

Twilight in the Spaces Between
a novel by david r. williams
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"Can you tell me where I can find the devil?"

"Why do you wish to find the devil?"

*"Because maybe the devil can tell me about
God."*

- The Seventh Seal

"I was born way down in Louisiana.

I love the way it sounds.

Cause that's my home.

I'm going back to Louisiana.

I'm going back to settle down."

- Louisiana, Percy Mayfield

"...the king's son calls me the "dark one"

...if he calls me again

...I will go with him."

- sephardic verse

*I had a dream last night that I held you.
And you still seemed as handsome to me.
But when I awoke I found you missin'.
It's just another crazy dream for me.*

*Crazy dreams linger on as I face an empty
dawn.
With no end to it all can I see.
For I've surely reached the end.
Lost your love to a friend.
Just another crazy dream for me.*

*Once you were mine and we were so happy.
I never thought that the end soon would be.
But now that you're gone, and I'm so
lonesome.
It's just another crazy dream for me.*

- "Crazy Dream" Patsy Cline

Entry. Andrea Ramsey's Dreambook (Undated)

*"There are no futures. There are only streams of
endless possibilities that collapse into one present as
we rush head long into them. But even the present is
an illusion, slipping from our grasp as we reach for
it, becoming the past.*

It is only the past that truly exists.

The past that scars our minds with memory.

With reverberations that dictate our lives.

With traces that haunt our eyes till death".

North Dakota, Winter, Now

Dear Mother

This is the last time I shall write you. You know the reasons why and so there is no need for me to repeat them here. I never was much for writing anyway. I will not call, as you know I abhor that obnoxious symbol of modernity they call the telephone. I will not email, as you have no computer. I am not really writing this. They do not let me have pencils...

"Super Max", the U.S. Maximum Facility at Bottineau, North Dakota, is considered to be the most secure prison in the world. It is the "end of the line" for America's most heinous criminals; criminals whose deeds are the fuel that drives lurid, true crime paperbacks and tabloid cover stories, crimes that open nightly news programs, images that will infect the minds of the morbid for decades to come.

...it is quiet and cool in my cell. I lie on my cot and close my eyes and I dream that I am with you, that I am holding you. That I am kissing your sweet, sweet face. Kissing away your tears. Kissing away your sorrow. Kissing away your fears. Protecting you as I have always done and always will. I miss Papa. Has he

wandered far this time? He will come back. He always does. I miss the stern Niobe. I miss the twins. But most of all, I miss the little one, our darkling sparrow. So frail, so bone thin, so lost in her own shadows. Especially now that I am not there. And of course I miss the woman I would make my wife...

Super Max is a one hundred and sixty million dollar, state-of-the-art, high-tech fortress of steel, concrete, and barbed wire. Those who come here, come for life. Even death does not bring freedom. The prison has its own cemetery and that is where its dead are buried. A measure that prevents thrill-seekers from turning their graves into shrines, and souvenir hunters from digging up the remains. For there are those who consider the inmates of Super Max, to be gods. Or the flesh and blood incarnations of Satan himself.

...Time is very different here mother. In Twilight the winters are mild and calm. Here, the wind howls so loudly I can hear it through the thick walls. It sounds like a chorus of the damned, pleading for salvation. Here, it is neither day nor night. Here, a single light shines down from a caged recess high above me. The level of the light never changes. It never goes out.

There is no clock. There is no calendar. I measure time in weekly sessions. Outside my door I can hear the sound of guards walking. Most often alone, but sometimes in pairs. When they walk in pairs, I know that when they return, they will have become a trio. Usually they are accompanied only by silence. But sometimes, depending on who they are escorting, there is idle chatter or strange babbling, like a preacher speaking in tongues. At times there is cursing. Rarely, but it does happen, there is scuffling and screaming. When the two pairs stop outside my door I listen to the locks being released and mark off another week. Another week away from you and those I love and must protect.

At Super Max, inmates are confined to their cells for a minimum of 22 hours of every day. They are allowed one half hour personal time to shower and shave with a cream hair remover, half an hour to exercise or take a book from the library, one hour to dictate letters to loved ones. They are not allowed to write, they are not allowed to have pens, pencils or even crayons - a Crayola through the eardrum is as lethal as a screwdriver, and really, all in all, more satisfying.

You asked, again, if you could visit. Mother, your

health would not withstand the trip. It is too far and too dismal. I could not tolerate seeing you, without being able to touch you. I could not tolerate you seeing me in restraints. I could not tolerate having you watch them lead me away, as they did that day in the courtroom. Nobody comes here to visit, Mother. No one save the lawyers and the psychologists ever make the journey. You would sink into misery the moment your kind eyes beheld what they have done to the earth around the prison. I only saw it once, when they brought me in, but it is still clearly etched in my mind. They take you down a long dirt road that rambles through mile after mile of desolate flat lands. Not a single tree stands. There is no grass. There are no shrubs. There is only dead earth, sprayed every month with a deforestation chemical first used in Vietnam and perfected since...

Driving toward Super Max, even before the prison itself is visible, one can see the 25-foot fences crowned with twisted loops of razor wire that move in a slow spiral, encasing the prison in a framework nautilus shell. They see five guard towers and the guards with their high-powered rifles, outfitted with night vision scopes. They see the walls of Super Max

reinforced with seven layers of steel and cement. To enter, one must pass through a series of detectors. Hands are stamped with a secret code in ultraviolet dye. Retinas are scanned. No one goes anywhere without an armed guard at their side. Not even the lawyers are left alone with their clients. They are assigned guards whom congress has granted authority to be present throughout, ordered to hear nothing and remember less.

...Mother, how much more can I tell you about her? I know that you will love her when you meet her. I have tried to describe her to you before, but words fail beyond what I have already written. She reminds me so much of you. She is tall and slender and beautiful. Her eyes are kind and her skin is soft. But underneath there is a core of steel that would break, long before it would bend. You will understand when you meet her. And again, when you do, you will love her as I love her...

There are 142 cells in Super Max. Each cell measures six feet wide by eight feet long by twelve feet high. Furnishings are stark. There is a cot. There is no sink or toilet. If the inmate of a cell wishes to urinate or defecate, he must call a guard and wait. If said inmate decides not to wait, he can use the drain

in the center of the floor. The cell will not be cleaned for 24 hours.

Every cell in Super Max is occupied.

Clive Euxideos existed in cell 47. It was his world and had been for nearly five years. The walls bore the markings of previous inmates, but not of him. Clive did not make his mark on walls. Clive made his mark on flesh. He has been, it could be said, a model prisoner. He takes his daily shower and shave. He uses his exercise time. He eats his meals peacefully and returns the plastic trays without incident. He makes the weekly walk to and from his session without trouble. He only speaks when spoken to, and as he is seldom spoken to outside of session, he seldom speaks. Clive believes that it is good, not to have to speak. It is good to be locked up for 22 hours of every day. The solitude gives him time to think.

And think he does.

He thinks about the world outside the walls. He thinks of his family. He thinks about the worthless flotsam of society that walks the land and how they

should not.

Clive sees himself as an avenging angel, scouring the dark lands without, granting life to those who deserve it, taking life from those who do not. To date, Clive has taken life from many who did not deserve that precious gift. They had been doctors and lawyers, trailer park trash and street corner scum. In no case had he stalked them. There was no need. They found him. They found him in bars and night clubs. They found him through television news broadcasts and newspaper headlines. They found him in movie theatres and concert halls. He'd rid the world of a lawyer who'd secured the release of a child molester, a doctor who'd gotten away with a hit and run that killed a young boy, a crack-dealing pimp who'd used a pipe to cave in the right side of one his whore's faces and the woman refused to testify against him. He'd also taken out a man whose pasley tie clashed with his chocolate brown suit and a woman whose constant cell phone yammering through a screening of "The Bicycle Thief" marked her as a philistine of the most loutish order.

...I remember little things. I remember what the garden use to be. I see an enormous turquoise sky

holding three small clouds. I see you and Niobe, in the garden, bent happily to your work in the early springtime rose beds. You both wear large, floppy hats that protect your skin from the sun. The early March wind tries relentlessly, but unsuccessfully to tear those hats from your heads and carry them away. The beds are barren but you and Niobe know what promise the early shoots hold. Soon those shoots will become highly scented bushes in colors running from white, to all shades of pink, to a dark velvet ruby. In the height of summer, some of the blooms will be as wide as a dinner plate, and wouldn't you love to sup off them if you only could? I watch from the veranda as you and Niobe root out the ants, and dig the dirt, and add the mulch, and then a thick layer of cypress around the base of the bushes. You then trim off the dead wood and prick your fingers on a thorn saved from the year before and do your dance. How I love to watch you dance....

Before he was captured, Clive visited the Hall of Records in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Clive did not know that he was going to be captured. In fact, he highly doubted it. But Clive was not one to leave anything to chance, and as he was passing through North

Dakota anyway, he figured why not. If he was captured, he would eventually be imprisoned at Super Max. Of that he had no doubt.

He made eye contact with the cops manning the metal detector and remarked on the weather. He stopped at the information booth and asked the ancient woman who'd spent most of her adult life working there, where the public records department was. She directed him up a wide marble staircase and down a long narrow hall with cracked walls, to a vaulted room filled with row upon row of wooden file cabinets. The room felt of age and smelled of water damage. There, Clive requested a copy of the floor plans for the Super Max. A copy of the blueprints for every structure built in North Dakota is on file in the hall of records. Clive paid the copying fee and took the blueprints with him to study and memorize. One interesting thing about Clive Euxideos is that he had a knack for remembering. He was able to take a "snapshot" of anything he saw or read and then later, could call that snapshot back up at whim, projecting it onto the big screen television mounted inside his skull. Then he would sit back (in the easy chair that was his brain) and study the snapshot at his leisure.

After careful study of the Super Max blueprint, Clive realized that, contrary to popular belief, the facility was not escape proof. The penitentiary design experts had *not* thought of everything. There were at least two possible escape routes. One was very nasty, but offered the greatest chance for success. The other was less nasty, and really, less risky at least in terms of injury, but the potential for success was also far less. Clive, never one to avoid nastiness, decided upon the former.

I have nothing left to write. Nothing happens here. Nothing changes. I have my memories and I embrace them, awake or asleep. I listen.

And so it was that one night, deep into a North Dakota winter, with the world outside being ravaged by a howling snowstorm, Clive Euxideos escaped from the escape proof U.S. Maximum Facility at Bottineau, North Dakota and vanished into the swirling night.

In closing Mother, I only ask that you look to the garden when the wind changes.. Our garden, once so carefully tended and lush and fragrant, now fallow and

*dark. The garden with the fountain that once bubbled
gaily, that now stands dry as the bones of the one it
took. Look to the garden when the wind changes mother,
and call my name.*

Yours Eternally,

Clive

Andrea Ramsey

Razor Blade Regrets

10 Years Before

It had happened again.

She awoke to blood stains on the sheets and on the carpet. Blood crusted under her fingernails, and the taste of it in her mouth. She awoke to another apartment ruined. To splintered furniture. To shattered mirrors. There was a large cast-iron candlestick buried deep in the ruins of what had been a new stereo. She wondered, 'What song was playing when I did that?'

The alarm clock flashed 12:00 at her.

She dared to throw back the sheet and look at herself.

Oh God. Oh sweet lord Jesus.

He held no answers for her. No soft embrace. No refuge or salvation. God had gone mad, countless light centuries before. His son had turned His back on the world of men. This, she believed. Believed with all her heart.

Andrea Ramsey, twenty-something and looking older, stumbled light-headed out of her bed of red sheets. On legs that threatened to crumble beneath her with every step, she made her way to the bathroom, turned on the harsh fluorescent light and saw what she had done to herself the night before.

That she had not bleed to death in her sleep, was in and of itself, a minor miracle, so perhaps she would have to reassess her concepts of God. Or maybe it was that God only had eyes for fools and lunatics, and she was long one, quickly becoming the other, and therefore worth special attention.

What had happened last night? She fought to gather the fragments of memory that moved elusively in the shadows filling her head. But just as she thought one was within grasp, just as she thought a piece of the tapestry was becoming clear, it fell back, was swallowed by darkness, and drowned in the alcohol haze.

Ah... alcohol.

For once, her shift had ended on time.

Out of the patrol car, into the station, paperwork filled out and filed, uniform jammed in her locker, civilian wear thrown on, not even time for a shower because the need to get a drink into her was strong, so strong she could taste it already, feel that slow, steady burn all the way down her throat, exploding into a hot blossom in the center of her stomach, that wonderful numbness spreading...

Where had she gone? Dennay's? The Locker Room? Maybe the Green Lounge on the city's East Side, dark and smoky, old jazz musicians gathered in the far corner under a blue light, playing standards to a scattering of applause from runny-eyed old drunkards with loud jackets and barflies with too much makeup and not enough time. Or the first place she saw in whatever direction she had taken?

Or did she go to the liquor store? Bought a fifth of whatever was strong and cheap, maybe two bottles, possibly three. Gone home and put on some music, dark depressing music, or maybe Patsy Cline

programmed to rotate, to play over and over and over again. Patsy Cline going crazy going to pieces walking after midnight.

And somewhere after midnight, working the second bottle, the feeling welling up inside, a feeling that if she didn't let it out, would force its way out, explode out of her in a terrible messy roar, tearing her apart, turning her into a whirling dervish, spilling entrails, coating the walls, killing her in a mad rush of agony.

So she starts crying, bites her lip to stop, feels canine teeth pierce flesh... warm blood runs down her chin ... drips off... quarter sized droplets on the floor on the carpet... the feeling coming stronger now, refusing to be placated by such a weak offering.

She stands in her bedroom in front of the full-length mirror, recently purchased after the destruction of the last, and which one is this? How many purchased for this apartment alone? She stares at the image in the mirror and it is like looking at an image on a movie screen...

that isn't her, isn't her...

...or like looking at a ghost, not real.
She takes her shirt off, then her pants, then bra and panties and stands in white socks like some lecher, lacking only the handlebar mustache, staring at the her that isn't her and hating what she sees. Not just hate, but fear and frustration and disgust and regret.

And suddenly there is a razor blade in her hand. She wonders where it came from... thinking she threw all the razors out the last time... thought she did but she must have hidden one... put one away in reserve for just such an occasion... and then she remembers that the one who does the cutting is not the one who is cut. She looks back at the image in the mirror and their eyes meet and the image smiles with a mouth filled with razor blades and she knows she is going mad.

Blood dripping down her arm.

She rubs a cap of bourbon into the wound. Cuts again. Rubs. Cuts. Rubs. Cuts. Adding fresh red lines to the existing white scars like runic symbols, like Mesopotamian clay tablets, telling a tale that only the trained eye can read, an eye well versed in

the alphabet of cutting- the language of the razor, the poetry of pain, the song of the sanguine.

Somewhere deep in the third fifth of bourbon. Still naked. Body more red than pink, wounds beginning to seal, teased back open to bleed anew. Taking the very tip of the edge of a blade and carefully nicking the flesh around her nipples, forming halos, then bringing the razor to her forehead and feeling steel touch flesh but not cutting. No... that would be showing and telling too much... but thinking about it... visualizing it... the red X carved into the middle of her forehead. No Manson freak. No, that wouldn't be the point. Only crossing out the third eye, cutting out the memory, stopping it from ever returning to infect the meat of her brain.

Much, much later.

Someone pounding on the door. Or is that her brain pounding on the box of her skull? The music loud. No, beyond loud. Bone fracturing, eardrum rupturing loud, and an angry voice screaming 'turn it down turn it

down what are you doing in there I'll call the police you stupid bitch'. And somewhere in the rage she grabs the brass candle stick and smashes the stereo to silence and screams 'There, are you satisfied now is that quiet enough for you cocksucker' and shouting epitaphs, the door beater goes away and the cops never come.

The mirror is in pieces. All those lovely shards speaking to her. 'Pick me up, look at my edge. Oh how lovely the lines we would make, how deep and how much blood'. It is only because she is two or was it three bottles drunk, that she can refuse the broken siren's call.

The sun comes up, shattering the horizon and turning it hot blood red to go with her dark, purple, bruised flesh. She stares at the edge of sun, and contemplates watching it rise swollen into the sky... watching it until the brilliant light burns her eyes out... and she would fall into the embrace of darkness forever.

But she does not.

Somehow, she makes it to her bed.

Plummeting onto twisted sheets and lumpy
mattress, and almost instantly, she is pulled
down into a vortex of spinning mirrors and
razor blade regrets.

Lost Highways. Winter

There are stretches of asphalt known as lost *highways*. Before the *intrastates* and *interstates*, before thruways and highways and ten lanes of bumper to bumper, all traveling at ninety miles an hour, twenty four/seven, there were ordinary roads that connected one end of a state to another, that linked one community to another. Roads that passed through towns not found on any map. Through miles of forest or mountains or farmland. Roads upon which you could travel for hours without seeing another living human being. Miles marked off by telephone poles and electric lines punctuated with starlings, oil slick sheen of feather, black beady eyes watching.

These were roads seldom traveled by any but natives, and not even they passed over the ruts that often. Roads black as Satan's asshole at night. Roads you did not want to break down on.

Most of these roads are gone, or can no longer be reached. But a few still exist. And are still used by those who know about them.

There is a two-lane blacktop that tears straight through North Dakota, running parallel to the Canadian border. The scattering of markers call it Rural Route 4, but you won't find it on any road map published after 1947, and damn few before then. It begins somewhere outside the town of Necho and ends where North Dakota becomes Montana.

In the summer it shimmers like illusion, in winter a steady north wind keeps it clear of snow, but glazed and dangerous. Along its length, the closest town after the last one, is never less than 52 miles away. It is typically silent here, except for that wind, except for a caw of crow, a flutter of wing, the mechanical whir of cicada.

Summer however is months away. Today the wind drives frozen pellets of snow drifts shellacked in ice. The sound is like snakes slithering through dry grass. The sun is a heatless smear behind a haze of torn and twisted clouds.

Another sound. One that does not go with the cold, brittle, sub-zero world. A woman's

voice. Singing.

Patsy Cline's "I Go To Pieces" on a radio, faint in the distance, growing louder.

A tractor-trailer roars into view. The wind scoops up snow and throws it over the world like a shroud, obscuring everything.

From under the whiteness, Patsy Cline and the sound of tractor-trailer brakes locking... seeking friction... finding nothing.

The sound of a horrendous crash is muffled by the winding sheet of snow.

Then all is silent save for the haunted voice of Patsy Cline... falling to pieces.

Rick Gilbert

Inside the thin metal shell of his Ford F150, Rick Gilbert listens to the same radio station he's listened to since he was five years old.

Yesterday, he turned 47.

A final strum of the guitar. The note fades and is replaced by a commercial for fertilizer, the huckster's words becoming so much background noise. The mood, so carefully constructed by the song, vanishes. A gust of wind throws a wall of white across the road ahead. Rick slows, boot gingerly touching the brake, he feels tire against asphalt and is glad for that. Nothing worse than black ice and there tends to be plenty of it on this road, at this time of year.

What can be said about Rick Gilbert?

Small town boy grown into small town man. Simple. Easy going. Good looking in a rugged, wind-scraped sort of way. Crows-feet spread out from the corners of his eyes like flesh colored glass cracking under pressure. His short, cropped hair is more salt than

pepper. His somewhat scruffy beard, the same. A quick smile. Clear, bright eyes behind which lie memories of a woman he loved and lost and another woman he loved and let get away. No children, but a great big Irish Setter named Clyde. He rolled out of bed every morning at 5:15 a.m. and fell back in each night at 10:00 p.m. He loved Ben & Jerry's ice cream - especially Chunky Monkey, and warm Canadian beer.

He is a part-time lineman for the county. Checking the wires, loose or down, ice encased or frayed. Mark it in his book and hope repairs can wait for the spring.

The snow clears. A tractor-trailer, on its side and off the road, comes into view. Without thinking, Rick slams on the brake, and immediately regrets it.

Stupid stupid stupid.

The pick-up skids, and the back-end threatens to come around. Rick fights to keep control. 'Don't need this', he thinks as he throws the steering wheel into each wrong turn the truck wants to take. Finally,

he gains control and the pick-up stutters to a halt on the shoulder.

Rick's daddy was a truck driving man. Flatbed tractor-trailer, hauling everything from scrap metal to one time, two army tanks traveling from Louisiana to Southern California and back again. 'Lonely out there', the old man would say. 'Big land we live in, people got no idea how big. And Texas is the loneliest and the biggest. You look at the map and you think, hell, I can make it across this state eight, ten hours tops. Two days later you're still driving through. Lots of nothing in Texas. Especially the southern part. Nothing but desert and sky and a single Mexican radio station fading in and out.'

Rick jumps out of the pick-up. His body stiffens instantly against the bitter chill. The wind howls out of Canada, cold as the inner most ring of Hell. Tears that spring to his eyes, quickly turn to crystal. He imagines he can hear them fall, catching the dead sun as they do, landing without sound in the snow. A man might last an hour out here

at best.

Might.

He wonders how long the tractor has laid there like some great metal beast, some prehistoric creature turned mechanical, that still laid down to die. Inside the cab, the radio is playing. 'Hank Williams', Rick thinks, but can't remember the name of the tune. The haunting yodel caresses the wind.

Rick gathers his great coat around him and fights through thigh-high snow to the tractor. Faint wisps of steam escape from under the hood, wisps that once beyond the protection of the truck are grabbed by the wind and savagely torn apart.

"Hello? Hello! You okay buddy? Anybody in there?" Rick shouts, doubting he can be heard above the wind.

He climbs up onto the cab. There's still some heat radiating from inside and that gives him hope that what he'll find inside is a live body. Bruised and battered, but alive. Rick leans in through the open window. Odd smell there... like bad meat.

"Hey buddy..."

A massive hand explodes out of the cab and grabs Rick by the throat.

Twists.

The sound of bone snapping is sharp, like stepping on brittle ice.

Rick's body hits the snow with a soft thud, arms splayed, and legs apart, as if he had just laid down to make a snow angel. His eyes are open. The wind freezes them and they cloud over. Later, the wind will die and snow will fall, filling his mouth and burying him without benefit of clergy, in swirls of white.

Clive Euxideos climbs out of the cab and jumps down. He stands over six feet tall, and weighs over 325 pounds. The weight is all muscle. His eyes are so pale, they are almost without color. His lips are full and sensual. He spots the pickup truck and nods, as if in agreement to a comment not heard. He looks at the body of Rick Gilbert. There is love in his gaze, like that of a mother toward her newborn babe.

The same freakishly large hand that snapped Rick Gilbert's neck, carefully, tenderly, closes Rick's eyes.

"Sleep" whispers Clive.

Clive turns away from the body and follows the path created by Rick, back to the road. He climbs into the running pick-up and the first thing he notices is the tape player. He lifts the center arm-rest revealing a small, but carefully labeled selection of home-made tapes. All classic country, none of that post-seventies Vegas pop-country-crossover crap that Clive abhors. And bonus - The Best of Patsy Cline.

Clive smiles. It's a frightening sight. His teeth are huge. In juvie and in prison (except Super Max where he was never within range of other inmates) he used them often, to mark what was his. In the real world, at a bar, he once used them to tear the throat out of a stranger who believed he was more of a man than he turned out to be. Clive can still remember the salty, metallic taste of the man's blood and the bitter taste of flesh soaked in cheap aftershave.

Clive shoves the tape into the player.

"Sweet Dreams" plays. Clive, humming the lyrics, puts the pickup into gear, U-turns and heads home.

Somewhere in Upstate New York, Summer

An impossible sun blazes low in a wasted sky.

Upstate New York had once again gone from dead of winter to dog days of summer without benefit of spring. Monday had been light snow in the morning with an afternoon high of 42; Tuesday had been 87 as the low, swollen creeks overflowing their banks, and a nasty humidity.

It had been a June of brutally hot days and sticky, sleepless nights...of brown lawns and power shortages...frayed nerves and road rage...record domestic violence and random acts of violence.

'Killing weather', the cops call it, and had the bodies to prove it.

Welcome to global warming.

The city sweats. Everywhere. Even in the so-called Cobblestone district, where old slaughterhouses once home to rats and junkies, are now being developed into homes for trendy neo-urbanites. In one as yet ungentrified corner, a gang of kids rap while playing basketball in the street, using a

battered trash can lashed to a streetlight for a hoop. Each time the basketball hits the asphalt, the sound is like a fist striking flesh.

A nearby tenement carved of rotted stone and waiting for the wrecking ball, offers single rooms with a toilet down the hall. In one particular room, although it could be any of them, dying sunlight creeps through filthy blinds. The sunlight turns the slow float of dust motes into a chaotic dance before striking the wooden floor where it sputters and flares. The floor looks as if someone tried repeatedly to ice-skate across it. An asthmatic air-conditioner coughs. The walls are nicotine stained. There is a bookshelf made of two by fours and cinder blocks. It holds a diverse selection of books- physics and eastern art, firearms and sexuality, abnormal physiology and body modification.

The sound of the basketball hitting the street joins the sound of a clock ticking. Otherwise, the room is silent. Next to a narrow bed, is a night stand with an open prescription vial and a cell phone.

On the bed...

Andrea Ramsey. Late thirties? Early forty-something? Pale skin, and near-perfect oval face. Her upper lip is marked with a small scar. She stares without blinking, mind divorced from the slow rise and fall of her chest. An athletic body is clothed meanly in boxers and a wife-beater T-shirt. Her hands are mannish, fingernails chewed painfully short. Her feet are slender, toenails painted what her mother would have called "whore red".

Her neck is long. Her face was once pretty. Not that she is unattractive now - do something with the hair, a dab of make-up, a bit of care. But life has slapped Andrea across the face too many times for her to care much about outward appearance. There's no one she feels a need to impress. You can see it in her eyes. Gray like the stone used for cheap grave markers, and just as cold.

Except for her face and neck, hands and feet, her entire body is criss-crossed with fine white lines, left behind by razor blade edges. Her body is wrapped in a cobweb of

scar tissue, the result of twenty odd years of cutting, the reminders of inner demons screaming for release, souvenirs of a long downward spiral into madness. She has not cut herself in five years, but a day does not go by that she does not yearn for the painful release, the awesome sense of revelation when the flesh parts like tiny lipless mouths that speak in blood.

She dreams of cutting. Of kissing razor blades, the tip of her tongue running over thin steel edges. The taste of metal and blood fill her mouth with an electric bitterness and her body with indistinguishable sensations of pleasure and pain. She dreams that her fingernails become razored and she slices them across her cheeks, down her throat, circling her breasts...

Which is why she keeps her fingernails so very, very short.

She holds her right hand tight with her left, staring at it with intense concentration. Slowly, as if anticipating its independence, Andrea releases her right hand.

For a moment her right hand remains still. Then - a tremor moves across her flesh. It becomes a pronounced shake that grows to a spasm. The flesh seems to ripple as if it were liquid. Andrea lifts herself out of bed, grabs the pills and swallows two, dry.

The clock on the wall vibrates with each tick. A group of people are standing outside the door, whispering. Somewhere someone is being beaten with a bare fist. The murky glass that protects the face of the clock, curves the reflection of the window. A featureless face, with its baleful fish eye is pressed against the curved glass, threatening to escape.

The pills kick in.

Andrea studies her right hand. The shaking has stopped. All she can hear is the sound of the clock and the sound of the basketball.

The cell phone chimes. She picks it up, recognizes the number displayed, and presses "talk".

"Yeah?"

She listens. On the other end a voice like splintered wood.

"Where? Where the hell's that? Yeah. Got it."

She writes a single word on a coffee stained yellow pad. She writes using large block letters, like a child first learning to spell.

Andrea presses "off", then reaches under her pillow and removes her Glock C18. The powerful handgun featured semi and fully automatic modes of fire. She ejects the clip and checks to make sure it is fully loaded. It is. But then she knew it would be. 9mm hollow-point dum-dums, bullets that do not pass through bodies but expanded upon impact, providing the maximum carnage possible. She slaps the clip back in, and jacks a bullet into the chamber.

Virgil

The world moves past the train window like a film-strip running horizontally. The urban decay of downtown, becomes rows of suburban, pseudo-Victorian ranch houses and then faded farms and fields spiked with corn harvest memories. Flat land becomes rolling hills, dotted with the occasional miserable looking cow, tail lashing at flies.

Andrea sits in an empty passenger car, a folder in her lap and her feet up on the seat opposite. Wearing jeans and a flannel shirt and an age cracked leather jacket. She wants a cigarette but doesn't want to get up and make the short trip to the smoking car. Then she remembers she quit smoking months ago. But she still wants one.

Instead, she looks through her reflection, staring through her own eyes to the world beyond. Her reflection gazes back at her expectantly, like a ghost seeking answers.

'What do you want me to say?' she asks her reflection.

'What do you want me to tell you?'

'What can I tell you that you don't already know?'

When she realizes she hasn't had a thought for fifteen minutes, she opens the folder.

Clive Euxideos stares at her from the glossy 8x10. A strange hollowness forms in her stomach, like a cresting before that first plunge down the roller coaster. Fear...excitement...hunger. A feeling like that suspended, eternal moment before a first touch.

In her mind she replays the conversation she had with Virgil, earlier that morning. Virgil runs the agency Andrea works for. They came to her soon after Clive was sent to prison, and offered her a job.

'What kind of job?' she asked.

They told her.

'What makes you think I'd be interested in something like that?' she asked. 'Why would you even consider me?'

'You fit the profile,' they said.

She didn't understand. She was an alcoholic. She cut herself. She'd been kicked off the police force. She was a razor blade away from killing herself.

She accepted the job.

And found she was very good at it.

Virgil was her only contact. Andrea knew little about the agency, except that there was some connection to the government. She knew they kept a low profile and were certainly never mentioned in the news. She knew that if she said anything about them to anyone, they would kill her.

She was sent a check once a month to cover her living expenses and as her expenses were few, she invested what remained. They left her alone unless there was an assignment, and when there was, she was expected to follow their instructions to the letter, which she did. She figured that in a few years she could retire - assuming she was allowed to retire.

Did she want to retire?

And do what?

Buy a house in the country? Travel the world?

She had no needs great or small, to satiate. No dreams to obtain. No goals to reach. Living someplace where she would be left alone, was the closest she could come. Someplace where no one would talk to her. Where the world did not exist.

But did she really want to be left alone with her thoughts and memories? Alone with her past?

Suicide seemed a better option.

Barrel in mouth.

Pull the trigger.

The past and all memory of it vaporized in an explosion of bullet and brain and blood and bone.

It really did seem the only logical ending.

She had no doubt, that when the time came, she would have no problem pulling the trigger. So why not just do it now?

Because you never really knew what was

going to happen next. Because, despite it all, there was always hope. Wasn't there?

She could almost make herself believe it. Sometimes.

Virgil's office was dark leather and darker wood, with a single small window shrouded in thick velvet curtains. A lamp turned low, barely outlined the desk piled high with police reports and maps. The air was heavy with an uneasy aroma of sage and vanilla. Virgil, in dark suit and dark glasses, lurked behind his desk. He had skin so pale it almost glowed, and pitted, lunar surface cheeks.

Her mind zigzagged from the agency, to office, to their meeting, once more. Virgil tosses the folder on the desk. Only once had their fingers touched when he handed her anything. Andrea recalled briefly, it was like touching a corpse one week in the lake, bloated and nasty soft with skin like tissue that sloughed off as they pulled it from the water. She could not hide the look of disgust on her face. Virgil saw it, and never forgot or forgave the slight.

"Clive Euxideos," Virgil announces, and waits for a reaction.

Andrea ignores the slight trace of mockery that edges his snotty voice. She refuses to give anything away. Virgil seems disappointed, but continues.

"He escaped. Yes, from Super Max. Don't ask how. It doesn't matter. He stole a tractor-trailer and wrecked it somewhere in North Dakota. Killed a good Samaritan stupid enough to stop and help. Stole the Samaritan's pick-up truck and vanished..."

Andrea turns the page and is looking at a morgue photograph of Rick Gilbert.

"After what happened in upstate New York last year, the day of coddling criminals is over. Oh, we still need to appease the bleeding hearts. Can't have them swaying public opinion." Virgil's mouth twisted.

"Americans are so namby-pamby. So wishy-washy. Always bloody forgiving. Bloody stupid is more like it. You think everybody has some good in them. Everybody can be saved, cured, rehabilitated. Christ, what a joke."

"Can we get to the point?" Andrea said.

Virgil waved his hand.

"Right. We want him dead. He had his trial, and a chance to live out his days in maximum security. Had an hour a day out for fresh air and exercise, three hots and a cot. Even soft toilet paper to wipe his bottom. What more could he ask for? He should have been executed, but don't get me started on that."

"Wouldn't think of it." Andrea said.

"Right. So what does he do? He escapes, the ungrateful bastard. Well, we've seen where the toast lands, and it's not butter-side up. We want him dead. And who better to pull the trigger, or twist the blade, than you? Its almost... well no, it is, poetry. I recommended you, by the way."

"You're too kind."

Virgil smiled. His teeth would have not been out of place on a bear trap.

Back on the train, Andrea turns the page to a map of America. A highlighted line leads from near where the northern border of

North Dakota mirrors Canada, straight south to Louisiana. The distance from point A to point B is 1,617.1 miles. Taking the straightest route, total drive time is 35 hours, 54 minutes. But of course, Clive didn't go that way.

Andrea looks out the train window, watching the world flow by.

Virgil's voice disrupts her non-study of the world around her. "The official theory is that Clive crossed the border into Manitoba. The FBI boys and the Royal Canadian Mounteds have joined forces to pursue that. We know differently."

Andrea turns a page. A photo, this time of a tall, gray-haired woman whose long, thin limbs give her an arachnid quality. The woman would not look out of place sitting in the center of a web. Her carefully sculpted face holds a pair of widely spaced, perfectly oval eyes. Yet for all the strangeness of her features, she is compellingly beautiful.

Clymenestra. Clive's mother.

Virgil speaks again. "We know that Clive

is going home. We don't know when he will get there, but we have no doubt that he will. We don't think he'll kill anybody along the way, but you never know. If the lust comes upon him, the need... then he might. Or it may just be the easiest thing to do."

"Why did you wait so long to call me?" Andrea asked.

Virgil's eye jerked away. He pretended interest in some paper on his desk. She could see his mental wheels turning. She expected him to lie to her and was surprised when he didn't.

"We wanted to give the official channels of law enforcement a chance to do whatever it is they do, and fail at it, and be forced to divert resources to other crimes. Also to give this high profile event a chance to die down. To move from page one to page twenty, to go from opening the evening news to no mention at all. Can't have our people out in the field when the field is filled with eyes watching. Politics Andrea, it's all politics. And timing."

Virgil shrugged. "How can we expect you

to kill the man under a spotlight?"

Andrea turns another page. A photo of a hard looking woman, with raven black hair.

"When Clive eventually returns to Twilight to see his family, you'll be there."

She returns from the office in her mind, to the train, and its endless clicking wheels. A shadow falls across Andrea. She closes the portfolio, and looks up. Standing over her is Orson Welles in "Touch of Evil", only seedier, something she would have never have imagined was possible. The suit was better though.

Orson Welles gestures toward the empty seat opposite her. "May I?"

Before Andrea can speak, Orson Welles sits. The first thing she notices, is that he uses some spray-on hair product to cover his creeping baldness. It's as if he applied black lacquer to his skull. It is not an attractive sight.

"I know you," he says.

"No," says Andrea, "you don't."

"I'm certain, that I do. Yes. That

fund raiser at the Palladium in London, two years ago."

"Never been."

"How amazing. She looked just like you."

"Wasn't."

Orson Welles extends his hand. His fingers are puffy and one of them sports a chunky gold ring that is beyond vulgar.

"I'm Henry Bennings," smiles Orson Welles, "I do surgical supplies."

Andrea makes no move to take his hand. She continues to stare into his eyes without blinking. Finally, Henry blinks, several times. Rapidly.

"Is that so?" said Andrea.

Henry sits back and crosses his legs, flashing a hairless, grub-white ankle. He pulls at his trouser.

"Yes. And I'm very good at it, if I do say so myself. Very successful. Made over 300k last year, and I plan on making more this year."

"Good for you."

"Good for me and good for my friends."

"It's good to have friends."

"Yes, I think so too. It's very good to have friends. I treat my friends very well, and special friends get special treatment."

"Do they now?"

"Oh yes."

Bennings leans forward and puts his hand on Andrea's knee. She does not tense, or pull away, or even blink. Henry takes the lack of rejection as acceptance, and leans closer.

"Yes. Very, very special."

Andrea thinks 'Does that approach actually work for this guy?' She can't possibly be the first he's tried it on. Has anyone ever fallen for his lines? She can't imagine why they would.

Andrea moves her face towards his, slowly, deliberately, seductively. Her shirt falls forward, the unbuttoned top revealing the swell of her breasts, the cups of her bra

just covering her nipples.

Bennings's eyes get very wide. He can't stop himself from looking, from staring. His eyes dart from Andrea's breasts to her face, as he smiles and swallows. Andrea returns the smile and moves her hand very slowly toward Benning's crotch. His entire body stiffens at her touch.

A switchblade is in Andrea's hand, the needle tip touching Bennings' right nut. His smile is sucked back into his mouth as his eyes get even wider. Beads of sweat that stink of fear, break out on his forehead.

Andrea whispers in his hair clogged ear. "If you don't get away from me I'll cut your ball sack open and shove your nuts up your asshole."

