and one of the bulbs suddenly opened to reveal an eye, gaping intently at her.

Sandra screamed and stumbled backwards, accidentally letting go of her towel and falling on top of the cleaner bottle.

The eyeball blinked.

Sandra kept screaming until she ran out of breath. Then she took another breath, and hesitated. Her mind was racing. ‘What IS that? Is it an alien? Some mutated plant? A monster? A monster!’ She couldn’t think. She had to get out. That thing, it was looking at her. It was staring

at her bare breasts! She got up, stumbling, and ran out of the bathroom. She ran into her bedroom and grabbed her robe and ran out the door to her neighbor's place.

Her neighbor was a twenty-one year old kid named Alan who had moved in with his trailer and his pit bull and his four-wheeler and his dirt bike and his many cases of Natural Ice about three months before. He had visited Sandra on a regular basis, helping her with household chores and offering to lend her cups of sugar or pairs of pliers whenever she needed or didn't need them. He thought she was a very attractive older woman. She was glad that he viewed her as unattainable, even though she was only eight years older than he.

She pounded on Alen's door, and he answered within seconds. He must have been bored. He didn't work, getting a monthly stipend from a rich uncle who had died, so he was usually bored.

"Sandra! How are ya, girl? What's goin on, you there in your robe?" he said, answering the door in his wife-beater and gym shorts.

"There is something in my shower! It's ...It's got a....oh, God, you have to see it for yourself, come quick!" She was gasping for breath though she had only run about a hundred feet to his door.

"Alright, let's go take a look," he said, following her scuttling footsteps. As she scuttled, she did her best to describe.

"It's terrible! It's extraordinary! My goodness, I don't know what it is! It scared the bejesus out of me!"

They went inside and into her bathroom.

"There! Look at that!" Sandra pointed at the growth. "It wasn't there yesterday!"

Alan bent down and looked. The bulb that had opened its eye was now shut. "Looks like

some sort of moss or something. It's funky lookin', but I don't know why it scared you so much."

"No, it....it did something. It...moved." Sandra didn't want to tell him the truth. She knew it would sound completely insane.

"It moved?" He looked at her, squinting his eyes suspiciously. "Are you sure, now?"

"Yes! Yes. It definitely moved. That part, right there." She pointed her finger close at the bulb that had opened its eye.

"Well, I got some drain cleaner back at the house if you want..." He turned toward her with his back to the plant. The eye opened again and stared at Sandra.

She screamed, and making Alen jump and hit his head on the faucet knob. "What! What is it?" he shouted.

"Look!" she said, pointing. He turned, but the bulb's eye was already closed.

"What?" he asked again, aggravated, rubbing his head.

"It....it moved again! Oh, god, just get rid of it, please!"

"Jesus, woman! I'll rip the thing out right now if you want me to!" he said, and was facing her again when four more of the bulbs opened and blinked at her.

"AAAAH! Yes! Please! Get it out right now!!"

Alan turned and the eyes all closed. He grabbed all the stems and once and yanked hard. Nothing happened. He yanked again. Still nothing. He used both hands and slowly, gradually, the stems began to pull out from the drain. "This thing's a bitch! And it feels really weird!" he said. One by one, the stems popped out, revealing tiny root systems on each one. Alan closed his eyes and pulled harder. The eyes on the bulbs all opened up and stared at Sandra. They looked to her like they were pleading for their lives. Suddenly she felt bad about wanting to get rid of them

so badly. It was just that they were in her shower drain. If they were somewhere else it would not be so...personally invasive. The eyes all looked at her, wide and beaming with desire to live.

Alan opened his eyes and all the others closed. He pulled out the last of the clinging stems. "There!" he said with finality. "Good riddance to one ugly weed! I'll just go and toss it in the fire pit, and you shouldn't have any more problems. Damn, I've never seen one that tough before! I'll go take care of this for ya." He began to walk out the door, and Sandra stared as the plant stared at her hanging limp from his hand.

"Wait!" she said.

Alan stopped. "What? What's wrong?"

"Um, nothing. I just, um, I know this girl! And she likes strange plants. A lot. Maybe I should give it to her. She could tell me what kind of plant it is. I'm curious."

"Yeah, me too, especially if it moves." Alan said, looking at the limp plant in his hand and rolling his eyes. "Alright, you want me to leave it here, then?"

"Yes. And thank you so much for helping me out with that. I'll take care of it." she said.

After Alan left, Sandra found a pot and filled it with good damp soil and re-planted the strange plant. She watered it again when she was done and as she was doing so, it slowly opened its eyes again. There were eleven of them in all, and they actually did move. They followed her as she moved about the house. She was glad that it had survived its re-planting process and went to the store and bought it some fancy plant food. Whenever she was home alone, it would watch her. Whenever someone came, it would close its eyes.

Sandra came to love the plant. It paid attention to her. It had no pre-conceived notions about her. No expectations. No demands. It didn't try to control her and it didn't prod her with questions when she chose to go out at night with friends. It didn't spend all her money. It didn't

drink. It surely never uttered a bad word to her or about her. Sandra came to learn that everyone wants attention in life, however very few people were as lucky as she to get the kind of attention they wanted. She pitied those poor folks who stumbled through their lives, trying so hard to find happiness and then learning that they were wrong. She had found contentment knowing she would never be alone. She went about her business, stopped speaking to many of her acquaintances, and eventually her closest friends, and eventually became a bit of a recluse. She was happy with the plant.

Sandra bought it all kinds of fancy fertilizers and treatments, and it grew larger and larger, taking up a bigger space in her home each day. She gladly shuffled furniture out of the way for her beloved plant, for it was not only a plant to her, it was a faithful companion. Her friends and family grew concerned when they stopped hearing from her. She had told no one about the plant, for fear that it would be taken away from her, either for scientific study or for her own good. She had begun to open her back windows to allow the plant to grow more freely, since it had interweaved a delicate lattice of eyeball-covered tangles throughout her trailer - it wound its way up table legs, around the sink, and borrowed back into the drain of the shower where it had come from.

Sandra didn't care anymore. The plant was too important to her, it kept the loneliness away, and loneliness was her most potent fear. As it grew, she only felt more attended to, as if each eye was an audience, and she was becoming more famous by the day. Even when the thought of a desire for privacy flickered through her mind, she remembered how dreadful loneliness could be, and she decided to count her chickens - or in this case, her eyeballs.

It was Tony who nearly took the fall when Sandra went missing. There were no other suspects, no other leads. It certainly looked like murder when Alan went missing, too. Word



about the trailer park was that Alan went up to see Sandra a lot. It all fit together. Jealous husband who refuses to sign the divorce papers killed off his wife and her lover and stashed their bodies somewhere. That was the only loose end. There were no bodies. He was held in custody for some time in suspicion of both murders, though they never could find the bodies. Although Tony regretted how he had treated Sandra, he never actually knew what had happened to her.

The cops thought the huge plant that had taken over half the trailer park, winding in and around people's yards, was just some sort of highly invasive weed. They thought it was strange and disgusting, but plants weren't their business. Just a quirk of the job. They decided after checking out the area, they'd just call the EPA and let them handle it. They were just upset that they didn't have the evidence to bust the guy who was obviously responsible. By the time half the force went missing on a routine sweep of the area, it was too late.

### Naked

In Provincetown, I once met a woman who had mastered the art of nudity. In all the love affairs I ever had, I never forgot her and how she changed me; how she scarred me – and made me see things in an entirely different way.

Our love affair began in a bathroom at a party. I followed her in. She looked at me, languid under heavy mascara, and beckoned me with a finger.

I expected her to lead me to some private room, but instead she led me outside, down the road, and into her flat. I trailed her like an eager dog, too nervous to walk alongside her. I followed just behind, watching her full body swagger with each provocative step. When she got me inside her flat, she sat down in a chair, and seated me in one across from her own as she undressed.

First, would come the outer layers. The heavy furs, the hat, the gloves, the boots. She shed them slowly, as if she was an orange peeling itself. I sat, tantalized.

Next came the shirt, which she slowly lifted with arms crossed. When the shirt lifted away from her face, her thick, dark hair fell around her like water. Her stomach was tight and muscular. She had a curve to her waist that could cause car accidents.

Slowly, she shifted her weight as she slid her skirt out from beneath, never seeming to leave her seat in the process. It dropped deftly around her ankles with a deafening pat. It might have caused an echo. I believe that with every inch that skirt fell, my jaw followed.

She was now left in her bra and panties, both of matching black lace. Not looking at me, she continued to slowly inch out of them, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to undress slowly in that chair, as if she did it every night.

A part of me wanted to get her attention, since she seemed to be drifting. She truly did seem to think she was alone; it was as if an empty chair sat before her. She never glanced my way.

When she undid her bra strap, her large, heavy breasts seemed to bounce out from their small enlaced prisons. They seemed to gasp for breath and relax, as if they'd been smothered for hours.

I felt myself stiffen, tighten. I could barely breathe.

She wiggled out of her underpants, slowly, seductively. She peeled them away like the skin of an orange, savoring each moment. She seemed to enjoy this process very much. Her thick eyelashes batted against her cheeks, she was watching herself just as much as I was. I wondered if she was doing this for me, or for her own pleasure. There was a grin on her face that was more twisted than angelic, it seemed to be wrapped in a deep plot that was too thick for me to detect.

She snapped off the panties finally, revealing her taught vulva that was shining with moisture. I nearly fell out of my chair. I couldn't stand sitting there any longer.

It seemed time for me to act. I stood up; making no attempt to conceal the tent my pants had pitched. I strode toward her, but she shot me a glance of disdain that stopped me cold. She pointed to my chair, as if she was offended that I had broken her from her determination to ignore my presence. Perhaps this was more for her than me. I sat, wondering what she would do next.

She sat back in the chair, leaning back, arching her back dramatically and reaching behind her neck with both hands. I hear a zipping sound, which took me a bit by surprise. What was she wearing back there? She was stark naked as far as I could tell at this point, her clothes piled around her ankles like a dead animals. For the first time, she made eye contact with me, locking me there, holding me, trapped.

She began to pull at whatever it was that she had unzipped on the back of her neck. It seemed tight, she showed effort in her face as she yanked. She kept her eyes locked on mine. Finally, she got a good grip, and peeled it out from around her shoulders. Her skin. She was removing her skin. It seemed to peel away like a layer of strange plastic, following her collarbone.

I shot out of my seat and cried out, but only a small sound escaped my lips, a sound of sympathetic pain. But she just smiled at me and pointed at the chair again.

It must be some trick, I thought. Some amazing trick. She had another layer under there, she must—otherwise this couldn't be happening.

She pulled and pulled, and the skin came off slowly. The blood underneath seemed to stay where it was, for the most part. A few droplets escaped around the edges, but where one

would expect a massive amount of fluid to spill out, it seemed to retain itself in some sort of jelly-like encasement.

She peeled the skin out and away, down off her breasts. Underneath, they were simply large orbs of fat, with only a small pink covering of blood over them, a sheen.

I was entranced. My lust clashed violently with a more objective scientific curiosity as I gave up on the reality of the situation. It was either a trick or a dream. Either way, it was profoundly interesting.

Her skin was now rolled up under her exposed breasts. and she pushed it down further with effort, revealing her stomach muscles, still taught. There was something about looking directly at her muscles that reminded me of being in grade school, when we would study pictures of the human body. Except for her neck and head, she looked like the picture of the person displaying the muscular structure of the body.

I was frozen in place, unable to move, unable to snap myself out of this trance.

She stood up and pulled the skin slowly down, unwrapping each arm, turning the fingers inside out. Her bloody fingers then pulled it down further, wincing a bit when it reached her snatch. Then she proceeded to pull it down over her thighs, and stripped each leg, yanking her feet out, turning the toes inside out as well.

After she completed skinning herself, she looked up at me and grinned. She bent over, and heaved the skin up in her bloody hands. Her feet left bloody tracks on the floor, which seemed to slowly be pooling in puddles around them. With a careless toss, she threw her skin at me, and it struck me in the face, leaving a streak of blood before it flopped into my lap.

I immediately stood to shake it off, feeling every heebie and every jeebie run through me like fire.

She laughed. It was the laugh of the picture from the biology textbook of my past come to life. Just muscle and veins. I was about to speak, though I didn't know just what to say, but then she started pulling the skin off her face.

This I couldn't take. This dream, this trick, or whatever it was, was going too far. It was becoming nightmarish. I stood up, intending to run for the door.

In two strides, she was over me, her face discarded along with the mop of flowing thick hair. Her teeth gleamed as she seemed to smile an even wider grin. Again, she pointed to the chair. Again, I felt all the resolve drain out of me, and I helplessly fell back into my seat.

She strode back to her chair, leaving bloody splashes behind her tracks. She sat back in the chair.

I watched, horrified, as blood began to drip down the sides in steady pools. It was as if it had lost the jelly-like continuity that it had before and was now slowly sliding off her in large globs. They splattered on the floor every few seconds, and yet she seemed to take no notice of them at all.

Instead, she began to untangle herself of her veins. She ripped them away, larger ones and smaller ones alike, as if she was freeing herself of chains. She had to contort her body a few different times to successfully free herself of certain tangles. Most of them she ripped out section by section, allowing herself to grapple out pieces from various spots on her body without having to unwind them or deal with the knots they often seemed to form in places. With each handful she gathered, she chucked them down to the floor like garbage. They fell like heavy spaghetti, slopping over the layers of skin that lay about. When she threw down the handfuls hard enough, they would splatter across the room. A few of the tiny flecks of blood sprayed me here and there. I was too swallowed by the spectacle before me to wipe them away, I just kept watching.

It was, as a whole, a process that made me grit my teeth to watch. Each time she severed a vein by yanking it free, a splatter of blood would spray out with intense force. She seemed completely to have come to some strange terms with her ability to do this, and seemed to concentrate on simply keeping the blood from spraying her in the eyes. Finally, she seemed to have freed herself of all of her veins and arteries. The blood pool around her feet grew ever larger.

Then she began to pull her muscles off. One by one she stripped them, like ripping meat from bone, which of course, was just what it was. She yanked and ripped her shoulder muscles off first, and then reached around and began on her back. Every few seconds, a chunk of muscle would plop to the floor.

I was beyond a healthy curiosity now, and was doing all I could to keep from retching all over the floor. I was helpless to leave, helpless to even turn away. What was happening in front of me was so surreal that I had to watch.

She worked out the muscles from her back and arms and shoulders, peeling away at the muscles on her hands like she was merely giving herself a beauty treatment of some kind. She took care to get every scrap, leaving behind only blood soaked bones that were quickly drying out, leaving them a brownish color. She grinned at me again. It seemed she was only taking her gaze off of me in order to continue undressing herself, if that's what you could call this.

When she got to her stomach, she stood up again. Taking her abdomen muscles firmly in her skeleton fingers, she ripped the entire stomach region off in one swift motion.

In a mass, a huge cluster of internal organs and intestines came spilling out all at once onto the floor. She even ripped off her breasts, letting the dense fatty tissue and muscle bounce off to the side, sliding a bit in the blood pool.

I leaned forward and wretched. It was the only thing I could do. I felt weak, sick, faint. I couldn't stand if I wanted to, let alone run. This was wrong. All wrong. I had come here with something else entirely in mind. I couldn't take this.

And yet she continued. She worked faster now, ripping muscles off her legs in larger portions, chucking them to the floor with what seemed like rage. Something about the room began to take on a smell too unholy to describe. My eyes were watering. My stomach heaved and my heart seemed to beat irregularly. I must be insane.

When she was done, or so I thought, she stood before me, a dripping wet red skeleton. She could do nothing but grin, grin, grin. I think that's what she would have done anyway, even if she had the face to form an expression. I shuddered and shrank in my chair as she stepped toward me. Through the splashes, onto the bare floor, where her bones clanked against the floorboards.

Suddenly, I felt a rush of energy return. It was the fight or flight syndrome, perhaps, that saved me, that snapped me out of my trance. And the response certainly wasn't telling me to fight.

I darted out of my chair and ran for the door. It seemed to be miles away, but when I finally reached it, I felt my senses returning. I grasped the doorknob and pulled open the door, but before I was able to shut it behind me I was struck in the back by something heavy. I turned and saw a skull bounce to the floor. Then, resting on its side, it looked up at me, its eyes still intact, still hers, though without the mascara, without the lashes, and most frighteningly, alive. The skull continued to grin up at me before I slammed the door and ran as fast and as far away from that place as I could.

## “Breech”

I knew something was wrong when I woke up one day with a hand coming out of me. I immediately called the doctor.

"You are having what is called a limb presentation in the birth," he said in a serious tone flecked with tinges of urgency. "The baby isn't positioned correctly. This is not to be confused with a breech presentation, which is when the baby's buttocks comes out first. I was just discussing this with one of the staff. I need you to stay calm, and call emergency medical services to bring you in to the hospital right away," "But I'm not pregnant," I protested. "And it's not a baby's hand."

The doctor was silent for a moment, and then he promptly hung up on me.

It was terribly uncomfortable, and if I hadn't felt as if it were connected to something up there, I would have tried to push it out. It was like those few moments after sex when you are lying there, waiting for this thing inside you to remove itself from your interior. It was just there. Luckily for me, the wrist was not altogether thick, so I was able to walk about my apartment with only discomfort, and at least no pain.

It looked like the hand of a man in his late twenties or early thirties. It was strong and slightly calloused. There was dark hair on the wrist, proving it hadn't come from me. I was blonde. I examined it more closely. Thankfully it was profoundly clean looking. The nails were short and well manicured. There was a small scar on the inside of the ring finger, and the top of it was slightly tanned, so I knew that this hand had experienced a history elsewhere. It had originated outside my vagina. I could at least tell that much. But how did it get there? Why couldn't I remove it?



It hung limp between my legs, but was just as warm as I was. It was a living hand, surely. I wondered what it was attached to. Surely it could not be a man fitting the description of the hand, I still appeared to weigh my regular 130 pounds, I still had a relatively thin figure, and no abnormal protrusions in my stomach or elsewhere.

I wanted to drive to the hospital right away, but I wasn't sure if I could sit on the thing in the car. I also really had to pee, but I wasn't sure what would happen if I did that, either. I went into the bathroom and looked at it in the mirror. The hand hung like a little flap between my legs. I looked like a Dali painting. The whole thing had freaked me out so much, I hadn't dared touch it - I thought I'd better leave it to the professionals to deal with such a peculiar health issue.

But, of course, curiosity gets the best of us all, and so, tentatively, I took the pointer finger of the hand in my fist and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Immediately, the hand jumped to life. It writhed around, almost in a spasmodic fashion for a few minutes as I watched, my mouth hanging open in shock. Without really wanting to, I began to get a bit excited from the movement of it. Emotions collided within me - I was frightened, but intrigued. It made me want to scream in more than one way. I lay back in the bed, half hoping it would get the hand to settle down. It didn't. Instead, it seemed to become more and more frantic, and when I leaned my head up to look at what it was up to, it was making grabbing gestures in the air, as if it wanted to make contact with something, with anything.

Finally it found something. It had the ability to bend more readily forward, since the palm faced upwards from where I lay. By bending with all its might, the tips of the fingers were actually able to brush up against my most sensitive spots. A moan escaped me, despite my shock and alarm. Every part of me was telling me that this was an urgent emergency that needed to be addressed, but my body and mind were beginning to have an argument. I made a slight effort to

get up, but as the hand worked its magic upon me, I was forced to lie back again. One minute ago, I was about to start screaming in fear. Now, it took all the energy I had to keep from screaming with pleasure. I was so confused. I didn't know what to do. And it felt so wonderful. Whoever's hand it was, it had experience, and it knew what it was doing. I decided in a muddled state of mind to deal with it later, since it was too good to stop.

I let the hand explore. It didn't have very far it could go, but within its narrow confines, it was creating the most pleasurable experience I had ever had. A part of me was in a slight panic, still wondering how it got there, how I'd get it out, but those things were not so terribly important anymore as the glaze came over my mind and the hand brushed and tickled - until I couldn't take it anymore, and I reached the climax of a lifetime.

I think the spasms of my muscles might have cut off some of the circulation to the hand, and so after that it died down a bit in its flailings. It seemed just as tired as I was after the whole ordeal, and we both drowsed off to sleep after that for a while.

When I woke up, hoping it was all some freakish, queer dream, I found the hand was still there. This time, I was going to the hospital, no question about it. I got dressed and ran to the car, taking care to lean back so the hand stuck out without any pressure being put on it. I decided I could speed - if a cop pulled me over I'd just show the damn thing to him, and he'd definitely let me go. I sped into the parking lot and ran inside the emergency room where I was greeted by a tired elderly woman at the check-in counter.

"May I help you?"

"Yes - I need to see a doctor right away."

After I gave her my name and my basic information, she asked me what had brought me to the emergency room that day.

"Um, I'd rather not say."

"Well, we need to know, dearie, so we know which doctor will be best for you."

I smelled bullshit in her excuse, and I read the curiosity in her eyes.

"It's a genital issue. That's all you need to know, and I won't say any more. Now are you going to let me see a doctor, or are you going to turn me away?"

She gave me a look like I'm scum.

"Please sit down, a nurse will come and call you in momentarily." she tells me sternly.

I sat awkwardly as she follows me with her eyes. She probably thought I was one of those people who sticks things up themselves and then can't get them out. I tried to adjust myself so I can sit comfortably without sitting on the hand, and, inadvertently in the process, I woke it up.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath. A few people sitting in the waiting room with me - a mother with her tear-stained adolescent son, a man in coveralls and a bloody towel wrapped around his left hand - turn and stare at me. I look away from these rude, gawking people, wanting to snap at them for staring at someone in the ER waiting room who might be afflicted enough to utter an expletive. The man looks away and even the kid goes back to his whimpering, but the mom kept staring at me with a smoldering look.

"You know, you should watch your mouth, young lady. There are children present," she said in the same stern voice as the desk douche.

I opened my mouth to respond, but just then the hand, which had been twitching and slowly twisting around, began its finger work again. My eyes lost focus on the woman and I gasped.

The mother looked around her, as if the thing that had caused my reaction was sneaking up behind her. Then she looked back at me, baffled. I got up and ran to the bathroom, where I

smothered my moans into the sleeves of my sweater until the moment came again where I couldn't hold it in any longer. My screams were probably heard all over the hospital, not to mention the waiting room.

When I came out, the stares were renewed. The old lady at the desk was on the phone, staring at me, talking about me.

"Yes, she just came out. I think she needs to be seen right away."

I was feeling profoundly relaxed. I couldn't remember a time when I had experienced so much sexual excitement in one day, and it was still early.

A nurse came out of the doors that only opened one way. "Please, come with me. We will get a doctor to see you right away." She put an arm gently around my shoulder as I walked with her down the hall.

"Third door on the right there. You should have come by ambulance if you were in so much pain. What is bothering you today, anyway?"

I smiled. I wasn't in pain. I felt great. I was even getting used to the wrist's presence in there, it was like getting used to wearing a thong. It wasn't comfortable at first, but you became accustomed to it after a while, and then, eventually, you wouldn't even feel it. The bigger problem was finding a way to sit that worked. I decided not to feed the nurse's craving for gossip.

"I'd like to talk to the doctor about it...and only the doctor." I told her.

The nurse gave me a look of frustration and stomped away. I went into the examination room and sat on the crinkly bed, leaning back. A thought occurred to me, that maybe I could maneuver the hand a bit deeper inside so I could sit normally. I decided to try it.

Gently, I gave it a little push. The hand grabbed mine and shook it vigorously - a firm

shake. I always appreciate a firm handshake. As if we had made a deal, the hand slowly slipped inside me, slowly working its way up, cupping itself in an elongated fashion so it would not cause me any discomfort. It felt wonderful, and its presence deeper inside seemed to hit upon a few more spots of pleasure that I didn't know I had. Breathing heavily, I let it settle into its warm hideout until it was still.

I sat up and felt fine. I could sit comfortably. I couldn't even feel the hand in there. I could feel something was different, but it was not nearly as uncomfortable as it had been before. It was as if I had just gotten a piercing down there, and was easing myself into a new, enhanced way of life.

Then, a twinge of panic struck as I realized that I might not be able to get it out again. I leaned back yet again and fished my fingers up inside myself. My pointer finger hit the hand's pointer finger. It hooked on. I pulled it out slowly, gently, and the process felt just as good as it had when I had pushed it in. I couldn't help but to let out a few moans, luckily, there was no one there to hear me this time.

Once I had pulled the hand out to where I had first found it, warm and damp, I wondered what would happen if I kept pulling. Strangely, the idea of pulling it out further made me more nervous than pushing it in had, and I hesitated at first before trying. But the way everything had been going so well so far had made me confident, and I gave it a gentle tug.

A shooting pain startled me. I stopped tugging immediately. The pain seemed to be behind my eyes. I glanced over at a small mirror that hung on the blank wall across the room. There was a dribble of blood running out of my ear. My eyes went wide and I jumped up and grabbed a tissue from a conveniently placed tissue box, mopping up the blood.

I looked down at the hand. I wondered what would happen to me if the doctor tried to tug

any harder at it, I had barely tugged it. I'd probably bleed from the eyes. Then I wondered what would happen if they tried to surgically remove it. I might die.

For the first time, I was truly afraid. But I was afraid of them taking the hand out, not of the hand itself. The hand clearly wanted to stay. It was as if we'd already become close friends...with benefits. I sat, leaning back, on the edge of the bed again. A single drop of blood had fallen out of my ear and sat, like a tiny red bubble on top of the wrinkled paper sheet. I sat there for a long time, thinking. I brushed my fingers up against the fingers of the hand. It had done more for me than any man had ever done, after all.

My act of touching the hand brought it to life yet again, and it started back up with the tickling. I laid back, and, thinking that it might be the last time, I enjoyed another of the most pleasurable experiences I had ever had. I think it might have been the screaming that brought the doctor, finally.

The rap on the door signaled his entry, and as he opened it, he said, "Can I come in?"

"No!" I cried, and he backed up and shut the door quickly, I never actually saw him. I had to collect myself. I used a few more of the convenient tissues, and re-dressed my lower half.

"Okay, come in," I said finally, and composed myself, crossing my legs at the ankle.

Sheepishly, he entered. A tall, balding man, he was defined more by his spectacles than the rest of his appearance.

"So what brings you here today?" he asked, looking down at his clipboard, as if it held any pertinent information pertaining to me.

"Well... you're going to find this really strange but..." Suddenly I saw an image of me, bleeding from my eyes, ears, nose, and mouth on an operating table as they tugged at the hand and tugged, and tugged...

"What is it?" he asked, looking at me closely. "The secretary told me it was something genital. You can tell me, I'm a doctor."

I glared at him. That bitch. They both wanted to know, so they could gossip, spread the word, until I become the subject of a television special on the health channel. They'd film the operation, my subsequent death, and they'd say, "There was nothing we could have done, we had to get it out. Leaving it in there was not an option..."

I looked at the doctor. The hand, concealed under my skirt, began to give me a vaginal massage. I never knew that there was such a thing. It was incredible, and all I could do was stare at the baffled doctor and concentrate on my breathing. It was not the same type of pleasure that was intended to end in an orgasm, it was meant to relax my muscles, which had grown quite taught with all the exercise they'd had this morning. I sighed and felt myself melting.

"Miss? Are you alright?" The doctor looked concerned.

"I'm fine." I told him. "I'm fine."

"So are you going to tell me what the problem is?"

I had already decided that there was no way anyone would ever take this hand from me. It was mine. It only wanted to give me pleasure. And all I wanted was to receive it.

"I ...I think I might have a bladder infection," I told him.

He seemed to relax. "Well, we'll have to have you urinate in a cup to be sure, but why don't you describe your symptoms to me."

I left as quickly as possible, learning that my urine was free of any potential infection. Besides a hand. As I strutted through the parking lot, having tucked the hand up inside me while I was in the bathroom so it would be out of the way, I realized that this was the best thing that ever happened to me. I never had to worry about dating, masturbation, or finding the man with

the right touch. When I was bored, I could have thumb wars or play rock, paper, scissors with it. I had everything I needed, sexually, at least, right inside me. It was an independence I had never even considered.

I thought about how much of a muddle my love life had been, and how everything had become so simple now. I thought about how I could do this anywhere, anytime I wanted. It occurred to me that I would be faced with an interesting scene if I were to want to ever have real sex again, but I was so excited with my current situation that I really didn't care about that right now. I'd cross that bridge when I had to. And finally, I thought that maybe, instead of being a freakish act of nature, this was the beginning of a wonderful relationship. I could feel the hand, inside me, agree with a thumbs-up.

9/6/12

### "Trojan Horse"

There was, in the local park that day, something new. It was a large red ball. Not just any large red ball, an enormous red ball. It was exactly 122.6 feet high and wide, fire-engine red, and no one knew where it had come from. No one knew how it got there, and whoever put it there had delivered it in the dark of the night, when no one was around to witness the event.

The local children were the first to find it, besides a few joggers who had slowed, stopped, gaped, and continued on. The children were the first to play with it. They began to roll it back and forth within the narrow confines of the park that was left over around the ball. The children rolled it and rolled it, until one perilous moment came when a child seemed to have



been crushed beneath it. The children, some shouting, some screaming, some gasping, some silent, all ran up and rolled the ball back off the child.

The child, a twelve-year-old boy, sat up, blinking. He was alright. He got to his feet and the other children cheered with glee. They went right back to playing with the ball. When it was found not to be dangerous, the adults were more than happy to allow their children to play with the big mysterious object. They gathered around it. It was a new thing to see a new thing to gossip about.

Soon, the ball was featured in all the local newspapers, and was the talk of the town. Men mentioned it to each other at the bar when they could think of nothing else light enough to say. After discussing the weather, they would discuss the ball. It was on television all the time, especially when it was moved from the park to the football field so it would have more space to be played with.

A new sport was invented involving the ball, which was almost like bowling but with people. The children of the town orchestrated these games themselves, and came together in a happy unison. One man claimed that the ball was his, that he had put it there, but then it was learned that he was mad, and the town went on thinking of the ball as a miraculous event as they had preferred to all along. There were community events that concerned the ball. It grew in popularity very quickly. Soon, people started coming from far and wide just to see the ball, sometimes driving from several states away.

The ball had come at a very special time. There was a war going on, and everyone needed a break from thinking about death and decay. Many of the young men in the town had gone to fight in the war. One of them had refused. His name was Harrison. Harrison was a young man of twenty, and he hated the big red ball.

Harrison had moved out of his parent's house when the cops showed up looking for him. They wanted to know why he hadn't shown up when the men of the town were drafted. So Harrison lived in a tent in the woods. He came to town in his old pickup truck to work; he had a lawnmower and some other tools. He owned his own handyman and landscaping business. There were enough people in the town who didn't agree with the war, and enough people who needed a strong pair of hands, many of which had been sent far away, so that Harrison was able to make a decent living.

Nearby to the tent in the woods where Harrison lived, down an overgrown trail and on the side of a large pond in the deep part of the forest, was a small cabin that was built by hand. It was built by a man whom was only known as Mr. Plareau. He was a man who preferred to be alone, and many years ago, he had been dealing for several years with the death of his wife and child during childbirth, and he had left society altogether. He hunted, fished, and took care of a decently sized garden and an adjacent potato field. He kept the garden for himself. The potatoes he sold for whatever else he needed, clothing, the occasional pot or pan, flint, and once in a long while, when he could no longer bear to resist, a piece of pizza. Since Mr. Plareau never desired to go into town, he recruited Harrison to do his errands for him. After a while, they became familiar, if not friends. Once in a while, Mr. Plareau would invite Harrison inside to sit on one of his homemade wooden chairs, and have a talk.

Neither man was much for talking, so for the first few minutes, Harrison would look around, in awe of the old man's handiwork. The small cabin was a covetable upgrade from his tent.

"You see any women these days?"

“Not much,” Harrison would answer, fiddling with a splinter coming up from the rough-hewn table. In reality, he was being ogled by many women who were left alone after the draft, but he was too stirred up lately and full of angst to care much.

“Don’t touch that,” Mr. Plareau would say, and Harrison’s hands would drop by his sides.

“What do you think of that goddamned ball? he asked.

“I hate it,” Harrison said in a low, seething voice. “It’s taking over everyone’s minds. It’s brainwashing them. No one even knows where it came from. It’s all they care about. No one wants to do anything about this war that’s going on. Everyone wants to just ignore it and go out there and play with that ball, the bunch of lunatics.”

“And what are you doing to stop the war?” Mr. Plareau asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“I’m not doing anything to stop it, but I’m certainly not doing anything to contribute,” Harrison grumbled. “I’m not going to throw my life away for something I don’t believe in.”

“Well, good for you, boy.” Mr. Plareau knew Harrison hated to be called “boy.”

Harrison glared at him. “What do you expect me to do? I’m not a goddamned superhero.”

“I didn’t say you were.” Mr. Plareau leaned back in his chair, which groaned. He tapped the table with his blunt fingers. “But isn’t there something going on with that ball out there, like you said?” His look was probing.

“I’ll do whatever is necessary to get everyone to wake the hell up and stop playing with that ball.” Harrison’s fists were clenched under the table.

“Maybe. Maybe you should go back to asking questions before you make assumptions, boy,” Mr. Plareau told him, and then he stood up, the signal for Harrison to leave.

From that day on, every time Harrison came into town, he refused to look at the ball. On a typical basis, there would be at least a small group of people around it, pushing it back and forth or bouncing themselves off it with a manner of dumb glee. He would go to work, do his job, read the newspaper (avoiding any articles on the ball) and go home to his tent. Sometimes he would go to the laundromat or the library or the grocery store. He read a lot of books. He especially loved history.

Harrison noticed the change the ball was causing in the town from the beginning. No one seemed to notice the giant leap in the death toll overseas the day the ball arrived. No one cared about the fact that the allied forces were falling back. The national news screamed at them to pay attention, to ready themselves for what might come next, but the local news soothed them with silly stories and photos of people, happy and smiling by the ball. Famous people who had come to see the ball. Drawings of the ball that children lovingly taped to the wall. The town was crazy for the ball, and nothing could snap them out of it.

By the time fall rolled around, the townspeople arranged for a great festival to take place – “The Festival of the Ball.” When there was an attack on the country, it was a headline that was quickly skipped over by many an eye in the town as the subheading featured the upcoming opening of the festival. People just tuned out at the bad news. They said, “Too bad, it’s terrible, what’s going on out there.” They continued to say “out there” even when the war came into the country where they lived.

Harrison felt like he was the only one following the progress of the war. He began to develop nervous habits as he tried to begin conversations with other people in town, and they

refused to recognize what he was saying. He would talk about the war, and they would talk about the ball. It was as if they had all been brainwashed. They would counter his comments about the future of what was going to happen with the war with comments about the upcoming future of what would happen with the ball. It appears they were decorating it for the fall festivities.

All the while the war crept closer. The enemy was in the country now. They had already taken over the southern states, and they were pressing north. On the news, they were calling for able women and elderly people to help in the manufacture of firearms, clothes, and shoes. They would beg for help desperately for the first five minutes of the news, then they would skip to a long story about the ball.

