

Urgency:  
An Anthology of Short Stories

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Kaitlyn Lansing

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[www.kaitlynlansing.com](http://www.kaitlynlansing.com)

To Radomir Quis, my father

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## I

### Microscope for the Microcosmic

*We made love with such urgency.*

I let it sit there, waiting in anticipation for the phrase that fell from my lips to rise again. But it just wouldn't. My mind tried scraping at the edges of this stanza, this line, this filled *ditch* where the letters ran all jumbled together. It was impenetrable, as this sentence lay embedded in all the structures of my brain at once. A memory. A fantasy. I couldn't tell which one it was anymore.

I tried to resuscitate my memories of the woman that I had fallen in love with but the memories just wouldn't come alive. "Huh," I mumbled, picking at the loose thread coming from my boxers.

Pacing back and forth, trying to remember, I stopped mid-way between the living room and the kitchen of my home – a home with a white picket fence, and a room designated to sex for a basement.

I provided all of that for her – the *real* American dream. She had shelter, food, clothes, and money – anything she wanted, I gave to her. But being a practicing physician was not easy. I was busy and preoccupied writing prescriptions more than I was able to write sonnets for her. Maybe that is what had driven her away.

But now I knew I couldn't get her back. My little girl had grown old and sour. She left me a decade ago. This story is about her.

\*\*\*

Peeling down the wrinkled stockings, Rebecca revealed what looked like parchment-colored skin to all the men in the room. Her exhibitionism knew no bounds, for she then began to shake off her dress as well. One by one, she unfastened, shed, unbuttoned, pulled, yanked off any piece of fabric that had made her decent. She was not a whore. She was a goddess – pulling all men into her orbit as she walked around them, licking her lips until the most vibrant part of her left was her hair. It was a fiery red that burned the eyes of her lovers. She whipped it around, a python reaching out to bite its victims one after another. Hissing, and pulling the red snakeskin around her body she let them touch her. Men violated her every orifice, because she loved the attention.

I met Rebecca at a friend's house. The friend was married and I knew they were swingers. They met with other strangers in the house who were roleplaying their way to the bedroom at an alarming rate. It kept their relationship alive, I suppose. Rebecca looked like one of the youngest girls there that night but her eyes told me that this wasn't her first time.

She naturally graced us with her petit breasts which were not overwhelming at all. Rebecca grabbed my hand and lifted it to fondle one, my body throbbed and I ached for her love. But in an instant, she threw my hand off and made her way toward another man of larger stature. His suit was black, glasses round, and mustache well-groomed. Along with wanting attention, it

seemed like she also gravitated toward the money.

But I wanted her, *urgently*. I wanted her sex. I wanted her power. I wanted her confidence. I wanted her deviance. I wanted her smell, taste, touch, anything, everything, *more*. *Now*.

Yet, Rebecca wouldn't let me get any closer – she teased me all night. Until finally, when that evening came to a close, I asked her a single question. “Will you come home with me?”

“Well, I don't see why not,” she said. “The party certainly hasn't ended for me.”

She grabbed her things and began replacing all the different fabrics that had stayed off for the evening. Her parchment-colored skin was newly filled with writing from her lovers. Some had written in red, others in blue, green, and even purple. It gave her an unhealthy-looking glow. But to me, she looked divine.

I took her forearm and brought her to my most intimate room. The night was endless as we breathed into one another. Her sinewy arms wrapped around my torso as I pressed myself into her. The heat filled all of the gaps in between. And Rebecca's body reacted hungrily in return – always listening and attuning to my body. Her irises shrank, and the ocean of tears grew too small. The round fishes in her eyes had to jump overboard and onto her mounds of red flesh.

Rebecca screamed louder, but it only made the room's silence even more prevalent. Vigorously, ebbing-and-flowing, I could feel her muscles ache with spasms, and I lost myself to her lovely contractions.

Sticky flesh, rapid breathing, loud moans came from my basement that evening – but no one around heard. We were completely free.

Free to latch onto each other. Free to hold on for eternity if we so chose. Free to whisper promises we knew we couldn't keep into each other's ears. I lay down beside her and whispered, “I'd be perfectly content to die right here in your arms, Rebecca.” I gave her a soft kiss on the nape of her bruised neck. Her head circled back as she held me.

“Mmmm, I like your fire. What's your name?”

“Dan or Daniel, whichever you prefer. I like your ‘fire,’ too. How old are you?”

“I'm thirty-three, but I feel seventeen.”

“You certainly look it. I'm forty-one.”

“Gee, you must ‘feel’ forty-one with the way you look at me,” she said.

Her wit bit back, cutting the thin thread of my ego like the three fates. The wiggling string that I had tried to keep intact all these years. I strained to swallow, but the saliva caught in my throat and I choked instead.

“Are you alright?” asked Rebecca.

“Yes, fine. Sorry, wrong hole.”

Rebecca's lips perked up into a half-smile. Now I knew what her naughty face looked like. I made an effort to get up. I fell, lopsided, right back down. Rebecca's giggles sounded like little sparrow chicks awaiting their mother's return. She amazed me.

Yet, her eyes were dangerous – a snakeskin shade of green. Her pupils dilated ever so slightly when they glanced at a new victim. She was doing that to me now, except Rebecca could taste fear on her tongue but I was unafraid of her venomous bite. She was mine. I claimed her the moment I saw her in my friend's home. Sure, she was being touched and marked by other men, but she was mine all the same. I think she understood that the first night I met her at the party.

Back in that designated room and fighting to keep her still, I held her hands behind her back and nibbled at her ear. She panted like an animal, one of the many among the other appetites I had to appease. I was the conductor of a beautiful orchestral piece – a raw symphony of human sounds. The only audience in attendance was the four walls of my basement.

I met the previous owners of this room when I moved in two years ago. It was just another storage area of the house. This room was not used for sex until I came in. The basement

was cluttered and old – dark mold covered the walls and cobwebs obscured corners. So I cleaned it, laid out a burgundy carpet, and set out buying new furniture for the space. There were three black chairs – the ones with the wooden posts for backs. They remind one of a prison cell which is exactly what I wanted. There was a table which made lovemaking much more interesting. Hanging on the back of the white door frame was a rack which held various toys. Pleasure toys that included a white Hitachi vibrator, a box of black rubber gloves, a roll of duct tape, a lighter, some pine-needle-smelling candles, hand-cuffs, small glass jars, a knife, a whip, a black blindfold, and a lot of rope.

All of these utensils were part of my medicine bag for the home. I paid special attention to every feeling caused by these instruments against my lovers' bodies. If a scream was too high-pitched, I slowed down – too low-pitched, I sped up. My musician's baton waved about directing the symphony to its final climax and then examining the results during the resolve. After my lover finished, I would pull out my microscope to examine the marks I'd left. My lover's fleshy parchment needed to be thoroughly checked in order to make sure it wasn't permanently damaged.

That's what I did with Rebecca. Over and over again. I got her to keep coming back, because I opened up her mind before her body through sex. I took a leap into the midst of her temporal lobe and played with her intellectual and emotional functions. I could make her say crazy things with my whispered words and gentle touch like, "Call me your whore, call me your angel, just call me *yours*." Rebecca, the snake, with her fiery red hair and her exhibitionistic tendencies was tamed under the practicing physician's hands. I thought that I had her for good.

But a few months later, she grew fearful. Initially, she loved losing control. She had abandoned herself to me and my care. But then one evening in our special room, she nuzzled her little head underneath my chin and wept saying, "I never get tired of this loving embrace at night – I always crave more and that feeling never dies. How could you?"

"But that's wonderful, no?" I gently tilted her head up to look at her.

"No, it's not. I just want...*more* of it – you're like this potent drug that I always want more of."

"Well, how can we remedy this problem? Should I prescribe you a lower dose?"

"I don't need your snide comments. This is serious. I've never felt this way about anyone before. I've been with so many people, but none of them sedated me like this."

"So...I 'sedate' you?"

"In a way, yes. You make me feel totally calm when I am in your arms, but as soon as I get up and walk away I feel...I feel reckless."

I kissed Rebecca on the forehead, pulling the covers up over her bare skin. Maybe she had separation anxiety, or maybe I had gone too far messing with her temporal lobe region. I touched her warm skin. Sometimes I wished that we could share the same skin – our flesh felt like the only thing separating our two breathing bodies. I understood how she felt.

"Maybe we just need to separate for a while?" I said.

"But I would only crave you more..."

"Well, perhaps you will learn to find a balance on your own."

"It's an unbearable feeling. Every day I look forward to your arms around me at night. And I care about nothing else. It's this constant feeling of never having enough of you. Now, I'm *never* satisfied. I've never felt this intensely, and I'm afraid that I'll die still wanting more. You've ruined my possibility of finding *real* happiness. I hate you."

Frowning, I tried to make sense of this unintentional betrayal. I understood that all people are social creatures and require warmth, but to need it so much that it scares you was odd. I wanted to comfort her, but somehow hugging did not seem like the right approach. Instead, I folded myself under the warm sheets and turned out the lights.



\*\*\*

In the morning, Rebecca was gone. She had lain with me in my bed from the night we met until now, one month later. A tiny, curled strand of red hair lingered on the right side of my pillow. My bones ached. Combing back my hair, I pulled on my jeans and dress shirt with difficulty. Every movement was a waste of time in searching for this girl. My joy. My songbird. My *everything*.

I went to work, prescribing people pills that would fix all of their problems – poking at others with my throat swab. Or using my stethoscope to hear another’s heart murmurs. My own heart was pounding hard – much too hard. My heart started to sprint on the way to the office when I passed a woman that looked like Rebecca. I almost grabbed her shoulder, but decided to pass her first and then glance backward just to check. But it wasn’t her. This woman had an annoying laugh.

I’ve always thought that laughs are meant to be saved. Not used by some coy college girl with her friend, laughing at pictures of her previous “devotees.” Laughs are meant for moments of pure exhilaration, not chatting with your friend on the way to work. Chuckles, giggles, things of that nature are acceptable in modesty, but not laughter. That’s sacred.

Rebecca always knew when laughter was appropriate. Her frontal lobe judged whether or not something was funny, and her temporal lobes signaled how good it was and the way it made her feel. Her laugh was light. Her laugh took with it all that life could offer, and it spat in the face of death. Yes, her laughs always came at the expense of decay. But I could no longer hear its songbird ring. I was *losing* myself to the darkness.

I continued working, and losing, and working, and losing. I lost the ability to sleep, I felt lethargic and tired. My whole cognitive ability slowed. I was a wreck without her – my little viper. I had nightmares that involved peeling off Rebecca’s snake-skin and wrapping myself up in it like bed sheets. I dreamt of parchment-colored flesh that crinkled and caught on fire if I so much as looked at it. I imagined that she came home, and learned to love the addiction, but then overdosed in a matter of days.

After a year of this torture and searching for the girl whom I had fallen in love with, I gave up – partially. I met new lovers. But we didn’t make love with such *urgency*. We danced to a sad, boring tango instead. The box step being done a thousand times over. I wanted a heartfelt waltz. I pushed myself into one woman who giggled incessantly. This new woman even dared to laugh, but it was in agreement with death. She cackled at me and my attempts to satisfy the most base of appetites. She wasn’t a snake, she was a pesky cockroach. Each of her orifices looked like black caves, her tempo resembled that of an echoing scream, aimless and constantly waning. The scream began loudly, but with each one grew fainter and more distant. My orgasms became moments of silent reverie for Rebecca. The colors of my intimate room all blurred together, and nothing tasted right anymore. I fell for hours into this sexual habit, but it was all mechanical. I watched my world repeat itself with an emotional distance that scared me. Pretty soon, I could not recall what she sounded like anymore. Albeit the laugh, I will never forget her laugh.

\*\*\*

A total of ten years passed by in this hazy manner. I grew gray hair and my mustache was untrimmed. Even at fifty-one I still had several lovers, the youngest was nineteen. But I was just as distant as the day Rebecca had left. I was haunted by the constant craving that she was so afraid of then. I became obsessed on a subconscious level with her laughter and her warmth. I didn’t want to, nor could I, forget those ties to her. If she had stayed, we could have embraced one another every night – a *thousand* times. And for me, that would have been enough.

It was a late December morning when I finally saw her again in a coffee shop up my street. She looked so different. If I must begin to describe her, I’ll start with her hips since that was the lowest part of her body that was unobstructed by the register she stood behind. Her hips

poked out at odd angles. Her waist was no longer tight and lean under her shirt. Now love handles and soft fat tissue built walls around her aging muscles and bones. Her hands – god, her hands – it looked like her snakeskin had not shed in ages. They shook slightly. Her arms were still thin, but the skin sagged and looked sad to see the world from below. Her breasts were held up by firm wire to keep them from drooping – defying gravity. They used to be so perky, so charming, and so new. Her chest, caved in slightly from reuse, every breath drawing closer to her heart. Her neck, still bitable, but no longer as taught. Her face, which used to be a beautifully-clean canvas, was presently filled with coffee stains and old scrap paper notes. She tried to cover it up with different creams and colors, but it made her look clownish. She had been used up like a dirty rag. And then there was her hair, her fiery red hair, still the same. Of course, it was now some fake brand-named, store-bought item – it lacked originality. But it was still the most vibrant thing about her. That’s how I knew it was her.

Still, I hid behind the menu that contained exactly two different types of coffees, teas, and assorted desserts on it, and the waitresses were too preoccupied waiting on other tables at the moment to see me. So I continued to hide, because I could not talk to someone who had changed so much. I had *lost* her and that was it. The passion between us was *caput*. Finished. We were both old now. We were withered things, like the autumn leaves that lay buried under six feet of snow. That snow was fresher and better than we were – us sorry, sappy leaves. I kept my eyes on her and watched her interact with people.

The youthful smile was gone, though you could tell that she longed for it from others in the way she interacted with the customers. Perhaps she thought that if she hung around the fresh snow, she may become some herself. A clean pile, untouched by any hand. Perfection. She said to customers things like, “I like that scarf” or “You have very beautiful eyes.” But the kids just nodded and smiled, unaware of the beauty that they each held. Unaware of the *envy* they caused the old.

The bags under Rebecca’s eyes showed, even under all of the caked-on makeup. She yawned, and her teeth were yellowed and worn down. The round fish in my eyes were swimming in their pools which had suddenly flooded, and they got swept out in the storm. I couldn’t bear it. Time, the mother of all decay, had laid waste to my viper. My little girl. *Mine*.

I imagined that I walked up to the register and told her how I felt. I would say something on bended knee with such desperation in my voice that everyone would hear. My Rebecca, with the brilliant red hair was still in there – somewhere. I imagined taking out my stethoscope and pressing the cold, hard surface to her chest to hear for that familiar beat that I used to when I laid on her breasts. I wanted to find my pleasure toys and make her sing again the way she used to in our sensual room. Then, I would take out my microscope to examine the sores. I thought that all I needed was to use my practiced hands on her body once more to bring her back to life.

But her tongue sensed my fear in that moment and her head turned toward me, so I ran for the door without making eye contact. I ran and ran – away from the red, away from the parchment, away from the snow covering the dead leaves, away from the aging, away from the fish, away from the snake-skin, away from time. I tried to run, and I failed.

I couldn’t really get away, because I heard her laugh in my head. Like little singing sparrows, the laugh carried and chattered on the wind. It coursed through my bloodstream and raised the hairs on my forearms. I heard her laugh, but it wasn’t the same this time. It was in *agreement* with the darkness we were attempting to outrun.

