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## Deconstructing the Body: The Exploration of the Human Mind through Symbols

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Deconstructing the Body:  
The Exploration of the Human Mind through Symbols

by

Cassandra Knudsen

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
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## **Abstract**

The writing of fiction is one of the most popular and enjoyable modes of self-expression; not only does it give the writer the freedom to indulge her imagination, but also allows her a particular insight into her own patterns of thought. This form of introspection is especially important to the symbolist, who hopes to convey psychological human truths through the use of symbols. Traditionally, the intentional use of symbolism is frowned upon in fiction writing, as it is seen as distracting from conveying human truth. However, this study hopes to prove through both literary review and the practice of fiction writing that such truths are best examined through the veil of symbols.

Key Words: Symbol, Fiction, Writing, Short Story, Storytelling

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## Table of Contents

### Part One

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Introduction.....      | 2  |
| Literature Review..... | 9  |
| A. Definition.....     | 9  |
| B. Application.....    | 10 |
| Methodology.....       | 20 |

### Part Two

|                             |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Don't Look Back.....        | 22  |
| Breathe.....                | 41  |
| The Girl in the Mirror..... | 61  |
| Kat's Nine Lives.....       | 80  |
| Boarded Windows.....        | 98  |
| The Corn Goddess.....       | 115 |
| Works Cited.....            | 140 |





## **Part One**

## Introduction

The art of storytelling is one of the oldest traditions of the human race; but why do we tell stories? In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong analyzes how storytelling originated, saying that “We are meaning-seeking creatures...we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value” (2). This idea of searching for meaning, while true, is simple. Robert Atkinson refines this notion in his book, *The Gift of Stories*. He suggests that stories perform four primary functions that are rooted in psychology, society, mysticism, and the cosmos; yet all four of these functions tie into human beings attempting to understand who we are and how we fit into our society and the universe (3-16). Consequently, storytelling is not merely about discovering meaning in our lives, but about finding meaning in the way we live them. Throughout history, stories – especially fictional stories and myths – have been used to present human ideals, urge social change, and delve into the human psyche. Writing, by its very nature, is an introspective and explorative process. In Joseph Esenwein’s book, *Writing the Short Story*, his section entitled “Gathering the Materials” lists observation, experience, self-study, reflection, reading, discussion, and taking notes as the primary sources for a writer’s work (52-61); thus, the act of writing is something that cannot be done without the study of the human condition.

In her collection of essays entitled *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Conner extrapolates on this idea by stating that “There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners” (103). Essentially, fiction is always an observation of reality, with mystery referring the unknown in ourselves and our surroundings and

manners representing the way we interact with each other and our environment. These elements are important to fiction because they are an integral part of everyday life, and to write fiction is to attempt to understand, explore, and reflect upon human nature. O'Connor asserts that writers should be able to "discover something from [their] stories," (106) which drives home the idea that the best writing reveals something about the human psyche.

Though fiction is not based on fact, it is, essentially, about conveying truth. Fiction requires both introspection and observation, and the combination of these elements is what makes it such a powerful and influential medium. Indeed, while fiction – even the more fantastic pieces – is in some way a reflection of reality, it also has the power to shape reality by offering us a better understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world and people around us. But how does fiction do this? What drives the reader to reflection and influences his perceptions so drastically? According to Rollo May and Erich Kahler, it is the symbol.

In his essay, "The Significance of Symbols," May states that "Symbols and myths are means of discovery. They are a progressive revealing of structure in our relation to nature and our own existence...Symbols thus are *educative*...and by drawing out inner reality they enable the person to experience greater reality in the outside world as well" (45). Symbols, therefore, influence the perception of those who experience them by revealing inherent and often unconscious aspects of human nature. Kahler, in his article, "The Nature of the Symbol," remarks that this exploration of humanity is essential to the creation of art, saying, "Only when we feel that a story tells us more than just some peculiar happening, that it shows us through the singular story a generally human or epochal condition, when, by its piercing vividness, it touches the human core in us;...only then do these images attain to the sphere of art" (69). This reasserts the idea that the artist is bound to convey an unconscious truth, and reminds the reader that the

functions of storytelling are all inherently explorative of human nature.

But why do symbols have such a strong effect on how readers experience a story? May suggests that symbols appeal to us on a psychological level because of what they reveal about “inner, deeper levels of human experience” (13). Symbols play a part not only in the written word, but in all forms of storytelling, from the subconscious narratives of the individual’s dreams to societal mythology. May credits the interpretation of symbols as being the gateway for the invention of psychoanalysis, and insists that one cannot dismiss symbols if one truly wishes to understand humankind. Ultimately, he asserts that we are more likely to learn from symbols because they offer us a more potent expression of something real (33-45).

Despite its importance, the symbol is taken for granted among most writers. In A.N. Whitehead’s article, “Uses of Symbolism,” he states that “The attitude of mankind towards symbolism exhibits an unstable mixture of attraction and repulsion” (233). Part of the reason for this is that symbolism is often seen as bogging down the truth of what the author wants to convey; yet at the same time, symbolism is an integral part of the way in which we perceive reality.

In their book, *Creating the Story: Guides for Writers*, Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler encourage their writers to abandon symbolism altogether, saying that “we should write to find out the truth of our characters’ lives, to describe things as clearly as we can” (213). They insert the disclaimer that the symbol is important to the reader, but should not be important to the writer because it distracts the writer from her major task – conveying the story. O’Connor extrapolates upon this idea, suggesting that many readers – and writers as well – approach symbols with the idea that, like a mathematical equation, if they can solve the “symbol” they can solve the “story” and figure out what the story means; this notion ignores the possibility that

stories and symbols can contain multiple meanings (70-71). O'Connor argues that "The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it...it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is" (96). A complex story that achieves what Kahler refers to as art is not rigid in its meaning; the meaning should have the capacity to change depending on the individual who is reading it. Consequently, the idea behind a symbol isn't to reveal the "meaning" of a story, but to help readers decide what the story means to *them*.

Joseph Esenwein says in his book *Writing the Short-Story*, that few authors have the "skill, sincerity and power" (83) to make symbolism work, and, as a result, most short stories that rely on symbolism do not do well. Jerome Stern discusses this problem in his book, *Making Shapely Fiction*, by pointing out that sometimes a symbol is too subtle, and readers cannot guess the writer's meaning, or even realize that a symbol has been used at all. More often, however, the symbol is too blatant or overdone, and merely exasperates the reader (236). If done properly, the symbol is left open to interpretation. William Tindall, author of *The Literary Symbol*, says as much in his assertion that "Melville's success in shaping [symbols] to embody his vision of reality is proved by the variety of critical interpretation" (26). One such example of Melville's affinity for symbols comes in the form of the white whale in *Moby-Dick*, which, in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J.A. Cuddon jokingly pronounces "a carcass which symbol-hunters have been dissecting for years" (886). There is no universal agreement as to what the whale represents, thus allowing the individual reader to interpret the symbol in his own way. Because he must assign his own meaning to it, the symbol has a greater impact upon him, and therein lies its success.

In his book, *Symbolism and American Literature*, Charles Feidelson, Jr., acknowledges that "Deliberate symbolism is hazardous in its quest for a pure poetry," (71), but also suggests

that the author's conscious exploitation of a device that all writers utilize can be a strength and a weakness rolled into one (70). In an excerpt from D.H. Lawrence's *Selected Literary Criticism* entitled "The Dragon of the Apocalypse," found in Maurice Beebe's *Literary Symbolism*, Lawrence expresses the notion that symbolism allows both author and reader to express an idea that cannot be blatantly defined, and that its power is derived from its ability to appeal to the individual's deep, emotional subconscious (31-32).

Part of what makes symbolism so compelling is the fact that it encourages readers to take on the role of co-author in the story; in this way, it becomes indispensable to a reader's experience of the narrative, especially given that one of the primary functions of storytelling is introspection, both on the part of writer and reader. Kahler professes that "the actual 'symbolization' is done, not by the person in whose unconscious the image arises, but by the analyst through inferential interpretation. To him alone these images are meaningful, just as the physical symptom carries a meaning only for somebody who looks for its cause" (59). By this, Kahler means that the reader, or the analyst, must give meaning to the symbol, and so the reader plays a part in what the story conveys to him or her. This sentiment is echoed by Tindall, who states, "To a point the reader may share the author's concerns and find in the symbol a reminder of his own; but for him the principal function of symbol is organizing his experience and enlarging it" (15); in other words, the symbol helps to shape the reader's experience, and to give him a deeper insight into the work. Tindall moreover suggests that, even if a symbol is too subtle for a reader to immediately grasp, he "may respond beneath the level of awareness and find himself surprised by an enrichment he cannot account for" (15). Thus, a symbol can be effective even if the reader does not understand it, because at least on a subconscious level he assigns meaning to the image.

In addition to the potential strengths of utilizing symbolism, Janet Burroway points out in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* that there is “another and more mundane reason that symbol cannot be avoided in literature, and should not, which is that people also...function symbolically” (321). Symbolism is essential to literature because it is essential to people and the way that we communicate. Rollo May takes this idea a step further, suggesting that “the individual *experiences himself as a self* in terms of symbols...” (22). That is to say that the use of symbolism is fundamental not only to communication between people, but also to the way that we think and the way in which we perceive our reality. Kahler further extrapolates upon this in his assertion that “...the [symbol] is no longer merely a road to reality, but the very figuration of reality—more than that, it is in itself a new, independent reality” (61). Thus, symbols are inherent to humanity and the way in which we experience things. Finally, Whitehead remarks that, despite the negative attitude of authors towards symbolism, it is fundamental not only to the writing process, but to life, and will therefore always be present (234).

Although the use of symbolism, particularly as an integral part of a story’s action or theme, is something that many writers are wary of, one can see that when it is done well it can have a powerful impact on the reader. Many critics, such as Rule and Wheeler, believe that if the writer is focusing on the symbol, she is not focusing on relaying the truth; I disagree. Symbolism is inherent to our perception of reality and ourselves, and therefore the symbol is much more potent and leaves a more long-lasting impression upon the reader than a blatant, straightforward message would. The author has more potential to relay a core human truth through symbolism than through bluntness, in much the same way that the symbolism in dreams and mythologies say more about the nature of the individual and society than their conscious thoughts and overlaying culture could. Through my own creative works, I hope to show that the symbol is not

something to be feared and avoided, but that it is essential to the observation and revelation of the human psyche that is the writing process.



## Literature Review

There are two things a reader should consider when discussing symbols. The first is how symbolism has been defined throughout history, both in textbooks and by symbolists. The second is how symbols have been used, and how effective such usage has been towards achieving a greater understanding of the human condition. In this section, I will define symbolism and provide a literary analysis of four stories that have successfully employed symbolism.

### Definition:

In *A Handbook to Literature*, the symbol is defined as “an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning” (Harmon & Holman 507). Moreover, Symbolism can also be defined as a literary movement that originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in France and remained popular throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in many British and American literary works (508). Indeed, some of the most well-known poets and novelists in Western culture are renowned for their expert use of the symbol, with Poe, Hawthorne, and Thoreau being just a few examples.

In his book entitled *Craft of the Short Story*, Richard Summers asserts that, while many short stories are written without the conscious use of symbolism, the “great stories, those that seemingly are surviving the test of time, almost invariably employ some sort of symbolism to attain their effects...” (95). Indeed, J.A. Cuddon cites writers from as far back as the time of epic poets like Virgil and Dante as having employed symbolism effectively. Yet there are many more

contemporary authors who depend “upon powerful symbolism capable of more interpretations than one” (886), such as T.S. Elliot, William Golding, Franz Kafka, and Herman Melville (885-86).

The basic idea is that the symbol is something that stands for something else; however, I find that this simple definition hardly does the term justice. Rollo May asserts that the “symbol is a ‘bridging act,’ a bridging of the gap between outer existence (the world) and inner meaning” (21-22). Therefore, the symbol is not simply a concrete object that stands in place of an abstract idea, but rather a link between the physical and ideological realities of a narrative.

#### Application:

In order to get a good idea of the power of the symbol in fiction, one must look at a few examples of its use. Some of the most well-known authors in Western culture have relied on symbolism in their works so extensively that Charles Feidelson, Jr., asserts, “In the central work of Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, and Poe, symbolism is at once technique and theme. It is a governing principle: not a stylistic device, but a point of view; not a casual subject, but a pervasive presence in the intellectual landscape” (43). This is perhaps most predominant in the works of Poe, who, as Louise J. Kaplan notes in her article “The Perverse Strategy in the ‘Fall of the House of Usher’,” “believed that truly imaginative literature locates its deepest meaning in an *undercurrent*. The surfaces of his tales are always deceptions” (46). In creating such eerie and often mythic images and situations, Poe drives his readers to examine his works thoroughly to discover what truths his stories convey. Indeed, Kaplan pronounces that part of the appeal of Poe is that the reader has to play the role of a detective in order to discover all the secrets hidden

within Poe's works (46-47); this goes back to the idea that the reader becomes the co-author of the story. Perhaps the reason that Poe's works stick so vividly with readers is that they have to think critically about what he might mean.

This artistic strategy is visible in all of his works, but is perhaps most obvious in his short story entitled "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which the narrator takes a trip to visit his ailing childhood friend, Roderick Usher. The reader learns that Usher's twin sister, Madeleine, is likewise ailing. She, presumably, dies, and they bury her. However, days later, Usher reveals that he has realized for some time that she was still alive. She breaks free of her coffin, finds Usher, and collapses upon him, at which time they both die. The narrator exits the crumbling house in time for it to collapse (Poe 350-66).

The most prominent symbol in this story is the house itself, which both Kaplan and Feidelson link with reason and sanity; thus, the decay of the house represents the decay of the minds of its inhabitants (Feidelson 40-42; Kaplan 50-51). Yet there are other symbols present in this work as well. Feidelson calls attention to the image of the lake. The narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher", who is already unnerved by the appearance of the house, looks "...with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows" (Poe 351). Feidelson asserts that the reason the lake has this effect upon the narrator is that it creates "a fusion between the mirror of their minds and the material world" (40); it is an embodiment of the link their minds share with the collapsing house. To some extent, it is the symbol of a symbol – an image of the connection between physical and abstract realities.

Kaplan, on the other hand, chooses to focus more on the symbolism of the relationship between Madeline and Roderick Usher. She references the psychoanalytic term of the "split in

the ego,” which is inherent in the relationship of the twin Ushers. Madeline is not so much a person in and of herself as she is a projection of Roderick’s unwanted sexual desires (54-64). Her return from the grave, therefore, represents the failure of his attempts to bury his incestuous longings. It is significant that Madeline does not fall on top of her brother, but rather into him: “For a moment she remained, trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her horrible and now final death-agonies bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had dreaded” (Poe 365). They are thus forever intertwined in each other’s arms – both a fusion of their single consciousness and a culmination of their incestuous longings. Usher thus succumbs to his familial tendency towards incest, or the “terror he has dreaded.” The final barrier of order decays; the house collapses, and Roderick is consumed by the fetish he had wanted to stave off (359-66).

Another prominent short story that is rife with symbolism is Vladimir Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols,” a story about an elderly couple whose teenaged son has been institutionalized in an insane asylum, where he has twice attempted to kill himself. By the end of the story, the couple decides that they want to take their son out of the hospital and bring him back home. They receive two phone calls back to back; at first, the mother assumes that it is the hospital calling to report that the son has succeeded in killing himself, but her fears are allayed as she realizes that it is only the wrong number. The story ends with the phone ringing a third time (9-14).

The ambiguous ending has inspired countless interpretations. In his article, “*Pnin* and ‘Signs and Symbols’: Narrative Strategies,” William Carroll suggests that the reader participates in the success of the son’s suicide at the end because he assigns that meaning to the final phone

call (245-48), which goes back to the idea of the reader co-authoring the symbolic story. Indeed, Carroll goes so far as to assert that the son is a symbol of the reader. The boy suffers from a disease that Nabokov refers to as “referential mania,” which Carroll says is a “critical disease all readers...suffer from” (245) and stems from our attempts to understand the meanings hidden in literature. Nabokov describes the boy’s illness in the following way:

...the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy...Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes...Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. Some of the spies are detached observers...others...are prejudiced witnesses...others again...are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things (11).

The boy is therefore simultaneously the reader, who is constantly attempting to decode every image and word in literature, and the victim of the reader, in that he is always judged, interpreted, and picked apart by him – sometimes unfairly. In the latter interpretation, the “spies” are the readers themselves; the detached observers represent casual readers, the prejudiced witnesses are literary readers, and the hysterical “others” are the symbol-hunters, who “grotesquely misinterpret[s] his actions” (11). In this case, the reader, as a co-author, not only judges but kills the son based on how he interprets the final phone call.

Larry R. Andrews suggests in his essay, “Deciphering ‘Signs and Symbols’” that the

story not only *contains* symbols, but *is* a symbol of the consequences of parental neglect. Andrews notes the distance between the parents and their teenage son, which is shown to the reader through their unusually old age, their lack of any direct communication with their son throughout the entire story, and their physical distance owing to their son being in a mental hospital. In one of his suicide attempts, the boy is also compared to Icarus from Greek mythology (288-89): “The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been...a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly—and stopped him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape” (Nabokov 10-11). Icarus’ father, Daedalus, is responsible for his son’s death; the son uses his father’s invention to fly too close to the sun and ends up plummeting to his doom. This allusion is echoed mere paragraphs earlier, when the parents notice that “A few feet away...a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle” (10). Andrews asserts that this is an allusion to the parents’ neglect. He, like the fallen bird, is neither “guarded closely nor trained for survival in the world on [his] own” (289). Thus, the symbol of parental neglect pervades every aspect of the short story, and the reader is therefore made to understand that the son’s death is his parents’ fault.

In both “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Signs and Symbols,” the reader is impressed with the eeriness of the ambiguity displayed. Perhaps what makes these stories so impactful is that their deeper meanings lie beneath the surface, and the reader must delve into them in order to discover what those meanings might be. Though these stories are somewhat older, having been initially published in 1839 and 1948, respectively, their captivating use of symbols has rendered them timeless. However, more contemporary authors are also enthralling readers with their use of the symbol; indeed, *The Best American Short Stories 2012* features

heavily symbolic works by Steven Millhauser and Eric Puchner.

Steven Millhauser's short story, "Miracle Polish," introduces the reader to a middle-aged narrator who is unsatisfied with his life until a mysterious, unnamed salesman sells him a bottle of Miracle Polish for his mirrors. Something strange happens when he applies the polish to his mirrors; though it does not change his age or appearance, it has a visible effect on him. He explains it in the following way:

There was a freshness to my image, a kind of mild glow that I had never seen before. I looked at myself with interest. This in itself was striking, for I wasn't the kind of man who looked at himself in mirrors. I was the kind of man who spent as little time as possible in front of mirrors, the kind of man who had a brisk and practical relation to his reflection, with its tired eyes, its disappointed shoulders, its look of defeat. Now I...saw...a man who had something to look forward to, a man who expected things in life.

(110)

This passage tells the reader everything he needs to know about the character, and sets up the symbol that is present throughout the rest of the story. Our protagonist is a man who has known very little, if any, success, and as a consequence he goes through his days feeling defeated and disillusioned with life. Though he admits that his appearance is exactly the same as it had been before, through the Miracle Polish he sees a different version of himself – a him that is hopeful. He later shows the polished mirror to his girlfriend, Monica, and sees that she, too, notices a change in her reflection. However, Monica does not appreciate the change as much as the protagonist; indeed, she starts to resent the polish, and even tells the narrator, in reference to her

reflection, “You know, sometimes I think you like me better there...” (115). Their relationship spirals downward from there.

The narrator can’t seem to get enough of the polish; he constantly buys new mirrors and applies the polish to them. At the climax of the story, Monica orders him to choose between her and the mirrors. It seems that the narrator’s initial choice is Monica; he invites her over and starts to smash the mirrors, but as he realizes what he’s giving up, he turns on Monica and demands if she’s happy. The result is that he ends up driving her away (108-21).

The symbol here is pretty obvious, but it’s effective, creative, and interesting nevertheless. The Miracle Polish is a drug, which the narrator becomes addicted to. Once he is hooked on it, he spends most of his time getting high. Though this addiction gives him a new zest for life, it also drives away his love interest, who feels that he loves her more when he is high. He tries to get her back by dumping the rest of his polish and smashing the mirrors – or basically, getting rid of his stash though he does not know where to find more – but in the end he only blames her for taking away the one thing that he felt made his life better.

Eric Puchner’s story, “Beautiful Monsters,” centers on a civilization of immortal children who have demonized adults and look upon aging as a disease. At the beginning of the narrative, an adult man comes out of the woods and seeks shelter among a “sister” and “brother.” While the girl never really trusts him, he forges a strong relationship with the boy. However, he grows sicker every day, and the other children of the community are on the hunt for him. The story ends with the man nearing death. The girl hopes to turn him in to the authorities, and the boy looks out to see an army of eternal children marching out of the woods with adult heads on spikes (196-211).

The symbols here are many and complex, and stem from the relationships between



characters. The reader can interpret the man as being the father of adopted children, especially with the implication that his own biological daughter has died – which is best exemplified in the scene between the girl and the man, when she awakens to find him crying over her sleeping form and talks to him about death (203). This symbol is strengthened by the wording used to describe the early life of the children that don't age. The girl, who works as an assistant in a lab where embryos are grown, feels “a pang of loneliness when they're hatched, encoded with all the knowledge they'll ever need, sent off to the orphanage to be raised until they're old enough...But, of course, the same thing happened to her...” (201); here, Puchner even uses the word orphanage to describe how the girl and boy were raised, which points towards them having been adopted by the man.

The reader also witnesses the confusing process of both masculine and feminine puberty, because the children are caught between being kids physically and adults mentally. This seems reflective of a symbol of the symbol, as it pertains both to the concrete reality of body and abstract reality of mind. The reader notes the boy's ascent into manhood by his adoration for and emulation of the adult man; throughout the story, he does various things to impress the man, including eating a squirrel though he does not like the taste of it (204-05). Moreover, he is fascinated with the “disease;” the reader sees that he is interested by the idea of the male body changing, “grow[ing] tall and hairy and dark-headed, as strong as a beast” (205). The notion of puberty excites him, but even more enthralling to him is the idea of adulthood. These interests seem indicative of male puberty.

The girl likewise experiences puberty. Where the man serves as a role model for the boy, he becomes a sexual object for the girl; moreover, Puchner shows the reader that the girl, lingering as she is between childhood and adulthood, is confused, with confusion being an

emotion commonly expressed in Western society as characterizing female puberty. The reader sees this when she touches the man's leg; he recoils, and the following scene ensues:

You're just a girl, he whispers

She stares at him. His face is turned, as if he can't bear to  
look at her. She does not know what she is.

He calls her Sleepyhead and hobbles out of the  
room...(203)

In addition to the girl being caught between two worlds even in her own mind, the representation of her puberty is driven home by the man's reaction to her. The man cannot see the girl as a sexual object, and her sexuality disturbs him; the reader can assume that the girl represents a teenager, who, while still physically young, has awakened sexually. Nevertheless, her condition forces the man to see her as a child even though she is *not* one, and he refers to her as a kid with the nickname "Sleepyhead" before fleeing the room.

