

The Road From Nowhere

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Falling Is Like This

Ramsey wasn't marrying Anne Francis because he wanted to but because he had to. He'd waited too long to pull out, and now, with their wedding less than a week away, he knew he'd go through with it. Ramsey wondered if he'd ever really thought he'd pull out.

He asked on the spur of the moment, when they were in bed together. They'd just finished an awkward bout of love making when he'd blurted it out. "Annie, will you marry me?"

She'd looked at him, tears threatening to spill down her face before clamping her arms around his head in an embrace. Lost in her arms, he immediately wondered why he'd asked. He wanted to tell her it was all a joke, but she was holding him so tightly, her tears of joy dropping into his hair, that he couldn't say anything. The next day he told himself it could wait just a little longer. Anne was happy, the happiest he'd ever seen the woman, and he didn't want to destroy that. Ramsey believed he'd tell her soon as she tried on wedding dresses, as she ordered the cake, as he was fitted for a tuxedo.

Telling her now would be cruel. Ramsey had never been cruel to anyone in his life; he prided himself on taking care of unfortunate people. In fact, that was how he got where he was now with Anne. He felt sorry for her, sitting alone at a table in his restaurant, enough food on her table to feed a family of five. She didn't look up from her plates, as though ashamed that she could eat that much, apologizing for her grotesque proportions that barely fit into the booth. Fat hung both above and below where the table cut into her stomach.

The most amazing sight was her breasts. He'd never seen any so big in his life, at least none that were real. He wondered what it would feel like to put his head between them. When he finally had the chance to, he realized that it was a dark empty place, a place no one had been before him, a place he'd never dare enter again. He lost his breath in there, with her bosom completely surrounding his tiny head.

When all the other customers were gone, Ramsey slid in across from her. "How's your dinner?" he asked. She looked up, surprised to have company, surprised to be alone in the restaurant.

"Wonderful," she said with a shy grin. Besides her breasts, that was what first attracted him to Anne. He'd always suspected that grossly obese women were loud and messy, but Anne was a quiet woman with a shy smile. He noticed that she didn't shove the food in her mouth but placed each bite on her tongue as though it were the first in a long time. Her napkin lay folded nicely beside the plate. She was a lady, his one true weakness, the last one of his generation he suspected. And in the least likely place.

"I'm Ramsey Blanchard. I own this dump."

She smiled again and wiped her mouth on the napkin. Then she refolded it and laid it neatly beside her plate as it was before. Anne's manners offered the place more prestige than it deserved. "Anne Francis," she said shaking his hand. He was amazed how his hand was lost in hers, how he couldn't even see it inside her giant paw.

Ramsey let her get back to her dinner, but he heard snickers as he went back to the kitchen. "You like her Rams?" his cook asked. "I think she might be a little much for you – for anybody for that matter." She laughed at her wittiness and glanced at Ramsey's

thin frame. He'd tried to gain weight for years but was destined to be thin, a man with the body of a teenage boy.

"Go home Alice," he told her. "I'll clean up."

When she left, Ramsey stood in the back and watched Anne eat. He'd never seen a person eat that much food so meticulously. After she was done and he'd cleared her table, he asked her to dinner the following night.

Sex with Anne was awkward to say the least. Ramsey had a hard enough time finding everything on a thin woman, but with layer upon layer of fat all over her body, Ramsey found himself completely at a loss. Of course, with her help, Ramsey was getting better at finding everything.

Their biggest problem was positioning themselves so he could breathe. In the end they'd decided the missionary position was best. That way they both enjoyed their lovemaking, and no one got hurt.

Afterward he rubbed his hand across her stomach, big yet oddly firm. Anne wasn't a doughy fat woman; she was just huge. Her entire body was big, covered in hard fat.

"I like to eat," she told him as he rubbed a small part of her stomach. "Maybe you should try it sometime." She pinched the skin under his arm that held no hint of meat. Since they started going out, Ramsey had been eating less and less. Never a big eater, now he just nibbled at the restaurant instead of actually fixing a meal.

"I eat. Just not much."

“Well, I’m an eater. That’s what I like to do.” She smiled her shy smile, and he had to smile back.

Ramsey thought he was doing Anne a favor by going out with her, but he soon learned that everyone who knew her loved her. Sure, strangers still looked at her like she was a leper, but anyone who took the chance to meet her fell in love with her immediately. There was something in her demeanor, that she didn’t act like a fat woman, yet she was so frank about why she was fat. No one could hold her weight against her, and they loved her for it. Once she got over the initial shock, even Ramsey’s mother loved her. Another reason why he had to marry her.

Anne grunted as they walked up the long staircase to his mother’s house. She was winded and tired from the long drive. When they opened the door, his mother’s jaw dropped to the floor. Ramsey had told her she was fat, but he hadn’t told her how fat.

“Mrs. Blanchard, nice to meet you,” Anne said cordially. She took his mother’s hand, and she let her shake it. But his mother didn’t move, just stood there looking at the sheer size of her. Anne didn’t bat an eyelash.

But when she closed her mouth, his mother’s disbelief had turned to pity. Her eyes turned weepy, and Ramsey wondered if she felt sorry for her son or Anne. Before she could say anything, Anne said, “Don’t feel sorry for me because I’m fat Mrs. Blanchard. That’s my fault.” She smiled as though she were taking a burden off Mrs. Blanchard’s shoulders. His mother smiled back, her pity replaced by something Ramsey couldn’t name.

“She’s a good woman,” she whispered later. “You keep a hold of this one.”

Ramsey just smiled. When his mother served dinner, he excused himself, saying he didn't feel well.

When Ramsey told Alice that he and Anne were getting married, she was surprised. Ramsey knew she was in love with him, knew she assumed they would get married someday. He hadn't done anything to make her feel this way, but he was the only person in the restaurant who liked her. Sometimes they'd go out after work, outings she'd considered dates and that he considered friends having a beer. She didn't take her anger out on Ramsey directly but started giving burnt food to customers or leaving the meat a little too pink in the middle.

Once she'd reconciled herself to the fact that Ramsey and Anne weren't going to change their plans because of her, she and Anne became friends.

"Oh God, looks like I'm gonna be busy today," Alice yelled whenever Anne entered his restaurant.

"I'd like one of everything," Anne would call out, only half-joking.

Ramsey winced a little at these comments and threw out whatever he was eating. His ribs were starting to poke out a little more, and he could see the bony knobs on the tops of his shoulders. He felt better knowing this, as though he could make up for Anne's overindulgence through his own deprivation. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and kissed Anne, tasting her last meal on his lips.

"I think I might sell the restaurant after we get married," he told Anne as she ate dinner and he watched.

“Why?” she asked with her mouth full of food. Her manners started to wear thinner as they got closer to the wedding. He winced a little as some of her food fell onto the table. She didn’t even notice.

“I just don’t want to do it anymore. I’m sick of food,” he said, pushing his plate toward her. She stuck her fork in his salad and pushed the lettuce into her mouth.

“Well, what do you want to do then?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Something...I just don’t know.”

He threw his hands in the air. She was taking this with a grain of salt. He thought she’d be upset if he sold the restaurant, if she didn’t have a place she could go and order whatever food she wanted without worrying about the stares. He’d hoped that would be the last straw, that she’d want a man who could provide food all the time. He should have known better. Anne loved her food, but she didn’t let it run everything in her life.

She pushed his plate back toward him. “Eat. You look sick.”

He sat with his head down and picked at the food, not eating much. He wondered if Anne knew he was seeing Alice too. He’d never cheated on anyone in his life, and he couldn’t really explain how it had happened. Alice stopped by his office one night after closing to talk about Anne. They’d chatted about the wedding, then Alice said something about how much she ate. The next thing he knew, they were rolling around on the floor. He looked at Anne, but she was more intent on her food than what he was doing when she wasn’t around. How could he do this to Anne? It wasn’t like he loved Alice; he didn’t even like her all that much. She was just someone to go out with after work. Anne was more. He wasn’t sure what she was more of, but she definitely was more.

Even if he decided to sell the restaurant and do nothing, she could and would take care of him. If he sold the restaurant, Alice would just bitch. She couldn't take care of him. He had to take care of her. He was the one who made out her paycheck each week. Besides, with the tantrums she was prone to throw, no one else would keep her for more than a week.

Ramsey told himself that he couldn't marry Anne because she was too good a woman for him. Or that he couldn't marry her because he was worried she would die. Obese people have quite a few heart problems; he'd read that somewhere. Just look at John Candy – dead of a heart attack, all because he ate too damn much. He didn't want the same to happen to Anne.

Deep down, he knew the reason was their visit with his mother. That look of pity, Ramsey couldn't handle it. But it wasn't just his mother. When his mother looked at them, Ramsey finally recognized what had been bothering him on other peoples' faces. They felt sorry for Anne, and for him. That look, every time he turned around, someone who didn't even know them was giving them a glance of pity. *That poor fat woman and her poor skinny husband.*

He wanted to shout, "You don't know her! Just say hi. Talk to her for a few minutes, and you'll see." But instead Ramsey put his head down and walked quickly, hoping the stares would go away. So far they hadn't, and he was having a difficult time going out in public with Anne. They'd tried to go to the movies once, a nice dark place where no one could see them, but Anne hardly fit in the chair and complained throughout the movie about how uncomfortable she was.

“I’m going to throw you a bachelor party,” Alice told him less than a week before the wedding. The restaurant was closed, and they were lying on the floor in his office. Their clothes lay in a neat pile on top of his desk, and Anne thought he and Alice were discussing whether or not he should sell the restaurant. But he hadn’t even told Alice that he was considering it. “We’ll just have it here. It’ll be great.”

“Bachelor parties are only for men Alice.” He ignored the pinched look on her face, instead looking at how her ribs jutted out too. He ran his fingers along the lines, wondering why she was doing this to him.

“I know, but I just want to celebrate all your happiness.” She spat the last word like a disease.

Ramsey sighed and removed his hands from her. He closed his eyes and watched the room spin behind his eyelids. “Whatever you think you’re going to accomplish, you’re not.”

Alice stood and started putting her clothes on. He could hear her zipping her jeans, tying her shoes. “I’m not trying to accomplish anything,” she said as she opened the door. “I just thought someone as happy as you should have a celebration.”

Ramsey heard the door close behind her but didn’t move. He lay on the floor, enjoying the simple feel of the fuzzy carpet beneath his body. “A celebration,” he whispered to no one in particular.

“What’d she say?” Anne asked when he got home.

“She’s going to throw me a bachelor party,” he whispered.

“Good,” Anne said moving across the room and kissing him on the temple. “I was afraid you weren’t going to get one. Better Alice than no one.”

Ramsey nodded silently and headed toward the bedroom. He couldn’t face her, not now. If he did, he’d blurt out everything that had happened between him and Alice, but Anne would never believe that Alice meant nothing more to him than not getting stared at by strangers.

“Hey, what’s wrong hon?” Anne called after him, but he didn’t answer. He closed the door to the bedroom and locked it. He heard Anne turn the knob, then again, a knock, finally her heavy steps moving away. During all this, Ramsey stood staring at the door wondering what he was doing to this poor woman who deserved better than he was giving her.

The restaurant was decked out in blown up condoms and blue streamers. Tacky. Anne would have had classy decorations. He stood in the middle of the restaurant, all his male employees and his few friends around him. Alice stood by the kitchen surveying the scene.

Anne was at home. She said she’d try to show up later, but a friend of hers was having some problems and needed to talk them out. Anne had invited the woman to dinner. Ramsey hoped she took all night. He didn’t want to see her, didn’t want to see the look in her eyes if she saw how this party just wasn’t enough.

He told her the night before that he was having second thoughts. She told him they were just pre-wedding jitters, cold feet, and that he’d get over them. Then she’d

kissed him, a passionate kiss, one meant to show him just how special he was, but he felt nothing, just a bitter taste from her most recent meal.