*We made love with such urgency.*

I let it sit there, waiting in anticipation for the phrase that fell from my lips to rise again. But I knew better now. That *urgency* had come and gone, but the unsatisfied yearning for love was still there. And in that moment I knew I would die, unhappy.



## II

### The 21st Century Coffee Shop

Fatigue. My eyes are boring through the paper cups of the vast coffee shop. Small, medium, large. Steam leaves a wet residue circle on the bar. The drug of choice waits for me. The hanging lights are glowing in the background of my mind – trying to show me the end of the tunnels that I have created. My future career, relationships – love, death...so many what-ifs.

The somber tone of the music playing in the background brings me back. My vision un-blurs – the glaze clears – and I watch intently the barista pouring a drink that isn't mine. When will it be *my* turn? I'm losing time inching my way toward oblivion, as the barista pours a drink that is *not* my own. It's pure agony, just standing there, watching.

The lucidity of my weakened state makes me look sickly on the outside. Ah, but that is just a shell. For at the point of sheer exhaustion, I feel whole – creative – attuned to details I never noticed before...I am *alive*.

“Large chai latte on the bar,” says the barista.

“Thanks.” I take a sip of the cinnamon-nutmeg-chai-mixed drink and my heart races. Pumping the creative juices to my brain one-thousand miles a minute, I became unhinged. Completely out of mind, my thoughts hit the page like rain onto the cool sidewalk. “Pitter, patter, pitter, patter” – the words fall sharp, raw – rounded only by the laws that define them.

My words fill the coffee shop with sound – a symphony of smells and vibrations. All while my eyes bore through the end of the paper cups that line the desk I have claimed. The emptied vessels stand by, looking noble in their pursuit to provide me with the charge needed to execute my creative mission.

### III

#### Scenes of Rebellion

The first time their paths crossed nothing happened. Only her strangely boyish haircut had caught Ana's eye. Looking behind her, Ana noticed the small fleur-de-lis tattoo imprinted on the back of her neck. *That's cool*, thought Ana. When suddenly, the girl with the tattoo gave a brief look back as if she could feel Ana's eyes boring through her neck at that very moment. Ana's eyes grew wide, heart palpitating more than before, as she saw her destined lover reach out to her with a mere glance. The second time their paths crossed Ana was chained.

\*\*\*

For the first time in her life, Mary was seeing two boys at once. They both felt her weight during rehearsal when she jumped into each of their arms. These two boys took her body and used it for their art – *her* art. Classical ballet was a world of structure, order, discipline, and strict sensuality. A world where women were women (petite and graceful) and men were men (strong and powerful). The studio was the bedroom and the stage was their own personal sex dungeon – showcasing the men's latest prey.

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Joey felt his romance with Daisy might ruin his life, but that didn't stop him. For Joey was subconsciously driven by his testosterone levels. Crudely-put, his penis did all of the talking. Joey knew that Daisy went bat-shit crazy every time she was PMS-ing. He knew that she was OCD. He knew that she was manipulative, stubborn, aggressive, and overall just a vile example of a human being. Yet, he stayed. All of his friends thought that Joey was the dumbest man alive, and perhaps he was.

\*\*\*

"Three women have vanished, a mother, her teenage daughter, and the daughter's friend – purses and cars left behind, TV on, door unlocked." The news reporter droned on in her everything-is-going-to-hell-in-the-world way, as people continued to walk the streets as free men. People *continued* to get into their cars, to drive to work, to play with their kids, to go to the doctor's, to jam at a concert. The world kept moving while the news reporters kept broadcasting in Dante's favorite style: the hell-raisers and the paradise-takers. News reporter's frame stories to get their way and change the world for better or for worse – yet it *continues* to turn.

\*\*\*

Maybe you wonder how a Jewish girl from Des Moines got Jesus Christ tattooed on her three times: ascending on one thigh, crucified on the other, and conducting a miniature apocalypse beneath the right shoulder. Well, I'll tell you how – she was sick and tired of her parents. She used "artistic license" to paint her body. It remained a canvas for the other biblical scenes she decided to drill into her skin all in the name of rebellion – not Christ. These images she would take to the grave with her. The crucifixion was her favorite scene for its vulgarity, and her favorite character was Judas for he too disobeyed his parents.



## IV

### The Floorboards Speak of Nostalgia

Dawn felt the hard wooden floor beneath her fingertips. Familiar old cracks and bumps reminded her of each fall, even *the* fall. She knew that the stage was her home. Each piece of floor board was unique in its various dark spots and textures. Sure, it was all sanded down and glossed over, but the floor never lost its own uniqueness. Dawn felt connected to those large planks of wood. She could feel the living tree that gave its personality to these floors. Dancers used them to reenact their dreams the next morning. For with every jump, leap, side-step, shuffle, those dancers made the floor work. It had to hold its brothers tight against the force of the dancers' weight. Pointe shoes came crashing down upon the finely-pieced wood. By the end of a rehearsal it would be covered in rosin – the kind of rosin used for violin strings, only crushed and bitter. That kept the dancers' feet from sliding against the sheen surface of the tree's trunk. The floor was cleaned once a day and its owner was very kind to it. The wooden floor loved to hold up the dancers and the dancers loved to land on solid ground.

The soloist, Dawn, carried herself very well and never had a hair out of place. Her job was to maintain balance. Balance within the studio, on stage, and in her life. Yet, she had trouble in the latter aspect. Dawn's life revolved around ballet and nothing else. She was the obsessive type and her love of classical ballet fueled that behavior. Every morning she would awake to the smell of rosin, sweet talcum powder, burnt wood, and a new pointe shoe odor. The day would open arriving at the studio early – eight o'clock in the morning, to be exact. Every girl would wear similar attire: pink pointe shoes, pink stockings, black leotard, hair in a tight bun, and sometimes shorts, legwarmers, and tightly-fitted shirts. That was all protocol. Every girl would take her place at the barre for technique training, balance practice, and stretching. Every girl would then assume any position her instructor told her to accept. Then, everyone branched off into their own realities. Dawn began by flexing each muscle, anchoring her body to the ground while the others drifted gently away into the background. Pointing her foot, she lifted one leg up into her palms – the fuzzy legwarmers acting as gloves for her legs, mittens for her hands. Her leotard sticking to her sweaty body, her stockings pink and smeared with the dirt collected from dozens of splits, and her pointe shoes (which were really torture devices covered in pink stain beauty) held her feet in place. Dawn was *made* for ballet.

Sweat droplets formed over her brow and fell one by one onto the loving wooden floorboards. They soaked up all of her sweat. She loved them dearly for it. "Alright, the music will begin shortly. The next combination across the floor will be *glissade, pas de bourree, and grande jeté*. Got it? *Bon*. Begin!" The instructor counted steadily a one-two-three beat as three girls at a time danced in unison across the floor. The pianissimo sound of the piano was playing a wonderful waltz. To the girls, life felt fresh and vivacious. Stretching up onto the balls of her feet, Dawn could feel herself getting taller. Her body followed the tips of her fingers in harmony toward the ceiling. Dawn's entire being knew what it was to be weightless, especially when both feet were off the ground in a *grande*

*jeté*. She defied gravity – unleashed unto the world with man-made wings. For Dawn shaped her body, Dawn molded her feet into pointe shoes, Dawn pulled her limbs into submission, Dawn played puppet-master to her body. And it obeyed.

This miraculous gift of dance coursed through her veins and every second was preoccupied with its utter beauty. Dawn did not believe that anything could be more breath-taking than to see what her own body could do. She loved watching her arched feet planted on the ground in pointe shoes. She loved the way her lyrical dresses and tutu-type costumes flowed and followed her every move. She loved the way her toned arms and legs kept her balanced in a pirouette. She loved the marks that her point shoes made on her already blistered feet. The life of a ballet dancer was beautiful in and of itself. Her life was art, *she* was art. And it was lonely.

Until one day, Dawn's prince came out of the shadows to haunt her. She noticed him by his feet hitting against her floorboards during rehearsal. His arched toes gave elegance to his raw power. When he jumped, Dawn noticed every muscle waking up and straining to keep this man afloat. Acting on muscle memory his limbs obeyed his commands. This man executed his pirouettes like they were an algorithm to life's most complex problems. And he landed like a god. The floorboards hardly shuttered underneath his graceful landing in *demi-pointe*. Dawn had to know his name. No, she felt obligated, *compelled* to worship him.

“Bonjour, mademoiselle.” He kissed both of her cheeks in greeting.

Dawn blushed, “Bonjour, monsieur. May I ask what your name is? And are you here as the second soloist?”

“My name is Jean-Claude. And oui, but I believe I am the *first* soloist.”

A crushing feeling of jealousy consumed Dawn. She refused to have a guest kick her out of the first soloist position. This man must be destroyed, she thought. Dawn turned around before replying and joined the other dancers in their barre exercises. Jean-Claude stood there appalled that this woman turned her back on him without even saying, “*Enchanté*” – just a plain, old nice to meet you. He decided that this woman must be destroyed – soiled – ruined – humiliated.

The next morning in the studio, Dawn and Jean-Claude would have their first solo dances together. Dawn felt the need to put on extra layers of clothes so that she would not have to feel Jean-Claude touching her. Meanwhile, Jean-Claude was about to put his plan in action. Touching her was just the first step. The pianist started up the waltz tune from before, only this time it was even softer and more somber. Jean-Claude walked like a cat ready to pounce on its prey, his tight stockings holding a rather large package right in front of the impressionable Dawn. She noticed it even more now that he was creeping towards her with open-arms. Dawn winced when she took ahold of Jean-Claude's sculpted hand – it was warm and closed over her entire fist. She could not escape.

Dawn lifted herself up onto *relevé* and began making circles around Jean-Claude's body. Then, the piano moved into forte and Dawn's walking turned into a fast-paced combination of intricate steps...still circling around Jean-Claude. She likened to a pack of wolves ready to defend her young against the predator. She did not even notice that he was after her. Her thoughts ceased when the instructor yelled, “*Non!* Dawn, you forgot the *arabesque*! *Répétez s'il vous plaît!*” The pianist started over and in that moment the two soloists had lost each other's scent.

Dawn and Jean-Claude marked their territories on the floorboards with rosin before attempting to repeat yesterday's dance. Jean-Claude held out his hand once more and Dawn felt a rush of warmth pump through her blood as she gave him her hand. Today, they did not forget the *arabesque*, and Jean-Claude kept his large, masculine hands around her skinny torso. Today, she wore fewer layers – just enough to feel his warmth and pressure against her ribs. Leaning forward, Dawn lifted up her right leg into the air and held a graceful pose. Subconsciously, she began to feel much better. Dawn's body still obeyed her even with this man holding onto her. The muscles still



tightened for her, the floorboards still held her up, the mind was still hers. She was still *made* for ballet. But so was Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude, now half way through the dance, was dripping with sweat. The floor, as usual, soaked each drop up for his safety. He was forcing his body to handle more weight than just his own. His hands had become sweatier and he almost dropped Dawn when she leapt into his grip. But she was light enough and not even sweat could make her appear less graceful anyhow. She did not seem to need him there. His plan was failing. Re-doubling his efforts, Jean-Claude let go of Dawn. Dawn hit the floor with a thud and the boards creaked in painful agony. In a matter of seconds, Dawn's world had been *shattered*.

The room went dark as the other girls giggled and chided about her fall. *The fall*. Dawn begged the instructor to get rid of Jean-Claude, but she just told her to deal with it. Tomorrow is another day to try again. All night, Dawn stayed awake and cried. She had lost control of her body because someone else had let go. She *depended* on him. On Jean-Claude. Meanwhile, Jean-Claude stayed up all night and thought about what he had done to this poor soloist. He knew that she depended on him and he let her learn that the hard way.

The piano began ever so softly, the peering eyes of other dancers looked at the two soloists, and both of them looked at each other. Jean-Claude reached out for Dawn's hand, searching for some subtle gesture of forgiveness. But Dawn was closed off – a Rapunzel trapped in her own tower. He felt the challenge in her glare – he must penetrate that tower. The instructor yelled a quick, "*allons-y!*" before Dawn grabbed Jean-Claude's hand. But she pulled away almost immediately, his very touch having shocked her. Giving Jean-Claude a glare, Dawn and the pianist began their hunt again. Just waiting for a good moment to strike at the jugular, but Jean-Claude seemed miles ahead of her. He touched her lean torso in the *arabesque* and proceeded to pull himself closer to her for more support. She pulled her lifted leg back down into *bourree*. Jean-Claude was so close that she could feel his hot breath on her shoulder. She flinched at the next lift, but he held her without stumbling. As the dance moved on, both soloists began to sweat, the floorboards worked twice as hard absorbing and maintaining their structure. The lifts became heavenly, the touches became forceful, and the hunter was closing in on the hunted. Time for the kill... "Bravo!" shouted the instructor, clapping furiously. "I want that kind of energy and grace every time!"

"Merci, Madame." Both of them curtsied to her.

Then, just outside of the chattering dancers and on the skirts of the studio, Jean-Claude asked Dawn: "How about a drink after rehearsal?"

Dawn, unable to respond for lack of breath finally uttered an "okay."

That evening Jean-Claude took Dawn out in his car to a little café downtown. She sipped her tea, but kept her eyes completely focused on Jean-Claude the whole time. She refused to relinquish control.

"It is great tea, isn't it?" said Jean-Claude.

"Sure is." replied Dawn.

"You know, I see you as competition. You are a beautiful dancer, Dawn. And I envy you for that. Look, I'm sorry about letting go of you the other day, but you must understand that I wanted to show you that you *depend* on me. I am not just there to look pretty. You need me."

Dawn's grip tightened on her teacup, "I beg to differ..."

Before Dawn could say another word Jean-Claude had gone in for the kill. He stretched his entire body out on the café table, grabbed Dawn's agile neck, and kissed her forcefully on the mouth. This act was not one of love, but of complete possession. *Mine*, this kiss said. *Conquered*, this night said. *Destroyed*, this moment said.

Rehearsal began at eight o'clock in the studio and the floorboards appeared shiny and clean. Not a speck was to be found and yet everyone knew that there were many wars fought on

this same ground. Today was no different. The two soloists found each other molding into one another, breathing on each other, touch became electrifying, every muscle became entangled, when one body moved the other shadowed it. The soloists became the *soloist*. Sweat from the two bodies became sweat from just one. The movements were all based on muscle memory and the subconscious desire to be dependent. If they were dependent on one another, then they could never fail.

That evening the same unifying dance they had in the studio earlier replicated itself over and over again in the bedroom. Dawn felt herself flying and falling. Jean-Claude had hunted down his prey, penetrated the tower, and consumed the soul-ridden flesh of Dawn. He marked her as his own, his territory, and his property. She gave him her control *willingly*. And it felt glorious.

Dawn and Jean-Claude awoke the next morning in each other's arms, wrapped around one another like children with their favorite stuffed animals. This was how they laid and slept for the following few weeks. Their dancing became even more succinct in rehearsals. For the next few weeks, their dance used up an ever-increasing amount of fire and energy. It was the longest high a dancer could achieve when off-stage. But the performance was coming up and the fire could not be lost just yet.

On performance night, Dawn contemplated what her solo meant to her. It had taken all of this time and practice – all of this effort – pure sweat, tears, and blood. But it was no longer *her* moment, no longer *her* achievement...it was *theirs*. Something about that thought made Dawn queasy, but the moment passed as soon as she stepped out onto the stage with Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude offered his hand and she took it willingly. He grabbed her torso for all of the lifts and positions that he thought she needed help with and he never took his eyes off her. Jean-Claude was letting his property be shown off. Dawn *felt* like the star, when in reality she was only the accessory. Dawn watched as Jean-Claude leapt into the air with all the force he could muster to propel himself up off the ground and still land on the balls of his feet. He stole her man-made wings. Jean-Claude was *made* for ballet.

