

AWAKENING: STORIES

By

Sarah Ellen Ireland

Thomas P. Balázs
Professor of English
(Chair)

Sybil Baker
Professor of English
(Member)

Rebecca Cook
Lecturer
(Member)

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Sarah Ellen Ireland

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ABSTRACT

My thesis, *Awakening*, is a collection of stories that follows a set of protagonists seeking to discover or solidify their identities amidst challenging environments. All three stories feature protagonists struggling to come to terms with some shifting aspect of their character. In “The Great Secret,” the main character must struggle to define a romantic connection to a new friend in a world where revealing one’s biological sex to the public is expressly forbidden. The protagonist of “Awakening” is must change her identity after she is ripped from her former life and taken on an unpredictable journey. In “Family Portrait,” the protagonist tries to form a new identity separate not only from her parents but from their beliefs and lifestyle as well. These three stories are preceded by a discussion of different techniques authors use to create empathy for characters that are likely to be unsympathetic for one reason or another.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In fiction writing there are several key elements of any successful narrative. One fundamental is the development of characters that entice and interest the audience. However, the traits of characters that grab and maintain the reader's attention are difficult to pinpoint and even more difficult to master. If the character loses the audience's interest, plot, setting, and even masterful language may not be enough to save the work. Yet while there is no set formula for creating compelling characters, there are a myriad of examples in literature of authors who write characters that earn the reader's interest, empathy, and attachment even while behaving in ways that most readers would find reprehensible. Karen Russell, Franz Kafka, and Vladimir Nabokov are three examples of authors who know how to write compelling, relatable, yet not quite likeable, characters. Russell's vampire couple from her story "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" is compelling because of their complicated and difficult relationship dynamic, Kafka's Officer from "The Penal Colony" is sympathetic because of the morality revealed by his morbid obsession, and Nabokov's character of Humbert from the novel *Lolita* is captivating because of the complex internal conflict and desperate desire he faces throughout the narrative.

In his book on reading and writing fiction, *How Fiction Works*, James Wood explores the many possible reasons characters either are or are not compelling to the audience. Though Wood admits that nailing down exactly what makes a character sympathetic is a difficult process, he offers a few insights into character that are useful in this respect. He lists several

elements of personality that help the reader sympathize with and relate to characters; round versus flat, realistic consciousness, and consistent memory all help make fictional people believable and compelling. Wood spends a lot of time discussing the flatness and roundness of characters, saying that both types of characters from E.M. Forster's definitions of flatness and roundness—that flat characters have one, single defining aspect and round characters have more complete personalities and are able to “surprise” the reader with their reactions to plot developments (127)—are both important to the story, as flat characters help “illuminate an essential human truth or characteristic” while round characters are closer to reality and are more complex, subtle, and fascinating (128). Wood says that both round and flat characters have their place in fiction, especially in light of the fact that many of the characters in short stories are flat, given that a novel length work is often required to achieve roundness in a character (128).

While Wood's discussion of round and flat characters is beneficial, one of the most interesting and possibly effective insights into characterization in short fiction is Wood's analysis of characters' relationships and sympathies with each other. He lists one of the aspects of our fiction-reading experience as “the extension of our sympathies toward other selves” (171). He then goes on to state that “sympathetic identification with characters is in some way dependent on the fiction's true mimesis” (171). In other words, the more truthfully the world is portrayed, the more sympathetic the reader will be toward the characters. True does not mean accurate to reality in this case, as we will see a bit later on, but portrayed in detail, in the truth of the world being created. However, Wood also makes clear that the characters' sympathies with each other are important to the true portrayal of the fictional world, and therefore their ability to be compelling.

He gives a good example of characters' feelings toward each other inciting emotion in the reader in the character of Celia from Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Despite the fact that she is not a completely likeable character because of her feelings towards her child, Celia inspires an emotional response and interest in the reader. Celia is envious of her daughter's career at Cambridge and the fact that her child was able to have work and purpose outside of husband, home, and children. The audience relates to Celia's guilty jealousy, her envy of her daughter's opportunity for an education, even though they do not necessarily approve of it. Celia's feelings are relevant to the reader, as she "unwittingly...gets resentful" of her child's success (173). Her sympathies with her daughter, however negative, are what allow the reader to relate to her because we too feel emotions we know we should not, perhaps wish we did not. We relate to the suffering that is caused by the incongruence between the expectation that a mother will love her child unconditionally and the reality that sometimes parents become jealous or resentful of children's successes they can't share in.

Much in the same vein, throughout her collection *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, Karen Russell consistently uses the characters' relationships and sympathies with one another to help draw the reader into the story and develop an emotional investment in the lives of the characters. An interesting example of this use of sympathy occurs in the complex and codependent relationship between the lemon-eating vampire couple of the title story: Magreb and Clyde. In this tale, Clyde is the character that the reader should find morally reprehensible, should dislike and judge. He is a vampire who has developed and given into a ravenous thirst for human blood despite the fact that he does not need it to live (8). However, the story does not focus on this feeding, but is instead follows Clyde's grappling with the realization that there is no such thing as "till death do us part" for a vampire couple. By comparison, he states a mortal's declaration of

love until the end of life is “easy. These mortal couples need only keep each other in sight for fifty, sixty years” (13). While his own commitment is beginning to wear on him, he dreads the idea of losing his wife more than the idea of being with her for all eternity. Almost directly following the opening lines, Russell introduces the conflict of the story and also one of the leads to emotional attachment to the characters: the friction between Clyde and Magreb. Clyde states that he has sat on his bench so long that it has irked Magreb: “My wife has no patience for this sort of meditation. ‘Jesus Christ, Clyde’ she says ‘You need a hobby’” (3). In these two short lines, Russell sets up a crucial element of character—the personality conflict between a couple that cares about one another, but cannot seem to work out certain differences—a very common and relatable problem in long term adult romances. Russell makes clear in this one simple line that, while Clyde and Magreb love each other, she is concerned for his emotional health since all he does is sit on a bench. Yet they are also becoming increasingly exasperated with one another— she because he will not become more active, he because she does not understand him. Thus, Russell inspires empathy for the couple by putting them in a relatable relational context.

Russell then goes on to detail the relationship and sympathies between Magreb and Clyde. The vampire husband states that before he met his wife, he had

once pictured time as a black magnifying glass and myself as a microscopic flightless insect wrapped in that circle of night. But then Magreb came along, and eternity ceased to frighten me. Suddenly each moment followed its antecedent in a neat chain, moments we filled with each other. (6)

Here, a snippet of backstory reveals the importance of Magreb’s companionship to Clyde’s life and therefore to the story. It also reveals the potential of these two to cause each other great pain. Magreb is important yet dangerous to Clyde; thus, Clyde becomes important to the reader because, as Wood quotes of Adam Smith ““the source of our fellow-feeling for the misery of others’ is mobilized by ‘changing places in fancy with the sufferer’—by putting ourselves in the

other's shoes" (172). So, by demonstrating the potential for misery to be experienced by the characters, Russell effectively helps the reader put herself in the "shoes of the other." That way, the reader is made to empathize very early on in the story. Russell then continues to increase the compelling nature of the character by fulfilling this potential for suffering. Clyde feels himself and Magreb growing apart; she wants to leave the lemon grove that has become their safe-house, but he wishes to stay and is terrified every time she flies up to the caves to rest, expecting that she will abandon him (16-17). His terror of losing her is another step in the suffering or conflict that, as Wood points out, puts the audience in the shoes of the other. Russell then extends this worry and suffering by sending Clyde and Magreb on a date, giving them—and by extension, the audience—hope, even in suffering, that the relationship might be salvageable, thus keeping the reader's interest, which might otherwise be lost if she knew outright that Magreb and Clyde were destined to fail, and despite Clyde's murderous history. However, when the movie projector freezes on the date, Magreb says she wants to leave and travel as far as it takes to satisfy her hunger. Ignoring Clyde's pleas to wait till they fix the frozen movie screen, Magreb rises to leave. Clyde protests, saying "Don't you leave now...If you leave now, that's it for us" (19). Of course, Magreb exits without hesitation. The reader understands and sympathizes with Clyde's frustration, his fear, his confusion "*has [Magreb] left [him]? ([He] will never find another vampire)*" (21). It is his loneliness, his terror of loss, his desperation, and his ultimate defeat that draw the reader to experience sympathy and catharsis with this character, even after Magreb leaves, and Clyde goes out into the alley and kills his human friend Fila. His pain and grief at this loss compel the reader to forgive him, to offer some understanding of his mistake.

Characters' sympathies with one another not only allow the reader to empathize with the fictional people whose lives they are entering into, but they also allow for the characters

themselves to seem more human, more real, despite their flaws. In this case, they allow the reader to empathize with Clyde, even though he is a killer. While Wood admits that true “roundness” can never be fully achieved in fiction, since fictional characters are not actually human beings (128), the complexity and difficulty of the characters’ attachment to one another certainly increases their roundness, their closeness to reality. The intensity of the relational friction between Clyde and Magreb is what makes them compelling as characters and Clyde a relatable protagonist, and this relatable quality of character is what draws the reader so quickly into Russell’s story.

In my own story, “Family Portrait,” I would like to achieve the same type of complex dynamic that Russell displays in the budding but fragile romance between my poorly behaved protagonist Danielle and her friend Evan. Character development is an aspect of fiction that I have struggled with throughout my writing education; teachers and students alike often told me in workshops that they either did not care about the characters in my stories or the characters were downright unlikable and didn’t have any redeeming qualities. While it is not necessary for characters to behave well to be liked, they must have some aspects of their personalities that make the reader relate to and feel compassion for them. In “Family Portrait,” the character of Danielle displays the same questionable likeability as Clyde does in Russell’s story, but for the first couple of drafts she had none of his redeeming qualities. Though she never kills anyone, she is angry, stubborn, rebellious, and sometimes hateful, arguing with her parents, making fun of their religion, keeping secrets from her family, and manipulating her peers for revenge against an unfair god. However, she sometimes regrets her behavior towards her parents and the strain it puts on their marriage. She also feels deeply for her classmate Evan, both liking him for being sensitive and wanting to change his religious views, but Evan feels that she is disproportionately

angry and has given up on God too quickly. They argue over Danielle's rebellious behavior; Danielle deceives Evan into believing she is more religious than she is; she convinces him to behave in ways that go directly against his faith; and in the end, the mistake Danielle drives Evan to make causes her to question her own past and beliefs. After being told she was too repugnant in a couple of drafts, I decided I wanted to increase the complexity of Danielle's character, the depth of feeling she has for Evan, and the regret she experiences about her fights with her family so these aspects could help the reader connect with her as a character. I feel that her relational difficulty and emotional pain will aid the audience in relating to Danielle even though she behaves in ways they might find contemptible. In this way I can attempt to compel the reader through the same relational means as Russell does.

Relational conflict is only one of many qualities that make up a compelling character; another tool writers might use to help their readers connect to their characters is what Janet Burroway calls a revelation of "moral purpose" (124). In *Writing Fiction*, she outlines Aristotle's four aspects of a "successful hero—he should be 'good, appropriate, like, and consistent'" (122). She says of the first aspect, goodness, "for the time spent in an author's world, we understand and identify with the protagonist...we 'see their point of view,' and the fiction succeeds largely because we are willing to grant them a goodness we would not grant them in life" (123), meaning that we are much more forgiving of characters in fiction than we are of real people. We are able to see the pain that creates their bad behavior, the good intentions that cause them to make mistakes, the internal turmoil shaped by wicked desires. Burroway says that, though Aristotle expected a valiant and admirable hero, the literature of the modern world has evolved into a medium that does not always expect the protagonist of a story to be an upstanding person. She says "you achieve identification with your characters when you reveal [a character's moral]

purpose as good” (124). This does not mean that character’s behavior must be good; their intentions do not even have to be necessarily good. However, their actions and intentions should illustrate some kind of moral compass, even a skewed one. Because we can understand a character’s moral purpose, we can forgive them their faults more easily than we can living people, and we can become one with these characters throughout their narratives.

A good example of this phenomenon can be found in Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.” In this story, the narrator/protagonist goes to an island penal colony, which for many years has carried out torturous executions performed by a horrific machine invented by “the Officer,” a man with a morbid obsession with the sick justice the machine delivers. Even though the most obvious reaction we as readers might have would be revulsion at the Officer’s bizarre and despicable behavior, we wind up identifying not only with the morally upright and rightfully repulsed Explorer, but also with the odd and repugnant Officer and his particular method of achieving redemption for his victims. The Officer has built the machine to write the offense of the transgressor over and over all across his body until he bleeds to death after twelve hours. Of course, at the beginning the reader perceives this man as a monster, reveling in the pain and suffering of every individual unfortunate enough to be cast into the mouth of this machine. However, later on in the piece, Kafka reveals that the Officer indeed has a moral compass, even if it is a sick and twisted one. The Officer says that offenders achieve enlightenment and redemption from their sins while being executed in his machine:

Even the dumbest one starts to understand. It begins around the eyes. From there it spreads out...Nothing further happens, the man merely begins to decipher the writing; he purses his lips as if listening to something. As you’ve seen, it isn’t easy to decipher the script with your eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. (61)

Despite the fact that his “moral purpose” is extremely perverse, he reveals his “good” intentions to the Explorer, his desire to help criminal offenders on the penal colony achieve redemption. We as readers begin to understand the moral direction from which the Officer comes. He is a correctional official on a penal colony, so his job, indeed his calling, is to bring justice to criminals, to bring salvation to sinners.

Though the Explorer is repulsed by the cruelty displayed by the Officer, and he ultimately puts an end to it, he does go through a period of doubt, wondering if he is simply being elitist, culturally insensitive, and intolerant. He thinks to himself that this place is “after all, a penal colony, that special regulations were required here, and that a military code had to be followed, even to extreme limits” (58). In this passage, even an eyewitness questions his own repulsion and offers some kind of “goodness” to the Officer, giving him a sort of understanding. When the Explorer questions his revulsion of the Officer’s machine, it causes readers to question their own repulsion too. We wonder if perhaps we are judging too harshly, failing to see the ultimate moral goodness of this machine, thus extending forgiveness to the Officer that we might be unwilling to extend to a living person.

However, the clemency offered by the protagonist is soon revoked, as the Explorer ultimately decides to inform the Officer that his machine is a loathsome miscarriage of justice and that he intends to escape the company of the penal colony residents (69). At this statement, the Officer realizes that he has failed in his quest, and decides to execute himself in his own machine, calibrating the words “be just” to be written on his body (70). Unfortunately for the Officer, his machine is unsuccessful at its assignment, killing him in a few moments rather than a half-a-day, the look in his eyes telling the Explorer that he has failed to achieve the redemption his machine seems to assure (73). In this sequence of events, we see that the Officer has a clear

“moral purpose” in the use of the machine: the achievement of salvation for sinners. Although we disagree with his cruelty, we achieve some understanding of him as a character, seeing that he wanted to carry out justice, even though his understanding of justice was skewed and harsh. We feel a kind of sympathy for him because he both fails to achieve his goal and fails to achieve salvation at the end of his life. The Officer’s moral purpose helps us to understand him as a much more complex person than just a mindless killer bent on cruelty. Therefore, we extend our sympathies to him as a character when we might not have done so if he had simply invented the machine for nothing other than a long series of mindless and gruesome executions.

Just as “goodness” helps to create character, another important tool of character development is intense desire. While relational development and moral purpose are both important to the accessibility of character, perhaps even more important is the internal dialogue the character has with himself or herself because of desires that are unfulfilled or shameful. This internal desire helps to add complexity to characters by illustrating phenomena that we all experience as humans: confusion, guilt, or anger about certain feelings, desires, or behaviors that we either cannot or will not control. In this way, authors can create characters that feel and behave in a “real” way, a way that feels akin to actual human experience. This desire can often give readers a glimpse into the mind of a character whose behavior or thoughts would otherwise repulse them.

Wood says that the idea that readers can feel what he calls the “ick factor” yet sympathize with characters we find creepy, unlikeable, or downright deplorable can both make us extremely uncomfortable and teach us to empathize with people whose circumstances led them to do despicable things (102). This combination of sympathy and discomfort can help create compelling characters, for in the wicked, the guilt-ridden, the conflicted, the tempted we see

reflections of ourselves: even if our behavior is not despicable to the extent of the behavior of the fictional characters we read, we can still feel the emotions they feel during their temptations and actions on those temptations.

Douglas Glover states in *Attack of the Copula Spiders* that this guilt is not the ultimate cause of our relation to characters, but rather the desire that drives this guilt is a reason why we can feel the “ick factor” and still sympathize with a character. He states “the reason we like to read good novels is not because we identify with this or that character’s particular desire; it is because we identify with any desire and any character who desires” (132). He incorporates Freud’s Pleasure versus Reality Principle, saying that the driving force of every narrative is thwarted desire, and readers relate to characters who cannot have what they want because we too desire what we cannot have (132).

