Dedications

I wish to thank, first of all, Dr. William Miller, for guiding me and advising me through the process of creation. I also include Dr. Thomas Koontz because he taught me that creativity could be prodded by the writer.

Finally, I want to dedicate this anthology to David Garrison, without whom none of this would be possible. Thank you for the late nights you read my work, made me feel better about my project, and gave a warm, loving critique.

Thank you all.
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A Dying Whisper, Father

"I've never been here before," the old man said querulously. "If I'd been here before, I'd remember."

"Of course you have," the younger man repeated patiently, as if used to his Father's vagaries.

"Don't patronize me," the codger snapped. "Who's running this show? You or me? I'm in charge here."

"Of course you are." His Son humored him with sad resignation.

Suddenly the glint of anger in the old man's eyes was replaced by a rapidly darkening shadow. "Do you think I'm getting...too old for this job? I'd never actually considered retiring until you started pointing out everything that was going wrong. Maybe...maybe the responsibility is just too great for someone my age." His hands trembled as old hands will.

"Dad." The one word held infinite sorrow. "How long has it been since you really came down to learn for yourself how things are running? I can't even remember. You've been losing touch for a lot longer than you admit."

"Maybe," said the old man. "Maybe I'm afraid if I stop believing I'm in charge...that I have a purpose; maybe I'm afraid I'll stop existing."
"Nonsense. You are not a dying whisper, Father. You will live and live. All around you; life and rebirth. Can you doubt the same for yourself? Someday I will have a Son. I will become You and He will become Me." The words defied the sadness in his voice.

"So you say. But how do I know that? It's been so long...so long. I can't even remember all of what went on today."

"That's natural. You've been watching from a distance for so long that---"

"It's more than that," his Father interrupted. "I just don't feel like I know what's happening anymore. Even with me right in the middle of it. It feels...unnatural. I've lost my touch. As much as I dread it, I think it's time to pass the light to you, my Son." His filmy eyes rested mournfully, unfocused, on a small boy looking at a picture book with his mother. Their conversation wafted over.

"Mommy, why does God let people hurt so much?" the blonde haired cherub asked curiously.

The woman's voice was both familiar and wise, as if she represented all the aeons of accumulated feminine wisdom. "Maybe God doesn't even know," she said sweetly. "Maybe He looks down and from a distance sees only the blue-green serenity of our world."
The old man was stricken, ashen-faced.

"Father...Father! Are you all right?" The gentle face was a portrait of anxiety. "Perhaps I shouldn't have brought you here..."

"No, no. I'm fine," he managed, gasping for breath. "But what about her, him? How will they live when even their God is blind? Jesus, it's so hard."

"I know, Father. I know."
Still We Live

Gray and battered. The landscape looked as though it had survived centuries and centuries of rain. The only trees that hadn’t shriveled into hollow, warped shells were the willows. And they dotted the environment meagerly.

It was nearing twilight when he set down, perhaps forty meters from a farmhouse. It too was gray, the boards bent and rotting from exposure to the rain.

“No one’s here,” he said, stepping down. The marshy soil sucked around his boot.

“Why have you come back?” The vibrato in the voice was familiar. The witch-girl.

“I wanted to see my family.”

“You were warned.” There was a slight question.

He turned. She was bent and gray, so like the landscape that he gasped. “Yes.”

She smiled—even her teeth were gray. “Do I revolt you? Are you remembering that we played together as children? My fire images were not dangerous, then.”

“What happened?” The question was undirected, allowing her to fill in details wherever she chose.

She gestured to his craft, its silver streamlined sides the most vibrant presence in the vista. “Let me mask it. That should give us a
few moments to talk.” She signaled for him to turn around.

Then she indicated he might look. Not quite invisible, no, she hadn’t mastered the art to that degree, but it blended so well that it was impossible to detect at first glance.

“Come.”

He followed, having no choice. Somehow this wasn’t his world any longer. He would obey her rules.

