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# SHELLS

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May, 2007

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May, 2009

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Summer, 2010

This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

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To Bruce for your endless support,  
love, encouragement and inspiration.

## Acknowledgements

Sincerest thanks to the following people whose support, advice and encouragement have been invaluable: Imad Rahman, Tamara Guiardo, Sam Lipsyte, Brian Furman, Jeff Karem, Michael Dumanis, Joe Mackall, and Christine Vodicka. Thanks also to the participants of Imagination Writer's Conference and Workshop, 2010. Also, gratitude to Pete and Boo for their contributions.

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## SHELLS

J.L. SCOTT

### ABSTRACT

This thesis combines four short stories which revolve around themes of loss and disorientation. The first three stories, “Costa Rica,” “Greece,” and “On the Way Down to Florida” are derived from a larger work entitled *GhostShells*, and are connected by character development and a common mystery. The fourth piece, “Car Crash,” is an independent piece that centers around a minor auto accident and the community activity it creates. All four pieces are linked by a central assertion that our physical bodies are merely shells for the souls within, and may be empty or full depending on the state of the soul.

## INTRODUCTION

### Where I Come From

The first thing I can remember writing I did when I was six. My mother brought home a piece of paper with a black and white cityscape at the bottom and told me to write something to go with it. I'm told that the poem I wrote won in some kind of contest, although I don't remember. I don't even remember the poem, though my mother says she still has it tucked away, somewhere safe, and maybe I'll find it again someday. What I do remember is coloring in all of the windows with a yellow highlighter and wondering who were all of these little people in the little windows who had all left their lights on?

While I was fairly young when I started writing, I had no concept of what being a "writer" was. Throughout my childhood and teen years I wrote copiously, and although I knew that one could get books published and be paid for it, I had no idea that one could write as a profession. It was not until searching for something to replace my theatre major with half way through my freshman year at college that I realized that one could earn credentials as a "creative writer" and, therefore, could earn one's living at writing.



Perhaps because writing is such a fundamental part of myself, something I could not imagine not doing, I never thought of trying to make money off of it. By the time I was nineteen I had written hundreds and hundreds of pages, but never in a world where being a writer was anything more than being a person who put pen to page. In the years since, I have learned that a writer is a craftsman: a writer wields his tool as a carpenter does a hammer or a surgeon does his scalpel, with care and knowledge. It was not enough that I put pen to paper. I needed to know how to use my tool.

My early writing was in imitation of what I read, which was mostly sequel novels to science fiction classics like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* or selections from the shelf marked “Classics” at my village library, such as *The Swiss Family Robinson*. While the worlds and plots I attempted to create often bore striking resemblance to those I’d read, the characters were often more original. It was the characters I was more interested in: the way they spoke, their thoughts and feelings, the small gestures that revealed their secrets. I cared more about who was in the window than what they were doing.

Working on my bachelor’s degree in creative writing, I continued to try to write character heavy science fiction and fantasy pieces with trite plots, often set in worlds appropriated from other sources. There were moments of quality, but for the most part I wrote three years worth of unusable material. Frustrated and in desperation, four weeks before my thesis/dissertation was due, I decided to try what my professor, creative non-fiction writer Joe Mackall, advised and wrote two chapters of something firmly grounded in reality, inspired by my own fears of death and responsibility. Suddenly realizing that there was a difference between “writing what you know” and writing what you like, I finished my thesis, graduated and lost contact with any sort of writing community. On my

own, I didn't know what to do with this new information and wrote only a single piece in two years. My confidence waned and with it my enthusiasm. It wasn't until winning the Melissa M. Martin Award at Cleveland State University in 2009 while finishing a degree in psychology that I remembered that I was, fundamentally, a writer. It wasn't long before I was writing again and I found that, exotic locales and fantastical premises aside, characters could still be interesting.

### Background and Influences

My delving into character was not without precedence. In high school I often tried to recreate characters I was already well familiar with, usually from television, capturing everything from their vocabulary to the small, repeated gestures that helped to define them. It was through acting myself, though, that I learned about the importance of physicality to a character. As an actor, one never simply walks across the room or sits in a chair. The way one walks or sits is important. Every movement on stage is loaded with potential meaning, and so even the smallest of gestures, pushing eggs around on one's breakfast plate, reveals something. If this doesn't directly translate to fiction (sometimes a character must simply walk across the room), the principle still applies. A writer chooses what stage business to include and how to include it, highlighting only the elements that reveal to the reader something about the character or situation without bluntly stating it: a tapping finger reveals impatience, a slanted glance implies suspicion, a gentle caress evokes romance. My work in theatre taught me to inhabit my characters: to capture the rhythm of their gait, the flick of their wrist, the tug at their shirt. I was able to use this skill to portray physically nuanced characters.

In the same way that theatre forced me to inhabit my character physically, my work in the field of psychology forced me to inhabit my characters mentally. I developed a structure for the mental causality of my characters' thoughts and behaviors. I now had a tool by which to measure whether my characters stood up to the test of reality. (*Would a person really do this? Sure, if he's operating under a reflective defense mechanism.*) The study of the mind, its inner workings, theories of personality development, gave me more room to expand my characters. Often, the majority of the information I have about the causality of a character's actions, thought processes, even belief systems never make it into a story. The backgrounds and structures are there, though, and that is what allows me to pick out that one tick, that one neurotic response that illuminates the character for the reader.

In between the theatre and the psychology, I worked on writing. My workshops in fiction, poetry and playwriting were interspersed between classes on Shakespeare, the modern drama and early American Literature. Modern fiction, however, was not highlighted. I found my literary influences in other ways and on my own. The first literature class I ever had covered the period between the Reformation and the early nineteenth hundreds. We read everything from Mark Twain to Zora Neal Hurston. In the course of that semester, two writers I was previously unfamiliar with stood out to me: Kate Chopin and Langston Hughes. The voices of these two particular writers stood out to me and I made a point of memorizing their names, searching them out in the library, stacking their books up next to my bed.

Chopin's voice is often distant, a narrator observing and commenting but allowing the reader to interpret. In *The Awakening*, for example, Chopin often simply told the

reader what Edna was feeling, maintaining a distance which allows the reader to interpret the meaning of that emotion and also influences the reader's interpretation of the character. That is, the reader might wonder if the character even realizes she has experienced that emotion, or if the narrator is providing information to the reader that the character does not have access to. In other stories, Chopin uses this distant narrator to portray events and characters who, at the time, were quite controversial. For instance, in "The Storm", the main character has an extra marital affair with a passing stranger during a storm while her husband is away. By keeping the voice distant, non-judgmental, Chopin left room for the reader to judge. At the time of its writing, a reader may have judged the character harshly, but I interpreted the character as being self-possessed, confident, strong and lonely rather than demonizing her. The distant voice is a Chopin trait that I have adapted to my own pieces to allow the reader to make their own interpretations and judgments of the characters and their behaviors.

I was drawn to Hughes for a completely different reason. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was the first poem I had ever felt a connection to and was impressed with Hughes' ability to create such a strong voice and mood with so few words. The poems collected in *The Dream Keeper*, especially, exemplified this skill. The rhythm and rhyme in "Irish Wake" and in "Parisian Beggar Woman" elevate the simplicity of the words to a level of deeper meaning, and comments on the nature of humanity by creating a sense of atmosphere surrounding a single character or scene. Another tool that Hughes used was syncopation, and it is a language tool that I have often tried to emulate, with varying degrees of success. Syncopation creates rhythm, forcing the reader into reading with that rhythm, elevating something that may not have otherwise been eloquent or elegant into

something that stands out. The first stanza of the poem “The Blues” is about shoe strings breaking, but because of the rhythm Hughes instilled in the words it is memorable, and seems to have a greater importance than it might otherwise. While I don’t consciously think about creating rhythm as I write, I am more aware of making sure that my work operates well on the word level, often finding that I have incorporated rhythm naturally. I believe this is due to a deep respect and admiration of Hughes’ masterful manipulation of the language.

Later, nearing the end of my work on my bachelor’s degree, I took a class on Film and Literature in which we read Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Raymond Carver’s *Short Cuts*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, I found another example of Chopin’s style of a distant narrator, one who related the story rather than interpreted and commented upon the story. Woolf, however, was able to draw the reader into the mind of Clarissa without losing that distance. In my own work I have attempted to take it a step further and create a distant first person narrator, relating the story and remaining sympathetic without coloring too much of the narration with interpretation or judgment. I also used *Mrs. Dalloway* as an excellent example of how to frame a story within a specific event, such as a party, and how that event then gives the story a natural pacing.

*Short Cuts* was my first in depth exposure to the short story, and Carver’s structural acumen served as my first basis for short story construction. The piece that stood out to me most was “A Small, Good Thing” and the way that a seemingly minor character framed the emotionally charged story of a child’s death. I also admired the way he used the seemingly mundane events of a “regular life”-- the annoying family dog, a night out with friends – to frame the peculiar epiphanies of life. Carver was also able to

twist what started out as mundane into something bizarre, as in “So Much Water So Close to Home,” or horrific, as he does in “Tell the Women We’re Going.” I have tried to incorporate similar techniques into my own writing, attempting to make the familiar strange.