Take the character of Humbert from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. His guilt, indecision, internal wrestling, and rationalizing of his pedophilia render him a relatable character because he is afflicted with a desperate desire he cannot fulfill without both internal guilt and external retribution. Humbert is selfish, unreliable, conniving, manipulative, and dangerous, yet he expresses guilt for his faults and, despite his deplorable actions, tries to assuage his own conscience and the harshness of the reader’s judgment throughout the narrative, trying to explain his deplorable, irresistible longing to the reader. He begins his narrative by illustrating both his guilt and his desperate desire, saying “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (Loc. 96). In this passage, Humbert discusses the driving force of his own novel and every reader’s own personal narrative: intense desire that cannot be fulfilled without resistance. His Freudian Pleasure is Lolita, the ultimate nymphet, but his Reality is that he has

been born into a world “which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve” (Loc. 235). We as readers may not be able to relate to Humbert’s pedophilia, but we can all certainly relate to the conflict between longing and actuality, the pain, guilt, and frustration it causes us when we want something we cannot have or, more importantly, we know is wrong. The conflict between desire and reality keeps the reader interested and sympathetic because we relate to the character’s feelings.

Our relation to Humbert’s desire manifests itself in many different ways. We like him for his expertise, his status as an aficionado of the objects of his desire. He discusses them intelligently, with beautiful language and colorful imagery. His devotion to nymphets is evident in the way he talks about them and his enthusiasm for them, saying that preteen to young teenage girls possess “fantastic power” (Loc. 225), and “you have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your lungs and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine” in order to appreciate them (Loc. 221). In this passage, Humbert reveals his desperate love for nymphets in a way that demonstrates his intelligence, his passion, his expertise. Despite the fact that his desire is unequivocally wrong, readers like him anyway because he is something that we all admire and wish to be: an expert. Humbert is a professor and a clever linguist who uses his skills to both distract the readers from the real horrors of his actions and win their admiration through the beauty of his words. He uses flowery descriptions of Lolita to alter the reader’s perception of her, making her seem like an older and seductive young woman when she is actually a child. In one instance, Humbert discusses how he enjoyed taking Lolita to swim so he could “watch her gambol, rubber-capped, be-pearled, smoothly tanned, as glad as an ad, in her trim-fitted satin pants and shirred bra” (Loc. 2478). In this passage, the reality is that Humbert is taking a pubescent girl to the pool to prey on

her in public. However, because of his careful word choice—the rhymes, the description of her adult-looking satin pants, mature jewelry, and womanly top—Humbert both entices the reader with his talent and helps us to forget, for a moment, Lolita’s true age, making us think of her as Dolores the young woman, not Lolita the pre-teen girl. Humbert’s skill for beautiful language helps the reader sympathize with him by illustrating his expertise and intelligence, but also by minimalizing the reality of what he has done, thus allowing us to connect with him based not on his sick desire, but the fact that he both desires and fulfills that desire, that he has so completely immersed himself in his own personal longing that he has become a connoisseur of his wishes.

Much in the same vein, I wish to make my own protagonist Danielle a sympathetic character by creating in her an obvious desire. Since, according to Glover, desire is the driving force of character sympathy, I have given Danielle a couple of different, somewhat disgraceful desires. On the one hand, Danielle wants to be with Evan. She wishes to change his beliefs, divert him away from his faith so that he will be a more suitable companion for her. Despite the fact that this desire to undermine Evan’s beliefs is unattractive on one level, I want to make it understandable on another level by relating it to Danielle’s anger and sense of loss that the suitable companion she already had was killed. I want to make clear to the reader that Danielle is trying to ease her pain and loss by dating someone capable of distracting her from this pain, even though he has certain aspects of his person that she feels need to be altered.

Danielle also wants to become a different person than her parents are or wanted her to be. She wants to openly defy her parents, date people they won’t like, abandon her faith, and live an alternate lifestyle to the one she was raised to live. While she has done these things in secret, she desires desperately to do them in public. She argues with her parents at home, but still shows up at church on Sunday morning; she has questioned her pastors in the past, but quieted her open

doubts upon resistance from her peers; she has dated a man her parents would not approve of, but never revealed their relationship to them. However, she wishes to get out of her parents' house and church and live life on her own terms. While she is angry and rebellious, most readers can relate to the desire to grow up and become independent and the impatience felt by people who have yet to achieve that desire. Furthermore, even though she is consumed with these desires, she also, like Humbert, experiences times of guilt and turmoil, feeling doubt that her behavior is acceptable and fearing that she may one day thoroughly ruin all her relationships. However, she never expresses this internal turmoil to anyone, too proud to admit that she feels remorse for her actions. Despite this pride and willful ignorance of guilt, I wish to make Danielle a more sympathetic character to the reader by integrating her wishes throughout the plot, helping the reader to connect to her regardless of the fact that her behavior is often insensitive and disproportionately angry.

I also use desire to compel sympathy for the protagonists in my other two stories. Even though their behavior does not make them particularly unlikeable, they still must be relatable to the reader, and their unfulfillable wants are an effective means of achieving reader empathy. In "The Great Secret," the main character, Ashmov, wants to preserve a relationship with another character in their school, but this character is not interested in sustaining the relationship after discovering Ash's biggest secret: biological sex. In "Awakening," the protagonist has a complex mix of desires. Her main desire is to go home after being suddenly jerked into an alien world where she has neither wanted nor expected to come. However, all of her unfulfilled desires at home—wanting to get out of a dead-end job, wishing to both get over and make up with her ex, and being unable to bring herself to contact her mother after a fight—leave her wondering whether she truly wants to go back at all. The characters in both these stories become compelling

to the reader because of the resistance to their desires and the ways in which they react to this resistance, even if they are better behaved than Danielle.

Relational strife, moral purpose, and intense desire are just a few of the many aspects of a compelling character, and a multifaceted character will have many other difficulties and triumphs than these issues. However, ultimately, the creation of relatable character boils down to the author's ability to make the reader assume the place of the character. No matter how evil, deplorable, or unsympathetic fictional people may seem, if the author succeeds in helping us see ourselves in them, no amount of bad behavior can make us disconnect from them. We extend our forgiveness to them more readily because we are often more ready to extend forgiveness to ourselves. Desire, relational strife, and moral ambiguity are all simply tools to help the reader sympathize with characters because we see these difficult or disagreeable aspects of fictional people in ourselves. Characters are not perfect, but neither are their audiences; at times some characters behave in deplorable ways, but their readers are often no better.

CHAPTER II

FAMILY PORTRAIT

Danielle stood silently fuming after sitting through yet another sermon about something or other that really didn't make any difference at all in the lives of people who didn't live two thousand years ago. She was in line for the church directory photos, pulling her hair down to cover her face and trying to find a happy place on a beach or mountain side while her parents chatted away with their friends, all waiting to get their faces slapped into a laminated three-ring binder to mark their territory, their place in the church's membership. She'd have to sit with the non-bruised side of her face toward the camera.

She hated this place, the smell of cheap bathroom cleaner everywhere, the giant stereo speakers and big screen TVs hanging from every corner of the amphitheater sanctuary while the homeless congregated under an overpass less than a mile down the road, the pastor pleading and whining for his congregation to agree with his words, to express their approval, the fake smiles of the attendants, the pressure on her to smile too.

"Hey," a deep voice boomed behind her. She jumped so hard she nearly lost her balance on her kitten heels.

"God, Evan," she said. "You scared the hell out of me." She gave her first smile of the day and flipped her blonde bangs away from her grey-blue eyes. Evan was the only person in her class that went to this church, and he was the crush of every girl in tenth grade: tall, with dark wavy hair and deep dark eyes, the first guy she had looked at that way since Marcus died.

“What happened to your face?”

Too late Danielle realized she had swept her hair out from in front of her bruised cheek. She came up with the first thing that popped into her head: “I was diving in the pool yesterday and scraped myself on the side.”

“How?”

“You know, I was trying to show off when I got in. Shouldn’t have done that.” Danielle shrugged. He punched her playfully on the shoulder for being a little klutz, always tripping and falling and ramming her face and arms into things. He could be a little naïve.

“You working on training for that long distance swim?” he asked.

Danielle rolled her eyes. “That’s like a year away.”

Evan threw back his coffee-colored hair and laughed. “Then what are you doing letting the side of a pool beat you up?”

Danielle giggled and said she didn’t know. Of course she would never tell him the real story, the one where her mother asked why she didn’t love God anymore, and she had asked how she could love something that didn’t exist. Her mother had backhanded her hard on the face.

Danielle had threatened to stay home from church, call the cops, but she and her mom both knew whose side the officers would take. They ate at the family diner every day. Then her mom had threatened to drag her to the car, so she’d had to admit defeat, put concealer over the bruise on her face, and get out the door.

None of the huge church’s hundreds of members knew her whole family had been fighting all morning about whether she would be going to service at all. Her mother always asked the same questions, somehow expecting different answers. Why don’t you love God? Why don’t you read the Bible? Why do you hate church?

For Danielle, it had all started a few years ago, around sixth grade, when the boys got to cut Sunday school early to go mess around out on the church playground and basketball courts, while the girls were held back to listen to the youth pastor's wife.

"Now girls," she had said. "Soon your bodies are going to start going through some changes. And you need to be aware that as you develop, the boys are going to start seeing you differently. It's important that you be modest, so you can keep their thoughts pure. It is our responsibility as their sisters in Christ to make sure that they don't lust after us. That way we can stay pure and chaste until marriage."

Danielle had watched Evan swing down off the monkey bars and fling himself headlong toward the slide as one of the other boys tried to trip him up to get there first.

"Wait I have a question."

"Ok Danielle sweetheart go ahead," the teacher said in her sweetest tone.

"I don't think it should be my responsibility to police what the boys think. That's their problem."

The teacher raised her brows. "Sweetie that's not a question."

"Well I don't think it's fair that I have to do what the boys tell me either. Where'd you come up with that? That's crazy."

"Honey that's what the Bible says. You can't argue with the Bible."

"Well did you ever think that maybe the Bible's wrong?"

There had been a collective gasp. Then the entire class, except for the youth pastor's wife, burst into laughter. She sent Danielle to a desk by herself, and later the pastor told her that she shouldn't talk back to her elders and should never question the Bible. He never said why. After that, the girls ostracized her and laughed at her. She sat alone in Sunday school, and, if she

slunk over to sit in the back of the youth section, the other girls got up and moved to the other side of the long pews. Pretty soon the word 'slut' started floating around.

Danielle would never tell her mother about the name-calling. The pastor informed her that Danielle had questioned the Sunday school teacher, and she grounded her for a month. Her mom had cried, said something about being frustrated and not intending to raise such a smart-mouthed child. What would she say if she found out the girls called her child a slut and a whore? She'd probably think she'd done something to deserve that name.

Even now the girls and their silky-voiced leader hated Danielle's presence. When they got to church that morning, she had moved away from her parents' usual pew and sat in the back of the sanctuary, as far away from the youth section as possible, but she still noticed the youth pastor's wife staring at her, as she did every Sunday. Danielle stared back unflinchingly. The woman was morbidly obese, but not so much that she couldn't fit into the fuzzy, pastel, high-collared sweaters she loved to wear even in the heat of the Kentucky summer. They usually had some ridiculous pattern on them like kittens or little candies. The ridiculous clothes matched well with the hair: dyed platinum blonde, parted way too far over to the side, and teased up so high in the back that it barely fit into her car. After staring an awkwardly long while, the youth pastor's wife smiled and turned her gaze back to the preacher. Danielle wished she could go home and hide in her room until her face turned white again. Why did the stupid directory portraits have to be today?

Evan was sitting three pews behind the youth pastor's wife, perched on the end so he could wheel his dad in and out of the aisle. After the accident, he had seemed only to grow surer in his belief. Evan sang the contemporary worship songs as loud as he could, like his heart was

woven into every word. Seven-eleven songs her grandfather used to call them as he complained about the church's switch from traditional hymns to new worship music.

“You repeat the same seven words eleven times,” he had said, slumping in the pew after everyone sat down.

Danielle thought maybe the new worship songs were easier for the massive congregation to sing together. It must have been difficult for the musicians to coordinate all the voices in a three-story, twelve-hundred-seat church.

On the way home, Danielle's mother asked her if she'd been listening to what the pastor had said, if she knew what the sermon was about. Danielle just stared out the window thinking that the preacher was talking about God as usual. She never answered her mother.

Where had God been when Marcus was killed? Shot walking home from a pizza place, all for nothing more than forty dollars and a cell phone. Marcus was big and tall. He didn't look sixteen, so why didn't God make him look like a kid? From that moment she lost her faith in this so called God. She had tried to turn to Him, praying for some relief from the pain, begging to be shown a reason why, be given any way to make sense of it all, but God was nowhere to be found. He left her prayers unanswered.

Her parents didn't know about Marcus. She had only been fourteen at the time, and they would have been outraged to find out their daughter was dating anyone, much less an African-American two years her senior. When he first died, she always cried in private, in her room with the door shut. Her parents might have asked questions, and they could never find out she lost her first love and her first lover.

She leaned on the car window, closed her eyes, and imagined herself on that old mountain top she and Marcus always hiked on. Gray clouds floated across the sky, running north

as fast as the wind would carry them. The air smelled of rain, and a cold blast of wind rushed up from the valley below, blowing sand off the flat rocks and into Danielle's sunglasses. They still had miles to go to the end of the trail. Marcus didn't care. He was already soaked through from jumping in that frigid river, right past the sign that said not to.

"Do you think it will rain?" Danielle asked.

"Who cares?" Marcus replied, leaning out over the cliff into the wind. The blast of icy air was strong enough to partially support his weight as he leaned precariously far out over the edge. Danielle wanted to yank him back but was afraid it might make him mad. Suddenly the wind died out, but Marcus leaned up and backward like he hadn't even given the idea of falling a second thought.

She missed those hikes. No matter what the weather they never failed to show up for a hike they'd planned. Once, during a cold snap, they found footprints in the snow: raccoon, coyote, bobcat, deer, maybe even a black bear, all covering the ice on a pond, the freeze so hard and so long the poor things had clawed and dug at the surface, desperate for water. Marcus had taken a huge rock and smashed it right through the frozen surface, opening a drinking hole for the animals, sending water shooting up like a fountain, turning the ice black, the dark hue of liquid spreading out over the hard, solid surface.

On another occasion, they huddled in a small cave to watch lightening striking the peaks of the mountains, cutting off the tops of the evergreens during a spring storm. Marcus let her sit behind him so she wouldn't get wet, leaning down so she could still see the raw power of the electrical currents.

Who would go hiking in lightning storms with her now?

When the family got home, Danielle stomped up to her room without a word and slammed the door so hard she knocked a picture off the wall. She stepped over the shattered glass and slid the paper out of the frame. It was a print her mother had bought the week she was born: a woman praying over a sleeping little girl in a pink and white bed while angels looked on from above. Danielle blinked the tears from her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose with two fingers. She dropped down on her own pink and white bedspread. How many times had her mother prayed so hard over this bed when she thought her child was sleeping and didn't hear, didn't know? Had it done any good?

She felt so angry with her parents, but really their only crime was they believed what they'd been taught. For a moment, Danielle was almost tempted to apologize for the hostility between herself and her parents over the past two years, tell them about Marcus. But she feared that, after all this time, it was too late to go back, and she didn't really want to anyway. In light of all the nights she spent crying after her mom left the room, begging God not to send her to Hell, praying as hard as she could for God to make her good enough, it was a relief to not believe.

Danielle got up and swept the pieces of broken glass from the picture back into the frame and tossed them in the garbage. Then she flung herself down on the bed again, wiped her makeup off with a tissue, and stuffed the print in her nightstand drawer. Muffled voices stole into her room through the gap underneath the door, the soft sobs of her mother and the angry huffs of her father, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. Rolling out of bed and quietly opening the door, she crept down the hall to the linen closet outside her parents' bedroom. There was a laundry chute inside where she used to listen to her mother's phone calls with her

elementary school teachers on the few occasions that she had been sent home with a note. She had always been able to tell how much trouble she was in by listening at the laundry chute.

“I just can’t deal with it anymore,” her father said. “If you flew off the handle then it’s her own fault.”

Her mother’s sobs grew louder, and she ripped paper towel off the roll. “No it’s not. It’s mine. I’ve asked God to take away my anger so many times, but it seems like every time I try to control it, that just makes it worse. I never seem to feel bad enough to stop.”

It was no secret her mother had an anger management issue. When Danielle was a little girl, her mom would get furious when she cried at the table or muddied her dress or spilled her beans. She hadn’t hit her then, but she had screamed in rage, grabbed her by the arm, shaken her countless times, embarrassed her in grocery stores or bank lobbies. She had always come back and apologized afterwards and even collected herself for a while, but inevitably the same rage would surface again a few months later. The hitting hadn’t started until Danielle was twelve or thirteen, and she had never figured out what she could change about herself to stop it; eventually she’d just given up, accepted it as inevitable.