The switchblade vanishes up her sleeve, and she sits back with a strange little smile on her face. A certain glaze to her eyes. If a snake had eyelids it would look like this, or wish it did. She already knows where she will hide the body. It will be months before it is found. If ever.

Andrea crosses her legs, opens the portfolio, and continues reading where she left off. As far as she is concerned, Bennings does not exist.

Bennings, blinking and gasping, staggers to his feet. He almost vomits with fear. Covering his mouth, he flees the car.

Andrea flips through the file. The photograph of the hard-faced woman. Virgil had said 'Clive's sister, Niobe.'

The memory of the beautiful woman Niobe had been, still lurked beneath the hard face and cold glare of the woman in the photograph... the woman Niobe had become. Her face was a mask carved by drink and one night stands...bitter disappointment and teeth-clenched rage at a world that attacked and would not stop... things had happened beneath the skin... terrible things were reflected in her eyes and in the set of her wide mouth.

'Niobe's children. Twins. Juvenal and Juvenia.'

There was only a photograph of Juvenal, the male half of the twins. He had skin that

could have been wax. Not Tussaud quality, but cheap, mass-produced wax used for holiday novelties sold at the dollar store. His Adam's apple jutted over stooped shoulders ending in long arms without muscle. Juvenal had cheekbones supermodels would chew their right arms off for, but which on him only added to the grotesque, and drew attention to the disquieting distance in his gaze. He was the kid all the other kids wanted to punch and kick because they knew they could, because they knew he would do nothing but take it. Because they knew even the teachers would pretend to be looking at something else.

A photocopy of a letter Clive wrote, just before his escape.

"...in which he tells his mother..."

...letters intercepted and read by the staff at Super Max before being forwarded to his mother.

"...he mentions you in several of his letters. He tells his mother you are his girlfriend. No strike that, you are his fiancée. You must have been very, very

good." Virgil's chuckle was not a pleasant sound. It lingered in her ears, still.

"That's your in."

Andrea closes the file and once again stares out the window.

Dawn is coming as she approaches Twilight.

Facts about Louisiana

These are things you should know about Louisiana.

Seven percent of the population are under five years of age. Twenty seven percent are under eighteen. Eleven percent are over sixty five. Over fifty percent are female. Over 63 percent are white. The medium household income is \$32,000. Twenty percent of the population live below the poverty level.

In the year that Clive Euxideos was captured, tried, convicted and sent to prison, Louisiana had an estimated population of 4,468,976 which ranked the state 22nd in population. For that year, the State of Louisiana had a total Crime Index of 5,422.8 reported incidents per 100,000 people, giving it the 4th highest total Crime Index in the country.

For Violent Crime, Louisiana had a reported incident rate of 681.1 per 100,000 people, the 7th highest occurrence for Violent Crime among the states.

There were 11.2 murders per 100,000 people, giving the state the redoubtable honor of America's highest rate for Murder.

Louisiana's 33.5 reported Forced Rapes per 100,000 people, ranked a lowly 21st place. The conclusion that could be drawn from that, was that criminals in Louisiana would rather kill than fuck.

The town of Twilight, population 76, was located in southwestern Louisiana. Southwestern Louisiana is hot and humid. The insects are big and the plant life is bigger. What they call "japanese mosquitoes" in the north, they call "gnats" in southwestern Louisiana. Sago palms grow 10 feet tall and 15 feet wide. Banana trees tower above roof lines. Elephant Ears grow wild along the bayous. Vines snare everything and anything that doesn't move.

Twilight sits on the eastern edge of Kisatchie National Forest, the only national forest in Louisiana. It is spread across the

piney hills and hardwood bottoms of seven central and northern Louisiana parishes, covering 300,000 plus acres. The woods are overgrown, thick and tangled. The timber, bushes, and grass are crunchy from the drought. Five years of bone dry summers and rainy seasons without rain had turned Kisatchie into kindling waiting for the match. The match had not yet come, but most believed it would. It was only a matter of time before heat lightning struck, or some idiot tossed a cigarette out the window of their pickup. And if that happened, and the wind was blowing in the right direction, a Bible's worth of prayers would not save the town of Twilight.

Welcome to Twilight, July

The train leaves a station that should have been torn down decades ago. The sound of its wheels fades slowly.

Andrea stands alone on the platform, duffel bag at her feet. A ticket kiosk stands shuttered and long unused. Everything is lifeless and still. The air is thick, almost clotted, and the silence is oppressive.

Andrea steps to the edge of the platform and looks down to see her reflection in an oily pool of water. The image ripples, distorting her beyond recognition.

A dead animal lays next to the payphone on the other side of the road opposite the platform. The pale wooden steps groan under Andrea's weight as she leaves the platform. She crosses the road to the phone and dust puffs with each step she takes. The smell of the roadkill is pungent and sweet. Two wasps buzz the carcass. Andrea takes the phone off the hook and finds the cable is severed.

She slams the phone back into its cradle, hoists her duffel bag and walks.

A bullet-riddled bus stop sign reads
'Monday, Wednesday, Saturday 11:00.' Andrea
looks at her watch. She frowns, drops her
duffel bag to the ground and waits.

She waited for over an hour,
entertaining herself by watching insects.
Butterflies flitted from one stand of purple-
flowered weed to another. Ants moved in
purposeful, yet chaotic starts and stops.
Clouds of gnats formed, milled about,
dissipated, then formed again - weaving
patterns that seemed to repeat themselves, as
if secret insect messages were being sent.

Something on the ground at her feet,
fluttered. A moth, pale powdery white. For
some reason it drew her. Staring down, seeing
its wings were torn and tattered, she gently
took it in hand and brought it to her face.
It continued to flutter, off and on, not
knowing it was no longer capable of flight.

"What happened to you," she whispered,
"that your wings are so tattered?"

It crawled across her palm, up her
finger, and then fluttered to her shirt and
clung there. Antenna lifting and falling.

Sensing what, she wondered, looking for what?

Time passed. She gently took hold of the moth's wings and placed it on the ground. It crawled about, but one of its legs was no longer working and she realized it was dying. When it stopped moving at all, Andrea slung her bag over her shoulder and started walking.

The road was dusty, rutted and clustered with stone. Tall trees lined both sides, Spanish moss hanging from their twisted limbs like flesh falling off old bone.

Ahead, was a weather-worn sign.' Twilight Pop. 731. 25 Miles.' Under this: 'Welcome Stranger and Sit A Spell.' Only Sit has been crossed out and replaced with Shit.

She passed a church that appeared abandoned. Its mournful shape was wrapped in thick, shaggy brown vine that reminded her of the legs of a tarantula. Yet its elegant stained glass windows had been barely touched by vandals. A large, circular cyclopean window had been set in the steeple, keeping watch on the surrounding countryside.

She hears the sound of a car engine idling, and a lounge tune from back in the days when lounging was serious, rather than camp.

Andrea comes around the bend. A huge Olds 88, vile orange in color with a blood-red interior and enormous chrome bumpers, is parked on the side of the road near a dirt drive. Far up the drive, barely visible, sits a house that appears as empty as the church. For a moment, she thought she heard a child cry out, but when she tried to pinpoint the sound it was gone.

Andrea cautiously approached the driver's side. At the wheel sat an old man - no - beyond old. Ancient. Strands of spider silk-like hair fell across his strangely dented scalp. His nose was long and hooked, his checks concave and thick with coarse white stubble. He appeared to be sleeping, but when she stuck her head in through the open window, she knew immediately that he was dead.

His mouth was open, and his tongue was gray. What teeth he had were few, and those

that remained were brown from decades (centuries?) of tobacco use and a general disregard for even the basics of dental hygiene.

Andrea jerked back as a wasp exited the open mouth, hovered in front of her face for a few moments, its mandibles working some strange bit of moisture, then buzzed off.

She quickly surveys the area. No one is around. In a single move, she opens the door, pushes the body over, and gets behind the wheel...

"Hope you don't mind grandpa, but obviously, your traveling days are done and my feet are killing me."

...and drives to town.

Just outside of town, Andrea pulls off onto a side road and parks the car. She positions the old man back behind the wheel. She gently runs her fingers through his thin hair.

"Thanks for the ride grandpa."

She kisses his forehead. The flesh is cold and rumpled beneath her lips. "Sleep

well." Andrea whispers, and means it. Then she walks into town.

Twilight is beyond sleepy. It is comatose. A mishmash of buildings built between the late 1890's and the early 50's. A place more memory than real. It should be sepia toned.

The majority of shop windows are pasted over with newspapers that are dog-piss yellow with age, mainly the front page of the Twilight Chronicle. A photograph of Clive Euxideos, originally stark black and white, now bleached pale shades of gray, staring straight into the eye of the camera, staring straight into her eyes...calm and undisturbed. The headline in tall, thick, shouting letters:

CAPTURED!

Andrea stops outside a barbershop. A Wild-Root hair tonic sign behind the fly-specked picture window catches her eye. She didn't know they still made the stuff. She looks through the streaked glass and into her past.

Andrea, seven years old, walks into a barber shop. The place is crowded with older men, and filled with their chatter. It smells of boiled coffee, stale cigar smoke, worn leather, and the odor of old flesh just barely out of death's reach but getting closer with every passing second. The buzz of nonsense conversations keeps silence at bay. She makes out bits about farming and fishing and the girl wearing the bikini on the calendar.

The lone barber is cutting what passes for the hair of one of the old men. Scissor blades flash through the sparse cloud-white fuzz. Large patches of dry flesh fall like snow in the land of the dead.

The barber is her father.

"Hey, hey, who's this little beauty?" says one of the old men. There is a square brown scab on the left side of his nose that draws her eyes. 'Not polite to stare' Andrea thinks and quickly looks away.

Andrea's father shakes a generous dollop of Wild-Root hair tonic into his hand and works it into the old man's hair remnants.

Her father is tall, dark, and greasy, with a built-in sneer that told the world he knew the real deal, when in fact he knew nothing. He smelled of electric razor oil and blue antiseptic.

"I think your girlfriend is here, Claude." says another old man.

Andrea's Father sees her, smiles, wipes his hands and reaches for her.

"Hey, doll face!" Andrea's Father picks her up and hugs her tightly. "Andrea," he coos, "my little Andrea."

The old men nod and smile.

Andrea looks over her Father's shoulder and sees, in the mirror that lines the wall, a child wearing her face. Their eyes meet and she sees that there is fear in the mirror Andrea's eyes. The feel of her father's hands on her body makes her flesh crawl, and fills her with a terror that makes her want to scream. But she doesn't scream. There can be no screaming.

"Miss? May I help you?"

Andrea snaps back to reality. The

Barber is eyeing her, wiping his hands on a towel. Her father is gone. She is no longer seven years old.

"Miss?" the Barber asks.

"Sorry. I was just... Is there somewhere I can get a bite to eat? Maybe a room?"

The Barber, thinking, surveys the town, as if seeing it for the first time.

"Well... I don't know about the room. There's a hotel up the interstate a ways, but, as for something to eat, the café closed two years ago. I guess there's always Sanctuary."

"Sanctuary?" asks Andrea

The Barber nods and points.

"Sanctuary. Across the street."

Andrea shades her eyes and follows the Barber's pointing finger.

Over a building that wouldn't be out of place in a John Ford western, hangs a red and black sign that is completely out of place.

The sign reads: Sanctuary.

The Barber continues to eye her.

"Thanks." said Andrea.

She walks across the street, feeling the Barber's eyes on her all the way, and enters Sanctuary.

Sanctuary

Andrea waits for her eyes to adjust, and looks around.

Luckless flies are drowning in bowls of sugar water. A lone drunk slumps over a table. The screaming décor is a blend of Wild West saloon and Italian chrome and glass that meshes so badly, it threatens to self-destruct.

The low music on the jukebox is something by Johnny Cash, she thinks. Something from that record of hymns he did, years and years ago.

Otherwise and except for the bartender, Sanctuary is empty.

The bartender smiles at Andrea. His square jaw looks good on a tall, lanky body. The eyes are young, but the face, isn't. Under one rolled up sleeve, a hint of tattoo or maybe a fading bruise. She can't tell. He feels her eyes on his arm and self-consciously rubs the spot, then pulls his sleeve down, just enough to cover the mark.

"Morning ma'am. What can I do you for?"

he asks.

Andrea takes a seat. "You can do me a shot and a draft, and hopefully you can do me something hot to eat. I'm starving."

"Well the shot and the draft ain't no problem, but the eats, I don't know. I can make you a sandwich? Sour dill on the side." the bartender said.

"That'll do it," Andrea said.

"What kind of shot and a draft you want?"

"Jack and whatever."

"We got a local brew here on tap. Nice, if you like something dark and bitter."

"Story of my life."

"Pardon?"

"Sounds good."

The bartender nods and gets to fixing the drinks. Andrea notices with approval that his expression never changed, not even when she ordered the shot of Jack Daniels. A good bartender, she thinks. Serve the drinks and keep your thoughts to yourself.

"So, where you heading to? Atlanta? N'orleans? Port Charles? Jacksonville?" he asks, pouring the shot and setting it in front of her without spilling a drop.

"Who said I was heading anywhere?" Andrea said.

He places the draft in front of her. No coaster. She appreciates that as well. "Well, you ain't from around here and I can tell you that no one who ain't from around here stays around here more than they have to."

He pulls a loaf of dark bread out from under the bar, then digs cold cuts out of a small refrigerator.

"I bet. Actually, maybe you can help me." Andrea said.

"I can try. Mustard?"

"Yeah."

He sets the sandwich down. "So what can I help you with?"

"I'm looking for the Euxideos."

He stops what he's doing. Mouth twisted with disgust, his grip tightens on the knife

he was using to spread the mustard. "Why don't y'all leave them folks alone?"

Andrea raises an eyebrow. "What's eating your ass?"

"Those good people have been through enough, without you reporters poking your noses in here."

"I'm a friend of the family."

His eyes narrow. "Euxideos ain't got no friends."

Andrea, holding his glare, pulls out her wallet and slaps down a twenty. "Keep the change."

She tosses back the shot. She knows she shouldn't but it burns good, all the way down, explodes into liquid fire in her stomach. The world is suddenly coated in a calm warmth. She takes the draft and sandwich to a table.

The bartender picks up the twenty, holding it as if it were a slice of rotted meat. He makes change and takes it to Andrea, laying it on the table. "That's too much tip," he says.

Andrea takes a bite of her sandwich and chews thoughtfully, ignoring the money.

He stands there, waiting, "You're really a friend of the family?" he asks finally.

"I really am," Andrea answers.

"Lookie here, I'm sorry. It's just that... those poor people. That son of theirs. But you must know all that. Who doesn't?"

Andrea nods. "Too well."

"But you don't know where they live?" he asked.

"I've never been to town. All I've got is the address."

"They don't live in town. Their place is just outside, about a mile south. Just stay on the main road out. Which shouldn't be too hard to do, since it's the only road out."

Andrea slides the change back toward him. "Thanks. You earned the tip."

"Thankie," he extends his hand. "Name's Blake."

Andrea takes his hand. It is warm and

rough. A man's hand.

"I'm..."

The Drunk lifts his head. It's Juvenal Euxideos, with glassy, alcohol-flamed eyes rolling wildly, a trickle of dried drool trailing out of one corner of his mouth, and right cheek imprinted by the buttons on his shirt sleeve.

"Babies full of rabies that's what they are!" Juvenal shouts, "The damned..."

His words drop to a drunken mumble and his head falls forward, striking the table with a loud bang. The empty glass topples, falls, and shatters when it lands.

"You shut yer mouth! You shut yer mouth about your own, Juvenal!" Blake jabs a finger at Juvenal.

Juvenal lifts his head, and tries to focus on Andrea, but can't. He begins to sing "Nine Bullets" by The Driveby Truckers.

"Nine bullets in my room mate's gun, and I'm going to find a use for every one."

His singing voice is surprisingly deep

and rich.

Andrea walks over to Juvenal and introduces herself. Something flickers behind his drink-dulled eyes. He knows who she is. He staggers to his feet and she can smell the alcohol sweating out of him. She doesn't even want to think about how much he has had to drink, to smell like that. She doesn't even want to think about how much like him, she used to be. Could still be, with very little effort.

"Oh," says Juvenal staring at Andrea like she had just dropped out of the sky to the accompaniment of an angelic chorus and the wall crumbling blare of a trumpet. "Oh Lordy. Ain't we been waiting for you."

Driving with Juvenal

Juvenal's car, an old Volvo cancerous with rust and splotchy with primer, reeked of stale beer and gym lockers in desperate need of a cleaning.

Juvenal was driving, was somehow managing to steer a relatively straight course on the rutted dirt road, while gesturing wildly with both hands, pointing out what he considered important landmarks along the way. His eyes frequently leave the road as he checks Andrea out, rolling up and down her body, snapping mental photos of anatomy that he stores away for future fantasy.

He points out the abandoned church.

"That was the Southern Christian First and Last Church of the Holy Wounds of Jesus Christ Our Savior." he told her, "Not used anymore" he added without needing to.

"You're kidding," said Andrea, referring to the name.

Juvenal shook his head. "No, that's it, all right."

"I mean the name."

"Oh, that. Christians." Juvenal shrugged, as if to say - what are you going to do?

A large black bird - a crow? - explodes out of the steeple carrying something small and pink and fetal-like, in its sharp beak. It shoots into the sky like an ebon missile and is gone.

"Why is it empty?" Andrea asks.

"Minister cut his own throat." Juvenal said. Very, very, matter of factly.

"Some of the congregation still kicking around though. They found them a new preacher. A hell fire and brimstone type. They do roadside sermons and protest stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Any stuff. Doesn't matter much."

They pass the train station. A circus train has pulled in. The cars are straight out of some 1920s photograph, but where once brightly garish, they have faded to monochrome memory. A dwarf stands on the edge of the platform, almost exactly where Andrea

stood. He is looking down at his reflection in the puddle. As the car passes, he looks up and their eyes meet. The dwarf opens his mouth to show long canines and rubs his crotch. Andrea looks away.

EUXIDEOS FAMILY HOME

Juvenal turned off the main route and onto a narrow road that appeared to stretch straight on to infinity. Two hundred year old trees the color of pale ash stood like sentinels on either side. They threw their limbs at each other to form a dense and tangled canopy through which only slivers of sky could be seen.

Andrea watched the play of shadow and sunlight across the hood of the car, barely listening as Juvenal prattled on about what she did not know and cared less. Then the road took a sudden turn and a house came into view.

The Volvo skids to a rock-spraying halt in front of the house where the Euxideos lived.

Juvenal falls out of the driver's door and staggers as fast as he can, to the front door. Andrea gets out and leans on the door, watching Juvenal stumble, fall, get up, turn towards her to wave wildly, nearly fall again, turn again, and crash into the stairs

leading to the front porch.

She gazes at the house and realizes she has seen it before. In the pages of a magazine or in a dream... she can't remember. But she has seen it. She has written about it in her dream book.

"I had seen this house before. Locked in fevered dreams of childhood illness. Sunken in past grandeur. Wisteria vines clutched the mansion, holding it together with a wooden desperation. Inside, every room would be latticed with yellow slashes filled with dust motes. At night it would stand dressed in flowing eternal black, as if wrapped in loose shadows. There would be furtive movement behind gray lace."

The house is tall and narrow. It is highly ornate, a prime example of what the french architects of the time termed *horror vacui* -- the fear of unadorned surfaces. Her gaze drifted over the structure, filing away in her mind the dormer windows that projected like eyebrows from the roof, and rounded cornices at the top and base of its roof.

Brackets held up the eaves, balconies underscored the bay windows, and a large cupola with room enough for a small office, hunkered under the patterned slate on roof. It had all the classical pediments, right down to paired columns, and tall windows, all around the first story.

With its tall mansard roof and wrought iron cresting, the house towered over her. The closer she came to it, the more it loomed until, nearly at the stairs to the porch, a small burst of fear opened in the pit of her stomach and she thought it was going to fall, and the entire building would come crashing down on her head.

Juvenal, still sprawled on the steps, stares at her with wide-eyed wonder. He calls into the house.

"Grand mama! Grand mama!" His eyes never leave Andrea. "Oh Lordy. Wait till they see you. Clive's letters don't do justice."

Andrea walks the stone path to the porch.

The door opens and Clymenestra Euxideos steps into the sunlight. She stands tall and

regal, like a Greek goddess aged with extreme grace. Her eyes are pale blue. They roll over Andrea from head to toe and back again. Andrea can feel the force of that gaze, right down to her soul.

Juvenal's head snaps back and forth between Clymenestra and Andrea as if his neck was made of rubber. He scurries out of the way.

Their eyes locked, Andrea slowly mounts the stairs, stopping an arm's length from Clymenestra. The two women take each other's measure. 'This is the strongest woman I have ever met,' thought Andrea. 'This is who I could be, when and if I survive this life'.

Suddenly and without a word, Clymenestra gathers Andrea in her arms, pulling her close, cheek-to-cheek and heart-to-heart. Andrea doesn't know what to do... how to react. She decides to do nothing at all.

Clymenestra speaks with a voice that is still strong but has been accented with age and defeat and sorrow. "Oh my child, oh my poor darling girl. How much you've gone through. How much we have all gone through."

Andrea looks over Clymenestra's shoulder. Niobe is standing in the doorway, arms tightly crossed over her chest, glaring. As if knowing that her daughter is behind her watching, Clymenestra pulls back, reluctantly.

"He told me you were beautiful, but... not like this. Not this beautiful."
Clymenestra's eyes misted, lips trembling.

Juvenal "guffaws". That's exactly how it sounded. "Clive sure can pick 'em."

Clymenestra fixes Juvenal with a stare that could shatter granite. Juvenal jerks as if struck. "This is your Uncle's fiancée. You will show some respect!"

Juvenal folds in upon himself in an effort to get away from that stare, but it fixes him like a needle through an insect. He can only mumble into his lap. "Sorry. Sorry."

Clymenestra's attention returns to Andrea. "Oh, where are my manners? Where's my head? Would you like some tea? Iced tea? Or a julep perhaps? Would you like something to eat? You must be starved after your long

journey. We use to have a cook
but...Juvenal, where's your sister?"

Juvenal gets to his feet, goes to the
front door and sticks his head in. "Juvenia!"
he shouts.

Clymenestra lifts her eyes to heaven. "I
could have done that boy! Fetch her, and
have her fix our guest something."

She looks back at Andrea, eyebrow raised
in question.

"Tea would be fine," Andrea says.

"Tea." Clymenestra tells Juvenal.

Niobe comes forward, as if something had
been holding her back all this time and only
now has she managed to break free. She fixes
Andrea with a glare that is pure hatred. Her
voice is a forced hiss. Words formed of spit.
"Guest? You don't even know who she is!"

Clymenestra turns to Niobe with movement
that is both slow motion and whip-quick at
the same time. She speaks in kind, but there
is a power behind her hiss that again feels
like a physical blow.

"This is your brother's intended!"

But Niobe has spent her life enduring these verbal assaults. She stands her ground, her eyes never leaving Andrea for a second. "How do you know that? Some one just walks in off the street, gives you a name! She could be a reporter! A fed! A bounty hunter!"

Juvenal laughs. It is an unpleasant sound. At first, the edge of hysteria it carries makes Andrea think he is crying, speaking through a membrane of fear. But she sees none of that on his face, only a mocking bemusement. "A bounty hunter! You're crazy mama. You ever see a bounty hunter looks like she does?"

Clymenestra directs her attention back to Juvenal who cowers like a dog about to be kicked, a dog that has been kicked many, many times before. She does not strike him however, but instead speaks very slowly, each word carefully chosen as if rehearsed just for this occasion. As if she were talking to some idiot child.

"Juvenal. You might be grown but you are not a man. And I will lay into you with a hickory switch if you don't mind me. Now,

go find your sister."

Juvenal hurries off, stealing glances at Andrea as he does.

Niobe steps in front of Andrea, glaring. Eyes lock. Neither blinks for what seems forever.

Andrea smiles. "I could show you my driver's license."

Niobe snorts then turns her head and spits. "Hell, that don't prove nothing. When I was thirteen I had a driver's license that said I was twenty one! All that proves, is you know how to get around and get what you need, to get things done. That's all that proves."

Andrea considers this. "I could send for my birth certificate," she offers.

Niobe snorts again, but does not spit. "Yeah like that can't be phony-ied up."

"That is enough, Niobe," says Clymenestra. "She is a guest in our house and I will not have you casting aspersions on her."

Niobe continues to glare at Andrea,

taking her measure as her mother did, but not seeing the same things. Not wanting to see the same things. A temple vein throbs and her mouth works like she's trying to chew something god-awful vile.

"I'm watching you," Niobe says and storms off.

Clymenestra sighs. "I must apologize for my daughter. She... we are all, under much distress."

"I understand," Andrea replies.

Clymenestra gives Andrea another once over. Not like the first time. This time...sexual? "Yes. You are lovely."

"Thank you," Andrea said. What else could she say?

"Where are your bags?"

"In the car."

"Juvenal," says Clymenestra, "Get Clive's intended's bags out of the car and take them up to the guest room."

Juvenal emerges from the shadows behind the doorway, smiling sheepishly. He hurries

past.

Andrea wonders 'how did she know he was there?'

"Yes, Grand Mama," he says.

"Oh, but... I can find a place in town. I'm sure there's a hotel up the road," said Andrea.

"Nonsense child," admonishes Clymenestra. "You are part of our family. I will not have you staying at some vulgar establishment in town, or at that roadhouse on the interstate. Certainly not on a holiday weekend! No, you will stay with us."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Clymenestra touches Andrea's face. Once more her pale blue eyes peer into Andrea's, probing deeply, looking for an understanding. She seems satisfied with what she finds. "You are one of us."

"Gabba gabba, one of us". The line from the movie Freaks suddenly runs through Andrea's head. A group of circus freaks assembled around a table, having a party, welcoming the intended bride of the midget, a

normal sized woman after his money.

Gabba gabba indeed.

Clymenestra looks past Andrea. Juvenal is standing at the foot of the stairs, single bag in hand. "Is that it?" she asks.

"I travel light," Andrea said.

Juvenal continues to eye Andrea, stupidly.

"Juvenal!" Clymenestra hissed.

Juvenal hurries the bag into the house where he is swallowed once again by the shadows.

Clymenestra turns. "Come," she says, and leads Andrea into the house.

Like the outside, the interior is ornate, and strangely baroque. Magnificent, if dulled with age.

"Oh, this is wonderful." Andrea said.

"Darling, it was," Clytemnestra said, "But time and neglect are taking their due. I have lived here all my life, as did my mother before me and her mother before her. There was money once. Money for caretakers

and groundskeepers. It's all gone now, to lawyers and lawsuits. Now, there's a few properties and stocks, enough to slow the decay, but not to stop it."

They passed a massive archway that opened into what had been an elegant ballroom. It was a long, dark room with a high ceiling. The shuttered windows that ran from ceiling to floor on one side of the room admitted only the faintest trickle of sunlight.

There was something about the room that caused Andrea to stop and stare. In the brief moment it took to blink, for the lids of her eyes to lower and return, the ballroom was suddenly alive with sound and color. Grand dames wearing gowns that were decorated like wedding cakes promenaded with fine gentlemen in gray suits that fit like gloves. There was a table laden with delicacies. A quartet of negro musicians dressed in red jackets, black pants and white shoes played a slow waltz and the dancers moved to the sound in perfect sync and refined rhythm.

"Dear?"

Her vision ratcheted back to reality. The ballroom was empty once again. The only sound echoing in the void, was the lonely ticking of a massive grandfather clock that had long since counted the times of fancy parties.

"Dear?"

Clymenestra's hand is on her arm, fingertips like cold steel probes pressing into her flesh, nails neatly trimmed but yellow with age and strangely rippled like old glass. Andrea looks from Clytemnestra's hand to her pale eyes and sees the concern there.

"Ghosts?" Clymenestra asked.

"Pardon?" Andrea said.

"This house is thick with them."

Clymenestra answered, and continued to lead Andrea toward the back of the house.

"Oh... remembering the balls we had, once upon a time. Such grand times they were, too. Back then, all the men were gentlemen, and all the women were ladies. We were all so elegant, but that was oh, so long ago. There

are no southern gentlemen anymore. And even fewer southern ladies."

They stepped out onto a wide veranda overlooking a lawn of sun-bleached grass and thriving, dark green weeds. Where the lawn abruptly ended, stood the remains of a long-neglected garden. Disheveled stone paths snaked through the ruins of rose bushes gone wild, and trellises threatening to collapse into piles of discolored wooden slats. A large fountain made of concrete, stood in the center of the garden, childish faces clustering around the rim. Beyond that, a field of tall dried grasses and gangly weeds, erupted. Perhaps half a mile further, wooded hills began to roll. Then, a flash... so brilliant, so intense, that Andrea gasped, thinking... this is it, this is the grand mal she had been warned would someday surely come, throwing her to the floor. She would lay there, with a wild unblinking stare, limbs locked, mind screaming in rage and horror but unable to command a body gone haywire, thick foam slopping out between clenched teeth, foam tinged with blood from a

bitten tongue.

But it was only heat lightning, followed by a low rumble of thunder. Andrea scanned the sky. It was hazy but devoid of clouds.

"Rain?" Andrea asked.

Clymenestra shook her head.

"There is no coming of rain in the air. There has not been rain for three years now, and very little for the two years before that. Everything is so dry. The Kisatchie is like bone. Kindling waiting for a match. One good lightning strike is all it would take to start an inferno. One good strike. Then only a shift in the wind, to bring the flames to us. Well... the town will go first. There's some small pleasure to be taken in that."

There was an edge to Clymenestra's voice that told Andrea, regardless of how refined this woman might appear or act, regardless of how regal and cultured, deep within was a stone-cold core that made her capable of terrible violence and exacting retribution. She would not like to be someone Clymenestra considered an enemy, or believed had done

her, or one of hers, wrong.

Was this where Clive got it?

Were those flames moving in Clymenestra's eyes? No, it was just a trick of the light, an arc of sun. Or a scythe. Slashing.

Clymenestra looked away from the horizon and focused on Andrea. The edge her voice had taken, was gone. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk like that. I fear the Lord as much as I love him, and such words are not those that would have passed our Saviour's lips."

Clymenestra smiled and Andrea resisted the impulse to jerk back. Up close, Clymenestra's long teeth looked as if she had painted them with white-out. Andrea's mind dredged up the vision of mothers eating their babies, gleefully chewing with too-white teeth on little bones that snapped and cracked as they oozed their store of rich, dark-red marrow.

"Still," continued Clymenestra, "it hurts what they did to us. They way that they visited the sins of the son upon the mother."

Clymenestra turns from her thoughts and once again makes Andrea her focus. "Was the trip long?" she asks. "Of course it was, what trip isn't?"

The screen door opens and Juvenia creeps onto the veranda carrying a tea tray. Creeps. Yes, that is the word that comes to Andrea's mind as she watches Juvenal's sister move. It is the motion of someone who does not want to be noticed. Because to be noticed may bring unwanted attention. May bring pain. May bring humiliation.

But that may have been exactly what she wanted.

Juvenia's death black hair obscures her face, so Andrea studies the body. Small, perfectly round breasts are encased in tight, thin fabric, the permanently engorged nipples threatening to erupt through the material. Low slung ass bound in low riding jeans.

To move like that, to move in a way meant to avoid attention, yet to dress like that... to dress in a way that could do nothing but draw the roving eye... it was dichotomous. It made no sense. Notice me. Please don't

notice me. Touch me, please don't touch me.
Hunger for me, please don't hunger for me.
Hurt me, please don't hurt me.

Please don't hurt me.

Juvenia places the tray on a wicker table. On it are a small tea pot and two cups, along with an assortment of small, carefully prepared sandwiches.

"My granddaughter," says Clymenestra.
"Juvenia. Come here, dear. Say hello to our guest."

Andrea holds her hand out. Juvenia shies away.

"Juvenia lacks her brother's boisterous qualities. Shy. Of course she can be quite fierce if the need arises, can't you Juvenia?"

There is a mocking undertone to Clymenestra's words, some message relayed that only she and Juvenia understood. Behind the veil of black hair, Andrea can see that Juvenia almost smiles. Or is it a grimace? Death's head rictus? It's impossible to tell.

"Say hello Juvenia, to your uncle's

fiancée."

Juvenia speaks without looking at Andrea. She mumbles something that might be "Pleased to meet you" or perhaps "Persimmons meat jew".

Andrea assumes the former. "Pleased to meet you Juvenia," she says. "Clive told me a lot about you."

Juvenia gingerly pulls back her hair then, hooking long pale fingers into it, revealing the same pale blue eyes as her grandmother, but these younger ones are surrounded by smears of vibrant red eye shadow. Her face is flawless, the smooth doll-like skin nearly as translucent as skim milk. Full lips underline a narrow nose, placed neatly by the hand of God, between cheekbones the same as the brother's, but here they work. Unfortunately, she also has the same distance in her gaze, perhaps further. Even looking directly at her, Andrea felt as if Juvenia were looking through her toward some point far, far away... a point only she could see.

Where the boys would want to beat up her

brother, they would want to rape Juvenia. She exuded an aura of sexual victim so strong, even Andrea felt its pull.

Juvenia drops her gaze as if struck, turns and hurries away. Her top is scooped low in the back. There is the tattoo of a golden carp between her shoulder blades.

They both watch until she too, is swallowed by the shadows of the house.

"The child isn't..." Clymenestra starts to say something, then stops. She looks pained, some deep rooted gnawing working its way through her heart.

She exhales loudly through her nostrils and continues. "Well. She just isn't. Never was. Not retarded mind you, just not right. Just... she doesn't understand the world, like the rest of us do. I remember, one year for Christmas, we bought her a dish of bright red bath oil beads. She was nine. Before anyone could do anything, she had put one in her mouth and swallowed it. Later, she cried and bubbles popped from her lips and nostrils. We laughed at her. But we kept a better eye on her ever since. No telling what she'd put in

her mouth next."

Clymenestra falls silent, thinking back on that time, and perhaps others. Andrea waited. A slight wind came up, did nothing more than move the hot air about, then was gone. Clymenestra jerked as if coming out of a dream of falling, and blinking rapidly, gestured towards the tea and sandwiches.

"Please sit. Eat."

Time passes and the dregs of mint tea are now cool. Sandwich crumbs fall victim to another breeze blowing the tall wildflowers that populate the land. A cicada buzzes harshly, but not for very long. The silence is comfortable, and Andrea sits back, watching curls of smoke rise in the distance, touching the sky like snakes made of fog.

Suddenly Clymenestra speaks, breaking the silence so unexpectedly that Andrea nearly jumps. Her voice is low and intense.

"So tell me Andrea. How did you meet my Clive? More importantly, how did you fall in love with him?"

She has anticipated this question and is

ready with her answer. It is not an answer she has had to spend much time thinking about, because it contains more truth than fiction, and even the fiction contains more truth than she cares to admit.

Andrea slowly turns her gaze from the smoke, to Clymenestra. At the end of that motion, it is not Clymenestra she is looking at, but a film that has played behind her eyes for five years.

She begins. "I met him at a dance..."

Last Call at Willie's Wet Whistle

Andrea Ramsey, stupid drunk, is slumped over a table, an empty glass in front of her. Her hair is longer and darker. She wears a flannel shirt and faded jeans, her feet encased in road-ruined biker boots.

A lurid neon sign buzzes, flickers and paints everything blood red, even the gouged, darkly stained hardwood floor. A sour faced bartender switches his attention from the game on ESPN to the clock on the wall, and occasionally, to Andrea. When his gaze falls on Andrea, his face sours even more, as if he were swallowing bile. Andrea doesn't notice and if she did, she wouldn't care. The only thing that matters is what is in her glass. But the glass is empty and so must be filled. She doubts the bartender will come over to check if she needs anything, so she has to get up and order another herself. She is not sure she can get up. She is not sure that if she does get up, she can make it across the mile long expanse of dance floor. She is not sure that if she survives that journey, she will be able to slur out the words carefully

enough, so the bartender will understand them.

What was she doing?

Someone is talking. There is nobody but her and the bartender and he isn't talking. Is she talking to herself? No, the voice is different... older.

"My Clive loves to dance. There used to be dances every Saturday in town, and he would always be there. All the ladies would want to dance with him. Oh, he was such a dandy such a Johnnie. He never took a lesson, either. It just came naturally. He told me once, 'mama, I just feel the music and let it take me where it wants to go.' He especially liked Patsy Cline."

There is bourbon in her glass once again. Andrea looks up. The bartender looks away. Andrea wonders - did he bring it? Did she get it? She can't remember. She wants a cigarette, and fishes in her jacket for the pack. Finds a wad of crumpled bills. Is there still time to get to the liquor store and purchase a bottle to get her through the rest

of the night and drive her into sleep? She checks her wrist for the time, but her watch is gone. Did she leave it at the apartment? Did she lose it? Did she ever have one? She tries to see the clock on the far wall, but it is a blur.

She hears the sound of coins being fed into a jukebox, as buttons are pushed, and Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams (Of You)" starts to play.

A shadow falls across Andrea.

"Would you like to dance?"

She looks up. Her eyes, narrow and mean, travel up the shadow's body. A big man, almost frighteningly so. Football player? Rugby? Professional wrestler? Her eyes come to the face, roundish head, close-cropped hair, eyes like the angel who welcomes you into heaven, must own. Those eyes are all she needs to know about this man. She will go home with him tonight. She would spend the rest of her life with him.

She places her hand into his. Her hand looks so small, so childlike compared to his.

