

2012

## GRACE LIKE SNOW

Jessica Lowe

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By

Jessica Lowe

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## Prologue

The building is gone now. Patches of grass have begun to reclaim the once scorched land. All that remains is a faint outline of its foundation: shallow grooves marking a rectangle in the dirt. Soon, more grass will grow, and it will become an empty space, just another vacant lot in New Orleans.

The building had a history though; it wasn't always a blighted infrastructure, abandoned and run-down. People had cared for it once, had owned and maintained it. It had been built in 1937 by a couple who had just moved to Louisiana. They had bought a house next door to the empty lot, then made plans to erect a workshop there. It was a sturdy structure, wood floors and walls with a tin ceiling, and fairly simple, too. They gave it a front door and a back door, then hung a couple of windows. They didn't need it to be pretty, so long as the man of the house could exercise his carpentry skills and craft benches, tables, and chairs to sell.

Eventually, the couple passed away, and the rights to the house and side building were passed down to their only daughter. She had moved north, and so made a quick sale of both properties to another family.

This family didn't have a carpenter, but they did have kids: two when they moved in, but it grew to four while they lived there. The building became a children's playroom, somewhere the nanny could bring them to give the parents some peace in the house. They put in child-sized furniture, little kitchen sets, desks, and chairs. They had a story book corner and a building block area, along with dress up clothes and costumes to play with. They spent many hours and days in the playroom, inviting friends from school to join them.

When they became teenagers, the room turned into a "hang-out" space, somewhere with couches and a television set, board games and a pool table. Eventually, though, the kids grew up and moved out, leaving the family with no need for the extra space. They decided to put it up for sale while retaining the house. This was difficult, however, because the building was not big enough to serve as a house, nor did it have the right appliances. They weren't sure who would want to purchase it.

Then, Reverend Douglas came along. He was a young minister, fresh out of seminary and ready to jump start his career. He saw the ad in the paper and decided to buy the property. As soon as the papers were signed, he began the hard work of changing it into a small church.

Reverend Douglas was very charismatic, and soon had a decent sized following. They helped raise money for pews and a pulpit, added a small steeple to the top of the roof, and then painted the entire building bright red. They wanted it to stand apart from the other buildings in the neighborhood. Douglas hoped to see continued growth in his congregation over the next few years. He wanted to one day tear down the building and construct a new church, one that was bigger and included separate rooms for Sunday school classes to meet in.

This dream was never realized, however. The church survived and grew for five years, and just as Reverend Douglas was becoming optimistic about their future, Hurricane Katrina

struck. The church was right on the outskirts of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward, so the entire building suffered severe flood damage. It stood in seven feet of water for eight days. Everything inside the building was looted or destroyed.

The few congregation members who managed to return to the area gathered together and gutted the whole place. They dragged bloated pews to the curb, rolled up soggy carpet, threw away moldy banners and pulled down warped altar rails. Reverend Douglas returned only briefly to assess the damage. Once he realized nothing could be salvaged, he left Louisiana entirely, planning to start up his ministry elsewhere.

The building still remained however, though broken and warped. It was left exposed with no one there to claim it or repair the damages it had incurred. As time passed, the building seemed to crumple. It was left unoccupied, and soon began to decay and fall apart. People who lived in the neighborhood learned to look the other way when walking down the street. The overgrown grass and graffiti-covered walls made them feel depressed.

A few teenagers began using it as a make-out location, sneaking in through the rotted-out door to kiss in secret. At one point, the City Council created a committee to help clean up the community. They got organized and attempted to board the building up, going so far as to nail wooden beams across its back door. But they ran out of funding shortly after that, leaving the project unfinished and the building still readily accessible to any who wished to enter. That is, until the fire consumed it all.

Soon however, all of this will be forgotten. The plot of land will fall into the hands of the city and will be sold to someone who wants to build their dream home, doing their part to revitalize the neighborhoods of New Orleans.

For now, though, one can still make out the building's recent history. Small signs linger that tell of its violent end. Even once the final bits of ash blow away and the land is evenly covered in green, all traces of the building smoothed away, one reminder will still remain: two small crosses standing on the back edge of the property, pushed down deep into the moist ground. A wreath of flowers hangs around one, while a handful of daisies have been laid against the other. These memorials make it clear that for some, the events that occurred in that building will be remembered always.

## Tobias

Tobias paces back and forth along the sidewalk, hands tucked into his jacket pockets, eyes focused on the ground. His thoughts are scattered and he can't make up his mind whether to keep going forward or to turn around and go back. In one direction lies the safety and warmth of a shelter; the guarantee of a bed to sleep on and a roof to sleep under, yet he feels his body pulling him the other way, its need for cocaine insisting that he go back. The shelter is still three blocks away, and he knows that they'll be closing soon. He has to hurry.

The pacing brings Tobias to a bench, which he collapses onto. He takes his backpack off and it falls to the ground. He removes a wad of bills from his pocket and begins to count, pulling them out of the crumpled mass one by one. Forty dollars is all he has left.

Tobias is stunned: How did it come to this? He thinks back to the events of last week, remembering how his sofa looked lying sideways next to the curb. His belongings all stuffed into garbage bags, two of which lay ripped open, having already been rifled through; his mattress and TV noticeably missing.

He vaguely recalled receiving an eviction notice, but he hadn't thought the landlord was serious. He was a few months behind on rent, sure, but that had happened before. He always got



it to him eventually. But seeing the insides of his one bedroom apartment so displaced like that had a sobering effect on him; all of his things nestled against the side of the building's dumpster made him rethink his future. He had sworn that day that he would change his lifestyle and stop spending money on drugs; actually start job hunting again, clean himself back up. He knew he had promise, the ability to make something of himself. At least people had told him that when he graduated high school; he assumed it was still true.

Back then, everything had seemed to fall into place. He had plans to join the army, to work his way up the ranks, to have them pay for his college education further down the road. But then it all seemed to vanish, almost as if it had never existed.

He had gone to his senior graduation party, just to make a quick appearance and say goodbye to some of his friends before heading off to basic training. He had seen several of them disappearing into a back room, and decided to see what was going on. As he opened the door, the smell of marijuana overpowered him. He didn't even notice when his friend Emilio walked by.

"Officer Toby!" Emilio said, "Would you like a hit before embarking on your military adventure?"

"No thanks man," Tobias replied, "I don't do that kind of stuff."

He was already worried about the fumes snaking their way inside his clothing, winding up his jacket sleeves and pant legs, curling up inside the threads of the fabric. All he could think about was how he would need to air them out before his grandmother washed them, how it would break her heart if she knew where he was right now, who he was surrounded by.

He wanted to get back to the other, smoke-free room, but needed to tell Emilio bye before leaving. Tobias looked around the room and finally spotted him: Emilio had just rolled a joint and was now in the process of lighting it – his fingers deftly gripping the cheap bic lighter. He

was having difficulty getting it to light, however, laughing so hard his hands were shaking, the result of a joke someone had told earlier.

Tobias found himself locked into place, unable to move, to breathe, eyes focused on Emilio's hand holding the lighter. Emilio's thumb spun the small metal wheel, *flick, flick, flick*, sparks registered, but no flame. Tobias began to feel dizzy. A tingling sensation started along the back of his neck, making him feel like his mind and body were separating, like he no longer had control of his movements. Emilio shook the lighter, flicked it again – each thumb stroke seen in slow motion through Tobias's eyes. Finally, the lighter lit and Emilio held it to the joint's end. He'd noticed Tobias staring.

"Last chance, man," he said, offering Tobias the joint.

Tobias reached his hand out mechanically and brought the joint up to his lips. Vaguely, memories of his grandmother's warnings against drug use came into his mind then, yet he couldn't focus, couldn't make himself care about anything. He inhaled, and immediately his mind reconnected – he could once again command his fingers to wiggle, mouth to move. He could look at the lighter and feel nothing except a slight twinge inside, easily muffled by the calming of the drugs. Tobias coughed as the unfamiliar smoke filled his lungs. He didn't know what had just taken place, what had caused his body to freeze up like that. He had yet to discover why fire tempted and teased him so. Not until later would he realize how much it had influenced his past, and therefore his future.

That moment had led to Tobias's last conversation with his grandmother. She had raised him since he was five years old, the only parent figure he could truly remember.

"I'm sorry Grandma May. I guess I just wasn't thinking," he had said.

“No, you certainly weren’t – there’s your whole future, ruined! I thought you were better than that Tobias, better than those others.”

“I am better! It was a onetime thing. I just got caught up in the post-graduation rush. I thought it’d be out of my system before the drug test. It’s not like I’m addicted or anything. It was a simple mistake.”

“Don’t you try to make excuses, Toby. I’ve heard these same stories before, remember? I know how your mother was as a teenager, all the hell she caused me. That’s why I took you in, so you could rise above all of this, not sink below it just like them.”

“Grandma May, listen—”

“No, Tobias. It breaks my heart, but you have to leave. You can’t stay here with me anymore. I’m not going to let you bring me down with you.”

“But they said they’ll let me reapply in a couple of years, and I’ll pass the drug test that time, I know I will.”

“I hope you do. But until then, until I know you haven’t let drugs dirty up all your life, I just can’t help you. I told you I can’t get dragged down in all that again – the constant worrying when you don’t come home at night, the guys with guns who show up at my door demanding money, the not knowing if you’re going to be dead or alive one day to the next. No, I won’t do it.”

“That wasn’t me though, Grandma. I’m not like that!”

“I thought you weren’t, Toby. I thought that with me getting to you early, raising you in a good house, it would save you. But I guess it’s in your blood. Now that you’ve let it get you once, you’re going to keep after it. I went through all of that with your momma, and your daddy turned out to be just as bad. I’m not about to go through it with you too. Now go.”

Tobias felt so angry then, so determined to prove her assumptions wrong. To a teenager, waiting two years to reapply to the military was nothing, just a small delay in starting his dream career, an opportunity to save up some extra cash before buckling down and becoming a part of the “real world.” In reality, however, two years was a long time, especially when he had no guidance or direction.

He began hanging out with Emilio and his group of friends more, sharing an apartment with them. He conditioned himself to seeing a lighter held and used, and soon, he was hooked – not on the drugs themselves, or the high they produced, but on the methodological process surrounding them. The cutting, the rolling, lighting, and smoking; he could get lost in the steps, the pattern, the order.

The wind blows and Tobias shivers. The sky is getting darker, and he knows that if he wants a bed at the shelter he needs to head over there soon. He stands up, stretching his stiff legs and placing his backpack on his shoulder. He thinks back to the forty dollars in his pocket and is almost happy that the total is so low. This gives him a solid reason for resisting temptation, a definite motive to not give in. His situation is too precarious, too desperate to continue buying drugs. This realization brings a sense of release; the knowledge that he no longer has the option to buy takes the power out of his hands. Now he can make the decision he knows is best, without relying on his self control.

Tobias strides purposefully in the direction of the shelter, satisfied. He relishes not having to sleep outside on a night that promises to be one of the winter’s coldest. As he walks, he tries to remember his parents. All he has are bits and pieces: his mother’s chapped lips, rough on his cheek as she kissed him goodnight; the tiny dots on the inside of his father’s arm that were explained to him as spider bites; the loud laughter; the angry yells. He knows it’s best to have

only these fragments to remember them by; to have had them die while he was still a child seems less painful somehow, more abstract.

He remembers how they died, though only barely; he had been so young. He had woken up to the sound of Remus barking, becoming suddenly aware of the smell of smoke and burning sheetrock. His five year old mind could make no sense of his surroundings, so he remained in bed, desperately crying out to his mom and dad. He wet himself when the door was kicked in, horrified at the giant monster that entered, surrounded by flames. Tobias struggled against him, not realizing it was a firefighter trying to help. He was carried out, but everything was a blur to him after that. He learned the other facts later: that his grandmother was called, that she drove over that night at 3 a.m. to pick him up, that his parents hadn't made it out alive, that he had refused to sleep with his bedroom door shut for two years afterward. All these things his grandmother related to him when he was older, surprised that he had no recollection of them.

"Well, surely you at least remember your fixation with the gas heater?" she asked him one day.

"No, what fixation?"

"Every time I gave you a bath I'd find blisters and cuts on all your little fingers, but I could never figure out where they came from. You always claimed you never noticed when they happened. Then, one day, I came back to the living room where I had left you five minutes before, coloring in your book like a good boy, and you were standing up near the heater on the wall. "Now what can he be doing?" I asked myself, so I tiptoed over to see. And, you crazy boy, you were standing so serious-like, slowly putting each of your poor fingers in through the grate and letting them get licked by the flames! Now, most parents wouldn't have known what to do in

a situation like that, but I did. I hollered out and whooped your behind good – letting you know that heaters were no play thing. Never had a problem with it again!”

The thought of his grandmother makes the frigid air turn colder. Tobias crosses his arms against his chest, trying to stay warm. His jeans are badly stained and torn at the knees, his shoes worn thin at the soles. He begins reconsidering the direction he’s chosen, debating on going back to get the drugs. He knows his money situation is tight, but the pull is getting stronger; he hasn’t smoked anything in two days, and all of this reminiscing about the past has dredged up old feelings he hasn’t thought about in months. He wants to make them go away and feel the soothing numbness only cocaine can give him.

Tobias grits his teeth and turns back the way he came, undoing the progress he had made towards the shelter. He walks quickly, head ducked down against the biting wind, wanting to get the drugs fast before he changes his mind again. He focuses on what lies ahead of him, the release he will soon get, the feeling of calm. His feet tread the familiar path automatically, allowing his mind to wander even further back to his past, back to the event that his mind had blocked from him for so long. It was the final piece of the puzzle. Though it made a lot of things clear, it also uncovered facts that Tobias would have preferred to keep hidden.

He had been five years old, playing in the dirt outside of his parent’s house. His favorite toy was by his side, a plastic dump truck he would fill with found objects, then dump out again. He had been so busy looking for pieces of glass, amber and green, that he didn’t notice the strange man who parked out front. Not until Tobias heard him knock on the front door did he glance up, distantly registering the slouched posture, grim face. This man had visited before, but Tobias had never spoken to him. He was no friend of the family; a guy that made his dad angry, his mother cry. Tobias released his cargo of broken glass on top of a small beetle, pretending it

was the man, covering it up until all that could be seen was his face reflected back at him, fragmented into slivers.

The man was allowed in, the habitual arguing and shouting ensued. Tobias walked around the yard, searching out other dump-worthy objects. He soon spied a small bic lighter. He'd seen them used many times, by his parents and their friends. Always he'd beg to be allowed to produce the magical flame – to spin the tiny wheel and make it spark. Always it was forbidden. "Lighters are adult toys only," his mother insisted, causing Tobias to want it even more.

And here one was. He'd found it all on his own and could finally experiment. He held his breath and struck his thumb downwards, copying the action he had previously watched in awe. Nothing happened, it didn't light. Undaunted, Tobias kept trying, small sparks encouraging him in his pursuits.

The door slammed open and shut. The man was leaving. Tobias quickly shoved his hand into his pocket, trying to conceal the lighter. The man had seen, however, and made his way over to investigate.

"Let me see what you got," he demanded.

Tobias tried thinking of a way to assume ignorance, but the man looked so authoritative, so powerful.

"Give it here," he said, holding out a hand the size of Tobias's face.

Tobias timidly handed over the lighter, then stood still, awaiting the man's scowl, the obligatory scolding. He was left wanting though. The man's only reaction was a slight chuckle as he turned the lighter over with his fingers.

"You like fire, kid?" he asked.

Tobias was torn in responding, the lack of disapproval in the man's countenance serving only to confuse him further. Hesitantly he nodded his head and replied, "It's pretty."

The man smiled, almost good-naturedly, and asked, "So why are you hiding it then?"

"Because I'm not allowed."

"Oh, I see. Well, how about we make a deal? I'll keep your secret if you keep mine."

"Ok," Tobias hurriedly replied, his outlook brightened by the realization that the man wasn't going to tell on him.

