

Gabriel's Diner

Finnigan Ellington

"You wanna get outta here?" he asked, extending his hand toward hers. For a moment she looked at her husband sprawled in the alley vomiting, blood slowly dripping from his head and flowing in slow rivers down his face, mixing with tears. "Yeah," she said smiling, "Let's go." She grabbed his hand and walked into the parking lot and over to his black Escalade. They got in and drove away, leaving me there in the street, bleeding and unconscious. By some luck I had managed to roll over onto my side and I didn't drown in the pool of my own fluids lying beside my face. When I came to, it was because of a sharp pain in my left ankle. I slowly opened my eyes, which were initially useless because they were covered with dried blood. After a few sickening seconds of rubbing them, I saw a blurry image of what looked like a dog chewing on my leg. I violently shook my leg, let out a weak yelp, and watched the huge rat run away under a spray painted dumpster. My whole body hurt, my appendages were achy as well, but mostly my head throbbed worse than any migraine I have ever lived through. I struggled to my feet and checked my pockets. *Fuck, my wallet,* I thought as I patted the empty back pockets of my ruined trousers.

I dizzily spun around looking for my beat up 73' Volkswagen Super Beetle. It was in a dark corner of the nightclub parking, my wounded yellow beetle. The drivers' side window was smashed in, there were bullet holes in the front and back windshields, and my back seat was scorched in an attempted arson. I walked over to it, tripping over my keys as I approached.

Must have fallen out of my pocket in the struggle.

I opened up the door, got in, and found my crumpled up pack of Marlboros in the glove compartment right next to the gun.

Wait a minute, I don't have a gun, I realized as I picked it up, shocked and scared at the blood that rubbed off on my hand from the chrome handle.

I stopped breathing for a moment, then quickly put it into an old brown lunch bag and rubbed my hands off on the roll of toilet paper I keep for the longer stakeouts.

What have I gotten myself into, I thought, as I turned the car over, my right hand still tinted red, and drove into the alley and back on 6th Street.

It was almost a year since it happened. I had been on the force only three years and I was working towards becoming a detective. It was my first undercover op, I posing as one of the dockworkers in a Chinese food warehouse in the Strip District. A shipment of cocaine was coming in, disguised in rice. I was trying my best to look busy unloading jacks of soy sauce, but I couldn't help but turn and look at the black Mercedes that pulled up in front of the entrance. I felt very nervous, I was sweating noticeably and I was afraid it would make my wire slip from my chest, were it was securely tightly to my chest hair with duct tape. The door opened and a tall man, probably in his fifties, who had short white hair and a long crooked nose, stepped out wearing a sharp black suit and a dark overcoat. The boat approached and docked, and a large crane was starting to drop the large skits of boxes on the dock. I pushed my manual jack, with the other workers, and got to work bringing them in. I tried to get as close to the car as possible, and on my second trip, I saw something that still burns in my eyes late at night, when they are closed.

My older brother Michael, who I thought was in the business of importing electronics, stepped out of the car and looked directly at me. I was walking and pushing an empty jack, and almost immediately we recognized one another, and our expressions must have been totally obvious because just as Michael was forming the question in his mouth, "Fin?", when the older gentleman noticed and pulled a gun out from his overcoat and pointed it square at me. I just stood there stupidly frozen when I hear the boom; the bullet ricocheted off the jack and I feel to the ground and lay there. I closed my eyes right after I watched Michael run around the front of the car and push the older guy, causing him to miss me. Before I looked up from the ground I had heard a second boom, this one lodging deeply into Michael's brain, killing him instantly.

By then, of course, the older guy was struck down by a police sniper, who also shot out the wheels of the Mercedes. The driver floored it anyway, driving straight into the water (the police eventually fished him out). The boat had stopped and was being detained by the River Guard. This all seemed to happen simultaneous to me as I lay there with Michael in my arms, trying in vain to hold his brains inside of his limp head. I can still remember the terrible blank look in his eyes and the warm sliminess of his brain matter. They tore me off of him shortly

after, sobbing heavily and repeating over and over again, "I'm sorry Mikey, I'm sorry".

My eyes bounced nervously from mirror to mirror scanning for police lights or blacked out SUVs, the Mafia's trademark transportation (at least, as far as I knew). My beat up car ran like a dream despite all the punishment and I managed to get back to the South Side. I parked in the usual place, Crooked Way behind Fox's Pizza. I live in the apartment above City Books- a small used bookstore owned by a Pitt Psychology professor and his artist wife.

I walked in and said hi to George and Makiko, who were sitting behind the counter as usual, reading old, yellowed books. There were only a few customers that I noticed, downstairs at least, but this being the first Monday of the month, I was sure I'd find the usual meeting of local poets upstairs on the second floor, near the coffee bar. I walked past some bookshelves and up the spiral staircase. Upstairs there was the normal crowd of about twenty, sitting on the old movie theater seats and the various old oriental carpets lining the hardwood floors. Most of them were twenties-thirties, a diverse crowd of woman in ripped fishnets and labret piercings sitting near to housewives and both business men and college students. I walked behind them and gave a low, "Hey" in acknowledgment, not wanting to interrupt a particular woman's incoherent babbling.

I opened the door to my apartment and got undressed. I threw my blood soaked clothes into a plastic grocery bag and turned on the shower. Skully, my calico, was sitting quietly on my large wooden trunk/bookstand, looking puzzlingly at my strange appearance. "Hey, skull how was your night?" I said, leaning over to pet her as she jumped onto the floor. After cleaning up my apartment for awhile and putting on a white tee and grey loafing pants, I went out onto the roof with my pipe and lighter to look at the sky. I was surprised to see, as I walked out onto the blacktop, Anastasia standing over my telescope bent over looking through the eyepiece.

Her long black hair was hanging over her face and her thin body was covered with a tight black *Finch* tee shirt and a black skirt than ended a few inches above the knees. Her legs were covered with black fishnet pantyhose ending in black ballerina shoes. "You can see the Eagle Nebula really good tonite," she said still looking at the stars.

I walked over to the old coach near the garden and sat down. I loaded the pipe with a small black ball, held up the lighter and inhaled deeply.

“How’d the showing go?” I asked, plumes of white smoke drifting, with my words, over to her.

“It went really well, I sold all but two.” She noticed the smell and turned around.

“I sold *your* painting,” she said smiling (referring to last year when she drew my portrait for an art class) and walking over to me. She sat down and grabbed the black glass pipe and lighter.

“Jesus, what happened to you?” she asked as she put the pipe to her lips, finally seeing the bruises on my face. She inhaled and put her hand on my face, gently gliding over the cuts and bumps. She exhaled, bringing her face closer to mine. I watched as the smoke ran over her face, behind her glasses and past her eyes.

“Rough night; I ran into Sara and Josh. I was tailing someone in Jack’s, and they were there with some of his friends.”

“Oh shit; you poor baby,” she said scooting closer resting her crossed leg against mine and still touching my face.