Out in the forest, in a clearing between the trees the small cabin stood, stoic and alone. Harrison pounded on the door. Mr. Plareau opened it and motioned for him to come inside. Harrison sat down resolutely at the table. He wanted to talk. Mr. Plareau took his seat leisurely.

“This is crazy. I don’t know what to do,” Harrison began. “They’re all so distracted that I swear they’ll all be killed! I’ve tried to talk reason into them, but that goddamned ball is all they think about anymore.”

“Yes,” Mr. Plareau said.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen if there’s an attack on the town, no one’s prepared, they refuse to prepare! My parents - my mom and my dad....” He was silent, and for a moment simply breathed, “They’re going to die, they’re all going to die if we don’t do something.”

“We?” Mr. Plareau raised his eyebrows.

“Well, I then. Just me. I have to do something.”

“And what will you do?”

“I don’t know. It’s all because of that ball, I swear! If only it would just go away...”

“Is it the ball?” Mr. Plareau asked. “Or is it the people?”

Harrison shook his head in frustration. “It’s both. I don’t know! Either way, if the ball was gone, they’d focus on the war, they’d focus on what matters.”

“Would they?” Mr. Plareau asked

“Stop asking so many questions!” Harrison pleaded, collapsing his head down onto the table.

Mr. Plareau laughed heartily. “But my boy, we must never stop asking questions.”

“You don’t want to help this situation! You just want to mess with my head! All this philosophical nonsense is getting us nowhere! If no one starts paying attention, I’m going to have to do something about this! I need your advice and all you give me is gibberish!” Harrison was desperate.

Mr. Plareau rose from his seat. “Are you, Harrison so different from them?” he said, pointing.

“Of course I am!” Harrison said, and stomped out the door.

After he had gone, Mr. Plareau sighed heavily. He picked up a knapsack in which he had filled with all his belongings, an old faded picture of his wife, and a few items of clothing, a hatchet, and some food. He slung this and his bow and quiver and his fishing pole over his shoulder and took one last look around the small cabin. Then, sighing one more time, he left the

town forever, and headed north toward Canada.

No one responded to the calls for more helping hands with the war, but there were more than enough volunteers for the festival. People were busy decorating their homes with small red balls; they wore red balls on their noses and attached them to their clothes. They strung red balls all over the town. Harrison found himself surrounded by clowns in the midst of what he knew could very soon become a battlefield.

One night, the night before the festival's grand opening, there was an evacuation. The word went out all over the news and the radio, and there were shelters set up in the next town in preparation for them. It was said that there would be an enemy attack threatening the general area, and their town was on the border of that potential area. Unfortunately, the time of forced evacuations was a thing of the past. The citizens were "strongly recommended to evacuate."

No one listened. No one left. They were all too excited for the festival. Those families that were even aware of the potential impending attack justified their actions by saying that their town was not in "the red zone" but "the yellow zone." There was little chance of anything happening. The evacuation was simply a precaution. Harrison went to his parent's house, and they were so captivated in the pre-festival show on the television that they refused to listen to him. He tried to argue with them, and they waited for a commercial break, and then promptly kicked him out.

The next day, as the sun rose, and as the people of the town filed into the football field for the festival, they were met with something they didn't quite expect. Harrison stood next to the ball. It towered over him, making him look small and helpless, like one of the children. He had a knife in his hand. People formed a circle around him and the ball, screaming at him not to do it. Cops threatened to arrest him. Citizens threatened to kill him. His parents even threatened

to disown him. One old lady threatened to have his private parts removed. She claimed the ball was the best thing to have ever happened to the town.

With everyone there watching, Harrison shoved the knife deep into the ball and twisted it. A screeching sound whistled through the air. Harrison's hair was windblown from the air that was escaping through the ball. He suddenly seemed very large as the ball collapsed in a heap. He was the first to feel funny.

Harrison wavered, and, looking rather pale, he stumbled, and then collapsed. People who had begun to rush him all stopped short, and fell to the ground. People collapsed everywhere. The weapon had already been released. It was too late. And as Harrison blinked, feeling his thoughts collapse in his head, he wondered why he didn't just join the draft when they'd asked him to.

Sept. 2012

### "Unfaithful"

She looked up at me, and I winced. It was those eyes of hers, eyes that demanded truth. I had no truth to give her eyes. Not the truth she was expecting, at least. I knew she wanted me to answer her, but I really didn't feel like it. This was becoming a pattern with her.

"You see that dog down the street?" I said, taking a seat on the couch. "The pit bull? She's been tied up to a post there for days,"

She bore her eyes into me. "Why won't you answer me?" she pleaded.

"I wonder if she was abandoned or something." I sat down on the couch, putting down my suitcase. I was tired, and I didn't want to deal with this. It had been a long day.

"Bruce, I need to know whether or not you are cheating on me." She stood before me, her



hands on her hips.

I ignored her. “She looks hungry, maybe I’ll go out and give her something. We still have some of that leftover steak, right?” I seemed like nothing I said would get her attention. She was bent on it now, there was no breaking her out of it.

“Bruce,” she said firmly. It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes?”

“You are, aren’t you?” She bent down putting her face close to mine. It smelled of something sour. Her eyes were big and dry-looking, and I could see the tiny red lines branching in their whites. I sighed.

“Listen, Beth. We have been together a long time. And neither of us have been very happy for a while now. I think it’s time for a change.”

Her expression changed suddenly from questioning to accusing. “It’s Karen, isn’t it?” she shouted at me. “You’ve been spending so much time with her at your work lately! You work with her almost every day! I should have known!” She began to pace up and down the living room floor. I wished she would just stop. It was like she was completely gone, unreachable, hardened. She used to be soft, once. I don’t know what happened.

“Beth, I have to admit, living with you is like living alone.” I didn’t want to say it, but I knew it was time.

“What – because I work two full-time jobs?” She looked defensive, fueled.

“Well, yes,” I answered, knowing she would pounce on this, not caring.

“How else am I supposed to save up so that we can have a life? I was saving so we could eventually buy a house, have children, and your response to me working all the time is to cheat on me?” She was almost screaming.

I felt incredibly tired. I was sick of this. “Look, I just think I need a change. I always told you that you don’t have to work so much, but it’s like you want to.” I held my head in my hands.

“Of course I don’t want to! But it’s the responsible thing to do! I can’t believe you would react this way and betray me! You piece of shit!” Her voice was raised to the point of shrieking. She had stopped pacing and was looking about the room, as if for something to throw at me.

“Beth, I’m sorry, but I just need some companionship. I thought when we started dating that I wouldn’t be lonely anymore, but I think I’m lonelier now than I was before I met you. Look. Why don’t I go for a walk. I’ll bring that dog some steak, and that will give you some time to cool down.” I just wanted to get out of this.

“So you are fine with going out and finding someone else? Just like that? Just like we never had anything?” She looked half desperate, half insane.

“I’m not saying that we never had anything. It was nice, in the beginning. But then it was as if you left me. You stopped talking to me completely. I feel like I’ve been alone for a long time now. I just want to move on.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.” She threw up her arms.

“You’ve been doing this to me for a long time.”

“Doing what?” She screamed. “Working all the time? You think I’m the one at fault here? If you would just get a second job, you would understand! But you won’t!”

“Because I don’t fucking need to!” She had managed to get under my skin again. “Neither do you!” For a moment I was left shaken. I did not want to blow up on her like that.

“So you just want to live our whole life within our means? You want to always live like this? Paycheck to paycheck? One date per week! That’s all I get out of you! The girls I work with, their men all work two jobs, and they get taken out at least three days per week! They’re

always rubbing it in my face! You keep trying to turn this around on me, but it won't work! You're the bad guy here, not me! How dare you try to reproach me for working! And when you are here, living a life of leisure, fucking some other girl!"

I sighed again. "What do you want, Beth? I was always fine with living within our means. I don't need an excess of money to make me feel secure. Anyway, I told you I'm ready for a change. I'm ready to end this. I don't want to be alone anymore."

I could remember a time when she would have cared for nothing more but going out to help that dog. Now I couldn't even get her attention when it came to the things that really mattered to me. I had known a long time ago that it was over, by her signs, by her unspoken language. I was just waiting for her to recognize it, to come to terms with it. It was a sad thing, breaking up. And it was also a sad thing, being alone. I didn't want to be the one to initiate the process.

"You asshole! I hate you! I don't know why I ever cared about you! You want to break up? Fine! I don't give a shit! You know why? Because there's a guy at work who has promised he'd treat me like queen if he ever got the chance!" A frightening smile came over her face, like the smile of an insane person. "He worships me, and it's really fucking refreshing – especially when I'm with someone who I never even see!" She was breathless.

"Beth, you don't see me because you choose to work all the time, remember?" I said, calmly. I was almost relieved that she had found someone else. It helped ease my guilt about not quite loving her anymore. My mind flitted back to the dog, waiting out there in the cold, for someone who never cared, someone who was never going to come back.

"Well, he works with me! So he actually gives a shit about me! He's there for me, and he doesn't sneak around behind my back with some other woman, because he loves me! Maybe I

should just go and be with him!”

“Maybe you should.”

She picked up a framed photograph of us, hugging and smiling, a photo from a long time ago, and she smashed it on the floor. “Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck the girl you’re seeing!”

“Hey, hey. Don’t start with her. She didn’t do anything.”

Her eyes went wide. She took a step forward, and slapped me across the face, hard. It stung. I remembered a time when she would never dream of doing such a thing. She was a completely different person now. “I’m gone! I’m done with you! Consider yourself fucking dumped, scumbag! Have a nice life with the slut you’re fucking! I’ll come back for my shit when you’re gone at work!” She picked up her purse and stomped out the door, slamming it behind her so hard that the house shook.

I sat back, and sighed. I waited a few minutes, listening to the clock ticking loudly, and when I was sure she was gone for good, I got up, grabbed my coat, and walked out the door. I walked down the starlit street, breathing the fresh new air.

Eventually I came to the pit bull that was still there, tied to the post. She whined a little as I approached, and then began wagging her tail rapidly as I came closer, recognizing my smell. I had lied to Beth. The dog had been there two weeks, and I had been feeding her regularly, and bringing her water. It had gotten to the point where I was sure that no one was coming back for her.

I walked up to her and she licked my hands. She looked up at me, into me, through my eyes and into my soul, and in her expression she said “Thank you. I love you. I don’t even really know you, but I love you just the same.”

I took out my jackknife and sawed away at the tight complex knot that tethered her to the

post. There was no one else there to witness this. Beside us, a major highway stood empty in the night. No people passed, no voices whispered. Her eyes were glassy, filled with love as we walked side by side, back home together.

9/3/12

### “Revival”

It was in the fall of that year of 2410 that I was revived. They had let so many of the others die in the cryogenic chambers: doctors, teachers, writers, artists... They had no need for them anymore in a society that was perfectly regulated. I often wondered, why me? A young female medic, from the year 2052, from a world where people were so intelligent that they didn't need to focus on one specific area of expertise... Why did they need me? It was the Motherboard that ultimately made the choice - that was what they called the computer that controlled everything, that appointed them careers and told them when to give birth and when to die. I was kept alive in the chamber in a laboratory because of my blood, strangely enough. Not rare blood – royal blood.

My family had survived the generations and procreated quite well, and had taken their place among the most wealthy of this particular generation I had found myself in. It was strange to me how feudal ideas seemed to have survived where most technology had fallen by the wayside. I was told that was how the motherboard wanted things – so she would be in complete control. It seemed strange to me, with all the other problems in the world solved, that money would still be used here in the future. But I had far too much to question already, and the nature of the Motherboard was just one of my many questions. They all feared her, and when the

bluecoats awoke me in the lab, they taught me to fear her too.

The bluecoats were men, at least I thought they were, who wore poofy blue gowns - like the ones people used to wear in hospitals when they were around really contagious people. They wore the blue masks of a surgeon, and goggles at all times, so I could rarely see any proof that they were human except for the occasional tuft of hair that came from under their blue caps.

In my past life I had been a medic, and that was why they had revived me with permission from the motherboard. I had never even really wanted to become a medic, it was just something I sort of fell into because I had a personality that craved action. In the time that I had come from, everything had been on its way to becoming completely regulated, so there was rarely any real action that didn't take place on television. I had been sick of living the pampered life of the average person, so I went to school and started working on a helicopter. It was the closest thing to living a life that was real. We only had about two calls a year if we were lucky, but the expectation was enough to keep me going. I was an adrenaline junkie in a world that offered no excitement. It looked as if this future offered even less.

They had let even the most expert doctors die in the chambers, since the fuel for them was so pricey. The non-profit agencies that had put so much money into freezing the best minds in history were simply too broke to keep them alive. It was a shame, what they had done. The world had become so focused on money that there was no interest in preserving the educated minds - minds that had been replaced by machines. With machines to do most of the jobs, there was little need for experts. In this future, all of the doctors were robotic systems interconnected into the Motherboard, and there were very few of these, since most diseases and viruses had been eliminated. Teachers were robotic, the police were robotic, everything down to the janitors were robots, which worked fantastically, until it didn't.

There had been an epidemic. It looked to me like something from a storybook. There were people walking the metallic streets with great, bulbous growths hanging from their skin. They looked like lepers, many of them. Others resembled inflated balloon people. The bluecoats told me that the healthy people were all hiding indoors, because it was spreading so fast. They thought I could miraculously solve their problems with my limited medical knowledge. They brought me pictures, not daring to expose the laboratory to the highly infectious germs. Picture after picture of horrific tragedy was flipped before my eyes. I wanted to do something, but I knew when it was better to go out and help and when it was better to turn tail and run. All I could really tell them was it was something I'd never seen before.

Then, one night, while I was lying awake in the room where they kept me, I figured it out. I was in a room with a large television screen that the bluecoats used whenever they wanted to communicate something to me. They rarely talked; they seemed to need this visual support of simple images and symbols to help them describe what they were talking about. I would often have to play a sort of game of charades just to get my own messages through to them. They were partially deaf, I learned later, and they depended on the visual messages more often than the sounds they made.

I figured it out as I was starting to drift off to sleep, at that special time when thoughts flow smoothly and easily. I pictured in my mind's eye a hovering figure, a black cloaked figure, wearing a mask with cold dark empty holes for eyes and a long sharp pointed beak like a bird's. I snapped awake. The pictures they had shown me of the victims of the epidemic now made sense. The two-day to two-week survival rate. The bulbous growths. It was the black plague, all over again. And I had no idea how to help them stop it.

I told them my theory in the morning and from the other side of the glass. They nodded

solemnly and then they left to seek advice from the Motherboard. I told them that I was pretty sure it came from fleas, or from rats, or something like that. There was little I could remember from my history books except for the haunting picture of the plague doctor in his beaked cloak. The beak was filled with herbs and posies, to keep the doctor from inhaling the plague. I told them that, too.

I waited around until dusk, receiving none of my meals that day. I paced my cell. It was plain, there was nothing but a bed, a chair, a small table, and a small cordoned-off bathroom area. I had asked them for a book at one point and they looked at me as if they didn't know what I was talking about. When I requested entertainment of some kind, they pointed to the screen on the wall that constantly displayed trippy moving designs, like a screen-saver of some sort. That was apparently all they had, and I sometimes watched them outside in the lab on their lunch break, staring blankly at their own screen. I had formerly wondered how they expected me to help them when they kept treating me like a prisoner. But then, there was a wall that separated them as well. I wondered if they were, to a certain degree, prisoners themselves in their own world. When they left, they left in strange transporting devices that they had to take extensive time programming, and then their “vehicles” would detach from the very walls they were in, and take them where they wanted to go, had they been given permission. I wondered if anyone here enjoyed freedom.

When they returned, they looked somber. “The Motherboard tells us there was no official cure for the black plague. She said it just sort of petered out when it ran out of victims. Because they were all dead.” They stared through the glass at me, wide-eyed.

“I could have told you that!” I said. They continued to stare at me blankly. “Listen, it’s the people in the streets that are getting this. I think you guys will be okay. You are cordoned off



from the rest of the world. You never leave these rooms or your transportation devices.”

“It’s almost Freedom Day,” one of them shuddered.

“What’s that?”

“Freedom Day is a holiday here in which all the lower people, the middle people, and the higher people are let out of their barriers and expected to mingle together.”

“What are you?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Eh?”

I repeated myself, with clarification, I wanted to know what their social status was, what their jobs were.

"We're lower people, of course, just like you," said one of the bluecoats, approaching me in my cell. There was thick plastic between us, but we could hear each other plainly through several holes that were put in one area for communication. His eyes were penetrating under his goggles. "The lower people all wear blue coats. We are expected to carry out the wishes of the Motherboard. The middle people are the ones that mostly have the epidemic, because they are allowed to co-exist. They are the ones who are usually wearing yellow coats, if they can afford them."

The other bluecoat wrapped his arms around himself and looked disgusted. "We have to share all their germs."

The other bluecoat, ignoring him, looking a bit frustrated, continued. "And the higher people, they used to wear red coats, but we haven't seen any of them in a few years. They live in the hills, and they can do whatever they want. No one sees them much or knows much about them except they are very wealthy, and very free."

“Well, when is this Freedom Day?” I asked.

“Two days,” one of the bluecoats said, turning his back on me.

"Wait!" I called. He turned, his glossy goggles reflecting the florescent lights above.

"What is your name?" I asked.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then he answered, "George."

"Nice to meet you, George," I said as he left the room.

Two days later, the door to my cell opened. So did the doors to the respective rooms my fellow bluecoats were cordoned off in. They both looked terribly frightened as we all walked out into the sunlight.

There were massive amounts of people walking up and down those metallic streets I had been shown on the television screen. I looked around. Everyone wore either a blue coat or a yellow coat. There were no signs of the higher people. And it was true, the people in yellow coats did look sick, some of them more than others, and I saw a few that could barely fit their coats on over the bulbous growths that seemed to emanate mostly around their arm pits. It was evident that the two groups were trying to keep themselves as separate as possible. They walked slowly, like beaten people, their heads down, and their eyes blank. They wore no expression besides a somber look. It was as if they were all zombies.

“This makes no sense,” I whispered to my fellow bluecoat. He looked frightened, as if he wasn't enjoying his freedom much. “These people should be indoors. This holiday is just going to spread the disease even more!” I was upset, and I was turning heads. People stared at me like speaking loudly was not allowed, but they did nothing. It seemed like this freedom was being forced on them. “I want to go see the Motherboard,” I said. The two bluecoats stopped walking, and looked at me in surprise.

“I suppose she can. Since its Freedom Day. Although I don’t know why she’d want to,”

one whispered to the other. The other nodded. They both looked nervous about the whole thing, but they seemed to restrain themselves from suggesting otherwise. We turned off on the next block and began heading in a different direction.

We walked in silence for a long time. The streets clanked underfoot, a cold, hollow sound. I missed the past, as I had every day since I had arrived here. At least back then I had a room of my own, and I wasn't treated like a prisoner. At least back then I felt like I had the right to life - now I felt like I was only here to serve the Motherboard's purpose. But there was no point to any of these musings. So I shoved those thoughts aside and walked on.

After almost an hour of walking, we came to a huge skyscraper. It was the only one I had seen. Most of the buildings there looked like metallic subsidized houses, or small apartments crammed together with low roofs and dim lighting. This was a sparkling monument; this was what was left of human achievement.

We walked inside. There were several corridors we had to pass through, and many guards stationed at each. They all let us through hesitantly, looking a bit paranoid.

Finally, we reached the end of a long hall and I found myself before a massive tangle of wires that seemed to extend up to the top of the skyscraper. There were sparks falling here and there. Once in a while an electrical wire smoked or sizzled far above, and I could smell the burning plastic. At my feet were bits of shredded wire and the floor was stained with burn marks.

"This is the Motherboard?" I turned to my companions.

They shushed me, assuring me she could hear. "Say what you want to say and let's get out of here," one of them whispered hurriedly.

"What - do I just say it out loud?" I asked, looking up at the heap of junk that was in

complete control of the world.

“No – type it in there.” One of them pointed to a keyboard that was almost hidden in the folds of drooping wires. It was an old-fashioned keyboard – not the kind I had expected to see. I walked up, carefully stooping and pushing aside wires, and then I typed into the keyboard this message:

“Why is everyone forced to mingle together on Freedom day when there is an epidemic going around?”

Behind some wires above my head, a screen flickered on. I hadn’t seen it there before, but now, white letters were showing across it – the letters I had typed. Then, after about a minute, I began to see letters appear on the screen – my response.

“Everyone is united together on Freedom Day.” it read.

I growled in frustration and began to type again. “What about the higher people?” I typed. I still had seen none of them.

After about a minute, the Motherboard responded, saying, “Redcoats are disobedient. Higher people are not regulated. All others must obey rules and be united on Freedom day.”

“What about the epidemic? It will kill everyone,” I typed. One of the bluecoats behind me was coughing uncontrollably. It was the one whose name I did not know. George stood behind me, watching me intently. I could see from a brown bit of hair coming from under his cap that he was young, from his stance he seemed to be in his late twenties. I wondered why I had not noticed this before. It was as if all the people were faceless in this world, defined by the color of their coats. I turned to look up at the screen's response.

“Everyone must be united on Freedom Day.” it responded.

I was pretty fed up. I expected the supercomputer to be much more advanced than this.

Instead, it seemed to be malfunctioning on every level. It was going to kill everyone. I wondered, for a panicked minute, if that was its intent. I wondered if it was capable of having intent at all. It was falling apart, for God sakes.

“So you want all of the middle and lower people to die of the epidemic?” I typed furiously.

I waited. The bluecoat began coughing again. I could tell they were nervous and they wanted to get out. I didn’t really care.

“Many people will die of the epidemic and then those who remain will be easier to regulate,” the computer finally responded.

I couldn’t take it anymore. The stupidity of this society was too much. They never did anything for themselves unless it was approved by this stupid hunk of junk. And this piece of junk was programmed to control them, not to look out for their best interest. It was a machine. And it wasn’t working.

So I did what my father always taught me by example – I began to smash the shit out of the broken machine.

“What are you doing? Stop!” one of the bluecoats was screaming as I began tearing wires from every direction. He tried to stop me, but was arrested by another fit of coughing. Sparks fell all over the three of us like a rain of fire. The bluecoat recovered from his coughing fit and attempted again to stop me, but he became tangled in the wires himself and began ripping them out as well, though not intentionally. George watched on, standing perfectly still. He seemed to be in deep thought. As I thrashed about, the screen flashed many different words at too rapid a rate to read them. Then there were screens full of letters, flickering images, and then it went black. Somewhere deep in the tangle above a massive fire had started and now large chunks of

flame fell around us. The entire framework of the computer began to make a sound like grinding thunder.

That was when we ran. We ran as fast as we could, the guards at each corridor scrutinizing us and looking back at the rumble that was coming. Some of them left their stations and ran with us. When we got outside, the skyscraper was burning. The entire top portion of it was enveloped in flames, and people were gathering around to watch. They looked up at the fire, and their eyes were filled with life, light, and wonder. Many of them were thinking for the first time in their lives. As they stood close to the fire, many of them, warmed, began to take off their coats. Soon, you could not tell who was a lower person and who was a middle person. Everyone wore the same rags. They looked like a group of beaten-down prisoners upon being inexplicably released. Some were confused, others were shocked. Eventually, they stopped looking at the fire and began to look around at each other.

We decided to take to the hills, me and George. The other bluecoat chose to stay behind. He was sick, and he knew it. He couldn't stop coughing, but George had a strong sense of ambition. He said we should try to take to the hills and find the higher people, to see how they live. George seemed to have it all planned out, as if it was something he'd been thinking about for a long time. I wondered myself about how the "higher people" lived, this world of the future being so little of what I expected it to be. I hope that they live by their own means. I hope I can find a place where I can feel like a real human again. I hope, because all I have left is hope, and because I know that even the end can be a beginning.

7/18/12

“Sterile”

She stood before me, stark naked. I yawned, showing her the insides of my skull through my mouth's opening.

"It's too bad that I can't pleasure you like this," she said.

"Well, what can I say?" I said, shrugging. "What do you expect?"

"Oh, I don't know," she sighed, her eyes rolled upward. The white portion of them that revealed itself reminded me of the stare of a corpse. "Just a little recognition I guess, like the way it was back in the old days."

I laughed at her. "Come on, put something on for me."

She began with her panties, slowly pulling them up her thighs. I waited until she had them fully on before I allowed myself to completely relax. "That's good." I said. "Now the bra."

She put on her bra methodically, taking her time slipping the straps up on her shoulders. My heart began to pound in my throat.

"Come on, hurry up, now put on the pants." I demanded. I sat back, reclining in my armchair as she struggled to pull on her pants in a graceful way. This was almost always my favorite part, and I think it was because she was unable to ever do it without stumbling that turned me on so much. She paused, straightening up afterwards, and looked at me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She spoke slowly; I could tell she was thinking hard. "I don't know. I just wish this was different sometimes."

“You need to stop living in a fantasy world. Snap out of it,” I told her. Sometimes I thought she was born into the wrong time.

“I’m sorry,” she said. And then she made such a show of putting on her shirt awkwardly that I was thrown right back in the mood again. When she was done with the shirt, she sat down on the floor and began donning her stockings. I watched her stretch them up as high as they would go, almost to her knees. She was dragging this out for some reason. I wished she would hurry up. She must not be in the mood today.

She put on her shoes and tied up the shoelaces, glancing up at me periodically.

“What are you looking at?” I asked finally after she had made several glances.

“Do you remember that time we tried....kissing?” she asked.

I immediately went flaccid. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked. “Why would you go and bring that up now?”

“I just thought....”

“You thought you wanted to fuck this whole night up for both of us didn’t you?” I was yelling now. I balled my fists. I had to calm down. She might be a little crazy, but I loved her. Or at least, I thought I did, before she started up with all this weird old-time shit she’d been talking about lately.

“I’m sorry!” She put her face in her hands. “I just have this weird feeling, these weird...ideas. I’ll stop now. I promise. Can I make it better somehow? I’ll put on a coat! And snow pants!”



My anger began to fade. She knew how to appease me. She knew what I liked. I decided to take advantage of the situation as much as I could.

“And a hat, mittens, and a scarf,” I ordered. She ran from the room, coming back with the heavy clothes in her arms.

I sat back and watched while she slowly put them on. I could tell there was something going on in her head, upsetting her, from her expression, but she was keeping it down, at least, for now. My heart began to thump again when she almost fell trying to get the snow pants on. Then she heaved on the heavy jacket. I felt myself becoming more excited with each passing moment. The less skin I saw, the more worked up I became. She put on the hat and I moaned, trying as much as I could to hold back. Then she put the mittens on, carefully adjusting them. I huffed, grasping at the arms of the chair, my knuckles white. Then, she turned, and walked out the door as I exploded in a release of indescribable satisfaction.

I thought she had left, as she should have. But I could hear her, softly crying on the other side of the door. My sense of relaxation and contentment was blown out the door as I ripped it open to find her crouched there on my stoop.

“What the fuck are you still doing here?” I yelled. I was done with trying to be patient with her. She was doing the kind of stuff you just don’t do.

She got up and looked me straight in the eyes, making me incredibly uncomfortable. I wondered if she was doing this to punish me in some way. Had I done something wrong lately? I couldn’t remember. And there she was looking at me....

And then she grabbed my face in her hands and kissed me hard. I shoved her away, and she stumbled backwards.

“What is wrong with you, you disgusting bitch!” I screamed. I felt like throwing up. I couldn’t believe she did that. She knew what happened last time. I didn’t think she’d ever want to repeat that scene. She just looked at me blankly like she’d completely lost her mind. She took a step toward me.

“Oh, no, you get the hell away from me,” I said, taking a step back. “I’m not fighting with you tonight.”

She kept looking deep into my eyes. “But I don’t want to fight with you, honey,” she said, taking another step forward.

Honey? Honey? I had heard of the word before, but I’d never heard someone actually use it in normal language. What was wrong with her? Was she being possessed by a ghost or something? I took another step back and shuddered. “Then what the hell do you want?” I asked, my voice breaking.

“You,” she said. She took another step and I realized we were back inside; she had backed me back into my apartment. She shut the door behind her and locked it. I cringed. I couldn’t fathom that she would dare to do what she was doing....

She pushed me down on the floor and ripped off her hat, jacket and gloves. She kicked off her shoes in one fluid motion and ripped off her shirt and pants as she stood over me. She showered me with the layers. I began to whimper. I didn’t want this. She couldn’t do this to me, not after all we had been through....

But she was. She ripped off her panties and bra and stood over me, again naked, but this time filled with life. Her eyes shone bright and her muscles were taught. I cringed and tried to shimmy away, out from under her, but she stepped square on my chest and held me down with her weight. I had no idea she was this strong. She took her hair out from the tight bun it had been wrapped in and it fell long and wild around her shoulders. I began to cry.

When it was over, I was in the hospital recovering for a long time. They put me through many de-contaminations, and had to flush my system out completely. She'd left me there, on the floor to rot, after she was done, to go and seek some other victim. They will get her, though, the way they get all the rest. It's no good, trying to run.

We all know there is no such place out there somewhere for those who live in the ancient past, like the crazy people talk about. Why would anyone ever want to live like that again – like it was back when everything was all germs and squalor, death and decay. They had such short lifespans, and they spent them so foolishly, so impulsively. All those years of corrective pornography taught us that it's the act of overdressing that makes a woman sexy, to seek out the cleanest of women, the most sterile, was every man's goal these days. Both women and men of all ages were all assigned to the same state-sanctioned jumpsuit. The sick people of the past thought that nudity of all things was attractive, but were taught the truth, that attraction was found in women who were unattainable sexually, women who were covered up.

I cannot understand what happened to her. She had been with me for so long, and yet, it was as if I hardly knew her at all when she began to behave like this. I know that when they catch her, they will give her the two operations: one so she can never apply for a permit to have children, the other to keep her from thinking unclean thoughts. Those who undergo the second

operation make wonderful partners if the couple does not want a child. But I hope I never see her again. I hope she didn't steal anything from me that wasn't hers.

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I am home now. I am reading the paper and I am pissing my pants. They got her, alright, it took long enough. Who knows where she was, who harbored her for so long. The reason I am currently pissing my pants is because when they got her she was already pregnant. Naturally pregnant.

This is almost unheard of. There has not been a natural pregnancy in decades. It is a sad thing, since she is now doomed to death. After she gives birth to a deformed child, they will kill her.

I know it's mine and I want to die. I will be infinitely notorious for being the first man in over 900 years who had allowed his seed to come to a horrifying fruition. I wonder what the baby will look like, and I want to die before it is born. I wish our laws allowed us to kill the monstrosity, like they used to. All I can think about are the horrible pictures you study in high school history class of the deformity period. All those children born looking like freaks and monsters, the way the human race almost became sterile through the slow increase of deformed people...it's enough to give a kid nightmares for weeks. And now one of those old-fashioned freaks will be my son.

There is a knock at the door. I have just finished pissing my pants and the knock almost causes me to shit in them, too.

It's her, of course. She's protected now, until she gives birth, and she can do or go wherever she wants.

"Oh my god," is all I can say.

She marches in, pushing me aside with her bulging belly. She goes for the cupboard and begins munching some crackers, spilling crumbs all out the sides of her mouth carelessly. She looks radiant.

"What do you want from me?" I moan.

She smiles. "You."

I look at her in horror. Again? With her...like this? I think that was about the time I fainted.

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When I awoke again, I was sore all over and back in the hospital. She'd done it again. Used me. I felt like dirt. I couldn't do anything about it, either, because she was under the protection of the state. So I clenched my teeth as I went through all the de-contamination procedures again.

The next few months went like that. She'd magically appear, eat some of my food while I cringed in a corner, rape me, and leave. She was becoming bigger every day, and more and more happy. I didn't understand her. She should be miserable, she was about to give birth to a freak that would have to be put in a lab and studied for its entire life. She should have been terribly depressed, but she was completely insane.

When the time came, I had moved into a new place and changed my name to try to get away from her. I thought she was off in some hospital somewhere when I read the headlines on the paper and almost really did shit myself.

“Baby born normal,” it read. “Specialists question evolution in copulation disintegration. Sex may become legal practice again in distant future.”

I couldn’t believe it. Normal? How was that possible? A miracle such as that hadn’t happened since the dark ages! Of course they had always held on to the hope, which was why abortion was illegal and pregnant women were protected until they gave birth. I thought about all those disgusting nights I spent trying to endure the act of sex.

I felt like I was going to be sick. I couldn’t believe the headlines. Sex was sick, it made you sick. That was what I had been told my entire life. And then I thought about those moments, the moments I never wanted to admit to myself. Sometimes, when she was in the midst of attacking me, and I didn’t want her to stop for some reason. I always thought I was being a masochist. I always thought there was something wrong with the fact that I thought, sometimes, that it felt good. I was deep in thought about whether I could ever endure the act again, and that was when she blasted through the door, her eyes bright as ever, with a baby in her arms.

My first thought was, “How did she find me?” but then I saw the baby. He was perfect. I leaned over, and, forgetting my manners, forgetting everything I’d been taught my entire life about how to act around babies, and I kissed him.

“The Flood “

It has been a long stretch here, in the city that was. As I pull my boat along the avenues of the desolate streets, all I can seem to think about is the life that was once so rich, before it all drowned, before it became encrusted in the slime of underwater life. My pole catches occasionally on the memories that lie beneath - webs of lost thoughts and emotions tangled in abandon. It is an empty face now, it shows nothing but the tears that have taken over. I call out every hour, but no one answers - no one is there to respond.

I need to sit for a while. This endless search is not only hopeless, but also seems to wear upon my determination, which is all I have left. I lean back in my small vessel, and I remember.

“It isn’t right!” she is screaming, standing boldly in front of a body of apathetic eyes, who watch with cautiously imitated sympathy. The town hall is full. Tiny, unseen pores squeeze out sweat, perfuming the air. Among them are swarms of the townspeople’s thoughts, which cry out in unison, none willing to be patient and not interrupt.

“We are ruining the ecosystem! We are allowing this travesty to drive animals from their homes, killing off rare plants that have been growing in the valley for decades!” She is enraged. Her temperature has reached 101, and a healthy blush comes over her expression. Her eyes are wide open, her thoughts are locked tight in place.

“Ms....”

“Emmit.”

“Ms. Emmit. First, allow me to thank you for your concern with our valley’s well-being. We assure you, we care for the balance of the ecosystem of our hometown as much as you do, and this was precisely why we have chosen the hydro-electric dam as a more eco-friendly alternative to the proposed nuclear plant. We are aware that the implementation of a dam is somewhat disruptive to the wildlife of the surrounding area. However, it tends to cause much

less than a nuclear power plant might. I assure you, we have kept the town's best interests in mind when we made the decision to allow this dam to be built.

“Did you include the interests of all the poor animals who's homes will be demolished? Or the interests of the plant life that will be killed off? What about Fernside park? It will be destroyed by your plan!”

“Ms. Emmet, Fernside park has been condemned for several years. The swampland causes it to be unusable. Your other concerns are legitimate, However, they are negligible compared to the alternatives.

“Negligible? NEGLIGIBLE! We'll show you negligible. You'll see!” She is stomping, stomping like a child, so each footfall echoes, banging against the ears of the townspeople, out the door.

