

INK
Beneath the Stain

a novel by
Zita Harrison

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“The more one judges, the less one loves.”
- Honoré de Balzac

THE COLOR OF INK

~ 1 ~

A large, dark blue splotch, the color of ink, covered the right side of the baby's face. Like someone had taken one side of a Rorschach test and glued it to his cheek. It sprouted at the hairline on the right side of the forehead, spread over his right cheek and his right nostril, wrapped around the right side of his chin and traveled a few inches down the right side of his neck. His parents stared at him in horror, through a foggy sense of distorted reality, when they first saw him in the delivery room. Could this really be happening? The baby was perfect in every other way; soft reddish fuzz on his head, cute little button nose, all five fingers on each tiny clenched hand, the cutest wrinkly butt...and an ominous cloud of stormy blue on the right half of his face. A cruel joke played by the powers that be. Shell shocked and exhausted after a long labor, all kinds of delirious thoughts went through their heads; they pictured some Zeus-like bearded force up in the sky, humongous, all-encompassing mouth open in thundering laughter that shook the world. That shook their world. Could they give it back and get an exchange? Do an "undo" like they could on the computer? Photoshop it out? In this day of technology, there must be something they could do.

Then his mother, Audrey, put him up to her breast and he latched on. I'm yours, that latch said, I claim what's mine. She was filled with the timeless, sublime sense of magic and miracle, of something that knew no boundary and could not be defined in words. This was her child. Of course they would keep him. The very thought of doing anything else was a sacrilege. As she saw the life that came from her and fed from her, she felt an honor that she had never before experienced: the humbling privilege of being given a divine responsibility. And she loved him in a way she had never loved anything in her life.

Her husband, Derek, was not quite as star-stricken, more hesitant. He felt resentful. They had so been looking forward to this baby. It wasn't fair. In most other aspects of life, they had a choice. (A thought he might rethink in the course of life.) Why not this? Being of the gender that is typically disposed more towards reason and logic than emotions and magic, he could not match his wife's attachment to the child. The birthmark really bothered him. It was hard to look at without cringing, but it was also hard to look at anything else. That damn birthmark screamed for all of one's attention. So, as he held his son and studied him, he failed to see that he was holding a miniature version of himself. He failed to experience the amazement and wonder of a new

parent when they see flashes of themselves in their offspring. Audrey thought that the baby had Derek's reddish hair, and thin lips, his eyebrows. She even suggested that the tight little frown that the baby had on his face most of the time reminded her of his mom. Derek's mom would have that frown on her face even when she was smiling. But all Derek saw was the screaming birthmark. In a daze, he wondered if he could give him away. But that was really not a serious option, was it? He remembered hearing once that children chose their parents for a reason. Maybe there was a reason they were chosen by this child.

So they called him "Ink." It turned out to be a memorable name, one that the artsy people of San Sebastian, California, thought was quaint...unusual. Until they saw him and realized why he had been given that name. Then they were just uncomfortable. It called attention to the source of the name, which they were trying desperately not to look at, as if they were flaunting his disfigurement. But Audrey thought it was brilliant. After all, there was no hiding the birthmark, and since she was a fine artist who did ink work, and Derek was a graphic designer, both creative by nature, would they have ever been satisfied with a name like "Michael" or "Andrew?" The name "Ink" would symbolize their love of art and celebrate for them what others might consider a deformity. The birthmark would be a form of abstract art on their son's face, cool and artsy. Derek reluctantly gave into his wife's conviction that "Ink" was the right name for their son. Maybe naming the birthmark would calm the screaming. It didn't. Not for Derek, and not for the rest of the world either.

In fact, most people were unable to share Audrey's conviction about the name. Cool and artsy? Maybe if half his face weren't actually drowning in it. Most people either recoiled in horror or felt unbearable pity for the child. They didn't know how to see the ink splotch as something beautiful. In the hospital, the nurses had gushed about his little feet and hands and tried hard not to look at his face. "Oh, he's beautiful!" they had said. "You're so lucky!" But their eyes had said, "Poor you." They saw the lifetime of struggle the child would have, and didn't want to wish that on anyone. Same with family and friends who came excitedly bearing gifts to meet the new little person. They had bought clothes, diapers, jungle gyms, strollers, bouncy chairs, swings, car seats, and looked forward to playing with him, and the baby had to go and be born like that. Hard to look at. And why wasn't the mother more bothered by it? In fact, the pride Audrey seemed to take in their son's unfortunate birthmark seemed perverse to them. Didn't she see that it was a curse? That the world was not mature enough for this, might not ever be mature enough for it? Didn't she see the life of discrimination, bullying and intolerance that lay ahead for the child?

“You could probably get it removed...there are all kinds of laser surgery out there...” one well wisher tried to suggest. The glare she got in return from Mom told her the kid was stuck with the mark.

Of course, both parents had nagging doubts about the birthmark. When all the hubbub died down and they were by themselves, Derek brought up the possibility of having it removed. Audrey, considering her show of enthusiasm and support for their son’s appearance thus far, was surprisingly open to discussing it. But it was no simple matter. There were so many considerations. First of all, was it even possible to completely remove a mark that covered half a face? Would they do laser treatments or skin grafts or what? Whatever they did, it would require major work and it would not be cheap. No insurance would pay for it, and they were not rich by any means. Derek’s little Graphic Design business sometimes did well and other times didn’t. Audrey had a steady income from a few publishers who hired her to do illustrations on a regular basis, but the pay wasn’t that great. She did her own ink illustrations at home, which she tried to sell, but not very successfully so far. And even if they did manage to somehow obtain the money for the removal, there were still other considerations. How old should Ink be when they do it? Wasn’t the baby way too young to have his face torn apart? What if the plastic surgeon messed up? Ink could possibly be left with scars more hideous than the birthmark. And if they kept it, would the birthmark grow with his face or stay the same size? If it stayed baby size, his face would eventually outgrow it. Maybe he could grow a beard and cover it up. It might not be too bad. They decided not to do anything for the moment. Audrey decided there was a reason her son was born with this stain, and that overcoming this tremendous challenge would definitely make him strong and extraordinary. And life would definitely be challenging for Ink, beginning with school.

The portentous birthmark decided to grow with Ink's face, getting larger as his face got larger, spreading over as much surface as it always had. An ominous cloud over their lives. His father got more and more morose. His mother continued to love her son and be hopeful.

To the children at preschool, he was a curiosity, like a giraffe and its spots. They wanted to know how and where he had gotten that mark, if it was something one could get done at the fair, like face painting or temporary tattooing, whether his mommy and daddy had it too. It might have been a little overwhelming for Ink, except for the fact that they were also at the age when their interest, along with their attention span, was short lived. They went back to whatever they had been playing with and played without judging each other. And, like most children at that age, Ink was good at occupying himself and was content with his own company. He didn't really care if anybody played with him or not. Upon arrival, he headed straight for the colorful, large print picture books, infinitely more interesting to him than other children. His mother read with him regularly at home, the result of which was that he had a better vocabulary than most other children his age, and loved books. And, since in this golden age of video games, books weren't the first choice for most children, he didn't face much competition. Now and then some child would try to grab his book away from him, more for the reaction than anything else, and he learned pretty quickly that if he let go of the book, they lost interest in it, and he could then pick it up again. On the whole, he didn't have to deal with any kind of negativity towards his birthmark. Except from the teacher. She was Ink's first taste of the ugly world of intolerance.

Mrs. Penelope Martin could not look at the child. She always looked slightly off to the right or left whenever she had to talk to him. She hugged other children, but not Ink. In addition, her extreme, unyielding Christian beliefs determined that the name his parents had given him was disgraceful and heathen. Artists and their blasphemous attitudes. If she had her way, the whole lot of them would be burned. Their complete freedom from the need to believe in God bewildered and threatened her. What kind of person doesn't want to be held accountable for his/her actions to some higher being? What kind of person doesn't need someone to pray to in times of trouble? They would all go straight to hell. And what was wrong with a nice normal Christian name like "Michael?" Or "Andrew?" On top of giving their deformed little troll a senseless name like "Ink," they had given him a foreign middle name. His middle name was "Anadi," meaning

“eternal” in Hindi, his mother had proudly explained. Ink Anadi Spencer. Mrs. Spencer had thought it had a nice ring to it. Rolled smoothly off the tongue. Mr. Spencer didn’t have much to say about it, or anything else. Mrs. Martin wondered what in God’s name they had been thinking. The child would be permanently confused about his place in the world. Not Christian, not Hindu, not really anything. Unless “Artist” was a valid category to belong to, which it definitely wasn’t.

In her little world built of fear and insecurity, Mrs. Martin spent an irrational amount of time brooding about Ink’s name and all that it implied. He was by no means stupid, and she could tell that he sensed her disdain towards him. In the detached way of children, he watched when she hugged her other students, patted them on the head. Watched the grimace on her face whenever she had to interact with him. He was a good pupil, quiet, attentive. Didn’t bug other children in class like so many did. Shared books he was reading. Except for the birthmark, undoubtedly a mark of the devil, and, of course, the name, Mrs. Martin could find nothing to complain about Ink. She knew, however, that evil manifested in many forms, and was always on the lookout for abnormal signs in both children and adults, anything that would indicate satanic influence. She tried in vain to find something in Ink’s behavior or words that would justify sending him out of her classroom. With the growing trend away from religion these days, she had no choice but to be forever vigilant. Who knew what was hiding out in plain sight?

That trend away from religion was, of course, an intrinsic part of public schools, and like other public schools, Laughlin Elementary favored no one religion above others. The diverse neighborhood they were in demanded more tolerance and open-mindedness than other neighborhoods. Mrs. Martin had to downplay her faith at the interview to get hired.

“While we understand the right of individual teachers to have their own faith...” the principal had begun when he saw the fat cross half buried in the multiple layers of what looked like her neck. There really was no visible neck. Her chin led to layers of flesh and ended in cleavage. The principal wondered how Mrs. Martin’s religion permitted the exhibition of this much flesh. Perhaps it was to enable the cushioned display of the fat cross. “This school has children from all backgrounds,” he had continued, “Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and even families that don’t believe or practice anything.” Mrs. Martin had nodded with a placid smile on her face. “This means,” the principal persisted, disturbed by that smile, “teachers need to contain their own religious beliefs and not discriminate against children from different beliefs or no beliefs.” That smile surely looked like it was hiding

something. Or was it? He didn't want to be paranoid or anything, but he needed reassurance. He owed that much to his community. So he sat looking at her expectantly, forcing her to respond.

"Of course," she had said. "What kind of monster would do that?" Little did she know herself. In the fashion of most bigots, she was also in denial of that aspect of herself. "Children are only children after all," she continued. "They don't know what to believe."

The principal felt his trusty gut protest. She wouldn't try to teach those children, "who didn't know what to believe," to believe what she did, would she? But his low-income neighborhood school had a high teacher turnaround, and he desperately needed a teacher. She had excellent credentials, albeit from a fundamental Christian school, so he ignored his trusty gut. And the school got saddled with a not-so-closeted bigot who, because of her very nature, had no choice but to believe, when she saw Ink, that the birthmark on his face was the mark of the devil, and his parents were vulgar barbarians for not giving him a good Christian name.

Hence, when Ink joined Mrs. Martin's class, any sermonizing she had managed to keep contained until then came pouring out like molten lava, and her lessons became infused with what "the Lord" said, or did, or would do, and wouldn't do. The four-year-old children were too young to really care. They stared at her blankly when she erupted about Jesus, then let it skim over most of their heads and went back to what interested them more...play. Many of them had Christian parents, and they didn't act like Mrs. Martin. She was just mad. Plus, the story of Jesus was more a fairy tale to them than anything else at this point, akin to the story that Ink told them about how his birthmark came about... another thorn in Mrs. Martin's holier-than-thou foot.

In the beginning, when other children asked Ink why he had that mark on his face, he said he didn't know. But they kept asking, and eventually he brought it up to his mom. She had secretly been a little worried about what would happen when her son was old enough to be affected by society. She wanted to tell her son to be strong. To not care what other people thought. That the mark on his face was beautiful and made him special. But looking at the 4-year-old's face, so sweet on one side and so marred on the other, the words failed. She tried talking to her husband about it, but all he did in response was shrug.

"What did you think was going to happen?" he said.

Furious at the continued lack of support and feeling from her husband, she slept on the floor in Ink's room that night, one of many nights since he had been born. And as she looked around at his books about dinosaurs, and fictional monsters, she had an idea that she thought might fit the world of children.

“Tell them a story about how it happened,” she told her son. “Tell them a dragon kissed you.” It was brilliant.

When Ink told the next child who asked him about the birthmark that he had been kissed by a dragon, it was as if the sun came out from behind the cloud. It spread across the school, lighting up every child it touched. Did they really believe it? It didn't matter. What mattered is that, for these children, school days became treks into a fantasy world where there was a boy who had been kissed by a dragon. It became a place that previously existed only in storybooks, but was now a daily part of their lives. They loved it. Parents struggled between having their children believe a lie and having them actually look forward to going to school for a change. It was just a silly story, some said to their offspring. These were the ones who told their four-year-olds that Santa didn't exist, and that the Tooth Fairy was really Mom. They didn't understand that their children's innate belief in magic was something to be cherished and nurtured before the world took it away. They themselves had lost their sense of magic a long time ago, if they had ever had it. But for a while, all the kids in Ink's class were fascinated by him. Of course, magic, by its very nature fleeting and illusive, is fickle. And so was the children's fascination with Ink's story.

Soon everyone got used to having a boy kissed by a dragon in the class, and went about their own business. But no one made him feel bad. No one, that is, except his teacher.

One day, approaching Christmas, Mrs. Martin had the children draw pictures of how their families celebrated the holidays. Despite the different races and religions represented in the class, most of the children drew scenes related to Christmas. The holidays were mostly about glitter and gifts after all. Pranav drew a Christmas tree with ornaments too big for it and gigantic gifts underneath it. It took a while to find the tree, but it was there. Julie drew a reindeer with a huge, shiny, red nose, and a sled buried in gifts and lights. Lin drew fifteen angels and blue, magic dust. Ink drew a Buddha and snowmen. Mrs. Martin was outraged. Not a Buddha. Not on this occasion. Any other time she could deal with the blasphemy, but not at Christmas.

“Why did you draw a Buddha?” she demanded, blistering.

“Because my parents are Buddhists,” Ink said.

They weren’t really, but one could see how it might look like that to a child. First of all, his mom meditated cross-legged on the floor regularly, like images of the Buddha he had seen. He didn’t know that her interest was in the process of meditation itself, different forms of it, different approaches to it, rather than Buddhism.

Second, she had a small alabaster statue of the Buddha in repose on her dresser. It was a beautiful piece that had called out to her in a Tibetan store. Unlike the brass and wooden statues, the pure, glowing translucence of this one emanated tranquility. Its simplicity had touched and inspired her. She had to have it.

Third, except for the statue of the Buddha, there was no other religious imagery anywhere in the house. No crosses or statues of Jesus or Mary anywhere. Christmas, his parents had told Ink, was a pagan holiday started in Europe a long time ago.

And fourth, when the end of the year came around, they celebrated winter. His mother put up a few cute snowmen and some white garlands bought at the dollar store around the house. Made snowman cookies. Thus, when he was asked to draw a picture of how his family celebrated the holidays, he drew a Buddha and snowmen. And since there was no word for people who celebrated winter, he said his parents were Buddhists.

Mrs. Martin could have taken the time to ask what the snowmen signified, could have taken the time to remember that children were seldom accurate in their versions of things, and that the views of the parents were rarely the views of a four-year-old child. But the floodgates to wounded religious fervor opened. Pent-up outrage at the boy and his heathen family came rushing out, and she swooped like an

avenging warrior on the Buddha. First she ranted about the fact that people should not be celebrating Buddha during Christmas. Then, tears in her eyes, she ranted about all the sacrifices Christ had made for the people. Ink looked a little startled at her vehement description of the blood and gore of the crucifixion, but on the whole, his mind was able to shut it out...he was hungry and wanted his lunch. That was when Mrs. Martin broke into a loud hiss that drew the attention of the nearby students and then spread in a ripple of nudges and whispers over the whole class. "If your parents don't believe in Christ," she began, all the wrath of the righteous in her scowling, twisted tomato colored face, her voice rising abruptly to a crescendo, "they will go straight to HELL!" The class froze for a minute. Even self-absorbed children looked over, a little scared. The teaching assistant sat, horrified, unsure of whether to do anything or not.

The slights and the lack of affection Ink could ignore. But the picture of his quirky, beloved mom engulfed in sky-high flames, surrounded by horned demons holding pitchforks, was too much. The thought frightened him. He burst into tears and went running out of the classroom, ignoring Mrs. Martin's screams for him to get back to class that instant.

And he refused to go back. Held in the safe, soothing arms of the smiling and comforting secretary in the office, he managed to stammer out between tears what Mrs. Martin had said. When his mother came to pick him up, he grabbed onto her for dear life. What would he do without his mother? Bad old Mrs. Martin.

Bad old Mrs. Martin denied everything and said Ink was lying. Other children were called in and consulted. "They're children for goodness sake!" shrieked Mrs. Martin in protest. "They're all little liars!" Eyes popping out, cheeks exploding, hair coming undone from the tight little bun she kept it in, she looked like the scared, crazy caricature that she was. But too many of the little liars told the same lie when asked separately, as did the teaching assistant; that the teacher had indeed said Ink's parents would go to "HELL." Some of the children shouted out the word "HELL" in their little childish voices to show how she had said it, which was disturbing to say the least. This coupled with the fact that the principal had his own doubts about the woman led to the demise of Mrs. Martin's stint at Laughlin Elementary School. No one wanted their children to be around crazy people. Needless to say, parents were relieved when they heard she left. And so was Ink.

By the time Ink was in upper elementary, everyone had heard about the boy who had been kissed by a dragon. Grown-ups who met Ink for the first time were struck by how attractive he was becoming in left profile. For as startling as the right side of his face was, the left side was delightful. They wondered about the extreme irony of it and why God would do this to the child. Not a teenager yet, his face was unblemished by angst-ridden pimples, and free even of freckles or moles. It was flawless and had the angelic, pinkish golden glow of a child's skin. His eyes epitomized "dreamy." They were a brilliant bluish green, fringed by thick dark lashes, a throwback to some unknown ancestor, since both of his parents had brown eyes. His nose was definitely his dad's, almost Greek in an unwavering straight descent from the forehead. But three quarters of the way down, it gently reversed direction and started curving upwards, adding some humanity to the otherwise god-like nose. However, the left side of his face was not what his peers noticed. And the older the children got, the less magical the dragon kiss became.

The innocent curiosity of toddlers was now morphing into meanness and bullying. Children began to learn about the all too human, timeless and ageless concept of power to be gained by making fun of others. They started perfecting the art of sneering, raising eyebrows, rolling eyes just as they saw their parents and other adults doing in life. No one really wanted to physically hurt Ink, however, until Kyle came on the scene.

Kyle was a bully the way children who come from unloving and bossy parents are bullies. His dad verbally abused him over everything from the way he looked, to the way he held his fork when he ate, like his own dad had done before him. If he had a bad day, he hit his child simply because he was there. If Kyle came home with a bad grade, the dreaded belt came out, even though the dad himself had never had grades to brag about. To avoid the scrutiny of nosy, interfering busybodies, Dad made sure the welts and bruises were in places that would stay hidden by clothes. Always on the butt, he would say, as if that was a redeeming factor. No one outside of the household saw them.

Kyle's mom, instead of trying to protect her son, stayed sullen and quiet. Putting up with an abusive husband had sent her scurrying into a protective shell. She had become a shadow, a part of the background, and only spoke when absolutely necessary, like when dinner was ready. She had no love to give. She was too busy trying to survive herself.

Anything she felt for her son initially when he was born had faded into apathy when her husband made it clear he was not happy about having another mouth to feed, and blamed her for not being more careful with birth control. It takes two, asshole, was the thought that went through her head; where was your birth control???? But the thought never made it to her lips. It would inflame his anger and invite him to take the belt to her instead of the boy. She had very little education, and didn't know what she would do if she left him. So she stayed, and life became something to be endured while she waited numbly for it to end.

So, of course, Kyle was a bully. He never had a chance to be anything else. He had a little following of boys who thrived on scaring and threatening their peers. A peek into their lives would probably have revealed similarly abusive backgrounds. Their daily acts of terrorism consisted of typical bully behavior: name-calling, tripping, shoving, making faces. When Kyle and his gang sauntered into the lunchroom, hands in pockets, little boys trying to act tough, children knew they might not be eating that day. They all sunk in their seats, trying to avoid his glance, hoping they wouldn't be the one he chose to pick on. They might be forced to give up their seats for no other reason than that Kyle had decided he wanted to sit there. If they refused to move, or even hesitated, they would get smacked. Of course they might get smacked around for no particular reason anyway. Teachers on lunch duty might or might not notice what was happening. The cafeteria was vast and noisy, and it was impossible to keep track of everything in there.

On the school bus, Kyle would terrorize kids sitting in front of him by pulling their hair and then threatening them if they had a problem with it. Most kids would either cower when he yelled, or get up and move, scared. But if they moved, that played right into his hands. It was the reaction he wanted. The attention, the acknowledgement. So if they got up and moved, Kyle would have no choice but to get up and follow them to continue his reign of terror.

One might wonder what took Kyle so long to focus on Ink. He knew about the boy with the so-called "dragon kiss" on his face. But when he first saw him, he didn't know what to feel. The birthmark was almost intimidating. It startled, unsettled, and made it impossible to look at anything else. So, when Kyle first saw him, he was content to pick on others and observe Ink from far away. Hmmm, his mind said, what can I do with him? Pulling his hair, as tempting as it was, seemed weak and insubstantial considering the magnitude of that birthmark. Part of him was curious, part jealous. Jealous of Ink's fame. Something bothered him about Ink also, and he needed to figure out what it was before he came up with a punishment for him. Then he got it. The kid

didn't act like he had any kind of deformity. His demeanor and behavior showed no shame or embarrassment for his appearance. Did Ink think he was special? Kyle didn't think so. He didn't act like some rich, spoiled kid who owned the world. He was no teacher's pet. Kyle had heard what had happened with Mrs. Martin in junior kindergarten (a story that had gotten more and more warped over time as it passed from mouth to mouth). She had told him in front of the whole class that he was ugly. Had left him out of class activities because she didn't like him. Had made him sit in the corner by himself and face the wall all day because she couldn't stand to look at him. And then she had told him to go to "HELL." But somehow Ink survived. Not only was he managing to live with that huge mark on his face, but he also seemed strangely content with life. He didn't have many friends, but was comfortable hanging out by himself, reading, or getting ahead in homework. That bothered Kyle. He himself, who had no disfigurement, other than the bruises hidden by his clothes, had to go through life feeling angry and unhappy, while Ink, with half his face blue, seemed fine. In addition, Ink was smart and got really good grades in class. That just would not do. He had to show him that the mark on his face made him ugly. He wanted Ink to want to hide from people, cower behind walls, not hang out openly in society and flaunt his mark like it was something to brag about. Kyle wanted Ink to want to hide from him. He wanted that power.

When the drawing appeared on the bathroom wall, there were suspicions about the artist, but no proof. It reeked of Kyle, vindictive and hurtful. It was also a really good drawing, and both students and teachers had seen Kyle draw in class and knew he was good. The image was of a boy who was only half human. The whole other half was a grotesque, dark blue splotch, oozing, menacing, arms and legs twisted and elongated to look like tentacles instead of human body parts. In fact, done in the context of an art class, without any intended personal hurt, it might have earned some acclaim. But on the bathroom wall, it was horrifying, an obvious attack. The eye on the deformed side was drawn bigger and protruded precariously from the face. The teeth on that side were huge yellow buckteeth with gaping holes where some were missing. Over the drawing, was written the word "FREAK."

The school buzzed. Children, both boys and girls, crowded in the boys' bathroom to look at the drawing. Chattering clusters in hallways went quiet when either Kyle or Ink walked by. The teacher announced in class that there was a "very inappropriate and mean" drawing on the wall of the boys' bathroom, reiterated school policies regarding bullying and meanness, and said it was to be ignored. It was drawn with a Sharpie, so it wouldn't come off easily. The principal was going

to have it painted over as soon as the handyman could fit it into his impossibly long to-do list. Until he was able to make it in, they had covered the drawing with a large sheet of paper. If anyone needed to use the bathroom, they would need to be in and out. No loitering. Campus security, consisting of two people who made rounds, as well as teachers of adjacent classrooms, would be keeping an eye on anyone coming and going from the bathroom. Whoever did it, the teacher said, looking straight at Kyle, should be ashamed of himself. Kyle chuckled to himself and put on his most innocent, wide-eyed look. They had no proof it was him. The buzz would most likely die out by the end of the day.

It didn't. Vigilance stretched between the two campus security men, and teachers, each responsible for the behavior and welfare of 22 to 27 boisterous elementary students, was not enough. The next day brought renewed buzz, but this time it was over something different. The paper that had been taped across the drawing had been torn off, and right below the half human, half splotch, there was an added message on the wall: "STUPID." Kyle was incensed. Did Ink write that? Would he dare? Instead of crumbling with shame, was he actually fighting back? Maybe a different kid had written the word, one who felt sorry for Ink and wanted to stick up for him. But he had a feeling it was Ink. It felt like him; smug, infuriating, untouchable. Okay. Kyle would do more.

He hid out after school hours. No one at home really kept track of him anyway. His next drawing took the point further. He drew a schoolhouse, and a bunch of mutant kids, deformed to the point of ridiculous, standing in a row in front of it. There were hands coming out of heads, Cyclops eyes, Dumbo ears, and of course, ink splotches. The school was labeled "FREAK SCHOOL." One of the boys was labeled "INK." There was a barbed wire fence surrounding the kids. Next to the school was another building, and in front of that one, he drew normal, happy kids, running around, playing. The second school was labeled "NO FREAKS ALLOWED." The drawing took him fifteen minutes at the end of which he slipped out in the dark and went home unnoticed by anyone at school, or at home.

The following day, the buzz continued over the boys' bathroom. The new drawing was taped over with a fresh piece of paper, and teachers continued their lectures in class over meanness and bullying. Students were advised to come forward with any knowledge about the perpetrator, but no one had noticed anything. No one would dare snitch on Kyle anyway. Conversations in hallways continued to come to a halt when Kyle and his gang strutted by, added bravado in their stride from the knowledge that everyone knew who was responsible, but no one

could prove it.

A couple of days later, the handyman still hadn't made it in, and new additions to the drawing showed up on the wall. A bunch of report cards with A's and medals labeled "1st prize" had been hastily sketched over the "FREAK SCHOOL." The children at the other school wore dunce hats and had report cards with F's. A new caption said, "STUPID AND BORING!" Again, Kyle was livid. This wasn't working. The little freak really didn't seem to care what anyone thought of him. Insult followed injury when he caught his little group of followers laughing at the drawing, pointing at the report cards with F's on them. They didn't seem to get it. They didn't get that the kids with the F's were THEM, and that Ink was making fun of THEM. It wasn't just a silly drawing; it was personal. So Kyle explained it to them. "It's not funny. The kids with the dunce hats are supposed to be us," he said. They agreed. If the kids with the Fs were supposed to be them, it wasn't funny at all.

The next day, as Ink was heading home from school, he was pulled into an alley by a bunch of boys with paper bags covering their heads, holes cut out for seeing and breathing. He was held down on the ground while one of them drew on the good side of his face with what smelled strongly like a sharpie. He struggled for a minute, made protesting noises, and then realized that there was no point in any resistance, so lay there until they finished. That took some of the fun out of the task, and Kyle, who was drawing, jammed down hard on Ink's cheek, bruising him and making him grunt with pain. When Ink staggered out of there after the boys had run off, both sides of his face matched.

Ink's parents had to give his face repeated scrubblings with isopropyl alcohol to get the dark, permanent color off. This made him feel dizzy and disoriented, and in combination with the soreness from the bruising, he was in no shape to go anywhere; so they kept him home for a few days.

"My poor sweetie," Audrey kept saying, trying hard not to cry. "Kids can be so horrible! It's okay, Inkie, everything will be fine."

"Really?" Ink's dad said, incensed, frustrated, picturing a whole lifetime of persecution for his son. Again, he said, "Everything will be fine? WHY? Do you think the WORLD is going to change???" Audrey took her baby to his room and shut the door. She did not want him hearing things like that. She wanted him to have hope going forward.

Seeking justice, Ink's parents met with the principal. Again, teachers had their suspicions, but no one had any proof and no one came forward. Some teachers, finally seeing how dangerous this little squabble was becoming, had made the time to take the matter into their

own hands and gone into the boys' bathroom to paint over the drawings themselves. Until the matter was resolved, lunch hour became detention for the whole school. Children were allowed to take ten minutes to eat their lunches, then had to go sit in various detention rooms and do homework. No playtime. This happened for a few weeks, but still no one came forward. The children's pent-up energy started manifesting in ways that made the teachers' already difficult job even more difficult, and playtime was reluctantly re-instated, but with the school CIA in place. Maintenance people pretended to work while actually keeping eyes and ears open for any information about the miscreant who had started all this. Teachers were also required to hang around the grounds to keep an eye on things as students left at the end of the day. Covertly, everyone was asked to keep an eye on Kyle in particular, which forced him to be on his painfully best behavior. So his usual targets found themselves enjoying a rare and much needed reprieve from his bullying. Kyle knew that he had probably gone too far this time, and decided to lay low until things blew over. And nothing definite was uncovered.

The marks and bruises on the good side of Ink's face eventually faded enough for him to return to school, but his parents decided they didn't want their son returning to Laughlin Elementary unless the culprit was found and punished. Ink was put in a local charter school with small classes and more individual attention, where the teachers spent some time discussing the virtue of not discriminating against people because of their looks. The whole story of what had happened at Laughlin had made it to the local newspapers, and parents put the fear of God into their children about harassing Ink about his face. As a result, not only did no one make fun of him, but no one wanted to hang out with him at all. He ate alone, read his books, and avoided school functions, and no one tried to color his face. He was not happy that his parents pulled him out of the public school. Leaving was admitting defeat, and he would have rather stayed and fought, and planned his revenge.

It was probably good that they did change schools.

A WHOLE NEW SET OF TRIALS

~ 5 ~

High school presented a whole new set of trials. The stigma of his birthmark alone was no longer allowed monopoly over his misery. Now Ink had to join all the other unfortunates besieged by the demons of the dreaded phase of life called “puberty”: the hormone induced haze through which everything was distorted; the erratic, irrational emotions; the blistering, bewildering uncertainty; the crippling awkwardness. Ink was now a teenager. And the adolescent acne plague descended on him without mercy, adding new dimensions of ugly to both sides of his face. The birthmark covering the right side of his face became riddled with little pus-erupting volcanoes, and when he tried to squeeze them out of existence, they turned into swollen mounds of angry blue/black flesh, which developed into bleeding craters. Appropriate symbols of his inner turmoil.

The childhood mantle of carefree complacency that had shielded Ink up to now was viciously ousted by a volatile temper. Consequently, his father, Derek, unable to deal with a screaming teenage son on top of a screaming birthmark, was gone most of the time, sometimes for days. Apparently, his work was taking him out of town these days, which was a good thing because it meant more money. But his absence felt personal, both to Ink and his mom. Ink felt like he should be angry at Derek for not being around, but having learned early on that his father was not comfortable around him, didn't let himself care much about him. Their relationship was distant. So the only one left to yell at was poor Audrey, the one who steadfastly stuck by her son and loved him fiercely. And Ink found himself yelling at her over the smallest things, thoughtlessly spewing out accusations and blame, often unjustified, deliberately cruel and hurtful. He did not understand where this rage and these horrible words came from, and frequently felt disconnected and estranged when he said them, almost like he was listening to someone else say them. Sometimes, an inner voice tried to step in, and whispered, “Stop. Stop. Stop.” But the voice vanished abruptly, and all he was left with was madness, rage at the universe, and Mom.

His mom's perpetual reassurances incensed him beyond reason. He felt no gratitude for her unconditional acceptance of him. Of course she accepted him. What choice did she have? She had brought him into the world. Well, the inner voice said, resurfacing, so had Dad, and he was unable to accept him. Mom could be like Dad and just stay away. And maybe she should, he thought angrily, unable to see beyond his own frustrations. It would be more tolerable if she stayed away; he

wouldn't have to deal with her constant, insipid efforts to make him feel like he was like every other kid, that there was nothing wrong with him. Because these reassurances were useless. He was learning from experience that a "freak" like himself had no place in the world. The contempt with which he had dealt with Kyle's use of that word in middle school he now turned on himself.

"Why didn't you have me put to sleep???" he yelled at his mom.

"Because we wanted you," Audrey responded helplessly, horrified that her child could feel this way. Every ingratiating effort she had made to prevent this seemed to have backfired.

"You didn't want me!! You wanted a beautiful, normal baby! Would you have chosen a half blue-face like me if you had the choice?"

"Yes," she tried to say firmly even though the question was senseless and obviously required no answer.

But her voice shook for just a second when she said it, and she failed to meet her son's eyes. Older now, and less absolute in her convictions, Audrey was reluctantly learning that she couldn't be as stubbornly inflexible as she used to be. The defiance she had shown towards the opinions of society regarding Ink's birthmark had come easy when he was an indifferent toddler, but now that he was an anguished adolescent in desperate need of friends, that defiance had turned into shaking uncertainty. She wanted him to be happy and well-adjusted. But she didn't want to spoil him. She wanted him to feel normal. But she knew he was different. Besides, did any teenager ever feel "normal," whatever that was? So what was she supposed to say to his accusations? She couldn't possibly tell him the truth, which was that, of course, she would not have chosen that her only child be born with half of his face blue, but that a mother couldn't not love her own child, even if it was born with two heads. And she wanted the best for him.

The truth would have been more palatable for Ink.

"BULL! You should have had me put to sleep when you saw my face!!" Ink yelled, shocking his mom into silence.

"I love you, honey," Audrey managed to stammer out, feeling horribly inadequate, and added a "very much" in case it made it any better. It didn't. He stormed off to his room and slammed the door shut.

"SAVE IT!!" he yelled through the door. It just wasn't enough. He heard his mother crying, as she had been doing a lot lately, and felt completely worthless. He knew he was making her cry, but he was consumed by his own problems. His rage overpowered any other feeling. His dad should have been there for her. He hated his dad for not being there to help them through this, for leaving his mom alone to

deal with it, for adding to Ink's feelings of worthlessness. Not that it would have made a difference to him had he been around, but maybe it would have helped his mom.

The fact was that Ink was now at the age where the company and assurance of parents were worthless. As was his own company. He needed peer support. He wanted to be a part of something bigger, a part of society. He wanted to hang out with other kids his age, go to dances and parties, learn to flirt with girls. Learn to kiss, make out. He had never wanted to fit in so badly. What were these new feelings? Another form of torture from the universe? Other kids didn't seem to be going through anything like this. They all seemed on the whole happy with themselves, laughing, chattering in the hallways, having lunch together, making plans for the weekend. But of course, both sides of their faces matched. So they had each other for support while Ink had no one but himself, his awkward, stupid, and ugly self.

In the beginning, he wore his silky auburn hair like a curtain over his face. But the blue screamed through the curtain. People still had a hard time looking at him. And kids were mean to him, like only high-schoolers can be, hurling spite at him, laughing and nudging each other as he walked by, getting up and leaving if he sat at their table in the cafeteria. So then he started defiantly tying his hair back in a pony tail, exposing the birthmark with the pubescent blue black mounds and bleeding craters in all their glory, as if to challenge the world. If hiding it was not going to make a difference, why bother? He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he was hoping for when he did this. People recoiling in fear? Looks of shock and disgust? Curiosity? Well, he got all of these in addition to the comments and nudging and laughing. And in defense, he decided to adopt an air of arrogance. Instead of cowering in shame like a more timid person might, he would shake his head and sneer condescendingly at their reactions. Or glare and growl, "Moron" or "Imbecile" as he walked away. Flip them off. But his reactions fueled their amusement and made them laugh even harder, and hate and anger burgeoned into a massive chip on his shoulder. It reached a point where he reacted with hostility to everything, sabotaging any chance at making friends he might have had.

If he had not been so hostile, would there have been those who might have been his friend despite the birthmark? There was no end of diversity around, after all. There were the Goths, the pink mohawks, the pierced cheeks and lips, the tattoos; the self-proclaimed social rebels who were ugly by choice. He failed to understand why anyone would disfigure him/herself by choice when they could look normal. Ink looked the way he did because he didn't have a choice. He had nothing in common with these kids.

Then there were the smart ones with their thick glasses and dorky clothes. The "Nerds." They hung out with other "nerds," because the "cool" kids laughed at them and rejected them. He had even less in common with them.

Part of him recognized that he was doing the very thing to others which he had had to deal with himself: discriminating, labeling. But he was too caught up in his own misery to care. He was learning that labeling others provided a temporary balm for one's own insecurities. If he could have chosen a label for himself, there was one he would have given anything for: that of the "regular" kids, blessed with normal looks from normal, bland suburban homes, who didn't seem to have any problems in life whatsoever.

What he didn't realize was that handicaps do not have to be physical, and that no one is spared some level of the other kind of handicap, the emotional kind. That beneath the appearance of "regular," these kids had their own set of demons. Whitney was so terrified of gaining weight that she binged and then threw up. Chen cut himself to relieve the pain of his emotions and hid the scars under long sleeved shirts. Diego would fail school without his ADD meds. Demons that were hidden from plain sight and not blaring on one's face for the whole world to see and make fun of. So Ink thought he was the only one with real problems. And terrified of being the object of ridicule, or worse, pity, he resorted to belligerence and scorn, which secured him the disgust and exclusion he most feared, and turned him solidly into the "freak" he didn't want to be.

Any interaction he had with others became limited to the classroom. Reluctant project partners who sometimes asked to work alone halfway through the project because Ink was impossible to work with. Reluctant teachers. And so on. If anyone dared to say "Hi" to him in the hallways, he would either ignore them completely, assuming hidden insults, or growl at them. So for the first time in his life, Ink discovered loneliness. He did not know how to be content with occupying himself anymore, as he had when he was younger, but neither did he know how to do anything else. When he sat by himself in the lunch room, he was ridden with self-consciousness. When he saw people whispering and talking and laughing, he assumed it was about him, and got up and left the cafeteria with his lunch unfinished. When he heard others talking about parties and social events, he scowled and shrugged. When he saw couples in the hallways, locked in the clumsy embrace of adolescent passion, he looked away. But he was parched. Parched for touch, affection and recognition. Acknowledgement of his existence and all that he had to offer as a person.

Feeling socially scorned and excluded, he began to seek out locales where he might be able to go undetected. Restroom stalls. For a while, every day at lunch, he would lock himself in a restroom stall with a favorite book. Or sit and try to imagine himself in the mountains. He and his mom drove to the mountains some weekends and holidays, and he felt a calm there that eluded him anywhere else. A feeling of being removed from everything. He felt a stillness there that throbbed with something indefinable. Something bigger. A vast benevolence. A kindness. Acceptance without judgment. He felt loved there. He wanted to stay there forever. It was hard to invoke this in the school restroom, however. Aside from the obvious problem of the smell, he began to feel that people knew he was in there.

One day, a group of boys came in, laughing, hollering about the

weekend. Loud, discordant, breaking voices of adolescents bouncing off the walls. Why were they yelling? They were less than a foot from each other. They were oblivious. Nothing existed outside their little world in the restroom right there and then. He envied them their apparent lack of unease. Their “birds of a feather that flock together” connection. He himself was the “ugly duckling,” the bird that nobody wanted to flock with. What a cliché. Suddenly, he realized that no one was talking. There was silence for a few seconds, and then whispering and low chuckling. Ink found himself sweating in the stall. Did they know he was in there? But how would they? One of them lit up a cigarette and the offending smoke filled the whole bathroom. Ink tried to choke back a gag. Maybe they were whispering because they didn’t want to get caught. But what if they were whispering about him...?

He started picking different restrooms at different times to avoid detection. But the same thing happened, again and again, in every restroom he hid out in. A number of boys coming in, talking, whispering, and not always smoking. It was the whispering. If they thought the stalls were empty, why would they whisper? Ink tried listening to what they were talking about, but his anxiety-riddled mind couldn’t make sense of the words. All he heard was the occasional cackle of laughter, which made him start, and heightened his anxiety. Logic told him they were just trying to avoid being heard by those outside in the hallways, not necessarily someone hiding in the stalls. Maybe they had their own reasons to be paranoid and extra careful. Drugs? But maybe they were laughing and whispering about him, the weirdo who hung out in restrooms. The toilet troll. Maybe they were also following him around, spying on him. Of course that was ridiculous. But was it? Was it any more ridiculous than the thought that someone could jam a permanent marker into his cheek and color it in?

Then one day they stayed in there for a whole agonizing twenty minutes, as if to see how long it would take to force him out. They yelled, cackled, whispered, snorted, farted, smoked. At times he heard the rustle of jeans as if they were bending down to look under the door of the stall. Was he being ridiculous again?

Choking in paranoia that wouldn’t let go, he decided he was done with the restroom stall scene. There had to be somewhere else. Somewhere less humiliating. The library beckoned like a beacon of hope. It was quieter, and there were always other people in there, studying, reading. He wouldn’t feel quite so isolated and mortified. Quite so creepy, like a creature of the dark hiding out in caverns, sinister, distorted. He would be a student like everybody else in there. So that became his place, and soon people knew where to find Ink if they needed to, which they rarely did. Better than finding him lurking

in a bathroom stall.

He channeled his frustrations into his studies, maniacally devouring information. At tenth grade, he was already reading college books. In class, he was bored to the point of madness. He felt he was smarter than most of his teachers, and he probably was. His essays intimidated and impressed them. As a result, he was impatient, short, and sometimes outright rude. God help the not-so-experienced teacher who tried to explain something Ink knew more about. He would laugh and sneer at them, yawn, hum and haw. He would challenge them, and even correct them, right in front of the whole class. When he wasn't being asked to go to the principal's office for disrespect, he was getting up and walking out himself, making it clear that class was a waste of time. Some of his teachers started out looking for ways to cross the vast ocean of hostility between them and Ink, to somehow connect with him, then gave up. He was unreachable.

At one point, his Economics teacher took him outside the classroom and tried talking to him.

"Ink, you might...hey, you probably do, know more than most of us. But that does not give you the right to treat us with disrespect." But even as he said it, he avoided looking directly at Ink, at the relentlessly disconcerting birthmark on his face. If he had made the effort to look Ink directly in the eyes, maybe, just maybe, he would have made an impression on him. But the minute he delivered his speech with his eyes looking off to the side, he lost him. Ink glared at him boldly and defiantly, then got up, said, "I'll take myself to the principal's office," and walked off, leaving the poor teacher staring after him, wallowing in his own clumsiness and inefficacy.

The principal, Mr. Curtis, was a big, ex-football quarterback in his late fifties. Talk about inefficacy. Doubled over football bulk turning to fat, trying to hold on to a grunting, Neanderthal macho-ism he just didn't have anymore, he gave Ink the same spiel he always did, the only spiel he had learned in his jock life: if he wanted to be part of the "team," he needed to get along, show "team spirit," blah, blah, blah. And Ink gave him the same reply he always did. He had no desire to be a part of any "team." He had wanted to say "stupid team," but for once held back. He was facing the principal after all. The principal gave him the same blank stare he always did, at a loss, then continued his spiel on "team spirit," like Ink just hadn't said anything, after which he either gave him detention, suspended him for a day or two, or sent him to the counselor. After the fourth or fifth time being sent to the principal's office, listening to the same asinine words, and giving the same response as always, that he had no desire to be a part of any team, it was pretty obvious to Ink that the principal was as clueless as the rest

of the school.

He obviously never listened to anything Ink said, and mindlessly spewed out his formulaic rant. He obviously lacked the aptitude necessary to acknowledge that the “team” angle was not going to work with this one, and that he would have to try something different, especially when he obviously didn’t have any other angle. Silly Ink to have expected more from someone just because he was the principal. Every time he heard the spiel after that, he smirked, and occasionally couldn’t help letting out a chortle. Sometimes, he just sat there and watched the principal with a raised-eyebrow expression. Sometimes, he almost felt sorry for him. The poor man was limited. He either didn’t realize he was saying the same thing over and over again to no avail, or he was naive enough to think repetition would make a difference, even if it didn’t get to the issues, or he just didn’t know what else to say, and didn’t really care all that much. Ink decided it was a combination of all three.

When Mr. Curtis saw Ink smirk, he stopped to watch him for a second. He couldn’t quite fathom that look. What kind of person would scoff at “team spirit?” Life was about “team spirit.” All his life he had been one of the team, had derived his identity from the team. Without that, there was nothing. There was nothing left to talk about. Mr. Curtis did not understand individuality. And he did not know why Ink was raising an eyebrow at him. Did he have a question? Somehow he doubted that. Could that possibly be condescension on the boy’s face? Condescension towards him, the coveted ex-football quarterback that every girl had been after in his younger days? The team leader? Once he tried saying he didn’t like Ink’s smirky attitude. That Ink had been sent to his office for a reprimand, and not to enjoy himself. The next few minutes, he gaped in disbelief as Ink tried desperately to control his laughter, his face distorting into all sorts of grimaces with the effort, eyes filling with tears. The boy was mad. From then on, he pawned him off to the counselor whenever he could, sparing Ink from having to sit through his useless drivel again.

The poor school counselor had her job cut out for her. A recent graduate from college, she wasn’t much older herself, in her mid-twenties. One would think she would have a better understanding of adolescent issues, having been there not too long ago herself. But Ink was not your average surly high schooler. With Ink, in addition to the emotional challenges that teenagers presented, she had to fake nonchalance about the blue side of his face. The poor, flustered young woman tried looking straight at it. She tried not looking at it. She tried looking at her hands, then the wall behind Ink’s head. She picked her cuticles until they bled and tried in vain to control her restless feet. Ink

didn't know whether to laugh at her or challenge her. The laughter would surely have finished her. She didn't seem like the type with a tolerance for things like that. So, once again, he opted for challenge.

"Go ahead and look," Ink said. "Get it over with so we can move on."

The poor school counselor decided maybe talking about it wouldn't be a bad idea. It was.

"That is an interesting mark on your face," she started.

"Oh, you think?" Ink sneered, and chuckled, a bottomless, menacing chuckle.

"How do you feel about it?"

Oh, God. Really???? "I love it," he said. "I think it gives me quite a personality, don't you? Like the phantom in Phantom of the Opera, or a handsome Quasimodo from the Hunchback of Notre Dame! In fact, if you're interested in getting one for yourself, I know a great artist named Kyle who can fill in one side of your face for you."

Not knowing what to say to this, the poor school counselor ignored it.

"Have you had it all your life?" she floundered desperately, completely thrown off balance. She should have followed her first instinct to flee the room instead. Ink decided he was done with humoring her inanity, accused her of damaging young people's minds with her incompetence and stupidity, and asked her if she had graduated from the school for the psychologically handicapped. He told her she should try cleaning toilets instead, he heard there was a high demand for that, and walked out. The poor school counselor burst into tears, spent her lunchtime talking to her own counselor and considered quitting.

The rest of the staff decided there was no help for the boy and they would just have to deal with him the best they could until he graduated. So he went about unchallenged, glaring and making people squirm, and became the official school "growler" with the half-blue face. It was what it was. People got used to him, and unless they were seeing him for the first time, they tried not to stare. They treated him with studied indifference when they had to, and otherwise kept their distance. It was a form of acceptance, not just of his face, but of his persona.

Ink also came to an acceptance. He would probably never be embraced into "regular" society. So he was destined to be the "lone growler." By the time senior year came around, however, the growling became more and more pointless. Maybe he just got bored with antagonizing people. Maybe he just got worn out. By his senior year, the growling had quieted. And then came Lexy.

To say Lexy was an “odd bird” would have been an understatement. She materialized at Ink’s high school at the beginning of their senior year, and she was a genius in all things scientific. Calculus, Physics, Chemistry. What puzzled her was why others had a hard time with these topics. They really weren’t difficult to grasp. One just had to pay attention. She would stare at these people who had a hard time with things that came so easily to her, and wonder what was wrong with them. Her eyebrows would bounce up on her forehead, eyes squint, mouth twist into strange shapes, distorting her little face into expressions that, to others, were even more confusing than Calculus, Physics and Chemistry. For what Lexy had a hard time with were people. When people said “hi” to her, she jumped, taken aback, eyes wide with alarm. When people tried to talk to her, she would try to respond in some clever way and just sound strange.

“What’s up?” a student once said to her on the way to class.

“What? Oh...yup! I mean nope! Nothing up, all down!!” she said awkwardly, to which the person gaped at her, thrown off balance, and hurriedly walked faster. She would laugh awkwardly when people were trying to be serious, and stay expressionless when people were joking, then realize laughter was required as a response, and let out a strange “snortle,” half snort and half chortle, which, of course, made everyone turn around and stare at her. Was she agreeing with what was being said, or disagreeing? Was she trying to be silly or serious? Even the social rejects and dorks didn’t quite know what to make of her.

There was really nothing in her appearance that distinguished her from other girls her age. She was not bad to look at; some would even say she was cute. Average height. Small, sparkling brown eyes peeping out through thick, purple framed glasses on a delicate face, flawless except for a few freckles scattered over the cheeks and nose, like stars in a clear sky. Her brown hair was cut in a short, asymmetrical bob that draped her ear lobes and showed off the π shaped earring she always wore on one ear, a testament to her aptitude in science. That earring did cause some comment. Other girls wondered where she got it. It was not of the variety found at the cheap costume jewelry stores at the mall, frequented by teens with limited budgets. Indeed, her aunt had found it while on a road trip in a small, obscure town, at a small, obscure store, owned by a small, obscure artist. There had been just one, for one ear, instead of a pair. It was made of what she had called “metal matrix infused multicolor calcite bronze,” and had cost almost a hundred dollars. It hung from one corner of the π at an angle, perpetually

puzzling. Other girls couldn't decide if they liked it, or wouldn't be caught dead wearing it.

Lexy's propensity for Math, Physics and Chemistry, however, became her doorway into high school society. Students, who avoided her initially because she was just too peculiar to be around, soon discovered her value as a partner in those classes. She could also explain these subjects in ways that other teens understood. So a month into the school year, she found herself being approached by those who hastily tried to ignore her outside of class, to set up study sessions or to pair up for projects. The only person who never approached her was the one she most wanted to be approached by: Ink.

From the minute she first saw Ink, she felt pulled towards him. One social reject seeking another? If it were that simple, there were plenty of others to choose from. But it was more than that. That birthmark captivated her. It beguiled, beckoned and bewitched her. She dreamed and fantasized about it, and wanted more.

In the beginning, she followed him around. Peeked at him from behind doorways and walls, locker doors. When Ink first became aware of her, he thought she was crazy. She stared openly at his birthmark, the overt, tactless stare of someone who either was completely unaware, or just didn't care. He thought that was rude, but was used to it after eighteen years of living with it, so ignored it. But then, the very first time she spoke to him, it was about the birthmark, which he thought was annoying. Did she really think he wanted to discuss it, like it was a cool haircut or something? How obtuse can one be?

One day, at lunchtime, she was following him again. Ink had looked back a few times, scowling and grunting to discourage her. Finally she sprinted the last few feet and spoke.

"Awesome!" she exclaimed and pointed at his face.

Ink looked at her with irritation and disbelief. What was this about? Was she trying to tease him like so many others had done all his life? Make fun of his affliction? Make him feel like a mutant?

"Go away," he said, crossly.