“Yeah, totally fucking blew my cover; things must have gotten pretty ugly, I don’t really remember much. My head is still pounding.”

“It’s OK, Fin, I’m here. Lemme take care of you.” She slid her other hand into the inside of my thigh and inhaled again. She arched her back, pulling up the shirt and showing her tan lower back covered in the Chinese symbol for *happiness* and, not that I was looking, the upper part of a black string thong and slowly let some smoke drift from her mouth as she brought it towards mine. Her light pink lips, still oozing smoke, wrapped around mine softly, and our tongues swirled around each other. Smoke filled my lungs as we kissed passionately for a few minutes. Her hand crept into my pants, and before long I was getting really good head, smoking opium at the same time. She then wrapped her legs around me and rode me for awhile, my hands rested on her firm ass while my eyes took in the sight.

Her brown eyes looked down at me from behind black rimmed glasses, black hair falling down in strands around her face. She bit her lower lip and I stared at her legs under her black skirt and her ballerina shoes that I had always liked. After awhile of shoving and grinding our hips together, she stopped and lay against me. We went back down to my loft and went to sleep.

My marriage had been over for awhile now. I met my wife, Sara, in college. My friend Paul was her biology lab partner and he introduced us when she approached us in the cafeteria. I had seen her before in some of my classes and thought that she was cute. I found out that day that she was criminology major, like me, and that we liked some of the same things, like skiing and watching independent films. She was two years ahead, and I dropped out halfway through sophomore year because I enjoyed working with private detectives in the investigation firm I was interning with at the time-*Goldsmith and Johnson*. I didn't really find learning theory exciting anymore after tasting real investigatory work, so I took a job with the Pittsburgh Police, with the goal of working my way up to Detective eventually.

My future wife was going through law school and I supported the two of us in a modest home in Mount Washington, a small uptown community, at 255 Harwood Street. We were good together, but she disliked me working strange hours in dangerous situations and the often shabby pay I earned. It also eventually bothered her that I didn't finish college. I guess she felt she was "above me" and it probably didn't help that, after my brother's death, I had become so obsessed with destroying the drug ring that I lost my job with the police for excessive use of force. I continued working as a private investigator, but was almost never home and, when I was, was usually interested in sex, no time for romancing. Also, I didn't work enough paying jobs because I was too busy with my own case. Well, for this reason partly, the other reason being I didn't really enjoy breaking up marriages by chasing around philanderers and snapping pictures of them to show their spouse. It is a sad thing, and I had often thought about lying to the client to save the marriage.

Anyway, Sara started having affairs with her coworkers, and eventually left me for a Judge- Judge Josh Rangos.

The woman now lying beside me was a good friend, a foreign exchange student from Russia that I also met through Paul. They had an art class and had to work on a presentation together. I saw them in the library and said hello. A few years later I saw her at City Books and started up a conversation. From then on, we were close friends. We would call each other and go out to events, cultural things like symphonies and art showings. I would watch her paint and she even did a portrait of me once, the aforementioned "*your*" painting.

Before tonite the flirting had always been innocent, just a harmless rouse that made me feel attractive while my wife was off fucking Judge Dick Head in his chambers.

She had a spare key to my apartment, a safety measure; I had hers also (just in case we ever got locked out). Sometimes when she was in the neighborhood, she would stop over with a pizza and a movie, or with some friends and we would hang out.

This morning I went to her first showing and was very happy to see her doing so well. She was surrounded by interested people in beautiful clothing, leaning intently over to her to listen to her interpret her work.

She is a really cool girl and I hoped tonite didn't mess anything up.

Paul has been my friend since we started playing hockey together in seventh grade. I actually introduced him to his future wife back in Carrick High School. He is now the county coroner and his wife, Brandi, works at a non-profit law firm for troubled kids. They had a son at age eighteen, Gabriel Jon-Paul, who is now ten years old. He's really smart, in fourth grade, and plays hockey like his old man. They have a really great life, one that my mother often reminds me that she wanted for me.

"Good morning Sunshine", her words reached my ears at about the same time as the light from the open window and the smell of French toast from the kitchen.

"Good morning".

She was sitting on top of me on the bed smiling and wearing a pink silk robe. She bent over and kissed me.

"Come on, I made you breakfast," she said leading me by the hand to the kitchen table. I smiled too.

"Thanx".

I looked at her as she put two pieces of toast on a plate and spread butter on them. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail and the robe hung to a little above the knee. Her skin was tan, and her bare feet looked pretty against the white tile. Her toenails were painted pink to match the robe.

"Here you are. Are you feeling any better", she asked jokingly, laughing a little and smiling widely.

"Well, I dunno, I could use some more of that treatment you gave me last night", I responded playfully.

"That can be arranged", she said as she swung her left leg over the chair and sat down to face me. We kissed again as before and she bounced on my lap, taking me out and sliding me in. After awhile of that, I laid her on the table and took her there for awhile.

“I think your toast is cold”, she said getting up. I laughed. She walked over to the bathroom and started the shower. I sat down and watched her silhouette, happily eating my cold toast. I got dressed and put on my watch.

Shit, 11 o'clock.

“Hey I have to go. There’s a shipment coming into the pier and I need to check it out,” I said walking into the bathroom. I opened up the sliding glass door and kissed her. Soap was running down her body and her long hair lay wet against her body. I touched her skin and she pulled me closer, getting my shirt and hair wet with shower water.

“I should be home around 6 if you wanna catch a flick.”

“OK, I’ll come over around 7:30,” she said between kisses. “Be safe”.

I grabbed my bag and my water from the fridge. “Bye Ana, Love...” *Wait a minute, let’s keep it simple.* “See you tonite.”

I got in the car and headed toward the East Dock. I had heard from a source (well, a crack head, if you could call that a source) that a shipment of cocaine was coming up the river from Missouri and then from here to New York.

Now this wasn’t just something you could simply call the police for because, of course, the higher up among them were probably in on it as well as the river guard, politicians; everybody basically. The mob has dirt on almost everybody with any kind of clout whatsoever. They go by the philosophy that most people have a weakness for at least one of three things- money, sex, and power. If you combine money and power, then there are only two main vices to worry about; get evidence of a person doing something wrong to get either and they will go to great lengths to keep that information private.

OK, I planned to break into the empty Zima building about fifty feet from the dock to take pictures and hopefully record some voices. (I called it the Zima Building, as you may have guessed, due to the huge Zima billboard on top of it.) I parked about halfway there from downtown, approximately seven city-blocks away, in a dark alley behind the *China Doll* Fast food place. I carried my equipment in a black messenger bag and took a slow walk to the building.

