

IV. Nature, Power

That next Wednesday, Stephen's English professor stood behind him, waiting, as he sat in a round-table discussion trying to answer her question. His eyes darted around the room for an answer that he couldn't find. His mind was distracted. The soft movement of her walking had brought the smell of soft white gardenias, the smell flowed over him, soft and sensual, and it tempted him to turn around and face her, smile at her. But he remained facing forward.

"I don't know."

"Think about it Stephen," her voice straining, annoyed. "Why would feminists hate the idea of Courtly Love? I mean why would women-lovers not like a system that portrayed women as the perfect idols of morality and virtue."

Looking down at the thin blue cover, Cretain de Troyes' Perceval, he flipped to the back cover and scanned over translator's notes that weren't helpful. The teacher walked away from him, back to her seat, clouding his mind thicker as he tried to rein his eyes from leering into his teacher's skirt when she sat down.

She was luring him away from his new outlook on life and women. That Sunday as he jogged home from Church in his blazer and loafers, he had decided to embrace the coldness, to accept it as a burden, and to take pleasure under its strain. It was masochistic but better than the teasing from God and women: the bait of warmth that always stung sharp as he eventually found its sharp hook. From now on he would suffer, self-reliant, unattached.

"Since Mr. Hills has nothing to offer, can anyone enlighten us with a reaction to the Feminist critique?"

Stephen's pants vibrated quietly. Discreetly, he pulled his cell phone out from his pocket and read the called ID, Marcy. He hadn't seen her since the night when he took her home. He had never called her and he had avoided the places she usually went, the sushi place, Ed's Bar. The whole time she had never called though. He thought she would have called, at least for her watch. But a sorority sister of hers had asked for it in a history

class of his. Still, if there was a stronger one between the two of them, he thought it was him. Smug in his new outlook, self-reliant, he pushed his cell phone back into the khaki pocket.

"I know. I know, Dr. Amberlyn." An outstretched hand jerked in the air like a catfish might lurch around against a boat bottom. The hand was connected to a frail pale wrist of a girl that wore self-made shirts with quips like: "Penis is gross." She was the girl in English class that didn't wear high heels because she thought the thin support was a phallic symbol of Man's attempt for dominance in society.

In the first half of the semester, she had tried to start a war between Stephen and herself. She had done her best to goad Stephen, provoke him, but Stephen hardly read and rarely made comments. Her eyes were sad and small and looked for approval behind a veil of confidence. Her body was thin, her hips narrow, and even though her arms, legs, clavicles were boney and hard, she screamed fragility.

"Yes Polly?"

"Well, because," she inhaled loudly and pushed her thin rimmed Buddy Holly clichéd glasses farther up her thin nose, savoring the moment. She spoke slowly, "when the chauvinist knights put her on the pedestal that they make

her less than human. They deny her the ability to be human, to have flaws. We become objects, material. That's why we hate knights. They objectify us."

Stephen was tired.

He had drunk enormously the night before, like every night since Sunday. Apparently, autonomy liked alcohol. His eyelids drooped heavy like they were being tugged on by fishing line with little lead balls pulling him and his eyes, down, downward into a sea of sleep.

Consciously fighting the sleep, his mouth began to speak without his thinking, "It doesn't make them not human, it just makes them not masculine. It recognizes the inherent differences of women and men. Men are brutish; Women are models of virtue, strong in character. They are the human form that man should aspire to reach."

He stopped and looked around. The class seemed interested, but he was out of thoughts, he was back to himself, the boy who had never read *Perceval*, the guy who knew nothing of Courtly Love.

He looked to his teacher for understanding. She would understand.

He met her eyes and her grin widened, almost like she had been caught, like she was embarrassed, like she had

been caught playing hopscotch on a sidewalk by another teacher.

Polly scoured and her hand shot up but Dr. Amberlyn stopped the impending dialogue, "Interesting point, Stephen. Class think about these gender issues for Friday and keep up with reading."

Twelve people filed out of the classroom, moving quickly. Stephen was almost out when the teacher's voice caught him, "Stephen hold back for a second." Polly snorted from the hallway before the door swung back shut.

"Your comment in class was really insightful. I'm glad to see you're finally reading something." Andrea Amberlyn was in her forties, old and motherly, but she retained genuine "hotness." It wasn't like she was attractive in an older woman sort of way, but that she still remained vivacious, sexual, arousing. Stephen had already noticed the wedding band around her finger, but he was not sure that the marriage was happy.

Standing nervous in front of her, like he was flirting with a new girl at the bar, he cursed himself from falling so fast, looking for the warmth only a few days since his decision. And with this teacher, married teacher, who could have children, and family dinners where the kids asked for the potatoes to be passed and everyone went in a

circle recounting their days. But maybe it was better to be attracted to this one, where he had no chance to make out with her. He could convince himself not to be teased by her warmth as long as he didn't look for warmth in her. This made sense to him.

"Too bad it's the first of its kind from you all semester." He flinched, chided like an unruly kid, he remembered his grandmother for the first time in months, but decided that this criticism had compassion behind it unlike the sterility of Rosie's lectures.

"Stephen, obviously you're a smart kid, otherwise you wouldn't be at this school. You didn't have to choose the class, so obviously you have some interest in it. I don't know why you seem to show such outward apathy towards the subject. Is it something I'm doing?"

Stephen held his head down, avoiding eye contact. His eyes, down, kept pulling themselves to her long, hosed legs. He knew what she was doing. She was placing the blame on herself to draw pity out of Stephen and make him admit he wasn't doing what he should. Education psychology.

"No. I'm sorry. I just have this job that keeps me up late." Lie. He drew his eyes up and looked directly at her while he said this. Inter-communication psychology.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that just means that you have to work extra hard. I had a job the whole time I was in college." Her disappointment sounded through his ears; sincere and true; Stephen squirmed under this unfamiliar pressure.

"Why don't you try and start reading this stuff? I think you would like it."

"Yes ma'am."

"You don't need to call me ma'am. Just try and read and if you have any questions, feel free to come by my office or drop me an email." She smiled as he left. Her mouth was large and her lips were thin but still red and feminine. The muscles in her arms were firm, holding a notebook, softly defined.

Later that night, Stephen sat in a cubicle in one of the small rooms of the library and read *Idylls of the King*. The room was dry and smelled musty and of old books and spilt coke. He was listening to her, not because of her sexuality, but because of her femininity, motherliness; she was how Stephen would draw up a picture of Woman. Pages into it, he felt taken and drawn like no other literature had ever done. These lives seemed right, like the lives of modernity were convoluted perversions of this way, like society had messed up when they tried to progress past this

stage. The maidens, and the chastity, and the duels and the ribbons of favor, and the chastity processed forward. They reappeared to him for the first time.

Reading on, Arthur returned back to his proper home. Stolen and raised in a foreign land, it made Stephen think about his childhood. Camellia was this same foreign land, and soon he would find his homecoming. He would be claiming in his rightful place soon.

The stories were a revelation, an epiphany as the pages turned faster and faster. He read as though he already knew. Properly ordered society: maybe a glass of wine and a kiss on the cheek before riding into battle: no fifths of bourbon or chasing girls to get them home and naked.

Beatrice's image came back to him. He remembered her face still vivid and bright, she would never love him, but like these stories told, she didn't need to, he only needed to love her and raise himself, battle because of her. This was the world that Beatrice must have disappeared into every time she left him, this is the world he wished he could disappear into and away from the now.

He would have read until the janitors came and turned off the lights, but from the dry air in the room, the cold air from the vents or maybe for some entirely different

reason, Stephen's nose began bleeding. He wiped the blood in wide streaks across the back of his hand. His nose had never bled before. Maybe it was from the smoke at the bars, accumulating over the years, and finally falling out onto his sleeve. He pinched his nose tight with a tissue and read on, carried away to flowing ceaseless fields drawn long in the sun and crowded stands high and vociferous, but still dignified. Now, he remembered the once uninteresting concourse in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the center display of a train of knights. Last year he had seen this and yawned, metal on plaster horses. But now, in his mind's eye, these mailed men were brought to life, the horses fleshed, galloping. The words of Tennyson shined their armor, long faded by time, and sharpened their lances, dulled by passivity.

He tried to read on, but the bleeding wouldn't stop, and so barely before midnight, Stephen left for his apartment. Long branched pine trees lined the sidewalks home. The concrete, cracked and bumpy, reminded him of bicycling over the long neighborhood sidewalks as a boy.

And then he remembered the day, a few weeks before he had left Camellia that had soured the romance of Beatrice until that night when he understood again her beauty. That afternoon, the sun coming directly from the west, in front

of him, he had seen her as a shadow, but the image was recognized immediately even after nine years of blank paper. A taller replica of the girl from the parking lot, she clutched the leash of a small yappy dog: both unaware of Stephen. The girl was in red, a red dress, but with the same held hair. The hair portrayed a girl still, naive but unencumbered, while her body and dress flowed full and womanly.

A glow came down from yellow broad streetlamps, making shadows on the sidewalk in front of her and between them. The lights, humming loudly, priming themselves for the long night, broke the silence that Stephen had felt, startling him. Against the afternoon sun, the yellow light's glow blurred her image, washed her details out, but also seemed to make her glow. She was like an illustrated angel from his Grandmother's old thick bible that sat six inches thick on the foyer table. Her face wasn't separated from the dusk, but melted into its background forming the image into a Dutch landscape. His heart was leaping again in the same way as the first time he had seen her. This was only the second time he had ever felt the piercing exactness of true love.

How many times he had wished for her. In the long nights when the air conditioner cranked through the frigid

nights, when the image of his mother and the preacher replayed through his puberty, destroying his thoughts and vilifying his sexuality, forever intertwining sex and grit and shame. He'd wished for her then to make it different, to purify his thoughts. She was the only one who could, the only one who could spread through him and vanquish the puckered mouth, heaving jowl of the reverend forever.

And now, after all this anticipation, she skipped, unaware and unencumbered alongside a small dog trailing in comically small strides. It was both funny and very sad for Stephen. He braced himself.

"I couldn't see you through the sun." Her unexpected comment registered as a foreign language, untranslatable to Stephen's racing mind. He could not form a response in his mind. They had stopped together like acquaintances eager to catch up on old times. He clawed to hope, hoping to hold secure the possibility that she remembered him like he remembered her, that she had spent nights and days thinking, fantasizing. The possibility appeared above his head, tenuous and insecure in his grips, but real enough that he began to be filled with a contentment unknown to him before that second.

Finally, he began, timidly but gaining confidence as his words flowed forward, "I don't think we know each

other, well I know you, sort of, but I don't think you know me. I mean actually, you may. I hope you do cause see I've been looking for you and it would be great if you knew who I was, but I don't think you do."

Squinting, stepping back, "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't think that I know you. To be honest, I was trying to cover for not recognizing you with that sun comment I made."

"Oh." Great. Now he looked both inarticulate and like a psycho.

"Did you say you knew me?"

"Oh. Well, no. Right. I thought that you were someone else also, someone from, a classmate." Cue Stephen pretending to squint. "Also, I mean, because the sun from behind me was making you all shadowy and stuff." Shadowy and stuff? Nine years and he had just Cyranno de Bergerac-ed her with "making you all shadowy and stuff." An image came to him, immediately: him, old, in Adult diapers, rocking in a ratty laz-y-boy whispering, "shadowy and stuff, shadowy and stuff"...

"Well, okay, then. I hope you find whoever you were expecting."

The girl passed out of the light and was taken away by the newly arrived night and blackness.

Stephen cried, wept, in the glow of the streetlamps. All this time and all the nights and the loneliness and the coldness and the waiting for her and not looking at other girls, and then, and then, it had turned "shadowy and stuff." He pulled the crumbled paper, his poem to her, from his wallet in the back pocket of his pants. Meekly, he held it out in the direction she had led her dog. She did not turn around; he knew she wouldn't. However the dog had looked back in pity, somehow picking up on the struggles of love. It was probably a male, or sympathetic female. The paper dropped to the sidewalk and Stephen walked on, secure in leaving Camellia. She had been his only hesitation, but now without her, the smell of the paper mill and the decay was choking.