He assumed she left. But she was tenacious. A few minutes later he looked back casually, and she was still following him, trying to be quiet, taking small, wiggly steps, like a penguin. When he looked at her, she tripped and caught herself, then looked up with a surprised expression on her face like she had no idea how that had happened.

"Ow," she said. Ink raised his eyebrows. She wasn't hurt.

"You're not hurt," he said, scowling again.

"True," she said, and shrugged. "What do I say when I trip?"

That made him think for a second, then he stopped. Seriously?

"Go away," he repeated, and started walking away again.

“Oops!” she yelled. This time he ignored her. “Ow!” she said again, running to keep up with him. He ignored her again. “I’m bleeding! Help! Help!” she finally squealed. Ink finally turned around and looked at her, along with others who had stopped to stare. There was no blood. She was just standing there, comically pouting.

“Where’s the blood?” he asked, aggravated at being forced to deal with her.

She pouted harder and pointed at her lip. “See?” There was a small cut on her lip which did seem to be oozing some blood. “Bit my lip. You told me to go away. Oh, accidentally of course...not your fault in any way. Nope, nope. Not in any way.”

He stared at her, not sure what he was feeling. Was it confusion? Irritation definitely. Curiosity maybe? Interest? That was risky. He knew from past experience not to show too much interest in other people because nothing good ever came of it. They would ask him what he was looking at. Or stare back and make some nasty remark about his ugly face. Or threaten to beat him up if he didn’t move on. He had never had any kind of positive reaction to showing interest in someone else. Until now. His mind felt lopsided. Like all of a sudden things were hanging upside down.

Lexy jumped a little under his gaze, her eyes getting bigger, her mouth pursing into a small “o.” Was she mocking him? Blood rose up his neck and slowly spread over his face, and he got angrier because he knew he looked ridiculous with half his face red and half blue. She itched her head like a monkey, shoving some of the hair on her scalp straight up towards the sky, and looked perplexed. Then she grinned, a cheek to cheek grin, full of cheer. It was as if a lotus opened up. Her face transformed into something enchanting that anyone would have a hard time staying angry at. Even Ink. But he had to keep up appearances. He couldn’t let his guard down. So he scowled again and started walking away. Lexy stayed next to him all the way back to class. Not behind him this time, but right next to him. Ink ignored her, but didn’t tell her to go away again. In the hallway, they went their own way to get to their separate classes. A strange experience but not altogether unpleasant, Ink thought.

After school, Ink exited his last class to find her patiently waiting for him by his locker, a puppy waiting for its master. His total lack of acknowledgement might have sent anybody else scurrying away, but Lexy was unaffected by it. She waited while he got his stuff, grinning cheek to cheek at him when he glanced over, then fell into stride beside him as he headed out. It took him about twenty minutes to walk home from school. After fifteen minutes of silent walking, she jerked to a stop and looked around, confused. Ink took a peek at her, then quickly

looked away and kept walking. He was starting to wonder if she was going to follow him all the way home. What on earth would he say to his parents? “Look what I picked up on the streets? A stray nut.”

“My bus stop is not this way,” she said as he kept walking. “Wrong direction, wrong direction.” A half-smile invaded his face despite himself. She was so strange, it was almost entertaining, like hanging out with a cartoon. “Tomorrow!! See you tomorrow!!” she yelled to his back as he got further away, then he heard the thwack, thwack of her shoes hitting the pavement as she ran to catch her bus. He was surprised to feel a little twinge of disappointment. He shook his shoulders trying to shed the feeling. Didn’t like how that felt. Used to being by himself, the sensation of wanting to be with someone was disturbing and alien. It made him feel vulnerable. There was safety in self-sufficiency. But the pesky half-smile stayed with him through the day. He tried to replace it with a scowl every time he caught a glimpse of it. On the shiny hood of a car. On the dirty glass wall of a bus stop stand. On the slivers of mirror inlaid into the wooden door of his house. But it kept coming back. That bothersome half-smile.

They fell into a pattern. “Hanging out” would probably paint the wrong picture. Lexy looked for Ink. Lexy followed Ink and walked with him. Lexy started going to the library to sit with Ink and do homework with him. Have lunch with him on the front steps of the library. It was always Lexy who initiated contact. Ink merely tolerated it. And that pesky half-smile took on permanent residence in his up-to-now cold and angry heart. It was at Lexy’s suggestion that they started going to the cafeteria now and then for lunch, and sat comfortably in silence amidst the habitual pitter patter of adolescents on break from class. It was kind of nice to just be around others, and not hiding out somewhere. He felt like he was part of the world, even if a distant, uninvolved part.

Other teenagers started to stare, curiosity on their faces. What were they doing? Were they dating? But what was between them was really no more than “a pattern.” There was none of the emotional attachment and reliance that exist between friends. Ink spoke rarely and mostly in monosyllables when he did. “There,” he would say if she was looking for something. “Cold,” he would say if it was too cold to be outdoors. And “See you tomorrow,” he started saying at the end of the day. Lexy threw out longer lines in her erratic and discombobulated way, face distorting into odd but not unattractive expressions, arms and legs gesturing in unintelligible motions. Sometimes Ink tried to figure out what she was saying, and sometimes he didn’t. But in their own way, in the only way Ink and Lexy knew how, they became friends. They provided for each other a layer of insulation from the taunts and

meanness that they had both experienced. They made each other feel safe. Was that not friendship?

Their relationship was based solely at school in the beginning. Then, one Saturday morning, Ink left his house and found Lexy standing outside. It was a winter day, and colder than it usually got in Northern California. Lexy had accessorized with a black furry boa around her neck and a silly leopard print hat, but no jacket. She was shivering while she waited patiently for Ink to come out. Goofy girl, he thought. He was momentarily surprised that she knew where he lived, but then again, he wasn't. He had no doubt that Lexy could find out anything she wanted to. She stepped into line with him as he headed to the grocery store to run errands for his mom. He glanced at her briefly, then continued in silence. Should he be worried that she had shown up at his house? He was not used to being with anyone on the weekends except for his mom, who served mostly as background. And sometimes his dad, who was not even that.

When Derek came home on a weekend, he would raise his eyebrows at Ink and nod, the extent of their interaction. The rest of his stay he acted like Ink didn't exist. Usually he and Audrey would go out, sometimes for the day, sometimes for a night, leaving Ink on his own. There was a time when the three of them used to try to have dinner together, but it always felt disastrous. No one really had anything to say, so they all just sat, suffocating in oppressive silence, choking on the food. Ink eventually just excused himself and went to his room. They hadn't sat down to a meal together in a while now. And more and more, when Derek left again, Ink's mom just seemed relieved. Ink could almost see the tension lift off her shoulders as his dad walked out the door and she relaxed. He felt momentary pangs of guilt about his parents' relationship. He knew the distance between them was a result of his father's inability to accept him, something he tried not to think about because it could be shattering if he let it. So, as far as Ink was concerned, he had no dad.

It was a curious sensation, therefore, to be with Lexy that Saturday. Part of him felt unsettled, the other part felt almost cheerful. Careful, his inner voice cautioned. Don't let yourself get too attached. That would surely bring disappointment. But he didn't mind her company for now. He walked along the aisles at the store, grabbing the items he needed, ignoring the looks from people who had seen him many times but couldn't stop looking, and from those who were curious about his quirky companion. Lexy skipped along with him, whistling, humming. Now and then she would stop when something interested her and look at Ink with round eyes and an "ooooh" on her

lips. When she stopped by the black licorice, Ink couldn't help himself; he grabbed a packet and threw it in the cart. His reward was her signature cheek to cheek grin. On the whole, the trip was without incident, until they reached checkout. At the register, the cashier, who had seen Ink many times, but still stared, accidentally grabbed an item that wasn't Ink's from the pile behind his and was about to scan it with their things.

"No, no, no, no," chimed Lexy, and softly smacked the guy's hand, then said, "Pay attention! Not competent!"

The guy apologized, but shot Ink an annoyed glance. Ink paused for a moment, slightly embarrassed. Should he back up the checkout guy who consistently stared at him since the first time he saw him, or the strange girl who had become his friend and companion? He looked at the guy and shrugged, the good side of his face lighting up with a half smile. Lexy chuckled delightedly, and they left the store with the cashier frowning at their backs.

Once outside, Lexy blurted out, "Let's go to the school dance tonight!" Ink looked at her, one eyebrow raised. "Ink should go! Lexy should go!" she insisted with a big smile on her face.

But this was one smile Ink did not return. Go to a dance? Had she completely lost her mind? He shook his head, the familiar scowl coming back to his face.

"Yes, yes, yes! Fun!!" she insisted. He shook his head again. This time she stopped and faced him, hands on her hips. "No fair! It's our school too! Why not??" When he didn't respond, she continued, "Just once! Just this once!" Ink went around her and started walking back to his house. He did not want to discuss this any further. "Come on Ink! Great fun! Come on!" she chanted, following him, running to keep up. Finally he turned and glared at her.

"Go away," he said. She stopped and her expression drooped, lips pouted. He hadn't said that to her in a while. Ink softened a little. "I'll think about it," he said. "Go home." He didn't like that he sounded mean. She was his only friend; maybe he shouldn't be like that. He threw an arm around her and hugged her briefly, surprising both himself and her, then gave her a little shove. "I'll think about it," he repeated. She understood that pushing him further might guarantee his refusal, so waved goodbye and skipped off.

Ink didn't know if he could dance, had never done it. It was his senior year in high school and he would be graduating in five months. Could he allow himself to experience a school dance? Make a fool of himself? But he didn't have to dance, he told himself. He could hang out and watch. Right. How creepy would that be? The guy with the ugly face who watched. If that was even an option. He could clearly see

Lexy dragging him out to the floor with everyone staring and pointing at them. There was no way she was going to go to a dance and not dance. Did she even know how to dance? And what would that be like? Arms and legs shooting out randomly and completely out of rhythm in all directions? He cringed at the thought. Would they end up being the comic entertainment for the evening? The show that everyone would talk about for years to come? He groaned, wishing this had never come up. Why couldn't Lexy just be happy with things the way they were?

Audrey thought it was a great idea. Finally, do something other high schoolers were doing. Participate in the classic high school experience, a dance. But his mother was always pushing Ink to be part of mainstream society. It bothered her immensely that her son never brought home other teenagers. No sleepovers, no raiding her refrigerator, no secret drinking with friends in his room. Yes, even immature debauchery would be preferable to complete seclusion. She didn't understand why he felt the need to isolate himself. So he had an unusual birthmark, which she thought was kind of exotic, by the way, but why did that mean he had to exist on the periphery of society? She would go on tirades about how he was labeling himself an aberration, that he was establishing his own exclusion from society by not accepting himself, that the key to integrating into society was to be comfortable in one's own skin, and so on, so forth.

Ink wanted to tell her to shut up when she went on about these things. He was a teenager, and mom would always be wrong in his eyes. In that much at least, he was mainstream. But he knew she was right. A huge part of his disconnect from society was the fact that he was unable to accept himself when everyone looked at him and pointed and whispered. Worse, when he looked at his own reflection, he himself wanted to look, point and whisper. At himself. He saw what he believed others saw. A grotesque mutant. Useless. Screw it, he thought. For once, he wanted to go and experience something he had every right to as a member of the establishment. He wanted to go to the dance. He could always leave if things got unbearable. But he was going to go.

The dance proved to be an initiation for Ink in two fundamental aspects of teenage life: drugs and sex. Lexy came to pick him up in her little lime-green Volkswagen Bug, looking disturbingly pretty. Ink was not sure he wanted to see her in that light. The other light, the goofy one, was safer. She had abandoned the loud glasses, which it turned out she only needed to read; put on purple eye shadow, a shocking, almost iridescent purple beaded top, black mini skirt, and black, lacy leggings with purple boots. Despite the initial shock of purple, she actually looked fairly mainstream. Just another flashy, attention hungry teenager dressed for a dance. Nobody seeing her for the first time would guess she was the socially stumbling, strange, alien-genius normally associated with the name “Lexy.” Well, at least one of them was able to mask the fact that they were blemished. There was not much he could do to look better aside from slathering on a whole vat of foundation, which would undoubtedly be how much would be needed to cover his birthmark, and then people would laugh and point and whisper because of that.

As they approached the school, the heart-pounding bass blasting from the gym could be heard from blocks away. It was disorienting. Ink couldn't figure out if his rib cage was quaking in his chest because of the sound or because he was nervous. Would he regret this? Would the decision to come to a highly public school affair just confirm that he didn't belong? Was he prepared to face further confirmation of that?

Inside, the gym was typically decorated to the hilt with strobe lights and banners. Fog machine going in the corner. With a growing sense of gratitude, Ink perceived that no one was looking at him, or pointing, or whispering. And he slowly realized why. It was the dark. A glorious, wondrous, merciful dark that was only interrupted by carefully planned, incidental, sporadic light. The whole idea was to diminish visibility. To distort reality. It was hard to focus on anything, and nobody wanted to. That part of life had been banished with the day. Body parts, blurred by the fog, chaotically and randomly lit up in the flashing beams of the strobe light, twisted, twirled and trembled in a Picasso-esque landscape of disjointed confusion controlled by the DJ. Sporting dark glasses and blue shock hair at the far end of the gym, he was the indisputable master of the night, bopping as he churned out an endless assortment of music designed to trigger the primal human instinct to rock and roll. He was a puppeteer, pulling the strings on a mob of puppets seeking mindless respite from teenage angst. And like toddlers bouncing to music, the crowd surrendered to the spontaneous

urges of their bodies. Tonight they didn't have to think about anything. They moved under his command, and stopped when he stopped. Ink watched, bemused, at the control this one being had over the hundred or so students in there. It was phenomenal. He felt a pang of regret at not having experienced more of these dances, and silently vowed to make the night a bigger part of his life.

They stood for a while and watched, shackled in shyness. At one point, Ink looked around to see that Lexy was gone. Where did she go? He fought the slight feeling of annoyance that she had left without saying anything. It was all right though. He was feeling curiously at home. A few minutes later, Lexy returned and pulled on Ink's arm. She motioned with her head towards the back door. What, leaving already? He wasn't ready to leave. For the first time in his life, Ink did not want to run away from society. He could live there in the dark forever. He resisted and shook his head. But Lexy kept tugging, so he reluctantly followed her.

Outside, the noise from the gym intermixed with sounds of traffic and students standing around chatting, laughing. Everything was familiar, yet different. The lack of visibility evoked a sense of mystery, of adventure. They made their way to a dumpster around the corner of the next building, and Ink caught a whiff of what seemed like combination skunk and nature. Both insidious and alluring. This was not a new smell for him. It lurked near bathrooms, alleys, street corners. He had smelled it on the actual bodies of people, and not just students. One day, he had smelled it on their French teacher. It was not a smell easily masked. Of course he knew about marijuana; who didn't? But he had no personal experience with it, and had never had any desire to try it. They came to a small group of students who were passing around a joint. His initial instinct was to turn around and walk away, but Lexy held onto him tight. He noticed there were no street lights in that corner. It was dark except for the glowing tip traveling from finger to finger, mouth to mouth. No one turned around and gave him strange looks as they approached. Everyone seemed relaxed and accepting. So, he thought, why not? Why the hell not. It couldn't possibly be any worse than having to live with half his face blue.

They were people that Lexy knew from partnering in class, and they passed him the joint like he was one of them. On the first drag, he thought he was going to explode. His throat burned horribly, and he coughed so hard that he felt like his lungs were about to leap out. A ripple of chuckles went around the group and people supportively patted his back. What was this? Camaraderie in crime? Whatever it was, it was nice to be included, he thought. Very nice. All of a sudden, all the tension of his poor stained life dissipated. He felt like he was

melting...happily. A stupid grin invaded his face and an involuntary chuckle erupted from his throat. The others started to laugh, then caught themselves and looked around nervously. Better not to draw too much attention. But Ink grinned right along with them. There was no need for hostility or suspicion. No need for anger. Nothing really mattered that much right then. Everything felt aligned. Lexy linked her arm through Ink's and laughed delightedly, extracting shushes from the others. But she wasn't worried. He looked down at her and smiled.

When they all went back inside, Lexy dragged Ink onto the dance floor. The flashing lights and still disjointed body parts were ridiculous and awesome at the same time. He and Lexy kept glancing at each other and erupting in delicious laughter. And contrary to his fears, Lexy under the influence was completely coordinated when she danced. In fact, she was mesmerizing. She surrendered to the music and moved in complete unison with it, eyes closed, arms linked over her head, transported, a different person. Wow. Who would have imagined? Ink had a moment of panic. Could he do this? What if he was the one who was uncoordinated? He looked around worriedly. But nobody cared. Everyone was just there to have a good time. There was no judgment going on that he could see. So he surrendered himself to the strings of the puppeteer and joined the mindless mob. Surrendered to the music and the moment.

They danced for a while. Then the numbing effects of the marijuana started wearing off. Ink started noticing looks others were giving him. Girls mostly. Why were they looking at him all of a sudden? His limbs began to feel heavy, self conscious. Awkward. The music which had so moved him earlier now sounded deafening and invasive. It was an effort to keep up with the beat. Lexy grabbed his hand and led him out through the jostling, unfriendly crowd, and this time he went willingly, ignoring the cries of "HEY!!" from people they bumped into.

The fresh air of the night washed over them like manna from heaven. And Lexy, grinning, pulled out another joint that she had procured for the road. They inhaled frantically, deeply, coughing and gasping, and eagerly waited for the burning to subside and to be swept, once again, into the hazy release from a scene that had become less enjoyable. This time, instead of heading back to the dance, Lexy pulled him in the opposite direction. Ink glanced at her curiously. What now? But it was all good. Right now he trusted her completely. Even so, when she shoved him up against a tree in a secluded area behind the school, and smashed her lips against his in a clumsy kiss, he was a bit taken aback. He had to admit it felt good. She smelled good, and once their mouths got situated, her lips were soft and intoxicating. He felt

himself relax and enjoyed the sensation that most others had already experienced by this time.

They came up for air, and he murmured groggily, half smiling, “What are you doing, Lex?”

She pulled his head back down, and whispered, “Quiet.” Her tongue slid into his mouth, roaming, exploring. He felt his body respond. All of a sudden embarrassed, he pulled away a little.

“Hey,” he protested, “I don’t know if…”

But Lexy was in charge. “Shhhh…” she said, attacking his mouth again, and her hand wandered, stroking, caressing. His eyes closed and he groaned in pleasure despite pangs of misgiving. They slid to the ground, surrendering to the moment. Floating in euphoria, they moved against each other instinctively, unquestioningly, until their eyes rolled back, bodies shuddered, breath erupted in heavy bursts. Then they lay there, drowning in delicious aftermath, limbs heavy, not wanting to move, only one word going through their heads: Wow.

Afterwards, they walked back to the gym, giving each other shy glances, happy glances. Ink wondered if he should hold her hand or something, but didn’t. He wasn’t quite sure what to do. Should he thank her? The dance was still going, but they felt too relaxed and sedated to make any further effort. And, anyway, the haze was starting to wear off again. Ink bought a couple of joints from Lexy’s friend, the start of a long love affair with pot, and they climbed in her Volkswagen to go home. The parking lot was swarming with clusters of teenagers. Hanging out. Making out. They glanced at each other again, as if to say, “We did it too!”

In Ink’s driveway, they just sat in the car for a while, in silence, in contentment. They were completely relaxed. This was a new feeling for them, and they wanted to relish it while it lasted. There had not been a thing wrong with this night. For the first time in their lives, there was no underlying sense of urgency. For the first time in their lives, they had felt like they were completely a part of high school society, exactly where they were supposed to be. Ink briefly started to wonder if there should be anything wrong with the fact that drugs and sex are what had brought them to this moment, then shrugged it off. It was hard enough being a teenager without the additional problems they had. If this is what it took to enable them to accept themselves, to soften the desperate need for the esteem of others, then this is what they would do.

His mom was waiting up for him to come home so she could ask him all about it. She ran out when she realized they were home and stuck her excited face in the window of the car.

“SO???” she asked, grinning widely when Lexy rolled down the

window. "How was it?"

Ink and Lexy looked at each other, discomfited. What exactly was she referring to? Were their actions glaring on their faces?

Ink shrugged impassively. "It was fun, Mom."

"That's IT? That's all you have to say? Your first dance? I want to hear EVERYTHING!"

"Trust me, Mom," said Ink, bursting into chuckles with Lexy, "you really don't."

"I DO! I really do!"

"Ok, we did drugs and had sex," said Ink, surprised at his own audacity. Lexy gasped and smacked him, shrieking with awkward laughter, back to being awkward Lexy. What had gotten into him?

"You did NOT!!" his mom squealed, laughing as well. But she turned around and went right back inside, leaving them laughing in the car. Maybe she didn't want to know how it all went after all.

For the last few months of high school, Ink and Lexy indulged in marijuana induced sex whenever they could. They couldn't get enough of it. Until he learned that she was telling people he was her "boyfriend." All of a sudden he found himself battling the archetypal male discomfort with commitment. He wasn't sure he liked that label. Was he her "boyfriend??" She was his best friend, actually his only "friend," the only one he hung out with and spent time with. True, they were exploring the inglorious world of sex and drugs with each other. But shouldn't there be more in a "girlfriend-boyfriend" relationship? Did he love her? He wasn't even sure what that meant. He thought about the love he felt for his mom. He knew he would be there for her whenever she needed him. Would he die for her? Maybe. He wasn't good with hypothetical scenarios. When they argued, he didn't feel like he loved her. He had been angry with her many times over the years over many different things. Found her deficient as a mother in many areas, especially the one that continued to insist there was nothing abnormal in the way he looked. But that anger had faded with time, and his feelings for his mom now could be described as a resigned-tolerant-annoyed sort of love. She was his mom and she was the only parent who had stuck by him. For that she deserved his love.

His feelings for Lexy, on the other hand, were harder to define. As someone who had been mostly on the periphery of mainstream society all his life, he wasn't sure how love for another human being, who was not a relative, was supposed to feel. How passion for another human being was supposed to feel. He enjoyed sex with her, but felt it would have been the same, if not better, with anybody else. He had grown to count on her, but it was a dependence born out of being shunned by others. Sometimes he felt like he was using her because she was available and he didn't have a choice. She could be strange and awkward beyond comprehension one minute, and calm down into a semblance of "normal" the next. But there was always nervous tension bubbling within her. There were only two situations which saw her relaxed and centered. One was when they were under the influence. The ugly duckling miraculously transformed in minutes into a beautiful swan, gracefully sliding through the waters, completely comfortable with herself and the rest of the world. Guys drooled over her when she was high. She became sex, drugs, and rock and roll incarnate. And the second situation was when she was doing Math and Science, during which she transformed into a pillar of self-confidence and inspiration without any help. In any other scenario she was stiff and awkward

again. Squawking. Tripping. Stammering. Sometimes downright embarrassing. Putting her foot in her mouth almost every time she spoke. And this was why they hung out, not because of common interests and a bonding of souls, but because they were both misfits. They were dysfunctional in regular high school society. And even with each other, even when they were high, they never really talked about anything real. He felt like she didn't really know him. And he didn't feel like he really knew her either. This was fine for now and preferable to the alternative, which was not to have any friends at all. But when he imagined having a girlfriend, he imagined more. Lexy found his birthmark sexy, which was a strange turn of events for him, one that he guessed he should be grateful for, perverse as it might be. But if it hadn't been for the birthmark, would she have been interested in him?

He was getting so tired of being defined by his birthmark, to being reduced to nothing more. There was so much more to him. A whole realm of thoughts, emotions and qualities, waiting to be explored and discovered. An endless depth of complexities he hadn't even discovered himself yet. How could he, at 18? But Lexy wasn't concerned with that. She didn't need a deeper understanding of him. She was content to just hang out, screw, get high and screw again. Yes, his relationship with her was very superficial. But was a relationship at this age capable of being anything more? He had to admit he did not really care to get to know what went on deep inside Lexy's soul either. But would he care to with someone else?

He started to watch other couples unobserved. He saw the way girls clung to their boyfriends and gazed into their eyes. Lexy and he never did that. Sometimes he listened in on conversations. And while many couples seemed to be about just having a "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" to brag about, to dress up like Cinderella and her prince and go to proms, and to add to the constant stream of gossip that enriched high school life, now and then he heard discourse that made him ache. Some couples really talked. Talked about life, beliefs, dreams, etc., etc. And these couples seemed as connected as human beings could be, given that they were only teenagers, despite the fact that they were only teenagers. It was gratifying. It gave him hope. That's what he would want in a relationship if he were given a choice. A connection based on an understanding of each other. A friendship based on more than both being social incongruities. He wanted a soul mate. And he had no doubt that Lexy was not it.

His first impulse was to set her straight. He thought about how he could phrase it: "Lexy, you need to stop deluding yourself" ...no, that was a little harsh; "Listen Lexy, I think the 'boyfriend' thing is a bit much" ...no, that didn't sound right. It had to sound casual enough that

she wouldn't think it was a huge deal. "Nothing personal, Lex, but I'm not comfortable being anyone's boyfriend right now"...no, that sounded lame. If he were going to smash her illusion, he at least needed to be honest about it. So what then... "I don't have any feelings for you?" That would definitely be honest. But then the thought hit him that if he rejected the boyfriend theory, he might lose her friendship completely, which, however superficial, was important to him. He didn't have anyone else. What to do. Why did things all of a sudden have to get convoluted, he wondered, disgruntled. It had to be the sex. Before the sex, there had been no talk of being a couple. But now, all of a sudden, she was labeling him her "boyfriend." What to him was just a nice benefit of their friendship, to her, took them to the level of commitment. Especially because he was sure neither of them was doing it with anyone else. He knew he wasn't. He also knew sexual monogamy was not enough to make a relationship. Not for him. He would not even be doing it with Lexy if she had not initiated it.

And it was always Lexy who initiated it, never him. Yes, he enjoyed it; he was human after all, despite the appearance of being otherwise. But sometimes it was almost as if he were humoring a child. She wanted to do it way more often than he did. He wondered what would happen if she decided she wanted him to make the first move, and did nothing herself for a while. Would he ever initiate it? If they went without for months and months, he supposed he might.

But a part of him felt relief at the thought of not doing it anymore. Strange. It was not something he dreaded. So, why the relief at the thought of not doing it? It was the "boyfriend" label. The sex was the basis for that label, and his level of discomfort with it was such that he actually felt relief at the thought of not doing it. He didn't just want a "girlfriend" to feed his own physical urges, or to feed high school gossip, or just to fit in. And the thought of dressing up and going to prom gave him hives.

But he did need a friend. Was the loss of her friendship a real possibility? Was being alone and friendless preferable to not being her "boyfriend?" Would he, in fact, be alone and friendless? He wondered.

Some things had been different since that first dance. The constant struggle with life, the relentless fetters of being born with half his face in shadows, seemed to have loosened a little. He realized that he himself was more relaxed. Maybe it was the drugs. Maybe it was the sex. Maybe it was a combination of both. But the result was that he was nicer and more approachable, and was seeing that people responded to him and liked him despite the giant splotch on his face. He was seeing that his loneliness might have been somewhat self-inflicted. That, terrified of being battered, bruised and obliterated, perhaps he had

never given other people a chance. But these days there was that half smile on his face, more than there had been before. And all of a sudden other teenagers were talking to him and he was talking back. He had even caught girls sneaking looks at him as if discovering him for the first time. And so had Lexy.

Lexy's initial reaction to this growing interest from other girls was a mixture of proud delight and trepidation. Finally, other girls were noticing what a prize her "boyfriend" was. Ink was, after all, very cute on the good side of his face. He also had a deep, sexy voice that, coming from anybody with a full face to look at, would make a girl's knees sag. And naturally well built, he had devoted a lot of his excess time to diligently working out over the years, the result of which was a body that was very nice to look at. She was, however, a bit taken aback when other girls started asking her about details. Was he a good kisser? Had she slept with him? What was that like? This was a little too much interest and at first made her jumpy. But then she got caught up in the moment. It did feel good to be considered part of the flock. And by the time she realized that extolling his virtues might not be the best idea, it was too late. What had began as plain curiosity from other girls became interest. A few times Lexy caught girls trying to flirt with him, turning away hurriedly when they saw her, or staring at her with defiance. All was fair in love and high school, right? And her initial pride and delight at all the novel attention started turning to agitation. Plus, Ink's natural distrust of others seemed to have relaxed a little, much to Lexy's annoyance. He looked like he enjoyed the attention from the other girls. She was still his faithful companion, but it was not as exclusive as before.

So when Ink, struggling with the whole "boyfriend" label, decided to pull back on the sex, he added fuel to Lexy's already ballooning anxiety. The first time he said "no," Lexy stared at him with her characteristic "o" and wide eyes; then, offended, turned around and flounced off. But she inevitably came back, as he knew she would. What he didn't expect was her turning into a psycho-fatal-attraction-stalker-type person.

It started with her draping herself on other guys whenever he was in sight. If he didn't want to do it, there were plenty of boys who would. Ink would catch her looking back at him to see if he was watching, then turn back and raise her voice in cheer and laughter, a show that she didn't need him. If he was concerned about it at all, it was because he was her friend. It was the more "uh-oh, what is she doing" kind of concern. Was she actually sleeping with other boys now? Part of him thought that if she found someone else to have sex with, it would, again, be a relief at this point. Maybe they could become friends without the complicated benefits. Maybe they could talk to each other and get to know each other on a different level, a deeper level. Even as he thought it, he knew that would never happen. That was just not Lexy.

And Lexy's own insecurities led her to an increasingly constant, heightened state of suspicion and distrust. She became convinced that with all the attention he was getting from other girls - normal, cute ones, not freaks like herself - Ink would "cheat" on her if he got the chance. If she had made the effort to get to know him better, she might have seen that, to Ink, this wasn't even an issue. If she had applied her scientific acumen to the matter, she might have seen that she was always the one who instigated the sex, that his interest in it, at best, bordered on "take it or leave it," which meant he didn't really care about it enough to make the effort to seek it elsewhere. She might have seen that he had never considered them "boyfriend and girlfriend," but just friends with benefits. Unfortunately, her scientific acumen did not extend to simple, non-mathematical, ordinary human issues. And it failed her here.

She started walking by his house, sporting dark sunglasses and a hat, to see if there were other girls. She followed him to other places. In her mind, she was a woman defending her relationship, vindicated in her actions. Little did she realize that it was completely obvious who was hiding under the dark sunglasses and hat. Her famous "Lexy gait" was not given to easy camouflage.

Ink's mother saw her walking by their house with the sunglasses and hat, and bombarded him with "frenzied mom" questions: "Is that Lexy out there? What is she doing? Why doesn't she come in? What's with the dark glasses and hat?? Are you guys not friends anymore? What's going on?" Ink just shrugged, unwilling to explain anything to his mom, annoyed and convinced as only offspring can be that their parents didn't understand anything, but still had to ask. But he kept his

eyes open for Lexy, disturbed at this new development. What was she doing? Was she, in fact, stalking him??? She wouldn't, would she? Then once when he was at the grocery store, he was pretty sure he saw her peeking at him from behind some shelves. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but he felt not. The quirky, abrupt movements gave her away. She really needed to work on that if she planned to spy on anyone. On him. He knew that gait better than anyone else. He had slept with it.

He also knew she was following him to see if he was with someone else. For a while now, their conversations had been tempests of frantic, manic questions about whether he wanted other girls and not her. And he hadn't even addressed the "boyfriend" issue yet. He had never really wanted her, she ranted. Was she just a convenience? How was he supposed to answer that? The oppressive voice of self-loathing that lurked not so deep inside her was rearing its ugly head, seeking a brutal validation. "I'm weird and unattractive and nobody wants me," the voice said. "I wouldn't want me either." Ink knew that voice. It spoke to him too. He had wrestled with it all his life, tried to ignore it, to conquer it. They both knew this relationship they had was a sham and the reality was that they were both rejects that no one else wanted. That might be the only real thing they had in common.

Perversely, Lexy threw out the proposal that maybe he should try dating other girls to see if he liked them better, all the while hoping desperately that he wouldn't. She pointed out girls who had asked about him, about what kind of kisser he was, and suggested that he should maybe give them a demo, waiting for the assurance that he wanted no one else but her. And Ink's thoughtless response, that he really didn't want to kiss anybody, and was not interested in anyone, was a slap in the face. She became a wounded bird, frail, hurt, feeling sorry for herself. But not for long. The wounded bird turned into a wounded lion, snarling and ferocious, enraged beyond reason at this confirmation of her fears that he really didn't care. She accused him of being a "cold son-of-a-bitch" who was incapable of feeling anything for anybody and railed on him for leading her on. What did he mean he was not interested in anyone? What did he think he had been doing with her all these months? What kind of arrogant bastard would think it was okay to sleep with someone regularly and not commit to them? She could see that Ink didn't know what to do with this side of her. She herself didn't know what to do with this side of her. What had she thought was going to happen? Marriage? And why not?

So, she told him she was pregnant. She hadn't wanted to tell him, she said, because she didn't want to burden him, but why should she be the only one to bear this responsibility? It was his problem too. Ink was devastated. She told him heroically not to worry about it, her voice

dripping with ice, like there couldn't be any lower form of life than him, and said she was going to self abort with birth control pills.

What? Ink had no idea this could even be done. He spent some time researching the issue of abortion via birth control pills and found nothing conclusive. And he didn't know which upset him more, the idea of having a baby at this point in his life, or the idea of aborting it. It was a part of him, a thought that his teenage brain was completely unequipped to handle, but nevertheless he couldn't run away from it. He spent three days unable to eat, drink, study or sleep. Then, at the continued insistence of his increasingly frantic mom, he finally told her, making her promise not to discuss it with his dad. That was not a problem. By this time Derek was mostly gone, and when he was around, it was more of a formality than anything else. They all knew it was only a matter of time before he left for good. But Ink wanted to be absolutely sure he was kept out of it.

Audrey was also devastated. If it was true, they had been careless with something that was too significant to be careless with, she said. Bringing a life into the world was not something to take lightly. Neither was ending it. Images of Ink as a baby went through her mind. How cute he had been. How precious. She was heartbroken at the thought of losing a beautiful grandchild. But she had never heard of taking pills to self abort...it sounded very fishy to her, and the fact that Lexy had thrown this at him when they were having problems made it a little hard to digest. Would she make up something as serious as this? Could she be that demented? She decided she wanted to pay for her to go to a clinic and get tested and wanted to see the results of the test. She wanted indisputable proof.

But Ink refused. He didn't like any part of the situation. He didn't like the idea of Lexy being pregnant with his child. But he also didn't like the idea of Lexy being the kind of girl who would try to control someone by making up something as huge as this. So he just wanted to leave it alone. He told Lexy the next move was up to her, and that he would support her in whatever decision she made, his participation in heroic resignation to suffering. He awaited her decision.

She did nothing. The subject got eerily dropped as if it had never been brought up. No more mention of being pregnant, abortions, just nothing. Of course, this convinced Ink's mom that Lexy had lied about the whole thing. She had lied, and then gotten scared at the enormity of her lie. And then just ditched the whole thing like it had never happened. Ink didn't care. Maybe she had gotten a procedure. Maybe she had never needed to. He just wanted it all to go away. But "hell hath no fury" like a Lexy scorned. She was just beginning.

The world started turning against him again. People started giving

him dirty looks. It had been a while since he had been subjected to any kind of looks at all. On the whole, he had been feeling accepted, even if not completely. But all of a sudden, things started going backwards. In class, scowling students started to whisper among themselves and glance at him angrily. When he tried to say, "Hi," or ask how they were, they would get up abruptly, and ignoring him completely, walk away. What was going on? Did Lexy tell them about the pregnancy and demonize him? Were they freaking out on his birthmark again just when he thought he had finally left all that behind? No, he felt. This was something different.

Then, some started coming up to him to ask why he had sent them offensive messages through the online social network. He had only recently created an account and had less than ten "friends," so this was disturbing. When he denied it, he was shown the messages. Sure enough, they came from his account. He knew immediately that it was Lexy. The wording sounded like her. She had hacked into his account, tech genius that she was, and was trying to hurt his relationship with others. The messages were mean and cruel, making fun of other students' weaknesses and insecurities, like it was all a huge joke to him. Desperately he tried to tell them that he thought Lexy might be responsible for it. Big mistake. They shook their heads at him for trying to blame his actions on the poor girl, and turned away from him. All this time, Lexy ignored him completely. She stuck her nose up in the air when she walked by him, and hung out with fellow Ink haters. And they all gave him looks. Looks of sympathy sometimes from those who were impartial; looks of hate mostly. Everyone avoided him though. No one wanted their own fragile high school reputation tarnished. The online posts continued. And once again, Ink found himself completely isolated.

One evening, after sitting through a football game by himself, because no one would come within ten feet of him, he started back home. He shouldn't have even gone, but he had to get out of the house and thought he'd give it a try. Stupid. What was he expecting? Images of boys with paper bags over their heads holding him down and jamming a sharpie into his cheeks invaded his head. The smell of permanent ink filled his nostrils, and waves of anxiety and panic associated with his childhood started to flood him. As he walked through the parking lot, head down, breathing hard, fighting to control the terror, he suddenly found himself on the ground, being slammed against the gravel. He threw his arms over his head to ward off blow after blow on his shoulders, stomach, legs. He felt bewildered... disassociated... couldn't reconcile himself with what was happening. Didn't know why it was happening. His mind flew to the mountains as

he lay curled up on the ground like a fetus, not fighting back, until the blows stopped, and with disgusted murmurs, the offenders walked away. "We're not the freaks, YOU are!" someone yelled as they left. "Go jump off a cliff, freak!"

It was calm in the mountains. He was above everything, far from everything. Wrapped lovingly in the throbbing stillness. The vast benevolence. Acceptance without judgment. A kindness that made him want to cry. He wanted to stay there forever. Dimly, he could hear the voices of people walking by. Through a bubble, he heard a few people expressing curiosity, a few laughing. But no one stopped to see if he was okay, to ask if the fetus on the cold, hard ground needed help. The voices were just distant murmurs in a world he did not belong to. "Take me now," he whispered through the agony that wracked him. "Take me away from this horrible world." But he felt nothing in response. Just stillness.

Slowly the voices faded. The pain dulled. The parking lot was completely silent. He dragged himself up to hobble home, feeling more alone than he ever had in his life. Amazingly, everything in his body seemed to be working in a twisted, crippled sort of way. He could almost pretend that it had never happened, except for the raw throbbing and misery that gripped him all the way from head to toes. The anguish was worse than before; before, when he never had it to lose. Now that he had known recognition, acceptance, been allowed to be part of a community, the loss felt devastating. He knew Lexy was responsible for this, but he couldn't stop the onslaught of feelings of complete and utter worthlessness. Like he had been given a chance, judged and discarded.

A visit to the doctor under the duress of his freaking mother confirmed Ink's belief that nothing was broken, only badly black and blue. Most of his bruises were under his clothes and hidden from malicious scrutiny and gossip. But when the long sleeves on the shirts he wore slid back, there were blue-black splotches on his arms that almost matched his face. Well, at least now he was consistently black and blue, he thought angrily. A complete mutant, not just a quarter.

Audrey wanted him to stay home for a few days, but Ink didn't want to. It would be showing weakness and showing that they, the rest of the world, had won. But every time he tried to move, he winced, and every time he tried to leave, his mom turned into a protective gorgon standing in his way with her arms on her hips. So he ended up staying home for a week.

Lexy had the nerve to try to visit. When Ink's mom refused to let her in, she tried to call. But Ink was done with her. What more could she possibly do to him? When she kept calling, he confronted her with

interfering with his social network account.

“I know you sent those hateful messages from my account, Lexy,” he said. Her theatrical outrage convinced him that he was right.

“What? No! No! No! No! You’re CRAZY! CRAZY! CRAZY! Why me?” she ranted. “Maybe I’m not ‘girlfriend,’ but I am ‘friend.’ Friends don’t hurt each other, right?” she couldn’t help a sneer at this last part. Her point was that she felt hurt by him. He understood. But he was so done with this whole scene that he had nothing to say. So he just sat on the phone, silent, waiting for it to end. And his complete lack of reaction, more than anything else, told Lexy that whatever they had had was irrefutably over. She hung up on him and didn’t call him again.

Troubled as he was by the whole situation, he understood that his prior behavior towards others had something to do with the complete lack of support he had right now. The growling and scowling, the barking at people who tried to be friendly, the alienating of people before they got a chance to hurt him. All of that was partly to blame for his plight. And of course, his misfortune in falling in with a psycho in the guise of a dysfunctional lamb. But if he hadn’t alienated everyone, he wouldn’t have been forced to hang out with Lexy. He might have had some regular friends, if there were such a thing in high school, who might have believed him when he claimed he didn’t send those malicious messages. But how was he to know? How was he to know any of this?

MENACING SHADES

~ 12 ~

Ink decided to stay home for a while after graduating from high school, and look for work. And heal. At this point, the thought of any kind of prolonged interaction with peers led to crippling anxiety. Sleep, always restless, was now marred by images of angry, screaming, distorted faces in menacing shades of purples, greens, and dark blue. Quite possibly this was kindled by the Toulouse-Lautrec prints his mother had hanging around their house, but in his dreams, they were the faces of young high school students and not the adult society Lautrec portrayed. Lexy's twisted visage screaming at him to be her boyfriend. Others screaming "FREAK!" More disturbing than the Lautrec prints because they were more real. A few years of recuperation were definitely in order before he subjected himself to college, which, by the way, he wasn't sure he wanted to do at all.

College sounded perilously like another arena for peer drama: the cliques, the drinking and sex, the power games, the relationship games. And surprisingly, the absence of parents, which should have been a selling point, now triggered apprehension. As useless as parents were to teenagers, their presence might provide a safeguard against the complete breakdown of sanity and order. College students were supposedly adults, not answerable to parents anymore. But they were not much older than high schoolers...how much more mature could they be? Didn't that maturity have to come from challenges in life that they couldn't possibly have faced yet? It sounded like the same infantile pettiness that characterized high school, clad in the vanity of higher education. He pictured a bunch of students in caps and gowns wandering around with their noses in the air, nudging each other, whispering, pointing at the current butt of their meanness, still inflating their own egos by putting down others.

Then again, sometimes he had heard his mom, and even his dad, when he happened to be around, saying mean things about people, usually anybody who failed to see the world through their artist glasses. Artists, his mother claimed, saw things as "they really were." Free of societal conventions and rules. But was that not just another form of bias, of intolerance? And why be mean? Did judging people and finding them somehow deficient have to result in malice? Why not live and let live? Shouldn't people in their early forties be above needless spitefulness? Shouldn't it be a goal in life to develop tolerance and acceptance of others? As long as they weren't doing any harm, of course. Nobody was saying put up with serial killers and rapists. But as

long as they were not doing any harm, why judge and condemn them for just being different? Maybe that was clearer to people like him, the victims, and not the perpetrators. And yet, he himself had acted with intolerance towards those that he felt were inferior in some way in high school. Maybe intolerance of others was an intrinsic feature of the human race, a prerequisite for self-esteem, for survival even. Survival of the fittest. The higher the level of intolerance, the higher the self-esteem, the higher the chances of survival. No, there was no reason to believe that college students would be any more enlightened than anyone else.

Audrey was conflicted about Ink's decision to stay home. She had been worried about how she would help him pay for the exorbitant cost of college even though Derek had made it clear that he would continue to help both her and Ink financially, as much as he was able, after the divorce finalized. He claimed that he cared about them and took his responsibility towards them seriously. We'll see, thought Audrey. Derek had not been much of a father up to now, to say the least, and Ink had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with him. But he didn't have to know if Derek gave them money now and then. However, neither of them really made enough money to pay for a college education. Audrey had been working full time at the publishing company for a while now and was able to pay her bills, but had little left over for anything else. Derek's Graphic Design company still went through up periods and down periods. Friends and colleagues said it wasn't the responsibility of parents to pay for college, that Ink could take out loans. But she wanted to do whatever she could to help her only son, and Derek concurred, possibly the last thing in their relationship they both agreed on. So it was a slight relief when Ink decided to stay home for a while; she would have more time to put money away for his education. It did make her a little apprehensive because she was from the generation where kids went to college unquestioningly right after high school. But so what? From what she saw and heard these days, a lot of young kids decided to work right after high school and take a break from formal education. Social norms had always been something to scoff at anyway. Something for people who were sheep and couldn't think for themselves. What was right for one person might not be right for another. There were famous people who had made it without ever going to college. Maybe Ink would become one of those. Maybe this break would provide him with the motivation needed to go back to school. Hopefully he would decide to go after some time had passed.

On the other hand, he was impossible to influence and control at this age. She loved him and wanted the best for him, but sometimes she

felt like she didn't know who he was anymore. He was home all the time, locked in his room, buried in loud music and just coming out to eat. And it was worrisome. Her friends' children were out smoking and drinking and doing God knew what else, which they complained about, but that was what kids this age were supposed to be doing. Pushing their boundaries. Exploring life. Not hanging out at their parents' home. Conversations with Ink were dominated by the question of why he wasn't out.

"Why aren't you out with friends, honey?"

"I don't have any friends."

"Sure you do. Nathan and Denise's son, Craig, offered to take you out."

"Don't like him, mom. He's stupid."

"Well, how about going to Great America with Scott from next door? I'll pay for the tickets."

"No, thanks."

"But wouldn't it be better than staying at home by yourself?"

"No."

Her precious little baby with the magical kiss of the dragon had transformed into a sulking, brooding, tortured person of unfathomable depths. A Gothic character, like Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Most of the time, she felt ill-equipped to provide him with any kind of emotional support. His impatience with her was intimidating and caused her to withdraw, which inevitably increased the distance between them. Did he even need her anymore? He acted like he didn't, but Audrey knew that this was probably a little bit of an act. She hoped. It drove her insane that she had no say in any decision he made, but she still fed him and housed him. She had hoped that the habit of openly discussing things with her child would fashion a better relationship with her son than she had had with her own parents. What she was slowly learning was that no child wants to be around his/her parents after a certain age, no matter how the parents act. And that if she insisted on taking an active role in his life, she would just hinder him from being able to follow his path when and how he chose. And possibly alienate him forever. She didn't want that. Ideally he would have his own place so she didn't have to witness the choices he made and worry about whether they were the right ones. But what choice did she really have? She couldn't just up and leave, like Derek. This was her house and her life too. So, was she supposed to kick her only son out into the streets to go live under a bridge until he could get his life together? Not going to happen. She would continue to push him to go to school or do something with his life, but with love and patience. The thought of asking him to leave always dissolved in the agonized re-

assertion that when she had brought him into the world, she had agreed to do whatever she could for him, without asking for any recognition or appreciation in return. Within reason of course. Any requests for a Maserati would be denied. Despite everything, he was her baby, a part of her, and she loved him desperately. So she tried to be part of the background. There if he needed her and not there when he didn't.

Then, miraculously, when Ink turned nineteen, things started to become easier. He got a job at the hardware store around the corner. All on his own initiative, without any nagging from Mom, he decided he wanted to make some money. She was able to devote all her spare time and energy to things she wanted to do, which didn't include nagging her teenage son to do something with his life. She really didn't enjoy that at all. And "Heathcliff" stopped snarling at her whenever he saw her because she wasn't trying to tell him how to live his life. It was that simple. And not. The worries were still there, but Audrey was able to push them aside whenever they surfaced. On the whole, life at home calmed down. Maybe there was hope after all. Things might not exactly happen in the order Audrey had envisioned, but maybe everything would work out in the end.

The owner of the hardware store around the corner knew him, knew his mother, and felt sorry for the boy. He hired him even though he didn't really need another employee. And he was rewarded with a sudden booming of his business, though short-lived. People started coming in to buy things they could easily have bought at Target for a better price: Tupperware, coolers, etc., extra things that hardware stores kept in addition to their regular merchandise to make extra money, and that were usually bought as an after-thought while shopping for hardware. Maybe the store owner's magnanimity in hiring the boy with the birthmark sparked something kindred in people, and they wanted to do what they could to pitch in and support the poor boy whose own father had abandoned him. Everyone had also heard stories of the things that had happened in school, and while the general sentiment was to be biased against Ink for all the hate mail he had allegedly sent, most just felt sorry for him. Then, of course, there were the gawkers who, despite having seen him many times before, wanted to go and stare at him, as if he were a zoo animal or a museum exhibit or something. It made their mundane lives a tiny bit more interesting.

It was good practice for Ink too. He learned to put a lid on the ugly monster that threatened to surface when people reacted to his face. He learned to put on a placid smile when dealing with the most unpleasant customer. A smile that almost said, "What...you haven't seen someone with half his face blue before?????" He learned that he didn't need anybody's approval to function. People still avoided looking at the right side of his face, but by this time, Ink was used to people looking at him slightly to the left. That was okay. He was what he was, and he had no choice but to accept and play the cards he had been dealt. Punishing others for it would change nothing. People who were able to somehow mask their imperfections, with makeup, with surgery, etc., would never learn to accept things because they didn't have to. They would continue to fight and try to shape life their way. But that was not an option for Ink, so what was the point in fighting?

He also learned that he was a fascination to the opposite sex. Not the silly high school kind, but the older kind, the ones who had gotten bored with life and men as they knew them. Women without careers whose wedded bliss had long been replaced by the drudgery of taking care of their husbands and children, and who were consciously or unconsciously always seeking something to brighten their horizon. New clothes. A new hair color. Nails. Cute young thing with birthmark on his face.

What began as covert looks and coy smiles when these women came to the hardware store ended with hastily jotted notes being slipped over to him along with the check or cash being tendered for merchandise. Sometimes it was a phone number, sometimes a request, if one could call it that, to meet in some parking lot or a motel room.

Ink was unsure what to do with this attention in the beginning, especially given his experience with Lexy. What would these older women expect of him? Should he be flattered? Or was he just a curiosity for bored women? Should he care? And what would their husbands, many of whom he knew, do if they found out? Getting beaten up by elementary children and high school kids was one thing. But the thought of getting pulverized by angry, grown men was... terrifying. They could kill him.

The temptation proved to be greater than his initial fears. The temptation to do something defiant of society, to see what these older and more experienced women wanted, to see where it all led. And for a change, the attention he was getting was not hurtful. It made him feel wanted. Ink's drive for sex was, after all, that of any normal nineteen to twenty year old boy. Horrendous. So when he got the first note, he didn't hesitate for too long.

Fortunately for him, the women were matched by their husbands in marital boredom. These couples had very little to say to each other, and any interaction between them was passionless. Quick pecks on dry, puckered mouths. Meaningless inquiries about the day. A pat now and then, like that between a pet and its owner. This was the noisiest complaint the women had: being treated like a pet instead of a wife. But underneath the noise, there was relief at not having to go through the pretense of being interested in their husbands. And the men learned to ignore the complaints because, not so deep down inside, they knew it was just noise. They felt the same lack of interest towards their wives that their wives felt for them.

Thus, when the rumors of infidelity started, they were either ignored or scoffed at, ("Really? My Ashley and birthmark boy? Oh, God, I doubt it, but if they are, then more power to them!! Keeps me off the hook!!" Wink, wink.) even if there might be any truth to them. It masked their indifference and enabled them to continue their mundane but stable life of pretense. Then it was back to what really interested them. The men had their jobs, cars and boats, projects, fishing, drinking buddies. The women had their beauty appointments, their soap operas, shopping and ladies' nights out. And now they wanted Ink.

Young and sweet, virile and enthusiastic, energetic, Ink was everything their husbands were not. And he had that fascinating

birthmark on his face. If one could make oneself look at it and not turn away, it was really kind of beautiful. Like abstract or expressionist art. It was like making love with a Van Gogh painting, some of them felt.

