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QUALITY

EDUCATION

by Layla J. Merritt

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine

Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

Damaged Goods

I'm dreaming that I'm at a slumber party and Kim and Carmen's house, eating pizza and playing Monopoly when Mom places her hand on my hip where I am sleeping on a bed of pillows and blankets. I open my eyes and see the Uhaul trailer behind us and remember that I am lying in a makeshift bed in the back of our Ford Bronco. Mom shakes my shoulder and her gold bangles chime gently in my ears.

"Wake up Fahama. Fahama we're here." I smile. The tinkling of the bangles is Carmen's laughter.

"Up Fahama! Let's go!" Dad shouts and slams the driver door shut after he exits the Bronco. I rub my eyes and look out the windshield at a bright, white concrete wall. The sky is black with a murky brown tint that prevents me from deciding what time it is. I grab my backpack and climb out of the truck. We're in a small parking lot with a few cars in it, most of them parked in numbered spaces under steel canopies. Dad is already walking ahead with several bags. I look at Mom and we stroll behind him, taking in the three-story wood shingle apartment complex that is our new home.

"It's upstairs," says Mom when Dad walks up to a door on the first floor. He begins to climb the staircase. I've never seen an apartment complex with staircases outdoors rather than in an enclosed hallway. There are two staircases, one on each

end of the complex about one hundred feet apart. When we get to the top, we are on the balcony, and there is a rail that runs the length of it so that people don't fall off the side and break their legs. It reminds me of a motel we stayed in Houston. Nothing like the community we left back in Michigan. Dad looks in each direction at the hunter green painted doors with gold plated numbers.

"14, 12..." Dad makes a bee-line for apartment number 10, the last door at the end of the walkway.

The new apartment is smaller than our apartment in Ann Arbor. The kitchen is open to the living room and Mom says she likes that, but I don't. I walk into the bedrooms. The small one is mine. It's stark white with a window facing the street and a closet with sliding mirror doors. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I'm ten years old and have a little tummy that rounds under my striped, pink t-shirt. My hair is dirty blonde and fuzzy with bangs that are sticking up from my forehead like an arrow. I'm wearing green surf shorts and a pair of dirty British Knights with mismatched socks. I sigh. I want to lay down, but my bed is in the trailer. I hope I don't have to help unload it right now. I'd rather sleep on the floor than carry the mattress up the stairs in the dark.

"Do you like it?" My mother is in the doorway. Her head is tilted so that her dangly earring rests on her shoulder.

"It's nice," I say for her, when really, I already hate it more than any place I can remember living.

"Look out this window, and you can see mountains. Do you see them?"

My bedroom overlooks a parking lot. There's our Bronco. In the distance, is darkness and in front of the darkness, is a thick haze, lit by fluorescent orange lights that make the street the town and everything in it seem dirty.

"I don't see anything."

"Look again in the morning. You'll see it."

"Okay. Mom?"

"Yes Fahama?"

"Do I have to unload the trailer tonight?"

"Fahama!" Dad calls from the living room, "Come help me in the truck! Come on! Pronto!" I look at Mom. My eyes are sad, pathetic and pleading for intervention.

"Bring your stuff up and I'll set up your bed while you change." She kisses my forehead and gives me a quick hug before I run to catch up with Dad.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep that night. I lay in my bed of blankets on the floor and watch the square of pale orange light cast in from the street, flicker on the ceiling. I reposition myself continually for two hours, and then, decide it's the window's fault. There were no lights outside my window in Ann Arbor; only trees, shrubs, the shed dad built me...no lights. This apartment wasn't as nice as our townhouse in Ann Arbor. The carpet is an ugly brown color. The floors in our old place were shiny wood that gleamed against the golden tint of the sun. I fall asleep

dreaming of my old apartment, and my friends. When I wake up the sun fills the entire room.

“Get up,” My dad is standing in my bedroom doorway wearing a white towel around his waist. His black hair is wet and combed back. He throws a towel over my face, smothering me in darkness.

“The shower’s running.”

After my shower, I dig through bags and suitcases for something to wear on my first day of school. It’s early September, and the air feels cooler than it had all summer. Shorts will not do, but that was all I seemed to have that fit, since I gained a few pounds over the summer.

“Hey.” Mom is standing behind me. She has a hairbrush in her hand.

“Hey.”

“Do you need me to braid your hair?”

“Uh, yeah.” I’m still digging in the suitcase.

“Get your comb.”

I find the comb and sit on the floor between her knees. She parts my hair down the middle and twists each side into two French-braids, which I like much more than one fatter braid, although it takes longer. I know she’s doing the French-braids because she wants to be nice. I’m nervous to start a new school.

“Your new school is really nice,” she says after she begins to twist the second section.

“You saw it?” I respond immediately from excitement.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I drove past it.” She is pulling my hair really tight, but it doesn’t hurt. I pride myself on being unaffected by life’s simple and necessary pains: The prick of a doctor’s needle; cold, December lake water; the sting of a bee. It was just being yelled at that could make me cry.

“Come on girls, time to go!” Dad is digging in boxes and pacing in the front room.

“Almost done,” mom says and wraps a rubber band around the end of my braid. “Get your book bag!” She meets me at the door.

“Have a good day at school honey.” We embrace.

“Love you mom.”

“I love you too honey. Go on.”

I run out the door and down the stairs where two lemon haired girls exit an apartment and lock it with a key. I stop running and stare at them; both taller than me, gangly and thin, with pale yellow hair, but one’s was straight and the other curly. They obviously are not twins, but must have been sisters or cousins, which to me is as good as sisters because I have neither. The straight haired one smiles. She has a small gap between her front teeth, which is the ideal compliment to the faint, beige freckles dotting her cheeks. My lips part to form a smile when-

“Fahama!”

Dad is standing near the stairs in his helmet. His upper lip is curled and he looks angry and confused. My half-smile wanes and I run to where my dad is waiting beside his motorcycle. He hands me my helmet and a moment later, I take my first ride into the bright, California sun.

“Here, take these too.” Dad drops another pair of jeans in my arms. “Hurry up.”

In the fitting room, I try on the first pair; too small. Everything in a size three is too small. I put on the fives and go out to show my dad who is leaning on a rack reading from a crumpled classifieds section. He erects himself when he sees me.

“Turn around,” he barks. “How much are they?” he asks after he looks me over a moment. I tug at the tag stapled to the waist of the jeans.

“Sixteen.”

“What size?” His eyes meet mine gravely. With some effort, I reach for the tag again. I twist my back with obvious difficulty to demonstrate how impossible it is for me to find out the size of the jeans. He reaches down and snatches the tag from my hand and off the jeans.

“Size five. Size five?” He looks at me like a small dog. “Do you know what size five is?”

I rub my toe against the pink, nylon carpet the store had placed over the linoleum in the girl’s section and shake my head for no.

“That’s one size smaller than what your mother wears! You’re fat. Put your shoes on and meet me in the front. Hurry up!”

Dad takes me into the school office to register for school.

“Does she have her immunizations?” asked Enid, the school secretary who was about 70 years old and wore a polyester blue suit even though it was still September and a warm 75 degrees outside.

“Yes, here.” Dad pushed some papers across the desk.

“Thank you,” said Enid and she took a file from her desk and begin writing.

“And she’s in the 4th grade?”

“Fifth.”

“Ok, big girl huh!” she winked at me while her hand kept scribbling.

“Do you have her class records? Any special honors?”

“No, nothing special,” Dad says, pushing me at the principal, Dr. Rodriguez, who soon walks me across a courtyard playground to my new classroom. Oddly, much like my new apartment building, my new school is designed without hallways. My classroom in fact, is not connected to any other part of the building, but is simply a make-shift classroom made of aluminum plopped down on the grass beside the basketball court. There’s a ramp to run up, but I take the stairs for Dr. Rodriguez. The classroom is dim even with the florescent lights that make a tiny static buzzing in my right ear. I don’t want to stick my finger in my ear. Dad always gets mad about that, so I just wait for Dr. Rodriguez, who is speaking with my new teacher across the room. My eyes run over the faces of the students until one stands out; the

freckled face, gap-toothed blonde from the first floor of my building is my class! I return her smile from earlier that morning.

When Dr. Rodriguez returns she says, "Welcome to Bradoaks, Fahama, I'm sure you will make a nifty part of our little family!" She faces the pupils. "Carry on children!" she says graciously and steps out in the sun. My new teacher approaches me like I might bite him.

"I'm Mr. Lyeman," he says when he is looking down on me, his lower lip protruding in a way that makes me feel he does not like children.

"What's your name?"

He wears green slacks with brown leather shoes, and a checkered shirt under a maroon, sleeveless sweater. He's not fat, but his face is bloated and soft and his nose is red. He has combed a very thin wisp of hair over the entire crown of his white head.

"Fahama Rapport," I answer standing as upright as my backpack will allow.

"Well Fehema, welcome. Class this is Fehema Rapport. Please make her feel at home."

"You may sit here," Mr. Lyeman instructs me to a cube of desks, arranged in fours, so that they make a perfect square. I sit directly across from a strong, black boy who looks like Michael Jordan. In my square, there is also a boy named Billy, and a girl named Toni.

Before the break, Mr. Lyeman asks if someone will take me over to computer room to meet Mrs. Frank. Nearly everyone wants to, and I pick Stacey, as her name is, who has freckles and lives in my building. Stacey is very polite. She reminds me of a squirrel because she's always alert; *watching, working, playing*, but she also has a remarkable patience; *waiting, working, watching*. Stacey is ten years old, but her sister, Daphne, who I had also seen in my building, is twelve and goes to another school called Hillman, where we will be going next year, she explains as we cross a vast field of asphalt to Mrs. Frank's room. Several very pretty girls with very dark brown hair standing outside take notice of me when we pass.

"She looks like Melissa," says one wearing a pink headband.

"Yeah, she does," says a quiet one wearing a yellow bow.

"What's your name?" asks the third one with a red headband.

"Fahama."

"I'm Clara," says the one with the red headband. She smiles. "This is Michelle, Nadine and Heather."

"Hi," I smile.

"You look like our friend Melissa. She went to Bradoaks last year," says Michelle, who wears the pink headband.

"Melissa was pretty," says Nadine quietly adjusting her yellow bow.

"You're pretty," says Clara, standing very near and smiling. Her face is very square and thin. I wonder if she gets to eat lots of junk foods that I don't.

"Where are you from?"

“Michigan.”

“Where’s that?” asks Heather. Heather wears a blue headband.

“Near Canada,” I answer proudly.

At lunch, I collect my tray and find a spot with Stacey at a long table near the window.

“Do you like Mr. Lyeman?” I ask, opening my peaches. Stacey has apricots, but she only picks at them with her spork. I feel like it’s a long time before she answers me, but I can tell that’s her way.

“He doesn’t really bother me, but some kids don’t like him. They say he has favorites.”

“Why are they his favorite?” I always want to be the favorite, but rarely am. “Are they smart?” Her eyes are far away from me as she chews.

“I don’t think so. I’m probably one of his favorites.” I want to ask her questions like what reading group she is in and if Mr. Lyeman lets us have class parties for birthdays and if she has any pets, but Michelle, with the pink headband is standing beside me.

“Come over to our table!”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Well I’m just eating...”

“Come on! Please! Clara wants to tell you something! Come with me just for a minute! Please!”

“Okay, just a minute.”

“Yay!” she bounces back to her table. Stacey glances up from her apricots.

“I’ll be right back,” I say as I climb out of the table.

All the activity in the cafeteria erupts from the Headbands table the way in which atoms branch out from a central nucleus. Clara of course, is there at the head, in her red headband, her gaunt cheeks stretched out as she tells a story to the rest of the group, which includes Michelle and the other two girls, plus several additional girls with very, dark, long hair and various headbands that I have not seen before. A few boys are also being rambunctious nearby for attention. Clara stops her story when she sees me.

“Fe-Mah! Hey everybody this is Fe-Mah! Sit down!”

A girl with a polka-dot headband that I wish belonged to me makes room for me on the bench.

“Fe-mah how’s your first day? Is it good?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. I think I like this school.”

“It’s a good school,” agrees Clara. “Monique’s mother is on the PTA, so we even get to ask for stuff.” I’m intrigued.

“Like what?”

“Like school parties or trips and stuff,” she says tipping her head for emphasis.

“Last year we got a roller skating party,” said the girl with the polka dot headband.

“I love roller skating,” I say.

“Us too!” says Heather.

“Hey, Fe-mah, why don’t your get your lunch tray and eat over here.”

I look back at Stacey. Her watery brown eyes are congealed on me. She turns to the window.

“Okay, let me just tell Stacey,” I say and push myself up from the lunch-table. Clara places her hand on my wrist.

“But there isn’t enough room at the table for Stacey, Fe-mah.” The flavor of the canned peaches, still sweet on my tongue, sours.

“Yeah, sure...” I say and smile. I walk back to Stacey’s table. She doesn’t look up from her sandwich. When I sit down, I sense the rapid movements of her eyes picking me over like a half empty lunch tray. I pick up my sandwich.

“You going to eat those?” I ask pointing at the apricots. She pushes the fruit across the counter.

“What did they want?” She asks after several moments. Her lips are pressed together in a firm line.

“They wanted to have lunch with us. I told them there wasn’t enough room at our table.”

Stacey holds the bread in her hands. There is a shadow over the freckles on her forehead and I can’t see her face. I hope she doesn’t cry. When she finally looks

up, the wonderful, black tooth-gap, so imperfect and unexpected, is flashing at me. I grin back and suck my cheeks into my face like Clara. Stacey bursts into laughter and so do I. When we're done, I stuff the rest of my sandwich in my mouth and stand up.

"What games do you have here?" I ask and climb out of the bench. Stacey picks up her tray and follows me.

"What to play at lunch?"

"Yeah." My garbage slid off the tray and fell in the trash.

"Uh, hand-ball, soccer, tetherball, jump-rope, basketball....kickball."

"What's tetherball?" I wasn't aware of any game called tetherball back in Michigan.

"See where those kids are hitting that ball inside the circle?" She points at a row of painted circles, eight feet in circumference, with a volleyball attached to a pole in the center of each. The circles are divided in half.

"The object of the game," explains Stacey as we stand in line to play, "is to get the ball to wrap completely around the pole. Then you win."

"Oh that's easy!" I proclaim. Her liquid gaze ossifies.

"It would be easy, if you were playing by yourself," she remarks and I realize how stupid I had just sounded.

"It helps to be taller than your opponent, she says eyeing the short, Mexican girl who just won the match. Suddenly I'm aware of how much taller Stacey is than

me. Lots of kids in my new class are taller than me, which is strange, since I was one of the tallest kids in my class in Ann Arbor.

“Watch me!” Stacey steps into the court and takes position in the farthest possible point from where the girl is serving the ball. She holds the ball in the air, serves, and Stacey hits it back with such force that it flies over the girl’s head and wraps around the pole three times before it’s returned.

“Impressive,” I say in the same approving voice dad would use.

The game continues for several minutes until Stacey defeats the little girl. I step in the court and Stacey holds the ball high in the air and grins. I see the black gap in front of the white sun and then the ball is above my head. Then it’s in front of me and Stacey is smashing it with her fist. It’s right in front of me and about to slap me in the face, so I duck, but then the ball is back and this time when I duck I fall on my butt. Stacey immediately hits the ball again and it whips around the pole so fast that I think the cord will choke me if I move too soon.

“What happened?” I ask slowly rising from the asphalt. I hope no one saw the game, but there are four people in line waiting. Stacey is holding her sides and laughing so hard water is leaking from her eyes, but when she sees the embarrassment on my face she composes herself.

“Try again,” she says and her palm slaps against my arm.

After math we take a recess break. Stacey and I head for the tetherball courts. I notice most of the Headbands are herding together alone beside the fence. I had time to play only two games when we were called back into class.

I ride the bus home with Stacey and a girl named Toni who is also in our class and lives in our building. Toni's mother Mona, is the reason we moved to that building. She and my mother were friends in the 1970's. They both wore bell bottoms and looked alike in their photos except my mom's hair was flat and Toni's mom's hair was big. I say goodbye to Stacey and go to my apartment, but the door is locked.

"Over here!" My mother is draped over the sofa in the apartment across the rail from us. Then Toni appeared in the doorway.

"In here Fehema," she says and smiles softer than her eyes stare. I cross to their side of the building. Toni moves aside so I can step in the living room. Their apartment is just like ours except that instead of brown and white, Toni's mother has pink and green paisley curtains and matching pillows. Also their furniture- from the leather sofa to the armchair, to the foot ottoman, is all matching white. It smells like pink, scented lotion.

Mom and Mona giggle.

"Don't be scared," Mona says and they giggle again. Mona drops a glass full of pink liquid on the surface of the shiny black table. My mom has one too. "Come here! Let's me look at you girl! I glance over at Toni who looks sad. "Toni, close the door, you're letting out all my air-conditioning!" Toni closes the door and I drop my backpack and present myself to Mona.

"Oh Jayne! She's beautiful! Look at that little heart shaped face, eyelashes longer than Maybelline, and all this golden hair. Girrrrrr! " I bite my lip to keep

from smiling. "Mmmm hmmm. I know that's right! Them little boys better look out now!" I glance back at Toni who has gone to the kitchen and returned with a package of fruit gummy snacks. I stare at them, wishing Toni had brought me some too.

Fahama, this is my son, Lawrence, Larry for short. Larry sits on the edge of the white sofa, a square, plastic box cupped between his fingers, his body swaying in time with the graphics on the TV screen. "

Larry, this is Fahama, Jayne's daughter," Mona says. He doesn't turn his head.

"Larry!" Mona blurts unexpectedly.

"Hi," says Larry glancing indifferently at me over his shoulder between plays.

"And this is my beautiful daughter Toni," says Mona. "Toni, don't be rude like your brother, say hello to Fahama."

"We already met," Toni says and pops three fruit gummies into her mouth.

"My mother removed her lips from around her straw long enough to say:

"You met?"

"We're in the same class."

"Oh?" My mother says, surprised. Mona begins to laugh.

"Of course you are! Why you're both ten aren't you! Isn't life grand Jayne?

After all these years apart, here we are in the same building, our kids are in the same class, one big happy family- and we can pick right back up like you never left California, like our friendship was never cleaved!"

It didn't take long to get settled in. Dad got a job selling Kwasaki Motorcycles at a small dealership in El Camino. He is usually gone until after eight. When he gets home we always have dinner on the stove, and I set the table. Our apartment is very boxy. The front door opens right into the living room. We've got a small table and the tiny kitchen to the left, the three foot counter-top dividing the kitchen from the living room. Dad doesn't like to open the blinds because he says it attracts attention. It's dark in the Box, and lined with brown carpet and cream walls so it feels like a coffin.

Last week, the school gave me some tests and decided that even though I'm in Mr. Lyeman's class reading from the Green Reading Book with my friend Stacey, I should spend each morning Mrs. Mattison's class reading from the Blue Book. After the Pledge of Alliance I cross the thin strip of asphalt between one porta-classroom and the next.

Mrs. Mattison is standing behind a small podium near the chalkboard. She is thin and flexible looking, like a lanky noodle in bright clothing. The firm, tight way her slim chest and arms fill up her turtleneck sweater and polyester pants make me think she is very strong. Her hair reminds me of Carla on "Cheers."

"Fehma, welcome! I'm Mrs. Mattison, how you doing- good?" Her eyebrow is bent and she waits for me to respond.

"I'm fine."

“Great!” Her dark hands slap together. “Ok class, we have a new addition to our group. “Fehma, introduce yourself.”

I wish she’d just introduced me herself, but now I turn to face the class. What I really did not want to see was the Headbands. All of them, and most of the cute boys I saw in the cafeteria were in Mrs. Mattison’s class. I wonder how they all ended up in class together. Maybe it had something to do with the PTA.

“I’m Fahama Rapport, I’m ten.”

“Ok, great Fehma! Tell us something about yourself. What do you like to do?”

“I like to draw,” I say looking out at the gradient of headbands, “and play Tetherball.” Giggles and snickers erupt among the students.

“Ok, great!” Mrs. Mattison’s hands clap. “Can someone grab a Blue Book from the back wall for Fehma please? Fehma you can sit right here.”

“It’s Heather’s desk.” Carla is standing in front of me with the Blue Book. She wears a shiny, red, roller-staking jacket with her red headband and I wish very much now that I had handled that first day in the cafeteria differently.

“That’s ok,” says Mrs. Mattison from the podium. Heather’s not here today and we’ll figure something out by the time she gets back. Now, today we are going to start learning about the Classics. Does anybody know what the Classics are?”

“Like old movies?” says Michelle.

“No,” says Mrs. Mattison. Her “no” has a sugary inflection that makes me want to guess the answer.

“Classic stories?” I say.

“Yes. And what’s a classic story Fehma?”

“Something that has been told so many times everybody knows it.”

“That’s right, so when we talk about Classics, in contemporary culture and literature, we are talking about the old stories from early in civilization. We are talking about Mythology. The way we tell stories today is very similar to how stories were told by the early Greek and Romans.”

Mrs. Mattison explains that we are to read about Medusa the witch, and Zeus the king and his sister Aphrodite, the goddess of love and I am glad I get to leave Mr. Lyeman’s class, even if it is awkward with the Headbands.

After lunch, I return to Mr. Lyeman’s class for math. We are learning how to divide fractions and even though I learned it last year, I like being at the top of the class and don’t mind the review. But twice each week in the afternoon, I go to Mrs. Franks computer lab for a very small class of smart kids who score really high on tests. The kids are all different grades in the school and there are only four of us. We don't do anything in class except play Oregon Trail- a fun computer game about pioneering across the Oregon Trail. At 2/3 of my wagon always perishes from disease on the journey, and I realize how uncertain life was on the frontier.

Bradoaks is ok. I’m learning my way around California. Everything is different from Michigan in simple things, like the words people choose, or the songs they listen to, what kind of cars they drive. In California, people drive very old cars

for years and years. They listen to oldies a lot. I counted four oldies stations so far. In Michigan dad only had one to listen to.

That night, I'm sitting at the kitchen table finishing my homework for Ms. Mattison's class. It's a report on which Greek God is your favorite and why. I write that I like Sisyphus because although he's living in hell, he never complains. Dad is sitting across from me eating peanuts while he checks my math homework. I can hear the dull crunch of the peanuts inside his mouth. I stop writing and take a small handful of peanuts. As I draw back my hand dad stops chewing and looks at me as plainly as if he were staring out the window.

"Fahama, is this your bookbag, and your shoes?" He scoops a few more peanuts into his mouth. Dully, I look down at my canvas bookbag, white Vans laces ups, stacks of drawing pads, a few colored pencils, two dolls. *At 10, I really was too old to play with dolls.* My eyes returned to him glumly as the pencil twisted between my fingers.

"Pick up this room and wash the dishes. "

"What about my homework?"

"Finish it later. I want the apartment clean when mom gets home from work."

I sigh.

"What? You think that's tough?" He is wide-eyed and enlivened. I knew better than to say anything.

"Grandma Hackett, whew boy, she was tough. One time she marched out in the street and caught me as I was riding up on my bike and just boom! Right in the chest! Knocked the wind outta me and I fell off the bike. Then she picked me up by my ear- like this," he says pulling my ear, "and dragged me and the bike home. That was for not walking my bike across the street."

Lethargically, I begin to pick up. My mother, four months out of her bachelor's in graphic arts, was working as a graphic designer for a non-profit, holistic wellness organization in Pasadena. Her boss was a chiropractor with a huge following of people, mostly whites and Asians.

Carmen is my best friend in the whole wide world, but if I had a best friend in California, it would be Stacey. Stacey and I ride the bus to school together everyday. I like Stacey's sister Daphne too, but she rides a different bus. Unfortunately, Toni rides the same bus as me and is even in my class. The more I get to know Toni, the more convinced I am that her father is a dinosaur. For example, Toni is as tall as Stacey, but she looks shorter because she has poor posture. She has a thick belly and fully developed breasts at the age of eleven so she's always frontally inclined. To compensate, she bends her knees too much and her movements are rapid and stiff, like a prehistoric, two-legged lizard. Her nose and mouth, are wide and her small, deep-set eyes wear thick brows.

Monday morning Stacey and I are waiting in line for the bus to arrive across the street from our complex. The sun is shining and we are wearing t-shirts under unzipped jackets. Stacey is re-reading her homework and I am eating instant oatmeal out of a paper cup.

“Hi guys. Leah what are you eating?” Toni reaches for my cup and I shy away with my oatmeal. Her greedy eyes are fixed on me as if she wants to kill me and drink my blood.

“So you know what I did at my cousin’s house in East L.A. this weekend?”

Stacey glances up from her homework. Stacey has known Toni much longer than I. I suppose they were friends which is why Stacey replies,

“What? What did you do?”

My eyes are rolling as soon as the words begin pour out of her mouth. Here it comes.

“Oh my God! My cousins have a giant house- a mansion in East LA! They got a Porche, two pool tables, they got a pool-”

“We have a pool,” I shrug. Toni puts her hands on her hips the way her mom does.

“They got a pool in their backyard Leah! Not just some crappy apartment pool that everybody swims in!” she screeches.

“I like our pool, it looks like a pond.”

“A lagoon,” says Stacey. I nod in agreement.

“Well you know what else they got in their backyard smarty pants? They got a cotton candy machine! A cotton candy machine all to themselves!” Toni stands a little straighter with the confidence of knowing we were envious.

“A cotton candy machine? All to yourself? What color cotton candy?” Stacey wants to know.

“Oh we got green cotton candy, we got purple cotton candy.”

“Ooooh.”

“We got blue cotton candy and of course, pink. But who wants pink when you have purple?”