In that moment, Dawn wanted to run off-stage and hide away from everything living. No creature could look upon such a wretch. *How could she have given up her wings so easily?* Dawn felt dirty, soiled, and ugly. Still onstage, Dawn felt the floorboards had bowed and cracked beneath her weight. She grew so heavy that even the floorboards gave up trying to give her solid ground. In one large swoop, the floorboards snapped and swallowed Dawn up whole. Dawn fell to the bottom of the basement where the concrete had an easier time holding up her weight than the wood. Looking upwards, Dawn saw Jean-Claude laughing and shouting that he had hunted the hunter. Shaking her head, Dawn noticed that she was still on stage going through the motions. Her muscle memory had saved her, but Jean-Claude knew that something was wrong. Boring through her eyes right to her soul, he saw that she feared losing control. Yet he understood that she also had this innate craving to worship him. He grasped that she wanted to feel free, but be with him for eternity. When the pianist hit the last keys and the dance ended, Jean-Claude pulled Dawn close and kissed her more gently. This kiss still said *mine*, but now it was also hissing *ours*. Dawn breathed a little easier, but pulling away from him – away from their dance – she felt numb. A piece of her had been sliced off. Dawn became a fragment of herself. She knew that this was it. This was the last dance of her career.

A week later, Dawn had missed her period. She was pregnant. Her career was indeed over and that god who came from Hell did this to her. He successfully eliminated his competition for good. When Dawn stopped showing up to rehearsals for the next season, Jean-Claude called her. Having discovered the news over the phone, Jean-Claude packed up his belongings and left his apartment for hers.

“I don't want you to help me!” screamed Dawn. “I don't need you!”

“Dawn, darling, please let’s get *married*. I never meant to do this to you,” gasped Jean-Claude. “You have ruined my body! You have stripped me of *my* man-made wings!”

“I did no such thing! You have done this to yourself, but I am willing to help you! I love you!”

Dawn’s face dropped into her hands and she sobbed loudly into them. She was no longer a lonely dancer consumed by the world of classical ballet. She had a relationship and a life and right now another being growing inside of her. More importantly, someone loved her besides herself. She had a god to worship for he gave her so many gifts. Agonizing as they may seem at times, she was given the gift of sex, love, friendship, and now a baby. Jean-Claude felt Dawn shaking in his arms and he kissed the tip of her nose tenderly. Sitting on the hard, wooden floor of Dawn’s apartment the smell of new pointe shoes in the air, life kept moving *forward*.

Nine months passed by quickly and the skinny torso turned into a balloon which popped yesterday. Dawn gave birth to a tiny baby girl. She named her Sophie. Someday Sophie would dance. She would after-all grow up with the smell of rosin, sweet talcum powder, burnt wood, and a new pointe shoe odor in the apartment. Jean-Claude and Dawn married while Jean-Claude continued to dance onstage for the both of them. Dawn stayed at home with the baby – too afraid to try rebuilding her old man-made wings. At the moment, they were lopsided, crinkled, and torn. Her muscles ached sometimes for no reason; her stretch marks marked up her torso and thighs, the extra skin on her tummy made her feel fat. This body was no longer *hers*, but *theirs*.

Yet, when the baby was napping and her husband was out dancing, Dawn would turn on a piano record of that wonderful waltz. Clearing the floorboards of the coffee table, the couch, and the matching chairs, the room looked just like a dance studio. Crossing one pink, satin ribbon over another and with the torture devices securely strapped onto her feet, they became her muted voice. And with that voice, she screamed and the floorboards absorbed every word of it. But they did not creak and they held her up on solid ground. Her world came back to her. Dawn had agency again in those few precious moments of clarity and freedom when pure momentum forced her forward in time. Her arched feet kept her balanced on the ground. Every fiber of muscle was manipulated by the war-torn prey. Although her limbs were tired and worn down with birth, she continued to create. Dawn’s body continued to be a resolute point of light in the dark cave of routine. Her body had been caught, marked, ripped to shreds, and yet it still had the virginal grace it once slept with daily.

The same chance of release that appeared every day at eight o’clock in the morning was what kept her going. After-all, the floorboards were always there to absorb her tears, so that Jean-Claude would never know that she was unhappy. Dawn thought that he could sense it sometimes, but he would let it slide and pretend that things had worked out alright in the end. Her happiness depended on his body and on his mind. And he was happy. She still worshipped him for his beautiful wings. Her soul was also now split between her and her baby. The more Dawn spliced herself – the less whole she felt. The only thing that could unite the three halves together was her dancing. Dawn danced because she *had* to in order to survive. It kept her sane. Ballet had only ever tried to help her create her wings, but Man had *soiled* them. Slowly going through the steps, Dawn would move alone to the parts that she had learned before he had ever walked into the room.

V

**Why Did the Gardener Adjust His Monocle**

Roy, a-retired-professor-turned-gardener, looked back on his teaching days with disdain. He taught foolish students who did not care for his un-earthly tragedies and comedies. So, Roy decided to rebel in his own way by leaving his monocle slightly displaced before each class. The lens distorted all the words and faces into one dizzying game, and he began leaving it that way. Shortly thereafter, Roy retired and tended to his garden. On his first day gardening, Roy adjusted his monocle to see more clearly the beautiful daffodils and hyacinths – their straight stalks and majesty made Roy forget about his other weeds.

## VI

### The Abstract

Just like the trolley problems, I cannot write in the abstract. “Mind exercises” are *not* tethered to reality. Yet it is always there. The abstract has chained itself to my legs in protestation that I rid myself of it. It makes my hands shake with frustration at the thought of its pseudo-existence. The abstract beckons me on, continuing to tempt me to untangle its most complex knots. Simply to silence the creature, I stick my hands in deep and fiddle with its insides to no avail. Then, I take a step back – face reddening – trying to calm myself down. The abstract has been caressed enough for it to quiet in my thoughts. The frequency of its calls becomes more seldom. I pick up my tattered mind, and mend it with some logical glue – allowing the glue to harden, waiting for the next wave of the abstract.

## VII

### In Silky Darkness

Wriggling to get her hands free, Abby moved back and forth – chaffing what little skin was left around her wrists. Even though Abby had asked for this, she was still frightened to bits about what would happen next. *Would her lover spank her bottom with the round, wooden paddle he just bought? Would he use the comb? Would he suck or bite down hard on her already bruised nipples? What would this man not do when he was lost inside his of his own Id?*

Before the blindfold shielded her eyes, Abby could tell that his composure had changed. Daniel was not looking at her anymore. He was eyeing her body – objectifying every crease and crevice for his own future use. Every hole had to be re-proclaimed as his and Daniel would not cease until her body had surrendered to him. That meant that any sudden movement, *any* sign of rebellion would cost Abby dearly. Abby was made to understand that she was his entirely and forever – not a lonely soul, not a piece of a whole, not a slice, not a half – *all* of her was his. The spankings simply served as a reminder.

Continuing to wriggle without sight, she suddenly felt the burning sensation of a belt across her left breast. “Owww!” Abby squealed, tears streaming down her face, a vicious trembling captured her body as the leathery tongue withdrew from her skin.

Her flesh buckled underneath the belt’s weight, as the skin coiled and then re-shaped itself to her rounded calf muscle. Abby could feel every area-to-surface contact that was made between her and the tough strap. The sound it made as it licked her flesh was not unlike those audio recordings of men whipping their horses on the behind – the cracked-whip sound was no friend of Abby’s. She screamed trying to reach for her leg, groping in the artificial darkness that her lover put over her eyes. Daniel just had to have complete trust and control over his play-toy.

Meanwhile, the silky darkness left Abby to her own horrible thoughts – to her own destruction. She agreed to this torturous ordeal to fight the demons skittering behind her eyes. They never do sleep...unless she is having kinky sex. The anxiety, the stress, the monotony of the everyday all disappeared in the throes of passion. When every atom in her system is shouting in pain or in ecstasy for more, *more*, MORE! The line between pain and pleasure becomes blurred as her being takes a ride up and down on the hormonal train. Her fight or flight responses rush towards her heart and mind, pushing the blood out and down into her sex. To top that off, Daniel would sometimes choke her to make more room for the hormones that want in – kicking oxygen to her throat and coming out in stifled moans. Every time they did it, she felt *whole*.

In Abby’s darkness, every sense is highlighted and quieted all at once. Her demons have spread to other parts of her body, leaving her mind a swirling mist of pure bliss. It does not worry any longer about trivial things. Daniel seems to see all of these changes in Abby’s nature, as if he were the conductor of some magnificent orchestral piece concerning the mind-body dichotomy. He creates harmony, where oftentimes Abby felt there to be *none*. Daniel owns Abby completely at this

stage by robbing her of one sense, but magnifying all the rest. Her hearing, touch, smell, and taste all intact to make up for the present blankness before her eyes. Abby could hear the belt's descent and landing, she could touch Daniel's heaving chest, she could smell the sweat that dripped into the mattress beneath her, and she could taste the salty tears of joy running down her now enflamed face.

## VIII

### Lazy Days and Moleskine Notebooks

Falling rain creates the natural soundtrack to my night. The thudding of each droplet makes a loud thump as earth's breath smashes the tiny translucent spheres against the pane. The taste of pure butter from a cookie enraptures my tongue while sweet, exotic tea spices wash down the remains. The comforting light of the library, the stacked books reflected in the window's glass. Tired lids open and close shut like heavy wooden doors. The lull of typing fingers and the rain descending soothes my heart into a rhythmical samba, danced with my dear friend, blood. The circulating droplets keep my body warm as I continually add caffeine into the mixture. Faster and faster it goes, until the once muddled words now become clear again and the paper soon has legs! "Freedom!" it shouts. Until its stubby, weak form falls back down and I must finish this damn essay before it finishes me. All night, alone with my books, in silence, under the sky's shed tears, I write.

My thoughts disengage themselves from my paper allowing my fingers to keep going through their tap dance routine. My mind wanders about a tall, effeminate, pale boy, who has brown eyes and hair, thin pink lips, and strong hands. A romantic who like a chess piece moves each thought of his into carefully calculated action. If one incorrect move occurs, he may lose her. Humbled by his circumstances he tries not reveal too much, as if the world would laugh at his leaky heart. An organ that palpitates at a different tempo from the way his body moves when he is around her. But he is caught: two twins of the same celestial body want him. He is their inspiration. They are one in the same – soul and body. Independent forces with a ruling presence. We do not *need* anyone. And yet, we *must* have someone.

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Her thoughts are racing with desire. *I want, I want, I want...*but cannot have, she tells herself. Lecturing voices keep badgering her about waiting. For time becomes relative in the face of love. As clocks tick she is aging. *I want love! I want life! I want passion!* She suffers from the wait, the envy. He has no clue that she waits on his every word. He has no idea of the power that he holds. If he said "as you wish," she would melt into a puddle of pheromones. If she could, she would beg him to lay his head down on her legs, so that she could fondle his luscious locks of hair.

The Eros is taking over. The Id is clumsily knocking over clouds. The body is beating the soul to a bloody pulp while knocking reason out of its tethered mind. It falls out of the ear and onto the floor, a speck of dust and no more. A whirling circle of desire...until fear kicks in. Until a strange chill nestles deep into her own marrow – she fears losing independence, losing a sense of self, and losing her own need to be alone. Breathing hard, she falls asleep, too exhausted at that point to think of love and all its mystery.

A new day emerges and calls on the soul to awaken from its sensual slumber. The pleated curtains are pulled back on both floors and the halls still reek of last night's meals. Each room is oddly sterile and the unknown soul is fatigued. The soul wakes up later than the body and is truly up



by sunset when the whole truth can be whispered ever so slightly under the cover of night. Grabbing his journal, grabbing her journal, they both go on their way. They travel out into the life that in one summer was thrown up into the air – so many possibilities, yet so little time. The black Moleskine journals are calling their names, their blank pages just begging to be used.

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I write: what a wonderful lull of light and color and sound. The quiet air conditioner is sighing with the cool breath of the autumn breeze outside. There is an embryonic ball of energy shining through my window, my flesh absorbing its purity. Renewal. My sundress ever so slowly riding up my legs, gathering in bunches around my thighs. My toes loving the warm fleece blanket they can touch, *feel*. The color blue enshrouds me in its brilliant hue. There is a big silver ring with diamonds shimmering around a deep blue eye. All folded around my thin, youthful fingers which squander the last light of day. I am just waiting to be loved. My thin and pale arms are waiting to be held by someone, something...a beautifully perfect mind and soul. I wish to trap it in the prism of my ring. It shall be known as the ring of youth, the ring of desire, the sighing, sleepy, sun-dried oasis of fantasies. No way to break from my reality. I am a young girl patiently waiting for a young lover.

We are lying in the brush, absorbing as lizards do the sun's most penetrating rays while a soft wind reverberates off of our bodies. Languidly, he slides down the tree's bark and onto my lap, where his soft curls tickle my legs. I want to touch him, but his vulnerable face scares me so. *What if he shattered into tiny silver slivers at my touch?* Our relationship thus far has been racing away on an upward slope. He turns his head up to face me, wisps of my hair teasing his nose. He reaches up like a babe and gently tugs on my ear. I move forward just enough that I can feel each slow breath of his come to fruition. Our lips touch ever so slightly, so that I can hardly even feel the soft fleshy skin brushing my own. And that is how we stay for what feels like an hour. I wish this day would never end.

## IX

### A Temper that Runs in the Family

So you say that I am too judgmental? As I sit in a stiff chair the sound of my professor's soothing voice coaxes me to listen – to hear – to hang on to every biting word that slips from her thin, aging lips. The words fall down upon my chest like a medieval presser. I am suffocating within the confines of my own fragile body. I am torn between wanting to scream and wanting to cry that my work is *still* not good enough. Still. The professor ends her drawling brigade of phrases that crush my spirit. Silence douses us in kerosene and her eyes set mine ablaze. She stares back at me and I can feel my hands start to sweat. My thoughts become a jumbled mesh of emotion and logic. Emotion is beginning to win. Defensiveness is seething with rage, attempting to leap out of its sealed cast-iron box, trying to slaughter understanding. With bladed word in hand, it leaps onto my dry tongue and tries to cut through the white enamel of my teeth. I swallow and breathe. I collect my thoughts. I scoop up my brain into a logical pale, allowing for the gooey rants to sit until the hard chunks sink to the bottom. I hear myself say, “thank you” as I slowly rise to leave the tiny room – defeated. As I walk out, I notice that not only am I moving slower, but everyone around me is as well. My world has suddenly dropped into some kind of sinkhole. People pushing through the muck, chains jangling with each step, hollowed faces tell a story of sorrow. A miniature Dante's inferno, if you will. Too judgmental? Too close-minded? Too harsh? You *must* be joking.

X

**The Lesson Taught in Classroom 306**

Entering the room, I sit down in one of those blue, striped chairs that attaches to a miniature desk. I set my books, purse, and water bottle down onto the floor, in order to make room for my notebook and pencil which completely cover the tiny platform. I finger the desk's wooden surface. It is covered in plastic and chipped on the corners where other hands have been before.

I have grown up in classrooms, roaming in and out of the educational institution my whole life. I have always played the sponge – soaking up my teachers' wisdom...and foolishness. From the age of three, I had learned how to master the role of student at my tiny tot's ballet lessons in NYC. I learned how to be graceful in everything I do. I learned how to use my body to perfect my actions. I learned about my hidden potential, and my newly found ability to fly across the stage. I learned about what it means to be art itself.

