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Sense of Color


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5/10/2011



Thesis Mentor



Second Reader

Sense of Color

By

Robert Lombari

Introduction

Good fiction will both entertain and evoke something—whether ineffable or concrete—in its reader. I have always favored fiction that engenders some form of sensation, preferably that dreadful sense of the unknown. Horror fiction has been steadily marginalized, in regards to The Canon, with a few sparks lighting up paths for others to follow. Within the past ten years, authors like Shirley Jackson and Stephen King have been granted honorary positions in secondary and undergraduate educations, and perhaps forthcoming years will see them pondered over and researched the way scholarship has recently done with John le Carré. Yet this stigma all genre writers must overcome remains, and, unless critically dubbed “literary” (although this is problematic, as Terry Eagleton has shown in his *Literary Theories: an Introduction*), genre writers will be forced to work from the margins for the moment. And yet horror fiction endures in popular culture, and I believe it is that term “popular” that makes scholars cast their noses up, because this “genre,” when written well, manages to tap into one of humanity’s most atavistic and indefatigable emotions—fear.

H.P. Lovecraft worded it best when he wrote, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear” (1). Fear is a commonality between all people—everyone fears something—it is embedded in our history. The *idea* of fear is more complicated than the actual sensation, however. When you are afraid, you know it, you are driven by it, some are even commanded. But to explain *why* something terrifies you requires much more knowledge of psychology and control of expression. Gary Smith is terrified of spiders; one asks him why; Gary says spiders are ugly. So does Gary fear all ugly things? Is it the spider’s eight hairy legs, the strange groping mandibles, the oddly shaped body? Gary cannot say, and we can see how explaining one’s fears becomes difficult when the surface is breeched for analysis. Psychoanalysts, such as Jacques

Lacan and Julia Kristeva, are much more adept in such endeavors; however, as Lovecraft explained, the origins of humanity's fears can be traced to those primal days when our progenitors found themselves surrounded by inexplicable phenomena. In those unfathomable times, individuals developed their understanding of the world through pleasure and pain, which is not far from the way in which many children develop their understanding of survival (Lovecraft 2). This idea of visceral sensations and encounters has always demanded attention in one manner or another. Our lives are wrought from organic fragility, and that sense of the finite hangs over every individual's head like a dangerous promise. My novella, "Sense of Color," seizes upon this atavism—the implication of one's own mortality and resulting fear. Death is the oldest of all fears, the cruelest unknown; it will never be understood. This idea of the unknown, which I have employed through Aiden's strange experience with music, also predicates Freud's notion of "The Uncanny."

Freud's essay attempts to shed light on the uncanny, or what is not known (*unheimlich*). What he achieves is a correlation between *unheimlich* and what *is* known (*heimlich*). Freud posits that uncanny sensations germinate from a primordial recognition of something familiar (523); hence the paradox that we fear familiar unknowns. Lovecraft substantiates this theory in his discussion of primordial humans and the notion of fears embedded in a physiological layer that moves forward from generation to generation (3). In my thesis, the reader will notice what accounts for the unknown is represented by worms (a known image). Worms evoke various sensations, but the one here—and perhaps most common—is that of death and decay. Aiden recognizes the worms for what they are without understanding them; he has played into his primordial fear of death and recognizes the obvious portent. The reader, of course, will not be blind to this implication either, and the development of an uncanny sensation increases. This

endeavor could not be completed, however, without invoking one of imaginative literature's most important elements: Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief.

The willing suspension of disbelief, which Coleridge discusses in his *Biographia Literaria*, comprises the "poetic faith" (152) that he and Wordsworth were attempting to invoke with their *Lyrical Ballads*. To successfully harvest this suspension of disbelief, a writer, in my opinion, must offer readers a world in which they can be invested, a world that could be only minutes down the road. Particularly in works of the weird or fantastic, the author has a responsibility to ground the reader in something they can digest without much trouble. By offering an imaginative world through this scope, the author makes it much more likely that the reader will suspend disbelief and grow fully immersed in the story. With this purpose in mind, I grounded Aiden's remarkable ability in the factual phenomenon of synesthesia. Synesthesia is the involuntary activation of one perception by another. Aiden's ability to see the colors is always precipitated by music, and therefore falls under this category. The story, of course, is not merely *about* this marvel; it instead asks what extraordinary circumstances could result from such a situation, what possibilities there may be in an area of science still widely understudied? Aiden learns that the possibilities are both profound and horrible, and the journey to that realization is what I have developed here.

Fiction holds an inimitable position in media; no movie or television series or radio broadcast can compare with delving into the pages of a truly evocative story. Fiction allows a more intimate connection between the work and reader; it requires something from the reader, and in turn gives back. A film churns out plots and concrete images as if they were set on a conveyor belt, and the audience, though sometimes compelled to think, does not have to employ much of their imagination to cull the meaning, the depth, the beauty of the work. Indeed, how an

author chooses to play with and instill sensation in readers belongs to the author's discretion, but the effect must be for the reader. Whether an author wishes to terrify, elate, sadden, depress, or confound, the key remains with the reader; only the reader can choose to take the journey, and only the reader can grant purpose to the author's intentions.

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Sense of Color

By

Robert Lombardi

Aiden sat at the dining room table with his textbook open in front of him. Midday light filtered through the beige curtains ahead, washing the boy's face and hands in that warm yellow, the kind that's somehow heavier than it is in winter—more *there*. His dog, Birdie, sat at his feet, patient and quiet like she was during all his lessons. Mr. Pierce stood behind his left shoulder; Aiden knew this because the sharp twang of the man's cologne was stronger on that side; it made him think of eucalyptus mixed with astringent: a smell that reminded him of the high school locker room.

“Come on, Aiden,” Mr. Pierce said. “From the top.” Aiden spread his fingers over the book's leaves, sighing and dropping his head.

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,” Aiden began, and recited the poem to the end with minimal errors. Mr. Pierce dropped a quick grunt or “good-good” to show his approval, but Aiden didn't really care. Something there is that doesn't love a tutor, he thought.

After the reading lesson, Aiden heard Mr. Pierce gathering up his piles of books, pens, and notes and shoving them into his briefcase—Mr. Pierce wasn't one to let organization get in the way of his schedule. “I'm leaving you a copy of ‘The Ancient Mariner,’” Mr. Pierce said, grabbing Aiden's hand and slapping a thin book into it. “I want you to memorize the first six stanzas for next time.”

“But that’s a lot,” Aiden contended, and reached down to give Birdie a pat. “How about three instead?” He heard Mr. Pierce stroll over to where the dining room window gazed out on the yard—the man was chuckling dryly.

“Lessons aren’t meant to be haggled,” Mr. Pierce said. “The six stanzas are fair. You just want more time to rot your brain.”

“No brain rotting for me, Mr. Pierce. I can’t even watch TV.”

“Don’t placate me, Aiden.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means don’t spit in my face and tell me we’re at sea.” And Aiden thought the man sounded like a sea captain reprimanding one of his crew—or maybe he was the Ancient Mariner, slowly training his crossbow on the circling albatross. Something about the way Mr. Pierce spoke, as if he were constantly delivering a speech to an empty room, unnerved Aiden in a way that he couldn’t put words to. Sometimes he liked the guy, but most days he just quietly shuffled through his lessons, not wanting to instigate one of these strange admonishments.

Aiden stood away from the table; Birdie rose with him and clacked into the kitchen where her water bowl awaited. “I’ll do the work,” he said, and snatched the familiar cane from its resting place near his chair. “I have the time.” He turned toward Mr. Pierce’s voice, the clouds of his eyes nesting blankly on the man’s barrel chest; if Aiden could still see, he would be confused by the tiny smile puckering Mr. Pierce’s wide face.

There was a silence then; Aiden raised his head uncertainly, then groped for the chair back in that slow, patient way he had. “I said I’ll do the work, Mr. Pierce.”

“I know you will, Aiden,” Mr. Pierce said. “Because you’re a good boy, and you understand responsibility. It’s essential. Especially for children like you.”

“Why?”

Mr. Pierce cleared his throat; Aiden heard the man’s heavy shoes clumping back toward him, like a drill sergeant. “I’ve taught plenty of blind children—hundreds I think—all over the country. Different religions and upbringings. Cultures and whatever. But you all have one common trait that always saddens me.”

“We suck at darts?”

“No,” Mr. Pierce said. “You’re all prone to apathy.”

Aiden fell silent. He couldn’t identify either empathy or criticism in Mr. Pierce’s tone. The man had no right to judge him; *he* wasn’t a blind fifteen-year-old. Aiden laughed, trying to shake off the heavy tension. “Thanks Mr. Miyagi,” he said. “You really know how to brighten a room.”

“I’m serious,” Mr. Pierce contended. “It’s a serious matter. You’re ahead of the game, Aiden. And I’ll see to it you stay there.”

“Well, thanks.”

“You’re tired,” Mr. Pierce said indulgently. “Maybe I’ll harass you with it some other time. Anyway, tell your mother I said thanks for the coffee.” Aiden heard Mr. Pierce’s heavy shoes clap down the hall, a sharp echo of leather on wood. “Coleridge,” Mr. Pierce called back, opening the front door, and for a second Aiden thought the man was clearing his throat. “The first six stanzas of his ballad—memorize them.”

Aiden waved him off. “I’ll do it. Don’t worry.”

“All right. I’ll see you Friday.” The door closed. Aiden liked Mr. Pierce about as much as any student can like a teacher, but sometimes the man seemed off, like a drawer set on a bad angle and won’t close right. Besides, Aiden figured his time could be better spent, and that’s why

he never regretted the sound of Mr. Pierce packing up for the day. Being alone was best—alone like he was now.

Well, his mother was upstairs in her office, which meant he was *mostly* alone. During the first half of spring, his mom was so busy with returns that she only left that office to prepare meals for the two of them, and that was only if he hadn't already snuck to the cereal. Aiden didn't mind; before the accident his mother was never home—she used to be an account manager with some big-wig accounting firm—but after the accident, she claimed her heart wasn't in that anymore. Aiden didn't believe that, though; he knew why she stayed home with him—guilt has a way of making people do strange things.

He walked toward the kitchen, his cane tapping smartly on the floor and baseboards of the narrow hall ahead. He entered the kitchen with two quick smacks to either side of the doorway—numerous black scuffs marked this ritual on the white paint. Birdie barked from across the room, letting him know she wasn't underfoot. “Good girl,” he said, and felt for the fridge. He opened it, snatched a bottled water from where they were always kept, then shut the door and followed the same path out with the bottle bulging in the back pocket of his jeans. He climbed the steps with a slight lurch, using one hand to guide his way along the railing, and always keeping the number of steps in mind. Aiden found it easier just to memorize the number instead of constantly banging his cane on each raiser, but sometimes he would lose count and take an extra step up at the end and almost fall on his face.

He could hear a radio blaring in his mother's office down the hall, and chugging beneath that the arduous clack and clatter of her adding machine. His mother enjoyed working numbers the old-fashioned way; she claimed it kept parts of her brain sharp. She wasn't a technophobe or anything (she had all the various accoutrements any savvy accountant would need), but she

found more pleasure in analog technologies. One day she told Aiden that a record player, even a tape player, is more human than an iPod. To which Aiden laughed and said that he'd never trade his iPod for a Dean Martin record. His mother, perhaps happy enough that Aiden knew who Dean Martin was, dropped the subject.

Still, hearing his mother's small fingers pecking away at that clunky calculator saddened him in a way he couldn't understand. The radio, though—at least it was there to keep her company. He heard the song she was listening to, flowing soft and smooth through the office door. He stood in the hall not far away and closed his eyes and listened. It was a country song, one he'd never heard, and it was soft and crooning and doleful. Poignant notes like that, notes that evoked feeling and not just quickened the blood, always brought a little color back into his new, darker world. Not much. A quick flicker of blue, or a string of red. More often than not he figured them as memories. And more often than not they made him very bitter. But not today.