“Yeah,” agrees Stacey. I agree too. The bus pulls up beside us. I run to the trash to discard my empty breakfast cup. When I come back Stacey is already walking along the moving line and Toni is ready for me. I reach down to grab my backpack off the ground, but Toni’s Vans sneaker is over the strap, securing it to the cement.

“Get off!”

“Off what?” she smirks as I’m bent over with one hand on my bag strap. She can kick me in the face if she wants. I stand and face her. I hate her eyes. They are dark and shriveled like hard dried-up blueberries.

“Move!” I order. She’s so close I can see the thin, black hairs up above her lip which is curled into a smirk. The bus driver blows the horn. Toni lifts her foot from my bag and spins around, knocking me to the floor with her backpack. She laughs.

“Better hurry up Femah, the bus is leaving,” she sings as I dust myself off. When I get inside the bus I see that Toni took the seat beside Stacey. Instead of sitting behind them, I sit in the first row with Jacob and the bus takes off.

Jacob is in Mr. Lyeman’s class. Jacob rarely speaks. Kids think he’s weird because he always wears blue jeans with loafers and suspenders. Nobody else wears loafers and nobody especially wears suspenders, but Jacob wears them every day. I have a pair of suspenders too and if Toni were beside me I’d slap her nasty face with them.

“Hey. Fahama?” Jacob’s face- smooth and creamy like whipped butter, is turned to me.

“Yeah?” I’m rolling my neck on my shoulders trying to relax.

“Did you like the movie we watched yesterday?”

“About the magnetic city?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, I liked it. Did you?”

“I picked it out.”

“Oh you did?” Mr. Lyeman sometimes let kids pick out movies, but I don’t pay attention to whom anymore because he never picks me.

“Yes, I did. My father helped make it. It was filmed in New Zealand.”

“Really? Where’s that?”

“In Australia.”

“Oh. I want to move there.”

“Where Australia?”

“No, the Magnetic City,” I say and Jacob grins so hard his nose touches his upper lip. The bus stops.

“Bye Jacob,” I duck out of the bus behind Stacey.

Toni is nearby, smirking. She’s still smirking while her hand is on her heart during the Pledge of Allegiance. I’ve never been happier to go to Mrs. Mattison’s room to read from the Blue Book because everybody, even, Pterodactyl Toni knows that the Blue Book is the highest book in school.

It never snows in Southern California. Occasionally, it does rain. Usually in January and February. Most days however, I can play tetherball. I’ve moved up the ranks, from amateur to almost good. By the end of the year I would be. Before Christmas break, we had Parent/Teacher conferences.

“Fahama’s grades are nearly perfect. In her weakest subject, she remains above the 90th percentile,” he told Jayne and Arthur. “But,” Mr. Lyeman continues, “Fahama’s attitude is rank with sarcasm.”

Arthur’s fingers fold tightly against each other until his fists are sweaty, red balls.

“What did she do?” he spits at the schoolteacher.

It doesn't matter because soon we move away.

It felt so good to be free after being grounded for so long. I ran through the grass in short shorts and a tank top. I played tetherball and sat in the park bleachers to watch a game, the sun bright and new on my skin.

"Fahama! Fahama!" Amy, my classmate, hung out of the passenger side of a car. "Can I use your phone?"

People didn't have phones attached to their faces back then you see, and I almost like it better that way. People couldn't clock your minutes, and know your schedule and make accusations or infringe how you chose to spend your time. Of course, there's no way to go back now, but would you want to? That is the question that answers itself. Ring! Ring!

"Come on get in!" Amy steps out of the car so I can climb in the back. "This is my boyfriend." I was stunned and impressed that Amy had a boyfriend old enough to drive, and climbed into the boxy backseat of the old sedan. He didn't say much as he motored the down the block to my house.

"Does he go to Azusa High?" I whispered as we dash into my house, leaving him idling on the curb.

"No, he lives in Ventura."

"Wow that's far!" I exclaimed, impressed that Amy knew boys in Ventura with cars. After a brief call to her mother, we walked back out to the car and found Amy's boyfriend in an altercation while seated behind the wheel. Three junior Cholos, in their daily uniform of black Dickies, white t-shirts, and classic Addidas, hung outside his car door. They all sat on small, BMX bicycles, they wore their dark

hair slicked back with oil. The big one was inches away from the driver's window, which had been rolled mostly down.

"Are you girls with this nigger?" This was a moment in my life that I will never forget. The moment my blood stopped cold in my veins and shocked me with the realization that I was actually Black. What should I say to the question, "Are you girls with this nigger?" That word nigger, loaded with so much meaning, a command of disrespect and opposition, of supremacy and hostility. No one had ever spoken that word to me with that tone. I had only read about it in books and watched people talk about in documentaries. Amy's boyfriend in the car is Black like Kenyan espresso grounds, his skin glowing red wherever the sun hit it. I am the color of cream soda. Does that make me less of a nigger? Do I let people talk about Black people disrespectfully in front of me? Was it because I was a girl? Smothered, my brain swam in delirium, my eyes scanned the Cholos, dangling from handle bars like monkeys, gritting teeth, looking for trouble, the big one, sharp and focused, ready to pounce. His eyes peeled down my hair, lips, skin, absorbing me like the scent of close prey.

"He's my boyfriend," Amy uttered, her baby doe voice saturated in confusion.

That omission, that we knew the "nigger" terrified me even more. Was I next? Suddenly, the boys were arguing, and the big cholo punched through the window of the car. Amy's boyfriend stepped onto the street, realizing his full size and eclipsed the underdeveloped Mexicans with his legs, fists and frame. Outbodied, 1 to 3, the big cholo pulled out a knife and gutted his victim in the belly.

The three black and white wearing junior gangsters pedaled into the late afternoon sun, leaving a big black boy bleeding in the street.

He bled on the tan carpet, in the front room, of our house, the one with quartered bay windows and no furniture. I called 911 as Amy soaked up the blood with a red towel.

"Someone's been stabbed!" My voice burst into the receiver. "Hurry!"

My father arrived moments after the ambulance left.

"You called the police?!" His thick fingers swam through the lanes of black hair on his head. "No you can't call the police!"

"Why? He was bleeding. You're supposed to call 9-1-1 right? That's what they always say; call 9-1-1 in case of emergency."

"Yes, you call 9-1-1. You are a- a kind person, Fahama, but you just can't call the police to our house."

"Why?"

"Because they bring more harm than good."

My parents talked about a court subpoena, where I would have to testify as a witness. I didn't tell them that I wanted to testify, that I was thrilled by the idea of participating in a court ceremony. They were horrified. Dad suggested we move. I cried and begged, but they concluded we could move somewhere with a better school district.

The more they discussed the possibility of a move, wooing me with big bedrooms and backyard pools in distant suburbs of the next nearest suburb, the more agitated I became. I hung out at the school or park until dark. Most of the girls who had been my friends had decided I was weird, the only cool girls that still chatted with me at lunch were Rayanna and Briana, who were both in the Gifted and Talented Education program with me. They knew the real me.

Hanging out late meant I was not doing my homework as thoroughly. My English teacher left late in the year to have a baby, and was replaced by a weak woman of soft countenance, her eyes dumbfounded, lips parted and gaping at the rows of twelve year olds. Her delivery was so slow, like the unfurling of mental saliva, not vomit, which is the acid guts of one's brain, but clear, bland, insipid saliva, which leaves no stain, shock or suffering, no lesson or enlightenment. Within days, the entire class was restless, including myself. I began to entrap and manipulate the substitute, forgetting my studies and spending my time listening for her fumbling mistakes, so I could exploit them for the entertainment of the class. I enjoyed their laughter, what seemed like approval from an entirely new set of friends, boys, even more than girls. I could be funny.

After two weeks, of using the sub as a sideshow, she called home. My mother threatened and smacked me a few times. When my father arrived home from work, she met him in the kitchen and I heard her whispering. Moments later he entered the den, with my mother close behind. After screaming and tossing me around a bit, pushing his huge index finger against my chest and threatening me, I was sent to

clean and get ready for bed. Within the hour, I could see that he had given me a black eye. I stared at it under the florescent, white light in my bathroom and wondered why that bruise of all the much harder hits I'd taken, was the one that would mean so much. There was a large bruise on my chest as well; it was green and although there were no bruises on my legs, my thigh hurt badly where he had kicked me. Still, it was only the eye that mattered.

When I awoke in the morning, my mother was four inches from my face and straining her blue eyes so hard I asked if she were looking for her glasses.

"You have lice," she said. "You can't go to school today."

And then something remarkable happened; something that would change me forever, and likely not for the better. I stopped looking at my mother like a mother, and instead, I saw her for what she was, a coward. Her mask was thin and the impalpability of her integrity was clear as it was non-existent. At 12 years old, I recognized that my parents were manipulating me, that they were afraid, and that they must be wrong. I was too young and immature to know that.

I sat up in bed and stared at her boldly, without fear, the way truth stares at a lie. Her eyes darted away from me and down to the tassels of her Oriental silk robe that she twisted between her narrow fingers. She drifted out of the room, her robe flowing behind her in the supple lingering way her beauty had always appeared to me. I followed her to the kitchen and watched her dark blonde hair fall over the side of her face as she poured a cup of coffee. Her fingers trembled as she brought the

hot cup to her lips. After she ingested the coffee, she looked at me and said, "Clean the kitchen today." She turned to leave, but I said firmly.

"I don't have lice." She stopped. Her wide, blue eyes narrowed.

"Yes you do."

"No I don't."

"Yes you do, I saw them."

"Maybe you confused them with the black eye dad gave me." My eyes burned in a silent rhetoric of revelation that she'd never recognized in me. Her fingers began to tremble and the coffee spilled.

"Shit!" She shook the coffee off her hand and glared at me bitterly. I glared back.

"You clean it up," I said and left her staring after me, her little girl, just 12 years old, 5'2" with tiny breasts that were so jejune they were just tender nipples swollen over a kiss of fat.

I went to my room and prepared for school. Fifteen minutes later, my mom knocked on my door. Tentatively she entered my bedroom, where I was sliding my homework into my backpack.

"What are you doing?" She asked me, keeping her distance as if she might need to run suddenly from the room.

"I'm getting ready for school," I continued stuffing my backpack. She swallowed like there was a prune in her throat.

"I can't stop you from going to school today if that's what you want to do. But you know that if you do go, they will ask you a lot of questions, and you won't be able to hide. They will come here and arrest dad and maybe me. We will lose our house and you will go to foster care. You will not be able to finish the school year. They will put you in a school for orphans and we might not see you until you are 18."

I stared at the dollhouse in the corner of my room. I didn't know where it came from. It was just sitting on the table one day, but it was raw and unpainted, unassembled and unplayable until then. It had taken over one year to get it assembled and by then, I was more interested in being with my friends than dolls. Still, I didn't want to leave my house. I wasn't done admiring it.

I folded my legs underneath me and collapsed onto the floor. Mom drifted out silently, pulling the door closed behind her. I tugged and twisted a piece of yarn from the carpet between my fingertips. I did not want to have to leave my school. I was close to finishing seventh grade. I had my life mapped out ahead of me. In eighth grade, I planned to continue being the class valedictorian, award winning artist, and choir soprano, but I also planned to run track, and most importantly, become a cheerleader.

The summer we moved to Azusa, when I was freshly 11 years old, I'd spent most of my time in daycare class for adolescents. Vanessa, who ran my summer program, was a little woman with a wide mouth. Her daughter, Marina, was 13, and looked just like her, except she was bigger. I would see her every day, practicing her

cheerleading routine with her squad. Like her mom, Marina was Polynesian with dark bronze skin and long, thick black hair, cut in a straight line. It swung below her waist like a pendulum when she walked.

Her friends were all cheerleaders, all cute and fashionable, but Marina was the leader. Where the other girls were skinny, Marina was athletic. Where the other girls were timid, Marina took initiative. Where the other girls, were pretty, Marina was beautiful. She did back flips and the splits and she told me she wanted to be a television broadcaster. I told her I wanted to be an astronomer. I didn't tell her that I wanted to be just like her; that I went home and dug out clothes that most looked like hers; magenta spandex shorts, a big, purple t-shirt, and high-top sneakers with pink socks. And this, I wore on the first day at my new school.

I chose the ensemble partially because I wanted to be Marina, but mostly because my parents had not bought me new clothes for school and I was too chubby for my clothes from 5th grade: A neon pink Marina imitation was the best I could come up with. Needless to say, I was unable to pull it off. The class, which was 95% Latino, stared and snickered when the principal brought me across the blacktop in the morning sun. I was all wrong and slightly awkward. I felt too large in size. My thighs were pudgy, and my legs were too long and gangly for my short, dimpled face. My sneakers were old and dirty and my shirt said Cedar Point even though we were in California and no one knew what Cedar Point was. The worst were those spandex shorts and matching socks. I knew I made a mistake the moment they all looked at me. I knew I had a long way to go to become Marina.

It was at least three months before my parents bought me clothes. Thus, it was virtually impossible to prove I was cool, so I gave up, instead focusing on what I did best, competing. Within four months I had earned my position as the highest achieving student in the school. My grades were perfect. I won spots in every school play. I ran for public office. I competed against my peers to represent the school on a television show called KIDQUIZ that came on at 6:30am on Saturdays. Not only did I make the team, but I was class MVP and Team Capitan, serving in both rounds of the trivia game show. But there still was just one person at my 6th grade birthday party. At my previous school, I'd made lots of friends by the time my birthday arrived. There were eleven girls at my birthday sleepover in 5th grade.

And now, one year later, six weeks from my thirteenth birthday, after I'd spent the year ascending from the umbrage of the unpopularity of 6th grade, I was to leave? I had friends, I was class valedictorian, in special gifted classes, and highly respected by my teachers. I was slender and athletic. I was almost Marina. I couldn't go to foster care.

A few minutes later, my dad knocked on the door. He entered with a stack of Levi's between his palms and kneeled beside me on the floor with a gentleness with which I had not seen him act before.

"Hi," he said. I had always been too afraid of my father not to answer him.

"Hi."

"I was cleaning out my closet, and I thought you might want these." He pushed the jeans closer to me. On top, was my favorite pair, the medium blue pair I

borrowed without his permission and wore with penny loafers and flowered, button-down shirts held in by white lace suspenders. That was the pair I wore to school for three weeks until Thanksgiving, when he noticed the leather patch on the back and said "Are those my jeans? Take them off now!"

"You don't want them?" I asked quietly in disbelief. He shrugged.

"Neh, 31's are really too small for me now. I've been buying 32's for the last year." He pushed the pile at me again, but I didn't take my hands out of my lap. He slowly rose from his knees. "Well try them on and give me back the ones you don't want," he said and closed the door behind him.

I pulled the pairs of folded jeans apart and looked them over. There were three; two medium blue, and one light. I imagined myself with three new pair of jeans to wear. I would wear them with suspenders, with loafers, with sneakers, with t-shirts, with collar shirts. They were loose enough to be comfortable, but slim enough to be cool. I wanted new jeans. I knew why he was giving them to me. I never saw my father go back on anything. He never did anything this nice for me and an hour ago I was on punishment. No one had said it, but I knew I could take the jeans, I could skip the beatings, the humiliation, the three months of chores. I could even skip class all day, if I just took the jeans.

Forty minutes later my mom poked her head into my room as she was heading to work.

"Oh, you're still here?" she said casually. "Aren't you ready for school?" I didn't even want to look at her, not because she had power and I didn't, for that was

never the case. My mother lacked the necessary character to intimidate me. No, I didn't want to look at her because she was pathetic. The pretense in her voice was weak and sickly like a feeble, diseased child who should have never been born. Why did she act surprised? She and he knew what they were doing. They knew their fate was in the hands of a twelve year-old; a twelve year-old who knew the substitute teacher had good reason to call her mother the night before and say that the perfect student was disrespectful to a teacher, who in taking over the class three months before the close of the year, could not establish firm lines of control in the classroom, was weak, and easily reduced to spectacle by the competitive and intelligent child; a child who knew that for the first time in her life, she would not be punished for grossly misbehaving.

"I'm not going," I said.

"Oh you're not?" she said, and I cringed from the starch of her false innocence.

"No."

"Have a good day. Get some rest," she said pertly. I closed the door and waited until I heard them both leave before I came out and parked myself in front of the television.

When mom got home from work that night I was outside playing and she didn't say anything. At dinnertime, no one made me sit alone in the kitchen, and no one made me eat diet food, which is what usually happened after a beating. Dad

even gave me one of his dark-chocolate-covered, Haagen Daaz ice cream bars that I wasn't allowed to eat for dessert. The next day, Friday, I stayed home from school again. I lay on the sofa watching cartoons and when school got out, I went across the street to the park to play tetherball with the neighborhood kids.

By Monday, the purple under my eye had faded into a dull ochre shade that was nearly indistinguishable from my skin. I went to school in my Levi's, which seemed to fit more snugly since lying around and eating so many Haagen Daaz bars all weekend. And much unlike all the other times I had been punished for misbehaving in school, I was exceptionally unaffected, exceptionally irreverent with the substitute teacher. When I got home from school, I was allowed to play outside. At dinner, I sat at the living room coffee table and watched Unsolved Mysteries with a cheeseburger in my hands. I didn't have to clean the table and wash the dishes alone like usual, and no one ever mentioned the substitute teacher or the black eye again.

Yet, just six weeks after avoiding foster care, my parents announced we were moving to a new town, so I ran away. I ran away to live with my friend for two days before her mother called me to the living room and there was my dad and his friend to pick up my glitter splattered backpack and escort me to the car without a word. When we arrived at our house, dad shoved me through the door so hard my knees hit the carpet. As usual, he shook his fist, he pushed and kicked me, but this time, so much unlike every other time, I stood back up, I shouted at him, screamed bloody hell in his face and challenged him to kill me.

"I'm not leaving this town!" My voice sounded stronger than during any other sentence I'd ever uttered. Dad's face, usually so hard and accusing, turned soft, and flat, his eyes somehow lost their fire and became rich and deep like the sea. And much unlike any other time I had ever spoken to him, this time, my dad was speechless, like he was afraid of what might happen if he said the wrong words. He withdrew, relaxed his fists and walked outside into cool desert night. I exhaled a moment so heavy it felt like my lungs were filled with brackish water. My mother looked through me, her stormy eyes wandering somewhere deep in her mind, and disappeared into the dark half of the house.

Chicago SumTimes

"Come on Femi please come!"

"No."

"Pleeeeeease! I'll pay for all the gas, all you have to do it come." Erin, 18, leaned against her Honda that was bright red like her long, wavy locks. It was late September, and getting chilly, but Erin still wore her favorite, skintight, white pants. Her toenails, polished in scuffed blue paint, peeked through her wooden clogs. She had the kind of tiny breasts that never settled, but were just baby cones, poking

through her t-shirt, that was too tight and short, exposing a puggy little blob of flesh. She snapped a wad of gum between her teeth.

"To Miles house in Chicago?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" she danced on her toes, holding her cigarette out in front of her like a symphony conductor.

"Who does he live with?"

"He inherited his house or something. His parents died."

"How?" I asked quickly.

"In a fire." Erin stomped out her cigarette.

I don't want to go, but I am persuaded. Its three and one half hours from Detroit to Chicago, with me riding shotgun, past corn crops and cow pastures that disappeared behind the twilight as we raced West toward the sunset.

It was 8:46pm when we arrived on the southwest side of Chicago, which at the time, was very dark and grimy, and cold like frozen metal. I recall cold empty streets, warmed by red and yellow street lights, wire trash cans and burnt out buildings on empty lots. The homes were all red brick, but they were dilapidated carport homes with a mix of brick and old, piss-yellow vinyl siding. A man in a starter jacket stood near a telephone booth on the corner with his hands shoved into his pockets.

"Ok, we have to find a payphone." Erin peered over the rim of the steering wheel.

"Does Miles know your coming?"

"You're such a skeptic Fem!" The directness of her tone and the indirectness of her response were bad signs.

"He doesn't know you're coming does he?"

Erin turned to me, her lower lip is held in place by her teeth. Her lips slowly formed a smile.

"Not exactly."

"Erin! What the fuck!" I shouted, rattling the fragile windows of the tiny car.

"He won't mind! He told me I can visit."

"How do you know he doesn't have a new chic, Erin?"

Erin touched her index finger to her upper lip. She turned to me.

"I guess we'll find out." Her pale blue eyes were hot with desire for sex or blood, perhaps a mixture of both. I sighed in defeat.

Miles lived in a three-story structure that is the broke, Chicago style version of a Brooklyn Brownstone. We climbed at least fifteen, narrow steps ascending along the East wall of the building. At the door, Miles accepted a hug from Erin, and typical smile and nod from me. He was dressed in his daily uniform, DC shoes, baggy jeans, and a dark hoodie. His bone pale face was speckled with tiny red and brown spots. His short hair was combed until the hair lay separated in thin strips.

"Hey," Miles said smiling at both of us.

"What's up! What's up!" Erin pumped her fist in the air as we brushed through the narrow doorway into a dry, urban cave of a time forgotten. The walls and windows were dusty and the wood floors were covered in boxes and

newspapers shoved toward the edges and corners of the rooms. The closet was half empty, with nothing but two coats and a several dry hangers on the rack, but it was overflowing with duffle bags, pillows, and a giant triple hose vacuum cleaner that was stretching in the cleared path.

In the kitchen, voices were audible from the house next door. A woman was saying something about buying shoes and then laughing. I wasn't laughing. The kitchen embodied a penetrating morbidity. It was a ghostly mausoleum, mummified by time, where the tragedy of what occurred was omnipresent. Black stains of smoke stretched along the wall from the stove to the ceiling, up into the bedroom above. Boxes and newspapers plates, cups and aluminum foil, jars of peanut butter and cans of cooking oil, a flowered apron and a second black apron with a carving knife and a pitchfork with the words "kiss the cook", a small dinning table with two dusty placemats, and one that was bright blue and red and said Superman. I read the date on a newspaper stacked on top of a laundry basket full of clothes. The house hadn't been touched since Miles' parents died. Now it was his.

I'm surprised Miles had not cleaned this up yet. Perhaps he wanted to savor the memories of his parents. But the apartment felt cold and dead like a mausoleum. It also felt haunted. I wondered if early in the rusty hours of the morning, before the sun wakes, the ghost of Miles' father sits at the kitchen table, drinks from this mug, and rereads the newspaper from the day of his death.

CHICAGO SUN TIMES: JANUARY 8, 1993. *16 Collapse in City Building!* I wondered if he had any premonition he and his wife would leave their son an orphan that day.

This place was like a witness to a family that no longer existed. I felt sorry for Miles then. He was only a young boy of 13 when it happened. An only child like me, he had no one, but a drunk uncle in Detroit, who took him in and let him run feral in the streets where his skateboard became wings that flew him beyond stark extinction. Extinction so close to home. Beside me, a red fire extinguisher glowed, lighting up the stacks of dusty saucers and plates on the countertop as if the mess was accrued yesterday rather than six years ago. That night, it would do them no good. They would be dead before the fire raged through the third floor bedroom windows on Hanover Street and attracted the attention of neighbors. It would take 6 more minutes for the Fire Department to arrive, and by then, they had inhaled enough carbon dioxide to kill a dozen people. Miles, asleep in his bed, never awoke from his dream until after the firemen burst the door off the hinge and uncapped the hose on his parents' room.

Marty, Miles and their friend Joe talked on the other side of the wall. I heard the occasional crisp, defined word in the muffled moss of hushed chatter.

"How do you know her?" asked Joe.

"Just a girl who hangs around," said Marty.

"Yeah, and he-" that's Miles.

"What?"

"Guys, come on. Come on guys. Shut up."

"You fucked her?"

"Eugh!" Joe's laughter sounds like a hiss spraying ice in every direction, covering my limbs so that I'm stuck to the ground, my ears pried open like a giant can of tomatoes. Hair stood on the back of my neck. I stopped breathing so that I could hear them more clearly.

"A couple times," Marty whispered sluggishly.

"I was like- what are you doing Marty!?"

"Are they staying here?" he asked, and Miles and Marty rumbled something inaudible. Their voices quickly fell lower and they begin to talk more quickly.

"When do you need it by?"

"What am I gonna do?"

What were they plotting? Their voices, so low and incomprehensible I had strained my ears. I felt tacs under my heels, along the edges of my buttocks, and around my eyes, pressing into me like the infants of force, demanding attention. I didn't feel safe. I was hated. Hated since the beginning, and all these months, years, they had smiled and welcomed me. I couldn't move from the floor, as if I too, were frozen in time, my mind a confined garden of souvenirs, congealed in psychological winter. I had to leave. I tipped my head back and walked brazenly out of the kitchen.

"Hey! Where were you?" Miles asked.

"We forgot you were here." Miles's friend laughs.

"Were you asleep?" Marty said.

"Yeah, for a sec." I smiled and picked up Erin's patent leather satchel off the floor. Her head lay on a dusty red velvet pillow, only her nose, mouth and chin were visible. Sticky clear liquid drooled out and was sucked back between her lips with each wheezy breath. I shook her ankle. I shook her ankle until she kicked free of my grip and turned over on her back.

"Erin. Erin." My heart was racing. The boys would notice my strange behavior soon. "Erin," I continued calling to her as I collected all our scattered things. Inconspicuously, I placed them beside the door. "Erin, wake up," I ordered, shaking her shoulder determinedly.

"What do you want?!" she hissed, her blue flashing wildly and then receding back into her spackled orange face.

"I need you to take me to the store," I lied.

"Walk," she said flatly and rolled onto her side.

"Erin, I'm not walking!" I said to her back. I grabbed her shoulder and pried her away from the back of the couch.

"No! Stop! I'm not taking you to the store!"

"Erin!" I hissed, well aware that everyone was watching us now. "I need to talk to you. Come to the kitchen."