His hand closes around hers and she can feel the power radiating out of it and she realizes that if he wanted to, he could crush her hand as if it were that of a porcelain figurine. Crush it to bone white dust that he would then inhale like some strange new drug.

Instead, the hand is warm... soft.. tender... gentle... He carefully brings her to her feet and then his arm is around her waist and they are dancing, close and slow, out onto the dance floor with the low, sad moan of Patsy Cline moving around them like a slow whirlwind of hurt.

"I was there with friends," Andrea tells Clymenestra, "but when I saw Clive, it was like, like... I don't know. He was all the way across the room, but it was like he touched me with his eyes. Touched me and asked me to dance, and there was no one else in the room except him and me and the song."

The bar is suddenly filled with light. Patsy Cline's voice dies in mid-word.

"Last call is over," hollers the bartender, "and I don't care where you go,

but you can't stay here."

Clive turns, very slowly. He speaks to the bartender in a low, soft, cultured voice. A voice that should not belong to a man who looks like Clive does. "Our song was not over."

As low, soft, and cultured as it is, there is also an edge to that voice. There is violence promised, if the words are not heeded. As big as the bartender is, and he is nearly as large as Clive, fear enters his eyes. The kind of fear a trapped animal might feel just before, overwhelmed, it lies down to die. The bartender considers the baseball bat under the bar and imagines the baseball bat broken in half and the most jagged end sticking out of one of his orifices.

The bartender turns down the lights and turns on the jukebox. Patsy Cline warbles up to speed and once again her voice caresses the beer-tinged air.

Andrea and Clive finish their dance. As the last note fades, they walk out of the bar and into a parking lot empty save for Andrea's car. A huge halogen light nailed to

a telephone pole blasts harsh light over everything.

Andrea, falls into a sitting position. The sound of the bar door locking is sharp, loud, and final. Clive watches Andrea as if waiting for some sign.

The halogen goes out. The parking lot plunges into darkness. A thousand stars burst out of the deep indigo sky.

"Can't stay here." says Andrea, words sliding out of her mouth like grease. "Asshole." She digs her car keys out of her jacket, tries to stand, fails and sits back down with a thump.

"You can't drive like that," says Clive.

Andrea shoves her keys at him. "You," she says, "Do."

"You want me to drive you home?" Clive asks.

"Don't you want to?"

She searches for his face but it is lost in the darkness of the parking lot and her own drunken haze.

Clive takes the keys from her, the touch of his fingers bringing an electric shock. She wants to feel those fingers on her body. Everywhere on her body. Exploring. Finding.

"I do want to," Clive said. And he did.

"We danced all night..."

He pulled back the blankets and sheet and laid her on her bed, undressing her with all the gentle and careful attention that a loving mother would show her first born.

He folded her flannel shirt and faded jeans neatly, and placed them on top of the dresser.

He gently placed the blanket over her still form and then brushed back the hair that had fallen across her face. Her eyes flickered, then opened, and she was once again gazing deep into those loving eyes. And then she was touching his face. His skin was soft, so incredibly velvet soft. Then she was leading his face to hers and her lips were meeting his, and his lips like his flesh, were soft like perfect pillows and it was like being kissed for the first time. Her

stomach felt hollow yet full and a wonderful electric tingle was running throughout her limbs.

Her lips parted at the probing of his tongue while his hands were moving down her cheeks... to her throat... to her breasts.

Then suddenly he was gone and she cried out as the coolness of the room swept away the warmth his body had provided. She feared he was leaving but no, he was turning out the light and the moment the light went out the room was filled with the tranquil blue of the moon.

She sat up, watching as he stopped at the end of her bed. While he undressed, his eyes never left her face. Then he was in bed next to her and reaching for her as she reached for him. Once again their lips touched and their tongues dueled and he was touching her in ways she had never been touched before, with a loving tenderness unlike anything she had ever experienced.

He ran his fingertips along the ridges of her scars, tracing the network of her insanity. He followed these memories of pain

with his tongue, finding his way along the routes of her darkness, fascinated by the path and the knowledge of her that it afforded him.

He entered her slowly and she gasped with the sheer, incredible pleasure of his love-making. His thrusts were long and measured and unhurried. She locked her ankles behind his lower back and pushed herself hard against him, driving him deeper, meeting his every movement with one of her own. When she climaxed, it left her feeling as if her bones had turned to liquid and there was no way she could ever come like that again, because then her flesh would also melt and she would cease to exist. But suddenly, there it was, and she was coming again.

When her body stopped shuddering after the fifth time, she pleaded with him to finish, because if she came again like that she'd go blind or die or...

Suddenly Clive's hands were around her throat and he was strangling her. Her eyes locked with his and it did not surprise her that his eyes had not changed. They were

still the same, still loving and caring and calm.

But he was killing her.

She reached under her pillow and pulled out her revolver, an old snub nose she carried for spare, and pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through Clive's side. He made a noise that was more surprise than pain and with blood pouring out of his wound toppled off the bed and fell to the floor.

Now more sober than she had been in years, Andrea was on her feet, gun in hand and Clive was starting to rise. She whipped the gun across the side of his head and the blow sent a wave of numbness riding up her arm all the way to her shoulder. Clive slammed into the side of the bed but continued trying to get to his feet. She drove the gun across his face in a wicked backhand that smeared his nose across his right cheek, and dark blood jetted out of both nostrils to splatter the cream rug.

"You son of a bitch."

Clive is still trying to stand, but

pauses to stare at the blood as if he has never seen its like before. He gazes up at Andrea in wonder. He says:

"I only sought to give you what you wanted."

Andrea puts the gun to his forehead and cocks the hammer.

The door breaks down, the lights blast on and men wearing FBI windbreakers rush in. A wall of guns are pointed at her, a wave of white noise, of yelling.

"FBI! Drop the weapon! Drop it!"

Andrea drops her gun and puts her hands behind her head. She is suddenly very aware, that she is naked. That the markings on her body are clearly visible for all to see. Her secret made known to those who had no right to see... who would never understand.

She looks down at Clive and Clive, kneeling in front of her, is smiling.

His blue eyes are filled with love... and understanding.

"Morning came and we watched the sun rise."

Wrapped in a blanket, throat sore, head throbbing, Andrea sat on a chair in her living room staring into space. Early morning sunlight filtered through the blinds, colorless ribbons speckled with dust motes. Outside, there are neighbors and reporters. Inside, a small army of CSI types go over everything in her apartment with the proverbial fine tooth comb.

An FBI agent approaches her. He holds a wallet in his hand, she realizes it is hers. She refuses to carry a purse. The agent is young, probably late twenties, but with the kind of face that will keep him decades younger than his actual chronological years, far into his life. She hates him for that, but takes comfort in the fact that when age finally hits him, it will hit him hard.

The agent is looking at her as if she were something he had unexpectedly discovered by lifting a rock or digging in dirt. He was talking to her.

"How could you not know it was him?" he asked, "How could you not have recognized his face? Don't you watch the news? Read the

newspapers?"

Andrea looked away. There was nothing to say.

The FBI agent opens the wallet, revealing Andrea's police badge and ID card. He freezes and she can feel the shock and surprise radiating from his body like heat off a sick dog.

His voice is a strained whisper. "You're a cop?"

Andrea forces herself to look at him. "Not anymore."

It was the final straw they needed to throw her out. Not even the union could save her job now, and in truth, she didn't want them to.

Memories... she sees herself standing before a police tribunal. A row of police officers, all older, all men, all in crisp, fresh starched, fresh pressed uniforms stare at her with thinly veiled disgust. One is standing and reading from a sheet of paper he holds in his hand. Andrea is barely listening. It doesn't matter what the words

being spoken, are. Nothing matters anymore.
Nothing at all.

"...dereliction of duty, conduct
unbecoming an officer of the law...."

In the movies this is where she would
lay her service revolver on the table,
alongside her badge and ID. But they already
have those things, all taken by the FBI weeks
before. Here is where she would stand and
face her superiors and make some grand, self-
justifying speech that would make her right
and them wrong. But in the real world...

"...terminated."

She sees herself walking down the long
hallway that ran the length of the station
she worked out of. She does not blink, does
not react to the snickers, the whispers, the
snorts.

She walks out. And another fragment of
her life comes to an end.

She gets into her car and drives to Hyde
Park where she sits in the car, in the lot,
looking out the windshield at families
picnicking, and couples walking hand in hand.

A flotilla of ducks drift in the creek. A young girl tosses breadcrumbs on the grass and suddenly a mob of seagulls appear, screaming as they fight over them.

Silence. Then she pounds the steering wheel and screams in rage and pain - the cry of the damned. Her tears melt the world.

She was back on the veranda, a trickle of sweat flowing between her shoulder blades. A flock of black birds swirls over the field, twists and is gone. Andrea says, "It was the most romantic night of my life."

The two women sit in silence. Andrea remembering the reality, Clymenestra visualizing the story told. This time Andrea breaks the silence.

"Have you heard from him?" Andrea asked, "I mean since..."

Clymenestra shakes her head once. "No. But I know he's coming, even if it means going back to prison. He will want to see his mother first, and he will want to see you."

"What did he tell you about me?"

“Only that he had met you. And that he
loved you.”

Clive's Room

A small bedroom. A single bed. Neoclassic art on the walls. A phonograph and some records. A dresser and a closet. A single wooden hanger. A table with antique medical equipment.

The door opened and Andrea entered. This, Clive's room, was now her room for as long as she wished it to be. Her bag was on the floor at the foot of the bed where Juvenal had placed it. She noticed that it has been opened, that her belongings had been gone through, that Juvenal had tried to make it appear as if he had not gone through them. A pair of her panties were missing however, and she wasn't sure how that made her feel.

"Is everything to your liking Andrea?"

Clymenestra called.

Andrea walked to the head of the staircase. Clymenestra stood at the bottom. She no longer climbed stairs she told Andrea. She was too old and frail, too afraid of falling. Andrea said nothing, even though there was no trace of frailty about the woman

at all, nor any trace of fear.

"It's perfect, Mrs. Euxideos." Andrea said.

Clymenestra raised an admonishing finger.

Was that an extra joint? No, trick of light and shadow.

"You call me 'mother', Andrea. And I will call you 'daughter'." Clymenestra said.

It is not a request or a suggestion. It is a fact stated.

"Thank you." Andrea said, although she was not sure why. "Thank you, mother."

Niobe comes in from outside, and pauses at the foot of the stairs. She glares up at Andrea and walks off. Clymenestra follows her. As Andrea closes the door to Clive's room...

Her room.

Niobe begins to shout.

The Shower

There is a bathroom right next to Clive's room. It is narrow and spartan, a man's bathroom. There is no tub, just a shower stall. In the medicine cabinet, Andrea finds expensive milled soaps and shaving products. Andrea runs her fingertips over the shaving brush's bristles. They are stiff, yet soft at the same time. She opens a small vial of some oil and cautiously sniffs. It smells like Clive did that night he...

...made love to her as if she were the only woman in the world...tried to kill her and she shot him.

She picks up a straight razor and her reflection is torn apart in the shiny metal of the handle, but perfectly formed in the surface of the blade. She resists the urge to run her thumb along the blade. She can tell it is well-honed and blood hungry sharp.

Andrea uses the toilet, then decides to shower. She removes her robe and hangs it on the back of the door. In the mirror she catches a glimpse of her back, of the

unmarked white flesh, the only expanse of her flesh other than her hands and feet and face that is not marked by the razor's kiss.

She turns on the shower. The hot is near scalding, and her hand twists a tap to add a touch of cold. She stands before the mirror watching her reflection fade as the bathroom fills with steam and the mirror clouds over, until she is but a dim presence behind the fog. A ghost trapped in mist.

Andrea steps into the shower and the hot water pounds her flesh and heats her bones. She runs her hand through the matrix of scars between her breasts and across her stomach, then finds her clitoris and gently rubs until she shudders.

Steam rises to the vent in the ceiling where a pair of eyes catch the light, and gleam.

In The Attic

Juvenal's eyes track ever ridge of every scar on Andrea's body.

He kneels, hunched over the vent, pants around knees, cock in hand, pumping furiously. Steam snakes up from the bathroom below, and twists around Juvenal's face, striped with white light and black shadow.

After he comes, he lays on his side in the dark, hot attic, one hand between his sticky thighs, one hand out, a finger tracing scars in the dust. Dust cakes his fingertip. He puts his fingertip into his mouth and sucks the dust like it was powdered sugar.

AN ISOLATED REST STOP IN OHIO**One Week After Clive Euxideos Escaped**

A battered pick-up truck that looks very much like the one Rick Gilbert once drove...

...very much like the truck he once sat in outside a girlfriend's house, watching and waiting for her to come home and when she did, she wasn't alone. And when she went into the house, she didn't go in alone, and the man she was with was his best friend...

...leaves a rest stop on I76 just as a Ford SUV pulls in.

Janice Brady climbs out of the SUV and comes around to the passenger side with heavy, plodding, world-weary stomps. Angry, she jerks open the door, grabs her seven year old daughter by the arm and extracts her a bit too roughly.

Janice is in her late twenties. There's a mean downturn to her lips that shows how unhappy she is with life. Janice hates her life. Hates her wide hips and cheesy thighs and drooping, too large breasts. She hates the man who left her three years ago unaware

that she drove him out. Life sucks and then you die. That has become Janice's mantra. Certainly her life sucks. She expects better, thinks she deserves better, but truth is, she has never done anything to make it better.

She is returning home after spending a weekend with her parents - a long weekend. She went expecting the worst and got exactly that. She is emotionally drained and physically exhausted. Two days of constant bickering will do that to you. The crushing weight of constant parental disappointment will do that, as well. Three days of enduring her shrill, psychotic shrew of a mother and her total control freak of a father, stuck in a house so thick with tension it was like a cord around your throat, will do it.

"I told you to go at the restaurant." says Janice between clenched teeth as she resists hurting the child she holds. But she wants to. Oh God, yes...she does.

She can feel the slender arms, the fragile bone under the thin flesh, and thinks, 'Just a bit too much pressure, just a twist'... and she would be rewarded with the

sharp, satisfying sound of bone snapping, followed by an ear piercing shriek of pain. She'd almost like to hear that sound. She almost like to inflict that pain.

"I didn't have to go then," Cassandra said. She looks like a miniature version of her mother without the mean downturn, with the light of a life not yet dimmed by disappointments, still bright in her eyes. That will come later, when she sees what life has in store. When her mother does to her what her grandmother did to Janice.

"No." says Janice, "Of course not. That would have been too easy."

Janice looks about. She suddenly realizes they are the only ones at the stop. The parking lot is long and empty, the far ends vanishing into utter and complete black. The scattering of street lamps nearby, shed light that is a dingy yellow, light that creates more shadow than it destroys. The globes are speckled with hordes of dead insects. The picnic area is filled with darkness, the woods beyond are shadows etched against the darker sky. The rest station

itself looked as if no one had used it in years.

It was the kind of place where women got raped and murdered or murdered then raped, or worse. It was the sort of place they tell you to stay away from, and when the television news reports what happened, people sitting in the safety of their living rooms shake their heads and say:

"What the hell was wrong with her? Didn't she know not to go into those places alone?"

But they didn't have a child screaming at them for the past half an hour that she was going to pee in her pants.

Cassandra dances. "Ma-mee!" she pleads.

Janice makes a decision. "All right." she says. "Come on. Lets go."

Janice grabs Cassandra's hand and yanks her toward the rest room. The child can barely keep up. She is more dragged than walks. The door is like the portal to a dungeon. The thick green paint used on the door has been repeatedly slashed with knives

and pens and any object that could be used to inscribe a name or curse word or symbol.

Janice throws the door open. The industrial-sized metal hinges squeal like vermin in vice grips. Her nostrils are immediately assaulted with the acrid aroma of urinal cakes and super strength disinfectant. The floor is white and black tiles, like a 50's dinner motif gone bad. The walls are yellow and green like a nightmare of 70's suburban designer malfunction.

The heavy door swings shut behind them.

The screams of both mother and child are loud and horrible.

A PICK-UP TRUCK

Clive sits behind the wheel of the pick-up truck that left the rest stop just as Janice and Cassandra drove in. He is cruising down the highway at a steady fifty-seven miles per hour. He wonders about the woman he saw getting out of the SUV in his rear view mirror. He wonders what she was thinking, pulling into a deserted stop like that. He wonders what she will do when she enters the rest room and sees what Clive did to the owner of the truck he is now driving.

He almost wishes he could have stayed to watch, to have been the proverbial fly on the shit-house wall. He'd have loved to be able to see the mother's face. The brief glimpse he'd gotten of her as he was leaving and they were arriving, told him all he needed to know about her and her life, and her dissatisfaction with it. If she had been alone, Clive might have taken a few minutes more and given her the release she asked for. But a few minutes more was something Clive could not spare. And he did not want to hurt the little girl. There was hope for her. Not

much. But some. He wouldn't be the one to extinguish that flame.

Maybe when the woman saw what old Clive had left in the rest room, she'd reconsider, and realize that being alive was better than being dead. For most people, anyway. He does feel a pang of regret for the child though. He would not have her slumber broken by nightmares, but what else could he have done?

Clive shifts. He is getting tired of the road and wants to go home. That desire drives him harder than any of the others. He reaches for the radio, but there is none. Instead, there is an 8-track tape player. He hasn't seen one of those since he was a boy. There are several Country & Western 8-tracks on the passenger seat. Johnny Cash. Merle Haggard. He finds a 'Best Of' collection by Patsy Cline, smiles, and plugs it in. "Walkin' After Midnight" plays. There is a bobble-head Jesus on the dashboard, made of plastic and wearing a flowing white robe with his arms out and palms held up as if testing for rain. His head wobbles from side to side with the vibrations of the road. There is a digital

clock set into his chest where his bleeding
heart should have been. It reads: 12:01.

STRANGE

The sun is setting. It streaks the horizon with crimson. Fireflies appear as if by magic across the road and in the cemetery.

Andrea is in Clive's room. Looking. She sits on the bed and runs her hands over the blanket. She feels between the mattresses and under the box spring. She opens the drawers carefully and feels around inside, looking for false bottoms, seeking clues to what makes Clive click.

She opens the record player and finds an old 45 ready to play. Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams (Of You)". It brings a smile to Andrea. She remembers her childhood record player, something like this one. Who had given that to her? Her father? Maybe. She couldn't recall. He had a collection of 45s, a mix of country, early rock and some lounge. She remembered listening to Teresa Brewer. 'Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon, all I want is loving you and music music music.' God, how could she remember that? Why would she remember that? She turns on the record player. The knob makes a soft click

and he record begins to revolve. Andrea lifts the arm (there is a penny taped to the arm to keep the record from skipping) and gently places the needle into the record's groove. Music swells and Patsy begins to sing.

On the veranda, Clymenestra stares out at the world. She hears the music and a sob catches in her throat. She rubs her throat and her hand moves down across her breast and her stomach and she shudders.

In front of the house, Juvenal stands on the porch, listens, and smiles. He hasn't heard that old record since Uncle Clive left. He turns and Niobe is standing in the doorway glaring at him.

"What the hell is wrong with you boy?" she jerks her head in the direction of the music, "What are you doing bringing that into this house?"

"Oh. I'm sorry, mother. I forgot how we only associate with the creme de la crème, now. High society. 'Specially after Clive butchered all those nurses..."

Niobe slaps Juvenal across the face. His

head rocks on his neck and tears swamp his eyes but do not spill. He's been hit harder. Much harder. He rubs his cheek, staring at his mother with a look that combines contempt with total disinterest in her very existence.

"You don't know who she is," Niobe said.

"So what?" Juvenal spits back, and walks away.

Niobe screams after him. "Where are you going?"

Juvenal turns, does a little soft-shoe in the dirt, and laughs. "Sanctuary!"

Looking for a place to hide her gun, Andrea considers the closet but thinks better of it. She notices a vent in the wall. She checks the screws and one is loose. She works that out with her fingers, then removes the others with her switchblade. Never leave home without one. She removes the vent and reaches inside. Feeling. She pulls out a small photo album. It wears a thick coat of dust. It has been a long time since anyone looked through its pages.

Why was it put in there?

She places her gun in the vent, replaces the cover and tightens the screws just enough to hold it on.

Andrea sits on the bed and opens the album. It holds photographs of the family with Clive. Of little Niobe standing hand in hand with a teenaged Clive, looking up at him, beaming. Photographs of people whom she had no idea were. Faded photos that could be from the Civil War era. The Euxideos family history, in image.

A voice comes out of the vent. Singing in a thin yet melodic tone. "The black goes on the wall. The black goes on the wall. The black goes on the wall..."

Andrea listens. What is that?

"The black goes on the wall. The black..."

Andrea follows the sound of the voice to a room at the end of the hall. The door is slightly opened on a room that is small, but nicely decorated. A bed, a small desk, a dresser, a bookcase. Frills and other feminine stuff.

A girl, perhaps seven years old, sits on the edge of the bed, head bowed, long straight hair black as the center of midnight, draped over her face. There is something in her hands, which wrestle in her lap as they manipulate it.

Andrea steps back, and the floorboards creak.

The girl, suddenly aware that someone is watching, gathers whatever was in her hands, and jumps into bed. "Sleeping," she says.

Andrea enters the room. "I'm sorry. I heard singing."

The girl lifts her head and stares at Andrea. She made Andrea think of those black velvet paintings of children with enormous eyes, wide open and tear-filled, projecting a sort of heart warming sorrow that was both endearing and creepy as hell at the same time. She thought of faerie folk legends and wondered if people who looked like this child were the source.

"Who are you?" asked the child.

"I'm..." Andrea started to say.

"I'm Eppie." The child announced.

The girl sat up. Immediately, Andrea could see how impossibly frail she was. She looked as if a good strong wind would not merely blow her over, but shatter her to fragments or tear her to shreds. Andrea imagined tattered pieces of the child strung over barbed wire, flapping in the breeze with a corpse's languid wave.

"Eppie?" Andrea said.

"It's short for Iphegenia but nobody calls me that." Eppie said.

"Your mother is Juvenia."

Eppie nodded, then tilted her head to one side, considering. Clive did that. In the parking lot of the Wet Whistle. At the foot of her bed. Andrea felt his hands on her body and shivered.

"You're not suppose to sneak up on people," said Eppie. "Are you cold?."

"No, I'm fine. I'm sorry. I heard someone singing and I wanted to see who it was."

"It was me."

"Yes it was. That was an interesting song. Are there any other words?"

"Yes. But I don't know them." She tilted her head to the other side. "Do you know my Grand-Uncle Clive?"

"I'm his fiancée."

Eppie gasped and slapped both hands over her mouth. Her eyes became wider, not something Andrea would have believed possible.

"Really?"

"Really."

Eppie crawls to the end of the bed and stares at Andrea. "You're pretty."

"Thank you. So are you." Andrea smiled.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm waiting for Clive."

Eppie's lips parted, stunned. "He's coming home?" she asked.

"Yes. At least I think so." She hesitated only fractionally. How much could this child know?

"When?" There was such hope in her eyes.

"I don't know. I think soon," Andrea replied.

Eppie looked at her book case. She began to pick at her blanket, rolling tiny balls of fluff between forefinger and thumb. "I miss him. He use to read me to sleep." Eppie sighed.

"Did he now?"

Eppie nodded vigorously. "Yes. Every night. Every. Now, sometimes mama reads to me. But she don't read so good. So well I mean. Sometimes, Grandma Niobe. Mostly nobody." Eppie finished sadly.

"What did Clive read to you?" Andrea asked.

Eppie pointed her chin toward the book case. "One of my stories."

"Would you like me to read you a story?"

"I would like that." Eppie beamed.

Andrea walked to the bookcase. "Anything special?"

"The blue one." Eppie said.

Andrea finds a slender blue volume. It

is a collection of poems. Eppie is under the covers, waiting. She pats the bed next to her. Andrea sits.

"Which one should I read?"

"I like all of them." Eppie said.

Andrea opens the book, and turns a few pages. "My daddy comes to pick me up tomorrow."

"Oh, that must be nice." Andrea replied.

Darkness filled Eppie's face. "I don't want my daddy to come tomorrow to pick me up." she said, voice low, not wanting to be heard.

Andrea felt bile rise and burn the back of her throat. "You don't want your daddy to pick you up?"

Eppie shook her head, violently. "He gets me every other weekend. At least that's what he's supposed to do. But he doesn't. He only gets me once a month or sometimes less. But that's all right. I'd rather I never saw him again. Ever."

Andrea could feel the hair on her arms rise. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't like him." Eppie said, voice flat and final.

"Eppie, why don't you like your father?"

Eppie looked away, her hands busily picking at the blanket, her gaze fixed on some dark distance, growing closer. "I'm not supposed to tell," she whispered so low, Andrea had to lean forward to hear.

Andrea resisted the urge to place her hand on the child's arm. This was none of her business. Not her concern. "Does he hurt you Eppie?" Andrea asked.

Eppie looked at Andrea, with a face gone blank, an unreadable mask. Andrea cursed herself for being so blunt. Of course the child wouldn't tell her. How many times had she been told not to?

Eppie gestured toward the book, changing the subject. "You said you'd read."

"Yes. Yes I did." Andrea agreed. She opened the book and began to read from a random page.

"I've traveled many miles said the master to the dame. Yet for all those many

miles, all those miles looked the same..."

THE FIRST CUT

She remembered it as being the first time she cut herself.

It was not a whole memory. It was bits and pieces, as were so many of her memories, even the most recent ones. It was fragments that appeared out of hot, angry white flashes that filled the world with an overexposed, blown-out haze and left her exhausted and trembling. Years of drugs and alcohol had done that, she supposed. It certainly hadn't helped.

She was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen? She remembered a note being passed in the classroom. Math? English? She could see the face of the teacher and thought her name was Ms. McGuiness and if that was right, then she was in the ninth grade and she was fifteen. The note wasn't supposed to go to her, but it had been delivered into her hand either by accident or out of meanness. She read it. The note said that her boyfriend whom she loved, loved, loved with a crazy all consuming passion reserved only for adolescents, was going to dump her and was already going out

with somebody else. Her stomach went hollow and her chest filled with thick pain. She could feel the burning eyes of those who already knew, who had already read the note, who knew before her. She felt her face go hot with shame and anger and then she was home, in a house that was not home... with people who were keeping her, getting paid to keep her, but not enough they so often told her... not enough money to have to put up with her, and with her bullshit. Then she was in the bathroom and the door was locked, something she wasn't suppose to do. Waves of deeply rooted pain swelled inside her, crashing against the inner walls of her being, and she knew she had to relieve the pressure or she would explode in gouts of torn flesh and liquid. She took the safety pin that had always been in the medicine cabinet, its rusted metal like dried blood, and she carved a single word into the delicate flesh of her arm. The relief that came from that single act of violation was nearly overwhelming, filling her eyes with tears of thankfulness. In a few seconds the red letters began to

form, standing out in bright red. The word reflected perfectly how she felt and what she wanted to be.

Dead.

SANCTUARY FRIDAY NIGHT

The bar smells of smoke. There is a haze, but Juvenal isn't sure if it's from the cigarettes dangling from the slack, wide lipped mouths of the Dante Brothers, or the liquor filling his own eyes or both.

Juvenal sits at the bar, hunched over a glass of whiskey. He has lost count of the number he's had. A twenty and a couple of crumpled ones are scattered in front of him. He believes he came with fifty, but couldn't swear to that.

Behind the bar, Blake eyes the clock and wonders if this night will be the night people start returning to toss a few back before heading home. Right now however, his only other customers are the Dante brothers, Earl, Mitch and Randy. Any other time he would rather not have them, but their money was good and every cent counted. It didn't matter who was spending it.

The Dante Brothers could have been triplets, so closely did they resemble one another. But if the core of the rumor was

true, then they each had a different father.

And no one, was sure they could claim the same mother either.

Their considerable girth had been fed by dinners of thick, coarse bread deep-fried in chicken fat and used to sop up ham drippings. They all chain-smoked hand-rolled spiffs made of wild tobacco wrapped in newspaper. 'Lung melters', they called them. You could get cancer just looking at one of those things.

They sat at their table, three hours of cheap drinks under their belts. Before stumbling in, they'd already polished off a jug of 'shine they'd purchased from "Running Elk", an old hippie with a knack for brewing premium home-made hooch and growing strange mushrooms.

The brothers lived in a shack in the swamp, and poached gators. They sold the meat to swamp folk and any one else who didn't care one way or the other about no USDA inspection stamp. That, and black market souvenirs.

Some say they lived with their mother.

Others say their mother was long dead. A few wise ones think both schools of thought may be right.

The brothers drink, shoot glances at Juvenal, and snicker.

Mitch, the oldest, has pale eyes like a snake's. One nostril is larger than the other. He wasn't born that way, but an insect bite got infected and the flesh turned black and crusted over and when he picked the crust, it fell off, taking a crescent of flesh with it. He kept the bit of dead black flesh in a small mason jar with a rusted lid, hidden in one of their butcher sheds.

Mitch is the best looking of the trio. He leans over to the brother next to him and says: "Hey, I got a riddle for you. How can your father be your brother?"

Randy plays along, or plays dumb, which is the more likely choice. "I don't know. How can your father be your brother?"

Mitch snorts. "You fool! When he's screwing your mother!"

The brothers erupt into howls of

laughter. Blake cleans a glass and looks at Juvenal. Juvenal tenses, but ignores the brothers. He finishes his drink and pushes it across to Blake.

"Hit me," says Juvenal. "Hit me with your rhythm stick, two some thing, some thing, click click click."

Blake eyes the empty glass, then the brothers, then Juvenal. "I think you should go home Juv."

Juvenal considers this. "I didn't ask you what you thought Blake. Now be a good bartender and hit me."

Reluctantly, Blake pours Juvenal another drink. "I think this is your last, Juv."

"Stop thinking, Blake. You'll give yourself a headache."

Mitch's slurred voice pipes up "We all know how close twins can be."

Juvenal's grip tightens on his glass.

"Especially when one's a boy and one's a girl." Randy sniggers.

Earl nudges the other two. "Close as

brother and mother?"

Mitch belches. "Shit! Closer than that!"
Their laughter is raucous.

"Whole motherfucking load of mother fuckers. Sister fuckers," Randy pronounces with the righteous solemnity of a drunken bigot.

Mitch ponders the suggestion, then adds his own. "Probably brother fuckers and father fuckers too!"

"Babies full of rabies!" Earl choruses.
" 'Course none of them as fucking cracked as that psycho son of a bitch they locked up in Dakota."

Mitch slavers over his glass. "Betcha some big old buck nigger fucked him up the ass the whole time he was there!"

Juvenal drains the whiskey and starts to get up.

Blake grabs his wrist. "Juv. Just walk out the door, man. Just walk."

Juvenal throws Blake's hand off, turns and walks toward the brothers. Blake grabs the phone. He wonders how badly Juvenal will

be beaten before the sheriff arrives.

Juvenal stops within a thrown fist of the Dante Brother's table.

The brothers stand. They form a wall of ass-kicking meat. Three pairs of eyes cracked red with drink, lock with Juvenal's.

"You want something, bitch?" Randy asks.

Juvenal sneers. "I hear the three of you lay down together in the living room and give each other a circle blow job,"

Juvenal is brutally beaten to the floor.

Andrea at Seven

Outside, the black sky was hung with pinpricks of wavering crystal. The air stood still and frigid. The world was hushed, as if waiting silent, in fear.

Andrea lived in a neighborhood where more houses were abandoned than occupied. Houses with patchy, weed filled summer lawns, cracked sidewalks, and cars on cinderblocks. Where trash never seemed to get picked up. Where graffiti was scrawled across every available surface like literary cancer.

In just another desperate looking house, in a living room that smelled of cat piss and cheap cigarettes and hate and despair, seven year old Andrea Ramsey gently rocked a broken doll she had found in a neighbor's garbage. The body is cloth, but the head is made of some hard stone-like material. The doll had one eye. Someone had practiced hair cutting on it with horrific results. Its body was crisscrossed with red marker, like a penitent whipped to ribbons. But Andrea loved it and sang to it in a low, soft voice.

"Rock you, rock you little snake, I will keep you safe and warm..."

Andrea's Mother, body like an assemblage of wires pulled taut, movements like missing frames of film, watches a wavering television screen. It is like viewing images through a window of rippling water. Images grabbed from the cold air and delivered to the television by an old antenna found on the side of a road and nailed to the roof.

"Andrea!"

His bellowing is harsh. He's been drinking since that morning, and they both knew that one of two things could happen, today. If there was a God, he would pass out. If there was no God, he would call for Andrea.

Andrea now knows that there is no God.

She sings louder, pretending not to hear. Her mother stiffens, and begins to rock, a strange movement like that of a spastic bird, pecking at seeds. Her eyes dart, seeking an escape that is not there, seeking a hole she could climb into and never

come out of. Her fingers, with their swollen knuckles, crawl in her lap like spiders dying of poison.

Again.

"Andrea! You get up here, girl!"

She sings louder still. Her mother reaches out and places her cold, dry fingers against Andrea's lips, stopping the sound.

"Andrea! You mind me!"

Her father stomps down the stairs. He stops at the foot and stands, glaring. His gross belly tests the limits of the stained wife-beater he has pulled across it. He holds a wide, leather belt that is cracked and sweat marked. The buckle is heavy and metallic. Spindly, hairy legs protrude from off-white boxers that do little to hide his erection.

Andrea stands and slowly turns to face him.

His mouth twists. She can smell his breath from where she stands. Cheap hooch and teeth that had not seen toothbrush or floss in weeks. Since the health authorities closed

down his barbershop he hasn't seen a need to bother.

"Get upstairs girl," her father says, and strokes the belt.

She risks a glance at her mother, who continues to rock, and stare at the television. None of this is happening. Nothing ever happens outside the tunnel vision that links her to the worlds that exist within the confines of the screen.

Her father smirks. His black eyes glitter with rodent intelligence. "That useless bitch ain't gonna help you any. You should know that by now. Now you just get your little ass upstairs girl and maybe I won't beat your mama tonight."

Andrea bows her head. She cringes as she moves past him, but the expected blow does not come. Not then. Not yet. She walks slowly up the stairs, dropping her doll at the top. It hits the landing with a dull thud. A splinter of wood jumps.

Andrea's father glares at her mother; his eyes drilling holes in the back of her

head. She sinks deeper into herself.

*Please don't see me please don't see me
please don't see me please...*

He turns to go upstairs. The step creaks under his foot. Andrea's Mother is visibly relieved.

*Didn't see me didn't see me didn't see
me didn't see me didn't...*

Without warning, Andrea's Father rushes at her and delivers a crushing blow to the back of her head. Andrea's Mother flies off the couch and slams face first into the rug. Her nose crunches and blood spurts. She screams. He is whipping her with the belt again and again and again, teeth clenched, the rage upon him, driving his arm.

Andrea stands frozen at the top of the stairs. Each time the belt strikes flesh, she feels more and more helpless, more and more powerless. Will this nightmare never end?

Not until someone dies.

She can't hold it back any longer. "You leave my mama alone!"

Her hands, as if acting on their own, cover her mouth. But it is too late. She wishes she could reach out and grab the words and pull them back into her mouth. Suck them back into her lungs.

The beating stops.

"What did I tell you, girl!" Andrea's father bellows.

He stomps to the foot of the stairs, and eyeballs her. "You get into the bedroom you little whore and get your pants off or you'll get worse than this." Andrea's father grabs his cock and squeezes it. Andrea doesn't blink. "You leave my mama alone."

Andrea's father laughs. "Oh, I'll leave her alone. 'Til I'm done with your little ass. Then maybe, if I ain't too tired, if I ain't too drained, she'll get some too. You hear me, Maureen?" He twists his head toward his wife, "Maybe you gonna get some too. If I can cut through the cobwebs clogging your dried up old snatch!"

Andrea screams "You touch her and I'll tell!"

His head whips back to Andrea. He speaks through teeth clenched so hard Andrea can hear them crack. "You little bitch. You won't say anything!" He stomps up the stairs, coming at her like a train. "I'm gonna beat you like a blues piano in a jazz bar, you little fuckhole!"

Defiant, she stands her ground. Andrea will not look away.

Andrea's father raises the belt.

The doll is in her hand. She does not remember picking it up. Andrea swings the doll with all the strength in her little body, and its hard, rock-like head strikes her father across the cheek and temple with the satisfying sound of bone cracking. His eyes go wide with pain and surprise and rage and fear.

Andrea's Father topples down the stairs, crashing through the side railing, and slams onto the living room floor. His head smashes against the floor, rebounds, smashes again.

His wide-open eyes glaze, like time lapse images of a pond freezing over.

Andrea descends the stairs. She studies her father's still body. His head is twisted in a way that would be very painful if he were alive. She cautiously walks around her father and goes to comfort her mother.

She is kneeling on the worn, oval braid rug, arms locked around herself, still rocking, lips pressed so tightly they turn white, as they tremble with murmured words Andrea cannot make out. She is staring at her dead husband, breathing through her damaged nose, the air rushing in, rushing out.

Andrea reaches for her mother. "It's all right mama. It's all right. It's over now."

Her mother jerks away as if Andrea's touch was death and begins to scream, the gaping maw of her mouth filled with brown, cracked teeth.

Andrea jerks awake.

The scream fades to silence. She sits up in bed, rocking for comfort. Slowly she stops rocking and wipes the cold sweat off her forehead with the palm of her hand. It is morning, and sunlight filters through the

linen curtain.

Outside, Eppie is screaming.