Readers can also note the moral and financial dilemma of harboring a fugitive. Finally, the ending offers the reader a symbol of the strain a couple may face when the "husband's" elderly father moves in. The reader sees this in the toll the boy's and girl's relationship takes after the man arrives, and how it worsens as he becomes sicker. They have bills that go unpaid and they fight – which is uncharacteristic for them. Finally, the man's illness reaches such a point that, though the boy feels disgusted with himself for it, he is simply waiting for the man to die. This conflict in emotion is reminiscent of that which one might find in a household where the elderly father has moved in with his married son or daughter. Ultimately, though the boy loves both, he chooses to appease the girl under the understanding that "The man will die, but he and the girl will be together forever" (209); though the father is sick and aging, the boy must

make things right with his wife, or the girl, because he will be with her for the rest of his life (196-211).

Poe, Nabokov, Millhauser, and Puchner offer their readers incredible tales that utilize symbolism to their advantage. While Poe and Nabokov have created timeless classics that still resonate with modern readers, Millhauser and Puchner offer readers with more contemporary tastes a powerful glimpse at the advantages of the symbol in literature.

## **Methodology**

In this section, I will briefly discuss Part Two of this thesis, which is composed of six short stories that I have written over the last four years. Readers should note that each of these stories have been submitted to collegiate level workshop courses and edited extensively since their initial drafts; in the case of some, such as “Kat’s Nine Lives,” not a single sentence from the original text carried over into the draft featured here.

Each story will follow a concise introduction in which I will discuss what symbols I have noted in my own work, and what those symbols mean to me. Nevertheless, I hope that readers will assign their own meanings to the symbols that appear. Moreover, I will offer a short commentary on the text itself which will highlight my personal opinions and criticisms regarding what I learned from writing each work, and how those lessons will shape future writings. Thus, Part Two will not only illustrate my attempts to explore varying aspects of the human condition through symbols, but will also demonstrate my personal growth as a fiction writer over the last four years.

## **Part Two**

## **Don't Look Back: Introduction**

The first story in this work is entitled “Don't Look Back.” I chose this short story to open the creative section of this thesis for two reasons: not only is it the first story that I workshopped in a college level course, but it also maintains a fairytale-like quality that – because classic fairytales are rife with symbolism – makes it an excellent segue into the symbolic realm.

I wrote “Don't Look Back” in Fall of 2011 with the intention of paying homage to one of my favorite fairytales as a child: Little Red Riding Hood. In “Don't Look Back,” I wanted to reimagine this fairytale as a modern story with an updated version of the Big Bad Wolf, whom I hoped to represent as a man who had hurt the protagonist, Camelia, in the past. However, as I started the revision process, I realized what this story was really about: Camelia's relationship with her father who disappeared. The idea behind the Wolf, consequently, underwent a change. I don't believe the Wolf represents a single transgressor; I think that, based on how he appears to Camelia, he can symbolize anyone who has hurt her. There's another symbolic element in the way the story ends, with the light in the grandmother's house going out and Camelia facing the way she came instead of forwards. I think this represents Camelia's inability to let go of her past suffering and look towards the future.

When I initially submitted this story for workshop, a lot of my peers took the representation of the wolf literally; although I tried to give the Wolf who chases Camelia human characteristics like “cigarette-stained teeth,” many of my classmates did not pick up on the metaphor. In my revisions, I attempted to illustrate more clearly that the wolf is not literally a wolf, but a representation of her pain and fear. Thus, I learned first-hand about one of the most common mistakes symbolists make – being too subtle in one's use of symbolism. In this

revision, I've added in a few extra scenes to help demonstrate my point better. I also wanted to draw more attention to the symbol at the end, which I had largely underdone in the rough draft; thus, I renamed the piece from "Prey" to "Don't Look Back," and had Camelia repeatedly tell herself not to look back more often throughout the narrative, to help emphasize her inability to move on.

## **Don't Look Back**

“Let's talk about the Wolf,” Dr. Daskalov said.

Camelia sat hunched over in the red cushioned seat, twirling her dark hair around her index finger. She swallowed and did not look up at him.

Dr. Daskalov sat, straight backed, across from her, sunlight slanting through the window and sprawling across the pages of the blue composition notebook he had given her to record her dreams in. Some of the dreams scrawled onto the pages were of seemingly little consequence; in one, she had been eating a bowl of cereal. In another, she had been careening down a river of white rapids – she had promptly awoken from this dream and rushed to the bathroom. Most were just strange, with the most absurd being the one in which she had been frying bacon, and the bacon had started to squeal at her and her house collapsed around her. But in almost all of them, she inevitably came face to face with the Wolf.

The Wolf took on a different appearance each time that she saw him. Sometimes he loomed over her, salivating, his eyes a wild, burning blue. Other times he was translucent and silver, as though he were a ghost. Whatever he looked like, he always filled Camelia with a sense of dread – not so much because he was frightening, but because she was afraid of the question she knew she had to ask, and because she was afraid to hear the answer. Though she would bite her tongue in her sleep just to hold it back, the question would always escape her lips just before she could wake up: “Why?”

Dr. Daskalov folded his hands across the pages and peered at her through his thick, wide-rimmed glasses. “Why do you think this Wolf character keeps reoccurring in your dreams?” he asked.



Camelia's lips twitched downward. She hid her face in her hands and shook her head, signaling that she did not wish to pursue the subject. Dr. Daskalov clicked his pen and scribbled something onto his clipboard, then said, "All right, Camelia." He glanced at his watch, then looked back at her. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about today?"

She shook her head again.

"How are your meds doing so far? You've been remembering to take them every morning when you wake up, yes?"

Camelia nodded, inwardly chastising herself for forgetting to take her medicine for the fifth day in a row. She said quickly, "They're okay," but that wasn't true either; they made her feel nauseous and ruined her appetite. She didn't like to take them, but Mama had insisted she start on something.

"So no panic attacks since you've started taking them?" he asked, glancing down at his clipboard again. Camelia pursed her lips and shook her head once more. He nodded in satisfaction and wrote something down, then looked back up at her. "Well, if you're sure there's nothing else you'd like to talk about...How does next Wednesday at four-thirty sound to you?"

"I think I have to work," Camelia said, scratching her scalp just behind her ear. "Can I call you tomorrow to let you know? I don't remember my schedule right now."

"Certainly," he said. He rose, and Camelia followed his example, scooping up her gray backpack in the process. "Don't forget though. I'll see you next week. And Camelia—" he called as she put her hand on the brass doorknob. She froze, then turned slowly around to look at him. He shot her a soft, kind smile. "I just want to say that you've been very brave about coming out with all of this. But what matters now is moving forward. Try not to spend so much time looking back. Okay?"

She nodded at him, then scurried out the door.

~~~

A few hours later, Camelia and her mother sat at the small, fold-out table in their yellow kitchen. The sky outside the rectangular window was a cloudy gray. The tree just beyond the window clung to its last two leaves as the wind purred through its branches in an attempt to entice the leaves away. Mama drank large gulps of iced tea between mouthfuls of spaghetti. Camelia nudged meatballs around her plate with her fork.

“So,” Mama said as she dabbed a napkin against her russet-colored lips. “How did counseling go today?”

Camelia did not look up, but she could feel the older woman’s dark eyes boring in to her. Mama knew that Camelia did not like to talk about her counseling sessions with Dr. Daskalov, but she persisted in asking about them anyway; inevitably, Camelia’s refusal to give her anything concrete resulted in Mama becoming frustrated with Camelia, and she did not want to deal with that right now.

The silence stretched between them, a void of words that aligned with the void between their souls. Finally, Mama snapped, “Are you going to at least look at me when I try to hold a conversation with you, or are you going to keep ignoring me?”

Camelia prodded her third meatball into place, so that the three of them formed a triangle. She started to scrape her fork through the sauce, as if to draw a picture there, but Mama lunged across the table, snatched the fork out of her hands and threw it against the ground. It clattered against the kitchen tiles, dribbles of red sauce smearing the dirty, yellow floor. Camelia leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. A tremble swept through her body in reaction to her mother’s violence. She still did not look up.

“*Look at me,*” her mother snarled. Camelia swallowed, her mouth involuntarily twitching down into a frown. She clamped her eyes shut and exhaled. Her forehead felt very hot, and the space between her eyebrows knit closer together. Camelia’s heart thrummed in her chest, her thoughts whirling. *Don’t look back.* Her fingers clenched in her lap, nails digging into the skin of her palms and knuckles turning white. Silently, she counted up to ten and then down again. Across the table, her mother sighed.

*10, 9, 8...*

“Camelia,” Mama said in a quieter voice. The legs of her chair screeched back against the tile, and a shadow flickered across Camelia’s eyelids as her mother passed in front of the light. A warm hand rested on her shoulder. Camelia remained still. Her mother’s knees cracked as she knelt down beside the chair. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Will you please look at me?”

Camelia took in a sharp breath and shook her head. The fingers squeezed her shoulder and then released her.

“Fine. Finish your dinner and clean up this mess.”

Camelia listened as her mother stood and shuffled down the hall without another word. When she was gone, Camelia opened her eyes and stared down at her unfinished plate, then at the fork halfway across the room. For a long time, she sat very still. Then, slowly, she rose, placed her full plate inside of Mama’s nearly empty one, and crossed the room to the trashcan, where she scooped the remains of their dinner into the yawning black garbage bag. After, she turned on her heel and marched to the sink, stooping to pick up the fork on the way.

Water steamed from the faucet into the saucy, red plates and the large, dark pot. Camelia drizzled blue dish soap onto a green sponge and scrubbed at the dishes. Outside, barren branches scratched against the glass, as if the tree were asking her to let it in. Camelia shook her head at it.

*Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin*, she thought to herself, recalling the old tale of the three little pigs. When she was younger and still asking for bedtime stories, her father had always alternated back and forth between that and Little Red Riding Hood. Camelia wondered if he even knew any other bedtime stories. She remembered the way he would lean over her when he finished, the smell of his aftershave wafting over her like the potion for a pleasant dream. He would always kiss her forehead and, even as he was reaching for the chord to her table lamp, he would say, “Remember that, little princess. Wolves will always try to trick you. They’re never who you think they are.”

Then he would turn the light out.

Camelia took a step back with the plates and turned to put them into the dishwasher. There was a sudden *bang!* as a violent gust of wind whipped the branch away and then slammed it hard against the window. Camelia gasped and dropped the plates, which smashed against the floor. Shards of red glassware scattered in every direction. She put her hands over her mouth, then quickly dropped to her knees and began to gather the shards together, ignoring the little prickling sensation in her fingers as she clumsily cut herself open over and over again.

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and Mama appeared in the door to the kitchen, her eyes ablaze.

“What did you *do?!?*” she demanded. She caught sight of the small rivulets of blood beading up against Camelia’s fingers and dripping onto the floor. “What are you *doing*, you stupid girl!”

Camelia froze, her mouth turning dry. The sound of raised voices, the sight of an angry face sent her spiraling down once more into her memories. And above all of it, she heard her therapist, Dr. Daskalov, admonishing, *Don’t look back, Camelia. Looking back makes the*

*monsters real again.*

“Stop looking at me like that!” Mama shrieked. She marched across the kitchen floor, glass crunching beneath the rubber soles of her flats. “You’re like a goddamn deer. Get out of the way. Get out of the fucking way! I’ll clean this up myself.” When Camelia did not move, Mama twisted her fingers roughly through her hair and yanked her up. “I said get out!”

The glass that had been in Camelia’s hands sprinkled across the floor. Mama released her and shoved her aside. “Get out! Get out! I’m so sick of this! Get out!” she shouted. Camelia whipped around and ran for her room. She snatched her backpack up and dumped the contents onto the floor, grabbed a handful of clothes out of her dresser, scurried to the bathroom, scooped her toiletries into the open bag, then rushed out the front door and let it slam shut behind her.

~~~

The old road stretched before Camelia, a dark row of pavement hidden beneath a paint spattering of yellow, orange, and red leaves. Barren trees loomed on either side, their gnarled fingers reaching for her, beckoning her to leave the well-traveled highway and traverse down the dark, empty road that eventually led to her grandmother’s house.

Camelia shuddered in the chilly Virginia air and pulled up her red hood, as though all she needed to protect herself from her fears was a thin stretch of fabric. She gripped the black straps of her backpack, realizing too late that, in her rush, she had forgotten to pack her medicine with her other things. With a deep sigh, Camelia began the long march along the unlit road to her grandmother’s house. It was late, but even if Grandma was sleeping, Camelia knew where she hid the spare key. Grandma, who knew well how things had changed between Camelia and Mama, had told her that if she ever needed to “stop by” for an evening, as she put it, she was more than welcome.

Overhead, the moon gleamed down at her like a Cheshire grin. It was a smile without eyes, a smile that did not see suffering because, as Camelia knew well, bad things only happened in the shadows.

Camelia watched her breath slip through her lips like a piece of her soul vanishing before her eyes. Absently, she touched the tender spot on the nape of her neck where her mother had yanked her up by the hair, winced as the little cuts on her hands burned. She looked down to examine the cuts in the moonlight, then shoved her hands deep inside her hoodie's pockets. They stung, but not nearly as much as what her mother had said to her just before throwing her out.

Mama knew what she had been through; Mama knew why she was so skittish, why she had to go to counseling. She knew about Brendon Woolfe, the man who had hurt Camelia, the man who haunted Camelia's nightmares. She knew, but she didn't understand. Camelia wished her mother would grasp that sudden movements, loud noises, and a negative atmosphere made her lock up. Mama always asked how counseling went, but even if she heard the words, she did not listen to everything they entailed. She could see on paper that her daughter had severe anxiety, but she did not comprehend that Camelia was afraid of everything.

Even her.

~~~

Just a year before, Camelia and her mother had been extremely close. On weekends when Camelia didn't have to go to work at Lee Wrangler's, they would go out for lunch and get manicures together, or head downtown and make pottery. In the evenings when they got home, they would curl up in Mama's large, king-sized bed to watch romantic comedies and eat popcorn together while Daddy worked nights as a security guard in an office building. Sometimes Mama would even let her have a small glass of wine.

During those days, Daddy always came to the mall to walk Camelia home after she got off work. On the nights that she had a closing shift, he would take an early lunch break to ensure that he could drive her safely back to the house, where he would always give her a quick hug and promise to see her in the morning before she left for school. Sometimes, when he was feeling especially generous, they would stop by Sonic on the way and he would buy ice cream for her and her mother.

Once, Camelia had asked him why he went through so much trouble.

“I mean, you’ve only been at work for a couple of hours and then you take your lunch. You basically have your entire shift left when you get back, and then nothing to look forward to,” she said, shoveling a spoonful of Oreo blast into her mouth. Daddy just chuckled, his eyes planted on the road ahead of them. The bulk of the blue-gray pickup creaked as they rolled across the pavement.

“I get to look forward to seeing you in the morning, princess. That’s all I really need.”

Camelia hadn’t understood what he meant, so she shrugged her shoulders and continued to eat.

The last time he picked her up was the night he disappeared. She remembered the strange look in his eyes as he leaned across the seat, keys still in the ignition and gas still pattering out of the tailpipe, and kissed her forehead for the last time. Camelia had not thought much of the fact that he lingered, that his throat caught when he said that he loved her, but she noticed the tears in his honey-colored eyes, and it arrested her hand on the door.

“Daddy?” she asked.

His lips twitched into a smile that was halfway a frown. “Sorry, princess,” he said, and dabbed at his eyes with the sleeve of his heavy, tanned leather jacket. “I was just thinking.

You've grown up a lot, you know. I know you're not interested in fairytales anymore, but do you remember what I used to tell you?"

She stared at him, not sure of what to make of this. He rested a large, meaty hand on her shoulder, leaned a little bit closer and whispered, "Wolves are never who you think they are, Camelia. They always appear to be a friend, but...but they'll hurt you, if you let them. Do you understand that?" He squinted at her.

Camelia unclicked her seatbelt and recoiled from her father. She could not smell alcohol on his breath, but she forced herself to chuckle and ask, "Daddy, have you been drinking?"

He let go and pulled away from her. His eyes settled on the curve of the driveway ahead of him. Camelia swallowed and reached a hesitant hand towards him. "Daddy?"

"I have to get back to work," he said gruffly. His tone was unusually sharp. Camelia blinked at him. Her hand fell back to her side. Then, slowly, she opened the door and alit from the car. When she turned back to shut the door, he said, without looking at her, "Remember what I told you, Cami."

Then he pulled away. Camelia watched as the red glare of his brake lights disappeared. She noted that he had not promised to see her in the morning. And in the morning, she did not see him.

When she got home from school that day, she found her mother slumped over at the kitchen table, her hair frazzled and her eyes bloodshot. A half-empty bottle of bourbon stood before her.

"Mama!" Camelia cried, dropping her bag. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

Mama shook her head. Instead of answering the question, she said, "His phone is turned off, so I called Rick. He said that he never even came to work last night. I looked in the closet –



his suitcase and about half his clothes are missing, and about a thousand dollars are missing from the bank account. You know what that means, don't you?"

She tilted the bottle back. Camelia winced as her mother took a hearty gulp, then slammed the bottle down against the table. Mama wiped her mouth, looked Camelia dead in the eyes and said, "Men are wolves. You think you're safe with them, but they're tricky. You never really know who they are until they've already eaten your heart out."

~~~

Camelia glared down at the trail passing under her red Converse and attempted to force the bitter memories back below the earth where she had buried them. *Don't look back.*

The back pocket of her jeans began to vibrate. Camelia paused to fish her phone out and glanced at the bright screen, where she saw a picture of her and her mother wearing tri-corns and holding up large lollipops. Daddy had taken it the day they went on a family trip to old town Williamsburg together. At the top, the word "Mama" was spelled out in bright letters. Camelia frowned and hit the ignore button. She did not want to listen to her mother yell at her anymore. She didn't have it in her right now.

A snapping twig from somewhere in the woods to her left made Camelia jump. She peered into the shadows, then resumed a quick pace. Her phone lit up again, signaling that she had received a text message or a voicemail, but she snuffed out the light without looking at it and shoved it into her pocket. The artificial brightness would only draw attention to her, and besides, she couldn't afford to be distracted.

The familiar feeling of being watched crept over her like a sinister cloud across the stars. All around her the shadows loomed, grasping for her with inky, tarlike tendrils. The surrounding trees and shrubs began to press in on her, enclosing the road like prison walls. Forcing a shaky

smile to her lips, she looked up at the grinning moon and thought to herself, *What am I afraid of anyway? Werewolves?*

The feeble attempt to reassure herself had the opposite effect. Camelia stopped in her tracks and wrapped her arms around herself. Dr. Daskalov's voice echoed through her mind.

*Let's talk about the Wolf.*

~~~

His name was Brendon Woolfe, and he had black curls, bright blue eyes, and ears that were ever so slightly pointed at the top. Several months after Camelia's father's disappearance, Matthew began working alongside her as a sales associate at Lee Wrangler's. She barely noticed him at first – he seemed to keep more to himself. But one Sunday afternoon before his shift started, her coworker and friend, Jamie, pulled her aside.

“What do you think of Brendon?” Jamie asked, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Camelia shrugged and set to work organizing a stack of jeans that had been upheaved. “I guess he's okay. I don't really know him that well. Why?”

Jamie's mouth widened into a grin that set Camelia's nerves on edge. “You know he likes you, right? He's *always* staring at you. Have you never noticed?”

“No,” Camelia said, and shrugged. “It doesn't matter. I'm not interested anyway.”

Jamie's shoulders slumped, her eyes grew wide. “How do you know? You said you don't really know him that well! You should try talking to him.” She placed a hand on Camelia's arm.

“I don't want to,” Camelia replied flatly. She pulled away from her friend. Though she did not look up, she could sense the disappointment emanating from Jamie. Her coworker crossed her arms.

“What's with you, anyway? You've just gotten really distant. What's going on,

Camelia?” Jamie asked. Camelia paused in the midst of folding a pair of jeans. She hadn’t told anyone at work about what had happened with her father. In fact, she had tried very hard not to think about it. She closed her eyes and inhaled.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said at last. Jamie flicked her wrist in a dismissive gesture, then turned and walked away without another word.

After their conversation, Camelia began to notice the prickling sensation of someone watching her more and more often. Sometimes, from the corner of her eye, she would see Brendon standing very still across the store. A few times she would look up and catch his gaze, but it would always make her shiver. Jamie was wrong; his watchfulness of her wasn’t the kind of watchfulness that implied adoration – it implied obsession. She noted the way he stood, his whole body tense, as if he were going to leap across the store and rip her throat out. His eyes bore into her like a wolf who has marked its prey.

Sometimes, when she walked home at night, she would get the same prickling sensation, but when she looked around she would not see anyone. She stayed on her guard anyway.

Then, one night, it happened. Both she and Brendon had worked the closing shift, and as she made her way home, she got into a heated argument with her friend, Alex, through text messages. She became so wrapped up in her phone that she did not notice Brendon ghost up beside her, and only realized that she was not alone when he said, “Why so lonely, Cami?”

Camelia froze. She looked up at him, saw the inhuman hunger in his eyes, saw that he was empty of everything except that hunger. She swallowed.

“I’m not...I’m not lonely,” she said.

“Hm. You should get a car. It isn’t safe to walk so far alone at night.”

“I don’t live far.”

“I know.”

Camelia’s hands balled up into fists and her teeth clenched. Every muscle in her body ached for her to strike him down now and run, but she held still.

Brendon looked up at the sky, despite the fact that it was empty, all its beauty washed out by the haze of streetlights. “Nice night out,” he said.

Camelia didn’t respond. He turned to look at her. They stared at each other for a long time, before Brendon finally said, “Well?” When she kept her silence this time, he added on, “Are you going to talk to me, or are you just going to ignore me, Camelia?”

Quietly, Camelia said, “Please go away.”

Brendon inclined his head towards her, his forehead wrinkling as his eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“I said go away. Please. I’m asking you nicely.”

“Nicely?” he sneered. “You realize you’re being incredibly rude. Didn’t you ever have anyone teach you any manners?”

“I want to be left alone.”

“All I want is a conversation!”

“Please leave me alone.”

“Listen, bitch—”

Camelia thrust her fist into his stomach and took off running down the street. Within a minute, his body slammed against hers and they both tumbled down to the concrete sidewalk. A sharp *crack!* sounded as her skull collided with the ground. Her brain rattled against bone. Pain coursed through her body, little scrapes and bruises blossoming across her skin. Her head swam, but through the fog she could hear Brendon muttering something.

“See what you’ve made me do? Stupid bitch.”

He locked his hands through her underarms and carried her into a nearby alley. And Daddy never came to her rescue, Daddy wasn’t there to protect her like he should have been.

~~~

The crunching of leaves behind her brought her back to the present. A cold sweat broke out over Camelia’s palms, and her heartbeat quickened in her chest. She clamped her eyes shut and forced herself to breathe. *Don’t look back*, she reminded herself. She thought of one of the many methods of calming herself down that Dr. Daskalov had taught her, and began counting up to ten and then down again.

7, 6, 5...

In the distance, she saw the tiny, golden gleam of light that meant she was almost to her grandmother’s house. There was nothing behind her, she reassured herself. If she did not acknowledge it, it did not exist.

Despite her attempts to soothe herself, she could not keep herself from walking just a little faster than she had been before. A malicious feeling roiled in the air around her, and she thought she heard something padding across the leaves behind her with soft, predatory steps. If something really was there, though, Camelia refused to look at it. She stared ahead towards the light in her grandmother’s kitchen so hard that her eyes began to water.

*Just keep moving*, she told herself. If she kept moving forward, everything would be all right. If she just kept her gaze set to what was in front of her, she would reach her grandmother’s house and she would be safe. All she had to do was not look back.

The footfalls grew closer, and she could not escape the notion that, whatever it was, it was gaining; it would catch up to her soon.