"This better be good!" Her bare feet hit the cracked wood floor.

In the kitchen, I could see the tiny red stars under her translucent pink skin. She pushed her rusty rug of hair off her face and set her blue eyes on me until they paled against her skin.

"What? What is it?"

"We need to leave here, now." I held my voice below where I thought the boys could hear. Her eyes rolled from the floor to the ceiling.

"Why do we need to leave now Fa-ha-ma?" Her words resounded in a mocky twang.

"It's not safe for us here!" She spat out a few giggles.

"I'm serious! Our stuff is already by the door, all we have to do is say we are going to the store and leave."

Erin folded her hands on her hips and pushed out her small bust.

"I'm going back to sleep."

She turned her shoulder. I grabbed her wrist.

"Hey let go!" she whined.

"We'll talk about this outside!" I hissed like a snake. "I don't want them to hear."

The space between us and them behind the wall in the next room was enormous because I couldn't hear anything, so I knew they were listening to me just as carefully as I was listening to them.

"Whatever Fahama, you just want me to take you, but I'm not letting you ruin this for me!"

"Erin!" I hissed as she stomped back to the sofa.

All the boys stared at us now, their suspicions raised by my obvious knowledge of their betrayal. I wouldn't spend another hour in their company. I

picked up my bag, and walked into the frothy winter wind where I caught a cab to the 2am bus to Detroit. Erin didn't call me for three days, and when she did she told my voicemail that Miles had also betrayed her, broken several of her CD's and pushed her down the stairs, but she didn't apologize. I erased the three of them from my phonebook and a week later, I applied to Wayne State University. I hadn't completed high school. I had been expelled from three different schools for truancy and behavioral problems, but I took the GED and scored well.

"You scored 81% on the math and science which is very good, but in the language arts category, you scored in the 99th percentile!" the admissions counselor gushed when I went to select my courses. I would start school in a week. Suddenly, I felt my head rise off my shoulders, and my chest lifted with confidence, a confidence I remembered from my youth, before I was sent away, before I hung out with druggie kids and sluts, before when I was good and the world was something I sought to win honestly, with merit, when I was an asset to every team, every school, every contest. I was back and I would never again let myself be misled.

Evil

I love L.A. My brothers are here, my mom is here, my cousins are here, the Lakers are here. It was tight, fitting in two vacations in two weeks, but Fahama said it's okay, she doesn't mind if I arrive on the 24th instead of the 20th. But today, it's the 23rd, and I get this email. It's been in my box 13 hours. I was at the Lakers game with my cousin Randolph. He just graduated from UCLA! That was the only school I would have gone to besides NYU. I love UCLA. But today, when pleasantly inebriated at 3am checking my email I see this, this letter, from... Fahama in Argentina.

"We wont be going anywhere. This was the worst mistake of my life. I'm sorry that you were even remotely involved. My life is majorly changing after this. They have completely butchered me. They have completely ruined my body. They fucked up my ass big time. I told them not to touch it, but they did. They didn't do what we discussed to my breasts. The incisions are jacked, the breasts are uneven, they didn't prepare anything before cutting me. They didn't do it anything like on Dr. 90210 and it doesn't look as if they did. If it weren't in a hospital, I'd think they were quacks.

It's too bad Ogo, because I liked you very much. My life has completely changed from this moment. I went against my personal ethics and now the irony of that has me for the rest of my life. My arms look awful. So much worse somehow than before. It's incredible really, how bad every single thing is. How off the mark everything is. they took my ass from me. I can't find it. They cut into, they didn't have to - they just did. No plan at all. I should have realized. But it was so early in the morning. I hadn't slept all night. they put me on the table., the doctor came in . I asked him if they were going to

shave my vagina before operating- that what should be done, I know. they said when I'm, asleep. then they gave me a shot and I was dreaming. they didn't even make any marks on my body with a pen while I was standing so that they would know where to cut. Of course it's not the same lying down. How could I have let them put me to sleep?

This is what I get. A hideous, disfigured corpse. Everything really, really hurts.

Oh yeah, and they stitched my left thigh to my vagina. Yes I can't wear underwear anymore. There's no crease between my vagina and my left thigh. I want to vomit every time I touch it. It feels like it's going to rip off. I don't know what to do. Call the police? Go home? Go to another doctor? Call my Aunt Helen? I'm just sitting in this fucking hostel wondering why I couldn't just love myself for what I am, flawed, but beautiful. Now I am ugly on the outside and I feel ugly on the inside for betraying myself.

They didn't do what we agreed. I don't know what to do. Maybe if I try to correct it now before everything is healed it will be better than waiting. I understand if you don't want to come here. This is a major buzz kill. I cry most of the day and night. I can't look at myself or touch myself or I cry for hours. All I think about it how I can escape my body and just live inside my spirit forever. Because I've obviously gotten life all wrong.

If you decide to come, just know that I don't want you to look at me. I don't want you to look at me like I'm pathetic. But that's what it is, so I don't know if I want to see you, because there's no other way to look. I trusted someone I didn't even know with my life. I am the stupidest person I have ever known; the most naive, ignorant,

gullible... fool. You shouldn't have to deal with this. We haven't been friends long enough. I want you to stay in LA and have fun. I don't think I'm coming back to NYC. I 'm just going to go chill with the fam so don't worry about me, I'll be fine. But I do need your advice. What do you think I should do? My best plan is board a plane home and get a doctor to take the stitches out and hope they can help before it's any later. I don't have much money, but maybe they'll have pity and accept a couple thousand up front and a payment plan. That's the best I've come up with, and I guess I'll have to tell my aunt. Let me know and PLEASE send me some shea butter. I can't find any here and I really need some, these scars look like they were cut with a cheap, steak knife. Lol. 4 real.

And now I'm a man, 28 years old, making tens of thousands of dollars each month, spending money on my mother's dress for our next trip, paying for my little brother's summer enrichment camp, footing the bar bill for my cousin's graduation party. I'm a man, 28 years old, with his entire life ahead of him. A man who finally spent a little on himself; fixed the stain on his front tooth caused by a basketball accident in 8th grade, and had beautiful girls smile at him on Santa Monica pier for the first time. But now, I'm a man who is quivering in his mother's lap, crying and apologizing again and again for telling you to go to Argentina. Why didn't I tell you to stay? That's what I ask, her my mother, alive with tenderness and sympathy, her rhine worked fingers cupping the back of my neck as tears rain. My tears, the tears

of a 28 year old man with a Platinum Visa card fall into the lap of a 55 year old Nigerian woman with four sons and a disrespectful husband.

"It's not your fault son. Even the girl has said it. But you cannot leave her there. You have an obligation. Come to church this morning and pray."

Sitting in the pew with my mother beside me, squeezing my hand, I watch women in stiff multicolor fabrics sway paper fans in front of them, bobbing their heads, which are twisted with braids or wrapped in bright scarves, to rhythms from the preacher's sermon. He says that God punished the descendants of the people of Israel by making them wander 40 years in circles searching for the arch until all were dead but one.

"God punishes our descendants for our sins," the preacher says.

Fahama , in Argentina, suffering, mutilated, and that was because she wanted to go and that was because of her parents. They were the ones who had hurt her. Her father beat her frequently; he broke her arm, cleaved it in two like it was a log and his fist were an axe. After the arm healed, her mother sent her to a ghetto to live with a friend who didn't trust her, who humiliated her by forcing her to take birth control while a virgin. She lost weight after she cut them off, went to the top school, moved to the best city, but their sins were cast upon her now and forever. Her fate was ordained before I met her.

I told her not to come, but Fahama still came to get me at the airport. She is pale and her eyes are jaundiced when I see her standing alone in the lobby, her eyes cast down, looking at no one. Her hair is unbrushed, long and straight, dull in color. She is dressed like a peasant in a Spanish style wrap skirt, long-sleeve shirt and dark shawl. I approach her tentatively, not sure if she realizes I'm walking toward her.

"Hi," I say when I'm across from her. Her eyes acknowledge me, but she doesn't smile. She walks ahead of me to the taxi that is waiting for us. We ride for several minutes before I say, "How are you feeling?"

She sighs and looks out the window, knitting her fingers around the frill of her shawl.

"I'm pretty swollen. It's hard to walk."

The driver pulls off the highway and begins a down narrow residential streets.

"What did the doctors say?"

"The doctors say it's normal."

"Normal?" She doesn't acknowledge my question. "Fahama, what do they mean normal?"

"I don't know," she practically hisses, her eyes flashing red for an instant and then turning dull brown again. She turns to the window and begins to shiver although it is at least 65 degrees outside. I had never heard her voice so hard; venomous, so final it was pointless to speak on it again. She sits, stiffly, in the bright, Spanish hues beside the colorless window, that matches her face, yellow grey like

resume paper. I can see every freckle on her skin, so small and delicate, the flecks of brown make her face look dirty, messy, sloppy. She does look sloppy today.

Everything about her has changed. Her voice, her face, her skin; they were all strained. Bitter and frail, she looks like she's been broken into thousands of pieces and glued back together with tomato paste.

The car makes a sharp turn down a stone street. Her eyes turn to me suddenly, but instead of red they are brown, deep, rich, sorrowful brown and I feel myself push back from her into the corner of the seat. Those eyes tell me I'm a liar.

"We're here," she says surprisingly cheerfully.

We step out onto the curb and I pay the driver with red and purple paper bills. The sidewalk is laid with spotless, red clay tiles as if we're in a mall instead of on the street. "Here, will you open the door," she passes me two keys on a plastic ring and leans against the wall, breathing slowly and pushing the air out of her mouth in a controlled rhythm like I've seen women do Lamaze classes on prime-time sitcoms.

"Are you tired?" She nods.

"Yes."

The door opens to an interior lobby that is fresh and cool with clay tiles and large plants beside the elevator. We ride to the second floor since Fahama 's not comfortable walking. It's so quiet, it feels empty and desolate, although the building is well kept. Fahama points me to the door and I push it open for us both. The apartment is simple, white, clean with green touches, and best of all, a balcony. I

push the glass door aside and step out into the afternoon light. Clay rooftops spread out below me, sprouting from between spade green palms, and I feel kingly, as if I own this apartment and all of the apartments in my view.

Fahama lays stiffly on the sofa, while I sit on the end beside her feet and point the remote at the television. I flick the channels from one Spanish conversation to the next, loving the feeling of being in a real Argentine apartment. I turned to Fahama, whose eyes are closed, yet flicking madly beneath the lids.

"Do you like the apartment?" she asks without opening her eyes.

"I love it! Good job babe," I congratulate and squeeze her hand. A moment later, she falls asleep on the sofa and I read the stock report on Bloomberg. When she wakes ten minutes later, her are tears in her eyes.

"What were you doing?" I ask.

"When?"

"Right before you started crying in your sleep?"

"I don't remember."

I tell her to get ready for dinner. She walks away dragging her left leg- that's the one she said her vagina is attached to.

We eat at an Italian restaurant nearby. It's an aged Argentine mansion, with high ceilings and 18th century architecture. The candles are lit and pearls drape the white linen curtains. Fahama sits down too fast, plopping into her seat and grimacing instantly afterward.

"Are you okay?"

I'm good," she says smiling tight and forced so that I don't believe her.

"Hey, if you want to just get dinner to go and eat it in the apartment that's okay with me."

"Get it to go? No, no, no, no. We're already here!"

"I know, but it's nothing to-"

"I'm fine. We can stay, I'm fine." Her smile is meek, but her eyes, are stone eyes, lit by a fire that I don't feel like arguing with.

"Okay," I acquiesce, "As long as you know we can do what you want."

On the menu is pasta and beef. I choose beef and Fahama selects pasta, although she complains the entire time that she will get fat from the Argentine diet.

"It's all meat and carbs. My aunt would love it here," she says. I detect sarcasm.

My food is delicious, but Fahama barely touches hers. Instead she sits on the chair with her shoulders turned inward, and smiles at me, toothy and wide, *God she is beautiful*, half hidden by a goblet of wine.

"Are you sure it's cool to drink wine with your medication babe?" I let a forkful of succulent meat dissolve on my palate.

"Yeah, it's just wine," another sip slides down her throat. "Besides, I stopped taking the meds."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm taking the antibiotics, but not the painkillers. "

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe them."

"Who?"

"Steinberg and Chavanne." She swallows the last of her wine. "They are lying," she adds casually.

Her fiery eyes flick around the room, lighting it with a wild energy I've never felt from her before. It is hot and anxious, yet confident and aggressive; judgmental and autocratic, malevolent and hostile; but, weak, disoriented, heated, desperate, anguished. I feel my vertebrate tickle and realize that I don't want to be here. I don't want to be sitting across from this beautiful creature, who looks so much like Fahama, and who is not Fahama. She doesn't even resemble Fahama.

"Are you ready?" I ask her when my napkin is on my plate. Her fire eyes are glazed and fixed on the tablecloth, hand in mouth, chewing her fingernails as here if teeth are saws. She removes her index finger from between her lips and says:

"Umm... maybe another glass of wine."

She spends fifteen minutes nursing half the cup of wine and then she slams the second half. When we get back inside the apartment, she quickly falls asleep. I leave her in the bedroom and study the stock exchanges for the day on my laptop on the balcony. I can't see the rooftops, only a canvas of smeared charcoal, bleeding red, blue and yellow points of light; water for the urban desert night.

When I'm tired I go to the bedroom. Fahama is passed out, clutching her shoulders, her eyes firmly shut, she tosses from side to side, her body nearly convulsing with unconscious delirium.

"Fahama, Fahama." She doesn't respond to my whispers, but seems to find a quiet place in her mind, her rigid body acquiescing into a peaceful moment following the familiar comfort of her name. I remove my jeans and slide between the linens. They are cool, but when I curve my abdomen against her back, I discover the mattress is cold and wet, and the top sheet is crinkled with moisture from the heat of her fingers and neck. Her shoulders shake, I touch her forehead. It is wet, but doesn't feel hot. There's another blanket in the closet. I take it to the sofa and fall asleep looking out at the balcony.

When I wake, Fahama is still asleep. I shower and dress, then go outside and purchase bread and coffee. It's quarter to eleven when Fahama meanders into the living room. I'm used to waking early, and I've been watching Maria Bartolemo unload the amalgamated failings of the US economy for hours.

"Hi," she whispers hoarsely.

"Hey babe."

She sits beside me. The collar of her shirt is crinkled with damp sweat, keeping the smell of moisture and rotten medication close to her body.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not yet."

"You will be soon. Why don't you shower while I make us something?"

She hobbles to the bathroom. A moment later I hear the shower running. It's a while before she returns, smelling like shea butter and wearing a plastic grocery bag around her head. I don't want to cook so I say,

"Hey lets go out for breakfast. I want to try more Argentine food." I wish she would invest in a shower cap.

"What's that on your head?" I laugh. She pulls it off and her long hair falls onto her narrow square shoulders.

"Ogo." Her voice is fragile like the song of a sick bird. She appears to me like a barefoot beggar girl, her smoldering eyes isolating her in the umbrage of her haystack streaked hair, loose and disheveled, her dress an ill-fitting towel clutched close to her by a meatless fist that may have well been a flat, outstretched hand, her neediness felt so desperate.

"Yeah babe?"

She stumbles toward me, and falls into me; her head bends to rest on my chest. I embrace her.

"What is it Fahama?" I think I hear her whimpering. Her chest is heavy with breath, but I can't feel her heartbeat. It's too long before she speaks.

"I have to see the doctor today. They said wait until Thursday, but my left leg is so swollen. It hurts and looks gross."

"Okay."

She pulls away from me and stares at something on the floor. "There's an open sore where they sewed it to my vagina." She whispers the last part so low that

the word vagina is inaudible, I only know she said it because of the word sewed. My knees lock, preventing me from swaying my step. The heat of her openness is suffocating.

"Well if it you think it's infected, perhaps you should call them.

"I left them messages all day yesterday."

"Leave another one."

"Will you call them for me?"

"Why?" My voice is loud in my ears.

"I feel like they don't listen to me. Whatever I say, they dismiss it. I think if you call, they will know they must come." Her eyes, bleeding amber pearls, drizzle on my heart.

"Why don't you leave them another message and give them time to call back? It's only twelve."

"Ok," she agrees, "but I'll tell them that you are here with me. That might help." She smiles, her pink round cheeks dimpling like a doll, and shuffles back to the bedroom.

Moments later I hear her voice, mildly shrill and obnoxious.

"Please return my call as soon as possible! Muy, muy rapido. My boyfriend is here and he wants to talk to you."

My left knee rattles under the lip of the table as she shuffles back to the living room, still closed loosely inside the dingy towel.

"Ogo?" It's the same faint, needy cry that frightens me." My leg skips erratically rattling the glass table rim. I touch my fingertips to the ball of my knee to stop it.

"Yes..."

"I feel like the doctors aren't listening to me. They said everything's normal, but it doesn't feel normal, it feels horrible."

"Well you just had surgery. It's not going to feel normal babe."

"It doesn't look normal. It doesn't seem right, no matter what they say," she aveers in her quiet, pouty way of poking out her lower lip and whining her words like a melody.

"Could you look at it?" I feel that flutter inside again, but this time it was accompanied by the taste of vomit in my throat.

"Look at what?"

"At me; at what they did to me. I don't believe it's right. I think they are lying, but I can't know for sure. Can you look and tell me what you think?"

It's funny, when you're a man, you work hard, you try to accomplish everything your friends do, everything your enemies do, you seek to conquer everything that passes in front of you, everything you see. Scores, money, property, beautiful girls, all the beautiful girls, until it all adds up to one; the best one money can buy. And when you think you've found a woman, a woman who is sexy, smart and beautiful, you'll do anything to see yourself as a man in her eyes.

In New York, I thought Fahama was that woman. Her confidence was contagious. Her body- was sickening, like a stacked amazon. She had smooth round curves that filled up my hands, filled up my eyes, and my mouth. Her tummy was concave and defined with washboard muscles beneath the surface of her soft skin. Her hips, were round, thighs- thick, ass- plump. She was that rare species of woman that looked sexy at 140 or 180 pounds. She was tall, but still shorter than me. She had long limbs and square bones and teeth. Her hair and skin were exemplary; her chin was sharp and angular, strong and dominant.

She had three kinds of smiles: The short, soft smile for when something was "cute" or it was time to take a pretty picture. A big, wide smile, full of teeth that was for all occasions. And then she had this really amazing smile, and you could really see then, the little girl with round dimpled cheeks. That smile was infectious. Every time I saw it I wanted more. I wanted to hear the tiny squeal and laughter that accompanied the smile. So I began to tickle her, to bring her gifts, to spoil her in my bed, whatever I could to make her smile like a little girl.

"Ogo?" And this time I feel something flutter in my groin. Someone told me once that when you feel those little flutters, those tiny rumbles and squeals, that it's a parasite inside you, eating you alive, demanding more.

"Yes."

"Will you look at it please?" I'm not sure what I say, I must have said ok, because she sits on the sofa and slowly unfurls her legs, draping one over the arm of and keeping the other bent. Her untied her robe and brushed it off each shoulder.

Her breasts exploded off her chest, so much like torpedoes, that I wondered if they weren't implants. But they were covered in black scabs that spread up from underneath, enveloping the entire nipple, like a virulent fungus.

"I cut the feet out of these athletic tube socks and used them for compression," she says holding a length of blood and puss soaked fabric between her fingertips and draping it across her thigh where it grazed the vagina leg and the same vomit danced in my throat.

"This is how my arm looks without the bandages." When she pulls the towel off completely I see that the arm is purple and black. It is so swollen that she must lift it with her spare hand.

"It feels like it's ripping in two, like it will burst any second," she says, her eyebrows pushed together tightly.

I see a lump like a sack of water weight tugging down her arm. I had never realized Fahama 's arms were so disgusting. They were fat like a baby's, virtually shapeless, with no visible muscle, and almost as wide as my ex-girlfriend's thighs. The scar, like the others, looks like the thick rubbery tracks of tires. Except, rather than curve around folds of uneven skin like on her vagina, on her arm, the skin, traumatized and jaundice, pulls away from the thick black stitches, as if rejecting them, rather than hugging them. They don't look like incisions, but lacerations, cut in an errant, zig zag starting an inch above the elbow and extending into the armpit, which is swollen and lacerated, the scar secreting white bubbles of puss. I remember the scent of old chicken quarters my mother had forgotten in the sink

one weekend before we left for a two-week vacation in Europe. We could smell them when we opened the front door, like a sour, foul corpse, yellow and swarming with flies in the kitchen sink.

She reaches between her legs, pushing apart the towel and attending to her vagina with all her fingers like a gynecologist. With her crooked leg and incisive arms, snaking in every direction, she reminds me of a Hindu goddess, the kind with snakes in her pussy. Except her vagina was her leg, and her leg was her vagina. My eye can't differentiate between her vagina and her leg, the skin never breaks and is marked in puss and black lines around tiny folds of skin that peek between larger ones, and blood is caked everywhere. And surrounded by the hair on her pussy, the entire center of her looks like a dead animal. The mangled body, the fur, the guts, puss, and blood, the cake, black scars even look just like tiretracks; she's road kill now. Her pussy is roadkill and her arms are mad Ecoli chicken; breasts moldy torpedoes.

"Can you see?" she asks, pulling her thin fingers away.

Instantly, I recoil, and to hide that, I stand still across the room, in the shadow of our distance, my mouth gapes, waiting for vomit to flow out onto the carpet, waiting for a scream that would drive her away from me.

"Ogo?" Her face is placid, begging for sympathy, demanding answers.

"So?" She 's still uncovered on the sofa. The curtain is open and the sun is bright.

"Maybe cover up?" I suggest, my eyes only grazing the sores decorating her flesh.

"But Ogo, what about the scars, and everything?" What am I supposed to do, to say, to this question? What is she asking me? I just want her to cover up. I finally close my mouth. She attempts to tuck herself into the corner of the sofa, using the back and arm of it for support and oozing out of it like a shapeless blob.

"I think you should listen to the doctors."

"Really?"

If ever there were a time in my life, that I want to be somewhere else, this is it. Is this really my responsibility to care for Fahama? She is an adult. She is independent. I'm really just here to help her get home. It's not my responsibility.

"Yeah, I don't think there's any reason not to listen to the doctors."

"Really?" she whinnies like a sick horse. I smile and step closer.

"Yes babe, it's okay."

Slowly, she rises from the couch, pushing herself onto her feet with a thrust.

"Careful!"

"I'm fine!" she blurts out, "but look" she says, dropping the towel below the bell curve of her back to her bottom. What was once round and fluffy, full and fat, seems flat, flabby, and foldy. Her ass, once a huge cushion for me to fall into is flimsy and thin like cardboard. Her previous shapes don't exist. The space a man can control when he's behind his woman, the reins of his control over her- is altered,

missing, somehow, and I feel unaffected by the sight of what had once so deeply aroused me. I feel my heart sigh with deep regret.

"It is ok?" She is watching my face. I raise it to meet hers.

"Yes, it's fine babe. Now get dressed, I'm starving!"

She looks at me a long time and in the amber reflection of her eyes, I see myself grinning. I pat my hand against her bottom.

"Scoot. To the shower babe."

"Want to come with me?" she says smiling coyly, her lip curling up and creating a tiny cheek dimple, but I am not aroused.

"Maybe later," I say, also smiling coyly.

Fahama pouts her lips into a smooch and hobbles into the bathroom.

"Are you sure everything looked okay?" Fahama says when we are sitting in a cafe.

I pour sugar into my coffee.

"Ogo?"

"Yeah babe?"

"Are you sure everything looks okay?" I took a bite of my omelet filled with steak and spinach.

"I don't see any reason not to trust the doctor," I said after chewing a long while.

"So it looked good, like everything is okay?" She was leaning in her chair, staring at my reactions. Her omelet, tomato and onion, was untouched.

"Yes, I mean, you are healing and should be resting as much as possible. That's all."

She smiled and took a piece of fruit from the plate. "I don't have to rest that much," she said and winked while pushing a strawberry into her mouth with her tongue.

After lunch, Fahama holds my arm and we window-shop, slowly like when I'm walking beside my grandmother, with her hand gripping the alternate side of her cane. But, it's okay because Palermo Soho is beautiful. The climate is temperate.

"It's winter here now," Fahama tells me while looking straight ahead a row of husky green bur trees. I admire the ivy, shrubs and trees that are blossoming bright warm colors over wood door garages in Spanish-gated yards.

"Palermo reminds me of Pasadena," I tell Fahama, who keeps her arm locked in the crock of my elbow, adding at least five pounds of drag to my natural step.

"Hmmm...." is all she says.

When we pass a payphone, Fahama wants to call her doctors. I lean in the shade of a building and watch her stand on the sunny street corner and speak into the receiver.

"I finally got ahold of Steinberg! He says he'll be here at 3," she tells me loud and frustrated as we prepare to cross the boulevard. I'm wondering if she might be too slow to cross the midsection of the street.

"Perhaps we should walk the extra distance to the crosswalk," I say.

"No, I'm tired. I don't want to walk far."

Later that afternoon, Fahama 's surgeon Dr. Steinberg comes to the apartment. Fahama slowly rose from the sofa, dressed only in a loose robe that inadvertently exposes too much flesh.

"So listen," she whispers hobbling toward me. "Make sure you talk to him. I told him you were coming and that he wouldn't be able to lie to you."

The doorbell.

I swing the door open. He is very tall, slim and about ten years older than me. Fahama introduces us. She seems hyper and controlling now that Dr. Steinberg is here.

"It's nice that you make house calls," I tell him. The doctor shrugs modestly.

"Normally on Sunday, I am with family, but in rare situations, I don't mind," he says smiling down dutifully at Fahama, who is hunched forward stiff and dollishly beside his elongated figure.

"I've been waiting for three days Diego! My boyfriend doesn't want to have sex with me until you say it's okay!