I smoked a cigarette and looked for the entry window that I used last year on a similar job. It was closed of course, but I thought I had angled it just enough so that the street light would reflect off of it minutely different than the surrounding glass, making it stick

out. Quickly realizing that this failed I tried to remember. I eventually recognized a door with a rusty Master lock on it and after pushing on a few windows, finally found my mark. I slid the glass out, climbed in, and replaced it. The sixth floor has the best view so I went up the stairs. Around me lay boxes and boxes of useless merchandise. Old *New Kids on the Block* stuff, toys based on long forgotten cartoons and out-of-style clothing. The boxes made good furniture, however, and I set up my camera, tripod and listening dish. I then connected both the camera and dish to recording devices. Smoking is a no-no in these situations- someone might notice the smoke- but damn did I want a cigarette for the forty five minutes it took for anything to happen.

A black Mercedes SUV pulled up to the dock and two men in black suits got out and walked over to the edge of the dock. They stood around and talked, one smoking a cigar. I tried to listen in, but their voices were drowned out by a deep low rumbling. It was the sound of the boat approaching. I looked up and saw it approaching. A white truck also pulled up and some men in brown jumpsuits hopped out. The boat slowly docked and I watched as the men loaded skits of boxes up and down ramps on motorized jacks. I took some pictures of them loading the truck. I also took some good pictures of the two suits. I didn't see any obviously shady transactions- no trading of briefcases or manila envelopes. The truck was loaded, the suits signed what appeared to be an invoice and the men shook hands. The SUV and truck drove away in different directions down the pier. I got a shot of the truck's plate- CVS -541- the Mercedes had one of those vanity plates with a boat on it, so the plate was too hard to make out. I took of picture of it anyway before it made a left back towards the city. I also got a good picture of the boat. Large cargo ship- black bottom, white sides- with **Bella Maria** painted on the port side in big red letters.

I waited for awhile to see what the boat would do but got tired and left after about an hour of it just sitting there and no fucking cigarettes. On the way back to the car I sucked a cancer stick down like the air was choking me. I listened to the audiotapes but heard only muffled words under the huge roar of the approaching boat and various running motors. The pictures turned out well, a little pixilated, but with just enough detail to make out some distinguishing marks on the two men in suits. One of the men had his hair parted in the middle, with a widow's peak. I remember thinking he was trying to look like Anthony Garcia.

The other guy was chubby and had a mole on the left side of his face right next to his temple. I put my stuff back into the bags and drove away.

On the drive home I thought about Ana and about what we would do that night. I was going to stop at *South Side Movies* to get one, but decided I would wait for her input. Maybe we would go to the *Rex* and then get some drinks at one of the million bars in South Side. I could hardly wait to see her and get my fuck on. She was always really hot and so cool. Being with her now was like a dream come true.

I walked into the apartment to the sound of Barry Manilow, “Oh baaaby, I, I can’t get enough of your love Baaaaaaby”. There was a trail of rose petals leading to the bedroom and to a round hole in the wall that wasn’t there before. All around the hole were arrows pointing in and a note saying “You know what to do for Bomb Skizzy”. I let out a laugh as I walked over, starting to get a chubby.

“My landlord is gonna kill me, we better patch this up later.”

I felt kinda silly putting myself into a hole, but my love of getting head, especially from her, made it worth it. I put myself in. I got a surprise all right, but not quite the kind I expected.

Something wrapped very tightly around my dick, so hard that I doubt any blood could get to it.

“What the fuck!” I screamed in agony as my apartment door opened.

“Hello Mr. Ellington. Now that I have your undivided attention we need to talk about Misses Valentino.”

“Ah, na-nothing happened. She came to my place and told me that she was scared for her life, that she needed my help. That’s it, she was pretty desperate and she maybe tried to come on to me a little-probably to get me to help her. Look, it’s none of my business.”

“You’re absolutely right, Mr. Ellington. Are you sure that’s all that happened? We saw your pretty little girl friend leave earlier, be a shame if anything were to happen...”

“I’m sure, now can you please tell whoever it is back there to release the kung fu grip on my manhood?!?” I looked him in the eye and waited.

It was Vincensio, the younger brother of Luciano Valentino. They were Italian, as you may have guessed, and the head of the Valentino gang, a rival of the Russians. They controlled much of the prostitution and gambling. They dabbled in drug running, but the Russians really had them beat in that department. Mrs.

Valentino supposedly had an affair with the cousin of the leader of the Russian gang, who's name I know only as "The Tsar" (corny? I know, but true).

On top of increasing her daily humiliations and beatings, this caused a war between the Italians and Russians.

This was obviously not the best time to be on anyone's bad side.

"Let him go, I believe him".

I was let go. I almost fell backwards; my penis looked like a swollen red banana. I could barely feel it. It had a dark red line around it from whatever was holding me.

"Come on. Thanx for your cooperation mister Ellington, sorry for the inconvenience. Appreciate what you did for my nephew, Tommy."

"No problem," I managed to squeeze out through gasps for air.

"Here you go, better in no time", said the goon who had put my wang in a tourniquet, as he threw me a zip lock baggy filled with ice. They left, and I sat down on my futon with the bag between my legs.

Tommy was just a kid when I helped him. He was eighteen and I noticed him in Mario's, a bar about a block from my apartment, talking to a pretty brunette- probably a university student.

Long story short, after having a few and playing some pool with friends I had to take piss. I noticed them leaving the bar from the back, which I thought strange. I left the bar about fifteen minutes later, deciding to leave from the back also to see what, if anything was going on. I was walking along the alley, rather disappointed at the lack of action, when I heard a muffled scream coming from some cars parked a few feet ahead on the side of the road. I ran over just in time to see the girl on top of him about to land another stab of a huge hunting knife into his bleeding chest. I ran into the car forcefully, moving it and causing her to fall back against the door. I pulled the door open, gun drawn, and told her to drop the knife.

"Fucking Bitch, you don't know who you're fucking with!" she screamed at me. She threw the knife in my direction but with terrible aim, it flew over my shoulder and probably punctured a swimming pool or something..

"You're dead asshole, just wait," she said running down the alley. I jumped into the front seat of the car and pried the seating column open with the knife she threw at me and before long had the engine running. We were at the ER of South Side hospital in less than

five minutes. I carried him inside, screaming for help. They put him on a stretcher and rushed him into surgery. I had to stay and answer a few questions. I then called Mario's and told Mario what had happened and where we were. "Holy shit! Right under my fucking nose, I can't believe this shit! Is he OK? I'll be right there. (*To someone else*) Hey watch the bar for me Tommy's in the hospital."

A few minutes later Mario came in, still wearing his white apron. We sat together and I brought him up to speed. I stayed until the doctor came out, telling us he would be fine but they needed to keep him there a few days to monitor his progress. She tore right through his torso and he was hooked up to about five different machines while they performed massive surgery. "Hey any of you fellows have B positive blood?"

"Nah- A negative", said Mario, looking worried.

"I'm the universal donor- O negative. I'll do it."

"Great, well we might need to take a lot so I'll get you some Gatorade and crackers". We walked back to the operating room and within minutes I felt the terrible burning feeling of blood rushing out of my veins. The bags were filled up and immediately put into Tommy. It seemed like they took a million gallons from me. They took so much I started to fall asleep; it was kind of scary really. I woke up in the waiting room next to Mario.