The room looks like a large box, lined with an expansive chalkboard and seven windows. It is painted and carpeted in a chaotic and unsettling fashion. Since the right wall is painted an "It's a boy!" shade of blue and the opposite wall is a deafening shade of white. The two walls that conjoin the longest sides are both white, as well. While the "window" wall uses jail-house bricks which are painted over with several coats to make that wall appear less like a prison, and more like a "house of learning." I would compare it to a mental institution kind-of-wall, if anything. Yet, the school we are paying 50 grand for would never tell you that. "Just add more paint!" shouts the president. Yes, more paint. More paint will solve this school's problems.

After-all, more paint had always solved *my* problems in art class. I always used it to cover up the odd angles and blemishes that I had in my self-portraits. Paint dripped from the brush and onto the page – a splash of color that drowned all of my features. When painting over things, I was able to forget them. But as I grew older, I learned not to hide my wants and desires behind the thickly-colored globs. My blemishes began to stay in the portraits, my eye for detail became more acute, and my hands grew more certain with every flick of my brush against the canvas.

The carpet has random patterns of color stitched into one another – hues of purple, red, blue, and mustard yellow. Even if you unraveled a corner of the ridiculous carpet, you probably would not be able to tell one individual color from another all wound up in the fibrous strings of floor.

The whirl of colors makes my head spin, as my mind races alongside my senses. The play between the two sing a hymn that goes like this: I desire to be the art *and* the artist. I have accepted my place as object in my portraits, maybe even a masterpiece, but I *also* want to create. I want to create *life* on both the page and reality itself. All those movies I have watched fill my mind – now I want to be the painter, the sculptor, the actress, the musician, the dancer...the writer. But to be the writer, I must become the observer. And so I sit and wait.

Then there are white, pock-holed, ceiling tiles that hold up 18-cubed fluorescent lights. The

lights create uninhibited shadows on people's facial features and they hardly produce enough watts to make my notes appear visible to me on the page. But the school's "green initiative" is to be more economical with our use of electricity, and so fluorescent lights it is. (Not to mention girls turning the lights out on me in the bathroom, hallway, and dorm "to save electricity," or having a "paper towel" ONLY bin in places where I need to throw away other trash). Yet, this is my classroom, my environment, my *home* for four years.

My home has always been at school, where I have decided on fighting back until the end. In elementary school, I was always taught to ogle at other people's work, but not my own. I was taught that my body was dirty and vile. I was scolded by the other children for thinking of myself as special. I was shown by my teachers that adulthood involves giving up your hopes and dreams, not following them. Well, I planned to prove them all wrong someday. I would fight the system that crushed the imagination. I would burn the box that fueled the shaming and the disillusionment with the world – the stories that told of death and not of life. That was the demon I had set out to destroy in each of my classes.

The first class I am to face in college is a philosophy class which teaches that people are limited creatures, who can only contemplate about things and never act upon them. It is a philosophy class that is attempting to tell me how to live, but not in a way that would guarantee my own happiness.

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The other philosophy students start walking in one by one: some in groups, some in pairs, and like myself, some alone. The pieces of last night's adventures begin infiltrating the previously quiet room with sound. The walls refuse to contain the numerous conversations and some of the reverberations escape into the already filled hallway. The atmosphere is congested.

Most of the students have sat down by now in classroom 306 and await the professor's arrival. Our professor decides to nonchalantly walk in about 10 minutes late this evening. The sun outside has nearly been decapitated by the hundreds of buildings obscuring its light, albeit its rays are still shining through some of the stifling clouds.

Clouds. Puffs. Smoke. Our professor holds her chalk the way she holds her cigarettes. I tend to pass by her taking a drag outside of her office when she needs a moment to herself. Even in the classroom the bits of jagged chalk are often cradled between her index and middle finger, loosely thrown around to show how *risqué* and experienced her right hand is. The yellow stains, short finger nails, and ever-present quivering are an acquired trait, even though the left hand would typically be occupied with a hard liquor of some sort. She frequently shares her stories in class about her "experienced palate" concerning various wines that she has tasted from all over Europe. But alas, this campus is alcohol-free-smoke-free-and-tobacco-free, so such relaxants are not permitted on the premises. Thus, the replacement cigarette, one that I like to think of as the new "chalk-based e-cigarette" is what our professor clings to for dear life – in the loose, calm sort of way. The associations that my mind makes when looking at this 5-foot, blouse and trouser wearing, quiver-er is how masculine she appears to be. Her hair sits in dark pepper-and-salt curls on her head and her face is aged and leathery. Her mannerisms are brute, blunt, and blistering. Like when she's teaching and her hand cuts unfamiliar shapes out of the air around her. Our professor talks of her field in a humble know-it-all-sort-of-way. And in this class, classroom 306, she speaks of Kant.

Placing my pencil on the page, I give my thoughts a voice. I can say *no* to all of those creatures who crawled out of their caves just to say *rescind your life from the stage*. I can make my words twist and tremble in front of Man. I can blind those who teach and teach what is on *my* syllabus. I can paint an image of truth, plastering it all across humanity's wall. I can shout *yes* to life, to living – not simply existing. I can show the world Man's greatness and Man the world's beauty. I am God of the page, Master of the words, Creator of the ideas that set my pencil on fire.

This is what my mind shouts, as I wait for more of Kant's words to spew from my professor's mouth.

She begins slowly, loosening the vile poison on us inconspicuously: "Okay class, for homework you read the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I'd like to discuss a few *brilliant* passages from that section today."

Our professor begins explaining certain sections to us. They are mostly filled with things that are long and convoluted, like this: "If, by abstracting from our way of intuiting a thing, we mean by noumenon a thing *insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, then this is a noumenon in the *negative* meaning of the term. But if by noumenon we mean an *object of a nonsensible intuition* and hence assume a special kind of intuition, viz., an intellectual one – which, however, is not ours and into the possibility of which we also have no insight – then that would be the noumenon in the *positive* meaning of the term."

It is nearly incomprehensible, and yet our professor feeds off it. She explains the "noumenon" as being the objects as "things in themselves" – meaning that a cardinal is not really red, but some other hue entirely. She claims that our senses play tricks on us all the time and so we must understand that in order to be *truly* free.

But how can someone be "truly free" if they cannot even trust their own senses? It took me back to that year in second grade when I put a stick into the water. It looked bent to me from over the surface ripples of the water, but when I went in to touch it I felt that it hadn't actually bent at all! I used my sense of touch to discover that my eyesight was being deceived. It's as if my senses keep checks and balances on themselves. My senses are just as valid as my reason, but Kant does not seem to think so.

Meanwhile, our professor's voice infiltrates my present thoughts with: "Here Kant is saying right off the bat that human reason's duty is to question, but it cannot find any answers in the realm of "pure reason." Hence, we can only critique it and hope to understand how we are limited. We must understand our boundaries in order to know what human nature is all about."

My heart quickens. *What boundaries?! We are at the top of the food chain! We are invincible! We are beautiful, glorious, triumphant, conquerors!!!*

I raise my hand.

"I was just going to ask if Kant was a happy man..." My eyes bore through the professor's awaiting an answer.

"I would say so, but then again, I'm not Kant," she chuckled.

"Oh, okay..." My voice chokes off, while my thoughts continue to stir with questions among the whirl of colors. *How could Kant be happy with this seemingly pessimistic philosophy?* I mean, he basically advocates for lecturing to Man about his limits, his inabilities, his shortcomings, his foolhardy senses. *What could be more negative than that?*

Our professor chimes back in. "Okay, so once again, Kant says that these questions are always on our minds, but that there is absolutely no way to answer them. Therefore, reason desires to find things that go *beyond* our experience or what we perceive on a daily basis. This is his explanation for why we believe in God and other mystical powers..."

At this point, my own hands started to tremble like my professors. I could feel myself aging, shriveling up on the inside like a raisin at what was being said. *What is the point of scientific discovery, if we will never have our questions answered?!* Fuming, I scribbled in the margins of my notebook. The poor thing is being dug into by a heavy, lead pencil in an instant. It didn't do anything to hurt me, and yet it felt like everything that I touched was mocking me, chiding, "look you puny little creature – you are killed by snow, rain, and wind. You are incapable of figuring out how the most basic things in the universe work. Your senses fool you and so you must follow the 'noumenal' or the laws of the 'moral realm,' the divine and omnipotent realm, because you are so *gullible, dumb, and blind.*"

*I mean, how could Kant believe in this stuff? Why did he insist on destroying every piece of ground that we could stand on?* My mind reeled and my hands continued to quake. Biting on the tip of my already gnawed-off eraser head, I came up with an idea. This insight gave me the ability to sit silently through class without feeling the smoke coming out of my ears, because I just concocted a superb plan to defy all of Kant's arguments. His big, lumpy sack-of-brains will be defiled by this masterpiece.

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One week passed and we had once again arrived in classroom 306, and I was steadily eyeing a guy across the room. He wore black skinny jeans, a fitting t-shirt, and his hair was just as dark as his outfit. This guy oozed philosophy major...and I liked it. His eyes were deep-set in his skull, above a low nose, and his pale skin practically reflected the notes that he wrote down in his journal. Looking at his face, I could see him trying to tackle the words of this man. *Though those words captured his expression, did his mind truly believe in them?* I sat in wonder, still chewing on the tip of my already worn-down pencil. It is almost as chipped as this fake-wooden desk beneath me. When class is over, I stand up and cruise right over to the mysterious enigma of a man and ask him whether he believes in this nonsense. He shakes his head from left-to-right, and I know at that moment that I have a volunteer to take part in my upcoming protest. I bend down to ear-level and whisper my tempting words into his ear. His eyes lower, and a grin eradicates any expression that had been tangoing with Kant's words previously. I've got him.

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The next class whirled around like a twister, destroying the other days of the week in its raging path. Leaving demolished little pieces of letters which ended up hanging off of the classroom door, classroom 306, with its screwed-up carpet, its striped chairs, and its jailhouse walls. I walked through the letter-ridden door and sat down. Today was *the* day...the day where Kant and all of his ideas must fall. Our professor asked us to open our books, and I allowed the first half of the class to go by as usual...

"Stephen, please read this passage on page 676 and then we'll take a quick 10 minute break."

While Stephen went on and on, I began to feel my hands shake again. I stared at my only chance, my *only* hope – the guy in black. He was awaiting my signal while trying not to look utterly suspicious. Leisurely, he would glance at me in a rounded, sweeping motion, as if he was not actually searching for my own eyes. Then, he would bore through the professor's skull, probably daydreaming about what her hair would do if it were alive. I could see him sitting there stumped when our professor finally called for a break.

During the break, all of the students left following our nicotine-addicted professor with the trembling hands, except for the mysterious man and me. We knew that as soon as break was over we would put "Plan X" into action. The strong smell of Marlboros filled the room as people slowly started to file back in. The philosophers had taken their hourly drags outside the pillared building and into the chilled darkness. The stench lingers in the classroom until all 30 students breathe in and exhale – filtering the smell just as the cigarette filters the black tar which fills their lungs and very thoughts.

We all breathe in deeply and dive back into the reading, beginning again with the noumenal realm. Until I shut my eyes and stand up. Students for the most part ignore me, probably figuring that I had to go to the bathroom or some other trivial type-of-thing. And Aristotle would agree that the mind is a thing of habit after all. But as soon as I stand, the guy in black gets the signal and the show must begin.

I stood up in that moment to show students that I would not take this brainwashing anymore. I stood up to teach them a lesson. I stood up to spit in the face of "the moral realm" and

the “divine” and the “omnipotent,” because I believe in Man. *Man* the father, the son, and the holy ghost. Man who invented the wheel, Man who built cities, Man who created art and language. What a brilliant uphill battle it has been and still is.

Everyone is seated in the chairs that make a circle and leave the center “open for discussion” and it is here that our lips met. The enigma has agreed to this, because he believes in Man too. And he begins ripping off my clothes and throws me to the ground, his hand on my throat, all to show this philosopher that we are free, and we are *limitless*. My fragile neck exposed, his mouth coils around it like a leech to its victim.

“Yes!” I shout. My eyes fall back into my skull, as I become all sense. No reason here. No home for the limits of my imagination.

He growls as he bites into me some more and pulls himself out of his pants.

The room has become oppressively silent (besides my load moans), as everyone is too floored to separate us. I’ve got them.

Stephen’s mouth gapes, Christa’s eyes widen, Jennifer walks up and leaves, Eric takes out his phone to film us, Bryce cringes, Clarissa laughs, Maxine wails, and everyone else follows one of those reactions. But each reaction is a *victory* to me. I have managed to plant a seed in each student’s mind. The sponges have already soaked in the color of the carpet, and the walls, and the ceiling tiles, and now they must soak in the color of my passion. My passion for Man.

This time I bite back as he pushes himself into me. Sweet ecstasy. It is absolute bliss. I continually get wetter and wetter as he pushes deeper and deeper. My moans become stifled screams. My mind has been erased. My blood can no longer support that realm. All the feeling tingles and flows downward. Down into the pits of all the nerve endings which are sending signals to my brain at the speed of light and as the temperature increases my brain ignites. Sweat begins appearing on his brow. I look into his eyes and I can tell that he is in this with me, and *only* me. Now tell me Kant, how does my *understanding* of the act of copulating work? For this is *real* – this is not in the “noumenal realm,” but the realm of hopes and desires. I am alive, *real*, and my world makes sense to me here – now.

My concrete. My world. My reality. My love. My time. My body. My mind. All of these mines enabled right here and now. Selfishly making love to a stranger, a fellow student, a prisoner who is sick and tired of learning about his limits – being taught *every day* to hate himself – to hate sex and love death. He was trained to know his boundaries and mentored in how to carry down that legacy. But he refused, *today*. And I refused, *today*, in classroom 306 where the circle of stupidly-striped chairs are home to the minds of the “givers,” and where the only “takers” are the two of us. Making love right in the middle of it all.

I can feel my hands stop trembling and my spirit lift. I know in this moment that I will *never* forget this day. The day that I finally stood up to the people who believe in omnipotence. I finally stood up to those who wanted to give up responsibility. I embraced being independent and unique in a benevolent cosmos. And I gaze at this wonderful creation with a gleam in my eye. The world is so sweet when you make it look that way. It has much to offer and I am *living* it.

This is the end. The climax. He starts pulling my hair and thrusting with increased speed. The carpet’s colors become a whirl of infinite hues as my entire body starts to give in. My stifled screams become unhinged as I fall into a spotted wave of sensation between my thighs. The rapid high pulls me up by the breasts as I forget about the rug burn and hold onto the very nature of this moment. He cries out, relinquishing himself to my internal spasms of ecstasy. I have never felt so *alive*. We have *created* something today. The man in black and I have defiled Kant’s noumenal, omnipotent, anti-life world by reminding everyone what life means, entails, and *is*. It is those few moments of pleasure, a paragon of sensation and mental stimulation which gives humanity a reason to keep fighting. I *live* for pleasure. Not just any kind of pleasure though, the kind that is earned is

best – the kind of pleasure that stems from enjoying life to the fullest. And as cliché as that sounds, that is the lesson I decided to give to this class today.

He finishes inside me as my body shivers with joy. We both collapse into a pile of fatigued muscles, both of us gasping for the little air that seems to be left in this room. I shut my eyes for a few moments before allowing our act to be judged negatively, as it most likely will be. But in those few precious moments, time really did cease. Having sex *stopped* time. I just know it. I will always remember this day as being the longest one in the history of Man. A mere hiccup in the span of all time, but one that for me meant the *world*.