Andrea leaps to the window. A man pulls a struggling Eppie toward a dusty pick-up truck. Juvenia stands there, not moving, her head bowed.

"Don't wanna go! Don't wanna go!"
screams Eppie.

This is not my problem. This is not why I'm here. I'm here to wait. That is all I am here to do, not to interfere. Not to get involved with the problems of this family.

The man is shouting at Juvenia. "This is your fault! What kind of lies you been putting in her head! Huh? What kind of lies?"

His grip loosens for just a moment, but it is all Eppie needs. She breaks free and runs behind her mother. He grabs for her but misses. "Get back here you little..."

Juvenia moves to block him. Surprised, he steps back, but not for long. An evil glint comes into his dark eyes. "Oh, now what do we have here? You think you're going to keep me

from my child? You think you're all of a sudden going to stand up to me, you pathetic piece of shit white trash? Huh?"

"I don' want you comin' 'round here no more." Juvenia said.

He laughs. "That's the most words I heard you say, since I fucked you."

"I mean it."

"Really? And how are you going to stop me, huh? What are you going to do, huh? You gonna raise your hand to me, huh? You gonna do like Clive do?"

Without warning, the man pushes Juvenia. She falls back, nearly toppling into Eppie. With a cry, Eppie runs for the house.

"Grand mama! Grand mama!"

The man is in Juvenia's face, his eyes wild, his teeth clenched, but not hard enough to hold back the reek of bad breath. His face is pitted, especially so on the right side. Growing up he would have been called "Pizza Face" or "Zits". This might account for some of his meanness, but the core was always there. Today, behind his back, he is

nicknamed "Moon".

"You want to fuck with me, huh? You think you can stand up to me, huh? Huh, bitch?" His words are spit. They leave dots of foam on Juvenia's face. He pushes her again, harder. She cries out, and staggers back.

"You get in that fucking house..."

He slams her again, harder. She is weeping.

"And you get that fucking child..."

Slams her again. She is crying, body shuddering, tears streaking down her long thin face.

"And you bring her to me..."

Slam!

"And you do it now!"

He drives both fists into her chest. Juvenia is slammed to the ground, the air knocked out of her. The man stomps around her and toward the house.

"Eppie! You get your ass out here, girl!"

Juvenia grabs his leg. He turns and raises his fist to hammer her down. Andrea grabs his wrist and he turns on her, snarling.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Andrea head butts the man straight in the face. He cries out, and staggers backward, both hands cupped over his face, blood gushing between his fingers from the mashed nose.

The dry, dusty earth greedily sucks the red drops.

Andrea speaks calmly and carefully, making sure he hears and understands every word. "Get out of here. Or I will kill you." Juvenia, eyes wide, fingers in mouth, a strange sound building deep in her throat, retreats.

The man pulls his hand away from his face. His eyes shine behind a face slick with blood. He looks at the blood that coats his hand, then looks at Andrea. He can barely comprehend what has just happened. So he reacts in the only way he knows how. He howls

with fury and charges her.

Andrea had never killed a man with her bare hands. That she could if she wanted to, there was no doubt. She realized, as this man was charging at her, that he was Eppie's father. She realized that he deserved to die. But his death deserved to be a slow and agonizing one. She believed that she could torture this man to death and not lose a minute's sleep over the act. But she was not here to do that.

He came at her swinging like the barroom brawler he pretended to be. But there was no skill to it. She easily ducked the blow and thrust her hand forward, jamming four stiff fingers into his gut right above the navel. His mouth opened and gushed bad breath before snapping shut like a jackknife. Andrea jerked away, and in the same motion, finished him off with a backhand that tore the corner of his mouth and sent a thread of blood gleaming into the air.

Moments later, Eppie's father laid in the dirt, torn and bloody. A bully since grade school, he wasn't use to losing fights.

Certainly not to a woman.

Andrea stands over him and once again speaks calmly and carefully. "Get out of here, and don't ever come back."

She steps back and Eppie's father staggers to his feet. For a split second he considers having another go, but instead, turns and limps as quickly as he can back to his truck. He points at her with a strangely twisted finger. "You just made yourself a world of trouble bitch!"

He jumps into his pick-up. It starts with a bellow of black exhaust. He shoves it into drive, stomps the gas and is gone in cloud of dust. Andrea turns. Clymenestra is watching her. Niobe is comforting Juvenia.

"I thank you for protecting my granddaughter," said Clymenestra, "but please, no more violence. There's been far too much of that around here."

Before Andrea can speak, Clymenestra turns and vanishes into the house. Juvenia follows. Andrea and Niobe eye each other.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

Niobe said.

Andrea wonders if she has heard right?

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. That man was Eppie's father. You got no right doing what you just did."

"Are you insane? He was beating Juvenia."

"That's the bed she choose to lay in."

"And what choice was Eppie given?"

Niobe looks away. "You've made yourself a bad enemy."

"I'll live. Christ, get a restraining order on that psycho bastard..." Andrea realizes what she just said, and looks away.

"He's the deputy sheriff." Niobe said.

"He's what?"

"It would be better if you don't interfere again."

"What would you like me to do? Stand around and let him drag Eppie off? Stand around like the lot of you, do? Do you know what he's doing to that child...?"

"Children say all kinds of things. Eppie, more than others. She is her mother's child in many ways."

"What? What the hell does that mean? That she's lying? That when he takes her they go and have ice cream and cookies?"

"And what do you know? What have you seen? Do you have proof?"

"I know what I just saw..."

"What did you see? You saw Eppie's father trying to get her into his truck while she was throwing a tantrum because she didn't want to go. Because her mother lets her do whatever she wants to do, and her father does not. You saw her mother getting between a man and his child. I don't know what you people do up North, Clive's beloved, but down here, nobody gets between a father and his child."

"What is wrong with you people?"

Niobe sneered. "You tell us. You're the one come here for Clive."

Andrea backs off and changes the subject. "Have you seen Juvenal around?"

"He didn't come home last night," Niobe

shrugs.

"Oh. I was hoping to catch a ride into town. I suppose I could walk."

"I suppose you could."

An insect sounds, a silvery shimmer the likes of which Andrea has never heard before.

Niobe speaks again, flatly. "He never did nothing, long as Clive was around. He looked though. His eyes were all over that child, and not like a father's eyes, either. Like a hungry dog looking through a window at meat. But he never did nothing till Clive got put away."

"Clive's not put away any more," said Andrea.

"He don't believe Clive is coming back."

"He's a fool."

"You think Clive is coming back?"

"Don't you?"

Niobe says nothing. She turns and enters the house. Andrea, feeling frustrated, looks up at the gray sky. She walks to the road, then turns to look at the house. Eppie is

looking out Clive's bedroom window. Their eyes meet. Eppie steps away from the glass, is absorbed by the darkness, and is gone.

The Late Ann Marie Kaspersak

Ann Marie Kaspersak was at least 45 years old. She would not admit to being older, had certainly claimed to be younger, but four and a half decades of life was a fairly decent and close enough approximation.

Her face was puffy and her body was lumpy in unattractive ways that owed everything to hard drinking, heavy cigarette smoking, and a diet of sugars and starches. She had black, beady, rat eyes and wore a horrid perfume she had purchased at a yard sale, years earlier. The cloudy, amber fluid came in a large industrial sized vat-like bottle. Its pungent aroma would gag a maggot.

She wore a pile of bleach-damaged hair that appeared to have exploded out of the top of her head. She had painted dark swatches of rouge across each cheek and a vile, bubble gum pink shade of lipstick on her mouth.

She wore a black sweater bejeweled with sequins and beads, and a pair of tight clam diggers that molded to a butt dimpled with cellulite. The cheeks of her ass slopped over

the sides of the bar stool she sat on like the ears of a hound dog, or really scary flapjacks. Her toenails were the same color as her lips. Her rough heels hung over the backs of her gold sandals.

She was sitting at one end of a long bar in a dive named the Blue Monkey. The Blue Monkey in question, was a ratty, old stuffed toy. The original owner, a crusty, seafaring old gent who swore his name was Karl Marx, had won it at a carnival in Madrid in 1956, put in a bird cage and hung it over the center of the bar. Karl had drunk himself to death, but the new owner liked the name and the monkey, and so, kept both. The Blue Monkey had endured spitballs, bottle caps, flicked cigarette butts, and a severe infestation of moths, but continued to hold court in his cage, gazing down with dull, strangely sad glass eyes, watching the dregs of humanity working toward joining the original owner.

Ann Marie Kaspersak slapped the bar. Her rings gouged the rough wood and her bracelets jangled with the flat sound of tin.

"Give me the usual, Sam I am. Ann Marie just got paid, it's Friday night and she's gonna get lay down a rug before you scratch the woodwork!"

She cackled, a sound like the slow whirling of blades chopping something hard in a blender.

The bartender rolled his eyes and mixed her another drink. 'Crazy skank,' he thought. But business was business. He'd learned to serve her fast and strong, for the sooner she passed out the better for all.

Ann Marie Kaspersak looked around to see if anyone had caught her "witty" remark. But the bar, at only eleven a.m. on a Tuesday, was empty.

Only it wasn't.

She did not see Clive Euxideos sitting alone in a booth, obscured in shadow. But Clive saw her.

He could see very clearly the words "kill me" on her forehead. To him, they glowed like hot embers burning through an outer layer of cold, gray ash.

In Clive's world there were two types of people who had to die. There were those who had to die so as to move Clive's agenda forward. These included the driver of the tractor trailer, Rick Gilbert, and the woman at the rest stop. He had killed them, because he needed what they had. He had killed them as quickly and as painlessly as he possibly could. He had taken special care to close their eyes. He had even said a little Acadian prayer for them. He was sorry that he had to send those good people to God before their time, but a man had to do, what a man had to do. He wished he had lentils to leave by their sides, but there just never seemed to be enough time.

Then there were the others. People like Ann Marie Kaspersak. People who deserved to die. People who deserved to die as painfully as they could.

Ann Marie Kaspersak's drink arrived. She sips and smacks her lips loudly, like a whore who had just enjoyed sucking a particularly tasty dick.

"Now that's what I'm talking about,

beechnut gum ya!" she crows.

She pulls out a cigarette, and turns to look around the bar once again, this time looking for someone to give her a light. Once again, she sees no one.

Disappointed, Ann Marie Kaspersak turns back to her drink and reaches for her lighter. Only the lighter is gone.

"Where in the frick..." her upper lip curls like a mongrel ready to snap.

A hand appears, holding her lighter. Clicks. Blue flame flickers. Ann Marie Kaspersak leans forward, thrusts the end of her cigarette into the flame, and inhales deeply.

She turns toward the holder of the lighter, blowing a dense cloud of smoke out of the side of her mouth.

Clive smiles.

Ann Marie Kaspersak smiles back. There is lipstick on one of her canines, and tiny hairs at the corner of her mouth. There is a low cunning in her eyes. Ann Marie Kaspersak isn't smart, but she knows what guys like.

And she knows how to give it to them, and make them want more and once they want more, she knows how to make their lives hell on Earth, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

"Thanks, honey. You're a real gentleman. Scholar too, I bet." She wrinkles her nose. It is not the endearing sight she believes it to be. Clive thinks of Bewitched on Crack.

"My name's Clive."

She eyes him up and down. Nice package. "Yeah? Mine's Reba." she lies, "Like the singer."

"Lovely." says Clive, "Actually Reba is a short form of Rebecca, a Hebrew name meaning troth or peacemaker."

"Ain't you the smart one? Don't know about no heebie name, but... truth?"

"Troth."

Ann Marie Kaspersak didn't know what "troth" meant, but then, she didn't care either. "What's Clive mean then?"

"Cliff dweller."

Ann Marie Kaspersak squealed. It was not a pleasant sound, more like a guinea pig in heat, being stepped on. "Ain't you the smart one?"

She digs a bit of tobacco out the corner of her mouth, wipes it on the bar, and downs her drink. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and tries to belch discreetly, but fails. She leans forward and her sweater's scoop neck falls away. She is not wearing a bra. Clive can see her breasts and thinks of slugs wearing pale pink caps. It is then and there, that he decides that Ann Marie Kaspersak needs to die. He had only stopped in for a quick bite before moving on. He'd stopped with no intention of doing anything to anyone, but Anne Marie Kaspersak, like so many before her, had come to him, had called to him, had made her need for death so very crystal clear. He could not ignore the signs.

"You gonna buy a drink for the lady, sailor?" Ann Marie bats her eyes, lashes clumped with mascara old and new. Clive is thinking. 'Yes. No doubt about it. She has to

die.'

Slow music is playing on the jukebox. "Let's dance," he invites. "There will be plenty of time for drinks later."

Ann Marie Kaspersak shrugs. Whatever. "It's your dime, sweetheart."

She doesn't dance well. That she is drunk, doesn't help. Clive doesn't like her perfume, either. It offends his nostrils. Yet as bad as the stench of the perfume is, the underlying odor of a body not well acquainted with soap and washcloth, can also be detected. Black marks keep adding up on the mental score card that Clive keeps. He doesn't like the feel of her chicken flesh skin. He doesn't like the smell of her breath - beer and tobacco and whatever she ate last. He doesn't like her laugh and the way she throws back her head and opens her mouth wide. He can see all her cheap fillings, and there are a lot of cheap fillings, all dark silver gray.

"So Wrong" is the next song.

Ann Marie Kaspersak purses her lips and

blows a raspberry. "I hate Patsy Cline."

Oh. She had to die.

And later on, she did.

Ann Marie's eyes are open wide with terror. She is tied to a kitchen chair with the silver duct tape Clive found in one of the kitchen drawers. That same silver tape is placed tight over her mouth. She struggles, but there is no escape.

Clive appears, dressed in a robe. It is her robe. It is silk and bright baby pink with a fuzzy collar and fuzzy cuffs dyed a slightly darker shade. He is naked underneath. Under different circumstances, the look would be funny, hilarious even.

Clive holds a large staple-remover in his hand. Like the duct tape, he found it in one of the kitchen drawers. It is a rather nasty looking thing, like the head of some alien alligator with steel jaws that end in four deadly spikes. When he works it, it makes a sound that goes 'click, click.'

"Staple removers," said Clive, "always remind me of the skull of some particularly

vicious prehistoric reptile."

Ann Marie Kaspersak struggles, more frantic now.

Clive moves closer. His bare feet make sucking sounds as he walks across the sticky tile floor. He wonders when the last time this floor was washed? Ever? It will certainly need to be washed when he's done.

Click-click.

"Following that line of thought, you are a particularly loud and vulgar woman. I really am in a hurry to get to where I am going, but this needs to be done."

Click-click.

He moves closer, and her eyes lock on the staple remover in his hand. She has never thought about what it means to be a staple. Now, she does.

Click-click.

Clive stands over her.

Ann Marie Kaspersak appears to be having some sort of seizure. The tape is actually tearing in spots, so great is her effort to

escape the shiny jaws of the staple remover.

Clive apologizes. "I'm afraid this is
going to hurt, really, really badly.

Click-click.

Circles

"Who is your father?"

A circle of children around her, nasty eyed, slope headed miscreants, jeering at her with hatred learned in lessons well from ignorant parents, spitting their singsong words at her.

"Who is your mother?"

Curled in a ball in the center of their malicious universe. Hands over ears, eyes closed, shutting out the twisted faces, the mocking words.

"Don't know, don't know, don't know, do you!"

Tears squeeze out between her tight so tight eyelids, run down her thin face, gather in the parched schoolyard dust.

Eppie think: someday I will be bigger. Someday I will come back and find them. Some day.

Someday I will kill them all.

Carnivals and Baptists

Andrea, needing to clear her head, walked toward town. She could feel the dirt road through the soles of her shoes, feel individual stones, gains of sand, even the dust. The light was unnaturally bright, as if the world were overexposed. Her eyes burned. She could feel fingers probing her sockets, seeking firm grip, wanting to squeeze, to pop, to spill yellow matter custard down her cheeks, flowing around her screaming mouth.

A cicada. The sound is like that of a high-speed dental drill. It bores through her skull and buries itself deep in her brain. The sun fills the sky, the light sears her eyes. Andrea moans, clutches her head, legs buckling. On her knees, hand barely under control, she drags two pills out of her pocket, somehow finds her mouth and dry-swallows them.

Eventually, the light recedes, and the sound of the cicada fades.

To be replaced by a cacophony of hammering, yelling, what sounds like an

elephant trumpeting, and the harsh, sanctimonious rhythm of preaching.

Andrea rounds a bend in the road. In an open field, a carnival/sideshow is being erected. Standing at the edge of the road where dust meets rocky shoulder, is Delmar Rouse, a Preacher. With Bible in hand, he rants to the flock that surrounds him. His voice is like cat claws through nylon. There is an intensity in his eyes that mimics the fevered madness of one who believes without question, and with utter conviction. For him the world is only six thousand years old. Dinosaurs walked the gardens of Eden. And only those who follow Christ are saved. For the rest, good as people as they may be, there is an eternity of hellfire burning.

Delmar is surrounded by a group of hollow eyed men and women. The women wear lace handkerchiefs on their heads. The men wear closely shaved heads with strange side burns. There is not an attractive one in the bunch.

Southerners really need to stop marrying their relatives Andrea thought. Delmar shakes

his fist at the carnival.

"Hell, which is also called a lake of fire and brimstone, will be material fire, and will torment the bodies of the damned, whether men or devils, the solid bodies of the one, and the aerial bodies of the others..."

A group of carnies taking a break, hoot and laugh. Delmar shouts down their taunts.

"Or, if only men have bodies as well as souls, still the evil spirits, even without bodies, will be so connected to the fires as to receive pain without bestowing life. One fire certainly shall be the lot of both!"

A tall, angular woman, the only woman among the carnie group, lifts her skirt. She is wearing a narrow swatch of cloth that hides little.

"I got your hellfire for you, Shaman!" she calls while delivering an impromptu bump and grind.

A collective gasp rises out of the Preacher's group. The women avert their eyes and the men follow suit, only a bit slower.

The Preacher is the only one who does not look away. His face fills with red and a vein throbs fiercely across his temple, threatening to burst.

Delmar hisses, "Whore of Babylon!"

Andrea speaks, not sure why she bothers. "It's just a circus, Preacher." He rounds on her, as do his flock. Who is this stranger, they wonder... this woman come down the road? Is she one of the circus folk? She obviously doesn't come from around here. Perhaps she is a potential convert?

"That is what they would have you believe. But it is really a three-ring den of iniquity! A whore's nest of sin and temptation," Delmar tells her.

Andrea nods. There isn't much you can say to something like that. "Well, you have a good day Preacher," she says, and continues toward town.

He calls after her, "Only those who turn their eyes away, walk the high-wire of morality!" Then the Preacher and his congregation focus their attention on the

field and its busy hive of workers, once
more.

A banner is erected: Teiresias & Moire's
Cavalcade of Illusions and Peculiarities.

SANCTUARY

The town was empty, its store fronts shuttered. Or was that shuddered? There's something wrong with the stone used to build most of these structures. It looks as if something has been gnawing at them, as if they're being eaten by time. Where the destruction is the worst, a black substance leaks out of the stone in thin sheets that stain and highlight the decay.

A crow complained while dancing on the edge of a roof top.

Blake was sweeping broken glass into a dustbin when Andrea entered. He looks up, the scowl on his face turning into welcome smile when he sees who it is. Blake has an easy smile, the kind of smile that makes you want him for a friend. The kind of smile that makes women think, 'this guy would make a great boyfriend and an even better husband'.

"Morning," Blake says. He props the broom against the wall and wipes his hands on his smock. "You're up early."

Andrea looks at the broken glass and

the dark stain of recently spilled blood. "So are you."

Blake shrugs. "A barkeep's job is never done. Sometimes the farmers come in for an early pick me up. I can't afford to lose the price of a shot and a beer."

"Business that bad?"

"Case you ain't noticed, this town ain't exactly booming."

"I noticed. Hey, can I get a glass of water?" Andrea wipes her forehead with her sleeve.

"Sure can."

Blake goes behind the bar and pours Andrea a glass of water. He hands it to her and the tips of their fingers touch, lightly. A pleasant tingle rides through Blake's stomach. If Andrea feels the same, she doesn't show it. She takes the glass of water and gulps it down. She shoves the glass back at Blake who refills it and watches Andrea gulp down that as well. His eyes trace the soft undulations of her throat. She hands the glass back again and wipes her mouth on the

back of her hand.

"Thanks." Andrea said.

"Man, you were thirsty." Blake said.

"Long walk."

Blake looks surprised. "You walked all the way from the Euxideos?"

"How'd you know I was coming from there?"

"Juvenal told me. That you were staying there, I mean."

"Yeah. Bit of a hike, but I can use the exercise."

Blake gives her a sidelong glance. "Not as far as I can see."

This time she feels that tingle. "Was that a pass?"

Andrea had never seen a person turn so pale so quickly.

This is Clive Euxideos' woman!

Hands held in front of him, Blake backs away. "No. No, it wasn't. No, ma'am. Never crossed my mind. Sorry. Sorry."

Andrea reaches for him. "Hey, hey. I was just kidding. Relax."

Blake turns, all cold and business only. "I got to finish cleaning up."

He grabs his broom and goes back to sweeping glass. She notices a chair with a broken leg. Something wasn't right.

"You said you talked to Juvenal?"

"He was in here last night."

"He didn't come home."

Blake says nothing but the way he stands, changes. It is almost as if he were ducking a blow.

"Something happen here last night Blake? To Juvenal?"

Blake stops sweeping and forces himself to look at Andrea. There is real fear in his eyes. "Juvenal got into it with three rednecks. I managed to get them to back off, but... well, they got their licks in first. I cleaned him up best I could. He's sleeping it off in the back. He didn't want anyone to know. He made me promise not to tell..."

"Where is he?"

Blake gestures. "Storage room back there..."

Andrea finds Juvenal passed out on a cot, surrounded by cases of beer and whiskey. There's an old easy chair and a mismatched stand with a banker's lamp, and some books. There's a radio from the fifties. She realizes that this is where Blake lives. This is where he sleeps, sits and reads, and listens to the radio when the bar isn't open. When he isn't cleaning up blood and vomit, or mopping the urine splattered bathroom floors.

It is the saddest room Andrea has ever seen in her life. What it tells her about Blake and about his life, is more than she wants to know.

She gently touches Juvenal's face. It is bruised and swollen. Rage fills her. She wants to find whoever did this and make them hurt. She wants them to be bruised and swollen, and to know what it feels like to be that way.

Andrea goes back into the bar. Blake is

clutching his broom as if it were all that kept him from collapsing.

"Who did that to him?"

"The Dante brothers. Backwoods trash. They were drinking... he was drinking. They got mouthy, he got stupid."

"And they kicked his ass."

"But good." Blake nods.

Andrea's hands clench into fists.

"What is it with this family? Who made them the poster child for bad shit?"

The Barber bursts into the bar. He blinks rapidly, looking from Andrea to Blake, as if not sure who he should address.

"What's wrong?" asks Blake.

"They found Papa Catallus."

Blake snorts. "About time. Where'd that old coot wander off to this time?"

"Heaven or Hell," said the Barber, "He's dead."

OLD MAN FOUND DEAD IN AN OLDS 88

As if they had been lurking in the shadows of Twilight, just waiting for their cue before stepping out, a crowd of townspeople gather to whisper around the Olds 88. A sheriff's car and an ancient ambulance flash their lights. A deputy moved between the crowd and the car like a caged animal waiting for someone to stick their hands through the bars so it could tear them off.

Juvenal, stiff with pain, eyes wide and sober, hobbles toward the crowd. Blake and Andrea follow a respectful distance behind him.

Juvenal calls, his voice clotted with dread. "Papa? Papa?"

The crowd reluctantly parts. No one wants to give up their viewing space to what may be the spectacle of the year. Yet, perhaps better is to come. No telling what an Euxideos might do.

Juvenal freezes when he sees the ambulance attendants preparing to lift the sheet covered body onto the gurney. "Papa?"

he repeats, sounding very small, very young, and very alone. He staggers forward. The Sheriff stops Juvenal with a gesture, and eyes him carefully, taking in the battered face and the smell of whiskey. The Sheriff is a large, thick man with a face like a shovel. He nods at the attendants and walks back to the car, jotting notes on a small pad. One of the attendants pulls back the sheet, revealing the sunken face of the old man.

"Papa!" Juvenal's arms shot out as if they were trying to rip themselves out of the sockets. His hands clawed the air, grasping for something they desperately needed but could never have. His cry was one of anguish and immense sorrow that tore bits of his soul away as it burst from his lungs and carried the single word out of his mouth. Then it was as if Juvenal were some strange man-shaped balloon, and someone had let the air out. He was crumbling into himself.

As Juvenal sank to his knees, Andrea rushed to take hold of him. She had never heard a sound of sorrow like that before. If she was one to pray, she would have prayed to

never hear its like again. She had never known her own grandparents. Had never known the love of an adult figure. She wondered what it must be like to love someone so much that their death could cause such heartache. She longed to feel that pain. To understand that depth of sorrow. To be so connected to someone that the breaking of that connection was like death itself.

The deputy jumped between her and Juvenal.

It was Eppie's father, the black eye Andrea had given him, hidden behind cheap, imitation Ray-Bans. He smiled. Like a rabid animal smiles. There was something dark between two of his teeth.

"Well, well, well. Knew I'd be seeing you, but didn't think it'd be this soon."

'Shit', thought Andrea. 'Shit'.

"Hey, Paul." Blake was at Andrea's side.

Eppie's father does not shift his gaze from Andrea's face. "Hey nothing," he says, "Let me see some identification. Miss."

Blake has no idea what is going on, but

that there is something between Andrea and Eppie's father, something that is definitely not good, is easy to see. "What's going on?"

Now, the deputy's gaze shifts. He fixes Blake with a cold, hard, challenging stare. "You just stick to watering down the whiskey Blake, and back off. Me and this little lady got some unfinished business."

Blake doesn't understand. "Unfinished..."

Andrea waves Blake, off. "It's alright." She digs her wallet out of her back pocket, removes her ID, hands it to Eppie's father. "Here."

He snatches it out of her hand, brings the ID close to his face, scrutinizes it. It is a fake, but the best fake money can buy. Andrea has no worries that this backwoods cop is going to suspect anything.

"Northern girl, huh? You got some business in town? You got some reason for being here? You get tired of fucking niggers up north?"

"Visiting."

"Visiting? Visiting who? The Euxideos?"

You ain't no family."

"Hey! What's with you?" asks Blake.

Blake has known this man all his life, and knows what he is like. It's no secret that he became a deputy for the sole purpose of continuing to make life hell for those whose lives he'd made hell, back in high school. He knows what that edge in his voice means. That dead stare.

"I said back the fuck off, Blake. Me and her. Got it?"

Blake backs off. What choice does he have?

Andrea stares Eppie's father straight in the eye. "I'm Clive Euxideos' fiancée."

The world went silent. Every eye left the crumbled form of Juvenal and fixed itself on Andrea. It was like a swell of fear and loathing, pouring out of them, falling upon her. Eppie's father's face twisted, as if he'd eaten a mouthful of roadkill.

"What kind of woman would admit to a thing like that?"

"Deputy, what's going on here?" It was

the sheriff.

As the deputy spoke, his eyes never left Andrea's face. "You hear what she said Sheriff? You hear what she is?"

The Sheriff eyes Andrea with open disgust. "I heard. But we're conducting an investigation here deputy, and I think that's a little more important than whatever problems you might have with this here woman."

"I just don't like strangers in my town. Especially ones with connections to the Euxideos," Eppie's Father said.

Blake, knows better, and still can't stop himself. "Seems to me you got your own connection to the Euxideos."

Eppie's father moves at Blake. "Is that right? Your sheet clean, drink slinger?"

Now his eyes shift, like ball bearings sliding through lubricant. Eppie's father fixes Blake with a look that tells him that someday, some late night, on some dark empty back road, Blake will be standing over the engine of his dead car and red light will

fill the world. Eppie's father will then get out of his patrol car and his hand will be on a gun that isn't his service revolver. Instead, it will be some Saturday night special he picked up from some two-bit crook, and in the chamber will be a bullet with the name 'Blake', on it.

"That's enough!" barks the Sheriff, "You're creating a scene, Deputy! Give the woman back her ID and get this crowd dispersed."

Eppie's Father doesn't want to, but he does. "Yes, sir."

Eppie's Father shoves the ID at Andrea. Calmly and slowly, she takes it. Their fingertips touch and she smiles and bats her eyes. The rage and hate that fills Eppie's father is so thick he can taste it. But there is nothing he can do about it. Not right now. But later... He turns and plows into the crowd.

"All right people, show's over. You all seen dead before!"

Papa Catallus is loaded into the ambulance. One of the attendants glances at

Juvenal.

"You coming?" his disinterest in Juvenal's response is painfully evident. They watch as Juvenal struggles to climb into the ambulance. His battered limbs protesting in pain. They do nothing to help. He manages to get in and slumps on a stool bolted to the floor next to the gurney. He is lost, detached. Numb. The attendants slam the doors close, go around to the cab, and the ambulance drives off. There is no need for the siren.

The sheriff leans into his patrol car and grabs the microphone. He speaks, listens to the garble that comes out of the small speaker, acknowledges and hangs up. He turns, eyes Andrea, and ambles over.

"What are you doing in town, miss?" he asks. His breath smells like stale coffee and candy mints.

"Like I told your deputy Sheriff, I'm visiting the family," Andrea said.

"No law against that is there, Sheriff?" Blake asks.

The sheriff flicks his eyes at Blake.

"You got an interest here Blake?"

"Just saying... We're... well, we're friends."

"Yeah? Well, you know what happens to friends of the Euxideos don't you Blake?"

Andrea has had enough. "Look I don't know what's wrong with you people..."

The Sheriff sputters, choking with anger and bewilderment, "What's wrong with us? You're the one engaged to that... Christ, is there a word for what he is? You look like a decent sort of woman. What the hell could attract you to something like Clive Euxideos?"

"He's one hell of a dancer."

The Sheriff looks about ready to blow a gasket. If there weren't witnesses, he might just, might mind you, backhand her snippy little Yankee mouth so hard her head would meet her body in the middle of next week. He leans in close, so close she can count the pores on his nose.

"Get out of my sight. And watch your

step. I don't know what happened between you and my deputy. I know he didn't get that eye, opening the door. Knowing him, he deserved whatever he got. But you watch yourself, girlie. I don't put up with no shit. Ask Blake. He knows."

The Sheriff returns to his car, grabbing Eppie's father on the way, and they both drive off.

Andrea watches them go. "Nothing like southern hospitality." She turns to Blake. "Can you take me back to the house? I better let them know what's happened here."

"Yes, ma'am." Blake takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "And I don't do that, you know."

"Do what?" Andrea asked.

"Water down the whiskey," Blake replies.

Waking Papa Catallus

A week passed. The coroner examined and finally released the body of Papa Catallus. The funeral home powdered and airbrushed him to perfection. A jazz band was hired straight out of New Orleans to lead the funeral parade, and usher mourners to the wake.

"And where you getting the money for all this pomp and freaking circumstance?" screamed Niobe, drunk on funeral eve.

"It's rainy day money," said Clymenestra, "and could there be a day more filled with rain?"

Figuratively speaking of course. In reality, the weather was as dry as Papa's bones would soon be. The air refused to move, stuck in place by dog breath humidity that was like breathing soup. At the head of the procession, the jazz band, slowly and solemnly, leads the way, playing a riff on Jelly Roll Morton's "Dead Man's Blues". A black, horse-drawn hearse follows, bearing Papa Catallus, looking not a day over 107. Behind him, walking, the family in black

deeper than any black Andrea ha ever seen in her life. Like fabric woven from the center of midnight. Behind them is a strange little cluster of old men. Papa Catallus' posse. "Cut-throat" card players and moonshine drinkers.

Andrea walks to the right of Clymenestra, at her insistence. She is wearing a black gown that belonged to Niobe, fifty pounds ago. It molds itself to Andrea's curves and except for the veil that covers her face like black spider web, she could just as well be going to a swanky cocktail party. The tough part is the heels, which she hasn't worn in a long time but has to admit, they make her legs look damn good.

"I'm not a member of the family," she said, "I don't feel I have a right."

"You are family," said Clymenestra, "Maybe not by blood or marriage, but by choice. And we don't often get to choose our family. Too bad."

"I don't know."

"I do. And I want you by my side. It

would make me happy."

They move past the carnival, and the workers stop what they are doing. Those that wear hats remove them. All bow their heads as if they had known Papa Catallus their entire lives and could feel the void his death had ripped in the fabric of the world. Somewhere, behind the tents and stalls, an animal wails. The sound is terrible indeed.

Outside the house of Euxideos, the jazz band stops. A final note echoes briefly, before fading to silence. The ushers, in their thick black suits with long narrow tails and spotless white gloves, remove the casket from the hearse and carry it up the walk and through the front door. The door is framed with black silk so weightless, that even in the absence of a breeze, it still moves. It ripples as the ushers enter, undulating like a giant black membrane, like a shadow alive.

Andrea helps Clymenestra up the stairs. Niobe hovers nearby, scowling. Juvenal holds the arm of Juvenia gingerly, as if she were something he did not want to touch. With her

hair done up and pushed under a wide brim hat, the only thing that distinguishes their faces is the hint of rouge on Juvenia's cheeks. Even then, you wouldn't be sure without looking to see that one was wearing a suit, while the other was wearing a dress.

Last come the old men. They are figures frozen in time, somehow detached from the tintype they were embedded in, come back to life for one last night of drink and remembrance and life. Andrea is not certain she did not see some of them in the Civil War photographs in the photo book she found in the vent.

Inside, every mirror and clock in the house has been draped with the same black silk.

In the ballroom, there are lotus flowers and wreaths of intertwined vines, hacked from the swamp. A table is laden with crayfish and gumbo and *po' boys*, beans and rice and an assortment of Creole finger foods. A very tall black man wearing a grave expression and an exceptionally tall steam pipe hat, stands behind a portable bar, fixing drinks.

Andrea watches the tall black man for a long time, and not once does she see him blink.

Papa Catallus has been propped in a large, carved oak chair. The guest of honor, there in spirit. Around him, hanging from the chair, charm bags and chicken feet dipped in purple paint. Candles that look to be made of blue glass burn, throwing a rippling cloud of light that smells of hot cinnamon and cloves.

Juvenal appears at her side, drink in hand, not his first of the day. Not his second either.

"Hoodoo dat voodoo," he says and laughs, but the laugh is distant and hollow.

"What does that mean?" Andrea asked.

"Da voodoo," says Juvenal and points to the charm bags and chicken feet. "Dat mojo working dere."

"I don't get it."

"Me neither. It's all voodoo to me." He turns and abruptly and staggers off, singing.

"Mister Hoodoo, voodoo you think you are, mister hoodoo..."

The jazz band set up on the stage. They are playing what sounds like an Irish jig, slowed down by at least half. If used as the soundtrack for a film, depending on the action, it could be either funny, or it could be extremely frightening. Andrea could envision Jim Carey doing a pratfall, or Hannibal Lecter feasting on entrails.

Eppie is at her side, looking strange in her flowing black gown. A child straight out of the Adam's Family.

Andrea started to speak. "I remember when my Grandfather died..."

Only it hadn't been her grandfather. It had been some old man who lived with the people she was staying with one summer. She'd pretended he was her grandfather. He spent his days sitting in his easy chair by the window, watching golf and Canadian television. She could not remember him speaking a single word to her. One day he wasn't there. Somebody told her that he had died.

"I don't want to talk right now, Andrea." Eppie said.

Andrea is surprised. "Oh. That's all right. I..."

Eppie was already moving away. She appeared to flow rather than walk, her mourning gown making a faint shushing sound as it trailed along the floor, the wood so highly polished, it seemed bottomless.

Andrea said, more to herself than Eppie, "I understand."

She didn't.

Juvenal, two drinks in hand, returns. His eyes swim in their sockets. They are faintly yellow and runny. Unfocused. How much has he had to drink already, today?

"You don't have a drink," he admonishes her. "This is a wake. You must have a drink. It's a rule. Everybody knows that. It's written somewhere."

"I don't drink."

Juvenal considers this. "That's not right," he says and wanders off to ponder her response.

She studies Papa Catallus' face. Heat and insects had left their mark, but the

funeral home did a good job of masking the damage. The decay had been made to look like age spots, the insect marks made to look like ravages of time, rather than mandibles.

The band launches into a more upbeat number but the sound is strange. It is like a radio broadcast from the past, like audio signals derived from memory. They sound more like a scratchy old 78 record than a live band.

"Didn't he ramble....he rambled, Rambled all around.... in and out of town. Didn't he ramble....didn't he ramble, He rambled till the butcher cut him down."

Now Niobe was by her side, a tall glass in her hand that was filled to the rim with some clear liquid. No ice.

"Where did you meet him?" Niobe said, looking at her grandfather and not Andrea.

"Who?" Andrea asked.

"Who. Who do you think? My brother. Where did you meet him?"

"At a dance. In Chicago."

"He never mentioned you to me."

"Your mother knew about me."

"My mother knows everything."

"His feet was in the market place..his head was in the street..Lady pass him by, said..look at the market meat. He grabbed her pocket book..and said I wish you well. She pulled out a forty-five...said I'm head of personnel."

Niobe finally looked at her. "I still don't know who you are. Or what you're up to. But thank you, for doing what you did. For Eppie I mean."

"What's the story there?"