“So just go say you’re sorry,” her dad said.

“I can’t. I’ve said I’m sorry so many times it doesn’t mean anything to her anymore. The pastor tells me to lean on the Lord, but it’s not working. I just get so mad at her I don’t know what I’m doing. She’ll never speak to me again when she’s older.”

Danielle loosened a piece of dirty laundry hanging on a bent staple in the chute and pulled it back up so it wouldn’t make any noise if it fell down. She wasn’t sure she would speak to either of her parents when she moved away, but she wasn’t sure she wouldn’t speak to them either.

She sometimes envied Evan's relationship with his parents; it seemed so loving. She pictured Evan hugging his mom when she dropped him off at school, driving his dad to the doctor and pulling his wheelchair out of the back of the truck to bring him to church. She wondered what those two would have done without him after the accident. They depended on him, trusted him. They treated him like an adult because they didn't have a choice.

Sometimes Evan could be a little too sensitive, too patronizing, too sympathetic, like he knew all the church girls made fun of her and called her names, and he felt sorry for her. On several occasions he had told her to wait on God, quoting Romans 12:19: "avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, 'vengeance is mine; I will repay,' sayeth the Lord." Danielle was tired of waiting, tired of looking to a probably nonexistent deity for solutions. And although she figured she should probably be thankful that at least someone was on her side, she felt like she wanted to make that superior, supercilious little boy just as aware of his own frailty and vulnerability as she had recently become, to prove that the Bible was wrong, that no one was coming to avenge or protect either of them. Yet she also wanted to be his friend, find a confidant in him. Even though he was a little sanctimonious, he was also a good listener, always ready to hear what she had to say, but never prying too much.

She remembered the time her mom forgot her at church. It wasn't her fault really because her father, Danielle's grandfather, had just died, and she was trying to make his funeral arrangements. When Evan found her, Danielle had been sitting on the front steps with her arms around her knees, calling one of her parents for the tenth time. Neither of them would pick up.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"I was helping the band put their gear away."

“Oh.” Danielle didn’t look at him.

“Hey. You want lunch?”

Danielle nodded her head, appreciative that Evan had asked no further questions. He just knew exactly what she needed. She ate with his family at the Texas Roadhouse off the interstate, and they’d taken her home. Her mom had been lying on the couch the entire time with a towel over her face, her phone stuffed silently in her purse.

It was Evan’s sensitivity, his willingness to help anyone that made her hope the whole Jesus-freak thing was just a phase. But one day they were walking down the hall to class, a long hallway with horribly ugly mustard yellow lockers reflecting a sort of vomit-colored light back onto the white walls opposite them. They were so ugly Danielle said they would be more effective birth control than the school’s ‘God doesn’t want you to have sex ever’ classes.

“You shouldn’t make fun of stuff like that,” Evan said.

She rolled her eyes “Come on it was just a joke.”

“It’s not a good idea to be so angry all the time.”

What gave him the right to accuse her of being angry all the time?

“So you think we should have blasphemy laws like in Pakistan?” she asked.

“No, I just think people ought to police their own behavior, you know.”

“No I don’t.”

“I know you don’t.” Evan turned away from her.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means Brian has a video of you throwing up beer off the front porch at his party the other night. He showed it to all of us at soccer practice.”

Danielle stopped. Occasionally she did go a little overboard with her drinking, especially when she was with her friend Stacy at parties where everyone else was doing it too. What if that video got on YouTube or back to her parents? They already thought Stacy was a bad influence.

It seemed Evan had almost read her mind because he turned around and faced her. “You don’t have to worry about it getting on the internet cause I deleted it off Brian’s phone while everyone was in the shower. You’re welcome.”

Danielle felt relieved, but Evan looked at her so smugly, like she was a little wayward girl who needed him to show her the error of her ways.

“I didn’t say thank you,” she said.

“You should. I got you out of trouble this time, but who knows where I’ll be next time. How often do you get drunk like that?”

“Who the hell are you? My dad?”

“I know why you’re doing this,” he said. “It’s cause of Marcus. I get it. I felt the same when my dad got hit by that drunk-driver, like I needed something to shut out the world. But turning to God is better than turning to alcohol.”

Danielle wanted to slap him. “Ok. Listen very carefully. Don’t talk to me about my drinking habits. Don’t tell me what I should and should not do. Don’t patronize me about religion. And definitely do not talk to me about Marcus.”

Danielle swung her ponytail around and stomped off to class while Evan ran after her.

“I’m sorry. Come on,” he said as she barreled down the hall.

They argued the rest of the way to class, and the rest of the day. Danielle didn’t know why Evan stuck around her; maybe it was just because they were the only two kids at that school who also went to Maplewood Baptist. They were still in that weird transition between being

friends and dating. Evan was the first potential love interest she had had since Marcus, but all the religious stuff was off-putting. Still, he was so much nicer than the other guys; maybe he would become a little less uptight if they just hooked up and got it over with.

Danielle knew exactly when they could have some alone-time: the convention was coming around. Her parents went to an annual restaurant convention every year. They used to take her, back when she was the daughter they wanted, believed the things they taught her. Her dad had loved introducing her to cuisine from all over the South: Texas Toast, Cajun crab boils, frog legs, fried green tomatoes, hamburgers, every kind of meat under the sun battered and fried like chicken. When she was little, the long booths had seemed magical, and her dad had usually “accidentally” lost track of her, never letting her run too far, but allowing her to explore a bit on her own.

She ran from booth to booth, finding new food, new cultures and new accents everywhere she went. At one booth, she listened to some Latinos from Texas speaking Spanish to each other as they prepared to demonstrate how to make a tortilla from scratch. At another booth, she listened to an older woman’s beautiful, drawling Deep Southern accent as the people from Savannah, Georgia discussed their special recipe for beer-fried shrimp. Still farther down, some people from Louisiana spoke a little Creole to her as she came up to try their low-country boil. They let her have a little cup for free, and she’d marveled at their long, beaded braids as she shoved the spicy sausage chunks and shrimp and potatoes into her mouth. She loved observing all the different Southern cultures, but she had always eventually wondered home to her parents’ section, to the familiar Appalachian accents and foods. Her parents’ special recipe for venison stew won a couple of awards through the years.

Even though she loved those trips, she'd uninvited herself a couple years ago after a huge fight with her mother over whether she could spend the night with Stacy again. Of course her mother didn't want Danielle to stay with the girl after she'd been caught with some weed in her sock drawer, as if everyone at that school didn't do it. Danielle had really planned to stay over with Marcus. That was why she fought so hard. She would have pretended she wanted to stay at a different friend's house, but Stacy was her only real friend, and it had to be convincing. Plus, Stacy would always lie for her. But her mom didn't want her to be around that girl; she had thrown a plate close enough for Danielle to hear the whir as it whizzed by her head. Danielle had picked up the biggest piece and pitched it back through the kitchen window, never sure if her mom had meant to miss her.

After that fight, her parents hadn't taken her on the trip again. This year they dropped her off at her grandmother's house to stay the night, fearing she might skip school or worse if left alone. But granny didn't stay up too late, so the moment she went to sleep Danielle was out the bedroom window and down the street with the money from her grandmother's wallet. She bought some cokes and beers from a place that never carded, and then she called Evan to come over and hang out at her house, saying she had a blue ray copy of *Star Wars*.

Her parents took away her keys when they left, worried she might try to sneak back in, but they didn't know she'd made a copy a long time ago, stowing it safely in a little hidden pouch in her purse. She could drink and eat all she wanted, clean up about four in the morning, and run back to granny's before she started roaming around the house around five or six a.m.

Danielle knew Evan didn't want drink, but she hoped to convince him to loosen up a little. He pulled in the drive just as she got in the door of the house, running to the kitchen to shove the cokes and beers in the fridge before he came inside.

“Your parents not here?” he asked after she had let him in.

“Nope they’re gone.” She smiled innocently up at him as he looked at her, aghast.

“We shouldn’t be alone here. I thought your parents would be home,” he said.

“It’s fine, we’re just watching a movie.” He definitely did not look reassured but followed her into the living room anyway, nodding politely when she asked if he wanted a drink.

“What kind of drink?”

“You know what kind of drink,” Evan said.

“Right. Coke.” Danielle rolled her eyes. “Come on. Lighten up a little.”

“No,” Evan said. “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”

“We aren’t going to get wasted. Just have one or two. You know, just a teeny bit of debauchery. ‘No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments,’ First Timothy 5:23.” Danielle smiled. “See. I know the Bible too.”

Evan stared at her, his brow a little creased. “I don’t know. I feel like it’s a bad idea.”

“If it was such a bad idea, why did Jesus turn water into wine so a bunch of wedding guests could get even drunker?”

Evan didn’t answer.

“Look, just have a beer. For me.” Danielle wrapped her arms around Evan’s neck and kissed him on the mouth for the first time. He slowly put his hands on her waist. “I kind of think of this as our first official date.”

“I thought you said nothing was going to happen.”

“Nothing is. You consider having a couple of beers and watching a movie ‘something happening?’”

Evan sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “No,” he said and walked to the kitchen, pulling two beers off the bottom shelf in the fridge.

“It’s warm. I just put it in,” Danielle said. She’d intended to chill it a minute longer.

“Can we put some ice in it?”

Danielle burst out laughing. “No!”

They watched *Star Wars*, making fun of wimpy Luke Skywalker and the outdated special-effects. Before they knew it, they had drunk most of the twelve-pack and were laughing for no good reason, not noticing when the movie finished. They laughed about the idiots at school; they laughed about the lamp when Evan kicked his foot out and knocked it over; they laughed when Danielle rolled off the couch and hit her knee on the coffee table.

Danielle asked Evan what he saw in all the churchy stuff, why it meant so much to him.

“I guess I just like the social part of it,” he talked a bit slower and deeper than his normal tone, but he was shockingly coherent for having drunk so much beer. “I have tons of friends in youth group, all the adults love me. I just feel so good about myself when I’m at church. It makes me feel closer to people, you know, even though sometimes I feel like I’m not sure if I believe the stuff they say.”

Danielle hiccupped. “What?”

“Yeah. I mean, sometimes I feel strong in my faith, but other times I feel like all I have is doubt. You know, alone in the middle of the night. But I can’t say anything about it. What would people think?”

“Wow. The alcohol really brings out the truth in you.” Danielle laughed.

“I really want to believe all that stuff. I do. For my friends and family. So I don’t go to Hell. I just. I don’t know.”

Suddenly Evan leaned in and kissed her, but not the way she'd kissed him, this kiss was leading somewhere, somewhere Danielle had no problem going. She ran her hands through his hair, up and down his back, leaned across the arm of the couch and wrapped her legs around his waist. He stopped.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought this was what you wanted.”

“It is, but I just. I don't know. I've never done this before.” Evan slumped on the cushion.

“Well I have,” said Danielle, forgetting she had never told him she and Marcus had sex.

She swung her leg over his lap and straddled him. They kissed deeply until they moved into the bedroom, undressing each other as they went. Danielle pulled the sheets back and threw the pillows on the floor to make more room. It didn't last long, and once they were through, Evan rolled over and fell into a drunken, sedated sleep. Danielle stared up at the ceiling, watching the fan make blurry shadows as it slowly wound around and around.

This sleeping, drunken kid was the real him, not the church mouse kid in the front pew singing along with every worship song, not the patronizing do-gooder policing all the other kiddies at school. He had doubts, questions, fears. His belief was not completely an act, but he wasn't the unquestioning follower she had thought him to be. He was going through the same thing as her. Maybe he wasn't as angry, maybe not as rebellious, but his doubts were as real as hers, his belief just as fragile. She remembered all those nights she lay awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering where God was, why he had left her alone. Now she knew Evan had the same doubts, magnified by unanswered prayers for his dad, uncertainty in the future, a growing realization that God was less protective than he'd been told. She felt deep in her soul that, no

matter what the morning brought, he would regret this night. And as she closed her eyes to sleep for a couple hours, she wondered if she might regret it too.

CHAPTER III

AWAKENING

I woke up standing in an abandoned cotton field overgrown with blackberries. The hot sun beat down on my face as I stood at the foot of a tall hill, looking up at the untamed, black wilderness. I couldn't understand where I was because a moment earlier I lay snoozing on my desk in the office, wearing my white button down and black slacks, the next thing I knew I woke in jeans in this empty, untilled, pasture. Vestige of the Old South: unkempt, forgotten, withering away under the unbearable load of lush, but wild, vegetation.

I had a bucket and started picking blackberries, but I never got to keep a single berry after a great roan stallion appeared behind me as I worked, and every time I filled the bucket he inhaled all the berries in a single gulp. I whipped around to face him, and to my surprise, he allowed me to approach and touch him, put my fingers on his long muzzle, and look him in the eye.

I asked him if he knew me. No answer. I asked him where I was, how I got into this field, but he didn't know.

"Isn't there anything you can tell me?" I asked.

He turned his head from me. "No."

I flung my hands in the air. Why was he here if he had nothing to tell me? He had allowed me to touch him, but when I tried to mount him, he turned and flung himself away, and

the last thing I saw was his thick red mane and tail flying over a tall hill and disappearing beyond the crest as he bucked and kicked as high as he could.

I followed him over the hill and discovered a city on the other side, but the stallion was gone. I ran down the hill and into the forest of cement, hurling myself through the empty streets, tears flying off my face as soon as they rolled out of my eyes. I kept thinking I might see the stallion again, but he had easily outrun me.

The city was in pristine shape: clear air that smelled like fresh rain, unpolluted, swept streets, all the buildings intact, all the sidewalks clean and undamaged. There were no abandoned cars; they were all parked neatly in their right places, parallel to the buildings, between the painted lines. There was just no living thing anywhere I could see.

All I could think was that I hadn't fed my Yorkie Ben. Could I call my mother? Such a stupid notion, even if I had a phone I hadn't spoken to my mom in so long that I didn't think she even knew what street I lived on now. Surely someone would notice Ben barking when I didn't come home. I had neighbors in the apartment building, friends, a landlord looking for late rent, so someone had to find him before he went too hungry.

I eventually stopped running and looked inside a building at the unspoiled lobby, nothing out of place: the sofa cushions plumped, the water cooler full, even the plants cast a healthy green glow on the polished, white marble floor. I went in for a moment, smelling the scent of Lysol, then stepped back out onto the street and started looking for a place to hide.

Maybe there would be zombies. Every movie and TV show I've ever seen: when the streets were empty there were always zombies, and me with no weapon, no companion, and no hiding place. Of course, I knew this was insane, but still it's almost impossible for thoughts like that to pop into your head when something is so out of place, so majorly, impossibly wrong. I

jogged down the street till I came to an open, sunny building I was comfortable resting in, the lobby almost all windows and skylights reflecting blue in the bright light. It still looked secure with its all steel frame and glass so thick that it bent the sunlight severely. I tried the door, and it opened without resistance.

I ran through the lobby, scraping up against large plants that were still alive, even budding new branches and flowers. What happened? Nuclear war? Aliens? Some kind of natural disaster? Disease? No one anywhere, no movement, not even a breeze. No bodies either.

When I was little, my grandmother told me that in the end of days Jesus would return and rapture everyone, that his followers would be taken in an instant to heaven. But that couldn't be what happened here because Revelations says that there will be many left behind, but there were none here. When my grandmother spoke to me about such things my mom always laughed and told me not to listen to such gibberish. Mom never tried to please my dad's mother after he died; I'm not sure she would have even let her see me if Nana hadn't threatened to take her to court. I liked my Nana even though I never really believed in her kind of religion. Maybe she had been right. Maybe she just missed the part about how many would be left behind.

I remembered the empty fields of blackberries. No people there either, raptured from the harvest. At least there had been some life there, and a companion, no matter how frustrating, is better than none. I looked around the lobby to a large, crescent-shaped receptionist desk that wrapped around several empty chairs. A phone. I stared at it for a few seconds before I recognized what it was. Slowly I approached it, as if I thought of it as some kind of black rabbit that might leap up at any moment and hurl itself away. Reaching out, stretching my arms and body away from my planted feet, I slowly wrapped my hand around the receiver, trying to think who I might call.

Robert was the only person whose number I had memorized, but he told me not to call him when he filed the divorce papers. Maybe this once I could; it was an emergency after all. Maybe this one time he might understand. It had been months since I phoned his apartment in the early hours, crying louder than normal so I didn't have to hear his lover in the background. I'd begged him to leave her for me as he'd left me for her. He would never believe that I was trapped in this place. He would only think that my story of being alone in an empty city was nothing more than yet another creative cry for attention. I put the phone down without ever listening to see if it had a dial tone.

I lay down on one of the large leather sofas in the lobby. I thought of my tiny dog Ben, the only male in my life so far who hadn't turned out to be a liar, the only warm thing in my bed at night since I had the courage to stop calling my ex-husband. Still, if I hadn't given up on him maybe I wouldn't be so worried about Ben starving in my vacant apartment. I put my hand over my eyes and pictured him sitting on the floor, so pitiful, staring from his empty water and food bowls to a door that still hadn't opened. I couldn't think like that. Someone would be by; someone would find him. I would get home somehow. I had to.