When Ink understood that he was safe with these married women, that the sex was free of any baggage or expectations, he dropped all restraints. The women said they felt like they were in college again, where one-night-stands were a part of life and fashionable, especially because their excess middle-aged flesh didn't bother him. Business went up for "Meals-on-Wheels" since the need for discretion prohibited going to restaurants. Ravenous after a good romp in the bed, the women had no compunction about charging their husbands' credit cards for gourmet meals to be delivered. Business also went up at the hardware store where Ink worked. The owner really didn't care about why there was a sudden influx of housewives at his store. He was just grateful for it. And so was Ink. Physically, if not emotionally, he felt replete, enjoying all the benefits of sex sans the drama. Until Monica Peters decided she was in love with him.

Mrs. Monica Peters, wife of the town council president, Greg Peters, and mother of two boys, 14 and 12, and one girl, 6, had been struggling for a while now with the realization that after twenty five years of marriage, her husband had absolutely no sex drive whatsoever. Neither for her, nor for anyone else. When some friends of Greg's went to the "red light district" in the city last month for a birthday party, he chose to stay home. Monica would have liked it if he had gone to the party with his group of Neanderthal buddies and ogled scantily clad women. It would have been a sign that his sexual appetite was alive and well. When her girlfriend, Karen, complained about her husband watching too much porn on the internet, then groping her inappropriately with their kids sitting right next to them on the couch watching T.V., Monica was jealous. She would gladly feign outrage at any kind of groping, in front of the kids or not. It would be a sign that all was not lost.

She knew he loved her. There were presents, flowers, and perfumes for birthdays and Valentines, nice dinners. But she felt more and more like the gifts and flowers were to make up for a lack of interest. At night, he was too tired from work to show any enthusiasm for intimacy. She got him his favorite beer hoping to reawaken the beer induced ardor that had defined their sex life when they were young. She talked dirty to him on the phone while he was at work, ostensibly to embarrass him, inwardly hoping that it would spark something. But all he seemed to get out of it was a good chuckle. "YOU!!" he would protest, and play along with her. And there it ended. In the evenings when the kids were in bed, dishes put away, and blissful quiet reigned,

she would snuggle up to him only to find him in the grip of the television, halfway through which he would just fall asleep. Even beer didn't work any more. It just made him fall asleep faster.

On weekends, when he didn't have hard-day-at-work as an excuse, she would drop all kinds of innuendos all day about getting frisky. He would smile and say something suitably responsive, though lacking in luster, like "Yeah, been a while." Or he would say nothing at all and reach over and give her a quick pat, or, if she was lucky, a kiss on the mouth that bordered on lascivious, but ended very quickly. In the evening, she waited in vain for him to bring up what they had hinted at all day. Sure, she could have brought it up...again. But there was the rub. She was the only one bringing it up. Her pride dictated that, after a day of hints from her, he make the effort. Hard to maintain an appetite for sex when it felt like he really didn't care. So she suppressed her annoyance and stayed quiet.

During the once-a-year family vacation, she hoped he would have more energy. He was as attentive and loving as he could be. But family vacations meant vacation for everyone but mom. Most of the time Greg snored on the beach after downing some beers, and she had to run around and make sure the children didn't get into some kind of trouble. Or play with Lisette, their daughter, because the boys wouldn't play with her. And surprise, surprise, Greg didn't trust the babysitting services offered by the hotels they stayed at, so romantic couple's night was out of the question. She felt like the pet that she complained she was, tongue hanging out, hungering for attention.

The irony was that it wasn't like she was lusting after him or anything. They had been married a long time, both were in their forties, Greg was almost fifty, and she was as bored with him as he was with her. But while Greg was actually losing interest in sex altogether, Monica was just now truly discovering the joys of it. Earlier on in her life, sex had mostly been about connection, and the lack of satisfaction she felt from the act got buried under the comfort of cuddling and kissing and having someone to call "boyfriend." Of not being alone. By now, however, she had experienced the convulsive, quaking, mind-draining tornado that her body was capable of, and she wanted more. Cuddling and petting were just not enough. But she went on being the good little wife, resigned to the sexual apathy of a tired and spent husband, because this was the contract she had signed when she got married. For better or worse. And the pent-up storm brewing inside her kept getting stronger and stronger, sometimes threatening to engulf her in waves of crippling, uncontrollable anxiety. Then she met Ink.

In the beginning it was just fun. She learned about him through the “married women’s network,” and the more she heard, the more she lost any initial reservations. The word was that he made them feel young and beautiful. Middle-aged love handles and stretch marks disappeared as he made love to every inch of them with the gusto of a drunk college student in a dorm room. Just the thought of it made her freshly awakened sexuality shudder. So, WHY NOT, she started thinking. Why the hell not.

Thus, Ink looked down from the sale of stone garden lovebirds one day to find yet another phone number being slipped to him. And he looked up to find a beautiful woman who had surely been stunning when she was younger: long, shiny golden hair, a little too shiny to be real, but beautiful nevertheless; wide blue eyes in a face which looked flawless except for a few wrinkles by the eyes and mouth. Good genes and a daily regimen of exercise and organic food had rendered Monica Peters, at forty, the appearance of someone in her late twenties or early thirties. Not that Ink cared. He enjoyed it with anyone these days. Any age past 18, any size, color. Was sex the only area of life where discrimination had no place?

The first time they did it, Ink took Monica Peters to screaming heights of ecstasy, much to the mortification of almost everyone in the cheap motel with paper walls. And much to the mortification of Ink himself. “Sssshhh...” he said, clamping his hand over her mouth, laughing, both entertained and startled at the volume of her enjoyment.

And afterwards, as she lay spent and sweaty on the bed, unable to move for a while, Monica wondered what Ink was thinking of her. Would he think she was completely mad, screaming like that? She had never, ever, screamed like that during sex. But, for the first time in her life, she had let herself lose complete control, going with the flow, come what may. And what came could only be received by screaming.

Ink did think she was completely mad, but in a cute, inoffensive kind of way. Deviation from normal did not bother him, he himself being one of that clan. The more of the strange and unusual there was, the less he felt judged, and the more he felt comfortable, like he was in his realm, his element. In fact, the more deviation, the more interesting, he thought. Normal was boring. So it was no effort to reassure her that she was beautiful when she apologized for the screaming.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

“For what?” Ink asked, stretching, languid.

“You know....letting the whole world know...”

He raised himself on one elbow and looked down at her then. "Don't ever apologize for that..."

"But..."

"No buts. Life is too short to worry about what other people think." He went on to assure her that she was beautiful, that every sound that came out of her was beautiful, that everything she did was beautiful.

"What, more than young girls your age?" she asked, hoping for verbal reassurance. And she got it. He laughed and said young girls were undeveloped fruit, green and sour, while she was mature fruit, ripe, sweet and luscious. Monica was in heaven. All those days of loneliness, pining for attention, and then this unbelievable creature from who-knew-where. Definitely not this world. This boy with a fascinating mark on one half of his face who made her feel like she was a goddess. He had to be some form of superior being from a higher civilization on a distant planet. No one from earth was capable of this kind of insight.

They started meeting every other week, then every week. Monica spent every minute of her days reliving every detail of her time with him, and lived for the next time she saw him. She swung back and forth between glorious defiance and abject misery about cheating on Greg. Ink, on the other hand, had never had much regard for the moral laws of mankind. "It is what it is," was his favorite rejoinder to everything. The fleeting quality of life itself dictated that one not let oneself be too bogged down with trivial details such as whether infidelity was right or wrong. It was neither. It just was.

"Right and wrong," he contended, "does not exist in the eyes of the universe, of eternity. They are concepts invented and imposed by people to control life."

"But, if there were no right or wrong," Monica replied, "how would we teach our children not to steal or kill?" This was a tough one for him to answer. He thought stealing should be looked at in context. Maybe the person who was doing the stealing was trying to support a family, or had an illness that needed expensive medical treatment; in which case, it surely couldn't be deemed "wrong." He did think that people should not be running around killing each other whenever they needed to solve problems. But each "offense" should be looked at separately, and not judged according to the strict and inflexible laws of the government, or by strict and inflexible people. Human beings had been given the ability to think, right? So why would the same law dictate every situation in life regardless of the circumstances? Maybe the person who stole should have to face a consequence, but it should be tempered with the understanding of what had made him do it. What,

then, Monica wondered, was the circumstance which made it acceptable for her to commit adultery? She had taken a vow in the eyes of God to be faithful to her husband.

“First of all, the vow should only be relevant between the two people who made it.” Ink refused to believe in a God that would condemn without understanding. “They shouldn’t have to answer to anyone else in society,” he said. “Second, you’re obviously unhappy and unfulfilled. Your husband has to take some responsibility for this situation because he is not there for you. He’s breaking the vow he made to you to make you happy.”

“So, the solution is that I retaliate? That I betray him? Shouldn’t I try, maybe, couple’s therapy or something before I look for someone else?” A part of her wondered if she should be asking this boy, barely out of his teens, these questions. Did she really believe he had answers? It felt like he did. He was, she told herself, a special “barely out of his teens.”

“You’ve been living like this for a while. If you thought therapy might help, wouldn’t you have suggested it? Your relationship probably feels unfixable to you. So your options would be to initiate a divorce, or to make the best of the situation. Would your husband be okay with a divorce? Would you?”

She shook her head. Greg was family. She cared deeply about him, and couldn’t even imagine divorcing him. It would be like cutting off her right arm. And he loved her. A dull, old shoe kind of love, but love, in any form, was precious. He would be devastated if they divorced, not to mention there were the children to consider. This was easier.

“Well, then, you have one life to live and it is what you make it. Right now this is what you are making of your life. Don’t worry about right and wrong.”

And there it was. They fell back into bed and the matter was resolved. The world and its views became irrelevant. There was nothing else to plague their arrangement. Nothing, that is, until the level of Monica’s attachment became worrisome.

Ink made it a point never to see more than two or three women at a time. More than that and life felt discombobulated. At the moment, every Tuesday was Monica day, and every other Thursday he alternated between Sandra Tan, Chinese-American hairdresser at Mimi’s Salon, and Annie Gonzales, librarian. The Thursday partners were never constant. Two or three weeks, then no news for a while. Then on again sometimes with someone different for a few weeks, then back to the original partner. Tuesdays with Monica, however, were regular. She insisted on it.

Now and then, he wondered if they should take a break. If the things she said were starting to feel clingy, possessive. But on the whole it still felt moderate, light hearted. Then she started bringing him gifts... a leather jacket, an I-pad... Ink protested but eventually accepted the jacket. It was a dark brown bomber jacket and was difficult to resist. He turned down the I-pad, saying she couldn't buy him gifts like that.

"Why not?" she asked, annoyed, defiant.

"Because," he said, "it puts a strain on our time together. I don't have money to reciprocate, and even if I did, I couldn't just buy you gifts, I would have to buy all my ladies gifts." He didn't usually bring up other women because he sensed that she liked to pretend they were exclusive, but now and then he would drop a hint to make sure she was 200% aware that they were not. Monica usually ignored it. This time she pouted and said he should only be obliged to buy people gifts if they had bought him gifts in the first place. Not that she was suggesting that he should buy her anything. She knew he was young and didn't have the money for gifts. But since it bothered him, she would stop for now.

Then, when they had been getting together for three months, she came in one day with another gift. Feeling slightly perturbed, he opened the flat envelope sized gift box wrapped in chocolate colored silky paper and a gold bow. He was completely prepared to refuse it and started thinking of what he would say to make it clear that he did not want this to continue. Inside were airline tickets. Two of them. To Bora-Bora, Tahiti. Of course he had never been, but had heard of the place as the perfect place to honeymoon. This was not good. Not good at all. What was he supposed to do with this? These tickets couldn't have been cheap.

"Monica," he began, desperately. She was draped lovingly around him, looking up at him with an expectant, excited smile. Could a woman of her age really have no idea how inappropriate this was? "I hope these are refundable," he burst out.

Well done, Ink. No "thank you" or "you shouldn't have." No show of appreciation whatsoever. Briefly he wondered if there would be any harm in it. Bora-Bora sounded really nice and he hadn't ever been anywhere like that. He really hadn't been anywhere. But the truth was he was horrified. He knew if he accepted this gift, he would be signing over a part of himself that he was not willing to sign over.

Monica sat up, annoyed again. She had been getting annoyed more and more lately. And while any rational person would stop to analyze why that was, and consider that maybe a good thing was going too far, Monica didn't. She had wondered fleetingly herself about the

propriety of buying the tickets, if maybe she was going too far, then given into a bout of generosity and imagination. It wasn't hard to picture them making love on the beach, gentle sea water lapping at their toes, a few feet from their bamboo cabin. But when Ink responded with dismay instead of grateful enthusiasm, it confirmed her fears that she had overdone it. Annoyed at herself, at him, at the whole darn situation, she said, "Yes, they are refundable." Then, frenziedly ignoring the voice in her head that yelled ENOUGH! she persisted, clinging to her dream, trying to salvage the situation, and her pride.

"But why wouldn't you want to go, baby? Have you ever been to Bora-Bora? In fact, have you ever been anywhere outside the U.S.? I will pay for everything. Your passport, hotel, food..." He covered her mouth with his hand once again to quiet her, but this time it was not light-hearted and fun like before. It was heavy and depressing.

"Stop," he said quietly, shaking his head.

"Wait...", she tried to continue, but he kept shaking his head and refused to listen. Finally she took a deep breath and said, "Okay, forget Bora-Bora," then proceeded to blurt out, "but I need to tell you that I think I'm in love with you."

"Love?" said Ink blankly. That had never been part of the equation. She was prettier than the others, fun in bed, but that was all she was. Someone else to add spice to his life. To occupy his time in the absence of a society of peers to hang with. But love?

Truth be told, he didn't even think he was capable of love. In fact he was pretty sure he wasn't. Part of him thought that was not so unusual for a twenty year old, but another part wondered if the life he had been dealt had robbed him of the ability to love. If the anger, resentment and disillusionment with the world had just made him a bitter young man who would never trust anyone enough to let himself love. He imagined that, in order to be able to love, you would have to open yourself up, surrender, take risks, even if it resulted in pain. And he felt closed. Shut in. Trapped in a dungeon because of a monstrous facial blemish that had brutally exposed the small mindedness and meanness of society.

"Don't tell me you don't have feelings for me," Monica challenged him. "I've seen the way you look at me..."

She had? Ink had no idea what she was talking about. He didn't recall looking at her in any special kind of way. Could she be referring to the sweat drenched smile of stupid contentment in the aftermath of sex? Oh, Lord. That would mean he was in love with all his middle-aged women, because they had all seen that look.

He tried to tell her he didn't think he was capable of truly loving anyone. Tried to tell her that she really didn't want an insecure young

pup who didn't know anything about life, and was still in the process of finding himself. That he wouldn't know how to make her truly happy. All in vain. He sounded lame even to himself, like he was just making excuses. Which he was.

She was convinced that he did love her and was just too young to realize it, and that she could make him see it. She was convinced that if they started seeing each other like a normal couple, that if she left her husband, it would all fall into place. She was convinced that, despite the difference in age, they belonged together. God had just somehow mixed up the times of their births, and Ink had thus been born over twenty years after her.

Ink looked at her helplessly, and had no idea what to say or do. The other women came and went. So he never had to worry about "breaking up" with anyone. With Lexy, it had been more of a "correction" than a break up. He had "corrected" her version of what they were to each other. Maybe that's all he needed to do here as well. But Monica was not Lexy. She was very grown up, and, at the moment, bursting with a very grown up, and terrifying, fervor. He felt the presence of something frantic and deliriously obsessive in her that could be potentially problematic if he denied her. A kaleidoscope of psycho stalker movies spun in his head, once again. Why was it that any female who set her sights on him turned out to be unbalanced? First Lexy, now Monica. It had to be his birthmark; it was like a bad drug and prolonged exposure to it made women crazy. Could it be that no one "normal" would ever be able to get past the birthmark? That only freaks would ever be able to do that? That only freaks would ever be able to love the freak? Was he supposed to resign himself to this? Maybe he should just stay away from women altogether. That sounded like a really stellar idea.

So he decided the only way out of it was to stop communicating with her. Cut her out of his life, abruptly and completely. Cowardly, yes. Brutal? Maybe so. But, the way she was behaving, he was sure talking to her would be useless. And she was scaring him. He felt like he was facing a force of nature, a devastating tornado over which he had no control, and which could sweep him away completely. His very survival depended on removing himself from her path.

First he stood her up one Tuesday. Monica, cheeks glowing from a facial and nails freshly and flawlessly painted, was feeling particularly pretty. So she pushed aside the slight sense of foreboding that people have when they know they might have acted inopportunistically. When they know they might have rushed something before the time was right. Something for which the time might never be right. She had with her a bottle of her favorite Chardonnay and some sharp white cheddar, a crispy baguette, still warm from the bakery, and Pimento olives, Ink's favorite. She donned the slip that Ink liked to nuzzle, a concoction of black silk and white lace. Then she got in bed and waited.

After ten minutes, she opened the bottle of wine in an effort to suppress the growing anxiety in her chest. She turned on the T.V. and flipped through the news channels for a few minutes. Got up and went to the bathroom to check her appearance. Came back out, poured another glass of wine and tore off a small piece of the baguette. She ate when she was nervous. But this time it did nothing to make her feel better. As she watched the clock tick forward, minute by minute, she knew he wasn't going to come. Maybe he had gotten into an accident, she thought hopefully, then chided herself for imagining something like that. Maybe something had come up last minute and he was desperately trying to rush through it in order to keep their date...the cell phone would probably ring any minute now, and Ink would be asking her to hold on and not leave, assuring her that he was on his way.

Two hours later, Monica sat on the bed with the empty bottle of wine next to her. Alone. Hair messed up. Makeup smeared from the effort to suppress angry tears. Her black silk slip was crumpled and littered with bread crumbs. Her mind refused to think. That was preferable right now to facing what might be an unbearable truth... that he had stood her up on purpose. Slowly she got up and got dressed, and keeping her mind carefully blank, threw what remained of the baguette, cheese and olives in the trash, and left.

But, as she drove away, she caught a glance of herself in the rear view mirror. And reality came crashing into the blank numbness she had been trying to burrow in, yanking her mercilessly out. Makeup and hair still a mess, she looked pathetic. A pathetic middle-aged woman who had deluded herself that her boy toy was more than just that. And, finally, behind rolled up car windows, she allowed herself a frustrated and strangled scream while she hit the steering wheel repeatedly in an effort to calm the frenzy. Then she took a deep breath, got some tissue

and wiped her face, smoothed down her hair. There could still be a perfectly reasonable and logical explanation for Ink not showing up. “He wouldn’t just stand me up. He wouldn’t be so callous,” she tried to reassure herself. “He cares about me. Something must have happened. Yes, that’s it. Something must have happened. I’ll find out when I call him. My sweet boy will be all apologetic. And I will forgive him and welcome him back with open arms. Or maybe I should pretend to be angry for a while...to show him he can’t just stand me up...but I wouldn’t want to scare him away...”

But Ink didn’t pick up when Monica called. When his caller I.D. became inundated with her number, he finally blocked it from his phone. Then one morning he woke up and found close to twenty emails from her, all with the message “WHERE ARE YOU?????” in the topic line. He blocked her email. Sorry, Monica, but this was about survival. Both hers and his. It would be better for her also, he told himself, if this didn’t get drawn out, if it ended quickly. He felt stupid for not considering that something like this might happen. That someone might be dissatisfied and lonely enough to get attached to him and want more than motel sex? And there had been warning signs. The gifts. The persistent regularity of the dates. The clinginess. But he had ignored them. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Well, he knew now, didn’t he? Hopefully, the situation would resolve itself given some time and distance.

It didn’t. Finally, one day, after three weeks of trying in vain to get hold of him, Monica came into the hardware store. Up to now, she had tried to avoid this because of the risk of public exposure and ridicule. But now she was desperate. She grabbed a candy bar, and stood in line. Hat pulled down low on her face. Dark sunglasses. Scarf. A celebrity trying not to be noticed, but doing the very things that would guarantee the opposite. No one dressed like that. And no one came into a hardware store to buy a candy bar. Ink noticed her when she was still three people behind in line, noticed others looking at her. And as he surreptitiously studied her, he had no doubt about who it was. Who else would it be? He promptly excused himself and went to the back, told his boss he had the stomach flu, and left through the back door. Poor Ink. No more was he a superior being from a higher civilization. Now he was just a little boy trying to escape the scary grown up. Later he heard that the lady in the hat and glasses had furiously thrown the candy bar at the cashier for some unknown reason and stormed out of the store without buying it. She was decidedly nuts. Obviously, more time and distance were needed.

Then he heard people talking about how she had left home and had moved into an extended stay hotel. It was becoming clearer all the time that she was not going to see reason easily. Otherwise, she would

have stopped pursuing him while she had any shred of dignity left. Not that he had any desire to try to sit down and reason with her. At this point, she had the allure of a creepy demon woman from hell. The only thought that went through his head concerning her was avoidance.

Most people didn't know that she was throwing away her life, her husband and her children for an adolescent whom she had known for less than six months. The small community of "Ink loving housewives" knew she had been one of his regulars, and suspected that she might have had something to do with the fact that he had, of late, become unavailable to all of them. It could be due to the fact that during lunches and other get-togethers, Monica plied the others with questions to find out if he was seeing any of them. But they really had no idea how far it had gone. They themselves would not have dreamed of giving up their own lives, lives that they had worked so hard to build and maintain, for anyone. Monica was either going through some sort of midlife crisis or had just gone crazy.

Ink quit his job and locked himself up in his room, thinking she wouldn't dare show up at his house. She did dare. One day, he came out of his room to grab a bite to eat from the kitchen, and there was Monica, in a flowered dress and sunglasses on top of her head, sitting in the living room, drinking tea with his mother. She had come to talk about the fund raiser she had put together for the local YMCA.

"Hello, Ink," she said, sweetly, innocently. Desperately. "I was just talking to your mother about loaning you to help out at the fundraiser for the YMCA next weekend."

Ink's head spun. He would never be rid of this woman.

His mother didn't think that was the kind of thing that would interest Ink, but she didn't want to be rude to Mrs. Peters, the wife of the president of the town council.

So she asked, "What would you think of that, honey? Go lend a helping hand at the fundraiser? Maybe get to know some people?"

Jesus, mom, really?

"I'd rather stick my hand in a paper shredder," he said.

"Ink!" his mom gasped, "there's no need to be rude!"

"Really, Ink, you would probably enjoy it..." Monica began.

"You have no idea what I would enjoy, so stop acting like you do." Enough was enough.

His mom gasped again and started to apologize, but Ink cut her off.

"Whatever idea you have in your pathetic little housewife brain about me," he continued, "is WRONG." He walked over to the door and yanked it open. "Get out," he said quietly, dangerously. "Get out and find yourself another boy toy and stop harassing me. Get out before

I vomit all over your stupid designer shoes.”

His mom had never really been a part of the network of housewives in town, but she had heard rumors. She now stared in horror as Ink walked over and grabbed a frozen Monica Peters by the arm, dragged her protesting to the door and shoved her out. Monica tripped down the stairs and almost fell, managing to grab the railing at the last second to steady herself. Children playing on the sidewalk stopped and stared. The next door neighbor shut off his lawnmower to hear what was going on. And, still, Monica was unable to stop. Ignoring the shame and horror she was feeling, she made one last effort.

“But Ink, sweetie...” she started to say, and he slammed the door in her face, then opened it, threatened her with getting a restraining order if she came by again, and slammed it shut again.

Back inside, his mom was too disturbed to say anything, so she just sat there and looked at him. She hoped he had learned something from this experience, but there was nothing she could say or do either way.

“Not a word, mom,” he said abruptly and walked into his room and slammed the door. Lot of slamming going on lately, Audrey thought helplessly.

The next couple of days went by relatively peacefully. But in the background was the constant anxiety of what Monica might do next. Somehow, Ink managed to keep himself calm through it. When he hadn't heard anything for a few days, he wondered if he could allow himself to breathe finally. She would have to stop some time, right? At some point, she would have to face the fact that she was just an embarrassment. That her middle aged fancy of re-living her youth with a boy half her age was just that: a fancy, and a stupid one. That her best bet at this age would be to go back home and beg her husband's forgiveness and try to salvage her family. Right?

Wrong, a sick voice in his gut told him. She will never just go away. She will always be a problem. He lay in bed at night, staring out the window at the universe, and sent out a plea.

“Please... whoever or whatever is in charge up there... if there's anyone at all... make this go away. I will never do anything unethical again. I swear.” He closed his eyes and put all of himself in that plea. He focused on the energy vibrating through his body and imagined Monica was no longer a problem in his life. He imagined himself a pillar of respect and consideration, never sleeping with married women or doing anything else that might be deemed wrong again. The stars outside glowed intensely in a clear, endlessly deep blue sky. And Ink felt calm, like the universe had heard his plea and that things might

change somehow soon.

The next day, Monica's face was splashed all over the internet followed by the headline "COUNCILMAN'S WIFE FOUND DEAD IN HOTEL ROOM." She had slit her wrists in the bathtub.

To say Ink was shaken would be a serious understatement. He was traumatized. Gutted. His plea to the universe the night before had not been for something like this. All of a sudden, he couldn't remember what it was that had pushed him away from her. What he saw in his mind was a beautiful, older woman with Goldilocks curls, a beautifully maintained body, and the sweetest, most generous smile one could have. He remembered how loving and giving her lips had felt, how her scent had transported him to a place where it was difficult to open his eyes, and blissfully unnecessary to do so. He had enjoyed her, used her, taken what she had to give, then discarded her ruthlessly, without any discussion or compassion. Like one would discard a used napkin. What kind of person was he?

He locked himself up in his room, refusing to eat or drink anything, and just lay in bed staring at the vast emptiness in the sky where something greater might once have been. If there were truly some form of higher intelligence out there, collective, individual, whatever, it couldn't possibly be so heartless as to grant his pathetic plea with this senseless act of despair. Or was it just one big game to said higher power...one big joke at the expense of human beings? "God has mysterious ways..." went through his head. Fuck that. If they were playing games, they had no right. No right. "Fuck you!! You do not put us in this world and throw challenges at us, then laugh when we can't cope," he sobbed. "I just wanted her to go back to her own life. I didn't want this. Not this."

As if in answer to his anguished questions, to make things worse, reporters started coming. Individually. In groups. With vans and cameras. Audrey initially answered the door and tried to talk them into leaving. Ink was not involved and not available, she told them. But they wouldn't stop coming. The scent of sticky gossip oozed through the air like honey, and they came like hoards of bees, driven by instinct and unable to help themselves. Obviously, it was a part of the master plan of whatever, or whoever, to torture the family. Grind them to a pulp until all that was left was misery, with no hope of recovery.

Finally Audrey stopped answering the door and the phone. It was impossible to go out without getting besieged, so they started having groceries delivered. The delivery guy learned quickly to ring the doorbell and leave the groceries on the porch, after which a hand would reach out and grab the bags one by one. Derek called now and then, having heard the stories, to see if they were okay. He and Audrey talked in a daze, unable to believe what was happening, and wondering

what they had done as parents to make this happen. He refused to admit that he could have been a better father, a present one.

Ink stayed in his room and came out once or twice a day to use the bathroom or to shuffle over to the fridge and grab some useless sustenance. His mom watched in anxiety as he shuffled back to his room like a zombie and completely ignored her. From the foul odor that wafted through every time he left his room, she gathered he wasn't showering. She wondered if she should get help for him, but didn't know how. Therapy? She knew he would not even consider it. He didn't really have any close friends that he could talk to. Briefly, she thought about Lexy, but then dismissed that idea. Wisely.

The substance abuse started to show up about a month after his twenty-first birthday. It had been a few months since Monica killed herself. The reporters had stopped coming and Ink started to leave the house for brief periods of time. He stayed out progressively longer as time went by and refused to discuss with his mom where he went or what he was doing.

"I'm 21, Mom, leave me alone," he said, hostile and irritable. So Audrey backed off for the time being, allowing him more time to do what she assumed he was doing...grieving, recovering.

One night, Ink's mom woke up to thuds and bangs, and went out of her bedroom to find a dark, hunched shape stumbling around just inside the front door, crashing into things and growling like an animal. She stood by her door, still half asleep, disoriented, heart pounding. She wondered if maybe she was having a nightmare. The smell of hard alcohol hung in the air. "Ink...?" she called out hesitantly. The shape twisted around, looked up at an unnatural angle and snarled. It was Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame. It was definitely not human. She stood there, terrified. Logic told her it was her son; who else would it be? But she was too scared to deal with it. People in this state could not be reasoned with. What if he turned on her? She went in her room, locked the door and tried to sleep, hoping he didn't hurt himself somehow.

But there was no sleep that night. Instead, she lay in trepidation, listening, ready to leap up to pounding on her door. It didn't happen. Maybe Quasimodo had passed out by the door and would safely stay there until the morning, at which point her she would get her son back.

The next morning, she tentatively left her room, listening for animal sounds. But it was mercifully quiet. When she peeked out of her bedroom door, there was a jumble of rolled up jeans and shoes lying on the floor, but no animal. The smell of alcohol still lingered, and she followed it to the bathroom. As she neared the bathroom door, the smell of alcohol started to give way to another, more noxious smell. Ink

was passed out in the space between the potty and the bathtub, in his underwear, crusty vomit around his chin and his chest. Audrey managed to heave him into the tub, turned the shower on full blast and left Ink sputtering in there.

When she tried to talk to him about it later, he was hostile, as usual.

“So I went out and got drunk, mom. Like you never did anything when you were my age,” he said angrily. He had a point. Audrey let herself hope that the overindulgence was a temporary phase and shrugged it off.

Then she started to notice that whenever she did see him, his eyes were red, he looked addled, and reeked of marijuana. Ink had kept his previous pot smoking with Lexy a secret from his mom, so she had no idea that he had already indulged. But she had always considered the possibility that, at some point, he would probably partake, just like they had done when they were young, so she wasn’t completely thrown off guard.

However, he seemed to be living and breathing weed. His hair reeked of it. His room reeked of it. His clothes reeked of it. It was startling and worrisome, and Audrey’s maternal instincts screamed. She could not leave it alone.

“Honey, don’t you think you might be doing a little too much?” she cautiously asked at one point.

“No,” was all she got. He refused to discuss it, went into his room, leaving a trail of pot odor on the way, and shut the door. At least he didn’t slam it, she thought thankfully.

She wanted to help her tortured, unhappy son, but didn’t know what to do. She worried that he would turn to harder drugs. Wondered what she would do if that happened. She vaguely remembered hearing something about getting adult children committed to rehab by force and prayed that it would not come to that. But, for now, she just saw evidence of weed. And alcohol. Sometimes when he drank hard alcohol, he got ugly. He got verbally abusive with his mother, called her names, punched holes in the walls and slammed things so hard that something broke. Cabinet doors. The toilet seat. He had not harmed her yet, but Audrey was scared. They hadn’t had a positive interaction in ages and all she felt from him was hostility. So, she reached out to the only person she could think of: the other parent, Derek. Contact between them had been more and more sparse as time had gone by. But now and then he emailed or called Audrey to check in. His contact with Ink was non-existent. The last time he had tried to talk to his son, Ink had told him he had no time for his feeble, half-hearted, phony efforts to be a dad and had asked him to leave him alone. So Derek had

gratefully done so, but had kept in touch with Audrey. His guilty conscience would not allow him to cut them out of his life completely. Even offering a little money now and then made him feel like a slightly better person.

He met her for coffee to discuss their son. Part of the problem, undoubtedly, was that Ink had too much time on his hands. He wasn't working or going to school and had time to brood and obsess about things. At his age, they had been firmly entrenched in college society. Maybe it was time to bring up college. Derek had saved up a little money he would be willing to put towards his son's education. He had not remarried, had no other children, and having failed his only son completely, didn't think he was "Dad" material, so did not want anymore. Audrey didn't have much, but knew that Ink had saved most of his income from the hardware store. They could always take out loans. It could be done.

"ARE YOU SERIOUS???" was Ink's response to his parents' suggestion. They simply did not see what was going on with him. The fact was he was tired of everything. Tired of being different in a world that had very little tolerance for anything different. Tired of trying to deal with life with half his face covered in blue. Tired of not being a part of regular society. Tired of people's twisted attitudes towards him. Either they hated him or they wanted to have sex with him, and then it was only the seriously disturbed ones. It was too much. Too much. He didn't want to deal with it anymore. He felt like he didn't have the energy. All he wanted to do was get high and spend his days in blissful oblivion. What were his parents thinking? Couldn't they see he was nowhere near equipped to go to college? He was barely holding himself together as it was. And for what? He had no idea what he wanted to do. All he knew was that he was sick of people. Why did Monica have to go and kill herself? It wasn't enough that the gods had dealt him a seriously bad hand when he was born with the birthmark? They had to send him Monica? And now he would have to try and live with a bigger mark. The mark of knowing that he could have been more considerate in letting her down. That he could have been less harsh and uncaring. The mark of knowing that if he had been nicer, she might have pouted, but she might not have ended her life. He would have to live with this much bigger mark. Go to college? For what? So he could achieve the necessary tools to make it in this life? WHY?

"Well you need to do something, honey," his mom said, trying hard to be patient and not react.

"Why, mom?" he asked, too tired to get angry again.

"Because at your age people need to be productive. You can't spend the rest of your life getting high and hanging out."

In the back of his mind, he knew that. He knew that he could not spend the rest of his life hanging out and getting high. But the thought of spending many more years with this handicap was almost debilitating. He could not imagine it without his mind shutting down.

One night Audrey woke up at 3am to whooping and hollering. She got up and went to investigate, dreading what she would find. When she opened the door to Ink's room, a dense, pungent cloud of marijuana greeted her. Ink and a couple of kids she had never seen before materialized through the cloud as if in a dream. Or a nightmare, depending on the point of view. A boy who looked like he could be about Ink's age. A girl who was obviously under age. There was a bottle of half drunk vodka on his desk. They looked up at her with glazed eyes and silly grins and said, "Hi." Ink's glazed look held a touch of defiance in it. He knew his mother would not be happy with this.

He was right. Audrey had, finally, had enough. Enough of the hostility, the constant stench of marijuana in the house, the complete self-absorption with no respect for her. She had tried to be liberal, tried to remember what he had been through and to keep in mind this was what kids Ink's age did. She had tried to be supportive and not judgmental, to be careful not to do anything to alienate him or push him away. But this was her home, her sanctuary. It was not a dorm room. Bringing loud, drunken strangers into their home at 3am showed a complete lack of regard for her. She was exhausted, and fed up with tip-toeing around him. He was over twenty, and she was still supporting him, a fact which he seemed to take completely for granted and showed no gratitude for. If this was the way Ink was going to be, he could leave. Maybe if he left, he would become aware of all he had been getting from her and gain some appreciation for it.

At that moment, she wanted everyone gone, and Ink with them.

"Get out," she said quietly at first. When they all stared at her blankly, she yelled, "GET OUT!!! NOW!!!" All three scrambled for their things and made a mad dash for the door.

Right then Ink was too drunk, angry, and fed up with his own life to care. Mostly too drunk. The room was spinning, and it was hard to focus on what his mom was saying. But he got it. She didn't care if he left. Fine. Screw her. He didn't want to live with her anyway. He followed the others out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Audrey took the phone off the hook and went to bed.

The cool night air outside helped to clear Ink's head a little, but not much. He stumbled along in the dark, trying to keep his eyes open. His "friends" were gone. Who knew where. He didn't really care anyway. He had just met them that night and if he hadn't been drunk, would not have brought them home. But for mom to act like that, with no understanding, with hostility and hate...couldn't she see how much he was hurting? He left the neighborhood and kept stumbling along the road. Except for a few random cars, the streets were empty. Not much happening at 3am. He looked up at the sky. It was clear and the stars were out. "Twinkle, twinkle little star...like a diamond in the sky" went through his head. His mom used to sing that to him when she still cared. When she knew what to say to him. What happened, mom? Somewhere along the way, he had directed all his anger at her and they had never been able to go back. It wasn't her fault he had been born with the birthmark. She had no control over it. He knew that. But who else was he supposed to blame? "I do love you mom," he mumbled, lurching along. At one point he had to relieve himself, so he went behind some bushes. When he came out, he realized he was at the foot of the Kelly Bridge. It rose out of the ground like the back of a sleeping dinosaur, lit up along the slopes, but desolate at that time of night. The bridge lights shone on emptiness. The emptiness in his heart, the emptiness in the sky. He climbed up on the bridge and looked down. The bay was so dark. Except for spots lit up by the lights on the bridge, it was black. And still. Unknown. Anxiety rose in his throat. But then he really studied the blackness, and he felt peace. He looked up and tried to locate the city in the distance, but all he could see was fog. He wondered briefly if the fog was in his head or over the bay. It would be so easy to take a dive. He imagined the shock of hitting the icy water, then the blissful sinking, surrendering. Soon he would be a part of the blackness. The nothingness. No more birthmark. No more hurt. No more anger. Just quiet.

Meanwhile, Audrey lay wide awake in bed, unable to sleep, terrified of what her son would do. How can a parent sleep when a troubled, drunk child has just left home? And to take the phone off the hook? That was not allowing any room for discussion at all. But no discussion would make sense right now. Ink was too drunk. Regardless of everything, however, Ink was her child. She had carried him for nine months and brought him into the world. She had loved and cherished him in his early years. All the hype about pushing your child out into the world once he was past 18 so he could learn to stand on his own

feet had never made any sense to her. She had always thought her son would leave when he was ready, and until then, she would be there for him as much as he would let her. She owed him that much. He hadn't asked to be born after all.

An hour later, unable to stand it anymore, she went downstairs and hooked up the phone again in case Ink had tried to call. There were six messages.

"Mom, pick up. Hello? Pick up," Click. He didn't even sound like himself. His voice was hoarse and slurred. He sounded demented. But then again he hadn't said anything more than single words at a time to her in a while, so she wouldn't really know, would she?

Next message: "I can't believe you're not answering the phone. You suck. Fuck you. Fuck you." Click.

"I swear to god I'm about to throw myself off the bridge. Do you CARE? Does anybody care?" Click.

"I said I'm about to jump off the bridge! Hello? Anybody there?" Click.

"Fuck you. You're a terrible mom. You shouldn't have had a child. You should have had an abortion!!!" Click.

"Ok, I guess this is good bye." Click. By this point, his voice sounded tired. Resigned. Fed up.

Audrey couldn't listen anymore. She ran up the stairs, threw on a robe over her pajamas, got into the car and drove in the direction of the bridge, looking around frantically for her son. One or two cars drove by. No pedestrians. No Ink. She drove around the toll entry booths to the bridge a couple of times, and still no Ink. Images of a body flying through the air into the water flew through her mind. Was this the end written for her poor son? Was it the proverbial blessing in disguise for the tortured victim of prejudice? It couldn't be. Why were certain people sent into the world to face meanness and discrimination? To see the worst in humanity? Why, if not to rise above it, to gain a strength that was beyond those who never had to fight to be accepted in life? To find their niche against all odds? Did Ink have that strength? His choices lately spoke of pain and weariness. Did he have the strength to keep fighting? His particular problem was unique. He had no support from others like him. Victims of other kinds of discrimination, minorities with a different skin color, even those with mental problems, had a community of others like them. They had people looking out for them. But she couldn't imagine one other person in the world, let alone a small population, with a birthmark like Ink's. The only place that came to mind where there might be others like him was, maybe, the circus. The circus. What kind of life was that for anybody? A life of people paying to look at him because he was different? Tears held back

up to this point flooded her eyes. What if he had jumped? She imagined staring down at his dead body in the morgue, and tried to quell the panic rising in her chest, spreading its sinister branches through her heart and veins, threatening to engulf her, to destroy her grip on life. Her fingers, with a presence that eluded her mind, found their way to her cell to dial 911. She managed to stammer out that her son had said he was going to throw himself off the bridge. The woman at the other end calmly started asking about where she was right then, where she lived, etc....did she not get it??? Panic gave way to frustrated rage. "MY SON MIGHT BE JUMPING OFF THE BRIDGE AT THIS VERY MOMENT!" she screamed, "AND YOU'RE ASKING ME WHERE I FUCKING LIVE???" At that point, they decided to take pity on her and told her they had already sent out a couple of cars to the bridge while they were talking. The questions were to keep her calm. "DID IT WORK?" she yelled, now completely out of control. "DOES IT EVER WORK???" They told her to go home and wait there while they looked for him. "WAIT?? WAIT?? ARE YOU FUCKING NUTS AS WELL AS STUPID?"

"Ma'am, we understand you are stressed..."

"STRESSED?" she was sobbing now, picturing a wall of bureaucratic inefficiency on the other side of which lay her dead son, "THAT DOESN'T EVEN BEGIN TO COVER IT!"

"But you're not helping anyone right now, so you should go home in case your son decides to show up there."

The simple sense of that cut through the frenzy. She would go home. Audrey calmed down, took a deep breath, and, just in case Derek really cared, called him on the phone to tell him what was going on. The answering machine picked up. Giving up, she went home in a daze, terrified of what was happening, never more aware of how little control she had over life, grateful for the auto pilot in her brain, begging the same universe that had betrayed Ink to protect him and bring him back to her safely.

She found Ink pounding violently on the front door, an ugly crack where he had repeatedly hit it. There were dark splotches of something on the paint around the crack. Blood. Evidence of how out of control things had gotten. Ink followed his mother's gaze to the door, then looked down at his knuckles. He had not even realized they were bleeding, had not realized how hard he had hit the door. They looked at each other, both bewildered, Ink swaying slightly, eyes glazed and somewhere else, somewhere unreachable. Anywhere was better than there. Quietly she let him in.

Ink went straight to his room, and Audrey went and sat down on the couch in the living room, trying to summon up courage to go talk to

him. She wanted desperately to go to bed and pretend the night hadn't happened. But it had. And she had to go and make sure her son wasn't slitting his wrists or something. So she went and knocked on his door. When he didn't answer, she opened the door and went in. He was sitting in front of the computer, his head down on his desk. She stared at him, looking for signs of the unbalanced, suicidal, foul mouthed maniac who had left those awful messages. But he just looked like Ink. Her son. Her baby. She knew who this was. Composing herself, she ventured to ask him if he was all right. Big mistake. Ink completely dissolved in sobs. Loud, wrenching, anguished sobs that threatened her sanity again. She did not know who this was after all. Had never seen him cry like this.

"Mom," he sobbed, "I can't go on living like this...I just wanna die..."

She threw her arms around him and shoved his face into her heart, trying to squash that horrible thought. "Stop it!" she cried. "Why would you say such things?"

"Why would I say such things? Are you completely clueless? LOOK AT ME!"

"Stop, honey, just stop," she said, rocking him in her arms. "People with...challenges much worse than you make lives for themselves. Giving up is not an option."

"I can't do it. I attract only fucked up people and they have only fucked-up-ness to offer...I can't live a normal life. It's too hard."

She wanted so badly to reassure him that everything would work out. But she couldn't. So all she could do was hold him, and say, "Ssshhh" over and over again.

"Why did Monica have to kill herself??" he sobbed. "If she can kill herself, why can't I?" She kept rocking him. Maybe if she rocked him enough, these thoughts would go away.

"I'm so depressed, mom," he said finally, the sobs quieting down to whimpers. "I can't find a reason to go on living. I just wanna end it all."

Audrey knew a big part of this was the alcohol. Otherwise, she would have seriously considered having him committed.

"Come on," she said, "let's get you to bed and we'll talk about this tomorrow." She managed to get him out of the chair and push him over to the bed. As she tucked him in, he held onto her hand, mumbling that he wanted her to stay. For the first time in years, she felt like a mom again, felt needed, and sat on the edge of the bed, stroking his hair and saying, "Ssshhhh" over and over again until his mind and body mercifully succumbed to complete inebriation blackout. This is what she had done for him when he was a baby. Except the sleep that came

then was pure baby sleep. As he snored softly, she sat and watched him for a while, unwilling to let go of the mommy flashback. He had been such a beautiful little boy. The birthmark had vanished in her eyes after the initial shock, after she grew to love him and took care of him. Now look at him. He was so handsome on the pillow, his good side up and birthmark buried. Silky auburn hair falling over his face. He could be an actor or a model. But hiding in the pillow was the evil birthmark. The one that had marred his life as well as his face, and would never let go.

The next morning Ink woke up with a massive headache, but alive, though not sure whether this was a good thing or not. He lay in bed and stared up at the ceiling. The same ceiling he had stared at for the last twenty-one years. His mind didn't want to face the events of the night before. The complete absence of anything that made sense. His mother kicking them all out. Wanting to jump off the bridge. The things he had said to his mom when she didn't pick up the phone. Oh, yes, it was all there. Not remembering was not an option. Now that he was sober, all of it was indelibly burned into his mind, and as much as he wished it was a bad dream, it wasn't. He had to face it. He had to apologize to his mom. Granted, lately they had not been close, and had clashed consistently. But when he had been drunk and desperate, wanting to end his life, he had called his mother. Not a friend. Sure he didn't have any, but he could have called 911. Instead he had called his mom. That meant that underneath all the hostility lay the knowledge that his mom loved him and was on his side. That he trusted her. And that when no one else was around, she would be. Which was why he had stumbled his way back home even though she had ignored his calls. He would have ignored those calls too.

Audrey looked up from coffee to see a sheepish, hesitant Ink coming into the kitchen. She wondered if he remembered falling asleep in her arms. Probably not. He would never do that if he were coherent. But she had not seen him anything but angry in so long, that the sheepish hesitancy was endearing. She held out her arms, hoping he wouldn't just ignore them, and he didn't. He came straight into them, sat down on her lap, and held her tight.

"Ow," she said. "You're a bit too heavy to sit on my lap these days, baby."

"Sorry," he said, laid his head on her shoulder like he used to when he was little, and made no effort to get up.

There was really nothing else to say. Excuses or justifications seemed pointless. What really mattered right now was that he was sorry he had put the only person in the world who would stick by him, no matter what, through the ugly events of last night. And he would listen

quietly to any kind of reproachful lecture his mom dished out about the amount of drinking and smoking, the use of foul language, or the direction his life was headed. He owed her that, and more.

But she just said, "I know." And stroked his head. This was not a time for recriminations, but for understanding. Ink had scared himself enough last night and didn't need to hear about it.

The events of the night before also brought home everything his mom had been saying about the need to do something with his life. If he didn't, the next time he might actually end up at the bottom of the bay. It was time for a change. A new set of people to point and stare at him. To try to beat him up. To strengthen his faith in humanity. It was time for college.

ONLY IN THE ART WORLD

~ 18 ~

A four year Liberal Arts college sounded oppressive and useless to Ink. There was the drama of college society and living in dorms, which sounded like hell. Then there were all those classes he would have to take in subjects he had no interest in. His mother said it would make him a “well rounded” person. Whatever that meant, he had a feeling it had been more pertinent in his mom’s time than now. Besides, he felt he was already “well rounded” in areas that mattered to him. Life. The world. The universe. Having always been an avid reader, and in the absence of a social life, Ink had read for recreation. Piles of National Geographic, Time, Astronomy, and many other magazines had accumulated in his closet through the years. And, of course, one could find anything on the World Wide Web.

If the purpose was to find an interest, well, he knew that he wanted to do something with Visual Communications; Advertising or Graphic Design. So sitting through classes like Economics and Calculus, and pretending to listen to excruciating lectures from potentially uninspiring professors seemed pointless. And after four years of spending massive amounts of money and taking subjects just to meet requirements for a degree, he would need further skills, skills that were actually useful. Audrey herself had gone to Art school to gain skills that could be applied to an actual occupation after four years at a liberal arts college that had equipped her with little to nothing to make a living. She was still paying off school loans. And Ink’s funds were limited. He had managed to save most of what he made in the year that he worked at the hardware store, but he would still need to take out some loans.

In addition to everything else, he was twenty-one and did not want to go to school for four years. Later on in life, if he felt the need to, he could go online and work towards a Bachelor’s degree. But for now, a trade school that offered an Associates degree and a portfolio sounded perfect. He researched some schools and costs and honed in on an Art Institute in the foothill college town of Stillrock, Colorado, a nice thousand miles away from his home. Not too close, but not too far away either.

Audrey’s reaction was the mixture of relief and apprehension that haunted any parent whose child was about to move out. Will he be all right? Will he eat okay? Will he make the right choices? But, she reluctantly conceded that, even at home, he had been pretty much a ghost for a while. They had little to no interaction. She stocked the

fridge and paid the bills, but that had been the extent of her presence in his life. Ink had been giving her a pre-arranged amount from his income from the hardware store to help with the mortgage. He loaded and unloaded the dishwasher to help out. But otherwise he was invisible. He ate when he felt like it, ate out, or didn't eat at all. Smoked, drank. Made choices that took him to the top of the bridge and ponder ending his life. It couldn't get much worse than that, could it? What if he got in an accident? But Audrey knew accidents could happen anywhere. She wanted to feel that nothing bad would happen to him if he stayed home. But unfortunately she knew that wasn't true. Bad things had been happening to him the whole time he had been living at home. If anything, he was prepared. Prepared to face the reactions to his face, prepared to be cautious when it came to women, and prepared to be cautious when it came to excessive drinking and drugs, she hoped. It was time. He was twenty-one, and although she kept hearing that more and more kids were living at home for longer periods of time these days, it made her anxious. So it was time to let him go. Yes, it was scary to imagine him out in the world by himself. But there was no point in imagining every possible danger that was out there. Go with God, or whatever higher power existed.

A few months later, Ink said goodbye to his home for twenty-one years. The town where he had learned that people at any age could be mean and intolerant, where he had weathered the turbulent years of puberty, where he had learned the invaluable lesson that his own conduct and attitudes affected how others reacted to him, that people were complicated. That life was complicated. And that, even though he was a grown young man, when things got really frenzied, his mother's lap held comfort for him. Mama. She had staunchly been there for him through birthmark and hell; through all the pubescent hate and anguish he had hurled at her. More than could be said for the other one. The "father." He stood in the living room and took one last look, he hoped, at his mom's Toulouse Lautrec prints that had so skillfully captured the chaos in the world and in people's minds that they had become a part of his nightmares. He dared to hope the world had more good to offer.

Then, fighting the big lump in his throat, Ink and his mom made the eighteen hour drive from California to Colorado. Ink drove in a separate car which he would keep when his mom went back, so there was no conversation during the drive, which was probably a blessing. He didn't really want to talk. The radio was much less turbulent as company, and even just plain quiet was good. It gave him time to think about things, settle his mind, and get ready to face the unknown without the incessant, anxious chatter of his well-meaning mom. Sometimes the radio died, but the breathtaking scenery along the drive

made music unnecessary. They drove through a museum of nature – forests, towering red cliffs and plateaus, canyons, waterfalls, rivers – an auspicious passage into a new beginning. Ink truly felt like he was leaving his old life behind, even though Audrey kept calling him on the cell to stop so she could take pictures, and it started to feel like they would never get to their destination. Finally he had to promise her that they would come back one day with more time, and besides, he reminded her, she could stop on the way back and take as many pictures as she wanted because she would be by herself. A sobering thought that sapped some of the excitement at the views. They made the rest of the way without stopping.

Finally they reached Stillrock, Colorado. The sun was happily shining, they were glad to see, but the weather felt slightly different from that in San Sebastian. Still warm and dry, but maybe with a little bit less ocean in the air. Ink knew it snowed in Colorado and was looking forward to the change. Looking forward. The thought felt surreal. Looking forward to what?