One willow, bent nearly double against the onslaught of centuries of driving rain, had a larger trunk than some of the others. She pressed a section of bark; he never would have been able to find it—a small door slid open. She beckoned for him to follow.

A home had been forged in the hollow of the tree. The sides were smooth, sanded to the point of shine. Soft cloth and mosses cushioned the floor. There was a cot, small though serviceable. It had layers upon layers of blankets. There was a large desk with a metal chair. To the left of the furniture was a space clearly used for magick. A few burnt relics were scattered here and there.

“You aren’t terrified? There are none left here who do not fear me.” She answered her own question. “But you wouldn’t be frightened, would you, Michelmas? Before you left, you were one I might have called friend.”

He nodded, content to let her speak her piece before asking his questions.

“How little you’ve changed.” She walked around him, as an
inspector. A gnarled hand touched his hair. "Still dark, wavy. I see you have not cut it. This honors the memory of your people."

Tension balled in his stomach at her words, but still he would not interrupt.

"In a few minutes, you will see your people, Michelmas. You should not have come back."

She paced a little, as far as the tree would permit. "The story... its what you have come to hear. But first, tell me, do I revolt you? Answer honestly. I will know if you do not."

"No. I cannot abhor what I do not understand. I have not been gone long enough for you to have aged this way. So in you I see the beauty you once possessed. I was not blind to it."

A smile curved her cracked lips. "You might find this impossible to believe, but of them all, I am the luckiest. I at least had power in which to choose the manner of my change. I at least retained my humanity."

"My family?" His voice roughened only a little.

She closed her eyes. "The government thought to improve the quality of life. They thought to expose us to artificial solar energy. Neither our bodies nor our planet were strong enough to withstand it. It triggered spontaneous change. I cannot tell you precisely what happened. But all the other species appear to have regressed several hundred thousand years...humans to humanoid shapes where only the most primal instincts survive."

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"And you?" The question masked his emotion.

"I chose the way of the land. At the time of exposure I could sense the change. I linked myself with the land. The way it warped, grayed, became drab and ugly, so I did. But still I live. And I retain the humanity the others did not. It was a fair price."

"Petra." His voice was husky but she could not tell for whom his passion rang. "There is much pain in you. There is much you do not tell me. You do not mention that you were unable to disconnect yourself from the land. That you feel its suffering still."

She turned, giving him a view of her gnarled back, ridges of her spine poking clearly through the thin material dress. "I had forgotten," she said thickly. "When we were as children, yet older, I taunted you because of your beauty...the ease of your excellence. Yet you never responded to me harshly. Did you pity me even then?"

"I pity you?" The astonishment in his voice was clear. "I might have pitied the sky more or the wind. So wild, so much beauty. My memory of you is the way you ran, the wind pressing your dress to your body...one graceful silhouette with your hair streaming behind you in a scarlet banner. How would I pity this?"

"I had forgotten." She said this again. "I taunted you because you would never know what I knew...never make the fire images dance with a gesture. Recklessly, you agreed to participate in the joining."
it did not fade. He said it aloud. “It did not fade. It was true I came to see my family, Petra, but more truly I came for you. Did you think I would not feel your pain, even across such distance? When one Joins, particularly with a witch-girl, it is for life. When I think again what you bore...a human is not made to endure such pain as a world might suffer.”

“It was a fair price,” she said. The harshness of her voice had faded until Michel heard slight echo of the velvet of her youth.

“Was it a fair price?” he asked, an edge forming in his voice. “You say this because you do not see the consequences. You did not have the right.”

“Not see the consequences?” Her voice rose, passion breaking despair. “I bartered my beauty for life. It was mine; I had the right.”

“You almost annihilated me. I had no forewarning, no magick to ward off the pain. Do not flatter yourself, witch-girl. Alone you would have died. It was not your will that allowed to withstand the pain of a planet. I took half that anguish, Petra. You forgot our Joining. I had no choice.”

“How can this be?” She looked near breaking. “You bear no marks. You suffer nothing.”

“I suffer nothing?” His voice had the emotion of thunder. “The pain took your body, Petra; it took my mind.”