I can't believe she just said that to the doctor. He laughs uncomfortably, and brushes the soles of his shoes on the mat for the second time.

"My leg feels like it is going to rip off and there is puss, I can't really see, but it stings."

The doctor smiles, and pushes the flats of his thumbs together the entire time she speaks. "Ok, it's probably normal, it's normal for there to be some blood. I will look and tell you." She limps into the bedroom pulling him behind her. She turns back.

"Do you want to come?" I shove my hands into my pockets. Her eyes swim toward me from across the room.

"I mean... do you need me?" I look to the doctor for mercy.

"Ah no," he says in the soothing tone they teach doctors in residency. His eyes are crispy and bright suddenly. "We don't need you."

The doctor shuts the plaster door shut and I breathe like I've been holding it on a plane for hours because someone died in the seat next to me. I can hear the low consonance of their voices on the other side of the wall. I flip on the TV and turn up the volume. According to the TV, all competitive sports in Argentina can be summed into one word: Futbol. Futbol, or Soccer, as we call it in N. America, is like religion for the Argentines. On every other channel is a different arena, multiple color jerseys for various barrios, all the same determined running and fanatical cheering.

"You think they are excited now. Wait until the end of the day when they are drunk." Dr. Steinberg is behind me.

"Oh, is it wild?" I chuckle.

"Lives will invariably, end."

I laugh.

"That bad?"

"Spectators are frequently beaten during futbol matches. Especially large ones, or big rivalries."

"Wow, I wanted to go, but..."

"You can still go, but sit in the back, away from where trouble could start."

I chuckle because intentionally taking bad seats made so much sense.

"Ogo?" Fahama stands crookedly in the bedroom doorway. Her voice is sweet like summer pear. I feel the two sides of my chest tug in opposite directions.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, I guess. The doctor said-"

"She is fine. Everything is normal," he chimes in. "Just fill this prescription of antibiotics tonight."

"Ready?" I ask him and open the door.

"Yes."

"I'll just walk you out," I tell Steinberg and Fahama's mouth gapes. "This way I can have a chance to talk to him," I reassure her before she can complain, and quickly shuffle out behind the doctor.

In the hall, the doctor exchanges a look of sympathy with me. I can tell from his eyes that he knows what I'm feeling. She's both our problem.

When I return she is seated beside the door, waiting on the sofa. I feel eyes pouring over me as I enter. I go into the kitchen and take a cup of tap water from

the sink. I bring it to my lips to wet them, then leave the cup on the counter. I turn in the doorway and Fahama is staring, her milky eyes blinking.

"Is everything okay Fahama?" I join her on the sofa. She is silent a long time.

"Steinberg said everything is normal," she says without looking at me.

Her silence is somber, like bad news.

"That's great. I'm happy."

She turns slowly.

"I'm happy too, it's just hard to believe." Her brow furrows under her mop of thick, sandy hair. Her adorable naivety reminds me of a curly-headed child in an old American movie.

It was night now, and lights twinkled from the mountainside in the distance.

"It's quite expensive that neighborhood; that's what I heard." Fahama sat on the sofa. She wore a purple and black Hawaiian robe, belted at the waist. She twisted a sandy lock between her fingers, which were much too thin and frail looking for her strong body.

"I want to wash my hair and wear it curly for dinner. It's looks a little ratty. Don'cha think?" she added, so that I had to look at her.

"It looks fine."

"Well it will still be nice to have it washed before you leave. Would you please wash it for me tonight, Ogo?" Her voice was sweet, but it was smug, as if she thought she already had the answer, the key- to me.

"Why do you want me to wash it?"

"I've been wearing my hair straight like this for two weeks. And it's hard for me to raise my arms."

I flinch from the memory of blackened blot clot stalks of rubbery flesh. *What could I say?*

"Okay."

"Can you turn on the bathtub?"

Why can't she turn on the bathtub?

"I'm having a little trouble bending down that far."

In the bathtub, Fahama rambles on about the boutiques she saw from the taxi and some artist named Tarsilla.

"We can go to The Museum of Modern Art so you can see it too!" She turned her neck and looked with one eye, as I sat on the toilet, knuckle deep in matted hair that hadn't been washed in a week.

"We can go to a futbol game if you want, I think there are a few teams. Also, there's San Telmo, the artist market, and Tango dancing, and everyone says the best restaurant in town is right on el Rio and it's called Siga la Vaca. That's means Follow the Cow. I see her dimple when she laughs.

"Of course I will go to dinner wherever you want, but I don't really want to do a lot of stuff. I think that's part of your recovery, to sit in bed."

She sighed and then twisted to face me with too much torque.

"Ahhh!" she shrieked. I grabbed her shoulders, unsure what I could touch without hurting her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" she laughed, even though she was breathing like she was giving birth.

When I lay beside her in bed that night she put her head in the crook of my neck. I smelled menthol and shea butter. She began to kiss my neck, trying and failing to maneuver on top of me. I kissed her lips.

"Ogo, let's do it," she whispered.

And this was the moment I'd been avoiding. This was why I'd been staying up late on the balcony, reading the real estate and stock pages. I felt the acid flare in my stomach.

"Babe, didn't you say you feel like your leg is going to rip off?"

"Yes, but the doctor said everything is normal. You say everything looks fine. Everything's normal, so we can have sex right?" She was an inch from my face.

"Yes, it's normal, but that doesn't mean we should have sex while you're healing."

"We don't have to do any wild positions. Just stick and move," she giggled. She backed her rump into the spoon of my groin and pulsed with pressure.

"Fahama."

She continued to pulse and bob against my penis

"Fahama, I just don't think it's safe," I protest.

"It's only my labia, not the actual vagina itself Ogo. It's totally safe the doctor said."

She backs into me even harder, her hips shoving into my lap until my manhood betrays me. She turned her head over her shoulder and stroked me with eyes.

"See, even he thinks it's safe."

I didn't want to. Why was she pressing me when I didn't want to. Didn't I say that?

"Come on Ogo," she whispered. I pushed my penis against her. Her back was arched so that her spine convex pushed back and my arms bowed over her frame. I felt I was humping a large animal. Behind my eyes it was black with images of her blood caked, road kill pussy, and ecoli chicken arms and I kept imagining it was touching my body; getting blood, puss, surgery, misery, fat, bad luck blood and vagina blood on my penis. It was within seconds, quivering from the strain of fucking while sick with images of road kill vagina. I felt him fading inside her. I couldn't touch her breasts, or her hips, or even her pussy: everything was covered in pads and gauze, so go clenched her shoulders and faked ejaculation.

"I love this pussy," I groaned for emphasis. And I did love it. I loved it so much I flew to be with it when I didn't want to. I sat across from it and listened to it when it was so stubborn it didn't make any sense. My parents never would have accepted me as a nurse, a doctor perhaps, but I hate blood. Can't stand the sight of

blood, puss or pink- unless it's in a pussy. I even want my meat well done. I don't want assist with any mangled body parts, I don't want to kill the mouse on the sticky trap. Give it to me; I will throw it out the window. I'm not handy, I'm money, I'm smart, I've got a solution two clicks away. I'm not a nurse, I'm a just man. What Fahama wanted was much more than I could give.

Free Skies

Just south east of London, there's a little pisser of a town called East Sutton. As you may know, South East London is full of cockneys, thieves, and just about every type of scoundrel and low life sort of nutter you can imagine in the world. This is a fact, that anybody having any sorts to do with London is aware. It's no surprise then, that the unfortunate border town to south east would be filled wit nothing but the most abject of former criminals, retired prostitutes with their teeth gone missing and all types of fishermen and failed military types, discharged from the Royal fleet because they'd had a leg ripped off by an angry shark or an eye blown out by a grenade thirty years ago and have lived miserable, crippled and bitter, off the government ever since. Most all of em was drunken bastards, going down the boozier until they was boomy proper and singing holy Christmas in April!

East Sutton is probably the grimeiest, filthiest, most debauched borough in the Queen's, mighty kingdom and that's where I, Joseph Graham III was raised up and where me parents as well. If you know anything about the Queen's Kingdom, you'll

recognize that Graham's not an English surname, but Scottish. That's right, me grandparents were born and raised in the Scottish hills of Aviemore, about an hour's drive from the outer boroughs of Edinburgh. Although they fancied Scottish pride over English incarceration, it was the times that brought them down from the hills and into London when me dad was just a seed in the soil. Back them days, you see, Scotland was at the mercy of the Queen and was of course heavily taxed and very poor. But London and Whales, was filled with factories, all bustling and jumping from the coal and steel industries. Me granddad, Joseph Graham Sr., found himself a job pounding steel on the burner in East Sutton. It was the practice of big Sutton factories to put up their workers in shoddily built community flats, but they let the lodging at a bloody, outrageous fee, which was automatically deducted from workers' pay, so they went home wit just enough to feed is family for the week. Thus, workers were never able to purchase their own flats, and they was forever slaving for the factory. However, once they were in them flats, they couldn't be put out as long as the payments was up to date.

When half of London was bombed into oblivion after World War II, most of them factories never reopened, and of the few who decided it would be bloody wiser this go round to build their factories in Leeds and Liverpool where they'd be less of a target than nine kilometers outside London proper.

Those who had been fortunate enough as to save a few quid were able to buy their flats from the masters who ran the factories, but most of them were sold to foreign merchants, who came in after the war, looking to make a cheap investment.

These landlords was worse than the masters. They raised the rents without fixing nothing and they sharked good people who had been living in them flats for decades, throwing them to the highroad if they couldn't pay.

Without work, nor money to purchase the family flat, me granddad borrowed from the Bank of England to whilst me grandmum, Lucile Graham, went to work as a seamstress. Unable to find work, me granddad fell into despair and began to gamble and drink heavily whilst me grandmum was off sewing in the factory. The old Joe Sr. was so gloomy and loomy, you can imagine what me young father was subject to endure. A few months after the London racketeering ring came looking to get his outstanding debts settled, he went missing. Three months later, he washed up on the banks of the Thames near Staffordshire.

Without his dad, and he grandmum working so hard, me dad became something of a scoundrel, without much of a conscience, nor a speck of morality to guide him. He was hardly present during me up rearing and was usually going down the boozier, or with one of his other families. The geezer had three before he was finished, but his first family, me mum was always proud to know, was with her.

The proud parents first welcomed me, Joseph Graham III, then came me brother, Dewey shortly after me ninth birthday. Dewey was a pretty baby, and despite the fact that we dressed him most proper for a lad in blues and greens, there were times in the streets, when he was mistaken for a girl! Most probably because he had the biggest blue eyes anybody ever saw, and fine, petite features, like an itty, bitty nose and pink, roses on his cheeks. We thought it was funny and kind of cute

that e looked just like little Drucilla McCarthy, who was called “Drui” on the old sitcom “All for One.” The name just stuck. It wasn’t long after Drui came, that me dad went off and found himself another bird. He began to spend less and less time at home and I remember when he was there, he was always fighting wit me mum. Well, he planted his seed in this other woman although me parents never divorced, and soon, he didn’t live with us at’all.

“Mum is dad coming back again?” I asked one night after a particularly bad fight when dad had shouted cunt, fauck and every cockney profanity imaginable, claimed he’d never be back and skipped down the windy road with his good shirt from Mum’s closet in his hand.

“I don’t know lovie.” She reached out to me from her seat of the sofa. I ran to her, delighted by the rare occasion to be babied by me mum and wrapped me arms around her neck. She smelled like vanilla candy and apricots.

“I don’t want im to come back,” I said softly, ashamed to be plotting against me own dad. Mum ran her hands over me hair, tucking it neatly behind me ears.

“I think we’ve got to make a trip to the barber lovie.” My mouth folded into a frown.

“A visit with the barber?” I said, but I was still thinking of the shouting that had awakened me in while Drui smiled in his sleep, oblivious. He hadn’t been around long enough to be afraid of dad.

“Yes. You and Drui need haircuts. I don’t want me boys looking unkept.”

“I don’t want me hair cut.”

I styled me hair so that it was long and shagged in the front so that from the side it slightly resembled a rooster. I had seen it on Davie Bowie, only his was red and mine was paper bag brown wit a bit on blonde left over from summer.

“It’s time for bed,” said Mum, lifting in her arms and carrying me to my room as if I were Drui. I loved the attention. Just the smell of her and the softness of her skin was enough to make me happy. She tucked me into bed and kissed me forehead, and did the same to Drui. I pulled the blanket to me chin so that I could fall asleep with her soft, vanilla sent in me nose.

2

That night I dreamt that I was the King of England, living in the Royal Palace. Mum was the Queen and Drui was a Prince. We were happy and free, and all the good people of England looked to us for harmony and inspiration. There was a threat on the Kingdom and I was sent to battle. I rode into the countryside on a beautiful gray horse until I came to a river. I lay my sword on the bank and my horse and I began to drink at the edge of the rippling tide. Suddenly, a powerful monster

grabbed my arm and began to pull me into the water. I reached for my sword, but it was too far away on the grass and the monster overcame me, dragging me under and wrestling with me beneath the surface. The monster had me pinned with his tentacles, and fought with all me strength, to turn and face him so I could out gouge his eyes. But when I stared into the face of the beast, I saw it wasn't a monster at'all, but me dad! His fingers we around my throat, squeezing it like a lemon and I realized I had failed the Kingdom,' as we sunk into the murky depths below.

In the morning, I was bloody knackered and as I slipped into me school uniform, I wondered if I, Joseph Graham III, were predisposed by fate to failure? I left for school early, eager to let the world outside swallow the memory of the night before. With Noodly O's and biscuits in me Superman lunchbox, I raced into the morning fog, vanishing into the opaque, white foam blanketing our park.

I climbed our tree and waited for Johnny. It was an old tree, at least one hundred years old, or so we claimed. Our tree was distinguished and monarchical. Its' milky brown bark was a softer shade than other trees in the park. It had a wide, thick trunk that had been hollowed out on one side after being struck by lightning and thick branches like muscular arms that stretched in the sky like the long, boney fingers of an old man. Our tree was ideal for climbing, and sprouted pale, green leaves shaped like diamonds that camouflaged us from passersby. We built a small fortress in the branches. It was just a pile of junk to be honest, but it was our tree house, where the Ferocious Four held meetings on important social decisions,

traded commix and made fratricidal bonds.

Of all the blokes I was chummy with, Johnny, was me oldest friend, and had been since the days when me couldn't even think to wipe me own arse. Johnny was the kind of genuine, sensible chap it was impossible not to like. That's probably why he was the president. Peter was the vice president and I, the treasurer. James was just a member because he joined our group late when he moved down from South East London after his dad got the sackey from his company.

"Hey fauckhead! I've been standing down here for an hour. Haven't you seen me? Come down." It was not Johnny's but Peter's voice that drifted up through the hazy morning vapor. I dangled, like a monkey, from a wobbly branch before pressing me trainers into the dank earth. Peter's tall, lanky frame wavered beside Johnny's short athletic one.

"You're here bright and early!" Johnny said, flashing the buck overbite that made his whole face look like teeth when he grinned.

"Well someone's got to look after the treehouse you know. Since me flat is the closest to the park, I do believe it's me obligation to attend to me treehouse." I said in me best gentleman's rap.

"It's our treehouse! I'm the vice president, Johnny's the president and you're the treasurer. So don't forget it," Peter snarled.

"Oh leave it you fauckhead. You always have to be a cunt!" I shouted as we ran out of the foggy knoll and onto the bustling highroad.

“You’re the one who is in the treehouse all night with your flashlight. What are you doing, looking at your mother’s magazines?” Peter said, tossing his head back and laughing haughtily, like an evil lord. The argument would have gone on as I was ready to announce that he watched his sister in the shower through a hole in the bathroom wall, when Johnny said:

“Oy! Look mates. He must be from London!”

He was a well built youth, of about 21 or 22. He wore a red coat and white trainers that gleamed brightly, not dull and gray like hours. On his hands he wore fingerless, black gloves and two flashy, gold rings.

“Look at the gold knockers in is mouth,” Peter whispered. Sure enough, a row gold teeth sparkled and shone every time the geezer spoke to the woman who hung off his arm like string. I didn’t understand the desire for gold teeth. But people in East Sutton were as poor as anyplace in England and had lived their lives with such low expectations that they learned to accept debased conditions as daily life. That’s why someone like Mr. Metal Mouth was naturally was the envy of everybody who dreams of wearing fancy jewels and baubles and such. People in East Sutton were thirsty to for the symbols of the other side of the golden arch, where wealth and status glimmer like the boomy stars over the blackened Atlantic.

“He sure idn’t from East Sutton. What do you think he’s doing here?” I asked me chaps.

“Them sorts, they’s only passing through for one reason, maybe two;

depositing off a kilo of dust with the local street merchant or checkin for a mistress tucked away where the wife wouldn't suspect. Maybe both. This one looks like he's here for the mistress today," said Peter. We laughed and ran for the school bell.

I found that most of me subjects, like mathematics, English and history were quite easy, and I excelled in them. I was well liked by me instructors without being a class rat, and was known for being a talented artist and bang-on footballer. Of everything I owned, which wasn't much, me comic book collection was unequivocally me most prized possession and the envy of the other boys who traded commix. As soon as I had a few quid, I spent it on commix. When I wasn't studying or footballing, I lay sedentary on me bed like a corpse, or in the treehouse, reading commix and drawing characters in me notebook.

The loudmouth bloke I was chummy with, Peter, had the best comic book collection of anyone. When Peter mentioned one afternoon that is dad didn't give him an allowance, it surprised me.

"Then how me friend, do you afford all those comic books?" I asked. I thought Peter must have a hustle I ought to know about. I didn't expect what I heard next.

"I steal them," he replied. I searched his white face that was round and flat like a plate, for a rebellious smirk or drifty eyes to give away his joke, but he just looked straight ahead as nonchalantly as if our conversation had been about what the cafeteria had served for lunch that day.

Once, Peter and I were caught pocketing commix. We devised a system we as used in the Megel's Book Shop. Ellen, the shopclerk, was always worked alone

during the week. Peter would create a diversion.

“Excuse me Miss,” he would say in his finest gentleman’s rap. “Where can I find the biology section?” Ellen’s thin eyebrows pulled into sharp triangles. Ellen was a big girl, not fat, but statuesque and bigger than most of the blokes in her class. She was six feet tall with long basketball player arms and giant hands. She had no bosoms to speak of at all and with athletic and masculine body, she vaguely resembled the transvestites the stood on Edgeware Rd. late in the evenings. She glanced over Peter for several moments, turning her pencil in her hand. He had bushy, brown hair, a pasty white face spotted with pale orange freckles, and wore our school uniform: A white shirt, black tie, and blue trousers, but his mum had sewn shoulder pads into his sports jacket, so that his shoulders appear larger than they were. Peter wasn’t the best looking bloke in East Sutton, but he was sly and he presented well. I figured girls mainly liked him because he was tall and he looked like he could be older, like 15 or 16. Peter and I were just 13.

“Peter I believe you know where the biology books are located, the far isle in the West Library.” Ellen replied.

“Yes, miss, but you must understand that I’ve been medicated for me grievous injuries inured while footballing. Me vision is blurred. I can barely see the drugs are so strong! I just need this one biology book for me exam tomorrow.” Ellen rolled her blue eyes and huffed.

“Please,” he pleaded.

Peering down from the tall oak desk, Ellen looked annoyed, but it was just an

act. She always went for it, well knowing, that his intent was to make fresh with her in the stacks. Yet, I do not think that when Peter's hands were under Ellen's blouse, she knew I was in the front of the shop filling me satchel with Batman, The Fantastic Four and Superman. Once I had the magazines I just walked out the door. But this time when I arrived at the door someone was waiting. It was Richard, the book shop owner's son and Ellen's brother. Richard was 14 and in the top grade at me school.

"Where the fauck are you going so bloody fast?" Richard's massive frame was stretched out to block me path. He looked at the satchel and his steely eyes narrowed like thin metal bars. I was sweating. This kid was famous for killing squirrels and dogs and cats and chickens! I didn't want him on me bad side. He was bloody vexed and brolic too. I had to think quickly.

"It's your sister! She's ad an accident in the biology stacks. I was running to fetch you! Oh God!" I cried for dear life. I must have been convincing.

"What? Come on!" He ran towards biology. I heard Richard shout "Bloody cunt!" Ellen screamed. Then there was a horrible crack, like someone's jaw breaking, followed by the cascading crunch of books crashing to the floor. That's when I took off and ran home without looking back. After that, I was afraid to steal and afraid to come around Peter or Richard, since neither of them apparently knew that he'd been set up. I wanted to keep it that way.

3

Winter came shortly thereafter and I was able to retreat from my peers, fairly unnoticed, to my fantasy world of superheroes and villains. My favorite superhero was Superman. I loved that idea that a meager, ordinary person, like Clark Kent could truly be the greatest superhero in the world. I loved the conflicting duality of the character. I thought about the secret that Clark Kent must keep from the world; even from his love, Lois Lane. I thought about Superman's parents, and how quiet and conservative they were and how much love and support they gave him, although he wasn't their real son. I knew if I weren't my dad's real son, he'd never speak to me at all.

My commix were an escape, a refuge from the destiny I believed waited for me outside my front door. My father was a scoundrel, and seldom exists in my memories, except for lots from when I was listening to him rough up my mum from behind the bedroom door. Between the "whack" and mum's short muffled scream I would pray to God that he would make him leave us; or make him die.

I resented being named in honor of two family-deserting drunkards and I saw looking after my Mum and baby brova a good way to separate myself from my dad and granddad. I earned money by purchasing candies and flavored chewing

sticks in bulk, then selling them at double the cost to kids at lunch. The extra money made mum happy. I viewed meself, as the sole protector of me mum and brova. Yet, despite me best efforts, I often lay in me bed at night pondering if I, Joseph Graham III, were predisposed by fate to wind up in a lonely staircase at dawn, a loathsome, drifty drunk, always in the pub on Sunday afternoons, and always tanked on Christmas Day, which after a time, was the only day Joe Sr. was ever guaranteed to drop in on us.

There was one Christmas I'll never forget. A mere youth of fourteen, I was snuggled in me bed, dreaming of commix, ham and butterscotch candies, when I was awakened by a loud "Bang! Bang! Bang!" I stirred, dreamily, and heard "Ho! Ho! Ho!" coming from outside. Me brova, who was five, sprang from the bed as if a blaze had been lit beneath it. I knew it was merely me dad, but Drui didn't mind none. He thought it was the real tub of jolly lard, "ho, ho, ho-ing" outside the door.

"Saint Nick as come! Saint Nick!" shouted Drui fanatically. As me brova shoved our bedroom door open, I saw me mum rise from her bed on the sofa and rush toward the door. I heard her hiss, "Joe, what have you done?" as I struggled to keep pace with Drui, who was tripping over his own feet in his hurry to greet the ole' velvet bum. Mum was still hissing and shooing when we approached. Me dad shoved his wide shoulders past her narrow ones and burst through the door.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" cried me dad. He looked a million kilometers tall, but even from way up high, I could still smell the whisky that oozed from his

pores and circled around us. I don't know where he got it, but he was clothed proper, in a red velvet suit and fuzzy cap. He even wore a wig and shinny, white beard with a moustache that curled at the tips like Don Quixote. Although me dad had a slender build like meself, he had something of a jelly roll beneath is trousers, the result of him glutting up the stout so frequent, and that helped him fill out the suit a wee bit in the tummy like the real St. Nick, although is trousers were still sloppy and saggy.

"St. Nick! St. Nick!" Drui cried. Me dad held a large potato sack half filled with presents in his left hand. The sack shifted suddenly. Something was inside-something alive! Drui's tiny mouth fell open.

"Fancy seeing what's in here lad?" me dad asked with the grin of a salesman. A small, muffled noise came from the sack. Drui's eyes got big as 50 pence pieces. Mum watched from behind the old bloke, her hands wringing and twisting nervously. My left eyelid began to twitch and for a brief moment, I thought of creating a distraction to take control of the situation, but I, just a boy meself, was also mesmerized by the mysterious contents of the sack.

"Comme eeere lad," said me dad, clearly intoxicated, but sounding something like himself. Drui's mouth just hung open as if he wanted a spoon stuck in it. Me mum and I stood frozen to the floor with flies in our bellies as dad coaxed Drui closer to the mystery sack.

Sensing Drui's hesitation the old man crooned, "Ere ere laddie, fear no trick

from ole' Saint Nick."

At that, we all laughed and relaxed a bit and Drui closed in on the old man and his bundle. Me dad leaned into Drui real close and whispered, "You want to know what I've got in this sacky?"

He was so close to little Drui's face, I thought the kid might have fainted from the horrible stench on his breath, but me brova didn't appear to notice and simply smiled innocently at dad, then mum and then me.

"It's something for you me son, because you've been such a good boy." Drui smiled eagerly because he knew he had been good. He was a very well behaved child, something of a mummy's boy, shy and always clinging to the hem of mum's skirt, but sweet nonetheless.

Me dad put the sack on the floor and it stopped rustling. Drui's smile was wider than his eyes and it warmed mum and me both to see him so happy and excited. Me dad released the neck of the sack that had been twisted up for so long. There was a preeminent gruff, a yelp and then the horror of one small canine with is teeth locked together like an angry devil, leaping blindly out of the dark bag. All in one motion, the beast flew out of the sack, latched his jaws onto Drui's face and I heard a horrible sound. Drui screamed helplessly as his little body was dragged by the deranged mutt. Me mum snatched a broom from the corner and whacked the beast in the head causing him to loose its' balance, but that only shook the mad pup, who quickly clamped is razor sharp teeth into Drui's soft, pink flesh again. The kid screamed and was suddenly thrown to the floor as the tiny demon kept fastened to

me brova's nose and chin.

