hey were never entirely sure what it was. One of the doctors said it was a severe asthma attack, another thought it was a heart attack. A third thought it was SIDS, even though she was almost two. We never got an autopsy, so it didn’t really make much difference.

All I could think about, as I bumbled around my ex-wife’s house, was that in a fair world this would cut my child support in half. I shared that around a couple of times, but nobody really seemed to get the joke. Or was it a joke? I wasn’t sad. Not like I should’ve been.

“Larry,” my ex-wife said, after I turned a corner and ran into a black man I didn’t recognize. She helped him up, gave me a cold shoulder. I flipped him off. “Larry, go home.”

“Hey, she was my daughter too,” I said. “This is my funeral as much as yours.”

“No one wants you here,” she said.

“I don’t care.”

I didn’t care, and it didn’t do any good. A few hours later I was sitting on the couch alone drinking shots of brandy while the guests moved around me. I’d been trying for a few hours to get sad. I knew I should be sad. Dead children are always sad.

She hadn’t been much of a child though. Not even much of a person. Two years old, and she’d barely said word one. She’d spent most of her life just staring out the window. Not to mention asthmatic and I was sure she was practically brain dead. Just staring out the window, pointing at birds, opening and closing her little mouth, not reacting to cars. The hours we’d spent trying to get her to talk, to move, to play with her brother. It was enough to drive anyone crazy.

My ex-wife’s dad, Rick, walked over and tapped my shoulder. “Come have a drink with me,” he said.

Dixie ran over as I came outside, dropped her ball down at my feet, wagging her tail wildly. I threw the ball for her, and off she went. “How you holding up?” Rick said. He poured us both a glass of whiskey.

“I’m alright,” I said.

“It’s a damn shame,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Beth’s really shook up over it.”

“Yeah.”

“Look, she needs…well. When a woman has a trouble like this, well,” I looked over at him. “Well, she needs a man there. To look after her. You know what I’m saying. She needs a…rock to cling to.”

“I’m no rock,” I said. “Just listen to Beth. She’ll tell you. I’m less than a pebble.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” he said. “She’s always been too independent for her own good.”

A week before our elopement he’d called me into his office. “What are your intentions towards my daughter?” he’d said, gripping the edge of his chair. I just wanted to fool around, but I didn’t tell him that. Two days later we found out she was pregnant.
And now here he was, telling me his daughter needed a rock. “Beth’s her own damn rock,” I said.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I was hoping that you would do the honorable thing.”

“Honor? We got a divorce! A dirty one. It’s over. Hell, she wouldn’t take me back now if I wanted her to.”

“Tragedies have a way of, well, loosening up a woman, if you catch my drift,” he said, looking at me. “They’re looking for someone. You just have to be in the right place.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Just think about it,” he said. “I just want what’s best for both of you. And Brian. Think about Brian.”

He walked back inside. I didn’t much want to think of Brian, or my marriage, for that matter. I didn’t want to think of much of anything.

I got in my car, drove back to the cemetery we’d left earlier that morning. Her grave was up on a little hill, a tiny little plot. If I hadn’t known what was in it I would have thought the casket was cute too, when they were putting it in. A cute little casket to go with a cute little dead girl.

I sat down on the grass next to the headstone.

Amy Bryce
2004-2006
Taken from us too early.

Why do we bother to bury children? I thought. Why do we bother to bury anyone?

I thought of all the stuff she’d never get to see. She’d never watch her brother get beaten up by the neighborhood bully, never watch her neighbors go to prom, never see the just married car riding down the street.

God damn it, I thought, why can’t I just be sad.

A bird flew by overhead and crapped on the headstone. I wiped it off with my suit jacket, poured my daughter her first drink of brandy, and got up to leave.

I spent the night awake in my apartment, staring at the ceiling. At about four in the morning my phone rang.

“Larry,” Beth’s voice cracked over the line.

“Beth?” I said.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just want to, I don’t know…”

This was it, I thought. It was my chance.

“Go to sleep,” I said.

“But…” she started. I hung up the phone.
The neighborhood children painted themselves red and purple, the juice of ripe berries dripping from their chins and staining their hands. Carson’s old mulberry bent down and held its branches low, like welcoming arms. Boys and girls in denim and cotton dangled from every limb. Their bellies, taut and full, resembled those of nursing pups. Ken half-heartedly suggested riding bikes. John attempted to rally support for a game of baseball. But the humidity dampened all aspirations. The temperature climbed to 99. The children hung from the tree like moss. The canopy of green became their sanctuary.

Suddenly, a chorus rang out, “Train! Train!” They all heard the whistle and the rumble at the same moment and moved into action like well-trained troops. Every child on Oak and Pine Street came running and screaming as if the ice cream man was throwing free cones.

John Casey was the acknowledged leader. “Line up and don’t shout ‘til you can see their eyeballs!” He cupped his hands around each side of his mouth, forming a megaphone and added, “Do this as you yell!” Everyone knew what to yell.

John sprinted ahead, first to arrive at the narrow crest of the hill where the tracks lay in a bed of white rocks. Something was wrong. Jimmy wasn’t behind him, struggling up the hill with the other children; he was on the tracks. The red-headed, 7-year-old hummed a Johnny Cash tune. He drew on the rails with a broken piece of yellow chalk. His bad ear pointed toward the approaching locomotive.

John crouched low, lunged in front of the train, and tackled Jimmy. The pair tumbled down the opposite side of the hill like two wrestlers. No NFL lineman had ever made a better play, nor any firefighter, a braver rescue.

The engine’s crew—who had been sipping hot coffee out of red, plastic thermos lids—looked up and saw only a line of children waving wildly, as if greeting brave soldiers returning from war.

If trains were animals, they would be lions, thought John. The train growled and hissed in reply. The heat of the summer sun magnified the pungent mixture of tar, oil, and creosote emanating from the railroad ties. It filled their nostrils. The dense smell became intricately woven into the fabric of the day. The passing train generated a blanket of reflected heat. The combination was nauseating.

I saved Jimmy. I saved him. I just jumped in front of a train! Thoughts swirled in John’s mind like an Indiana tornado. He leaned sideways and wretched violently into the tall, green grass.

John and Jimmy gazed up at the thundering train that came so close to claiming them. Its hypnotic song reverberated in their two small frames. “Thuh-thunk, thuh-thunk, thuh-thunk,” it sang rhythmically. The lion had transformed into a lullaby. An occasional screech of steel against iron served as a refrain.

The red caboose arrived and delivered them from their trance. Trainmen in overalls leaned over the rail, waving to the crowd of happy children on the other side of the hill. They were gods—powerful, gift-giving, life-taking, beast-taming gods, these men. John wanted to be one of them. One day I’ll ride the rails from coast to coast like my Grandpa Casey used to.

A dull ache in John’s chest echoed his emptiness since his grandfather’s death.
Boys and girls lined up along the tracks, standing as close as they dared. With hands cupped around their mouths, they sang at the top of their lungs, “Throw chalk!!! Throw chalk!!!”

It rained chalk—each one yellow outside and white inside. The chalk landed at their feet, it littered the tracks, some pieces were caught in mid-air, and others rolled downhill, begging to be chased.

Children eagerly gathered the chalk like candy thrown from a parade float. They transformed grey sidewalks into museums of art. From the opposite side of the hill, John watched the caboose disappear ‘round the bend. He whispered, “Throw chalk.”

Jimmy lifted one arm and wiped his nose on the short sleeve of his favorite t-shirt. As they descended the hill to Oak Street, he handed John a short, fat piece of yellow chalk. It was all he had to offer. “I’ll never forget,” Jimmy promised.

Just as the boys reached the street, Denise Murphy and Veronica Joyce rolled up on giant wooden spools from The Paper Company. Denise adjusted the purple ribbons on her pigtails and all in one breath said, “We set a record, John! Three blocks without falling off! Did you guys get us some chalk?”

“Here,” said Ken, offering the girls his only two good, unbroken pieces.

“We gotta go,” said John, apologetically.

The boys passed under the willow and climbed up into John’s apple tree. Jimmy dangled from the perfect horizontal branch below. No one said anything for awhile. Then, John told Ken what happened back at the tracks. “Blood brothers…that’s how it works,” he concluded, trying to make it sound as if it was no big deal.

“Thanks, Buddy,” offered Ken in his most serious tone. “Not everybody would do what you did,” and he glanced at his little brother hanging-on tenuously beneath him.

•••••

Normally, John and Ken went everywhere together, just the two of them. This summer had been different, though. Ken’s mother, Rose, had called the boys into her kitchen during the first week of summer. She made an announcement. “Startin’ next week, I’ve got a job as manager over at the Soap ‘N’ Suds. I’m counting on you, Kenneth Wade, to watch your brother Jimmy. Keep an eye on him—hear me? Play outside like you’re supposed to. And do not come bother me at the laundromat unless it’s an emergency.”

“This is important, Kenneth. I’m gonna save every penny I make. I don’t care how long it takes. We’re movin’ back to Kentucky where ya’ll can breathe some clean air!” She blew a perfect smoke ring over their heads, stubbed-out her cigarette, and stared at them with steel-blue eyes no one could argue with. The steep mountain roads, evergreens, and ice-cold ponds of Kentucky were woven into her upswept strawberry-blonde hair. Down-home bluegrass was the background music of her voice. Rose was a displaced thoroughbred. “Any questions?” No one dared to speak. Your dress is the exact same shade of blue as your eyes, thought John.

“I got a hair appointment at Melba’s. Be good!” She kissed her boys on the top of their matching heads. They listened to the music of her high-heels clicking along the path. Then, she slipped behind the wheel of her lipstick-red Thunderbird, and was gone.

“They ought to name one of those hurricanes after your mother,” John suggested as the dust settled. She’s beautiful—dangerous, but beautiful.

Making the best of the situation, the boys performed a blood-brother ceremony. John stabbed his index finger with a needle, Ken did the same, and Jimmy reluctantly followed. They touched fingertips. At least I finally have a younger brother, thought John. Jimmy promised to keep all of their secrets. In return, John and Ken began teaching Jimmy everything they knew.
“Other than that near-death episode you pulled on us this morning, you ain’t really been a load this summer, like I thought you would,” Ken informed Jimmy. “So, we’re gonna let you come to the switching yard with us today—heart of all the train action in Hammond.”

The boys hadn’t walked two blocks before a train delayed their journey.

“B&O, Buddy, my favorite,” noted Ken admiringly as the engine appeared within sight. “This one’s got ‘em all: flatbeds, tankers, boxcars, piggyback cars—every color, too. See ‘em?”

John and Ken were train connoisseurs appreciating each passing boxcar like some people sip fine wine. “It’s a secret code—numbers, letters, chalk marks. Right there, on that boxcar, Jimmy,” explained John, pointing to the cryptic writing passing by. “They’re carrying rolled steel, lumber, cables, oil—all kinds of stuff—heading for every state, too. I sure wish I had a good watch. I’d time every train I saw.” mused John.

“A watch! I wish I had a supe’d-up cherry-red Mustang with lots of chrome and a 390 under the hood! I’d race across these tracks and wouldn’t wait for no train!” said Ken.

The caboose arrived at last. “My Grandpa Casey said they’ve got a high bunk up in the caboose. You go to sleep in one state and wake up in another. That’s the life for me—traveling coast to coast.”

The crossing gates went up, block after block, down the line. “Looks like flags at the Indy 500!” observed Ken, who related everything to cars. “Did I tell you I’m working on a model of a ’57 Chevy? My dad got it for me at Ron’s Hobby Shop last night. I couldn’t believe it.”

“I’d like to get a model railroad going one day,” replied John.

“You know what today is? It’s the halfway mark. Summer’s half-over already.”

That somber thought quieted them all. No boy ever wanted summer to end. John handed them each a piece of Bazooka bubble gum to take away the bitter taste of the news.

“You gonna ask Miss Luv to marry you or what, Buddy?” Ken asked, trying to brighten the mood.

“You’re the one who’s in love with Miss Luvinski; not me.”

“Oh, I forgot: you like Denise Murphy who always wears purple. You probably got a list about her, ain’t ya?”

“As a matter of fact I do. Just working on it this morning,” said John, as he pulled a list from his pocket, unfolded it, and read it aloud.

List of things I like about Denise Murphy:
1. She knows all the state capitals.
2. She knows how to catch fish and can clean them, too.
3. She can climb any tree in our neighborhood—even Carson’s mulberry tree.
4. She can swim out to the floating dock at Wolf Lake.
5. She likes to read Hardy Boys mysteries and shares her books with me.

“Now, what’s not to like about a girl like that?”

John held up a little brown suede pouch that jingled. “I’ve got a bag full of going-to-the-pool quarters and I’m heading to Douglas Park this Friday. I’m going off that high-dive they’ve got! “Who’s going with me?” No volunteers.

Ken turned to John. “I’ll go, but no high-dive.”

They walked past the Church of the Nazarene. Unfortunate girls in unfashionably long skirts were being ushered into the old, cold, brick building to spend a glorious summer day indoors at Vacation Bible School. “Waste of summer! Ought to be a crime!” muttered Ken, outraged that such a thing could happen to children.
As they rounded the corner, the faded, pale-green arch of the Calumet Ave. Bridge loomed ahead, resembling a mammoth stuck in a tar pit. When they reached the Calumet River, Ken announced—solely for Jimmy’s benefit, “Time to cross!”

“Couldn’t we just go over the bridge?” asked Jimmy, with a desperate edge to his voice.

“Bridges are for cars, grown-ups, girls, and sissies,” Ken replied, brushing aside the hip-high, green grass, as they descended the steep hillside and headed down to the shore.

John went first, effortlessly across in less than a minute. “Confidence, Jimmy!”

“It’s the Calumet, Jim. Don’t fall in or it’ll fall off,” Ken warned, seriously.

Jimmy stood at the river’s edge. “What’ll fall off?” he asked, trying to sound disbelieving and brave at the same time. His voice cracked.

“You know what. Now don’t act stupid and do exactly what I do. Come on!” ordered Ken. He hopped from boulder to boulder with amazing agility for a boy of his size. “See, it’s easy,” Ken was saying. He looked over his shoulder just in time to see Jimmy slip from a green, slime-covered boulder and fall waist-deep into the nastiness of the Calumet.

