



## HIGHWAY TIME

The big older Pontiac sped along eating up mile upon mile of highway. The driver slouched indolently behind the wheel, his left elbow resting comfortably on the car window fingers steadying the wheel but not gripping it, tapping in time to the classic rock on the radio. His right hand gripped the wheel at almost the top, but even that grip was relaxed, almost lazy. His rich hazel eyes were hidden behind aviator style sunglasses. He had a strong chin with a neatly trimmed goatee which matched his equally neatly trimmed short black hair.

The highway he was on stretched the length of the country, The Trans-Canada Highway, and he was driving west from the prairies towards the West Coast. The Rocky Mountains stretched before him, running north to south, like an impenetrable barrier. But Evan Kirby knew better; the highway found its winding way through mountain passes across the continental divide over several ranges ending in the Pacific Coastal Range and the sea. There by the sea, on the great Fraser River Delta which two million or more souls called home, lay Vancouver: a port city, a crossroads of the world. But the draw there for Evan was the rich and bountiful entertainment industry. Evan Kirby was a guitar player. He had played with an assortment of bands in prairie towns and cities but, drawn to classic rock and the new innovative sounds coming out of some of the west coast studios, had decided to try his luck in Vancouver. After all, he had reasoned, the weather's warmer there too.

The car was a cluttered mess and a Marshall amplifier took up more than half of the back seat. Some fast food bags and beverage cups littered the floor. On the seat beside him was a Calgary newspaper, a copy of Guitarplayer Magazine and a couple of CD's. As the car cruised further into the mountains the Calgary radio station he had been listening to started to crackle and break up. Evan steadied the wheel with a couple of fingers only and loaded a CD into the player. The car was filled with the sound of Led Zeppelin as he cruised through the Banff National Park Gates.

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Just west of the Banff townsite there were a couple of hitchhikers along the road. The first two were a grubby looking pair of men which Evan barely looked at. But his eyes were drawn to the slim girlish figure standing alone clutching a small pack to her side almost as though it were a teddy bear. The wind was blowing her long straight blonde hair wildly from beneath her hat, a crocheted close-fitting soft turquoise cap. She wore a pair of flared, faded and somewhat tattered blue jeans and a shirt that was a tight fitting long sleeved soft knit fabric in a darker turquoise than her hat with a dragon boldly painted across the front. Evan whistled under his breath as he pulled over to pick her up. 'Geez, she's just a kid.' he thought, 'They just get younger.'

She seemed to struggle to pull open the passenger door and he was again struck by how young and fragile she looked. She put her bag on the seat between them and managed a shy smile at him before her eyes slid self-consciously to her hands in her lap. "Thanks." she said in a near whisper.

Evan put the car back into gear and glanced over his shoulder before accelerating back onto the highway. He glanced sidelong at his passenger, wondering what she was running away from. "How far you going?" he asked.

"Vancouver." she murmured softly, still only one word.

Evan chuckled lightly to himself. "Great," he told her, "I'm headed there too, you're in luck."

"Thanks." she whispered again.

Evan concentrated more on his driving now as the road wound it's way through some of the most spectacular scenery on the continent, the highway clung to mountainsides and traversed canyons and wound through rocky valley floors. He cast occasional surreptitious looks at the girl beside him. She, for her part, was absolutely silent but her eyes watched the passing scenery with something akin to reverence.

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The Led Zeppelin CD ended and Evan reached for the other case on the seat beside him. He held it out towards the girl and she looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"Put that on will ya." he said with a grin. She glanced at the CD and smiled shyly. She fumbled a bit with the CD player but managed to get Evan's CD in. The sounds of Treble Charger filled the car. Though he was still watching the road, he smiled as he noticed that she was tapping her feet in time to the music.

"You like?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said softly, another one-word answer.

"Cool." he replied. "They're pretty good, they rock, ya know? By the way, I'm Evan."

She glanced briefly at him and lapsed into silence, her eyes again falling to study the papers and magazines between them. When a few moments went by without a word from her, Evan tried again.

"I'm Evan." he repeated softly, "What's your name, kid?"

Her fingers brushed the magazine cover nervously before she finally spoke, "I'm Sky," she answered, "and I'm not a kid."

He gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as the big car negotiated an especially tight turn with a dizzying drop off on his left, but all the same he'd noticed her fingers had passed over a headline which read The Sky is Crying – SRV Gone Ten Years as she had found a voice to introduce herself. He smiled to himself.

"Okay Sky, pleased to meet you." he told her. "So what takes you to Vancouver?"

"You do." she said, with a sarcastic tone.

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Evan laughed deeply and heartily. She had spirit and spunk for sure, he thought, maybe after all she was old enough to be out on the road. She laughed nervously too as though relieved he had not become angry at her sarcasm.

The car sped on eating up miles of road. Past Field, BC as they had passed from Alberta to the most western province and through Golden. As they continued through the valley between one mountain range and the next towards Revelstoke, Evan began to feel hungry and tired. 'Time for a break,' he thought, then almost guiltily he wondered how long it had been since Sky had eaten.

"We'll be in Revelstoke in about twenty minutes," he told her, "I need to get gas, and I'm gonna grab a bite, okay?"

"Okay," she said, still watching the ever changing scenery as they sped along.

When he slid from the car at the gas station she clung to her backpack and watched him with something akin to fear in her eyes. He wondered again just what she was running from or perhaps it was running to. He made a half-hearted effort to

clean the highway dust and squished bugs off the windshield and when he started on her side of the glass he waved and winked at her through the window and was pleased when she relaxed a little and stuck out her tongue at him.

He pulled into a twenty-four hour highway diner just down the strip from the gas station and slid out of the car once more. Sky hesitated. Evan leaned his six foot frame over to peer across the seat at her. "You coming?" he asked.

She got out, still carrying her pack and followed him into the diner, her shorter legs moving almost at a run to keep pace with his long lazy strides. They were shown to a booth in a quiet corner of the almost empty diner and the hostess poured Evan a mug of coffee then left to get the glass of cola that Sky had requested. Evan stirred a couple of large spoons of sugar into his black coffee and glanced through the menu. He watched as Sky didn't offer to open her menu but instead idly toyed with the cutlery and paper napkin. The hostess returned with the cola and Sky thanked her softly.

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"You're welcome hon," the hostess said, then turned towards Evan. "Your server will be with you in a moment."

He smiled up at her and nodded his thanks. As she walked away he took a long swallow of the coffee. "Man, I needed that." he chuckled. Sky smiled shyly at him and took a tiny sip from her cola, as though trying to make it last a long time. He stretched his legs comfortably beneath the table and leaned back lazily in the booth.

"Better eat now," he told her. "I'm not planning on stopping except for gas between here and the coast, it's gonna be a long night."

She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze and toyed with her straw. He was about to say more but decided against further comment as the waitress approached with a pad in hand. He

guessed, correctly, that she did not have enough money to afford eating. 'I'm a sucker,' he thought wryly, 'But what the hell.'

"Are you ready to order?" the young woman with the pad asked with a tired smile.

"Yeah thanks," Ewan said. "We'll have two cheeseburgers deluxe, with gravy for the fries."

"Alright Sir, thank you." she said, scribbling quickly and picking up the menus. Sky stared open mouthed at him as the waitress moved away. He grinned at her in mock shock.

"What? You do eat, don't you?" he asked.

"Evan, I can't pay for this." she told him. "I'm kind of broke, you know?"

"Yeah, I kind of guessed, Sky." he answered her. "It's my treat okay? No strings, don't worry. You look like you could use a meal."

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"Thank you." she murmured. She took another sip of her cola and lowered her face away from his again. He watched her hand as her fingertips brushed across her eyes and came away shiny with her liquid tears. 'She's crying.' he marvelled. He stifled his first instinct to comfort her and instead changed the subject.

"Glad you like Treble Charger," he said. "There's a lotta cool stuff happening in music these days. I'm kinda hoping I can get in with some players in Vancouver and get a regular studio gig, ya know?"

"You're a musician?" she asked.

"Yeah, guitar player." he said "Figure I'll get some work out there pretty easy. How 'bout you?"

She took another drink from her cola before replying. "I'm going to join my boyfriend."

He considered that for a moment, wondering if her parents knew she had up and run after some guy, and also, if the guy had any idea she was on the way to join him. He drained his coffee and

caught the waitress with just a quick nod and smile for a refill. As he sweetened the coffee once more, he tried to draw her out more.

"That's cool Sky." he smiled. "Bet he's happy you're gonna join him. Musta been hard to be so far apart, huh?"

The waitress came back with their cheeseburgers and Sky was silent until she had left again. Then, as she took her first bite of the burger, she mumbled a barely audible answer.

"He don't know I'm coming exactly. But he'll be happy to see me, I just know it."

Evan got the impression she was trying to convince herself. He took her lead and started on his own burger, letting the conversation slide for a while. In the light and face to face like this, Evan guessed she could not be more than half his age, fifteen maybe sixteen. After getting half way through his meal in silence, he took a long swallow of ice water and let his curiosity find voice again.

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"So, your boyfriend," he began tentatively, "He go out to Van for work too?"

She eyed him as though she were considering one of those sarcastic answers, but his soft hazel eyes met hers with nothing more than kindness and concern. She dipped a fry into the gravy and watched the gravy drip from it onto her plate as she spoke. "I don't know. He just split, ya know?"

Evan nodded, "Yeah I remember what that was like. When I was sixteen, I just split. Couldn't handle my parents and teachers telling me what to do anymore. And there was this chick, well ya know, she thought we was getting married or something. And hell, I was only sixteen. So I just split." He reached for the other half of his burger, concentrating on the food once again and letting his words sink in.

She ate her fries in silence for a while, her free hand nervously playing with a long strand of her blonde hair. Finally, she took a deep breath and looked away from him, out the window as she spoke, "It wasn't like that. He's just confused and scared is all. He'll be so happy when I get there. It'll be okay. After all, he's gonna be a daddy."

"Damn!" Evan exclaimed, all pretense of deference gone as his shock was obvious. Sky moved uneasily in her seat, taking a hold of her backpack as though she was going to simply run. He quickly recovered some of his dispassionate tone and added with a kind smile, "Congratulations that's awesome. Eat up girl, you're eating for two." The waitress came by just then and refilled Evan's coffee mug for the third time. She took Sky's now empty cola glass and asked her if she wanted more. He quickly interrupted and ordered a glass of milk for the girl before she could speak. Sky at first looked angrily at him but her face softened to a shy smile before she spoke.

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"Thank you, Evan." she said. "That would be good for the baby. Ryan would take care of me like that, ya know?"

"Sure kid," Evan agreed, half heartedly. She did not protest his choice of words. They both silently went back to eating.

Sky finished before him and excused herself to find the ladies room. He was surprised that she left her pack with him at the table. 'Perhaps a gesture of trust.' he thought. As he finished his fries between sips of the strong black coffee, he



wondered what sort of home she had left behind and whether she had even considered how she would bring a child up on the cruel streets of a big city like Vancouver. His logic told him that she should be going home, certainly her parents must be worried and, like any parents, though they would be upset with her situation, they would help her. Sky's own assessment of her boyfriend was probably quite correct too, he thought, the kid had run because he was scared. Evan doubted that Sky's sudden appearance in Vancouver would change that any.

She returned to the table just as he gulped down the last of his coffee. He grinned at her, as he stood up, "Finish your milk, I'm just gonna recycle this coffee. Then we'll get on the road." She smiled gratefully up at him and took the milk glass in both hands as he turned away.

When they got back to the car, he unlocked her door first and held it for her as she settled herself back on the wide front seat. He opened the trunk and pulled a blanket out. When he got into the car, he draped the blanket across the back of the long front seat. He noticed she was no longer clinging to her back pack but had left it on the seat between them. He motioned to the glove compartment in front of her.

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"There's some more CD's in there." You're in charge of music, okay?"

"Okay." she giggled and quickly retrieved the small stack of CD's. As he started the car and headed along the service road back to the main highway, she was going through each CD, examining the covers. She finally selected Red Hot Chili Peppers just as Evan put his foot down and accelerated west again along the highway.

Evan relaxed into his comfortable driving posture as the big car ate up the miles. Beside him, Sky continued to watch the scenery go by but as the sun was setting quickly ahead of them

the once sharp images were becoming indistinct and the mountain peaks, once towering majestically over the road, began to blend into the darkening sky behind them. Evan tapped his hands in time to the music and resisted the urge to draw the girl into further conversation. More than a half an hour had passed when she finally broke the silence between them. "Evan?" she asked tentatively.

"Yah." he drawled lazily.

"If you were sixteen and your girl got pregnant, you'd be pretty scared, huh?" she asked softly.

Evan's fingers briefly stopped their rhythmic tapping. "Yeah baby, I'da been scared shitless."

"I know Ryan was scared." she conceded. "But he tried to hide it, you know? Like he was all mad at me and all. Then I heard from some of the kids that he'd split for the coast. And I got all scared too, you know? Like maybe he was just mad at me."

Evan took a deep even breath before he answered her. "It's a scary thing for both of you, Sky. That's a new life, a new person growing inside of you now."