I kicked the devil as hard as I could. It sailed toward the ceiling like a football, then fell to the floor like a lead brick. It may have been dead; it didn't move, but I didn't wait to find out. I kicked and stomped the crazed beast until me slippers and me mother's broom were painted red. Mum's hand gripped me shoulder, but I didn't feel it.

"Joe! Joseph! Stop Joseph! You've got to go fetch help Joe!" Drui was in me mother's arms. I couldn't see his face, there was too much pink and red everywhere. It looked like spaghetti. Me dad sat frozen on the floor. He looked at me, but it felt like his his glazy eyes dull just looked through me like glass.

"You fauking cunt!" I screamed. I kicked his ribs.

"What the fauck did you do that for Joey?" he patronized. I back off.

Somehow, even as boozy, pile of rubbish on the living room floor, he intimidated me.

"Joe get help!" shouted me mother again. I declared me hatred of the bastard, me father, as I ran hell out of the flat and to the street, where I found our neighbor Tiebor the sailor, working on his roadster, which he always did when he was home from sea.

"Tiebor! Tiebor! A mad pit-bull attacked Drui!" I was covered in blood.

Tiebor, being something of the hero type and certainly having a fancy for me mum, was immediately running beside me with a giant wrench listening to me tell him what had happened. . "It's just a busted lip. Let me see the boy Charlotte. I'm

sure he'll recover just fine," dad told mum when we reached the flat.

"Don't you lay a finger on this boy or I will castrate you when you're bloody drunk and incapacitated!" she hissed.

The deep line tightened in me dad's forehead tightened and he backed away. Me brova's face was a grotesque welter of blood and tissue. Tiebor gagged and lurched as if he was to be sick, but quickly composed himself and rendered the stoic military expression to which we were accustomed.

A moment later we put mum and Drui into the passenger seat of Tiebor's roadster and they peeled off to the hospital. I wanted to go too, but there was no space for me in Tiebor's tiny, two-seat auto. As we stood in the road, watching the smoke from the tailpipe melt into the sky, me dad, still in the horrible Father Christmas costume, lifted a cheap steel flask from his back-pocket, and practically inhaled the stinking stuff that already spilled out of his pores like rotten cologne. I expected him to say something, but he just stood there on uneasy feet, sloshing up the brandy and waving to the small crowd of neighbors who had gathered to observe the brief commotion.

I stormed back to our flat. The pit-bull was drowned in a pool of blood that had stained the pale, wood floor deep burgundy. I stared at the beaten corpse, realizing it was just a pup, no more than four or five months old. I thought about the weighty fabric of that brown sack that had been wrapped tightly around a fist for heaven knows how long. The pup's rage and the damage it had inflicted on Drui's little face indicated it possessed a strength heightened fear. Why would me dad

bring a pit-bull as a gift? Everyone was aware of their hostile and aggressive reputation, and it was obviously not the pet for a prissy, five year old. I ran to me room, fell on me cot and cried like a girl.

I thought about how I could have intervened, could have somehow prevented the dog from attacking Drui. I thought about how maybe if I had stood behind mum and told that louse to get out that it might have never happened and Drui's pretty, little, doll face would still be white and delicate and smiling, shyly and sweet. I thought about how Drui might not survive and how people died all the time from attacks and how even if he lived he'd be broken and bitter and frightened out of is wits all the bloody time. I thought about how I might have saved me baby brova who needed me protection and I cried until the cot was damp with me tears and I couldn't cry anymore.

I lay upstairs for several hours. I was glad me dad was gone. I cleaned the carcass of the pit off the floor, then dug a hole and buried it in mum's garden, placing a large rock over the grave so that the scavengers couldn't dig it up. Then I mopped up the blood. It was dark before I had finished mopping and there was still a faint, red smear on the floor that no amount of soap would remove.

I lay awake most of the night waiting for mum and Drui to walk through the door, but they neva did. In the morning, I saw Tiebor outside cleaning his roadster.

"Tiebor, where's mum and Drui?" There was an guilty look on his face and he stared down at the rag in his hands.

"She's at the hospital Joe."

“Is Drui all right?”

Tiebor looked at me with pity, the rag wringing between his fists. His lips moved but no sound came out.

“Dr- Dr- Drui’s in the hospital Joe,” he said finally. “I don’t know what’s happened since last night.”

“But you were there! They fixed him right?” I cried

“Listen Joe, I think it would be best for you if you just waited in the flat until your mum gets back.” His voice was gentle, but I vexed the wancker wasn’t honest with me.

“I’ve waited all night long! I’m going to the hospital meself!” I stomped off. Tiebor didn’t follow me, but he did call out that I should tell me mum to check for him when she feels well enough. I didn’t look back.

An hour later, I was in the hospital lobby asking a smiling, flax-haired nurse where I could find Drui Graham. The nurse checked her log and her smile vanished.

I followed her down the stark corridors, the sharp scent of ammonia filling my nose as I peeked into each room at the wounded and sick in their blue hospital robes and thick, white bandages. We passed through several wings before we approached a door that read: TRAMUA UNIT. There were no rooms inside, just beds lined up in rows with lots of heavily bandaged people moaning and crying. Most of em looked like they was very close to death. I felt guilty that I was healthy and well and wished I could leave. I couldn’t imagine what it meant to actually be a victim in one of those narrow beds, until I saw mum leaning over a cot.

“Mummy, mummy!” Mum raised her face and I saw that it was expressionless, just a flat, white visage with red, puffy eyes. I sat beside her, I squeezed her but she didn’t squeeze back, she just looked back to the head of the bed and that’s when I saw me brova.

Druí’s entire head was wrapped in thick, white gauze so that I couldn’t see a shred of skin and there were three tubes, two thin ones and a wide one coming out from the bandages that connected to a machine in the corner.

“What are those tubes for mum?” She wiped her puffy eyes.

“That devil chewed off is entire nose and mouth. He has no way to breathe or keep from choking without them.” This she said flatly, as if it were a fact to which she had been aware her entire life. “He’s not been conscious since we arrived yesterday.”

All afternoon we stayed like that, with mum holding onto Druí’s tiny fingers and telling him how much we all loved him and needed him to come back to us. She never stopped whispering to him even when the doctors came and said his fate was still uncertain.

“The longer his temperature stays high, the more risk there is for infection,” an American doctor told mum gently. “Hopefully it will go down soon, but until then, all we can do is wait and hope for the best.”

Early the next morning, I was asleep in the chair beside Druí’s bed when I was awakened by a sudden clamor and shouts of panic. Druí’s body was shaking and jerking.

“He’s having a seizure,” cried the flax-haired girl as she and another nurse held Drui’s head and body to the bed. The doctor ran over with a huge syringe and thrust it into Drui’s chest, but his tiny body continued to convulse violently.

“Give me another syringe,” said the doctor and three more nurses came running. The doctor pumped me brova’s little chest with another dose as I watched helplessly, with me mum under me arm, who was crying hysterically. Finally, Drui’s limbs stopped flailing, but his body kept vibrating.

“Get those bandages off the top of his head!” ordered the doctor. When the bandages came off we saw that Drui’s head, which had been shaved clean, was seared bright pink, and beads of sweat ran down it like raindrops on a windowpane.

“He’s on fire,” cried the doctor, “Bring ice, lots of ice, now! Now!”

Mum cried in agony and threw herself toward Drui, but the nurses pushed her back. The nurses brought a tub of ice in cold water and set it next to the breathing machine and the doctor plunged Drui directly into it the icy-cold tub. Drui’s arms began to flail again, but the doctor held him in the tub while the nurses held packs of ice to his head and neck.

“He’s going into cardiac arrest!” cried the doctor and they all pulled him back out of the tub and the doctor performed resuscitative action with electric paddles. The white jackets surrounded Drui, touching, pumping, breathing, shouting as his beaten body shook violently. At the end of the day, mum and I went home without our little Drui, without our little boy.

4

We walked home in silence. We sat in separate rooms, each crying, each suspended in grief and disbelief. How had our world had collapsed so suddenly. Our little Drui was gone. Two days after Christmas day our favorite was gone forever. I imagined that it was all a nightmare, and that I would to wake up on Christmas day with Drui asleep in the bed next be me, but that neva happened.

Two days later we were dressed in our Sunday best to watch the small, wooden casket lowered into the dirt. Me dad neva came to pay is respects, which being as it was he who had been directly responsible for me brova's death, made the service that much more difficult for mum to endure. Yet, his absence at the funeral didn't surprise me none at'all, for he had a lengthy history of evading responsibility, but it burnt me clean inside, knowing we was all suffering, and he wasn't. I knew he was just fine, forgetting his crime in a bottle of whisky. His bloody conscience couldn't have been too bruised, for the bloke next door told me he'd seen him outside Bell's Pub that morning as the family prepared to see our beloved Drui for the last time. It seemed that everybody was teary proper and full of boo-hooiness as dear old Minister Morton reflected on the life of Drui.

“The tragedy, that is the loss of a child is one the greatest that we can ever know as human beings,” Parish Morton declared from the pulpit. He wore a black suit with a stiff, white collar. He was a nice parish. He always remembered everyone’s name and he neva told on kids when they went to confession.

“Some may question why God, would take the life of such a beautiful child as Dewey Graham. Yet, it is not for us to question God’s motives, but simply to be thankful for the wonderful moments and the lives which were so magically blessed by the presence of this innocent child.” He pulled out the bible and began to read.

“John 14.1-6. Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In me Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to meself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'”

Rain soaked me good shoes as we made our way through back to our quiet flat. Mum was so frail and weak that I neva stopped holding her, fearing she would collapse under the strain of her own weight. For several ours following the funeral, people stopped by with cakes and biscuits and the women all took a look at the gray, broken woman by the fire and quickly busied themselves making tea or some other cheerful refreshment.

One by one, they came, pleading with her to eat a bit of digestive or sip on cup of tea, but she was despondent with grief and only thing that stirred in her were the golden flames dancing in the reflection of her eyes. I listened from the doorway as the women talked in the kitchen about how dad had destroyed her.

“Well it’s no surprise she’s terrified now. It’s that good for nothing husband of hers. A downright bum that one, bringing a pit-bull to a baby!” Mrs. Worth declared as she refilled the ladies’ tea cups.

“What a beast,” said Mrs. Kent. “Why I remember Charlotte well back during our days at Saint Mary’s School for Girls. She was a lively one that Charlotte- fun, smart, and quite lovely as well. She might have had most any man in East Sutton, had she wanted him.”

“But she married Joe Graham. Who was to know he would turn out so horrible? He was quite a fit when they wed you know,” added Mrs. Knight with a wave of her finger.

“There was no doubt she loved him,” said Mrs. Worth.

“It’s a crying shame!” proclaimed Mrs. Downing. They all shook their heads towards the floor. “That man as ruined her, and now he’s responsible for life of that precious child! Oh poor Charlotte!” sobbed Mrs. Downing, dabbing her eyes with tissue.

“There, there, dear,” consoled Mrs. Worth. “Perhaps it for the best; all part of God’s plan. I don’t know that younger child was in the best of health.” Her voice trailed off. “At least she still as her first son, he’s a good boy, that Joe Jr.. He’ll look after the poor soul.”

“Let’s just pray history don’t repeat itself and he turns out like his father,” said Mrs. Kent after a moment of silence and they all murmured in agreement.

I stumbled away from the door, humiliated, vexed and ashamed. How could this happen? And now everyone expected me to become a bloody cunt like him. I didn’t want to be me dad’s son, I didn’t want to be me.

The Haunting at Les Freres LeNain

Kier stood beside her worn, black, leather suitcases in front of the small train station in Laon, France. The two-hour journey from Paris had been quite peaceful, and she managed to catch some sleep, waking up as the train approached its last stop. A faceless, pre-recorded, female voice announced their arrival as the train slowed to an easy grind.

“Gare de Laon,” chirped the pleasant, French voice.

Kier rubbed her tired eyes and stared out the window. She realized she was at the base a small mountain. An ancient, gray cathedral rested imposingly on the near end of the plateau. A medieval stone wall curled around the cathedral and the houses at the height of the plateau encircled at least half of the mountain. From the chimneys of the

little, French bungalows wafted opaque smoke clouds that sailed delicately through the sky. They became translucent by the time they swirled seductively around the base of the cathedral's towers.

“Welcome home,” Kier said to herself and began collecting her luggage.

Now she stood alone in front of the little train station. The streets were deserted and mysteriously quiet except for the employee who sat watching French football in the back. Every so often Kier heard the jubilant cry or the muffled groan of the attendant as Arsenal battled for football glory.

“Bar a la Gare, Restaurant a la Gare, Poste, Café a la Gare,” read Kier on the signs of shops that were quiet and dark inside. Well, I can't get a cup of coffee, but at least now know I'm at the train station, she mused, realizing the town she had committed to live in for the next nine months was hardly creative, and incredibly small.

Kier breathed heavily with fatigue and pushed an amber-brown curl behind her ear. Immediately, it bounced back in front of her eye. She wanted to have a positive, life-altering experience in France. She wanted this to be the best year of her young life; the one that brought abundant change and growth. Lately, she had felt that her life had lost direction and she hoped that this would be her opportunity of reclaim her focus.

She was hardly sure how that would happen here in Laon since she didn't care for small towns. She even disliked American suburbs. She had always felt confined in the suburbs back home in Illinois, and at seventeen, after her high school graduation, she moved in with a friend in Chicago. She discovered large cities were much more preferable to her taste. She loved nightlife, dancing, making friends, and living in the

moment. She would certainly be living in the moment now, she mused as she noticed a small station with an unlit neon sign.

ZOMA? Her eyes scanned the length of the tracks that began at the Zoma station and ascended in a wide, circular stretch, disappearing halfway up the mountain. She speculated that it carried people to the top of the mountain. It was cute. But if the Zoma is public transportation, why is it closed on Sunday? Could the town really be that small? Kier closed her eyes and reflected on her circumstances. She had never been in a town that didn't have public transportation on Sunday. Kier began to panic. How would she live? How would she get around town? How would she make friends? She didn't know anything about small town life and that she did know, she didn't like. Yet, it was important that she enjoy her rendez-vous in France, whatever it was, and she didn't want to give the appearance of belittling the town or the people with her big-city attitude.

She reconciled that she was probably nervous about her new job and her new life in a new country. After all, Kier was just twenty-two years old. A recently graduate of the University of Chicago, she had majored in investigative journalism and minored in psychology. Of course she had studied French as well, but meeting her foreign language requirement had been a tedious, two-year endeavor. Yet, the journey to foreign country was appealing. She liked to travel, but she wasn't the sort to waste her time visiting crowded monuments and taking expensive, tourist excursions. Kier liked to be immersed entirely in her new atmosphere by connecting personally with its' culture. She desired the thrill of being someone else. She wanted to dive into the environment, meet the locals and become a member of the group. After she had make a few friends, gone on a couple

dates and visited the best museums and nightclubs, she was ready to leave and try someplace new.

Kier couldn't decide if her adventurous personality was a positive, motivational trait, or if she was running from something. She decided it was positive. Her nomadic tendencies were undoubtedly inherited from her parents. They never stayed settled in one place for long. Kier's mother was an overpaid, traveling nurse moving from city to city, hospital to hospital on twelve-week contracts. The intense demand for nurses at home in the states helped her parents live their uniquely charmed lifestyle. Kier's father had not worked since leaving the Chicago area five years ago to follow her mother's work contracts. He was ten years older than her mother. For thirty years he supervised lazy, assembly workers and arrogant shop technicians at the Caterpillar Plant in Peoria. For thirty-six years he was more faithful to KOOL Filter Kings menthol cigarettes than to his wife. Every day for twenty-five years he drank a beer after work and a bloody Mary after dinner. Now, at fifty-four, Mr. Maddock was retired, sober, and breathing clean air. It only took her mother twenty-four years to straighten him out, but she managed. Herman Maddock was a new man, stress-free, and enjoying life. Now when people asked Kier about her father, she merely reported straight-faced with a twinge of a smile,

“He golfs....and lives with my mother.” It was a charmed life. He was supported financially by his wife. His nights were spent eating out and his days were usually devoted to golfing. When Kier was young her father was the aggressive, go-getter, Type A Personality that is prone to early heart-attacks. Now, whenever she spoke to her father he sounded relaxed and easy-going.

“What’s been going on Dad?”

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that. I’m thinking about buying a boat,” he might say, and frequently did with conviction.

“Dad, won’t you and mom be moving soon?”

“Yeah-, but I really like boats.”

Herman and Cynthia Maddock loved the ocean too, so Kier’s mother frequently accepted contracts in Los Angeles, San Diego and Florida. Kier’s father would ride his bicycle around the marina for hours, stopping at the boat club for a coke and some conversation. Before the afternoon had passed Herman Maddock had had a personal tour of at least a quarter of the boats in the marina. The same talent for getting along with people that kept him maintaining Caterpillar all those years also served him well in his retirement. Pretty soon he and his wife were sailing the Pacific on the thirty-foot schooner of their new friends. After a couple months it was off to a new marina and a fresh green. There was irony in that although Kier consciously avoided becoming her parents, she envied their lives. It was a charmed existence, and she felt they deserved it.

She only hoped that her life would turn out so well. Kier knew she took a gamble when she ran out on her life in Chicago and flew off to France. All of her friends from school and home were carefully nestled in their places. After graduation, her best friend Yasmin took a job in television production in New York City. Her other friends had found great jobs in Washington DC, Chicago and even Tokyo. They leased 40th floor apartments on Lake Shore Drive and tiny, expensive flats in the East Village that were worth every dime.

Everyone in her life was taking steps toward the future, and Kier wanted the same contentment for herself. She wanted to explore the treasures of Europe: the modernity of London, the art of Italy and the romance of Paris. Most of all she wanted to be bilingual, goal that had evaded her throughout her life. She was moving forward, but she was also stalling for time. She had left someone back home in Chicago, someone very dear to her. Julani.

Julani was her boyfriend of four years, a sizable chunk of her young life. They met when she was just a young girl of sixteen hanging out in the clubs and bars on Chicago's Westside. She frequently saw him around town: at the bar, the record shop, and the trendy, Westside shops. He was handsome. Tall and lean, with a straight nose, full lips, intense, ebony black eyes and bronze skin, he drew the attentions of many young ladies. He was very popular and everybody that Kier knew also knew of Julani.

Although they had never been introduced, Kier somehow knew him too. Before they met, when Kier still carried a backpack and pinned her ringlets back with colored barrettes, she never thought about him. She never held her pillow tightly and fantasized about their first kiss. Even after they became good friends she never thought of him as a lover.

On several occasions, they had driven together to Toronto in his VW Bug, jamming to Jamaroqoui and laughing at each other the entire way. They shared their youth with one another, their excitement, their energy and their passion for music and dance. Once, in Toronto, they had even slept together on a tiny loveseat for two. The loveseat was so small, Kier had to lie on top of Julani so that they could both fit. It took

them ages to finally fall asleep. She could feel his warm chest pushing against hers as he exhaled and she readjusted her hips so that her thigh wasn't wedged so particularly between his legs. Years later, Julani said that night on the loveseat was the catalyst igniting his love for her. That night however, they had both pretend to be asleep long before their restlessness subsided, and by morning, it seemed they had grown fonder of one another. Still, they never spoke about it and instead, pretended innocence remained between them. She cared for him, of because of it, Kier never allowed herself to become infatuated with Julani. If they had felt anything, each of them continued to ignore their attraction. For more than two years after the loveseat incident they abated one another, dating other people and continuing to develop their non-committal friendship.

Inevitably however, a girl and a boy will unite. It is the way of nature, and is only a matter of time. It was Christmas Eve in Chicago. The snow fell and the wind ravaged everything on the streets, but Julani and Kier went out anyway. Some friend's in Bricktown had a party in their loft. It was a good night. Kier spent most of the night dancing with good friends and catching up with old ones who were in town. She didn't spend much time at all with her friend Julani, with whom she had arrived. It wasn't necessary. Neither of them was dependent upon the other in a crowd. When they met in the hall he held her hand and pulled her to the open window at the end of the hall. He retrieved two, small champagne splits from his back pockets. Kier gasped and squealed like a toddler when she saw them.

“Where did you steal those from?” she asked as Julani popped the corks.

“Brian’s place downstairs.” He replied nonchalantly.

“Now I know how I got stuck hanging out with you, you’ve always got the good stuff. Resourceful devil.” Julani laughed quietly.

“To what shall we toast Julani?” Kier asked, looking playfully into his steadfast, black eyes. He smiled and tilted his head so that he looked adorable.

“To the New Year of course....and to new adventures.”

The bottles clinked and they sipped their champagne watching the snow fall.

When the party was over, and the car plowed through the ringlets of winter frost and snow that blew off Lake Michigan like the winds of a hurricane, Kier indulged in a sentiment she had never allowed herself before.

They were each in a somber mood. The car was silent except for the monotonous rubbing of the wipers against the windshield. Kier looked at Julani who rested comfortably behind the wheel, but was focused on the lonely highway. She wondered if she should say something; break the silence by talking about the party or their plans for Christmas Day. She leaned back and relaxed, realizing the silence in the car was merely another wordless moment. They had shared many and would share many more. It was then that Kier had a vision of the future. She saw herself as an older woman with fine lines outlining her cherry lips and round, teddy bear, brown eyes. She was leaning back in her seat, as she was then, tired and quiet after a long night. Julani was driving them home. She looked at Julani again, wondering if he could read her thoughts, but he only stared at the pellets of snow beating the windshield. Kier smiled, closed her eyes and didn’t speak

until they reached home.

It was long after that they lost all ability to resist one another. It was still January, and winter festivities and excitement continued to fuel the city. Kier came to Juliani's place feeling happy and confident. He seemed to treat her differently from early on in the evening. His compliments came more readily and eager than usual.

They went to a rock concert at a small, local venue known for its quality selection of wine and tap beer. She ordered merlot and he drank Newcastle. As usual it was a great time with Julani, but as Kier walked away from the table in her special occasion, slim, red hot pants, she felt Julani's eyes on her bottom. She was probably already drunk when she strolled slowly back to the table knowing that everyone's eyes were on her. Julani watched her and called to her with the same adorable, endearing look.

"Come here hotness," he called to her. He took her warm hand in his own. "My ace. Sit here," he commanded with a sly grin patting his lap.

She didn't hesitate, and when her hips were squared firmly over his groin, she draped an arm loosely around his neck. He held her close so that there was no space between them. His finger caressed a piece of flesh on her lower back exposed by the hot, red pants that sunk down low when she sat. Julani pushed the fluffy, golden curls aside and whispered, "We still haven't tried making love," into her ear.

His breath was warm and his lips brushed against her ear when he spoke. Kier's pulse beat with sudden electricity. A small giggle escaped from her throat. She turned and stared into his eyes with interested disbelief. Their faces were nearly touching. Keir wet her lip and his eyes sparkled with mischief. The fingers on her neck descended deep into

the curls. Her head rolled decadently over his palm as he held her. He pushed her hips and face toward his as if he meant to kiss her, but she let her body slide seductively away from him and laughed incredulously.

“You’re drunk,” she said with a haughty laugh. She pushed his eager palms away from her body.

“Yes, and you’re sexy,” was his sincere reply.

“Too bad it’s taken you three years to notice.” When she said this she brought her lips so close to his that he could feel the electric current in her body. His palm slid underneath the seat of her pants and confidently cupped her bottom.

“It’s impossible not to notice sex kitten.”

“Then why now wolf?” Her speech was heavy and the wine on her breath swirled over his lips like warm syrup. She felt him rise under her thigh. Her stared into her eyes and at her plump, honey breasts with desire. For a moment he forgot his game and that was good enough for Kier. She slid slowly down to his knees and stood quickly before he could pull her to him again. She knew she had his full attention and she savored every moment as she switched her hip and fell jubilantly into her chair. Julani only feasted his eyes upon her with want. The secret was out, and no longer did he attempt to disguise his interest or intentions. He wanted her like a new pair of sneakers and lust rose inside him like a burning fire. It had been dormant for ages. It had been suppressed as he waited for the right moment when both of them were free and both of them were eager.

Kier rolled the wine goblet around in her palm and teased him with her lips and eyes. She loved the way his eyes were fixated upon her, ready to devour her whenever

she said “Go.” She had never enjoyed his utmost devotion before, and she suspected from the way she relished in it now, that she had always longed for it. She felt her face become very warm.

“What did you think of the song I recorded with Maliki?” she asked not wishing to give away her power just yet. Julani straightened his back.

“It thought it was hot.” He sipped his beer. “You sound like Aaliyah; very soulful yet banging; perfect to make love to.” This last part he said firmly, his eyes locked to hers. He wanted to see her reaction. He wanted her to give herself away, let him know that she would be in his bed that night. She only ran the tip of her tongue over the droplet of wine on the rim of the glass.

“Damn I wish I was that wine glass right now.”

Kier finally had to laugh. They both laughed.

“I’m serious,” attested Julani.

“You’re a fool,” she said laughing at his determination. She didn’t want to give in to him, especially when he had had so many others and especially when he had only surprised her with his interest tonight. She wanted to be chased. She wanted to be hard to get, but his attractiveness and sincerity were made him difficult to resist.

“Hey, do you want to go watch this show before it’s over,” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Kier slipped her hand inside his arm and they deserted the café. Later, when the stage was empty, they were packed into a smoky after-hours sipping undercover screwdrivers and snorting bumps of coke off a key in a corner. They were high as a kite

and full of energy and chemical joy.

Julani dipped the key into a small portion of cocaine folded neatly in a scrap of paper. Chivalrously, he and held it of for Kier to partake. Carefully, she pushed the pile of power into the perfect position under her tiny nostril and inhaled as hard as possible. The drug shot up her nostril and smashed into her brain like a fist. Her head flew back in a violent jolt, but she came up laughing.