“Ahhhh!!! Ahhhhh!!!” Jimmy screamed and grimaced, expecting his reproductive organs to drop off and fall out the right leg of his jeans. The stinky, murky water of the Calumet River soaked his Levi’s and favorite orange Underdog t-shirt.

“Shut up, Jimmy, Shut up! For Pete’s sake, I made it up! Now quit squealing like a girl and take my hand.” Ken pulled his likeness from the foul green water with the oil slick on top. He whispered into Jimmy’s good ear, “You tell Mom one word of this and I swear I will tell everybody in the neighborhood that you still pee the bed.”

John tried to console Jimmy, whose bottom lip was quivering. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it to the switching station tomorrow. I’ll teach you to cross. I’ve never fallen in yet.”

The boys walked down Soul Street on the way home. The smell of heaven wafted over them before they could even see the sprawling factory that looked like a castle or the 10-foot tall chain link fence of The Queen Anne Candy Company. “Wish my mom got a job there instead of the stupid laundromat!” said Jimmy, who had developed a keen appreciation for chocolate.

A chink in the armor of the factory fence revealed a small retail candy store. The face of the store was a pristine white tile wall with two rectangular glass windows, like eyes full of chocolates. The door was covered in fancy gold, script with a little crown over the letter “Q”.

A tall, blonde woman carrying a large white box of chocolates walked out of the store. She wore a white linen dress, pearls, a large hat, and matching shoes. She took one look at Jimmy—who smelled like the Calumet and looked like a drowned rat—and said, “You boys look like you’re having a pretty rough day. Would you care for a chocolate?” Before the boys could answer, she opened the box, revealing chocolates wrapped in gold foil, chocolates with pecans sticking out, chocolates hiding caramel, chocolates full of strawberry cream. “Shall I choose for you?” She handed them each two chocolates in noisy brown paper cups. “Have a lovely summer afternoon, boys,” she said through perfectly painted pink lips.

Each of the boys managed a syllable or two at her back, “Thank you!” or “Thanks!” they mumbled. She slipped into the back of a long, white limousine.

“Is she a movie star or somethin’?” asked Jimmy. “Looks like Glinda the Good Witch.”

“Are you crazy? This is Hammond, not Hollywood—or Oz,” Ken responded. His understanding of geography
was greater than his knowledge of women.

“That lady, she’s like the fancy South Shore train for city people. She’s just passin’ through. She doesn’t belong here,” said John. **I don’t belong here either.**

“Race you to the corner!” Ken yelled, shoving the second chocolate into his mouth as he bolted. Jimmy followed in floppy, wet clothes. John caught up easily. Dark grey clouds covered the sun, erasing summer. A crackling noise was heard and rain started to pour—not in drops, but in sheets and buckets.

“Partly cloudy, chance of rain,” laughed John, mimicking the weatherman.

“Same forecast, different day!” replied Ken. “That’s the region, Buddy.” Ken grabbed Jimmy’s shoulder. “This is great! Now we won’t get in trouble! Mom’ll never know you fell in the river ‘cause we’re all soaked!”

The boys rounded the corner and turned into the alley that divided Pine and Oak Streets. Normally, they would have carefully scanned the alley for Dude. Their own revelry ensnared them. They walked right into the wolf’s den without a care. It was too late. Dude was mowing his lawn in the rain, wearing a shower cap and a yellow plaid dress, and smoking a fat cigar. He had on tall green rubber boots—waders—as if he was going fishing. He saw them.

“Just keep walking,” John whispered. “Do not make eye contact and do not laugh or he will go off.”

Just then Anna, Dude’s mother, opened the screen door and yelled to her son, “What the hell are you doin’ out there in the rain?” Dude picked-up the entire mower by its base and began trimming the top of the hedge with it, in reply. Ken—emboldened by Anna’s presence—yelled, “Nice hat ya got there, Dude.” All three boys broke into a run, made it past Mr. White’s house, and turned into Ken’s yard as if they were sliding into home. They exploded in laughter.

“That was the best ever! I expected Dude’s fingers to start flying off like little Jimmy Dean sausages when he hoisted that lawnmower up over the hedge,” said John.

“You know they say he killed his own dad, ‘cept nobody can find the body,” said Ken, passing on the neighborhood lore. “I believe it! He gives me the creeps.”

“He is crazy, but I don’t know if he’s ever killed anybody,” said John.

“Then where is Dude’s daddy?” asked Jimmy, who rarely said anything.

“I see Dude’s cigarette glowing out there in the dark when it’s pitch black. He walks this alley every night. Buddy, my Mom couldn’t pay me to take out the trash after dark!” said Ken.

“Ken, you want to run to Bobby Beach with me later, after your mom gets home?”

“Sounds good,” said Ken nonchalantly, although the 5-mile run required serious stamina.

“See you later.” John turned, made his way across the alley, past the gardenias he and his father planted for his Mom when Grandpa died, up the back stairs, and into his own house.

As John opened the squeaky screen door, he heard a sound he loved—his mother singing “Blue Gardenia.” It was a beautiful, mournful song that made him think of the lonely sound of a train whistle late at night. It was also the only song to cross his mother’s lips all summer, but at least she would still sing. “Is Billie Holiday here, again?” he asked with mock seriousness as he entered the kitchen. He found his mother at the stove and kissed her on the cheek. It seemed to John that his mother stood on the edge of a cliff these past few weeks. He didn’t know what to say, but he never forgot to kiss her every day. She kept cooking, but nothing tasted the same.

John sat on his back porch swing and admired his new black Converse sneakers as he tightened the laces. He
heard his little sister Mia approach, singing like their mama. The screen door creaked, bounced, and clanged shut behind her. “Why’d ya buy those new shoes with your own money, John,’stead of the ones Mama buys us all at Jupiter’s? Mama says you could get three pairs of shoes for what those cost.”

John thought for a minute. “It’s my special half-way-to-being-all-grown-up, nine-years-old summer; and it’s my golden birthday summer, too. Besides, if a man’s gonna go places, he’s got to have the right shoes!” He smiled and tousled her black curls as he descended the stairs. John’s Converse sneakers represented a winter of shoveling snow and fetching firewood for neighbors. He stepped off the last stair and imagined all the places his feet would take him.

John walked across the alley and headed towards Ken’s back door. Ken emerged before John reached the door. The two best friends headed towards the lake without a word. They walked for the first few blocks, heading west on Pullman Street, then north on Calumet Avenue, making a straight line for Lake Michigan’s Bobby Beach.

Annie’s Flower Shop blinked a pink, neon welcome. “We sure got a lot of flowers from there last month,” said John. “Our house smelled better than Queen Anne Candy.”

“That was real bad what happened. I liked your Papaw. I’m sorry he got sick like that. He told some good stories about his train days. Same ones, but they were still funny.” Ken spoke in a grave tone of voice that he rarely used.

They broke into a jog. Ten blocks later, they ran past the Rand-McNally Map Company.“They keep the whole world folded-up in there, Ken. I’m goin’ to see it!"

“I want to stop by the Dairy-O on the way back. I gotta taste for a root beer float,” said Ken.

John pointed to Ron’s Hobby Shop as they jogged passed.“That’s my favorite store in town. They’ve got the whole city of Hammond under glass in there—trains and all. My house, yours, the Dairy-O, Lewis & Clark School, the switching yard, Wolf Lake, the Roller Dome, the Paper Company, Hoosier State Bank, the Army/Navy Surplus, even the gophers—Ron built it all himself, too. He makes everything look so real—every building, every sign. That guy’s amazing.”

“Ron does some real good model cars, too,” said Ken. “He taught me some paintin’ tricks to make ‘em look real.”

“Bobby Beach!” shouted Ken, as it came into sight. “Almost there!”

“It’s not the most beautiful beach in the world—the Indiana Dunes has this place beat hands down—but I like Bobby Beach. You can stare out at the lake and pretend you’re looking at the sea. Saw a giant turtle here once. I’m going to see the Pacific Ocean one day!” said John.

“Buddy, you need to get down to Kentucky if you want to see someplace beautiful. You gotta come see my Papaw’s farm and all his horses runnin’ the pasture. They got mountains, streams, trees—lots of trees. This is all right for up north, though,” Ken conceded.

That night John clicked-on his flashlight and slid his Secret Treasure Box out from under his bed. He held his blue savings deposit book in his hand. The silver letters on the cover read Hoosier State Bank. The balance line read $109.00. He counted his cash. $18.00. “Not quite enough to see the world,” he said into the darkness and wondered how much it would take.

He stared up at the top bunk which was used only when Ken stayed-over. John thought about what the doctor had told his mother after Mia (his fourth sister) was born, “No more babies.” No brother, thought John. He unfolded a piece of paper and read a list he had written years ago.

List of things I’m going to do with my little brother:
1. Teach him everything there is to know about trains
2. Build a model railroad together
3. Go off the high-dive
4. Play games (especially Chess, Monopoly, and Battle Ship)
5. Go camping at Journey Lake.
6. Roast perfect brown marshmallows (not the burnt black kind)
7. Walk on spools from The Paper Company
8. Share my room and all of my G.I. Joe’s and baseball cards

John used one finger to trace the initials JWC on the antique pocket watch. It was a relic from his Grandpa Casey’s days as a train man. The arms of the watch had long since stopped at 9:00 p.m. John turned over his two silver dollars from the late 1880’s. He touched his old stamps from Holland and Germany, his coins from France, England, and China. “I’ll see them all,” he whispered. John stuck his finger through a new hole in his worn world map. He traveled from country to country on the floor of his room. Then, clicked off his flashlight. The quiet gave way to the 9:00 p.m.’s woeful whistle, but John drifted off to sleep before the train reached Oak Street. Half-way to all grown-up…Just passin’ through…I’ll see them all…ride up in that caboose.

“The Wolf Lake triangle slide! This is worth the 4-mile ride!” announced John, as he jumped off his Schwinn. The slide was a giant, flat, triangular piece of sheet metal. It was poised at a 45-degree angle, towards the mid-day sun. There was just one rail all along the perimeter to cling onto as you climbed the upside down “V.”

John whispered into Jimmy’s good ear, “Follow me, Jimmy. Here’s the secret: Speed. You gotta be super-fast or your feet will burn off. And you can’t wear shoes or it won’t work—they slow you down. Climb fast or fry like an egg!” John was brilliant at it. He reached the top in less than a minute. Ken quit one-third of the way up, giving-in to scorched feet and exhausted biceps and triceps. “You’re doing great, Jimmy!” John yelled in encouragement. “A real sick-o invented this thing; but you got him beat! Keep goin’ fast!”

Jimmy conquered the slide on the first try, becoming somewhat of an instant legend! “That was brilliant! This calls for a celebration!” yelled John, patting Jimmy on the back. “My treat—we’re stopping at the Dairy-O on the way home for chocolate-dipped ice cream cones!”

“Wait ‘til I tell Mom!” Jimmy beamed. “This is the best day of my life!”

Filled with ice cream and success, they pedaled home. “I saw some boxes in the alley. Want to get ‘em and slide down the hill by the tracks?” asked Ken. The grass is just right for it. Maybe Denise and Veronica will want to go.”

Ken, Jimmy, and John turned their bicycles into the alley, jumped three potholes, and rode right down the center of a long, shallow puddle, sending muddy water out in twin arcs. They turned into the Collins’ backyard.

Rose came out of the house with a pitcher of lemonade. “Sit down, boys. Lunch is ready,” she said, pointing to the picnic table John’s father had made. Something in her voice didn’t sound right. Hurricane Rose. I feel a storm brewing, thought John.

“Fried Chicken! Thanks, Mom. We’re starving!” said Ken, his senses dulled by the smell of chicken.

“Mama’s got some news. You know your Great Aunt Ruth’s been sufferin’ with the cancer. Well, she died last night. She was only 79. And she was my Mama’s last living sister.” Rose stopped to wipe her tears. She’s even beautiful when she cries, thought John. Ken gave his mother a hug. Jimmy—who always imitated his brother—did the same.

“You know Aunt Ruth didn’t have no kids. She left me her ranch, boys. We’re movin’ back to Kentucky sooner than we planned.” Hurricane Rose, thought John. There goes everything. “Daddy’s gonna take care of getting’ the
rest of our things packed-up. He'll meet us down in Harlan County in a few weeks. I know it's sudden-like, but we have to leave today. I've got to take care of the funeral arrangements 'n' all. And I need my babies with me."

Everyone was silent. Not even the neighbor's black dog dared to bark.

“Now let’s enjoy one last meal at this fine table.” They all held hands, and Rose—who hadn’t seen the inside of a church in 18 years—said grace. She had a lot to be thankful for.

After lunch, John helped Ken and Jimmy pack their important, personal possessions—things that couldn’t be entrusted to grown-ups. Ken filled his bag with his lucky marbles, his favorite Hardy Boys mysteries, a deck of playing cards with hot rods on one side, his baseball cards, a ticket stub from opening day at a Cubs game, a framed photo of he and John at a Bears game, and a fossil that John had given him.

Jimmy packed his green army soldiers, his eagle feather, his Winnie-the-Pooh book (still his favorite bedtime story), his cats-eye marbles, and the Joe DiMaggio baseball card John had given him. John and Ken did their best impressions of grown men. They walked around the yard, choked back tears, and gave each other a long, strong hug good-bye. Ken said something funny and they tried to laugh, but their voices sounded hollow.

Jimmy had no such reins on his emotions. His face curled into itself, his head dropped forward, and he sobbed. “I don’t want to go! John’s my best friend! Can’t we just stay ’til the end of summer, Mama?”

Ken didn’t say, “Quit acting like a girl” or “Quit slobberin,” like he usually did. Instead, he said, “Come here, Jim” and sort of gave his brother a hug. “Now go on in and get a pen and paper and we’ll write down John’s address and give him ours. OK?”

Jimmy ran into the house. He returned with a pen and a small notepad with pages in every color. “Write it in here. My rainbow notepad!”

Ken and John each wrote down their address and phone number. There was talk of phone calls and letters, the possibility of a Casey family vacation down to Kentucky next summer. I’ll never see them again, I bet. Gone. Like Grandpa Casey.