Ramsey stood in the middle of the room questioning some of his friends on cold feet. He'd had too much to drink and wondered if Alice was still watching him. She'd been standing in the doorway all evening, never taking her eyes off him. He could feel her eyes boring into his body, a body she knew in every intimate detail.

“What’s wrong, afraid she’s too much woman for you?” one of his busboys chortled. “Yeah, I’d be afraid of that one.” He winked as though the two had a little secret, but everyone else was a little nervous, wondering what Ramsey would say to an attack on his future wife. But Ramsey said nothing, just looked at him with an odd little smile on his face.

“I mean,” the man said, growing nervous by what he’d said. “She’s a damn good woman. Don’t get me wrong about that. She’s just a little more of a woman than I care for.” He’d had too much to drink. The other men tried not to laugh, but Ramsey could see their eyes dancing in merriment.

“At least I’ve got a woman, Sam,” he said quietly. The other men watched him closely. His neck was growing red, a sign that he was ready to blow.

“Yeah, you gotta whole lotta woman! You wanna throw a little my way?”

“Hell, she’s enough for the whole lot of us,” one of the cooks said.

Before he knew it, Ramsey’s fist had connected to the man’s face. The man was doubled over, holding his nose, and blood was dripping everywhere.

“What the hell’s wrong with you Ramsey?” he yelled. “We was kidding. Just a little razzing before the wedding.”

Ramsey just watched as the other men dragged him to the bathroom. They whispered to themselves along the way and shot glances at Ramsey. But Ramsey didn't care. He doubted anyone would say anything about Anne again.

Ramsey turned toward Alice who stood in the door of the kitchen, her eyes fastened on him. He strode toward her and pulled the strings of her ever-present apron.

"Let's go," he said, pulling her toward his office.

She stumbled after him, and he saw that she'd been drinking too. "I love you," she said when he closed the door. Her voice came in a harsh whisper next to his ear.

His hand that had reached to pull her apron off was poised midair. He'd told Anne he loved her but didn't know if he was telling the truth. He'd never told Alice because it wasn't the truth. He knew that whatever they were doing together, it wasn't out of love, at least not on his end.

"No you don't."

"I do. Marry me instead," she said.

"Anne..."

"Not Anne. Marry me."

He looked at her, not understanding what she was saying. He couldn't marry her; he was marrying Anne. He didn't want to marry Alice.

"You're drunk."

"Yes," she paused to consider it. "But I do love you. And I do want to marry you."

She started to unbutton his shirt, kissing his neck. He didn't stop her, but his hands remained limp at his sides.

“I can’t marry you,” he whispered.

Alice pulled her head back and looked at him. “Yes you can.”

“I don’t want to marry you,” he said loudly, too loudly.

Alice looked at him with wounded eyes. “You don’t?”

Ramsey shook his head and looked at the ground.

“Do you want to marry Anne?”

“I’m marrying her, aren’t I?” He straightened his shoulders and looked her square in the eye. Tears were starting to course down her cheeks.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes I did.”

Alice stepped back and looked at him. He felt like he was under a microscope, that she could see everything he hadn’t said. She didn’t say anything, just walked out the door and closed it quietly behind her.

Anne peered at Ramsey’s eyes when she picked him up but didn’t say anything. He didn’t try to hide from her that he’d been crying. He didn’t try to tell her he was sober either. It was obvious that he wasn’t.

After standing alone in his office for a while, he went back out to the party, but Alice was nowhere to be seen. He asked the others where she’d gone, but no one knew. Then he told everyone to go home – the party was over. A few people looked surprised and asked what was wrong, but he just shook his head and walked away. He handed everyone their coats, thanked them for coming, and quickly ushered them out into the

cold. He'd spent the next hour making For Sale signs and hanging them in the windows, all the while finishing a bottle of vodka.

When Anne walked in, he was sitting on the floor with the empty bottle. "Are you okay?" she asked as she picked him up off the floor. She tried to set him down on his feet, but his legs immediately gave way. His head jammed into her breasts, forcing him to relive the one time he'd put his head there on purpose. He could smell food in her clothes, could feel his head being sucked in, into blackness. Ramsey could feel himself slipping down into darkness, Anne's arms reaching out to grab him, but there was nothing she could do – he was falling, and neither one of them could do anything about it.

Under a Snow Filled Sky

I never expected to be in his apartment again, but there I was standing in the doorway. The lingering odor of cigarettes drown the smell of the fresh snow that melted on my coat and head. The thermostat was turned up high, and the room felt like an oven. The things I'd once loved – the rust colored couch I'd given him, the balcony overlooking most of Oakland and Squirrel Hill – now gave me the chills. I felt like I was entering a place that no longer existed. But it did exist, and I was there.

“Thank you for coming,” Travis greeted me.

I nodded and saw that the hair on his arms was now more of a focal point than the arms themselves.

I glanced into the living room and wondered why I felt it hadn't been lived in. Like life was on hold in that room. The lights were off but I could see that nothing had changed since the last time I'd been there. Even the haphazard way we'd rearranged the furniture while painting was still as I'd left it.

Before I could get a good look Travis grabbed my hand and led me back to his bedroom.

Nothing had changed. The walls were still a pale yellow, the color I'd chosen and he'd hated. At the paint store I had shown him every color I liked, but he grimaced at all of them. Only when I threw my samples on the ground did he find one he could live with, one I'd shown him an hour earlier. As I stood in the middle of a mess of samples, he picked that one up and smiled sheepishly.

Even my underwear that had always hung on the bedpost was still there. It had been a month, but the room was far from free of me.

The window was open, and snow was pouring in, covering the bed.

“Do you want something to drink?”

Like it was a social call, like he hadn't called me at four in the morning threatening suicide. Like I hadn't called a cab and stood in the middle of the road so I could jump right in.

“No, I'm fine.” I paused, didn't know what to say. Tell him I'm not worth suicide?

He sat on the edge of his bed and his face dropped into his hands. I could already see the tears squeezing between his fingers, a quiet weep. I stood beside him quietly, trying to think what I would have done a month ago. I tangled my hands in his curly hair and rubbed his head. I would have done this. Yes. This is right.

He sat, silently sobbing while I ran my fingers through his hair again and again. It almost felt right.

Travis was my math tutor, a man-boy with dark curly hair and a small but beautiful body. One night, soon after we started studying at his house, he showed up at my apartment. I had a small studio apartment that smelled like Chinese food from the last tenants even though I'd been there for over a year. I'd been sitting in the middle of the floor, papers scattered around me, trying to do a problem set when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door, and Travis stood there, a smile on his face. “Come on, let's go.” He grabbed my hand and started to pull me out of the apartment, but I stopped. I looked down at what I was wearing – my brother's cut off sweatpants and a man's shirt. I wasn't even wearing shoes.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Just grab some shoes.”

He held the car door open as I stepped in and then went around to the other side.

“Where are we going?” I asked once he’d gotten in.

“Just thought you could use a break.”

He pulled out and started driving. I glanced over, but he wasn’t offering any information. I sat back in the seat and enjoyed the night. It was one of those rare nights in the city where you can see more than five stars. The air smelled of fall leaves, sweet but tangy.

I glanced over at him occasionally, but he enjoyed sitting beside me, telling me nothing, leaving our destination an unknown. The cars grew fewer as we moved higher into the hills of Pittsburgh. The roads were still wide but without streetlights, as though we were in the country instead of the edges of a city.

He stopped the car on a side street and looked at me. “I come here whenever I need a break. It’s the best place to clear your head.”

“Where are we?”

He just smiled and pointed toward a main road. We walked slowly, but as we got nearer I could see the city spread before me. We crossed the road and leaned against a railing, taking in the city.

“Mount Washington.”

I smiled, knowing I’d told him that I hadn’t taken the time to enjoy all of Pittsburgh, that I wanted to see the sights. He’d taken me to see the entire city at once, a view of the city from above.

I leaned over the railing and watched lights twinkle all over the city. Pittsburgh is beautiful at night, when you can see how the city really is built around the rivers, bridges spanning them all over the city, a mass of tall buildings lighting the center of it all. Though I was watching the city, I could see in the corner of my eye that Travis was watching me, a smile on his face.

It was a Thursday when I finally realized where we were heading. Sitting down to dinner, he said, “You know, if I could have it my way, we’d just leave Pittsburgh, move to some deserted island, and live a happy life with just the two of us.”

His eyes lit up with a new fire, one I hadn’t seen since our romance at Pitt. He was enthralled by this idea, of his living for me, and my only living for him. I felt like someone had just hit me in the stomach with a hammer.

I sat looking at him through the candles that he’d lit in the middle of the table. The wax was dripping down the sides, and I focused my gaze on the puddles on the table cloth when I answered. “What about other people?”

“We don’t need them,” he said as he reached over and clasped my hand. I looked into his eyes and knew that he meant every word of it. I felt a chill go through my body. I smiled at him and focused on the candles instead of his gaze.

After that night I looked at our relationship through new eyes. Each night we came home to paint and to be with each other. And I loved every minute of it. Still, I had a dark feeling in the pit of my stomach. I could see what we were turning into, going to work each day only to come home and spend our entire evenings together. It got to the point where I really thought we were living on some desert island. It just happened to be located on the corner of Forward and Eldridge.

One night I told him I wouldn't be home after work the next night. Some of the teachers were going out to dinner, and for once I decided to go.

"Why?" he asked, a wounded look in his eyes.

"They invited me out to dinner, and I accepted." I decided not to tell him the real answer, that I didn't want to live on an island. I tried to smile brightly.

"What am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Go out with someone from work. Or just enjoy a night to yourself."

"I want to spend the evening with you." He looked into my eyes, his own growing darker. "Don't you love me?" This would become his favorite line.

"Of course I do," I said with my eyes lowered. "It's just dinner."

A month ago I told Travis I was leaving. His eyes looked like my grandfather's did right before he died – glassed over and confused. Maybe because I never really told him before then that I didn't want to live on a desert island.

Travis still hadn't moved off our desert island. But now he was living there alone, and for the life of him, didn't know what the hell to do about it.

He peered up at me between his wet fingers and I removed my hands from his hair. I felt stupid staring down at him, his face a mess of tears while mine showed almost no emotion.

"Did you call my dad?" he asked.

"No. No I didn't." It was a lie. I'd called his dad before I even called the taxi. He was a grown man, but I didn't know who else to call. Even though I'd never met his

dad, only heard stories about him from Travis, I didn't know who else would believe me that he needed serious help. Only later would I find out that his dad thought Travis just needed a weekend at home with his family, not the mental hospital I'd suggested.

He looked up at me, trying to believe me, but I could see that he didn't. He collapsed backward onto his bed. "I just want to die," he groaned.

I sat beside him and put my arm around his middle, just in case. When he called, he said he was going to jump out his window – six stories with nothing but concrete below. The window was beside his bed, six feet high and wide open. The snow was landing softly on the sheets but melting as it landed. He wouldn't even have to try to jump. He could just take one step forward from his bed and walk out the window. I gripped him a little tighter, and as though in response, I could hear a siren racing down the slick streets toward Homestead. I wondered if that sound would become all too real tonight.

"I don't want to live without you."

"You will though," I replied lamely. "Don't tell me you've just sat in your room for the last month. You had to have done something."

He shook his head no.

"Well, you should have gone out. You have to know some of the guys at work. Or you could invite your brother up." I felt like I was at work. I was telling a five-year-old that he didn't hate school, that he had fun there.

"I don't want to see anyone. I just sit here thinking of you."

I sighed and lay there, my body begging for sleep. I could feel the heat from Travis' head and wondered how he was warm when my entire body was frozen. I put

more effort in trying to convince kids that they liked school than I was with the man I'd been with for over two years. Now that I'd been gone for a month, I could see that he wasn't living a life. He never had been. He was living for me, but I didn't care. I just wanted to go to sleep. The bed we'd shared for so long was comfortable, and somehow I believed that my arm was going to stop him from jumping.