Underneath these conscious influences, however, lies something more deeply rooted. As recently described by Sam Lipsyte, my work is an attempt at “an updating of that early gothic atmosphere of Poe and Ambrose Bierce – that creepy factor.” I read both Ambrose Bierce and Edgar Alan Poe in high school in a college composition course. “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and “A Resumed Identity” by Bierce remain favorite short stories today, as do “The Cask of Amontillado” and “Hop-Frog” by Poe. While my work may not resemble the work of these two authors in subject matter, the atmosphere I attempt to create is related. Bierce was a master of the ghost story, creating a sense of eeriness with a short description of scenery or the reaction of one character to another. Poe was a master of suspense and mystery, building each slowly over the course of the story, pushing the reader to the edge before resolving and ending. My work has underpinnings of Bierce’s eerie atmospheres and Poe’s suspense. The final scenes in both “Costa Rica” and “Greece” are meant to leave the reader with a sense of something not quite right while the three pieces present from the longer work *GhostShells* (“Costa Rica,” “Greece” and “On the Way Down to Florida”) drive a central mystery which is only finally revealed in the last pages of the work. These stories are an initial attempt at capturing that early gothic atmosphere in a modern way.

#### On Materials Included

The title of this dissertation comes from a thought on the separation of mind, soul, and body. In each story, characters act as bodies moving through their worlds, their lives, with little or no internal richness. The concept behind these characters, especially in the case of Emily, is that a person's soul may be irreparably damaged – die -- and yet the body and mind continue operating. Consider the old saying “What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger:” Is it not possible that, in some cases, the thing that didn't kill you, should have? That you might not have been better off dying, physically, than being trapped in a world you can no longer find joy or comfort in? If your soul is dead, your body becomes nothing but a shell for a ghost that can only escape when the body ceases to operate. It is these shells that we observe in our day-to-day lives: other people moving through their lives without any outward sign of a living soul within.

*GhostShells* is a book which would include “Costa Rica,” “Greece,” and “On the Way Down to Florida” as well as three other short stories. Each story involves the character of Emily Scarborough, though each is told by a different narrator. The stories are portraits of Emily as she is seen by each narrator and the effect that an association with her has on them, told in reverse chronological order. The main mystery revolves around who the character of Alan is and how Emily has come to be so damaged. In the book, “Costa Rica” would appear first, then two as yet unwritten stories, then “Greece” and “On the Way Down to Florida” and a last unwritten story. The stories are here presented in that order.

“Costa Rica” is about a young man who moves to Costa Rica in search of a romantic connection, which dissolves, and finds himself the care-taker of an elderly woman. The story takes place near the end of Emily's life, when she has become senile

and is being taken advantage of by her employees. She mistakes the narrator, who has been unable to make the connection he desires, for someone from her past. He is finally able to experience the kind of connection he is looking for through this mistake, allowing him to recognize the faults in his other attempts. Yet, at the end of the story, it is unclear whether he will be able to utilize his experience to his benefit or if, like Emily, he will be unable to make a connection except through senility.

The second piece, "Greece," is a portrait of Emily as seen by her younger brother during a visit in Greece. The younger brother detects traces of Emily's damage but, like the rest of the family, had been assuming that she was "getting better." By the end of the story he has come to a new realization about his sister that haunts him.

Framed by a brief interlude with Emily, "On the Way Down to Florida" is the revelation of her true condition as told by a character who has experienced something similar. The story takes place very close to the event that has damaged Emily and is the resolution of the driving mystery of *GhostShells*.

"Car Crash" is a stand alone piece that is not related to the characters or world of the three previous stories. The action revolves around a minor car accident in a small town and the flurry of activity it induces. The omniscient narrator provides details of the action and some of the interior thoughts of a few of the characters while withholding judgment, allowing the reader to make their own judgments of the situation. In the end, the accident is cleared away, the traces minimal, and the world continues without any great change.

## Conclusion



At six years old, I wondered who lived in the windows of the little buildings at the bottom of my page. I have begun to explore those characters through my work, exploring the expanse and nuance of human existence. I have learned that I need to know how to work my art with care and knowledge, and through my courses and workshops I have begun to fill my toolbox with the appropriate accouterment. These techniques and tools have been gathered from an eclectic assortment of sources, which have influenced my aesthetic. I carefully choose which tools to use based on the story and characters I wish to expose, and therefore my aesthetic is eclectic. My initial attempt at wielding these tools is not, perhaps, meant to be a sign of my mastery of the art, but rather the evidence of my progression and potential for continued growth and artistic ability.

## *Costa Rica*

I moved to Costa Rica with a girl named Maria. She was from M--, a pretty little coastal town with two hundred acres of beachfront nature reserves and about five Americans per capita. I wasn't worried about finding work because Maria had promised that her father would give me a job at his hotel and tour company. I had been an hospitality major back in the States, so that sounded perfect to me.

I met Maria at the University of California, Berkeley where her father had sent her to complete a degree in massage therapy so that he could draw in the type of customer looking for a professional spa masseuse at their vacation resort. I had moved to Berkeley after my girlfriend had transferred there from Loyola, but about two months after my arrival she told me about her friend Erica and I never saw her again. I thought about returning to Chicago, but I had only moved there because a friend of mine from high school, who just happened to be a girl and who I just happened to be sleeping with, begged me to go with her because she was too scared to move to a big city from our tiny ho-dunk town in northwestern Ohio by herself. She needn't have worried; less than six months after getting there she was moving in with a guy named Tony and telling me I could keep the apartment we'd rented together. There had been other girls of course: Rita, Sandra, Crystal, Piper, Amanda, Krysta, Elizabeth. Even Candy and Bobbi, if you wanted to count one-night stands. It's true my track record isn't great. I never can seem to get it, to pick up on those little things you're supposed to know, to make the connection. Maria wasn't like the others, though. She said she was tired of all the men her father set her up

with, she wanted someone different. I was different, with my blonde hair and pale blue eyes, my love of basketball and Spongebob Square Pants. We went everywhere together: the theatre, restaurants, shopping, we even had classes together. I bought Maria anything she wanted, digging into the measly savings I'd managed to put away, relieved to have finally found someone happy to be by my side.

“My father will love you,” she told me, “As soon as he gets to know you.”

Maria was all kinds of wrong: wrong that her father would give me a job, wrong that he would love me, wrong that everything would work out and be wonderful. There was a lot of yelling, mostly in Spanish, then Maria told me, angry tears running down her cheeks, that I would have to find a motel room for the night.

“I will talk to him,” she said, “I will make him understand. Don't worry.”

I didn't have a lot of cash left after the plane ticket, but there was a hostel nearby and I figured it was good enough for one night. The next day, though, over another lunch I couldn't afford, Maria told me her father still wasn't giving in. One night turned into two and two into three and suddenly it was nearly two weeks later and Maria's father was showing no signs of giving in. I saw Maria everyday: for lunch or a stroll down the beach, a hurried tryst in my hostel-room a couple of times. She kept promising that once her father saw that she was serious he would give in.

Meanwhile, I was out of money. Nervously, and in bad Spanish, I inquired at a few restaurants and scooter rental huts for part time work. I got a lot of shaking heads and nada. Walking back to the hostel down the town's main drag, sun beating on my head, the exhaust from a hundred little cars filling my lungs, honking, laughing, and the harsh screams of “Autenticacion recuerdos de Costa Rica!” ringing in my ears, I started to

wonder if it hadn't been the wisest choice to drop everything and move halfway around the world with a girl I'd only known five months.

In the hostel's entryway, I paused. There were a couple of locals sprawled on a sagging couch in front of an outdated TV watching a Spanish game show host laughing at his contestants, the woman behind the desk filing the nails on her pudgy fingers and a brochure display half full of faded slips of papers advertising restaurants and theatres that no longer existed. None of them seemed like good sources for a job hunt. I turned to head back up to my room, planning on staring at the ceiling in my room until an idea came to me, and knocked into a dumpy looking woman in a pink skirt suit, nearly sending her to the floor.

"Sorry," I said quickly, trying to help her stabilize, "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"I'm fine," she said in an American accent and then took quick stock of me, "Are you the American who's been looking for work?"

"Yes." I was surprised. Maybe she had been sitting in one of the restaurants I'd been to.

"Do you want a full time job?" she asked. This seemed too coincidental to be good, but I told her yes anyway.

"I'm looking for someone to help take care of an older woman," she said, "Are you interested?" I didn't want to lose the chance of making some money, but I knew I was nowhere near qualified to be someone's personal nurse, so I hesitated.

"There's free room and board and the job pays eight hundred a week," the woman said, a little hint of desperation in her voice. She needn't have been worried: for eight

hundred a week plus free room and board I would've signed up to clean bedpans with my toothbrush. For that kind of money I could always buy a new toothbrush.

"I'm interested," I said. She introduced herself as Camilla Burgman, personal accountant, and told me to grab my stuff and meet her outside; we were going to interview with the older woman in question right now.

Mrs. Burgman owned a car with full air conditioning and bucket seats with seatbelts. She was silent as she fought through the mid-afternoon traffic, leaving me to wonder if I was headed towards a lucky break or a grisly death. There had been no time to call Maria before we left and I fretted over her showing up at the hostel, expecting to find me and my not being there. I imagined a whole scene between her and the front desk clerk, Maria waiting worriedly by her phone at home. I decided to ask if I could use a phone when we reached our destination.

"Her name is Emily Scarborough," Mrs. Burgman said suddenly. We had exited town, leaving the traffic behind. The jungle immediately took over: thick green walls of trees and vine on either side of us, blocking out all but a runway strip of blue sky above us.