She frowned. “Cease these complicated riddles.”
He turned, kneeling at her feet. "Lift up my hair. The base of my skull." He felt her fingers tremble as they discovered truth.

"What are you?" she breathed, moving back in a motion that was not so much disgust as fascination.

"Cyborg. I had a chip copy made of my brain in the advent of any damage. The pain wiped my brain clear. I'd never known anything like it. Lucky for me I had the copy. I was dead, Petra. Bastian 1 brought me back."

"Who is this Bastian 1?" The question was a defense mechanism.

"A computerized surgical team on my ship that I had programmed to react under such a circumstance. I was exploring Cytron 1 alone when it happened." He grimaced. "Yet I suffer nothing. My shell is as beautiful as the day I left but I am neither man nor machine, incapable of love. Merely twisted passion."

"And you are not at all the same?" Petra asked, desperately trying to cope with knowledge. Knowledge of what he was and of what she had done.

She quivered, realizing he had purposely leashed his own pain to sensate hers. Their Joining made them acutely sensitive to the point of sixth perception. His quiet, crashing confusion swamped her; his alienation rivaled her own. "It was a fair price," she said again desperately. "Still we live."

He gave a bark of what might have been laughter. "Still we live... I have come for you, Petra. This barren planet does not interest me. I come for you."

"Do you mean to slaughter me for my misremembrance?" Her words were defiant; her tone was without hope. "Your fate was tied to mine. You have suffered as I did. Do you prefer this?" She cracked the door, mist seeping inside.

Facsimiles, caricatures of humans, slavered over the bloody carcass of some animal. Their feral eyes darted up and down from their feast nervously, nostrils flared at an unfamiliar scent. One creature ripped away chunks of flesh with its teeth and occasionally bowed the head to lap up the pooling blood. Naked, they were all covered in filth and open sores. The once soft and taut human skin hung in folds, drooping over protruding bones.

She shut the door tightly. "This is your family. What option did I have? As a fate, death is preferable. I would choose it."

He acknowledged her words. "It is as I would have done. You could have done little else."

"Then why did you come, if not for revenge?"
“We belong,” he said simply. “We participated in the Joining too young, but we did so. I have lost much, as have you. The creature I am, I feel nothing save in connection with you. You are mine; I have come to claim you.”

“Claim this?” Her voice disbelieved. She looked at herself. “I am all that is hideous. Even if I wanted to go with you, I would not believe.”

“You are mine,” he said again. “I left you once because I was afraid. I was too young to be a Witch-Lord. I claim you now.”

She backed away nervously, unconsciously making gestures of warding. “Please...do not.”

The warmth of his hands rested on her shoulders; he absently stroked the protrusions of bone. His hands moved one by one to each button down the front of her dress.

“Please do not...” she begged, eyes cast downward. “If you can feel anything, do not...”

“You owe me this,” he murmured. “I have needs, yet as a result of the magick of our Joining and the half-man I am, I can take only you.”

“I am...so ugly...” Her voice broke; she kneeled at his feet wretchedly trying to cover her thin, warped body.

“In my mind’s eye, I see your beauty. Trust.” His whisper threaded through her.

“What do you mean?” She pushed some straggling gray hair
out of her face.

"Computerized," he said, tapping his head. "My memories are so vivid now that they become pictures."

She stood slowly, only a quiver revealing her shame. "Then I trust. According to the ancient laws of the joining, you have the right to claim me. It is as it must be."

He was strong, she realized, at the easy way he lifted her bony frame... the warmth of his hands sweet on her flesh.

He laid her on the cot, draping a blanket over her. For warmth or for cover, she wondered painfully.

He disrobed and the beauty of his hot, solid flesh hurt her eyes. She looked away.

He slid in beside her, not shy about letting his body contact hers. She shivered.

"Michel." She said, then stopped because his arms had gone around her. They stroked the bones of her back, her wrinkled skin.

He shushed her, mouth playing with hers gently. His hand tangled in her hair. Its softness in his palm did not mention its change of color.