He ambled into his room, tapping his cane to either side of the doorframe, smiling as he took the three steps to his bed and laid the cane down. There was a guitar in the middle of the mattress; Aiden picked it up by the neck and took two steps left, where he knew the stool to be. He removed the water bottle from his pocket, sat, tucked the light, wooden body of the guitar to his chest, and gave a perfunctory strum. His head tingled; nothing compared to the whisper of a perfectly tuned guitar (he'd been promised a new one for his birthday, an electric one). He strummed again, smiling; then he pinched a pick out from his hip pocket, felt along the guitar neck for the fret he wanted, and slid into a warm, lilting rhythm that spread that tingle into his chest and neck.

He wasn't a virtuoso or anything; a year of lessons had brought him to average skill. Oddly, being blind helped; it made his hearing and fingers more sensitive, more capable of

persuading the instrument to do what he wanted. As he strummed and plucked, drawing out those warm and ululating melodies, the world diminished, fell away. He felt weightless, or lighter somehow, as if his life never happened and he were just *here*, floating in a stream of sound his hands weaved and pulled out—hands that were no longer his. He fell into the same zone where apt sports players find themselves during an impossible winning streak.

When the music took him, time lost purpose; the only sense of it was a distant pulse: him tapping his foot to keep the measure. When he first started the lessons, he could only play for an hour before his fingertips started to sting; in a few months, though, calluses capped his fingers and let them slide along and work the strings for longer periods. Now he only stopped when his mother interrupted him.

But for now, in his room where sunlight fell and pooled in his bed and across the floor, he was feeling it, caught up in the motion, blissfully lost. Here there had been no accident; here there was no tutor, no Braille, no Frost or Coleridge, no isolation. Here there was clarity; here he could see.

“Aiden?” His mother’s voice; he struck a minor note by mistake and cracked his world. The tingles flared, became discordant; his teeth vibrated.

“What?” he sighed.

“Dinner’s ready. Come down.”

He stood, reposed the guitar on his bed, and grabbed his cane. “I’m coming.” He stopped in front of the bedroom door. A mirror hung there, and, before the accident, Aiden would sometimes stand like he was now and inspect his growing body. But that small, simple conceit was beyond him—would *always* be. Why had he asked that the mirror be kept? Mom had offered to take it away, but he’d railed against it with all the fast hatred of adolescence. He

screamed and thrashed his cane against the doorjamb then devoid of the marks from his habitual tapping. Mom had relented with that passive, do-what-you-want air she had. Yet keeping the mirror hadn't help.

He stood before the cold glass, willing his eyes to quit fooling around and let him see again; let him see who he was, what two years had changed. He could feel the tiny clusters of acne on his forehead that hadn't been there a few months ago, but he didn't know what that meant. Had he become a monster? Did he still have that odd dimple on the right side of his mouth when he smiled? Had his eyebrows thickened? Touching his cheeks and chin and neck only told him so much. He'd lost weight—a lot of it—that was easy to tell. Before the accident, Aiden bordered on husky: a term tailors and doctors use in lieu of the word “fat” (“fat” is bad for business), but the accident had stolen his appetite along with his vision. He didn't mind that part; being skinny was easier. But was that all that changed? Who was he becoming? If you can't see yourself are you wholly there, or diminished? Or was Aiden Chase just a memory, thin like a glint on the water? He had to rely on others for recognition, to glean substance, and that was a low feeling.

Aiden sighed, inched forward, and touched the cold, glossy surface of the mirror.

You're still there.

He opened the door, catching the scent of grilled chicken and rice, and went downstairs.

People talk about invisible forces, and no one can see them working on you, but Aiden wondered if people knew how terrifying it was to be blind to everything; he wondered if they knew the invisible forces felt more real when everything else was shut out.

Let them learn on their own, he thought.

#

Meredith Chase lay in her bed thinking about life before the accident. This had become a kind of ritual for her, a placatory nostalgia that helped sleep claw her down, down into that numb place where no guilt, no anger lived. Birdie always slept with her, which was a small comfort.

An alarm clock sat on the nightstand; its red numbers screaming-bright even with the bedside lamp on. She lay with a magazine collapsed over her breasts, her hands on top, breathing slow and letting the memories fill her up. Life hadn't been a fairy tale before the accident—not by a stretch—but it had been better. Yes. *Better*. It's strange how one incident can cleave a life in two; she and her son shared the same moment, the same determiner: THE ACCIDENT. That's how she thought of it. The timeline of her thirty-six years, if you drew it on a piece of paper, would be a straight line with little incidents noted in bland, sterile writing for the first thirty-three years; then, in 2008, the line suffers a steep plunge off the page, and giant red letters, dripping and accusative, scream like the numbers on her clock: THE ACCIDENT.

So her memories could be cleanly sliced in two, with the labels “life before...” and “life after...” pinned keenly on either side of those awful, capital letters. The accident had been her fault; she could admit that now (at least to herself), but everything that happened afterward—well, that was someone else's fault entirely. Between those two labels (“life before...” and “life after...”) Meredith preferred the former. Her mind and body might *act* in the latter, but her happiness, her audacity to hope and dream remained behind, in those “other” days that seemed more like dreams now and less like the trite happenings she once thought them to be. Yes, the accident had been her fault, but she had no way to expect it, no way to prepare, to counter. The problem with reliving her memories was that they eventually lead to this—the one she wanted to erase, to turn a blind eye to, like her son had been forced into doing.

The memory of that morning sticks out like a thorn in the palm—obvious, invasive, throbbing. Whenever she had to meet with a client early in the morning, Meredith would drop Aiden off at his Aunt Sarah's—Paul's sister, who managed to stay in contact even when Paul went off to do whatever it is ex-boyfriends and dead-beat fathers do. Aiden would have breakfast with his cousins, then Sarah would drop them all off at the high school. A foolproof plan, and one Meredith always appreciated. But then that day—

Meredith had been running late to meet with the chairs of H & B, a construction company with projects all over the east coast. The chairs were Mrs. Holmes and Mr. Boon; they were your average no-nonsense, I-have-a-lot-of-money-so-don't-fuck-with-me clients, and Meredith had no intention of losing their business because of a late morning. She'd been speeding.

She fired through a stop sign on County Road, which could have been the end for her and Aiden, but at five-thirty in the morning only the squirrels had to stand clear of Meredith's white coupe. A few squirrels scampered between tussocks peppered along the sections of lawn bordering houses and streets while others watched from maple branches and fence posts.

The bread truck pulled around the corner where County and Hawk roads meet, and there Meredith's coupe collided with the bread truck's heavy, white rear panel at forty-three miles per hour. The early morning quiet was shattered with the resounding wrench of metal and exploding glass. Later, after the paramedics took Aiden and his mother away (the truck driver was unhurt), fire fighters found glass spread along the sidewalk and neighboring lawn like bird feed.

Meredith suffered a broken collarbone and hairline fracture to her jaw, but Aiden—

“No more!” Meredith tossed the magazine away and pulled her knees into her chest. She rolled on her side, letting the sadness wash over her like it always did. Birdie whimpered and nuzzled the small of Meredith's back. It's harsh, but sleep would not come otherwise. She pulled

her light hair back from her face, a face that was once beautiful and rosy, with lips a natural pink and eyes like shaped glass, but now too pale and too hollow. A thin scar ran from the lobe of her left ear to her chin.

She tied her hair back—her cheeks still wet—turned off the lamp, and whimpered with Birdie in the dark like a child stranded someplace alien: cold and alone. Sleep came in time, and Meredith welcomed it.

#

Mr. Pierce came over despite Aiden's birthday. "Tutelage does not recognize birthdays," he had said, to which Aiden grimaced. But Mr. Pierce had no intention of teaching today. The boy's new guitar had arrived from its ambiguous Internet origin (Mr. Pierce never trusted Internet purchases), which meant Aiden's attention was spoken for.

In truth, he enjoyed hearing the boy play; there was something about the music, simple and cautious as it was, that was touching. Also, he believed Aiden's mother, Meredith, enjoyed the company, which was why Bryan Pierce wore one of his better blazers.

They sat in the dining room, where Aiden usually took his lessons, but the boy was apparently upstairs playing with the new instrument, though Mr. Pierce didn't hear anything. Meredith sat across from him, her arms crossed over her breasts and a smile, like Aiden's, puckering her mouth. "Are you going to stay for cake, Mr. Pierce?" she asked. He laughed, rubbing the back of his scalp.

"Only Aiden is allowed to call me that, Meredith," he said. "You have to call me Bryan."

Meredith lowered her head, seeming to study her hands, her smile widening slightly.

"Okay, *Bryan*. Will you?"

"Do you have coffee?"

“Of course.”

“I’d love to.”

They stayed quiet for a few minutes, both waiting for Aiden’s moody, flowing rhythm. Neither would admit it, but they both felt a certain joy and sadness at the sound of Aiden’s playing. The music reminded Bryan of the indefatigable spirit more common to the handicapped than the able; it reminded Meredith of something else, though. Her thoughts divided between Aiden’s father, Paul—the envy for his freedom, the bitterness—and a swelling love for the boy who reminded her of him.

Meredith looked at Bryan, his shoulders seeming round even in a sport coat, his hairless pate clean and smooth, the solid lines of his jaw outlining a lightly parenthesized mouth. An aging man, yes, but with a quick expression always cocked in his dark eyes, like a boy about to put mud in your hair. Paul had been lively and expressive, a lot of fun, but when the time came to put on big-boy pants he sprinted off with his “sorry, babe” billowing behind like a streamer. They’d never married, and Meredith didn’t regret that—Paul would’ve been more of a burden than anything else after THE ACCIDENT, anyway. He still popped his head into their lives every few weeks (usually when visiting his sister, Sarah), and Meredith only bore his company for Aiden’s sake. Still, his freedom made her bitter.

“Is he going to play that thing?” Bryan’s voice pulled her away from her thoughts, and she was happy for it. She smiled, feeling the puffed flesh under her eyes as if two quarters had been fastened there with tiny chains.

“He takes his time,” Meredith said, following Bryan’s gaze to the ceiling. “Sometimes I think he likes tuning better than playing.”

Bryan grunted. “Too much caution shows a lack of confidence.”

Meredith shrugged her shoulders, wanting to agree, wanting to admit she missed the rush, that this life of crawling along made living more of a chore than a pleasure. But instead she asked, “How is Aiden doing?”

“He’s doing fine. I’d call him a natural, but it’s really just good instruction.” Bryan grinned, Meredith grinned back.

“I’m sure. I wonder if Braille helped with his music lessons.”

“I think it was the other way around, actually. Aiden lost his sight at thirteen: an age where the mind is still capable of that ‘sponge thing’. I’m not surprised he took to the instrument so naturally.” Bryan turned his eyes down and started circling his finger over the tablecloth in tiny motions. “He doesn’t listen very well, though. Don’t take that the wrong way. He’s a teenager after all, a teenager who recently found a passion for music. I don’t begrudge him the pleasure of idle thought, mostly because it isn’t idle. It makes him happy. And—” Bryan chuckled. Meredith didn’t find the sound unpleasant—it’d been a long time since a man laughed in her home. “I’m sorry,” he continued. “I tend to ramble about my students. It’s a nasty habit.”

“Not at all,” Meredith said, leaning forward with her hands clasped. “I love hearing about Aiden.” *He’s all I’m allowed to think about anymore—him and Birdie. Where is Birdie?* She looked around, then remembered she’d let the dog out a few minutes ago. Bryan must have read her expression differently, because he said:

“You’re tone says otherwise,” and shifted the direction of his trailing finger.

Meredith shook her head, still smiling. “Tones are easily misread.”

“I suppose they are.” Bryan reached out and cupped Meredith’s hand in his own, stroking the back of it with his thumb. “Sometimes people should be more obvious.”