"Stupid kid. That's really all she was, when he...seduced her. 'Seduced her.' How utterly polite. Got her drunk, fucked her like a rabbit, and knocked her up more like it. 'Course she was old enough. Just."

"Isn't there anything you can do about him..."

"Like what? He's the law and we're... we're what we are."

"Does Clive know?"

"It didn't start till Clive was gone."

"Didn't he ramble...i said he rambled, Rambled all around...in and out of town. Didn't he ramble...oh didn't he ramble, He rambled till the butcher shot him down"

"He slipped into the cat house..made love to the stable. Madam caught him cold..said I'll pay you when I be able. Six months had passed ..and she stood all she could stand...She said buddy when I'm through with you. Ole groundhog gonna be shakin yo' hand."

"And didn't he ramble...he rambled. Rambled all around...in and out of town. Oh didn't he ramble.....he rambled. You know he rambled...till the butcher...cut him down."

"You think Clive would really come back here?"
asked Niobe.

"You think Clive would really go to Canada?" Andrea countered.

"Everyone else does."

"I'm not everyone else."

"No. You sure aren't."

"I said he rambled..lord...till the butcher shot him down..."

The song ended. The old men leaped to their feet
(so to speak),
and applauded wildly.

"Nothing like a jazz funeral." Said Niobe.

"No, there sure isn't." said Andrea.

Later. Music plays. People dance.
Alcohol goes down fast.

The sun was setting. Sometime during the festivities, Blake had arrived. He wore a chocolate brown suit that made him stand out like the proverbial sore thumb, like a turd in a cistern of crystal clear water.

Somehow or other, he had joined up with Papa's gang of old cronies. They had gathered near the body, drinks in hand, empty bottles at their feet. So many, you'd think all would be on their backs snoring, but they just kept knocking 'em back like so much soda water, and smoking *roll yer owns* that reeked of bitter clove with an underbelly of sage.

"He was so cheap..." began one.

"...that when he went to sleep at night he tied a bag over his mouth," finished another.

"And why did he do that?" Blake asked.

"So he wouldn't lose any breath while he was asleep!"

The old men cackled wildly. Wasn't it just the funniest damn thing you ever heard in your whole damn life, wasn't it just though?

Another piped in. "And he plugged up his arsehole so he wouldn't lose wind on the other end!"

More howls of aged laughter. One hoisted his drink without losing a drop. "To Catallus!" he called.

"To Catallus!" they roared, all hoisting their cups, none spilling a single drop of the precious fluid.

They all poured back their whiskeys without hesitation. All except for Blake, who had to stop and gasp for air before managing to finish. Another bottle appeared out of nowhere, and everyone's glass was full once again. An attempt is made to refill Blake's,

but he waves it off.

"You can't stand on one leg," said one of the old men.

"You're falling behind, boy!" said another.

"Can't hold your liquor Blake?" teased a third, "What kind of bartender are you anyway?"

"And you know," said a fourth, "that Catallus was so cheap, he hated to throw out the bathwater after bathing in it!"

"Said to save it for soup!"

"He wouldn't stake you the chance to starve, if you asked him for it!"

One old man slaps Blake on the back.

"Ha! Staked! Steak! Starve! Get it?"

Blake coughs. "I got it. I got it."

"He gets it!" howled the old man.

Another drink is hoisted. "To Catallus!"

"To Catallus!"

There are refills all around, and everyone drinks. Blake almost gags. The group steps back as one.

"He's gonna lose his supper boys!"

"No. I'm okay," says Blake.

"You know, the last time old Catallus had his hair cut, he also had a manicure. And he took hair and nails home in a bag with him!"

"Hah! The other day, we was walking down the road and a buzzard flew down and made off with his lunch!"

"What happened?"

"He bawled like a baby! Then went to the judge and tried to get the buzzard subpoenaed!"

"To Catallus!"

"To Catallus!" Drinks are tossed back and a new bottle appears to do refill duty.

"Damnation, but that old stick was so stingy he actually told me he couldn't afford to speak!"

"To Catallus!"

"To Catallus!"

Blake drinks, retches, and hurries outside. The old men laugh and catcall.

"These kids. Can't hold their liquor to
holler."

"Damn televisions what's doing it."

"Television?"

"That and that internet thingy."

On the Veranda

Andrea, needing a breath of fresh air, found Clymenestra standing on the back porch. In the distance - the underbelly of the night sky shimmered with the setting sun. Andrea joined her at the railing. In the darkness that covered the field, clusters of fireflies danced in stuttering chaos.

"How you holding up?" Andrea said.

Clymenestra takes her hand. "I'm fine, my dear. Crazy old man was always wandering. Growing up, we never knew when he'd be home. That rambling song they played. That's all about my father."

Andrea looks toward the hills and sees a thin tendril of smoke rise black against the red sky. "Hope that's not your forest starting to burn,"

A firefly lands on the rail between them wearing its spectral glow.

"I wish they were sparks," said Clymenestra, referring to the firefly. "I wish they would drift from the sky in numbers like the plague, and fill the forest and set

it ablaze."

There wasn't anything to say to that.

"Can I get you a drink? Tea?" Andrea said.

Clymenestra lifted her hand as if to swat the firefly. It darted away, and instead Clymenestra patted Andrea's hand softly.

"No darling. I'm fine. But, if you could, please check on Eppie for me. She loved her Papa."

"Certainly."

Andrea turned and went back in the house. Clymenestra continued to stare at the shifting hues of red as the sun set and the night closed in.

If she had the power, if the fireflies were like living embers, she would fill her fists with them and endure the burning of her flesh to carry them to the forest, to throw them into the brush. If somehow she could summon the lightning to strike, and make flames grow and cause the wind to rise, she would hand Eppie to Andrea and tell her to run as far and as fast as she could. When she

was certain they were both gone, she would
call forth the flame to consume Twilight in a
crimson holocaust that would do Hell proud.

Lentils for the Dead

Eppie lay fetal, on her bed. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and shallow. The smell of incense was strong here, far stronger even, than in the ballroom. Andrea inhaled and could taste anise at the back of her throat. She thought, 'this can not be good for the child.'

She opened the window without making a sound. The rope and pulley mechanism, as old as it appeared, was surprisingly well maintained. A night chorus entered the room. A crackle of crickets sawing, the piercing call of some night bird, the stealthy movement of a predator.

Andrea stood over Eppie, her eyes taking in the child's impossibly delicate features, and whisper-fine hair, shining like threads of black glass. Her eyelids were the color of a fading bruise, and a network of bluish veins pulsed slowly beneath her translucent skin.

How long Andrea stood there, she would never be able to say, but the whole while,

her eyes never left the child. She wanted to burn the image of the child into her mind. To be able to conjure up that image on nights that were cold and dark and lonely, beyond despair. As Andrea turned to leave, something glittered on Eppie's cheek.

A single tear.

Andrea reached out and carefully touched the tear. It flowed from Eppie's cheek to her fingertip like a thing alive, seeking some new source of nourishment. Eppie murmured, but otherwise did not stir. Andrea brought the tear to her face. Her reflection wavered over the curved surface. She brought the tear to her lips and tasted salt and sorrow.

Andrea noticed a corner of black material protruding from under Eppie's pillow. She carefully worked it out.

It was a doll that has been made to look like Eppie's father, an assemblage of the mismatched parts of other dolls. A body that once belonged to a Barbie who had come too close to an open flame. The right arm torn from a G.I. Joe. The legs were fabric, their thighs stuffed into the Barbie's hip holes.

The porcelain head, freakishly small compared to the rest of the body, had its original features scraped off, and an approximation of Eppie's father's face painted on, using a marker. A thick black "X" had been slashed across each eye. Andrea was impressed by the skill shown in the creation of the face. She is not sure that Eppie could have drawn it. Uneasy, Andrea carefully puts the doll back and as silently as she entered, leaves the room.

Juvenia was waiting for her at the top of the stairs. Even out of the shadows she appeared to be lurking, a future ghost waiting for death.

"Poppopjubalsear," Juvenia said. Or "Papa Jubel is here."

Juvenia took Andrea by the hand.

"Who?" asked Andrea.

"Papa Catallus' brother." Juvenia said slowly and clearly, as if speaking to an idiot child. Oh, thought Andrea, you can articulate.

They descend the stairs and enter the

ballroom. The rest of the wake attendees stood in two lines, forming a path to the body of Papa Catallus. Juvenia positioned Andrea at the end of the right side line, then took her place at the end of the opposite line.

Andrea wondered: 'Okay, now what?'

The front door opened. An old man who may have been born around the same time as God, entered. His face was like leather left out in a rainstorm, then dried, badly. His eyes were clouded as if a spider had woven exquisitely fine webs across them. Yet his vision was obviously unimpaired. He is slow and stooped, and it takes him what seems like hours to reach the ballroom entrance. Behind him walked a Tall Black Man whose flesh was so dark it swallowed light, whose limbs were so long they seemed to have extra joints. Was it the same Tall Black Man who had been serving bar? Andrea thought it might be, but wasn't sure. The bar stood unattended, pushed back against a far wall.

At the entrance, the Tall Black Man took hold of Papa Jubel's arm and lead him to Papa

Catallus, then stepped aside. Papa Jubel stood motionless, studying the body of his brother.

The room was silent. The house that surrounded them, even more so. Out in the world, the chorus of night had gone quiet as if out of respect.

"A plate." Papa Jubel said.

His voice was like the final gust of wind before the end of a storm. A remembrance of power and fury.

The Tall Black Man walked to the buffet table and retrieved a plate. He laid the plate at the feet of Papa Catallus, in a motion that reminded Andrea of those monster cranes used to build skyscrapers.

Papa Jubel addressed his brother. "Dear brother, I have come many miles, through strange lands, to see you one last time. Yet what I see before me is but a poor, sad memory of what you were oh brother. And I have come too late. You cannot hear me now. So alone, I must speak to what remains of you, this which was once your body, and

expect no answer."

With the help of the Tall Black Man,
Papa Jubel kneels.

He removed a handful of lentils from his
pocket and scattered them across the plate.
The sound was like heavy rain on a sheet
metal roof.

Clymenestra filled her handkerchief with
sorrow.

"So I shall perform this ancient ritual
over your remains, weeping, this plate of
lentils for dead men to feast upon, wet with
my tears. Oh brother, here's my greeting,
here's my hand forever welcoming you, and I
forever saying goodbye...goodbye."

The Tall Black Man helped Papa Jubel to
his feet and without a word, they turned,
walked out of the ballroom, walked out of the
house, and into the arms of the night.

As if that was the cue they were waiting
for, everyone but the family followed.

Juvenal was the first to speak, his
voice harsh with sorrow. "So. That's it.
Nothing left but the reading of the will.

That shouldn't take long."

"That will be enough Juvenal," said Clymenestra.

Juvenal giggled. He was obviously very, very drunk. "You made a funny Grandmother. A pun. A bon mot. A..."

"Enough, you drunken fool!" hissed Niobe. "Don't you ever know when to shut up?"

Juvenal arched his neck and looked down his nose at his mother. "Yes. I am drunk. And a fool. But I was one before I was the other." Without another word, he walked to the bar and grabbed a bottle. It was empty. He peered into it, his face sad.

"Empty," he said, and staggered out of the room.

"Where are you going Juvenal?" Clymenestra called.

"To get drunker and more foolish." Juvenal called back, and lurched into the night where, as if in greeting, the chorus started up again.

"I better stop him, before he hurts himself," said Andrea, when it became obvious

nobody else was going to.

Niobe snorted. "You can try," she said, and walked away in disgust. "Boy's as useless as a glass eye. Tit on a bull. Dick on a mule."

Clymenestra pretended not to hear. Instead, she went quietly to her room, where for the rest of the night, she stared at a photograph of her father.

Euxideos Family Cemetery

Outside the air was sticky, the chorus of insects louder than Andrea had ever heard, before. It was as if her skull had been packed with crickets.

Blake was slumped on the stairs, hunched over, elbows on knees, head in hands, moaning.

"Make them shut up," Blake moaned.

"You're not much of a drinker for a bartender."

"So I've been told," Blake said. He belched softly, the taste sour, "Actually, I'm not much of anything, really."

Andrea ignored the comment and looked about. Juvenal was nowhere in sight. "Did you see which way Juvenal went?"

Blake tried to point with his chin, moaned, and gestured vaguely with his hand, toward the road.

"That way," Blake said.

"Thanks. Get some sleep." Andrea said, and hurried after Juvenal.

Blake watched her leave the illumination cast by the house lights, and then watched the night swallow her.

Sure, worry about him. I'm just dying here.

She heard Juvenal before she saw him. His drunken shuffle over loose stone obvious enough to be fake, although she didn't believe that it was.

"Hey Juvenal," called Andrea, "Where are you going?"

Juvenal stopped, turned, almost fell, but somehow managed to stay on his feet. He had to think very hard before coming up with an answer.

"I'm going into town to get a drink," he announced, carefully, "To honor my grandfather's memory."

"You go into town, and all you're going to get is another beating," Andrea said, "not much honor in that."

Juvenal spat. "Oh, thank you. Thank you for bringing that up. Thank you for reinforcing my masculinity. Thank you for

reminding me where I sit, in this matriarchal universe I inhabit. Did I say matriarchal? I meant miserable. Matriarchal, miserable, what's the difference?"

"What you should be doing is staying here, with your family. They need you." Andrea calculated her chances of winning the argument. Juvenal's mouth twisted bitterly. "They don't need anything! Eppie has Juvenia. Juvenia has Eppie. My mother has her hatred. My grandmother has her ghosts."

"And what do you have Juv?"

His body slumped. "I have nothing. I have nobody."

He staggered to her. The waves of alcohol that radiated from his body, that rode his every exhaled breath, were strong enough to drive her back, like a physical blow.

Had she ever drank that much? Had she ever been that drunk? Yes. She had.

"You must have really loved your grandfather."

Junvel nodded slowly and stared at the

road. "He brought me up. He protected me. He taught me how to hunt and fish and trap. Well, he tried. I was never very good at any of that sort of thing. I know I must have disappointed him but, he never let on that I did. And he certainly never loved me less for my failings."

Juvenal stopped. He looked at her and his eyes were filled with tears. "Are you really in love with him?"

"In love with who?" Andrea asked.

"With Clive! Who the hell are we talking about?" Juvenal shouted. He spun around, eyes searching the blackness of space above them as if the answer might be hidden there. "How can that be?" he demanded to know. He brought his face back down level with hers, but his eyes continued to roll in their sockets. With effort, he got them under control and fixed her with as steady a stare as he could hold.

"How can you love him? He's a mass murderer. He kills people, mostly in really nasty ways. He is going to get caught. If he lets them take him alive, and I highly

doubt he is going to let them do that, then he will spend the rest of his life in prison. Or maybe they will reverse the life without parole decision, and give him that lethal injection they should have given him when they had the chance. You don't stick a rabid dog in a cage. You put it down. I mean, think about it. You and Clive. Where's the future in that? Where's the basis for a long-term relationship? There ain't no long term to Clive."

He seemed to see Andrea's face for the first time, and with some surprise, said "You're very beautiful. What's that nick on your lip?"

"Shaving accident." Andrea replied.

"Huh?"

"Look Juvenal... you're very drunk. Let's just go home and get some sleep."

"No, I don't want to go home. I'll make you a deal. I won't go into town if you come with me."

"Come with you, where?"

"Place I go when I want to think. When

I want to be even more alone than I usually am."

"That's pretty melodramatic, Juvenal. Who writes your material?"

Juvenal looked hurt. Andrea softened. "Sorry. All right, but just for a bit. It's been a long day and I'm tired."

Without another word, Juvenal stumbled past her and started through the field. Shaking her head, Andrea followed. The tall dry grass crackled as they moved through it. Gnats rose in clouds that buzzed around their heads. Rather than go silent at their passage, the night chorus grew louder still.

"Where are we going?" said Andrea and an insect immediately flew into her mouth. She spat.

"Journey's end," said Juvenal.

"Yeah, it better end soon." Andrea dug another insect out of her nose. "Christ."

As they approached their destination, a flickering light, low to the ground, appeared and vanished. Near the tree line, two stone monoliths rose. An arch of wrought iron with

ends anchored at the tops of the monoliths, bore the name EUXIDEOS. It was the family cemetery. The city of the dead.

Juvenal entered without hesitation. Andrea reluctantly followed. Cemeteries were not her favorite places. All that hope of a better world beyond, depressed her. She didn't believe there was a better life. She believed you died and you rotted. You fed the multitudes of insects that burrowed through the Earth. You went from top of the food chain to the bottom. Your memory faded from those who survived, and once they died, so did that fragment of remembered existence.

Moving through the rows, Andrea wondered how many generations of Euxideos were buried here. She couldn't tell, but the number had to stretch back through dozens of generations.

"We don't bury our dead in the ground," said Juvenal. "Round here, digging a six-foot hole to bury the dead is folly. The hole'll fill to the brim with water before you're half way through. Hell, in the old days, when they still used to try, a coffin would float

when placed in the grave, so they drilled large holes into the bottoms. It let the water in, and forced the coffin to sink. I've heard tales of coffins floating through the streets when the rains came. So, that's why we bury our dead above ground. What's that song? 'Bury me in a shallow grave, so I can feel the rain on my face'?"

In the center stood a monstrous memorial, like a small cathedral, swathed in shadow. Juvenal was leading her toward it. The other tombs spread out from the memorial, laid out on a grid, forming narrow walkways like spokes on a wheel. The closer they got, the older the surrounding tombs became. They were strewn with beads, voodoo relics and graffiti. Nearly every tomb had a small lantern that contained a pale, wavering light. Andrea wondered whose job it was to keep them lit. On many of the markers, time and weather had worn away the names and dates, leaving only bone white stone, crumbling. The last legible date Andrea could make out, was 1832.

As they came closer to the monument, the

more it loomed. Whoever the architect had been, he was either a genius or a madman. The lines of the monument were not straight, yet appeared to be. Or was it the other way around? Like the house of the Euxideos, the structure looked as if it were going to fall. Andrea thought, 'We are going to come to the foot of the monument and it is going to finally topple with age, crushing both of us to death.' But like the house, this too was illusion.

"My office," Juvenal gestured and bowed.

"It's...grotesque," said Andrea.

At each corner, positioned north, south, east, and west, stood the statue of a different woman, obviously carved by a master. Each would be incredibly life-like, even in the light of day, and were even more so, in the dim illumination and flickering shadows of night.

A marble bench was placed in front of the monument, positioned so that those who sat, were offered an unobstructed view of the interior. Juvenal sat. Then gestured for

Andrea to do the same.

Here, she could see into the center of the monument. Under the vaulted ceiling, stood the huge marble statue of a stern patriarch in Biblical garb. A man with the face of Clive Euxideos.

"Hieronymus Euxideos," Juvenal said, "The founder of the proud lineage to which I belong. And his four wives. Actually five. He married one of them, twice. Don't remember which. Maybe the one facing south. He lived with two of 'em at the same time. I believe he was married to the one facing north, and she let the one facing east, live in the carriage house. That's gone now. Used to stand behind the garden. I don't remember their names, but he outlived them all. Now, they all lay together again... moldering ... juices intermingled... just like they did while alive."

It was an image Andrea would rather not have embedded in her brain. "Lovely." Her voice was flat. She glanced at Juvenal, chin buried deep in his chest. Sleeping? Suddenly, he jerked forward and vomited.

Andrea shook her head and walked away to give him some privacy. She looks around, trying to avoid the gaze of the statue whose stern features bore too close a resemblance to Clive for her liking. She notices a tomb that appears to be new. Moving closer, she saw that it was a miniature of the house, surrounded by a wrought iron fence. It was the current family's plot... waiting.

Closer still, she read the names carved into the white stone, stone that caught the lantern light and sparkled as if encrusted with diamonds. Clymenestra. Clive. Niobe. Juvenal, Juvenia and another on the bottom...

Andrea squats and reads. Jocasta.

"My older sister."

Juvenal is behind her. There is vomit on his chin and his shirt is wet. Andrea tries not to look at it. She would rather not know what Juvenal had for dinner that day.

"Grand mama says it happened while Clive was watching her. She drowned in the fountain. That's why it's drained. That's when they stopped planting. Garden use to be

beautiful."

A terrible thought crosses Andrea's mind. "You don't think Clive..."

Juvenal shakes his head violently. "Clive don't kill his own. I give him that."

(beat) "I hope I never have to know what it's like to lose a child."

Andrea runs her fingertips over the name. "I never will," she whispers to herself.

She stands up. "We should go."

Juvenal looks stricken. "Please... don't go. Stay with me. Sit a spell."

"I'm sure the others are worried."

"I'm sure they don't even know we're gone."

Andrea sighs. "Just a bit longer. It's getting colder." A wave of goosebumps rippled over her skin.

They walked (Andrea walked, Juvenal staggered) back to the bench. Was that the sun coming up? No. It was the moon, monstrous and full, ready to crash into the Earth as

they watched.

"So, what do you do out here?" asked Andrea, "Besides get creeped out?"

"I don't get creeped out. I think."

"Yeah? What do you think about?"

"Life."

"In general?"

"Mine, in particular."

Juvenal moved closer. Andrea tensed, thankful there was no breeze and that she was not standing down wind.

"Niobe thinks you're a writer from one of those people magazines. Or true crime. Or maybe some reality program." He laughed bitterly. "Reality. Jesus. If they only knew."

Andrea sighed and rubbed her temples. "I'm here to wait for Clive."

Juvenal's face twisted with rage and sorrow and hate and a gamut of emotions Andrea could not read. "Clive's never going to come. They got cops everywhere. They got roadblocks everywhere. They got helicopters

circling. They got his face plastered all over the newspapers and post offices, everywhere. You know what? You know what? He's hiding. He's holed up somewhere and the moment he pokes his head out, someone's going to blow it off. They're going to track him down and when they find him they're going to shoot him dead like the rabid dog he is!"

Andrea got up. "I'm going back."

Juvenal grabbed her arm. She pulled free, balling her fists.

"Please. I don't have much. Never did, never will. But I could do better, I know I could. If I had a reason. I never had a reason before. Never needed to do anything...never wanted to do anything. But I could. I can. I will. If you're there."

"Juvenal..." Andrea took a step back.

He cut her off. "Everything happens for a reason. You met Clive. You came down here to wait for him. But really, you came down here for another reason. You came down here for me, because you're my reason. You're what I need to change my life. You're that

part of me that's been missing for all these years, that last piece of the puzzle. You fill the void inside me."

"Juvenal..." Andrea warned.

"I love you," Juvenal cried, desperation dripping from each word.

Andrea rolled her eyes. "You don't even know me. Look, let me take you home. You'll go to bed, and go to sleep. When you wake up, you'll feel foolish, but all this will have passed, and been forgotten."

Again Juvenal grabbed for her. This time he made the mistake of trying to kiss her. She pulled her arm free while shoving him away with her other hand. He staggered backward.

"Juvenal. Stop it."

He came at her again.

"Juvenal. Don't." she warned.

He refused to stop. His eyes were rolling in his head, as he rubbed his crotch. His erection was obvious.

Andrea kicked him between the legs.

Juvenal, screaming, dropped to the ground, clutching at his testicles, rolling and vomiting. Eventually, his stomach emptied, he curled into a ball, trembling and moaning, lost in a deep, alcohol haze wrapped around a core of pain. Andrea felt a pang of sympathy.

"I'm sorry Juvenal." She reached out to touch him.

Snarling he sat up and slapped away her hand. "Get away from me, you fuckhole!"

The word was like a physical blow. Andrea jerked and somehow found the self-control to simply turn and walk away. But the urge, the almost overpowering impulse, was to launch herself at Juvenal and pound his head against the granite steps of the monument, again and again and again, until it cracked... shattered... smashed open like an eggshell and his brains spilled out in great abstract gouts of black and red, like cranberries blended with midnight.

Juvenal struggled to his knees, tears streaming down his face to blend with the glistening snot that ran over his vomit-slicked chin. "Wait! Come back! I'm sorry!"

Oh good Christ, I'm sorry!" he moaned as she walked away.

When he could no longer hear her footsteps moving through the dry weeds, Juvenal pressed his face against the cool earth. He closed his eyes and almost immediately began to dream of worms rising from the dirt, tiny mouths working to burrow into his flesh.

Night Cap with Niobe

Blake was crumbled on the porch, shivering, and snoring loudly. Andrea considered waking him, then decided not to. She had managed to swallow the better part of the rage she felt toward Juvenal, but enough was still surging through her body to make her think better of. She did not want to have to deal with another drunk. She was not sure what she would do. Somebody might get crippled. Somebody might get dead. It would be a shame if that somebody ended up being a nice guy like Blake, just because some other idiot had pissed her off.

Andrea entered the house. The air was still thick with the pungent odor of funeral incense. One of Papa Catallus' cronies sat slumped in a wicker chair, open mouth revealing a random scattering of teeth, chest rising and falling, his inhale a shrill whisper, his exhale a phlegm-clogged wheeze. Gazing at the body of Papa Catallus had this one visualized the shade of his own future?

Time passed. Standing in the vestibule, listening to the silence of the house, Andrea

realized that she had never felt more at home, more at peace, at any other time in her life. Despite the incident with Juvenal. Despite the real reason she was here. There was something inviting about the house... something attractive about the family of Euxideos... something comforting, despite all their demons.

She felt like family.

She felt like she belonged.

What did that say about how screwed up she was?

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. It came away wet. Tired. Just tired. She was bone weary and needed to sleep. She entered the parlor to pay her last respects to Papa Catallus. In the morning, the funeral home would come and take the body.

Eppie was sleeping at his feet. She was wearing only a thin nightgown that draped her slender body like a shroud. As Andrea neared, Eppie shuddered and reached out, fingers clawing at something in a dream. She called out a word Andrea did not recognize, and

trembled.

Andrea knelt down and reached for Eppie. Her hand came away wet. It was urine. Andrea gathered Eppie in her arms and lifted her. Eppie, still asleep, cried out again.

"It's all right baby," whispered Andrea, "It's all right. I'm here."

She carried Eppie upstairs to the bathroom and sat her on the toilet while she drew a bath. Hovering somewhere between sleep and that first moment of wakefulness, the child swayed as if drunk. Keeping a eye on the water level, Andrea undressed Eppie, marveling at the bloodless skin, the delicate limbs. She gently placed the child in the tub. Eppie's eyes flickered briefly when her feet first touched the water, but she remained more asleep than awake.

Andrea cleaned her with a large yellow sponge, working gently, as she would a new born or some incredibly fragile heirloom. Something that could never be replaced. One wrong move, one application of too much pressure, and it would shatter into millions of pieces that could never again be gathered

into a whole of any value.

Finished, Andrea wrapped Eppie in a towel and carried the child to her bedroom. There, she found a warmer nightgown and dressed her, and put her to bed. Eppie sighed, murmured something, and rolled onto her side, snoring faintly. Standing over her, tears came to Andrea's eyes. She fought them back, and went downstairs.

Andrea found Niobe at the kitchen table. Niobe has a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand, a glass in the other. She is wearing a nightgown bleached to near transparency. That she wears nothing underneath is blatantly obvious. Andrea maintains eye contact.

Niobe eyes Andrea up and down. "What are you doing up?"

"Nightmares" says Andrea.

"Lot of that around here," says Niobe,, pouring herself a drink. Whiskey neat into a plastic tumbler. There were silver flecks like finely chopped tinsel in the tumbler and they drifted in the fluid as the tumbler moved.

"You like to fuck?" Niobe wondered.

"I can honestly say, no woman has ever asked me that question before," Andrea replied wryly.

Niobe snorted. "I ain't gay. Not saying I don't like women, but I like men, too."

"I wasn't implying anything," Andrea said.

Niobe scratched her forehead. A rain of tiny flakes drifted past her eye. "So?"

Andrea leaned against the counter. "Yeah, I like it."

"When'd you lose it?" Niobe asked.

Andrea raised an eyebrow.

"We're getting mighty personal here."

"I don't have a problem with that, do you?" Niobe took a large swallow of her drink.

"I guess not," Andrea shrugged. "I was sixteen. He was fourteen."

Niobe nodded, as if that was what she thought had happened. "Ah. Younger man." Niobe said.

"Yeah." Andrea said.

"Thing about younger is, they can get it up more than once a night."

"Yeah, but they come faster too. Usually, too fast. Older men, some older men, those who've had some training, last longer."

"It's a trade off. You want a drink?"

"Sure. I prefer older. They know more. Know what works and what doesn't. Some of them do, any ways. Those who took the time to listen and learn."

"I don't know. Younger men. I like to show them what to do. Show them what I like. Where'd it happen? Ice?" Niobe reached an arm back to the fridge.

"No ice." Andrea said.

Andrea thought back. How many years had it been? Too many. Who had she been staying with then? A relative? Some foster family? She couldn't remember. But she could remember his face. The image was as clear as a spring morning.

"In a basement. I was skipping school.

He was with two of his friends, and they wanted me. But I picked him."

"Good. Ice ruins a drink. Why him?"

"He was... quiet. He wasn't like the other two, like some dog in heat that wouldn't stop sniffing. And he had great eyes. Real deep blue."

"Any good?"

"It was fast."

Niobe handed Andrea her drink. "Yeah the first time should be good, but it seems like it never is, least according to the stories I've heard, and of course, personal experience. Did you ever do him again?"

Andrea looked into her drink. Swirled it gently. "He moved. I saw him again, years later. We talked, but nothing happened."

Niobe fumbled a cigarette out of a pack. "Did you want something to happen?"

"I wouldn't have minded. He still had those eyes." Andrea said regretfully.

And she was looking into them. Only, they weren't the eyes she thought she

remembered. They were pale. They were Clive's.

"What's the best you ever had?" Niobe asked.

Andrea answered without hesitation.

"Your brother."

Niobe made a face and squinted at Andrea. "Bullshit. Really? No. Don't tell me. Yuck."

"Yeah. He...he's... Most guys, all guys, even the ones that know what they're doing, ultimately they're in it for themselves, no pun intended. Getting off, that's the goal. But Clive... he didn't care if he got off or not. He was focused on me, on my needs, on my feelings. On making sure that I got mine." Andrea smiled. "Again and again and again..."

Niobe's face twisted with disgust as she waved her hands. "All right, I get the picture. Not that I want it."

Andrea laughed.

Niobe contemplated her near empty tumbler. "I need to find a man like that."

Andrea stared out the window. The world

beyond the glass was pitch black. All she saw was her reflection, half a ghost etched in the night, looking back at her. The same ghost that had watched her on the train. Yet not the same.

"There are no other men like that."

She finished her drink. Niobe waved the bottle at her.

"Another?"

"Never been known to turn down a second date with Mr. Daniels."

"Yeah, Jack is the man. Strong and brown, burns all the way down and warms you up something fierce."

"Now, why can't all men be like *that*."

"Yeah."

Andrea hands Niobe her glass. Niobe pours to the rim.

"That's one serious drink." Andrea said.

"Can't dance with one leg." Niobe said.

"Or kick ass."

"Good point. At least I think it is. Sounds good with a buzz on, at any rate."

Niobe lifts her glass. Some slops over the rim, spilling on her wrist and the floor. She doesn't notice or else she doesn't care. She is already long drunk. "Cheers."

"Back at you." Andrea drinks half of the glass.

Niobe watches appreciatively. "You've done this before. Wait a minute, I thought you said you didn't drink?"

"I lied."

"Yeah?" Again, Niobe eyes Andrea up and down. "What else you lying about?"

"Less than you probably think."

"Who are you?"

"I've already told you who I am."

"I know what you told me, told us, but who are you, really?"

Andrea looks out the window pretending interest in the night sky. Niobe sighed.

"You like Eppie." It is a statement, not a question.

"She's a beautiful child. There's a lot of pain in her life." Andrea watches the

golden whirlpool in her glass, as she gently swirls her drink.

"In all our lives."

Andrea shook her head. "Adults can take care of themselves, or should be able to. Children are different. They don't ask to be brought into this world, they just ask to be loved. And love is what they should be given. Not pain. Not hate. Not violence."

Niobe snorts. Finishes her drink. Reaches for the bottle and misses. She tries again. Success.

"And where did you say you were from? Maybe you better sprinkle some fairy dust on yourself and fly back. 'Cause wherever you're from, it ain't here. Cause here's where the trolls live."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Now Niobe stares out the window, focusing on something beyond the darkness.

"When I was Eppie's age, I was afraid of dark places. 'Course, all children are, but I was particularly afraid of the dark places between the light places. I called those the

in-between places. The places where the trolls lived. When I got older, I started reading up on quantum physics."

Andrea looked surprised. Somehow she didn't see Niobe as the academic type. Niobe caught it.

"Why that look? I may be southern, but I ain't stupid. You know, black holes are memories of stars? Stars that have died and been sucked down by gravity? And in the center of that hole is the vanishing point, the place where everything we know ceases to make sense and comes to an end. Twilight is like that. It's both an in-between place and a vanishing point. It's where everything comes to an end. And there's no escaping it. And its full of fucking trolls."

Andrea holds out her glass. Niobe fills it. "I guess I'm from there too."

Niobe tips her drink from side to side. "I want him dead."

"Do you?"

"He destroyed this family. We had a name once...money...respect. Now, we have

shit. My mother... what you see is a ghost, a specter. Nothing like what she used to be. He drained her, like a god damn vampire, sucked the life right out of her. People used to get out of our way. Now they spit. They used to say "Yes, Ms. Euxideos". Now they sneer. *'Look at that bitch, sister of that fucking lunatic. Whole family is as crazy as shit house rats. Whole family in the same bed, fucking like rabid minks. Whole family ought to be run out of town..murdered in their beds. Even the little one, before she turns, before she picks up a razor and does like Clive do'. Fuck."*

Niobe drains her drink and pours another. "I want him dead. I want to see him bleed. And if you're not here to do it, then I will."

"Others have tried."

Niobe's elbow rested on the table. She had a large steak knife in her hand, the tip inches from Andrea, who stared at it calmly.

"You should put that away before someone gets hurt."

"Oh someone's going to get hurt, that's for sure. Someone's going to die!"

"Can I finish my drink first?"

Niobe puts the knife down, then. "I wasn't talking about you."

"I know."

"Eppie's the one I worry about. What is all this doing to her? We can't send her to school anymore with the kids tormenting her, and the teachers ain't no better. She's got no friends. And that mother of hers. She's my daughter, but Christ... she's worthless as cat snot. And that rat bastard father..." Niobe picks up the bottle and heads for the door. "I'm going for a walk."

"Need company?"

Niobe considers the offer. "Tell me who you are."

"I'm not a reporter. I can tell you that."

"You ain't his fiancée either."

"We have danced."

"Really?"

"Really."

Niobe ponders the contents of her glass once more.

Andrea waits.

When Niobe looks up again, there are tears in her eyes. "I got to go and visit some old relatives. I guess I'd rather do it alone. But thanks for the offer."

"Okay," said Andrea.

"You need a top off before I go?"

"I'm good."

Niobe leaves, stumbling out into the darkness.

Andrea starts to finish her drink.

Stops. Eyes it. It calls to her. But no, that is not the siren's song of the alcohol, the alcohol is only the curtain behind which the real singer sings. The metal waits behind the mask. Drink, drink and when you have drunk enough, pull back the curtain to reveal the prize behind. See how the prize shines? See the way it catches the light? Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it what you want? Can't you feel it? The thin sharp edge against that

thin soft surface of flesh? Pick it up. Go ahead. Don't be shy. Don't be afraid. We are, after all, old friends, are we not? Well acquainted. Very, very well acquainted. You know you want to. You know how good it feels. How good that first cut. How good that release.

Andrea pours the drink down the drain and leaves the kitchen, turning out the light.

ANDREA'S ROOM

Clive Euxideos moves through Andrea Cobblestone District room. Fragments of yellow streetlight peek through the blinds. It is not much, but it is all he needs, for Clive's night vision is like that of a cat's. He sees the world quite literally, in shades of gray, as he has an extremely rare form of color blindness known as *maskun* or *achromatopsia*.

From down the hall he can just make out Patsy Cline's "Strange". Or is it a random bit of old memory?

Clive stops. He inhales slowly and deeply, drawing the lingering essence of Andrea into his nostrils. He smells the shampoo she washed her hair with. The lotion she anointed her flesh with. The deodorant she glides over her armpits. The lacquer she uses to pretty her toenails. It is a heady brew and it makes him throb with desire.

He walks to the bookcase and runs his fingers over the titles: philosophy, medieval history, Asian erotic art. Most, he has read

himself. He would like to discuss them with her, when they meet again. And they will. But will there be time?

He continues to move about the room, stroking this, touching that, circling to the bed. When he gets to the bed, he reaches towards it as if moving in slow motion, teasing himself, building anticipation until the point of contact. When his fingertips touch the sheet, it's as if some strange new electricity leaps from fabric to flesh and runs up his arm to his brain. His eyes glaze and his mouth opens. The sheet wears her essence like a ghost, and he is grateful that she had not washed it before leaving, grateful that she had not washed it in some time.

Clive gathers the sheet in his massive hands and brings the cool, worn, Andrea-saturated fabric to his face, inhaling with a dying man's last desperate gasp. There is much, there. The cold-hot sweat of waking from nightmares too horrid to tell. The salty sweat of days and nights too hot to move. The wet throb of masturbation.

Flash.

Willie's Wet Whistle.

Clive and Andrea dance. The bartender wipes a glass and watches them and then the clock. Patsy Cline on the jukebox. "She's Got You". Andrea drunkenly mangles the words. Normally, that would enrage Clive, but somehow, for some reason, when this woman does it, it does not chaff. It is almost endearing, like a very young child who has only recently learned to talk, attempting to sing a song they have not quite learned.