In that one span of time, I became both the art and the artist. My creation was mortal and beautiful. It ebbed and flowed into and out of existence, as most beautiful things do. A tinge of nostalgia washed over me as I thought about what just occurred and would most likely never happen again. (I am pretty sure we had just violated a few codes of conduct by doing this). But I have never regretted anything I have created in the past, so I refuse to do that now.

Slowly, we unlock from one another, standing up strong and tall for the point we had just made. Sliding back into our clothes, I try to be as graceful and representative as possible. I feel like I'm a contestant for Miss America and am obligated to be a role model right now for everyone involved in this great display of affection. I grab my bunched up panties from one side of the circle and my pants from another. I slide those up, along with my socks that have been half way down my heels for the past who-knows-how-long. I smell like passion. My nostrils are overwhelmed by the animalistic smell and I am aware that everyone else can smell it too. Everyone knows what we have done here, in classroom 306. *What will they tell their friends? Will they spread "the word?" Do they understand what all of this meant?*

If the answer is no, then they must think harder and longer about their entire schooling. They must think about what it would mean if children were taught that Man is a god, or that Man is wonderful, or that Man is not to be feared, or that Man is made to be *loved*. If the answer is yes, then they will stand up and cheer. They will have recognized this moment not as a hostile protest against philosophy, but against all of the Platonists – all of those who believe in the mystical.

As I swiftly pull down my shirt which was jammed up toward my neck, I watch my day-lover fixing his belt buckle. I approach him one last time to adjust his black t-shirt, the one he seems attached to, by pulling it down tight over his chest. That chest must have breathed in a thousand broken letters – all of them floating around inside his ribcage just trying to bring a full sentence to the surface.

But he does not realize that we do not need words for this lesson. Words attempt to capture this moment and preserve it, but the memory is all this room needs. Memory works like a painting, producing an image in one's mind that will never fade. This moment has said all that it needs to and I am confident that the image will not disappear from anyone's mind. I, being the artist, have used my art to remind people of their potential. This is not a dream, but a *reality*.

I finally look around at the faces in the room. Stephen, the guy who read the passage before break, had his eyes peeled wide open, a little drool exiting his clamped mouth. And another girl next to him unconsciously had let her jaw drop. About half of the students had left in disgust while the other half stayed in disbelief. In fact, staring back at us were all of these shocked faces, none of them seemed to understand. *Could they have possibly not gotten the point?* I try to hide the burning sensation surfacing underneath my fleshy cheeks.

Then, I glance again at my day-lover once more, hoping to find some comfort there. His look reassures me that this moment will be remembered and mulled over until people get it, whether they like it or not. Feeling surer of myself and our lesson, I see the last piece of evidence I need to know that this protest was a success. I examine my professor's face and work my way down – checking for any sign of a change. My revitalized sight rested on my professor's hands... which had



stopped quivering.

## XI

### Pathetic Apology No. 264

Dear Crystal,

My love, I am so sorry for my idiotic behavior last night. The whole night just slipped my mind really. I was drunk. I had been drunk since 4 o'clock – *way* before we were supposed to meet. My friends all came over and basically kidnapped me from my dorm. I had no *real* control over the situation and *I'm sorry* for that. But I also need some nights to myself – I need some “man time.” I know that is no excuse for missing your special day... but remember when you were an hour late that one time for one of our dates? It's not as bad, but still. I am always either on time or the meeting is off. I am always straight with you. *Please*, forgive me, babe.

Listen, I know you may be really upset with me for a few days, but things will get better, I promise. Why didn't you just text me to remind me that it was today? I mean, at least then in my drunken stupor I could have taken a cab to your place or told you to push it back a day. But you didn't do anything of the sort. Women. You all constantly feel the need to “test” men – to see if they'll ever show up to your “events.” Well, I'm not going to take that kind of treatment. You love me and I love you. We are simple creatures *together*. We don't celebrate everything-under-the-sun, because we don't need all those gifts to remind each other of our undying love.

Someday, you'll understand, dear – I know you will. But for now, just understand that I love you and I hope you still feel the same way. Our love is stronger than our tiny screw-ups. Please, try not to be *too* emotional about this. Emotions get in the way of reason. And you know that we both see reason as a virtue and emotions as a vice. So I made a mistake. *I'm sorry*. I will tell my friends to apologize too, if that makes you happy. I'll bring you some nice balloons and gifts tomorrow, as well. I can already see the bright, pretty little smile that my baby will have on when I next see you. Besides, by the time you get this letter, I am sure that you will be ready with open arms to forgive me. Anyway, I love you more than you'll ever know and it'll never happen again.

Sorry,  
*Robert*

## XII

### The Climax

“Oooo, ohhhh!” “Yes, that’s good.” “Harder, harder, HARDEERRRR!!!!” Little Ariel Kapowski walked in on her stepmother, Susan, and her father having sex. And not only were they having sex, but this sex involved whips, chains, ball-gags, paddles, and some rope.

As the bed was creaking, her stepmom was screaming and little Ariel glaring in horror. Running downstairs Ariel grabs the sharpest thing she can find on the marble-table top of the kitchen. Arming herself against her evil stepmother, Susan tries to calm Ariel down. But to Ariel, this was the last straw. *She’s not blood, she doesn’t belong in this family, that devil killed my brother. It just isn’t fair for her to take my father too.* Susan had to be stopped.

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Susan Jacobson, now “Mrs. Kopawski,” was a 23 year-old slut – according to the neighbors – who owned a tea shop named, Pixies. Its facade was just as “pretty” as Susan’s flesh. But behind the 3 coats of paint, there was a moldy, crusty, old wall. Yet the interior of the shop *paled* in comparison to this woman’s ugly soul. She was a hag in Barbie-doll clothing. Every day Susan would cake her face in makeup and walk out of the house in six-inch stilettos to work. The talk around town is that her feet have permanently molded into the shape of her pointy heels. Susan had inherited the tea shop from her dead grandmother. It was her one and only job. When people asked Susan if she would ever go to college and get a degree in business, she would always reply that her dream job was to be a good housewife with a rich husband to take care of her. She never wanted to work a day in her life. Yet the rent kept demanding more work from her – drying her pockets of all the potential manicures she could have gotten each month.

One day, Susan served a nice man named, Eric. Eric must have been in his 30s, but he looked filthy rich and was *moderately* “dark, tall, and handsome.” Susan eyed him a few times without even noticing the little girl holding onto his hand. Ariel, who had just turned 9, loved tea. Her new porcelain tea set was already waiting to be used back at home for the first time. As Susan continued to ignore little Ariel, Eric had reciprocated the flirtatious eyes of the “mysteriously-gorgeous-girl-behind-the-counter.” After a few late-night phone calls, some dinner dates, and a bunch of hotel “sleepovers,” Eric introduced Ariel to her new stepmother.

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Grasping even harder onto the knife, Ariel lifted it as a sign of strength and power over the vile creature she was *supposed* to call, “mom.” Ariel screamed, “Dad how could you?!” Eric, still fidgeting to pull his pants over his abandoned erection, ran downstairs to Susan’s side.

“Ariel, honey, put the knife down. Let’s talk.”

“Talk about what, dad?! You having sex with this...this *witch*?”

“Ariel! That’s rude, say you’re sorry to Susan.”

“But dad, you *betrayed* Kip. She doesn’t understand his death. She’s an outsider, don’t you get it?!”

“Sweetie, Susan had *nothing* to do with Kip’s death and you know that. If anything, I shouldn’t have let a 13 year-old kid hang out with a bunch of 16 year-olds! I was just happy he had friends!”

“Why didn’t *you* drive him to the party on the last day of school, instead of those drunken kids?!”

“I didn’t know, I didn’t know!” Eric starts tearing up.

“Yeah, well, now he’s *dead* and I’ve spent *all* summer trying to keep myself busy just to be able to forget it. I’m playing with my dolls and reading and biking just so I can *forget* it all! And you haven’t even noticed because you’ve been with *her* all summer!”

“I’m so sorry, dear...”

“I *miss* him. We used to do everything together and now I wake up feeling alone all the time. I’m scared.” Ariel starts weeping heavily while loosening her grip on the knife.

Meanwhile, Susan witnessing this whole scene tries to make sense of the soap opera before her. Looking at Eric, she calmly says, “I think we better leave her alone for a while.”

Ariel looks up, astounded at Susan the Monster. The *last* thing she wanted was to be alone. Ariel wanted her father *back*, but Susan tried to grab him from her once again. Yet, this realization went right over Eric’s head as he took hold of Susan’s sickeningly thin arm and pulled her away from Ariel.

Ariel, the only seemingly sane one left in the house decided to do something rather insane for once. Still holding onto the knife, she lunged toward Susan. Yanking on her golden locks of Barbie-doll hair she hacked at it with the kitchen knife. Ariel wanted revenge for her brother’s death – someone had to pay. Susan held onto her scalp and screamed in a wretched voice, “STOP, MY HAAIIIRRR!!” But it was too late. A giant clump of blonde hair lay at Ariel’s little feet. Eric, meanwhile, who was more concerned about Susan’s looks, grabbed ahold of Ariel in a moment of anger, and spanked her until her behind was as bright as a cherry tomato. “It’s not fair! I don’t want to be ALONE!!!” cried Ariel. Eric, now lowering his hand, started to feel sorry for his little girl whom he loved so much. But he just couldn’t understand all of the tears. At this point, Eric could only repeat that he was sorry over-and-over again, slowly curling up into himself. The women in his life had always hated him. Always. His first wife left him for someone less “ambitious,” his second wife only wanted him for his money, and now his poor daughter hated him for leaving her alone and being too preoccupied by “love’s arrow.” Eric felt defeated. Susan felt shortchanged. Ariel felt betrayed. Kip felt nothing – nothing at all.

## XIII

### Welcome Mat

Touching the plastic tabletop cover, Helen reached over her brother's arms to grab a piece of stiff pork from the porcelain plate. Her grandmother simultaneously shoved a barbecue sauce bottle in her hand, hoping that it would mask the fact that the pork was overcooked. The chewing sounds that each family member made were all audible. Her brother chews like a noisy cow, while her grandmother, aunt, and uncles attempted to chew more politely, but still ended up making munching noises that sounded like some poor animal was being ripped to pieces by its prey. Helen cuts smaller pieces, drowns the unfortunate mammal in barbecue, and focuses on severing the fatty pieces from the tougher ones. But she only ended up making her plate look like a war zone instead – although it is true that her chewing was more stifled than the others.

Inside her head, however, the chewing was violently loud. The thrashing sound her tongue made against the saliva-ridden chunk – her victim – made Helen feel bad. Yet, she swallowed it whole when her mouth told her brain it was finished. The automatic strain of cutting pieces, drowning them, and devouring them whole allowed her to express in some ways how she felt on the inside at that moment. For inside, her mind was shouting, “WHAT IS WRONG WITH EVERYBODY?!!! CAN'T SOMEONE JUST SAY IT – SAY *ANYTHING* AT ALL?!!!!” There was an “elephant in the room” every Christmas dinner, but her extended family pretended that it simply didn't exist. And so, Helen kept on eating...plotting out various routes of escape for when the screaming in her head would drive her to a solitary place, probably to vomit. *The nearest bathroom was just across from the kitchen, the nearest pillow was within the bedroom upstairs, the nearest way outside was past the living room which was behind the kitchen doorway.* This kind of plotting kept Helen quiet throughout the main course.

By the time all of the possible plans were realized, she noticed, in fact, that it was time for dessert. The finest Old English tea set was put out, accompanied by some crummy store-bought scones and stale-boxed chocolate biscotti's. Helen's grandmother, aunt, and uncles whipped out their newspapers and popular magazines which covered their faces, as Helen and her brother continued to sit in the now-crippling silence. This happened every year; the meal would be served, the chewing would ensue until Helen thought her family's jaws would all fall off and break the nice porcelain plates, and then the dessert with newspaper time would end the silent evening. *Merry Christmas*, says Helen as she tries every year to outrun her grandmother's fleshy-spit-covered-folds-of-skin-kisses. Helen's heart nearly erupted after each fleshy attack to her face. Throughout the dinner, Helen's palms would tremble and sweat and leave wet marks all over her silverware. Her chest would close up, just as the walls were around her. With every clock tick, her eyes would dilate just to be able to see her meal – for the kitchen remained a dark hole to her. Helen's mind would race, imagining escape plans and cursing her vocal chords once again for failing her. That failure resulted in extreme panic from within which could only be extinguished once she arrived back at school.

With the dessert portion coming to a close, (it always lasted about 30 minutes), Helen reached for her coat and quickly walked to the front door. Her family members pulled her by the shoulders in some sort of quick, awkward embrace of affection accompanied by a few short, empty pecks. Her grandmother was always last, and with tears in her beady little eyes she said, "I love you." And Helen walked out the door to vomit on her newly bought Welcome mat.

**XIV**

**The Sales Pitch**

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

**GRANT CARNOT**.....a realtor at Happy Housing, Inc. and a gruff-n-tough man who is focused solely on his work for his own sake, 34 years old  
**SOPHIA WAKEFIELD**.....a marketer at Kixton Housing, Inc., a jealously-calculating woman who wants to see her career blossom simply for looks, 31 years old

**TIME:** It is late fall of 2014 in New York. The skyline has a wintery aura to it and the shops below seem icy.

**SETTING:** Upstage area suggests a beautiful view of New York City. There is a large apartment-looking window which has the view painted onto it. The sunrise is starting to shine between the skyscrapers. Downstage area has a queen-sized bed and a desk that is full of papers. The papers are stacked in piles and some of them are in crunched up wads on the floor. It looks like a bachelor pad of sorts. The apartment is owned by GRANT, but a bra and other feminine items are strewn around the room – suggesting that he has been sleeping with a woman for quite some time. This woman is SOPHIA, a jealous and reputation-seeking businesswoman who thinks she’s in charge.

***ACT ONE***  
**SCENE 1**

*(AT RISE we see GRANT, who is 34 years old, in his apartment bedroom, sitting at his desk. He is furiously writing something down on his mound of papers. GRANT uses several different fountain pens to sign his documents. Meanwhile, SOPHIA, who is 31 years old, enters from stage right. GRANT does not look up to see her.)*

SOPHIA

Are you going to even look at me anymore?

GRANT

Hmmm?

*(GRANT sounds distracted and is still scribbling away. SOPHIA has an annoying nasally voice which he prefers to ignore.)*

SOPHIA

I *saaaaid*, are you going to even look at me when I come over anymore? You know I used to be your most prized possession, Grant. I own a drawer here now. I still love you. Grant?

*(Pause. SOPHIA sighs loudly)*

GRANT

Sophia, can we talk about this later? You can have my full attention tonight *after* work.

SOPHIA

But that's what you keep telling me. You keep pushing our "talk" back. Wednesday, you said "Let's talk after dinner." Thursday, it was "let's have sex first, honey." It's now Friday, and you're telling me "Let's talk after work." Do you love me anymore?

*(Another pause. GRANT puts his pen down and looks at SOPHIA)*

GRANT

Fine, we can talk about this right here and now, before I even go to work. So, why are you nagging me? Haven't I told you that I love you enough? How come you feel so insecure now?

*(GRANT stands up and puts his arms around SOPHIA's waist)*

SOPHIA

I feel "so insecure now," *Grant*, because ever since you became a realtor for Happy Housing Inc. and that one "cursed" property piece, you've practically forgotten my existence! You know I have a job too, but that doesn't suck up all *my* time.