We are thinking, how can she put up such a fuss? We are thinking, how can a dam possibly upset someone so much? We are thinking of her patchwork pants, of the fact that she is barefoot. Some of us are even thinking how a person could be so concerned with the ecosystem and the poor animals could wear toe nail polish, which is tested on them.

We are not thinking that she will go to her house, where she has collected handfuls of misled revolutionaries. We are not thinking of her plan to blow up the dam and drown us all.

Now, I pull regularly through the dark waters, sometimes, the sun shines clearly enough so that I can see the tops of buildings below, quivering as if with fear. I sometimes call out, but no one seems to be here anymore. I believe I am the only one left. I used to see traces of them, of the fact that they had all been here at one time or another - desks floating, pieces of homes, children's' toys. They're all there, under me, somewhere, and when I get close to the weeds, I panic, because I can see their bodies tangled, their hair intertwined in the lily-pad stems. I



sometimes find shoes floating, but never again will I dare to see if there are feet still within.

Now that I think about it, she was right. The dam was a danger to all life in our town, but not as much as she.

With a start, I leap back up to a sitting position. I heard something, I swear. There! There it is again! I will pole closer.

It is a cluster of trees, where the noise comes from, a sad, whining sound. A baby? How could a baby survive for this long in a tangle of trees?

But it is no baby. A dog. Not a very handsome dog, either - his fur is matted and he looks to be half-starved. But he is alive, he is here, somehow. I pole over to him, and he thankfully drops into the front of my canoe. He stares at me for a while, and I do the same to him. We take each other in. Then, he approaches, slowly, timidly, tail between his legs, head down, eyes up. When he gets close enough, he licks my hands.

We continue on, searching for the shore. I have not seen it yet. The foliage from the many trees created a maze out of this place, one which I might never solve. I have my fishing pole, thankfully, and we survive on raw fish and the occasional apples that float up from the area in which the old orchard once stood. Days go by. Still, there is nothing, no one else who stirs in this untraceable civilization.

We have spent days floating in this seemingly endless tangle of water and weeds. The treetops are beginning to wither. They are not meant to live this way. The mist obscures all. It looks like fall is creeping, and I feel as if I might soon die. Of malnutrition, infection, starvation, dehydration, go ask a doctor, because I don't know which is in the front. My friend, the dog, holds on. He is more determined than I ever was, I credit him this. We are too weak to pull ourselves about, too weak to pull in any fish. There are no more apples left, and even if there

were, I couldn't stomach another one, ever again. We are slipping away, lost to all hope, when we finally find our way out of the maze.

At first, I believe that I am dead. Then, looking about, and coming to my senses a bit, I realize this is not so. And the mound that lies before me is not another tree top emerging from the still waters. It is a hill, a hill of solid ground, rising up like a god. The dog barks - he sees it too. I weakly pick up my pole and steer toward this dream within a dream. When my boat hits the bottom, I wake up.

There is a figure coming toward me. It is a female, I can tell that much. She is saying something to me, bending over me. She looks familiar. She looks like someone I had to remember for some reason. I feel a surge of energy building in my throat, and then I swallow it, knowing I do not have the energy to act just now. I let go. All I wanted was to find the shore, and this I accomplished. I let darkness take over.

When I awake, the first thing I see is the dog, who is hovering over me, panting. Droplets fall from his tongue down onto my face. I sit up. I feel revived, I must have eaten at some point, without remembering. I look around. There are people here, mulling about, only a few, but people, nonetheless. I see the girl who found me - and immediately I recognize her as the same girl from the meeting at the town hall, the girl who was responsible for the death of an entire population, not just the people, but the precious animals and plants that she advocated so passionately.

I must not say anything. I must not let them know that I know. They are all her people, every one. They must have been somewhere that they knew would be safe when they blew up the dam. I listen to them, to the things that they say. They all look hollow. They look as if they had a path, a plan, but they went astray somewhere. They weren't sure just where. I wish I could tell

them. I wish I could just point at her, and tell them it was her. She sits off to the side, filing her perfect fingernails. They all had such pure intentions, until they listened to her. They allowed her to brainwash them about being brainwashed by the rest of us. They are both murderers and victims. They are shell-shocked Nazi soldiers, the stink of death caught in their noses. The things they say, they say looking at each other for approval, as if they will fall apart like dry leaves without support. I listen to them, nonetheless.

“Now, at least, the land will go back to the way it was before people came and ruined it.”

“It’s like it was when the Native Americans lived now. I only hope it will stay this way.”

“We can start over, and live with the animals, side-by-side.”

“They all deserved it, every one of them. They were money-grubbing, greedy monsters, whose only concern was killing anything that got in their way.”

“I know, it’s sad, and we lost a lot of people that were close to us, but look at the bigger picture, look at what we have accomplished. We have a clean slate to work with now.”

“We can start new.”

New. I bide my time. I wait, waiting for night to fall. When it falls, I rise, slowly. My limbs are sore, weak. I go in search of her, the dog by my side.

It is lucky that I run into her before I start to search the tents. She greets me with open arms, happy to see her new pet, whom she alone saved from the clutches of death. She speaks to me as if I am a child, as if she knows better. I do not hear what she says. I ask her to come with me, that I must show her something.

We walk to the shoreline. We stand close to the water, looking at our dark silhouettes reflecting back at us defiantly. I tell her that what I want to show her is in the water. Just a bit deeper. The dog remains on the shore, never again will he swim without a memory of fear that

will ever haunt him.

I can tell she is uncomfortable, she will not keep going deeper as I gesture. She knows what is under that water, the lives she sacrificed for her clean slate, the thoughts and fears and the ever-open eyes that watch her in dreams. She can avoid them in the daylight, but not now, not while their hair winds around her ankles.

I notice that her nail polish is still perfect. She must have re-done them since the meeting. She must have brought it with her when she hiked to the high ground where she watched the entire town drown. I take her by the hand.

At first, there is only minimal resistance. Then, as it would happen inevitably, she struggles, tries to pull away with all her might. I hold her hand tight, and clasp my other hand over her mouth. She will not put a stop to this cycle she has started.

I pull her in. She fights, thrashes. I do not let go. It is not easy, I am weak, tired. Yet there is something within me that tells me I must not stop, it is beyond physical exhaustion, beyond emotional revenge. It is a voice that echoes from the universe that what must be done will be done, and that no human force will deny this power.

I pull her deeper. Her struggle is not so difficult to control now, the water slows her movements. We are neck deep now, and I pull her head down into the water. She fights for her life with the same vigor she fought with to murder our town. Yet her movements slowly diminish, and finally, they stop.

Dripping, I return to the shore, where the dog licks my hands. I look up at the stars, finding the north star. I do not know why, but I decide to follow it. The dog trots by my side. I do not know where I am going, or what I will do. All I know is that I saw something that was not right, and I had to make it right, despite the fact that I was sick of death, sick of corpses. Now,

perhaps, I can get away from all that. I touch the dog's head by my side, and he smiles at me.  
And we walk on, into the starlight, away from the flood.

3/21/12

### "The Garden of Fire"

They are all around me. There is nothing I can do to stop them. I am surrounded. I dive under the upturned roots of a fallen tree and hold my breath in the darkness as I hear them walk by, searching for me.

I don't remember quite how this began. I remember being lost in the woods outside my home, the trees all looking foreign and twisted. I don't remember how I got there. And then there was the cave, the dark cellar-like place, where I was locked up and fed scraps and murky water for what seemed like years. I'm not sure how much time I spent there.

Now it's all about running. Running is all I can do, all I know how to do. Everything is a muddle in my mind. All I know is that if I stop running, terrible things will happen. I can feel it.

There was a time when everything was different, I remember that. I vaguely remember that there was even a time in which I used to enjoy the unmentionable. I used to do it voluntarily. I can barely fathom that idea now.

Now, I will do anything I can to avoid the unmentionable. I will run, fight, die before I let that happen to me again. It has happened too many times. I am done.

When I run, I can feel bits and pieces of myself falling away. The stain between my legs grows. It is a monster, that stain. It only goes away when I submit to them. They give me the

serums, the medicine. But then they do the unmentionable. I would rather run, like this, blood caked between my toes, bits of me falling apart, than stay lying in a bed, powerless.

There is nothing left down there now anyway. What do they want from me? There must be others, other females left out there. Why would they keep me around? I was used up a long time ago. Ripped apart.

No more.

As long as I keep running.

Eve is a bitch. Take it from me, because I know. Little does she know that she's right, there are no females left. She's the last of her kind. They all died off after the uprising. After the riots died down and sex-slave trafficking became the only viable industry, they became a commodity. When they were used up, that was it. All we can do is move on to the next thing, the next thing that will run out, which is food. There are no other concerns apart from staying alive from day to day until we all die. It's every man for himself out here, and everyone who didn't get that right from the beginning is dead now. I knew right from the start, and that's why I'm still here. I am king of this place. At least, I'm king of this parcel. If I meet another king, I'll kill him and rule over twice the space I do now. That's how things work. I take, they give, or they die. My supporters are many. I've been recruiting for a long time. If something happens that I don't like, I kill whoever's responsible. If no one's responsible, I kill someone anyway, to make a point.

Eve was my main squeeze. She was a rarity, that girl. One of the last. I remember back, not long ago, when pussy used to run through here like a river. Then it became a trickle. By the

time it dried up, we were already sending out scouts to find more, and in the course of two years, they were only able to find three. One was a cripple, who couldn't talk, one was a bald woman, and then there was little miss Eve. She was perfect. Only missing two fingers. Other than that, she was in one whole piece and ready for action. The cripple died within weeks. The bald woman lasted a bit longer, but Butch killed her with his thing, even though he claimed he didn't mean to.

I claimed Eve for my own. I wouldn't let anyone else touch her, just me. I remember I used to tell that bitch that she was so lucky, that she might live if she just stayed with me. I knew she'd be in high demand, and I was her protection. But that stupid bitch didn't care. All she could think of was running away, and she tried, a bunch of times, made me ripshit at her. Got me all bent all outta shape, she did. So I started to rent her out. I told her, if she wasn't gonna appreciate my protection, I'd just stop protecting her. You think you got it bad now, I says to her. Rented her out to the high rollers first. Got quite a bit of money for her, too. But then when things started getting tight, I'd start giving her out to anyone with the goods to trade, mostly groups who'd pool their food to pay for one final lay, even if they had to share it between all twenty of them. I remember a few of them kept coming back for more, too - they'd rather starve to death than live another day without getting a few slams in, the fools. You know, it's that kinda thinking that gets people dead.

But then one day she was gone.

I searched all over the place, sent out three times as many scouts as usual, even went out looking for her myself for a few. I still have scouts out now. One of them thinks he's some sorta tracker - thinks he's on her trail. Whatever. I call it a loss. She was fun for a while, but toward the

end, she'd lost all her friction. She'd just lie there. Stopped fighting like she used to. That used to get me all hot and bothered. She became boring, and was too used up to enjoy anyway. She was a mess down there. Couldn't tell half the time whether I was shovin it in the right place, or just a cut. I thought she was gonna just die off, and if she did, everything would've been just fine. But no, the bitch had to run away, and now she's worth all the more.

I'll find her. Then I'll teach her.

I need to stop running. I can't breathe. I need water. Need rest. But every time I slow down, I see their faces, their bodies hovering over me. That's when I get up and run. But I feel so weak now. I was able to stop some of the bleeding with some moss I found, at least. If only I could find a willow tree. I could use a painkiller.

Up ahead, there is something strange in the trees. It is high in the treetops...a light. But it is not like a fire, and it stirs memories inside me that have long laid dormant.

I don't understand. I am closer now, and still the light seems to hover in the trees. It is so high up that from here, now that I am closer, I can't see it. There is just the faint memory of the glow and where it was that keeps me going forward. It was somewhere around here, I swear it was...

"Hello?"

I stop dead in my tracks. Who was that? Where did it come from? It seemed to come from above, from the same place as the light. It sounded....different. Different from the desperate



cries and grunts that I'm used to hearing. It sounded...clear. Should I respond? What if it's....? No, I will not respond.

Suddenly there is a light pouring on me. The same non-fire light. It scares me. I don't know what to do. I try to run but the light follows me, spots me wherever I dart. So I kneel down and cover my head and cower, a position that has saved my life on several occasions.

There is a man in front of me. He is shining a light at me. I could run from him but his light will catch me. I don't know what to do. I'm so scared. I swear, I won't go back. I'll swallow glass like Marsha did before I go back. I'll even kill him if I have to.

"Oh, my goodness. You don't look so good. Why don't you come with me, young lady?"

I shake my head. What is he saying? It sounds like English but...different. I feel like I've heard those words before...so long ago. It hardly makes sense, this feeling coming over me.

"Okay, okay, I can see you've been through ... a lot. Please, just take my hand."

He is reaching out a hand to me. I wince, and wait, but nothing happens. When I open my eyes, he is still there, holding out his hand. I remember my brother. I had a brother. Yes. A long time ago. An older brother. He used to try to protect me. He said that once to me, once....I was very little...I had fallen, there was pain, and he had said, "Take my hand." Just like that. He'd held out his hand, just like that, too.

Then I hear it, crashing in the bushes in the distance. The sound of men shouting. The sound of them. I get up to run but the pain makes me stumble. I try again. The man holding out his hand is looking in the direction of the sounds. He looks worried. He will kill me if I don't run now. I have to get up and run now. I have to get up....

"The poor girl. She's been brutalized. When I heard the men, I had to do something. I grabbed her."

"But no one gets brought here unless they volunteer. You know the rules, Adam."

"She could barely understand what I was saying, she was so weak...."

"It doesn't matter. If she came here against her will, she could bring us all down with her, and I won't have that. You'll have to let her go."

"But she's in no shape to be moved right now!"

"After she is healed, then."

"But she's the only one besides you, Lilith. Don't you care?"

"Get out."

"Alright, alright, I'm going."

I awake to light. There are potatoes on a shelf above my head, with wires connecting them. And light. An electrical light. I remember what they're called now. My head feels clear. I feel as if I've eaten for the first time in days, though I don't remember having eaten. I feel clean. My thoughts, my mind, I feel like it is coming back to me for the first time in years. I must have been drugged...but for how long? Everything is so mixed up...I remember what I had been running from...I will never forget that. The pain is there to remind me.

But the bleeding seems to have stopped somehow. I thought it never would. But these blankets are white. White blankets...am I still dreaming? No, I can't be. The pain. Where am I? Who brought me here? Wait. It was him. The man. It must have been. He was the last person I saw before...

I don't understand. If he was taking me as his new slave, why would I be in a bed with white sheets? I didn't even know there was a place left on earth that still had white sheets - sheets not covered in blood or other varieties of stains.

He's here. I can see him standing over me while I pretend to sleep. He stands in front of green leaves – where am I? There are wooden boards all around, shelves, tied up rope-ladders, and all kinds of burlap bags filled with things hanging from hooks. I wonder, when will it come? When will he bring pain? Will he bring pain? He seems so young. One of the youngest men I've ever seen, in fact. He is wearing clothing that seems clean. It has been so long since I have seen clean clothing. And he doesn't smell like the other men. I wait, my whole body tense. He's touching me. His hand is on my forehead. It makes me remember something....mother. It makes me remember my mother, with her hand over my forehead, just like this.

"You poor girl. You've been through so much. It's okay now, you're safe."

I open my eyes.

"You're awake! My goodness! I'm so sorry, I probably startled you. How are you feeling?"

I shake my head, not knowing how to respond. How am I feeling? Compared to what?

"You were in quite the state. We thought we were going to lose you there for a while. Doc must've put over 80 stitches in your... in you. It's been almost a month since you came here, and you've been in and out the entire time. Forgive me if you remember all of this, but I feel like whenever you wake up, I should let you know what's happening."

Someone is behind him now, a silent figure, watching. I try to see but it is just a shadow. But it seems to be growing. It seems to be pulling him away. I hear voices speaking in low tones. One of the voices seems....like it could almost be a....No, It couldn't be.

"What is your name?" The shadow steps forward, and it is what it couldn't be. It is a woman.

"Eve," I tell her, without ever choosing to speak. I wonder if I am dead.

She takes a step back. "No," she says. Then she's gone.

The man is gone, too. I can hear them, arguing somewhere. I lay back and let the darkness take me.

My men found something today. You wouldn't fucking believe it. They found a family in the trees. Apparently, down near the lake, there's some trees, real tall ones, and this family was living up there. Father and his two sons. Almost looked like they were fixin to live up there, had a little tree-house going. Roasted the sons on the spit, had some better eatin' than we've had in months. We made the father a worker, but he'll probably end up dead soon, since he's a fighter. At least we'll get some labor out of him before then. Do what you can, that's all you can do to survive. I tell ya, though, this family's got me thinkin'. What if... what if there's more? Ever since

Eve left there's been this emptiness in me. Butch cracked a joke the other day saying I musta been in love with her. Forgot about that word, love.

Anyway, when she was around, I thought maybe someday I could have a son, you know, to protect and bring up as a right mean killer. I could mold him into a machine, so when I start to get old and weak, he could look out for me. I'd train him right, that's sure.

If I could just manage to find me a woman or even a young boy, not like those brats spouting moral bullshit, but a young kid who hasn't learned anything yet. That way I could make him into whatever I want. He'd be better than a slave, like a younger, stronger version of me to protect me when I get to the age where I need it.

So maybe I should look into this shit. See if there are any more monkeys in the trees around here. Maybe I'll find myself a nice banana.

When I wake up again, she's standing over me with a knife. I am seconds away from death, and yet I feel no urge to scream. I feel complete calm. I watch her with trusting eyes. Her eyes are on fire.

Then she lunges, but awkwardly, off to the side. It is the man who has tackled her. He takes the knife from her, and they are yelling at each other.

"She's the only other one we know of! You can't!"

"She's going to take you away from me!"

"Why do you think that? There are millions of men out there!"

"Because of who she is! Because I'm an old woman compared to her! Because you don't understand! You weren't raised the way I was!"

They stop for a moment, seething at each other. Then they both are looking at me. There is a long moment of silence. I wait, pretending to sleep. They they both leave.

I don't understand her jealousy. Does she know that I am unable to ever do the unmentionable deed again? Even if it were in love, as it should be, never again will I do that. I cannot. I am not fit, even if I wanted to. Even if I changed my mind, my body is wrecked beyond repair. I remember the conversation I had with the doctor on that cold night, about a week back, when he came and told me that I would never be able to do that again without risking infection and death. I remember telling him I was glad of it.

I was surprised they even had a doctor here. I guess travels, but still. He told me there are other communities in other places like this one, places where there is still law. Those who stick to the trees seem to be the only ones left with any sense of decency. He told me that the last of civilization is tree-bound, and those humans that remain on the ground have become animals. Most of them have forgotten the old ways, and many of them are forgetting even basic human intelligence.

He told me a story about how he encountered a group of men who had forgotten altogether how to speak, and they communicated with physical actions and grunts. He was able to heal one of them that had suffered an infection in his foot, and they had given him an entire wild hog for it, recently slaughtered. Another small group of men once chased him up a tree, and he thought it would surely be his death. But then he found they were unable to climb the tree,

and had no way of burning it even if it had occurred to them, they had so forgotten their humanity. So they moved on and he was able to survive another day.

I feel strong today, despite almost being killed. I am used to that. Slowly, carefully, I sit up. The bed is canopied, and outside the canopy, there are rough-hewn boards. The other side offers the same view, but on this side, there's a window. Outside the window are thick branches. There are narrow walkways going from one little hut to the next among this grove of trees, tall trees, all of them very close. Each little hut nestled in the branches looks like a tree-fort built by children and then fortified by adults. One of the huts is always humming, that must be where the generator lies, as all the electric lights seem to be strung from there. People are always going in and out. The Doctor told me there is an exercise bike hooked up to it, so it is powered by humans. So my suspicions were correct. I am in a tree. I'm not dreaming. There are people who live in the trees, and I am here among them. I remember hearing all of the rumors, the stories, the myths about them. I never believed. I do now.

"She needs to go."

"But I spoke to her! She said she wants to stay here if we'll let her. She said she's willing to work. If that's not voluntary, I don't know what is."

"I don't care, and you don't understand. There is a history here to consider. She needs to go."

"What history? Why won't you tell me why you hate her? What did she ever do to you?"

"Nothing. It's what she will do that I'm worried about."

"Lilith, now you're talking crazy. I will not turn her away if this is your only reason."

"Excuse me? Who do you think brought you here? Who do you think took you in, your whole family in? Who orchestrated all of this when everything else was falling apart? All that aside, who do you think is in charge here?"

"Okay, okay, calm down. I know you call the shots up here. But you're not thinking this through. What about them? The land lovers? What do you think would happen if you turned her away? Do you think she'd just say thanks and trot off into the wastelands? Or do you think she'd go tell the land lovers exactly where we are and how to find us? What do you think would happen, fearless leader?"

"Well?"

"Lilith?"

"She can stay as long as you stay away from her."

"Thank you."

I am in a dress. The dress is white. If I close my eyes and concentrate really hard, I can remember a green dress I wore once when I was very young. I remember my father's laughing eyes as he spun me around in it, and his smell, like patchouli.

I spin around and smile as the frills float on the air. I must thank whoever left this for me. The doctor took care of me the past few weeks, and now I feel like a new me. I do not know what happened to the man who saved me. I thought I saw him watching me in my sleep a few



nights back, but I could have been dreaming. I can dream here - unlike I ever could before. Instead of nightmares, I dream of light and color and good things. Simple things.

The doctor's name is Gregory, and he is mostly Russian, and speaks little English. He is a good man, though. He has taught me how to walk again. I thought I never would - and I wasn't sure if I wanted to, but I am glad now that he encouraged me. "Not know until try. Not know until try." That's what he kept telling me when I was overwhelmed by my own weakness. So I did try.

I haven't seen or heard the other woman since that one night. I don't think she knows that I know she exists. If she wants to kill me, I can't fathom why. My heart almost leapt for joy and hope when I saw her, despite the shock she gave me. I wonder if she understands that she and I are living priceless lives. I wonder if she knows that we seem to be the last of our kind. I wish I could talk to her. It's pretty obvious that she's the one in charge here, and if that's the case, I'd like to thank her for saving my life.

I've found her. Eve. She's up in a tree, the stupid bitch. I can't believe she's still alive. Girl was half dead when she took off. I was ready to give whichever scout found her body a whole bushel of apples. Now one of the bastards comes back saying he saw her up in a tree with an old man, reading out loud to him out of a book. Can you believe it? A book! I thought those things had all been used up as kindling long ago.

Now that I know about these tree-dwelling assholes, though, things have been looking up. Eve should be happy that she's brought me such bounty. I thought those two young boys were good, I didn't know shit back then. Last night I tasted baby meat, and there was nothing I've

ever had that even came close. They must be taking good care of her to be getting babies outta her already. Either that or...maybe there's more women up in those trees. If that's the case, then there's a whole mess of treasure growing up there, like fruit, just waiting for me to pick it.

I already put together a plan. It'll be an ambush. They may have the higher ground, but we have something they don't. Nothing to lose. I planned it for tonight, and I've been waiting for days. I knew there would be no moon tonight, so we can catch them completely off guard in the dark. Some of my men have told me that they can make light in the dark, light that's not fire, but I think they're going off the deep end. They're starting to lose it from starvation, so they'll say anything to amuse themselves.

This time, I'm going with them. If they find her, I want her first. I want to make sure none of the others take her first. She belongs to me. And when I knock that bitch up, I won't even share her with anyone, except maybe Butch of course. He starts losing control of himself without pussy. I sometimes wonder who misses her more, me or him. He liked to beat on her too, though, and I'll have to tell him to stop if I want her to give me a good quality son. At least he'll have to lay off her stomach. What I do, well, I do whatever I want. I don't beat her too much anyway, unless she talks. Or tries to run away. I'll beat her light. That way my son will come out tough as nails.

For now I wait and watch the sun setting. Those tree dicks, they're probably watching it too...for the last time.

I was with Gregory when I saw them. They were a distance away, in the bushes, but I saw them nonetheless. I don't know why they didn't come for me right away. They are probably

planning an attack. I know my time is over now. They will come soon. They will kill everyone. I have come to learn that there are thirty people here....thirty! I am amazed that so many have found a way to live fruitfully. Where I came from, there were only about a dozen, and even then they were dwindling, slowly starving. The people who live up here call them the land lovers. They aren't afraid of them. They claim to have even stolen food from their leader, the one who used to say he was my master.

I have to keep reminding myself that I'm awake, that this is real. I was so accustomed for so long to living a life of suffering and pain, I hardly know what is happening to me. I used to live a life of submission. Never again. It amazes me that people here have been able to survive, unbroken. They are my idols.

I still have not been able to speak to the other woman here. I imagine she is the mother of all the children, of which there are several. I thought I'd never see children again. When I first saw one I cried. Apparently, according to Gregory there haven't been any girls born yet, but there is still hope as long as she's here. She is the savior of us all. If I ever get the chance to thank her, I will.

I know that they are coming, and I have been preparing. All day I have been talking to as many people as I can. Some of them have actually been listening. These people are not ready fighters, but I'm trying to change that. They've survived thus far by being elusive, but that won't keep them alive forever. I've already taught a group of boys and men how to carve arrows and construct bows. They've been practicing with them all afternoon. Gregory and I have been carving arrow after arrow, and now, as the sun sets in the distance, I wonder where all of this overwhelming hope came from, and I pray it never dies.

She's been war-mongering. I don't know why I allowed her to be brought here. She needs to die. She will ruin everything. Adam is mine. I don't care that he is a child compared to me in age. I will not be pushed out from Eden, not now that I am so close to perfection. My baby was born two days ago, it is Joseph's baby; I made sure she would not be related to Adam. Just in case. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. She is the future. If my life were to end, she would have to take over for me, become my predecessor. Then Adam could be with her, and I could live on, through her. She is so important I don't even know what to name her. It must be a name to remember. She must be protected. If that girl does anything to compromise my baby's safety, or if she messes with Adam, I swear I will kill her myself.

The men came as soon as the last light had left the sky. They came with fire. Setting fire to the trees where they knew the families lived, they waited. They had to surround the trees with dry wood and kindling, for at first they would not burn. But then, as the flames began to leap higher into the canopy of the treetops, they got what they were waiting for.

They got a response.

The first hail of arrows were lit with the very fire of the enemy, and they came down from the tree branches like rain upon the men below. The men ran in scattered directions, unsure how to respond to this sudden and unexpected reaction. They hid in bushes and shrubs until their leader's shouts rallied them back to the burning forest.

"They will have to come down soon or they will burn! Then we will have them!" He shrieked, waving his arms in a frenzy. His hair stood on end, and his haunting appearance frightened the men back under his control. The hail of flaming arrows had slowed and nearly petered out. The men returned to the burning trees to wait for their victims.

They were met with more arrows, these ones tipped with an herb that temporarily paralyzed the body. They were a construction of Gregory, whose knowledge of herbs had come in handy more than once for the people who dwelled in the trees. The men fell, even those who were only grazed with the arrows, and were left to stare into the burning branches, helpless and unable to move as more arrows showered down upon them.

The men's numbers were dwindling. Several had fallen, and the handful that remained were running in circles attempting to avoid the rain of death that fell upon them. They had expected no resistance; they had assumed there would be no need for weapons. They had few weapons themselves as it was, a few blunt clubs at best, and they were unable to use them upon the unseen people high above them as they were.

In a desperate rage, their leader began to climb one of the burning trees. The men who remained followed his lead, finding themselves to be a lesser target when concealed amongst the flames. Two of the men fell before reaching the treetops, their bodies engulfed in flames. The leader, though, made it to the top.

I don't fucking get it. Everything is going wrong. My men are all dead. It doesn't make any sense! The first family we plucked from the trees put up no fight, had submitted immediately. Something was changed about these people. They were a bunch of goddamn

hippies without any weapons not two weeks ago! Now, look! I will not accept that my men were taken out by a bunch of tree-hugging pussies. I know she's up there. I'll fucking get her if it's the last thing I do. I'll bet she's responsible for all of this bullshit. I bet she trained them to do this. I'll fucking kill her. Where is she? If I don't get to be the one to kill her I swear to fucking god...

It was Adam whom he came upon first. Adam came running down the wooden platform toward him, wielding a thick tree branch. The man took a ready stance and waited. When Adam was close enough, he swung the branch, which the man caught in his muscular grasp and yanked away from him in an instant. He swung it back at Adam in a swift motion, smashing him on the head with it, knocking him out instantly.

Then, without warning, he was attacked from above by Lilith. She came down upon him from an upper tree branch, swinging a machete. She brought it crashing down upon him and sliced it deep into his shoulder. He screamed and spun around, seizing her by the throat. slamming her against the tree trunk, he wrapped his hand around her throat as she slashed at him. She managed to land a long scratch across his face, beginning from his eye. His eye was punctured, and the vitreous fluid spilled down his face as he shrieked in agony.

"You bitch!" he screamed, and he bashed her one final time against the trunk of the tree, grabbing her body and snapping her neck. He threw her limp body down and stumbled forward, screaming at the top of his lungs. He yanked the machete from deep within his shoulder up and out, and stood for a moment, catching his breath.

From behind a wall of smoke and flame, Eva stepped up to him.

I am broken. He has killed me. My baby. All I can think of is her. Who will take care of her? Where is Adam? The pain is dull and seems faraway. I thought I had him. I thought I'd win. I was so wrong. So proud.

Wait. It's her. I see her. She is coming. She. She is saving us all, and I almost killed her. If I had, Adam would be dead now, my baby would be dead now. She is coming for him. I know. He thinks he has come here for her, but now she is coming for him. We were all so wrong about everything.

Eve stood, staring at the man who had formerly enslaved her, who had almost killed her. He wavered, and smiled at her. The flames crackled around them, lighting their sweat-bathed faces. They both wore the same expression – one of determination.

"I been lookin for you, bitch. You ran away from me," he said in a low tone.

"Come get me, then." She taunted, her face down, her hair hanging over her eyes.

He charged toward her, swinging the machete in a long arch.

She stepped aside, and he slashed the blade deep into a tree branch. He fought to remove it, but it was lodged. Giving up, he turned toward her and leapt on top of her. In a swift motion, she seized an arrow from the quiver on her back and plunged it into his one good eye. He screamed, rolling off of her. She got up and ripped the machete from the tree, adrenaline pulsing

through her veins. She walked up to him where he lay on the floorboards, and plunged the knife down, cutting off his manhood - that had brought her so much agony. He shrieked in unbearable pain, his voice echoing over the treetops. He continued to roll off the platform and fell, screaming all the way, to the forest floor, landing with a resounding thump.

Eve struggled to her feet and ran over to Lilith's broken body, which lay crumpled a distance away. She was still breathing short, gasping breaths. Eva gathered her into her arms, and their eyes met. For a long moment, they just looked at each other, neither of them saying a word. Then Lilith gasped, and spoke.

"My baby. Will you take care of her?"

"Her?"

"Yes."

"Of course I will. I'll protect her with my life."

"Thank you."

"Thank *you*, for saving my life. What's her name?"

"What?"

"Your baby girl, what is her name?"

Lilith's eyes began to roll back. Her lids fluttered as she made one last intake of breath and said, "Eve."



Sept. 11, 2012

“Going Fish”

Tuesday:

So my therapist is making me write this diary. I don't think it will help, but she promises not to read what I wrote if I show her a new page each day, real quick-like. She thinks a girl who's recently tried to slit her wrists needs to do something to show “distinct progression.” Whatever. I don't really care what she thinks. Fuck her and all her so-called solutions. She wouldn't even know if I had someone else do the writing for me. I could, I guess, but that would require talking to someone at school. I try my best not to talk to anyone there. In fact, I try my best not to talk to anyone, ever, at all. People just suck. I'm off to take a bath.

Wednesday:

She was pretty pissed that I didn't write a whole page. I told her she was lucky I wrote anything at all. I got nothing to write about anyway. Sick of it. Sick of this world. No matter how long I wait, it doesn't get any better. He's gone. He was the only one I could talk to, and now he's gone, just like that. I should have known from all his stupid fucking "business trips." He knows what this breakup would do to me and he didn't care. He hasn't even called me like he said he would. I guess he never really cared at all to begin with. Now I got no one. Fuck, now I feel even worse. This shit's not working.

Saturday:

I wish I had something else to write about besides fucking therapy. I don't do much else these days. Go grocery shopping sometimes. They still let me do that. They are so fucked up.

They even tried to hide it from me when he sent the divorce papers. They said they'd planned on giving them to me when I was more stable. Like maybe when they take this fucking pain-in-the-ass machine off my ankle, maybe never. Anyway I don't want to focus on them. Last time I was writing I just made myself feel shittier. So now I'll just write about the things that make me happy. What was I writing about? Oh, that's right, the grocery store. I got some nice bath salts today. I think I might got try them out. I think that baths are the best medicine. They relax me so much. They work ten times better than writing this stupid pre-school diary, I'm 23 years old, for god sakes. Anyway at least now I have something to show her that I wrote so she'll get off my back.

Sunday:

I did some research after I learned in my psychology class about water therapy. It seems that baths have been used in therapy for a long time. One guy experimented with switching people between hot and cold water. It was supposed to make even the most crazy fuckers chill out. So when I was taking my afternoon bath earlier, I tried switching the water between hot and cold and running it over my toes. It was so nice. The different sensations distracted me from everything that was making me miserable, and for a little while, I felt like I had actually been content. For a while, I could forget about him. I even forgot about how I freaked and fucked up my life, got myself into this mess. I'm almost glad that the therapist isn't reading this shit. She'd probably take this bath idea to the bank and make millions.

Monday:

She thinks I'm making real good progress. I won't tell her anything about the baths. I'm up to three of them a day now, and I'm thinking of upping it to five. I just take a bath between every class and I'm okay for the next few hours. When I'm in the bath, I can just relax and let the

hot water loosen my muscles. I can feel completely at peace, safe. Safe from all the pain he caused me, safe from myself. I wish I had just done this before. I feel better and better. If I'm going to be addicted to anything in life, I think that baths are a wonderful thing. I wish I had something else to write about, but my life is pretty dull. When I'm not bathing, I'm typically not happy, and I don't really want to write about the thoughts I have then.

Friday:

Another discovery. I think I should be the therapist. I fell asleep in the bath. When I woke up at first I was a bit panicked, realizing I could have drowned, but I doubt I would have. The water was only deep enough so that I was submerged, but my face was exposed and I could breathe easily. If I had tried to roll over I believe I would have choked on water and woken up. Instead, I had the most incredible nap I have ever experienced in my entire life. I got up and felt like a different person. Like all my body parts were infused with the moisture that brings us life. It was indescribable. I didn't think about him for an entire hour after I woke up. I even raised my hand in class and made a comment. Everyone stared at me, though, so I'm not going to do that again. I thought if I could just try to act normal, people would accept me, but they all treat me like a freak no matter what I do.