The stranger knelt down to Tobias's level and handed back the lighter. He whispered, "There's going to be a fire tonight, a big one, right here; lots of pretty flames to see, so make sure to keep your eyes open."

"Tobias!" his mother called, "Come inside – *now*."

The man smirked as he rose back up, "Nice chatting with you. Remember our deal." He winked. Tobias slipped the lighter safely into his pocket, then ran inside.

"What did he say to you?" his mother asked, sweat beading on her forehead from the humid house.

"Nothing, mom. He just told me he liked my truck."

"Are you sure Tobias? Look at me – are you *sure*?"

Tobias glanced up, the weight of the lighter against his leg made him feel dirty, but at the same time he felt a thrill remembering his promise to the man, his possession of an adult toy, his success at keeping an adult secret. "Yeah, I'm sure."

When Tobias first discovered this memory years ago, his drug use increased. The guilt he had felt for disappointing his grandmother after high school was nothing compared to the realization that it was *his* fault the house had burned down. He was the only one with the



knowledge to stop it, the ability to warn his parents ahead of time, yet he didn't. He was too engrossed in thoughts about his new toy, too impressed by his newfound powers of deception. He felt that he was the one who should have burned alive, not them. This was why he had experienced such a strange fascination with fire. Somewhere deep inside of him, he knew what had happened. His brain had just hidden it from him, knowing that he wouldn't be able to handle the truth: he was a murderer.

He needed something to help him forget whenever these images came to mind, something to rebury these memories he had once tried so hard to uncover. Smoking a rock was the only thing that helped him escape from thoughts like these.

Tobias turns a corner and sees Ronny half a block down, usual spot, usual time. Twenty bucks should get him enough to last through the night, to make the jumbled mess of thoughts disappear. He can always make more money later. He breathes deeply, dismissing the thoughts of restraint, disappointment, failure. He approaches Ronny casually, says hello and shakes his hand.

"Tobias! Where've you been hiding at man?"

"Oh, I've been around."

"Around, huh? Well, what can I do you for today?"

"Give me twenty dollars worth."

Both Tobias and Ronny look around, confirming that they aren't being watched. Tobias hands him the twenty dollars, and Ronny gives him a small bag containing a rock of crack cocaine.

"See you around Toby. Stay safe."

"Thanks man. You too."

Tobias turns, retracing his steps. His hands are back in his jacket pockets, one tightly gripping the newly purchased drugs. He feels better already – calmer, more collected. Perhaps all he had to do was buy them, have them on his person. He feels like he could go several days before really needing to use them. He begins to walk back in the direction of the shelter, knowing they'd have no reason to turn him away as long as he is drug and alcohol free. It will be closed in less than an hour, but if he hurries he'll get there in time.

Why had he not thought of this before? Why did he think he had to choose one or the other? How easy it was now to have the drugs and simply chose to not smoke them. He can't even remember why he felt the need to use tonight. This rock could last him a week, maybe a month. He feels so good he even begins thinking about finding another job soon, replenishing his depleted store of cash. Surely it wouldn't take long to save up enough to rent an apartment again, buy some new furniture on the cheap. He could stay clean, start working out; he could be military-ready again in a few months.

Tobias is in control now, both of his thoughts and his actions. Just knowing that the drugs are there, being able to feel the hard rock with his fingertips, gives him strength. It's almost as if the moment of weakness has passed and the pressure of making the right decision has been removed. He has it if it if he needs it, but right now, he feels like he'll never need it again.

He begins to look forward to sleeping at the shelter, eager to have a safe place to gather his thoughts and plans for the future, determined that things will be different from here on out. Tobias reaches the shelter's front doors and holds his breath as he pulls on the handle. If the door is locked that means he got here too late. He exhales as the door opens, and then walks inside. The warm air envelops him as the door closes, and he smiles. He approaches the front desk where a young woman sits in front of a computer screen.

“I’d like a bed for the night,” Tobias says.

The woman looks up from her screen and frowns. “I’m so sorry,” she says. “They were supposed to lock the doors. We don’t have any more.”

“What?” Tobias asks, stunned.

“The shelter filled up early tonight, the weather being so bad and all. We’ve even exhausted our number of emergency cots. People are lying down in every space we have – we just don’t have any more room.”

“Is there anywhere else? Another shelter close by?”

“Let me see.” The woman looks at her computer screen again, then looks back up at Tobias. “It’s past five o’clock. All the other shelters will have closed by now. I’m sorry. I wish you had come a few minutes earlier, we just filled our last one.”

Tobias nods his head, unable to speak. He turns back toward the door and sees a guy standing in front of it, waiting to lock it after he goes out. He feels trapped, like everything is out of his control. He tried making a good decision, yet he will still be sleeping on the streets tonight. All of the plans he had made for turning his life around are forgotten. Tobias walks out of the shelter and back down the street, aimlessly wandering.

He passes by an abandoned building and decides to examine it more closely as a possible shelter for the night. The outside of it is a sickly pink color, the faded remnants of what he imagines was once a bright red paint job. Tobias peers through the windows, but can’t see much of what’s inside. He pushes open the front door. It’s heavy, made of wood. He sits down in a far corner of the room, taking the bag out of his pocket and examining the white ball inside. How stupid he was to think he could have any kind of a future. How stupid to believe he could save the drugs for later, make them last.

Tobias opens his backpack and pulls out an old t-shirt. He carefully unfolds it, and takes out his glass pipe. He removes the rock and places it in the base of the pipe, using his free hand to draw a lighter from his pocket. He hesitates before lighting it, examining the thumbwheel and flint. He then spins it firmly, almost in defiance, and strikes a flame. He holds it under the tube for a few seconds and knows that he can never stop, knows that he can never look forward to anything more in the future than his next hit.

Jesse

The man is cocooned inside of a sleeping bag, lying with his back against the cement wall of the underpass. His eyes are closed, arms limply wrapped around a garbage bag full of his possessions. It's two in the morning, and the cold weather has driven the majority of New Orleans' residents indoors, everyone anticipating the predicted drop to twenty degrees by six a.m.

Three boys drive by in a Jeep and spot the man lying on the ground. They immediately hit reverse, pulling the car into the grass next to the bridge, leaving tire marks on the soft ground. They had hoped to find someone here; it's the third spot they've been to tonight, searching for the next subject in their video series.

They climb out of the Jeep, one of them with a video camera in hand. They approach the man, stopping when they are just a few feet away from him.

"This is your night to shine," Brian says, looking at Judah.

"Right," Judah replies. He remains still, eyes trained on the man in front of them.

"Camera's ready when you are," Tommy says. He's holding the camera out in front of him, lens pointed at the man, his finger resting on top of the record button. "Just remember what

we told you about keeping your face out of it – if they can't see who we are, we can't get in trouble.”

They're all tipsy, bordering on drunk. Judah takes a deep breath. “Should I start by waking him up?”

The other two boys nod. Tommy pushes his finger down to start recording. Judah walks a few steps closer to the man, stopping when the tips of his tennis shoes are almost touching his sleeping bag. He lifts his leg and gently prods him with his foot. The man remains unmoved, still asleep.

“That's no way to wake a bum,” Brian says. He approaches Judah and steps closer to the man. “This is how you do it.” He swiftly kicks the man in his side.

The man's eyes open and he instinctively sits up, pulling his possessions closer. Judah runs back several paces, but Brian remains still. The man looks at the boys, but doesn't seem to really see them. His sleeping bag slips down slightly, but he doesn't adjust it. Instead, he removes his arms from around the garbage bag and wraps them around his knees, beginning to rock back and forth.

“Well,” Brian chuckles, “I think he's awake now, though not because of you. Come on, show us what you got.”

Judah thinks. If he had known this was what they were going to be doing tonight he would have planned better. This was only the third time he'd hung out with Brian and Tommy. They were the popular kids at school, which, at an all-male, private catholic school meant that they got into the most trouble. They were never scared to talk back to the teachers or tell the cafeteria lady where she could stuff her Monday-meat-surprise. Every party they threw had

alcohol and tons of girls, some of whom were rumored to be in college. Everyone wanted to be friends with them, but for some reason Judah was the only one they'd given a chance.

He'd watched some of their past videos before; so had most of the other kids at school. Only a few people actually knew who made them though. Tommy would change their voices to sound different and photoshop smiley faces over their heads if the camera had caught them. They always managed to do something really edgy in each video, something unpredictable and funny. One time they tackled a guy while he was sleeping and duct taped his hands behind his back. They taped his mouth too, then took turns sitting on him, riding him like a bunking bronco. Another time they found a man who was so out of his mind on drugs that he didn't even know they were there. They took a permanent marker and drew all over his face and arms, mostly penises, and wrote the word "BUM" on his forehead.

Of course, no matter what the main action in the video consisted of, they always ended them the same way. They would all stand in a circle surrounding their target and piss on him while yelling out the title of their video collection, "Piss on this!"

This is Judah's chance to prove that he is cool enough to hang with the group, that he is capable of joining them on their homeless bashing escapades. Brian is giving him the opportunity to star in his own "Piss on this" video, and the last thing Judah wants is for them to leave tonight thinking he's a pussy.

He turns to face them. "Empty out your pockets, give me any spare change you have."

"What? Judah, we're here to fuck with him, not give him more drug money," Brian says.

"I know, just trust me," Judah answers.

Brian and Tommy dig in their pockets, producing an assortment of quarters, nickels, and dimes. Judah takes the change and walks back toward the homeless man. He stands close to him

again, this time noticing that the man's clothes and sleeping bag are stiff with dried sweat and collected dirt. His eyes are fixed on an object in the distance. His beard is white, spotted with gray; the skin on his face resembling a worn leather shoe – stretched, faded, dull.

Judah reminds himself what this guy is: a druggie, an alcoholic – someone who clutters up the streets of his city because he chooses drugs over shelter, too focused on getting high to ever attempt finding a job. “They’re parasites,” he’d heard his dad say, angry after being approached by yet another one on his way to work, “They live off of hard-working people’s wages, never doing a damned thing themselves. Lazy bastards don’t even pay taxes.”

Judah speaks to the man, “Hey, bum, you need some money?”

The man looks up and nods, tentatively reaching out a hand.

“Then catch,” Judah says, throwing the coins one by one, aiming at the man’s face, hands, neck, any exposed body part. He steps closer with each throw, pelting the metal disks at him. “Come on, catch!”

The homeless man ducks his head, holding his hands over his face, palms turned outward in an attempt to protect himself, as well as to signify his willingness to surrender. “Stop!” he screams. “I’ll talk, I’ll talk. The boat’s in the shoat with the coat; Peter brought it there. Ask the others, they were there, they saw.”

“What?” Judah asks, stunned.

“Awesome,” Tommy says, stepping closer with the camera, “we got a crazy one! This is gonna be good.”

“Judah, help me grab his bag,” Brian says.

The man has resumed his rocking motion, eyes wildly moving from one boy to the next. They both grab the bag and jerk it toward them. Brian tears it open and they shake out its



contents over the man's head: dirty clothes, empty water bottles, newspapers, and a toothbrush fall out.

"It's raining trash!" Brian calls, laughing as the man places his hands above his head once again.

"That's what he was holding onto?" Tommy scoffs. "How worthless."

"We want you to leave," Judah yells at the man, "to get the fuck out."

"That's right," Brian chimes in, "you're trash, just like all that shit in your bag – we want you gone."

The man gets onto his hands and knees and digs through the contents that have been scattered around him. He is intently looking for something, mumbling incoherently under his breath. Finally, he moves a dirty shirt aside and picks up an envelope lying underneath. He then sits back, clutching the envelope to his chest. "I know who sent you," he says, looking up at the boys. "The FBI will never give up. But you just try and break me, just try. The fish made a wish in the dish, you'll see."

"What the hell?" Judah asks.

"You really picked a winner tonight," says Brian, "definitely a good one to run off. We don't need crazies running around, bringing down the standards of our neighborhood."

"Wonder what he's got in that envelope," Tommy says.

"Maybe his money?" Judah offers.

"Yeah, or his dope," says Brian.

"Well, I think we need to initiate Project Brown Eagle," says Tommy.

Judah and Brian both stare at him. "Project what?" Judah asks.

“You know, like a mission. The envelope is brown, and we’re going to swoop in and grab it like an eagle.”

Brian rolls his eyes, “Could it not just have been Project Steal the Envelope?”

“That’s way less cooler,” says Tommy.

“Let’s just get it then,” Judah says, bending over to try and take the envelope from the man.

The man pulls away from him though, holding the envelope tight against his chest and curling into the fetal position.

Brian looks at Judah. “I think it’s time for some tough love,” he says. “You getting that envelope from him will make this video go viral.”

Judah nods. “Hey motherfucker,” he yells, “who do you think you are?” He kicks the man in the back. “You think you can just live anywhere you want? Dirty up our streets and not have anyone do anything about it?”

“That’s right! We’re going to show you that this is our city, not yours!” Brian adds, emphatically kicking the man’s side.

The man groans, but remains tucked into a ball.

“You aren’t worth shit!” Tommy yells, aiming his foot at the guy’s face. The man protects his face with one of his hands, the other still clutching the envelope to his chest.

Brian grabs the man by the collar and leans down to him. “Nobody would even care if you died right now,” he says. “No one. Your life is meaningless – nothing. All you are is a failure, a waste of space. And we want you out of *our* space, got it?” He shoves him back down onto the concrete and looks at the others. “I think it’s time, boys.”

They gather around the man and all unzip their pants. The camera tilts wildly as Tommy pulls himself out. He adjusts it back straight again, re-focusing on the man lying on the ground, then nods. All three piss on him, soaking his sleeping bag, hair, neck, and chest. “Piss on this!” they yell, laughing. The man doesn’t try to roll away, he remains tightly curled while the urine streams around him, running through his limp gray hair and continuing down his face. Through all of this the envelope remains dry however, hidden underneath him protectively.

The boys step away and zip their pants back up. “He’s still holding onto it,” Brian says, glaring at the man. He is moving now, crawling on the ground, collecting his assorted possessions, stuffing them inside his sleeping bag and trying to roll it up.

“This is your video Judah, do something about it,” Brian says. “You’ve waited long enough.”

Judah pauses, watching the homeless man. He is still on all fours, holding the envelope in one hand, muttering incoherently under his breath. Judah approaches him, squatting down so his face is only a foot away from his. “I want that envelope.”

The homeless man looks up, meeting Judah’s gaze briefly, then looks back down, continuing to gather his possessions.

“Hey!” Judah yells, standing up, “I said I want that envelope!” He kicks him, and the man rolls onto his back.

“Be careful not to touch him,” says Brian, “I don’t want any piss smell in my car.”

Judah stands over him. The man cringes, shutting his eyes tightly; his right hand clutching the envelope by his side. “Are you so crazy you don’t understand me when I talk to you? Give me the fucking envelope, NOW!” Judah steps on the man’s hand that’s holding the envelope, crushing his fingers.

The man hollers out in pain, but still maintains his grip. Judah steps to the side of him, freeing his fingers from underfoot. The man begins speaking rapidly under his breath, saying the same thing over and over.

“What the hell are you saying? Say it to my face, bum!” Judah yells, frustrated that his one shot to prove himself is turning sour so quickly.

The man looks up at Judah and repeats, louder, “Crust of bread said Fred, crust of bread for the dead.” His speech is disconnected and leaves Judah confused. The man takes the envelope and tears it in half, holding up both pieces to the boy.

Judah hesitates briefly, then snatches the pieces from him. He takes a few steps back from the man, moving closer to his friends.

“Well, what is it?” Brian asks.

“It’s some sort of letter, a card,” Judah says.

“Read it out loud, this is going to be hilarious,” says Tommy, focusing the camera on the torn envelope.

“There’s a note on the outside,” says Judah. He reads it to them, “You weren’t at the shelter when we came by. The manager said if we left this with him he’d get it to you.”

Judah slides out the paper from each half. “Weird. It’s a birthday card. There’s a note written on it.”