GRANT

That's not true. Sure, since I've made it my goal to sell this "cursed" house, I have been working my hardest. But that will all pay off. Don't you understand that I love my job?

*(GRANT starts to get angry and his fists clench around her)*



SOPHIA

Ha! And I don't? Besides, it feels like you love your job now more than *me*. . . . I mean, you fall asleep every night exhausted. You toss and turn in your sleep thinking about ways to sell this house. You wake up in the morning with tired eyes.

*(GRANT lets go of SOPHIA and sits back down on the edge of the bed. GRANT looks out of the window onto the NYC skyline)*

Do you even realize that the very first thing you mention to me in the morning is how “ready you are to make the sale?” You spend the day getting ready for work in the apartment and then at your office. And in your office, your hands touch all of the fountain pens you own. Your mind pays attention to every dollar sign out there. Your arms cradle the very documents that hold your sales records together. You hold the living proof of your success in your smile. You live, breathe, and eat in the name of Happy Housing Inc. Can't you see that your customers are your lovers and not *me*?!

GRANT

You know that I'm doing this for us. I –

*(SOPHIA cuts GRANT off mid-sentence and she stands up and wags a finger in his face)*

SOPHIA

No, don't give me any of that “us” bullshit anymore. I am so sick and tired of you ignoring me! You are working for yourself and no one else! You don't care about me or anyone else who isn't a paying customer.

*(SOPHIA storms out on stage left)*

GRANT

You're being irrational! And yes, you have a job of your own, but you don't care about it like I do. We can talk about this when I get home.

*(Curtain)*

## SCENE 2

*(AT RISE we see SOPHIA, who is dabbing her eyes with a tissue on stage left. She is right outside of GRANT's apartment door. Meanwhile, GRANT is pacing back and forth across his bedroom, mumbling to himself while putting on his clothes.)*

GRANT

I'll show her my love.....(*mumbles*)....No "us," ha!.....(*coughs*).....Ridiculous woman....

Come now, Sophia! I can still hear you outside my door. Can we resolve this now? I'm not going back to work with you in this state. You're being *unreasonable*.

SOPHIA

Oh, am I, Grant? All I wanted was some time together. Why worry about your job when you already have the money and the fame? I just don't get it! Love is so much more important.

GRANT

Yes, but for your information, I work so hard because I *love* working with *people* and making *homes* out of houses. I can make four walls feel magical. Heck, I can weave my imagination into the fibers of the carpet and the paint in the walls. People can see themselves *living* in these homes when I speak to them. My boss just can't see it. Do you know how many days I wish I could quit because I am not getting the recognition that I deserve at this corporation? But it puts food on the table and gets us nice things.

(*GRANT is buttoning up his shirt and lets SOPHIA enter from stage left again into his bedroom*)

SOPHIA

I already have nice things, Grant. I'm the rich one here. But money doesn't matter to me, you know that. My marketing career at Kixton Housing Inc. *does*, but only because my name is etched onto a door in that building – my name is in the directory. I also work just as hard as you do, if not, *more* for that kind of reputation.

GRANT

But darling, don't you know what you're working for?

(*Long pause.*)

SOPHIA

Well, for myself of course, my reputation is at stake. But that doesn't make me a shallow asshole to everyone, like *you*.

(*GRANT winces at that comment and zips up his pants with frustration*)

GRANT

I am not cold, shallow, or irrationally self-absorbed. I work for myself, because it brings me pleasure. And there is no one who can take that away from me...not even the woman I'm just *screwing*.

Urgency: An Anthology of Short Stories

*(SOPHIA, who was standing in front of GRANT while he was getting dressed, now gives him a look of complete astonishment and squints her eyes. Something in SOPHIA's mind has changed.)*

SOPHIA

You know, I could have just slapped you so hard right now, because that's a lie. *You're* the one being irrational now. And seeing as I am an intelligent, strong woman I won't play along with your stupid games. Although, I must say, I am very disappointed in you...and I will *ruin* your chances of selling this "cursed" property. You have never failed to make a sale, until now.

*(SOPHIA throws her tissue on the floor and starts to walk away toward stage right)*

GRANT

Was that a threat? Look, I would never sabotage your chances at a career. Why act so viciously? Maybe I was wrong about you. You really don't know what working for yourself feels like. Not really. You're just concerned about your looks and reputation, little rich girl. Hear this, Sophia. I *will* sell this place no matter what. You can't stop me.

*(GRANT puts his index finger in SOPHIA's face)*

SOPHIA

I can and I will. All I need to do is make a few phone calls.

*(SOPHIA slams the door again in GRANT's face)*

*(Curtain. End)*

## XV

### A Teenage Philosopher Defends Missing Her Curfew

Hi, mom...hi, dad. Wait, wait, wait! Listen. I know that I missed my curfew and I'm sorry, but I can give you a valid, ontological proof for why this all is *okay*.

You see, I met someone. She's in my class, you know, Philosophy 101, and she and I spent the evening arguing in the library over certain antinomies in philosophical discourse. I was *fascinated* by her lack of knowledge in the area and made it my goal to inform her of the paradoxical nature of Kant's view on pure reason in his *Critique*. I mean, she started off the night not even understanding what "noumena" meant. Can you believe it?!

Anyway, we had walked from school to the public library at 4 o'clock and talked all the way to midnight. At one point, I thought my head would explode. You know that Socrates believed that we learn through discourse? He also thought that "the eyes were windows to the soul." Ever heard of that cliché? That's an old one! I was using my precious time, my precious evening to discuss *philosophy*. And it felt so good!

Please, mom...dad. Look at it as just an extension of the school day. My new friend and I had a lot to learn from each other and I really am sorry for missing dinner and worrying both of you. "Time flies when you're having fun!" (Yet another sorry cliché, ha-ha!)

So here's my ontological proof: If A (which stands for Me) plus B (which stands for Time) equals C (which stands for Learning), then that means that I learn more, the more time I spend on such affairs. My entire being relies on time in order to bring myself closer to the truth. Did you know that William James, a very important American Pragmatist, thought that there were multiple truths and realities, not just one absolute? What do you think? My friend claims that that is metaphysically impossible, but I'm on the fence.

Mom, dad, are you starting to understand now? My curfew is simply arbitrary in the face of learning. I must be making a million neuronal connections, my synapses firing, with the amount of stuff I'm learning in a day. What kind of parents would stop their child from learning about the cosmos?

I am currently trying to tackle 5 main areas of Objectivism. The first one is metaphysics, the second is epistemology, the third is ethics, the fourth is esthetics, and the fifth is politics. By answering those branches, I will be that much closer to the truth! Isn't that exciting?!

Who could keep their daughter away from the search to discover the truth? The meaning of life? Whhhoooo? Right now, the world revolves around the "philosopher kings," according to Plato. I desire to be one of those people! Who needs sleep when the world revolves around you?!

Please, don't look at me like I'm nuts. I'm a teenager. I've got my whole life ahead of me! I'm so tired of living under your rules. Curfews are made up to oppress teens! They are obstacles which kill my time, halt my search, and dash off my youth!

I promise to try and get home before curfew, however, if I feel that my learning is being jeopardized by this nonsensical time obstruction then I won't come home on time. Is that alright? I think it's only fair. I could even text you that I'm going to be late. After meeting this new friend, I feel more-and-more like I could learn and grow just from being in her presence. No, she doesn't know everything, at least nothing about Kant, but she certainly knows a lot more about the Existentialists than I do.

I told her that Existentialism seems like a pretty pessimistic philosophy, but she assured me that it is actually quite optimistic. She thinks that being completely alone and on your own in the universe is really freeing. You create your own life. I guess if you look at it that way, she's right. Existentialism gives agency and a sense of free-will back to humanity.

Do you two ever discuss philosophy? I mean, past my curfew? Imagine if you two were entranced in a riveting conversation about life, time, space, or the universe itself. Now, would you want to be *disrupted* from that sort of intellectual high by some mightier authority figures telling you to go to sleep? Of course not!

Look, as I said before, I am willing to warn you two when I will be late in the future. Okay? Why do you both still look mad at me? A curfew is totally baseless, it means nothing! I just want you two to see it from my perspective. I realize that I am only a teenager and that I live in your house, under your rules, blah-blah-blah. But...but...philosophy is everything!

I think it is really unfair of you to ground me. All you're doing is stifling my hungry mind. Sure, I have books I can read in my room, but I get so much more out of talking philosophy with other people! Come on!

I don't understand it really. I gave you two a perfectly sound argument for why missing curfew was acceptable. If I was doing drugs or playing games, like most normal teens do past curfew, then you would have a case. But learning at the library with a friend? You're being unreasonable!

Alright, alright, *fine*. You two can "sleep on it." Hopefully, after you psychoanalyze your dreams tomorrow, you'll see that I'm right. My ego or "I" plus time always equates to learning more. And that equation is utterly destroyed by your non-metaphysical-non-epistemological-non-ethical-non-aesthetical-non-political curfew!!!

## XVI

### The Veiled Übermensch

One early May morning, Marilyn had to run some errands. She arose tired, feeling the monotonous weight from the previous night's chores on her eyelids. Lying next to her was her hard-working husband, James. He had been injured in Okinawa and was not too long ago sent back to his home-base, where he slowly pulled his career back together as an accountant. Marilyn admired him. She smiled, as she remembered him bending down on one knee, his nose still all bandaged up, asking for her young hand in marriage. Tracing the slightly elevated line that cut across his nose now, she watched him sleep. His blond, bed-hair curling softly around his pale, little ear. Even after all the horrible things he must have seen, he still looked like a child. Every eyelash was defined and separated – always moving with his twitching eyelids. His harshly-built nose looked drawn on, too sharp to be real against the fluffy white pillows. The blue blankets just barely covered his rising and falling chest. He was a battered and bruised dream.

Careful not to wake him, she slid herself out from beneath the covers and stepped into her fuzzy red slippers beside the bed. Trying to avoid the cool floor tiles beneath her, she made sure that her feet were securely placed in each slipper. She took her time tip-toeing toward the kitchen to start making breakfast. Of course, the dishes in the sink all had to be dealt with first.

Still trying not to make too much noise, Marilyn only slightly turned the faucet on – its drops became a steady stream of water. She placed a generous amount of soap on the yellow sponge she picked up which still had flecks from last night's meal on it. Suds multiplied as she rubbed each dish clean to the point of perfection. The dishes were returned to their original state of purity when she washed them. She couldn't say the same for when her husband had to do the dishes. She would point out the specks still left on them, to which James would reply: "It's not in a man's nature to clean things until they're spotless." But Marilyn had made it an art. Each dish forgot what it was used for to create yesterday's meals. They were all given a nice rinse, patted dry with a soft cloth that smelled of spring, and then placed back into their proper homes.

But this morning, Marilyn felt that the sink could not contain all of the dishes its mouth held. In fact, the kitchen itself was cluttered and darker than usual. Strategically placing the large plates on the bottom, and the cups on top, with the silverware lining the outside lip of the sink, she began scrubbing away at the grime. Grime, in general, made Marilyn's heart pound. She felt the home was always battling this unrecognized disease of accumulating dirt, and she felt that when she *did* fight the spreading illness head-on she was ignored. It was consuming her very soul. Picking up one plate after another, she pulled too quickly and one of the glass cups fell sideways. *Clink!*

"Oh, no!"

Quickly setting down the plate, she checked the cup to see if it had cracked. Biting her lower lip as she turned the cup over as a large piece of glass fell away from the surrounding puzzle pieces. "Damn it..." A second passed, and Marilyn picked up the sponge – vigorously scrubbing the parts

of the cup still intact. Marilyn could hear James' footsteps in the hall.

"Baby, are you okay?" said James while rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine, love. Just fine..."

Marilyn moved on to scrubbing the shards of cup.

"Ouch!" she said, as a jagged piece of it dug into her flesh.

She dropped the cup on the floor, which shattered into a puzzle too difficult to solve. Her body bent under the weight. Picking up the various slivers, she started to cry. Her fragile body shivered, giving way to the sobs that were welling up inside of her petite frame since she came into the kitchen.

"What did you do? Drop a cup? That's okay, I'll go buy another one later," said James as he walked into the kitchen.

"Yes, dear. I dropped it like a fool. I'm sorry."

Marilyn gently wiped a tear from her cheek, carefully dabbing below her eye to avoid causing premature wrinkles. A ruined face would be truly tragic.

"Well, you're going to the grocery store soon, why don't you just buy a new cup there?" he proposed.

"Yes, I suppose I could do that when I'm there. I'll take a trip to the store before breakfast – it's only 6 o'clock."

She placed a hand on the floor and slowly pushed herself up. Walking back to the bedroom, she picked out her dress for the day and put it on. Her cotton dress unfolded each pleat as she walked with a sad kind of dignity. Afterwards, she dolled up her face with black mascara and some cherry red lipstick. Picking up her small purse, she gave James a peck on the cheek and walked out of the house.

Marilyn's skirt flew up on her way to the grocery store to buy some soup. One time, a man walked behind her and offered to hold the door open for her when she entered the store. Little did she know, he just wanted to see her checkered underwear peek out from beneath her dress as she walked into the draft that came between the first and second aisle. But she knew that he made a conscious decision to be chivalrous that day. Even she felt her own fragility, and *liked* it. She couldn't blame him for appreciating the little things in life.

Marilyn walked everywhere, because she was never taught how to drive. Her parents did not believe that women should. But she never minded – they lived close enough to the store and all that walking was good for her anyway. Still, she couldn't help feeling a bit helpless during her grocery shopping endeavors, especially with four bags hanging from her arms while trekking back home.

Upon entering Rick's Grocery Store, her heart began to prep for the race it was about to win. Grocery shopping had always been a race – get in and get out, *fast*. There were too many fussy mothers, with babies being pushed in grocery carts. They all seemed to give her the same look – one of tired dismay. It horrified Marilyn for some reason. Perhaps, they too felt unappreciated at home. Looking down, she couldn't read the list she had between her bony fingertips, because they were shaking so much.

*I can't do this. I have to find a restroom. Just breathe. Restroom? There, I think I see one. Thank goodness. What if I had passed out? What if I appeared weak? Who knows what friends I may find shopping in here today?* Marilyn breathed, her skirt still in place, and walked out of the restroom with new vigor. She could do this. *How hard is shopping, really?*

Glancing back down at the carefully constructed shopping list, she walked toward the soup aisle. She always bought the canned foods before the fresh ones. There was something about ending on a fresh, natural tone that made her feel better. She listened to the small horse-clicks that her high heels made and she rolled her shopping cart down the right aisle – the flickering from the fluorescent lights made her feel dizzy. Picking up speed, the reds and blues of the cans started to

blur. She just wanted to get to the Campbell's products. *There are so many choices. Too many.* Biting her left thumbnail, her hazel eyes skimmed the row of Campbell's soup – picking up the Hearty Beef Soup and then the Home-style Chicken Noodle Soup. She could not choose one. She wasn't hungry. Her lips trembled.

Shoving the soups back onto the shelves, and knocking a few of the smaller, hand-sized jugs of soup onto the ground she turned and left the store as quickly as she'd come. Marilyn's heart crossed the finish line once outside of the steel-framed doors of the store.

Marilyn slowed down her pace only once she reached her home. Pulling out her keys, the frustration mounted as the key would not fit into the hole – her hands were too inebriated to make it in. The lock began to move on its own, and she thought she had lost it. She had finally gone crazy. Her chin dropped and once she raised it, she was face-to-face with the checkered pattern of James' shirt. He smelled like fresh linen. His furrowed brows looked like two caterpillars kissing, gently coying up to one another until they had to part again.