“That’s great!” she shouted rubbing a balled fist over her nose. Julani took his, twice as big and with the expertise of a rock star.

“Did you buy this?” she asked, bouncing her bottom.

“No.” she said not looking to give an explanation. Kier was too far gone to notice his subtlety.

“Where’d you get it?” She shook her shoulders and jiggled her breasts at Julani. He barely noticed. He was concentrating on what was going up his nose. He only offered her a weak smile before taking his hit.

“Did someone give it to you?” She asked, but she already knew someone had. Julani could get anything they wanted, with or without cash. He had skills that made him a great buddy.

“Yeah, some guy just gave it to me.”

Kier smiled and threw her arms around his thin neck. They began to dance. His legs opened and locked her hips between them as the bounced to the music. His dreadlocks fell in front of his eyes, making him appear sexy and innocent. Kier pulled his hand and pranced out of the grimy, dark corner. The dance floor was packed tightly with

homosexuals and party people on drugs. Julani spread a palm over the seat of the red hot pants as Kier bounced her ass around flagrantly. They mimicked sex, from the back, from the side, from the front, with one leg in the air; it didn't matter. It was a gay club anything can be done in a gay club. After some time they went to the corner again for a refreshment, then back to dancing and socializing.

Kier stood in front of the tiny mirror in her bra. There was a wrap on the other side of the door. The door was shoved, but it was locked. Kier smiled smugly. There would be no walking into her room anymore. She felt sexy and excited as she snatched the yellow bath towel and wrapped loosely around her body. She unlocked the door. It was Hanna She wore her pajamas; knee length, red Umbros, a Picardie t-shirt, and thick rimmed glasses.

"Still naked?" Hanna remarked with a smidge of arrogance. Kier handed her the coffee pot and shoved the door closed- with a smile.

On Saturday, the bells chimed groggily at ten, for it was cold and foggy again.

A smug fog obscured the high tiers of the cathedral towers. Kier leaned into her window and warmed her thighs on the toasty furnace as she gazed over sleeping village. All was quiet in Laon, and Norte Dame loomed majestically over the shops and cottages in the distance. The picturesque, French Tudors and the sleeping

bungalows spread like a blanket between the ancient church and the imperial college.

Kier searched for the moon, but it was well hidden above the smoky, ash-colored clouds. The only source of visibility was the thin layer of light over the small city nestled on a mountain. The warm, orange glow blanketed the fairy-tale town like a cloak. The yellow-orange lights from the town created a soft, rose shade on the moist, night palette. "She sleeps." Kier whispered moodily in the darkness.

The cathedral, sanctuary for many centuries, to vermin and innocents alike, stood luminescent, like a vibrant impression immersed in the quiet isolation. The Towers of Our Lady ascended and rose over the city, then disappeared under a shroud of smudgy charcoal.

Kier scribbled, *Yellow orange, rose, charcoal*, on her special, green notepad. She had already decided she would paint the scene outside her window someday. She was to begin preparation soon; to her list she added: *Go to art store: Charcoal sticks and Rose paint.*

The cathedral was of interest, but Kier wanted to see the moon. She wanted the moon and stars, faces and friends. She wanted to dance to beautiful music and fall in love; she wanted to be a part of art in the making. She wanted to know freedom, but instead of liberation, she felt she was trapped inside a beautiful painting and she didn't have the courage to escape.

Sometimes, in the early afternoon, after the day's tasks had already completed, she would complain of boredom to her flat mates.

“I just don’t know what to do with myself,” she would moan empathetically. Brianna was never any help; all she ever did was sit at her desk and watch French dubbed, B rate American television programs while munching absentmindedly on cheese and hard toast. “Prepare your lessons,” she would respond dully without looking away from the screen.

“Yes, yes, but today is Tuesday, and I don’t have to work for another forty hours.”

Hannah was more sympathetic, “Yes, it can be pretty quiet here. I’ll bet your room needs cleaning.”

Like a castaway alone on an island, Kier tried her best to occupy her time and her mind. She sowed buttons onto her low-cut blouses and reinforced the hems on her pant legs. She tacked string on her bedroom walls so that her earrings could all hang prettily in a row. She read books like the Communist Manifesto, Jane Eyre, and the DaVinci Code; whatever she could find. At the beginning of each month, she ravaged the pages of French fashion magazines, but in the end, she only felt lonelier because she imagined her colleagues might view her fashion triumphs as elitism or arrogance.

Sometimes she just ate. She would sit at her desk for hours, writing in her green notebook or frivolously surfing the web- and snacked. She drank wine, coffee, and tea loaded with sugar. She ate tiny, sweet Clements from Senegal and French baguettes with mango-melon jam. There were days when it seemed that the only

exercise she got was walking downstairs to the vending machines in the middle of the night for some cheap, American chocolate. She never ate candy bars or fast food at home in Chicago, but since she had been in France, she had eaten McDonalds three times. She avoided thinking of all the chocolate she had eaten.

Kier pulled herself from the lonely, window scene and put on a pair of heavy sweatpants. She switched on the radio and scanned the cluttered desk for her reading glasses. Notepads, papers and white envelopes stuffed with bills from back home were scattered over the old, wooden desk. *Why is it so hard for you to stay organized?* she asked herself, pushing the papers around on the desktop. No spectacles. Kier tugged on the brass coated, metal handle of the drawer. It broke off in her hand. Frustrated, she backed away from the desk and consoled herself.

"I need something to eat," she said turning to her only friend, the refrigerator, for refuge. The tiny fridge smelled mildly sour, like cream before it hardens. There was a jar of pickled beets in the door, onions in the drawer and Clements. She pushed her hand to the back of the fridge where the Clements were, and felt something cold and gooey. "Uhh!" she yowled, snatching her hand anyway. It was covered in black goo. "That's what that smell was."

After scouring the glass shelves, Kier tied the trash-bag and descended the staircase. Her lone footsteps sounded like tiny, mice scurrying on the dark, empty staircase. Kier often felt strange alone on the staircase at night, when the children were gone. During the school-day they packed into the wide staircase like sardines. Kier had learned to maneuver down the steps skillfully as the children rushed up,

chanting "Hello! Hello Kier," in sweet, delicate voices. Kier wondered if she actually missed them. The lights flashed on instantly as she passed each sectioned meter of the hallway. She looked at her reflection in the glass. She wore her tired, blue college sweatshirt and no make-up, but she still looked pretty and soft.

Kier approached dumpster and all the alley-cats fled to the nearby crevices. She watched their glowing, green eyes spy on her in the blackness. "Cowards," she hissed into the dark and went back inside. Keir passed the teacher's lounge, which was always kept locked at night. She really couldn't understand why, since there was never anyone around then anyway. After dinner ended at seven, the students loitered vagrantly in the halls. They sat in clusters on the stairs or fought each other for a chance at the pay-phone. By eight they had all disappeared into their dormitories and wouldn't be seen until morning. There was a supervisor in each dorm to ensure that the children didn't get into trouble after curfew. "I have the chocolate all to myself!" Kier said loudly. She heard her voice ricochet down the corridor. She purchased a Twix and savored the chewy caramel as she walked slowly. She was already feeling a little bit better. She attributed it to the cats, even though they were busters.

Just as Kier was about to round the corner that led down the corridor to her apartment, she saw a quick glimmer of light at the end of the dark hallway. What was that? She stopped chewing and squinted in the darkness. She remembered that she didn't have her glasses. She shrugged it off as blind fatigue and took another bite of the chocolate, but then she saw the light again- for sure this time! It was a

brilliant, white glimmer that only flashed for an instant. Two seconds later it appeared again, and again. Like a curious child, Kier felt compelled to investigate. She had her eyes locked on the rhythmically, flashing light now, and she crept toward it slowly like a lizard, keeping close to the wall. Besides the light, she couldn't see anything at the end of the hall. She began to feel nervous and she considered running back to her room without seeing what was at the end of the corridor. Kier glanced over her shoulder: Nothing. Stop tripping Kier. She began to exhale, but before her breath was released completely she heard a sound from the end of the hall. She listened intently, her back pinned against the wall's cold tiles in the darkness. There was a scratchy sound followed by a thud: then again. Kier's skin became electric! All her body-hair stood on end, and she suddenly felt terribly cold. There was something at the end of the hall, but she didn't think it was person. *A cat maybe? A possum? But if it's moving, why aren't the lights coming on?*

Kier broke a chunk off her Twix bar and slid it across forcefully the tiles. The lights flashed sequentially. Far away, at the end of the hall, Kier heard the Twix stop suddenly and the lights flickered. Kier's mouth dropped and she stood momentarily paralyzed. A small girl stood near the end of the corridor. Her straight, brown hair was flat, dull, lifeless and disheveled. A shade paler than ivory, her thin arms and legs hung from her body like wet spaghetti noodles. She looked a little gray all over, but her hands were dirty, almost black. In her left hand Kier clearly saw the silver handles of an old jump rope. She wore an oversized, faded t-shirt that read: *4th Annual Paris Marathon*, no pants, no socks, and just one blue, canvas sneaker on her

right foot. The laces were untied. The Twix bar was wedged under the small sneaker. The little girl stood frozen; feet apart, her face turned down toward the chocolate under her foot.

A scratch followed by a thud; she was jumping rope! But why didn't the lights appear? Ten seconds had passed, but the child didn't move, she didn't raise her head, and Kier remained glued to the wall at the other end of the hall. "Um, cherie, est-ce que tu-," Kier lost her voice when the girl suddenly lifted her head, exposing a shockingly, frightful visage. Her lips were coated in white; they looked dry and cracked, and there was something black caked in her nostrils. Two swollen, red eyes glared hatefully at Kier and although she was hidden by darkness, she felt the child's intense eyes pierce through her. Kier felt her heart skip a beat. She dropped her chocolate bar. She blinked, and the child was gone. Kier gripped the wall and looked frantically in every direction, but she didn't see the girl. The Twix at the other end of the hall was gone too. Kier turned the corner and ran like lightening to her room.

Kier threw open the door of her bedroom and switched on the light. The room was exactly as she had left it. She tried to relax by pacing the floor. Her body felt rigidly tense and her forehead and palms were sweating. *Breathe Kier.* There was a brief knock at the door before the door was shoved futilely into the deadbolt. Kier had locked it immediately. Now she ran to the door to greet Hannah.

"What's going on?," Hannah asked causally. Her ignorant half-smile faded and her tone changed when she saw Kier. "Are you okay? What happened?"

*An American Family***2062**

Amy

It was a typical Saturday afternoon in December. The sunless sky was dismal. The air was cool yet dangerously muggy so that the people walking on the streets wore a layer of perspiration underneath their expensive, wool coats and soft, leather jackets. The ravenous clouds cast peculiar shadows over the City, smearing the distinction between buildings and people, cars and trains, reality and fantasy. Amy and Anthony Reyes were inside their home alone.

“Hey Tony! Tell your teleimage to go to the Playboy channel,” said Rick. Rick was the extra tall, extra skinny, extra horny kid in Anthony’s crew.

“Augh!” Anthony grunted under the weight of Simon, the wrestler. “Hold up dude, augh, Greenbay is about to get crushed in a minute! Augh!”

“What the fuck Tony! It’s the second down. Do you expect me to wait until then?” Rick snapped back.

Ogo strolled in with a case of beer.

“Finally man, what took you so long?” said Rick.

“Augh! Augh! Augh! Surrender!” screamed Anthony as Simon pushed his leg backward forcefully. “Surrender!”

“Surrender what?” Simon demanded coyly. Anthony’s face had turned bright red. “I can’t hear you

“I surrender because I’m a weak, pussy who likes to take it. Augh!” Simon released him and he lay in the fetal position. Change the fucking teleimage fuckhead!” Rick shouted from the sofa.

“TV to Playboy Channel,” moaned Anthony from the floor.

“Oh yeah, this is what I’m talking ‘bout.” Rick was mesmerized by the life-size image of a nude woman.

“She is hot.” Simone agreed.

“Don’t jack your dick in my house Rick!” Anthony called from the floor.

“Jack my dick? Why the fuck would I jack my dick in your house?” For some reason the chronic masterbater was indignant.

“Ugh, because you’ve done it before.

“Bullshit I’ve done it before.”

“Bullshit?” Anthony stood up.

“Is it bullshit that my sister caught you jacking your dick in that chair when she feel asleep out here once?”

Simon and Rick erupted with laughter as Rick shock his head in denial.

“Why are you such a perve Rick?” Anthony demanded.

“In the 7th grade, his mother had left his father to be a nun! What do you expect!” Simon said and double over with laughter on the sofa.”

“He carries a porno and lube in his back pocket at school!” Ogo shouted and they all laughed until their sides hurt because it was true. They opened a second round of beers.

“Okay, what do girls and KFC have in common?” Anthony asked everyone.

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

“You start with the breasts, then work on the legs and by the time you’re finished with that all you are left with his a greasy box to put your bones in.” The boys roared with laughter for the second time.

“Hey Tony, when your moms coming back” said Ogo after they had calmed somewhat.

“Both of my parents are gone for the day. My dad’s working and my mom is working out and going to spa and all that shit she does on Saturdays. No one will be home for a long time, except my sister, and she won’t bother us.”

Amy had spent most of the afternoon trying on clothes and walking back and forth in front of her bedroom mirror. Her stupid brother and his loser friends were in the family room she chose to remain out of sight. After changing at least 25 times and striking a minimum of 150 poses, Amy decided that she needed a pair of black, leather boots and some new bangles. She changed quickly, hopped into her Series 657, solar-powered, hybrid BMW and navigated it toward the busy shopping mall.

It took Amy a long time to find parking in the mall parking lot, but eventually a cozy, anonymous looking space appeared in the center of the rows. Before going into the mall, Amy lifted three, large shopping bags from the vehicle’s trunk.

Pite Pat

Pite Pate

Pite Pat

Her tiny footsteps snapped against the cold asphalt as she made her way briskly to the door. The alligator pumps, were Gucci, the stylish, dress; Armani. She was a thing of beauty and the type of woman every woman would want to be; thin, pretty, wealthy, sophisticated. Her air was contrived so that when she walked, she pretended not to look at anyone. With her chin high, she strode as if she were

carefully observing something very interesting in the distance. Her eyes remained focused, searching and determined, even as she smiled at the approaching reflection in the gleaming, mirrored doors.

“Welcome to DeMarx Collection, the ultimate shopping experience. You are parked on level five. Remember, level five,” said an affable female voice with the ubiquity of being nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

Amy thought of the people who needed to be reminded of where they parked; people like her grandmother Helen, who was forgetful and senile and who'd probably have her license revoked by the state soon anyway. But Amy would never forget something as simple as where she parked. She was too mentally adept and observant, especially while on a shopping expedition.

A newer mall, the interior of DeMarx Collection was truly a stunning presentation of white marble and shining, gold accents. It was especially elegant during the winter holidays, when the mall was draped from top to bottom in metallic, gold ribbon and tiny, white lights hugged every post and rail in sight. A magnificent Christmas tree stood regally in the center of the mall, complete with glittering ornaments and giant, white star on the top that nearly touched the ceiling. Amy knew the tree was real from the odor of fresh pine that lingered pleasantly in the air and she wondered how many hundreds of years old tree had been when it was cut. Five floors below, outside Santa's Toy Shop, parents waited patiently in line

for a picture with Santa while their nosey children meandered about the Christmas tree, anxious to rip open the stacks of fake presents cloistered beneath it.

Amy found her way to Triton Rebel, a chic retailer of high-end jeans and trendy fashions. The scene inside was absolute chaos! The store was packed with suburban shoppers scooping up cashmere sweaters and tweed sport coats. Many items were out of place on the racks and the heavy, oak tables that were piled with green slacks and red sweaters strewn over one another in an abundant, heaping mess.

Amy avoided the line of bodies that curved around the registers like a zig-zag. They must have been like this all day, she reflected as she searched for gifts for the men in her life: Anthony, her baby brother, who was sixteen, Oregon, her dad, and Marcus, her sort-of-boyfriend for the last three months.

They hadn't discussed any kind of commitment or expectation, but Marcus had taken her out every weekend for the past month. Marcus was lean like a runner, and had fair hair, the color of washed out flaxseed and a sanguine complexion that made him look boyish and belied his real age of 29. Ironically, his favorite hobbies were dancing and drinking Jack Daniels Whiskey. Sometimes he took her to the casino, where they gambled much of his money away on Black Jack and Roulette. Sometimes they won. Whatever they won he always split with her, even though it was all his money to begin with. Afterward he would take her up the casino hotel suites and she would slip into one of the plush, terry robes from the bathroom. She

would order room service, Champagne and strawberries. She didn't eat. She could never eat when Marcus was there. She just watched him, handsome and irreverent, straddling the bar stool in a grey suit, cutting thin, white lines on the glass countertop. "Ready to hit the slopes for a little ski action?" he'd ask, rubbing his palms together anxiously. Like a pet, she'd rise in the soft, terry robe and cross the bed on her knees, and greet him with a submissive kiss. Then she'd place the short, plastic straw in her nostril and inhale. For a moment, her face would disappear under the long hair spread across the glass the way oil might spread across a highway; from the inside out. But then the head jolted back as if it were unexpected and she'd place a finger over her nose and another between her eyes where a violent pressure had suddenly struck. They watered. "This burns!" she would cry feebly, as he would fondle her buttocks and tell her pain was a corollary of enjoying the best.

"I keep telling you baby, Marcus doesn't bake with Arm & Hammer, this is 100% Columbian baby. Take it easy," he'd sing with a mouthful of ass. Then the burning would start to feel more like an irresistible tingling making her feel like she were standing on top of a mountain. Marcus would wrap his arms around her, he'd engulf her, envelope her in his lust, as if her were sucking her into him like a grape, consuming her hungrily and completely. And when he was finished, he spit her out exhausted and dehydrated like a raisin. Afterward, she would smoke hash and wonder how it was that a man so sexually virile had the appearance of being so physically weak and attenuated. She knew she probably couldn't trust him; he was too rich and too secretive. Amy didn't even know what he did for a living, but

she could tell he was no idle dangler, swinging from daddy's money clip in appeal for handouts the way she did. Marcus was keen as a hawk, he made things happen, he knew everybody, and because he looked non-threatening, a corollary of those ruddy checks, and soft, blond hair, he made friends easily. Still, at 18, Amy lacked the life experience to know what was to come for she and Marcus, but she *was* intent on finding him the perfect gift that day.

Amy loved fingering the plush, cashmere sweaters, scarves and socks. She quickly wrapped a charcoal scarf, three pair of socks and some Reindeer boxers in a sweater and headed toward the jackets where she found a really cool denim one she knew Anthony would love. For Dad, it was a blazer and textured tie. One her way into the women's section, she picked up a couple pairs of dark slacks just in case she needed extras.

The women's department was even busier than the men's. Amy quickly found herself a pair of jeans, three sweaters, and several pair of adorable, lace panties in different colors and patterns. As she stumbled toward the suits with the heap of clothes and three shopping bags, a young, salesgirl dashed forward, cheerily calling, "May I start a room for you Miss?" The girl, a tiny, mousy looking creature with a blunt bob and bangs, was grinning from ear to ear; Amy knew why: Despite several apparent purchases already, she was continuing to shop in obscenely expensive shoes. To the sales girl, that spelled SALE. A blithe and unconcerned shopper with an unlimited credit balance, whose only goal is to spend money, was every retail clerk's fantasy.

“Why yes, thank you,” Amy replied gratefully and unloaded the mountain of ready-to-wear clothes onto the tiny, salesclerk until the blonde bob disappeared completely from view.

“My name is Andi,” said the perky voice, somewhat muffled from behind the pile.

“Thank you for your help Andi,” Amy gushed and quickly hurried over to the better suits and slacks. She picked out two complete suits, one black and one grey, each with interchangeable slacks and skirts. She also discovered a pair of hip, pink, sateen pants and a gorgeous, black, chiffon, mini-dress with a bright, crimson sash that reminded her of a cross between *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*- her mom’s favorite movie. Amy pulled two sizes and kept moving. She saw Andi around the corner in the underwear section helping an old man pick out some very trendy, women’s lingerie and decided it was a good time to stumble errantly into her fitting room. Along the way, Amy picked up an iridescent clutch, a silk blouse and a fitted, black dress- size 0, for her mother.

There was no salesperson outside the fitting rooms when she arrived, just the muffled sounds of ladies shimmying in and out of wool trousers and cotton sweaters from behind the doors. Amy saw the blue sweater she had selected for her brother hanging on the front of fitting room door and quickly ducked inside. “Let the festivities begin,” she whispered with a wry smile.

First, Amy tried the sweaters one by one- a pink, a yellow cable knit, and a purple cashmere sweater than was just heavenly to the touch. The suits were both

nice, but she knew she couldn't get all four bottoms, so she chose the grey skirt and black slacks and moved on. The fitting carried on until Amy was down to the last item, the chiffon mini-dress. The dress fit like a glove and Amy pranced joyously in front of the 3-way mirror, watching herself from every angle and imagining herself at the Whitney's Garden Party, dancing closely with Jean Marc Dijan, the dreamy French actor.

"Is everything all right in there Miss?" called Andi's saccharine drawl from the invisible side of the door. Now she reminded Amy of a water sprite. Amy quickly stripped down to her underwear and grabbed a pair of jeans she didn't like off the floor. "Yes," she said, opening the door a crack. "Would you mind plucking another of these in a bigger size?"

"I'll get that for you right now!" said Andi obsequiously. "Great!" said Amy and shoved the jeans at Andi. "Be right back!" said chirpy Andi. "I'll be here!" sang Amy just as chirpy.

With the door closed and Andi gone for a few minutes, Amy got down to business. With her smart, little, Swiss Army Knife in hand, ran her index finger along the interior seam of the divine purple sweater until she felt something thin and firm underneath the fabric. Carefully, she slid the blade under two stitches of thread, created a tiny hole, and pushed the out the pin-thin, loss prevention magnetic censor, that was not half the size of her fingernail. It fell quietly onto the carpet. This she did with the chiffon dress, the sateen pants, the suits, the dress for her mother,

the tweed sport coat, the denim blazer and all the gifts for her brother. Amy's heart thumped rapidly in her chest as she quickly folded the items and tucked them inconspicuously behind a leather ottoman in the room. She had to finish before Andi came back to harass her. She has almost finished arranging everything when she heard a familiar shuffle outside.

“Knock.

Knock.” chirped Andi from outside the door.

God, she really is annoying, thought Amy as she finished tossing the items she wasn't interested in near the door opening where Andi would be able to see them. She slid the door open a crack.

“I've got your jeans,” Andi cheered proudly as if she expected an award for obtaining them. “I hope they fit,” she said.

“Thank you so much Andi,” Amy said warmly and snatched the jeans. The door was nearly closed when Amy felt resistance from the other side. Her heart skipped a beat and she felt her left eyelid begin to twitch uncontrollably.

“Is there anything I can take out of your way?” asked the annoying sprite. Amy handed her the extra chiffon dress, eager for her to be gone. She was afraid the girl would notice her eyelid twitching and become suspicious that Amy was so nervous.

“Take this dress, it looked a lot better on the hanger than it did on me,” she lied. Alone again, Amy noiselessly inserted the de-magnetized merchandise into the empty shoeboxes. She was concerned about the length of time she'd spent in the fitting room and quickly dressed and collected her things. Outside, Andi was

folding a pile of clam diggers. She glanced up suddenly when Amy approached wobbling on her stilettos under the weight of the bags and clothes draped over her arm.

“How did everything work out?” asked Andi.

“I absolutely adore these jeans, the 6’s fit so much better,” gushed Amy.

“Fabulous!” Andi exclaimed in a weak attempt to sound sophisticated.

“I’m also going to take these cashmere socks and this silk blouse for my mom.”

“Isn’t it beautiful,” Andi remarked of the blouse. “Your mom will love it.”

“Indeed,” agreed Amy happily, realizing Andi had no clue that she had just stolen several thousand dollars worth of merchandise.

“Thank you so much for your help Andi, I never could have done it without you.”

“You are so welcome. Have a great holiday!”

“You too,” Amy said with a slight wave as she marched toward the back of the line. She knew the girl would not follow her; she was far too happy about the multi-item sale she believed she had just made to chase her suspiciously. Amy lingered near the end of the line a few moments, mulling distractedly over a pile of sale items. Soon she was out of the line and trying on an lime green, plastic jacket with dramatic, consumer facial expressions. After turning in the mirror a few times, Amy returned the jacket to the hanger, picked up her bags and left.

Her heart raced as she neared the store exit. There was always the slight possibility that she had forgotten a censor or that Andi would enter the fitting room and realize that she'd entered the room with an abundance of items and exited with a mere few. When she saw a cluster of shoppers heading into the store at once, she knew it was her chance to escape unnoticed if the alarm did sound. If she had made any mistakes throughout the course of her heist, it would come out now, the moment of truth, when she could actually time her fate for one unstoppable instance. She held her breath and sailed under the electronic gate over the arch of the doorway. She exhaled on the other side after only silence followed her across the polished, marble tiles. One down, two to go, she thought and smiled smugly like a Cheshire cat. She had gotten away with it, like she knew she would! Her thundering heart slowed down until she felt like she was lying in the warmth of the sun.

The three shopping bags were only half full, so Amy, headed downstairs to Jacqueline's Closet, one of her favorite stores, where she knew she could find a few items to top them off. Security at Jacqueline's was much tighter than at Triton Rebel, and the girls there didn't operate the fitting room on an honor system like they often did at the many preppy, suburban stores like Diamond Mine. Despite that, Amy was able to walk out with a irresistible, belted, leather jacket and a pair of shorts. Upon entering the bustling ladies boutique, Amy immediately adorned the coat and wore it as she pursued the racks of tiny satin tops and skin-tight pants and skirts. She carried a few items into the room, but decided the jacket, which had a lovely, \$9,000

price tag, and the hot shorts would be enough to satisfy her. Just as she had done at Triton Rebel, Amy removed the magnets sewn into the garments and left the store. She was brimming with delight when she walked to her car, emptied the contents of the shoeboxes and headed back into the mall for a refill.