Meredith watched Bryan's hand, feeling a warm tingle rise on the surface of her skin. She felt an alarming mix of excitement and horror at his touch. She pulled away and stood. "I have to let Birdie in." The silence, benign and almost comfortable before, now fell between them as something physical. Meredith hated the way Bryan's eyes suddenly became finicky, almost diffident, and, perhaps hoping to diffuse the moment, she said: "I should start that coffee, too. Would you like to come into the kitchen?"

Bryan's smile returned. "Lead the way," he said.

#

Aiden sat on the new amplifier that came with the guitar. It wasn't an impressive rig: a simple fifteen-watt combo Fender amp that would've cost less than a hundred bucks. The guitar, however, Aiden knew to be a pretty thing. A twenty-two-fret PRS maple top hard body with a neck-thru design. Aiden specifically asked for an electric blue color scheme, more out of habit than aesthetics, because, of course, he couldn't tell the difference. But *knowing* the guitar was blue would make it *feel* right somehow. He ran his fingers over the new strings, clean and smooth; his tongue twanged with the taste of metal—he didn't know why.

He'd finally gotten them tuned to the key he liked, and now it was time to see if going electric would be worthwhile. He strummed a chord. The bigger, thicker quality of the amp gave the tingling he always felt something extra: a psychic *zing*. He strummed again, and behind the oily curtains where his vision had fled two years ago, something new shimmered. Particulate... granulated... The tingling meandered into his neck, the back of his skull. Aiden smiled. Did everyone enjoy playing as much as him? He hoped not. This was his; he'd paid for it; he'd *earned* it.

He slid his left hand along the neck, finding the fret he wanted, and, with that almost careless fluidity, sprang off into a rhythmic dirge, hitting all minor keys, plucking a minor-fifth and strumming a chord that dipped and swayed with the slow, doleful grace of a funerary procession. Yes, his skin came alive, his teeth numbed. The world flew away with the darksome panic of a raven's wing beat. In the space where his sight used to live, those granules twirled and pulsed and lit with color.

Color. My God—*color!* Not the tentative, ghostly flecks of shade he saw when listening to certain songs, but full, velvety hues. His brain had not forgotten, after all. The particles danced and churned and spun into a cyclonic ballet; all shimmering blue. Aiden knew the name for that blue: cerulean. It made him think of island waters glinting under the sun: the cold color masking the warmth inside. He'd never stumble far into an ocean again, but, my God, the *color*.

His fingers slid into an ascending scale, one he'd never learned but just sounded right, like it had to come next, then back into the undulating rhythm, like the pitch of a wave. Aiden smiled, not feeling the light fronds of his hair dangle over his eyes. The cerulean grains coalesced into something solid, fashioning a vertical double helix, smooth and spinning. Aiden believed rapture would be something like this, perfect and immersive. Then more colors bled into the vision: red that he knew was called "vermilion" and gold and emerald. His lips vibrated with sensation, became moist. The knock at his door and Mr. Pierce's throaty voice pulled him out, almost painfully.

When his tutor knocked again, Aiden sat gasping and twisting around on the amp. *What was that?* he thought.

He heard the door click open and Mr. Pierce's voice call: "Aiden? Hey, are you all right? You're sweating."

“I saw colors.” He blurted out, reflexive, breathless.

There was quiet then; Aiden knew Mr. Pierce was staring at him, assessing. *Assessing what? A damned miracle just happened right here in my room.* “I saw colors,” he repeated, raising his face, hoping the sincerity he felt would be plain there.

He heard Mr. Pierce clear his throat again. “What do you mean?”

“I—I was playing and—I saw colors. *Actual* colors!”

Mr. Pierce laughed. Aiden suddenly hated the man. “Well, that’s wonderful, son. People say music heals.”

“You don’t understand,” Aiden contended, but knew there was no point. Had he actually *seen* colors? Or was it simply a cruel trick of his mind? He hoped for the former, but the lightless world pressing back, muting anything vivid and turning up the heat and noise, proved otherwise.

“I do understand,” Mr. Pierce said, cupping Aiden’s shoulder with a warm hand. “I had a student once who used to love dancing. But losing his sight forced him to give that up for a while. When he adjusted, though, and started to dance again, he told me the world was almost like it used to be. Whenever he danced, he felt color all around. He adapted. You’re adapting, too. It takes time, but this world, your *new* world will be bright again. Different but *bright*. I promise.”

“Maybe—” but Aiden didn’t know how to finish.

“Come downstairs. Your mother’s got the candles ready to go.”

“I don’t want to,” Aiden mumbled, and Mr. Pierce fell silent.

Aiden thought he could feel the man staring at him, doing that damned *assessing* thing again. When the man spoke, Aiden felt an odd chill tumble down his back.

“You want to know something else I’ve learned about children in your predicament, Aiden?” Aiden didn’t answer; the question sounded rhetorical. “You all seem to think the world owes you something. I don’t know what it is. Maybe a pat on the back, or a card saying ‘I’m sorry.’ But you won’t get those things. The world keeps spinning, upside-down or not. I know your mother tries,” Mr. Pierce put a heavy hand on Aiden’s shoulder and squeezed, not painfully but purposefully. “Don’t put more of a burden on her by being a brat.”

Aiden turned his face toward the man; he could feel the heat of Bryan’s large body, as if his own presence were being swallowed. He shrugged the hand off, laid the guitar down on his bed, reverently—almost with fear—and snatched his cane.

They walked downstairs, Mr. Pierce’s heavy footsteps clumping just behind Aiden’s. Neither of them spoke.

#

People wonder what it means to be blind: are one’s visual perceptions limited to a perfect pitch of black, or does something wholly unimaginable, wholly indescribable replace that which was lost? Part of Mr. Pierce’s curriculum was to have Aiden read essays and research articles (transcribed in Braille of course) on topics concerning blindness. He learned that “visual impairment” (he always pictured those pedantic quotes around the phrase) was divided into scales and subcategories—like color blindness. Aiden wished the accident had left him on that scale, but it hadn’t. He’d been left totally blind, but even that description, plain as it seemed, was abstruse. The darkness he lived with was not a perfect drape but more of a valance; it shifted and pulled, created its own depth and variance. It allowed him to discern shifts in lighting, but his interpretation remained curtailed, incomplete. Aiden could tell the difference between night and day, so long as there were no lamps or streetlights to throw off the shifts. A paltry talent, maybe,

but it helped him feel in tune with the world, still present. After the first year, though, he relied less and less on this minute change in the space behind his eyes. The drop in temperature, the weight of moonlight, the chirr of crickets, the subsiding din of traffic: these were the real signs that night had rushed in, blanketing the world, drawing everyone closer.

So when Aiden woke, he knew dawn still lingered far on the other end of the world. He climbed out of bed, just as agile and aware as if it were day. He walked across the room, listening for the wooden groan on his fourth stride, then reached out and grabbed his guitar from its stand without raising his head. He knew the amplifier sat another three steps away, but first he had to get the headphones and something else from his dresser. *Can't wake mom*, he thought. He knew the lessons and the new guitar were gifts from a mother trying to counteract guilt. Aiden didn't blame her—not for the accident and not for the guilt. But something inside never let him say this. He was afraid to suffer alone. They would share this penance, at least for a time. One day her guilt would ebb, but he would still be blind. He wouldn't begrudge her that, and, if he actually *had* seen those colors earlier today, maybe salvation could come to them both—sooner.

He ambled over in that same slow, purposeful gait, letting his senses work. He plucked the headphones from his dresser along with the other item, crept over to the amp, felt along for the switch, and flicked it. There was a worrisome and distorted *hummm* as the amp kicked on and warmed. Aiden's heart thudded. He plugged one end of the audio jack into his guitar, then felt along for the amp's input. When the male end tapped the outside of the input, there was a shriek of feedback and Aiden almost dropped the guitar. He stood there, the guitar and wire clasped to his chest, as if that would keep them quiet. He waited for his heart to slow, waited for the telling *thud* of his mother getting out of her bed, opening her door, plodding down the hall with the *clicks* of Birdie following, and bursting into his room, demanding what all the noise was about.

But that didn't happen. The house only dozed with its same familiar and strange sounds. The sporadic whistle of a breeze through an open window; the resonant and calming *whirr* of the refrigerator; the sullen *pop* of the house's joints as the last of the day's heat ebbed away. Aiden took a steadying breath, feeling the moistness gathering beneath his arms and in his crotch. He reached out, turned off the amp, and plugged his headphones and the guitar in first before turning the rig back on. *You have a lot to learn*, he thought.

He sat on the amp, put the headphones over his ears, and enjoyed the solitary for a moment. With the headphones on even the faintest noises disappeared, and Aiden wondered how close this was to that hapless soldier in *Johnny Got His Gun*. Of course, that guy had been blind, deaf, mute, and limbless. Aiden knew he was better off than *that* guy, but, still, he wondered. He already perceived the world through an altered sensory system; what if he lost his hearing, too? How would someone exist with only a sense of touch? Well, that soldier (Joe, was his name) had figured it out, but the world wouldn't listen. And wasn't that how it always went? People only listen when others have trivial things to say—lies—but if something significant, something lettered in bright neon, is shared then everyone becomes like Joe's doctor when he started communicating through Morse code. They clam you up, pat you on the head and call you nuts. Well, Aiden would see.

He turned the volume knob on his (blue) PRS, feeling the static fill his ears, sensing the empty space inside ready to receive his sound, knowing the colors would come. He broke into a different rhythm from the one he'd played earlier that day, culled out exciting scales, fashioned doleful ascensions. He played for a long time, and he enjoyed himself, but the colors didn't come. He'd imagined it. Had to have imagined it.

His cheeks felt wet. “You were stupid,” he muttered. “Just stupid.” Well, he’d gone through the trouble of rigging his gear (and, honestly, he was too revved up to sleep anymore, anyway), so why not play until the sun rose? Aiden decided to do just that. He believed some people would envy this part of blindness: the closeness with oneself. Finding it easier to shut out the world because you have one less door to worry about. He could play until the sun rose, poured through his window, and warmed the tops of his feet.

He didn’t wipe the tears away; he followed them to the next rhythm, the one he’d played earlier today. He strummed and followed the fluidity, surprised that he remembered the song so well. He smiled, letting the song pull him away.

This time it was red. Those shimmering particles pitched and yawed, became horizontal lines see-sawing on a vertical axis. Then there was violet, orange, and (blue) his favorite. He stopped only once before sunup to turn on the tape recorder he’d taken from his dresser along with the headphones. The recorder had an input and output, so he could plug the guitar directly in to record and still hear himself play.

The colors danced for him; he pulled them out with each note and combination. He cried and smiled and made them dance. They danced the rest of that night.

#

Meredith stood with Bryan in the kitchen. The day’s lesson had just ended and Aiden lurched upstairs without a word—a rude action he’d been inclined to commit over the last few weeks.

“Aiden’s seemed a little dreamy these last few days,” Meredith said casually. She and Bryan each stood holding a tumbler of iced tea. Bryan sipped from his sweating glass, smiled, and shrugged.

“Well, he’s doing fine with his lessons, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No. I’m not worried. Just curious.”

The afternoon was hot, and Meredith had opened all the windows. A warm breeze fluttered the vinyl blinds behind her and puffed onto the nape of her neck; she shuddered.

“Your son has a very active imagination. Maybe he needs to get his body a little more active to keep up.”

Meredith cocked her head. Of course most children could be described in such a way, but Aiden’s imagination had fallen into early retirement—right around the age of ten. Aiden was almost pragmatic in his assertions; he’d puzzled out the Santa Clause and Tooth Fairy myths long before Meredith grew tired of feeding them. He never had an imaginary friend, and movies—even the horrific and bloody kind starring hockey-masked, chainsaw-wielding psychopaths—rarely interested or affected him. In a sense, Aiden was far along to becoming quite a bore. *That’s not fair*, Meredith thought. *You know it isn’t. How much time did you really spend with him before THE ACCIDENT? Sure, you needed to win that bread—God knows Paul was useless then—but did you ever really know what was going on in your son’s life?* “No,” Meredith whispered, and Bryan looked up with the glass paused against his lips.