The neighborhood was undoubtedly that of a college town. There were students everywhere. Walking around the streets with backpacks and various “I-devices”: I-phones, I-pods, I-pads. Unloading suitcases and boxes from their parents’ cars. Lining up in front of the ice cream shop. Lining up in front of Kunst Art Supplies. Ink supposed that was where he would be getting his supplies. They passed a park in front of a church where students sat on blankets on the grass with books, laptops. And in the nice, little brownstone apartment building a few blocks from the Art Institute, which was to be Ink’s new home, students walked around the hallways, laughing, chattering, some in pajamas. Ink frowned, having wanted to avoid the “dorm” atmosphere. But Audrey was glad that Ink would not be the only art student living there. The landlady at the apartment stared at him suspiciously and accusatorily, as if she was not sure she wanted someone with a huge birthmark on the face living there. Audrey and Ink stared back at her, Audrey with a reconciliatory, almost pleading smile. Please don’t be mean to my baby. I have to leave him on his own for the first time. Ink just stared at her blankly.

“He was kissed by a dragon when he was born...” Audrey began, continuing the reconciliatory smile, but was effectively shut up by a glare from her son.

The landlady turned and stared at her. Was the family crazy? Then she shrugged. The lease had already been signed, but only for six months. The boy seemed harmless enough except for that grotesque mark on his face, and if he turned up to be trouble, she could always kick him out. It was in the agreement.

And so Ink became ensconced in a tiny studio apartment overlooking a park with trees. One tiny room, tiny bathroom, and tiny kitchenette. It was perfect and it was all his. Trees were all around, outside his windows, lining the streets on the way to school, surrounding the small shopping center a few blocks away. And not too far in the distance he could see hills. Their neighborhood in San Sebastian was amidst hills too, but had fewer trees. It was a little greener here. He was glad. Trees and hills made him feel present and centered. They were part of what he felt in the mountains, in nature. That benevolence. It felt safe. Until his first day at school.

Everyone stared. The students, the teachers, the janitors. People on the street. People at the grocery store. Even the stray cats on the street stopped to stare. Ink tried to ignore the stares and go about his way. What choice did he have? He told himself he should be used to this after twenty-one years. But now he realized that this was a whole different ball game. In San Sebastian, the staring had gone down to a minimum. People had gotten used to him after twenty-one years. Here, he was a novelty again. Maybe Art students would get used to it quickly. He hoped. After all, artists were notoriously “anti-establishment,” pro anything different, right? Then he heard someone say, “Freak,” as he went to class one day, and a murmur of chuckles went through the hallway. Guess not. There would always be that person that needed to feel superior and felt vindicated by putting down others. He also had to remember many of the students here would be in their late teens, and their brains were not yet capable of consideration for others. He sighed. He felt older than his twenty-one years.

One student tried to ask him about it.

“Hey, dude, how’d you get that bruise, man?”

To which he replied that his cat beat him up.

“For real?” the kid said, not knowing what else to say. To that Ink shook his head and walked away.

Most of them looked away when caught staring. But some continued to stare, oblivious of good manners. The teachers had more tact, those with the wisdom of age to guide them, but even some of them avoided looking directly at Ink, and some of their smiles were a little too bright.

Fortunately, when they were in class, students were mostly focused on their work. They were there because they wanted to be, because they loved Art. They listened to the teacher’s instructions, then put on their headphones and got to work.

Ink also remembered what a bear he had been at high school and how that might have been partially responsible for his isolation. So when he met people’s eyes, he nodded his head as if to say hello. Unfortunately, for the time being, they reacted either by looking away, or gave a stupid little awkward grin that didn’t encourage any further interaction. It felt bleak, impossible. Was there anyone out there who was...the word that came to mind was “enlightened”...who was enlightened enough to accept his face?

The life changing answer came a few weeks into the second semester in the form of a photography student named Molly Rhodes.

Molly was in her senior year and looking for a subject for her senior show. When she saw Ink, a million light bulbs went off in her brain. She approached him in the cafeteria where he sat by himself, eating a sandwich and staring out the window at his friends, the trees.

“Hi...,” she said, smiling tentatively, showing teeth that looked like they were growing out of a thin almost non-existent upper lip and digging into her lower lip. Ink looked up at her surprised, suspicious. He said nothing.

“May I sit?” she asked. He shrugged and held out a hand towards a chair. She didn’t seem to be focused on his face. Little did he know.

“I’m Molly,” she said, holding out her hand. What could this be? Another Lexy? A sexual explorer wanting to see if the guy with the birthmark was any good? Oh, God.

“Ink,” he said shortly, but held out his hand to shake hers.

“Hi...Ink...” she began, “enjoying your lunch?”

Really? What on earth did she want? But he needn’t have worried, because asking about his lunch was the extent of Molly’s formalities. She got to the point very quickly.

“I have a proposition for you,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows in query, still suspicious. In a rush, she told him she was a senior, majoring in Photography. She had been looking for a “crushingly amazing” subject for her senior show. She thought he might be it.

Ink was intrigued. He sat back and studied her. She resembled a tree with her frizzy brown hair and skinny frame. Small, close set snake-like eyes looked back him from a longish oval face. They glittered with an intensity that was unsettling. Heavy black eye liner framed them. Her eyebrows were petite and feminine, but went up like wings at the outer ends, giving her a devilish look. High cheekbones. Long chin. A nose that was long and flat and ended in a full, round, upturned tip. She wore a black septum ring with a ball. Big ears with huge, flat lobes adorned with three or four earrings and an ear cuff which peeped through the frizzy hair. Not conventionally attractive. Creepy-cute. Ink felt no threat from her.

“I wouldn’t have to get naked or anything, would I?” he asked, permitting himself a slight grin. As long as it wasn’t pornography.

“Actually...” she began. Oh, no, he thought. “I mean...I would like to do a series of black and white compositions. Mainly that crushingly amazing face of yours...” she blurted out in a rush before he could object to anything. “...but with fragments of other parts of you, shoulders, back, hips and so on. So there would be some bare skin, but nothing intimate will be showing. It would all be very tasteful.”

“Bare skin?” he repeated, a little taken aback. He would have to

take his clothes off??? He might need to think about this.

“I’m picturing compositions that are very abstract, contorted poses, whatever you’re able to do, of course...no pain...”

He had seen black and white compositions of skin and muscles in a book his mom had in her bookshelf. He understood what she was talking about.

“Close-ups of your face,” she continued. “It’s so amazing...” she trailed off just in time. Her use of the word “amazing” was getting a little redundant. But it was also curiously gratifying, like gushing flattery. This he was not used to.

He told her he needed to think about it. At least it wasn’t a straight out refusal. She told him to take as much time as he needed, within reason of course; she had to have the show done for graduation. She gave him her email address and left.

To pose nude for photographs. Or semi nude. For Art. He knew the photos would be very impersonal. Probably dehumanized to abstraction. But his face would be in them. He tried to recall images of nude photos he had seen. There was the one with the woman crouching in the “child pose.” She was a hunched over mound, her legs bent under her. Her feet stuck out behind her, under her buttocks, the wrinkly arches prominent against the smoothness of the hips. Her shoulders rested on the ground, arms laid back along her sides, and her head rested on her chin, profile towards the photographer. He imagined a big birthmark on the cheek in that picture. It would be stunning. He wanted to do it himself. For the first time in his life, he wondered if the birthmark could be an asset. Only in the Art world, maybe. But that was a big world. He knew he would model for Molly with the absolute conviction that one experiences when pieces of a puzzle fall into place.

The next day, when he went to school, something had shifted in the universe. People still looked at him, but he no longer felt like a freak. Instead he felt like they were looking at him because he was unique, interesting. For the first time in his life, it felt like someone wanted to celebrate his birthmark. To find something positive in it, something good. He wanted to take time to explore this feeling, relish it. What had Molly called his face? “Crushingly amazing.” He felt distinctive. Stronger. The need to be invisible became less prevalent.

He started to walk with his head up, and became bolder in making eye-contact. Raised his hand in salute. Nodded hello. In class, he opened up. Participated in discussions, responded to other people’s comments, chuckled when something funny was said, and reached out to help when someone was struggling. Soon, other students began to warm up to him.

Some still reacted either by looking away, or giving stupid, little,

awkward grins. And, of course, there were always those whose insecurities demanded that they continue to try to make him feel like he didn't belong. They acted ridiculously offended at him, like he had no right to be in their world. They got up to leave when he was around. Ignored him. But now, it made him smile. That person was deprived of vision. Someone to feel sorry for. If you can't deal with it, dude, it's your problem, not mine.

"Don't recall asking you your opinion," one student once said when he tried to join in a discussion.

"You didn't," Ink responded. "But it was a good one anyway, wasn't it?" He walked away with a grin on his face, sensing the student trying to glare a hole in his back, and failing. It was exhilarating, liberating. Empowering. Thank you, he thought to the universe. Thank you for showing me that I'm not just a mistake.

Molly started photographing him. Ink didn't know what to expect when he followed her back to her place. A studio apartment with a darkroom in the bathroom? Dorm-Community living with studio lights set up in her bedroom? She was a student after all; her setup would not be professional. So when she led him to a huge second floor loft apartment with skylights and massive windows, his mouth fell open. Brick walls. Wood floors. Partitioned off by carved, wooden oriental screens, one half of the loft held the bed, dressers, small eating table and kitchenette, and the other half was her studio; it held her camera equipment, backdrops, umbrellas and a little closed off room that served as a darkroom. Wow. How was it that a college student could afford something like this? Rich dad? Trust fund?

"Yeah, I know," Molly said at Ink's expression. "It's obscene, isn't it?"

"Obscenely awesome," Ink replied and they both laughed.

"Would you like a shot of tequila to help you get in the mood?"

Molly asked, grinning. But Ink shook his head and thanked her. He didn't need it. Plus, after the drunken debacle on the bridge at home, he wanted to stay away from it for now.

"All right, then, you can get undressed behind that screen over there and put on the robe hanging on the hook." She went over to the studio and started setting up. Ink had decided to go nude even though Molly had told him he could keep underwear on. Why the hell not. Jump right in. It would be an experience. He grinned as he donned the robe and walked out, hoping for a minimum of awkwardness. He needn't have worried.

Molly had made the studio area dark, except for a few spotlights. Nice. It was obvious to him that she did not see him as a live nude man at all. In fact, Ink noticed, slightly disappointed, she acted like she hadn't even noticed that he was completely nude. What had felt to him like a jump off a tall building was to her just another day in the studio.

In the next hour, Molly molded Ink into all kinds of contorted poses. The touch of her hands was entirely impersonal. She could have been working with a clay model. She positioned his arm under his knee and turned his torso around at the waist, his face at an angle, birthmark towards the camera. She made him wrap his arm around his head and twist it so that it looked like someone else's arm was about to snap his head off; again, birthmark towards the camera, but at a slightly different angle. She made him cross his hands over his chest so that his head was positioned above a V made by his shoulders and arms, then

twist his face up to the ceiling, the birthmark towards the camera. To his credit, Ink said, "Ow," only once. And Molly completely ignored that. True to her word, there were no shots of private parts involved. Her focus was on the curves of the body, the muscles, the imperfections of the skin, the light body hairs. And the birthmark.

"Okay," Molly said after around an hour and a half. "You can put your clothes back on now." So, she had noticed that he was unclothed, he thought wryly. "I'm going to develop these, then take it from there. I will need you for a few more sessions. Let me take you to lunch as a Thank you."

Over lunch, Molly told him about the person responsible for her apartment and her unlimited budget in everything: her father, old money, entrepreneur, billionaire. Had Ink heard of the fashion brand "Devianza?"

"It's Italian for 'deviance,'" she said. "My father is the creative genius behind the line and owns it. It's his baby."

"Wait," Ink said. "Devianza...the clothing line?" He had heard of the name. His mother had talked about how different it was and how she could never be seen wearing clothes like that, despite the fact that she was an artist. How their clothing looked like a collage of pieces from different countries and cultures. "Glorified, international hoboism," she had called it sarcastically. It was for the adventurous. Those who were into the unconventional and mismatched. Those who didn't mind being stared at and even thrived on it. It was popular amongst people in the entertainment industry, actors, musicians. Lexy, in fact, had dreamed of working for them. She thought their products were amazing. She thought if she worked for them, she might be able to get discounts or even freebies on clothing otherwise way beyond her budget.

"Yup," Molly answered. "And shoes, accessories. But mainly clothing, incorporating elements from all over the world in new and innovative looks." Wow, thought Ink, no wonder. "That is his favorite endeavor right now, but he is also constantly involved in other money making things. It keeps him busy and keeps us filthy rich." A grin and a wink took any possible sting out of her bragging.

"And he pays for everything for you? Most parents can't wait to get their kids out of the house after they turn 18."

"Most parents aren't my dad. He can afford it and I'm his only child. So why not? I'd do it for my kid if I could afford it."

"Aren't you worried about the level of control that gives him?"

"No," Molly grinned. "I agreed to let him pay for my education, housing, etc. on the condition that I have the freedom to make my own choices. He doesn't tell me what to do. He understands because he was

the same way with his own filthy, rich parents.”

Ink wondered what her motive was in telling him all this.

“Didn’t want you to think I was selling drugs or doing other illicit things for money and not let me photograph you,” she went on, reading his mind.

Lucky girl, he thought as he walked back home. Not only does she have a parent who’s rich enough to support her as long as she needs, but he understands the need for freedom and doesn’t try to control her. He wouldn’t mind meeting this man. He didn’t quite know why. Just sounded like a great guy.

It didn’t take other artists long to realize the drawing power of Ink as a subject when they found out Molly was photographing him. Molly had asked him to refrain from posing for other photographers, but students in his life drawing class wanted to sketch him. Some in his painting class wanted to paint him. And, of course, in his mixed media class, he was the favorite subject of ink work. His mother would have been thrilled that the name she had given him had finally come full circle.

Students took Ink out for beers and burgers to show their gratitude, invited him to parties, etc., and his social life slowly became fuller. On a personal level, however, he still didn’t seem to be connecting with people. His relationships lacked depth. No one seemed to care about what he was made of inside, what held him together, what made him laugh and cry. There was no one he could really talk to, feel really close to, and he understood that it would take someone really special to be able to look past the birthmark, to understand that his face was not all there was to him, and to want to know what else there was. But he was content, for now, to be a part of the Art society.

Meanwhile, Ink’s face began to show up in display cases at the Art institute. It was interesting to see how people interpreted his birthmark. The ones with the religious undertones were the most amusing. One person had drawn his face in profile up in the sky, with the birthmark as one of several clouds. One had to look twice to notice the silhouette of his face among the clouds. It placed him firmly in the realm of divine nature. Besides symbolic depictions of him of this nature, there were also just plain portraits of his face. One of the more sketchy ones looked like the art of Picasso, face and body distorted to match the birthmark in shape and nature. Another one looked like a Monet with his face done in impressionistic dots.

His email and phone soon became inundated with requests to pose. The challenge of the day was how to portray Ink, one that students eagerly tackled. The “kiss of the dragon” had once again made life more interesting for everyone. Somehow, he managed to balance

modeling for others with his own work so he didn't fail his classes. He could have been materialistic and charged for his service. Time was tight. He wasn't working, so there was no money coming in. But he didn't. He was content with the regard people had for him and didn't want to ruin it by asking for money. It contributed to the sense of camaraderie.

One might wonder why he didn't think of doing self portraits and join in the "Ink Drawing Club" himself. It never even occurred to him. Having lived and suffered with that face all his life, he wanted to forget about his birthmark, not revel in it. If others got something out of it, that was great. But he didn't.

He did, however, ask a few others to pose for him in return; not those who stood out as beautiful, but those who stood out as not so beautiful. The ones who were a little heavier than was considered fashionable. The ones with facial features that were not considered attractive: a big nose or mouth, big ears, unusually long neck, bad complexion. The mousey ones that no one noticed. These were the ones that he found interesting. Initially taken aback and uptight, afraid that all their flaws would be revealed, they slowly relaxed and let Ink do impressions of them. And Ink made sure those impressions were very positive. No ugliness or darkness. Fun, pretty, uplifting colors, shapes and compositions. In return, he was gratified to see his subjects, none of whom were confident enough in their looks to have ever volunteered for something like this, leave happy. They looked at him slightly differently after that, like they saw something about him they had not considered before he drew them. In his eyes, they weren't ugly or boring or unglamorous. Through his eyes, their insecurities were eased and their fears mitigated.

Molly's show was scheduled for early May. Any inkling Ink had of the direction the photos were going in was blown away by the end results. As he had predicted, the images were magnified almost to abstraction so that it was hard to tell what part of the body one was looking at. But, in addition, Molly had spent hours in the dark room manipulating the photos. The play of light and shadow on the skin was the basis of the composition. Amidst the light and shadow was Ink; the textures of his skin, freckles, hairs, fragments of shoulders, hip bones, and limbs in juxtapositions of curves, angles, lines, all somehow framing either portions of or all of his birthmark. They were dramatic and mysterious, combination "Film Noir" and "Gothic." Sexy and sassy in a dark, brooding way. It was brilliant.

The more artsy crowd "oohed" and "aahed" over compositions while the less avant-garde stood in front of images and talked about whether they were looking at a forbidden part or not. If not, what were

they looking at? Molly and Ink, standing in the corner observing reactions, chuckled.

“Should I bother telling them what they’re looking at?” Molly asked Ink.

“Naah,” he said. “let them see what they want to see.”

And they did. The next day some raved about the “startling,” “haunting” compositions of light, shadow and skin done by Molly. There were also those who were uncomfortable with the amount of skin in the photos. They would never put together a whole show of body parts. And some thought the compositions were dark and negative, like “cut up bits and pieces of a human being.” Even amongst artists, there were different levels of daring. But no one questioned its artistic value. Art was supposed to provoke commentary after all.

One day, after almost a week had gone by, Ink stopped by Molly's show on his way home. He liked to re-visit the images now and then. They gratified as well as inspired him. Strengthened his faith that there was a place for him in the world. The number of people he saw in there was getting smaller and smaller. Like with anything, the newness was wearing off and people were finding other things to talk about. Today there were only two people in there. A gentleman, somewhere in his mid to late fifties, Ink guessed from the scattered gray stubble covering his freckled bald head. And a hefty man in a suit who stood a few feet behind him. From the way he kept an eye on the gentleman and the surroundings, Ink realized the hefty man was a bodyguard. He was curious. Who was this person? He noticed the expensive looking clothes the man was wearing and decided he did not look like he had any connection to the college. Too well dressed to be a professor or an administrator, and too old and wealthy to be a student. Encountering complete strangers was still slightly harrowing for Ink, who was never sure of the reaction he would receive. So he avoided the man and walked around looking at his favorite compositions in the opposite end of the room. Every time he studied the pictures, he found something different. As he studied one piece of artwork, he became aware that the stranger was watching him. Out of the corner of his eye, Ink saw him standing stock still a few feet away and staring at him. Unabashedly. Great, Ink thought. He had probably just realized that he was looking at the subject of the photos. What gave him away? Could it be the giant mark on his face, he wondered sarcastically. He ignored him, reluctant to deal with questions that might come from a stranger. What was he doing in there anyway? He didn't know the show was open to people outside the campus. To his annoyance, the man walked towards him. Ignoring him didn't seem to be discouraging him. The hefty man followed.

Ink turned around with a caustic "Can I help you?" on his lips and found himself staring at Molly. Older. Bald. And male. But definitely Molly. Small, glittering reptilian eyes that were close-set and borderline cross-eyed, like Molly's. But these had prominent, bulging pouches below them and were framed in deep crow's feet, signs of his age. No eye-liner to the rescue here. The look in them was disturbingly feral, predatory. Ink suppressed a shudder. The face was long and oval, like Molly's. But the high cheekbones and long chin were fleshier and a little saggy, also signs of his age. Thin upper lip like Molly's, but covered in gray stubble. Prominent teeth that looked like they were

digging into the full lower lip. Long and flat nose with a full, round tip that turned up; no septum ring. Big ears with huge flat lobes; no earrings. His eyebrows were bushy, a man's eyebrows, but angled up at the outer tips, like Molly's. They looked like a crow's wings and made him too look devilish and sinister. There was no doubt as to who this was, and all of a sudden it all made sense. Of course, her father had come to look at her show. They had been wondering why he hadn't come to the reception. Well he was here now.

"You must be Molly's father," said Ink, congratulating himself on his quick recovery, holding out his hand. "You look exactly like her."

"Bill Rhodes. Nice to meet you. Actually, she looks like me. I came first." His speech was slow and careful, almost delicate, as if he deliberately chose each word he was saying. And he looked Ink directly in the eye. Maybe a little too directly...was he avoiding looking at the birthmark? Was he worried about offending Ink? And his voice was soft and husky, reminding Ink of the voices of sultry nightclub singers he had seen in movies. Kind of creepy. He wondered briefly if Bill Rhodes was gay. Just out of curiosity.

"I had to come and say hello. Molly was right. You have an amazing face," he continued in his snail's pace and sultry voice. Why was he speaking so slowly? Ink started to feel a little annoyed. He had a physical abnormality, not a mental one; he didn't need to be spoken to like he was slow-witted. Then he forced himself to relax. He knew how it felt to be on the receiving end of impatience and intolerance, and did not want to be like that.

"Thanks," he said, laughing wryly. "Hasn't always brought me glory though."

"I can imagine," Bill Rhodes said, gently, with a grin which his jutting teeth got in the way of. "The world has very little tolerance for anything different."

He understood, Ink realized, a little surprised. Had the billionaire experienced bias in his lifetime? Bill did have very unique features. One wouldn't call him ugly, but while he definitely had presence, he was not attractive. There was something in the ungainly, toothy grin, though, that Ink felt an immediate empathy and liking for. Except that he kept staring at him with those unnerving, squinty, beady eyes, like he was studying him. Ink half expected a forked tongue to whip out from under his protruding teeth. He found himself tensing from habit at so much focus on his birthmark and forced himself to relax again, sensing no hostility. Still, hadn't anyone taught the guy it was rude to stare??? Sighing inwardly, he decided to joke about it.

"Freaky, ain't it?" he asked, grinning.

"What?" Bill Rhodes started as if from a trance. "No, no, not at

all. Sorry, didn't mean to make you feel self-conscious. It's just that my mind is working overtime at the sight of your birthmark." He was definitely not into mincing words.

"Oh?" Ink asked. What could this possibly be? What could Bill Rhodes, billionaire, entrepreneur, creative genius, possibly be thinking about Ink's dreadful mark from hell?

"Are you free for dinner?" Bill offered suddenly. Ink stared at him, taken aback. Nope, he was definitely not into wasting words, or time. "I have a proposition for you." The same exact words Molly had used. They were undoubtedly related, he thought wryly.

But Ink's guard went up a little. While he had nothing against gays, he was not one himself. Besides, if Bill were gay, would he be interested in someone with a face like his? Gay people he had met were a lot more tolerant than other people, being often subject to persecution themselves, so maybe he would. Some kind of kinky thing? Not for Ink. Not those eyes. But dinner out with a billionaire would not be a bad thing. He tried to remember the last time he had had a proper meal and couldn't.

"Should I call Molly?" he asked hopefully, not wanting to be alone with the guy and his hefty man.

Bill Rhodes shook his head. "No, just you and me. Molly and I had lunch." Bummer. It might have been more bearable with her there. But he accepted Bill's dinner invitation. Why not enjoy a gourmet meal at the expense of someone who could well afford it?

They met downtown at Luigi's. It was a small restaurant under an awning with Italian flag colors, and some bistro chairs and tables outside. Ivy covered the walls, the faux marble columns, the windows and doorways. The interior revealed a combination of rustic terra cotta mottled walls and brick walls. Strategically placed giant chipped urns. There were large photographs on the walls of various well known scenes from Italy. The Fountain of Trevi peeking out between amber colored buildings on a narrow, cobbled street, balconies overflowing with vibrant gardenia. Michelangelo's David, unashamedly nude in all his glory. Multi-colored, gilt edged Gondolas lined up by the Piazza San Marco in Venice. Nice, but he was a little disappointed, having hoped for something more grand and impressive. Surely the billionaire could afford to take him somewhere more opulent than this Ma and Pa place? Then, without even letting him see a menu, Bill asked him if he ate prawns, and when he shrugged and nodded, ordered for him. What if he had wanted red meat?? The man was obviously used to being in charge. Arrogantly so. Ink wondered if the evening was going to continue to prove challenging.

"This place has the freshest, most succulent prawns in the area,

and the cook is dizzyingly skilled,” Bill said. He must have seen his expression, Ink thought. That almost sounded like an apology. “I stop by every time I visit Molly.”

Ink had to admit the platter of huge pink and white prawns, picturesquely piled atop linguini shimmering in olive oil, cherry tomatoes, whole cloves of garlic, and garnished with fresh basil leaves, looked like a work of art too beautiful to eat, and a travesty if not eaten. It smelled even better. And when the first plump piece of shrimp gently burst in his mouth, he smiled in sublime gratitude. He had never had shrimp like this; melt-in-your-mouth luscious, without the pungent smell of fish that some shrimp had, and not in the least chewy like the shrimp they served at chain breakfast places. Maybe Mr. Cross-eyed Beady deserved to be in charge. It was all he could do not to shovel the food in his mouth. For the past few months or so, since he had joined the Art Institute, his food at home had consisted mainly of quick and easy items: macaroni and cheese, frozen chicken nuggets, and if he felt like being healthy, a bag of Iceberg lettuce mix, apples and bananas. Or chips and dip, pretzels, and barrels of cheap beer at school parties. He didn’t go out to eat when other students did, more conscious of making his money last. So Ink was in heaven.

He forced himself to eat one forkful at a time, and chewed slowly, relishing every morsel, every sensation. Yes, definitely heaven. Bill Rhodes watched him, smiling. A glass of Chardonnay to wash it down and heaven felt very real indeed.

“So,” Bill began, “the reason I wanted to talk to you...”

“Hmm,” mumbled Ink, wiping his mouth, all hazy attention from the wine and good food. Here it comes, he thought.

“Have you ever thought of modeling for a career?”

Ink stared at Bill through the haze. It was one thing to model for a bunch of silly students. What kind of modeling was Bill Rhodes referring to? Images of rows of beautiful men pointing and laughing at his audacity to show up for an audition flashed through his head. Pointing and laughing at his birthmark. Why would anyone pick him over someone with beauty on both sides of the face?

“Not really,” he said, starting to get a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. The kind one gets when about to be pressured into something one is not sure about. “I don’t really...” he began, but Bill held up his hand, and Ink was quiet. After a meal like this, the least he could do was hear him out.

“I know what you’re thinking. I can imagine the life you must have had with that birthmark. The world is cruel.”

“Then you understand...” Ink began, only to be interrupted again.

“I think there is a place for you in my world. Hear me out. First of

all, I'm in charge. This means my vision defines everything.”

“Are you talking about your line of clothing?”

“Devianza, yes.” He said the name slowly, with satisfaction. Then he took a sip of wine and chose his words carefully, sensing Ink's anxiety. “We are rebels. We thrive on difference,” he said. “On the unusual and bizarre. On deviance. Hence the name. We want ordinary, average people to look at our merchandise and not understand it, even judge it. We celebrate confusion. We cater to the eccentric and the wealthy, those beyond needing the approval of society, those who want to make a statement.” He stopped his oration abruptly, letting his words sink in. And they did.

A sudden rush of hope stormed Ink's mind. He tried to block it, afraid to let it in. Hostile thoughts circled it, like predators circling prey, ready to pounce and destroy. Thoughts of rejection. Of ridicule and scorn. Humiliation. Images of walking down a walkway and being laughed at. Faces in menacing shades of purples, greens, and dark blue, like those in his mom's Toulouse Lautrec prints, distorted with screaming, cackling, evil laughter. But hope persisted. Bill Rhodes' words conjured up images of a very different, very exclusive world, akin to a very exclusive circus perhaps, created and maintained by those with a vision beyond the ordinary. Those who saw beauty in imperfection and anomaly. And risk. Those who were prepared to risk the safety of convention, of what was mainstream, and explore other dimensions. The hostile, predatory thoughts wavered and hope strengthened. Bill saw it and pounced.

“I want you to be the new face of my line. Completely and irrevocably mine and no one else's. In return I will make you very rich,” Bill said.

Completely and irrevocably? Hope wavered. The words “completely and irrevocably” sounded more like ownership than an opportunity, even with money attached to it. Would he be a captive? A bizarre bird in a cage, preening for spectators, longing to fly? Longing to be free? But “fly” where? And what kind of freedom? There were not many choices in life for bizarre birds like Ink. Everyday people were not enlightened enough to make room for him. Maybe he was meant to fly with Bill. To be known, accepted and even revered, almost part of a cult, like he had been for the last year in the art school circle, but on a much larger scale; maybe that was what “flying” looked like for him. And he would make lots of money. Was that not “flying?” Was financial security not freedom? He had never imagined modeling for a career. All his life he had shied away from being looked at, and now he was being offered a position which depended on it. Dread uncoiled and stirred in his stomach. But again, he had already

experienced modeling for Molly. And he had to admit that to be looked at, not as something disgusting and repulsive, not as a freak, but as Art, was better than any other form of “looking” he had experienced.

Suddenly he knew without a doubt that this was meant to happen. But the words “completely and irrevocably” floated around ominously in the back of his mind. What kind of person would want that much control over somebody else? What would he be letting himself in for? But surely, it could not be forever. He would age and lose value. Right? By then, he would hopefully have lots of money and be able to retire anywhere in the world, maybe purchase his own island...away from all the intolerance and judgment.

“Okay,” he said.

Bill beamed. “Thrilled to have you on board, my dear boy!” His grip, as he shook Ink’s hand, was firm and solid. In that grip, Ink felt assurance. He felt the closure of a lifetime of anguish, of wondering what role he could possibly play in a world that would not easily accept him. Maybe this was what his journey in life had been leading to, why he had been burdened with the vile birthmark. Together they would show the world that imperfections could be beautiful.

Of course, he would be still something to be looked at and nothing more. The familiar frustration bubbled in the depths of his soul. Would anybody ever see how much more he had inside of him? He put a lid on those thoughts. There was no point in pondering this. One had to make the best of what one had been given, one step at a time. And who knew what else this could lead to?

The next weeks flew by for Ink in a whirlwind of getting his things together, quitting art school, saying good bye. Part of him wondered if he was doing the right thing. He had almost completed the first year of Art school, had managed to make a place for himself in the Art society, and he was about to throw it all away on something he hoped would be lucrative, but didn’t really know. Bill Rhodes had said he would make him filthy rich, but were there any guarantees? Well, Ink told himself, Bill was filthy rich himself, so he must know what he’s doing. Granted, a lot of his money was family money, but a lot more came from his various, very successful endeavors. Plus, Ink was developing more and more faith in that “benevolence” he had felt from time to time in the universe. It had been there at crucial points in his life: when he had been beaten up as a child, when he had considered jumping off the bridge, and many other times. He felt it in the trees, the wind, the hills. It had not felt so benevolent when Monica killed herself. In fact, he had been very angry at the universe when that happened. But he had felt it again when Molly found him. And he felt it now; a strong sense of destiny, like he was going on a path that the

universe had written for him. He sincerely hoped he was not imagining things.

DEVIANZA

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The first thing to do was to find some place to live. Finding lodging near work was going to be a challenge. Studio Devianza was in Eriwald, a town in the Rocky Mountains, roughly a two hour drive through winding mountainous roads from Stillrock. Ink searched the internet and found some inn-type establishments and ski lodges in the area which he could never afford, but no long-term housing closer than an hour and a half drive from the studio, and these consisted of rooms to rent in private homes with shared bathrooms and kitchens. No apartment complexes. Not surprising. It was a resort area where people went to ski. But then where did the rest of Bill's employees live? Surely, they didn't commute an hour and a half to two hours every day and back?

Ink got his answer when Bill asked him to come and live at the studio. So he guessed the "studio" was a bit larger than the one room apartment he lived in now, spacious enough to house people. In the beginning, he hesitated. It sounded too close for comfort. But then he learned that most of Bill's staff, except for a handful of "rebels" (according to Bill) who wanted to retain their independence, lived there. Those "rebels" had tiny rooms with shared bathrooms and shared kitchens in private homes on the outskirts of Eriwald, and commuted an hour and a half to work and back everyday. Was that lunacy or wisdom? Evidently it was worth it to them to keep that separation, to be able to leave the work place at the end of the day and go back to their own place, a completely different environment, where they could unwind and relax. That one bedroom was their space.

On the other hand, he learned from Bill Rhodes, those who lived at the "studio" had a few rooms to themselves: a bedroom, another space that could double as a living room and a personal studio, a private bathroom and a fully equipped kitchenette. So the "studio" was a LOT larger than the one he lived in now. It sounded like it was a whole apartment building, kind of like college housing. But the huge bonus was that Bill didn't charge them anything to live there; he considered it part of their compensation. So they saved money on lodging. Bill then proceeded to tell him that the work spaces and offices were located in the west wing, while the lodgings were in the east wing. So at the end of the day they would be physically leaving the work area and going back to their own space. Therefore, if there were no other reasons to live separately, like a wife or other family, why not live at the studio?

Molly had an answer to that. “Beware,” she said to Ink. “All that glitters might not be gold.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ink asked.

She shrugged, unwilling to discuss it any further. “I don’t want to influence you in any way, Ink. Just make sure and think about it carefully. If you find yourself drowning, pull yourself out.” That sounded ominous. Ink decided to chalk it up to father-daughter tensions.

Ink’s mother, however, had no qualms about trying to influence her only son. Audrey expressed doubts that echoed those of his own that he was ignoring, about whether he was doing the right thing.

“You’re going to drop out of art school completely? Why don’t you keep a couple of classes?”

“Why, Mom? It’s too far to commute to anyway.”

“Maybe online classes? So you can work towards a degree? I mean what if this doesn’t pan out?”

“It will, Mom.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Bill Rhodes did not make his money with bad ideas. He knows what he’s doing.”

“But, do you have to live in his studios? I mean, Jesus, Ink, a studio with right and left wings?”

“What’s the problem with that, Mom?”

“Well, I don’t know...it’s almost surreal. Not something us regular folk come into contact with. Plus, what kind of lifestyle is it when everything and everybody is contained within one set of walls? It sounds almost like a prison to me. Don’t you want some independence?”

“It’s just a convenient living arrangement for his employees because there isn’t anywhere else to live nearby. I suppose I could look for a room in a private home in the area just to keep some distance. But to what end? Where will it get me besides commuting an hour and a half each way every day? Oh, and living in a pitiful room in the home of someone who can’t look me in the face because of my lovely birthmark and acts like I’m a moron?”

His mom had no answer to that. She knew what she would do. There was no way she would relinquish her privacy and freedom. But she didn’t have a huge, blue birthmark covering one side of her face. She knew the world could, had, and would continue to lash out at her son. That was the reality of his life. In fact, she admitted reluctantly, Bill’s little microcosm might turn out to be exactly what her son needed to flourish. A world where he was accepted and valued because of his face, not rejected because of it. Still, the amount of wealth and power

this man had made her nervous. Sometimes she wished she had seriously looked into getting the birthmark removed when Ink was a baby, if that had been a possibility. Their lives would have been so much simpler.

“I need you to be supportive and positive about this,” Ink said. “I really believe this might be my big opportunity, mom. I don’t know how it could get any better than this. It would be stupid to at least not give it a try. Plus, it’s not bondage. He said I can leave anytime I want.” The words “completely and irrevocably” buzzed through his head again, and he shoved them aside.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be supportive...providing I can come out with you and check out the situation.”

“Really, Mom. I’m not a baby anymore.”

All he had were two suitcases. Hardly warranted help. But she had to see where her only son would be living. Didn’t matter that he was over twenty-one; she stubbornly refused to stop the ceaseless worrying, and needed constant reassurance that he was going to be all right. Something Ink supposed he would only understand if he himself ever became a parent. And bring another human being like himself into an intolerant world? Not likely.

So a few weeks later Audrey flew out to Stillrock to drive with her son to Studio Devianza. She rented a car and drove separately so she could drive herself back to Stillrock airport after dropping Ink off. And Ink acted the mortified son, but he was actually glad to have her along. He would never admit it, but it made him feel a little less nervous about the move.

As they left town, the flat and dormant ground of Stillrock started to rise, to awaken. Stretching, swelling, tumbling. Thick, verdant underbrush materialized on sensuous, voluptuous curves reminiscent of a woman’s body. Hips, belly, breasts. Hawks flew in the air in search of breakfast; some poor little rodent that had forgotten for the moment that there was danger in the air. Ground squirrels popped up from the earth and dashed back in when they saw the hawk. Higher up, the hills were dotted with cows, grazing peacefully, happily oblivious of what might lie ahead. As they drove on, the billowing earth morphed into soaring, rugged walls of canyon. Hard and muscled, craggy and menacing, they were the male counterpart of the gentle, maidenly hills. Rows and rows of coniferous sentinels appeared to usher them deeper into the mountains, into a world devoid of civilization, of raw, ungoverned, deadly nature, the only sound that of the wind whipping through branches that rattled and shook in protest. The scent of pine, fir and cedar seeped through every pore in their bodies. It was cleansing.

The crows were a little disturbing, however. Flying from tree to

tree, skulking on branches, savagely tugging stringy pieces from some dead animal clutched in malignant claws. Gruesome, funereal, horrid harbingers of doom. Audrey gestured and grimaced to Ink through the car window, the wireless service having faded in the mountains. Prior to that, they had been communicating via cell phone now and then. But Ink didn't have to hear what she had to say. He knew she had always hated crows. She had admitted that this was stupid and unreasonable, that they were just another part of nature, and that most of their ugly image came from media. But she hated them all the same. She thought they were bad omen. He grinned, pushing down the slight feeling of unease that crept up.

The huge trees intertwined, forming a dense wall, sometimes a canopy, blocking the light almost completely. As the trees broke apart, they emerged to glaring sunlight and the roar of rivers and waterfalls. It was sensational, dramatic. Consuming. Ink felt the power of the universe here. It almost felt like Bill. It made them feel small and insignificant.

Sporadically mailboxes peeped through vegetation on side roads, signs of human inhabitation. Ink assumed these were the private residences that had rooms for rent. Every so often they drove through what could be called a little town. Rustic grocery stores. A church. Gas stations. They passed a gas station which had a sign that said "last gas station." For about an hour after that, there was only wilderness. If it hadn't been for the very specific directions Bill had given them, down to what tree to look for, what mountain peak, specific rock, they would have gotten lost. The small wooden signs on the corners of roads were almost completely buried in undergrowth and trees, and easy to miss.

After an hour or so of wondering if they were going the right way, natural forest gave way to an expansive manicured clearing with hedges and gardens and fountains, amidst which sat Studio Devianza. Audrey gasped and jabbed frantically in the direction of the building from her car, giving Ink a look which said, "Are you sure about this?" Doubt gripped them both again, alarming, unsettling. It was a castle. A colossal stone castle.

Immense masonry walls rose up to meet battlements. Ink half expected to see men in armor stationed there with spears and shields. What did Bill need protection from? Small spired towers, chimneys and turrets stood amidst the battlements. Clover windows wrapped around the stately crest of the castle, below which rectangular windows and bay windows with ornate moldings disrupted walls of stone. As they turned the corner to the west side, Audrey jabbed again, drawing an irritated, "Mom, would you stop that?" from Ink, even though she couldn't hear him. "I told you not to come." A massive lancet window

the size of half the entire height of the castle in its length and width greeted them. It was divided into six narrower sections and topped by a smaller rose window, through all of which multicolored stained glass reflected the glory of the sun. Designed to celebrate the power of the almighty. The power of Bill Rhodes. A spacious, cobbled patio, surrounded by low walls and hedges, sprawled out in front of the façade, and judging by the hefty, ornate, double wood doors that lay open beneath the huge lancet window, Ink gathered that this was the main entrance. He was intrigued. Somehow the thought of an avant-garde industry like Devianza being housed in a Gothic revival castle like this was...well...deviant. It was pure genius. He grinned despite all his reservations, excited, inspired, hopeful.

Inside the double doors, graced by the giant lancet window, was the main hall. Here, Gothic blended with 21st century convenience. Modular office walls divided up the area. The people running around the place were dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Ink breathed a sigh of relief. He would not be expected to wear medieval garb, he thought wryly. They walked across the hardwood floors and looked around. Track lighting from walls lit up specific spots. Large screens showed images and videos of the latest Devianza endeavors to people mulling around taking notes and talking. Workspaces had all the modern technology needed for work: computers, scanners, printers, copiers, etc. Larger spaces along the stone walls were draped with backdrops and set up with elaborate photography lighting and equipment. Ink assumed these were the photo studios. And, right past the huge hall, between the west and east wings, stood a wide stone staircase with intricate railings, over which hung a huge wrought iron chandelier. But, next to the staircase, they saw shiny metal doors to double elevators. Smart addition, Bill. The blend of contemporary and medieval, of light and dark, somehow worked. It was creative; an incorporation of styles through the ages. And perfect for housing Bill's entire company and providing living space for his employees. It was a small world of its own. Bill Rhodes' world.

A receptionist seated at a very modern looking, granite, semi-circular desk against a wall let Bill know that Ink had arrived, and, in a few minutes, the maestro himself emerged from the elevators. Impatience and intensity radiated from him as he strode towards them, accompanied in the distance, again, by hefty men. Ink sensed a shift in the surrounding energy, a subtle change in movement, like people were tightening up their act, wanting to impress the boss. Bill Rhodes was definitely a presence around there.

"What a delight to meet Ink's mother," he said, his measured and deliberate speech a marked contrast to his vigorous movements. He flashed a fleshy, toothy grin and shook hands with Audrey.

"Nice to meet you," said his mom weakly, and was quiet after that, not knowing what else to say. Bill took some getting used to, and the whole situation was very overwhelming.

"You must be tired. Wes will show you to your rooms," he said, gesturing to a young man standing dutifully behind him. "Madame, you must be my guest tonight."

"Oh, no," cried Audrey. "I actually have plane reservations early tomorrow morning, so I should be back in town by tonight." Ink knew

her plane didn't leave until 10 pm the next night. She had allowed a day to see the town. Audrey looked sheepishly at Ink behind Bill's back, and shrugged. Ink shook his head in response, but felt guilty relief that she wanted to leave soon. He was anxious to start his new life and would do it better without her there.

"Oh, pity. All right, Wes will show you to Ink's rooms," Bill said. "Can you at least join us for a buffet lunch?" Audrey nodded and thanked him. As long as they didn't serve roasted boar heads or anything.

They followed Wes to the elevators. Nothing medieval about those. Inside, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, this was familiar territory. At least for a few minutes. They emerged from the brightly lit, shiny, mirrored elevators into a dimly lit, dark wood paneled corridor with wrought iron sconces and huge pieces of gilt framed oil paintings. As if they just walked through a time portal to a different era entirely. Ink and Audrey looked back at the elevator longingly, tempted to run back to its familiar haven.

Ink was given two rooms which, combined, were bigger than the entire downstairs of his mom's house. Again, it was a blend of contemporary and medieval, of light and dark. There was a living room with brocade covered couches and dark wood tables, small tapestries hung on the dark wood paneled walls, velvet drapes covered windows with ornate moldings, dark hardwood floors were covered with oriental rugs. It felt stifling. But light shone from an entertainment center with a huge screen and stereo system across from the seating. LED cabinet lights lit up the different stereo components. In one corner of the living room, more light shone from a work space complete with computer equipment as well as traditional art materials. Contemporary track lighting on the wall lit up a big wood drawing table, nothing like the puny ones the students bought at the art store. This table was custom made. Shelving with more LED cabinet lights, built into the dark wood paneling on the walls next to the table, held pencils, paints, markers, art books, as well as a variety of software necessary to produce digital artwork. A computer with a sizeable screen as well as a tablet, a plush mouse pad, a printer, and a scanner sat on another wood table at a right angle from the drawing table. It was mind boggling.

Along the wall, behind the couches, was a fully equipped kitchenette. Ink could make his own meals there if he desired. Since there weren't any grocery stores nearby, Bill had groceries delivered once a week, and he could add his own items to the shopping list. Or he could join the rest of the staff in the vast kitchen and dining area on the ground floor of the East wing that served buffet style meals three times a day. The kitchen was also stocked with anything Ink might need to

make himself a snack if he got hungry between meal times. So, unless he really wanted to, he wouldn't really have to spend money on food.

"It's almost obscene," Audrey whispered to Ink, rattled. "This kind of luxury should be earned, not acquired for free." The wealth and power here reeked of something. Something that couldn't be trusted. Something malevolent almost, inhuman...she shook it off violently, chiding herself for her over-reactive imagination. But all the same Audrey Spencer sent a prayer to the universe to take care of her son.

"He just has a lot and likes to share, Mom," Ink said. "Besides, it's not like he's giving away anything. We have to work for it." He couldn't shake off the feeling of unease either, however. Was he about to sell himself to the devil? Well, why the hell not. If the devil was able to offer him a way to make some sense out of the cruel fate of being born with half his face marked, and he wouldn't be expected to do anything immoral, then why not?

There was even less light in the bedroom, a smaller space than the living room. A set of ornate wood double doors led to a four poster king-sized bed drowning in what looked like a million plush pillows covered in brocades and velvets. What on earth did one do with that many pillows? They were going to end up in a glorious mess on the floor, first chance he got. More dark wood paneling on the walls were covered with tapestries similar to the ones in the living room. More wrought iron sconces like the ones in the hallway. No track lighting or LED lights in here. Again, it was stifling in its medieval-gloominess. Slivers of light sliced through more dark velvet drapes on the windows, indicating it was daylight outside. Ink moved the drapes aside to look at the windows. They were narrow and tall and had elaborate framework. Didn't let as much light in as he would have wished, but they would do. These curtains would be drawn apart and tied back, first chance he got. Or, maybe, he would take them off altogether, and keep them off. He wondered if he could replace the tapestries with some of Molly's black and white photographs. Wow, he thought, envisioning it...how about that for a fusion of medieval and contemporary? And it would give him some ownership over the space.

About eight feet across from the bed was a stone fireplace which drew a tender sigh from his mother. She used to curl up in front of the small fireplace at home with her baby boy when he was little, and still willing to cuddle. Wes informed them that the fire ran on gas, a modern convenience. Ink chuckled when his mother turned up her nose. She was a stickler for real wood fires.

Wes went to a set of double doors on one side of the bedroom and opened them. Light and fresh air poured in, drawing a sigh from both Ink and his mom this time. This was more like it. Outside, a spacious

patio looked out to the beautifully hedged gardens with ponds and fountains that surrounded the estate. Far on the edges of the estate, they could see forest and towering mountains. About an hour's walk maybe? Hard to tell. Now, this, Ink thought, he could get used to. Especially the stairway that led down from the patio to the gardens. He would be able to come and go as he pleased. Ink and Audrey looked at each other with the same thought in their minds...freedom.

A few hours later, after a sumptuous buffet lunch which put all other buffet lunches to shame, Ink's mom got ready to leave. He held her tighter than he ever had, than he had ever felt the need to. It felt like the last remnants of his old life, of all that was familiar, was going with her.

"You'll be all right," Audrey said, trying to control the shaking in her voice, trying to be positive and supportive. "Just be true to yourself."

He would try, even though he wasn't totally sure what that was, Ink thought, as he watched his past drive away.

Ink's life at the "studio" seemed to take off smoothly. From the very beginning, he noticed the lack of bigotry around him. It could have been because the lord and master demanded it. But there didn't appear to be any whispering, sly glances, or laughing behind his back. And he understood why. As when he was a model at art school, the general attitude towards him was of that towards an "objet d'art," a mannequin, not a human being. Professional, detached. They dressed him up, turned his head this way and that, posed his arms and legs, styled his hair, shone lights at him from different angles, then stepped back and looked at their work of art with pride. His face was, of course, an integral part of the whole scenario. It added a whole new dimension to the picture, the mood, the message. A dimension that made people want to study what was in front of them and analyze what it was that was making them feel what they were feeling. It was unconventional, defiant of everything traditional and safe, and it challenged and shattered established ideas of what was beautiful. It evoked fear and confusion, repelled, yet attracted, and made them wonder if there was, in fact, beauty in aberrations.

In one set of photos, the setting was an alley, with brick walls, some garbage cans and cardboard boxes strewn around. It was strange, almost disturbing, and evoked images of night creatures, alley creatures: cats, rats, vampires, werewolves. Ink was photographed from different angles, and in different poses. Crouching on the ground like a big cat, leaning up against a brick wall with graffiti on it, sitting on a garbage can, female models fawning over him. His birthmark side was in all the pictures. Would anybody really want to buy anything portrayed in such disturbing manners? They would. They did. It was Devianza. Everyone was focused on only one thing: to market the products in the character of the company that people had come to expect: the bizarre, the illogical, the dangerously nonsensical. And the result was always outrageously stunning.

What continued to be missing from his life, however, was human connection. Ink let himself hope that this new world of artists, removed from the ignorance and bigotry of the outside world, would result in him making some real friends, in people seeing the real him, the person beneath the birthmark. But of the small team assigned to him, no one really seemed interested in getting to know him. They were too busy arranging him and re-arranging him.

There was Sabrina, Japanese-American, the only girl on this particular team, who did his hair and makeup. No one would call her

glamorous. Oversized shirts and leggings were her staple uniform; she was all about comfort. Her black hair was cut in a bob which she often swept back with her glasses. Her breath, inches from his own face when she was working on him, smelled of clove cigarettes. It was nice. It reminded him of his mom's pumpkin bread during holidays. She always put lots of clove in it, saying that was the secret to awesome pumpkin bread. And she was right. It was always delicious.

Brandon, comfortably and confidently gay, dressed him. He had no hesitation flirting with guys around the set and making comments that firmly placed him in the world of gayness, but he did it in a way that was completely unremarkable, with none of the flamboyance that characterized so many other gay men he had met. He made it seem like the most natural thing in the world, which it was, to him. Ink admired him. He couldn't recall ever meeting someone who was so completely unaffected and impervious to the opinions of others. He had met gay men who tried to act like they didn't care what people thought of them, but their speech and behavior revealed otherwise. Brandon had none of that. He was supremely at ease with who he was, which made everyone, both male and female, want to get to know him. Ink wished he could be like that about his birthmark.

Max and Aristide worked on setting and posing. They argued, laughed, and ultimately were completely in sync with each other, even though Max was completely American and Aristide was obviously French. They had one thing in common that transcended both nationality and background: they were both artists. And they obviously enjoyed what they were doing. Ink found out that Aristide had been named after the subject of the Toulouse Lautrec painting, Aristide Bruant dans Son Cabaret. He knew it well. His mother had a print of it in her house. There was just no getting away from that guy.

Kenneth, in charge of photography, was very British. He didn't say much, and was very focused on his job, to the point of obsession. He got stressed out if things didn't turn out exactly as he had envisioned them, and would try all sorts of things to achieve the effects he was looking for. It was almost comical to watch him when he got like that. He muttered to himself, threw his hands up in the air when he was frustrated, and sometimes stalked off the set angrily. The effects, when he was happy with them, were "brilliant," as he proclaimed himself with a huge grin on his face.

They had been all working with each other for a while, and seemed completely at home with each other. Ink let himself hope that maybe he would become one of the group, and not just at work; they all seemed so nice. He knew that at the end of the day the group would sometimes gather in the bar, have a few drinks on Bill, and unwind.

That might be a good place to start.