“Go on,” Tommy says.

Judah reads, “Just wanted to let you know that we’re thinking about you. Susie and Jacob ask after their Uncle Jesse all the time. This is our fourth trip this month, and we still haven’t been able to see you – I’m getting worried...are you still taking your meds? We’ll try to come by again next week. We miss you, and I want to make sure you’re ok. I really do wish you’d

reconsider coming to live with us. We could help take care of you here. I hope you have a nice birthday and are keeping yourself well. Your loving sister, Margaret.”

Judah is silent after reading. He looks again at the hand written words, at the embossed “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” in big letters on the card’s front.

“What a freak!” Tommy says, smiling. “All of that effort for a stupid birthday card? He’s got some fucked up priorities.”

While Judah was reading the homeless man had finished collecting his belongings and left. They can still see him in the distance, walking slowly with his sleeping bag bundled over his shoulder.

“He’s definitely fucked up in the head,” Brian says. “It reminds me of this joke I heard one time. Here, turn the camera on me. Ok, what does a homeless person get as a birthday present? Nothing! Haha!”

Tommy cracks up laughing, then hits the stop button on the camera, their video complete. Judah still hasn’t spoken. He just keeps turning the card back and forth in his hands.

“Well, that’s a wrap,” says Brian. “That wasn’t too bad for your first time, though I was hoping for something more valuable in the envelope.” He turns to Tommy. “Rewind it to where Judah was standing over him, I want to watch that part again. I bet the guy was about to wet his pants he was so scared!”

Tommy rewinds the video and he and Brian gather around to watch on the tiny screen. “Judah, you gotta come watch this! You looked so pissed!” Tommy says.

Judah remains still, apart from the others. He can hear his voice replayed through the camcorder’s tiny speakers, it sounds tinny and weak. The other boys laugh loudly, then close up the camera and head for the Jeep.

Brian looks back and sees that Judah still hasn't moved. "Let's go!" he calls. "It's freezing out here."

Judah doesn't turn his head, but he knows he has to join them. He opens his hands and watches the two card halves flutter to the ground. He begins to walk toward the Jeep, but stops as soon as he gets out from under the bridge. Tiny snowflakes are falling, some sticking to the grass and dotting it with white. New Orleans hasn't seen snow in five years; he can't help but feel a rush of excitement – maybe tomorrow would be a snow day and school would be cancelled. He starts to smile, but then remembers the video they've just made.

Judah looks out in the direction the man took when he left, but he can no longer make out his shape in the darkness. He holds one hand out in front of him, palm facing upward, collecting the snow as it falls. It's surprising to him how quickly it melts when it hits his skin, changing from perfect ice crystals into freezing drops of water. He shakes his head, then dries his hand off on his jeans and walks over to the Jeep.

## Mary

Mary dumps the tomato sauce into the ground meat, stirring so it won't burn. "Sophie," she calls, "start picking your toys up. Daddy will be home any minute now." Her hair is pulled up into a bun, though several strands have fallen out and now hang limply in front of her face. She checks her reflection in the door of the microwave and tries unsuccessfully to smooth the unruly strands back in. Looking down at herself, she sees the large grape juice stain from earlier, splattered right across her very pregnant belly. "God, I look like freaking Barney," she mutters, trying one last time to rub it out.

Mary opens the oven door to check on the garlic bread which is just starting to brown. She debates whether or not to leave it in for a couple more minutes when the sound of water sizzling on the stove top makes her turn. "Shit!" she exclaims, rushing over to the spaghetti pot which is now boiling over. She grabs the top without thinking. "Shit!" she yells again, having burned the center of her palm. She grabs the pot holders and brings the spaghetti over to the sink to drain, trying to ignore the pain in her hand.

She had hoped to look nice for when Dave got home, have dinner ready and the house in order - anything that would prevent him from slipping into one of his moods. He had been tense

that morning before leaving for work, a sign that Mary would need to be extra careful not to do anything to upset him that evening.

“Sophie, you better be cleaning up in there!” She transfers the spaghetti into a serving bowl and brings it to the table. She sticks her head into the living room and sees toys strewn everywhere: baby dolls, Barbies, stuffed animals, and plastic pieces of food cover the leather sectional and hard wood floor.

Sophie is sitting next to a pad of paper, a cupcake-shaped rubber stamp in hand. She concentrates on pushing the stamp deep into the ink pad, then slams it down onto the paper several times. Her left arm is covered in cupcakes, as is the floor around her.

“Sophie!” Mary exclaims, hurrying over to take the stamp away. “What are you doing?” She carries her over to the kitchen sink. “We’ve talked about this before: stamps are for paper only, not our bodies or the floor. God, we’ve got to get all of this ink off before Daddy comes home.” Mary turns the water on and struggles to move Sophie’s arm underneath the faucet.

“No!” Sophie shrieks as the water hits her arm. “My cupcakes – Mine!”

“Sophie, stop it! I have to wash it off.” A car door slams. Sophie squirms out of her grasp and runs toward the garage door crying, “Daddy, Daddy!”

The door opens and Sophie immediately throws her arms into the air and jumps up and down. “Hey sweetheart,” Dave says as he picks her up, “did you have a good day today? Oh my – what’s all over your little arm? Mary, have you seen this?”

Mary is frantically filling up glasses at the dinner table; the silverware clutched in her other hand. “Yes, she got into her stamp pad while I wasn’t looking. I tried washing it off, but she wouldn’t stop fighting me. I think she’s getting sick or something, everything’s been a struggle today.”



“Is dinner ready?”

“Almost, I’m running a little behind.”

Dave walks into the kitchen and opens the oven door, revealing a pan of crispy, black circles. “Well this looks fantastic.”

Mary returns to the kitchen and sees Dave looking in the oven. “Oh no!” she cries, “I forgot the bread!” She takes the pan out, using an oven mitt this time, and begins to scrape at the burned tops with a knife.

“Busy day?” Dave asks, peering into the still-messy living room.

“Very. Sophie refused to take a nap, and my lower back has been killing me – this baby just won’t give me a break. Then, I discovered that the chicken I was planning to cook for supper had expired. I was going to run to the store and pick up something else, but I used the twenty you gave me earlier this week to replace the light bulbs in the bathroom, so the only option left was spaghetti.”

Dave laughs.

“What?” Mary asks, looking up from the trashcan where she had been scraping the bread.

“Oh, nothing,” he replies. “It just sounds like you’ve had quite the rough day.”

She continues scraping, “It was pretty stressful. A couple of times there I thought I was going to have a mental melt down.”

Dave smirks. “How awful.”

Mary’s hands freeze. “Are you making fun of me?”

His smile broadens. “No, of course not; I mean, babysitting a three year old can be so trying. And then, cooking a spaghetti supper for two adults and a child...whew! It tires me out just thinking about it.”

“That’s not funny.” Mary places the salvaged bread onto the table and fetches Sophie from the next room.

Dave’s smile disappears as he replies, “No, it’s not.”

Mary warns herself to be more careful as she places Sophie into her booster seat. Tonight is not the night to get an attitude with him. She spoons some spaghetti into Sophie’s bowl, cutting the noodles into smaller pieces and topping them with cheese and butter.

“I made the tomato sauce myself this time,” she says, changing the subject. “I found a recipe online that had nothing but great reviews.”

“I want grape juice,” Sophie says, holding out her cup that is currently filled with water.

“No, honey,” Mary replies, “remember what Mommy said earlier? We’ve had enough juice today – you barely touched your lunch because of all the grape juice you had.”

Dave carefully spoons sauce onto his spaghetti and then stirs it thoroughly, making sure it is completely mixed in. He sprinkles it lightly with cheese, then expertly twirls a couple of noodles onto his fork.

“So,” Mary chimes, “how was work today?”

“I want it,” Sophie insists, pushing her cup away.

“No juice.” Mary moves the sippy cup back towards her child. “You can have some after you’re done eating; only water for now.”

“Well,” Dave starts, “we had a machine malfunction at the plant today.”

“NOOO!” Sophie screeches, “don’t want water – JUICE!” She throws her cup onto the floor. The top pops off, spilling water everywhere.

“No Ma’am! We do not throw things!” Mary scolds. She squats down carefully, making sure her stomach doesn’t bump the table, and begins wiping up the mess. “I’m so sorry honey;

she's been in this mood all day. I really think she's getting a cold or something. This winter's been a pretty chilly one." She raises herself up off the floor and back into her seat, exhausted from the effort. "Dave?" she asks.

Dave holds his now empty fork halfway between his mouth and the plate. He's chewing slowly, a look of disgust on his face. He immediately spits the mouthful back onto his fork and wipes his tongue with a napkin. "Ugh, what the hell is this stuff?"

"What? What's wrong?"

"It tastes awful. How much salt did you put in here?"

"None, the recipe didn't call for any. Unless...oh no." Mary's face goes white.

"What?"

"It called for two tablespoons of sugar, and I may have gotten the containers mixed up..."

Dave pushes his chair back from the table. "Are you freaking kidding me Mary?" He throws his napkin into his plate.

"I'm so sorry," she replies, pushing her chair back too. She grimaces as the baby inside of her kicks a little too hard. "I was reorganizing the kitchen the other day and transferred all of our dry ingredients into new jars. I must have labeled them wrong."

Sophie, having entertained herself all this time by playing with her noodles rather than eating them, asks once more, "Grape juice?"

"Honey, I already told you—" Mary begins.

"Grape juice!" Sophie interrupts, yelling loudly.

Dave rises from the table shaking his head. "How stupid does someone have to be to mess up spaghetti? It's just pasta and sauce."

"Dave, I know. I'm sorry—"

“It would be one thing if you had been busy doing something else all day, using your time productively, but the house is a wreck. I had thought it impossible, but I’m pretty sure it’s gotten even dirtier since I left this morning. And you – have you even showered today?”

“GRAPE JUICE!” Sophie screams, frustrated that no one has been paying attention to her.

“Sophie, enough! I’ve already said no, now stop it!” Mary yells back.

“Oh give her some damn juice already. Where’s your cup sweetheart? Daddy will give you some juice.”

Sophie slips out of the chair and brings Dave her cup. She follows him into the kitchen, holding onto the leg of his pants as he pours her some grape juice.

Mary throws her silverware onto the table and stands up. “I’m thirty-two weeks pregnant, Dave. I can only do so much. Bobby put Miranda in daycare for the last two months of Adele’s pregnancy; maybe we should do something like that too. I could really use a break.”

Dave removes Sophie’s grip on his leg. “Go play in the living room, baby.” She skips into the other room, clutching her juice cup. He steps closer to Mary. She doesn’t even see him raise his hand, it happens so quickly; her cheek first numb and then stinging from his slap.

“Are you really that goddamn lazy Mary? I had to look past a lot of things when I married you; I blinded myself to your many flaws, gave you a chance even though people told me I was crazy for doing so. And you know what I told them? That at least you would be a good mother to my children. That’s how I defended you. And now, you want to ship Sophie off to strangers, to a daycare full of sicknesses and minimum-wage employees. That’s how you want our child to be raised? Have her health and development be endangered because you need a break?”

“Dave, I’m sorry,” Mary starts.

“No, you’ve said enough.”

Mary’s eyes are brimming with tears, but she keeps her mouth shut tight, not wanting to escalate things further. Dave leans in close and whispers in her ear, “After all the things you’ve done tonight, saying sorry isn’t good enough. I want you to *show* me you’re sorry. Prove it to me. Now, I’m going to go give Sophie her bath and put her to sleep. When I get done, I want the kitchen to be cleaned up and you to be in bed, waiting for me. Got it?”

Mary nods her head. He kisses her roughly on the mouth, then spanks her as she turns to clean off the table. He leaves the room as she dumps the spaghetti sauce into the trashcan. The words he whispered echo in her mind, and she can’t help but shudder. Nights like these never go well. Every time she did something that angered Dave to the point of violence, he always required makeup sex from her after. He claimed it made their relationship stronger, that it helped to reconnect them.

She reaches up and touches her cheek lightly. It still hurts, and she knows it will bruise by tomorrow; they always do. It’s yet another thing that Dave says proves how weak she is. She always has to have excuses at the ready to tell her friends, or at least, the people she pretends are her friends. They are all the wives of other men that work with Dave. Because she isn’t really close with any of them, they aren’t too hard to fool: a clumsy fall down some stairs or in the bathtub, a dropped weight at the gym; things like that usually kept the questions at a minimum. One time she had them convinced that she had taken up taekwondo, but had to nix that when one of the ladies expressed an interest in joining.

After cleaning the kitchen and showering, Mary climbs gently into bed. She’s completely exhausted, and her feet are painfully swollen. She lies on her left side, propping a pillow

underneath her large belly. Last night she barely slept at all, every position was uncomfortable to her. She hopes that tonight will be better. Perhaps if she can make herself go to sleep before Dave comes to bed, he'll forget about his previously whispered words.

She closes her eyes tightly and thinks to herself, "Sleep, sleep, you have to go to sleep." Secretly though, she knows it won't work – nothing will. She had done so well these last couple of weeks, never arguing or talking back, trying to be a perfect wife. They had gotten along great; so much so that Mary had begun to believe that maybe this would be the time things would actually change. Once again though, she was wrong.

She hears footsteps and holds her breath, hoping Sophie's attitude hasn't angered him even more. She listens for familiar sounds – the clink of his Rolex being placed on the nightstand, his jeans being unzipped and tossed casually into the clothesbasket. Then she feels the covers being pulled downward, the bed sinking slightly as he slides in beside her. Every nerve in her body is alert, her eyes wide open to the surrounding blackness, waiting.

His hand reaches out and grabs her right shoulder, flipping her onto her back. His mouth finds hers, and he forces his tongue inside as his hands grope under her t-shirt, searching for her breasts. He finds one and squeezes. Mary inhales sharply, forcing herself not to pull away, even though they are sensitive and the pain is almost unbearable. "It will be over soon," she tells herself, "soon."

Dave rolls her over onto her stomach and gets on top of her. He uses his legs to force hers apart, and pulls her underwear down. He forces himself inside of her, and she can taste the saltiness of her tears. He's rough, and the position hurts her, but Mary stays silent, knowing that any complaint will just make things worse.

He grabs her hands and pins them down above her head, then shifts his weight so that all of it rests on her, the pressure falling directly on her belly.

“Dave,” Mary whispers, “we need to switch positions.”

He doesn’t respond, so Mary tries to work her hands out of his grasp.

“Want it rough, do you?” he says, beginning to ram himself into her.

“No, you can’t put all of your weight on the baby,” Mary says, panicking. She starts struggling underneath him, but that just makes him hold onto her hands even tighter. Finally, she calls out, “Dave, the baby – you’re going to hurt him!”

“The baby is fine,” he grunts.

Mary is sobbing now. Desperate, she reaches her head up and bites the back of one of his hands.

“You fucking bitch!” he yells, letting her hands go. She immediately props herself up to relieve some of the pressure on her stomach. Dave rolls her over onto her back, pins her down by sitting on her legs, and slaps her in the face. “You want to attack me? Huh? You want to try and act all strong?” He slaps her again, making her head spin.

“No, Dave, please. It was hurting the baby. I had to get your attention.”

He grabs a pillow and pushes it down over her face. “Will you stop talking about the goddamned baby! I’m so sick of you using it as an excuse to sit on your ass all day. Nothing is hurting it! You just don’t want to fuck me!”

Mary can’t breathe. She tries to push Dave’s arms away, digging her fingernails into his skin. They toss and turn, then Dave loses his balance and they go tumbling off the bed. Mary lands on her stomach. Sharp, sudden cramps burst like fireworks from her abdomen, and she twists instinctively into a fetal position. She moans loudly, the pain overwhelming her.

“You were pregnant before, and you fucked me then,” Dave continues, moving to a sitting position next to her. “You kept the house clean and cooked edible dinners. This has nothing to do with him and everything to do with you trying to make me angry. Now apologize, damnit.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, out of breath and dizzy.