“Excuse me?” he said.

Meredith smiled diffidently. “I mean, Aiden wasn’t really the imaginative type. At least not before everything.” Bryan nodded, unsmiling.

“Well, people change. Especially when so young.”

“You really just have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Meredith said, surprised by the shortness in her voice.

But Bryan smiled, ambled over, and leaned forward to put his glass in the sink. He lingered there for a few moments, their bodies only inches apart. “I’m far from wise,” Bryan said, and Meredith could feel the warmth of his words. The sweetness of tea undercut by a lingering bitterness of coffee. Bryan caught her eyes and held them; Meredith thought the man handsome in a classic sort of way, akin to a May-December crush she had on a college professor years ago. But Bryan wasn’t that old—was he? The bald pate and lined mouth were somehow alluring declarations of experience, but his eyes were bright and finely set, no crows or bags to draw your own eyes away. *Thirty-eight*, she thought, then turned and put her own glass in the sink, clumsily breaking the connection.

“Would you like to come to dinner tomorrow night?” she blurted, unaware that she was even going to ask. But there it was, and she couldn’t bring herself to look back.

She felt a warm hand on her shoulder, then Bryan was turning her, turning her. She felt like she’d been set on a great, wooden wheel, and it creaked and lumbered as everything turned and shifted. “I’d love to,” she heard him say; then his face was there, *looming* there in the green spring light, and she suddenly felt very afraid.

#

Aiden sat on his amp wearing basketball shorts and a t-shirt, his guitar held close to his chest and his head raised. His eyes were closed, but it didn’t matter; the colors swarmed and billowed like a series of flags.

Birdie lay by his foot with her snout on her paws, breathing slow but never sleeping, her white fur thinned closer to its summer coat.

Aiden suddenly laughed and Birdie perked her ears, whimpering.

The music stopped and Aiden laughed again. “It’s all right, girl. It’s all right.” Birdie nuzzled his elbow. Aiden smiled and rubbed her head, massaging one ear the way he knew she liked. “You’re a good girl,” he said; her tail thumped in assent. “Wanna hear my song again?” Birdie remained silent. “All right.”

Aiden performed the same slow strum into a minor chord, keeping tempo with his bare foot. His left hand slid along the frets, finding the right notes, and his right strummed and plucked the song out, fashioning the structure of it like a Lego model—slowly building and forming into one recognizable piece.

He didn’t take his eyes from Birdie. They sat together—Aiden playing, his mired irises cast blankly down, and his dog looking up—and as the song twined together and the colors returned, his usual delight and wonder shifted to something else—something ominous.

At first it was just the colors, like they had been, intertwined and radiant and perfect and clear, engaged in a constant dance that delighted him the way a pinwheel delights a toddler. But then they shifted, broke down, became a shape that culled a memory from that part of him before the accident. It was Birdie, lying on her side the way she was accustomed to do, one hind leg stretched out. He couldn’t *see* her; he never made the mistake of thinking his sight had returned, because in this view there was no depth, no texture—just color. Maroon, to be specific, with flecks of gold where Birdie’s eyes would be.

Aiden watched; his mouth reeled tight enough to throb the muscles in his jaw. There were *things* in the colors, dark things that reminded him of the video Mrs. Helstrom made them watch in Health Class—the one that showed photos and videos of magnified organisms and parasites that were partial to nesting in the corners of your eyes, on sponges, and in the fleshy map of your

palm. They were grotesque and amorphous, and they were gathered in the center of Birdie's chest—where her heart would be.

Aiden stopped playing, slapping a hand to the strings to cut off their distorted croon. The colors vanished in a snapshot with no after image. Aiden leaned forward, put a hand on Birdie's head, and whispered, "Hey girl, you okay?"

Birdie licked his palm, and he could hear her tail give a happy *thump-thump* to the floor.

He leaned back, his head still inclined toward the dog but unable to know for certain if she was still there. A breeze fluttered through the open bedroom window, bringing the smells of grass and pine in with it. It was the first time he'd played that song for an audience, the first time he summoned the colors in another's company.

He played again, fashioning the same rhythm but with less accents and scales—the colors would only come to a similar permutation of the same notes, never wholly new ones. That he'd been quick to grasp.

The music came and the colors along with it. At first there were just the scintillating threads—blue, violet, yellow, and green—and Aiden shook his head, certain he'd imagined the tiny, dark maggot-things. He continued playing anyway because, when you're feeling it, it's best to let it ride. The colors stuttered like bad reception on an old television, and his lips tightened; it was the first time the colors failed to cheer him. They merged, coalescing into that sickly maroon which mimicked Birdie's shape and the nuggets of gold where her eyes should have been. He felt his own eyes widen, and then the things were there again, nestled in the small curve of Birdie's chest. Squirming and flicking with a strange ardor that made Aiden's stomach clench.

He saw Birdie's head give a curious tilt and stopped playing. The colors were sucked back to wherever they slumbered. Aiden called out for his mother.

#

In the end Meredith submitted to Aiden's worries not because she believed him right but because part of her had grown accustomed to indulging the boy. Whatever he'd gotten into his head about Birdie had obviously upset him.

Bryan had just left and Meredith sat at the kitchen table with a warm mug of coffee steaming next to the daily crossword, which she'd been hunched over when Aiden called her name. *Not my name*, she thought. *He called "Mommy."*

She started up the stairs with a light scurry, her white sneakers padding up the wooden raisers; there had been something in her son's voice, something more pressing than the usual "Could I have a glass of water?" or "I can't find my remote." She went into his room and saw Birdie thumping her tail at Aiden's feet. Nothing seemed out of place, but the way he looked—eyes wide and staring off over her shoulder, dark hair tousled, and skinny shoulders almost shuddering—made a pit yawn open somewhere in her stomach. "I think Birdie's sick," he had said, and Meredith looked from her boy to the dog, feeling the dull throb of impatience come tromping into her skull like an ex-boyfriend she'd rather forget.

Meredith did her best to allay Aiden's odd worry, saying that Birdie looked just fine to her, but then Aiden lied, and that made her curious.

"She threw up," he said. "She hacked and cried then puked right here." He pointed to the floor where his foot jittered up and down. "I cleaned it because I was afraid you'd be mad at her, but now I'm just worried." Meredith knew better; Aiden would never bother to clean up after the dog—not when a fully capable mommy with 20/20 vision was only a shout away. "Please, mom," Aiden pressed. "Just take her to the vet. Just to be safe."

The lie—ridiculous as it was—had surprised her too much to allow questioning. She leashed Birdie, told Aiden to stay in his room, and drove down to Dr. Bunt’s animal clinic. As she drove she gnawed her lip and thought: *Why would he lie? It’s silly. He won’t even clean up his own mess, and I’m supposed to believe he cleaned up the dog’s puke?* She laughed, glanced at Birdie panting in the passenger seat, and patted her head. “Well, at least we’re out of the house for a bit, right girl?” Birdie held her long, toothy grin, and added a tail-wag as if to agree.

Meredith bought the American Eskimo six months after THE ACCIDENT, believing both she and Aiden could do with some company, especially after Paul reduced his presence to bi-weekly harangues.

Dr. Jason Bunt was an old acquaintance from High School, and he’d recently set up his practice in their town when Meredith bought Birdie. Meredith felt more comfortable dealing with people she knew, especially when health and money were involved, but she insisted everyone felt that way. The fact that Jason had been a close friend (almost close enough to be her “first”), of course, had nothing to do with it.

Jason Bunt was handsome for his age, like a Dean Martin with lighter skin and *much* less hair (it was turning out to be Meredith’s year for bald men). He had a cleft in his chin that always reminded her of modern sensation novels—the kind where the men are always sweaty and shirtless and *engorged* (she hated that word; it reminded her of slugs, but she didn’t know why). Of course, she read more of those busty, panty, thobby books than she would ever admit, but only she and the ghosts of her life had to know that little whatnot. They offered her mind a quick tryst with the more visceral and undernourished parts of herself; they provided the personal erotica she’d sacrificed for the good of her boy. So when Dr. Bunt said Birdie had a heart

murmur, Meredith had been too busy daydreaming about sexy meetings and sunsets dunked in rum to hear.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

“A heart murmur,” Dr. Bunt repeated, his New York accent academically trimmed and trained to a more watery speech. “Don’t be too worried though. We found it at a manageable stage.” He patted Birdie who lay dutifully on the metal observation table with her nose in her paws and tail swishing happily. “If it’d been another few months she might’ve been in trouble.”

“I see,” Meredith said, not knowing she spoke. The stink of thousands of animals and feces covered over with sawdust and disinfectant seemed to come alive, and Meredith had to lean on the examination table to steady herself.

Dr. Bunt grasped her arm. “Are you all right?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. I’m—I’m just glad she’ll be okay.”

Dr. Bunt smiled and patted Meredith’s shoulder; he did it with a conspicuous tenderness that differed, Meredith was happy to see, from the way he pet the dog. “Birdie’ll be golden in a month or two.” Meredith noticed that his smile had a way of thinning his lips down and deepening the lines around his mouth—another resemblance to Dean Martin that wasn’t particularly handsome, but still somehow homely and endearing. “One little pill every day for about a month should take care of it.”

“Thanks Jay. I really appreciate this.”

Jason smiled. “Happy to help. You should be able to pick her up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Hmm?”

“Birdie.”

“Oh, of course. But—maybe you could bring her over yourself, and I could cook us some steaks if you like? As a thank you.” She didn’t realize the absurdity of her offer until it’d tumbled out of her mouth—a mouth she seriously had to consider riveting shut. How many clients had hit on her with similar pathetic charms after she’d saved them a bundle on their tax returns? Too many. And now, here in her life AFTER, she’d slumped to the same pitiful rank as the lonely old men she’d labeled clowns and lechers.

“I’d love to,” Jason said, and Meredith felt one side of her mouth twitch in what she hoped was a smile.

“Okay, good.”

“I’ll bring her over around seven. Does that work?”

“Works for me.”

“Be warned though,” Jason patted his slim belly. “I can really pack down free food when it suits me.”

Meredith laughed, feeling oddly excited and foolish. “Nothing wrong with that.”

Jason’s smile thinned. “It’s been awhile since I’ve seen Aiden. Has he kept up with the guitar?”

Meredith laughed again, feeling more foolish than ever, and thought: *Well, girl, you had the spotlight for a minute today. Be happy with what you get.* “Yes,” she replied. “He’s actually gotten pretty good. I’ll ask him to play for you tomorrow.”

“Tell him I’d look forward to that.”

“I will.”

“One more thing before you go.”

Meredith had turned to pat Birdie's head then turned back; if she could've seen the way her hair tumbled off her shoulder and hid the scar on her cheek, the remarkable resemblance to the girl she'd been BEFORE would've terrified her. "What made you think she was sick?"

Meredith flicked her eyes between the grinning dog and man. "She'd been acting a little funny," she lied. "Aiden was worried. So I promised to bring her in. Good thing I did."

"Yeah," Dr. Bunt agreed. "Lucky thing."

She smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Dr. Bunt smiled back. "Definitely." Meredith gave Birdie a pat good-bye and left.

She didn't remember her plans with Bryan until she passed the sign for Highway 35. She cursed, pulled over, and stared at her cell phone in the passenger seat, trying to think of some feeble excuse. The choice between the two men seemed simple—Jason was sweet, handsome, and soft in a fashion, while Bryan had all those qualities but with something extra—something rough, like a callus on the hand. He'd scared her, though she couldn't figure why. Her attraction to him was feral and unsteady—something she craved but couldn't comprehend. *He's Aiden's teacher*, she reasoned. *He's a bad idea*. But like all bad ideas Bryan continued to pervade her thoughts. She dialed his number.

#

Aiden fumbled down to the kitchen, his shorts and t-shirt exchanged for jeans and a sweater. Drawing the colors out earlier had left him feeling cold and hollow. He smacked either side of the doorway with his cane and moved toward the fridge. That hollow feeling wasn't hunger, but he figured filling the space might do him some good.