I awoke to the sound of rushing, roaring water, but when I opened my eyes I knew it couldn't possibly be water, for I was floating in the depths of space. There was no pain, no crushing feeling, no freezing blood in veins, no emptiness of oxygen, just floating, bobbing up and down.

Robert would have loved this. He used to make me ride roller coasters over and over to get the sensation of flying, falling, floating in space. I hated that feeling, the freefall, the floating sensation in the pit of my stomach telling me to stop, put my feet on the ground before I lost my

hot dog. Poor Ben. His little hot dog costume I got him for Halloween was so cute even though he hated it and ripped it off after two minutes. I wished I knew he was alright. Rob didn't like Ben much, always wished I would give him up and get a big saltwater fish tank so he wouldn't have to share space on the couch. Rob always made me do things I hated, dragging me to amusement parks, outdoors clubs, roller rinks, and I never had the courage to say no. Getting rid of Ben was the only no I ever told him. Maybe Janine didn't have a dog.

Janine, that woman from Rob's law firm who I always knew was prettier than me, smarter than me, more fun than me. I knew he would fall for her the day I came to meet him for lunch. When I walked into the firm and saw her sitting at the desk outside his office door, tar-black hair all done up in a knot, magenta nails leaving little pink lines on the corners of all the papers she handled. "Do you have an appointment with Mr. Barber?" That's what she'd said to me, like she didn't know we'd been married for three years, like she hadn't seen my picture on his desk, and I walked past right her and into his office without a word and demanded to know how long she'd been working there, and he said two months, and I asked how the hell he could go two damned months without telling me about her. He had said he didn't think it was a big deal, that he had no reason to bring it up, that he'd gotten other receptionists before and I hadn't cared. He never had a receptionist that looked like her before, siren in a pantsuit; that was why I didn't care.

But when he and I met that was my job. I suppose that might have been some of the reason I was worried about his receptionist. I guess that's how he meets his new squeezes: they come and sit at a desk outside his office door. It's how he met the old wife and the new sheet-warmer. Maybe he was already sleeping with her then. It had been a long time since we'd been happy, a long time since I stopped hoping we'd ever be happy.

What hope did I have anyway? I was just the temp, just some ordinary girl who answered phones at any call or customer service center that would take her. “What is the issue you’re having today ma’am?” That was the extent of my job, my future. It had taken me months just to get up the courage to ask an irate customer to stop yelling at me, and I wondered what Rob had ever seen in me in the first place. I had been fairly beautiful and thin back then, much skinnier than I am now. My hair had been longer and a much darker brown too. But then I started gaining weight when Rob and I began growing apart, stopped dying my hair. On some level I wanted to know if Rob would love me without my tiny waist and dark sheet of curls. I guess I got my answer.

I scanned my new surroundings again. I was far from the earth, and none of the planets looked at all familiar. Far away, two twin stars blazed bluish-white. A bright pink light glowed over my shoulder, cast by a monstrous magenta gas-giant immediately behind me, so close I felt I could reach out and touch it, yet I was beyond all the moons circling around it, so I must have been out of reach of its orbital pull. The white, glittering surface of one of the moons was made of ice and the orange, roiling surface of another moon was volcanic, all fire and molten, sliding rock. Plenty of other, less shocking moons hung around the planet, mostly dusty, crater-riddled relics like our own. Tremendous storms churned all over the planet, slinging marbles of whiter pink through the fields of deep magenta. Gigantic blasts of light flew out of these storms: lightning covered by swaths of thick, tumultuous cloud.

I pulled back in terror of this stormy planet, of these fiery, icy moons. If I were to somehow be pulled in, who knew? I could be crushed to death, frozen solid, burned alive. I tried to swim away from them in the weightlessness, but I couldn’t move at all. I screamed for help, just because I could, but the emptiness was so vast that the sound fell flat as soon as it left my

mouth. Who would hear me anyway? I didn't want to be here, wanted to go back home more than anything, back to my little job, little apartment, little dog. It wasn't much; I wasn't happy, but I was comfortable. There wasn't any risk of being pulled into some ice sickle moon.

I felt myself drifting toward sleep, the familiar overwhelming tiredness falling over me, my eyelids growing heavy, my vision blurring, a warm tingle rushing throughout all my limbs. I couldn't go to sleep here. If I did I could be pulled into a moon as it passed by me, could wake up far into the vast abyss of one of those monstrous craters or falling into a boiling caldron. I moved my arms and legs, tried to do some flips, anything to stay awake, but this sleep was an impossible force to fight.

I awoke in pitch black but could tell by the place where the stars ended that I was sitting on a hill or cliff or some other high place. There was a streak of dawn on the starry horizon, well possibly dusk too. But I was hoping for dawn as I had no idea how much space I had, and I did not dare to move for fear of falling. I might have had all the room in the world, but I might have been on the edge of a knife. I had no clue.

Sweat ran down my neck despite the chill, and the hot ball of stress in the pit of my stomach that started to grow the longer I lay still. Was I doomed to continue all eternity alone, falling asleep and awakening in a new place every so often, never finding anyone? Even if I found someone, how could I guarantee they would not be taken from me when I fell asleep again? What if one day I woke up inside some lake of fire from which there was no escape? I kept thinking of the fiery moon, and if I had appeared just a few miles from where I did, I might have been trapped on its surface. The only worse hell than Hell is not knowing where the hell

you're going or if you're going to someday wake up in some horrendous place and then never fall asleep again.

I wished I had my mother to come and tell me not to be afraid of the dark, like she did when I was a child and had been listening to my Nana's stories about demons and monsters and wolves in the wood eating little girls with picnic baskets. Nana loved kids, but sometimes she'd forgotten what it was like to be one, to take silly stories so seriously. One night when I was eight, after Nana had read me a story from the Bible, the one where Jesus casts out the demon into the pigs, I had been crying in the bed, fearing a demon might enter me and there would be no one to cast it out, no pig for it to enter. Mom came into my room to find out what was the matter, and I asked her if she could cast out a demon.

"Don't worry about demons or angels, sweetheart," she said. "Angels and demons are figments of people's imagination, just like monsters in the closet." She stayed in the bed with me that night, and as I lay next to her, listening to her sleep so peacefully, I believed her. I still do.

Rolling into a sitting position, I sobbed with my head in my knees, missing fuzzy little Ben, missing Robert though I knew that was stupid, lying cheating bastard; I missed my mom more than Rob. I had no idea why I hadn't called her for all that time, two years I think, and all the reasons I came up with to not call her seemed so idiotic. She got a female partner when dad died, said she'd been seeing her for a while but didn't want to divorce dad because of me. Before I dropped out of college, she told me to stay away from all those guys from the fraternity. We had a huge fight about Robert not being able to explain all those late nights at the office and refusing to tell his mother to invite me to Christmas. She turned out to be right about him. That's the real reason I didn't want to talk to her: she had been right, the worst crime one human can commit against another. Still, had I known I hadn't had time, I would have done anything to

reach her, told her I didn't mean it when I said stay out of my life, admitted I was wrong. I thought I had time; that's why I put it off. Isn't that why we all put things off?

As I lay still, I tried to remember everything up to the point that I awoke in the field. Had I been at work? No that couldn't be right because now that I thought about it I had slept on my desk a minute yes, but then I had a call come in and I woke up. So I hadn't just jumped from work to this empty place. I had left when it was time and gone to volunteer at the rescue barn like I did every Friday through Sunday because I loved horses but couldn't afford to have my own. They had a bunch of new ones from some dude ranch where the guy got old and quit giving kiddie rides and couldn't take care of the place or the horses, so he left them to rot. Then he died with no family or friends, and he got left to rot. Those poor horses were so scared and starved before anyone found them.

Perhaps I died in my apartment later that night. I couldn't remember anything after going to the ranch, but perhaps I had finished up, gone home and passed out in my apartment. I didn't have any friends. I had a few people talk to me at work or at the barn, but I was always too shy to go out with them, wanting to go home and sit on the couch with my dog instead. Maybe it wasn't shyness; maybe I was just lazy, too tired to put effort into making friends. Maybe I would be left to rot in my home like the old guy in his little farmhouse. Surely I would start to stink up that whole apartment building. I couldn't go weeks and weeks like the old guy on the ranch. I wondered if Ben would eat me or starve lying across my body. I hoped he would eat me and live.

Of course being dead was just a theory; I couldn't really be dead cause if you die you are supposed to go to Heaven or Hell, or get reincarnated, or maybe just cease to exist altogether. I don't know, but you're not supposed to jump from one weird place to another like you're in some kind of haywire teleporter.

I lifted my head from my knees after a while, and when I looked up, the light was getting brighter and bigger; finally the sun started to rise. As the light kept coming, I realized I had been right not to move because I was in a high eagle's nest hundreds of feet above the desert rock below, perched on a lair for a bird that must have been twenty feet tall. There were no babies and no eggs, but I knew I wanted to get out of there before the eagle came back. If I was dead, it couldn't hurt me, but I might not be dead either, could be caught in some kind of time/space matrix, just as fragile and temporary as I had ever been. I didn't know what happened or why I was here, better not to take any chances. My life's mantra: don't take any chances.

I could not climb down since the rocky desert yawned hundreds, maybe thousands, of feet below me and stretched probably well beyond what I could see, with no water, no food fit for me. Not that I was thirsty or hungry, but I still feared the fall, feared that I could not traverse the desert, feared everything, so I didn't move at all. I just sat still with my eyes closed for what seemed like hours, trying to think of a way down.

When I finally looked up I could see limitless miles of vacant desert.

Of course the desert deceives those who count on its emptiness; lack of human presence doesn't mean lack of life. I watched a small, tan dot—a fox most likely—dart from rock to rock while a normal sized hawk wheeled overhead. The sun flew far out over the horizon, rising toward the center of the sky, and the animals scattered at the approach of the heat of the day. No shade relieved me, and I found no way to climb down, being terrified as usual of what might happen, but as I looked for a way to dig a hole in the nest for shelter, a monstrous shadow fell over me, and I looked up just in time to see the last fall of the great golden eagle as it landed on top of me in its nest. I opened my eyes to find myself between its giant talons.

Terrifying with its razor beak and at least ten feet taller than I had anticipated, it surveyed its domain with complete indifference. I curled up in a ball, hoping this monster wouldn't see me, but of course I was an intruder in its home. It would tear me apart for sure.

I had no hope of escape, but the eagle looked down at me and stepped over my crumpled, trembling form to the edge of the nest and laid something down on the soft, woven grass: a huge swordfish. Even in my particular predicament I had to wonder what on earth or wherever I was a swordfish was doing in the desert, or had the tremendous bird flown hundreds of miles across the desert to find a sea beyond some distant mountain range? Surely not a great feat for such a large bird. It tugged and ripped meat off the fish, taking several opportunities to look at me, but never making a gesture to show any interest. It knew I was there, but I could do it no harm, so it had no reason to care. I had to ask if this eagle might be something that could help me. I stood up, fearing the beak, the talons, and the fall, but desperate to be brave for once.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked it, but it ignored me.

“Do you have a name?” Still no response. “Please,” I felt that same tightness in my lungs, same tears in my eyes, same hot ball in the pit of my stomach. It might be foolish to draw attention to myself in this situation, but I approached it anyway. If I would ever have any chance at getting home, I had to find out what was happening to me. The eagle ignored me as I crept toward it.

“Please,” I said. “I just want to go home.”

The eagle raised its head and looked over me, far out into the desert. Frustrated to the point of no longer fearing for my life, I ran up to it and started tugging at its feathers. Each huge, golden feather was at least as long as me, and the whole time I tugged I also shouted at the bird

ridiculous questions I should have known it didn't have the answer to. Where was I? How could I get away from this place? What did I have to do to get home?

A feather came out. The eagle, which had been ignoring me the whole time, looked down at me with its fiery eyes and with one quick and sudden movement pushed me out of the nest like a chick that had worn out its welcome.

As I fell, I wondered what would happen to me at impact. I was terrified of hitting the ground, but I couldn't do anything. Would it hurt? Would I be injured? Would I die? Would I sink into the ground or just bounce right back up? I never found out because as I neared the ground, I fainted.

When I awoke I was unharmed on the desert floor. First I wanted my dog, but then thought of my mother. I cried for the years I spent without her, the memories I could have had, the Christmas mornings I spent alone with tiny, furry Ben, the remote, and a carton of eggnog, never invited to Robert's family get-together, never having the courage to call my mom and ask if I could come to her house for the party, the twinge of guilt in my diaphragm that I missed Ben more than anyone else in the world. I wondered what Mom thought of me now, if she knew I was missing, how long I had been gone. I pictured her on the couch with Ben and her partner, watching the news for any information, scanning all the new faces on the milk cartons, running to the phone every time it rang. Then again, I might not have been gone more than a couple of hours, for time seemed to have no meaning on this journey. Maybe I never left at all, maybe I'd been dreaming all that time. Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me; eagles and pink planets are waiting for thee.

Dream or no I was comfortable here, on this soft and sandy floor, with its warm, dry air and bright red light, like the setting sun, but I couldn't see where the light was coming from

because the eagle's nest rose high above me and blocked my view in that direction. All I saw was the purplish sky of a partly cloudy dusk. As usual, I had no idea how much time had passed since my last awakening and had started to think that I might sleep hundreds of years every time I fainted and view a little snippet of the evolution of the universe from a different vantage point with every awakening.

My mom told me countless times, if I didn't go out, learn to make friends instead of sitting alone on my couch in front of the TV when I wasn't working or at the barn that I would wind up just like this: all alone. I guess she was right about that too. When the people at the barn asked me to come for a weekend trail ride or even just a drink I made up excuses till they stopped asking. When Robert asked me to go to all those adventurous places he liked, I always refused or made a scene about it. I think he thought he could change me, but I wouldn't let him. And look at me now, turned out just like my mother said, even though I got furious at her for it. I realize now she only said it so I wouldn't end up like this, wouldn't end up like the old dude rancher, dead alone in an empty and dilapidated house.

I thought back to the last thing I remembered: trying to pull one of that guy's poor old starved nags into the barn out of the storm. It had been thundering really loudly as we rode up in the trailers, but the rain hadn't come yet. Plus, it wasn't like we could have left them in the trailers till the storm passed anyway. Instead we had all hurried up to get them inside, out of the wind, but they hadn't been inside for so long they put up a fight to stay out in the approaching rain.

Funny how we all have different perspectives, and what makes perfect sense to one being seems like the most insane thing in the world to the other. They thought we were nuts for wanting to go inside, and we thought they were nuts for wanting to stand under a tree and get

soaked in the deluge or struck by lightning. The roan stallion I struggled with didn't like the sound of the rain on the barn's tin roof. Poor boy, so thin, so petrified, like a tiny little dog in a shelter cage. I remembered the look of utter terror he gave me as we went into the barn and he realized I was going to try getting him into the stall; I remembered not being able to do it and tying him up at the crossties so I could go out and get help, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't figure out what had happened after that.

Weird how, of all the things I was afraid of, horses were never one of them. They give you this feeling, like even when they're scared and putting up a fight, they're just trying to protect themselves. They don't really want to hurt you. People want to hurt you.

That was the thing Robert and I had in common: we both loved working with horses. He was so impressed by my ability to calm them, to get them to do as I wished. He said it was a gift, my way with horses. Maybe they knew I cared for all of them, or maybe they just sensed I could never be a threat. Rob bought me a beautiful black mare when we were first married, but I'd had to sell her after the divorce. Alimony didn't cover the cost of her upkeep and mine too.

While I lay on the ground thinking, the sleep started coming over me again. I jumped up and ran towards the sun, trying to keep the light in my eyes. I had to stay awake. If I didn't I might end up in someplace much worse than this. I slapped myself across the face, shocked when it actually hurt. I tried to keep running, but I just couldn't maintain my balance, couldn't keep my eyes open or my limbs moving.

I opened my eyes to discover a giant maroon and silver eel staring at me, its gills opening and closing in tune with some slow, steady internal rhythm. It breathed and blinked and swished

its long, shimmering tail back and forth, a tail in which each ripple was twice as long as my entire body. It could have swallowed me whole a dozen times without effort.

I had not been lying down, but floating upside down in a crystal clear ocean where dimness, but not full darkness surrounded us. The ocean floor was not too far below, but the bright surface was far above us. Seaweed as tall as a forest of oaks swayed all around us, blotting out the remnants of the weak sun. We floated in a clearing a few dozen yards in diameter, meaning that the sun could shine frailly down on us, but the area surrounding us was cast in a permanent shadow, never to be exposed to the light of day.