"Yeah, I know," she murmured. "I don't know if Ryan can handle that, you know? We haven't known each other long. Like we met at the roller rink where a lotta the kids hang out. And he was so great, you know. And my girlfriends said, 'Like go for it, he's so good looking.' Then he invited me to go to this party and, well, you know...." her voice trailed off. Evan was struck by the irony that she couldn't bring herself to tell him that she had gone to bed with this so-called boyfriend but now found herself carrying his child. He made no comment, waiting for her to continue. When she spoke again, her voice was choked with emotion and unshed tears. "Now I've just gotta find him, you know? I can't do this alone. Damn, I'm so scared."

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Evan glanced sidelong at her, noting her hands were clutched tightly together in her lap. The expected tears didn't come but her face turned away from him and she stared out into the growing darkness. Evan spoke, without taking his eyes from the highway, "Sky, you have every right to be scared. But you gotta let that fear work for ya, baby. You've got a baby coming now and that baby needs you. What's best for your baby, Sky? Running to Vancouver, where you might find this Ryan guy and he might help you or not. That don't sound too good for you or your baby, ya know?"

"I know." she whispered, then sobbed almost desperately, "But I can't go home now! Mom and Dad, don't even know I'm pregnant. They'd kill me." When her tears came, they were silent.

Again Evan resisted his first urge to comfort her. 'God.' he thought, 'You're in way too deep here Evan, this is a kid, having a baby!' He drove in silence as she cried herself out. Finally when she calmed a bit he spoke again.

"Sky, I don't think you're giving your parents enough credit. After all, girl, they raised you. And look at all the courage and smarts you've got. To be out here at all took guts, girl. Maybe you should think about telling them where you are, you know. And what's been going on. Then just see what happens. You can call when we get down close to Vancouver, then if you don't hear what you want, you don't have to do anything about it. Just go on and look for Ryan. That's if you still think he wants to be found."

She was silent for so long that Evan was unsure if he'd gone too far. Finally, she sniffled a couple of times and turned from the darkness towards him. "You really think it'd be okay? My parents, I mean." she asked.

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“Yeah baby,” he assured her. “They’ll be upset, of course, but it’ll be fine.”

“I’ll think about it, Evan. “Cause Ryan, ya know, he’s too scared I think.” she said into a silence made more profound by the fact that the CD had just ended. Evan smiled in the darkness.

Sky changed the CD again, sliding Goo Goo Dolls into the player. Shortly after that, Evan noted that she had slipped into a far more relaxed posture. Within a couple of miles, she had slumped over onto her backpack which made a good pillow. He reached behind him and pulled the blanket down from the back of the seat, spreading it across her sleeping form as best he could. Evan hummed to himself as the big Pontiac continued eat up the miles, winding down through the Fraser Canyon towards the coast.

Hours later, as Evan decelerated into a service road in Abbotsford, Sky stirred beside him. She yawned, stretched and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. When she sat upright, he saw her glancing around, trying to get some bearings, the post midnight darkness combined with the nearby brightness of street and neon lighting completely hid any landmarks from view and Evan wondered if she would have recognized them in any case.

“We’re in Abbotsford, sleepyhead.” he told her. “Almost there. Thought I’d stop for a coffee and maybe if you still wanna make that call...” he trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished.

“Umm Evan, I’d have to call collect.” she said softly. “I really didn’t bring much with me.”

He pulled in to an all night diner parking lot and parked next to the building where a neon blue strip lit up a pay phone. He turned to face her, reaching across the back seat for his jacket as he spoke, “So call collect. I’m betting they won’t

mind much about a few bucks for a phone call, just so they know their girl's okay, ya know?" Without waiting for her response, he slid from the car and she watched his retreating form enter the diner.

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When he returned with a large styrofoam coffee cup in his hand, she was standing shivering in front of the phone. Evan put the coffee onto the roof of the big Pontiac and grabbed the blanket from the front seat. She looked sidelong at him as he draped it round her shoulders and her hesitant fingers picked up the receiver. He stepped a respectful distance away as she placed the call, picking up the coffee and staring into the darkness. It took a few moments for the operator to connect the call and she looked up at him with fear in her pretty eyes. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile and a thumbs up from the hand not holding the coffee. Then her full attention went to the phone and he knew he had gambled right and her parents had accepted the call.

"Daddy," she said uncertainly. Then, "Daddy I'm okay. I'm in Abbotsford." Another pause and then, "I hitchhiked, I was looking for Ryan." She listened a long time and cast a tear-filled glance at Evan. He nodded as positively as he could at her. At last she spoke again, her voice shaking, "Daddy I have something to tell you..." a short pause, then her words came in a sobbing rush, "I'm pregnant. That's why I was looking for Ryan. And then Evan gave me a ride and he said I should call you, and I ... " She looked directly at Evan now, tears streaming again, but listening still. Finally she spoke again, "Evan is a guitar player, he's going to work in recording studios in Vancouver, he... No Daddy he's really been nice, he said to talk to you. Daddy, I wanna come home." she finished plaintively. She listened for a long time then, without warning, thrust the receiver towards Evan. At first he shook his head in dismay, then he relented and took the phone.

"Hello?" he said hesitantly.

The voice on the other end was firm but not angry. "I understand you picked up my daughter, Evan? That's right isn't it? Evan?"

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"Yes Sir, my name is Evan Kirby." he said keeping his voice even and calm. "She kinda looked like she needed a friend. I'm a sucker for strays, ya know?"

"Seems to me, young man, I owe you." the other man said, "Meredith was lucky that it was you that picked her up and convinced her to make this call."

Evan had looked in some surprise at Sky when her father had mentioned her real name. The girl would always be Sky in his mind. "She convinced herself, Sir. I just listened, ya know?"

"Don't call me Sir, Evan. The name's Geoff Cavanaugh." Meredith's father told him. "I have a last favour to ask of you, if you could see your way clear to drive my girl to the Vancouver Airport? I'll see that a ticket home is waiting there for her."

"Yeah Mr. Cavanaugh, it'd be a pleasure." he replied.

"Thank you, Mr. Kirby. I won't ever forget what you did for her."

Neither Evan nor Sky spoke for much of the rest of the drive into Vancouver. It was starting to get light and the city was grey and somewhat somber under early morning cloud cover. Evan tuned the radio in to a local Vancouver classic rock station. Beside him, Sky gazed around at everything as though trying to memorize it; her first ever view of Vancouver. He rapidly located the route through the city to the southside and the International Airport.

"You don't have to come inside with me." she told him half-heartedly.

Evan chuckled at her. "Of course I do, baby. Completes the circle, ya know?" he parked the car, pocketed the key and walked beside her to the terminal.

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She picked up the ticket which her father had left for her. With Evan protectively beside her, they found their way towards the departures hallway. She stopped just short of the security clearance area and looked up at her tall travelling companion. Tears filled her eyes once more.

"Evan, thank you." she whispered, solemnly sticking out her small hand to shake his larger one. He winked at her and, instead of taking her hand, opened both his arms and wrapped the slim girl in a warm big brotherly hug.

"Thank you, sweet Sky." he crooned at her. "Take care of yourself, kiddo. And take care of your baby, okay?"

He stepped back and she turned towards the gate. She looked back over her shoulder, smiling through her tears, "Good bye Evan," she called, "I'll look for you on MTV."

He grinned at her, blew her a kiss and called back. "If it's a boy, Evan's a good strong name, ya know?"

She turned and was gone.

Thirty minutes later, Evan Kirby sat in front of the viewing lounge windows in Vancouver International Airport and watched the 767 lift into the sky heading east. He took a long drink of yet another sweet black coffee and ineffectually wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. He arose, leaving the rest of his coffee where it sat, and strode quickly towards the exit doors.

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## AMY FOSTER

Kennedy is a country doctor, and lives in Colebrook, on the shores of Eastbay. The high ground rising abruptly behind the red roofs of the little town crowds the quaint High Street against the wall which defends it from the sea. Beyond the sea-wall there curves for miles in a vast and regular sweep the barren beach of shingle, with the village of Brenzett standing out darkly across the water, a spire in a clump of trees; and still further out the perpendicular column of a lighthouse, looking in the distance no bigger than a lead pencil, marks the vanishing-point of the land. The country at the back of Brenzett is low and flat, but the bay is fairly well sheltered from the seas, and occasionally a big ship, windbound or through stress of weather, makes use of the anchoring ground a mile and a half due north from you as you stand at the back door of the "Ship Inn" in Brenzett. A dilapidated windmill near by lifting its shattered arms from a mound no loftier than a rubbish heap, and a Martello tower squatting at the water's edge half a mile to the south of the Coastguard cottages, are familiar to the skippers of small craft. These are the official seamarks for the patch of trustworthy bottom represented on the Admiralty charts by an irregular oval of dots enclosing several figures six, with a tiny anchor engraved among them, and the legend "mud and shells" over all.

The brow of the upland overtops the square tower of the Colebrook Church. The slope is green and looped by a white



road. Ascending along this road, you open a valley broad and shallow, a wide green trough of pastures and hedges merging inland into a vista of purple tints and flowing lines closing the view.

In this valley down to Brenzett and Colebrook and up to Darnford, the market town fourteen miles away, lies the practice of my friend Kennedy. He had begun life as surgeon in the Navy, and afterwards had been the companion of a famous traveler, in the days when there were continents with unexplored interiors. His papers on the fauna and flora made him known to scientific societies. And now he had come to a country practice – from choice. The penetrating power of his mind, acting like a corrosive fluid, had destroyed his ambition, I fancy. His intelligence is of a scientific order, of an investigating habit, and of that unappeasable curiosity which believes that there is a particle of a general truth in every mystery.

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A good many years ago now, on my return from abroad, he invited me to stay with him. I came readily enough, and as he could not neglect his patients to keep me company, he took me on his rounds – thirty miles or so of an afternoon, sometimes. I waited for him on the roads; the horse reached after the leafy twigs, and, sitting in the dogcart, I could hear Kennedy's laugh through the half-open door left open of some cottage. He had a big, hearty laugh that would have fitted a man twice his size, a brisk manner, a bronzed face, and a pair of gray, profoundly attentive eyes. He had the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales.

One day, as we trotted out of a large village into a shady bit of road, I saw on our left hand a low, black cottage, with diamond panes in the windows, a creeper on the end wall, a roof of shingle, and some roses climbing on the rickety

trellis-work of the tiny porch. Kennedy pulled up to a walk. A woman, in full sunlight, was throwing a dripping blanket over a line stretched between two old apple-trees. And as the bobtailed, long-necked chestnut, trying to get his head, jerked the left hand, covered by a thick dogskin glove, the doctor raised his voice over the hedge: "How's your child, Amy?"

I had the time to see her dull face, red, not with a mantling blush, but as if her flat cheeks had been vigorously slapped, and to take in the squat figure, the scanty, dusty brown hair drawn into a tight knot at the back of the head. She looked quite young. With a distinct catch in her breath, her voice sounded low and timid.

"He's well, thank you."

We trotted again. "A young patient of yours," I said; and the doctor, flicking the chestnut absently, muttered, "Her husband used to be."

"She seems a dull creature," I remarked listlessly.

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"Precisely," said Kennedy. "She is very passive. It's enough to look at the red hands hanging at the end of those short arms, at those slow, prominent brown eyes, to know the inertness of her mind – an inertness that one would think made it everlastingly safe from all the surprises of imagination. And yet which of us is safe? At any rate, such as you see her, she had enough imagination to fall in love. She's the daughter of one Isaac Foster, who from a small farmer has sunk into a shepherd; the beginning of his misfortunes dating from his runaway marriage with the cook of his widowed father – a well-to-do, apoplectic grazier, who passionately struck his name off his will, and had been heard to utter threats against his life. But this old affair, scandalous enough to serve as a motive for a Greek tragedy, arose from the similarity of their

characters. There are other tragedies, less scandalous and of a subtler poignancy, arising from irreconcilable differences and from that fear of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads – over all our heads...”

The tired chestnut dropped into a walk; and the rim of the sun, all red in a speckless sky, touched familiarly the smooth top of a ploughed rise near the road as I had seen it times innumerable touch the distant horizon of the sea. The uniform brownness of the harrowed field glowed with a rosy tinge, as though the powdered clods had sweated out in minute pearls of blood the toil of uncounted ploughmen. From the edge of a copse a wagon with two horses was rolling gently along the ridge. Raised above our heads upon the sky-line, it loomed up against the red sun, triumphantly big, enormous, like a chariot of giants drawn by two slow-stepping steeds of legendary proportions. And the clumsy figure of the man plodding at the head of the leading horse projected itself on the background of the Infinite with a heroic uncouthness. The end of his carter's whip quivered high up in the blue. Kennedy discoursed.

“She's the eldest of a large family. At the age of fifteen they put her out to service at the New Barns Farm. I attended Mrs. Smith, the tenant's wife, and saw that girl there for the first time. Mrs. Smith, a genteel person with a sharp nose, made her put on a black dress every afternoon. I don't know what induced me to notice her at all. There are faces that call your attention by a curious want of definiteness in their whole aspect, as, walking in a mist, you peer attentively at a vague shape which, after all, may be nothing more curious or strange than a signpost. The only peculiarity I perceived in her was a slight hesitation in her utterance, a sort of preliminary stammer which passes away with the first word. When sharply spoken to, she was apt to lose her head at once; but her heart was of the kindest. She had never been heard to express a dislike for a single human being, and she was tender

to every living creature. She was devoted to Mrs. Smith, to Mr. Smith, to their dogs, cats, canaries; and as to Mrs. Smith's gray parrot, its peculiarities exercised upon her a positive fascination. Nevertheless, when that outlandish bird, attacked by the cat, shrieked for help in human accents, she ran out into the yard stopping her ears, and did not prevent the crime. For Mrs. Smith this was another evidence of her stupidity; on the other hand, her want of charm, in view of Smith's well-known frivolousness, was a great recommendation. Her short-sighted eyes would swim with pity for a poor mouse in a trap, and she had been seen once by some boys on her knees in the wet grass helping a toad in difficulties. If it's true, as some German fellow has said, that without phosphorus there is no thought, it is still more true that there is no kindness of heart without a certain amount of imagination. She had some. She had even more than is necessary to understand suffering and to be moved by pity. She fell in love under circumstances that leave no room for doubt in the matter; for you need imagination to form a notion of beauty at all, and still more to discover your ideal in an unfamiliar shape.