He felt around for the peanut butter and jelly jars on the door, tapped over to the breadbox on the counter, and removed two slices of wheat bread. He made the sandwich, bit into

it, and chewed with loud smacks, breathing harshly between bites. What were those worm things? Had the colors really shown him Birdie? Had they shown something wrong with her, or were they the ones making her sick? And how could he know something was wrong anyway? *Because those worms felt wrong.*

His stomach roiled; he swallowed hard, hearing his throat click as it tried to work the sticky lump down. He grimaced, floundered toward the sink, and threw up what little he'd eaten. A long, brown line of phlegm depended from his chin, and he wiped it away. "What's going on?" he whimpered. But he knew. He knew it was the guitar—and that *song*. Had to be. Before he'd gotten the PRS, before he'd thought of that strange dirge, colors were no more than fond memories of a life he was rapidly forgetting—memories that would only bubble up here and again when a sorrowful tune played out nearby. The gauzy shadows of light and dark were his world now, and he'd just started to adapt. The music had helped at first; it was always there, waiting to catch him up and hurry him away from the shadows. And when the full colors first came he'd been excited, renewed. But now, if what they'd shown him had been real, the colors were something to be feared.

He gripped the sides of the sink and lowered his head between hitching shoulders. He wished his mother would call, tell him that he'd been stupid, and that Birdie was fine. Please, oh please let that happen. He'd accept the admonishment; he'd accept that he might just be a little crazy. Just please let those worm things be his imagination and nothing more, nothing real, nothing to be feared. "I'll never play again," he said, his voice cold and flat in the strong glow of the kitchen. "I'll sell my guitars. I'll *give* them away. Just let it be fake."

The phone rang, and Aiden's head jerked up. It would be his mother. He knew it. He tapped his way over to the wall unit that seemed ancient and primitive amidst all the other

gleaming, stainless steel gadgets beguiling the kitchen. A ceiling-mounted microwave, a digital stove, a digital coffee maker, the cold metal of the fridge with its digital temperature gauge. Everything was cold, but when he picked up the receiver and felt the extended and worn cord butt against his leg, a warm sensation vibrated through his hand, passed his elbow, and settle in his chest. “Hello? Hi mom. Is she—? But why—? Okay. All right. What time tomorrow? Yeah, I will. Bye.”

He felt for the phone’s cradle then hung the receiver back. Birdie had a heart murmur. Dr. Bunt would be bringing her home tomorrow; he’d be staying for dinner. Mom sounded funny about it. “She knows I lied,” he whispered, but that wasn’t a major concern. The problem now was that he would be asked to play for them tomorrow after dinner, or maybe before. And what if he saw something? “I won’t. I imagined it. There’s nothing to see. I’m fucking blind.” But still—the colors. He would make them come again, not because he wanted to, but because he couldn’t help himself. And what if they showed him something that he didn’t understand, something he couldn’t fix like he did with Birdie? “It won’t happen.” What if he sees the worms hanging around Dr. Bunt’s chest? A clogged artery? A blown valve? Or what if—oh Jesus—what if they’re in mom? Breast cancer? Something worse? No, he wouldn’t play tomorrow. No matter what they say or how strange his mom thinks he’s acting, he wouldn’t play.

But what if the colors showed him something he could change? Birdie was going to be okay; Dr. Bunt said the murmur could be easily treated. So what if he could help them? What if he could stop something that would otherwise swell and pulse and kill if left to its whims?

“But I might not see anything. Birdie could’ve been a one-time thing. A fluke.”

Yes, there was that possibility, but something continued to pinch at the hollowness of his gut, worrying at him, taking its time. He shuffled past the sink, catching the nutty odor of his

vomit, and turned on the faucet. Beneath the *shush* of the water, Aiden's thoughts turned to Mr. Pierce, and he wished the man had believed him. More than anything he needed an adult who would understand. And who the hell did Dr. Bunt think he was inviting himself to dinner?

He went upstairs, collapsed in bed, and let the varying gray of his world lull him down into a fitful sleep.

#

Bryan Pierce's garage was a Jenga-like jumble of boxes labeled in austere block letters—X-mass Dec., Power Cords, E-Bay, Lesson Plans, and various others. A tool bench abutted one wall and sported wrenches and hammers and saws and power tools on its hooks and in its cubbies. Five years ago, he fitted the garage with a weight bench and dumbbells, which sat worn and grimed in the center of the space. It would have been a kind of screw-you to the ex, since she'd made it her job to criticize his weight in their last years together, but he didn't think he'd ever see her again (especially since she opted to live in Cali with the rest of the Commies).

He lay on the weight bench now, clad in shorts and a tank top, his bald head glistening, his muscles engorged and vascular. He pushed against the bar, lifting an impressive amount of weight that belied the blazer-coat-wearing persona he strove to uphold. Two veins bulged in his reddened forehead, forming a blue V that edged down between his eyes. He racked the weight with a heavy bark and *clank*, sitting up and wiping his head with a towel. He was grinning.

Meredith had called yesterday to cancel their date for tonight; Bryan hadn't been surprised. She was very much like his ex-wife in that respect—timid and superficially gallant. Yes, he knew her type. She was the type that needed a man to keep her world balanced, a man who didn't mind forfeiting his balls. *Ball-less man plus ambitious woman equals happiness.* Bryan knew the equation, and knew what all those women refused to admit: the equation never

worked. Women like Meredith needed a man who could pull them out of their ambitious shells, like he and his dad used to do with the muscles down at Seven Presidents' Beach during the summer. They needed an A-type personality, one to direct them, and, yes, one to throw on the breaks when their feminist ambitions were getting a little ahead of everybody. Equal opportunity? Sure, but a woman still has her place and a man still has his. Did females go out spearing mastodons in the frozen forests while males suckled the babes? Not once. It would be unnatural. Bryan was a proponent for nature.

That's not to say Bryan Pierce didn't believe equal opportunity had its place in today's economy. *Laissez-faire*, right? When it came to making money, anyone could do it. Bryan wasn't a clodhopping misogynist like his dad. In fact, Bryan believed women should be *encouraged* to get out there and win the bread. God knew most of them had forgotten how to make the stuff, anyway. The problem was that women were very much like children when it came to sense. Most times they did fine by their instincts, but occasionally they required a *nudge*, an edifying tap on the nose. Bryan knew how to educate—it was his passion. If all the blind children he'd tutored could learn how to pick up the pieces of their lives and rediscover something worth caring about, then there was no reason why a woman couldn't be taught how to prudently hunt and gather for the good of her family. Man owed the development of his reason to Woman, anyway. Woman taught Man how to feel, how to steer his thoughts and focus them to specific tasks. An Adam and Eve union if ever there had been. But evolution has a way of shifting the sands, cutting the rope, boiling the bits. Man had ascended, and Woman right behind him. Bryan thought he'd make a fine overseer, and Meredith, with all of her expensive intelligence and monetary talents, would be a fine hunter to send out into the world. Bryan could mind the boy; he liked Aiden.

So it was with these thoughts in his head that Bryan moved through the heavily draped and furnished gloom of his foyer and up the primly carpeted stairs to his bedroom. He turned on the shower and mentally fussed over what blazer he would wear. He decided the tweed would be too warm and opted for the cotton—it breathed. He could pair it with jeans, boat shoes, and a lavender collared shirt—just to let Meredith know he could be a little fun when he wanted.

“What if she was telling the truth?” he whispered and turned the shower faucet up. Steam and heat fogged the small bathroom—only exceptionally hot showers were acceptable. Meredith had claimed that she’d fallen behind on several tax returns for supremely loyal clients, and she had to have them done for Sunday.

But you don't think that's true at all, do ya champ?

His father always made the most unwelcomed cameos since his passing ten years back. This imaginary version of Big Tom Pierce had relapsed to using that ridiculous nickname, a nickname Bryan knew to be peppered with contempt rather than endearment. Big Tom had been an all-star football player who ran his way right into one of New England’s textile mills, where he argued with and clobbered machinery until one gobbled him down headfirst. Big Tom always blamed Bryan’s mother, Delilah, for catching pregnant and holding him from a scholarship to U Mass. Bryan didn’t care either way; he just didn’t like when Big Tom beat his mom around like she was one of the textile machines who decided to quit on him. Women have their place, but it’s rarely on the other side of a man’s closed fist—or a yardstick. Whenever Big Tom had finished with Bryan’s mother and she lay unconscious and bleeding on the yellow kitchen linoleum, Big Tom would leer into young Bryan’s face, his breath feral and acidic, like a wild dog who’d taken to whiskey, and bellow: *What champ? You don't think she deserved it? If you'd actually think*

for a second you'd know she had it comin. Just watch, champ. One day that woman's gonna break your heart just like she does mine.

Bryan had always looked back at his father with sad incredulity—incapable of believing the woman who was his world, the thing that ensured his constant survival, could ever hurt him. Then she left. No kiss goodbye, no note, no word. Bryan came home and found that his after-school snack wasn't made, the dishes from breakfast were still soaped and sullied in the sink, and the small house was ready to burst with all the silence filling it up. He sat in a corner and cried until his father came home and told him to *quit that goddamned bawlin. Where's your mother, champ?* Big Tom never remarried. There were women, but none of them bothered with Bryan, the little champ. Bryan manned the domestic responsibilities: cooking his father's meals, washing underwear, and plates, and rugs, and walls, and furniture. My God! Women washed so many things!

But Bryan could do it. He could do it for Meredith, because he knew how to be the conductor. She would bring the spoils back to *him*. And, in time, Aiden could learn, too. He could learn some good ol' Emersonian Self-Reliance. Who says a blind boy can't vacuum? It's a character builder. Meredith just needed that *nudge*, that's all. Did Bryan believe Meredith had too much work to do to honor their date? *Do ya, champ? You b'lieve that broad?* "Not a lick," he whispered and grinned into the mirror.

Maybe the pink shirt would be better.

The shower was almost scalding to touch, and Bryan climbed in, allowing the spray to batter his skull and redden the skin. Tonight would be a pinnacle evening. Yes, he could feel it in his teeth.

#

Dr. Jason Bunt came to the house at six forty. Outside, the light was still strong and gold, with the smallest hints of purple flecked across the lawns and highlighting the eaves. Meredith wore a white and yellow sundress with her hair down around her shoulders, obscuring the long facial scar; Aiden wore jeans and a green polo shirt, which Meredith picked out.

Aiden sat in the living room with his guitar in his lap and the amp set austere over a square of carpet turned upside-down, so not to scratch the flooring. When Meredith brushed past him to answer the door, Aiden called out, "Why are you wearing that perfume?"

"I always wear perfume," Meredith called back.

"No you don't," Aiden replied, but Meredith must not have heard.

Aiden heard the door open and his mother exclaim, "There's my girl!" The telling scrape and clack of Birdie's paws on the floor let him know she was excited to be home. He set his guitar aside, grabbed his cane, and made his way toward the door.

Birdie bolted toward him and sat nuzzling his hand (she'd learned long ago never to jump up on him). Aiden laughed and rubbed her ears pointed ears. "Good girl. You okay?" He could smell the close, almost damp odor of other animals around her, and hated Dr. Bunt for probably locking her up in a tiny cage over night while veterinary assistants poked and prodded and tested.

"She's quite well, Aiden," Dr. Bunt called inside. "Just needs to take her medicine for a few weeks, and she'll be good to go."

"Thanks," Aiden replied, keeping his gaze away from Dr. Bunt's voice.

"Smells delicious in there."

"The steaks are almost done," Meredith chirped, and Aiden felt his stomach hitch at the sound of her enthusiasm. But that wasn't really fair; Aiden had always liked Dr. Bunt. The problem, of course, Aiden knew Jason was here to fuck his mom, and his mom probably wanted

to fuck him right back. Then maybe a prolonged relationship so they could keep fucking. Then either marriage or a separation to find other people to fuck. Aiden knew this—it wasn't hard to see writing on the wall when it was written in brail. He also knew his position in this little perverted escapade—he was his mother's prop, her way of garnering sympathy. He hated her for that.