"Hey, he's gonna be all right man, thanx a lot. You've done our family a great service and we won't forget it."

Things actually worked out great. Initially I was worried because I knew the girl was probably related to the Russian mobsters and I was afraid of some backlash for me. I was approached one day by a black limousine and told to get in. Afraid not to, I complied, and sat across from a light skinned, black haired man in a sharp black suit.

Fuck, a Russian; here it comes. I thought to myself as he opened his jacket.

Instead of a gun, he pulled out a small yellow card and handed it to me. **Get out of Jail free** it said. It was a monopoly card.

"This is for what you did in the alley. My family is grateful. This card will get you anywhere you need to go in our territory. If anyone fucks with you show them the card and you won't be bothered."

Turns out that they were actually happy that I found her first.

As I came to know, not only was this attack not authorized, it was perpetrated right behind an Italian restaurant in the heart of the

Italian controlled South Side. Had almost anyone else found her, she would have been dead. The girl was trying to get back at him for a stripper friend of hers that he had raped in Club Erotic a month before. He told her he would kill her if she told anyone and the poor girl lived daily in mortal fear.

Spoiled brats, I thought to myself, *just like rich kids- they think because they're connected that they can do whatever they want.* That particular lucky night I got in good with both powerful families in Pittsburgh, a fact that probably kept me alive more than a few times since.

I was still icing my balls when the phone rang. "Hey, it's me. Would you rather watch *Saving Private Ryan* or *Halloween*?" "Let's get *Halloween*, it's a classic. Hey would you swing by Ralph's and get a pizza too?"

"OK, sounds like you had another rough night."

"You have NO idea," I replied, "Hurry over, I miss you."

"Don't worry; your nurse is on the way. Bye."

I felt really warm to know that she would be with me soon. I wasn't sure how to explain the sudden enlargement and reddening of my member (although I'm sure the enlargement wouldn't be a problem). There was also the matter of the dark ring around the bottom of it. In the end I decided to go with the truth. Ana would understand, she always does.

First I cleaned up the rose petals and erased the "Bomb Skizzy" message over my new glory hole. I then opened up my worn copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and turned to *Romeo and Juliet*. I was getting into it by the time she came in, looking like heaven and smelling like pizza.

"Hey Ana", I said putting down the book, "thanx a lot for coming and getting all that stuff. You're the best".

"No problem. Hey I started a new piece today, it's called *Sunlight Requiem*. It's about life from death."

"You mean life after death?" I asked, intrigued.

"No life from death, growing from it. Like a dead fish decomposing and its nutrients feeding a tree. Kind of like you and your marriage. It was hard for you, but you have grown from it. I really respect that you never tried anything with me when you were still together. I mean I would have let you, and probably liked it, but it would have been wrong. You respected both of us by doing that."

"Well, I tried everything to make it work with Sara, we just wanted different things out of life, that's all."

She sat down next to me and we started eating the pizza.

“And you are still really nice to her and everything, its really amazing Fin. I want to tell you something, but I don’t want you to freak out.”

I nodded and stopped chewing.

“I think that I’m falling in love with you, in fact, I have been for awhile. Ever since we became friends I wanted it to be more, but I didn’t want to hurt your marriage or anything. But now that she’s gone and we can be together...I want to be with you.”

My heart felt lighter than it has since I was a boy.

“Me too, I mean you’re the coolest girl I’ve ever met. You’re beautiful, funny, understanding, kind, smart. You’re a great artist and we love all the same things. When I’m with you I feel just perfect, like a kid in summer riding bikes with his friends. For real, I can’t explain it, you just make me happy.”

She leaned in for a kiss and pushed me over on the futon.

“Marry me”, she whispered softly into my mouth.

Forget being careful, Fin, you love this girl. She isn’t like the rest and things won’t go bad. Give love another chance.

“Yeah...OK!” I said ecstatic.

We made slow love on the futon for at least an hour. Afterwards she laid her head on my lap and we snuggled together watching *Halloween*. We made fun of the victims and laughed a lot. I think we fell asleep halfway through because I woke up around three in the morning having to go pee. She was sleeping in my arms; her head rested peacefully on my chest. I didn’t want to move. I even thought of peeing in the half-full 20 ounce of Mountain Dew on the coffee table so I wouldn’t have to get up. Nah, I didn’t want to risk peeing on her by accident! I carefully slid out from under her and put her head on a pillow. I sat down on the toilet and looked through *Newsweek Magazine* for awhile. I didn’t flush because I was trying to be quiet. I pulled down the futon, laid beside her and fell asleep. I slept like a baby that night- the type to sleep that can only be achieved by someone under five or someone that has reached their full potential in life. Being with Ana made me feel like a better person and the world a better place. I didn’t even dream that night. I didn’t have to.

The next morning I woke up before her and got a shower.

“Hey, what’s with the glory hole?” she asked as I was getting dressed. I told her about the former night’s drama.

“I did notice some weird looking guys outside as I was walking in,” she said, a little scared with the realization.

“Don’t worry, everything is OK now. Hey, let me treat you to breakfast this morning. I know a little diner down the street that has great pancakes.”

“OK, just lemme get ready real quick,” she said stripping and giving me a kiss. I followed her into the bathroom and ended up taking another shower. We made love, again, in the shower and got dressed together.

“Don’t forget your sketchbook,” I called up to her from the stairway, “I want to see requiem.”

Walking along Carson Street, we looked into the windows of the shops. Ana wanted to stop in Slacker for a minute to get some new thigh highs. She got the really sexy fishnet ones and we made our way down to *Gabriel’s Diner*. The diner was shaped like one of the fifties type. It looked kinda like a large motor home and was right across the street from the farmer’s market. We sat down in a booth across from the windows.

“Whadda’ll it be today, sweethaats?” Doris, our waitress asked. Doris herself looked like she had walked right out of the fifties. She was wearing her hair in a beehive, an ankle length frilly dress and black shoes with white socks.

“We’ll have the pancakes,” I replied handing her the menus.

“Hey look at that old guy over there looking out the window”.

“Oh, he’s here all the time,” I explained, “He knows all the waitresses and he and his friends often play cards. When they’re not around he just sits there staring off at the market I guess.”

“I wonder what he’s thinking about,” she replied. “Oh, here it is,” she said opening her sketchbook and turning the pages. She stopped it on a painting of a man bleeding standing about knee-deep in a dark swirl with light all around his upper body. His chest was cut and veins protruded his muscular arms. He was bald and didn’t have a face. Where it should have been was just a swirl of skin.

“Why doesn’t he have a face?” I asked.

“Because he hasn’t been born yet. His soul is making a decision. He can be a boy or girl, born almost anywhere in the world to anyone. Or he can see what else there is, but that’s not familiar. He can sense that there is something more, out in the light, but he is scared by it and, like most of us, chooses to come back. He wants a new life- to find a love he missed before, a career he wished he chased after. You know whatever.”