But he didn't move. He just lay there, staring at the ceiling. I could hear him sucking the snot back up into his nose occasionally as I started to drift off, my body beside him, but my head facing the window.

"What are you thinking?" he asked suddenly.

Pulled out of half-sleep, I mumbled, "Nothing," my head still down on the bed, now watching the snowflakes dance outside the window.

"You know what I've been thinking?" he asked as he sat up and wiped the snot off his face with his arm. "I've been thinking about everything I could do to fix things if we got back together."

He paused, waiting for me to say something, but I remained mute. I fixed my gaze on a particularly stubborn flake that was continually pushed upward.

"You know how you told me I should get help? Like a counselor or something?" I turned away from the window and nodded. "Well, I did. I've been seeing the guy at work. We've been talking about a lot of things. Like how I treated you. How I was so jealous that I wanted to keep you all for me in this apartment. He's been helping me fix those things."

He looked at me hopefully, and I tried to feel something. But the only thing I felt was hope that his dad would arrive soon. But it was a two-hour drive for him. That was over an hour if he'd gotten in the car right after I called him.

I could hear another siren, but this one much closer, along with the yells of people below the window. I wondered who was going through what I'd been fearing since I arrived.

“Well, I'm glad you're seeing a counselor. I hope it helps your next relationship.”

At this the tears started anew. He grabbed my coat in his fists and laid his head on my chest. I could feel the shudders that were coursing through his body and shivered. A sudden draft sent a shower of snow on my head, but I let him lay, let him cling to me, because I knew once his dad arrived he'd never see me again.

I also knew he wasn't going to kill himself, at least not tonight. Suicide was just a tool to get me here. To let me see what had become of him. All I could see was that he was even more pathetic than the last time we were together.

Still, even with his clinging to me, I held him around the shoulders. In my mind I knew he wasn't going to jump, but another part of me wasn't so sure. So, I kept a tight grip and stared at the ceiling, trying to ignore the spasms that ran through his body and the snot that hadn't yet decided whether or not to freeze to my shirt.

“Don't you love me?” he asked through his tears.

“I never said that,” I whispered. But I could feel the last threads of our love dying as I whispered the words. He hadn't changed. It was a question I'd heard many times in our relationship, but now I didn't have to explain myself. I just had to make sure he didn't jump for at least another hour.

“You don’t, do you?” He looked up at me, the first bits of anger taking root in his eyes. I could see the muscle bulging in his jaw, the way it always did when he got angry. His eyes turned a peculiar color of green instead of their usual blue. “You think I’m pathetic! You think I’ll never change! Well, I have. Dammit, I have.” The last words came out in a whisper, a sound more breath than words. He saw what I saw – nothing had changed. He was still Travis. And I was still Linda. I stared at him silently.

Slowly the tension left his jaw, his eyes returned to their normal color. His face lost the heated color. His entire person seemed to wither as he collapsed into sobs again, but this time he didn’t hold onto me. He didn’t even look at me. Maybe he was seeing the Travis I saw. All I know is that was the one point during the night when I wouldn’t have blamed him if he walked out the window. I wouldn’t even have tried to stop him. In fact, I’d give him a helping hand if he needed it.

I’ve wondered what I would have done if he’d jumped. Probably just watched. But I’m not sure that I ever would have forgiven myself. I didn’t want him to die; I just didn’t want to see him alive with no purpose besides me.

I sat up and looked down on him, surprised at how tiny he appeared. He was almost a hundred pounds heavier than me, but curled up weeping he looked like a child. For the first time all night I could feel my heart going out to him. I give my heart to all children, whether they deserved it or not.

I sat down beside him and wrapped my arms around him. But this time I wasn’t trying to stop him from jumping. I was trying to make him believe that he was a man and not a child. I guess I was trying to make myself believe the same thing.

He lay with his face pressed into a pillow to muffle the sobs. I lay with my arms around him and smoothed his hair. His sobs did not subside.

A knock on the door awakened me from my stupor. A fine layer of snow covered both Travis and me. My arms were still around him, but he was asleep. I closed the window and could see that the first signs of morning were trying to break through the black night. I didn't remember falling off to sleep but knew that I had. I looked at my watch: 6:30. The pillow was drenched with tears and snot.

I opened the door, and Jack, Travis' dad, enveloped me in a hug. The cool air in the hallway whooshed into the apartment. Mark, Travis' brother, stood self-consciously nearby.

"Hi," I whispered. "Thanks for coming." As though it was still my apartment, as though I had any more right than they did to be there. My face flushed pink as I ushered them inside.

I remembered Travis telling me once that his dad was an avid hunter. I had always wanted to introduce him to my dad. I had hoped they'd become friends, even if only during deer season. Now, that thought seemed far off.

"A little warm in here," Jack said, taking his coat off.

"He's asleep – in the bedroom," I offered. Jack walked in, making no attempt to be quiet, and I could hear Travis stirring. Mark and I looked at each other stupidly before moving to the couch. I could feel sweat trickling down my neck, see it starting to bead above Mark's lip. I found myself wondering if he wouldn't look better with a moustache.

We sat side by side but said nothing. What was there to say? Mark and I knew each other only as brother's girlfriend and Travis' brother.

In our awkward silence, I could hear Jack's voice rising in the next room and tried to block it out. Travis needed something, but I didn't think it was a lecture. I winced as I started to make out some of what Jack was saying.

"...Well why'd you do it? What's your fucking problem boy?..."

Mark moved his hand and clasped mine. I held tight, not knowing what else I could count on. "How long have you been here?" he asked. I could see he was as distraught as I was.

"A few hours." I paused. "I didn't know who else to call. Is he really mad?"

Mark looked up at the ceiling and then back at me, giving my hand a little squeeze. "I think he's just worried. I drove because he was shaking so bad when we left."

Day had broken outside the windows, and Mark and I sat in the morning light that arrives before the sun. Now, only a few of the snowflake stragglers drifted slowly toward the ground.

I stood and adjusted the thermostat. The apartment suddenly felt silent, even with the muffled voices in the next room. The whooshing air that I'd heard was suddenly gone, and after so many hours with it, the room felt strange without the noise.

The yelling in the bedroom suddenly stopped as footsteps started moving toward the living room. I sat down quickly, and Mark squeezed my hand again.

"He's packing," Jack said, sitting down next to me. He glanced at mine and Mark's hands and then back at me. "How are you doing?"

I just nodded, suddenly exhausted.

“Well, we’re taking him home for now.” He paused for what seemed like forever and stared out the window. I think all three of us were watching the snow swirl in a kind of daze. We were in a daze after the night all three of us had. “We’ll see what happens after that.”

As we sat looking outside, another ambulance blared in the distance. Only then did I take the time to actually look around the living room. Everything was in its place, but he hadn’t touched it since I’d left. Dust had gathered on all the surfaces. Cups that had been there when I left were still in the same place; only now they had mold growing in them. Half-eaten sandwiches lay molding.

“Maybe you should go in again,” Jack said looking at me hopefully. I wasn’t sure what he expected of me. After a full night with Travis, I didn’t know what else I could say. But I could see that Jack had spent himself.

Travis once told me that his dad was a good guy but never quite knew what to do with the two sons he had. So, instead of playing the father figure, he’d always tried to be their friend. Now, when more than anything Travis needed someone to be his dad, Jack was lost. He’d never played the part before. I realized that his yelling in the bedroom had been an attempt at what he thought a father was supposed to do.

“I really don’t think I can do anything.”

“But you were his girlfriend,” he insisted. “We’ve barely seen him in the past four years. You know him better.”

“You’re his dad! You knew him for years before I ever met him.”

“But I barely see him anymore,” Jack insisted stubbornly. He looked like a child who hasn’t gotten his way. Travis used to look like that when I went out to dinner with friends. “You’re the one who knows him now.”

“You’re forgetting that I broke up with him. I really don’t think he needs anymore of me. I think he needs his family, people who love him.”

Jack just sat there looking at me, as though unable to decide whether he should believe what I’d just said. “But you guys were together for a couple years. That means something doesn’t it?”

“Sure, but I didn’t really leave on great terms.” I didn’t want to tell him everything, but I knew the only way I’d stay out of that room was if he knew everything. “I, well, I, I wasn’t very happy when I left,” I finished lamely.

I couldn’t do it. It was one thing to tell my parents what had happened, but it was another to tell Travis’ dad. I didn’t care what my family thought of him, but I couldn’t let his dad see how pathetic he’d become.

“Well, nobody’s happy when a relationship ends,” Jack said. “That’s just not part of the deal. You’ll realize that when you get older.”

I could feel the anger trying to push words out of my lips, but I couldn’t do it. If I could just bear the next few minutes, everything would be fine. I could leave.

“Linda, I really think you can talk to him. I tried, and I don’t know what else to do.” He held his hands out to me, palms up. I wondered how he’d made it this far with his sons if this was his best try at parenting.

I nodded and stood. Jack stood with me and enveloped me in another hug. “Thanks Linda. I think you’re the only thing that’s going to help him right now.”

I looked at him in amazement before turning to go into the bedroom. He really didn't get it, but it wasn't my place to tell him what kind of a person his son really was. I wondered how much he even knew about Travis and myself. I knew that the last person Travis needed to be with was me. Mark may have known that, because I saw him wince when Jack told me I could help him. But it was obvious that Jack had no clue. He'd never had to be a father, and now that he was called upon to act the part, he didn't know how.

I looked back at Jack before leaving the room, but he was back in his spot on the couch, mesmerized by the snow, looking deflated.

"Why the hell did you call him?" Travis asked. He stood in the middle of the room with clothes strewn across a suitcase, but none had made it all the way inside.

I looked at him and said nothing. He knew why I called.

I walked past him fuming in the middle of the room and started to fold his clothes neatly as I put them into the suitcase. My back was ramrod straight, as I tried to contain my anger. I turned to him standing exactly as he had before, but now his eyes were focused on me. "Is there anything else you want to take?"

He pointed at a pile of clothes in the corner, and I picked it up. His eyes followed me, his arms helpless at his sides as I folded the pile, put it in his suitcase, and zipped it shut.

I turned to him and noticed that though he hadn't moved, his tears had started to fall again. "Anything else?" I asked.

At that moment I think he could have done anything he wanted, including jumping out the window, and it wouldn't have fazed me. I was beyond feeling.

He shook his head no, his first movement since I'd entered the room. I pulled the suitcase from the bed and sat it beside the door.

He left it where it was as we walked into the living room, our bodies close. Jack and Mark still stared out the window. Travis cleared his throat and they stood.

"Ready?" Jack asked tousling Travis' hair. I felt sorry for his inept efforts. He smiled uneasily.

"Almost," Travis whispered. He stood looking at them, and I wondered what he had on his mind.

"Listen," he continued, "I think I'm going to be fine. It was just a bad night." He turned to look at me. "Last night would have been exactly two years for us."

I stood looking straight into his eyes as he swelled with pride. He'd never remembered our anniversaries when we were together; I always had. This time I was the one who hadn't remembered. And I didn't know how to answer him. I could feel my body growing warm when Jack interjected.

"I didn't come all the way up here for nothing Travis." His voice sounded with authority, but his eyes were pleading for my help.

Travis turned to him and looked as though he'd forgotten his dad was there. "I'm sorry she called you, but really I'm fine."

"You call her out in the middle of the night, and you're fine?" Jack bellowed. Travis cowered a little and lowered his head. "You tell her you're going to kill yourself, and you're fine? No boy, I don't think you know what fine is. But you're going to find out this weekend."

Travis straightened his frame and looked into Jack's eyes. "You can't tell me what to do anymore."

"When you pull this shit I can tell you whatever the hell I want. We're going home. And you and I are going to cut wood tomorrow. Maybe that'll bring you back down to earth."

Travis glanced over at me, begging for help, but I just looked back as though I didn't understand.