That night was nearly three years ago, and since then he had harbored a throbbing feeling of regret but resignation. But after the night's reading, he reunderstood Beatrice. Like he had already decided as a boy, he knew now that he did not need for her to love him. It was enough for her to exist, to allow him to love her even if from afar. Her rejection, her distance didn't change how he should feel for her. She was a model for him, an image for him, both virtue and beauty, to be emulated and relished.

Walking into his apartment, he was brought back quickly to modernity, away from the Camelot, finding Ben and some girl from his Math class making out on the couch. Their books were spread across the coffee table, half hidden by Ben's shirt.

"Stephen. My man. Working hard or hardly working?" Ben asked still hunched over the girl on the narrow couch, his back muscles strong and solid, bracing his body over her. The rest of their clothes were on, apparently this was only a short break between chapters.

"Not working as hard as you apparently," Stephen half-smiled, half-grimaced at his friend's separation from knighthood. He tried not to think that he would have done the same just days or maybe even hours before. In his room, he wrote his English professor an email, and when he was done, he looked back over the email, proud of the lucid and intelligent composition of the email. Having pushed her sexuality far back into a closet, he barely heard his own musings over the possibility, if he worked real hard, smiled, came by her office, of making out with her by the end of the semester.

Focus.

Chastity.

Though he only read a few works, he knew that sex destroyed the virtue of the women and the men, broke apart the pedestal.

Still in his chair, he leaned back and plugged his ears to help him think.

This is it. This is what he had been looking for. This was his alternative to religion. His excuse for not having sex, maybe even an, until then unconscious, reason for his resistance. Yes. It was clear, puncturing the skin would break the model, and so there was no reason to worry over the possibility.

Can't sully the image.

Stephen waited for the professor's response. She did not respond. He checked his mailbox every thirty minutes for the next two days. She sent nothing.

He was upset. He moped all Friday morning. Sulking he entered the class, determined not to look at her, but when he walked into class, he was met with a wide grin from her, teeth white, defined lips. He smiled back.

Were her teeth bleached? There could be no way. His model would never need synthetic covers. He bet she didn't need to shave her legs either. No hair grew, especially on her toes. Toe hair was by far the most in-effeminate thing possible on a person. Once, he had left a girl's bed,

taken a cab home, because in the dim light of her nightstand lamp, he had seen forgotten toe hair on her smooth leg. There was no way a single hair had ever sprouted from Dr. Amberlyn's perfect toes.

After they had all sat down, while he still thought about toe hair, she started, "Stephen, why don't you open up the discussion?" Excited, he had gained courage against the thin nosed, bleach haired Polly waiting in the corner, in coil, ready to respond to whatever he said. Her eyes were as small as ever and layered thicker than he remembered with a film of sad bravado.

"Perceval only learns by the women that he encounters. They are his teachers of virtue and mores. The knights around him don't have the same power. I think that anyone that reads anything besides reverence is silly and argumentative. I mean, I wish people wanted to emulate me; I wouldn't mind people gaining strength from me. But that's not my role, I am not a part of the fairer sex."

Polly's hand had been up since the word only. "Sounds like what a man would say. If the knights liked women so much, why didn't they ever let them out of the castle?"

Bitch. Stephen didn't know so he slid back down in his chair, someone else spoke up in defense of the knights and lances and maiden's favor. Dr. Amberlyn walked slowly,

lightly around the room and seemed to glide as the table hid her legs from view. She wore a black skirt and crème blouse; the ivory buttons were buttoned high, hiding, but hinting at her femininity. He fought his imagination to fantasize about what was underneath.

Pure, White, Chaste.

When class let out, Stephen loitered, slowly putting his books in his bag. The smell of Gardenias blooming behind, made him smile. She was behind him. His confidence left quickly, and his cheeks flushed, the blood draining to an unknown pool, betraying his nervousness. He gathered himself. Be intriguing. Be witty. Be meaningful. You are a boy of potential to be shaped to a man, he told himself.

Turning around, "Great Lecture today, ma'...Dr. Amberlyn."

"Thanks. And thank you for you email Stephen. I'm sorry that I didn't email you back; home life isn't great. In the future, I'll try and do better about replying. You know, if you're interested in Courtly Love, I can recommend some more books. This is probably the last we will see of it for the rest of the semester."

"Yes ma'am." Dammit. "Don't worry about the email. Actually you know, if you had some more books that would be great."

"Sure. Just drop me a line." She left him gathering his things. He watched her as she glided out; her blonde hair was thin with age but still strong. A panty line showed through her pants, but he understood that something must be wrong with the material...or something.

Walking through the halls, he was excited and eager to read. He planned to go to the library all night again and look up on his own some Arthurian books to read. Ben and his friends would be angry that he was ditching them on a Friday night, but he had to, this was more important now.

A strong draft drove through from one of the opposite hallways. It chilled him and he shivered in a spasm. He stopped, zipped his fleece, and stuck his hands deep into its pockets. The blast had been so unexpected and overwhelming, it felt like the cold hit not his skin but deep, into and through his organs.

The blooms of gardenias he held in his mind wilted and died. Stephen felt lonelier and colder than he had in months. He didn't know what had happened, but outside, walking in the tall pines, the Nashville autumn chilled him colder. Polly's beady eyes stared at him somewhere in the

dusk, through the distance. The professor's panty line, bold and lumpy, blocked his way to the library. And so instead of going forward, he took a left, zipped his fleece up to his neck, and called Marcy for the first time in weeks. The arteries of his heart seemed cold and hollow. He could feel an ache in the tubes, his blood seemed to be resting in a pool, leaving him cold.

"Why would you call?" No greeting.

"It's good to hear from you too." He wanted to try his boyish charm before any desperate begging. He knew it might have to come, he knew without it he would lie in bed, teeth chattering for nights until the feminine came, held close next to him in comfort and outstretched arms and in the smallness of comfort.

"I don't need this. I don't want this." Her voice echoed through whatever hall she was walking through. Stephen wanted to say that he didn't want it either, that he had thought this weakness had been conquered, that he hoped this would be the last time he called on her.

He promised again the lies that she always believed. She said she might come over later that night, "but only to talk."

Knocking once and entering, she came over that night. She was dressed in high heels and with her hair flicked out

in that "messy-chic" look that grated upon Stephen when he saw it on freshman girls and chubby, older women, copying their daughters, trying to reclaim some youth they never experienced.

Stephen had pulled his comforter from his room into the living room and was watching Sportcenter with Ben, drinking bourbon and coke.

"Why is it so hot in here?" she said. Rolling his eyes, Stephen stood up to face her.

"And what are you wearing?" In Umbros and a sorority T-shirt, he felt bad for not changing or showering. "Um, I thought I told you we weren't going to stay here?" She asked.

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"Oh wait, did you just want to stay here and hook up all night. Aww. Are you lonely tonight Stephen? I can't believe you."

Ben snuck out of the room, keeping his head down like an ostrich that hides his head believing if he can't see the lion, the lion can't see him. Stephen watched him as he left, wishing he could disappear as well.

"I'm sorry. I mean I can wear this to a coffee shop, right? Where do you want to go Marcy?" Wow, he hated her

name. But in a soft maroon shirt, her breasts were large, warm, enticing, eclipsing his annoyance with her.

"I don't care. Whatever. Maybe I should just go."

"Look. I don't know why you want to go out. What's the difference? We've always been able to have fun without other people. Just stay here for a while. We can watch Family Guy reruns. That'll be fun huh?" He cocked his head to the side, raised his eyebrows, pitifully. "It'll be fun."

She sat down. She saw something in Stephen that even Stephen didn't see. Or at least that's what she told herself, that's what legitimized her to herself.

"I'm sorry I'm not dressed. We can go out if you want. Just give me a minute. It's just so cold outside. I thought it would be better in the apartment. You're not dressed right."

Her pursed lips loosened. She untangled her crossed arms, and slid down, comfortably, into the couch.

He smiled. It was always amazing to him how little women expected from men; how greatly they wanted just a little bit of sentimentality. She inched closer to him, but the smell of hamburgers from her dinner hung off of her and kept Stephen fighting against himself to ask her to leave. He wished that he could smell a little perfume,

some light scent, or rather nothing at all, anything but this oily dense cloud.

They watched TV and he held her hand and stole kisses from her cheek, while she playfully refused to give him her lips. Flirtatious teenagers in innocence, but Stephen knew this was all to prime her. Ready her. And, though he might regret it later, later when the rush had died and the only thing that lingered was her in his athletic shorts and t-shirt, he could think of nothing else but getting her to his bed.

"I'm tired, sweetie." Stephen said, getting up from the couch carrying her hand as he led her to his room. She did not resist; dutifully she followed. Part of him wished she would fight back, tell him he was a prick and a coward. But she didn't. She said nothing.

There in the bedroom he fell though her and lost himself in the warmth of a body and closed his eyes, not thinking of the person but of the heat and firmness and the body that gave him pleasure.

Replete with her in his arms, filled, he ignored the thought of her leaving the next morning. He stayed in the moment. They lay quietly. He hadn't tried to break the skin, she hadn't asked. She was slow and caring. She was beginning to understand his fragility. She rubbed his hair

and crooked her face to his, eyes shut, for a long time. He ventured miles away from her, cantering on a horse, in front of maidens and men, in a field of pageantry and ribbons and flags. He wondered why the world had left him earlier: why the need of Marcy had overcome him, taken him into submission. In his boyishness he lay like a child with his mother.

During the early morning, not even four yet, she rustled and bent down over the side of his bed to put on his t-shirt from the floor. Waking up, he rose, naked in the darkness, and walked to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, coming back into the bedroom, he treaded as walking on thin branches that might break from his weight. He had hoped that Marcy would already be back asleep, that the room would be dark and hiding. But she was up, reading the introduction to *Vita Nuova*, a book Dr. Amberlynn had recommended to Stephen in an email.

"What took so long in there?" she asked without looking up. He froze from her question: embarrassed and unsure. He stood waiting for her to look up, look up at him, naked and exposed by the faint reading lamp.

Marcy gasped; her hand drew up to her mouth.

Calming her, sighing in embarrassment, "It's okay. I just nicked myself."

A loud chuckle, almost a guffaw escaped from her. He had known once her fears were allayed the laughter would come. Stephen looked through Marcy as he held a thick crumple of toilet paper below his belly button. Small spots of blood were splattered across the paper like a lazy Pollack painting.

"What were you doing? What would you be doing with anything sharp down there? Were you cutting something? Do guys trim down there?" She was working out the scene before her, throwing out questions, trying to suppress her laughter.

"I don't think this is funny. I'm bleeding for Christ's sake."

"Why were you doing it at three in the morning?" Her laughter continued, loud and harsh: it was the same type of cackle that gave those home video shows that feature men taking a softball, football, etc. to the genitalia. He hated when she made used to make him watch that. It made him gag when she laughed at the clips. His quasi-Puritanism bled through unevenly, but it was strong in its opinions on lowbrow humor and primetime television.

"I don't know. I saw a stray hair on my chest, so I took out the scissors, and then I saw another one down

there. Do we have to talk about this now? I know. It was stupid."

For a long time he had stayed in the bathroom, but the bleeding wouldn't stop and he had no other choice but to go back and face her: face the husk of that he had cared for an hour earlier. While he was blotting, he had rolodexed through his most embarrassing moments: standing in the girl's line on the first day of kindergarten, garnering him the nickname Stephanie for the rest of his lower school education, puking on the Jackson Mall Santa Claus's beard as the camera flashed, preserving the memory. This was up there.