In another hour and a quarter, Amy had collected a black leather bag, another coat, three pairs of slacks, gloves, and surprisingly- her first pair of shoes. Not the first pair she'd ever owned of course, but the first pair she'd ever discounted. Amy didn't care for the words steal or stolen; that just sounded unclean. Discounting shoes was problematic. The salesgirl first had to retrieve the desired footwear from back storage and then she only brought one pair, and thus, they were easy for the clerk to manage mentally, making them less attractive to Discounters. Yet, Amy Reyes, slick as oil and fine as wine, strode out with a free pair of Aqua, Alexander McQueen pumps that were so hot, staring at them too long could burn one's retinas. They were worth a fortune, as was whole of her booty, and she had fooled a team of sales people. She had fooled them all, and she was the only one in the world, privy to that information. Between deceiving Andi and the others, and escaping unnoticed with her reputation intact, Amy felt then, that she was smart as a whip and virtually invincible!

Before, when grandma was less crazy, she would say things like, "If criminals are smart enough to get away with a crime, then they're smart enough to make it honestly." But the only way Amy knew to do it honestly, meant her spending her money; her dad's money really, and he just wasn't as liberal with it as she'd have

preferred. Amy loved clothes tremendously, she adored them, she fantasized about them, she coveted them, still, she could have admitted that she was addicted to the thrill of the crime, more than to the clothes themselves. And of course, there was that little ski habit, which, by all accounts, had the potential to cost more than keeping up with fashion.

Skiing off in her BMW back to the split-level, ranch-style home she cohabitated with her mother, father and younger brother, who was 15 and spoiled rotten. Their grandmother, who hadn't been officially diagnosed as crazy, but was so old that nobody ever had a clue what she was talking about, had been visiting lately too. She had been in Colorado two months now, and was kept with the family, apparently against her will, as she seemed to loathe and detest her detention. This hatred was evinced in the constant issuing of one garrulous complaint after another, usually about her daughter-in-law, which were accompanied by innumerable, loathsome, guttural sounds throughout the day.

The foyer was dark and empty except for the hollow silence that resounded latently on the polished, marble floor. Amy approached noiselessly in the dark. The familiar sound of the 6 o'clock news reverberated off the fancy, black iron, spiral staircase leading down to the lower level, of the somewhat palatial estate. The staircase was intended to resemble willowing vines and Magnolia trees. Last summer, Amy's mother, Mrs. Karen Reyes, had insisted on having the detestable stair trap installed because it reminded her of the Magnolia's on their old property in Los Angeles, where the family lived when the children were small, before the cold

froze the coast. Magnolias or not, Amy didn't like the staircase. She thought it was tacky, especially indoors. It was patio furniture; it wasn't meant to go indoors, that's why the metal was always freezing at night when she was walking barefoot to the kitchen for a glass of tonic. Yet, her mother, blithe and impudent at the same time, would never think about the practicality of installing a narrow, black staircase that can't even support many women's shoes because the heels always stuck between the metal bars. She would never consider all the aspects of anything. She was like a very ripe, red, genetically grown strawberry that you can't wait to eat, but when you bite into it, you discover it's insipid, jejune, almost tasteless and completely disappointing because it's a boring lie and a waste of human excitement because it can bring no joy.

Mother and Grandmother

Amy entered the room and Karen Reyes looked at her daughter with glassy eyes.

"Hello Amy. Did you have a nice time at the mall honey?" Karen's waxy smile showed off the big, square venires that had recently been affixed to the caps of her teeth. Her real teeth, which were concealed completely by the brilliant, white fakes, had colored tan from all the years of smoking her stinking Dajarum's. She held one then

between her perfectly manicured fingers with the white tips.

“I found a few things,” replied Amy casually.

“Matzeltoh,” she commented enthusiastically, as if Amy had acquired a job rather than a dress.

“Amy, there is a young adult convention next weekend at The Forum. It would be great if you came again. The youth are so important. That’s why we reach out to as many as possible, not just my son and daughter, although you and Anthony are comparatively brilliant, you could.... Karen’s voice trailed off.

Amy watched her mother patiently, contemplating smugly, just how long it would take her to remember they had been talking. It was simply Karen Reyes’ way, to be remotely present, yet simultaneously absent. One never really knew what was inside her head, but it rarely appeared to be very important.

Karen took a sip of the black martini that had a permanent home in her right hand. Her cosmetically enhanced, emerald green eyes, glowed impressively, like shinny beads in the dim light. They remained glassy pools, almost as if she were drugged. She looked like a doll really, the latest collaboration from Bob Mackie and Mattel: She was an elegant, brunette with catlike eyes, shinny red lips and nearly 100% synthetic parts. For a woman of 51, and a mother, Karen Reyes was amazingly flawless, ageless really, and incredibly beautiful. Over the years, she had had so much cosmetic surgery that strangers were often astounded to discover Karen was Amy’s mother rather than sister or friend.

Amy noticed how tightly her mother clenched the stem of the martini glass, as she gazed catatonically at the blue light, hypnotized by teleimage in front of her. She had forgotten Amy completely. Miffed at being ignored, Amy too, turned her attention to the live teleimage that was always in the center of the room.

The 6 o'clock news included the culmination of the days most lurid headlines complete with video and interview. First there was the smiling, adolescent, black girl in a graduation robe who had been murdered and mutilated in her college dorm. Then there was the tiny body of a newborn baby being lifted out of a garbage can by uniformed police. Finally, the massive wet, mess in the city.

"The city formerly known as New York, suffered another massive tsunami yesterday, this time a category four. Although Manhattan has been uninhabited since the sea level rose, submersing the borough in nearly three feet of seawater over the past eight years. The most recent tsunami did topple some of Manhattan's most famous 20th Century landmarks," said an attractive, pouty-lipped reporter who stood in the windy rain in a trendy designer trench coat. The detritus and destruction in the background looked as if the waterlogged city were a merely a tragic canvas contrasting her artificial beauty.

The city was soaked in dirty, gray water carrying everything from dead rats to floating plastic chairs and clothes. It looked like ten hurricanes had hit at once, thrashing the empty city with the aggression of all the seven seas.

Archaic images of the once mightiest of all fine cities filled the room: Wall Street, Times Square, Soho, the Manhattan skyline shortly before hungry sea

reclaimed the island that once served as the gateway to America for refugees and immigrants from around the globe. They saw the Chrysler Building, sparkling against the blue sky like a silver bullet, then deserted in a swamp of brown water scattered with lonesome detritus of a city swallowed by the savage sea.

“I went there once,” Karen said sadly, her voice monotone. This was news to Amy, who envied the Manhattan of the movies like *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *Sex in the City*. “You went to Manhattan Mom? When?” she demanded. Karen didn’t seem to hear, and only watched the teleimage stoically.

“As you can see,” reported the woman gravely, “the front entrance to the famous skyscraper is completely submersed in water and with so much water pressure on the former tallest building in the world, architects and oceanographers say it could topple at any moment!”

A young scientist named Devon Marrian was introduced. He wore a bold, orange sweater over a white oxford and a pair of thin wire spectacles perched on his long nose. His black hair looked fuzzy and soft, and didn’t seem to match his chiseled, angular jaw and fine, long features. When he explained the submersed buildings were collapsing from the unyielding pressure from the truculent and inclement ocean waves, he spoke softly, but with the certitude and consistency of a reputable erudite.

“How much more do you think the water level will rise here in New York?” asked the reporter.

“That is a good question,” he rubbed his palms together. “The fact is, that the scientific community just doesn’t have a definitive answer to that question right now.”

“Well how concerned should we be? How concerned should residents of New York State be?”

“Worldwide, atmospheric temperatures have reached records highs and lows around the globe. Water temperatures have increased another 1-2% over last year alone and I suspect it may be due to increased volcanic activity deep beneath the ocean’s surface. We know that volcanoes exist in contraction zones of the Earth’s tectonic plates. However, what we do not know, is just what is happening in the Earth’s core. There is evidence of a significant warming in the chimney steams of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and other spreading zones. This may explain why the oceans temperatures have begun to increase, in some areas, more rapidly than atmospheric temperatures that have traditionally been thought to have been the result of excess carbon in the air.”

It was all bad news as usual, but Amy found herself attracted to the young intellectual. He was cute in the way a dirty puppy or a teenage boy is cute; flawed, yet ingenuous, and utterly adorable.

“Do you like him?” A small, red smile was drawn on Karen’s porcelain visage. “He has strange taste in clothes,” she said resolutely, hopeful that an insipid reply would belie her geek attraction.

“Oh that reminds me!” Karen Reyes suddenly sang out with more conviviality than she had probably exuded all day.

“Did you happen to catch Dakota Fanning on Tyra yesterday?” Amy shot her mother a discerning look. Her question was absurd, of course, since Amy was always in school on Fridays.

“No I didn’t mom,” she responded flavorlessly. Her mother was so pathetic.

“Oh! You should have seen it! Tyra had Dakota Fanning model the new aluminum foil evening gown! You’ve heard of it right? It’s designed by Chanel, and it’s supposed to protect you from the radiation. It was just sooo unique. You know-functional and fashionable,” she stared the teleimage and nodded approvingly.

“She never looked better than Dakota, so thin. I really don’t know how she does it.” She was gripping the martini glass tightly again, and by the time her waxy smile had melted into a flat, red line, Amy knew she had been forgotten.

Amy turned to her old, cranky grandmother who sat in the recliner behind Karen. She was Amy’s father’s mother, and although she was also ethnically Jewish, she was a Mexican Jew. Karen had long suspected that she was something of a pagan, and likely so, since she had taken up with Oregon’s father, who was a dark, Mexican atheist.

“Hi grandma.”

“I’m not your grandma!” barked the fat, old woman spread over the recliner like a wet pancake. “The messiah is coming for me and when he does, I’ll see you all

carted one by one, into the darkest pits of your own depravity!” when she said this her bottom lip trembled allowing a string of saliva to spill over her lip and onto her blouse. The old woman didn’t notice. She just kept glaring at the back of Karen’s head. Amy felt like disgorging her lunch, which coincidentally, was next on her to do list.

“That’s not very pleasant Helen,” said Karen calmly without looking away from the latest Mid-East bombing on the teleimage. Quietly, Amy and the three bags disappeared into her bedroom, as her grandmother grumbled low Spanish curses loudly enough for anyone to hear.

Oregon Reyes

Like most nights, Oregon Reyes was late getting home from work. He had an extremely important business meeting with Lucy Higgle, the Porn Actress. Oregon hoped to direct the busty, strawberry-blonde in a reality teleimage series to be aired on Ruderman Reality Teleimage Newtork. Over a five course dinner and a bottle of champagne, Oregon Reyes hammered out the final details of and Lucy’s and his relationship as star and director. Now he just had to have his plan approved by the board of executives, including his father-in-law, chairman and CEO, Triton Ruderman. That was the piece of the puzzle that would require some strategic thinking on Oregon’s behalf, but for the moment, the opportunity for mass exposure

excited Lucy and she showed that by being friendly and giggly that night out with Oregon,

“Basically, all you’ve got to do is let me know what it is that I can do for you. Do you understand Love? If you want more camera time with your boobs, or your ass, or your gorgeous face,” Oregon placed his fingers on Lucy’s freckled chin. She smiled. Her lips were full and pink. She was young and natural and although he was old enough to be her father, he loved how it felt to have her attention. He loved the way he felt when he made her laugh; like he was still a man of 25, who could do no wrong with the girls. Yes girls! That must have been what most men saw in Lucy and why, despite that she’d only been making porn a year, she was becoming increasingly popular.

“If you want something,” he said as they strode to his BMW, and her face waned toward his. His hand found her right hip and lingered gently just above her buttocks. “Whatever it is Luce, just tell your assistants or say- ‘Oregon, get your people in here to clean my trailer’- and you got it!” I want your camera close up on my left nipple- you got it!” Lucy laughed again, soft and light as if she were a small bird. She pulled him close when they reached the car. “I want your crew to change the lighting in my bedroom,” she said playfully. He could smell the champagne on her breath, sweet and enticing. “I want your dick in my mouth,” he said making a short leap that he expected would be taken as a joke. They both chuckled. “...You got it!” She whispered with her plump, pink lips two inches from his long, wide ones. Oregon slipped his palm under her hair and pulled her head backward. Her thin,

white neck stretched like silly putty. She gasped with excitement and the corners of her mouth turned up coyly. He kissed her firmly, his taugth lips pressing against her desperately and with all the passion of a man who only loves his own self-perception. He slid a hand between her legs and Lucy trembled virginally. She embraced him deeply, as if they were long lost lovers on a deserted beach.

“Ohhh Oregon,” she purred, rolled her R’s like catwoman. “Give it to me daddy.”

Old as he was, Oregon Reyes could not resist a woman calling him “daddy-“ especially if it was a woman young enough to be his daughter. Oregon had a huge teacher/student fantasy that he had played out one million times with one thousand women. “Get in!” he commanded and shoved her onto the passenger seat. He watched her cross and uncross her legs as he drove. “Hilton Hotel Please,” he commanded in a firm voice.

“651-598-1111. Dailing now,” said the affable, female voice of the BMW’s internal computer. Oregon placed a hand on Lucy’s thigh.

“Thank you for choosing the Hilton Hotel. For English, say English,” said a computer voice that seemed tight and perfunctory, not like the BMW’s.

“English.”

“Would you like a room?”

“Yes.”

“Date?”

“Today. Now.”

“Yes, I have something available,” said the computer perfunctorily.

“Name?”

“Oregon Reyes.”

“Social Security number?” Oregon closed his eyes a moment and hoped Lucy would not memorize it.

“007-901-5558.”

“Oregon Reyes born February 9, 1995?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Room 301. Use your credit card to finalize at your suite door. Thank you for selecting the Hilton.”

A moment later, Oregon and Lucy were undressing each other with their eyes as they ran for the elevator to take them to the stark and anxious bed. Later that night, after he had left Lucy dreaming in the hotel bed, Oregon would slip quietly into the massive bed he shared with his wife Karen, and finally get some sleep.

Oregon Reyes 2

The next day, the sky was blue and the clouds had vanished completely, as it had been a hot summer all week long. Playful sunbeams danced with rainbows on the miniature, cascading waterfall on the façade of the small Asian Temple.

Ironically, the temple was actually a small massage parlor. The massage artists always providing a happy ending at least, and for Oregon, it was often much more intimate. Oregon stepped out of his car and looked at the splendid, little whorehouse approvingly.

It must be emphasized that Oregon Reyes is a man, a handsome man. Oregon Reyes is the tall, lean, bronzed gentleman with the salt and pepper hair who always wears a coy smile on his disarmingly handsome face. Not is he utterly attractive, but Oregon Reyes is a handsome man at the height of his career. He is charming, polite, educated and experienced at life. It is therefore, nearly needless to say that women and men alike could sense the brilliance, like a light suspected to lie just beyond a curtain of mystery. Success had always come easily for him. He had a magnetic quality that was so inherently natural, friends and enemies alike had reinterpreted his style to suit themselves. As early as junior high school, Oregon stood out from the flock. There aren't many six-foot, tall, fourteen year olds in Mexico, particularly those with blue eyes; that alone was enough to give him the confidence of a winner, yet unlike most winners, Oregon maintained the attitude of a player.

Oregon Plot Pitch

It was a warm, winter morning in Denver. Lucy and Oregon sat on a wall of concrete outside the massive skyscraper that was home to Ruderman Realty

Teleimage Network. Oregon was to meet with the C level executives at RRTN to pitch his idea for a new pilot. He fancied bringing Lucy along could help sway the board in his favor. Lucy, ate a hotdog, while Oregon emphasized to that she remain sexy, flirty and otherwise silent Above all, the buxom blonde was to show special attention to Triton Ruderman.

“I like the outfit kitten. It’s conservative, yet it hugs those sumptuous curves,” he lauded.

Even in mature clothing, the 23 year-old Lucy reminded him of an orange kitten, and he knew Triton Ruderman loved kittens.

Triton and his 63 year-old wife Beatrice, had five of cats. The cats were so spoiled that the couple felt obligated to keep two of the five apart at all times. The result was that they had to run from one room to another chasing and rearranging the cats every time they wanted to open a door in the house. The cats moaned like whores whenever they wanted something, and from cuddle to catnip, they always got it. Oregon despised seeing people constantly run behind their animals, tending to their individual idiosyncrasies as if they were human. It made him wonder who had actually been domesticated; the pet or the master. And he suspected, however ill perceived, that Lucy’s presence in the board room that day would answer that question.

“Hi, am I late?” devon Marriam asked as he approached the pair. He glanced at his watch nervously.

“No, no you’re not late at all, Lucy and I, we just had a, uh....meeting shortly before this.

Devon Marriam, may I introduce you to Lucy Higgle, our star. And Lucy this is Devon Marriam, our award winning, Harvard educated scientist,” introduced Oregon with a flourish.

“Actually, it was Oxford Oregon,” corrected Devon.

“Harvard, Oxford, whatever! Now,” said Oregon quickly before Lucy and Devon could finish their hellos. “I trust you have reviewed the prospectus in detail and you have no objections?”

“Yes, it looks fine, as long as my laboratory is private and fully funded as per our agreement, I haven’t any objections to your proposal.”

“Excellent!” cried Oregon. “Let’s go in.”

They stepped off the elevator on the 76th floor, also known as the executive etage, where the chiefs discussed future projects. The regal and masculine hall was draped in burgundy and cognac, like a secret den or a woodsy lodge. Lucy silently decided no women had been involved in the planning of its décor. There were pictures of Triton and other steely-eyed men staring out from their bronze framed, boxed tombs of dried oil and acrylic. Each of them wore a small, toothless smile of ample satisfaction, There was even a picture of Oregon decorating the mahogany walls, although there were no other directors’ photos among the executive elites.

As she passed under the steely-eyed gaze of the founders, Lucy felt her nerves flare and a knot in her stomach began to tighten and unravel again and again like the wringing of a wet rag. She began to feel nervous, as if everyone would realize she was just a white trash girl, from Arkansas with straight teeth and a buxom rack. Perhaps it would have been of some comfort to know that everyone was already aware of this fact, but of course, she didn't realize that they already knew.

The usual suspects were already waiting in the boardroom and when Oregon and his stars arrived. Oregon's father-in-law and RRTN President and CEO Triton Ruderman, Vice President, Alex Ruderman, CFO Fred Nadler, the creative director, Denise Mitchell, and Clifton Gains, a lawyer and program advisor who had been with RRTN since the beginning were already waiting.

"Oregon, come in, good to see you boy!" called out a deep, twangy voice that sounded like a Southern, Mall Santa. Triton Ruderman, CEO and senior chair on the Network, stood at the far end of the conference table. He wore a beige three-piece suit and on his feet he wore pointy cowboy boots. He eyed Lucy and Devon with interest. Oregon ran to the man dutifully. "Triton! Good to see you!" They embraced heartily, but awkwardly, as Triton was twice as wide as Oregon, and half as tall. "How is, Beatrice?" Triton coughed and the smell of peppermint filled the air for a moment. The older man embraced his chin, "B," he muttered, caressing his chin,

“she’s well, very well, she’s gone to a retreat with the cats.” He eyes were fixated on Lucy’s cleavage.

“With the cats?” Oregon repeated with the hope that he had misheard Triton.

“Yes, we’re hoping some therapeutic pampering will do them well.”

“Them Sir?”

“Them yes, them cats and Beatrice.” This he said matter-of-factly, as if it were obvious to everyone in the room. Suddenly his voice became warm and fast. “Who is this heavenly creature hiding behind you?” he cooed, sliding toward Lucy. The executives craned their necks, each curious to disrobe the mystery woman with the massive cleavage.

Lucy blushed and smiled graciously. Triton picked up her hand without asking and stroked it like a kitten. Inside himself Oregon was laughing at the dog and pony show he had orchestrated, but outside he said:

“Triton this is Lucy Higglar. I-“

“Shh.” Triton put his hand over Lucy’s other hand.

“Welcome to Ruderman Reality Teleimage Network Lucy. I’m Triton Ruderman. I started this place.”

“Thank you Triton.”

“You are a fox,” he added quickly and smirked slyly.

To this Lucy giggled and purred catlike, as was her way.

“Do we even need to talk about business?” Although he was serious, Oregon chuckled, as if he were joking.

“Yes, let’s get down to business.” Alex commanded impatiently. He was a thin man, with thinning hair and black eyes that looked like dark, black beads. Everyone quickly sat down, except Triton, who helped Lucy into his chair, then meandered lackadaisically to his seat at the head of the table.

“Let us begin then,” Alex announced and sat. Everyone opened the project plan. Oregon quickly jumped out of his chair and said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, thank you for meeting to discuss my latest idea for a Ruderman Reality Teleimage Network series. As you know, my last series, grossed more ad revenue than any other RRTN program in history. So, it is with great honor, that I present Infinity Buggle: A Reality Series Staring Lucy Higgle!”

The conference room lights faded and an image appeared, first a logo, then a cast. Lucy was centripetal. The strawberry blonde hair, the soft, white flesh contrasted against the many glistening bronze bodies in the images. It looked as if they were in pain or perhaps they were a part of some twisted, Roman orgy. A man’s energetic and coercive voice began to tout the campaign for the series.

“What happens when a hot, Vegas, porn star and a Nobel Prize winning Scientist become roommates in Vegas? I whole lot of drama! Get ready for the most salacious, most provocative, most hilarious reality series ever.”

“nice huh?, ” whispered Oregon to Devon as the pre-pilot continued in the dark.

“Geeky huh?” whispered Devon. Oregon continued listening.

“Lucy Higgle, the sensuous, adult film actress with the banging body and one serious passion for her work is coming to prime time and has brought along a few of her friends, Alexis Saxis, MarcoPolo and Debbie Danforth. ” all of the executives were watching the teleimage intently.

My friends like to sleep over. We have a lot of slumber parties. Sometimes things get a little crazy,” said Lucy laughing. Lucy and her friends were dancing on the tables in their underwear.

“But Lucy’s got a new roommate, Devon Marriam, and he’s not exactly in her circle.

Devon appeared alone, refined and genuine. “The scientific community expected a .5%, global, temperature increase over five years. What we are experiencing worldwide us much closer to 2%. We don’t know when it might stop. My goal is to immediately find the source of the unexpected increase in temperature increase worldwide so that we can begin to address the issue.”

Devon Marriam and his colleague, Jack French, are both Harvard educated scientists, and winners of the Nobel Prize in Climatologic Science” said the announcer as Devon entered the front door. He was wearing his oxford, orange sweater and tweed jacket. With him were two other geeky types. The three of them stared at the party of porn stars tabling on tabletops in amazement. Triton let out a soft chuckle and Oregon knew he had his series.

Production

strike while the iron is hot. In some ways it was a dirty business, and despite their millions, Trenton and the boys knew how to get dirty. Devon Marriam arrived at the set in the early morning hours, long before the others. He wanted some alone time with his new environment before the other participants arrived.

The capacious, three-story sprawl sat on a hill-top, just underneath a much larger, palatial estate. When Devon entered the black iron gate that decorated the driveway entrance, a black, uniformed guard appeared.

“May I help you?” inquired the guard authoritatively from the top of the staircase.

“I’m Devon Marriam,” he declared proudly. “I’m going to be on this show. I’m going to live in this house.” The guard’s reply was about as black as his figure appeared in front of the pale, yellow light filling the doorway behind him. From inside the Smoky Mountain bungalow. The guard didn’t speak or move. Devon reached into his pocket, and to retrieve his invitational papers to move into the house, but suddenly the guard shouted from the top of the porch. “Don’t you move motherfucker! Don’t you move or I will blow your sneaky ass away! “A big, black, steel gun was pointed at Devon.

Devon froze. IT was true he had arrived at 6am, but he hadn't expected this kind of hostility. The man approached with the gun at arms length. When I stood close enough for Devon to make out his facial features in the dim light, he said, "I've got my papers right here in this pocket. I'm Dr. Devon Marriam." The guard, a 7 ft., overweight, Black man, pushed the weapon closer to Devon's face and snatched the papers.

The papers were unique, because really, they weren't papers at all. As per Devon's request, the invitation was baby soft, organic fiber that felt like stiff linen. As soon as the guard's thick, callused fingertips brushed touched the thick, soft, texture of the paper, he knew he had made a mistake. They had told him the invitation would not be regular paper. The guard casually pulled his gun down, yet kept a stern eye on Devon, who was relived, just to have the handgun pointed in his direction. The guard read the hand-painted, gold letters that spelled out the location of their new home.

"You, Devon Marriam, are the honorable guest of Ruderman Reality Newtork and are cordially invited to join us at 8am at One hundred twelve East Derwick Blvd."

"Well!" said the giant with the gun, it's a pleasure to meet you sir." Devon's eyebrows pulled into a crooked line. After being threatened with a glock and called him a sneaky son-of-a-bitch, he was surprised the man was saying this now. Having a gun barrel 18 inches from your face is not something one forgets, like someone borrowed your favorite shirt without asking. Devon had nearly wet himself from the

shock. Devon realized his leg could have been soaking wet on the first day of filming. This was very serious.

“I apologize about the gun,” the man was saying as he unlocked the door. There’s a gang of sneaky kids around here stealing equipment. I thought you was one of em’.

“Ha! Ha!” laughed Devon and the guard chuckled. Devon was led into a palatial, outdoor corridor filled with tropical plants and trees that smelled of refreshing morning rain.

