

PALE STATUE

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will focus on the Inciting Incident as described by both Robert McKee and Christopher Vogler, both world renowned for their workshops involving the process of making stories. I will argue that the Inciting Incident is the most important aspect of prose. The creative section of the thesis is the beginning of a novel called, *Pale Statue: Blood Sisters*. The novel is cosmic horror set in rural Kentucky. The main protagonist, Maureen Ford, is a teenager who has grown up unaware of her father's involvement in a cult during his college years and unaware that alien DNA has affected her growth, also giving her the ability to hear the dead talk. When she meets the new girl at school, Amayda Fisher, Maureen begins a perilous journey to create the Pale Statue and free an ancient race.

## Dedication

The author dedicates this thesis to Sherry and Richard Bonnington. Thanks, mom and dad.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A good story requires a strong initial motivation. Robert McKee, a respected authority in the craft of the story, labels the initial motivation the “Inciting Incident,” which is an action that signifies that changes are needed, a break from the status quo. The Inciting Incident is key for the ordinary to turn into the extraordinary.

This introduction will explore the idea of the Inciting Incident and its relation to Hero’s Journey, using *The Writer’s Journey* by Christopher Vogler and *Story* by Robert McKee, both of whom conduct classes around the world about the craft of story making. I will argue that the Inciting Incident (also known as a Call to Adventure by Christopher Vogler) aspect of the Hero’s Journey is the most important part. Important meaning that it is perhaps the most important part of the story that needs to be executed effectively. A weak Inciting Incident signals to the audience that the eventual climax will not worth the commitment to stay till the end. I will use the novels, *Twilight* by William Gay, *The Drawing of the Three* by Stephen King, and *Kindred* by Octavia Butler to show effective and different Inciting Incidents. I selected these novels because they share very similar themes with *Pale Statue*, my creative work. *Twilight* is a very horrific journey for the young protagonist, Kenneth. The genre I am working with is cosmic horror in Kentucky. *Kindred* deals with a young black female protagonist who travels through time, similar to what my character Maureen experiences. *The Drawing of the Three* deals with



strange magic and portals, which travel to different dimensions. Each one of these novels deals with themes similar to what I will be working with.

The Hero's Journey is an idea first identified by Joseph Campbell in, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell, who was an anthropologist, traveled the world to study other country's myths and legends, and claimed there were vast similarities between different cultural myths concerning heroes throughout the world. McKee and Vogler both recommend reading Campbell's book in their own texts. The idea behind the "Call to Adventure" and "Inciting Incident" are basically the same thing. However I feel that calling it the "Inciting Incident" makes the idea more inclusive for other genres of writing. Vogler, in a *Writer's Journey*, simplifies Campbell's research to help writers understand and develop the literary form of myths for modern literature and film. *Story*, by McKee, mainly focuses on script writing, which tends to emphasize the dramatic and visual aspects of fiction. His book, however, is equally relevant to prose writing and I would argue almost essential reading for writers looking to make their stories more dramatically dynamic.

Each Hero's Journey has a Call to Adventure, which McKee, in *Story*, calls the Inciting Incident. The Inciting Incident is the first major problem that propels the protagonist through the story to reach the climax. A simple example of this would be the capturing of the princess, which would commit a hero to a journey in order to save her and possibly win her love. The capturing of the princess is the Inciting Incident that propels the drama for the rest of the story.

The Inciting Incident is the first indication of the hero's conflict/quest/goal. Another example of an Inciting Incident is the alarm clock. We are asleep and comfortable in our beds. The alarm clock blares at us at six in the morning, jolting us uncomfortably into reality. Hitting snooze may help some, but really only delays the inevitable. Eventually, we begin the process of

getting ourselves ready to encounter our day that could promise anything. The Inciting Incident is a jolt to the system. It is the blaring of an alarm, the unexpected knock at the front door, the kidnapping of a relative, or the phone call telling the main character a long lost friend is on their deathbed. But whatever it is, it needs to have dramatic fuel behind it. It has to be something to eventually motivate a character into action and sustain them throughout the adventure.

Here is Robert McKee's take on the Inciting Incident:

When an Inciting Incident occurs it must be dynamic and fully developed, not something static or vague. This for example is not an Inciting Incident: A college dropout lives off-campus near New York University. She wakes one morning and says: "I'm bored with my life. I think I'll move to Los Angeles." She packs her VW and motors west, but her change of address changes nothing of value in her life. She's merely exporting her apathy from New York to California.

If on the other hand, we [the readers] notice that she has created an ingenious kitchen wallpaper from hundreds of parking tickets, then a sudden POUNDING on the door brings the police, brandishing a felony warrant for ten thousand dollars in unpaid citations, and she flees down the fire escape heading West-this could be an Inciting Incident. (McKee and Gauthier)

McKee, here, emphasizes the dramatic aspect of the Inciting Incident. According to McKee, there needs to be a level of tension strong enough to carry a story from beginning to end. The reason the above example works (the pounding at the door) is because that Inciting Incident has the dramatic tension that is packed with dramatic potential. In another example, simply waking up because an alarm clock has gone off isn't much in the way of dramatic tension. There are plenty of ways to make the alarm clock idea more potent. What could give an alarm clock dynamic potential is the type of day the alarm clock is waking the hero up to. Is it the day of her wedding? Is it the day she plans on hiring a hit man to kill her husband, pushing the snooze button to delay the inevitable meet? A simple alarm clock lacks dynamic potential if completely lacking in importance.

The Inciting Incident in *Twilight*, by William Gay, occurs when Kenneth and his sister discover, after digging up their father's grave, that the local graveyard is missing the vault for the coffin they purchased. They dig other graves and discover other oddities in how the people of their town have been buried. They know the undertaker is up to something. This provides effective dramatic tension to carry the story to its conclusion as the siblings first steal more evidence, pictures from the undertaker's hearse that show the undertaker violating dead bodies that he had dressed for their funerals. Instead of turning to the authorities, the siblings decide to blackmail the undertaker for a decent sum of money to get them out of rural Tennessee and into a bigger city with better jobs and a better life. The undertaker in turn hires Sutter, a locally famous criminal who always gets away with his crimes, to kill the two siblings and get the pictures back. The Inciting Incident is Kenneth and his sister discovering that the whole town has been lied to about how their dead that have been buried. This motivates them to blackmail the undertaker, which sets up the appearance of Sutter, hired to kill both Kenneth and his sister. Sutter ambushes the siblings at home and Kenneth's sister dies in a hail of Sutter's bullets as they try to escape. This sends Kenneth into the world of the unknown, a forest known locally as "Harrikin," where he must find strength in himself to overcome Sutter or die trying. The Inciting Incident of *Twilight* has the dramatic punch that awakens Kenneth and his sister to a grim and depraved reality, which ultimately corrupts each of them in different ways. It helps push Kenneth through the second act and carries him till the end, where he realizes that he has grown into a man corrupted by defeating Sutter.

Unlike *Twilight*, *Kindred's* Inciting Incident is different. The story starts with the line "I lost my arm on the last trip home. My left arm."(Butler) The novel starts at the end of the narrative, because when the actual Inciting Incident occurs in the novel the main protagonist,

Dana, still has her arms. The “last trip” is the last time the protagonist, Dana, travels into the past. The story of *Kindred* starts in the 1970s in the new home of a married interracial couple. Dana unexpectedly starts traveling back in time to the antebellum south through an unexplained force. In the antebellum south, she has to help a boy named Rufus survive. Rufus is the son of a slave owner, soon to be one himself, and also one of Dana’s ancestors. Saving him is necessary to maintain Dana’s family line. The book starts the reader at the end of the story with Dana’s missing arm, a clever hook to maintain tension. The Inciting Incident occurs in the following chapter where the narrative begins with Dana and her new husband, Kevin, moving into their new house together. Dana starts to feel sick and she goes to the bathroom where the world around her starts spinning and she appears next to a river where a boy is drowning. The boy’s mother is screaming for her boy, Rufus, but is helpless at the edge of the river. Dana swims to the boy’s rescue, brings him ashore, and revives him with CPR. The woman beats Dana as she is reviving the boy, but stops when the boy shows signs of life. The boy’s father shows up with a gun pointing at Dana. Dana fears for her life and the boy and his parents vanish and Dana is back in her bathroom of her house in the 1970s. It is figured out later by Dana and her husband that when Rufus fears for his life, Dana is sent back in time. When Dana fears for her life in the antebellum south, she is sent back to the 1970s. Dana repeatedly returns to the antebellum south where she must save Rufus’ life. Each time she goes back, the time spent in the past grows longer and longer. Sometimes she is in the past for months and eventually years. Dana’s other ancestor is a slave named, Alice. Rufus fancies Alice and as he ages, he desires her sexually. Dana is then put in the position of allowing Rufus to rape Alice to maintain her family line. Dana is able to escape the cycle of going back into the past when she appears during a much later time in Rufus’ life, where Alice has left him and Dana’s slave ancestors are safe. Rufus attempts to rape her and she

stabs him to death with a knife, fearing for her own life. She is sent back to the 1970s, in terrible pain. Her arm is now inside the wall of her house, out where Rufus had been holding it during their struggle. Killing Rufus breaks the cycle as he can no longer fear for her life. And so the story starts when Dana has lost her arm, a completion of a cycle. The Inciting Incident in *Kindred* is something that the protagonist has no say over, unlike in *Twilight* where the siblings decide to act against the undertaker when they discover the tampering of the graves and find the secret photos. Dana loses all of her agency with her Inciting Incident. She is teleported back into the past and cannot control it. Dana's Inciting Incident perhaps has the same effect as slavery did to black people during antebellum south, the loss of their agency. It makes sense that Dana loses her own agency at the expense of the narrative, justified by the theme of slavery.

Stephen King's, *The Dark Tower, The Drawing of the Three*, is the second of a book series of seven. The main character is known as, Roland or the Gunslinger, his ultimate goal is to reach The Dark Tower, where he will face an ultimate evil. However in *The Drawing of the Three*, the Gunslinger is looking for more people he believes might help him in his ultimate quest. The Gunslinger's world exists in a parallel dimension to our world where he crosses multiple thresholds, literal doors that allow him to enter the minds of other people and bring them into his strange reality. The first thing that happens before he meets his first potential ally, is that he arrives on the shore of a beach where a giant crab attacks him. The Gunslinger loses two fingers fighting the creature, fingers that he uses to fire one of his six shooters. Though the Gunslinger survives, his wounds become infected. This is the Inciting Incident for the Gunslinger. His normal world was the fantasy world that he travels for his ultimate quest to reach The Dark Tower. The Inciting Incident for, *The Drawing of the Three*, is the loss of his fingers. The loss of fingers raises the tension as the Gunslinger, who doesn't know what

penicillin is, must find a way to save himself. He does however have a sense of what medicine is and so he knows what he must obtain. The Gunslinger's fading health provides strong and dynamic tension in which the reader will be worrying about his health and survival throughout the entire book.