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"How this aptitude came to her, what it did feed upon, is an inscrutable mystery. She was born in the village, and had never been further away from it than Colebrook or perhaps Darnford. She lived for four years with the Smiths. New Barns is an isolated farmhouse a mile away from the road, and she was content to look day after day at the same fields, hollows, rises; at the trees and the hedgerows; at the faces of the four men about the farm, always the same – day after day, month after month, year after year. She never showed a desire for conversation, and, as it seemed to me, she did not know how to smile. Sometimes of a fine Sunday afternoon she would put on her best dress, a pair of stout boots, a large gray hat trimmed with a black feather (I've seen her in that finery), seize an absurdly slender parasol, climb over two stiles, tramp over three fields and along two hundred yards of road –

never further. There stood Foster's cottage. She would help her mother to give their tea to the younger children, wash up the crockery, kiss the little ones, and go back to the farm. That was all. All the rest, all the change, all the relaxation. She never seemed to wish for anything more. And then she fell in love. She fell in love silently, obstinately – perhaps helplessly. It came slowly, but when it came it worked like a powerful spell; it was love as the Ancients understood it: an irresistible and fateful impulse – a possession! Yes, it was in her to become haunted and possessed by a face, by a presence, fatally, as though she had been a pagan worshipper of form under a joyous sky – and to be awakened at last from that mysterious forgetfulness of self, from that enchantment, from that transport, by a fear resembling the unaccountable terror of a brute...”

With the sun hanging low on its western limit, the expanse of the grass-lands framed in the counter-scarps of the rising ground took on a gorgeous and somber aspect. A sense of penetrating sadness, like that inspired by a grave strain of music, disengaged itself from the silence of the fields. The men we met walked past slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes, as if the melancholy of an over-burdened earth had weighted their feet, bowed their shoulders, borne down their glances.

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“Yes,” said the doctor to my remark, “one would think the earth is under a curse, since of all her children these that cling to her the closest are uncouth in body and as leaden of gait as if their very hearts were loaded with chains. But here on this same road you might have seen amongst these heavy men a being lithe, supple, and long-limbed, straight like a pine with something striving upwards in his appearance as though the heart within him had been buoyant. Perhaps it was only the force of the contrast, but when he was passing one of these villagers here, the soles of his feet did not seem to me to touch the dust of the road. He vaulted over the stiles, paced

these slopes with a long elastic stride that made him noticeable at a great distance, and had lustrous black eyes. He was so different from the mankind around that, with his freedom of movement, his soft – a little startled – glance, his olive complexion and graceful bearing, his humanity suggested to me the nature of a woodland creature. He came from there.”

The doctor pointed with his whip, and from the summit of the descent seen over the rolling tops of the trees in a park by the side of the road, appeared the level sea far below us, like the floor of an immense edifice inlaid with bands of dark ripple, with still trails of glitter, ending in a belt of glassy water at the foot of the sky. The light blur of smoke, from an invisible steamer, faded on the great clearness of the horizon like the mist of a breath on a mirror; and, inshore, the white sails of a coaster, with the appearance of disentangling themselves slowly from under the branches, floated clear of the foliage of the trees.

“Shipwrecked in the bay?” I said.

“Yes; he was a castaway. A poor emigrant from Central Europe bound to America and washed ashore here in a storm. And for him, who knew nothing of the earth, England was an undiscovered country. It was some time before he learned its name; and for all I know he might have expected to find wild beasts or wild men here, when, crawling in the dark over the sea-wall, he rolled down the other side into a dyke, where it was another miracle he didn’t get drowned. But he struggled instinctively like an animal under a net, and this blind struggle threw him out into a field. He must have been, indeed, of a tougher fiber than he looked to withstand without expiring such buffetings, the violence of his exertions, and so much fear. Later on, in his broken English that resembled curiously the speech of a young child, he told me himself that he put his trust in God, believing he was no longer in this world. And truly – he would add – how was he to know? He

fought his way against the rain and the gale on all fours, and crawled at last among some sheep huddled close under the lee of a hedge. They ran off in all directions, bleating in the darkness, and he welcomed the first familiar sound he heard on these shores. It must have been two in the morning then. And this is all we know of the manner of his landing, though he did not arrive unattended by any means. Only his grisly company did not begin to come ashore till much later in the day..."

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The doctor gathered the reins, clicked his tongue; we trotted down the hill. Then turning, almost directly, a sharp corner into the High Street, we rattled over the stones and were home.

Late in the evening Kennedy, breaking a spell of moodiness that had come over him, returned to the story. Smoking his pipe, he paced the long room from end to end. A reading-lamp concentrated all its light upon the papers on his desk; and, sitting by the open window, I saw, after the windless, scorching day, the frigid splendor of a hazy sea lying motionless under the moon. Not a whisper, not a splash, not a stir of the shingle, not a footstep, not a sigh came up from the earth below – never a sign of life but the scent of climbing jasmine; and Kennedy's voice, speaking behind me, passed through the wide casement, to vanish outside in a chill and sumptuous stillness.

"... The relations of shipwrecks in the olden time tell us of much suffering. Often the castaways were only saved from drowning to die miserably from starvation on a barren coast; others suffered violent death or else slavery, passing through years of precarious existence with people to whom their strangeness was an object of suspicion, dislike or fear. We read about these things, and they are very pitiful. It is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in

some obscure corner of the earth. Yet amongst all the adventurers shipwrecked in all the wild parts of the world there is not one, it seems to me, that ever had to suffer a fate so simply tragic as the man I am speaking of, the most innocent of adventurers cast out by the sea in the bight of this bay, almost within sight from this very window.

“He did not know the name of his ship. Indeed, in the course of time we discovered he did not even know that ships had names – ‘like Christian people’; and when, one day, from the top of the Talfourd Hill, he beheld the sea lying open to his view, his eyes roamed afar, lost in an air of wild surprise, as though he had never seen such a sight before. And probably he had not. As far as I could make out, he had been hustled together with many others on board an emigrant-ship lying at the mouth of the Elbe, too bewildered to take note of his surroundings, too weary to see anything, too anxious to care. They were driven below into the ‘tweendeck and battened down from the very start. It was a low timber dwelling – he would say – with wooden beams overhead, like the houses in his country, but you went into it down a ladder. It was very large, very cold, damp and somber, with places in the manner of wooden boxes where people had to sleep, one above another, and it kept on rocking all ways at once all the time. He crept into one of these boxes and laid down there in the clothes in which he had left his home many days before, keeping his bundle and his stick by his side. People groaned, children cried, water dripped, the lights went out, the walls of the place creaked, and everything was being shaken so that in one’s little box one dared not lift one’s head. He had lost touch with his only companion (a young man from the same valley, he said), and all the time a great noise of wind went on outside and heavy blows fell – boom! boom! An awful sickness overcame him, even to the point of making him neglect his prayers. Besides, one could not tell whether it was morning or evening. It seemed always to be night in that place.



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“Before that he had been travelling a long, long time on the iron track. He looked out of the window, which had a wonderfully clear glass in it, and the trees, the houses, the fields, and the long roads seemed to fly round and round about him till his head swam. He gave me to understand that he had on his passage beheld uncounted multitudes of people – whole nations – all dressed in such clothes as the rich wear. Once he was made to get out of the carriage, and slept through a night on a bench in a house of bricks with his bundle under his head; and once for many hours he had to sit on a floor of flat stones dozing, with his knees up and with his bundle between his feet. There was a roof over him, which seemed made of glass, and was so high that the tallest mountain-pine he had ever seen would have had room to grow under it. Steam-machines rolled in at one end and out at the other. People swarmed more than you can see on a feast-day round the miraculous Holy Image in the yard of the Carmelite Convent down in the plains where, before he left his home, he drove his mother in a wooden cart – a pious old woman who wanted to offer prayers and make a vow for his safety. He could not give me an idea of how large and lofty and full of noise and smoke and gloom, and clang of iron, the place was, but some one had told him it was called Berlin. Then they rang a bell, and another steam-machine came in, and again he was taken on and on through a land that wearied his eyes by its flatness without a single bit of a hill to be seen anywhere. One more night he spent shut up in a building like a good stable with a litter of straw on the floor, guarding his bundle amongst a lot of men, of whom not one could understand a single word he said. In the morning they were all led down to the stony shores of an extremely broad muddy river, flowing not between hills but between houses that seemed immense. There was a steammachine that went on the water, and they all stood upon it packed tight, only now there were with them many women and children who made much noise. A cold rain fell, the wind blew in his face; he was wet through, and his teeth chattered. He

and the young man from the same valley took each other by the hand.

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“They thought they were being taken to America straight away, but suddenly the steam-machine bumped against the side of a thing like a house on the water. The walls were smooth and black, and there uprose, growing from the roof as it were, bare trees in the shape of crosses, extremely high. That’s how it appeared to him then, for he had never seen a ship before. This was the ship that was going to swim all the way to America. Voices shouted, everything swayed; there was a ladder dipping up and down. He went up on his hands and knees in mortal fear of falling into the water below, which made a great splashing. He got separated from his companion, and when he descended into the bottom of that ship his heart seemed to melt suddenly within him.

“It was then also, as he told me, that he lost contact for good and all with one of those three men who the summer before had been going about through all the little towns in the foothills of his country. They would arrive on market days driving in a peasant’s cart, and would set up an office in an inn or some other Jew’s house. There were three of them, of whom one with a long beard looked venerable; and they had red cloth collars round their necks and gold lace on their sleeves like Government officials. They sat proudly behind a long table; and in the next room, so that the common people shouldn’t hear, they kept a cunning telegraph machine, through which they could talk to the Emperor of America. The fathers hung about the door, but the young men of the mountains would crowd up to the table asking many questions, for there was work to be got all the year round at three dollars a day in America, and no military service to do.

“But the American Kaiser would not take everybody. Oh, no! He himself had a great difficulty in getting accepted, and the venerable man in uniform had to go out of the room several

times to work the telegraph on his behalf. The American Kaiser engaged him at last at three dollars, he being young and strong. However, many able young men backed out, afraid of the great distance; besides, those only who had some money could be taken. There were some who sold their huts and their land because it cost a lot of money to get to America; but then, once there, you had three dollars a day, and if you were clever you could find places where true gold could be picked up on the ground. His father's house was getting over full. Two of his brothers were married and had children. He promised to send money home from America by post twice a year. His father sold an old cow, a pair of piebald mountain ponies of his own raising, and a cleared plot of fair pasture land on the sunny slope of a pine-clad pass to a Jew inn-keeper in order to pay the people of the ship that took men to America to get rich in a short time.

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"He must have been a real adventurer at heart, for how many of the greatest enterprises in the conquest of the earth had for their beginning just such a bargaining away of the paternal cow for the mirage or true gold far away! I have been telling you more or less in my own words what I learned fragmentarily in the course of two or three years, during which I seldom missed an opportunity of a friendly chat with him. He told me this story of his adventure with many flashes of white teeth and lively glances of black eyes, at first in a sort of anxious baby-talk, then, as he acquired the language, with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar English words, as if they had been the words of an unearthly language. And he always would come to an end, with many emphatic shakes of his head, upon that awful sensation of his heart melting within him directly he set foot on board that ship. Afterwards there seemed to come for him a period of blank ignorance, at any rate as to facts. No doubt he must have been abominably

sea-sick and abominably unhappy – this soft and passionate adventurer, taken thus out of his knowledge, and feeling bitterly as he lay in his emigrant bunk his utter loneliness; for his was a highly sensitive nature. The next thing we know of him for certain is that he had been hiding in Hammond's pig-pound by the side of the road to Norton six miles, as the crow flies, from the sea. Of these experiences he was unwilling to speak: they seemed to have seared into his soul a somber sort of wonder and indignation. Through the rumors of the country-side, which lasted for a good many days after his arrival, we know that the fishermen of West Colebrook had been disturbed and startled by heavy knocks against the walls of weatherboard cottages, and by a voice crying piercingly strange words in the night. Several of them turned out even, but, no doubt, he had fled in sudden alarm at their rough angry tones hailing each other in the darkness. A sort of frenzy must have helped him up the steep Norton hill. It was he, no doubt, who early the following morning had been seen lying (in a swoon, I should say) on the roadside grass by the Brenzett carrier, who actually got down to have a nearer look, but drew back, intimidated by the perfect immobility, and by something queer in the aspect of that tramp, sleeping so still under the showers. As the day advanced, some children came dashing into school at Norton in such a fright that the schoolmistress went out and spoke indignantly to a 'horrid-looking man' on the road. He edged away, hanging his head, for a few steps, and then suddenly ran off with extraordinary fleetness. The driver of Mr. Bradley's milk-cart made no secret of it that he had lashed with his whip at a hairy sort of gypsy fellow who, jumping up at a turn of the road by the Vents, made a snatch at the pony's bridle. And he caught him a good one too, right over the face, he said, that made him drop down in the mud a jolly sight quicker than he had jumped up; but it was a good half-a-mile before he could stop the pony. Maybe that in his desperate endeavors to get help, and in his need to get in touch with some one, the poor devil had tried to stop the cart. Also three boys confessed afterwards to

throwing stones at a funny tramp, knocking about all wet and muddy, and, it seemed, very drunk, in the narrow deep lane by the limekilns. All this was the talk of three villages for days; but we have Mrs. Finn's (the wife of Smith's wagoner) unimpeachable testimony that she saw him get over the low wall of Hammond's pig-pound and lurch straight at her, babbling aloud in a voice that was enough to make one die of fright. Having the baby with her in a perambulator, Mrs. Finn called out to him to go away, and as he persisted in coming nearer, she hit him courageously with her umbrella over the head and, without once looking back, ran like the wind with the perambulator as far as the first house in the village. She stopped then, out of breath, and spoke to old Lewis, hammering there at a heap of stones; and the old chap, taking off his immense black wire goggles, got up on his shaky legs to look where she pointed. Together they followed with their eyes the figure of the man running over a field; they saw him fall down, pick himself up, and run on again, staggering and waving his long arms above his head, in the direction of the New Barns Farm. From that moment he is plainly in the toils of his obscure and touching destiny. There is no doubt after this of what happened to him. All is certain now: Mrs. Smith's intense terror; Amy Foster's stolid conviction held against the other's nervous attack, that the man 'meant no harm'; Smith's exasperation (on his return from Darnford Market) at finding the dog barking himself into a fit, the back-door locked, his wife in hysterics; and all for an unfortunate dirty tramp, supposed to be even then lurking in his stackyard. Was he? He would teach him to frighten women.