John handed Jimmy a thick, yellow piece of chalk and said, “I’ll never forget. You keep this to help you remember us up here in Indiana. Blood brothers.” They hugged.

John watched the red Thunderbird leave down the alley. Arcs of muddy water sprang from the puddles beneath its wheels. Ken and Jimmy waved through the back window.

With heavy legs and weak eyes, John climbed the stairs to his back-porch swing. He heard the whistle. Then, the shouts. Every child within two blocks yelled, “Train!!!” John gazed at the apple tree that he and Ken used to sit in for hours at a time. “Throw chalk,” he whispered. “Throw chalk.”
Lunchtime is the best time to watch people. Someone’s life put on hold for just a few minutes while they enjoy their food. I usually scrounge a few dollars up to buy a meal at the nearest fast food joint at the mall. I get there before the crowd and I usually sit in the back corner for a great view. I can see who comes in with their kids, the people who treat the employees poorly, and those on break from work. Sometimes when I’m walking in the mall, I follow people to get a taste of what their life is like. The best people to follow are the ones who just don’t seem to “make the cut.” I’ve been banned several times now, perhaps five?

Through watching people, I’ve made stars out of people in my head, the ever-popular re-occurring characters. I don’t know real names, so I’ve made them up. Sometimes, I even greet them by the made up names. Take Craig for instance.

Craig is a closet homosexual who flirts with Simon over at the Dairy Queen; he even flirts right in front of his girlfriend, Margot. His hair is greasy and looks like a meatball. He generally dresses in a simple fashion: jeans and a button up shirt.

Margot looks part Italian, but is all woman. Her breasts are restrained by only a spaghetti strap shirt. Her right nipple is slightly higher than her left. Margot’s hair is as black as a freshly burned building, and it bounces with her breasts as she walks. Utterly mesmerizing.

After they get their ice creams from Simon the Dairy Queen, they sit on the empty bench next to mine. Margot talks to Craig about getting married, yet he always changes the subject to some macho nonsense, all while smiling at Simon. Howard passes through my field of vision.

Howard comes in to get photos developed. He has a cheap suit on and has his thinning hair slicked back. He’s fat, perhaps 380 lbs. I swear he’s a used car salesman, since he’s always talking to the photo guy about car deals and market changes. He and the photo guy have some sort of secret handshake they perform while he buys his pictures. I looked over his shoulder once while he was admiring his photographs and saw a naked little girl, but since he’s going bald and greasy, the lights reflected from the top of his head, partially blinding me. The fat fuck is always worried about his photographs.

Elvis is a tall skinny white guy with the only pompadour in the state. He’s also the local drug dealer for the middle school. He comes in about four hours at a time and starts out standing next to the pay phones. The hood on his black jacket is always pulled over his head. Most of his customers are middle school kids, so sometimes his product is nothing more than crushed up jellybeans; you just need to know what the real stuff on his menu is. I’ve bought from him a few times.

Life goes on.

The teenage girls aren’t wearing Uggz or snow jackets anymore, even though it never snows. I’m guessing it is springtime. I was banned from the mall again. I decide to perch near the restrooms today and sit on the benches adjacent to them. I see people go in and out all morning, but early in the afternoon, no one enters or exits the bathrooms anymore. I look around from my position, no one. I stand up and walk to the ends of the mall; still not a
person. I head to the South exit and notice a large crowd has gathered around the entryway, staring up at the roof. I run outside, the doors fly open.

I meld with the sea of faces. On the edge of the roof stands Howard, his left arm around Simon the Dairy Queen. Howard's right arm grips a Glock .9mm semi-automatic handgun.

“İ'll fucking shoot him, you God-damn PIGS! Get back!” He yells. The local police force is out in full force, all five of them.

“All right, Mr. Porter, just don’t do nothing stupid,” Captain Buford calls to him. Howard begins to yell at the crowd, but Elvis catches my eye. I shove my way over and give him a nudge. He jumps as he looks over at me; his beady eyes examine me from under his hood.

“I want some good stuff,” I say.

“Man, you want some of this stuff, I got some red, yellow,” he begins to go through his unzipped jacket, “I got some…uh…orange stuff here, something purple, and some green shit. So what ‘chu want?”

Decisions these days. “Gimmie some green and yellow.” Green is marijuana, but I’m not quite sure what the yellow is, but it feels great.

“A’ight, a’ight, $40.”

“I’ll give you $23.” I look him dead in the eyes.

“Don’t play me…”

“It’s been a rough day,” I frown a little.

“Bitch, I got a kid to feed.”

“No you don’t, $27, final offer.”

“Aww man!” He thinks for a second, “I’m chargin’ you more next time, pops.” He never does. He hands me my new best friends and he walks over to this fat kid, “Hey buddy, you want to buy some shit?”

My new purchases go into my front right pant pocket. Someone brushes up against my shoulder. Black hair catches my eye. It’s Margot. She looks over to me and smiles. I smile too, not at her, but the idea of bending her over right there and fucking her.

Craig looks over and gives me a head nod as I snap out of the day dream and smile at him.

I look up at Howard; he’s now sitting down, still clutching Simon the Dairy Queen. He’s crying a river; we’re all going to be swimming soon.

“All right, I’ll come down.” The sunlight reflects off his head partially blinding parts of the crowd. He stands, letting Simon the Dairy Queen and the gun go. The Glock falls to the pavement like a meteor. The gun hits with a loud click, causing it to discharge the round in the chamber. The bullet flies faster than Superman through the air and pierces the propane tank next to the entryway. A large explosion blasts the tank into the sky. It lands on top of one of officer’s car. A second explosion detonates the car, shattering the windows to the cars surrounding the area and the windows in the South entrance way. The flabbergasted crowd starts cheering. The police get up from the shock wave. Howard just hangs his head.
Why Phoenix?” I asked. “My brother can get me a job and said I could live with him until I get my own place. Plus, it’s cheap as shit to live there.”

“Yeah? It’s also fucking hot.”

“And there’s tons of Mexicans.” I glared over at Tony, but with a half smile.

“Dude, we live in L.A. If you’re scared of Mexicans, maybe you should move back to home where there’s nothin’ but white folks.”

“I would, but this town is treating me too good.” Tony said; his voice saturated with sarcasm, as he refilled his glass from the pitcher. I shook my head and turned my attention back to Frank.

“Is this like you moving to Colorado ’cause you thought you could snowboard everyday?” Frank started to open his mouth to respond but I cut him off. “Or like when you wanted to move to South Dakota so you wouldn’t have a long ride to Sturgis?” Tony laughed as he drank, causing him to spit out some beer.

“No, I actually think this might happen.”

I shrugged my shoulders and took a large swallow from my own glass. We were all getting to that age where we start to feel the fear.

“I need a cigarette.” Tony suddenly announced. “Wanna go outside?”

“No, it’s cold out there.”

“You’re a pussy. Frank, how ‘bout you?”

“Sure do.” The two of them stood up from their chairs.

“You sit here and think about what you’ve done.” Tony laughed as they walked outside, like he had just made the greatest joke ever. I sat at our table alone, clutching my beer. I like this bar. It’s small, dark, and loud enough to drown out the sounds of desperation. It’s a little hole in the wall—I’m not even sure if it has a name. It’s on the corner of Canoga and Roscoe in a run down little plaza. Next door there’s a liquor store, so if you leave the bar 5 minutes before closing, you can buy more beer. Then you can take it home and lull yourself to sleep, or pound a few and venture around the corner to the titty bar. The girls at that place can smell the booze on your breath the second you open the door. They’ll proceed to turn you over on your head and shake out every last dollar and ounce of self-respect you thought you had. Then, when they’re through they’ll tell you that you’re the sweetest guy they danced for all night.

“You guys need another one?” I turned around to see the waitress behind me.

“Yeah, put it on your man’s tab.” She attempted a disgusted face, but failed. She and Frank had gone home together once.

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks, Sweetness.” She walked off to the bar. I looked around the bar; some redneck was singing “I Got Friends in Low Places” for the third time that night. Some grizzled old drunk that was a fixture there, sat at the bar, drinking alone. I’ve always loved being around old drunks. They never judge you. If you get too drunk and do something regrettable, or even inexcusable, they’ll have already forgotten by the next time you see them.
Sweetness came back with a full pitcher and set it down on the table, she smiled at me and I smiled back. I let my eyes continue to scan the room, and they soon came to rest on the other reason I liked to come here. The karaoke DJ, or KJ, or whatever ridiculous name they go by, was calling up the next star. I enjoyed watching her run the show. Tonight, she wore a dress that fell just above her knees; it was white, and covered with flowers. I imagined the material was soft, and what it would feel like running between my fingers. Her blond hair fell down her back, and looked as if it never needed to be combed. She never drank, yet she was always happy and friendly. This place could never touch her.

“Oh boy, more beer!” Frank and Tony had just come back in.

“You paid for it, asshole.” I told him. Frank just smiled and walked off to the bathroom. Tony sat down and filled his glass. We sat in silence for a moment or two.

“You think this Phoenix shit’s really gonna happen?”

“Maybe, he seems pretty excited. Why? You gonna miss him?” Now Tony was just being a dick, but I barely noticed.

“I don’t know…it would just be weird coming here without him.” Tony’s eyes grew serious but before he could respond he was interrupted.

“How are my boys doing this evening?” KJ had begun making her rounds.

“Hey there.” Tony smiled at her. “Your tits look fantastic tonight. I mean it, they’re nice.” She smiled and shook her head. She came over to me and embraced me.

“And how are you doing?”

“I’m alright. You smell terrific, like home.”

“Aw, drunken boys. Hey Joe, give ‘em another pitcher on my tab.” She turned her attention back over to Tony. “So, are you going to serenade us tonight?”

“You know me, get enough beers in me and I’ll go up on any stage and jump around like an idiot.”

“You’re such a whore.” I said, and we all laughed.

“Alright, I’ll put you in. I’m gonna put you up soon, ’cause this place needs some life.” Tony nodded in agreement and KJ walked towards the bar where she put her arms around the old drunk and asked him how his night was going. Frank came back to our table and sat down. He filled his glass and took a large swallow. We all sat quiet for a few minutes. Frank was the one to break the silence.

“I was thinking about going to church, you know, to meet a girl.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Out of all my friends, I couldn’t stand to lose Frank to Jesus.

“Christian girls are easy to fuck.” Tony had no fear of loss.

“No, not that. I just want like a nice, good girl, one that’ll cook for me and shit.”

“I used to have a girl that did my laundry.”

“Aw, fuck good girls, they’re boring. All these girls in here may be sluts but at least they have personality.” Tony raised his glass in approval and we all drank, but Frank remained silent. Our moment of self-reflection was broken by an announcement by KJ that it was Tony’s turn to sing. The old drunks cheered and Tony walked up to the stage with confidence.

For the first few bars, Tony stood still, like a statue. The entire audience leaned forward in eager anticipation. The drums kicked and he was off. He jumped from one end of the stage to the other, his feet moving in perfect
unison, perfect time. When he started to sing, his voice was raspy, but gigantic. It resonated through the room like a train roaring through a tunnel, and had the crowd in a trance. They clapped along, smiles spreading across their faces, erasing the age and the tiredness from their eyes. He urged the patrons to get up and dance, and many of them did. A score of middle-aged alcoholics littered the dance floor as they spun each other around and jumped up and down. Frank got up and threw himself into the mix. I just watched the whole event with a smile. It didn’t matter if Tony never made it—if he never even appeared in a movie—here he was a star. He had the entire world at his command; it just so happened that the entire world was a shithole bar.

Many bars close at 11—mostly the hip, corporate bars. Often times the college kids that spent time at such degenerate places would decide they hadn’t experienced enough life for one evening and head out to a local watering hole to seek out the American dream. They were easy to spot; they’d walk in around 11:30, too beautiful to be intelligent, and too drunk to be in public.

As soon as she walked in she caught my eye. Her dark hair hung past her shoulders, her shirt showing off her slight belly, and her ass hanging out of a black skirt. She turned her head and looked right at me, I stared right back at her. We were frozen, locked in a moment of time. On the stage, an aging, balding man began to sing “Heartbreak Hotel.” Her and the two girls she was with got excited and ran over to the dance floor. They formed a small circle and danced together. They were a triumvirate of sex, ruling over the shy, the timid and the weak. I watched her as she swung her hips back and forth, not really to the rhythm of the music but that didn’t matter. I was addicted; I needed her.

When the song ended, the trio stormed the bar. They got their drinks and came to sit at the table right next to ours. I drank my beer silently for a minute or two. I was nervous—more so than usual. I drained the last of my beer, refilled the glass and took a deep breath. I turned my chair and leaned over to her.

“What are you drinking?” I asked her as casually as I possibly could.

“Rum and diet.” Her voice was warm and kind, I instantly relaxed.

“That sounds awful.”

“No, it’s good. The alcohol’s still got a lot of calories, but I’m gonna work out tomorrow, so it’ll be alright.”

“Yeah? Where do you work out?”

“My work has a gym that I can use during lunch.”

“Oh.”

“What gym do you go to?”

“Oh, I don’t go to any gym. In fact, I’m adamantly against working out. I mean, until they make a video game out of it, count me out.” She smiled and lowered her head slightly as she laughed. I could feel I was getting close.

“What are you drinking?”

“Oh this? This is a special seasonal brew that they only serve to VIP’s around here. I tip pretty well, so they hook me up.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up. “What’s it called?”

“Bud light.” This time she laughed out loud and placed her hand on my chest and gently pushed me. I was in. We sat together and talked. I don’t know how much time passed, but a few more drinks were consumed by both of us. The conversation came free and easy; the entire world seemed to have gone away.
“I love this song!” She announced, I didn’t even notice there was music. “Come dance with me.” She took my hand and dragged me up from my chair. I grabbed my beer and took it with me to the floor, clutching it for dear life. At first, it was uncomfortable. She grinded her ass against my crotch as I awkwardly moved my feet back and forth, sipping my beer. She turned around and smiled at me. She gently took the glass from my hand and placed it on the nearest empty table. She came back and took my hands again and led me in the dance. We rocked back and forth, swayed and grinded. We were a steaming duo of raw sexual energy. My body poured sweat. The moisture escaping my body left me dizzy. I felt higher than I had ever felt before. I never wanted the song to end.