Wednesday:

I have made it a point to take naps in the bath now, and it has been the best improvement I could have ever hoped for. I don't feel like dying anymore. I feel like there is something in my life to look forward to, a nice, relaxing nap in the bath. I use it to motivate me to get things done. I tell myself, if I can just do the dishes, pay this bill, whatever it is, then I can go take a bath. I have strangely lost my desire to tamper with the temperature. I also have developed the habit of taking cool baths. I used to take steaming hot baths, but now I find I'm more comfortable in

cooler water. You can stay in it longer without feeling uncomfortable. After a while, your body just kind of matches the temperature of the water and you feel like you are one with it. My therapist says she'll be able to give me a good review at my next court hearing. Maybe I can get this stupid anklet off sometime. I hope. I was hoping I could rust the thing with all my baths, but no dice so far. They make these things sturdy.

Sunday:

Something pretty scary happened. I turned over in the bath during one of my naps. I didn't wake up right away, either. I woke up and there was water sloshing through my lungs. I was lying on my side, and half my mouth was open to the water and half of it to the air, and I guess my lungs just sort of compensated. I coughed up a good amount of water. I thought for a while that I might drown. But now I feel okay. There's a difference, though, in my breathing now. When I move, I feel like there's still some sloshing around in there. I don't want to go to the hospital or anything, that's for sure. Hospital was what got me into this whole therapy mess. It would just make things worse for my court case, which is so far going alright. Anyway, it doesn't hurt or anything, and I can breathe alright, so I guess it's fine. They'd just probably make me stop taking my baths, and I just couldn't deal with that. I suppose if nothing gets worse than it's not a big deal. I would never dream of giving up my bath time. It is my time, my only time.

Thursday:

So I sleep in the bath all the time now. My lungs can handle the water just fine. I guess there was nothing to worry about after all. I have my court date in a week, and I think things might just go well for me this time around. These baths have done wonders for me. I feel an almost inhuman happiness. Well, I'm not sure if it's happiness, but it's not sadness, that's for sure. It's more like...contentment. Satisfaction. I even started going swimming in the lake on a

daily basis. I was always a swimmer, but never like this, never like I am now. I make sure to go for a morning swim and a night swim every day. With that and my five baths, I just might never leave the water again! Ha-ha, it's funny; my therapist was asking me the other day if I was using a new skin treatment. She said my skin was almost shining. I told her I had a secret cream. If she only read this she'd know it's just real moisture, from water. It makes my skin super soft and bright to the point where it's almost vibrant. I love it. I love being in the water. All this swimming is like a new way of life for me, one I could easily get used to.

Wednesday:

I know this sounds strange, but I have re-vamped my life and I love my new arrangement. I merged my bedroom with the bathroom so I can sleep in the tub. I have my alarm clock set up and my clothes hung up and everything. It's truly fantastic. I even did a nice tropical theme and it looks great. Some people might not accept this way of life, so I decided I'm just not going to tell anyone. I will, however, keep a true account of how this helps me rise out of the ashes of my depression. This could be a breakthrough for so many people. So simple! Just sleep in your tub! I could write a book, call it "Water Therapy" and make millions. People might not be ready for this just yet, but I swear, someday they will be. And what it does for you physically! I can hold my breath underwater for so much longer than I used to, and my skin looks amazing. It's always moist, never dries out, my complexion is perfect, and my body is in the best shape of its life from all the exercise I get swimming. Water was the answer all along. And him? I've almost forgotten him completely.

Thursday:

I made the most amazing advancement! I'm sure it's because I have been breathing in small volumes of water lately while napping in the tub. When I was on my morning swim, I was

swimming underwater for an extra-long time, and I miscalculated just how far down I was. I almost didn't make it to the surface. When I got close, I could no longer hold my breath anymore, and I inhaled some water. When I broke the surface, though, I did not feel as if I were choking. I wondered if I had simply drunk a gulp, until it occurred to me to try to breathe underwater, just a small breath. So I dove down and tried it. Incredibly, I was able to take several small breaths of water before having to return to the surface, almost tripling the amount of time I could spend underwater! I am now far beyond the world record. If I ever were to tell my secret, I could gain infinite amounts of fame. But for some reason, I don't want fame. It seems too complicated. I just want a simple life in the water. Oh, and by the way, my court date went well. My therapist actually recommended for them to set a date to have the anklet removed. She seems so childish and innocently ignorant to me now. She knows so little about curing depression. I pity her.

Monday:

I have been out swimming almost all day. I have been practicing the breathing underwater technique, and I've been getting even better at it. It is something else to be under there, where humans cannot touch you. It is an entirely different world. A better world. On a darker note, though, I have been having some problems. Nothing big, but I'm finding it difficult to concentrate on talking to people. I keep fading off, thinking about the water. The therapist went on for five minutes, and I never heard a word of what she said. And sometimes when people talk to me I can't understand them. It comes out all garbled, like it's a different language or something. This even happened to me a few times when I was paying attention and really trying to figure out what they were saying. I just don't want to talk to anyone anymore, not because I'm sad, but because I feel like it's not necessary.

Wednesday:

Now, sometimes when I take a deep breath of air I start coughing like crazy, and I need to not only drink water to feel better, but inhale some of it. It's almost like it's easier for me to breathe water than air nowadays. And my skin won't dry at all anymore, it stays wet and kind of slimy all the time. It also has these small lines in it, marking off different little sections that are extra shiny and almost look like the beginning of scales. I thought it was gross at first, but it seems to make me able to swim faster, so I really don't mind all that much. Things that used to worry me don't bother me anymore. Nothing really matters as long as it doesn't come between me and the water.

Friday:

I wish people would just leave me alone. I'm sick of writing in this book, I have found something to help me get through this. I can just swim. I don't have to think when I swim, I can just be myself. Now I can stay underwater so much longer, and it's like home under there. My therapist is all worried now. She thinks something's going on with me, but she's really the one with problems. She's the weak one.

Sunday

Now this communication thing has gotten worse. I try to hear people and what they're saying but it's really hard for me sometimes. It's actually getting harder to write. I don't know what's wrong with me. I just want to swim all the time. I'm sick of writing.

?

Well then I'm off. Goodbye to all of you. I have been cured. Water is the answer. You all figure it out when you're ready. If anyone wants to find me, you know where I'll be.

6/6/12

## “Jack and Jill”

Jack is so handsome. I watch him, his muscles rippling, his tanned skin giving off that wonderful scent of a man. Even though he’s only a junior like me, he already talks, acts, and smells like a full-grown man. He turns around, squinting in the sunlight, and reaches his hand out to me.

I am the luckiest girl in the world. I take his strong hand and he pulls me toward him, helping me up a difficult pile of rocks.

“Come on, the spring’s just up ahead!” he said, smiling. He throws the pail over his shoulder casually and strides forward. I follow him eagerly, like I always do. My dearest. My love. I have to smother these emotions so he doesn’t know just how much I feel for him. I don’t want to frighten him away.

I am so tired, hiking up this mountain at such a speed, but I struggle to keep up anyway. I’m not much of a hiker, so this mountain has been a challenge for me. But I don’t want to lose him. Finally, as we approach the crest I pause to catch my breath.

“See? Right there!” He points to a spring bubbling up from a crack in a rock. It pours down the side of the edge, sparkling. Jack swings the bucket off his shoulder and leans out over the edge to fill it up. He precariously hangs out over the cliff, balancing expertly.

I feel emotions well up within me. I need to tell him how I feel, I can’t stand it anymore. I feel like I’m about to burst. He’s so attractive in this moment, the sun shining on his shoulders. I feel myself beginning to blush, to shake. I have to do this. If I keep putting it off, I’ll never tell him how I feel, and he might go with some other girl. I try not to gasp for air, although I am out



of breath. I can't let him see my weakness. I can see tiny beads of sweat on the back of his neck. They catch the sunlight whenever he leans over. I want to kiss them.

I almost trip over a root, and he sees me and smiles. I smile back, awkwardly, trying my best to regain a ladylike composure. He is smiling, his shoulders glistening in the sun with sweat, filling his bucket with the spring water he claimed was so worth the climb. I try to focus on the crunch of the dry leaves underfoot as I approach him, the sharp smells of late summer, the buzzing of the cicadas. I try to focus on anything besides my breathless state. I feel dizzy but I force myself not to care. I look at him, and he looks like a bright and shining god before me. I feel like falling to my knees. I know I need to say something. I have to, before it might be too late.

“Jack?”

“Yeah, Jill?”

“I...I'm in love with you.”

He swings his head to look at me, sloshing the water unsteadily in the bucket. For a split second, I see a look in his eyes, and I am confused. Instead of a look of love, it is a look of panic. My heart sinks.

He slips. He loses his footing on the precipice. My eyes go wide. I didn't realize he was that close to the edge. Time seems to slow down as I watch him, grappling in midair of something, anything to grab onto. His feet scuttle in a series of sliding slips. He is trying to regain his footing on a mossy spot covered in water from the spring. I take this all in at once, and as my body screams at me to react, I watch him start to fall.

He is swinging his arms in big circles, and he seems to regain his balance. He leans into the rock, the water from the spring spilling over his chest and legs. He is laughing nervously.

“Oh, my god, Jack! I really thought you were going to fall!” I lunge toward him to give him a hand. I reach out to him. He smiles, looking tremendously relieved.

“I thought I was too, for a second there!” He takes a step toward me.

And then he falls.

I scream as he loses his balance. I try to grab his hand, but I miss it only by a few inches. He falls backward, down the perilous drop, still grappling for a grip. I keep screaming as I see him receding away, that same look of panic frozen on his face. He falls so fast, his body seems to get smaller, and then I see it bounce off another cliff far below, sending it flopping in an awkward roll down the remainder of the mountainside, sending up a cloud of dust.

I peer over the side where he fell, my scream petering out in my throat, still stinging. I don't know what to do. It all happened so incredibly fast. Everything is gone. My life is over as I know it. I suddenly want to die. I don't want to live without him. My mind reels. I know what I should do; I should go down there and get help. Maybe he's still alive, by some small chance. Maybe he can be saved.

But I know the truth. He couldn't have survived that. No one could have. He is done for. I think about going down the mountain, about living the rest of my life, alone, without him. A life without love. Would it be worth it? Suddenly a thought strikes me. We are reading “Romeo and Juliet” in class. What if we were to die together? It would be terribly romantic. My mind races, darting back and forth between this scenario and the one where I go back down the mountain to

live the rest of my life as a spinster. Like my bitter old aunt that everyone just wishes would die. I don't want to live like that. I think of Jack, envisioning his smiling face in my mind, his hand held out to me. I can't live without that without him. How could any person live without that kind of love, having tasted it?

As I peer down in the place where he fell, I realize, my life is simply not worth living without him. Before I have too much time to think about it, I step over to the edge of the cliff. The water from the spring trickles down the back of my leg. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. All I think about is him, being with him. Then I step out, over the air.

I feel free. I am falling, free and easy. The wind sails by my ears, rushing delightfully. I spread apart my fingers as I fall, feeling the sensation of it fully. My head is tilted back; I see the sun, the clouds above. It is wonderful.

And then I hit. The jolt completely jars me out of my elation, and I feel a sudden rush of intense pain all over. I scream as my body ricochets off the cliff side, and I am falling again, this time, not free, but smashing, rolling, smashing violently again, rolling some more, all dappled by short flights through the air. I feel a warm liquid pouring over my face, through my eye. All I feel inside is screaming pain, urgent pain, the kind of pain that blocks out everything else, so it is your only focus. I feel my body rolling now, flopping over grinding broken bones, slowing to a stop. I gasp for air, but my lungs feel like they are not working. Then, darkness takes over.

I awake to a groan. It is not mine. The first thing I am aware of is pain. I open my eyes, but I can only see out of one of them. The other is just pain. I try to sit up, but I can't. My body is completely battered, broken. I hear the groan again. This time it is more recognizable. It's Jack.

“Jack?” I try to say. Only a gurgling sound comes out. I try again. This time, I manage to get out something that sounds like “ack.”

“Jill? Is that you?” He groans. “Jill, I need help. I hit my head pretty hard, and I think my legs are broken.”

I let out a sigh. He can’t see me. “Jack....I ....fell.”

“Jill? What did you say?”

“I fell. Fell off da mountain.” My jaw feels loose. I think it’s broken.

“You fell? Are you alright?” He sounds panicked.

I feel a mixture of elation that he cares about my well-being and a mixture of weakness that compels me to just give up. The pain is taking over again. I feel myself blacking out.

“I jumed.” I tell him.

“You WHAT?”

“I jum...”

“I heard you! Why would you do such a thing?”

“I dunno... pwoally cuz.....cuz.... I...”

“Because you love me? Well, what a load of good love has done! Now we’ll both die here, with no one to come to help us!” he shouts. I think he might be angry. The he groans. “I feel so dizzy,” he says.

As my consciousness slips away, I realize he's right. It will probably take him a lot longer to die, too, since he seems like he's a lot less injured than I am. No one knows where we are; we came here today on a whim. I feel a rush of anger that keeps me awake for a few more seconds. I'm angry because we're both going to die, and we can't do anything about it. I'm angry because I told Jack finally how I feel, and this is the result. But most of all, I'm angry because he's angry at me for what I did, which was for him.

"Aleast I din drag you up a mountain fo a pale a water," I retort.

"What?!? You wanted to come! You acted excited!"

"To hike a mountain fo a pail a water?"

There is a silence.

"Jack, I'm sowwy," I say, fighting to stay awake myself.

"Jack?"

"JACK?"

I am alone now. I wait for the darkness to come again, but it doesn't. I wonder if this is my punishment for the stupid choices I've made. I wait for what seems like forever. Occasionally I call out to Jack, to see if he's awake, alive, anything. I get no responses.

After a while, it starts getting dark. I wish I had never jumped. I could have saved Jack, and I wouldn't be stuck here now, waiting for death. I try to move again, but any attempt just creates more pain.

Then I hear it. A rustling in the bushes in the distance. I try to call out, but only an indecipherable sound escapes my throat. Still, whoever it was must have heard me, because the rustling seems to pause, then come closer. I make more sounds, pleas for help. Maybe we can still be saved, both of us. Maybe it's not too late. I call out over and over, and the footsteps come closer, shuffling through the underbrush. I feel like I'm ready to cry with happiness. At least I know that I won't die here, slowly and painfully.

Whoever it is that is coming to save me emerges from the woods. Thank god, this nightmare will be over soon. I want to yell to Jack. "Someone has found us! Someone has come to help us!" With tears in my eyes, I look up at my savior.

He is a wolf.

11/9/12

### "Hair"

It all began when I hit puberty. As if being an adolescent Italian girl in an all-American school full of inbred rednecks wasn't difficult enough, I had to be hairy, too. My mother chastened me for getting out the tweezers before the ripe old age of eighteen when she had started plucking her eyebrows, but it was nothin' doin'. I was a hairy monster, and there was nothing I could do but try my best to beat all that hair down.

Now, it's been a full year since I got my period, a full three years since I started growing hair anywhere besides on my head, and it's still coming. I've thought of everything. I've tried electrolysis, paying my way through it with my caddy job, but that didn't work. I tried waxing,

hair removal crèmes, cutting it, plucking it; nothing seems to slow it down. It seems like I'm at it all the damn time. I'm at it now, in fact, with the scissors this time, since my patience is low today.

“Gertrude!”

“What is it, Mother?”

“Are you sitting in front of that damn mirror still? I swear to God, you spend half the day sitting there looking at yourself! Get your ass down here and eat your dinner!”

“I'm not hungry!” I shouted.

“Remember! You have to take your sister to the dance tonight!”

I groaned, and leaned my head against the cold hard mirror's surface. I almost forgot I had promised my sister I'd take her to the dance. I rarely went out in public these days, ever since I was deemed “the gorilla” at school. I only went out sometimes with my best friend, Kat, and only to places where people didn't stare at me.

I finished butchering my eyebrows into a reasonable state and cleaned up all the hair that had fallen to the floor. I was so tired of living like this. I wished it would just stop. I was pretty well aware that I would never find a boyfriend, much less even be able to make friends the way I was. I was like the bearded lady at the circus, only my beard was my eyebrows. They were the worst. I could shave off my arm hair, my leg hair, all my other hair, and although there was a lot of it, it didn't grow back anywhere near as quickly as my eyebrows did. I had to chop them down at least twice per day. It was what coined my beloved nickname; it was what made me crazy. I

could deal with it, if it weren't for these eyebrows. They grew so fast that I could almost watch them, and indeed I did in dread during many long classes at school.

I threw on a decent outfit, not really caring what I wore, and walked downstairs. My mother was helping my sister put on eyeliner for her first time. She was ten, which I thought was too young anyway to be going to a dance, but Mom said that was why I was going. The kitchen still smelled of meat loaf and macaroni and cheese, most of the dishes were dirty in the sink. I suppose she didn't find it important enough to save me any. I didn't really care.

"You ready, or what?" I asked Lola, my sister.

"Yeah! Let's go dance!" She pumped her little fists in the air. She was wearing a cute multi-colored dress, with matching multi-colored socks.

"Let's go get this over with," I said.

When we got to the dance it was almost dark already. There were all kinds of kids mulling about the school, kids of all ages. I saw some of the kids who called me "the gorilla" all the time, and I tried my best to avoid them. It was a school-to-school dance, which meant there were kids there from the school in the next town over, so there were a lot of kids I didn't know.

It took my sister about three minutes to find all her other overly-enthusiastic little friends, and they all ran off giggling together. I told her to meet me at the big clock out in front of the school at nine, when the dance ended. Then I wandered around.

I did what every smart kid without a date does at a dance, and I asked everyone I saw for a dollar. With kids in such high spirits, almost everyone was willing to spare a dollar. They all pitied me anyway, at least the ones I dared approach. I even tried asking some random guy I had



never met before for a dance, but he just shook his head vigorously and took off into the crowd. I had made almost thirty bucks and was trying hard to fight off depression when it happened.

I saw him.

At first, I thought he was a chaperone, or a teacher, but he was really very young, just as young as me. It was his mustache that made him look older. It was an enormous mustache, and his dark hair accentuated its beauty. It was curled up at the tips, twirled delightfully, and full, full as an animal pelt hanging from his upper lip. It was the most extraordinary thing I had ever seen on a boy my age. I was instantly bewitched by him.

I didn't realize it until it was too late, but I had been walking toward him, and was almost toe-to-toe with him when I asked him his name.

"My name's Charlie," he said. "What's yours?"

"Gertrude," I said as if in a dream.

I pretended not to be impressed with his mustache. I didn't mention it once. He kept looking at me funny like he was waiting for me to say something about it but I never did. We walked around the halls and talked. He was from the other school, which was why I'd never seen him before. I thought we were really hitting it off, and then some other girl came up to him, a pretty blonde girl, with two friends in tow, all of them wanting to stroke his mustache. They all thought it was fake. He became distracted and forgot I was even there. In a state of disappointment, I wandered on.

I kept seeing him, though, across the room, or even from a longer distance away. That mustache was so noticeable, I couldn't get it out of my head.

That night, after I'd brought my sister home, while I was lying in bed, stewing in my anger, I made a decision. I decided that I was done with trying to suck up to boys. They weren't worth it. I was just going to be myself and let things go the way they wanted to go. And I vowed to stop trimming my eyebrows.

My mother thought I had lost my mind. She refused to recognize the freakish things that were happening to me and concentrated on harping me about tweezing more regularly. She seemed almost scared of me after a while when I refused, and she pretty much avoided me as much as she could after that. My family refused to recognize me anymore. It was as if I became a ghost in my own house.

Needless to say, I went from being "the gorilla" to being "the thing." My eyebrows grew and grew, into two shaggy, long strips, and then it just kept right on growing. After a while I was able to put it up into my ponytail and so I was able to see, something I'd dearly missed doing for nearly the past year of my life. Human interest stories were written about me and put in the local newspapers. One newspaper reporter came over and really ticked off my mother.

"So where else does it grow?" he'd asked, one eyebrow lifted in curiosity.

"Um," was my only answer. I felt incredibly vulnerable. My mother was just bringing in tea for the two of us (always keeping up appearances when she was in the public eye,) and she was arrested immediately by my look, by the way I sat, straight and taught.

"What's going on in here?" she asked.

"I was just asking your daughter about her... disorder. Does it only affect her eyebrows, or is it... all of her hair?"

Despite his carefully chosen words, my mother's instincts kicked in and she immediately understood.

"You get the hell away from my daughter and out of this house, right now," she said flatly, her fists clenched. I felt a rush of pride. Maybe I was wrong about her, maybe she did still care about me.

That was the end of the interviews, although I did allow myself one final public appearance – I was on a talk show for having been the top donor of hair to cancer patients. That was the first time I felt proud rather than ashamed of my problem.

"Every day, thirteen real-hair wigs are made and donated to cancer patients, all of them from your head. How does that feel?" That was the opening question. I didn't know how to answer at the time. I just smiled. That memory helped me later when I was in the depths of my despair, when I thought about doing things like pouring toxic waste all over my eyebrows. Scientists who specialized in hair restoration came to try to interview me, but my mother recognized how run-down I was feeling, and she never let them in. There was a boundless supply of attention I was getting that I didn't want, so I became a bit of a recluse.

I stayed home most days watching television, taking anti-depressants, and playing solitaire. I became used to being alone, and after a while I preferred it. My mother slowly became used to my freakishness, and she became something of a mother again. I might have gone crazy with loneliness if it weren't for her and my sister. I wished I had someone to talk to, but no one would ever want to be friends with a freak like me, so I hid away, and the weeks slowly turned into months.

One evening near suppertime, as I was dwelling in a pool of misery in front of the television, I saw an ad for a restaurant I used to love, a pizza place called Buggy's. I hadn't been there in almost a year since I had taken to solitude. I had been finding a lot of comfort in food lately, and I had gained some weight. Buggy's was only a few blocks away; I had walked there many times. It was so close. I really didn't want to go out, but I really wanted that pizza. And something in me was screaming with the cabin fever that had built up over the past several months during my reclusion. It was time for me to go back out into the world, despite how cruel it could be. So I got up, put on my deepest hooded sweatshirt, and walked out the door and down the road.

The walk was actually very nice; it was the first time I'd been out in so long that it was a surprisingly refreshing experience. By the time I got to Buggy's, I was in pretty high spirits. I walked through the parking lot, already able to smell the glorious scent of the roasting bread and cheese and pepperonis. I was relieved to see there was only one other car in the parking lot. As I walked by, I glanced at it. In the passenger seat was a boy leaning back in his chair, crying. I recognized him at once. It was Charlie, the boy from the dance. He was leaning too far back for me to see his mustache. I tried to walk by quickly, so as not to embarrass him, but I felt his eyes on my back as I walked in the store. I felt a little bad for him, wondering why he was crying, but then I quickly checked myself. He'd been a total jerk to me at the dance, acting just like my parents – like I didn't exist.

I tried to focus on the pizza menu in front of me, but I kept wondering about him, back there behind me, watching me through the plate glass windows. An old woman ordered a pizza in front of me. I wondered if she was Charlie's grandmother or something. She turned and smiled at me.

Behind me the door chimed. I turned and saw something I would have never expected. There was Charlie, standing there in front of the door, and gathered up in his arms were massive piles of hair, all of it pouring down like a waterfall from under his nose. His mustache was insanely out of control. I stared at him.

“Oh, my God, what is THAT?” the girl behind the counter gasped.

“Charlie! Get back in the car! What do you think you’re doing?” the old woman shouted at him.

“Are you..... are you that girl from the dance?” he asked me, ignoring both of them.

I was shocked. How could he have possibly recognized me? It had been over a year!

“Yes,” was all I could think of to say.

He smiled, or at least I think he did, I could see it in his eyes if not his mouth, which was completely hidden by hair. He even talked in a muffled manner.

“I’ve been trying to track you down.” He blushed visibly. “I heard we had something in common.”

Now it was my turn to smile. I threw back my hood, no longer caring what other people thought. I even went as far as to wring my hairband out of my hair so all my eyebrow hair fell around my face. It was slightly longer than my own long hair, since I had cut it just this morning. If his mustache was growing at the same rate as my eyebrows, I imagined he hadn’t cut his in at least a few days.

The old lady had put a hand over her head and was sitting down at a nearby table. I suppose she might have been about to faint. The girl behind the counter just stared, her mouth hanging open like in a cartoon. Charlie was laughing, a loud, boisterous laugh, and it was good to hear a human's voice again, someone who was actually interacting with me, paying attention to me, and enjoying themselves. I didn't even care if he was laughing at me, because I could tell he was in the same boat. In fact, a warm feeling began to spread through me, and I suddenly broke out in laughter as well. It felt good to laugh again.

Charlie held out his hand to me. "Gertrude, right? They're beautiful, your eyebrows. I can just tell from the way they look. Feel this." He held out a handful of mustache to me. I felt it.

"It's all rough and scratchy," I said, amazed and thrilled.

"I know, and yours looks so soft! I love how they fall so elegantly down the sides of your face! It makes you look....exotic."

I'd never thought of myself that way before. The word "exotic" sounded so much more appealing than the word "freak," which was what I had gotten so used to.

"Thank you," I said. I was still too dumbfounded to form much of a conversation. But I could tell he wanted to talk.

"Do you....want to go for a walk or something?" he asked, looking suddenly timid.

I looked over at the old woman, who was steadily nodding at me. She looked like she had gotten over her initial shock and she had the hint of a smile on her face.

"You two go ahead, I'll be here," she said.

I looked back at Charlie and gave him a nod and a smile. The funny thing is, if either of us had continued to keep our hair very closely cut, we never would have found each other. I had completely forgotten my desire to eat pizza. He fumbled, transferring all of his hair from both arms into one, and then he gave me his free arm.

I took it, and we walked out the door together.

1/17/13

### “Revenge”

He grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me toward him. He was strong. He was big, I was small. His grip on my arm was so tight that it hurt; I tried not to cry out. I didn't want him to see my weakness. He pulled me right up to his piercing blue eyes and smiled.

“We're going to have a great life together,” he said softly, in his slithering voice, flashing those huge, white teeth.

I shuddered. I looked at him straight and said nothing. I waited until he released my arm. Then I turned, pacing myself carefully, trying not to run, and walked into my room, shutting the door behind me. Not slamming, shutting it quietly.

I sat down on my bed and buried my face in my hands. I missed Mother. How could she have left me with this monster? How could she have married such a man? In the end, she had been weak all along. After Dad died, she just gave up. She just wanted someone to do all the work, all the thinking, all the living for her. It was just too damn convenient that she met him just as she began getting sick. And all that money she'd been saving for school for me... well, it was

pointless to dwell in so much self-pity. I rose from the bed and sat down at my desk. I selected a book from the shelf before me, tucking my auburn hair behind my ears; I took leave of the world for a while.

He knocked on the door not half an hour later. Then he came in. Just like that. I could have been changing. He didn't care. He was the control now.

"We're going out in an hour. Put this on." He threw something onto the bed. It looked like a handful of lace at first. I stared. "It's time you learn business." He smiled, adjusting his black tie. I hated that he was always wearing a suit. Mom had thought it was romantic, I just thought it made him look like a swindler.

"What is that?" I asked, putting down my book and getting up.

"It's your outfit," he said, a twinge of anger in his voice. He left the room and shut the door behind himself in one fluid motion.

I stared at the thing on my bed. It was some kind of skimpy piece of lingerie. This was wrong. He was crossing the line. It hadn't been a month since her funeral, and now he was going after me. I felt suddenly sick. I ran across the room to the phone by my bed. I could just call the cops on him; he was coming on to a minor, for God sakes. I picked up the phone, but to my horror, the line was dead.

I looked around the room. This was not good. Our apartment was on the ninth floor. There was no escaping out the window. I looked at the lace thing on the bed again in panic. I wasn't really going to have to put that on, was I? I was afraid of what he would do if I didn't. It



wouldn't be the first time he'd laid a violent hand on me. What I truly feared, though, was not his fists. It was something much worse.

I went through my drawers of my desk. There was an old letter opener, a miniature one that my mother had given me a long time ago, a gift from her own mother. It had a bone handle and it was carved like the face of a wolf. I grasped it tight, holding it against my chest, sobbing in silence.

When he came in, I was ready. I had wrapped myself in my father's old duster to cover myself. I looked like a whore underneath.

He laughed. "Let's see."

I let the coat drape open, feeling sick as he watched my seventeen-year-old body that barely filled the lingerie. He came toward me, slipping the coat off my shoulders onto the floor. His hand grazed just below my shoulder, near my breast. I wanted to scream. I tried not to tear away. He motioned for me to turn in a circle. I did. He watched, smiling.

"Perfect," he said. "Come on, let's go."

I grabbed up the duster again, wrapping myself up. Then I followed, clutching the small hard lump in my pocket. I slipped it into my winter boot as we descended the stairs. I had a feeling he would be making me take the coat off again later.

He walked with purpose. The cracked walls and the fluorescent lights illuminated an animated world of graffiti before us. At the bottom of the stairwell, the lights were flickering as always. It made him seem like a beast, like a monster, blinking in and out of existence. I wished the lights would go out and he would just disappear. I stopped at the front door.

“What?” His eyes bore into me.

“I’m not going out there.” I said. “Not like this.”

He laughed, flashing those big white teeth. There was something in his eyes, though, that did not reflect his laughter. Grabbing me by the throat, he squeezed tight. My eyes went wide. I should have known better than to talk back to him like that. I should’ve known.

He shoved me against the wall and looked at me, his head slightly cocked. He was thinking about what to do next. He pulled me forward again and then slammed me back again, as if it was a casual motion that jogged his thought process. Suddenly his slimy lips were pressed hard against mine. I made a small noise, and held still. He pushed his mouth deeper, shoving and probing his way in with his tongue. A tear slid down my cheek, transferring to his own face. It felt like he was trying to get in through my mouth. He pushed deeper, sucking my own tongue out from where it was pulled back. Then he bit.

I tried to scream and shoved him away from me. Blood poured from my mouth, down my lip. I spat out a wad of it onto the floor where it fell with a thick splat. My tongue felt broken, I wasn’t sure if I could talk.

He stood aside, like a perfect gentlemen, letting me pass.

“After you, Miss Priss,” he snarled, grinning wide and bloody.

I stepped outside. I wrapped the duster around me as tightly as I could. I could feel him behind me; I could hear his ragged breath. I marched, like a slave, for several blocks, not looking back, but not daring to run.

Finally we reached an old building. It seemed condemned, but I could see lights, movement in some of the dirty windowpanes. He dragged me in by my arm. I submitted, still swallowing blood.

We went inside and he shoved me toward a stairwell. I marched. When we got to what seemed like the fourth or fifth floor, he opened a door, and light flooded the stairwell.

Here was a place where he could feel at home. There were other women here, several of them around my age, mulling about. There were two other men, both of them with the same look as he had – that fake bureaucratic look that went over so well with the cops. They didn't look like the stereotypical pimps I was used to seeing in the movies. These were the real thing, and the real thing had to blend in.

“Here's new flesh!” he declared, shoving me toward the men. “Take off that jacket,” he told me.

I obeyed. The two men, one of which was smoking a thin cigar, looked me over. The one without the cigar whistled. I looked around nervously. He was motioning for me to spin again. I did. The man with the cigar removed it from his mouth.

“I like her ass,” he said. “I'll give you forty for her.”

He laughed. “What, you mean for the hour? Sorry, pal, this one's a virgin. She'll be taking in at least a grand the first few times. If we let the chinks have at first, we might be able to fake it longer.”

The man without the cigar was tittering. From the corner, I noticed a girl who was staring at me sidelong. She was pretending to be looking at her nails, but she was watching me. She was

dressed in a similar outfit, only she had a long skirt on, one with big slits cut up to her waist. She was beautiful and unbearably thin, but something about the way she held herself seemed older, experienced. The other girls in the room looked more like me – they had expressions that revealed that they were broken inside, that all they knew was submission.

“We’ve got a group coming in now,” the cigar man muttered. “Let’s see how well your prices go over with them.”

I was shoved to the side while they huddled together and began speaking in hushed tones. I wondered what they could possibly be speaking of that they didn’t want us to hear.

“What’s your name, honey?” The woman with the slit skirt had materialized beside me.

“Emma,” I said, my voice sounding muffled from my now swollen tongue. A drop of blood escaped my lips and I immediately wiped it away.

“Aw, honey. He got you good, didn’t he?” she said. Her voice was low, and soothing. It was so low it was quieter than a whisper.

I nodded, holding back a sob.

“Come fly away with me, little bird,” she said, and she walked to the window.

At first I thought I had misheard her. But I followed anyway. The men paid no attention.

We looked out the window together. “See that?” She pointed ever so slightly with the top of her little finger. Below us, several stories down, was an awning. I hadn’t noticed it before. She looked at me and winked, throwing open the window with a strong arm.

That got the attention of the men. They looked over at us.

“Hey, what’s going on over there?” the man without the cigar said. I looked back at the woman, but she was already halfway out the window. She slipped out gracefully onto a narrow ledge outside the building. Then she reached out her hand for me to grasp.

I had to think fast. I looked over at him, and he was striding over toward me, fast. He looked mad. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to die. I wanted to live – just not like this. Not like this.

I crawled after her. She pulled me out onto the ledge just as he reached the window. He put his hands on the sill and leaned out just as she slammed it down, crushing his fingers. I heard him shriek. It made me shudder, that anger. But then I was in her arms, and she smelled of jasmine and honeysuckle, and I felt like I was going to faint....

“Fly!” she said low in my ear, and she jumped, and I jumped, our hands clasped together tight.

I felt like I was in a dream, a falling dream, one where your stomach drops out from under you. I screamed, and still we were falling when I finished screaming.

Then we hit. It wasn’t as painful as I expected it to be. We bounced upward, off the awning, and fell with a jarring thunk onto the sidewalk. I opened my eyes to face Abraham Lincoln, gone green. His face bore down with determination, and for a moment I thought he was speaking to me.

“Get up. Get up, Emma. Get up,” he said. But then I realized it was her. I got up and Lincoln shrunk away from me, a penny half buried in the grime. I stumbled to my feet, and I could feel her hand on my back.

“Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” She smiled. “Come on; let’s get out of here, quick.” She yanked me, and we were running, running fast. I could hear shouts of men behind us for what seemed like hours. I was breathing hard; my heart was thumping in my ears. I wasn’t dead. I was alive, and what’s more, I had flown.

We darted through several dark alleyways, through a park dappled with sleeping bums, and across a painfully well-lit parking lot. Finally, we reached a door. She slid up to it and tapped on it, several light taps. It opened, and we slipped inside.

There were several other girls there, but these girls were dressed in snug, smart clothes. One of them was sitting on a couch, a book beside her that she had apparently just put down. Another was standing before a desk, strewn with paperwork. A girl with flowing brightly-colored clothes stood before us. She had been the one that let us in. She embraced me.

“My goodness, you poor thing! Let me get you some clothes.” She scurried into a back room. The woman with me looked at me with a soft smile. It was then that it occurred to me that I had left my father’s duster behind. I wanted to cry, but I held back. It was just a thing, after all.

“You made it, kid. That was pretty good. None of the others would have gone for it. I knew I saw something in your eye.”

“Who are you?” I asked her.

“Name’s Harriet. And this is what we call ‘the league.’ It’s a place for girls like you, a place where you can be safe from men like....that.”

