Swimming At Night

Selected Poems, Short Stories, and a Novella

For Professor Corinne E. Blackmer, who has not only been a literary inspiration, but a spiritual one as well. This could not have been possible without her guidance and support

Going Crazy

(Short Stories)

(The Storrs Family)

Viking Funeral

(Oscar)

He knew that the red can was bad, and that he was not to touch it.

He had been told many times. He had been scolded. Oscar hated it when his father yelled at him. He loved his father, and hated it when he would change. He did not like it when he yelled, when his eyebrows scrunched up and he growled through gritted teeth. But Oscar couldn't help it. Every time he came to the docks, he could not help but stare at the red can. He liked to examine the faded sticker, which had begun to yellow and peel over time. It was very old. He liked the smell of it. It reminded him of something, yet he could not remember what, exactly. Whenever Oscar came here, there it was. Unchanging. It had been sitting there before he was born, long forgotten in the heat of endless summers.

His father grabbed his hand, tearing him away. He knelt in front of him, face painted in anger.

"Oscar, do you know what this is?"

The little boy nodded, head hung with shame.

"What is it, then?"

Oscar held his hands behind his back, staring at his feet.

"Gasoline, daddy."

"And why is gasoline dangerous?"

The boy stretched out his arms, flailing them wildly.

"Things go boom."

His father smiled. He mussed Oscar's hair and the boy laughed. "That's right." He patted him on the shoulder. "Now go play somewhere else, son."

Oscar looked up at his dad, taking one last glance at the gasoline container before scurrying away. He walked along the dock, peering down through the cracks in the wood, watching the waves crash beneath. The sea air swept over his wind burnt face. He licked the salt off of his lips. Oscar always had always loved the salt. Sometimes he would run his finger over the wood finish of the boats, gathering the white powder for a good lick.

The boats always interested him. Especially his grandpa's. He liked the idea of going out into the ocean, all alone, braving the open water. He wished that one day he could do it all by himself. Memories of storms and squalls and beaches filled his young mind. Memories of Bloc Island cookouts and Martha's Vineyard moped rides. Memories of Cape Cod baseball and Long Island family reunions. Memories of his grandfather. The sailor. The teacher. The old man who was still strong, still sharp. The man who caught bluefish early in the morning and cooked them up with sliced onions, just the way his grandson liked them.

Oscar came to the end of the pier, stopping at the large post on top of which the lone seagull always sat. He looked up, waving to it. It looked down, cocking its head to the side. Like the gasoline, the bird was always here, always waiting to greet him. The boy took a seat on the edge of the dock, swinging his skinny legs back and forth.

Oscar was wearing his favorite blue bathing suit, as he had always done whenever he came here, yet refused to take off the black socks. They stuck up out of his sneakers, itching his shins terribly. He had been wearing them since the day of his grandfather's funeral,

and, to his family's dismay, had refused to take them off since. It had been nearly a week ago, and Oscar's feet were beginning to smell. His father had to drive down to the marina with the windows open in an attempt to air the little boy out. But Oscar would not take the socks off. If he removed them, he would be removing the last remnants of his grandfather. Oscar was not yet ready to do that. He was not ready to let go.

He looked back towards his grandfather's boat. He could see his father standing with his aunt and two uncles, and another man who was still a stranger to him. On the ride over, his father told him that they were having a meeting with the family's attorney. Oscar did not know what that meant.

"He's a special friend to the family, Oscar."

"Why is he coming to the boat?"

"Because when your papa left us, he didn't say anything about the yacht."

Oscar scratched his head, looking out of the backseat window in confusion.

"What's a yacht, dad?"

His father smiled. "I mean the boat."

Oscar leaned back in the seat, repeating the word over in his mind.

Yacht.

Yacht.

Yacht!

It sounded funny, and he giggled to himself for the rest of the ride.

* * *

He looked intently at the man who they called "attorney". He was wearing a suit, which made him important. He did not look like a friend. His face was mean, like his father's angry face. In fact, everyone standing on the deck of the…yacht…had their angry faces on. They pointed their fingers at each other, they're mouths open wide, eyebrows scrunched up (as angry people often do). They were yelling. Oscar got up and walked quietly over to the side of the boat. He curled up next to it, grabbing the fender hanging off of the side to steady himself against the rocking. Pressing his ear up to the bow, he listened intently.

The person talking must have been the attorney, since Oscar did not recognize the voice. It was very low and shallow, like his teacher. The kind of voice that put little kids like him to sleep.

"Listen, at no point in the will does your father state who will actually maintain ownership of the boat."

"Well what the hell does it say then, Jerry?" That was his uncle Edward.

The slow voice came back. "It simply says, 'my children will enjoy the boat however they wish.'"

"This is ridiculous!" The shrill screeching was his Aunt, Karen.

"Maybe we should be looking for a new lawyer. One that doesn't screw up our father's estate!" yelled Uncle Edward.

Finally, his father spoke up, and Oscar, very carefully, poked his head up to look on. He prayed that no one would see him. As his father had told him earlier in the day, this was to be a very grown-up talk. They would be talking about big people things. Things Oscar would not care about or understand.

He saw his father wiping his glasses on his shirt, standing in the middle of everyone. Surprisingly, his voice was very calm. Gentle, like when he would read to Oscar at night.

"Now, listen, everyone. I'm sure that there's something we're not seeing here. Dad must have said something about sharing it, or-"

His uncle threw his hat on the ground in anger. "Oh, shut up, Norman! You just want it all to yourself!"

"Of course not!"

Aunt Karen cut in, "I'll take this to court, I swear! Dad promised me the yacht! He said that he would leave it to me!"

Edward laughed. "Please. When's the last time you even stepped *foot* on this thing, Karen?"

"Do you have any proof of this?" asked Jerry, the attorney.

"Of course she doesn't!" replied Edward, "she just wants somewhere to go with her little boyfriends!" Oscar did not know what this meant.

Karen lunged forward, slapping Edward hard across the mouth. He stumbled back, yelling words that Oscar would be

punished for if he ever repeated them. The boy could not believe that his family was yelling out so many of those words, and to *each other*!

Oscar looked over at his father, who just stood there, watching all of this unfold. He could see his father's legs shaking slightly, could almost see a tear fall down the side of his face. Oscar had never seen his dad cry before. He thought that grown ups couldn't cry. But his father did, as he watched his brothers and sisters hit and yell at each other over a big boat.

The attorney Jerry tried to break the fight up, but he was hit by someone as well, though Oscar could not see who, exactly. There were more bad words. Jerry stormed off of the boat, and told everyone that he would be "pressing charges".

Oscar ran down the docks to hide as everyone got off of the boat. He snuck behind the big wooden post. The seagull had flown away. Oscar thought that the bad words might have hurt the bird's feelings. Cautiously, he peeked around the post, his eyes fixed on the boat. His father was the last one to get off. He stood on the docks for a very long time, so long that Oscar's feet began to hurt just watching

him. His father stared at the boat, touching it one last time before calling out Oscar's name.

* * *

That night, Oscar was lying in bed, but could not sleep. He sweated through his pajamas. In a burst of frustration, he threw the blankets off and made his way to the kitchen. A glass of milk always helped him go to bed. He started to walk down the stairs, but stopped halfway when he saw that the kitchen light was already on. Slowly, he tip-toed to the crack in the door, only to see his mother and father sitting at the table. They both looked very sad. Their arms were stretched out across the table, their hands and fingers locked into each other's. They spoke very softly, so Oscar had to strain to hear them. His mother's voice was quiet.

"Well what do you expect, Norm? Your family has always been like that. Always selfish."

"I know, I know. I just thought…for my dad's sake…I don't know. I figured they would be reasonable about this. But Karen, goddamn her temper. I mean, hitting Edward? And *Jerry*?"

"Please, dear. We've always known about her tantrums. They've certainly never helped anything before."

"I know, honey, I know. These people, though…it's as if…as if they're not even family anymore. And my God, to act that way in *public*! I'm just so glad our little guy wasn't there to see it. Oscar is the only reason I wanted the boat anyway. I just wanted to be able to give him that *one thing*, you know? To be able to take him fishing, the way dad did. This family is falling apart, and for what? A damned boat?"

They both sat there in silence.

Oscar crept away, and made for the front door, knowing what had to be done. As quietly as possible, he snuck over to the garage, where his bike sat on the kickstand. He opened the door, slow as ever to avoid the loud grinding. Hopping on the bike, he peddled as fast as he could, down the driveway and out onto the street. The trip wouldn't take him long. The streetlights flew by like shooting stars, illuminating his path. Oscar shook against the wind. He should have remembered to bring a jacket, but there would be no time for that. His stomach was full of butterflies, both the good kind, like on

Christmas morning, and the bad kind, like when he knew that he was going to be grounded. He was exited, his little heart pounding, threatening to burst out of his chest. Oscar had never ridden his bike at night before. Not this late, anyway. There were no cars in sight. Everyone was home, safely tucked into their beds. Feeling adventurous, he rode over the yellow lines in the middle of the road. It was a strange feeling, braving the world by himself. His small feet moved furiously, the bike picking up in speed.

It was not long until he saw the bright lights of the marina, beckoning to the young boy as a light house beckons to wayward sailors.

* * *

There it was, in the same place as always. Steady as the sun and the gull and the post. It was waiting for him. It had always been waiting. With trembling hands, Oscar lifted it up. He could hear it slosh around, half full. The smell was stronger than ever as it dripped onto his sneakers, onto his pants and his shirt. With quiet

footsteps, he crept along the pier, making a point not to step on any of the cracks in the wood.

His grandfathers boat swayed in place, safely roped to the dock. The boats always seemed different at night. No loud motors. No birds calling out. No horns. There was only the hush of the waves. The sound that had for so many years rocked Oscar to sleep in the cabin. The little boy took a deep breath, gathering all of his strength before climbing on board.

He poured out the gasoline, splashing it all over the boat. This memory was not worth saving. The sweet smell spilt out onto the wood. Oscar swung the container violently, back and forth, back and forth. Waiting for the boom. He poured it all out until the yellow water began to gather at his ankles.

"Why won't you burn!" he yelled, little lungs straining to force out the words.

"Why won't you burn!" he repeated, throwing the can down.

He kicked at the gas, splashing it up over the covered seats and sliding doors. He bent down and splashed with his hands. The

gasoline felt funny, and made his fingers stick. He pounded his tiny fists against the fiberglass floor in frustration.

"Burn!" he cried, over and over again. He didn't care if anyone heard him. He didn't care if anyone saw him. He just wanted it to go away.

Oscar curled up into a ball, holding his knees with trembling arms. The sat in the gas and let it soak him through. The wind blew and he began to shake, but he couldn't feel the cold. He no longer felt anything. Soon he began to cry, louder and louder as the toxic smell spilt into his nostrils.

A hand touched his shoulder. Soon, he was being lifted up, carried off of the boat and onto the pier. His legs were wobbling as he was set down. Oscar looked up through tearing eyes, only to see his father standing in front of him. This was it. Here would come the angry face, the yelling and finger pointing, all of the things that the little boy hated in this world. But it was different, if only for this one night. Tonight, on the docks, among the smell of gas and waves and gulls, his father looked down with gentle eyes and only smiled. It was a sad smile, the kind that you give at funerals when you see your

friends. The kind of smile that hides great sadness and pain. But it was a smile nonetheless, and Oscar was comforted.

His father reached into his pocket, digging around the jacket. Out came a small pack of matches. With the sad smile still on his face, Oscar's father touched his shoulder, squeezing softly. He lit the match. The small, yellow flame ignited and flickered, the wind threatening to blow it out. His father kneeled in front of him, and in the gentlest, most loving voice that Oscar had ever heard, and ever *would* hear, uttered the simplest, most profound words that anyone could have said to a boy of nine.

"Let it burn, son. Let it go boom."

That Bitch!

(Hayden)

It had been a rude awakening.

All he wanted was some shuteye.

Just fifteen goddamned minutes.

Hayden awoke in as bad a mood as ever, throwing off the sweaty sheets in frustration, only to have his naked body attacked from the chill of the open windows. Somewhat in a daze, he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to reassemble and reassess the fragmented chunks of the night before.

What the hell happened?

Lying on his stomach, he craned his stress-cramped neck to the side, fixing his gaze on the cluttered room, focusing on piles of mixed dirty and clean laundry, Chinese takeout boxes, and manuscript papers strewn on the floor like Mardi Gras confetti. Slowly, he ran a hand through his mane of sleep-gnarled hair, gathering his surroundings in mid-yawn.

It was Sunday. He knew that much for sure. From the looks of it, it must have been pretty late in the day. Outside, he could hear the commuters marching back to their respected apartments. He could hear their shouts over the blaring horns of taxis as they labored their way through crowded avenues.

How long had he been sleeping?

The night before had been rough on him. It had been rough on the both of them. This much, he knew was true.

His body froze, rigid in shocking realization. Without looking, he ran his hand over the other side of the bed. Nothing. He turned. Her indent was still pressed deep into the mattress, blankets and sheets forming a perfect outline of her perfect body. But, alas, as Hayden's luck would have it, the body was missing. He tried to piece it all together while studying the blanketed chalk outline.

She couldn't have just left. It was impossible. Probable…perhaps, but she was not such a drastic human being. If anything, she was the most cool-headed, down to earth girl he had ever known.

A bottle of Jack Daniels rolled across the hardwood floor, gaining speed as the wind blew through the bedroom.

He must have really screwed up this time.

Hayden made his way to the bathroom, stubbing his toe on the door as he tried to fit the shirt over his head. He stopped short as his foot kicked up a piece of paper. The white sheets spiraled up in the air, and, with surprisingly fast reflexes, he managed to snag it before it floated into the sink. Even before he read it, he already knew who it was from. Well, that was obvious, seeing as how no one else could have snuck in to leave a post-it. He glanced at the handwriting in red pen. She had terrific handwriting. Beautiful, actually. He had figured himself a professional writer, though compared to her, his penmanship looked like chicken scratch. With out his trusted laptop, he would surely be lost. Thank God almighty for blessing us with spell-check.

Hayden glanced at the paper for some time, not sure if he really wanted to read its contents. Eyes still a bit blurry, he decided to bite the bullet. Obvious. How the hell could he have not seen this coming? A breakup note. A goddamned, fourth grade break up

note. She wrote the usual words, whatever words one would expect when being left without a moments notice. The letter was stained with "maturity gap" and a hefty load of "its not you, its me" bullshit. Same old same old. The last line, however, took Hayden aback. It read: "It was you, you're actions, that ended this."

"I didn't end it," he muttered out loud, "you just did."

Pictures of her faced flashed before him in a dazzling speed, one vision after another, taunting him in a sick cerebral slide show. The memories swirled by in such rapid succession he feared he might need to aim his head towards the toilet bowl. He felt sick. Physically sick. Every memory, every moment they had shared had blended into one gigantic mosaic inside of his head. No matter how hard he tried he could not get rid of it. His eyes burned as he forced them tighter. He opened them and looked around the dreary bathroom. Taking a lighter, he set the note ablaze, letting it fall into the running sink.

This place was not the same without her. She made it home. Coming back to her each and every night that is what made this his home. A place of love and safety and laughter and tears. Alone, it

was nothing. Nothing but mere walls and floors. A room that he slept and ate in. What was once a real home had suddenly been stripped down, exposed to its bare bones, and empty place filled with empty conversation, void of any feeling remotely close to anything good.

It was unbelievable. Seven months down the drain. Seven months! All brought to a grinding halt by three paragraphs. Not even a set of X's and O's at the bottom, though he didn't think those would have been appropriate anyway. She must have been serious. Their fights before had been small. Battles compared to wars, though the wars were rare. And even those weren't so bad.

How did he not see this coming? He himself had been fighting his own war, between his heart and his head, for the entire seven months, feeling as if he was on the knife's edge, about to be cut off at any moment. Now, it seems, his worst fears had been realized. It had finally happened. He sat down, resting against the wall. Stability could do some good.

Too much damage had been done to his senses already. He needed to get out. In a frantic rage, Hayden leapt across the room, assembling anything that could be close to resembling a decent outfit.

He made his way out of the front door of his building, stuffing his hands into his pockets upon coming into contact with the cold. He had almost forgotten what the weather was like today. The sunlight and clear skies were deceiving. Beautiful things often are. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, he blended into the afternoon crowd. It was funny; he'd been living here for five years now, yet, in this city, he still felt very much like an outsider. Just a visitor. The gigantic buildings that loomed above him…they could never be tamed, never be truly "owned". The city was a living and breathing thing, and sometimes, swallowed people whole. Everyone was simply tourists, guests to gaze at its magnificence. No hard anyone tried to claim a piece of it, the city would always remain its own. A separate entity entirely. Hayden could not put into words the loved he felt for this place, nor his admiration and pure wonder.

The tightened his shoulders as he moved on with the herd. Crunch time. He braced for impact as the body flow merged into one

gigantic mess in the middle of the crosswalk. A few stubborn couples refused to let go of each other's hands, forcing others to move around. Hayden was always eager, and never missed the opportunity to witness a collision. Those were always good.

Taking the alternate route, the park, Hayden found a separate peace. He began to dwell less on the ugliness of the morning, and more on his family. His thoughts drifted to his sister and brothers. He wondered how Kathy was doing in school. How Oscar was doing in the hospital. How Ethan was doing, wherever he was in the world.

The sun shown brightly in the sky, yet Ethan could not bring himself to enjoy it. Not quite yet. Hayden was a writer, after all, and the creative process was a constant in his mind. At times it felt more like a disease. The voices of Joyce and Wilde rang in his head, forever whispering; scattered sonnets of love and heartache, of the hero's journey, of the loss of innocence…blah blah blah. Such things only hurt, now. The ghosts of Shakespeare's romantic tragedies haunted the corridors of his mind, taunting him. Mocking his sorrow.

In a sad sort of way, he liked the feeling. He felt alive, and it was good to know that he had loved. Life would've been far worse, had he never experienced it at all. He felt like he was in one of those poems right now. It was almost as if none of this was real, not really happening to him. He felt like a spectator, watching the scene of lost love unfold on a Broadway stage. It was unreal. He had often written of love lost, of characters loosing those who they cared about, yet he had never truly connected to them. Sure, he could feel bad for the characters, but, in the end, who cares?

No one ever cares. No one ever cares until it happens to *them*.

Long walks through these cobblestone paths were often a great source of release for him. Yet today, that aura of comfort was gone. He felt empty. Everywhere he looked, he saw couples. Playing catch, walking, jogging, laying in the grass. They came at him from all sides, surrounding him, leaving him in his own black hole of loneliness, into which he gently slipped.

His mind turned back to his faltering career. Everyone wanted him to get up off his ass and actually write again. He supposed it was true. Hayden had written only one book, yet it had become an

international bestseller, boosting him to stardom into select literary circles. He really loved it. The whole process, really.

Though naturally a shy person, Hayden was never shy enough to accept praise. He couldn't get enough of people telling him how much they loved his work. He wanted to explode in fit of joy. University lectures and book signings gave him the sense of being a rock star. He was, really, in his own small way. A bit of a celebrity. He loved walking down the streets, looking into bookstore windows and seeing his work lined up in neat little rows along the shelf. The profits were pretty good, which meant that he no longer needed a steady job. Yet the fact that he slacked of severely after all the success was a thorn in a lot of sides. Almost nightly, his friends and family urged him to get back into the game. People don't respect bums, especially bums with potential, and he supposed that he was one, now.

He really did need to start writing again. Suddenly, he stopped. The wind blew as he stood in the park, frozen in place. He felt something…inspiration? Yes! The urge to get up and do something, to make something of himself. And he had just the idea.

His manuscript, only half completed, was in dire need of revising. He needed to get back home.

Hayden ran into his building, jabbing the elevator button about ten times before the doors finally opened. It could not have moved fast enough. He reached the apartment, pushing open the door.

Inside, he looked around to all of the papers on the floor, yet, deep down, knew that something was missing. He walked, slowly, to his desk. It was gone. The laptop was gone. His work, all of his work, including back up discs and hard copies, had been lost. Taken. Stolen. Her personal things were now missing as well, her belongings nowhere to be found.

Hayden dropped to the floor, his fist clenched. He held a fist up to his mouth, biting down hard on his knuckles to stop from screaming.

THAT BITCH!

Another Perfect Tuesday

(Oscar)

Oscar gripped the steering wheel with trembling fingers as he pulled into the parking lot of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Wincing, he edged his way into a narrow parking space between two daunting SUV's, avoiding a good scratch. Oscar cut the ignition, stepping out of the warmth of the heated seats and into the biting chill of late November. Teeth chattering, he pulled his windbreaker tightly across his chest as he made his way to the front door.

The gigantic building loomed in front of him, ominous, sterile, forbidding. He sighed softly to himself as he pulled open the doors. This was undoubtedly the last place on earth he wanted to be. He had only been to the DMV a few times before, once when he was sixteen to take his license exam, and the other to get rid of his old plates. Each time, he made it a point to never set foot inside the building ever again. It had been a mental solemn oath. Over the years he had been pretty efficient in this, and tried his best to abide

by all traffic laws, even if that meant *actually* going the speed limit. He couldn't count how many times he'd been late because of that, but missing an appointment seemed to be worth it. Anything was better than this.

Indeed, it was a foolish thing to get so irritated over, but Oscar was an impatient man. As an ardent believer of TV dinners and drive-through McDonald's, he did not like to be kept waiting. At times even toasters moved too slowly for his taste.

The DMV was a lifeless place, an establishment of cold mechanical bureaucracy and assembly line rhythm. It was uncaring of basic human emotions; crying or begging would get you nowhere. Accurate forms and properly ordered documentation were God. Failure to comply with basic protocol would result in fake smile and a request to "come back later". The unorganized and the unprepared are quickly banished.

Such things made him tremble with anxiety. Public places were often avoided. He loathed interaction with others, even on the most in-personal basis. A simple trip to the grocery store was a potentially nerve-wrecking experience.

He suffered from severe Social Anxiety Disorder, something that he kept secret from everyone, including his few close friends. He had visited a therapist only once, who told him that he did indeed have a serious condition, and insisted on prescribing medication. That was something Oscar could never handle. He refrained from taking pills, due mainly to his firm belief that human emotion could not and should not be modified by modern medicine. Pills alone could not tell someone how to feel. Nor should they be able to. But sometimes he questioned his own beliefs, as he was beginning to now.

The doctor said that it was most likely his past that had made him turn out this way. A bad childhood could do a lot of damage to one's mind. Oscar waited in line, growing bored, contemplating just how "bad" his childhood was. Not too traumatic, really. At least *he* didn't think so. Just a worrisome mother who kept him on constant surveillance until high school, in turn having complete dominance over his passive father. He supposed it might have been all of her constant paranoia that caused him to become something of a head case himself. He supposed that, subconsciously, he had developed

some of her habits. After a while, he figured that his childhood had never been bad. Everyone has their quirks, their secrets.

The line began five feet into the front lobby and snaked all the way up to the desk two rooms away. The heavy door slammed shut behind him, and he wished it hadn't. Oscar took his place at the back, a little unsure of himself as countless faces turned to see who had just entered. He coughed slightly, a habit of his in uncomfortable situations, and darted his eyes to the ceiling as they stared. Anything to avert their attention. Anything to take their probing eyes off of him. What he wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall.

The pace at which the line was moving was mind-numbingly slow. Oscar looked at the clock, and though he felt as if an hour had gone by since he last checked, it had been a sluggish ten minutes. He scanned crowd, observing the other poor souls who shared his predicament. He felt for them, deep down.

He wanted to reach out and connect to them, to say, "I understand your quarrel. I am your ally in this evil place." Of

course, such things would never utter forth from his trap-shut mouth.

Directly in front of him, a haggard-looking mother tried to fill out some forms as she stood in line, holding papers against the wall, scribbling furiously as a little girl tugged at the hem of her shirt. In front of them, a young woman screamed at her boyfriend in rapid Spanish. She gestured wildly with her hands, illustrating her point. Oscar could only imagine the obscenities she was spitting at him. The boyfriend cowered away, not wanting to cause a scene. A few heads turned in their direction as the rants grew louder and louder.
In fact, he realized, it seemed as though only half of the people waiting in this place actually spoke the English language. Hundreds of words in a multitude of tongues filled the room in a low rumble.

As the line moved forward, the hum of human conversation was overpowered by a computerized voice in the main room announcing the designated ticket numbers. Oscar walked into the main waiting area, greeted by the odd robotic voice. He felt like he was boarding the Starship Enterprise, and after only a few moments he found his imagination running away.

Perhaps if he truly pretended he was in space, he could actually make the experience more enjoyable. At least it would kill some time. He fantasized about boarding the spacecraft, leaving Earth, society, all of it.

Leaving everything.

Just one man on interstellar retreat. It wouldn't be so bad, he thought to himself, just getting out. What better way to live out a life of peaceful solitude than in the infinite expanse of space?

Of course, there were other places to live quietly: Vermont, perhaps, or Maine, but Oscar never liked the woods. The Milky Way was far more appealing.

He was awoken from his little dream by a tap on the shoulder. His turn up front. Stepping over the yellow line on the floor, he crossed into forbidden territory. He cast a nervous glance over his shoulder just to be sure that it was really his time.

The young woman behind the desk didn't even notice him walk up. She had her back turned, laughing with another coworker. Oscar waited patiently as the two joked around, becoming more aggravated at each passing moment. It was exactly these sort of

miniscule things that were liable to push him off the edge. To them he was a fly on the wall, unnoticeable; unimportant enough to be given the slightest shred of attention. He coughed slightly to announce his presence. The girl talked for a few moments more, then spun around to Oscar, looking quite annoyed that he'd interrupted.

She pushed her hair behind her ears, "Can I help you?"

"I have a little problem."

She raised her eyebrows, giving him a sideways glance.

Embarrassed, Oscar looked down at the desk, folding his hands.

"My license was stolen last night. I'm here to apply for a new one."

"Just your license?" she asked.

"My entire wallet, actually. Everything. I don't even have identification with me."

She blew a strand of hair away from her face, reaching under the desk. A moment later she emerged, slamming down a stack of papers at least two inches thick.

"You're going to have to fill these out. I hope you remembered your Social."

Oscar stared incredulously at the stack. His eyes widened as she handed him a pen and pointed to a small desk next to the wall. He didn't have time for this garbage.

He kicked himself for deciding to come in on his day off.

Another perfect Tuesday.

And he most certainly did not remember his Social.

The grueling process dragged on as he scribbled away, signing line after line, until finally he brought the returned forms back to the girl. Once more he took his place in line, and finally took a seat in the main waiting lobby. The bullpen. The open space reminded him of some sort of prison recreation area.

He squeezed into a hard plastic chair; shoulder-to-shoulder with two very opposite, very annoying companions. To his left sat the heaviest man he had ever seen. It was amazing that the chair could even support his girth. He was breathing loudly through his nose as he looked through a hunting and fishing catalogue, slightly nudging Oscar in the ribs as he flipped through the pages. Oscar

peered down, eager to see what had the man so captivated, and saw a huge array of fishing poles and fold out tents. He wasn't much of an outdoorsman, so he leaned back in his chair and looked up at the large screen. At this rate he wouldn't be called for some time. He tried to relax, tried to keep his contempt for the system at bay, and as he did so it seemed to grow even worse. His pulse raced and his face felt hot. He could no longer stand these people, their habits, their attitudes and actions. The robbery the night before had brought his spirits down even more, and he could not help but play it out over and over in his mind. The heartlessness of it all; the brazen, remorseless ignorance. All of this for a license; a piece of plastic.