"You like Patsy?" he asks.

She manages to lift her head off his chest and looks at him with unfocused eyes and he sees such sorrow, such overwhelming pain behind those eyes that it forms an ache in his heart. What have these eyes seen? What has this woman endured?

"How can anyone not like Patsy Cline? You have to be an asshole not to like Patsy Cline." Her frown turns to a smile. "Your terpsichorean abilities are nothing short of wonderful."

Clive smiles. "Thank you. You're quite a dancer yourself."

Andrea's surprise is obvious. "You know what terpsichorean means. I like that. I like you."

Andrea sinks her face onto Clive's chest and begins once again, to mangle the words to the song. Clive pulls her closer. He likes the feel of this woman. There is the feminine softness that all women should have, but also, just below the surface, there is tight muscle and even deeper. there is an inner strength that is like a core of steel. This woman is a survivor. This woman has survived much. At the same time, he feels in her bones, a world-weariness, a sense that she is tired of struggling, tired of waking up screaming, tired of constant disappointment. A fighter who is tired of fighting. It is confusing, and he is not sure that what he had planned on doing to her, is what he will do.

The jukebox shuts off mid-tune.

Andrea continues to sing. Clive turns his attention to the bartender, like a snake

casually aware of new prey. Their eyes meet. The bartender is big, but not as big as Clive. The bartender thinks, at this moment in time, that he could possibly take Clive, certain he could with the baseball bat hiding behind the bar in hand. He is completely wrong.

"Last call's over and done. We're closed."

Clive stares at the bartender. He stares for a very long time. He sees the bartender's brain turning, eyes flicking quickly to under the bar, to the baseball bat. Calculating.

He makes the right decision. "Okay, finish your song. There's laws, you know. I got to close, when I got to close, you know. Lose my license..."

The bartender mumbles to himself as he snaps a switch and Patsy Cline warbles up to speed. The song plays. Clive and Andrea finish their dance.

Fast forward through the end of the song.

Andrea staggers out of the bar. Clive,

sober, behind her. Andrea almost falls.
Clive grabs her, but she pulls away.

"I can stand on my own..."

She falls against a car. Laughs. Clive tilts his head to one side, watching her like an inquistive dog. Andrea is staring down at her feet. One of her shoes is missing. Did she lose it while dancing? Clive doesn't know.

"Man, I ain't been this drunk since..."
She almost falls forward, rights herself, falls back against the car. "...yesterday."
Andrea remembers Clive. "Hey. You. Where you wanna go? What you wanna do?"

Clive makes his decision. "I've enjoyed our evening immensely, but I think you should go home. It's late."

Andrea sneers. It twists her lip and Clive resists the urge to reach out and twist it back the way it was. He fears he would twist too hard. He fears he would twist her lip off her face.

"Late?" Andrea nearly chokes on the word, " My ass is late. It's early.

It's..." Andrea looks at her wrist. There use to be a watch there. She is certain of it. She eyes the position of the stars, realizes the time. "Oh," she said, "so that's why we got kicked out."

The bar lights go out. The parking lot light goes out. In the darkness, Andrea moves closer to Clive. "You got a place?" she asks.

He inhales and tastes her scent. It lays on the back of his throat and dissolves slowly. "I think you should go home."

"I'm too drunk to drive."

Clive smiles, "I don't have a car."

Andrea digs her keys out of her pocket and half hands, half throws them at Clive. His arm shoots out like a cobra striking, grabbing the keys.

"Take me home?" Andrea asks.

Clive considers this. He moves the keys about in his hand. A car key. A door key. A locker key. A simple metal ring. No fobs. No pictures. No supermarket or video store bar-coded bits of plastic. Function, and nothing

but.

"I'll take you home." Clive said.

Andrea tries to stand and starts to fall. Clive catches her, and pulls her close. In a motion so quick it takes him by surprise and Clive is never taken by surprise, Andrea kisses him. She steps back, and appears stunned as she touches her lips, as if there were something on them, something sweet and wonderful.

"Damn. You got the softest lips. Like butterfly wings."

Clive helps Andrea into her room and to her bed. It is not the Cobblestone room, but another, not as nice. The last drink has kicked in. He more carries her, than she walks. At the foot of the bed she throws her arms around his neck and once again he is surprised at how quickly she can move, even shit-faced drunk, and he wonders how quickly she could move if fully sober and angered. That, he thinks, would be something to see.

She says something that sounds like *"whatsha gonna dotomy bababoy"* but is

supposed to be "What are you going to do to me you bad, bad boy?"

Clive kisses her forehead and strokes her hair. "Shhhh."

He carefully removes Andrea's jacket, then lays her down, removing her boots and socks, smiling at her painted toes.

Andrea begins to snore gently. Clive carefully removes her pants and blouse. He stands for a very long time, carefully studying the scars her body wears. He knows what they are and what they represent, and the small ache that she placed in his heart, grows.

He folds the garments neatly and places them on her dresser. He looks around the room. It's not much, but it is neat and clean. He notices that there are no mirrors or artwork. But there are stacks of books.

Andrea murmurs, and Clive moves to the foot of the bed. Again, he watches her. She continues to murmur. The words unintelligible, but the tone and pitch suggesting anger, fear, disgust, and hatred.

He wonders what visions play across her mind. They cannot be pleasant. He notices a vial on the nightstand and picks it up. It is medication for a neurological disorder. Seldom fatal of itself, he knows, but those afflicted often end up with no control over their bodies. Their thoughts become disconnected, jumbled, clarity fragmented by increasing levels of dementia. Symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease. The drinking will only make it worse. Doesn't she know that? He knows she does. Saddened, he turns to leave. Makes his way silently across the room. His hand touches the doorknob.

"Please. Don't go. Don't leave me."

He turns back. Andrea is sitting up. Reaching for him. "You need to sleep", Clive jerks his chin at the vial, "And you shouldn't drink while taking those."

"Please," she says, "I don't want to wake up alone."

Clive studies her face, and comes to a decision. He turns off the light before undressing. Naked, he slides into Andrea's bed and begins to trace the scars that track

her body. "There's been so much sadness in your life. So much pain. I can help."

They are both naked, now. Clive gently caresses Andrea's nipples. They are pale pink, almost bloodless, and still instantly hard.

"So beautiful."

He kisses her stomach.

"So beautiful."

Her inner thighs. Trails like a razor.

"So beautiful."

Lower.

Andrea grasps the bedpost, twists, cries out in pleasure.

Clive wraps his hands around Andrea's throat. Time to take away the pain. Time to make it all go away. It is the least he can do for this beautiful, tragic woman.

A gun explodes.

Clive jerks into the present. He let's go of the sheets and they drift onto Andrea's bed like a ghost consumed by sunlight. He touches his side where Andrea's bullet gouged

the flesh. The raised ridge of scar tissue
feels like her.

From the nightstand he picks up a
notepad. He runs his fingers over the top
sheet of paper, feeling the indent. He tears
off the sheet and holds it up to the window.
There is a single word:

'Twilight.'

Tomato Soup**Andrea, Eight Years Old**

...and the foster parent, the guardian person,
the mother who wasn't *her* mother, would
shriek...

"Eat it while it's hot!"

...that daily bowl of tomato soup, five cans
for a dollar, six when on sale, like a
cauldron of blood bubbling and steaming, and
if she didn't take a spoonful then and there,
if she didn't endure that searing pain across
her tongue, she might wear that bowl of soup.
That bowl of soup might just get tossed in
her face, into her eyes, and she'd go blind.
And then what would the foster mother, the
mother who wasn't her mother, do to her? So
she ate it, and endured the pain with tears
running down her cheeks, her little body
quaking with fear. And the foster mother, the
mother who *WAS NOT HER MOTHER*, smiling and
nodding and saying over and over, 'isn't that
good, isn't that good soup, isn't it good...'

Dream of Broken Dolls

Andrea sleeps. And dreams.

She wanders through a house that is sometimes the house of Euxideos, and sometimes the house of her father, and sometimes an impossible fusion of all the places she had ever lived in her life, the project housing and no-tell motels and single rooms with the bathroom up the hall and to your right. She can hear rats scurry and roaches chatter. She can smell the pungent odor of bug spray and urine.

She is wrapped in a gauze-like fabric that is nearly translucent. Her body is naked, underneath. This bothers her...and yet it does not.

The walls are cracked. The cracks are deep and dark, and although she cannot see into their darkness, she knows there are things moving in that darkness... things it is best she does not see, things she does not want to think about, things that, it would be better, never suspect she can see them.

Papers are blown across her path by a

phantom wind. They are old and brown, and crackle like dead leaves. They are scrawled with words of passion. Voices read the words in lusty whispers.

She enters a bedroom that is Clive's bedroom... that is the bedroom her father raped her in... that is her room in the flophouse. She opens a huge window barely contained by the wall that supports it, revealing a landscape that goes on forever, under a sky the color of solder. Dark clouds form, and lightning flashes.

The scent of ozone laces the still, brittle air... air upon which the sun beat, hammering at it like liquid gold. Far in the distance, the flat land clashed with a dark mirror image of thunderheads. Lightning strobes within that darkness.

Andrea turns from the window and she is in a child's room.

A broken china doll with a cracked face stares at her, with its one remaining eyeball. Flame dances over the surface of the eye like red tears.

She turns and finds herself in the center of the room, surrounded by broken dolls, many with pins sticking out of them and many with their lips sewn shut.

She picks one up and it is Eppie's doll... it is the doll she found in the neighbor's garbage... it is the doll she hit her father with... it is her father's body with his face turned one way and his body turned the other.

A broken child's doll. No. A child's broken doll. There was a difference. A crack ran across the face, across an eye socket empty and filled with darkness. The remaining glass eye gazed unseeing, at nothing. The limbs of the dolls looked as if someone had tried to pull them out of their potbellied torsos. There was something bitter and violent about the image that caused the taste of metal to flood the back of her mouth.

Andrea turns and Eppie, doll-like and broken, is floating in mid-air in front of her. She stifles a cry and reaches for Eppie. When her hand touches Eppie's, there is the sizzle of flesh burning and the smell

of phosphorus.

Andrea jolts awake. The sound of a rifle fades into the distance.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the house silent around her, she felt as if she were still locked in that dream. Taunted by feelings of domination and forced acquiescence. Images flee into the darkness of lost memory as she tries to recall specifics.

Andrea isn't sure if the noise was part of the dream, or heat thunder, or what. She goes to the window and looks out at the early morning. And hears another rifle shot.

Andrea and Eppie Go Crawdaddin'

Andrea stared out the window, watching the sky lightened with the rise of the sun, watching the field give birth to birds and insects. Something, she wasn't sure what, scurried across the road and vanished into a hole. A floorboard creaks and she turns.

Eppie, dressed, was peeking into her room.

"Good morning," Andrea said.

Eppie entered and sat on the bed. The mattress barely gave, so slight was the child's presence. Were her bones hollow?

Together they looked at the world outside the window.

"You're the only one up," Eppie said.

"Is that so?" Andrea smiled.

"It's very early."

"Is it now? Why are you awake then?"

Eppie's eyes got bigger. Andrea wouldn't have believed it possible.

"I'm going crawdaddin'."

"Crawdaddin? What's that?"

Eppie tilted her head, as if Andrea, not having heard of crawdaddin', was just the strangest thing. "Ain't you never hear of crawdaddin'?"

"I don't think so." Andrea said, "Suppose you tell me what crawdaddin' is, that you got to get up so early for it?"

"That's easy. You got's to get up early to gets the craw dads."

Eppie giggled hysterically. It was the first time Andrea had heard the child laugh. The sound was something she could only describe as happy crystal, like a beautiful clear chime of joyous emotion. She wanted to hear that sound again. She thought of jokes she might tell, of funny faces she might make, of stories with happy endings.

Eppie leaned forward. "You want to go with me?"

Andrea smiled again.

"I would love to go with you."

Andrea heard the stream before she saw it. The sound was a gentle murmur that ebbed and flowed, that bubbled and hushed. The walk

took longer than she thought it would, and she wondered if the rest of the family knew that Eppie came here, and if they knew how far from the house it was.

"Almost there," chirped Eppie, "almost there."

They stopped at the edge of the rocky slope. The water caught the sun when it peeked out from between clumps of cloud and tore it into a mosaic of golden light that shimmered and teased.

"It's beautiful," said Andrea.

Eppie slipped her hand into Andrea's and lead her down the slope to the edge of the stream. She was carrying a plastic pail in her other hand. The water moved slowly near the stream's edges, but progressively faster toward its center. It was not wide, but although they could see the bottom near the edges, the center was black. Waterbugs moved frantically on the surface. Eppie carefully surveyed the waters, looking here, then there.

"So," said Andrea, "how exactly do we go

about doing this crawdaddin' thing?"

"Just watch me," said Eppie. She sat down and removed her shoes, then rolled up her pants. Andrea watched.

"Gotta take your shoes off first." Eppie said.

Andrea slipped off her shoes. Eppie eyed Andrea's toes, then gave Andrea a sideways glance. "Those sure are some pretty toes."

"Thank you," said Andrea.

Eppie entered the water. Andrea followed. The moment her feet touched the water she yelped. "It's freezing!"

Eppie nodded. "Clive says the water comes straight up out of the ground, miles away. That's why its so cold. He was gonna show me, but we never got around to it."

Emotion caught in the child's throat. She turned her attention to the water and began moving slowly through it, staring intently.

"Comes right out of the Antarctic from the feel of it," muttered Andrea.

"You'll get used to it."

"Catch a damn pneumonia first."

Eppie gave Andrea the big eyes. "You want to do this or not?" she demanded.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Andrea sighed.

Wincing every step of the way, and wondering how Eppie could be so nonchalant about the cold, Andrea worked her way through the water to stand next to Eppie.

"Now what?"

"You gotta find a good rock." Eppie pronounced.

"A good rock?"

Eppie pointed. "Like that one."

She waded to a large, saucer-shaped rock and squatted next to it, eyes narrowed, looking for something. Her feet had stirred up the silt. To Andrea it looked no different than any of the other water-polished rocks around them.

"You gotta wait till the water clears. You gotta sit real quiet like, so you don't scare the crawdads." Eppie said.

Andrea realized she could no longer feel her toes. "Geez," she said, "I'd hate to do that."

The water cleared quickly. Eppie carefully reached into the water and slowly lifted the edge of the rock. "Look," she whispered.

Andrea looked, frowned, looked closer. What was she suppose to be looking at? Ah. There was a small, clawed creature lurking under the rock. "It's like a baby lobster."

"I guess," Eppie shrugged. She really didn't think so at all, but was too polite to say.

They both continued to stare at the crustacean. Its beady black eyes regarded them without interest.

"So," said Andrea, "now what?"

"First you put your one hand in front of it, where it can see it. You don't want to do it too fast or you'll scare it right off. You want to just make it a little nervous, is all. Then you take your other hand and put it behind the rock, like this."

Eppie showed Andrea what she meant. Andrea doubted she could get her body to twist that way. "That looks pretty awkward."

"Yeah, well, I'm at that age, or so they tell me." Andrea, surprised, chuckled, then realized Eppie was straight-faced serious. "Do they, now?" she said solemnly.

"Yeah," Eppie replied. "Okay. Now watch. I'm going to move my one hand closer and closer and..."

The crawdad jerked backwards and right into Eppie's waiting hand. Squealing with delight, Eppie scooped the crawdad out of the water and dropped it into the pail with one fluid motion. She began to jump up and down shouting triumphantly. "Gotcha!" Eppie crowed.

She held the pail out toward Andrea who looked in and confirmed that, yes indeed, the crawdad had been captured. It waved its tiny claws at her in what it surely believed was a menacing manner.

"Now what?" Andrea asked.

"Your turn." Eppie announced.

"Sure," said Andrea, "I can do that."
How hard could it be?

Andrea looked around for a "good" rock, mimicking Eppie as closely as she could. Eppie watched, like a coach checking the form of a new athlete. "This one?"

Eppie shook her head. "Nope."

"How about this one?"

"Nope."

Andrea found another rock that she thought might work. Hell...how would she know? It was a big rock with some moss waving on it. But hell, they were all big rocks with moss waving on them.

"This one?" she asked Eppie.

Eppie waded to her side, eyed the rock and nodded. "Looks good."

Andrea squatted. When her butt hit the cold water she shrieked and jumped. Eppie roared with laughter. "Christ! I just got goosed by Frosty the Snow Pervert!"

Eppie, stifling giggles, gestured at the rock. "Go on, you big baby."

Andrea sniffed in her best imitation of an indignant grand dame. "There's no need to be rude."

"C'mon. Get the crawdad."

"All right," said Andrea, "Just hold on."

She squatted again, slowly. Despite being ready for the cold, it still caused her to grimace. She peered through the crystal water at the rock. Slowly, she lifted the edge. Two tiny black eyes stared up at her. "I see one," she whispered.

"Okay, now take your other hand..."

Andrea waved her off. "I can handle it."

Eppie shrugged and pretended interest in something on the stream's edge. "If you say so."

Andrea placed one hand in front of the crawdad, then slowly placed her other behind it.

Eppie leaned forward. Andrea looked up and their eyes meet. Eppie smiled. Andrea smiled, then turned her attention back to capturing their prey.

Andrea moves one hand forward. The crawdad shoots backward - right into her waiting hand. She jumps up, hollering. "I got it! I got it! I got it!"

Eppie beamed, "You sure did! Hey, you're good at this."

Andrea brings her closed hand to her face. She can feel it wiggling against her palm. The feeling is strange, alien.

"Let's take a closer look at this little bugger."

"I don't know if you should do that." Eppie warned.

Andrea opened her hand. The crawfish sat on her palm, calmly staring at her with its beady black eyes.

"I wouldn't..."

Suddenly the crawfish jerked, shooting like a rocket at Andrea's face. She screamed and staggered backwards, twisting as she fell. The crawfish dropped into the water with a *plonk*, as Eppie laughed so hard, she doubled over, clutching her sides.

"Oh, oh, that is the funniest thing I

ever saw in my whole life!" Eppie managed between shrieks of laughter.

Andrea, drenched, sputters. "Oh, so you think that's funny?"

Andrea began splashing water at Eppie. Eppie returned fire. Soon, they were both drenched and convulsed with laughter.

It felt good to laugh. It was a sound Andrea was not used to hearing come out of her mouth. It was a feeling she had forgotten. She never wanted to forget it again.

Eppie's Father

On the roadside, Eppie's Father watches from his truck. There's a foul, loathsome hate, churning his guts. His fingers crawl up the handle of his revolver and he imagines taking it out of the holster and making his way to the water's edge and pressing the cold steel against the bitch's forehead, right between her eyes. He wants to see the fear in her eyes, wants to hear the scream bursting from her whore of a mouth before he pulls the trigger and the sound of her scream is replaced with the sound of her brain and the back of her skull, splashing into the water.

He imagines all this and it makes him so hard, he has to stroke himself through his trousers. His lips twist, he jerks the shift into drive, and roars off.

Eppie continues to laugh and splash, but Andrea is listening intently to the sound of the truck, fading.

Fairies

Morning melted into afternoon. Fitful sunlight scatters across the surface of the water as it flows around reeds standing straight and tall. Dragonflies flit from one to the next, twisting in the still air, dancing an aerial ballet of strange geometries only they understand.

A sound that Andrea would one day describe as shimmering, slides out of the silence, then is gone. Noting her puzzled face, Eppie says "Fairies."

Without thinking Andrea replies "There are no fairies."

She wanted to pull the words back into her mouth, but of course, could not. Eppie appeared unperturbed by Andrea's disbelief.

"Grand-Uncle Clive says that only the blind can see fairies. And only the deaf can hear them."

"So," wonders Andrea, "only people without fingers can touch them?"

Eppie eyed Andrea up and down. "That's a funny kind of thought."

They lay side by side, on the bank of the stream. Their pail was full of crawdads, and their clothes were nearly dry. The stream sang them a liquid lullaby. Eppie propped herself on an elbow.

"Did you know that if you got a tapeworm in your belly, it will come out at night while you're sleeping and lick the salt off your lips?"

Andrea opened her eyes and looked at the child. "That is not a nice story."

Eppie picked up a pebble and threw it into the stream. "Can I ask you something?"

Andrea sat up. "You can ask me anything."

Eppie picked up another pebble and turned it over in her hand. It was oval and smooth and gray, and there were bits of white fossil embedded in it. "Do you dream?"

'Why would you ask that?' Andrea thought. "I think most everybody dreams, Eppie."

Eppie placed the pebble back where she had picked it up from. Exactly where she had

picked it up from. "I dreamed I was in heaven once."

"Really?"

Eppie stared at the stream but that was not what she was seeing. "Grandmama Clymenestra says you should tell dreams to make them come true."

"I never heard that before," Andrea pondered the idea. "I thought you shouldn't tell, if you wanted your dream to come true."

Eppie slide her palm across her nose. "That's wishes. We're talking about dreams."

"Right. Sorry."

"Should I tell you my dream?" asked Eppie.

Andrea picked up a stone. It too, was filled with small fossils. "If you'd like to."

Eppie scratched her nose, then examined her nails. "I was alone," she said, "and I was all in white. I was looking around and I said, 'this is nice.' Except 'nice' wasn't the word I meant. A voice said, 'that's not the word.' I turned and saw somebody and I

asked, 'is this heaven?' And the person smiled, but not like it was funny or nothing, like they knew something I didn't. So I asked, 'are you God?' And they smiled more. And that was it."

Andrea scratched her own nose but did not examine her nails. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes." Eppie said.

"Is anyone making you do something you don't want to do?"

Eppie looked away and her body stiffened. She began to tug at a clump of grass. "What do you mean?" Her voice was low and distant.

Andrea swallowed. This isn't my place she thought. This isn't for me to say. This isn't a subject I should be talking to this child about. But if not me, then who?

"I mean... Eppie, when I was little, your age, somebody made me do things that I didn't want to do. And this person was an adult. This person told me not to tell anyone what he had done, or what we were

doing. That it was a secret. And that if I told, he would hurt someone I loved. Hurt them real bad. Is someone telling you something like that, Eppie?"

The silence was long and telling.

In the stream, a fish jumps. Silver scales catch the sun and flash like a mirror, throwing light across their faces. Then the fish was gone with a satisfying splash.

"Eppie?"

"It's getting late," Eppie observed. "We better get home."

"Sure." Andrea said and said nothing else for a long while after.

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

The office is dark. Eppie's Father works at an ancient PC. He types the name that was on Andrea's fake driver's license, into the database and hits enter.

He waits.

Phone modem. What are you going to do? Need one of them DSL or T1 lines. Like that'll happen in a million years. Damn town just got cable only the other year.

Fucking backwater. Should have gone to Chicago when I could have. Should have said 'F'off Twilight.' Shoulda, coulda, but did ya?

No.

The words 'NO RECORD' appear on the screen. He enters a few more commands. Andrea's fake driver's license comes up and he frowns. Eppie's father was mean and cruel and basically, just down-right evil. He'd been a school yard bully who'd gotten the shit beaten out of him at home by father and brothers, then turned that hurt and hate, three-fold on his class mates. He didn't

drink or smoke. Didn't have a single person he would call 'friend', and didn't care. He became a cop because it gave him the best chance of legally kicking the shit out of others, of keeping his position as alpha male in the dwindling pack that was the male citizens of Twilight.

But he wasn't stupid. And he possessed the same feature that all good cops - evil or not - possessed. He just *knew* when something wasn't right. Driving past a quiet looking storefront while making his rounds, he would know that someone had broken in and might just be in there now. He would see someone walking down the street and he would slow down and eye them carefully, because he knew they had either done something they shouldn't have, or were planning on doing it.

He just *knew*.

Same as he *knew* there was something wrong with this whole set-up. The driver's license was real. He'd seen some of the best fakes there were and this wasn't one of them. It was real. And yet it was *wrong*. Nothing he could prove in a court of law, nothing he

could take to the sheriff and point to and say, 'hey, let's drag this bitch in and find out what the real story is.' But he could feel it, like a worm burrowing through his guts.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

He calls up his e-mail and pecks out a message.

Heading Home with a Pail Full of Crawfish

Andrea wondered where the day had gone.
They'd left the house barely past sunrise,
and now dusk was looming.

They walked slowly back home, each with
a hand holding the pail now a bit over half
full with crawdads, savoring the silence and
moment.

Andrea had expected they would set the
creatures free at the end of the day, but
when she suggested doing so, Eppie had looked
at her with an expression that might have
been sheer horror, or might have been sheer
bewilderment over how anyone could suggest
such utter stupidity.

"But, what are we going to do with
them?"

"Why, boil them up and eat them." Eppie
said.

"Eat them?"

The sun was near setting. Clusters of
fireflies were already flashing over the tall
grasses on either side of the road. A hot
breeze appeared out of nowhere, kicking up a

tiny dustdevil that spun, threw grit, and died. The sound of crickets was accompanied by the sound of their shoes crunching gravel.

"You love Clive?" asked Eppie.

"Yes," said Andrea, "Very much."

Eppie stuck her finger in her nose, dug around, pulled something out, examined it and flicked it away.

"That's nasty," said Andrea.

"Yes," agreed Eppie, flicking the thought off, as well. "I love him, too. He used to read me stories. He read me stories all the time. I told you that, right? Nobody can read a story like Uncle Clive. He acted out all the parts, and did different voices for all of them. He would be the king and put on a Burger King crown or he would be a superhero and put on a towel and pick me up and fly me around the house."

(beat)

"I miss him."

"It sounds like he loved you very much too."

"People say he's very bad. How can he be very bad when he reads stories so good? They try not to let me hear, but sometimes I hear what they say on the news, or see stuff about it in the newspapers. And of course, the kids at school, they're mean. They say mean things. It makes me feel bad. That's why I don't have to go no more."

Andrea feels uncomfortable. She starts to speak, and is halted by the vibration of her cell phone.

"What's that?" Eppie asked.

"My cell phone." Andrea said.

"Oh. I thought you farted." Eppie said.

On the cell phone, a digital buffalo or maybe it was an armadillo, she could never tell, ran across the screen. The caller's phone number appeared and blinked. It was Virgil.

"This is kind of private, Eppie. Can you sit down and let me walk on ahead a bit?"

Eppie shrugged. "Sure." Then she sits on the side of the road, the pail of crayfish between her bony knees. Andrea walks away

quickly, thumbing the phone button. "Yeah?"

"Andrea," Virgil said, "how are you dear?"

Eppie picks up two of the crawfish, one in each hand, and uses them as puppets.

Crawfish One: *Help me daddy, help me! I don't like it in the pail. It's smelly and nasty! And pink!*

Crawfish Two: *You shut up you dirty crawfish girl! You're bad and your underwear is dirty and you are going to get a beating and burn in hell!*

"What do you want?" Andrea demanded, sotto-voice.

"Where are you dear?"

"Where the hell do you think I am? Where you sent me. West butt-fuck Louisiana." She was shocked at how easily she slid back into her old persona.

Real persona? A tough as nails, hard-core bitch. Was that her real self? She quickly glanced back to see if Eppie had heard, but she was busy playing with the

crawfish.

"Is that anywhere near rim job?" Virgil asked.

"Yeah, and blow job is right up the fucking street." Andrea snarled. She realized she was angrier than she had been in a long time. Furious at this pompous ass for intruding on her day. For ruining what had been one of most wonderful days of her life.

"What do you want?" Virgil asked, patiently.

"What? You called me, wad."

"Oh yes. I was, preoccupied. They lost track of Clive, near Koshkonong, Missouri."

"What do you mean they 'lost' him?"

"Exactly that. Gone. Vanished. Trail cold as your nipples."

"Jesus Christ. How long ago?"

"Two days."

"So, he could be here."

"He could be."

"Why wasn't I told sooner?"

"You're being told now."

"Right."

"And how are things there in the bustling metropolis of Twilight?"

"Everything's fine. The night-life is exquisite. We catch fireflies in jars and watch their lights go out as they die."

"How quaint. And it appears that the Euxideos have accepted you with open arms."

"Hook, line and sinker."

"Do you need us to send any backup?"

"I can handle this"

"And your gun is loaded?"

"Locked and loaded."

"With the dum dums?"

"Of course."

"Will you make him suffer? Will you save the head shot for last?"

Andrea turns off the phone and resists the urge to throw it as far from her as she could. She turns and Eppie is standing right there, staring at her, eyes wide and

gleaming. "You won't let them hurt my Clive will you?"

Had she heard? No. Andrea had not mentioned Clive by name. She squats so that she is face to face with Eppie. "No one's going to hurt your uncle, Eppie, not with me around."

Eppie stared at Andrea for an uncomfortably long time, studying her face, looking for the truth of that statement. Looking for the lie.

A bat rushed overhead, with the sound of beating leather.

"Getting late," Eppie said.

They start back. Along the way, Andrea takes the full load of the bucket. Eppie slips her hand into Andrea's free hand. Andrea squeezes Eppie's hand, tight.

Love Letter From Clive (excerpt)

*...someday I want to really give myself to you
with all the passion that I feel. I want to
fill you with my passion. I want to fuck you
with my feelings..."*

PAPA JUBEL IS NOT HAPPY

The family had gathered in the sitting room around an ornate table carved of black oak. Papa Jubel sat at the head. The tall black man stood immobile at this left side, face carved of mahogany and just as emotive. He wears a stove-pipe hat with a band of woven swamp reeds decorated with crocodile teeth.

In a leather chair off to one side and nearly lost in shadow, the family lawyer sat, doing his best to fade into the background and not be noticed. He is tall and angular, with a baby's face trying to appear worldly and wise, but failing miserably. The man could pass for H. P. Lovecraft. He crosses and uncrosses his legs from time to time, but does not speak.

Papa Jubel slams his fist down, face suffused with thick, dark veins throbbing under the thin flesh that covers his temples.

Juvenal jumps, pretends he didn't, hopes nobody saw. Everybody did, but nobody cared.

"And I tell you, I won't have it! The body is a temple. The body houses the soul,

and even when the soul is gone, the body deserves respect. It deserves the decency of a good Christian burial and it deserves the decency of ritual and rite!"

Papa Jubel stabs a gnarled finger in the direction of the cemetery. "There are nine generations of Euxideos asleep in that holy ground. The circle shall not be broken!"

"But Papa Jubel..." says Niobe.

Papa Jubel rounds on her. "You have no say here! I was his brother. I am the oldest. The say is mine!"

Clymenestra raises her hand, palm toward Papa Jubel. There are faint markings on the creased flesh. Numbers perhaps. Strange signs. "I have to agree with you Uncle."

Papa Jubel nods. "Well, at last someone here's talking some sense."

Clymenestra slowly looks around the table, taking in the faces of each family member. "I have to say, it almost makes me physically ill when I think of my poor father's body being fed to the flames, his ashes scattered to the winds, his memory with

them."

Papa Jubel nodded again. His thoughts..."Exactly."

Clymenestra now fixes Papa Jubel with her own hard, unblinking stare. "But I love my father. And I honor him and I obey him. And even in death I will continue to do so. I will honor his wishes to be cremated..."

"I will not hear this!" he screams and saliva blows from his mouth in a fine mist. It rains upon Clymenestra's face, but she does not react. She does not blink. She continues to stare, defiantly. "I will obey his final words and take his ashes to Owl Creek and let the wind take them..."

Papa Jubel is on his feet. "I won't hear it! I won't stand for it!"

The Lawyer clears his throat and speaks. "I'm afraid sir that the will is very, very clear on the matter".

The Tall Black Man turns and fixes the lawyer with a stare that feels like a physical blow. The lawyer twists to avoid it.

Papa Jubel turns on the lawyer. "I have

lawyers too. Better than you! We'll see what's clear and what isn't!"

Clymenestra reaches for Papa Jubel. He jerks away, as if her touch were sure death. "Please, Papa Jubel, this isn't the time..."

Papa Jubel stands. His eyes are terrible, indeed. His upper lip twists in disgust, revealing darkly stained teeth.

"What wretched incubus took your father's form and spilled its vile seed into your mother that she should give spawn to such demons as you? And the rest of you?! Dear god the horror our once proud name has had to bear! The scandal! The shame!" Papa Jubel slowly rolls his gaze over everyone in the room. "You all disgust me. You are all dead to me."

Without a word, the Tall Black Man gently wraps his large thin hand around Papa Jubel's arm and leads him out of the room. The silence is deep and thick.

Juvenal, of course, is the first to speak. "Well. That could have gone better."

Niobe slaps at his arm and hisses "You

are the dregs."

The lawyer stands, wanting nothing more than to be on his way. He addresses Clymenestra. "What would you have me do, ma'am?"

Clymenestra suddenly felt tired, very tired indeed. "As you said. The will is quite clear. Do as my father instructed. Make the arrangements."

"They've already been made, ma'am."

Clymenestra closes her eyes, feels them burn behind the lids. "Well, then..."

Andrea and Eppie enter just as Papa Jubel and The Tall Black Man exit. Andrea and the Tall Black Man lock eyes. The world goes strangely, unnaturally silent. The Tall Black Man's eyes seem to flash as if they were silvered mirrors.

The door closes behind them.

Andrea blinks rapidly.

Eppie gazes up at her, concerned. "You all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

Aren't I?

Eppie looks about nervously. She lifts a crooked finger and motions for Andrea to come closer. Andrea bends down as Eppie's lips whisper the word, "Zombi."

Andrea frowns, "What?"

"Don't look at their eyes."

The family exits the sitting room. Niobe speaks to Eppie. "Iphegenia, get upstairs and put out your mourning clothes for tomorrow."

"Yes grandmama Niobe." Head bowed, Eppie hurries up the stairs.

Andrea raises a questioning eyebrow.

"Family disagreement," says Juvenal.

"Juvenal!" Niobe snarls.

"Sorry."

Clymenestra speaks, finally. "My father wished to be cremated and his ashes scattered. Papa Jubel believes it is sacrilege, but there is little he can do. I must honor my father. But in doing so, I lose yet another member of my family." She pauses, and turns her words on herself. "Why

are there no right decisions?"

A FEW WORDS ON THE SUBJECT OF CREMATION

For an average size adult, cremation takes from two to three hours at a normal operating temperature of between 1,500 and 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. After cremation is complete, all organic bone fragments as well as non-consumed metal items are swept into the back of the cremation chamber and into a stainless steel cooling pan. All non-consumed items, like metal from clothing, hip joints, and bridge work, are separated from the cremated remains. This separation is accomplished through visual inspection, as well as using a strong magnet for smaller and minute, metallic objects. Items such as dental gold and silver are non-recoverable, and are commingled in with the cremated remains. Remaining bone fragments are then processed in a machine to a consistent size, and placed into a temporary or permanent urn, selected by the family. There are numerous ways to scatter the ashes. For those who were lovers of

water, remains may be placed in a bio-degradable urn that gently cradles the departed all the way down into the ocean's depths, where it safely dissolves. For the mountain lover, ashes can be scattered in the Sierra Nevada Mountains where the service promises to find that "special resting place under the oaks, pines and cedars". There is even a service that will stick your remains in a fireworks rocket, sending it up to scatter said remains in a burst of technicolor enchantment. The final image you will leave your mourners with, is that of the dearly departed as a Fourth of July, pyrotechnic wonder.

THE DAY THEY CREMATED PAPA CATALLUS

That morning they cremated Papa Catallus.

The sky above was devoid of bird or cloud. The trees seemed to sag as if they were made of wax and were melting into strange new shapes. The air was clotted with humidity. Andrea thought: This is what it must feel like trying to breathe in the womb.

Not wanting to be away from the house, Andrea feigned cramps. Clymenestra had Juvenia fix a pot of mint tea before the family left for the ceremony. Andrea poured some tea into her cup, swished it around, then poured it and the rest of the pot into the toilet.

She broke down her Glock, cleaned it, and checked the mechanism. She took out a bullet and ran her fingertip over the "x" etched across the head. The bullet would explode upon contact, ripping through flesh and organs and depending upon where it hit, detaching limbs.

"Sweet Dreams" plays on the phonograph.

Andrea lays on her bed in t-shirt and

panties, staring at the ceiling. It is too hot to move. She dabs at her neck with a wad of tissue. Disgusted, she throws the tissue away and gets up.

She goes to the door and peeks out. The house is silent. A short trip to the kitchen gets her a plastic bag, and she wraps her gun in it.

Then she goes into the bathroom and turns on the shower. Cool water runs over her body, washing away the heat and dust and sweat. As she dries off, there is a sound above her. She freezes, and notices pale light visible above the ceiling vent.

Wrapped in her towel, Andrea exits the bathroom and finds the attic door, with its narrow twisting staircase that leads upwards.

The ceiling is vaulted, the space underneath packed with old chests and furniture. Andrea moves into the attic, listening, watching, ready. Standing over the vent, she sees that it offers a perfect view into the bathroom and the shower stall. She squats down and notices the wads of tissue, and the stains on the floor. Her lips curl

with distaste. "Get a life Juvenal."

When the boy returns from the ceremony, she will have to take him aside and have a little talk with him about privacy and personal space.

Stacks of photographs wrapped in black ribbon, sit on a seaman's chest. Andrea shuffles through decades of images. The house, people, parties... everyone happy. Faces bright with smiles. Eyes sparkling with alcohol. Most of the photographs are black and white, edges brown and crisp with age. A handful were color that had faded to drab pastel tones, more remembrance of color than the real thing. All were water stained. Or, at least Andrea thought it was water.