They sit in silence for a moment, then Dave reaches out and tucks a strand of Mary’s hair behind her ear. “Why do you do these things Mary? If you would just act right I wouldn’t have to punish you like this. You know how much it hurts me to make you cry. Think how much easier things would be if you just listened to me. I don’t ask you for much, you know. Some husbands demand that their wives get full time jobs, whether they have young children or not. Really sweetheart, you’re lucky to be with me.”

Mary nods. “I’m glad you put up with me.”

Dave smiles, then stands up. “Well, you sure do make it difficult sometimes.” He climbs back into bed, then notices Mary has yet to move. “Aren’t you coming back in?”

“Yeah, in just a second.” She struggles to push herself up to a sitting position, noticeably shaking with the effort.

“That big belly sure makes you move slow.” He steps back out of bed and casually lifts her in his arms, then drops her on the mattress. She has to bite her lip to keep from screaming in pain.

He moves back to his side of the bed and lies down, facing away from her. “I’ll forgive you this time, but I can only be patient for so long. Tomorrow’s Saturday, so I’m expecting us to try this again when we wake up – except I don’t want to hear any more of those lies about hurting the baby. It kills the mood.”



“Sure, honey, whatever you say,” she replies. “Goodnight.”

She lies awake for the next three hours, motionless. After a while the pain lessens to a more tolerable level and her breathing becomes less ragged. She tries to get her thoughts in order, fear and exhaustion causing them to be jumbled and unclear. Dave had always been easy to set off; she knew he had anger issues when she was dating him back in high school. But she had thought most of it stemmed from all the stress of living with his parents, having to follow their rules and do what they said. Then, when he was in college, it was the cramming for tests, the non-stop homework, the jerk teachers that kept him constantly on edge. She told herself that as soon as he was able to get out, be free, it would get better, it had to.

But it hadn't. And now, four years after graduating, he was just getting worse. It took less and less to set him off, and more and more for him to be satisfied that she knew her place. With Sophie, he had been interested in the whole pregnancy process – for a little while he was even affectionate – but with this one, it seemed like he just wanted her to get it over with already. And if that was how he was now, what would happen when her due date got closer? Would he still expect the house to be spotless and dinner prepared by six? He has never scared her this badly before; she's endured slaps and punches, been thrown into the wall several times, but this was the first time he had tried to smother her with a pillow. If his violence keeps escalating, her baby's safety will be in danger. She can't risk that.

She places her hands on her belly, hugging it to her, wishing she could apologize to the tiny child inside for all of the rough treatment tonight. She listens for the sound of Dave's breathing. It's regular, and she knows he is asleep.

She stands up slowly, her whole body stiff and aching. He is sprawled out on his stomach, legs spread on top of the covers. Her thumb twitches impulsively, spinning her

wedding ring around and around her finger. The joints have swollen too much during her pregnancy for her to be able to take it on and off like she used to while thinking. She looks at it and remembers how she promised to never leave him, no matter what. She knows that most people would tell her to go, to get out, but she still loves him, and he's always been such a great dad.

She knew when she married him that Dave wasn't perfect – even he knew that. He had told her from the start that she shouldn't date him, that he was dangerous, a “bad boy.” Everyone at school said the same. He got in fights, threatened teachers, had a troubled home life. But Mary was convinced that they didn't see the side of him that she saw. He always treated her so kindly, and she could tell that he was truly sorry whenever he did something that hurt someone else. He told her that he couldn't control himself, but that he felt like, with her help, maybe he could.

She shakes her head, trying to make these thoughts go away. She walks to the closet and changes into a sweatshirt and jeans. She grabs a thick jacket and places her wallet inside the pocket, even though she knows it's empty.

As she begins to tiptoe towards the bedroom door, she hears a car door slam outside. She jumps and immediately looks at Dave. He hasn't moved. She walks faster, but pauses briefly by the nightstand. She hesitates, looking at him one last time, so vulnerable and innocent while asleep. She takes a deep breath and reminds herself that she is doing this for her unborn son, that tomorrow morning could be even worse than tonight. She picks up Dave's watch and slides it into her pocket, then leaves the room.

Once she closes the door behind her, she hurries down the stairs to Sophie's room. The walls are purple, and everything has a slight greenish glow which comes from the flower-shaped

lamp that serves as her nightlight. Mary grabs a Hello Kitty backpack and stuffs it with clothes and a blanket. Then she gently shakes Sophie awake.

“Sophie, sweetheart, it’s time to wake up.”

Sophie sits up and rubs her eyes. “Mommy?” she asks.

“Shhh baby, be quiet now. Mommy’s going to put some warm clothes on you.” Mary dresses her quickly, sliding the clothes on over her pajamas. She wraps her in the comforter, hands her a stuffed puppy dog, and carries her to the garage door.

Mary is trembling now, worried that she’s making a big mistake. She refuses to let herself think too long about what she’s doing, or what the consequences might be. Grabbing the keys to the SUV, she opens the door and goes outside. The air is biting, even in the garage. She buckles Sophie into her car seat, relieved to see her falling back to sleep almost immediately. Mary’s hands are shaking too badly to start the ignition. She takes a deep breath and holds it, counting for four seconds. This is the loud part, the garage door opening, the car starting. If he is going to wake up, now would be the time. She tells herself she has to be quick – there’s no time to look back.

She inserts the key, starts the car, and pushes the garage door button, wincing at the noise of it all. She speeds backwards out of the driveway, no idea where she’s headed, just as long as it’s far away. Every pair of headlights she sees in the mirror look like her husband’s truck. She wishes she had thought to take his keys with her. She can’t help but think that he has already woken up to find her missing. Once he realizes that she’s taken the car and Sophie, he will stop at nothing to find them again. She increases her speed, trying to put as much distance between herself and Dave as possible.

One hour later, the gas light flashes on empty; she has no money to buy more, no checks in her name, no credit card. Only the Rolex watch in her pocket which she hopes to pawn in the morning.

She exits the interstate at New Orleans and turns into a residential neighborhood. Houses line the street on both sides, hedges trimmed to be neat rectangles, cobbled walkways leading to ornate front doors. Mary can't help but wonder why her life didn't turn out like this, trying to figure out what she did wrong. She thinks back to her pseudo-friends, wishing she had been able to just drive over to one of their houses tonight, instead of to a different city. They would never have believed her, though. Dave hit her? Never. In their eyes he could do no wrong. Always charming, making the ladies blush with his wide array of compliments. And of course, he was always so good with the children.

"Why can't Steven be like that?" Evelyn would ask as Dave invented yet another creative game to keep all the kids occupied.

"He's so handsome, too," Martha would swoon.

How could she turn to them for help? They would think she was crazy – that she must have misunderstood. Surely it was just an accident; perhaps her hormone levels just caused her to freak out over nothing.

Mary regrets losing contact with her family. Dave had been convinced that they didn't approve of him. He had become paranoid thinking that they were going to try and steal her away. He insisted that they move to a new state, break free from all their ties, start their own life together, just the three of them. He made her promise to not call them or give them their new address. She hasn't talked to them in two years.

Mary pushes those thoughts away. She can't let herself think of anything right now except moving forward. The car is slowing, the gas almost completely gone. She glances behind her and sees a deserted street. No car is chasing her, honking its horn and flashing its lights, yet she still feels threatened. The car rolls to a complete stop, and she slams her hands on the steering wheel in frustration.

Sophie is still sound asleep, and Mary wonders if they should just spend the night in the car. It would at least be warm, and semi-safe. That idea lasts only a minute, however. She can't stand the idea of Dave searching for her and spotting their car while she lies helplessly asleep inside.

Her breath fogs up as soon as she steps outside. She lifts Sophie up and puts the backpack on, then begins walking down the street. Part of her can't help but think that she's being ridiculous. She's very much pregnant, walking down an empty street at two in the morning, alone. All while carrying a sick three year old, and on one of the coldest nights of the year. She shifts Sophie from one hip to the next without waking her up. Each step is a challenge, wondering if she should instead be walking back towards the vehicle.

One foot shuffles forward, and then the next. A light snow begins to fall, wetting both her and Sophie's hair. She looks up at it, wondering why tonight of all nights it has to be this cold. She pulls the blanket tighter around her daughter and examines the neighborhood she's walking in, trying to get her mind off of the dropping temperature. This area is different from the one where they left the car. The lawns are no longer wide and well tended. Now they hardly exist, comprised mostly of dirt and gravel rather than grass. The houses are different too: the paint is chipped and boards are rotting, several even have cardboard taped to their windows.

Mary doesn't see the crack in the sidewalk. She kicks it and stumbles, but doesn't fall. Her feet are numb, a combination of cold and decreased blood flow caused from her shoes cutting into her swollen ankles. She's exhausted, reeling from the lack of sleep and food. Her grip starts to loosen on Sophie, and she knows they'll have to stop soon.

She begins to examine street corners for possible places to rest, when she spots a building up ahead. Its windows are busted out and the front door hangs by only one hinge. Its walls look solid though, built of wood, and the tin roof, though rusted, would keep the snow off of them for the night.

She opens the door and is startled to discover two men already inside. One is asleep in the corner using a backpack as a pillow. He is firmly grasping a glass pipe, and twitches slightly. The other is sitting up against the wall, staring straight forward. He doesn't look up when she walks in, doesn't seem to know she's even there. The smell of urine causes her to gag as she walks past him, and she can't help but notice how dirty his clothes are.

Regardless, the building offers more protection than the sidewalk outside, so Mary moves to the corner farthest away from both men. She places her back against the wall and uses it as a support to slide down into a sitting position. Sophie stirs and wakes up.

"Daddy?" she asks.

"He's not here, sweetheart. Just Mommy and baby brother."

Sophie's eyes flutter as she attempts to keep them open. "Cold," she says.

Mary pulls the extra blanket out of the backpack and wraps Sophie up in it.

"It's ok, you'll be warm soon. Just go back to sleep."

Sophie drifts off, and Mary relaxes for the first time in hours. She reaches a hand down to her belly and lets it rest there, thinking to herself that the baby must be sleeping too – she hasn't felt him move in a while.

She closes her eyes and thinks back to the insanity of the evening, wondering yet again if she made the right or wrong choice to leave. A small voice inside of her whispers that she deserved it: the pain, the belittling, the bruises. She should have worked harder to make sure everything was in order for when he got home, especially because she had already known he was likely to be upset with her. If she had just done that, he would have never hit her. There would have been no reason to have make-up sex, and things would have never spiraled out of control like they did. After all, he didn't enjoy hurting her. If she could just stop messing things up, he would never have to again.

No, she can't let herself think that way. No matter how scary it is to be on her own now, she can't just excuse Dave's violence away. Not anymore. Tonight he hadn't just been hurting her; he'd been hurting their child. Yes, it would be easier to go back. To pretend, just like all the times before; believe him when he says he's sorry; trust that he means it when he promises he'll change. But, no, deep inside, she knows that will never be true, knows that she can never go back.

Mary twists the ring around on her finger again, her thumb turning it compulsively. She pauses and brings her hand up to her face, examining the diamond she has worn for so long. She remembers the night he proposed, how nervous he looked, how relieved he was when she'd said yes. He seemed to be everything she needed back then, the perfect partner. She couldn't wait to spend the rest of her life with him.

Mary exhales sharply in pain, the stomach cramps returning. They aren't as sharp as before, so she's able to remain sitting upright. She shakes her head vigorously and twists the ring one final time, pointing the diamond downward so it doesn't show. She hugs Sophie closer to her chest with one arm and rubs her belly with the other. The child remains still inside of her, and she closes her eyes. "It's ok babies, you can sleep now, Mommy's got you. And she's going to keep you safe."



Nathan

It's happening again: he can feel the solid concrete underneath him, the brick wall at his back, but it's as if the person sitting there isn't really him; almost like he's a stranger, watching from a distance. He is powerless to move, to speak. He tries to bring himself back, struggling to reach out toward the bottle of alcohol next to him, but is helpless. The memories overwhelm his senses. They force him to recall the past in vivid detail, to relive each experience.

The sensation of water entering his nose and mouth is so realistic that he begins to choke and gasp for air. He can see the current rising again, past his knees, up to his chest, and finally over his head. He remembers stretching his feet down, hoping that if he pushed far enough he would make contact with the ground, even if it was just with the tip of his toes. The water was too high though, and he soon became unable to tell which way was up. He can still feel the waves pulling him back and forth; still taste salt water in his mouth and feel the burning in the back of his throat.

Nathan inhales deeply, finally able to regain some control of his body. He shakes his head, trying to clear his mind, and puts one arm around the dog lying in his lap, pulling her closer. With the other he reaches out and grabs his bottle of vodka, shaking as he untwists the

cap and holds it up to take a swallow. As the warmth courses down his throat, he tells himself that he's safe now, that Katrina was five years ago, that the water is gone.

The dog shivers, curled into a tight brown ball on top of him. Nathan's back is up against a building in the hopes that it will keep some of the wind off of them. He reaches into a worn duffel bag propped up behind him and pulls out a thin purple blanket. He drapes it over both him and his dog, carefully tucking it in around her.

A man approaches, but Nathan doesn't look up.

"How's it going?" the man asks.

Nathan flinches, startling the dog. He squints into the darkness, unable to make out the man a few feet away from them. The dog jumps up and runs over to him, tail wagging.

"Oh, hey Daniel," Nathan says, relaxing. He reaches for his bottle again.

"I've been looking all over for you," Daniel replies, bending over to pet the dog. "It's supposed to freeze over tonight; some people are even talking snow. We need to hunker down somewhere warm." Daniel squats down and the dog climbs halfway into his lap. She's fairly large, a mixed breed with short fur. Though still shivering, her tail thumps against his leg, and every time he stops petting her she nudges his hand with her nose, asking for more.

"And where would that be?" Nathan asks. "I tried thinking of somewhere to go, but this was the best I could come up with."

"I know of an abandoned building over in the ninth ward. It's got some holes, but the walls are still sturdy. It'll definitely be better than out here."

Nathan stands up at the mention of the ninth ward, the purple blanket crumpling at his feet. "Faith," he says, calling the dog to him. She trots over obediently and stands with her side pressed against his leg. "I don't go to the ninth ward anymore, you know that."

“I know, but there aren’t any other options.”

“No thanks,” Nathan says, packing his blanket back into his bag.

“It’ll be safer than spending the rest of the night out here. You’ll freeze to death.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Nathan, come on. Faith is shivering like crazy. Just trust me, ok?”

Nathan kneels down and hugs his dog to his chest. He can feel her shaking in his arms. She pushes her nose into his open jacket and whines softly. “I don’t know man,” Nathan says, “I just can’t go back there.”

“I’ll help you, alright? It’s just for one night. We can leave as soon as it’s morning.”

Nathan considers this for a moment, thinking about his past friendship with Daniel. They had met in line at a soup kitchen that served lunch seven days a week. Nathan brought his tray outside where he’d left his dog tied up, and Daniel followed him to keep him company. He even tossed her a piece of his bread. The two men struck up a friendship, and from then on always met up to eat lunch together there.

One day, Daniel invited him to come to Jackson Square and listen to him play his trumpet. Nathan did, and was amazed by the music Daniel could produce. Whenever he listened to him play, a calm would settle over him; he never had to worry about being paralyzed by the past as long as Daniel was playing his trumpet. Nathan made a habit of spending a few hours every day with him, listening to his music. People would often gather around and give Daniel money. Sometimes, Nathan would have Faith do a few tricks in between songs to hold the audience there longer. Daniel was always fair about splitting up the earnings.

Nathan takes another long drink from his bottle. “Ok,” he says, and picks up his duffle bag.

“Good, let’s get going before it gets any colder,” Daniel replies, heading down the street.

Nathan keeps his eyes trained on the ground, watching Faith pad beside him. He tries to focus solely on the street they’re walking down, examining the chipped yellow paint on the line down the middle, hoping that by not looking around him he’ll be able to pretend that they’re headed somewhere different, to somewhere that isn’t the ninth ward, to a neighborhood he doesn’t remember, to a place he never lived.