“Cool”, I said sipping a cup of coffee. “I guess that’s what you think happens when you die?”

She looked up from the book at me, “I...I dunno...I hope so”.

Chapter Two (Jonathan Baptist)

His hand quivered as he touched it, gently running his fingers over the soft silk fabric. He inhaled deeply and in ever increasing succession, as the memory burst the floodgates of his mind. She was wearing it when he first met her that night on the dock. She had taken leave of her parents after dinner, when the conversation turned to local politics and fine cigars. Walking close to the edge, she was looking out over the water to the lights of the city on the other side. Watching from the deck he saw her gracefully turning around, the city lights reflecting off of the water making her the center of a shimmering sea of stars. Their eyes met, and they both looked quickly away. He pretended to be mopping the deck, and she feigned interest in the wooden poles of her walkway. Slowly, his eyes took her in again, mesmerized by her beauty. There was something about the way the lights flickered with the waves, a peaceful undulation that made her seem like she was herself floating. Her pale white skin contrasted heavily with the black night, golden hair flowing out from underneath the bright yellow shawl which now lay delicately in his wrinkled hands.

He walked slowly over to her dresser. Covered with lace dainties and a silver plate with various perfumes, he opened her jewelry bureau. Wedged between the painted glass was a picture of their honeymoon. They were standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking Niagara Falls. The sun was breaking over the horizon, enveloped in the sparkling mist they smiled youthfully back at him.

It was the beginning of their life together, seventy happy years. An amazing woman, she managed to raise four children, work part time as a piano teacher, and always knew just how to make his troubles drift away at the end of a hard day. A skilled musician, she filled the home with beautiful music. Her favorite instrument was the violin, with which she could take you to the bottom of your heart to the highest heaven. She had the unique ability to share her true feeling and emotions, just one of the things he loved about her.

He softly spun the golden necklace holder, each one bringing back found memories of weddings and dinners, nights spent dancing away, or quiet evenings sitting by the river. There

was a weathered oak bench right near the railroad tracks that they would sit at. Hand in hand, they would look out over the water and talk about the old days, reminisce about that first night. It still felt like yesterday.

He walked across the draw bridge and onto the dock, making sure his foot falls feel silently. She continued her best attempts not to notice, in fact, she walked almost to the very end of the path. No plan, no idea of what he was going to actually do when he got there, his feet kept walking toward her, eyes fixed on her sweet countenance.

“Good evening, Miss”, he said, rather embarrassed at the crack in his voice. “Beautiful night, isn’t it?”

She shot a quick glance in his direction.

“Shouldn’t you be working?” she asked coyly.

“Ah...yes, but I was taking a break and couldn’t help but notice you standing here alone, I thought maybe you could use some company.”

“I’m fine, thank you”, she said, cheeks reddening.

“I didn’t mean it like that”, back pedal, back pedal. “I just thought that you might....I dunno....ah”.

“What’s that over there”, she said, mercifully saving the conversation and pointing to a dark billow of smoke rising from a much-lit factory.

“That’s the Carnegie Steel Plant, my old man works there everyday from dawn ‘til dusk. It’s hard work and it don’t pay much, but a man’s gotta work, I guess”.

“Doesn’t pay much”, she corrected. “My father works with Henry Clay Frick; he owns a smelting plant in Homestead. We live in the North Side on Willow Ave....” Splash, a fish jumped up and startled her.

“Let’s go sit on that bench over there”, he said, pointing to a bench under the railway station roof. She nodded in agreement and they went over and sat together. He was worried about what she thought about the way he talked and the clothes he wore. At first she seemed hesitant, but after a few minutes he had gotten her to laugh, and soon they were talking like good friends. She wrote down her address on a piece of napkin that he had put in his pocket after cleaning a table. “682 Willow Avenue, Allegheny City”.

The lights in the boat dimmed, and it was time for her to leave.

“I had better be getting back now. Father will have had his fill of Brandy by now, and my poor Mother will be bored half to sleep,” she said slowly standing up. He stood up as well.

“Well, goodbye,” she followed; turning away and starting to walk back down toward the boat bridge.

“Wait,” he said after her, causing her to turn quickly, her foot sliding in the dirt. He ran over to her, gently steadying her by grabbing her arm. Their faces in close proximity due to accident, again their eyes met and slowly pulled away.

“I’m sorry; I never got your name.”

“I’m Catherina Goldstein,” she said slowly, the redness of her face draining out as she regained her composure.

“Jon Baptist”, he replied dumbly.

“Goodbye, Jon Baptist”, she said, walking backwards, repressing a coy smile. “Be sure to write!”

“I surely will, Catherina Goldstein!” he yelled to her back as she stepped onto the bridge. In disbelief, his balance faltered and he shot his foot back quickly to right himself. Unfortunately, directly behind his foot was the top of one of the wooden supports holding up the dock, and this caused him to trip on it, falling backwards right into the cold water. She heard the splash right as she approached the entrance, and turned quickly taking a few steps back towards the dock. Surprised and shivering, he quickly swam to the top and pulled himself back onto the dock. As his head poked above the wooden planks, he saw her laughing and waving.

“I’m O.K.!” was the only thing he could think to blurt out, his initial embarrassment cooling also to laughter.

“GoodBYE, Jon Baptist”, she said through muffled giggles, entering the boat.

Walking over the railroad tracks, jumping from board to board, he replayed the night’s events in his head. He hardly noticed his wet clothes causing him to shiver in the night wind. Nor did he pay much attention to the normal landmarks marking the way home. The big oak tree, the fishing hole, the Ho-Bo camp. He walked quietly and slowly through the rusted fence, past the yard littered with the rusted Chevy and various broken lawn equipment in varying stages of disrepair.

“I see you’ve already washed your clothes”, his mother said as he walked into the living room.

“How much”, she asked, motioning with her finger for him to come closer.

“Get out of those wet clothes; you’ll catch your death!” He walked over to her, no longer dripping but cold and damp.

“Only 90 cents tonight, I dropped a plate and old man Trigger took it outta my pay”.

“That miserable miser,” she replied with a sour look on her face. Noticing her son’s falling chin, she quickly changed her demeanor. “That’s O.K.,” she said cheerfully. “Your father gets paid tonight and he also finally got that damned lawnmower to work”. “That’s great”, he said faking a smile. He was thinking about what to say to Catherina. First he had to find some paper, and envelope, and of course, a stamp. Maybe he could steal one from his postmaster, the man who gave him the papers every morning to deliver.

The next morning at three o’clock he got up and got dressed. He walked to the well to get water and bring it home for breakfast. He fed the chickens and got some eggs. About half way through cooking the eggs his father came into the room. “Mornin’ son,” he said, sitting down at the table tying his worn out black shoes with the soles hanging off. “Mornin’”, he replied, “I heard you got the Anderson mower working”.