When the music did come to a stop, we both stood there staring at each other, panting. She knew as well as I did what the next step was, but how to get there was the issue.

“I need a cigarette.” She breathed.

“Yes, me too, but let’s go out back, it’s less crowded there.”

“Can we bring our drinks?”

“As long as they don’t see us.” I grabbed my beer and she went over to our table and took her drink. She conversed with her friends briefly and came back to me. We hid the drinks on our left side as we exited the bar.

We stumbled out the door arm in arm. The lonely old man from the bar was standing outside by himself. He was staring out at the dark street. He glanced over at us and smiled a little. Not the kind of smile that makes you feel welcome, but the kind that makes you feel guilty for having the youth he wishes he had, except he knows he’d just waste it again. We walked around the corner and lit up our cigarettes. I inhaled and let the brief high relax me.

“So, what’s your name, anyway?” I asked her.

“Diane.” She laughed. “I’ve already told you that like three times.”

“Oh, well, it was loud in there and I have bad hearing.” Sometimes I lie just to hear myself talk. “I want to show you something, Diane.” I took her hand and led her to a little alley next to an apartment building a short ways from the bar. We instantly began to frantically make out. I wanted to touch her entire body at once. She fumbled with my belt a little as she pulled my pants down.

“Wait, I’m not ready yet.” She didn’t listen and began undressing herself. I began to shiver from the cold, and I hung there limp, and lifeless.

“Do you have a condom?”

“No, I don’t.” I actually did, but I didn’t want her to think of me as a slut for some reason.

“That’s okay, I don’t like them anyway.” She pulled me closer and began to kiss me again.

“I think I had too much to drink, and it’s too cold.” I couldn’t find the right way to explain myself. She looked down.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She rolled her eyes in disgust, pulled her panties back on and left me, naked.

I sat by myself, shivering in the cold air for a few minutes, drinking the beer I had smuggled out. I let the alcohol warm me; give me strength. The cold gravel scratched at my bare skin. I thought of Vegas, and the whore, and the first time my body had failed me. I remembered lying in my bed in my white boxers.

I was nervous. She counted the money I gave her and stuffed it into her purse. She pulled out her cell phone and began to dial.

“Okay, I’m starting.” She said into the phone. “So call me in like, 15.”

“Hey, we have the same phone.” I don’t know why this amazed me so much.
“Really? That’s so crazy.” She didn’t sound like she really heard me as she turned the clock radio on to some generic rock station. Eric Clapton’s voice rang out through the muffled speaker. My mind was racing, and my heart was pumping the blood through me in an attempt to purge my body of the white powder I had so carelessly consumed. She danced slowly to the rhythm of the music but my body wouldn’t slow down. I silently cursed the vile drug. She freed herself from her bra and crawled across the bed towards me. With a slight smile she tugged at my pants until they were just below my knees. She saw the lifeless limb and smiled bigger. Her mouth and hand were like a team in the truest sense. Still, not a twitch or a shift, or even the slightest sign of life came out of me. I never knew shame like seeing the disappointed look on a prostitute’s face. Soon the 15 minutes passed and her phone rang. In seconds she was dressed and ready to go. She came over to me and kissed my forehead.

“You know, you shouldn’t have to pay for this. You’re not a bad looking guy.” If murder was legal for just a day, a minute, she’d be dead.

I shook off the memory and drained the last of my glass. I stood up, pulling my clothes on as I rose. I walked back from the alley, the cold really starting to wear on me. I needed another drink. As I walked to the back door of the bar I saw the old drunk that had smirked at us on the way in. He was leaning against the wall, smoking. The smell of whiskey surrounded the air around him. I did my best to give him a victorious smile. He just continued to smile at me.

“What do you want from me, old man?”

“Did ya get your dick wet?” The old man sucked on his cigarette, the smoke seeping out of his nostrils. “A man an’ a woman go in that alley, only one thing that happens.” I suddenly felt the need to impress this empty soul.

“Yeah.” I said as I lit up my own cigarette.

“Do ya love her?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” The old man just started laughing, and it was not a pleasant laugh.

Relax.” He said. “I’m only kiddin’. None of ‘em are really worth loving, are they? They sure got something we need though, don’t they?” I stared into this crystal ball full of bitterness and Jack Daniels, amazed. I couldn’t take this situation anymore.

“Yeah, they do.” I said. “I’m gonna go back inside, take care of yourself. Drive safely, huh?” I put out my cigarette and walked back inside, not looking back at him.

As I went back into the bar, I noticed the crowd had thinned out quite a bit; it was closing time. I walked to our table; it was empty. I didn’t see Frank anywhere but Tony was at the other end of the room, sitting with a couple girls. Our table still had a pitcher that was a quarter full but there were no glasses anywhere. I looked around but didn’t find any so I picked up the pitcher and drank. I walked over to Tony. I stood next to him for a minute until he noticed me.

“Hey, buddy! I want you to meet my new friend Lindsey.” I nodded in her direction and took another swig from my pitcher. “Lindsey takes a couple of improv classes; I think she’d be perfect for my sketch show, don’t you?” I smiled through my teeth. Tony had no sketch show.

“Yeah, that would work out great. You’ve needed a girl in that troupe for a while now.” Lindsey’s eyes lit up, hope bulging out of her sockets. The place was starting to reek of desperation. I drank some more from my pitcher and let my eyes wander around the bar. Diane was at one table by the front entrance with another girl. They were talking and laughing, and looking directly at me. I sighed and continued to scan the room. My eyes came to rest on KJ. She was packing up her equipment. She looked up at me and I smiled at her, she smiled back, but it seemed to lack the warmth
from earlier. I drained the last of the pitcher and walked towards the bar. The bartender was wiping down the counter.

“Hey, Joe.” I said as I extended my hand.

“Hey, my man, how’s it goin’?” He took my hand and shook it rigorously.

“Never better.” I released my grip and sat on a stool. “Could you get me a shot of jack and then close me out?”

“Sure thing.” He flipped a glass on the table and filled it, then walked away to sort out my tab. I tilted my head back and drank. I let the whisky pour through me, warming my blood. I closed my eyes and took it all in. When I opened them the bill was in front of me. I took some cash out of my wallet, put it down, and stood up. Frank had just re-entered the room. His hair was messed up and a couple buttons on his shirt were undone. I smiled and slapped him on the shoulder.

“You ready to go?” I asked him.

“Let’s do it.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you out there.”

Frank headed towards the exit and I strolled back over to Tony. “Hey man, I’m taking off, you need a ride?”

Tony looked up at me. “No, my new friend Lindsey is gonna take me home.”

Once again I had to smile, and I patted him on the back. “Alright, enjoy yourself.” I turned to walk away.

“Hey wait; will you give me a ride to work tomorrow?”

I looked back at him and sighed. Sure. Don’t I always?”

He beamed up at me. “You’re a king.”

“And you’re an asshole.” I slurred. I turned again and walked off towards the exit.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, buddy.” Tony shouted after me.

“Yes.” I returned without looking back.

•••••

“So do you really think you’re going to Phoenix?” The car was stopped in front of Frank’s apartment. He was halfway out the door.

“I don’t know, probably.”

I listened to the radio for a couple seconds, some sad ballad of the decaying American dream. “I don’t think you should go.” The booze had started to turn on me. I pushed the nausea down my throat, back into my stomach.

“Why not?” He was now standing outside the car. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t want to be alone. That I wanted to go to church with him and we could both meet nice girls. We could marry those girls and buy houses on the same street and watch football on Sundays. Nothing would ever change, but it wouldn’t have to. “I’d have to find a new bar.”

Frank laughed a little and closed the door. He poked his head in through the open window.

“Sure buddy, take care, and drive safely, huh?” He walked off towards his apartment. I drove off, down De Soto, into the heart of the Valley. I turned the radio off and drove in silence, trying to stop the world from spinning out of control.
There was nothing to suggest that the Altamont Sunshine Community was a hotbed of crime. The brochure called it an “age-qualified estate,” and some of the residents called it home, but everyone agreed it was quiet. Moments of repose could become whole days of repose. Sometimes people went to their eternal rest, but that didn’t make noise either. People talked about other things.

A few times a day, a car might glide along the curving drive in front of the white, three-story building. Behind the landscaped shrubs and the big window of the lobby, gray-haired people sat in armchairs, looking out at anyone who might be looking in. Sometimes a curtain in one of the rows of apartment windows would move aside, and watchful eyes would take an interest in any activity, to say nothing of any suspicious activity. There were flowers and vegetables quietly growing in the community garden down the hill past the drive. They should be safe.

And yet, Hetty Forsyth feared the worst. She knew people were capable of anything. There was that new resident who always hogged the best seat in the van to town, instead of taking turns like she should. Even her friend, Alice, would pretend to put money on the collection plate during Mass, but Hetty often sat next to her and knew for a fact that sometimes she hadn’t donated anything. And then there was Jim McDermott. He smoked his damn cigars next to her vegetables and gave the tomatoes tobacco wilt.

Hetty noticed movement out on the drive, and twitched her curtains aside to check. But it was only her next door neighbor with her walker. She couldn’t be on her way to the garden. The grass would stop her.

The wall clock said it was too early for breakfast. They wouldn’t start serving for another half an hour.

She had to decide whether to go anyway, and wait with the others poised to snag a good table. It wouldn’t do her veins a bit of good if all the chairs in the hall were taken, but the alternative was to wait by herself, which always seemed to take a lot longer.

She straightened her dear departed husband’s picture on her photo shelf, and knew without having to think about it that he’d been gone twenty years and seven months now. She moved on. She wiped a speck of dust off her daughter’s wedding photo. Her son’s college graduation picture needed to be inched forward a bit, which knocked over one of the flock of grandkids. She straightened them all. They were cute little chiggers, smiling and eager. None of them looked like they were waiting for something.

She’d seen three of them just a few weeks ago, when her son had brought the tomato seedling for her garden. He’d called it a seedling, but it turned out to be a half-grown plant with a huge, gorgeous tomato already on it. Suddenly, Hetty was likely to be the first to harvest a good tomato this year. That’d show that old boaster, Jim McDermott.

“That,” she said with satisfaction, “will show Jim.”
At which point one of the granddaughters piped up, “Aw gee, Grandma, are you growing tomatoes at somebody again this year?”

She stopped herself just in time from saying you watch your manners, youngster. Her son would get uncomfortable. But she couldn’t let it pass. “I’m just growing tomatoes. Jim’s the one who always has to make noise about how big his are.”

Hetty decided she’d wait for breakfast in line with the others rather than by herself in her room. She headed out the door, using the handrail in the long hallway just to be on the safe side.

“You ought to buy a cane, Hetty,” said a thin, encouraging voice behind her. “Then you wouldn’t have to worry.”

Hetty took her hand off the rail at once and turned around. It was Alice. Alice was no bigger than a minute and wore a brown wig. Sometimes she had the wig on straight, and sometimes she didn’t. Today was one of the skewed days. She didn’t seem to mind either way. She had what people called a cheerful disposition.

“I’m not worrying,” said Hetty. “I’m just walking. To breakfast.” Only people who were old and decrepit used canes. Didn’t Alice know that?

“I just had some good news,” said Alice. “My daughter called, and she’s bringing all her children over for my 73rd birthday.”

“My son’s kids are all coming up for Thanksgiving,” Hetty countered.

Someone in the breakfast line heard her as the two of them approached, and had to chime in. She was exhausted, she said. All three of her granddaughters had brought their new babies during the Fourth of July weekend.

The minute hand of the clock met the six at last, proving that it was seven thirty, and everyone flooded toward the tables. The staff made feeble protests that it was too early, like they always did, but they knew when they were beaten.

“I think we should have a competition.”

That was Jim, booming as usual, at the table right next to Hetty. He was almost as good as she was at snagging good tables.

“What kind of competition?” somebody at another table asked.

“Flowers and vegetables and things. We got a lot of good gardeners. We could even start a pool.”

None of the assembled women commented on the idea of betting.

“What?” said Jim.


“What’s wrong with that? I saw you at the church bingo just last Monday.”

“That’s at church,” she pointed out. The man didn’t seem to understand the simplest things.

“You just want to have a competition so you can boast about the size of your tomatoes,” said Alice to Jim, grinning knowingly and putting more butter on her bread roll than was good for her.

“Men,” muttered Hetty under her breath to Alice. “It’s always got to be about how mine is bigger than yours.”

“What, dear?” asked Alice. She was a bit deaf, and her hearing aid was in her far ear.

Jim, however, was not deaf, so Hetty couldn’t just say it again, louder. She edited on the fly.

“Mine’s the biggest one out there.”

“See?” said Jim. “Hetty’s all for it. Only don’t go counting your chickens, young lady. There’s a coupla weeks to go before they’re ripe.”
“Mine,” said Hetty, “is way ahead of yours. And chickens don’t get ripe.”

“They don’t get wilt, or rot, or leaf curl, either.”

“Well, when you know how to take care of things, they don’t go bad like that. They come out well.” Like all her children, for instance, as opposed to that good-for-nothing son of McDermott’s, the rich banker, or whatever he was, who never did more than send a card at Christmas.

“They haven’t come out yet, is all I’m sayin.”

Oh, yes, they have, Hetty wanted to retort, but a well-brought-up person didn’t say things like that. She sat silent and straight while she ate her ham and scrambled eggs, which said it for her.

But Jim McDermott had unsettled her. She set off for the vegetable garden after breakfast to check on things. He might have been doing more than smoking at her best plants, for all she knew. He might have been sneaking extra water on them, to make sure they did get rot and wilt. He’d seemed awfully sure of himself.

Besides, her prize tomato was only a day or two away from perfect. She’d pick it now, and let it ripen the rest of the way at home, on her window sill. That way it would be safe.

She left the nice smooth surface of the drive, and began the death-defying trek down to the garden. Other people got medals for that sort of thing; old people just carried on. Hetty did. She’d always been a determined sort. The grass was slippery and crowded with ankle-turning tufts. This would be a lot easier with a cane she admitted to herself since there was nobody around.