It seemed I had been there for some time, and the eel had positioned me in this manner, unaware that my head was meant to go upward, for it had always lived in a world of no up and no down. I turned myself upright. The eel did not react. When I tried to speak, to ask it if it understood, the bubbles I expected to come out were not there. I should have been prepared for this, who knows how long it had been since I had last breathed a real breath, but still the shock of it overwhelmed me, sent the hot stress ball back into my stomach and the tight feeling back into my airless lungs. Somehow it never struck me as odd that I was not shocked by a giant, sentient eel, but I was shocked by the fact that no bubbles escaped from my mouth. Still, I leapt back and the eel lunged forward, intent on keeping me present, the first creature that had acknowledged me in any more than a rudimentary, disinterested way.

I had swum back a few feet, but had not gone far; composing myself, I reached out to show it I had no intention of leaving. I didn't want it to start chasing me. It came forward and placed its scaly head near me, its snout longer than I. I placed my hand above its bony nose, keeping well away from its toothy mouth, which now hung agape. I was trying to push it away from me; it was too close, but it wouldn't allow me to budge it. Its teeth were each the length of

my index finger. I tried to keep myself from trembling, not knowing what would happen if I couldn't hide my fear.

“Do you know me?”

“No.” An androgynous voice resounded in my head in no particular language. The eel never spoke out of its mouth, but rather projected its thoughts to my thoughts and I understood in the language I was comfortable with.

“Have you seen something that looks like me before?” This time I thought in my head, to see if it could read my thoughts too.

“I don't think so,” it thought back.

“How did I get here?”

“I'm not sure. One day I swam into my clearing and you were there. You have been sleeping in my home for several days.”

“So you did not see me appear?”

“No.” The eel tilted its head downward, trying to give me some kind of odd condolence because it could not seem to help me at all, but now I knew I had appeared well before I woke at least some of the time. Maybe it could help me on my quest to find out what happened and how I could get home. It might be a lot easier to enjoy this strange journey if I had a companion; the eel was interested in me, but who knows how long the interest of a gigantic predator in some foreign ocean will last.

“Do you know how I can get out of here?” I asked. “Is there anyone else you know of? Anyone else that has ever just appeared here?”

“No.”

I let myself sink to the bare, sandy floor. The eel did not follow me to the bottom but hovered over me, casting a frail shadow, barely darker than the floor of the sea.

I looked up at it. “Where am I?”

“You are in the sea. It is warm. The light is not too bright. There is plentiful food and we are deep enough that the storms of the surface cannot harm us.”

So this eel didn’t know any more about my situation than I did. I might have a conversation that lasted a couple of days or a week, but eventually I would fall asleep and wake up somewhere else, confused and alone, and I would never find another, a permanent companion. Maybe the next companion I woke to would kill me.

The eel swam away from me, but then turned suddenly and looked closer. “I did have a vision.”

I raised my head and looked it in the eye. “What vision?”

“As I slept I saw a great cloud. In the cloud there was a walking, two-legged animal like you standing in some kind of place that was dark, and the surfaces around it seemed hard and smooth. A great, red, four-legged animal, much larger than the two-legged, stood behind. When the sound of thunder clapped above, the two-legged animal made a dash behind the four-legged. The four-legged kicked out with its two hind legs and hit the two-legged in the head. That is all that was in the dream. Does this help?”

I thought of my mom again while I stayed with the eel on the bottom of the sea, wishing she were here to see me now. She had always been interested in marine biology but never had the opportunity to study it. She just made me sit through endless hours of Discovery Channel documentaries: Blue Planet, Planet Earth, that sort of thing. I wondered how she didn’t believe in

monsters when these shows talked about sharks twenty-five feet long, wales that could swallow a car. She said those were just animals, monsters were made up by people, maleficent, that was the difference. The marine animals just lived how they lived, did what they did, even the dangerous ones killed to feed themselves, not for greed or anger or pride. I watched shows about lions killing other prides' cubs and wasn't sure I agreed with her. I never quite knew why she didn't go through with a degree in zoology or marine biology if she loved wild animals so much. She had never graduated college at all, never even gotten through enough to pick a major. But I hadn't either, never finished school, never stayed on a job more than six or eight months, never even got done furnishing my little apartment after I moved out of Robert's house. My dog and I still slept on an old, hand-me-down mattress. He probably didn't sleep there anymore.

Now I knew what had happened to me. How could I be so stupid to run out behind a rough old rescue horse during a storm, during the panic of trying to get them into the barns with the lightning flashing above?

The eel's story had awakened other memories. I saw a glimpse of an ambulance ceiling, with IV tubes and EMTs standing over me. I saw flashes of doctors, operating rooms, the ceiling of a tiny hospital cubicle surrounded by blue curtains. At least I knew Ben was safe now; someone probably went and got him after they took me to the hospital.

I thought of my mother beside my bed in the hospital. She and I had our last fight about Robert, the one where we stopped talking, when I thought he was going to finally take me to see his family that Christmas and was devastated when he didn't. The third holiday season, the hundredth time around I thought maybe, just maybe, he might stand up to his mother. She never liked me, but I didn't really know why. Mom had been furious that he kept leading me on like that, never making me welcome in his family even though we were married.

I'd been standing in the kitchen in my mother's house when she finally said what she really thought of Rob: he was a no good son-of-a-bitch who would never quit stringing me along, refusing to introduce me to his family because he planned on divorcing me when he got bored, and he didn't want to piss them off. Men like him took advantage of indecisive, fearful women like me. I knew all this was true at the time, had realized Rob and I had no future together, but I suppose I hadn't been ready to admit that to myself. I loved Robert. How could I let her say he was using me? I screamed at my mother for knowing what I already knew, told her she had no idea about mine and Rob's relationship, that we were a real married couple even though we had to spend the holidays apart, said she just didn't know how his family was, called her a meddling bitch and said I never wanted to see her again. I slammed the door so hard on the way out I heard the glass in the living-room cabinet break. So much for subtlety. I wondered, even if I did get home, would she forgive me? Would I admit I had been wrong? Did I honestly even want to go back to my dead-end job, dead-end home, dead-end life? If only I had Ben; that might make my decision easier. I loved my mother, but she didn't need me; my tiny little dog needed me.

The eel had been coming and going at its leisure, never returning with anything that resembled food I might be able to eat, but then again I didn't need food anyway. One night, when it slithered through the weeds and folded itself into our layer, I asked if it had a mother.

"Of course," the voice said in my mind. "Everyone has a mother."

"But you knew yours right?"

"Oh no. Our mothers do not fraternize with their offspring. They simply lay their eggs and allow us to fend for ourselves. We are lucky when they don't eat us. Why? Do you creatures maintain a relationship with your mothers?"

I was stuck. How could I explain to this thing that knew it normal for mothers to abandon or eat their offspring that I had cut my mother out of my life because she tried to look out for my best interests?

The eel leaned in closer to me, put its head right up to my face. I raised my hand against those long teeth. “Perhaps it was not what she said, but the way in which she presented it,” it said, revealing it could read my thoughts whether or not I allowed it. “Content is sometimes not as vital as presentation.” “Perhaps this will help. I once had a dear friend who told me that I swam up too close to the surface of the sea, too far into the shallows of the coral islands. I never argued with him about this issue, laughing instead at such cowardly foolishness. Sadly, one day, in my exuberance for netting the plentiful fish on the reef, I failed to notice a storm rolling in from the windward side of the island. I was dashed horribly against the rocks, slit all the way from my fin to my tail, and only by finding shelter in a coral hole did I escape death. I slunk back to my lair, bloody and broken, with the knowledge that my friend was right. And do you know what I did?”

“What?” I asked.

“I never saw him again. I was too proud to admit that my laughter had been faulty, too self-righteous to allow my friend to see me in my wounded state. I fled far away from him and the island chain, and I do not know if he is alive or dead. I am too old now to travel the distance and find out.”

I sat quiet for a moment, not knowing what to say. I couldn’t make sense of it. Was the eel telling me that if I ever woke up I should let nothing stand in the way of my relationship with my family? Or was it saying that it was too late for me, that I would never return and even if I did there was no hope of reconciliation? I never got an answer.

I left the eel a few days later. It was the longest stay I had so far. We did not talk much more because the eel spent most of its time away from me, hunting, swimming through the dark underwater forest. I moved up to the surface and stuck my head above the water, but the only thing within my view was endless, weedy sea all the way to the horizon, lit by a white sun reflecting off the stagnant water. I didn't try to find land, or even escape my surroundings since I knew now that it was all in my head. I swam as deep into an empty trench as I could, all the way to the bottom, but I never saw any of the glowing fish that they show in the movies, only dark emptiness.

I wasn't sure what the rules of this dream-state were. I feared if something killed me in this odd world I might die in my hospital bed, so I had to avoid dying in my dream. But I also worried that maybe if I went with any of these animals, took much of their advice, they might lead me to death as well. And I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to stay like this either.

Instead of trying to stay awake, I now tried to fall asleep as often as I could, but it was as if this dream-state had decided to do everything to keep me in its clutches because now that I wanted to sleep I couldn't, and if I did fall asleep on purpose, nothing happened. I just woke up in the exact same spot.

I finally achieved the accidental sleep listening to the sound of a storm churning the waters above, but only making the slightest rocking of the salty water on the sea floor and awoke again in the most familiar environment I had seen thus far: a green, late summer forest. I could tell winter was coming because the squirrels were fat and scrambling to get the last few nuts on the forest floor. The trees, tall and thin, had only the first few of their wide, flat leaves beginning to show a hint of anything other than green, the soft streaks of orange and yellow reflecting the sun that peaked through the much thinner canopy. I did not explore but sat down to enjoy a bath

in the afternoon sun. I leaned back against a tree and looked up at the canopy, listening to the loud, colorful birds, larger than the songbirds I was used to in temperate woods like these, as they flew through the top branches, hopping from tree to tree and avoiding the hot sun above.

My eye caught a huge white eagle wheeling through the branches. I was sure the other birds would scatter before this great predator, but they didn't seem to notice it. It dropped out of the trees and sped towards me as though it might attack me, and I put my arm up to defend my face, but it landed in front of me. That's when I realized it wasn't an eagle, but a cockatoo, a cockatoo so large I thought it was an eagle when viewing it from below. It cocked its head to one side and blinked, observed me for a second, then turned its head down and closed its eyes. It turned and opened its wings to fly away.

"Wait!" I shouted, much too loudly for something so near. It stopped mid-takeoff, and when it looked back, the voice of a young boy asked me if it could tell me a story.

"Of course you can," I said, grateful for the company.

The cockatoo raised himself up, hopped to a perch on a fallen branch, fluttered his wings, and ruffled his feathers.

"Once upon a time there lived a girl with two heads, residing in a hovel on a hilltop. Clemencia had not, of course, been born with two heads. She had started out with only one, having been conceived and born down in the valley where her parents and her grandparents and all the other generations before her were also. Never had anyone thought much about her until the day of her twelfth birthday. On that day she sprouted a tiny, dark nub on the right side of her neck. Her parents had wondered at this nub, and her father took her to see the healer on the other side of the valley, the healer who used the water of heaven to cure people of their ailments.

“The water from heaven fell from the falls that had no end. Many had tried to climb to the top, but none had come within sight of the source, and so numerous were the people injured on their quest that it was discovered the water had the power to heal these injuries. Soon pilgrims came from all over the region to bathe in the water, and to be healed of all their illnesses. Sometimes the water healed, and sometimes it failed, for even the stuff of heaven cannot cure every ailment. Still, many people began to remove it in buckets, flasks, and saddlebags to take back to their own villages. In time, merchants came and took the water to sell for profit to towns too far away for people to journey. Over many, many pilgrimages, the once pure and powerful waters became polluted and ruined. Merchants sold waters from the river that no longer healed, or labeled waters from ordinary springs as if they were from the healing river, so that the legendary waters no longer held any sway over illness or injury, and there were so many forgeries that it became almost impossible to find water from the true river. Still, people held hope that perhaps they would run into some luck when they visited a healer and might get a drop or two of the ancient, holy water.

“Clemencia and her father traveled to the healer, who said his incantations and threw some very pure looking water over her nub and sent her home. Clemencia was very unhappy as she walked home that night. She feared the healer was indeed one of the swindlers of the river, and when her nub refused to go away, she was sure. The night after the day she went to the healer, Clemencia cried for a long while as she lay in her bed. She was afraid of the lump, it was getting bigger, and she feared what it might become. The bump continued to grow, and one day Clemencia awoke to discover the head of a fully grown cockatoo sprouting from her shoulder. The little, white head blinked and looked at her before turning forward to survey its new world. Clemencia leapt out of her bed and ran to the looking glass in her tiny room. The white bird

stared back at her, attached at the base of her neck. Clemencia burst into tears. “What will I do?” she thought to herself. “What will everyone say when they see me like this?”

“The cockatoo leaned into her and caressed her neck with its head. It seemed to say “all will be well,” but she did not believe it. She knew she had to leave, that she couldn’t let anyone see her this way. So she pretended to be ill all day so her parents would not see her and snuck out in the dead of night after they had gone to sleep. She ran far away from the valley, up into the mountains that no one inhabited, for they were high, cold, and harsh to visitors, often whipping up storms when disturbed by unwelcome intruders. But the mighty peaks did not seem to dislike Clemencia, in fact, they welcomed her with a sunny morning and a warm breeze that they brought up from the valley. They seemed to understand her plight and pity her state. Clemencia made herself a shelter in a small cave below the snow caps, using the supplies she brought from the valley. She had food, fire, a bottle to collect water from the springs, and blankets for the cold nights. Thus she lived this way, alone with the bird’s head on her shoulder. Over the next few weeks she began to take a liking to the cockatoo, and he became the companion she lacked up here in the lonely wilderness. She often talked to him of her life in the valley, of her school friends and Alejandro, the Don’s young son she had dreamed of one day marrying, but who she knew would never have her like this. The more she talked the more the bird listened, and though he never said anything to her, she felt he understood her better than any human had.

“One night, Clemencia went to sleep with the fire burning at the edge of the cave entrance. When she awoke the next morning, the cockatoo’s head was gone, as if it had never been there. Clemencia felt panicked and lost, she had grown to love the bird, left her life in the valley for him, and now he had disappeared. She cried all morning by the dead embers of the fire. She thought that his head had dissolved back into her body and his companionship was

gone. Then, a great, white bird flew into the cave and lighted on her shoulder: the cockatoo had come back to carry Clemencia home. He pressed his head to hers, and she discovered that when she closed her eyes and concentrated, she could see as he saw and feel as he felt. She commanded him to fly, and he lifted himself up over the mountains and away toward the valley. Clemencia could see the snowcapped hills, the shimmering snake of the river, and the tiny black dots of villages basking in the waning autumn sun. Even though she leaned against the wall of the cave, she flew in the body of the bird. Soon she would have him return, she knew he would be strong enough to carry her back to the village. She knew also, that for the rest of her days he would never leave her.”

“Are you the cockatoo?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Am I Clemencia?”

“No. I thought you could be. You are small and your hair is brown as the tree-trunk, like her. But your face is not the same.”

“How did you lose her?”

“I woke up one day and she had disappeared. She had not packed or cleaned or even changed clothes. I feared she had been kidnapped or wandered away in a dream-walk, but no matter how far I flew I could not find her. After many years I gave up, guessed she was dead, for I knew she’d never leave me. I have been travelling the world ever since, trying to see as much as I can before I die.”

“How old are you?”

“One hundred and thirty-eight.”

“Wait, this happened over a century ago?”

“Parrots live a long time, love.”

“But she’s surely dead now.”

“Yes. And I have accepted that. You gave me a spark of hope for a moment, but I am not destroyed, for I have accepted the worst. It has come to pass but I am still here.”

I finally transported myself by falling asleep on purpose. I lay down in those woods and willed myself to sleep, hoping that the next place I woke would be in my hospital bed with my mom and dog by my side. I thought maybe if I fantasized about it, that I could decide where I wanted to go. Instead I woke lying in a soft pile of dry, powdery snow with no idea how long I had been there, but my breath had melted a little pool of water where my nose had been pressed into the snow, so I figured it must have been quite some time.

The snow was so deep the drifts were piled up taller than me in places where the rock jutted out from the ground. I was at the bottom of a limestone cliff so high that I couldn’t see where it ended; it just flew up away from me into a thick, white cloud bank. The trees in the woods behind me were blacker than onyx, and the few grey leaves that still clung to them trembled like tiny dogs in the high wind.

I spit to see how cold it was, and my spit froze in midair, like in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” I remembered reading that story in the ninth grade and being struck by how he described the cold of space and the way water froze before touching the earth. My spit made a hole in the snow because it landed as ice. I wondered if the cloud cover made it warmer like it did in the story, the clouds being only thing that could warm anything, the wood so hard and black that there was nothing to build a fire with here. I walked up and knocked on one of the trunks, finding it hard as rock, either petrified or frozen solid. I couldn’t tell.

I kicked the tree to see if any leaves would come off, but instead a thousand tiny, lilac-colored butterflies came fluttering out of miniscule holes I hadn't seen before. The cloud was so thick I accidentally sucked a few insects into my open mouth before I realized they had all frozen in midair and were falling to the ground like little purple rose petals. They shattered like glass when they hit the snow, so fragile that even the soft powder could not cushion them.