The old, brittle looking woman sitting to his left gave him a big, gapped-tooth grin. Oscar managed to smile back, unable to comprehend how she was even able to form such a gesture.

Leaning back in the chair, he looked down at the small ticket in his hands, reading the long line of numbers. He began to stare at it, the only thing he could do to pass the time. Anything to occupy his mind, give him some stability as he prepared to float away. Float away, Oscar…

***

When he looked up, Oscar found that he was alone. No one was sitting next to him: the fat man, the old woman, even the young girl at the main desk had all but disappeared. The room it self remained as it was before, only quiet, empty, lifeless. The intercom hummed softly, as did the fluorescent lights overhead, yet no voice. Only electrical quiet. His heart began pounding as his head churned a million thoughts a minute, trying to grasp onto whatever sense of self-control he could muster.

Reality had somehow ceased. It was a dream-like state, or rather, a state of complete solitude. It was indeed something he had dreamed of all his life: to be alone, unattached and untainted.

But it was not his wish to be here, alone, like this. The vision he perceived had been much more grandiose. This was something

entirely different. It was a joke, a cruel joke by some unworldly power that he could not explain nor even begin to comprehend.

He stood up from the chair, his legs weak and shaky. Calling out into the emptiness, his voice hoarse, he searched for some sign of human life. There was no reply. The tiled floor, which had been marked with black etchings of shoe soles, was now completely white. It looked waxed, as if it were brand new.

In fact, the entire place looked as if no one had ever been there. The crumpled up papers on the floor, the jumble of folders and booklets behind the desks, and, as he looked out the window, even the cars in the parking lot had all vanished. The only solace he could find in this was the fact that he no longer had to deal with the Volvo. He grabbed a pen out of his breast pocket and threw it down a hallway. The gesture was returned with echoes.

He dropped his ticket to the floor, stumbling out of the main lobby and into the open parking lot. A violent gust of wind drove him back against the Plexiglas doors. Picking up force, it held him in place as he struggled to pry himself off. The power of the wind was

unbelievable. It lifted him up and tossed him like a rag-doll, his body constantly slamming against the doors.

It suddenly stopped, and he felt himself slump to the ground, knees slamming onto pavement. He heard a sickening snap from where his legs should have been but felt nothing. He no longer even felt the cold.

He pulled himself up to a kneeling position for a moment, finding it difficult gathering enough strength to do so. He felt an invisible force pushing him into the ground, as if gravity had somehow magnified itself. Just lifting his head up was an unbearable task. His neck, though he could not seem to feel it, bulged out, the veins protruding, pumping viscously.

He was in a battle, with what exactly he did not know.

And he was loosing.

* * *

The earthquake came without warning.

As he struggled to lift himself up, an ear splitting crack ruptured through the ground. Oscar's legs gave out as the Earth itself shook violently. The asphalt caved in, falling into the depths of the earth as the quake moved directly toward him. The ground disappeared, falling away into nothingness. It looked as if the pavement was eating away at itself, disintegrating.

There could be no reasonable explanation for this. It was utter madness. He let out a blood-curdling cry as the demonic quake finally reached him and the ground was swept out from under his feet.

Then he was falling, falling, falling into oblivion.

But he did not land.

Darkness, now….

….Light had abandoned him

Something did not feel right. His arms felt shorter, harder to move. A strange sensation came from between his shoulder blades. He felt things, strange things on his body that were not supposed to be there. His legs, which had been kicking violently, were now numb. It was almost as if they were not there at all.

He was still falling.

Looking down at his body, he was horrified to find that it had taken the form of a fly's. His skin was hard and pure black. His legs were multi-jointed, twitching. He could not scream, for he had no vocal chords. His feelers moved frantically, and finally caught the side of the hole, stopping himself from falling any further. He cried horribly to himself, damning the world and his own imagination.

So this is what would become of him; this is the life he would lead. Inside he had always felt this, a sort of premonition, a foreshadowing of his future. It was only logical that he should take his true form: a fly. An insect: insignificant, quietly watching society pass by, buzzing wildly, swatted at, ignored and cast aside. The thought nearly drove him insane.

Trying to get a feel for his new body, he moved the muscles on his back, slowly at first, and then rubbing the two wings together frantically, picking up enough speed to lift himself off of the side of the wall. He flew clumsily, bouncing from one side of the gigantic hole to the other, trying to find a sense of balance as he made his way to the top.

What kind of life would this bring about, trapped in the body of a fly? Adventure? Perhaps not. It was not possible; this did not add up. Here he was, an insect, yet still maintaining the knowledge and brainpower of a man. Indeed, it was the ultimate hell. Oscar felt hopeless and weak. Suddenly, he found that he was reaching the surface. Peering up through lidless eyes, he spotted the gray sky looming overhead.

It was bliss, bliss to be out of the hole.

SMACK!

Oscar was swatted down hard onto the pavement, his wings torn and battered, his legs bent and snapped, his abdomen cracked

and oozing. Pain surged through him. Pain like none he had ever felt. His very will to live had been spilled from his body, squeezed from his organs onto the asphalt. His life was ending, and he knew it.

With his vision blurred, he looked up to find the assailant, only to see his mother, gargantuan in size, standing over him, wielding the fly swatter. Her eyes narrowed, a smirk steadily making its way across thin lips. She twirled the massive weapon in her hand, moving slightly closer to him as he convulsed, trying to push himself further away.

Visions of his past floated through his mind, his life summed up in a state of cold panic: Patronized from elementary through college, by coworkers and girlfriends, by acquaintances and enemies, by strangers, by his own family.

The world, his own life, flashed by in a violent surge of hatred and brutality; the very savagery of human nature, driving him to the breaking point. Yet there was nothing he could do now. He lay

broken and helpless. Dying, no doubt, left only with bitter memories, with a silent hatred for all human kind, and began to cry.

He cried as he lay broken. He cried for the generations to come, for the babies yet to be born in this world. Will they suffer the same life as he? Will they have to live their lives in this superficial world, shunning their individuality, hiding the fact that they are real in a fake society? A world of dwindling morals? Nuclear threats? Suicide bombings? Genocide? Senseless rape and murder? A world driven by money and selfishness?

He cried for them, for he knew the answer. There would be no hope. No hope for man. He cried as the massive fly swatter whipped through the air towards him, coming closer closer closer with each passing moment, gathering speed gathering strength.

He let out a guttural squeal from where his mouth should be. He closed his eyes and held his breath, tensing his muscles, anticipating the deathblow, waiting in agony for what seemed like eternity.

But the pain never came.

He lay trembling, nearly hyperventilating, his body cold from a rush of adrenaline. The rush a man feels only when he knows that he is in the last moments of his life. But there was nothing. No sickening swat, no blood spilt or bones cracked. There was only silence.

He dared to let a few more moments pass by before opening his eyes.

***

Oscar looked up into the sky, and, much to his surprise found that there were no longer any clouds. The sky was completely blue, the sun shining dominantly over the empty lot. His mother, the flyswatter, the horrible visions of his past had all gone.

He looked again, only this time made it a point to stare directly into the sun. It was the only thing that he figured to be real. The only thing that seemed as it should be.

The piercing white rays stabbed into his eyes, yet he couldn't find it within himself to look away. It was euphoric.

He had been in the dark far too long.

It felt as if all of his earthly chains had been broken as the light poured into his soul. It blocked out all thought, all worries, all of his needs and his wants. Everything escaped him. Nothing seemed to matter. Feeling came back to his body, his human body, a warm sensation coursing from his heart, spreading to his legs into his feet, from his shoulder blades into his arms, down to his wrists and into the fingertips. The warm prickle surged up the back of his neck, into his face, giving him life, a new life: reborn into total nirvana. The blackness of past events had been all but erased, wiped away and the burden lifted from his shoulders. Everything was as it should be. He was finally at peace.

He lifted himself up, glad to be standing on two legs. He lifted his hands, squeezing them into fists, getting the feeling back. He walked in the parking lot towards his car, taking his time, enjoying the sunshine and the fact that he was alone and at peace. It was then that he heard the voice; faint, far off, almost like a whisper. Yet it was

there nonetheless. He looked around curiously, trying to determine just where it was coming from.

***

"Young man?"

The little old woman nudged Oscar in the ribs as he lay in the chair snoring. "Young man? Are you alright?"

She poked him again, taking a little swing at him with her purse.

Jolting awake, he nearly fell out of his seat. He looked around wide-eyed at the waiting room. People walked in every direction. It was packed, just as before. The robotic voice buzzed overhead on the intercom. It was a sign of relief that Oscar could not put into words.

He looked at the numbered ticket, now wrinkled up in his palm, and peered up at the massive screen.

"I believe you're up next," said the woman, smiling.

Concerning a Patient

(Kathy)

Being the youngest child and only daughter of the Storrs family, Kathy had the pleasures of several freedoms, on account of her parents having dealt with three sons prior to her adolescent years.

Always out and about, she had grown, these past few years. Much of her development could have been contributed to her three brothers. In a way she had taken lessons from each of them. She had traveled, much like Ethan, she had written a few not-so-great short stories, in light of Hayden.

Yet there was a space, an emptiness inside of her because Kathy, at the age of twenty, did not fully know who *she* was. In school her work was so-so. In college, she had focused more on social circles than writing term papers. It seemed that she had always dwelled on the less important aspects of life, rather than truly

put herself to work against the things that mattered. Most nights she and her girlfriends prowled the streets in search of parties. She was now realizing that, perhaps she should have spent more time prowling the stacks of the library.

All the while her parents, in a good way, left her quite alone, never going too deep, never asking too many questions or getting too personal. Now, as she sat and looked back on the past years of her life, she sighed deeply, finding that it was all just a waste; fragile, like a thin piece of paper torn from a spiraled notebook. Her first year of college was questionable, at best. She somehow surrounded herself with the most superficial of friends without even trying to do so, and, sure enough, she had become exactly like them. Sweet little Kathy was now sarcastic Kathy. The Kathy who smiled through her teeth at others and who looked out only for herself

It simply did not matter, all that which she truly thought important and necessary, and for that she was now scornful, as much as one can be when reminiscing on a wasted life. The party raging behind her did not help, and, as she sat alone on the front porch of

some un-pronounceable fraternity home, the regret was stronger than ever.

It was on one of these evenings at Yale that she received a call on her cell phone from Donna, the mother and caretaker of the Storrs brood. It was frantic, concerning Oscar, the eldest of her three brothers, who had apparently suffered some sort of mental breakdown.

These were usually common, but she could tell by her mother's frantic tone that this episode would be different. Her mother's urgency surged through the phone lines, her voice distorted with static and fear. She was yelling about Oscar's mishap, something to do with yelling and screaming in public, property damage, and, though she really couldn't tell above the bad signal, attempted assault.

Were there to be any more interruptions tonight? She could only hope not. Kathy had always had a conflicted relationship with Oscar. Though they were separated by an eight year gap, it was always she who felt like the caretaker, always looking out for her

older brother. Always calming him down when his panics would send him shivering into hysteria.

A voice came from behind as one of her friends emerged from the party.

"What's going on, Kath?"

She snapped the cell phone shut, looking away from the blasting music, from the house party and all of her friends who were too care free to take genuine concern in her predicament.

"Family stuff, Greg. I gotta go."

She ran off towards the street, hopping into the car before Greg or anyone else had a chance to respond. No unneeded attention, two-faced smiles and pats on the back from false friends. In a way Kathy was known for her crudeness, her lack of caring, her pessimism, though that was simply public opinion. Why should she give a damn about other people's problems? Thus, the phone call, though important, was deeply frustrating. She was missing quite a party, all because Oscar still didn't know how to handle himself. Not this again.

She got on the highway, slamming the pedal to the floor. A few unsuccessful calls to Ethan, a voicemail from Hayden and her mother, and she was at the hospital in Bridgeport. She recalled the last time Oscar had gone through one of these "episodes". It had been nearly a year ago, and for a period of two weeks straight he had stayed in his room, a self proposed solitary confinement. He had some sort of phobia about being out in public. The specifics, though great for a good story, had somewhat been lost in her memory, though she remembered that it took the family quite sometime to recover from the ordeal.

If Oscar was awake, she'd really let him have it this time. Too many problems caused for an already unstable family. What the hell went on in that mind of his?

Her father Norman was in the front lobby, already preoccupied with a wrestling match against the soda machine. He had his skinny frame wrapped around the gigantic machine, rocking it furiously back and forth. A few nurses had to run over and calm him down before Kathy decided to approach him.

She put on her "Hey, daddy!" smile and ran over, giving him a big hug and kiss. She furrowed her eyebrows into the perfect *"I'm really concerned"* look.

"How's Oscar doing, dad?"

"Oh, Kath, I just don't know. They've got him knocked out, kept saying no visitors, but your mother, oh no, she's giving them hell up there. You know how she is. I had to come down her before she started swinging."

That was just like her mother, not taking anything from anyone.

"Where's Ethan and Hayden?"

"She didn't tell you?" Her father took off his glasses, wiping them on the sleeve of his shirt. He patted his forehead with his handkerchief, and all the while Kathy couldn't help but noticed how much he resembled a shaken Woody Allen.

"Ethan's in Greece, doing god knows what, looking at some *very* important pillars. Hayden's on his way from New York. Last I heard he was driving through Norwalk, so he should be here soon. I'd

imagine you and your brother have a lot to catch up on…without your mother around, I mean."

"Not really, dad. You'd be surprised how insanely *boring* college can be."

He nodded, not fully registering the fact that she was joking.

It was sometime before Hayden arrived (and Kathy was genuinely happy to see anyone). Hugs were exchanged, jokes made, and Kathy had finally realized just how grown up her older brother had become.

"How's Oscar?" He asked.

"No clue. As of now they're saying no one can go up to see him, but mom's there, fighting tooth and nail apparently."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere near that," he replied, laughing slightly. He looked over to his father who cast a nervous smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"So, how's the writing coming along?"

"Great, in fact. Second novel's being published this fall."

"That's wonderful!"

"Yeah, it feels good to be back on my feet again. How's Yale, you snob?"

Kathy pretended to take offence. "Shut up. Its ok, I guess. A little boring."

"Well, I told you not to go Ivy League."

Their father sighed. "And we just *had* to pay for it, didn't we, honey?"

Kathy shrugged, "Well it's not like anyone forced you to send me there!"

"And I suppose your stubbornness and begging had nothing to do with it?"

Hayden stepped in between them, "Ok, ok, glad I could be here to bring about that lovely father-daughter moment. Where the hell's Ethan?"

"Greece," Kathy answered.

"Jesus. Can't the kid ever stay in one place? We're not even Greek."

"Can't he just stop spending my money? And we're not a lot of things, yet he feels the need to mingle amongst all of them, God knows why." Their father replied once more.

Hayden simply laughed, as he no longer relied on his family's wealth to peddle him through life. Kathy simply looked down, knowing that in her case, it was the only thing she was really clinging to, the only thing she truly depended on. Working in the real world was not exactly one of her finest qualities, as her attitude towards people in general was a little less than enlightened.

Her thoughts turned once again to Oscar and her scorn for him, putting the family through this once more. She found it strange that she did not care in the slightest. Pathetic. Yet it was something she could not argue against, it was a rift in her feelings, one of pure appreciation and one of total ignorance, one of total numbness. It was as if her emotions were in a constant battle with each other over whether to care or not to care, and it drove her to the point of what felt like insanity at some times.

The Storrs family waited in the lobby, hands behind back and in pockets, watching the masses walk in and out, in and out, in and

out, some more worse off than others, some better. It was during the long period of waiting that the silence behind them was broken by a loud wail.

"My babies!"

Hayden and Kathy turned around to see their mother, arms outstretched, running across the lobby, ignoring the receptionist's plea to slow down. She grabbed Hayden before he could make his escape, running her hands through his hair and telling him how much her little boy had grown up. She then wrapped flabby arms around Kathy's neck and squeezed, crying about how much she had missed her baby girl. Kathy was almost sick. Almost six months and not even one phone call. Oh, yeah. She was missed, alright.

"Well, let's go up and see him!" said Hayden.

They rode the elevator up to the eleventh floor, getting off on the psychiatric ward. They passed rows and rows of Plexiglas windows, looking at the patients sitting around the game room, shuffling around on the carpet, fiddling with cards, numbly gazing at the lone television sitting on metal fold out chairs.

A general shock swept over the Storrs as they entered the room.

Oscar lay in bed in one of the single rooms, sleeping quite soundly under a heavy dose of medication. Kathy looked around the room, at the drab curtains pulled tightly over the windows, the cold, blue sitting chair, the symphony of beeps and buzzes. She hated hospitals. Hated the smell and the fear and the constant feeling of death hanging in the air.

Her mother wiped her eyes with a tissue, stifling back sobs through mumbled prayers. Kathy just stood, face expressionless. Soon she began to cast a daunting glare at her comatose brother, silently cursing him for causing the family so much pain.

They all gathered around, Hayden grabbed Oscar's hand, softly speaking words of encouragement to his older brother. Their parents stroked the top of his head, their faces somber, almost as if they were paying their last respects at a wake. It was all very heartfelt, Kathy was sure, but she could not bring herself to feel sorry. She could not bring herself to feel any sort of remorse or feelings of sadness whatsoever, and in doing so, made herself simply depressed, depressed because she could not *make* herself feel those things. The confliction threatened to rip her in two.

The whole ordeal went on for a half an hour, until a soft voice came over the intercom, announcing to all in the hospital that visiting hours would be over in ten minutes. Hayden and Kathy had to actually pry their mother away from Oscar's side as he lay dormant. She was screaming in agony now, looking at her oldest son with tubes in his nose and arms, lying helpless in a white bed, machines beeping and pumping all around.

Kathy gave her parents a hug as she walked them to the black Jaguar in the parking lot, promising that she would meet them back at the house immediately. She watched them leave, standing in the cold lot. The breeze felt good. It washed away the stench of the sick and the maimed. She turned to see Hayden standing by the front doors, attempting to light a cigarette.

She walked over briskly, pulling her jacket tightly around her chest.

"Hey, big brother. Mind if I get one of those?"

He handed it to her without even looking, holding up the lighter so she could take a long, first pull.

"I was watching you tonight."

"Yeah, and?"

"And I just wanted to ask you, how come you don't care? You don't care about anything. About school? About your family? What do you care about?"

She was dumbfounded at how her older brother had seen right through all of her lies.

"I…."

He held up a hand. "You know what, never mind. Let me tell you something. I've been on this planet longer than you have; I've dealt with parts of life, shitty parts that you've yet to experience. And just let me tell you one thing. Life is too short, *way* too short to go through not caring, to be angry and superficial. Don't think I haven't noticed. Don't think you're so damned special that something like this shouldn't bother you, because it should. You're not all grown up, Kath, not yet. You know, whether you like it or not, that's your brother up their, connected to all those machines. I know you may not realize it now, but one day you'll come to appreciate

him. You'll come at appreciate all of us. And not just because it's something that is asked of you."

He threw his cigarette on the ground, crushing it with a stomp of his foot.

"There *is* such a thing as human kindness, Kath. Christ, I just hope you realize that one of these days."

With that, her brother walked away, turning the corner of the building just as the first flake of snow fell gently to the ground.

And it was quite funny, because at that moment, hearing those words, Kathy listened. She had actually listened to the wisdom of older lips. It was embarrassing yet good to know that her brother had caught on to her act.

And she cared.

Walking slowly, she tiptoed through the dim lobby, making her way towards the eleventh floor.

***

The room was small. Too small. The curtain separating him from his roommate

flapped as a high wind came through the crack in the window. Oscar felt as if his head were two sizes too big. Rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, he glanced at the IV, then felt the tubes going up into his nostrils. Coughing, he felt them running down the back of his throat, filling his stomach as he slept in his comatose state. How long had he been out? No way to tell. He didn't e even know how he got here. The ambulance must have taken him from the DMV, though he vaguely remembered hands grabbing at him, siloughettes of figures standing over him as he laid helpless out in the parking lot.

"Hey, buddy," came a voice from the far corner of the room.

Oscar looked over, pushing back hair with his free hand. "Yeah?"

"You got a smoke?"

"A what?"

"Cigarette, pal. You got a cigarette?"

"Are you kidding?" he answered, "I can't even get of bed."

"Too bad." Said his roommate, "they only let you smoke in the common room. Yeah, yeah. Common room. Love smokin'. Love love love it!"

Oscar rolled his eyes. Great. Now they put him in with the nuts. He hoped with all hopes that he would be able to quickly fall back asleep, to drift into the depths of dreamlessness, of quiet.

"Why don't you just try to get some sleep?" he uttered, finding it hard to hold conversation with tubes scratching the back of his throat.

"Can't sleep. Not tonight, pal. No sleep. Bad dreams. Bad bad bad!"

"Oh yeah?" he said, smiling to himself, "why's that?"

"Can't say. See things. Keep me up. Don't know when's sleep…when's awake…sleep…awake or…" the high, naisly voice lowered and lowered until it faded, followed by heavy snoring. They had most likely put him on some powerful sedatives. Poor guy. Probably needed them bad.

He tried to get up but his arms felt weak. It was hard to support his own weight as he gripped the poles on the side of the

bed, swinging his legs slowly onto the floor. The tiles felt cold under his bare feet, and he found he was shaking. The sedatives must have been wearing off, which was a relief. He needed to see something other than the white walls and the get well cards.

Outside, the city loomed on for miles, lines and lines of houses and apartment buildings and factories and lights, lights everywhere. He wished now that he could walk down there, out on the sidewalks with the rest of the normal people, going back to their normal homes and normal families, not having to douse themselves with medicine every morning when they woke and every evening when they went to sleep. He wished that he could be one of them. Happy. Care free. Not afraid. Quietly, he stifled back a tear, angry with himself for being the way he was, being unreliable to everyone including himself, falling and falling into a deep hole, a trap that he himself set yet could not get away from. Why was he like this? Why couldn't he just snap out of it? The tear fell down his cheek, the first one that had fell in a long time. He fell, grasping onto the radiator underneath the window.

"Oscar?"

He turned, startled. His younger sister stood in the doorway, leaning to one side, holding her purse with a free hand.

"Oscar? Are you okay?"

He turned away for a moment, whipping his face with his sleeve.

"No, Kath. Not at all."

"Yeah," she uttered a small, polite laugh. "I know. I heard."

"You came to see me? All the way from college by yourself?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I come to see my big brother?"

He felt he was ready to cry again. He felt fragile, good for the first time. It was unbelievable that she of all people would come to see him. He needed her.

"Wow, Kath," he said, walking over to her, "you have no idea how wonderful that is..."

They embraced and Oscar buried himself in her shoulder. Kathy began to cry as well, feeling for the first time how good it was to not pretend.

"I've missed you. Did you know that?" he asked.

"I've missed you, too. I've been away for too long. I need to be around to look after you."

"I know. Someone needs to."

"Mom and dad were here. Hayden, too."

"No way," he said, "Hayden was here?"

"Of course. You didn't think your brother wouldn't come, do you?"

"I don't know. I've been a little…mixed up lately. I don't even know what's up and what's down anymore."

"Well that's why you're here. To get better. We'll be here, too. All of us. I just wanted you to know that…I care about you, Oscar. I really do. I know that in the past I haven't been that loving, not that caring. I came here today with everyone… but against my own will. It was mom, really. She dragged me and I just scorned and huffed and puffed. But Hayden really made me see something today. He made me realize how much I've missed you all, how distant I've been, and I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. I know. I was your age too. I've been there. Coming was a big step for you. I think coming here was

a big step for everyone. I love you, sis. And I just wanted you to know that. Jesus, even the fact that you showed up, you just helped me. Who knows what I'd have done if no one cared. I wouldn't even be here today. You'd be reading about me in the papers. I *am* going to get better though. I promise."

"Well..."

"Excuse me, miss?" A nurse walked in, looking at Kathy with a sideways glance.

"Yes?"

"Visiting hours have been over for some time. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

With Kathy by the arm, she walked out. Kathy smiled over her shoulder at Oscar, promising that she would come by tomorrow. He nodded somberly, turning away in his hospital gown.

He walked over to the window, to take one more look at the city below before climbing back into bed, at peace now knowing that someone out there cared.

Andalusia, I am un Chien

(Ethan)

He coughed once, checked his breath and put in a new stick of gum as he tried to work up the courage to approach her. Ethan Storrs had been riding the Eurostar through the French countryside for nearly an hour now, all the while exchanging glances with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. His cheeks had now been burning red for a record-breaking fifteen minutes. The golf ball in his throat grew more suppressive with each passing moment. He tried to swallow but couldn't. Tried to think up something to say, but his mind drew up a blank screen, a single curser blinking, blinking, blinking. Well, what now, hot shot?

She must have been his age, perhaps a little older, and most definitely French. With the air about her and the way she carried herself, she just had to be. No American could ever look so elegant just reading on a train.

She looked up from her magazine, her green eyes locking intently on his once more, lids fluttering slightly. The corners of her lips curled into a smile. He smiled back.

The conductor's voice came on the intercom, interrupting the moment they had briefly shared.

"*Prochain arrêt, station de Paris*!"

She glanced up at the speakers, then back to Ethan. He still hadn't taken his eyes off of her. She smiled wider this time, giggling softly. Embarrassed, he quickly averted his eyes to the window. He checked his watch, ran fingers through his hair, moving his body in a fit of nervous self-consciousness.

The sun had just begun to set over the city, the simple beauty of it was picturesque, almost compelling… But then again, so was she. She was a thing of poetry, of complex beauty and mystique. A thing to be admired. An art form that he could never hope to comprehend, for attempting to do so would take a lifetime. Ethan could think of no one else more suited for immortalization. A questionable stranger with boundless potential.

The train slowly stopped, and immediately the passengers began to stand up and gather their things.

It was time to bite the bullet, time to just grow the hell up and talk to her. Nothing was unattainable, not in Ethan's mind, yet conversation with the likes of her seemed pretty close. First impressions were never his specialty, nor, he figured, would they ever be. Gripping his small English-to-French book, he pushed back his ear-length hair and walked towards her. Somehow he found it hard to talk, his lips felt numb, his mouth full of cotton.

"Excusez-moi… mon Françaism, umm…. n'est pas très… bon."

The girl simply laughed, pushing back blonde hair from her face. She looked at him for a while, her eyes slowly sizing him up and down. They narrowed playfully as she gently bit her lower lip. Ethan practically trembled under the weight of the gesture. It was unspoken electricity. He waited, heart racing with unbridled anticipation for her to respond.

She leaned close to him, her mouth nearly touching his ear as she whispered to him.

"Neither is mine."

Ethan was stricken with awe. Ok, step two, conversation. No French, a fellow English speaker, this should be easy.

It was then, during that slight pause, that she took a step back, raised her eyebrows quickly and picked up her bag. She took out the magazine she had been flipping through and ripped out a page. For a minute Ethan wondered what she was doing, until she took at a pen and began to scribble something. She handed him the torn piece of paper.

It was a phone number. Paris area code. She gave him a mischievous smile and turned away, her hair nearly whipping him in the face.

He stood still for a moment at a loss for words, watching her walk away, shifting his gaze from her to the piece of paper in his hand. He was standing motionless when he was shoved, quite harshly, from behind. Irritated, he turned around slowly, "Hey, listen buddy…"

He shrunk back as he saw the size of the burly Frenchman behind him. The monster grunted, huge veins bulging from a thick neck like a bull preparing to charge. Ethan offered a weak smile and

laughed timidly, stumbling towards the sliding doors. He stepped off of the train and caught a glimpse of blonde hair moving through the main platform. Forgetting about the beast behind him, he decided to follow. He had to talk to her just once more.