4, 3, 2...

In spite of her best efforts to control her breathing, air rushed into her lungs in sharp, quick gasps. A gust of hot air slithered through the seams of her hoodie and planted what felt like a demon's kiss on her neck. *It was breathing on her.*

Camelia came to a halt, overcome by a sudden paralysis. Sweat slicked her palms and forehead. Her insides performed somersaults. Slowly, she turned her head to the left. From the corner of her eye, she saw him – the ragged, mangy Wolf, little more than a silver sliver of a ghost in the moonlight. He bore his cigarette-stained teeth at her in a malicious grin, a satisfied, guttural growl dancing through his lips; her terror was pleasing to him.

“Oh God,” she choked. Her neck snapped forward and Camelia broke into a run. The Wolf snarled behind her, letting loose a cruel, barking laugh in the otherwise stagnant forest. Now, as before, there was no one to save her.

Camelia kept her eyes focused on the pool of light spilling through her grandmother's window. She was almost there, but she knew, even without looking back again, that she would never make it in time. The Wolf snapped at her heels, his hellfire breath slowly melting her resolve. Cold terror stabbed into her like barbed wire wrapping around her soul, suffocating what little strength and courage she had. Her eyes started to roll into the back of her head, but still she forced herself to keep running.

Then it happened. Her foot came down on the pavement wrong, and she plummeted down. Her body crashed against the road hard. Behind her, the Wolf slowed his pace to a stalking creep; his excited, heavy breathing told her that he was savoring her pain, her fear. Cringing, Camelia lifted her face to look forward as the light in her grandmother's window, her only beacon of hope, went dark.

The world became silence. Camelia steeled herself for the inevitable agony that was to follow this moment, but nothing happened. The forest had grown unnaturally still.

A soft panting behind her alerted her that the Wolf was still there, but his presence no longer exuded malice. Camelia pushed her torso up off the ground and twisted around so that she sat facing the Wolf. He watched her, his head tilted to the side, ears lowered back over his skull. Camelia searched his demeanor for the slightest sign of treachery, but she could see none. This was not the demonic beast from her nightmares, but the ghostly, mystical creature she had dreamt so often about.

Then she saw his eyes.

They were not the blue that she had expected, but instead the color of honey.

A lump caught in her throat. She put a hand over her mouth and whispered through her fingers, “It’s *you*. *You* were the Wolf all along.”

The ghost bowed its head towards her, as if in a nod. Camelia choked. Tears slithered down her cheeks, but she did not bother to brush them away. She let herself weep for a long time, knowing what would happen next. The question was already boiling in her, rising to her throat. She swallowed hard – she did not want to know the answer.

“Why did you leave us?!” she cried suddenly. The words echoed through the distant treetops, fluttered away like butterflies on the wind. She leaned her head into her hands and sobbed. “Why? You loved us. You were happy. Why did you go? Why?”

Camelia snatched up a rock from the side of the road and pelted it at the spectral image. “Why, you son of a bitch! Tell me why!”

The stone swept through the Wolf and skidded across the pavement behind him. He stared at her for a long minute, her shoulders heaving, her body trembling as she fought to keep

herself under control. Then he turned his face upwards, towards the smiling moon, and closed his eyes. A soft, haunting howl emerged from him, and as the air swallowed his song, so too did it swallow him. She watched him dissipate before her very eyes.

Camelia was left looking back the way she had come. The road was empty; there was nothing for her back that way. And yet, she could not bring herself to stand up, to turn around and finish the walk to her grandmother's. She pulled her knees up to her chest, buried her face in the crook of her arms, and cried.



## **Breathe: Introduction**

The next story I wrote in Spring 2012. “Breathe” opens with an introduction from the protagonist, Jenna, who is recording her sightings of a strange man. This mysterious man, who first appears at the site of the car crash that kills Jenna’s mother, always seems to turn up at the most inopportune times, and the sight of him is enough to give Jenna panic attacks and force her to withdraw from the real world. The reader later learns that his name is Mors, which in Roman mythology is the personification of death. I wanted to tie this story to mythology because mythology, like fairytales and dreams, is concerned with symbolism, even though the reader can see that Mors does not appear to be the god in the myths. Whether he really is the incarnation of death or merely a figment of Jenna’s imagination is left up to the reader; the true power of the symbol lies in Jenna’s inexplicable fear of him. For Jenna, Mors symbolizes death; consequently, her fear of him is her fear of her mortality, which is why she always sees him in places where there’s a chance something could go wrong. In short, Jenna uses Mors as an excuse to stay away from activities that could lead to her death. On the other hand, it’s possible that her constantly seeing Mors is a form of wish fulfillment. Though she’s afraid of death, she looks for it because she hopes that it will reunite her with her mother.

This story started out as a very short, four page narrative that was mostly exposition as I tried to cram Jenna’s experience into the writing course’s five page limit. When revising it for the thesis, not only did I turn most of the exposition into scenes, but I experimented with format and how I wanted the story to be conveyed. I ultimately decided to have the narrator writing her experiences down in retrospect. Although I really enjoyed writing this story, I do feel as though it still needs some work done to it before I can say that it is *finished*. In future drafts, I’d like to

take what I've learned about characterization over the years and apply it to Jenna to give her more depth than she currently has and make her less of a reflection of the person *I* was when I first wrote her back in 2012. Although Jenna is not *me*, her voice is very much like my own. In future drafts, I hope that her own voice will come out stronger.

Despite these drawbacks, I still feel that this story is a worthy addition to the thesis, not only because it helps to illustrate the development of my writing over the years, but because of how the symbol has become refined since the initial draft. As a symbolist, I have made both of the mistakes that Jerome Stern warns against: I have been too subtle in my symbols, and too overt. In this draft, I toned down the final scene between Jenna and Mors so as to make the symbol less forthright and more natural to the reader.

## **Breathe**

Over the last few years, a strange man has been following me around. Although I never see him in the same place twice, every time that I've noticed him, he has always looked exactly the same – never aging, never changing clothes, and almost always in the midst of smoking a cigarette. I've never been able to figure out who he is, or how he managed to follow me from my hometown in Tifton, Georgia to the Big Apple. Most of all, though, I've never really understood why seeing him has always made me feel so afraid, and why, since he came into my life, I've felt as though I have no control over anything.

I'm writing down a collection of my experiences with him in the hopes that perhaps writing it out will help me to understand, and, eventually, regain some sanity in my life.

So, let's begin.

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The first time I saw him was the night my mother died.

I was barely conscious as the paramedics hauled me out of the car. Red lights flared like demon eyes in the night. I remember dazedly asking where my mother was even as I saw the men force the jaws-of-life wide and wrench her body from the driver's seat. In a daze, I turned my head away to the other car, the car that had hit us. The driver was a drunk, wobbling man with wide, frenzied eyes that zoomed around like flies before they finally locked onto something behind me. The paramedics turned me around to lay me on the gurney, and I realized what the man who killed my mother was staring at, and why.

On the opposite side of the road, a tall, thin man leaned against the brick wall, the dark hood of his long black coat shrouding his gaunt, sallow features. I thought he was the devil at

first. The tip of his cigarette glowed like a breath of hellfire, his lips releasing smoke into the air. What frightened me most were his eyes. They were dark and empty, like the eye sockets in a skull.

That was when I lost consciousness.

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The morning after, my eyes opened to the sight of bright, fluorescent lights gleaming down at me from a flat, white ceiling. Groggily, I sat up. Blood rushed to my head and black dots fizzed across my vision. I slumped back against the cushion, my eyes widening in an attempt to see through the dark haze. When my vision cleared, I swiveled my head to the left without lifting it off the pillow. There was an empty, cushioned red chair and a small table propping up my father's copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. A bookmark with an orange dragon on it peaked out from halfway through the thick volume. I turned over to the right. A plastic bag filled with blood hung on a rolling rack about a foot away. The dark liquid travelled through a thin tube that led to my arm. I've never liked seeing blood, so when I realized what it was, the saliva in my mouth suddenly became hot, and my eyes started to roll into the back of my head. I turned back to the left.

The *swish-swish* of loose scrubs announced that a nurse had come into the room. I didn't look at her, but she edged around the bed and peered down at me. I can't remember, but I think her name was Amy. A smile of relief came to her painted red lips. "Miss Jenna! You're awake." Then, taking a long look at my face, she asked cautiously, "How do you feel, honey?"

I shook my head. If I opened my mouth, I knew the sour tasting saliva churning within would turn into vomit. The reality of my situation sunk in like a slow, cold knife in my gut. If I was in the hospital, that meant that we really had gotten into that wreck, and my mother really

was dead. Forever.

It's been three years since my mother's death, and my mind still cannot wrap around this reality. Forever is such a long time, and I was only fifteen years old; my life was just beginning. How do you go the rest of your life and never see your mother again? One minute, she and I had been laughing about some stupid song on the radio, a warm pizza in my lap. The next...she wasn't there anymore. But how could that be? How was it possible that I went home later that week and she wasn't there, and never will be again?

The nurse walked around behind me and started fiddling with something – maybe the bag of blood. “Your father will be very happy to know you're awake. I think he just went to grab a drink from the vending machines, so he should be back in shortly. Are you in any pain at all?”

I was in agony, but I guessed she didn't mean a broken heart. I shook my head again. She reached across me and tapped a small, white control sitting on the bed. “If you need anything at all, just push that green button. The doctor will be in shortly, but until then I suggest you get some rest.”

I nodded my understanding. She patted the blankets near my hand, then turned and walked out of the room. I watched her go. She made a right as soon as she exited the door, and disappeared from sight.

And there he was.

My hands balled into fists. The man I had seen at my mother's accident – the devil man with the cigarette – stood out in the hall. His hands were in his pockets as he watched patients being rolled by on gurneys, but none of the nurses asked him to move. In fact, no one but me seemed to notice him at all. At first, I considered that maybe he worked there – maybe he drove the ambulance, or worked as a paramedic. But no; he was too strange and unnerving to be a

hospital employee.

Suddenly, he looked at me. The blood drained out of my face, and a cold sweat beaded up along my forehead. My hands felt cold and clammy as I clenched the bed sheets so roughly my knuckles shone like marbles. I bit my lip.

He arched a thin, pale brow at me. Another gurney rushed past, this one bearing a large man draped in a blanket. The man in the coat cocked his head to the side to watch them go. The angle of his neck looked unnatural, and a shiver passed through my body. After a short pause, he pushed off from the wall and glided down the hall after them, his movements so lithe and swift that he might have been a shadow. Or a ghost.

I stared at the spot where he had stood for a long time before my father, holding a Mountain Dew in one hand and a bag of Cheetos in the other, appeared in the door. When he saw that I was awake, he rushed over to me and gathered my hands into his. Almost immediately after, he bowed his head and began to cry.

For a time, I forgot about the strange man in the coat. I forgot about the fact that I was in a hospital, that all around us there were people crying, dying, and suffering. The noises of the hospital muted as if someone had pressed a button, the bustle outside my door became invisible to us. The rest of the world vanished, so that there was only my father and me in our bubble of grief.

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After that, I kept seeing the man in the coat in random places. Usually all I managed to catch were brief glimpses of him here and there, but every time I saw him, it brought back memories of my mother's death and filled me with an insurmountable sense of dread. If I was about to cross the street and saw him standing on the other side of the road, I wouldn't be able to

cross even after he was gone. If I stood in an elevator and caught sight of him just before the door closed, I would break out in a sweat and get out of the elevator as quickly as I could, regardless of whether it opened onto the floor I needed.

It was then that I started to realize that with him around, I would never be able to function as a human being. I couldn't even maintain normal relationships with my friends. In fact, one of the most humiliating events of my high school career happened the summer after my mother's death, when my friend Miranda invited me over to a pool party to celebrate the end of the school year. I had been so excited to get out and mingle, but when I looked into the pool, I saw his face reflected just above my shoulder. I screamed and whipped around, but he wasn't there. Everyone turned to stare at me, but I was too busy searching for his face in the crowd to feel as embarrassed as I should have. When I couldn't find him, ice settled into the pit of my stomach. I sunk down onto the concrete, tangled my fingers through my hair, and rocked in place until someone called my dad and he came to take me home.

I didn't get invited to any more pool parties after that.

In the car, my dad asked me if I wanted to talk about what had happened.

I glanced at his speedometer, noted that he was going five miles under the speed limit. Since Mom's death, he always drove slowly and carefully. I sometimes wondered if he only did so when I was in the car. Before the accident, he used to weave between cars and slice his way through traffic; the open road was like an invitation for him to press his gas pedal to its limit.

I folded my hands in my lap and stared down at them. By that time I had already stopped looking out of windows, because sometimes when I looked out, I would see that strange man on a street corner, or walking out of a store, or sitting under an umbrella at a café. I had never told my father about the man, but in that moment, I was seized by the desire to tell him everything. I

knew that Dad would figure out what was going on for me; he would call the police, get them to hunt this man down and lock him away where he could never terrorize me again. Dad would not sleep until he knew that I was safe.

Even as the thoughts occurred to me, I knew that they were true. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, not daring to lift my gaze from my lap; I think it was the first time that I noticed how much he had aged since the accident. His copper hair had streaks of gray, and there was a weariness to his eyes that did not fit a man in his lower forties. The lines of his face, the purple bags beneath his lids, said that he was exhausted; could I really add on to his worries?

Slowly, I began to realize that my father was every bit as afraid as I was. He wasn't afraid of the strange man in the coat; he was afraid for *me*. It occurred to me that I was relying too much on him, that I was too dependent and it was costing him too much. I couldn't ask him to fix my life, because neither of us would ever be individual people if I continued to make all of my problems his. If I ever wanted to get past this, I had to figure it out on my own. I couldn't let my dad take care of me for the rest of my life; at some point, I needed to be able to take care of myself, solve my own problems. Maybe, if I could do that, I could fix myself and start to regain some of the control that I had lost when I started seeing the man.

"No," I said flatly.

Dad reached over and patted my knee. He breathed out, his shoulders sagging; it seemed to me a gesture of relief. In a soft voice, he said, "It's going to be okay, Jenna. I hope you know that."

I wondered if he did.

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I forgot to mention that Dad had used the insurance money from the accident to buy a



new car for me. It was a green Hyundai Sonata, and it sat in the driveway for about a year before I would even touch it.

“You’ve got to learn some time,” Dad said every time that I told him I didn’t want to go out for a drive, though he always looked so relieved when I said no.

A month after the anniversary of my mother’s death, I decided that he was probably right. In a little over a year, I would be graduating from high school and would be on my way to college. Though I hadn’t broached the topic with Dad yet, I knew even then that I wanted to go to school out of state – to get as far away from the man in the coat as possible. When I moved, I wouldn’t be able to rely on my father anymore, and maybe that was the best thing for me.

That afternoon, when he got home from work, I unhooked the Sonata’s keys from the key rack and dangled them before him. His face paled.

“You, uh...you want to go for a spin?” he asked as he flung his jacket onto the back of a chair.

“Yes. Like you said, I’ve got to learn some time.”

“Yes, well, right *now*?” he asked skeptically. He fiddled with his tie, his eyes carefully avoiding mine. “I just got home from work, kiddo. I’m tired–”

“Dad,” I interrupted. He looked up at me, saw the resolve in my expression. I sucked in a breath. “If we don’t do it now, it won’t happen. I need to start standing on my own two feet more. I can’t always ask you to take me places.”

He took a step closer to me and placed a hand on the back of my head. “You know I don’t mind taking you wherever you need to go, kiddo.”

I pulled away from him. “I know, dad. But I have to do this.”

He sighed. “All right. Let me change into more comfortable clothes, at least.”

After that, we went out for thirty minute increments almost every night. Although I was cautious, Dad was always drenched in sweat by the time that we got home. Even though my father was panicky, I, to my own surprise, felt confident for the first time in months. I maneuvered smoothly around turns, handled intersections with grace, glided between cars on the highway with textbook perfection. For a time, I tasted freedom. Behind the wheel, I was in control. No one else could decide my destiny there.

Then came the day of the examination for my driver's license. Dad and I sat together at the Tifton DMV and waited for them to call out the number we had drawn. The wait was interminable, and though Dad and I busied ourselves with talking about what we thought of the latest episodes of House, Doctor Who, and South Park, we had long since run out of things to say before the squat, round woman at the desk finally called us up. Her nametag read Lisa.

We handed the paperwork over the desk. Lisa beckoned for me to follow her out the back door, and Dad clasped my hand and arm.

"Good luck," he whispered. I nodded and walked after Lisa. She performed a basic examination of my car, made sure that the inspection sticker was up-to-date, that the brake lights worked, that I knew how to use the turn signals. Then we climbed into the Sonata and fastened our seatbelts. I adjusted the rearview mirror.

"Whenever you're ready, hun," Lisa said. I put the car into reverse, then pulled out of the gravel parking lot and onto the road. Lisa gave me various instructions from the passenger's seat, directing me through traffic. My palms were a little sweaty, but for the most part I felt that I was doing really well.

We pulled up to an intersection. The light turned green. I glanced in either direction to make sure that the intersection was clear, then shifted my foot to the gas pedal. We were halfway

through the intersection when a large, red pick-up truck flew out in front of us. I slammed on the brake, my breath catching in my throat. Lisa swore and leaned across me to jam her hand against the horn.

He was in the passenger seat. He was looking down at me.

Lisa leaned back in her seat and rubbed her temples. “Sorry about that, hun. You’re doing fine. Unfortunately, other people are behind the wheel too, and sometimes they do stupid things.”

I remained motionless, my hands clenched white against the wheel. Horns started blaring behind me; I was stopping traffic, but I couldn’t seem to make myself move. Lisa looked over at me.

“Come on, kid. We’ve got to move,” she said. Then she noticed how sharp my breathing was, and she leaned over and put a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head and put my hand over my mouth. *He had been there.* The devil man in the long, black coat! He had stared at me from the passenger seat with those deep, soulless eyes.

Lisa couldn’t have known how deeply her words affected me. I could control how I drove, yes, but that’s not really control at all. I could do everything right and someone else could still ruin everything. Mom had done everything right, and look what had happened to her – a drunk driver! A stupid, fat, middle-aged man with no idea what he was doing. I saw the flashing lights of the ambulance again, realized that everything is chaos. There is *no such thing* as being in control.

“Can you at least get us off the road?” Lisa asked finally, her beady eyes darting around at the people who were trying to get around us. I took my foot off the brake and glided slowly down the road. I turned off into the first parking lot I found, then put my face in my hands and cried.

“I can’t do this,” I bawled. “I can’t. I can’t.”

“It’s all right, hun. You’re just shaken up. You’ve just got to learn to deal with things better, is all.”

I handed her my keys. When we got back to the DMV, Dad saw that my face was streaked with tears. He drove me home, we hung up the keys to the Sonata on their hook, and I didn’t touch them again after that.

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At the beginning of the semester, we pulled into a space in front of the girl’s dorm building. The back of Dad’s SUV was loaded with cardboard boxes full of my clothes, books, movies, and other stuff. He turned the car off but left his keys in the ignition, then looked over at me.

“You know, it’s not too late for you to decide you don’t want to do this,” he said, draping his arm across the back of his seat. “You could always wait a year and just go to college in state. Georgia College is only a couple hours away from home. Or you could take online classes, you know.”

I looked at him and forced myself to smile. “It’s fine, Dad. This is where I need to be,” I said.

He sighed and turned his gaze forward, towards the building where I would be living. “You know, you’re sixteen hours from home here, kiddo. I won’t be able to come to the rescue if something happens.”

“I know,” I replied with a nod. I didn’t add on that that was part of why I had chosen to come here. My father was a good man and had always taken care of me, but I knew that I couldn’t rely on him for the rest of my life. At some point, I had to have the strength to stand on

my own. Besides, there would be no devil man out here; I was confident that I had left him back in Georgia.

We spent the next hour and a half carrying boxes up to the dorm and unpacking. My father spent the whole time reminding me that New York is not like Georgia, that I shouldn't stay out too late or wander around by myself, and that he'd be leaving me a couple hundred dollars to buy myself some warmer clothes for winter.

When we had finished, we grabbed dinner at a local pizzeria, where my father shook his head in disappointment at the iced tea they had given and added about five packs of Splenda to the liquid. We headed back to the dorm. Dad pulled me in to a long hug, until finally I gently pushed him away. He smiled down at me.

"I'm really proud of you, Jenna. I know that your mother is too." He kissed my forehead and shot me a final wave goodbye as he turned towards the parking lot. I leaned against the pillar at the front of the building and watched him go, my arms folded over my chest and my shoulders tense. I waited as he pulled out of the parking space and turned down the one-way street, then disappeared around a curve. For a long time, my gaze remained fixed on the place where he had been. Somehow, I couldn't accept that I wasn't just going to see him again tomorrow morning, shoveling a plate of scrambled eggs that was more salt and pepper than egg into his mouth.

I was too restless to go back inside, so instead I leaped down the concrete steps at the front of the building and set off down the sidewalk. Might as well get better acquainted with the campus that would be my home for the next four years, I figured.

Dusk settled over the campus; street lights flickered on, creating amber pools of light across the pavement. Buildings, crammed close together, loomed up above me, their windows illuminated like a thousand curious eyes. The air was thick with smog, and I could hear the

honking of cars and *zoom* of tires from the roads that surrounded the college in every direction. Snippets of rap and hip-hop songs wafted into the air, then disappeared beneath the roar of traffic. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans. Already, I missed the peaceful quiet of the Tifton suburbs, the scent of honeysuckle in the air, the low, slow thrumming of acoustic guitars. My fingers brushed the top of my phone case, and for a moment I considered calling my father and asking him to turn around and get me. It wasn't too late yet.

But no. I would never be a person if I went back to Georgia now. Besides, I wasn't sure I could handle another two days crammed into the SUV listening to my father's audio-books about a sexy, spunky female detective who did everything perfectly. How Dad listened to such trash was beyond me. For some reason, her ability to manipulate and control situations made me sick.

I flopped into a black, iron-cast bench on the sidewalk and draped my arms across the back. The branches of the oak tree that stood in a small square of green behind me drooped, the leaves rustling in a faint breeze. I tilted my head back and tried to look for a star, but there were none – just skyscrapers upon skyscrapers polluting the horizon in every direction. I sighed and dropped my chin down onto my chest, thinking that perhaps I should head back to the dorm. It was dark now, and I was alone and friendless on this campus. The realization solidified within me like a cube of water hardening into ice.

My mouth suddenly felt dry. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and stretched it out in front of me as I tried to keep myself from peering into shadows in search of monsters that weren't there. Then I stopped. I looked up.

The man in the long black coat leaned against the wall of the library about a hundred feet away. He took a drag on his cigarette, exhaled a heavy puff of smoke. His eyes were locked on me.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I was on my feet and sprinting in the opposite direction. I fumbled to pull my key card out of my pocket, rushed into the dorm's lobby, and then took the stairs two at a time until I reached the third floor, where I bounded down the hall and threw myself into my room. I gasped for breath and leaned back against the heavy wooden door for support. My legs felt like sticks underneath my weight. My hand came to rest over my chest; through my skin, I could feel my heart thrumming with such violence that I wondered if it were still trying to drag me forward.

Consumed as I was by the sudden panic that had arisen in me, I didn't notice the girl sitting on the bed by the window until she said in a cautious voice, "You okay?"

I jumped, put my hand over my face, and exhaled sharply.

"Sorry!" she said with a laugh. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I shook my head and swallowed. "You're all right. I'm just...I saw someone I didn't expect to see."