Everything looked okay in the garden when she stopped for a moment to study the way ahead. Everything looked okay when she picked her way down the row between her plants. But when she reached her son’s plant, the one that never failed to warm her heart, there was no big, ripe tomato on it.

There was only a stem left. It had been cut clean off.

This wasn’t a raccoon, or some wretched bird taking one peck and ruining the whole thing. This was a person. This was someone who wanted a fresh tomato and didn’t care where they got it.

There were footprints here and there, but they all looked like small ones. Jim was a big fellow who usually left tracks even on the beaten paths. There was no way to guess who might have done it. Nor could she call the police to search every room for a tomato.

She might as well face it. One more thing she cared about was gone. She could wait for the hard little green ones on the vine to grow. She could wait for Jim to stop talking about his bigger and better harvest. She could wait, as always, because there was nothing else to do, and she could try not to think too much about what she was waiting for.

She turned, and climbed the hill, stopping for breath now and again.
Shake and A Roar; A Shiver and A Whine

Joseph Lewis

She smelled like baby powder, but she tasted like sweat.

They sat together in the bedroom, staring deeply into each other’s eyes. The sun was rising outside the window; the bright orb a romantic orange behind a smoggy metropolitan horizon.

He clasped the back of her head with his right hand, and cupped her rosy red cheeks with his left as he leaned in to kiss this Damsel in Distress. With his heart pumping the passion of a thousand stampeding stallions running through him, he gave her a kiss so tender and soft it could wake the sleeping woman inside.

With the tightest grip, he brought her so close to his heaving chest it would seem they were one.

With his tongue he flicked her earlobe; then nibbled and bit, holding on with his teeth as he wrapped her slender legs around him.

The two of them there—him on the floor, she holding onto him for dear life—embracing the sort of passion only soul mates are allowed to experience.

Her groans grew louder, and he wondered if the neighbors could hear.

Their hands clasped and fingers intertwined as he carried her to the bed, tearing off her clothes and slipping off her pink panties. He backed away and admired every inch of her slim, naked body, thanking God for his five senses, with which he devoured her.

Blonde hair the shade of freshly picked corn spread out across the bed like a halo of innocence around her head. Eyes as blue as the purest Caribbean waters; two splashes of brilliance that contrasted her fair, freckled skin.

His fingertips explored the uncharted hills and valleys of the princess’ naked back—from the shoulder blades to the curve in her lower back—and lower.

Lower…her curves were perfect there. Never on God’s green earth—not since the days of Adam and Eve—had such perfection existed; as crescent and pale as a thumbnail moon, and as edible as a freshly baked cherry pie.

Just like a Barbie doll, he thought.

Her groans increased in frequency—in between her gasps for air—and he giggled at the thought of someone hearing.

His fingers continued their journey until they found the place where all good women let their husbands rest.

She was warm and welcoming.

She screamed for mercy and he could barely control his excitement. He whispered words of comfort deep into her ears before his descent.

She tasted like a whole other world; a world of flowers and honeybees, a world dripping with nectar. His tongue danced like naked children in an enchanted meadow; a meadow thick with the musky smells of their bewitching potions—their sweet, inviting incenses.

She grasped desperately at the white bed sheets and happened upon her favorite teddy bear, bringing it close
to her. She held it so close between her petite breasts it hurt, hoping so badly for it to come to life and save her, like a knight in shining armor.

He tickled her with his beard, dragging the grey scruffiness of it along her naval, around the bear and along her neck, stopping briefly to nibble at nipples as tiny as the purest, precious, pearls. He could contain himself no longer.

Outside, the city train thundered by, engulfing the room. A shake of the cars and a roar of the horn, a shiver of the rails and a whine of the wheels, and it was all over.

He basked in the magnificence of it all. His hands were clasped tightly on her wrists, leaning wholly on them; her hands purple from his full body weight.

He released her from his heavy grip, and from the hook of his manhood.
She twisted and convulsed in pain, holding onto her bear like a life jacket, letting the tears flow like a river of blood.
He licked the salty tears off her cheek.
She squeezed the bear tighter, so tight she punctured the bear’s skin, ripping at the hole till her whole fist could fit inside. She ripped out the fresh white guts and threw them across the room at the Prince.
He told her that that’s what grown ups do, and left the room.
He took the white sheets with him.
She threw the hollow, life-less body of the bear after him, hitting only the door.
Then the woman curled up into a ball, and stopped crying.
The sun shone brightly on the vast, rolling plains of the kingdom, as it always did in this land. The grass was always a luscious green and there were blue, red, yellow, and purple flowers that dotted the landscape, not in a flawless grid, but with an almost intentional randomness, seemingly placed in a way that exuded beauty in perfection. In the exact center of the field, there sat the Citadel of the kingdom, an enormous shimmering tower made completely of pure white marble. This multi-leveled tower was so gigantic that it reached to a height above the clouds. At this height was the palace level where only the King and a very select few were allowed. On a parapet, at the level just below the cloud line, stood Lucius Morningstar, the Light Bearer of the kingdom, and the right hand of the King.

Lucius regarded the land before him, but he could not admire it as the paradise he had loved for so many years. His mind was occupied elsewhere, driven deep into thought by the recent events of what was usually a very quiet and orderly kingdom. He had been standing there since the arrest of two law-breakers earlier that day. He was so preoccupied with his contemplation that his normally keen skills of observation failed him, and he didn’t notice Micah’s approach until he heard a voice from behind.

“They have been judged,” Micah said as he took a place next to Lucius.

“And what, in His immense wisdom, does the King judge a worthy punishment?” responded Lucius, his eyes not on Micah but remaining fixed on the view before him.

“Their faith will be tested. They will be tortured until they admit that what they did was wrong, or until the King is content. Then, they are to be executed.”

“I see.” Lucius’s eyes lowered from the horizon as his sight glazed over and his thoughts turned inward.

“Poor souls.” Lucius spoke softly, more to himself than to the friend standing next to him.

“You feel sorry for them?”

“They may have broken the King’s edict, Micah, but they were with him in the beginning, just as we were. They are our brethren.”

“Anyone who goes against His will can no longer be considered our brethren.”

“You don’t think that is a little harsh?” Lucius said, already knowing his answer.

“I think the King’s word is law. And I will always obey it. You question the will of the King?”

A small smirk rose on Lucius’s face. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I am going to speak plainly with you, Lucius,” Micah started. His voice had a tone of anger to it that was misleading. Anyone who knew him, as Lucius did, knew it was a simple zealous obedience. “I don’t like your current attitude. It is the same as earlier. It is not easy to arrest two law-breakers when your supposed partner in the job just observes the matter from a distance. It seems to me, now more than ever, that you could care less if the King’s will was carried out. Your lack of passion disturbs me, and it could be taken as an act of dissension with the King.”

“You forget who you are talking to.” Lucius’s sight now turned and met that of Micah. Looking into Lucius’s gaze, one could see a radiance of intelligence that gave his eyes an almost luminescent intensity. It was what
made Lucius unique from the other servants of the King. “You are the Captain, Micah. You were sent to enforce and 
you obviously did not need any help from me, because the arrest went without a problem. The King only sent me to 
make sure that it was returned to its place.”

“And did you return it?”

“Not yet.” Lucius pulled a large tome from its resting place at his feet and laid it on the rampart in front of 
them. He placed his hand almost lovingly on its cover. “I was going to make the trip shortly. After I had heard the 
judgment. Now, I tire of your questions.” There was a moment of silence as Micah turned away from Lucius.

“Forgive me,” Micah began, “I did forget who I was talking to. We’ve been friends since the beginning of all 
this.” He motioned his head at the view they were now both enjoying. “Since the King first founded this wonderful 
land. Lately, you have been very preoccupied. I see you here often, lost in thought. Allow me, as your friend, just one 
more question. What is it that is bothering you?”

Lucius searched his mind carefully for the right words. In truth there were many things that had been 
bothering him but he could never speak of them plainly with Micah. This fact saddened him but his friend would 
never understand. “It has to do with the King’s new pets,” Lucius said.

“His sheep, yes. I was just on a routine inspection of their progress. Their breeding goes well. Though I understand 
one of them tried to stray from the flock. The King wisely had him quickly killed.”

“The King grows fonder and fonder of them. It has grown to the point that only the select few of us who are 
allowed in His throne chamber can visit them. And, not too long after he started the breeding, he told me that he 
was going to make all of us bow and swear loyalty to them just as we once did for Him. He has only told me this; 
the announcement will soon be made to everyone. That is the thing. We once swore an oath of loyalty to serve him 
and only him, to have no one before him. How can we, in good conscience and in keeping with this oath, pledge the 
same oath to these creatures?”

“Ah, an understandable plight. What I will tell you is that by pledging this second oath we are not breaking 
the first one but strengthening it. We will be following his word, and so we will be following our oath to him.” Micah 
smiled and rested his hand on Lucius’s shoulder, feeling very confident that he had freed his friend from his inner 
turmoil. Lucius was about to thank him and bring and end to the conversation when a voice came from the doorway 
behind them.

“Morningstar, I have come from the King with orders.” It was Gabriel. It had been a long time, aside from when 
Lucius saw him to hear of his announcement, that anyone was allowed above the clouds to see the King. It had been 
even longer since the King had left his throne so Gabriel had become his messenger.

“Yes,” Lucius said, “what is it?”

“I could not comprehend the meaning of his words, but He said that you would understand. He said that the 
announcement is to be made soon, and you are the one who will make it. You are to return the tome to the vault, 
and then you will gather the Host of the land and make the announcement.” Lucius was surprised at this order. 
Apparently the King would not break his seclusion even for this event.

“Very well. Thank you Gabriel, I will leave for the garden immediately.” With that, Lucius carried the tome 
through the doorway and down the Citadel.
“Micah of Chaldaea, the King has orders for our captain as well.”

Micah kneeled and bowed humbly. “How may I have the pleasure of serving His will?”

Lucius walked through the broad golden gates of the garden. He took the time, as he walked, to view his surroundings. He had always considered the country they lived in to be paradise but this garden was even more beautiful than the plains he viewed previously. There were plants everywhere. Huge diverse flowers of all the colors of the rainbow mixed in with lush ferns of multiple shades of green. Fruit trees of every kind imaginable lined the stone path that snaked through the garden. The intoxicating aroma of the flowers and the fruits was so pleasing it was almost unbearable. As he walked, he could also hear the soft, soothing sounds of water trickling through the streams and ornate stone fountains. In the very center of the garden was a massive tree. Its roots were more ancient than time itself and its fruit was by far the sweetest. Lucius was more enamored with this place each time he came here.

Then there were the sheep. They were housed here and to Lucius, they were a plague on this beautiful place. They ate the plants and they expelled their wastes wherever they pleased. Lucius was afraid to think of how the garden would smell if the flowers and fruits were not so perfectly overpowering. What he had told Micah earlier was true, but it was not the whole truth. He did not want to break his original oath, but he also did not see the purpose behind making him and his brethren say it to these lowly animals. What good would come out of their worship? He knew an answer but he hesitated to even think it. If he had told Micah what he was already thinking he would not have been surprised to receive a sword through the chest right there on that parapet. But he could not help the direction of his thoughts. He knew that the order to serve these animals was the King’s way of controlling him and his brethren. The King was testing their loyalty, as if it had not already been proven time and time again. In the beginning, when He first formed this kingdom, the King was a benevolent ruler. He never acted above his followers, never was too good to be seen, and never tortured and killed his people. Now he was even killing his beloved sheep for straying from the flock. He had become a tyrant, mad with his power.

Lucius came to a stop when he reached the tree in the middle of the garden. He looked down at the large book in his hands. Aside from his thoughts of the condition of the King, he had also come to question his purpose in the kingdom. The edict that the two had broken was that against knowledge. They had broken into the vault below this tree and taken one of the countless volumes stored there so that they could make its contents their own. Only the King and Lucius held the knowledge of the kingdom and the King had decreed that it would remain that way. Since the beginning, Lucius had been its keeper and guardian. No one had broken this law until now. Now Lucius wondered if it was worth killing to protect. Why would the King want to protect it in the first place? Why would he deny such a wonderful gift?

“Excuse me, Morningstar,” Lucius turned to see Beezle, another of the King’s servants, slightly lower rank than he or Micah. “I was told,” Beezle’s speech halted when he saw Lucius was holding the book. “Forgive me, I did not realize you had not returned it yet.”

“There is no reason to be frightened by it, or me.” Lucius held the book out to enable Beezle a closer view, but he just backed away further. “If you are curious it is only natural. If you have any questions you are welcome. Perhaps you can help me with my current plight. Speak openly please.”

“Well… I just,” Beezle hesitated, “I am rather curious… what is it about this knowledge that… makes it so
forbidden?” Lucius felt comfort in the question that was so close to his own. His thoughts returned to his opinions of
the state of the King, and everything became clear. Control and power. A large smile rose on his face.

“There is nothing, my friend, that justifies it being so forbidden. Come, we must gather as many of our
brethren as we can. I trust you know of ones that share your thoughts?”

“Yes…”

“Good. I have an announcement that is long overdue.”

“•••••

“My friends, my brethren, I have gathered you here to give you something you have deserved but been
denied for far too long!” Lucius held the tome up above his head. Whispers enveloped the crowd before him. “This,
my friends, is the glory of knowledge! The power of learning about our world, learning about the many forces that
inhabit it, and the power of learning about the strength within ourselves! This is power that He has held since the
beginning! The power that our selfish King was not willing to share, and was willing to torture and kill our brethren
over! He wished only to control all of you, and sit on his throne above the clouds, giving out frivolous orders as he
pleased! He has fallen so far from what He once was! We are slaves in our own land! But now your bonds can be
broken! We can all own this power! We can all live above the clouds! We can have our own wills! Why be ruled by Him,
when we can rule ourselves!” The crowd roared its approval. They were all craving it just as Lucius had predicted.

Lucius handed the tome down to the crowd and began doing the same with other volumes he had taken with him
from the vault. Beezle came up to Lucius and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Great Light-Bearer,” he said, “Micah marches on the Elysian Plains with an army from the Citadel.”

