

A HINT OF MEANING

Erin Brinkman Kinch, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Barbara Rodman, Major Professor and Program
Chair

John Tait, Committee Member

Thomas Preston, Committee Member

James Tanner, Chair of the Department of English

Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse
School of Graduate Studies

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A Hint of Meaning contains a scholarly preface, "Language, Experimentation, and Craft: Creating a Vivid, Continuous Fictional Dream," that discusses the ambiguities of language and how they relate to different aspects of the craft of writing. Six original short stories follow the preface. "Musical Chairs" explores a woman's conflicting emotions about her ex-husband. "Baby Steps" depicts the struggle of a woman against her father's alcoholism. "Go Home Happy" depicts a day in the life of a video store employee. "Bargain Basement Perfection" contrasts the reality of a relationship with an imagined, perfect relationship. "Did You Hear about Donald and Bitsy?" is an experimental piece that tells a story through gossip. "Glass Angels" explores a minister's relationship with his homosexual son and how that relates to the minister's faith.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PART I: PREFACE	
Language, Experimentation, and Craft: Creating a Vivid, Continuous Fictional Dream	2
Works Cited	30
PART II: STORIES	
Musical Chairs	32
Baby Steps	51
Go Home Happy	66
Bargain Basement Perfection	77
Did You Hear about Donald and Bitsy?	100
Glass Angels	110

PART I
PREFACE

Language, Experimentation, and Craft:
Creating a Vivid, Continuous Fictional Dream

Language has always been important to me. Words are the currency traded among people for insight into each other's lives, and words build on each other to become portals into places people cannot access alone. Until fall 1999, I had never thought of language as fallible. Misunderstandings are prevalent in communication, but I attributed them to the flawed people involved and the effort they put forth (or lack thereof)—not the words themselves. However, in my first graduate school class, Literary Criticism, the professor opened my eyes to the flaws inherent in language, which forever changed how I think about language, and, by extension, the craft of writing.

This professor described what he called the *lump theory of language*—a theory built on two basic premises. The first, as I understood it, is that objects in the real world cannot be defined by mere words. He brought up the word “tree.” The tree out in the world that humans try to describe is a *lump*. None of the words to describe the lump—tree, oak, leaves, branches, etc.—can fully portray its truth. William Youngren describes this divide between language and lumps in his essay on semantics:

The first step in reaching a scientific understanding of the way language works is to make the following distinction between two levels—or groups of levels—of reality: first there is the objective or unspeakable or nonverbal level (or levels), composed of objects, events and feelings as we experience them, and of the submicroscopic flux that lies behind these, inaccessible to ordinary sense experience but known to modern physics; then there is the verbal level (or levels), composed of the words and

statements we use to talk about the objective level(s). This distinction is sharp and absolute, since ‘an object or feeling, say, our toothache, is *not* verbal, is *not* words. Whatever we may say will not be the objective level, which remains fundamentally un-speakable. Thus, we can sit on the object called ‘a chair,’ but we cannot sit on the noise we made or the name we applied to that object....’” (254)

Jorge Luis Borges uses fiction to explore this distance between reality and language in “Funes the Memorious.” This story describes a man named Ireneo Funes with the dubious talent of remembering everything he has ever seen or experienced. Funes devotes his life to the contemplation and categorization of his memories.

He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of ideas of a general, Platonic sort. Not only was it difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol *dog* embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front). (65)

While Funes and his infinite categorization methods are an absurd example of language and its inherent ambiguities, they do illustrate the problem at hand. Ambiguities arise in language because of the distance between what the sounds we make stand for and the lumps out in the real world; and those who attempt to communicate with this flawed medium suffer through these ambiguities—even if they do not realize it.

The second facet of the lump theory, as I understood it, was the problem of perspective. To go back to my earlier example, if you say the word “tree,” each person who hears it will think of something different—one person might think of an oak tree

while another thinks of a pine. People bring with them their own interpretations of language, and every spoken word is colored by the unique worldview of the person who hears the word. The person describing the tree has a different perspective and a different interpretation than those listening; and, because of these different interpretations and views, true communication is much more difficult, or, perhaps, impossible.

Again, I had never thought of communication in this light before, but when I seriously considered the lump theory as a whole, I began to believe it was correct. The image I get in my mind from the word “tree” is different than that of others—I have asked people and compared the results. Additionally, when I closely examine other episodes of miscommunication in my life, a surprising number can be boiled down to different interpretations of a word or a phrase.

I am not a complete doomsayer on the subject of communication. A true writer would be hard-pressed to completely abandon the idea of communicating ideas to others. However, the lump theory brought me face-to-face with the true difficulties of communication and the inherent faults in the language that I have always loved. Before that class, I thought language was a tool that we used to bring ourselves closer to others—now I believe, in many cases, language merely delineates the small, lonely, personal worlds in which we all live. People view the world of lumps through the windows of their own souls and their own understanding and interpretation of what the words mean. Language allows people to attempt to share their worldviews, but the method is flawed. As one person tries to describe the view through his or her tiny window to another, the second person’s understanding is hindered because of the view from his or her own window.

Over time, I have come to believe that fiction is one of the best outlets for communication of these unique views. Writers have the time to work with the words on the page and paint a word picture of the view from their personal windows without the interruptions or changes of topic that occur in conversation to distract them from their goal for their finished product. Fiction includes an experimental aspect—the ability to “jazz around” with words, structure, form, etc. (Gardner 93)—which, if utilized well, gives writers the unique ability to create the best representation of their worldview that they can. Of course, those who eventually read the piece of writing bring their own views and interpretations into play; however, the piece of writing is static, unlike a conversation between two people that ebbs, flows, and meanders down side paths and tangents.

Ultimately, though, it is the submersion process involved with experiencing fiction that makes it one of the best outlets for true communication. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner discusses the idea of fiction as a dream—this dream is basically a complete submersion by the reader into the unique world created by the writer. Submersion into this dream is something I experience every time I read a story that completely captures me; thus, Gardner’s concept of the fictional dream, as follows, has become the basis for how I view and discuss the concept of experiencing fiction:

[...] fiction does its work by creating a dream in the reader’s mind. We may observe, first, that if the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must probably be vivid and continuous—*vivid* because if we are not quite clear about what it is that we’re dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is that they’re doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and judgments must be confused, dissipated, or blocked; and

continuous because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion. [...] one of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader's mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream. (31–32)

To completely experience a story is, as much as possible, to enter the world of the characters and experience things from their points of view. Therefore, if readers are willingly submerged in that fictional dream, they could be more open to communication and to seeing the world through the writer's window than, possibly, at any other time. This openness and the profound effect the two ideas that comprise the lump theory (ambiguities in language and how they relate to different people and their different perspectives on the world) had on me inspired me to try and share them in a story. This was the beginning of "Musical Chairs."

Instead of the lump being a tree or a toothache, my lump is a chair. People sit in many chairs during their lives, and yet chairs are almost invisible—more setting than symbol. However, an experience available in one chair is completely distinct from those to be had while in a different chair. Different experiences can also be had in the same chair at different times or in different places. For me, as a writer, the choice of chairs was the first step to choosing between two entirely different scenes and, eventually, entirely different lives for Allie, the main character in "Musical Chairs."

Because of the ambiguities and fallibility of language, I'm not sure my original idea is evident in the story. I began the story to explore the lump theory through fiction, and, as language is wont to do, the story changed into Allie's story—the story of a

woman dealing with her feelings about the fact that her ex-husband has cancer and the memories that evokes. The chairs are still there as symbols, but they are not the focal point. Beginning this story with the lump theory and chairs in mind gave the story a unique shape and a fluid feel. Dealing with such a difficult issue is an unpredictable process—emotions such as grief, anger, fear, and love move in and out of perspective as the person tries to process what has happened. I hope the structure I chose helps readers share a little of that fluidity when they submerge themselves in Allie’s story.

For readers to have a chance of completing the submersion process into any story, however, the fictional dream comprising the story must, as Gardner says, be vivid and continuous (31). The dream must be complete and enticing enough to make readers crave submersion into that world, and it must flow without interruptions that jar readers out of the dream and back into the real world—it is the craft of writing that allows writers to create such a fictional dream. Writers must take language, despite its flaws, and mold it into the best creation they can.

As a reader, I want the words on the page to fade away as the story plays like a movie or a dream in my mind’s eye, just as Gardner describes. I want to see characters move about in their worlds and to hear their voices. I want to feel their pain. I want to experience the author’s creation, not simply be told about it. When it comes to reading, I am very self-centered, and, I assume, I am not the only self-centered reader in the world. If an author is able to maintain a vivid and continuous fictional dream, odds are, I will get the complete submersion into the characters’ world that I crave from a reading experience.

Other writers, such as Anne Lamott, agree. In *Bird by Bird*, Lamott tells writers to note the words “vivid and continuous” for future reference because of their importance to the writing process. Lamott says:

Outside the classroom, you don't get to sit next to your readers and explain little things you left out, or fill in details that would have made the action more interesting or believable. The material has got to work on its own, and the dream must be vivid and continuous. Think of your nightly dreams, how smoothly one scene slides into another [...]. You mostly go along from scene to scene simply because it's all so immediate and compelling. You simply *have* to find out what happens next, and this is how you want your reader to feel. (57)

The more vivid authors can make their fictional dreams, the more interesting and compelling those dreams become to the reader. Vividness can absorb readers into the piece, while a lack thereof could inspire them to throw the story away in disgust.

Setting a vivid scene does not come naturally to me. Characters and their actions capture me, sometimes at the expense of the world around them. Classmates in writing workshops pointed this out to me in some of my earlier stories, which inspired me to hone my craft and try to create better, more vivid settings. If my characters stand out but act on a stage full of murky shadows, I failed to create a vivid fictional dream.

Lamott says writers should imagine themselves as the set designer of the movie version of their stories. As writers create rooms for their characters to live in, they will not only set a vivid scene, but also learn important details about their characters (74).

Just as everyone is a walking advertisement for who he or she is, so every room is a little showcase of its occupants' values and personalities. [...]

Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less Okay. (74)

In "Greenleaf," Flannery O'Connor gives telling details about two characters through a glimpse of a single room. Mrs. May ventures into the milking room on the Greenleaf boys' farm to find proof to support a lifetime of prejudice against her lazy hired man and his dirty, grasping family. Once inside, she finds gleaming milking machines and unsoiled white concrete (360). O'Connor uses these details to illustrate that Mrs. May is an unreliable narrator. If Mrs. May is wrong about the state of the milking room, perhaps she is wrong about all the other things she surmised about the Greenleaf family. Giving the two Greenleaf boys the gumption to keep a milking room clean makes them more than the two-dimensional characters that exist in Mrs. May's mind.

Rebecca, the main character in "Baby Steps," confronted by the fact that her father is an alcoholic, runs to her old bedroom for solace. She always thought she had a "normal" childhood. Finding out that her family was not perfect sets her off on a journey through the past to try and put together the pieces. The story culminates when Rebecca visits her childhood bedroom and looks at the layers of her past that remind her of the happy childhood called into question by evidence of dysfunction. The truth has been unspoken all her life, and now that it has been spoken, all Rebecca wants to do is run away. She looks at the shell of her room and finds no truth there. Only when she

examines objects (like family photographs) more closely, does she pick up on signals she should have seen all along—and when she sees them, in the end, Rebecca runs again.

Two rooms of significance appear in “Glass Angels.” Though the plot involves a son telling his father that he is gay, the main character is not the son, as one would expect in a “coming out” story. Instead, the main character is James, a Southern Baptist minister and father, and the two most important rooms in his life are the living room of his home and the sanctuary of his church. The living room represents his love for his family—everything in it reminds James of his son, and the memories culminate when he looks at his son’s senior portrait, the dominant piece of art on the wall. The sanctuary, on the other hand, represents his faith—inside the sanctuary, the power of God and the strength of faith fill his heart. In that old-fashioned room full of stained glass and wood, James feels secure, powerful, important, and, above all, justified in his beliefs. Contrasting the two most important rooms in his life juxtaposes his two strongest emotions—love for his son and faith in God. Because his faith does not allow James to sympathize with his son’s confession, I wanted to show the reader what exactly that bid for sympathy was up against and give context to a worldview that, to most, would seem heartless. In that sanctuary, James is not a father—he is a vessel of the Lord who must hold up his beliefs like the wooden beams hold up the arched ceiling and be as unwavering in his faith as the stained-glass angels are in their devotion.

Gardner takes a different position from Lamott on how setting can help create the fictional dream. Instead of rooms, Gardner discusses the importance of using details that appeal to all five senses, not just sight. The more senses a writer invokes, the deeper readers can submerge themselves into the fictional dream. According to Gardner, as

readers move among the characters they should “lean with [the characters] against the fictional walls, taste the fictional gazpacho, [and] smell the fictional hyacinths” (97).

Arguably, the visual details are the most important. For readers to see a movie in their head as they read, they need all the visual cues that that will allow them to imagine what they would see on a movie screen. Audible details are important, as well. Readers need to hear the dialog, the snap of twigs as the killer approaches from behind, and the bark of the neighborhood dog as they screen their mental movie. However, if the author is up for the challenge, that movie can be so much more than any traditional movie, which only gives its viewers sight and sound. Taste, smell, and touch are difficult for a movie to portray; therefore, the use of narration gives the author more power than a director. With narrative, the author can encourage readers to run their fingers over the cat’s fur, taste a lover’s kiss, or inhale the sweet scent of a cake baking right along with the characters; and when this is done well, it takes the fictional dream to a whole new level of vividness.

In “The Sweet Smell of Gasoline,” Timothy Walsh uses the sense of smell to draw the reader into his fictional world with the title. The adjective “sweet” does not normally come to mind with the thought of gasoline, which makes the title compelling. The discovery that the characters work at a gas station gives the title a new interpretation.

As Walsh paints his picture of the gas station, he continues to draw upon his readers’ sense of smell.

Eddie has worked here off and on for maybe fifteen years. Like me, he loves the smell of gasoline. You probably like it too even though you

might not realize it. Next time you pull into a station, take a whiff and see if you don't think it's about the best smell there is. (38)

This paragraph is interesting because the narrator addresses the reader directly, which can be risky. If the narrator said simply, "you *like* the smell of gasoline," it might jerk readers out of the fictional dream if they actually despise that smell. However, use of the word "probably" allows the narrator to draw the reader into the story with the familiar address and gives the story a loophole in case the reader actually hates that smell.

A few paragraphs later, Walsh uses aromas again for a more traditional effect: Some days the wind off the river is enough to make you want to stay inside, even though the air in the garage is pretty rancid. The whole place smells of piss and sweat and engine gunk. Outside, even when the wind is up, there's always a hint of gasoline in the air. There are pines along the cliffs above the river. The pine smell goes well with gasoline. (39)

There are many ways Walsh could have set this scene. The visual image of engine gunk pooling on the floor as sweaty men changed the oil for customers might have been compelling, or the green of the pines along the cliff could have been contrasted with the typical gray, concrete world of a filling station. Instead, he chose to illustrate all of the above through the sense of smell. With this choice, readers can imagine not only sweaty men in service station uniforms and oozing engine gunk, but also the smells those things involve, taking the setting and, thus, the fictional dream, to another level of reality.

The sense of touch is important to Allie in "Musical Chairs." Her discomfort in the hospital waiting room is symbolized by her discomfort in the chair with the cracked armrest. As she feels her way through her purse (e.g., fringe tickling her fingers) to find

change, the reader learns about the character through the items Allie has in her purse. When Allie goes into labor, she focuses that pain through her hands, holding onto the arms of her recliner so tightly that she feels pressure from the seams and imagines her pain turning her into a monster strong enough to destroy the cherished chair. As the sense of touch illuminates her world, more vivid elements of setting are created that place Allie in a more believable world the reader can experience through more than one sense.

Reliance on the sense of touch is representative of the rest of Allie's life, as well. Her close relationships are characterized by a free exchange of touching, be it hugs and kisses or the mere touch of fingers to someone else's cheek, while troubled relationships are signified by a lack thereof. For example, when her relationship with Brian has begun to disintegrate, their ability to touch each other physically is restrained by both physical and emotional distance. During Allie's pregnancy, the reader can see how their marriage is falling apart by the way Brian has made himself physically absent from the apartment, even though Allie could go into labor at any time. In contrast, a neighbor knows when help is needed and supplies the closeness Allie needs during labor by putting an arm around Allie's shoulders to help her to the car. At the end of the story, when Brian and Allie talk in the hospital, Allie starts to feel close to Brian again. Her first reaction is to touch him—an action she stifles before its completion, but which gives the reader hope that maybe some part of this tortured relationship could be repaired. Thus, sensory details create more than a better setting in the Gardner vein—they illuminate characters and their relationships, as well—all of which contribute to the vividness of the fictional dream.

Once writers have at least the beginnings of the vivid setting for their stories, as well as characters to work with, they can concern themselves with Gardner's other

component for the fictional dream—making it continuous. By continuous, Gardner means the fictional dream should not be interrupted. Instead, the dream should flow so that the reader is engulfed in the fictional world and wants nothing more than to get to the next event, and the next, and the next. Gardner says, “[...] if it’s the author’s carelessness that makes [the reader] read twice, he has a right to feel that the author has violated the fundamental contract in all fiction: that the writer will deal honestly and responsibly with the reader” (99). The dream loses that continuous experience if the reader has to stop and reread passages because of confusing grammar, syntax, or other errors. The more often a reader has to stop and reread portions of the text or ponder what the author meant by a confusing sentence, the more the reader will doubt that the author’s story is worth the reader’s precious time to read it, endangering any possible communication that could be had through the reader’s submersion into the story.

As a writer, I know that I need to do my best to avoid these pitfalls in my own stories. “Bargain Basement Perfection” was the first story critiqued in my spring 2004 workshop. One of the comments I received on the story was quite embarrassing to hear spoken aloud in class—Warren enters his girlfriend’s room in one of the final scenes to find Colleen astride her lover, but, because I focused on Warren, the scene did not include another good visual description of Colleen. Thus, in my classmate’s mind, Colleen was fixed atop her sex partner during the rest of the confrontation. Her natural reaction would have been to get away from her lover, maximizing her distance to minimize their association. Because Colleen did not do this, it pulled my classmate from the fictional dream. When I reread the moment, I decided this absurdity would probably pull other readers out of the fictional dream, as well. Though I have not done a full

revision of this piece, I have revised that detail and addressed several other problems mentioned in that workshop. Ultimately, I am under no obligation to change things based on critiques by other people; however, I think that in honor of keeping the fictional dream continuous and keeping my contract with my readers, any comments should at least be examined to see if making a change would help the flow of the fictional dream without losing something important that I want to portray in the story.

Another aspect of craft I have found important for creating a vivid and continuous fictional dream is the selection of point of view for a story. Point of view refers to who is telling a story, and it is important because the same story can have an entirely different feel or tone when told in the first person than when told in the third person. Janet Burroway devotes two chapters to the different elements of point of view in *Writing Fiction: a Guide to Narrative Craft*. She asks authors to consider these five questions in relation to the story:

Who speaks? To whom? In what form? At what distance from the action?

With what limitations? All these issues go into the determination of the point of view. Because *the author inevitably wants to convince us to share the same perspective*, the answers will also help reveal her or his final opinion, judgment, attitude, or message. (202–203)

Psychic distance is an important part of point of view. Gardner says, “Careless shifts in psychic distance can also be distracting. By psychic distance we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story” (111). A story with great psychic distance will give the reader more well-rounded information and the ability to better understand the plot from a more universal perspective, but it limits the closeness

and, thus, the empathy, a reader feels for the characters. Less psychic distance allows the reader to feel closer to the characters as their thoughts and feelings are put on display along with their physical actions. However, the more the story is told through one character's point of view, the less objective it becomes and the more difficult it is for the reader to grasp anything that might lie outside the one, particular point of view.

Any of the choices of point of view and psychic distance can create a good story that submerges the reader into the author's chosen worldview. Though Gardner contends that the authorial-omniscient point of view is the most noble of all the options (157), even he agrees that "[i]n contemporary writing one may do anything one pleases with point of view, as long as it works" (155). The trick for me is to find a point of view in which I am comfortable writing and through which my characters' stories can be told naturally. My favorite point of view as both a writer and a reader is the third person. This point of view style is not necessarily locked into one character's perspective like first person and yet it still has the option to allow the reader to hear characters' thoughts. The third person also allows readers to discover details, like the character's gender, by picking up on clues such as the character's name instead of forcing them to wait until the first person narrator verbalizes such facts. Making it easier for readers to discover such details can help ground readers in a story—for example, if readers do not spend pages wondering if the narrator is male or female, they might be better able to submerge themselves completely in the fictional dream.

Despite problems such as those noted above, if the first person narrator has a gripping voice, he or she can still compel readers to submerge themselves into the fictional dream. Such a voice must be strong, unique, and interesting enough to draw in

readers and hold them inside the narrator's world. More than that, it must keep them from feeling claustrophobic inside the single perspective filtering all the readers' perceptions in this particular fictional dream, and it must prevent them from being bored by that perspective. Because of the interpretations every reader brings to the words in the story, there is no precise formula for giving a voice that strength and uniqueness; however, writers must do what they can to make the voice of their first person narrators stand out among the crowds of such narrators if they want a chance to communicate their ideas.

The first person narrator in Ring Lardner's story, "The Golden Honeymoon," had the strength and uniqueness to capture me as a reader. The narrator is an elderly man who celebrated his fiftieth wedding anniversary by spending a month in Florida with his wife during the early 1920s. Many of the details in this story are mundane. The narrator is not much of a storyteller. He recites the facts filtered through his jealousy and annoyance. Also he is not a well-educated man, as illustrated by the grammar and syntax of the story:

I guess the fact is neither one of us would be welcome in a Quaker meeting, but as I tell Mother, what did God give us tongues for if He didn't want we should use them? Only she says He didn't give them to us to say the same thing over and over again, like I do, and repeat myself. (45)

Despite the narrator's limited viewpoint which filters all the actions in the story through his perceptions and the fact that his voice could be grating if not done well, his voice compelled me into the fictional dream of this story. After looking at the piece more closely, I decided that I found the narrator's world compelling because it was so different from mine—a glimpse of his world through his eyes held my attention. I enjoyed submerging myself in a time period when people considered birdcalls a high form of

entertainment, ate all their meals in cafeterias, and traveled by train. The uneducated voice of the narrator did not become a distraction, but gave the time period and the character more depth. If this story had been set in the present day, its mundane aspects would probably have overwhelmed and bored me. When writing in the first person, I keep these things in mind.