Not Today

Missing coats and hats were found, the first aid kit was stocked, the kids were on the bus. That is, all the kids but one. I sat under the teacher's desk and refused to come out. My hands were wrapped around the grating in the back in case anyone tried to pull me out. My legs were spread wide against the front, making it impossible for anyone to budge me. My teeth were barred. But I was only boycotting the field trip.

"Marissa, come on. Everyone's waiting on you." Mrs. Pritchard used her biggest smile on me – full of teeth. I didn't budge. I could see through her phony smile. I knew she was mad, and I knew she would show her true colors if I stayed under the desk any longer. I'd seen her show them before, but never on me.

I loved her; she was my teacher and my friend. Mrs. Pethtal, my third grade teacher used to make fun of me if I couldn't pronounce a word. Mrs. Pritchard helped me. She encouraged me to try, and I got better. I started reading because I liked to.

If other kids made fun of me, she stopped it. She didn't let anyone pick on anyone else. She taught us that we were all different colors, but God loved us just the same. That's why he made us different. She was my friend.

"We're going to leave whether you're coming or not." She started to get up, to walk out of the classroom. Then she sighed and kneeled down in front of her desk again. "I thought you wanted to go! Come on!"

Her face was starting to turn red, but I held my ground and shook my head stubbornly. Somewhere in the back of my head I was wondering what my mom would think of this. She'd probably tell me a girl of ten shouldn't be acting like a baby. She

might even whip me, but I didn't think so. Maybe if I explained my side of the case she'd forgive me.

"Here comes Mr. Thorne, Marissa. He looks mad." Mrs. Pritchard looked at me hopefully, but I just stared back at her. My dad told me a long time ago that the best thing to do is not to back down. Just like a cat, if it looks away before you do, you've won. She looked away first but pretended it was only because of the principal's entrance. I knew better - I'd won.

She stood, dusting herself off in the process. I could see Mr. Thorne's shiny black shoes walk toward her. I couldn't see the expression on his face, but I could feel it in his words. He was angry, and I was the cause.

"Why hasn't the bus left yet?"

Mrs. Pritchard didn't say anything, but Mr. Thorne kneeled down and peered back at me. Then he straightened himself up and whispered something to the teacher.

"I don't know!" she squealed. "She won't budge. And I'm going to pull my hair out soon." She was cracking; I could hear it in her voice. It was already high and nasally. I had never made her sound like that before. Usually I did everything that was asked of me. I never complained. I was the model student. That is, until today.

Mr. Thorne bent down and tried to pull me free, but I held on with all my might. He was grunting and groaning, his knees cracking with each attempt. He got one of my legs free and it was waving wildly in the air. I didn't have control of it any longer. All I could do was wave that leg and keep my death grip on the desk. My leg was reaching for something solid, and he grabbed it in his hand. But his grip wasn't tight enough. Seconds later it was free again, waving wildly in the air until it met with his face. I could

see him thrown back, blood starting to pour from his lip. He grabbed hold of his mouth and stood shakily.

I didn't want to hurt him, but I couldn't go on the field trip either. We were going to the fish hatchery, but it was in Mannington. My sister told me all about Mannington, how they still had their rebel flags, how they burned crosses in people's yards, how they didn't like anyone who didn't have snow white skin.

I was in my room packing all the things Mrs. Pritchard told us we'd need for the field trip when my sister walked in. She plopped her butt down right on top of my pile of supplies.

"Get up!" I urged, pulling on her arm. "You're sitting on my stuff!"

She rose slowly and glanced down at it. "Where you going?"

"The fish hatchery."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am, tomorrow. A field trip."

"It's in Mannington," she said ominously. "You can't go to Mannington. They don't like people like us there."

I just stood and looked at her. She was always trying to scare me, to make me believe her lies. She liked to laugh at me afterward.

"I'm serious Marissa. Only white people live in Mannington. They don't like us there." Her eyes were big, bigger than I'd ever seen them. She was scared – really scared, not just pretending. Suddenly I didn't feel so happy about the field trip. When she told me about all the things they do to dark people in Mannington, I was terrified.

I wasn't going into Mannington. I wasn't going to let them hurt me because my skin wasn't pure white. Instead, I was going to fight with all my might and not let go of that desk until the bus was back with all the other kids. Mom would understand. She had to. She went to Mannington, but that was only because she had white skin, white skin with silky black hair.

I believed my sister, and that's why I wasn't going. My skin was too dark, my hair too curly. I wouldn't get out alive - that's all I could think.

"Marissa." It was Mr. Thorne, leaning down to me, but not getting too close. He had a handkerchief pressed up to his bleeding mouth, and I was suddenly sorry. I could see the red pulsing out onto the white cloth with each beat of his heart. I was sorry I'd done it, but it couldn't be helped. "We're going now. And you're going too." His voice had a kind of finality in it, but I couldn't let go of the desk.

It turns out I didn't have to. The next thing I knew Mr. Campbell and Mr. Donaldson were in the room too. They, along with Mr. Thorne and Mrs. Pritchard, grabbed hold of my legs and pulled as hard as they could. This time there were two on each one so they wouldn't make the same mistake twice. I felt like I was being quartered. My arms were pulling in one direction, while they pulled my legs in another. It was too much for me. My arms let go suddenly, and the four teachers flew backwards as I slid across the floor, my dress rising to my waist. I could feel the blood rushing to my face and felt like a boiled lobster. Everyone was staring at my Tuesday underwear.

I curled up in the middle of the floor and cried. I couldn't help it. My resolve to stay was gone, but my fear wasn't. The teachers stood over me, suddenly uncomfortable in their newfound win. I didn't even glance at them. My thumb went into my mouth,

something I hadn't done in years, and I lay crying and sucking my thumb, feeling like the entire world wanted to see me die. It wasn't just those people in Mannington. It was the people at my school. I saw utter hatred in their eyes.

My sister told me to be careful of people who want to take you to Mannington. If they have white skin, they have no clue. She told me about the girl in the class ahead of her who told everyone that people spit on her in the street. They treated her like an animal. I wasn't an animal. West Virginia or not, I wasn't going to be treated like I was inferior.

It felt like flames were leaping from my teachers' pupils and falling onto my little body, trying to make it darker, blacker, than it already was. I was contorting and twisting on the floor, trying to dodge the flames, but I just looked like a little girl having a temper tantrum.

"Marissa," Mrs. Pritchard said in her normal voice. I opened my eyes and saw her kneeled beside me. Everyone else was gone. I could see Mr. Thorne waiting on the other side of the door, but he was talking to the other teachers. "Sit up honey."

With those words of love, she suddenly looked like the teacher I'd known all year long, the woman who loved me, dark skin and all. I sat up. I looked into her eyes and could feel them searching for something in mine. But they were still full of tears ready to brim over with the slightest provocation.

"Now, talk to me. Why don't you want to go with everyone else?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. How could this lady with blonde hair understand what they did to dark people in Mannington?

“It’s going to be fun,” she went on, pretending she hadn’t expected an answer. “All the other kids are excited, and you’re letting them down. They’re all sitting there on the bus, ready to go. But we’re waiting for you. You don’t want to let everyone down do you?”

“No,” I whispered.

Her eyes brightened. “Then let’s go.” She stood, her hand held out to help me up, but I just sat on the floor and stared at her, shaking my head no with the brimming tears now falling freely down my cheeks. She sighed and sat in front of me, Indian style, just like we used to in kindergarten.

“Why not? If you tell me what’s wrong, we can fix it.”

“I can’t go to Mannington. They don’t like dark girls there. My sister told me. They hate us. They kill us.” Sobs were rising in my throat and I was choking to get them back down. I needed to tell Mrs. Pritchard the truth. For some reason I suddenly felt that if she knew the truth she’d cancel the whole field trip. She’d be outraged at the gross prejudice in Mannington, and the entire trip would be canceled. Then, I’d be everyone’s hero, the one who saved the entire class from ruin. “I can’t go. No one can who isn’t white.”

I looked up, done with my confession. Instead of horror in Mrs. Pritchard’s eyes, I could see laughter. Then, her eyes couldn’t hold all that laughter, and it moved to her mouth. Her smile turned big and her laugh was loud. Because there wasn’t enough room for all that laughter in her mouth, it started to spill out of her eyes in the form of tears. But they weren’t the same as my tears. They were tears of mirth. Seeing the horror on my face, she leaned over and hugged me. “I’m not laughing at you honey. It’s just that

that stuff doesn't happen anymore, not in Mannington or anywhere else. It used to, but not now. Whoever told you that was wrong." Here she looked in my eyes for some sign that I trusted her. I looked at her in defiance as long as I could, but I had to look away. This time, I'd lost the staring game, but it was because I knew she was wrong. And you can't tell your teacher that she's wrong.

"I promise. Nothing's going to happen there." She paused. "Do you believe me?"

She looked at me for some sign that I did, but my chin was plastered to my chest and I was playing with the tassels on the sash of my dress. She lifted my chin, forcing me to look at her. "Do you believe me?"

"No," I whispered before looking down again.

I could hear her sigh and get up. I could hear her footsteps, heavy in defeat as they moved towards the door. Then, I could hear both her and Mr. Thorne's footsteps come back to me.

"Okay young lady. I'll tell you what we're going to do," Mr. Thorne said with the fake cheerfulness he always used. "You and Mrs. Pritchard are going to stay together for the whole day. Nothing's going to happen to you. Okay?"

I nodded yes, because after you've kicked your principal in the face, there's not much more you can do that same day without getting into trouble. I let them pick me up off the floor and help me toward the door. I could feel my feet moving, but inside, I was frozen still.

They led me from the classroom and down the long hallway toward the front door. I could feel the eyes of teachers on me, but I didn't lift my head. I didn't want to

look at them, at the people who didn't understand what I was going through, only that they had a girl who was throwing a tantrum for nothing, for things that didn't happen anymore. It was all too much to bear. I could feel myself being led to my death, like they were leading me to the firing squad. Outside, in the bright sunlight, I felt the lifeless plodding of my feet across the playground, out of the fence, and toward the bus.

At the door of the bus, my mind caught up to everything that had been happening. I could feel my entire body stiffen. Mrs. Pritchard was trying to push me forward, but I couldn't move. Instead, she picked me up and started to carry me to the bus. When we reached the door, my arms and legs suddenly found life in their former lifelessness. They stuck out straight, barring my body from entrance into the bus. I could hear curious children peering out the windows at me. I could hear the labored breathing of Mrs. Pritchard struggling to push me onto the bus. But I couldn't see anything except my arms and legs reaching for something on the sides of the door to hold onto, something that would bar my way onto the bus.

"Marissa!" Mrs. Pritchard screeched. "I've had enough." With that, she let go of me. I could feel myself falling and straightened my legs so I wouldn't fall. But my arms were still reaching for something, anything on the side of the bus.

I could hear an animal-like screech rising from my throat. Now, instead of being gentle like before, Mrs. Pritchard pulled my arms from the sides of the bus and pinned them close to my body. Then, I could feel her lifting me, shoving me onto the bus. Another teacher took me from her arms and pulled me up and onto the front seat. I curled up in the corner. Mrs. Pritchard sat beside me and I could feel myself shrinking

from her, from the woman who had forsaken me, who was leading me into the clutches of those people in Mannington.

The bus started up, and I could feel it moving away. I slid slowly from the seat and curled up on the floor. “Marissa! Get up off the floor.” She was saying it, but I really couldn’t hear it. I was looking down at my arms, at their darkness, watching the tears hit my skin and make it darker.

Now, it was too late. I was on the bus. I couldn’t change it, so I wrapped my arms around my body, shaking in both fear and shame, hoping for the best and fearing the worst. Above me, Mrs. Pritchard stared ahead, pretending none of those bad things really happened, not anymore, not today.