"Do we need to go the hospital?" She asked half seriously, straining, but trying to be a caring girlfriend. He saw in the concern of her eyes that she really did care about him and this irritated him now.

"No. Honestly. Let's just forget about it."

"Aw. My fuzzy wuzzy has no hair, my fuzzy wuzzy is now bare," she sat up in bed and held out her arms for him. The voice grated Stephen's nerves and he looked around the room, for a reason, for an excuse, to get her the hell out of his room.

Nothing spoke except her, "Come back to bed, Fuzzy."

Stephen placed himself on the bed, careful not to stain his white comforter. He put two pillows behind him, and sitting up, he dabbed his wound and tried to think his mind into making the bleeding stop.

Stop. Hold. Control.

No response.

Sometimes he wondered what a person could control. It couldn't control hair growth, fingernail growth, or heartbeat. He had tried and failed with all these already. All these things seemed to have their own little mind, or maybe more properly, bigger mind that kept the organs churning despite Stephen. Trying to ignore her and the bleeding, he wondered along what evolutionary limbs things were made into involuntary actions. He wondered what it was that didn't trust things to keep themselves alive.

"Let me see." She rubbed close to him, her skin felt thick and medicinal against him, therapeutic, too warm, like a heating pad, from lying under the comforter.

"No. Why?" He did not want her to see, not at all. 'Trauma brings couples closer,' his red-haired sociology teacher had lectured. He barely remembered the class, but he remembered that sentence, and the teacher's fat lips waving disconnected, like two thick jump ropes waving loosely back and forth.

As soon as the blood began to run, he had cursed himself, not because of the nick but because he knew she would have to find out. He didn't want the intimacy she offered, something greater waited for him in the coming waters: Dr. Amberlyn, chastity. Marcy? She tried, she was naïve, didn't understand; she wouldn't even know how to step upon a pedestal; she didn't have nearly the virtue, nearly the social graces: none of the necessary grace.

"Let me see it now, or I'll be sure to never see it again." She laughed at her own cleverness.

"It'll be okay." He responded coldly, not amused.

"Whatever. You don't want my help. Fine. Whatever Stephen. Let's just go to sleep."

"Are you staying the night?" The words stung even to Stephen, but he had no choice, he needed her out, away from him and his skin.

There was a second of silence, like the way sometimes the pin from a grenade is pulled, thrown, and then there is a second of recognition, cognizance, before it blows shrapnel and men deep into the trench walls.

One one-thousand.

"Fuck you, Stephen Hills." The shrapnel shot through at Stephen as she jumped up, gathered her things in one fell movement, and, crying, swore, "If you ever fucking

call me again...You prick. I hope your prick gets infected and falls off. I do. I swear to God I do." He had never heard her curse, and he was impressed at how straight and controlled the words flew. He thought it might be inappropriate to compliment her though, so he stayed quiet. This was his first good idea in a while. The pang of her emotions did hurt him, he wasn't completely numb to it now, but honestly, what had she expect from him? She should remember precedent better.

"Bastard," she screamed as she slammed the door to his apartment.

After she left, guilt came to him, but not from her, it was from Dr. Amberlyn. What would she think of his behavior? Being so selfish, breaking chastity, using a girl and not virtue to warm him. He promised himself never to dip so low; he promised himself chivalry: to reclaim in reality the yellowed pages of used books and library copies of these legends. When the bleeding stopped, he flushed the toilet paper, and wrote the professor an email requesting a meeting. To him, it had just the right amount of self-confidence without coming off pretentious.

V. Felix Culpa

i. Enter: Francesco

The next morning, Stephen sauntered all the way up to the third floor where Dr. Amberlyn's office sat, but as he neared the door he hesitated. On the threshold, he stopped and listened to her rustling papers. She had responded an hour after he had emailed her, around five o'clock in the morning. Had she been up that late or had she gotten up that early? Probably gotten up early. It seemed more appropriate.

The rustling of papers stopped.

"Is there someone out there?"

Dammit, look like stalker. "Yes, ma'am. I was just looking at the hallways, well, in the hallways, at the posters on the walls." Stop talking. Don't be nervous. Act like a knight, not an idiot.

"Okay, well then, do you want to come in the office?"

Jeez. He was still in the hallway, talking to her from around a corner. "Yes," he muttered, walking in.

"Have a seat. What did you want to talk about?" The buttons on her blouse were buttoned to her neck. Again. But this time the collar was tight, the highest button tugging from his hole. The whole thing made her head unattached from her body. They seemed to be two distinct things. Still, Stephen conceded, both her body and her head were independently attractive.

"I guess, I just wanted some more to read, and maybe we could start talking sometimes about the stuff that I read. I think it would help a lot in learning to have someone to direct me."

"Like a Courtly model of your very own." She laughed at a light comment, but Stephen, caught off guard, was silent. How much did she know, he asked himself. Was it too thinly veiled that he was trying to set her up as a model? Should he explain himself? Tell her about his mother and the preacher, or the young nine year old, or the coldness that climbed over him at unexpected times? He would wait.

"Ha ha. Not quite. I mean I don't even have a horse right?" What did that mean? From the blank look on the teacher's face, she did not know either. Stephen could be

corny if not altogether socially awkward. "I really just wanted some books to read, I'm sorry if it came out wrong."

"Stephen, it's a joke. I'm just saying. I'm a married woman, the unattainable teacher. You're a young man looking for his way in the world. I give you books on virtue like a woman would give her knight descriptions of virtue. I just think it's interesting."

He wanted her to say these things, to have a courtly model, but it was uncomfortable at the same time. When she spoke, he never knew whether she was flirting with him or acting motherly. The wide curves of her body gave this ambiguity, she was both sexual and motherly. Sometimes they are the same things, the larger breasts the breasts the more sexual, the more motherly.

"Do you want to be my model?" A grin of levity took away any pointedness from his question. Now it was her turn to interpret what he said.

"We'll see. You'll have to do something to win my favor." She smiled and re-crossed her legs. "Hold on a second for me." She rolled her eyes at the caller ID on her cell phone, opening it and cupping it in her pale hand.

"Yes..."

Short pause.

"I told you I was leaving early."

Long pause.

"I can't do this right now. I'm with a student...I can't believe you would ask that, what difference does it make? I'm hanging up now."

"Sorry about that. Different day, same problem. Make sure you really think about the person you marry. Don't marry them because they are a cute stock broker and your mother has been harassing you to marry since you were twelve."

Stephen: Blank stare.

"It was a joke. I must be off today."

"It was funny." Stephen made a note to laugh at her next joke instead of merely stating its humorous qualities.

"Have you read Capellanus? That's where you should really start if you want to be a true believer. It's where the whole canon really begins. The Art of Courtly Love." She pulled from her shelves a blue bound thin book. "You can borrow this one, but you'll probably want to buy your own copy. It won't take very long to read it, just tell me whenever you finish and we can talk about it for as long as you want."

"Great. I think I've heard of this." Lie. He rose from his chair and took the treatise.

"You know some of this material doesn't translate very well because of their views on sex. I think that's one of the most interesting parts. The idea of chastity as a given. Can you imagine any modern man subscribing to much less assuming a chaste life?"

"But not a woman?" Stephen wanted to raise his hand for the chastity role, but he resisted, remembering that his current state stemmed from fear and not virtue.

"Well that's another interesting part. A translation into modernity is difficult because culture's perception of the more sexual creature has really changed. Virgil called women 'raging furnaces of impure lust.' But I think that today it would be easier to believe that a woman would have less problems with chastity than men. Many marriages exist in almost chaste relationships, at least for some of the partners." The last sentence hung out of place, she had delivered it with a confiding tone that made it much too personal not to be awkward Stephen.

"Some men could deal with the chastity thing, for the right woman I think," he replied.

"Well there is a subtle difference in being a chaste man and withholding sexual desire so that you can have sex with a woman at a later date."

"Ha. Yes, I suppose. Possibly too subtle for a twenty year old, but I think that I can see where you are coming from."

"Okay, well let me get ready for class. I will talk to you later. Just email or come by."

As Stephen rose again, he heard her phone vibrating against the desk, she rolled her eyes to herself, and as he excused himself, closing the door, he heard, "This better be important. I really don't feel like doing this all day..."

Deep in the catacombs of the carrousel in the old thick library, Capellanus gave a lecture of purity and virtue to a very eager student. In solitude, the words echoed around the enclosed cubicle and bombarded him from all directions. Capellanus described a religion of feminine worship and his words formed a powerful sermon. Like a skillful preacher, he spoke in conversational wisdom and powerful threats. The writing was a beautiful combination of instruction and laudation on women. He described them with a care that Stephen had early only in reference to the Eucharist or other Christian sacraments. A woman stood as a stepping-stone. She was a virtue to admire, but also, as importantly, a tool to mould oneself.

Stephen lost himself in a dark whirling confusion of mysticism and oils and brick and stone, and before him appeared a modern group of people with polyester clothing and pleated khaki pants. Sitting before him, they pointed and prodded him in judgment. Draped in white, in a flowing garment that covered him but did not form to his body. Instead, it revealed his head from atop amorphous fluidity.

A center elder spoke. But the man spoke so low, so deep, that Stephen couldn't understand the words at first. But then, the words, sounds, began to repeat themselves. The man began to chant, and soon a hum from the rest grew from his single voice. "Why are you a virgin?" The noise gained energy from an unfamiliar kineticsism of repetition. The words built energy, gathered from all the voices, fervent in their questioning. They then released all the pent emotion on the end word, heaving the sound to Stephen, and demanding him to reply to their questioning.

Surrounded in a mystic setting, the cavern of varnish and ornate carvings strengthened Stephen's resolve. He had tradition supporting him. He calmed himself, and looked at them all, squarely, carefully in the eye. They represented a modernity of androgynous solipsism. Behind him he could feel the movement of Aristotle, Capellanus, and their school. He leaned in a little closer to the audience, not

like he was trying to tell a friendly story, but like he was trying to savor the moment. He was confident in the truth that he had now to answer them.

"My reasons have come before me. They have existed without me, and they will exist when I am no longer a rustling leaf, floating within this temporal sphere. This setting supports my reasoning: the pageantry and the beauty of the classical woman. To understand women, one must understand them as a rose, careful to avoid their thorns, but even more careful to avoid staining or wilting their petals with harsh words or action. Such a thing cannot be undone. Rather, once they are sullied, a pockmark will forever remain as a shameful reminder of their fallen grace. Truly, to understand my reasoning, one must understand the duty for men to embrace the purity of the feminine reality. To sully the mind, sexually, would be to stain the virtue of the woman. A man could not lay with any woman, without lowering the value of all women." He exhaled slowly in a restful satisfaction at his mastery in rhetoric. He felt even Dante would have reveled in Stephen's speech. Stephen had wanted to work in the word Uti, art directed for the right purpose, but he hadn't been able to find a proper place. Smugness rested as a crown

upon Stephen as the courtly student waited for a reply from the crowd.

But the people stayed hushed.

Stephen told himself that their silence had to be an acceptance, a clear recognition of guilt that kept their gapes transfixed upon Stephen and the Giants behind him, on whose shoulders he had stood, and opened their eyes to a new reality.

But just as that resolution solidified in Stephen's head, the laughter began. In great buckets they laughed, and mocked him as they recanted in shrill voices his "pageantry." Stephen had been so certain for a second that it would work: that they would understand like he understood, that they might bow and lay prostrate before him, moved by the lux and veritas of his words. And if not, atleast they would nod in recognition of his view, a simple head nod and quick exit. He had been wrong, laughably wrong. They left his mind still rolling, modernity unconvinced.

The last one that closed the door in his mind shouted back, "Right, women are pure. They don't even believe that of themselves."