"An old boyfriend?" she asked, pursing her lips in understanding. "I saw mine too. Three of mine, actually. What bad luck."

I thumped down onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. Bad luck indeed. How could he have followed me here? I began to wonder if he really was the devil, but if so, why was he following *me*? What had I ever done to incur his interest? What did he want?

My roommate, who I later discovered was named Antonia, prattled on about how she had encountered three of her exes all in one day, and classes hadn't even started yet! I looked towards the open window. Gathering all my strength and courage, I slipped off the bed, shuffled over to the window, and peered out into the dark grounds.

I couldn't see him, but I knew that he was there, that he would always be *there*. I felt his

eyes on me, and the realization made me shiver. With a quick tug on the rod, I drew the blinds closed.

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That pretty much brings us up to date. For the last several months, I've locked myself inside my dormitory room and done nothing but read books and watch comedy shows on my laptop. Though I made a few friends in my classes and at the cafeteria, they quickly gave up on trying to convince me to come out with them at night. Sometimes, it's very lonely, but I haven't seen the devil man since that first day on campus, and I'd like to keep it that way.

Exams are next week, and my dad is coming to get me the following Saturday. I've packed all of my things up...just in case I decide that I don't want to come back. This semester has been pretty awful, and I never see Antonia because she's almost always got something going on. At least in Tifton I'll still have the daily human contact of seeing my father.

Antonia wants to celebrate the end of the semester by dragging me with her and her friends to a club Friday evening. She says she won't take no for an answer.

"You haven't done one fun thing this semester, bookworm," she said earlier, playfully punching my arm. "That's about to change, though."

I guess we'll see how this goes. Hopefully the devil man won't be there.

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I'm having a really hard time wrapping my mind around what just happened; but he was there tonight.

As promised, Antonia dragged me out with her and her friends. When we got to the club, they shed their winter coats and merged into the chaos of the dance floor. Her older sister, Marie, hung back for a moment to ask if I needed anything. The sight of the frenzied crowd set my



nerves on edge. Marie must have seen something in my face to show that I wasn't feeling well.

"Mind getting me a drink?" I breathed, and handed her a twenty. "Whatever they have that's strong."

Grimly, she nodded, took the bill, and went to the bar. I slunk around the dance floor and shimmied into a dim booth in the corner, wishing I could dissolve into the darkness like a shadow. A flurry of bright lights flashed through the room. They reminded me of the ambulance lights from that distant, dreadful night. I started to have a hard time breathing.

That was when I saw him. He was standing on the other side of the room, next to the stairwell, glaring at me. My hands began to tremble. A cold sweat broke out across my brow, and my heart beat so rapidly in my chest that I thought it was going to leap through my rib cage and be trampled on the dance floor.

He turned away and headed up the stairs. I watched him disappear. For a moment, I struggled with myself on what to do. I could stay put and try to ignore the fact that he was in the same vicinity as me, or I could call a cab and head home.

But I surprised myself by going with a different option entirely. In a single, decisive moment, I sprung from the booth, skirted the dance floor, and sprinted up the stairs behind him. I emerged into a dark, quiet hallway that ended in a glass door. Light from the streetlamps outside stretched across the carpet, illuminating a path for me to walk on amidst the shadows. I swallowed and crept along the dim hallway.

He was on a little balcony just outside the door, leaning against the railing. I saw his breath form wisps of smoke and vapor that rose into the air like ghosts. My hands trembled violently as they reached for the brass knob. Gathering all my courage, I opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony beside him.

We stood there in silence for a long moment, him puffing on his cigarette, me shivering from fear and cold. Finally, my voice shaking, I said, “Why have you been stalking me?”

He laughed hoarsely and turned to look at me with a face that reminded me of a skull. His cheeks were sunken in and his lips were thin and pale, and he had dark bags to complement his deep, black eyes. A tuft of short, blonde hair was barely visible beneath his dark hood.

“Have I really been following you, or have you just been looking for me everywhere?” he countered. He had a deep voice with an Australian accent. I didn’t know why, but for some reason it sounded ancient to me.

I stared at him. I didn’t know how to answer his question, because even I wasn’t sure. There seemed to be a double meaning to his words, and suddenly I felt that my question was a foolish one. I looked away and tried to reason with my scattered thoughts. My heart pounded more violently than ever, and I realized that I was crying.

“Who *are* you?” I asked as I turned back to him.

Without looking at me, he shrugged and said, “You can call me Mors.”

“That doesn’t tell me who you are.”

“Doesn’t it?” he asked, sending me a sly smile. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, green carton. “Want a smoke?”

“No,” I said numbly. He shrugged, tucked it away, then straightened and turned to face me.

“Jenna, what are you doing out here?” he asked. His question was like a slap in the face. I opened my mouth to ask how he knew my name, but nothing came out.

With the hand that wasn’t holding his cigarette, he brushed his icy thumb across my cheek, wiping away one of my tears. In a surprisingly fond, gentle voice, he whispered, “Are you

afraid, Jenna?”

I gaped up at him. My insides were suddenly colder than my surroundings. My throat felt constricted, and I realized that I was holding my breath, that I had been holding my breath for a long, long time. Slowly, I nodded. He peered into my eyes. “Why?”

My teeth chattered and my lips trembled. I murmured, “Because you were there...” I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

He seemed to understand anyway, because he chuckled sadly and shook his head. “Poor Jenna,” he said. He put his cigarette out in the ash tray, then placed his other hand against my face. The odor of smoke overwhelmed my senses, and though I wanted to recoil, I found myself paralyzed. Gently, he tilted my face up and kissed my forehead. He leaned his cheek against the side of my head and said into my ear, “You’re so afraid but you’re still searching for your mother. But she isn’t here, Jenna, and I’m not going to help you find her. Not now. Not yet.”

His skin was cold, but soft. “You’ll see your mother again someday, I promise, but until then, you’ve got to stop looking for me. You’ve got to start breathing again, start living again. You’ve got to, because your fear of death is killing you.”

He pulled away and smiled down at me kindly. “Just breathe, Jenna. Don’t worry about me. Just breathe.”

There was an air of finality to his words. I blinked, trying to piece together what he was saying, when suddenly the door slammed open behind me. I jumped and whirled around to see Marie standing there with my drink.

“Jenna, I looked everywhere for you. What are you doing out here by yourself?” she demanded. I blinked at her.

“I’m not by myself, I’m with...” I trailed off as I realized that my hand was gesturing at

the empty air beside me. She was right; Mors had disappeared. There was no one there with me. I hurriedly looked over the rail at the sidewalk below, my heart pounding, but he wasn't there either. I pushed a strand of hair back behind my ear. Where had he gone? How had he managed to get away so quickly? I looked behind a potted plant, then turned around in place. One minute he had been everywhere; now he was nowhere.

Marie watched me. She frowned, sucked in her lip, and walked over to me. "Jenna, are you okay?" she asked, placing a hand on my shoulder. There was an extra layer to her words, a layer that I didn't understand at first. My eyes snapped to hers; she was looking at me as though I were her pet dog and she had just realized that I had rabies. My fingers flexed; she thought I was sick, that there was something wrong with me that ran too deep to fix.

But there wasn't. I knew it with a sudden clarity. I touched my fingers to my face, felt the cool skin where Mors had touched me. My cheeks were still damp from crying.

"Yeah," I said finally, wiping my gloved hand across my face. A smile spread across my features. I sniffled. "Yeah, I'm gonna be fine."

And I breathed.

## **The Girl in the Mirror: Introduction**

I wrote the original draft of “The Girl in the Mirror” in Spring 2013. This story centers around the reflection of a girl named Elizabeth. The symbols here lie in the reflection herself, and how she experiences the world of the mirror. Throughout the story, Mirror Girl is faced with the fear that she is the only sentient reflection, and that all other reflections are inanimate. Her literal solitude mimics Elizabeth’s emotional loneliness, because Elizabeth believes that no one loves or understands her. In the few instances where Elizabeth entertains the hope that someone cares about her, Mirror Girl sees the correlating reflections come to life.

In addition to her experiences of the world, Mirror Girl herself is a symbol. On the one hand, she has the potential to represent Elizabeth trying to look at her situations from an outside perspective to better understand them and, consequently, grow from them. This is best exemplified by Mirror Girl’s gradual discovering of what it means to be human. However, Mirror Girl could also symbolize a friend who is trying to understand Elizabeth’s pain. This would explain her helplessness throughout much of the story, because she is unable to change the fate or decisions of her friend. Ultimately, however, she saves Elizabeth’s life, which shows that a caring friend can make a difference.

One of the most common criticisms I received on the rough draft of this piece was the helplessness and general victimization of both Elizabeth and her reflection. In the drafts that I’ve worked on since then, I have attempted to give Elizabeth and Mirror Girl a little more control over their lives; this is why Mirror Girl is able to intervene in Elizabeth’s attempted suicide despite being only a reflection. I moreover attempted to make many of the supporting characters more natural and less vicious towards Elizabeth so that the reader can see that, despite

Elizabeth's own doubts, she is not really unloved or uncared for, and often brings disaster on herself by putting herself into poor situations.

This is another story that I do not feel is completely finished as of yet. In my initial drafts of this piece, I wanted to experiment with the lyrical quality of the prose poem, and although I have since taken out much of the overly-flowery language, I believe that there are still ghosts of it hidden throughout the narrative. As I've learned since writing this piece, fiction is most effective when abstract ideas, such as emotion, are made manifest through physical action and dialogue, rather than through language. Although language can be, and often is, used beautifully in fiction, the fiction writer's job is, first and foremost, to tell the story. It is up to the reader to come to his own conclusions about how the story should make him feel.

## **The Girl in the Mirror**

The door opens, and there you are. Our eyes sweep over one another, surveying the damage. Your skin – my skin – is a sickly pale, lined with veins that explode into fireworks of black and purple bruises. The mud on our jeans and white tank top from the night before has crusted over. The violet hue of the skin beneath our eyes betrays how long it's been since you've had a decent night's sleep.

I've been longing for you to look at me for the last week – I'm your reflection, and though I love to watch you, I can only mimic your own movements. But now that you finally look at me, and I can look back at you, I don't like what I see. There's vengeance in your eyes. There's murder there.

We step into the bathroom and shut the door behind us. The lock clicks. Overhead, a dusty light bulb flickers as we cross the room, drawing closer to one another. We support ourselves against the sink and you lean your face close to mine, peering into my eyes as if you're looking for the answers to all your questions in the grimy mirror surface that separates us. Apparently not finding anything, you wrinkle your nose, draw back and hurl your fist into the glass.

Part of my reality fractures. My head swims in an attempt to keep up with the fragments of myself that are crunching out of the framed world I exist in and dripping to the floor. Blood beads up from your cuts and trickles over your knuckles and down your forearm, leaving a dusty red trail. Someone on the other side of the door has heard the crash and fiddles with the doorknob, tentatively calling out Are you okay? Hello? Hello? Are you okay?

You knot your bloody fingers through the spikes in your hair. Then you lunge and snatch

up one of the larger shards. Gazing at me, you press it against your wrist. Your eyes challenge me, and I see in them the words you won't say: Dare me to do it? Do you? Do you fucking dare me to do it?

I want to scream at you No. I want to break free of my link to you, pound on the glass and cry and beg you for mercy, but all I can do is reflect back at you a hatred that I don't feel.

You apply pressure, but just enough to make a few dark red beads bubble up over your skin. You don't tear your gaze away from me, and I realize that this act of vengeance relies on you believing that no one cares about you, not even me. I search desperately for anything, anything at all that I might be able to do to convince you otherwise, but as long as you are glaring at me, I can do nothing but glare back.

That's when I understand that you have to see me. If you can't see me, you can't project your self-loathing onto me. If I can make you look away for an instant, I can change everything. I can save you, save us.

As your reflection, I have to mimic your every move. I have never, for one second, been in control of what happens to us. But I can't let this happen. I won't, so I muster together all the strength and energy available to me, delve into the very essence of my existence, and force everything, literally *everything* I have into this one action.

And I accomplish the impossible. You blink, and in that moment I show you your entire life.

~~~

The first time you came this close to death, you didn't understand what it meant to die. You were four years old. It had just finished raining and your mother let you out into the front yard to play, warning you not to leave the gated area. For some time you squelched through the



mud in your pink boots and rain coat, singing melodies to yourself while I followed you in murky puddles and the mirrors of cars passing through the streets.

Something beyond my line of vision caught your attention, and before I knew it you were dashing across the road while I, reflected in the sleek, shiny red metal of the hood of a car, sped towards you. The driver slammed on his brakes and the tires screeched as his wheels skidded over the wet pavement. We scooped a turtle that had been in the road up into our hands and looked over at the driver shyly. I watched the world through his red car door, my head swimming in the face of the near tragedy.

Your gaze latched onto something on the other side of the car, and we shuffled around the man's vehicle to the side of the road where the house was. We set the turtle down by a puddle, and through the muddy waters I listened to you whisper to it, Lady Turtle, I know your shell protects you from most things, but it can't protect you from everything. You've got to be careful where you go.

Then we looked up to see your mother storming across the yard, her cheeks flushed. She yanked us up and out of the street, apologized to the driver, and dragged us into the house. From the mirror in the hallway, I heard her shout at you. I bowed my head along with you.

But I saved her life, you breathed. She's alive because of me.

A turtle's life isn't worth yours, your mother reprimanded. She dropped down to her knees and pulled you into a tight embrace. Nothing is worth that, she said.

In the mirror in the hall, your mother's reflection mimicked the action and hugged me, but it wasn't like the one your mother gave you. There was no warmth in the embrace, no tenderness, remorse, or love. I couldn't even feel her arms around me, and for the first time I wondered if she was there at all. Was anyone? Or was I the only one?

I wished I could speak to her, ask her if she existed, receive some sort of confirmation that I wasn't alone in this mirror world. I tried to convince myself that she must have the same consciousness as I did; why should I be sentient if no one else in the mirror was? But try as I might, I could not dispel the creeping feeling that her image was hollow, that there was no one else out there.

~~~

You started school when you were five, and because you had a seat by the window, I got to learn with you. Your attention was as flighty as that of a humming bird's, though, and I would often catch you looking out into the world. I didn't see what you saw; my yearning eyes were turned inside. You gazed right through me, not seeing me at all. So what were you looking at? I don't know, but I understood the expression you wore. It was an expression of desire, of a hunger for life to begin. I knew, because I felt the same way.

On one cold winter morning that year, all of your classmates were breathing on the bus' windows and drawing pictures in the fog. Most of them played games of tic-tac-toe or inscribed their names in hearts under the letters  $\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}$ , but you always sat alone. I was your only companion, so when you decided to do the same, you wrote on the glass my name:  $\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{H}$ . You beamed at me, proud of yourself, and I beamed back. I loved the way your little finger traced over mine. I wanted to seep out of the glass, through your fingertip, into your body. I wanted to know what *warmth* felt like, what it was like to touch things that actually existed and *feel* them. I was ravenous for everything.

Your smile fell, replaced with a look of dissatisfaction and sadness. You pressed your forehead against the glass and peered into my eyes, searching. What were you searching for?

~~~

My favorite place to see you is through the mirror, because it's the place where I appear most vividly. I lead only a half existence, so when you're not around, or when you're only dimly reflected, I fade in and out between a hazy reality and a void. In the dark, my consciousness unravels, and I forget who I am, *what* I am. There's no sense of time, no thoughts, no self; just a nothingness that has always lasted and will last forever.

It's only when you reappear in a reflective surface that everything comes back to me, and, much like you when you've awoken from a deep sleep, I get the sense that time has passed. For a time I'm okay, but the fear remains. Anything that isn't being reflected dissolves. If you turn your face away from the glass, the half of mine not facing the mirror evaporates into shadow. If you stand in front of a countertop, my legs disappear entirely. If someone else is in the mirror with you, I have to watch the way they disintegrate and don't even react, and know that if they *are* sentient, if they do exist like I do, they're every bit as afraid and alone as I am.

Every day, I experience the terror of you turning away from the bathroom mirror and approaching the door. A universe lies beyond yours. Emptiness lies beyond mine.

~~~

It was your first day of middle school, and that meant getting on a new bus. You climbed up the stairs and flopped down into the first empty seat you could find. Two black chords trailed down from your ears to a CD player in your hand, making it easier for you to ignore the world that was ignoring you. The bus stopped again, and suddenly there was someone else beside you. You didn't look over until she tapped on your shoulder and motioned for you to take the ear buds out.

She had copper hair, bright blue eyes, and a speckle of dark freckles over a pale, round face. She beamed at you, held out her hand, and introduced herself. You stared at her because

you weren't used to this, but slowly, you smiled and shook her hand.

From that point on you were nearly inseparable. She gave you candy on the bus, and you gave her flowers. The two of you would curl your legs up against the seat in front of you and draw pictures of turtles and such on the way to and from school. You passed notes back and forth in class, and chattered whenever you could get away with it. Sometimes when you got home, your parents reprimanded you for letters and phone calls they had received from your teachers, but it was the happiest you'd ever been and nothing could bring you down.

I had no way of knowing if the ginger girl's reflection was conscious like I was, but there was a twinkle in her eyes and a warmth in her actions that convinced me she *must* be sentient, that we were in this together – all of us.

The two of you remained close throughout your time at middle school, despite your parents saying that she got you into trouble and that you should try to find other friends. When it was finally time to start high school, you braved the first year together. She taught you how to straighten your hair, and you showed her how your mother did her make-up.

One day the two of you took a trip to the mall together, and her reflection and I followed you around in shop windows and in the polished marble floor. The two of you wandered into a CD store with the large, round mirrors in the corners so that the sales associates could keep an eye out for theft. Based on a few hints, we had guessed that the ginger girl probably stole sometimes, but it wasn't a subject we'd ever felt comfortable with addressing. So when your eye fell on a CD you wanted and you complained that you couldn't afford it, she plucked it from the shelf, wandered into a blind spot, and reemerged a minute later suggesting that the two of you leave.

When we tried to exit the store, a sensor began wailing from the two plastic posts beside

the door. The ginger girl panicked, grabbed our wrist, and screeched at us, Run!

We sprinted from the store and out into the throng of people. A security guard caught up with us within minutes and took us to a dark room with eight dim computer monitors, where he got your information and called your mothers. Ginger girl's reflection and I were only outlines in the monitors, but enough of our consciousness was in your reality for us to hear your whispered conversation and sobs as ginger girl told you how sorry she was. I sensed myself moving, and realized that you were patting her shoulder in a gesture to comfort her. There was a rustling in the darkness of the monitor, and I felt – physically *felt* – something brush against my hand. The softest traces of something pleasant – was it warmth? – enveloped my fingers as ginger girl clasped your hand, and her reflection took mine. You breathed that you forgave her.

But your parents didn't. They came and got you, drove you home, and told you that you were never allowed to see ginger girl ever again. I listened from the mirror in the hall as you begged and pleaded and cried, but they stood firm.

She's a bad influence on you, your father said. We've always said so. You don't need to be hanging around with a thief.

Please, you begged. She's the only friend I've ever had. I need her now.

Some friend, your father sneered. My answer is no, and that's final.

When you looked as though you were going to argue with this, he growled, I said that's final.

You bit your lip in defiance, tears streaming down your cheeks, and stormed out of my line of vision. A heartbeat later, you reappeared in the mirror in your room. You stood in the doorway for a moment and yelled down the hallway, You just don't want me to be around her because she actually loves me and you don't!

You slammed the door shut, and the entire world reverberated with the force of something ending.

~~~

That year, you were invited to spend a summer with a girl you'd befriended at her family's summer home on the lake. You became close with her older brother, who was there with his girlfriend. You glowed whenever you were with him. Since you were so attached to him, I often hoped to catch a shimmer of consciousness in his reflection's eyes, a trace of the warmth I'd known from ginger girl. Sometimes I tried to force myself to see something, but there was never anything there; his image was as hollow and distant to me as that of everyone else. When I finally realized this, something dark opened up within me. I felt like I had carried some of the emptiness out of the void and into the light.

It was a warm day and you and your friend's brother went canoeing while his girlfriend and your friend were somewhere else. You were a real damsel in distress, all delicate and misunderstood with your long, dark brown hair and shadowy make-up that made your blue eyes look stormy. He was seventeen and full of passion, with golden hair and strong arms. Out there, alone on the lake, how could you not get caught up in the moment?

My own experience was distorted. Your movements in the boat cast ripples over the water, so that his counterpart and I melted into gentle waves. I prayed for a mere taste of the unity and warmth I had felt a year before, when ginger girl's reflection had held my hand, but even when his reflection merged, blurred, and intertwined with mine, so that we literally became one unified swirl of color, I felt nothing. He was cold and empty to me.

When the boat stilled and the lake's surface smoothed, you were glowing with joy, your cheeks red with warmth. I felt nothing but the chill of the water.

Later that evening we met him on the bank. We smiled nervously as he turned to us, but our face fell when we saw the expression of embarrassment and regret that he wore.

I'm really sorry, he said. What happened was a mistake; it was my fault. But you shouldn't stay here. It'd be best if you called your parents to pick you up tonight.

He left you alone on the shore. You sunk into the sand, pulled your legs up to your chest, and stared at me over your knees. Dusk descended over us, melting your world into hazy shadows. Silent questions dwelled in your eyes. I wished my own could offer you assurances, but all I was capable of doing was reflecting your own sadness and rejection back to you. At the very least, you ought to have known from looking at me that you're beautiful.

But you didn't see that. You never could.

~~~

When you turned sixteen you started to come out of your shell a bit more. The piece of the void that I had discovered inside myself was getting bigger, so that I felt like a black hole had opened in my chest and was devouring all the energy and light that had once existed there. The gravity inside me was so immense that I became desperate in my search for an emotional cork, with which I could plug up the hole and stop the hurt. When I looked at you, I thought you might have felt the same. Is that why you let all of it happen?

You befriended a group of girls, but there was no pretense of intimacy between you. They didn't try to confide in you, hug you, make you feel human, and you didn't ask them to. But I *wanted* them to. I looked into the eyes of their reflections, desperate to find something living there, but all I saw were shallow, two-dimensional images. I began to wonder if I would ever find someone else like ginger girl in this mirror world, or if we were the only ones who were alive and I had lost that chance at warmth forever.

They invited you to parties every weekend at one of the girl's trailer. I don't know if you liked the drinking, but I assumed not, because from the TV set I felt us wrinkle our nose every time we took a shot. Once you admitted to one of the girls that you hated the smell. I wished I could hate it with you.

Regardless, you always went. In those months, you took any excuse to get away from your house for a few days at a time. Too often were the nights that you spent at home ended by you charging into your bedroom, tears streaming down your cheeks. You locked the door to get away from the yelling from beyond.

I don't know why you and your parents argued so much, but I think I started to understand after the incident with rock star boy. Most of what I heard involved them criticizing your friends, your grades, your clothes, your entire life, and you lashed out against their attacks with biting words and fury. They wanted what was best for you, but they had taken ginger girl away and you never forgave them for that, so the only revenge you could have on them was to hurt yourself. I didn't know that at the time, of course, but I can see it now.