"Her husband passed away many years ago so she lives on her own. She moved here about ten years ago. I guess she only meant to stay for a year or so before moving home but she got sick and she's been here ever since." This information only raised more questions for me: What kind of a person moved to Costa Rica for a year? If she was heading home, where was she before? If she was sick, how much medical care did she need and was I expected to give it to her?

“She’s American, so you won’t have any trouble there. Her last caretaker was local and she hated it, made me promise to find an American. Not too many Americans around here are looking for this kind of work.” I saw her slide me a glance from the corners of her eyes but didn’t offer an explanation.

“Anyway, she doesn’t need any help with personal stuff, you know, getting dressed or any of that, just keeping up with the gardens and the housework and the shopping and stuff.”

“That sounds easy enough,” I said, “I can handle that.” Mrs. Burgman’s lips twitched, as if she wanted to laugh but was holding it back. I turned my attention back to the scenery. We had been driving for about twenty minutes and were now climbing a steep hill. The trees on either side were starting to thin out a little, though the shade beneath them was still deep. After another ten minutes or so we pulled in front of a hacienda style house; terra cotta colored stucco, wooden double doors intricately carved in a floral design, a flat rooftop terrace with a thatched roof above. There was a small, circular patch of grass which the driveway wound around, a stone fountain bubbling in the middle, but the jungle encroached nearly to the walls of the house. Mrs. Burgman parked and led me inside.

Even after I’d been there a while, I’d stop and stare sometimes. The house had that feeling that only rich people’s homes have; open and airy, professionally decorated, un-lived in. The floors were cool marble, the ceilings were cathedral height, the arcs between rooms were all in mosaic with hand glazed tile. The front entry way led into the main living space, a great room with a river stone fire place, hand carved furniture of local hard woods and an American style kitchen with all the latest high-end appliances.

The view, though, was the true spectacle of the room. The north wall was a series of glass doors and through them the Atlantic shone like a jewel in the sun, crystal blue. The jungle stretched out from below the house right to the water line, and spread out to the left and right along the curve of the bay. In the evenings, when the sky was painted in pinks and purples, and the just slightly cool breeze washed the scent of jungle and salt in through the doors, there was no site on earth more beautiful.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Mrs. Burgman said from beside me as we both took it in, “They say it’s the best view in Costa Rica.” Then, with a flip of her wrist, she pulled the curtains closed.

“There’s a pool and quite a bit of landscaping to maintain,” she said, “There are landscapers but the weeding and hedging of the stuff up by the house will be your job. Mrs. Scarborough used to entertain, of course, but she hasn’t thrown a party in years so you won’t have to worry about that. As you can see, the house is quite large and Mrs. Scarborough has a lot of little knick-knacks she’s picked up over the years, some of them quite valuable, so there’s a lot of dusting to do.” Mrs. Burgman headed down the west hall and I followed, trying to take in the lines of the photographs on either wall. They all seemed to be of a young woman in various locales around the world, but Mrs. Burgman was walking too fast for me to stop and take a good look.

“Mrs. Scarborough spends most of her time in her library. You’ll bring all of her meals here.” She stopped in front of another pair of carved wooden doors and I wondered how such an, apparently, feeble woman opened such heavy doors.

“As I said, Mrs. Scarborough is old and she gets a little confused so if she says anything...funny...jut ignore it.” I nodded and Mrs. Burgman pushed the doors open.

The room was just as large as the first, and the walls were lined with books. Heavy curtains hid what was probably another spectacular view. In the middle of the room, on a circular oriental she'd probably actually gotten in India or Turkey, Mrs. Scarborough sat in one of two wingbacks facing the currently closed curtains, a small spindly table with a small lamp in between them. Mrs. Burgman led me in the room and introduced me, making sure to mention that I was American. With a jab in the ribs I said hello and that it was nice to meet her, but Mrs. Scarborough only gave me the quickest of looks. She was very small, almost like a child, and she was very thin, but she still had a head full of dark auburn hair that hung around her face and disappeared down her back. She held a book limply in her lap and seemed to be concentrating on what Mrs. Burgman was saying. Which was mostly how she would take care of everything and that I would be starting right away. Mrs. Scarborough said nothing and Mrs. Burgman seemed to take this as acceptance because suddenly she was leading me through the house, showing me where everything was, giving me emergency contact numbers, putting a set of keys in my hand and walking out the front door.

When she'd gone, I stood alone in the entry way for a few minutes, not sure what to do. Only two and a half hours ago I'd been thinking that I'd have to find some way home, and now here I was with a job that paid better than any job I'd ever had before and close enough that Maria and I could still be together. If I did my job well, maybe they'd even let me bring her here to live with me and we wouldn't even have to worry about her father.



Mrs. Burgman had given me a cell phone so that either she or Mrs. Scarborough could reach me at any time. I dialed Maria's phone number. It was late afternoon, long after our usual meeting time, and I was worried that she would think I'd left her.

"Reidencia Sanchez." It was their maid. I asked for Maria in my broken Spanish.

"Maria no esta aqui." It took me a minute to understand that Maria was not home. I didn't know enough Spanish to ask where she had gone or when she would be back. Instead, I said my name twice, gave the number for the cell phone, repeated my name and headed to the kitchen. I had been left with directions on what to make for dinner. Mrs. Scarborough was to have a baked filet of salmon, no breading, limp carrots and soggy rice with a side salad of her Tuesday evening pills.

"Ah, there you are," Mrs. Scarborough said in a surprisingly strong voice as I brought the dinner tray into the library, "Oh, you've made dinner! That's so sweet of you, honey, I know you've had a long day."

"It's my job," I replied, "Do you need anything else?"

"No, thank you, honey," she said, "But, Alan, I noticed that the stupid light in the bathroom is flickering again. Maybe on Saturday we should go into Home Depot and pick up a new one?" I didn't know there were Home Depots in Costa Rica, and my name wasn't Alan, but I said sure and hurried out of the room to check if Maria had called.

She hadn't. She didn't call the next day, either, though I kept the phone in my pocket and checked about every ten minutes to be sure. Worried that the maid hadn't given her my message, I tried calling her again.

"Maria! It's me!" I nearly choked when she picked up the phone.

"Oh, hey," she said, "Where are you? You weren't at the hostel."

“I know, I called and left a message with your maid.”

“Oh, yes, she said she had a message for me. I forgot to ask her what it was.”

“Oh,” I was unfazed, “Well, I got a job!”

“A job?”

“Yeah!”

“Why?” She sounded confused. I was used to this kind of question from her. She did not have what you might call a practical mind.

“Well, I was running out of money,” I said.

“You were? But you’re American, surely you have enough money,” Maria said.

“Sure, but I spent most of what I had on the plane tickets, you know. And I figured, since I’m going to be living here, I might as well settle in, find a job and somewhere to live. Unless your father’s change his mind?”

“No,” Maria answered, but not as bitterly as when I’d asked her two days ago. I told her about the job and she said she knew about Mrs. Scarborough. The old woman had moved to town about ten years ago and bought the house on the hill. They say her husband died long ago, and that she’d gone a little crazy a few years ago when her brother had died. Maria didn’t know anyone who’d ever actually met her. I offered her the grand tour and she agreed to meet me in two days. Mrs. Burgman hadn’t said anything about having guests over, but I was willing to risk a little displeasure from Mrs. Scarborough in order to please Maria.

The next two days passed slowly. Mrs. Scarborough was very quiet, spending nearly all of her waking time in the library, and except for continuing to call me by the wrong name and occasionally asking me to fix something that wasn’t broken, she wasn’t

very demanding. The gardening chores weren't extensive and since the house was mostly unused it was easy to keep clean. I spent most of my time wandering around, looking at the odd things she had sitting on shelves, like a collection of glass pigs and hand-painted wooden spoons. Every shelf had a collection of something, rare and random: carnival masks from Florence with long hooked noses and empty eyes, ancient Chinese meditation mountains carved into chunks of jade, six hand-painted boomerangs.

On my third day I walked into the library with Mrs. Scarborough's dinner tray and regular helping of three white pills, two blue and one yellow. The curtains were pulled, as usual, the small lamp in the middle of the room the only light.

"I have your dinner, Mrs. Scarborough," I said softly, set the tray carefully on the desk and rounded the chairs. Mrs. Scarborough's chin was buried in the collar of her thick sweater, her long, thick hair hanging over her face. My breath caught in my throat and my heart pounded in my stomach. The thin yellow light played over her hand, the skin sallow and brittle, the bones protruding as if they were wrapped in little more than tissue paper and blue-veined ribbon.

"Mrs. Scarborough?" I reached out toward her slender shoulder, my fingers trembling at the expectation of a still chill. I gripped lightly, feeling mostly sweater, and jumped back as her head whipped up, her eyes flashing open, crystal green and blazing.

"Who are you?" she rasped, "How did you get in here? Where is that Camilla woman? Has she stolen all my money yet? And where did you come from?" I would have thought she'd gone crazy if she hadn't been saying crazy things since I'd gotten there.

"It's me, Mrs. Scarborough," I replied, trying to stay calm, trying to sound reassuring, "Mrs. Burgman isn't here. Are you all right?" She scrutinized me intensely

for a moment, her eyes sizzling and her skeleton hand gripping the arm rest like the talons of a vulture. Then it slackened and her head tilted to the side. Her eyes softened and became like moss again.

“Oh, Alan,” she said, “You scared me. Did you dye your hair? It used to be brown. I liked it better brown, honey. You look too much like Cormick with your hair blonde like that.” I didn’t know what she was talking about. I had never had brown hair. Confused but pleasant, though, was normal so I told her I would change it back and handed her the glass of water and her little pill cocktail.