The girl who stood by the desk came over and led me to the couch, where the other girl had already gone back to reading. She sat me down, and rubbed my back. It felt good.

“I’m Sadie,” she said. “My goodness, you are a young one! And this is Nadia. Don’t be offended by her and her books. She went through a lot, and I don’t blame her for wanting to escape like that. Can I get you some soup? How about a warm cup of tea?”

“Um, yes, please,” I stuttered, realizing I was starving. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten. Sadie scurried off through a door just as the brightly dressed girl returned with a big fuzzy robe. They giggled when they ran into each other in the doorway. They acted like schoolgirls, although they all seemed to be in their twenties. The girl came up to me and I stood. I looked down at myself and felt sick.

“You can take it off if you want, dear. We’re all girls here,” she said softly.

I didn’t hesitate. I ripped the dirty piece of lingerie off, and stood there naked for a moment, breathing, feeling free, before I took the robe from the girl’s arms and wrapped it around me. It was soft and warm and clean. It felt good, like pure comfort.

“I’m Kat.” The girl smiled. “And I see you’ve met the others already. You just sit down and make yourself comfortable, darling. You’ve had a long night.”

“We flew,” I said weakly.

The girls all glared at Harriet, who backed up against a wall, laughing. “I’m sorry! It’s really the only way to get a girl out of that place. It worked with you, Kat, remember?” She held up her hands in mock defense.

“Harriet! Why do you have to be so dangerous? You could have killed her, or yourself!”  
Kat was scolding.

“I don’t know, I kind of think she enjoyed it.” Harriet laughed, looking at me. “Right, Emma?”

“I, I never flew before,” was all I could think of to say. I looked over at Nadia. She was deep in her book, paying no attention. Sadie came back into the room with tea and chicken soup. She handed it to me and smiled as she watched me eat ravenously.

“At least someone enjoys my cooking!” she laughed.

I stopped eating for a moment. I realized my manners. “I’m sorry.” I said. “Thank you so much for the food.”

“Don’t mention it. Just eat, and rest. You’re safe here,” Kat said, patting my hand.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“It’s a safe house. We call it “the league” because that’s our little organization. After a while, if you want, you can join us. It will take some preparation, but most girls who come here want to help.”

“Help do what?”

“To get girls like you out of situations like yours. And to bring them here, where it’s safe,” Kat said, smiling.

“And then... do they just hide here?”

“Some of them do, some of them go on their way, and some of them, like Harriet here, become soldiers. They go back out, get themselves caught, and they get back in the game, just to find other girls like you who need help.”



“Soldiers,” I said softly to myself. I liked the way that sounded.

Harriet was pouring herself a glass of red wine. She winked at me. “I’m the air force.” She laughed.

Time went by. I became well again, physically and psychologically. The girls took care of me, and after a while, I began taking care of myself. I got a job waitressing, making a good amount of money, too. I lived in the apartment with the other girls. There were a few girls who were brought in. A couple of them stayed for a while, then went on their way. One of them went back to her pimp. It was like a tragedy for the girls when they lost her. I didn’t understand why she went back, and in this way I learned how some women enjoyed helplessness, because it was all they knew. In all the time I lived there, though, he never left my mind. The girls didn’t believe in revenge. They claimed they were only there to help people. And not just women. One day they brought back a young boy, who was only eight. He stayed, ever thankful to them. He was always cleaning, always helping out as much as he could. I shuddered to think about what he had been through.

It had been two months since I had flown when I spoke to Harriet about my plan. She was the only one who I knew would understand. I wanted my father’s duster back.

We set out in the night, when all the other girls were asleep. We were both aware that they would never approve. We made our way back to my old neighborhood, where I could see visions of my mother, frightened and nervous, her hands fumbling, walking the streets. She was always looking for something, that ghost of hers, and I wondered if she’d ever find it.

My fear grew as we reached the building where I used to live. Harriet held my hand tight. It was warm and strong, and gave me hope. We walked inside, through that terrible place under

the flickering light where he had nearly bitten off my tongue. I froze, but she pulled me forward. We walked up the stairs quietly, nearly on tip-toe. When we reached the correct landing, I hesitated, but she pushed me from behind, and I jolted forward. The door was covered in graffiti. Mother had always scrubbed it clean when she was around, but she wasn't around anymore.

I tried the door. It was open. I slowly swung it back, and that was when I heard the sounds.

It was the sounds of a young girl, crying. There were muted, muffled screams. They came from his bedroom. He had some other girl in there. I cringed. I wanted to curl up and die, right there. I didn't want to see this. Now I realized why so few of the girls chose to become soldiers.

Harriet charged past me and ripped open the bedroom door, furious. What petrified me into stone fueled her into action. He turned and let out a shout of surprise when he saw her. She was even younger than me, and dressed up in a Catholic schoolgirl outfit that was dirty and torn. She was tearstained and bloody in several places. She took one look at me and cried out, and then she ran to me, and threw her arms around me. She knew we were there to help her, to stop him. It was in our eyes.

Harriet was on top of him, punching him in the face over and over. He tried to throw her off, but she dug her nails into his eyes. He let out a scream of agony, a sound that made me almost faint it was so frightening. He fell on the floor, blood and fluid leaking from where his eyes had been. Harriet calmly walked over to the sink and began washing her hands.

"He's all yours," she said in her low voice.

I took out the letter opener, the one my mother had given me. The young girl looked at it. She touched it lightly, and then detached herself from my embrace. She stood back, her eyes wide.

I walked up to him. Each step that I took filled me with power, with rage. I thought of all of the things he had done, first to my mother, and then to me and the girl. He was on his hands and knees on the floor. I stepped on his back and bore my weight down on him, until he lay flat. He was whimpering, crying, begging. He was apologizing, asking for forgiveness. Asking for God and Jesus to forgive him.

“Do you remember me?” I asked.

He looked around, his mutilated eyes seeing nothing. “Emma?” he croaked.

“That’s right.” I leaned down and put the dull blade of the letter opener to his throat. I had taken the time to sharpen it during my stay at ‘the league’ to the point where it could slice through a piece of paper held loosely in one hand. I knew it was the right thing to do, but I hesitated. I looked up at the young girl, who was watching, horrified. Harriet was watching too, but she was calm. She nodded at me in understanding.

I wanted him to die. But I didn’t want to kill him. It was so simple, yet so complex. I felt like screaming, like jumping out the window and flying away like I had done before. But I knew there was no awning below to break my fall. I gathered my strength together.

He was laughing. The laugh of a madman. “You can’t do it! You always were weak!” he cackled, barely able to breathe. Harriet saw the change in my expression. She strolled over and sat on his legs, holding his arms pinned for me. She was strong, and I was thankful.

I flipped him over. He was wearing only a pair of boxers and a sleeveless shirt, so it only took me a moment to fish his manhood out. He gasped. I grabbed him hard and pulled as he screamed, and sawed through with the letter opener. It wasn't easy. I expected to have it done in a moment, but the blade, though sharp, was not serrated, so I had to pierce through it several times in order to completely dislodge it from his body. The shrieking in the background was piercingly loud, but I could barely hear it. I was focused in on my task, and I completed it to the end. The young girl watched in stunned silence. Harriet smiled.

When it was done, I stood up. He could live now if he wanted to. He was harmless now. I walked over to the sink and washed off the letter opener, when something caught my eye. It was the duster. It had been shoved into a closet, but the arm poked through. I went and got it, and put it around me. I took my sister by the hand and led her out of there. Harriet walked beside me.

"I'm proud of you, kid," she said, patting my back. "You make a good soldier. A new kind of soldier." She smiled. "Let's not tell the other girls about this, though. I get why they don't like people doing what you just did. They just want to end the violence. But sometimes, I think revenge is completely justified."

"You're a soldier?" The young girl asked me, not quite understanding.

"Yes," I answered. "I am."

1/19/13

"The Pills"

What I am about to tell you is true. It actually happened. I decided to call this a “fictional” story only to protect myself and my loved ones from the potential consequences. You may wonder what I am talking about. Let me explain.

Quite recently, I found myself involved in a certain...situation. I was standing on a bridge, in a city, late at night. It could have been any bridge that was high enough so that if you fell, or you were, say, pushed, off that bridge, there would be no hope for survival. No hope even for an open casket funeral. Let’s just leave it at “no hope.” It could have been any city, one with thugs, one with no place to turn when you needed money. And finally, it could have been any night. Perhaps it was last night. I really can’t get into these kinds of details.

I stood with my back against the railing, and I wasn’t alone. There were three other men there besides me, all of them with the benefit of experience in doing this sort of thing. They didn’t just have experience behind them, they also had muscle.

“Guys, please, be reasonable,” I pleaded. “I got the wife and baby at home, you know. You really can’t be thinking of doing this, can you? George? Ted? Bill?”

None of them seemed to feel much like responding. I looked down at the drop below me, gripping the rail tight. My hands were sweaty; they slid over the cool metal without getting a grip. I could smell the chew in Bill’s mouth.

“Guys, you know I’m good for the money, huh? Just give me another day; I can have it for you by tomorrow, no problem. I got a guy, a cousin I can ask for a loan...”

I was running out of things to say. My breath came ragged in the night, making plumes of smoke that masked my face. I thought about Beatrice at home with the baby, bathing her in the

sink, getting her little jammies on. I couldn't die here, not tonight, not like this. I had too much to live for.

George took a step forward. I tried to take a step back, but I was already against the railing. There was nowhere for me to go. I looked at my watch. I had three minutes. I couldn't even try it until three minutes went by. That's what the guy had said. The guy with the big scar down his face. The guy who wore the long duster jacket. I was beginning to wonder if it was real or not. Sure, the first time had worked well enough. But how could I be sure this guy wasn't a quack? It could have been a one-time thing. I don't know. All I knew was that I had to keep stalling a little while longer.

"George! Remember that time I found your boy in the park?" George stopped, listening. "He was so out of his gourd he didn't know which way was up! Remember? I was the one who got him hooked up with that doctor, so he wouldn't have to get kicked out of school. The kid would've OD'd without my help! Now, George, you think this is a good way to repay a friend, now? I am your friend, aren't I, George? And Bill! You remember that time I shook up that kid who'd broken into your bar? You remember his face?" I laughed loudly. "And Ted, you remember all those nights you got smashed and I drove you home? I was always looking out for you guys, I was!"

All three of them took a step toward me. George picked me up by the collar of my shirt. My legs flailed as I tried to grip the railing and lost hold. I found myself suspended in the air, only the stars above me and the depths below me for companionship. I gasped in fear. I didn't want to die. Not here, not like this...

I kicked hard and sent George flying. He dropped me immediately and his body was thrown like a small stone across the street and against the railing on the opposite side of the bridge. His body hitting the metal made a sickening “twang” and then he slumped to the ground. The railing where he had hit was bent.

The other men stared in awe. They looked at me. I got up and dusted myself off. Then I dealt Bill a handsome left hook to the jaw.

His jaw actually came off. The lower portion of it made a grotesque ripping sound and went flying; hitting Ted in the face and knocking him clean off his feet. What was left was Bill, screaming, out of the biggest most endless hole of a mouth you’d ever seen. And the blood! It was everywhere, spilling out like a flood. Bill’s eyes were practically popping out of his head. Ted and George were getting to their feet, wavering. They all ran.

And that was the last I saw of the boys. They stopped bothering me about my debts after that. But it wasn’t the last I saw of my back-alley doc. I went back there, and I bought up the whole stash. When I tried to go back the next day, he was gone. He’d been ranting about the government men who were after him for stealing the pills from some lab; I thought the guy was just a schizoid until I found out how well the shit worked. Now I believe he was telling the truth, and he either had to move on or those government men did finally catch up with him. Either way, he’s gone. And I have them. A bottle of fifty. The guy had asked me to try to put them to good use. He was a mysterious one, with one blue eye and one brown. It’s probably a good thing if I never see him again. I might get addicted to those things. And they didn’t come cheap. They might have cost me my wife’s life savings, and she’ll still lose her shit if she finds out. But now I have a way to get it all back. And no one will be able to fuck with me while I do it.

Only this time, I'm making sure they kick in first.

I began my mission on a bright sunny day, a good day for new beginnings. I had the whole thing planned out. I was going to walk up the biggest scumbag in town, Marcus Autrualius, the leader of the local biker gang, and try to sell him the biggest bag of flour I can get my hands on. Maybe throw some kerosene in it for authenticity. Then, after I had the money, well, I could deal with things as they came.

I ate a good breakfast of frosted-mini-wheats and threw a pill in. Then I made sure I waited a bit, drank some coffee, before I shouldered my backpack with the flour in it and went out the door, kissing my wife and giving her fine ass a squeeze. I remember I was whistling on my way into the ghetto, and even the thugs were afraid of my confidence. I made it to the front of the building, where a couple of them stopped me and took my bag and searched me.

"I'm here to see Marcus. I've got a good deal for him," I said, smiling at the burly men. One of them gave me a shove as they led me inside. I didn't let it faze me.

When I got to the room where the man himself was sitting, I could feel the energy building inside me. I wanted to punch something, to throw something, to run a marathon around the block. But I held still, and I kept my cool.

"What the fuck is this?" Marcus was saying, he'd been fingering a wad of bills which he dropped beside him on a small glass table. Now he was examining a small batch of what I had brought him as an offering. He didn't look like he much liked it.

"Is this fucking flour? Oh, boy, did you choose a nice sunny day to die, boy." He made a small motion and the two thugs grabbed me. I threw them off like feathers. They were launched



against the wall, one of them knocking down a bunch of shelving. Marcus stood up. He looked surprised.

I walked up to him and grabbed him by the throat. “You remember the old woman who lived here? The one who you killed when you broke in and gave her a heart attack? Well, that was my mom, you sonofabitch.” I gripped harder and his eyes bulged. He tried to hit me away with his big arms, tried to kick me, but I was like a statue, immovable. I tightened my grip and felt my hands sinking into his flesh, felt the blood pouring down them. I pictured my mother, so frail, so innocent. She had never hurt anyone in her entire life. I squeezed harder and the body dropped out from under me. The neck slid upwards, detached. The head popped out of my grip and fell to the floor, rolling so that it faced down. I had decapitated him with my bare hands.

The next few weeks I was busy. I wanted to clean up the streets, to make them a place where my family could live without fear. But something happened that I didn’t expect. The cops. They were following the homicides and they were looking, as much as they also were supporting what I was doing. I could see it all in the media – the police claiming that they were going to catch the vigilante, and all of the ongoing public responses. Most people were behind me. Others thought I was playing God. I had a couple of them show up to question me when I wasn’t home; they shook up my wife about it, made her scared.

I was compelled to stop, but I had about half the pills left. They made me feel good, they gave me purpose. When I took one of them, I was like a superhero. But the rush soon faded, and I just wanted to go back to my old quiet life. My wife could tell something was taking a toll on me, and she’d suggested more than once that we move out into the country. At this point, I went out on my adventures less and less. But something would always happen to trigger my desire to

go out there and set things right – newspaper stories about men who got away with raping and beating small children, women who ripped babies out of other women’s wombs, even teenage boys who slaughtered entire classrooms full of kindergarteners...these people deserved to die, goddamnit! And if I didn’t go out and kill them, they would just get away with their crimes. I couldn’t stand for it.

One day, after I had accomplished many things but still was feeling unfulfilled, I found myself in another situation. I was facing a boy of seventeen, a boy who was addicted to raping young girls. Very young girls. I had followed him and his friend, his new apprentice, to an old abandoned building, where they had lured a girl on her tricycle. I had come in to find her crying, and the boy was on top of her. The other boy was watching with a smirk. The boy who was on top of the little girl, who must have been about four or five, was punching her in the face, yelling at her to shut up. At this time, my little girl was about three, and I must have just lost it. I don’t remember what happened. But when I came to my senses, I saw I had killed the little girl by accident in my frenzy. I fell to my knees, holding her little body to my chest, and cried. She looked so much like my own little darling. I looked at her, and had to wretch. I had to leave her little broken body there. I had to get out.

I went home, and I told my wife that I had decided that she was right after all. We would move to the country. I would stop taking the pills. I had fifteen left. I went into the bathroom and held the bottle over the toilet. I tipped it, but stopped. I couldn’t do it. What if I needed them someday? And didn’t have them? I had made a lot of enemies. What if someone came after my family? I had to keep them, just in case.

We moved out to the country. Life became simple. I could pay more attention to my wife, Beatrice, and my little girl Lilly. She was a gift, that little angel. She could lift my spirits from the darkest depths imaginable. She was a miracle. I loved her more than life itself.

One day, we were walking together down the sidewalk when a terrible thing happened. There was a dog, and she called out to it, it came, loping, smiling, and crossing the street toward us. Then came the truck. It was going fast. Too fast. There was a screech. A yelp. I closed my eyes but my little girl, saw the whole thing. She cried and cried. I ran up to the dog. It was barely breathing. My mind raced. There were the pills, in my pocket; I always kept them there, just in case. I wondered if they would work, I didn't know if they worked that way.

"What the hell," I muttered, and slipped one of the pills into the dog's mouth. The worst that could happen was nothing. I waited. I watched. The dog's breathing became more regular. It sat up. Wagged its tail. My daughter cried out, and it loped up to her and licked her face several times. I walked over, my hands in my pockets, laughing. It worked! I couldn't believe it. There was a new world of possibilities out there for these pills, a whole new way of using them that I never expected.

"Daddy, you saved him!" my daughter cried out happily.

"Shhhh." I bent down to her level. "Don't tell anyone. It's a secret," I said.

She nodded vigorously. She was a good girl. I knew she'd keep her end.

Over the next few years, my life changed. When I heard about those terrible news stories, I would set out, this time not to catch the bad guys, but to help save the victims. My wife never knew. My daughter, on the other hand was different. As she grew I told her stories, and as she

matured she listened more and more rapturously. One day, when she had just turned nine, she stopped me in the middle of one of my stories.

“Do you have any left?” she asked.

“Any of what?” I was surprised; I had never told her about the pills. The versions of the stories I told all involved a man who had miraculous powers. I had never even suspected that she knew the truth.

She smiled, and wiggled deeper under her blanket. “Just promise me, Daddy, if you have any left when you die, promise me you’ll give them to me.” All I could see were her eyes poking out from under the blanket. They sparkled.

“Alright, honey, I promise,” I said.

I was an old man, tired, when she asked about them again. This time she thought she’d heard me tell her about them in a story. That’s good. We were sitting in a coffee shop, having breakfast together. She had a big job now, helping to run a hospital, but she still made time for our weekly breakfast outings. She was such a good girl. I wish I hadn’t run out of the pills so long ago. I’d have given them all to her, she would have put them to good use. I took another sip of my coffee and smiled at her, feeling proud. I waved the waitress over and ask for the bill.

“It’s all covered. That man over there asked to pay for your meal,” she said.

I looked over at the man who sat at the bar. He was old, perhaps an old friend of mine. I was losing my memory, having trouble recognizing people these days. I excused myself and walked up to him.

“Thank you, but ...who are you?” I asked when I got close enough. I still didn’t recognize him. He turned to face me. He had the faintest trace of a scar down his face, and he smiled at me with one blue eye, one brown. He shook my hand, and deposited a small vial into it. Then, laughing, he stood up and threw some cash down.

“For the girl. To put to good use. It’s refined,” he said, smiling. Then he winked at me, picked up his long duster jacket, and pushed out the door, leaving nothing but a jingle behind.

3/14/13

### “Idea and Practice”

Ideas are everything. It is what we are made of. Ideas in the dark can be distracting. Sometimes, they can take over a person’s life, and lead to either ruin, or success. It all depends upon the idea. Such was one such idea that came to a man by the name of John one night on the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, as he lay in his small, rickety bed on the third story of his 12th floor apartment in the Bronx.

He couldn’t remember what had woken him, a smash from the apartment upstairs perhaps. There were always tremendous smashes coming from up there. His sister lived in the apartment above him, a circumstance due to the fact that his father had once owned the complex before he died. His last wish was for John to take care of her when he was gone, to make sure she always had a place to stay.

Now, John lived in the apartment complex he had inherited to keep a closer watch over her, even though she rejected his offers for help. He had to make sure his sister always had a place to come home. She was overweight, worked part time as a bagger at the local grocery, and constantly suffered from some injury or another. Besides John, she had no friends or family to speak of, and the people in the apartment halls whispered that she was a hoarder. This explained the smashes. Her perpetual bruises and the occasional broken arm were caused by her attempts to get around in her place, only to trip over stacks of stuff on the floor or be inexplicably crushed by some of the larger piles.

John felt sorry for her. He even tried to clean up her place a few times with her permission. He was jobless, after all. But each time he tried to help the stuff would pile back up as quickly as it was put away. So, although it was against all of his morals, he gave up. She had no desire to live any other way. He had no right to force her to, no matter how much it might be for her own good.

This was the way with so many people these days. They did what they had to do, nothing more. John remembered way back, long ago, when people used to do things with their free time. They would go out and enjoy life, actively. Now, it seemed that every person who breathed air did it only because they needed to, not because they found it enjoyable. Free time was for sitting perfectly still, for getting drunk without ever having to get up, free time was for television.

John was in his forties, and had dabbled for years as an inventor. He believed that his greatest achievements were yet to come. He was worried that he'd grow old before he saw many of his ideas come to fruition. The clock was ticking. He had never begun a family, and living as a bachelor for so long had made him a bit quirky.

Sitting up in bed one morning, he ran his hands over his face, a strong face, but without strong convictions. He knew that with each grey hair he found, he was losing a bit of himself to the world. He wanted to harness the power of the world, not to let it harness him.

The idea came along with the smash, it came smashing through his head, the idea's pages fluttering madly like the scattered books that fell to the floor which was his ceiling. Society would be saved. The poor could find shelter, the hungry could find food. There would be no more loneliness, no more hoarding. All because of this idea.

It was people. People would fuel their own lives, quite literally. John's idea was this: he would invent a battery, one that was charged by motion like so many that have already been developed. But the battery would be plugged into people. Yes. He could see it now. A small wire would run from each of them, and they could plug it in to things. Electronics, appliances, motor vehicles, anything that required a form of fuel or charge could be powered by people power. Daily activity and motion would charge the battery.

The ones who stayed still all the time, the couch potatoes, they would have to keep working to pay their bills, they would have to keep toiling until they became healthy. However, those who were physically fit would get the most benefits. The more a person was in motion; the more the battery would be charged. It was perfect. A flawless plan.

John had a partner and friend, named Calvin, and Calvin was something of a genius. He helped John bring all of his hare-brained inventions to life, and without him, he would have never been able to quit his job as a security guard to be what he always dreamed he could be, an inventor. Calvin had massive amounts of intelligence when it came to designing technology. He

had single-handedly created a prototype for John's idea of "moon glasses," glasses that made it easier to see at night for driving or hunting.

It was a low-grade throw-off of the same concept used in night vision glasses except it dimmed bright lights as well, so drivers weren't blinded by the headlights of other's. It was an idea that had gotten John semi-famous, and had allowed him to be financially set for life. Calvin had a fifty-percent share in the royalties of whatever John invented, and was therefore always open to hearing John's new ideas.

It was three-thirty-two in the morning, but John couldn't wait. He called up Calvin on his bedside phone.

"Cal. Sorry to have woken you. I think I've got something here."

"John? Is that you? God, John, what the hell time is it? Jesus, John, this better be really good."

John explained his idea.

"Well, you do have something, there. But I don't see it changing all of society completely like you think it might. It shouldn't be too difficult to convert a motion battery to be triggered by human body movement, though. I can call you when I have it ready. "

"Cal, you've got to understand. This is the idea I've been waiting for my whole life. If it doesn't take hold, I swear...well, I don't know what I'd swear. But I would swear something, I assure you that. We need to make it compatible. With everything. Can you design the thing to look like a plug for an extension cord or something?"



“I don’t see why not, but if this doesn’t get as big as you think it will, I don’t want you going into another fit like the last time, alright?”

“Tooth covers were a great idea! I don’t understand why no one wanted one. Especially all those smokers, and people with sweet teeth. And old people! They cover up everything! They put plastic covers on couches and chairs...why not their teeth?”

“Because most of them don’t have teeth anymore, John. I don’t know why tooth covers didn’t catch, but you’ve got to get over this. It’s time to move on. You’ve got a fine idea here. Let’s work with this one.”

“Alright then. I’ll look into ways to advertise and distribute. You work your magic. Call me as soon as it’s ready.”

John hung up. He looked up at the tiny holes in the sheetrock of his ceiling. He liked it here, in the crowded, shabby apartment. He could move to a nicer one, but he didn’t want to. This was where he came up with his best ideas. While he was surrounded by people. People who, whether they knew it or not, needed his help.

~ Five years later ~

“I just can’t believe it. If you look back on the night you called me, if you’d told me then that this was going to take over the nation this quickly, I would’ve hung up the phone and called the crazy house to come pick you up. Now look at you,” Calvin said. He nodded toward John, who sat across from him at the booth in the restaurant. Sparkling wine glasses clinked around them. Smells of gourmet food wafted invitingly from the kitchen. People at other tables were trying to point at them without being too conspicuous. They all stared.

“I had no idea myself that it would get this big,” John said as he watched a girl at a nearby booth plugging her cell phone into her ankle. He liked the ankle as a port. It was one of several choices, but surely the most subtle. She almost looked like she was trying to hide it, scratching her leg as she slipped the cord up her pants and under her sock. “I suppose I knew it could be this big, but I never believed it would be, and after such a short time.”

“I’ve got to admit, it’s done a world of good for people. The whole exercise initiative, it’s cut down on obesity in this country drastically. Of course, a lot of the really obese people just got the same waivers as the handicapped, but there’s really nothing you can do about that. If I were you, I’d just be thrilled that the government took so well to the idea and established it as common law. Before you had to fight the system. Now you are the system.”

“Yes, but sometimes I wonder if it’s a good thing that it was made into a law. I just wanted to make people’s lives more convenient, you know, make the world a better place. But now it seems like people who didn’t have a port put in are struggling like crazy to make ends meet. And with the way cash is losing its value they don’t have a choice but to buy in, really. I didn’t want that. It’s like they have no choice but to plug in. And that group, the protesters, what are they called again? I don’t even know if I entirely disagree with them.”

“The free energy people? Don’t worry about them. They’re just a bunch of people who plugged in before they realized they’d have to get off their lazy asses and move around a little in order to get a charge on their battery. They’re just spiteful.”

“But the things they say, their signs, like the one that says: ‘a mile run = an hour of heat’ Are they really telling the truth? How can that be?”

“They’re exaggerating. A mile run would power my car for a week. There’s no way they can’t heat their home for more than an hour after they run a mile. That would give them practically a 40% charge.”

“But what if it’s true?”

“Are you telling me that my prototype was defective? I worked all the kinks out of that thing. I worked over it again in front of the feds so they could see how it worked. There’s no way there is anything wrong with their batteries, John, I’m telling you.”

“I’m not saying that, but what if the feds, I don’t know, made their own adjustments? So some people have to work harder for their charge maybe. It’s the only way to explain what these people are protesting about. Plus, there has to be some reason my sister upstairs refuses to speak to me anymore. I thought this new system would help her. But instead she goes and disowns me. I’m not even sure if she’s still living up there. It’s been quiet for a while now. Maybe I should go up there and check on her.”

“I’m sure she’s fine, you and I both know she stocked up on those waivers. She’s probably just still angry with you. And anyway, John, as you know, with any huge change like this, there has to be some kind of regulation. They did ask me for the design specs, and they did do most of the designing, so I suppose it’s possible that not everyone is getting a fair charge. But really, what reason would they have to do that? Even if they were, there isn’t much to be done about that is there? All we can really do is be happy that a simple walk will give each of us a day’s worth of power. It’s not like the whole system is unfair. They still give out tons of those waivers; you can even get one by faking sick.”

“Yeah, I guess. But the protesters...”

“Listen, John. When schools started teaching Darwinism rather than Creationism, there were protesters. When blacks gained equality, there were protesters. If everyone bent over and let those protesters manipulate them, we’d still be living in the stone ages. I’m not saying you shouldn’t look at both sides of every coin. I’m just saying, you should sit back and see what you’ve accomplished with your one idea, and be glad. You’ve helped a lot of people.”

The next day there was a headline on every paper and in every newscast. The government was phasing out the waiver program. The free energy group, a massive group of protesters, assembled their own news station. It was quickly shut down, but before it was, John watched with horror as a man ran on a treadmill on live television for six hours without receiving enough charge in his internal battery to power a light bulb for ten minutes. John knew now that some of these devices were defective, and he was also pretty sure he knew who was responsible.

After the year ended, it became illegal not to have port put in. Ports were given to babies upon birth. Those people who died without one would leave a hefty fine in their will for their loved ones. Money, which had already been shifted to all credit cards, was shifted to the concept of charging. People could use the power they had charged to purchase goods. Life became simpler...for some.

Many people were happy with them. The majority of the population began going on walks, runs, and exercising regularly. Society changed as a result. McDonald’s began selling healthy foods. There was caffeine in everything, even baby formula. Parents limited their kids’ television time. People got up off their couches everywhere, and went outside.

But for the minority, it was a living hell. Some people took to living off the grid so they didn’t have to have a port put in. There were many homeless, but people’s sense of charity was

nearly gone. They had to work much harder, physically, to earn their allotted power supply. They weren't about to give it away to those who seemed to never be moving around. The lowest financial class was hit the worst. When the government stopped giving out the wavers, many people died. Those who were morbidly obese, those who were handicapped, and the elderly, just couldn't keep up. The government finally admitted to regulating the charging levels differently between people. They claimed they curbed the necessity for motion for small babies, the elderly, and the handicapped.

When more of these groups kept dying off, there was little others did. People were much less free with their charge, since now there was no way to cheat to get on top. Each person had to honestly earn what they made. Those who were the most physically fit were also the richest – and being rich didn't mean living in luxury, it meant hard work in exchange for better surroundings.

Every once in a while, a cry for help would be heard, and then it was quickly smothered by the media. The cries came from those who walked and ran and lifted weights and still didn't receive enough charge to survive.

John was going for a walk one day when he saw one of them. It was a girl, and she was running. She was gasping for air, and John could see every muscle in her neck bulging. Her face was deep red, and she was covered in glistening sweat. Her eyes seemed to bulge from her head as she fought for air, as she pushed herself to keep going. John watched her as she passed him without a glance and continued by him across the park. She'd almost crossed the green when he saw her collapse.

He ran up to her. She was still gasping, as if she'd been running from an evil foe, as if she was running for her life. Her eyes were unfocused, looking somewhere into the blue sky. He could see her heart thumping in her chest; it almost looked like it was going to burst out of her. He bent over her.

"Miss, are you alright?" he asked.

She didn't answer him, although her eyes focused on him. She had to take several more gasping breathes before she could answer.

"I need... to feed ....my husband," she said between breathes.

"Why doesn't your husband feed himself?" I asked.

"He did....now he can't....he got a blood clot in his leg...now he's starving," she said.

"Well, he should have his charge curbed then, since he's handicapped."

She shook her head. "It's not considered a handicap."

"So just buy food for the both of you then, and don't buy other things."

She gave him a smoldering look. "Food is all I was ever able to afford." She began trying to get to her feet. She was utterly exhausted, though. He tried to lend her a hand, but she batted it away. She finally got to her feet, wavering slightly.

"Look, I don't understand. Just this one run should have you and your husband charged up for two days of food. What's the problem?"

She slapped him, hard. It stung, the memory more than the act itself. “What did you do that for?” he asked.

“What do you know, huh, Mister? Who the hell do you think you are? I’ve been running for three hours now, and look!” She drew up her sleeve to reveal a port with its tiny gauge showing that it was nearly empty. There was no way that such hard work had given her such a small charge. It simply couldn’t be.

“That’s not right...” John was saying as the girl turned away from him and began jogging away.

He caught up with her. “There must be something wrong with it. Did you have it checked out?”

She stopped running. “What do you want from me? Why won’t you just leave me alone?” Her stare penetrated through him, leaving him feeling like she was looking around the curvature of the earth and back at him after a full revolution. It was a strong stare.

“Because I, well, I feel sort of invested in the ports.”

“Why?” She asked.

“Because I invented them.”

“What?”

“I invented them. The ports. I came up with the idea.”

Before he knew it, he was being attacked. She showered him with punches. She was screaming something but he couldn’t make it out in all the chaos. He tried to defend himself, but

the girl was impossibly strong. She threw him to the ground and began kicking him. He felt one of his ribs crack. He covered his head until the blows suddenly stopped. After they ended, he could hear again. There was a warm trickle of blood running down his face, through his eye, into the side of his mouth. His lip felt huge. He could hear her screaming.

“You asshole! Do you even know what you’ve done? I used to be able to earn a living, now I’m starving! You tell me you did this? You are killing us honest, hard-working people? Why? Why would anyone do that?” She was crying now, sobbing violently. She fell to her knees.

“I’m sorry,” she was still sobbing. “I’m terrible to have done this. I just lost my mind. I’m dying! And so is my husband, and I can’t do anything about it.” She was helping him to his feet. The world was spinning. He couldn’t see straight. But he could feel, and he felt terrible. What had he done? He had been trying to create a system that could not be corrupted, and now that it had been put in place, they had found a way to make it corrupt. There was no reason why it should be easier for some to charge up than others. He wondered why the politicians who had always been obese were still obese. It was all becoming clear. His idea might have been a good one, but it was only good as an idea. In practice, it had become a living nightmare.

“I’m going to do something about this,” he said. The girl was wiping the blood off his face with a handkerchief. He was amazed at how old-fashioned some people could be. But he was also thankful. The girl was shaking her head. “Just let me help you get home. I’m so sorry.” She was still crying.

She brought him to his front door and he never got the chance to ask her name before she flitted away like a nervous bird. He lay in bed all day, thinking.



The next morning, he got on the phone and began making calls. He called his senators, and the men who ran his business, but none of them would confirm that he was telling the truth. They all took on a tone of apology as they made their denials. They knew the truth, but there was no way they could admit to it. John became angry. His calls became more accusing. He shouted into the phone at the politicians who refused to even recognize that there were curbs to the charging that had nothing to do with physical ability. Finally, in his frustration to simply be understood, he called his friend Calvin.

“So why is it that the lowest class is dying out, even the healthy ones?” he shouted.

“The majority of the lowest class never lifted a finger, that’s why. They have to work harder to compensate for those who were welfare abusers in the past. It’s all part of the design. They didn’t tell you? Well, it’s true that I’m far more diplomatic than you. They probably thought I was the brains behind the whole thing, no offense.”

“What design? What is it?” John asked.

“The same design as there ever was. The same design that becomes the default in every society. The strong survive. The weak perish.”

“I just met a woman today, and let me tell you, she was damn strong. She broke my Goddamned rib! But she was dying anyway. How does that fit in to this design?”

“I don’t know, John. I don’t have all the answers. All I know is that you came up with this idea, it’s helped millions of people, and you’re still not happy. Why can’t you just be happy, John? You have enough money to buy whatever you want. Go use some of it, for God sakes.”