I fell into the pile of tiny shattered butterflies and burst into tears. I killed them all, not meaning to but it was still my fault. My tears froze before they even hit the snow, landing in little icy balls that resembled white BB's, sinking into the powder and leaving little holes where they'd been. Was I alone here? It seemed so since I killed all the butterflies. I hoped that I would see a white wolf or an owl or something, but everything remained so quiet and lifeless, like the butterflies were the only thing on the planet and had spontaneously generated from the tree itself.

The hot ball appeared in my stomach again, expanding through my intestines and up toward my throat, rage that I had been chosen for this lonely journey, desperation that I both wanted to go home and wanted to keep traveling through all these strange new dream-lands, guilt that it was my fault for being in this predicament, terror that if I froze to death in this dream I might actually die. I could not seem to dispel the fear that even if I did wake up, I would let things go back to normal, take little Ben back from whoever he was with, not tell anyone of my dreams, of this world that did everything it could to keep me captive.

I screamed as loud as I could, the sound echoing so forcefully off the nearby cliff that it hurt my ears. My tears flowed now as I leapt up and pulled a chunk of hair out of my head, but I didn't even feel it. I ran from tree to tree shrieking and crying, slamming my fists into the trunks. Butterflies swarmed out of them, all cool, pastel wisps of tissue paper freezing, falling, and shattering in droves on the soft snow. I don't know how long I did this, but when I finished I

couldn't see a speck of white snow underneath all the shattered butterflies. I stared at them, feeling both horrified and accomplished at the same time, unable to look at them. I ran.

The cold air filled my lungs, definitely there, freezing me from the inside. If I stopped I'd turn into an icy statue, so I ran till I came to a frozen lake and fell, sliding out across the ice. The surface was not covered in snow as I thought it should be, but rather, it was clear as the air around me, displaying dozens and dozens of fish staring up at me, frozen more solid than the fish in the seafood isle. I thought of the eel, how it talked to me, and for half a second I thought I saw its face in the ice, but it was just my imagination. I pressed my face to the surface, staring into the dead, still aquarium and thought of Ben, the way he used to sit on the floor and look at the fish in my little bowl on the kitchen counter, the way I picked him up and put him on the counter when I fed them so he could see them lunge at the flakes, hear them chomping and charging at each other in competition for more than enough to go around. I saw his little tan and grey face, the little blue bow I tied in his silky hair sometimes, heard the way he whined and fussed over the fish, wanting to catch them, getting the hair on his paws wet with fishy water. My own hair had frozen solid from being wet in the cold, and it bent severely as the ends touched the ice.

I remembered when my hair froze like that on the ice-fishing trip Rob made me go on when we went to Montana for our anniversary. I said I wanted to stay in the hot tub, but he said we might never get another opportunity to fish in a frozen lake. The sun had been bright enough to shine through the foot-thick ice. I remembered the sound the fish made as they swam underneath the surface trying to escape the vibrations Rob made with his sledge hammer, pounding a hole for us to stick bait through. The weather was frigid, the fish stank and were slimy, and the little shack on the ice smelled like urine and shook in the wind, like it might fall down at any moment. I complained the whole time because that had been the last weekend I

thought Rob would finally say he was bringing me to his family for Christmas: on our holiday ski trip by the roaring fire in our cabin, just before the reality set in of being unwanted on Christmas Day. Instead he wanted to drag me out in the middle of nowhere and slither fish up through a hole in the ice. I screamed at him after Christmas was over, said I was tired of being treated like an outcast by his family, threatened to leave him if he couldn't tell his mother off. I was furious I had spent another holiday alone and three days of our trip slogging through the snow to some ice shack. Three Christmases and anniversaries come and gone. Three years wasted.

I tried to sleep again, fearing if I did I would freeze to death, and if I didn't I would be trapped in the lifeless snow forever. I took the risk of dying; it seemed better than the alternative. When I woke up I lay on a rock on the side of a great island mountain, looking up at a lavender-pink sky over a deep purple sea. I had no idea what chemical would make it that color, only sure that I wasn't on Earth. I remembered the magenta planet I had seen earlier, wondering if I had finally made it to the surface, but that couldn't be right because the sun was clear and bright in the sky, but the magenta planet had been covered in a thick, roiling blanket of cloud. The black-purple sea rushed toward the island in a series of waves I could only imagine would have been considered tsunamis on Earth, their impact so strong I could feel the shock of it each time one hit the island. I stood, realizing as I did so that I was on the very top of the mountain. I turned to see a gigantic, lava-filled crater right behind me. My scream caught in my throat and my tears fell backwards into my nose. What if I had landed in that?

I glanced up from the boiling lava leaping toward me from the crater to see a storm that I

could only imagine in some science fiction nightmare: a wall of beetle-black cloud, stretching farther than I could see, rolled over the sky toward the island, the shadow crawling across the splashing, tumultuous ocean faster than the waves could outrun it. The clouds built so fast that I could see them growing upward. Waterspouts spun out of the wall, so numerous that they crossed over each other like spaghetti noodles, and lighting fell out of the cloud bank so often that I could hardly tell where one bolt ended and another began.

I had to get off this mountain! I leapt away from the crater and slid down the slope as fast as I could, trying to avoid scraping myself on the ground under me, rough and black like pumice, and knocking several huge rocks out from under my body and sending them flying down the mountain. At the crack of the last rock at the bottom of the valley a huge shadow passed over me. I looked up to see a royal blue dragon with bright orange wings wheeling like a great eagle overhead. I slid underneath a tree until it passed and flew back over toward the stormy side of the island. It was smaller than I had expected a dragon to be, having imagined them as hundred foot long giants spouting blasts of fire out of their mouths. This one couldn't have been more than twenty feet long and maybe ten or eleven feet tall, still big enough to eat me without much trouble.

If I was going to die, I wanted it to be my decision, not in the throat of this creature. I hid underneath this blue and yellow scaly thing I could only assume was some kind of tree. The mountain was covered in them, spaced so far apart their shadows would never cross paths and the only shade they could provide would be spotty and isolated. Hopefully I could still hide underneath this thing, its shadow just enough to cover my whole body. I crouched for a while under the shade of the tree, long enough that I thought for sure the dragon must have flown down

the length of the island, slid out from under the tree just as the clouds covered the sun and the first streak of lightning on this side of the mountain split the hot air with a pop.

I felt myself lifted off the ground by some mysterious and irresistible force I assumed was the wind, but when I looked down I saw blue claws wrapped around my waist. I screamed as loud as I could and pushed with all my strength against the claws, beating them and wedging my hands between myself and them. The thing they attached to seemed not to even notice that I would rather fall to the ground than be its next meal. Instead it flew me to the stormy side of the island, me clawing and kicking the entire time, and set me down on the scratchy black sand. I leapt up and flung myself away from it, but it swiped its tail out at me and wrapped it around me like a constrictor. I closed my eyes, refusing to watch as it sank its teeth into me, but instead it sat me on the beach like a toddler and held me there. I had cut a hole in the knee of my jeans and the sand stuck to the exposed skin. The dragon looked at the way the sand clung to me, putting its nose down to my skin and blowing the sand off of me, almost as if it were trying to see if the color of my knee was actually the same color as the skin of my arms, my face.

I looked deep into its yellow eyes; it wasn't a dragon but some kind of lizard-like creature with a great head shaped sort of like a chameleon's without the hump in the back. It had serrated, sharp teeth and some kind of orange fan that opened up at the back of its head, the head attached to a long neck connected to shoulders with muscular arms that it did not walk on; instead its upper torso joined to some kind of second, four-legged torso, like a centaur's. Its wings had sections of rectangular bone or cartilage that webbed through with orange skin. It did not have scales, rather deep blue skin, thick and rubbery like a cactus. It looked at me like it had never seen anything like me before in its life, staring from my hair to my eyes to my dirty tennis shoes.

A crack of thunder louder than a nuclear blast shook the whole island, and a monstrous wave the height of a skyscraper rose on the horizon, yet the lizard thing did not even look away from me.

“Hey,” I said. “I know you don’t understand me but we have to leave now. You can fly, but I can’t. So can we go?”

The thing looked out toward the speeding wave with total indifference, but it must have understood me because it looked out at the terrorist storm when I said something about it. It stared, motionless as the wave kept coming, holding tight to me as I tried to escape the grasp of its constrictor tail. “Please! I’ll drown!” I screamed, terror overwhelming me, taking away my reason as it always had. I didn’t want to die; I wanted to live, even if it meant I might never wake up. If I lived there was always the hope. If I died that hope would die too. I squirmed with all my might, but the creature just stood there, claws rooted in the sand.

The wave roared above us, blotting out the constant flash of lightening behind it, sucking all the water off the beach. I screamed in panic as it made its final approach, but out of nowhere the tsunami hit an invisible wall. The water roared upward over a dome I couldn’t see; the force of the wave shook the whole island with a shock that felt like an asteroid impact, sending more giant boulders falling down the volcano, then the wave receded and fell back into the ocean. Of course the lizard thing hadn’t been afraid, knowing nothing could harm us. There was probably some kind of invisible cap on the volcano too. I looked up at the blue creature. “I’m sorry. What’s protecting us?”

“There is a shield over every island on this planet.” Like the eel, it never spoke, instead a female voice appeared in my head, in the language I understood.

“So this is a planet other than Earth?” I asked.

“Of course. You did not discover that for yourself?” she replied.

“Well I assumed but...”

The giant, winged lizard dropped her head down and looked at me like a scientist might look through a microscope. “I have never seen one of you up close,” she said.

I made my decision in that moment. I wanted to stay here with her. Not saying anything more, I reached my hand out and pressed it into the lizard-creature’s clawed hand, knowing nothing of how long I might hold on.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT SECRET

They call it the Great Secret. Everyone knows there are two; everyone knows which one they have, but no one else does. Well, the providers know. Sometimes there is one provider, or two, or three, but mostly it's just one. Usually the providers like to pair up when they are young, but then they split up as time goes on. I don't think many of them pair up again, but they know the secret; they discovered it when we were all babies.

In my history classes, I learned that long ago people used words to denote their secret: "He" and "She." We use seh now, for everyone. For instance "Nobody likes Movrak, seh is an extremely annoying person." That way the secret is kept safe. Most kids call their provider "parent," but "provider" works just as well. Kids in the past knew their parents' secret, called them "mother" or "father," but kids now hardly ever know their providers' secrets till their providers die. I know mine's though; seh told me a few years ago when I was eleven because seh said that it was not fair that I should not know the same secret that I had unwittingly shared as an infant, so I call seh by seh's first name: Hinma. And Hinma calls me by my given name: Ashmov, or Ash for short.

The ones people pair up with are called secret-keepers, and are expected never to reveal the secret. I will have many secret-keepers throughout my life, when I pair up, and I will find their secret, but for now, my provider and my doctor and Uvrah are the only people who know.

When Uvrah and I met, we were thirteen; that was only a year ago, but it feels like ages. I didn't even notice Uvrah at first. We were in the same class for six months before we even spoke a word to each other. We took notes side by side and learned about how some of the old societies slaughtered all but a select few of the female half of their populations before the Third World War. Together we took timed essays about the fifty-year nuclear winter and global restructuring and talked about how the new global government took away all gender distinction, said it was the only way to stem the genocide. We discussed how people eventually came to accept it, and there was no reason to censor sex or force the new way of life on people anymore. Everyone learned to keep the secret themselves. Uvrah and I hardly looked at each other as we sat through all of this history together; seh simply had seh's friends and I had mine. Then one day everything changed.

There was a bully in the school by the name of Khilo who always went around picking on the other kids: seh slammed one kid's head in a locker and even threatened to discover and reveal another classmate's secret, but no one ever did anything about it because Khilo was so big. Seh must have been a six foot tall fifteen-year-old. I guessed that's why Uvrah never stood up to Khilo either; we were all too scared, but one day I was walking down the hallway to history class when Khilo tripped Uvrah's small sibling Navr in the middle of the walkway. Navr's bag spilled everywhere and seh started crying while Khilo pointed and laughed hysterically. All the other kids in the hall started giggling too. I began to help Navr by finding seh's smart-glasses, fully aware that all of the eyes in the hall were on me, but then suddenly two feet came flying out of the corner of my eye and struck Khilo hard in the face, spattering blood everywhere as the bones crunched in Khilo's nose. Uvrah must have been a foot shorter than Khilo, but seh flipped

over backward *in the air* after seh drop-kicked Khilo. Then seh proceeded to kick the bully all over as the poor, but not undeserving, kid lay bleeding and screaming on the floor.

Uvrah only stopped beating Khilo when one of the teachers came and physically pulled the fight apart. I know Uvrah didn't get in too much trouble that day because all the teachers had spent the past two years assigning extra work, giving detentions, and even suspensions to Khilo and nothing worked until, in a matter of about sixty seconds, Uvrah permanently solved the worst of the school's bully problem.

I went to find Uvrah later, knowing where seh would be: sitting under the big apple tree down by the lake about a mile from the school. The heat from the approaching summer rose in rippling waves off the black asphalt as I walked the half-mile that was paved; the unpaved half-mile was much less miserable since the heat was absorbed by the cream-colored dirt. I heard the low, elephantine hum of thunder in the vast distance, turning my head for just a second to see a black, upwardly boiling cumulonimbus on the horizon, as there usually was every afternoon in the spring and early summer. Winter never comes here, and the rainy season only lasts a few weeks, so we never really get an escape from the heat.

I approached Uvrah cautiously, never having seen someone so violently attack another human before. I was nervous I might provoke the same reaction, but seh was simply sitting in the shade close enough to the water to put seh's feet in, so I walked up and sat down, pulling off my shoes so that I too could put my feet in the hot, stagnant water. It was better than nothing.

"I hear thunder," seh said, not looking in my direction but upwards at the sky. "They'll be grounding traffic soon. I hope my parent isn't late; seh might have to land and drive home on the ground."

“That was a pretty crazy thing you did earlier,” I said, not wanting to sound too admiring, but still not able to quite suppress the smile on my face. “I hope you didn’t get in too much trouble.”

“Nah,” Uvrah said. “They gave me detention tomorrow and called my provider and told seh what happened. Seh was furious until I said what Khilo did to Navr. Then seh said there would be iced-sugar waiting for me when I get home. I guess seh already called the serving-bot to put some out for me.” Uvrah ran a copper-colored hand through seh’s thick, chocolate hair, taking off a layer of dust but leaving little flecks of sweat-covered dirt clumps behind instead. I looked at my own reflection in the water: my shoulder-length black hair and dark eyes suddenly seeming dim in comparison to that red-speckled mop of brown contrasted with two orbs of brilliant blue.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” I asked.

Uvrah laughed. “A few years ago I got karate lessons for my hatching-day. I got really into it and now I’m a third degree black-belt.”

“So how come you never beat Khilo’s ass before?”

“I don’t know. I just never really thought it was any of my business,” seh shrugged. “I always thought the teachers would handle it or someone else would stand up to Khilo. They always tell you in martial arts you should never, ever use it unless you have to. I guess I never felt like I had to until today. I didn’t want everyone to know about me because now they’ll all want me to do tricks or get in fights and beat up this kid or that kid and what not. I didn’t want to deal with that shit.”

I knew seh was right, even if this solution was a bit selfish. Uvrah would become a little overnight celebrity at our school, and I never felt like seh was the kind of kid who wanted that

much attention. Still, it had to feel nice to be the new school hero, to have all the kids staring at you, mouths open, like you were a god, to have all the teachers telling you how bad you were and how you deserved to be expelled while winking and smiling and slipping you candies out of their sleeves.

I started tugging on the collar of my uniform, even though it was a short-sleeve-shirt, I was still dying to get out of it and into something less hot, less confining. Uvrah just sat there skipping rocks out into the pond and pulling apple blossoms up out of the sand, crushing them, and sniffing them as they released the last pungent, sweet scent they would ever give.

“Wish this tree had some apples on it,” seh said longingly.

“I have a few bucks. We could go buy some apples if you want.”

Uvrah laughed. “That would require getting up.”

That was the first day I ever had a real conversation with Uvrah. We ended up sitting at the pond and talking until the sun began to give off that dusky, warmer light right before the end of the day, and we were both sure that our parents would be wondering where we were soon, that dinner would be getting cold, that Uvrah’s victory iced-sugar would surely be melted.

Next day at school, I expected a riot, expected Khilo to come roaring in demanding a fight, a fair rematch with the kid who only won with a sucker punch, but Khilo was not anywhere around. I heard later that they took seh to the hospital for surgery to fix seh’s nose, and that the pain pills hadn’t totally worn off. Khilo missed three days of school before finally showing up to a crowd full of kids hoping for a brawl, for another monstrous spectacle between Khilo and Uvrah, but as the old farmers used to say “that horse had been broken.” Khilo came in and quietly slunk into a desk a couple minutes after class started, making no sound and trying to slide down as far into the seat as possible. Seh had a giant, silver brace across seh’s nose that looked

kind of like the metal oxygen mask they put on a person's face as seh is dying and having seh's consciousness uploaded to the eternal-life database.