Items of Value

The cross-stitch sampler lay in Sylvia's lap, but her hands were lifeless. The television was on, but she could not tell you the program. Dusk had long since fallen, and her eyes strained to see her husband's approach out the window. Only the glow from the TV was present in the room, but even it seemed too bright. Outside was a dark cavern, and she could not see its interior. Still, she stared, hoping to catch a glimpse of him coming home.

Constance's presence in the doorway startled her. It had been so long since she and her daughter had been alone that now it seemed an illusion. Her hair was gray now, but Sylvia couldn't remember when it had changed. The woman rubbed her eyes to will away the sleep but said nothing to her mother. If she noticed Sylvia, it was only in passing, as it always had been. She hated how much she loved her husband and daughter and how they only had eyes for each other. She'd been left out of the equation somewhere, and it hurt – had for years.

Sylvia did not take her eyes off the window but noted that her daughter turned on a light and sat down in the chair opposite herself. It was getting darker and she worried that something had happened. She strained her ears to hear a passing car or the siren of an ambulance. Still, there was nothing.

“Where's Dad?” Constance asked.

Not taking her eyes off the window, Sylvia whispered, “He went hunting.”

Sylvia knew the silence that followed. It was a silence that was all too common and had been for years between her and Constance. But tonight it had taken on a new note, one of worry and of blame.

“You let him go hunting?”

“I do not *let* your father do anything!” Sylvia exclaimed, finally turning away from the window. “You should know that by now.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Sylvia could feel the blame evaporating into thin air, and she could once more breathe easily. She looked into Constance’s eyes for the first time in what seemed like years. It startled her that she’d never noticed how old her daughter had gotten. Her eyes were like dark pools of water that had been stagnant for too long. They still had the same vacant stare they’d always had when she looked at Sylvia. It was chilling, but even as a baby Constance hadn’t loved her.

“Well, he should have been home by now,” Sylvia said to fill the silence. It was like sitting in a room with a strange woman – one she hadn’t seen since the woman was a baby. Even when Constance did come to visit, it wasn’t to see her. It was always for Stanley. She didn’t even know the woman sitting in front of her. But it was too much to think about now; she had enough to worry about. Stanley had said he would be back at seven, and now it was almost eight. She could just picture him dying alone in the woods, his last words falling on absent ears. Constance’s boys had promised they would stay with him, but they were only sixteen. Why didn’t she force him to stay home? She sighed, knowing that she couldn’t force him to do anything, that she never had been able to.

“Did he go alone?” Constance asked.

“No, no. Your boys went with him. They had orders to stay with him the entire time.”

“But they wouldn’t know what to do if something happened!” Constance wailed. The woman was near tears, but Sylvia didn’t know what to do. Ever since she was a child, Constance had always gone to her father when she needed something. Mother was only a nuisance, something that took up her father’s time.

“Would you rather he had gone alone? I didn’t know what else to do!” She pleaded. Sylvia’s family had never belonged to her. It was theirs, and she learned a long time ago that she couldn’t do anything about it. She just tried to stay out of the line of fire.

“No, I guess you did the only thing you could. Still, the idea of just the boys up there with Dad!” Constance’s words told Sylvia that she was not to blame, but her pursed lips and runny nose said something different. She blamed Sylvia for things she couldn’t help. If she felt like it, Constance would blame Sylvia for all that was wrong in the world.

They lapsed into a silence too full to even try to disturb. Two weeks ago, on a routine visit to his cardiologist, the doctor told Stanley that he had more blockage in his heart than they had thought. He needed open heart surgery. In fact, it had gotten so bad that the doctor wanted Stanley to have open-heart surgery the very next morning. But as usual, Stanley was obstinate.

“Now wait just a minute,” he exclaimed. “You want me to just go in there and let you guys play with my heart without any time to let this sink in?”

“Mr. Rowand, we have to. You have severe blockage in four arteries. You could have a heart attack at any-“

“And I could have had one a while ago too. I could have one right now! I can’t just let you guys open me up without thinking about it.”

And that was it. Stanley wanted time to think – three weeks to be exact. He’d told Sylvia later that he just wanted time to enjoy life, to see what he could be missing. She told him not to think like that, but he said he was looking death in the face now. He wasn’t going to back down without a fight, but first he needed to let it all sink in.

He went on with his life, pretending nothing was wrong, but Sylvia knew he didn’t really sleep at night. He wasn’t eating much either. He called Constance more and more until she’d finally come to visit. Sylvia’s care hadn’t been enough for him; he needed his daughter, the person he would give his life to if she asked. It wasn’t the same for his wife. Sylvia knew that. But she wasn’t bitter. It hurt, but she had resigned herself to the fact that this was just the way things were, the way they’d always been. Nothing was helped by getting upset – she had done that enough to know better by now.

Sylvia noted that both she and Constance were staring out the window. She didn’t understand how anyone could have as much love for another person as Constance had for her father. Sylvia tried to love everyone just a little bit, so that if something happened to one, she could handle it. She still had others to love.

But not until now had she realized just how much love she held for her family. Just the idea of Stanley out in the woods was too much for her. She wanted to say she was sorry for everything she’d ever done to him, especially the big things. There was so much she’d never said, and now she couldn’t help but fear she never would. She wanted him back in the house where she could keep a close eye on him. She looked at the clock,

and it was now well after eight. It felt like the temperature in the house had suddenly plunged, but Sylvia knew it was an iciness that had gripped her body, not the house.

Constance sat in her chair, hugging herself and rocking back and forth. In any other setting she would have looked crazy, but Sylvia knew it would kill her if anything happened to Stanley. She wanted to put her arms around her daughter and tell her that everything would be okay, that Stanley had gotten a big deer, and that's why they were late. But she knew it wouldn't work – it hadn't worked when she was a child. She knew that if she even tried to put her arms around her, Constance would freeze. She always tensed when Sylvia touched her. Always. Sometimes it had been hard for Sylvia, knowing her child loved her only as an afterthought. Other times it was easy, knowing there was nothing expected of her. When she thought these thoughts, a sudden guilt overwhelmed her and she did something nice for Constance like bake her cookies or buy her a sweater. But it was never noticed, and then Sylvia did not feel so guilty.

Constance sighed audibly and Sylvia looked in her direction. Now, she was looking directly at her mother.

“Do you love Daddy?”

Sylvia was startled by the question and said nothing. She just looked at her daughter. The woman stared back at her as though she had just given a challenge. Even though she had seen this look a million times before, it still chilled her bones.

“Of course you do.” She looked deep into Sylvia's eyes. “I shouldn't have asked.”

Sylvia said nothing as Constance turned her eyes back to the window. She looked in the same direction before answering. “Yes, I love your father very much. But I

realized a long time ago that I can't make him do anything. So, I let him do as he pleases, and I love him in my own way."

"And what way is that Mother?" Constance whispered. There was malice behind it, but Sylvia pretended to ignore it. She remembered the time she realized she was excess baggage, that no one cared if she were home or not. She had never told anyone about it, but she suddenly hoped that if Constance knew, her icy heart would melt. Maybe she'd see that Sylvia really did love her. Maybe she'd realize how hard it had been, that she'd tried to make them love her, that she had for years.

"Once, when you were a baby, Stanley went fishing for a week in the mountains. I'd seen babies cry when their mothers leave, but never that much. And never when a father leaves. I couldn't keep you quiet for anything. All week, you acted like you were missing a leg or something – something physically attached to you."

Here she paused, not knowing whether or not she should go on. She stood and crossed the room to get a better look out the window. Constance did not move, hadn't since Sylvia started her tale. She was waiting for her mother to finish, and Sylvia knew she had to. Now she leaned her back against the window, both a support for her trembling body and something cool to help the sweat that was beginning to trickle from her body. She had never told this story before.

"All week long, I couldn't do anything with you. You fussed about everything." She looked straight into the girl's eyes, but there was no response. Constance sat, her head hanging low, waiting. Waiting for the answers this story would contain. "When your father came back, it was like the sun came out again for you. Your tears dried instantly. And your father ran straight to you. I'll never forget that."

Now, Constance looked up into her eyes but said nothing. Laughter danced in the dark recesses of her pupils. Sylvia couldn't bear the triumphant gaze and turned back to the window. She put her forehead against the cold glass and tried to forget about everything that was happening. She relished the coolness of the glass and searched futilely for her husband in the deep recesses of the darkness. But there was nothing to see except the blackness of the night that had taken over.

“Do you love me?” Constance asked in barely a whisper. It was more of a breath.

At first Sylvia couldn't be sure whether her daughter had asked the question or if it was a question within her own mind. She turned and looked at Constance who was now drawn tightly into herself. She had asked the question and Sylvia had to answer. “Yes. I always loved you, but I loved you differently after that trip. I loved you more because I thought you loved me less.”

Sylvia could feel a tightness grip her heart. She had not meant to say it, hadn't even known she'd thought it before it came out of her mouth. She could feel her eyes fill with tears and couldn't find a voice to say anything more.

She didn't want to say anything else to her daughter. She wanted to recant everything she had just said. It was one thing to know the value of your love in the back of your own mind. It turned into a whole new thing once it was let out into the world. She had enough to worry about.

“You thought you loved me more?” her daughter said, her voice thick with hatred. “How? When did you show me all that love you had bottled up? For that matter, when did you show it to Daddy?”

“I tried,” Sylvia whispered. She had tried; all her life she tried. But this was always the response. Blind hatred. She couldn’t take it anymore. She loved Constance, but it was never returned. She didn’t want anything her mother had to give. “All my life, I tried. You didn’t want it.”

“You didn’t try. You just left, walked out. Whenever anything happened, you walked out. And I had to watch Daddy sit there, so sad, so-“

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore!” Sylvia exclaimed. She was surprised by the vigor of her own voice. There was a power behind it she had never felt before. All those years of feeling unloved by the two people she loved more than anything was suddenly forcing her to scream. To tell Constance that enough was enough. To cry out for help, but she didn’t know how. It was too late now. They had all gotten old.

“I have a story for you,” she continued as though her mother had said nothing. “You told me one. Now I’ll tell you one.

“I remember when I was a girl,” Constance began, “and Daddy took me fishing once. We went to that place in the mountains that he liked. We were going to spend the entire week there – just the two of us. I must have been nine or ten. The second day there, I caught the biggest fish I’d ever seen. Daddy took pictures of me standing next to it, and the fish was almost bigger than me. I was so proud. I kept saying I wished you were there to see it. So, Daddy cut our trip short. We came home to show you the fish, but you weren’t here.”

Sylvia could feel her heart constrict. She could feel the grip becoming tighter and tighter. Shadows were swimming in front of her eyes as she frantically searched for her husband in the darkness.

“You didn’t come home that day, or the next. You didn’t come home until the day we were supposed to be there. Daddy pretended we had just gotten there. He never said anything. He didn’t even mention it to me.” Her voice had lowered, and Sylvia had to strain to hear it above the train that was flying through her ears. “Where were you? We waited for you. I wanted to show you my fish. I kept it alive in a bucket of water for days. But by the time you got home, it was already dead and so rotten we had already thrown it out.”

Sylvia remembered that trip. It was the trip that had ended her affair with the young man across town. She knew Stanley had been home for days, but she never said anything. She just loved him more because he didn’t say anything, because he pretended it never happened.

“Where were you?” Constance whispered again, her voice now choked with tears.

“I loved you. Both of you. I’ve always loved you.”

“Where were you?” she screamed, her voice echoing off the past that she couldn’t let go of. “I want to hear you say it. Just say it!”

Sylvia could not answer. She was ashamed, ashamed of her love that was never enough. Love that was never fully returned. She had gone into the arms of another man because her love was never returned.

“I had to. I couldn’t bear to watch you two love each other so much without any room for me.”

“Don’t turn this around! We came back. You weren’t here. You weren’t here.” Constance stopped, gripped by a sudden emotion Sylvia didn’t know. She didn’t want to know it either – it was stronger than any emotion she’d ever received from her daughter,

but it was not a good one. She looked at her daughter, unable to tell her why she wasn't there. That she couldn't find love at home, so she went somewhere else, but it didn't help. No, Constance didn't want to know any of that. She didn't care, not for her mother, or for anything she had to say.