His mouth found her meager breasts; they had young brown nipples that perked to his tongue. In the half-light, pleasure drove her in and out of humiliation.

He murmured old words to her, meanings obscured but
resonating with passion and radiance. He continued stroking her
with lips...fingers...(as though she retained the beauty he
remembered more clearly than she) until she forgot her ugliness.
She arched her knotted spine and offered herself up. Parting her
thighs, he claimed her before she lost the illusion and most of the
pleasure.

She was young again and running with him along green hills.
She called to him and he answered. Together they fell clinging into
soft grasses. He lifted her skirt and thrust into her while she chanted
the words of Joining. Then their souls were running along the green
hills, loving, fiery, climbing like the the ivy on the trees. Spires of
green surrounded them, dank, sweet, beautiful, until
unexpectedly...all at once, they caught a brief glimpse of sky.

"For you too?" she asked, shuddering at the clarity of the
memory and the receding tide of passion.

"Always." He intoned the archaic words that claimed her.

"Always," she echoed. Witch-lord, she added silently.

"Come with me. Together we will find what we have lost." His
dark eyes were enigmatic.

She rose and slipped into her dress. She made the gesture of
warding as they walked toward his ship.
‘Them Good Ol Boys...’

“You know the buses get worse everyday,” I mumble, taking a long drink.

“Do not,” my companion mutters back. “You’re seeing things again. I wish you’d stop drinking that stuff.”

“Awww, Larry. If it was up to you, there’s not telling what I’d be doing instead. I like riding this bus. Hate when they kick us off. It gets pretty cold this time a year. You remember the winter of ‘78. Thought I’d never be warm again.”

“You woulda died, if I hadna found ya. Riding the buses all around was my idea ya know...”

“Was not, you liar. I was gonna do anyway...the very next day.”

“Bullshit,” Larry laughs. “The best ideas are always mine.” He wipes his nose on the dirty sleeve of his coat.

Larry and me have this same argument every winter around Christmastime. But I usually let him win because it makes him happy. He likes to think he takes care a me. But
I know what's what. So I humor him. Larry's my best friend. We been together since that winter of '78.

Larry's a hero. He told me so. He used to be in the army. He fought one of those wars, I forget which one though. But he's got a whole little box full of medals and citations. I always ask him why a good guy like him wants to stick around a guy like me for. Larry says its because I need him. Maybe I do. I sure was lonely until I found Larry. Larry's my best friend.

We got a real nice place, just off a Rush Street. At night it's real pretty. The street gets all lit up and the neon signs just flash off and on all night long. I can't hardly remember living anywhere besides Rush Street. We got our place behind the dumpster. There's massage parlor just up the road, and this one girl, she's got white white hair, she always brings us stuff, mostly in wintertime. And usually Christmastime. She's my favorite lady. Once she brought us a whole fruitcake. It was toasted even.

Larry don't think much a Darlene. He says she's
nogoodfornothing. I like her though. I said that, I think.

Larry was just asking me the other day why I always talk to her and not him whenever we’re together. I told him it was because it was only being nice, since I see Larry a whole lot more than I see Darlene. He snorted and spit. As I said, Larry don’t think much a Darlene.

Larry pokes me because I’m just sitting on the bus and not talking to him. The real reason Larry pokes me is because Larry can’t stand to be quiet. “Whatcha doing?” Larry asks.

“I’m just thinking,” I say.

Larry laughs at me. “Dummies don’t think.”

As I said, Larry likes to think he’s better than me. So I let him.

“I do so think,” I argue before being quiet again.

Ol’ Miz McKeever is sleeping over the heat vents again, so it’s getting a little colder. But it’s better than being outside. I’m watching her pull her navy wool stocking cap over her ears tighter. Her pea green parka look like it’s
losing most of it's fur. Miz McKeever, she got this duffel bag just filled, she says, with treasures she found. Her hands always real tight on it, even when she's sleeping. Nobody else on the bus this time a night, just us people who ride so often.