Each door the Gunslinger comes across on the beach wasteland he travels leads him into different minds. Each one has their own Inciting Incident. The first door he comes across leads to the mind of Eddie Dean. Eddie Dean is a character that the Gunslinger must bring into his world to help him on his ultimate quest. Eddie is a drug addict working for the mafia. He is on an airplane headed to New York City. He is also smuggling cocaine, which is taped to his body. The stewardesses of the plane already suspects that he is smuggling drugs. The normal world takes it time to establish itself as both Eddie Dean and the Gunslinger come to realize how much trouble they are in. The Gunslinger realizes that Eddie must pass customs and knows that the substance Eddie is carrying is illegal. The Gunslinger attempts a few small trials to see how he can pull objects from the world of 1980s into the world of the Gunslinger. He first brings back a tuna fish sandwich to nourish his ailing body, something which only makes the stewardesses more suspicious about the passenger (raising the stakes). The Gunslinger brings back a penny next and comes to the conclusion that he can take the drugs Eddie had taped to his chest through the door into the Gunslinger's world. When all of this is realized by the Gunslinger, the Inciting Incident begins.

The Inciting Incident in Eddie Dean's story doesn't occur until the Gunslinger feels the need to finally make Eddie Dean aware that the Gunslinger is in his head, alerting Eddie to the danger that awaits both of them. He directs Eddie into the restroom of the plane where Eddie strips his clothes, unglues the drugs from his body, which allows the Gunslinger to pull the drugs

through into the Gunslinger's world, hiding them. When customs searches Eddie, they find no drugs. The Gunslinger and Eddie eventually end up in a gunfight at a mobster's hideout, the mobster who initially sent Eddie to get the cocaine. Here they get enough medicine to ease the Gunslinger's infection, but only for a short time, the infection comes back. It isn't until the end of the novel that the Gunslinger finds enough medicine to completely kill off the infection.

The most interesting door the Gunslinger crosses, in my opinion, is the door that leads into the mind of Odetta/Detta. Odetta/Detta is a woman with a split personality. She is two characters in one body. Odetta is a middle aged black woman and civil rights activist who suffered two physical traumas early in her life. The first trauma she endured was a stone hitting her in the forehead that was thrown at her from a tall building and the second was being pushed in front of a train, losing both of her legs. These traumas resulted in Odetta's other personality, Detta, an angry and bitter woman who steals from department stores and attacks those trying to help her. Odetta, on the other hand, is prim and proper and a respected woman. Both personalities have no knowledge of the other's existence. When one personality takes over, the other one remains dormant.

Odetta/Detta's Inciting Incident occurs when she runs away from home, controlled by her Detta side. She has run away from home multiple times before, but this time the Gunslinger enters her mind as she is stealing from Macy's in NYC. The Inciting Incident is when he enters her mind. Detta is aware of this intrusion and she makes a scene inside the store, which alerts security to her presence and her stealing. The Gunslinger takes control of her and escapes security and he brings her through the door into the Gunslinger's world. She has been initiated into the Gunslinger's quest. However, Odetta has no control over her angry side, Detta, and she becomes a threat to the Gunslinger. The only way for Odetta/Detta to come to terms with this is

to recognize her other half and accept that the other side is there. When she does recognize the other half, she becomes, Susannah Dean, and completes her journey in *The Drawing of the Three*, now ready to head for The Dark Tower with the Gunslinger.

In *Twilight*, the Inciting Incident sets a straight narrative path from point A to B. Kenneth and his sister chose to go on their adventure even if it spins out of their control. But like *Kindred*, the characters of *The Drawing of the Three* have very little choice in their involvement in the story. Destiny has chosen them. Though the powers in, *The Drawing of the Three*, being used to carry these protagonists across dimensions is sort of explained in the sense that there is a magic that exists in the universes that are connecting the Gunslinger to the world of Eddie and Odetta/Detta. The book hints that this all can be understood as they travel towards The Dark Tower. *Kindred* lacks explanation and it is perhaps left out to reflect the bewilderment one might feel in learning about the atrocity of slavery and reflect the lack of control slaves had over their own lives.

The Inciting Incident in my work, *Pale Statue: Blood Sisters*, has always been the same in all of my drafts: the introduction of Amayda into Maureen's life. Their connection is the catalyst and driving energy of the story. They're instant connection and strong infatuation bordering on obsession, pushes the dramatic energy through the rest of the story. The bond that brings them together will certainly be tested, torn, and strengthened. It is a love story that spans thousands of years.

Maureen is a girl who, unknown to her, is half Yogg, an alien. Maureen is unaware that being Yogg allows her to hear the dead bemoaning their regrets. She worries others might think she is insane and keeps this secret to herself. Amayda, a Yogg, knows Maureen's secrets and was sent to get her ready for the ritual of the Pale Statue. But unexpectedly Amayda runs away from



home. Maureen sets out to find her, suspicious that Amayda knows more than what she has told her and is also infatuated with a girl that seems to also understand her. It's a work that spans across thousands of years, where Maureen is connected in her dreams to witness the first time the Pale Statue was attempted around the time of the end of the ice age.

The Pale Statue is believed to be able to break the Yogg out from the cages, the human bodies they hide inside of, and back out into space. It is a dream the Yogg have held for billions of years as they drifted bodiless in the dark reaches of caves eventually being able to attach themselves to the brains of humanity. The love of these two girls, Maureen and Amayda, will determine the success of this dream held for eons.

## CHAPTER 2

### PALE STATUE: BLOOD SISTERS

#### THE CANVAS

Once death was terrible, but terrible can be beautiful. I wanted everyone to know this, so on the first day of school I painted my arms with black-lined skulls, an intricate design that bathed bones in windy flames and took me all night to finish. I worried they would smudge in my sleep, so I bought this expensive black waterproof paint that the label promised not to smudge after it had dried. It worked as advertised. With skulls on my arms, a bright tie-dyed shirt of the Great Pyramids of Giza, emblazoned with the name “Juno Reactor,” a band no one else in Franklin Kentucky had heard of but me, hiking boots, and black jeans. I was a far cry from the khaki slacks, button up shirts, and sweaters my dad always bought me. To top it all off was my new hairstyle: twisted and braided down over the front of my right shoulder.

I spent a lot of time worrying in the mirror. It’s hard when you try a new style in public, trying to convince yourself it fits and fits other people’s assumptions about you. Showing yourself as something new takes courage and so I was late to school trying to find that courage in the mirror. I closed my eyes and pretended I was dressed as usual, that I was my same old self even though I wasn’t. I had to lie to myself to get into my red rickety Ford Tempo, start the ignition, and drive. I tried hard to convince myself there was no turning back.

“Homeroom, Ms. Green. Homeroom, Ms. Green,” I chanted as I hustled through the halls of Frankfort High, as if the words would teleport me to class on time. It was my first day as a

senior and it was the first day I was ever late to class.

My eyes burned. The school smelled acidic, as if the janitors just flooded the halls with turpentine. The floor sparkled under the bright fluorescents. Over the summer, the school painted the lockers bright orange and changed the brown floor tiling to white and yellow checkers. I was running through the halls of what felt like a spaceship right out of a 1970s sci-fi.

My boots squeaked up the last flight of stairs to the coveted floor of the seniors. I wanted to walk the halls calm and slow, gloating I finally made it to the beginning of the end, but the best I could hope for was to not get yelled at by Ms. Green.

A few students caught glimpses of me as I darted past classrooms. What did I look like to them? During the summer my body experienced an unexpected growth spurt and I now stood well over six feet tall, dreading the coaches would harass me to play basketball. My knees ached. My arms were always sore. Every morning I gulped down four aspirin and they helped on the good days. Today was not one of those days. As I ran down the halls, my legs screamed. But I liked being tall, it added to the mystery of what I was. I wanted to be an enigma.

I stopped outside the door to Ms. Green's homeroom to catch my breath. I knew once I walked in, there was no turning back.

I could retreat, run out of the school and jump into my car and drive home. I could say I left because I was sick, and I could wash all the paint off at home with the remover, shove all of my weird clothes deeper inside my closet, maybe take them to a thrift store, and come back the next day like nothing had ever happened. The only thing that would draw attention was how tall I had gotten. No one had really seen me yet, just a black shadow running down the hall.

I could do it; I could run and slip back into my old skin.

"Listen up!" Ms. Green shouted inside her classroom. "Because the fiber optics overhaul

took longer than expected, you're getting your locker assignments after roll. So be quiet!”

I held the backs of my hands up in front of my face. Skulls stared back at me as they burned in jagged painted flaming lines. I straightened my shoulders, shifted my backpack, and walked into class.

A boy by the walled pencil sharpener jumped as I rounded the corner. Every desk was taken except for two and one of the two had books on them. Both of them were at the front. The class all turned from Ms. Green to me, striding with fake confidence to the last unclaimed seat.

“Maureen Ford?” Ms. Green said. Her red glasses slid down her nose and she caught them in her hand.

I smiled. I had accomplished one of my goals, shock. “Yeah?” I sat down in the desk, a meter away from Ms. Green, who stood at the center of her white erase board at the front of the class.

“Wow, you’ve grown,” she said. She asked me what my shirt said as she looked me over trying to figure me out. She slid her glasses back on. “What’s on your arms?”

I looked at them and shrugged. “Skulls.”

Some of the teenagers laughed and I looked around the class for anyone I knew, but none of them were my friends. It was fine though. Homeroom didn’t last long.

Ms. Green stepped in front of me, lowering her roll book, placing a finger on her round chin. “Is this some sort of joke? Did someone put you up to this?”

“No ma’am, just me.” I chewed my lip, regretting the grasp my old habits still had on me. Though maybe “ma’am” was still acceptable for new Maureen. But I didn't know, not now, not with everyone staring at me.

“I think you need to present yourself to Ms. Hall.”

I blinked. “What? Why? I didn't do anything wrong.”

“You are not appropriate for school. Go now. No more complaints.”

I rose to my feet stunned. Never had a teacher ever sent me out of the classroom. Ms. Green eyed me as I took my first step around my desk. She was sending me away because I possessed the courage to express myself. Sure the skulls were edgy, but everyone knew I was an artist, an artist that painted dead bodies and skeletons.

“Come on Ms. Green,” I said breaking another old habit. I never complained. I displayed my arms for her. “This is an art project. I'm an artist.”

But Ms. Green leveled a stare. “It's not appropriate and frankly I find it a little disconcerting,” she said. “Don't be stupid, Maureen, go.”

The class broke out in laughter.

My mouth dried, and I choked as my throat tightened. I didn't expect anyone to laugh. The painted skulls were part of my agenda as a changed person, someone now realizing their potential. No one knew yet, because I knew it sounded crazy, but I heard the dead in the air. Their voices swam to me, a clear signal, from hearses leading funeral processions. The skulls were a way to ease people into what I was. Maureen Ford, a girl in communication with the dead.

Ms. Hall was the assistant principal and guidance counselor (formerly known to me as Jean); her office sat on the first floor near the front entrance of the school surrounded by the freshmen classrooms. I thanked whatever powers that be that most of the classroom doors were closed. The last thing I needed was for freshmen to see my march of shame.

I arrived at Ms. Hall's door. She leafed through papers at her desk unaware of my presence. I didn't know what to say.