The next day, Maria drove herself up just after Mrs. Scarborough’s lunch. I met her at the door and she gave me a quick kiss as she stepped over the threshold.

“I’ve always wanted to see inside this house,” she said as I led her into the great room. I had closed the curtains so that I could unveil them dramatically.

“Santa Maria!”

“I know,” I said, slipping an arm around her waist, “They say it’s the best view in Costa Rica.”

“Someday, I will live in such a house,” she said. I didn’t tell her that I’d have to win the lottery jackpot to afford a house like this. I showed her the rest of the house: the five bedrooms, seven bathrooms, the gourmet kitchen and the palya pool house with swim up bar: the same tour Mrs. Burgman had given me, except the library.

“And this is my room.” I opened the door. It was small, and didn’t have an ocean view, but it had its own bathroom and it was, like the rest of the house, furnished in fantastically expensive finishes.

“Let’s go back to the main room,” Maria said and took off. In the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of wine from the chiller then seated herself on a couch in front of the glass wall. I didn’t tell her to be careful not to spill or to use a coaster if she set the glass down.

“So, do you think you’ll be able to convince your father to let you see me soon?” I asked, sitting next to her gingerly.

“He is so stubborn!” She waved a hand in the air, “He still wants me to marry Juan Carlos.”

“Who’s Juan Carlos?”

“My fiancé,” she replied, waving her left hand in front of my face. I had never noticed the large diamond ring before.

“I didn’t know you were engaged.”

“The wedding is supposed to happen next month,” she said, flipping her long black hair over her shoulder, “My father and Juan Carlos have been planning it while I was in California.” She did not look at me as she spoke and I wondered why she had never said anything before.

“It’s not that Juan Carlos is a bad man,” she continued, “He’s very attractive and he’s rich, but he’s just so...normal.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter because you’re not marrying him. You love me. Right?” Maria didn’t answer immediately and I thought, maybe, she hadn’t heard me. She kept staring out the window-wall. I thought, for the second time in three days, that maybe it was time to cut my losses and find a way home, but then she turned back to me with a curvaceous smile.

“Of course,” she said and kissed my cheek, “Look, I have to go, but I’ll call you later, ok?”

“Ok.”

It was four weeks later before I saw Maria again. We kept in touch on the phone, at first, but after only a few days she stopped returning my calls. Thinking her father was somehow keeping her from calling me, I went to her house several times on my trips into town to pick up groceries and supplies, but she never seemed to be at home. Mrs. Scarborough and I found a nice little routine; I took her breakfast in the morning and she would remind me of some chore that didn’t need doing. I would take her lunch in around one and she would ask if we’d had any RSVPs for a party she wasn’t throwing. At dinner, she would usually chat with herself about what I could only assume were memories of friends and family. After I put the dishes in the dishwasher and locked all the doors, I would sit and read with her until she was ready to go to bed. She sometimes needed help walking to her room after a long day of sitting. She had a huge library, but I was a slow reader and never even made it through the worn copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird* that I’d picked up. Mrs. Scarborough seemed to have a different book every night, but I never could tell what she was reading until one night she looked up and said,

“Alan, do you remember this?”

She called me Alan all of the time so I knew she was talking to me. I left my book on my seat and went to stand behind her. She was looking at a scrapbook. The pictures appeared to be of a young woman, perhaps Mrs. Scarborough from forty years ago, and a

young man, blonde and pale, on some kind of rooftop terrace, with deep blue sea behind them.

“That was the summer Cormick came to visit us in Greece,” she said, “Do you remember?” She looked up expectantly at me and I realized that she thought I was someone I wasn’t. I felt sorry for her, an old lady living in a big house, the only people who knew or cared about her the people she paid. Before I could say anything, though, she narrowed her eyes.

“Of course you can’t remember.” She flipped the page, “You weren’t there. You didn’t go on that trip with me.”

I went back to my seat, but I couldn’t read anymore. As soon as Mrs. Scarborough was in bed, I went back the library and started pulling books down from the only shelf I’d ever seen her read from. They were all scrapbooks, about forty or fifty of them. Some seemed newer and Mrs. Scarborough was recognizable in the pictures, while others were quite old, the pictures falling off the pages and the corners of stickers curled up. I spent nearly the whole night on the floor, looking through her life.

The pictures were all captioned with names and dates and locations. They didn’t seem to repeat. I could find no one named Alan in any of them until I reached the last one, which had been wedged behind the others at the back of the shelf where Mrs. Scarborough probably couldn’t even reach. It was a wedding album and, although I figured it must’ve been the oldest one there, it was in perfect condition. There were only a few standard photos of the wedding party and the reception; the rest of the book was full of pictures of the couple. I had never seen Mrs. Scarborough smile, but in these pictures she was beaming: glowing, you could say. The pictures were not labeled, but on

the front of the book was printed “Emily and Alan” in a big heart. The name Alan did not appear anywhere else.

The next day, when I went into town for the usual provisions, I saw Maria. She was descending the steps of a large, ornate church in a flowing white gown and veil, her arm hooked through that of a dark haired man in a tuxedo who wore the same expression Mrs. Scarborough had in her wedding photos.

I moved to Costa Rica with a girl named Maria, but I stayed for an old woman. I had saved plenty of money to return to the States, but whenever I tried to buy a ticket I would get stuck on the “destination” question. I had no idea where to go.

For weeks, Mrs. Scarborough continued to ask about non-existent chores and non-existent parties and to call me Alan. I began to notice that sometimes when she looked at me, though, she would narrow her eyes and tilt her head to the side as if checking to make sure she was really seeing what she thought she was seeing. Then, suddenly, her condition began to deteriorate. She could no longer walk from the bedroom to the library or back again. She stopped eating the meals I brought and would only pick at pieces of pineapple and Ritz crackers. Mrs. Burgman had to hire a nurse to come help her dress and shower and use the bathroom.

But she still sat in the library with her scraps of faded memories, and I sat with her until she dozed off in her chair. Then I would pick her up and carry her to her room where I would tuck her in snugly and leave, wondering if I’d still have a job in the morning. She had let the book fall to the floor one night and I put it carefully back on the



shelf before collecting her delicate body into my arms and carrying her down the long, darkened hallway to her overly large bed. The nurse had already put her in her nightgown and turned down the heavy quilts she needed to stay warm, so all I had to do was slip her in.

As I wedged the blankets in around her, her eyes flashed open. They were a startling green, bright and clear.

“You’re not Alan, are you?”

“No.”

“I’m dying, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Oh thank God!” She closed her eyes, dropped her head and I wished that I had been Alan.

## Greece

The party was being held on the rooftop patio which was quickly filling up with people, each of whom Em greeted warmly at the front door, introducing me as they filed past through the kitchen and up the stairs. Em's apartment was at the top of a hill looking out over the bay. Below, you could see white stucco buildings studding gray stone hills, scragles of olive trees clinging to the slate. White crests billowed on the edges of crashing sapphire waves, the white-blue sky endless to the horizon. A dark pair of sunglasses did little to tone down the glaring view, a white sun washing things out like an over-exposed film strip. The smell of the salt spray somehow managed to waft up to the rooftop, mixing with the scent of cooking lamb and fetta. Em had a knack for finding living spaces with country-specific charm and amazing vistas.

We were in Greece, the summer between my junior and senior years of college. My sister had decided that I was old enough to make my own plans, even though she was the one who had invited me to stay with her for the entire summer, had paid for the plane ticket, had convinced Mom that a young man of my age could handle himself in a foreign country. She couldn't take three months off of work but promised that once I'd met some people I'd have plenty to do without her. Greece was the sixth country Em had lived in, in as many years. I had been to visit her in each one, though usually only for a couple of weeks and with her constant supervision, so I guess she figured I should know the ropes. By the time she died, Em would have lived in twenty three different countries, and I

would have visited her in every one of them. I never did get the hang of traveling, though, and would get terrible culture shock everywhere I went.

Barely over my jetlag, only my third day in her white stucco apartment, I didn't know any locals and hadn't had the energy to wander the streets aimlessly looking for some. Em was throwing one of her famous week-day evening parties in my honor, and from experience I knew that this was the best place to meet everyone who was worth meeting, who knew how to speak English, and might invite me for exciting Grecian adventures. Em collected people the way a magnet will collect metal shavings from a worktable.

The sound of Em's robust laugh punctured through the sound of American music streaming from an American radio station on the laptop in a corner and the odd cadence of twenty or so Greek voices trying to sound like Katie Couric or Matthew McConaughey, with varying degrees of success. She glowed like buttered toast at the edge of the topaz-blue pool. In her left hand she held a glass of who-knows-what and her right hand was flapping through the air as she spoke, a clear sign of her Americanness. She was talking to a Greek man whose name I can't remember, a Jason or Adonis, his black hair slicked back, white teeth flashing as he laughed at whatever my sister said, saline water beading on his perfectly hairless chest. He ran some fancy restaurant nearby which Em had promised to take me to, but only because he had been standing there. I knew she had laid in a prodigious supply of inauthentic foods in preparation for my coming. I was not what you'd call an adventurous eater. I hadn't touched any of the kebabs, veggies, cheeses or rare fruits that had been set out for the guests. I was, instead, hovering over the tray of Ritz's with CheezWhiz sprayed on the top, sent via FedEx by our mother the

week before my departure for my express benefit. Mom and Dad only saw Em about once a year when she flew us all out to wherever she was for Christmas. (Em was also famous for her Christmas parties, bringing a flavor of American Commercial Spiritualism to her ignorant and deprived foreign friends.) Mom had only recently begun to stop complaining about the fact that Em had not touched American soil since she left for Europe and her pleading calls for Em to come home had reduced from once a week to once a month. It would be another couple of years before Mom would accept that Em wasn't coming home again, but I didn't mind; the middle class Midwesterners I attended college with were impressed by my relation to a bona-fide European jet-setter and I at least saw my sister several times a year.