Back in the library, his forehead rested on the low stacks of books covering the desk: Ovid's *Art of Love*,

Spenser's *Fairie Queen*, Lewis' *Allegory of Love*, the Romances of Cretian de Troyes'. Despite the failed catechism, these authors still seemed to be holding him, embracing him in the same way that random girls in the past had fulfilled him for fleeting moments. They warmed his core and then the whole emotion seemed to congeal, creating a cocoon. But this new shield felt more comfortable, more permanent than any girl ever had. It didn't cover him with an itch, a desire to crack against the cover. No, this one made him strong against his soupy sappy emotions.

In the next class, Dr. Amberlyn walked in late with red, purple eyes. It seemed the eyes had been crying for so long they stained her lids in a deep fluid purple, the red was the sadness and the purple was the pain that mixed together in pitiable union. She did not excuse herself and instead charged into Milton, dictating notes instead of provoking the usual discussion. After class, Stephen stayed behind as she gathered her things and fielded questions.

"I had hoped that you would wait for everyone and stay after to talk Stephen." Surprised by her appreciation, he mumbled a "sure." It wasn't Courtly for her to admit any need of him, but he thought there must be some secret reason for her pretending to require him.

"Want to walk me back to my office? We can talk about what you've read so far if you want."

"Sure," knowing that the stroll would require him to miss his next class.

The sidewalk displayed a puppet show of dancing clowns disguised as leaves, shadows from the oaks and magnolias on the campus whirling in the wind. They played unaware while Dr. Amberlyn lumbered under the great weight that she bore so openly, or possibly the lumbering was from her heels that were high, unstable, forcing her to wobble along. Stephen hoped her mannerisms were from the weight, but he imagined it was probably a little of both.

"You know the Knights, they sometimes fail. Most of the time they fail their first time, they make the wrong decision. Lancelot obviously, Perceval, the Green Knight, they all failed their virtue. Most of the time they fail with women. The chastity thing is just too hard. I don't think I told you, but that's what I'm writing my next book about. This idea of the implication of the author's constructing these failed men. Were they trying to say something larger or was this just some interesting plot twist?"

"Well what do you think?" Too late he understood that her question had been rhetorical.

"I'm an English professor, of course I think that they were trying to say something larger. My hypothesis runs a parallel between the Church and this model of love. I think it was their answer to original sin or at least some recognition of the fallibility of man. The church hated Courtly Love because they were both trying to establish virtue. And for every tenant of the Church, Courtly Love had an answer of their own."

Stephen already knew this from Lewis's *Allegory of Love*, but he decided to stay quiet and just listen. The conversation took her mind from whatever had been pounding against it in steady waves for the last week.

They reached her office and she pulled the door closed after letting Stephen in. She sat on one of the two cloth chairs in front of her desk and Stephen hesitatingly sat in the other one. She scooted and angled her chair towards his while his back stiffened and the rest of his body coiled tight and unflinching.

Around her office hung mini-posters from medieval conferences and Knightly presentations. Behind her desk hung a heavily framed rolling pasture scene that seemed to suggest the knights of Camelot had just ridden from view or were preparing to gallop into the scene, just about to come from below the hill. The wandering beauty in the hues of

fading green to white to yellow to crimson in the dusk of the print helped defend the Knights in Stephen's mind as she continued recounting the failures of so many knights. He didn't want to hear these things; he wanted the virtue that Capellanus promised. Why was she telling him these things? Suddenly she shifted her monologue, abruptly she tapped his forearm with her index finger.

A burst of current ran from her body to his in loud femininity.

Crashing back from the fields of the pastoral scene, Stephen felt the touch lingering as a soft impression on the folds of his fleece. Touch, for the first time. It spread from his arm to the genesis of his arteries and then back out, carrying the news through the spider web of his veins in an erratic confusion of lust and boyish respect.

"Stephen. I know I should keep my private life away, but it's been so overwhelming lately and you've been so supportive. You just seem so genuine, and that's such a departure from the usual people you meet. You may not have known it, but you've been really helpful for me in this rough time. It nice just to have someone to talk to, you know. It doesn't really matter what we talk about, just so long as I get this interaction. Things I think are getting

better at home. My husband and I have been working on things."

Think, think, he thought to himself, be sympathetic, say something sympathetic. No. He didn't want to give support to her. Supporter was not supposed to be his role's description. But still he felt for her and wanted to care for her; he wanted to say something that was comforting and confirming. Go:

"Well, I'm glad Dr. Amberlyn. I didn't really know, but I'm glad to help you like you've been helping me. If there's anything that you need, I'd help you in anyway I could."

"It's good to hear a voice say that. Burton keeps me on such a tight leash, and I moved away from my family to take this job. And well, there just aren't many people that can tell me those words."

Her age melted down in front of him as she opened up, but she herself was also falling in front of him. She was becoming weak and dependent. Her pointed classroom lectures and squared posture portrayed her as so much more of an independent figure. The wordless raw emotion he remembered from the frailty of his mother as she shifted awkwardly and naked in the conference room so many years ago swelled in his throat now.

ii. Enter: Paolo

That night when Stephen came home from studying, Ben and Stephen's friends lay slumped on the couch watching football and drinking bourbon. They stopped laughing when he entered and, synchronized, turned their eyes onto the television and ignored him.

"What's going on guys?" Loud and laughing Stephen started, but the enthusiasm echoed fake even to Stephen's ears.

"Nothing. How was studying? Monotone and slurred, Ben did not feel obligated to reciprocate the fakeness of the deserter that used to drink with them.

"You read all the books in the library yet?" Johnny added in, not expecting or wanting a response.

"Did you bang that teacher yet?" Ben asked half-interestedly. Stephen winced. In the beginning, Stephen

had told Ben about Dr. Amberlyn, how she was hot. They had joked about the ultimate boy fantasy. But after the first few weeks, after Stephen and her had really begun to talk, have personal conversations, he had stopped bragging about her. The situation had become too real.

"Let me guess, you're not going out tonight?" Johnnie asked.

No. Probably not. I want to guys, I just can't." Clearer and clearer, the memories from Camellia began to replay themselves in Nashville: the solitude, the communication failure, the disappointment from his family had changed to disappoint from his friends. The gulf between himself and now this new world broadened as he studied more and withdrew himself. And, like before, now as he looked on them as an outsider, he pitied them. And they pitied him.

"You didn't bury anything in here and not tell me, did you Ben?" Stephen asked.

No response.

"Can't you smell that guys? It's been bad for a while, I can't figure out what it is." Stephen insisted.

"Stephen, I don't know. I don't smell anything." In feigned concern, sarcasm dripping through the thin veil, Ben turned to his friends. "Guys, do you smell anything?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, I smell something. What is that?" Johnny sniffed. Is that pussy?"

"Yeah, actually, I think I do smell it." Mark said. "It seems to be coming from over there, behind the couch. Wow, it must be a really big one to smell that bad."

"Stephen, I'll be sure to get to the store tomorrow and get some needle and thread. That way we can just sew it up. Should end the problem."

They laughed half at their crudeness and half at their wit.

Stephen sighed, rolled his eyes through their loud laughter and followed the bare hallway to his room. On his computer, there was 1 NEW EMAIL. From: "Professor Amberlyn", Subject: (None), Received: 20 December 2004 11:05p.m.. His finger hesitated above the mouse. He opened the window and skimmed the sloppy strung sentence:

I was hoping you were serious about being there for me. Things just got bad here. I wanted to see if you could come over, just for a little while to talk. My address is 3345 Tulip Avenue. I know this seems weird, but I really need someone to talk to about things. If you get this, just come, don't worry about the time, I'll be up.

Sitting back, it was simple what he should do. Don't go. Startlingly clear in a mind that had been overgrown

for so long. It seemed the grungy men, who had been expected for so long, had finally come suddenly with their van and hoes and shovels. In one swift swoop they had picked out the weeds, trimmed the shrubs, and moved the grass, leaving a tidy, manicured mind. Resolute, he stood and walked to the bathroom to brush his teeth before bed.

Inappropriate. Nothing good could happen. She was a woman frail and unsettled. As a courtly knight, his duty was to protect his love, even if he was protecting her from herself.

In the bathroom, he bent down to turn on the faucet, but instead of hovering over a sink, he found himself bending into the shower stall. Absentmindedly, he had walked toward the wrong one. Accident. Just let go of the knob and turn back around. Brush your teeth and go to sleep. He tried to turn, but his hand seemed stuck. Clutching the controls, his eyes were glazed, unblinking, focused on the knob. Fight it, fight the urge to shower, shower and then go to Dr. Amberlyn's. Divided between pushing further clockwise and pulling his hand off, his fingers held tense. Raised veins spread through his wrist and across the top of his hand.

Minutes passed while Stephen studied the knob, unblinking: a cold Plexiglas ocular ball, a dilated pupil

of metal tubing disappearing into thick fiberglass, unblinking. Obliquely, it stared towards him, judging him, before it spun clockwise from a determined push.

Rationally, he knew not to undress. He undressed. Sensibly, he knew not to step into the shower. He stepped. Logically, he knew not to pull out a white polo and athletic shorts from the dresser and slip on flip-flops. Pull. Slip.

Futilely, he thought the flip-flops and the athletic shorts made him look unconcerned. Maybe if she thought he really expected just to "talk", she would hold back. I could have put on slacks, and cologne, and brown leather shoes, he thought to himself. He grabbed a frayed Vanderbilt hat on his closet doorknob. 'Piece de Resistance.' He smiled at the genius of his subtlety. A hat on his head? That's not sexy, that meant he was expecting to "talk." Even better, when he took it off inside her house, his hair would be matted thick against his head, holding tight like a helmet, clearly unattractive for even the most ardent of Mrs. Robinson's.

In another part of his head, two figures solidified, constituting themselves from Stephen's vague thoughts. Beyond the skirmishes of clothing or showers, they met on the center field of his newly manicured lawn. Stephen hung

above the ground, as each held so tight to opposite sides that he hovered. Desire, the want of her as a model of virtue, had firm ground, pulling slow and solid. Doubt, hung to Stephen, slipping on itself, and scraped fierce against the wall, looking for leverage, a crevice to dig even his fingers into.

'You can rationalize this in your head.'

Nodding and moving closer to the door, 'Yes, quite easily I can rationalize it in my heard,' though Stephen wasn't sure of a rationale to use.

Desire spoke with a wide toothy grin, with cheeks high, red, and chubby. His eyes twinkled with a light that reminded Stephen of the Santa Claus in children's books with golden warming stars drawn into his eyes.

'If courtly love is true, then you must be willing to trust your model. Think back. It's like Vacation Bible School. Remember when they would take you out to the woods that one day out of the week and you would fight the mosquitoes off and follow a pimply older boy. Then he would take you to that tall skinny log and make you climb. One step. Two steps. Three steps. Your friends would gather around the bottom to wait for your Trust Fall. 'Turn your back away' the teenager shouts. You do, but slowly: it's shaky on the top. Feel that? But as nervous

and unsure as you are, you believe. Crossed arms, closed eyes. Fall. Fall right into their little outstretched hands. Enveloped into a new trust. You trusted them; they caught you. You are proven to them; they are proven to you. This is your new Trust Fall.'

With one of the softer memories of childhood, one of the few moments of trust, Desire had nearly gathered Stephen into his arms and moved over the threshold. Doubt slipping in and clinging lower and looser, yelled out as desire pulled Stephen further away, 'There is a difference though, she and you aren't camp friends. You aren't twelve. You've made her Woman and Reconstituted Mother and Femininity. You've been trusting her as a child would his mother; she's been leading you like a mother would a mother.'