She had been close enough to me once that I called her “Mom.” She used to date my dad. She taught me how to use make up and tampons. We watched *The Simpsons* and movies late on Friday nights together. My earliest memories of Jean involved Saturday morning cartoons. I remembered smelling coffee, thinking my father was there in the living room with me for some reason, but I turned from the cartoon on the TV to see Jean sitting there, looking comfortable and saying good morning to me. It was like she was supposed to be there.

I had wanted her to be my mother, but whatever happened between her and my father had ripped them so far apart, it hurt me to even look at Ms. Hall.

She looked up at me from her desk. “Don't tell me that you're the first student to show up at my office unannounced this year.”

I said nothing.

She sighed, her gaze softened. “Come in. Sit down.”

I sat down across from Ms. Hall in an old leather barrel chair. Everything in Ms. Hall's office looked ancient, like things had been pulled out of a vault, locked away since the 1950s.

“So why you are here?”

I didn't know exactly what to say. I could say that Ms. Green saw my arms, my art, and forced me to come down to Ms. Hall's office. But that felt too clinical, too formal. So I just talked to Jean like I would have years ago.

“If art had an emotion,” I said. “Then this must be what it would feel like. Some people like it, others are confused, and many hate it and call it names. And this state that I am in, this shaky, nervous, on the canvas state. Whatever it is, is art. I am art. That's why I'm here.”

“Say that again in English.”

I sighed, she was Ms. Hall after all, not Jean. “My arms. Ms. Green didn't like them.”

She tilted her desk lamp at me and leaned to get a better look.

“You painted skulls on your arms?” she said. “You know this is a rules violation? Body paint is just like make-up, and you can't wear either.”

“But I'm not wearing this as make-up,” I said. “I'm not trying to attract boys or anything.”

“I believe that,” Ms. Hall said. “But I can't have students walking the halls all painted up looking like skeletons. Or have a parent call me tonight and tell me how Billy or Branden and Sally were frightened by an occultist.”

“I'm an artist, not a cultist.”

“I know, but why not paint on a canvas instead?”

“A body is a canvas.”

Ms. Hall sighed. “What happened to you, Maureen? What is this?”

“It's me,” I said. “The beginnings of my true formation.”

Ms. Hall stopped a laugh in her throat.

“True formation?” she said. “Is that what you told Ms. Green?”

I didn't know how to explain to Ms. Hall without seeming crazy. I could tell her that the dead were speaking to me, but I had promised myself I would keep that secret, even from those I most trusted, even from the woman I once considered a mother. I couldn't trust yet that they wouldn't just call me crazy and lock me away. I didn't expect Jean to almost laugh at me though. The blank and confused look I must have had on my face seemed to only fuel further shame because Ms. Hall kept trying to suppress her laugh with a hand near her throat, as if she might start choking.

“I'm sorry,” Ms. Hall said, straightening her posture, trying to keep a straight face. “Look Maureen, this is completely unacceptable. I know it's not make up.”

Her fingers quoted “make up.”

“And that you consider yourself an artist, who I think is tremendously talented, perhaps even the best I’ve seen at Frankfort High. Regardless, it doesn’t give you a pass. If you start painting skeletons on your arms, then other students might figure that if Maureen can do it, we can. Well do you get what I’m saying?”

I nodded, slouching.

“And,” Ms. Hall continued, “If your father was not a teacher at this school, I would be sending you home. No questions asked. But if you walk out of here and head straight to the bathroom around the corner and wash all that from your arms, then perhaps there doesn’t need to be any more fuss over this. Am I clear?”

“Crystal.”

She winked at me as I left. Was she only punishing me out of duty as an authority figure or was she mocking me? I held my composure as best I could as I left Ms. Hall’s office, a skill I had mastered in disguising my boredom at church years ago. But a fire burned deep inside of me, an anger I never felt before. Anger was such an alien thing to me. The nerve that Ms. Hall had, her face: the disregard and disrespect. And her wink? What was that? I pushed through the girl’s restroom door with a growl, my fist shot out as I crossed the restroom floor and snapped into the metal paper towel dispenser, denting it.

“You idiot,” I told myself in the mirror. “Of course this would happen and you didn’t even think about it.”

It was in the soapy water of the girl’s restroom sink that I realized being myself would cost me. I soaped up my skin until my arms were completely white and scrubbed hard with paper towels. All I wanted was to yell at everyone and tell them that I wasn’t who everyone thought I



was. But as the soap from my arms washed into the sink, I realized that I wasn't sure of who I was either.

I lathered up my arms again, the first wash had little effect. If anything, the skulls just got shinier, glistening under the white light of the bathroom fluorescents. I scrubbed the soap into my arms hard with a paper towel. The skulls started to bend, but they didn't fade. I lathered, I washed, I repeated. The harder I pressed, the deeper they bent, folding into themselves, dulling and warping into grotesque bloated faces. This was not how paint should behave. Paint fades, it doesn't bend. I scraped harder and harder, bending noses and eyes into mush.

“Fade damn it.”

The first block bell rang. Most of the freshmen girls who entered the restroom on their way to their first block ignored me as they reached around me for paper towels or a spot in the mirror to check their hair.

One gave me a long side eye. “Forget to bathe this morning?”

I wanted to pop her in the face. I felt crazed. I grinned and she fled out the restroom door.

The first block bell rung and the girl's bathroom emptied as I scrubbed and spit curses. Cracks started to emerge in the lines of the skulls. I took a breath. As I scrubbed, they grew, but the paint still wasn't fading. The late bell rang and I dried my arms off. They were still a mess of lines, but hardly recognizable as skulls. I had to settle on the mess, otherwise I'd miss my entire day. I rushed out of the restroom and back up the stairs, interrupting Ms. Green's physics class. She looked at my arms.

“Better that than skulls,” she said.

I was twenty minutes late to my first class, English. Mr. David marked me tardy, another first. I sat at the front far right side of the classroom and glanced at one of my friends, Alicia, in

the back. She smiled at me and waved quietly. I leaned onto the wall, hoping the teacher would not call on me. Class crawled.

Afterward, I met Alicia in the hall who said my t-shirt was cool and wondered why I was late.

I shrugged. “Ms. Hall drama.”

“Really?” Alicia wore jeans and a blue Adventure Time t-shirt. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. “What did she do?”

“She didn't do anything,” I said. “I came to school wearing make-up and she got upset.” I didn't want to admit my skull slip up.

Alicia blinked. “What's on your arms?”

“Paint,” I said, wishing for a long sleeve shirt. “I was painting and it got all over my arms, and I haven't been able to wash it all off yet.”

“They look likes flowers.”

“What?” I raised an arm. Some of the tops of the skulls had bent in on themselves giving birth to sloppy blooms. They looked like the flowers of a kindergartner finger painter. “No way.”

“Maybe you should try washing it off during lunch when you have more time,” Alicia said.

“I'm tired, and I want to go home.”

But something caught the side of my eye, and I spotted a girl further down the hall through the rush of students. A tall blonde girl was wandering the lockers, her fingers drifting over the combination locks, turning them with idle curiosity as if stuck in a dream. Her back was to me. She had long, straight, bright blonde, methodically combed hair. She wore a black The North Face jacket despite the eighty degree weather outside, black leggings, and dirty white

Reebok shoes. I wanted to get her attention, but didn't know what to say. I watched her drift down the hall like a specter. She didn't seem alive. She drifted like a cloud, as if she were made of air.

A few days ago, I bought my body paint at Franklin's only costume shop, Goblins and Ghouls. I went there a lot because Mr. Nichols had all this cool jewelry and special order books I could order clothing and pay him with cash wholesale. But the day I got the body paint something strange happened.

“Maureen Ford?” a voice said from behind me as I was paying Mr. Nichols. I turned and there stood this man, maybe in his mid-to-late forties, his hair thinning, long and blonde. A thick five o'clock shadow colored his face light brown and his eyes were a smoky white. He wore a faded gray jacket that once looked to be brown.

“Yes?” I said.

“My, you've grown. That's good.”

“Do I know you?”

“Doubtful. But I knew your father. Long before you were born.”

“Really? You go to college together or something?”

The man snorted.

“He's teaching now, right?” he said. “At the local high school?”

Mr. Nichols handed me the bag with my paint inside. I really wanted to get out of the store, the man gave me the creeps.

“Geometry.”

“Geometry? Wonderful.” He jerked his thumb toward the back of the store. “I saw a

painting of a grim reaper back there with your name on it.” He smiled.

Mr. Nichols spoke up. “She's the best artist this side of Kentucky.”

“It's amazing.” His eyes locked on me. “He has a very intense face. It's the eyes that make a person. You'll see.”

“It's a she, but thank you,” I said. “Thank you for the paint, Mr. Nichols.” I headed for the door relieved the man didn't stop me. My father had always been a mystery. He never talked about his past with me at all and avoided my questions about having grandparents or other relatives, simply stating “You don't.” It was something that had really made me mad, and now here was a man who knew at least a few things about my father that I didn't. I should have stayed and questioned him, but I couldn't get past the man's eyes and his attitude. He was like the type of guy who sold speakers out of his van in the mall parking lot. I was also a bit surprised, buying the body paint was a secret. I couldn't let the stranger find out about it.

Outside parked next to my car was a green Saturn and inside sat this beautiful girl I guess to be about my age. She was blonde and wore a plain white t-shirt. She stared at me as if stuck in a trance.

“Hello,” I said as I walked to my driver's side seat right next to her. Her stare turned into a smile and her hand raised from her lap onto the glass, like children do in movies when they look at Christmas displays. It freaked me out a little.

But looking at that same girl now drifting out of my sight down the hall of lockers, I never considered she would actually be going here, to my high school. She must have just moved here.

I turned to say something to Alicia, but she was gone. I needed to find out who that girl was.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PAINT

I arrived at Ms. Green's physics class on time and said nothing, avoiding her eyes. I sat in the back, and no one paid me any attention, just like the usual quiet and polite Maureen of last year.

My headache eased when the lunch bell chimed in cutting Ms. Green off mid-sentence. She dismissed class with a solemn bow of her head. The hallways drowned with seniors. Lunch time was always frenzied at first no matter what grade a student was in.

I had trouble telling anyone apart from the mass of students who rushed to lockers to be the first in the lunch line. The sea of students parted for me, not because I once had skulls burning on my arms, but because I towered over all of them. A lot of students didn't recognize me at first. Some stopped in the hall just to say "wow." My doctor hadn't predicted my growth spurt and was amazed by how quickly I had grown. By the time school started, I had passed two of her predictions. During my junior year I stood around five four, but during summer I grew an entire foot. If I didn't have skulls to impress the school, I had height.

But like skulls, height had its problems. The world wasn't made for tall people. I found that out when I hit my forehead on my own bedroom door frame and when my feet starting sticking out over my bed when I laid straight on my back. But I didn't want to be known for being tall. I wanted to be feared. Feared in such a way to become admired.

Then there were my friends, the ones I avoided over summer without any good explanation other than my job at Piggly Wiggly and muscle pains. I dreaded seeing Sarah the most. If anyone resented my absence, it was her. I couldn't explain why I had been so absent from everyone over the summer. Sarah was the epicenter of our clique, the one everyone else gravitated towards. My close relationship with her granted me a sort of lieutenant's role during my sophomore and junior years. The last thing I wanted to talk about now was my arms. If only they had seen the skulls in their original form, the girls could begin to really understand me and maybe even they would start to hear the dead.