The guests were all talking and laughing loudly, but I couldn't understand what any of them were saying, mostly because they kept slipping into Greek. I was wearing a t-shirt that said "It's all Greek to me," but hadn't gotten so much as a curious glance, except from Em, who had burst out laughing when she saw it. Although I was supposed to be meeting people in order to make plans for the summer, most of the guests were more Em's age, meaning ten years older than myself, and weren't paying much attention to the younger brother of their hostess. That was fine with me. I didn't feel like explaining what a major in computer engineering had to do with a minor in Japanese the way I had in France, or trying to find excuses for declining invitations to take a ride on some stranger's speed boat or out to some other stranger's great grandfather's vineyard the way I had in Italy. I was happy to wallflower in the shade with my tray of CheezWhized Ritz's, watching the party happen around me. Bikini clad women dipped in and out of the pool while men in flipflops and open white-linen shirts watched. An early

arrival tended the grill and my sister flitted between the groups of youngish professionals, laughing loudly and filling half empty cups, a social butterfly in her element. Suddenly, she looked up and caught my eye from across the rooftop. She wiggled her fingers at me and I raised a hand in return. She smiled and cocked her head to the side, asking me if I was having a good time. I shrugged. Em nodded once, indicating the tray of crackers beside me, holding back a laugh because I was the only one who had touched them. I released a chuckle with my smile. I thought it was funny too. Em turned back to her friends and I watched her for a moment. The sun had bleached her hair from the dark auburn I remembered to a flaming orange, hanging halfway down her back like a flag on a windless day. She had been heavy in high school, but had lost all of the weight right before she'd moved to Europe, while she'd been sick. In her over large sunglasses and green bikini, she still looked like a recovering chemo patient to me. She never would put the weight back on.

Bored with my crackers, I wandered over to the pool chairs tucked safely under the canopy and plopped down. The sun was declining slowly and I figured I still had several hours before the party would even start to break up. Eventually, Em would notice that I wasn't talking to anyone on my own, would pull me away from my quite comfortable solitude and force me into making friends. To forestall the inevitable, I pulled one of the many scrapbooks Em always had sitting about into my lap and started flipping through the pages. It was an old one and I hadn't seen any of the pictures for years. They were of a hiking trip we had taken in Mohican State Park when I was a freshman in high school. Mostly they were of river scenes and trees and rock formations Em had thought were interesting.

“Which one is that?”

I squinted up at a woman standing over my chair in a pencil skirt and a white blouse I couldn't quite see through: a new arrival. Without waiting for me to answer, she slid into the chair next to mine and pulled the book into her lap. She had long brown hair and the olive complexion of a stereotypical Greek beauty, but she spoke with very little accent. She did not bother to introduce herself and since I was the only pale, blonde haired, blue eyed, American accented twenty something male around, there was no need for me to introduce myself.

“I love these picture-books,” the woman said, flipping through the pages quickly, barely glancing at the pictures, careless of the crafty selections of paper and stickers Em had surrounded them with.

“Ah, this must be you!” The woman jabbed her finger at the page, sliding a look at me, matching my fourteen-year old features with the young man sitting beside her. I waited for her to ask me more: about myself, about the trip, about the pictures. Instead, she looked back at the book, flipping another page.

“This is Emily,” she said, holding the book up to her face, “Look how young she is!” She did not comment on the size difference, which I thought was kind. The pictures had been taken pre-chemo.

“Who is this?” She tilted the book towards me so I could see who else was in the picture.

“That's Alan,” I answered without thinking.

“Who's Alan?” the woman asked. I opened my mouth to answer, but stopped. Em never told her friends, no matter where she moved, and it wasn't my place to. There were

plenty of pictures of him still in my parent's house, but it was a little bit of a shock to see one of him here. In the picture, he and I stood next to each other, shirts off, dripping sweat, posing awkwardly. We had just finished a five mile hike uphill with the bulging backpacks Em had refused to carry.

"C'mon, honey," Alan had whined, "We look horrible."

"You look like people who just climbed a big hill," Em replied, her camera already focusing as we poured water from our water bottles over our heads, "You know, all manly." We both knew she wouldn't leave it alone until we posed so we did and she walked away to take more pictures of fallen trees and interesting patterns in the dirt.

"Is she always like this?" Alan asked me under his breath while she was distracted.

"You think this is bad? Last summer she went through three rolls of film in one day at Cedar Point." I laughed and Alan grimaced.

"There's a waterfall not too much farther," Em told us as she returned, "We should stop there for our lunch." Alan agreed and then headed up the path in front of us. I pulled my t-shirt back over my head and Em wrapped an arm around my waist. I was already a head taller than her, so she couldn't reach my shoulders, or ruffle my hair the way she had when I was younger and she was taking me out to a movie or mini-golf. Some girls might have been jealous of a new brother after being an only child for ten years, but that was not Em.

"He's nice," I told her, since that was the question on her face.

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. I mean, he’s not as cool as me, but who is?” I grinned and Em laughed, shaking her head. She nodded at the trail, we needed to catch up with Alan, but I could tell she was pleased and I was glad.

We had gone back to Mohican a few times after that and I wondered if Em had meant to put out one of those scrapbooks, instead of this one. The woman was still waiting for me to answer her question, one finely-sculpted eyebrow lifted and her head cocked to the left.

“Diana!” Em saved me, appearing out of the sun with a smile, “I’m glad you made it! I see you’ve met my brother”

“Yes,” Diana replied, rising from her pool chair to kiss my sister’s cheek, “We were just looking at one of your picture-books”

“It’s the one from Mohican,” I said, watching Em’s face carefully. Her expression did not change, but her eyes darted to me. Did I tell? I shook my head once.

“Really? I didn’t realize I’d set that one out,” she said, “You know, Diana here runs a tourist company. She could probably give you a really great tour sometime.”

“Yes,” Diana said, turning back to me, “Where have you seen already?”

“Um, the airport?” I replied. Em was already walking away, called by a woman who appeared to have set her hair on fire by standing too close to the grill.

“What! You can not come to Greece and see the airport! Come!” I found myself being pulled by the wrist out of my seat and across the patio, down the stairs and out Em’s front door. Diana pulled me right across the white-gravel drive way and pushed me into her tiny black convertible.



“Eh, won’t Em wonder where I am?” I asked as she slid into the seat beside me and revved the engine.

“She’ll know,” Diana said vaguely and pushed her stiletto heeled shoe down on the accelerator, twisting the wheel sharply and spinning the car out of its haphazard parking spot before rocketing down the steeply inclined road. Trees and bushes and blurred past in green and brown stripes, which quickly turned to gray and terra cotta as Diana raced through the city. She hardly slowed down at all as we passed buzzing café’s and crowds of people pouring onto what appeared to be party barges docked in the harbor. I clutched the armrest, white knuckled, and tried to keep my eyes trained on the road in front of us. Diana dodged and weaved through traffic with practiced ease, her slim, brown hand wrapped around the gear shift, her left foot pumping the clutch in rhythm with my choking gasps.

“So, where are we going?” I managed to ask, trying not to stare at her sun glazed knee peeking out from her pencil skirt.

“I will take you to Emily’s favorite spot of Greece” she replied.

The sun finally descended below the horizon as we raced out of town again, up another hill. The road twisted along the edge of a cliff, flat, but barely two yards from a precipice completely unprotected by guardrails or retaining wall or even warning signs. We cruised silently as the darkness deepened, the ocean stretching out endlessly on the right and the empty fields of grasses and olive trees on the left fading away into shadow. If I squinted and ignored the strong scent of salt water permeating everything, I could almost imagine that those were fields of corn, august-tall, and I was shooting through the darkness with some Midwestern girl on our way to the drive-in.

Diana slammed the brakes on without warning. My seatbelt cut into my chest as she swung off the road and into the grasses on the left. She hadn't said a word the entire trip and I couldn't imagine what could be out here in the random countryside.

"Come," Diana said as she slipped out of the car. She left the headlights on, shining straight ahead in two narrow beams, illuminating what looked like some crumbling stone walls overcome by weeds. I followed her as she picked her way towards them carefully and then turned back to stare out at the ocean. The moon hung low over the water, but despite its white glow the darkness was thick. I could see why Em might like it here: she liked desolate cliffs overlooking the sea.

"You know the Battle of Thermopylae?" she asked.

"Sure. Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans."

"These American movies are not so historically accurate," Diana scoffed.

"Yeah, it didn't even mention General Themistocles and the navy or the Thespians and Thebans that backed up the Spartans" I agreed. Diana gave me a quick smile. The top half of her face was illuminated in silver by the full moon but the bottom half was gold from the headlights.

"But what none of the stories tell, even the histories, is the tale of the Persian who made it through the lines." She turned back to the stone ruins and pointed at them, "This is what is left of a small village which nobody remembers the name of anymore. From this village came a sailor and brought many things back from other countries, including a slave woman once. And this Persian found his way from Xerxes' army to this cliff and told the Greek, 'This is my sister that was stolen from me ten years ago. I have searched

many lands far from our home for her. I am taking her home now, and I will kill anyone who tries to stop me.”