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"Smith is notoriously hot-tempered, but the sight of some nondescript and miry creature sitting cross-legged amongst a lot of loose straw, and swinging itself to and fro like a bear in a cage, made him pause. Then this tramp stood up silently before him, one mass of mud and filth from head to foot. Smith, alone amongst his stacks with this apparition, in the

stormy twilight ringing with the infuriated barking of the dog, felt the dread of an inexplicable strangeness. But when that being, parting with his black hands the long matted locks that hung before his face, as you part the two halves of a curtain, looked out at him with glistening, wild, black-and-white eyes, the weirdness of this silent encounter fairly staggered him. He had admitted since (for the story has been a legitimate subject of conversation about here for years) that he made more than one step backwards. Then a sudden burst of rapid, senseless speech persuaded him at once that he had to do with an escaped lunatic. In fact, that impression never wore off completely. Smith has not in his heart given up his secret conviction of the man's essential insanity to this very day.

"As the creature approached him, jabbering in a most discomposing manner, Smith (unaware that he was being addressed as 'gracious lord,' and adjured in God's name to afford food and shelter) kept on speaking firmly but gently to it, and retreating all the time into the other yard. At last, watching his chance, by a sudden charge he bundled him headlong into the wood-lodge, and instantly shot the bolt. Thereupon he wiped his brow, though the day was cold. He had done his duty to the community by shutting up a wandering and probably dangerous maniac. Smith isn't a hard man at all, but he had room in his brain only for that one idea of lunacy. He was not imaginative enough to ask himself whether the man might not be perishing with cold and hunger. Meantime, at first, the maniac made a great deal of noise in the lodge. Mrs. Smith was screaming upstairs, where she had locked herself in her bedroom; but Amy Foster sobbed piteously at the kitchen door, wringing her hands and muttering, 'Don't! don't!' I daresay Smith had a rough time of it that evening with one noise and another, and this insane, disturbing voice crying obstinately through the door only added to his irritation. He couldn't possibly have connected this troublesome lunatic with the sinking of a ship in Eastbay, of

which there had been a rumor in the Darnford market-place. And I daresay the man inside had been very near to insanity on that night. Before his excitement collapsed and he became unconscious he was throwing himself violently about in the dark, rolling on some dirty sacks, and biting his fists with rage, cold, hunger, amazement, and despair.

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"He was a mountaineer of the eastern range of the Carpathians, and the vessel sunk the night before in Eastbay was the Hamburg emigrant-ship Herzogin Sophia-Dorothea, of appalling memory.

"A few months later we could read in the papers the accounts of the bogus 'Emigration Agencies' among the Sclavonian peasantry in the more remote provinces of Austria. The object of these scoundrels was to get hold of the poor ignorant people's homesteads, and they were in league with the local usurers. They exported their victims through Hamburg mostly. As to the ship, I had watched her out of this very window, reaching close – hauled under short canvas into the bay on a dark, threatening afternoon. She came to an anchor, correctly by the chart, off the Brenzett Coastguard station. I remember before the night fell looking out again at the outlines of her spars and rigging that stood out dark and pointed on a background of ragged, slaty clouds like another and a slighter spire to the left of the Brenzett church-tower. In the evening the wind rose. At midnight I could hear in my bed the terrific gusts and the sounds of a driving deluge.

"About that time the Coastguardmen thought they saw the lights of a steamer over the anchoring-ground. In a moment they vanished; but it is clear that another vessel of some sort had tried for shelter in the bay on that awful, blind night, had rammed the German ship amidships (a breach – as one of the divers told me afterwards – 'that you could sail a Thames barge through'), and then had gone out either scathless or damaged, who shall say; but had gone out, unknown, unseen, and

fatal, to perish mysteriously at sea. Of her nothing ever came to light, and yet the hue and cry that was raised all over the world would have found her out if she had been in existence anywhere on the face of the waters.

“A completeness without a clue, and a stealthy silence as of a neatly executed crime, characterize this murderous disaster, which, as you may remember, had its gruesome celebrity. The wind would have prevented the loudest outcries from reaching the shore; there had been evidently no time for signals of distress. It was death without any sort of fuss. The Hamburg ship, filling all at once, capsized as she sank, and at daylight there was not even the end of a spar to be seen above water. She was missed, of course, and at first the Coastguardmen surmised that she had either dragged her anchor or parted her cable some time during the night, and had been blown out to sea. Then, after the tide turned, the wreck must have shifted a little and released some of the bodies, because a child – a little fair-haired child in a red frock – came ashore abreast of the Martello tower. By the afternoon you could see along three miles of beach dark figures with bare legs dashing in and out of the tumbling foam, and rough-looking men, women with hard faces, children, mostly fair-haired, were being carried, stiff and dripping, on stretchers, on wattles, on ladders, in a long procession past the door of the ‘Ship Inn,’ to be laid out in a row under the north wall of the Brenzett Church.

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“Officially, the body of the little girl in the red frock is the first thing that came ashore from that ship. But I have patients amongst the seafaring population of West Colebrook, and, unofficially, I am informed that very early that morning two brothers, who went down to look after their cobble hauled up on the beach, found, a good way from Brenzett, an ordinary ship’s hencoop lying high and dry on the shore, with eleven drowned ducks inside. Their families ate the birds, and the



hencoop was split into firewood with a hatchet. It is possible that a man (supposing he happened to be on deck at the time of the accident) might have floated ashore on that hencoop. He might. I admit it is improbable, but there was the man – and for days, nay, for weeks – it didn't enter our heads that we had amongst us the only living soul that had escaped from that disaster. The man himself, even when he learned to speak intelligibly, could tell us very little. He remembered he had felt better (after the ship had anchored, I suppose), and that the darkness, the wind, and the rain took his breath away. This looks as if he had been on deck some time during that night. But we mustn't forget he had been taken out of his knowledge, that he had been sea-sick and battened down below for four days, that he had no general notion of a ship or of the sea, and therefore could have no definite idea of what was happening to him. The rain, the wind, the darkness he knew; he understood the bleating of the sheep, and he remembered the pain of his wretchedness and misery, his heartbroken astonishment that it was neither seen nor understood, his dismay at finding all the men angry and all the women fierce. He had approached them as a beggar, it is true, he said; but in his country, even if they gave nothing, they spoke gently to beggars. The children in his country were not taught to throw stones at those who asked for compassion. Smith's strategy overcame him completely. The wood-lodge presented the horrible aspect of a dungeon. What would be done to him next?... No wonder that Amy Foster appeared to his eyes with the aureole of an angel of light. The girl had not been able to sleep for thinking of the poor man, and in the morning, before the Smiths were up, she slipped out across the back yard. Holding the door of the wood-lodge ajar, she looked in and extended to him half a loaf of white bread – 'such bread as the rich eat in my country,' he used to say.

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"At this he got up slowly from amongst all sorts of rubbish, stiff, hungry, trembling, miserable, and doubtful. 'Can you

eat this?' she asked in her soft and timid voice. He must have taken her for a 'gracious lady.' He devoured ferociously, and tears were falling on the crust. Suddenly he dropped the bread, seized her wrist, and imprinted a kiss on her hand. She was not frightened. Through his forlorn condition she had observed that he was good-looking. She shut the door and walked back slowly to the kitchen. Much later on, she told Mrs. Smith, who shuddered at the bare idea of being touched by that creature.

"Through this act of impulsive pity he was brought back again within the pale of human relations with his new surroundings. He never forgot it – never.

"That very same morning old Mr. Swaffer (Smith's nearest neighbor) came over to give his advice, and ended by carrying him off. He stood, unsteady on his legs, meek, and caked over in half-dried mud, while the two men talked around him in an incomprehensible tongue. Mrs. Smith had refused to come downstairs till the madman was off the premises; Amy Foster, far from within the dark kitchen, watched through the open back door; and he obeyed the signs that were made to him to the best of his ability. But Smith was full of mistrust. 'Mind, sir! It may be all his cunning,' he cried repeatedly in a tone of warning. When Mr. Swaffer started the mare, the deplorable being sitting humbly by his side, through weakness, nearly fell out over the back of the high two-wheeled cart. Swaffer took him straight home. And it is then that I come upon the scene.

"I was called in by the simple process of the old man beckoning to me with his forefinger over the gate of his house as I happened to be driving past. I got down, of course.

"'I've got something here,' he mumbled, leading the way to an outhouse at a little distance from his other farm-buildings.

"It was there that I saw him first, in a long low room taken upon the space of that sort of coach-house. It was bare and whitewashed, with a small square aperture glazed with one cracked, dusty pane at its further end. He was lying on his back upon a straw pallet; they had given him a couple of horse-blankets, and he seemed to have spent the remainder of his strength in the exertion of cleaning himself. He was almost speechless; his quick breathing under the blankets pulled up to his chin, his glittering, restless black eyes reminded me of a wild bird caught in a snare. While I was examining him, old Swaffer stood silently by the door, passing the tips of his fingers along his shaven upper lip. I gave some directions, promised to send a bottle of medicine, and naturally made some inquiries.

"'Smith caught him in the stackyard at New Barns,' said the old chap in his deliberate, unmoved manner, and as if the other had been indeed a sort of wild animal. 'That's how I came by him. Quite a curiosity, isn't he? Now tell me, doctor – you've been all over the world – don't you think that's a bit of a Hindoo we've got hold of here.'

"I was greatly surprised. His long black hair scattered over the straw bolster contrasted with the olive pallor of his face. It occurred to me he might be a Basque. It didn't necessarily follow that he should understand Spanish; but I tried him with the few words I know, and also with some French. The whispered sounds I caught by bending my ear to his lips puzzled me utterly. That afternoon the young ladies from the Rectory (one of them read Goethe with a dictionary, and the other had struggled with Dante for years), coming to see Miss Swaffer, tried their German and Italian on him from the doorway. They retreated, just the least bit scared by the flood of passionate speech which, turning on his pallet, he let out at them. They admitted that the sound was pleasant, soft, musical – but, in conjunction with his looks perhaps, it was startling – so excitable, so utterly unlike anything one

had ever heard. The village boys climbed up the bank to have a peep through the little square aperture. Everybody was wondering what Mr. Swaffer would do with him.

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"He simply kept him.

"Swaffer would be called eccentric were he not so much respected. They will tell you that Mr. Swaffer sits up as late as ten o'clock at night to read books, and they will tell you also that he can write a check for two hundred pounds without thinking twice about it. He himself would tell you that the Swaffers had owned land between this and Darnford for these three hundred years. He must be eighty-five to-day, but he does not look a bit older than when I first came here. He is a great breeder of sheep, and deals extensively in cattle. He attends market days for miles around in every sort of weather, and drives sitting bowed low over the reins, his lank gray hair curling over the collar of his warm coat, and with a green plaid rug round his legs. The calmness of advanced age gives a solemnity to his manner. He is clean-shaved; his lips are thin and sensitive; something rigid and monarchical in the set of his features lends a certain elevation to the character of his face. He has been known to drive miles in the rain to see a new kind of rose in somebody's garden, or a monstrous cabbage grown by a cottager. He loves to hear tell of or to be shown something that he calls 'outlandish.' Perhaps it was just that outlandishness of the man which influenced old Swaffer. Perhaps it was only an inexplicable caprice. All I know is that at the end of three weeks I caught sight of Smith's lunatic digging in Swaffer's kitchen garden. They had found out he could use a spade. He dug barefooted.