When I lined up for lunch, I caught a glimpse of one tray that looked like meat loaf and mashed potatoes and carrots, another with spaghetti and green beans. Most of the students were getting the spaghetti, so I got the meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

As I rounded the salad station someone called out, "Skully." I turned to look to see a table of jocks pointing at me. I couldn't remember their names, but the one who repeated the name Skully at me was a guy who always knew how to talk to teachers, a charmer. The rest of the table laughed. I wasn't sure if the name was meant to hurt me, but I didn't mind it. Agent Scully was one of my favorite television characters. I watched *X-Files* a lot as a kid and if the jocks were calling me Skully, the name would probably spread through the school by the end of the day. I smiled at them.

After buying lemonade from the vending machine, I trudged towards the lunch table my friends and I always sat at. Glancing around, I realized I wasn't the only one who might feel as if they had completely changed into some new being over the summer. Some students stood taller, some wider or skinnier, some acne on one face, a cloud of pimples on another. Some weren't sitting at their usual spots. The soccer players I knew from junior year, now sat scattered among

jocks and computer nerds. Allegiances had shifted and a sinking feeling in my stomach tossed with anticipation about what I might see of my friends, or what I wouldn't see.

As I rounded the last pillar, I saw Sarah sitting in her usual place, but she had changed too. Her hair was the same shade of red, but real short, like it had only grown a little past a buzz cut, and she looked skinnier. It brought out her cheeks and her face was deeper and soft, her green eyes more focused, sharp as a knife, calculating and worried.

Mary sat on Sarah's left and didn't look much different from when I last saw her earlier in the summer, still tiny with delicate fingers, skin tight around her face. I had drawn her skull on the back of my left hand, but that warped in the freshmen sink. A white flower sat idle in her hair, which was one of Mary's habits: picking flowers and wearing them. It was something I envied and wanted to copy once, but Mary had made it her own.

Sitting on Mary's left was Sue, quiet and tucked away as usual. But her thick glasses were gone and her exposed face was plump with a healthy glow. I never thought of Sue as ugly, far from it, but there was no denying she had become extremely pretty, with or without her glasses. She awkwardly spun her fork in her spaghetti, spooling the noodles into a fat comb until it could no longer catch any more food. Still she tried to spool and spool, not paying her friends any mind.

But someone was in my seat, a light skinned girl I had never seen before. Her bangs were long and stylish, the rest of her hair short above her ears. She wore a white and black flannel, gray jeans, and a silver chain from her belt to her wallet touching the tiled cafeteria floor.

I blinked and hovered away from the table, unsure of my approach. I couldn't just force the new girl to move, that would be rude. They sat there so comfortably chit-chatting that I doubted my friends even expected me.

My only other friend, Alicia, was more of a soccer player than a nerd like me, though she had her moments. And I had no friends on Alicia's side of the cafeteria. Sighing, I pushed forward. I had to see how my first day back at school would play out with them before I could really ponder any changes. We had suffered so much of high school together after all. At the very least our clique was non-judgmental about nerds, sexuality (Mary had helped keep what Sarah and I had been doing together a secret), and being smart. While most students cared about their reputations and their looks and what boys they should be dating, we had focused on reading the same books, watching the same shows, even joining chess club, and helping each other get A's in other classes by proof reading each other's work or staying up late to help each other study. We didn't mind labels because we were the only ones in our grade we could really rely on. So why did we care if other students had called us nerds? We wanted to learn.

Sarah noticed me first and her gaze caused the others to turn and look, even Sue.

"Maureen? Wow," Sarah said as I sat down to Sue's left and another empty chair, putting distance between me and the new girl, the invader.

Sarah's surprise shook a nervous chuckle from me. Surprising Sarah was one of my goals, though I wished my arms were still painted so I could hold the skulls up to awed scrutiny.

"What?" I said, trying more nonchalant.

"I love your hair," Sarah said. "And you're friggin' tall."

"Yeah, Maureen," Mary said. "You were like?"

"5'4 by the end of junior year."

"And now?"

"6'4."

"Jesus," Mary continued. "You're a freaking Amazon."



“It hurts a little,” I said. “Sometimes my knees ache and I gotta take Advil for them, but it’s not so bad. Some back pains too.”

“What’s on your arms?” Sue asked. She was black, about my same shade of skin. Her face glowed, but her eyes were nervous and unstable. We thought of her as a genius, that someday she would grow up becoming a mad scientist.

But everyone else’s expression was hard to read. I sank into my seat and pondered a half truth or lie to avoid further embarrassment. But they probably already heard rumors about it.

“Paint,” I admitted, but my voice squeaked. “I tried to wash it off, but it got-wouldn’t come off.”

“They look like flowers,” the new girl said.

I turned towards her and tried to smile sweetly but could only glare. “Flowers?” I looked down at my arms. Normally I would be embarrassed; I didn’t want them to be flowers. Alicia saw it and the new girl confirmed it. But I couldn’t shrink against the new girl’s observation. “Well,” I leaned in slightly. “You’ve got an imagination.”

“Cool shirt,” Sarah said, turning my attention away from the new girl.

“Thanks.”

“What’s Juno Reactor?”

“They’re this cool trance group I’ve been listening to over the summer.”

“Trance? Like techno?”

“Sorta.” I couldn’t deny I liked having something the other girls didn’t know. “Other music too, darker scarier stuff, sorta Satanic.” But each difference was another shovel digging into the gulf that separated me from my only group of friends.

Sue glanced from her spaghetti at me.

Sarah's face warped into minor confusion and quickly resettled on an undisturbed smile.

“Ok, that's different.”

She and Mary exchanged a nervous laugh.

“Oh Maureen, this is Andrea.” Sarah gestured her hands in a dramatic presentation as if Andrea, the new girl, were part of a magic trick.

Andrea smiled politely and offered an awkward “hey.”

I nodded.

“Didn't see you much this summer,” Sarah said, her tone drifting from casual to serious. It must have seemed as if I had fallen off the face of the Earth. I just wanted to be alone as I grew into an Amazon, as I worked at the Piggly Wiggly, as my muscles ached beyond Advil. And then there were the voices, but I tried to tuck those memories away.

“Well I was working a lot.” I said.

“Yeah,” Sarah said.

“And my Dad didn't like me using my car unless I had to go to work.” Another half-truth.

Sarah's lips twisted. Her gaze drifted towards her lunch, more spaghetti. Over the summer I rarely returned a phone call and that habit drifted into never. I wasn't sure what to say, so instead I ventured into my tasteless mashed potatoes. I glanced at Sue who stared at me in deep silence. They must have been talking about me before I sat down, and I doubted it was anything good. I salted my mashed potatoes and focused on white mash as if it would teleport me back home if I finished them.

But something about the new girl, Andrea, caught my eye. It was a sequence of bright colors spilling out of her right pocket, a rainbow key chain. I glanced at Sarah, but I didn't know what question I should be asking.

“The Island of Lesbos,” a boy said at us. I didn’t catch who it was.

I turned towards Sarah.

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

I hesitated. We kept it a secret for a long time, and it was a big deal if suddenly everyone knew. That meant I too was possibly outed, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready. The new girl wore it proudly on her key chain, which was probably why she was invited to sit with us. Mary already knew. Sue wasn’t told officially, but she wasn’t an idiot.

“Come out?”

“I did.”

“Without telling me?”

“I barely saw you at all this summer. When you stopped returning my calls, I figured you wouldn’t care.”

“How did your parents take it?”

“My mom took it much better than my dad. He still won’t talk to me, but at least they didn’t kick me out like I thought they might. It’ll get better with time.”

I took a big gulp of my lemonade. “Sorry.” This was too soon for me. I didn’t want to be known as a girl with a strange sexuality, not yet. I felt like an idiot. I dug into my meat loaf.

The new girl, Andrea, picked up the lost thread and started talking about something called *Firefly*, and I knew nothing about that, but I thanked some fallen angel the conversation changed.

The girls talked about movies I hadn’t seen and television shows I had never watched. My friends were talking in an alien code that would require me to commit to years of research just to grasp its basic structures. I mused over their new movies, television shows, and books,

wondering if any would be worth my time, but my mind got caught on thoughts about Sarah and her coming out without telling me or at least giving me a warning. She had a good excuse, I guess, but it didn't stop the shock.

After I finished most of my lunch, I excused myself to go to the restroom. Dumping my tray and sliding it to the dishwashers, I left the cafeteria and rushed up the stairs to the senior's area. I slid into the ladies room and intentionally took longer than I should. The ending lunch bell could not come soon enough. I washed my face three times. Leaving the restroom I wandered to my locker and opened it, staring blankly at my book bag. Gathering my books for next block history only took a second, so I grabbed a sharpie from my bag and started drawing on the inside of my locker. I outlined a skull, jagged and evil with deep flaming eyes, its teeth devouring arms and legs of other students and teachers, pouring from its mouth like a waterfall before the next block bell finally rang.

I hid my arms under the table during Art class, the last block of the day. The chairs around me remained vacant as other students flowed in and grouped into their cliques. Sue walked in and sat next to me. I wouldn't be alone this semester.

Sue whispered a quiet hey and I smiled weakly at her in return. Nothing was said about lunch, but she looked at me meaningfully after pulling her notebook out.

"Is this seat taken?" an unfamiliar girl's voice said from behind me. It was the blonde girl I saw wandering the halls like a ghost. She needed a seat. I wished for a jacket like the new girl's so I could lift my arms out from under the table and not look like I was about to throw up.

She pointed to the chair across from me. "That one?"

Her voice was deep like Courtney Love's, but without the inebriated slur. She wore a

white V-neck and silver necklace with a small metallic ram's skull that dangled between her small breasts. Sue said that the chair was not taken and that she could have it.

The blonde girl said thanks and sat down setting her books on the table.

I realized I had been staring like an idiot.

“So what's your name?”

The words snuck out of my mouth. Old Maureen was never one for small talk. She always found it annoying, but I wanted nothing more.

“Amayda Fisher,” she said. Her voice was clean of any accent that I could recognize. She could have moved here from anywhere.

“Never heard that name before.”

“What?”

“Amayda.”

“Oh, it's the name my grandfather gave me.”

“You're grandfather?” Sue said. “Where's your parents?”

“My dad's at home, I guess,” Amayda's tone remained serious and unaware of how strange it was to have a grandfather name a child. I guessed that maybe it was a traditional grandfather sort of thing since I never knew my grandparents and that maybe there were some families that did that even if it seemed peculiar.

“You're Maureen Ford.”

I blinked.

“I saw that awesome painting of that Grim Reaper in the costume shop. The store owner talked about how proud he was of it when we asked him about it. It was nice of you to give it to him.”

“Oh,” I said. The new girl was a fan. “I shopped there a lot over the summer, and he asked for a painting so I gave him one.”

“Killer shirt.” Amayda said. “Juno Reactor's pretty cool. Beyond the Infinite is one of my favorite albums.”

“Really?”

“It was the first one of theirs I heard like way long ago. I tend to like darker stuff, but it's still cool.”