“Let's go into the living room for a few minutes,” Meredith said in her new voice. “Aiden can play for us while we wait.”

Aiden knelt down in front of Birdie, feeling her breath puff on his cheek, and he scratched her head and ears. “I don't want to play.”

Meredith chuckled nervously; it made her sound like some pathetic movie actress bungling a seduction. It made Aiden hate her more. “Aiden,” she said levelly, “you said you would play for Dr. Bunt—as a thank-you for helping Birdie. Remember?”

“No. *You* said I should play for him. I never agreed.”

If Aiden could see his mother's face, he would recognize the reigned anger slowly thundering between her eyes and lips—it had been a rage to never tempt, but he was handicapped now—immune.

“Then why did you have me lug all of your equipment down here?”

“It's okay,” Jason said quickly. “He doesn't have to play. I just thought it would've been nice to see how far you've come, Aiden. It's pretty impressive what you've done, you know.”

Some of the tension leaked away. Aiden didn't know if the man was earnest or just playing the game—the game that ends with Aiden sequestered in his room, listening for lewd noises. He thought perhaps Dr. Bunt was sincere, and he said, “Thank you.”

“How about we have dinner and afterward, if you feel like it, you can play for us?”

“All right,” Aiden said, and he could imagine his mother looking at the man gratefully—a kind of thanks-for-diffusing-*that*-bomb look—and his hate was renewed.

They ate salad first—Aiden and Jason seated at either side of Meredith who sat at the table’s head. The salad was one of his mom’s specialties (and Aiden’s favorite): a mix of greens and almonds with fresh berries showered in citrus dressing. Conversation never lagged between the adults, but Aiden decided to be reticent. At one point, Jason asked Meredith what she thought about that whole “Spitzer Thing,” to which she giggled and said huskily,

“Now serving client nine.” Both adults broke into gales of laughter at that. Aiden felt embarrassed and small. He wondered how many women Dr. Bunt cajoled into bed with that little hot topic.

After the steaks, Jason asked Aiden what kind of guitar he played. Aiden grinned, knowing the man probably didn’t comprehend the difference between a six and twelve-string guitar, and answered: “A PRS.”

“Very nice,” Jason replied, and the intrigue in his voice alarmed Aiden. “Hollow or solid?”

“Solid.”

“Twenty-two frets?”

“Yeah.”

“I have a Gibson. Got it when I was in college. Never got passionate about it, but it helped me kill time. It was relaxing.”

Aiden forked some potatoes into his mouth, now looking in the direction of Jason’s voice. “Playing makes me feel better,” he said, and that was all.

“I didn’t know you played, Jay,” Meredith said, and Aiden could imagine the doctor shrugging his shoulders. He relaxed a little at the lowered pitch of his mother’s tone, as if she felt the limelight slipping from her and her pretty, perfumed dress.

Aiden nodded toward the living room where his guitar and amp sat like stoic observers. “You can play mine if you like.”

“I’d rather hear you,” Jason said. “If you’re as good as your mom says you are, I wouldn’t want to embarrass myself.”

“I’m not that good,” Aiden said, pleased.

“Well,” Meredith pushed out her chair. “Why don’t I clean this up and you two can go in the living room and play?”

“I’ll help with the dishes,” Jason said.

“No, no. It’s fine. It’ll only take a minute.”

Birdie nuzzled Meredith’s leg and she patted the dog’s head. “Birdie will keep me company.”

“All right,” Jason said. “What do you say, Aiden?”

Aiden nodded, feeling the command of the situation returning. “Let’s do it.”

While they sat in the living room—Aiden seated atop his amp with the guitar snug against his chest, and Jason on the couch, leaning forward on his knees—the loud clank and clatter of dishes peppered their conversation. Aiden was tempted to ask his mother to keep it down, but knew that would be pushing his luck a little too far.

“Do you know any Beatles songs?” Jason asked.

Aiden looked at him quizzically. “Who?”

“The *Beatles*. You don’t know who—”

Aiden laughed. “I’m joking,” he said. “Of course I know them. I never learned their songs, though. I prefer Led Zeppelin and Queen, but that song about Jude is pretty good.”

“Good taste,” Jason said. “Well, let’s hear you, kid. I bet you’re a regular virtuoso.”

Aiden grinned, found his fret, and played.

He played well—very well—but he didn’t play the song that called the colors. Not for this man. That would be borderline blasphemy; it would sully the song somehow. Aiden couldn’t explain why he knew that, but he did. That song had become something sacrosanct, something powerful. He supposed he should title it, but then that would also undermine its purpose. Plus, he was scared, scared of what he might see. The problem was he hadn’t seen his mother’s face in over two years; he missed her. He would play the song, but not until she came in; she deserved to hear it in person.

For Jason, he played a simple, energetic melody infused with chromatic scales and a catchy refrain. The man enjoyed it—Aiden could tell by the sound of his loafer catching the song’s tempo.

Aiden got caught up in the motion, the sound, and he didn’t hear the soft *clap* of his mother’s sandals on the floor. “Your kid’s talented,” Jason said, and Aiden could hear the smile in his voice, but he knew that smile wasn’t for him—it was for his mother. He supposed that was all right, so long as he could play.

“What about that new one?” his mother asked, entering the room and sitting next to Jason. Aiden heard the rustling of clothes and knew Dr. Bunt had put his arm around her. “That song you recorded on your tape recorder. I always hear you play it before bed. It’s pretty. I’d like to hear that one.”

“I was just waiting for you,” Aiden said, and found the familiar rhythm. The song was as warm and charged as it had always been, its poignant drive catching the three of them up in its motion. Meredith and Jason heard the beauty, got lost in it, and Aiden watched the colors bleed into the world (that part belonged to him).

He saw his mother, her face and neck and shoulders set in a rosy outline against the blue bulk of a man’s shoulder. She was looking into Aiden’s eyes the way she did before the accident, smiling at him. Something changed in her face, a kind of recognition, but then the worms came. They didn’t nest in any one part of his mother’s body; they crawled and writhed up her legs and arms, all engorged and wriggling. They covered her in a squirming cloud, blocking her face, stopping up her mouth and nose. Aiden felt his jaw working, his teeth chipping against each other. The worms were spinning a bag around her, blocking her out from the world, dousing the pink and red that outlined her like the snuffing of a wick. Somewhere he heard Birdie whimpering, and he turned to find her. She stood in the corner; the worms still festered in her tiny chest. These things were seers, minions marking his mother for something worse than breast cancer or diabetes, and he hadn’t been able to stop them.

His cheeks felt wet, and from far away, somewhere near Birdie’s crying, he heard his mother: *Aiden? Honey, are you all right? Aiden!*

Then there was nothing. The worms stole away with the color.

Outside the bay window, hidden in the shade of a spruce, someone watched it all.

#

Aiden was stuck in that odd limbo between sleep and waking. At times he felt the dampened coarseness of his sheets rub his arms and neck, but then that strange space would pull him away with a greedy panic, like skeletal fingers.

Images splashed against whatever passed for a screen in this place (his mind, he guessed); but they were without color, and Aiden was glad. He saw a door wink into being; it was the door to his house. Something pounded against it on the other side, shuddering the frame and splintering the wood. Then the image fell away, like sand passed through a sieve, and another took its place.

His mother was there, dressed in the same yellow and white sundress. She was rendered in grayscale but with a neo-noire red brushed across her lips. She was moving to answer the door.

He saw their living room: the plush chairs and couch arranged tidily around the glass coffee table, the glossy television hung above the mantle, the bay windows oddly dark and insidious. His home looked compiled of carefully arranged props; they were familiar the way a stranger sometimes seems familiar. But they were background; they were stoic witnesses.

His mother opened the door, and that darkness that clouded the window pooled inside; it choked her, wrung the red from her parted lips. Then the worms.

They crawled from her open mouth, they squirmed into her nose, they puddle about her feet. The room cracked like heated glass run under cold water, and Aiden woke gasping and sweating.

“*Mom?*” he cried. “Mom! Where are you?”

The house was quiet and cold. He could tell by the drop in temperature that the sun had passed away hours ago. No one answered his cry, but as he listened he heard something odd coming from down stairs; it sounded like the sloshing of a full bathtub.

He fumbled along the nightstand for his tape recorder, plugged one of the tiny headphones into his ear, and turned on the song. He saw the room lit with gossamer strings of

blue: the walls were scintillating threads, the floor a black canvas with cerulean borders, and the odd furniture bits were like finely penciled sketches.

He suddenly remembered playing the song for his mother while Dr. Bunt listened; he remembered the rosy outline of her cheek, the soft glow of her eyes, the recognition he saw there just before the worms—

What did it mean? The worms had shown him Birdie's sickness, but that had been different. This time the worms had formed some kind of cocoon around his mother, blocking her out, suffocating her.

He moved through his bedroom door into the hall. The air was still redolent of charred meat and starch. He could hear a strange wet pattering steadily breaking up the quiet. Was it raining?

He descended the stairs, counting each raiser because he'd left his cane in his room. The song played on in his head, drawing the colors, piecing the world together with cold, glimmering strings. He could see, in a way, but couldn't determine depth. The stairs were just pretty shapes; he needed to feel his foot land solidly before he could continue.

The foyer felt cold; a breeze rippled over his arms, raising the skin and tiny hairs. He looked and saw the front door standing open; the world outside was black and empty, like it had been in his dream. "Mom?" he called out again, and a low whimper replied. He scanned the hall, and in the corner, crumpled and motionless, he saw his dog.

"Birdie!" he cried, and ran to her. He cradled the dog's head in his arms and felt something warm and sticky coat his hands and shirt. Birdie's breath came in long, gurgling shudders. Aiden pulled Birdie delicately to him and cried. She wouldn't live. He saw the worms working up her body, wrapping themselves around her, forming that sickly cocoon he'd seen

around his mother. “No,” he whispered. “Leave her alone.” But the worms were implacable. He tried to brush them away, but his hand passed through their tiny, engorged bodies. He felt Birdie’s chest; the erratic heartbeat was barely noticeable—*thump—buh-thump—thump*.

Birdie whimpered once more then stopped breathing. Aiden laid her down. The worms had her.

Mom will be the same! part of him cried.

But an alien voice contended: *Not if you hurry.*

He went into the kitchen; that pattering sound grew louder. He looked at the sink, but couldn’t understand what he saw at first. There seemed to be an endless mass of minute crystals spilling over the basin and coating the floor. His shoes grew warm and he could feel the dampness penetrate his socks. “Warm water,” he whispered.

Why did she leave the water on?

She must have been cleaning the dishes when—

He tried to avoid the answer, focusing his attention on the cold beauty of the scene, but the worms had told him, hadn’t they? They predicted something vile, and here, Birdie had been the beginning.

Find her, a voice urged, and Aiden believed it was the colors. But that was senseless; the colors brought the worms. The colors had no stake in him; they were clockmakers (wind it up, watch it tick). Why should they care?

He turned left and saw the basement door ajar. *She’s down there*, he thought. *She’s not alone.*

He eased the door fully open, wincing at the quiet squeal of a hinge, and descended slowly. The warm water was running over his shoes and down the stairs. He could just hear the

boiler churning somewhere down there, but he wondered what sounds he *couldn't* hear over the odd conflation of water and machinery. If his mother were in trouble, wouldn't she be screaming? *Not if she's dead*, the colors replied.

"Shut up," he whispered.

He moved slowly down, taking care not to slip. The tape recorder in his pocket clicked, the song stopped, and the colors winked out of the world.

"Shit!" He stopped on the middle raiser and fumbled in his pocket. Had the tape ended or had the batteries in the recorder died? He couldn't remember the last time he'd replaced them. He pressed the rewind button and sighed when he heard the tiny cassette whir. How long until it finished?