"His black hair flowed over his shoulders. I suppose it was Swaffer who had given him the striped old cotton shirt; but he wore still the national brown cloth trousers (in which he had been washed ashore) fitting to the leg almost like tights; was belted with a broad leathern belt studded with little brass

discs; and had never yet ventured into the village. The land he looked upon seemed to him kept neatly, like the grounds round a landowner's house; the size of the cart-horses struck him with astonishment; the roads resembled garden walks, and the aspect of the people, especially on Sundays, spoke of opulence. He wondered what made them so hardhearted and their children so bold. He got his food at the back door, carried it in both hands carefully to his outhouse, and, sitting alone on his pallet, would make the sign of the cross before he began. Beside the same pallet, kneeling in the early darkness of the short days, he recited aloud the Lord's Prayer before he slept. Whenever he saw old Swaffer he would bow with veneration from the waist, and stand erect while the old man, with his fingers over his upper lip, surveyed him silently. He bowed also to Miss Swaffer, who kept house frugally for her father – a broad-shouldered, big-boned woman of forty-five, with the pocket of her dress full of keys, and a gray, steady eye. She was Church – as people said (while her father was one of the trustees of the Baptist Chapel) – and wore a little steel cross at her waist. She dressed severely in black, in memory of one of the innumerable Bradleys of the neighborhood, to whom she had been engaged some twenty-five years ago – a young farmer who broke his neck out hunting on the eve of the wedding day. She had the unmoved countenance of the deaf, spoke very seldom, and her lips, thin like her father's, astonished one sometimes by a mysteriously ironic curl.

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“These were the people to whom he owed allegiance, and an overwhelming loneliness seemed to fall from the leaden sky of that winter without sunshine. All the faces were sad. He could talk to no one, and had no hope of ever understanding anybody. It was as if these had been the faces of people from the other world-dead people – he used to tell me years afterwards. Upon my word, I wonder he did not go mad. He didn't know where he was. Somewhere very far from his mountains – somewhere over the water. Was this America, he wondered?

"If it hadn't been for the steel cross at Miss Swaffer's belt he would not, he confessed, have known whether he was in a Christian country at all. He used to cast stealthy glances at it, and feel comforted. There was nothing here the same as in his country! The earth and the water were different; there were no images of the Redeemer by the roadside. The very grass was different, and the trees. All the trees but the three old Norway pines on the bit of lawn before Swaffer's house, and these reminded him of his country. He had been detected once, after dusk, with his forehead against the trunk of one of them, sobbing, and talking to himself. They had been like brothers to him at that time, he affirmed. Everything else was strange. Conceive you the kind of an existence overshadowed, oppressed, by the everyday material appearances, as if by the visions of a nightmare. At night, when he could not sleep, he kept on thinking of the girl who gave him the first piece of bread he had eaten in this foreign land. She had been neither fierce nor angry, nor frightened. Her face he remembered as the only comprehensible face amongst all these faces that were as closed, as mysterious, and as mute as the faces of the dead who are possessed of a knowledge beyond the comprehension of the living. I wonder whether the memory of her compassion prevented him from cutting his throat. But there! I suppose I am an old sentimentalist, and forget the instinctive love of life which it takes all the strength of an uncommon despair to overcome.

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"He did the work which was given him with an intelligence which surprised old Swaffer. By-and-by it was discovered that he could help at the ploughing, could milk the cows, feed the bullocks in the cattle-yard, and was of some use with the sheep. He began to pick up words, too, very fast; and suddenly, one fine morning in spring, he rescued from an untimely death a grand-child of old Swaffer.

"Swaffer's younger daughter is married to Willcox, a solicitor

and the Town Clerk of Colebrook. Regularly twice a year they come to stay with the old man for a few days. Their only child, a little girl not three years old at the time, ran out of the house alone in her little white pinafore, and, toddling across the grass of a terraced garden, pitched herself over a low wall head first into the horsepond in the yard below.

“Our man was out with the wagoner and the plough in the field nearest to the house, and as he was leading the team round to begin a fresh furrow, he saw, through the gap of the gate, what for anybody else would have been a mere flutter of something white. But he had straight-glancing, quick, far-reaching eyes, that only seemed to flinch and lose their amazing power before the immensity of the sea. He was barefooted, and looking as outlandish as the heart of Swaffer could desire. Leaving the horses on the turn, to the inexpressible disgust of the wagoner he bounded off, going over the ploughed ground in long leaps, and suddenly appeared before the mother, thrust the child into her arms, and strode away.

“The pond was not very deep; but still, if he had not had such good eyes, the child would have perished – miserably suffocated in the foot or so of sticky mud at the bottom. Old Swaffer walked out slowly into the field, waited till the plough came over to his side, had a good look at him, and without saying a word went back to the house. But from that time they laid out his meals on the kitchen table; and at first, Miss Swaffer, all in black and with an inscrutable face, would come and stand in the doorway of the living-room to see him make a big sign of the cross before he fell to. I believe that from that day, too, Swaffer began to pay him regular wages.

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“I can't follow step by step his development. He cut his hair short, was seen in the village and along the road going to and fro to his work like any other man. Children ceased to shout

after him. He became aware of social differences, but remained for a long time surprised at the bare poverty of the churches among so much wealth. He couldn't understand either why they were kept shut up on week days. There was nothing to steal in them. Was it to keep people from praying too often? The rectory took much notice of him about that time, and I believe the young ladies attempted to prepare the ground for his conversion. They could not, however, break him of his habit of crossing himself, but he went so far as to take off the string with a couple of brass medals the size of a sixpence, a tiny metal cross, and a square sort of scapulary which he wore round his neck. He hung them on the wall by the side of his bed, and he was still to be heard every evening reciting the Lord's Prayer, in incomprehensible words and in a slow, fervent tone, as he had heard his old father do at the head of all the kneeling family, big and little, on every evening of his life. And though he wore corduroys at work, and a slop-made pepper-and-salt suit on Sundays, strangers would turn round to look after him on the road. His foreignness had a peculiar and indelible stamp. At last people became used to see him. But they never became used to him. His rapid, skimming walk; his swarthy complexion; his hat cocked on the left ear; his habit, on warm evenings, of wearing his coat over one shoulder, like a hussar's dolman; his manner of leaping over the stiles, not as a feat of agility, but in the ordinary course of progression – all these peculiarities were, as one may say, so many causes of scorn and offence to the inhabitants of the village. They wouldn't in their dinner hour lie flat on their backs on the grass to stare at the sky. Neither did they go about the fields screaming dismal tunes. Many times have I heard his high-pitched voice from behind the ridge of some sloping sheep-walk, a voice light and soaring, like a lark's, but with a melancholy human note, over our fields that hear only the song of birds. And I should be startled myself. Ah! He was different: innocent of heart, and full of good will, which nobody wanted, this castaway, that, like a man transplanted into another planet, was separated by



an immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future. His quick, fervent utterance positively shocked everybody. 'An excitable devil,' they called him. One evening, in the tap-room of the Coach and Horses (having drunk some whisky), he upset them all by singing a love song of his country. They hooted him down, and he was pained; but Preble, the lame wheelwright, and Vincent, the fat blacksmith, and the other notables too, wanted to drink their evening beer in peace. On another occasion he tried to show them how to dance. The dust rose in clouds from the sanded floor; he leaped straight up amongst the deal tables, struck his heels together, squatted on one heel in front of old Preble, shooting out the other leg, uttered wild and exulting cries, jumped up to whirl on one foot, snapping his fingers above his head – and a strange carter who was having a drink in there began to swear, and cleared out with his half-pint in his hand into the bar. But when suddenly he sprang upon a table and continued to dance among the glasses, the landlord interfered. He didn't want any 'acrobat tricks in the tap-room.' They laid their hands on him. Having had a glass or two, Mr. Swaffer's foreigner tried to expostulate: was ejected forcibly: got a black eye.

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"I believe he felt the hostility of his human surroundings. But he was tough – tough in spirit, too, as well as in body. Only the memory of the sea frightened him, with that vague terror that is left by a bad dream. His home was far away; and he did not want now to go to America. I had often explained to him that there is no place on earth where true gold can be found lying ready and to be got for the trouble of the picking up. How then, he asked, could he ever return home with empty hands when there had been sold a cow, two ponies, and a bit of land to pay for his going? His eyes would fill with tears, and, averting them from the immense shimmer of the sea, he would throw himself face down on the grass. But sometimes, cocking his hat with a little conquering air, he would defy my

wisdom. He had found his bit of true gold. That was Amy Foster's heart; which was 'a golden heart, and soft to people's misery,' he would say in the accents of overwhelming conviction.

"He was called Yanko. He had explained that this meant little John; but as he would also repeat very often that he was a mountaineer (some word sounding in the dialect of his country like Goorall) he got it for his surname. And this is the only trace of him that the succeeding ages may find in the marriage register of the parish. There it stands – Yanko Goorall – in the rector's handwriting. The crooked cross made by the castaway, a cross whose tracing no doubt seemed to him the most solemn part of the whole ceremony, is all that remains now to perpetuate the memory of his name.

"His courtship had lasted some time – ever since he got his precarious footing in the community. It began by his buying for Amy Foster a green satin ribbon in Darnford. This was what you did in his country. You bought a ribbon at a Jew's stall on a fair-day. I don't suppose the girl knew what to do with it, but he seemed to think that his honorable intentions could not be mistaken.

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"It was only when he declared his purpose to get married that I fully understood how, for a hundred futile and inappreciable reasons, how – shall I say odious? – he was to all the countryside. Every old woman in the village was up in arms. Smith, coming upon him near the farm, promised to break his head for him if he found him about again. But he twisted his little black moustache with such a bellicose air and rolled such big, black fierce eyes at Smith that this promise came to nothing. Smith, however, told the girl that she must be mad to take up with a man who was surely wrong in his head. All the same, when she heard him in the gloaming whistle from beyond the orchard a couple of bars of a weird and mournful tune, she would drop whatever she had in her hand – she would leave Mrs.

Smith in the middle of a sentence – and she would run out to his call. Mrs. Smith called her a shameless hussy. She answered nothing. She said nothing at all to anybody, and went on her way as if she had been deaf. She and I alone all in the land, I fancy, could see his very real beauty. He was very good-looking, and most graceful in his bearing, with that something wild as of a woodland creature in his aspect. Her mother moaned over her dismally whenever the girl came to see her on her day out. The father was surly, but pretended not to know; and Mrs. Finn once told her plainly that ‘this man, my dear, will do you some harm some day yet.’ And so it went on. They could be seen on the roads, she tramping stolidly in her finery – gray dress, black feather, stout boots, prominent white cotton gloves that caught your eye a hundred yards away; and he, his coat slung picturesquely over one shoulder, pacing by her side, gallant of bearing and casting tender glances upon the girl with the golden heart. I wonder whether he saw how plain she was. Perhaps among types so different from what he had ever seen, he had not the power to judge; or perhaps he was seduced by the divine quality of her pity.

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“Yanko was in great trouble meantime. In his country you get an old man for an ambassador in marriage affairs. He did not know how to proceed. However, one day in the midst of sheep in a field (he was now Swaffer’s under-shepherd with Foster) he took off his hat to the father and declared himself humbly. ‘I daresay she’s fool enough to marry you,’ was all Foster said. ‘And then,’ he used to relate, ‘he puts his hat on his head, looks black at me as if he wanted to cut my throat, whistles the dog, and off he goes, leaving me to do the work.’ The Fosters, of course, didn’t like to lose the wages the girl earned: Amy used to give all her money to her mother. But there was in Foster a very genuine aversion to that match. He contended that the fellow was very good with sheep, but was not fit for any girl to marry. For one thing, he used to go along the hedges muttering to himself like a dam’ fool; and

then, these foreigners behave very queerly to women sometimes. And perhaps he would want to carry her off somewhere – or run off himself. It was not safe. He preached it to his daughter that the fellow might ill-use her in some way. She made no answer. It was, they said in the village, as if the man had done something to her. People discussed the matter. It was quite an excitement, and the two went on 'walking out' together in the face of opposition. Then something unexpected happened.

"I don't know whether old Swaffer ever understood how much he was regarded in the light of a father by his foreign retainer. Anyway the relation was curiously feudal. So when Yanko asked formally for an interview – 'and the Miss too' (he called the severe, deaf Miss Swaffer simply Miss) – it was to obtain their permission to marry. Swaffer heard him unmoved, dismissed him by a nod, and then shouted the intelligence into Miss Swaffer's best ear. She showed no surprise, and only remarked grimly, in a veiled blank voice, 'He certainly won't get any other girl to marry him.'

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"It is Miss Swaffer who has all the credit of the munificence: but in a very few days it came out that Mr. Swaffer had presented Yanko with a cottage (the cottage you've seen this morning) and something like an acre of ground – had made it over to him in absolute property. Willcox expedited the deed, and I remember him telling me he had a great pleasure in making it ready. It recited: 'In consideration of saving the life of my beloved grandchild, Bertha Willcox.'

"Of course, after that no power on earth could prevent them from getting married.

"Her infatuation endured. People saw her going out to meet him in the evening. She stared with unblinking, fascinated eyes up the road where he was expected to appear, walking freely, with a swing from the hip, and humming one of the lovetunes of his

country. When the boy was born, he got elevated at the 'Coach and Horses,' essayed again a song and a dance, and was again ejected. People expressed their commiseration for a woman married to that Jack-in-the-box. He didn't care. There was a man now (he told me boastfully) to whom he could sing and talk in the language of his country, and show how to dance by-and-by.