The first draft of “Glass Angels” took the form of a first person narrative from the minister’s point of view. I thought James would be despised for his less-than-open-minded views on homosexuality and believed that only a first person narrator with an interesting voice could draw the reader in and make the character sympathetic. Another factor that contributed to my choice of point of view was that I wanted my minister to experience a crisis of faith, an idea I thought could more easily be explored with less psychic distance between the reader and the character. However, to get James to the crisis of faith, something had to shake him and his faith to the core. I needed a trauma that would conflict with the tenets of James’s faith without the reprieve of a timely demise. I had an image stuck in my mind of a group of religious zealots I saw demonstrating at a movie theater in downtown Fort Worth. The street by the theater was a main pedestrian thoroughfare between downtown and the most popular parking garage, which gave these zealots plenty of targets for kamikaze-style witnessing. Among the group was a small boy wearing a sign covered with drawn flames that read, “Sodomites will burn in hell.” The fact that someone could put an emblem of hatred on a child sickened me and made me certain James’s son had to come out of the closet. It would kill James to be at odds with his son; but with his revelation, the son would place himself at odds with James’s faith—things I hoped to portray through the eyes of a first person narrator.

However, based on the critiques I got in my workshop, first person is not my strongest writing style—and, honestly, I knew that going in. When I write in the first person, I slip into “telling” as opposed to “showing.” James took the microphone and droned on and on as a first person narrator. The onslaught of information and emotion overwhelmed some of my classmates, keeping them from submersion in the fictional dream and eliminating the chance that they might get closer to understanding a different worldview. Also, as the story evolved, it became more about the relationship between father and son than the minister’s crisis of faith, so that reason for using the first person became less important. Finally, it was hard for me to make the first person voice as unique as I wanted, so, to me, it ended up sounding ordinary.

After the workshop critique and much thought about the issues above, I shifted the point of view in “Glass Angels” from first person to limited third person. With the omniscience limited to James and his mind, the story had little more psychic distance than it did in the first person. Additionally, my higher comfort level writing in the third person made it easier for me to focus on the other aspects of the craft necessary to create a vivid and continuous fictional dream. Describing the setting was also easier in the third person. In the first person, James told the reader about those details, which to some readers in my class meant that the narrator’s focus left his son to concentrate on the architecture of the sanctuary. The oddity of that was enough to jar them out of the fictional dream. In the third person, I could thread details through the narration while the characters were in the midst of the action.

The change in point of view ultimately made “Glass Angels” a better story, and the challenge of dealing with the minister’s faith was not as difficult in the limited third

person as I had anticipated. I was wrong about needing the first person point of view to create sympathy for James despite his fundamental views. Instead that point of view lost James sympathy because the readers were overwhelmed by a perspective they found distasteful. They rebelled against his limited consciousness like I rebel against a second person narrator who tells me I like something I actually despise, and were unwilling to submerge themselves in his worldview. My experiences with “Glass Angels” reinforced my convictions about the importance of point of view selection to the craft of writing and the writer’s ability to use craft to create a fictional dream.

Another important aspect of craft is shaping a story. The form a writer gives a story contributes to the creation of a vivid and continuous fictional dream for readers to submerge themselves in. Many choices are available to the writer in this area, including a broad array of traditional structures. Alternatively, if he or she so chooses, the writer can “jazz around” (Gardner 93) with something more experimental. Experiments in fiction always run the risk of failure. If the story is too “out there” for readers to submerge themselves in, the viewpoint that the writer wanted to convey will never be communicated. However, if the writer can create something new and different to entice the reader into the story and enhance the reader’s experience, the writer is one step closer to transcending the failures of language to find true communication.

One traditional shape for a story is chronological order—start at the first minute of the story and end at the last. Gardner says, “If we are to see a perfectly focused dream image, we must be given the signals one by one, in order, so that everything happens with smooth logic, perfect inevitability” (113). However, chronological is not the only form available to the writer. There can be something intriguing about a story that gives

readers snippets of different time periods and weaves them all together so that, at the end, they understand something about the characters that could only be understood by seeing all the different times in their lives. Another available form is stream of consciousness. Gardner says, “In surreal fiction the writer translates an entire sequence of psychological events, developing his story as the mind spins our dreams” (169). In a stream-of-consciousness story, path the narrator takes is the most telling detail about that character.

Whatever choice the writer makes about how to order the events in the story and give the story its form, the most important thing is that the shape feels natural, not forced. Lamott says that plot grows out of character:

Let your human beings follow the music they hear, and let it take them where it will. Then you may discover [...] that your characters had something in mind all along that was brighter and much more meaningful than what you wanted to impose on them. (62)

“Pet Milk” by Stuart Dybek combines all of the above ideas into a compelling, contemplative, nostalgic story. “Pet Milk” begins with the main character sitting in his kitchen drinking a cup of coffee laced with Pet milk. In stream-of-consciousness fashion, this leads him to remember his grandmother’s kitchen and then sharing a certain drink with his girlfriend Kate. The stream of consciousness goes from general to specific as the narrator recalls the night of his twenty-second birthday, when a high school boy witnessed him making love to Kate on a subway train. The story flows naturally through the narrator’s mind, and the shape seems to grow from the narrator. The jumps in time are not always in sequence, and the transitions swirl like the Pet milk swirled through the coffee at the beginning of the story:

[...] I sat by her table watching the Pet milk swirl and cloud in the streaming coffee, and noticing, outside her window, the sky doing the same thing above the railroad yard across the street.

And I remember, much later, seeing the same swirling sky in tiny liqueur glasses containing a drink called a King Alphonse: the crème de cacao rising like smoke in repeated explosions, blooming in kaleidoscopic clouds through the layer of heavy cream. (168)

By using such gentle transitions, Dybek sends readers swirling gently through the narrator's memories without allowing them to feel lost. If the story started with the grandmother, then moved to Kate and the restaurant, followed by the birthday interlude on the train, and ended with the older narrator in the kitchen, the story would lose some of its appeal. The ending, especially, would lose its snap—instead of ending with the high school boy on the tracks and the narrator's realization about how special his moment with Kate in the train was (to himself and others), the story would end with the narrator alone with his coffee. That ending would be sad and lonely, whereas the current ending is more uplifting—the high school boy can look ahead to a time when he will make love to a woman on a train; but the man in the kitchen, at least in this story, has nothing more to look forward to than becoming like his grandmother.

Certain plots would not work with an abstract time sequence. As Lamott said, plot should grow from the characters, as should the form or time sequence chosen for the story. "Bargain Basement Perfection," "Go Home Happy," and "Glass Angels" have moment-in-time structures. I felt that I was able to get the necessary information into those pieces through the current situations of the characters. I could have used flashbacks

from different times in their lives, but I felt doing so would clutter the action, drawing importance away from the growth experiences of the main characters.

“Baby Steps” and “Musical Chairs,” on the other hand, became more all-encompassing stories about the characters. Rebecca is a woman trying to deal with the imperfections of her past. The information she learns in the present colors her past with a new, imperfect light, and, to understand this, the reader needs to see snippets of Rebecca’s past juxtaposed against her experiences in the present.

The same situation arose with Allie in “Musical Chairs.” A vague idea about language and the number of chairs we sit on in our lifetimes led to Allie sitting in the hospital chair waiting for news about a patient. I wanted this story to really come from the character of Allie. With “Glass Angels” I had worked from a plot perspective, which proved to be a much more difficult creation process. Writing is easier for me when it comes from the characters, and I did not want to force an artificial plot or structure on Allie. In fact, I did not know what would happen in each segment until I actually wrote it. The ideas flowed in a non-chronological order, so I wrote them that way. Ultimately, I was pleased with this structure. In some stories, coloring in the past with light brush strokes across the whole canvas can be more compelling than starting at the top and painting down to the bottom.

The danger with writing a story in something other than chronological order is that the readers could get confused and be jolted out of the fictional dream by the need to backtrack and figure out when something occurred. Dybek did a great job with his transitions in “Pet Milk”—never once was I confused about what happened when. Instead, I flowed through the story like the crème de cacao flowed through the heavy

cream in the King Alphonse. Only once in the story does Dybek have a traditional break between segments. The rest of his transitions are done merely with words and paragraphs.

I would like to go back and work on such transitions in “Baby Steps.” I think this story would benefit from that kind of structure. In the first draft of “Baby Steps,” I used breaks between each time change to clue readers in to the time shift. I also used different names for the main character to indicate different times in her life. During her childhood, Rebecca went by the nickname Becky, but when she left home, she began using her full name. I hoped these two clues would be enough to help readers understand the chronology of the story segments. However, when I submitted this story to my classmates in my fall 2000 fiction workshop, they had a significant amount of confusion in regard to timing. One of the suggestions I received was to use different fonts for the different time periods, which I did in the revision; however, I’m not sure that is enough. When I work on a third draft of this story, there are several things I would like to change; and one of those would be to take out the different fonts and the page breaks, and weave more subtle transitions into the piece to adopt a more stream-of-consciousness style. I think this would help with readers’ confusion and be more organic to the story. Rebecca is going through emotional trauma, and trauma does not stay in neat compartments. Instead it spills out over the page, so I would like for her thoughts and memories to do the same in a revision of this story.

In “Musical Chairs,” however, the page break structure feels organic to the chair theme. I tried to title each section in a way that related to the chair in question or her experience in that chair, and each section reflected something in Allie’s life that also related to the chair. For example, her future in-law’s uncomfortable antique chairs were

things of show, not things of life—symbols of the attitude that permeated Brian’s family. Allie’s inability to find comfort in that chair illustrated the way she would never find comfort in that family. The title of the section, “Stiff,” applies to both the chair and the March family. Giving the sections specific titles, I hoped, would help clue readers in that with each section they were getting something completely different—a different time period, a different memory, a different Allie, and a different chair. Maybe one of the reasons that readers got confused about chronology in “Baby Steps” was because there was nothing special about the page breaks to clue the reader in that they were more important than just a signal of the passing of time as it rolled traditionally forward. I hope the section titles helped emphasize the importance of the breaks in “Musical Chairs” and allowed the reader to adjust to the new set of circumstances more quickly.

Over all, I feel that the experiments in chronology and form worked in the above-mentioned two stories. An experiment I tried in another story, however, I deemed a failure after two attempts. In my spring 2003 Form and Theory class, I received the assignment that became “Did You Hear about Donald and Bitsy?”—take a risk and write something in a way that we had never done before inspired by something we discussed that semester in class. My story idea came from an in-class discussion about “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas” by Gertrude Stein. Her autobiography includes details about the lives and careers of many people she associated with during the events she chronicled. Some of these details were relevant to the story of her life, such as the works of art that inspired her writing; however, matters like Picasso’s trials and tribulations with his first wife seem more like gossip than material for the autobiography of anyone other than Picasso himself.

Can gossip ever truly become art, or is Stein's autobiography just the next step up from a 1920s version of a supermarket tabloid? Though my classmates found gossip to have some redeeming, story-telling remnants, they were neither completely willing to embrace it as art nor to denounce it as trash. The discussion made me wonder if I could create a story entirely with gossip. Challenges inherent in this story idea included how to make readers care about characters not "seen" on the page; how much narration to use; and how to differentiate between voices of the gossips.

To create an environment conducive to gossip, I set the story in a bar with a group of regular patrons who knew each other well. By the very nature of gossip, several people had to be involved in the story, each with a version of the story to tell. The subject of the gossip itself needed to be simple, because of the challenges involved with its portrayal. Thus, I chose a love story, which is simple and yet has enough leeway for many interpretations depending on the motivation of the characters doing the gossiping.

Even before I learned about the lump theory of language and how everyone comes to a conversation complete with his or her own concepts about the meaning of words, stories with multiple points of view interested me. The description of one event in the limited third person point of view of several different characters can give a more complete description of all facets of the event than one description in the universal third person, because all the different limited interpretations can be woven together to create something more than each single story. The perceptions each person takes away from the same event are tiny glimpses into a character's deep inner-workings. Gossip grows and changes based on who retells which portion of what story. Misunderstandings and assumptions take the place of facts as people embellish their gossip. All the characters in

my story have their own motivations that affect their versions of the gossip. Depending on the speaker, Bitsy can be seen as a saving angel, a scared girl, or a manipulative bitch, while Donald can be seen as the knight in shining armor, a cheater, a bumbling sap, or a sensitive and caring man. The reader must determine which persona, or combination thereof, is real.

I wrote the first draft of the story with minimal narration, and came away dissatisfied. Because the narration had been stripped of its filters (i.e., none of the characters' emotions could come through to surpass their words in importance), it became more stage direction than narration. When I re-read the first draft, it read like a story written by someone new to writing without a mastery of narration or point of view, which took the emphasis away from the stories my characters wanted to tell. Something had to change, but I did not want to add more narration and lose focus on the gossip. I decided to take out all of the narration, instead, giving the gossip more than center stage—now it had the whole stage.

This new focus gave the voices of the characters the utmost importance as one of the few ways readers could tell the characters apart. The characters that told long stories (Leigh, Mike, and Sadie) needed more distinct voices to help define their motivations. Leigh, as a cynical, professional woman, needed to sound both tough and smart. She couldn't be afraid to swear, but she also needed to weave bigger words naturally into her dialog. Mike, on the other hand, was a less-than-well-educated construction worker with a crush, so he needed an unadorned, Texas drawl (which would also contribute toward setting the scene in a limited fashion), less-than-perfect grammar, and starry descriptions of Bitsy. Sadie needed the drawl and the similes of a small-town girl, but as a long-time

student, bad grammar would be out of place in her dialog—her romanticism also needed to show through in her descriptions. As the father-figure, Rex needed a strong dialect with commanding words. Frank, as an outsider, ended up with rather neutral tones, which fit someone unsure of his place in what was going on. All these personalities would have to be completely portrayed by the words the characters spoke.

Another way to show who was speaking to whom was to have them call each other by name. I have always been conscious of this in my writing. Though it feels natural to put names into written dialog, in my experience, people do not seem to call each other by name much in everyday conversation. As such, I am reluctant to over-use names in dialog. However, with the lack of narration in this story, sometimes a name was necessary for clarification. I tried to do this only when absolutely necessary.

Despite my best efforts, this story has never worked the way I intended. Readers always have problems keeping up with who is talking. The only person who did not have this problem was one to whom I explained the concept beforehand. She actually liked the story. Sadly, like Lamott says, writers cannot sit next to their readers and explain things (57); so, unless I write an introduction of some kind, there is no explanation of the purpose of the experiment, and an introduction would probably be too boring to hook anyone in at all. For the purposes of my thesis, I cheated a little with this story. I gave each character his or her own font, so people reading this story for the first time in this thesis will have a better chance of keeping the speakers straight; but, for publication purposes, this would never work. This story needs a major overhaul if anything is to come of it, but I included it as-is in my thesis because I learned a lot from the experiment—it encouraged me to think outside the box and gave me a new understanding

of the complexities of dialog. Finally, it allowed me to take risks with some hard-core “jazzing around” (Gardner 93) in a way that differed from anything I had tried before.

During my years in graduate school, I have learned a lot in my writing classes. I have experimented with fiction in ways I never would have dreamed of during my undergraduate studies, and I know my craft has improved measurably since then. However, the most valuable concepts I was exposed to during graduate school would have to be the facets of the lump theory—the flaws and ambiguities inherent in language and the problems of communication that come from differing worldviews. The more I know about these problems, the more I can try to overcome them by utilizing my other writing skills and the aspects of craft I have learned in workshops and by reading the many authors exposed to me in my studies. We all spend our lives looking out of that tiny window of perspective on the world, and that will never change. However, if I can imagine that the people I talk to all have their own tiny windows to deal with and if I could ever convey that to anyone else, maybe it can eventually help us get, if not all the way there, at least closer to communication that we would have been before—through conversation, and especially through writing and submersion into a vivid and continuous fictional dream.

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PART II
STORIES

Musical Chairs

Fractured

The crack in the armrest ground into Allie's forearm. She shifted in the uncomfortable plastic seat and rubbed the new scratch on her arm. No one in the crowded waiting room paid her any attention. Hospital chairs created discomfort on purpose. An uncomfortable place to wait encouraged loiterers to pick up and head home, to be filled in on the status of their friend or relative at a later time.

"Got any quarters, Mama?" Allie's freckle-faced daughter, Melinda, knelt next to her mother's knee. The seven-year-old opened her eyes as wide as possible in an expression of longing.

Allie reached for her purse even as she corrected her daughter. "Do you *have* any quarters, *please*."

"Do you have any quarters, please, Mama?" Melinda dutifully repeated, watching Allie dig in her purse. "There's SweetTarts in the snack machine."

Folds of lush blue-velvet fabric covered Allie's purse. Feathery fringe in a lighter blue rimmed the opening and tickled her fingers as she reached inside. As usual, Allie's wallet had sunk to the bottom of the bag, hiding underneath a huge ring of keys and the old, cloth diaper Allie used to clean smudges from her glasses. The old leather of the wallet felt smooth against Allie's fingers as she zipped open the change pocket and fished for coins. She found one. Melinda held out her hand eagerly. Her daughter stood so close that Allie caught a whiff of Melinda's bubble-gum-scented lip-gloss. Seconds after Allie dropped the quarter into her daughter's hand, the quarter vanished into the front pocket of

the girl's overalls. A little more fishing revealed two dimes, a nickel, and a stamp that marked the bearer as one-eighth of the way to a free sandwich at Subway.

Allie poured the rest of the change into her daughter's hand. "This is it."

"Thanks!" The girl skipped to the vending machines across the hall, her brown braid flopping behind her with each step. Allie touched a loose strand of her own hair, and pushed it back into her ponytail. Melinda was the spitting image of her mother with that honeyed brown hair and those twinkling blue eyes. Even their features were near mirror images, differing only with age. A proliferation of freckles and perfect eyesight were the only noticeable recognition of another genetic line in Melinda's mix.

"I love that purse."

Allie turned her head slightly to look at the woman in the seat next to her—a purple wind suit accentuated the silver in the woman's hair and the plum eye shadow smeared over her lids. The woman's pants made a loud *whoosh* as she adjusted herself in her own plastic chair.

"Thanks," Allie replied.

"Where did you get it?" The woman gestured to her own purse—a simple, black leather handbag with a missing zipper. "I'm due for a new one, and I want something more fun."

"I got it in Fort Worth, Texas," Allie told the lady. "A little shop downtown sells them. The same lady's been running it since I was a girl."

The lady grimaced. "Too bad. I'd love one, but I don't think my husband would appreciate the gas bill." The woman gave Allie a sympathetic look. "I hope you didn't have to drive all the way to Phoenix just to sit in the hospital."

“Mrs. March?” The nurse’s entrance saved Allie from having to reply. A hush fell over the waiting room as everyone waited to see whose turn it was for news. “Allie March?”

Allie stood to attract the nurse’s attention. “It’s Ms. March. Not Mrs.”

The nurse nodded. She was short and pudgy around the middle. Her bright, jungle-print scrubs made the muted colors in the waiting room drab instead of soothing. “Brian is out of surgery and in recovery. They’ll bring him down to his room in about an hour. When I find out what room, I’ll let you know.”

“How did the procedure go?” Allie asked. She turned for a quick glance toward the vending machines, grateful that the purchase of SweetTarts still occupied Melinda.

“The doctor will be down in a few minutes to speak to you,” the nurse answered.

Allie nodded again, and sat back down in the chair with the cracked arm to await more news.

Stiff

Everything about the dining room of her future in-laws’ house made Allie uncomfortable. In her family, the term fine china meant Dixie, not Dansk. Here, Allie chewed every bite of her dinner scrupulously to make sure no crumbs fell into the depths of burgundy carpet at her feet. Bubbles of fear raced up and down her spine every time she set down her knife. One drop of gravy on the ivory lace tablecloth, Allie felt sure, would mark her for life with Brian’s parents.

“Allison, darling, do tell us what you mean to do with an English degree.” Brian’s mother, Chelsea, curved her lips in a polite, half smile that displayed no teeth. The rest of

her face didn't move when she smiled. Allie thought briefly of a statue she'd seen in Europe—beautiful, but hard and motionless. Chelsea had frosted blonde hair swept up in an elegant French twist. Not one stray hair brushed the shoulders of her black pants suit.

“Please call me Allie. Everyone does.” Allie tried not to let her smile look forced when she corrected her fiancé's mother about her name for what had to be the third time that evening. “And, I'm not sure what I want to do after I graduate. Teaching is always an option, but I'd really love to write.”

“Ah.” Kenneth, Brian's father, steepled his long fingers together below his chin and eyed Allie through a pair of expensively camouflaged bifocals. “Much profit in the writing game these days?”

Allie felt her cheeks heating up. She looked to Brian for rescue, but his eyes were firmly trained on his plate as he used his silver fork to toy with steamed string beans. No rescue lurked on the top of his blond head, so she turned back to Kenneth. “It depends on the way you play the game, I suppose.”

“And how do you play it?” Kenneth took a sip of his wine and watched Allie over the rim of his glass.

“I write children's stories,” Allie admitted. She wished she could manufacture some great lie about guaranteed best sellers full of intrigue, blood, guts, and either lawyers or spies, but she didn't have it in her.

Chelsea cleared her throat with a delicate cough and beamed at Brian. “Luckily, our Brian has that great job offer coming through.”

“Don't jinx it, mother,” Brian protested.

He smiled, but Allie could see the strain in his face. Brian didn't want to be a stockbroker. No matter what big job offer came through because Chelsea and Kenneth could pull strings, Brian wouldn't take it. Last night, in bed, Brian had talked about telling them the truth. Allie tried to picture the reaction if Brian told his parents that he wanted to change his major to education on the cusp of graduation so he could get his teaching certificate and coach high school football. He had been a volunteer coach of one of the local peewee leagues since his freshman year at college. He had a gift for it, and, even more important, he loved it.