Another stack, all of Clymenestra when she was young. Classically beautiful, with high cheekbones, upswept hair and knowing eyes. She stands with a series of different men, all handsome and well dressed, but none her equal. They might as well not even be there, the image of Clymenestra so overpowers them.

Andrea does not know why she does it,

but she opens the chest. The odor of damp and dust and age, creeps into her nostrils and she pulls at her nose to work it out. The chest is filled with bundles of yellowed letters, tied with fragile lace that nearly crumbles when she unties it.

Again, not knowing why, Andrea begins to read the letters. They are love letters, all written in the same hand, an elegant, fluid scrawl.

Dearest Beloved,

I awoke with the taste of your lips, your flesh, your touch, in my mouth. I awoke with the aroma of you in my nostrils. You were still sleeping, deep and silent. The sun was rising, summer hot and bright. I sat at my desk and watched you, no, studied you. My eyes lingering over every inch of your exquisite body. It was already wet there, where my hand reached. I imagined it was your hand, the wide palms, the long fingers, the carefully, perfectly groomed nails. The flesh soft. My body responds immediately, responds as it would if it were your hand, and it is

*your hand, though you lie deep in sleep
across my bed, half a room away, mote-filled
shaft of sunlight cutting through the open
window, falling upon your flesh, turning it
gold. I can see the myriad of small, fine
hairs that cover your body. They catch the
sunlight and turn to gentle threads of soft
copper and I moan as I slide my fingers in
and around the curves and folds of myself and
then move my hand, wet, across my abdomen,
between my breasts, nipples so hard they
hurt, as if straining to be free from their
place on my breasts. I bring my hand to my
face and inhale deeply my scent, and you stir
and I can see again your large cock, and I
taste myself on my fingertips like some
strange honey. You say something I cannot
hear, but as your lips move, I can feel them
upon me and everywhere your lips touch, my
flesh is marked by their passing. The marks
that brand me, that tell me that I am yours
and you are mine, now and forever. Once
again, my hand moves down my body and once
more, my fingers find my inner core and with*

every touch I begin to unravel, to come apart, to disintegrate into white hot liquid that you can cup in the palms of your hands and bring to your lips, to sip and savor the very essence of my soul. Then I could stand it no longer. I walked across the room, and as if you knew I was moving closer, you softly rolled over onto your back, revealing yourself to me as the sun grew even brighter, the shaft of light more intense. You were like some Greek God, cloaked in a garment made of pure light, and I parted my lips and took you into my mouth. Your hands were in my hair and your hips were thrusting upward as you moaned. I took you deeper and deeper, until you cried out and convulsed, and then we laid there intertwined, hoping it would be forever, while the sunlight faded once again and night appeared and we both passed into sleep.

Andrea lifted her eyes from the letter and in the darkness of the attic, ghosts make their presence felt.

A much younger Clymenestra, perhaps mid

to late thirties, perhaps early forties, with a very young man, perhaps not out of his teens, in the throes of passion.

FLASH

Shafts of light come through the attic vent, falling upon their bodies like bars. He cups his hand behind her neck and lifts her face to his and they kiss. Still kissing her, he lifts her nightgown above her waist and her legs part. His hand moves down her abdomen, and continues lower, finding her wet and ready for his touch.

FLASH

Clothes laying around them. Both completely undressed. Their bodies like sculptures. He moves down her, kissing and nipping, then peeling back the smooth folds of her sex to work his tongue inside. Air explodes out of her and her back arches and she works her fingers into his hair.

FLASH

His mouth climbs to her belly button, then to her breasts. His other hand, wet, gently moves across a nipple. She arches

again and he slides into her effortlessly.

Her mouth opens and she moans.

FLASH

Limbs intertwined. Massive arms around a body thin and angular, like abstract sculpture.

FLASH

Flesh hot and sweaty.

FLASH

Mouths mesh. Lips melt and fuse. They pull apart and the flesh is like taffy, stretching. It tears with a hideous ripping sound revealing clenched teeth.

FLASH.

Andrea cries out and falls back. The vision is gone. Her head throbs, threatens to crack, to explode, to splatter her aching brain against the stained walls.

The light has faded. The day is gone and the house is still empty. She can feel no presence behind the ghosts and the memories. How long had she laid here? She staggers to her feet and stumbles

down the stairs to her room, where she
dry swallows two pills and the room spins
and goes black.

Forty-One Years Ago

Clive stood framed in the doorway of his mother's bedroom. Barely fourteen, he was already a man, barrel-chested with unusually large hands and tragic eyes set wide apart in a face surrounded by long auburn hair.

The house was silent.

Papa Catallus had gone hunting with Papa Jubel. They would be gone for days. Father was also gone, perhaps with his other family or drunk in some back alley juke joint over in *N'orleans*. Clive didn't know which and cared not at all. The servants had Sundays off.

Mother lay on her glorious four poster, canopy bed, limbs thrown about carelessly, the soft whisper of her breathing telling him she was fast asleep. The fresh scent of jasmine teased his nostrils like a memory of flowers. She stirred, lips parted and a tiny poof of air escaped them. He watched her chest rise with each inhale, breasts pressing taunt against the sheer material of her summer nightgown. His eyes traveled down her

flat belly, along the suggestion of well-formed thigh under the material, to her delicate ankles and long, narrow feet. She has the most beautiful toes he had ever seen on a woman, and Clive had looked at a lot of women's toes.

Time passed, marked only by Clymenestra's breathing and the soft tick of the clock in the ballroom.

Clive now stood at the side of his mother's bed. From here, he could see out the narrow floor to ceiling windows that looked out onto the garden and the fields beyond.

He stood less than a foot from the edge of the bed, between his mother's legs, long legs forming a perfect V, toes pointed toward the wall behind him.

He reached out, hand trembling as if cold, or electrified with some strange, unnatural current. His hand stopped, his fingertips less than the thickness of a book page from his mother's right foot. His eyes moved from his hand to her face, back to his hand, and the shine of sunlight on the highly polished fingernail of his index finger.

Later.

It is night, and he's in his own bedroom. There's a 45 on the record player, volume turned low. Patsy Cline. Sweet Dreams (Of You). The revolution of ceiling fan blades barely move the sluggish air. He threw the sheet off. The soft cotton, normally so cool and crisp, now felt woolen and unpleasantly moist, like forgotten fabric found in a basement. He passed his hand across his chest, feeling the sweat as he moved lower, through the dark hair on his belly that had sprouted there seemingly overnight. The hand slid into his underwear, touching himself. He was hard in an instant, the urgent throb of need, pulsing against his palm.

Whispers.

He bolted upright. Caught? Who? 'It'll fall off if you touch it too much', Papa Catallus had told him and Papa Jubel laughing and singing "and you had to do wacka do wacka do..."

The whisper is coming from the vent. Clive listens, straining to hear the soft

voice, but cannot make out the words. He slips quietly out of bed, and feels the wood floor, glass-smooth against his feet. Clive puts his ear to the vent, trying not to breath. Sound travels both ways, you know.

His mother is speaking strangely, her words wrapped in thick breath, phrases punctuated with odd breaks, all caught in her throat. A low noise that could have been the growl of a mountain lion far in the distance, rises from the pit of her being. A vibration travels up his body. He does not know what she is saying or what she is doing, but he understands the feeling it brings him. Clive touches himself. His cock rises as if in greeting. He takes hold of himself and begins to pump. Images flood his mind... breasts taut against fabric... well-formed thigh... delicate ankles... beautiful toes bathed in sunlight. His back arches. Do wacka do wacka do wacka do.

The door opens. He spins around, almost crying out.

She is there, in the doorway. His mother wears the gossamer nightgown, and somehow he

can see her as well in the darkness, as if it were the full light of day. The material is near translucent where it sticks to her warm, perspiration damp flesh, and before he can speak, she is pressed against him. He cannot remember her walking that distance, but her warm... soft... oh god, so soft hand is upon him and he cries out. As he does, she brings her lips to his and swallows his cries of pleasure.

Time

Time passed as time does. Seconds became minutes became hours became days. Days passed into weeks and the weeks became a month, then half of another.

In that time, most of the world forgot about Clive Euxideos. The Earth revolved, continuously spinning day into night. Babies were born and people died. Politicians lied and celebrities changed hair styles. The media reported all with equal gravity.

After six weeks, Andrea found herself sinking easily into the languid rhythms of the House of Euxideos. Each day, save Sunday, she took mid-morning and mid-afternoon tea on the veranda with Clymenestra. It was always served by Juvenia, who never spoke a word, and avoided eye contact. It was always served at the same time, and it lasted exactly one hour.

In that hour, Clymenestra spoke and Andrea listened. She spoke of her past, and of the way life use to be when she was the same age as Juvenia, and how different things

were now. Other than during the tea ritual, Andrea caught only fleeting glimpses of Clymenestra as she moved between rooms, or turned a corner, or sometimes, in the distance, standing like a specter in the Euxideos' family cemetery across the way. It was as if Clymenestra, not yet dead, was practicing haunting the house and grounds. Andrea had no doubt that if the house still stood one hundred years from then, the fleeting figure of Clymenestra would continue to be seen.

Niobe, she saw even less of. She heard her in the morning when the world was still dark. Niobe would slam cupboard doors and mutter, then slam the front door and roar off in her truck. Days might go by before she returned. And when she did, it was late at night and she was stinking drunk. The sounds of her screaming epitaphs at her mother or someone else, could be heard through the vents. Her ranting would inevitably conclude with a heart rending wail that dissolved to anguished sobs, then silence.

Juvenal, she came upon now and again.

She had decided not to mention what she had found in the attic, but he seemed to know somehow, and so avoided her as best as he could. She would often find him sitting in the study reading a book, or in the kitchen drinking coffee, or going up the stairs to his room.

Andrea often thought that she should say something to him, if just 'good morning' or 'what are you reading' or anything at all, but realized she had no interest, not even in passing, and so, she did not. He seemed not to see her, at any rate. As if she were not there. As if she were the ghost and he refused to believe in her existence.

He had taken to carrying the urn that contained Papa Cattalus's ashes. Niobe raged at him to put the urn away, but he refused and she would eventually run out of breath and walk away cursing under her breath.

If not for Eppie, it would be almost as if she lived in the house alone, with Clymenestra's teas a visit from some strange specter who drifted in from the other side of the grave to chat.

She felt hazy, like she had when she first started taking her medication. Wrapped in a cocoon of stale air, her senses muffled, her perception of reality seemed skewed at strange angles.

Andrea came to understand that time was different here. It was as if, trapped within the confines of the house, time had forgotten how to move forward, had become stupid and meaningless. The great clock in the ballroom continued to tick, but it was only sound, like that of the crickets at night or the crows during the day. The crows. Each day brought more. Great flocks hunched silent in the trees as darkness fell, exploding into random flight and choruses of angry laughter with the coming of day.

Sitting in her room, looking out the window, Andrea noticed the dead flies littering the space between the window ledge and the outside screen. She took to counting them every morning and found some small pleasure when their number increased. One day, however, there were less, and she wondered if she had miscounted the day before

or if finally, some of the first dead had succumbed to time after all and crumbled into dust.

The house was laced with strange sounds. Wind that moaned like a young girl in heat. Rustlings like dry leaves, or clusters of bat wings unfurling in unison. Spiders wove intricate designs across the front lawn that the low sun and glittering dew revealed each morning. It was all gone after the first cup of coffee, but while it was there, she would stand on the front porch gazing down, trying to make sense of the threads. No matter how hard she tried, all she saw were the delicate silken strands, interconnecting...but not what it all meant.

BLACK BIRDS SINGING IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

She dreamt she was standing in a playground surrounded by a towering fence, and although there were open gates, she knew they would be closed before she could reach them. Then the playground was an amusement park, and rising into a sky of black smoke was a slide of shining metal. But it wasn't just one. It was a series of slides placed side by side, and at the top of each slide was a single child, a girl, wearing a short polka-dot skirt and knee-high white socks. They were all ready to go down the slides, but what they didn't know, what nobody knew, what only *she* knew was... that somebody, and it might have been her, she didn't know for sure, but it could have been... had embedded razor blades in the metal all the way down the slides. She ran toward them, shouting a warning, but her legs were churning through cold molasses and no sound would come from her mouth. Then the carnival opened, and the children plunged down the slides. The bright, shiny metal turned red with their blood, and the air filled with their screams. And the last thing

she saw before she woke up, were bits of flesh on the razor blades, and her father, standing under the slides, blood raining on his upturned face.

Andrea jerked into consciousness and the sound of Eppie moaning. She jumped out of bed, fully dressed, and with her Glock in her hand, she hurried to Eppie's room.

Eppie, still asleep, was struggling with some invisible attacker. Andrea slipped her gun into her waistband and gathered Eppie in her arms. Eppie's eyes shot open, wide and frightened. "No daddy! No..."

Andrea gathered her closer, stroking her hair. It was incredibly soft, like goose down. "It's all right Eppie. It's all right."

Eppie clutched Andrea tightly and buried her face in Andrea's chest. "Don't let him hurt me," she whispered, "Don't let him hurt me."

Andrea kissed Eppie's hair and the taste of cinnamon haunted her lips. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

She gently moved Eppie away from her, so she could see the child's face. She took her sleeve and wiped tears from Eppie's cheeks.

"I promise," Said Andrea.

Eppie looked over Andrea's shoulder as if expecting to see her father standing in the doorway, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I saw Daddy and he was in my room in the shadows, and there was fire and there were dolls, the dolls of a broken child, smiling, broken faces, laughing and daddy was daddy was..."

Andrea gathered Eppie close yet again. Eppie's father had not come back to the house since the day Andrea drove him away. But she could feel him, watching and waiting, and she feared what would happen when her assignment was completed and she had to leave. He would return, she had no doubt. She could stop that from happening. She really could.

"Shhh, shhh. Don't think about it. Let it fade. Let it go far, far away. Do you want me to get your mother?"

Eppie tightened her grip on Andrea. "No.

I want you to stay. You."

Andrea continued to stroke the child's hair. She could feel the frail little body growing calmer, but Eppie's grip did not loosen. "It's alright now. I'm here and I won't leave," she whispered.

They sit in silence for what seemed like hours. Every time Eppie's eyelids began to lower, she would jerk awake.

"It's late," said Andrea, "You should sleep."

"Scared to sleep," said Eppie.

"If you stay up all night, you'll be tired all day."

"Sing me a song. Please... it will help," Eppie pleaded.

"I don't know any songs."

"Everyone knows a song," Eppie insisted.

"I can't think of any I want to sing. You like Blue Oyster Cult? Metallica?"

Eppie scrunched up her face. "I don't know them." Outside a night bird squawked.

"Do you know Black Bird?"

Black bird? I don't think so. How's it go?" Eppie hums a few bars of a vaguely remembered tune. "Like that."

Andrea wondered... The Beatles? "I'm not much of a singer, you know."

"Try." Andrea thought for a minute. How did that song go? She took a breath and in a low, whispery voice, sang.

"Black bird singing in the dead of night. Take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life. You were only waiting for this moment to arrive..."

Eppie fell asleep long before the song was over.

Andrea opened her eyes. She had fallen asleep as well. She was still holding Eppie. She gently laid the child on her bed. Her joints protested. They'd become stiff staying in one position. For how long?

Andrea quietly left the room. She stood on the landing. Listening. Watching. The house was death silent. She knew death silent. It was that instant right after a target took the bullet and died, a silence

that was so immense, it echoed forever. But in the next second, the world returned and the silence was gone.

A shadow, downstairs on the wall, moving. Someone was in the kitchen.

Andrea pulls her gun and creeps onto the landing. Waits. Listens.

The shadow moves again - quickly, like someone not wanting to be noticed.

Andrea slowly moves down the stairs, placing her feet like an angel walking on clouds. A stair creaks, low.

The shadow freezes.

Andrea waits.

The shadow moves, and is gone.

Andrea hits the floor, rushes the kitchen, her gun up, ready to pull the trigger. She charges through the door.

The kitchen was empty.

Silent.

She edges to the backdoor. Peers out.

Nothing.

The tile floor unmarked.

Yet.

Someone had been here. There was no way she could have imagined that. No way it had been some trick of moonlight and tree. She could feel the passing of a body through this space. And yet.

No way. No *fricking* way.

And yet...

Nothing.

Had it been Clive?

She closes her eyes and sniffs the air.

Nothing.

Somewhere, the night bird screams.

Red Neck Sculpture

Air lays against flesh like a wool blanket,
itchy and uncomfortable, and unwelcome.

A ring of trees surrounds a clearing, a
natural circle so perfectly formed it
suggests the work of man and machine. But it
was not formed by either.

Dew glistens on clumps of long, thick
grass and clusters of fern catching the sun,
flashing and flaring, a star field fallen to
Earth. There is an eerie silence here, as if
the ring of trees prevents the normal sounds
of the woods, the call of birds, the hum of
insects, from entering. The locals call such
places Druid circles or Indian burial
grounds. There are more than this one, most
deep in the dark woods where few dare to
tread. But the clearings have nothing to do
with old religions or indigenous people. They
have to do with time and silence, and what
happens when the Earth itself forgets.

A rifle shot disrupts the woodland
silence. The sound echoes and reverberates,
fading, into the distant hills. Undergrowth

snaps and crunches under the weight of some animal.

From the edge of the clearing a pheasant explodes out of the dense brush and takes to the air. A hunter emerges from the woods. He is big and burly and square of jaw. His chicken-fried steak fed and beer loaded gut hangs over his belt like the head of a baby whale. He watches the pheasant go, the look of sorrow and loss in his deep brown eyes, an emotion only another hunter would understand.

"God damn it," the hunter says under his breath.

The hunter looks around, a strange hollowness in the pit of his stomach when he realizes where he is. This is not a superstitious man, a man given to lending any credence to tales of woodland spirits and the like. He was a man with a bit of learning under his belt, for all the good that had done him in this life. But still...

He thinks of how far back the road and his truck are, and wonders how long it would be before someone noticed he was gone, and what would be left when they found his body.

*What the hell you thinking like that
for?*

He moves past a toppled tree with roots that spread into a fan. Up close, the roots and moss and fungi make intricate designs like an ancient chart... like forgotten writings... like sacred symbols that humans can no longer read.

He glances at his watch, rationalizes that he's been out long enough and turns to head back. But first he whistles, then calls

"C'mon Blue!"

His voice is swallowed by the stillness. He listens, but hears nothing. Not even the call of birds.

Then...

Blue comes bounding out of the brush and joins the hunter. The hunter reaches down to rub the hound's head. Blue lifts his head to meet the hunter's hand, half way.

Dark clouds begin to ooze out of the horizon. They are an ugly purple, and swollen.

"Looks like we might just get some rain after all, huh boy? Well, better head back. You smell like hell when you get wet, and I'll catch hell when you get on the couch that way."

As they head back, the hunter reaches into his shirt pocket and feels the Zippo lighter sitting there. Gift from his wife a few years back. He no longer smokes but he likes the lighter and takes it with him most everywhere he goes. There is something solid and reassuring about it. Your security lighter his wife jokes. My good luck charm he tells her and laughs.

Suddenly there is a rustle in the tall grass, and a crack of twigs under foot. The birds go silent. Blue freezes, and points towards a dark stand of trees.

The hunter brings up his gun. "What you got boy?" he whispers, "What you got?"

Blue begins to whine. The hunter frowns. Blue never whines. Well, not 'less he wants to go outside and take a piss or a dump, or when he wants a piece of the cookie you're eating.

The dog almost sounds...

Afraid?

"What's the matter Blue? What's wrong boy?"

Blue backs away. A chill runs up the hunter's spine. He can feel the hairs on the back of his neck and his arms, rise.

That ain't right. No sir, that ain't right at all.

What is that sound? The hunter tilts his head and listens. There is music coming from the stand of trees. It *sounds* like Patsy Cline's "I Go To Pieces". It *is* Patsy Cline's "I Go To Pieces".

What the hell?

Blue lies down and continues to whine, then abruptly bellows and runs away. The hunter has never seen any dog act like this before, certainly not Blue. He calls after the hound.

"You damn wuss. Get back here. Blue!"

The sound of the fleeing dog ends, like a radio having its power button pressed off.

But the sound of the music continues. Rifle up and ready, the hunter heads in the direction of the song. And enters the stand.

It is a circle of tall, thick trees, centuries old, surrounding tall grass the color of dust.

The hunter freezes. He sees the tape player and turns it off, then , does a 360 degree swivel. Nothing. At the edge of the stand, a jumble of what looks like twisted driftwood and rags. Puzzled, he moves closer...realizes...

"Jesus Lord Almighty Mother Mary and Joseph..."

The Dante brothers were dead.

Years from this moment, an author will write a book about Clive Euxideos. In the book he will describe in horrific detail, how Clive had murdered the three brothers who had beaten Juvenal. They had not died quickly...or intact. They had been gutted like fish, limbs torn and twisted, lips sewn shut, eyes gone, parts removed and inserted into various orifices...

Clive had tied the three brothers together, back to back, with lashings of thick vine. Then he performed some surgeries that were not included in any medical textbook. He had committed some serious medical malpractice of the surgical kind.

He had used what he could find in the woods- sticks... stones... the jawbone of some long dead carnivore. A staple remover. He had done a round-robin, moving from one brother to the next, inflicting just enough pain and suffering to get them pleading for death, so that the other two had a good idea of what was coming for them. Their agony and fear fed off of one another, creating a maelstrom of screaming and bleeding and stark, raving, agony-fueled terror.

He had pissed into their eyes before those gelatin orbs were extracted with his fingers. He had pissed into their gaping eye sockets near the end, just before the final cut.

They were like... a sculpture. Like a twisted, bad, world-gone-mad meat sculpture.

The hunter, eyes wide, mouth open, vomit

rising to burn the back of his throat, brings his rifle up and steps back. Right into Clive, who cuts his throat. The wound opens like lips parting, and blood flows.

The rifle drops to the ground. The hunter turns to face Clive, mouth opening and closing without sound. Their eyes lock. The Hunter's eyes are filled with wonder and questioning and a slow realization that he is already dead. He puts his hands to his throat. Blood pours between his fingers as he sinks to his knees.

Clive watches the hunter die with great concern. He feels no malice toward this man and feels sorrow that he has done what he had to do. 'Wrong place, wrong time,' thinks Clive.

"Sorry," Clive whispered. "Nothing against you, old hoss, but my work here... well, it's not time. They can't know I'm here. Not yet."

The hunter gurgles and dies. Clive closes his eyes and kisses him on the forehead. "Sleep."

Something shiny.

Clive retrieves the Zippo lighter from the hunter's shirt pocket. He flicks it, and a jet of blue-orange flame dances. Clive smiles. The grass is very dry.

PHONE CALL FROM CASSADY

Eppie's Father sits in a darkened office. The sheriff has taken the night off. Probably sprawled in his overstuffed easy chair, the one with the spring poking through the seat that he doesn't seem to notice or mind...

And maybe he likes it huh? Maybe old Shrieff likes that sharp, pointy metal spring gnawing at his asshole. Yeah maybe he just do.

...probably drunk as a skunk. In his boxer shorts. Drool pooled in the hollow of his chest between his fat, hairy man-teats.

Eppie's father boots the PC and waits. When the system is up, he launches the browser and enters:

ftp://dingleberry:piston@tinieslikeithard.com

On the screen: a single zipped file. He drags the file to his desktop and waits for it to download. Finished, he double clicks on the file. It opens. In a few minutes the screen is filled with thumbnail images of naked children. Some with adults.

Eppie's father is what is known as a

fixated, or preferential child molester. He had no adult sexual orientation. He was not sexually attracted to women or men -- only to children. Every week or so he is emailed a new ftp address with login and password. Each week or so he downloads the zipped file, opens it, and extracts the images he finds within. Sometimes the images are of children he has seen before. Many times they are images of new. Some are younger than others but none are older than twelve. There are boys and there are girls. There are white and black and hispanic and the occasional asian. They have one thing in common. They all look terrified and confused.

Eppie's father saves the images to a disk, slips the disk into his shirt pocket, and turns off the computer.

The phonerings. It is Cassady, a good old boy cop-friend of Eppie's father, who'd made the move and gone to work in Chicago.

It had been close enough to ten years, but Cassady still hadn't completely lost his accent. It came back even stronger when talking to somebody from "down there."

"Hey Hambone. What the hell you still doing down there in ass-wipe Louisiana? When you coming up here where the big boys play?"

Eppie's father laughed. "Shit. Ain't no ass-wipe here. More like fist-fuck."

"I hear that. I tell you what, sure was surprised to get that email from you. Didn't know they had computers down there."

"Hell, we got indoor toilets and everything now."

"No kidding? So anyway, that driver's license you sent up..."

"What you find?"

"Shit, you hayseeds as blind as you are stupid? I mean, sure, the hair's different and the eyes, maybe contacts... who knows. But, still... sure as shittn', it's her."

"Who is she? Who is the bitch, really?"

"Open your eyes, Spanky. That's that stupid-ass female cop got that fucked by Clive Euxideos. Got her ass booted off the force for that shit. Course there was lots of other stuff going on before... she was on probation and all... drinking problem I heard,

but that... man, that Clive hookup thing was the last straw. Heard she had some kind of nervous breakdown disorder thing after that..."

"Son of a bitch, son of a bitch."

"What's all this about anyway, old son? You..."

"I'll tell you later."

Eppie's father hung up.

That bitch. That little fuck hole. And someone like that was going to stand between him and his daughter? He'd shoot her dead first.

Shoot.

Her.

Dead.

A VISIT

Evening coming in fast. Andrea in her bedroom cleaning her gun. Her cell phone vibrates.

"Yeah?"

(beat)

"What do you want?"

(beat)

"You're what?"

(beat)

"You better have a good reason for being here."

Hurrying down the road, lips clamped tightly, she feels the blood pounding behind her eyes...feels the need to smash something, or someone.

A sound. Behind her.

Someone is following, has been following, since she left the house. She passes into the shadows of trees and waits, her switchblade dropping from her shirtsleeve into the palm of her hand. There is a silent snick as it opens.

A figure separates itself from the

surrounding darkness. Realizing it has lost sight of her, it begins to run.

Andrea erupts out of the shadow, and with a full forearm smash across the side of the head, the figure is slammed to the road. Her switchblade catches the moonlight and gleams. The blade stops a scant inch from...

"Virgil," says Andrea. ...and removes the blade from Virgil's carotid artery.

Andrea backs off. Virgil slowly gets to his feet, gathering the shreds of his dignity, brushing road dust from his jacket.

"Do you know how much this suit cost?" he asks.

"You stupid son of a bitch. What are you doing sneaking up on me like that?"

Virgil straightens his sleeves and rubs his throat. He swallows and winces. "I believe you've cracked my larynx."

"I almost killed you. You stupid son of a..."

"Yes, yes, my mother was not the best sort. Bit of tart, really. With a fondness for gin and bitters. Nasty. I can still smell

her breath when she tried to kiss me."

"What are you doing here? Where the hell do you get off calling me out of the blue, showing up like this..."

"Do you know who Ratchet Dumont is?"

"Huh? He's Eppie's father... the deputy sheriff. An asshole. A child molester who wears a badge. The only reason he's alive, is that Clive has to go first."

"He's been making inquiries about you."

"You didn't come down here to tell me that."

"No. I came to check out the situation, first hand."

"There's nothing to check out."

"There's those who are worried that you may be going native. I've called. I've left messages on your service."

"I'm busy. I'm doing my job. When he shows, I'll be ready. You go back and tell whoever the hell you report to, that."

"And the family?"

"What about the family?"

"They mean nothing to you?"

"Nothing."

"Not even the little one? What's her name? Ipecac?"

"Eppie."

"Eppie. Poor little abused Eppie. Daddy's girl isn't she?"

"Shut. Your. Mouth."

Virgil eyes Andrea. Considers speaking, and decides against it. He is a smart man after all. Seconds tick by, with no grandfather clock to mark them. "How much longer do you think?"

Andrea surveys the dark field. "He's close. I can feel him. A week? I don't know. It'll take as long as it takes. I can't believe you came down here. Are you trying to blow my cover? Go home. Sit in your office and diddle call girls. I'll let you know when I'm through. Why are you here, anyways?"

"There's been a slight change of plans."

"What does that mean?"

"First, whether you like it or not, I'm

going to be around until this is over. Call it quality assurance."

"Fine. Makes no difference to me, but I'll tell you this-stay out of my way. Don't get between me and him. I will shoot through you to get him."

"Ah, well, that's the second part. You see, much as it pains me to have to say this, our Mister Euxideos is no longer on the hit list."

"What are you talking about?"

"We want him alive, not dead. Not mangled or mutilated or dying. But alive, and whole."

"He will not be taken alive."

"You are not here to avenge your loss of face. You're here to do a job, as you said. Well, the parameters of that job have changed. If you can't deal with that, then it is you who need to go home. And it is me who will do what remains to be done."

"If I see him, I will kill him."

Virgil shook his head and chuckled.

"Why? What are you looking for Andrea? A sense of closure? You fucked up one career,

are you going to fuck up another? You don't bring him in alive, and you'll get more than a fuck up, you'll get a bullet in the back of the head."

"Don't threaten me."

"I am not threatening you, Andrea. I am telling you."

"You don't get it, do you? What happened between me and Clive was just the bottom of a long downward spiral I was already on. This isn't about me. It's about them. It's about family. It's about what he's done to them and what he's still doing to them, and what he'll continue to do unless someone stops him. They need help. They need to be saved. And I can save them."

Virgil rolls his eyes up one side of Andrea and down the other. "And who's going to save you Andrea dear?"

She has no answer to that, because quite simply, the question had not occurred to her. "Stay out of my way." Andrea turns her back on Virgil and walks away.

Stops.

Slumps.

Turns back to him.

"I want to be the one who gets him."

"I understand," Virgil said, "I really do. And that's what I told them. That you were the one for the job. That you could be trusted to do what needed to be done. Because, let's face it Andrea, deep down inside, you're a girl scout. You only want to do the right thing. So please, do the right thing this time."

"He won't go without a fight."

Virgil pauses to consider. A hint of smile turns his lips.

"I suppose if you blow his kneecaps off, they can deal with that. Just keep your bullets out of his brain."

CARNIVALS AND WHITE TRASH

"LAST DAY" a banner proclaimed. It had been draped over the Teiresias and Moire's Cavalcade of Illusions and Peculiarities banner. Andrea had never known a carnival to stay in one place for so long. She thought that perhaps they had set up some sort of permanent residence. Louisiana's version of Disney World. Disney on crack. White trash World.

A wall of pickup trucks line the road. The air had changed. It felt charged with some strange electricity that sent cats pouncing on phantom prey, then screaming as if in heat. Her mind was filled with a chaotic swirling of thoughts. Kill Clive. Don't kill Clive. Maim Clive. The metrics of her assignment had changed dramatically. Why did they want him alive? What did it matter to her? How could she bring him in alive? How could their confrontation not end in one of them dead? She needed time to understand, to think, to plan. So lost in thought, so focused within, she only realized she had entered the carnival grounds when she stepped

on a corn dog.

Andrea shouldered through a crowd of slovenly men with unshaven jowls, whose bellies, distended by deep-fried fat, hang like the heads of enormous slugs over their jeans. They were with women whose lard asses tested the stretching capabilities of spandex, whose faces wore layers of thick make-up that transformed them into demonic Kabuki actors on crack. Most were surrounded by clusters of themselves in miniature, and for Andrea, it only reaffirmed her belief that reproduction should not be a right, but a licensed privilege. They shoveled fistfuls of popcorn shellacked with a dark glaze, and deep-fried twinkies on popsicle sticks and brown corn dogs slathered with fluorescent mustard, into their thick-lipped mouths. They grasped paper cones topped with balls of shaved, colored ice that melted before they could finish it, coating their hands in trails of sticky blue, red and green.

In the twisted channels that ran between the food stalls, gaming booths, rides and attractions, the air was hot and heavy. It

was a miasma thick with the stench of diesel fuel deep fryers, body odor, and vomit churned by rides like the Spin-O-Matic or the Thrill-A-Rama or the Salt and Pepper. Clouds of insects swarm neon lights that epitomize 'lurid'.

She'd seen these faces before, at the countless carnivals her father had dragged her to. He loved the crowds, the smells, the rides and the grease-infused foods.

She wondered - 'Does the carnival truck them in? Why are these people here? What draws them?'

Andrea passed rundown booths holding rigged games of chance. The prizes, even those on the top shelves, were cheap and tattered. Stuffed animals that appeared to have been dumped on the side of the road as garbage, after laying in some basement for years. Their dead eyes staring at nothing.

'And why are you here?' she asked herself. Just passing through? On your way to where? Burning off your anger at Virgil's visit?

The carnies, despite looking so sinister, so wrong, were even sadder than the prizes, even more pathetic. They gazed at the steady flow of rubes, contempt in their eyes, and sneers in their voices. Calling 'three balls for a quarter three shots for fifty cents three tries for a buck win a prize for the little lady for the girlfriend for the main squeeze c'mon and show her what a man you are fine specimen of a man big man hot shot show 'em, show 'em, show 'em.'

It was beyond obvious, that there was something physically or mentally wrong with every one them. Heads that were too small for the bodies that held them, or eyes too close together.

A flash of light. Andrea along with most of the crowd looked up. Knives of lightning carved jagged white light across the dark sky. Is this it? Is this the long awaited rain?

No. Just more heat lightning.

Andrea passed a tent. A stray wind fluttered the flap and inside the dark confines of the tent she saw, or thought she

saw, two men in clown makeup. Their pants were down around their ankles, skinny legs bent, one hunched over, fingers touching the sawdust covered floor, the other standing behind, gloved hands grasping bony hips, and grinding away. They both look up as the flap waves and their eyes meet Andrea's. They are smiling... leering... and she is the one who looks away.

At a gazebo, a quartet in black face and red suits with silver buttons plays a dirge version of some pop tune. Something by Burt Bacharach?

She will take him alive, if she can, but it won't be easy. Then again, would killing him really be easier? 'I need to be alone to think. I need to go home,' she tells herself.

Home to Eppie and Niobe and Clymenestra.

Home to *her* room and *her* bed.

The bed where Clive once lay. The bed where she now lay, imagining her body sinking into his, becoming one.

She turns to go back the way she came, but is caught in the crowd. Andrea fights to

get through the crush that has suddenly become thicker, a wall of grease-fueled fat, denim and spandex. It's like trying to swim through a mindless herd, hypnotized by the bright lights and spinning rides, all shuffling along in one direction for no reason other than that is the direction everybody else is going in.

She steps on a sandaled toe. Someone curses. She twists to apologize and a shoulder strikes hers. Nearby, a child is screaming for its mother. Bellowing piggy laughter that finds pain and suffering the pinnacle of hilarity.

She feels fingertips graze the back of her neck. The touch burns. Only one man's touch has ever burned like that.

"Clive..." Andrea jerks around.

Clive brushes by her. Like her, moving against the flow. Unlike her, for him, the crowd parts.

He whispers as he passes. "Andrea."

Andrea whirls, panicked. Turns again, and sees the back of Clive's head being

swallowed by the crowd. She reaches for her gun and feels the hard reassurance of the handle. But there are too many people.

She fights to follow.

Brief glimpses of the back of Clive. Again, the crowd parts for him, then closes tightly, as if it had never opened...as if he had never passed.

Anger building, she pushes forward, jabbing elbows, stepping on toes, and not caring. There are shrieks of indignation, more curses, and a stinging slap on the arm.

Then...

She is at the back of the carnival, the white trash festival behind her, the dark of the field and woods in front of her. Fireflies burn, speaking their secret language of illumination.

Clive is nowhere to be seen. Andrea turns wildly. Where is he? Is that Clive vanishing around a tent? She catches up and grabs him.

Gun out.

Turns him.

It isn't Clive.

The tall, broad-shouldered man stared at her with large yellow eyes that were dull and uncomprehending. The right side of his head was dented as if someone had swung a baseball bat into it. His mouth hung open and she could see his tongue, like a worm swollen with disease, twisting in agony inside.

Andrea backed away. "Sorry. Sorry."

Of course. How could it have been him? Surely one of the townies would of noticed. Sent up an alarm. How could they not?

The rustle of leaves makes her look up. A withered tree stands before her. Moss more brown than green, hanging from its branches. A southern wind rattles the dull leaves.

Then, the wind stopped.

Everything stopped.

There is a dead calm, that time measured in milliseconds when the world goes silent. Then a cold wind began to move in from the north.

In the crowd, that shifting pack of inbred rubes, heads jerk up like deer sensing

danger. They point dirty-nailed, greasy fingers and utter low moans, 'what the fucks', and a few screams.

In the distance, flames appear, grow, shift, and lick the night sky like the tongues of dragons. The sky recoils and spasms. Dense, choking smoke rolls across the carnival grounds.

The crowd breaks, the herd running for their trucks, tearing at each other to be first, trampling their own in blind panic.

The forest is burning. The flames are coming this way.

Andrea whispers "Oh, Christ."

MOTHER AND CHILD REUNION

Clymenestra stood on the veranda, watching the fire move towards the house. The flames dance in her eyes, as do the embers that explode and flee.

She knew she should turn, should run, but she felt weightless, and so was afraid to let go of the railing for letting go would send her soaring into the black sky, following the paths of the embers, never to return.

'And what,' she thought, 'would be wrong with that?'

Would that not be like death?

She longed for death... but first, to feel his cool embrace and hard body against hers. To feel his tender lips one more time, pressed to hers, inhaling as she exhaled, sucking her essence down into his own being.