Sylvia didn't want to remember the past. She knew now how much love she held for her family, and it hurt her. She turned and walked to the door. The air was too thick here. It was always her fault. It was her fault all along. There was enough love. There always was. She just couldn't see it.

“Wait!” Constance yelled after her. “I know. I know where you were.”

Sylvia was at the door, her hand already on the doorknob. She wanted to open it, to get out of the room. But she didn't. Instead, she turned and faced her daughter, ready to hear it. It felt like she was staring the executioner straight in the eye. It made the hair on the back of her neck stand at full attention.

“When I was little I didn't know. It took me a while, but I found out. I could see when daddy was hurting, but I never knew why. All I knew was that you were gone and he was sad. Then, I was just mad at you for leaving.” She stared Sylvia straight in the eye, unafraid of all that she was doing. It scared Sylvia to know how little her daughter felt for her. “Do you remember my friend Dana? Of course you do – you were sleeping with her dad. She was just a girl then, same age as me, but when she asked her mom why she left, her mom told her everything. She told me a long time ago-“

“Don't you remember?” Sylvia interrupted. “When I was home, it didn't matter. I was here, but the two of you were in your own world. I wanted you to love me more

than anything. I wanted to be a part of this family, but I wasn't. I never was. Can't you see that?

“You have sons. How would it feel if they didn't want anything to do with you? What would you do? What would you think?” Sylvia hoped she had cracked that brick wall between her and her daughter, but when she looked at Constance, the woman peered at her as though she hadn't heard a word. As though none of it mattered. Her mother was invisible to her. Needles were flying from Constance's eyes, piercing her mother's heart, but the woman didn't notice. She stood behind her wall and watched, not letting any of Sylvia's pleas penetrate.

“For a long time, I hated you,” Constance continued as though she had never stopped. “Now I don't really feel anything for you. I just want to hear you say it. I want you to tell me that you deserved it. Everything you had to deal with after that, you deserved it.”

Sylvia couldn't say it. She couldn't think it. She hadn't deserved any of it. It started long before the affair. It was like that from the day Constance was born. At that point there was nothing she could do. She wanted to say it – to tell her daughter the truth. But the fire in Constance's eyes told her that it didn't matter. Instead, she just turned the doorknob she'd been holding and opened the door.

On the porch, Sylvia wept for the love she couldn't have years ago and the love she couldn't find today. Now, there was more than just a door between her and her daughter. There was a gulf, and she wasn't sure how to cross it. She wasn't sure if she ever could. Her daughter's heart wasn't open to anything her mother had to say. Maybe it had been years ago, but now it was frozen shut, at least for Sylvia. There was nothing

left for her mother in that heart. Sylvia wasn't even sure if there was anything to begin with.

She stared into the darkness, willing the return of her husband. She couldn't remember the last time she'd actually told him she loved him. Now, now she wanted to tell him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and let him know just how much she loved him and always had.

The door opened behind her and Constance came out. Sylvia could feel her coming toward her, wanted to reach out and beg for just a little love, but she couldn't. Instead, the two stood beside each other and peered into the darkness. There were only a few inches between them, but the distance seemed greater.

Sylvia stood beside her daughter as they scanned the darkness. In the distance they heard a motor and both froze. Sylvia could not breathe or move. She stood immobilized by the sound. When the headlights came into view, their hands clasped without reason. They watched the truck's ascent.

The Grieving Process

Marion was the one who'd suggested he buy the dog, but he didn't blame her for what had happened. She told Hank that the dog might help him get over his grief for his wife. So he'd bought it, a chocolate lab named Dani, after his wife Danielle.

That was how it started, just a dog for a companion, but now he was afraid of what he was becoming. Dani had become an obsession, like alcoholism, where the drinker will go to any lengths not to let anyone know what he's doing.

The problem started one night at dinner. Hank was cooking pasta in the pots he'd bought Danielle just before she died. He was being extra careful not to harm them, as though they were a part of his dead wife. Hank was cooking too much food – he still wasn't used to cooking for one yet.

Dani came in the room, rubbed her nose against the back of his hand, scared him so badly he burned himself on the boiling water. "Dammit Dani! Can't you see I'm trying to cook?"

The dog just looked at him, not really understanding. She walked to her empty food bowl and lay down in front of it with a big sigh.

"Oh, I'm sorry honey," he said as he kneeled down beside her. "You'll get dinner too."

He opened a can of food before dumping the pasta on his own plate. But Dani sniffed at it and turned her nose up.

"What?" he asked, his mouth full of pasta. "It's beef flavored, Dani."

She looked at him, but didn't move.

"Stupid dog," he sniffed before turning back to his food again.

Hank took a bite but couldn't swallow it. He felt sorry for Dani. Here he was enjoying a big dinner; besides, there was more than enough for two.

Hank stood and grabbed Dani's bowl from the floor.

"This stuff's yucky, isn't it honey?" he crooned as he washed the dog food down the garbage disposal. "You deserve better, don't you?"

He refilled her bowl with fresh spaghetti and put it on the table across from his own plate. "Come get it honey!" But the dog just looked at him. If a dog ever was confused, Dani was. She was a dog, not a person. She couldn't get up on that chair.

Hank grabbed her collar and pulled her to the table, her nails no use on the linoleum. He picked her up by the scruff on her neck and tried to arrange her legs on the seat of the chair.

"There," he sighed ten minutes and multiple scratches later. "I knew you could do it."

He watched as Dani shoved her face in her bowl, swallowing the spaghetti as quickly as she could get it in her mouth. Hank took a bite and then looked around his house. All alone, just the two of them.

"Do you remember Nancy?" he asked the dog. Dani continued to eat. "She had her baby yesterday. You remember she and her husband have wanted a baby for a while. You remember, don't you Dani?"

The dog attacked the garlic bread he'd left on the table.

"They had a girl. Her husband brought pictures to work. A pretty baby, just like the one we were going to have."

Hank's throat constricted, and he could feel tears welling again. He hadn't made it through a day in the past month where he didn't start crying. Today was going to be another failed try. But before the tears could fall, Dani finished her food and bounded from the table.

"Where you going Dani?" he called out. "Don't you want seconds? You always liked seconds, especially of my spaghetti."

Then he realized what he was doing and fell heavily into his chair. This time the tears did come, and he cried for a long time.

Hank and Danielle had only been married for five years when she died. His world was crushed when they called him to the hospital. She'd been on her way to work when a deer jumped out in front of her car. She'd tried to swerve, only to hit an oncoming car. At least that was the what the police had put together from the witnesses. She'd died almost instantly.

He'd gone numb as soon as they told him, couldn't think for days, until long after the funeral was over. Marion, Danielle's sister, had taken care of everything, from which casket to buy to what clothes she should be buried in.

Marion had been his lifesaver, even suggesting he buy a dog. "It'll keep you company Hank," she'd said, sitting beside him on the couch, taking his hand into her own. "All you do is sit around feeling sorry for yourself."

He'd started to object, but she held her hand up, asking him just to let her talk. Hank knew enough about Marion to know that if she wanted to say something, nothing you did would stop her.

“At least a dog will give you a little responsibility, something to make you get out of bed each morning.” Then she’d smiled and brought the dog inside. Dani was almost full-grown when he got her, rescued from a shelter. She was a chocolate lab, but something in her face told him that wasn’t all she was.

He’d taken to her immediately, treated her like a child. It was nice to feel needed, to feel like someone couldn’t survive without you. But soon, very soon, he was growing to the point where he couldn’t live without her. After the episode at dinner, it only grew worse.

Hank pulled Danielle’s closet open and chose the dress she’d worn on their anniversary earlier this year. Marion had told him that he should get rid of the clothes, but he couldn’t. Now he was happy he hadn’t.

He pulled the dress over Dani’s head as she struggled to get out. But once it was on, she really couldn’t move. It dragged under her paws and made her slide instead of walk.

She snapped at his hand as he tried to fasten a hat to her head. “Good girl,” he crooned. “You loved this dress. I love this dress. And you look beautiful.” He kissed the dog on the head and pulled her into the living room.

A feeling somewhere in him was trying to surface, but he just pushed it out of the way. Marion had bought him the dog to help him get over his grief, and that’s what he was doing. Or at least that’s what he thought he was doing.

Hank couldn’t be sure, but later he thought Marion had seen him. He and Dani were sitting on the couch watching TV. He had his arm around her, both for the comfort

of her touch and to keep her from running away. She didn't like the dress. He stroked her paw as he held it in his lap. If he closed his eyes, it felt human, like Danielle's. So, he closed his eyes, pretended to watch TV, and instead just enjoyed having one last afternoon with his wife.

He knew he was going too far, but this would be the last time this happened. After this, he could put the dress away, and Dani could go back to being his dog – his pet.

A knock on the door. Hank jumped off the couch, the dog bounding ahead of him, trying to greet the visitor at the door. He flew at her, tackled her, sent them both sprawling on the floor. But Dani hadn't made it to the door. She was safe underneath him. Hank picked up the dog and shoved her into the laundry room, locking the door behind himself as he left.

He opened the door.

“Marion!” he exclaimed, breathless.

She stood, her mouth half open, her eyes wide. Her hands were wrapped in her skirt, as though she was afraid to move them – afraid of what they would do.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his heart beating a little faster. She must have seen him.

“Oh, yeah,” Marion said, shaking her head viciously. “I've just got a lot going on, needed to get out of the house for a while.” She smiled nervously.

“Come in,” he said, holding the door wide.

She walked in ahead of him, cautiously looking around the room, as though she expected to find something.

“Sit down. Sit down. Can I get something for you?”

“A cup of tea would be nice,” she said, the color finally returning to her face.

Hank nodded and headed toward the kitchen. The dog started barking and scratching at the door.

“Just Dani,” he said turning to Marion. “She’s been bad – getting into stuff today. So, I put her in the laundry room. Don’t open the door.”

Marion just nodded, staring at him blankly. He couldn’t decide if she’d seen or not, but if she wouldn’t say anything, he wouldn’t either.

Hank walked into the kitchen, his hands shaking in fright. He put water on to boil and then cracked the laundry room door, just to make sure Dani was okay. She’d been quiet for a few minutes, and that worried him.

The dog sat on her haunches, still dressed to the nines. He smiled and started to close the door, when Dani came bounding out. He lost his grip on the door as she tore past him. He lunged, threw himself at the dog and caught the very end of Marion’s dress. It was enough to stop her. He grabbed at that and pulled her back to him.

Wrapping his arms around her, he lifted her and pushed her back into the laundry room. “She wouldn’t understand honey,” he whispered as he slammed the door.

“Everything okay in there?” Marion called from the other room.

“Fine,” Hank said, his voice shaky. “Just fine.”

Hank was ignoring everything else in his life. He’d taken more time off work, telling the bank that he just couldn’t come back, not so soon. He’d asked for a longer leave, and they’d granted it to him, but now he felt guilty. Who was the grant for? Danielle or Dani?

He sighed and pushed the question from his head. He hadn't cried in over three days. That proved Dani was good for him. If he could just keep going, just a little longer, then he'd be fine. Dani could go back to being a dog, and Marion could stop asking such prying questions when she came to visit.

"So, Hank," she said and cleared her throat, "you and Dani are getting along pretty well?"

"I think she's the best thing you could have done for me."

She just nodded, and Hank thought he saw a glimmer of guilt in her eyes. But she shouldn't be guilty. This was his fault. But soon, really soon, he'd be able to go back to real life, leave Dani behind.

"You don't think you're spending a little too much time with her?"

"Dammit Marion, you're the one who got her for me! What do you want? Do you want to take her back?" He stood, anger masking the terror that he felt. He grabbed Dani's leash, which he'd sprayed with Danielle's perfume. He hooked it to the dog, and started to pull her over to Marion. "Here, just take her now."