A few minutes into the walk though, he can’t help but glance up at his surroundings. He braces himself for sights of smashed windows and fallen trees, but is surprised to see newly built homes instead. The last time he was in this neighborhood was five years ago, a few months after the storm. So much has changed since then. He continues looking at the houses as they walk, stunned by all of the progress. His spirits start to rise, and he thinks that perhaps he won’t be able to recognize any of it at all; he can just pretend they’re walking somewhere else. But then he sees an empty lot on their left.

He knows there are several possibilities: a house may have been there that just couldn’t be repaired, or it might have been a piece of land nobody wanted to rebuild on, but whatever the cause, all Nathan can think about is the red spray painted X that was left on his front door. All the houses in the neighborhood were similarly marked, some with the addition of a number beneath, denoting how many people were found dead inside. He spent hours going around to his neighbor’s houses after they were allowed back into the city, trying to decode the symbols on the door to see if they had managed to make it out, or had been trapped inside.

The wind blows, and it feels like the temperature has dropped five degrees. It’s such a powerful gale that it ruffles Faith’s fur and causes her to close her eyes against it. Nathan takes another desperate sip from his bottle, less concerned with the warmth the alcohol provides, and

more hopeful that it will keep the memories at bay. As soon as it touches his lips though, all Nathan can hear is her screaming – high pitched wailing intermixed with a gurgling moan as her lungs fill up with water and she drowns. “No,” Nathan mutters, capping the bottle and shoving it into his jacket pocket, “No!” he says again, his hands moving up to cover his ears as he shakes his head from side to side, eyes closed. He knows it can’t really be her, that she never did scream, no matter what she was going through, and even if she had, he would’ve been too far away to hear it. He presses his hands harder into the sides of his head, but it only makes the screaming louder.

Daniel says something to him, but he can’t hear it, the screams drowning out all other sounds. “I tried to find you!” he yells into the darkness surrounding him, tears filling his eyes. “I didn’t want to give up – I was just too tired!”

Snow begins to fall, a few flakes melting on Nathan’s face and hands. He can feel the tiny pin pricks of cold, turning into drops of water as they hit his warm skin. This sends him over the edge. He takes his hands off his ears and starts running, trying to escape the images of his past. Daniel calls out for him to stop, but once again, Nathan can’t hear him. The snowflakes feel like stones, pounding against him, reminding him of the rain, of the harsh pinging sounds it made as it came down upon their tin roof. He thinks about how the rail filled the lake up to bursting, how it finally got so full that it couldn’t hold even one drop more.

He clearly remembers the loud boom that occurred that morning. His first thought was that someone was celebrating the end of the storm with fireworks. But then he saw the water streaming in the neighborhood and knew that something terrible had happened. It wasn’t until much later that he learned the true source of the noise: the levees had failed. He had run back

inside to his mother, both of them scared and unprepared. She was waiting on him to tell her what to do, he knew, but he hadn't planned for this – hadn't planned for any of it.

Nathan stops running, stops moving at all. Just stands completely still. The screaming has stopped, and he can hear his dog panting next to him.

Daniel catches up to them a few minutes later, slightly out of breath, "What was that?" he asks.

"I just can't do this. It's bad enough when I'm nowhere near here, but now you're bringing me back to the center of it all? I can't handle this, man."

"I'm sorry, but there just isn't anywhere else for us to go. We're almost there. Just remember it's over now, ok? The storm's gone."

"Not for me," Nathan replies.

"You'll feel better when you get a chance to rest. Let's keep going."

Nathan starts walking again, trailing slightly behind Daniel. His arm hangs down so his fingers can brush the top of Faith's head. She had kept up with him when he had taken off running, not letting him out of her sight for even a second. He knew he could always count on her to be there, to follow him no matter where he went.

He remembers how they had found one another, both desperate, their lives in danger. He can feel the bile rising in his throat as the images resurface: a twisted pink tricycle, a smashed trashcan, a man floating by on his stomach, dead. It made him nauseous - the stress, the exertion, the fear. As soon as he reached the rooftop he immediately vomited over the edge, purging himself of all the salt water he had ingested trying to get to safety. That's when he saw her. She was paddling frantically, barely keeping her head above the water. She was about ten feet away when their eyes met, and he knew that if he didn't help her, she would die. Nathan

used what little energy he had left to whistle and call her to him. She pushed herself forward, and finally made it to the roof's edge. Her toenails clicked along the metal gutter, scrabbling for purchase. He reached down and grabbed her underneath her front legs to pull her up. She couldn't have weighed more than fifty pounds, but it still took all of his remaining strength to lift her on top of him. Once in his arms, she just laid there for the next hour, a soaking heap of fur, too tired to even attempt shaking the water off.

They walk several more minutes in silence, then Daniel speaks, "I need to take a break, my back is killing me."

"Sure," Nathan replies, sinking down onto the snow covered ground. Faith tries to climb into his lap but he pulls his knees up to his chest and turns away from her. He stares straight ahead and ignores her insistent nudging. He is exhausted – from the walk, from the cold, from trying so hard to keep his mind in the present, not the past. He closes his eyes and lets go, allowing himself to be consumed, yet again, by the actions of that morning – the day the levees opened up, destroying his entire world.

They hadn't slept the night before, too worried about the storm going on around them. The noise from the levees drew Nathan to the door. As he stood there, the neighborhood was eerily quiet, transformed into someplace unfamiliar, covered in downed tree limbs and power lines. He hardly noticed the water beginning to seep in, but once he saw it, there was no time to debate about what to do.

He ran back inside the house to get his mother. She was sitting in her recliner, the place where she slept, ate, and lived. "Mom, we gotta go. Get up," he said, reaching his arms around her to help her stand.

"What are you talking about?" she replied. "The storm is over, we're safe."

“Mom, water is coming into the city.”

They were silent for a moment, and then he was helping her up, giving her the walker to hold onto while he fetched the wheelchair.

“We need to hurry,” Nathan said as she lowered herself down into the chair. The water was already seeping under their door, collecting in a pool, saturating the carpet.

“Let me just get my medicine first, and grab a couple things...”

“No, mom, we have to go now.” Nathan pushed her wheelchair through the house, his feet making wet sucking sounds as he walked. By the time they got outside, the water was up to his ankles.

“Oh my god,” his mom whispered when she saw the neighborhood.

“We need to get to the other side, up to higher ground. We’ll be safe there.” He pushed the wheelchair as fast as he could, though was greatly slowed by the debris in the street. In half an hour the water was up to his thighs, the wheelchair half submerged. The pushing was grueling work, and his breathing soon became labored. He had to stop often to clear a path for the chair, sometimes being forced to go around things that were too heavy to be moved.

“Nathan, we’re moving too slow. You need to just go on,” his mother said.

“What are you talking about? I’m not going to just leave you here. We’ll be fine, only a few more blocks to go.”

They saw a few others heading in the same direction, but more were still inside their houses. Nathan called out to one couple he saw, yelling for them to get out, to follow them, but they just shook their heads and went further inside. They wanted to believe that their houses would keep them safe, that the water would stop soon, but Nathan knew he couldn’t take that



chance. He had wanted to evacuate days ago, as soon as he heard how bad the storm was predicted to be, but with his mother's poor health he didn't want to risk it. He regretted that now.

They continued trudging forward, finally coming across a fallen tree that blocked the entire street. He pushed her over to the curb, but she was too heavy to lift over it with the chair.

"We're going to have to leave the chair here," Nathan said.

His mom nodded, the water now up to their waists. Though it was a struggle, he managed to lift her out of the chair, and, by supporting most of her weight, they were able to continue moving forward. The going was even slower now, however, and they were still at least a mile away from higher ground – though they weren't even positive it would be high enough.

"Nathan," his mom said, short of breath, "I have to take a break. I can't keep going."

"We don't have enough time to take a break, we have to keep moving," Nathan replied, struggling with the task of keeping them both upright in the fast swirling water.

"Just a short one..."

"No mom, we —" Nathan cut his sentence off short, having to grab his mother as her knees buckled beneath her. "Mom!" he yelled, catching her right before her head submerged.

"I'm sorry, I have to stop," she said, tears streaming down her face.

"It's ok. We'll stop. Let's get over to a car." He helped her stand again and they pushed through the water to a small car, its top the only thing not underwater. Lifting her was easier now that the water had risen, so he was able to help her onto the hood. From there, they crawled up to the roof, both of them soaked and panting from exertion.

"Nathan, I'm not going to be able to make it in time, the water's rising too fast."

"I'm not going to just leave you here, all right?"

“I’m being serious. I love you, and I want you to make the most of your life. I’m ok here. The water won’t rise much more than this. I’ll be fine.”

“If that’s the case, then I’ll be fine too. I’m not going without you.”

“Nathan,” she said, placing her hand on his cheek, “these last ten years I’ve been a burden to you, I know it – preventing you from starting your life right, moving up in the world.”

“Mom, don’t.”

“No, I want you to listen. You’ve taken good care of me, even when you didn’t have to, even when you could’ve just gone away and never looked back. Now it’s my turn to take care of you again. Go Nathan, quickly. God will take care of me.”

He looked away, fighting with himself. Then, a look of determination flashed across his face. “Alright, I’ll go, but I’m coming back for you. I’m going to go find help, and we’ll come get you, ok? As fast as I can.”

He climbed down off the car and started half walking, half swimming away, the water reaching up to his neck.

“Nathan,” his mom called after him, “I love you.”

He looked back at her, the water starting to lap around the edges of her dress. “I love you too, mom. I’ll be back soon.”

Though it was easier to make a path through the water when Nathan didn’t have his mom to support, the street was getting more and more challenging to navigate. The current was strong, and pulled him under several times, turning him around, causing him to lose his sense of direction. Nothing looked familiar, the water covered everything – he no longer knew if he was headed towards higher elevation, or going back towards the levee break.

His energy was gone. He kept telling himself he had to hurry, had to find help, had to go back for his mom. But even with adrenaline coursing through his veins, he could barely keep his head raised above the water. He had just accepted the fact that he wasn't going to make it when he spotted a rooftop about thirty feet away. It was flat, and shorter than the others around him. He swam towards it and managed to haul himself over the edge.

Though it was a relief to be able to breathe again without being sucked under the current, when Nathan looked out into the neighborhood, he felt empty. The water level had stabilized around him, and he realized with a stab in his stomach that it was much higher than the car had been. When the canoe came three days later to carry him and the dog to safety, he insisted that they go back to where the car was. They searched for two hours, but he couldn't locate the exact spot his mother had been left. All cars were completely submerged, and he knew the current had been too rough for her to have hung on for long.

Still, he couldn't just let her go. He asked around for months afterwards, but never heard anything, good or bad. As the weeks went by, the feelings of guilt increased and the what if questions multiplied; he couldn't stop thinking about the things he could've done differently. Perhaps if he had stayed with her, let them both rest some, she would have been able to continue on. He wondered about the other roofs in the area, what would have happened if he had thought of climbing on one sooner, had been able to help her onto one as well. And of course, he couldn't shake the idea that if he had just found a way to evacuate both of them a few days before, she would still be here.

He had left her, abandoning her to drown. She would have never done the same to him, no matter how much he would have begged and pleaded. His whole life she had never given up on him. Her words echo back in his mind, "I want you to make the most of your life," she had

said, insisting that he go on without her. Yet here he is, sitting on the ground as snow piles on top of him, not even bothering to brush it off.

“Ok, ready to get started again?” Daniel asks, standing back up. “We don’t have too much farther to go now.”

Nathan sinks down deeper and replies, “No, you go ahead. I think I’ll stay here.”

“Oh, come on man! We went through this already, remember? You decided to trust me in the hopes of actually being warm tonight. What changed?”

“I don’t think I want to be warm.”

“Are you crazy? You’ll die out here!”

Nathan mumbles back, “Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing.”

Daniel crouches in the snow beside Nathan. “Now, why would you say something stupid like that? How would you dying be a good thing?”

“Just leave me alone, ok?”

“Dying never fixes anything. You can’t do anything when you’re dead. As long as you’re still living, there’s hope that you’ll be in a better place tomorrow. We might be down on our luck now, but that’s no reason to give up on the future.”

“I’m not giving up on anything!” Nathan yells, taking Daniel by surprise. “I have made nothing of my life – *nothing!*” He pauses briefly and takes a breath, then says quietly, “I let down the one person I cared about the most; I have nothing to live for.”

“What, you don’t think I have things I regret about my past too?” Daniel replies. “You think I like sleeping outside, always hungry, never able to get fully clean? Look, we might be in a tough spot right now, but who knows what will happen later on? You gotta have hope, man.”

Nathan slumps back to the ground and places his face in his hands.

“You just have to get through one day at a time, you know? And today, what you need to do is come with me so we can get some rest. It’s too damn cold outside to be acting like this. Plus, did you forget all about your dog? You think she’d go find somewhere warm to stay if you decided to sleep in the snow? No! She’d stay right there with you, even if it meant the death of her too. You’re all she has, man.”

Nathan sits in silence, then slowly takes his head out of his hands. Faith tries to climb into his lap again, and this time he lets her. He exhales and watches his breath puff out in front of him. He gingerly moves Faith to the ground and rises. Daniel looks at him, and Nathan nods once. They resume walking.

A few minutes later, Daniel stops in front of the abandoned building. Window panes are missing or broken, the front door hangs by a single hinge, and the wood structure itself seems like it could collapse at any moment.

Daniel holds the door open and they walk inside. The room isn’t much warmer, but it does keep the wind and snow off of them. Several other people have already made the space their own, though Nathan doesn’t really look at them. He walks to a vacant corner and sits on the floor; Daniel sits a few feet away from him, his back to a wall.

The building has clearly suffered some severe water damage. The sheetrock sags, though no longer saturated, the wood floor-boards are warped, and there’s no mistaking the faint water line that goes evenly around all of the walls, starting several feet above Nathan’s head.

He pulls his dog close to him, burying his face in her fur. His thoughts flicker in and out like a fuzzy TV channel, the image of the building changing to resemble his own house after the storm – after eight feet of water had stood there for an entire week. He peeks out, unable to keep himself from looking.

The faint water line seems to swell, becoming a thick border of black mold going all the way around the building. The floorboards look bloated, the wood soft and flexible underneath. He can no longer see the people inside, but instead recalls the items in his house, everything having moved and shifted. He feels just like he did that first day he went back, as if he had gotten his address confused and walked into a neighbor's house by accident. He felt like he had been transported to a different world, somewhere foreign and strange where couches were sideways and everything was twice its normal size, swollen with water. He remembers how a single shoe, one that used to be part of his favorite pair, rested on top of their ceiling fan blade. His mother's bible lay in the middle of the floor, the pages distorted and dried into a wave-like pattern, the cover faded. He pressed a finger into a couch cushion and was disgusted by how much water seeped out. It was like the house was no longer his own. It didn't even smell like before. Instead everything smelled like Katrina: a mixture of mold, stale water, and death.

Nathan can smell it now, though he knows it's all in his mind. He rubs his eyes and reaches for his alcohol. The dog climbs into his lap as he takes several sips, lying down and resting her head on his knee. He closes his eyes and reminds himself of Daniel's words, that he is safe here, that nothing bad is going to happen. He takes a deep breath and opens them again. This time the building doesn't change. He reaches his hand down to the floor and strokes a board with his fingers, reassuring himself that the wood is sturdy and not water-logged.

Faith shoves her nose into Nathan's face and gently licks his cheek, drawing him back into the present. He opens his arms up to her, and she slides right in, curling up next to his chest. She feels warm against him, and he smiles slightly as he runs his hand down her coat. They will be warm tonight, and he knows that coming here was the right decision. He places his head next to hers, inhaling her scent. He tells himself that the storm was a once in a lifetime disaster;

nothing like that would ever hurt either of them ever again. He closes his eyes and hopes for a dreamless sleep.