Most of the streets we pass now are dying. They're buildings boarded up, windows got gates pulled all cross them. People scurrying past, heads down. I wish I could tell them to take the bus home, cause then they're safe. But the bus just keep on moving. Trees look all bony where they got planted by that ol Mayor Daly. He stick those trees in little cracks in cement and spect them to grow all proud and strong. Nothing going to grow like that when all there is is rock to hold on to. Just get pale and sad. Streetlights blur by. The City looks most beautiful than anything I ever seen when you get closer to my part a town. Here nothing but death and dyin and more like it.

My part a town is lights. They flash off and on for food and hotels and shows and gambling and girls. Larry says
Darlene is nothing but a whore. But I don't like him saying that since she's always so nice to us. Then there's people on the streets who're all so nice and they have all kinds of things to sell. Luther, he sell gold chains inside his coat. And Jimmy, he sells pills from a big bag. They cost a lot. He tell me never to buy any from him, even if I did have some money cause he like me too much for that. Jimmy's real nice. Pedro got himself just a whole string of girls. They walk up and down the street with him, dressed so little that I think they must be crazy. Pedro himself though, he wears a big animal coat. He look real warm in his big coat and big car. I don't like Pedro much. Then there's ol' Barbarini, he been selling papers, candy, cigarettes, and magazines as long as he can remember. As ol' as he looks, that must be a long long time. He don't have any legs. He lost em, he says, in the war. I don't think it's the same war Larry fought. Barbarini's way too old for that. He's real proud he did it though. Worth my legs again and again, he says, all red and misty, you young people don't know nothing bout sacrifice.
I think I do.

I know lots of people. Good people. But Larry'll always be my best friend, but don't you say nothing to him. We take care a each other. I have this dream that one these days we gonna find some luck and get us jobs in one a those fancy restaurants. Then we'll get us a room somewhere--heat, running water, the works. But so far, it ain't so bad. At least we got each other. That's enough.

Two ugly men get on the bus. We've stopped at Washington and Fillmore. They look around the bus at me real meanlike. Larry and Miz McKeever wrinkle their noses. I hear one man say, "I sure will be glad when we get back in the company of some normal people, like them good old boys at home." The other one says something I don't hear, but I feel real cold inside. Colder even than when I sleep outside in winter.

The bus bounces across the curb. The driver laughs and I see her face in the mirror. She's got rouge on her face nice and deep in round circles. It looks like someone 22
punched her good on both sides of her face. But she smiles at me. At least she don't mind if me and Larry ride the the buses around when the weather gets real cold. She never kicks us out like some do.

The two ugly men are staring at me. One of them has a tattoo on his chest. I can see it because he's not smart enough to button his shirt or coat. His hair is long and greasy. The other man isn't as ugly but looks meaner. His face is all beat up and he has what looks like a broke nose. They aren't looking at me too friendly.

"What are you staring at, retard?" The first one grunts at me.

"Yeah, what?" the second one echoes.

"Nothing," I say, as nice as I can. I turn to say something softly to Larry.

"Hear the retard muttering about us?" Ugly asks Meanie, just as I finish asking what time it is.

"Yeah, I heard just fine," Meanie says threatening.

"Can we see your dolly?" Ugly asks all nice and sweet.
"Where'd you get such a nice dolly?"


"Gl Larry," Meanie laughs at me. "No Dummy. That's Gl Joe you've got there."

Clearly they're not too smart. "I told you this is Larry. He's my best friend. We go everywhere together."

"You think he'd miss Larry if he was involved in a tragic accident?" Ugly asks Meanie, snatching Larry from my hands. He dangles my best friend from the neck, just out of my reach. I scream.

"Yeah, let's see," Meanie smiles at me, and rips Larry's head off. I'm still screaming. Larry's dead. Darlene can't help me now. Meanie laughs. He opens the bus window just wide enough to get rid of Larry's lifeless body. He hits the pavement and bounces once. I scream louder and louder. Larry's broken broken body is crushed further by a red car and the number 12 bus just won't stop.