So, one evening, bored and lonely, Ink wandered into the bar and walked over to them. They were all sitting in plush armchairs, feet up on the coffee table, relaxed, laughing, enjoying the end of a hard day's work. Ink got a drink and sat down with them. As Ink sat down, Sabrina was smacking Brandon's arm because of something he had said. The sudden silence was resounding. It echoed in his ears. It hurt. All his insecurities came rushing back. Years ago, he would have turned around and walked off. Today he managed to keep his composure and say, "Hi," and they all said, "Hi," back to him in unison, like a class of students saying good morning to a teacher who had just walked in. Nobody had anything else to say. He was the model, the mannequin; what does one say to a mannequin, one that nobody really wanted to look at except to dress and pose? After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence that began to feel ridiculous, they tentatively resumed talking within themselves, if only to make noise. Ink was content to just sit and listen for a while. It was better than being alone in his room. But occasionally he would notice someone glance at him and quickly look away, and he realized that any sense of ease being imparted was pretense. Stay, his inner voice said, and let them get used to you. But twenty minutes of being pretty much ignored were enough. He got up, and when people turned to look at him, raised his glass, smiled and said, "You guys have a good evening."

"You leaving already, Ink?" a few people said together, then punched each other and said, "jinx." They tried in vain to hide the palpable relief in their voices.

"Yeah," he smiled again, choking back the disappointment he felt. "Just wanted to grab a quick drink. See you all tomorrow."

Years ago, he would have just left, making his displeasure crystal clear, and alienating people in the process. Today he managed to consider how the others felt and show empathy. He did not want them to feel guilty or anything for ignoring him because that would surely affect their work atmosphere the next day. So he smiled and let them know that it was okay to ignore him, that he understood, and that he didn't hold it against them. This earned him the regard he had wanted. As he walked away, he heard someone saying, "He's nice." The disappointment tempered a little. But he couldn't deny the relief he himself felt as he left. It just hadn't felt enjoyable.

The group might have warmed up to him on a more personal level after that if he had given it a chance. At the end of the next day, as they were packing up, Kenneth and Max actually approached him and asked if he was going to be coming down for a drink that evening. He should have said yes. If he had, things might have been different. But he still

felt the discomfort from the night before. He felt it form an unbreakable bubble around him. He could see through the bubble that what lay outside might not be so bad, but inside the bubble, he was a prisoner. A prisoner of years and years of discrimination and mistreatment which had left a scar bigger than his birthmark. He was also tired. The team had worked him hard today. Watching T.V. in his room sounded less of an effort. So he said, “Not tonight, but maybe Friday.”

“O.K., man,” they said. Max slapped him on the back as he left. But it didn’t happen on Friday, or on any other day. The invitations continued for a while, then trickled, and stopped. The bubble held. There was no ill will. People just assumed he was a loner. During work, Ink joked and laughed with them, made suggestions, gave feedback. Lunch break was usually quick; sometimes they grabbed a plate from the buffet and brought it back to the set. But after work he sometimes sat with the others at dinner, and sometimes grabbed a plate and went back to his rooms. He talked to his mom a lot. He missed her.

Ink’s face started to appear on the covers of magazines. The world was intrigued by him, and not just the eccentric. The whole world. First he appeared in Devianza magazine. Most of that issue was about him. He was introduced as their new face and modeled everything from clothing to jewelry to perfumes made by Bill Rhodes’ company. Then he appeared courtesy of Bill in some other magazines, but this time with stories and interviews attached to them, and always modeling something for Devianza. The more exposure he got, the better. Invariably, he was asked what it was like to grow up with a big black-blue Rorschach inkblot on half his face. He was tempted to tell them it was nothing. That nobody ever noticed it. That he never felt excluded from anything. That he didn’t get brutally beaten up a few times because of it. But scorn and sarcasm had not served him well in the past. And now he needed the world to like him. To buy products with his face representing them. So he put a placid smile on his face and closed the window to that part of his soul.

“It was rough,” he said. “The world is relentlessly tough on anything that doesn’t match their definition of normal.” They liked that. It made them feel sympathetic.

They asked him about the memories that stuck out in his head the most.

“In kindergarten, I told the kids I had been kissed by a dragon, and they were fascinated,” he said. They loved that. It transported them.

“Of course,” Ink continued, “that wouldn’t work on older kids. Life just got harder. People chose to ignore the fact that underneath the face there was intelligence, depth, an actual person. I think that will

always be the hardest part of my life. The fact that people can't get past the face and look deeper." It was gratifying to be able to finally get that out there.

"But your face is what has brought you fame and fortune," they responded. Then again, it was not so gratifying when no one got the point.

"Yes," Ink nodded. "And I'm very grateful for that." He pushed his point a little more. "Ultimately it's still about my face, and not about me. And I understand that, for someone who looks like me, most of the interactions in life will be about my face. But I also feel I have more to offer as a human being than an icon, and I continue to hope that some day someone will know the real me."

Again, they heard only what they wanted to hear. The part about the person beneath the face was not sensational enough. They were impressed by how well spoken and intelligent he seemed. They talked about how he did not fit people's stereotypes about models being all looks and no brain. Beautiful on the outside and empty on the inside. Was there any escape from stereotypes? Ink wondered. Did anyone escape judgment? No, he realized with sudden clarity. Even beautiful people were judged. Everybody judged everybody. He was not the only one being judged, but just one of millions. Shouldn't that make it easier to deal with? But it didn't. It still hurt. When the judgment was accompanied by hate and ugliness, it hurt. And where there was hurt, there were more hate and ugliness. And then more hurt. It was a vicious cycle.

So when the media portrayed him as the bright new star who had been kissed by a dragon in the modeling world, a dragon named Bill, Ink had to laugh at the irony. It was strange how that worked out. The dragon had saved him from a world of judgment when he was a child, and was saving him again in his adulthood. For now anyway, the ugliness and hate would be put aside.

Other companies approached Bill with generous offers to borrow his model, but were always refused. Ink had signed a contract to work exclusively for Devianza. He had to admit it was nice. He was their king peacock and got the royalty treatment. His bank account got bigger and bigger.

Ink got to travel outside the country for the first time in his life and experience the pulsing, throbbing energy of eras that existed centuries before the U.S. was even born. He was photographed in Rome amidst glorious classical statuary and narrow, Bougainvillea-lined alleys on cobbled streets. And he got time to check out the sights. Michelangelo's art, particularly the Pietà, the sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding her dead son in her arms, brought tears to his eyes. None of the brassy glory of St. Peter's, or any other religious depiction he had ever seen, touched him like this one. The pristine, almost translucent, ethereal whiteness of the marble needed no ornamentation. It begged to be touched, but looked like it would vanish if it were. And the soul-shattering pathos on the mother's visage was one of the timeless pathos of all mothers, the eternal mother, the mother earth, the stars and moon, the whole universe. It reached into unfathomable depths of the soul and twisted and crushed. It would stay with him for the rest of his life. That one could create this level and depth of emotion from marble was more miraculous to him than stories of burning bushes and red seas. The ability to create, he realized, was truly divine, and Michelangelo, he felt at that moment, must have been God. Apart from the sublime beauty in nature, the only other phenomenon in life that resonated a higher presence was Art. Art throughout the ages. From Paleolithic cave paintings to present day Computer Graphics, and everything in between; it was all impressive and all resonant. Oh, and in food also. There was no denying God in hazelnut gelato.

If only Art could be a unifying element between people, and countries... maybe there would be less pain in the world. But the hunger for power and dominion was stronger and blinding, and would always rule men. It was about survival of the fittest, an innate and essential part of all forms of life. And from the highest of positions in government, all the way down to schoolyard bullying, people would always pick on the weakness of others to give themselves more power. Sadly, Art would always be just a distraction from that.

In Paris, he was photographed inside the Moulin Rouge. He remembered his mother's Toulouse-Lautrec prints and wished he could have brought her here. She would have loved walking around Montmartre. One day, he would. He spent one whole day at the Louvre and, true to what everyone said, still didn't get to see all of it. That was okay though. His mind was boggled from just what he did manage to see. The Mona Lisa, what he was able to see of it through the fighting crowd, was very nice. He admired the skilled fusion of subject and

imaginary background which he understood was a novelty at the time it was done. But it lacked emotion for him; it didn't touch him like Michelangelo's work had done.

In Athens, he was photographed in front of the Parthenon, one of Bill Rhodes' favorite structures. It also was a testament to something bigger, and, although it didn't touch him as much as the Pietà had, it did get him choked up a little. It glowed. It glowed like a pregnant mother and it glowed like a new bride. It glowed and shone and sang, like a princess from the heavens perched on her Acropolis, her throne, saying hello to the world, the entire sky for support in the back. Bill had told Ink he wanted to buy the whole temple and bring it back to the U.S. to set up on his estate. Thank God for small favors, Ink thought wryly, that Bill would not be able to do that.

And that was just the beginning. Bill had plans to send him to Egypt, Turkey, India, Thailand; the list went on and on. And Art, not just the Fine Arts, but in the form of architecture, music and dance, food, pervaded all these cultures. It didn't seem like life could get any better. Isn't this what everyone wanted? A career that involved travel and culture?

And yet, a nagging discontent festered deep inside him. Even in his travels, his birthmark was what people saw. It was what people spoke to. It was what he was to everyone he met. He yearned for a deeper human connection that would fill him up from within, make him feel whole. He despaired of ever finding one. He had thought he might see more of Bill Rhodes on a personal level, but had not yet had the opportunity. When Bill was around, which was not often, the hefty men were never far away. He knew Bill lived in the studio, but he and his research team were constantly traveling to all parts of the world, hunting for treasure: new fabrics, jewelry, looks that inspired new ideas, sometimes for weeks on end. His crew at home were superbly efficient and functioned beautifully without the presence of their boss, allowing Bill to leave for long periods of time without worrying.

Too bad. Ink felt like he would like to get to know the older man. He didn't completely understand why, but at times he had felt a powerful sense of ethos from Bill. In some way, Ink felt like he was more than a mannequin to him; strange, because they had not spent much alone time together. But the few times that they had talked, Ink had sensed a kindness and an understanding from him that almost felt like commiseration. Almost as if Bill understood what his life must have been like with his birthmark in a way that others didn't. Then, one night, he found out why.

Around 2 a.m. that night, unable to sleep, Ink wandered down to the main kitchen for a snack. He had not yet bothered to stock his own

refrigerator in his quarters, because there really was no need. In addition to the hot breakfast, lunch and dinner always provided at scheduled hours, the refrigerators in the cavernous main kitchen were always stocked with cold cuts, cheeses and a variety of fresh vegetables for sandwiches and salads. The pantry held every possible kind of dry goods from an assortment of nuts and dry fruits to breads and pasta. There was also a basket of fresh fruit always on the counter. And ice cream. There was an entire freezer with all kinds of ice cream in it. That was what Ink made a beeline for this night. A pint of chocolate ice cream would do him nicely for a snack.

At 2 a.m., the kitchen should have been empty. But this night, as he tiredly walked along, he heard sounds. As far as he could tell, they were coming from just one voice. As he got closer, he heard stuttering. A crippling, hindering, devastating stuttering. The person could hardly get out a word, and frustration and rage riddled his voice. It did not sound like a happy conversation. Hesitant to walk into a scene of such obvious distress, Ink peeked around the wall into the kitchen. And saw Bill speaking into a phone. Powerful, indomitable, all encompassing, all controlling Bill Rhodes. In pajamas. Alone. A half eaten sandwich and a glass of milk sat on a plate on the kitchen table. Bill was leaning up against the counter at the far end of the kitchen by the door which led out to the downstairs patio, and his fleshy face was distorted with the effort of speaking.

“N-n-n-NO!” he spat out. “Th-the-tha-that’s n-n-NOT accep-ceptable!”

Ink froze in shock, briefly wondering if he was in a dream. It felt surreal. He tried to turn around as softly as possible to leave, but Bill turned in his direction at that moment. Ink stood on the other side of the wall for a minute wondering what the best course of action would be: to flee or to acknowledge. He couldn’t flee; that would be ridiculous. He was pretty sure Bill had seen him before he ducked behind the wall. How mortifying. Deciding on humor, he peeked back around the wall at Bill who was staring in his direction, and waved hesitantly, stupid grin on his face. Bill stared at him blankly for a moment longer with his disconcerting eyes, his agitation obvious, and Ink thought he might want him to leave; but instead he waved him to come in and turned back to the conversation. So, Ink made his way to the refrigerator in the massive kitchen, trying not to listen to the heated and disjointed exchange that was taking place. Forgetting the ice cream completely, he desperately grabbed some sliced turkey, rye bread and mayo and went over to the kitchen table to make himself a sandwich like Bill had. He didn’t even like rye bread. But he couldn’t think. It was too painful to listen to Bill. Part of him wanted to run, and he realized with a jolt

that this was what others must feel when they saw him for the first time: awkwardness, uncertainty, the desire to flee. He was consumed, all of a sudden, with indescribable sorrow and pity for Bill. And shame at himself; of all people, he, Ink, should know better than to indulge in these sentiments. He carelessly slapped his sandwich together, trying frantically to shed these emotions so that Bill would not pick up on them. But this explained a lot. Ink now understood the sense of empathy he had always felt from him. Bill, like Ink, had a handicap which would surely have not escaped the ugliness of an intolerant world. In the eyes of the world, they were the same.

Bill slammed down the phone on the counter, and Ink looked up to see him breathing deeply and methodically for a few minutes, eyes closed. Diaphragm breathing, Ink realized, as he noticed Bill's stomach moving in and out. Then he opened his eyes and looked at Ink directly, startling him a little.

"S-s-sorry y-you had to w-witness that," Bill said, slowly, carefully, as if he were trying to halt the stutter as he spoke. His face looked rigid and unnatural, like someone was holding it in place. And Ink realized that Bill was trying to do just that, in an effort to control his speech. Pity surged through him again, and Ink shook his head a little to come back to the present moment. He wanted to say something to comfort Bill, to reassure him, to let him know he was not being judged, but his tongue was a huge block of cement in his mouth and nothing came out.

"It's o-okay," Bill said, giving a weak smile like he had just experienced a seizure or something. He took another deep breath, and his speech magically normalized for the time being. "Glass of wine?" he asked.

"Yes," Ink said. He really wanted a glass of wine. To drown the sense of misery and gloom he was feeling right now. He did not want to offend this man who had given him a life by making him feel any less than he was. Maybe if he acted like it hadn't happened, it would go away. No such luck.

"Relax, Ink," Bill said, addressing the issue right away as he poured the wine. "I'm the same person I always was." His speech was still slow, but, for the moment, the stutter was mercifully gone. Amazing. Ink breathed a sigh of relief inside and felt immediately ashamed again. Where were all these vile feelings coming from?

"I know," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "I know. Bill, I had no idea...but I in no way feel..."

"Like I'm some kind of abnormal f-freak?" Bill interrupted, sticking his teeth out in a clumsy grin. And he was back. "You know how it feels and you don't want to make me feel that way?" He had

gotten to the core of it.

“Yes,” Ink said softly. “You are NOT a freak at all.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Bill said, gesturing towards a chair. They sat down with two glasses of wine. “You just witnessed something that not many people know about me.”

Was that a good thing?

It was a genetic disorder, he told Ink, and came out only when he was overly distressed or disturbed. His father had had it. Molly, thank God, seemed to have been spared it. To control it, he worked with a speech therapist, took mood stabilizers, and saw an acupuncturist. Most of the time, these things worked. Except for his body guards, nobody at work knew about it, partly because he was away so often that others did not get the opportunity to find out. Molly knew. She had pushed her father over the edge many times. As did his ex-wife. She had the power to set it off like nobody else did.

“Was that who you were talking to?” asked Ink.

“Yes. She’ll occasionally make financial demands which are above and beyond our divorce agreement, and above and beyond reasonable, just because she knows I have money. But I also have to pay everyone working for me and finance my company. Okay, I could give her more, but why should I?” His wife, Molly’s mother, he told Ink, had left him shortly after their daughter was born, three years into their marriage. They had dated for one year before that, during which Bill, hopeful for a normal life, had managed to keep the stuttering from her. After they married, that hope was quickly shattered.

“She could get me riled up like nobody else and relapses happen when I get extremely emotional. So she discovered my problem pretty quick. The three years we were married were rife with hate and resentment. She felt like I had tricked her into marrying someone she didn’t really know.”

As she was increasingly exposed to it, she got more and more erratic, and eventually came to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Couldn’t deal with being married to a “freak,” she had told him outright. Ink frowned at the offensive word. He couldn’t believe someone could leave a loved one because of something like that. Wasn’t it bad enough that the whole world laughed at it? To be abandoned by someone who had professed love and devotion, till death do us part, etc., etc. would be devastating.

“I realize now I probably should have been honest about it before I married her. But after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on treatments, I felt like I finally had it under control and wanted to pretend it didn’t exist.”

Ink could definitely understand that. At least Bill was able to hide his affliction, unlike Ink, whose birthmark glared at the world every single day of his bleak life. He did not have the option to “pretend it didn’t exist.” It completely obscured who he really was, making it

impossible for people to get to know him. So Bill's next words almost made him cry.

"But she did know me," he said, sadly. "My stutter does not define me. She knew the man beneath the stutter. She just couldn't see him anymore once she saw the stutter."

His eyes closed for a moment, disappearing into the bags of flesh and crow's feet around them. Then, he opened them and stared at Ink with a direct intensity that said, "I AM more." And Ink knew he was. Like himself.

That night, two people bonded as only those whose life experiences had set them apart from others can. They stayed up all night talking about ugliness and hurt they had both encountered, the ignorance and stupidity that existed in the world, and how neither of them had really been able to find anybody who could see past their handicaps and connect with the person beneath. Until now.

They had both been beaten up more than once during their lives. Ink recalled the time in elementary when his face had been brutally colored in with permanent markers. Bill remembered the time when his mouth had been stuffed with paper towels all the way down his throat so he couldn't speak. Both were efforts to wipe out what had inflamed others, for whatever reason.

"It's beyond imagining, isn't it?" Ink asked. "No one can conceive what it feels like to be touched with such hate and viciousness. It's completely perverse, and doesn't make any sense at all."

"I know," said Bill. "It's a complete shock, a complete violation of your right to feel secure in life, your trust, however naïve, in humanity. And all you can do is curl up into a ball and disappear into your own mind and wait for it to stop."

"And hope they don't kill you," Ink added. "Unless of course, you fight back, but then that opens up all sorts of new problems."

"Yup. You get in trouble for fighting even if you are the victim. And most of the time there are more than one of them and they have baseball bats. How does one person fight that unless they've been trained to, like a superhero or something?"

"That's what we should have done," Ink said, ruefully. "Taken Jiu Jitsu and formed a league of anti-bully vigilantes." They laughed.

"We could have done that if we had met when we were young at the same time," Bill said. "We could have been 'Rhodes and... Ink? Rink?'" They laughed again. A laughter that bordered on hysteria, but tinged with regret. They could have used each other's support when they were growing up. Of course, had they actually known each other in their adolescence, it might have been a completely different story,

most likely one of competition instead of mutual support.

The first bottle of wine was drained. And then a second. And a third. Sandwiches and milk forgotten, they brought out peaches and dark chocolate and cheese and almonds, and munched happily as they drank and talked. And both Bill's stutter and Ink's birthmark were, for the moment, completely gone.

Bill loved the story of the dragon kiss featured in magazines, and was honored to be considered Ink's "dragon" at this point in his life.

"You'll excuse me if I keep the kiss imaginary," he said.

"If you must," Ink pouted jokingly and they both burst out laughing.

"But you know..." Bill continued semi-soberly, "the people that act with such hate and viciousness towards things that are different act out of fear."

Ink nodded.

"They are unhappy people themselves, if not for an obvious problem, then a hidden one. For example, they could be abused at home."

Ink nodded again, the image of Kyle from elementary school passing through his head. He could, maybe, understand the cruelty coming from that boy if he was being hurt at home. Understand, but not justify.

"But then there are those that are poor and frustrated in life and just need someone to blame...like some supremacist groups for example."

"Yes," Ink agreed. "Those are the ones that are hard to feel for. Instead of working on improving their own situation in life, they blame and hurt others."

Bill sighed. "It's so complicated. People are so messed up."

They discovered that they had both had vile tempers growing up, and sometimes still did.

"How could you not?" Bill asked. They both admitted it was a result of their circumstances, and it did not mean they were bad people. But that in trying to overcome what they had endured at the hands of others, sometimes, the angry part of them got the better of them. Ink had seen that side of Bill now and then, and he now understood why.

He remembered the time an employee had brought Bill the wrong files. Within sight and hearing of everyone, he had lit into him, calling him stupid, inept, inefficient, worthless, and followed with rants on how someone like him could get hired at his company when he demanded only the best. People had looked at each other uncomfortably, wondering if he was over-reacting a little. Granted, it was a little urgent that the correct files get to him promptly, and it

would take time to obtain them, but everything was housed in the mansion, and it wasn't like they would have to go to Antarctica for them. The young man had stood there with his head hung, looking like he wished the ground would open up and swallow him, then tried to stammer out an apology at which Bill had screamed for him to shut up and get out of his face.

Ink had been taken aback, to say the least. He had wondered if he had made a huge mistake committing himself to someone he really didn't know. Having a bad day, Bill? More than the words he had used, what had stayed with people was the complete lack of control Bill Rhodes had shown. Talk about Jekyll and Hyde. Then, when Bill realized everyone was staring at him, he had jolted, startled, like he didn't know what had possessed him. The civilized thing to do at that point would have been to apologize. But he had turned abruptly on his heels and walked off.

That incident had stayed with Ink for a few days. But now, it made sense. Part of him said that, whatever they had been through, nothing justified treating other people badly. But then he had chalked it up to Bill having a bad day. Bill was human after all, and everyone was allowed a bad day now and then. It didn't happen on a regular basis, or all his employees would leave. But he, himself, did not want to be on the receiving end when it did.

They had also both been smarter than their peers as well as some teachers. Compensation from "God" for the physical afflictions? Or vigorous development of lonely minds through intensive studying? Probably both, they decided. They talked about the inferiority of their teachers and what agonizing boredom it was to sit through their classes. Ink told Bill about the principal he had in high school who kept repeating the same point over and over without really listening to his students.

"For people like that," Bill said, "it's all about ego. It's Narcissism. Sure, they are seemingly good at what they do, but they do it blindly and un-budgingly, almost like they are running a fundamental religion, a religion in which they are God. Individual opinion and difference of opinion are wrong, and therefore irrelevant. They live on the power and glory they get from being unquestioningly right, and, if anyone disagrees with them, it can offend and, more importantly, threaten. To address it would be to acknowledge it, and to acknowledge it would be to allow that there might be another point of view, which threatens the God image they have of themselves. So they ignore it."

"Wow, Bill," Ink said, drunkenly gratified by his analysis. "You nailed it." He wondered if Bill might be talking about himself in a way; this would explain his complete grasp of the concept of God-like

territorial power. Maybe Bill harbored similar God issues and the need to preserve and protect his authority in his own domain. He remembered feeling Bill's presence the moment they had entered his realm. Or had he just been imagining things? He remembered Molly's warning that "all that glitters might not be gold," and shook his head, not liking the direction these thoughts were taking him.

Because, for the first time in his life, Ink felt understood. Validated. Accepted. And he was not going to ruin it.

At the end of that night, early in the morning, Ink floated back to his room in high spirits. After hours of bonding and understanding, and wine, he felt like he really saw Bill. Who he was. What he cared about. What drove him. Love and compassion swelled in his heart. Enduring a childhood filled with discrimination and cruelty had not crippled Bill, but given him a resolve, a strength and passion, to survive. Instead of being riddled with hate and resentment, he was generous. He used his money to provide for his employees beyond the scope of duty because he wanted to. "He wanted to control them" came unbidden to his mind, and he pushed it away violently. Ink did not want to go there. Besides, there was nothing wrong with wanting a little control. Didn't everyone want that? He was not going to let thoughts like that ruin his euphoria. Nobody was perfect. Bill had plenty of good to offer. He was a creative God. His work was a testament to that. He saw the beauty in the bizarre corners of life that eluded most people, and that spoke of depth, insight. Of vision. And of course, now Ink understood why: Bill was one of those who came from the bizarre corners of life. Like himself.

And Ink felt like Bill saw him too. Saw the boy beneath the stain, the boy who had spent twenty-two years yearning for recognition, for an identity free of the birthmark. His tight, parched heart burgeoned and flooded with affirmation, thirstily soaking, bathing. Deliverance gushed through his eyes and streamed down his cheeks, cleansing and healing. Part of him wondered briefly if the wine was making him feel like this, and tomorrow he would just feel stupid. Perhaps. But right here, right now, he felt the hand of the universe, the hand of God and the hand of Bill Rhodes. It felt good.

After that night, when Bill was not traveling, he and Ink met for at least one meal a day, usually breakfast, his hefty men at a discreet distance, until Bill had to leave again. They became a support for each other that they had not had before. "We're 'The League of Damaged Gentlemen,'" they dubbed themselves jokingly, "LDG."

Initially, people talked. What was going on? Why was Ink being given more attention than others? Of course, he was their star, the face of their line of products. But Bill had had other models in the past and had not spent this much time with them. He had other models now

whom he had never bothered to get to know. In fact, he had many employees, who had been around a lot longer than Ink, whom he had never spoken to. It was all about work with them. He made his boundaries clear and no one dared encroach upon them. So they wondered if Bill and Ink were more than just friends. But Bill had a daughter; he was not gay. Or was he? People could come out late in life. Maybe he had spent his entire life dumping on his homosexual tendencies and suffered in silence, and had just gotten the nerve to admit it to himself. Maybe he swung both ways. Who knew. Their curiosity was partly born of jealousy. They felt that it was their hard work and talent that kept the company going and that they deserved more appreciation than they were getting.

But the buzz died down pretty quickly. Bill's staff loved their work and were grateful for it. For artists like them, the concept of combining ideas from all over the world to create a look so bizarre and unusual that normal everyday people could not relate, was what life was all about, an opportunity too great to jeopardize with petty ego issues. They decided he could screw rabbits for all they really cared, as long as they could go on working for him. Given that, nobody really believed that he was screwing Ink. Or rabbits.

A SOUVENIR

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When Bill traveled, Ink mostly kept to himself. This was no surprise to anyone. People had long accepted the fact that the young man with the birthmark was not going to be a part of their everyday crowd. Only a few felt curious enough to want to get to know him anyway. For most, it was a relief, a load off their shoulders. If he didn't want their company, that freed them from having to worry about it. Now, however, there was a difference within Ink. His heart felt lighter, like the calm, fresh air in the aftermath of a storm. He had a friend. Bill's friendship grounded him, made him feel less alone, more settled. Connected. Like he was finally home. Much as he loved his own mom, she could never understand what made him tick like Bill did. He and Bill were a different species. A part of the world, and yet not.

It was during one of Bill's treasure hunting trips, this time a month long trip to Paraguay, that he came back with a special souvenir. He was usually gone for no more than two weeks, so everybody was curious to see what had kept him for so long. The last time Bill had been gone for more than two weeks, he had returned with ideas that dazzled.

They found out during a dinner and show to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Devianza, held in the mansion's ballroom, which Bill had converted into a dine-in theater complete with stage, lights, props and curtains. He liked to entertain and held regular small performances for monthly birthdays, celebrations, or sometimes just because. Buffet dinners were offered to accompany these, and of course, his employees were never charged to attend any of them.

He also held shows on a bigger scale a few times a year, featuring local, national and international talents: comedians, music bands, acting groups, dance. The bigger shows were also free of charge to his lucky employees, as long as they remembered to book seats in advance. The public were invited to enjoy these shows for a small fee, usually no more than \$50.00 a ticket, and sometimes less. It was not meant for profit and went towards the cost of running the shows, flying out the act, housing them, paying them, etc. Needless to say, these events were always sold out. People came out in hordes from neighboring towns. The only other place nearby to see shows of this caliber was Denver, which was roughly a three hour drive from Eriwald, up to another hour of trying to find parking, where tickets cost three times as much, and where the dizzying congestion and sweat-logged urban air seriously hindered enjoyment. People eagerly made the drive to Eriwald, a town

happily coddled in the natural beauty and majesty of the Rockies, and cathartic, life-giving fresh air, to see Bill's shows, bringing business to the hotels and inns, not just during ski season, but throughout the year. Once he had swept in the entire cast of the Broadway play *Wicked*. All parking spaces, side streets, dirt roads in the vicinity, anywhere one could squeeze in, whether they could get out afterwards or not, were devoured by cars. Employees had to book seats way in advance to get in. It was, of course, completely worth it, and one more thing to feel thankful about to the mighty Rhodes, indisputable patron and ruler of his realm.

The night of the 10th anniversary of Devianza, the seating in the theater was rearranged to accommodate tables. There was Champagne. The buffet served prime rib. Ink, of course, sat at Bill's table, along with a couple of his managers.

As people tucked into the bleeding, soul-melting prime rib and waited for the show to begin, Ink noticed Bill seemed restless and fidgety. When he tried to speak, the words lodged in his mouth and his face contorted with the effort. So he stopped trying and just sat there. Was he on the verge of stuttering? It had never happened in public since Ink had started working for him. And he knew that only something extremely disturbing would crack Bill's extensive speech therapy. Had his ex-wife contacted him again? He visibly relaxed after a couple of glasses of champagne. He still stayed quiet, though, but in a breathless, anticipatory way, as if speaking might take away from the moment. Ink gave him a questioning look and mouthed "You O.K.?" He shrugged and held his palms up, as if to say he didn't know. Then, he held up his thumb to reassure Ink and turned back to the stage. Ink was intrigued. What could be reducing Bill Rhodes to this speechless jellyfish?

By the time the lights went out, people were wound up with anticipation. There had been no clue as to what the show would be. The curtains parted slowly to an enchanting world of purple and gold. Rows of branchy trees were lit up with purple lights at their bases and strung with little gold twinkling lights that looked like fireflies. The ceiling glowed an eerie, stormy pattern of light and shadow, reflecting back the branches from the trees. Dry ice smoke slithered over the ground and rose up to drench the air. People held their breath. In the center of the stage, as if in a mirage, there was a figure curled up on the ground. As the audience watched, riveted, Spanish guitar wafted soulfully through the room, and the figure slowly uncoiled itself, like the frond of a fern, and came to rest on one foot, perfectly balanced like a stork, one arm up towards the sky. A single gold spotlight separated itself from its cohorts and focused on the figure, revealing a young woman dressed

like a gypsy. Layers of skirts and sashes with gold sequins hung from her hips. Her limbs, covered in gold bracelets, echoed the gold covered branches of the trees. A white peasant blouse fell off her shoulders and tucked in under her bosom. It glowed a luminous white in stark contrast to the velvety, dark skin of her neck and shoulders, her belly. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders and blouse like live black silk, melting into the darkness, except when it leaped up to touch the gold of the spotlight. The Spanish guitar burst into Flamenco, and the figure sprang to life and transformed into a kaleidoscope of arms, legs, colors and textures in an astonishing coupling of the bursting energy of youth and a mature sensuality.

Ink had never seen anything like it. He felt like he had just been exposed to something life changing, something phenomenal. A swirling nebula from a different galaxy, a supernova dancing on the stage. Tearing his eyes away from the girl, Ink glanced at Bill with a “Wow” on his lips.

But Bill Rhodes did not see him. He did not see anything in that room but the girl. His face was twisted, as if in pain, shoulders tense, breathing forced. His hands shook slightly as they gripped the champagne glass. He was in a dazed world of his own, beady eyes glistening, teeth jabbing into his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. There was a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead. Ink thought he looked like Nosferatu in the dim light, with his big, flat-lobed ears and bald head. And those eyes. He looked mad and possessed. Ink fought the slight feeling of anxiety that swept through him. He did not know who that person was across the table from him, and he did not like that person who was across the table from him. He wanted him to go away, and wanted his friend back. He reached across the table and nudged Bill’s hand. The spell broke. Bill looked at him and grinned sheepishly, taking a deep breath and letting his shoulders drop. He flexed his neck, drained his glass of champagne and poured more. Still fighting anxiety, Ink looked back at the girl and was sucked back into the nebula where nothing existed but her.

The girl danced for twenty minutes or so, then gradually curled back up into a ball on the floor as the music slowed down. Her movements were amazingly fluid, as if she didn’t have any bones in her body. Ink was dumbfounded. Then the curtains closed and she was gone. The silence in the room was only momentary and gave way to thunderous applause and cheering. People stood up at their tables. The curtains lifted again, and the girl stood on the stage, now lit up with regular muted lights, and bowed, her skirts spreading around her, hair streaming to the floor as she knelt. The lights dimmed again, and a slow melody flowed through the room, sumptuous, stirring, spell-binding.

The girl began to move to the slow tempo of the music. And, this time, was even more mesmerizing than the last. A gymnast, a ballet dancer, an elegant bird, she arched and twisted her body and neck, and reached out with her limbs for a world beyond her grasp. A world denied. The spotlight fell on a look of deep sorrow on her face. A look so heart-wrenching that not one soul in the room remained untouched. Ink glanced at Bill and saw tears in his eyes. He felt his own eyes water in response. The music was sad, and the girl was even sadder. And the applause this time shook the earth.

After the show was over, and the lights came back on, people sat at their tables sipping wine and chatting, returning from the emotional journey the show had taken them on. Ink studied Bill curiously. He looked exhausted, but content, as if after an intense odyssey. He opened his mouth to speak, and Ink wondered if his stutter would come out, but it didn't. Whatever tension had been in this man had all been rubbed and kneaded out by the performance.

"Everybody still alive?" he joked. People at the table chuckled giddily, cautiously. He was still the boss after all. All of a sudden, a smile spread over his face, and he held out his hand. Ink turned to see the dancer coming towards their table, her gait the same amazing combination of youth and sensuality of her dance. Her skirts swayed around her ankles as she approached them. Ink's heart skipped a few beats. How does one act around a goddess?

"This," said Bill, standing up and reaching for the girl's hand, "is Solana. My Esmeralda."

Ink stood up and held out his hand to shake hers. He found himself looking briefly at the most shocking pair of hazel eyes he had ever seen. More intense because of the smooth cappuccino skin. Lined with thick black eyeliner, and densely fringed with unashamedly fake black lashes that almost reached her eyebrows, part of her stage makeup, her eyes dominated her whole face. Deep red lipstick on her heart-shaped mouth, a painted mole on the cheek, and a light brushing of rouge on her high cheekbones completed her look. Ink looked away slightly as his hand met hers, hoping to somehow hide his birthmark. Silly, he knew, but completely necessary for his own survival. He needn't have worried. She hardly met his eyes as she gave him a limp, half-hearted handshake, then looked away, disinterested, and sat down at the chair Bill held out for her. Despite the garish costume and the stage makeup, she was even more beautiful than she had been on stage. Beautiful, but unreachable. Her placid smile was that of an automaton, one that did not reach her eyes. It was like biting into something that looked scrumptious and finding that the flavor was off. Could this be the same face that had been twisted in pathos just moments ago? Either

she was just a really good actress, or the stage was the only place she revealed herself. Why? Why reveal yourself for the whole world to see on stage, but not in person? Did the distance provided by the stage make her feel safe? Did personal contact make her feel threatened?

People from other tables came up to meet Solana. They stood around the table, shaking her limp hand, complimenting her on her performance. Some offered to buy her drinks, to which she replied that she didn't drink. She thanked them all impassively, in a heavy Spanish accent, with no warmth or feeling. Again, from someone who had just previously had every person in the room crying, this was completely bewildering. Ink didn't think she was trying on purpose to snub people. But somehow her essence rejected this scene. The adoration and compliments left her untouched, and she didn't care who knew it. It didn't discourage anyone. Still drunk on champagne and the show, people continued to come up and meet her in person.

Ink let himself watch her quietly from his side of the table, curious. She seemed oblivious to his presence anyway. Who are you? He wondered. What is your story? She seemed young. He couldn't tell how young because of the makeup, but he would guess no more than twenty or twenty-one at the most. Around his age. As if picking up on his thoughts, she suddenly turned and looked straight at him through the small circle of people around her. Again, completely without expression. Ink didn't look away or turn his face to hide his birthmark this time, but met her gaze head on. His heart beat faster at such bold directness. Something flickered in her eyes. He couldn't tell what it was. Annoyance at being directly stared at? Curiosity at his face? But whatever it was, it was acknowledgment. In that moment, Ink felt her complete awareness of him, and nervously looked away. Then looked back. Now she was watching him. It had to be his birthmark. Why else would she be studying him like that? Even in the dim light, it glared defiantly against the fairness of the rest of his skin, perhaps even more dramatically. His curse. He felt compelled to turn his head again so the birthmark was not in full view. He did not want her to see his birthmark. He wanted her to see him. The boy beneath the stain. Desperately. Where were these feelings coming from? As he turned, his eyes fell on Bill, and he found himself battling anxiety again. Bill was staring at Solana, his face flushed, eyes shining with something... excitement? Adoration? A feverish, almost frenzied energy emanated from him. Again, he looked possessed. It wasn't much of a stretch to imagine him drooling, or throwing up green vomit like the possessed people in exorcism movies. Ink shook his head to free himself of that disturbing image. It dawned on him that Bill was very taken with this girl, but, from the blank look on Solana's face as she glanced at Bill

and turned away, the feeling was not returned.

An hour later, Bill proprietarily decided it was time for her to retire.

“Solana has had a long day,” he said to everyone, and standing up, took her arm. “Come, my dear, let me walk you to your room.” Ink felt a pang in his heart. No more Solana for the night?

She stood up stiffly, and although he had her arm, tried to keep herself as removed from him as possible, staring straight ahead. One of his employees stopped Bill with a quick question, and, while Bill talked to him, Solana looked down at the hand that gripped her arm, and then briefly up at Bill. Once again that night, Ink was shocked. A look of pure hatred flashed across her face as she looked at Bill. But the next moment, when Bill looked back at her, it was gone, replaced with emptiness again. It was as if it had never happened, but Ink had seen it, and knew without a doubt that she hated Bill. Knew that there was a story there, and that she was not there willingly. What was going on?

That night, the sheets on Ink’s bed felt oppressively warm. The dark walls in his room felt like they would swallow him. He tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He got up and wrenched the curtains apart to let some moonlight in. Then wrenched them back together, because the full moon was enormous and invasively bright, an undeniable, inescapable, looming presence, even through the narrow windows. It made his brain hurt. Darkness was preferable to that. An unstoppable barrage of thoughts stormed his head. All of Solana. She was achingly beautiful. So different. And not just in a Latin sort of way; there was no shortage of Latinos around; at school, back home, even one of his housewife flings had been a gorgeous Hispanic. But Solana had touched him, cold and impassive as she had been. She had stirred his blood in a way that nothing had ever had. A terrifying longing to get to know her filled every pore of his being, made him quiver. It was terrifying, because all his life he had tried consciously to keep any kind of real desire at bay for fear of being disappointed and hurt. People like him were safer not wanting what the rest of the world wanted. But this time he had no control at all over his emotions. They consumed him. The way she had steadily looked at him for a few minutes burned in his mind. Brief as the look had been, and across a crowd of people, in muted lighting, it had almost felt like she was seeing him, not like everyone else did, but without repulsion, without discomfort and without avoidance. Or was it all a product of hopeful imagination, a yearning that this beautiful creature finally see in him what all others had failed to see? Bill Rhodes was the only other person in his life who had “seen” the real him.

An ominous sense of foreboding nudged his mind. “Be careful...”

it said. Bill had called Solana his “Esmeralda.” What had he meant by that? Was he alluding to the “Esmeralda” in Victor Hugo’s “Hunchback of Notre Dame?” The use of the word “my” declared ownership of some sort, and not just because he paid her to dance. The implications behind this were frightening. His demeanor during the dance had been startlingly disturbing. In that demeanor, Ink had seen maniacal desire. He realized Bill wanted to own Solana, body and soul, even though she hated him. Tone it down, Ink, he said to himself, shuddering. Bill was his best friend, his mentor, too important to him to alienate or hurt in any way. Ink could not, would not do that to him. Briefly, he let himself entertain the thought that Bill’s feelings towards Solana were paternal, charitable, protective. But he knew he was deluding himself. There was no doubt, from the way Bill had looked at her and acted around her, that “daughter” had nothing to do with his feelings towards Solana.

He got up and went out to the patio and stood staring at the moon for a long time. It was still eerily huge, and dominated the whole sky, lit up the gardens. But the brightness that had hurt his brain when he was in his room was strangely comforting out there. It felt like an actual presence. He sat down on one of Bill’s expensive, architect designed patio chairs, wrapped up in a blanket, and kept staring at the moon until he couldn’t anymore. Then he fell into an uneasy sleep and woke a few hours later to a morning filled with unease, shivering through a blanket wet with dew, and with the absolute conviction in his mind that he had to stay away from Solana.

The next day of work was torture. Everything required more effort than usual. Greeting his colleagues. Showing some semblance of interest in what they were doing. Dressing up. Putting on makeup. Letting himself be posed. Laughing at jokes. Camaraderie was not coming easy to him right now. He wanted to tell them to leave him alone and walk away, back to his room where he could brood in peace. Several people asked him what was up, to which he had no answer. So he just shrugged, practiced his placid smile and mindlessly went through the motions expected of him. By the time they broke for lunch, he had had enough. Pleading a migraine, he slipped away to the library. His own quarters would be the first place people looked for him. There would be no people in the library. Just walls of books. And blissful quiet. He felt his “migraine” receding just at the thought of it.

The library was one of the original rooms in the mansion and Bill Rhodes had obviously tried to maintain its character. Floor to ceiling built-in book shelves of wood, narrow windows draped in velvet, built-in cushioned benches, wood floors strewn with oriental rugs, huge stone fireplace. Round mahogany tables and brocade cushioned armchairs were scattered throughout the room. An over-sized couch with brocade upholstery and velvet cushions, matching armchairs, and lacquered mahogany coffee tables sat around the fireplace. The only modern conveniences in the room were the recessed lighting in the ceiling to afford more light when needed, and the gas-operated fire in the fireplace. Ink went and sat down in an armchair facing the fireplace and closed his eyes. Solana’s face swam around in his head. But he dozed, emotionally tired from the restless night, and from being poked and prodded.

About an hour or so went by when something wakened him. There was a faint earthy, musky smell in the room, one that hadn’t been there before. He heard the rustling of pages and, reluctant to surrender his solitude, sat still, hoping whoever it was would not notice the small fire almost buried in the fake logs, and would go away soon. A book dropped with a bang and was followed by, “Mierda!” and some low grumbling in Spanish. It appeared his rest was over. He peeked around the back of the armchair. A woman was crouched on the ground, picking up loose pages that had fallen out of a book. She was facing the back of his chair but completely unaware of his presence. Ink realized from the way her hair fell over her shoulders and almost touched the ground, his heart all of a sudden hammering hard against his chest, that it was Solana.

She stood up and flung her hair over her shoulder, and he noticed she had no makeup on and was dressed in a plain t-shirt and jeans. Without the heavy stage accessories, she looked younger, he guessed around eighteen or nineteen maybe, and even more beautiful. More human now than goddess. And there was nothing impassive about her demeanor right now. She was a little ball of emotion, eyebrows clenched, lips twisted, cheeks flushed. Ink read anger. Frustration. Unhappiness. Still grumbling, she spun around and crammed the book back in a tight spot on the shelves behind her, probably hoping no one would find the ripped pages. But then she grabbed another book and turned back towards the table, and towards Ink, still hiding in the armchair. This time, she handled the book carefully so as not to drop it, turning the pages slowly. But then, cursing again, she flung it on the table, impatient and annoyed. Gasping as she realized she might have damaged another book, she grabbed it, turning the pages again to inspect it. She set it down again, gingerly this time, on the table. Then, she looked around at the library, with no idea that she was under observation.

Feeling it was wrong for him to be spying on her, Ink stood up. Startled, Solana did a little leap, and grabbed the back of a chair. She looked at him, eyes wide open, now showing alarm. Then, she recognized him and her face relaxed a little, though still wary.

“Hello,” Ink said. He was supremely conscious of the marred side of his face, and kept his head at a slight angle away from her so she wasn’t staring directly at it. Again, he probably looked bizarre, but he didn’t care. Better to appear bizarre than ugly, right? He didn’t want her to focus on his birthmark, and took comfort from the fact that the light from the fire being behind him, his face was more or less in the shadows.

“Hola,” she stated, proudly, defiantly. Her voice was rich and pastoral, and conjured up images of herbs, flowers, soil. She tried to push the book she had grabbed out of sight. They stared at each other for a minute, then Solana looked away. Ink tried to force his mouth to say something, anything, feeling unbearably inadequate and stupid.

“Did I scare you?” he croaked out, cursing the nervous phlegm in his throat.

She stared at him, not saying anything. Great, Ink, he thought. Good way to start a conversation. Now she’s going to think you’re weird. He laughed a little, nervously, at which she raised her eyebrows.

Then he spat out, “You like to read?”

“Sí,” Solana answered. She looked down at the book on the table. “I mean, if I can.”

“You mean you can’t read English?” he asked, moving out from

behind the chair. She started a little, stiffening, and stared at him like a cat stopped in its tracks, as if to say, don't you dare come any closer. What was she so afraid of? Did she think he was some kind of monster because of his birthmark? He was used to reactions of disgust or awkwardness, but alarm was not one he usually encountered. Maybe it was because she was from a different country and unfamiliar with things. But then she relaxed, and he sensed that her tension was not about him. What has happened to you to make you so wary? Ink wondered.

She shook her head in answer to his question about her ability to read English, then looked down at the floor. "I don't read nothing. No English, no Spanish, nothing."

She couldn't read. Ink's heart cracked a little. Emotions swept over him, pulling his face in a dozen directions. She couldn't read. What hand has fate dealt you, you poor thing, that you have been denied the joy of reading? Of losing yourself in powerful words that touch your heart, liberate your soul, and transport you to places that don't recoil from you, where there is no judgment, or shame? As he stood looking at Solana's head bowed in unhappiness and shame, Ink knew a strong sense of purpose like nothing he had ever felt in his life. He knew it as sure as he knew that the world would shrivel up and die without the warmth and benevolence of the sun. It felt completely right.

"I'll teach you...that is...if you wish...to read, I mean," he stammered out, cursing his shyness, but driven by the confidence that this was meant to be, sending out a silent prayer that she not refuse him because of his looks. He wasn't proposing or anything, after all, just offering to tutor her.

She looked up at him fully then, her face proud and noble, like some tribal princess, but the shame lingered. In her face, he saw what it meant to her. Reading. Literacy. What separated humans from beasts. What would make her more than just something lovely for the viewing pleasure of men. Hope skimmed her face briefly. Then it was gone. Too risky? Futile? Life had made it difficult for her to hope.

"Only if you wish. No pressure," Ink said, quietly, still near the armchair, his face still in shadows. He sounded kind this time, and sure. And completely unthreatening.

Solana looked at Ink, looked down at the book on the table, then back at Ink, then back at the book, and said nothing.

"You let me know if you are interested," Ink said, and, turning back to face the fireplace, sat down on the chair again.

A moment went by. Then she said quietly, "Jes. I woo lie that." Ink realized after a second that she had just said, "Yes, I would like that." It was breathtakingly adorable.

Back in his room, breathtaking adoration came crashing down, and Ink was suddenly gripped by hairy tendrils of doubt. He would have to turn on more lights in the library for their sessions. Illuminate his ugliness. They couldn't study in dim lighting. And he wouldn't be able to keep his face averted all the time. That would be ridiculous. He thought of going through the different kinds of headwear Bill brought back from his trip to see if any of them could hide his birthmark. The only thing that might work was the Persian head scarf, the hijab. There were ones for men. It could be pulled up to cover most of his face if not all of it. He grinned wryly to himself, taking refuge in humor. He could try makeup. The amount of makeup needed to make his birthmark vanish would look fake and clownish, but better a clown than a freak of nature, right? He could get some sort of mask...maybe, if it was dashing enough, she wouldn't ask any questions. Maybe one of the countless Venetian masks Bill kept in his costume hoard. It would give him an air of mystery, of adventure...like the man in the iron mask...a prisoner of his misfortune. Or he could just tell her not to look at him. That could be a condition of them working together. I'll teach you to read and write, but you cannot look at my face. He sighed. He did not want to appear a victim in any way to her. There was so much more to him. It was becoming more and more important every minute that she see that. There would be no getting around it. He would just have to deal with her seeing him in all his glory. He could just bring it up first thing to get it out of the way. "So, what do you think of my birthmark?" he could say. What would she say? He wondered. Would she ask him where he got it? The dragon kiss seemed stupid now. It had worked for Bill, but he did not know if it would work for Solana. He briefly considered making up a story of catching some disease in Africa that had disfigured him. He could tell her it was an elaborate tattoo, a souvenir from a visit to Tahiti. He felt like he was going mad. Taking a deep breath, he made himself relax, thinking, O.K., it is what it is. And I am what I am. That's all there is to it. And if she thinks I'm a freak, she can find someone else to teach her to read and write. But he might have to get down on his hands and knees and beg her not to if she did that.

To his complete surprise, Solana showed no reaction whatsoever to his birthmark. She marched in like a soldier, ready for battle with illiteracy, a girl with a purpose. And acted like he was a completely normal, average, every day person with nothing obliterating one half of his face. It was a new experience for Ink. She had to be aware of it. There were posters and ads plastered all over the place. The vile mark on his face was the look of Bill's line of fashion, his signature. But she looked him right in his fully lit face when he talked, hanging on every word he said, like there was nothing abnormal about what she saw. Ink looked for signs of discomfort, the signs of evasion that he had seen on so many faces all his life. Even his co-workers, whose job it was to actually focus on his birthmark, study it and make it a part of a visual composition, showed signs of "trying-not-to-look." They were always professional in their attitudes, faces politely expressionless as they worked, but Ink could tell that they were trying too hard to act normal. That never went away. Perhaps it was out of consideration, courtesy, and not disgust or horror. No one wants to be caught staring at anybody, right? Whatever it was, it fed and sustained the wall between him and them.

But Solana didn't have to put on any kind of act. She had a purpose for their interaction which made his face irrelevant. He wondered if he should feel relieved that she wasn't focused on his birthmark...or hurt that his looks were irrelevant to her. Did she even see him? Maybe she was color blind. Wouldn't that be awesome.

Solana, however, seemingly unaffected by Ink, was fully aware of the effect she had on him. It was the effect she had on men of all ages and ethnicities. They didn't even have to touch her, and were happy just being near her. And she didn't mind. She much preferred those men to the kind that mindlessly drooled over her and wanted to own her. Like Bill Rhodes. Ink's reaction to her was that of a wide-eyed child on Christmas morning for the first time. It did not feel predatory and devouring like Bill Rhodes' attitude towards her. Her initial mistrust and caution had softened when she realized Ink was not a threat, and, while she tried to keep their relationship strictly that of teacher and student, she thought he was sweet. The next time she caught him staring at her, she told him so. "Joo are sweet," she said in her heavy Spanish accent, unfailingly omitting and mispronouncing English sounds in her adorable way. "But back to lesson, O.K.?"

That night, Ink lay awake in bed, starry eyed, thinking, "I'm sweet. She says I'm sweet." For the first time in his life, he didn't feel

like the boy who had been beaten up because of his blighted face. He didn't feel like the boy who despaired that he would ever be seen as anything more than his birthmark. He just felt like a boy. A normal, sweet boy. The sweet little boy, buried deep down inside by resentment, anger, and frustration, who just wanted to be known. The next day, he eagerly surrendered to a sweet-little-boy-lilt in his step as he walked, and didn't care who noticed.