When he opened his mouth again, Allie tensed. This was his moment, she was sure of it. She leaned back, but had to lean forward again when a hand-carved curlicue in the oak dining chair gouged her back through her linen blouse. And, then, nothing happened. Brian just smiled at his parents and let them guide the conversation back to the wonderful world as they saw it, with a full social whirl, the right clubs, the right job, and the perfect, socialite wife.

String beans stuck in her throat.

Spasm

The first contraction came at 10:07 p.m. on a Wednesday night. She sat in her favorite chair watching the news before bed, waiting for Brian to come home from work. The chair cradled her like an old friend. She'd bought the chair second hand for her first apartment and never been willing to let it go, not even for the designer chair Chelsea promised to replace it with. In places, the upholstery had worn, but its mauve color made Allie think of the pink of a seashell she'd found on the beach as a little girl. Something

about that seashell tone relaxed her aching muscles. Her belly was huge now—more than once, strangers asked her if she was having twins. No, she would have to say. Just the one. Hefting all that extra weight made her legs ache, so she craved time at the end of the day in her chair with her feet up on the crotchety footstool that only worked for her. The only time Brian had tried to use it, it spasmed and shook when he pushed the lever, refusing to fully extend.

The baby's official due date had come and gone by eight days. Allie tried to focus on the news story about the biggest squash at the Texas State Fair and forget her baby worries. The baby twitched when she rested her hands against her gargantuan stomach.

The first surge of pain rippled through the lower muscles in her stomach and radiated out through the small of her back before the weather came on. Her fingers clenched against the armrests of the recliner. As the pain surged, Allie felt like the mere pressure of her hands would rip the chair apart from underneath her. Like some kind of X-Man or Incredible Hulk-ette, she would smash the armrests with her bare hands and rip through the seashell upholstery with her unpolished fingernails.

Then the pain stopped.

The newscaster droned on as if Allie's world had not just collapsed in on itself.

One finger at a time, Allie released her grip on the chair. Imprints of the upholstery stripes stood out in stark relief against her white palms.

“Brian.”

The word came out as a whisper. Allie felt tears burn against her lashes, but they did not spill over. She stood carefully and looked at the clock. Timing contractions was important. Her feet held her up as she walked across the apartment to find the phone, but

her knees felt weak. Of course the cordless phone wasn't in its cradle. She found it nestled in the middle of the laundry hamper on the bedroom floor. Her fingers knew his cell phone number without Allie having to give it conscious thought. She braced herself against the bedroom wall with one hand and held the phone to her ear with the other, listening as it rang.

And rang.

And rang again.

And the voice mail picked up.

"Damn it, Brian! Where are you?" Her voice came out more like the growl of a snarling lioness protecting her cub. "You said you'd be here... Fuck! I guess I have to drive *myself* to the hospital to have this damn baby."

That was when she felt the sudden dampness between her legs. Warm liquid rolled down her thighs and formed a puddle at her feet. If it weren't for the pain attacking her insides again, Allie would have worried about cleaning the carpet. Instead, she dropped the phone and concentrated on breathing. The handset missed the basket and hit the floor, but Allie didn't care. When the contraction passed, Allie tried to decide what to do next. Logically, she knew her tiny hope that Brian might burst through the door was a pipe dream. This was happening too quickly—she had to get to the hospital, and she would have to do it alone.

A pair of dry XXL men's sweatpants and a maternity T-shirt had replaced her nightgown and she had her purse in hand and the front door open before the next contraction hit. Her fingers clenched the doorframe as the pain boiled through her lower regions. She almost heard the snapping noises as her mutant-strong fingers crushed the

wooden doorframe into toothpicks. As the contraction wore on, she sagged against the frame. Though her feet were planted firmly inside the apartment, her head hung outside in the crisp night air. She could see the swirls of fog as she breathed in and out in the pattern she'd learned, alone, during Lamaze. She thought fleetingly of her jacket, but the closet seemed miles away. It was all she could do to maintain her ground. She couldn't go back now.

“Allie?”

When the pain eased, Allie looked up to see her neighbor, Mildred, standing near the stairs, a plastic bag of groceries dangling from each wrist. Mildred was fifty, and had recently divorced her husband. She also had three children—children she blamed for each and every one of the gray hairs that permeated her short cap of dark curls.

Before Allie could even open her mouth, Mildred was by her side. She tossed her groceries in the foyer of Allie's apartment, and then she slid an arm around the younger woman's shoulders.

“Don't worry, sweetie. You ain't the first to give birth, and you ain't gonna be the last.” With fingers capable despite the onset of arthritis, Mildred took the keys from Allie's right hand and the long-packed backpack from her left hand. “C'mon. I'll get you there in good time. All you worry about is that baby.”

Shadows and Light

“I'm afraid it has to be filled.”

Allie squinted, trying to see Dr. Dennis through the glare of the exam light. She started to say something, to protest, perhaps, but a scaler, a mirror, and several fingers

hindered speech. Involuntarily, Allie swallowed and then nearly gagged at the sharp flavor of Latex gloves.

Dr. Dennis finally removed everything from her mouth and turned to look at the X-rays on the light panel on the wall.

“See the shadow here?” He pointed to the X-ray with the tip of a scaler. Allie leaned over to look more closely once the dental assistant finished suctioning residue. Sure enough, against the white of her back molar was a shadow. “We need to take care of it before it gets worse. Make an appointment for a filling at the front desk on your way out.”

Allie nodded as she accepted a paper cup full of water from the assistant to rinse the mingled tastes of Latex, blood, and tutti-frutti polishing paste from her tongue.

“Thank you, Dr. Dennis.”

The dentist grinned. His teeth looked like two rows of white Chiclets. “Any time, Allie. And don’t forget to floss every day. Your gums will thank you for it.”

Before Allie could disentangle herself from the large, blue chair, all its levers, and the matching blue bib chained around her neck, her cell phone began to ring. Expecting it to be Melinda calling to say she was ready to be picked up from her piano lesson, Allie dove for her purse. She managed to bang her knee on the assistant’s rolling chair and sent it sailing across the room, but Allie got her hands on her cell phone before it rolled over to voice mail. With one hand, Allie tried to free her hair from the chain holding the bib on, and with her other, she held the phone to her ear.

“I’ll be there in about ten minutes, honey.”

“Allie?”

Allie froze. The assistant came deftly removed the chain from around Allie's neck and then moved off to sterilize instruments. Allie didn't even notice.

"Brian?"

"You and Melinda have to come to Phoenix."

On the Edge

"Comfy, honey?" Bethany stepped into the small room where the bride waited for her big entrance.

Allie started to nod, and then froze. One wrong move, and the tower of curls on top of her head might fall, sending baby's breath and her frothy veil tumbling to the floor.

"I'm fine, Mom." Allie shifted on the small, wooden chair beneath her petticoats. Her mother had borrowed it from the church nursery. A child's chair was the only thing that would fit under the petticoats without wrinkling the entire confection.

In a few minutes, it would be time for Brian's cousin to usher her mother to her seat. Allie heard the musicians switch to the first piece of processional music. First Brian's grandmother would be escorted, and then it would be time for the parents. Allie's father had died two years before, so she would walk down the aisle alone. Her Uncle Tom had offered escort her, as had her friend Michael, but Allie refused them both. She was marrying Brian of her own free will—not being given to him like a cow or a bag of money. The walk should be hers alone to make.

"You know you don't have to do this."

Allie looked up at her mother in surprise, forgetting to be careful of her elaborate hairstyle. "What are you talking about? I love him!"

“I know you do.” Bethany reached over with tender fingers and tucked a stray curl back into the arrangement. “He’s a nice young man. I just want you to know that... if... for some reason you didn’t want to... I just want you to know that I’ll love you and support you in any decision you make.”

There was a knock at the anteroom door, and a young, male voice called, “Mrs. Heron? Are you ready?”

Bethany took Allie’s hand and kissed it. The touch of her lips felt like the brush of a slightly withered rose. “Walk proud.”

“I love you, Mama.”

Pushing

“I miss my mom.”

The edges of the wheelchair bit into the back of her knees even through the sweatpants. Allie tried to enjoy the warmth the sweats provided while she could. She knew once the nurse got her into a room on the maternity wing, she would have to change into one of those paper-thin gowns. Goosebumps rose on the bare skin of her arms in protest of the thought.

“Maybe you could call her.” The nurse pushing the wheelchair was young and blonde. Her smock was a pale green, but the color actually made the nurse’s green eyes sparkle. Allie figured that the nurse was younger than she was.

“My mom died last year. Car wreck.”

Before the nurse could reply, another contraction hit. Allie groaned and gripped the arms of the wheelchair. Her knuckles turned white and she could have sworn she felt the metal crumple beneath her fingers.

“Breathe with me.” The nurse stopped pushing and reached out to rub Allie’s back as Allie fought her way through the contraction. The nurse’s practiced fingers massaged Allie’s lower back, releasing some of the pain that pulsed there.

When it was over, Allie turned her head to look at the young nurse. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” In the nurse’s eyes, Allie saw a depth of understanding that belied her youth. And then the nurse smiled, and the pretty young thing re-emerged.

Empty

Primary colors plastered the lobby of the Treasured Tots daycare in bold swipes. A green chair in the shape of a teddy bear butted against a huge, red stripe on the off-white wall. As Allie paced, the bear seemed to smirk at her. She wished they would hurry and bring Melinda to the front. Allie had a schedule to keep.

“Mrs. March?”

Leaving the green teddy bear behind, Allie walked to the front desk and a receptionist who was chewing her lower lip. Her nametag labeled her as Lindsey. “It’s Ms. March these days.”

“Melinda isn’t here.” Lindsey couldn’t meet Allie’s eyes.

“I dropped her off here this morning.” Allie leaned forward on the desk and spoke in a calm voice, but barely controlled panic roiled just below the surface. “Since three is

too young to have a driver's license and I doubt she could reach the phone book to call a cab, there aren't many options left."

"Your husband picked her up this afternoon."

"My husband?" Her voice rose in pitch and volume. "I don't have a husband!"

"Her... her father." Lindsey scabbled on her desk for a clipboard and held it out for inspection, pointing at the signature on the line after Melinda's name. "He came in just after eleven and signed her out."

Allie swallowed, searching for moisture in a mouth that had suddenly become the Sahara. "Brian isn't allowed to have her now." She gripped the edge of the desk, not in anger this time, but as much needed support for her weak knees. "How could you let my little girl go home with anyone but me?"

"He was on the sign out sheet in her file." Lindsey stared at Allie with a gaze of horror and disbelief. "I thought it was OK..."

"Oh god." Allie stumbled out of the day care and toward her car like someone either blind or drunk. Her limbs didn't want to function. At the car, she leaned heavily against the side, which brought her gaze on level with the empty car seat in the back. A strangled sob escaped from the back of her throat and she sank down to sit on the gravel, leaning her head against the tire, oblivious of the dirt or the smell of rubber. She knew that the other parents in the parking lot were staring at her, but there was nothing she could do. Getting to her feet required more effort than lifting the car above her head and throwing it through the daycare's large front window.

Allie and Brian had endured a bitter custody battle. Brian had been cruel, but Chelsea made the comment that haunted Allie's nightmares. *If you continue with this*

charade of a divorce, you'll never see Melinda again. When she'd managed to get custody despite the pricey lawyer her in-laws hired, Allie had hoped she'd called Chelsea's bluff.

"Ms. March?" Lindsey had followed Allie outside and crouched next to her. The younger girl's sneakers crunched on the gravel. "Can I help you? Can I call someone?"

Bleakness filled Allie's eyes as she looked at Lindsey. "There's nobody to call."

The Sticky Spot

Only one booth in the restaurant wasn't littered with crumbs and crumpled napkins. Allie slid into it, trying to avoid any sticky spots. Brian slid in across from her and set the tray in the middle of the table. Two small burgers, two small fries, and two small sodas.

"We could have gone somewhere more upscale." His pristine sweater and khaki pants stood out in the fluorescent lights of the fast food establishment.

"Upscale is over-rated," Allie replied. She grabbed a fry from the tray and popped it in her mouth. "Besides, this is finals week. We need the fats and preservatives to stay awake all night. Eat a salad, and you're hosed."

"And I thought it was the espresso." Brian unwrapped his burger hesitantly and took a bite.

"Your mom didn't go for fast food, huh?" Allie took a big bite of her burger and let the taste of secret sauce linger on her tongue.

"Not hardly." Brian nibbled the end of a fry as if afraid it might bite him back.

"And you never snuck out with your friends and went to a drive-through?"

Brian shrugged. “We went out for burgers and pizza, but my crowd didn’t have the drive-through mentality.”

By the time he had answered her question, Allie had worked her way through her burger and had started on the fries, which she first covered with a liberal coating of ketchup. His eyes widened when he realized what had happened.

“What?” Allie extended her arms in an “it’s not my fault” gesture. “You’re looking at a product of the public school system, Mister. Thirty minutes for lunch with a wait of at least fifteen minutes for food—I learned to wolf it down early.” A delicate pink flush colored her cheeks, but she shrugged as if she didn’t care what he thought of her. “I used to try and force myself to be lady-like and chew each bite twenty times, but then I couldn’t carry on decent dinner conversation, so I gave it up.”

A giant laugh exploded from the boy across the table. A teenaged couple a few tables down turned to stare at them. Allie leaned her head on her hand and turned so she couldn’t see them. “I’m glad my common upbringing amuses you. Let’s go back to campus. We’ve got a Lit final to cram for.”

His finger brushed against her cheek until she turned back to face him. Then he took her hand. “I love this.”

“Fast food?”

“Being here with you. I don’t care about lady-like behavior or upbringing. I want to see and do new things, and I’d like to do them with you. Maybe next time we could go for fried chicken.”

“Do you mean like a date?” Allie studied his face for any clues as to his veracity. When he’d asked her to study with him for the Lit exam, Allie had assumed it was

because he knew she took good notes and had an A in the course so far. They'd chatted throughout the semester, but nothing serious. He was in a fraternity, and she was far from sorority material. If this was some kind of prank she'd smear secret sauce in his perfectly styled hair!

"Yeah. Like a date." His expression seemed sincere.

"I don't know if I'm your type." Allie pulled her hand out of his.

"You're exactly my type, Al." Brian lifted himself up and leaned across the table.

Allie didn't move, and when his lips brushed hers, she tasted salt.

Broken

When the doctor arrived, he led Allie away from the waiting area before he would discuss the case. Melinda sat in the broken chair, eating her SweetTarts and chattering to the older woman in the wind suit. Allie glanced at her daughter frequently, just to make sure she was still there. The penalties for violation of custody had been meted out, and neither Brian nor his family tried to steal Melinda again, but the fact that it had happened once made Allie all the more watchful.

When they reached an uninhabited row of chairs, the doctor stopped and turned to face Allie. "I'm sorry to tell you, Mrs. March, that the prognosis is not all we had hoped."

"It's Ms. March. We've been divorced for five years."

If that news fazed the doctor, he didn't show it. "We went in to remove the tumor, and that procedure went smoothly. However, after we got in there, we discovered that the cancer has spread to the body cavity. We removed what we could, but there's no way to be sure if we found it all."

“What about chemotherapy?”

“His oncologist will probably put him on a course of treatment,” the doctor said.

“There is always a chance it will succeed, but, considering the extent and the speed at which the cancer spread, the odds are not in his favor.”

Allie was quiet, and then she asked, “When will you tell Brian?”

“It will be several hours until the grogginess fades completely. I should be able to speak with him tonight during my rounds.” The doctor pressed her hand in a firm handshake. “I’m sorry I don’t have better news for you.”

Breaking the Silence

The next morning, Allie woke up before the sun. She and Melinda were staying with one of Allie’s old college friends, Sarah, who now lived in Phoenix. Allie slipped out of bed and got dressed in the dark. She knew that Melinda would be fine with Sarah and Sarah’s family until she got back. Allie would take Melinda to see her father later today, but first, Allie needed to talk to him alone. Soon enough, Allie was on the highway in the car Sarah had loaned her, and on her way to the hospital.

Technically, visiting hours hadn’t started yet, but Allie walked purposefully toward Brian’s room and the nurses didn’t try to stop her. Maybe they, like everyone else in the hospital, thought she was his wife and, therefore, allowed to visit at any time. If so, now was not the time to disabuse them of that notion.

His room was in the middle of a long corridor. Allie and Melinda had visited him yesterday, but Allie doubted Brian remembered it. Little he’d said to them through the haze of anesthetic had been comprehensible.

She knocked quietly on the door—two slow raps followed by two quick ones. It was an old code they used to use in college. When she opened the door and slipped inside, she saw that Brian was awake. His face was thinner now, more haggard. A day's growth of stubble covered his chin and cheeks, and Allie saw strands of gray in it. His hair looked thinner, too. She thought she saw a few strands of white mixed in with the blond.

“Hey, Al.” A wan smile flickered on his lips for an instant.

Allie pushed a large chair with an orange, vinyl seat closer to the bed and sat down. The cushion squeaked under her weight. The noise seemed to reverberate in the quiet room. “Good morning, Brian. Feeling better?”

“Other than the gaping wound in my gut, sure.”

“You spoke to the doctor?”

“Yeah.” He clasped his hands together in his lap. A purple bruise stained the skin around the I.V. needle on the back of his left hand. A machine on the other side of the bed beeped intermittently as it dripped fluids into the I.V.

“I'm sorry, Brian.”

“Don't be sorry!” The words came out harsh, and Allie flinched backward in her chair. The back came up over her head, and gave away a little as she leaned back.

“Why did you ask me to come here?” The conciliatory tone had vanished from Allie's voice. This wasn't her college sweetheart—he was her ex-husband. “If you wanted to see Melinda, your parents could have brought her. Why aren't they here, anyway? I thought Chelsea would be here terrorizing the nursing staff.”

“I told them not to come yet.” As the sun began its ascent, a pink glow crept into the room. “They’ll be here in a couple of days.”

“Will you go home with them for the treatment?” If he came back to Texas with his parents, she assumed he would want to see Melinda more frequently.

“I haven’t decided yet. There’s one thing keeping me in Arizona.”

“I heard the job was a good one. Chelsea raves about it every time I drop Melinda off at their house.” The vinyl screeched again as Allie moved in the chair.

“I’ve been coaching again.” His voice was so quiet she had to lean forward to hear him. “Pewee league. My office sponsors a team.”

Her surprise was palpable. Brian had given up coaching when he took his first job in the business world—something Allie had fought violently against. Just one of the many battles she’d lost.

“I just wanted to tell you that.”

Allie reached out to touch his hand instinctively, then she thought better of it and let her hand fall to her lap.

“You’ll bring Melinda by this afternoon?”

“Of course. She wants to see you awake.”

“Thanks, Al.”

They lapsed into silence—a silence only broken by the I.V. machine and its intermittent beeps.

Baby Steps

Mommy liked to sleep late on Saturdays, so, when Becky found the snow early one morning, she didn't think to wake Mommy up.

The color caught her attention first. When Becky caught a glimpse of white blotches where only sand-colored carpet should be, she forgot about Saturday morning cartoons and pushed the bathroom door all the way open. Pale crystals covered the bathroom floor, and they sparkled when Becky flipped on the light. They radiated out toward the toilet in the corner, turning the ordinary bathroom carpet into wintry ground, the likes of which the girl had never seen in her seven Texas winters. Bits of brown carpet peeked through the crystals like underbrush poking through snowy ground in all the movies Becky had seen about snowstorms.

She held her breath and stepped inside the bathroom. She took another step toward the nearest patch of crystals, and then another. Snow inside the house—it seemed like something that would only happen in fairy stories, but here it was, right in front of her. Becky's bare toes curled into the soft, clean carpet as she edged closer to the miraculous substance. Each movement seemed to take an eternity. Longer than it took for sleep to come on Christmas Eve, or the night before the first day of school. The only noises breaking the sacred Saturday morning silence were Daddy's snores coming from the back bedroom and the thumping of Becky's heart.

Her leg stretched out, toes extended. She touched a glistening patch of white fluff. It crunched. Something sticky clung to the end of her big toe. It wasn't cold like snow should be.

“Oh God!”

Fingers squeezed her shoulder. Becky shrieked as she felt fingernails through her thin nightgown. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. “Mommy!”

“Get away!” The woman pushed Becky through the door hard enough to send her stumbling into the wall, banging her shoulder. Becky turned back with reproachful eyes, but didn’t say anything when she saw the look on Mommy’s face. The wrinkles around her eyes lengthened as she stared down at the coated floor.

Becky sniffled, for the first time noticing a strange odor in the air. “What is it, Mommy?”

“Dried vomit.”

The woman seemed deflated for a second. She closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. “Go watch cartoons, sweetie. I’ll clean this up, and then we’ll go get doughnuts.”

Becky nodded silently, and walked into the living room. She didn’t want to leave Mommy alone, but she knew she had to do as she was told. Daddy’s snores weren’t quite loud enough to cover the quiet sounds of Mommy crying.

* * *

Rebecca could hear the phone ringing from outside her apartment. She’d counted four rings before she managed to balance her groceries on one arm and unlock the door. Once inside, she didn’t even bother to shut the door. She dropped everything over the arm of her second-hand couch and lunged for the phone before ring number six.

“Hello?”

“Becky?”

“Hi, Mom.” Cordless phone in hand, Rebecca shut the door and started taking the plastic Tom Thumb bags into her small kitchen as she talked. “What’s up?”

“Something wonderful.”

Rebecca paused with a can of black-eyed peas halfway to the cabinet. Her mother sounded funny, almost chipper. Maggie Reeves was seldom chipper. “Tell me.”

“It’s your father.”

* * *

“Come on, Daddy!”

Becky darted through the store, her brown pigtails bouncing with each step. Daddy tried in vain to keep up, but a lady with big, orange hair got in his way. Becky finally reached her goal, Aisle Seven, and stopped. She looked back, her hands in the pockets of her pink pants. She played with the hole in her left pocket as she waited for Daddy to catch up. The multi-colored aisles pulsed around them. Some offered enticing beeps and lurid signs proclaiming massive discounts, but only one thing held Becky’s attention, besides Daddy.

“You’re too fast for your old man, sweetie.” He panted a little as he finally reached her side. A few drops of sweat glistened on his neck, near the collar of his winter coat.

Becky giggled as she was supposed to and then reached out and took his large hand in her small one.