The terminal was an absolute mob: locals moving through with grace, businessmen talking heatedly on cell phones, confused tourist pointing to the digital train schedule. He nearly lost sight of her several times. He peered over the mass of heads, trying his best to keep up.

A small boy darted in front of him, tripping him up. A worried mother ran after in dire pursuit, screaming in rapid French. He gave her a slight smile, and then tried his best to run up the crowded stairway, emerging into mainstream Paris.

Suddenly he found himself in the fading daylight, breathing in the warm summer air. The noise of the city was nearly deafening, and in his sudden state of confusion he nearly walked right into the middle of the street. Traffic lights blared in every direction as tiny, almost toy-sized cars whipped past. Ethan froze in the middle of the

street, trying to find his bearings, and even more so, trying to avoid a near death experience. These were not American streets.

A red Peugeot laid on the horn, and a traffic officer ran franticly in front of the car, blowing his whistle until he was red in the face. Both the driver and the officer gave Ethan dirty looks, staring him down. He held up his hands in a goofy apologetic smile and turned back to the busy sidewalk, catching one last glance of the blonde girl walking through an open café.

He sprinted after her, both hands gripping the straps of his backpack as he ran. It was hard enough lugging the thing around, but running full force with it nearly set him off balance.

A small, portly vendor was busy pushing along his cart full of gourmet chocolates. In the heat of his chase, Ethan didn't even notice the small man, and nearly ran into him. Throwing his hat on the ground, the stocky little peddler swore, grasping the handles of the cart as it almost tipped over.

So far, his time spent in Paris had not been going as well as he'd planned. Ethan thought he must've looked a fool to the

Parisians, glaring at him with their noses up, obviously not amused with the oafish American tourist. But he could care less what the onlookers thought. His mind was on her and her alone and, frankly, he didn't give a damn about what anyone thought.

Once again spotted her red jacket as she made her way through the crowd in front of the Louvre.

Shit!

He shoved his way through a group of spellbound Japanese tourist staring, quite dumbfounded, at the great glass Pyramid. He smashed his way right into the middle of their little circle, knocking over the tour guide. At any other point in time, he would've offered the poor guy a hand, but this time he let it slide. He wracked his brain for how to say "I'm sorry" in French and/ or Japanese but couldn't remember, so he continued to just keep on running.

She crossed the street and made her way towards the entrance of a subway station. He was close to her now, and probably as close as he was going to get.

He cupped his hands around his mouth, coming to a stop just across from her.

"Wait! Hold on just a second! I need to talk to-", he paused.

She paused as well, mid-step, turning around slowly. Spotting him, her green eyes lit up once again. Same as Ethan, she cupped her hands around her mouth, preparing to yell something, when she was cut off by the loud engine of a double-decker bus. Ethan couldn't hear her at all over the squealing brakes. It came to a halt in front of the sidewalk, pistons roaring, stoplights blinking franticly, blocking Ethan's view to where she was standing on the sidewalk.

The doors opened up, allowing a group of tourists off. The lugged their suitcases off the bus, making their way down the stairs of the subway terminal.

He ran across the street and around the bus, stopping on the sidewalk in shock. She wasn't there. She must have gone down the stairs into the terminal. It would be impossible to find her now. Shaking his head incredulously, he looked at the folded piece of paper in his hand one more time, then slipped it into his cargo pocket.

He bent over, putting his hands on his knees, just remembering to catch his breath after the chase. Looking around, he realized that

he had no idea where he was, alone in a big city, and decided to hail a taxicab. In bad French he told the driver to take him to his hotel.

It was evening now, and he glanced out the window, looking at the different people walking down the street. Some were alone, walking fast, headphones glued to their ears; others were hand in hand, walking slowly, enveloped in conversation. Some were laughing, some were yelling, a few, he noticed, even cried. Yet somehow, it all seemed to just feel *right*. Everyone was alive, the city electric with activity.

Slowly, Ethan smiled to himself.

This was going to be quite a vacation.

Married To It

(Hayden)

To the reader of this account, I ask that you not take too harshly to the lack of specifics, as it was several years ago in which the events of this story took place.

The year was 1994, and as I recall the marriage was set to take place on Saturday, the twenty first of May, as soon as the sun came up. No doubt, it was a very serious mistake on my part to spend the entire night before drinking, thus having to subject myself to nearly overdosing on Advil upon waking. The affairs of the following morning have been clouded in memory, though I can recall much running around, every member of my immediate family scrambling to find missing socks, ties, and hair clips.

I am recounting these events because, well, it was a most unusual ceremony. A clash of cultures, if you will. It was for my brother, Oscar, who had been living in New York for five years prior and was marrying a young woman from China. It was quite unexpected, as everyone had seemed to have given up any hope that he would ever tie the knot at all. My brother had always been a very private, very…*unique* individual, which is much more polite than simply saying that he was "strange". These thoughts were quickly

banished upon receiving our invitations a mere two weeks away from the ceremony itself.

As coming from a large, some would say rambunctious half Irish, half Polish family, I was a little skeptical of how the day's events would progress without some sort of skirmish, large or small. The memories of the '87 Thanksgiving brawl were still fresh in my mind. To be honest, I was unsure if at least half of the bloodline would even bother to show.

Being the youngest of the family (since my sister Kathy was unable to attend), I was assigned to drive the grandparents over, a task I accepted with much unenthusiasm. I really didn't need to hear their rants about the temperature, about the time, about leaving their dogs alone at home, and mainly about "when will this thing be over?"

To be honest, I was most concerned for my grandfather, Edgar, who did not take too kindly to the fact that his grandson would be marrying someone from the Orient (a bit of a World War II prejudice). Luckily, throughout the pre-wedding festivities no such problems arose, for which I was quite thankful, mainly due to a lot of pep talks and stern warnings in the minivan during the ride to the chapel.

I must admit I was a little skeptical about my appearance: my suit was about one size too small, and it took a long time to slick back my shaggy hair to look at least half presentable. I had heard that

presentation was everything to the Chinese… or perhaps it was something I had overheard in chef's class back in high school.

I was told that we would first be taking pictures at the hotel. It was a very old, overgrown place in the middle of Old Greenwich. I dropped the old folks off in front, ushering them out onto the sidewalk. Lighting a quick cigarette, I pulled away, going about my search for a parking spot. About fifteen minutes later one finally opened up, and only about a twenty-minute walk to the entrance.

Another glance around, overlooking the reception desk, and I spotted my brother Ethan sitting in one of the chairs to the corner, head in hands.

"Good day to you, best man," I joked.

He looked up, studying my face as if struggling to remember who I was.

"Yeah. Hell of a morning, eh?"

I glanced around the empty lobby.

"Where is everyone?"

"Beats the hell out of me. I've been waiting here for fifteen minutes. Haven't seen hide nor hair of anyone in this goddamn family. Or even *hers*, for that matter."

We walked to the front desk and asked where the pictures for the Storrs/Liu wedding would be taking place. The woman at the desk told us a room number to which we knocked, only to find a family in swimsuits leaving to use the pool. Running through the motions for at least another half hour (everything looked the same)

we somehow found the suite in which the groom and the rest of the men were staying, just in time to miss the last bottle of champagne.

I stood by the door, looking at my brother whom I had not seen since his stint in a mental-rehabilitation clinic. I wanted to get at least one last glance at him before he hopped on his plane to Asia. He looked different somehow. Not himself. He was sweating. His hands shook as he tried to pin the flower to Ethan's suit jacket, though he attempted to hide it. He looked a mess. I decided that this really wouldn't be a good time to catch up. Best to leave the two brothers to share this last moment of freedom together. As I made my way for the door, Oscar called out to me, his voice stern yet shaky. Thus, I was given another job: deliver a handful of Chinese-lettered envelopes to the bride's room.

The journey did not take as long as I predicted, due to accurate directions and the correct room number. Behind the closed doors, I could hear much commotion, and above that much screaming in rapid Chinese. My soft knock was answered by a sharp pull of the door, a young Asian fellow blowing a string of hair from his face, his cheeks flushed. It looked as if a fist fight had broken out inside. I could still make hear violent thumps and bangs in the back rooms. Nervously, I held up the envelopes in my hand, slightly ushering them in his direction. I really had no idea if this was the right way to go about it. They could have been either very important or extremely insignificant. His eyes lit up upon seeing them and he grabbed onto my sleeve, urging me to enter into the bridal war zone.

A slew of women swarmed upon me in a tidal rush, some of which were distant cousins of mine who I had to put on the "it's so good to see you again!" face for. Older women patted my cheek and smiled as they saw what I had been carrying. As I was pushed down into a nearby seat, the bathroom door suddenly burst open, a fury of white gown storming out into the sitting room. Oscar's bride, Christine, raced out, the Maid of Honor following behind, red faced and sweating, struggling to keep the train from tearing. Christine swore and carried on, a mess of shrill cries and runny makeup, yet the other women seemed to pay no mind. It seemed as though she was having some second thoughts. Perhaps just cold feet, but in a foreign language, I really couldn't tell.

Deciding to leave the girls to their business, I got up and placed the envelopes on the nightstand. Upon doing so, I was met with an uproar. Fragile old women bounded from their seats, pushed me back down and forced a small porcelain cup into my hands, filling it with what appeared to be teas.

"Sit! Sit! Drink!" they half pleaded, half commanded, to which I obeyed genially.

Not wanting to offend them (bad with other culture's customs) I decided to take one sip before politely nodding towards the door and skaking my head. I wasn't quite sure if they understood that I was a mere messenger, and not one of their select party. In this frantic scene I could in no way be sure of this, and hoped with all hopes that they would grant me the right to leave.

Finally they understood and allowed me to escape. The air conditioning in the hallway was a brilliant change from the sweltering body heat of the bride's room, and I accepted the cool breeze gladly, leaning against the wall to regain what little composure I could muster before venturing forth.

Halfway out of that particular wing of the hotel, halfway tot the parking lot, to a fresh cigarette and temporary freedom, I was issued with yet another task.

"Hayden! Hayden! Wait for us!" I turned, quite somberly, only to see my second cousin Alicia storming towards me, the corsage threatening to fall from her wrist. Behind her marched a line of the older women from my side of the family.

The bluehairs.

Perfect.

"Would you be a dear and bring these ladies to the lot?"

"Sure thing. No problem," I replied, quite sarcastically, though I don't believe she noticed.

I was now the Shepard, leading the way out for the disoriented old herd, some of which thought we were on our way to a birthday party rather than a wedding. I stayed at the end of the line, making sure that there were no stragglers. I could tell by the smell in the air alone that my aunts Grace and Angela had already been at the scotch. They giggled and laughed to each other, talking about "that bellboy who looked an awful lot like Douglas Fairbanks" whoever that might be.

On the way out I gave the best smirk I could muster to the receptionist, who returned it with much more animation than I'd planned for. I left the women to their own devices once we reached the drop off/pick up area, and walked hurriedly to my car as my cell phone began to vibrate against my breast pocket.

"Yes?" I answered, not bothering to look at the caller id.

"Excuse me mister, but you'd better have a damn good explanation for not being here right now."

Great. My mother.

"I'm on my way. I was held up at the Shanghai sanctuary over here."

"Hayden! Don't say things like that!"

"Come on, you know I'm only joking."

"Well please forgive me if I'm a little high strung, it's only you *brother's wedding*. A wedding that we'd all thought would never *be*, might I add."

"Yes, yes, yes I know I know."

"…A wedding that's *starting* in three minutes!"

"Alright, I'm on my way."

"Just like you, Hayden, you know that? Why is that every time something like this happens you're just so conv*eniently* not around? I just absolutely *love* how we can always depend on you."

"You know I don't like crowds, mom."

She hung up. I raced to the parking lot, searching for the lone white minivan.

The wedding drew all sorts of people, many of which I had never seen before and were *supposedly* loving relatives who hadn't seen me since I was *this tall*. A quick nudge from the familiars urged me to play along, acting most excited to see them. To be honest, I found certain exhilaration in the charade. What was even more interesting was meeting the entirety of Christine's family, who, as luck and fate would have it did not speak one word of English besides "hello". I and a few of my cousins spoke to them in broken English, laughing as we all made our way into the chapel.

The actual ceremony was nice, which is the kindest, most humane way to put it. The priest, though his intentions were good, was extremely boring, and kept explaining to the crowd what each stage of the ceremony meant, as if instructing a classroom full of children. He then made us practice each hymn before we sang, which made me want to scream out loud right there in the pew. As if we didn't know the steps. Come on, how many movies have there been? Everyone knows how a marriage works. Say the vows, kiss the bride, all that good stuff. Yet he ran through he motions, at least twice, making the actual wedding that much longer than it really needed to be. I mean it was a great ceremony, and I was truly happy for Oscar and Christine, yet it just seemed a little dragged-out. Perhaps it was a lack of alcohol, perhaps the lack of sleep. What

made it especially strange was that there was no "you may now kiss the bride" or even "I now pronounce you man and wife". Perhaps they were doing something different because of Christine's family, who most likely were not of the Christian faith. And yet again, the Maid of Honor kept coming out into the aisle, fixing the train of the gown every ten minutes.

Hot and nearly sweating in the pews, I looked, every now and then, at Oscar the groom, standing on shaky legs before the altar. He pulled on his collar, craning his neck, looking even more hot and bothered than I. You could tell by his demeanor that something was not right. He was nervous. I fantasized about him running off through the aisle, past shocked faces and gasps while making a mad dash for the parking lot.

But of course this didn't happen, and in no time they walked arm in arm down through the pews, accompanied by joyous music blasting from the organ to the back of the chapel. I turned slowly, along with everyone else in my row, as they made their way past. My eyes caught Oscar's, and for a second, just a split second, he winked. I knew right then that everything was alright, that the premonitions I had been feeling were just that, silly daydreams and nothing more.

***

Back at the hotel, everything was uplifted. Smiling faces and laughs filled the corridors, and especially the pub, to which I ran as soon as cutting the minivan's ignition. I walked through the pool tables, eyeing the television screens playing the latest horserace from Kansas City. The same group of old men that had been smoking in the lounge when I had entered had had gathered around the screens, waving their arms and yelling furiously, some throwing off hats and stomping on them to the ground as their newest bets had gone down the toilet as fast as they had been placed.

I made my way to the bar, becoming quite familiar with the bartender, whose name I learned was Tiffany, after several rum-and-cokes.

"So, how are you related to them?" she finally asked me.

"Groom's brother," I offered, slumping my head down slightly before catching myself in the process.

"You must be very happy for him; I know I'm pretty close with my brothers, too."

"Actually, we're not as close as you'd think. I mean we were, but that was a long time ago. He's been living in New York for the past couple of years…moving to China soon. China! Can you believe that! I'm lucky if I get a phone call." I spun my glass around, watching the ice cubes swirl in the pale yellow booze.

Tiffany frowned, and then turned to some of the other patrons, filling glasses and joking politely to pass the time. It was an

awkward silence between her and me. My mood still hadn't worn off, even on the stool. Luckily the silence was broken by a call from one of the smoky tables to the far corner.

"Hayden! Is that Hayden Storrs I see over there? Come over here, you handsome devil!" I could tell it was Grace, and not just by the slurs alone. I glanced over to see a few ladies seated at the table, aunts and distant cousins, fully dressed to the neck in their emeralds and rubies and finest outfits that I'm *sure* their husbands had scoured the closets for.

"Wasn't the ceremony absolutely *marvelou*s, Hayden?"

"And didn't you see that *dress*? What an amazing *dress*!" My cousin Allison put in.

"You know, I heard that her younger brother, that handsome looking Chinese boy actually *made* the gown for her!"

"Yes," I interjected, not wanting them to get too carried away with themselves, "it really was nice. A little different, though. Don't you think?"

Grace made a face at me. "It was…*unusual*, but in a good way, dear."

"I haven't even seen her family *since*!" cried Allison over her daiquiri.

"Do you think that they might not have approved of it?" asked Angela, aunt number two.

"Oh, who *knows*? You know how traditional those people can be."

"Quiet!" hushed Allison, "we don't want to be impolite. After all, they're *family* to us now, for goodness sake!"

"Oh! Oh marvelous! I feel so *Eastern*!" cried Grace again. I fought the urge to kick her underneath the table.

"You know," I said, "I haven't really seen them around, either."

"Perhaps they're all preparing the tea ceremony!" said Angela.

"Oh…now what is that, exactly?" asked Grace.

"Something to do with serving the elders of the family tea, then working your way down. Hayden, isn't your sister going to be involved?"

"No," I replied, "Kathy's away in Italy somewhere. Some sort of study abroad program for Yale. I think little Rachel's doing it though. Uncle Dan's daughter."

"Oh, that little Rachel! How *adorable!*"

The decibels rose and rose with each passing minute, until finally a few heads started to turn. These ladies could really throw 'em back.

I excused myself before going any farther, too lightheaded and tipsy to stay seated, especially with that group. I stumbled around for a few minutes, my eyes scanning wildly across the room, not focusing on anything in particular. Finally I caught sight of a familiar face as Ethan accidentally knocked over a barstool, throwing a few back with Uncle Jim.

"Hey there, partner," I said, wobbling over, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, if it isn't my favorite bro!" he slurred, slapping me on the back. I burped my stomach quite unsettled.

"What's ya say to a drink!" he asked, his voice raspy from too many cigarettes.

"Sure," I replied, knowing that this would have to be the last one for a while.

We drank with Uncle Jim until we were red in the face, practically on the ground laughing.

Polish vodka is the work of the Devil. I swear.

I felt a little out of place sitting with the old relatives, and the graceful antics of the Jim man offered me a welcome retreat from the drudgeries of pleasant conversation.

It was around this time, several drinks and laughs later, that my cousin Terry, rough around the edges, came to crush the fun with stern announcements.

"Tea Ceremony in the Green Room! Let's get a move on, people! Let's go!"

Everyone began to gather their things-purses, wallets, cameras, as I gathered Ethan and Jim from the floor, the back of my suit threatening to rip as I bent over to offer a helping hand.

***

The Tea Ceremony took place outside, in a nice little courtyard in front of the hotel, away from the noise of the other guests. The nature theme was very predominant, yet peaceful, as I sat back in my

chair, closing my eyes and listening to the birds chirp their tunes, totally ignoring the droves of loud human voices trudging into their little sanctuary.

What was very disturbing about the whole thing was the fact that Christine's family was not present. Their absence sent many whispers and murmurs through the crowd, everyone talking in heated, hushed voices, Irish and Polish tempers rearing to blow. Oscar looked even worse than before, dressed in a black one piece oriental outfit. The mere fact that it looked ridiculous was just adding insult to injury.

Christine, on the other hand, looked quite beautiful. She had changed from her gown to a lovely Chinese flower-patterned purple dress. Her demeanor screamed elegance, and she carried herself to the serving table with a grace unparalleled to that which I have ever seen. As she sat down, however, I could see the tears welling up in her eyes.

She looked through the crowd, getting up, dragging Hayden behind her, calling out for her parents, for her aunts and uncles, for her cousins and, above all else, her brother.

The tears came streaming. Everyone stood up, clearing a path as she frantically ran thought he crowd. Edgar almost laughed the only one sitting down.

"I knew it," he said very loudly, trying to address everyone. "I knew it."

The women began to cry as well, so sorry for Christine and all of the hard work that had been put into the whole thing only to meet with her parent's customs. I sat with my mother and my little cousin Rachel, who tugged on my sleeve, asking me what was going on.

"Rachel, Christine can't find her mommy and daddy."

To that the little girl began to feel sad as well. By now everyone was in a total state of shock.

Grace called out, "Did anyone see their car leave?"

Everyone replied no.

Angela and Allison began to cry. Ethan ran to Oscar's side, Christina's Maid of Honor to hers.

They had not seen them since the end of the wedding itself.

I got up, walking slowly. I grabbed Oscar and gave him a hug. A genuine hug. I hugged Christine, too, telling her how sorry I was for the both of them. This was just too much. Such a bad thing to happen to such good people. All of a sudden I felt a hatred for Christine's family, for leaving her during such an important moment of her life. Who in their right mind could possibly stoop so low? Who would do something like that? What kind of people were they? Well, now I knew.

I wanted to leave. I was drunk and depressed, and I knew that, above all else, I would probably never see Oscar again. People don't just come and go to Connecticut from China as they please. I turned to my mother and my cousins, gave them all kisses on the cheek. I was too drunk to drive home. I called a cab.

Waiting in the lobby for the taxi, I saw Oscar's limo drive away, the cans clattering against the pavement, a JUST MARRIED sign holding them in place. It sped off, the sun just beginning to set as it turned out of the parking lot. Such a beautiful scene, yet I had a hard time imagining what was going on inside that car.

***

After a few hours of sleeping, I was finally kicked awake by the driver. Looking around, my eyes blurry and bloodshot, I noticed was that we were not parked in front of my house. I wasn't even on my street, or in the right town. He began to inform me that, in some drunken stupor, I had ordered him to "take me to 134 Coolidge Street, Southport, Connecticut". Aunt Grace's.

Being the big entertainment queen, she was chosen to hold the after-party at her home, though I wasn't quite sure if anyone would be up to it by now. Music blared from open doors and windows, and though it was dark out I could see several people gathered in the backyard. Weakly, I managed to crawl out of the cab, opening my wallet and throwing the driver a couple of twenties.

He had left the meter on during my slumber.

Asshole.

Entering through the front door, I was approached by the same gals with whom I had been seated with at the bar: Grace, Angela, and Allison. It was a strange and comic, yet very annoying coincidence that these should be the first party-goers to run into, especially in my current state. I was still having trouble maintaining consciousness enough to even stand on my own two feet before they started to lay into me.

"Oh, Hayden! How *dreadful* a thing to happen to such *good* people!" Allison cried, her voice quite convincing for the "mourning relative".

"Did you end up talking to Oscar?" Grace asked. "To think, my own nephew, and he won't even return my calls."

"No, I didn't talk to him, really. Bad timing I guess," I replied. I felt like shit. These ladies needed to leave me alone.

"That poor, poor dear Christine," Angela put in, "so beautiful. How could they have done something like that to her? I mean *honestly*!"

"Couldn't say," I mumbled.

"Well this just isn't going to fly with me. I'm looking them up in the book and calling them *right now*!"

"Oh, please," said Allison. "They live in Beijing or *some* crazy place like that, for heaven's sake."

It was then, looking over Grace's shoulder that I saw my mother sitting with the Maid of Honor at the kitchen table, hands locked together, engaged in intense conversation. I decided to

approach them, not coming too close at first, seeing as how they were talking about Christine's family and their past and all that. Apparently her father had grown quite wealthy in the rice farming business, and owned several estates in whatever province they were from. They were very well-to-do; all of the children educated in English schools and so on and so forth.

"Mind if I join you?" I interrupted as politely as I could.

"Hayden!" my mother said, jumping out of the seat to give me a hug. "I thought you went home, what happened?"

I poured myself another drink, holding it up. "This happened."

"Yeah. You'll need that, with this family," she replied. The Maid of Honor laughed, a young, very good looking girl who must have been at least my age. She couldn't have been more than twenty five. Noticing that I was staring, quite dumfoundedly at this beautiful Asian girl, my mother finally brought herself to pleasant introductions. "Buddy, this is Kiera. Kiera, Buddy. Kiera's Christine's best friend, though she lives in the States now."

"Oh yeah?" I said, "What part?"

"Oh, around here," she answered, "Norwalk."

"No kidding?"

The flirtatious conversation carried on and on through the night until we finally walked out to the backyard hand-in-hand, venturing forth into the real festivities. I was now most sober as I patted the pocket containing her phone number and address, and happy, now, upon spotting the table at which sat Uncle Jim, Ethan,

and Edgar. They passed around a bottle of some unpronounceable Polish vodka, tipping back their patio chairs as far as they would go without spilling out onto the grass.

Outside on that particular night, I no longer felt dreary. I was alive, and as I looked into her eyes the night itself was alive with music and dance and song! The furies echoed their beautiful tunes as the earth itself rotated with glee unlike anything else! It was alive! Alive with love and with heartache and with sadness, yet it was alive! It had vitality, it had life, it was tangible proof that everything would be ok, and though we don't always think so, everything seems to have a way of working itself out in the end.

The ending is what counts. It ties, it binds. Gives clarity and closure. Gives hope and leaves room for doubt and for guesses. Leaves it open for questions and for rumors, for concerns and for praise. That's the only thing that matters in any story, you know. The ending.

And this one's a keeper.

An Unexpected Lesson

(Hayden)

The airline was terrible. My elbows ached as attendants pushed their carts carelessly down the aisles, oblivious to outstretched arms and legs. The coffee was cold and tasted like it had been watered down severely. The plane jerked at unnecessary moments as if the pilot was falling asleep at the wheel. My stomach was acting up due to the food that had just been served before the second viewing of Titanic. The stuff looked like it had been minced up with a pestal and flopped onto the dishes with an ice-cream spoon. Holding my spork in one shaking hand, I was unsure of how to even approach the alien cuisine. I needed a cigarette.

I was bored and tired, just coming back from a marriage ceremony that had not ended on the greatest note and a relationship which had not worked out exactly as I had planned it to. Staring out at the gray carpeting, I felt myself beginning to drift until my attention was somehow pulled away by a soft tapping sound. Stupidly I hadn't even bothered to look at the passenger sharing the seat over. In fact I had tried not to make eye contact with anyone save the one attendant who covered the alcohol cart.

It was definitely the strangest, most comical thing that I could have experienced. Sitting there in a grey business suit, sandals, and white, thinning hair, was the most ancient looking Chinese man I had ever seen. He looked like something out of the old Wu Tang Clan kung fu films, an old hermit living on top of a mountain. In his hand he grasped an old wooden tennis racket, and proceeded to bounce a ball up and down. With the other hand he whipped away his long, white mustache, and I could see that he was smiling.

He stopped for a moment, the ball dropping slowly onto the strings then spiraling around the edges threatening to fall. But the old man's hands were steady, and the ball stopped itself dead center. He had noticed my stares and was now returning them, the smile still on his face.

"Do you play?"

The question caught me off guard. I was staring at him so much as if he was some sort of statue that I was not expecting him to speak.

"Umm, yes. Well, a little. Not too much, really." I rubbed my eyes, trying to get rid of the sleep as I was now engaged in genuine conversation.

"You should!" he exclaimed, his accent British. "Fantastic game. Good for the mind."

"I suppose."

"Travel often?" he inquired.

"I do, but not by plane. I really don't like to fly."

"Oh, neither do I. Only on very serious occasions." He stopped, looking at me very sternly, "are you in flight for business?"

"No, well yes and no. I'm coming home from a wedding. I also need to hand in my manuscript."

His eyes lit up, "Oh, a writer! A man of letters! A man of principles and imagination, a man of character!"

The very way he carried himself made me laugh, and he shared in as well.

"I wouldn't say all that. I've written some stuff. Nothing too great. You're not looking at Shakespeare here."

The old man looked taken aback. "But who says that you will not be the next one?" he asked. Shakespeare was often spat on in his day, was he not? Who is to stop you from being one of the greats?

"Well," I started, not sure of how to answer. "I guess no one."

"Only yourself, my boy. If it is your creation, only yourself. A writer has no other references to look to, only his mind. There are no textbooks to follow, no rules, no guidelines. If you cannot see that, then it is no wonder you do not consider yourself one of the greats. It must come from a depth within you."

By now I was getting a little irritated. I liked this guy, I really did, but I really disliked talking about my work, and especially disliked being lectured on it by an old man who didn't write.

"And what are you flying for, may I ask?"

He sat back, slouching in his chair, stroking that Shaolin mustache of his as he closed his eyes in concentration. "A student." He said.

"A student?"

"I am looking for a student."