Amayda's eyes were a smoky pale green and a dense amount of brown freckles splattered her cheeks. She seemed to be a real blonde; her hair was bright and brushed, shimmering. Her shoulders were broad and firm and she sat poised, almost regal as if she had been taught by an instructor. I wondered if Amayda's family was rich. Her fingers were long, like mine, and her nails painted purple. Mine were black. I hoped she wasn't straight. Class interrupted our discussion of various pagan gods and goddesses of death that had somehow spawned from our discussion about our favorite bands. I had forgotten to introduce Sue. It was during our sketching of a bowl of wax fruit that conversation started again.

“What happened to your arms?” Amayda asked.

I hesitated. The mutilated skulls still refused to fade: if anything they seemed to have grown darker. But Amayda seemed understanding. She knew rare things.

“They were skulls I painted on, but the teacher saw them and, well, I had to wash them off. Didn't work out so well.”

There was too much ease and that frightened me, but I kept talking.

“I bought water resistant smudge proof paint and that seems to have backfired and I can't believe I'm telling you this.”

“Why?” She grinned devilishly.

I whispered. “Cause it's fucking embarrassing.”

Amayda touched my arm and I drew back.

“Can I see?” she said.

“Why? They're messed up anyway.”

“Come on, Skully.” She smirked.

I lifted my arm for her inspection. Amayda's purple tipped fingers softly traced the thin hairs on my arm, drifting around the damaged black splotches of my skin. Her fingers discovered and traced the vanished cheekbones and teeth that had faded and warped under water.

“They've inverted,” she said.

Her fingers drifted towards my wrist and a static pop zapped. Sue and I jumped. Sue had been just as entranced.

“Sorry,” Amayda said and giggled.

“What was that?”

“I was seeing what you painted.”

I glanced at Sue who looked just as confused as I felt. We started sketching again, and I didn't know how to carry the conversation any more. I pondered writing Amayda a note, but that seemed childish and even if I did, I didn't know what to say. I just met this girl after all.

But at the end of class Amayda slid me a note. I tucked it away, sure I shouldn't read it in front of students who might get a glance of a word or two. Maybe it was her phone number. Maybe she was asking me out on a date. That would be too soon though. It had only been one class period, but it felt like I already knew her.

I walked with her as we left the classroom, Sue not far behind.

“So hey,” I said to Amayda in the hall. Amayda turned towards me, still walking away.

“You have to go so soon?”

“My dad.”

She spun back around and rushed down the hall.

Students poured out around me. Sue shrugged and left with a promise to see me tomorrow. The last thing I wanted was to rush to home waiting for my own father. I was sure he would have words with me tonight about possibly everything that went wrong with today, but I didn't want to miss Amayda leaving. I wanted to catch a glimpse of her father's car in hopes it would reveal something about her family, like maybe he decided to drive the sports car today, or a minivan, maybe even a hearse.

While we were talking I had completely forgot to ask Amayda anything about her father and my own, so any little bit of information I might get from just seeing her leave propelled me. I ran down the hall away from the main entrance to a third story window. The first car in the queue parked off to the side was the green Saturn I saw outside Goblins and Ghouls. Amayda's father (I wasn't exactly sure) sat in the driver's seat, cigarette smoke drifted from his open window. A minute passed and Amayda walked out the main back doors across the walkway with other students in tow hustling for their parent's cars, ready to go home and watch TV or play video games. She strode around them with majestic long strides, almost ethereal. I admired that. She turned her head and our eyes met. A shiver itched down my spine; she knew where to look. Normally I would have looked away in embarrassment, but I watched the girl climb into the passenger's seat of her father's green Saturn. Her father started the car and drove away.

I pulled her note from my pocket.

A Juno Reactor Lyric: “I feel the universe functioning.”



## Chapter 4

### FREEZING WISHES

When I got home I rushed to my room and turned my computer on to try my hand at stalking. I logged into Facebook and typed “Amayda Fisher” into the search bar. But she didn’t show up. The only Amaydas I found on Facebook were all Hispanic and lived in Central or South America. Amayda's grandfather, the one Amayda said had named her, must be foreign or Hispanic.

Google found Amaydas in Florida and Massachusetts, but no one by the name “Amayda Fisher.” It was strange she was hard to find online. Because a girl who was into music like Juno Reactor (which I discovered over the internet) seemed to have no online identity whatsoever. How could a girl who shared so many of my interests be absent from the digital world?

It was possible she had a fake Facebook account under some alias to avoid nosey or judgmental family members. From what I had seen her father was creepy, and it wasn’t hard to believe that if Amayda was different, like me, she might not want to share herself with the world. But it was still hard to believe.

I was at this for a few hours, reading other Amayda profiles like they were her cousins and maybe would learn more about her through them. But no inkling of a gorgeous blonde Kentucky girl graced any of them.

The garage door hummed. I jumped, spell broken. I shut my door so I wouldn't see my dad (rather he wouldn't see me) when he went to his bedroom. He walked into the hall below,

heading towards the kitchen. His usual routine was kitchen first with mail in his hand, opening each and every one of them, even if it was junk, and reading it all from beginning to end, chuckling to himself. He was a man who found mail funny and laughed at nothing else.

We rarely spoke to each other except to say that dinner was ready or we need more toilet paper, mechanical stuff, so it startled me when I heard him calling my name, telling me to come downstairs.

He sat at the kitchen table with his letter opener in one hand and a letter in the other, it looked like the electricity bill. He didn't look at me, but told me to sit. I did, and he read the bill for an aching minute and laughed about the “sincerely” at the bottom of it.

The first thing people notice about my father is the scar on his face. It goes from his left lip up to his eye. Whatever cut him had gone so deep that he could never completely seal his mouth. A tooth always showed. He had a different story for everyone who ever asked about it, from knife fighting as a child, to alien abduction (sometimes he had a dry sense of humor), to an incident during fly fishing when a friend cast a rod and the hook sliced him. His lip twitched as I sat there staring at it, wondering why my father acted the way he did.

“How was your day?” he asked, not looking at me.

“Fine.”

He turned the bill over, reading the power company's logo. “That's not what I heard.”

I said nothing.

“Simpson County Power, ‘keeping you electrified’” he laughed again. “Terrible logo. Makes me think they need an electric chair somewhere on here.”

I didn't laugh. He looked at me.

“Nothing?” he asked.

I remained quiet.

“I hear Sarah’s a lesbian and that she told her parents. Did you know this?”

“No-Yes. I learned about that today.”

“Do you want to tell me anything?”

My dad’s eyes were unfocused, cold.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if there is anything you need to tell me.”

“There isn’t.”

“There’s a new girl in your grade, Andrea Washington. I heard she’s a lesbian too.”

“I’m not a lesbian.”

“Ok.”

His lip twitched. He scratched his head. “Everyone has to be dramatic this year. As if being teenagers wasn’t hard enough, you got to have lesbians over here, and you? What? A goth? Getting in trouble? Embarrassing me? To do something so silly like painting your arms with skulls in a post Columbine world? What were you thinking?”

“Dad-”

I didn’t know what to say. I was grateful he had changed the conversation. My father was a severe man, serious even when he was trying to be funny. I could tell he had seen things that made him the way he was, like maybe murders in a ghetto or the aftermath of a deadly hurricane or earthquake. He was so solitary and uncaring, his face in a permanent scowl. I don’t think he even liked kids. I never took any of his classes, but the students who called him Mr. Twitch (not to his face) hated him because he kept the classroom in lock step and would make kids stand up for an entire class if a student brought the wrong sized graph paper or the wrong numbered TI

calculator. Only when he was with Jean, did he soften and rounded out. When I was in middle school and they were dating, the bus would drop me off at the high school and I would wait in his classroom where other students hung out and studied. But when Jean left him he grew rigid and religious and the students stopped coming after class unless he ordered them to.

“What did Jean say?” I asked.

“Ms. Hall?” He looked back at the bill. “She said a few things. I think you know what. And I think you’re trying to delay.”

“Go ahead and ground me and get this over with.”

“Talk to me, Maureen.”

“I don't know what to say. So I painted skulls on my arms. Why is it such a big deal?”

“Why did you do it?”

“Because.”

“That’s not good enough. Elaborate.”

“I thought-“

I figured a simple explanation might be enough to get me out of this even if it wasn’t exactly true.

“The skulls. I painted them on both of my arms, because I thought it would be cool.”

“On both arms?” He hit the ceiling fan light on. It whirled to life over our heads and shined down on us. I squinted my eyes.

“Yeah.” Looking down at my arms I realized that most of it had finally faded or rubbed off somehow, but the remnants were still noticeable.

“You're ambidextrous?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“You forgot?”

“How long?”

“Like always.”

Maybe my dad was growing senile, or maybe the gulf between us grew larger than we both realized. He took a moment to digest the fact and his face deepened. He hit the light off, killing the rocking of the fan.

“I was embarrassed when Ms. Hall told me about you coming to her office,” he said. “Franklin is a small town, Maureen. A little difference goes a long way and people notice and they talk. Everyone gossips, and now are they going to start gossiping about you, maybe even about me. I thought I raised you better than to do foolish things like this.”

“They’re not going to talk about you, Dad.”

“Did anyone tell you to do it?”

“What? Who would tell me to do it?”

He sighed both relief and exhaustion.

“School isn’t about self-expression. It’s about learning. You can worry about expressing yourself when you’ve graduated. Focus on school. Focus on college. Don’t lose all the trust you’ve already built with your teachers. They believe in you. All during lunch I heard how Ms. Green was so surprised and a little embarrassed by you.”

I closed my eyes. My head was already above the clouds, beyond school, beyond college. And regardless of how much my dad made sense, I just couldn’t bring myself to focus anymore. Maybe I had what they called senioritis. I needed everything just to be done with, especially school.

He took a deep breath.

“Only one more year, Maureen.”

“Ok.”

I nodded, but it wasn't genuine.

“We are normal people, Maureen. We should strive to do our best. We should not make fools of ourselves and we should never draw needless attention. You're seventeen and you're acting like you're twelve. I shouldn't even be having this discussion with you. You're almost a grown woman. Start acting like one.”

“Yes sir. I understand.”

I understood it too well. My father wanted me to be like him.

“Do you have any more pranks? Any other dress code violations planned?”

“No.”

“Then from now on until I say otherwise you're riding into school with me.”

“What?”

“And I don't want to even see any shirts with skulls or pants with skulls or anything that looks demonic or strange on any part of your body. You're a respectable smart young woman, not some aspiring delinquent going out, drawing attention to herself, and causing mischief. Am I clear?”

“This is a bunch of bullshit.”

“What did you say?”

Cussing had been banned from this house since probably before I was born. He even winced when he heard an “ass” on television.

“What did you say?”

Maybe if I said it a second time without emotion I could recover some from my mistake.

“Bullshit.”

“That's what I thought. Do you also want to go to church with me on Sunday too? I can wake you up for that.”

Of course I didn't, but Dad was presenting it as if I had a choice even though I knew he'd make me regardless. It comforted me that it wasn't the freaking out comment that upset him. I've always considered my dad a sort of oddball trying too hard to operate in a normal world.

More and more I felt suffocated by a man who barely involved himself in my life. I wanted to yell at him, but I didn't want any more salt in my wounds. Saliva rumbled in the back of my throat in frustration much harder than I intended.