## Daniel

The abandoned building is full by the time they get there. Daniel has never seen so many people in it before. Three of the corners are already occupied; those are always the best spots. He and Nathan are freezing, the snow outside continuing to fall, a thin layer beginning to stick to the concrete. It isn't much warmer inside, with the wind blowing through all of the building's cracks and crevices, but at least it is dry.

Daniel watches Nathan walk unsteadily over towards the last empty corner, a few feet away from the door they just walked in. He drops his duffel bag and lies down, immediately curling up into a ball. His dog follows after him, stopping briefly to shake the remaining snow off her fur before nuzzling into his arms.

Daniel lays his backpack and the rectangular case he is carrying in front of the door, and then sits close by Nathan. He doesn't expect any more people to come in tonight, and the solid oak behind him serves as a good back support. The only problem is a gaping hole near the bottom of the door, big enough for a small animal to climb through. The wood has been broken, and splinters stretch across the open expanse of space. Daniel scoots as far from the hole as he can, taking the case with him, trying to separate himself from the biting wind blowing through it.



He removes a blanket from his backpack and folds it into a thick square. He places it behind him to serve as a cushion between the door and his lower back in hopes that it will help ease some of his pain.

He pulls the rectangular case towards him and into his lap, resting his arms on top of it. Nathan has already assumed his normal sleeping position: his purple blanket pulled over himself and Faith, only his shoes and the faint outline of her tail visible from underneath.

Daniel examines the other people he's sharing the building with. One of them looks vaguely familiar, an older guy with a beard, speckled gray and white. He's seen him around the streets, but has never talked to him before. Daniel had heard he had a reputation of being a "crazy," so he generally steered clear. Tonight, he's sitting next to a trash bag full of his belongings, holding a license plate in his lap. Daniel can see his mouth moving, but can't make out the whispers. He can see his finger tracing the license plate numbers though, again and again, as if he were in a trance.

There's a younger man in the room too, sitting with his arms locked around his knees, rocking back and forth, a glass pipe clenched firmly in his hand. Daniel figures the guy recently did some drugs; he seems to be out of it, and doesn't even have a blanket wrapped around him. His curly, black hair looks unkempt and slightly knotted, like he hasn't had a real shower in weeks.

Daniel has to look twice at the last person in the building. It's a pregnant woman, holding a young child on her lap. She's sitting next to one of the only two windows in the building, her face dimly lit by the streetlamp outside. All but one of the panes of glass is broken, the four panels divided by a thin wooden cross in the middle. Daniel can see the lamp's reflection in the

whites of her eyes. She's wide awake, on alert. The child in her lap is perfectly still though, fast asleep.

Daniel exhales and can see his breath fog up in front of him. He can't think of why a woman in that kind of condition would be here on a night like this, especially with a kid in tow. Surely anywhere else would be better than this. The building is old, the wooden walls dry and full of cracks. There is no insulation; the cold air seeps right through the floor. Daniel can feel it penetrating through his clothes, and knows she must be freezing as well; all she has is a jacket to cover her and the child.

Suddenly, Daniel's back spasms; he can think of nothing else until the pain passes. He's been pushing himself too hard lately. The doctor told him a year ago that he couldn't stand for more than two hours at a time. Otherwise he could cause the small fissure in his vertebrae to become a crack, leading to possible paralysis, or worse. The pain is unbearable though, a sign that the walk to get here was farther than he had thought. He adjusts the blanket behind him and leans his head back against the wall, trying to keep a straight posture. The cold aggravates the pain more, causing it to progress from its constant slow throb to an unrelenting sharp pinch, like the tip of a knife being pressed deep into his skin, then twisted back and forth.

He longs for a mattress, something soft to lie down upon so he can finally get some rest. He misses his old bed, misses having an apartment to go home to. He'll even allow himself to admit that he misses Lucinda, having her greet him at the door with a kiss, dinner already cooked and the table set, waiting for him. He can't think about her without getting angry though. It's been three months since they separated, three months since she kicked him out of her place, three months since he'd had a home. He can't help but blame her for every bad thing he has had to go through during that time.

Daniel knows he caused her some stress, he had lost his job, and that put them in a tough spot financially, but he refuses to think of that as his fault. It was an accident, one that could've happened to anybody.

He had been placing bricks up the wall of a building downtown for his job. They always had something different for him to do, bricklaying, painting, nailing together rafters and beams. It was one of the main reasons he loved being a day laborer for a construction company, that, and the fact that they paid him in cash with no taxes taken out.

Of course, he found out later that this wasn't as good of a deal as he had originally thought. Being a day laborer meant quick pay and a way to cheat the government, but it also meant no benefits – no insurance and, most importantly, no workers compensation. He never really considered those things to be major draw-backs, though. Construction companies were everywhere after Katrina hit, and they all wanted workers who were willing to be paid in cash. Daniel thought he had finally caught a break, finding a job where he could make enough money to help Lucinda with the rent. It was a great deal, until he got hurt.

Each worker had a section of wall to brick, and a certain number of bricks they had to lay in order to get a full day's pay. Daniel always liked when the day's wage was determined by a set amount of work to do. He was one of the fastest workers, and could often finish well before the normal five o'clock cut off. But today, the boss gave everyone an additional incentive to work quickly: the first one done with their allocated number of bricks would get their day's pay, plus a one hundred dollar bonus.

Daniel jumped at this offer, knowing that he stood a pretty decent shot of winning. He began laying the bricks that morning, going as fast as he could without decreasing the quality of

his work. He noticed that the scaffolding was still slick from the previous night's rainfall, but didn't slow down; the bonus money was just too great of an offer to lose by being cautious.

He can still remember how it felt to fall: the sensation of having nothing but air surrounding him, the feeling that his stomach was above him, left up on the scaffolding. People were right, it did seem to make time slow down. He didn't experience any meaningful revelations or see his life stretched out before him like a flip book in the sky, though. Instead, all he could think about was the two bricks he still had left to lay, and how he wasn't going to get the bonus money after all.

He landed flat on his back ten feet below and immediately lost consciousness. He came to with his coworkers surrounding him, but when they spoke to him everything sounded far away. He couldn't feel or move anything from his waist down. The whole next week he spent in the hospital where he had three surgeries, and then went through six months of rehab before he could walk again. Lucinda helped him through it all, driving him to doctor appointments and emptying out his bedpan. She even arranged for a babysitter to watch her kids so she could spend the first few nights with him.

Once he was mostly recovered from the injury, Daniel found it impossible to find work. No one wanted to hire someone who couldn't stand for long hours, plus he was a liability: with his current injury, he was at a much higher risk for having another accident. No company was willing to take that chance.

Daniel readjusts the blanket again in an attempt to dull the continual pain. The temperature inside the building has dropped significantly since he came in, making it worse. He glances around the room once more, then stiffly rises to his feet.

“Nathan, come help me get a fire going in here,” Daniel says, walking over to the purple mass in the corner. “It’s just getting colder. I can’t take it anymore.” He bends down and places his hand on what he thinks is Nathan’s shoulder, gently shaking him. “Nathan?” He lifts the blanket slightly to reveal his face.

“I can’t,” Nathan whispers.

“Sure you can, come on. I saw a metal trashcan outside we can use. A little warmth will help everybody out.”

Nathan lifts himself onto his elbows, then unscrews his bottle of vodka and takes a long pull from it. He recaps it and settles back down, pulling Faith closer to him. “I just can’t, Daniel. Sorry.”

“Are you serious? Come on!”

The younger man with the glass pipe speaks up, “What did you have in mind?”

Daniel pauses briefly, then replies, “I want to move that trashcan in here and start a fire to keep us warm. We’ll have to bring some wood in from outside too.”

“Ok,” the man says, “let’s do it then. I’m sick of being cold. My name’s Tobias, by the way.”

He stands and follows Daniel outside. They return a few minutes later, Daniel dragging in a large metal trashcan and Tobias holding an armful of sticks.

“Shit, it’s cold out there,” Tobias says, dropping the sticks in the middle of the room.

“Yeah,” Daniel replies, “I can’t remember the last time it snowed in New Orleans – it’s crazy.”

The pregnant woman has been closely watching Daniel during all of this, and now speaks up. “I want to help,” she says. Her daughter was awakened by all the noise and now sits on her lap drowsily, eyes blinking.

“That’s ok, ma’am,” Daniel replies, “I think we have it under control. We just need to collect some more wood.”

“I want to get warm just as much as you do. At the very least I can collect some of the dead leaves in here – those would help get it started.”

“You really don’t have to,” Daniel says.

“No, it’s fine. Sophie can help me. We’ll go ahead and put them in the trashcan.”

“Well, ok then. Just don’t strain yourself. We’ll be out getting some more wood.”

The men leave and the lady turns her daughter so that they’re facing one another. She looks her in the eyes and brushes a stray hair behind her ear. “It’ll be warm soon, sweetheart, but first we need to collect all the leaves in here and put them in that can over there. Do you think you can help mommy pick up the leaves?”

Sophie nods, then stands up, holding tightly onto her mother’s hand. They walk around the room together collecting handfuls of dead leaves, blown in earlier through the building’s numerous holes.

By the time Daniel and Tobias return Mary and her daughter have filled the can with about six inches of dried leaves. Both men are carrying several bigger sticks, a few of which are log-sized, broken off from a nearby branch.

“This still isn’t enough,” Tobias says, setting down his load of wood. “We need some smaller pieces that will catch quickly.”

Daniel places his wood on top of the pile and looks around. “What if we take some of the wood splintering off the building?” He reaches over and yanks a small sliver of wood off the front door, then pulls another, increasing the size of the hole.

“I noticed some of the baseboards were loose over there,” the woman says, pointing to a back wall.

Tobias walks over and easily lifts the board up, the screws having rusted through. He steps on it and tugs, snapping it into pieces. Suddenly, a loud cracking sound comes from across the room. They all turn to find that the older man has set down his license plate and is smashing his foot into the floor. The boards are old and brittle, like the rest of the house, so they crack without much effort. He pulls his foot back up and then slams it down again a few more times, splitting it into several pieces. He brings them over to Daniel and says, “The floor more the four shores,” then places the wood next to the other stack. He walks back to the hole and continues breaking up the boards.

Several minutes pass in silence, then Daniel says, “Guess we should get it going then.” He picks up some of the smaller sticks and wipes the snow off of them, then places them in the trashcan. He puts some of the thicker branches on top.

“Some of those are damp,” Tobias says. “That’s going to make it harder to light.”

“Not if you use some of this,” Nathan says. He had been watching them work, but now stands up and walks over, handing Tobias his bottle of vodka. “Just don’t use too much, I’m not sure when I’ll be able to buy more.”

Tobias opens the bottle and pours some over the top logs.

“Wait,” Mary says, “does someone have a lighter?”

“I do,” Tobias answers, pulling his bic lighter from his pocket. “Not quite sure how I’m going to light it, though, I need a piece of cloth, a rag or something.”

The older man pushes forward again, bringing in a new load of pulled up floor boards. He sets them down, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a dirty sock. He hands this to Tobias, then stands there looking at the barrel of wood.

“What the hell?” Tobias drops the sock immediately.

“No, I think he wants you to use it to start the fire,” Mary says, “he’s trying to help.”

“Oh,” Tobias replies, bending to pick the sock back up.

“You look familiar,” Daniel says, “what’s your name?”

The stranger looks at him and mumbles, “Jesse,” then goes back to his spot in the far corner and sits, tracing the numbers on the license plate once more.

“Well, thanks Jesse,” Daniel calls after him.

Tobias opens the bottle of vodka again and tilts it over the barrel, holding the sock beneath the stream. His hand slips slightly though, and he spills vodka all over his arm holding the sock.

“Shit!” he exclaims, quickly turning the bottle right-side-up.

“Damnit!” Nathan yells, reaching forward to grab the now almost empty bottle away from Tobias. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry, man, my fingers are so cold, I lost my grip.”

“Let’s just get this thing going already,” Daniel says.

“Yeah, ok. God, my arm’s freezing now.” Tobias holds the lighter near the sock and spins the metal wheel. It clicks into life, and the sock quickly catches on fire. He drops it into the barrel, and, after a few tense seconds, the rest of the wood starts crackling with flames.



“Yes!” Daniel says. “Now let’s move it over near the front door. That way it’ll help block that wind coming through the hole.”

They scoot the trashcan over until it sits directly in front of the door. Everyone gathers around it, staring down at the flames. The woman is holding her child now, though it’s obvious she’s struggling to keep her still, the child wanting to get down and explore.

Daniel stretches his hands out over the flames and feels the warmth spread through him. “Why don’t we all move in closer? It’ll be easier to fall asleep if we aren’t shivering.”

They all gather their things and form a semi-circle around the fire. The woman lets her child down for just a moment as she tries to ease herself to the ground. Daniel notices that she’s having a hard time with no wall to lean against, so he goes to help her.

“I’m Daniel,” he says, letting her hold onto his arm as she lowers herself into a sitting position.

“Thanks Daniel, I’m Mary.” She smiles briefly, then sees her daughter run towards Nathan’s dog. “Sophie, no!” she exclaims.

“Woof woof!” the child says, pointing at the dog, her hand an inch away from its mouth.

“Get away from there!” the woman yells, reaching out to pull her away.

Faith lifts her head up and licks Sophie’s hand. Sophie giggles and holds her hand up to show her mother. “Cold,” she says, then giggles again.

“Come here, now,” Mary says.

Sophie walks over slowly, dragging her feet along the floor. Mary takes her by the shoulders and says, “We do not play with strange dogs Sophie, I’ve told you that before. They can bite you.”

“Oh, it’s ok,” Daniel says, “Faith would never hurt anyone.”

“Well, that’s good to know, but still…”

“Mommy,” Sophie whines, “I want woof woof.”

Mary sighs. “Honey, the dog’s tired, we need to let her go to sleep.”

Daniel laughs. “Hardly, that’s all she’s done all day. Nathan keeps her wrapped up so tight under that blanket, I’d bet she’d love a new face to lick.”

Mary sighs again. “Alright, you can pet her, but be careful.” She releases Sophie and watches nervously as the child runs back to the dog.

“Woof woof!” Sophie calls, kneeling down next to Faith. The dog rolls over, exposing her belly, her tail thumping on the floor. Sophie pats her and smiles.

Daniel sits down next to Mary. “So, how much longer you got?” he asks, gesturing towards her stomach.

“Eight more weeks,” Mary replies.

“Do you know what it is yet?”

“Yes, a baby boy.”

“That’s exciting. I bet you’re ready to have him out of there, huh?”

“Well, kind of.” Mary rubs a hand over her stomach and looks down, “Now that my situation has kind of, well, changed, I’d be ok with him staying a little longer. At least until I can get things figured out again.”

“Right, well I was kind of wondering about that… I mean, how did you end up here? It’s not often you see a woman and her kid out on the streets.”

Mary looks away. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Daniel nods, though still doesn’t understand. He looks around the fire and notices that everyone has moved except Jesse. “Hey man,” he calls, “do you want to move closer to the fire?”

“The numbers are speaking,” Jesse says loudly. “One, six, seven, nine, I can’t hear them. I can’t hear them!” He is fixated on the license plate and doesn’t get up to move.

“Is he ok?” Mary asks, glancing over her shoulder.

“Yeah, just a little cuckoo,” Daniel says, twirling his finger around in a circle next to his temple.

“Is he, you know, safe?” she asks.

“I’m sure he’s fine, there’s just something wrong in his head.”

“Oh.” Mary reaches out for Sophie and pulls her into her lap.

“So,” Daniel says, “I don’t mean to pry, but I can’t help but be worried about you. From the state of your clothes, it looks like this is your first night on the streets – do you have somewhere else to go tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, really,” she says. “I’ll try and find somewhere, I guess. Tonight was kind of a last minute decision. I wasn’t really thinking clearly about where to go. I just stumbled into this place.”

“Well, you know they have shelters for people to stay at, right? Especially for people like you; or maybe you have friends you could call? Family?”