The words came strong though he continued to slosh and fall. From thin lips on a tired face, the voice strengthened for its last attempt, continuing through a gray beard covering sallow cheeks. 'You are following her aimlessly. But where is she leading you? I know. I can see your path. Soon it will be too familiar. Your course will soon find you wandering through familiar corridors. You want a memory? Remember the wooden corridors? Down the main hall and to the left, the second door on the

right. The same cracked door. Don't make the same mistake looking behind that door. Though this time the naked body will be Dr. Amberlyn's, it will reveal the same. This same scene. Your mothers. Do you really want to find her again, for the second time, laid twice against a table, fallen twice in your blurred vision? And where will the thumping come from this time? Who will be the man that replaces the preacher?" Nausea swept over Stephen and in a rebuke against the sadness, even though it may have been the truth, he pushed himself out of the room and beyond Doubt's voice. For a second, the questions burrowed deep, hauntingly, far into Stephen's pit. If he were to see her fall, it would be his doing, his body; it would be himself at the desk, with his mother.

But Desire held him now and they walked connected. However the friendly Santa Claus had changed now that they were in the hallway. He had grown six inches, his shoulders had broadened, and his face had thinned. His friendliness was hardened into sternness, and the stars had disappeared behind a strong black pupil. Like a King to a knight, he now addressed Stephen.

The king's words came from a wide mouth, from a face with cheeks squared but blushed. 'You are embarking on a quest, my young knight, a quest of faith. Be honored. You

must trust her to see what you cannot see; to understand what you cannot understand. Is that not why you chose her as your Courtly Lover to begin with? She has asked you for faith. Think how happy she will be when she knows your trust flows fast and true to her. Now before me, before this court, promise to give yourself in faith to her: to lay your sword and shield at her feet and open your breast in faith that she will not pierce it.'

Excitement replaced the uneasiness. It was time to put his work, his research, to the test, a quest of faith. Marching through the living room, there was the silence before the battle. The boys had left to a bar or apartment or something. As he walked out of the apartment, he could see the two parallel lines of men. Trumpeters were in the front. The King and court on the right, on the left, the poets and writers watched the boy move through the lines. No knights spoke for final hints. No writers spoke for final tenants. The maidens were in their chambers; none had given him their favor or ring or pearls. His maiden was waiting for him at the end of his quest. As he walked beneath the stairs down from the apartment, he could still see them held in place, silent.

Into the night, he shouted far down the path before him, "Yes, Queen. This humble Knight accepts your mighty

quest. Though my return is uncertain, honor in your eyes weighs worthier than movement in my breast."

An elderly couple walking towards him, rushed quickly off the sidewalk and over the road and to the opposite side of the street, avoiding his eye contact. Outside of a late-night diner, some Graduate Students chuckled, "Nothing like a drunk Freshman."

Ignoring them, he marched on, keeping his eyes straight before him. He was blind to his ridiculousness, assured and confident in his delusion. He had turned his back on rationalizing the situation and was happy to go forward fast and resolute.

Full of bravado, he strode forward, past the bars where he had wasted so many nights, drinking, talking commonly.

He heard familiar voices, "Stephen!" "Where are you going?"

"Are you high? His eyes make him look like he's high."

He ignored them. Peasants, he quipped to himself. He wore his determination and allegiance like a heavy mail that weighed real and tangible on his back. He prayed in silence as he walked that the cover would protect him in his battle. As he expected, no one answered him, but he marched on anyways. The cold weather froze his resolve and

brought his hope snuggled into his breast; his need for God had been replaced, filled by this woman he walked toward, by woman in general. Blistering, blustering wind whipped his hands and face. With his chin held high, his face burned and was scalded red from the cold.

Moving from the streets, the woods and leaves and beaten paths across the campus courtyards created a more realistic backdrop for his battle. He had been called by Virtue to honor and uphold her name in a foreign land. Unsure of his tasks, beyond the test of faith to his woman, he would not ask about the rest of the trials until she told him. Imagining his fleece as a sort of cloak of humility, he refused to question his model again. He was no one to ask or doubt her motives; his mind operated on a plain lower than hers, unable to distinguish or see her purposes.

Emerging from the woods, his destination was unveiled to him all at once, coming directly upon it, 3345 Tulip Avenue. The house loomed on the street, on a large plot, surrounded by small houses with tiny, sparsely landscaped, maybe a boxwood haphazard here and there.

There was no moat in front of 3345, but almost as symbolic, the lawn and first story were shrouded from the street by a high iron-gate and a thick line of Dogwoods

backing the gate. Her husband was a lawyer, or businessman, or something. Stephen couldn't remember. It was something that had him working downtown and making enough money to buy the Japanese Wilting Palms that lined the walkway to the Southern Mansion.

Windows spread full across the front, prefaced by a proper southern porch with hanging plants and ceiling fans. The house stood in a majesty that was the heads side of the Southern lifestyle. It was this south that all the southerners wanted to remember, that all the southerners claimed would be the whole of the south if it wasn't for the Yankees burning everything good and proper. The opposite side of this coin was Stephen's hometown, and the plant, and the runoff into the Mississippi River. These were the two pictures of southern culture that people picked arbitrarily from: the Antebellum south that remained in pockets, scattered and proud, and the poor, uncultured acres of country towns that spread across the Bible belt. The Two worlds lived side by side, static, unaware of the rest of America or their rising middle class.

Stephen hesitated outside, his confidence wavering as the air blew softer now behind his back. Instead of walking up the stairs, he stood in front of the house, forgetting for a moment his mission, imagining a black

woman with thick arms and skin that creased in the folds near the elbow. She was a stereotype with even a piece of muslin fabric wrapped tight around her head. She smiled though, showing off huge, bright teeth, and poured bourbon into the tumblers of two men. They wore Seersucker's suits and talked about the tobacco fields or Sally's debutante ball. They had skin that was tan but not weathered. Their hair was white and brushed back from their foreheads. The color of their wide moustaches matched their hair in distinguished fashion.

"Lord, Calvin, she was a pretty sight. All done up in her formal dress. I told Mary Ann not to tell me how much it cost. Women and their clothing, but if it keeps them out of our hair, it's not worth stirring up."

"I swear, Nathaniel, same thing with Sarah Ann. I see those tailors coming up in their fancy carriages, and I just go out to the fields. Spending all the money we work so hard to get."

Snapping back, Stephen walked up the last few steps, trying carefully not to trip over the ivy chasing itself across the staircase. He stumbled anyways and wished he had an iron mask hinged upon his hat. He needed some stronger defense. Now would be the time to lower the creaking metal and ready himself for a blow. Climbing up

the three stairs, he could only tug at the worn bill of his cap.

iii. A Reading Session

The door opened before he had a chance to reach for the gilded but flaking knocker. "I'm so glad that you came. I knew you would." She wore a black t-shirt, v-neck, thick material and plain blue jeans. Anytime that Stephen saw professors in regular clothes, it was awkward, unsettling for some reason. It was always weird for him to see teachers eating, or at a bar, or dressed in anything but a suit or button down shirt. It was as though Stephen only they were alive, animate, when they were teaching him.

The casualness of her outfit bothered him. He had thought she would be more dressed up, worn something that showed she was expecting him.

She rested her hands and head on the edge of the door as they both hesitated, separated by the glass of a screen door. The eyes that had been purplish-red were now colored

purple-black, bleeding across her chin like pools of ink invading paper. They were still wet from crying, but the tears had stopped. Pain had grown over sadness, like a moss spread across a moist river stone.

"Yeah. Sure. I am too." How was he supposed to act? Should he bow before her, humble in her presence? Should he stride forward, confident as a knight? Take her? Hold her? Or maybe he should rush in looking for the men who done this to his cherished, demanding a duel.

He wanted to ask her, but knew it was too late. This was the test and you're not allowed to ask the teacher questions after the test has begun. Really, it wouldn't have mattered if he had asked. She didn't know what she wanted: only that she needed someone there, now, at that moment with her. Stephen had been the only one that she knew would come.

She smiled through puffed lips and drew the door into the house, creating a current that swept him and the outside air in too. From the porch he couldn't see into the house, but inside it was huge and old. She or the husband must have had family money. This house was too much for only one generation's wealth.

The front foyer with fourteen-foot ceilings held a long chandelier and a large portrait of Dr. Amberlyn

sitting, hands in her lap, and a thick old man, maybe ten years older than the woman, with a single hand on her shoulder, staring vacantly through the painting and beyond Stephen. From the light of two small lamps, the chandelier sent refracted jewels into the peerless void of the rest of the hollow house. Following her down an exposed brick hall, they passed intricate iron rod workings scattered across the way. They hung in attempt at flippancy that looked too haphazard to actually be haphazard. They looked expensive though, and old. How old? Centuries maybe? Maybe even from Britain? They certainly could have been early, early Anglo-Saxon. Stephen couldn't tell.

The professor didn't look back as they walked. He watched the swing of her hips through the loose jeans. It was sexual but in a common kind of way. She looked like other girls, women who swayed their hips, consciously exaggerating their steps when they know boys are watching.

The hall led into an expansive formal room, large and dark, ornamented with large buffets and over-stuffed leather couches.

Without looking back, she said, "Take a seat, Do you want a drink?" She picked up her caramel-colored tumbler and nested it deep into her palms. He stood, not knowing in which Italian seat to sit.

"Sure," he said, giving the answer he thought she wanted, even though the thought of liquor in his nervous stomach made him gag inwardly.

Filling her drink, but forgetting his, still facing away from him, she teetered, swaying on the balls of her feet. "It probably was not very smart to email you. But, I just did not know where to turn. He left me today. Just left, out of that huge French door out there. Did you know that door came from a Castle outside of Marseilles?

Stephen shook his head. He had not known this. He wondered if he really should be expected to know the origins of heavy wooden doors. He wasn't sure.

She continued without waiting for an answer, "I really thought everything was getting better. It was. But he just did not have the patience. He did not want it enough." Her delivery tried for casualness, but in the large room it echoed rehearsed and stilted to Stephen. Who doesn't use contraction in conversation he wanted to know.

Stephen knew so little of the "him" that she talked about. They had never really talked about him; Stephen didn't want to talk about him. It was okay to think of her as married, but not to actually think of her husband. He crammed his hands into pockets, his knuckles rubbed against the felt and lint of the bottoms searching to hide

themselves as deep as they could. He rocked in place on the heels of his sneakers. He began to rationalize: who knows, maybe her husband had been right? maybe they had been hopeless? what does she want me to do?

Is there a grail that I can find for you?

Is there a monster that needs slaying?

He didn't want to be her friend, comforter; he was a man, virtuous and stoic. If she expected him to wipe away the tears, she had confused him with one of her chambermaids.

Stephen asserted himself in his mind, but he held himself outwardly quiet, now eyeing the bar, and wanting a drink to ease him.

"I think that he may have been cheating on me." She continued after another long pull, "Lately, it's like he didn't even see me. He's been coming home late, leaving early. Even before when we would fight for long hours and stay upset for weeks at a time, we would lull into affection, tired from screaming, and release our tension over each other, on each other. But lately, there is this apathy. When we pass in the halls, he moves aside to avoid even the incidental touch of our shoulders."

This was too much. She was talking now, vaguely perhaps, but still, of sex and passion and lust. The lust

between two spouses, lust that led to sex and away from what Stephen consciously wanted. He wanted that drink now, hard and fast, down his throat, but up to his brain. The bourbon would calm him, direct him.

Before Stephen, this woman was like a pane of struck glass, covered with tiny fractures that hung together in breathless peril. In the quiet, he could hear it crackling under its own weight. Soon the friction holding the pane would slip and bring itself crashing against an unconscious floor.

He came back, jerked by a sudden silence. The Professor's back was now arched forward, toward him, and she was staring at him, searching close for something in Stephen to materialize, maybe some glue for the brittle pieces of her pane. But she found nothing. She should have seen how this boy was wrong, had been wrong the whole time for what she wanted: the validation. But she had never seen it, and didn't see it now. She saw nothing but a body that was there when all the others had gone away.