“Then church it is.”

“Oh come on.”

“And bring me the paint you used. Now.”

“But I bought it with my own money.”

“And when you turn eighteen in January, it's yours again.”

I walked upstairs and grabbed the paint from my dresser. Counting to five Mississippi, I tried to swallow my anger. All the adults were overreacting. For one thing, how are skulls on a girl's arm going to offend a students? Skulls were biology.

He was reading another letter when I handed him the body paint. He didn't bother to look at it and set it down next to him on the table. On my way back to the stairs he called my name and still looking at the paper he said rather strained, “I love you.”

I stood at the foot of the stairs. That was something he never said. He couldn't look at me, but he said it. I fumbled an awkward, “I love you too,” in return and walked upstairs utterly confused by today. Too emotionally exhausted to do much of anything else.

Eventually I got around to doing my homework and washing off my arms completely with the body paint remover. When I finished, I heard the doorbell ring. After some conversation at the door, my dad yelled pizza at me from downstairs. Pizza was enough to bring me back downstairs. Dad had ordered a large Hawaiian style from Harmon's, our favorite. He sat at the kitchen table, which he mostly used as his desk. We didn't eat together. The table was too messy for that. But he had his own space as he leafed through his papers. He told me I could take the rest of the pizza and that he wasn't going to eat much at all. There was a twelve pack of cokes in the fridge and I grabbed two and as I turned with the pizza and drinks in hand, I saw that symbol.

I'd seen it before years ago, hand written in my father's journals. It looked like Uranus depicted in a three quarter circle the with its vertical dust ring slicing through the center like a blade with twenty eight dots scattered all around it, most of them scattered below and above the center circle. But Uranus had twenty-seven moons.

When I was a child, my father and I watched a ton of space documentaries, like Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* and the universe specials they once had on the History channel. That's how I knew it must have been Uranus, but it had that extra dot, an extra moon. So I asked my father about it because it was all over his journals that were all mostly illegible, like he was making a collection of asemic writings. He told me it wasn't a planet, but a symbol. But I couldn't tell if it was his dry humor or not, like this pipe isn't a pipe but a picture of a pipe type deal. I didn't push him, but he continued, "There are spaces where mathematics fall apart. Places where bridges can be made if their seemingly illogical nature can be grasped." It didn't make any sense at the time and seeing that symbol again startled me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, resting the pizza box on the counter.

"Hmmm?" He didn't look up at me.



“That symbol,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “You remember it?”

He sat the page down and took a bite of pizza.

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn't worry about it,” he said. “It's nonsense.”

I wasn't going to press him. He'd bought the pizza after all. I decided that I wouldn't make another trip downstairs at all for the rest of the night.

The sun had set and I knew that if I was going in with my dad tomorrow, I would have to wake up early, so I didn't set about any new projects like painting. I tried to watch the first episode of *Firefly* on Netflix, but I couldn't get into it so I watched the remake of *Battlestar Galactica* instead and ate all of the pizza. I felt stuffed and a little sick from the grease, but it was worth it.

When I went to bed, I thought of Amayda. It's one of those things when you meet someone new. Your mind starts going through narratives that are found in movies, like canoeing on a sun lit stream, in each other's arms on a couch watching a movie. I had wedding fantasies too. At some point as a teenager I had decided I wanted to get married with white dresses and rose pedals scattered on a white carpet. Sometimes I get sentimental.

My hand drifted to my other pillow and I imagined Amayda there, her cheek under my palm. I shifted my weight in the bed to accommodate room for her, but I didn't know if it would be enough space. My bed was full sized, and Amayda was only a few inches shorter than me. Both of our feet would dangle off the end. That made me laugh. I like bed time because there's no one to tell you to stop thinking.

I never told my dad directly about my interest in girls. I just laughed when he would ask

me about boyfriends. Concern about good grades always put that question to rest. Education was more important than procreation in his book and that was something I did respect about him. I did find some boys attractive, even if they lacked maturity. But I never wanted a boy to call me a hoe, so I avoided them.

My father was religious and serious about it. He believed God condemned homosexuality and I heard him talking about it with others at church before. He wasn't venomous about it, but I wasn't comfortable testing the waters. I didn't even want to believe in God, especially if He actually did condemn my feelings and behavior. But I did, sorta. I could hear the dead, the words of the afterlife, but if something like God actually ran it, I was skeptical. As far as I knew, I was the only person alive that could hear them. I figured there would be something about it in The Bible, but there was nothing like what I experienced. I kept it hidden far deeper than my interest in girls.

At some point my eyes closed for good and I drifted away. It was a simple thing to reach oblivion. All I had to do was lie down, talk to myself, close my eyes, and release my consciousness like a boat drifting from the dock on top of icy dark water. I departed from myself as my sense of body dissolved and tentacled out into the ether like forgotten party streamers caught in a storm. I always felt safe, even in the frantic swaying; it relaxed me like a massage. A thin flavor of raspberries laced the darkness and my sensory tongue drifted through the air, savoring it. I was totally free and alone in the total darkness of space.

After floating through the aimless darkness for some time, the first draft greeted me with an unusual smell, fresh ice. Sometimes strange smells and tastes met me in the tail ends of dying drafts from the edges of the world, dirtying the raspberries. Flavors of smoke, sweat, and blood, sometimes rot: the flavors of other lives. The flavors forced me to recognize and envision real

three-dimensional events. If it was smoke, something was burning, maybe a house or a bonfire. Some smoke felt pure like a campfire and other smoke was heavy with the scents of coal and pollution. If the smell was rotten, something or someone had died and I pictured animals like birds and dogs crushed on the sides of roads. Thankfully rot was rare, but after my friend Nathan's death, Sarah's brother, I minded it less and less thinking those smells might instead be gifts; reminders that even in the grave, the dead still thought of me. But the ice was different, unique. This ice towered and drowned my ethereal senses. It reminded me of Alaska and the autumn not too long ago I spent with my dad on a cruise there, breathing an ocean that wished it could freeze.

I was on a ship, eleven years old, floating in the Chukchi Sea off the Alaskan coast. My father's friend then, Mr. Patel, a chemistry teacher, won the cruise by entering a PBS fundraiser drawing. It was the only time I ever left Kentucky except for a few times I had been in Tennessee. Tennessee didn't count. It was too close to be a real adventure.

Icebergs strayed in the sea like ancient aliens searching for life forms to crush. Kentucky snow could not compare to the ice mountains that drifted in the distance. They often melted and sections crashed into sea. The sounds of the melting ice bergs were like clean, cloudless thunder that shattered over the horizon. I cringed as the edges of icebergs thundered, breaking like snapping bones, avalanching into the sea. The tour guides warned us of the oncoming global catastrophe. Dread and worry filled my head. I knew every time the icebergs melted and shattered into the Sea, the bergs weakened and shrunk, dying. This was not a vacation, but an education about the coming apocalypse.

The tour guide pointed to one iceberg I guessed was three times the size of my house. I gawked at it as they approached, the cruise ship minute in comparison. But the tour guide told

those that were paying attention on the top deck that even though the icebergs seemed massive above water, below where you could not see, they could reach the depths of one hundred and twenty meters.

“How big is a hundred and twenty meters?” I asked my father. I leaned through the railing, my mouth open as my eyes failed to trace the iceberg’s underbelly under the clear blue water. I wished for a submarine.

My father leaned on the banister next to me. “Think of our truck being approximately five meters long.”

“Ok.”

“Now divide into one hundred and twenty, the length of that iceberg's underbelly. Can you start to see it?”

I could not at first and I blinked at him. But as my father’s bright red F-150 stretched out across my mind, I traced its length. Many days after school I walked around my father’s truck repeatedly, waiting for him to leave his classroom and in the repetitive march around the red behemoth I understood the length of five meters. “One hundred and twenty divided by five,” I said to myself and my eleven year old brain solved the equation, “Twenty four.”

I imagined walking down a line of twenty four of my dad’s bright red trucks end to end, after school. At first I thought that twenty four was the length of a line of five trucks but I kept walking down the pavement of the school parking lot and five turned into seven, turning into ten, then fifteen, then one after the other my boots clicking on the pavement until the steady rhythm reached the twenty fourth.

A red hue smeared the iceberg.

“That’s deep,” I said. “It’s like the two of the huge parking lots behind your school.”

“What we see on the surface is a pale reflection of the depth that is always underneath. One truck turns into twenty four and an iceberg is understood in terms of red Ford F-150s and parking lots. There are so many other ways to understand an iceberg. You could imagine our house about say roughly eight point five meters tall and then an iceberg is fourteen of those. But it’s more than numbers, its perception. Imagination and whatever the measure you use to determine its length, its depth, its entirety. Measure and imagine. That’s how the future is made.”

I measured things by dad's truck. It was four trucks from my cabin to the main deck, a quarter of a truck the bed to the toilet. I measured my world with red streaks and black wheels.

But something else hid behind the trucks. It was dark, nebulous, and terrible. It hung in the words of the tour guides on the deck, giving speeches about whales (which we never saw to my disappointment) and icebergs. In between pondering the depth of icebergs, I heard words such as climate change, global warming, disaster, upheaval, starvation, disease, not in our lifetime, but soon. Our world was dying a slow and painful death.

As the Alaskan cruise zigzagged along the northern coast above the Bering Strait, the speakers squeaked to life forcing all on board to listen as the tour guide explained the vastness of the sea and the ice on the horizon and how it once, only five years ago, stretched out over the patch of water they were sailing through.

I asked Mr. Patel, over breakfast the next morning if the world was really ending.

He smiled weakly and tried to laugh it off, but his face grew stern. “The world isn’t ending. It’s changing. And if we don’t do anything about it, it’s humanity that might end,” he said. “The world will remain for billions of years and there’s not much we can do about it, but we're changing the climate by using up all of its finite resources.”

“But what can we do to save it?”

He smiled at me. “You’ll probably live a normal life. If anything terrible happens because of climate change, it will be a long time from now, perhaps next century. This gives us enough time to try and repair the damage we’ve done as a species because of us burning so much carbon.”

I wondered why the prospect of dying before anything “terrible” would happen should comfort anyone. “But bad things are already happening,” I said. “The ice up here is melting away faster than anyone imagined.”

“True.” Mr. Patel adjusted his glasses. “There isn’t much solar protection this far north, but in terms of radically changing how the majority of people live on the planet probably won’t occur until around 2100.”

“I could still be alive for that.”

“I’m sure we’ll fix it.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well.” He considered for a moment. “We can start by using more alternative energy like solar panels, eat less meat, and recycle more. That would help.”

“We pray,” my dad cut in. He sat next to me. “We call on higher powers.”

Patel chuckled. “Oh come on, Dwayne.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “You think the governments of the world are going to do anything? The UN is a mess and the oil companies are making so much money that our government, the biggest polluter in the world, only gives lip service as the planet dries up and withers away.”

“That’s scary, dad.”

“But it’s true. We’ll all be drowning in the ocean before the government lifts a finger.”

“But we shouldn’t give up hope, Maureen,” Mr. Patel said, looking at my father strangely.

Dad took a big bite of scrambled eggs drenched in hot sauce and black pepper.