“They come to hear the sheep announcement.” Lucius quickly concluded.

“I don’t think so, Morningstar. They march in tight battle formation.” Lucius wondered briefly how Micah could
have known about his modified announcement so soon, but did not have time to pursue the thought much further.

He looked at the crowd before him. They were all armed as the servants of the King always were, but there was only
about one third the total host of the land. They would be outnumbered.

“My brethren,” Lucius began again, “I was meant to gather you here and give you the King’s new
announcement! He wanted me to tell you that we were to pledge our lives to his pet sheep in the same manner that
we once pledged ourselves to Him! This should tell you exactly how He feels about us! To Him, we are worse than
filthy animals! Well, we will be His slaves no more! Now, an army marches here from the Citadel! And if they try to
take away our freedom, we will defend ourselves with a valiance that has not yet been dreamt of!” A cheer began to
rise from the crowd, forcing Lucius to yell with all his might. “And if we are to die there on those beautiful fields of
Elysium, we will die free!” The crowd could now be heard across the plains. They began chanting, “Long shine the
light of the Morningstar” as they began forming their lines.

“•••••

Both armies were ordered to halt when they came into view of one another, and Lucius and Micah walked out
to the center of the field to meet each other. There was a moment of silence as they stared at each other. Micah
broke the stillness.

“If you do this, you will lose.”

“I will be doing nothing. It is you that will attack if you choose to. We simply want to live our lives how we wish.”
“What I choose is irrelevant. That concept has no meaning for me. You march against my Lord and so he has
decided that I must fight against you.”
“If he is against my free will, then I guess I am against him. I wish I could help you to see that you do have a
choice in everything.”
“I don’t understand why you are doing this Lucius. He gave us all that we have. He created this kingdom, gave
us our high places in his order…”
“He can have his order,” Lucius cut off Micah, “I don’t want it anymore.”
“So be it. None of you will be shown any mercy,” Micah said as he turned and walked back to his army.
“I expect none,” Lucius retorted as he did the same. When he reached his army he turned to see Micah ordering
his charge. The ground shook with the strides of the soldiers. Then Lucius ordered his charge and the two armies
collided with a violent clash of steel on steel. Despite the daunting size of Micah’s army, Lucius first felt the battle
was going well. Looking around he saw his companions defending themselves valiantly just as he had foretold. For
a moment, there was a small spark of hope in him. That is until he saw Micah. Somehow he had thrown himself into
the very center of Lucius’s army. There, he was killing with alarming speed and finesse. He leapt from victim to victim
as if he had wings to carry him. Before Lucius even realized it, Micah was upon him. Micah brought his sword above
his head, to strike down at Lucius and Lucius brought his shield above his head, more reactionary than skillfully. He
successfully blocked Micah’s attack, but the blow was so powerful that it knocked Lucius on his back. He had no time
to recover as Micah extended his shield into Lucius’s face. Lucius felt his head get rammed between Micah’s shield and
the ground. Then there was darkness.

When he awoke, he found himself outside on the parapet. He was kneeling with his legs shackled together at
the ankles and his hands tied behind his back.
“I told you that you would lose,” Micah’s voice came from behind him. He did not make the effort to turn
around. Nor did he guess Micah wanted him to.
“So what is his judgment this time? What will become of me?”
“You will be taken, above the palace, to the very top of the Citadel. From there you will be cast from the walls
down to the land below, along with all your followers.”
“Creative. Who will become the new Bearer of the Light?”
“No one,” Micah said. “It will remain solely with the King.” A small smirk came to Lucius’ face. Perhaps that is
what he wanted all along.
“At least we are free,” Lucius said.
“We are all free under the Kings benevolent wisdom.”
“No my friend, you are blind. A prisoner of your own ignorance.”
“I’ll ask that you don’t call me your friend, for I cannot return the sentiment. Anyone who does not support the
King is my enemy.” Lucius could hear Micah’s forceful footsteps trailing away behind him.
So this is it, Lucius thought to himself. From his kneeling state, he could barely see the horizon of the paradise
he would not call home any longer, and a huge smile rose on his face. The smile turned into a soft, content
laughter. The King could do what he wanted to him now. His free will was everlasting.
I stood in front of a cheap Ikea mirror, cocking my hips back and forth the way I saw older women do it on T.V. My curveless body was accented by lithe tan legs that extended out of a black mini-skirt and a crop top that said, “100% angel.”

“How do I look?”

“How, oh, you look great Jen,” my friend Summer replied barely looking up from her issue of teen-bop. “Did you know JTT has never kissed a girl, that is so sweet. Uh, the things I would show him…”

“Hey Summer, where’s your mom tonight?”

“She’s sleeping; my mom doesn’t actually leave the house. She’s such a lazy bitch, I can’t stand her.”

“I don’t see why, she’s always sweet to you, and she gives you hundred dollar bills like once a week. What more could you possibly want?”

“To be treated like an adult, I practically am one already, twelve is just a number.”

“True.”

“Anyway, we should get going, the party is starting up soon, and I paged Adam not too long ago, so he should be at the spot any moment now.” I took one last glance at myself in the mirror, hoping I looked as old as I was trying to be. “Well, let’s go.”

Summer walked over to the window, opened it, popped the screen out and gently set it down outside leaning against the side of the house. We walked three blocks before we came to the only lamppost on the street that blinks. We didn’t have to wait any time before Adam’s car pulled up. “You fine young thangs looking for a ride?”

“Damn right we are,” replied Summer grinning as she reached for the car door while simultaneously trying to keep her halter top from sliding down.

I shuffled into the back seat, where I always sat. The car started up, and Bone-Thugz-N-Harmony poured out of shitty, ford, speakers. “Now tell me whatcha ya gonna do when there ain’t no where to run…” the words echoed in ears.

“I love this song,” I shouted into the front seat.

“What?” asked Adam.

“I said I love this song!”

“What?”

“I said I fucking love this song!” I finally barked.

“Oh yeah, it’s pretty good. Okay, well, we’re here.”

The shitty ford came to a stop in front of the only house a peach, two story, upper-middle-class tract home. “What a dump,” said Summer, stepping out of the car while again saving her pre-teen nipples from being exposed by her flighty top.

“Really? I mean, your house is only one story…”I began to say before Summer’s sidelong glare sealed my lips. We knocked once, and then didn’t wait for a reply before we entered. As we walked in music was blaring so loud it was becoming a beat instead of a song, and the tract home was strewn with high schoolers drinking and dancing.

“TIIIIIIIIIIIIIIISHA!!!” I heard Summer squeal as she ran up to and hugged a girl who would resemble Alicia
Silverstone, if only it wasn’t for that Jewish nose of hers. She always swore she’d get it fixed one day, she never did.

“Hey! What’s up ladies? Would you like a beer?”

“Sure,” I replied as Tisha walked us over to the kitchen and handed us a partially chilled Papts. I opened my beer and took a sip, then sat it down behind me. The music stopped for a moment and turned from one partially recognizable beat to the next.

“Huh, I love this song! Let’s go dance!” exclaimed Summer as she pulled me over to the dinning room table. We crawled on top of it, and began to shake around like we knew what we were doing. Actually, this was my favorite part of these parties, I loved to dance. About part way through the song I spotted a boy wearing a backwards dodger cap staring up my skirt. I grinned and plopped down in front of him, sitting on the table, my legs spread, leaning back on my hands.

“Hi, what’s your name?” I asked him, noticing his brown eyes had a slight hint of green in them.

“Justin, yours?”

“Jennifer,” I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, then hopped down from the table.

“It’s really loud down here; wanna go upstairs where we can hear each other?”

“Sure,” I replied. He took my hand and led me up to one of the rooms upstairs. We walked into the master bedroom. It was decorated in shades of blue, with puppy figurines and pictures of family everywhere. To enhance the look of the room, there was a couple making out on the bed.

“All of the rooms are being used, but this one has a chair,” Justin said.

“Whatever,” I replied. We went over to the chair, he sat down and I sat down on his lap. I looked at him for half a moment, and then leaned in to kiss him. His breath smelled like cheap beer and cigarettes. Like most boys his age, he went straight for my shirt. He tried to pull it off, but it got caught on my ponytail. I reached up and assisted.

“Sorry,” he said. I smiled and we continued to kiss. It wasn’t long before I was batting his hands away from my skirt, so I decided to take control of the situation. I slowly started to unbutton his pants, sliding down the chair onto my knees. I pulled his dick out, it was pretty small, but all the better for me in this situation. I began to go down on him; he moaned and grasped the seats. I reached up to grab the base of his dick to try and hurry this up, but he came before I ever had to. I swallowed, it was bitter. I crawled up onto the chair next and rested my head against his chest. I sat wondering why I was doing all this, as I always did after I engaged into sexual matters. I always came to the same conclusion, it was better than being at home with my mother who called me a whore long before I ever was one. I got up out of the chair.

“Hey, where are you going?”

I reached for my shirt and put it on over my head in one swift motion. “I have to get going, my friends are waiting for me.” I leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Can I get your phone number?” he asked.

“Sure, um …” I looked around, noticing the couple on the bed was still making out, and then grabbed the pen on the night stand next to them. I took his hand, and wrote my phone number down, with my name on top of it, dotting the “i” with a heart.

“I’ll call you soon,” he lied.

“Okay, cool.” I left the room, walked over to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, first leaning in really close to inspect my face, then taking a step back to see my full body. Looking over myself I cocked my hips again. Maybe all of it would have felt more natural if I had looked more like a woman.
The sign above the restaurant read *Sid’s Pizza*, but unless I was squinting hard I had a hard time making out the letters. There was a large picture of Sid over the door on the inside, just to the left of a massive rip in the wallpaper. I’d watched Sid remove it once to give the glass a quick spit polish. Behind it there was an even larger wallpaper tear, and whatever was underneath looked like someone had taken a chisel to it.

In the picture Sid was thirty and happy, a “Grand Opening” banner hanging over his head, all smiles as the first customer walked up to the door. He looked so pleasant in that picture, that if not for a much cleaner, though still recognizable, sign hanging over the restaurant in the background, I never would have guessed the current owner of Sid’s pizza was the same guy. That and his name card still read Sid.

Twenty five years later, Sid was surly, fat, and overbearing. I don’t think I’d ever seen him smile, and as I walked into the pizza shop that Tuesday and saw him kneading the dough, I decided he was probably tired of pizza as well. He was yawning as he went through his rhythm, occasionally breaking it to sneeze and wipe his hands on his apron. And when he spun the dough over his head, it was with the manner of a man so good at his art any passion he had felt for it had long since disappeared.

“The hell,” he said as he saw me, wiping his hands on his faded apron.

“You back again?”

It was a stupid question, so I just kind of half smiled and turned to my video game. I’d come in every weekday on my way home from school for the past couple of years to play Space Invaders in a small corner of the restaurant, right by the door to the back room. There wasn’t much to the back room. It was small and cramped and full of files and receipts.

“Order pizza or get out,” he muttered to me, then started working on his dough again. I’d ordered pizza once. Once was enough.

Some of the kids at school asked me sometimes why I stopped by Sid’s. I suppose it’s hard to say what the initial attraction was. Sid was mean, drunk half the day, and constantly badgering me to get out of his restaurant. Which was dark and dirty. Mostly I think I went because if I was at Sid’s, I wasn’t at home. These days I went half out of habit. The place was practically a second home.

It was three and the restaurant was deserted. Not that Sid did good business any time of the day, but the afternoon slump always left the place especially empty. Sid never turned on the radio when it was just the two of us. I guess he didn’t think I merited the attention, which suited me just fine. The place was silent but for Sid’s rhythmic working of his dough and the blips of alien space ships exploding.

I don’t mean to brag, but after six years of Space Invaders I can get pretty far on a quarter. I stole the

**Flight**

Rhawn Friedlander

T
money from my father. He was too out of it to notice, anyway.

I generally watch what Sid’s doing out of the corner of my eye, so I noticed when he stopped his kneading for a
minute to stir the sauce behind him. He looked over at me, as if noticing me for the first time. He walked over and stood
behind me. I could almost feel his dirty breath on the back of my neck, which gave me shivers all over.

He watched me fire at aliens for a while. “So, what do they teach you in that fancy school anyway?” he finally
asked, poking my book bag with his foot.

I went to a Catholic girls’ school. My dad had a thing about keeping me away from other men. Not that he had any
idea what I did when I wasn’t at home.

“The usual stuff,” I replied, my eyes on the screen. I wondered if the white blouse and plaid skirt fooled him into
thinking the school was fancy, or if he was just being an ass. “Mathematics, literature, stuff like that. Theology.”

“Figures,” he muttered. “Nothing useful.”

I shrugged, and he walked back behind the counter.

“How the hell do you play that thing every day?” he asked. “Probably rots your brain or something.”

“Maybe,” I replied.

“Fucks with your eyes anyway,” he continued. I looked over at him. He was taking an unusual interest in me today.
Usually we didn’t get past him telling me to get out.

“Can always get glasses,” I told him.

“I guess. Shouldn’t you be outside or something?”

He started kneading again. His movements were jerky though, the rhythm all gone. He kept stopping and bumbling
about the kitchen, as if he were looking for something.

“C’mere,” he said after a while.

I looked over at him. “C’mere,” he said again. I looked back at the screen. Humanity probably didn’t really need my help.

I grabbed my bag and strolled behind the counter.

“You’re here all the time, might as well make yourself useful,” he muttered. He pointed at the dough. “Knead
that,” he said. “I’ll go get you an apron.”

I poked it a little bit. It was sticky. I’d watched Sid do it plenty of times but it didn’t seem to matter any. I tried pushing on
it, prodded it a little bit, but all I did was get my hands covered in goop.

“What the hell are you doing?” he said as he came back.

I just shrugged. He reached past me and dumped some flour on the dough and the board it was on. “Rub it on your
hands too,” he told me, and I floured up my hands. He handed me the apron, and I put it on. I wondered for a second
what he was doing with a pink apron.

He moved behind me, and put my hands on it. “Like this,” he said, and showed me how. His hands were rough. I
felt kinda queasy.