Diana spoke swiftly, but evenly and I could almost see the Persian and the Greek, facing off in the middle of the village, the sister crouching in fear behind her master, unable to believe her brother had come to rescue her. The Greek challenged the Persian to a battle, which, according to Diana, lasted for hours. In the end, the Greek put his sword through the Persian’s stomach and he bled to death on the cliff, his head cradled in his weeping sister’s lap. Diana pointed to the ground beneath my feet, maybe just for effect.

“That is where he died and where they built his funeral pyre. When his body was nothing but ashes, the Greek man turned to his slave and said, ‘Your brother has given his life for yours. Live it well’ and he found a ship that would take her home and she returned to her family. They say she still haunts this cliff.”

“Why would she haunt it if she got to go home?” I asked, confused.

“They say she came to find her brother, but did not find him here.”

Diana headed back to the car but I stood on some ancient Persian’s funeral site, wondering if even my death would get Em to come back home, and why this was her favorite bit of Greece.

After the someone-died-here sightseeing, Diana drove me through the city, pointing out clubs and cafes and shops in a voice I could tell she used on fun-seeking tourists. It was late by the time she dropped me off in front of Em’s apartment, although the darkness hadn’t yet been touched by the encroaching sun. There were no cars or

scooters left out front and all of the windows were dark, so the party must've broken up quite a while ago. I opened the front door slowly and tip-toed through the living room, hoping not to wake Em. To my surprise, I heard the sound of someone walking around filtering down the stairwell from the roof. I headed back up to the pool area, wondering who could still be hanging around. But there was no one on the roof except Em.

She stood at the other end of the rooftop, the bright moonlight silhouetting her against the dark sky. She had thrown a white t-shirt and a pair of jean shorts over her bikini, but her hair was still hanging loose down her back, fluttering in the late night breeze. From where I was I couldn't see her face, but her arms were wrapped around herself as if fending off a blast of chilly air. She was staring out over the bay, gazing into the darkness as if she could see something out there. There was nothing to see but black sea and empty air. With the city quiet and the music off, you could hear every wave below as it crashed onto the rocky shore. Em, it seemed to me, was standing a little too close to the edge of the roof, from which the hill we were on top of plummeted straight down to the ocean without so much as a guard rail. She moved, slightly, and the moonbeams bounced off of her skin. In the silver light she looked gaunt and exhausted, her arms and legs slick and bony, her ribs poking through the thin t-shirt. And then for a second, just a second, I thought I could see right through her, right through her body out to the dark ocean. I could see the little pinpricks of light shining from the early morning trollers heading toward the fishing waters right through her chest, the thin line of the horizon cutting through her neck, the stars glinting through her skull. For that moment, the only part of Em that remained on the planet was a ghost, a memory in my own mind. Then, just as suddenly, her body was solid again: thin and wasted, but there. I had a

sudden urge to pick her up, tuck her into bed and call a doctor. Instead, I sniffed loudly to announce my presence and started to cross the patio. Em threw a glance over her shoulder and reached down for the half full black trash bag at her feet.

“Did you just get back?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Everybody gone?”

“Yep,” she answered. “Everybody left. They always do. Eventually” I looked around the patio: there was still quite a mess. Em moved around, dumping plastic cups with cigarette butts floating in them and crumb-ridden paper plates into her bag.

“Why don’t you leave this till morning?” I asked.

“I have to teach in the morning,” she said, throwing another cup into the bag, “And I don’t want it to sit here all day.”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind.” I took the bag from her and set it next to the now empty buffet table, “C’mon, go to bed, you look exhausted.” Em let me push her toward the door, her steps shuffling and her head drooping. At the first step she stopped and turned around.

“Hey, thanks,” she said as if I had just offered to give her a kidney. I wondered how many times she had been left to clean up all by herself in the dark.

## *On the Way Down to Florida*

I hate funerals. I do seem to find myself at quite a few of them, though. Always seems to be some brother, or mother, or father, or sister or great-aunt Bertha passing on. Well, I'm not a spring chicken so I suppose it's to be expected. I had been to one the weekend before, particularly bad: young man, hadn't even reached thirty years old yet. It was a funeral home I was familiar with, knew the director by name: Mr. Marrow, sounds like sorrow. It had been a house forty years ago; I knew the family that had lived there. The entire first floor had been converted to the viewing room, all the walls knocked out to make one big room. They'd put a thin gray carpet over the floors, painted the walls a bland shade of taupe and put navy blue curtains around the windows. Even the folding chairs filling most of the space were gray and blue. Outside it was a gorgeous mid-May day full of sunshine and flowers and newly green trees, but inside there was nothing but gloom and grief. Most the funeral homes in town were outfitted the same.

It was a good one, far as funerals can be good. Nice music, soft, the kind of thing I suppose the young man listened to, a fancy slide show of pictures on the screens Mr. Marrow had put in just the year before especially for this sort of thing. There were flowers all about, white roses mostly, some of those white daisy types they soak in food coloring to make them unnaturally bright blue and purple. The family was all lined up in front of the coffin, all in black. There was the mother and sister, sobbing their eyes out, going through boxes of Kleenex, not even able to speak to the folks filing past them. The father was silent, shaking hands and accepting condolences without a word. The brother, younger I think, was smiling, talking, laughing even when someone remembered something funny to him.

Then there was the wife. It was her that stopped me. She was dressed in black, like the others, plain pair of trousers, shirt, pumps, no jewelry. It was the scarf though, that was truly sad. Black silk over a bald head. I'd heard she was recovering from cancer; from the looks of it she still had quite a ways to go, though folks said she was done with the therapy, fully recovered except for the surgery to make her whole again. She stood at the end of the receiving line, just a couple of steps apart from the rest of the family. She wasn't sobbing like the other women, weren't even shedding a single tear. She shook people's hands as they passed her, but her eyes never seemed to rest on any of their faces. She stared past them, not at anything, just into the air, glassy and unfocused. I don't think it was just the chemo that had drained every pigment of color from her skin and sunk in her cheeks. She had friends and family all about her, his and hers, but she seemed not to notice them. I have been to many a funeral, but not ever have I seen a woman more devastated. I went through the line like everybody else, a copy of the obituary card from the little stand by the door in my hand. There was a picture of the young man on the front, a cropped snapshot from some sort of party. On the back was Psalm 23 and a reprint of the obituary I'd read the day before. When it was my turn, I shook the tear-wet hands of the wailing women, nodded the silent father, said my words to the brother, but I couldn't bring myself to approach the young wife. Instead I shuffled off to the back of the room, pretending I hadn't seen her cause she hadn't see me, I knew.

I was at the grocery when I saw her again. It was hard to mistake a woman unnaturally pale, black silk scarf over her head, with a dead sort of look in her eye. She was going through oranges: her hands sifting through them, squeezing them, putting them back, choosing another and another until her bag was full. There wasn't much else in her

cart, just a can of asparagus, a box of Ritz crackers, a block of cheddar cheese. Putting the bag of oranges in with the rest, she pushed out of the produce aisle and toward the dairy, her shoes making a sort of clicking sound on the tile floor. It was just after midnight and most the place was empty except for the poor souls who'd got put on night shift, and you could hear the whirr of the coolers in the back and the squeak of the cart's wheels echoing through the shelves.

"What a surprise to see you in here this time of night," a young lady's voice said from behind me and I turned to see the check-out girl I preferred to ring me out. She never once rung up my canned corn twice or forgot to run my super saver coupon card. She was being ironical because I never shopped except after midnight when the only people you chanced running into were the high school kids, bored on a summer night, or the drunks stopping off for a frozen meal before driving home.

"You know whether they got around to putting out the new milk?" I asked. They put out the new jugs of milk during the night shift, the fresh milk that lasted longer.

"I think they're on break, but I'll go check for you," the check-out girl replied and scurried down an aisle and through the flimsy swinging doors that separated the front from the back. I followed more slowly, pushing my own mostly empty cart down across the tiles. Shopping after midnight meant you had time; no one to watch as you move up and down the aisles, not knowing what you put in your cart and not caring much, silently urging you to hurry up, wondering why you'd been there so long.

I stopped at the end of the aisle, the end that emptied into the dairy section. The young wife was staring into the coolers. They hadn't restocked them yet, and the last gallons were stuck at the back of the top racks. She was a short thing and even in the



pumps she wore her arms weren't going to reach. They would push them forward when they started loading in the new gallons, and if she waited for a few minutes one of the stock boys would come out and help her. I pushed my cart forward slightly, aiming for the cheese and yogurts, not wanting to intrude on her solitude. I watched from the corner of my eyes, pretending to be considering fruit on the bottom or mixed in. She did not move, didn't even shift her weight from foot to foot. I could see her shoulders shudder a bit, the air from the surrounding coolers likely breezing through the gauzy sort of top she was wearing, but her eyes remained fixed on the out of reach gallons of milk that would spoil in a day or two anyway.

From the other end of the store I could hear laughs: high shrilly laughs mixed with the low tumble of a male guffaw. It was the liquor section down that way, right next to the pharmacy section, and I wasn't surprised when a threesome tumbled around the corner, the two women tottering on their sparkly spike heels, the man with a bottle in each hand. They were laughing with the kind of abandon only the drunk and the sublime can find, at the pattern on the tiles, or the way the boxes of Little Debbie's were stacked, or at their own laughter. They stumbled a little closer and I started to maneuver my cart toward soup aisle, but stopped when one of them started pointing my way.