The teacher stood as a false idol to Stephen. She had given him armor and told him that it would serve him. But now as he looked at her, vulnerable and drunk, he heard a different kind of threat, this time coming directly from her, a siren's call, slow and sweet. He needed plugs for

his ears and twine for his hands. He wandered who would protect him for Dido's unending call and get him out of Carthage?

Stephen was confusing his myths. He was confused in general. Should he take her? Allow her to take him? Retain some respect somehow?

He planned to just keep eye contact with her, and calmly just back out of the door and down the steps past the gate.

But before he could move, from long across the living room, she began to stride toward him. Coming fast until she held herself six inches from his chest. Her chicory breath was strong over the gardenia fragrance. One hand, crooked at the elbow, held her drink. The other, he couldn't see, but felt as it glided across the mesh of his athletic shorts.

She would take him, whether he wanted it or not. She needed this from someone, and he was would have to be the one. There were no other alternatives.

"You think I'm sexy don't you Stephen? I see your eyes dart when I cross my legs. You think I'm sexy don't you?"

Stephen was helpless. He wasn't strong enough to fight her or the urges of his body. He was failing. His

mind faltered in its reasoning that had been so clearly and devastatingly wrong. He felt the warmth flood into him, the temporal one that would come and fade, that had come and faded from so many other girls.

"Dr. Amberlyn. I don't think," he wavered, stammered, continuing, "This is what we should be doing. I mean I don't think this is very virtuous? Maybe I should go?"

He muttered weakly and ineffectually. Her hand stayed on his shorts. She dropped the tumbler in her other hand, intentionally, onto the rug beneath their feet. The bourbon splashed against his shins and the coldness soaked into his socks. Free, the hand, reaching around, drew him closer, pulling him from the small of his back.

"It doesn't feel like you want to leave Stephen. It's okay. I like it. I think you're sexy Stephen, a sexy young man. Have you ever been with a woman Stephen? Wouldn't you like to?"

"What about cou-courtly love?" His voice cracked like the teenager that he was acting like. He began to get angry. Act like an adult he told himself. This should be his fantasy: a teacher, no strings attached. This used to be his fantasy. And now here, this was the perfect chance to end the catechisms, and the doubts, to finally grow up.

"Stop it Stephen. That's enough of that. We all have lust and desire. Right now I am lusting for you." She pushed her leg in between his legs and he felt the bottom of her breasts heavy against his chest. She continued, "Humans are sexual. We're weak. We need it. Most of us even like it. I bet you would."

He stared at the framing between the ceiling and the wall. He couldn't look at her. It was nice, intricate molding, maybe mahogany.

Frustrated, she jerked away from him and went back to the bar and filled another drink. He looked around. They were in a middle room, surrounded on all sides by openings, like an indoor courtyard. He also noticed for the first time that none of the other rooms had furniture. They were all empty without even moving boxes or duct tape scattered from a recent move. Stephen's heart sank into his stomach and he was overcome with a nauseating sense as he wondered how long ago the husband had really left. How much of what she was telling him were lies?

"You want Courtly Love?" Her voice came back, motherly and feminine, but in a voice that Stephen no longer trusted. "Let me show you something. Let me read something to you. Huh? You like to read. Let's read?" She nearly ran to the bookcase and pulled a thin green book

from the shelf. "The Book of Lancelot of the Lake. It's by Galeotto. This is the story of how Lancelot was beset by love. Come over here. Stop looking around. We're alone Stephen and no one is going to find us."

He sat next to her and from the book they read Lancelot confess his love for Guinevere, and the secret kiss that they stole in the Queen's chambers. As she read her voice changed again from the caring one, the showing one. She began to breath heavy and often. Stephen didn't understand why at first, but then began to speculate that someone, at some point, must have told her that it was sexy. Maybe another boy like him? Maybe this was her pattern?

She was trying to sound raspy and sexy but to Stephen it sounded forced and old. It reminded him of the middle-aged woman who walked around the mall in Abercrombie and Fitch clothes, showing their belly button droopily resting against the low-rise jeans.

He waited for her to stop reading, cool again, the warmth had receded back, and there was a break for him to leave, to get up and walk away from the pane before it broke.

"...and in that moment of longing, they embraced."

Crash.

As she finished the final word, enunciating strongly on the final -ed, she had heaved the book towards the fireplace. But the book ricocheted off the fire screen and dropped onto the marble surrounding. The flames scattered, dispersed, scared for a moment, but then gathered back together, strong, blazing.

"See. It's okay. Even the greatest knight and the greatest queen failed. Don't you want to be like these knights? I thought they were your heroes." Her head bobbed like a fishing line being pulled into thick water. Stephen was scared now, not for his virtue, but for himself. She had been clever, fooling him, and now he feared what more she could have planned for them.

Her tone had turned patronizing as she chuckled at the beliefs that she had pretended to hold with Stephen. From above the scene, they were both pathetic, lost, looking to each other, finding nothing. But at least Stephen was looking beyond the now. She was holding this moment as the only moment for her. This was the only possibility she had to prove herself.

She tried to keep the buoy above water, focusing. Her bitterness spread unevenly and came forth and flowed back as her drunkenness and reason drifted. She continued, "Isn't this what you want? A woman? A real woman that

teaches you all the little things that your mother didn't." Her voice was merciless and Stephen felt like a dog having his face buried into his own pile of shit. She was untethered now, flying wherever her head remembered, spilling out, cracking.

They were both cracking now as tears fall down Stephen's face: he was being turned on by his first real mother, the only one to know him, the only one who had heard his story. It was like a vindictive mother and a cruel girlfriend trying to smother him with his own words.

She continued, "Well here I am." Her voices now shrill, too loud for her vocal cords. "Be a fucking man for once. Stop crying and fuck me. Do it now. Do you hear me?"

But Stephen was sobbing so heavy he couldn't hear her words. He could only feel her kisses begin, sloppily against his cheeks and the wetness of her mouth leaving his cheeks cold and damp.

"Sssh..." she tried to shush him, pressing her pointer finger hard against her own lips. The ends scrunched drunkenly into her face. Her lipstick smeared across her chin and upper lip.

She was like a clown, red framing wide her lips and fresh mascara, wet from Stephen's tears, spread across her

cheeks. He stood up suddenly, unbalancing her as she crouched over him, and watched her fall in slow motion onto a finely combed Persian rug. Her face planted against the intricate design, holding her neck craned for an instant. He watched the whole uncomfortable contorting of her body falling and landing and while she fell he knew that more than a woman was falling. He was watching a pane shattering itself onto the floor. A pane that was more than just her. His model that had forged his mail and given him a morality and a sense of virtue had been a fake. It lay crumpled. Courtly Love lay crumpled. Femininity lay crumpled. His way was lost again, like after seeing the preacher, like every time after the warmth faded away from the revolving girls. But this time there was no one to follow anymore. There was no one at all. Beatrice was as far from Stephen's mind as the reaches of Camelot from China. The professor had destroyed his hope. He was in despair.

So he turned away fully from the woman. He walked in his worn running shoes beyond the porch and the seersucker suits, back along the path, and through the fence and trees that shrouded the house. The courtyard seemed cluttered and messy. He walked into the street, not proud or confidant, but as a broken, vengeful dog. He wanted

revenge, to bring them down like he had been brought down. There was a nothingness in his life that wanted to be spread into others. And now Stephen pledged himself to the nothingness, not because he wanted to believe in nothingness, like an enthusiastic atheist, but because he had hurt so bad to believe in a something and he had been abandoned by everything but the void that now wrapped him.

VI. The Steps Down

Stephen wandered the alleys of 21st street in the Vanderbilt district. It was only one o' clock and the crowds still milled around the bars, drunk, sober, prowling, preying. He walked stripped of any constructions that he had once believed in.

"Aquinas was wrong. Freedom is not believing, its being unattached from all." He shouted down the street and he waited for people to turn and applaud in like mind. A few did turn, and several laughed, but no one shouted back in agreement. None seemed to understand.

Frustrated at revolting against a virtue that no one valued anyway, he entered the familiar wood-paneled bar.

He had a cold, irrational desire to deconstruct himself in the same way that his post-modern, post-colonial English professors deconstructed society. Like a damaged building, he sought to completely level his beliefs. Throw

them all away and live stripped. He was hurtling forward separated from his normal self, pushed by the way that the professor had fallen. He hurt so badly, and he wanted sympathy but he knew there was no one to give him a warm, understanding hug. And so he wanted empathy, it was a foreign feeling, but he wanted someone to hurt like he hurt. He wanted that company. He knew it was wrong, and he hurt with these feelings, but he couldn't find an alternative.

"Hey Stephen." A rotund girl droopily stood in his way to the bar. Stephen had been scanning the packed bar for a familiar face and almost ran over the short roadblock. He hesitated for a second and she stared back at him in apparent expectation of some response. He was sure that he had never seen this person's face before.

"Hey." Unimpressed, he walked past her. "Give me a glass of vodka."

"I don't think we sell just glasses," the middle-aged bartender responded.

"Well, then, can I have like three shots and an empty glass?"

"Tough day at the office?" The bartender smirked and poured three shots into a tumbler.

Stephen smirked back, handing him his credit card. "Keep the tab open." Even though the bar was full, he could find no one he recognized. He wondered where his roommates and old friends were and inhaled the cheap vodka scent. God he hated vodka.

"So what did you think about that test? It sure was tough huh?" The same girl from before had saddled herself onto a barstool next to Stephen. He took three large gulps to chug the drink.

"Yeah. I guess." He responded.

She kept her stare on him in expectation of more. Sitting without the sway or speech of a drunk girl, he wondered why she kept talking to him. It almost seemed as though she knew about his pain and that she was reaching out to comfort him. Maybe she was. Maybe, because she had felt pain before, she could see the marks on his face.

And so he turned to her, and looked into her to see caring, but the bar was too dark. Instead, he played the class game with her, "This is kind of embarrassing, I mean I recognize your face, but what test are you talking about?"

"Oh." She paused surprised. "We are in International Relations with Baier. I sit in the front and you sit over on the right you know?"

"Right." He was in the class, but still he could not place this girl. He had never seen her face or maybe he had and just glossed over its fatty dimples and pony-tailed curly hair. Her pale skin was blotchy in the bar light. Feeling pity for her, he looked at her closely like he was recognizing her from their class. Glancing down he involuntarily recoiled at her nubbed elbow. It was crooked at the elbow and had the beginning of an ulna and radius or whatever bone, but around the protrusion was a flapped skin that seemed to be stuffed back into her arm. He didn't know why he felt so bad noticing this. This had not been the reason that he had never noticed her.

She saw him look and she cut her eyes away. This was obviously a reoccurring problem for her. She was used to the hesitant glance and the following awkward silence. She had felt the hurt that he felt now, but it was different. Stephen thought the feelings would be soothing on him, but instead he felt that her pain, whatever it was, didn't scrape deep enough. Whatever depression she had known, she still could not empathize with him.

And so Stephen, gripped and controlled by misogyny and masochism, continued, almost separate from himself, "You know, I can't believe that I've never noticed you before. How could I never notice such a good-looking girl? Can you

forgive me?" He smiled the boyish smile that he had learned in three years of college, and then he waited.

"Oh don't be silly. I don't believe you." She drew her hand to the fringe of her low-cut shirt. She fingered the edge and brought his eyes down to it. In the same light that made her face look blotchy, her breasts were lit lumpy like poorly skinned potatoes. In the never failing belief of compliment, she took his words as sincere flattery. Her legs moved nervously with childish excitement. She reminded him of how he had reacted with the professor, with naïve faith, in the classroom and the office and the home.

For a moment then, he drew himself back. He didn't want to hurt this girl. He wasn't a hateful person. She was innocent and unknowing. She had no culpability and he tried to break himself free from her and his trance on revenge. He tried to walk away and let the girl live on because he knew she was the type that could fall farthest, longest, loudest.