Meanwhile, Uvrah walked around the school to the cheers and calls from students everywhere to perform some other stunt, to flip off the bars on the playground, to beat up Khilo again. Uvrah gracefully handled the attention for the first couple days, but after that, seh started becoming more and more irritable until seh began yelling at everyone who passed in the hall and even looked in seh's direction. Uvrah and I ate lunch together every day at the cafeteria and walked home every afternoon when school let out, making me wonder why we had suddenly become seeming best friends.

We started sitting together in physiology class the next time we had it. I hadn't even known we had that class together because I'd always sat in the front by the window and seh had always sat in the back to be with a friend. After the incident with Khilo, Uvrah and this friend were no longer on speaking terms. I wasn't sure why; all I knew was seh sat with me now.

We whispered back and forth to each other as the teacher told us about the evolution, both natural and contrived, of human sex characteristics, that not only did everyone in the past know each other's sex, but females even reproduced with it by letting their babies grow *inside their bellies*. The teacher grimaced at this notion, both so beautiful and so horrifying at the same time. Seh said that this way of reproduction was not only time consuming, inconvenient, and impractical, but also dangerous, as the fetus often killed the host or severely damaged seh's body, sometimes permanently. Many of these primitive humans lived in terror of this aboriginal method of reproduction, but of course they had no choice but to allow these parasites to grow in their bodies. Still, the teacher told us these hosts believed they were doing something great, respectable, fulfilling, even if they sacrificed themselves. Seh said they had a special name for

themselves: mothers, and they used to have “breasts”: glands that produced milk without any kind of technological intervention.

I leaned over to Uvrah. “Can you imagine?” I asked, wrinkling my nose. “Having no control over your own body?”

Uvrah shrugged and said that we had a much better method now. I knew what seh meant; the Egg sounded much more pleasant.

Our teacher talked excitedly about the Egg, how the operators of the reproduction center take the DNA of the one or two people who want a child, make eggs and sperm in a generator, fertilize them in a petri dish, and place them in an artificial womb, or Egg, for nine months’ incubation, screening out genetic diseases and deformities by correcting or removing them during each developmental stage. It’s a beautiful process: clean, sterile. You simply have to decide you want a child, place the order for one, and voila; no overpopulation, no accidental or unloved or unwanted children, no kids dying of cancer or organ failure or birth defects. Scientists engineer embryos in the Egg to stop females from developing breasts and menstruating (at least that’s what I think they used to call it, back when they couldn’t put an end to it) and males from developing low voices and conspicuous body shapes. The teacher had said in one class the only reason they had not removed gender altogether was the fear that human beings might have to return to sexual reproduction if another great war blotted out technology for a half a century, as it had in the past. Even though the global government was stable now, we couldn’t trust it to always be. But if something happened, we could take simple hormone supplements to restart our biological processes.

I wondered what Uvrah would look like with breasts and a tiny waist, or maybe a hairy chest and thick, muscular arms. It was strange to picture seh like that, and I couldn’t imagine

seeing someone with so much maleness or femaleness in real life. Uvrah stared quietly at me till the end of class, and I wondered if seh was thinking the same thing.

I thought intensely of our strange new arrangement after we left our last class and wondered why, all of a sudden, we seemed inseparable, had started seeing each other in the afternoons, had switched desks in order to be next to each other.

“Why did you start hanging out with me instead of your old friends?” I asked while we sat on the overpass near my house, throwing rocks at birds as they flew over the deserted road.

“I don’t know,” Uvrah said. “I guess it’s cause you’re the only one who doesn’t treat me like a circus side show. I mean even my regular friends, the fight with Khilo is like all they can talk about. They won’t shut up about it, and they think cause they’re my friends they can make me do stuff when the other kids aren’t around. So I just figured I would quit hanging out with them till this all blows over. You don’t bug me about it. You’re pretty cool.”

Seh said those last words with a little blush and a downward glance. It was true though, that I hadn’t mentioned the incident with Khilo once since we had that first conversation about it. I guess I just thought it was over, that there wasn’t anything more to talk about. A pigeon landed on the railing of the bridge. Uvrah tensed like a dog that has scented a fox, sliding seh’s hand over to the little pile of stones we had laid on the rail and leaning ever so slightly forward. Taking an almost imperceptible step toward the pigeon as it looked in the other direction, seh flung the rock at the unsuspecting bird, hitting it squarely in the back. The pigeon threw itself off the rail, spread its wings, and flew away from us with an indignant look on its face, as if to say we were both idiots. Uvrah laughed and leapt in the air, ecstatic that we had actually gotten one of them. I felt a little guilty for throwing things at the birds, but not that guilty because I had

always considered pigeons to be disgusting pests that spread parasites, poop everywhere, and fling themselves at you if you have even the smallest scrap of something they want.

Uvrah turned around and walked off the bridge, clearly satisfied with seh's accomplishment. I followed, running to catch up as both myself and my legs were a good deal shorter than seh's.

"My provider bought a Halloween costume today," Uvrah said unprovoked as we walked to the store for a drink.

I laughed. "Why? Halloween isn't for months."

Halloween had become popular in the last century or so, even more than it ever had been, because it was the only night a year that people got to wear clothes that represented secondary sex characteristics. Of course, this didn't reveal one's actual secret. We could go as a female character from an ancient novel one year and a male protagonist from an old movie the next. It didn't matter. Many people stuck to characters from more modern fictions, characters who had never revealed their secrets, but some people reveled in how old-fashioned it all was, how they could wear vintage ball gowns and makeup and stuff their shirts with false breasts or strap on fake muscles and glue on facial hair and answer such masculine names as Clark and Peter and Bruce.

Uvrah didn't seem as fascinated by Halloween's gender-rule-bending as I was. Seh simply said that seh didn't know why seh's parent bought the costume so early, and it was stupid to prepare for one silly holiday so far in advance.

"What's seh dressing up as?" I asked.

"Snow White, from the old fairy tale."

"Isn't that story almost two hundred years old?"

“I don’t know, don’t ask me. I think it’s way older than that actually, like almost a thousand years old. My parent just loves it. One of seh’s friends is going as a wolf. You know seh and seh’s friends are all kind of nerdy that way. They love super old literature from the days when people were still using horses for transportation and washing themselves in a bucket outside.”

“That’s hilarious.”

“No it’s not. I know this cause they want me to be something from the theme too. I don’t know what I want to be. It all seems insane to me. I mean, why do I have to worry about this now? The school year’s not even over yet.”

“Are you going to do it? Be some fairytale thing you don’t even know?”

“I have no idea. It will be a war if I don’t. My provider is really good at making me feel guilty, and I feel like I have to do it cause when I said no, Navr cried. I think I should do it for Navr; I won’t have a sibling this young much longer.”

I went home with Uvrah and Navr that night and had dinner at their house. Their provider, Brieden, cooked a much better meal than mine. My parent was never good at cooking, burning the most basic things, drying out olive-water joles, oversalting tifers, forgetting the boiling fospa berries and upsetting the snoozing safety-bot when they started burning, but Brieden served us the most delicious fospa berry stew I had ever tasted, with little white beans and chunks of fospas and just a hint of meat sauce. Brieden even gave me a little sip of wine though I had another three years to go till I turned sixteen. Then seh let us turn on the interactive hologram and start projecting Torminiloo: a game show where you have to answer questions and do whatever they dare you to in your home to win the prize. They chose participants from the audience watching from home to play on their interactive screens. I watched Torminiloo every

night, hoping beyond hope I might be chosen. Some of my friends' parents said the show was stupid, that the things people had to do to win prizes were silly and dangerous, but I didn't care; it was a funny show.

I liked seh's hologram projector better than mine. It shrunk and expanded again when it followed us through doors into the other room instead of waiting till someone got the remote and turned it to its side and back again, and it floated much steadier than ours, none of that bobbing up and down a little in midair nonsense. If we had more money we could fix those little glitches or buy a new one, and I found myself wondering what Uvrah might think if seh saw my pitiful, ancient hologram projector.

By the end of the school year we had become close friends, so it came a shock to me when Uvrah told me seh was going to a horse camp to learn how to train so that seh could have a horse in the next quarter. I, of course, congratulated seh, said that was awesome, pretended I was fine with it, but, truthfully, I felt like I was losing a treasure I just found. It was strange to feel this attached to someone I'd just barely met, to feel like crying because I was going to spend a summer without seh.

I shouldn't have been so upset since summer break was only four weeks. We get breaks for four weeks in the summer, two in the fall, four in the winter, and two in the spring; they say the breaks help us learn. We get July off and go back at the beginning of August. Those four weeks weren't so bad; my provider and I went to the beach; I went camping at the lake with some friends and their families, the normal summer stuff, but the whole time I missed Uvrah. I felt everything fun that I did over the break would have been better if seh had been around, that the stars would have been brighter, the sky would have been bluer, the ocean would have been clearer, the lake would have been warmer if Uvrah was there with me.

I spent the last few days of the break looking out the window waiting to see Uvrah walking up the drive, but it never happened, so on the last day I walked the two miles over to Uvrah's house. I saw Brieden's brand new car in the open landing bay and Navr ripping the paper off of new backpacks and school stuff on the front porch.

"Uvrah around?" I asked as seh pulled out a new pair of smart-glasses.

Navr looked up at me with a jealous jerk of the neck. "No, seh's with the new horse."

I didn't have to ask where the barn was; before Uvrah left, seh took me to the boarding stable where Brieden had reserved a stall for the new horse. We lived in the outer skirts of the suburbs, so the barn wasn't far from the house. I walked down the street, feeling a little snubbed, like there was some reason Uvrah didn't call me or come by when seh got back, like I meant so little to seh that I wasn't even worth taking a few minutes for.

When I got to the stable, I found it empty, just a couple of people riding in the ring, someone giving a horse a bath outside one of the barns, another person walking up the big, green hill with a halter. I went in the larger barn, the one with the newer wooden planks and the tin roof still shining in the bright sun, heating up the interior of the barn so much that the fans and the little air conditioners could barely keep up. Apparently Brieden had enough money to buy a car, but not enough to afford a barn with a central cooling system. I had already started sweating, but not just from the heat inside the barn. I felt stifled by the silence of the stable, listening for more than just the snort of a bored horse waiting to be turned out when the heat of the day passed, the buzz of a fly lazily seeking a meal in the shady, slightly cooler barn, the tearing off of chunks of hay in the stalls. I walked farther down the barn, feeling the tightness in my stomach increasing with each step. I knew Uvrah's stall would be toward the end on the left. Would seh be there?

As I approached the last set of stalls, I heard the sound of brushing, the stomp of heavy, ironclad feet and rounded the corner to find a tall, stocky, black-and-white painted steed standing over Uvrah. The horse's eyes drooped sleepily in the early afternoon lull as Uvrah ran some kind of black, rubber brush over its coat. I didn't make a sound, suddenly realizing how little I knew about horses. What if I startled it when I entered the stall or tried to get Uvrah's attention? Would it hurt someone, rip the rope that tied it to the wall, hurl itself out of the stall? I just didn't know, so I backed slowly up and away from the stall entrance. The horse perked its ears and opened its eyes the rest of the way, prompting Uvrah to turn slightly to see the cause of the disturbance. Seh's eyes widened a bit, and suddenly I lost my nerve, not knowing what to do or say, simply standing in the stall entrance looking like a mute fool.

"Hi, how are you?" Uvrah asked.

I didn't know what to say to that; it was so curt, so blunt. "I'm fine," I said quietly. "I'm guessing horse camp went well."

Uvrah started talking about all the things seh had done at camp: riding long trails with bags full of tents and camping equipment; learning to groom, tack, and administer basic equine medicine; training new foals to walk on a halter. I stopped listening after a while, beginning to feel I had been replaced by a horse. Suddenly I felt words coming up so fast I couldn't stop them.

"Why didn't you call me when you got home? I know you've been home for a couple of days now."

Uvrah looked at me like I had lost my mind. Seh's eyebrows lifted and seh's mouth opened a little slit. "I was trying to get my horse here. We had to trailer it and drive for over two hundred miles. It's been hard the past couple days trying to get settled."

“You couldn’t tell your sensor to call me, send me a hologramchat on the interactive screen, anything? You could have ridden the horse over?”

“I’m sorry my entire life doesn’t revolve around you.”

My righteous indignation melted and was replaced by another familiar emotion: embarrassment; I felt like an idiot, and I also knew that I might be very close to driving Uvrah away. I had to be careful. “I’m sorry, I guess I just missed you. What’s your horse’s name?”

Uvrah still seemed tense and distant, seh’s entire body was stiff and robotic as seh continued to remove shed hair from the horse’s coat. “It’s on the door,” seh said a little roughly.

I looked outside the stall to the open door where a plaque that read “Rustler” hung on a nail in the middle of the first two by four.

“Why Rustler?” I asked, still trying to get the subject off of my little interrogation.

Uvrah relaxed seh’s shoulders a bit. “Because, its coat is painted like a cow’s, so I don’t know, I guess the previous owners kind of liked the idea that it was a cowpoke’s horse. I didn’t want to change the name it had for the last seven years. Horses are smart, they know their names. They know a lot of what you’re saying when you talk to them.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that as I looked into the animal’s large, tar-black eyes, but I supposed there could be some intelligence in there. The horse looked me in the eye and held my gaze, not with the fawning neediness of a dog or the fleeting, bored disinterest of a cat, but more like an objective observer, like I was some intruder on its private time with its new caretaker and even though I wasn’t a danger, I was an annoyance. It pushed its ears back a little and lifted its hind foot as I approached, as if it knew I feared it. I wasn’t sure I should be doing this, entering the stall and coming so close to this gigantic, strong animal, but this was the biggest part of Uvrah’s life now, and I wanted to be a part of it, so I did my best to swallow my fear.

“School starts back on Monday,” I said as I walked up and placed a trembling hand on the horse’s thick, muscular neck. Its ears plucked back up and eyelids relaxed a little as it realized I wasn’t going to interfere with its grooming session. “How are you going to take care of Rustler when we go back to class?”

“I was planning on coming before school to feed and after school to ride and groom,” Uvrah said as seh bent down with some kind of hook and picked up one of Rustler’s back legs. This looked dangerous, so I stood still and asked what on earth Uvrah was doing.

“Cleaning Rustler’s feet. You have to take the dirt out of their hooves or they could get a fungal infection.”

Uvrah easily cleaned the rest of the animal’s hooves, and it quietly and cooperatively lifted its legs in turn, with only a slight tap of Uvrah’s hand on its ankle. Uvrah then put a blanket and a saddle on the horse’s back and led it out the door.

“Want to watch me ride?”

I nodded and followed seh to the ring, which was full of gravelly sand and had several large sections of fence that I assumed were meant to be jumped based on the one time watched the equestrian sports on the Olympics.

Uvrah closed the gate to the rink and mounted Rustler with the grace of one of those Olympians, placing a foot into the stirrup and swinging the other leg over the saddle and into the other stirrup without seeming like seh even thought about it. Seh began walking Rustler about the rink, telling me what exactly was happening as it happened: the warm up—a simple stroll around the ring—the trot, the canter, the gallop (a beautiful, magical gate where the horse seemed to fly rather than run, its mane swinging out behind it, mingling with Uvrah’s dark hair), the jump over the little sections of fence. Uvrah had the grace of the Olympians on the show, not

bouncing when the horse ran, not sliding when it jumped, moving in and out of the curves as if the two, horse and human, were one.

After working the horse into a light sweat, Uvrah came back over to me and swung out of the saddle like seh had been doing that seh's whole life. "Want to ride?"

I started. I didn't want to say no to Uvrah, but I had never been on a horse before, and I feared that not only would I fall and get hurt, but I'd also make a fool of myself in front seh. Uvrah went and got a little plastic staircase with only a couple of stairs. I would later come to learn this was a mounting block.

"It will be fine. I'll put the lead rope on the bridle and be there the whole time."

Uvrah took the leash from the halter and attached it to a little ring on the bridle, right under Rustler's chin. My stomach twisted as I followed my friend to the mounting block, climbing the little staircase and clumsily slipping my foot through the first stirrup. Uvrah pulled my foot out of the stirrup and told me it was the wrong one, then helped me get the right one in and swing a little shakily into the saddle. I felt the leather between my legs, firm yet soft too, expensive looking. I felt a dip and tiny lurch as Uvrah led the horse on a slow walk around the ring, hugging the fence because seh knew I would be more comfortable nearer the rail. The reins were tied through a metal ring on the front of the saddle, so I relied solely on Uvrah to guide me. I ran my fingers through the horse's mane, noting that, though mostly black and white, it had chocolaty streaks through it, the same color as Uvrah's hair.