“Now, baby, what did you want me to see?” He smiled back at her, and she preened under the attention. They didn’t spend much time together, just the two of them, so when they did, Becky knew it was special.

“Over here!” She pulled him down Aisle Seven until she reached the display she knew so well. Then she pointed to a doll. Not just any doll, The Doll. The most beautiful doll in all the world. Her blonde curls were soft to the touch and could be styled in any way a girl could imagine. The doll wore a pink ball gown with silver trim and pink slippers covered dainty feet. Her lips were full and red, and her eyes big and blue. Pink bows nestled in the cornsilk tresses, allowing just a glimpse of a delicate, plastic ear.

“Wow, that’s a doll.” Daddy let go of Becky’s hand and ran his thick fingers through his buzz cut.

“She’s beautiful.” The unasked question hung between them. *Can I have her?*

Daddy pointed to a smaller doll sitting on a nearby shelf, above one of those lurid discount stickers. He fingered her red yarn hair. “What about her? She could use a home.”

Becky shook her head.

A plush puppy with fluffy fur poked his head out from a mound of stuffed animals, with Daddy’s help. Becky laughed when Daddy made the puppy bark. “Take me, Becky. Rrr-uff!”

“No thank you, Daddy.” Her face drooped a little, but even at eight years old, Becky knew that she couldn’t always have everything in the toy store. It was amazing enough that Daddy had taken her with him on this trip into town. She turned to go.

“Becky.”

She turned, and her face lit up with a smile that showed off her missing tooth—front row, lower left. Daddy had the princess doll in his strong arms.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re the bestest Daddy in the whole world.”

“And you’re the best daughter in the whole world. Now let’s pay for this thing and get out of here, before you talk me into the matching wardrobe set.”

* * *

Groceries sat unpacked on the counter, but Rebecca didn’t care. She didn’t notice the ice cream melting into the plastic bag. Her attention was riveted on her mother’s voice through the phone.

“After the accident, your father started going to A.A.” Maggie paused, perhaps for breath, or perhaps to try and gauge her daughter’s reaction.

“Alcoholics Anonymous?” The words felt weird. Like someone had shoved them in her mouth, and speaking them didn’t get them out; it just lodged them there more tightly. She’d never expected to hear that name in conjunction with Daddy. Daddy, well, he was just Daddy. He was the way he was, and that never changed. Life wasn’t perfect, but it was good. Wasn’t it? A.A. was for those people on TV. The ones who couldn’t hold down a steady job or make the rent. The ones who ended up living in alleys, drinking from bottles wrapped in plastic bags, or in jail. Not her Daddy. There had been weird times when she was growing up, sure, but not like the horrible things that happened to other people, Rebecca was sure of it.

* * *

“...but Nancy didn’t heed the old man’s advice. Instead she...”

A mature girl of nine and a half shouldn’t have bedtime stories anymore. Becky knew this, but she loved this end-of-the-day ritual. It didn’t matter if the story was bad, good, new or something she’d heard a million times. She curled tighter against Mommy on the bed. As a special treat tonight, Mommy had said they could read on the couch in the living room. It made Becky feel grown up to be in the living room after nine thirty. She rested her head on Mommy’s shoulder and listened.

As Becky began to get drowsy, the words about the famous, female sleuth blurred together, but Mommy's voice was still there in the background.

A car door slammed, accompanied by the whirring of the garage door closing.

Mommy jumped, slamming the book shut without even putting in the bookmark.

Becky found herself with her head on the sofa cushion.

“Come on, Becky. Let's go in your room.”

“Can't we just...”

“No.”

Becky knew that when Mommy used that tone of voice, she'd better obey. The last time Becky hadn't listened when Mommy used The Tone, she ended up in the corner for an hour. Without even one toy to play with! Not even one of those boring plastic toys with no movable parts.

Mommy had already started walking down the hall. Becky turned to follow, and then stopped. Laura! She turned and went back to the couch, but the princess doll wasn't there. Becky looked around the room and spotted the corner of Laura's pink, satin dress peeking over the top of the piano in the corner. Mommy must have put it up there to keep it safe. Becky clambered up onto the piano bench and pulled Laura back into her arms.

“See, Laura. I would never, ever forget you.” The princess doll wasn't as pristine as she had once been. The pink bows were long gone—victims of a hair experiment gone awry—and her tresses were irrevocably tangled. Her pink dress even looked used now, seams flapping here and there. But to Becky, Laura looked just right. She fit into Becky's arms perfectly and slept in Becky's bed every single night.

A loud burp made Becky turn quickly. Daddy stood in the doorway.

“Hey, baby. Wha’cha doin’ up so late?”

His voice sounded funny. Extra loud, but there was something else, too. The only word Becky could think of to describe it was fuzzy.

“Mommy was reading Laura and me a story.”

“Aren’t you too old for that?” Daddy flopped down in his easy chair. It creaked under his weight and started to wobble. Daddy flung out his arms to steady himself. His hand jostled the table next to the chair, and the lamp on the table tipped over the side. Luckily, it landed in Daddy’s lap, instead of crashing to the floor. Daddy started to laugh like it was a cartoon gag. He tried to set the lamp back on the table, missed, and set it on the floor instead.

Becky averted her eyes. Part of her wanted to yell. Part of her wanted to cry. But mostly, she just wanted to get away. She slid off the bench.

“Hey!”

She looked back.

“Aren’t you going to give your dear old Dad a kiss good night?”

Becky walked back over and planted a kiss on Daddy’s scruffy cheek. “Good night, Daddy.” He smelled funny, a mixture of sweat and something strong that Becky never had a name for.

“Good night, baby.”

As she turned to leave, Daddy reclined the back of his chair and closed his eyes. Before she even got down the hall to her room, Becky could hear the snores. He always snored louder on the weekends.

* * *

“He got his one month sobriety chip last night.”

“Only a month?” Rebecca asked. “I thought you said the accident was in February.” Her eyes automatically flashed to her wall calendar. It still said July.

“It took him several months to work up to it,” Maggie explained. “He would go for a week or two and then have to go out drinking. It wasn’t until then that he realized that he really couldn’t quit by himself.”

“But...”

Maggie kept talking, right over her daughter’s voice. “I’ve been going with him to meetings when I can. I learned what kind of an alcoholic your father is. It’s called a functional alcoholic.”

“What does that mean?”

“That he’s capable of keeping control over his life when he has to, but when he has a break, he’ll binge.” Maggie gave a nervous laugh that sounded tinny over the line.

“Well, that’s a paraphrase of the official definition.”

“That’s, uh, really...”

“Can you come home this weekend?”

The abrupt change of subject startled Rebecca. “Why?”

“It’s family night at A.A. It would mean a lot to your dad, and to me, if you came, Becky.”

Rebecca scraped her fingernails up and down the plush arm of her blue chair. “I’ll try, Mom.” But inside she screamed, *No, I don’t want to go! Don’t make me!*

* * *

“Do we have to go, Mom?”

“Your father asked us to.”

Becky sighed. The air blew her bangs off her face with an angry huff. “I hate those guys.”

“Look on the bright side. It’s a good, steak dinner.”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“You’re in eighth grade,” her mother said. “You can’t be a vegetarian.”

Becky rolled her eyes, but turned to go get ready for Daddy’s friend Len’s birthday party.

They went in separate cars. Daddy wanted to go early, so Becky and Mom followed later in the van. When they got there, Len’s house was full of people.

“I didn’t realize the party was going to be this big,” Mom said quietly. She’d already turned off the van, and they were just sitting there in the dark.

“We could still go home,” Becky suggested.

Mom opened her door and got out, leaving Becky no choice other than to follow.

Things started out OK. Becky followed her mother through the house to the food, and they managed to get a good dinner out of it. Becky really wasn’t a vegetarian—though she thought about becoming one on the spot to annoy her mother—so she enjoyed the food. But she felt awkward there. Out of place. Everyone was older than she was, there weren’t any other kids there, and most of the people had beers in hand. Mom didn’t allow alcohol in their house, so it was weird for Becky to see it in such plentiful supply. Becky knew Daddy drank, but that happened out with the guys or at the country club. This was Len’s house.

Her mother didn’t seem comfortable, either, but finally Becky saw her strike up a conversation with Len’s wife. Becky wondered what had happened to Daddy.

When her plate was empty, Becky threaded her way through the people toward the kitchen. She recognized Daddy’s laugh before she saw him. He was at the kitchen

table with Len and some other guys. They had cards out and the table was littered with plastic poker chips and dark brown bottles. He didn't notice Becky. She quietly moved through the kitchen and set her plate on the counter.

"Hiya, Becky." The plate clanked to the bottom of the sink as Len's hand came down on her shoulder.

"Oh, hi." Becky tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Are you enjoying my party. It's my birthday, you know."

"Sure." His hand moved down to her back. It grazed her hip. Becky jerked back.

His droopy eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing! I, um, just have to, um..." She moved back through a nearby doorway and found herself in an empty, small pantry.

Len followed. Becky felt a shelf against her back as he moved toward her. There was a sway in his steps. He reached out to steady himself and his hand grasped her arm. Fingers brushed her breasts. He mumbled something she couldn't understand. Becky pulled away and lunged to the side, sending several cans clattering to the floor. Something popped filling the pantry with the smell of syrup.

"Shit!" Len swore, grabbing for a shelf.

Becky darted out of the pantry, tears blurring her vision; but she couldn't let them fall, not in this house full of people. She felt better when she was back in the kitchen. She looked around, expecting someone to demand what she'd been doing in the pantry of all places, but no one seemed to notice. They were all involved in their own conversations. Then her eyes fell on the one person who would help her. Her savior.

"Daddy!" She practically ran over to the card table.

He looked up from his cards to squint at her through the haze of smoke. Red lines marred his green eyes. Several cigarettes and cigars burned unattended in the ashtray in the middle of the table next to the pile of poker chips and some crumpled dollar bills.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“Daddy, Len, he...” Becky gasped for air.

He looked around. “You want to tell him happy birthday, huh?”

Just then Len reappeared. He didn’t even look at Becky. He slid into his empty chair and popped the top off of two frosty bottles of beer. “Hey, I got one for you.” He handed it to her father.

“Daddy,” Becky whispered.

Daddy took a swig from the fresh beer. “Thanks man.” He gave Becky a lopsided smile. “Go find your mother, OK? I’ve got to finish this hand.”

* * *

Traffic was light, so it didn’t take Rebecca much longer than two hours to drive to the small town where she’d been born and raised. As she cruised the familiar streets, she felt the familiarity settle over her like the yellow baby blanket she’d carried around until she started kindergarten and decided that it she was too grown up for such a thing. Of course, the yellow blanket stayed tucked under her pillow for years after.

As she turned onto her old street, Rebecca felt a funny sense of dread that she’d never known before. She pulled into the driveway and turned off the motor. She could hear her heart beating in her ears, louder than the drums on the radio.

When she got up to the door, it was locked. No one was home. She used the spare key hidden in the decorative rock to the right of the door to let herself inside. The house was quiet and dark, like a cave.

Without the aid of lights, Rebecca made her way down the hall to her old room. Only then did she turn on a lamp. The room remained just like she'd left it when she left for college the first time, despite her mother's threats to clean it up and make a sewing room out of it. Usually, walking into this room made Rebecca feel right at home. It was her sanctuary, her security, the place where nothing could intrude. Her posters still hung on the wall, including the completely humiliating one of the guys from *Beverly Hills 90210*, reminding her of teenaged obsessions and fun times giggling with girlfriends. Her awards covered the shelves in blue, red and gold glory, reminding Rebecca of all her achievements. Could the daughter of an alcoholic have placed first at the state track meet? It didn't seem possible to her. Her fingers trailed over her pink satin bedspread. It was worn now, but it had been so beautiful when she was in that pink stage. She'd begged her mother to buy it for her and felt like a queen when she slept under it. A picture from her sixteenth birthday party caught her eye and Rebecca leaned closer to inspect it. Her mother had taken Rebecca and her three best friends to an amusement park for the day. The five of them posed for a picture by the front gates. Rebecca thought she and her mother looked happy in that picture. They probably were—they'd been free of Daddy that weekend. He'd been on some fishing trip with the guys. Finally, she approached the shelves where her stuffed animals and dolls still lived. She pulled out a familiar doll with permanently tangled blonde hair and a faded pink dress.

"Hi, Laura. I'm home. It's been a while, huh?"

* * *

"You have to drive the truck, Becky."

The fifteen-year-old glared at her mother in the parking lot. "I only have a permit. There's got to be a licensed driver with me."

"Your dad has a license."

“Fat lot of good that does,” Becky muttered under her breath.

Her mother reached out and grabbed Becky by the shoulders. “There’s no other way to get both cars home.”

They had met at the Chinese place for dinner. Becky and her mother had been out shopping for school clothes. They’d had a fight because Becky wanted a purple hat with a daisy on the brim. Mom thought it was stupid. Daddy had been at the restaurant first. Becky knew enough to realize the clear liquid in his glass wasn’t water, or even Sprite. Though she could pretend it was.

She met her mother’s eyes with a sullen gaze. “Fine.” She snatched the keys from her mother’s hand and got in the driver’s seat of her father’s truck. Daddy slouched in the passenger seat. Becky wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant aroma of sweat, gin, and Chinese leftovers.

Down the row of parking spaces, Becky saw her mother’s van come to life and pull out. She started the truck. This was the first time she’d driven so far all alone. Almost alone, anyway. Her hand trembled as she slid the automatic gearshift into Drive. She released the break and the truck started to roll forward. Becky looked out the windshield and slammed down on the brake. The truck rocked back and forth. Becky held herself stiff.

Daddy opened his eyes when he slid forward in his seat. Only the seatbelt her mother had fastened around him kept him on the bench.

“Shit, Becky,” he mumbled, cracking an eye open to see the truck almost touching the car in the opposing parking space. “What the hell were you doing?”

Becky didn't answer. Instead she put the truck in reverse and pulled out of the parking space the other way.

* * *

Rebecca wandered through the empty house, holding Laura in her arms. If her room had been her childhood sanctuary, she was vulnerable out in the rest of the house,. She examined the family portrait hanging in the hall with a critical eye. Was that really a happy family? It looked that way until a closer inspection revealed the crows feet surrounding the mother's eyes. Until the observer spotted the father's puffy eyes, or the tenseness in the little girl's smile. The amusement park snapshot in her bedroom had shown truly happy faces—now Rebecca thought that the smiles in the posed portrait of the three of them looked fake.

"I didn't know it was so bad," Rebecca said quietly, grateful that only Laura was there to hear her. "I thought it was, well, life."

She stared at the picture, focusing on his image. Memories flooded over her—the ones she didn't want to remember, the ones that weren't perfect. Pain. Birthdays missed for fishing trips and nights at the club. Being embarrassed to have friends over when he came home after a night out with the guys. That tenseness in her stomach when she heard the whirring of the garage door. Rebecca pulled her hand back and slammed it into the wall. Pain flared from her fingers down the bone all the way to her elbow. She swore and cradled the arm as the picture rocked on the wall. It tilted to the side, and her father smiled at her, askew.

Alcoholic. She looked at her father's crooked image and thought the word over and over in her brain. And suddenly it fit. Alcoholic. Tears welled up in Rebecca's eyes. She turned away from the picture and went into the living room. By instinct, she found her father's favorite chair and sank down into it. The smell of leather mixed with Daddy's

favorite cologne drifted around her. Daddy loved her. She was sure of it. Even if she had hated his drinking so much she ran away from it so she didn't have to acknowledge it. But underneath it all, he did love her. And her mother, too. At least, she was pretty sure.

An open A.A. meeting. That was the purpose of this weekend. That's why she had come home.

Rebecca knew she couldn't do it. Not now. She knew Daddy loved her, but thinking about everything still made her want to scream.

Rebecca stood up and walked to the front door and locked it behind her. She pulled out her keys and got into her car. She sat Laura in the passenger seat and turned on the motor. She laid her hand on the doll's faded cornsilk hair as she pulled out of the driveway.

"Not tonight," Rebecca said quietly as she drove by the neighbors' houses, back toward the Interstate. She glanced down. Laura smiled at her. "Yeah, Laura, but maybe someday."

Go Home Happy

“Kyle, I need your help.”

I looked at Bonnie over the returned tapes as I alphabetized them. As always, my heart sped up when I focused on her. Today she had her dark hair clipped up on one side, baring her long, graceful neck and one of her perfect little ears. I knew I loved Bonnie the day I realized I loved her ears. Perfectly round with small lobes, Bonnie wore two small earrings in each ear, and her left ear—the one bared today by the rhinestone clip—had a silver cuff around the top.

“What’s up?” I asked casually, continuing to sort the tapes. *Mission Impossible II, Mission to Mars, Fight Club... What’s that doing here?* But only a tiny portion of my mind was on the job. The rest of it was on Bonnie.

“I think Craig’s going to come in here today.”

A copy of *Mansfield Park* had to slide in front of *The Matrix*. “I thought you dumped him last weekend.” My casual tone belied my avid interest in Bonnie’s love life. Ever since we met—I trained her when she started working at Blockbuster with me—she had never been long without a boyfriend. She attracted boys like I collected stray pennies, without a second thought. When Bonnie was with a guy, she liked him. He became her world. But she never seemed to ponder what life would be like without one.

Bonnie and I bonded when she was my trainee. I tutored her in the arts of phoning people with late tapes, running the till and labeling PVTs (previously-viewed tapes for the non-Blockbuster indoctrinated), and she told me what it was like to be a graduate student. I was still working on my bachelor’s degree, five years later. It took a lot of

Blockbuster hours to pay for one class at my exclusive, private college, but when the scholarship ran out, that's what I had to do.

"That's the problem," Bonnie said, bringing my attention back from where it had wandered. "He's obsessed. He keeps calling me, and showing up wherever I go. When I left work that night you were off, he was waiting outside."

"Did he try anything?" I demanded. My grip tightened on *The Mighty*.

"He didn't do anything, but it made me feel weird." Bonnie circled the counter and moved to stand next to me. I could smell her perfume as she leaned in to help me sort tapes. Honeysuckle, like the vines that grew in my mother's backyard. Automatically, we fell into a work pattern while we talked. She sorted tapes into their proper letter category, and I arranged them in order and put them in the right place in the row on the counter.

"You never told me about the breakup with Craig," I reminded her.

"Well..." She stopped suddenly and looked around the store. It was almost empty at 4:30 p.m. The evening rush didn't start until 5:30 or 6. One lady and her kid were fighting over whether to rent *The Little Mermaid II* or *American Pie*. Mom seemed to be in a losing battle against bawdy humor.

"Where did Mike go?"

I smirked. "He's upstairs breaking down cover boxes." Breaking down unused cover boxes was one of the most arduous, boring jobs in the store. You had to take the boxes, remove the Styrofoam and unfold them, without tearing them in case we needed them later. Everyone hated it, so the job was given to newbies like Mike.

"You're so mean," Bonnie teased.

“That’s me.” I plucked at the shoulders of my navy blue work shirt, pretending that I was pulling on suspenders. “Dumping on the rookies.”

“How come you never made me break down boxes?” Bonnie’s slender eyebrow quirked up.

I shrugged and turned back to my tapes. “I...” The truth was, when she was new I did most of the crap jobs for her. But I couldn’t tell her that. “So, you were telling me about Craig? And your favor?”

“I need you to be my boyfriend.”

Romeo Must Die, Return to Me, Rules of Engagement... What could I say to that?

“When Craig comes in, I mean. I need him to think I’ve moved on. Maybe then he can move on, too.” The corners of her mouth drooped, and a worry line ran a jagged race across her forehead. “I had to break up with him because he was talking children, a family, ’til death do us part, and we’d only been going out for two weeks. It freaked me out.”

“Some people do want ’til death do us part and all that stuff.”

Bonnie started balancing tapes on her arm to put them back on the shelves. An experienced Blockbuster employee can fit as many as 20 tapes on one arm. “I do want it. Someday. But with someone real. Someone I’ve known so long that we can finish each other’s...”

“Sentences?”

She would have shaken her head at me, but tapes were wedged against her neck. One wrong move and they’d all go crashing to the floor. “I was going to say thoughts. So, are you going to be my boyfriend, or not?”

“What the hell.”

“Thanks.” Bonnie smiled and then headed toward the New Release wall with her armload of tapes, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I watched her go, my eyes drawn to the way her hair swung against the small of her back and the way she stepped so gracefully, even with tapes balanced from her neck to the tips of her fingers.

“Hey, loser!” Sean jumped over the counter in the space Bonnie had just cleared and landed on the floor without missing a beat. “What’s up in the land of movie-freaks?”

“Nothing spectacular,” I replied, unwilling to confide my new psuedo-relationship to Sean of all people. He was an interesting guy, there was no doubt about it, but he was also no stranger to Jerkville.

“I saw you.” His mouth was higher on one side when he grinned, especially when he wagged his eyebrows, too.

“Saw me, what?”

“Eyeing Bonnie the Babe. I heard she’s on the market again.”

“Shut up.” I turned my back on him and headed to my till. The lady and her kid had settled on *Titan A.E.* I took her tape and her card and scanned them both into the computer. “Will that be all for you today?”

“Mom! I want some Sour Apple Blasts!” The kid had to be at least twelve, and there he was pulling on his mother’s arm, whining for candy.

“Not today, Max.”

“Please!”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Do you want me to put this movie back? I will!”

“That will be \$3.24,” I said quickly, hoping to get the money before she followed through on her disciplinary threat. Voiding out the transaction was doable, but annoying at this point.

The kid took the hint and finally shut up. His mom handed me three bucks and a quarter and walked off, kid in one hand, video in the other, without waiting for her penny. As she walked out the door with the “Go Home Happy” poster above it, I called, “Your movie’s due back Sunday at noon.”

She didn’t acknowledge me. I hoped she wouldn’t come back with a late fee and then blame me for not telling her about the “new” hours. I didn’t understand why people couldn’t get their minds around the midnight/noon switch. It had been a year already!

“You want Bonnie, man. I can see the lust all over your... face.”

“Shut the hell up, Sean. Just go upstairs and get your till. James is up there.”

“What happened to Joe.”

“Called in.”