"Are you a professor or something?" I asked.

"In a way," he said. And with that he stopped talking and craned his head in the other direction. Now the old eyes stared out of the window and into the graying sky. I sat there, eyes fixed on the

bald spot of some very large man's head, and thought of the intriguing senior citizen next to me.

The pilot spoke and the plane landed and everyone got off safe and sound.

No terrorists this time, everyone could relax.

No turbulence, everyone was comfortable.

As the masses departed they were met with a smile and a handshake at the door, and I was up next, reaching my hand out to limply shake the captain's as he tipped his hat to me. My feet felt strange upon descending the makeshift metal staircase outside the craft. Just as the right foot hit pavement I was again distracted by a tap on the shoulder. I turned and it was the old man, a lot shorter than I had realized, holding out a small yellow business card. I glanced at it quickly before disposing of it in my pocket.

"In case you ever need a lesson," he said, his eyes bright.

I got into a taxi and went home to my small apartment. The interior was next to miserable. The walls and floors were drab; I wasn't too great of a decorator. The only expensive appliance on the

whole place was a TV placed in front of some hand me down couches from my brother Oscar. The kitchen was small and mostly unused considering that the microwave was the only thing getting any action.

I brought my bag into the bedroom and set in on the mattress. My manuscript slid out and I lifted it up, sitting on the edge of the bed and sighing before opening to the first page. A couple of paragraphs in and I was convinced that the writing was sub-par, that no one would appreciate it and the royalties would be next to nothing. This always seemed to happen, and to tell the truth I can't stand reading my own work. If I do, I'll revise it until there's nothing left, and I guess you can call that a complex. It gave me a headache to read, much less write.

After looking over chapter one, I decided to call my editor, get it over with and just bring the goddamn thing to the office. Plans quickly changed as Mary the nineteen year old secretary curtly informed me that Mr. Gerhart was "out" on vacation, and that my deadline for submission was two days ago.

I replied with a "thank you" in the same vicious tone and hung up. A quick nap and a quick moment to gather myself from the jet lag and I was already pouring the Honey Nut Cheerios before noon. As I stood to get the milk I spied the yellow business card on the countertop. With nothing to do seeing as how I was now apparently unemployed, I figured, what the hell?

How about another round with the tennis professor. At least it would save me from a large dose of moping and even larger dose of lounging: my two scheduled events for the day. In fact, I hadn't even bothered to look at the card, and found that there was no number, not even any ink. I turned it over and scribbled on the back in pencil, barley legible was one sentence:

For lessons, meet at Fairchild Courts.

Now, Fairchild Courts is a tennis club, and not just some backwoods piece of crap open-to-the-public sort of thing. I mean this place required money. I was down payments galore and some collateral to sit and have a drink in the club house. I was a little skeptical of showing up there, thinking of all the high school nights sneaking in beer to the back lawns. Showing up now as an adult to

some sort of requested meeting, well that just seemed absurd. I decided to bite the bullet anyway and scrounged out my Polo fleece from the closet. I was not sure of the pants, so I put on some Dockers with gym
shorts underneath just in case I was seriously going to engage in some volleying.

* * *

"I was not sure if you would come," he said to me, waiting at the gate of the far most court.

"To be honest I wasn't very sure either."

He stood there staring at me, his arms folded yet still clutching the old racket.

"Are you sure you want to learn?" he asked, "are you sure that you are prepared?"

"Sure," I replied, really not knowing what the hell he was talking about, "and what exactly will you be teaching me?"

He smiled, "That is all up to you. Come," motioning with one arm he led me onto the grass court.

He handed me a racket and lobbed the ball over. "Contact," he lectured, "is key."

"You know, I had to miss an important meeting to be here," I half lied.

"And what is it," he said, returning the volley, "that you want so much from this meeting?"

"To get paid," I shrugged simply, looking around the club. The old man crouched and stretched and the entire time I could not help but compare him to Yoda.

"And this is important," he panted, "how?"

"Because that is what I need to live comfortably."

"You need green paper to be comfortable? To be safe?"

"To survive," I responded uneasily.

He shook his head, returning my meager serve.

"And this is where you are mistaken, pupil."

"How so?"

"What you are concerned about is not of importance."

"How could it be of no importance? What are you, homeless or something?"

"Oh, no," he answered.

"Then how do you survive?"

"I survive because I am happy."

"Happy? Really?"

"Are you happy?" he asked me. The rapid-fire questions were hitting me faster than the tennis balls. I was not sure of how to answer the question, but deep down I really knew.

"No," I said simply, "I'm really not."

"And why is this?"

"Because I'm trapped. Because I can barley pay the bills to have a roof over my head. Because I can't hold a steady relationship or even maintain a healthy relationship with my brothers and sister and parents." I found it strange, yet somehow comforting to be opening up to a complete stranger like this. Yet something in the old man seemed comforting, like a living confessional booth. "Because I drink too much, and because life is getting too serious." I served the ball back, harder than before.

He returned it with a Jedi-like speed. "There is not a shred of evidence to back up the notion that life is supposed to be serious," he stated, and I missed the ball, my racket limp at my side as it soared past me. The words had caught me off guard.

"But I don't' understand," I replied

"Do not understand what?"

"The notion that life is not serious."

"Well than if you can not put it out in retrospective we shall go one by one."

"As in?"

"As in the good that comes from your life…surely there must be something fulfilling? Something worth missing? Let us start from the top. What drives you? Who do you dwell upon more often than not"

I whipped the sweat off of my brow as I returned his serve.

"My family I guess. My brothers and my sister."

"And when you talk to them, when you help them out when they are in need, when you dine with them and spend holidays, is this not fulfilling?"

"It would be if I spent more time with them. We're split up, you know: California, France, Connecticut, Massachusetts…"

"Even so, are you not as a whole when you are around them? Around the people you love and the people who truly know who you are inside instead of what you pretend to be?"

"In a way, yes. I can be myself without judge."

"And are you happy being alone?"

"I wouldn't say that much."

"So you have learned the first lesson. Fulfillment, though it carries its own set of joys, cannot compare to what is inside, the true harmony of being in good company. Acceptance, though it may seem like a basic instinct, is what I believe that every man, woman and child strive for. The background or ethnicity matters not. It does not matter what language you speak or what god you pray to. The feeling of belonging, the feeling of finally settling down to a comfortable level, I believe that this is man's hardest challenge. Because everyone needs someone. If you have the blessing of good friends, there can be no other divine fulfillment."

"Divine fulfillment?" I asked, "like God?"

"This would have been my second lesson had you not guessed it."

He stopped playing and stared at me. He stared in with ancient, graying eyes.

"Do you believe in a god, Mr. Storrs?" he asked, his voice soft, barely above a whisper.

"I'm not sure," I replied, not having gone to church in at least eight years.

He picked up another ball and lobbed it over to me.

"For my next lesson, I would like to pose a question to you, if you do not mind."

I swung, "Go for it."

"Would you rather go through life believing in God then dying and discovering that he didn't exist, or would you rather not believe in God only to one day die and come to him face to face?"

I stepped back over the base line, returning his powerful serve. He was a lot quicker than he looked.

"I don't know," I said, "I haven't been to church in sometime. But I defiantly believe there's something out there. I'd say I'd rather believe and get my hopes up rather than not believing at all."

"So you have faith?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

"And this faith does not set you at peace? Does not make you happy?"

I returned his top spin. "Not happy. Comforted."

"Ahh, yes. Comfort. To live comfortably. Indeed this seems to be *another* thing every human strives to accomplish. But comfort can be many things. It can be curling up in front of a fire, a quiet dinner with loved ones. Or it can be to live lavishly. The big house, the nice cars. But what then? What will you do with all of these things if you are not fulfilled?"

I shrugged, "Sit back and enjoy life, I guess?"

"And say, for example, that *you* were blessed with such a life. You would simply sit back? You would not write?"

I was getting pretty tired from the match, and I was growing even more tired with the fact that he mentioned my writing every chance he got.

"No," I said, "I probably wouldn't."

With that the old man nodded slowly as if taking my words into deep consideration.

"I see." Was all that he said, his voice soft remorseful. With that he simply walked away. No eye contact. No goodbyes. No nothing. The racket wielding sensei had vanished into the sunset.

I went home tired and confused. After a quick shower I decided to check my messages. As usual there were none, save my mother franticly asking if there was any "funny business" with the "Arabs" on the plane ride home.

I did nothing. I sat and sat and ate bags upon bags of chips until I felt disgusting. With nothing to do, alone and nowhere to go nor anyone to talk to, I decided to make my way back to Fairchild Courts. As expected the little old man wasn't there. He was probably off on some other voyage, searching for some other pupil to

teach all of his life secrets to. He was gone but the words hung in the air. His phrases hovered all around like fog and humidity.

That instant I was in my car, manuscript on the passenger seat, racing towards my editor. Because life is too short to simply exist.

It is too short to drift.

In Hell with Hemingway

(So Long, Oscar)

I will see you

Nicotine-stained hands fast at work, he wracked his brain, jabbing at faded keys. The typewriter shook, threatening to fall from the desk. His eyes burned, large pockets of flesh forming under gray lids. Patches of sparse, wiry beard protruded form spackled areas of his chin and cheeks. Long strands of white hair fell into his face, irritating his eyes as he tired to push the mop back, sweating. The heat of the attic room was breaching on unbearable.

He lived alone, working in his widow's watch, uncaring of the world outside. He lived the writer's life, the life of solitude and single drudgery, working at night with the pace and vigor only an insomniac could manage. The married life did not suit him, nor the dating scenes of the modern era. He had tried both and both had failed. He liked his typewriter just fine.

The property he had bought just one year earlier had been a steal, acres and acres of forest providing the right form of quietude he had so longed for, living in the city so many years prior. It was a welcome escape, a welcome retreat for him to finally sit and work at his craft, to chisel out any insuffiencies and problems, to fix all of the cracks in the final, polished drafts that his old machine spit out night after night after night.

Working in the late hours proved to be more productive. Only at sundown could he achieve his full potential. It was then that the stories poured out, the creativity and angst dripped onto yellowing pages. But this night the words would not flow, and he seldom chose the right word. Two days. He had two days to complete the manuscript. It was a battle trying to stab out a simple sentence.

He was interrupted by the ringing of the kitchen telephone. He got up, startled yet curious to see who exactly would place a call at such a time. Glancing at the grandfather clock as he made his way downstairs, he saw that it was a quarter past three in the morning. His eyes burned, his face felt thin and stretched.

In the kitchen, he turned on the light. The phone was still ringing. Obviously the person on the other end was desperate. He figured it must be someone calling with a problem, from a telephone booth or someplace like that. It was quite annoying, seeing as he was on a role, just finishing up a novella which was to be published, hopefully, sometime at the end of the month. Clearing his throat, he picked up the receiver, pulling up a chair.

"Yes?" he answered.

He was met with only silence. Concluding that it must have been a wrong number, he hung up and once again made the climb to the widow's watch. He once again sat in front of the typewriter, yet his eyes were focused on the other end of the table. They were focused on the yellow bottles and little baggies. The writing was slow and his mind ached and if he could not make the words flow, he would have to force them out.

He opened one bottle.

Three pills.

Another.

Five, now.

Panting.

Six from another.

Sweating.

Eight.

Heart racing.

His eyes burned and vision spun and he could not see the typewriter in front of him. He tried to stand but his legs would not permit him. He was chained to the ground. It was not his choice yet he accepted the drug's authority without question. He was their instrument, and they would do with him as they wished. Looking out the window he could make out the stars but could not focus on any one in particular. He turned to the table and his hands felt the metal keys and he felt secure. He looked to the paper sticking through, to his cup of coffee, to the tennis racket on the floor nearby.

Screaming, now.

Pain.

Fading fading fading light going on and on and on to nothing.

Darkness and peace.

On the other side, he managed to type before collapsing to the floor.

And the breath left his body.

These Fangs

(A Novella)

"But first, on earth as Vampire sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be rent:
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race;
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must feed thy livid living corpse.
Thy victims are they yet expire
Shall know the demon for their sire,
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
Thy flowers withered on the stem."
-Lord Byron (Giaour)

"Tape 1, side A. Let us begin with some basic terms. Please, listen carefully and repeat."

Click.

"Kooooonnneeeeeeccchhheeeeewwwwaaaaaaa. Hello."

Click.

"Doooommmmmmoooooo. Thank you."

The cassette hummed inside of the player, sending vibrations through my desk. I slumped down, trying to pronounce the words. Japanese. What a language. Who the hell uses more than four syllables to say hello, for Christ's sake? Does anyone even take the time to say the entire "hello" anymore?

At this point, you are confused. What the hell is he speaking Japanese for? The answer is quite simple. Let's begin with the introductions, although, as avid readers, I'm sure that you've heard this all before.

My name is Matthew Parker. I work for Wexler & Wexler, an advertising firm who, as fate would have it, recently picked up a new client. A client of the Japanese persuasion. I was lucky enough to land the job right after college, as executives scoured my campus

looking for the next "bright thinkers" of the new generation. Young kids with cool ideas for Gap commercials, I guess. It seems that studying hard really did pay off, as, at 26, I am currently the youngest executive in Wexler & Wexler history. But you'd be amazed at how easy this job really is. You can often find me staring intently at my computer screen, typing away furiously. But if you look a little closer, you might find me in a heated game of Tetris.

We're currently making a deal with a Japanese soft-drink company, Bluejean Explosion!, who plan to start marketing their product in the US. As far as the name goes, I have no idea what it means, but that seems to be the rough translation into English. Apparently the stuff makes Redbull look like baby formula. There have even been reports of heart failure due to drinking more than two cans. Terrific.

As for my social life, I would have to say that, at this point, it is fairly non-existent. Work takes up most of my time, and the few hours when I am not coming up with magazine ads, I spend with my girlfriend, Amy, with whom I've been with for the past six months. My friends are all still around, yet I really don't get to see them as

much as I should, except for Sean, my best friend since high school who, as no surprise, lives directly across from me in our building.

I think that's enough background information for one sitting. The story begins right…here.

* * *

"Parker?"

My boss, Steve poked his head into my office, knocking on the door even though he was already edging his way in. He sat down in front of my desk, exhaling deeply. His pudgy face was flushed, his ears bright red. Steve wasn't an exercise buff, which, by his enormous gut and beagle-like jowls, was plain to see. He huffed and puffed, pulling at the tie around his neck as though it was attacking him. He was stressed out. That much was clear. I popped the tape out of the cassette player and sat up straight, waiting for him to begin drilling into me, which was the usual routine for a Friday afternoon. With Steve, it always seemed like he reserved all of his criticisms and assignments for the beginning of the weekend. It gave him somewhat of a bad reputation around the office. Several employees made it a

point to duck out early on Friday afternoons. Office Space is somewhat of an instructional video around here.

"Well, its official. The Japs are coming."

I looked up at him. "What?"

"Bluejean Explosion. They're ready to talk about the US campaign."

I wrung my hands together, trying my best to give off a sense of enthusiasm. "That's great!"

Steve pulled out a tissue from his breast pocket, running it across his greasy forehead. "Yeah, yeah. I set up the meeting for next week, and I just wanted to make sure that we got all our ideas out there."

I flipped through my notebook. "We should be all set. My guys have been working on this for a couple of weeks, now. I think they'll be pretty happy." I looked back at Steve. He was sweating profusely. I could see the reflection of the ceiling fan on his bald spot. Very distracting.

Steve's voice was distant. He looked directly at me, but his bloodshot eyes were undoubtedly somewhere else.

"Good, good." He was nervous, and had good reason to be. First of all, for all of Steve's business prowess, it was plain to see that he was oblivious to the rest of the world. Outside cultures were alien to him. I doubt that he could point out Canada on a map. How was it that this guy landed a deal with the Japanese? And, how the hell did they accept it? This only led me to question the character of the men at Bluejean Explosion!. I assumed that the meeting would be quite interesting.

After some mindless small talk and some insincere words of encouragement, Steve left my office, slamming the door in a fit of panic. I could still smell his cologne wafting inside of the room. The guy put it on pretty thick. I spent the rest of the afternoon wondering how many times he's showered in the past month.

* * *

I got home from work early. Slipping through the front door of my building, I smoothly avoided my landlord, Mr. Chan. Not that I

was late on the rent or anything like that. He just had an incredibly thick accent, and I could never understand a single word that he said to me. I found it better to just side step him completely until the end of the month when I could just give him a check. Money is the language of the world, and when it came to dollars and cents, we understood each other completely. However, I feared that he was becoming suspicious of me, since I always darted by his door, which always hung wide open in the hallway. I'm sure he's poked his head out more than once, only to see me jump on the elevator in a hurry.

My tie was killing me. I quickly unbuttoned the top of my collar and yanked it off. Usually I don't do that, because more often than not I mess up and almost strangle myself.

Keys in the door.

Briefcase on the table.

Beer out of the fridge.

Remote in my hand.

I'm good.

It was eight o'clock when I heard the door slam shut and snapped out of my nap. Amy strolled into the living room, her arms folded. Shit.

In the six months we'd been together, I knew that when those little arms were all tangled up like that, I'd better duck for cover. She's only given the arm fold four times since I have known her. Here are the past examples:

- When I went through my philanthropist stage during Christmas and, quite by accident, tossed my paycheck into the Salvation Army donation box.
- When, after a long night of drinking (which I do not do that often), I woke up on a bus in southern New Jersey.
- When, after giving it some serious thought, I gave her mother an electronic beard trimmer for her 56th birthday.
- When…well…this is number four. I'm good, for the most part. ….Let's read on.

"Why aren't you dressed?"

"Really?" I was amazed. Surely I had broken some forbidden rule. Surely there was some line that I had crossed, the penalty for which could almost certainly mean death.

She frowned, her nose wrinkling up like the chick from Bewitched. "Really *what*? What have you been doing all day?"

Rubbing my head, I looked around, my eyes half open. "Well, I, uh, worked. Landed a big account, actually. Then I came home, put on the History Channel, and fell asleep."

She sighs.

I held my hands up in surrender. "I could give that to you in writing if you'd like."

She folded her arms tighter.

"Don't you remember? Sean's birthday party at the club?"

I did remember. Only the thing is, I hate night clubs. And to be honest, I don't really care for birthday parties. Plus, I see Sean all the time. He'd understand.

"Oh, yeah. I don't think I'm up for that. I got an early start tomorrow. Gotta call these guys from some Japanese firm we're dealing with."

"C'mon…please? I know that all you're friends would really be happy to see you. God knows you've been working nonstop."

I rolled over, propping myself up on my elbows so I could get a better look at her. "Don't you have to work tonight?"

"Well, yeah, but I'm playing at the club tonight! I talked to the owner, and he said I could fill in for their normal dj."

"That's great. But…yeah…I don't…"

She jumped on top of me, strattling me with her legs, holding my face with both of her hands. Squeezing, I think, would be a better way to put it. Not the playful kind, either.

"Listen to me. You work all the time. Go out with your friends and HAVE! A! GOOD! TIME!"

She continued to shake my head until I finally agreed.

While Amy sat in the kitchen and fixed herself a bowl of Cheerios, I began the arduous task of getting dressed. The whiplash didn't help a lot, either. I can't stand getting dressed up; especially when I know that I'm going to a very social place like a night club. I'm a very neutral dresser. I'm a white, gray, blue, and dark green person. That's about it when it comes to shirts. Jeans and khakis are

the standard pant. I don't like yellow or black. Those colors are just too extreme. I can't live up to them. But I have no shirts or pants that scream CLUB! So I just ended up with a white t-shirt and a pair of jeans. A jean jacket topped it off, and I slung it over my shoulder just in case it was chilly outside.

I walked out of the bedroom and presented myself to Amy, who just nodded her approval.

When I arrived at the club, Sean's party was already in full swing. My friends, and friends of my friends, took up an entire section of the floor. I could see Sean, standing on top of a table, a beer in each hand, laughing hysterically. A blue party hat sat on top of his head, his pudgy face red and sweating. In mid joke, he looked up and saw me.

"Matty!"

I walked over, clapping him on the back. "Happy birthday, buddy."

"Dude! Where the hell have you been?"

"Worked late. You know how it is."

"Oh, c'mon man! You're my best bud!" He looked over to one of the girls standing around the party. "Hey, sweetheart! Do me a favor and get this kid a drink!" She smiled and departed for the bar. He looked back at me, holding the back of my neck with a large, meaty hand. "Let's get this party started! It's a celebration!"

The party was pretty great, I have to admit. Its not that I don't like my friends. I do. I just like them in small doses. We drank for hours, all gathered around the one table, pounding shot after shot, chasing with a couple of beers each. I could see that John was about to pass out, so I called for one of the guys to help him into a seat. He had a gigantic grin on his face, spreading from ear to ear.

"Looks like I'm calling out tomorrow…" In five seconds flat he was out cold.

Soon after, Sean pulled me away, dragging me onto the dance floor with the rest of the guys. My buddy Eric grabbed the nearest girl he could find, trying his best to make his big, uncoordinated, clunky Irish body groove to the music.

I danced by myself, not really making contact with anyone in particular. My focus was mainly on Amy, who would look out over the dance floor and slip me a wink every now and then.

The tracks she spun were all pretty good. Good music is hard to come by. The electronic symphony exploded into my brain, mixing with the alcohol. I'm usually lazy. But it caused my feet to move with my hands to move with my waist in a way that was only possible through artificial stimulation.

Before long, the club scene was wearing on me. My legs hurt. The bass reverberated through the walls, the floor, the tables. My ribs began to rattle in my chest with every breath. I looked around, snapping out of my beer-induced haze. My friends were nowhere to be found. They probably left already, leaving me there in some drunken joke they had brilliantly devised.

Looking over at the booth, I tried to spot Amy, but she must've been kneeling down picking out new records or something, because I didn't see her anywhere. The bar, maybe? Probably not, seeing as how she didn't drink, but I decided to push and shove my

way over there anyway. The crowds were beginning to irritate me as I forcefully elbowed through to the other side of the room. Everywhere I looked, people were grinding on each other, fixated with the blaring music, totally infected with the aura of the smoke and the lights and the sweat and the movement. I suddenly felt like an old man, like I didn't belong here. I just wasn't feeling it. Not tonight. Not my element. I wanted to go home.

Out of nowhere, a young girl jumped out in front of me, positioning herself directly in my way. But she didn't stop completely. She bounced up and down, wiggling her body as she danced in place, smiling at me. Very annoying. She was, however, completely gorgeous. Platinum blonde hair hung in her face, though most of it was held in the back in a ponytail. Perfect body. Stunning, really. I smiled back and looked down at my feet nervously, then motioned with my head towards the bar. Obviously she didn't realize that she was, in fact, not flirting with me at all, but rather causing me a great deal of inconvenience. I would have walked right by, but there was something about her eyes. They drew me in. Not in the sense that they were beautiful, though. They were

completely… no, ***severely*** dilated. They were completely black, her pupils the size of silver dollars. I was used to seeing people on drugs and could tell instantly. Ecstasy. Perfect.

"Hey, wanna let me get by?!" I yelled. I knew that unless she read lips, she probably couldn't understand me. I couldn't even hear myself.

She continued to dance there, twirling the glow sticks in her hands. "What?!" she screamed back.

"Nothing, forget it!" I placed my hands on her hips. She smiled, pulling closer. Slowly, I began to push her aside, giving her a little twirl since I didn't want to be forceful or seem rude. I'm very polite.

Once I placed the X girl out of my way, I started to make my way to the bar once again. My legs hurt. Just a quick visit with Amy, a kiss on the cheek, and hopefully I'd be home on the couch in twenty minutes. She was there, sitting at the counter, some exotic drink in her hand. She was laughing. I smiled, just because seeing her happy made me smile.

She has a killer smile. Great teeth.

When she saw me, her face lit up. It always amazed me that I could have that affect on anyone at all, especially her. Kicking the stool away, she waved franticly, running towards me. She moved through the crowd like water. Dipping in and out of clusters of drunken guys and gyrating girls. She finally reached me and clenched my wrists hard, holding onto them tight.

"Hey…having fun?!"

I laughed, "Yeah, fantastic time!"

"Come over and meet some of my friends!"

I shook my head, "No, no. I think I'm gonna get going! Eric and everyone else left!"

"Oh, ok! I'll come over later and keep you company!"

I gave her a quick peck on the cheek and made my way to the door.

Outside was bliss. The cool breeze washed over me, fumigating my clothes of all the cigarette smoke. I inhaled the fresh air, filling my lungs, happy to be rid of the musk and perfume.

The street seemed unusually dark. Eerie, almost. Strangely, the sidewalks were completely desolate. I turned left, looking down the street to where the line for the club would usually be snaking around the block by now. Where the hell was everyone? It was a Friday night. Where were the college kids? The high schoolers with the fake ID's, borrowing their parent's Mercedes for the night? Even the bums seemed to have vanished. The streetlights were faded, one by one down the street like old Christmas tree lights, flicker flicker flicker.

"**I have a personal dislike to Vampires, and the little acquaintance I have with them would by no means induce me to reveal their secrets**."
-Lord Byron

A tap on my shoulder.

I began to turn. But didn't quite make it.

That's when this psycho bit me.

I screamed, or at least I think I did. The blinding pain shot through me like a spear. The teeth clamped down harder and harder with each passing moment, impaling me with unrelenting agony. I could hear a faint snapping, a pop here and there, the molars pressing down into my arteries. My knees buckled.

I fell, my shins smashing onto the side of the curb. As I dropped to the ground, my attacker came down with me, their pearly whites still digging in, warm liquid running down the side of my neck, onto my shoulders, spreading to my chest, into my armpit, soaking through my shirt.

I screamed again, "What the f….!" But couldn't even finish my thought. My mind began to race as I thought of the most derogatory

curses to throw at my assailant. Surprisingly, the notion of self defense did not even come to mind. The teeth stabbed into the side of my head harder and harder. Tears began to stream out my eyes.

I remained in suspended animation for some time. The stranger did not let go, but rather gripped onto my arms, their fingers hard as iron, squeezing me in closer, as if they were holding me in a loving embrace. This sick bastard was taking his time. Killing with kindness. Mutilating with passion.

Finally, the teeth pulled out. The grip on my arms softened. I felt something warm, sinewy, sliding across the wound, sopping up the excess blood. A tongue.

Gross.

I crumpled up, every muscle in my body deciding to quit on me, giving as much support as a rag doll as I lay sprawled out on the street.

I lay wounded and maimed in public. On one of the busiest streets downtown. But there was no one around, no one to act as witness to this perverse violation. No one to hear my cries for help. I could still hear the thumping of the bass coming from inside the club,

the rhythm finding symmetry with the beating of my heart as it pumped faster, faster, faster, then slower as I coughed blood and strained to yell.

I looked up, my eyes wide and unfocused. Pain consumed me. Trying to make eye contact with my attacker proved useless. I could only make out the shape of a body standing over me, their hands wiping their mouth. And I could hear their laughter. Not evil laughter like a villain in a James Bond movie. It was pure, joyous laughter, like a little kid on Christmas morning. They were truly enjoying it.

I could, however, make out just one thing:

Green.

Neon.

A pair of what could only be glow sticks.

The bright green spectrum danced through my eyes, twirling around in emerald wonder while everything around me faded to black.

* * *

I awoke to the sound of machines. I was slow to open my eyes. The lids were heavy. Was I still drunk? I looked up. Bright white. I looked over to the side. More white.

Where was I?

I moved my legs. Whatever I was laying on was cold, leathery. A thin, light blue blanket was draped over my body. It wasn't until I looked down at the plastic bracelet around my wrist that I realized I was in a hospital.