On most of the nights when you came into your room, you pummeled your pillow with your fists until you wore yourself out and sunk onto the bed. One night, though, you flung yourself into your closet, only to reemerge a few minutes later with an old, battered stuffed turtle that your father had given to you when you were six. You clutched it to your chest, flopped down onto your bed, and rolled over to look at me with cloudy eyes.

~~~

On the last night you spent with these friends, they invited a few boys over. Things got a little wilder than usual. You set your eyes on the one with the dark, shoulder length hair and crooked smile. He looked like one of the rock stars you have plastered all over your bedroom



walls, which is why you liked him, I guess.

While the others danced around and took shots in the kitchen, you two took your drinks to the couch. You giggled often and kept touching his arm, shoulder, and leg. It wasn't long before he took your hand and led you out of the reflective scope of the television screen, but you reappeared a few minutes later in the messy, abandoned bedroom belonging to your friend's mother.

For several minutes I couldn't see what was happening; we had our backs pressed against the mirror that hung on the door. I'm just an image. I don't know what it means to feel, or taste – not in the way you do. I was faceless at the time, but I sensed his hands roaming over your – our body, his lips travelling over our skin, and something inside me squirmed. His touch was void of warmth, blood, and matter, but something told me it hadn't always been so with this one. His reflection might have been alive once, but the abuse of the soul had warped him into a ghost, and somehow that was worse than the idea of him never having lived at all. I wished I could reach through the glass and grab your hand, because I was afraid that what was going to happen here would make me like him. This boy was death for us.

The lock clicked. He pulled you towards the center of the room and turned you so that your back was to the bed against the other wall. I had only experienced warmth once in my life, but it wasn't until he put so much distance between us that I truly understood what it felt like to be cold. His hands caressed our slender curves, trailed lightly down our ribs, paused on our hips. His tongue ripped through our lips as his fingers fumbled with the button on our jeans. We withdrew and you gasped. Our arms shot from their place around his neck and grasped his wrist.

No, no, you rasped.

His counterpart gave me a lopsided grin, like your words were a fucking joke to him.

Murmuring, Come on, baby, he batted our hands away, forced his tongue down our throat again, and resumed unbuttoning our pants.

We pushed him back more forcefully this time and slapped him. You exclaimed furiously, I said *no*!

The arrogant smile disappeared; his expression twisted into rage. Before either of us knew what was happening, his fist whirled into your left eye. We spun and our knees crashed to the floor. Your face was turned away from the mirror now, and so mine dissolved into nothing. Wrath slithered through me, and I wanted to rise up. I wanted to turn around and kill him, but I was helpless to stand up for you, for me, for either of us. I didn't feel the hit. I didn't understand that you were hurting, and so my rage coiled around like a snake and turned on you.

I cursed the bond that forced me to sit by and let him hurt you like that without retribution, I cursed you for letting him do it, and I cursed the being who had designed me to be helpless. What was the point of my existence if I couldn't do anything? If I couldn't fix the pains we felt? Why was I here just to suffer?

I flickered out of existence as the door was thrown open and slammed shut. My shoulders heaved in time with your sobs, but your cries were too soft to penetrate the glass. At last, you crawled into the bed and fell motionless, your eyes transfixed on me, as if you were waiting for me to emerge from my prison behind the glass and cradle you. The sight melted my rage, and I forgave you.

You lay on the bed and stared at me with your swollen eye for half an hour before someone finally entered the room. Our eyes found those of the girl who lived in the trailer. Rather than show any genuine concern, she gawked at you. My venom had coagulated by now, but it stirred to life again when she reprimanded you for pissing off the boy, who had gathered

his friends and left. We fixed her with an incredulous gaze and you explained that he was a stupid boy who didn't know how to handle rejection. Why should they want guys like him around anyway?

She ogled us as though we were a stupid beast in a zoo. But did you *have* to reject him? she asked. Why couldn't you just let him do his thing? It would have been fun and felt good. What's the big deal?

We wrinkled our nose in disgust, and you snapped, I didn't want to, okay? Isn't that enough?

She shook her head at us and said, Why did you come in here if you didn't want to, stupid? You had to have known what it was that he wanted, and if you didn't want it you should have stayed in the living room with us. We would have taken care of you and told him to leave you alone, but you led him on, so you brought this on yourself.

She gestured at our eye.

You told her to go fuck herself.

~~~

The next morning after you got home, your father hounded you to your room, howling at you and ignoring the shame pouring down your cheeks. Without even giving you a chance to explain, he demanded to know if this was what you wanted from your life – to let people walk all over you, and allow your men to treat you like shit. You shouted that you hated him, locked yourself in your room, and slept for the rest of the day.

Later that evening, a knock sounded on the door. You had barely finished opening it before your father stepped in and pulled us into a tight embrace. A shock of warmth went through me, the first I had felt since the time ginger girl held my hand. When he withdrew from

us, I looked into his reflection's eyes and saw a spark of consciousness there. Had it always been there? Or was he coming to life?

We stared up at him in surprise. Something in me was flooding, filling up the gurgling emptiness in my chest. Then he blinked, and the spark was gone, and all the love and warmth drained out of us like water down the drain of a bath, leaving me to feel the chill of the void more potently than before.

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After you turned seventeen, you started seeing a lanky boy with a goatee, black eyes, and a tattoo of the words *oliblōM lē* over a leering red devil face on his arm. You hated him as much as I did – I could tell by the way you grew tense when he touched you. What I couldn't understand is why you would let him. Had you reached such a point of self-loathing that you thought it was what you deserved? Even I, with my desperation to fill the hole in my chest, which had only grown wider since the events with rock star boy and your father a year ago, wanted nothing to do with him. He was like rock star boy in the way that he felt like he had once been alive, but when I looked into his eyes I saw the grim reaper himself. I couldn't imagine you were using him to fill a void. That would be like trying to fill emptiness with a deeper, more menacing emptiness.

One night after you had a fight with your parents, you called him to come and get you. You threw your belongings into a duffel bag, scribbled a note saying you wouldn't be back, and climbed out of your bedroom window. You stayed with him for about a week. I could not get over the way you looked at me the first evening you spent there. You were sitting hunched in the bed, covers wrapped around your bare chest while his fingertips caressed your spine. I inwardly shuddered to think of his filthy hands on you, of his counterpart mimicking the action in my

world. His reflection was the most potent one I'd ever come into contact with, because I felt every touch. But it wasn't the kind of feeling that I wanted; he was cold, freezing cold, and he weighed upon me in a way that made me think I'd rather feel nothing at all. His embrace to me was like a coffin.

Your expression mirrored my own revulsion, but it was the look in your eyes that scared me to death. They were void of grief or sorrow, empty of regret or joy, lacking in pleasure or despair. It reminded me of all the lifeless images I had met in the mirror, and I didn't want that for you.

That was when I knew you were dying, but I was helpless to change it, and no one else could see what I saw.