You can't just stand here.

But he couldn't see and he'd left his cane upstairs.

Time is not your friend right now. Your mother will die.

He continued on, each step down taken with arthritic care. He thought he heard a voice, but it was hard to tell over the rushing water and churning pipes.

His foot rested on something harder than the wooden steps, and he realized it was the ground too late to avoid spilling forward into the inch-high water. His face went down and under; the metallic and oily taste of sullied water rushed down his throat. He heaved himself up to a kneeling position, trying not to gasp loudly or splash. Had he been heard? Time seemed to clamp down on him, demanding he hold still while the water churned and pattered all around him. He didn't hear the voice anymore.

The recorder had stopped rewinding, and for a moment he thought the water had damaged it, but when he found the PLAY button, the song returned and the blue crystalline

strings bloomed ahead, revealing the cellar in that cold double dimension. He saw lines of shelving before him, blank columns that he remembered to be made of brick, and off to the right, where the washer and drier squatted near the barrel-chested boiler, two figures stood, one larger than the other.

One of them was broad and tall, a man. The colors scored him out in red and purple; he loomed over another, smaller figure—his mother. The contours of her body were a sickly, pale yellow. The worms clouded around her head, and Aiden realized the man going to hit her.

“Stop!” Aiden shouted, as he dashed forward, his feet spraying in the inch-deep water. “Let her go!”

“Aiden?” the man called, and something familiar rang in his voice. Aiden knew him.

His perceptions underwent a strange inversion; the blue threads and crystals of this colorful world shone out with painful intensity, singing his eyes in a way that mimed looking into the sun. The man had turned from his mother and leaped at him—there was something in his hand, something like a bat. Aiden had just time to see the worms fly from his mother’s mouth and cloud the man’s head before the weapon connected with his jaw.

The world bled away; Aiden crumpled to the wet floor without a sound. The song played on in his head.

#

Jason helped Meredith carry Aiden to his room. He cradled the boy in his arms while Meredith led him upstairs. She looked over her shoulder, saw Aiden laying motionless and quiet, and thought how small he looked, how fragile. Birdie followed them slowly up, whimpering. Meredith frowned. *He’s my son*, she thought, as if only realizing at that moment. *He needs me*.

“Where’s his room?” Jason asked.

“Right here.” Meredith opened the door and turned down the bed sheets. “Thank you for carrying him.”

Jason laid the boy down. Birdie leaped delicately up onto the bed, and laid her muzzle close to Aiden’s still hand.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you two to the hospital?” Jason asked.

“I—I don’t know,” Meredith answered. “Do you think he needs a doctor?”

“Why would he pass out like that?”

Meredith shook her head. At the moment, everything seemed absurd.

He saw me

Her mind kept returning to the moment just before Aiden passed out; she could have sworn—

“He’s not on any medication,” she said finally.

“Well that doesn’t mean a whole lot, Mare,” Jason replied.

Is he mad? she wondered. *Why should he be mad at me?* and then, without knowing why, she said: “I’m sorry this happened.”

“You didn’t make it happen,” Jason said. “Just tell me what you want to do.”

I want you to go away. I want to be with my boy.

“Nothing,” she answered. “I’ll take care of it.”

Jason turned to her; the accusation in his brow and set of his jaw made her hate him. He rubbed his shiny pate and sighed. “Will you call the doctor?” he asked. “He needs a doctor.”

“I’ll take care of it, Jason.”

“Fine.”

She walked him downstairs and to the front door. He turned around,

Probably wants to say what a terrible mother I am

But Meredith closed the door before he could speak, and rushed back upstairs to Aiden. She kneeled on the floor, brushed his damp hair from his forehead, and kissed the skin.

He's cold.

“Call the hospital,” she whispered. “I love you, sweetheart.”

She kissed Aiden once more then went downstairs. On her way to the kitchen, the doorbell rang. She turned around quickly, twirling her summer dress (which she now felt foolish for wearing), and gaped at the door.

He's persistent, she thought. Probably wants to make sure I don't let my son choke on his own tongue or something.

But as she approached the door, something inside her became more certain it wasn't Jason.

She paused with her hand on the knob. She suddenly remembered Bryan Pierce's face, the way it looked in the afternoon sun spilling through the kitchen window—big and commanding and hungry.

She pulled the door open.

“Paul?”

He stood there with the sun dying behind him; his faded jeans hiked up around his designer boots, and a bedazzled t-shirt clapped to his svelte frame. She took in the hair combed close to his skull and the scar dividing one eyebrow as if she'd never seen them.

“Hey, Merry,” Paul said. “How ya been, babe?”

“What are you doing here?” Meredith suddenly felt very vulnerable in her thin summer dress, as if the fabric weren’t enough of a buffer between her and this man she’d allowed to fuck her in a beat up Mustang.

Paul grinned; it was boyish and handsome, the kind of cocky smile heroes wear in fairytale books to woo the princess. “I was in town,” he said, “visiting Sarah. She said it’d be a good idea to come by here. Said you’ve been having trouble with the kid.”

Meredith closed the door a little, holding it firm, and her stomach twitched when Paul’s smile disappeared. “Aiden and I are fine. I don’t know what Sarah told you that for, but it’s not true.”

“I see.” Paul leaned one heavy hand on the door and sighed; Meredith caught the inimitable whiff of his favorite liquor—Bombay gin—and her throat clenched. “Well, let me see him,” he said. “I want to.”

“He’s not feeling well. Maybe you should call tomorrow.”

He shoved on the door, but pulled back at the last second when Meredith cried out. “I’m here now,” he said, speaking patiently as if to a child. “It’ll be easier if you just—”

“What’s wrong with you! Get out of here!”

“You better quiet the fuck down, Merry. You’re gonna cause a scene.”

“Meredith?” a new voice called, and she was elated and terrified to see it was Bryan Pierce sauntering up the shadowed walkway in a pink button down and gray sport coat. “Hey, everything all right?”

Bryan was bigger than Paul, but the smaller man appraised the newcomer with a wild glower. Paul seemed to dismiss the big man and turned his light eyes back to Meredith, “Who’s this guy? Boyfriend?”

“No,” Meredith said, noting that the quickness of her answer drew Bryan’s eyes to her.

“No,” she repeated. “He’s Aiden’s tutor.”

Paul turned back to Bryan. “Nice to meet you, pal, but this is a private conversation.”

“Do you want him to leave, Meredith?” Bryan asked, stepping forward.

“The fuck you think you are—” Paul tried to protest, but Bryan’s big hands were already pinning the smaller man’s arms behind his back. “Hey! Fuck off, asshole! Merry! I swear to God!”

Bryan tossed the man onto the sidewalk and dusted his hands off like a clichéd desperado in an old spaghetti western. “Don’t come back, *pal*. My brother’s a cop.” And Meredith wondered: *this would be almost funny if it weren’t actually happening.*

Paul stood shakily to his feet, rubbing a few bits of dirt from his designer jeans. “The fuck you get off puttin your gorilla hands on me! Goddamned cue ball!”

Bryan grinned; the darkness set around his mouth and into the folds of his brow, giving him a shark-like expression. “You remember how to walk?” he asked. “I suggest you do it. You don’t want me to remind you.”

Paul flipped Bryan the bird. “You all can get on with your orgy, or whatever the hell you doin, while my boy sits ‘round sick.” He pointed at them. “Just wait, Merry. I’m gonna pull Aiden outta there! Watch! DYFS will go to town on your door with a battering ram!”

“Last warning,” Bryan said, and Paul walked off, scuffing his designer boots on the pavement and cursing under his breath.

When Bryan turned back his face was almost normal again, and Meredith stood in the doorway with her hands cupped and trembling over her mouth.

“Hey,” Bryan came up to her; light from a nearby streetlamp caromed off his head.

“Meredith? You all right?” He took her hand; Meredith felt like she could scream, but she buried it down, choked it out; it wasn’t proper etiquette to scream into the face of your hero, right? No matter how sick their touch made you feel.

“I’m okay,” she managed. “Paul—he always comes around whenever he feels like it. He didn’t even come for Aiden’s birthday—”

Bryan kissed her fingers; his lips felt oily. “It’s all right. He’s gone. Where’s Aiden?”

Meredith’s eyes widened. “Oh, Jesus!” She ran inside without another word. Bryan followed her in and locked the door.

#

Meredith picked up the phone to dial—who? 9-1-1? Get an ambulance? Or maybe she should just drive Aiden over to the hospital herself. She remembered something, though, about it being poor judgment to move a person who had fainted or had some kind of an episode. Where had she learned that? Probably from the movies.

Bryan entered and leaned calmly on the kitchen counter. He crossed his arms and gazed out the darkened window with a thoughtful purse to his lips. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Meredith turned to him, the phone suddenly feeling like a brick in her hand. “Bryan. I— Thank you for what you did. I appreciate it, really. But Aiden’s sick. I need to call an ambulance.”

“He only fainted.” Bryan said.

Meredith looked from the phone to Bryan—the waning twilight flashed hot and orange on his scalp. “Yes,” she replied, her mind fluttering like a moth trapped in a lampshade.

Bryan grinned. “Not uncommon,” he said. He uncrossed his arms, plugged the sink, and set to washing the few dishes left behind from Meredith’s disastrous dinner. “Hardly seems like anything to get in a tizzy about.”

Meredith looked from the phone to Bryan again, the scar on her cheek suddenly coming alive with a nettling itch. The way Bryan spoke made her feel like the woman in that wallpaper story—pliant and placated. Was she being hysterical? Part of her believed it, but this was her *boy*, her only tie to a world that had magically continued on without her. *Tragedy is cruel like that*, she thought absently. *No matter how terrible, how irrevocable the change, everything just continues on, like grass growing over a cemetery plot.*

Meredith swallowed and clicked the phone off. “How did you know that?”

“I was watching,” he replied, and his tone was so matter-of-fact that Meredith had a lunatic moment where she almost said: *Oh, of course. Silly me.* But the coldness of his tone, the accusatory nuance cutting his words made her mouth clap shut.

“You should’ve told me,” Bryan said, ticking his skull slowly from side-to-side, as if listening to a song. “I’m a big boy.”

The faucet continued running; the water had reached within an inch of the sink lip, and soon it would spill over onto the floor, but Bryan just went on rubbing the same dish with the same concentric circles.

“Bryan—” Meredith began, but then the dish flew through the air and smashed just behind her head. Tiny ceramic shards bit into her neck, and Meredith screamed. Birdie sprinted down the stairs from Aiden’s room, barking and growling. She leaped up at Bryan and bit into his forearm, snarling and snapping her head from side to side. Bryan growled back, grabbed a knife from the arrangement of drying dishes, and jabbed it into the dog’s chest. Birdie cried out

but held on a while longer. Bryan twisted the knife then tossed the dog to the floor, where she laid panting and whimpering.

Meredith shrieked and moved for the dog.

“No!” Bryan shouted, closing the distance between them with two long strides. “You keep your mouth shut when I’m talking,” he hissed. “How could you treat me this way? After all I’ve done for your boy?”

Meredith dropped the phone and clamped her hands over her mouth; tears welled up in her eyes and ran between her fingers. She could feel the scar on her cheek pulsing now, as if something in there, alive and wriggling, wanted out. She looked from Bryan to Birdie—the dog was dragging herself into the hall, apparently surrendering to the stronger opponent. Meredith shook her head, unable to think of anything to say. *He wouldn’t hear me, anyway*, part of her mind declared.

Bryan cupped one large hand over her mouth and pulled her closer. “You need to talk to me, Mare. You need to make me understand.” He released her and stood with his fists bunched at his sides. Meredith thought for a moment that he looked like a Neo-Soprano gangster with his blazer and pink shirt, perhaps one that would look at home in a Mel Brooks movie. Why do we think the most ridiculous things at the worst moments? she wondered.