He wanted them to meet every day, but was afraid of attracting attention. People were sometimes up and about even at 10 pm; the usual group having drinks in the bar, someone wandering down to the kitchen for a snack. People going out for whatever reason. So, for the time being, they met three times a week, on varying days, after 10 pm. After a grueling day of work, Ink should have been tired at 10 pm. But he wasn't. It was the only part of the day he looked forward to. Any fatigue he felt vanished in a puff of Solana-magic when they met. Her company revived him and nourished him. He came armed with ESL worksheets and printouts from the internet, and he relished every moment of the sessions, like one does a delectable piece of dark chocolate melting slowly on the tongue and lingering for hours afterwards. He loved the way she looked at him when he explained things to her, her brows furrowed, her face completely serious and focused. He loved the way she stumbled when she tried to read, sometimes with frustrated tears in her eyes, staying at it until she got it right. Anyone else might have been embarrassed to show frustration. But not Solana. She didn't care. She was a child, thoroughly in the moment, tenacious in her drive to accomplish something. Ink understood that this must have been something that had plagued her for a long time. She was there to learn, and that was her only concern. Sometimes, though, after she finished reading a line, he would just sit there and stare at her, reveling in her beauty and her magic until she said, "Ello?" and waved her hand in his face. Then they laughed, embarrassed, together. She moved him beyond words.

He got in the habit of leaving her discreet little notes under her door to communicate, in case he needed to cancel, reschedule or confirm. Phone calls made so much noise and could be monitored. He didn't really think anyone would monitor phone calls; that would be such a violation of privacy. But he didn't want anyone covertly overhearing anything either. And she wasn't in the habit of checking emails; just as well because those could be "accidentally" discovered as well. Was Ink being paranoid? Perhaps. What would be the worst that could happen if their tutoring sessions were discovered? They were completely innocent. Maybe, he just wanted to keep this to himself as long as possible. It was his 'baby.' It was all his and nobody else's. He

felt territorial and protective about it and did not want to share it with anyone. He did not want to have to answer any questions, deal with insinuations he knew would come up, or be made to feel like he needed to make any explanations. And underneath all that, the real reason, he suspected, was that he did not want Bill to know right away. He would know soon enough. There was little in his world that Bill did not know about. But he didn't have to know right away that Ink was spending precious time with his prized possession on a regular basis. It might not be a big deal...or it might.

He remembered again the look on Bill's face the night Solana had danced. He had gone from edgy to anguished to almost fanatical, all the while so riled up that he was unable to control his stutter. It had scared him. What was that really about? Maybe it was for the best that he not know. Some things were better left alone. Not just because he was the boss, but because he was also a friend. Possibly his only real friend. Someone who cared about his wellbeing and was there for him. Someone with whom he could spend time and not feel self-conscious and judged, someone with whom he felt accepted.

But his bond with Bill was about taking on the world in spite of their physical issues. Two things defined their relationship. The first was commiseration. To Bill, Ink was the boy who had been picked on because of his birthmark, and to Ink, Bill was the man who had been picked on because of his stutter. Bitterness towards the hand that fate had dealt them was what they had in common. What made them friends. The second was that Ink owed Bill his life. Literally. Bill housed and fed him and paid him. His kindness and generosity were overwhelming. But Ink still sometimes felt, against his will, that it was less about kindness and more about power. Bill was complete and indisputable lord of his domain and all the people in it. Those who accepted his generosity were like helpless insects caught in his web, unable to get out, in his debt forever. He had felt and pushed away that feeling of being trapped many times, only because his life had been so much better since Bill had found him. And there was the catch. What was the problem? He had gained a life where his looks were accepted, celebrated, and worth a magnanimous paycheck, in place of a life of discrimination and abuse, in exchange for eternal fidelity. Not so bad, really. Not like Bill made unreasonably barbaric demands or anything. And what - or who - else was there to claim his allegiance? There had been nothing so far that had made Ink question his commitment to him. But all of a sudden, there was Solana.

Solana also made him feel accepted. And, around her, Ink's birthmark ceased to exist. There was no commiseration in their time together. No pity. Sweet, lovely Solana who made his heart ache. Who

made Bill drool. The thought of Bill discovering the tutoring sessions made him anxious. Like unleashing something dark and terrifying onto the world.

Solana enjoyed finding Ink's little notes slipped under her door. Sometimes, they would just say, "Hi. See you soon." with a smiley face drawn on them. She knew he enjoyed her company. And, even though she wanted to keep their relationship strictly about the tutoring, it didn't hurt to be friendly, did it? In fact, the ones with the smileys were the ones Solana liked best. They made her smile. They were personal and cute and made her feel like she had a friend. And she knew that she did. Silly as he was, and a little naïve, he was a friend.

She didn't really have any friends, anyone she could talk to, except for Aisha, the African American girl who was one of Bill's cooks. Aisha lived in a couple of rooms on the ground floor with her mother, Bola. Bola was in charge of the cleaning crew. And, in return for cooking and cleaning, Bill Rhodes provided for them as he did for every other person he employed. Aisha brought Solana's food up to her room a few times and her big cheek to cheek smile poked through Solana's reserve. It was impossible not to smile back. Aisha also understood and spoke some Spanish, and they had clicked, even though Solana was probably about seven or eight years younger. They chatted when Aisha brought her food up, and sometimes she and Aisha would steal away on a nice day and go for a walk around the grounds, sit on the stone benches warmed by the sun, and chat. She was the closest to what Solana could call a friend. And now there was Ink.

She saw that he had not had a happy life. She saw that he was conscious of his face, and would sometimes try to angle it away from her. It didn't matter to her. In her life, she had learned that what was inside mattered more. Sometimes, when he was looking down at her work for a few minutes, she studied him frankly, wondering what he must have had to put up with in life because of his birthmark. She knew how stupid and hateful the world could be. So if he happened to look up, she smiled into his eyes. He saw that she was not looking at his birthmark, but at him. And, in return, in his eyes, she saw gratitude, appreciation, and also something she had almost given up hope on... respect. None of the leering lechery she saw in other men when they looked at her, but respect. The respect that every human being deserves, not because of wealth, power or accomplishments, but just because they exist. This was something she yearned for. Because Solana, like Ink, and like Bill Rhodes, was also a victim of a world full of unhappy, damaged people who empower themselves by denying others the respect that they, themselves, have been denied.

Ironically, her victimization wasn't the result of some sort of flaw

or defect in appearance or bearing, but of beauty. And poverty. She was poor and beautiful in a world where men brutally imposed power over disadvantaged women. Her beauty drew attention, and her lack of education, money and status stripped her of the basic human right to respect. She was a toy for men, especially those with money. Like Bill Rhodes. But not with Ink. Even though they really knew nothing about each other, just as she saw him, the boy beneath the birthmark, he saw her, the girl beneath the beautiful face.

Ink longed to know more about Solana. Where she came from, what made her who she was, what brought out her beautiful smile. But he was afraid to ask, afraid to stir up anything that might end their time together. Unexpectedly, he started to find out a little about Solana's background from Bill, the very person he was afraid to discuss her with.

Some nights, in between trips, Bill wanted to drink. Nights that were reserved just for Ink. While he appreciated the trust this implied, Ink had to reschedule the tutoring sessions. This made him feel guilty and nervous. Like he was deceiving his friend and patron. It was during one of these nights that, after a few glasses of wine, Bill started to talk about Solana. What did Ink think of their new dancer? Had he ever seen anything like it? Wasn't she amazing? At first, Ink was taken aback. Bill had never tried to discuss her with him before. He felt tentacles of anxiety stir in his stomach. Had he somehow discovered their library sessions? He detected no accusation or reproach in his tone, however. So he shook off the vile tentacles, and made himself relax into a state of placid wariness.

"Where did you find her?" he asked, succumbing to the urge to know despite warning signs that went off in his brain.

But again, Bill didn't show any signs of hostility.

"At a club in Paraguay on one of my trips," he said chattily, as if it was the most natural question to ask. "She was one of the dancers. She came up to me after the show and told me over drinks about her ambition to go to America. So I offered her a job here. She was enthusiastic and grateful, and accepted. But since she's been here, for some reason, she acts like she hates me." Yes, it was glaringly obvious that Solana did not care to be around Bill.

All of a sudden, racked with emotion, Bill blurted out, "All that I've had to overcome in life...the humiliation and degradation, the frustration, anger, if all that happened for a reason, it was her."

The tentacles stirred again. What did he mean?

"It's l-l-like everything has b-been leading m-mm-me to her," Bill continued, frenzied, starting to stutter. Then he stopped and took a breath and apologized. "She has the power to relieve all the torment in my head. But in-in-stead, Solana m-m-makes m-me stut-stut-stut-t-ter. Her and my ex-w-w-wife," he spat out.

A dark cloud descending on him, Ink began to realize just how intensely Bill felt about the girl. "Manic" was the word that came to mind again. It was disturbing, but Ink understood. He too had felt the

girl's magic. The difference was that while he just wanted to relish it and cherish it, Bill wanted to possess it, and became crazed, almost unbalanced, when he was denied it. She was, indisputably and frighteningly, his drug of choice.

"W-Whenever we meet for d-d-dinner in my quarters," Bill continued, "she sits there like stone. Sh-she responds t-t-t-o me in one syllable w-w-words, and makes no effort to hide her d-d-disdain and d-d-disgust."

A lifetime of rage flared in him, and his foot lashed out violently at the leg of the table they were sitting at. A half empty bottle of wine toppled over, and Ink watched, dazed, as if in slow motion, as it crashed on the wood floor, shattering, glass and red wine flying everywhere. The sound rang perilously in his ears. Completely buried in the dark cloud now, choking in the crushing grip of the tentacles and every other threat in life, he saw that he was facing the Bill that he had seen the night of Solana's first dance. The one he didn't know. The one he wanted to run from.

"Does she think she's b-b-better than m-me?" Bill railed, his voice starting to rise. "Because I st-stu-stutter? SH-SHE-SHE WAS-WAS-WAS N-N-N-NOTHING before I met her. Her family l-l-lived in a f-filthy shack and scrounged through garbage for th-th-things to sell!! N-now they live in a c-co-concrete flat that I P-P-PAY-PAY for," he spat out, spraying Ink on his marred cheek, "and want for nothing. And she treats me like I d-d-d-disgust her." His face twisted, jerked and convulsed in a grotesque parody of himself as he struggled to get the words out, and Ink finally gave in to the terrified impulse to look away.

Bill stopped abruptly and closed his eyes, and, for a few seconds, took several deep breaths. Ink took the opportunity to quickly wipe the spit off his cheek, and watched, impressed again, as Bill slowly regained control.

"She wanted to come to America," he continued calmly as if no spittle had flown out of his mouth a few minutes earlier. "I did not force her. I am not an ogre."

Ink nodded and solemnly agreed that Bill was definitely not an ogre...not quite, he thought to himself quietly. And why would Solana be disgusted by Bill? Was it the stuttering? Somehow, he didn't think so. She seemed more level-headed than that, judging from her lack of reaction to his own facial deformity. It had to be something else.

"Maybe she thought she would have more freedom..." Ink suggested hesitantly.

"She h-h-has free d-d-dom!" Bill barked, then quieted again. Breathed. "She h-has the freedom to go where she wants, a car at her disposal and enough money to go out and spend. I've seen her go for

walks in the garden, sometimes with Aisha, our cook.”

“Maybe it’s not turning out to be what she hoped? Maybe she misses her country, her family, friends, and wants to go back?” he suggested recklessly, knowing that he was probably playing with danger. It needed to be said. For Solana.

“No,” Bill shook his head. “She’s not a prisoner here.” He was quieter now, and tired, his passion vented. “She knows if she is unhappy she can return any time she wants. But she wouldn’t make half as much money doing anything in Paraguay as what I pay her. The money goes to help out her family over there. And over here I pay all her expenses. So all the money she makes goes straight to her family.”

Ink was puzzled. Solana did not have the air of someone who had all this freedom and independence. There had to be more to the story. But, much as he wanted, it was not his place to come right out and ask Solana about her arrangement with Bill. Not his business...yet.

Then Bill found out about their late night reading sessions. Two or three times a week, at various times of the day when his mood required it, he had Solana come to his quarters to keep him company. He would have meals sent up, and they would eat together. Solana ate; the poor background she came from made it impossible for her to refuse the food that Bill's cooks sent up: rich, succulent cuts of meat, seafood, fresh, plump vegetables and fruits, hearty breads and potatoes. She ate prudently, though with relish, another result of her background. The idea of gorging herself when everyone in her old neighborhood had little to eat was offensive. She would eat until she was just satisfied, then stop. Bill loved to watch her eat. Surreptitiously, of course. It was the only time around him when she allowed her demeanor to give a little. Her face relaxed. Her enjoyment of the food showed. And, when it was time for chocolate hazelnut gelato, her favorite, she became a little girl eating happily without a care in the world. Chocolate hazelnut gelato was a staple for their in-room dinners. It was the only time he didn't feel her disdain. Otherwise, not much interaction between them took place, as usual, and she sat stony-faced and hostile while he worked or read or watched T.V. But just having her there was enough. For now.

One night, hungry for her company, he sent a servant over to her quarters to fetch her. The servant came back and reported that she was not answering her door and might be in bed already. Up to now, if Bill happened to require her company in the evening, he let Solana know at least a few hours in advance, fortuitously giving her and Ink time to switch the tutoring session to a different night. But not so tonight. Tonight, there had been no prior indication that Bill might want to see Solana. It was also later than the usual time at which he sent for Solana in the evenings. Normally he sent for her around six p.m., and she returned to her rooms by ten or eleven. But tonight he had a sudden, manic need to see her that would not be ignored, and he didn't care how late it was even if he had to get her out of bed.

"Wake her up," Bill ordered. "Use the master key and go in if you have to." Privacy violation issues were non-existent where Solana was concerned. She hated him already, so why not?

The servant came back and reported that he had entered her quarters, and had knocked on her bedroom door, assuming she was asleep, then opened the bedroom door and called her name. But she was not there.

"Well, find her," Bill ordered again. Where on earth could she be?

The servant came back a half an hour later and told him she was in the library with Mr. Ink.

“What?” Bill asked, puzzled. “What are they doing?”

“Don’t know sir. I peeked through the doors and saw them, then came up to tell you right away. I would assume they are reading since they are in the library.”

Reading? Solana came from a poor family, an illiterate one. What was she doing, reading? What need had she to read? Was she even able to read? The thought unsettled him and scared him. The thought of Solana reading scared him. Education provided advantage. Up to now, he had enjoyed a sense of power over her, the power of the educated over the uneducated. Solana was supercilious enough with him as she was; who knows how she would be if she could read?

He thanked his servant and sent him away, then got up, put on a robe and went for a walk. It was almost eleven. The lights were dimmed in the hallways. The carpet muffled his slippers footsteps. The double doors to the library were slightly ajar, and slowly, guardedly, he crept up to them and peered through. Ink and Solana were sitting at the far end of the huge room, lit up by the recessed lights from the ceiling above them. He could not tell what they were talking about from the doorway. All he could hear was murmuring. But he could see. The scene was one of intimacy, familiarity, he perceived in astonishment. They didn’t look like they were reading. They were looking at each other, talking in low voices, smiling. He turned around and leaned against the wall. Hot, murderous rage and jealousy swept up his neck and face. The consuming rage of someone who had been picked on all his life. Of someone who had thought he finally had control and had realized that he might not. Caught in a blaze of emotion, for a minute he couldn’t breathe. All he could do was burn. He looked through the door again through a haze of red. How dare he. How dare she.

Quietly, he stole back to his room, climbed into the shower with all his clothes on, and turned the water all the way to sub-zero cold. He turned his face up to the full, razor-sharp blast of freezing water, and gave himself up to the stabbing discomfort. He hated feeling this way. When he was younger, he cut himself. Long, painful cuts that scarred his forearm from wrist to elbow, and that he kept hidden under long sleeves. But that just wouldn’t do anymore. He had an image to maintain. One that suggested being in control, in command. So these days, when the rage-heat struck, he turned to penetrating, numbing icy water.

After he had dried off, feeling calmer, though still unhappy, he went outside to the patio with a blanket, sat on one of his many

architect-designed chairs, and stared at the same dark sky that Ink had spent the night staring at when he too had been touched by Solana. Maybe it was completely innocent. If they were having an affair, they would not be in the library. Besides, Ink would not do that to him knowing how intensely he felt about the girl. Would Solana dare? Yes. He believed she was defiant and angry enough to try to get back at him. They had looked so friendly and close in the library. Like two people very comfortable with each other. The heat started to rise again, and he took deep breaths, to empty his mind, to manage the rage. He had to be sure of what was going on. Ink was a vital part of his life, his company. He could not risk Ink's friendship, could not risk losing him as an asset to his company, over nothing. But there was no mistaking the aura of intimacy he had perceived between them. The same Solana who was cold, aloof and unfriendly with him had looked just the opposite with Ink. He couldn't hear what they had been discussing, but he could see her expression as she listened to Ink talk. She had looked utterly engrossed in what he was saying. No sign of boredom or impatience. How dare she. She was a lowly dancer. How dare she showed him, Bill Rhodes, master and owner of everything in his realm, anything but compliance and humility? She needed reminding of her place.

He would have her dance more often. Up to now, it had been once a week, sometimes once every other week. Maybe he would have her dance every day. That would put her in her place. Remind her of her worth. Ok, maybe not every day. Friday, and another day... Wednesday was a light day; Wednesday night would be good. Two days a week. And for longer. Instead of an hour, she would dance for two hours. He might be kind and let her take a short break in between. He might not. Posters would go up in town and invitations would be sent out as reminders so there would always be a crowd to watch her. Twice a week. He would force her to dance scantily clad if he wanted to. Slut.

That Friday night, Bill had Solana perform. She was clothed, but barely. Bikini top instead of blouse. See-through skirts. He had had flyers put up at the local bars. Free liquor and free show attracted a different class of people; winos, bums. Drunken yelling and hooting was encouraged. He heard someone yell out, "Hey gorgeous show us some booty!" Some of the employees had to get up and leave, mortified at the lewdness and depravity of the crowd. They felt sorry for Solana and wondered what had possessed Bill.

Ink made himself sit through it, outraged, but determined to be there for Solana. She looked desperate and frazzled. Her eyes went straight to his table and latched onto him. Ink tried to convey strength and encouragement through his gaze, to tell her that she would survive this. He kept his eyes steady on her, and sensed, more than saw, Solana

slowly become more centered, less affected by the crowd. He glanced at Bill now and then to make sure he wasn't watching him. But Bill was too busy watching Solana and egging the crowd on with his own hoots, a growing number of empty shot glasses collecting on the table in front of him. Ink felt ashamed of his friend. The enjoyment Bill was getting from the whole scene made him a bully, the very thing they had both had to endure and fight off all their lives. He had never seen him like this.

Bill himself felt twinges of remorse and doubt when he saw Solana flee after the show was over, eager to get away. Had he gone too far? But, in the end, the satisfaction of putting her in her place won. He was the one who held the strings.

The next day, Bill saw Ink at breakfast. Ink seemed quiet. Could he be upset about the show last night? But it wasn't like he was a boisterous person anyway, Bill told himself to shut down the guilt that nagged the back of his mind. He was probably just imagining things. He wanted to ask him about Solana's performance last night. Part of him thought it might be more confrontational than he was prepared for. Part of him wanted it. Wanted to play the game. Wanted to win. Besides, if Ink had nothing to hide, there shouldn't be any problem, right? He got some waffles and went and sat down with him. Ink stiffened a little, and a subtle change in expression went over his face. Bill wondered what was going through his head. He casually asked him what he thought of last night's show. Did he enjoy Solana's dancing? Did he think she was worth keeping? Okay, maybe he went a bit too far with that one.

"Sure," Ink said. Bill saw the veil that went down on his face. Saw through it.

"Sure?" Bill chuckled. "That's it? Sure? So you mean you're not m-masturbating in your room after her p-performance?" Damn. He needed to control what came out of his mouth. And the stutter. Wouldn't do to have Ink think he was worked up about anything. Ink stared at him speechless. He didn't know how to respond to that.

"Because that's why I got her you know. That's the e-effect I want her to have on people." Bill continued, again cursing his inability to stop. When Ink still didn't say anything, Bill said, "Relax. I'm just kidding. I do want people to be in awe of her though. She's phenomenal, isn't she?"

"I suppose," Ink shrugged, still cautious.

Suddenly Bill found himself impatient and enraged once again. Ink was keeping things from him. He owed him, and he was keeping things from him. What kind of friend was that? What kind of loyalty? After everything he had done for him. Putting a pasty grin on his face, he stood up to leave.

"Well, you have a productive day, my friend," he said, and walked away, leaving the waffles on the table. The game had gotten old quickly.

Ink stared at his back, sensing he was angry. Bill had wanted more from him. Feedback, support. What had he wanted from him? Comradely luridness? Damn his inability to think quickly. He should have tried to go along with him. But he couldn't even think of it. He couldn't think of Solana in terms of masturbation. What would Bill

think? Would he suspect Ink was hiding something? But Ink was always quieter than others. So his lack of comment was actually completely in character. In fact, if he had tried to play along with comradely lurid sexual jokes, it would definitely have been forced and strange. He remembered the time when Bill had first spoken of his obsession with the girl, however. Ink had thrown out some comments which, pitifully ineffective as they were, had at least been an effort at camaraderie. An effort at making Bill feel important. But that had been then. Before he had formed a connection with Solana as her tutor. As a friend. When he thought of her now, he felt nurturing, protective. Respectful. Not masturbative. He shuddered in revulsion at the thought.

The next few days, when Ink ran into Bill, it was awkward. Bill was borderline hostile. If he didn't have to talk to him, he ignored Ink completely. Looked right through him as if he weren't there at all. Acted busy, preoccupied. When they had to talk to each other directly, he forced a smile on his face. But the smile was distant, wary. Their friendship had lost some ground; but why? Why would Bill be so angry because of Ink's lack of response about Solana? Ink didn't understand. As far as he knew, Bill did not know about their sessions...or did he? Wasn't he overdue for a trip anyway? He hadn't left town since his last trip, which had been over three weeks ago.

What Ink didn't know was that, in the evenings, in the silence of his room, without the affairs of the day to occupy him, Bill's mind went obsessively to Ink and Solana. His imagination and emotions started to run wild, getting more and more distorted. What were they doing? Why were they with each other? What could they possibly have in common? Images of them in bed went through his mind. Solana on top, arching her back in pleasure, hair thrown back... his head wanted to explode. He wished it would. Then maybe he could have some peace. He tried to control his mind, tried to remind himself of who he was and how far he had come, that it was beneath him to give in to base thoughts like these. But the thoughts were tenacious and wouldn't leave him alone. They plagued his brain like a million buzzing insects, driving him mad. He had to find out what they were up to.

So the night found him sneaking down to the library to spy on them. Sneaking around his own house. And he hated himself for doing this. It made him feel stupid. Inferior. It reduced him to what the world had labeled him because he stuttered. But sitting alone in his room with the buzzing was worse.

Some nights Ink and Solana were not there, and he stood around the corner and waited to see if they showed up...sometimes for a whole hour. Why weren't they there? Were they somewhere else? In her bedroom? In his? He felt frustrated, desperate, powerless. Betrayed.

Like forces beyond his control were taking over.

When they were there, he watched them intently. Watched their body language, their expressions, listened to the tone of their voices for any sign of intimacy. They were usually too absorbed in what they were doing to sense themselves being watched. For now. He finally established that Ink was teaching her to read and write. He realized that they didn't meet in the library every night, but around three times a week, and not always on the same days. And he knew they were in their respective rooms on the other nights. His servant had told him so. So it appeared innocent for now. But when he was back in his room, the thoughts battered his head until he wanted to scream. He did not like the idea of her learning to read. If she wanted to learn to read and write, why hadn't she come to him? He would have gotten her a top-of-the-line, professional tutor. Ink was no tutor, had no training in teaching anything. In fact all he had was that gross birthmark. That was his identity, his livelihood. That was all he was. Shame and disgust swept over him. He did not want to lower himself to this. To the level of the world he had spent his life trying to overcome. Just another ignorant person making fun of someone's disfigurement. A friend's disfigurement. But lately they had not felt like friends. Friends did not keep secrets from each other, right? Why hide the tutoring? There was only one reason they would hide it...and that was because they enjoyed it. He noticed their body language changing over time. He saw her reach out and touch him, lean close to him to see something. They were getting more familiar, more comfortable with each other in a way he himself could never hope to achieve with Solana. The muscles in his face twisted in anger until he wanted to claw them out. And he scurried back to his quarters like a giant rat, startling himself again at the violence which threatened to overtake him, and sat in his room trying to rid himself of it. I am a human being, he told himself. A powerful, important human being. I have no reason to feel this way. But the feeling would not go away. It was their fault. Ink and Solana's.

Then one night, Ink realized they were being watched. Bill had been observing them for a few weeks now, but their dedication to the endeavor they had taken on, and their growing enjoyment in each other's company kept them preoccupied. This night, however, Ink caught a fleeting reflection, a flash of something in the window across from the door. It was far enough away that it was almost imperceptible, and he wondered if he imagined it, because the next minute it was still again. But every nerve in his body was all of a sudden widely alert and tingling, sensing a threat. He knew without a doubt that someone was watching them, and the thought came to him that it had to be Bill Rhodes. Who else would it be? He had seen the mania in him, knew he was capable of it. His head swam with images of Bill in his pajamas and a night cap, like some kind of ugly Dickensian character, lurking in the hallway with a candle, spying on them. It felt surreal, as in a dream, a nightmare. Was he becoming delirious?

But all of a sudden things made sense. Bill's recent coldness towards him. He knew Ink and Solana were meeting, even if he didn't know exactly why; so, he knew Ink had not been perfectly honest with him when he downplayed his relationship with Solana. Ink knew this would not bode well with Bill Rhodes at all.

He started to withdraw a little from the scene in the library. If Solana got too close, he pulled back. When she smiled at him, with the comfort and familiarity that had developed between them over the months, he didn't smile back, and didn't meet her eyes.

Solana looked at him strangely the first time he drew back. She had just touched him on the arm to emphasize something she had said. Then, when he continued to be distant, she retreated herself, like a confused, wounded pet. Pride kicked in, and she sniffed and shrugged him off, focusing all her attention on the work. Fine. If Ink wanted to get strange all of a sudden, fine. It was not like she had never experienced that before. Men were just stupid. Did he think she "liked" him or something? That she wanted him? Dios. She definitely did not want Ink, and she had to make that clear.

But she hoped this "pulling back" was just a temporary thing, whatever it was. The fact was that Ink was kind and respectful to her and treated her like she mattered. He was the first man in her life to do so. The boys and men back in her old neighborhood did not know how to be respectful to women. That was their culture. They were not bad people, but they had grown up with the notion that women were there to serve their needs. And the men at her work all wanted something

from her. Any “respect” they showed her was part of an act to that end. Ink, on the other hand, was actually doing something for her, teaching her to read, and wanted nothing in return. In the beginning, she had wondered if he would want any kind of payment. She had gone through all kinds of scenarios in her head of how she could turn him down and not lose his friendship. But over time, as he continued to teach her and made no demands, she had realized with relief that he really did not have an ulterior motive. And, as it is with people who make no demands, it is easy to be with them, to learn to like them and to enjoy them. To love them.

But when the day of their next session dawned, Solana found a note from Ink under her door, canceling their meeting and telling her he would let her know when he could do it again. Now she was really worried. No more lessons for a while? For how long? She was making such progress. What if she forgot everything she had learned? Again she found herself wondering if he thought she was developing feelings for him. Could it be that he actually did think that? And would that be so bad if she was? Sometimes, she had caught him looking at her like an adoring puppy dog. She knew he liked her. So what was going on? She decided to pull back as well. The next time she passed him in the hallway, she barely acknowledged him before looking away. So now both Solana and Bill were ignoring Ink.

At this point, Ink was more worried about the latter. He knew Bill could be mean. He was terrified of what he would read into their secret sessions. How he would react. After that night, he was not comfortable with meeting in the library.

The next time Bill hosted a show, Ink wondered if he should take his usual place at Bill’s table. It would be strange if he didn’t. It would be the first time since the night they had bonded that he didn’t sit at the Lord and Master’s table, and a clear admission that something was wrong. But if he did, it would be strange as well. They would be forced to go through some sort of charade. That could, however, pave the way for their friendship to heal. And Ink realized he would like nothing better than to go back to the way they had been with each other. The strain of the current state of things was unbearable, and he had been lying awake at night wondering what to do about it. Maybe the moment he had been putting off, the time to share his “baby,” his precious Solana-time, with Bill and the rest of the world, was finally here. Maybe he should just come out and tell Bill he was tutoring Solana. Trying to maintain secrecy when it was obvious that Bill was aware of something would just prolong and sustain the tension.

But the thought of telling Bill filled Ink with dread. Images of Bill drooling and worked up over Solana went through his head. It would

not be a simple matter at all. Maybe he should just stay in his room and skip the show that night. But that would be strange too. He had not missed a show yet. He decided to go and see what happened. Let life take its course.

To his surprise, Bill waved cheerily at him when he entered the room, giving him no choice but to head over to his table. He noticed with uneasiness that Solana was there, also seated at Bill's table. The tension was palpable. She sat like a statue, unresponsive to both Bill and Ink. Ink sensed her confusion and hurt, but he didn't want to reach out to her at the moment. Better let Bill cool down.

Bill, on the other hand, did not know why Ink and Solana were ignoring each other, but he liked it. They looked unhappy. He liked that too. Whatever had happened, the library had been empty the last few times he went looking for them, and evidently they were not meeting anymore. It empowered him. He was back in command again. The thought that they had discovered his spying on them momentarily threatened his composure. He did not like the image that painted of him. But he shook it out of his head. He was not in the mood to go there. That night he had brought in a local production of dancers, and the three of them sat through the show, pretending fascination, avoiding each other. Now and then Ink and Bill looked at each other briefly and gave a thumbs up, or some other hollow acknowledgment of their enjoyment. But it was mercifully loud, and impossible to carry on any kind of conversation, even if they had wanted to. Usually Ink and Bill would linger over a drink after the show, chatting, catching up. But not this time. By the end of the night, Bill had had enough of the farce, and wishing them a good night, left. He glanced back as he was leaving and saw Solana get up and walk off. It didn't look like she addressed Ink at all. And Ink sat there by himself, looking glum. Interesting.

A couple of weeks went by without any communication between Ink and Solana. Then one night Solana found a note slipped under her door. She stared at it for a few minutes, affronted, conflicted. He actually thought that after ignoring her for a couple of weeks, he could just slip a note under her door, did he? She snatched it off the floor and took it over to the fireplace in her bedroom, drawing back her arm to throw it in the fire. Then she put it down on a side table and went and sat down by her window. She stared out at the dark, trying to pretend the note didn't exist, dying to see what he had to say, anxious in case it was bad news. Maybe when she looked back it wouldn't be there. But the note would not be ignored. It throbbed and pulsed on the table like a living thing. So she went and got it. If it didn't begin with some sort of apology, she would throw it right into the fireplace. But there was no apology. And she didn't throw it anywhere. All it said was "Meet by

Pan at 10 pm tomorrow night.” There was a statue of Pan in a little niche in the garden, surrounded by tall hedges. Ink and Solana had both talked about that statue being their favorite from all the ones in the garden. Her immediate reaction was to disregard it. And him. Who did he think he was? After ignoring her and causing her distress for a couple of weeks, he orders her to meet him in the garden and expects her to do as he says?

The next day, she vacillated. Part of her remembered how sweet he was, and how he looked at her and treated her, and could not imagine any intentional malice on his part. Something must have happened to make him act the way he had for the last two weeks. Then again, self-preservation intervened, and she told herself she had a right to be angry and hurt and needed him to apologize if he wanted to see her. She would not go. By the end of the day, she thought that maybe that was the very reason he wanted to see her: to explain, to apologize, and she needed to give him that chance. The fact that he wanted to see her implied that he cared enough to make some effort. Right? She would go. She owed him that much for the free lessons. If the conversation went in a direction that made her unhappy, she could always leave. What if he just wanted to tell her he couldn't keep up with the lessons and didn't want to keep her wondering any more? What if he wanted to tell her he had picked up on her growing feelings for him and wanted to end them before they went any further? She didn't think she could stand it. Better to keep wondering and keep some pride than be completely humiliated. She would not go. Let him wait by Pan by himself and see what it felt like to be disappointed.

In the end, she went. Because she really had no other choice. It was the moon's pull on the tides. It would not be denied.

It was semi-dark when she reached Pan, the moon being partially behind clouds, and the tall hedges made a small fort around him. She liked this version of Pan. Unlike other versions she had seen, the grown man with goat legs, pointy beard and huge horns, sinister and threatening, this one was a younger boy, with small, harmless horns, standing on one leg and playing the flute. It was whimsical and charming. At first she didn't see Ink because of the darkness, and wondered if she had made a mistake coming. Maybe she should leave before it was too late and she was crushed completely. But then he materialized from the hedges, and she realized he would never have stood her up. That she knew him better than that, even though they had not known each other that long. She knew him.

He took her hand and led her to a stone bench near Pan. When they were seated and he went to let go of her hand, she held onto it, and after a moment's hesitation, he let his fingers wrap around the tender

skin of her palm and returned her grip. The bench was small and their knees met, pulled away, and met again. There was silence for a few minutes in which they just sat and savored being near each other. The two weeks they had ignored each other had been long. There was no need for words. Their clasped hands and touching knees spoke volumes. Finally they looked at each other. Ink's face was softly lit up by the moon. Solana reached up and touched the marred side of his face, stroked it gently. And Ink was filled with the wondrous emotion of deep and complete acceptance that he had never experienced in his life. Even though they had only known each other for a few months, he felt understood and loved for who he was, for all that he was. Tears filled his eyes and spilled out to meet her hand. It was a loving homecoming after an eternity of searching. They kissed deeply and completely, breathing each other in and feeling each other in every fiber of their beings. Ink put his arm around Solana and they sat there, unwilling to spoil the moment with words.

Solana finally broke the silence to say that he must not love her.

"I am not good for you," she whispered in shame, face turned towards Pan and away from Ink.

Ink looked at her in complete amazement. Given what they had just experienced with each other, it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard.

"I am not clean," Solana continued.

"Why? Because you are sleeping with Bill?"

"I have not slept with Bill. Not jet," she said in her Spanish accent. When Ink looked surprised again, she continued, "He is waiting. I think he wants me to like him before we have sex." And she didn't like him. Ink understood. Bill wanted acceptance from Solana. He did not want to force her. A chill went through Ink at all the implications of this.

"You are not unclean," Ink said firmly. "You are an amazing dancer and a beautiful girl. Why do you think you are unclean?"

She took her hand from Ink and looked down at her lap. When she looked back up at him, her face was anguished.

"What is it, Solana? What makes you unhappy?" Ink asked, suddenly worried.

"I am not just dancer," she whispered, looking away at Pan again.

"But you said you have not slept with Bill..." he stopped as he realized what she was trying to tell him. She had not slept with Bill. But she had slept with others. She was not just a dancer. She did more. For money. His head buzzed with images of Solana, dressed like a prostitute in some club, face heavily painted, leading men to her room with a smile. He felt like he was going to be sick. And yet he had to

admit he had wondered. Briefly and fleetingly wondered if she had ever been more than just a dancer. Then, realizing he was happier not knowing, he had brushed it out of his mind.

“Why don’t you leave, Solana?” he asked, grabbing her hand again. “Bill says you are free to leave anytime you want. To go back. Is it the money?”

She stared at him, different emotions flashing across her face. Disbelief, anger, hopelessness.

“I cannot leave,” she said, looking down. “I hate it here and I cannot leave.”

“But you wanted to come to the U.S, right? To make money? To help your family? You went to Bill yourself...”

“He tell you that?” she asked, snatching her hand from his and jumping up. Then she took a deep breath and sat back down. Took his hand again. Kissed it. “Let me tell joo story of Solana,” she said.

SOLANA

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Solana woke up to the teeth-jarring, clattering and clanging of rickety trucks as they rolled by, and the screaming of children playing in the dirt outside. She sat up blearily on her threadbare mattress and coughed at the familiar fumes of exhaust and garbage. The air outside had been replaced a long time ago by noxious vapors from droves of high emission vehicles packed so tightly on the road that one almost had to climb over them to get through. And the landscape had been replaced by hills and fields of foul-smelling trash, a source of income for the poor who picked through them daily to see what they could find to peddle. Even the nights, when there were fewer cars on the road, brought no reprieve from the poisonous air. It seeped through the gaps in the plywood walls of huts, and saturated the makeshift cardboard ones, drenching everything inside from mattresses to food to hair. The squatters were used to it, and some did not even remember fresh air.

A glance at the cheap watch on her wrist, given to all the girls by the boss so they could get to work on time, told her it was 11am. It was normal for her to sleep this late, and sometimes even later, since she worked at night. At the club, the girls were allowed to sleep as long as they wanted during the day so they would be rested and alert for the evening show. But this was her one day a month at home, wretched as it may be. For a day, she did not have to worry about depraved men in designer clothing leering at her, pawing at her, following her into her little room at the club. She did not want to spend it sleeping.

She brushed a cockroach off her blanket. Cockroaches were a part of their lives, a small nuisance compared to the plight of so many others in the shanty town settlement of Chacarita, in the heart of downtown Asunción, Paraguay. Families squeezed together in glorified cardboard boxes overhung with filthy rags and newspaper to keep the weather out, boxes that were mercilessly swept away during the rainy season, and which the residents came back to rebuild over and over again, because they had no other options.

Their children brushed their teeth in filthy water spewing from faucets on the street, mangy, flea infested dogs sniffing around them. One might wonder what the point was of brushing teeth in water that would surely bring dysentery, with toothbrushes that had been scored at the dumps, if the purpose was to clean. By the time the children reached their twenties, if not sooner, most of their teeth would be rotting. But rituals of hygiene like this, however futile, were measures to hang onto their humanity. After brushing their teeth, they ran off like

the children that they were to their daily jobs: climbing and rummaging through fetid mounds of garbage in search of treasure to sell for something to eat. Right next to the people peeing and defecating in sidewalk drains because they had nowhere else to go. One walked by them as if it wasn't happening. It couldn't be. No one wanted to acknowledge the shame of a human being exposing his private parts to the world as he relieved himself on a public sidewalk. Then again, everyone was used to it. Dignity was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Solana's family was one of the few fortunate ones who had a home with plywood walls. The slanted corrugated iron roof kept the rain out. Since Solana had gotten work two years ago, they had managed to install some plumbing in the back for a small outdoor sink and faucet, and a shower stall. They now had running water to boil and drink, and brush their teeth in, when the plumbing worked. Between her job, her father's now and then factory job, and her mother's house cleaning, they had enough to afford their scanty lodging, and food to share sometimes with neighbors who didn't have any. A daily meal of "sopa paraguaya," cornbread made with cheese and onions. The cheese was sparse. The onions were plenty. Vendors were eager to sell their onions for a pittance when they started to spoil. And, if one was lucky, one might be able to find some that had been thrown away that still had life in them. Cooking was done in a separate "kitchen" shed they shared with a few other families. Others cooked their food on makeshift fire pits out in the dirt.

All four of them slept in the one room, Solana and her brother on one mattress and her parents on another. They were grateful for what they had, cockroach and all. At least they had some privacy from the world, if not from each other. More than those living in cardboard boxes. Every fart, snort and grunt could be heard through those. Solana got up and climbed over her brother, ten years younger than her eighteen years, a product of one night when her father had decided to throw some of his hard earned money to the winds on cheap tequila. At that time his was the only income, and they would be short on food money until he got paid next.

If Jorge had taken the time to think about it, he might have restrained. But it had been a bad day at the factory. His boss had been especially cantankerous and had seemed to single him out to vent on. On leaving work he had once again stared with anger and resentment at the shiny buildings where the rich lived and worked, just a few hundred meters ahead. "A la mierda," he had mumbled sulkily, and headed straight to the dirty little shack that served as a bar for the poor. It might not have leather seats and glass block walls like the bars in the city, but it had cheap tequila. He would never be able to afford, nor be

accepted, at the fancier city bars.

Solana still remembered the night when he had stumbled home, spraying the entire room with liquor breath, and fallen on her poor sleeping mom despite her protests. She had buried herself in her flimsy blanket in an effort to drown the animal grunts of her father's "pasión" coming from the other end of the room. The sounds of her mother's resigned compliance. And the result was Jacobo, her baby brother, ten years younger than she.

Any anger they felt towards Jorge for his lack of control and stupidity disappeared when Jacobo was born. The first time Solana laid eyes on the beautiful little baby boy suckling at his mother's breast, she fell in love. This was their little thing, her brother, and they would happily stretch their meagerness to include him. But unknown to Jorge, Solana's mother, Noemi, went and consulted with Abuela Lucía, the neighborhood grandmother, nicknamed affectionately "Lalu," about special herbs to prevent their family from growing any further. She was determined not to have any more children. And she didn't.

Solana walked outside and looked around. The sun was bright through the haze of polluted air, and she had to squint her eyes to take in the sight. Neighborhood kids kicking a ball around. Women stoking fires in pits in the ground to prepare to cook. Clothes strung up between huts to dry. They were oblivious to the trash around them, cigarette cartons, broken bottles of cheap liquor and beer, rotting food, rubble. She waved at Lalu as she came out of her cardboard dwelling, carrying a pot to put on the fire, and said "Buenos días." Lalu waved back and answered, "Mba'eichapa nde pyhareve? (How are you in the morning?)" in Guaraní, the language of their ancestral indigenous Indians. Most people in the area spoke both languages, passed down and picked up through generations, though the elderly obstinately stuck to Guaraní. It was common to hear a mixture of Spanish and Guaraní called Jopará. Everyone understood each other no matter which language was spoken. Despite their dire circumstances, and the fact that they were constantly reminded of how poor they were because of their close proximity to the wealthy city center, the community that had developed in this town of squatters was a strong one. Their kids ran in and out of each other's homes; everyone's door was open to everyone else. If someone got sick, everyone rallied together to help. If someone needed food, they all pitched in whatever they could. They had a sense of kinship that was beyond those who had their own homes, cars, good jobs, and health insurance, because they needed each other to survive. They were like one huge family and they kept each other going.

Often they would gather in the dirt yard in the center of their settlement in the evenings, as if they lacked for nothing in the world, to

sing and dance, a highlight of the day for everyone. There were those who sang, and those who played instruments found in the nearby dump, usually broken. They drummed on garbage cans. The children sang, clapping their hands, laughing with joy. And they danced. The adults danced, and the children danced, and sometimes even the seniors, toothless grins, age spots, walking sticks and all, tried to get up and hobble to the music. For a few hours they put aside the life that they had been dealt, the sense of despair, of wondering why their prayers to Jesus Christ did not help them. But they stayed tenaciously faithful through everything. Even the poorest of the poor had pictures of Christ in their homes. They hung garlands on them and lit candles and held onto their belief that the almighty worked in mysterious ways and had reasons not understood by mere mortals. Because to give up on the almighty would be to give up on hope. Then they might as well be dead.

But with time, as the almighty continued to fail them, for Solana, dancing took the place of religion. Ever since she was a little girl of five, people were entranced when Solana danced. They watched and cheered and clapped. As she approached sixteen, it became her escape, her deliverance. She threw herself into the music, completely shutting out everything. It transported her from their existence of poverty and disease and took her to places she could never describe in words even if she wanted to. Places where the lack of material things didn't matter, where every soul was equally worthy and an equally vital part of something much bigger and beautiful. When she was little, people loved to watch her spunk and enthusiasm. As she grew, they were mesmerized and transported themselves by this beautiful girl, her eyes closed and focused on something ethereal, curls, scarves and skirts swirling around in the light of the blazing fire until one couldn't tell them apart. They all stopped dancing to watch her, then whooped and hollered with all their hearts and souls when she collapsed on the dirt ground, spent, and back from her journey. Boys from their community circled around her, eager to help her up, to be a part of her magic. Eager to be more. But at sixteen, she wasn't interested.

Maybe hearing her dad's grunting in the night had turned her off being with men. She knew what men and women did together, and it just sounded gross and dirty. Once a boy had dared to steal a kiss and grope her growing breasts, and she had slapped him and kneed his balls so hard that he had fallen over and landed in the dump behind them, clutching his groin in pain. Then she had leaped on him and proceeded to hit him a few more times, spewing out as many swear words as she knew, until he had almost been buried in the putrid garbage. "Right where you belong!" she had said, before stalking off. He never

approached her again, but told stories about how she had almost bitten his tongue off, and nobody else dared approach her after that either. That was perfect for Solana. Boys were stupid. Groping at her chest like that. She had caught one trying to sneak a peek at her through a hole while she showered, and had jammed a toothbrush hard through the hole. It had come away with some blood on it, and the boy had run away squealing like a pig. She had no patience for them.

Solana's dancing was what had landed her a job. She thought back to the night when she turned sixteen and was dancing her heart out. Their group had noticed some unfamiliar men standing nearby. Their clothes, while not expensive, were not squatter rags. Drunk on cheap tequila and music, they had not thought about it much. What was the harm in strangers watching their Solana dancing? It would show them that there were beauty and magic even in poverty and filth.

The next morning, while Solana's father was at work, and her brother was out at the garbage dump with some other neighborhood boys, there was a knock on Solana's door. Her mother, whose shift was in the afternoon that day, cautiously opened the door. It was one of the strangers from last night, smiling broadly. He held a box of chocolates wrapped in shiny red paper and tied with a bow. Her guard up instantly, Noemi asked him what he wanted. He asked them to come outside and speak to him. She slammed the door in his face, scared and wary, and he spoke through it.

"My name is Enrique. I have a job for your daughter. Nothing bad. Promise. Pay is very good," he said in Spanish. Solana and her mother looked at each other. At sixteen, it was time for Solana to graduate from garbage picking to a job at the factory for the pitiful pay they offered. Most girls were there a lot sooner, but Noemi had delayed her going as long as she could. She knew what happened to young girls in the factory. She knew from experience that the world was not kind to poor young girls. Especially ones as beautiful as Solana. But they couldn't hold out any longer, especially with Jorge spending his earnings on liquor the way he was, and sometimes missing work because he was passed out, drunk.

"Let's hear him out," Solana said. "We can always say no, right?"

So Solana and her mother went outside to hear what Enrique had to say. He worked in a nightclub in town and was looking for dancers. "Very good place. No hanky panky," he said.

News about a girl who danced like fire had spread, and he had come down to take a look for himself. So that was who the strangers were the night before. He raved about Solana's dancing. Told them she was something special. Told them how much she would get paid and that she would get to keep all her tips. It was more than her father or her mother was bringing home. Her mother was troubled. She had some idea of what happened at these clubs beside dancing. She had also heard stories of girls being kidnapped for human trafficking. Girls who were often sent far away, to America or Europe, and they never

saw their families again. But Enrique saw the angry, protective look on her face and hastily reassured them that there would be no sex.

Solana's face flamed. The thought of someone doing to her what her father did to her mother disturbed her. But the thought of the pay was enticing. They would be able afford some extra things. And the man said there would be no sex, and she would be doing what she did best, what she did effortlessly and instinctively, and get paid for it. Wasn't that the ideal job? Plus she was pretty sure she could take care of herself. She knew man's weakness, the place between his legs, and knew what a hardy blow to that area did.

"Mama, I wish to check it out," she said. "It would pay better than the factory, and I love to dance."

"And what if a customer wanted more?" Noemi asked, tortured at the thought of subjecting her darling girl to the ultimate humiliation of rape.

"They are told to watch only. That is the policy of our club," the man said.

"What if they offer a lot of money?" Noemi insisted, not completely convinced.

"Your daughter is free to leave whenever she wants. This is a job, not slavery."

Solana interceded again. "Mama, can we go and look together? And if you have doubts, I will not do it. You know best." The man nodded and said they would be welcome to come and check out the establishment before agreeing to anything.

So, at 7am the next day, Solana and Noemi walked the short distance between their slum and downtown to visit the club. The walk took 40 minutes. Garbage-ridden dirt roads gave way to paved sidewalks. Cardboard huts gave way to concrete high-rises, giant billboards advertising luxury products, people weaving their way around honking cars, holding handkerchiefs up to their faces to avoid breathing the exhaust. Still congested and polluted, this life spoke of wealth that the squatters could only imagine. The building they were looking for was a three story building with rows of neon lighting wrapping all the way around. More color was given by patches of mosaic and colored glass on the walls. When they walked in, they stopped and stared. It was the first time either of them had been in a building in this part of town. It was huge. The interior was like a kaleidoscope of sparkling luster in all different colors. Copper columns. A granite bar with brass countertops. Chrome fixtures. More brass around glass tables. A huge piece of artwork hung on one wall that looked like it was put together from various metals. And there were mirrors. On all the walls where one would expect to see windows, there

were mirrors to reflect back all the shine, doubling the effect. It was disorienting and gave the women doubts about this gleaming world that was so different from theirs. Solana thought it was showy and ugly. Across the bar at the other end of the room, there was a stage. Strobe lights hung from the ceiling, and sparkly velvet curtains partitioned the area through which they presumed the dancers came out. There were spotlights situated at different locations along the walls and ceilings. Noemi had been expecting the smell of alcohol. But all they smelt was lemony cleaning detergent. A group of girls were sitting on couches in the corner chatting, laughing. There was food on the coffee table in front of them, and they ate while they chatted.

“We give them breakfast before they get off work,” said Enrique. “They work until four am, then clean up, have breakfast at 5:00, then they are free to go. If they don’t want breakfast, they can leave earlier, but we give them good food to keep them strong and nourished. We’re having breakfast a little later today so you can join us.”

He took them over to the group and introduced them one by one to Solana and her mother. They looked like they ranged in age from late teens to early twenties. The girls, however, did not look oppressed or scared, but content. Not unhappy to be there. Were they putting on an act for them? Solana thought it all looked great. She didn’t have many girlfriends her age, and the thought of making new friends excited her. Noemi wondered if Solana was too young.

A waiter brought out mugs of fresh Tereré, a cold drink with herbs in it, and Solana and Noemi drank theirs thirstily. Water was scarce in their settlement, and drinks like Tereré were a rarity. The table was laden with plates of mbejús, fried cassava cakes cooked with cheese and eggs; asada, barbecued meat; empanadas, beef turnovers; and arró quesú; a cheese and milk risotto popular with the natives. Solana and Noemi stared at the food, wanting to dive in but not wanting to seem desperate.

“Help yourselves. Don’t be shy,” said Enrique, smiling, and pushing aside their hesitation, they proceeded to pile plates with a little of everything, wishing they had brought Jacobo with them. Could they ask for a doggie bag for Jacobo and Jorge? They ate gratefully and listened to Enrique making small talk with the girls, who seemed comfortable enough with him. Well-fed, happy. Noemi wondered hopefully, recklessly in denial, if this could actually be a Godsend for Solana.

After they were done eating, the girls got up, gave Solana and Noemi hugs and kisses, then left Enrique to talk to them. The owner of the club, he told them, was a good man and an honest man. He was American, and they had different standards of how to treat people over

there. The pay sounded exorbitant to the girls. Just for dancing? Wow. What they didn't know was that it was a trifle compared to how much they actually charged their customers. Less than 20%. They knew how these slum people lived. What they could afford. The dismal conditions in which they worked at the dumps and the factories. They knew what they were offering would put stars in their eyes, and they were right. Before they left that morning, Enrique gave Solana an advance that was enough to feed the whole family for a week, and Noemi was determined that Jorge would not be spending any of this money on Tequila. She would keep it safely hidden. They went home that day feeling like the sun was finally smiling on them.

How naive they had been, thought Solana, sitting down on some piled bricks just outside her home and leaning against the wall. She put her face up to the sky, let its rays warm her face, her entire being. Make her forget for a few minutes what she had to do later on tonight. She felt hopeless, tired and angry. And stupid. How excited she had been on the first day of her job, two years ago. She had woken up full of enthusiasm and hope to birds chirping outside, and the sun shining. Had the sun always shone so brightly? Had those birds always been there, or were they heralding a new beginning for her and her family? And all she had to do was dance.