“No,” Mary says firmly. “I’m not calling anyone.”

“Ok, a shelter then. They have beds there, and heat. Some even feed you dinner if you get there in time.”

“Maybe, but I don’t even know where they are. I never thought to look.”

“Oh, that’s easy. I can walk there with you tomorrow, no problem.”

“I’d appreciate that. But, if they’re so great, why aren’t you there right now?”

“That would be because of this.” Daniel slides the rectangular case out in front of him. He unclasps it and removes a lustrous trumpet and a polishing cloth. He begins to gently shine it, rubbing the cloth along the sides and in between the valves. “It’s how I make my living, playing in Jackson Square for people. But the prime time for business there is between five and ten, after people get off work and start heading out on the town. Shelters are pretty strict on time: you have to check in by a certain hour and check out by a certain hour. Unfortunately, they don’t keep the same hours as my music. To stay the night there you gotta be in by five, right when I start playing. It just doesn’t work out.”

“You play the trumpet?” Tobias asks. He’d been listening to their conversation, huddled close to the fire, wide awake.

“Yeah, I do,” Daniel replies.

“Are you any good?” he asks.

“I’d like to think so.”

“Really? Play us something then,” Tobias says.

“Nah, no one wants to hear me. Plus it’s late; they’re trying to get some sleep.”

“Actually,” Mary cuts in, “if you played something it might help me get Sophie’s attention away from the D-O-G.” Sophie squirms in her grasp, eyes still set on Nathan’s dog.

Daniel fixes the mouth piece to the horn, and asks, “Well, what do you want to hear?”

“Anything, preferably something slow, but whatever you normally play is fine,” Mary replies.

Daniel blows softly through the mouthpiece and raps his fingers on the keys. He begins to play “Amazing Grace,” the notes ringing out through the room, rich and full.

Faith barks once, near the beginning, but Nathan quickly hushes her, listening intently to the song, his vodka held tight to his chest.

Mary hums the tune along with the trumpet, rocking Sophie in her lap. Though she resists at first, Sophie's exhaustion soon wins out. By the time Daniel plays the third verse, she's almost asleep.

Even Jesse ceases to mumble under his breath while Daniel is playing, the whole building silent and still. After the song ends, several minutes pass where no one speaks. Then, Tobias says, "Wow, you really are talented man."

"Yeah," Daniel says, "something like that." He unscrews the mouthpiece and puts it inside the case, his thoughts reaching back to when he first bought it, how high his hopes had been back then.

It had been ten months since his fall, and he still hadn't had any luck getting a job. Lucinda was housing and feeding him for free.

"So, are you going to do some more job hunting today?" she asked him before heading out to work. "You haven't tried looking downtown yet, maybe someone's hiring there."

"Sure baby, I may try there today. It just gets discouraging after a while."

"I know it does, but you need to keep trying. I love you, but my funds are really starting to run low. I don't know how much longer I can do this."

He got up and put his arms around her waist, hugging her from behind. "You know I hate staying here all day long, not being able to help you and the kids out. I'll keep looking, but I just don't know where else to go. No one wants to hire me."

"Well, maybe a job should be your long term goal, and you can get something else for right now."

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked.

“I mean, there are other ways to get money besides working for it.”

“What, you want me to beg?”

“Not beg, honey, you ask for donations. There’s a salvation army not too far from here, have you asked them yet? What about all those churches down the street? Surely someone out there would understand. Even a little bit would help with the groceries.”

“Lucinda, are you crazy? I am not about to go ask for free handouts. That’s not like me – I work for my money. I work hard.”

“I know you do, but you aren’t able to work hard right now. Just try, ok? I know it isn’t something you want to do, but sometimes we have to do things that we don’t like for our family. And we are your family, right Daniel? I know you don’t deal with the kids much; they stay out of your way and you stay out of theirs, but I still need your help to provide for them. Please, honey, I need you.”

“Of course,” he said.

She kissed him on the cheek and left for work, a smile on her face. He left the house shortly after she did, resolved to swallow his pride and do as Lucinda suggested. He made it all the way to the street in front of the Salvation Army before backing out. A woman had spotted him standing on the street, staring up at the door. She asked him if he needed something and he quickly replied that he was just waiting on a friend. As soon as she turned around, he left.

As he walked back home he played out different scenarios in his head, trying to figure out how he would break the news to Lucinda that he hadn’t been able to ask for handouts. He would just have to try harder to find a job; that was the only solution. He decided to stop in at his

favorite pawn shop to take his mind off of it. He came there about twice a week and had become good friends with the manager.

“Daniel! Just the man I was hoping to see,” the manager said as Daniel walked in the store.

“No money today, Ralph. I’m just here to look, can’t buy.”

“Aw, well that’s too bad. Let me just show you some of what we got. I put aside a few things I thought you might be interested in.” Ralph pulled a box out from behind the cash register. “Now,” he said, holding up a bracelet with several painted beads, “here’s a pretty present for the missus.”

Daniel shook his head, and Ralph reached for the next item. “Aha, well here’s a collectible: a perfect condition Louis Armstrong vinyl record. Now, I know you don’t have a player, but think of the history in this, one of our very own jazz legends.”

Daniel was tempted, Armstrong was his idol, but he didn’t have even a cent on him. Ralph was good though, he knew Daniel’s tastes, including his weakness for anything that had to do with music, especially in regards to horn playing.

“Those are some fine items, Ralph,” he said, “but like I said, no cash on me; maybe next time.”

“Well, I do have one more thing,” Ralph said as Daniel turned to leave, “but I don’t know if I should show it to you right now with you not having any money.”

“Why not? Lay it on me. I can still appreciate what I can’t buy.”

“But this is different. This is something you’ve been asking me about for years…” Ralph reached down and brought up a rectangular case.

He opened it up to reveal a trumpet, almost brand new except for a few places where the gold finish was scuffed up. Daniel picked it up and was amazed at how smoothly the keys glided up and down. It had been so long since he'd held one; he had forgotten how powerful it made him feel. Like he could do anything, be anything.

Band was the only class he got an "A" in during high school. In fact, it was the only class he even passed. The director told him that he had promise – that he might even be famous one day if he kept at it. That idea had really lit Daniel up, though soon he realized the impossibility of that dream. He lost access to the school's trumpet when he dropped out, and he never found another chance to play. Yet, here one was, within his grasp, but he had no way to pay for it.

"Ralph, she's beautiful," he said, running his hands along the trumpet's sides. "I wish...How much?"

"Two hundred even."

"God, I would do almost anything to have it. Can you save it for me? Just until I can get the money together?"

Ralph whistles low. "I wish I could man, you know I do, but that's not the way of my trade. I kept it hidden for you today, but by tomorrow, I've got to have it back out on the shelves. We do a quick turn around here; I can't have items hanging around, waiting for certain people to come and get them. If that happened, I would never make a dime. I'm sorry, Daniel, if you can't get it today, it'll be sold."

Something snapped in Daniel's head then. He had an idea, though he knew if he thought about it for too long he wouldn't follow through with it. He had to hurry. "I'll get the money. Today. Don't you dare sell it yet."

"Wouldn't think of it; just make sure you come back."



Daniel rushed back to the apartment and went straight for the bedroom he and Lucinda shared. He dug through the closet, retrieving a small shoebox out of the back. He opened it and pulled out several bills: it was exactly two hundred dollars in cash. He clenched his fist around the wad of money and went straight back to the pawn shop. A few minutes later, he walked out with the trumpet under his arm.

He tried not to think about how Lucinda would react. Instead, he convinced himself that she would be proud of him: this would solve all of their problems, this would be his job. He could easily play while sitting; it was almost as if the trumpet was an investment. Sure, two hundred dollars seemed like a lot to spend now, and yes, he did take it from her, but once he got going he could make it up easy, maybe even in a day. Daniel's hopes grew, convinced that Lucinda would be so happy for him, knowing that he had found a purpose again, a way to contribute and help her out.

This fantasy didn't hold up once Lucinda got home, however. She walked in on Daniel shining his trumpet, and immediately the questions started.

"Where'd that trumpet come from?" she asked.

"I bought it – Ralph had been saving it for me at the shop," Daniel replied, keeping his eyes on the instrument.

"How could you buy it? You have no money."

"I found some," he said. "It was a bargain price too, only two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred...where did you find that kind of money?"

"Around. Look, baby, does it really matter? This is an answer to our prayers and—"

"Daniel," Lucinda cut him off, her voice rising, "where did you get the money?"

He just looked at her, not answering. She shook her head and ran into the other room. A few minutes later she came back out with the empty shoe box.

“How could you?” she yelled at him, throwing the box to the floor.

“Now don’t be mad,” Daniel started to say, but was silenced with a look.

“You stole from me? After all that I’ve done for you? Two hundred dollars Daniel! That was all I had! And for a trumpet? You have to take it back.”

“Wait just a second – I know you’re a little upset right now, and I probably should have asked you before taking the money, but this trumpet is our ticket out of the hole. I can make money now, and of course I’ll pay you back, that’ll be the first thing I do.”

“You can’t make money with that thing! Why are you trying to kid yourself?”

“I’m not kidding myself!” Daniel yelled back at her. “I can play, and I can play well – all I have to do is find a street corner to set up in, and people will be giving me money left and right, just you wait and see.”

“I’m not going to wait and see nothing, and neither are you. You’re bringing that trumpet back and getting me my money.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little unfair about all of this? I know it’s risky, but you just have to trust me. I can make this work.”

“Maybe you can, but I need more than a maybe to count on. I have four kids to feed Daniel, or did you forget that? What if something happens to one of them and they need to go to the doctor? What if the car breaks down? I can’t have a savings of zero!”

Daniel stood up and walked over to where she was standing. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down into her face. “Baby, I can’t bring it back. Music is in my soul, I’ve

already lived too many years without it. I don't know when another chance like this will come. You have to understand."

"I'm sorry," she said, "it has to go. You need to give me back my two hundred dollars today, or else you just can't stay here anymore."

"Oh Lucinda, you don't mean that."

"I do! We aren't young anymore. I can't just throw caution to the wind and follow you while you chase your dreams. I have to think about the kids, they come first."

"What about us? I thought we came first."

"Honey, don't do this..." Lucinda's eyes began to fill with tears.

"I'm not bringing it back. Are you really going to kick me out on the streets? Throw away everything we have together?"

Lucinda had backed away from Daniel so they were no longer touching. "Just return it, that's all I'm asking."

"No," Daniel said, "I won't. I hope you and the kids are happy together." He turned and walked out of the house. He didn't look back, but he knew Lucinda was watching him from the door; he could hear her sobbing. He walked slow, waiting for her to call him back, to apologize for being so ridiculous, but she never did.

Three months on the streets had taught him a lot: playing his trumpet in the Square did make him some money, but only about fifteen dollars a day – barely enough for him to live on. He had gotten to know some of the homeless community, he and Nathan had become good friends, and he had a few others who he could count on to have his back. It was rough out there; you needed people you could trust.

In the building, Daniel looks back over at Mary with Sophie asleep in her lap. There was no way she would make it on the streets alone. He reaches over to her and offers his blanket.

“Here, y’all need it more than I do.”

“Thanks,” she says, using it to cover both of them.

“So, I was thinking some more,” Daniel says, “and I was wondering if your husband knew you were here tonight.”

“No, he was the reason I left.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t want to pry, but he’s truly concerned about Mary’s safety. “Is there any chance you’ll be able to go back?”

“I don’t think so, no.” She snuggles Sophie closer to her chest. “If I went back, I would be putting my children in danger, and I just can’t do that.”

“But living on the streets puts them in danger too.”

“Daniel, I know you’re just trying to help, but I know what I’m doing. It’s safer for us here, in this freezing cold building, than it was in my own house. I’m not going back to him.”

Daniel is silent for a moment, then asks, “Was it hard? You know, to finally leave?”

Mary thinks, then says, “He’s my husband, all I’ve ever known. And I still love him, I can’t help that. But my kids come first.”

Daniel nods and places his trumpet back into its case, then closes and latches the lid. It’s the only real possession he owns, made even more valuable because of what he had to lose to get it. He wonders what Lucinda is doing now and how she’s faring on her own. They had been together for several years before the big separation; he doesn’t think she would have been able to find someone else so soon.

He looks up and sees that most of the others have fallen asleep. Nathan is back underneath his blanket with Faith, Tobias is lying down with his backpack as a pillow, and even Mary has her eyes shut now, clutching Sophie to her chest. Daniel can't see if Jesse is still tracing his license plate or not, but if he is he's doing so silently.

He contemplates going by Lucinda's place sometime next week, just to check in. He hasn't seen her since the fight. When he left he didn't care how upset she was. He wanted to hurt her just as she'd hurt him. But now, it almost seems insignificant. He can't help but think back to Mary's situation, how she had to make that decision to leave, knowing that it wasn't going to be easy. Yet she had no other choice. She did what any mother would have done, sacrificing all to keep her kids safe. Had Lucinda done any differently? Had he given her any other choice?

Daniel stretches out on his side, cradling the trumpet case to his chest. He sighs, feeling the warmth from the fire above. He's too exhausted to think anymore, and so allows his eyes to close. Soon, he drifts off into a deep sleep.

## Epilogue

The trashcan tipped over at 5:36 Saturday morning, startling everyone awake. A rotten floorboard had broken underneath it, the heat from the metal bottom accelerating its collapse. A log tumbled out, still on fire, accompanied by a pile of embers. They scattered across the floor, falling into crevices between the boards. Faith started barking, whining occasionally as she paced beside her owner, eyes trained on the expanding flames.

The hole in the door, previously covered by the trashcan, was now newly exposed. The wind outside gusted through the opening and spread the fire across the floor and to the walls.

“Shit!” Tobias yelled, running to the other side of the room. Jesse and Mary were already there, trying to put distance between themselves and the flames. Mary held Sophie close to her chest, and Jesse was mumbling incoherently under his breath, holding his license plate up in the air and waving it about frantically.

Nathan was still in close proximity to the fire. Daniel was leaning over him, shaking him by the shoulders, telling him to get up, to move. Nathan was curled in the fetal position, arms locked around his knees, eyes staring vacantly forward.

“Come on,” Daniel repeated, “We have to get out of here.” He glanced towards his trumpet case resting against the wall, out of his reach, but not the flames.

The fire was growing, enveloping the walls, reaching up to the ceiling. The front door was already consumed with flames. Nathan shook his head back and forth, “It’s happening again,” he said, “I’m trapped. We’re trapped. I can’t breathe.”

“It’s the smoke,” Daniel replied, “it’s getting thicker. We have to find a way out.” Nathan didn’t reply. Daniel looked up again to his trumpet and watched as the flames descended upon it. He swallowed, hard, then lifted Nathan forcibly from the floor, grabbing under his armpits and pulling him to a standing position. Pain shot up through his back, but he forced himself to ignore it. He slowly walked Nathan over to join the others, leaning him up against the wall to give his back some relief. Now they were all huddled around the building’s back door.

Tobias was violently kicking at the door while slamming it with his fists and cursing. It didn’t budge though, and they remained stuck inside.

“We have to find another way,” Mary said, Sophie clutched tightly in her arms. The child had cried only briefly when the fire broke out, then became silent, holding onto her mother’s neck, eyes shut tight.

“She’s right,” Daniel said, “it’s boarded up from the outside, we can’t break through.”

“I’m not fucking dying in here,” Tobias yelled as he began to ram his shoulder into the door. “Not like this.”

Mary tore two strips of cloth off of her jacket. She tied one across Sophie’s nose and mouth, then one across her own to protect them against inhaling the smoke. “What about the windows?” she asked.

They moved quickly, as a unit, to the other wall of the building. Tobias reluctantly followed. The window was about five feet off the ground with four window panes, three of which were already broken. It had two pieces of wood separating the frames, one vertical and one horizontal, creating a sturdy cross.