Part of her demanded she run. *The man’s big, but you run five miles a day. You’ve placed third in the Glenridge County Marathon two years in a row. You can get out.*

But Aiden’s upstairs, a different voice—the mother voice—contended. *If Bryan can’t get to you he will get to Aiden.*

So run to the neighbors.

The Gargiulos are on vacation, and the Myers are in their eighties!

Survival instinct, girl! Self-preservation!

But my boy—

Meredith's knee shot up into Bryan's crotch before her inner voices could finish squabbling. The big man went down with a shudder and shriek that belied his size. She vaulted over him and ran down the hall to the front door. The bastard had locked it; that slowed her down, but it only took a flick of the thumb and forefinger and she was outside and sprinting over her lawn a moment later.

Ring the Myers' bell and call the police. Bryan wouldn't be crazy enough to barge in on a couple of senior citizens. He wouldn't—

The grass was dewy and slick from the ebbing heat, and Meredith's sandals were not meant for running. She slipped halfway across the lawn, spilling forward and landing several feet away from the Myers' front walkway. The Myers had a lawn display of wild purple tulips bordered by five low stone slabs cut to mimic miniature hillocks—Meredith's head struck one of these stones, and she lay with the sight of the lawn slowly switching places with the darkened pitch of the sky. She felt an odd sense of nausea and chagrin, and she crazily hoped no one was around to see her lying in the Myers' lawn with her new summer dress hiked up around her bony hips.

She heard breathing somewhere far away, a high, airy whistle as if someone were hyperventilating through his nose. Then thick fingers twined into her hair, and she was steadily pulled back across her lawn and up her front steps. The redbrick raisers scraped her calves and shins. Then she watched as she was dragged through her open front door and into her kitchen, where warm water had pooled in the floor.

“I only wanted to take care of you,” some voice said. Part of her knew it had to be Bryan, but another part—the part responsible for cognizance—had fluttered up into the higher branches of her mind.

Self-preservation, girl.

She felt the cruel pitch and yaw of gravity as strong arms heaved her up and thumped her onto a big shoulder. Bryan toted her through the basement door and down the stairs. She saw tiny dribbles of water following them down, down, down into the darker world of her home. The boiler hummed and churned, pipes clanked. She was tossed onto the old couch near the washer machine—the one her mother had gifted to her without bothering to match any sort of décor. A light bulb hung languidly from the exposed rafters; a chain depended from it. Bryan tugged the chain, and a swaying, jaundiced light lit on his face. The bulb oscillated, highlighting Bryan’s sneer then dropping it back into shadow. Again, Meredith felt that nausea roil in her belly.

“I’m disappointed, Mare,” Bryan said, and the reproach in his voice reminded Meredith of her father, which only added to the absurdity of the moment. “I had the best intentions—the *best* of intentions—but you spat in my face. I can’t abide that. Not even from you.” He leaned forward, sweat beaded off his smooth scalp and landed on her lip; she tasted heat and salt and oil. “Women who would abandon those who love them deserve what they get. I’m sorry.”

“Bryan,” Meredith rasped, her throat felt hot and coarse, as if someone had stuffed a dusty rag down its length. “I’m sorry. Please, just leave me and Aiden—”

Bryan slapped her; his large hand met her cheek with an eye-watering *clap!* “Shut up!” he shouted. “You don’t even deserve that boy. That poor boy. He’ll be looked after. Know that. Maybe it’ll bring you some kind of comfort.” His eyes darted to the floor, flicked, then settled on something. The big mass of him dropped out of Meredith’s view, and for a moment she thought

she could kick him, break his jaw maybe, but his hand settled onto her thigh and squeezed painfully, as if anticipating her thoughts. He stood up again, but now he had something long and dull in his other hand. Meredith realized what it was and, despite the fear worming through her, eating away at her, a memory shined through with the brilliance of sunlight reflected off a mirror. It was Aiden's baseball bat; she and Paul used to take him to King's Park so he could practice. They would take turns pitching and hitting and fielding. Scraped knees and sweat and bruised shins and warm light. So much laughter; she thought now you would have to be mad to laugh that much. But the memory brought some kind of peace, as if a living part of it were taken and placed inside her. She smiled.

Bryan raised the bat over his head. Meredith pitied the sorrowful, pulled look in his face. *He thinks he's being merciful*, she thought, and prepared for the blow.

"Stop!" a voice cried. "Let her go!" Meredith's muscles coiled; that voice had awakened some long-slumbering instinct. It was her son.

Bryan turned. "Aiden?"

Then her boy was screaming; his sneakers splashed in the low accumulation of water. She watched Bryan turn and raise the bat.

No! her mind shrieked, and her body heaved up.

Bryan swung the bat, connected with her son's boyish and pimpled jaw, and clove him to the wet floor.

In that moment, no more than seconds, Meredith felt something—a living, sickly weight—burst from her body. She reached down, grabbed the steel pale used to catch excess water from the boiler, and smacked the back of Bryan's shiny skull. There was a loud *clank* followed by a nauseating *crack*.

Bryan spilled forward into the water. Meredith dove onto his back, wrested the bat from his big hand, and jabbed the blunt end into the red and swollen mass of flesh behind his head.

Once—twice—*crack*—again—*crack*.

She sat astride Bryan's wide midriff, the bloodied end of the bat poised over her head, gasping and crying. Bryan stirred under her; pink bubbles gurgled out of his nose where the water had reached. Meredith held the bat with two hands and forcibly shoved the man's mouth and nose under the water. Bryan managed to get his hands under him, but Meredith hooked her legs over his arms and sat on his head.

He struggled weakly beneath her; she felt his sides laboring, his neck muscles writhing. She screamed as pink froth bubbled up around her thighs, but she managed to hold on.

It seemed like a very long time before Bryan finally stilled. But when he did Meredith remained on top of him a while longer. She shoved harder on his head until she heard the muted *pop* of his nose breaking. She stood, her legs trembling and barely able to support her, and looked down at her wet and bloodstained dress. She dropped the bat and shrieked.

Aiden made a low whimpering sound, and that brought a little clarity back to her. She stumbled over to her son, wiping her nose and sniveling. "Aiden?" she called. "Oh, Aiden, baby—"

"Mom—"

"Mommy's here." She knelt next to him and cradled his head in her lap. "Are you all right?"

"The colors," he said. "They're going."

"Aiden?"

"I can still see the worms," he said. "They left you. They're eating him."

“Aiden, honey, we have to get you to the hospital.”

“They’re eating him, mom. Like they ate Birdie. They’ll finish him up.” He turned his eyes up to her, *looked* at her, and touched her cheek. “I’m glad,” he said, and then fell limp in her arms.

#

Summer died without notice; fall brushed through the maples and stripped them naked without a word. Winter came without a preamble; one morning Indian summer still fluffed the waylaid tree limbs and doleful pines, but by that night a numbing frost had settled over the hills and forced the rejuvenated foliage to bend and sleep. It was in winter that Meredith and Aiden moved in with her mother on Cardinal Road, about twenty-five minutes from their old home, which now had a For Sale sign staked in the front lawn (the same lawn Bryan Pierce dragged Meredith across by her hair only months prior).

Meredith’s mother had taken to her widowhood and senior citizen status quite well—as a girl, Meredith would’ve sworn her mother didn’t know the meaning or purpose of a hobby. But now the woman belonged to two book clubs, played Texas Hold’em with several friends on Wednesday evenings, and often went to “the pictures” with a tall man by the name of Williams. Audrey Chase welcomed her daughter and grandson willingly enough, but maintained her independent lifestyle without a wrinkle, which left Meredith and Aiden with a lot of time together.

Meredith worked out of her mother’s basement. There was a room toward the back of the space—a space which consisted of a carpeted floor, empty refrigerator, and nothing else—and Meredith moved her desk and computer and files and contacts inside without much ceremony.

“A month, at most,” she’d told her mother, to which the old woman replied with a curt smile and kiss on her daughter’s forehead.

“As long as you need, my love.” She cupped Meredith’s scarred cheek, looked at her in that way mothers have, then left for her movie date.

Aiden pattered around in the spare room upstairs, mostly working on his lessons assigned by his new tutor, Mrs. Holden. Occasionally he would pick up the blue PRS guitar, affectionately rub the dust from the strings—maybe pluck one or two—then set it back on its stand and return to whatever he’d been doing.

Meredith offered to get him a new dog, but Aiden would only reply with a solemn shake of his head. Meredith understood.

A small scar blotted Aiden’s right temple; it was the size of a quarter but hardly noticeable because he wore his hair longer now. The colors had been literally knocked out of his head, and Aiden guessed he should thank Mr. Pierce for that, though he couldn’t bring himself to. He told his mother about the colors a few days after the “incident” (that’s what people in town called it, or at least that’s what Aiden heard them call it when he and his mother walked through the supermarket or strolled into the movie theater). The ACCIDENT had been replaced, but this time Aiden had gained more than he lost. Meredith was his mother, and he’d been given a second chance to be her son. He even looked forward to the visits from Dr. Bunt these days, as they were days guaranteed to bring out his mother’s laughter.

Meredith came into his room the night after Christmas; a snowstorm had blown in right around noon and didn’t seem to have an exit planned. When Meredith entered, Aiden stood at the window, his hands pressed to the glass, feeling the cold grow heavier and more distinct, like a

pond just before it freezes. “Hey, kiddo,” she called from the doorway and came in and sat on his bed. “You doing okay?”

He turned to her voice, tapped over to it with his cane, and sat next to her. “I’m all right.”

“Did you start that reading Mrs. Holden assigned?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, don’t save it for the day before.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Dinner will be ready in a half-hour.”

“Mom?” He reached out and touched her cheek. Meredith put her hand over it.

“What?”

“You don’t have to feel bad anymore.”

He felt her head give a curious tilt. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t blame you for the accident. I never did.” For a while neither of them spoke. Then Aiden felt something small and wet trickle onto his hand. “I wanted to tell you that a long time ago, but I was afraid.”

Meredith nodded. “I’m still afraid,” she said.

“I didn’t want to be alone. Like this.”

“I know, baby.” She wrapped her arms around him, and they sat that way—the snow falling heavy and high outside and the house warm and quiet and safe.

Meredith cleared her throat and held Aiden away. “We’re all human,” she said. “And we’re all messes.”

“I guess people don’t want to see that,” Aiden said distantly.

“No. I guess they don’t.” She stood with a sigh and wiped her face. “I should go finish dinner.” On her way to the door she saw the guitar, with all its signs of neglect, propped in the corner. “Why don’t you play anymore?”

Aiden angled his head to the floor; in thought or annoyance Meredith couldn’t tell. She didn’t think he would answer and was about to repeat the question when Aiden said, almost whispered:

“I still see them.”

“See what?”

“The worms. I see them whenever I pick it up.”

Meredith bit her lower lip and tapped nervously on the doorframe with her fingernail.

“They’re not real, honey. Remember what Dr. Kernan said? They can’t hurt you.”

“No, they can’t.”

Meredith came back into the room, hugged her son close, and whispered, “We’ll be better one day. I promise. Not all things stay broken.”

“I know,” Aiden whispered. Meredith kissed the top of his head, like her mother used to do for her, and left the room.

Aiden sat on the bed for a long while. Snow pattered softly against the window, and he knew the storm would have done significant damage by now. He sat and wondered how many people out there were meeting the worms. How many people were slowly being eaten without knowing it.

He stood, walked over to the dulled PRS, picked it up, and brought it to the window. Someone was trudging through the snow down the street. A man. An elderly man. Aiden couldn’t see the snow or the walkway or the streetlights or the power lines, but he could see the

man. The man walked with a heavy parka clung tight around his body. The parka was black. It seemed to coil and uncoil around the man's throat, writhing and constricting. Aiden wondered if the man knew he was being strangled; he wondered if the man knew his time was up. He watched the man pass beneath his window, and for a moment he thought the man looked up at him. But he laid the guitar down and the old man disappeared.

He put the guitar back in its stand, picked up his cane, and went down to dinner.

END