"Hank, that's not what I'm trying to say." She sighed.

He just nodded and let Dani go, his fear vanishing.

"I'm just worried about you, that's all," she said, gripping his knee. "You need to rejoin the living."

"I already have." He smiled.

Marion acquired the habit of walking in Hank's house without knocking. They were such good friends that it shouldn't have bothered him, but now he had to hide Dani

almost all the time. Of course Dani didn't like that, and now whenever he let her roam the house freely, she ran out the door if one was left open.

More than once, the neighbors had given him strange looks when his dog was caught running around the neighborhood in a dress and hat. At first they'd believed the dog was some sort of art project, but now he avoided their gazes when he saw them. They avoided him too, not stopping by for a chat like they did when Danielle was still alive.

Hank cried the most for his wife at night. Some days, with Dani around, he would go the entire day without crying, sometimes even making it through the night too just by holding onto his memory of her. But he was beginning to have nightmares. They would start out at his and Danielle's wedding. But when he pulled the veil away from her face, Dani stood there instead. His family screamed and ran, but he just stood there and kissed the dog, not realizing anything was wrong.

The dreams scared him because he knew that what he was doing to his dog wasn't quite right. A year ago, if he'd heard about someone else doing what he was doing, he would have been repulsed. He and Danielle would have made fun of him but still feel uneasy about it. Now, he was that guy, the guy with problems.

But Hank wouldn't believe that he had problems. He was just trying to get over his wife. There was nothing wrong with that. He just wasn't doing in the same way most people did.

Now, Dani slept with him in bed. At first, he'd tried letting her lie across the foot of the bed, like a dog would in any other house. But that didn't even last one night. He

was dreaming that he was in the car with Danielle during the accident. He didn't get hurt, but he had to watch her die.

Hank woke in a cold sweat and pulled Dani to the head of the bed. There he put his arms around her like he used to do to Danielle, so one was always underneath her, completely numb when he woke in the morning. No matter how many different positions they'd tried, they always ended up back at this one with his dead arm. He nuzzled his face into the scruff on Dani's neck and fell fast asleep. Since then, the dreams had stopped, and Dani didn't seem to mind being held while she slept.

Still, he was bothered by what he was doing. But he didn't know what else he could do to assuage the pain of losing his wife, so he pushed those thoughts out of his mind. He hoped a day would come when the pain wasn't so bad anymore, a day he and Dani would go back to being just owner and pet.

Hank and Dani were dancing in the dining room when the front door flew open. The dog really had gotten good at dancing like a human. Hank tried to push her down to push her out of the room when Marion burst in.

"Hank!" she exclaimed.

Dani dropped to the ground and slid away in her floral print dress. Marion watched her go, wouldn't look at Hank.

"What are you doing here?" he yelled. "You said you were going out of town for the weekend."

She ignored his question and gawked at the dog trying to rip the dress off with her teeth.

“Dani!” he yelled. “No!”

Marion looked back at him, her eyes full of tears. Hank shrunk back, unable to explain. Unable to tell her what was happening.

Marion’s legs looked like they would collapse, and Hank propelled her toward a chair. “It’s not what it looks like,” he whispered.

“It looks like your dog is wearing your wife’s clothes. It looks like you were dancing with her.” She paused. “Do you have a better explanation? Because I’d really like to hear it if you do.”

Hank felt faint and pulled a chair up beside Marion’s. He tried to hold her hand, but she jerked away from him as though he were a stranger. He looked at her, unable to understand. Was she afraid of him?

“You’re the one who told me to get the goddamn dog!” he yelled. “You said it would help me. And she has. She’s a good dog. A good dog.” His voice trailed off. He didn’t have much anger to begin with, and now he was just embarrassed.

Marion’s face dropped into her hands, and Hank could see her weeping. But he didn’t know what to do. She was weeping because of him, and nothing he could do would change that.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I am. Really.”

He heard the screen door slam, and his head jerked up.

“You didn’t leave the door open?” he cried.

She looked at him, not understanding.

“You did!” he yelled, bounding to the door. Marion didn’t follow.

He was on the porch and could see Dani bounding down the street. “Dani! Come here honey!” he yelled. “Come back to me! Here Dani! Come back to Hank baby!”

People were coming out of their houses, looking at him, looking at the ass end of the dog running down the street in a pretty floral dress and floppy hat. The dress was tearing away, leaving little bits on the road.

“Come back Dani!” He couldn’t stop yelling. He ran to the end of the driveway. “Here Dani! You can’t leave me!”

Hank broke into tears in the middle of his driveway, in the sight of all his neighbors who already thought he was a little crazy. Their suspicions were confirmed. Hank fell to a sitting position, still yelling feebly. But the dog was gone.

He felt hands on his shoulders, knew they were Marion’s, but he didn’t turn around. He sat, a crumpled shape, still whispering Dani’s name.

Marion wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulled him to his feet, and pushed him back toward the house. “She’s gone Hank. She’s not coming back.”

A View of the City

It was summer when Irene met Cydra. Summer was the only time of year she could stand to be in Pittsburgh. The rest of the year was gray and cold, but in the summer the gray skies subsided, making people believe Pittsburgh was a place you could live year round. Irene knew better.

Irene was enrolled in a writer's workshop at the University of Pittsburgh. This was the same class she took each summer. She met Cydra there. The two should have been instant friends – they were both aspiring writers, both newly single and without children – yet something held Irene back.

They should have been friends because they were the only people in the workshop over twenty-five. Actually they were both closer to forty. They should have been friends because everyone else was writing about death, while they were writing about life.

But instead they were acquaintances who bordered on friendship yet somehow never quite met the requirements that would turn their relationship into something more. They lived in the same building, and Cydra would occasionally stop over to chat, but Irene felt a wall between them that she couldn't scale.

They walked to and from class together, complaining about the suicide and death stories they'd had to read.

"Twenty bucks says no one writes a story this summer where all the characters live through the end," Irene chuckled.

"Oookay," Cydra drew out the first syllable. She had a habit of drawing out the beginning of most thoughts, as though she hadn't yet decided what word came next.

Irene had slowly grown accustomed to it, though she could see in the faces of the other

students in class that no one else could stand it. “Sarah might do something real. She has a little sense. Ooof course there’s probably just as good a chance that you’ll get my money.” Cydra was dressed in her usual uniform of pressed slacks with a button down shirt – top button always buttoned. Even if it was a humid day and everyone else was wearing a tank top, Cydra buttoned the top button.

Today the air was chill, the air after a storm, so she didn’t look out of place, but Irene wondered how many of these classes she went to and was mistaken for the professor. Irene was more of a jeans and t-shirt type of woman. She usually let her hair swing loose over her shoulders.

“Haaave you ever been to the top of that?” Cydra asked pointing at the Cathedral of Learning, a huge structure that dwarfed all other nearby buildings.

Irene shook her head, knowing she’d been meaning to go but hadn’t found the time.

“Aaafter class,” Cydra said, “let’s go up. It’s an amazing view.” She smiled softly, and Irene wondered if Cydra considered her a friend. She wondered if the sense of detachment was her own feeling, a feeling Cydra did not know.

They entered the cathedral silently, but a small gasp escaped Irene. She hadn’t expected the entrance to be so grand. The ceilings were high, the interior was made of the same stone as the outside of the building. The room was full of students studying, a room where you had to be quiet, but even a pin dropping would be loud.

Irene and Cydra made their way to the elevators and found the ones that went up to the top. “Weee can only go to the thirty-sixth floor. You can’t get to the top four,”

Cydra whispered. Even when she whispered she found a way to draw out the first syllable. Irene wanted to ask her how she did it, but she didn't want to be rude.

Inside the elevator Irene was quiet. It didn't look unsafe, but how could she feel safe standing in a box thirty-six stories above the ground? Cydra had a smile of anticipation on her face, as though a broken elevator would just be another part of the fun.

When the doors opened, Cydra stepped out first, leading the way to one of the windows. Below Irene could see all of Oakland – all the way up and past Carnegie Mellon. She felt powerful as she looked down at all the people. She could see what everyone was doing down on the streets. And they had no clue she was watching. The thought made her smile.

"I come up here a lot," Cydra said. She held her hands in her pockets as she looked down at Pittsburgh. "Dooo this." She put her forehead on the pane of glass and looked down.

Irene did the same but found the view no different. It just made her forehead cold. Cydra stood staring down at the city without moving.

Irene spotted another window at the other end of the hall and walked to it. From here, she could see all of downtown and beyond. She preferred this view – a view out to forever. Lights sparkled as far as she could see. The USX building was visible in the distance, along with the one that had different colored lights to tell you the weather. Now it was blue, but Irene had forgotten what the colors meant.

Cydra walked up behind her and looked. “Iii like it up here. I look down and realize that no one knows me. None of the people in the cars care that I exist. And it makes me happy.”

Irene looked at her, but Cydra was lost in the city. She wondered how two people could see the exact same thing yet have two opposite reactions to it. Cydra felt unimportant up here, but Irene felt almost too important, as though she could know anybody just by seeing their movements from thirty-six stories up.

Cydra turned to her suddenly, “Rrready?”

Irene nodded, and they headed toward the elevator. Though they were together in the elevator and all the way home, neither said another word.

Irene could see a solid progression in her stories toward the end of the summer. After her divorce, she could only write about her husband and what an ass he was, but now she was moving away from that. Yes, most of her male characters were still based on her husband, her ex-husband, but now she could control him. She had successfully fought the urge to kill him in most of her stories.

But she still couldn’t see a progression in her friendship with Cydra. They didn’t go back to the Cathedral together again, though they would sometimes run into one another inside. Irene supposed there were other windows she could look out of, but she liked the view from the ones Cydra had shown her. When they saw each other, both were silent. They nodded, knowing no explanation was necessary.

Irene needed that view of the city. Otherwise she wondered why she was spending yet another summer in Pittsburgh. Her friends and family all lived in Rhode

Island, yet she went away each summer, telling them she'd talk to them when she got back, not before. But every other summer she had known she was going back to her husband. This summer she knew no one would be waiting for her when she got off the plane.

Each apartment she'd subleased over the years had a phone, but she never used it, and it never rang. Summer was her time, but this was the first summer that she hadn't befriended someone. Those summer friends took the place of all the people she'd left behind in Warwick, but this year there was no one. Usually she met a man or woman who served as a friend for the summer, a friend with whom she kept correspondence for only a few months before their letters dwindled away to nothing. Irene couldn't even imagine what a letter to Cydra would say.

The feeling of power she got from the cathedral became her substitute friend, even when she and Cydra stood shoulder to shoulder over the city. Some nights when Irene stood alone over the city, she could hear the whoosh of Cydra's silk pants moving toward her as she exited the elevator. She stood still waiting until Cydra was beside her, their scents intermingled as they both looked downward. Sometimes they'd leave together and walk home silently. Other times they'd leave separately without saying goodbye.

At times Irene thought their ritual was the most intimate friendship one could find; other times she'd never felt more alone. She wasn't sure which feeling was real – or if they both were.

It was the end of August and the nights were growing cool. Pitt Students were slowly filtering back to campus, and the workshop was ending. A few of the younger people had already left to go back to school in other places. After tonight's class they would only have the party at the professor's house. But Irene never went to the parties.

They were already critiquing someone's story when Irene slid into a seat at the back of the room. She hadn't written in the last two weeks and wasn't sure why she'd come to the last class. One story they'd read for tonight was about a young college student's dreams of suicide. It ends when she swallows a bottle of aspirin. The other story started out with a woman dead and dealt with her friends' coping. Irene wasn't sure if she'd won or lost the bet with Cydra. No one had died in the story, but the subject was death. She'd ask after class.

Irene sketched in her notebook while everyone discussed the stories. She didn't want to be there. Even with all the windows open, she could smell the sweat from everyone's bodies mingling into a sour odor that hung in the air. Even with the cool nights, the temperature was over ninety everyday.