He tried to walk, but his left leg was asleep from the bar stool, and its numbness made his leg too heavy to move. It was a ridiculous picture, Stephen trying to shake his leg out, this girl perplexed at his gyrations. And so he sat back down and was finally captured for good by a

foreign but unrelenting desire to break the pane hard against his own floor. It would not let him go. It consumed his mind like Courtly love or the search for warmth had consumed him. In the way that he had seen women fall on their own against the floor and shatter into pieces shooting irretrievable across the floor like a bucket of paint dropped against a sidewalk, he now wished to cause the same pain. In the same way that Dr. Amberlyn had crushed him against the floor, he wanted to break this pitiable girl. To fully prove the deconstruction of himself he resolved to break open this girl that stood before him.

Unknowingly, she had wandered over to a once sympathetic boy now transfixed on tearing down anything before him. He was a bad person, but he felt helpless, tension between hardened revenge, nihilistic apathy, and immobile sympathy. The hardened revenge wins this fight every time.

"No really I'm serious. Do you come to this bar often?" He wished she would hear his lame lines and realize how this would end. He wished she would just walk away.

"Well, I mean. I've been here a couple of times." She stumbled trying to validate the reasons that she didn't go to the popular college bar.

He knew that her answer would be "a couple of time." In reality, he thought, it was probably her first time. She was probably in a sorority that she had gotten into because she was a legacy and the actives felt pity for her. She probably stayed in her dorm most of the time, pretending to study, but watching Real World or (insert meaningless reality television show). As she watched TV she would sneak miniature Mars Bars into her mouth while her roommates were getting ready to go out.

"We usually go to like frat houses and stuff. Are you in a fraternity?" Her as a type, as a walking stereotype, grated against his mind and his desire to break her began to shout through his mind. She retained this false sense of self-confidence and it aggravated Stephen into impatient action.

"I can't really hear you sweetie. Why don't we go somewhere that isn't quite as loud?"

Stephen couldn't believe he had just tried that line. It was a pathetic line, he was ashamed, but he held out hope that it would be so transparent that she would walk away.

She didn't.

She nodded yes and smiled and walked out of the bar with him, past her roommates that she winked towards.

"Where do you want to go?" He asked nonchalantly, folding his fingers into her hand.

"Oh I don't care. We can go wherever. Do you remember my name?"

Crap. She had never told him. He was sure that he would have remembered.

"Umm...I'm not sure if you ever told me. I guess I just kind of got carried away by the whole thing. I'm sorry." He clasped his hand tighter to hers and rubbed his thumb against the back of her hand.

"It's Nancy. My name is Nancy." The name fit her pretentiousness. He had amalgamated all of his hatred into this one person that he drew close to in the coldness of the winter. She was less than a person now. Instead she stood for the fragility of feminine. She was pathetic walking with a guy that didn't even know her name. Selling herself for a chance at validation from a nameless body. Where did she think they were going? In her delusion did she think that they might go to a coffee shop and talk about her life?

"Oh really? Born in Delaware huh. Home of the Potomac. That's so interesting. Tell me more. What is the name of your pet? What makes you smile when it is raining outside?"

She would flip her hair and wait for people she knew to walk in and see her with a man, as she sucked her Caramel Frappuccino (extra whip cream). That would show them. She was appreciated she would say. She was cared for.

Where was your man?

"I like that name. You look like a Nancy. It fits well." He told her with a smile and a blanket of sincerity. She might be pathetic, but he also know, recognized, that in his hatred of her there was a hatred of himself. He was pathetic for letting women hurt him so much. He was pathetic to need this revenge. And yet he was taking out his hatred of himself on this object. He was ashamed, but did not turn around, did not let go of her hand.

"Maybe I should just go home?" There you go. She had seen through him. She was leaving. She was better than this. Good for her.

"Yeah. Sure." Here he should have let it go, but he didn't, he couldn't let it go. He needed the empathy of

another person. Revenge took over, "I mean I understand. Where do you live? Let me walk you home Nancy. What is your major?"

"Okay. Well I live in my sorority house. It's not too far away from here. I mean we don't have to go home if you don't want to right now."

"No. It would probably be the right thing to do. We can do something another night. What do you think? Why don't you go ahead and give me your phone number?"

She gave him the number and they smiled kindly whenever their eyes met as they walked.

"Here we are. Thanks so much for walking me all the way here."

"Sure. I don't want to be forward Nancy, but do you think maybe we could sit and just talk for a while. I mean, wherever, on the porch or inside. Whichever. I really want to learn more about you." Waiting for her reaction, he worried that he was laying it on too thick.

But she smiled and flicked her hair and led him inside to their cafeteria hall. Amidst the composites of girls from years past with straight long hair and shiny pearls draped across their white skin, Stephen fed Nancy's vulnerable ego. They talked for hours about her little

anecdotal life: where she had lived, how many sisters and brothers she had.

While she talked Stephen tried to decide whether he was more masochistic or misogynistic. He was seducing the pitiable creature, plotting to leave her, and break her ego. But, in contrast, he was having to sit through this painful conversation, the fake chuckles, and the tedious recounting. He was having to fight with himself about what kind of man he truly would become. It was like she had been saving up to tell her story and she finally had a voice that was willing to listen. And she let it flow like a dam that gave way with a crack formed from Stephen' feigned interest.

"And then we moved to Tucson because my Dad got a better job. It was like the old petroleum engineering job, but it was also different cause he was the boss of more people. And I like Tucson, cause it was hot, but it was a different kind of hot..."

And he responded like he was a child coming down the stairs on Christmas morning. There were "aahs..." and "wow" and a constant wide toothed grin. Part of him began to feel pleasure for making her happy. She did seem to be growing, her confidence rising. In this moment, paradoxically he was helping her, building her, but this

goodness would only last in the moment. Soon she would regret the thing that was making her so happy now. But he knew that there was a bigger goal.

Then he questioned himself: Shouldn't he have gotten a pretty girl, the prettiest girl he could find and then break her? No. That wouldn't have been a true picture of the feminine. And feminine was fragile. And he wanted the girl that was most fragile. And she sat before him with long twirls of curly blonde hair. He imagined her on the phone tomorrow with her "Big Sis" or her mother.

"I met the best guy last night. He's so cute and we stayed up all night and just talked. He wasn't like the other boys I've met."

"Oh, Nancy. I'm so happy for you. I told you, if you're just patient, the good guys are out there. They rise to the top eventually."

"I know. I'm so excited. I gotta go get ready, he said that we were going to go ice skating this afternoon. Bye"

"Bye sweetie. Have fun. Stay safe."

And as he looked at her, he could see her falling fast. She wanted to fall for him and he was going to let her. Fall right into his arms...or where they used to be. This would be a new Trust Fall.

Stephen was hurried away by the anticipation and he blocked out his normal sentimentality: the old sentimentality that would have pitied this girl, placated her at least.

"And then that's why I decided to come her, and since my mom was in this sorority, I pledged this, and I could have gotten in anyways. I didn't get in just because I was a legacy. My Big Sis told me so."

"Of course, sweetie."

"And now I'm the house manager of the entire thing. That's exciting, huh? Do you know what that means? That means I have a key to the whole place, every room."

"Wow. Congratulations. I'm sure you do a great job."

She looked around the empty room as if she was making sure there was no one eavesdropping. "Do you wanna go somewhere in the house? Is there like anyplace that you would want to see? We could go in the chapter room. No one is allowed in there. Or we could go in the kitchen and fix something. They have drinks in there too. What do you think? I might have some bourbon upstairs?"

"Sure. Yeah, whatever sweetie, all that sounds like it would be fun. The bourbon sounds good too."

"Yeah, I know. I should go get it, huh?"

"Okay, well, let me into the kitchen and then I can get the coke and stuff together and then you can come and meet with the bourbon. What do you think?" The bourbon did sound good to Stephen. He had drank two more shots before they left the bar, but he felt entirely too sober for what the plan that he was making up in his head. There was only a small chance it would work and if it backfired it would probably ruin his reputation around the gossipy campus.

She led him across the room to the kitchen. She pulled out a handful of keys from her purse, dozens and dozens of stupid clanking keys. She unbolted the deadlock, turned on the fluorescents, and led him into the brick floored and metal tabled kitchen. The sorority was big, a few hundred girls, so the kitchen was huge, tables and tables, pantries, and ovens for the women to come during the day and cook. It was certainly big enough to run around and duck and hide.

"Okay, so I'll get the cokes and stuff together. Run up and get the bourbon. I know a game that we can play. It'll be fun."

When she got back, Stephen had made drinks of coke and also set out empty cups. "These are for shooting."

"Oh I don't know if I do that." Stephen took the bottle from her and filled a Styrofoam cup with a few inches of bourbon. "Drink. You'll like it. I'm doing it too."

With the sincere sounding words and a smile, he convinced her to drink big swigs of the strong whiskey. After finishing, they both shook their head and grimaced. They fixed more drinks, this time mixed with coke, and Stephen talked to her, stalling to let the alcohol take effect. After two more drinks, she asked Stephen what he had been waiting for, "What game do you want to play?"

"Oh. I don't know. It's kind of stupid. I don't know if you'll like it. We might better not, I don't want to ruin such a great night." She had already drawn herself close to his body. They leaned their back against the metal table and Stephen acted reluctant. She insisted he tell her.

"Okay. Well it's this game that I've heard about." Lie. He had made it up while she was talking. It was on the verge of idiotic and would only work if she were full of the bourbon and sincere glances that he had been giving her. "It's this game called "Hide and Peek."

There was no stopping now.

"I've never heard of it before. It sounds like fun. How do you play?"

"Okay, well it's a lot like hide and seek. I think we can play in here." This would be one of the hard parts of the sell. The kitchen was big, filled with pantries and large cabinet doors. The space was open and probably thirty feet long. There was room to run around. But would it stay fun for long enough? "So one person counts and the other person hides. And if you get found, or if you can't find the person, you have to take a shot." She seemed okay with that. So he decided to push, "and there is this other thing you can do, but I don't know."

Her eyes were glazed and her body seemed to hang loose and soft. "Tell me" She pleaded with a sound that seemed like she hoped it would be sexual.

"And, also, besides the drink, we could play that you have to take off a piece of clothing," he said the last part as fast as he could, in a low voice, like he was trying to sneak it through, quick and low. "I mean I just heard about it. I don't know if it would be cool or whatever. Maybe not."

She paused and Stephen watched her consider her answer. He felt like he could actually see her convincing her mind that this was an okay idea.

"No. I want to play. It sounds like a lot of fun. I mean, I haven't been in front of that many people," she hesitated, then continued, "but I think it'll be fun. I'll hide first. Count to like twenty."

"Okay." She scurried away and as Stephen counted he heard her opening and closing cabinets, door, even drawers. "Nineteen...Twenty." He pretended to look for her, pretended not to hear her heavy steps as he stooped over looking in cabinets.

"Ha. I got to the base. Off with the shirt mister." He pulled his polo above his head and she laughed and hurried off to the base by the door with his shirt in hand. They played for rounds and rounds. He was actually enjoying himself as they chased each other around and around tables. Soon he was in his boxers and she was completely naked: their clothes clumped on a table at the base.

"Okay. One more round. Hide really hard, okay Nancy. That way we'll be even." He winked at her and threw the empty plastic bourbon bottle over his shoulder. She had gulped the last shot while taking her flesh colored panties off. Her breasts hung, sat, like potatoes on her chest. Lumpy. The room was dark though and Stephen's vision was

blurred, but her body didn't seem as bad as it had in the bar.

"I know a way to make things even." She bit her lip and tugged at his boxers.

He gently pushed her hand away. "No. We have to play fair. You just got to do a good job of hiding okay." She shrugged and skipped away looking for a hiding place.

"One...Two...Three..." He leaned over the table counting until he heard her close the door to one of the pantries. Slowly he pulled her pants out of the heap of clothing and took the keys from a pocket. Holding the keys in one hand and the bundle of their clothing in the other, he kept counting. "Fifteen...sixteen..."