It didn't take long for her to find out the truth. She had been told to get to work in the late afternoon on that first day to go through some training. Etiquette on the job, etc. When she got there, Enrique was nowhere around. The men who were there leered at her and spoke in tones she had never been spoken to in her sixteen years. The smile on her face halted. She had not expected this. One of the men grabbed her arm and steered her towards the back. Puzzled, she struggled and protested. She told them she was to meet Enrique for training. The man laughed, unlocked the door to a room, and shoved her inside, saying she was going to go through training all right. He was going to enjoy training someone as pretty as her.

The room was bare except for a bed. As Solana stood looking around, bewildered, her mind refusing to concede the truth of what every bone in her body told her was about to happen, the man locked the door behind her and started unbuckling his pants. Solana whirled around, and when she saw what he was doing, squealed in protest. Enrique had said no sex. He had promised. The man continued grimly. She found herself being pushed violently onto the bed, and when she tried to scream, he put his hand over her mouth. He was big and strong and said he would break her neck if she didn't co-operate. She quieted down in terror, and when he pulled down his pants, stared in horror. She knew what made men different from women; she had seen them on the little naked children around the settlement. But she had never known they could be so big. And red and angry looking. It looked like a monster. The monster that Lalu had told them stories about when they were younger. The slaughterer of innocence. And hope.

The pain was unbearable. Tears ran down her face for the gentleness and kindness she did not get. She started to lose consciousness, tried to hold onto the thought that when Enrique found out, he would kill the man. Dimly she heard more men entering the room, laughing, and realized it was just the beginning. She decided then and there that there was no God, because if there were, he would surely not let this happen to her. Or was he punishing her for being less sure of him lately? In which case he was cruel and undeserving of her loyalty.

When she came to, the room was dark. She had been left mercilessly naked with nothing to cover herself with. She sat up, wincing in pain and shame, and looked down at herself. At the revolting red and purple bite marks on her. The blood on the sheets. The blood of her innocence. She put her arms around her knees, and

cried.

The door opened, and the first man, whose name was Benedicto, came in. She shrank in terror, scrambling desperately for a non-existent sheet. But there was no escape. She was completely exposed to hostile eyes with no hope of respite. So she lay down and spread her legs, closed her eyes, accepting and surrendering. Maybe it would go easier on her if she didn't fight. To her surprise, he came over with a robe, sat her up, and draped it around her. The gentleness in his touch made her wonder if she was going mad. He picked her up and sat her on a chair, then proceeded to change the sheet on her bed. This time he added extra sheets and a blanket. Then he got some cotton balls and Iodine and cleaned her wounds.

"Told them not to bite," he muttered brusquely as he worked. "Enrique will kill them. He wants you in top shape for tonight. Now you might not start until tomorrow night."

Her confused mind focused on only what she wanted to hear. "Enrique will kill them," Benedicto had said. Enrique had said there would be no sex. Enrique would take care of her. This was a mistake and it would never happen again. But Benedicto went on to say, "Enrique said not to leave marks of any kind. No bruises or bites." And she knew that Enrique would not. Not kill them. Nor protect her. That this was all planned. That Enrique was the devil himself and had ruthlessly lied to her and her mother.

After he finished swabbing her, Benedicto helped her put the robe on and tied it. It was soft terry cloth and felt comforting. She burrowed into it, trying desperately to forget what had happened. Benedicto then told her how it was going to be. When clients saw her dance, they would offer more money for sex, and she would agree. She would bring in more money because she was young. That meant more money for her. Clients were not allowed to knock the girls around in any way, because the girls had to dance and needed to look good. There were always bodyguards outside the rooms to get rid of overly aggressive clients. She would be put on birth control pills. And clients were required to wear condoms for STD prevention. There was a supply of them in the bedside drawer.

All the girls stayed on the property, and she would be staying in the room they were in now. She could decorate in any way she wanted, he said. Pictures, knick knacks, flowers, drapes, anything she wanted, like that should make her happy. If she didn't give them any trouble, she would be allowed to visit her family once a month. And lie to them. They were to think everything was fine. And then came the crunch.

As Solana sat there thinking that she would have to figure out a way to escape, she was told that if she tried to run away, her family

would be hurt. Her little brother would grow up a cripple. Her father would be blinded. Her mother would be tortured and raped. She slowly realized that escape was out of the question. She was completely trapped. They had been so stupid. So easily duped into believing this would be some divine answer to all their problems. He told her she should be grateful that she was getting paid because a lot of businesses just gave the girls room and board, and forced them to work for free. But the owner of the business was a kind American and insisted that the girls get paid.

When Benedicto left, she lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. A kind American. He had no problem with young girls getting gang raped and abused, and with their families being threatened. But he paid them, so all was well. Her mind clung to one thought. She would be able to visit home. She would be able to bury her face in her mama's loving bosom and cry. But she couldn't cry. She couldn't say anything or her family would be hurt. She would have to put a smile on her face and act as if the sun was still shining on them, and everything Enrique had told them about the job was true. She would have to act as if she had a great life. Dancing, getting great pay, being treated with respect. Panic swept through her and she wanted to vomit. Could they pack everything up and try to move away? To where? They had nowhere to go. It had been hard enough to make a life for themselves here. Pack up and start all over? Impossible. No, she would not be able to share any of this with her family. Besides, she could see her father doing something stupid, like storming the club in outrage and ending up getting shot or something. She had no choice at all. And then she screamed, and screamed, and screamed, her poor, young heart twisting and tightening until it felt like a hard little ball of lead inside her chest. Cold and dead. Nobody came to check on her.

The pay turned out to be less than what they had promised. A lot less. But she was able to keep her tips, and these were generous because her dancing captivated and dazzled. She threw her soul into her dancing, determined not to let the rest of the story spoil the reason she had joined the club. To keep the one thing that freed her. To dance.

Customers, on the whole, were not rough with the girls. And Solana soon saw that her looks were an advantage. She was so beautiful that it was intimidating to some, even though she was only sixteen. Most of these men would never dare pursue beauty like hers in their lives, because they thought it was beyond their reach. So they treated her like she was a precious object, and like being with her was a privilege. They talked to her and confided their fears and insecurities to her. She soon realized what they really wanted from her was emotional. Reassurance, consolation. That somehow she had the power to make

them feel like everything was going to okay. So she held them, and comforted them, and they wept. They wept when they lay with her. And they wept when she danced. And sometimes they forgot why they were there and were content to spend their time curled up in her arms as she stroked their hair and murmured comfort to them. She became one of the most coveted girls on the staff, not because she knew all the tricks of the trade, but because she could do something none of the other girls could. She could make men cry. The cost of a few hours with her kept going up, not that she saw any of it, and the men were told to keep an extra eye on her clients to make sure no one hurt their precious investment. She never failed to marvel at the huge tips she got, though. In one day, her tips equaled what her father brought home in a week.

Occasionally Benedicto and a few others would line up and take turns with her to remind her of her place. She learned quickly to find a place in her mind where she could retreat at these times. A meadow of flowers. The sun shining on her, warming her. Rabbits and squirrels and deer wandering around, coming up to her to be petted. Birds flying around. The wind in her hair. Not a cloud on the horizon. Her fairy tale. Her escape.

When she saw Enrique breezing through the club now and then, he looked right through her, like she didn't exist. Could this be the man who had shown up on their doorstep with a box of chocolates and a smile to win their trust? Solana wondered how a human being could be so heartless. She couldn't remember ever meeting anyone like this in all her sixteen years. Maybe it was because her mother had sheltered her as long as she could, but she liked to think that their own poor, little, squatter society thrived on selflessness and kindness. She liked to think that, at least in this one way, they were better than those with money and opportunity. Better human beings.

One good thing came out of the situation, however. Solana learned to speak English. Many of her clients were English speaking, and, by paying attention, she started picking up words, then phrases. Some of the men took it upon themselves to coach her when they saw her interest in mastering the language. It made them feel good to be able to do something nice for the beautiful girl who had the power to make them cry. She was a quick learner and pretty soon found herself translating for the others. She still didn't know how to read or write, but at least she knew how to speak English.

It had been two years. The family was enjoying the extra income, and Solana resolutely kept up the appearance of being content on her once-a-month visits. They wanted to know why she couldn't come more often. And she just said there was no time. She usually went the day after pay day and gave Noemi all her money, and they celebrated that night with the neighbors. Lalu made "sopa paraguaya" with plenty of cheese bought with some of Solana's money. The men brought cheap wine from the local bar. It was comforting to see the familiar faces smiling and enjoying the fruits of her labor. But Solana did not dance with them anymore.

Noemi worried that something was not right with her daughter. Why would she not dance? She told her mother it was because she danced every night, and when she came home once a month, she wanted to relax. That made sense. But Noemi sometimes caught her staring off into the distance, a look on her face that seemed to be a mixture of anger, hopelessness and resignation. Shame? In her heart, she knew all was not right. She looked away. Their lives had been better with Solana's income. If she ignored it, maybe whatever was troubling her child would go away. She swallowed the surge of guilt that threatened to rear up and drown her with what-kind-of-mother-am-I thoughts. And they never talked about Solana's job.

Then, one night at the club, Solana's ability to speak English came in handy. She had a special guest. The American who owned the establishment came to check on his investment about once every six months. Everything had to be spotless for his visit, and cleaning began a week before he came. Girls were told to dance their very best. This time, however, he was returning only a month after his last visit. Having seen Solana dance during his previous visit, Bill Rhodes now wanted to meet her.

They met in a small alcove closed off by glittering drapes, and she disliked him right from the beginning. She didn't know exactly what it was. Maybe it was that he acted like he was used to having his way. She found his smile sycophantic, and, underneath the smile, sensed the uptight pugnacious defensiveness of someone who had a huge chip on his shoulder. And part of her withdrew into a shell because that was the only way she knew how to deal with these feelings. She put on a placid smile, but was not able to meet his eyes, and she answered his questions like a robot. And that was even before he began to stutter. That made her jump a little, being completely unexpected, and she frantically tried to cover it up and recover her placid smile, which only

made it worse. She tried to decipher and answer his stuttering questions politely. But things had changed. She now saw him as someone with a disability instead of someone rich and powerful; and yet, she was unable to summon any feelings of pity or compassion for him. She still found him repulsive. She saw that he sensed the change, that he was not happy about it. But there was nothing she could do about that.

Bill Rhodes had fallen under Solana's spell on his last visit to his club. None of the other girls had ever affected him the way this one had. The way she moved, the expressions on her exquisite face, and the fire with which she danced had touched and inflamed his heart, his soul, the very core of his being, like nothing else had ever done in this world. He had been unable to get her out of his mind, and had been compelled to return after only a month instead of the usual six months. Thus, when he sensed her disdain for him through all her detached smiling and nodding and politely appropriate responses, he was first indignant, then petulant, then incensed. Then the stuttering that he paid so much money to therapists to control slipped past all his training and discipline and was revealed to the girl. There was no doubt that she noticed. She jumped and then tried to recover her composure. Was he being paranoid? Maybe. Maybe not. But he sensed his drop in stature from mighty to disabled. And he was tempted not to tip her at all. But more powerful than this affront was the realization that he wanted her approval and her affection. He wanted her to like and accept him, stuttering and all. His whole existence depended on it. He felt like if he could get this girl to like him, it would make up for all the prejudice and loathing he had encountered throughout his life. So he was ridiculously generous with his tipping. But instead of fawning over him for his generosity like others did, Solana thanked him very politely, unemotionally, showing none of the regard he so desperately craved. And he became obsessed, possessed, in his need to conquer her.

He resolved to stay in the country for a couple of weeks, and Solana had no other clients during that time. But although he paid for her time, Bill Rhodes never went to her room with her, preferring to sit and talk in their little alcove instead. Solana wondered why he didn't go to her room with her. Maybe he was impotent. He looked like he was in his late fifties. But he acted like he didn't want to push things and wanted to take his time getting to know her. She hoped he would be leaving soon. She had to admit she was a little relieved he never went to her room with her; the stuttering was unnerving and difficult to get past.

After a few weeks of sitting in the little curtained alcove with Bill Rhodes, Solana found out why he was in no hurry. She was told by Benedicto that she was going to America. When she stared at him in

horror and started to protest, he smacked her across the face so hard that her head hit the wall. As she slumped on the ground, dazed, he told her Bill Rhodes was being very generous with her. That he would move her family into a small apartment in the city, give them a monthly income. Jacobo would get to go to school. How would she know, she asked bitterly? How would she know what was happening with her family? She would be all the way in America. Benedicto told her they would be moved before she left, so she could see them settled in their new place. It would not be fancy, but it would be better than what they had now. A concrete apartment with electricity and water, two rooms, and a small kitchen, basic furniture. Beds, tables, a couch set. They would even get a television and a telephone, all services paid for. She would be allowed to call them once a month. She would be able to ask about money and see how well they were doing. Bill Rhodes was a generous man and would keep his word. Besides, she didn't really have a choice. If she refused, or tried to run away, they would find her family and...yes, she knew, they would hurt them. She couldn't try to hurt herself in any way either, or they would find her family and hurt them.

When Benedicto left, Solana sat on the ground against the wall where she had fallen and allowed hate to swell in her heart like a cancerous bubble for this man who thought he had the right to do this to her. This man who thought he was God because he had money, and had no respect for the dignity or rights of others. And she wanted to kill him. She had to go along with him for now, but the first chance she got, she was going to kill him. Then what? Return to the slum? Have Bill Rhodes' men come looking for them and hurt her entire family? Frustration and anger raged through her, and in her little room, for the second time since she had first been brought there, she screamed, and screamed, and screamed. Again, nobody came to check up on her. They knew why she screamed. Briefly she considered slashing her wrists, but remembered what would happen to her family if she hurt herself. She could not even end her own life. She was absolutely powerless. Except for her hate. That he could not take away from her.

OVER THE EDGE

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Ink was devastated. In his eagerness to bond with someone who had experienced similar things in life as him, someone who understood, he had turned a blind eye to anything he might not like in Bill Rhodes. Because he had definitely seen things. Moments of cruelty and unwarranted meanness that could have eroded his idolization, had he let them.

Like the time one of Bill's employees had brought him the wrong files, and he had gone berserk, crushing the poor guy in front of everyone. Another time, one of Bill's employees had piled her plate with food from the buffet. They heard her say she hadn't eaten all day and was hungry, but judging from her ample size, she was also obviously an avid eater. Bill had watched her with a sardonic look on his face and said snidely to Ink: "Can fat people actually get hungry? You would think their body fat would tide them over in the absence of food." He spat out the word "fat" like it was a bad taste in his mouth. Ink had been briefly surprised at the vindictiveness, but shoved it out of his head. He did not want to think bad thoughts about his friend and boss. But when the woman came back for seconds and piled her plate again, Bill gave a chuckle and shook his head. As she walked by their table, he muttered spitefully under his breath, "Eat much?" Ink remembered his mortification at the comment. There had been no need for that. A few nearby people heard the comment and turned around to look at her. The woman sat down and stared at her plate self-consciously, then took it and shoveled the food in the trash, uneaten. "Well," Bill had said, without compunction, "She definitely didn't need more, but it's a good thing she wasn't paying for it." Ink had given a small nervous chuckle. Later, though, he had heard that Bill, in a fit of remorse, had given her tickets to an all expense paid weekend cruise. See, he had said to himself, he's not a bad guy; he's just conflicted. He had shoved the incident out of his head.

And Ink knew the reason for the conflict, the struggle between the opposing forces of meanness and kindness. He knew about the bullying, had experienced it himself. That would be enough to push someone over the edge now and then. Most of the time Bill was courteous and in control, and wasn't that all people could really ask of anyone? Everybody had bad days. Even the most saintly of people. He was trying desperately to make allowances for his friend and boss. To focus on the better side of him.

But then there were the lewd comments Bill had made during the

dances. Ink had tried to chalk that up to intoxication, but again there had been a level of vindictiveness that was surprising, borderline unacceptable. No, definitely unacceptable. He seemed to get an enjoyment from controlling and belittling others sometimes that was almost deranged. Then he would turn around and shower everyone with generosity. He was a complicated man. Despite all his successes, Bill obviously harbored a grudge towards the world, and behind his geniality and generosity lay insecurities that sometimes made him hostile and demanding.

Ink's own goal as a human being, on the other hand, was to move on, leave all that behind, not perpetuate it. When he found his niche in life, he wanted it to be untarnished by ugly memories and resentments. Ink wanted to accept his fate, control his anger with time, and make peace with life. He now realized more than ever that his only hope for any kind of happiness was to do exactly that. He did not want to spend the rest of his life being eaten away, like Bill Rhodes.

Now Ink fully understood Bill's mania with Solana. She represented everything he wasn't, and wanted. She was beauty personified. The more she refused him, the more she strengthened in his mind what the world saw him as: abnormal, repulsive, flawed. She fed his worst fear: that in the eyes of some people he would always be a monster. Her acceptance and love would validate his existence. And he went about trying to procure her affection in the only way he knew how, by the only means through which he had himself received respect and recognition. Through money, control, and fear. But instead of making Solana more receptive, it had made her hard. She tolerated him, but made no secret of her loathing of him. Even if he hadn't taken her away from her family and her life, she would not have liked him. Because what she was, her beauty and poise, coupled with her constant rejection of him, amplified his insecurities and brought out everything unlikeable about him. He was at his worst around Solana. The genius millionaire entrepreneur, instead of being untouchably secure as one might expect, was reduced to a blithering, self-loathing idiot, trying to force a woman who hated him to like him. Theirs was a "Beauty and the Beast" story with no hope of a happy ending. And now he suspected Ink, whom he had rescued from a life tainted by bigotry, of betraying him. Although Ink had never been the subject of Bill's wrath, he knew it would not be enjoyable.

"We have to be very careful," he said that night after Solana finished her story. "This could go very wrong for all of us if Bill knew about us."

When they stood up to go home, Bill Rhodes's presence loomed between them. His was not a force to be ignored. They let go of each

other's hands and walked a little distance away from each other, scared to look at each other in case anybody saw them and reported back to Bill, even though it was past midnight when they got back to the house. No one seemed to be around; people were usually in bed by then because of their 7am schedule the next morning. Their fears were not completely unfounded, however. They were being watched.

Bill Rhodes, who had been up and festering about Solana's lack of affection for him, and Ink's lack of loyalty, glanced at the array of screens in his office connected to cameras in various strategic parts of the house: the entry, the work place, etc., and, for a moment, tried to deny what he was looking at. Ink and Solana sneaking in, past midnight, and parting at the stairs to go to their separate rooms. He wanted dreadfully to ignore it. Tell himself he had dreamt it. Ink was a valued employee, a friend, and Solana...he wanted Solana like nothing he had ever wanted in his life. Did that make him pathetic? He could have any woman he wanted. All he had to do was offer them what he had given Solana; a beautiful home away from filth and poverty, and a better home and generous monthly income for her family. She even had a car at her disposal to go out and visit the town or anywhere else she wanted to go. With, of course, an "escort" to go with her and ensure her safe return. Any other woman would give herself willingly to him for these luxuries. It was a good life. But not Solana. All his money and generosity meant nothing to her. She would rather have lived her life in poverty back in Paraguay with her family. In freedom.

Freedom was a concept Bill didn't quite grasp, because in a way he had been in chains all his life. He was a prisoner of his affliction. His life was shaped and affected because of it. He had been denied the good will of others because of it. So, again, money had been his way into society. What had brought him acceptance, tolerance and respect. When money failed to get him what he desired, he found himself at a loss, frantic and manic. Possessed.

When Solana got back to her rooms that night, she felt uneasy. As she went to open the door, she sensed something sinister, and her stomach tensed. The feeling became fierce, stifling, and, for a moment, she couldn't breathe. Her legs felt unsteady, as if she was standing on the edge of an abyss. She shook it off. Her mother had always said she had an overactive imagination. The fear of being discovered by Bill Rhodes was making her paranoid. There was no one in her living room. It was quiet. But the quiet throbbed.

The sensation became stronger when she stepped into her bedroom. The whole room swam with it. When the door clicked shut behind her, as if by itself, she whirled around in panic. Bill Rhodes was standing in front of the door in the dark, shards of light on his face from

the moonlight outside.

“Hello, S-Solana,” he half whispered.

“Bill,” Solana said, all her previous disgust for the man replaced by sheer fear, “what are you doing here?” She felt the threat with every cell in her body.

“D-did you have a nice s-s-stroll with Ink?” He had to spit out Ink’s name to get it out in one piece. “W-was it s-sweet and romantic? D-does he have any idea what a wh-whore you are?”

“Bill...” she started again, staring at him in horror, searching desperately for any vestige of humanity. But there was none.

He held up his hand and shook his head. “I d-don’t w-w-want to hear it. I am done w-with your b-b-bullshit.” She had never heard him speak like this. For a moment she went into cognitive dissonance, wondered if it was actually Bill Rhodes she was looking at. It was dark in the room; maybe it was an intruder who had broken in. Even that would be preferable to facing a deranged Bill Rhodes.

She backed up, looking around frantically for a way out. But Bill stood between her and the door. And he was bigger and stronger. The patio could be a means of escape. But drapes were drawn around the patio doors. And they were locked. In the time it would take for her to pull aside the drapes and unlock the doors, Bill would be on her. She could run into the bathroom and lock the door. Then what? Her mind was incapable of going beyond that. Right now, she just had to get away. Out of sight. She made a frantic scramble for the bathroom door, but Bill was too quick for her. He moved surprisingly swiftly for an older man. He grabbed her and slammed her against the wall. Her cheek hit the corner of a picture frame and she felt it split open, felt blood trickle out.

“I w-would h-have given you E-EVERYTHING you wanted,” he said, his face inches from hers. She felt him against her legs, her stomach. Hard and menacing. Relentless and brutal. His breath was warm and suffocating on her face. And she knew what was coming. All these months of keeping him at bay were over. His patience and tolerance had given out, and he was driven by a madness she could have prevented if she had just made the effort to be nice to him. Estúpido, estúpido, estúpido, she thought.

At that point, if she had surrendered, things might have gone differently. She could have resigned herself to being with him, like she had done with all her other clients. She could have apologized, turned on the charm, and beguiled him, like she had done with other clients. She would have been the one in control then. But she was aware that she had belittled him with her stubborn denial of him, and now that he

knew about Ink and her, she was terrified. So, she struggled. She kicked, clawed and tried to scream, at which point he slapped her on her already bleeding face. Her head hit the wall again and she slumped. Dazed and disoriented, she felt him pick her up and carry her over to the bed. Dimly, she felt him throw her down and straddle her.

Suddenly, wide awake, she tried to scream again, and he slapped her again. “S-shut up, you s-s-stupid whore. Who d-do you think you are? Th-this is m-my house and m-my bed. Y-you b-b-belong to ME!!” He spat out, spraying her face with his saliva. Afraid of being slapped again, she stifled her screams. Through strangled moans and whimpers, she realized he wanted to hurt her because she had made him feel ugly and unwanted. And, as he brutally took her, she realized through tears of pain and terror, that this was vindication for him, validation, vengeance. Aside from the men who had broken her in when she first arrived at Enrique’s club...at Bill Rhodes’ club...no one had treated her this viciously. And even those men had not been so hateful. Leering at her plight, yes, but ultimately they had just been doing their job. There really had been no feelings involved. And her clients had always treated her delicately, like she was something precious and fragile, like they did not want to hurt her. Like they were grateful for their time with her, and they just wanted to relish her. She brought them joy. It had never been like this. This complete annihilation.

Afterwards, she lay in agony in bed, damp with her own blood, feeling swollen and bruised all over, feeling like a punching bag. Not a human being.

Bill Rhodes got up, his rage spent. He was disgusted with himself, and he blamed and hated her for forcing him to resort to this kind of animal behavior. He felt base, ugly and mean. He had not wanted his first time with Solana to be like this. He looked down at her swollen face as he dressed. One eye was almost swollen shut. The cut on her cheek was black and blue and streaked with blood. Did he do that? She was not putting on any airs now. And she would definitely not be dancing for a while. He would have to get the resident doctor to look at her and patch her up. And pay him extra to be quiet. Only a monster could so savagely brutalize such beauty. But he would not apologize, he thought, as he drew the covers over her flinching body. The monster would not have surfaced if she had given herself to him willingly. If she had shown him affection and respect. He listened to her receding whimpers as he left the room, thinking he would have given her the world ten times over. All she had to do was pretend to love him. Just pretend, damn it. Why couldn’t you just pretend.

When Ink didn't see Solana for a few days, he became worried. Scared to ask about her in case of what people would read into it, in case of Bill finding out, he bided his time. Their newly affirmed love was too precious to be debased by gossip. He hadn't seen Bill in a few days either, however, and the implications were terrifying.

But then he found out that Bill Rhodes had been cloistered away in his rooms with his R&D crew. They were supposedly going to leave in a few weeks for a one month research trip. To Australia, this time, to explore styles from the Aborigine culture. They were going far, far away, for one blessedly long month. One blessed month of not having to worry about Bill Rhodes. It would be a vacation for Ink and Solana. They could go out, take trips to the mountains maybe. But Solana was nowhere to be seen.

For the employees' monthly birthday celebration, they were all invited to the theater again, and Ink went, heart pumping at the thought of seeing Solana. Maybe she had been resting to get ready for the dance. Maybe he could steal a moment alone with her at some point when no one was looking. Maybe...but the dancer was someone else. Someone local that Bill's entertainment manager had picked up at a dance club in downtown Denver. Her dancing was more sexual, but lacked the emotion and sensuality of Solana's dancing, and her movements were automatic, unconvincing. People started leaving fairly early during the show, bored and uninspired. So where was Solana? Was Bill Rhodes giving her a little break? Once before he had brought someone in to take Solana's place, and he had told Ink then that he didn't want to wear her out too quickly, that he wanted to pace her performances. But it had been over a week since Ink had seen her. Was she avoiding him? Had he imagined their connection? No, there was no mistaking the emotions of their night with Pan. So where was she?

Eventually, one night he worked up the courage to try and sneak over to Solana's room to slip a note under her door. The sight of the guard sitting right outside her room, fiddling with his cell phone, startled him. A guard? All of a sudden, Ink was filled with foreboding. It hurt to breathe, like there was an elephant sitting on his chest. Had she tried to run away? Was she hurt? There was no reason to think Bill Rhodes had found out about them. They had been so careful. He walked by the guard casually, careful not to show any interest. Maybe Aisha would know. He knew she and Solana were friends.

Fortunately it was Friday, one of Aisha's days to cook. People started lining up early on her days. She made wonderful food: stews

and curries and marinated grilled meat, combinations of her own heritage and things she had picked up from other cultures; India, Thailand, the Mediterranean. She fit right in with the eclectic character of the company. Bill loved her cooking, and she was one of the highest paid cooks there. Once when she had thought about leaving to go and cook in a new restaurant that was opening up in San Francisco, Bill had doubled her salary to make her stay. Ink hurried to get down there before the line began. There she was, doing her magic on a spicy vegetable curry. He recognized the scent of mint, but nothing else; not that it mattered, it would taste good regardless of what was in there. Careful not to attract attention from the other workers in the kitchen, he walked over to her under the pretense of smelling what she was cooking.

“Doing your special voodoo again, Aisha...I can smell it all the way from my room!” he said. A few people looked around, smiled, then looked back to what they were doing. She looked at him indignantly, objecting to the use of the word “voodoo.” He grinned cheekily, then asked her in a whisper if she knew anything about Solana. Her rich dark skin became a shade paler. She told him she hadn’t spoken to Solana in a few days. She told him she had work to do and he needed to leave her alone.

“Aisha, please, if you know anything...” Ink pleaded, becoming increasingly scared. She looked at him, obviously stressed. She could see that Ink would not leave easily. His misery was apparent on his face, and the longer he hung around, the more likely they were to be noticed and to get in trouble. The head chef did not like the cooks chatting while they were cooking. It was a distraction and would get in the way of the perfection he demanded of the meals that came out of his kitchen. So she told him quickly that Solana had not been well. That she, Aisha, had been sent to Solana’s room a few times to take care of her because they knew she was her friend. She didn’t say anything else. Ink felt his heart plummet. Not well? What was wrong with her?

“Go now,” said Aisha, and turned her back on him. Ink walked away, determined to see Solana whatever it took. Little else mattered in life.

He decided to skip lunch, and while everyone was lining up and drooling over Aisha’s cooking, slipped outside and made his way to the balcony outside her room. There was no guard there. No one expected anyone to try to enter that way. Grabbing onto bushes, vines, molding on the walls, whatever he could reach and prop his feet on, he scrambled up to her balcony, praying he wouldn’t fall and announce himself. The doors were locked. He tried to peek through the gaps in the drapes but couldn’t see much. It was dimly lit in there. Then he saw

a window, slightly ajar, a few feet away on the wall to the right of the balcony. He would have to climb up on the balustrade and reach over to get to it. Grabbing vines and wall again, he managed to reach over and push the window open, squeeze through, and catapult himself onto her carpet. He got to his feet quickly, afraid Solana would squeal or something in surprise and the guard would come rushing in, but it was completely silent.

When he saw her, he gasped. Her face was slightly swollen, obviously healing from some bruising, and there were nasty stitches on her cheekbone. One of her eyes looked a little more puffy than the other. There were bruises on her arms and neck. But more than the physical damage, what struck Ink was the look on her face. She looked dead. Spiritless. She didn't look at him when he went in, but stared blankly at the T.V. that hung on the wall opposite her, oblivious to the automated laughter coming from it.

He went to her bed and knelt over her. Solana's eyes remained blankly on the T.V.

"Solana," he said softly, gently, trying to keep his voice steady. When she didn't respond, he took her hand and laid it on his marked cheek. She looked around slowly and stared at him for a moment. Then her eyes shifted in recognition.

"Hey," Ink said, "I've been looking for you."

Solana's eyes filled with tears. Ink reached out and took her in his arms, and, as if that was her cue, she buried her face in his chest and started crying. What began as a low sob escalated to a heart breaking wail, with intermittent stifled shrieks of panic. Ink looked at the door to the hallway in horror, expecting it to open any minute and the guard to confront them. But the door stayed closed for now. The living room, between her bedroom and the front door, probably muffled the sounds. He reached for the remote control and turned the T.V. up a few notches. And in a few minutes Solana's sobs subsided to whimpers while she held onto him with what strength she had left. Ink had no doubt in his mind about who had done this. Bill Rhodes. All the drama that had been building up around Bill and Solana...and himself, he acknowledged bleakly...had been building up to this. The muscles on his face tightened. He felt anger he had not felt since high school. The outraged, protesting anger of the oppressed. He took deep, cooling breaths.

"Did Bill do this?" Ink asked, making a supreme effort to stay calm, hoping against hope that she would deny it.

She nodded against his chest and sniffed. Then she pulled back suddenly. She shoved at Ink, pushing him away, and beat against his chest angrily, repeatedly. He stared at her in confusion, terrified that

she was losing her mind.

“Jes, Bill did this,” she said, raggedly, tortured. “But this happen because I am woman. This is man’s world. Men hurt women in this world.” She looked at Ink with sudden vehemence, as if he were part of the dirty clan of “man.” Her shoulders and bosom heaved with the weight of ages of victimized women. “DIE, hombre!” she spat at him, following in Spanish with “Cabron! Pendejo!” Ink had heard those sounds before. He knew they were not flattering.

“Sorry,” Ink said helplessly, wiping the spit off his face. He knew that people in general could be cruel and stupid and ignorant. And maybe men were like that more so than women, ruled by the demon in their pants. He wanted to say that not all men were like that, but he kept quiet. There was no need to say anything. Solana knew not all men were the same, that buried amongst the endless jerks, there were good men. She spoke out of frustration and anger, out of pain. He let her vent.

She finally calmed down and whispered, “Sorry.” Ink didn’t care. He thought she was the most beautiful thing in the whole world, bruises and all.

“He found out about us?” he asked.

She nodded. “When I came back that night. He was here.” Her voice shook and threatened to dissolve in shrieks again. And she closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

“Solana, did he rape you?” Ink asked, hoping desperately that she would deny it, knowing in his heart what the answer was. But it still hurt when she confirmed it. Like someone was crushing his head. He turned around and punched a pillow. Again and again and again. He would have punched the wall, but the small part of him that was trying to hold onto sanity remembered the guard outside. The pillow burst and feathers flew into the air in a cloud, showering both him and Solana. They sat and looked at each other, feathers in their hair and clothes. Any other time it might have been funny.

“We must kill him,” were the next words out of Solana’s mouth. Ink looked at her in horror. Surely that was not the only option.

“You can’t be serious,” he said. “I know you’re angry, Solana, but murder?”

“We have to,” she restated firmly. “There is no other way to be free.”

“We can’t,” Ink persisted. “We’re not killers. I mean, end a LIFE, Solana? We CANNOT!” Anger had given away to panic, and general discombobulation. The world felt crazy and unfamiliar. Killing a human being was not something he could even begin to think about. It was shocking, and threatened to unravel everything he made sense of.

“We can run away,” he said. “We don’t have to kill him, we can run away, far away, where he will never find us!”

“He hurt my family if we run away,” Solana said sadly. “He has men, money. He find us and hurt us.” She shook her head. “We kill him. It is the only way.”

“But that would not be right,” Ink said pitifully, aware of how ineffective that sounded.

“Not right?” Solana said, flaring up again. “NOT RIGHT? What is right about what he do to me?” She pulled back from Ink. “You think I WANT to kill?” she asked. “I don’t want to kill. Is crazy!! But there no other way!!!” Her face was anguished, almost delirious.

“He has good in him, Solana. Look at how generous he is with his wealth.”

“His wealth give him power. Evil.”

“He had a hard childhood...you’ve heard him stutter, right? He was bullied all his life because of that.”

“You had hard childhood. I had hard childhood.”

And there was the rub. She was right. Bill Rhodes was not the only one in the whole world who had been picked on and bullied during childhood. What he had been through did not give him the right to hurt others. But he was among those that were not able to overcome it. Somewhere in his mind, he was stuck in victim mode forever, a permanent testament to people’s cruelty and stupidity.

“We need to give this some time,” Ink said, trying to be the voice of reason.

“Time for what? So he rape me de nuevo?” Solana’s voice threatened to dissolve again.

“No,” said Ink firmly. “That cannot happen again.” He pulled her close and held her tenderly and protectively. She released a long breath and buried herself in him again. “He’s going on a long trip. One month. He will not be around for a while. We can take that time to think about things, maybe come up with a plan.”

Solana took a deep breath, the thought of Bill being gone for one month giving her some calm. “Joo right. We take time. Think about it.” She sat up, picked some feathers off Ink’s hair, then flung herself at him again, almost knocking him off the bed, wincing from the aches and pain that shot through her body. “I thank Dios for you! Te Amo querido!” She showered his face with kisses. Ink kissed her forehead, and told her he loved her back. He did. He had never felt such emotion for anyone. It was overwhelming. She was what he had been looking for all his life. The missing piece of his puzzle. He could not let Bill Rhodes hurt her again. He would not let Bill Rhodes hurt her again. Something had to be done. But what?

He let himself out through the balcony, slipping and sliding down the vines, getting scratches on his arms. He would have to hide those, wear long sleeved shirts for a while. Or think of a believable lie about how they happened.

Could Solana be right? Was Bill's fate to be murdered at the hands of his obsession? He couldn't even think it without his entire being convulsing in shock. Sure, in his teens, he had contemplated murdering those who had hurt him, but had had no doubt that he would never actually do it. The task was so beyond his imagination. Where does one start? HOW does one start? How does one reconcile oneself to such a drastic decision? And what would it do to them? To Ink and Solana? Would they be able to go on after this? Would they be able to have a life with the death of Bill Rhodes hanging between them? Wouldn't it always be there? But would they be able to have a life otherwise? Couldn't he just try talking to the guy? Man to man? Friend to friend? Victim to victim? No. She was right. Bill's violent obsession with Solana would give them no reprieve. It released the monster in him. Just look at what he had done to her. They had no chance of a life with him alive.

Images of Bill smiling and sharing his life story with him went through his head. His heart constricted with pity and sorrow for his friend. If anyone should understand, it should be him, Ink. His head felt like it was going to crack. He looked up at the moon and stars, trying to summon something bigger than them. If there's anything out there, he thought, tell me what to do. Is this what was meant to be? There was no answer. Ink slumped, wondering why he bothered to reach out. There had never been anything. He had probably just conjured up that indefinable benevolence because it made him feel better. He felt exhausted, depleted, then surprisingly calm. A feeling of surrender descended on him. A feeling that events were taking shape that were beyond his control. A feeling that he really had no choice but to go with it, whatever "it" was. Maybe that was his answer.

Bill Rhodes, meanwhile, wondered what would happen when Ink discovered the incident between him and Solana, as he surely would. It was as inevitable as the sun coming up in the morning. His mind refused to think of the “incident” as something “he had done” to Solana. It was something that had “happened between them.” He kept telling himself that her unfriendly behavior had undoubtedly been responsible for his complete loss of control, his degeneration into bestiality. He refused to take responsibility for it.

What would Ink think? Would he be loyal to him, or Solana? And if he chose Solana, what would he do? Would he try to protect her? Bill Rhodes did not like the thought of losing Ink to Solana. The bond between them, between people who shared similar injuries in life, was a powerful one. He could not think of anyone else in his life with whom he had connected like he had with Ink. They felt each other’s pain. With that came a resolve not to hurt each other, to be compassionate, supportive. To provide for each other what no one else had been able to. Ink had made him feel unconditionally accepted, even when his behavior had been regrettable. He had noticed that Ink had looked the other way during moments where he had given into his baser side, the side of which he was ashamed. Ink knew where it came from and empathized, did not judge, and his acceptance made Bill question his own behavior. He would go so far as to say it made him a better person. Ironic, he mused. The very thing which had the power to heal, acceptance, was the very thing which was held back most of the time. Bill Rhodes was eternally thankful and indebted to him for that. He really loved the boy. He knew the boy had loved him back at one point. Before Solana.

Beautiful Solana. Also a victim. He knew. A victim of poverty, beauty and lechery. He knew Ink felt her pain, as did Bill himself when he was clear headed. It was hard for him to admit that he had contributed to that pain, had perpetuated it when he brought her to America, even though he told himself he was rescuing her and her family from destitution, giving them a better life. Being clear headed was a challenge for him where Solana was concerned. She made him act in ways he knew were wrong, and her denial of him brought out the monster in him, the exact opposite of what Ink did for him. This monster would not be shoved aside, and demanded gratification. A gratification that was also essential to his survival, but shook his humanity, and sanity. He felt capable of doing unspeakable things where Solana was concerned. And when he thought of losing her to

anyone, his brain started to convulse. Who would he himself choose if he had to?

If it came down to it, which one would he be okay with losing? Ink or Solana? Acceptance, and sanity; or rejection, and insanity? Humanity or Bestiality? The answer should have been clear. Why would anyone choose insanity over sanity? Why, indeed. But that question implied that one actually had control over one's choices. If only Solana would accept him and calm the monster; but Bill Rhodes understood that this was humanly impossible. Part of him wished he had never brought her to America. The right thing to do would be to release her. But he could not imagine losing her. How could he choose between them?

Ink had to be made to understand, without any uncertainty, that Solana belonged to him. That he had to stay away from her. This was about the timeless code between people, and especially friends. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife. Or thy friend's woman. But would Ink consider him a friend when he found out what a monster he had been?

He presumed Ink had not found out about "the incident" yet, since he had kept Solana cloistered away for a while. But Solana could not be kept hidden forever. How could he prevent her and Ink from seeing each other? He had to postpone his trip to Australia. If he went away for a month, there would be nothing keeping Ink and Solana apart. Who knew what he would find when he returned. No, this was not a good time to take a trip. Australia would still be there after things had settled down. He decided to play up his friendship with Ink. Reconnect. Keep him occupied. He would ask Ink to go fishing over a weekend, take a little vacation from work. On him. People were nice to him when he paid for things.

So to Ink's surprise and horror, Bill Rhodes called him one day after ignoring him for a couple of weeks, and asked him to join him in a guys' weekend away. Beer, fishing. No work related anything. Fishing? The last time Ink had even thought about fishing was when he worked at the hardware store back home, a couple of years ago. An eternity ago. So much had happened since then. And he had no interest in fishing, let alone any interest in going away with Bill, given what he and Solana had discussed. But he realized a flat refusal might not be the best idea. If everything were normal, then there was no reason to refuse. If he did turn down Bill's offer, therefore, it would be admitting that everything was not normal. He should go. But he couldn't. Try as he might he could not summon up the camaraderie that used to exist between Bill Rhodes and himself. Solana's bruised and battered face kept coming in the way. He could not believe his friend and mentor had

done that. How could he consider him a friend anymore? What would that say about him? Was he so desperate for acceptance that he would be willing to be friends with a monster? He could not imagine going fishing or anything else with him. Making small talk. Pretending. It sounded agonizing and intolerable. He might have to kill Bill Rhodes right there and then. Briefly he considered that thought. He could push him in the lake and drown him. His whole being balked at the idea. No, he had to turn down the invitation. So he made some lame excuse about feeling under the weather.

Bill Rhodes didn't know how to feel when Ink declined his offer. Had he found out what had happened to Solana? Why else would he turn down an offer to go on vacation, all expenses paid, and with a good friend? Were they still friends? They had not spent any quality time together in a while... which is exactly why he wanted to take Ink fishing. But Ink did not want to go. Did this mean he had chosen Solana over him? Bill's heart ached at the thought of the boy he had reached out to. Taken in. Made famous. Loved. He should have tried to maintain the routine breakfasts they were having. But work got in the way. And tempers. And Solana. All of a sudden, it was crystal clear whom he would pick between Solana and Ink. Had to be Solana. Solana belonged to him. Both he and Ink would pick Solana. She had bewitched them both. Ruined their friendship. But they would still both pick her because nothing else would do.

Okay. If he couldn't reconnect with Ink, maybe he could try to make it up to Solana. Some time had passed since he had last seen her. He had let things lie for a bit. Cool down. Heal. Both for her and for himself. Yes, he needed to heal too. But it was time to seal the healing and set the tone for their future. The tone needed to be different. Up to now he had considered her an acquisition, his property. But that night had taught him that he did not want to have to force himself on her like a master to a slave. He did not like the way that made him feel, let alone her. Bill Rhodes craved her affection, her respect. He understood now that in order to gain her respect, he would need to give her respect. And he knew what he had to do; he would woo her, treat her like an equal. Women liked to be wined and dined, and given expensive jewelry. Yes, he would order something stunning for her. Highest quality diamonds on white gold. A bracelet. He would sweep her off her feet. Simple.

ALMOST A DATE

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Solana sat looking at the card through the protective screen her mind had put up between herself and the world. It was hard to fully fathom what she was looking at. It was beautiful, embossed on parchment paper, and had obviously been specially made for her.

“Would you please do me the honor,” it said, “of allowing me to apologize over dinner?”

It had been almost three weeks since “the incident.” Up to now she had mostly stayed in her rooms, coming out now and then to take a walk in the gardens, accompanied by Aisha, whom Bill seemed to trust completely, and an additional hefty man a few feet behind them. People who saw them out there wondered about the need for a bodyguard. Solana knew exactly why he was there. To make sure she didn’t do anything Bill wouldn’t approve of. Like run away or try to kill herself.

Solana talked to Aisha in Spanish, in low tones, pretty sure the bodyguard couldn’t hear them, and even if he could, wouldn’t understand. Communication with Ink had been out of the question; the tutoring sessions were officially over for now. But she had to talk to someone or she would go mad. Her hatred for Bill Rhodes had been festering, taking on obsessive proportions, filling her imagination with all sorts of vivid, bloody images of Bill in the throes of agony as she first inflicted unimaginable torture on him, then a slow, painful death.

Aisha had been scared when Solana first started confiding in her. She could not believe what the kind and generous man who was their boss had done to her. She had heard rumors of meanness, but had not wanted to hear it, and had never been the brunt of it herself. Everybody had good and bad in them, after all, and most of the time what she saw was good. Bill Rhodes took good care of his employees, took good care of her and her mother. They had a fairly decent life because of him. But she had seen the cuts and bruises. The pain. Had tended to them. There was no doubt about the truth of what she was saying.

Solana had told Aisha a few months back that she was being tutored by Ink in the library, and Aisha had been thrilled for her, though a little puzzled by the need for secrecy. Why would Bill Rhodes have a problem with it? Learning to read surely seemed like the kind of thing he would encourage among his employees. Aisha would not have been surprised if Bill had offered to hire someone himself to tutor Solana. Then she began to understand that it was more than tutoring. Solana and Ink had been drawn to each other. Even so, and again, why would Bill have a problem with it? She knew Bill and Ink were friends,

and would have thought Bill would have been happy for his friend.

Now it made sense. Bill wanted Solana for himself. That was why he had taken her from her family and country without her consent and brought her to America. That was why he provided housing and income for Solana's family. So he could have their daughter. When she got over the initial disbelief and shock, she was appalled and outraged, cringing in horror when Solana described, in detail, the attack on her. She had heard stories of human trafficking all her life. They, themselves, had never been well off, and her mother, Bola, had warned her about dangers like that for poor women. And now she was seeing it first hand. Beautiful Solana was a victim of the very thing her mother had warned her about. A horrible abomination. Horrible for anyone, but to a rare bird of beauty and innocence, even more of an abomination. She wanted to help. But how? Bill Rhodes was not a force to be taken lightly; what could Aisha do to help that would not have repercussions on herself or her own family?

Solana told her not to do anything for now; she did not want to put her friend in danger. Bill had not touched her since that night, so all was still for now. She told her just being able to talk to her about it was huge. So for the time being they walked in the garden, and talked. And sometimes turned and waved at the hefty man, who never waved back. She did not share with Aisha her thoughts of murder.

But now Bill wanted to see her again. Could she stomach having dinner with him? Was he expecting sex? The card was, in fact, very polite and respectful. Bordering on humble...or a cruel joke. She shuddered at the thought of what might happen if she dared to refuse... more of what had happened that night? On a continuing basis? So did she really have a choice? No, she would have to go. Besides, it might be a good idea to get on some sort of tolerable footing with him. Play along. At least then, hopefully, he wouldn't hurt her. And it would give her time to develop her own plans. Her plans for revenge. For justice.

The night of the dinner, Solana was escorted out to a terrace towards the back of the castle. She stared in conflicted surprise at the scene, the little girl in her gasping with delight, the angry woman resisting it. The evening was lovely, slightly warm. A soothing, gentle wind waltzed through the leaves on surrounding trees. Garlands of soft muted light hung from the low walls around the patio. Bouquets of exotic, colorful flowers were set up everywhere as well as strewn on the ground, infusing the night with their heady scent. A small trio of musicians who looked like they were straight from Italy stood ready to play the violin. Waiters in tuxes stood ready to pour wine and Solana smelled the mouth-watering aroma of grilled meat.

Bill Rhodes had never made this much effort for her. It almost felt

like a date. Until now she had been his property, but all this made her feel like more. She looked around apprehensively, uncertain what to expect. What plot was he hatching in his twisted mind? A short distance from their dining table, a wrought iron stand offered chocolate truffles, and Solana headed straight over there and popped one in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged as she munched, half frantically, seeking solace, afraid they would disappear. She closed her eyes and let herself drown in the flavor of dark chocolate imbued with Grand Marnier. Bill Rhodes knew what she liked. All those times she had requested a dessert tray to be sent up to her room, he had made note of it. And, for a blessed chocolaty moment, everything seemed fine. Then Bill spoke from behind her and the moment was gone.

“Good evening,” he said. She whirled around, half eaten truffle in her mouth and managed a warbled “Good evening” in return, chocolate oozing out of the corners of her lips.

“I see you found the truffles,” he said, smiling. A smile that almost made him appear human, she thought. Pity his heart didn’t match.

He handed her a napkin to wipe the chocolate off her lips, then held her chair out for her to sit. She stared at it, transfixed, her mind scared to acknowledge all this extravagance. She did not know this, did not understand it. It scared her. What did he want? The waiter poured some wine, which Solana swallowed in one gulp, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Bill Rhodes. But thankfully he didn’t comment on it. Their last encounter, turbulent and devastating, pulsed between them, and she was not going to feel guilty about downing the wine, no matter how expensive it might be.

The appetizers started coming, and Solana stared, stupefied, mouth not yet recovered from Grand Marnier and chocolate, at seared scallops with crème fraiche and caviar, prosciutto roasted figs, mushroom polenta cut into little flowers. Bill pulled out a long, narrow, black box and handed it to Solana. She stared at him wordlessly, stared down at the box.

“S-S-Solana,” he began, obviously nervous, then took a deep breath and calmed himself. “I can’t begin to describe how badly I feel about our last encounter.”

Again she was surprised, suspicious. What was this? Humility from Bill Rhodes? To what end? Securing affability in the bedroom? He had made it viciously clear that she was his property to do with as he wished, and being nice, or humble, was not a prerequisite of their relationship. But the flowers, the romantic dinner...this was different conduct, evidence of a different kind of regard. He was not treating her like his property here, but making an effort to please her. Solana looked

away. He had not shown this side of himself to her before, and she wasn't sure how to respond. Up to now she had talked to him as little as possible, making her disdain for him evident through her silence. What was she supposed to say here? I forgive you? How does one forgive an act of such brutality and humiliation? How does one get over it?

"There is a monster in me that comes out sometimes," he continued. "I hate that part of me. I wish someone would cut it out." His voice trembled a little with emotion. "I hate that you were... privy to that part of me."

She kept her face averted. Now she could feel heat rising up her neck and infusing her cheeks. The heat of shame, frustration, deep hatred. The murderous anger. These last few weeks, she had done her best to pull a shroud over the feelings she had experienced that night, feelings she did not want to dig up again.

"S-Solana," he began again. "You are very special to me. I have not been expressing that in my actions towards you." He opened the box, and Solana couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips. Inside lay a sparkling diamond and white gold bracelet which would have brought tears to any woman's eyes. "This," he continued, "is a token of how special I think you are. And if you will allow it, there will be much more." All of a sudden, the bracelet looked like chains. A symbol, a grotesque reminder of her incarceration.

She looked away again, fighting the urge to vomit all over it. Let me go, she thought. Keeping me prisoner does not make me feel special. She paid no further attention to the bracelet, but turned and attacked the hors d'oeuvres. Food was safe. There was a moment of silence. Bill Rhodes sat there, holding the box with the bracelet in it, not knowing exactly what to say next. Looking stupid. Solana ate and downed another glass of wine which the waiter promptly refilled. The wine gave her courage. She looked up at him, and this time did not try to hide the anger in her eyes.

"Thank you for beautiful flowers. Beautiful dinner. No thank you for bracelet."

Now Bill's eyes flashed with irritation. He snapped the box shut and sat back, looking at her.

"Wh-What do you want, So-Solana? Wh-What w-will make you ha-happy?"

Was he stupid? He had taken her against her will, removed her from her loved ones, turned her into his toy.

"Joo serious?" she finally burst out, breaking months of silence. After all, what did she have to lose? "Joo take my FREEDOM!" Her voice rose in outrage. "Joo never ask if I WANT to come here! Joo take my RIGHT!" She shoved the food away angrily.