“What's wrong, dolly?”

“I didn't get the groceries...or the glass cup.”

“You looked stressed. Look, it's okay, we'll just go out for dinner tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, dear.”

James' muscular hand touched her tense face – the blue veins popped out of his thin skin. Marilyn wondered whether those veins would look as powerful when he was old. His skin would sag, and like yellowed paper it would crinkle. Sun spots would cover his beloved hands, and those veins would swell and dictate where the skin would fall around them – and not the other way around.

James then grabbed her hand gruffly and that reassurance made her smile. She felt safe in his tight clasp, he was her foundation. He took the lead as he led her to the car. Opening the door for her, she got in. He took the wheel and they went to a diner for breakfast. The crowd usually consisted of elderly married couples. They did not belong. Marilyn tried listening to James discuss his work, she really did. But her mind kept disengaging, and thinking about other things. Her chaotically-anxious mind finally decided to cling onto that throbbing pain she was experiencing in her side at the moment. *What is causing that pain? It's so sharp, perhaps I pulled something? Oh-no, now I feel nauseous. How do I tell James without making him worry? I have to find a restroom to calm down...*

“I just can't understand this man, he wants me to give him a check for—“

“Excuse me, love.”

“Yes? What is it, I was just about to get to the real meat of the story.”

“I know, but I need to use the restroom.”

“Oh, sure. I'll wait here and man the food until you come back.”

“Thanks,” said Marilyn, giving her best fake smile. Getting up, her dress felt as heavy as chainmail which made her woozy. Her heels were sinking into the ground from the weight, making her stand still in place. James gave her a funny look as she struggled to move forward.

Finally reaching the restroom, she took out her lipstick and drew a wiggly line over her mouth. Her face was ruined. The morning was ruined. *Everything, just ruined.*

She reached for a paper towel, and without putting water on it, began vigorously rubbing her lips with it. This aggressive scraping soon moved from her lips to her cheeks, and her chin, and her eyelids, and then her forehead. Placing the towel down, and staring back at herself into the mirror, Marilyn saw the raw, red complexion she had kept hidden.

She wanted a job.

She walked toward James, who was combing his slick, blond hair back. His nose was still just a bit too animated to be real against the restaurant's curtains.



"I think I want a job," said Marilyn.

"You have a job – it's in the home," said James, cutting into his morning toast and eggs.

"You don't appreciate the job that I do there. I feel like I need something *more*."

James looked up at her. "Sure, I appreciate your work."

"No, you don't. You think that buying a new cup or soup is so easy. That scrubbing the greased-up stove is child's play. That making sure your things are back in order when you come home is the work of magic."

"Calm down. I understand your frust- "

"No, James, I feel like you don't."

"Well, what kind of job would you like? You only finished high school, and they mostly taught you typing."

"Yes, so I was thinking about becoming a secretary. Anything. I just need to get out of this house. *Please?*"

"Well...alright, I want you to be happy, baby. *But* I also want the house still functioning," he said with an arched brow.

"Don't you worry, I'm sure that I can manage both. Thank you, dear."

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Marilyn woke up that early June morning for her first day of work. The previous week she had circled the ad for it in the newspaper and called the number on the house telephone. She was given an interview the next day, and wore her nicest dress which seemed to have worked on the male interviewer who kept staring at her legs the entire time. She woke up excited for her first day of work.

Again, she tried not to wake her sleeping soldier. His eyes doing their twitching dance as usual, his blond hair that would never gray, his large lips that were just meant for the sensual. She bent forward to kiss James' pale forehead. He was not at fault for not seeing her quietly suffer these past few years, he was her crutch at times, that she needed to lean on no longer.

Gathering her things, hands shaking, she walked over to Coverly Road where there was a government office that needed a secretary. Pushing through a door that had gold letters etched into it, she walked through it, closing her eyes. She immediately came upon the front desk, where a rather large old woman sat. Her face made into a grimace, she looked the young, twenty-five-year-old Marilyn up and down. Her eyes scanning for one defective part to make fun of to no avail. She looked perfect. Disgusted, the woman pointed gruffly at Mr. Thompson's door. He was to show Marilyn to her cubicle and give her a brief tour of the office as the boss of this department.

"Ah, nice to meet you...Marilyn? Is that right?" said Mr. Thompson.

"Yes, that's correct, sir." She tried to stay calm, but her elevated voice gave her away.

"Marilyn, imagine this as a home away from home. We have family and friends in these cubicles. We talk, and laugh, and work. Then, by five, or sometimes four, if you're higher-up, you get to leave this all behind ya!" Mr. Thompson gave her a wink.

"Oh, well that sounds fun. But I'd also like to produce the best work possible for this office," said Marilyn.

"Slow down there, don't have a cow! We don't have that much work for you. Besides, why fuss over a few transcripts and some paperwork every day?"

"Mr. Thompson, I *like* working. It's mostly been housework – but I'm good at it and I think those skills can translate into anything I set my mind to."

"Ha! Alright, so you're one of the ambitious ones. We'll have to watch you." And with that, Mr. Thompson pointed her to her cubicle in the center of the room.

Marilyn felt lighter now, walking to her *own* desk. She could breathe – feeling lighter and less constricted somehow. It made her jittery. She skimmed through the small pile of papers

forming on her desk, fingering each one with grace. She glanced around the small cube. Although there were no windows nearby, she still had a little fluorescent light over the desk itself. The walls of the cubicle were a dark blue fabric, push pins from the previous person were left stuck in it. Some “To Do” lists covered the sides of the panels. Within the cubicle, she had a small black chair and a nice oak desk with a typewriter set in the middle. Marilyn looked at the lists of things to do, and began. She focused her entire mind on these few menial, paperwork-related tasks. And in a matter of a few hours, as opposed to the days these papers were meant to take her, she finished. Calling Mr. Thompson over, she looked up with joy – only to be met with a sour face.

“Listen Marilyn, I appreciate the enthusiasm, I *really* do. But you just can’t work this quickly.” He drew in closer to her ear. “You’re making other employees look bad, ya dig?”

“I...w-what?” She had never heard of such a thing before. Her chainmail dress began to form again. She breathed heavily.

“Sir, I’m not sure that I understand. This was easy, and I wasn’t *really* working my fastest. Please, sir, I came here to make a difference – to *do* something.”

“That’s lovely, sweetheart. But not how this office – or any other – works. You walk around, talk with some of your peers for a bit, dabble with the coffee grinder in the staff lounge, then come out here to work on one piece at a time.”

“But that’s so inefficient. I mean...at that rate, I might as well take half the pay, sir.”

Marilyn stared in complete loss at her typewriter. In her life, she had always been told to work *more*. Mr. Thompson gave her a quick shrug and said, “That’s just how it is,” before turning around and heading back toward his office.

A few minutes later, Derek, the man in the neighboring cubicle started laughing. Poking his head around to see her, he gawked and then pulled himself together.

“Let me guess, you’re a housewife who thinks that working a ‘real gig’ is some sort of noble quest.”

“I mean...I suppose you could put it like that...”

“I think you’ll learn pretty quickly here that that isn’t the case. You see, men inhabit these god-awful cubicles all over the world. We live in them for half our lives, slaving away for our women and our children. Some of us also have hour-long commutes. Have you ever watched the tired and bored, the soulless and the weak try to ride on the train back and forth from work? There’s no light in their eyes – men just can’t wait to run out of their tiny hells and back into the comfort of their clean, bright homes.”

“I never saw it like that. My husband doesn’t seem to mind his commute, and he certainly loves his job...”

“Sure, some have it better than others. But he’s probably just faking it. Your husband is only smiling because he has *you* at home. Do you have children?”

“No, we don’t, but someday we may have some.”

“Well, then he just loves coming home to his wife, and his comfortable home. But believe me, he comes home with a bit more of his soul missing every day. He may have sweat spots under his arms one evening, the next a single gray hair, and before you know it, sunken eyes and a beer belly.”

“I take good care of him, and he has never come home disheveled or unhappy before.” Frustrated with her coworker, Marilyn turned her chair around only to be greeted by the other worker behind her.

“Sorry to barge in, but I overheard your conversation. I’m Sue, but my friends call me Candy. Good to finally see another woman in this office.” Sue gave a similar wink to Mr. Thompson which sent chills up Marilyn’s frail arms.

“Are *you* able to work well in this office, Sue? Am I really working too fast?”

“Tell you the truth, honey, sounds like you’re going to put us all out on the street soon. I have a feeling that you’ll be let go in a couple of weeks. You can’t work yourself to death. Now I have a question for you. Why leave your housewife gig? If you don’t mind me asking, are you poor or something?”

Surprised by the question, she cleared her throat before speaking.

“No, my husband and I are not poor. I chose to get a job because staying in the house all day was making me...crazy.”

“Well, I bet that in three weeks you’ll go crazy right here in this cubicle. *Good luck.*”

Marilyn’s chainmail dress came back on in full force, and as she stood up to get some air, she fainted.

Blinking several times, she opened her eyes a bit. She felt a breeze, and saw the brown cuff of Mr. Thompson’s suit jacket. The hazy figures became one and she realized that she was lying down on the office carpet, right next to her cubicle.

“Marilyn, please go home and get some rest. Come in tomorrow if you’re feeling better,” said Mr. Thompson.

“Oh, no I’m fine. Really.”

“Go,” Mr. Thompson said.

She packed up her purse and lunch bag, and walked out of the office wondering if she would be allowed to return tomorrow.

Back at home, James had the day off for once, so he had decided to prepare a congratulatory dinner for his wife’s new job. He thought this would help, carefully folding the fine cloth the way his previous supervisor had taught him. *First fold the right triangle over to the left and then...*

Marilyn came in, trembling through her thin suit jacket – her chainmail dress wearing her down with every step she took. He thought that she looked ten inches smaller than this morning.

“What happened, love?”

“Work.”

“It didn’t go well?”

“No.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She pushed a piece of brunette hair behind her ear and took a seat at the celebratory table, sighing.

“My boss doesn’t want me to do my best. He doesn’t want me to work harder...just slower. Painfully slower. My coworkers feel threatened by me. The previous one, Sue or whatever her name is, just told me that I’d go crazy in my cubicle after three weeks. I’m *scared.*”

Slowly Marilyn’s face scrunched up and she started to weep. Loud tears came splashing down all over her jacket. She couldn’t hide her feelings anymore. She felt trapped – unable to breathe.

James kneeled down by his wife’s side.

“Baby, working isn’t a joyride either. I’m told the same thing sometimes. Granted, I’m not working a secretarial gig. But even accountants are told not to work so hard. We spend much of our lives there, so we try to make the best of it and live a little. That doesn’t mean that I don’t feel fulfilled or not busy. Besides, why do you think that I have other hobbies on the side, like fishing? I use those hobbies to bide my time, and just...well, *cope.*”

She looked into her husband’s eyes. They were such a clear blue, but something about them looked a bit dulled – not like a dead fish, but close. Maybe he *was* losing a bit of his soul, for her.

“James, I had no idea. I...I mean...why can’t we change that?”

He smiled. “You mean, why can’t we change how jobs are structured nowadays? I ask

myself that all the time. I often blame the Commies or the Japs, but it's also just human nature. Most people go to work, and they see it as a chore, so they work the least amount for the most amount of money. Simple economics. But then there are those few people who *never* lose the spark that they had in their youth. Those people are the leaders, the soldiers, the ones who see their job as an opportunity, who work harder than the amount they oftentimes earn. But those people are *so* rare, Marilyn. We can't change anything without them, but there just aren't enough of them. And so we just sit and wait."

"But why would you wait? You'll never accomplish anything if you don't say something. I'll go to our governor, I'll take this issue to court!"

James brushed his slick blond hair back, while he continued to smile to himself.

"Do you think something is *funny*?" she said.

"No love, I just admire you. You're an angel, and that's why I chose to marry you. You didn't think that I saw that spark hidden there inside you? You didn't think that I noticed how my slippers are always in the right spot by morning, or that our stovetop is always squeaky clean, or even those delicately-made meals you make? But I did, and I kept it hidden from the world, I wanted it all to myself – that diligent work ethic of yours. I didn't want anyone to blow it out. But it seems like today, they tried."

Marilyn blinked. She had never known that he saw her passions, her anxieties, her thoughts. She assumed that he didn't recognize her work around the house. Yet he did, he saw it all. He saw her battle against the grime that now filled both her home *and* her workplace. Marilyn fought on her own scale, but it was one that was appreciated by *all* the innovators of the world, like James. She suddenly felt very naked in her own skin.

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Marilyn returned to work for the next three weeks – fighting all the way. She awoke as usual. She worked on her daily chores, made her husband and herself lunch to take to work, and then slipped out at eight-thirty to walk to the office. Now, Mr. Thompson's winks made her feel like he had a nervous tick instead of a self-confidence that filled the room. Her coworkers started to ignore her, but she did catch them glancing at her every now and then – probably wondering when she was going to crack. Waiting. Praying that they wouldn't lose their jobs before her. Her coworkers began telling Mr. Thompson about all of the paperwork that she seemingly filled out incorrectly – hoping that somewhere she would mess up. But she worked at the same pace, regardless. Typing until her hands throbbed with pain, she continued to get a week's worth of paperwork done in a day. Her head ached by the evening, and she could feel her anxious thoughts creeping up in her conscious mind about feeling trapped. She tried to shove them out by repeating her mantra words – relax, relax, *relax* – but they were becoming too strong. Her anxiety started to control her life again, and she watched as her cubicle began to shrink around her. She was sealed airtight in this box, leaving no more room for oxygen. Mr. Thompson called her into his office at the end of the third week.

"You're fired," he said. "I've told you multiple times already to *slow down*. Do you see this form that you filed? It's not filled out correctly, at all. That's what happens when you become too hasty with your work – you end up doing a *sloppy* job. Sorry, but you'll need to have all of your stuff packed up and out by this afternoon."

Marilyn stood up, her legs turning to jelly, but she tried to ignore it. It was clear to her in that moment that her coworkers must have filled out a document incorrectly and passed it off as her work. She would have *never* made such a foolish mistake. They had simply wanted her gone. The demons in her head snickered, but she pushed them aside as much as she could. She didn't lose anything, they did. She was also *free* from the constant harassment and isolation that the office brought her. She was *free* from the dirty winks and fake smiles. She was *free* from the grime that she could not scrub off her work – there were no clean files here. Picking up her little purse and her

home-made lunch, she touched the typewriter one last time, and closed the golden-letter door behind her.

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The next morning, Marilyn woke up to the sound of birds chirping outside of her window. Glancing over at her warm husband, she gently glided her hand over his stubble-covered cheek. James turned away, and she was sorry that she had disturbed his sound sleep. Kissing him on the back, she got up and put her slippers on. She wrapped a robe around herself and walked into the sunbathed kitchen. The room looked more spacious than ever, its cream wallpaper absorbed the sun and reflected it back into the luminous room. The plates didn't look nearly as daunting or as dirty. The white floor tiles were pleasantly dotted with sunspots. She walked to the sink and picked up the first dish with her left hand, and the soapy sponge in her right. Then, with the dishes done, she moved to the fridge, arranging and rearranging all of its contents – and finally made some toast and tea for James and herself. Watching the steam from the tea unfurl in the sunlight made her want to cry. Her anxieties were at bay, at least for now, and she felt *whole*. Her mind finally stayed in the moment. She breathed in the silence, and let the world move on.