When he got to twenty he opened the door and shut it softly. He locked the deadbolt behind him. Putting on his clothes, he couldn't hear anything from inside the door. He was buckling his belt when her head popped into the one-foot square Plexiglas window of the door.

She was crying. But she didn't say anything. She just looked at him. She didn't seem as surprised as he thought she would be. She didn't seem angry; she wasn't knocking at the door. Her face was blank except for the tears that fell down her chubby cheeks and onto her breasts.

This was the shattered pane that Stephen had wanted. He watched her for a long time, peering through the window as she went around the kitchen looking for a way out. There was no unlocked exit. He had checked while she was getting the bourbon. There was one phone but Stephen had stuck the cord in his pants while she was counting in their early rounds of the game.

She was stuck till at least the morning, stuck until her sorority sisters would come down or the kitchen manager came in. Her roommate would wonder where she was. "Probably shacking, good for her," she would think. Instead the breaking truth would be that was slumped against a pantry wall.

He felt himself being dragged deep while he watched her. In the same way that he thought Courtly Love was to bring him up, this, this opposite, brought him down as he watched her silently taking his abuse. Her body shivered as he watched her. The bourbon and the running had warmed them, but now as she slumped, her body was cold in the night.

Though her body lay crumpled against the door, unmoving, he watched her for almost an hour. He watched her body, cold, seem to freeze hard as ice, unmoving. She stared ahead, but at nothing in specific, out into a void.

It was then that Stephen shuddered himself, violently, almost spasmodically, and then he lay, on the opposite side of the door, slumped against the door. He cried for himself and for the girl. There was nothing now that he could do to take back what he had done to the girl. There was a finality in his interactions that seemed disconnected from his literature. Literature can be rewritten. If the hero makes a mistake, just cross it out, and try again. But now, as Stephen felt regret pictured the pathetic little girl that lay on the other side of the door, he was seized by helplessness. He couldn't open the door and explain to her what had happened through the rest of his life to make these things occur. She probably wouldn't understand and she definitely wouldn't stay long enough to hear his introspections. He couldn't say he was sorry. It wouldn't matter, in the same way that she represented femininity to him, he surely had represented masculinity to her. He was the masculine she had always desired and now that he had left her, masculinity had left her. Coming back would be transparent and futile. He could do nothing now except sit against the door and feel sorry for himself.

This had not been the revenge that he had sought. He had crushed himself and this girl. This had not been the plan. It was not that he realized the futility of his

attempt to deconstruct himself and women. He needed both. He needed himself, this despair and disconnect from his normal personality was too great, too uncomfortable. He needed women also. He thought about these things as he stumbled out drunk and unaware back into the night.

XII. The Beginning

The stained glass reflected the morning on my face and woke me into a multi-colored mixture of prisms and lights. My eyes blinked and cringed against the invading brightness. My first thought, though my head was still hazy, convoluted, throbbing, was that the brightness was a punishment, or at least symbolic of reality coming down upon me: the light raining down, leaving me uncovered and in the world's sight. I had avoided reality for so long, caught up in the world of chivalry and love and then hate, but now I was back and life reigned again. My fantasies subsided back beneath the current. The pain of the girl with the lumpy breasts seemed as fresh as when I had stumbled out of the sorority house and wandered to where I was now.

Rubbing the gross globs of sleep from my eyes, it registered for the first time that I was outside, laying on thick Bermuda grass. My mind was still slow, adjusting, but I put the pieces together one by one, in grass, near stained glass, in a courtyard, bells ringing seven up above. I was in the Catholic Church by my apartment: St. Paul's Catholic Church, the one that had offered so much, but then delivered so little. From my angle on the ground, I could see the little old ladies filing through the massive doors. I had woken up just in time for early mass. Still, even if I had wanted to, I couldn't stand and walk the thirty meters to the sanctuary.

How had I gotten here? I had no idea, and I still really have no idea. I remembered leaving the sorority house and walking out into the parking lot, unsure of where to go, but then my mind goes black and doesn't wake up until this morning. Blacking out wasn't really that surprising. It happened fairly regularly, but always before I had made it home: waking up under my soft comforter in the late afternoon. I had never just collapsed in some random spot. I had never woken up outside, out in the open: in front of God, I guess one could say if one were trying, too hard, to be literary. But still, passing out like this, it seemed too

unexplainable. It almost seemed like my drunk mind had planned it out, purposely stayed outside, maybe avoiding home for some reason, maybe wanting to stay in this courtyard in some sort of masochistic desire to be exposed for the wretch that I had been.

I sat up and put my hands out to my side to stabilize my rocking body. It was so early and I could feel the alcohol still running through my streams. I was drunk, but it was morning drunk; there was a distinct difference. Things were heavier than if I would have been night drunk: the air, my lungs. And things weren't funny like night drunk things were; I had no urge to run around and the drunkenness didn't provoke me to drink more like it would have at night. I just felt off-keel, but somehow still under control. My left hand planted itself into a thick syrup of diet coke and bourbon and bile: somewhat under control.

It was only then that I noticed a girl, maybe fifteen feet away, sitting under a dogwood, serene, rubbing a rosary and looking at me, not watching me, but just looking. I rubbed my face and felt dried dribbled puke on my mouth and cheek crusted into my skin. I rubbed the puke off and could see little specks of blood running through the puke telling me how close I had come to a serious

poisoning. I must have drunk more after I left the sorority house. I just couldn't remember where.

Having forgotten this mysterious girl for a moment, I knew that I needed to say something: explain why I was here: explain the stark disparity between her praying and my unconsciousness.

"I'm embarrassed. This has never happened before." I told the hazy, but recognizably feminine form. It was a weak beginning, but I thought that I should probably start small and simple, and I couldn't really think of anything else to say.

She didn't respond, but still looked at me, shaded by the dogwood in the slanting rising sun. I felt like she was praying for me, mumbling words as she looked at me. This may have only been my imagination, but still it made me feel awkward. Looking around, trying to avoid her eye contact, my pupils finally adjusted to the morning light and consciousness. I began to be able to focus, for the first time, in many, many hours, on actual objects, instead of just outlines or silhouettes of the church or benches or girl. It was then, in that sudden moment where things refocused, that I realized who this girl was.

Beatrice.

From so many years ago, with the same thick sandy curly hair, she now sat with a white dress on, waiting for Sunday mass to begin. Her shoulders were broader now, but still rounded and soft. She was feminine all over: soft, not hardened or angled like anorexic sorority girls. There was not one sharp angle on her and it made her seem as some Victorian painting or sculpture. This was what women were supposed to look like. Even though she was sitting I could see her hips were wide, and her breasts were round and high, but full, and somehow in the most erotic tone they whispered of this woman's maternal make-up. There was nothing masculine on her face that was rounded also. She was red in the cheeks and her crystal eyes seemed as white as her eyes but in a unique manner. Like water they reached out to the person seeing them and washed their eyes with her water. This was Beatrice after all these years and in the moment, my pain seemed to ease away and seep down into the ground. She was the one that I had been searching for in all the other girls, fruitlessly, futilely looking to find in empty bodies.

She had shown up in just the perfect moment. This was the moment that I needed her most, and the moment I was most ready for her eyes to come and wash over me.

"Oh my God. It's you." Again my spoken words seemed to fail my inner monologue. But still I waited for what I hoped would be a warm, if not understanding reply.

"Excuse me. Why were you laying there?" She said in a formal, almost British tone. She was confused, but seemed genuinely concerned about my condition even though she recognized me only as a stranger.

"Beatrice. I'm Stephen. We've met before. I'm from Camellia. It's been so long, I saw you at the Grocery Store and then walking your dog? I know you don't remember and that's fine. Why are you here? What are you doing here?" My emotions overran me. I had needed a life preserver and one had been thrown out to me. Here she was to wipe away the stains from the girl and everything before. I don't know that I ever believed in fate until that moment.

It was all like a poorly done war/love movie where the couple reunites, unknowingly stumbles into each other after thirty years at some Grocery Store in Bulgaria. But it was also like a Romantic Novel or novel from Cretien de Troyes where things always end either with death or love. I prefer to think of this situation ending in the latter.

"You must have me confused. My name isn't Beatrice. It's Amanda. And I never lived in Camellia," and then a

sort of recognition occurred across her face, like she was remembering a memory for the first time in years, "though I did visit my aunt there a couple of times when I was still living with my parents, but only twice in that whole time.

"Yes. Yes. Those two times, I saw you then. It was you. You were beautiful then too. You seem just the same in fact, pure and good." I should have stopped talking then, but I continued, blurting out, betraying any sense of propriety. Perhaps I should have been more guarded, more mysterious, but I couldn't let her leave once more without stating as directly as I could the ways I loved this woman that I knew only through the narratives in my mind.

"One time, I was in the car and you were with your dad, and then I went home and wrote a poem for you. I still remember it, do you want me to recite it to you." I jumped up, filled with energy, and waited for her to say yes. Yes recite this poem that must truly be wonderful for you to have remembered it after so many years.

"I'm sorry, Stephen. Mass is starting now and I am singing in the choir. I really must go."

I started anyways, "Washed Pure as the spouting spring waters, features sketched from an ancient artist..."

"Really, this is flattering, but I must go. I can't miss mass."

"Beatrice?"

"My name is Amanda."

"Amanda. Will you give me this one chance? After mass come back out and hear me out. I think I can pull things together, and make everything clear, if I had just this little time."

"Fine," She walked away but looked back before she opened the heavy ten-foot doors. As she left my sight, I thought about how the size of this coincidence. It was so large that we almost owed it to Fate to give it a chance.

That was a good line. I made a mental note to use that when Amanda came back out.

I took a seat to wait upon the bench in the courtyard where the trees drooped down against the scattered benches and the old stone. The church stood in such stark contrast between the modern Nashville buildings that surrounded the brick and stone Cathedral. I remembered reading within the church that its architecture had been inspired by Westminster Abbey: the same two long towers mounted in front, the same intricate stone work, the same elaborate moldings on the arches. It was inspiring, in its beauty but also its ability to survive after so long. I wondered then, how many buildings had been raised and then maybe

demolished, or even razed in some civil war skirmish. But this building had remained unscathed.

Glancing down from the high walls, I looked at my watch. She had only been in mass for eight minutes. I was bored and needed her to come out again so that I could tell her the long rehearsed message that I had come up with so long ago. But then it struck me that the circumstances had changed, that I was no longer the person in high school that was waiting for her, patiently, diligently: purely waiting. I thought about this and knew that it would be too much for her to tell everything so soon, so quick. The debacle with the professor had just been yesterday. It seemed like years ago when I had been ruined, and yet it had been less than a few hours since I had taken my aggression out on the girl. I wanted to be another person than that boy from such a short time ago, and I wanted this girl to be the one that helped me.

I thought about these things, the way I needed Beatrice, or Amanda now, now more than ever. I needed someone to lead me, tell me which way to go and I knew this girl could do it. I couldn't do it on my own, maybe if I had had a mother, or even a father. But I was too completely divorced from normalcy. Who could I learn from

besides this woman? I was too weak to do it alone, I already knew this. Amanda could help me.

The time passed quickly as I thought of this and soon Beatrice came back to the courtyard. The outlay of this area had been inspired by the garden at Westminster Abbey. It was wide and shaded, the one in London had been for the monks, for herbs, but this plot seemed only to serve as a diversion, a further separation from the outside world.

As she sat down I resolved not to tell her of my past. Rather I would just let things grow. I promised myself that one day, when I was ready, when I thought she was ready, then I would tell her the whole long story. One day when the scars had formed hard and couldn't be reopened.

But for today, I wanted to have my first attempt at a normal life.

Having sat down on the bench across from mine, she waited for me to speak.