“Ya, it needed a new chain for the chain drive. I had to take the one off the bike”.

Fuck, he thought, *I need that bike to deliver papers.*

He felt like killing the old man, but knew better than to open his mouth.

“I’m sorry I had to do that, as soon as we get some money I will buy you a new one”.

Ya, that’ll happen, he thought to himself while pushing the eggs into the pan so hard that the simmering sound got louder than the muffled neighborhood voices outside.

“It’s O.K.” I gotta go. He put one of the eggs into a small piece of newspaper and into his pocket. Running out of the house, he grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. He worked for a year to get enough money to buy that bike from the rich kids uptown, now he was back to walking. Today he would have to run to make it to the post office on time, and then to deliver his normal volume of papers.

Out of breathe and exhausted, he made it just on time.

“Where’s the bike,” Tom the postmaster asked him as he loaded papers into his bag.

“Dad needed the chain,” he sputtered out through deep gasps.

“Tell you what”, he said, smiling thoughtfully. “Why don’t you use mine?” He stopped loading the papers and looked up.

“Really? You mean it?”

“Ya sure, just be careful and make it back here in one piece by noon”.

“Wow, thanx Tom, you’re a pal!” he said happily cramming the last few issues of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* into his green canvas bag. Tommy, about 16 years older than him, had a big black Schwinn bicycle, much bigger, faster, and fancy than his now useless contraption. Tom took it out of the back, and carried it outside to the sidewalk.

“Take care now, Jon”, he said as he sped away down the alley. He went around the corner and then stopped for a minute to get a long stick from near the trees on the side of the street. Around here, most kids used these to throw in another kid’s spokes, causing them to fall so that you can steal their bike. He used them simply for protection against this, he just had to find one long enough to reach both the front and back wheels. He rested it on the handlebars and the rear reflector and went on his way throwing papers as we went. He made record time on the new bike, making it all the way downtown by 8 o’clock, early enough to stake out a corner and hawk papers to the morning suits.

“Titanic Sinks in the North Pacific, Extra, Extra, Read all about it!” he shouted, making penny after penny as the morning crowds past by. At around 9:30, after most of the people went to work, and with his bag empty and pockets full of pennies, he hopped back, just then...*holy shit*...the Black Water Alley Gang. This was a ruthless group of kids that lived downtown and had clout from the Point to Market Square. There were gangs for every district- the Forbes Ave Fury, the South Side Scumbags- and they were all known for beating the shit out of paperboys and robbing them blind. They carried whatever weapons they could find- baseball bats, chains, knives, bricks, you name it. Most of them had razor blades pushed into the rubber of the soles on their shoes, so they could kick you when you were down and do the most damage. It was rumored that the leader of this particular gang also had a gun, just some added incentive to make him pedal like hell to get back across the bridge into North Side, were the North Side Nightmares would protect him. On his new bike, he flew like the wind over the Hot-Metal Bridge. They didn’t even try to chase him; he was lucky this time. There had been many other times when this was not the case, especially before he had a bike. Some of his friends were in the gangs and this usually only meant that instead of getting beaten and robbed, he was usually just robbed, or “taxed”, as they liked to call it.

He saved the life of the leader of the North Side Nightmares, a kid 10 years older than he. He swam him to safety in the Monongahela River a year earlier after he fell off a barge in a failed hijacking. It was because of this that he could travel anywhere in the North Side without fear. Trevor “Killer” McFeely wouldn’t let anyone touch him, and even told the gang to protect him if need be. This was especially lucky because he lived in the North Side, both across the train tracks and near the River. He pulled onto Ridge Ave and stopped at the “El Hombre”- a shady bar his Dad sometimes went to on breaks from work or after. He carried the bike threw the open door and put it in the coat -room. “Whadda’ll it be taaday, little Baptist?” Ned the bartender asked as he sat down at the bar.

“Nothing for me today, Ned. You seen my Dad?”

“Not taaday Kido, here, it’s on da house,” he said passing him a glass of milk.

“Thanx Ned,” he replied taking a swig. After finishing the milk, he said goodbye and left to hand in the money and the bike.

“Thanx a lot for the bike,” he said.

“No problem, you can use it whenever you like. Here’s your pay, you did well today”.

“Ya, I sold to the suits in the Square”.

“That’s good, just watch out for the Alley boys, that’s all”. He nodded and took the money, a whopping buck fifty. On the way home he got some groceries- milk for the baby, noodles, and some grain. He walked painfully past the ice cream parlor, watching enviously at the uptown kids drinking their milkshakes wearing their perfect little suits and ties and dresses. He managed to kick a rock all the way from Bates Street to Mulberry Avenue where the road ended. He dropped the food off at home and decided to go over to Adolph’s.

Adolph was his best friend, they grew up together just about a quarter mile apart, and both their dads worked in the mill. Adolph had a speech impediment, a nervous stutter that Jon suspected was a result of nightly beatings. Hopping over the broken wooden fence around his house, Jon poked his head into the window of Adolph’s room.

“Hey, let’s go fishing,” he said looking around at the pinups on his walls and at the clothes spread all over the place.

“I have homework to do,” he replied, scratching his oily black hair with dirty hands. He was lying on his stomach on his bed, *History*

of the United States, volume 4 open up under his abnormally round head.

“Come on, don’t be a wuss,” that test isn’t for another week”.

“I know but I need to study for it.”

“Come on, you’re a genius. It’s nice out and tomorrow it’s supposed to rain. Study then. Come on, get off that fat ass.”

“Shut up, dork,” he said getting up and grabbing the poles and bait box from his little closet.

“I hate that shit anyway,” he said and they started laughing. They walked together down the path, over the tracks, and to the fishing hole.

Jon took his normal seat on a large oak stump and hooked his line.

"Pass me over the can", he said, a second later catching the old Campbell's Chicken Noodle soup can they used to hold the dirt and worms.

"Hey I met a girl; she's an absolute doll baby."

"Ya right, I bet you kissed her too," replied Adolph, impaling a poor wiggling worm with his hook.

"No really, I met her on the dock. Her folks are stinking rich, and she was bored so she was walking around outside. I was on my break smoking a cig when I saw her. I'm not sure if she likes me, but she seemed to". He cast one off about twenty feet out.

"Come on Jon, you don't have a chance. Her folks'll murder you."

He shrugged and sat in quiet agreement, although his brain raced with ways of winning them over. I could be a famous writer, he thought, like Samuel Clemens. I could have a cool surname like Billy Baptista. They talked about school and girls- particularly Catherina and a voluptuous brunette (well, as voluptuous as a second grader can be). Midnight came before any bites, and they walked home and went their separate ways. Sleep didn't come easily for young Jon Baptist that night, as he composed poetry in his head to be later written down in the most elegant and prosaic letter ever written.