He stared at her as if she had gone nuts, although part of him was thrilled that she was finally speaking. “Are YOU s-serious?!” he asked. “You were a p-p-p-prostitute dancer l-living in a room at a whore house, MY whore house, in a poor, f-filthy town. You H-HAD no rights. I r-rescued you from po-po-poverty, gave you a n-n-nice place to live, m-money, clothes. I m-moved your family out of a dirty s-s-slum into a d-d-d-decent ap-pa-partment with running w-water, e-e-electricity. They are eating g-good f-food and living a g-good life.” The stutter was completely out of control. He stopped, closed his eyes and focused on his breath again. This would just not do.

“Joo also hurt them if I don’t do what joo want,” she retorted. “How can I be grateful?”

They stared at each other angrily. Their differences were irreconcilable. Both having been misjudged and mistreated all their lives, both still suffering; both, in their own ways, still victims; neither able to look beyond his/her own pain.

To Bill, Solana had the beauty that made her acceptable to the world, the beauty he so craved. What did she have to complain about compared to him? He was blind to the fact that persecution and injustice were not restricted to people with actual physical afflictions or disfigurements. He did not understand that Solana’s injuries from being treated like an object that had no rights was just as agonizing and consuming as his.

And, to Solana, Bill had what she desperately desired, control over his own life, power. The respect of other people. He had no reason to complain.

But the threat to Solana’s family, Bill Rhodes reluctantly realized, while it kept her from running off, was not enough to make her be nice to him. Maybe a different kind of threat would be. A threat to a more recent friendship, one in closer proximity, perhaps. A threat to Ink. While part of him wanted to close up at the thought, he saw no other way to control Solana. Between Ink and Solana, he had to have Solana.

“Ink is your friend,” he finally said, abandoning all attempts at nobility.

“Jes,” said Solana, her heart suddenly cold.

“He is m-my friend too,” said Bill Rhodes.

Solana looked at him, dreading what was coming next.

“It would b-b-be v-v-very unfortunate i-i-if anything b-bad happened to him.” His sudden stuttering, he knew, was due to the fact that he was severely conflicted doing this.

Solana stared at him, aghast, her fears confirmed, the world crashing down around her.

“Joo his FRIEND?” she asked, agonized.

“B-b-both you and I would l-lose a friend. That w-w-would be terrible, wouldn’t it?”

Solana sat, silent.

“Wouldn’t it?” Bill Rhodes repeated, raising his voice, insisting, demanding a response.

It would. It would be devastating. She could not be responsible for that. She would not be responsible for that. She nodded silently, conceding defeat. Nothing more needed to be said.

They sat in tense silence for a few minutes. Then, slowly, Solana reached forward and took the box from Bill Rhodes’ hand. She took out the bracelet and put it on her tiny wrist. It glowed and shone eerily, a sharp contrast to her brown skin, dazzling, clamoring for attention. She looked up at him, filled with hopelessness, and saw triumph in his eyes. At that moment, if she had had a knife, she would have stuck it into his cold heart.

“To you and me,” Bill Rhodes said, raising his glass to hers, sealing the deal.

The next time Ink scraped and scrambled his way to Solana's window, he found it locked. He could see from the shifting of light through the velvet curtains that someone was obviously there. That Solana was there. It was past midnight. Who else would it be? Why was the window locked? He knocked gently, balancing himself on the balustrade, hoping he wouldn't go crashing down to the bushes below. There was no answer. Maybe she hadn't heard him. He knocked again, a little louder. Again there was no answer. She had to have heard the second knock. The thought hit him that Bill Rhodes might have had the windows locked. His very presence might be preventing her from opening the window. Panic-stricken, he frantically launched himself off the balustrade, hardly registering the scratches and blows he received on his way down the ivy to the ground floor. The implications of the locked windows made him shudder.

After a sleepless night of tossing and turning, he finally got up bleary-eyed the next morning and wrote Solana a note, hoping to slip it past the guard. Maybe if Aisha took her food, he could give it to her to give Solana.

"OK?" the note said simply.

He didn't have to get Aisha. There was no guard outside Solana's room. But his knocking again elicited no response, and the door was locked. He slipped the note under her door. She would get it and surely send him a note in return, like she had done in the past. Everything would be all right.

But she didn't. Two days went by, and Ink got no answer from Solana. By now he had not slept in a few nights, and people were starting to notice the circles under his eyes. Heavier makeup had to be used to cover them up for his photo shoots.

"Dude," said Sabrina, his Japanese-American makeup girl, breathing clove cigarette in his face, "you need some serious sleep. Everything okay?"

Ink smiled weakly and made no response. The smell of cloves made him feel a little better though. It always had. It was a whiff of something familiar and sane. Okay, maybe not sane, but heart achingly familiar. He was struck by a pang of longing for his mother.

"If these circles get any deeper, I might have to use putty to fill them in," Sabrina joked, but looked at him worriedly. "If you're not feeling well, you should see the resident doctor. He could give you something to help you sleep."

But sleep was the last thing on Ink's mind. The constant, hovering

presence of imminent danger threatened to swallow him whole if he let his guard down, if he slept. He felt like he was on the verge of insanity. Sometimes his body, unhappy at being denied rest, would take over, and he would start to slide into blessed slumber. But then he would jerk awake, his stomach quivering with panic, his breathing short, legs trembling as if he was about to fall off some precipice. No, sleep was the enemy at the moment. So he wandered around hollow-eyed like a tormented zombie.

She was not dancing anymore. She had not danced since Bill Rhodes had attacked her. He had stumbled into the theater a couple of times in vain hopes that she might be performing. Various other talents had been brought in. Comedians. Cuban Jazz. Was Bill keeping her sequestered for his own purposes? Ink's head felt like it would burst at the thought. He would have no problem hurting Bill Rhodes if that was what was going on. Vaguely he was aware of the irony of the age-old situation; two friends fighting over a girl. Any friendship he had felt towards the man was completely gone. He tried to talk to Aisha about her again, but this time, Aisha told him that she had been replaced. Someone else was taking Solana's food up to her. She had not talked to her in a while. Ink noticed that Aisha seemed tense, reluctant to talk to him any longer than absolutely necessary. She kept looking around as if to see if they were being observed.

Then, a few miserable days later, Ink finally saw Solana. He was sitting at the bar one afternoon, abjectly nursing a mug of Irish coffee with an extra shot of whiskey, a habit he had acquired recently, when he heard laughter. Bill Rhodes and Solana were coming down the grand stairway together, both laughing, as if it were the most natural thing in the whole world. She was wearing a smart pantsuit and a hat, and something sparkly on her wrist. As Ink sat there and stared, a confused and wounded puppy, she saw him. She turned away abruptly, with a flip of her hair, and put her arm through Bill's. Bill saw Ink too, but instead of ignoring him, he raised his hand and waved, a huge grin plastered on his fleshy face. They appeared to be having a good time. Ink searched in vain for signs of coercion. The bartender, who had been curious about the boy's sudden interest in afternoon drinking, looked at them, looked at Ink, looked back at them, then at Ink again.

"Careful, dude, your misery is showing," he said quietly as he went about his work.

Ink was past caring. He watched as a servant followed them down the stairs with a few suitcases, which he then loaded into a limo waiting outside. They drove away without a second glance at him.

They were gone for five days. Five agonizing days for Ink. He could not shake off the despondency that possessed him. People

noticed.

“Hey,” Kenneth said in the middle of photographing him, “you’re seriously bruising these photos. Stop looking so sad. No one’s going to buy these clothes if you look like that.” Then Sabrina suggested using that as a gimmick. The melancholy could be a look, kind of like Picasso’s blue period. They decided to use it. Ink felt grateful to the world of Art for its forgiving and accepting disposition, because at the moment, he had no control over his own.

Thus, temporarily, the portraits of Ink took on a look that was sad, brooding. And strangely intriguing. Up to now, the focus had been on the clothes, his expression kept purposefully bland, the birthmark being the gimmick. But these photos taken during Solana’s absence were raw and emotional. The pain and hurt, the anxiety and fear on Ink’s face, along with his birthmark, suggested stories that his previous photos had lacked. It added a new dimension to the work, like a scene from an emotionally charged movie. One wanted to know more about the boy in the photos, became emotionally invested in him, connected with him, and identified with him on a whole different level. It would be a selling point for the clothes he modeled.

When Bill Rhodes returned and saw the photos, he was agreeably gratified. He thrust aside the lurking sense of remorse at capitalizing on his friend’s misery, fully aware of the role he played in that. He didn’t know what to do about that, not at the cost of his relationship with Solana. Ink was young. The young had time to recover from life, a luxury that was denied to those who were older, whose time was more limited. Like himself.

Ink caught glimpses of them on weekends, again getting into the limo with suitcases, and returning a few days later, laden with shopping bags and boxes, Solana always sporting newly purchased attire. Huge bouquets of flowers were brought in on a regular basis, which everyone assumed correctly were going straight up to Solana’s room. Beauticians and massage therapists drove up from town to pay her personal visits. There was talk that Bill Rhodes and Solana were in love. Either that, or the soulful dancer from Paraguay was a conniving harlot who had managed to procure herself the sugar daddy of all sugar daddies. Ink fought off regular bouts of nausea. His “blue period” came to full bloom. Then, to complete his misery, a private tutor started coming in to give Solana English lessons, officially ending any further excuse for them to meet.

Ink could not completely banish the thought, however, that something was not right. The universe felt off-kilter. Doubt, like a pesky mosquito, buzzed and whined around his brain all day and all night. Part of him wondered if that were just his own inability to accept

what was happening. Maybe the only universe off-kilter was his. Everyone else seemed fine. Unconcerned. The initial talk died down pretty quickly, and people went about their work and usual routines. At the end of the day, nobody really cared about Bill and Solana's relationship. Nobody but Ink.

He continued going to shows for a while, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but in vain. Both Bill and Solana were markedly absent from the shows. He sat by himself, applauded a little to show interest in the performance, then left. One night, however, throwing caution to the wind, he took a chance and walked by her room again. Still no guard. He knocked on the door. A maid answered. When Ink requested to speak to Solana, the maid came back, saying Solana was tired and did not want to see anybody right now. He asked the maid if she had told Solana it was him, Ink. Yes, she had. No, she still did not want to see anybody.

Incapable of giving up on what they had felt for each other, he tried a couple of more times to see her, and was told the same thing. The third time, he heard Bill Rhodes laughing from the room, and quickly walked by without knocking. And now his melancholy turned into bitterness. Could it be possible that he had been wrong about Solana, that he had been completely taken in by a cold and calculated pretender, who had finally realized she was better off with one of the richest men in the world than with a stupid boy with a stupid birthmark on his face? Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why would anyone ever want to be with him? Why would anyone ever be able to see past the ugly birthmark? Why would anyone ever want to get to know the real him? The thoughts sliced through him, bringing unbearable pain, as if he was physically hurting himself.

But the aftermath brought some clarity. Some calm. He pondered on the fact that he, himself, was not lacking in money anymore, had not for a while. His stupid birthmark had earned him a substantial bank account. If it was fancy courtship that Solana wanted, he could send her presents and flowers too. But he would not compete with Bill Rhodes. Especially if Solana had already made her choice. And if she was the gold digger this would make her out to be. Why would he want to spend his life with someone like that? But how could this be? And there it was again, the buzzing mosquito. It did not make sense at all. In any universe. Their nights in the library went through his head. The delight they grew to feel in each other's company, the feeling that things were right. The kiss they had shared with Pan. All that had been real. He had no doubt about that. And how could she possibly endure Bill after all that he had done to her? Bill had ripped her from her family, attacked her mercilessly, stripping her of all dignity, humanity, leaving her a

crumpled doll, broken inside and out.

The more he thought about it, the more he knew without a doubt that Solana did not love Bill, that it had to be all a massive act, and that Bill must have augmented his threat to her somehow.

Then Ink got an invitation from Bill to join them for a show one night. The note gushed disingenuous sorrow that they hadn't met in a while. Bill addressed Ink as "my friend." Ink shook his head, trying to dispel the big eddy of disjointed images and feelings his mind was swirling in. Images of Bill, his friend; Bill, the monster; Solana, the beaten up victim; Solana, the woman he was in love with; Solana, the conniving bitch. Nothing made sense anymore. Part of him wanted to leave. Take what remained of his sanity and flee before it was too late and he had to be institutionalized. Leave Solana. Leave Bill Rhodes. Leave Solana with Bill Rhodes. But a bigger part of him knew he couldn't do that without knowing exactly what was going on. He had to find a way to talk to Solana alone. He decided to meet them at the show. Maybe Bill would go to the bathroom or something, allowing them a moment unhindered.

No such luck. To say the evening was excruciating would be an understatement. The show was loud and made it impossible to carry on a conversation without yelling. Bill was draped over Solana like a parasite the whole time. Saccharine smile plastered on his face. Ink spent the first half of the evening trying to meet Solana's eyes, but met Bill's eyes instead. Bill seemed to be watching him for his reaction. Solana would not look at Ink at all. She leaned into Bill. Kissed him back. Stroked his hand on her shoulder. Laid her hand on his knee. A brilliant diamond bracelet sparkled on her wrist. They were obviously making their "debut" as a couple. Bill Rhodes was establishing his territory in no uncertain way, and from the looks they were getting, the message was getting across. People seemed to be watching them more than the show. Paul from production came by and slapped Bill on the back, yelling, "You lucky bastard!" Bill shrugged and grinned.

There was, however, a quality of make-believe in the whole scene. It seemed staged, like they were actors in a play. Exaggerated actions and reactions. Forced conversation and smiles. Yes, people newly in love were known to be all over each other like Bill Rhodes and Solana were. But this did not feel real. Ink watched, dazed, hoping that something would happen, a divine intervention of some sort, to allow him a minute to decipher the truth. Instead, at the end of the evening, Bill Rhodes leaned towards Ink and bellowed in his ear through the mercilessly raucous music that he was going to propose to Solana. Bill wanted him to best man. Ink stared at him, and knew that the his horror showed on his face. He looked at Solana, willing her to look at him, but again she wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Congratulations,” he yelled out, gagging on his own words.

“You okay ol’ boy?” Bill yelled back, his eyes narrowing, acknowledging Ink’s misery. His expression became defiant, ugly.

“Yeah,” Ink yelled. “I’m tired though. Think I’m going to go to bed. Early photo shoot tomorrow.”

Bill nodded. The moment felt onerous, heavy; mistrust, anger, and betrayal swam between them. They sat for a moment without saying anything. Then the music stopped as the band took a break. And they sat in the disjointed aftermath of deafening noise, ears ringing, striving for normality.

In one last-ditch effort, hoping feverishly to detect something in Solana’s face or words, Ink reached over and patted her hand, forcing her to look at him. He had to reach over Bill Rhodes to do this, and Bill’s head swiveled around, following the movement of his hand.

“I’m happy for you guys,” Ink said. Bill’s head spun back around to Solana’s face. She gave a stiff little smile and nodded. Bill tightened his grip around her shoulders, and she laid her head on his. As Ink got up and left, he thought her tight smile faltered, turning into a look of bleak resignation. Or was that just wishful thinking on his part?

At this point, prudence ordained that Ink concede. That he accept his loss and make a gracious exit. That things were approaching a boiling point and a potentially obliterating eruption. But prudence had no say in his feelings for Solana. The forced and exaggerated scene of that night stayed with him. Her tight little smile when he congratulated her, Bill's manic look of ownership, his greedy fingers on her shoulder. It all reeked of coercion, and made it impossible for him to move on. He had to talk to Solana. He had to somehow get her alone and talk to her. He needed to hear the truth from her lips. That was going to be a challenge.

The talk was that Bill Rhodes was now a permanent fixture in Solana's quarters. He took his meals with her in there. The maid cleaned a bed that two had slept in. The laundry women collected his clothes along with hers. Except for when they went out together, Solana stayed in her room. And turned Ink away every time he tried to see her. After hearing Bill's voice coming from her rooms, he was afraid to try to see her in there anyway.

Then, one day, Ink saw the massage therapist going to Solana's quarters with a fold-up cot, towels and baskets of oils on a cart. The therapist was almost unnoticeable behind all his materials. And he had an idea. For double the cost of the massage, the therapist turned out to be very accommodating to Ink's proposal. It helped that over the month or so he had been coming in, the therapist had developed a dislike for the Lord and Master. Bill's manner of entitlement and arrogance had thoroughly alienated him.

A few days later, Ink saw Bill leaving the mansion with a few of his men. He put on a baseball cap, slipped in behind the pile of cot, towel and baskets that he had borrowed from the therapist, and Solana found herself facing the man she had been trying to avoid, the man she was trying to protect.

They stood there in a daze for a few minutes, not saying everything they wanted to say, looking, relishing, fearing. Solana looked beautifully vulnerable. All Ink wanted to do was hold her. Cradle her. Keep her safe.

"Solana," he began. She regained her senses with a jolt.

"Are you crazy? What are you doing here? Get out!" she interrupted, half whispering, half screaming, trembling at the thought of what would happen if Bill heard he was in there.

"I had to talk to you..." Ink began again.

"No," she interrupted again. "No, no, no." She spun around and

fled to the other end of the room. Ink flew after her and grabbed her this time.

“Listen to me,” he said forcefully. “I am not leaving until we talk.” She jerked away from him, but he crossed his arms and stood, resolute, unbudging. Solana looked fearfully towards the door. “Don’t worry, I locked it,” Ink said. “If I don’t have to chase you around, no one should suspect anything.”

“Ok,” said Solana, taking a deep breath. “Talk. Quickly.”

“Bill says you are getting married.”

“Jes.”

“Do you love him?”

“Jes.”

Ink’s face crumpled, his agony blazingly visible.

“Solana, it’s me...tell me the truth,” he said desperately.

“Are joo stupid?” she asked heartlessly, defiantly. “Why would I marry him if I didn’t love him?”

Ink stared at her. He didn’t like her like this. Then one solitary tear trickled out of her eye and down her face.

“Why?” she asked him again. “You tell me why.” More tears were pouring out now.

Again, Ink wanted to hold her. Love her, comfort her. Tell her everything was going to be okay. He reached out, but she flung his arms away violently.

“NO,” she said again, passionately. She was a wreck. What she couldn’t express was destroying her. Then she took more deep breaths, wiped her eyes, and grabbing a tissue, blew her nose. And proceeded to tell him she had no feelings for him anymore. She was in a relationship with Bill Rhodes now. He treated her like a queen, and flew her out to visit her family once a month. So that was one of the places where they had been going with the suitcases, he thought. Her life was great, she said. She could ask for nothing more. She needed him to leave her alone and forget about her.

But the tears kept flowing, belying her words. He understood there was nothing he could do at the moment. He understood that he might just make things worse by persisting. But he had no intention of forgetting about her. He needed to take some time and think about things, possibly make a plan. Because, clearly, she was not happy. That was all he needed to know.

“Sorry,” he said miserably. “I’ll go for now.” As he turned away he saw a momentary flash of despair skim her face. “But I am not going away,” he added, and as he reached the door, he turned back around and said, “If you need me, you know where I am.” Then he slipped out and hurried back to his rooms. In the flurry of the moment,

he failed to notice the pair of eyes on him.

A few days were all Ink planned on taking to conceive of a solution to their problem. A week at the most. Something had to be done soon. The growing sense of urgency was undeniable. But the universe had other plans. The eyes that had been watching the night before had not been friendly ones.

The very next night, unable to sleep as usual, Ink wandered around aimlessly, mind stuck in erratic limbo, and found himself by the library. The very library where it had all started. Memories flooded his head. Solana caught like a deer in headlights as she thumbed through a book. Solana's eyebrows scrunched in a frown as she tried to read. Her beautiful hair flowing over her shoulders like a midnight waterfall. Her skin glowing golden from the warm light. Her gentle exasperation as she looked up to catch him staring at her as she read. His sheepish embarrassment. The whisper of their joined laughter, caressing, comforting, happy. He went in, sat by the hearth, and stared at the fire, willing it to give him an answer. The fire wrapped him in comforting warmth, and he dozed off for a few minutes.

All of a sudden, the door was thrown open, and he turned around to see Aisha standing there. Her eyes were wide open, breath ragged. She had been running and looked terrified. Ink was on his feet in a second, feeling his stomach knot. It had to be Solana. It was. Aisha told him in hurried, frantic whispers that he needed to go up to Solana's rooms immediately. When Ink asked why, she shook her head, her eyes tearing up, and said, "It sounds bad, Ink. I'm scared for Solana." That was all that needed to be said. He had no idea how she knew he was in the library, and he didn't care. He was just glad she had found him.

Ink flew up the stairs almost blindly, his feet barely touching the ground. Solana. Her name resonated in his head over and over again. As he neared Solana's rooms, he heard a resounding crash. He heard Solana scream. He heard Bill Rhodes roar in response. "WHY WAS HE HERE?" Heart pounding against his chest, Ink slammed the door to her living room open and stared at the scene. Solana, one eye swelling up already, was cowering on the ground by an end table that had been knocked over. Bill leaned over her, hand raised to hit her again. Pieces of a broken vase lay scattered on the ground around them. His head spun around at the sound of Ink bursting in, his hand paused in mid-air. His fleshy face was almost unrecognizable, demented and twisted in perpetual stutter, mouth open, teeth glaring, eyes bulging with madness.

"W-Well, w-w-well," Bill said slowly, trying in vain to control his

stutter. “Th-th this is turning ou-out to-to be v-e-ery interesting. Did-did-d-did you think I w-w-would-wouldn’t find out about your li-li-little visit?”

Ink stared at him, frozen in body and mind. Vaguely, he registered Solana getting on her hands and knees and scrambling away towards the wall, whimpering. This had to be a nightmare. It couldn’t be real. But it was. His feeling that things were coming to a head had been justified, and it had happened a lot sooner than he had imagined.

Bill turned towards Ink, swaying slightly as if he had been drinking. “I s-s-see EV-EV-ERYTHING! I know E-E-EVERY-TH-THING! I own EV-EV-ERY-TH-THING! S-Solana is M-M-M-MINE you stupid, fool!” he spat out. The insult spurred Ink to life. He charged at Bill Rhodes, knocking him over, and they fell together onto the dining table behind them, then rolled over to the floor, Ink on top. Ink lashed out blindly, furiously, at Bill’s face, ribs, abdomen. Blood splattered his face as he smashed Bill’s nose. Bill threw up his arms to block his punches, then slammed an elbow into the side of Ink’s skull, the tender spot on the side of the temple. Ink reeled, his head swimming, vision blurring. He heard Solana scream. Bill lurched up and flung his arms around Ink’s neck in a lethal embrace and yanked his head forward until their faces were almost touching. Pain sliced through Ink’s neck, down his back. He gasped, and the thought that he was no fighter, and that this was insane, briefly flew through his mind. He struggled to get his head loose, but Bill had him in a vise, tightening his forearms around the sides of his neck, cutting off blood supply to his brain. Ink felt himself sinking, blacking out.

“Y-y-you were m-my F-F-FRIEND!” Bill hissed, spraying Ink’s face with saliva and blood. Outraged tears rolled out of his eyes, down his face, mingling with the blood from his broken nose. “M-MY FRIEND!!” he screamed. Maintaining his hold around Ink’s neck, he rolled over so that Ink was now on the bottom. Then Bill released his neck, and holding him down with one hand, crunched his fist into Ink’s face. Through a fog, Ink thought he heard a crack. His jaw? Cheekbone? He didn’t know. Didn’t care. Just take me now, he said silently to the universe. Finish it.

“I L-LOVED YOU!!” Bill screamed, landing blow after tortured blow on Ink. The lifetime of anger and outrage they had both tried to bury came spewing out, scorching, unstoppable. The present dimmed. Suddenly they were both children, fighting their tormentors. Both of them had had enough. Ink came back into focus and grabbed Bill’s hand as it swung up to hit him again. He heaved up like Bill had before, and smashed his head into Bill’s already battered nose. Bill bellowed in pain and grabbed his nose, letting go of Ink. Ink threw his arms around

Bill Rhodes' torso and tried to swing him down sideways. Bill, his hands trapped between them, managed to grab a chunk of flesh from Ink's cheek between his teeth. Ink howled in pain, but kept his grip. Blood squirted out of his cheek, down Bill Rhodes' chin. They struggled, locked together, crashed to the floor sideways, then rolled over. Bill was on top again, his hands free, and he plunged his fingers at Ink's eyes, clawing, gouging.

Suddenly there was an extra weight on top of them. Solana had launched herself onto Bill Rhodes' back and was hanging on, legs wrapped tightly around his waist, one arm around his neck, the other punching his head. Bill roared again, thrashing like an angry bull. They tumbled off Ink onto the ground, and Ink staggered up, breathing hard, trying to get his balance. All of a sudden, a blow landed on his jaw from the other direction. His head swung sideways, blood spurting from his mouth, teeth smashing into each other. Squinting through the pain, he saw Bill's men swarm into the room. Where had they been? Another blow landed on his stomach, right under his ribs, and he doubled over. One of the men grabbed Solana off Bill and threw her across the floor. Her head hit the wall, and she slumped to the floor, unconscious. Ink wanted to go to her but couldn't. He would have slid to the floor himself if not for Bill's men, who had him firmly by the forearms. He watched Bill Rhodes sway to his feet unsteadily and thought spitefully, disjointedly through the pain, that he didn't seem to have fared much better.

"Ab-b-bout time y-you got here," Bill Rhodes barked at his men, panting, smeared with Ink's blood as well as his own. One of the men gave him a towel and he held it to his face. "Wh-wh-what took y-y-you s-s-so long?"

He had forgotten that he had told them he didn't need them when he was in Solana's rooms, and at this time of night, when everyone had gone to bed, he didn't usually have any need for security. So his men went and hung out in the recreation room downstairs, watching television, grabbing a bite to eat, unwinding. On call with pagers and cell phones.

"What do you want us to do with them?" One of them asked.

"I d-d-on't know y-y-et." Part of him wanted to throw them both in the freezing river that ran along his property. But the part that desperately wanted love, acceptance, and forgiveness, held back. "L-lock them in their rooms f-for n-n-now. G-guards outside w-windows and doors." His stutter seemed to be calming down a little. He turned away as one of the men threw Solana over his shoulder and carried her to her bedroom. The other dragged Ink, legs trailing on the floor, head sagging.

“You have no right!” Ink shouted brokenly as they exited. Bill Rhodes sneered hideously, then spat and groaned with the effort. Ink was entitled to his opinion, he supposed. But the sneer hid the fact that he felt disturbed about the way things had gone. It felt crazed and surreal, and he blamed Solana and Ink for it. Ink mostly. He had had Solana where he wanted her. She would never have instigated a meeting with Ink’s safety contingent on her staying away from him. So it had to be Ink who had contacted her. But she had to have agreed to the meeting. His men had told him they had been in her rooms together for around a half hour. She shouldn’t have agreed to meet him. He wasn’t sure who he was angrier with. They both owed him so much. He had taken them both out of their miserable existences and given them opportunities at better lives, a fact that neither of them seemed to appreciate. He loved them both, he thought miserably, and did not want it to be like this with them. But the monster created by the bigoted world had reared its ugly head once again, and now he didn’t know if any of them would recover from the night. He cleaned up his face, took some Ibuprofen for the pain, a sleeping pill, and went to bed. Maybe, a night’s sleep would make it better. But somehow he doubted it.

That night the same thought went through all of their heads: the world did this to us. None of us asked for this. Ink did not ask for a birthmark that people could not look past. Bill Rhodes did not ask for a stutter that made him the object of ridicule. Solana did not ask to be a breathtaking beauty born into dire poverty that made her all man's toy. And none of them had asked to be born into a world where power over others was a survival tool. But there was only the one world. So it would have been better had they not been born at all than to be born with disadvantages. It would have been better if they didn't exist at all. No more anxieties, no more fighting to survive. Sounded like absolute bliss.

The more Solana thought about it, prowling like a caged animal in her prison, the more she craved it. Then the realization hit her that she was the main problem here. She was the problem. Her effect on men had been the bane of her existence all her life; at home in the shanty, where she had to fight off horny adolescent boys; at the club, where men were either awed by her, or intimidated by her and wanted to control her; and then with Bill Rhodes, who wanted to possess her. Te Odio, she thought angrily, looking at herself in the mirror in her bathroom, I hate you. If she didn't exist, maybe Bill and Ink could have been friends. But when she appeared in their lives, she came between them. Both of them wanted her. Hatred for the face that had caused her endless grief expanded like a tumor inside her. The image in the mirror trembled and became distorted, as if it were under water. She looked ugly right now, face bruised and swollen, black eye, bleeding lip. If I could look ugly like this all the time, then things would be different. She flew into her fully stocked little kitchenette and grabbed a small paring knife from the block of designer knives of all sizes sitting on the marble counter. Symbols of Bill Rhodes' generosity. Symbols of his arrogance. She went back and stood in front of the bathroom mirror again. The hand holding the knife moved with a mind of its own. With precision, it sliced through her face from left eyebrow down past her nose to the right corner of her mouth. She was in so much agony already that she hardly felt it. But she saw. She saw in wretched horror as the swollen cheeks split open and her beauty oozed out and slid down her face, to her neck, bosom. There. Maybe now men would leave her alone. Maybe now the problems would go away and she could have a normal life.

But she knew that, in the end, the problem wasn't her face. The problem was the world. Look at Ink and how he has suffered, she

thought. Look at the monster the world has made Bill Rhodes into. The world was what was ugly. Not to exist at all was the solution. She wanted to mutilate and destroy her whole existence. Slash it all off the face off the earth. Say ENOUGH to the world. No more. No more to life.

A calm descended on her. They had been figuring this all wrong, thinking Bill Rhodes had to be taken out. It was an impossible task for the two of them. He was too powerful, had too many resources. They were like two ants trying to take out a giant rodent. No, what needed to happen was that she, Solana, needed to be taken out of the equation. She could not run. Bill would hurt her loved ones. The image of her precious family cowering before Bill Rhodes cut through her deeper than the knife had, causing her to convulse in pain. No, running was not an option. Besides, she had no doubt there was nowhere on earth she could go that he would not find her. The world belonged to people like Bill Rhodes. The only way she would ever be free of him was if she were dead. Muerto. Ink would be free from both her and Bill. Her family would be free. And she would be free of Bill, and of the whole rotten world of men. The simplicity of it made her wonder why she had not thought about it before. Because the will to live, and to survive, is strong, she thought. And senseless. Why fight to survive in a world like this?

Salty tears flooded her face, mingling with her cuts and bruises, reigniting the pain. But she embraced it. She wanted to feel pain. It was the pain of release. The release of life. It brought with it anguished acceptance as she realized fully what she was thinking. Her heart heaved as images of her parents, her brother, Lalu, friends who had loved her, and whom she had loved back, flashed through her head. And Ink. She loved him so much. Bruised and bleeding face streaked with grief, her shoulders shook with despair, doubt, and yet, conviction. Fear and anticipation hammering against her ribs, she turned to the bathtub. Breathing in waves of panic now, she sat down on the rim and turned on the tap. The sound of the water calmed her and she let her mind go into the comfortable fog where thought floated away. When the water was knee high, she stared at the paring knife in her hand, summoning the nerve, begging the universe not to fail her now. Then, clothed so people didn't find her naked, she slid into the tub and sliced into her wrists horizontally from thumb to pinky. She focused on the pain as the blood seeped out of her flesh. It felt good. It took her mind off everything else. It gave her a sense of power, of control over her own life. There was no Bill Rhodes. No horrible world. No Ink. Her stomach contracted briefly at the thought of never seeing Ink again. But it was better for everyone this way. She sat back and closed her eyes.

The water was warm and soothing. She had always liked the feel of warm water, ever since she was a little girl. Baths were a luxury back in the shanty town. Lalu used to heat up water on the mud stove in batches and fill up a makeshift brick bathtub for the kids now and then. It was so much fun she didn't think she would ever need anything else in life. She opened her eyes groggily and watched the water slowly turning a light pink. There was no fear now. No anxiety. Just peace. The sense that this was meant to be. A surrender to a higher power. She felt herself slipping into darkness.

Through the shadows, she saw the bathroom door open. Through the shadows, she saw a silhouette. There was no mistaking that silhouette. The bushy, frizzy hair piled on top of the head. She heard Aisha gasp. Somewhere in her head she smiled at the memory of her friend. Then she closed her eyes. She sensed the hustle and bustle that followed rather than fully registering it. Things were surprisingly hushed. What, would no one cry for her? She felt arms go around her shoulders and under her knees, and felt herself being lifted out of the water. The dark swallowed her. And there was blessed silence.

Early next morning, Ink lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, his body one colossal sore. His mind an even bigger one. He stared up at the ceiling and thought about how stupid it all was. Life. People. Bill Rhodes' men had cleaned and bandaged him up. But why? They should have left him to bleed and suffer. They should have just finished him off. What did it all matter in the end? The events of the night before were terrifying, consuming, beyond anything he had ever experienced in life. More than getting beat up in school. More than Monica committing suicide. The tragedy of the fact that all three of them had been hurt by people all their lives, and were now hurting each other, sat heavy in his heart. They should have been able to be there for each other; empathize, commiserate, comfort. Instead they had turned on each other. Was there no solution for people like them? How were any of them going to go on from here? And would it even be worth it? What kind of life would it be? Granted, he had money now and could easily move to any part of the world he wanted to. Go be with his mother, the only person whose love for him had always been and would always be completely selfless, the only person who didn't want anything from him except that he be all right and happy. His bruised face tightened, then released as he let the tears come. He wanted his mom. Wanted an earlier time in his life when things were less complicated. Ironic. Life, eclipsed by a giant, dark blue cloud on his face, had never been uncomplicated for him. In fact, Bill Rhodes had given him the only real opportunity he had ever had in his life. He had given him the chance to feel like he could contribute to something, be a part of a community. A chance to feel like he wasn't a freak. To be accepted and valued, not judged and persecuted. He had felt gratitude and love for this man who now had him by the balls. What a hopeless mess. Things could not possibly get any worse, could they?

Someone was knocking on the door to his living room. What now? It was unrelenting, ceaseless. They had locked him in, for Christ's sake. They could let themselves in. He was in too much pain to get up. And they did finally let themselves in. He heard the main door open, footsteps. Then, with a quick knock, the door to his bedroom opened. Bill Rhodes walked in, hobbled rather, obviously in a considerable amount of pain from the night before, and sat down gingerly on the edge of the armchair at the foot of Ink's bed. What was this? An attempt at apology? Ink was about to turn over and face the other side when he noticed the expression on Bill's face, even through the swelling and bruising. He looked stunned, shattered. Ink sat up,

suddenly scared. He had never seen Bill this devastated.

“Solana...” Bill choked out.

Ink swung his legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the stabbing pain. The pain in his heart was worse.

“She’s g-g-gone, Ink,” Bill Rhodes blurted out. “We killed her. You and I.”

Ink stared at him, disconnecting, shutting down. What on earth was he talking about? He would never hurt Solana. His first impulse was to launch himself at Bill. Hammer him until he admitted he was lying. Take it back. Make it not so. But he just stood there. In shock. Then Bill Rhodes staggered to his feet and left the room, and Ink followed. Both of them walked as if in a daze, in disbelief, confusion. Their minds were incapable of acknowledging the reality of such a situation. Solana dead? What did that even mean? The hallway felt warped, endless, like something out of a nightmare. The walls felt like they were closing in on them. Noises came from a different dimension. The level of noise went up as they neared Solana’s rooms.

There was a crowd of people outside her rooms, some inside the living room. They had heard the news, but were not being allowed inside the bedroom. As they approached, Bill glumly told Ink what had happened. Ink’s stomach clenched and he felt out of breath, like someone had knocked the wind out of him all over again. He looked at Bill and felt a flash of anger. This had been completely unnecessary. If only they had been able to respect each other. And themselves. That respect would have prevented the actions that occurred. Would have prevented this.

Whatever or whoever lay on the bed bore no resemblance to Solana. She was turning a shade of grey. Ink stared in horror at her, once beautiful, now battered and swollen, at the savage clotting wound that split her face diagonally. Dead people were so often described as appearing at peace. Not so in her case. She looked destroyed, broken. And dead. Gone. No one could touch her anymore. He understood why people were not being allowed inside. If they saw her, they would know she had been treated badly, and Bill Rhodes’ ugliness had to be kept a secret, he thought angrily. Even now, protecting his image was more important. But people weren’t stupid. They talked. They knew.

Aisha and her mother, Bola, were standing next to the bed, weeping quietly. The resident physician solemnly drew the sheet over Solana’s face, concluding the final act to confirm death. It was not real. It couldn’t be. But it was. Solana was dead. Ink didn’t know how to be a part of this reality. Didn’t want any part of it. He fell to his knees, an intense rushing in his brain. Bill Rhodes knelt down on the floor with him and put his arms around him. Although Ink’s entire being balked at

his touch, he didn't have the strength to push him away. United by their grief for the woman they had both loved, and the part they had both played in her demise, they wept together.

The next couple of days passed in a blur. Ink found out that Aisha, having lain awake half the night worrying about Solana, had finally gone to check in on her friend. The guard Bill had posted outside the room had not been able to stop her from barging in, and she had discovered Solana in the bathtub, in water turning a ghastly shade of pink. The first person she had called had been her mother, the one person she knew without a doubt that she could trust. Bola had dragged the resident physician out of bed and brought him with her, while Aisha, with the help of the guard, had carried her to the bed. They had then notified Bill Rhodes. Bill had burst into the room to find the doctor standing over her, shaking his head, pronouncing her dead.

Solana's family had been informed. Ink could not even imagine the heartbreak they must be going through. Another human-trafficking-statistic-family. Were there any other options for girls like her from poor backgrounds? Had they been hoping that maybe Solana would be spared the fate of so many in that situation? What did they think was going to happen when they let her join the club?

Her body would be shipped back to Paraguay to be buried. Bill Rhodes would, of course, pay for the funeral, although there was no question of him actually going to the funeral himself. People with Bill's status did not attend funerals for people from shanty towns. Plus there was the guilt. He offered to fly Ink out first class if he wanted to be there. But Ink declined. Solana's death was unfathomable to him. She had been so young, beautiful, so full of fire. It was unimaginable that death would have the audacity to put out that fire. There would be no point in traveling all the way to Paraguay. Better to say his good-bye here and now. Aisha and Bola would accompany the coffin, and convey everyone's sympathies.

They went to the airport with a posse of people from the company. Everyone wanted to pay their respects to the woman who stopped their hearts when she danced. Some wondered what had transpired. They all knew about her relationship with Bill Rhodes. Most did not know about her relationship with Ink. Everyone had heard of the scene in Solana's rooms a few nights ago. Talk had spread. They all knew that somehow their benevolent boss was responsible for this. And while nobody wanted to risk their jobs, the general feeling towards Bill right now was negative.

As people stood around the closed coffin at the foot of the plane, the wind blowing, plane's engine roaring, Bill Rhodes tried to say a few words, but caught the angry looks people gave him, in particular

Aisha, and stopped in mid sentence. Instead they stood in silence, each of them remembering and saying goodbye to Solana in their own mind. Then the coffin was lifted, Bill and Ink among those who carried it, and put on board the plane.

Bill maintained that Ink and he were equally responsible for what happened. Together they had made life intolerable for Solana, he said. She was in a better place now, he said. Ink had to make a supreme effort to control lashing out at him at this point. You are responsible, he thought. You took her unwillingly from her home. You threatened her family. And when Solana wanted me, you couldn't respect that. YOU made her life miserable. What gave you the right? Part of him wanted to fulfill Solana's wishes to kill Bill Rhodes. He would gladly go to jail. Hang himself in his cell. The other part just felt weary of the whole drama. He wanted to sleep for months, hibernate like bears, and maybe awaken better able to cope. An impossible dream. Whatever life they chose to lead from now on would be indelibly tainted by the horror of what had happened. It confirmed what Ink had felt throughout his existence: that anything good in life was transitory, because people were inherently selfish and mean.

BAMBOO SHUTTERS

~ 49 ~

7 years later.

Ink woke up to a chorus of bird chatter outside the bamboo shutters on the bedroom window. Two years here, and he was still amazed by the flurry of sounds erupting in the early morning when everything else slept and the birds had the stage all to themselves. So many different kinds of birds, so many different kinds of sounds.

It had been seven years. Seven years of letting go, reconstructing reality, sense and purpose in life, and the strength to go on. He stretched lazily, feeling life course through his muscles and veins, and looked at the clock. It was seven a.m. and warm already. The ceiling fan did little to dispel the light sheen of sweat on his neck and forehead. But he had two hours before the first visitors arrived, and a lagoon of inviting, perfect-temperature water, forty feet from his front door. There was just enough time for him to go through his morning routine: exercise, a quick, glorious skinny dip, shower, and a breakfast of papaya, eggs, whole wheat toast, and coffee. Then he would pour passion fruit juice, made up the night before, in little paper cups, set the cups on a tray, and be ready to greet the first round of visitors when the ship docked at nine and they came ashore on little boats.

His job, if one could call it that, was to talk to visitors about the botanical garden, the adjacent rainforest and all the different kinds of birds and animals, then take them on a tour of the garden. For about forty-five minutes he would show them the different plants and flowers, many of which they had never heard, discuss special planting methods, weather, and other elements that made this part of the world different. He would then answer questions, let them pluck and taste exotic fruit straight from the trees, which never failed to delight, point out the resident sloth at the mouth of the rainforest, then let them loose for a self-guided walk. By the time they returned from their walk through the rain forest, he would have a feast of grilled pork and chicken, rice with beans, salad, and little coconut cakes ready for them, during which he would walk around and make conversation, answer any further questions, laugh and smile at their jokes. Once again, for the gazillionth time, he felt so lucky. So far it had been all good out here.

The garden and rainforest were in a part of Costa Rica only reachable by boat, which meant only people who could afford to pay for the trip, usually in cruises of various sizes, would be able to go there. No riff raff. No teenagers to get drunk and raise a ruckus. The cove in front of the property, perfect for swimming, was not big enough

to accommodate large cruise ships, so the ones that visited were usually smaller, more intimate ones, with maybe forty to a hundred passengers at the most. And even those had to anchor some distance away, because it was too shallow closer to land, and send their passengers over in groups by smaller boats.

Mostly the visitors were nature people. They loved the wild, the sense of adventure. Completely absorbed in the experience, they hardly noticed his birthmark, and if they did, didn't care enough to comment on it. He had been fortunate enough not to meet any Disneyland-type tourists on these excursions yet; the loud, obnoxious kind who acted like they owned the world. Who felt like they either had to ask about the birthmark, or crack some stupid joke about it. He felt blessed. For now, this was the perfect place for him. When the groups left, it was just him, the wonderfully calm inlet water, and one young man, Carlos, who helped him maintain the property. He spent his days in the sun, surrounded by green, trimming, watering, planting, and doing whatever else that needed to be done in the gardens. In the evenings, he read, swam, had a beer. His only contact to the outside world was the internet, which he turned on when he wanted to check the news or email, by which he kept in touch with his mother, then turned off. Along with the world.

Sometimes, Carlos came and sat with him. Initially Ink had been reluctant to form a personal relationship with him, distrustful of people in general; but as he spent time with him, he saw that Carlos was benign enough. He was content to sit in silence with Ink and stare out at the water. Slowly Ink had opened up enough to offer him a beer, make small talk. Then he became curious about his only companion on the island, and started to ask him questions about his background. Carlos answered his questions, but did not ask Ink any in return. He seemed to understand that this quiet man with the birthmark was here because he did not want to be around people. He could imagine the hurt one would endure from others because of such a mark. Meanness in life was not a hard thing to imagine. It was everywhere. But not here. Here everyone was happy, eager. On vacation. Being mean was not part of the agenda.

One day, Ink noticed a woman among the group. Something about her was vaguely familiar. The woman was pleasantly plump. Was it one of his "housewives" she reminded him of? There had been all kinds, he thought uncomfortably, unsure of whether to feel ashamed in retrospect or not. He had used them as they had used him. And he had no desire to come face to face with any of them at this point. This woman's face was mostly obscured by a huge sun hat and sunglasses. Her black hair lay in a braid over one shoulder. A diaphanous, flowered

scarf was wrapped loosely around her neck and shoulders. Wanted to keep the sun off, he imagined. Many women, usually the fair skinned ones, sported hats, shades and scarves like this. But from what he could see of her, this one was dark skinned. Smart lady, he thought. All skin burned, regardless of color, and should be protected.

He noticed that she did not interact much with the rest of the crowd, but kept to herself, ambled around examining the exotic plants, took pictures. Something about the woman's stature, the way she held herself and walked, he realized slowly, reminded him of Solana. The woman Solana might have been had she been allowed a normal, happy life. Had she been allowed to live. And for the first time in a very long time, Ink let himself tentatively think of the woman he had spent the last seven years trying to forget. The pain had been consuming, insupportable. He had had to shut her out, her and Bill Rhodes both, in order to be able to function, to heal.

At first, when he had left seven years ago, Bill Rhodes had wanted to keep in touch, reluctant to lose his friend, and his marketing find, but he had understood and respected the distance Ink had needed at the time. Bill had needed the same. The events at the castle had left deep wounds that only time and separation would heal. They had discussed perhaps re-connecting in a few years, but neither of them had made the effort. Ink knew where to find Bill if he wanted to contact him. He was sure Devianza was still based in the hills in Colorado. But as far as he knew, Bill Rhodes had no idea where he was. He had no doubt Bill could find out if he really wanted to, with all the resources he had. But he had not heard from him, so either he was leaving Ink alone on purpose, or had no idea where he was, or both. Thus, they had grown blissfully out of touch, something Ink was eternally thankful for.

Ink had wanted to disappear. He had wanted to leave his old life behind completely and start over somewhere where no one knew him or his history. His mom, stunned at what had happened, had understood the need to be out of touch for a few years. If anyone were looking for him, the first person they would contact would be her. And had reluctantly let him go. He had cancelled everything connected to his old self, gotten a new identity, new accounts. It had been a lot easier than he thought. His name was now Michael. Unremarkable. Safe. Michael Adams. Mrs. Martin from Laughlin Elementary would have been proud.

He watched the woman bend over and examine some plants. Watched her fingers break open some Granadilla and scoop out the sweet jelly-like flesh inside. Watched the seeds slide down the side of her chin. When the group headed for the rainforest, she lingered behind, obviously alone, taking more pictures.

He decided to play the good host and went up to her to ask if she needed anything. As she turned towards him, she took off her hat and shades. Ink stifled a gasp as he stared at the long scar that ran diagonally down her face. It was obviously old because it did not have the red, puffy and angry appearance of a new scar. Instead it was almost flush with her skin, but a lighter tone. It didn't look like it would ever completely go away. Poor woman. What happened to you? He tore his eyes away from the scar and forced a smile on his face. He knew how it felt to be stared at because of some disfigurement and did not want to be the person that stared.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked politely.

She smiled then, a smile which might have been pretty if it had not been for the tight scar tissue clenching her skin. And she spoke.

"Hola, Ink," she said, softly.

He jerked then, completely taken aback. No one knew his old name. He stared at her in disbelief, stomach tightening in panic as old emotions came flooding back. Frustration. Fear. Blighted love. You're dead, he thought wildly. I saw you dead.

"Solana," he whispered, afraid to say it any louder in case the world came crashing down around him. Images went through his head, images that he had archived away in remote parts of his mind so he could move on. So he could survive without her. And he had. But now that survival felt increasingly threatened as he stared at her. Part of him wanted to run. Run as fast and as far as he could go. Because he was undoubtedly looking at Solana, a shattering threat to the tranquility he had worked so hard to achieve. Once again, his sense of reality was challenged. Was he finally going mad? She would be in her late twenties now. Her face was heavier, but it was still Solana. Even with the scar, Ink thought. The scar she had inflicted on herself in an effort to wipe out the pain of her existence.

"I...did you want to go with..." he pointed towards the group vanishing in the rainforest, at a complete loss over what to say. She shook her head, her smile fading as his discomfort became obvious. They stood for a few seconds in uncertain silence. Then he turned and held out his hand towards a clearing by the house. Towards shade trees and benches. And quiet. She led the way as he watched from behind. Yes, it was Solana. Somehow she was alive. And she had come to find him. His pulse quickened at the implications. His head felt like it was going to burst. He took a deep breath, and exhaled, felt the tension pass down his body and out through his hands and feet. Okay.

They had an hour until the tour group came back for lunch. In the shade of a tall *Erythrina* tree at the foot of the botanical garden, they sat and talked. He knew that Aisha had found her friend bleeding in the

bathtub and had called her mother. They had both been well aware of the situation developing between Solana, Ink and Bill Rhodes. They had observed silently as Bill had gotten more and more psychotic about Solana. Had watched as the situation disintegrated, and felt increasingly sorry for Solana and angry at Bill. And when Solana tried to kill herself, they had decided to take the opportunity to help her.

Bola had reached into her endless knowledge of herbal medicine and pulled out a concoction which, when administered, temporarily simulated death; breathing stopped, skin turned pale and grey, body went cold. The resident physician, who had been treating Solana's bruises and cuts, outraged at the brutal treatment of this beautiful, young girl, had been more than ready and willing to help. He had therefore provided the medical confirmation to the world that she was indeed dead. The dread of discovery hanging over them, heart pounding in throat every step of the way, Aisha, Bola and the doctor had attended to the arrangements for Solana's "body." They had bathed, dressed and put her in the lavish coffin Bill had ordered, declared it closed for viewing, and stood guard over it at the airport while others from the company said goodbye. Aisha and Bola had offered to accompany Solana's "body" back to her family, to which Bill had agreed. Since Solana was not a factor in his life anymore, Bill Rhodes had also given her family a generous "severance pay," enough for them to live independently for the rest of their lives if they chose to. Guilt money. But this meant that they were finally free. The family had packed up everything, and had spirited an unconscious but alive Solana to blessed obscurity.

Meanwhile, Aisha had insisted on keeping in touch with Ink when they parted seven years ago. When he changed his identity, and moved to Costa Rica, he had given her an email address at which she could contact him if needed. This was not his primary email. In fact he had several, all under different names, making it hard for anyone to track him. He had heard from her now and then, but she had not bothered him for his location. The need for distance was mutual.

After enough time had passed, things had cooled down, and healing had happened, Aisha's mother, Bola, whose network of contacts among the working class and underground was far reaching, had located the young man with the birthmark who maintained the botanical garden and hosted tour groups on an island in Costa Rica. And here they were.

They stared at each other, all kinds of questions in their eyes. So much had changed. So much energy had been put into forgetting and moving on. Could they still have feelings for each other despite all the scars? Did they even want to? The chatter of the group returning from

their rain forest walk brought them back to the present.

“Boss,” Carlos called out from the direction of the house. He had almost finished laying out the food, a task that Ink usually led. Carlos had seen that this woman Ink was talking to was something special to him. Very possibly she was part of what had made him seek out a life of solitude. And he gladly left them alone to finish their talk while he got things ready for the guests by himself.

Ink and Solana hesitantly smiled at each other, relieved for the distraction, grateful to put the past aside for the time being. They were both still young. They had time. There was no sense of urgency to make any decisions right this second.

“Food?” Ink asked. Solana nodded.

They got up and headed for the barbeque lunch. As they walked towards the hungry tourists, their hands slowly found each other, remembered, and held tight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zita Harrison is an avid writer, reader and computer artist. She has a Masters in English and a Bachelors in Art. A member of the California Writers' Club, she loves to write about different things. Her first novel, *Ink - Beneath the Stain*, came out in July 2016, for which she designed her own cover. Zita loves to travel and experience different cultures and people, and incorporate them into her writing. Rome and Greece are two of her favorite places to visit; the combination of ancient past and present. The food. An ecstatic resident of Northern California for 22 years, Napa Valley wine tasting, and Ghirardelli Intense Dark Cherry Tango Chocolate are two of her favorite indulgences. She is also passionate about music, and loves going to concerts. Zita is Currently working on her second novel and some short stories.