I could see the tube inserted into the side of my arm. I could see the machine with the bag full of strange liquid that it was attached to. I felt the bandage on my arm. It was tender. I hate IV's. I hate blood. I usually pass out at the sight of it.

The machine beeped loudly, sending a jolt through my chest.

"Matt?"

Amy leaned over me, her hands running down the side of my face.

I looked up, vision blurred and disoriented. "What….what happened?"

"I don't know exactly, but it looks like someone…"

"Someone what?"

"Bit you."

I stared up at her. Then, with a shaking hand, reached and felt the side of my neck. My finger ran over two dime-sized holes.

Shit.

I winced in pain, quickly retracting.

"The EMT said that he found you lying on the sidewalk. Do you remember what happened?"

Before I could answer, the doctor came in, knocking loudly on the already opened door to announce his presence. He sat in the chair directly next to my bed. His voice was deep and overly-dramatic, like the fake doctors on daytime soap operas.

"Matthew? My name is Doctor Richards. How're you feeling?"

I let out a long breath, still trying to get my bearings.

"Well… doc… not so good."

He laughed softly. "Yes, I can see that." His face quickly molded to a look of concern. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Well, I left the club. Then, someone, or ***something,*** bit me."

He tapped his pen against the clipboard, removing his glasses in deep thought. "Did you provoke them in any way?"

I looked over at him incredulously, "Provoke them? No. They snuck up on me from behind. I wasn't exactly asking for it."

He wrote something down on his clipboard. "Did you manage to get a look at them?"

"No. I really can't recall anything specific."

He stood up, "Well, the good news is, you're just fine. We ran all the basic tests on someone who's been stabbed or punctured. Rabies, AIDS, you're all clear. The wounds aren't infected in anyway." He paused, chewing on the end of his pen. "In fact, they seem to be healing at a very fast rate." He chuckled. "Some of my colleagues agree that the speed of the healing process is somewhat… ***abnormal***. To be honest, I think it's extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it! I'd keep you here for an extra day, but, it looks like you really don't need it."

I smiled, running my hands through my gnarled hair. "Well, that's a relief." I winced again. If my neck was healing so fast, why the hell did it burn so badly?

Again, a look of concern washed over his face. "I do consider it to be a little unnatural how little these wounds have hindered you. The doctor in the ER said that your artery had been completely severed. Somehow, though, it seems to have had little effect."

"Guess I'm just lucky." To be honest, I was just as shocked as he was.

He frowned, "Indeed. I should think it is rather lucky, considering that a human being needs this artery *intact* in order to live."

To that I did not have a response.

What was he saying? His general attitude indicated a lack of trust, as if I were hiding something from him. What was I supposed to say?

Doctor Richards leaned over to examine the neck one last time, finally offering his hand. I shook it weakly. His grip was incredibly

tight, and I tried my best to pull my hand away before he broke it. He smiled once more.

"Yup, looks like you're A-okay. I'm just going to prescribe some medication to help out with the tenderness, help you with the pain a little bit until you're ready to go."

When Doctor Richards took his leave, Amy told me that she needed to be going as well. Not long after they left, a short, burly nurse came in toting a wheelchair. I sighed, mustering the strength required to pull myself up out of the bed.

* * *

The next day at work, I spend a better part of the afternoon playing Tetris, waiting for the executives from Bluejean Explosion! to arrive with my boss. Every now and then I would pick at the bandage around my neck as the wound began to grow itchy.

At 12:15, they finally entered (I had been waiting since 9). Mr. Ishima was the first to enter, laughing like a jackal, exposing a set of horribly crooked, yellow teeth. I prayed that he would not sit too

close to me. The breath couldn't have been anything good. Mr. Hinara soon followed, dressed in a shabby, pea-colored business suit. His thinning hair was mussed to the side, greasy and, I could only imagine, unwashed.

How the hell did these guys become executives?

My boss, Steve, entered with the translator in tow. I stood up, straightening my tie.

Steve held out his arms in praise. "Matt, my boy, I think I smell a deal on the horizon!" He came at me with a tremendous bear-hug. I resisted it to the best of my ability, but Steve was twice my size. I could only stand there and except it as he crushed my ribs in a fit of excitement.

Mr. Ishima said something, his voice incredibly loud and serious. The smile, however, was still on his face, so I know that it must have been good. The translator, a beautiful brunette, turned to Steve. "Mr. Ishima would like to know where you plan to take the brand."

"Well, I think I'd like to let our brightest executive, Matt, take that one."

All four of them turned to me. I shrunk in my seat. Hinara stared at me, his head cocked to the side like a curious dog. I coughed, clearing my throat. As soon as I began talking, I grew more and more distracted as the hot translator spoke to them at the same time, causing me to loose track of my thoughts.

"Well, gentleman, after trying you're product, I must say that this stuff is incredibly tasty. A bit sweet, though. Lots of sugar and caffeine. The older crowd will never go for it." I paused. The translator continued, her lips ushering out rapid spurts of Japanese. I let her finish up before continuing. "I say we target the youth. Extreme sports fans: snowboarding, skateboarding. ***This*** is our demographic. You know, fun, exciting things. The kids will love it. We need to contact those kinds of companies and have them spread the word around. Trust me, gentleman. This has worked in the past with loads of products. We have a very intense, active product. Let's advertise it that way."

It took an extra minute or two before the translator wrapped it up. All the while, Ishima and Hinara sat perched on the edge of their seats, eyes locked on me with anticipation and intensity. They

rubbed their chins in deep contemplation, faces blank as stone. Suddenly, with no moment's hesitation, they exploded into motion, their faces lit up like a goddamed firework finale. They howled away in their native tongue, spitting out their words in a way that, might I say, almost frightened me. What appeared as anger could only have been excitement. Hinara waved his arms around franticly. Ishima got up, imitating what I could only guess to be someone riding on a skateboard.

The translator was beaming as she laughed along with them, nodding her head. She looked back at us.

"They love it!"

For that, I needed no translation.

Suddenly, both men sat down. Instantly, they returned to their previous positions, thinking deeply. They shot down onto their seats at an incredible pace. Again, Mr. Ishima spoke.

The translator turned to me, "What are some of you're ideas for the campaign?"

Luckily, Steve stepped in, talking very much with his hands, as if trying to communicate with the other men through sign-language.

"Well, gentlemen, if you would kindly look at the portfolio's I've given you, you'll see that if we can only just…"

Slowly, Steve's voice began to fade away. Beyond that, I could barley hear the young girl speaking her fluent Japanese. All sound seemed to be muffled, as if I had just strapped on a pair of earmuffs. I was spacing out. It seemed as if the volume had been turned down in the room. I yawned, and then proceeded to groan loudly as I stretched my arms over my head.

Hinara looked over at me with an impatient glare. Steve, growing nervous, quickly jumped in.

"Oh, don't mind him, Mr. Hinara. He's just a little burnt out over the whole matter. He really has put a lot of hours in on this project."

Hinara nodded understandingly, turning his attention back to the presentation.

I quickly excused myself. "I'm going to grab some coffee."

I asked if anyone else wanted any. Everyone declined.

As I left the boardroom and walked to the snack area, my legs suddenly felt like rubber. I grabbed onto the wall for support,

holding myself up while my knees shook. The receptionist, Mary, looked over, her face lined deep with concern.

"Hey, Matt. You ok?"

I laughed, propping myself up, trying to look casual. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Little head rush, you know? Woo!" I continued to laugh, but I think I laid it on a little thick because she simply rolled her eyes, turning back to the phone.

The trek to the snack room proved incredibly difficult. As I stood in front of the coffee machine, I was so damn tired I could barely bring myself to stand still while I filled the Styrofoam cup. It felt as if my entire body had fallen asleep while my mind remained alert. The coffee was hot. I blew in it. I chugged. The searing liquid felt good as it ran down my throat, deep down into my stomach. I took a breather, walking over to the window to peer down at the street.

For some reason, the sun seemed unusually strong, despite the slight overcast. I squinted, trying to make out the tiny shapes below me, but couldn't. A few more seconds passed before I felt a pain on my forehead. It was very specific, only hurting where the sun was

poking through the shades. I felt like an ant being torched by a magnifying glass. Shutting the blinds, I decided that the florescent lights were a better idea.

Again my legs gave out. I felt an enormous weight on my shoulders. More coffee. I made myself another cup. Black. Chugged it down. Nothing. I still felt like shit. Another cup.

Nothing.

One more? Sure.

Still, nothing. What the hell was going on? Was my system so used to this stuff that caffeine did nothing to me anymore? Highly unlikely. I decided that if I remained standing any longer I would collapse.

The options set out before me were pretty grim. What could I do? Should I go back into the boardroom and try to suffer through the tedious meeting, going back and forth, back and forth with Hinara and Ishima until I dozed off and embarrassed myself?

What I did next was something I normally would never dream of doing.

I left.

I booked it out of there, power walking towards the elevators, avoiding eye contact with my co-workers. A few heads turned, poking out from behind desks, above cubicles, through glass office dividers. "Where you going, Parker?"

"Lunch!" was the only response I could muster before leaping into the elevator. The moment I pressed M, I collapsed. My breathing had become slower, more erratic, as if in mid REM sleep. I yawned continuously, trying to get a grip on myself.

Once outside, I found that I had to take off my blazer and hold it over my head to block out the sun. I looked like a lunatic, running past everyone in their shorts and t-shirts while I trampled through like someone trying to escape the rain.

Soon after, I came stampeding down my hallway, making a last desperate rush for my apartment. The door flew open. I collapsed onto the couch. With all of my might, I tried to open my eyes, but couldn't seem to do it. I squinted, scrunching my face as I tried to block out the light coming through the windows. It burned like fire, my entire body enveloped in stinging agony. For a split second, and

perhaps it was just the work of my over-active imagination, I could have sworn I smelt the stench of burning flesh in my nostrils.

I had to think fast. The burning would not desist. I tried closing the curtains, yet the thin fabric did not work very well as a deterrent against the heat. Soon I devised a plan. Gathering all of my energy, I sprinted to the bedroom closet, grabbing a handful of king sized, black comforters. I grabbed as many as my arms could carry. Going to each window, I draped the massive blankets over the windows, blocking out every beam of light until my apartment was drenched in complete darkness.

It is difficult to say what happened next, but sitting in the dark, I began to feel a lot better. My body seemed to relax. Slowly, my energy levels rose. I found that I had begun to regain some of my strength. I lay back down on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling, letting my eyes adjust in the black. The pain in my neck shot back up again, and I glanced at the painkillers sitting on the table. I grabbed a small handful and swallowed.

I don't know how long I slept.

When I awoke, it was difficult to tell whether it was day or night. Do I dare risk peeking through the comforters? Would I be able to withstand the pain? No. Not worth the trouble.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could faintly see the one and only source of light in the entire apartment: a blinking red "4" on my answering machine. On and on it flashed, beckoning me, urging me to roll off the couch, to crawl to it.

I pressed the button.

BEEP!

"Heyyy!" ***Amy***. "It's me. Just calling to see where you wanted to go tonight. I was thinking we could stop by the café and see Sean, maybe catch a movie or something. I'm working right now but I should be out in an hour or so, so, gimme a call! Love you!"

BEEP!

"Hey bro" ***Sean***. "Hey, do you have a can opener? Can't seem to find my…Oh shit! Hey, Pete, what the hell was it doing under the couch? I thought I-"

The line went dead.

BEEP!

"Matthew, this is Steve. What the fuck? Just decided to leave yesterday? Jesus, Parker! What were you thinking? You know, you're lucky I'm a forgiving guy, or your ass would be out on the street right now! I want you to call me immediately. I'd really like to know what was more important than the biggest deal of your *life*. Jesus!"

I pressed delete. To be honest, I didn't really give a shit what Steve thought. All I could decipher from the message was that I'd been asleep for more than a day. This, more than anything, frightened me. I looked over at the clock, which read 9:35 pm. I'd been out for 28 hours.

BEEP!

"Hey, it's me again." ***Amy***. "What happened last night? I called you like a dozen times. Call me as soon as you get home, ok?"

END OF MESSAGES.

I sighed, looking down at the machine as my fingers brushed over "**DELETE ALL**".

I crawled back onto the couch. I felt sick. My stomach began to turn. I could feel the acids begin to rise. Vomiting was inevitable. I gagged. Nothing. My stomach rumbled. It rushed up into my throat. I gagged again. Again, nothing. Purple and red dots clouded my vision, turning the darkness of my living room into a feverous light show. I felt awful.

Soon I realized that I was not sick at all. I was just really, really hungry. I went to the refrigerator, yanking open the ancient door. At first I hesitated, fearing that the light would blind me. But I forgot that my refrigerator was from the Prohibition era, and had a small, 15 watt bulb inside that only worked half the time. So I opened the door and looked into the light, and, as luck would have it, nothing happened. Could it be that only the light of the sun caused me harm? I contemplated switching a few lamps on to see what would happen, but decided that it'd better get some food in me beforehand.

I looked at the contents of the fridge: Pound of cheese, assorted lunch meats, half a can of yogurt, milk, soda, a few vegetables, fruits, some leftover pizza.

Nothing seemed appealing to me, or strangely enough, edible.

I couldn't bring myself to pick anything, though the hunger consumed me, tearing through my stomach like a knife. I winced in pain, clutching my sides. Where else?

The pantry!

I marched over to the other end of the kitchen. The snack drawer would hold the answers. Inside, I still couldn't find anything. Goldfish, Doritos, cookies, cereal, pretzels, canned soup and ravioli. All shit. I paced around, hoping that by moving my feet, the hunger would somehow subside. I went over all the possible lists of places to get delivery, to order some take out. Nothing came to mind. Soon, my stomach began to growl, angry with me for depriving it so.

While the pains of hunger grew and grew, my head began to hurt as well. I could feel a sharp pressure behind me eyes. It seemed that my brain was longing for nourishment as well. Back on the couch, I could only find comfort in sleep…

When I awoke from my second slumber, I decided that no matter how detesting the food seemed, I must force myself to eat. I made a salami and cheese sandwich, loading it up with hot sauce. I

took a bite, chewing slowly. My throat suddenly froze up. I could not bring myself to swallow. I crumpled up the remainder and chucked it into the trash. The microwave was directly in front of me.

I heated up some soup.

It tasted like dirt.

I spat it out, poured it down the drain. Liquids, I thought, liquids would do the trick! I grabbed a Pepsi from the fridge, cracked it, put it to my lips. It tasted like muddy lake water. This time I really did gag.

My body became cold. I retreated back to the couch, nestling myself under a mountain of blankets. The dark felt good. It cradled me, rocked me gently, back and forth, back and forth, lulling and soothing. My skin was still freezing cold, my bones complete icicles.

* * *

Again I was roused from my sleep, this time by an incessant banging on my door. The voice behind it was muffled, yet I could tell it was Amy. I moved closer to the door, pressing myself against it.

"Matt! Matt! What's going on, honey? Matt! Matt!"

"I'm sick." The words drifted out of my mouth slowly, my voice quiet and strained. I was weak.

"Can I come in and see you? Do you need anything?"

"No, no. It's contagious, alright? Just, just don't come in, ok? I'll call you later."

I leaned forward, my forehead pressed up against the door. I could almost feel her body heat emanating through the wooden slab that separated us. I could hear her heart beating, its finely tuned thump thump thumps reverberating in my ears just like the pounding bass at the club. It was so loud I couldn't stand it. I could feel her breathing. Soft, shallow breaths. Crying, perhaps? Could be.

"Listen, just go, ok? I gotta figure out what's going on with me."

"Matt, can't I-"

"I said I'll call you, alright?!" I did not mean to seem so angry. I could only imagine how she felt.

I pounded my fist against the door, losing patience. I waited a good fifteen minutes before stepping away from it. I couldn't keep standing like this. The couch seemed more appealing than ever. I wavered over to it, yet this time, thought it would be a good idea to flip on the television. I put on the only black and white movie that I could find, as it seemed to be easier on my eyes. Soon, looking around my apartment, I realized that I no longer even needed the lights. My eyes had adjusted, somehow. As I continued to watch, I found that I had tuned in way too late to the movie. The plot was already in full-swing. I had no idea what was going on.

I flipped the channel up, looking for something else, when my door flew off of its hinges, spiraling into my apartment before smashing into my kitchen counter, shards of wood and metal exploding into the living room and beyond.

I spun around, leaping off of my couch in shock.

Sean stormed in, panting. His head turned around, wildly searching around in the darkness.

"Matt? What the hell is going on man! You didn't hear me knocking?!"

I moved towards the light coming from the hallway, shaking. He saw me, stepping back slightly. Suddenly, he turned and flipped on the lights. I cringed, shielding my face. Sean stood there, bewildered, studying me. He cocked his head to the side, squinting.

"Dude, what is going *on* with you?"

"Not feeling good, that's all."

"I've been calling and knocking on your door for that past two days, man!" He stepped closer, examining my face. "Holy shit, look how pale you are!"

"Am I?" I looked down at my hands.

They were white as paper.

I couldn't see the blue veins running underneath.

My skin had become porcelain.

Sean looked over to my homemade comforter-curtains. "Jesus man, let some sun in here! It's beautiful out!"

He moved towards the window, his hand reaching for the blankets.

"No!" I screamed, leaping out in front of him. I grabbed him by the shoulders. I would've pushed him back if I'd had the strength.

I looked up at him menacingly. "What are you even doing here? Why'd you kick my god damned door in you moron!?"

"I told you, I've been trying to get in here for the past two days! I need your can opener!" He reached into his pocket, producing a can of olives. I looked at them with disgust, turning away.

"Yeah, fine. You know where it is."

"Hey." He paused, looking at the damage. "Sorry about the door. I'll replace it tomorrow."

"Gee, thanks."

Asshole.

He proceeded to muscle his way around the olives, twisting and turning as he wrestled to get it open.

"Son of a bitch!" He dropped the can opener, blood running over his hand.

I shook my head. "I don't have any band aids here."

"I'll catch you later."

He left, scurrying across the hall, his bloody hand wrapped up in his t-shirt. I remained in the kitchen. I kept the lights to survey the disaster area. I swept up the splinters and picked up what was

left of my door, resting it against the wall. The dust buster, which had lain dormant in my closet since I had moved in, was finally put to good use. Soon, it looked as if nothing had happened, save the fact that the only entrance to my apartment was now a gaping hole in the wall.

Through all of my cleaning, I failed to notice the small puddle of blood that had gathered on the counter top, forming a pool around the forgotten olives.

"I never knew what life was until it ran out in a red gush over my lips, my hands!"

-Anne Rice, Interview with the Vampire

What I did next is something that, to this day, causes me much guilt and despair.

As I had mentioned before, the hunger was persistent. My stomach turned, trying to eat itself. I stood, legs uneasy, and began to sway, gently, side to side. My eyes, though wide, observed nothing in particular. They stared absently as I concentrated on little nothings. They turned, gazing at the countertop. They followed the small, maroon specks dotting the hardwood floor like a trail of candy.

They closed.

When they opened, their attention turned back to the source of my immediate interest. The can of olives sat on the table, a ring of blood beginning to form around its base. My nostrils flared up.

A…a what?

An enticing scent?

No, a delicious one!

What, oh, what was that wonderful smell wafting through the air?

My feet were in motion, following the sweet smell. I took a few steps forward, leaning over the counter, staring down at the can. Bringing my nose down, I sniffed the small puddle, which was beginning to congeal on the white marble.

My mind was somewhere else. I bent my head down, closer and closer to it, to the delicious smelling red liquid.

Had the real Matt Parker been there, his shouts of protests would have been heard. ***"What do you think you're doing?"*** He'd yell. ***"Do not do this! You are not an animal!"*** But, for that split second, the real Matt Parker, the rational Matt Parker, was nowhere to be found.

With great hesitation, my tongue slid out, lightly brushing the cool surface of the countertop. It moved, ever so slightly, to the olive can. Like a magnet, it was pulled towards the red. It liked the red.

Just a dab.

Just a dab.

Tell yourself its ok, Matt. It's normal. Normal to want to taste another's blood.

I don't know how long I stood there, leaning over, sopping up the blood. The taste was beyond description. I had never experienced a delicacy such as this. The best chefs in the world would be baffled at its magnificence. I could feel it run smoothly down the back of my throat, warm and comforting, refreshing and replenishing. I felt it as it seeped into the depths of my soul.

Filling me.

Consoling me.

Making…making me…***whole.***

I laughed with glee, my hands outstretched like Moses on Mount Sinai, praising Yahweh. I was elated! I screamed out until my voice went hoarse. I could feel the blood pumping, viciously pumping back into my veins, from the chest to the toes, invigorating me! I looked at my arms, the muscles gaining their firmness, and down at my legs, which carried the weight of my body with ease.

All systems go, ready for launch!

But the celebration had not lasted long before the shocking realization of what I had just done. Sure, as a young boy I would sometimes suck on my finger if it had been bleeding, and no, I didn't

think it tasted all that gross. But this was different. This blood had not been my own. It had been the blood of another, shed in my household, dripping onto the unclean, dust ridden floor.

And the taste, oh my God, the taste!

How could it be so intoxicating? More so than wine, than whiskey! My body felt amazing. From a mental state, I was only disturbed. I paced around. The clock read 9:15.

Night time.

Safety.

Figuring now as good a time as any to stretch my legs, I decided to go for a walk, leaving my open apartment.

* * *

Thankfully, the streets were vibrant, full of activity and life. I needed that. I needed some outside stimulation to work out the sores and stress. The street on which my building was located was in a very fashionable side of town. Where once it was a cut up neighborhood of Eastern European immigrants, it was now gentrified into the new, hip, downtown spot. Outdoor cafés, bookstores, and shops lined the sidewalks. I walked down the street, looking over at

the record shop that was situated directly across from my apartment. Every now and then I'd go in and check it out, because they had a good stock of rare albums. Plus, I really liked the staff, especially this one girl who worked there who I simply referred to as Gothic Girl.

She was your typical Hot Topic customer: blonde and black streaked hair, black shirt, black skirt, black everything. She wore dark purple lipstick what nearly doubled the size of her mouth, black eye shadow smeared around her lashes. She looked as if she was prepared at any moment to act as a stand-in in a horror flick.

But she was really good looking, and it seemed that she would look good no matter what she wore, no matter what clique she fit into. I often pictured her in different roles: as a doctor, a business executive, a waitress, a hippie, and came to a conclusion that each one would look good in its own right. She just happened to be into darker stuff, and that by itself was strangely appealing.

I badly wanted to go in, to pretend to snoop around to get a better look at her, but I had no money and didn't want to risk going in there and finding something that I actually wanted. So I decided to save myself from temptation and continued down the block. I

really did feel amazing. I felt so amazing, in fact, that I decided to take a little jog, something that I would never dream of doing in any other circumstance. I trotted around the neighborhood, using up my newfound energy.

But, alas, I am an avid video-gamer, a lover of made-for-TV movies, a native of the recliner, and found that my energy, with no matter how much stimulation, was in short supply. I passed the record store again, peering into the windows to spot Gothic Girl, who, for many a night, served as a mental image during my times with Amy.

I returned back home, and noticed that I had a couple more messages.

Amy and Steve. Again. I decided that Steve and the guys from Bluejean Explosion! could wait. Plus I knew that Amy was just checking up on me, so I decided to delete both.

As the night wore on, I tried to get myself to sleep. I tossed and turned in my bed, sweating furiously, my sheets clinging to my sticky body. I groaned in frustration, pulling the pillow over my

head. I swallowed some more painkillers, but their drowsing effect failed to kick in.

I did not feel the need to rest until dawn.

* * *

"Buuuudddddyyyyyy…"

I sat up with a jolt. Sean laughed, standing over me. I tried to kick him in the ribs but missed, flopping off of the bed.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Just seeing what's up."

"I'm sleeping, that's what's up."

He looked at his watch. "Its eight o'clock at night! What the fuck have you been doing lately? You an insomniac now?"

"No. Nothing like that." I rubbed my eyes. "I don't know. I just haven't really been feeling that great."

He grinned. "Really? Sick, huh? Why were you running around the block like an idiot last night?"

Damn. Caught out. "Temporary recovery I guess."

He nodded, walking around the room. I watched as he scratched at his bandaged hand. I couldn't look away. He saw me.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing."

"Well c'mon, man, let's go get some pizza or something."

I didn't want to tell him that my body found all food disgusting, yet I also didn't want to alienate myself from my best friend, so I sucked it up and agreed.

* * *

We chose our usual corner booth in the pizza place. Sean ordered to larges, and two large sodas. I slouched down in my seat, stirring the ice cubes around with my straw. Sean chewed like a cow, staring at me.

"You really are pale, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Got a fever?"

"Nope. Don't think so." He leaned forward, pressing the back of his gigantic hand against my forehead, nodding in agreement.

He continued to stare, getting a better look at me.

"What's going on with your eyes? They're all sunken in. Your cheeks, too. You look starved. C'mon, eat something!"

He grabbed two enormous slabs, sliding them towards me. I picked at it nervously, watching the grease as it absorbed into the thin paper plate.

Sean continued to eat voraciously, becoming impatient at the fact that I wasn't joining in.

"You gotta eat one of these days, man."

Trying not to disappoint, I picked up a piece, ushering it into my mouth. I bit down.

"Shit!"

I grabbed my mouth, feeling my tongue. I don't think I've ever bit it so hard in my life. I could see blood on my fingers.

"Oh, shit, dude! Here!" Sean grabbed a handful of napkins, handing them over to me. I pressed them against my tongue, holding them there. It kept bleeding.

My tongue was swollen. "I'll be right back."

I went to the bathroom, looking at myself in the stained mirror. I really did look sick. Sean was correct. My eyes were, in fact, sunken in, dark circles beginning to form underneath. My jaw line had become more pronounced as well. My face was thinning. I hadn't eaten in a few days, and it really showed. I looked like a refugee from those TV ads, the ones that begged for pennies a day to sponsor some kid in Ethiopia.

I opened my mouth, inspecting it with prodding fingers. I moved them over my tongue. I could feel something sharp. I cut the tip of my finger. What the hell?

I stretched my lips, examining my teeth.

"Jesus Christ!"

My canines were double in length. It looked as if someone had filed them down. The ends came out to fine points, sharp as a razorblade. I nearly cut myself again trying to wiggle them around.

Now, being sick would explain the pale skin, the abnormal sleeping habits, and the lack of energy. Yet no illness could explain this. I fell back onto the toilet, sitting there, craning my neck so I

could still watch myself in the mirror. I glanced at the vulgar graffiti spewed along the stalls as I contemplated my new set of chompers.

What was I going to say? How would I explain this to Sean? Sorry bro, but we need to leave. Why? Oh, it's no big deal, really. I just have gigantic fangs growing out of my mouth.

I walked out of the bathroom, pulling my hood over my head to block out the suspicious stares of the other patrons. When I got back to the booth, Sean had already wolfed his way through both pizzas.

I sat down.

He burped.

"Well, I guess we're done." He looked over at me. "You weren't hungry still, were you?"

"No, let's get out of here."

We left, going back to Sean's place for a quick game of Halo. I did awful. He killed me a dozen times in a row, laughing like a triumphant Neanderthal.

"Damn, Matt, you got sloppy!"

I looked at the screen absent mindedly, the controller limp in my hands. My mind was elsewhere, going over the events of the past few days. It was clear that things were happening, things that were beyond my understanding or control. I realized that the first step to identify this, like any other disease, was to get a good understanding of it. As far as I knew, my symptoms were not documented as side-affects for any illness in the medical community. But I had to seek help. Outside help. My mind raced, trying to figure out who could help me.