Marilyn sat on a kitchen stool and envisioned a world in which someday leaders with that youthful spark would come and rid the world of all the grime. They would see opportunities and use them as the fuel that would keep this world *clean*. One day, people would smile and wink sincerely. People would cheer for hard work and strive for perfection, and then she would be able to breathe for the first time. That would be her cure – *her* time. Marilyn would please her husband, keep her flame alive, and wait for the revolution.

## XVII

### A Letter to Mr. Rilke

Washington, D.C.  
September 23, 2015

Dear Mr. Rilke,

Your words brought pleasure and a keen sense of power to my ears as I read your letters to Mr. Kappus aloud. Although, I believe you have a bit of a collectivist and mystical streak to you and your thoughts on writing those were minor in the face of the other pieces of wisdom you shared in your letters.

To me, the author feels this *urgent* need (as you said) to write. It is a “necessity.” I desire to share my experience with the world. But the main pleasure that I gain from writing derives from this notion of “tasting life twice.” I feel this way every time I am compelled to slow down and absorb a particular moment in the world that strikes me. I forever commit those moments to memory when I write them down. And in that way, I become immortal in my solitude.

“To walk inside [myself] and meet no one for hours” in the quietude is why I almost always desire to write from home. My new abode is free from distractions. I do not have a TV or any other unnecessary electronics. I keep everything minimal, so that I am able to focus my entire being on my thoughts and the page in front of me. In the organized space, my mind de-clutters from the day and I am left to my sweet solitude, where my imagination can fill that empty space in the room. And in that way, I am never alone.

I aim to keep and create a world that I want to live in – both externally and internally to the page. My readers get an “inside look” into that ideal world and can *choose* to do what they will with that knowledge. I continue to write though, with or without my readers, because I overflow with thoughts without release. My ideas must be engaged with because they *are* unique and special. I also enjoy being able to read what I have written later as more of a reader than a writer. My creations are precious and completely mine.

I have ownership over my work, my thoughts, and my words. I am to stir the emotions and stimulate the mind with them. I write to unload and relish in the beauty that body and mind perceive on earth.

Yours,

Kaitlyn Lansing

## XVIII

### A Woman is a Vessel

I am a vessel.

I am born a feminine figure with the grace to match it. But I fear that this honor is not valued anymore. This is why I must tell the story of three women. One, a baby, who is full of vitality and potential – the other, a student, who has allowed herself to become the cynical victim – the final, an old woman, who allowed hate to seep right into her marrow and sit there for ages. For each of these women I fear for what they are unable to see about themselves.

And who am I? The skin on my heels rounds off so well to support my feet. Delicate callouses pad the three areas of support. They allow me to arch and flex and dance with masterful control. The muscles in my legs give me the mind to stretch right through the floor while pulling the string up from my head to the ceiling. I play the instrument well.

My body balances and I treat it with respect. Layers of fabric weigh down on me, stretching the flesh to accommodate the warmth in between. Flesh expands and breathes in heat created by whirring molecules. I feel the delicate wings of my arms and shoulders – ending in a fragile few coiled fingers. Rippling bones make up my spine to allow me to bend myself into expression.

God, this body flows like water. Meanwhile, the mind oils the joints and excites the spirit. And like smoke, I glide. I unfurl. I unleash myself unto the world.

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I embrace the babe whose story makes me want to dance with joy.

Rose was born on a sunny July day. She came into the world bathed in her mother's cries. Stretching out her delicate little fingers and toes, Rose moved as her own being. When she was hung upside down by the doctor, she did not cry. For her mother assumed that she was too busy admiring herself in the reflection of the doctor's stethoscope to care about the odd sensation of blood flowing faster into her head.

She would look at herself in anything – mirrors, watches, the television, her plastic toys, spoons or fresh puddles. She could not look away. Rose tried to understand that each movement she made was her own. When she began to make sense of this, it became a game of trying to outsmart her own reflection. But of course she always lost.

When Rose turned six, she was given her first doll. Immediately, she made her doll discover her own body in the mirror, but somehow it was not as fun to manipulate her arms and legs into the two directions that they twisted. Front, back, front, back. She combed her hair, changed her outfits, compared her own body to that of the doll, until one day Rose put the doll down and went back to examining herself instead.

Her legs could turn out and in, they could bend at the knee or even move side to side. Rose realized then that her own body was far more fun than her doll's. When her mother was cooking in the kitchen, she would often play some classical cello suites and Rose would start to sway. The deep,

harmonic sound would make her want to move. Her mother caught sight of this phenomenon and finally enrolled her in a ballet class.

The ballet classes proved to be a perfect fit for the little Rose. She leaped over large pieces of newspaper which the instructor called “a great lake.” She stretched her legs and learned to point her feet. Her dreams began to be filled with fairies and a ballerina’s smile, and all of those images played out in front of mirrors in her mind. The studio, however, was full of real mirrors and Rose could watch herself glide across the floor in her little tights and leotard.

Her body was hers and this was all that mattered. Rose was in control of it and watched it intently. Every muscle, every movement, and every thought in her mind was hers. She was unstoppable. Ballet trained her to become a graceful woman – conscious of her movements and aware of her own body language. She felt responsible for both. Rose quickly replaced her mother’s nurturing touch with her own when she began to care for herself from an early age, always dancing and watching herself grow with the same awe that she had had since birth. She kept this wonder about her mind and body working in unison and always dancing in front of her mirror, her life.

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I am a vessel that brings a Grecian urn to life.

Of all the living that woman must do, she should do it with grace, for she has etched on her frail arms the words of history and men. Draped over man’s sallow chest like the bones of a bird’s wing, her arms rest into their form waiting for time to do its work and fossilize her own stories deep underground. But this bride sleeps unburdened by the quest for love as she rests in quietude for the next man to find her with his lips. His mind will surely follow to discover her remembered woes and wonders.

The brides-to-be will also follow, walking in a long line of those who have yet to be read. Woman lives with grace and preserves her innocence by never becoming cynical. For cynics lose all their youth to anger.

It has been said that woman was once the sun, but now they are the waning moon and men are the glorious sun. But why battle? Why feel anger? *Give* man the sun. Let him shine down with all of his values onto Mother Nature’s earth. Allow woman to be the earth: home to love and roots. Woman calls and moans for love: an embodiment of her very sex. Her flesh writhes at the thought of warm rays beaming down from above. He evaporates her nurturing love and values and sheds his in return for heat. They exchange this to produce and take pleasure in their obsession.

I test, I challenge, I *dare* woman to fight against herself. They try to destroy what makes them great. Smash the Grecian urn to the ground and hear the popped veins from the artist’s hands burst onto the black figures from a time that is no more. The heroes of the day who are no longer exemplified, but are ruined and then forgotten lay in bits on the floor – a muscular leg here, a sword over there, a head somewhere else.

To make me scream takes effort. Someone would have to torture me – reduce me to a zero – in order to erase my existence from the everyday. But I will not be smashed. I will not be conquered by the loudest voices. I am not to be toyed with – I *will* rebel.

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I prod at the side of the cynical student who disdains all of existence with her calls to action.

Gogol, Chekov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky flit in and out of Marilyn’s mind: The Russian “greats.” The literary “canon-makers.” The “men of the century.” The ones who “give life” to stories.

But her voice gets hoarse as she extols other names: “Morrison! Pynchon! Joyce! Woolf! Plath!” She screams them and chucks them like a rabid dog on the sidewalks of her campus – the saliva bubbles accumulate on the sides of her lips. Marilyn had thin lips and thin hair and thin



eyebrows that were plucked so heavily as to make way for the black pencil and metal piercing she got done when she was seventeen. Her beanie only graced her head when she finished a smoke on the quad. Her fingernails were bitten down to the flesh and she took pride in the yellowed skin she had from the tobacco stains of her cigarettes.

She hates old, dead, white males. They can't tell her how she feels or explain why life is all pain and sorrow. Love is ugly, short, and intolerable. She has sex, of course. But it's with the guys she meets at punk concerts who are already too far gone to realize she's just robbed them of fifty bucks for some more smokes.

Marilyn is independent. She doesn't need anyone to tell her what to do – go cook, go clean, go strip for me. All she wants to do is find an image and embrace it. She laughs with the existentialists. She snickers at the losers who think that life has purpose or that someday having womb nuggets will make for a happy life.

“Right,” she would tell her friends, “as if babies spitting up on you and screaming in an airplane terminal with everyone giving you the death eye will bring a person happiness.”

To be a mother meant giving up your life and becoming just like everyone else.

“Fuck the system,” she says in every class. And the teachers hand her over an A every time.

Marilyn knows all about Platonic ideals and Marxist ideology. She feeds on it and it gives her the edge she needs to wake up every morning with her chalk and flyers at the ready. No one raised any objections to her cries, although her professors all knew that it was futile. She'll always be stuck in the system, but, like raising a child, sometimes you just have to let them have the realization for themselves.

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I am a vessel whose purpose is to create.

I cover my womb from the dead with my hands and feel a warmth that comes from finding my sweet spot in bed. Mimicking my sweet child, I lay in the fetal position trying to trace myself back to the origins of my form. My long, sinewy roots take hold of my ankles and wrists in order to pull me to the ground and shout, “Lo! You are of the earth. But an animal of the freest kind – in mind and spirit you will soar creatively.” I do not fear this sign nor do I consider it a nightmare. But I wake up with remnants of it always from my dreams. I unfold from my roots that now must seek out the sun creeping from behind the curtains and the water that is dripping from my kitchen faucet as I stretch toward the sky.

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I carry the ashes of the old lady whose hate rotted her from the inside-out.

On Twelfth Street there lived a lady who was four feet tall and bemoaned the fact that she moved for her husband. Every time a feeling of regret crept in, she cried. She would wrinkle up her eyes into a bitter glare when she decided to lose more salt than water. Her grimace scared all of the children on her block away.

Her name was Irene. She sat with a crooked back, wrapping her red knuckles around a cane when she had to stand. Her eyes came too far out of her sockets for people to feel comfortable making direct eye contact with her. All those in the neighborhood were just waiting for her to die.

Oftentimes in the middle of the night neighbors would hear her rattling breath and her wailing about “Evan. *Evan!*” The symphony of rattling and wailing kept everyone up. Some kids a few blocks down thought that a monster lived down the street and the only way to keep it out was to crawl under their sheets and frantically chant “go away, go away, go away.”

Irene lived by herself for a decade after her husband was buried, not to rise again. She ate her stew with a spoon too big for her mouth. Large clumps of carrot often found their way to her chin and gave her the look of a child that just spit up its food or missed entirely. Her source of amusement by this time was to knit voodoo dolls of her dead husband and stab him with her

knitting needles when she was finished. She hoped he could feel this in the afterlife, if there was one.

When an unexpected knock disrupted her from one of her voodoo sessions, she raised her heavy eyeballs to the window beside the door. A man in a black suit, middle-aged with slicked back hair was holding a bunch of roses in his right hand and a book in his left.

“Hello ma’am, I would like to see if you would be interested in attending our sermon tomorrow on how Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, gave sight back to the blind.”

This man looked straight at her.

“I’m not in-ter-est-ed in your hogwash, *boy*.” Irene’s old voice trembled over her words, but caught herself mid-tumble enough to emphasize the word “boy.”

“Well, I still thank you for your time. Here is a rose. Take care.”

She took the rose from his hand, gave him one last scowling look, then closed the door.

“Humph! To think that he knows the sac-ri-fice I made for my husband to live here – in this du-mp. Why I oughta be te-ach-ing him a thing or two about Christ and his sac-rif-ice!”

Irene threw the rose to the ground by the door, relying on her cane to carry herself back to the chair she had sat in before the man appeared.

That evening, Irene’s rattling and wailing came to its final climax when she screamed, “God, save my soul!” That was when the roots holding her wrists and ankles tethered to the earth unwound and the neighbors all awoke to the eerie silence of the night. No one dared go near the house except the children who had gained more courage by the time the sun gave them their sight back.

Three children, Abigail, James, and Tommy, walked together up the cracked stairs, through the open front door when little Abigail stepped on the rose.

“Ow!” said Abigail while holding onto her foot and hopping around on the other. “Shhhh!” James and Tommy said.

“But something bit me! This house is haunted. Can we *please* go back?”

“Stop being a baby, look,” said Tommy. He picked up the rose that now carried a bloody and cracked thorn on its side. The petals had all started to turn brown and shrivel.

Continuing forward, James took the lead up the steps into the room where they always heard the monster sleep. Abigail, her foot tracing a bit of blood across the floor, was second and Tommy was following at the rear.

Opening the door, the old woman was lying on the bed, cradled by her sheets. Her wrinkled face took on a soft sheen in the mid-day sunlight and her body – though spread out in all directions – was relaxed. Abigail came closer to her face, holding her nose, she bent forward and kissed the dead woman’s cheek. All over her body blue lines crossed and coiled making the words almost jump off of her old bones with stories for the children to read before she would be fossilized by the earth.

Abigail, James, and Tommy spent the entire afternoon reading.

“Gee, what a woman,” said James.

“Yeah, I can’t believe that she was a nurse in the war,” said Abigail.

“She must have been pretty young when she met her husband,” said Tommy.

The rest of the stories poured out of those shriveling veins. She married young, he moved bases to a small-town in Pennsylvania and she had hated this town ever since. She came to hate her husband, too, who would leave to go out with his buddies when he wasn’t traveling somewhere else. She was left alone and in her spare time she seethed. Becoming cynical of *all* men, Irene withdrew until her husband’s death. Afterwards, she continued to withdraw from the world and from her own skin. The roots began to loosen.

Yet, lying in that bed there – Irene became a young girl. She became a girl who

never knew the depths of cynicism, pain, or withdrawal. She became a girl waiting to burst forth as the earth – *of* the earth.

Like the arms of a Grecian urn, she will take them down to the weighty soil and rise again to remind man of his loss. Her stories remind woman of her hurt when the old creeps in and pokes out the eyes of the seers – a violent cry for a second chance at the womanhood she could not retain.

## XIX

### The Stain

Isabella's bra felt like a wet sponge by the time she trudged through her apartment door. It was always the same, the two mile walk to work, the business of the day, constantly on her feet. Then the two miles she greeted to get back home before midnight. In her petite body, Isabella managed to muster all of her energy to walk those many miles a day. Her poor feet.

With each new evening, she passed by the same stain on the carpet to her apartment door and wondered if this was the day she'd clean it up. But each time her own rationalizing made her walk right past it each time: *It's not your job to clean those steps...is it? You'd be pointed at by the neighbors for sitting out in the hallways scrubbing the floor. Why should I care about the stain when I have other things to do, like sleep?*

Never could she find the strength at night to clean that spot, so it lived as a constant reminder of the monotony each week served, along with how tired she was by the time she arrived home. Sometimes, it looked larger, more like an amoeba than a beach ball. Sometimes, it took on this gray color as opposed to what she presumed was years old, coffee-brown in the carpet.

The stain remained there until Isabella found a lover and her life became more intimate. She could not let him walk through those doors and see the ugly, ever-changing stain. Her life was in motion again for the first time and nothing was going to ruin it for her – not even that abhorred stain. But before she opened the door with the cleaning spray in one hand and the paper towels in the other it had disappeared.

**Author's Bio**



Kaitlyn Lansing was born on 3 January 1994 in New York. Kaitlyn studied literature and philosophy throughout her education which shaped her creative voice. Her published works include: *Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Poems*; *Unveiled: An Anthology of Nonfiction*; *Urgency: An Anthology of Short Stories*; and *Marginalia from the Snake Pit: A Novella*. Kaitlyn's unique perspective and raw prose bring light to matters that are often left untouched. Readers can see more of Kaitlyn's work at [www.kaitlynlansing.com](http://www.kaitlynlansing.com).