"Oh my god, look!" A girl in a go-go type skirt said, waving her arm up and down with her finger extended, "It's that chick, you know the one, whose husband just died?"

"Right," her friend with too much make up on nodded, "Alan's wife."

"It's so unreal, don't you think?" go-go girl said.

"I know!" The makeup girl responded, "What's her name again?"

"Didn't you go to their wedding?" the go-go skirt asked.

“Yeah, but I only stayed ‘till the cake and I can’t remember,” said the makeup girl.

“What’s she going to do, now that she has all that money?” the go-go girl asked.

“What money?” the third, a man, asked. I had heard a bit about this, too. Big gossip travels fast in a small town. It seems the young man had died of something called Toxic Shock Syndrome, some kind of thing you get from staph infection in a small wound. A papercut, in his case. He went to the hospital, the doctors there told him it was the flu and sent him home. Next day he was dead.

“How much?” the man asked. This is what young people ask, I’ve learned. A person’s life ends and the mourners want to know what they’ve left behind. They were getting louder, the alcohol dulling their ability to hear each other in normal tones, and I glanced behind me to see if the young wife would notice. She was still staring at the milk, shivering.

“Three mill,” the go-go girl gushed, “In out of court settlement.”

“The family was pissed she took it, too,” the makeup girl added, though I don’t know where she was getting her information from. None of the family had looked angry to me, just standardly sad.

“Guess they figured they’d be able to get more if they’d sued, but his wife signed a paper that said she wouldn’t. Said she didn’t want to go through a long, drawn out court case.”

“I don’t know what they’re complaining about,” go-go girl said, “She gave his mom and dad the life insurance and that was a hundred thou.”

“Well, she’ll be fine,” the man said, “She’s still young and with all that money, she’ll be fine.”

But he was wrong, I knew. I recognized the look that young woman had and I could tell; she would never be fine. All the youth and money in the world would not be enough for her to reach “fine.” She might as well have died with her husband. I knew a young man once who’d had that look.

He met a girl in 1957, loved her and married her. He bought her a cute little house with a green door and a willow tree in the front yard. This particular young man loved his wife so much he completely disregarded the conventions of the time; if some of the boys from the factory were going out for a cold one after work, he called home to ask if she minded first. At parties, he followed her around as she chatted, fetching her drinks. He bought her anything she asked for and a fair few things she never did. He helped out with the dishes and the laundry cause he just couldn’t see to letting her do it all herself. He got heckled a bit for it, too, even by his own father, but he didn’t mind so much, long as it didn’t get back to her.

By 1959 the doctors were telling them that they’d be having a little one. She wanted to name him Matthew Edward, convinced as she was that the baby would be a boy. The young husband painted the spare room all blue and waited for her to decide whether she wanted baseball bats or rocket ships.

About four months along, her just showing, she decided she wanted to see her mama. So, he took the week off work to drive her down to Florida. He loaded up the Ford Victoria Mainline he’d bought from a guy he’d known in high school: her two suitcases and his small duffel, the little bag she’d filled with mints and a hair brush and a

paperback novel. It was a twenty-two hour drive and, despite his offers to make reservations for a hotel room, she had insisted that she would be fine and wanted to drive straight through so they could be there in time for Sunday church with her momma. They were only on the road for a few hours when she began to squirm a bit and he asked her if she was ok.

“I’m fine,” she answered, “I guess the baby doesn’t like the car trip too much. He’s kicking around a bit.”

“Do you want to stop?” The young husband asked but she said no so he kept driving, sliding glances over at her when he could afford to take his eyes off the road. She had unpinned her hair and it was fluttering in the wind from the open window, her face turned towards the sun as she watched the fields of corn and soy bean race by, a small little smile playing at the corners of her lips. The young husband suppressed a smile himself, wondering how he’d found himself so lucky as to be married to such a beauty, such a sweet woman. Secretly, he was proud of the growing bump beneath the dress she’d tailor made to hide it, sometimes even running his hands over her smooth belly while she was sleeping. He had already started making plans for catch in the yard and a new red bicycle for Christmas in a couple of years.

Another sixty miles or so and his wife was showing increased signs of discomfort. The young husband pulled over to a little fuel station and diner to let her walk around a bit, telling her they were getting low on gas and giving her money to get them both something to drink before they continued on. She came out of the diner with two Cokes and a smile, so he made sure she was comfortable again they continued on. As they drove, though, she only seemed to be getting worse. She looked pale and claimed to be

cold, though it was the middle of summer and reaching the low nineties. His heart began to beat harder.

“Maybe we can just take a break for a short while,” she said around lunch time and he pulled into a park where she could walk around in the grass. He went to the local market and bought anything he thought she might like: a bottle of milk, biscuits, grapes, a turkey sandwich. She nibbled for a moment, and then pushed it all away.

“There’s something wrong,” he said, “We should find a hospital.”

“No need, I’m fine. It’s just the car ride,” she said. They were about halfway down to Florida so he looked up a motel and called from the pay phone in the soda shop to reserve a room for the night. He told her they would finish the drive the next day and she did not argue. At the motel desk, the young husband asked where the hospital was, just to be safe. He settled her in and watched her carefully as she washed her hands, her face, brushed her hair out. She was still pale, even her small, plump lips.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, “Do you need anything?” She said she was fine, but was feeling hungry again.

“Would you go down to that little diner we passed and bring back a little something? I think I might just take a little nap until you get back.” She smiled sweetly and he nodded, but he didn’t think he should leave her alone and hesitated at the door, wondering what to do. She spread herself out on the bed, and closed her eyes. He told himself that there was nothing to worry about, that she would be fine and anyway he would only be gone for quarter of an hour, half at most. Still, he did not want to leave her and he stood in front of the door, jangling the keys in his hand. She opened her eyes and smiled at him again.

“Don’t worry,” his wife said to him, “I’m sure it’s fine. The baby just didn’t like the vibrations or something. I’ll see you in a little bit.” She smiled at him from the bed, her soft brown hair loose splayed out around her head like a halo, her bright blue eyes clear and her lips curved in a tired-sort of way. He smiled back and opened the door.

It took him twenty-five minutes, round trip, and the whole time he was waiting to order, waiting for the food to come, waiting for the red light at the corner to turn green, he worried. Something inside him told him he should never have left and the tension in his chest had been building so much that as he parked the car and made his way to the door of their room he felt as if his lungs might collapse and his heart explode. The key stuck in the lock and he struggled with it, trying not to drop the tray with her meal. Finally the door swung open and he was back, stepping over the threshold, ready to breathe with relief, but she was on her side, her arms wrapped around herself and there were red stains in the bottom of her lacey night dress and across the motel coverlet.

She died two hours later after an ambulance ride and an hour pacing in the hospital waiting room, alone. I never knew exactly how. Complications, they said. I reckon they didn’t rightly know themselves. There was a funeral and all. I don’t remember a thing of it. There are two gravestones: one with her name and one that says “Matthew Edward, Taken to the Lord before entering the World.”

The first thing I remember from after is my own face in a mirror one morning, while I was shaving. I rinsed the cream off and when I looked back, I wasn’t in the reflection at all. There was the shower curtain behind me, the wall and the little doily she’d put on top the toilette, but no me. I blinked and my face was back, there on my head, bits of shaving cream still stuck to my jaw. But it wasn’t a face I knew. The hands

holding the razor weren't mine, nor were the legs I was standing on. I had no control over the body I seemed to be trapped in.

For years, this body has carried me around: eating, sleeping, talking, walking, even getting a bit of skirt when it felt it needed it, but I've had no part of its life.

The young wife was still staring into the cooler of milk cartons. The three drunks had tottered away, bemusing themselves with outrageous claims of what they would do with three million dollars if their husbands had died. The stock boys had not come out to refill the racks or offer the young wife any help. Frowning, I pushed my squeaking cart towards hers. She did not look in my direction, or give any indication that she sensed my approach. I did not expect her to.

"Do you need any help, Missus?" I rasped in my rarely used voice. Her lower jaw unhinged from the top but no sound issued forth.

"I can reach something for you, Missus," I said, "A gallon of milk. If you can't reach." Slowly, as if being careful not to snap her own neck, she turned her face to look at me. Her eyes had been green once, a clear type of crystal green, but they were hazy now with chemo, maybe, and grief. A shiver ran down my spine, the cold air from the coolers reaching down the collar of my shirt.

"He drank two percent" she said, barely audible, and turned to stare through the glass again at the empty racks, "They don't have two percent."

I didn't bother to tell her that they would be re-stocking soon, that the shelves would be full of gallon after gallon of every kind of milk a person might want. They would never have the two-percent she needed.



## Car Crash

A chilly June day. Chilly because the skies had been filled with thick, grey clouds for three days straight. The rain had washed away all the accumulated heat the May sun had strained to build and the western wind, which was no more than a slight breeze pushing microscopic droplets of water into people's windshields, had been cooled long before it reached a small Midwestern town in north central Ohio. A small red car, sporty but out of date, had started to make a right hand turn at the intersection of a one semi busy thorough fare and one barely used trail in one of the lower class sections of residential areas that was the bulk of the sprawled out town. A black car, once a fashionable option for a recently graduated high school student whose parents could afford it, with no headlights on, not enough brake power to squeal, slid neatly into the passenger side door, pushing the small red car slightly towards the wrong lane so that it faced the white car that had been waiting at the stop sign head on, but more effectively halting the movement of either vehicle. The sound was such that even a young woman, nearby, who had never before heard the sound of two one to two ton hunks of metal ramming into each other at speeds of about 25 miles per hours, at least in real life, immediately recognized it and thought to herself "I've just heard a car accident," then grabbed her cell phone and her boyfriend's slightly oversized fleece lined jacket and hurried out to the corner to observe. A psychology major, she thought she might be interested in going into trauma therapy, although she wasn't particularly fond of the idea of trying to help women get over being raped or soldiers deal with PTSD. Car crash victims she thought she could probably handle.