“I’ve gotta make store manager someday.” Sean shook his head. His too-long, black hair flopped back and forth with the motion. “I need a job where I can put myself on the schedule and then not show up every night and still get paid.”

“There won’t be an opening as long as we’ve got Joe.” I rolled my eyes.

Sean disappeared toward the upstairs room where the managers did their work and kept the money.

“James told me to come see what else needed to be done.”

I looked up to see Mike's eager face in front of my register. I heard the door jingle and some high school kids walked in, laughing and talking. Mike couldn't be much older than them. He definitely had that wet-behind-the-ears look. From what I'd heard, this was his first job.

"The toilets haven't been scrubbed in a while." I handed him the bathroom key.

"Where..." His voice trailed off. He was obviously embarrassed at not knowing such a mundane fact as where the bathroom was. It wasn't all his fault. They're pretty well hidden.

I pointed. "Over there, underneath Whoopie."

Mike turned and walked off toward Ms. Goldberg's face on the wall. I smiled, happy to be out of another gross task. I looked down. The stray penny the lady hadn't waited for was still in my hand. I looked at it for a second, and then stuck it in my pocket. Maybe it would bring me luck with my new girlfriend.

"Excuse me. Do you work here?" A tiny, old woman in a blue hat stared at me from the other side of the counter.

What gave you the first clue, lady? The blue shirt. The name tag? Being behind the register? "Yes, Ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a movie."

"Do you know the title? I can look it up for you." I waited, my fingers poised over the computer keyboard.

"I don't know the title. My granddaughter recommended it. It's a love story..."

Just then Sean reappeared, till in hand.

"Sean, would you like to help this lady find her movie?"

He looked at me with horror. “I’d be happy to open my register.”

Shaking my head, I walked around the counter and guided the lady toward the back of the store, hoping to figure out what movie her granddaughter wanted her to see, or at least a close approximation to it. After a few probing questions on my part, and several rambling answers from her, we finally figured out she wanted *Anna and the King*. I handed her the requested movie, and she turned to go without a word of thanks. Typical.

“Howdy, stranger.”

I looked up to see Bonnie standing there, smiling. She placed her last tape and dusted her hands off happily. “Who’s minding the registers?”

“Sean.”

“Oh, good.” Sarcasm dripped from her tongue. “You guys aren’t going to watch *Cool As Ice* again tonight, are you?”

“Don’t diss Vanilla Ice’s flick,” I replied in an overly macho voice. “It’s got everything: music, motorcycles, babes...”

Bonnie arched her eyebrow again. “Anyone who thinks ‘Hey baby, drop the zero and get with the hero,’ is an attractive offer flunked charm school.”

“That’s me. A charm school drop out.”

“That’s what I love about you, Kyle. Your sense of humor.” Bonnie reached out and gave me a hug. I leaned into it for a second, inhaling the fruity scent of her shampoo as her hair tickled my nose. She pulled back and looked me in the eye. Suddenly, I felt it. This was the moment I’d been waiting for, for over a year. The time was finally right.

“Bonnie, I...”

Her eyes widened. “Kyle!”

A hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. Before I could react, a fist smashed into my face and pain blossomed from my right eye, through my jaw and around the outside of my ear.

I staggered back a step and tried to see my attacker. He was tall, but spindly. He had big fists, though, and a piercing stare. I knew him, even though we'd never actually met.

"Craig." I could sense a crowd forming around us. Customers peered over the tops of shoulder-high shelves straining for a glimpse of the action. But the security cameras were definitely working because James was downstairs in an instant. He grabbed Craig by the bicep and strong-armed him to the door.

"Bonnie!" Craig called, his voice cracking pathetically. She didn't even turn to look. Her eyes were focused on my face.

"That looked painful." She reached up and touched the skin around my eye. "It's already swelling."

I groaned. "Just what I need, a black eye to finish the week up right."

"I'm really, really sorry." Bonnie bit her lip for a second. "If I hadn't..."

"Hey, man, that was some shot. You OK?"

I gave the random patron a glare that would have reduced him to cinders, if I were Superman. Of course, I'm not Superman, so it didn't. But I wished it would have.

Luckily, though, the guy took the hint and walked away, leaving me alone with Bonnie.

Well, as alone as it's possible to get standing in the middle of the New Releases.

"It's not your fault," I told her, putting my hand on her shoulder. "I didn't even get to be your boyfriend."

“I just feel bad that he hurt you. I don’t know what I ever saw in that jerk.”

She looked up at me, and the pain in my eye completely vanished. Nothing else was important—not customers, not tapes falling on the floor, not Sean alone with a register, not Mike who must have fallen in the toilet because he’d been gone so long. I focused completely on her face. Her lips parted just a little. I leaned down. I don’t know how I did it. Now, I can’t even remember consciously deciding to, but I did it anyway. I kissed her. Her lips were warm and soft, but they didn’t move.

I pulled back. Bonnie stared at me with a shocked gaze. “Kyle, I didn’t... I don’t...”

My stomach sank. I swear it flowed down into my Nikes and leaked out onto the ugly blue and yellow carpet. “It’s OK. You don’t have to say anything.” And she didn’t. I could see my answer written all over her face.

“Hey, Bonnie!”

We both looked toward the front of the store. James was there with Sean and another employee who’d just clocked in.

“Yeah?” she called.

“You can leave any time now that Josie’s here.”

Bonnie turned to look back at me. I stared back at her, hoping she might change her mind. Then she turned and walked up to the front of the store. I watched her talk to James for a minute, and then she walked out the door, underneath the “Go Home Happy” sign.

Go Home Happy. Who did the people who think up these slogans think they were fooling?

I joined the others at the front. I stepped closer to the window and watched Bonnie get into her car and start the motor. When she began pulling out of her parking space, I finally felt satisfied that Craig wasn't going to jump out from behind some bush and attack her.

"You can knock off early if you want, Kyle," James said. "You look like you could use some sleep and a steak for that eye."

"Thanks."

James nodded and headed back upstairs to his managerial duties.

"Are you sure you want to leave?" Sean asked. "I promised Josie that we'd check out *Cool as Ice* during clean up."

I shook my head. "Not tonight, man." I went to take my till out of the register, and realized it was already gone. I sent James a mental thank you. The mundane chore of counting out my till might have been too much for me right now, but he'd taken care of it.

"You're a zero, dude. We'll have all the fun without you."

I couldn't dredge up a witty comeback or even a biting insult. "See ya."

Sean gave up and a customer approached, movies in hand, so I turned to leave. The parking lot had filled up in the past half hour. Things were getting busy. My car was around the corner. As I walked toward it, I heard a noise.

"Bye, Kyle."

I turned to see Mike standing by the Dumpster. "What are you doing out here?"

"Sean told me to take out the trash."

“I see.” I reached into my pocket for my keys. My fingers pulled out something else as well. Something round and hard. The penny.

“What’s that?” Mike tossed the last trash bag into the foul-smelling compartment and wiped his hands on his khakis, leaving two smears of grunge.

“Stray penny.” It flashed copper in the gleam of the street light above. I flipped it to Mike, who caught it easily. “You take it. Maybe it will bring you luck.”

“Gee, uh, thanks.”

“No problem.” And with that, I got into my car and started the motor. As I drove away, I glanced back at the rear view mirror. Mike stood there for a minute, and then walked back to the door. As he entered, I saw the glint of the golden sign. Go Home Happy. Yeah. Sure.

Bargain Basement Perfection

She called to him from the window, glowing under the lights. Her curves were perfect—an impeccable hourglass figure just to his taste. He longed to run his hands down her smooth lines and caress her strong body. He could never say no to a strawberry blonde. And that G-string!

Warren Cooper stopped walking and gazed into the window of the EZ Pawn. The guitar lay there innocently, as if she hadn't just been throwing herself at the young man outside like a common tart. He tugged at his dark blond ponytail and stared through the window. The afternoon Texas sun that baked the city streets also reflected his face in the glass, superimposing it over the guitar. The reflection's brown eyes seemed to squint at him, warning him to move on.

But he stayed. She held him there, bound by an invisible string. Warren knew he couldn't afford her—whatever the cost. Working in the computer lab in the School of Education deciphering Mac issues for aspiring young teachers didn't pay much. Just enough to make being a work-study student at Phillips University barely viable. And today Warren had more important shopping to do. He had been dating Colleen McKinney for nearly a year, and today was her twenty-first birthday. He had to find a present for Colleen, not one for himself. No matter how gorgeous that guitar was.

A cowbell clanked as Warren walked into the pawnshop. The Sahara quickly became the Arctic as a blast of cold air hit his face. The smell of stale cigarette smoke crept up his nostrils and settled itself in his clothes and hair for the duration. Except for two people standing near the front counter, the shop was empty. They ignored Warren as he moved to look at the guitar from a new angle, without the glass barrier between them.

The man behind the counter was too involved haggling with a greasy-haired teenaged boy over a pair of speakers to pay attention to a potential customer. One of the speakers had a Linkin' Park bumper sticker plastered on the side.

“C’mon, man. I gotta get at least two-fifty.” The kid shifted his weight back and forth on the balls of his Nikes. “I paid over three.” The high pitch of the kid’s whine made Warren wince.

The bronzed man behind the counter wouldn’t budge. “A whole stereo maybe.” He ran fingers through his thinning hair. “Speakers alone, I give you ninety-five.”

The guitar whispered his name again in that little, singsong voice. Forgetting about anyone else, Warren stepped closer and saw immediately that he’d been right. It was a Fender twelve-string. He had to bend almost double to see underneath the guitar stand. Warren topped 6’5”, and he was lean—when he bent like that, he ended up in some uncomfortable-looking positions. His thin lips curved in a smile as he noted the strap and the instrument’s clean condition. Nothing marred the light cherry wood’s perfect finish. His fingers itched to take the guitar down and coax a few chords out of those strings. They probably needed replacing after sitting in the heat of the window display, but Warren knew he could get something out of them.

The cowbell clanked again, startling Warren out of his reverie. The kid was gone and the guy behind the counter stared at Warren. Warren straightened abruptly.

“You like instruments?” The pawnshop guy hooked his thumb toward a case in the back of the room. “I got more back here.”

“How much for this one?” Warren gestured toward the Fender in the window and approached the man casually.

“Seventy.” The man crossed his arms over his sweat-stained white shirt. “Steal at that price. Man who brought it said it hardly played.”

Warren sighed. He had just shy of a hundred dollars in his checking account right now. He’d been planning this night with Colleen for a long time. He wanted it to be special. He thought he was in love with her—love did not equal a twenty-dollar gift.

An idea struck him. A crazy idea, to be sure. Almost insane, actually. Of course, he had to follow up on it.

“Do you sell jewelry?”

The man gave Warren a look that eloquently illustrated the stupidity of that question. The only thing people liked to pawn more than electronics was jewelry. He gestured at the glass-topped counter in front of him. Through it, Warren could see rings and bracelets and earrings of all descriptions. Necklaces, too. Even a couple of brooches. Warren crouched and ran his gaze over all the options. Many were flashy and gaudy—he understood at a glance why they’d been sacrificed to pawnshop limbo. Gaudy and Colleen didn’t mix. She was the kind of girl who could leave the house with only a moment’s notice and be ready for anything. She wore a little makeup, but nothing obvious. And her clothes were casual, but classy. Huge silver sunflower earrings would definitely look wrong hanging from her delicate earlobes. The chunky, silver ring in the shape of a wolf’s head would look out of place on her long, thin fingers. It belonged on someone who wore black nail polish... or maybe harlot red. A gold chain caught Warren’s eye. Colleen would wear that. It would hang in the hollow of her throat. The price tag attached to the chain by a bit of string named a price of thirty-five dollars.

He almost asked to see the chain, but something else caught his eye first. Lying next to the chain was a simple gold band. Nothing fancy, but the smooth metal glowed with a beauty of its own. Like Colleen.

“Can I see that ring? The gold one?” Warren pointed through the case.

The man unlocked the case from the back and pulled out the ring in question. Without a word, he handed it to the young man. Warren inspected the ring carefully, turning it over and over in his large hand. He didn’t see any flaws, and it wasn’t tarnished. It was yellow gold, which bespoke its value to the observer—unlike white gold or platinum, which looked, to the naked eye, no better than sterling silver. Warren slid the ring on, and it fit his left pinky exactly. He’d tried on Colleen’s high school ring once, and the only finger it would fit on had been his left pinky. He looked inside the band and smiled. It was engraved with the word, “Faith.” Instinctively, Warren knew Colleen would like that. Faith in her, faith in them—it worked any way he looked at it. And, better yet, it only cost seventeen dollars and fifty cents. Perfect! Who said nice gifts had to be expensive? Well, maybe he had thought so a few moments earlier, but now he’d changed his mind.

“I’ll take this.” Warren handed the ring to the man. “And I’m going to look at that guitar in the window.”

“Buy two and it’s ten percent off.”

Warren smiled. Perfect.

* * *

Colleen was waiting for him in the lobby of her dorm. She lived in Hartfield Hall, an upperclassmen girls’ dorm. She sat on one of the pink couches talking with her

roommate, Gwen. Warren paused in the doorway to watch them. Colleen was the opposite of Gwen in pretty much every way. She was a show dog—a pure-bred, pampered Golden Retriever with svelte lines, innate grace, and the knowledge that she would always be taken care of—while Gwen was a pudgy, practical, brown mutt with short hair who always had a plan for how to get her next meal. Colleen was the cheerleader-type to Gwen’s studiousness. Silks suited Colleen, while Gwen clothed herself in denim and always wore her glasses.

Warren had actually known Gwen first. They’d met at orientation. They’d even dated for a week during freshman year. Needless to say, it hadn’t worked out. They were still friends, though. Better friends than lovers. They got together every week to watch the new episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and then they would cap off the evening by playing guitar together. Until today, he’d always been envious of Gwen’s twelve-string. On those nights, Colleen had a previous engagement to meet with her art history study group.

Gwen saw Warren first. She touched Colleen’s shoulder and whispered something. Colleen stood up and walked gracefully toward the door. The skirt of her pale blue sundress swayed gently with each step. In one hand, she held a small purse. A white sweater draped over her shoulders.

“You’re late.” She arched a perfectly plucked brow.

Warren pulled his arm out from behind his back where he’d been hiding a single, long-stemmed, white rose. “And you are the most beautiful thing on this campus.”

She smiled, accentuating the dimple in her left cheek. “I guess you’re forgiven.” She raised the flower to her nose and breathed in the delicate fragrance.

Warren held the door open for her, and they walked out of the dorm and into the steamy, southern night. Warren glanced back as he let go of the door and saw Gwen standing in the lobby watching them leave. He raised a hand and waved at her. Gwen waved back.

* * *

They ate dinner at Chili's. Not as high class as Warren would have liked, but after his purchasing spree that afternoon, it was all he could afford. But Colleen loved the spinach salad at Chili's, and she ordered an Electric Lemonade (something blue and alcoholic that had little to do with actual lemonade) to celebrate finally being legal.

Over a decadent chocolate dessert, Warren pulled the ring box out of his pocket. His stomach churned with a sudden surge of nervousness. Who was he kidding? It was a seventeen-dollar ring from EZ Pawn. Colleen would hate it, and her perfect birthday dinner would be ruined.

"What's that?" Colleen asked. Her eyes fastened on the small box in his hand.

"It's your birthday present."

"Do I get to actually open it?"

Warren took a deep breath, and then he handed her the box. "I hope you like it."

"Why wouldn't I?" She fell silent as she looked at the ring. The gold gleamed against its black velvet backdrop. Colleen took out the ring and examined it.

"Faith," she whispered, running a finger over the engraving. Then, without warning, Colleen leapt out of her side of the booth and into his, hugging him tightly and smothering his face with kisses. "I love it, Warren."

He felt himself relax as the sweet, citrus scent that was uniquely Colleen enveloped him. *I told you so*, his inner voice said. *Perfect.*

* * *

The next morning, dawn came slowly. First, darkness cocooned Warren and Colleen in his dorm room. Later, he could just make out the silhouette of her shoulder. Next the glint of her hair appeared. Finally, enough gray morning light filled the room to illuminate her face pillowed on his chest. The two shared the twin bed in his room. Warren had a coveted single on the first floor of Collins Hall. Two people had to sleep closely to fit on a twin bed, but Warren preferred it that way. He inhaled Colleen's scent, and held her even closer, enjoying the feel of her naked skin on his. He didn't want to move away from her heat against his side or the warmth of the covers. He could see the ring on her finger from where he lay. Her left hand splayed across his stomach. She had the ring on her third finger. Her high school ring had been moved from this place of honor and now decorated her right hand.

The doorknob rattled.

“Yo, Coop!”

Warren recognized the voice—Stoney, the sugar fiend who lived down the hall. Stoney couldn't start the morning without something sweet, and it showed in his linebacker build. When he ran out of his own stash, Stoney always showed up at Warren's door, looking for a fix. Everyone knew that Warren's grandmother kept him well supplied with care packages full of chocolate chip cookies, and, unless he had company, Warren also had an open-door policy.

The doorknob rattled once more, and then Warren heard Stoney's footsteps shuffle off down the hall.

"Locked the boys out, huh?"

Warren looked down at Colleen. She stared back, still beautiful, even with heavy-lidded eyes and curls sticking out every which way. "You should be glad I locked it for you. After he gets his morning fix, Stoney's gonna spread this story up and down the hall."

Colleen rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't worry about Stoney. When he has low blood sugar, his memory's, like, gone. He'll forget all about it before he gets out of the shower."

The navy sheet pooled around Warren's hips as he sat up, pulling his arm out from under her warm body. Colleen wrinkled her nose at him and readjusted the sheet so that only her head was visible.

"You know from experience, I take it," Warren muttered. "About his sugar-induced amnesia."

"It's not a secret that Stoney and I went out." Colleen tucked the sheet under her arms and sat up, too. She laid a hand on Warren's bare shoulder. "That was B.W." Her fingers began to trace a pattern through the freckles on his shoulder blades.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Before Warren." She leaned over and kissed his neck. "Don't worry." She raised her hand up so that he could see the ring. "Faith, remember? You had it engraved."

“Yeah.” Warren tried to shake off the bad feelings. Sure, Colleen had dated Stoney. She’d dated lots of guys. By the numbers, she’d had three times as many significant others than he’d had. But that was the past. He ordered himself not to dwell. “Wanna get breakfast in the caf before your class?”

She shook her head. “I’ve got to go back to my room and print out my history paper.” Colleen got out of bed and located her clothes where he’d tossed them last night. Once dressed, she ran her fingers through her unruly curls and patted them into some semblance of order. Enough order to walk across campus, anyway. Warren watched her for a while, and then he pulled on his red boxers and walked to the window. He opened it and extended a hand toward her. She caught his hand and gave it a quick kiss before sitting on the windowsill. Even in her sundress, she lithely swung her feet over the sill to dangle over the grass a few feet below. Warren braced her, and she dropped to the ground with the ease of someone familiar with the routine. He barely had to steady her before the drop. She grinned at him and blew him one last kiss as she began the trek home.

When she was gone, the room was quiet, but Warren could smell lingering traces of her citrus scent. After a moment, he crossed the room and picked up his new guitar from where it sat in the place of honor on his dresser. The only other thing on top of the dresser was Colleen’s portrait in a silver frame—she’d given it to him for Christmas. When he strummed the guitar, the strings thrummed under his touch, reminding him of the way Colleen practically purred when he nibbled her earlobes. After fingering a couple of chords, Warren began to play the melody that had come to him recently. He liked to write songs, and this melody always popped into his head after he’d spent time with his girlfriend. Maybe he would name the song “Colleen.”

* * *

It was one minute after nine when Warren slid into his seat in astronomy. It was his last required lab science, and then he could concentrate on his major, business. Taking core requirements bored Warren. If he was going to be the CEO of a company by the time his was 30, he should be doing internships and networking, not stargazing. Luckily, Gwen was in the class, too, and she got As. She could tutor him when he was too busy to do the homework himself.

“You’re late,” Gwen accused from her seat next to him.

Warren looked at the front of the lecture hall. “Dr. Donovan isn’t even here yet.”

Gwen sighed. The sigh ended with a slight huff. Her sighs had infinite meanings. Louder sighs implied frustration because the person she was frustrated with was meant to hear them. The more quiet, involuntary sighs implied other feelings, especially sadness. If she huffed when she sighed, then she was pissed off. The louder the huff, the more pissed she was. This sigh, Warren interpreted as frustration at him. He frowned.

“Something else bothering you?”

“Colleen showed me the ring.”

Warren’s frown faded. “Great, huh? And I’ll tell you something, if you swear not to tell her.”

“OK.”

“I got it for seventeen bucks at a pawn shop! I’m going to shop there more often.”

“Not for my next birthday, I hope.”

Warren grinned. “No promises.” He slid his arm around Gwen in a friendly hug.

“You do realize...” Gwen’s words trailed off, and she turned so that she could study his face.

“Realize what?” He straightened up in his seat and stared back at her.

Gwen sighed again. It sounded different than the previous sigh—less gusty and imperative, more plaintive, and no huff. “You bought her a wedding ring.”

Warren blinked. And then he blinked again. “Ah... what? No,” he stammered. “It’s just gold—no diamonds.”

“Diamonds are for the *engagement* ring,” Gwen explained slowly. “Wedding bands usually look like the one Colleen is wearing right now.”

Warren reached hastily for his wallet. The receipt from the pawnshop was folded in with a couple of ones and a five. Yesterday he’d only had eyes for the guitar. Today, he stared at the other entry on the receipt. Right there, in blue on yellow, it said, “wedding band.”

“I didn’t... it wasn’t... she... oh, man.”

“You didn’t propose then?” Gwen asked. “You guys didn’t elope?”

“No!” Warren exclaimed. “I’m not... we’re only 21.” A hot flush gave his dusky stubble a russet hue as a new idea occurred to him. “You don’t think that *she* thinks...”

Gwen sat back in her seat, clasping her hands in front of her. “I’m not sure. She didn’t announce herself as the future Mrs. Warren Cooper, but she is wearing that band on her ring finger. If a guy on the street sees that ring, he’ll consider her off limits.”

Warren slumped down unhappily. “How do you break off a proposal that you didn’t know you made?”

Just then, the professor entered the auditorium. The lights dimmed and the slides he used to illustrate his lectures about the solar system flickered to life on the screen at the front of the room.