You wouldn't look at me for the remainder of the week. You passed before surfaces where I appeared and immediately averted your eyes, as though you couldn't bear the sight of me. I felt the shame on your expression and thought perhaps you felt like you couldn't face me, but I only wanted to show you that I could always forgive you and would always love you, and, above all else, to make sure you were going to be okay. But you wouldn't look. And so I waited.

~~~

I don't know what started the fight.

You had removed the mirror from the bedroom and put it in the hallway just outside, saying that it made you feel nervous as you slept. I couldn't be with you in there anymore, and I couldn't see what happened. But the door slammed open and the next thing I knew we were crashing down onto the floor. oliblōM lē loomed over us, his chest heaving, his eyes burning. He bellowed at our cowering form. We cried from our place on the ground and held our arm up in front us, but that didn't stop him from striking us.

Get out of my house, bitch, he howled.

Please, you sobbed. Please, no. I have nowhere else to go.

He wailed on us so hard that you curled into yourself, as if trying to hide in a shell. *It can't protect you from everything. You've got to be careful where you go.* Every strike to me was like a glacier being hurled against my skin; I didn't feel the pain, but I felt the malice and that was enough.

olibliM lE relented for a minute to catch his breath. We peeped at him from behind our arm. You choked out the words I love you, but we both knew you were saying it as more of a plea for mercy than out of genuine feeling, and so did he.

He grabbed us by the arm, yanked us to our feet, and you disappeared. Next thing I knew, I was in one of the filthy mirrors on his truck, and he was tossing us off the front steps and into the mud. He slammed the door and locked it. We lay in the mud for a minute, crying silently. Then you pulled yourself together. We pushed ourself up out of the muck, pulled our phone out of our pocket, dialed, and listened.

After a few moments, you said, Hey mommy, it's me. I'm sorry for...I'm sorry for everything. I'll be at the gas station on the corner of Fourth and Ninth Street. I know it's late, but please come get me. I love you very much. Please call me back when you get this.

With that, we rose shakily to our feet, and were off. Over the next few hours I saw you frequently in car mirrors and doors while you waited. Sometimes we were on our phone, but by the gathering cloud in our expression, I could tell that you still hadn't gotten a hold of your mother. One of the times I appeared we were in the midst of smoking a cigarette with an older man. He patted us on the back and said something before walking off. I caught the faintest hint of warmth in his touch.

Eventually you went to go sit by the road, and appeared, fleetingly, in mirror after mirror. The pauses between your appearances grew longer as the night stretched into early morning. Finally, the next time I saw you, the sun was peaking over the horizon.

I guess that was when you decided that no one was coming to save you. We rose to our feet and began to walk down the road. I didn't like the expression we wore. It was too rough, too determined, too full of an emotion I didn't understand.

Then the car reflecting you turned around a corner, and you were gone again.

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And here we are. You open your eyes and look at me as if just seeing me for the first time, and the shard of glass clatters to the ground. Tears pour down your cheeks, and you wrap your arms around yourself. I, of course, mimic the action, and for the first time ever, warmth spreads through me from within.

Are you okay in there? Are you okay? a man's voice keeps calling from outside. The door rattles as he pounds on it. Do you need help? Are you okay?

We jump as our phone starts to ring in our pocket. We quickly press it to our ear. Hello? I don't hear what's said on the other end, but we smile, tears raining down our cheeks. Yes, mom, yes, I'm going to be fine. Please come get me. I love you so much.

You were looking at me when you said it.

## **Kat's Nine Lives: Introduction**

“Kat’s Nine Lives” was initially written for the same semester as “The Girl in the Mirror”. At about this point in my thesis, I’ve noticed a rising motif in my works. I see myself being concerned often with outside spaces and inside spaces, with physical appearance versus inner truth. This is a theme that is present in all three of the final stories in this work, and it begins with “Kat’s Nine Lives.”

This story is told from the perspective of Steve, who is dating a woman with eight robots. Problems arise between them because the real Kat never seems to have time for Steve, and is always sending her robots to spend time with him instead. Although Kat’s robots are controlled by her, and maintain many of her own behaviors – such as not liking to be touched, not eating very much, etc. – the reader can see that they are, in their own ways, distinctly different from her. Whereas the real Kat is introverted and dresses in baggy t-shirts and shorts, “Social” Kat is programmed to soak up sexual attention. This is where the symbols come in. Each robot is specifically designed for a particular set of tasks, and this reflects the many personas people employ for the various aspects of their lives. For example, a person can act one way in the classroom and then act completely different at work or among his friends. Consequently, Kat’s robots are representations of these personas. Thus, Steve’s frustration can be seen as arising from wanting to know Kat for who she really is, and not just the faces that she puts on.

Out of all the stories in this piece, this is the story that has been edited the most extensively. As I mentioned in the methodology section, not a single sentence from the original draft carried over into what is featured here. The initial draft, entitled “The Ninth Life,” follows Steve as he begins a relationship with the mysterious Kat, a beautiful woman who has a knack



for being everywhere all at once. For much of the story, he speculates on why she seems capable of being present in multiple places at once. The story ends with him finding out about the robots, touching the real Kat's arm, and expressing an interest in getting to know the real her.

Even in the revision, the bones of this story remain the same; on a basic level, nothing has changed, because both narratives express the same idea in a different way. However, I believe that this draft of the story is more interesting to the reader because it explores how their relationship works *after* Steve discovers Kat's big secret. Ultimately, I think the strongest point of this version is that it allows the reader to spend less time waiting for Steve to figure out what's going on, and more time focusing on the relationship itself.

## **Kat's Nine Lives**

It's Saturday night and I'm on a date with my girlfriend's robot.

Yes, you read that right. My girlfriend's robot. In fact, Kat has eight robots total: she has one for her management job at Trim's, one for her graduate studies at Pocketton University, two for her volunteer work at the hospital and thrift store, one for her internship at Noble Prosthetics, one that acts as a hostess and keeps the house clean for her, and one for miscellaneous use. There's also one called "Social," and she's the one hanging on my arm tonight.

I buy our tickets for "The Disease," the newest zombie flick to come out, and walk into the movie theater arm in arm. Though I'm happy for the rare physical contact, I can't help but note that Kat's robots don't give off any heat; it's just another reminder that I'm with a machine and not with her.

Kat's strange method of getting things done stems from a combination of situations: a rich daddy who owns a company that manufactures computer software, and Kat's own incredibly long list of things she wants to accomplish before she hits thirty. If you think of the biggest overachiever you've ever met in your life and multiply them by a hundred, you'll have Kat.

We take our seats, and "Social" Kat puts her arm on the rest between us. I lay my hand on top of hers. Though for the most part we're surrounded by large groups of chattering teenagers, here and there are a few couples gabbing happily. Most of them have lifted their armrests and are leaning in to one another. Some of them kiss.

Even though Kat assured me she'd be "with" me at the movies, I feel alone. Somewhere, on the other side of her computer screen, the real Kat is probably putting together lecture notes or monitoring the "Trim's" robot to make sure she's using the appropriate automated responses for

customers. At best, Kat's only half-paying attention to what's going on in "Social" Kat's life.

I turn my head sideways and kiss her forehead, rub my hand up and down her arm. She flashes a smile at me. The lights in the movie theater dim. Kat sits very, very still. Unnaturally still.

The previews flicker on.

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Two and a half hours later, we walk out of the movie theater together.

"What did you think of it?" I ask her, looking forward. She takes slow, careful steps beside me, her heels clicking against the sidewalk as she adjusts to my slouched, fumbling pace. I think about how she must look next to me – Aphrodite's daughter next to a tall, gangly man with a pudgy belly.

The real Kat isn't perfect, but her robots all are. "Social" Kat has clear blue eyes like sapphires, tanned, unblemished skin, and long, golden tresses that curl perfectly around her shoulders. Her boobs aren't *big*, but they're proportionate to her slim figure and waist. She walks with a mechanical grace, because Kat programmed her social robot to be sexy. I have no idea why, though. In real life, Kat's not a very sexy person. I don't mean that in a mean way – she just doesn't like for people to touch her.

Kat smiles widely. "It was *awesome*. I really liked the part where Jared went back for Olivia even after realizing that she'd been bitten. I mean, it was stupid, obviously, and impractical, but kind of sweet."

I laugh and shake my head at her. "Really? He went back and *shot* her, Kat."

"Yes, because he knew that nothing would be worse for her than losing her beautiful mind," Kat affirms. I chuckle and rub her back. Part of me wants to put my arm around her, but I

know that would inhibit the robot's ability to walk the way Kat programmed her to, so I drop my arm to my side instead.

Kat looks at me with interest, a sly smile curling her features. Although you could always tell there was something off about her, sometimes her facial expressions seem so realistic to me that I forget this isn't her *real* face. "Did you know that movies about undead creatures are actually a pretty accurate representation of current national fears? That's why zombie movies and vampire movies alternate in popularity in correlation with which political party is in power. I learned it from this study--"

She goes on for several minutes, chattering happily about all the things she knows about everything. I listen, loving the way she talks, knowing that on the other end of a computer screen, the real Kat, *my* Kat, is whispering into her headset with that breathy voice of hers, so unlike the rich timbre of "Social" Kat's.

We walk into Brunetti's, a local Italian restaurant. The host looks Kat up and down. Beside me, "Social" Kat rolls her shoulders back and puffs her chest out at the attention. It's an automated response, but it still makes me grimace. The host leads us to a booth and "Social" Kat leans seductively forward, her chin resting in her palm, her glossy lips curled in a smirk. The guy at the table next to ours shoots furtive glances over at her, but somehow, I'm more interested in what the real Kat's doing back at home. I imagine her tiny frame curled up in her computer chair, a textbook propped open in her lap as she chews on a pen.

I smile and reach across the table to take Kat's hand, but stop myself. "Do you remember how we met?"

Kat's robots have two pre-recorded laughs. One's a loud, boisterous guffaw, the other a soft, flirtatious giggle. She uses the latter here. "Of course. You came into Trim's wearing these

*enormous* clothes.”

“I thank God every day that my step-dad shrunk all my work-shirts in the wash,” I laugh.

“You’re just lucky I didn’t call security when you started spazzing at me about my lanyard,” Kat says. She leans back in her seat so that it’s easier for her to talk, but other than that she remains still.

I shrug. “You were wearing a Warcraft Galaxy lanyard, and you were sexy as hell. That’s every nerd’s fantasy and you know it.”

“I *was* sexy as hell?” she asks, raising her brows.

I shift in my seat. “Well, you know...it was before I knew that—”

Luckily, I’m saved from trying to finish this doomed statement by the appearance of our waiter. He, like every other man in the damn room, ogles my girlfriend as he takes our drink orders. I get a Coca-cola. Kat orders water because it’s free and she isn’t going to drink it anyway. After he disappears, I try to change the subject, “So how’s the studying going?”

She blinks. “What?”

“I mean, you’re probably studying right now, right?”

“No,” she says icily.

“Oh...how’s Trim’s? Everything going fine over there?”

“I’m just here, Steve.”

“Right,” I say. Kat’s never “just” doing one thing. “So...if you had nothing else to do, how come *you* didn’t just come out with me, then?”

What a weird conversation. I try to imagine how this must sound to anyone who might be listening in.

Kat’s jaw tightens. “Why are you being pushy, Steve? You always do this.”

*And you always lie*, I want to say, but I swallow the words.

The waiter reappears at the table with our drinks, then takes our food orders. I order chicken alfredo for us to “split,” and, not for the first time, think about how stupid it is that I’m basically taking myself out to dinner while the real Kat nibbles on something she had “Hostess” Kat cook for her. I glare across the table at “Social” Kat, as if it’s her fault that I’m in this restaurant alone, on a date with a doll. I knew I was pathetic before – twenty-three years old, college dropout, still living with my parents and playing MMORPGs like Warcraft Galaxy – but this? This is a new low for any human being.

Kat leans in and hisses, “Steve, you knew how it was and you said you wanted to try. Why can’t you just be happy with what we have?”

I rub my hand over my face. What she said wasn’t exactly true. When Kat and I first started going out, I had no idea that I was actually dating one of her robots, though I started to suspect that there was something off after our first date. She and I went out for coffee. After we went our separate ways, I took a trip to the mall and saw her there, dressed in uniform and apparently involved in her work. She managed to write it off and gave me the excuse that she was exceptionally good at multi-tasking – which, to be fair, she is.

We probably would have kept going like that, but then I started to get “pushier,” as she puts it. I demanded that she let me into her life, and eventually I caught her in the very act of lying. Only when I had accidentally stumbled into her room and seen her robots with my own eyes did she finally fess up.

I lean back in my chair and look at the wall. “Kat...it’s not that I’m not happy,” I start to say, but my thoughts are cut off as the waiter reappears to refill my drink.

Kat swirls her straw around in her untouched water, the ice cubes clicking against one

another and the rim of the cup. “Then what is it?” she asks after the waiter has gone again.

I lean forward and run my hands through my hair, drag both of them down over my face. I take a large gulp of soda, swallow the wrong way, and cough for a minute. Kat holds her water out to me and I wave it away. She sets it back down on the table and folds her hands in her lap, then stares at me with those creepy, lifeless sapphires she calls eyes while I pound on my chest and try to get myself to stop coughing. Finally I do, and I lean back in the booth and spread my arms across the back of it.

Kat waits for a beat, then says, “Well, Steve?”

“Well what?”

She rolls her eyes. “If you’re not unhappy, then what’s the problem?”

Kat sits straight, shoulders back, arms at her side, chin tilted up. Below the table, though I can’t see them, I know her legs are crossed, not a single muscle twitching out of place. Every ten seconds, on the dot, without fail, without variation, she blinks. In fact, I can count it out. One Mississippi, two Mississippi...

“Steve?”

...Ten Mississippi. Blink. I hear real Kat’s breathy voice in my head explaining that “Actually, the adult blinks every five seconds on average, but I cut it in half to save myself some trouble – it still won’t rouse suspicion, but it’ll save battery and programming complications.” A soft, whispering laugh.

“Steve!”

“That’s the problem,” I nod at her eyes. She raises her brows at me. “I know exactly when you’re going to blink. It drives me insane.”

She looses that creepy, guffawing laugh and hits my arm playfully. Kat’s robots are

pretty strong, though, so it still kinda hurts. “Weirdo.”

I sigh and rub my arm. “It’s cool, not like I needed that arm for anything.”

Kat smiles at me. “Well, you’re fortunate enough to have two arms; if anything happens to the one, you just build up muscle in the other.” She winks.

“Always so practical,” I grumble. “It’s never, ‘Oh, Stevie, your poor, irreplaceable arm!’”

She shrugs. “Your arm could be replaced, though—”

I hold a hand up to stop her. “No. That’s just it. A machine can’t replace flesh and blood.” I give her a pointed look.

“Machines are more functional,” she says without looking at me.

“Functional isn’t human.”

Kat snorts. “Functionality is the height of humanity, Steve. It’s the goal humankind has always cherished most.”

“No, the goal that humankind has always cherished most is *human interaction*. Connecting with other human beings. We’re social creatures, Kat, not ro—” I stop, try to think of another way I can say this without making her think I’m being deliberately ironic. She leans her head back against the booth and peers down her nose at me.

“Listen, Kat,” I say. I wave my wrists around, as if doing so will draw an elegant sentence out of me. “Functionality is important to people, yes. But that’s why they make machines – to be functional so that they can devote their time to more important things—”

“Like school.”

I shake my hands. “No, no. School’s another thing that’s all about function. School is a means, not an end. It’s more like making personal connections,” I finish, and lay my hands on the table. I incline my head towards her.



“Maybe those things aren’t mutually exclusive,” Kat says. “Sometimes machines function to help foster social interaction. Look at MMO’s like Warcraft Galaxy – the kids who are too clumsy to play kickball and who have trouble communicating face to face can still join a guild, make friends, and do things together that are fun to them.”

“Yeah, well, at some point those kids have to get out from behind their computer screens and go into the real world,” I challenge before I remember that I’m wearing a Warcraft Galaxy t-shirt. She raises her brows, but before she can speak I add, “I know that I’m a gamer, but I don’t live behind my computer. I do other things too.”

Kat looks down at her lap. “That’s not always easy–”

“What’s so hard about it?” I ask. I sweep my arm around. “Everyone in this restaurant is physically here – except one. All of these people had to get up and go out and make real life friends to meet in real places with their real bodies.”

“Stop,” Kat says.

“I’m just saying, Kat. Everyone else comes back to reality at some point. Why can’t you?”

“I’m not everyone else. I thought you would have realized that by now,” Kat says through her teeth. “I won’t say it again, Steve. Drop it.”

I drop it.

The waiter arrives with my alfredo. Kat unwraps her silverware, places her napkin into her lap, and nudges a piece of chicken around with her fork. “Social” Kat is programmed to play with her food because people are less likely to notice she’s not eating if she at least interacts with the food.

I wolf it down. There are only a few bites left when Kat says quietly, “You know, you’re

not supposed to eat the entire entrée in one sitting. Restaurants always create portion sizes too big to appease customers whose eyes are bigger than their stomachs, so ideally you should take about half of it home in a box. That way you don't overeat."

She's more than likely right – Kat always is, about everything – but I finish it off anyway. When I'm done, I set my fork down on the empty plate, lean back, and look at her, as if challenging her to say something about it. She smirks at me knowingly.

"Do you want a Mylanta now, or would you rather wait until you feel like the alien's about to burst out of your stomach?" she asks.

I cringe at her sassy, smug tone, like she's already beat me. "I think I'll take my chances," I sneer.

Kat shrugs happily and says in a sing-song voice, "All right."

God, I hate it when she does that.

I pay the check and we leave. Kat asks if I want to walk around the strip mall for a little while, but my stomach is already starting to cramp up so I say that I'd rather just take "Social" Kat back to her house.

We get into my old, white Eagle Premier. Kat peers at me from the corner of her eye and moves her big, leather purse around so that I can hear the Mylanta shaking within. She's smirking.

The Premier squeals as I turn the key in the engine – the belt is loose, just another reason I need to get it in to the shop soon. Kat completely freezes – the robots tend to lock up at extremely loud, high-pitched noises. I imagine the real Kat on the other side of the computer, scrunching up her face behind her large, black-rimmed glasses and covering her ears.

The squealing fades and "Social" Kat goes back to normal. She glances over at me and

says, “You know, I’m about to just look up how to fix it and go in there myself.”

“You can’t do that. This is delicate machinery,” I say, patting her leg to show that I’m talking about the robot. Before I knew about the whole eight robots thing, I had once invited Kat to go roller-blading with me. She refused on account of being too “fragile.” The robots were tough, but they were also expensive, and the point of Kat working at Trim’s was to be able to pay her father back for the parts she had used in making them.

“I meant *me*, derp. I meant *I* will go in and fix it up,” Kat says, patting herself on the chest. I pretend not to understand still.

“Yes, I know. But I can’t let you risk one of your robots trying to maneuver through this old monster. I wouldn’t want one to get torn up working with the engine.”

“Agh, you’re impossible,” she says, but I hear the echo of a chuckle in her voice. It wasn’t a pre-recorded laugh, but Kat actually giggling as she spoke into the headset. I smile at the sound; my chest loosens up.

“You know,” I say, glancing over at her. “I really can’t wait to see you, Kat.”

She widens her eyes in incredulity. “Why?”

I shrug and run a hand over her fake hair. “I just like being near you.”

Kat doesn’t say anything, but pulls out of my reach and turns to look out the window. I sigh and shift the car into reverse. We pull out of the parking lot and get out onto the highway, then follow it out past the city limits. I turn on the radio, surf through the stations, decide that there’s nothing on that I like, and turn it back off. Kat is quiet and still. I wonder what she’s doing at home, if she’s grading her undergrads’ tests or writing a paper or double checking the “Trim’s” robot’s handiwork to make sure that it’s efficient.

My stomach groans loudly. Leaving one hand on the wheel, I drop the other to it, as if

doing so will keep it quiet. Kat plays back her pre-recorded laugh and starts digging around in her purse. My face grows hot.

She pulls out the half-empty pack of Mylanta. “Ready yet, lover boy?” she asks slyly, arching a brow.

I hold out my hand nonchalantly and say, “Well, if it will make you feel better knowing that you got to take care of me, I’ll go ahead and take one.”

Kat shakes her head as she shoves her nail through the tin backing and digs out the tablet. “You’re a dork.” She grins and places the chewable in my hand. I put it in my mouth.

Kat wouldn’t need a Mylanta. She’s a robot and she doesn’t eat. But she carries an entire pharmacy around in her purse just for me. I sigh and pat her knee. “Thank you.”

She beams. Without taking my eyes off the road, I nod at her purse and say, “You wouldn’t happen to have a condom in there too, would you?”

“Even if I did, you wouldn’t be likely to get it with a line like that,” she snorts.

“To be fair, I’ve been pretty romantic this evening. I took us to a charming drama about a group of rotting dead guys who just want love and acceptance and end up getting their brains blown out for it, and then I brought us to a nice Italian place so you could watch me eat,” I nod. “That’s top notch stuff.”

Kat thinks for a moment, then shrugs and says, “Eh. I guess it could’ve been worse.”

I laugh. “Thanks, Kat.”

She smiles at me and punches my arm. Again. Ow.

I turn off the highway and pull onto Kat’s road. Trees line the pavement, shielding all of the nice, rich houses from the eyes of the poor, unworthy passerby, like myself. I turn down Kat’s driveway, park, and turn the engine off. Kat’s silver Mercedes isn’t there. “Social” Kat and

I get out and make our way across the flagstone path to the heavy, wooden front door.

The front hall is lit. Though I can't see her yet, I can hear "Hostess" Kat in the kitchen putting away dishes. "Social" Kat and I walk into the dining room and, as she's programmed to do, "Hostess" Kat, whose wearing scrubs and a bandana over her golden curls, turns around and greets us with a warm, friendly smile. "Hey! Sorry, I didn't hear you come in. Just make yourselves at home, I'll be with you as soon as I'm done cleaning up."

I nod at her even though I know she's on auto-run right now. It would have felt rude to ignore her. "Social" Kat and I take a left down the hall and go into the big master bedroom where Kat keeps her giant computers and stores her robots when they're not in use. I take a quick glance at the wall and notice that half of the robots are missing. Of course, the spots under the labels "Social" and "Hostess" are inevitably empty, but so are those under "St. Mark's Hospital" and "Misc." So much for her being "just" with me.

The real Kat sits in front of a large desk against the far left wall of the room. Three mammoth computer screens silhouette the back of her big, comfy computer chair. She swivels around to face me, smiling broadly. With slow, careful movements, she extracts herself from her headset and bounds across the room to me; even the short distance leaves her breathless.

Real Kat is almost nothing like her robots. She's short, pale, and nearly flat-chested. She wears big, bulky glasses in front of dull blue eyes, and her white-blonde hair is lank and barely grazes her shoulders. There's a scattering of freckles across her nose, and several nicks on her legs and around her knees from shaving. She wears running shorts and a big, baggy brown t-shirt that does nothing to hide how skinny she is.

She's not the bombshell she makes herself out to be, but I've always thought she was kind of cute. I give her a short, loose hug – the only kind of hug Kat will ever permit – and try

not to count her ribs.

“What did you eat?” I ask her when I pull away.

“Hostess made me some grilled cheese,” Kat says. Her voice is like a soft breeze, and I have to strain a little to hear it. I glance towards her desk and see that she only ate about half of it.

“I wish you’d come to Brunetti’s with me. Sometimes, when I take you out, I’d like to, you know, feed *you* too.”

“To what?” she winks and giggles.

I force myself to smirk. “Anyway, want me to make you some hot chocolate?”

“I could get Hostess to make both of us some—”

“Kat,” I whine. “You’re *too* efficient. When are you going to let me actually *do* something for you?”

“You bought the movie tickets earlier,” Kat smiles.

“That’s not saying much. I feel like I might as well just bring a camera to the movies and film it for you.”

“That’s called bootlegging.”

“And streaming it through your robot to your house isn’t?”

“Touché.”

I glance at her computer screen. “What are you doing right now?”

Kat frowns and claps her hands in my face, which makes me jump. I hate when she does that, especially since I know she’s only trying to distract me from looking at her screens. “I was just bringing Social back into here.”

I try to force a smile but I realize it probably looks more like a grimace. “Good. Then do

you want to come watch a movie with me?”

Kat shifts and looks down at her PowerPuff Girls watch – an adult watch would be too big for her wrist, so she always has to buy kids’ watches. “Well, Social’s battery is probably running low, but I could get Hostess to sit in the living room with you–”

“No, Kat,” I say, heaving a sigh. I put my palm to my forehead. “I want to watch a movie with *you*.”

Kat shuffles her feet and looks down at her watch again. She starts to turn her head back to the computer screens, but stops herself, probably not wanting to draw my attention back to them. Finally, she sighs and admits, “I just have a lot to do, Steven. I’d love to watch a movie with you, but it’ll have to be through Hostess”

“I don’t want to watch a movie with Hostess,” I plead. “I want to watch a movie with you. With the real Kat.”

“It’s not like you’re not spending time with me just because I’m not physically in the room with you,” she snaps. “I tried to tell you that earlier. You can still interact with someone through a screen. Sometimes that’s easier.”

I take a large breath, and suddenly a million things start spewing out of my mouth. “Kat, I don’t want to date your robots. I don’t want to sit across from your robots in restaurants, I don’t want to pretend to hold your robots’ hands in movie theaters, I don’t want to sit in your living room and put my arm around a robot and watch a movie with a robot and listen to a robot’s pre-recorded laughter over and over and over again when I know that your laugh is more beautiful, that you’re more pleasing to look at, that you actually give off a little body heat.” I reach forward and touch her hand, which is actually ice cold because she has poor circulation, but my God, at least it’s real.

Kat doesn't recoil, which I take as a good sign.

"I know that you're always busy. I know that you have a lot to do. But for one hour long documentary, can I put my arm around your shoulders and just take you in? Because – I know this will come as a shock to you, but I like you better than your robots, and I miss you when I'm with them."

Kat glances at the robots lined up against the wall, at "Social" Kat standing dutifully still beside me. Quietly, she mumbles, "Why would you like me better? I made her to be perfect. Is...is she malfunctioning?" She tilts her head to the side, trying to look at her robot from a different angle.

I sigh and brush a few strands of hair out of Kat's face. She looks up at me with wide, uncertain eyes, and I say, "No, no, she functions perfectly. But I'm not interested in perfect. I'm interested in you. Sure, your robots are kind of like your body," I pat "Social" Kat's shoulder. "I can get used to you wearing them as your skin in public. I'll take them out to movies and show them off to my friends if that's what will make you happy. But at the end of the day, I'm not in love with Kat's body. I don't just want to be with Kat's body. I'm...I'm in love with Kat's soul." I touch her shoulder. It was the first time that I verbalized how I feel about Kat, and it even caught me a bit off guard. I hadn't known until just now that it was true.

Kat stares blankly at me for a long moment. Then, slowly, she smiles.

"Okay, smooth-talker," she says with a laugh. "Just let me wrap things up real quick and we'll watch a movie together, okay?"

I throw a metaphorical fist into the air in triumph. I try to sound nonchalant as I say, "Okay. Should I just go look for a movie to watch while you do that, or...?"

"Yes," Kat says.



I turn to leave, but pause in the doorway and look back over my shoulder. Kat has already replaced her headset and swiveled around to face her computer screens again. “Oh, and, um...you know, I love your soul, but I *do* love your body too, so if Social still has that condom in her purse—”

“Get out of here!” Kat cries with a laugh. I lean my head against the doorframe, watching for a full minute as her fingers glide smoothly across her keyboard, listening as she speaks softly into her headset.

Kat has eight lives. In one of them, she’s a full time graduate student with a teaching assistantship. In another, a hardworking intern at Noble Prosthetics. Another is the efficient, clean manager at Trim’s working hard to pay off her debts to her father, and two others are philanthropic volunteers at St. Mark’s hospital and a local thrift store. She’s also a homebody who knows how to make all her guests feel welcome, and a sexy socialite who catches the eye of every man in the room. Finally, she lives the life of a woman without a specific cause, who goes out to do odd jobs here and there and often chauffeurs her other lives around.

But then there’s the ninth life, the life that nobody knows about but me, the life that sits behind a computer and manages all the other lives. And she’s my favorite of all of them.

## **Boarded Windows: Introduction**

In Fall 2013, I wrote “Boarded Windows” as an experiment with the perspective of an unreliable narrator. There are two major symbols here: the house and its outer and inner states, and Dr. Lamont himself as a figure of the past. This story is also concerned with age; the narrator is much older than “Stella,” or Audrey, and the house is the oldest on the block. They’re both considered to be superficially “quaint” and “charming” for their adherence to Victorian ideals; however, the reader also sees the downside of maintaining such outdated structures. The inside of Dr. Lamont’s house, which he keeps carefully concealed behind boarded windows, is not only deteriorating, but also shows signs of violence in the scratched surfaces and holes in the walls.

Dr. Lamont himself is an oppressive patriarchal figure; he assigns an identity to Stella as lover and potential mother, while completely disregarding who she really is. He justifies himself by claiming to be her “protector,” as many oppressive men have often mistakenly considered themselves the protectors of women in the past. He keeps her locked away in a room, limiting her range of movement and barring her from freedom. The reader also sees that he does not take care of her; in his charge, she has deteriorated. She lives in an unsanitary house and has to use a chamber pot instead of being allowed the modern convenience of a toilet. Stella is really nothing more than a thing to him. Thus, his age and the age of the house set him up as a symbol of past ideals, and the outer appearances of civility and charm really hide an interior of violence and filth. Finally, in some ways, Stella’s escape from Dr. Lamont and the house can be seen as representing the liberation of women.

The aspect of the story that earned me simultaneously the most praise and the most criticism during workshop was the perspective. Although people found Dr. Lamont’s account of

events interesting, it did limit what they knew about him and the world around him. When revising, I added in the party scene at the beginning to show how he interacted with people other than Stella and demonstrate why he had not been caught yet. Though he remains unreliable, I did include a few extra details in this draft that didn't appear initially – such as how he managed to get Stella into his car, why Stella chose this day to attempt an escape, etc. Over all, I found a better balance that helped to answer many of the reader's questions while still allowing him to be wary of what Dr. Lamont claims as the truth.

## Boarded Windows

I knock on the door, and Mrs. Yates, my neighbor, appears. Her broad, fuchsia-painted smile reveals her crooked yellow teeth, her veiny flesh accentuates the bright, watery blue of her eyes. She's wearing a floral-print dress and a red kerchief over her thin, curled hair.

"Dr. Lamont! I'm so glad you made it, sugar," she says, her voice raspy with the years of cigarette smoking. She steps aside and I cross over the threshold into her home, shrugging off my coat in the process. She reaches for it, but I smile down at her and hang it up on the rack beside the door.

"No need to trouble yourself, Mrs. Yates. I can manage."

"Aw, bless you, Doctor, you're gonna make me look like a bad hostess," she says, slapping my arm playfully and grinning all the while.

Jazz music plays from a small stereo in the dining room, where several of my other neighbors are chewing on stale biscuits and shrimp. There's only one face among the group that I don't recognize – a red head with bright green eyes and a plump physique. She's smiling as she looks up from one of the dining room chairs at a man who's standing over her and waving around a carrot emphatically.

Mrs. Yates appears at my elbow. "That's Mrs. Couch. She moved into the house right across from yours. Her husband and children are at a school function, sadly. You know, I told her I set up this little get together so they could meet everyone, so you'd think they'd have all come. Oh well, ain't no use grumbling about the way people are today. Come on, dear, let's go on and say hello." She wraps her frail fingers around my arm and guides me over to where Mrs. Couch is sitting.

“Mrs. Couch, honey,” she says. The woman looks up at us, her features stiffening as her gaze rests on me. “This here is Dr. Lamont. He lives right across from you.”

I bend down, watching her, and plant my lips upon her hand. Her mouth twitches.

“Nice to meet you,” she says coolly.

“Ah, dear lady, the pleasure is all mine,” I reply. I straighten and look down at Mrs. Yates. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to peruse your selection in the kitchen. You always make the most delicious foods for these parties.”

“Well of course, sugar, you just help yourself,” Mrs. Yates says. I nod to both of them, step around the woman’s chair, and turn the corner into the kitchen. But I don’t get a plate. The kitchen is empty, so I lean against the wall by the doorway just out of sight of anyone in the dining room, and listen.

“He’s the one who lives in the house with the boarded up windows?” Mrs. Couch asks, her voice just carrying to me over the mumble of conversation and crooning of a saxophone from the stereo.

“Oh, yes, well, we had a bad hurricane come through not long ago and everyone boarded up their windows, sure,” Mrs. Yates replies. I nod my head in approval.

“But that must’ve been months ago. He hasn’t taken them down yet?”

“It ain’t nothing to worry about, sugar,” Mrs. Yates assures her. I imagine her patting Mrs. Couch’s hand. “Dr. Lamont’s been here for years. Sure, he’s got himself a few quirks. He’s a very private man, you know, but he don’t mean no harm. He’s a good man. He just don’t like nobody being busy-bodies is all, and that’s the honest to God truth. But he’s not doing nothing in there that you or I don’t do every day, you can be sure.”

“All right, all right,” Mrs. Couch says. “I just have to ask. I have a little girl, you know.”

“Oh, I know, all right, and you can be sure, as long as that man’s here, ain’t nothing bad ever gonna happen to your kids. He’s a saint, he is. A proper gentleman and all that.”

“I just think it’s odd that a man with no wife or kids lives in such a big house by himself and has all the windows boarded up, is all.”

“Well, you rest easy. Ain’t nobody in that house but him.”

My jaw clenches. Mrs. Yates is a kind old lady, but I have never told her, or any of my other neighbors, about Stella. She has such a simple view of the world that I don’t think she would understand. There’s a bit of an age gap between Stella and me, but we love each other and age is just a number. Besides, what kind of heartless monster would I have to be to abandon her now that her mental illness has set in? There is no one in the world who could love her or care for her as much as I.

I walk over to the counter where a stack of plastic plates and several dishes of food have been laid out. The bridge of my nose twitches as I slosh some sort of chunky, orange gumbo onto my plate. What would Mrs. Couch know of such matters? Has she ever had to keep a secret to protect someone she loves? What business is it of hers what I do within my own house?

The rest of my neighbors know me and like me well enough to understand that I would never engage in any sort of sinister activity; I’m a gentleman, much too refined for such nonsense. But if Mrs. Couch is going to stick her nose into my affairs, then she’s threatening more than just my sense of pride and right to privacy. She’s threatening the well-being of my poor, suffering Stella, and that is something I cannot allow.

I go back into the dining room with my plate and sit down in the chair beside her. She smiles stiffly at me, her arms and legs crossed as she looks me over. Her apparent aloofness to my courtesy annoys me. After an hour or so, I excuse myself from the table and bid farewell to

my neighbors. Mrs. Yates follows me to the door, where I gingerly kiss her wrinkled, veiny hand, swing my coat on, and leave.

A dog barks from Mrs. Couch's yard across the street. There is only one car in their driveway, leading me to believe that her husband and children are still at whatever school function they were attending. I glance from left to right to ensure that no one is around, then cross the street and dive into the shadows beyond the amber glow of the streetlamp and white flare of their porch lights. For a time I sit among the bushes, listening to their dog bark and peering through Mrs. Yate's windows. I take my pocket knife from my coat and pass it back and forth between my hands, glaring at Mrs. Couch through the glass. She seems to have relaxed since I left, her arms and legs unfolded, her head lulling to the side as she drinks lazily from a champagne glass. Her attitude cements my belief that she knows something she should not know. I consider that perhaps she has somehow found out about Stella, that she wants to tear down the boards and show Stella to the whole world, that they might ridicule her and shame her for what she cannot help being.

I decide then and there that Mrs. Couch will not be a problem for me. I will send her a message, not in words, but in deeds. She wants to hurt my Stella, but I will hurt her before she even comes close. Before too long, she will see that she must leave. I do not tolerate threats to my Stella's peace of mind. I flick open my pocket knife and turn to glare at the fence, behind which her dog is still howling, but I hesitate. If I act now, while most of our neighbors are at Mrs. Yates, it will only drive her to act out against me, having no one else that she could blame. With that in mind, I slip out of the shadows and back across the street, pulling my key from my pocket.

My house is the oldest in the neighborhood, which is part of why I chose it in the first

place. I grew up admiring Victorian literature, architecture, furniture, clothing, and mannerisms. Before I met Stella, I wanted nothing more than to show the world that I was civil, classy, and a real gentleman, so I spent much of my free time collecting antiques – my house included. The house stands three stories tall, with white-washed pillars supporting the upper and lower decks and the front left corner rounded out to create the effect of a turret. All of the doors, regardless of which side one is on, can only be locked or unlocked with a key.

I step into the entrance hall, lock the door behind me, and drop the key into my pocket. With a jiggle of the handle to make sure that it's secure, I turn away from the door and flick the lights on to reveal a small, coral colored room. While the outside of the house is immaculate, the inside could use a bit of work; there are cracks in the wall, dust on the hall table, and cobwebs in the corners of the room. In a faded, antique vase, a bouquet of roses curls over, the brown, wilted petals scattered across the scratched, crooked table surface. I glance into the vase and see that white mold has started to creep between the dead stems; the water has been stagnant too long. It needs to be thrown out.

There's a narrow staircase pressed against the wall before me, the chipped black railing gleaming in the dim lighting. I ascend, the old stairs creaking beneath my weight, turn to Stella's room, and turn the key to unlock the door, but pause; there is no click. The door was not locked.

My chest tightens. I turn the key over in my hand, as if doing so will trigger some memory of not locking the door this morning when I left for work. I have never made such an oversight before – not since the first couple months, in which her madness drove her to try to leave the comfort of our home on many occasions, until finally I was forced to keep her in her room throughout the day so that she could not hurt herself. Now, with Mrs. Couch sticking her nose where it doesn't belong, I have an extra reason to be wary.



I push the door open and step into the room. There are large, dark stains in the maroon carpet, and the floral wallpaper is peeling in places. The scent of iron, urine, and sweat hangs heavy in the air. The rusted chamber pot I gave Stella to use during the day peeks out from beneath her frayed, silken sheets.

Stella is sitting listlessly on her queen-sized, four-poster bed, but she jumps up the minute she sees me. No harm done, then. She must not have realized that I'd forgotten to lock the door. Her sleek blonde hair is tied back with a neat bow, and a black, velvet dress ripples down over her young curves. She looks thin and pale. There's a large, yellow bruise on her upper arm; how did that get there? A pang shoots through me as I cross over to her and place my hand on her cheek. She flinches.

I fell in love with my Stella the first time I saw her. She had been seventeen then, young, bold, full of vitality. She was a strong girl with golden skin and sparkling hazel eyes. She'd been out for a jog in the park, her powerful legs pumping in her black shorts, perspiration soaking through her blue cotton shirt. With a sight like that, I was done for. She got stuck in my head. I began to spend whole days in the park just waiting for her to run past. Sometimes, after her run, I would keep a safe but watchful distance and see where it was that she went and who she spent her time with. Too many of her friends were boys, and I didn't trust them with her. I was like her guardian angel, and I knew that if she ever needed me, I would be there to protect her. It was a full time job. Couldn't sleep. Barely ate. I loved her so much.