"Murder!" I scream. "Murder!"
Blue like a sky creeping gradually toward midnight, the dress was warm where it brushed her thighs. The lace stockings slid up easily, almost sexual. A steady throbbing rolled between her shoulders.

His friends. She wasn't sure He wanted her to meet them...even if she wanted it herself. Look fine, He'd said. Made a good impression, she thought, fluffing her hair out a little bit more.

Nine. He said He'd be here at nine. She sat on the grey sofa, pulling threads from one worn arm. The mirror she had flung to her left found its way into her hands. The face in the mirror was pale, dark eyes wide...lips red. She stood, pacing back and forth. Nine. He said nine. The cheap clock on the wall read 9:10...9:20 next time she checked. Its plastic brown face glared.

She sat, deep breaths easing the knot in her back. A knock reinjected her tension with the ease of a hypodermic. Another deep breath. She answered the door.

"Ready?" A nod. "Stand back, I want to see. Turn around for me...you look beautiful..you look...I...mmm!"

His hands crept familiarly across her hips to hold her against Him. They climbed toward her breasts.

She pushed Him away, smiling, as she granted Him a kiss. "Sean and
Clyde are waiting in the car. Let's go."

The night was clear and crisp, stars woven into the fabric of the sky--so many chips of ethereal ice in a universal tapestry. A shiver rolled down her spine, but His arm about her shoulders kept her from feeling the cold. The spectral-winter trees danced around the walk, wind cracking their bone-limbs. An icicle fell directly behind them, spearing a drift of snow noiselessly and without pain.

His head towered above her; she felt He was looking at grand, important things from His higher vantage point. Pausing beside the car, He swung open the door. Briefly His lips brushed hers, two shy, hot butterflies.

He slid in the back and started talking to Clyde. He was separated from her by the tall line of the front seats. She turned to Sean. His hand circled on the gear shift as he replied to her questions. His fingers caught the glow of oncoming headlights and looked magical.

Their banter wove a net around them and the two in the back only occasionally showed an interest in their weavings. Her lips curved down.

"So are you primed for this?" he asked, slipping her a glance that seemed to hold deep green secrets.

"Not really," she answered with a nervous sigh. "I'm not going to know anyone except the three of you...possibly a couple more people."

"I'll probably be in the same situation. Mary's parties are always strange." His gaze ferreted out the loneliest hollows of her face. "You
certainly look primed for the occasion. May I take the liberty to say that I
have never seen you look more radiant?"

"You may," she smiled. "Aren't you the gallant one?"

"Truth knows no silence."

The small red car idled at the light, waiting for an opportunity to 
show its speed. In the dark, his slim fingers brushed her black-stockinged 
knee. A shiver drifted up her leg, and she wished it had been another hand.

The short drive ended without Him speaking to her. Sean continued 
paying her soft, fragrant compliments until her mind turned to him totally. 

Before Sean could move, He leapt out of the back seat, saying, "Baby, 
just don't get mad at me, whatever I do tonight? I tend to get a little bit 
wild at these parties. Just remember I love you?"

Her curved lips formed a line across her face. "Well, don't get angry 
if you find me with Sean, if you aren't going to take care of me."

"I won't," He said, and left her to find her own way across the ice to 
the porch.

"Happy Birthday," in falling tones to His shadow.

Clyde spared her no glance, following Him as a spaniel might. His 
hello had been perfunctory at best, since he little liked sharing His 
attention.

The tiny houses huddled together on the block, as though for warmth. 
Cars jammed the side street end to end, forming a barrier of metal right 
past the square sign that read, "No Parking Here to Corner." She could
hear music pulsing and the unmistakable sound of celebration from inside one of the warm homes. Like a small, hungry child, she could do no more than press her face with cold fingers.

Sean came up behind her and without asking, curled his arm around her shoulders. “You cannot possibly be expected to cross the ice alone in such precariously feminine shoes. Allow me...”

Laughing, they crossed the walk as in some winter game. Being of like heights, their strides matched and they spoke of summer: with irony counted all the victories they might snatch in a sack race.