It took him the good part of the next morning to finish the letter, having to go through many drafts until the words flowed perfectly and letters looked like fine calligraphy. Although the family had little money, both his parents loved to read and had passed that love onto him at a young age. Before ever having entered a classroom, he was able to read anything put in front of him and write both in normal and cursive styles. He drew a picture of a rose in the upper right hand corner of a clean sheet, and copied

the final letter onto it with extreme care. Rubbing his sore hand, he looked down at the page.

Dear Catherina,

Among the reflection of a thousand city lights on the smooth undulations of dark, flowing water I saw an angel in a yellow dress standing silently- her light rivaling that of the moon and all the lights in the city. Her golden hair flowed like a mountain spring from underneath a pretty lace bonnet and her eyes, like shimmering stars, looked inside of me. My eyes never saw beauty until that moment, and the memory of her resides inside my heart keeping it warm on the coldest of summer nights.

Time has seemed to be standing still since that moment, and with each agonizing breathe I wait until we are together again and I can feel the warmth of your sweet smile on my face.

I pray at night that you remember me fondly, and that this letter finds you well. "Catherina", those beautiful words drift out from deep within me and carry me to your side. I will wait, like a child before Christmas Day, to hear from you, my love, your thoughts and feeling towards me and if and when we could see each other again. For now, I will end this letter, and in closing leave you with the words of Elizabeth Brown. "I will, henceforth, hear the voice of god with thee, and he shall see in my eyes the tears of two".

Return to present

He took another slug of the wine as he walked into the grass. Leaves falling around him, he looked out across the river to the water plant. Walking through duck droppings, he sat down on the weathered oak bench and pulled out his notebook. The water looked dirty as it lapped upon the ground near his feet, garbage floating among the fallen tree branches. A ripped blue plastic shopping bag, a pop can.

Horrible how people ruin everything, he thought.

Pen to paper, he stared at the empty white page in front of him, trying to think of what to write. Nothing came. He put the bottle to his lips again, the hot rush spilling down his throat causing him to cough. Some neighborhood kids walked by on the path whispering about what they had heard about the strange old man.

On the page in front of him played out the drama of the night before- drinking at Jack's, the fat woman near the pool table. It was coming back in fragments.

They had talked, *about what?* He couldn't remember, he could just recall the way her chubby cheeks puffed out as she smiled and let out a piggy type of laugh. She was not the type of woman he normally would have gone for. She was the type very typical of the lower class Pittsburgh bar scene. Late thirties to early forties- face reflecting a hard life of cigarette smoke and broken dreams. She had married an alcoholic steelworker who she eventually had to leave for her children's sake. Raising three children alone and working is barely possible, and now she was desperately seeking someone to help; someone to be her companion and friend, her lover- and someone to help with the kids.

She wasn't superficial or a gold digger, people just need other people.

He felt deeply sorry for her, deep enough not to mislead her despite the fact that he hadn't been with a woman since his wife died some five years ago. Instead he sat there and sadly listened to her story, offered to help her get a job at his friend's law firm as a secretary, and exchanged phone numbers. She hugged him with a hopeful smile as he stumbled out of the bar, drunk and weighed down with sadness and self-pity.

The sun was beginning to sink below the horizon, and in the failing light he noticed the electric lights of the plant across the river being to buzz on. The wind was starting to get colder now and he decided to call it a night. He walked with his thoughts back to the streetcar station and got on the local. He sat next to the window, like always, to watch the world pass by. The sound of the wheels turning was a familiar comfort, reminding him of train rides spent with his mother as a young boy.

The night was cold, and he braced himself against the wind as his feet slowly moved over the cobblestones. The night looked somehow darker than normal, the wind cut deep inside his jacket.

Insert ending of old guy story

Chapter Three (Doris)

"Whadda'll it be, Sweethaats?" she asked the odd-looking couple. The man looked to be in around his early thirties. He was wearing fading khaki Dockers and a wrinkled white dress shirt open at the top, with no tie. His brown hair hung down around his

face on either side, past soft hazel eyes. He hasn't had to look at except for all the cuts and bruises marking up his otherwise attractive face. *Must have had some fight*, she thought to herself as she wrote down her four hundredth order of the night- pancakes and coffee. Her calloused feet throbbed inside her black shoes, sore from supporting her slightly overweight frame and heavy dishes for fifteen hours. She was almost to the end of yet another double, something she often had to do to keep the wolves away. "Almost quittin' time?" Bob the fry cooked asked wiping away the sweat from his red forehead with the dirty white rag that could always be seen dangling from in between his belt and beer-belly. "Yeah, one more hour", she replied sitting down for a short break on the brown wooden chair near the time clock. "Can't wait to get outta here."

"How's Bobby doin'?"

"OK I guess. He's been dry for about two weeks now. Maybe this time it'll work." She voiced her hopeful words through a fake smile, not really believing them as they escaped her. She knew that more than likely she would be getting a call tonight from the police asking her to come and get her son. Either that or she would get a call from him or one of his "friends" to come pick him out of a gutter somewhere.

Sitting there looking down the kitchen at Bob flipping the pancakes over on the hotplate, she thought about when Jonathan was a little boy. He loved to dress up and act like people. First it was cowboys. He probably got the idea from watching television shows like *The Lone Range*. He would chase his little brother Nathan around the living room with his big hat flapping and his chaps on, two silver toy pistols draw and shooting. "Bang, bang, got ya Engine!" he would cry out laughing.

Next it was a sailor.

His Father had been in the Navy, and one day after seeing an old picture of him, he decided that is what he wanted to do. His Aunt Mavis found a darling sailor outfit at the thrift store, and you couldn't get young Jon into any other clothes for all told a full year.

He would get so immersed in whatever he was interested in, with the dressing up for example, but in particular, photography. Pictures always fascinated him, and the house was full of them. Dad was older, in his forties, and had all the old Finch photos from his childhood home in Mt. Oliver, the home his father had built. He also had pictures from the navy, pictures of other places, far places across oceans, places that held a million

wonderful secrets waiting to be unlocked. He would sit for hours studying them, his eyes lingering on each person and every detail in the scenery. He would imagine what it was like to be there, looking at the camera as the picture was taken. What would he see; the person holding the camera and the world across the street that was now immortalized at 407 Kambach Street in a faded black paper album? He thought about the passers by that just perchance happened to walk by as the flash went off. Who were they and where were they going? How many pictures are out there, perhaps, that just, perchance, happened to capture him walking by, the moment now frozen in time forever in someone else's picture book? These and many others floated inside his head and kept him busy for hours. Indeed, many times she had chided him for being home so much, "why don't so go out and play, it's summertime?" The remembrance made her sad; he was simply content to be home with her. *O where does the time go?*

"...DORIS, orders up", Bob was staring at her. The tear beginning to swell in her eyes retreated and her eyes regained sight. She got up and grabbed the tray. The man and woman were talking, laughing and smiling. *Young love, how wonderful, how fleeting*, she thought as she approached and carefully placed the plates and drinks on the table.