A knot explodes in a fountain of sparks that rains down upon the flickering ground. A hot breeze tests the barrier of flesh that is her face.

"Mother."

Clymenestra presses the back of her hand against her lips. The skin is parchment dry. Tears flood her eyes, and extinguish the flame.

Clive appears in the distance, walking through the ruined garden, toward her. With a sound that could have been fear, that could have been relief, that might have been passion long restrained and now given flight, Clymenestra hurried to him.

They embrace. His massive arms gather her to him. She buries her face in his chest and the sorrow bursts from her. He can feel his breastbone vibrating in sympathy with her sobs. He can feel her tears soak through the fabric of his shirt and stain his flesh. He caresses her hair with long, careful strokes.

"Let it out mother. Let it all out," he whispers into her hair.

She lifts her tear-streaked face from his chest and he is looking down at her. She falls asleep at night with the memory of those eyes, and awakens from nightmares to the same image.

Clymenestra touches his face with a trembling hand and thinks 'How smooth his cheek is, despite all.' Notices the contrast between the back of her hand and his smooth skin and 'How old my flesh has become... how full of life I once was... how full of juice... how I have been sucked dry by time.'

"My dearest," she whispers, "My beloved."

He lowers his lips to hers and they kiss. His hands slide down her back. He can feel the nubs of her spine through the thin material of her nightgown, like a string of beads under tissue.

There is an athame in Clymenestra's hand, a knife used in magic ceremonies and rituals. It has a very short, ivory handle with silver inlay, and a very long, very sharp, curved blade.

She reluctantly removes her lips from his and stares into his eyes. There is something in her eyes, a look he has not seen before. His eyes narrow as if trying to see better, as if trying to understand something that is not clear.

"No more my dearest," she whispers, "No more grief. No more pain. No more of this life."

She drives the athame into his side. There is pain, but it is nothing he cannot deal with. His only reaction is to grunt, more with surprise than anything else.

Still looking deep into his mother's eyes, still looking for meaning and reason, his right hand leaves its resting place on the small of her back and clamps around the back of her neck. Their eyes still locked, he twists his wrist and her neck breaks with the sound a baby bird fallen from its nest makes, striking pavement. The flames vanishe from her eyes.

Clive lowers Clymenestra to the ground. Her face is peaceful. He carefully removes the athame from his side and casts it away. The wound is deep, but nothing vital was touched. He will keep it clean and it will heal and he will add yet another scar to his collection. He reaches into the pocket of his jacket and removes a handful of lentils that he places in a small pile on the ground near

Clymenestra's head.

He thinks of Andrea and that makes him smile. "I'm glad you got to meet her mother. I'm glad you love her," Clive says, then he turns and walks back toward the inferno.

SANCTUARY AND ASHES

The bar is full up tonight. No special reason. It's not Saturday... it's not the night before a holiday... it's not the first of the month or the fifteenth. It's just one of those days when, for whatever reason, everyone decides that heading out to the local bar for a drink or two, might not be such a bad idea. The jukebox is humming. The noise level is fueled by two drinks, going on three.

No one at the bar is aware that a fire is burning, and the flames are coming their way.

Juvenal walks in, cradling the deep green cremation urn in his arms. It is the first time he has been in the bar since he was beaten by the Dante Brothers.

The bar goes silent. Juvenal walks through the stillness as if unaware that every eyeball in the place was fixed on him. He could have been the only one there. As he sits at the bar, he thumps the urn down.

Blake stares, then leans forward,

hissing "Are you out of your mind coming in here?"

Juvenal looks at Blake with eyes that are as red as blood from the throat of a fresh-butchered hog. "I'll have a shot and a beer. And my grandfather will have the same."

"You need to leave Juvenal."

"Fast Elk" Barragon is standing over Juvenal. "Fast Elk" runs the bait shop on the edge of the swamp. He also brews up a mean tub of white 'shine', when he's short of cash. The Dante brothers were his best customers. He puts his lips very close to Juvenal's ear. "I got three friends gone missing Euxideos. You know anything about that?"

Juvenal turns, very slowly, on his bar stool, to face Fast Elk. "And how would I know where your friends might be?"

Fast Elk thrusts his face into Juvenal's. His eyes are wide and crazed, cracked with red veins from drink, his brown teeth clenched tight enough to splinter. He

screams "'Cause you fuckers know where all the bodies are. You bunch of crazed mother fuckers...."

Juvenal grabs the urn and smashes it into Fast Elks' face. The urn explodes, scattering shards of porcelain, a cloud of Papa Catallus' ashes, and bits of charred bone. Fast Elk hits the floor, face slashed and bloody, caked in ash.

A riot erupts.

Juvenal goes down under a hail of fists and feet. Blake grabs the phone and tries to call the sheriff but the flames have already eaten the phone lines and all he hears is a strange, deep silence.

Eppie Gone

Andrea stood over Clymenestra, in the garden. The strange new angle of her neck, pulled like hand blown glass gone terribly wrong, tells her all she needs to know. Her pale eyes stare at nothing. Clive had not closed them, so Andrea did.

'There does not need to be a heaven,' she thought. 'Those who have suffered are rewarded by death.' Death is the release. Death is the end to all pain and sorrow and grief. And was that not what salvation was after all? The end to all that? But Hell... there was a need for Hell. There was a need for just and terrible punishment for those who brought pain, sorrow and grief. Andrea prayed there was a Hell. And feared that there was not.

Gun out, Andrea enters the house. She finds Juvenia sprawled on the floor at the foot of the staircase.

Juvenia lifts her head at the sound of Andrea's footsteps. Her lip is split. A handprint blazed on the flesh of her right

cheek, swollen and red, moving towards purple.

Andrea felt a rage unlike any she had ever felt before, flooding her senses. She grabbed Juvenia by the arms and resisted the urge to fling the woman from her, repulsed by the moist, clammy feel of her flesh, the flesh of a body five days in the water, tissue thin. She imagined her fingers tearing through that fragile membrane of flesh, sinking deep into the spongy meat beneath, into muscle gone near liquid and bone ready to dissolve. Flesh like this, belonged on some boneless, deep-sea life form, not a human being.

From where Andrea stood, she could see Eppie's bedroom door was open and the room was empty.

A cold, hollow fear gnaws her soul.
"Where's Eppie?"

Juvenia's mouth opens. Closes. Opens again. She tries to breathe and cannot. Andrea shakes her. Wants only to strike her, again and again, bloody that stupid fish gaping mouth, mash those lips to pulp.

Why didn't you protect her?

"Tell me!"

Juvenia croaks "Her father took her.
Couldn't stop him. Couldn't..."

"Where did he take her?"

"I don't know. Probably his place. By
the old church. He said...he said..."

Now Andrea did fling her to the floor.
Juvenia cries out and reaches for Andrea,
but Andrea is already out the door.

"...he said I was nice and I was pretty..."

Juvenia staggers to her feet and limps
toward the open door. Her eyes burn with
tears of fear and shame. Ribbons of snot run
from her nostrils, adding to the salty taste
of blood on her lips.

"..he said he liked me better than all
the girls..."

Her hands, like spiders, crawl crazy
over her body, gripping, grabbing, and
digging as if seeking entry. She moans. "He
said he was going do to her what he use to do
to me...use to do to me...do to me..."

Juvenia's frantic actions stop. Her eyes bulge, as if pushed from behind, as if some terrible pressure were building in her skull. She raises her hands to her face, fingers curled. She stares at them, as if they were the hands of some ravenous beast and not her own.

Then...

Juvenia screams like Hell's own were ripping her guts out, and she feverishly claws at her face. Swathes of flesh curl under her fingernails.

"And I liked it! I liked what he done to me. God help me, I liked it!"

Eppie's Father

Andrea drove like a woman possessed. Thick, gray-black smoke roiled across the road, obscuring the world. On either side, trees smoldered, then burst into flame. Spanish moss, burning, thrown into a frenzy by superheated air, flailed like scarecrow arms. Flocks of screaming crows filled the black sky.

Andrea slammed on the brakes and was out of the car and running at the house before the engine died. The house outside of which, she had found the body of Papa Catallus.

The fire was heading directly for the house. It moved like liquid, a furious, consuming flow. It was only a breath away.

The door was open. Gun thrust in front of her, Andrea charged in, ready to pull the trigger... wanting to pull the trigger... knowing that she would pull the trigger no matter what she found. The curved, cool metal of the trigger grew hot and itchy beneath her finger, burning with sex stroke need. She would not let Eppie be hurt again... would

not stand for it... would avenge the hurt already done.

She moved through rooms inhabited by stark, Goodwill rejected furniture. No, it wasn't even that good. Who lived here with bare walls and bare floors?

No person lived here.

She found the computer room.

A monster lived here.

A monster who needed Hell brought to him, who would not have to wait for death to come. She would bring him Hell... would give him a sneak preview of his eternity.

She kicked in a door. It was empty, as was the next, and the one after that. The bathroom? Through the narrow window over the tub, a wall of flame rose into the night. The paint on the walls began to blister.

"Eppie!"

Hysterical sobbing.

Upstairs.

Andrea took the stairs in giant leaps. A flaming branch crashes through the window on

the landing, showering the interior with glass and flame.

"Eppie!"

Something slams against the roof. Thick, choking smoke begins to fill the house, and the paint turns black.

Andrea kicks open a bedroom door.

Eppie is curled on the cigarette-scarred floor at the end of a bed holding only a lumpy stained mattress and thin worn blanket.

Never mind that, look at the child, look at the child!

Eppie's dress is torn. Fingertip-shaped bruises are already forming on her forearms. Her father is nowhere in sight.

Where is that bastard?

Focus on Eppie!

She kneels beside the child, carefully reaches out, cups her chin gently and lifts her head.

The small mouth is bloodied, a man's handprint clearly etched on her right cheek, mirroring the one worn by Juvenia. Her eyes

are dull, unfocused, the pupils strangely large. Did he drug her? Did the bastard drug her?

"Eppie?"

Eppie seems to notice Andrea for the first time. But looks at and through her at the same time, as if seeing her from a great distance. The words, when they come, are slurred.

"All...right."

"Where is he?"

Eppie pulls away. Told not to tell. Not ever to tell.

Something else crashes into the house and it trembles down to the foundation. Eppie jumps and whimpers.

Forget him. Pick up the child and get out.

How could he leave her here like this? He must have seen the fire coming. Did he leave her here to die? For the flames to consume the evidence of his guilt?

She would find him. She would kill him.

Andrea gathered Eppie in her arms and was again amazed at how light the child was... how bird thin... how close to non-existent. Like a barely held memory... a ghost. She stands, holding Eppie close, feeling her heart banging to get out.

Eppie's lips at her ear. "The closet," she whispers.

Andrea, moving in molasses time, puts Eppie back down on the floor and turns, gun in hand. Hiding? The bastard is hiding? Silently, she takes hold of the knob and throws the door open. Eppie screams.

In the book that will be written about Clive Euxideos and his murders, the book that is considered to be the one book about Clive Euxideos that must be read, the death of Ipeghenia Euxideos-Dumont's father, rates close to five pages. It is a very clinical description, based on eyewitness accounts and the forensic pathologist's report.

Eppie's father was hanging in the closet. The back of his skull had been neatly pierced by a metal hook bolted to the inside of the door, the one that he used to hang his

robe.

He had not been dead when the back of his head had been pushed onto the hook. But he thanked God when he felt the dull metal ball at the tip of the hook crack through his skull and enter his brain. Anything to stop the pain.

The horrible, hideous pain.

Clive had found Eppie's father pushing his daughter's face into his lap. Eppie's father was naked.

Clive hit him a glancing blow where the back of the skull met the spine, and he went down like the sack of shit that he was.

Eppie moved to embrace Clive. He held out his hand, stopping her. He sat her down and squated.

"I want you to close your eyes dearest one. I want you to close them as tight as you can. Tighter than you have ever closed them before. Do not open them, no matter what. And I want you to put your hands over your ears and I want you to sing your favorite song. The one about the black bird. Can you do that

for me?"

Eppie nodded.

"And I want you to do keep your eyes closed and your hands over your ears and that song on your lips until I kiss you on the forehead. Can you do that for me?"

Again, Eppie nodded.

"Show me how good you can do what I asked."

Eppie closed her eyes and put her hands over ears and softly began to sing "Blackbird".

"Sing louder Eppie."

Eppie sang louder.

"Just a bit more."

She did as she was told.

Clive turned back to the father. He bound Eppie's father's hands to the top of the door frame, his feet to the base, and then he slapped the bastard's face until his eyes fluttered open. When he saw Clive staring at him he opened his mouth to scream. When he did, Clive pulled a large staple

remover from his pocket and went to work.

It takes a long time to skin a human being, especially using a staple remover as your primary instrument. Clive had picked up the staple remover from an Office Depot he'd chanced upon, after the one he'd used on Ann Marie Kaspersak had broken while he was using it on her. He liked to think of this new staple remover as the large, industrial-sized model. It was the *Tyrannosaurus rex* to the previous model's raptor.

Clive had practiced and he had gotten very good at it in a very short period of time.

It did not seem like a very short period of time to Eppie's father. It seemed more like eternity. More like Hell. He screamed so hard, his vocal cords ruptured and then all he could do was moan, with a horrible, liquid sound.

But it was enough.

Andrea stepped back and without a word, without reaction, closed the door.

Eppie lay on the floor now, curled once

again into fetal form, breathing rapidly, harshly. Andrea gathered the child in her arms and turned to the door.

Niobe was in the doorway, steak knife in hand, face streaked with smoke. "I wasn't going to let him hurt her again."

"We have to get out of here." Andrea wipes her face on her shoulder. The heat is growing.

Outside, at the car, Niobe watches the roof of the house burn, tongues of flame working at the sides. "Burn in Hell, fucker." she hisses. Andrea lays Eppie across the back seat. She takes a tissue and carefully wipes the child's tears, dabs the blood from her lip.

Andrea speaks slowly and softly. "I have to find Clive, Eppie. That's why I'm here. Please tell me where he is."

Eppie looks at her and the sorrow that fills the child's eyes, breaks Andrea's heart. "Church," Eppie says and the sound is more like glass crunching underfoot, than a word. Andrea stands. She hates letting the

child go... hates the empty feeling in her arms... the cold space where the warmth of Eppie radiated... the hollowness that now fills her chest.

She turns to Niobe. "Take her as far away from this as you can."

Niobe nods. "We're already gone. I got some money put away. We'll be all right." She slides behind the wheel, starts the car, places her hand on Andrea's. "Thank you." And they drove off into the night.

Andrea turns back toward the house. It is engulfed, the flames growing brighter and brighter. She stares, unable to tear her eyes away. The white noise... hiss of the flames... a flickering, hypnotic dance.

Suddenly.

Pain. It ripples like a stone cast into oil and the world becomes like old movie film projected at 10X speed, jerky, staccato... flashing. Each ripple is a wave of agony that screams in her eyes, and races around her brain. The world becomes overexposed, washed-out, then blinding white. The sound of the

fire in her ears is like being jammed between two cell shattering drills that burrow into her head. Her gun falls from her grasp and she drops to her knees, right hand jerking wildly. She fights to make the left do what it has to do, to fumble the vial of pills out of her pocket.

The vial is empty.

Oh god what happened to the pills... where are the pills... did I take all the pills... couldn't have taken all the pills... where are they... where are they...are they...oh God...

Andrea crushes the vial. She grabs her right hand with her left and through sheer will, stops the shaking, quiets the shriek of drills, forces the world to shade back into some semblance of form and color.

She picks up her gun. It is heavy. The effort causes beads of sweat to break out on her forehead. Her limbs tingle as if asleep.

Upright now, she looks around. The world seems very intangible, her connection to it broken, as if she existed in a dimension beneath this one. As if she were passing

through illusion.

Her phone rang. Without thinking she thumbed the 'on' button, brought it to her ear.

"Hello Andrea," Clive said.

She said nothing but her mind raced. How did he get this number? Nobody had this number.

"You found the molester?"

"Yes," she managed to say. Her throat felt parched.

"I almost left him for you. Almost. But I got carried away."

"You did that to him in front of the child?"

"I spared her as much as I could."

"You're insane."

He chuckled. "And the sky is blue and the grass is green."

"Where are you?"

"Didn't Eppie tell you?"

"The church."

"Yes, the church."

Through the smoke she could see the church. It was surrounded by flame but as yet untouched, as if the flame were paying homage.

Was he really in there?

Somehow, she knew he was.

Like calls to like? She could feel him. The way she had felt him in the Wet Whistle. Drawn, like honey bee to flower, like moth to flame, like flies to shit.

Andrea had not set foot in a church in a very long time. She wondered if she could remember how to recite the Hail Mary. She wondered what ring of Hell was reserved for those who killed in church.

"I'm going to kill you Clive," she said.

"You love me too much to kill me."

"I have thirty bullets."

His laughter rumbled softly, again.

"Come to me Andrea. Let's dance."

The phone went dead.

She checked her gun. One clip in, the

spare in her pocket. Her head continued to throb, a slow, steady jackhammer thud, carving a notch in her temples. She could feel the veins testing the limits of the flesh that covered them, threatening to burst through. Her gun weighed less than it had just moments before. Her strength was returning, at least to some degree, but holding the gun steady was still a problem.

Andrea inhaled deeply and headed toward the church.

THE CHURCH

Flame consumed the time-gnarled trees
and dry, clotted underbrush like rage
feasting to satiate a long-denied hunger. It
snarled and cackled, crisping colonies of
termites and roasting small animals too
sluggish to escape. Knots exploded, throwing
legions of fire gnats into a sky cancerous
with churning black.

Andrea stood outside the church, gazing
into its confines. The doors were gone and
someone with a fair amount of artistic
talent had spray painted the white washed
wall around the frame into the semblance of a
mouth. It was an old whore's mouth, gaping,
open wide, waiting to accept strange new body
parts.

The foyer was lost in darkness. Was
Clive in there? Was he standing inside at
the edge of the frame, waiting for her with
arm raised, ready to end all this with one
crushing blow? Or one slash of the blade? No.
That was not Clive's way. That would be too...
easy. Clive would want this to last, to give
it depth and substance. to make their final

dance the stuff of songs and books and films...
and maybe even legend.

Beyond, she could see into the church proper. The flames outside the stained glass threw kaleidoscopic shafts of rainbow light through the smoke, forging a slow strobe of gray and faded hallucinogenic color.

Andrea wondered 'Is that real or is that my brain?' Was there a synapse misfiring, in dire need of the drug that kept them from short-circuiting, from sending her into a screaming schizophrenic Hell?

She took a step forward. And heard glass shatter.

Virgil fell from the sky. He had been thrown through the circular stained glass window, mounted cyclopean in the steeple. Andrea jumped back as the shards of thick, colored glass exploded against the concrete stairs like rock candy rain.

Virgil did not shatter.

He made a loud, liquid sound and jagged edges of broken bone tore through his flesh. His head burst like an over ripe melon,

spilling a hideous mixture of bright red and the deepest black. Eyes open, his body twitched violently as nerve endings, trying to make sense of it all, misfired.

Then he was still.

Andrea wiped something thick and gelatinous from her face, stepped over the body, closed her eyes and walked into the church.

One thing all cops dread is going from light to dark, or dark to light. For in that split second, you are blind... defenseless... nothing more than a target waiting for the bullet. Andrea plunged into that moment, into the mouth, holding her breath she thrust her gun left then right, ears straining to hear the slightest sound.

Then she was in the church, eyes snapping open. Was she alone? Andrea looks around, her gaze passing over a dry, stone cistern.

No, she was not alone. Clive was here. She could feel him, feel his presence, like some pungent musk. It filled the church and

filled her nostrils, saturating her senses.
The dark one had called her name and she had
come.

Stairway to the steeple on the right.

Body pressed close to the wall, she
moves to the stairwell and slowly, advances
upward. At the top she pauses, and listens to
the rustling.

Deep breath. The cool metal of the
trigger, burning.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Andrea leaps onto the balcony, spins and
fires three times at a figure standing there.
The body collapses to the floor. It is not
Clive. Standing over the body she realizes he
has been long dead and it was not her bullets
that took his life. She had no idea who the
poor wretch was... no idea it was the hunter
from the woods... no idea what he had been in
life. All she knew was that in death, his lot
had been to make her waste bullets.

'Who are you,' she wondered. 'What did
you do in life to deserve this fate?'

Andrea studies the shadows, then goes to

the edge of the balcony, looks out over the church. A scattering of pews is visible through the thickening churn of smoke. There is a dancing chaos of stained glass light driven by the flames. It flickers and flashes on the altar with a huge cross bolted to the wall behind it. Christ hangs from that cross. His legs are missing but his feet remained, firmly nailed. His eyes upturned, beseeching, ask for an end to two thousands years of agony.

Andrea notices the doors on either side of the altar that lead to the preparation room. She turns and heads back down the stairwell.

The smoke becomes denser as she moves through the church. Andrea kicks open a door and walks into a short, curved corridor, hugging the wall with her shoulder, heading toward the door at the opposite end.

She passes through it, to the accompaniment of a sharp crack that draws her eyes up. The ceiling is smoldering, turning black as she watches. Any moment now, flames will break through, licking along the ceiling

like insect tongues.

Andrea looks down.

The floor is covered in ash, dotted with footprints leading to another half-open door. Something glitters in the crack of the door. An unblinking eye, watching.

Andrea fires three times through the door.

Wood explodes.

She rushes the door and slams it back.

Nothing.

The wall behind the door is gouged with her bullets' impact.

What had once been the sacristy is now cluttered with old newspapers, broken glass, crude limericks and cruder drawings spray-painted on the walls. The sound of running.

Andrea rushes down a second curved corridor and dives headfirst through the door, back into the altar. She hits the floor in a roll, coming up in a crouch, pulls the trigger, and sends bullets into every dark corner.

Stop. Listen.

The only sound, that of her breathing and the crackling of flames. She quickly checks her gun, and calculates number of bullets fired. 'Stop wasting shots,' she tells herself

Andrea stands.

A cracking.

She turns as the huge wooden cross falls from the wall and comes crashing down at her.

She moves, but not fast enough.

The end of the cross clips her right shoulder, tearing it from the socket. She screams. Pain rides the arm, down into the hand which spasms and throws the gun. She crashes to the floor, holding her shoulder, the pain unbelievable. The gun skids across the marred wood.

Fight it fight it fight it.

Pain triggers synapsis, sparking the world with flashing white explosions behind her eyes that drown everything in harsh brilliance.

Memory wells up like blood from a
razor's slice.

Rising out of the smoke, was her father.
He was wearing his wife-beater and stained
boxer shorts and within, his erection was
straining. His eyes were wild with lust...
boring into her... even in the dark... even with
her eyes closed, she could feel those eyes
tearing into her head as his cock tore into
small, fragile body. She was in her room and
he was standing in the doorway... he was at the
end of the bed and was crawling into her bed...
this time there was a gun in her hand and she
pulled the trigger. His head erupted in a
mass of blood and brain and skull, only... that
isn't what happened. Oh no, that isn't what
happened at all. And even what she remembered
as having happened, isn't what really
happened, now was it?

*Get out of my head get the fuck out of
my head!*

Daddy didn't die from falling down the
stairs, the side of his skull split from the
blow of the doll. He lived with his neck
broken, completely paralyzed and mother was

screaming... screaming at her 'What did you do, what did you do to your father?' And then mother was signing the papers that put Andrea in the home, while mother stayed at their home, the real home not a house, and took care of father. She bathed him, fed him, brushed his teeth and wiped his ass and Andrea never, ever, saw either of them again... would kill both of them, if she ever saw them again.

GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

Andrea lurches to her feet, limbs trembling, arm numb, shoulder burning with pain that twists her stomach. The white noise now full volume, television static frenzy, everything blown out, and the world was consumed by blinding white light.

Fading now. Through sheer will she beats it back.

The gun. Where's the gun?

So much smoke, so hard to see. It burns her eyes, rasps her throat, claws her lungs. Tears stream down her face. She tries to breath as shallowly as possible, running the

risk of hyperventilating. She narrows her eyes to slits. It doesn't matter, because there was nothing to see save a wall of shifting smoke.

Movement in the smoke.

She drops to her knees, left hand frantically sweeping the floor. The gun... where's the goddamn gun? There it is. The weight is strange, the gun awkward, held in her left hand.

Clive is coming at her.

She twists, and fires.

Silence.

Nothing.

Her teeth clamp down and grind as another wave of pain rides through her shoulder. A sound, like air forced through clenched teeth, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Gun up.

She wipes eyes now tearing badly from smoke. It's becoming hard to breathe. Clive's voice drifts out of the smoke like

memory.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known."

Andrea scans the smoke searching for the source of the voice.

"Most beautiful."

A blur to her right.

Andrea turns, fires.

Clive, behind her, rushes out of the smoke and slams into the back of her head. Andrea cries out and is thrown forward. Her shoulder slaps the floor. Pain explodes once more and she screams. Then he is gone.

She did not lose the gun that time. Did not lose the gun.

Clive's voice, everywhere and nowhere, coming out of the smoke, echoing.

"And still she holds her gun. As if it were part of her. But then... it is, isn't it?"

Andrea fires.

Clive's hand erupts out of nowhere, and grabs her wrist.

Andrea fires.

Clive grabs her by the throat, and pulls her to him.

Andrea struggles.

Clive stares straight into her eyes.

She brings her gun to his temple.

He smiles.

Andrea pulls the trigger.

The gun is empty.

Clive whispers "I think about my tongue tracing your scars..." He pushes Andrea away and vanishes into the twisting smoke.

Andrea feels herself rising forever, through layers of smoke. She feels so tired... so very, very tired.

"Come on Andrea. Time to finish this thing. One way or the other."

She ejects the empty clip, and jacks in a new one. This too, seems to take forever to accomplish.

Clive chuckles. "You never were much for small talk, were you?"

Andrea, gun up, moves toward the voice.

Movement.

She jerks toward the sound, finger tapping the trigger, but not firing. Oh, no. This old bitch knew that trick.

Somewhere, Clive was singing. "Fifteen bullets in her gun....and I'm the target for every one..."

The acoustics of the church, brilliant for preaching, making a voice clear even in the cheap seats, was terrible for trying to pinpoint the source.

A figure leaps down from the balcony.

Andrea fires into it, repeatedly.

The figure slams into her, knocking her to the floor.

She keeps firing, hears the soft, satisfying sound of flesh exploding, then sees the decayed face of the hunter, leering down at her. Foul liquid drips into her eyes, her mouth. Gagging, Andrea pushes the corpse off.

Clive is still singing. "She got eight

bullets left in her gun...and I'm the target for every one..."

Andrea grabs the back of a pew and gets to her feet. Holding her breath, she listens, then moves back toward the stairwell.

"Warm."

Andrea whirls around, fear building in her. She cannot see... can barely breathe.

Clive's calls from the stairwell, impatient. "Come on, let's go."

Andrea goes to the stairwell, and shoves the gun in.

Clive's voice coming from ahead of her, coming out of the ever-thickening smoke. "C'mon, c'mon. I got places to go. People to violate. A world to cleanse."

Andrea moves slowly up the stairwell. It is dark, but where it exits onto the balcony, the air is filled with dense smoke that glows with reflected flame.

Behind her, a figure rushes through the smoke. She turns and fires twice.

Clive's voice, now back on the first

floor. "Six deadly bullets in the lovely one's gun and I am the target for every one..."

Andrea moves back into the church foyer. There is another door across the way. She creeps toward it, and enters.

It is a room for children to sit out the sermon, with a large plexi-glass window for separating screaming babies and bored, complaining children from the worshipping masses.

The walls were spray-painted with black graffiti. Arcane symbols. Half faces. Words she had never heard before, that somehow made sense, written in characters she did not recognize, but could nevertheless read.

Andrea turns.

Self-published sex magazines on old wooden school desks. Children, naked... some younger than Eppie... staring out from photocopied pages.

Andrea turns 90 degrees.

A blackboard with chalk drawings of sex organs. There are long needles through most

of them.

Andrea turns, and completes the rotation.

All she can see through the scratched Plexi-glass windows looking into the church, is smoke and embers and flame.

"Where are you?" she calls out. But gets no answer.

"Finish this!" she shouts.

"I said finish this!" Her scream rises above the fury of the flames.

On the other side of the Plexi-glass, Clive is running between the pews, directly toward the window like a bullet made of flesh and muscle and blood and bone.

Movement at the corner of her eye.

Andrea jerks toward it and brings up her gun. Clive crashes through the plexi-glass. Old, it shatters like thin ice in winter. Lethal shards, rain. One slashes her cheek.

Andrea, face on fire, falls back, pulling the trigger again and again and again. Clive spins in midair, backhanding Andrea across the face. The blow is so

powerful, her feet leave the floor. Her head slams into the blackboard, and cracks the slate. Light explodes behind her eyes. The roar of the fire becomes the screams of the damned.

Clive hits the floor in a crouch. His eyes catch the flame and it dances in their dark depths.

Andrea tries to focus, can't focus.

Clive straightens.

Andrea rolls on to her side, tries to get up, can't. Can't do nothing. Beaten. Spent.

Clive sings. "No nasty bullets left in her gun...now's the time for Clive to have his fun."

Clive grabs a shard of Plexi-glass. The edge is much thicker than what he is used to, much less sharp. But Clive is an old dog who likes to learn new tricks. The staple remover is still in his pocket but, you know... been there, done that, right? Onward and upward. Never look back.

He runs his thumb over the edge. Blood

wells. That surprises him. "Dully sharp. Is that a contradiction?"

Andrea rocks on the floor, moaning. He takes the sound as consensus. "Good," he smiles, "There's more coming."

Andrea wipes at her eyes. She can't get enough oxygen. Clive tries to be helpful. "Slow, even, breaths. That's the way."

He comes closer.

Andrea scurries in retreat, until her back hits the wall. She tries to focus but the world swims behind liquid. It is like trying to see through spectacles made of old glass, like sheets of thick oil.

Clive regards her calmly, kindly. Like a patient father watching his young child discover the world. "Trapped is not a good feeling. But it's how I felt the whole time I was at Max. The doctors, they just kept poking and prodding me, trying to figure out what made me tick. Stupid bastards. As if they could find answers by reading a chart. As if there are any answers. No. No answers. Only questions."

Clive kneels and takes her face in one hand. She gasps, flinches, tries to pull away, but the back of her head strikes the wall behind her. Clive's grip turns into a vise. His face runs and melts. When he speaks, his mouth smears across his chin and cheek, and the sound is like slow wind through narrow trees.

He brings the plexi-glass shard to her cheek. Its edge catches flame and filters dull rainbows. "We've got unfinished business."

She feels cold pressure against her flesh. The edge seeking entrance. The edge whispering to her in that voice only she knew. Begging favor. 'You remember me, don't you Andrea? You remember granting me entrance oh so long ago? You thought you'd forgotten but you never did. Flesh never forgets.'

Blood wells around the edge of the shard. Andrea gasps. It is not a sound of pain.

"No. Too Pretty. Let's do this right."

He drops the shard and Andrea moans,

denied the release of climaxing. With one quick movement, Clive's hands went around her throat and started to squeeze. Andrea felt as if her head was going to pop off, but their eyes met, and suddenly the veil was lifted. She could see with frightening clarity, and there was such incredible softness in his gaze, a wonderful, sad kindness, and she felt herself drawn into that gaze, felt the pain fade as it had the first time with him... alone... in her bedroom. Then the pain was gone and she felt a tranquil warmth. Suddenly, her lips were forming a smile. She saw death in Clive's eyes, but not some fierce, skeletal reaper come to tear her unwilling soul from its cage of flesh and muscle and vein and bone. It was a caressing, soft death, carrying promises of no more pain, no more tears, no more having to endure this horror called life. And she wanted to take his hand, for there really was no need to fear the reaper.

She drove the shard between Clive's ribs, piercing his heart. She twisted her wrist and the Plexi-glass snapped, its edge

slicing off her baby finger and releasing a jet of blood.

Clive inhaled deeply, then exhaled blood. It spilled over his lower lip, dribbling a series of twisting threads down his chin that became rivulets, then a great gush that splashed her neck and chest, all hot and sticky and almost sweet-smelling.

His eyes closed then, his hands falling from her throat. The massive body shuddered, a long powerful spasm more orgasm than death rattle. Clive toppled off her, his body hitting the floor like a wall collapsing. He lay on his back... eyes open... not quite dead... not yet.

Andrea tore one of the sleeves off her shirt, then tore a strip off that and wrapped her hand as best as she could. She found her severed finger and wrapped that and put it in her pocket. Maybe they could reattach it.

In the church proper, the roof dropped into the pews with a terrible crash. The walls soon to follow.

Above her.

The ceiling explodes in a sheet of flame. Embers shower down around them. Andrea flees. Clive stares at the embers as if they were the most beautiful things he had ever seen. It is almost as if the embers are trying to enter his body, sparks of life seeking to return. The embers fell on Clive's open eyes and made soft sizzling sounds as they did.

Outside, it began to rain.

TWILIGHT

If the fire had burned through the parish of Twilight existed with all the intensity of a Biblical holocaust, the rain that followed would have done Noah proud. The flames, as ravenous as they were, the underbrush, as parched as it was, were no match.

Andrea staggered toward town. Dust had turned the road to mud. It pulled at her feet like nightmare. Her shoulder burned. The stump of her severed finger itched. She felt like crying but was not entirely sure why. Regardless, she refused to let a single tear escape.

Now, with the sun coming up, with the rain stopped, snow was falling through fog, only it wasn't snow. It was bone white ash, and it wasn't fog, either. It was thick, gray smoke. And when the smoke cleared, the ash continued to fall like fragments of moth wings.

Andrea walked past the train station. It had seen no flame.

The house of Euxideos had not fared as

well. What remained, was black timbers, haphazardly spread, stark against the pale sky... surrounded by ash.

The cemetery was untouched, yet all around it the ground was blackened. Corpses of trees thrust out of the scorched earth, like splintered fangs turned to charcoal. Others lay fallen like the charred bones of some immense beast.

She found Juvenal sitting at the mausoleum. Hair mussed. Face streaked. Clothes dirty. His eyes are red and swollen and wet, but whether from smoke or from crying, or from both, she didn't know and cared even less. She felt like bitch-slapping him across the back of the head, telling him to wipe his nose and suck it up. She didn't, only because her slapping hand hurt too damn much, being the one 'sans' pinky.

He stared at her for what seemed a very long time, as if he didn't recognize her, as if she were some long dead acquaintance suddenly returned from the spirit world and he didn't know if he should laugh with joy or

scream with fear, if he should jump with glee or jump and run for his life. After a few moments, his brain unlocked and he spoke.

"Is he...?"

"Yes."

Juvenal's face crumbles. "Grandmama..." he moaned into his hands.

"Eppie? Niobe?" Andrea asked to make sure.

"Gone."

"Your sister?"

"With them."

Andrea nodded. Good. She hoped that Niobe had the sense to take them all as far as they could possibly go. She *believed* Niobe had that sense.

Juvenal sniffled and wiped his nose with his sleeve, leaving a swath of black that ran from his nostrils across his cheek.

"Well, then..." he said. "You'll be leaving."

Andrea nodded again. "Nothing to keep me here."

"Was there ever?"

"Nothing to keep you here either," she said.

Juvenal shook his head. "It's there. You just can't see it."

"All I see is death," she told him. "Your family is gone. Your house is gone. I can't imagine there's much left of town."

Juvenal stuck his chin out like a defiant child. "We can rebuild. I can help. I can do that."

Andrea couldn't believe what she had just heard. "After what they did to you? The way they treated all of you?"

"They had reason. Now, with Clive gone, maybe we can all get on with our lives. Even you."

"Yes," said Andrea, "Even me."

She went into town to see what was left.

She walked past the carnival grounds. The earth where the midway had stood, was blackened. The heat had twisted the metal rides into strange and almost fanciful

shapes. Carnies stood about like the living dead, waiting for someone to tell them what to do. The dwarf staggered drunkenly across the road in front of her, calling for someone named Browning.

In town, fire fighters milled about, exhausted and not looking much better than the town they had tried to save. Shell-shocked locals took stock of their losses. A lone dog sat in the center of the street, howling. It was the most despairing sound Andrea had ever heard in her life.

She stopped at what had been the barbershop. Only the front of the building remained. Across the street, Blake was sweeping ashes outside of Sanctuary. It was one of the few buildings untouched.

Andrea called to him, but he pretended not to hear and quickly went inside.

CODA: Entry. Andrea Ramsey's Dreambook

Leaving Twilight.

As it had for five billion years, the world rotated into night. The sky, without moon or stars, was an ebony arch without depth.

A train pulls out of a dilapidated station illuminated by a single yellow light. On the train, Andrea stares out the window of her dark compartment. Later, she would write in her journal.

"Leaving now. Watching Twilight fade. Leaving behind what has already become hard memory. Moving forward into nights that new nightmares may yet shatter. When I was younger, I thought, 'what sort of God would create a being that bled for a week from a wound between its legs, but didn't die? What sort of God would allow innocents to be born into lives of hate and fear and abuse, then allow them to perpetuate the line?' Later I added to that list, wondering what sort of God would allow an abomination like Clive Euxideos or Eppie's father or my own father,

*to walk the Earth? The answer is obvious.
Only a mad God. A god driven insane by the
countless eons of darkness it was forced to
endure before realizing it had only to utter
four simple words... 'let there be light.'
And in that light, I see what might be a
future. And I can almost believe... that it
could be mine."*