“What can hope do?” I asked. “I hoped for my mom to come back and she didn't.”

Dad choked on his eggs and drank it down with a big gulp of apple juice. “Ok, ok,” he said. “Perhaps I’m being too cynical, Maureen. I apologize.” He wiped his chin with a napkin.

Patel was the first to leave the table, and I sat there watching my father. I had finished my food long ago and had watched the sea, but when Patel left, I had questions that I wanted to ask. My father shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he finished up his eggs.

“What's on your mind, Maureen?” he asked.

“Can God really save us?” I asked. Watching the ice burgs float in the sea, witnessing the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. I couldn't write the supernatural off.

My father measured me with a stare, as if he were making sure I wasn't trying to make fun of him. And after a minute he spoke serious and soft. “Can He? Sure,” he said. “Will He? I don't know.”

“Mr. Patel doesn't think He will.”

“Ravi is an Atheist. To him that question doesn't matter. But he's wrong, there's very serious stuff out there. There are greater powers. I’ve seen plenty to believe.”

I looked around the dining area to see if I could catch a glimpse of Mr. Patel again. I didn’t know atheists lived in Kentucky. They were generally laughed away by people at church as if they were punchlines in Sunday morning cartoons. But learning that Mr. Patel was one had confused me. He was the first individual I knew that stepped out of the norm.

“He is?”

“Maureen, there are great things about humanity and there are terrible things that aren't. You'll understand when you get older just how complex people believe in the workings of the cosmos and the planets. But if anything will save humanity, it's humanity. Everything on the outside is wrong and evil. God is the father of humanity, our creator, our shepherd. He is our best hope. To deny the spirit is to deny man. To strengthen faith in humanity is to strengthen faith in God. In a way, Patel is right. It is up to us. But we are more than just flesh and bone. We are flesh and bone that connects to the Father. Being right with the Father is what is right for human kind.”

Little did my father know, his speech planted doubts within me, doubts that would deepen and further alienate me from church. Mr. Patel was an atheist, and he was one of my father's only friends outside of school and he wasn't a bad or angry. I didn't give up faith though, I only doubted. What I saw on the outside, the hatred towards gays and the oppression of women, sure it wasn't monolithic, but my father accepted certain truths about sexuality that applied to me and I knew he was wrong. I couldn't give faith to a system that would actively seek to dehumanize me. I needed to step back. I needed to find my own truth, my own faith. And so far it wasn't in Franklin Kentucky.

Later that day I drew my first skull on my hand with a black Sharpie I found by the drink machines. It was a simple thing with triangles for eyes, dots for a nose, and three lines for teeth. Dad saw it and gave me a look as if I were tainted. I never knew where that Sharpie ended up, it wasn't in my bag the next day.

My last memory of the cruise was standing on top the deck and breathing in the smoke from the burning from the engine. Perhaps the ones who wanted to save the world were only doing it more harm. The cruise was an education, but I wondered if the cost of bringing so many people on a carbon-roasting boat to witness the nearing death of Alaska was too much for the



world to bear. The smoke grew thicker and the wind pushed it into my face and it burned, but I could not move away. My eyes watered and I coughed. I was no longer at my remembered sea, but back in the blackness of oblivion, suffocating in the smoldering wind of another incoming draft. I broke from my day dream. The differing scents of other smokes multiplied within. There were the familiar smells of dirt and wood, but also the scent of roasting meat, of a person burning alive. I knew it to be a people because I knew what normal edible meat smelled like. Edible meat smelled like the color brown, but the colors of the smoke in my oblivion were orange and yellow, the colors of thought and creation. Other people's minds melted somewhere beyond oblivion in hungry blazes, and I breathed it in. Something grabbed my foot like a shackle, catching me and pulling me in.

My journey through oblivion drifted towards an incinerator. My entire experience in oblivion was a gentle straying towards the edges of Hell. I panicked. I thought of my father's words, his condemnation of things I knew I had done and never asked forgiveness for. Heat burned on my face. Judgment had already been cast upon me. I must have died in my sleep somehow. Hell was real.

I saw a fire burning in the middle of a blizzard. People in furs chanted words that made strange complete sense.

*bin*

*vesxakah*

*bin*

*vesahah*

the way

voices rise

the way

voices rise

Freezing wind raced across my pores, and I felt alive, like in the moments after a car crash and finding out you're still alive and in one piece. But a voice screamed inside of my head with words I didn't know. A strange language of emotions that was polluted with fear. Someone was inside of my head. The fear overwhelmed me as dancers spun around, faces blurry, skin covered with pelts. The world spun, and I fell to the ground grasping my forehead, cursing my dad, fearing truth before everything went blank.

CHAPTER 5  
THE WATTS IN THE WALLS

“Maureen,” a voice said. “Maureen.”

I woke up screaming. My father, who stood in the doorway, yelped. He had turned on my lights. I stopped when I noticed he was wearing his usual teaching clothes. My world had not shattered, not completely.

“Jesus, Maureen,” he said.

My chest panted. I took a moment to catch my breath.

“Sorry.”

“A nightmare?” he asked, straightening his glasses. His lip twitched.

“I think so.”

He walked across my room to my computer desk where the pizza box from last night sat and opened it.

“You ate all of it?” No wonder you're having bad dreams.”

He smiled, grabbing the box. He only minded clutter on his table in the kitchen, everywhere else had to be perfect.

“Anyway, get up. I'm taking you to school so don't waste any time. And remember, normal clothes. Nothing foolish.”

He left.

The only time I had ever screamed was on roller coasters at King's Island, and those

screams had a tinge of excitement. I felt a little embarrassed and concerned that my father didn't offer any words of support or guidance about it. He had left the door open and I could feel the cool air in the hallway mocking me to get up. All I wanted was to curl back up under my blankets and imagine a world with no school. It took me some time before I could push the covers off me and get to my feet.

The hot shower calmed me, and by the time I got into my clothes, black jeans, sneakers, and a white t-shirt with a giant black star in the center, my wits had settled. I had lost the battle yesterday, and I had no ground to stand on to keep fighting today. I could be normal enough, at least around my father and hopefully enough at school. Now wasn't the time to fight the powers that be.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I poured myself a bowl of Frosted Flakes. My father watched the news in the living room as he scrolled through headlines on his phone. Things were starting to add up, like when I suspected as a child that Santa wasn't real. There was no name or face to it yet, but it was there. I eyed my father's stack of notebooks. There was one I knew that had this strange Uranus like symbols in it. It was a red notebook with the dates 01-10-92 to 05-05-92 on it. Leafing through the edges of the stacks, I found it in the middle of one of the stacks in the center of the table. I pulled it out and shoved it into my book bag. My dad was too distracted to notice.

I thought I might show it to Amayda. If her father knew mine back in college, then maybe she would know about the symbols.

I rested my head on the window during the ride to school. My mind swimming from Amayda, to Uranus, then my dad, his radio, and how classic rock stations played the same music over and over even after months of not being in my father's truck. They were the same old tunes.

“How come people don't listen to new or different music? When they listen to top forty it's the same party or love songs just repackaged. And classic stations are just the same songs over and over with nothing new.”

“Sit up,” he said.

I did, disappointed that I couldn't connect. And here they lay the problem, at least for me. The adults wanted me to be normal and quiet, to become the sweet little girl repackaged in the body of a lanky black girl. But I desperately wanted to be so much more, so much more than a boring nine to five life, get married, procreate, and raise kids, dying alone in a Hospice. That was one of the most common sorrows of the dead, those who died alone and forgotten, missing their children and grandchildren.

We arrived at school two hours before class. I wasn't tired, but I was as cheery as the overcast sky. My father headed for his classroom and I walked to the cafeteria, hoping maybe Amayda was there waiting or one of my other friends. The place was empty except for a couple of freshmen playing Magic the Gathering on a corner table. I bought a lemonade and sat at a different table, close to the vending machines, watching the usual spot where Sarah, Mary, Sue, and maybe Andrea would sit at during lunch. Was it normal to feel so alien from a group you've been a part of through most of high school?

I remembered my father's notebook in my backpack. He'd certainly be angry if he saw me studying it. But he never said that I couldn't take it. I think he assumed I wouldn't find any interest in them. Leafing through the pages I found more symbols that didn't make any sense. There were lots of circles and jagged lines and number symbols. It looked like a storm raging across a field of stars. Many of the Uranus type symbols had been blacked out by a Sharpie, and I wondered if it was the same Sharpie I found during the Alaska cruise. But of course there were

millions of black Sharpies. Why was he writing these symbols last night? Maybe he was making a new book.

The storm depicted on the pages moved me. I leafed through the book again and traced the lines he scratched in with my fingers, seeing if somehow I could find some tactile meaning behind them. It was like looking at the pyramids and feeling a sense of kinship, like maybe when people who descended from ancient Europeans look at Stonehenge or wear Celtic crosses. My father had identified with a storm, a storm that spanned space, something perhaps more ancient than man, more ancient than this world, something that used symbols lacking any human logic.

The homeroom bell rang. I had been staring at the storm the whole time. My side of the table was soaked with the condensation from my lemonade. I glanced across the cafeteria to the usual table and saw all of them, including Andrea, rising from the table and leaving. Had they not noticed me? I had sat here for over an hour and no one said a word to me. Not even a “hello” or a “you should sit with us” sort of gesture. I was offended and a little ticked off, and I plotted revenge during my walk up to homeroom, stopping by my locker to drop off my backpack.

As I opened it I heard Amayda's voice from behind me.

“Skully!” she said, walking up next to me.

“Hey, you weren't in the cafeteria earlier, were you?”

“No. Why? I like your shirt.”

“Thanks.”

Even though it was normal enough for my dad, I still liked that she liked it. Amayda wore a green shirt under her black The North Face jacket, and another black skirt similar to the one she wore yesterday, but it looked tougher, slightly militaristic and its length, or lack of, threatened the dress code. I admired her taking that risk.

“Love your skirt,” I said.

I never really complimented my friend's clothing. We rarely had dressed to impress, so complimenting Amayda felt a little awkward, but fun.

She smiled and thanked me back.

“So what were you asking?”

She leaned on the locker next to me.

I wanted a little revenge.

“Say, you should sit with me at lunch today.”

“Cool, where at?”

I was a little surprised it was so easy to get her to come over to eat with us. A person like her, cute, talkative, energetic, seemed like a girl who could easily make friends, easily become popular. But who was I to second guess myself?

I told her where and then we talked about our classes and homerooms. I asked her about Facebook, and she told me she never used it. The second bell rang, and we caught ourselves in an awkward pause. We both knew we needed to leave, but something, some social gesture felt needed. She hugged me briefly. I returned it. It was only a second.

I saw Sarah down the hallway, coming out of the restroom, noticing us at that moment, and quickly turning her head to hide any shock she might have felt, or maybe disgust. That answered one question though: they were actively ignoring me, at least Sarah was. I had achieved at least one point in this game. Sarah knew I wasn't alone. Amayda would make a great ally.

Paying my classes any mind was harder than ever. I couldn't focus, and I watched the rain and listened to its static during my first block class. I grabbed the notebook between first and

second blocks, and saw Amayda again in the hall and she waved at me. I saw Sue before walking into class, and she did the same. Sue never waved.