Tobias didn't hesitate to punch through the remaining pane of glass, causing it to shatter around their feet. He grabbed the bottom of the wooden cross beam and jerked, trying to dislodge it. "We need something to swing at it with, like a bat," he called.

"Here," said Nathan, grabbing a random bag from the floor. Tobias took it and began to slam it into the wooden bars. The fire was growing behind them, continuing to spread out sideways and upwards. The tips of the flames licked at the edges of the wall housing the windows.

After several hits from the duffel bag, the wooden bars began to splinter and then crack, the middle section finally caving in. The smoke was so thick they could barely see, the open window serving as a vacuum, pulling the fumes out in a big cloud, burning their eyes and throats. They could hear the house breaking all around them. The dog was with Nathan still, had followed him when he had gotten up off the floor. She had stopped barking, and was instead continuously whining. Nathan crouched down next to her and pulled her to him, offering what little comfort he could.

Tobias pulled the remaining wooden beams loose and tossed them outside, clearing their escape path. The fire was at the window now though, and his jacket sleeve caught as he brushed up against it, the fire enveloping his entire arm in just a few seconds. He screamed then, waving his arm around and calling out for help. The movement made the flames grow wilder; they began climbing towards his neck and face.



Suddenly, Jesse pinned him to the ground, smothering him with his sleeping bag. After a few seconds, he stood back up, pulling it off of him; the flames had been extinguished. He then said, “The numbers. They’re coming.”

Tobias met his eyes, then used his good arm to reach out and grab Jesse’s wrist. “We need to climb out,” he told him, maintaining eye contact, “I’ll help you.”

He pulled Jesse towards the window, then motioned to the opening and helped him get up. As soon as he was through, Tobias quickly followed him out into the night.

“You and the girl go next,” Daniel said, reaching out his hands to take Sophie. “Climb up and I’ll pass her to you.”

“We’ll be out soon, sweetheart, I’ll keep you and your brother safe,” Mary whispered as she passed her to Daniel. She then used her hands to pull herself up backwards, protecting her belly from the flames. She could feel the broken glass cutting into her thighs as she sat on the window sill, blood beginning to run from the cuts on her palms as she grabbed on for balance.

Daniel handed her Sophie, who immediately clasped her arms around Mary’s neck once more. “Hold on tight, ok?” She held Sophie securely to her chest and tried to turn herself around. She intended to jump out, but lost her balance and fell. She turned herself mid-fall so that she landed on her back, protecting Sophie and the baby inside.

The snow was shockingly cold after all of the heat, and she could clearly see the black smoke billowing out from the house, silhouetted against the white outside. She continued to hold Sophie to her chest with one hand as she used the other to half-crawl, half-scoot them away from the house, leaving small lines of blood on the snow behind her.

The flames had surrounded the top and sides of the window, the opening shrinking as the fire took over the window’s frame.

“Faith, let’s go!” Nathan said, tugging at her neck. She was standing with her legs locked, refusing to walk any closer to the flames. He lost his grip, and she pulled away, terrified and confused. The smoke was so thick now that Nathan couldn’t see anything. His eyes were watering and his throat felt like sandpaper.

“You have to leave her behind,” Daniel said.

“No! I’ll find her, she’ll come.”

“She doesn’t understand what’s going on. Maybe if you go, she’ll follow you,” Daniel said.

“What if she doesn’t? I can’t just leave her here to die.”

“She will,” said Daniel. “Go.”

Nathan pulled himself up on the ledge and climbed out, calling after her the entire time. Daniel could hear him clapping once he got outside, whistling and shouting, but Faith remained inside.

Daniel emerged from the house soon after, walking a few steps before collapsing in exhaustion. There were two fire-trucks in the street, along with a number of police cars and several ambulances, yet he hadn’t heard the sirens. Soon they were all surrounded by paramedics, given blankets and gently led over to be examined for injuries.

Nathan was already talking to a fire-man, gesturing wildly, “My dog is still in there,” he said. “She wouldn’t come out. Please.”

The fire man shook his head, “It’s too dangerous. We can’t risk a man for that, the flames are too out of control.”

Mary was in the back of an ambulance, Sophie sitting next to her on the bed. “I need you to find his heartbeat,” she said, “I haven’t felt him kick in a while.”

“First we need to check you out ma’am,” the young paramedic replied as he strapped a blood pressure cuff to her arm.

“No,” she said, pushing him away. “I need to know if he’s ok.”

Tobias had some treatment put on his arm and was told that he needed to go to the hospital right away. Daniel was made to wear an oxygen mask and sit still. “Severe carbon monoxide poisoning,” they had told him.

Jesse sat quietly in the snow, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He appeared to be injury free, but he wouldn’t talk to any of the paramedics. He just continued staring at the house as it burned.

Nathan refused to stay in the ambulance. He went as close to the house as he could stand, the heat radiating off of it in waves. He kept calling out for his dog, his voice hoarse from all of the yelling. They finally led him away, said he had to stand back, that it was unsafe. He broke down then, sobbing, but unable to turn away from the house where Faith still remained, trapped inside.

Jesse got up and moved to where Nathan was standing. He set his license plate down in the snow, then stood there with him, both of them staring at the flames. Wooden beams cracked and fell through. The two fire hoses were going at full stream, trying to quell the flames. Tobias soon came out to stand beside them. He placed his good hand on Jesse’s shoulder, thankful for his help in putting out the flames on his arm.

Then out of the quiet, Mary screamed. They could all hear the repeated shouts of no, the hushed voices of the paramedics trying to soothe her, the uncontrollable weeping. Suddenly she had left the ambulance, staggering with Sophie in her arms back towards the building, falling on

her knees in the now dirty snow, her body shaking with grief. “He was my son,” she cried, “my son.”

Daniel pulled off his oxygen mask and went to her, ignoring the instructions of the paramedics. He knelt down and put his arm around her, draping the fire blanket over the both of them. “I’m sorry,” he said, “so sorry.” She turned towards him and he held her as she cried.

A fireman approached the group of them, passing out housing vouchers. “These will give each of you two nights in a hotel. It’s not much, but that’s all we can do. Hopefully it will give you all a chance to rest at least. I’m sorry this happened.”

“What are we supposed to do now?” Daniel asked him.

“Well, I guess you start over,” he said. “That’s all you can do.” He nodded a goodbye, then walked back to the fire truck.

They remained there in silence, all five of them together. They watched as the sun rose, slowly illuminating the building’s remains. Soon they could distinguish between the charred wood and twisted metal, the piles of embers and debris.

The fire burned for a long while after they had all been taken to the hospital, dying only when there was nothing left for it to consume. The smoke continued for several hours more. Then, slowly at first, snowflakes began to fall. They sizzled as they landed against the smoldering ruins. Eventually, patches of white formed across the ground’s scorched surface, burying the blackened ashes.

## Afterward

Homelessness is a complex problem, one that is not easily defined or categorized. It does not simply describe the state of being without a home, because “home” can mean a variety of different things to different people. Is a home just a roof over one’s head? What if that roof is shared by ten other strangers? Or if the person staying there does not actually own or pay for the roof, but is sleeping on a friend’s couch? This lack of a clear definition adds to the confusion with which most people view those who are or who have been homeless.

My goal in writing this thesis is to help dissolve some of that confusion: not necessarily give a concrete picture of what homelessness is, but to demonstrate that the people who experience it come from a wide range of situations and backgrounds. If one has never really come into contact with someone who has lived in those circumstances, it may seem easy to classify all homeless people under the same generalized umbrella. Yet these stereotypes tend to be negative and often discourage people from interacting with or helping homeless individuals. Some of these assumptions are that without access to shelter are unemployed, are lazy, are drug or alcohol addicts, are criminals, or have chosen to be homeless in order to be free of bills, rent, and stress.

I want to expose these stereotypes and break them down. There is a lack of understanding about those who are homeless and those who are on or below the poverty line. This has created a divide between them and those who are financially stable. In the past, when I have been approached by a person who is visibly homeless and asking for food or money, I have felt awkward, and slightly scared. I wanted to write these stories and research homelessness so that I would no longer feel this way. My hope is that someone from a middle class background can read this collection and walk away from it with a new perspective. I want them to realize that people who are homeless are, no matter what else, still *people*: people who love and feel pain, who have wants and needs just like everyone else does.

Though this may seem like common sense, that people who have been or are currently homeless are still human beings, I believe that the line often gets blurred. When people start to view others as vagrants or worthless beings who take up space and misuse government tax money, it becomes hard to see the humanity hidden underneath. Through my stories, I strive to reveal this veiled facet in the hopes that true compassion and understanding may eventually close this gap between the homeless and the homed.

To accomplish this, I wanted to tell the stories of several different people who were experiencing homelessness. By having a number of characters, I would be able to explore some of the major causes of homelessness, as well as some of the common struggles homeless people encounter. I felt that the best format to do this in would be the short story; that way I could focus on each character individually. I did not want to focus solely on one person the whole time, but rather rotate in order to fully describe multiple situations.

Because the format I wanted to write in was the short story, I then had to decide whether to make it a short story cycle, or a short story collection. In a story cycle, each individual story

can be read and understood on its own. However, they are written with the intent that, when read together with the other stories, a greater understanding is achieved. A story collection focuses more on each story as a solitary work. They may be linked by a similar subject, but the experience of reading each separately is not changed or enhanced when they are read as a whole.

I wanted all of my characters unified by a central idea, so therefore chose to make it a short story cycle. In this case, they are all connected physically by a place: each of the homeless characters end up in the same abandoned building on the same night. But they are also all connected through the themes of entrapment and escape. Each character is trapped by something in either their past or present, and they are all trying to free themselves of it. The building eventually serves as a symbol of this entrapment when it catches on fire, limiting their possibilities for escape.

I also wanted to use the short story cycle format to emphasize the idea of community. The characters all come together in the end and are able to support and help one another. This happens in all socio-economic classes, and is yet another aspect of humanity that is not often associated with the homeless. I was impressed with the short story cycles *Uncle Tom's Children* by Richard Wright and *Bloodline* by Ernest Gaines. Both of these authors use a main theme to connect their stories. Neither have their characters physically come into contact with one another, but instead use the progression of stories to demonstrate a changing of perception and growth over time. Interestingly enough, both are about slavery and the oppression of black people, which I felt linked up strongly with my goal to demonstrate the prejudice against the homeless.

After discovering the format my thesis would take, and the main point I wanted to get across, I then had the challenge of figuring out how to write them. My Thesis Director instructed

me to read a variety of stories during my Independent Study Course with him in order to observe how different authors handle tone and voice within short fiction. This helped me decide how I wanted to handle each of these in my own writing. I also studied several short stories that were written to elicit social change, one of which being Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," which also addressed the gap between rich and poor.

When deciding on how to connect the different characters in my stories, I came across a newspaper article about eight homeless people who had died in a New Orleans fire. They had lit the fire in an abandoned warehouse to stay warm. While they were sleeping, the flames spread to the wooden floor, soon engulfing the entire building. The irony of these people making a fire in order to stay alive and then having that same fire become the source of their death really struck me. I wanted to explore the helplessness of that situation. I was also curious about what circumstances would have to occur for all of those people to end up there, all together, on the same night.

One of the many difficulties I encountered when doing research for this project is the fact that I am an outsider too, just like those who I hope to have as my audience. I wanted to write stories that accurately portrayed homeless individuals, not ones that just propagated my own personal stereotypes. I interned at Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless, where I was able to visit several resource providers in the area who cater specifically to the needs of homeless individuals. I talked with several homeless people, in one case getting the opportunity to lead a group therapy session at a transitional housing location specifically designed for substance abusers.

I did research on people who experience homelessness and discovered that certain subsets or conditions affect a large number of them. Measurements have been taken by various sources,



and estimated percentages are as follows: 40% of homeless men have served in the armed forces, 26% suffer from mental illness, 38% have an alcohol problem, 26% have problems with other drugs, and about 50% of all homeless women and children are fleeing from domestic violence situations (*National Coalition for the Homeless*).

After discovering these statistics, I decided that I wanted my stories to represent a main cross section of those issues and struggles. Therefore, I created characters that fell into these categories, including a cocaine addict, a paranoid schizophrenic, a victim of domestic violence, and someone with post traumatic stress disorder. I had to do independent research on each of these situations in order to more fully understand the resulting difficulties and complications. Most of this took place through online searches. I knew nothing about paranoid schizophrenia or post traumatic stress disorder, and so read about people who had lived with both, as well as accounts from their family members detailing the process of first realizing that there was a problem, and then seeking help for it.

I also researched drug addiction, specifically in regards to cocaine, including the average cost per dose and effects it has on people. Additionally, I spent a large amount of time looking up information about pregnancy and still births, and also stories about domestic violence, especially ones written by the victim of the abuse. All of this helped me to write more informed, non-judgmental stories that accurately portrayed these real-life occurrences. This includes violence against the homeless. At first I thought this was something that rarely happened, yet when I began looking up statistics, I discovered that there were one hundred and thirteen violent attacks against homeless individuals in 2010 within the United States. I also read several reports of teenagers beating, and in some cases killing, people on the streets, simply out of boredom. I

wanted to bring these facts to life in order to show people that this is the reality homeless people live in every day.

Homelessness appears to be such an oppressive, hopeless state, that I feel the belief in a higher power is one of the few things that can help restore some peace or hope of a future to those experiencing it. Therefore, I wanted to include God in my stories. I also thought this would be a great way to link my undergraduate career with my future career goal, which is to become a Methodist Pastor. I will be attending seminary in the fall at Duke University, and I liked the idea of connecting my belief in God with my passion for creative writing

The problem with combining these two things, however, was finding a way to write about God subtly and not be too heavy handed. I did not want anything to come across as sentimental in my writing, which meant no ray-of-sunshine, miraculous fix-all ending. Yet I still wanted to leave the reader with a sense of hope. Flannery O'Connor was a large influence on this aspect of my writing. She masterfully wove God and religion into her work, but did so in a way that allowed one to find Him only if they purposefully looked. I feel like this relates to my personal view of God as well, that He is all around us, but we must open our eyes and actively look for Him. I also used William Faulkner as a guide in including God discreetly, demonstrated through his novel *As I Lay Dying*.

It is difficult to associate something as terrible as poverty and homelessness with God though, especially in those instances where a person is made homeless through one bad decision, or as a result of circumstances beyond their control. Why would a loving and forgiving God want such an unfortunate thing to happen to anyone?

I still do not have an answer for this, except to say that I believe God does not actively cause bad things to happen in our lives. This resolution still left me struggling with how I could

include God into my stories. The book “Falling Upward” by Richard Rohr helped me solve some of this dilemma. He proposes a theology that one must experience a time of complete and total brokenness, a “falling,” in order to more fully understand and connect with God. Rohr believes that it is when one has reached this point of absolute zero that true spiritual growth occurs. It follows the theological idea that there must be death before there is life, and so one must experience a small “death” before he or she can fully realize life with God.

Taking this philosophy into account, I used the final burning of the building to represent the ultimate falling for each of the characters. They all lose an important part of themselves and experience something terrible in the disaster. However, though this would normally be a scene of hopelessness and devastation, God is there in the aftermath, seen in the snow that covers the building’s charred remains. They have all fallen, but out of the ashes they will rise back up and become new. Through God’s grace and infinite chances to start again, they will be able to rebuild their lives. They have been cleansed, in a sense, baptized by fire, and though God did not cause them to lose part of themselves, it is through this suffering that they will be able to grow.

The main objective of my collection is to help people from financially stable backgrounds better understand the reasons and complications surrounding those who are homeless. I want to clearly demonstrate that individuals who are homeless are just like everyone else. They are not the violent, dangerous, free-loading animals the media and society often makes them out to be. In some cases, they are victims themselves, made even more vulnerable because they do not have a door to lock against people who wish to do them harm. At the same time, I want to portray God, not in the devastation, but in the chance for a new life. He is there when the characters use one another as supports, he is there when the firefighters reach out to

offer aid, and he will be there in the weeks, months, and years it takes for this wound to heal and for the characters to gain strength from it.

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