“I don’t know,” Gwen whispered, casting a surreptitious glance at the professor, “but I think you’re going to have to do something. Unless you really do want to marry her.” Warren didn’t answer. The sigh that escaped Gwen’s lips was so tiny that it was almost inaudible.

* * *

After astronomy, Warren wandered the campus, lost in thought. He passed the library and the statue of J.T. Phillips, the university’s founder, and then cut behind the art building toward his favorite spot on campus. Between the art building and the building that housed the School of Education, stood an iron statue of a bobcat, the university’s mascot, snarling in victory. The student body affectionately called it Bob. Behind the statue, several benches hid in a shady bower. Ivy crawled over rustic, wooden beams, giving the area a secluded feel in the middle of the busy campus.

As tradition dictated, Warren paused by Bob and rubbed the statue’s nose. School legend said that act guaranteed students luck on their next exam. Warren hoped the luck extended to relationships. Obedience done, Warren took a seat on one of the benches, ready for some quality brooding about the ring situation. He slung his backpack down on the bench. His astronomy and statistics texts thumped loudly, sending a grackle flying from the bower. Warren winced at the angry squawks.

“Rough day?”

Warren turned his head to see a girl sitting on the next bench. She wore a hunter green T-shirt. The green must have camouflaged her, because he definitely hadn't noticed her before. The front of her shirt had a sorority logo on it, and something about Rush week, which made her a freshman. The girl had almond-shaped eyes and straight, black hair that hung down past her shoulders. Obviously of Asian descent, she had a willowy, fragile look. The thick textbook open in her lap looked like it weighed at least half as much as she did.

"Does it show?" Warren asked.

A half smile curved the girl's lips. "Just a bit. You look like you pulled an all-nighter."

"Not really." Warren slumped back on his bench.

"Then, I'd have to guess girl trouble."

"Got it in two."

The girl leaned forward. Hair spilled over her shoulder and pooled on the book's open pages. "I'm a psych major. Reading people is part of the job description. How about I give you a free session?" The girl shut her textbook with a snap and shifted it from her lap into the backpack on the bench next to her. "Tell me your troubles and let me give you my professional opinion."

"You want to listen to my problems?"

"Call it practice."

Warren considered her offer for a minute. It was out of the blue, sure, but not necessarily unwelcome. Maybe she could shed some light on his problem from the girl's point of view. Gwen hadn't been much help, but Gwen wasn't the same kind of girl as

Colleen. Gwen was staid and calm, happy with her small circle of friends. Colleen was more the social butterfly. If she'd had the money to pay for it, she would definitely have rushed a sorority.

"If I'm going to tell you my troubles, I'll at least need a name," Warren said.

"Unless you prefer Hey You."

"I was thinking of changing my name to Hey You, actually," the girl replied with a laugh, "but you just talked me out of it. I'm Marissa."

"Warren." He adjusted himself on the bench so he was facing her. She made similar adjustments. "So, do I need to lay down, or what?"

"Whatever. It's up to you." She tapped her gold watch. "Clock's ticking. I've got class in twenty minutes."

"Great bench-side manner."

Marissa gave Warren a mock glare. "I'm still learning. Seriously, though, what's up?"

"It's my girlfriend." Warren started to reach back to tug on his ponytail, a nervous habit. He consciously stopped himself and put his hands in his lap. "I bought her a ring for her birthday. A simple one, a gold band. I... uh... found it at a pawn shop." Hurriedly, he added, "It's not as bad as it sounds. It was the perfect ring for her. The engraving on the band was just what she would have wanted. Why does it matter that I got it at EZ Pawn if it was something she would like?"

"Did she?" Marissa asked. "Like it, I mean?"

"She loved it."

“If you’re not fighting because you were Mr. Cheapskate, then what’s the problem?”

“When I bought the ring... I didn’t...” There was no way to explain the rest that didn’t make him sound like an idiot. “It’s a wedding ring. I gave my girlfriend a wedding ring, and she’s wearing it.”

“But you didn’t propose?” Marissa clarified. “You just handed her the ring.”

“Yeah.”

“And now you don’t know how she took it,” Marissa surmised. He nodded, and she continued, “Talk about a blunder, man. If you ask her how she took it and she thought you meant it as a proposal, that will be bad. But, if you don’t ask her and she thought it was a proposal, she’ll be picking out China patterns by tonight. And, if you ask her and she never thought of it that way at all, then you’re the dweeb who brought up marriage first. And suddenly the idea is out there.”

Warren listened to Marissa, amazed. She’d put words to his anxiety and phrased questions that he hadn’t even pinpointed for himself yet. More than that, though, she was right!

Marissa scrutinized him closely. “Do you love this girl?”

“Yes.” He had no hesitation on that point.

“Do you ever want to marry her?”

That one stumped him for a moment. “I hadn’t really thought about it. Maybe, someday... you know, once we’ve graduated and everything...” His voice trailed off as he thought about Marissa’s question, really thought about it. He had a sudden vision of the future that could be. He could see himself living with Colleen in a trendy, upscale

apartment. She would be an artist quickly making a name for herself in the local art scene, and he would be an upwardly mobile young business man on the fast track to success. Eventually, they could buy their dream house. One with a pool, a hot tub, and a two-car garage. Then, one day, in a hazy time even farther in the future, he could just barely make out Colleen sitting in a rocking chair with a baby in her arms. A little girl named Jennifer.

“Well, do you?” Marissa prompted, a little impatiently.

“Yeah.” His voice was soft as he spoke mainly to himself.

“What was that?” Marissa asked.

“I said yes.” There was a more definitive ring in his voice. “Yes. I do want to marry her someday.”

Marissa began digging in her backpack. “Good. I think that breakthrough should help simplify matters.”

Warren nodded. “Actually it does. It’s a good thing I ran into you.”

She pulled a hunter green binder out of her backpack and flipped it open to a page in the middle. “Could you sign this for me?” She indicated a blank line at the bottom of the page. A different masculine scrawl filled each of the four lines above.

He gave her a confused look, but took the binder. “Are freshman psych students charging now?”

“One of my pledge tasks for the Alpha Delts is to get five boys I don’t know to tell me their troubles. If you’ll just sign there, verifying that you told me your problems of your own free will, I can check off this task and move on to the next one.” She pulled a pen of her backpack. She removed the cap with a snap and handed it to him.

After a moment of stunned silence, Warren added his own signature to the page and handed the binder and the pen back to her. He noticed that next to each signature were descriptions written in a loopy, feminine hand. Phrases like “alcoholic,” “dyslexic,” “Mama’s boy,” and “senioritis.” He could only imagine what she would write down about him. “Girlfriend issues,” perhaps, or maybe “bargain basement boyfriend.” He would be the laughing-stock of the Alpha Delt house this week, for sure.

“I bet that psychology major came in handy for this assignment,” he said, shaking his head ruefully.

“I’m not one.” Marissa slipped the binder and pen back into her backpack and zipped it closed. “I’m studying theater.” She stood and hoisted the heavy backpack onto her shoulder. “Now that I’m done, I can give my roommate back her textbook. It’s way heavy.”

Warren grimaced. “Theater major!”

Marissa looked at him calmly. “I helped, though. Admit it. All you needed was someone to vocalize the questions. You found your answers on your own.” A few seconds later, she had disappeared into the crowds of students changing classes.

It took Warren a few minutes to digest what had just happened, but after he thought about it, he realized that Marissa had been right. Sure she was an evil sorority princess who had lied and tricked him into talking, but along the way she had helped him realize something important. He wanted to marry Colleen. He wanted that perfect wife, the perfect house, and the beautiful baby. Now he just had to ask for it.

* * *

After he'd recovered from Marissa and her revelations, Warren went back to his dorm room to change clothes. A guy didn't propose to his girlfriend every day. A future businessman knew that he had to project the right image. He decided on a nice, button-up shirt (despite the heat); a pair of crisp jeans; and his favorite boots, the black ones. On his way out the door, he picked up his new guitar. Colleen loved it when he sang to her. It would be just the right way to set the mood. Maybe he could play her the tune he'd been writing that morning. She'd be flattered if he told her he'd named it after her.

He walked across campus to the girls' dorms quickly. Maybe he should be nervous, but it was hard to be when Colleen was already wearing his ring. When he arrived at Hartfield Hall, Warren found the door to the east stairs propped open. Despite regulations against it and urban legends about murderers and rapists, occasionally someone propped the door open. Instead of announcing his presence by entering via the front door and calling upstairs for an escort, Warren decided to utilize the propped door and the element of surprise. He just hoped Colleen was in her room. Unable to hide the grin on his face, Warren mounted the stairs to the third floor two at a time.

Colleen and Gwen had junior privilege, so they'd landed a corner room. It was bigger than most, and quiet since it was at the end of the corridor. A marker board hung on the outside of their door. Other girls in the hall constantly scrawled little notes on it. When Warren stepped up to the door, it had been wiped clean. Instead of cheery messages and requests for paper proofing or homework help, all that decorated the board was a hastily scrawled heart.

Before he could knock, Warren heard a laugh from inside the room, followed by a murmur. Even though he couldn't discern the words, Warren recognized Colleen's voice.

Gwen must be in there with her. Warren paused, his hand lifted to knock. Should he ask Gwen to leave, or whisk Colleen away? Whisking was more romantic.

“Warren?”

He turned to see Gwen coming down the hall from the study lounge.

“What are you doing out here, I thought you were...”

Warren placed his fingers on his lips, cautioning Gwen to silence. He stepped away from the door toward Gwen so that Colleen wouldn't hear him. He didn't want to blow the surprise.

“I'm here to see Colleen.”

Gwen took in Warren's dapper appearance. “You just got here?”

He nodded. “Just a minute ago.”

She stared at the heart drawn on the marker board. Then she took a deep breath and let it out in a very slow, almost silent, sigh.

“Something wrong?” He watched his friend with concern.

“I thought you were in there. With Colleen.”

Warren frowned. “I thought you were in there. Maybe she's on the phone.”

“That heart...” Gwen swallowed convulsively, then she grabbed Warren's arm and moved so she stood between him and the door. “Don't go in there. Let me.”

Warren laughed at her absurd reaction. “I planned this all out. It's a surprise.”

“She didn't know you were coming.”

“That's the conventional definition of surprise.”

Gwen stared at him for a long moment, her eyes wide and serious behind her wire-rimmed glasses. “If you’re going to go, go.” She stepped back. They both heard Colleen’s laugh again. “She never locks it. Not even...”

Warren stepped forward. He knocked, several brisk raps.

“Gwen! Come back later,” Colleen yelled through the door.

He looked back at Gwen. She seemed to be holding her breath. Her arms were clasped across her chest in a defensive posture. Tension tightened his chest for no reason that he could name. His grip on the guitar tightened, and he felt the strings bite into his palm. Warren reached out and twisted the knob.

“Gwen!” Colleen shrieked. “Get out!”

Warren stepped through the door.

A surreal, dream-like feeling swept over him. Things slowed down. They were happening in front of him, but they weren’t happening to him because it wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. Colleen wasn’t in bed with another guy. Not his Colleen perched up there, her breasts bouncing as she moved on top of someone else. She wouldn’t do that to him. Those weren’t grunts he heard because there wasn’t a guy in here. Colleen was in here alone. She was studying, or maybe watching TV. Whatever the hell this was, Warren truly believed for that first moment that it wasn’t real.

Then she saw him. Her moan of pleasure became a squawk of shock. Her hands jerked at the covers, pulling them up to hide her exposed body. Sunlight glinted off the gold band on the third finger of her left hand. Then she moved, scrambling as far from the guy as the covers would allow.

Reality started crashing into Warren's skull. He sucked in a breath and almost gagged on the musky smell of sex. He tried to retreat from the smell but misjudged the distance when he stepped backwards and rammed his leg into the corner of Gwen's desk. He swore as the pain dashed him back into normal time. No more slow motion. No more dream.

He stared at Colleen, hurt, confusion, and anger warring for control of his expression. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

“Warren, I...”

The man below her moved, attracting Warren's attention. He saw a familiar buzz cut and football player build.

“Stoney!” The word came out as an accusation to Colleen, not a question to the man in her bed.

Anger won the battle. It built up in Warren's chest, expanding so it was hard for him to breathe. He stepped closer to the bed. His leg still hurt badly, but he wasn't going to limp. Warren forbid himself to show weakness. Colleen clutched the covers more tightly, shivering.

“Coop, get a grip.”

“A grip?” Warren's voice was calm when he replied to Stoney's comment. Deceptively so. “Grip this.”

In one swift motion, he raised the guitar and slammed it into one of the bedposts. The post tore through strings and the center of the strawberry blonde soundboard before cracking the other side of the instrument. Guitar strings twanged discordantly before they broke. Warren pulled the guitar off of the post, doing even more damage in reverse, and

swung it again. This time into the wall over her nightstand. The guitar splintered even more, and the things on the nightstand—a glass, some makeup, and a framed picture of Colleen and Warren at his grandmother’s birthday party last year—fell to the floor and broke.

“Warren.” Colleen’s eyes pled with his. He couldn’t look at her. He dropped the mess of a guitar to the ground with the other broken shards.

“Warren!” Gwen farther inside the room and reached out to him. “Let’s go.”

“This is your fault, Gwen!” Colleen cried. “You should have...”

“Shut up!” Gwen grabbed Warren’s arm and pulled him to the door. “I thought you put the heart on the door because you were in here with Warren. It’s not like you told me you were cheating on him.”

“You would have run and told him. You’re so in love with him, and you can’t stand it that he’s mine.” Colleen’s face twisted with rage.

“I’m not yours.” At first it was a whisper Warren barely felt pass through his lips, then it was a shout. “I am not *yours!*”

Colleen stood up, pulling the covers off the bed with her. Stoney covered himself with her pillow, but everyone else was beyond caring about him. Colleen extended her hand to Warren, holding her Laura Ashley comforter over her body with the other hand. “Warren, please. Come back and let me explain.”

Warren shook his head and let Gwen pull him out of the room. “Explain it to Stoney. Maybe he’ll buy it.”

* * *

“I’m so sorry.”

He barely heard Gwen. Her voice flowed over him. They were in his room on his twin bed. Gwen sat, leaning against the wall, and Warren lay with his head in her lap, curled into the smallest ball his lanky body would form. She had taken down his ponytail and sat smoothing his hair back with gentle fingers.

“If I’d known, I would have told you. I knew she cheated on her other boyfriends, but I thought you were different.”

“Gwen?”

“Yeah?”

“I came over there to propose. It was supposed to be perfect.”

“Oh, Warren!” Her voice hitched with a suppressed sob. “She’s not good enough for you.”

“That’s what everyone always tells the one who was cheated on.”

“This time it’s true.”

Conversation subsided. Warren lay there, focusing on drawing his next breath. The last thing he noticed before he fell asleep was her fingers stroking his hair—Gwen’s stubby, calloused, imperfect fingers.

Did You Hear about Donald and Bitsy?

Anyone here know a Donald Jacobs? He called, asked me to meet him here after work.

Donnie, sure. Comes in here all the time.

He ain't been comin' in so much lately.

What would you know about it, Mike? C'mon and take a load off.

Oh, Leigh. Prime target.

A little young.

Young? Your last one was twenty-six!

Shut up, Sadie. He's coming over.

I'm Rex. I own this place. Bartend, too.

Frank.

It's a pleasure, Frankie. I'm Leigh, and there's a seat right over here just for you. Sadie and I need a little testosterone on our side of the bar.

Uh, thanks. Rex, I'll have a beer. Whatever's on tap.

You got it. You said you were looking for Donald?

Yeah, anyone seen him?

You know those investment bankers, Frankie. Always men of their word. I'm sure he'll be here soon.

Unless he's otherwise occupado.

What do you mean?

You ain't heard about Donald and Bitsy? Quite a tale.

Tell me about it.

Well, if you really wanna know, guess I can fill you in. I 'spect you might be waitin' a while anyway, so it'll fill the time.

Y'see, Donald used to always be in here. The Blue Bird was practically his second home. A lifer, like me. Guess after a day of investment bankin', y'need to just kick back with your pals, y'know? Yeah, so in March this girl comes to the dart tournament. Rex puts one on every month. Course, I'm the record holder 'round here. I can get to zero faster than most of y'all in here. It's all in the wrist. But, I weren't playin' that night. Previous month's champ can't play. Gotta give everyone a chance at the prize, that sorta thing.

Anyway, that night was the first time I saw Miss Bitsy DuPres. Man, what a cute gal. She walked in wearin' this pink sweater and her hair all in curls. Blonde, too. Like you, Frank. Don't know how a gal like her heard about this place. We don't get a lot of teachers in here, but Bitsy was a wiz at the old dartboard in spite of all that education. Beat all the guys. No body could believe such a little thing could get her score down so fast. Never missed a trick. The way she set her feet together and squinted one eye when she aimed, it was somethin' to see. She wiggled, too, when she did it. Like she had to get the jitters out before makin' her throw. It comes down to her and Donald, and she whupped up on him good, that gal did. And Don ain't no slouch at darts. Not so good as me, mind you, but no slouch. You shoulda seen his face when she hit that last number right on the money!

So, anyways, after she won, Donald offered to buy her a drink. 'Just to prove I'm not a sore loser,' he said. Heard him my own self. They went right back to that booth in the corner and sat there talkin' all night. I never saw Don look like

that before. Smitten from the get-go, like my mama would say. Faster than you can drywall a five-by-five closet, they were an item. He stopped comin' in here every day. Only once a week, maybe, and even then she was with him. They sat at that corner of the bar when they came in. Sometimes, we'd all talk, but sometimes they'd just be over there whisperin' and cooin'. Ralph here started callin' them the love birds, didn't you Ralph?

I didn't mean nothin' by it.

Course you didn't. Anyway, Bitsy's a real sweetheart. I liked her from the start, fair to say. When you talk to her, she listens. Really listens. Seems to care about whatever it is you're talkin' 'bout. School teacher and pretty, and yet she never makes no one else feel dumb if they ain't educated as much as her. She always has somethin' nice to say, too. Told me once she liked my hat. Just a blue Cowboys hat, but she said she liked it. And she seemed to make Donald happy. I ain't seen him that happy since before my wife wore a size eighteen.

There was that time he bought her the necklace, remember?

What, Ralph?

You remember, Rex. Don bought Bitsy that necklace and gave it to her. If it weren't real pearls, I'll be damned.

So, they were a happy couple, then?

Yeah, I'd say so, Frank. In my estimation. Yes.

Your estimation, Mike? Not the most reliable measure.

What do you know about it, Leigh?

More'n you.

Whaddya mean?

It's not really any of my business, but if you must know, then I guess I'll tell you.

Bitsy isn't Donald's type. He doesn't go in for those damsels in distress. He prefers a girl with spunk, gumption, and a head on her shoulders that's good for more than holding up her hair.

The kind of gal who runs her own public relations agency?

Donald and I have been over for years, Sadie. Don't make connections where there aren't any. However, the ex-girlfriend does have a picture of what a guy wants in a girl, and she's earned it the hard way, through trial and error. In our case, his error, but still. That Bitsy, my god! Even her name shouts meek, mealy-mouthed miss. What kind of man wants that? She lured him in that first night, and he couldn't figure out how to get out again. You guys know how she won that tournament? She had you all so flummoxed by shaking her ass before throwing the dart that none of you could hit the target. I may never have won the tournament, but at least I keep my ass where it belongs.

You keep your ass stabled three states away!

Ralph, give her a chance to finish her story or I'm cutting you off.

Sorry, Rex.

Thank you. You'd think I was talking to a group of juvenile delinquents. Where was I? Oh, yes. After Bitsy won the tournament, Donald didn't offer to buy her a drink. He was upset about losing, and she walked over in that tight sweater and said she'd buy him a drink to make up for kicking his ass. Like her ass hadn't been distracting him the whole time. It was demeaning.

The next night, she showed up here again, on the prowl. It was Saturday, so all the college kids were around. I was here with Tad, a guy I used to see. Donald was here, too. He

and I were talking while Tad fleeced the frat boys at pool. Bitsy walked up, pushed into our conversation, and took it over like she was god's gift. Like men haven't seen blonde hair, blue eyes, and big tits before. She didn't look at me or even acknowledge my existence. Talk about uncouth! She stared at him with those doe eyes, and when Tad and I left, I saw Bitsy and Donald in the parking lot. She claimed her car wouldn't start, and would he please take her home. Like that isn't the oldest excuse in the book! If a girl wants to get laid, she ought to just come right out and say it, not hide behind excuses that date back to the 1950s.

Her car was broken. Bad alternator. She brought a tow truck the next morning to take it down to Pearlman's. I was here changing out the taps. Bitsy came inside to thank me for letting her leave her car in the parking lot overnight. Like I would have her towed. The college kids, sure, but not Bitsy.

The car is not important! All I know is that Bitsy roped Donald into a relationship that he didn't want, and the reason why I know that is because he told me so from his very own lips. The night after I officially threw that cheating scum Tad out of my apartment, I ran into Donald at Tom Thumb. He seemed really subdued. My Donald was never subdued. I don't go in for subdued. You have to be full of life and able to uphold your end of the conversation to keep my interest, and Donald filled that bill for several months before we parted ways. That night, however, he was just staring at the grapefruits with this horrible look on his face. He could hardly even talk. It was a sad, sad way for a man to be, and I made no bones about it when I told him so.

'Donald,' I said, 'don't let this girl change you without a fight. The real you is worth saving.'

'She's killing me,' he said. I asked him if he meant Bitsy, and he couldn't bear to do more than nod. So, I took him home with me. We talked and, well, I don't kiss and tell, but I

think when he left my place, he was his old self again. I helped him realize there was life beyond Bitsy, and I haven't seen them together since.

That was the night Bitsy came in here without Donald!

She came in here without him?

Yeah, and that never happens. No one is less of a barfly than Bitsy. I've been a waitress here for neigh on ten years, so I know my barflies. The night she came in, it was a Monday. I remember because I'd gone and gotten my hair done, and I only go to the beauty shop on Mondays. There was this one time that my beautician had to move my appointment to Tuesday because she was doing hair for these girls for the high school play. They were doing *Steel Magnolias* so they needed that big football helmet hair. So, she moved my appointment to Tuesday, and I plumb forgot all about it. I had to go for a whole week with flat hair, and the gals in my Plato class gave me the hardest time. Wouldn't let me deliver my oration with a straight face, after I'd worked so hard on it, too. You remember, Rex, I was practicing that thing over and over in here. I made practically everybody listen to it. You remember, right?