Back then she wasn't afraid of anything.

She's different now. Something broke inside her, and she went crazy. But luckily, my love for her is unyielding, and I care as much for my little lamb as I once cared for my brave lioness.

“My pet, you’re looking a little unwell. Maybe you should go out a bit more, get a little fresh air?” I say. Her lips grow thin.

“I don’t have a key,” she says sharply.

I frown disapprovingly at her tone, but rather than reprimanding her for it I say, “Well, perhaps if you’re a good girl and promise not to make a scene or bother the neighbors, we’ll go out into the backyard together later.” I make a mental note to make sure that Mrs. Couch has gone to bed beforehand; I’ll have to keep a close watch on her until she’s gone.

I kiss Stella’s forehead and withdraw to look down into her face. Her eyes are averted. “Stella,” I whisper. “Look at me.”

She continues to stare at the ground, but I can see in the way her mouth is set that she’s doing it on purpose, to be defiant. Anger at her ingratitude rises within me, and I yank on her hair. She gasps.

“Look at me,” I repeat, more sternly, and her watery gaze meets mine. I smile and stroke her chin. “I got you a present.”

She watches me reach into my pocket and withdraw a pearl necklace, which I hook around her neck. I cup her chin in my hand and beam at her. “You’re a pretty doll, my little Stella. Now what do you say?”

She’s quiet. My fingers tighten against her chin, causing her to wince. “What do you say, Stella?” I repeat. She’s a good girl, but her parents did not raise her to be very polite. I find myself constantly having to teach her lessons on the most basic courtesies, such as when she should speak, when she should be thankful. I know it doesn’t help that I spoil her, but I do try my best to teach her to be grateful. Unfortunately, with my poor Stella, the lessons seem to go in one ear and out the other.

She hesitates a moment and then murmurs something inaudible.

“Speak up, Stella,” I admonish. “It’s rude to mumble.” I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin as I speak. Someday, I will make a great father, if only Stella’s weakened body will be able to support children. We’ve been trying to have children for months now, but sadly our attempts have yet to come to fruition. Stella’s been very strong about it, but I’m sure she must be even more disappointed than I. I glance down at her broad hips and see that they’re much bonier than they had once been.

Stella glares up at me suddenly, swatting my hand away from her face. She pulls away from me and says firmly, “My name isn’t Stella.”

The knuckles of my left hand pop as I flex my fingers and the skin across the bridge of my nose twitches. She takes a step backward. My anger subsides as I remind myself that she can’t help it anymore. Forcing myself to remain calm, I exhale deeply and say, in strained tones, “Don’t be difficult tonight, Stella. I want us to have a good evening, but whether or not we do is your choice.” Another breath and my smile is back. I take her arm and guide her out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and into the dining room. The floorboards moan beneath us.

The dining room is the same coral color as the entrance hall; it is rounded out, the inside of the turret-shaped room. All of the large, French windows are boarded up with wood that has slowly begun to decay; I will have to replace the boards soon, though I must think of a way to do so discreetly, lest that nosey Mrs. Couch get any ideas. I’m thankful for these boards, because in addition to hiding my poor Stella from ridiculing eyes, they also hide the state of my house’s interior. No one can see the large hole in the wall, the result of me, to my embarrassment, losing my temper with Stella one day. No one can see the scratched and chipped table that sits, lopsided, in the center of the room, one of its legs cut short. No one can see the dust, or the

grime, or the rat droppings on the carpet. To them, I live in a charming, quaint Victorian house; but they have no idea what it's like inside.

I sit Stella down in the chair to the right of the table head, where I sit.

"Now, Stella, my sweet, do you know what today is?" I ask pleasantly.

She has perfect posture. Her back is straight, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She stares down at the table in front of her. In the soft dining room light, I see the red lipstick she's wearing and it makes me hungry. I love her in red. I love it smeared across her lips, staining her teeth, leaving an iron tang on her tongue.

"No," she says.

"Why, my pet, it's our anniversary!" I tell her, somewhat hurt that she wouldn't remember such an important date.

Without looking at me, she puffs out her chest like an angry bird, gestures around the room and says, "How should I know? Do you see a calendar anywhere in here?"

"Stella," I say sharply, my fingers curling against the table. She immediately deflates. "Don't get an attitude with me."

We fall silent. Looking over her, I think back to when we had finally met for the first time, a year ago today. It was already late at night when she staggered out the door of some boy's house, the boy and a few of his friends exchanging some words with her on the stoop, concerned expressions on their faces. She laughed, hugged each of them, and pointed in the direction of her parents' house, only a few blocks away. Whatever she said seemed to put them at ease, because they went back inside and she began to shuffle homeward.

My car – a Mustang with a fresh coating of white paint, though the seats had holes in them and there was a rip in the fabric of the ceiling – was parked at the end of the street, but

when I saw her walking alone down that empty road, I knew my time had come.

I cruised along slowly until I pulled up next to her and rolled down my window. She turned to glare at me suspiciously as I leaned across the passenger seat. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glazed. She was drunk, but my arrival had made her fully alert. Stella held her head high, defiant, as if daring me to try something with her. I forced myself to smile, though I didn't like her attitude.

"You okay, sweetheart? You need a ride somewhere?"

"I'm fine, thanks," she replied. It was the first time I'd heard her voice; it sounded nothing like what I had imagined. My mouth twitched.

"It's not safe for a pretty young lady like you to be out on the streets by yourself, you know."

"I can handle myself, thanks."

I shot a pointed glance back towards the house. "Why not get your friends to go with you?"

She froze in her tracks and whirled around to glare into the shadows of the driver's seat. "Were you watching me? How long have you been here?" she paused and looked me over more thoroughly. "Have I seen you before?"

"I just happened to notice you as I was leaving my friend's house," I replied defensively. Her accusations and ingratitude made my chest grow hot, and the furious expression on her face turned her into an ugly harpy. I didn't like this side of her. I wanted Stella, *my* Stella, to go back to being the way I'd always known her to be. With an effort to contain my mounting temper, I softened my visage and voice and said, "I just don't want anything bad to happen to you. You've obviously had a few drinks. Why don't you go back to your friend's where you'll be safe?"

I didn't want her to go back to them, but I hoped the suggestion would make her trust me more. I was right.

The venom faded from her features and she looked ahead, distantly, saying, "I promised my parents I'd be home tonight. It's not far. I can make it."

"Well," I said, parking my car against the curb, "At least let me walk with you so I can be sure you get home safe. Look at me, I'm almost old enough to be your father," I laughed. "No one will harass you if they see you with me."

She was hesitant, but she agreed. I stepped out of the car and followed along a few paces behind her. We rounded a corner onto the main street, but only one or two cars passed us. My hands balled into fists in my coat pocket. I watched her wobble along, her blonde hair frizzing in the misty night air. I looked down at my knuckles, then back up at the back of her head. I thought of her going back to those boys, of them caressing her with their dirty fingers, of their lips gliding along her jaw. My arms trembled. I could not let that happen to her; I could not let them use her that way. Without hesitating another instant, I slammed my fist into the back of her head. She toppled over, but I caught her just as her knees hit the ground. Her limp body swayed to and fro in my arms as I lifted her, and, ducking into the shadows, brought her back to my car. After she woke up, she fell madly in love with me, and we've been together ever since.

"I want to go home."

The quiet, firm statement made by the present Stella stirs me from my reverie. I look at her.

"What?"

"I want to go home. I don't want to be here. Please, let me go home." She pronounces each word carefully. Her hands, still in her lap, have balled up, her knuckles gleaming white in

the soft lighting.

“Stella, my dear, you’re unwell! You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“My name isn’t Stella,” she snaps. Her expression blazes, red creeping like fire over her skin. She reminds me of a hideous witch. “There is nothing wrong with me. I’m fine. But I don’t want to be here. I’ve *never* wanted to be here.” She stands up, her body trembling. Tears splash down her cheeks as she slams a fist down into the table. Her voice rises with every word. “You’ve kept me here long enough. A whole year. A whole year of my life that you’ve stolen from me!”

I watch her intently, flexing my fingers on the table. “Stella, if you don’t calm down I’ll be forced to give you your medicine.”

This is usually enough to cow her. Stella’s medicine is a sedative injected into her neck, and she has a childlike hatred for needles. The mere sight of one is enough to make her whimper. I don’t like to have to give it to her, but her madness occasionally makes her a threat to herself and me, and therefore it must be dealt with.

She falls silent and takes her seat, unclenching her fists, but her jaw remains clamped tight and her arms continue to shake. I frown.

“Stella, pet, you know you’re very sick and you say some hurtful things to me. I know it isn’t your fault, but I want you to apologize right now.”

She glares at me and says nothing. I push my chair back and stand over her.

“Apologize,” I growl.

Stella shrinks under my gaze. “Don’t come near me,” she replies, a tremor in her voice. Her hand darts for something hidden in the ripped seams of her seat cushion, and she draws out a long kitchen knife.

My jaw tightens. “Where did you get that?”

Since Stella’s little accident nine months ago, when the poor, clumsy thing gashed her own wrists with one of my pocket knives – luckily not deep enough to do any real damage – I’ve made it a point to lock all sharp and dangerous objects in a cupboard in the kitchen. I send a sideways glance through the archway leading into there and notice that the door to the cupboard is slightly ajar and hanging a little off its hinges. I look once more at the mysterious yellow bruise on her arm. She must have realized that I forgot to lock her bedroom door after all.

Stella rises shakily from her seat, keeping the knife pointed at me. She clutches it with both hands like an amateur. Her body quakes violently with a mixture of anger and fear, the knife wagging as her hands quaver, but she’s determined not to drop it.

I affect a look of disappointment and say, “Stella...”

“My name isn’t Stella!” she shrieks.

I lunge to wrestle the knife away from her. She gasps and tries to evade me, but I have my grip firmly wrapped around hers, crushing her fingers beneath my palms, and I pull. We play tug of war for a minute before I slap her with my left hand. She stumbles backwards and releases her grip. The knife clatters to the floor. I stoop to pick it up and then stab it forcefully down into the table. Stella jumps and closes her eyes, as if she cannot bear to see the jagged tip carving its way through the table’s wooden skin. When she looks back up at me, her eyes are shining and dim all at once.

I grab her arm and pull her into the hall. She sinks to the ground, but I yank her up. “You’ve been very bad, Stella,” I snarl. My skin prickles with heat, my teeth grind against one another. “I wanted you to be good so we could have a nice anniversary together, but you ruined *everything*.”



“I’m sorry,” she wails, struggling against me. I wrench her forward. “I’m sorry, please! I can be good! I’ll be good if you give me another chance! Please, please!”

The stairs titter underneath us; it sounds as though the house is laughing at my disappointment. I stomp down hard with each step, and the ghostly chuckles turn into groans of pain. We reach the landing. I throw her into her bedroom and follow her in, locking the door behind me. Stella falls strangely silent as she watches my ring of keys. I cross over to the drawer where I keep her medicine, unlock it, and put the keys away.

Stella looks at the needle, then looks at me. Her face is blotchy and red, her chest heaving. She stands very still. I flick the syringe with my middle finger and take a step towards her. Her body is tense, like a cat preparing to pounce.

“Now Stella, my pet, be a good girl and let me give you your medicine,” I say calmly, with the air of a man attempting to soothe a wild beast.

“Stay away from me,” she says through gritted teeth. She swallows.

“You’ve misbehaved, Stella. You’re too worked up. You need to let me give you your medicine.”

“No,” she replies, her voice rising slightly. I raise my brows and force myself to smile. My teeth are clenched.

“Please cooperate, my little doll. The harder you struggle against me, the more this is going to hurt.”

Stella stands there, wound up, unyielding. I start for her, but she dodges around to the other side of the bed. I follow, my footfalls coming down heavily on the carpeted floor, my pace steady. She throws the pillows at me and crawls across the mattress to the drawer.

“Stella,” I say, my annoyance mounting.

“Leave me alone,” she cries. She rips the dusty table lamp from the bedside table and hurls it at me. I try to dodge, but it grazes my shoulder. My fury ignites and I dash back around the bed.

“Stella, behave!” I shout as I close in on her.

Her back is to me. “Stop calling me that. My name – is not – Stella!” She yanks the drawer out of the dresser, whirls, and smashes it into my right ear. I hear a sharp, ringing noise. The world turns sideways and grows dim. For a few minutes there is nothing but the ringing and a deep, resonant pounding, like the drums of war. Blood, hot and sticky, trickles down my face.

Then Stella is leaning down beside me, crying profusely as her hands spider through my coat. My dear pet, she must regret her fit of madness and her cruelty and is now checking to see if I’m all right. She stops moving, as if she’s found what she’s looking for. Her gaze meets mine. She looks afraid. Afraid that she’s hurt me. Afraid that she could lose me forever.

She draws the keys from my pocket, her lips curling into a sneer. Her breathing is still ragged with terror, but even though her voice wavers as she speaks, I recognize the fury that drives her. “My name is Audrey, and I’m not your pet.” She rises, steps over me, and then she’s gone. I hear her thunder down the stairs, listen as she fumbles with the keys at the front door, sniffing and hyperventilating all the while. No doubt she thinks I’m going to get back up and come after her. But I’m not going to; not this time. I imagine her dashing across the street and running into Mrs. Couch’s arms, telling all of her madness induced lies, making it sound as though she had not been in love with me the whole time while I bleed here on the floor.

I close my eyes, realizing that it’s over. It’s been over since that wicked woman moved in across the street, because if Stella hadn’t left, she would have taken her away from me. I’ve lost. Stella, my Stella, is gone. She never really was.

## **The Corn Goddess: Introduction**

The final story in this thesis is the “The Corn Goddess,” which brings this piece of work full circle. As the reader enters on a fairytale note, she leaves with a story that is loosely rooted in Native American mythology. The main character is named after Onatah, the goddess of corn, who is kidnapped and taken to the underworld every winter, and whom the sun must find and liberate. The protagonist lives in a city that exists under a dome – or the “underworld” in question. Though the city is beautiful, with silver trees and artistic buildings, the reader quickly learns that there is no actual life here. Citizens are forced to wear suits all the time, and are trained to pay attention only to the surface – not what’s underneath. The result is a heavy concentration on superficiality and appearances that constrains the people who live there and forces them to act contrary to their real emotions. The big symbol in this story is the suit, which represents the “outer layer,” and a society that suppresses the individual. Thus, Onatah’s removal of the suit piece by piece is symbolic of her shedding her attachment to a society that does not care for her as a person. Instead of the “sun finding her,” as her grandmother wishes, Onatah liberates herself and discovers the girl beneath the helmet. She and a boy, Adras, decide to remain in the wilds together. Here, another symbol is present – where Onatah represents biology and science, Adras represents spirit and literature. Together, they create a balance that understands the importance of what’s above *and* below the surface.

This story is the culmination of this thesis for two reasons: not only is it the story most lately written, but it also focuses on the idea behind the symbol. “The Corn Goddess” is interested in the exploration of the aesthetic reality versus the inner truth, or the physical surface of the symbol versus the underlying meaning. In some respects, this goes back to the idea of a

symbol of a symbol, or a symbol that is concerned with representing a reality that is simultaneously both physical and abstract. Though Onatah, in adherence to the ideals of her society, is initially interested only in the surface of her suit, or “the body,” as her mother refers to it, she ultimately attempts to find a deeper meaning in herself. In deconstructing the body, she opens up a gateway for introspection and the exploration of her own mind, allowing her to discover who she really is on a non-superficial level.

## **The Corn Goddess**

Sunlight shimmered through the leaves, the noontime rays like tangible golden threads in the air. Grandmother – or Gamma, as Onatah liked to call her, with Mom being Alpha and Dad being Beta – picked her way around ditches and over large rocks, leading Onatah deeper and deeper into the forest. A shadow flitted from one low-hanging branch to the other, rustling the leaves and causing Onatah to jump. She hugged herself and followed after Gamma, her head lowered.

Not for the first time, she asked, “Gamma, why are we out here? Won’t we get in trouble? Mom said you could get in trouble...”

“Come on,” Gamma said gruffly, not pausing to look back.

They came upon a tall, thick log. Green moss and crusty lichens covered much of the wood. Onatah held back and crinkled her nose, but Gamma pulled herself up onto the log and patted the spot next to her. Onatah pursed her lips and shook her head.

“Come here,” Gamma ordered. “Now.”

“It’s got that weird green stuff on it. It’ll get my new suit dirty,” Onatah said, gesturing to her silver-colored, rechargeable insulation suit.

“With the way you’re growing, you’ll get a new one before you know it.” Gamma waved a dismissive hand. “Now come here. Quickly!”

Scrunching up her shoulders, Onatah climbed up onto the spot next to Gamma. She winced, thinking of how Mom was going to scold her for the inevitable green stain that would be all over her bottom; she didn’t look at her grandmother.

“Now take off your helmet.”

Onatah stared. “Huh?”

“Take off your helmet, Onatah. Breathe the fresh air,” Gamma said.

Onatah looked around, wide-eyed, as if she might find someone out in the woods who would rescue her from Gamma’s sudden insanity. Seeing no one, she said helplessly, “Mom says fresh air is bad for you. She said it can kill you.” She recoiled from Gamma. “Please don’t make me.”

“Oh, please,” Gamma said, rolling her eyes. She unclasped her helmet, took it off, and shook out her long, dark hair. She looked Onatah dead in the eye and said, “People have always breathed fresh air; this ridiculous thing only started back in my great-grandmother’s day. First they made the clothes that maintain body temperature, then everyone started wearing the insulated suits, then came the O2 tanks, and now they’re even building this stupid dome of theirs.” Gamma threw her arms out.

Overhead, a branch bobbed and dropped a slew of nuts around them as something skittered among the trees. Onatah ducked and put her hands over her head.

“Stop that,” Gamma sniffed. “It’s just a squirrel. They have those in Cúpula too. For now,” she added with a sigh. Looking back at Onatah, she repeated, “Take your helmet off.”

Onatah shook her head.

“Oh, for Einstein’s sake,” Gamma said, and reached out to unclasp the helmet herself. Onatah tried to draw away, but Gamma grabbed her shoulder, pinned her down, and tugged the helmet off. Onatah gasped; her head swam as cool air flowed into her lungs, and her vision darkened. She swayed and put her head in her hands.

“Oh, Gamma, you’ve killed me!” she cried.

“Stop being melodramatic, Onatah,” Gamma sighed. “You’re not going to die. I brought

you out here because I wanted to have a face-to-face conversation with you, and since they're implementing this dome idea, this might be the only chance I get. Although I had hoped your mother might carry on the tradition and take you out here herself, but she doesn't seem to be interested in such things," Gamma grumbled.

Slowly, Onatah's vision cleared. It still hurt to breathe, but after a minute she realized that the natural air was nice. She turned to Gamma, whose forehead wrinkled.

"Well, now that I have your attention," Gamma said. She looked down and absently brushed a caterpillar off the log. Onatah pulled her legs up to her chest. Gamma exhaled and looked at the surrounding trees. Her long, gloved fingers drummed against the bark beneath them. Onatah squirmed.

Finally, Gamma turned back to her and said, "I named you Onatah because I wanted you to have a connection with your roots. A long time ago, our ancestors believed that Onatah was a goddess of corn – corn is something that you eat. Well, it was something we ate when I was a kid, before they replaced food with Calorie pills." Her cheek twitched. She tore off a long, thin branch from the log, then leaned forward, and drew something that resembled an oval into the soil.

"Corn," she said, with a final swipe of her stick. She looked back up at Onatah. "Every winter, bad spirits took Onatah and smothered her in the underworld." Gamma kicked her foot across the drawing, covering it with a fresh coat of dirt. She dropped the stick and leaned back, making the motion of a sunrise with her arms. "But every spring, the sun would find her and liberate her."

Gamma touched Onatah's hand. Her voice was strained as she said, "My greatest hope for you is that the sun will find you, Onatah."

Onatah swallowed.

When they made it back to Cúpula several hours later, the police were already at the house. Mom stormed outside, a man in a dark blue police suit on her heels. Onatah took Gamma's hand.

"Where have you been?" Mom snarled, glaring at Gamma's expressionless face. When Gamma didn't answer, she turned to Onatah and jerked her away from her grandmother. Mom's boney fingers dug into Onatah's shoulders as she spun Onatah around in place. Onatah winced as Mom's grip tightened, knowing she had seen the stain. Her tone was colder, lower, as she repeated, "Where have you been?"

"I took Onatah out," Gamma said.

Mom pushed Onatah away. "Get inside. Now."

"Mom—"

"Go!" Mom growled. The light that rimmed her visor illuminated her dark, blazing eyes. Onatah swallowed and scurried away. Before she closed the door behind her, she heard her mother bark, "How *dare* you go behind my back and take the child that *I* paid for out into the woods like you have the *right*—"

The door clicked closed. Onatah went up to her bedroom and peered through the slit in the curtains as the police loaded Gamma, handcuffed, into their car. Mom stayed in the yard, arms folded across her chest, and watched them take her away. Onatah's fingers clenched around the window sill, her mouth suddenly dry; when the police took someone away, no one ever saw them again.

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The pinkish-purple lights of the dome that covered the city of Cúpula rippled as rain



pattered against the high, rounded ceiling. Onatah hitched her backpack up higher onto her shoulder as she walked along the gray sidewalks to the Cúpula University Library. A golden tram – part of the Edison line, which nearly had a monopoly on public transportation in Cúpula – zoomed past her. Platinum trees lined the sidewalk, their clean, silver branches hung with bright baubles that varied in color from violet to turquoise. In Cúpula, there was not a tuft of grass nor a speck of dirt; since the air-tight dome had been implemented, the filth of nature had been all but eliminated.

Onatah breathed deeply from her O2 tank, which smelled like corn; it was one of the cheapest scents available, and it reminded her of her grandmother, whom she had not seen since that day sixteen years ago. When she turned eighteen and the law no longer required her to report her whereabouts and activities to her parents, she had tried to visit her grandmother in the prison, but had been turned away.

“That radical doesn’t get visitors,” the man at the desk had told her. “Stirs up too much trouble among the inmates. They’re thinking of giving her a lobotomy.”

Her chest tightened at the memory. That had been four years ago, and she hadn’t gone back to the prison since then. She wondered if they’d gone through with it, if they’d silenced her Gamma for good. Onatah tried to shove the thoughts from her mind. She turned a corner and saw the familiar silver oak with its glittering diamond vines that stood in front of the Library. Though she saw the fake tree almost every day, her breath caught in her throat at the sight of it. It was one of the trees her mother had designed, proof that even Mom was capable of beauty. She remembered her mother showing her the plans in her senior year of high school.

“I thought you might like it,” Mom had said, nodding in approval. “I designed it for you.”

*Sure*, Onatah had thought, though she didn’t verbalize her doubt.

Onatah turned up the steps to the fuchsia library building, which was round at the bottom and had a tall, violet spire with an enormous chunk of amethyst at the top. The buildings of Cúpula were works of art. They ranged in shape and color, their walls, windows, and doors inlaid with refined minerals and jewels. In a recent poll among commercial truck drivers, politicians, and the other select groups of people with permission to travel between cities, Cúpula had been voted the safest, cleanest, and most beautiful city in the world. Onatah swelled at the thought.

She found a niche in a corner of the second floor and set up her holo-tablet. Onatah divided the holographic screen in two; one showed the text of her “textbook” and the other showed a blank document. Her gloved fingers glided smoothly over the sensory keys, creating a study guide in the document to help her remember the material she was reading.

Someone cleared his throat across the table, interrupting her rhythm of typing and reading. She glanced up to see Adras, a boy she had met a couple weeks back at a research convention, sitting across from her, the chin of his helmet perched on the bridge of his hands. Her chest tightened and her stomach fluttered. A smirk curled his lips and he asked, “Studying for a test?”

Onatah shrugged. “Actually, we won’t be covering this chapter in this section of the class. I’m reading it because I want to.”

“Wait a minute,” Adras said, pulling back. He raised two fine, silvery eyebrows, poked one of the translucent diagrams projected in the air, and asked, “You’re reading a *biology* textbook for fun?”

“Fun?” Onatah replied. Her tongue had been on the verge of forming the words, ‘Fun is something *children* have, not adults,’ but she stopped herself. Perhaps to Adras, the fact that they were still students meant that they weren’t quite adults, and she didn’t want to come across as

pompous. Instead, she said, “I just want to get ahead. Besides, what else would I read in my spare time?”

Adras looked her up and down, his expression impassive. “Have you ever thought about reading literature?”

Onatah crinkled her nose. “Why would I? It’s banned, anyway.” The reading of literature, like many other activities, had been found to be both unproductive and controversial, and had consequently been outlawed long before she or Adras were born.

“Well, yeah, but you can always find some if you know where to go,” Adras said, winking one of his purple eyes. Their color told her more than his fancy suit or his lavender scented O2 tank did. Once upon a time, people had bought overly large houses to show off their wealth; now they did it through the enhancements they bought for their children. Adras’ parents had paid extra to have their own DNA genetically altered in the lab to produce a purple-eyed boy. What other enhancements had they bought for him? His height, perhaps? His strength? His glittering teeth? *How much of this boy was fake?*

Onatah’s stomach tightened. The thought surprised her because it was accompanied by a feeling of disgust, which she quickly wrote off as jealousy. Her own parents belonged to the middle class; that meant that they were wealthy enough to *have* a baby made in the labs, but could afford only basic enhancements. Still, she supposed she ought to have been thankful; some couples couldn’t afford any enhancements. Some couples couldn’t afford the lab expenses to make a baby at all. She was lucky to be alive.

Adras glanced surreptitiously around their table, then pulled a book entitled *The Age of Innocence* out of his bag. Onatah’s eyes widened, and she whipped her head back and forth, as if trying to plan an escape route. She thought of the police taking her grandmother away, of them

giving her a lobotomy for having too many ideas, and her skin prickled under her suit.

A hard smile parted Adras' lips, and he said, "Personally, I can't get enough of them. I'm addicted." He laughed. "Want to borrow?" He slid it across the table towards her.

"No," Onatah hissed, shaking her head. A cold sweat bubbled up on her brow. She shoved it back towards him so hard that it slid off the table and fell open on the floor. "Put that away. Put it *away*!" she lunged, as if to take the book and throw it somewhere.

Adras snatched the book before she could get to it and shoved it back into his bag. "All right, all right, sorry I brought it up. But why not, if you don't mind my asking?"

Onatah shook her head again. "It's a waste of time and I want nothing to do with it."

Adras raised a brow. "You mean to tell me you're a biology major and you're not interested in life?"

With a nod towards his bag, Onatah sneered, "*That* can't teach me anything about life. Except how primitive people used to be." She shuddered inwardly, realizing it was something her mother would say.

Adras chortled sarcastically and muttered something that sounded like, "Primitive?" Before she could ask him to repeat himself more loudly, he pressed on. "You won't learn the kinds of things you'd learn from your biology textbook. You don't learn about the surface," he leaned across the table and playfully tapped the corner of her visor. A sharp clicking noise rang through the interior of her helmet. Onatah flinched. "You learn about what's beneath the surface," Adras said with a smile.

"Well, I'm sure that means something, but I don't really care," Onatah said. She bit her tongue and cursed herself; she hadn't meant to sound so dismissive.

Adras countered her heat with a careful, cool indifference. Apparently deciding to

abandon the subject, he shrugged and said, “A few friends of mine and I are going out tonight. Do you want to come with us?”

Onatah settled back into her chair and exhaled. “Where to?”

He looked her in the eye. “I mean we’re going *out* out. Into the wilds. We’ve got a guy to drive us and everything. You’re a senior, right?”

It was considered a rite of passage for seniors at the university to go out into the woods for a few hours, to discover themselves – a sort of primeval tradition that they had carried with them from their ancestors. As long as they were discreet and returned to the city by the midnight curfew, officials tended to look the other way. No one had ever stayed out past the curfew.

Onatah stared. “Yes, I am. But...no. I don’t think so. The wilds are dangerous. Besides, my parents–”

Adras laughed. “*Relax*, Onatah. Do you mean to tell me you’ve *never* broken the rules before? Never taken a chance? No? So all you do is read your textbooks and prepare to be a cog in the Cúpula machine for the rest of your life. You oughta stop and smell the roses sometimes—it’s an expression,” he added on quickly, seeing that she was about to say something. Onatah shut her mouth and shifted in her seat. Adras leaned forward.

“Listen, Onatah, things are changing under the dome even as we speak. People don’t like to be trapped. We’re prisoners in here, and in *here*,” he said, gesturing first with his arms to the dome, and then with his index fingers to his helmet. Onatah swallowed. It sounded like something Gamma would say.

She thought of the green-stained suit, of her tear-streaked face, of her mother storming up the stairs once Gamma was gone and slapping her helmet with so much force that her brains rattled around in her head.

“For Einstien’s sake, you aren’t an animal, Onatah,” her mother had snarled. “You aren’t some wild beast. You’re a human being. Start acting like it. And I’d better not *ever* hear about you going out in the woods again. *Ever*. Do you understand me, Onatah?”

Oblivious to the way she was sitting on the edge of her seat, Adras went on. “I’m not my parents. Not even genetically, anymore,” he pointed at his eyes. “I want to be something different. I want to find out who lives in this helmet. Who is Adras, and is there a soul underneath the layers of corporate technology?” He smiled again. It looked like a grimace to Onatah. Adras stood and said, “I’m going to find out, and nothing, *nothing* is going to stand in my way.”

Something dark and cloudy flickered through his eyes. He flashed his uncomfortably perfect teeth at Onatah and held out his hand for her. “So what do you say? Come out with us. Maybe there’s someone in *there* too,” he laughed and pointed at her helmet again.

Onatah studied him for a minute. She remembered that day, so long ago, when she and Gamma had sat on a log and Gamma drew pictures in the dirt. She licked her lips, trying to recall the fresh air – what had it tasted like? She couldn’t remember anymore. But she remembered the way her Gamma’s hand had felt in hers, the way Gamma squeezed her fingers before Mom ripped her away.

Cautiously, Onatah placed her hand in Adras’. His smile widened; she tried to withdraw, but his fingers tightened around hers.

“Relax,” he said. “Just breathe.”

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The sun had already sunk below the tree tops in the West, leaving smudges of pale amber and swathes of gray across the sky. Onatah, Adras, and two of his friends – Onatah did not know

their names, and did not care to – climbed out of the back of a large, commercial truck. A voice crackled over the radio in Adras' suit.

“The next truck with goods for Cúpula should be here at 9 o'clock. Don't miss it. There won't be another coming by this way tonight.”

“Got it,” Adras said. He clicked a button, and the radio went silent.

Onatah shifted. “What time is it now?”

“7:30. We've got plenty of time,” Adras said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Onatah looked around. On either side of the road were monstrous walls of biological trees. They sprouted in every direction, their twisted trunks gnarled. Leaves, twigs, rocks, and other unidentifiable residue littered the dusty, dirty ground beyond the pavement. Adras' friends crept towards the mess of foliage, but she remained in the middle of the road.

Adras must have guessed what was going through her head, because he said, “Really, Onatah, there's no glory in standing on the road. We won't go far, but if your feet never leave the pavement, then how can you claim to have even left civilization?”

Onatah watched as one of the boys slid on a pile of pine needles and landed on his butt. She put a hand to the side of her helmet, as if she could still feel her mother's slap. “This is as far as I go, Adras. If we were meant to be out in the wild, we wouldn't be humans.”

Adras laughed. “That doesn't make any sense. You know people used to live in the wild all the time.”

“When they were monkeys. But we're not animals anymore. We're civilized,” she said. A blush crept across her dark features as she added on, “Besides, it's dirty.” She glanced down at her freshly cleaned suit, remembered the green stain. This time, Mom would not know that she had left Cúpula.

Adras came to stand in front of her, a smile that made her stomach flop spreading across his features. He looped his gloved hand into hers. She wondered what his skin felt like. Was it warm? Was it soft?

An image of her and him embracing, her dark, bare skin melting into his pale body like two vines intertwining flashed into her mind, but she quickly forced it out. Shame flowered in her chest. She knew that sex still happened behind closed doors, even though it was illegal. The truly rich and desperate could buy contraband O2 tanks that were big enough to fill an entire room with air for an hour – probably from the same place where Adras got his literature. But sex had been criminalized for a good reason; with sex, women ran the risk of getting biologically pregnant, which, in the airtight dome, could have grave consequences. Babies, like the Calorie and Hydration tablets that had replaced primitive food and water, were artificially engineered in labs in the city.

But Onatah had never had sex, not only because of the dangers, but because it was an animalistic instinct – something that should be buried under the suit.

“Your flesh body is like the bones under your skin,” her mother had once said. “It’s necessary framework and nothing more. Forget it. Your *real* body is this one.” She patted the arm of Onatah’s suit. “This is what marks you as a member of civilized society. Nobody cares about the bones under the body unless they’re poking out. Don’t let them poke out.”

But even bones could ache, as Onatah had learned, and oh, how hers did ache sometimes. There was a longing in her that called for the touch of a man. Goosebumps traveled up her arm as she looked into Adras’ sultry eyes and thought for just a moment that perhaps he, too, had felt the unbearable yearning for the flesh. But no, she was mistaken. She averted her eyes in embarrassment, hoping he had not noticed the heat in them. Love, passion, flesh, blood, and



bone – those were the concerns of *animals*, not human beings.

So why was she so hungry?

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“Shouldn’t we turn back?”

“Lighten up. Not yet.” Adras’ voice was sharp. Onatah could tell that he was struggling to keep his tone level, to not show her how annoyed he was becoming with her. Up ahead of them, his friends began to snicker about something. Onatah narrowed her eyes and took a step over a large, twisted fallen branch. Dusk had crept in around them, the milky colors of sunset fading into the cool purple-gray of early evening. It would be dark soon, and they would be all but blind, their city eyes unused to the blackness of the world beneath a canopy of leaves rather than the glow of a luminescent dome.

“I think we’re going too far,” she said, watching the shadows melt together in the gathering gloom.

“We’re barely off the pavement, Onatah. Give it a rest,” Adras said, swatting a bug away. The light that rimmed his visor showed his scowling features.

She looked away from him, into the shadows. “What time is it?”

“It’s only 8 o’clock.”

Ahead of them, one of Adras’ friends walked into a web and started to flail around in an attempt to remove the sticky strands from his suit and helmet. Onatah shuddered, trying not to think what might have happened to him if he had not noticed it and had taken the web back into the city with him.

“The man said the last truck–”

“I know what the man said, Onatah.”

“If we don’t turn back–”

Adras stopped and inhaled. His friends kept walking, but he turned to face her. “Look. Why don’t you wait here? We’ll be back in about fifteen minutes tops. Then we can all turn around and make it back to the road in plenty of time. Okay?”

“What? No. You said we were going to stick together. What if you can’t find me again?” Onatah asked.

“Just don’t move. We’ll find you if you just stay right here,” Adras replied, enunciating each word carefully, as if he thought Onatah were stupid. She narrowed her eyes as he turned to walk after his friends. She took a step after him, but he turned back to her and pushed her down. Onatah landed hard on the brown earth. The air whooshed out of her lungs.

“Oops,” he said flatly. “Sorry. Just wait here, all right? We’ll be right back.”

He disappeared after his friends. Onatah pulled herself onto an overturned tree and hugged herself. She didn’t try to follow them again. She wasn’t entirely sure why she’d come out here anymore; she didn’t know Adras very well, but she had wanted to impress him so badly. Onatah had made a mess of that, but she no longer cared. All she wanted now was to go home.

The meter on her visor signified that her battery was running low. “5%” flashed at her in burning red letters – usually she would have been home by now to charge it. She hoped that it would last long enough to get her home, but just in case she turned off some of the suit’s inessential functions. All around her, the shadows thickened, snaking off the ground and into the air.

“There are no shadows in Cúpula,” Mayor Sempers had said on the news over fifteen years ago, when the dome had first been implemented. His words and his smile had stuck with her, perhaps because they had seemed such a contradiction to one another. It wasn’t that his face

had been dark – quite the opposite, his teeth were like gleaming mounds of snow, his eyes unnaturally vibrant behind the visor of his helmet. But there was something eerie and artificial about the radiance of his features that had made her feel like shadows were lurking there beneath the surface.

The wild did not fear the dark the way civilization did; it wore its shadows for all to see. The gloom across the forest deepened. The light that rimmed the interior of Onatah's visor caused the glass to reflect her own features – trained to remain indifferent despite her mounting fear – back at her. She looked into her own flat, dark eyes, her expressionless face. She was a perfect combination of the DNA of both of her parents; they had not paid to have any of it altered, at least not superficially. And yet, as she stared, she could not help but to wonder: *How much of her was fake?*

Trembling, Onatah reached up to a button on the side of her helmet. She pushed down, and turned the light off to see the thickening shadows.

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More than half an hour must have passed and they still had not returned. Onatah peered into the trees through which they had disappeared, and with a sudden certainty she realized that they weren't going to come back for her. She trembled. Her vision swam, the world tilted, and she fell down onto her hands and knees. Everyone was gone. They had all left her out here. Alone.

A soft beeping noise sounded from her helmet as her suit tried to remind her to charge her battery. The meter now read 1%. Her throat constricted. If the battery died before she could get back, the suit would stop all its functions; her body would build-up dirt, she would have to remove her helmet, and she risked infection.

The sounds of the wilderness at night, which had previously been little more than an annoyance, suddenly had the power to destroy her. Chirps, screeches, and the soft padding of creatures skittering through the undergrowth assaulted her from every angle. Almost reflexively, Onatah put a hand up to the noise-cancelling button on the side of her helmet, but quickly dropped it back to her side. Some survival instinct stirred within her. The wilds were a dangerous place; all her senses had to be alert if she was to survive this.

Onatah felt her way along the ground, crawling over roots and needles. She toppled over into a ditch. Pulling herself upright, she leaned against a tree and put her head into her hands. *Relax. Just breathe.*

Adras' words came back to her. She thought of Gamma removing her helmet for the first time, remembered the way the air had filled her lungs. She clenched her eyes shut and tried to steady her breathing. The initial panic subsided, and she was able to think.

Adras and his friends weren't coming back, but if she kept moving, she might make it to the road in time to hop on the returning truck. Onatah pushed herself shakily up from the ground. By now, her eyes had adjusted; seeing was still difficult, and she would have to move slowly and pick her way carefully over the uneven ground, but she could at least keep herself from walking into tree trunks and low hanging branches.

The beeping in her helmet started to fade, signaling that her battery was about to die. Fear rippled across her brain again, but she fought it back. Onatah inhaled a last breath of air from her O2 tank as the suit powered down. She shut her eyes, and, clenching her teeth, unclasped the helmet. Her dark hair rippled down her suited back.

The air of the wilds was thick and watery in her lungs. Strange, new scents wafted to her, more disturbing and exquisite than any of the available flavors in the O2 market.

Onatah, the girl beneath the helmet, breathed.