"But I don't know. To me he appeared to have grown less springy of step, heavier in body, less keen of eye. Imagination, no doubt; but it seems to me now as if the net of fate had been drawn closer round him already.

"One day I met him on the footpath over the Talfourd Hill. He told me that 'women were funny.' I had heard already of domestic differences. People were saying that Amy Foster was beginning to find out what sort of man she had married. He looked upon the sea with indifferent, unseeing eyes. His wife had snatched the child out of his arms one day as he sat on the doorstep crooning to it a song such as the mothers sing to babies in his mountains. She seemed to think he was doing it some harm. Women are funny. And she had objected to him praying aloud in the evening. Why? He expected the boy to repeat the prayer aloud after him by-and-by, as he used to do after his old father when he was a child – in his own country. And I discovered he longed for their boy to grow up so that he could have a man to talk with in that language that to our ears sounded so disturbing, so passionate, and so bizarre. Why his wife should dislike the idea he couldn't tell. But that would pass, he said. And tilting his head knowingly, he tapped his breastbone to indicate that she had a good heart: not hard, not fierce, open to compassion, charitable to the poor!

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"I walked away thoughtfully; I wondered whether his difference, his strangeness, were not penetrating with repulsion that dull nature they had begun by irresistibly attracting. I wondered..."

The Doctor came to the window and looked out at the frigid splendor of the sea, immense in the haze, as if enclosing all the earth with all the hearts lost among the passions of love and fear.

“Physiologically, now,” he said, turning away abruptly, “it was possible. It was possible.”

He remained silent. Then went on—

“At all events, the next time I saw him he was ill – lung trouble. He was tough, but I daresay he was not acclimatized as well as I had supposed. It was a bad winter; and, of course, these mountaineers do get fits of home sickness; and a state of depression would make him vulnerable. He was lying half dressed on a couch downstairs.

“A table covered with a dark oilcloth took up all the middle of the little room. There was a wicker cradle on the floor, a kettle spouting steam on the hob, and some child’s linen lay drying on the fender. The room was warm, but the door opens right into the garden, as you noticed perhaps.

“He was very feverish, and kept on muttering to himself. She sat on a chair and looked at him fixedly across the table with her brown, blurred eyes. ‘Why don’t you have him upstairs?’ I asked. With a start and a confused stammer she said, ‘Oh! ah! I couldn’t sit with him upstairs, Sir.’

“I gave her certain directions; and going outside, I said again that he ought to be in bed upstairs. She wrung her hands. ‘I couldn’t. I couldn’t. He keeps on saying something – I don’t know what.’ With the memory of all the talk against the man that had been dinned into her ears, I looked at her narrowly. I looked into her short-sighted eyes, at her dumb eyes that once in her life had seen an enticing shape, but seemed, staring at me, to see nothing at all now. But I saw she was uneasy.

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“‘What’s the matter with him?’ she asked in a sort of vacant trepidation. ‘He doesn’t look very ill. I never did see anybody look like this before...’

“‘Do you think,’ I asked indignantly, ‘he is shamming?’

“‘I can’t help it, sir,’ she said stolidly. And suddenly she clapped her hands and looked right and left. ‘And there’s the baby. I am so frightened. He wanted me just now to give him the baby. I can’t understand what he says to it.’

“‘Can’t you ask a neighbor to come in tonight?’ I asked.

“‘Please, sir, nobody seems to care to come,’ she muttered, dully resigned all at once.

“I impressed upon her the necessity of the greatest care, and then had to go. There was a good deal of sickness that winter. ‘Oh, I hope he won’t talk!’ she exclaimed softly just as I was going away.

“I don’t know how it is I did not see – but I didn’t. And yet, turning in my trap, I saw her lingering before the door, very still, and as if meditating a flight up the miry road.

“Towards the night his fever increased.

“He tossed, moaned, and now and then muttered a complaint. And she sat with the table between her and the couch, watching every movement and every sound, with the terror, the unreasonable terror, of that man she could not understand creeping over her. She had drawn the wicker cradle close to her feet. There was nothing in her now but the maternal instinct and that unaccountable fear.

“Suddenly coming to himself, parched, he demanded a drink of water. She did not move. She had not understood, though he may have thought he was speaking in English. He waited, looking at her, burning with fever, amazed at her silence and immobility,

and then he shouted impatiently, 'Water! Give me water!'

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"She jumped to her feet, snatched up the child, and stood still. He spoke to her, and his passionate remonstrances only increased her fear of that strange man. I believe he spoke to her for a long time, entreating, wondering, pleading, ordering, I suppose. She says she bore it as long as she could. And then a gust of rage came over him.

"He sat up and called out terribly one word – some word. Then he got up as though he hadn't been ill at all, she says. And as in fevered dismay, indignation, and wonder he tried to get to her round the table, she simply opened the door and ran out with the child in her arms. She heard him call twice after her down the road in a terrible voice – and fled... Ah! but you should have seen stirring behind the dull, blurred glance of these eyes the specter of the fear which had hunted her on that night three miles and a half to the door of Foster's cottage! I did the next day.

"And it was I who found him lying face down and his body in a puddle, just outside the little wicket-gate.

"I had been called out that night to an urgent case in the village, and on my way home at daybreak passed by the cottage. The door stood open. My man helped me to carry him in. We laid him on the couch. The lamp smoked, the fire was out, the chill of the stormy night oozed from the cheerless yellow paper on the wall. 'Amy!' I called aloud, and my voice seemed to lose itself in the emptiness of this tiny house as if I had cried in a desert. He opened his eyes. 'Gone!' he said distinctly. 'I had only asked for water – only for a little water...'

"He was muddied. I covered him up and stood waiting in silence, catching a painfully gasped word now and then. They were no longer in his own language. The fever had left him, taking with it the heat of life. And with his panting breast and



lustrous eyes he reminded me again of a wild creature under the net; of a bird caught in a snare. She had left him. She had left him – sick – helpless – thirsty. The spear of the hunter had entered his very soul. ‘Why?’ he cried in the penetrating and indignant voice of a man calling to a responsible Maker. A gust of wind and a swish of rain answered.

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“And as I turned away to shut the door he pronounced the word ‘Merciful!’ and expired.

“Eventually I certified heart-failure as the immediate cause of death. His heart must have indeed failed him, or else he might have stood this night of storm and exposure, too. I closed his eyes and drove away. Not very far from the cottage I met Foster walking sturdily between the dripping hedges with his collie at his heels.

“‘Do you know where your daughter is?’ I asked.

“‘Don’t I!’ he cried. ‘I am going to talk to him a bit. Frightening a poor woman like this.’

“‘He won’t frighten her any more,’ I said. ‘He is dead.’

“He struck with his stick at the mud.

“‘And there’s the child.’

“Then, after thinking deeply for a while–

“‘I don’t know that it isn’t for the best.’

“That’s what he said. And she says nothing at all now. Not a word of him. Never. Is his image as utterly gone from her mind as his lithe and striding figure, his caroling voice are gone from our fields? He is no longer before her eyes to excite her imagination into a passion of love or fear; and his memory seems to have vanished from her dull brain as a shadow passes

away upon a white screen. She lives in the cottage and works for Miss Swaffer. She is Amy Foster for everybody, and the child is 'Amy Foster's boy.' She calls him Johnny – which means Little John.

“It is impossible to say whether this name recalls anything to her. Does she ever think of the past? I have seen her hanging over the boy's cot in a very passion of maternal tenderness. The little fellow was lying on his back, a little frightened at me, but very still, with his big black eyes, with his fluttered air of a bird in a snare. And looking at him I seemed to see again the other one – the father, cast out mysteriously by the sea to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair.”

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## RETURN TO PARADISE

Lisa gazed out over the Caribbean Sea, feeling the faint breeze against her face – eyes shut, the white sand warm between her bare toes. The place was beautiful beyond belief, but it was still unable to ease the grief she felt as she remembered the last time she had been here.

She had married James right here on this spot three years ago to the day. Dressed in a simple white shift dress, miniature white roses attempting to tame her long dark curls, Lisa had been happier than she had ever thought possible. James was

even less formal but utterly irresistible in creased summer trousers and a loose white cotton shirt. His dark hair slightly ruffled and his eyes full of adoration as he looked at his bride to be. The justice of the peace had read their vows as they held hands and laughed at the sheer joy of being young, in love and staying in a five star resort on the Caribbean island of the Dominican Republic. They had seen the years blissfully stretching ahead of them, together forever. They planned their children, two she said, he said four so they compromised on three (two girls and a boy of course); where they would live, the travelling they would do together – it was all certain, so they had thought then.

But that seemed such a long time ago now. A lot can change in just a few years – a lot of heartache can change a person and drive a wedge through the strongest ties, break even the deepest love. Three years to the day and they had returned, though this time not for the beachside marriages the island was famous for but for one of its equally popular quickie divorces.

Lisa let out a sigh that was filled with pain and regret. What could she do but move on, find a new life and new dreams? – the old one was beyond repair. How could this beautiful place, with its lush green coastline, eternity of azure blue sea and endless sands be a place for the agony she felt now?

The man stood watching from the edge of the palm trees. He couldn't take his eyes off the dark-haired woman he saw standing at the water's edge, gazing out to sea as though she was waiting for something – or someone. She was beautiful, with her slim figure dressed in a loose flowing cotton dress, her crazy hair and bright blue eyes not far off the colour of the sea itself. It wasn't her looks that attracted him though; he came across many beautiful women in his work as a freelance photographer. It was her loneliness and intensity that lured him. Even at some distance he was aware that she was different from any other woman he could meet.

Lisa sensed the man approaching even before she turned around. She had been aware of him standing there staring at her and had felt strangely calm about being observed. She looked at him and felt the instant spark of connection she had only experienced once before. He walked slowly towards her and they held each other's gaze. It felt like meeting a long lost friend – not a stranger on a strange beach.

Later, sitting at one of the many bars on the resort, sipping the local cocktails they began to talk. First pleasantries, their hotels, the quality of the food and friendliness of the locals. Their conversation was strangely hesitant considering the naturalness and confidence of their earlier meeting. Onlookers, however, would have detected the subtle flirtation as they mirrored each other's actions and spoke directly into each other's eyes. Only later, after the alcohol had had its loosening effect, did the conversation deepen. They talked of why they were here and finally, against her judgement, Lisa opened up about her heartache of the past year and how events had led her back to the place where she had married the only man she believed she could ever love. She told him of things that had been locked deep inside her, able to tell no one. She told him how she had felt after she had lost her baby.

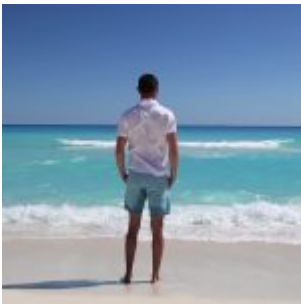
She was six months pregnant and the happiest she had ever been when the pains had started. She was staying with her mother as James was working out of town. He hadn't made it back in time. The doctor had said it was just one of those things, that they could try again. But how could she when she couldn't even look James in the eye. She hated him then, for not being there, for not hurting as much as her but most of all for looking so much like the tiny baby boy that she held for just three hours before he took him away. All through the following months she had withdrawn from her husband, family, friends. Not wanting to recover from the pain she felt – that would have been a betrayal of her son. At the funeral she had refused to stand

next to her husband and the next day she had left him.

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Looking up, Lisa could see her pain reflected in the man's eyes. For the first time in months she didn't feel alone, she felt the unbearable burden begin to lift from her, only a bit but it was a start. She began to believe that maybe she had a future after all and maybe it could be with this man, with his kind hazel eyes, wet with their shared tears.

They had come here to dissolve their marriage but maybe there was hope. Lisa stood up and took James by the hand and led him away from the bar towards the beech where they had made their vows to each other three years ago. Tomorrow she would cancel the divorce; tonight they would work on renewing their promises.



## **SIMON AT THE SHORE LINE**

My girlfriend keeps her halo on the nightstand. From my side of her bed I can just see a glowing arc of it, obscured by my wallet and a box of tissues. Her sheets are white and the lacy bed-skirt hangs down all the way to the floor, where it swishes about softly in the breeze that comes in through the open bay window. We're not exactly on the beach, but we're close enough that you can almost taste the salt in the air.

I always wake to see her stretching her thin arms, yawning and

making soft sighs to herself. Sometimes she hugs her little shoulders. Sometimes she sits cat-like on her haunches, with her hands together in front of her. Sometimes she sways and coos as if receiving a gentle caress; her eyelids flutter, and she smiles, with her mouth closed, content.

For a little while I pretend to be asleep, watching her enjoy the breeze and the sunlight, the coolness of the bed, or whatever it is that seems to bring her so much happiness. She wriggles her shoulders and unfurls her wings; blowing the silk canopy outwards. The billowing sheet collapses in slow motion as she folds them in again. Her dove-white feathers are sweet and smooth; rich, earthy, but somehow immaculately pure. I hold my breath and drink in their beauty as they slide silently together and flutter across her naked body. Lailah, she looks how cream and strawberries taste.

She fits the halo above her head, its glow warming her golden hair. She rises from bed with her wings tucked curtly across her nude back. Her toes touch the floor and she glides across the room, her hips swaying as if she weighs nothing at all.

I'm trying to catch a glimpse of her ass wiggling as she walks, but her wing-tips are in the way. She arches her back and tosses her hair, and I'm watching the crisp morning light play across the little gap between her thighs. After all this time, I'm still consumed with lust for her. Kissing her lips is like drinking great draughts of cool milk and spiced honey. I wonder, not for the first time, if this is all wrong. I even asked her once, when she was still flush and sticky with sex, "Lailah," I asked her, "Is this wrong?"