Trust me, Sadie, I remember, but we were talking about Bitsy.

You're right. Got off on a bunny trail, didn't I? Happens sometimes. There was this one time I was trying to tell my roommate how to make my granny's apple pie and we ended up talking about irises. There's no easy trail from here to there, I'm telling you.

Oh, but Bitsy! She came in that Monday night. It was just me and her, pretty much. A couple of the guys were playing pool in the back, but we were the only two at the bar. She looked all upset and asked me if I'd seen Donald,

but I hadn't, and I told her so. Poor girl looked like she'd lost her best friend. She'd been crying something fierce, let me tell you. Her eyes were all puffed up, and her mascara was running. Her nose was all red, too. And she was wearing this big, old flannel shirt; ratty jeans; and had her hair in this sloppy ponytail like she didn't even care to look pretty. Not that she doesn't always look pretty, even in a flannel shirt, but that night, she just didn't care.

Of course, I asked her what was wrong. I told her that talking it out would help, and I'm nothing if not willing to listen. Apparently, she and Donald had a fight. He'd asked her to marry him over a dinner of roast turkey and string beans, and she said no before time for the chocolate pie. I asked her why she said no. I mean Donald is such a great catch. Investment banker, plenty of money, and he treats her so nice. I would kill for a man who treated me like that. Bitsy was even wearing that pearl necklace that he gave her. Kept touching it all nervous-like.

'You don't know this, Sadie,' she told me. 'No one here does. I was married before. It didn't work out. I have to be completely sure before I take that plunge again.'

She looked so sad. I could practically see the ambivalence dripping out of her like honey off a comb. She wanted to marry him, but she was scared. So I told her right then and there that if he really loved her, he would wait till she was good and ready. And I stand by that, too. A gentleman will treat his lady like she needs to be treated, no holds barred.

Sammy! Get your butt over here.

So, that isn't Donald? When the door opened, I thought maybe it would be Donald.

No, Frankie. It's Sammy. Another lifer like Mike.

Are you a lifer?

Me? No. I just come here when I need to unwind.

Every night!

Shut up, Sadie! Your tip's going through the floor.

I'll put the rest of my tip on your tab.

You guys are never going to believe what I saw.

Tell us, Sammy. Here's a gin and tonic to wet your whistle.

Oh, that's perfect, Rex. You've got the touch. So, anyway, I was in the park just now—my interview was there because the director of the playhouse says she thinks better in the fresh air. Makes it harder for me to take notes, but it makes her loosen her tongue. After we were done, I was walking back to my car when I saw Donald.

I don't suppose Donald was coming this way, was he?

Aren't you having fun with us, Frankie? You don't want to leave so soon.

I don't think Donald was heading here. He was in the park with Bitsy. They were broken up last week from what I heard. Big blow up over string beans or something, and then he almost got together with some other girl. But they are back together now, and how! She was holding the biggest bouquet of tulips I've ever seen—red ones—and she was sitting on a bench. Don, he was kneeling in front of her with one of those black velvet ring boxes. It was better than when Mitch proposed to Lucy on *Dallas*! Don was crying, and Bitsy was crying, but they were smiling too.

The ring was gold. I think we're going to have a wedding to attend soon.

I always did like that Bitsy. Such a cute thing, and always lookin' out for other people. She called me a cab one night, and I ain't never forgot that. She brought my Cowboys hat out to me, too, when I forgot it. Great girl, that Bitsy.

Remember the time she asked Sammy to come speak to her class?

I enjoyed doing that so much. Bitsy was a sweetheart to ask me. She said her class wanted to talk to a real writer. I think I enjoyed it more than the kids did, which was probably why she asked me. Taking pity on old Sammy. Such a sweet girl.

What about Donnie? He's a great catch, and I've always said so. I was telling the gals in my class about him, and one of them asked me to try and set her up with him. 'Sorry girls,' I said, 'but he's taken.' Now he's really taken! And that sweet Bitsy, I'm so glad he finally convinced her that it was time to quit waiting and move on to the next phase of her life. Pretty thing like that doesn't need to be a stick in the mud.

They aren't getting married. Sammy must have misinterpreted what he saw.

What are you talking about, Leigh?

After the emotional roller coaster she put him through, why would any man in his right mind go back to that? It took me hours just to get him to loosen up the night after I found him at the grocery store. He wouldn't go back willingly.

Don't look now, Leigh.

Where?

Out the front window. If you do, you'll have to eat some crow. I might have a good recipe, though.

Hey, Frankie! Where are you going?

He's here.

Forget it, Leigh. You lost him.

You can't lose something you didn't want in the first place. I'm not really into blonds.

Can I have everyone's attention please?

Donald! *Your ears must be burnin', son, 'cause we've been talkin' 'bout you for the past hour.*

Good things, I hope.

Depends on who you ask.

Well, Bitsy and I just wanted to stop in and let you all know that we're getting married.

Congratulations!

When?

Tonight, actually. We're hopping a plane to Vegas right now. That's why Frank is here.

You all met Frank, right? He's going to stand up with us, be our witness, considering he's Bitsy's brother and all. You OK, Leigh? You look a little green. Where...?

Just let her go, Donald. She needs a moment to herself.

You know we ain't lettin' you out of here to catch that plane till you tell us everythin' about what happened. Start now.

We do have a few minutes to spare.

Good, then talk, honey. Around here, we could use a story with a happy ending.

Glass Angels

“Licentious clothing is a sin. Beware, sisters, for if you inspire lust in men, you will be judged by the hand of God.” The woman paced a stretch of sidewalk in front of the movie theater with small, precise steps. Her unadorned face, tight bun, and shapeless gray dress provided a dull contrast to the vibrant actress in red Spandex on the “Coming Attraction” poster decorating the wall at the woman’s back. When she paused for breath, another took up a similar cry, and then another. They knew their cues. They did this at least two weekends a month, if not more. It didn’t matter what movie was playing—these zealots came out in droves to save people from their sin.

Bess and James Montgomery walked toward the parking lot in the middle of a crowd. Bess gripped her husband’s arm as they approached the group. James slid his arm around her shoulders. The tiny *whoosh* of his nylon whispered protectively against her silk.

At least a dozen men and women lined the sidewalk between the theater and the parking lot with a monochromatic glory. The women wore loose cotton dresses that covered their bodies from neck to wrist and ankle. Sturdy shoes peeked from under their skirts with every step, and some covered their buns with brown or gray kerchiefs. In contrast, the men looked almost normal. They wore blue jeans and work shirts as they challenged moviegoers with questions like, “If you die on your way home, will you ascend to the pearly gates of Heaven or fall into the flaming pits of Hell?” The rustle of pamphlets and the crackle of flyers punctuated the women’s cries and the men’s questions. Occasionally, one of the small shadows slightly behind the adults could be seen as a drab child.

“To take part in the 1,000-year kingdom of God, a Christian must be holy!” one of the men called in a bold voice. A black fedora perched on the man’s head at a challenging angle that didn’t quite mask the zealous fire in his eyes.

Bess and James kept a quick pace, not wanting to lose the protection afforded by the other moviegoers. Despite having just spent two hours laughing and crying at the same romantic comedy, it was a crowd of strangers, but none was willing to break the pack as they approached the proselytizing masses.

“Are you a Christian, sir?” Fedora thrust a flyer at the man in front of Bess and James. The flyer’s intended recipient—a man who wore his heavy metal T-shirt and waist-length hair with pride—pushed the flyer away and grabbed his date by the arm to hurry her steps. The date, an equally proud girl with coils of dark hair pinned to her head with sparkling clips, winked at Fedora and blew him a kiss. Fedora kept his flyer and let the couple surge past him.

Then one of the women farther down the line made her move. She waved a pamphlet in front of the girl and shrieked, “It is a sin to yoke yourself to a nonbeliever! Better to pray for him from afar than to burn for eternity with him by your side, my sister!”

“I ain’t your goddamned sister!” The girl’s lips, colored a red so dark that it was almost purple, curled in a smile indicating thoughts of a most impure nature. She hooked her thumb toward Fedora and added, “Go home and fuck his brains out. Show ’em licentious, babe!”

The couple walked on, leaving the woman with her hand still raised, the abandoned flyer fluttering in the cool, evening breeze. James shivered and pulled Bess closer still.

“Ma’am?”

The voice surprised them both. They had been prepared for yelling, coercion, and threats, but not for what they saw—a tiny girl sheathed in a long, calico dress who had large, blue eyes and tousled, brown curls. The girl extended her hand to Bess, a flyer clutched in her fist.

“Jesus loves you,” the girl told the couple with an earnest expression. James had seen expressions like that before when he gave the Children’s Sermon on alternate Sunday mornings during “Big Church.” The little ones would sit around him and agree with everything he said about God’s love, that same, solemn expression on their faces.

Bess reached down and took the flyer. “Thank you, sweetie.” Bess moved as if to touch the little thing’s shoulder, but one of the women snatched the girl away before she could be contaminated. James yanked his wife’s elbow and pulled her toward the car at a faster pace. They broke free of the crowd, and made it the rest of the way to their car unscathed. Neither spoke until James negotiated their navy blue Impala out of the parking lot.

“I had to take it.” Bess worried the strap of her seatbelt with her fingers. “How could I not?”

“Just ignore her, that’s how not.” James clenched his jaw. “What if someone from the congregation saw us talking to those people? They would lump me in with those crazies and damage everything we’ve worked for.”

“You’re a minister,” Bess replied tartly. “If you aren’t supposed to talk with misguided people, then who is?”

“People like that are more than misguided. They’re deluded, idiotic, and don’t have the compassion to fill a thimble. They’re the kind of church group that people who don’t live in the Bible Belt think of when you say Southern Baptist, and if Deacon Blodgett saw me talking to them, think of the rumors his wife would spread.” He squeezed the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles turned white. “Next time we see those people, just ignore them. I don’t care how cute the little girl is.”

Bess looked down at the flyer, which lay in her lap. “I just didn’t want anything to happen to her if she didn’t meet her quota. The fact that someone would make their child do that...” Her voice trailed off and silence filled the car again, broken only by the crinkling as she crumpled the flyer between her fingers.

The drive home took less than ten minutes. A quiet house greeted them upon their arrival. Bess went to their bedroom to change clothes. James paused in the entry hall to hang up his jacket. Even after three and a half years, their home felt strange to him without the daily presence of their son, Tommy. The things that used to irritate James—blasting stereos, loud movies, toys or books scattered about, shoes dropped in the middle of the room—he now remembered with a hint of nostalgia. Their son, who preferred Tom now, was a senior at the University of Texas, majoring in journalism, but James still thought of him, on occasion, as a carrot-topped ten-year-old. The clay ashtray Tommy had made in Sunday School still sat on the desk in the corner, and James could never forget the stain that marred one of the cushions on their floral-print couch. They kept that cushion flipped with the stained side down, but Tommy’s cola had marked the furniture,

just like his growth marked the doorframe between the living room and the kitchen all the way up to six feet. James cleared his throat and the noise sounded abnormally loud in the childless house. He called for his wife—the only other person who could understand how he felt. James hoped he didn't sound as plaintive as he felt.

Bess walked into the living room from the door on the other side, already wearing a pair of satin pajamas and matching robe in a delicate rose color that brought out the natural pink in her cheeks. “Yes, dear?”

“I'm sorry I snapped at you. It got to me, too. That little girl.” He shook his head slowly and moved closer to her, seeking her comfort.

His wife didn't reply, but she smiled the smile that, even after 25 years of marriage, James never tired of seeing. She wore her hair short now, in a cap of curls around her head instead of long and wavy—easier to hide the gray, she claimed—and crow's feet lined her green eyes, but that smile made them sparkle just as they always had. Sometimes James wondered what Bess thought of him now. Was he still as attractive to her with salt and pepper, receding hair, and a paunch that seemed to keep growing despite attempts to ride his exercise bike? Then Bess rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. One kiss from Bess was enough to drive his negativity away, at least for the moment, which left room for positive thoughts.

“He'll be here on Thursday,” James reminded her. “Less than a week.”

They both looked at Tom's high school portrait hanging on the wall behind the couch in a dramatic gold frame. His familiar face peered back at his parents, somehow taking his father's Roman nose and his mother's eyes and combining them into a look of his own with the straight red hair that appeared once every few generations in the

Montgomery line. A small, enigmatic smile hovered around his mouth. James wondered what Tom was thinking when the photographer snapped that picture.

“I’m counting the days.” Bess fingered the edges of her robe letting the soft material slip through her fingers.

“Are you going to make your pot roast?” James asked. It would be their first family dinner since Christmas—two people couldn’t finish a pot roast on their own, and the short-cut recipes never had the right taste. His mouth watered at the thought of his wife’s signature dish.

“You know I will, dear. It’s his favorite.”

“It’s my favorite, too.”

“I know.”

* * *

Despite the fact that he had Thursdays off—each member of the ministerial staff at Riverside Baptist Church took a different weekday off since they worked Sundays—James woke up that particular Thursday earlier than usual. He couldn’t go back to sleep as he could in his youth, so James slipped out of bed and into the plaid robe Bess had bought him at the last J.C. Penny’s closeout sale. Then he wandered down the hall to the kitchen to start the coffeemaker.

By the time Bess arrived, the smell of snicker-doodle-flavored coffee permeated the house. An omelet sizzled on the stove as James added freshly-chopped onions and grated cheese. Two blue plates waited next to his work area.

“You didn’t have to do this.” Bess leaned against the doorframe, her head cocked to one side and her hands in the pockets of her pink robe. Though still in her pajamas,

Bess had taken the time to stop in the bathroom and apply a coat of red lipstick. She always said if she had her lipstick on she was ready for anything.

“I wanted to.” James left the eggs unattended for the thirty seconds it took to approach his wife and kiss her on the cheek. Then he sprinted back to the stove, his slippers flapping against the tile floor with each step. The toaster dinged, and without needing to be asked, Bess removed the bagel and put half on each plate. She smeared each half with light cream cheese, and then poured two mugs of coffee.

The couple had just sat down to enjoy the rare treat of a mutually prepared breakfast when the doorbell rang. James gave his wife an apologetic look.

“Start without me. That might be Mrs. Smythe. Her father is in the hospital again, and I told her to let me know if she needed anything.”

Bess began to tidy her hair with her fingers. “If it is, invite her in. I’m sure she could do with some coffee.”

When he reached the door, James slipped the chain free and found the knob already unlocked. Unless he had been uncharacteristically careless and left the knob unlocked when they got home after last night’s business meeting, there was only one person who could be standing on the other side of the door. His polite smile gave way to a huge grin as James pulled the door open and saw a familiar, tall man standing there, his russet hair covered by a burnt orange baseball cap.

“Tommy!” James stood back to let the boy and his basket of dirty laundry through the door. “Tom.” He corrected himself and then, once the basket and Tom’s backpack were on the floor, James pulled his son close for a hug.

“We didn’t think you’d be here ’til this afternoon!” Bess hurried in from the kitchen and pulled Tom down so she could kiss him on the cheek.

“We got back from the ski trip early.” Tom moved to pick up the basket. “Let me get this out of the way.”

“Nonsense.” Bess scooped up the basket before Tom could reach it. “I’ll take care of these.”

“I just wanted to save the quarters.” Tom tried to lever the basket away from her with his longer arm span, but Bess managed to sidestep him. “You don’t have to do my laundry, Mom.”

“It’s my only chance to spoil you, so hush!” Bess held the basket hostage and then carried it off through the kitchen to the laundry room.

Father and son exchanged glances that acknowledged the futility of pursuing the issue. Though usually mild mannered, Bess had a spine of steel, and thwarting her when she made up her mind was more difficult than squeezing extra money out of the church deacons after they’d paid their ten percent tithes.

Half an hour later, laundry twirled madly in the washing machine, the omelet had been divided into thirds, an extra bagel steamed on a third plate, and the reunited family sat around the kitchen table. James took a bite of his omelet, followed it with a sip of coffee, and realized things were just about perfect.

“So, sweetie, how was the skiing?” Bess wrapped her fingers around her coffee mug, caressing the warmth before she took a sip.

Tom swallowed a bite of bagel before answering. “Really good. Blaine’s uncle hooked us up with a great cabin right off the slopes.”

“How is Blaine?” Tom had brought his roommate home once. The boy was blond, polite, and quiet. Bess had taken to him immediately. James thought the boy well mannered and well groomed, but they hadn’t hit it off. Blaine’s views were much too liberal for the minister’s taste. James knew that Tom had picked up on his father’s feelings, so James tried to make the effort and act interested.

“Blaine’s fine. Took a hard fall on a black diamond run, but came out of it all right.” After a bite of eggs and a slurp of coffee, Tom said, “What’s new with you guys?”

“Your father is trying to get the church to sponsor a food pantry for the needy.” Bess beamed and patted her husband’s hand. “Volunteers are lining up in droves to staff it, if only the deacons will approve the funds.”

“That’s great, Dad.” Tom scraped up the last of his omelet with the end of his bagel.

“Do you know who volunteered for the first shift if the food pantry gets off the ground?” James winked at his son. “Mrs. Talbot. She said Jenny is home on Spring Break, too, and would love to see you.”

Tom exchanged a look with Bess. James frowned, certain that his wife thought he was a meddling old father. So what if he was? James would love to see his son settled down when he graduated in the spring. Tom hadn’t met the love of his life in college, so perhaps his high school girlfriend would look more appealing now. Jenny came from a good family that had been a member of Riverside Baptist for decades.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Tom stood up and began gathering the empty plates.

“Why not?” James watched his son carry things from the table to the sink on the other side of the kitchen. “She’s a nice girl, Tom. You could do worse. I think she’s still sweet on you.”

“I’m not in love with her,” Tom replied. Silence reigned around the table for a long moment, and then Tom said, “I think I’m going to take a nap. It was a long drive back from New Mexico.”

“You do that, honey.” Bess stood up, pausing by her husband’s chair. “We’ve got you for the whole weekend, so there’s plenty of time.”

After Tom left the room, James looked up at his wife. “Jenny and Tom were such a good match. I wish he could see that.”

“They weren’t a good match if he didn’t love her,” Bess replied.

“Well, why couldn’t he love her?” James stood up and shoved his chair under the table with a thump. “Once he graduates, it’s going to be a lot harder for him to meet eligible girls.”

“Maybe he has plans of his own.” Bess padded over to the sink in her bare feet and turned on the water. James saw the steam rise as Bess added soap to the water.

“Need help?” he asked by way of reconciliation. She definitely thought his matchmaking too intrusive. James told himself that Bess was right. He needed to let Tom, and God, take care of it. The Lord had someone perfect picked out for Tommy, and it would all come to fruition in His time.

Bess shook her head. “I’m fine, honey. You go on.”

* * *

The next morning, James went into the church warm and full from the memory of last night's pot roast dinner. Luanne, the church secretary, greeted him with her customary warmth and followed him back to his office with the handful of pink message slips that had accumulated on her desk from the day before. Without the stack of messages, her desk was as neat as her crisp blue dress and tight chignon. The fact that she managed to live in a house with five cats and never show up to work with a stray cat hair on her clothes amazed James constantly. She was twenty years his senior, but luckily the light in her eyes and her southern drawl softened her angles and edges or people would find his secretary a stern matron instead of a welcoming gatekeeper.

"You have several messages, Reverend." Luanne laid the message slips on the corner of his desk "Also, Brother William wants to talk to you about the prayer service at the hospital."

James glanced down at his calendar, quickly flipping it to the right date. Then he grimaced. In the excitement over Tom's arrival, he'd completely forgotten about the bimonthly prayer service Riverside Baptist sponsored at the local hospital. Every week a different church hosted the service as a community outreach effort. James had been one of the founders of the program, encouraging the various churches to work together more than they ever had before.

"Let William know I'm here whenever he's ready," James said.

"Yes, Reverend," Luanne replied. Then she took something from her pocket wrapped in a white handkerchief. "One other thing. The deacons found this mixed in with the Wednesday night collection, and thought you might want to take a look at it."

“Thank you, Luanne.” James took the object from her hand and slid it into the pocket of his suit jacket. He would look at it later, once he had prepared for the prayer meeting. Once Luanne had gone, he sorted the phone messages. None that couldn’t wait. That taken care of, James went to his file cabinet and began looking for an old sermon he could adapt for the day’s purpose. He didn’t need much—something short, sweet, and inspiring for invalids and hospital staff. William, the music minister, always arranged for an uplifting solo and several comfortable hymns that he could lead from the old upright in the corner of the hospital’s small chapel. James kept meticulous records of when he preached on what topic, and he kept all the notes and written versions of his sermons, as well, for just such an emergency. The sermons and topics were filed in alphabetical order and cross-referenced by date. The dates were important so that he didn’t return to a topic too soon in the rotation. Baptists weren’t like Catholics—they wanted an ever-changing show from the pulpit, not routine liturgy. When James found a likely topic, he pulled out the folder and began to go through the contents.

“Morning, James!”

The reverend looked up to see William standing in the doorway of his office.

“Good morning, William.”

William had been the music minister at Riverside Baptist for almost three years. He’d arrived fresh from seminary. James, himself, had just celebrated his fifteenth anniversary. Luanne and the rest of the staff had presented him with a cake for the grand occasion a couple of months back. William topped James’s height by at least half a foot, and he always seemed to find the perfect vocal key for whatever subject under discussion. This morning, his voice modulated a deeper key for the solemnity of a

hospital visit, but small trills of the buoyancy and the excitement William still felt about performing in public lightened the tone several notes. James could hear the excitement in William's voice and see it on his face. James remembered that excitement. He used to get it right before he stepped up to the pulpit to preach a sermon.

"Here's the order of worship for this afternoon." William handed James a list of hymns.

"Good choices. Should fit right in with my remarks." James gestured with the folder, knowing it made him look prepared and on top of things.

William nodded. "Sounds great. Want to drive over together?"

"No thanks." James shook his head. "Tom's in town. I'm supposed to have lunch with the family today."