An older man, maybe in his late fifties, with a rotund middle not uncommon of these areas, stood beside the black car at the passenger's side where a middle aged woman, possibly in her early fifties, no younger than late forties, sat with her feet touching the ground and looking mildly out the open window of the open door. Another man, mid to late thirties, for whom the sporty red car had been a pre-midlife crisis attempt to reach his youth, paced back and forth in the street, his dirty ball cap that probably had nothing to do with baseball matching the grease stained factory work-shirt and jeans. He continued to exclaim his surprise at having not seen them, his sincere regret and his total and complete fault. He held his left hand at an odd angle, close to his chest, and wrapped his thumb and middle finger of his right hand around the wrist every so often. The psych student walked quickly over to them, introduced herself as Melanie and asked if they were all right. A man from the propane store across the way walked far enough up the street to tell them he'd called it all in without having to scream and then quickly walked back to his storefront where he, and the rest of the workers, stood behind the class, arms folded, and gabbed as they watched events unfold. The owner let them stand and gab as there wasn't much work for them to do and they hadn't had a customer in two days at any rate.

Now a small crowd was gathering, teen moms who had skipped school emerging from run down duplexes with bad piping and low rents, dragging toddlers with koolaid stained mouths and Bert and Ernie striped t-shirts out into the chill with no shoes on to watch the only good bit of live action violence that would take place safely in the next few weeks. Store attendants that had nothing better to do because the mom and pop shops of the lower end of town, ramshackled and chipping, rarely getting more than the devoted

customers that only kept coming out of custom, were less busy on a chilly June day than Antarctica was in the height of tourist season. The young woman named Melanie gauged the scene carefully, her eyes bouncing from the poor woman sitting in the black car, obviously in shock, to the poor man pacing by his damaged youth, also obviously in shock. She had just finished her bachelor's degree only one month ago at the local university and was living nearby until she could sum up the courage to go on to grad school and obtain all those various inscribed forms that people demanded to see before paying her to listen to them talk.

The female victim was closer and the paramedics should be arriving soon enough to tend to the pacing man so she quickly crossed the radius of the automatic circle around the accident and squatted in front of the woman. She began to ask inane, ridiculous questions like "Do you know who the president is?" and "What year were you married?" mostly to make the woman pay attention, and then moved on to questions that demanded thought, such as "Do you know what 12 times 4 is?" and "How do you spell Monet?" She could not remember from any of her classes how to deal with shock victims and was winging it, though she tried to sound professional, as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

The older man stood beside her, not speaking, but gazing down at the helpful woman whose head he could only see the top of around his grey t-shirted bulbous belly. He and his wife had been on their way to HomeDepot to pick up a new toilet for their deteriorating first floor bathroom. His wife had ordered it out of a catalog from American Standard in what he considered an overly pastel shade of blue, but hadn't argued at the choice. Ever since their last son had moved out, his wife had been sort of despondent and

the remodeling of the first floor bathroom was the first thing he'd seen her put some energy into in months. She was already talking about remodeling the kitchen and he had already started calculating the cost. Before she was done they would have a whole new house. He could only hope this would be enough to get her over her empty nest syndrome.

Meanwhile, a tall, sinewy man in his seventies had shuffled far more quickly from his sagging front porch than he had in some many years to run his eyes over the damage. The red car was dripping fluids and the black car was smoking, but there was little he could do about that, and so he moved to the other side of the semi-blocked street and raised one gnarled hand, his fingers splayed and his palm facing outwards, to halt one side of traffic, then scooped the opposite hand and bent it back and forth from the wrist while simultaneously bending the forearm from the elbow to indicate to the other side of traffic that it should proceed. The sheepish instinct to follow the directions of whomever took charge, learned in the early years of school, allowed the drivers to follow his directions and keep an orderly movement of vehicles this way and that. The old man's sense of duty and honor, developed as a child when he remembered such words as meaning something more than dying in some dusty foreign land to protect the egomaniacal country's non-right to the planet's black blood, were sated as he performed this task. He was suddenly glad that God had prompted he and his wife to move in town when they had determined that the solitary life of a quiet, honest farm house was no longer beneficial to their continued existence. Their son, Daniel, had changed his name to Candy and moved to New York to pursue Broadway, leaving the farm to rot away, nearly twenty years ago.

Now, the old man's brightly checkered, flannelled back was easily seen in the grey, sifting rains of the just barely afternoon, the first thing the sole officer first on the scene saw as he plowed through the parted cars to the accident. The old man continued his task at a nod from the officer, feeling proud that his actions had been recognized and approved by the fine young man whose responsibility it was to see to the peace and protection of the little town, while the officer strode with steady, confident steps to the nearest car, the black, and asked if anyone was seriously hurt. The pacing man joined them, proclaiming loudly that it was all his fault, that he was so sorry, that he thought he'd maybe broken his wrist and so would the officer mind reaching into his car to extract his wallet which contained all the information the officer might need to start proceedings. The officer, Collins, began proceedings with the disciplined briskness he'd developed as a beat-cop in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago. Worried about the increasingly alarming reports on the local news stations, his wife had insisted that they move and so he had followed her to her small hometown where this single car accident constituted a busy day.

The shrill sirens of the first ambulance blessedly stopped a good twenty feet away as the bulky vehicle maneuvered through stopped traffic and the gas station through way to get as close as possible to the potentially critical victims. Three paramedics emerged from the cube, pulling latex gloves over their nimble fingers as they split up, one medic for each victim, to do what they could. The young woman named Melanie reported that the woman was in mild shock, but didn't seem to have any immediately apparent physical injuries, while her husband was coherent and similarly unharmed. Another patrol car screeched onto the scene and Officer Collins thanked her, told her not to wander off because someone would have a couple questions, and went to meet his fellow

officers. They already had their notebooks out, pulling pens from the breast pockets beneath their shiny silver badges. They took statements from witnesses, contorting their faces into grim expressions of seriousness, writing down names and phone numbers and addresses to list in the accident reports they would have to file later. Cars continued to pull in and out of the gas station, their drivers wanting to side step the long process of waiting their turn on the road.

The oldest officer, a man with twenty years of experience at fielding fender-benders and domestic disputes for the under-challenged small town police service, gave the medics the okay to remove the victims from the scene and called Jack's Mobile Auto Service and Towing from his cell phone as the two ambulances tumbled away, their lights swirling silently in the gray light. Jack's number was on his speed dial, an unwritten acknowledgement between him and the city that he would clean up all in-town accidents for slightly more than cost if they ignored the lack of zoning permits for his shop, run from his garage, at edges of town.

A man had appeared in the crowd offering beer and popcorn to his neighbors while others had dashed into the gas station to purchase candy bars and cold cokes. The manager of the small station, a balding fifty year old man who had given up on any hopes of escaping the drudgery of his hometown at the tender age of nineteen, started breathing heavily as he rang them all up, took their money, addressed the next person, and thought about the sales figures he would be able to send to corporate at the end of the night. They would be the best figures he'd been able to cobble together for weeks, even with a little inventive number keeping. Another few nights like this and he might even be able to think about that Christmas bonus the company offered every year and he never seemed to qualify for.

It was supposed to be shared between all employees, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them, and in the meantime he would be able to get caught up on some of those outstandingly late child support payments. He pointlessly hoped for another crash next weekend.

Two of Jack's best tow trucks, the new models he'd just sunk a hundred thousand dollars into, with the special decals that were guaranteed to catch attention, eased onto the scene and disgorged tall men of linebacker builds with newly shaped mullets and oil beneath their fingernails. They laughed and chatted with the two younger officers as they went about their work, the four of them high school friends and Wednesday night poker buddies. They debated the recent baseball game, oblivious to the very near tragedy the site might have been witness to, their minds occupied with the closeness of quitting time and their hands busy with the mechanical movements of attaching a ton of dented metal securely to their trucks. They, like the E.R. doctor who saw death every night, were accustomed to the carnage of plastic and glass and carried on with their lives with callousness of heart that allowed them to function as human beings after long days of cleaning up the wreckage of other people's lives.

The crowds were already beginning to disperse, wrappers and beer cans littering the sidewalks. The officer in charge over-saw the waltz of emergency vehicles as the code-required fire engine, the ambulances, the excess squad cars and the tow trucks all tried to extricate themselves at once. The old man in the checkered shirt shuffled painfully back to his porch and sagged into his wicker rocker, going over the details in his mind so that he would remember them accurately when Daniel-Candy called at the end of the week. The young psychology student retreated to her apartment and an

episode of Fraser with her lunch before heading to work at the local Goodwill, a clear misuse of her quality education. Traffic resumed its normal pace and the gas station manager went back to waiting, bored, for a customer. Ten minutes later, a woman noticed the powdery glass still left in the road as she drove through the intersection and wondered where it had come from, but was immediately distracted from her thoughts by the screaming of a newly awakened infant in the backseat, and did not even bother to check the newspaper the next day for an accident report.



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