Uvrah walked around the ring in front of the horse, confident and strong, not afraid at all of this huge animal that could stomp seh to death with one swift move, assured in seh's ability to bend the animal's will to seh's own, to both trust and expect obedience from a beast that could be both danger and aide, friend and enemy. I felt myself bolstered by this confidence, this

straight posture, and began to relax on the horse. I let go of the mane and looked up from the ground. The world around me was much farther down now as I sat on this creature, so tall it was, and I could see farther up the hill and more of the stable grounds than I ever had before. They had some kind of trail at the far end of the pasture that looked like it led off into the woods. I asked Uvrah about it, and seh said that it was a trail that went through a gate off of stable property and up into the mountains at the end of a string of farms that the stable paid to let boarders ride through. I thought riding that trail might actually be fun, like maybe I could borrow a horse that wasn't scary and ride it, or maybe Uvrah and I could both ride Rustler, me sitting behind, arms wrapped around seh's waist, nose in seh's chocolate brown hair. I shuddered, shocked at how much imagining this scenario had pleased me.

When we finished the ride and put Rustler out to pasture, we walked back to town and went out for dinner. Uvrah tried unsuccessfully to order a beer, but after the server laughed at us we decided we would have to just keep paying that older kid with the fake I.D. chip who always hung out on Tenth Street to get it for us.

We waited till the sun finished sinking behind the mountains to walk back to the house so that the streets would at least be a little cooler on the way. As we made the final steps up the front porch of Uvrah's house, seh stopped and looked at me.

"I had a really good time today." Uvrah's voice was shaky and seh looked away at the house rather than at me. Seh took a hand and put it on the back of seh's head. Then, suddenly, seh leaned in and kissed me, not a passionate, sexual kiss, just a light peck on the lips.

Afterwards, without another word, Uvrah turned and ran silently into the house.

I turned and walked the half-hour back to my place, my mind churning with uncertainties and hopes. Was Uvrah now my date? What had changed between us? Why had seh kissed me

now? Would things get weird between us or would we be able to enter into this new phase in our relationship without a hitch?

I rolled around in bed all night thinking about these questions, only getting a couple hours of sleep before I decided to get up at dawn and make myself some breakfast. My provider still snored loudly from seh's room, the sounds of a monkey wrench being thrown into a jet turbine drifting easily under the closed door. I put some coffee on, not that I liked it; I actually hated it and had to put a ton of milk and sugar in it so that it wouldn't taste like coffee, but somehow it made me feel more mature to drink it, more grown up. My provider didn't have enough money to buy me some of the nice things my friends had, so I felt sometimes seh made up for it by letting me do things the others didn't get to do: drive the car in an empty parking lot and even pull it off the ground every once in a while and fly through some of the unused travel lanes, have a sip of wine with dinner, drink coffee. I liked the grown up feeling, even if the coffee was bitter, and the wine made my throat hurt, and I still wasn't able to quite see over the steering column while also pressing the gas. They have self-driving cars now, but they're too expensive for us.

I vegetated on the couch all day, too tired to go out, too awake to go back to bed, staring at the screen watching the old movies back when they recognized people based on their sex. Sometimes I thought the only reason the government didn't censor these movies was so we would feel like we were free. I often wondered if we were really as free as the people in those movies, the ones who wouldn't be prosecuted or shamed for revealing their secret. What a complicated world it must have been, and an open one, one where maybe people didn't have to hide as much, or maybe they had to hide more.

I remembered what my history teacher said about the times when these old films were made: that violence was mostly based on sex, that a full half of the human population was

slaughtered and mutilated and enslaved and driven down into the dirt for nothing more than the shape of their genitals. I could see it in the movies, the female ones getting beaten up, raped. Even the females who were supposed to be dangerous and strong still dressed to please the eye of another. It makes sense that everyone dresses the same, wears their hair plain, whatever the length. We don't have elaborate dresses or sharp black suits now, just trousers, loose, flowing tops, jumpsuits, the like. That's the one thing I guess I might return to the way it used to be: the clothes. They look so much fun to me, like getting ready would not be a task you suffer through just to get out the door; it would be a hobby.

This cleansing of gender right down to the clothes was done so long ago that no one even remembers it, but sometimes I feel we live in too much fear, that too much emphasis is placed on guarding the secret and not enough on self-control, on disciplining yourself to not discriminate, to not hate or judge someone based only on one characteristic they had no say in. Still, nowadays it would be so humiliating for everyone to know your secret, so who would dare to reveal it in the hopes that maybe, just maybe they wouldn't be judged? Sometimes I wished I had the courage to reveal my secret like they did in these old films, without any qualms, through the way they acted and the clothes they wore. I wished I did not care what others thought of me: I wanted everyone to know me, to know all of me, and I wanted to know them too, but I couldn't bear the thought of what they might say. I wasn't even sure what Uvrah might say.

I didn't see Uvrah until school started Monday, and after spending the entire weekend waiting for the sensor on my ear to activate or to hear a rap at the door, jumping up every time I heard the sound of a vehicle landing on the roof, just to have it be some strange automaton delivering food, I was in no mood for excuses. As soon as I caught seh in the hall, I grabbed seh's arm and dragged seh into the nearest corner.

“Why would you kiss me and then run away? Why would you leave me to rot all weekend?”

“I thought you were the one who left me. When you didn’t call me or come over, I thought you were embarrassed and wanted to be left alone.”

“No! No way. You are not going to pin this on me. You kissed me. That means you call me, not the other way around.”

“Look I’m sorry. I was embarrassed, and I didn’t know what to do, and I figured you thought I was a weirdo and never wanted to see me again.”

I had never seen Uvrah look so fragile, so small, leaning on the wall with slumped spine and downcast eyes. I remembered when seh kicked Khilo’s ass, threw the rock at the pigeon, rode the horse with such ease. Seh didn’t even look like the same person now, with hunched shoulders and a slight tear in seh’s eye, all the confidence and swagger gone. I wanted to hold Uvrah, to care for this new delicacy, to wrap my arms around seh’s tender neck and stroke all the chocolaty hair on seh’s head.

“Why did you think that?”

“Because now I don’t know if we’re friends or if we’re dating, and I feel like I’m going to lose you because of a stupid mistake.”

I found it amazing how I could go from being furious at this kid to feeling like an idiot for ever being angry in the first place. “It wasn’t a mistake,” I said and leaned in for a quick kiss on seh’s surprised and slightly open mouth. Then I took seh’s hand and led seh out into the hallway to announce to the world the new direction our relationship had taken.

The next couple of months were a blur: kissing by the lake, going out on dates, our parents telling us how cute a couple we made, how adorable our first relationship was. It’s

amazing how, when you're that young, you think your first relationship will be your last, no matter what.

Of course, the thing they call the honeymoon phase never lasts, and for us it fizzled out as fast as it began. It all started with our first sexual experience on Halloween night. I sat in the living room of Brieden's house as everyone got ready, attending Brieden's house party because my own provider was working late and not celebrating Halloween that year. I would have wanted to be with Uvrah anyway, as it was our first real holiday together. Every manner of vintage fairytale characters from Snow White to Robin Hood ran through the house trying to fix runny face paint and glue wigs onto rubber bald-caps. I didn't really know any of them, but Brieden had uploaded a little encyclopedia to my smart-glasses so I could learn a bit about all the characters. The smell of plastic and costume makeup permeated the house with an industrial chemical scent, like the water from the old fracking regions evaporating on a warm day.

I hadn't spent a lot of time getting ready, as I was a character from a much newer tale: a traveler named Hoskha who explored non-oxygen-based life forms on planets that would be poisonous to people. That costume didn't require any makeup or wigs or intricate clothes, didn't have an assigned sex, so I waited for Uvrah to come out. Seh hadn't told me what the costume was, either to make it an awesome surprise or out of embarrassment at the fact that seh's parent made such a ridiculous costume decision. When Uvrah finally did come out of the bedroom I almost laughed out loud; seh told me that the group had a friar for the costume set up, but never mentioned seh was the friar. The costume was ludicrous: a fat suit and a bald cap that was much lighter than the rest of seh's skin, complete with brown robe and cord belt.

Despite the lunacy of the costume, Uvrah flashed seh's giant smile at all the guests. "Navr is having so much fun. I don't want to stay in this thing long, but the look on seh's face when I came out was so worth it."

I laughed a little, thinking how adorable it was that, even though Uvrah was a teenager now, seh still enjoyed doing things for seh's younger sibling. It was true though, that Navr wouldn't be little forever.

The adults had us take pictures, using their smart-glasses to capture a memory exactly as it appeared to human eyes and store it in the eternal-life database. Everyone quietly rolled their eyes and allowed me to squeeze in even though my provider had not compelled me to dress with the theme. Then we went trick-or-treating, an interesting and ancient tradition linked all the way back to the frights of the superstitious inhabitants of the British Isles. Weeks ago Brieden had asked us to come along for Navr's sake, so seh wouldn't be alone. Navr got picked on a lot and didn't have many friends, and the moment I saw Brieden's sad eyes I understood exactly why Uvrah said seh knew how to make a person feel guilty. It was hard even for me to not feel a tinge of remorse for not going in a matching outfit, and Uvrah and Brieden had a strong relationship. I imagined how hard it would be for seh to upset seh's parent.

I knew once Uvrah entertained Navr for a while, seh and I would be able to slip away from the adults as they preoccupied themselves with the smaller children, and sure enough, once we had gotten out into the neighborhood, Navr ran shrieking down the sidewalks with a pillowcase full of candy, and we were able to slide off onto a little walkway and turn around away from our group. We walked to the back of a little alleyway between two close houses so Uvrah could get out of that ridiculous costume, and then we ran to the nearest one of Brieden's friend's houses so seh could leave the wig and empty robe in the open landing dock.

“Where do you want to go?” Uvrah asked.

“I was thinking maybe we could go back to my house. There’s a fridge full of food, and my provider has a deadline tomorrow so seh won’t be home for hours.”

Uvrah agreed and we walked down the neighborhood street toward my house. We stopped and left a note for Brieden, as Uvrah was feeling a little guilty about ditching everyone without saying anything, and we ran before anyone could find us costume-free.

I let us into the house and turned on the lights, then turned on the hologram projector to watch a Halloween special, the one where the aliens take over the planet but then accidentally release all the ghosts of dead people. Silly I know, but it had been a Halloween tradition since I was a kid. The nostalgic side of me felt like something might be missing from the holiday if I didn’t watch it. But before I could bring up the special, Uvrah kissed me, deeply, like seh’d never kissed me before. We had made out a hundred times, but this time I was very aware that it could wind up somewhere beyond just kissing and rubbing around. I removed Uvrah’s shirt and ran my hands over bare, copper skin. Before I knew it, my own top had been pulled over my head and tossed on the floor, and that’s when it hit me: someone was going to find out my secret tonight. For the first time in my life, a person aside from a parent or healthcare provider would see me, all of me, and we hadn’t even talked about it yet. I felt a wave of terror that made my heart stop beating and my hands start shaking. Even though I loved and trusted Uvrah, I wasn’t sure I was ready for this and leapt up off the couch.

“What? What’s wrong?” Uvrah stood up.

“I don’t…”

“It’s ok,” Uvrah said and took me back into seh’s arms. Suddenly I felt warm in this embrace, terror melting, curiosity piquing. Perhaps I was ready; we had been dating for a couple

of months now, so maybe this was right. I guess most people don't even wait that long. I remembered being told in my first sex-ed class that there was nothing to worry about, revealing someone's secret was illegal, immoral. I knew I could trust Uvrah, and seh's confidence spread through my limbs and up into my skull. I opened my mouth and kissed seh again. We rolled around on the couch for a while until finally all the clothes had come off and I saw Uvrah's secret for the first time. All I could think was "Huh, same as mine."

The actual act of lovemaking was a little awkward and embarrassing because we were both virgins and didn't really know where anything went. They tell you all about it in sex ed: what will happen once you discover someone's secret, the different scenarios in which you might find yourself, but it doesn't prepare you at all, doesn't help very much when the situation actually presents itself. We fumbled around for a while, a little awkwardly and bumpily, but the emotion I felt for this lover of mine saw me through it until we were both able to obtain satisfaction. After, we lay on the couch, naked and not caring, until we realized what time it was and that my provider would soon be home. We put our clothes back on and turned on the hologram projector so it would look like we had just been innocently sitting on the sofa and watching holiday specials. My provider probably would have had a fit if seh found out I revealed my secret so early. Seh always told me it was better to wait till I was older.

When my provider came in, seh told us that Uvrah needed to go home, and we shouldn't be hanging out this late on a school night. Hinma drove Uvrah home and I went upstairs to go to sleep. I lay in bed, confused that I had discovered Uvrah's secret, but it hadn't been some kind of profound moment of enlightenment nor had it been an intense bonding experience; I wasn't sure if it had even brought us closer now that Uvrah was gone. I thought I should feel some kind of intimacy that I knew this huge secret of Uvrah's that not even seh's friends or extended family or

even my own provider knew, but instead I felt responsible, worried, burdened, like I had just learned something that had given me power over this other person, and now this person also had that power over me, so we were now bound to each other whether we liked it or not. I knew I was probably putting more weight on the matter than it deserved, that other people probably didn't worry about it this much, but I couldn't help it. I thought I was ready for this.

Halloween had been on a Monday that year, so of course, I had to see Uvrah the next day at school, and seh barely looked me in the eye as we passed in the hall. We went three whole days without even speaking to each other.

Uvrah came up to me after those three days and pulled me aside, asking me if we could talk. I agreed and we went into an empty classroom. I sat on one of the desks and put my feet in the chair while Uvrah slid into the desk behind me.

“So, the other night was a little weird for me.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

“Why was it weird, you think?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I just feel like knowing this huge thing about you is just too much for me, like maybe we should have waited a little while. I thought you weren't even going to talk to me again.”

“So it wasn't that we're both the same?”

“No. I was perfectly fine with that. I feel like it would have been weirder if we hadn't been.” I was confused. Where was seh going with this?

“Well I don't,” Uvrah said curtly. “I think maybe it would have been better for me if we had been different. I mean, maybe it would have gone better, been easier or something. I don't know, maybe it's just cause suddenly I found myself not attracted to you the way I was before.”

This was a complete surprise. I was still attracted to Uvrah, perhaps more than I had been before. I just felt a little overwhelmed by the entire experience. But here seh sat, telling me that because of what I had between my legs I wasn't attractive anymore. Could I say any different? If we had been opposite sexes would I have failed to be attracted to Uvrah while seh continued to find me sexy?

"Look," Uvrah said. "You're awesome, and I have had a ton of fun these past few months, but I feel like I want to go back to being friends. I think that will be easier for us because then we won't have to worry about everything being so complicated, we can just have fun and do stuff like we always have. I still want to see you all the time, hang out, just not like this."

I felt a heaviness in my chest, like a stone sunk into my heart and weighed it down to my diaphragm. How could things go back to the way they were before all this happened? We couldn't just go back to being friends, but I wanted to keep seeing Uvrah, wanted to stay in seh's life. But now I knew the reason seh wanted to take a step back was that seh was no longer attracted to me.

"So how are you going to magically find out someone's secret before you sleep with them?" I asked, unable to completely disguise the bitterness in my voice.

"I don't know, date seh for a while and then ask before we do it, sneak a peek while seh's in the shower. All I know is that it's an issue I can't get past. I hope you aren't mad."

I knew it was stupid to be angry with Uvrah. Seh couldn't help not being attracted to me any more than I could help being attracted to seh. Still, it hurt more than I was willing to admit. We tried to hang out like we used to, tried to stay friends and ride horses and walk all over town like we had done, but it just wasn't the same. There was a hurt, bitter feeling attached to seh

now, and it wouldn't go away. Eventually I started coming up with excuses to avoid spending time with seh, and in time, seh took the hint and found other friends. So did I.

I still see Uvrah in the hallway sometimes, and we are always perfectly civil and perfectly nice to each other, but every time I see seh, I feel that same sense of longing I get when I'm really hungry and we drive by my favorite restaurant, the smell intoxicating and comforting at the same time. I know eventually these feelings will go away, that eventually I will find someone new and exciting, someone who wants my mind and my body. Still, I can't help feeling some sense of loss, that if things had gone differently for us that first night, maybe we would have stayed together, would have been one of those rare couples that never part.

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VITA

Sarah Ellen Ireland was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Dr. Stanley and Vennice Ireland. She is the first of four children. She was homeschooled throughout her elementary and high-school education. After graduation, she attended Lee University, where she became interested in Literature and Creative Writing. She became involved in the English Honor Society Sigma Tau Delta, eventually being elected to serve as an officer. She was also involved in several other honor societies including Alpha Chi and Phi Alpha Theta and did volunteer work for retirement homes and animal shelters throughout her undergraduate career. Sarah completed a Bachelor of Arts in English in May 2011, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She was accepted into the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in the summer of 2012 and offered a graduate assistantship one year later. She hopes to one day continue her education by pursuing a Ph.D. in Creative Writing.