John hung up. He was angry. That image of the woman's face, covered in sweat, her eyes bulging out as if they were begging for help...it haunted him. He picked up the phone again. He made many calls. He told all of the investors, his accountants, all of the businessmen and politicians he'd met with when the invention was first taking flight, that all he'd made a mistake. He'd never meant for his invention to be used this way. He refused to allow it. He wanted to order a recall on all of the ports. He had full rights, it was perfectly legal. There were many arguments, many accusations. They all wanted to know how he expected this to happen when the ports had been installed in people at a widespread scale. They wanted to know his plan for going back to what they believed to be a barbaric way of life - carrying money and being allowed to grow fat and lazy. They stalled, reasoned, some of them begged. But he was adamant in his orders.

That night, as he finally lay down to sleep, he dreamed of another life. He was living on a farm with a group of people. Everyone chipped in and worked to help the group. Everyone was happy. He was milking a cow as the birds chirped and flitted about in the treetops. He was watching three children running around in the dusty yard, playing tag. They were squealing loudly, and he chuckled as he watched them. He could smell fresh bread baking from a nearby open window to the farm kitchen. The war sun beat down on him, and he felt like he was home.

He awoke the next morning and thought about the dream, a smile lingering on his face. He tried to keep it in his mind as he got up for breakfast. But his stove wouldn't turn on. He assumed it was broken and went to take a shower instead. But there was no water, not even cold water. He ate an apple and went out into the street for a walk. When he reached the spot where he'd seen the woman running the day before, he stopped. He wondered what had happened to her. Was she still alive? And what about her husband? His mouth suddenly felt dry. He walked

into a nearby store and tried to buy a drink of water, but the clerk told him he didn't have enough charge.

“What? That can't be, I just walked here from my house. I should have plenty! Something is wrong here,” he said, suddenly realizing.

The clerk just laughed at him. “Oh, you walked, eh? What are you a movie star or something? It costs me a two mile run to get one of these drinks. I tell you, whoever came up with this stupid God-forsaken system can kiss my ass. It's harder to get by than ever these days.”

“Yes. Yes, you're right about that,” John said dreamily.

As he walked home, he watched the people around him. They were all running. There were no cars on the road, no electric lights buzzing, just an eerie ghost of a city with people running in all directions at top speed, as if they were all frightened. And although they ran in different directions, they were all running from the same thing; death. There was one person he saw, a man in a blazer, who looked very wealthy and important. He was the only one walking slowly, taking his time, as others rushed by him. Some of them bumped into him as they passed, some simply brushed by. All around him, he could hear the light beeping of the sound of a battery gone too low. It came from them all. One by one, he saw people drop to the ground. For some reason, John wanted to walk up to the man in the blazer and tell him that this had all been a terrible mistake. If only he could make one person understand...

He made his way toward the man. He heard the beeping now coming from his own port. It sounded like a countdown. There was a long tone, and his head swam. Darkness was overcoming his sight. He was almost to the man in the blazer, but not quite. The man turned and looked at him, a cold depth in his stare. Was it Calvin? Or someone else? He couldn't tell. It was

becoming so dark. How could they do this? How could they turn him off like this? Everything seemed so confused, so mixed up. He could feel himself falling to the ground, and the man in the blazer took a step back. He hit the ground with a thud. Why had he done this? All he'd done was to try to make the world a bit like heaven. Now it was something else entirely. Maybe there was no way to fight against corruption. Maybe it was just a natural part of us all. He thought about the woman with the sweaty face and the bulging eyes. "All we can do is keep going," he said to the frightened looking man in the blazer as they turned out the lights.

Calvin shook his head slowly, his eyes welling up with tears. He bent down and brushed some dust off John's ashen face. He spoke to him, softly. "Some ideas can save the world, old man. But some ideas...Some of them just don't work."

Then, among the many bodies strewn through the dead city, with a faint beeping coming from under his shirt sleeve, he walked away.

1/31/13

### "Strange Culture"

There was a crashing sound, and Scout looked up from the trash can he had been weeding in. It was a boy, about twelve. Scout growled, showing his teeth. The boy sneered at him, and threw a rock in his direction. Scout didn't like young boys. They were bad news. There was more than one occasion in which he'd suffered a beating from one of them. The boy picked up a larger rock, smiling. Scout ran. He was picking up speed at the end of the alleyway when he crashed headlong into a man, the worst kind of man. It was the dogcatcher. Scout recognized him at

once. He tried to turn and run the other way, but the man seized him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him into his truck. Scout crouched in the back, waiting. He hadn't the faintest idea what was about to happen to him.

It was a time on earth that has not yet arrived. New planets had recently been discovered, and dogs, cats, and chimps had been sent in capsules to these different planets. The earth was almost all used up, and the people were looking for another planet to live on, one that was suitable for them. The animals involved in the experiment were injected with small trackers that could tell if they were alive or dead. The trackers woke up when the dogs woke up from their long cryogenic sleep, a sleep that allowed them to go light years away without aging.

Scout was chosen to be one of these dogs.

He was put in a capsule, and shot into the deepest reaches of outer space. Scout was to be a part of an experiment, one that was meant to find out if there were other planets that were suitable for human survival.

Scout had lived a rough life. He'd lived with several different owners, gone on many adventures, and landed himself in a kennel, where he was chosen for this quest. He knew very little about it. All he knew was he received a lot of attention from men and women in white coats, people who showed him little affection, but seemed very concerned with him. He liked them, even though they were terribly serious. It was better than living in the kennel - that was for sure.

He had undergone a series of tests, and from the tests the men and women in the white coats were able to discover that Scout was more intelligent than the average dog, which made him a candidate for space travel. He was poked with many needles and strapped to many electric

wires which altered his mind, making him even more intelligent. After many tests, Scout developed a basic understanding of how human life worked. He was ready.

When he was placed in the capsule, he had already received several injections and he was very sleepy. He fell into a deep dream state, one in which he never let out the tiny barks or kicks that he typically did while dreaming. It was like being dead. It was peaceful.

When he awoke, the capsule lay beside him. He was surrounded by creatures, strange looking things, with many strange appendages. They seemed to have several arms, and only a single leg, at the bottom of which was a large, spiked wheel. Their heads were set into their bodies; their faces were on where a human's chest would be. The faces themselves were also quite strange; they had a large hole in the middle, with two holes above and two below. Which holes might be eyes, Scout was not sure. On the back side of their body was a small circle of holes, tiny ones, like the holes in a phone. Scout was not sure what to make of them, and at first, he was frightened. He shrank to the ground, his tail between his legs.

One of the creatures approached him. It held out an appendage, one of its arms, he thought, and touched it to the large hole in its face, then held it out to him. It was a gesture of some kind; it seemed like a gesture of peace. Scout wagged his tail a bit and timidly gave a lick to the end of the appendage, which was covered with many tiny little nubs at the end. It tasted like a strawberry.

The creature jumped a bit, it seemed surprised. Then it took Scout's paw in its hand, and touched it to the hole in its face, a return of the gesture. Scout got the message that he was in a place where he would be safe.

The group of creatures that had surrounded him wheeled into a line, and one by one, they repeated the gesture and then began to wheel away. Scout followed. The land was lush with strange plants, the ground covered in plant-like matting, a bit like moss, but it was orange, and warm, dappled with green flower-like projections. Scout was busy, sniffing everything that came his way. The planet had many different smells and sights. Strange structures seemed woven into large trees. They were like shelters, attached to the trees, hanging off them like heavy droplets of water.

Over the next few days, Scout learned much about the new society in which he found himself. The creatures kept pets. They were like sheep, but with claws rather than hooves, and each of them had three breasts that looked surprisingly like a human's. They milked these, and drank the milk many times during each day. The days there were shorter, about half the length of an earth day, which suited Scout's napping schedule just fine. At first, Scout was hesitant to try the strange milk. It seemed like he was overstepping some kind of boundary, but when he did try it finally, he learned it was delicious, with a light, grass-like flavor.

Scout didn't know if he would ever get back to earth. He had a limited understanding that it was more likely that the humans, probably the ones in the white coats, would be meeting him there if the planet was worthy of them. So far, it seemed like a place where many species could survive together, and was therefore a good option. He wanted to learn more about the creatures, though, about the way they lived. There was so much to learn, and yet, there was also much to fear. With his increased intelligence, Scout often found himself stricken with bouts of fear of the unknown. These usually happened at night, when the black slithering creatures came out. His fear was not only for the unknown, but also of death. He was still unsure about the planet and its potential dangers, so he wandered about in both awe as well as weary caution.

He was free to wander about the civilization, so over the next weeks, he watched the creatures in all of their daily activities. Many of them were odd, spending all day with devices plugged into the holes on their face, sitting perfectly still inside their shelters. Some of them who drank too much of the sheep-like creature's milk and became loud and tipsy. Others wheeled around at incredible speeds. The younger creatures would play a game involving throwing an oval fruit into a hole that was dug into the moss-like plant that covered the ground.

Scout was curious about everything. It was all new to him. He began to discover new creatures, smaller ones, some of them as small as his toenail, others half his size. Some of the latter ones were kept by the creatures as well, not exactly as pets, but just kept. Each creature seemed to have at least six of them. They were small and round and furry, with beady little eyes that peered at you as if constantly judging you. He watched these creatures wearily. He wasn't sure of their purpose. Then one day he saw one of the creatures pluck one from the enclosure in which they were kept.

Scout trotted after the creature, who went to a room that they used both for eating as well as evacuation. They evacuated through the end of one of their arms, it was an arm they never used for anything else that he saw. There were pod-shaped objects that they evacuated into, and their poop smelled like concentrated strawberries. They ate through the large hole in the face. Most of the time, they ate various plants that resembled fruits and vegetables. But the small creature that was now clutched in the large creature's grip was making a terrible sound, a sound that resembled terror.

He watched as the large creature took the smaller one and squeezed it with three of its five arms. It squeezed and squeezed, and the creature shrieked and screamed, until Scout could



hardly take it anymore. Perhaps these creatures were dangerous, he thought. Perhaps it was trying to defend itself. Suddenly, something popped out of the small creature, an object that looked like a round ball, about the size of a tennis ball. Scout remembered the balls back home he used to play with, but this one seemed different. He had no urge to play with it.

The large creature took the ball and smashed it against the floor. It cracked, but did not open. Was it an egg? Scout couldn't tell. The creature then went over to a device that was always warm, and opened it. Inside there was a bowl-like object. The creature cracked the egg-like thing into the bowl; the inside was a thick dark liquid. Scout felt sick. The creature seemed calm, like this was all very normal, this awful treatment. It wheeled over to the small creature which lay spent on the floor and ran over it with its wheel several times in a row. The creature screamed, but its screams became less and less after a few minutes, and then it went silent. Scout was frozen in place, trying to understand what was going on, trying to figure out whether he would be next.

The big creature picked up the small one, now limp. It went over to a corner where there was another bowl filled with strange objects. It selected one, one which resembled an eggbeater, and it began using it on the small creature's body. Scout could not see exactly what was going on. The creature was turned away from him. But when it was finished, it produced a deep, dark, dripping mass. The creature, Scout assumed, had been skinned. It was dropped into another device, one that made a great deal of noise, as if it was shredding it. It dispensed a finished product; the small creature had been cut into many tiny pieces.

The large creature went over to the warming device and opened it. It dropped the pieces into the bowl that held the liquid. There was a smell, a terrible smell, and it saturated the

creature's shelter. When it was finished, the creature took it out and ate it with slow relish, licking its small fingerlike projections when it was done. Scout wondered if he had correctly followed what had just taken place. Did it just cook that creature in its own fetus? What if he was next? Scout decided to keep his distance from these beings, for they did some strange and awful things to their fellow creatures.

The next day, Scout learned something about the way they found mates. There was a ceremony, one in which he thought the creatures were doing mating dances for each other, but they suddenly began fighting. The male creatures fought barbarically, ripping off each other's appendages, until one fell. Then the female would approach. The male would then proceed to beat the female into submission before having intercourse with her, a frightening process that involved them sticking what looked like their arms in what looked like their mouths and moving in violent, punching motions. Scout was overwhelmed by the experience. In fear, he ran away from the mating area.

He found himself in a place where there were long lines of creatures. He watched as the ones in the front were slowly stuffed into small boxes. Some of them were coming out of the boxes as others were being stuffed in. Those that came out looked dizzy and disoriented. They were then given a handful of strange rocks, which they carefully put into a small pouch they all seemed to carry before leaving. Scout moved on, as the place smelled badly of decay.

He trotted by another place where the creatures seemed to be enjoying themselves much more than those who were being stuffed in boxes. They were making lots of loud sounds and they seemed jovial and happy. Many of them were drinking the strange milk.

They all surrounded a large pit of fire and every so often, one would go up to the fire and burn themselves. Some held their limbs over the fire for longer periods than others, but the result was the same – the burns seemed to elate them, to make them more happy and intoxicated. Scout wondered why a species found it pleasurable to slowly kill themselves. He was disgusted by the spectacle, but curiosity took over. He decided to stay for a while, to see what would happen next.

He was beginning to find some entertainment in watching the creatures when a group of them approached, all of them making loud noises. They were all badly burned and smelled of singed flesh. They came up to him and grabbed him by his legs, and dragged him out. They began beating him. Fear seized Scout, and he thrashed around desperately, trying to free himself. But the creatures' appendages were strong, and he was unable to twist away. Scout growled and barked, and his barks seemed to alarm the creatures momentarily. Finally he got away from the group and began to run away. One of them came after him, and managed to grasp tightly onto one of his back legs. The creature's appendage seemed to cut into his leg. Scout's heart was beating loudly in his head. He was frightened out of his wits. What were they going to do to him? Out of raw desperation and pure reflex, he turned and bit the creature.

One of the creatures made a shouting sound as the one he'd bit tore away from him, dripping black blood. Both creatures shouted back and forth. Both of them seemed to be gesticulating at Scout, who was struggling to get to his feet. Then the creature he'd bit took out a tiny box and pressed a button, and Scout felt his heart stop.

As he fell, as he gasped for breath, as his life slipped away, Scout wondered why. He hadn't done anything but try to defend himself. Just like he had on earth. He thought about home, about sunshine and grass and chasing chickens in a farmyard. As much as he feared living

among these creatures, he still didn't want to die. As he lay there, his life fading, memories played in his mind's eye. He remembered his mother, her soft fur, and his brothers and sisters before they were all separated. He remembered being left in a box in a street, and then all the nights of picking through trash cans and stealing food where he could find it. He remembered the time he bit the young boy who had been beating him, the tranquilizer, and the pound.

And then, as he took his last gasps, he realized that he had succeeded in his mission. This planet was perfect. It was just the place for human beings.

3/2013

“the eye Of The mind”

It was a cold day in the deep of November, and I was walking the street at night. I crouched down as something shifted in the snow at my feet. A black and yellow butterfly scratched its way out of its frozen catacomb and flew away. I shook my head. Tiny bits of soot fell from the sky, staining my skin. I did not wipe it away. I was sick, sick of pleasing others. It seemed for years that others were the center of the universe, that others were where meaning lay, but I was sick, sick, and finished with the people of the world.

I walked up the dark stairwell. I slid my hand across the crack in the wall, traveling, zigzagging up, up with me, tiny pieces of it crumbling to the floor with the sound of light rain. There should be a man here, someone to meet, someone to see. I was tired. Without knocking, I entered. His spectacles slid off his nose as he nodded up at me, surprised out of sleep. His nervous eyes dart toward the clock, as if I am the one testing his sanity. I am right on time. He

fumbled to pick his spectacles up, sliding his fingers down the sides of his lips insolently. I considered using this precious window to leave quickly and shut the door as if I had never come in. He cleared his throat.

“Come in, come in, sit down,” he said, picking a book up off the floor. I thought he had a mind, this man, when I first met him. He read, that’s enough - no one reads anymore but those few whose minds remain. I studied his ear as a small spirit slipped out. It was making a racket, whether it was hysterically crying or laughing, I was not sure. She was nude, and as she shook with fermented emotion, sticking out her tongue and making faces at me. I smiled meekly, just to be polite.

“What is it, Jerry?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” I sat down.

“How are you? It’s been a while.”

“Fine. I stopped by simply to tell you I am moving on.”

“Moving on? Where will you be going?”

I looked at him coldly without answering. All I could think about was how encompassed by questions he was. I detest so many questions; he never used to speak like this. They must have gotten to him. Those bastards. Gardeners who plant seeds of ambiguity and doubt. They prey on those who are open -minded and impressionable, forming what took years to preserve unformed.

I scrutinized this man before me, my psychiatrist, watching the spirit struggle to pull her stuck foot from his ear. I remembered a time when he used to dance with them - he would dance when no one was watching. I caught him at it once, coming in for an early meeting. He was twirling, twirling in circles recklessly, knocking bottles and glasses from his mini-bar. I remember how I stood there for several minutes watching him before he saw me and fell

awkwardly on his ass. When I asked him, he told me he'd been dancing with his dead wife. That was when he allowed himself the magic of tangents. He never does that any more.

“You were once a great man,” I said.

“And no longer so, you think?” he asked, looking hurt. His inability to speak without using questions was answer enough. I got up, disgusted.

“Wait, Jerry. I have someone I want you to speak with. It about those things you keep seeing. I think this person might be able to help you...”

Without giving him time to finish, I seized the glass paperweight off his desk and threw it at the window. It made a magnificent smash, and provided a perfect distraction for me to slip out the door. He gasped, and as I ran away, I could hear him screaming after me, but I kept going. I didn't need him anymore.

The things I see. He wanted to refer me to someone else who can help me with the things I see. As if he didn't see his wife while she was twirling in his arms. He knew she was there. So did I. It's the rest of the world that needs help seeing.

I returned to the street. The place where I feel at home. Where there are so many other people, yet one can be perfectly alone. I looked at my hands. They were cold. If I concentrated hard enough, I could warm them; I discovered long ago the trick to controlling one's breathing in order to change one's core temperature. But right now, I didn't care. I had to find that butterfly; it was going in the direction I wanted to go.

A man was in distress; he had dropped his groceries in the street. Oranges, bright and vivid, rolled gracefully in orbit of the storm drain. I helped him pick them up, pocketing one. I continued on, whistling an old Irish tune that I had heard somewhere. Bonafide.

That which is bonafide. That's what I looked for, in this darkness, that which was left of

reality. It was so hard to find, so hard to fight off the false lies that were so enticing, so comforting. I found a rock and picked it up, putting it into the pocket with the orange.

There was a cat in my way. Cats. They were the queens of liars, having given in completely to domestication and self-destruction. A cat was a whore, and no snobbery could mask the smell that tainted them. I pointed at it, and it became a dog. That was better. Dogs were not liars. They had sold their souls to humans, a tremendous folly, but at least they were honest. Dogs and horses. Such strange creatures. Why do they sacrifice themselves for us? Why is it that you can push a horse to gallop until it dies? What other living creature would ignore their own limitations - who would die for another creature, let alone a cruel creature such as the human? They were slaves, dogs and horses. But at least they knew the truth. At least they could face it - not like cats. Cats and humans, both whorish slaves, both in denial. The least they could do was recognize their place. Who was the slave-whore anyway, the one providing the service, like the horse or the dog, or the one that relies on the others to survive? That was something to wonder about.

I stopped at a corner and peeked around. I had once been blasted by a stranger coming around a corner at full speed. Now I peeked. There were a few penguins clucking in a small circle, but no people. I proceeded. One of the penguins patted me on the back as I passed him. We exchanged meaningful nods. I went to the place where I usually sleep. I was too tired to go on tonight. I would have to begin my journey tomorrow. I knew one thing: I would be leaving this city. The time to be in the city was over.

I got to my bench and sat down. There were still a few newspapers left to cover myself with from the night before. I huddled down, watching the mice run circles around my feet. I apologized to them; I had no crumbs for them tonight.

“Jerry?” I heard a voice from the next bench. It was Lilly. Her parents had abandoned her at the age of seven to better afford Botox and facelifts, so they might leave their retirement funds intact. She’d been living on the streets for two years now and I considered her my friend. She came over and sat next to me, rubbing her small hands together in the chill of the night air.

“Hi, Jerry. I had a good day today. I found a dollar.” She grinned toothlessly at me, her whole face beaming. I reached into my pocket and gave her the orange.

“It’s a beautiful rock. Thank you,” she said, still beaming at me. What was she talking about? She wants a rock? A rock? I remembered the rock in my pocket.

“Here.” I fished it out and gave it to her. She squealed loudly. I covered my ears.

“An orange! Is it real? Thank you, Jerry, oh, thank you!”

I looked at her in fear. “What are you talking about? It’s a rock.” Something was wrong. She wouldn’t fool me like that - not her. Something was wrong with me. The feeling made me panic for a moment, then I pushed it aside. There are some things we can abide, some things we just aren’t ready for.

She looked confused. Then, as if it was only fleeting, the confusion left her face and she threw her arms around me. “I don’t care. Thank you, Jerry.”

I forced a smile. “You be good now,” I told her. “And don’t believe what they tell you.” I have to make sure of this. This is of the greatest importance.

“I won’t! I won’t, ever!” she assured me. I let out my held breath.

“Now go to the warm place, but don’t listen to them. They’re all liars, you know.”

“The shelter? Okay, but don’t worry, I never listen to them. I know that they lie; I’ve caught them doing it. Jerry? Jerry, you’re my best friend.”

I rustled her hair and chuckled. She was one of the few people who could cause me to



chuckle. "Lilly, I'm going away."

She looked at me with giant eyes. "I understand." She smiled. "I'll miss you."

I gave her my favorite coin. She started to cry. She ran away. I knew it was the last time I would see her. I smiled as I watched her frail figure scurry away. She ran in the direction of the penguin I had exchanged glances with, off in the distance. From far away, I saw him give Lilly as she ran by another meaningful nod. Then I got up. I was going to wait for morning, but now was a good a time as any. I was going.

I began walking east. East was a good direction. It had so much life in it - I thought to myself how the East would promise the mysteries of the Orient, and then I stopped. I sniffed the air.

"Shit on the wind," I muttered to myself, smelling the rank east breeze.

I turned around. I was going west. West was the way to go, away from everything, away from it all. Away from the smell of shit on the wind. Toward wide open spaces. How I craved wide open spaces - endless sky and plain. If only I had a cornucopia to guide me.

I poured my soul into the westward direction. It was cold, but then, the West was always cold, but beautiful. I wished I had some chocolate, but then, I needed every oxidant I could get; I couldn't let them take those away from me. They were all I had left. Them, and my gums. I was hoping to floss soon.

I suddenly bumped up against something. It was a dog. He looked up at me and wagged his tail. He was brown and filthy. Perhaps he had been the shit on the wind. The look in his eyes reminded me of myself. I looked into his eyes, and he looked into mine, a warm smile on his face.

"Well, come on, then," I said to him. He followed. Of course he wanted to come; dogs

loved it out West. Bones everywhere. Every square inch, you dig, and there's a bone. Or so I've heard from a dog I used to know. So we strolled along, this dog and I, if not immediate friends, then at least acquaintances.

It was sunset when I decided to make camp. I was in some sort of park, and there were a few benches available, one of which I chose to stretch out on. The dog took shelter underneath. As we lay there, reclining more comfortably than the rich could dream of, I decided to have a little talk with my new companion.

"You know, there is a part of me that has always regretted missed opportunities," I begin. "You and I, we're not the type to complain, but I'm sure there were times when you held back and regretted it later. All those cats that could have been chased, all those meats that could have been snatched, and what is it that keeps us from holding on to these moments? Reserve? Discipline? To what end, if it becomes a lifelong regret afterwards?

"It's as if a demon lives inside of each and every one of us, and it prevents us from achieving our greatest moments. Or is that the angel? It's as if we are programmed to resist our own greatness. But why? Is it our hesitation to take risks that causes this effect, or is it something else, an external influence, like the devil? What do we do when those opportunities are unethical? Avoid them and play it safe?

"But that's a weak way of thinking, to blame our impulses on external forces. We should be taking responsibility for our own actions, blaming only ourselves for our own shortcomings. Those that do - they're the ones who end up acting upon opportunities. And yet, it's not only the weak-minded who are the ones who miss chances; we all do, and why? Yet, isn't that the perpetual question we all ask, the one that four-year olds use to drive others batty? Why? Why? Why? And what is the perpetual answer? Well, it differs, but the reasoning behind it is all the

same - because. Now, I remember back when the word ‘because’ was no answer in itself. But now, the connections to other words that it used to require to get by have all fallen away. Now, it’s just simply because, and folks get real peeved when you ask for more explanation.

“‘Because what?’ is now a taboo question. But I digress. It’s those missed opportunities - that’s what we were talking about. You know what? We should make a vow to each other, here and now, that we won’t miss any more opportunities, no matter how crazy they may seem. Agreed?”

There was a small sigh from the dog below him.

“What the matter?”

The dog whined.

“Are you hungry?”

Another whine.

“You know, I haven’t eaten in a spell, either. Let’s not miss this opportunity, shall we not?” I got up and stretched. There was a bakery across the street. I searched the ground until I found a small stick, the perfect size. I approached the bakery door, making sure the coast was clear. I tried fruitlessly to wiggle the stick inside the lock, these locks were starting to get complex these days. Finally, I found a large rock nearby and smashed a hole in the glass-plate door and unlocked it from the inside. The alarm began to sound.

My eager companion and I casually walked inside. He managed to scoff down all the desserts at his level, and, taking several items and filling my ratty old backpack, we took our leave and returned to the bench to watch the police roll up, sirens blazing.

One of the officers, after sweeping the area, gave me a suspicious look as I slowly chewed my white-chocolate macadamia-nut cookie. Then he turned away. As I watched a herd

of buffalo follow them inside, I felt the warmth of fullness bringing that old sense of comfort that it once gave. Slowly, by degrees, I slumped over, until I was lost in sleep.

The next morning, I awoke to a magnificent sunrise, and enjoyed the eastern lights over a couple of doughnuts that I shared with my new buddy. I began to call him “Bud” for short, which he took to as good as any other name. It was his company that I felt the most comfortable with. These humans never understood. I had forgotten where I was going until Bud headed west, triggering my memory.

I walked westward for what seemed like forever. When I was tired, I sat down.

The lights were too damn bright. The chair was hard. I could barely see the room around me, but I could tell it was cold and small.

“State your name for the record, please.”

“Jerry.”

“Jerry, what?”

“Jerry Seinfeld.”

“Please be serious, sir. You are facing criminal charges.”

“Jerry Pinkerton.”

“Jerry Pinkerton, you are aware that you are being charged with the rape and murder of one Lilly Mason, age nine? Now that you are acting a bit more...coherent, how do you plan on pleading to this charge in court?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard what I said, Mr. Pinkerton. Please answer the question.”

“Lilly was....was....raped? Murdered?”

“Answer the question, sir.”

“Wait. Wait a minute. What is going on here?”

“Sir, you were presented with the charges when you were put under arrest. How do you plead?”

“Wait! I was arrested for having a dog without a leash! No one told me...”

“Sir, we have your signature on this paperwork which states that you waive your right to a speedy trial, and it outlines the charges in full. If you failed to read it through completely...”

“I wasn’t allowed to read anything! I was told to sign a form that stated my rights, but they wouldn’t let me see it,”

“Sir, we are not here to discuss the circumstances in which you signed the paperwork or how you were brought in. I ask again, what will you plead?”

“Innocent, by God!”

“‘Not guilty’ will do just fine. Now, is it true that you have recently undergone a case of psychosis in which you were considered to be not in control of your own actions?”

“No - I mean, yes, I was undergoing a psychotic episode, which lasted almost two weeks, but I was in control of my actions. I mean, I’ve never been known to harm anyone during any of these episodes.”

“And just how often do these episodes occur, Mr. Pinkerton?”

“About once every two years or so...before this one it was four years.”

“And have you been seeing a professional for this?”

“Yes. Dr. Zimmerman. He was alright, but then he wanted to refer me to someone else...”

“A Doctor Tara?”

“I don’t know the doctor’s name. I became....frustrated when he told me he wanted me to

see someone else, and I left.”

“Do you remember meeting Miss Mason afterwards?”

“Who?”

“Miss Mason. Lilly.”

“Lilly, yes. I met her. I told her I was leaving, and I left.”

“We’ll come back to that later. Mr. Pinkerton, what exactly was the nature of your relationship with Miss Mason?”

“Lilly...Lilly was...my friend.”

“Your friend?”

“Yes, my friend. She had no one, and I had my government stipend, so I sometimes gave her money or food.”

“What did you give her money for?”

“Well, I don’t know, whatever she wants, I guess. I’m not going buy underwear for a little girl, but I’m pretty sure she needed that kind of thing.”

“So you took underwear from her in exchange for money?”

“What? No, that’s not what I said! I gave her money for nothing. Just for her, to use how she wanted. She had nothing. I bought her food all the time, but sometimes I thought that wasn’t enough, so I just gave her money.”

“For nothing?”

“For nothing.”

“Where were you on the date of September 12<sup>th</sup>, at around 9:00 pm?”

“I was....I was having an episode.”

“And do you remember the nature of what goes on during these episodes?”

“I remember...most things.”

“Do you remember where you were on the given date, at the given time?”

“I was....heading west.”

“West?”

“West.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. I decided to go west, so I started heading that way.”

“And how, pray tell, were you able to tell which way west was during a psychotic episode?”

“I was heading towards the setting sun.”

“And after the sun set?”

“I fell asleep on a bench, with the dog.”

“Do you intend to call the dog as a witness, sir?” the man chuckled. His salt-and-pepper perfectly groomed beard vibrated. Tiny pieces of lint showered from it. I watched as the tiny bits fell slowly, and, suddenly giving birth to wings, they rose up and flitted away. I closed my eyes, and clenched them tightly shut for a moment. When I opened them, the scene was normal. I let out my held breath, relieved.

“No.”

“So you have no solid alibi for that night?”

“No, I do not.”

“And your only witness is the dog?” Another chuckle.

“Yes. He is,” I said.

The dog was led in. He hopped up onto the chair across from me and barked. I closed my

eyes again. ‘No, no, not now...’ I thought. I opened them. The dog was gone, but the vision left me wondering what happened to the dog. I pictured him getting an injection and going to sleep forever in some animal hospital.

“Where’s the dog?” I blurted out.

“Why should that matter?”

“It does to me.”

“He’s being held at a local pound.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“What?”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“No, we only euthanize strays, and although you keep your dog looking like a stray, he’s your property, and is simply being held right now. You will be able to get him back if you’re released.”

“If?”

“You are one of the prime suspects for Lilly Mason’s rape and subsequent murder. You have no alibi. Therefore, if.”

“Do you have any evidence against me?”

“Not at this time. However, after you answer a few more questions, we will be able to decipher....”

“Wait, I want a lawyer, now.”

“Sir, you waived your right to a lawyer when you...”

“When I was having a psychotic episode?”

The man got up and left the little room, slamming the door behind him. I smiled.



It was more than difficult to get a dog out of the pound when you don't remember what it looks like, but they took me through the kennels, and I recognized him at once. When they asked me what name he went by, I told them his name was simply "Dog." At that, I was given "the look," you know, the one that judges you without requiring any further information. I responded to "the look" by explaining, "Look, I know he's a dog, he knows he's a dog, and his name is Dog." That shut them up. When their backs were turned I leaned over the cage and looked into his big grateful eyes. "Hey, Bud," I said.

I had to hurry. I knew, I could tell, I was losing it again. I thought about Lilly. I knew her for such a brief time, and, as far as rag-doll homeless children go, she was the brightest, most cheerful one that I had ever met. I had met more than one. Every time I fell into one of these episodes, I would do whatever I could to help children in need. There was something about them that broke my heart, these children of the street. It was when I was sane that I seemed to always be misbehaving. Something in my memory tugged and pulled as I thought about this. Another memory to bury. Another one for the back-burner.

Considering what was done to Lilly threw me into a rage that inspired some less than law-abiding fantasies. But there was one thing. I had an idea of who could have done it. I didn't want to mention it at the police station, because I knew that they would all scoff at me and subsequently assume that I was shifting the blame to cover my own ass. It's always best to play dumb in those situations. People assume that stupid people are innocent, most of the time.

Bud and I walked quickly to the park; the one where I had met Lilly many times. She loved to mill around the park, it made it seem like she belonged, and she was often asked if she was lost. She loved to feel like a normal child, whom people looked at as belonging to someone,

and this place was the closest she could get. On one occasion, she was even shooed away from me by an elderly lady as I was handing her some cash to get lunch. I remember her giggling hysterically at the woman, who looked shocked when she lied to her, saying that I was her father.

It was a nice place; people brought their families, their dogs, and everyone was always cheerful - that was why they were there, to unwind. But there was one man who I didn't like, who I never liked - the one that I suspected to be Lilly's murderer. He walked through the park daily, always slowing to look at her, and it was the way in which he looked that got under my skin. Like he was hungry for her. A predator watching its prey. And he had another look, one that resumed when he passed her by. It was a look of planning, as if a plot was forming in his mind, and had been for a long time. I had been watching him closely for a few months, more or less in the past several days when I had fallen into a deeper psychotic state than usual. Today he never made his walking circuit. Today, he didn't show up at all.

So, I stayed, and waited. For the next few days, he didn't show. Then, on the fourth day, as I was gesticulating at some bats that had surrounded me from nowhere, I saw him. There he was, "stretching" by a picnic table, combing the park with his eagle eyes. I decided to watch him for a while. There were two women who came to the park regularly, not the most reputable sort, who let their children run without the slightest check until it was time to leave. I had seen a few occasions in which the two youngest girls, about six and seven or so, were given moderate beatings for not coming when they were called at the end of the day. These two liked to stray as far as possible, sometimes hiding in the small shrubs from their bullying elder brothers. I had noticed them several times, but now all I noticed was how the man's eyes were glued to them as he passed them in the sandbox. It was almost as if I could read his mind, as if his plotting thoughts were being muttered aloud, so only I could hear them. I was convinced that it was him.

But I needed proof.

I decided to follow him. He walked a few more times around the park, always slowing and staring at the little girls, and then headed for the parking lot. I watched him get in a cab. It was time for Bud and I to jog. We followed him downtown, hanging back a bit, helped by the many red lights and busy streets. At one point, his cab cut off another cab driver and I thought I had lost him. Bud darted down an alleyway, and I followed, more distracted than calculating, but when it came back out into the street, I found myself in front of the cab. I patted Bud's head appreciatively.

After that, it wasn't difficult to follow him all the way to his apartment complex, a looming cheap place downtown. I don't understand why people think they need to go places in cars in this city. It's simpler and cheaper, and often the same speed on foot - sometimes faster. From across the street I saw him go inside, and then I followed him in. He was in the lobby, fishing mail out of a mailbox, when he caught sight of me. He paused and looked up at me, a curious recognition in his eyes. I put on my best drunkard imitation.

"Yis thisss, uhgh, is thiss one-tah-seben Mabple Street?" I slurred.

"No," he said, and, turning away, he mounted the stairs quickly.

I looked over at his mailbox. It read, "Peter Glines." I looked at the wall, until I found the buzzer for Peter Glines. His apartment was number 107. I wrote his name and address down on a slip of paper and put it in my pocket. I wasn't really sure what I was accomplishing. It certainly wasn't proof, but it was progress. I looked around me. Where was I? A hotel? It seemed like....and there was a party....confetti was falling, and a woman was laughing, swinging up to me, and then staring at me, as if offended.