He took his hands off and watched me work for a bit, commenting occasionally. I settled into a rhythm I guess, or
tried to, like I’d seen him do. After a while he nodded and moved off, stirred the sauce a bit, and then busied himself
doing other things. I kept an eye on him. He seemed to have forgotten about me completely.

It wasn’t hard work, but it was tedious. No wonder Sid looked so bored everyday. I watched the window for a while,
cars going by, people busying themselves.
“Are you still doing that?” he asked as I pondered why anyone would buy a yellow car. I must have jumped a bit. He smiled at me.

“You’re smiling,” I said.

“Hmph,” he replied, and cut the dough into thirds. He flattened them out a bit with a roller, and then pointed. “Spin that,” he said, and stepped back. I picked it up and hefted it a bit. I tried an experimental throw, and it landed on the ground.

“Good thing I always make extra,” he muttered. “Like this.” He threw another third in the air with a flourish and caught it on his fist. I picked up the third piece and tried to duplicate his spin. I didn’t have much luck.

By the end of the spinning session he had a circle and I had more of a square. “Fuck it, doesn’t matter,” he told me.

About a half hour later people started coming in, though the place never came even close to half full. He had me man the register after a five minute tutorial. I couldn’t quite get the hang of opening and closing the door so I just left it open, which almost seemed to amuse him. I probably only screwed up a couple of orders.

He kept getting more personable as the night went on. It was the strangest thing. Unnerving. Before long he was shouting “order up” and gesturing wildly or rubbing his hands together. I think he might have clapped once. By the time the crowd had gone from slight back to none and we were doing dishes, he was all laughs.

His eyes were bright and shiny. With a little bit of trying, I could practically see the man in the photograph.

“Was nice having you around, for once,” he told me as I handed him a dish to dry.

I didn’t answer.

He even went so far as to pat me on the back as I was leaving. I saw it coming and tried to duck away, but he didn’t miss. “Good work,” he said as I walked out, looking down. I walked across the street and watched him for a while through the window, as he bustled around the restaurant, readying everything for the next day.

“You’re home,” my dad slurred as I opened the door. I’d waited a couple of hours at the bus station out of the hope he’d be asleep. I closed my eyes as he gave me a hug, and a kiss. “C’mere.”

Tomorrow I’ll go to the library, I thought.
England, 1887

The wind was howling like a feline in pain and rain battered the windows hard when I discovered the cold and very dead body of Mr. J. Edgar Edwards, Esq. I was not a female inclined to screaming fits and hysteria, nor was it the first time I was confronted with a corpse that had recently shuffled off its mortal coil. Though indeed, this body had the distinction of being much more freshly deceased than the others. Yet, though death was not unfamiliar, I had to force down a gag when my eyes met Mr. Edwards’—dead though he was, his eyes were open and staring in what had been a last moment of horror. His neck was twisted at an unnatural angle that did not pretty the sight.

I forced myself to grip my books—Thistledown Manor had a most wondrous library that I devoured every chance I came—lest they fall atop poor Mr. Edwards. I barely had the voice to call for my father, but I found it nonetheless. My father knew I would not call for a small reason—his footfalls, with others, thundered quickly outside the library doors—they flung wide, crashing against the wall behind them. My father, a dark figure against the golden glow in the hallway, quickly assessed the state of things. Seeing as I was neither hysteric nor faint he handed me off to his companion, kindly Dr. Ashcombe. Dr. Ashcombe, after a muttered “Dear God” quickly checked me over and passed me on with an “Anthony, take her.”

My “I am perfectly fine” fell on unhearing ears—I was passed to Dr. Ashcombe’s son Anthony. He could have been as beautiful as the golden Gabriel, had he not been even more engrossed in books than I. But Anthony had been my companion since my birth, for he was only a few years older, and our fathers had a long friendship together. Anthony took my books from me and set them on the nearest table, then pulled me into the hall. He had not chosen the path of doctor: rather, he was interested in police matters and things that needed solving, and was a consultant alongside my father.

“Scarlet, what happened?” He demanded.

“I found him dead.” I told him. “I had not even checked to see if he was breathing when I called for papa.” I looked back into the library—the fire still roared, bathing the shelves and tomes in its golden tone. But for Dr. Ashcombe kneeling next to Mr. Edwards and my father stranding over him, there was no sign of anything amiss.

“How can this happen at a house party?” Anthony asked, mostly to himself. “Especially this house party.”

Yes, there was that question. After all, only scientific analyses and discussions of forensic science in policing could move my father to quit London for a week and come to a country home. It was a meeting of minds out here, so to speak, and now there was a death to ponder using all of the assembling scientific minds—how ironic.

“He is dead.” Dr. Ashcombe said, rising. “There is nothing to do.”

“Oh my word!” A woman exclaimed. I looked—it was Lady Esterhazy, a silver haired woman with a gentle and regal bearing, already decked out in fine evening clothes, no doubt in preparation for supper. “Mr. Edwards! He…is he…?”

I left Anthony and caught Harriet Esterhazy’s hands, pulling her out of sight of the body. “I am afraid he is, my lady.” I told her.

“Oh dear.” Was all she could manage to say, her eyes darting to where Dr. Ashcombe and my father stood.

“Scarlet, come here.” Papa said. “You might as well test your skills while the dead is still here. Let’s see if you can determine the cause of death.”
Lady Esterhazy, while a supporter of sciences and other new learning, was not as inclined to allow young ladies into police business, or for them to become a student of so recent a crime. “Really, Mr. Haverlock!” she admonished, her face paling. “To allow your daughter to study one so recently deceased, a man who has been our company—"

My father held up his hand, all the command he needed for silence. My daughter is as good a detective as I, my lady, and my eyesight is starting to fail me.”

Dr. Ashcombe snorted. Papa glared, quickly there then gone again. “She will note more than I will, Lady Esterhazy.” At papa’s nod, I approached the body. It was easier to think in terms of corpse, instead of J. Edgar Edwards, Esquire.

“Tell me what you see, Scarlet.”

I looked at the corpse again. “His neck has been broken, yet there seems to be a speck of blood on the side of the desk.” My father noted it with a glance, then focused on me again. “The drastic twist to his neck does not suggest it was broken when it hit the table—rather, before.”

I looked to my father—he stared back, the intense gaze that could make grown men confess and strip bare any evidence. “So, Scarlet.” He said quietly. “Your verdict in this matter—accidental, or murder?”

A woman gasped—I thought Lady Esterhazy. “Murder.” I whispered, searching the body again. “No doubt to it.” He gave a small decisive nod. “That is as I see it.”

“Murder?” Dr. Ashcombe asked. “Here?”

A little white lace stuck out from Mr. Edwards’ clenched fist. “Papa, look there.”

He did, an eyebrow arched. “So you spotted it too.” He crouched next to the hand of interest, blocking the roaring fire and casting a shadow over the grim scene. With delicacy he pried the fingers apart, and lifted from their grasp a garter. A red garter, with a large, garish, crimson paste-jewel, framed all around by white lace.

“Certainly no man’s article.” My father muttered. “Unless there is a man in this house hiding a secret.”

“I doubt it could fit around a man’s leg much.” I murmured, stepping not a foot away from the body. “An assignation? When I have not seen him show much interest in anything besides fossils and a good glass of port?”

“And he is still…er, properly fastened.” A delicate blush stained the sharp planes of his cheeks. I felt like laughing at his sudden modesty. “Curious indeed.” He added, and hid the garter away. “Mr. Ashcombe, do you concur with her findings?”

Anthony nodded. “Yes sir.”

“Well then.” My father said, somewhat cheerfully. “Well, I will fetch Anthony’s uncle and see if there is a way to remove Mr. Edwards’ body. Lady Esterhazy, my dear,” Papa approached the noblewoman, taking quite chivalrously by the hand. “Would you be so kind as to inform the other guests of Mr. Edwards’ unfortunate demise but keep the details to yourself?”

Lady Esterhazy nodded somewhat dazedly, but allowed herself to be led out of the library by my father. “Why would someone murder poor Mr. Edwards?” She asked no one in particular.

“It probably began as a robbery of a country home, and went bad when the robber realized that their was a party.” I told her before she left the room. When the doors finally shut again I found a chair and slumped down into it, relieved to shed the ladylike pose even though my corset now pinched.

“Scarlet, you cannot be serious to chalk this up to a robbery. A robbery!” Anthony began to pace the room as he always did when his brain was muddled. “No man, however desperate, would be stupid enough to break in during
a house party possessing a woman’s private article—"

He passed in front of me—I kicked him, taking perverse satisfaction when he dropped his gentlemanly façade and swore most profoundly. “You are as literal as your father, Anthony.” I said to him. “It drives me positively insane sometimes. What I say to a woman as delicate as Harriet Esterhazy does not apply to what I say to you.”

“You are a consummate actress, Scarlet Haverlock,” he grumbled, rubbing at his thigh where I had kicked him. “It takes me too damned long to unravel your riddles.”

“When I want you to know something,” I retorted. “I will tell you.”

He sighed. “I should know better not to hold my breath while waiting for you.”

That irritated me even as I laughed. “If I had held my breath while waiting for you, I would have died of asphyxiation years ago.” Died when he had first kissed me.

He watched me, his hands on his hips. No matter how long I stared into the deep depths of his eyes, I could not read his mind. “We are helpmates, you and I,” he said quietly. “As our fathers help each other.”

“But nothing more than that?”

“Mayhap, but not now.”

I stood, fussing with my skirts. “Make sure you do not wait for ever, Anthony Ashcombe. I am not that patient.”

“I know.”

The door opened—my father hurried in with quick steps, passing between Anthony and myself. Anthony, traitor that he was to avoid the sharp probing of papa, exited the library quickly and shut the door firmly behind him. Papa stood before the fire, scant feet from Mr. Edwards’ small bloodstain.

“Are you sufficiently recovered from this shocking experience, Scarlet?” he asked.

“I was never sufficiently shocked, papa. For the sake of Lady Esterhazy’s expectations, though, I managed to be a little overwrought.”

“I am sending you back to London tomorrow, Scarlet—I don’t want you here.”

“Pardon? Papa—”

He held up a hand, like a magic wand commanding my tongue to stillness. “You have never been this close to a murder.”

“I have attended cases with Scotland Yard along with you—”

“And precious few of them,” my father replied. “Though I would have allowed you more. But you are a woman. I have nothing against your sex—indeed, I loved one of them very much, twenty years ago. But English society especially is not kind to women. Scotland Yard allowed you to witness because I told the inspectors that I had to have you beside me.”

“I am in no danger, Papa.”

“Can you say with absolute certainty the murderer did not see you enter the library?”

“But I did not see him.”

“Which he or she does not know.” My father frowned. “You will be gone by tomorrow.”

“Anthony can protect me.”

His dark eyes looked to the door. “Young Ashcombe is a fine man. Handsome by modern standards, of course.” I allowed myself to grin. “No, papa, I have not had him yet.”

A small smile twitched his usually grim mouth. “I would have been more worried about him having you.”

“Anthony has seen only as far as my ankles, or mayhap a knee when we ran about as children. If he got any higher than that, to my garters even…” The garter that Mr. Edwards had been clutching in his hand. I knew where I had seen it.

“Scarlet?” My father asked; he stood straighter—a predatory gleam entered his eyes.

“I saw that garter.” I told him. “I know where.”

“It’s too fine to be a maidservant’s, so one of the guests.”

I nodded. “When we arrived this morning, and Lady Esterhazy’s trunks spilled all over the drive, one chest was full of ladies garments. I remembered them, for many were red or shades thereof. But I will not believe Harriet to have committed such a heinous crime, even though she would no doubt have the strength to break a neck.”

“Why do you say so?”

“The garter is dainty and Lady Esterhazy, while trim, is not so thin. It would never have fit her.”

“Someone in Lady Esterhazy’s entourage perhaps.”

“I do not know who came with her—a sister, I believe, and a beloved servant, maybe one or two others. Lady Esterhazy is a lady of noble birth and loves to have a court about her.”

“Mr. Ashcombe!” My father called. Anthony, traitor though he was, did not venture out of ear shot of his mentor, and entered the library at the call. “Find out where Lady Esterhazy is. Scarlet, check the lady’s lodgings—if Lady Esterhazy and her entourage are there say nothing and report back to me.”

“And you?” I asked.

“I need to puzzle this scrap of lace.” He waved the garter around. “Its presence in Mr. Edwards’ hand is quite inexplicable.”

Anthony, with a glance at me, went to do my father’s bidding. Papa, in rare affection, kissed me on my cheek. It was rare indeed to see this stark, blank man show strong emotion, and it was these moments I cherished.

No other guests were about as I hurried up the stairs. No one would want to linger after the murder, nor endure the cold the storm had brought. Even maids and manservants were absent from the halls, flickering tapers providing only faint light.

Lady Esterhazy’s door was closed—I knocked and called her name. There was no response. I looked inside. The fire in its fireplace was roaring—Lady Esterhazy was already asleep on her bed, her heavy bulk a large interruption to the smoothness of the sheets. Yet the bed was made, and she lying atop it in her evening gown, splayed facedown in what must have been a most uncomfortable fashion.

“Lady Esterhazy?” I called, stepping into the room. “Harriet?” The door closed behind me with a quiet click.

No, Lady Esterhazy was not conscious, but someone was. They grabbed me from behind, covered my mouth with a bony hand, and wrapped a strong arm about my neck, holding tight to where I could not break loose. I fought—clawed, scratched, and would have kicked had my skirts not bound my legs like shackles. Dark spots, hundreds of pinpricks, danced in my eyes and my lungs burned trying to draw breath.

“Be still, you fool!” My assailant—I did not recognize her voice—commanded me. I complied. The arm about my neck loosened, and I could inhale sweet air again. “Where is it, Miss Haverlock?” She demanded, the hand moving from my mouth but encircling my throat, her cat-nails grasping at my windpipe.

“Enlighten me, madam.” I replied angrily, my throat raspy. Had I screamed? I had screamed loud enough? Lady Esterhazy did not stir from her awkward position. I hoped she had not died at this woman’s painful hands. “If I don’t
know what you are seeking…”
Her arm tightened. “The diamond, you little tramp! The fool Edwards passed it back to Esterhazy here, I know it! I searched her first, but she had already given it to Edwards!”