After the game, I thanked Sean for the pizza and left, thoughts still going back and forth. I decided to see what movies were on the black and white channel. It must have been a horror scene, because it showed a beautiful young girl walking down a creepy looking path in the woods. She wore a white dress, and had incredibly innocent features. I could see the fear painted plainly on her face. She looked over her shoulder, to the dark woods on either side. Her pace quickened. She wrung her hands together, licking her lips nervously. Soon, she began to run, faster and faster down the trail. Suddenly, a figure leaped out of the woods, grabbing her. I was shocked as I

watched the events unfold. The attacker grabbed her, pulling her closer and closer until, finally, it bit into her neck. The image faded out. An announcer's voice came on:

"Dracula, Prince of Darkness, will return after these messages."

I sat up, my body rigid. I turned it off. Standing up, I made my way over to the window. Pulling back the comforter, I gazed down at the record shop, and realized where I could find my help.

“You're a creature of the night. My own brother, a goddam shit-sucking vampire. You wait 'til Mom finds out!”

-Lost Boys

As I entered the record store, I could see Gothic Girl in the back room doing inventory. I walked slowly around the racks, looking over the alphabetized band titles sticking out on white plastic cards.

Nothing good.

I decided to hang around and pretend to shop until she emerged from the back. Finally, she did, just as I was pretending to examine the ipod accessories. She moved behind the counter, slumping over the register, holding her head in her hands. Must've been a long day, what with listening to the Cure and the Stone Roses for eight straight hours.

She looked up and smiled at me as I approached the counter.

"Hey, Matt!"

I smiled. "Hey, what's new?" You see, I called her Gothic Girl because, like an idiot, I have the bad habit of forgetting her real name the minute she tells me. So, to save myself the embarrassment, I dodged any situation that would lead to name calling.

"Wow. You look like garbage." Her face remained emotionless. Only the tone in her voice revealed her moods. I kind

of liked that. With her, simple conversation turned into a guessing game.

"Yeah, I know," I looked around to see if anyone else was eavesdropping, "that's kind of what I'm here about."

She looked at me quizzically, peering out from those dark eyes. The first emotional glance she has ever given. This is indeed a milestone. I could see that she had changed her blue contact lenses for bright purple ones. It was difficult not to stare at them.

I was unsure of how to approach the situation. The topic was ridiculous, I know. "I…I wanted ask you about something. You see, my body's been going through these…changes. At first, I thought I was just sick, but, now, I don't know."

"What's going on?"

"I'm…changing. Changing into something."

She laughed slightly, pushing her hair back away from her eyes. "I really don't see what you're getting at."

I leaned forward, opening my mouth to expose the fangs. She laughed again.

"Oh, awesome! You sharpened them? My friend Sam used to do that, thought it was the coolest thing ever."

I shook my head.

"I didn't do this to myself. It just happened."

She tensed up, looking around, over her shoulder. She leaned in, her voice barely a whisper. "Are you messing with me?"

"I wish."

She was beaming. "Really? Are you serious? This is amazing!" She looked at her watch, and then grabbed my arm. "Listen, I get out in a half hour. Wait for me, alright? I got something I want to show you."

* * *

We walked back to her apartment in the dark, the short trip filled with stunted conversation and awkward silences.

I finally stopped, turning to her. "Look, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think I'm turning into something. I've been doing things. Strange things. My body isn't working right anymore. I can

barley eat. I'm up all night and sleep all day. I feel like I've had a spell cast on me and I just think that maybe-"

"I can help you?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think I can help you?"

I looked at her, embarrassed. "Well, I dunno. The way you dress, the way you act. The music you're into. I just figured that you would…I don't know…like this sort of stuff."

That came out all wrong. The last thing I wanted to do was to stereotype. But I had come across a lot of her type in the past, and they were always into this dark, mystical, satanic shit. Lucky for me, she was no different.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

She grabbed my arm, leading me up the stairs of her building.

Her apartment was far different from what I expected. Here, I thought that I would be entering a dark sanctuary with strange posters and dark furniture.

Candles and pentagrams.

Black cats and cauldrons.

On the contrary, her place was illuminated with whites, bright yellows and baby blues. Very clean. Sleek. Modern.

She told me to have a seat on the couch while she grabbed me a beer. I told her I wasn't thirsty. She returned from the kitchen, a glass of wine in her hand.

"So, Matt, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Look at me. I got fangs sticking out of my mouth."

"So what do you want me to do?"

I looked down at my feet, a little embarrassed. "I was wondering if…you know what's happening to me."

She smiled, purple eyes sparkling. She walked to the bookcase, struggling to pull out a massive old book the size of a dictionary. She slammed it down of the coffee table, dust flying up in a cloud. I looked up, puzzled.

"What's this?"

"It's something that will tell us exactly what's happening to you."

I sat there and explained all of my symptoms. She checked in the glossary, finally flipping to a page in the middle of the book. She poked her finger at the title page, urging me to come closer. I bent down, staring at the bolded word.

Vampire.

See also:

Vampyr (Romania)

Vampirism

Transylvania (history)

And so it was. That was all the clarification that I needed. Deep down, I knew that this is what I had become, from the moment I looked at Sean's blood with need and affection.

"I knew it," I whispered to Gothic Girl. She folded her arms, pacing.

"So, why ***did*** you come here?

That was a good question. I already knew what I was. Why was I reaching out to this semi-stranger? The answer came quickly, though I felt a little embarrassed.

"Look, I know that we've never talked for more than ten minutes before tonight, but, I need a friend right now. My girlfriend would never understand. My friends wouldn't, either. I'll probably lose my job. I just need someone to talk to, someone to help."

She sat on the floor, blowing a strand of hair from her face. "Well, I think it's clear that there's one thing we ***have*** to do. We need to get you situated, so you do this vampire thing ***right***."

I didn't quite know what she meant. "Do it ***right***?"

"Sure. Listen, you still want to keep your apartment, right? You still need to pay your bills. So let's do this: quit your job, and I'll start looking for places who are hiring for night-positions. That way you'll blend in, and people will understand why you'd be sleeping all day. See?"

"Yeah, but what happens when I need to start…you know…biting people." This was the part that I had feared the most. I am no killer.

Gothic Girl pointed to the old dusty book in front of her, reciting from the faded text. "Although it has yet to be proven, there is some speculation within the supernatural community that a

vampire need not feed on only human blood, but the blood of an animal as well. However, the benefits of doing so have yet to be recorded."

I contemplated this, and, though it sounded totally disgusting, it was still better than attacking an innocent human. Gothic girl wrote something down on a piece of notebook paper and handed it to me. A phone number.

"That's Anthony. He's a butcher, works down the block. You should go see him tomorrow. I'll call him ahead of time to let him know that you're coming."

I folded the paper up, slipping it into my pocket. A meal ticket. Gothic Girl sighed and got off of the couch, standing in front of me. Her tone became slightly more serious.

"And Matt, I hate having to say this, but I think you're going to have to end things with Amy." She paused. "It's for her own protection, really."

I nodded my agreements. God knows that I wanted to stay with her, but who couldn't say that, in the heat of a small argument, my vampiric instincts wouldn't take over? My frustration and rage

could lead to her demise, crumpled up in a pale heap on the floor. I looked back up at Gothic Girl, who only smiled down at me. I liked it. I was amazed at how lightly she was taking this whole situation.

We went back and forth, I asked questions and she recited her answers from the book. I had to know the necessities. I had to know which things were true and which were false.

If I was really a vampire, I was going to be a damn good one.

"What about sleep? Coffins or no?"

"It says here that vampires don't need to sleep in coffins. In the old days, it seems that coffins simply offered more protection from hunters, since the vampires were able to lock them from the inside."

I considered this for a moment, and remembered that my protection may not be up to par, as I didn't even have a front door.

"Well, what about things that could kill me. Crucifixes, wooden stakes, silver?"

"Nope, all of those are harmless. Well, except the stake, but only if it goes through your head, not your heart. So I think you'll be ok. Most people would probably go right for the chest."

I laughed. "Through the head, huh?"

"Yup. Just like Dawn of the Dead."

Later, after much planning, we decided to call it a night. Or rather, I called it a night, since it was nearing dawn. I thanked Gothic Girl, who told me for the second time that her name was Lauren.

* * *

The next evening, after receiving several threatening messages from Steve, I decided to finally leave him a message of his own. I told him that I'd been offered another job, and decided to take it. I gave him my best, and told him that I hoped Bluejean Explosion! would bring him a lot of success. No doubt it would. That stuff was loaded with more addictive additives than heroin. After ending things with the company, I decided to look through the classifieds to find a job that would accommodate my nocturnal schedule. I found nothing. All I saw were ads for drivers and waiters, and both would most likely have me working during the day. At least I still had that last paycheck coming in soon.

I looked out the window, watching the black clouds glide over the moon. It was enticing. Beautiful. For the first time, I realized that I was a vampire. It's a funny thing to say, "I'm a vampire".

Go ahead; say it out loud to yourself, right now. **I'M. A. VAMPIRE**.

A little ridiculous, no?

I can't tell you how many times I repeated those words over and over, yet liking the way it sounded more each time.

I stepped outside, pulling my coat tight around my chest. The chill was nice. For the first time, I walked down the street a new man. Suddenly, I felt that the life of a vampire could very well be a glamorous one. I mean, just think about it. I'm twenty six years old, and from this day forward, I won't age a day, a second, even.

I would live forever!

It was wonderful, just thinking of all of the things I always dreamed of doing, and now, with unlimited time, I would finally be able to do them. I could travel to the far parts of the world, see things unfold in a way that no human ever has. I would experience the passing of time. Babies would be born, and I would be there. I

would watch them go to school. I would watch them graduate. I would watch them get jobs and go on to do great things. I would watch them change the world, pay their dues, gain their fame, make their stake in history. I would be there when they grew old and died. I would walk up to their graves and toss a rose on the casket, and I would remember. I would turn around and watch it all unfold again. Perhaps even I would contribute.

I thought of the new technologies that would be invented hundreds of years from now, the wars that would be fought. I even began to think of the new bands that would emerge in the coming millennia, the new movies and movie stars, the new cars and restaurants and, oh, my God, video games! I would be witness to it all! The sands of time would fall from the hourglass, things would wither and die, things would be born and explode into the universe, and I would remain, tranquil and wise with eternal life!

I could not be stopped.

Stick to the shadows.

Hide from the light.

No one would ever discover me.

No one would ever know what I was until it was too late.

I shouted my rejoice into the night sky. I was intoxicated. My eyes fell back upon the earth, upon the city. I saw the world with new eyes. A hunter's eyes. Girls no longer looked cute, or hot, or even gorgeous. They looked delicious. Beautiful, shapely food products. Apples, if you will, ripe for the picking. When they passed me, my nose no longer picked up the scent of their shampoo, their perfume, their hand lotions.

No, it twitched, nostrils flaring with the aroma of warm blood pumping right underneath their flawless skin. I had never noticed how easy it was to spot their blue veins pulsating under their hands, their necks. Before long, the fun of it all began to dwindle, and I was filled with only temptation.

I was hungry.

Hungry for my first bite.

But I restrained myself, holding the number of the butcher, Anthony, as that hollow feeling gnawed at the back of my belly. The voice in the back of my head screamed at me. Taunting me. Urging me to bite, to suck, to feed. I felt sick.

I quickly found a payphone, punching in the numbers as I read them from the wrinkled paper. The voice at the other end was harsh, demanding.

"Yeah, what?"

"Is this Anthony?"

A pause. "The name's Tony, pal."

"Sorry, Tony. My name's Matt." I was about to go on and explain myself, when I was cut off. Tony's voice was tense, nervous, as if he were wearing a wire.

"Yeah, Matt, sure. Shannon told me about you. Come down to the shop in twenty and we'll talk."

I would have thanked him, but the line went dead.

Walking to the butcher's, I was feeling a little apprehensive. I had just fifteen minutes ago realized that I was a mighty creature, superior to any living being. Yet, here I was, going to collect scraps for my meal. It bothered me a little bit, until I realized that I needed to be humane about this. As far as I was concerned, people were not for eating. Not just yet.

* * *

"Here you go."

I stood behind the counter while Tony slammed down two plastic containers filled with blood. To me, it looked like soup to go. I examined the food, turning the containers around in my hands. The blood was dark and thick, and made little movement when I shook the plastic.

"What kind is it?" I asked.

He wiped his hands on a dirty apron. "The one on the left is pig. The one on the right is lamb. I'll let you bring these two home to decide which you like better, then we can get a little arrangement going."

It was strange that he was acting so calm through all of this. I looked up at him questioningly.

"So, you have other…customers, like me?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. I get about three or four of you guys a week. That's how I know which kind you guys like. I gave cow's blood to a couple of your type, but they said it was pretty tasteless. Most like the lamb though, got a real nice flavor."

"Oh, I see."

"And listen, whenever you need more, just come around back. I'm not usually open at night, but just in case. You know how it is."

I thanked him, and he told me that the two half gallons should last me the next two days or so if I paced myself. I asked him for a bag, since I didn't want to look like a freak walking home.

When I got back, I placed the two containers in the refrigerator. I threw out everything else. The food in there was of no more use to me. I poured a little bit of the pig's blood into a plastic Star Wars cup and drank it down. Not bad. I did the same with the lamb. It was definitely better. Almost as good as Sean's.

I finished the cup and was about to watch some television when I saw Amy standing in the doorway.

My heart dropped to my knees. My pale face grew paler. I hadn't been expecting this. To be honest, I had forgotten her in the past few days. The only thing that had jogged my memory was the conversation with Gothic Girl. I stood dumfounded, watching my girlfriend's outline in the hallway lights. We both stood motionless,

just staring at each other. I slowly brought a shaking hand up to my mouth, wiping the red from my lips. Luckily, she spoke first.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Did I have to actually answer that? I stumbled for words, but my tongue was heavy, my brain lost for words.

She stepped closer. "Did you hear me, Matt?"

"I've been…busy."

"Couldn't call?"

"No, that's the thing. I just found out-" I stopped and caught myself before I allowed the following words to slip out. I was an idiot. Was I really going to tell her what's been happening to me?

She looked at me, her face blank. I could sense no emotion. Her love for me had fled in that moment. I already knew that. I gazed down at the floor, too ashamed to look at her. I had avoided contacting her for this very reason: I could not tell her what I was, and yet, I still wanted to be with her. I knew that she would never understand. She would think that I was lying and try to make me prove it. And I knew that, when I proved that I was indeed a bloodsucker, that would be the end between us. I guess I thought

that by not talking to her, I would make the relationship last. Drag it out a little while longer. But it was futile. The moment had come, and I could almost read her thoughts before she opened her mouth to speak them out loud.

"Please, ***please*** save your excuses. We're over. I just came to grab some of my clothes." She stormed past me in a fury of perfume and anger. I could here her rummaging around the closet, slamming doors with increasing frustration. When she emerged carrying the pile of clothes, I tried to slow her down, tried to reason with her, but she wouldn't have it.

"Amy, I-"

"Just shut up, Matt. Please. Do NOT call me." A tear ran down her cheek. Her voice was hushed, almost a whisper, yet I could sense the rage building up underneath. "I don't want to hear your goddamned voice."

She took her last steps out of my apartment, and at that moment, in those last fifteen seconds, Amy, the Amy who I loved, the Amy who I had one day planned to marry, was out of my life in a storm.

I sat calmly in my recliner and watched the open doorway, and knew that I would have an eternity to ponder my failure.

"As loud as hell
a ringing bell

Behind my smile
it shakes my teeth

And all the while
as vampires feed

I bleed"

- Pixies

The next night I felt incredibly alone. I roamed the streets, looking for something, anything to reach out to. I thought about calling Gothic Girl, Lauren, but didn't want to burden her with my troubles. I passed the small movie theatre on the corner of my street, and, figuring I had nothing better to do, decided to go in.

I approached the main counter, looking up at the screen to see what was playing. Nothing was, but I bought a ticket to some B movie anyway. I noticed a **NOW HIRING** sign hanging on the wall. I walked up to the manager, pointing to the sign.

"Excuse me, but are you still looking for help?"

He was a greasy little man, in a suit two sizes too small for his boxy frame. He looked up from the register, smiling, wiping his oily mustache.

"Why, yes, we are."

"What positions are you looking for?"

He rubbed his hands together, thinking. "Well, what would be an ideal schedule for you?"

"Days, mostly. My nights need to be free."

He grinned. "That's perfect! We're looking for an usher for the matinee shift!" He leaned closer to me, "Easy gig. Nine bucks an hour!"

I was sold. Who needed to make eighty grand a year, especially on a vampiric schedule?

"Do you need me to fill something out?"

He looked at me, sizing me up and down. "Oh, what the hell. You look like a trustworthy young man, just come in tomorrow and we'll get you started. One o'clock."

I was blown away. This was the perfect job. One o'clock was good. I would be able to sleep in. I went into the movie, but left early. The over-acting was killing me.

I was ecstatic, and wanted to talk to someone. I called Sean to see if he wanted to play some video games. No answer. So I went home, and fell asleep unusually fast, dreaming of coffins and stakes and silver bullets and Christ on the Cross.

* * *

As I marched down the aisle with my flashlight in hand, I realized that this was a great opportunity, a great job for someone in my condition. Think about it: All I did was sit in a dark theatre all day, watching movie after movie, occasionally going out into the lobby to chat with the rest of the employees over soda and nachos.

Being an usher was the best job I could ask for. I could work during the day in complete darkness. I could blend in perfectly, and would make all the money I needed to spend at night. Plus, working the matinee shift proved a lot less stressful, as I did not have to deal with large crowds or incredibly loud teenagers falling all over each other.

No, the only theatre-goers I had to deal with were little elderly couples, shuffling to take in a movie before 4 o'clock dinner. They were easy to manage, and never asked questions. Plus, with their poor eye-sight, they tended to sit in the front rows, leaving me to lounge out in the back. I could basically do whatever I wanted. Some days I brought a Game Boy, other days I read a book by flashlight. No one bothered me. It was heaven.

I had been working the day shift for a week when I received my first paycheck. It was scraps compared to my old job, but it was enough for the necessities. I decided that I needed to form a strict budget. I made a list and put it on the fridge.

THINGS I WILL NEED.

- Sun tan lotion. Lots of it. The strongest on the market.
- A nail file (for the teeth)
- Sunglasses. Huge ones. Aviators.
- Thermal shirts and pants (I'm always cold, now)
- Money for Tony (food)

Now I was all set. I purchased the items and brought them home. The first night, I filed my fangs down to their usual size. I rounded them off, scraping vigorously back and forth until I could smell burning teeth. Something I haven't smelt since my days in the dentist's chair as he scraped away at my cavities.

By the end I had cut my gums pretty badly, though thanks to my condition I was unable to bleed for very long. For that I was thankful. I had realized that while I now loved *and* needed blood,

the sight of my own still sent tremors down my spine. Made me sick, even. I was happy that that would no longer be a problem.

I made myself a little snack, taking the blood I had recently purchased from Tony and sticking it in the microwave. I found that when it comes to blood, warm is better. I can feel it in my stomach, coursing through my cracked, dry veins. Better than lying in a hot tub. More relaxing than a nice mug of hot-chocolate.

I sipped slowly, letting the red drip over my bottom lip, onto my chin. Drops began to fall on my collar as I tilted the cup back, drinking deeply.

"Matt?"

I spun around, startled. The cup fell out of my hands, smashing on the hardwood floor. I cringed. Sean stood in the doorway, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He stared at me, eyes moving from me, to the blood on the floor, to me, and back again. I could hear his heart beating. I hear his lungs heaving as he struggles to find his breath. Sweat began to gather on his upper lip.

He pointed to the floor, to my mouth. His hands shook, as did voice.

"Matt….is…is that….."

"Blood, Sean." I sighed.

I gave up.

No use hiding it, especially from him. It was a risk, I know that. But it was a gamble I was willing to take. After all, if I didn't have Sean, who the hell could I trust?

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I stepped closer to him, putting up my hands to show him that I wasn't going to hurt him. He stumbled backwards, feeling behind himself for the wall while his eyes remained fixed upon me. They were opened wide, as if he were looking at a monster. He tripped over a piece of the broken door, falling backwards. I leaped forward with unexpected speed and caught him. He screamed as he saw me coming towards him. I did too.

I never knew I could move so fast. I was a blur. I caught him by both arms, pulling him up. My strength seemed to increase as well, seeing as how Sean is nearing 220 pounds. I lifted him up with ease, letting him find his balance on his own. For a moment neither of us moved. We just stood there, breathing heavily, casting nervous

glances at one another. Suddenly Sean swung at me, his fist connecting with my jaw. Blue dots clouded my vision as I tumbled backwards, biting my tongue. I snapped back up angrily.

What the fuck was that?

Somewhere in the back of my brain, I could hear an explosion.

With primal instincts, I grabbed Sean's leg and tossed him as hard as I possibly could. He flew across the hall, crashing through his door, nearly taking it off of the hinges. I could hear him cry out as he sailed through the air. Once the door broke in, there was only silence.

Did I kill him? Because I'll tell you right now, that's something I did not want to do. If anything, I was trying to keep Sean as a friend. But now, as I rubbed my probably-broken jaw and he lay sprawled in debris, I could see that reconciliation might be difficult. I doubted that Sean would accept my new condition.

He began to lift himself up off the ground. I approached him, trying to explain what was going on when he took another swing at me.

Again, the punch connected. This time I put him in a choke hold, slamming him onto the ground. He cried out, using all of his strength to get out of my grip. I punched him.

Hard.

Suddenly he snapped out of it. He remained motionless on the floor, looking up at me. I grabbed him by his shirt and pulled his face close to mine.

"LOOK AT ME!" I screamed. He turned away. I punched him again. And again. My knuckles cracked on contact. Again he cried out, spitting up blood all over himself.

"FUCKING LOOK AT ME, SEAN!"

I pulled my lips back, exposing the poorly groomed fangs underneath.

"Do you see these?!"

As he nodded I could see tears beginning to well up, his eyes wide with fear.

I let go. "Good."

When I released my grip on his shirt, he collapsed back onto the ground. I paced around his apartment, unsure of what to do

next. I had just beaten my best friend to a pulp. I had just revealed that I was a vampire. This is not the way I had pictured telling him.

This behavior wasn't getting us anywhere. I walked over to where he was crumpled on the floor. He looked up at me, shaking violently, shielding his face with an outstretched arm.

I offered my hand, and after a while he took it. Hoisting him up, I let him fall back onto the couch. He slumped down, gently rubbing the back of his head. I could see a small stream of blood trickling down his cheek.

We both looked down at the floor, not saying anything for a long time. The silence was unbearable. What the hell could I even say? I had to say something. Some words, any words, needed to be spoken. How could I fix this one? What I came up with was by no means profound.

"Drink?"

Sean looked up at me, bewildered. Finally he understood what I had meant and nodded. I poured some scotch. He accepted it, hands shaking. The ice cubes rattled in the glass like chattering teeth.

I watched him as he took a sip, wincing slightly as the alcohol poured down his throat. How I wish I could have that feeling again. I wanted things to burn inside me. Anything to get rid of the cold. The pain was what let you know you were alive. He took another swig, a much bigger one this time, before setting the glass down and looking over to my direction.

"Are those…real?"

I nodded. I didn't have the strength to explain. Sean played enough video games, watched enough movies. I knew that he would have an easier time figuring it out that most. I sat down next to him and grabbed the bottle. He walked to the kitchen and got two more glasses. Together we sat in the demolished living room, drinking in silence. I swallowed the booze, even if it went down with less of a kick than water. I let Sean digest my "coming out of the coffin", letting him take in the fact that he was sitting next to a real life Count Chocula. Finally he spoke.

"So when did this happen?"

"Bout a week ago."

Sean rubbed his chin, thinking. Suddenly he laughed, bursting to life.

"Oh, shit!" he began laughing, "no wonder, dude!"

I looked at him, confused. He punched me in the arm. "I should've realized what was going on with you. Sleeping all day, not doing shit. Christ, I thought you were just on a bender or something!"

I went back to the beginning and gave him the blow by blow. I started with the club, talking about the bite.

"Wait. Stop."

I paused. "Why?"

"Did you see who it was?"

"No, I couldn't see a thing. Please, Sean. Don't try to pretend you're a detective, ok? This isn't CSI"

He grabbed me. "You don't remember anything at all? Nothing?"

It came to me in a blur, a murky vision. "Glow sticks," I said.

Sean took another drink of his scotch. "Glow sticks?"

I told him of my last clear memory of the night of the attack. I couldn't see who bit me. I could only see the glow sticks, hanging limply from the biter's wrists as they ran away. And…maybe something else.

Long hair?

Blonde hair?

My mind raced, putting together pieces of a broken puzzle even as I was recounting the events to Sean. The club. The music. The crowds. What had happened, what…?

"The girl!" I screamed suddenly.

Sean jumped up, dropping his glass on the floor. "Jesus, man! Chill out!"

"Sorry." I bent forward, rubbing my temples, trying to remember. She blocked my way. I remember. The girl on ecstasy. She wouldn't leave me alone. The only person that I could remember who was wearing…glow sticks. They hung from her neck, from her arms and wrists and ankles. Her blonde hair. I saw it all.

"Son of a bitch!" I yelled as Sean cleaned up the broken glass. He looked up at me.

"What?"

My head began to spin, my recollection straining against the pictures swirling through my skull.

"This girl…there was this girl…she stopped me in the club."

"And?"

"The glow sticks. She, she was the only…only one wearing them."

"The only one wearing glow sticks? Weirdo."

I turned, my fists clenched. "It was her."

I began to pace, my empty heart pounding, swirling around dust. Had I any fluids in my body, my face would have been flushed by now.

"The chick? You think *she's* the one who did this to you?"

I nodded, my teeth gritted in rage.

Sean stood up slowly, dusting himself off.

"Well, you know what we need to do, don't you?"

"No, what?"

He laughed, shaking his head. His voice became calm, relaxed.

"We need to find that bloodsucking *bitch* and pound a stake right through her heart."

"**Sic Gorgiamus Allos Subjectatos Nunc.”**

”We gladly feast on those who would subdue us."

-Addams Family Credo

I told Sean about my semi-weekly visits to Tony the butcher. I told him of my meetings with Gothic Girl (sorry, Lauren), and my new job as a matinee usher. He took it all in, devising a plan. The next day he would meet me at work, then, after the sun went down, our detective skills would be put into action. A demented Hardy Boys mystery was brewing on the horizon.

Work was simple enough. I spent the majority of my afternoon making sure that no one's canes or pushers were blocking the aisle. I thought that an old man had died right in the middle of Lawrence of Arabia, but it turns out that he was just a deep sleeper. Must've been the dim lighting. At a quarter past six, Sean was waiting for me in the lobby. He leaned on the snack counter, trying to make small talk with the sixteen year old girl who worked the register. With some effort, I managed to pull him away.

"So, what's the deal with this Tony guy?" he asked as we made our way to the subway station.

"Apparently, he has a little deal worked out with the local…uh…" I looked around, just to see if anyone was listening in, "vampires."

He laughed. "So this guy's like, what, a blood dealer?"

I shrugged. "Guess so."

* * *

Tony's shop was busy. The line was going out the door, wrapping around to the other side of the building. I grabbed Sean and snuck around back. The usual pick up spot. I waited a couple of minutes before banging on the door. It swung open violently, hitting the brick wall. Tony's gigantic frame took up the doorway. He looked glad to see us.

"Back for more already, Parker? Damn. You know, you should really slow down. It's not good for a vampire to drink too much. Could become, like, I dunno, a reverse alcoholic or somethin'."

"No, I'm good for now. I just wanted to ask you some questions. I…I have a problem."