"What are you doing here? Were you invited?" she demanded. I turned on my heels,

feeling a sudden flood of fear. Was I not invited to this ball? Was I not on the guest list? The chandelier tinkled overhead threateningly. I turned and ran out the door.

Screaming. All I could hear was screaming. The bats were back, screaming in my ears. It was the middle of the day. Had I been asleep? I must have been. I was lying on a bench in the park. I swatted at the bats, but they quickly transformed into dollar bills which stuck to me like glue. I was attempting to scratch them off when a disheveled woman approached me. She was in a panic.

“Did you see them? Where did they go?” She seized me by the shoulders and began to shake me. “You’re here every day. You must have seen them! Where are they?” she kept yelling. When she let go, she loomed up over me in monstrous proportions. She must have been twenty feet tall. And that was when she began to look like a demon.

“Get away from me!” I cried, shrinking away and hiding under the bench with Bud. He whined and licked my nose. “She’s after me!” I told him.

“Leave him alone. He’s just a crazy old bum! Come on, let’s keep looking!” Another woman came out of nowhere and yanked the first one away.

I stayed under the bench for a long time. It was safer there. Then the rain came. Bud and I were hungry, so we left to go to the shelter for a bite to eat. A man kept asking me if I was alright. I was better off than he was, though. He was covered in bees. I kept wondering what it was that I was doing. I had some kind of plan, but I wasn’t sure what it had been.

After we left the shelter, we went to a place that I like to go when it rains. It was once a bus stop, but the bus didn’t stop there anymore. There was an overhang with a bench inside it, though, and it made a perfect place to wait out a rainstorm.

I settled in next to Bud. Perhaps he could help me straighten out my thoughts. “Bud,” I

began, “I can’t seem to remember what I was doing. Could you be so kind as to remind me?”

“Roulf,” Bud answered in a refined voice.

“Roulf?” I inquired.

“Yes, Roulf. Do you expect me to be able to form your human words with my tongue?

It’s just not made for that.”

“I’m sorry. I just feel so confused.”

“Well, that’s because you *are* confused, and you have been so for quite a while. It was my understanding, though, that you were on the trail of the smelly man.”

“Smelly? Man?”

“Correct. The man who smells bad, smells wrong. You thought so yourself, I believe. You thought the smelly man killed Lilly.”

“Lilly!” I cried out, suddenly remembering.

“Yes, Lilly. And you were too late to help her. Perhaps too late to help the other two as well.”

“Other two?”

“Yes, yes. Must I spell everything out for you? You saved my skin, and I owe you my life, but, damn, you are a scatter-brained fellow, that’s for sure. I’m speaking in reference to the two little girls who wandered off and vanished in the park today, while you were too busy fighting off money bats to notice.”

“Was it…”

“Well, I didn’t see anything, but I could certainly smell him. And afterwards, when those tow dingbat mothers were running around like beheaded chickens, I couldn’t smell him anymore. I don’t know how he did it in plain daylight, and I did take a few trips to eat out of some nearby

trash cans, but I am personally convinced that he took them.”

“Well, what are we doing, then? We need to go help them!” I cried, leaping up. Bud followed suit, his tail wagging.

We ran. We ran like a river that runs down a mountain; unstoppably fast. I fished in my pocket as I ran, and found a scrap of paper with an address written on it. My memories were coming back faster now. I found his apartment downtown and scurried into the elevator, pushing the button frantically several times. I made it to apartment number 107. I tried the handle. Locked. Dog was coughing, almost retching. I watched him for a moment, completely forgetting where I was or what I was doing. Dog seemed to choke for a moment, and then coughed up a small object, and licked his lips. It was a bobby pin.

“How did you...” I looked at him, and noticed how sternly he was looking at me. “Oh!” I realized, grabbing the slimy bobby pin and fishing around the lock with it.

It took about a minute for me to open the door, and yes, there are some things that you learn from having a criminal record that are useful. I slipped inside quietly.

I entered the room. There was something comforting about it. It smelled like home. I looked around. There was a simple spread of furniture, nothing more. The furniture itself was elegant and yet not overdone, it was tasteful. I examined the couch, it was a patchwork of beautiful leather, yet the colors softly blended and matched. There was a lampshade that had strange, enchanting circular designs spotting it. Forgetting my mission, I walked inside and took a seat on the couch. I lifted my feet up onto the coffee table, a lovely carved wooden item with a claw-foot theme, but upon closer inspection, the claw feet resembled human hands. Something made me feel suddenly strange and uncomfortable. I got up. I walked from room to room, looking at things, while Bud whined at the door. He didn’t seem keen on coming inside.

I found the bedroom, where there was a great wardrobe. I opened it. Inside, there were belts, there must have been at least two dozen, all of them made from leather, with strange nubs lining them. A bat flew out, almost striking me in the face as it flitted by. It bounced off the walls a few times before it found its way out. I heaved a sigh. Was any of this really happening? I saw a jacket in the back of the wardrobe. It was another beautiful leather patchwork piece, like the couch but even more fine. It was checkered, the patches had a pattern. I stared at it for a long time, wondering at its beauty. I wanted to try it on. There was a sleeve missing, I noticed, but other than that, it was a perfect work of art. A Masterpiece worthy of any scrutiny. I lifted it out, it was heavy.

Then I heard something.

It was like a cry, a small, muffled cry, but a cry nonetheless. I swiveled around on my heels, but there was no one in sight. I stood still, silent, listening.

There it was again. Like a tiny whimper. I walked out back into the living room. Bud sat in the doorway, staring at me. He wasn't whining. I went back into the bedroom, my ears piqued, and heard it again, just barely. It seemed to be coming from the wardrobe.

I looked inside. Nothing. A flash of clarity swept over me. The little girls! They must be here! I had to find them. There must be a secret compartment of some kind...

Then it hit me. I got down on my knees and crawled into the wardrobe as deep as I could. There, at the back, near the bottom, was a small space, with a word written lightly in pencil. "Narnia," it read. I rapped on the back of the wardrobe where the word was etched and the wooden backing clicked, and swung open to reveal another tiny space.

There were two little girls shoved in there. They were bound and gagged, shoved tightly into the small space together. Both had been stripped naked. For a moment, I stood there, frozen.

The scene was almost fictional, and I had to stop, to question if it was real. It certainly didn't seem real, surreal if anything. I was going to get myself in trouble here. I must be somewhere I wasn't supposed to be again. I had to stop doing this.

Slowly, I began to back away. My hand was clenched on the doorknob to the wardrobe. It wouldn't let go. I could feel my heart thumping, my breath coming fast and shallow. Then it was just my breath, louder than anything. I looked around again - this time my eyes fell on Bud, who had come into the bedroom. I took another step back, confused. Bud showed his teeth - at me! Why would he do that? Why wouldn't he come with me? I was leaving. I wasn't supposed to be in places like this where I didn't belong....

I picked up one of the belts that was hanging above me. With incredible energy, I whipped it across my path. I had to get out. This monster was in my way. There was blood spilling from his jaws as he growled. He was over ten feet tall, and I, I was tiny and helpless. I looked back, inside the wardrobe were two giant, slithering snakes. I screamed. Bud closed in.

I looked around for a weapon. This place was immaculate, one of those places where all the furniture was ordered out of a magazine, everything matching with perfect color coordination. There was a picture on the wall. I recognized it as an Escher - and I began to get lost in it. There were people walking up a stairwell, and yet they were walking down it. The top was the bottom. I stared at it for a long time, trying to solve its mysteries. Escher always did this to me. I looked around, again, confused. The bats were back, circling the ceiling like vultures. I focused in on a photograph that had fallen by my face. It was a picture of Lilly, a dreamy look in her eyes. It had been taken from behind some bush, (there were a few branches bordering the picture,) of her in the park, wandering. The vision of her face snapped me back into reality. I had to keep in control of my mind.



I remembered the coat. It was such a lovely thing, only unfinished. I needed to take control and stop leaving things like that unfinished. I shook my head. The bats flitted away. The snakes became little girls again. Stupid, simple little girls.

I remembered everything. The police, the questioning, the danger all around me. It was a good thing that I was back. Reality was sharp and clear again. I was in control. There was no time to wait for nightfall, no time to go to the workshop. It had to be done here and now if it was ever going to be finished. Only then would I be complete, when the coat, the beautiful coat was finished. I went to the cabinet where I kept the supplies and rapped on the back. It opened up into another cabinet, where I removed the chemicals I would need. I took out the chloroform first, dousing it onto a rag. Then I went back to the bedroom.

The dog was in there. He'd dragged the two girls out from the wardrobe and was chewing away at their bonds. I stared in disbelief. At first I thought I was losing it again. Was this happening? I checked myself. Of course it was. I kicked the dog out of the way. He hit the wall, hard. As he tried to get back to his feet, he continued to growl at me. I could deal with him later.

I dragged the bound girls onto the bed. I would have to buy another new bedspread after this, just like when I first began. At least the bed was a big space, one where any mess could be neatly wrapped in blankets and discarded. The girls were crying, luckily only muffled cries, besides the tiny whimpers the gags were tight. I took out the chloroform soaked rag and held it in my hand. The rag smelled like something familiar. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Then it hit me. It was the man from the park. He had smelled like this before, on several occasions. Each time he smelled like it, I would go out and get myself a new piece of furniture just to forget. But I didn't have any place to put the furniture. Luckily I got a government stipend, so I was able to rent a small apartment in a crummy part of town where the rent was

cheap. It was a place for me to put things. I didn't live there. He lived there. The chloroform man lived there, but not me.

I didn't want to smell him. He was making me feel sick. And Bud was growling at me, and I didn't know why. I felt like my mind was spinning in circles. The chloroform was too close. I was woozy and frightened. I picked up the belt off the floor. The touch of the nipples on it made me shudder and I threw it across the room. The sudden motion triggered the dog into action. He leapt on me, knocking me to the ground. I could feel him biting my neck. I tried to fight back. I managed to throw him off. I slammed him against a wall again, much harder this time, and he fell to the floor, limp. I stood there, breathing for a few minutes, trying to regain my composure. Why was I here? What was going on? I looked around and saw the two girls on the bed.

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry, are you alright?" I frantically untied them and undid their gags. They were both crying and gasping for breath, huddled together in fear.

"I have to get you out of here before he comes back!" I told the two crying girls. They screamed when I approached them. I backed away. I went to the wardrobe and took out two sweaters. Both of them were coarse like hair and incredibly itchy. But they would have to do. I threw them at the girls, who screamed. "Put them on!" I screamed back. I couldn't get them out of here without something to wear.

They obeyed, and put on the big sweaters, sobbing. Over in the corner of the room, Bud groaned and shook his head, and slowly got to his feet. What had happened to him? The man must have hurt him. I looked around. No one in sight. There was a cluster of fireflies swarming from room to room chasing a floating rainbow that kept letting out high-pitched giggles, but no other man that I could see.

I looked back at the girls, who were now dressed somewhat. I wondered why it was that their hair seemed almost like silken thread to me. If I had some of that hair, I would, why, I'd weave a sweater! The dog was growling at me again. I shook my head. Swirls of chocolate spilled from my nose and sailed through the air onto a giant sundae. I looked back at the girls. I had to get them out. I ran to the front door and opened it.

"Go! Get out of here!" I yelled at them. They scrambled up from the bed and ran up to the door.

Then I remembered the coat. I slammed the door shut just as the girls reached it. There was such dismay in their eyes that I began laughing, it was hilarious. I laughed and laughed, with the stupid dog growling and the girls whimpering at my feet. It was perfect! Not only would I be able to finish my coat, my masterpiece, but I might have enough left over for a small lamp or a new pair of shoes. I could even have the dog paws preserved for my tub, which I always wished had clawed-feet.

I had dropped the rag somewhere. And I had untied the girls, one of my psychotic moments, it must have been. I need to find some way to control those episodes. There had to be a way. I could get myself in some serious trouble if I spilled the beans during one of my episodes. If I ever told anyone about my real life, I'd be locked up for good. I had to find that rag. I shoved the girls back into the bedroom and threw them back onto the bed. I'd have to tie them up again. I picked up the rope off the floor. I looked over at the coat lovingly. It was such a work of beauty. So many people had put their lives into the making of that coat. I couldn't waste all their work and effort just because I was having a breakdown. It had to be finished, for their sake.

I picked up the rag and walked up to the girls. I hovered over their little helpless bodies. I glanced around. The dog was still growling at me. In the kitchen, I could see a bowl on the table,

inside it was a single bright orange. An orange. Or a rock. The chloroform in my hand suddenly smelled good. So good. Like letting go.

I held it to my nose and inhaled deeply. I needed to tie these girls back up. I needed to get started. But I inhaled again. It smelled so good. All of the lines became fuzzy, the shapes were going dark. I could feel my legs falling out from under me as I collapsed in slow-motion. What had I done? I'd never be able to finish the coat if I didn't.....I had to fight off the man, the bad man who smelled bad and kidnapped little girls.....I had to finish this before I got caught... I had to save those girls....finish the coat...kill the man....before he finishes the coat....

10/26/12

### “Expectations”

“Quickly,” the note read. Emerson looked down at it, clutched tightly in his fingers. He quailed. What if he got the wrong one? It could be detrimental. Laura had taken so long to get through her addiction, only to live a few glorious months with him, happy for the first time, before she died.

She had been addicted to a highly toxic and extremely rare new experimental drug, and she knew her death was coming. What she didn't know was that she'd find a way to break her addiction, to learn to live again. When she did, leaving the drug behind in a flourish, eliminating the remainder of her stash, and cutting off her connections with the man she got it from, she

realized her recklessness had taken hold of her health – that it was too late. The drug had been designed to stop the effects of nerve gas; it was being developed by a man who'd known her father back in the war of 2020.

It was supposed to work like atropine, without having to be injected into the heart, but it caused a euphoric effect, and those soldiers who took it were never able to get off the stuff. They called it wac, since it made a person feel “whacked out.” A black market of sales quickly arose, since it had been so rare, and Laura's father's friend was her connection, up until she called him that day, telling him she was done, and not to answer her calls anymore. The man was glad – he'd felt guilty for years, being the deliverer of death to his already dead friend's daughter.

Emerson put the note in his pocket and went out to his car. He unplugged it and got in, driving across town to the place where she used to work. He drove by empty buildings with vacant eyes, smashed windows, reminiscent of another time. There were large stretches of empty factories, where the only sound was the wind that howled through the lonely rooms, now exposed to the elements. He thought how he and Laura used to explore all the abandoned places, about their lives together, how happy they had been.

He remembered how he had been in countless failed relationships before he's met her, how she saved him from his pit of misery. He had been with a few girls, each one he'd thought he'd loved with all his heart. Each one had cheated on him, leaving him in the dust. He had been told that the problem was that he was “a nice guy.” No one wanted to be with a nice guy. It seemed like all girls wanted was a guy who would treat them like dirt. Why was it that he had the inability to be cruel? If only he could master this he might have better luck in life.

Laura had been like a godsend to him. She had struggled with her addiction, but she was always faithful to him. She always made it clear to him that she loved him deeply. He missed her

every moment of every day. There was nothing in the world he wanted more than to get her back. And now he had that chance. He gripped the steering wheel tighter and clenched his teeth as he drove as fast as the car would let him to Laura's old workplace.

When he got there, the place looked to be abandoned. There were no lights on in the big building, besides a faint glow from deep within that Emerson only noticed when he approached the door. He knocked, and at first, no one answered. Then, when he was about to try the door, he heard a shuffling inside, and the door opened to a man with dark circles under his eyes, a man who looked like death.

"What?" the man said, breaking into a fit of coughing.

"Is this the Alpine Medical Center still?" Emerson asked.

"What's left of it, yeah. What do you want?"

"Well, I was....I was the one who started seeing Laura, toward the end," he stuttered, not knowing what else to say.

The man swung the door open immediately. "You're Emerson? Come in! Come in, quickly!" He hastened him inside. There were medical tools and devices clogging the hall; the place looked like it had run out of room for equipment.

"It's all shit that no one wants anymore. We're back to the dark ages now, since the war," he grumbled. Emerson had heard it all before – from the older generation, that things had been so much more technologically advanced before the war. When they talked about all the technology, though, it all seemed so useless to the younger generation. People were starving, people were dying of disease and viruses. Every day, another natural disaster struck the earth in some location or another.

Medical treatment had become incredibly basic. There was no need for advanced life

support, because no one could afford it after the stock market crashed and burned to nonexistence. Hospitals cared for those who could care for themselves. The days of living off support of any kind were over. All of the machines which had cost so much to maintain, were abandoned. The only companies that made machines made electric cars, which were passed down from one generation to the next. There were no aspirations of greatness left, just base desires remained. The only chemists left to the world made addictive drugs, and even they were becoming far and few between.

He remembered holding her close, as they both lay in the grass in their secret place, a small opening in the woods. They had talked about their future, how they would have children and grow old together. They spoke about the careers they would pursue, the achievements they were to make, and all of the adventures they would have together. Then they made love in the grass and the ferns as the sunset against the blackened silhouettes of the trees.

Emerson followed the man through the cluttered hallway, which smelled of dust. He clutched the letter from Laura in his pocket, never letting it go. She had given it to him just weeks before she died, only to be opened upon her death. She told Emerson that he had changed her, that where she once would have gone silently into the dark, she would now fight against it with all her might. He didn't know what she'd meant, until he read the note. He read it the day he found her, dead, in her bed. He'd come in with a rose and a sandwich, to find her staring at the ceiling. Forever gone. He'd wept to the point of bitter despair, he'd considered dying by her side, and then he remembered the note.

It had been tucked away in his desk drawer, and he slid it open and found it, laying it out and smoothing the edges before he dared read the now sacred words.

"Emerson," it began.

“I am going to die, and if you’re reading this, then I have already died. I want you to know that you have become everything to me. You are my savior. I thought my life was a waste before you came and revived me. I want to live now. I don’t want to go. I know that this is hard for you right now, and I know I swore I’d do anything to be with you forever. And I will.

“I work with a man at the research facility, Doctor Zinnagan. He is a very, very intelligent man, who worked for the government before the war. He is now alive to pay a debt. Long ago he did experiments on young girls, working to clone them when our race nearly went sterile. Many of them didn’t survive in his lab. Now, he dedicates his life to saving people, to keeping them alive. He has always told me that he would never clone again, but he is like a father to me. I know he will help. Go to my workplace, and find me. I will be there. He will bring me back. All you need is a piece, a hair, a nail, any small fragment which may contain my DNA, and he can bring me back, Emerson! We can be together again. But you must be sure that the piece you find of me is fresh. If it is old, you will get back the version of me that was addicted, and things may not go the same way they did the first time around. It was a delicate balance of events that led me to quit wac, and I may not do it the second time around. This is very important, and it must be done. Quickly.

All my love, Laura.”

The man opened a door, which creaked loudly. “This was her office,” he grumbled, letting him step inside. Emerson dove at the desk, searching, looking. He searched in the cracks of the old dusty keyboard, and though all the drawers while the doctor watched on, scratching himself, clearing his throat from time to time. After nearly an hour of searching, he found a single strand of her hair, what looked like an eyelash, and a small flake of dried skin. He took the items gingerly on a tissue over to the doctor.



“Can you do it, using these? Can you bring her back?” he asked, pleading.

“Which one? I only need one. I could’ve done it earlier, and I would’ve for that sweet girl – your job is to tell me which one is the most recent.” He looked at Emerson coldly.

“How, how am I supposed to know?” he asked, feeling lost. He looked down at the fragments of the girl he loved so much, sitting dead in his hands.

“You could guess,” the doctor suggested.

He carefully selected the eyelash. “Try this one,” he said. He remembered her brushing her eyelashes against his cheek.

“Butterfly kisses,” she’d said, giggling. He had grabbed her by the waist and threw her down and ticked her, not wanting that beautiful sound of her laughter to end.

The doctor took the eyelash. “Hold on to the rest of those, just in case. This will take some time. Come back in two days,” he said.

Emerson thanked him and left to spend the next two days in unbearable suspense, unable to eat or sleep, he waited. When two days had passed down to the minute, he returned to the old medical center, and pounded at the door.

The doctor answered, looking more tired than ever. The bags under his eyes seemed to take up his entire face. “Come in,” he said to Emerson, motioning.

Emerson followed him down the hall, where he was led into a different room altogether. It was unlike any room he’d ever seen. The walls were bright white, and everything was shining and clean. He could hear his heart beating in his head. His hands were wet with sweat. There were tools neatly lined up on a countertop, and a shining large machine in the corner. In another corner was a hospital bed and on that bed, was a girl. Laura.

Emerson rushed up to her side. “Laura!” he exclaimed, taking her hand in his. She

withdrew it, looking at him suspiciously. She sat up.

“Who are you?” she asked, looking offended. Her sleek hair fell in front of her face, making her look veiled. Emerson stared at her.

“You chose the wrong piece, Bud. She didn’t know you when she shed that eyelash,” the doctor said. He made a clicking noise with his tongue, a noise of pity.

“My name is Emerson. I am here to take care of you,” he told her, never taking his eyes off her precious face. He would do anything to keep her from going back to that drug. But he could not keep her as a slave.

With the doctor still shaking his head, he led the new Laura out to his car and brought her home. He brought her inside, fed her, helped her bathe, and put her to bed. He fell asleep with her wrapped up in his arms.

But when he awoke the next day, she was gone. He frantically searched the house for her, finding nothing awry but his phone which was off the hook – and had Laura’s old connection on it listed as the last call. He now knew where to look for her.

He found her in the streets outside the old community building. The community building was the place where junkies went when there was nothing else they could get. It was a giant building that was used in many different ways. For many people, it was a place to squat. For others, it was a house of prostitution, but for most, it was a place to find low-grade wac.

She was face-down on the street. There was blood pooling in her face as well as her stomach and thighs. Her hair was limp and damp. She smelled of sweat and sex.

Emerson gingerly rolled her over, crying silently. His tears fell on her in a torrent as he saw that she was already dead. There were marks all over her arm. Someone had given her a bad batch. It was a common death, but no less painful for him. With a wasted sense of hope, he

lugged her body back to the Alpine clinic.

“Can you try it again?” he begged the doctor when he opened the door just a crack. “Please?” he asked, tears running steadily down his face. His whole life, he had never been able to find someone. He’d been with girls – here and there, but he never felt real emotion towards them. She was the first. She was his everything. She had shown him life again.

He had fallen into the same old lifestyle most people lived, and she had shown him a different way. When he wanted to stay inside all day she’d forced him out. She had forced him to climb old rickety buildings with her, to explore the underground subway tracks, to rediscover animal life in the wild when he thought it was too rare to be found anymore. She’d shown him that to choose the most difficult path was often the most rewarding. She enchanted him, haunting his dreams every night. He refused to let her go.

The doctor sighed and motioned him inside. “Will it be the skin flake or the hair this time?” he asked..

“Try the skin flake,” he said, thinking that the hair could be possibly more aged. He carefully lugged Laura’s body into the sterilized room and placed her gently onto the bed where he had found her. With the doctor watching him with pity, he left.

Two days later, Emerson was pounding at the door again, and the doctor was slowly shuffling to answer it. “It’s not good,” he said to Emerson as soon as he let him in. He and Emerson walked into the back room, and she lay there in the bed, alive again, but this time, in an entirely different way. She was strapped to the bed with restraints, and she thrashed and screamed violently. As soon as they walked in, she began to curse them both, making even sailors sound prudish.

Over her screams, the doctor explained. “Now this is an entirely different one. And

congratulations! You chose another bad one. This one was going through withdrawals. I think I might even remember the day she lost this skin flake; she was only here for a few hours because she had to leave to get her fix. She was sweating like crazy and spent most of the day in the bathroom, slamming things around.” He motioned Emerson out of the room. The boy was confused, he wanted to run and hold her, but he knew she would only scratch and bite him. He’d seen her this way before. He followed the doctor out.

“With your permission, I’d like to go ahead with trying the hair, and put this one to sleep. She’s just going to keep suffering until she gets the stuff,” the doctor said.

“What? Are you kidding me? You act like the real version of her never was addicted to anything! We can get her off it. I will not let you put her down.”

“Then you’ll have to take her. I need that space.” the doctor told him.

“Fine,” Emerson said, glaring at him and walking back into the room with Laura. He undid her restraints and she punched him, scratched him, and made him bleed. He did his best to hold her arms pinned as he dragged her out, her thrashing violently against him all the while.

“Good luck,” the doctor said as he went out the door. But just as he swung the door open Laura ripped herself from his grasp and took off at a sprint. She ran into the road and was immediately smashed sideways by a passing truck. She fell to the ground, limp. Emerson ran to her, screaming, and it was already too late. Her blood splattered across the open street, the truck continued on as if nothing had happened. Another common death. The doctor watched the entire scene from the doorway of the clinic. He shook his head slowly as Emerson walked back inside cradling her limp, broken body.

“Let’s try the hair this time,” he said.

Two days later, Emerson returned, feeling completely flustered and confused. Was this

simply not meant to be? Was he fooling with science that he shouldn't be? Where should he draw the line and give up? And then what? He had his fingers literally crossed as he walked up to the door, and he was praying under his breath as he knocked.

The doctor answered, looking glum. "The hair was old," he simply said, leading Emerson into the back. Emerson wanted to lie down and die. There was nothing left for hope in him. He walked into the back room, and found Laura lying in the bed, already dead.

"I couldn't keep her alive without giving her drugs. She had such bad withdrawals, and I just didn't have what I needed to treat her. I figured it was better to let her go than to keep her alive on that shit." he hung his head. "I'm sorry, kid. I really thought this might work. Otherwise I never would have arranged the whole thing with her. That girl, she really wanted to live toward the end. And it was because of you." He held his face in his hands.

Emerson felt the tears streaming down his face again. He didn't want to live without her. If there was no chance in getting her back, he decided to just die. And now that was all he had left. "Thank you for trying to help," he said slowly to the doctor, weighing each word. He was drowning in despair.

"I'm surprised you never found anything else. You didn't find any old snot or anything under her desk?" the doctor asked.

With a rush, Emerson remembered Laura's avid habit of picking her nose. She had to have put all those snots somewhere! He ran back the room that used to be her office, and bent down to look under the desk. There was an array of old mucous deposits glued there, and for a moment he was overwhelmed with the amount of precious DNA that surrounded him. Then, he focused, and started gingerly touching each one, until he found one that was still pliable, not yet hardened and brittle like the rest. It was surely the most recent. He took it, and excitedly

presented it to the doctor, who sat, looking depressed, in the sterile room on a stool.

“Look! This will work, right? It’s fresh!” he said.

“Kid, I don’t know if I have enough supplies left. I already cloned three of them. I’ll try my best, but you better give me three days for this one,” he said, looking so tired that he wavered. Emerson gleefully handed over the booger, and left.

Three days later, he returned, pounding on the door harder than ever. It opened immediately to a young girl who was strikingly beautiful. Her hair was long and vividly red and her eyes were big and alarmingly green, and Emerson was momentarily lost in the space-time continuum that loomed within. She had an erotic look about her, the way she moved, and Emerson was more than struck by her appearance. He focused on shutting his mouth and gathering his scrambled thoughts.

“Are you Emerson?” she asked. Half of her mouth seemed to be smiling at him, but he wasn’t quite sure.

“Yes, who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Doctor Zinnagan’s daughter. My name is Karen. I am taking over his work for him; he’s very sick. But please, come in.” She motioned him inside and he followed, his mind wiped entirely blank.

She led him down the hall into the sterile room where Laura was lying on the bed. She sat up when Emerson entered. She reached out to him.

Emerson dove into her arms. He cried with happiness. She cried as well. “You brought me back! You did it!” She was sobbing. “Emerson, thank you so much! I love you!” she cried. “And you were able to choose the right piece!”

Emerson looked at her. She was the Laura he remembered. He was incredibly relieved.

He felt as if he could rest now, and everything was perfect. There was Laura, when he never thought he'd have her back – it seemed too good to be true.

After getting her collected together, Emerson walked her out to the car. She was still very weak. There were some strange-looking blue veins in her neck that seemed to pulse and throb whenever she tried to move. It was a worrisome sight, but Emerson assumed that she probably just needed some rest. He returned to the clinic's entrance to thank Karen and to tell her to thank her father for all they had done. Life was meaningful again. Life was full of life again.

“Thank you!” Emerson said, after a quick and awkward embrace with Karen. He told her to thank her father as well. “You have no idea what you have done!” He looked straight into her eyes. She looked straight back into his. Her eyes bore down, penetrating deeper than anyone ever had, deeper than Laura, deeper than his very mother.

Somewhere, deep within, she shifted something, moved something. He realized he had been foolish to think of committing suicide over Laura. In fact, in that very moment, he'd forgotten Laura entirely. He was momentarily hypnotized by her stare, like that of a queen's. He knew at that moment he'd never be able to forget her.

“You're welcome,” was all she said.

Emerson walked back to his car, and in a mixed state of elation and complete confusion, he drove away.

4/5/12

Dog Love

There I was. There he was. There we were. We sat next to each other on the couch, my hand resting lightly on his muscular shoulder. He was a dog. I'm not. I'm human. No matter how much I want to live his way of life, no matter how potently I wish, I will never be a dog. I need to accept this. I need to move on, but I can't. All I can think about is George. George George George. He is so handsome, so full of integrity.

Human boys aren't like that these days. None of them will ever stand for anything. Oh, sure, there are boys who will make a stand against something that no one had ever had an issue with before, but if there is even a hint at a potential opposition they back down like little pansies.

Not George. George stands for something. He stands for what's right. While humans lie, George tells nothing but the truth. His powers of manipulation are only used for good, for spreading affection. He has no secrets, nor does he want any. He lives life straight-forwardly, without allowing others to influence him. He has no sense of guile, or deceit. He is who he is, and he reflects me for who I am. In a world of cheating, lying and stealing, there is one thing left that is true, and his name is George.

When I first met him, I thought at first I had fallen in love with his owner. I so loved to be in his presence that I confused who it was that I was really in love with. It was my mistake to assume that it must be the human of the pair who had me on my toes.

But soon, I realized the truth. George had a fine owner, this was true, a fine specimen of human, probably finer than any other I've met in my life. If I were to settle upon a human as a lifetime companion, I'd probably choose him. But I promised myself long ago that I would never settle. I want the best, and the best is definitely George.

I stroked his soft, thick fur, sinking my fingers deep inside for warmth. He leaned in on me, kissing me lightly on the cheek. We were lovers, he and I.



The only problem with our relationship is our communication barriers. Sometimes, once in a while, there's just something that we can't quite get through to each other. It helps to only ask him yes or no questions, but it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes, I honestly want to know his opinion on something, and I just can't get it.

In order to deal with this frustration, I try to distract myself. I'll get down on his level and pretend I'm a dog just like him. I'll do everything, the sniffing, the rolling in grass, the barking, the tug-of-war games with a rope held between the teeth. Let me tell you, there's something to it. Acting like a dog, and really, truly making an attempt to think like a dog really takes your mind off your everyday troubles. You should try it sometime.

George's owner finds me amusing, I think. He likes to see George happy, so he allows us to be together as much as we like to. He pursues me from time to time when he isn't too tired with living a human life. I love to be pursued by him, but there is too much time left in the day that I must fill. Because of this, I find myself playing dog far more often than I play human. His human life consists of many hours of monotonous work, so he has little time for being a dog. His human ways of unwinding are not very dog-like either, and so, in the meantime, I am happy to be with George.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling tired, George will meet me halfway and pretend he's a human. He'll get up on his hind legs and walk about, make dog sounds that resemble human speech, and try to read. You may find this last part hard to believe, but I've seen him do it. He'll plop himself down in front of a book and just stare at it for long stretches of time. I do believe that, in a way, he came to understand the written word, or at least recognized it for what it was.

"George?" I asked him.

He looked at me earnestly as a response. His owner was in the bathroom.

"George? I love you, George. You are the best. You are my favorite. You are the man."

George nodded in agreement.

"George?"

He perked up an ear.

"What would you say if I asked you to run away with me?"

George got up and went to the door and whined. He looked at me expectantly.

I looked around. The coast was still clear. "Alright," I muttered, and I found myself stumbling for the door, forgetting my coat.

George's owner must have wondered what was going on as I tore out of his driveway. I might be back. I might not. It was really up to George. I'd follow him wherever he went.

And he wanted to go west. Right from the beginning, that was the way he pointed, and I followed, blinded by my love.

After a day of driving west, we stopped for food. I didn't have much money. I knew that this was all or nothing, that I had to abandon my job, my family, and my entire life in order to follow my dream of running away with George. I had plenty of doubts, countless hesitations, but my love for him outweighed them all.

I went into the convenience store and found that I only had enough money for a single bag of dog food. I looked longingly at the cellophane wrapped-sandwiches and bags of chips, and went up to the register and paid for the dog food.

George led me into the depths of the South, and as it got hotter and more dry, I began to lose the smell of the lingering coast in my nostrils. It was replaced by the smell of grass and rich earth, and George, of course. I got hungry enough to start eating the dog food with him. At first, it made me gag, but I got used to the taste, and eventually it got so that I barely noticed it.

We traveled from the Deep South to the Mid-West, and it was somewhere around Wyoming that I began to lose my understanding of how to drive. It was strange; I realized slowly that I had forgotten what certain buttons did. I began to have trouble shifting. I felt confused, and part of me was a bit panicked that I was losing this knowledge that I never had a problem retaining in the past, but another strange emotion had come over me. It was a sense of simplicity, of what really mattered - the feeling of a hug, or sunshine warming your skin, the happiness of being in the outdoors. What certain functions of certain buttons did seemed meaningless to me, it was just useless information. The feeling of being independent was what mattered, of being unhampered by society's expectations.

I felt as if I was being slowly, gradually set free. I pulled over after I began to swerve because I'd lost all concept of how to drive. We left the car where it had gone off the road, into a thick section of bushes and shrubbery where it had become completely obscured. Then we started walking. It was nice. There were no confusing buttons or levers to deal with. Just reality. Just the present moment. There were sights and sounds to think of instead of worries and fears. The life of a dog sure was the life for me.

We lived like vagabonds for several moons. I scrounged what I could from the land and George honed his hunting skills. Sometimes he would have more meat in a day than berries or roots that I could find. On those days, if I begged, he would give me some of his scraps. It grew colder, eventually, though. We huddled together for warmth under the leaves and the brush, but we were still cold. I think it must have been around that time that I started growing a fur coat.

At first I thought it was just a natural reaction - which it was, technically. It simply should have taken thousands of years in evolution to take place, but for me, it happened in a matter of days. I began to notice a thickening in my arm and leg hairs, as well as my own hair,

which had developed a grizzled appearance, like a lion's mane. But then the hair began to thicken more and more, and it began to grow in places where it never had before. I was in a state of intense instinctual awareness at the time, and this probably saved me from panic.