~~~

Sweat slicked the inside of Onatah's suit and poured down her face. The wilds were hot and muggy, and through the occasional break in foliage she could see that clouds were gathering overhead. Thunder rumbled in the distance. She hoped she would reach the road before the downpour. She had a vague memory of the occasional rainstorm from when she was very young, but she could not remember whether they were dangerous or not. Either way, it was better to wait them out inside.

A twig cracked somewhere to her left, followed by shuffling noises. Onatah stopped. She scanned the darkness, but she could see nothing through the tangle of leaves. A faint ripple of hope stirred within her. Perhaps it was Adras. Maybe they had come back this way after all; maybe they were looking for her.

"Adras?" she called softly. Whatever had been moving stopped, indicating that it was something unfamiliar. Her body tensed. She was about to walk in the other direction when another thought occurred to her: if it *was* Adras and his friends, and they *had* circled around to avoid coming into contact with her, then the likelihood of them responding to her was slim.

Her face grew hot, and she turned towards where the noise had been coming from. Onatah marched through the gloom, not sure what she would do if she did discover Adras and his friends hiding out in the darkness. Could she tell them off? It wouldn't be socially acceptable to lose her temper on them, but she decided that she did not care. They had abandoned her, and whatever the repercussions, she would give them a piece of her mind. She would make them feel as terrible, as lost, as forsaken as she had felt in the instant that she realized they had left her out in the wilderness alone.

Onatah crashed through the undergrowth and stopped. There was no sign of the boys. Instead, she had stumbled upon a four-legged, long-haired creature with a tail and eyes that reflected light. It lowered its head at the sight of her. *Dog*, she thought. Gamma had owned one named Archer before she was locked away, and Onatah used to play with him when Mom wasn't watching. Many dogs had lived in the city once, before the airtight dome was implemented and they, along with cats, birds, squirrels, and all other inhuman forms of life were purged.

Onatah remembered the bliss of nuzzling Gamma's dog. Without making a sound, she crouched down on her knees, removed her gloves, and extended a hand towards the dog. It eyed her warily. Softly, she said, "It's okay. You don't need to be scared. I won't hurt you."

She didn't know why she was doing this, why she desperately wanted the dog to come over to her, but she did. For several heartbeats, the two stared at one another. The dog's ears were plastered back over its forehead. It sniffed the air. She kept her hand out, wishing she had one of the dog treats Gamma used to keep for Archer.

Hesitantly, the dog came forward. She smiled and reached forward to touch it, wondering how its fur would feel beneath her bare hand, how its coat would feel against her cheeks. A low rumble in its throat stopped her. The dog took a step back and barked. Onatah's mouth went dry. She withdrew her hand slowly. The dog barked again.

A blinding white flash split the air, followed by the clap of thunder. The pair jumped and, before she could do anything more, the dog had disappeared into the trees. Onatah exhaled in relief and got to her feet. A warm droplet of water landed on the crown of her head, followed by another, then another. The downpour had begun. With a sigh, she began her trek once again.

A few more minutes brought her to the road. She stood at the edge of the trees, staring at the slick black pavement that wound through the wilderness and lead back to the city. Before she

had not wanted to leave it; now she could not bring herself to draw near to it. Not that it mattered, she realized. By now it must have been well past nine o'clock. The last truck was more than likely already in the city, and Adras and his two friends with it. Onatah sunk down the base of a tree. That was it, then. She was going to miss curfew and would probably be kicked out of the university, disowned by her parents, maybe do a little time in prison.

The rain, instead of cooling her surroundings down, only made the air hotter and muggier, and the insulated suit wasn't helping. Onatah inhaled deeply, suddenly feeling as though she was suffocating within the confines of the suit that had always been a comfort to her. She yanked the suit off her body and dropped it on the ground. If she was already going to be locked up, she might as well go all out. Why the hell not show up in the city naked? It wasn't as though she had much else to lose.

Onatah leaned against a tree, letting the warm droplets of water wash over her, cleansing her body of sweat and grime and all the shadows that had built up underneath her suit. She closed her eyes and breathed, relishing the feel of the damp soil beneath her feet, the water on her flesh, the rough bark of the tree at her back. How could she have been denying herself this all her life?

Her muscles relaxed, her breathing grew deep and rhythmic. Out there, in the middle of the storm, with nature looming all around her, Onatah fell into the most restful sleep she had ever known.

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Onatah awoke to the songs of birds. The sky had cleared overnight, leaving only a few wispy, violet clouds overhead, and refreshment and rebirth through the damp woods. The sky to the East blushed the colors of rose petals and tangerines as the sun crept over the horizon. Onatah

stretched and stirred like the corn of her namesake, liberated from the underworld by the caress of sunlight.

A dark splotch appeared on the horizon down the road. *Truck*, Onatah thought with a grimace. It would be upon her within a matter of minutes. The weight of her reality crashed down upon her, drowning out the songs of the birds and the tranquility and stillness of the morning. She would have to wave it down. They would clothe her in a spare suit, a fresh helmet. They would bring her to the asylum, where she would spend the rest of her days in a white, cushioned room, staring out a barred window at the dome, knowing that just behind its glow was a world of starlight and beauty. Her parents would never speak to her again. Probably no one would speak to her. Psychologists had been done away with when humanity decided that all that mattered was the surface.

Her heart stopped beating as she imagined it. But what choice did she have? She didn't know anything about actual food or water. She couldn't survive out here without Calorie and Hydration tablets. What if she ended up being someone else's food? She thought of the dog from the night before. And what about weather? Last night hadn't been too bad, but the dome shielded them from far worse natural disasters, like tornados, hurricanes, and the like. She had to go back.

But if she didn't...

Onatah's fingers flexed. Everything she had ever worked for was in Cúpula. She was a senior at the university, just a few short months away from graduating and pursuing the career as a biological engineer that she'd worked towards her whole life. She thought of Gamma, alone in the prison, of the silver oak with the diamond vines that her mother had designed for her. If she stayed out here, she would never see her parents again, never see her silver oak or the glittering buildings that made her heart swell. She would never be able to pay Adras back for abandoning



her. And she would never be able to do anything to help Gamma.

Gamma's voice rang through her ears. *My greatest hope for you is that the sun will find you, Onatah.*

Onatah looked toward the horizon, felt the sunlight on her body. Out here she was free, but she was alone. There was no Gamma here, there wasn't even an Archer here. No Adras. No Mom or Dad. No one at all.

The truck was almost there. She had to decide quickly, because the driver would see her in a minute anyway. Her body tensed, the air caught in her lungs. She turned and dove into the bushes.

Into Adras.

Onatah froze. Adras' purple eyes widened behind his visor.

"Onatah?"

For a heartbeat, Onatah stared at him. Then she pulled her arm back and swung her fist into his helmet. Adras stumbled back and clutched his head. She shook her hand to help relieve the sting. Her knuckles purpled.

"What the hell!" Adras cried.

"That was for abandoning me!" Onatah shouted, crossing her arms in front of her body.

Overhead, a branch swayed and scattered leaves as something ran, startled by the noise. Adras cringed.

"Relax," Onatah said. "It's just a squirrel. They used to have them in the city." She stopped, realizing that it was the same thing Gamma had said to her years ago. She sucked in her lip and glared at him. "Take off your helmet."

Adras blinked at her. "What?"

“Take it off. You’ll be safe. You can see for yourself that it’s not killing *me*.” Onatah gestured at herself with her chin. Adras furrowed his brow and, moving slowly, as though he did not quite believe her, unclasped his helmet and pulled it off. Silvery hair whispered down his neck. He inhaled and leaned sideways.

“It hurts,” he said.

“It does at first,” Onatah nodded. She gave him a minute to recuperate, then said, “Why didn’t you come back for me?”

“This *is* me coming back for you,” Adras replied. “My friends got on the truck. I was going to go with them, but...”

“But what?” Onatah snapped, her hands balling into fists. The stench of oil filled the air as the truck rumbled by, only a few yards from where they stood. Adras’ eyes widened in the direction of the road. His shoulders slumped when the sound faded.

“I realized it wouldn’t be right to leave you out here,” Adras said, sighing. “But now we’ve *both* broken curfew. And your suit is missing.” He shook his head, his cheeks reddening. He didn’t look at her. “We’d be lucky to get life in prison.”

Onatah relaxed. “I’m not going back.”

Adras’ stared. “What do you mean, you’re not going back? How do you think you’re going to survive out here?”

Onatah shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m going to try.” She shot him a pointed glance, then said, “You could try with me. If you wanted.”

Adras was quiet. His temples twitched. He looked up at the canopy of leaves, then down at the muddy floor. Onatah waited, listening to the hum of bees, inhaling the mingled scents of mud and grass. A frog croaked nearby.

The silence between them swelled. Onatah turned away from him.

“This isn’t my first time in the woods,” she said. Adras looked down at his gloves and said nothing. Onatah rolled her shoulder; there was a slight twinge in her back, probably from sleeping against the tree. She sighed. “My grandmother took me when I was very young. They carted her off to jail and gave her a lobotomy. You talked about wanting to know the Adras beneath the helmet. If you go back, there won’t be an Adras beneath the helmet.” She looked at him.

Adras’ fingers curled.

“My home...” he whispered.

Onatah rubbed his back. He looked up at her, met her dark eyes with his purple ones. Something rustled in the undergrowth behind him, but this time he didn’t jump.

Adras pulled off his gloves and extended his hand towards her. Onatah smiled and looped her fingers through his.

He was warm.

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