Tony frowned, and then looked over his shoulder. He leaned forward, his voice hushed. "Alright fellas, come on in. Go right back into the office. I gata take care of some business up front, I'll be back in a second."

He led us through the back of the shop, through the gigantic freezer. You know, the kind with the massive animal carcasses hanging from hooks? The freezers from Rocky and Goodfellas. I felt like taking a few swings at one of the slabs, but figured I'd probably end up making a mess. Tony's office was small and cramped. A tiny desk sat in a sea of paperwork, piles and piles of receipts and order forms and inventory slips. The floor was littered with napkins and old Burger King wrappers. It smelt like a high school gym locker room. We sat down on the two metal foldout chairs, sweating in the heat.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony came barging in, his apron once again splattered with blood. I licked my lips at the sight of the grizzly mess.

"Sorry, gentlemen. Been havin' a busy night."

"No worries."

He sat himself down at his desk, squeezing into the tiny wooden chair. "Now, what was it you guys wanted to talk about?"

I leaned forward, arms resting on my knees. "Tony, how many vampires come in here each week?"

He scratched his head, "'Bout six or seven."

"Male or females?"

"Both. Guys and chicks."

Sean interjected. "Tell us about the chicks."

Tony leaned back in his chair, and I worried that it would snap under the weight. He rubbed his massive stomach, as if thinking about a good meal. "Ahh. I got two vampire broads that come here every now and then. It seems to me that they hunt for a couple of nights, then come to get their fill here when they get bored. Only see 'em about three, maybe four times a month."

"They hunt?"

"Yeah. You know." He snapped his teeth shut. "Bite people. Suck 'em dry." He laughed. I cringed.

"Can you tell us a little more about them? Some specifics?"

"Well…one's a brunette. Name's Cindy. Sweet little thing. Can't be older than 18. Seems like a loner. Shy."

"And the other one?"

"Well, she never gave me her name. But let me tell you, if this chick wasn't a blood sucker, holy shit. The things I would do!"

Sean leaned in. "Hot, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Blonde?"

"Yeah…how'd you know?"

"Just a hunch."

Tony leaned in, his breath heavy. "Alright guys. Why don't you tell my why you're really here. I know it's not for a late night chat."

"I want to find whoever did this to me."

"Huh?"

I pulled down my collar, exposing the two scars on my neck.

"Oooohhhhh. You mean you wanna find the one who changed you. The biter."

"Exactly."

Sean spoke, his voice seeped in anger. "And we think it was the chick."

"Well boys, I wish I could help. If I were you, I'd check around town. Likes to dance, I bet. Has the body for it. Little club hopper. Go to the local hot spots. If you ask me, I'd say she's already out."

"Hunting?"

Tony pointed. "You got it."

I wrung my hands together, my stomach swirling with anticipation. The moment Tony said clubs, I knew. This was it. This was the one.

"Perfect."

We thanked Tony for his time and wished him a good night, but only before I grabbed two containers of blood. I would need a snack.

* * *

Finding her would not be hard. The hard part would be getting her alone. The hunter must now be the hunted, and the hunted must now be the hunter. I thought of a suitable method with which to kill her.

Guns?

Never handled one.

Fists?

She would be quick. My newfound agility would do me no good against a fellow vampire. How I wished to hunt a mortal. How easy it would be to subdue my prey. But, how in the hell would I be able to do ***this***?

As I pondered the inevitable murder, Sean and Gothic girl entered my apartment, slamming down her ancient book onto my blood stained counter. I could hear them talking. I could hear her pointing out all the facts, and I could hear Sean humming his understanding.

"Matt!"

Lauren called out to me, urging me out of the bedroom. Taking a glance in the mirror (yes, vampires ***can*** see themselves); I walked out into the kitchen, where they huddled around the book, drawing their plan of attack.

Sean folded his arms, a stupid grin forming on his face.

"Stake."

I rubbed my head, tired. "Excuse me?"

Lauren closed the book, turning to me with her hands on her hips. "He said stake. That's what you're going to use."

I was out of ideas and exhausted. "Fine. Sounds good. Let's go to the hardware store."

Sean laughed. "Hardware store? Bullshit." He walked over to my broken door, which I had yet to clean up. Mustering his strength, he managed to rip off a good shard.

Oak.

Solid.

He slammed it down on the counter, and proceeded to hack away with a knife until the wood glinted with a sharp point. Pressing his finger to the tip, I could see the blood drawn. Sean sucked his finger, nodding his approval.

"Yep. That bastard's sharp alright." He held the stake, showing Lauren. She merely nodded. He handed it to me, and I gripped the wooden weapon tightly, my knuckles aching under the pressure. I took swipes at the air, practicing my strikes. I could envision her laying there. I could envision he stake stabbing through her head, through her skull, through her brain, through the ground below her. I could see her eyes wide with fear. I could hear her

muffled screams. I could see her thrashing and fighting and losing and dying.

Now we were in business.

We drew up the plan. It was perfect. And since you, the reader, have followed along this far, I feel that it is only right for me to let you in on our little secret.

<u>Operation High Stakes</u>

Step One: Go into the club (obvious)

Step Two: Spend the rest of my paycheck on drinks, buy rounds for everyone.

Step Three: Hope to God that all the alcohol will attract the girl

Step Four: Have Sean talk to her, invite her back to his place

Step Five: When Sean has her alone, high, drunk, and totally unable to function, break in and TAKE HER OUT, guns blazing.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

…I now realize that this plan was poorly devised.

"The one thing vampire children have to be taught early on is,

don't run with wooden stakes."

- Jack Handy (Saturday Night Live)

As I have stated before, I absolutely detest clubs. My biggest fear would be Amy at the DJ booth, though luckily, this must have been her night off. Sean and I entered the club, he dressed in the finest button down shirt he could find, and I draped in a black hoodie and sunglasses. If this chick was here, I'd prefer to be incognito, although I doubted she remembered the faces of her victims. More likely, she only hunted while in a drug-induced stupor. Killing in the heat of passion.

We entered the smoky dance floor, some Daft Punk pounding through the walls. It was packed, even for a Tuesday night. Like snakes, we weaved in and out of the dancing masses, looking wildly for our target. In no time at all, we spotted her. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a flash of neon light. There she was, plain as day, in the middle of the floor. The glow sticks were draped all over her body, and she waved her arms around wildly like a fire-dancer. It really was beautiful. She really was stunning, though the fury in my heart somewhat over powered my sexual excitement. I nodded to Sean and gave him my wad of cash. He took it, gave me a serious look, and marched his way over to the bar.

I moved to the wall, taking a seat on the bench. My fists clenched up as I watched her from the corner, my eyes burning through the lenses. I gritted my teeth. The fangs cut deep into the gums, but I didn't care. The pain only brought pleasure. It only made me stronger. Faster. I smiled.

Listen, now.

Listen and watch.

Listen to the drums go bang bang bang.

I saw Sean approach her, a drink in each hand. He smiled, she smiled. He walked, but began to dance a little bit as he got closer. Steady, I thought. Don't spill the drinks. He got closer and closer. She moved in as well. This was the chemistry that would be essential to our operation. I wanted her to want him. I wanted her to think that he would be an easy meal. Just another big, dumb ox that she could manipulate and annihilate. Smile, baby. Let's see those beautiful teeth.

I could see their lips moving. Conversation. A little harmless flirtation. Perfect. C'mon, Sean, don't waste any time. He hands her the drink. She accepts. Keep going. Drink it down, drink it

down…there you go. Sean bends down, his lips pressed close to her ear. A soft whisper. She wants another. He moves to the bar, giving me a glance and nodding slightly as he does so. In no time he is back. She is dancing in place. Dance! Dance, you beautiful killer. You creature of the night. You're time is coming. Live it up. It will all end soon, baby. I promise.

They drank and danced for at least an hour, grabbing each other, moving as one. He held her waist, again whispering into her ear. She laughs. He pulls her in closer. A kiss. Damn, he was good. Sean should really get into acting.

Soon after, hands interlocked, they begin to exit. I get up from the table, following the tops of their heads as they pass through the sea of college kids.

Outside is cold, but a fresh release. I make sure to stay a good distance behind. I've watched enough police movies to know how to properly tail my suspects. I can hear them laugh as they walk along the street. She stumbles a little bit. He catches her before she trips over the curb. She has great legs. Deep down, I almost wish it was

me who was whisking her away to the bedroom. I move my hands to my belt, gripping the stake that I had cleverly tucked away.

He led her into the front door of the building. I ducked behind a phone booth, watching them stumble into the lobby. I prayed for Sean. I prayed that he would be able to hold it together until I arrived. I watched through the glass.

But suddenly, our entire plan went to shit. I could hear Sean screaming. I swore to myself as I sprinted to the front. She had him on the floor, struggling to hold him down. I looked to the floor. No blood. She growled in a rage as she fought to pin down his massive body. Sean was fighting back earnestly, holding her at bay. With one hand, he pushed back her head, her fangs exposed, inching and inching their way towards his jugular.

Enough was enough. This was it. I took a breath before plunging into the fray.

With great speed I withdrew the stake, gripping it with such force that I feared it might break. Sean screamed out to me. Don't worry, buddy, I hear you. With a malicious intensity, I grabbed a

fistful of that platinum blonde hair, tearing her head away from Sean's scrambling body.

She cried out in pain. I pulled even harder. I threw her onto her back, delivering a powerful kick to her stomach. That laid her out flat. No time to waste. Now was not the time to fuck around. Now was the time for payback. Now was the time for that glorious revenge. Fuck you! Fuck your kind! Fuck you for turning me into what I am!

"Fuck you!"

I plunged the stake deep into her head, a spurt of blood flowing forth like a geyser. I twisted it, driving it deeper and deeper into her writhing body. She gurgled and attempted to scream as the blood ran from her mouth, onto her hair, over her arms. I removed it, and then stabbed again. I don't remember how many times I stabbed and stabbed into her brain until she was nothing more than a mangled corpse on the floor. The blood sprayed onto my face. I licked it off, spitting it out on her body.

I stood up, legs shaking. I trembled with rage, and, soon after, joy. I had accomplished what I had set out to do. Slowly, I began to laugh to myself. I had defeated the enemy.

I looked over at Sean, who was leaning against the elevator door, rubbing his arm.

"You ok?"

He nodded, forehead drenched in sweat.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." He paused, looking back at the girl. "Is she dead?"

I looked back. The scene was grizzly. "Oh, yeah. She's dead."

Sean let out a sigh. I walked over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks man. I thought she had me. I didn't know…I didn't know if you..."

"Don't worry, Sean. I wouldn't leave you alone. I got your back."

I punched him in the arm. After realizing what I had done, I suggested that we make our way onto the elevator. Sean agreed. The police would be arriving soon, no doubt.

* * *

Back in the safety of my apartment, we were greeted by a worried Lauren, who hugged me with such force I feared I would suffocate.

"Oh my god!" She grabbed my face, as if to see if I was really there. "I'm so glad you two are safe!" She hugged me again, and this time I returned the embrace. Sean left, but came back a few minutes later with his trusty bottle of scotch. He poured three drinks. I slammed mine down, although I couldn't taste it. What the hell. It was a victory drink.

Lauren grabbed my hand. "So it's done?"

I refilled the glass. "Yeah. It's done."

Sean rubbed his head, his face painted in a look of disbelief. "Holy shit. I really thought I was a gonner, there. You know, they say that, when you're about to bite it, you're entire life flashes before your eyes. But I gotta tell you, I saw nothing. Absolutely nothing." He took a long sip. Christ, he was really shaken. I can't remember

the last time that Sean was truly afraid of something. For the longest time, I didn't believe it to be possible.

"The only thing that matters is that you two are safe. Now we can go on. Live normal lives without having to worry about that psychopath roaming the streets."

I could only laugh. Normal lives? Yeah, right. Maybe for those two. Unfortunately for me, I did not break any kind of curse. I was still trapped in this cold, lifeless body. There would be no "normal" for me. Ever. I simply shrugged off the idea. I had already come to terms with my condition. No use bitching about newfound powers. After all, I would live forever. Right?

"Well," said Sean, "that was, without a doubt, the strangest thing that I have ever been a part of."

"Better get used to it," I replied, "after all, you're stuck with your best friend here."

He laughed. "Yeah. My blood suckin' buddy!" He mussed my hair, which was still spackled with blood. I excused myself and hopped into the shower. As I watched the blood run down my hair, onto my legs and my feet, I grew hungry. My eyes were held in a

daze as it swirled around the drain. In a way, however, it was cleansing. It cleansed me of her blood, wiping away this terrible memory. I was now a killer. I had blood on my hands, and not just in the proverbial sense. There was no walking away from that. No matter.

I dried off, got dressed, and joined my friends. I relaxed, flowing into pleasant conversation as we drank the night away.

* * *

It was the next night that I found Tony dead on the floor of the butcher shop. The lifeless eyes stared up at the ceiling, bulging from their sockets, yellow and bloated. His fat throat had been split open, congealed red ooze forming around his body like a twisted chalk outline. The more I stared at the mangled body, the sorrier I felt. A little voice in the back of my head was fairly jealous, in fact, that I was not the one to do it. That little voice had been getting louder these past few days, more urgent in its tone, more commanding in its demeanor. Tony would have been a fine meal, his veins running

with the same blood of the animals he had so loved to slaughter for my kind. But that was neither here nor there. He had been a good friend, and a kind man.

But, after all, he wasn't exactly in the safest business. It was inevitable that something like this would happen.

God speed and goodnight, old buddy.

After assessing the gruesome scene, I knew that I needed to get out of there. I needed a walk.

Fresh air.

I wandered the streets, a warm breeze blowing down the sidewalks. Spring was on the way. The rains had stopped, which was a plus. I looked up. No smog. In this city, that was a once in a lifetime spectacle. I decided that I couldn't miss out on the opportunity to gaze at the stars. God knows that I hadn't taken the time to fully take them in. Not in a long, long time.

The best place for star gazing was actually located right across from my building, on the roof of Lauren's record store. Unzipping my jacket, I climbed up the rusted fire escape. These steps held many memories. Summer nights were full of rooftop parties, the only real

chance that I had ever really got to spend with my friends, sitting around the grill, looking out over the skyline, the skyscrapers our only source of light. It was then that I had been a workaholic, fretting over meetings, traveling, Steve's nagging, Steve's breath, his sweat and nervous demands. Man, I hated that guy. As I made my way up, I was overwhelmed with a sense of relief.

Work?

Never again.

I felt like a kid on summer vacation. Only now, my summers would be endless. They would stretch out over time, until I could no longer remember the date. Soon, over my long years, I wondered if I would even remember the years. I had no use to.

The roof was just as we had left it a mere six months ago. The lawn chairs, though scattered and torn from rain and wind, were still assorted over the makeshift hang-out. The grill was there as well, only rusted, its top cracked. I wondered if we would ever light it again. Surely Sean would be able to use his handwork, banging it around until the old thing blazed up once more. The taste of beer was lost on me, though, during the coming summer, I actually looked

forward to downing a few. It would be nice. Especially now. Everything was at peace.

Peace, for a vampire, is a hard commodity to obtain.

The stars were indeed beautiful. Where once the sky was congested with a palpable green fog, by the grace of God the winds had come to swipe the tainted substance away. I craned my neck up to the heavens. Star light. Star bright. From now on, the stars would only be my only source of light. The only suns so far away that they could no longer do me harm. No matter. In a way, it was better. As one sun killed me, here I could look at thousands. The night was truly beautiful. I have come to realize that it is the day that is horrid. In the night, there are no distractions. The bustling of the city somehow seems to die. The stress and screams disappear. The night covers us in a blanket of security. It is a beacon for the mortals, urging them to make their way back to their homes, to retreat to their beds and their families. For me, it is time to go out. As I sat on the ledge, I felt as if I were the only person in the entire world. The night gives us freedom. Freedom from suspicion and the drudgery of everyday life.

Shut down, stores.

Shut down, schools.

Shut down and allow me to roam.

To live.

For a time, I sat on the ledge and tried to remember the sun. I tried to remember how it shone through my window, how it used to rise and set. Try as I might, the image would not come. I have fallen, now. I have forgotten the look of the sun. Of the day. Of light. It has abandoned me, yet, I feel no remorse. I am not jealous of those who walk in the light. I am merely indifferent. It seems as though I will never share their lives, never again to run and hike and lay on the beach. It doesn't matter. The night is beautiful. This is vampire value number one. The stars are everything. While I am burnt on the beach at noon, here I can lay at midnight, washed over with a cool breeze, endless constellations swelling and swirling above me.

I snapped out of my philosophic day (sorry, night) dream. Glancing over to my building, I watched the lights turn on and off in the windows. My eyes followed the floors, from the bottom to the top. I could see the windows of my apartment, blocked out tight in

complete black. I looked over to Sean's place, and could vaguely make out the soft hum of a television, the only source of light.

Suddenly, going against my better judgment, I veered my gaze towards the one apartment I did not wish to see.

Amy's.

The lights were on. Dining room. Slowly, I watched as they dimmed down.

A figure?

Yes.

I saw her walk into the room, holding what could only be a bottle of wine, which, from experience, I know to be her remedy for any ailments. She moved slowly into the room, sitting at the table. Suddenly, another silloughette appeared from the other room, joining her.

What the hell?

I moved closer to the ledge, squinting to get a better look. Broad shoulders. Short hair. Tall. A guy.

Another fucking guy.

I took a seat, my legs weak. Hands shaking, I zipped up my sweatshirt as I took in the scene across the street. They sat for some time. She got up, yet returned shortly with two glasses. She poured. He accepted. For two hours I watched them drink, until, I could only assume they consumed the contents of the entire bottle. For a time they sat across from one another. Their lips moved.

What were they talking about, I wondered?

Was he coming on to her?

Or, perhaps, was it the other way around?

For another hour they talked, the conversation ceasing as, in horror, I watched him get up and move closer to her. A kiss. More talking. Another kiss, longer this time. Soon, their lips were locked for a half hour.

My blood, had I any, would have been boiling. My fangs hurt, and with good reason. I dug them deep into my gums, breath heavy. I knew what was coming. The rage was building. It was a feeling I was beginning to grow accustomed to. Vampires, I have learned, can be incredibly bi-polar. One moment at ease. The next moment in a

fury. Feelings are hard to contain. The rage continued, my fists again clenching as I watched my ex make out with this stranger.

Who could he be?

A co-worker?

Some random club rat?

Perhaps they met in a bar. Perhaps he watched her all night before mustering the courage to offer her a drink. I could see it all to clear, her accepting with a smile. Why wouldn't she? She didn't have a boyfriend. Could they have talked about it? How she had left me that night in the apartment? She did, I could tell. He must have consoled her, trying his best to come up with some cheesy line. I could see them leaving the bar, his hand interlocked in hers as she leads him up the steps.

Fucking bastard.

So I waited. They embraced.

Say goodnight, sweetheart.

Say goodnight, stranger.

He left the room. I watched for a while as she sat alone, the bottle still clutched in her hand.

* * *

This, dear readers, is what we call a "turning point" in the literary world. This is where the hero (a certain Matthew Parker), makes an enormous change in their life.

"But", you say, "you're a vampire!" Wouldn't that be enough?

No.

The turning point of my story, dear reader, is this…

That night, I began to hunt.

* * *

Climbing down the fire escape, I could only sense the taste of blood. Tony was dead, and I felt sorry. Tony's death had certainly damaged my entire operation. I could no longer get blood in a safe manner. This was a split second decision, one made of hunger, as I descended the stairs in search of the stranger. A small fog rolled in, concealing the streets in a light mist. This was good. With grace and caution, I crossed the street, my body pressed up against the wall of the building. Looking around the corner, I saw him leave. He was a big guy, I'll give him that, but, against me, muscles didn't mean shit. I waited a few moments before lightly trailing him, my footsteps soft

as whispers. I could hear him moving through the fog, whistling. The bastard must have been pretty pleased with himself. And why not? Amy was one in a million. Well, enjoy it while you can, buddy.

I moved faster now. I could feel the heat of his body. I could smell his blood, guiding me along. Faintly, I could hear his heart, which beat rapidly in his chest. Oh, he was excited. I could feel the blood pumping, through his wrists, in his ears.

Delicious.

The memory of drinking Sean's blood came back to me. How wonderful it was! Night after night, I had dreamt of tasting a human once again. Now my dreams would see fruition.

With incredible pace, I moved up behind him. The whistling grew louder. He strolled along, hands in his pockets. That was good. It left him defenseless. All the more better to grab you, my dear.

I stopped.

"Hey."

He turned around, surprised. "Hey…do I know you?"

"No, no. I was just wondering if you knew the time."

He glanced down, holding up his wrist, trying to examine his watch in the street light.

I growled, gathering my footing before the pounce.

He cried out, but his screams for help would go unanswered.

With brutal force, I grabbed his neck, squeezing it with such power that I feared his head might explode. With my other hand, I grabbed onto his shoulder, pulling him closer. He kicked at my stomach, trying to fight back, gurgling through his crushed windpipe.

"What…what the fuck…what…" but his last words would be cut short. I could see his eyes bulging, then, slowly, lids closing. I was sending him into a coma, my grip cutting off the oxygen to his brain. His face swelled, bursting into a dark purple.

Choke, you son of a bitch, choke!

"Yes!" I howled, before plunging my teeth into the side of his neck. I bit down.

Hard.

Really hard.

I heard his veins pop. Now the fun would begin. The warm blood spilt out, onto my lips, down my throat. Tastes beyond words. But I wasn't finished.

After draining him, I bit down even harder, and then tore away. His flesh ripped from his body, the blood now pouring out like a fountain, spraying my face and clothes. I licked it off my hands, my sleeve. My hands were still around his neck, or at least what was left of it. I released, and his body dropped to the ground, his head cracking on the pavement, skull shattered.

The way of the vampire is one of relentless hunger. My thirst was not yet quenched. And, though he lay broken and dead, I still knelt, consuming the blood. I drank and drank until I was certain that he was empty, his face going from purple to white as I consumed him from the inside out. I was ravenous. I was a murderer.

And I didn't care.

I yelled once more, howling into the stars. There was no going back. The son of a bitch was dead, and I was full.

After the slaughter, I looked up and down the street. No witnesses. I dragged him into the nearest alley, lifting up his gigantic

frame and tossing it into the dumpster. I slammed down the lid. That was that.

My body shook. I could feel it, now. The feeling of life coursing through my veins. This is what every vampire dreams of, the feeling after the kill. Better than heroin, better than cocaine. I was high, my face still spackled with dried blood. Yet soon, I felt sick.

What…what…what **HAVE I DONE?**

"A vampire lives in a constant state of desire and disgust. His nature often revolts him, but he doesn't have the will to deny his indulgences. There's the killing, but there's also the pleasure, the sensuality, the lust. The sheer ecstasy of it all."

-"Forever Knight - Stranger Than Fiction"

"Matt?"

"Matt?"

"Matt!"

The words were faint, floating by as if in a dream. My eyes were heavy, unable to open.

Someone was shaking me. I knew that much.

"Matt! Wake up!"

I jolted up, lashing out wildly with my arm. When I opened my eyes, I found myself on Lauren's couch. She stood in front of me, her arms raised in defense. What wild drive of insanity and confusion landed me here? I rubbed my eyes, my face.

"What…what the hell am I…?"

She sat down next to me, her hand on my shoulder.

"You don't remember?"

I shook my head.

"You stumbled in here last night. Covered in blood."

I looked down at my clothes, a sweater and a pair of jeans.

Clean.

"I threw yours away. Those are my ex-boyfriend's. I had to clean you up."

"…thanks."

She studied me, her face clouded in concern.

"Matt, what happened last night?"

I stood up, pacing.

"Matt?"

I didn't turn around. To be honest, I was embarrassed to look at her. The shame, the guilt of it all was too much. I couldn't look into her eyes.

I moved to the window, looking down over the street. As I stood, I could hear her walk up behind me, her hands on the back of my neck. Slowly, they moved to my shoulders, rubbing slightly. Her lips pressed close to my ear, her voice a somber mix of confusion and worry.

"Matt…please?"

With a deep sigh, I slowly confessed my sin.

"I hunted, Laur. I killed a man. I bit him and drank."

Time lapsed into an unbearable silence. I wanted her to say something.

Anything.

Would she be angry? Supportive? "Please!" I screamed inside my head. "Please say something!"

Yet the silence hung dead in the air. I could feel her breath on the back of my neck, warm and soothing. She slipped her hand down, clutching mine. I held on tight.

"It's okay," she whispered.

I felt, at that moment, that I could cry. I turned, facing her. She looked up at me with those eyes, those sad, purple eyes. I felt only love.

"I understand, Matt…this is what you are. We knew that one day, one day down the road, that this is what you would do. But it's what you ***have*** to do. You need to stay alive. For me. For Sean. It's okay."

We embraced.

I choked back the tears as she held me, her sweet perfume consuming me. Her love consuming me. No words. No words

could express the comfort I felt at that moment. She was it. The only person, the ONLY PERSON in the world who I could turn to, who could console me. Who understood.

"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you ***so much***."

She ran a hand through my hair, wiping back a tear as it streamed down my cheek.

"You'll be alright, Matt. You know that…"

As I walked back to my place, Lauren's words stuck in my head, repeating over and over like a broken record.

"For me. For Sean…..for Sean….for Sean."

* * *

"Matt?"

Sean walked into my apartment.

"Yeah…come in, man."

He walked over to the couch and took a seat, his back rigid. He looked pale. His head moved from side to side, eyes darting around as if something was about to attack him. I could see him shaking.

"Its okay, Sean. You can relax. I just wanted to talk to you."

His nervousness was understandable. After all, I had called him the night before, telling him what I had done. The conversation did not go as well as I thought it would, but lately, none of them had. Sean was not quite as understanding as Lauren. He seemed distant…afraid. I looked at him sitting there, and, for the first time in our entire friendship, could not read his feelings. Whether it was fear or disgust, I could not tell.

I was unsure of how to go about this. It was a disheartening prospect, the pushing away of a dear friend. But that is what I had to do. I needed to send him off. This much, I knew.

Slowly, I approached him, settling down on the couch beside him. He cringed. That sent shivers down my spine. Sean, my best friend, ***cringed*** at the mere fact that I was even close to him. I sighed, resting my chin on my hands.

"I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

As expected, he looked at me quizzically, before averting his eyes to the floor. I knew that my appearance was far from comforting. I could only imagine looking upon my pale face. Sean

was staring into the eyes of a ghost, whose eyes had turned a shade of lifeless grey and whose soul had withered and died a long time ago.

"I'm dangerous, Sean. I mean it. I wanted you here because…I wanted to warn you. I'm not the same. I've…I've changed over the past few days. And I don't like it."

"Matt, what are you talking about? You drink blood out of plastic cups, for Christ's sake!"

"Tony's dead."

His jaw dropped. I can't believe I hadn't told him yet. In the confusion of the past few nights, even I had almost forgotten.

"So it's not safe anymore. For you. Now I need to kill, Sean. I need to hunt. Humans."

With trembling arms, he began to lift himself up off of the couch. Before he could leave, however, I reached out, grabbing his arm. He recoiled. My hands were frozen. The shock set in, and I could see him begin to cry. Sean, the rugby player, the bar brawler, the loudmouth. The single touch of my dead hand had finally

allowed him to reach his breaking point. His eyes watered, as did mine. Yet still, I could not let him go. Not just yet.

"You need to be careful, Sean. I don't want to hurt you."

He ripped his arm away, face red with anger.

"What the fuck does this ***mean***, Matt? Are you going to bite my neck or aren't you? I don't know what I'm supposed to do!"