"Ah." William turned and headed for the door. "See you this afternoon, then."

Alone in his office, James flipped through several pages of handwritten notes in the folder until he found the printed sermon. The pages were covered with markings. Words to emphasize were underlined, and he'd starred the important points. This one would be easy to condense. Taking the sermon, a red pen, and a legal tablet, James exited the office. Luanne gave him a questioning look.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be in the sanctuary."

Luanne nodded dutifully, and James went on his way with a brisk step. He needed to brush up on this sermon before this afternoon, and that was something he couldn't do quietly in his office. Sermons had to be practiced behind a pulpit. Even if it wasn't the same pulpit or podium from which he would deliver the message, he couldn't rehearse without the proper motivation.

No one bothered James on his way to the main sanctuary. He passed Carlos, one of the maintenance engineers, but got by with only a nod. James had attended other churches with bigger staffs than this one. Riverside had four members of the ministerial staff—James, William, the missions director, and the children’s minister—a maintenance staff of two on ordinary days (though a third came in on Sundays and Wednesdays), and Luanne. Those were the only people working in the building on a daily basis.

The sanctuary sat apart from the rest of the building, down a short corridor lined with benches and windows. The corridor ended in a foyer. Doors on one side opened to the church steps that led down to the street. The doors on the other side opened into the sanctuary. On Sundays, all these doors stood open, beckoning in all passersby. Today, they were all closed. Heavy bolts locked the doors leading outside. The daily staff entered and exited through the door that led to the parking lot around back. James pushed one of the heavy, wooden doors that opened into the sanctuary and walked in. The well-oiled door swung silently shut behind him.

James paused and took a deep breath, savoring the aromas of the wood oil used to polish the pews and the fresh flowers on the altar in front of the pulpit, and the bookish smell that came from all the Bibles and hymnals in the pews and the large leather Bible next to the flowers on the altar. He walked slowly up the center aisle, taking time to admire the look and feel of the large room. It seemed different than it did on Sundays, full of people. Though his goal was always to fill every seat in the sanctuary, James did love the room when it was empty and silent. It seemed almost holier somehow, more sacred. So many modern churches had traded in wooden pews and stained-glass windows for folding chairs, clear windows, and plain walls. Riverside Baptist still had the classic

look that it had been built with sixty years ago. Only carpet and upholstery had been refurbished over time. To James, the look promised spirituality.

Tall, narrow, stained-glass windows let in the morning sun as tiny bursts of color. James stepped through a square of orange and raised his hand briefly to catch a triangle of blue on his palm. Each window depicted a scene from the Bible. Old Testament stories—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, Noah, and others—marched down one wall and New Testament scenes—the manger, the baptism of Jesus, the empty tomb, etc.—lined the other wall. James’s favorite window was nearest the pulpit on the New Testament side. It depicted a choir of angels floating in the starry night above a group of shepherds. One angel, presumably the leader, floated above the rest. Her blonde hair and golden halo sparkled in various shapes and shades of yellow glass. Through the abstraction of the lead-bordered panes, James could tell they were singing about their king, newly born human in a nearby manger. Angels—beings created solely for the purpose of praising God—had always fascinated James. If God had such beautiful creatures to worship and glorify him every moment of every day, why did He create man with his pesky, unpredictable, ungrateful free will? When James looked at that window, he imagined he could hear the glass chorus singing their heavenly melody.

Soft, red carpet covered the aisle James walked. It warmed the room next to the cool, white tile under the pews. The wooden pews had red, upholstered seats to match the carpet. The ceiling of the sanctuary rose high in an arch, and wooden beams made dramatic lines all the way up. Sometimes, staring up at them, James felt as if he were in his own ark while the sinners of the world drowned outside in an endless flood.

The baptismal rose proudly behind the choir loft, housing a spectacular golden cross on its high wall. In reality, the cross was made of iron covered with layers of golden paint, but from the pews it made a striking focal point. When James preached from that pulpit, he could feel the power radiating down from the cross, through his words, and out into the congregation. Every time he slammed his fist on the pulpit to make a point, the sound echoed through the room with pleasing drama. Each slam felt to James like another soul saved.

James ascended the stairs to the pulpit with a sure step. He instinctively knew the distance between each step without glancing down. After spreading the sermon on the podium, he found the section he intended to adapt and began to practice. The words flowed easily from his lips with the power of that cross behind him. He spoke of healing and lingered fondly on the story of Jesus and the paraplegic lowered through the roof of a building. It was a story that brought hope to those in the hospital; a story that reminded them their Creator was in control, and His healing hand was upon them. It was only when James paused mid-oration to jot down a note on his tablet that he realized he wasn't alone any more. Tom sat on the front pew staring up at him.

"Time for lunch already?" James gathered up his papers and walked down the stairs. "Where's your mother?"

"Talking with Luanne." Tom made no move to get up, so James sat down next to him, noting with amusement the vibrancy of the red upholstery on this pew compared to the others. Unless they were late for heavily attended Christmas or Easter services and had no other choice, Baptists did not sit on the front row.

Then James looked more closely at his son. Tom's brow had a deep furrow, and his hands clenched and unclenched in his lap.

"Is everything OK, son?" James reached out and touched Tom's shoulder, letting his hand linger for a moment in a show of paternal support.

"There's something I've wanted to tell you for a long time. I don't know how."

"Just say it," James advised. He made a quick mental list of all the things that could be wrong, and solutions for dealing with them.

"Can we go someplace else?" Tom looked up at the golden cross and then back at James.

"There's no place better than this. This is the house of the Lord." James took a deep breath and then decided to broach the subject himself. Maybe if he started the ball rolling, Tom would figure out that they could talk about this thing. James was pretty sure he had figured out the problem. "Are you failing that math course? We can afford a tutor. Whatever it takes for you to finish with that Summa Cum Laude."

"That's not it, Dad."

James felt a rush of relief. Tutors were pricey. If Tom was passing that troublesome math course, then whatever it was couldn't be as bad as James had feared.

"Can we please go somewhere else?"

"Son, tell me. Now." A stern note entered James's voice. Tom obviously needed to get this out, and the sooner the better

"I'm gay." Tom's tone was calm, matter-of-fact.

"I'm sorry?" The chorus of angels in the window went completely silent as James tried to rationalize what Tom had just said.

“I’m gay.”

Frantically, James tried to figure out a way to make sense of that two-word sentence. Happy. Gay could mean happy, couldn’t it?

“Dad?” Tom leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. James watched and felt cold inside. He saw circles under his son’s eyes that he had not seen before. And there was a sickly, yellowish pallor to his skin.

Please, Father. The silent prayer burst from James’s mind. *I heard wrong. Please. My son is Yours. Please don’t let him have said it. Thy will be done, Father.* James had faith that God’s will was not for Tom to be gay. God’s will was for no one to be gay. Satan gave man these lusts, and God could take them away.

“I’m gay.” Tom repeated himself once more, his voice stronger. “I always have been. I was afraid to tell you because...”

“You are *not* gay!” James’s voice cracked, but he did not look away from his son’s face.

“I am.” Tom leaned back in the pew, away from James. His back came up against the arm of the pew. No more room to retreat.

“You’re not.”

“I would know better than you. Why do you think things didn’t work out with Jenny? Why do you think they never work out with any of the girls I go out with?”

James stood up and began to pace. He looked at the golden cross and then back at his son. He walked through a square of pale, red light coming from one of the windows. The power of that color, the color of the blood Jesus shed on the cross, imbued James with a new strength. More than that, it gave him words. He had said these words before,

but this time they had a new meaning. It was his own son he had to pull back from the brink of Hell, not an anonymous stranger in the congregation.

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” The words from Corinthians burned through James with a purifying flame.

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor *homosexual offenders* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

“What about *For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have ever lasting life?*” Suddenly, Tom was standing, too, facing his father. Looking down on his father from a greater height.

“You never said God’s love was conditional.”

James stepped back and felt the stairs to the pulpit. He stepped up once, and found himself a little higher than his son’s eye level.

“God’s love isn’t conditional.” James felt his voice fill the sanctuary. He’d been doing it for fifteen years, and he could do it now. “But you have to repent of your sins, Tom. I don’t know what you’ve been doing at that school or who’s been influencing you, but you have to hear the Word of the Lord. The Word will save you, son. Just listen.” He took a breath. Tom looked as if he were about to speak, so James launched into more scripture. This time Leviticus. The big guns. “*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.* Do you hear that? Detestable. Do you want to be detestable to your heavenly father? You must repent of this sin.”

Any other person might have stumbled over the words, might not have known what to say, but James had been talking about sin, Hell, and salvation for so long that he knew the words by heart. He felt a rush of gratitude for that. Woe to him had he been found unprepared.

Tom advanced toward James, pausing only at the step, refusing to climb up. “What I didn’t want was to be detestable to my *father*. Me and God... we’ve made peace. I wanted the same with you. No more lying or talking about girls at dinner. No more pretending to be someone I’m not to make you proud. You have to know who I am!”

There was a moment of silence. Tom watched James. James stood frozen.

“Forget it.” Tom turned and began to walk away.

“No!” James couldn’t let him get away—there was still too much work to do. He came down off the step and followed Tom down the aisle. His course took him through the red square of light and through an orange one. Fire. If he couldn’t save his own son, what kind of preacher was he?

“You’re not gay.” James grabbed the sleeve of Tom’s shirt, stopping him before he could get to the doors. “You’ve been tricked. There are programs, rehabilitation. We can get you all sorted out again.”

“Lock me up in an asylum? Brainwash me?” Tom ripped himself and his shirt out of his father’s grip. “Forget it!”

“I’m your father,” James roared. “I paid for you to go to that school and get corrupted. I’ll fix this, and you can come back to the fold.”

“I never left. It doesn’t matter if your closed-minded congregation can’t accept me. I’ve found one of my own. God made me this way, and He doesn’t hate me.” Tom’s

voice thickened with emotion. “You think I haven’t read the Scriptures? People don’t stop shaving because of the laws in Leviticus. Your suit is made of two different kinds of fabric, and the grapefruit this morning—not from a tree declared forbidden for three years.” His chest expanded and contracted as he pulled in deep breaths. When he spoke again, it was almost a whisper. “I knew you couldn’t accept me.” Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes and glimmered violet as a stream of light came through another panel of stained glass.

James knew it was time to press his advantage—tears were a sign of weakness and James had one last weapon in his holy arsenal. “This will kill your mother.”

“She was alive when I left her in your office.”

“She’s alive now.”

James followed the sound of that voice to see Bess in the doorway. The silent doors hadn’t betrayed her entrance. “You knew? About this?”

She nodded once. “Tom told me at Christmas.”

In vain, James tried to recall some sign, something that he had missed. He recalled nothing but his wife’s smile over the turkey dinner. He advanced on his wife with wildly rolling eyes. “Liar!”

Bess didn’t retreat.

“How could you keep this from me? I had a right to know!”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell.”

Tom pushed himself between his parents. “I made her promise not to tell you so I could tell you myself.”

“Liars. Both of you—liars!” James looked back. The angels were still silent, and even the cross seemed to have lost some of its luster.

Tom looked down at his mother, and she clasped her son’s hand for a moment. Then Tom let go. “Don’t worry, Father. As soon as I graduate, you’ll never have to see this liar again.”

“I won’t pay for it!” James snarled. “Not one more penny. If you can’t abide by my rules, you can’t live on my paycheck!”

“The last check cleared two weeks ago,” Tom said. “But don’t worry. I’ll pay back every cent. I don’t want to be beholden to *you*.” Tom pushed the door open with an angry smack and walked out of the sanctuary.

James stared at Bess. She looked like the same woman he’d seen over coffee this morning. Blonde curls ringed her forehead like a halo. Tears spilled over her lashes and down her cheeks, leaving tire tracks of mascara.

“He’s my son.” She reached out her hands to her husband. “I love you, but I had to help him.”

Part of James wanted nothing more than to fall into her embrace and let it wash away everything that had just happened, but the other part of him couldn’t allow that. That other part kept whispering *liar* over and over again. Without another word, James walked out of the sanctuary, carefully avoiding any contact with his wife.

* * *

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. James vaguely remembered Luanne talking to him when he wandered into his office, but he had no recollection of anything she might have said. In the back of his mind, he knew he had to be somewhere.

Eventually he remembered the prayer service. The sermon had been forgotten on the pew in the sanctuary. James would not go back for it. He got in his car and drove to the hospital in a daze.

The chapel had already begun to fill when James arrived at the more modern, more ecumenical place of worship. The walls and carpet were beige and the windows clear glass with white blinds. The old upright piano stood at an angle to the podium and rows of simple chairs with no colored upholstery to speak of. A few framed prints of famous religious works of art hung on the walls. William sat at the piano, already playing the first hymn. James sank into a seat on the front row, barely able to concentrate on anything but breathing. The soloist, a young girl from the local community college, sang a sweet song, but the words blurred together for him. There was a long moment of silence after the soloist took her seat. Suddenly, James realized it was his turn. He stood and shuffled up to the podium, his hands hanging empty at his sides.

James gazed out at the rows of chairs in the chapel. People filled over half of the seats, the usual assortment of patients in multicolored robes; nurses, doctors, and orderlies in white; and a few administrative staff members in suits.

They watched James passively. The minister realized they were waiting on him to say the magic words that would cure their aches and pains, heal their wounds, and take the sting from bruised hearts and shredded souls. James was their shepherd. He knew they were waiting for him to provide their catharsis. This wasn't supposed to be interactive in their minds. He was supposed to do the work and deliver them to God, as a shepherd delivered his flock, but how could he do that when he had just lost the sheep that mattered to him the most?

People began to shift in their seats.

“Brother James?” William’s voice held the tenor of worry.

James didn’t acknowledge William’s question. Instead he turned and walked out of the chapel. His feet took him down the main corridor out the front doors, and they didn’t stop there. James walked for a long time. When he tired, he stopped to rest on a bench or a bus stop—whatever he happened upon. When he passed a park, he stopped for water at the water fountain. The cries of children at play caught his attention and he watched them for a moment. A little boy and a little girl swung on the swings. Their legs pumped them higher and higher as they fought to see who would get free of gravity first. Finally, the little boy launched himself from the swing and hit the ground on both feet with a shout of triumph. For an instant, James thought he saw a flash of red hair, and then the boy stood up, golden curls glinting in the sun.

Eventually, James ended up downtown. The walk had been long and his feet hurt, but the pain kept him focused. He had to think about something other than the turmoil in his soul. If he thought about everything that had just happened, he might curl up in a corner and never move again.

When he shoved his hands in his pocket, James felt something foreign. Something hard wrapped in a soft cover. He pulled out the handkerchief that Luanne had given him earlier. Inside the folds of white cloth, James found a simple golden ring. The circle gleamed, the orange fire of sunset reflected in its depths, countering the darkness reflected from James’s brown eyes. He turned the ring over and saw a single word engraved on the inside: *Faith*.

Who would inscribe such a thing and then abandon the ring in a church offering plate? Suddenly angry, James balled up the ring in the handkerchief and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Then he heard the voices.

Without realizing it, James found himself at the movie theater. It wasn't time for the first evening shows yet, but the zealots were already there. This weekend there were more than usual, and they had signs. As he edged closer, James saw that some of them stood in front of a certain movie poster. It was the poster for a new comedy. James had seen the previews and vowed then and there never to see the film—an independent film about a group of homosexuals trying to find their place in the world. Propaganda, he'd called it last weekend. Bess had been silent. At the time, James had thought she was just too interested in the romantic comedy they were about to watch to care about previews but now he knew her silence to be a sign of her lie.

Fedora was back. This time, he wore a white T-shirt emblazoned with an American flag that unfurled across his wide chest. He held a sign in his arms and used it to gesture. The sign was white with blocky, black letters: "Leviticus 18:22." Nothing more. Without the associated text, James wondered how many people even knew what that meant. But James knew. He'd quoted that very verse a few hours before.

Behind Fedora, others held similar signs with other verses: "1 Corinthians 6:9," "Romans 1:27," "Leviticus 20:13," and others. Two women walked by holding hands. Fedora gestured to them with his sign and said something. James couldn't make out the words, but the women hurried away after exchanging a few harsh words.

James almost walked away. Then he saw her. The same little girl who had handed Bess the flyer last weekend stood next to Fedora. Her companion was so large and so emphatic that the girl in her mud-colored dress escaped notice; but once James saw her, he couldn't look away. She stood in Fedora's shadow, her eyes wide and staring under a swath of stringy curls. A poster hung around her neck with a cord fashioned of bright red yarn. The poster was white, like the others, with black letters. "Sodomites will burn in hell." Orange and yellow flames swirled around the edges of the poster, curling and writhing in streaks of marker and dollops of paint.

A violent burst of righteous anger surged through James. He wanted to rip that sign off the little girl's neck and tear it into a thousand pieces. The act of putting that sign on an innocent child reeked of evil, even more so than the act the sign described. He ran across the street.

When he reached Fedora and the little girl, James huffed for breath. When he could speak again, his voice was gruff. "This is evil."

"Evil is this movie and such immoral actions being paraded in front of good, decent Christians. Are you a Christian, sir?" Fedora looked James up and down, taking in his sweat-streaked face and expensive suit.

"I happen to be a Baptist minister." James felt his chest expanding like Jesus's must have when he turned over the tables of the moneylenders in the temple. "Just because this movie is immoral, you don't have the right to dress your daughter up in the flames of Hell."

"Hypocrite!" Fedora's voice rose with each word he spoke. "We fight against the hypocrisy of so-called Christians armored in superiority and holding fast in stone temples

of sin. You allow Satan and his lies to corrupt you and your children, while the Bible demands punishment. An eye for an eye!”

Other conversations in the area stopped and everyone turned to watch the confrontation.

“What about love?” James demanded. “Why should this child wear Hell on her chest when Jesus came to this Earth and died for our sins?”

“We must be holy to be worthy of what Jesus did for us.” The man’s voice boomed like a radio with the bass up too loud, and James wondered if he sounded like that to his congregation. “Only the holy will be judged worthy to be with our Lord. We are in the end times. We must all repent to save ourselves. Even her.”

The little girl stepped back, her wide eyes moving from James to Fedora. Then she started to cry. A woman in a sickly yellow dress hurried over and pulled the little girl out of earshot. When her flames disappeared, it extinguished the fire inside James, as well. The man in front of him would never listen to reason. He thought he was right, and there was nothing James could say to convince him otherwise. Fedora was just as blind as those people in the hospital chapel. He was just as blind as Tom.

James turned and trudged back to the street and took a left at random. He wanted as much distance between himself and the movie theater as possible. Fedora shouted something else, but James ignored it, relieved when he turned another corner, which put him out of sight of the theater.

“Dad?”

A small independent coffee shop sat a few yards away. Bess and James frequently stopped there for a decadent dessert or a cup of flavored coffee. In fact, they’d been there

last weekend before their movie. Now Tom stood in front of the iron chairs his parents had sat in the week before, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. He had exchanged jeans and a sweatshirt for black slacks and a gray turtleneck. Somehow, though, the neutral colors didn't make him look drab. He looked polished and more mature than James had ever seen him.

James's gaze lowered, unable to sustain contact with his son's for long, and James noticed someone familiar sitting at the table.

"You know Blaine," Tom said, his tone carefully devoid of emotion.

"Yes." The thin blond's stare made James even more uncomfortable. James walked a few steps away.

Tom handed his cup to Blaine and followed. "Did you come for more lectures?"

"I didn't know you would be here. I was just walking, and..."

A sneer twisted Tom's lips. "I thought you came to join the protest at the theater. Gotta stop the spread of evil."

Sodomites will burn in Hell.

Questions deluged James, pouring through his mind almost more quickly than he could identify them. Would Tom burn in Hell? What about forgiveness and the cross? What about faith? What about years lived in the bosom of the church? What about an old man's broken heart?

"I love you, son."

Tom blinked and stared at James.

James said it again. "I love you." The great weight that had settled into his chest splintered.

“Now you’re going to tell me that Jesus will love me, too, as long as I renounce my evil ways, right?”

“I love you, Tom.” Tears made a warm, sticky, salty path down his cheeks. The skin they passed over felt tight afterwards. The weight cracked and moved some more, freeing his lungs to suck in a huge gust of air.

“What about my lifestyle?”

James swallowed, trying to rid himself of the last lump of the weight before he spoke. “I can’t support this lifestyle. Not even for you. The Bible says it’s wrong. But I love you, Tom, no matter what.”

“That isn’t enough.” Tom squared his shoulders.

“What do you want?” The father’s question came quickly, almost desperately.

“I don’t want to be loved in spite of myself. I want to be loved for myself.”

“You heard all the sermons and read all the passages.” James noticed a halo around Tom, created by the yellow, neon light in the window of the coffee shop. Open. “I can’t change my whole belief structure because you ask me to.”

Tom shook his head slowly. “I’ve compromised who I am all my life, and I won’t do it again. If you can’t accept me and support me, I don’t want your love.”

Water flowed down the gutter past the sidewalk where the men stood. Leaves swirled in it, dancing joyously until they sank into the sewers below. James felt his soul fall with them, deep down into a mass of soaking, crumbling leaves.

“You may not want it, but my love will always be here for you.” James looked at his son one last time, and then he turned and walked back the way he had come. For the first few feet, he hoped that Tom would change his mind and call him back. By the time

he'd walked a yard, he knew it wasn't going to happen. James thought about turning around himself, going back, about promising Tom anything. But he didn't. James shoved his hands in his pockets and felt the hardness of the ring against his fist. Without looking, he pulled it out of his pocket and dropped it in the gutter.

“Mister!”

It was the little girl from the protest. Her sign was gone, but he recognized that tangled hair and those wide eyes.

“Yes?”

“This is yours.” She held her wet hand out to display the ring.

“You keep it.” The girl stared at James, so he added, “It's not really mine.” Then he turned and kept walking. The little girl didn't say anything else. She just stood there until he rounded the next corner, the little bundle clutched in her hand.

On the next block James found what he was looking for—a pay phone. He plunked change in the slot, and then dialed the number than he knew from memory. Bess answered the phone on the first ring.

“Bring me home.” He didn't say please or apologize. That would come later. Right now those three words were all he could say.

Bess understood.

“I'll be right there.”