“You’re the first one to get here,” said the guard in a voice that resonated like an echo in a barrel. Devon’s eyebrow raised slightly. “You can get your breakfast the Green Room-“ he paused and pointed his massive index finger at a set of French Doors, “-dataway.” The guard placed his hands evenly on his belt and rocked on his heel a moment looking curiously at Devon who couldn’t have been more uncomfortable unless his leg was leaking. He had a fair suspicion why the guard was eyeing him so curiously; he was wondering what his story was, why his hair looked so fuzzy, and how this unlikely looking candidate had become a renowned scholar by the age of 28. There was an awkward silence. Finally the guard chuckled quietly began to turn off. “The rest of them should be here in about an hour, and I’m Clark, you’s be seeing me around here quite a bit.”

“Thank you Clark,” said Devon, but he was already gone, just another dark shadow disappearing into the thick, wet mist that filled the courtyard.

Devon spent the time before everyone else arrived checking out his new home. The design crew had decorated and customized the interior of the house with an unusual amalgamation of gaudy and classic. The house featured a fully modern kitchen with giant stainless steel appliances and an island countertop with four barstools like rocked when Devon tried sitting on one. The tables in the dining and living room were cold, heavy steel, inlaid with frosted glass and metal piping that resembled silver thread streaking the frosted glass. A giant Teleimage screen was laid into the near wall so that everyone could watch films or reality Teleimage. All of this was very impressive, but it was, without question the study, which was the scientist's favorite. Devon certainly recognized the difference between a study and a lab. A lab was cold, pungent and always illuminated with stark white light. This study was warm and dark

The director, when he arrived that morning, was pleased with the efforts of the crew. The house was hip, eco-friendly, intelligent and most of all, sexy. The rooms were lined in plush synthetic velvet (since real velvet aided in the persistence of allergies). The beds were heavy and masculine as if they were designed for sybarite pleasure and salacious discovery. Rather than doors, the bathrooms featured screens that depicted sensual images of sumptuous rainforests and fresh water lakes. There were no pictures of the Ocean: Everyone was afraid of her raging majesty and the engulfing obscurity that diminished the shoreline a bit more with each passing day. In general, the world wanted to ignore the increasingly relentless ocean that made it impossible to forget that it, not humankind, dominated Earth.

But our scientist, when in his laboratory/study would never forget, for it was all around him, as it was to be and was written into his contract with Ruderman Reality Teleimage. And as part of his contract, our scientist had insisted upon a fully modern workspace, equipped with a 24/7/365 satellite geological monitoring system that boasted real-time streaming digital of the Oceans, the geological poles, the plates, areas of heavy moisture, severe drought, and the weather patterns were also alive on the screens that illuminated each wall in the study without interruption. It was an independent researcher's living dream!

Production began on the set and Oregon couldn't have been more pleased with dynamics in the household from the start. In addition to Devon and Lucy, the house had four other castmates. Devon and Lucy had both been allowed a sidekick. In Devon's case, it was an assistant, Walter Chin, a half AmAlexan half Chinese, first year, PhD candidate from Colorado University. Walter was 22, but he appeared at first glance to be not more than 14, for he was short in stature, and slightly diffident in nature, and for some reason his clothing always fit slightly too big, as if his entire wardrobe had been selected for someone else. Yet, despite Walter's distant persona, he had a humble confidence that was supported by wealth of knowledge on scientific facts, subjects and theories. His knowledge of astronomical physics was impressive. He could site the location or orbit of at least 200 bodies in the celestial orbit. His knowledge was often memorized information, providing dates, orbits, authors, weight and molecular data, rather than insightful contributions. Thus, he

was ideal assistant for Devon, and Walter adored his role and fawned over Devon obsequiously, always waiting for an order, a need and hand.

Walter served as comical relief when any women were around. Suddenly this confident, master of information became a klutzy fool whenever beautiful women were present. Not like Devon, who seemed virtually impervious to feminine meandering. Always the gentleman, Devon never offered poignant observations of others' sexuality, he simply pretended not to notice. Lucy had selected Monica Lair, another porn actress, as her companion. Monica was older than Lucy than perhaps, six years and she had passed her prime without reaching the success that Lucy had already. Still, in all credit to Monica, she was a very attractive, athletic brunette, and her sisterly advice and concern for Lucy was touching in a twisted way Oregon knew his audience would love. The girls often made sexual advances at one another, or shared a deep kiss in public, if both were intoxicated, and no suitable men were around, they might spend the evening in the same bed.

Lucy and Monica often threw parties at the house, filling it with a sexually charged atmosphere that sometimes brought Devon and Walter out of the laboratory. It was the classic fish-out-of-water scene the first time that happened. Devon and Walter were lured out of the lab by the sound of loud, yet groovy music. Outside, they found a BBQ and pool party in full swing. Booze was flowing, powder was abundant, and girls were stripping and jumping into the pool. Although Devon and Walter had been

to the occasional magna cum laude celebration, they never been in a situation quite so frank. The scene was like a prelude to an orgy. Oregon was thrilled.

“I think we should go back to the study,” Devon whispered without moving his lips as he watched an unknown woman strip down to a thong and jump into the pool. Lucy and Moica ran up to them with a throng of horny people behind them.

“Devon! Walter! You made it! Chirped Lucy happily, then she turned to the crowd. “Everyone, these are the kings our kingdom, the prices of our castle! These are my housemates, the scientists!”

Everyone in the crowd cheered and quickly besieged Devon and Walter, dissecting them and shoving shots into their mouths while pulling their clothes off. Oregon had a hilarious shot from that night where Walter is on his third shot, the girls have been crowded around him for twenty minutes, and when he drops his pants to throw him into the pool, a giant erection is exposed. Later, Lucy and Monica would say on camera that Walter was evidence that a man’s physical size couldn’t predict the size of his package. Oregon knew he had a winner on his hands. The affableness of the characters and the combination of personalities was just too comical. The stark contrast between the ingenious, Noel Prize Winning scientist and his recondite comrade and the colorful, buoyant, salacious Lucy and Monica was like corruption and innocence. It wouldn’t be denied. Overall, the situation was harmonious because Devon had his private laboratory, and the girls were obviously in control of the house since the boys were so agreeable. Yet it was Devon, who in every scene, who at every party, was the cynosure of all eyes. People realized that

they were in the company of genius so natural, that it hadn't misappropriated other important qualities such manners, charisma, integrity and wit.

He hoped this guy wasn't a crazy rapist.

KAREN REYES

Wearing a pink, silk robe, Karen Reyes sat on the satin chair in front of the large, antique vanity, as she always did in the evenings. Her nightly, beauty regime was like a ritual, something to remind her that the world was still turning, a time for her to spend alone and examine herself thoroughly, and whether she liked it or not, she relished in it. She always began by erasing the remains of the day; the layers of blusher, pressed powder, of matte-liquid foundation that covered her face like a thin layer of ceran wrap. The brown shadow, charcoal mascara, streaked away until she sat stared at an starkly authentic image of herself. Karen noticed her skin appeared thinner, fine lines spread outward from her eyes, forehead and mouth and there were tiny freckles and age spots that weren't visible when she wore the painted visage.

“It’s time for another chemical peel,” she whispered tenderly to her aged reflection.

“I read that chemical peels are dangerous. They eat the skin away and after awhile there’s no skin left to peel,” retorted a flat voice. Karen Reyes’ neck snapped back sharply. Amy’s well proportioned frame leaned causally inside the doorframe. Karen returned to the mirror, expressionless and continued with her beauty ritual. Amy hovered beside the vanity watching her mother apply a thick, brown mask that smelled oddly of black tar and oranges. The thick paste was heavy and globbed together rather than spreading smoothly. When she finished she resembled a raccoon.

“What’s that?” questioned Amy, coiling from the pungent odor.

“It’s a licorice root mask,” replied her mother coolly. Karen Reyes didn’t like being pestered during her alone time, especially by her ungrateful children.

“If it’s licorice why does it smell like shit?” Amy replied and moved father from her mother, where she could finger the contoured glass jars and bottles of creams and colognes on the table top.

“If it smells so badly, that’s all the more reason for you to get out and mind your own business,” Karen addressed sharply, her pale, blue eyes shinning out from the dark mask like blue ice. But rather than capitulate into apology, Amy simply laughed with a jovial amusement that Karen took for irreverence. Amy uncapped one of the jars and slowly put her nose to it.

“You look a little nuts with that stuff on your face.” Karen sighed. She was losing patience with the girl who had obviously come merely to annoy her.

“Get out Amy!” ordered Karen, her soft voice suddenly louder.

“All I’m saying is it’s weird mom. It’s like you’re obsessed. All you ever do is fawn over yourself. It’s like you’re not even my mom; you’re like this twenty-something alien. In fact, you’re beginning to actually resemble an alien. An intense wave of anger jolted her and a flood of warmth suddenly tingled in her face and neck. She felt the mask begin to soften. Karen angrily snatched the jar from Amy’s hands.

“How dare you!” Karen hissed from inside the dark mask, exposing her flake white teeth.

“How dare you judge me! I’m your mother! I gave birth to you; fed you; raised you! You only exist because of me! Me!” Amy recoiled from surprise, yet giggled gaily.

“I’m not a baby anymore mom.”

“Damn right you’re not you little twat!” Exclaimed Mrs. Reyes with an elegant flourish of the palm that surmised Amy’s attire was inconsistent with her claim. Amy gasped dramatically. Her mother had never called her anything so vile before! Sure dummy, stupid, bitch, or spoiled brat, but never twat, and with such conviction! But she had. Now, the exceedingly composed Karen Reyes was seething, her breath sounded like faint cat hisses and the mask was melting with the beads of sweat that had suddenly appeared at her hairline. Mrs. Reyes advanced toward Amy, and Amy,

having never seen this side to her mother, stepped backward clumsily, nervously, in fear.

“You’re far from a baby you condescending little bitch! In fact, you’ve already begun to saunter into physical decay. You’re getting fat, and before long, those big, beautiful breasts will droop, your chin will spread, your thighs will sag. You’ll watch in horror as your entire known method of survival is eroded piecemeal, line by line; crease by crease; freckle by freckle...until you’re bitter, angry and afraid! People will treat you differently because you look differently on the outside, but you won’t feel differently.”

She suddenly turned back to Amy, “What do you know?” she demanded hotly.

“You’ve never even been on love. You’ve never had to sit back in silence and keep your sanity for decades as your very own husband is rewarded for aging. He is treated with more respect, more attention and adulation from everyone from women to colleagues to strangers. Meanwhile, you in contrast, you lose everything that ever meant anything tangible! Everything that set you apart from the other five billion girls in the world eventually you will lose and then you’ll know what I’ve lived through, and you won’t be judging me then, because you’ll be one million times worse!”

Karen raised her right arm dramatically and sauntered backward as cocky as if she had just demounted a horse.

“I’ll never be worse! I’ll never be as fucked up as you!” Amy screamed six inches from her mother’s face. You’re jealous of how good looking dad is! That’s

pathetic! No wonder he's cheating on you!" Karen's pale, white hand slipped out and smacked Amy's golden face. Amy had not been slapped by her mother in years. Amy cupped her cheek as hot tears welled in her eyes.

"Damn you! You lie! You lie to yourself! You're already worse! You think you are so smart, slick as oil, locking yourself in your room all day long with those big shopping bags from Niemans and Bergdorfs. It's funny that I never find any charges from those lovely shops when I pay your credit card bills. All I see are restaurants, gas stations, spas and transportation. Where, I've asked myself time and time again, do all those clothes come from? Where Amy?"

Amy was rigid, frozen in place. Her wide, red mouth stiffly parted like an open window in on a frosty, winter's night. Mrs. Reyes interpreted the heated silence as an omission of guilt and scoffed menacingly at her daughter, who was seething with the embarrassment of a coward caught in a lie. Rather than acknowledge her indiscretions and admit to the secrets which were already revealed, Amy, like so many criminals who cannot speak to their own cowardly reflection, hide behind the worn cloak of secrecy she had been shrouded by suspicion and invective.

"You don't know what you're talking about crazy bitch!" Close to tears and with her ivory complexion colored burnt sanguine, Amy shouted out the words vehemently, but her vicious attempt to conceal the truth was desperate and pathetic at best. Mrs. Reyes chortled gleefully and returned to the vanity.

“You live in a fantasy world Amy. You’re twenty years old you’re already a pathetic, soulless, shell of a human being.”

“Just like my mother,” Amy hissed bitterly.

“Well,” she said slowly, the sarcasm oozing from her vernacular, “at least you know where you got it; it’s hereditary.” The spot on Amy that had appeared in the doorway a few minutes before was not the cheek-streaked, tomato-face, glaring out from what was obviously a very fragile shield of emotional armor. Then the tears came. They poured down from the pink eyes and burnt cheeks like a sudden, thunderous rainfall. Mrs. Reyes, immune and victorious, turned her attention to the mirror and continued to exfoliate.

Mucus ran out of Amy’s nose into her open mouth as she shouted hysterically through her tears.

“I hate you! I hate you!”

“Blah, blah,” said Karen. The girl erupted from the room blindly. In the doorway, she smacked dead into Oregon, who had just come home from work. Upon seeing her father, Amy burst into a second monsoon of tears before breaking past him and disappearing down the hall.

“What the hell was that all about?” he demanded of his wife, who was apparently unperturbed and seated calmly at her vanity smoothing a translucent substance into her forehead with soft fingertips.

“*Karen* why did our daughter just run out of here like a bat out of hell?”

“Your daughter is a prostitute,” Karen said flatly.

“My daughter is a what? Oh cut the crap Karen! Our daughter is not a prostitute!”

“Oh really,” Karen suddenly stood and faced him. Then you must give her tens of thousands of dollars cash regularly.”

“Karen, what is this crazy shit you’re saying to me. What the fuck?”

“Well if you don’t give her the money then she’s getting it somewhere else because her credit cards don’t reflect her wardrobe purchases.”

“What did she say when you asked her?”

“She denied it.”

“She told her no, I’m not a prostitute.”

“Not exactly in those words.”

“Karen, I don’t understand what your problem is. If Amy said she got the items legitimately then she did.”

“So you believe what our daughter says?”

“Yes.” Answered Oregon.

“She also mentioned that you are having an affair.”

Oregon stopped short. This, he hadn’t expected. He figured she must be bluffing; trying to leverage her position to fish out information. He responded slowly.

“If I believed that Amy said that, which I don’t, the first thing I would do would be to sit that girl down and ask her why she’s making up stories just to upset

her mother. Were you fighting with her? You were fighting with her right?" Karen nodded. "See, she was just trying to hurt you back."

"I don't think so Oregon. I think she said it because it's true. I wouldn't be the first time." Karen lit a Djarum and smoked it through the stiff, licorice mask.

"Karen don't start," Oregon said and walked into the closet. Karen followed him.

"Don't start? Don't start? Don't tell me not to start after you were caught banging your assistant on you lunch our!"

Oregon froze. It was true, he had been seen by a group of colleagues living the casino hotel with Monica recently. I didn't know who didn't have the decency to keep the secret from Karen.

Karen sensed his guilt.

"Yes, that's right! You're guilty! Karen index finger waved at Oregon, who overwhelmed, threw his hands in the air.

"I don't fucking care anymore Karen. I really don't. Yeah, I'm seeing someone." Karen didn't make a sound, she just stared, steel-eyed at her husband.

She didn't blink.

"Now I have to worry about HIV and STD's." Karen announced.

"No you don't anymore. I'm leaving you."

Amy went into the kitchen and removed from the refrigerator, the milk, peanut butter and Polamer All Fruit Blueberry fruit spread. She sat at the kitchen

table alone, shoving the dull knife into the peanut butter first, and then the blueberry spread. Each time she licked the knife stuck with peanut butter and dripping with sweet jam she closed her eyes as if to taste the flavor more. This was her therapy. Dipping into the family pot, spreading her germs about the jar and reigning in the comforting flavor of childhood. She heard doors slamming upstairs. Her parents were fighting, probably because she told mom dad was having an affair. Poor dad. Oh well, Amy didn't care, he was having affairs.

The fight with his wife set Oregon Reyes loose on the open highway in his classic BMW. With his ears burning from the Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil*, Oregon plowed through the ran, far, far away from home and the sound of Karen's miserable, fake voice. He hated fighting with her. In fact, merely talking to that delusional shell of a woman frustrated Oregon to the point that they barely spoke at all. He knew also, that frequently she went well out of her way to antagonize him. For years she would prance about in her underclothes, making display of perfectly sculpted legs, or newly crafted bum, she owned the finest set of breasts that money could buy. Early on in their relationship and even after the children came, he couldn't help but become aroused at the sight of her and the perfect body, despite the grotesquely insecure, fraction of a person that lived inside it. But, she had used her million-dollar body to taunt him, to cross and uncross the milky, cream-colored thighs, then deny him the indelible rights that should be afforded to every husband.

Stoically, she would yawn and boorishly say that she was too tired to satisfy him because she had exercised so long with Alex, her personal trainer.

This knowledge, that she saved her energy for other men, that she revealed in patronizing him, that she cared only that he satisfy her desire for compliments and prolific adulation, had turned Oregon sour toward his wife. He quickly learned that he could enjoy himself more with different women, women who did not reject him, did not taunt him and did not humiliate him when they were alone. These women wanted to be with him, they visited their trainers so that they would be firm and excited when they saw him, rather than tired and lazy. There had been many women Oregon had possessed during their marriage. Oregon went to Monica's that night.

A few nights later, Oregon's father in law had pulled him back, reminded him that this was a family enterprise and that it could not be compromised by the dissolution of his daughter's marriage.

Old man Ruderman had asked to meet him at Houstons, a restaurant the family owned and honestly, their favorite eatery. In a dark, corner booth drinking a Manhattan and slicing a slab of bloody meat, Triton Ruderman looked earnestly at Oregon and said. "We know about the affair, with that actress," there was a long pause while Oregon chewed his well-done steak thoroughly. "Karen told her Beatrice of course, and me, she said you told her you want to be with this girl, this Monica."

Oregon's neck snapped back and he finally locked eyes with Triton. "I think I love her," Admitted Oregon cautiously. Triton's long face shrunk into a tight frown. "Oregon, from one man who has had his fair share of women, to another; you can not leave your family. It's bad for the kids, it's bad for Karen and it bad for you." Oregon dropped his fork on the plate and stared at a table across the dining room. Triton continued earnestly.

"It's also bad for the network, because we promote ourselves as the last family owned and operated Teleimage network. It would completely tarnish our family image."

Triton paused to chew a hunk of rare meat.

"Karen I and, we're just not on the same page anymore," said Oregon in an empathetic tone that he thought could help Triton understand his position. Triton's steel eyes turned on him sharply.

"Not on the same page? Not on the same page boy?" When he raised his voice his nostrils flared open. "Do you think Beatrice and I are still on the same page?"

We're not even in the same fucking book- and haven't been in thirty years! That's doesn't mean I leave her and embarrass our whole family. We have a reputation to uphold, and an admirable legacy to preserve for our descendants. You may only live one generation, but your name lives on forever."

"They say the world won't even be here in a few years anyway so I don't know how much that matters." Oregon defended lamely. Now Triton dropped his

fork and it fell to the plate with a loud clank. Several people in the dining room turned to look.

“I’m going to pretend that I didn’t just hear that pitiful, cop-out statement exit from your lips.” Said Triton in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper. “There have always been, in every generation since the dawn of mankind, nay-sayers and doomsday preachers. Yet, that doesn’t mean we stop being our best, stop living to our potential or stop setting the stage for our children and grandchildren to surpass our accomplishments. When I talked to Karen, I didn’t know what to think about what was going on. Now I see. You’ve got shit on the brain son. Get it together!” he hissed causing his wide nostrils to flare out even as he was relaxing on the back on the chair and slowly sipping his Manhattan.

“I see this family moving in the political direction soon, so there will be no leaving Karen, now or ever. It’s fine to get out and enjoy some pussy from time to time, but just keep it away from home, keep it out of the press and everyone will be just fine.” Oregon stared at his plate: Brown steak, bright, green beans, golden, yellow potatoes: The presentation; perfection, the vegetables; colorful and stunning, the meat: fleshy and wet. Yet, he had lost his appetite for perfection. It was his belly really. The realization that he would never be able to do what truly pleased him, made Oregon feel queasy. Self-abnegation would be bonded to him forever like the chains of matrimony.

“Go away for a while at the end of this project,” said Triton warmly. “Take a few months for sabbatical and get it out of your system. Also, break it off with

Monica, it's getting too hot with her." They finished their meal and that was the last Oregon ever said to Karen about leaving her.

The DISCOVERY

One night, after they had been at the house about 6 weeks, Devon remained working in his study throughout the night, long after the roommates had all gone to bed. He couldn't sleep with so much data left to analyze. There were hundreds of reports to investigate, each from a different team of scientists from around the globe. Oceanographers, physicists, oil spectators, even ornithologists had contributed to the data, each hoping to contribute their mind blowing findings on geological change with the community. Astronomers had made interesting observations with the new Jupiter orbiter. As the robot sped back to Earth toward the end of its mission, it captured hundreds of the same heat composite photographs that it had used to track the calorific activity of the giant, red planet.

What Nasa received back from the space machine, was a series of unusual and geologically alarming calorific patterns in the middle of the oceans where warmth was non-existent. The camera watched Devon as intently as he inspected the photos; meticulously, eagerly. Both he and it sought to expose something. The world was watching, hinged on the brink of a remarkable and exigent discovery,

with the world's hope poured into this one man's, our scientist's, dream. He was the star; after all, he had upstaged a porn actress.

That's when a soft rap was heard at the study door. Devon surprised by the disturbance; he assumed everyone was asleep, as they should be. Painfully, Devon tore himself away from the data to answer the door. Amy stood in from of him wearing a long Hawiian print skirt and a tiny t-shirt that read GROTESQUE. She held a small, round container between her palms.

"Well hello," Devon said to her.

"Hello." An awkward silence followed.

"What's that?" Devon asked pointing a long, slender finger at the Tupperware container.

"This?" she toyed coyly. Devon smiled insincerely and replied with detectable irritation.

"What is it?" he asked again in an effort to be polite. He didn't enjoy being disturbed for nonsense.

"A turkey dinner complete with stuffing, gravy, and cranberry relish. I brought it for you, from my grandparents' home. Don't worry, it's Kosher." Realizing his irascible temperament, Devon felt his checks color sanguine and quickly redirected his gaze to the safer location of his socked feet. It wasn't very funny, but a burst of laughter suddenly erupted between them, loud and quick like a sudden, fiery thunder bolt.

“In 3 days, Earth’s poles will reverse, causing a cataclysm as such that the oceans, the continents, the skies, and all life on Earth, will be tossed like a salad in the violent rearrangement of everything on Earth. Ocean’s will obliterate continents, they will swallow the globe before they calm, and they Earth settles into another ice age. It is almost certain, the no land animals will survive the pole reverse.” –Devon Marriot

“We are all slowly dying from carbon monoxide poisoning. Within a few days every land animal on earth will succumb to death, the result of slow, ineluctable deprivation of oxygen to the brain.” Our forefathers obviously didn’t realize this consequence of global warming. They’ve sentenced us all to death! –Devon Marriot

I would find was fairly surreal.

POST DISCOVERY

An hour after Devon’s discovery, Oregon, blinded by the shock of the ominous episode, stumbled aberrantly up Denver’s Avner Avenue. It was shortly after 1:00pm, and the streets were still crowded with business folk out at their favorite salad shop of sushi hut. A sharp sensation suddenly pierced the nerves on the right side of his head, stabbing at his temple like incisive, surgical tools. Agonizingly, he cupped his temple and felt the muscle twitch, bold and slow. Oregon

felt himself needed to sit down. He found a lonely park bench near a large, water fountain and planted himself there, damp and disheveled, to curse and castigate himself. His long, greasy fingers pulled through the shinny, thick, locks again and again.

This can't be possible. His own, firm voice said determinedly . But then there was prick in his chest, something that didn't hurt, but that felt heavy, ominous, like his heart would stop beating.

It had been years since he had seen Blanca. Her full name was Rosa Blanca Hernandez and he had known her since the 8th grade, when she sat beside him in their little classroom in Arjula, Mexico. Oregon struggled to remember the precise moment that they initially met when he joined the small AmAlexan Academy in the small town just north of Mexico City. His childhood was a hazy smudge of baseball pitches, school dances, and homemade fried ice cream running like an endless reel of film, always turning, but never capturing those seamless layers of transparent memories. Yet, despite the translucency of the past, his vision of her now after twenty years time, was suddenly as indelible as the East Indian Henna she would use to tattoo her hands. The straight, dark hair that had never been cut, the smooth golden skin, the slightly large and imperfect nose that had once caused his mother to question if she had Jewish relatives. Her voice floated back to him as soft, light laughter reminiscent of toiling bells. He remembered the giant, brown eyes, the tiny, pink mouth, and the skinny legs that ran fast, fast enough to get a poor girl from Los

Lobos into the AmAlexa Academy with the children of doctors, professors and filmmakers.

He recalled how she had impressed him early on. Not only was she a track star, outperforming even the males in competition, but during football and basketball season she was positioned on the cheer squad. Undoubtedly his first, young love, Blanca had received a track scholarship to USC, but had instead followed him to the lower ranked Santa Clara, because she was too afraid to be alone in the states. And although in contrast, Oregon was excited and uninhibited by the new direction his life was taking, he was also relieved to have a familiar face in the crowd, a friend by his side, a lover in his arms.

Oregon, who had earned a baseball scholarship from the small, private university, began training with the team freshman year. For the first two years Oregon served primarily as a bench warmer, Jerry Waratch, the senior pitcher dominated the mound.