Irene wondered why she had left the coast to come to Pittsburgh. The beach was a ten-minute drive from her apartment in Rhode Island, but here, you'd have to drive six hours before you got near the Atlantic.

Besides, she hadn't been working at all during the last two weeks of the workshop. At first, she sat staring at the blank screen for hours before giving up. Sometimes she started a story by killing her husband off, but she didn't know where to go from there. He was dead – that had been her goal, and she'd achieved it. Now, she hadn't turned on her computer for days. She spent all her free time standing on top of the

Cathedral. Sometimes she'd look at the city for hours, picking a person and following him until he disappeared.

People were moving around her, packing up their bags. The professor was reminding everyone about the party at his house the following night. His bald head glowed under all the sweat.

“Cooome on,” Cydra said taking Irene's arm. She led her into the Cathedral and up to the windows. Irene followed without question. It was appropriate that they should spend the last night here.

The city's lights were just turning on – one by one over the entire city. This was Irene's favorite time of day.

“Lllet's walk over to the party together tomorrow.”

“I usually don't go to the party,” Irene said, looking away from the windows. “I figure I spend enough time with everyone over the summer.”

“It'll be fun.” Cydra grinned. “Weee may as well get something besides death out of this class, huh?”

Irene smiled.

Cydra showed up in a long dress that flowed loosely around her thin frame. Her hair was piled on top of her head, a few strands falling on her bare shoulders. Irene had never thought of Cydra as an attractive woman. She hadn't really thought of Cydra as a woman at all. Now, she was forced to admit that Cydra was beautiful.

“Rrready?” Cydra asked.

Irene could only manage a nod as they headed out the door. The night was overcast and warm, but the breeze was cool. Irene wished she'd brought a wrap.

Irene looked around her as they walked. She'd decided this would be her last summer in Pittsburgh. She should have stopped the year before. The workshops were all the same. The only difference was the person she befriended each year. This year she hadn't even accomplished that much. Cydra was still just as distant as she'd been at the beginning of the summer. Irene knew nothing about her life, just what she guessed might be true in her stories. With so much truth in her own stories, she had trouble believing that people could conjure stories from thin air.

"Who won?" Irene asked as they spotted the professor's house in the distance.

"Won what?"

"Death. All the stories had a dead person in them, but yesterday's started out with a person already dead. So, who won?"

Cydra stood contemplating the question. "Lllet's just call it a draw."

The house was full of students from the workshop and the people they'd brought. Besides the professor, everyone was under twenty-five. Irene could feel the heat radiating outside before she even passed through the door. She wondered why she'd agreed to come. She should have spent her last night in Pittsburgh inside the Cathedral.

"Coome on," Cydra yelled into her ear as she took Irene's arm. They weaved through the students until they arrived in the kitchen. A keg sat in the corner with a group of kids clustered around it. On the counter sat a few bottles of wine and giant pool cups. Cydra grabbed two cups, and Irene filled each to the top with wine.

"Maay as well get something out of this, huh?" Irene said.

She and Cydra stood against the counter watching the students at the keg, each in a different stage of drunkenness. Irene felt out of place, like a chaperone instead of just another person at the party, but Cydra seemed to be completely at ease.

Cydra waved at someone in the next room and turned to Irene, "Iii'll be right back." Without waiting for an answer she made her way into the next room.

Irene felt more self-conscious standing alone. She looked down at her own dress and then at the students wearing shorts and tank tops. Irene started to make her way out the door when one of the young women from the workshop barred her way.

"Hey, you wrote that story about the woman and her dog, didn't you?" The girl staggered a little as she spoke.

"Yes." She wanted to tell the girl it wasn't about a woman and her dog, but about the grieving process, but this wasn't the time. "The woman and her dog, yeah."

"Yeah, well I really liked it. I wasn't sure if I told you that in class, but it was good."

"Thanks." The girl smiled, showing her braces, and Irene wondered how old she could be. She didn't look older than seventeen.

Irene wandered away from her and decided to at least look at the rest of the party. The students were clustered in little groups throughout the first floor of the house, each group having a party of its own. As she moved through the living room, Irene realized she'd finished all her wine and squeezed through the groups back into the kitchen.

She bumped into a few people and realized she was drunk. But it was a party, and she was supposed to be having fun, right? Well, she'd just get a little more this time. A young man she didn't recognize was holding the bottle of wine out and before she could

stop him, he filled her glass to the brim again. She hadn't wanted that much. She wasn't a heavy drinker, and she'd already had quite a bit more than usual. She thanked him and headed back into the rest of the party.

She wandered through the rooms, peering into each group to see if Cydra was talking to somebody. She'd made it through the entire house twice and was covered in sweat before she realized that Cydra had probably gone home.

She sighed. She was finally starting to have a good time. The mixture of wine and the happiness all around her made her feel like she was a part of the party, even though the only person she'd talked to was the girl from her class. She didn't care that everyone else was half her age.

The heat and the wine were starting to have an unsettling effect on Irene's stomach. She suddenly felt the need to vomit and ran to the front porch. She didn't even see all the people she hit on her way out. She didn't notice that people were yelling at her for knocking their drinks out of their hand.

On the porch, she pushed her hair out over her shoulders and leaned over the banister. She heaved all the wine her blood hadn't absorbed and deposited it into the professor's flowers. She took a gulp of wine, swirled it around her mouth, and spat into the flowers.

She stood against the banister and breathed in the cool night air. Slowly, her stomach was settling. The sweat was drying on her face, leaving a salty mask to wipe off later. She picked up her glass of wine and started to sip as she looked out into the street.

"Ffeel better?"

Irene jumped and looked in the direction of the voice. She hadn't seen Cydra sitting on the porch swing. Irene could only see her legs until she stood up and out of the shadows.

Cydra walked toward her slowly, weaving with each step. "Iii did that a little bit ago. I usually don't drink this much. But hey, it's a party right?" She laughed loudly. "Paarty time," she said softly, lifting her cup and taking drink.

Irene stood still as Cydra made her way over. She stopped just short of running directly into Irene.

"You know Irene, I'm always so reserved. I hate it." Her words were thick coming out. "Buuut," and she held up her cup and took a drink, "when I have something to drink, I loosen up. I can do whatever I want. Like this." Cydra lifted her hand and ran it through Irene's hair. "God I love your hair!"

With that Cydra walked back into the party. Irene watched her stagger through the crowd, talking to people she didn't know and wouldn't talk to sober. Irene wondered if she'd looked the same when she was walking through the party. They were both drunk, both older. She wondered if the other students ever mistook them for the same person.

Irene sat down and began to swing back and forth. The air was cool, and she didn't want to go back to the party. She just wanted to sit, here, on this swing, until Cydra wanted to leave. She took a sip of her wine and leaned back.

She could see that the party was starting to wind down inside. People were laying their cups on the counter, grabbing their friends, walking out the door. But Cydra wasn't

in any of the groups who left, and so Irene remained where she was and had a little more wine.

“Cccydra,” Irene whispered to herself, wondering why they couldn’t be friends. Irene knew she and Cydra would have a lot in common if they ever talked about their lives. If they had as much in common as Irene believed, she should be able to enjoy the party too. Even if this trip to Pittsburgh hadn’t turned out the way she’d planned. Even if no one was waiting for her at home. “Cccydra,” she whispered to herself again, marveling at how easily she could pick up the same pattern.

Cydra walked onto the porch, weaved slightly as she tried to make her way to the steps. Irene stood to take her arm. But she’d drunk the rest of her wine too, and the porch was spinning. When she looked off the porch, the whole city swam. She laughed and grabbed Cydra’s arm. “Let’s go home,” she whispered.

Cydra didn’t seem to be listening, but she followed. The two stumbled up the side streets, onto Fifth, and finally into their building. Irene felt walked her to her door and stood by watching as Cydra pawed through her purse for the key to her apartment. She shifted everything around, put her entire arm down into the bag, but each time she came up with nothing. Finally, she turned the entire purse upside down and dumped it on the floor. A tube of lipstick rolled down the hall along with some coins. Cydra got down on her hands and knees to paw through the mountain of stuff that had come out.

Irene watched idly, leaning against the wall to steady herself until Cydra looked up at her. “Aaaren’t you going to help me?”

Irene kneeled beside her friend, the two of them shifting the pile back and forth, as though the keys would suddenly appear. They both knew the keys were somewhere else, maybe at the party, maybe in the apartment. But still the two women kneeled on the floor going over each thing in Cydra's purse.

Irene saw her birth control pills, all the makeup, the stack of pictures that were held together with a rubber band. The top of the stack held a picture of Cydra with a man, probably her ex-husband. Cydra wore the same dress she wore now. The man wore a suit, a cheap one that he'd had for years from the look of it. The lapels were a little too wide, the color a little too old. Irene pulled the picture out of the stack and slid it into her pocket.

She continued to look through Cydra's purse, but Cydra leaned back against the wall, her eyes closed, her breathing steady. Irene opened her wallet and looked at her driver's license. She was 5'4", 130 lbs., brown hair, blue eyes. She lived in Norman, Maine. She had four credit cards. All of them had a piece of tape stuck to the front telling Cydra that they were maxed out.

Irene put her wallet away and turned to the pictures. She took the rubber band off and started to page through them. Cydra as a little girl, some old people around a table, probably her parents.

"Theeey aren't there," Cydra mumbled in her sleep. Irene looked up, but Cydra had shifted and was lying on the carpet.

The man was in another picture, one with some different old people, probably his parents. Irene put this one in her pocket too. She snapped the rubber band back into place and started to put Cydra's things back into her bag.

“What are you doing?” Cydra asked with her eyes closed.

“Putting your stuff away. You can stay with me.”

Cydra nodded and tried to sit up. She pushed herself up and leaned backwards against the wall. “Iiii don’t think I should have drank this much.”

Irene put Cydra’s bag over her shoulder and stood. The ground still swayed under her feet but not as much. She leaned against the wall opposite Cydra and bent down to take her hands. Cydra offered no resistance when Irene pulled her up, but she didn’t help either. She let Irene pull her up as though it didn’t matter if she were standing or sleeping in her hallway.

Irene led her down the hall to her own apartment and threw her on her bed. Cydra didn’t make a sound when she landed – she’d fallen asleep before her head hit the pillow. Irene pulled her shoes off and covered her with a blanket, then filled a glass of water in the bathroom and put it on the nightstand.

Irene sat in a chair on the other side of the room and wrestled with her shoes until they came off. She pulled her own dress over her head, threw it over the chair and put on a T-shirt and shorts before sitting down again. Irene took the pictures from her pocket and looked at both of them. They were taken on the same day – the man wore the same suit, and both pictures were taken in front of the same house. Cydra rolled over and groaned.

“I left some water for you. Drink some now or you’ll feel like hell tomorrow,” Irene said without looking up. She heard Cydra taking a drink, but she was still trying to place the people in the picture. The man could have been Cydra’s brother, but she had the feeling he was her husband, ex-husband now.

Cydra sat up in bed and watched her. She nursed her water slowly. “Piiictures?”

Irene nodded and looked over at her. “Yeah, just some people I know,” she said before standing up. She slid the pictures back into the pocket of her dress. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Cydra nodded and laid the cup on the table. Her head fell back down on the pillow, and Irene pulled the blankets over her. Cydra mumbled something, but Irene couldn’t hear her. “Okay,” Irene said as she turned to leave but stopped in the doorway. She watched Cydra until her breath was slow and even. When Irene was sure she was asleep, she sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at her. Wrinkles spread from the corners of her eyes, and gray hairs had sprung up in her hair. Her mascara left dark circles under her eyes. Taken by an emotion she wouldn’t name, but something akin to love, Irene leaned over and kissed Cydra gently on the forehead. Cydra woke up and looked into Irene’s eyes. She did not seem surprised.