"Thanx a lot", said the man, with a thank you echoed by his companion. They hardly looked up at her, barely broke stride from their conversation.

They reminded her of many couples before and she had seen the many different paths that lives take. "They'll make it", she mumbled under her breathe, *they have to*.

The couple had left before her. She walked past their table on the way out and found a pleasant surprise.

Four dollar tip, nice kids, she thought as she walked out the door and down Carson Street. She walked past the bars, peering from her periphery nervously, afraid to see him in one destroying himself. She quickly made it back to her small apartment on Sarah Street, the time on the clock in the living room shone **12:00** in dark red letters and she found Eric sleeping on the futon in his basement apartment, which was dimly lit by a weak 12 watt safe lamp for developing pictures. She walked over to his home made drying rack and looked over some recently developed pictures.

They had to have been at least twenty year old negatives, from back when they lived on Bailey Avenue with the pool in the backyard. Looking up at her was little Eric, seven years old, wet in

swim trunks and a towel draped over his upper chest and slung over his head. He was smiling mischievously and looked, perhaps, to be shivering. Behind him was the pool, a four foot high above ground number, with a big white ladder leading into it at the end of a small cement path that led from the awning back porch to the pool. An old wooden fence was behind that, with an aluminum one to the left and right, the right one being hidden behind tall, thin trees that would carry large purple flowers in the summertime. Many happy summers were spent right there, swinging in the shade on the wooden porch swing with Jerry or one of the neighbor women, either Donna or Marge.

Donna lived to the left and was a gardening virtuoso. She had a large vegetable garden in her backyard, with tall tomato plants climbing up a twine scaffold on the left side, lettuce and parsley in the back, and a wooden trellis covered in delicious purple grapes. The side of her yard nearest theirs was dominated by an old been tree that hung largely over their adjoining yard and would, in the fall, dare to drop attack after attack of wither bean stalks into their yard and pool. Donna had married a reclusive auto mechanic and had three sons to him "on three different birth controls" she could be heard to remark some years later- Donald, Dean, and Derrick, all D names. Two of them were Eric's age, and the trio formed a self destructive triangle. Eric's father, Jerry, who was a railroad signalman, died at 64 not ten days shy of his retirement. He was walking along the tracks on a hot and sunny "dog day" in August when he decided to pour his thermos full of ice water on his head. He fell over and when into shock, dying some minutes or hours later of "sepsis due to myocardial infarction caused by shock", according to his autopsy. Anyway, losing his father messed up the young teenager, and he turned to the drugs so readily available from his older neighbors Doug and Dean. The lasting result of these years was his crippling alcohol problem that has continued chasing him throughout his life, periodically ruining his life and the lives of those around him, not to mention his liver. Now he was staying with a friend, Dominic, who left him there under the conditions that he must take his *Anabuse* everyday and also to clean the house and look for a job. Looking, literally, at the past the terrible regrets of a mother tormented her, like the always did, but now she was alone and felt silly at her initial impulse to stay the tears forming in her eyes. She took the picture with her to her room, laid it down beside her in bed, held it tightly to her breast, and cried herself to sleep.

Finding Sleep (Thomas)

He walked thru the rain on the cold city street, the silence broken only by the hum of neon signs or the occasional passing car. *In his head played the days' events-* hour after hour on the phone trying to pump money from the scum of society for his already exceedingly wealthy boss.

He doesn't need that fucking money, he thought as he listened to another desperate mother's sob story about how her baby's daddy's in jail and she just lost her job, *I need that money*.

"Look Shaquina, just pay the fucking bill or we'll have to foreclose on the house", he hung up. Not naturally a prejudiced or uncompassionate man, years of being forced to be the "bad guy" had hardened his heart. It was the 28th, only two days left to meet the quota.

The phone rang, it was his ex-wife threatening not to let there son visit for the summer if he didn't send her more money.

"Julian needs summer clothes," she barked matter-of-factly over the phone lines.

Oh, so YOU need summer clothes, he thought bitterly to himself as he slowly let the air drain from his lungs.

"What happened to the four hundred dollars I send every month?", he asked.

"I had to make the car payment, and you know I use that money for storage."

The words burned in his head, *the bitch drives a Benz and can't afford to get the kid a God-damned outfit?*

His thoughts were broken by a woman and a young child hiding from the rain under the awning of the downtown Kaufmanns. They hurried into a black car, the driver smiling lovingly at his wife and child. He watched them drive away, and closed his eyes.

He thought about what Julian must be doing at that moment, sadly realizing that picture to be almost a year old by now. His pace sped now as he approached the bus stop; a cloud much darker than the night fell over him as he sat bathed in the unnerving light of the sign in the store window.

LIQUOR STORE.....LIQUOR STORE, the words pierced into his very soul.

"No, I can't," he whispered under his breath, as if the sign could hear him, and the battle raged on between his addiction and his will.

Who would care?, he thought, *that's all anyone expects from me, they think I'm a joke.*

This was a familiar trial. The cloud was getting so thick now that he doubted even God could see him dying there. He was torn apart as he stood slowly; just then, the bus came around the corner.

Last bus all night, he thought as he made the first agonizing step.

Sleep would not find him on the way home that night. He stared thru the glass, thru the world outside, as his thoughts were silenced by the sobering reality of his life. His feet were dragging as the entered his small apartment above a garage.

"Almost thirty and I live above a garage", he muttered to himself as he passed face-down pictures of a life that seemed so distant to him now. Frozen moments of happy days spent at the beach with his son...too painful to remember now.

"I'm fucking starving", he said to the open air as he opened the refrigerator door, only to find an old hot dog and a packet of mustard from Macdonald's.

There's Vodka in the freezer, the thought crept into his head.

NOOOO!, his soul screamed against it.

He fell into the couch and flipped between the only three channels he could afford and tried desperately to forget, to let go. He tossed and turned in bed; every depressing detail of his life pounding in his head, racing and flying too fast for him to control. He lay there, alone and sweating, in his own private hell; surrounded by the cloud so dark and so thick that he could not see past his own hopelessness. He stared at the phone, praying that someone would call; somehow he would have some relief. But silence was all he heard as the bottle seemed to call, louder and louder, to him from the freezer.

"I'll take you out of this. I will make you numb", its incessant moan called out; until the sound was deafening and he could hear nothing else.

Finally, he screamed into the darkness, " Help me! Oh God, please help me. I am all alone. I can't take this anymore, please take this away".

"I am here, my son", the words floated thru his mind, he had heard without hearing.

This is fucked up, and I tripping?

"And so is your Mother, she and I are with you always".

"Mom!" he screamed, "Momma can you hear me? I need you!"

He waited until his ears hurt, but no sound was heard. But suddenly the phone rang; it was his brother Paul with understanding and gentle words of encouragement to help him thru the night.

"Get some sleep now, goodnight", he heard as he hung up the phone. When he closed his eyes, he felt the warmth of his mother's smile on his face.

"Goodnight son, I love you", she said as she tucked him in.