He looked down from the porch frowning. She was merry, and the sound of her laughter for someone else made his stomach curl around itself. He waited so they might enter together.

But swiftly they entered, and His butterfly heart lifted at familiar faces. The room pulsed with life and laughter. Lights were low, and flashes of strobe attacked her eyes. Two females of uncertain age danced in a jerky, rhythmic fashion, then collapsed, giggling. The guests seemed to take on a reflected glow, when they noticed, one by one, that He had arrived, bringing His characteristic incandescence. He left her standing with Sean, wishing for introductions she had not gained.

Like two uncertain wild things, they hovered in His wake, until as one, they retreated to a corner of the room. There they felt less conspicuous and forged defenses together. After a time, their banter and lack of curiosity about others at the party drew a small audience.
An exquisite blonde named Jera slid into an armchair near their corner. Her eyes were wide...slanted, like some potent moon faerie. She listened to their words as if they held some fascination for her.

Others strove to hold her attention with compliments, but her eyes still wandered over to the two in the corner, as though she needed their words to unravel some ancient riddle.

Sean laid a hand on her arm, breaking the spell of Jera’s gaze. She leaned close to hear him over the music and voices. “I’m going to get something to drink. I hear they have Everclear and Kool-Aid in there. Want to share one with me?”

She nodded, secure in the circle of names she now knew, but not wanting to leave its protection.

Within moments, Sean was back, slipping in at her side as though he knew her need for someone familiar. She tugged nervously at the hem of her dress. Everyone else was in slacks or jeans.

“You look great,” he murmured, breath steamy in her ear. “Stop fussing.”

She smiled. “I can’t help feeling awkward. I think those two on the couch are talking about me.”

“You’re probably making them feel uncomfortable or something. Anyway, don’t worry about it. That’s Sheila and Kari. They don’t count.”

“Was that your Sheila?” she asked before she thought.

“Very briefly,” Sean said, closing his eyes.

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She didn't ask anything more, nor did he volunteer the information. They passed the paper cup back and forth, gradually feeling the warmth glow through them.

"This is stronger than I thought at first," she said, pressing a hand to her cheek.

His eyes were half closed as he looked at her. "I can't judge. I had two wine coolers before I left home. Sort of a preparation for the ordeal."

Before she could ask, He slid into the circle from chasing around the house. He immediately became the center of attention, and all eyes turned to Him. The arm He slung around her shoulders felt heavier than she remembered; her bones seemed to creak under the weight. The color was high on His cheeks; the attention and the liquor tinted His face with an earthy glow, a sensual pleasure in living that she, with her small voice and tired spirit, could not hope to equal.

"How's my baby?" He boomed. "Have you missed me?"

How could she reply to that? Either way she must come across badly: pining for attention or callous to her love. "You know the answer..." she hedged. I love Him...I love Him...I love Him...I love Him... The refrain pounded in her head, but each time it seemed to get a little fainter. Her eyes slid to Sean, who said nothing. Sean's green eyes, though, were liquid and speaking of mistakes and regrets.

His dark eyes seemed no longer to rest on her face as He looked at her, but rather to be invested with the power of Dionysus, stirring the
party to higher frenzy.

Again His butterfly heart lifted at a passing pleasure, and quickly she was forgotten in the lure of something new. A slim blonde hand beckoned, faerie queen summoning with only a gesture.

Sean's hand again brushed her knee, handing her the cup. She smiled at him, the mundane gesture drawing her approval. Mortals must drink with mortals. The pressure of belonging to Him lifted, as Sean filled her with alcohol. Her smile became real. She made a game with him of taking the tiniest of sips and handing it back. He followed her lead.

When that was gone, she asked Clyde if he would slip into the kitchen and bring them another; he was glad to oblige. Since He was nowhere to be found, any sharp bid for attention was worthless.

They continued the game, the alcoholic warmth bonding them together more closely than the rules of their friendship allowed. Without thinking, at last she drained the last portion from the bottom of the wilting paper cup, and Sean looked at her reproachfully for ending their game. Smiling, she offered him a drink from her own two lips.