All of my desires to look attractive to human males had dissolved over the past few months. All I cared about was the practicality of survival, and the enjoyment of impulses. I had learned so much, and George had taught me everything. I would never have been able to survive without his help. He taught me how to hunt meat, how to chew grass to assist in digestion, how to keep warm in the cold when there was no shelter by digging a hole. I would have starved or frozen or both without him.

By mid-fall, I was covered head-to-toe in fur, and my hands and feet had become blackened and tough from use. One day, as I was chasing some wild rabbits for dinner, I thought I broke my legs. A firm snap in my knees happened suddenly, and I fell to the forest floor. It was not painful, only very uncomfortable at first. I eventually got used to it, this reversal of my knees. The only problem was that I lost my height. I had to stay on all fours from that point on in order to function more efficiently. It took a while for my arms to develop the muscle that my legs had in the running process, but soon I was able to keep up with George, something I had never been able to do in the past.

It was the beginning of winter when I noticed that George was getting depressed. I think he missed the ease of domesticated life. I missed it a bit, too, but it had been pushed so far from my mind that I hardly remembered what it was like.

One cold day he trotted back through the woods the way we had come.

Whimpering, I followed him back to the road, back to my rusty old car that had been parked behind a copse of trees off to the side. It was covered in leaves and pine needles and dust,

but other than that, it had remained untouched. George jumped up and pawed at the door while I sat back and watched. I didn't want to go back to that life. If he went, I'd follow, but I didn't want it. Just thinking about it reminded me of not being with him, my love.

George made a point to come back daily to the car. Each day he jumped up and pawed at the door, looking back at me expectantly. I would have taken him for a ride, at least, to make him happy, but I didn't remember how the thing worked. It was all so confusing.

One day, George jumped up and pawed at the door and the door swung open. He must have hit it just in the right way. He jumped inside and sat in the driver's seat. I jumped in and pushed him aside and sat in the passenger seat. We sat that way the rest of the day, me whimpering, George silently studying the buttons and gears. We came back every day for what seemed like forever.

Then, just as winter hit hard, on the first snowstorm of the year, George figured out how to start the car.

"No, George! Let's stay, please! We don't have to go back! Please!" I half begged, half yelped. But George didn't listen. He kept studying the controls. He put his paws on the steering wheel. I noticed that his paws had become misshapen, strange looking. Almost like fingers. I wondered why.

And then he straightened up, shook, shedding fur everywhere, and pulled out onto the road.

He kept shaking and scratching all throughout the first part of the trip. Soon, he was almost bald, and his paws had become warped into long, gangly black fingers. They slowly lightened, though, and in a matter of days, he looked more like a human than some humans do.

I, in the meantime, had been reduced to low growls and whines. I still was covered in fur,

which made me hot, and all I wanted to do was go back to the woods, where I was free. But I loved George. I would not leave him.

When we arrived back at his owner's house, the ground was covered in deep snowdrifts. It was with shame that I reluctantly cowered towards the door, following him. George led the way gaily, happy to be back in the swing of domestic life. The windows glowed with the warmth held behind them. At the first bark, the door swung open, and there he was. George's rightful owner. The reunion was tear-filled and ecstatic, as I sat in the background, silent and sad.

“George! You look so....human!” he said.

George may have loved me, but in the way a dog loves. There was little intensity or passion. It was a simple preference of familiarity. It was an appreciation rather than a reason to live. I was heartbroken, for I still loved him like a human.

When George's owner was finished with his reunion, he noticed me. He came up, and touched me gently, petting my fur, which had become tough and coarse from exposure to the weather. Some of it came off in his hand and he looked at me strangely. I whined.

He picked me up and took me to the bathroom, and washed me. George watched, wagging his tail happily by the heater. I gave him a look as I was being scrubbed, a look that said, grudgingly, that he was right, this was pretty nice.

As I began to relax, I felt a crack and my knees reversed back to their human state. I winced, but George's owner kept rubbing my back soothingly, and I sank back into the bubbles with pleasure.

It didn't take long for George to revert back into his dog-like state. I seriously believe that he had assumed a more human form simply because he had to, and because he could. He is a massively intelligent dog, with capabilities I'm sure I still have yet to discover. Once he had

navigated our way back to where he wanted to go, his need for assuming a human form fell away. I do not blame him for wanting to stay a dog. I must admit, after having been both, I preferred the dog form immensely more.

When he was finished, I felt like a human again. I felt right. All of the hair that didn't belong had fallen off, clogging his drain. I looked at George, and he looked at me. I saw him through dog eyes and he saw me through human eyes. We would forever have a connection that no one could ever sever. I looked at George's owner, the fine man specimen, who would make a wonderful mate. And then I looked back at George.

"Will you adopt me?" I barked at them both.

George's owner said nothing, but he patted me on the head. George barked. I was home.

6/7/12

### "The Abarimons"

I have been places, many places, and I have seen many things. I have seen insect life that has yet to be discovered. I have seen the darkest of nights, deep within dense forests of all foreign lands. I have seen it snow in the tropics, and I have seen it rain in the driest of deserts where rain is unheard of. I have seen many things that were called miracles by the people who lived in the places I have visited. They have even written articles about me. "Simon West, the last of the great explorers," they once called me in a backpacking magazine. My dog has even developed a small amount of fame for joining me on all my adventures. The intriguing and amazing things I have seen could fill entire volumes. But nothing, nothing compared to what I saw, once, years ago, in the deep wilderness of a region untainted by humankind.

I was in the Himalayan Mountains in Pakistan, on a trek seeking solitude. Many of my adventures included goals, to discover a new species, to seek out some old fossils, to mine precious stones, whatever fit the region at hand. I was good at finding just what it was that the particular region had of interest, and I exploited it for my own amusement.

But I was growing tired of such monotonous work, and I wanted, for once, to take a trip somewhere where I could just explore with nothing particular in mind to look for. I'd been here before, when I climbed Everest, but not in the more obscure region of the mountains that trailed farther off toward the most northern part of India. Not many had travelled there. It was said to be a desolate place where many people found themselves lost and would never return. It sounded perfect.

I had been about four weeks in when the incident occurred. I had with me only my supplies, which were stacked upon a mule I had bought; my dog, Scout; and my companion and guide, Tahir. Tahir was a man of few words, perhaps only of few English words, however we got along well and he seemed to like me, despite the fact that I was American, something that often gets in the way of striking up friendships in foreign lands.

It was on a cliff side with a very narrow passage that it happened. We were edging our way across, leaning against the sloping wall behind us as much as we could, for the fall was so far that the ground could not be seen except for the distant horizon, which reflected a warm afternoon sun. We had gone up far enough so that there was about a foot of snow to trudge through, and Tahir was constantly testing the footing ahead by prodding through the snow with his staff. The going was slow, but I was accustomed to such treks, and I enjoyed the fresh air as we inched along.



Suddenly there was a low growl that seemed to come from all around us. It reverberated in an almost groan-like noise as Tahir turned to me, his eyes wide in alarm.

“Chaal! Run!” he shouted over the rumbling that had grown from the growl. I realized then what was happening. An avalanche. I did what he told me to do. I ran. We were more than halfway across the ledge, so we ran forward, over uncharted, unstable ground. It was a choice between possibly falling to your death or being buried alive in snow, so I took the one choice I thought might save me.

The snow was slippery underfoot, and several times as I scrambled forward, I felt my feet slipping toward the perilous drop. I went faster, hoping to keep balance. I could see Tahir up ahead of me, a dark shape in the snowy mist that began to envelop us. It was the beginning of the wave, the start of the massive landslide, coming down right towards us. I looked up. There was nothing but white – a great, white tsunami that would surely envelope us in death. I could see the place where the ledge widened up ahead, but I was sure we would never make it. My breath came in panicked gasps as the first sheets of snow began pouring down over us.

Then, I saw it. A tiny cave, dug into the side of the cliff. I knew at once this was our only hope. My dog had already ducked inside; the mule with the supplies was nowhere to be found. I cried out to Tahir, but he didn’t hear. I cried out again, a last attempt, before I saw him swallowed up in the wave of snow, which swept him like a rag doll off the edge just as he was about to reach its end. I felt the weight of the snow falling on me, and I quickly dove into the small cave, just as the heavy blanket of snow came roaring down over where I had just been.

I sat in the pitch black cave, listening to the deafening roar. The entrance was at once filled in and there was barely space for Scout and me inside. He whimpered, and I hugged him

close to me. I wondered if I would die here, frozen, in this cave. It may have been better to die quickly, like Tahir probably did, than to wait for a slow, cold death.

After a few minutes of petrifying fear, the roar subsided. The avalanche was over. I waited a few hours with Scout in the dark just to be sure. Then, realizing just how cold my body was becoming, I began to dig my way out. Scout helped. We dug and dug, for what seemed like an entire day. I thought we would never reach the surface. But then, when we were both at our weakest, I saw a faint blue glow from above. With renewed hope, I dug us out. Scout was ecstatic. He romped in the fresh, untainted snow like a puppy.

The landscape had been changed by the avalanche. Where I had been formerly standing on a narrow ledge, I was now in a wide open area. All of the landmarks that Tahir had been using to guide us had vanished. I realized with dismay that my attempt at surviving this event had only just begun.

For two days we walked aimlessly, eating snow, since there was nothing else. I tried my best to keep a steady direction the way I had come, back toward the base of the Himalayas, back where it was warm enough to not freeze to death. I must have gotten misguided somewhere, though, because I found myself in a part of the wilderness that I did not recognize. I remembered all the survival skills I had learned, but very few of them were of use without our supplies, which had been lost along with the mule in the avalanche. I did what I could, though, and on the third day, I even managed to light a fire in the snow.

It was something I'd seen Tahir do with much more skill than I. He'd used a piece of ice to magnify the sunlight onto a pile of sticks and wood shavings, setting them on fire. I had to use a small, empty burlap sack I had kept in my pocket for collecting any items of interest I thought I

might find as my kindling, and I built it up with some sticks I had found from a bush I dug up out of the snow.

Scout and I sat close to the fire, and fed it slowly as the day became night. I realized we should keep moving, but I didn't know where to go, and the only reason to keep moving was to keep warm, which we were somewhat already accomplishing. In all honesty, I was distraught. I had been trying my best to keep my wits about me, but in the face of impending death, this becomes difficult.

It was almost dark by the time I thought about finding some kind of shelter. I looked around. There seemed to be nothing as far as the eye could see....but for one thing. Off in the distance, moving up an incredibly steep slope at incredible speed, was a figure.

For a long time I thought I was seeing things. Three days without food and very little rest can do that to a man. But I watched the figure, and I realized that it must be real. It looked like a human, but one that was not bundled up as I was. It was a thin silhouette, and I could make out each slender limb as it strode. It seemed to have long hair, and the way that it walked, at such an incredible speed, was very strange. It was not just the speed which made it so peculiar, but something about the legs, the feet....

The feet! They looked all wrong, as if they were backwards. I shook my head and looked again. The figure was still there, its feet now buried in deep snow, still making its way up what appeared to be an eighty-degree slope. I decided that my eyes were playing tricks on me about the slope and the speed and the feet. What I could tell for sure was there was a person out there, and this meant I might be saved. I called out toward the figure at the top of my lungs, startling Scout from a deep sleep. He whined.

The figure stopped dead when I called out. It stood in absolute stillness for what felt like a full minute. I called out again, and it turned slightly, facing me. Then, it started coming toward me. I sighed in relief and waved an arm. I watched, and waited for it to approach.

Something was strange. I began to have doubts about my incorrect judgement of its speed. It really was moving as fast as I thought, for it covered the distance between us in what surely would have been less than half of the time it would have taken for any fit man. As it approached, I realized with horror that I had also been right about the fact that it was without clothing. It was an old man, completely naked. He had long, sweeping hair, and dark skin. As he strode even closer, I called out again.

“Hello! I’m lost! Do you speak English? I speak a little Hindu, but I...” I trailed off as the man approached, keeping a distance from my little fire as if it was too hot for him. I looked at his feet. They were pointing the wrong way. I gasped, felt lightheaded. The world began to spin around those backward feet, and I fell into a faint.

When I awoke, I found myself in a cave by a warm fire. Scout was by my side, and there was a pile of roots and plants and a chunk of some kind of meat at my feet. I ate ravenously, offering some to Scout, who declined. He must have already eaten. I almost retched afterwards from the shock it caused my body. Then I began to look around.

At the opening of the cave were three figures, all watching me. One of them was the old man, who I assumed brought me here and saved my life. The other two were women, one old, one young and strikingly beautiful. There was something wild and primal about her, and yet she was soft and delicate looking. I was immediately taken by her, but then I realized again that these were not typical humans.

They all had backwards feet, and were all nude. They were also larger than the average human, and more built, with light-colored skin that seemed as thick as leather. They seemed to not like the fire, and they sat as far away from it as possible, occasionally showering themselves in handfuls of snow as if it was too hot in there for them. They were all talking to each other in muted tones, in a language I did not recognize. It sounded ancient. The old man, seeing that I was finished eating, came closer and spoke to me. I couldn't understand a word he said. His speech resembled a broken Arabic; it flowed gracefully, but was completely strange to me. I thought of all my experiences in foreign lands, and I decided to play charades, a game that has saved me many times while lost in translation.

I first bowed to him, and he smiled, understanding my thankfulness. I then held my hands above me, making a look of confusion, and spun my finger in a circular motion, hoping he'd get the idea that I was lost. He nodded, as if he comprehended. Then he pointed to my feet, made a look of surprise, and laughed.

I was a bit baffled at first, that he found *my* feet to be strange. I smiled at the thought, and pointed to his feet, making the same face and laughing myself. It was as if we were instant friends. He approached closer and put his hand on my back, patting it with affection. He guided me over toward the entrance of the cave, and I sat with him and the two women. They both pointed to my feet and giggled. I laughed in return. They handed me another chunk of meat, and I ate gratefully, sharing some bits with Scout, who lay by my side in sleepy contentment.

We communicated the best we could through charades, and using some sounds. I described the avalanche and they immediately understood, saying "Palash, Palash." I took this as their term for it. I told them that I had come from far down the mountain. And they fanned

themselves as if they were not just thinking about it. They clearly were more comfortable in the snow. I wondered how a race of people could live in this region for so many years without ever being discovered. I realized I could make myself rich sharing this amazing new knowledge with the world.

This was something incredible, something completely unheard of. I envisioned the fame and recognition I would get - but then, suddenly, I thought about what would happen if they were discovered. They would be exploited, taken from their natural habitat; some of them would surely be killed so science could learn from their interesting anatomies. I looked around at the smiling, warm faces that had taken me in, saved my life. I realized that this would have to remain a secret. Perhaps, someday, I could write about it under the guise of fiction. Otherwise I would have to keep silent about this, if I wanted to help them the way they had so selflessly helped me.

That night, I stayed up quite late talking and laughing with my new companions. These people, whoever they were, however they had managed to elude the rest of humanity, were good people. They were something of a miracle in themselves, having survived so long with such ease in an unforgiving climate such as this. I was happy to be alive and even happier that I had been given such a rare opportunity. I crawled back to the dying fire and curled up with Scout with a great deal on my mind.

They had said they would guide me down the mountain tomorrow, but they had implied that they could only bring me so far. I knew as long as I could get to a warmer climate, I could survive long enough to make my way along a river until I found civilization. They had also given

me a large pile of meat and roots, which I had packed away into my deep coat pockets. My only regret was not getting to know the beautiful young lady more.

She was intense and exotic; her laughter sounded like rain on a tin roof. Her dark, long hair fell in chunky curls, sending soft shadows over her face. She had a look of complete purity about her, not a line on her face showed a sign of worry or stress. She was slightly larger than we in stature, but still she seemed to radiate a strong sense of femininity. Her body was lithe, thin and muscular, and her eyes smoldered with a fiery light. They were a deep orange and large, her eyes, and I had never seen anything so striking in a woman. She reminded me of a wildcat of some kind, the way she moved.

That night, I was awoken. The fire had gone out, and there was blackness all around. I could see a dim light from the entrance of the cave from the moon, where the old man and woman had been crouching. There was no sign of them now.

It was she who had awoken me. I found her sitting on top of me, her hand placed squarely on the center of my chest. It was as if she was pouring something into me. I felt warmth radiating from her heat that was more intense than anything I had ever experienced. She slowly bent over me, closer, until I could feel her body against mine. It was strange; her body was neither cold nor warm. It was simply there, supple and soft. I tried to embrace her, but she let out a little hiss and made me lay still.

I will not go into the details of what happened that night, mostly out of respect for her. All I can say is that we made love in a way that was never attempted by humans, and that it was the most marked experience I have ever had. Afterwards, I wondered if we had even made love, or if what we had done was something else entirely, some kind of sacred ritual. Either way, I

spent the remainder of the night in a state of bliss that I cannot describe well enough to do justice to it. She left me after we finished, striding out into the eerie moonlight on her backwards feet, and I never saw her again.

The next day the old man awoke me and led me down to where the snow petered out and the warmer climate took over. He walked with me, patting me on the back occasionally and pointing at my feet to laugh (this joke never seemed to get old for him,) before he began to sweat profusely. After a while, he was bathed in such a sweat that he could not go on, and he embraced both of my hands in his before turning back.

I wished I could give him something, anything, a gift of some kind, to show my appreciation. Then, quickly, I ran back to him, after finding a photograph in my pocket. It was a photo that had been taken of Scout and me after returning from a trip to Maldives, and I was in my bathing suit, smiling. I had taken the picture along purely by accident; it had been in my pocket when I left. I ran back to the old man and gave it to him, bowing to him one last time. He broke out in laughter, pointing to the picture, and then to me. He bowed in return before turning to continue his way back up the mountain.

I often wonder to this day about the beautiful girl and her family. I wonder if there are more like them. The one idea that nags at me the most, though, is that there may be a young child among them now with feet that splay out sideways. I may never know, and a part of me hopes that if there is a child, he or she will live with those people, outside of human reach and influence. They seemed to live such a happier, simpler life. But I'm not even sure if what I did that night would bring forth a child. It all seems like a dream now, and for a long time, I thought I had imagined the whole experience. Even now, my mind plays tricks on me, and I sometimes



wonder and doubt whether any of this really happened. I did a great deal of research, and I found that these people are mentioned in many ancient myths. They were called Abarimons. To prove that they were real seems ludicrous now. I would be a laughing stock. So I keep my memories to myself.

Someday, I think I will go back. I will try to find my way to the place where I was lost before, and perhaps find her again. No woman I have met can please me, none can please me like her. I would be happy if I could just see her one more time. I will plan a trip to return there, but first I will train myself to become more used to cold climates. Maybe, someday, I can leave this world behind and join them in the mountains. It sounds like a far-fetched dream, but it is mine. For never will I forget the girl who loved me with the backwards feet.

1/20/12

### Three Blind Mice

"You klutz!"

"You stepped on my tail, you imbecile!"

"Only after you sat on my crumb sandwich!"

"I didn't know you had a crumb sandwich there. You didn't declare it!"

The two mice swatted at the air in the direction of each other's voices. When they finally found each other, they leapt into a wrestling frenzy.

The third mouse crept off to the side, sniffing around the floor until he found the slightly-squashed crumb sandwich that had been left behind. He ate it quickly.

A loud crash startled the three blind mice from their squabbling.

It was the dreaded farmer's wife.

If they had been able to see; the glint of the huge carving knife would have blinded them, causing them to be unable to see, thus this sentence is pointless.

But they could certainly smell her. The farmer's wife, who had long since lost her mind, always smelled of excrement. They could smell her from a mile away, but never had they smelled her so strong, so up close.

"Run!" the first mouse squeaked, and they took off across the wide, long countertop.

She was right behind them with the knife. They ran side by side, slightly touching, as they had done since they learned that this was the best way for them to all run together without tripping over or bumping into each other. Unfortunately, this made them a much larger target.

If the farmer's wife had retained any of her wits at all, the three blind mice would have been no match for her. She would have chopped them up into fine little mincemeat pieces and fried them up for dinner. That, after all, was what she had done with the cats. Unfortunately for her, however, she was practically blind herself, not to mention the fact that she had been singing the Chiquita banana song for the past five and a half hours, and was thus a bit tuckered out to be hunting.

With a loud "Clang!" the knife came down, shooting a spoon across the room and shattering the salt shaker, which crashed to the floor. The mice had almost made it to the crack between the counter and the fridge. They only had a few more feet to go.

"Go faster! She's right behind us!" one of the mice shouted, his statement being terribly accurate for a guess.

The knife came down again, this time hitting home, and sliced off all three of their tails at

once. They all squealed in agony and dove the last few inches into the crack, into safety. The farmer's wife cackled as she licked the mouse blood from the blade, and turned to stomp off into the dining room.

The mice screeched and squealed and rolled and reeled until they were out of energy. The third blind mouse found an old piece of a tissue and wadded it up in their tail stump wounds to stop the bleeding. It was not only a matter of pain, it was a loss of pride. Being blind, the three mice had only once thing for each of them to be proud of - and that was their handsome tails. Now, they had nothing. What mate would ever want a tailless, blind mouse? For several days, the mice hid inside the crack, rekindling their sense of self-worth. It was a difficult time for them all.

But then, after a week had gone by, and their tails healed up for the most part, the sadness and destitution turned into anger and rage.

"We've got to get her, that old hag. She took everything from us!" the first mouse said to the others.

"She deserves to suffer like she made us suffer!" the second mouse said.

"But how will we do it?" the third mouse asked.

The three blind mice then put aside their squabbles and their petty disagreements, and they worked together to form a plan of revenge.

The next day, they scurried out from their hiding place in the crack, across the kitchen floor and up the stairs. They sometimes snuck up there during the night, mostly to gather feathers from the busted open pillow that had lain there for months, ever since the farmer's wife had lost her mind and began slashing everything with her big carving knife. This time, though, it was not feathers for their nests that they were after. They were after blood.

They scurried over the toppled over dresser, spewing out clothing in every direction. At one point, two of the mice became lost in the mess of clothing, and the third mouse had to play Marco-Polo (a game they were all much accustomed to) until he found them and freed them of their tangles. They skirted past the torn pillow, which one mouse almost drowned in. They failed at dodging the smashed glass picture frames, in which two of the mice stubbed their little toes, and trotted wearily past the old, rotting pumpkin that had begun to take on the sharp scent of mold. They were able to avoid that, since they could smell it.

They ran through the bedroom, past the farmer's dead body on the floor, which had gone from stiff to slimy in the past few months, and was nearly black with rot. He smelled far worse than the pumpkin, and was easily avoided. They carefully sniffed their way around the old blood spill, which had long ago dried into a flaking brownish color caked on the wooden floorboards. If some of their friends hadn't long ago eaten out his eyes, he would have stared at nothing.

Finally, they reached the lower corner of the bedstead. The farmer's wife lay in the bed above, cuddling close to her carving knife, asleep. She gurgled in her sleep, and a string of snot streamed out of her nose with each exhale, and got sucked back up with each inhale. Her feet stuck out from the blanket at the end of the bed, her long toenails curled, yellow and thick around her cracked and smegma-covered toes. She snorted in her sleep and turned over, the knife still held tight in her grasp.

"Just like we planned, now." the third mouse whispered to the others, who were licking tenderly at their stubbed paws. They nodded in understanding.

"Okay?" said the third mouse.

"Okay!" they chimed, remembering that nods do not suffice among the blind.

The three blind mice then climbed the blanket and crept ever so quietly closer to the

farmer's wife. A thick wad of phlegm drooled out her mouth onto her crusty pillow, already stained with years of drool. It blubbered out slowly, and when she exhaled, it blew up into a bubble momentarily, brushing up against one of the mice and nearly frightening him out of his wits.

"Ready?" asked the third mouse.

"Ready!" the other two squeaked.

In a mad rush, all three mice scurried up onto the farmer's wife's chest, and held on. She sat bolt upright, screaming profanities and gibberish. Seeing the three mice clinging desperately to her chest, she did what any typical person with sense would do, she took her carving knife, and stabbed at them.

The third mouse's sense of smell was keen, and he could smell the metallic scent of the knife as it plunged toward them.

"Jump!" he shouted, and the other two mice leapt away, one bouncing off the bed, the other falling to the floor. The third mouse jumped to the bed frame at the farmer's wife's feet. He faced her as she stared at him with rage. It took a moment for her to realize that she had stabbed herself, and not the mouse. The carving knife protruded from her chest where it was lodged, wavering slightly. She gasped. a different gurgle came into her throat, and a trickle of blood ran down the side of her lip off her narrow chin. She grabbed the knife and pulled it out of her chest. Blood spurted out immediately soaking her crusty old shirt in a bright fluorescent red. She wielded the carving knife, and pointed it at the third mouse at the end of her bed, who seemed to be grinning at her.

With her last ounce of energy, she threw the bloody knife at the mouse. He turned, and showed her a clear view of his backside, showing her his missing tail, and, in the moment of her

demise, she realized that this was no accident, that those mice had been plotting between them to kill her ever since she'd cut their tails off. It was the first clear thought she had experienced in months.

Then she died.

The mice took over the house after that day.

And so, when you hear the story of the three blind mice, do not pity them, for they took care of that farmer's wife pretty well. Not all small, adorable creatures are helpless, you see. And, although it is not a human trait to reward acts of revenge, in the world of mice morals, there are some occasions in which revenge is necessary. As it was with the three blind mice, who, of course, lived happily ever after.

2/7/13

### “What Happened After”

What happens after happily ever after? After the action stops, and the real life begins? We forget. We forget that we aren't living in a movie, in a world where “happily ever after” applies. Because it doesn't. We live in a world where life continues on, and we have to deal with what comes next. Sometimes it's boredom, or loneliness, or just being distraught. Sometimes we just have to deal with it. When that crowd chased me out of that church, angrily screaming swears that were probably never uttered so close to a place of worship, me laughing, pulling the stolen bride along behind me, I thought for sure it was a happy ending. I thought that this was it; that now we could live happily ever after. But no one told me what typically happened afterwards.

I was completely in love with this girl Elaine. And she liked me quite a bit too. There was a lot of other stuff going on between me and her mother, but I wanted to be with her, and she me. The only problem (besides her livid mom) was that she was supposed to marry this guy Carl, who was a complete ass. So I did what every storybook hero has to do in these situations. I stole her. That's right, I stole her right off the altar at the last second. And that was our happily ever after – that is, until it actually happened.

What happened after was this: We were happy. I suppose. We sat together on the big seat on the bus, the seat way in the back. We sat a distance apart, our hands clasped in the middle. It was almost a reach, almost a chore to have to hold her hand from such a distance. Her hand didn't fall into mine or wrap around it. It clenched it. Some Simon and Garfunkel song was playing on the radio in the background and everyone on the bus was willfully trying to ignore us. We were not a part of each other; we did not complete each other. Each of us was already complete, and still, we held hands anyway. I wanted to scoot over and put my arm around her like she was mine, but it seemed so presumptuous at this point. She was looking out the window at the suburban yards racing by. I wondered if she was thinking about everything she was giving up for me. I felt like cringing.

I wondered what I would do next. Like, right now, the next thing I was about to do. Where were we going? I hadn't even looked. The thought of what to do came on slow, like a dream, but then, as it settled, it became more and more urgent that I figure it out. I was the man, wasn't I? Wasn't I supposed to be whisking her away? The people on the bus kept turning around to stare at me. She was obviously a bride, but I...well, let's just say it was obvious that I was not the groom.

“Do you want to...?” I began, turning toward her suddenly.

She turned toward me eagerly. “What? What did you say?”

I had to recover. What had I been about to say? Did I even have a plan before I opened my stupid mouth?

“Nothing.” I shook my head, angry at myself.

“Oh.” She looked at me for a moment, and then turned her attention out the window again.

I thought frantically. What could we do? I couldn’t take her back to my apartment. It was a mess. And it would look trashy for me to bring her home like a cheap date after what we had just been through. I needed to bring her someplace nice, someplace expensive. I wondered why she had chosen to run off with me in the first place. What did I do that made me so worthy of her? Carl was better than me in every way. His good looks, his money, his job, all of those expensive hobbies. *Carl*. I had to think of something, though, the bus was entering downtown, and this was where most of my options were. She was beginning to look around, shaking out of the trance she’d been in for the last half hour.

“Would you like to go out and get some coffee?” I asked.

“Sure!” Elaine said, and then, looking down at her huge flowing gown, “but I, um...”

“We’ll get you some new clothes of course! Whatever you want! Where would you like to go? Sears?”

“Sears?” she looked confused. “Is that place still around? Does it even sell clothes?”

“Oh, I mean, wherever you want. Where would you like to go?” I thought of adding “Madame” for a nice flourish at the end, but by the time I thought of it, it was too late.

“Oh, I don’t know. Let’s walk for a bit until we find something.”

“Alright then.” We rang the bell and the bus stopped and let us out. Great. Now I would



have to take her clothes shopping, just so I could take her out for coffee. I hoped our relationship wasn't going to be like this – like one big trip to the poorhouse.

But she was frugal, and cost me very little, and by the time we were sitting down at the coffee shop, her in a fresh new outfit, sipping our drinks, I was stuck trying to think of what I would do from there again. I was supposed to have horse, a limo, or at least a motorcycle or something that I could carry her off on. I was supposed to bring her on my private jet to a tropical island where we could be alone. But I was pretty broke, and I could hardly afford a picture of a tropical island, let alone the real thing.

I certainly didn't have much to offer. I had just graduated from college and I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. My parents were constantly pressing me into going into graduate school, but I hadn't thought that far ahead. There was no way of being sure that I'd ever make something of myself. I had worked menial jobs, washing dishes, serving ice cream, doing some landscaping, but I was still unsure about what I wanted to do for a career. It seemed like such a big decision to make when you know so little about life.

I thought about how I should offer to take her to dinner, maybe a movie at least, something, but I barely had enough for a hot dog. I had spent most of my money on the cab to get to her wedding on time. I wasn't thinking then, and now that I had time to think, I didn't know what to do.

“I wasn't sure about the dress.”

“About what?”

“About donating my dress to that store. It was over seven grand.”

“What?” I gasped.

“Yeah. Well, it was Carl's money, so.”

“Oh.” I pretended to act like that made it not matter. My mind sped back to the store and begged the clerk for a reprieve. I wondered if it was possible. Could I somehow get it done without her knowing? I’d have to get rid of her for a while. But I couldn’t just ditch her somewhere....

“So would you like to go out to dinner later?”

Damn it. She had to drop that bomb.

“Um, well, you see, I’m kind of broke right now... so...”

“Oh.” She looked down, uncomfortable. “That’s alright, we could do something else. Like, go to a movie or something.”

I cringed. “Well, you see, I really don’t even have enough for that.”

“What?” she asked, staring.

“Yeah, I’m really sorry.”

“You don’t have any money at all?”

“Not really.”

“Well, how am I supposed to get home?”

“What, you mean, how are you getting back to Carl’s place?”

She seemed to cringe at this point. Then she began talking through her teeth. “I do have to get my stuff out of his apartment, you know. I doubt he’ll even be there, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid, just...”

“Jealous?”

“Well, yeah, obviously...”

“Do you think you should be acting jealous after what I just did? After everything I just

walked away from for you?”

“Well, I suppose I’m jealous whenever you’re with him.

“Does that mean you’re never going to trust me?”

“No! That’s not what I mean.” I scrounged in my wallet until I found a credit card that hadn’t been maxed out yet. “Here, you can use this to get home if you’d like. I...I suppose I’ll just go home. You can call me or come over whenever.”

“Benjamin! That’s a bit casual for the man who just stole me off the altar, don’t you think? I was hoping for a bit more romancing after that,” she said, squinting at me.

“Look,” I said. “If you can think of anything we can do in this city without money, please let me know. I’ll be waiting at home for your call.”

She hailed a cab all in a huff, and I began my long stroll home. It took me over an hour to walk from where I was. I knew that Carl’s place was closer to the coffee shop than mine, but I shrugged that thought away. When I got home, I went on a frantic cleaning frenzy, until you could eat off the floor. She would have to be impressed.

I waited all night for her to call, but she didn’t. Oh well, I thought, she’d get back to me soon enough. But the next day she didn’t come, nor the day after that. So on the third day I called her, bracing myself for Carl to pick up the phone. But it was her.

“Listen, Benjamin, what we did was fun and romantic at the time, but I knew it wouldn’t last. It couldn’t,” she said over the crackling lines. “I’m staying with Carl again now anyway.”

I felt like she had crushed my skull. It was excruciating. I felt like falling down on my knees. “You’re what?”

“Yeah, it’s not that bad, I guess. And it’s what mother wants. She really hates you. Anyway, I’ll be fine, I’m sure. We just have to do the best we can with what we get in life, you

know?” She sounded like she didn’t know.

“I don’t know.” I admitted.

“Look, I have to go. I need to fold Carl’s laundry before we go out to the Rouge tonight.”

I was baffled. How did he get a reservation at the Rouge? That was where celebrities went. I realized I was way out of my league. I needed to back off. I thought I had been in love with this girl, but she was way to high-maintenance for me. There was no way I could compete with this kind of money.

So I took my pants off and sat and I started watching some Kung Fu. I must have gotten through most of a six pack when the phone rang again. I almost didn’t pick up. But on the off chance it could be her....

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

It was her. My heart throbbed.

“How are you? Aren’t you still at dinner?”

“I’m at a payphone. I’m bored stiff. He won’t stop talking about stocks. It’s like us getting back together means nothing to him. I don’t know what I’m doing. I just wanted to talk to you.”

I watched as Bruce Lee kicked Chuck Norris in the face, and the film cut to a kitten meowing, then it cut back to the fight. I suddenly remembered watching this one with her. She’d liked the kitten.

“You should come over,” I said, suddenly not caring about sucking up to her anymore.

“What? Are you kidding me? And leave him stranded again?” She sounded surprised.

“What are you, his chauffeur? Anyway, I have a beer left here with your name on it.”

“Ooooh. A whole beer? I don’t know who to be more impressed by, you and your beer, or Carl and his stocks.”

“Whatever. You don’t have to. I’m just watching ‘Return of the Dragon.’”

There was a pause.

“I’ll be right over,” she said, hanging up.

As I sat with her, our legs intertwined, re-watching the film I’d just seen, I realized that things would never be perfect – there would never be a happily ever after. I also realized that the harder I tried to strive for perfection, the more frustrated and stressed out I became. I decided to try to live in the moment, to enjoy it. I figure happy endings do exist, but they are just endings to different scenes of life, not of life itself. I somehow liked that idea even more than “happily ever after;” instead, I would get so much more. “Happily ever after” is so dry, so cliché, so formal and final. How about “all the emotions of the spectrum ever after?” That at least adds some depth to it, some flavor. We would all wither up and die if we were to live happily ever after, because death would be the only thing to look forward to if there wasn’t some kind of up-and-down roller-coaster like trip ahead of us. The promise of the unknown, that was better than knowing your fate.

She reached across the couch to grasp my hand and I got up. She looked confused. Her hand sat limp where she’d reached on the middle cushion. I sat on it and farted. Giggling loudly, she tugged it out from under me and held it out like she’d need to wash it. I kissed her without warning. She held me, laughing. We might get in a fight tomorrow and break up. I might get hit by a bus. It didn’t matter, because we had this moment, and it didn’t have to be for “ever after” to make me happy. It just had to be now.