< 2 >

Maybe I'll never know. Maybe I have to figure it out for myself. She kneels at the window. Birds are just starting to sing outside, and she runs her pearl-colored comb through her hair. A hundred strokes on one side, a hundred more on the

other. Watching her, I fall back into the lazy sort of late-morning dreams that are so full of meaning at the time, but later I know will seem foolish. As the morning breaks, I can see her in little snips and vignettes, half mixed in with my wandering dreams. Now she's singing gently. Now she's eating half a grapefruit and licking the spoon. When I finally throw the sheets off and sit up, she's leaning on the bed at my feet, resting her chin in her hands. She says, "Good morning, Simon."

Cereal with little slices of fruit for breakfast. Clean clothes folded at the foot of the bed. I don't know why I've got things so good; I don't know why I deserve Lailah. Before she leaves for work I make love to her up against the breakfast bar. "Make love", that's always what I call it with her. Other girls I used to "fuck", or "nail", or "screw". It doesn't seem to fit for her though, doesn't seem right. Even with her dress pulled up around her hips and her hair whipping around her shoulders, she seems so above this place and this act. Even biting her lip and arching her back, even spreading her wings in bliss and knocking a vase off the bar, she seems so perfect and innocent.

She preens and straightens herself while I clean up. She kisses me goodbye, and she blows out the door.

I should get out of the house. Maybe go apply for some jobs. I should at least put on some pants and get outside. Pants first though; once I've got that figured out, everything else should fall into place. Pants are in the laundry hamper. Doing the laundry, that'll be a good chore to start the day. Lailah likes to fold the clothes though, I can never do it right. Maybe I'll let it wait till this afternoon, get some more perspective before I decide whether to do it myself or let Lailah take care of it later. I've got to have pants though. Maybe I'll just wear them dirty. Lailah hates that, kind of makes me look like a shlub. Don't want people to think I'm the kind of guy who can't find a clean pair of pants in the

morning.

< 3 >

Sometimes I hate how good things are with Lailah. I should just go hang out with Rick and Sarah. Maybe kick back a few beers, maybe get smoked out. I grab some clothes out of the hamper and throw them on before I rush out the front door, almost tripping down the stairs in my flip flops, almost fleeing from the perfect antebellum porch.

\*

“You know, Simon, I can smell her on you,” Rick says. He’s leaning back into the patched old sofa we found out in front of the house down the street. I wish he would stop staring at me with those blood-red eyes. Sarah is pressed into him so closely it seems like you can only see her eyes and her purple lipstick-smile. Rick is running his fingers through her black hair, running them up and down her short little horns.

“You spend too much time with her,” she says, and she flicks her tail behind her, rhythmically. “What do you two even do together?”

“I don’t know,” I say. The room is dark, but it’s beach weather outside; there are birds chirping. All the blinds are closed and there’s a black bed sheet covering half the sliding glass door that opens up into the weed-ridden backyard. Why does it have to be so fucking dark in here? Their eyes are boring into me; these guys are my friends, but I always feel so weak under their stares. I feel like an open book, like they’re flipping through the pages, smirking and whispering to each other. “Nothing unusual; normal stuff, I guess.” I look around the room for help, or inspiration. There’s a deer’s head mounted above the fireplace, I think it came with the house. Matthias is lying like a heap of unwashed clothes on the bamboo rocking chair across from me, totally blazed up or strung out on something, he’s been like that since I got here,



and that was before ten. No help there. "We go to the beach most evenings, especially if the moon is out." I say, "We help out at the shelter on Wednesdays. Sometimes we visit my mom in Madison on the weekends."

< 4 >

Sarah laughs, "Yeah, but I mean," and she licks her lips, "what do you do?" I've got to get out; I just can't take their razor sharp stares anymore.

"I need a drink," I complain as I get up from the bleached-yellow lawn chair.

"We've got Equis in the fridge," offers Rick.

"Hey man," Matt says, his voice croaking and dry, "get me one of whatever you're getting, huh?"

Rick and Sarah, they're always so clean and neat, but their house is filthy. It looks like a bomb went off in a middle-class yard sale. Something stinks in this place, and it's not the ragged B.O. stench of cheap weed, not the creeping sourness of all the unwashed dishes and bowls full of molding food stacked high in the kitchen. It smells like sulfur here, like rotten eggs and vinegar.

The fridge creaks when I open it; its contents always remind me of the chem labs back at Southern State. Weird bottles and dark plastic jars filled with thick yellow and green juices. Tupperwares with troublingly inadequate tinfoil lids; the odd open can of Coke. Just like the grad lab, there's some chilled beer and liquor at the back. I can hear Rick and Sarah giggling and whispering in the living room and I just know they're about to go at it. It should probably be a stiff drink, then.

I take my time searching for reagents; half a dried up lime, a plastic tray of ice cubes, and a bottle of what smells like bourbon. The label's been peeled off, so I check the color. I

stir the bottle and look for bubbles forming at the surface of the brown liquid. I was never a very good student, but I was one hell of a lab tech. I shovel dirty dishes into the sink to clear room for my workspace, and I can hear Sarah in the living room cooing and breathing heavy. I wonder what Matthias is doing, if he's watching. I wonder if he's got one hand down his greasy sweatpants; I think probably he has.

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The first step is the ice cubes. I crack a tray of them and pick them out one by one. Too small and they'll be wasted, watering down the drink. Too large and they'll never get the drink cooled. Adding the bourbon is easy; just have to avoid too much splashing and churning.

I always preferred the lab to classes anyways. Glistening tubes impregnated with vividly colored admixtures; clear, bubbling solutions surging through coiled tubes and boiling up in frothy reactions. Simple things, common and ugly, but with so much hidden potential, and so simple to bring it out to full and magical life. This was beauty, this was creation. The endless diagrams of chemical cycles had no more appeal for me than the frank anatomical illustrations of a sex-ed class do for a horny teenager.

A lime isn't just a lime; it's the sweet bitterness in your mouth that drowns out the sharp tinge of alcohol. A lab tech isn't just a grimy grad student, he gets to decide everything's purpose and destiny; he gets to play God. I can hear Rick growling; the lights dim all across the house. There's a thin pall of smoke creeping into the kitchen, and the tinge of brimstone curls my lip as I squeeze the lime into my drink. Now comes the big risk that makes an experiment truly great. The wet, slapping, moaning noise in the living room escalates as I stand for several long seconds staring into the fridge, contemplating the open can of coke. The metal feels cool to my fingers; I can see no greasy lip mark around the lid. Some things you can control, some you can't. I pour

the contents, whatever they might be, into my drink.

This is why I never graduated from Southern State, why I make my living giving blood plasma and sperm samples; titrating and nitrating shit for junkies on the side. All great discoveries were made by accident; Curie and radiation, Rutherford and the atomic nucleus. Take a chance, you only live once. The liquid is a promising brown color; there are a few bubbles forming in it, presumably, but not certainly, from carbonation. The noise from the other room quiets down as I stir the concoction; the lights in the house brighten slightly. I grab Matt a bottle of Equis and slouch back to the living room to find Rick and Sarah lying in a heap, loosely clothed, on the floor. Rick's got purple smudges of lipstick arranged improbably all over his body, and sure enough, Matthias is passed out, with a hand down his sweatpants. I toss him the bottle.

< 6 >

"I hope all those moonlit walks on the beach are worth it, Simon", says Rick, pulling his pants together, "because you have no idea what you're missing."

\*

I tell everybody I want to go visit Lailah at work; Rick says they don't have anything else to do, so what the hell? It's a long walk down to the mall, but we're used to walking everywhere; none of us owns a car since Matthias' old Toyota rusted out. Matthias blinks in the daylight, and tries to get a glimpse at the sun through wincing eyes and fanned fingers. He seems surprised, like maybe he didn't expect it to be there. Rick unfurls one vast, leathery wing to shade Sarah, who clutches him tightly, her claws digging playfully into his skin. There's a sea breeze blowing in, whispering along the old salt-worn wooden fence that stretches down the street, whipping through the palms that reach up uneasily around the neighborhood; the air smells like salt and fish, and suntan oil on sweaty tourists. "I'm feeling like barbeque", says

Rick, "let's get Mongolian for lunch." Sarah says she just wants to hurry.

"Yeah man", Matthias says, glancing, confused, at the cloudless blue sky, "I can't take this like, sun." He turns and pushes forward. The scarred stubs of his wings twitch painfully across his back as he leads the way, his sandals crunching on the little shells and pebbles that line the street.

\*

We're passing by the little shops and restaurants downtown when Rick stops us, "Hang on," he says, "I need to buy some catnip." We stand out front of the pet store with the little puppies pawing and lapping at us through the glass. You want to take one of the little slobbering things home, but you know it'd just ruin the furniture and crap all over the carpet.

Matthias is telling me how they raise these puppies in dark warehouses. I ask Sarah what Rick needs with half a dozen bags of catnip, but her blood-red eyes just stare indifferently at me over a big pink bubble of gum she's blowing up. Matthias is saying some of the puppies, they get sold, and they probably lead long happy lives of fetching papers and getting scratched behind the ears, he's saying it must be like some kind of dog heaven, just to have a family to belong to. Sarah is popping the bubble, and she draws the wet pink mess back in with a single skilled lick, and her eyes never leave mine through the whole motion, much as I try to look away. She reminds me of a snake, standing slack and curved, flicking that gum in and out of her mouth.

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"Some of them aren't that lucky, though," Matthias is saying, "most of them, probably." I ask him about the unlucky ones, and he says that when a puppy gets old enough, it isn't worth selling anymore. He says they, you know, they usually get rid

of them.

The sales girl is telling Rick that he must have a very happy cat, and he turns to her and gives her his pearly-white smile and replies cheerfully, "I hate cats."

\*

"What ever happened to your halo, Matt?" Rick and Sarah are switching the parking tickets between the cars as we walk along the tree-shaded storefronts; they stop sometimes to share deep, breathless kisses and shameless gropes. Someone's going to pay a forty-dollar ticket they didn't earn. Someone's going to get a free ride, like they were just forgiven. Someone's going to have Sarah's ass print on the dusty hood of their mustang; wonder what they'll make of the tail-marks she's sweeping out.

"Oh, you know, it's still around." I knew Matthias all through college, but it wasn't till I started dating Lailah that I found out he was an angel, or was anyways. Hard to imagine that the guy who has seven stitches from crashing through our glass-top coffee table in a drunken stupor is supposed to be some kind of celestial being.

"So you don't know where it is?" Rick and Sarah are making out under a dogwood in front of a family diner; Sarah's little bat wings are fluttering, and her pointed tail is whipping around behind her, lifting up her skirt.

"Of course I know where it is! What do I, hey, what do I look like to you?" I eye him doubtfully, he's a mess. His hair's long and unkempt. He's still wearing those grimy sweatpants; the wife beater he's got on is full of holes.

"So you know where it is, but you don't actually have it." Rick and Sarah, they have to kiss around two pairs of fangs. It sounds like a quiet little knife fight. "Matthias," I say slowly, "did you pawn off your halo?" A pudgy guy with an

apron and a little paper clerk's hat is coming out of the diner to ask Rick and Sarah would they please stop that. He must mean the furious dentistry they're performing on each other.

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"What?"

I think I can hear Sarah laughing, and Rick saying smoothly, no. "I ask only because you also pawned Rick's microwave and my old stereo. It would seem to fit the pattern."

"It's not... no, Simon, look. It's not exactly like a pawn shop. I know this guy, I can trust him, and he knows I'll buy it back. Anyways, I don't know why somebody would even want it. I mean, what would they do with it?"

"Well, whatever you used it for, I suppose." Sarah is hissing at a middle-aged woman through the diner's big street-facing window, she's licking her lips and staring down the husband. "Someone would want a halo, right? I mean, God's sign of His presence; that's gotta be worth something. Someone's gonna want that, I'm sure."

"Not me man," he says. He stares squinting up into the sky, "I'm not sure at all."

\*

Lailah works at the Victoria's Secret at the mall. Supposedly she and the others have got a little network going, all across the country. She says they've got forty store managers. She's working a register, nodding curtly and listening to the customers with an easy look of concern and attention. She's wearing a little white sundress, the kind that would light up if we were out on the beach, drinking in the rays and glowing gold, the perfect color to frame her clear white skin. I want to tell her how much she means to me, how beautiful she is. All I can manage is, "Hey Lailah, you look great."

I drift towards her helplessly. Once she waves and greets me with that voice that somehow always sounds clear and pure like a song, or like fresh water, when her golden eyes soften as they lay on me, I'm hers. She asks me about my morning. She wants to know have I eaten and am I still feeling okay after that cold I caught last week. With most people, small talk is just small talk, but I can't listen to her voice long enough, I can't get enough of her giggles and sighs and her curt glances. I'm a glutton for her.

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I tell her about Matthias and his halo. I tell her I don't think it's right, for him to just get rid of it like that. I ask her, "Don't you like, need it for something?"

"Yeah, sure you need it. You can get by without it for a while, though, just like anything else you own, and if it comes right down to it, it's just a thing, just an object."

"It seems kind of important to me, like maybe you shouldn't just leave it at a pawn shop." I try to lean in close to her over the check-out counter. Why can't she understand how serious this is? "Shouldn't you like, tell him to go get it back? Maybe we can go buy it."