Ms. Green hovered over me most of the class. The red notebook sat under the notebook I idly took notes in. I wanted to read it, but I knew Ms. Green would tell me to put it away if she saw me staring at it, and the last thing I needed was for her to send me to Ms. Hall's office again. I forced myself to watch her and took notes. She was another person I had to convince I was normal, so I tried my best to look like I was listening. All I could think about was Amayda, and the storm covering the stars in the pages of my dad's notebook.

I was the first out of the classroom when the lunch bell rang and one of the first in the lunch lines still with my books in hand. It was hamburgers, fries, and salad. I put extra cucumbers in mine and also on my burger with lemonade to drink. Being the first at the table, I reclaimed my seat. Surprisingly, Amayda was the second, and I gestured for her to sit down in Sarah's seat. The seeds of my revenge sowed.

“So this is where all the cool kids sit, huh?” she said.

“Hah,” I said. “This is where the lady nerds sit. Welcome to the club.” I could have said that the lesbians sit here now, but I wasn't sure how she would have taken it yet.

“Lady Nerd? Sounds regal.”

We talked more about classes, and how Amayda liked it living in Franklin. It turned out that she was from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and moved up here to live with her father when her mother passed away from cancer.

“My mother died from cancer too,” I said. “I was a year old.”

“What is that?” Sarah's voice echoed from behind us. “And why is it sitting in my seat?”

I turned to see Sarah flanked by Mary and Andrea. Sarah wore a pink polka-dotted shirt. I



admit it was rather cute. But her sudden outburst of anger, her finger pointed out, I cringed not expecting Sarah would explode. I had wanted this to be a slow, quiet, and excruciating form of vengeance.

“This person,” I said. “Is Amayda.”

“I’m sorry,” Amayda said. “I didn’t realize this was your seat.”

“It’s ok,” I said. “She can sit next to me.”

But Sarah waited like she couldn’t hear me. Mary looked concerned, and Andrea looked away. Before I could say anything else, Amayda got up and pushed her tray to the seat on my other side. She circled the table away from Sarah. Sarah sat, and following her lead Mary took her place and Andrea sat down next to Mary. I knew that if I waited a few extra seconds that someone like Andrea would offer some bit of conversation that would steer the table away from Sarah’s outburst. But the awkwardness remained unchallenged. I was angry. I pressed on.

“Did y’all ignore me this morning?” I said. The southern slang slipped across my tongue as if it had been hiding there all summer waiting for the right moment to jump out and draw attention to itself.

“What are you talking about?” Sarah said, absently biting a fry. “You were the one ignoring us.”

“I didn’t even know you were all in the cafeteria” I said. “I was reading.”

“I’m sure you were.”

“Why are you so angry?”

“I’m not angry. If you think we were ignoring you then consider it a small demonstration of how you acted towards me over the summer.”

“Is that what this is still about?”

Sarah stared at me, her gaze cold and calculating. I had wanted the thing to play out with screws tightening, waiting for one side to break. But instead both sides broke. I didn't know what to say or how to respond. Mary didn't offer any help. Instead she remained quiet, perhaps glad that this, whatever it was exactly, finally bled out.

“Well.” I grabbed my tray, my books under it. “I hope the Island of Lesbos has a nice day.”

Mary offered a futile “wait,” but I had to stick to my decision and was relieved that Amayda followed me. All the tables in the cafeteria had been claimed by the first arrivals and they were watching us fracture. I kept walking until I found myself outside on the side steps of the cafeteria. Rarely did anyone sit outside, mainly because there were no tables or chairs and it was completely absent of lunch time politics, a complete demotion in the social order. But that bothered me the least. If Amayda stuck with me, then things would be ok and at least the rain had stopped.

“You want to talk about it?” Amayda said.

I had been still, watching the teacher's cars in the parking lot.

“No,” I said. “Not now.”

A voice fluttered from behind. Sue was walking towards us, offering a weak greeting.

“Oh hey,” Amayda said. “Sue, right?”

Sue nodded and sat down on the steps next to Amayda. She didn't say anything about the drama inside and calmly ate her hamburger. I sighed, but it was a good sigh. Not the one when you reach the top of a mountain, but perhaps when you get out of the car after sitting inside for two hours. I ate. And after I finished my lunch, I pulled out my father's notebook.

“I want to show the two of you something.”

I told them that it was my father's and that it had all of these strange drawings he drew long ago when he was in college. Amayda she didn't give a hint of recognition. I flipped it open and showed them the pages of drawings of the solar system and the clouds my father had drawn around the planets, as if they had all been gassed, all of it spelled out in small numbers and symbols I didn't know. It started with the sun and through the notebook other planets revealed themselves around notes and scratches of equations one right after the other. But most of the pages were just the clouds of the storm or gas or both and there weren't many numbers or symbols in those. The planets I had looked at from just hours ago had shifted very slightly. Mercury had shifted the most.

“This thing is moving,” I said. “The planets are revolving around the Sun on the paper.”

“Huh?” Sue said.

And I explained that the planets had shifted since I had last seen them. I admitted it was impossible, but it was true.

“Have you seen anything like this before, Amayda?”

Amayda looked at me from the notebook. Her expression soft, sad, and regretful, something I didn't expect. She nodded solemnly.

“Do you know what it is?” I asked.

“The solar system,” she said.

“Yeah, but do you know why?”

“It's a remembrance,” she said. “A tracing of a memorial.”

“Is it moving?”

“An illusion,” she said. “Helped by the lines of the clouds, and lightning.”

“Really?”

I flipped through the pages again. It was hard to tell if what she was saying was correct. The lines of the storm were jagged and irregular. She could have been right. The blacked out Uranus symbols remained on some of the pages and Sue asked about them and I drew one out for her on the back of the book.

“Your father is an interesting man,” Amayda said. “Very talented.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“I remember it from my father's stuff,” she said. “But the one you drew has the moons wrong. They aren't supposed to be vertical.” Amayda drew it out next to mine, the moons lining up to crisscross Uranus' ring.

“What is it?” Sue asked.

“I like it better in the Hawaiian tongue, Hele'ekela.” Amayda said. “Such an unfortunate name in western civilization. Uranus or ‘your anus.’ However you want to pronounce it.”

“I guess it depends on whose anus,” I said and we laughed.

The ending lunch bell rang, and we gathered our books and lunch trays. When we had reached the dishwashers, Sue had hurried on to class leaving Amayda and I behind. She stopped me outside the lunchroom doors.

“It is Uranus,” she said.

“Really?”

“From very long, like a very long long time ago.”

“But why?”

“Things were different back then.” She glanced down the halls. “There's something I need to tell you.”

She led me by the wrist to a hall that led down to the maintenance and custodial areas,

away from the traffic. She pulled out a pen and drew my father's symbol on my hand, the one with vertical moons.

“That's you. That's what it's supposed to mean.”

“What?”

“You'll know,” she said. “Just listen and you'll know. Vesxahaka-aka-un.”

She leaned in and kissed me. Her tongue forced itself past my lips and we held each other. I weakened and held on to her more for support. I was surprised. I was happy.

The words she said meant: “They will speak to you and help guide you, follow.” I never remembered learning this language, but I didn't want my confusion to ruin the moment. I slid my tongue into her mouth, her breath into mine. She tasted like hamburger meat and pickles.

“Ladies!”

We broke. Ms. Hall stood behind us, shaking her head.

“If the two of you stand in this hallway a second more you'll both get a detention.”

We hurried on.

It was hard to breathe during third block. The static of the rain had grown loud. I had arrived just in time before the final bell rang and claimed a seat close to the window. I flipped through my dad's notebook again, but couldn't focus on anything inside of it. I closed it and stuffed it under my books under my chair and stared at my other notebook, blank. I wrote a few notes down the teacher had on the board, but my mind swayed out the window, lost in the rainless sky and the whitening clouds. My tongue swam in my mouth, feeling Amayda's saliva mixing with mine. She had drunk water before she had kissed me and it was cool, soothing. Part of me wanted to give up control and scream, but the other part, the one I currently wore, sat quiet and unconcerned, focused on the outside. The symbol on my hand tugged on the edges of my

composure. Amayda said it was me, but I had no idea what she meant, nor who I was. Was I a planet, a gravitational force pulling moons out of their orbit?

But wait, it wasn't raining outside. It had stopped before lunch time. "What's that sound?" I asked aloud.

"What was that, Maureen?" Mr. David asked me.

"That noise. That static."

"What static?"

I glanced at the students around the room. They were all staring at me like I was crazy. No one understood me. No one else heard the noise.

"Nothing."

It could be possible that I was hearing something maybe trapped around where I sat, like directional static from a wire or something pointed at me. But that idea unsettled me even more. Why would anything be directed at me in particular?

When the bell rang I rushed for the restroom and washed my face. The cool water brought me in some, and I was relieved that no static followed me into the restroom. All I needed to do was to remain quiet, soft spoken, polite, and considerate for another ninety minutes and then I could hide someplace in school or maybe outside, away from everyone until my dad was ready to leave.

I only had one more class. A class with Amayda. Amayda, the one who probably brought me to this frantic phantom static hearing state to begin with. It had to be her. Amayda, the one who had me on the tip of her finger, the one who came out of nowhere spinning everything upside down. It wasn't me, I realized, it was her. It was her that was doing this to me, whatever she was. I couldn't tell if she were my enemy, my best friend, or even my one true love.

The final fourth block bell rang and I rushed down the hallway towards class. I didn't have time to gather my supplies. I ran covering my ears, thinking I could borrow Sue's or Amayda's if the teacher needed me to.

But when I got to art class, Sue sat alone. I looked around the room as I sat down next to her, but Amayda wasn't there. As the role reached Amayda Fisher's name, no one answered. The teacher marked her absent. The static blared in my ears.

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## VITA

R. Graham Bonnington was born May 10<sup>th</sup> 1982. He is the youngest of three children. He attended many schools all over Chattanooga, finding a hard time fitting in: Bright School, Saint Peters, EFG, CSLA, CSAS, and Chattanooga School for the Creative Arts. He dropped out of high school during his junior year. He got his GED (2000) just weeks after being diagnosed as a type 1 diabetic. He attended Chattanooga State where he received an Associates Degree (2004) with a focus in Communications. He attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, receiving a BA in Communications (2011). While attending UTC, Graham rediscovered writing prose in Tom Balazs' screenwriting class, a practice he had given up since high school. He later attended graduate school at UTC to get his Masters in English (2014). Graham's interest in literature started as a child with the pulp post-apocalyptic paperback adventures series known as *ENDWORLD*, Terry Brook's *Shannara* series, and later Robert Heinlein. During his studies at UTC, authors such as Cormac McCarthy, Larry Brown, Flannery O'Conner, Djuna Barnes, William Gay, and Octavia Butler influenced his writing and his growing appreciation for prose. He would later read H.P. Lovecraft's work, which inspired *Pale Statue: Blood Sisters*. Disturbed by Lovecraft's racism, Graham set out to write a cosmic horror piece that involved marginalized people as main protagonists and characters throughout, while also pondering over the machinations of extraterrestrials, and how the outside looks in.