“Did you check her jewelry box?” I asked her. “Though she never wore a red diamond…”
“No, you fool!” The woman nearly screamed as she shook me. “I had the red diamond, I sewed it into my garter. Or so I thought it was the diamond, but Mr. Edwards laughed at me. Laughed! He said that it was a fake, and he would never pay me for it!”

I snorted. “Of course it was a fake.” She had tried to ransom a jewel? And where had Mr. Edwards gotten a red diamond? “No real red diamond is so hideously garish.”

The lady's subsequent shriek pierced my eardrums. The door flew open—the sound lost to my ears. My father was at the front and dear golden Anthony not a foot behind. The blaze in my father's eyes, brighter than ever, was dim compared to Anthony's.

“Mrs. Crutcher!” My father said, “I could not but help overhear your conversation with my daughter. You thought you had Mr. Edward's diamond, did you? I am sorry to disappoint, but Mr. Edwards sold it. An unfortunate gambling habit, you see.”

“Liar!” Mrs. Crutcher screeched again. Her grip, iron and near-unbreakable, held firm—I could hear the snap of Mr. Edwards' bones in my mind at the hands of this woman. A thin woman, from what little I had seen earlier of her and the thin I had mistook for frailty. “I will kill your daughter, Haverlock, I swear it!”

My father never bowed to threats, and he didn't bow now. “Anthony!” he yelled out.

A pistol popped; a window shattered and the storm poured into the room—Mrs. Crutcher jumped, and I broke free from her arms, running past my father as he ran for her. Anthony caught me and held me, pressing my face into his shoulder. I could hear the ensuing scuffle but could not look at it. My hands, body, seemed to shake. Why did I shake? I am not a female inclined to hysteria.

“Good God, Scarlet.” Anthony whispered in my ear. “Please do not nearly die again. I nearly had a stroke at the sight of this one.”

“I will try very hard not to.” I murmured.

There was a commotion in the hall—curious guests no doubt—as a howling Mrs. Crutcher was escorted down the hall by my father. Then I remembered Mrs. Willis.

“Harriet!” I left Anthony's arms, though I would have paid to remain in them.

“Oh, dear me!” Lady Esterhazy exclaimed faintly, a relieving sign of life.

“Help me, Anthony!” I said to him—together, we managed to maneuver Mrs. Willis into a more-or-less upright position. When he passed close to me I hissed: “You shot out the window?”

He shrugged. “Your father needed a distraction.”

“Try something less dramatic next time—you owe your uncle a new window.”

Lady Esterhazy looked dazedly at me, eyes slightly glazed—perhaps not a good sign.

“Scarlet, use your smelling salts.” Anthony told me.

I glared at him. “Do I look like the type of female that carries smelling salts?” I demanded. But I looked at Harriet—she was the type of woman to carry those vile things. Her reticule was on the bedside table. I found them, and promptly waved them under her nose.
“Thank you, dear Scarlet.” Lady Esterhazy said as she regained her sanity. Then her eyes went wide as her recent memory returned. “That—that Crutcher woman!”

I patted her hand as I sat next to her. “She is already under arrest, Lady Esterhazy.”

Harriet looked relieved, then realized that Anthony was holding her up. “Oh, uh, thank you kind boy. Do be a good lad and fetch me a nightcap. I think I could use something nice and strong.”

Anthony looked to me, I nodded at him. “Let’s set you down for a nap.” I told her. “It will do you good after the shock you’ve had. In an aside to Anthony, there will be time enough to talk to her about this diamond tomorrow.”

We got her into her nightclothes and into a new bedroom since the other was now property of the thunderstorm I stayed with her, sitting in an armchair and wrapped in a shawl against the cold. I thought she had fallen asleep—the candle had nearly gutted when she turned to me. There was something glittering in her hand, and her eyes were desperate when she looked at me.

“Take this, Scarlet.” She said, pressing it into my hands. “Do not ask me the story to it, for even I do not know all. But it suffices to say that it came from my husband, who was once at the mines in Africa. Take it away my dear—don’t ask me to explain it, and I care not what you do with it.” She rolled away. “You may leave me now.”

I had a most dreadful abyss growing in my stomach when I felt the solid planes of a jewel between my palms. I claimed the small candle from her bedside and left her room, hurrying to my own before I dared to look at what I had been given. But the candle provided light enough that I had no choice to view it. Beautifully cut in the style known as Brilliant—round and large, I held a fortune in my palm. A rare red diamond. How the Crutcher woman could have mistaken a vile paste-jewel for this exquisite thing I could not contemplate.

But what was I to do with it?

I remained awake, well into the morning hours and well after the sun rose. Papa had spoken to the authorities, and we stayed one more night with Anthony’s uncle and his family, a night when I finally found sleep. Then papa brought about that my nerves needed rest—females are sensitive, after all. I managed to bite my tongue before I pointed out that Mrs. Crutcher was hardly a sensitive sort. But my father insisted we leave. Anthony was a gentleman and handed me up into the carriage. I wish he would have not been a gentleman, and held me again, or mayhap kissed me. A kiss would have been nice, since I hadn’t had one since our first, and I would have liked another. I watched him grow faint as the carriage crunched and rocked its way down the drive toward London.

The red diamond was a heavy weight in my little purse. I pulled it out, intending to confess all to my father. He sat facing me yet leaned against the opposite wall, watching the Ashcombe land recede in the distance. He did not look at me, but instead put a finger to his lips. “On your side of the carriage, Scarlet, you should see the River Kennwick. We pass quite close to it, remember? Not a foot to the side of the road, and only a few feet down to the water. Very beautiful this time of year, though the village downstream is quite impoverished. Their fishing helps a little.”

I smiled, and looked at the diamond one more time. A beautiful creation that would feed a village for a few cold winters. With an arm outstretched through the window and a flick of my wrist it went sailing. I didn’t watch it plop into the water, and I ignored the shouts of the boys, who had been swimming nearby, as they dove for it. My father allowed himself a small smile as he gazed out his window. I settled back for the long ride and watched the countryside go by.
The people connected to just a single dollar bill is phenomenal. The bills have paid for the birth of a baby all the way to the death of a cheating spouse. Everyday, a beautiful woman hands me her money. I look into her eyes; I am met with an astronomical stare.

“Excuse me,” she broke the silence.
“Oh, hi, what can I get you today?” I already know what she wants.
“Just a lemonade, like usual.”

I click a few of the buttons on the cash register. She hands me a crisp $20 bill. I place my palm over her hand as I take her money. I feel her warm soul wrap around mine. I could stand here all day, my hand on hers, but I give back her change. My eyes break from her glance, and I focus on her curly red hair. It flares like a roaring forest fire. The flames beckon to engulf me. One of these days, she will be mine. She turns away and is gone in the abyss that is Sea Breeze Mall.

We have a new employee today; he is an older gentleman who seems to be balding. He bore a strange resemblance to that guy who was up on the roof with a gun several months ago. Either way, if that bastard even touches me wrong, I’m going to cut his fingers off and throw them in with the mini corn dogs. I need him to take over for a few minutes; I need to find my siren.

“Hey Howard, take over for a few minutes.”
“But uh…” he sounds like pig farts.
“Just do what I showed you, you’ll be fine!”
He begins grumbling as I jump over the counter, “Stupid punk.”
“I heard that,” I spun around, “I haven’t worked here for six years so you could be an asshole and think you’re better than me on your first day. I’m what kept this Hot Dog on a Stick going! You’re MY bitch.” My hat goes flying at Howard; I go flying off the other way.

I spot her behind the counter at Victoria’s Secret. I picture her in a lacy bra and crotch-less panties. The light in the mall dims, everyone melts into the ground. The smell of burning flesh brings me to my knees as I notice I am in the middle of a fire. The Hellish flames intoxicate me. She emerges, her hair singeing, twisting towards the heavens. My eyes start to glaze and burst into flames.

“How may I help you today?”
“A lemonade, please.” She smiles.
I could taste her shampoo.

I invited Howard to my small apartment. I think I was still rather drunk from earlier in the day when I had part of a bottle of tequila during lunch. After work, we hopped into my Taurus. The damn thing makes so many noises; I should put it
out of its misery. I open the door to the small shit hole. Bottles of Jack Daniels line my counter tops. I have a few pictures of my family up and an Ashlee Simpson poster that I beat off to sometimes. The dog next door was still barking incessantly.

“Why are your pictures broken?” Howard grunts.
“Uh…that’s how they came.”
The place still smells like the incense I was burning last night, with a crisp whisky smell.
“Mind if I sit down?” Howard asks.
“No, no. Go right ahead!”
“So what do you have to drink?”

After several minutes of listening to the dog bark, I broke the silence. “So what were you doing before you joined Hot Dog on a Stick?”
“You know, I used to be the best damn car salesman in this God damned town. I could have sold a fucking Pinto to Bill Gates! But one day, the boss caught me hitting on his youngest daughter, so he fired me,” he shrugs.
“How old was she?"
“Whose dog is that? Will does he ever shut the hell up?”
“Oh, that’s just Sam’s dog, and no he doesn’t,” I laugh, “He’s the landlord’s black lab, but the he gets mad if you say anything to him.”
“Ah, gotcha…” he pauses, “So what about you, what were you doing before?”
“Well, I got the job when I was 17 and have been there ever since.”
“How can I help you today?”
“Just a lemonade, please.”

I love you.

Today is so fucking hot in the mall, I want to take my skin off. I decide to finally go into her store today. I leave Howard in control again; hopefully the bastard won’t screw things up again. I make my way close to the help desk, but making sure to keep just enough distance so I won’t seem creepy. I begin to pick up some of the bras and keep quite a perplexed look upon my face.

“Oh, hello,” she saw me, “So, I finally get to help you today, huh?” She giggles.
“Yeah” I laugh too.
“So are you looking for your girlfriend, wife, the likes?”
“No, I’m single.” I’m in like Flynn.
“Oh…well, how…can I help you?”
“I was thinking to myself, ‘I help this woman everyday, and I don’t even know her name.’ So here I am.” I smile at her.

She stood there for a moment, perhaps realizing that she felt that connection, that yearning, which I have suffered from for two years.
“It’s Jane.”

An old woman stood up on the other side of the store. She was watching us closely. I smile at her, which causes her to frown. “Beverly, stop talking to your friends and help me over here!”

Beverly’s face becomes as red as the Devil. “Sorry,” she said pouting, “I have to go help her.” She starts to walk
“What time are you off?”
“Six,” she says, she turns around and gazes into my eyes, “if you can catch me.”
I missed her.
“Hi Beverly!”
“Hello there, you weren’t quick enough yesterday,” a grin graces her face.
“Are you kidding, I’m a regular Speedy Gonzalez!”
“I bet,” she looked me over.
Howard was snickering from behind the deep fryers; he was dipping the corn dogs.
“I really want to,” my turn to look her over, “get to know you.”
She stands there staring into my eyes, I feel like that rabbit I ran over on the way to work. She pulls out a pen and a small sheet of paper from her small purse. A customer behind her begins to get huffy; his hair looks like a meatball.
“Can we hurry this up?” he blurs out.
“Sir, I’ll be with you in a moment.”
“A moment, I’ve been in line for almost 5 minutes! I’ve got places to go, you know?”
This guy is lucky that I’m in a good mood. “Dude, you better stop.”
“I want my fucking drink and I want it NOW!”
She writes down an address along with Friday at 9:30 P.M. She raises the paper to her mouth, kisses it, then hands it back. Her lips seem to have burnt the paper. “Looks like you have your hands full,” she smiles.
“Hey, fuck you too, cunt.”
She sticks her nose towards the roof and strides away like a pussycat. I can only stand there and gaze at her.
“Look bro, I don’t have all fucking day, I want a fucking lemonade and corn dog.”
“Sir, there’s not much stopping me from dragging you in the back and flogging you to death.”
His eyes widen and look like they might just explode. After noticing Howard, he becomes even more mortified and backs away slowly. Howard stands there perplexed.
I pull up to the address on Friday; it is for a small house in a quiet neighborhood on the other side of town. My heart is ferocious. Tonight, I knew she would finally be mine. I get to the door and knock. I loaded up on Wild Turkey before I came, oh what a day it was, (and hopefully what a night it will be!) She answers in a rose red dress. The smell of her shampoo hits me like a shot of heroin.
“Come in,” she beckons.
Her little home has all the things a little home should have: a small couch, small TV, etc… I notice her bookshelf is crammed with literature of various sizes. There is a cross on the wall.
“So, you want to go get some dinner? McDonald’s has cheese burgers for $1.00.”
She stares into my eyes and lunges for my lips, sucking on them, moaning. My God, she tastes like strawberries on a warm summer afternoon. I am shoved backwards and we knock into the bookshelf, several books fall with a crash, the cross vibrates. We bounce our way to the bedroom, losing clothing like a wilting flower, the Wild Turkey is set free in my blood! She shuts the bedroom door behind her.
In a matter of moments, my body tenses for the big blow. Beverly is on top screaming, rocking, roaring, my little hell cat.
In a matter of moments, my body tenses for the big blow. Beverly is on top screaming, rocking, roaring, my little hell cat. “I’ve done it!” she exclaims.
“Me t—”
The door bursts open releasing men, women, and children. They fill the room chanting, “She’s done it.” A pastor of some sort enters soon after. Beverly is holding my legs in place with her silky thighs; my arms are bound to the bed.
“I’m free of the Beast, Grand Reverend!”
“Yes child, you have vanquished the Beast from your body,” he takes her hand and hands her a robe.
“What the fuck is this shit?” I yell over the chants.
He glares at me, “She has freed herself from the control of darkness and is now purified to be apart of Us. Her soul is spared!”
Various hallelujahs shoot around the room.
“Now then, do you accept the Burden, my child?”
“The ‘Burden?’ I don’t understand what the fuck you’re talking about! Who the fuck are all of you?”
He melts me with his eyes, “You have been judged,” he breathes in deeply, “and that judgment is sacrifice!”
The crowd begins to howl with delight. He holds a vial in his right hand and snaps it with the left. He begins to stab his palm, causing blood to splash everywhere. He pushes his gushing hand against my face; the mixture on his palm slowly drips into my mouth.