Lailah sighs and lazily rolls her eyes in frustration. I could just reach across and kiss her right now. "Matthias... it's too late to bother with him, Simon. He's lost his wings, anyways. It's never going to be the same."

"Why not? Doesn't he deserve another chance?"

"He's had a second chance Simon, more than one."

I ask her about the other girls, if they're giving her any trouble. She's shift manager now. "Lailah," I ask her, "why this place? With everything you can do, isn't this place just, you know, kind of beneath you? What are you, I mean, you and the girls like you doing here?"

She shrugs her shoulders, her wings whispering behind her, she says, "I think we're doing great work here."

"Really? Can't you like, save people's lives right before they get into a car crash? Can't you tell people not to get onto a plane that's going to fall out of the sky? I've heard you can heal people, can't you heal the lame and the sick or something?"

"You're thinking about guardian angels; that's not my thing. And healing... I've done a lot of healing, Simon, but it just gets tedious, and afterwards, they're not thankful for very long anyways; it's the speeding ticket of miracles."

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"Well, just what are you guys doing? I mean why are you here, what's so special about this place?"

"We're here because it's something definite; we know we can do it, and we'll have something to show for it. We've tried other things, believe me, but this is something that we know can work."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look around you," and she gestures to the crowd of young women and couples sifting through the tote bags and pull-out drawers of colorful panties, "Ten years ago this store stood for nothing but sex and lust. Now mothers bring their daughters here. We sell as many tank tops as thongs." Sure enough, there are two little teenyboppers trying to get past me to look at some sweaters. At the back of the store, Sarah's trying to tell some girl and her mom how thongs are considered classy and sophisticated these days. She's trying to get them to look at a pair of crotchless panties. They don't even sell those here.

I lean into the counter and I ask her, "Don't you think you should be doing something more worthy? Isn't there supposed to



be some higher plan?" Under the smooth glass counter display there are ten shades of Pink-brand sunglasses, a little sign says ten percent of their purchase proceeds are going to fight breast cancer.

"I don't know."

"You don't know if there's a plan?"

"Maybe there used to be. I don't know. Someone knows."

"So there is a plan. Are halter-tops and half price Bermudas part of the grand design? Am I?"

"Simon, please," she gives me her sad, distant look, her lips pouting just a little and her brow creasing, "it's not that simple. Do you remember the parable about the master who left his land and his money in the care of his servants? Some of them were very careful with his wealth, but some of them risked everything on a big gamble."

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"Well, what were they supposed to do?"

"That's the point, Simon. He never told them. They all did what they thought best according to what he'd taught them, but they didn't all agree on what that was." She's sorting a bunch of change into her till and telling someone that Capri's are still the regular price. "That's what it's like for us," she says. Rick is trying to sell his catnip to a pair of lanky teenagers outside. He's got it in little Ziploc bags, and he's telling them it's fancy weed from Brazil. "We try our best, we do what we think is right."

Matthias is lounging against the storefront, blocking everyone's view of the mannequins in the window. The teenagers are asking him if Rick's stuff is really as good as he says it is. "It's not for you guys," he says, "you shouldn't be smoking that shit." They buy three bags. Lailah's saying

people like her, people like Rick and Sara, and even Matthias, they're supposed to have a mission, but sometimes they forget, or they just get tired of it. She says thanks for coming to visit her. She says she always likes to see me, and to know that I'm thinking of her.

"Lailah," I ask her, "you want to meet me at the skating rink tonight at eight?" She says sure. I tell her, "Don't forget."

\*

"I can't stand that place anymore," Sarah complains, flicking a black curl of hair from her face, "the angels have had it under their thumbs for too long, it's no fun."

"No fun at all, my little imp," Rick agrees. I can't believe that the hundreds of other people in the food court don't notice his horns, or at least the huge bat wings he's got folded awkwardly behind him in the little booth seat. Maybe they just don't care.

"And they've been meddling at Hot Topic, too, you know," Sarah continues, glaring at no one in particular, "I saw this middle-aged woman wearing Crocs in there last week. No one even sneered at her, I swear, not one sneer." She takes a slow, rueful draw from her near-empty soda cup; her cranky stare daring anyone to get pissed off with the gurgling noise it makes. "Come on, Matthias," she says, taking his limp hand, "We're gonna go see what people are reading at the Barnes and Noble and sneer down our noses at them."

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I ask Rick if the demons have got any set-ups like the angels have at Victoria's. "Not many," he says, "see the guy over there, near the sunglass hut?" He points one clawed finger over my shoulder, and I twist in my seat to look, "That guy trying to get girls to try on skin lotion?" I tell him that I see the guy, a bald Hispanic guy in a Hawaiian T-shirt. "He's one of us." The guy's talking up some couple, trying to take

the girl's hand and rub something on her arm. He's got a forked tongue that flicks in and out and licks his lips. I can see there's a scaly black tail running out from the back of his shirt.

"We've got a lot of guys who only want to be cops," he says, "they just want to rough people up and stuff like that. It used to be popular to be a lobbyist; we've still got a few politicians."

"Well, what are you guys doing, you and Sarah, I mean? Aren't you supposed to be corrupting someone, or like, driving somebody insane?"

"How do you know we're not?"

Across the food court, I can see Sarah and Matthias in the bookstore being snooty to this guy who's reading something from the self-help aisle. They're trying to catch his attention and then shake their heads disapprovingly. The poor guy kind of deflates and shuffles away, holding the book like something unpleasant someone else gave him to hang on to for a moment. Rick is explaining all the really big jobs they used to do, how he'd seduce nuns and make them leap from bell towers in shame. I can see Matthias catch up with the self-help-reading guy and try to console him; maybe he's telling him it was just a stupid joke.

"You ever hear about those nasty Papal elections in the middle ages that would end with blood in the streets and armed gangs walking around clubbing everyone who backed the wrong guy?" I tell him maybe I do, yeah. "We used to pull that kind of thing." He nods to himself, maybe remembering the good days, reminiscing about choking some bishop in the alleys of Rome. In the bookstore, Sarah is pulling Matthias aside and scolding him, maybe telling him not to ruin her fun, maybe trying to tell him that he should take this more seriously.

"I guess it does get a little boring after a while," Rick says. "And it's not as easy to corrupt people anymore, not as easy as you might think, and not half as rewarding."

Matthias is skulking out of the bookstore with his head down, and I can see Sarah watching him go, tapping her toe and folding her arms and vaguely fuming. The guy who had the self-help book taps her on the shoulder, and he looks like he's trying to talk to her politely. She covers up her surprise by just glaring at him, working her jaw like she's chewing on some gum, and idly twisting a strand of her hair. The guy, maybe he's telling her it's no big deal if a guy needs a little help every now and then, maybe he's saying that he's not ashamed to want to try and get his life back on track. She bites back at him with some quick retort and he gives her the finger as he scuttles away, glancing resentfully over his shoulder.

"People just aren't that good anymore," Rick says. "Maybe we've done our job too well."

\*

From the steps of our old apartment building you can just about see the ocean if the trees are blowing the right way, and that's where me and Matthias are sitting, sharing a couple of beers and waiting for eight-o'clock to roll around. Lailah and I used to live here, till she asked me to move in with her. Where she got the big plantation house that we're in now, I never asked. She'd probably just say, "God provides". Maybe that's true. I keep asking myself why she's with me, why she's here at all. Maybe that's the answer, I'm not sure.

"You can almost see the ocean from here," Matthias says, craning his head to see past the swaying line of trees. "I forgot about that."

"This place wasn't too great, but yeah, you almost can see it from here, sure."

"I'm sorry about the table, Simon."

"I'm sorry about the stitches."

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Matthias stares down into his bottle, "I guess I had it coming, way I was acting."

"You sure you remember all that? You were pretty messed up."

"Yeah, sure I do."

Somewhere just beyond those trees people are coming in and out of the water and realizing that they've got big bright burns all across their backs. Probably a few guys are finishing off their beers and putting away their tackle. Maybe some kid doesn't want to leave his sand castle because the tide's coming in and it'll just get washed away.

"I'm sorry about the stereo too."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'll pay it back sometime."

"Alright, man. Don't worry about it, though."

Lailah and I used to go out to the beach around this time of day. The tourists would all be packing it in and we'd be the only ones schlepping out with two fold-out chairs and a couple of drinks. We'd hunt for shells along the shore, even though it'd already been combed over a hundred times. Sometimes you never know, you just might find something beautiful.

"What do you think about Lailah, Matt? I mean, you must go way back with her, right?"

The sun's going down now; it must be getting close to eight. "Lailah?" Matthias says, "She's a good girl, Simon. You need to hang on to her."

Lailah and me, we'd sit out on the beach watching the sun set and the darkness creep in over the water, until it washed over us and we were alone except for a few lights behind us, and a few distant ones in the water and in the sky.

"Yeah, I know."

"No, man, listen to me, I mean it. She's good, like, completely good. You can't let her go man. You don't know what it would be like for someone like her to be hurt that much. It'd probably destroy her. She'd probably never be the same."

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"I'm not saying I'm gonna, but I think she's a little stronger than that, don't you?"

"I wouldn't be so sure, Simon."

"Hey!" Rick shouts at us from below. "We ought to go, huh?" He and Sarah are looking up at us from the yellowed grass in front of the building, littered with broken bottles and liquor labels. Somewhere police sirens are howling.

"Yeah sure, Rick," I shout back, "let's go."

\*

The skating rink behind our old apartment has been about to go out of business for as long as I can remember. No one will let it, though; maybe there are just too many memories of first kisses and hand-holdings there. Too many first dates and educated-guess gropings beneath the cheap strips of neon glow-in-the-dark tape and green plastic stars. Maybe a place like that can't really die until all those memories are gone.

Every Friday night the rink is packed with twenty-somethings like me who should be giving serious thought to becoming adults. We should all be at home preparing our taxes, or sampling wines. Me and Lailah's crowd, we should move on and forget how we made friends here or got shorted by the soda

machine. Some of us maybe should be ashamed of the things we've done; one too many people stood up or left out of the couple's skate. Something keeps us coming back to the hypnotizing darkness and the bright lights. Maybe it's the flowing mass of strangers and old friends, the endless curve that you can climb out of at any spot and find a bench to rest on, maybe try to cop a little feel on. At the rink, the aim is to be aimless. It's enough just to keep pace and move with the crowd.

Matthias likes it here, he just watches from the sides. "Everyone's happy," he told me once, "Or at least, they look like it, or if they're unhappy, at least they have something else to think about."

Lailah and I are skating easily, hand-in-hand. She's light, like her skates are barely touching the rink. Her hand is cool to the touch, not clammy. I ask her, "Can you ever go back?" She shakes her head, her hair rolling in long, breezy waves beneath the pseudo-strobe light of the disco ball, "No," she says. It's peaceful here with her; I can't imagine why I've got life so good. Sometimes I tug her around the turns so she speeds up and almost slips, and she giggles and I can see her cheeks blush, even in this fake twilight. Sometimes we move around younger couples, just kids who maybe are making the same mistakes that we did. I want to say that they should know better, but then again, so should we.

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Rick and Sara are sharing a root beer float, off by the dining area. They're not bad people. They love each other, I'm sure. Maybe people like them have a bad rap, or maybe they were just born into a bad situation. It isn't their fault, and at least those two have someone to love.

The old, recycled music is loud enough that there's no need to talk. The hissing sound of a hundred skate wheels always reminds me of a long ocean wave, ebbing and flowing as the

music changes. You could almost think the maze of green plastic stars above us is the real night sky. When you go back outside, it's almost a shock that the stars are so coldly lit and distant. It seems sad. People shuffle to their cars in little clinging groups; it seems so lonely. I ask Lailah, "What happens if you lose your wings?" She says, for one thing, you can't fly.

The music changes. The loud, rolling breakers of skating noise change to a low hiss and bubble, the sound of the couple's skate. Some people leave the rink, others pull each other close. Lailah wraps her wings around us, the canopy of her feathers warming the glaring light. The shifting colors seem to change more slowly, and then not to change at all, but simply to flow across her face, now lighting her rosy cheeks, now brushing through her hair. Lailah watches me with her golden eyes, and we're alone. I take her hands in mine and lean away. She follows and we spin together beneath the cover of her wings.

I want to ask her why I deserve to have her love. I want to know what she sees about our world that makes it worth being here. It must seem so simple and dark to her. It must be lonely. Our world must be like a cheap knock-off to her. Any love I can give her must just be a shadow of what she knew before, but staring into her eyes, I know that she's truly, totally contented. I ask her, "What is it like to be here?"

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She looks into my eyes for a long moment, her own golden eyes starting to glisten over. "What if," she says, "what if your parents sent you away when you were very young? What if all you ever wanted was to make them happy, to do the right thing in their eyes?" She looks away, "Imagine yourself young and helpless. All you ever wanted was to study at your father's feet, to know your mother's loving touch. Imagine being lost, without enough of either knowledge or love. What if you never knew if they were watching? What if you never even knew if



they were still alive? What if you started to imagine that you'd just imagined everything?"

"It must be lonely."

Her milk-white arms embrace me, pulling me into her soft breast with a weakness that could break your heart. Flashing green and blue beams light the canopy of her wings as I kiss her little lips, glowing red in the flashing halo around us.

"It's not so lonely," she whispers, "It's not so lonely anymore."