"I think it'd be best to change your locks."

"What? Are you kidding me?"

"I don't know what else to tell you. You need to protect yourself. What else can you do?"

"Matt…this is freaking me out."

"I know. But just listen to me. There's going to be some nights when I need to feed. And I won't be able to control myself. Jesus, the mere thought of breaking in to your place and-"

"And what? Listen. One of us needs to move. I can't see any other way out of this. I mean, shit! How am I supposed to live? How am I supposed to feel safe living across from you? Across from someone who, on a whim, could just swoop in and murder me?"

"This is why I had you come over." I paused.

"To tell me you're a killer, now? A rabid animal?"

"No. To tell you that I'm leaving."

Sean stood there for a long time, staring at me. The expression was hard to interpret. A mix of fear and…loss? Was he sad or angry?

When he at last spoke, his voice was soft. Defeated.

"Where are you gonna go?"

"I'm not sure. The one thing that I ***do*** know is I'm certainly not staying in this city anymore. I can't live here. Jesus. The thought of me attacking you, attacking ***anyone*** I know, kills me inside. I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I'd drive a stake into my own head. It's too much to bear. Too much on my conscience."

Sean nodded his understanding, wiping a tear from his eye.

I paced, my hands brushing the black curtains on the window.

"I can't tell you where I'm going."

"I know."

"You…you've been a good friend Sean. The best that anyone could ask for. I want you to know that. I've always wanted you to know that. And I don't want you to forget it, either."

I walked over to him, my arm on his shoulder. Shrugging off the shroud of fear, Sean pulled me in close, giving me the most powerful bear hug he had ever attempted. My back cracked, but I didn't care. One last embrace.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm so sorry."

And with that, I walked Sean to the door. He made his way across the hall, and, at that moment, I knew that I would never see him again. My best friend, and, in reality, my only friend. I don't know if any of you have had to part with someone close to your heart, to send them away for their own good. Let me tell you, it will eat you inside out.

Eat you alive.

He smiled at me, one last smile before, slowly, he entered his apartment, shutting the door softly behind him.

Goodbye, Sean.

We've had a good run.

* * *

I turned back to my own place, wondering just what I would be taking with me. And, as I glanced over my belongings, I also dwelled on the fact that, I had no idea where I was going. At this point, my life was open to just about every avenue the universe had to offer. Nothing was out of the question. Nothing was taboo. What would be my destination? The answer was simple, as it is for most all vampires. Anywhere. Anywhere in the world where there is a sun and a moon. Where there is light and dark. Where people roam. Shit.

The choices were endless.

The options, infinite.

I laughed to myself as I stood in my kitchen, realizing that I didn't need ***anything***.

Well, perhaps a change of clothes.

* * *

After the feelings of guilt and loss had finally been expelled from my conscience, I decided that, this being my last day in town, I might as well take one last walk. One last glance at the place I had

called home for more than a decade. The city that, over time, had not remained simply a string of buildings and strangers, but had grown as an extension of my own self. It was a living, breathing thing. God, how I would miss it.

It was 11, which gave me plenty of time for a stroll around the old block. Spring had finally set in, and a warm breeze, a small gift from the coming summer, swept over my body. I basked in its comforting wisps. I continued down the street, looking into the windows of the coffee shops, of the clothing stores. I glanced over to the record store, and, again thought of going in, but I knew that Lauren was off tonight.

For a while, I thought about calling her. I cannot lie. She had been on my mind for quite some time now. Even before the whole "vampire" escapade. How many nights did I hang around that place just to get a glance at her? I couldn't say, because I know, dear reader, that you already know.

What was it, this feeling?

Did I like her?

Did I love her?

Was I in like with her?

Or was it something more?

Something deeper?

Perhaps. I put the phone back in my pocket. It would have to wait, I guess. Maybe it would never happen at all. I was, after all, leaving. Though, a vampire with no specific agenda is a curious creature. Our minds work differently. We are unpredictable, susceptible to carnal instinct. I would go wherever the glorious spring wind would carry me. It would be my guide. My Shepard.

So long as it did not lead me into the light.

Yet, as my thoughts dawned on Gothic Girl, they also pulled away, dragging towards Amy. Sweet, sweet Amy. Who, by the way, had broken up with ***me***. At least she was smart enough to leave. Any more time together would have surely ruined us anyway. But, oh, dear Amy! Six months! For six months we had loved! We had shared so much! And, when speaking of people in their mid twenties, living in the city, six months is equivalent to about two years. (Its like dog years, except for people with serious commitment and emotional issues.) Her leaving was the worst thing that had ever

happened to me. Even after the bite, I still didn't really care. It was for her that my feelings stretched. It was for her that my heart ached, threatening to tear from my chest in its pursuit of impossible love.

And that's what it was. Impossible love. For I knew that it could never happen.

Lauren, Amy. Lauren, Amy. The scale was at an equal balance. It would not sway in either direction. My heart, my cold, lifeless heart had found itself in a stalemate. On one hand, I could not let go, and had absolutely no chance of winning girl number 2 (Amy), back. Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, girl number 1 (Lauren), was understanding of my problem. And compassionate. And she did not pass judgment. And she wasn't superficial.

Shit!

Who am I kidding?

The choice was pretty obvious, and, by now, you probably think I'm a dumb ass. In the literary world, however, I could very well be considered a classic case of a "hopeless romantic". Read up on your literature, people!

"Suppose someone came to you and said you can be attractive, brilliant, wealthy, fascinating, and you can live forever. Would you turn it down?"

---Meg Reed Thompson

As I continued my walk, my thoughts drifted further away from women and more towards possible living locations. I guessed that Europe would be the better choice. Everyone spoke English there. It is, after all, the birthplace of vampires. I could go to Romania, to Transylvania, the heart of my culture. The place that so inspired Bram Stoker as to compose an entire novel of my own kind. How glorious it would be, to traverse those dreary villages, under that pale moon. To walk amongst the forests and the mountains, in which lived the creatures of every child's nightmare. I would live in a castle, perhaps. Preferably abandoned, yet not so eroded as to be totally uninhabitable. How I wished to drink blood out of silver chalices, under a chandelier of candlelight, reading a good, long, long book. Sitting on a throne in a room of stone and cobweb and dust. I would clean it up, of course, but I would really like the initial atmosphere.

A nice conclusion.

A promising dream.

In about fifteen minutes, I was at least thirteen blocks away from my place. Glancing around, I spotted the Metro, a fine dining

area that had been the stage of I and Amy's first date. Walking up to the windows, I squinted as I tried to get a better look inside.

* * *

Just then, as I was window shopping the lovely cuisine, a hand came crashing down on my shoulder, nearly taking me down. Goddammit! Here I was, yet again, interrupted.

"Matt? Matt Parker, is that you?"

I slowly turned, though I did not want to.

Yep. There he was, bald head and all. Steve. My former boss. The former slave driver. The former crusher of Friday nights.

"You look like shit!" he exclaimed, extending his hand.

I took it weakly, giving it less than half a shake.

"Look, Matt…I know that things haven't been working out for you down at the office. I'm not sure what exactly the problem is, or what you're not liking about it, but, we can fix things. We'd really like to see you come back, Matt."

He was really giving it to me straightforward. Begging was not his forte. What, I wondered, had happened over at the infamous

Wexler & Wexler, that would have its CEO attempting to rehire me on a sidewalk at midnight?

Might as well check it out.

"Listen, I know that the messages I left were a little harsh, but-"

"Hey," I interjected, nodding my head towards the Metro, "want a drink?"

He glanced at his watch, then to the door, then to me, repeating the process three more times before finally agreeing.

As we sat, Steve stirred his drink with a straw, brooding. I wasn't going to ask him what went wrong. His "please respond to me" demeanor was actually quite annoying, and I was not willing to let his bait reel me in. The work bullshit could wait, it seemed, until he had finally worked up the courage to down his entire Jack Daniels, wiping his mouth with a dirty sleeve.

"Its those Japs again, Matt. Those FUCKING Japs!" He screamed, and, noticing the heads of the other patrons turning, quickly slumped into his seat, his voice hushed.

He leaned closer to me, once again distracting me with that shining, bright bald head of his. It really was blinding, at least in this light. Why couldn't this guy just get a rug?

"The deal fell off. Now, I'm not blaming you, but, your little run-out didn't help any. Those guys kept telling me something like, "you have no honor", or, "you lack the honor" or, oh, what the hell, I don't know. The bastards seemed to have lost confidence. Matt, I'll tell yea, I don't know how long I pleaded with them, how many times I bowed and all that nice little goofy shit. I really tried to please them. Really tried to reel 'em in, you know?"

I stared down at the menu, and then motioned for the waiter.

"We'll have the wine," I said, "red, preferably."

Steve looked at me incredulously. "Hey, Parker! You even listening to anything I'm telling you? Hey!"

Finally I looked up at him, glaring with eyes that felt as if they were on fire.

"Yeah, Steve, I'm all ears. Just ordering us a couple of drinks."

With that, the pudgy bumblefuck of a businessman settled down, cozying up in the excess of the leather chair. His weasily little nosed twitched as he looked at me, as he studied my face.

"Jesus, Parker, you don't look so good!"

His graining voice was beginning to wear on me, as was his method of conversation. Never nice, little sentences. Always shouts, with this one. The guy can't start one god damn question or story without one.

"Yes, I know," I responded, taking the time to stare directly into his beady little eyes, "I haven't been feeling well, lately."

"I see. Well you should really go to a doctor, my man, because you look like the living dead!"

Again, with the yelling. I was relieved when the wine arrived. I uncorked the bottle, pushing back the waiter whose job it was to do so (there's something about it that I just love), and poured a drink for Steve and I.

"Drink up," I said, hoisting my glass in the air. Steve did the same, as though we were celebrating. But what was it that we were

cheering to? Steve's notion that I would come back to work? No. We simply cheered to the deep, dark, dark nothingness.

I drank the wine, letting it pour down my throat, even though it still tasted like dirt. I masked my disgust, bringing up a napkin to wipe my lips.

Steve drank well. He drank so much, in fact, that our little party of two went through three more bottles. I sat back and waited. Waited for the opportune moment.

I was leaving tonight, and hungry. Who better to feast on, I thought, than my former boss? The coincidence was incredible. The chances…next to impossible. Yet here I was, sitting across from him, waiting and waiting and waiting.

I let Steve drink more, offering words of encouragement.

"Come on," I said, "it's a celebration."

He looked at me through glassy eyes and nodded in his stupor, the grin stretching ear to ear.

He stood up, finally, legs shaking beneath him, arms grabbing onto anything that would steady him, and made his announcement, the one that I had been waiting for all night.

"Okayyyy….Parrker! I'ma gonna go…I'ma gonna gousa bathroom!" I watched him stumble through the restaurant, knocking over chairs and, at some points, other people.

I waited a couple of moments, sipping the wine that tasted of dirt, before following.

The bathroom was big. That was a plus. There were eight stalls, and, looking underneath, I could tell that only two of them were occupied. Suddenly, a toilet flushed. I leaped into the nearest stall, peering through the cracks towards the sink. But the man who exited was not Steve.

Good.

I got out of the stall, walking slowly to the end. I could see his cheap little loafers as I peered under. He was whistling, as well.

Why was it, I thought, that both of my victims whistled before I killed them?

With force, I kicked in the stall door. I caught the bastard with his pants around his ankles, in the literal sense. He looked up, terrified, screaming.

But I made sure to silence him.

One fell swoop, and he was out. I grabbed his tie, swinging it around and around his neck until he could no longer breathe. I like doing that. Suffocating. Waiting until my victims are ready to burst. After all, it forces all of the blood straight to the jugular. Kind of like eating a Starburst, if you are looking for a comparison. All the juicy goodness in one single rush.

I bit.

He tasted of sweat and cheap hotels.

His blood, however, was amazing.

I was sure to be gentle this time. I did not want to leave a mess, or make one. That is, I simply wanted to leave the body sitting on the toilet seat, and not make a big, bloody spectacle of the whole bathroom. It took a great deal of determination to keep myself from going into a rage, as I had the last time. But, once again, the carnal instincts kicked in.

I ripped and tore.

Again.

I punched and beat.

Again.

The blood spattered on my shirt, on my face.

Again.

I left my victim mangled and unrecognizable.

Again.

I blacked out.

Again.

* * *

I found myself at Lauren's….

Again.

I do not know how this keeps happening. Its not that I'm objecting. I'm really not. I just find it hard to believe that I managed to crawl back sixteen blocks, only to collapse, yet again, in front of her door.

That night, however, I felt as if things were going to change.

"My last dinner cost me my lover."

--- "Innocent Blood"

Again, I awoke on Lauren's couch. My clothes were still splattered in blood. Quietly, I made my way into her shower. Peering into the bedroom, I saw that she was still sleeping. Quietly, I washed myself off, and, to my surprise, found that she had hung up a new set of clothes on the rack.

After changing, I tip-toed back to the living room. As I prepared to lay back down, I heard stir in the bedroom.

"Matt?"

Lauren stood in the doorway, a sheet draped over her body.

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

"No. Its okay."

She moved closer to me, and, to my surprise, ran her hand over the side of my face.

"You did it again, didn't you…"

I nodded, my face somber.

With that, she got up, moving back to the bedroom to change. As she put some clothes on, I began to pace around the room. How could I tell her?

When she came back in, I decided to just blurt it out.

"I'm leaving."

She held her hands up to her mouth, gasping slightly. She ran over to me, clutching my arms.

"Where? Where are you going?"

I shrugged. "Away. That's all. I can't stay here anymore. I can't run the risk of hurting you. Because…because…"

She looked up at me with those purple doe eyes, the sadness swelling up.

"Because why?"

Slowly, I held her arms, caressing her shoulders. I brought my mouth close to her ear, my voice quiet, full of nerves and fear.

"Because I…love you."

And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen.

We stood there for a long while, gazing into each other's eyes. I didn't know what to do. As before, I began to feel embarrassed. By now, I was used to female rejection, although I had never felt this way about someone. Not in a long time. Not even in Amy's case.

This kind of love was something different. It was a whole new entity unto itself. The feelings rushing through my body were beyond description, my love for her beyond words. How badly I wanted to tell her. How badly I wanted to explain just how much she meant to me. What words could express that, in all the world, she was the one person who mattered the most. Well, perhaps I could have just said that, but my shyness was a strong preventative. It was unnerving, to open up your heart to another. To put it all on the line. It is, without a doubt, the most difficult thing that someone can do. And it is something that I seldom work up the courage to attempt.

The silence continued. I looked into her eyes, deep into her eyes, so much so as I could see into her soul, into her entire being. And, through it all, I had the sense that she was doing the same. If only she could read my mind. Then she would know. Then this pause would not be necessary. I was throwing myself at her, yet, with each passing moment, I slowly began to regret opening up my mouth at all.

Suddenly, she sprang forward, her lips pressing against mine. It was bliss. We held each other tight, her soft, sweet lips enveloping me. She tasted amazing.

It was not long before, with much stumbling, we moved towards her bed.

Hands caressed.

Lips smacked in heated passion.

Clothes dropped to the floor.

Soon, I had her under the sheets, which had tangled up over our heads. I stopped, pulling away slightly to get a better look at her. Her beauty, her perfect figure all of it made me want to break down. I came in slowly, kissing her cheek, moving down to her lips and finally…down to the neck. My lips brushed against it, hovering slightly just above her skin.

What was I doing?

I didn't want to bite her, honest.

But for some reason, I seemed to be attracted to that spot and that spot alone. And, after a while, I knew why. I wanted her. I wanted her…forever.

"Matt," she whispered, her fingernails digging into my back.

"Matt," she whispered again, her voice sprinkled with an innocent hint of urgency.

I looked up at her.

"I want you to do it."

Slowly, I stopped, bringing my face closer to hers.

"But I…I don't know if…"

"No," she said, hands running through my hair.

"You won't hurt me. Not if it's out of love."

Again, I leaned in, kissing her lips softly.

"Are you sure?"

She writhed under the covers, thrashing her body in ecstasy.

"Yes! Please, Matt. Let's go together! I want to come! I want to come with you! I…I love you…"

Again, she cupped my chin in her hands, and, though I was going back for the lips, she aimed my mouth in the direction of her neck, slightly urging me down.

I was afraid. What if I did it wrong? I had never tried to change someone. I only knew how to kill. I only knew how to

mangle and murder. My talents were amateur at best. I had not yet come to grasp my full vampiric potential.

"Just bite slowly," she pleaded, her breath heavy. I could hear her heart beating rapidly in her chest as she pulled me in closer, closer, closer.

"Drink only a little…enough to make me sleep…"

I did as I was told. It was too much not to. With one hand, I slowly felt the side of her neck. Gently, I pushed a strand of hair behind her ear before I made my plunge.

I bit softly. I did not want to hurt her. She let out a soft moan, but not out of pain. It was out of comfort. Relief. Once I broke the skin, ever so gently, I began to drink.

I could feel her legs as they wrapped around my torso, squeezing slightly.

Pace yourself, Matt.

Her fingernails moved up and down my spine, scratching a little harder with each stroke.

Do not get out of control.

Slowly, I drank. Slowly, I stopped, and released, easing her softly back down onto the bed as she went limp. I put my sleeve up to her neck in order to stop the bleeding, although it wasn't so bad.

Inside, I was nervous. I prayed that it would work.

I stood over the bed, watching her, pale white, a smile spread across her face as she soundly slept.

I wondered if she was dreaming of me.

"The walls of my castle are cracked, the shadows are many. But come in. Feel yourself at home."

---Carlos Villarias in the Spanish film version of "Dracula"

Epilouge

It has been two years since Lauren and I made our voyage to Europe. I must admit, I love it here. The culture, the people, the nightlife. Every thing here seems to be more…accessible. A more ancient setting, a more ancient culture.

I finally found my way to Transylvania. It is perfect. I could not have imagined it any other way. The people are friendly. They do not bother me much. It seems that my kind are not so uncommon in these parts. The villages are nice and neat, picket fences and quiet farms. I love the rolling hills, the sheep grazing in the meadows.

The night here is beautiful. From the mountains, you can see the entire galaxy.

There is no smog, here.

No smog to block your dreams of the heavens.

About a week ago, my ultimate dream finally came true. The castle is small, I'll admit that, but it is perfect. Nestled deep into the side of a mountain, its spires glow in the night sky. As I predicted, it is a little run down. The roof is only half eroded, but still livable. After asking a local farmer, he told me that it had been abandoned for more than one hundred years.

So far, Lauren and I have been cleaning it up, and, believe it or not, it has become quite the home. I spend my nights roaming the halls, enjoying the sound of my footsteps on the stone floors. I light the torches in the dining hall as we sit down for our meals (The locals are easy pickings). I sit on the great throne in the common room. Our bed is drenched in cobwebs, though Lauren insists that we get rid of them. We will, soon, but not just yet. I am beginning to like this feeling, this feeling of being a vampire. I am used to it now.

I am the king of the castle, and Lauren is my queen.

I will not pretend as though I do not miss home.

I do.

Many a night, roaming the corridors of Château Parker, have my thoughts dwelled on Sean.

I hope that he is doing well.

I am sure that he understands.

One of these days, I'll have to call somebody to install a phone in this place so I can check on him. I have forgotten the sound of his voice. Maybe I'll have them set up a television, too. And some video games. Do they have cable in Europe?

But it doesn't matter.

I have an eternity.

I have an eternity in which to do whatever I please.

No one will ever know that kind of satisfaction. I can't tell you, dear reader, how much this all means to me…but I'm sure that you can get a rough idea.

I will watch the sun set over these mountains for the rest of my life.

I will be at peace.

And Lauren, through the eternal stretch of time, will be right here beside me.

* * *

That night, a cool fall breeze swept over the plains of Romania. I sat perched on the mountainside, observing the towns spread out below me. From the road, I heard a car horn blaring loudly. Looking down, I saw a large truck, moving with incredible speed towards the city. I took a closer look, down, down to the sticker on its side.

BLUEJEAN EXPLOSION! THE DRINK THAT MAKES YOU MOVE!

Slowly, ever so slowly, a smile spread across my face.

So here we are,

Just me and you,

Nestled in a coffin built for two

Shut the door, now,

Shut it tight,

Goodnight

Goodnight

Goodnight

Goodnight

Selected Poems

STOP

You're a reaction

A deep breath
And I'm coming up for air
An ache
And I won't settle for
Less I know
Catch up
Lights are red and I can't take
You with me
Suffocating but I know
You're something that tightens
Binding me
Struggling and I can't fight back
Efforts useless something
Coming over me
Not how it once was
Different now
Things change and I
Don't want to
Evolving and turning
Slowing, now
Slowly
Slowly
Slowly stop
I can't come back and now
You're going away……

Morning After

Wake up
Sun is shining

Washing
Washing
Washing away
The night before
So many questions
So many doubts
Where will we find ourselves,
The night after next?
That answer will wait
Wait until morning
Wake up
Wake up
We'll answer this later
Too early for worries
Too early for questions
For now I'll just sleep
And you will wake up
And ask yourself how
How many more times
Will you need to wake up
Before you change

A Poem for Her

Poems will never get through to you
Not as long as I write them

Ideas slashed onto pages
My pen is a weapon I'll use to confuse you
I'll be poetic, don't worry
And I'll use big words

I'll use big words so you think that I love you
So you'll read my poems and show them to friends
And you'll laugh and you'll cry
At stupid little poems
And we'll be so happy
When you think that I love you

History

My history is mine
It cannot be taken
Cannot be copied
I am a product of oppression

In a camp of concentration
I am a single tear
Brought by the fear
Wrought of a Nazi death dealer
I am the Irishman's blood
Forced from his land
By an English man-at-arms
I am Easter, 1916
I am a child born from a gun
A bullet shot by a patriot
Who spilled his freedom crimson
Thick on the walls of oppression
Though freedom was rarely won
I am the product of a dream
Brought over an ocean
To the red white and blue,
Blue waters under a black sky
Behind this star spangled banner
Lay the memories of war
Of the pain that brought us here
I am a product of death
Of revolution
Shouting from the heavens
That refuses to be ignored
My dreams are filled of hunger strikes in the skylines of Belfast,
My nightmares scream in gas chambers
And ovens in Germany
Still haunting me to this day
To my dying day
This is me
All of me
It cannot be taken

Hari-Kari

Since the beginning, you have been there for me
My best friend
To console me in times of grief

To cover for my misdeeds
To rid me of misfortune
You have kept a close watch, a sentinel
Of my life
You have offered your help
You have instilled trust
When I built my dreams, you supplied
The brick and the mortar
When I lost all hope, you
Alone had instilled faith
And when I faced a quarrel
You stood beside me, offering the aide
Of your fists
You offered protection
Loyalty
Relentless
In silence you gave the gift
Of conversation.
Through storms and squalls your door
Hung open, beckoning shelter
I am undeserving
Undeserving of such good-doings
If ever
If ever you need help, friend,
Look no farther
For there is no need to search
For as always, I stand beside you
And if you face dishonor,
If
No longer you can bear
If you unsheathe your blade and plunge
Plunge into your stomach

Please, do not cry out

For I am with you
Worry not about finishing
For I will be behind you
My sword at the ready
To ease your pain
As not to bring disgrace to you
And your honor

For you are a friend

By my side eternal
And I will swing
I will swing that sword
Because you are a treasure
Of which I never deserved
Nor could have wildly wished for

KURT

Why did you leave us so?
The fame?
Attention, not wanted nor asked for?
Only to preserve your craft.

To send a message.
Memories, now
Are all you have left us
Memories compacted onto discs,
Which still play today
Memories printed onto shirts
And stickers
Memories of your voice
Of agony and angst
Yet through the pain comes understanding
To legions of your followers
Who mourn the loss
The loss of a voice
Soft and quiet
Yet necessary for a generation
The soft voice which will still echo
For generations to come
Once a whisper,
Now it screams
Why leave us so?
Why not a painless escape?
A gun is not fitting of you
The artist
Oh powerful grunge king
Inventor
A lover of meaning, of deep sentiment
Your hair left long
Sweaters slightly ripped
…writing poetry between shots of heroin.

That One Time

I was a good friend, a safe keeper of trust and of secrets
Except for that one time.
I was a good lover, kind and caring, thoughtful of my actions

Except for that one time.
I was a good guardian, watchful and protective
Except for that one time.
I was a team player, who valued others, never thinking of myself
Except for that one time.
I was creative, enjoying the process of honing my craft
Except for that one time.
I was happy. Content with life, and good friends and family
Except for that one time.
I was a peaceful person, never causing harm or doing wrong against anyone
Except for that one time.
Yet now as I look back on the things I've done,
On the person I once was,
And the person I've now become,
I'll take some time,
And choose my actions wisely,
So never again will I repeat the word "except"
And I will make it right this time.

DEAD

Is Art truly dead?
When did it happen?
No explosions or shots of a gun.
No wars fought or battles won.
No coverage on the evening news.

When did we loose it?
Did we loose our love?
Numbers, now.
Dollars and cents.
Are all we love.
No room for art.
When was the funeral?
I guess we missed it.
The obituary must have been small.
Too small to notice.
Did ANYONE go?
Yeats would have gone.
And I suppose Lowell, or
Wilde, perhaps.
Only they're gone as well.
And Art lies with them,
In tombs of stone
And dark.
And no one remembers.
Dollars and cents, now
No time to think.
No time to ponder,
Ponder the world.
The Arts have died
Too bad I missed it.
I would have uttered
Some words as it passed
I would have held its hand
As it lay in the final moments
I would have offered a comfort
A pat on the back,
Sweet nothings,
For always being there for us
But it's too late now.
Art has passed.
Vanished.
And it seems to me
A tragedy.
A tragedy that we missed it.
A tragedy that no one was aware
Or in, fact,
That nobody cared.
Dollars and cents, now
Are all that floats,

Floats through our brains,
Busy and preoccupied
Short attention spans
Short tempers
Short skirts
How short, now,
Our minds have shrunk.
We have forgotten
Our first gift.
A sin, as some consider.
It was Art
Always at our backs,
In the back of our minds,
Which now only hold images
Of dollars and cents
I am sorry, Art.
The world has forgotten you
But there are at least some who remember,

Their pencils stabbing the page.

Swimming at Night

There is excitement in this
An unusual act
Too quiet, it seems
The ocean at this time

Alone with the stars
The only source of light
The body slips through
Oily warmth
Still as glass
The splashing is loud
Louder than usual
As no sound to block
A hint of pleasure
In the solitude
A hint of panic
At the racing thoughts
Of what lies underneath
What dwells in the blackness
Miles down
Beneath peddling limbs

The City

Basking in the window
The night sky is filled
With sirens and laughter
With shouting and engines

Which roar in the night
Straight through my window
The calm summer breeze
It's picking up now
The curtain's blown pack
The volume increases
Of light and of life
My cigarette clasped
Lightly between fingers
Below me are street signs
Girls in high heels
Walking with purses
And laughing with glee
All speech is slurred
With volumes of wine
Or shots from the bar
Or whatever drink
They were buying that night
A truck drives by
Its mighty horn blaring
At skateboarding kids
With their middle fingers up
I sit on the balcony
Smoking in silence
It drifts to my face
Stinging my eyes
I reach for my shoes, now
And depart for the elevator
My mind in a tangle
What am I missing?

What I listened to: Pixies, Dispatch, Camera Obscura, Calamine

I'd like to thank everyone who has encouraged me all of these years. For everyone who has read some of my work, for anyone who had commented on my writing, for anyone who pushed me to finish, even when I had thought there was no end in sight. This is for you, all of you, because you give me the strength to do what I love.

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