His eyes took on the glint of Irish rivers and mountainous secrets. "If circumstances were different, you know I would..." The regret in his voice made her swallow hastily. Their bodies were touching fully from shoulder to thigh, and his warmth transmitted eagerly, being of this world and material in nature.

"I know..." she said, eyes reflecting the shade of her dress...making
him think of midnight, adolescent desires.

Sean touched her hair and inhaled it's quietly spiced fragrance. For an instant he dreamed he had the right.

Her spirit burned briefly in response to the hunger of his fingers and wished she loved him, branded so deep in her was his dreaming.

And as he teetered on the edge of saying what he could not, Clyde slipped into their dwindling circle and whispered in his ear.

"Not with Jera? Mary too? Yes, a good joke to be sure..." Sean heard the words but could not believe their truth. He had closeted himself in a bathroom upstairs while She was down here loving him?

She heard the whispers; her cat ears perked to any mention of Him. "Has he done that then?" she asked, when Clyde had tired of his tormenting game and walked away.

"Yes," he said. And again, "yes." His fingers touched hers with a measure of comfort while taking pleasure of her shadow-patterned skin.

She wanted his desire because it was hot and human; it was not of some mysterious motivation like weather or God or Him. And so her palm turned upward, inviting the pressure of his fingers within.

"Desire is of the flesh," she quoted uncertainly. "It flowers as an orchid, does it not?"

He heard the velvet of Her voice cradle the words. "Beautiful and fragile, grown in a hostile environment..."

"It must be the alcohol," she said hurriedly. "I'm not normally so
melancholy or so pensive.” But her eyes continued to devour what her words would deny. Before she could betray herself, she rose.

Silently, she turned from him and gathered her belongings from a chair. I love Him....I love Him... The refrain seemed so weak now as to have belonged to someone else...another woman’s obsession. Not a head turned to mark her passing from the room, save one.

“Where are you going?” Sean called, desperate now and afraid for them both.

“Out,” she said and vanished into the cold darkness.
And Never Again Learn War

Trees cast an emerald shadow over stone. I was wet, but could not have said if it was sweat or tears. The hard, sloping sides of the gravestone reflected the steamy heat; bits of limestone gave death a glamour all its own.

Upon a hill, wild grass and weeds waved in a mystic mating dance, stirred by wind to higher frenzy. Deep cobalt blue slashed across the sky, and the twilight crept in, bringing purples as a gift.

Long forgotten flowers swayed all around, heads bowed and slender necks bent in mourning. It was a lonely, misremembered place, touched only by sun and wind and sky.

Graves leaned at drunken angles, marking row by row and forgotten age; no wreaths or flowers mourned a passing. Death and half-life made their homes here with the wailing of the wind.

I thought sunshine did not always mean happiness; its unforgiving brilliance had faded lettering until the people were an anonymous mass. The winds had eroded stone hearts and ceramic birds until nothing was left but shards of pottery. It was a place with no peace.

Thin, rocky soil peeked through at the edge of the long grass where nothing would grow. As if guarding the perimeter, a circle of wild,
sweet berry bushes tangled their thorny arms together. From half-eaten fruits, juice flowed like blood and stained the grass.

A raven’s cry echoed overhead--was sucked up by silence.

I sat down on the grave, leaning my back against the cool stone, wetness creeping down my cheeks. He was family. I had the right. The book in my hands was warm to the touch.

I heard the words again. “Pa died at three this morning.” So long ago it seemed. I was another person, opaque and unfamiliar.

And all I could remember about it was the sweltering Tennessee Williams’ heat and him. The drive had been so long, stretched pale and sun-bleached far into the distance. So long alone to think about death.

I pulled into my Aunt Linda’s driveway that day; long and curly it was. The house was typical, well-bred Southern with the long, comfortable porch and graceful, white columns. Not that a Yankee bastard like me would know anything about the more genteel side of our family. They never quite forgave my mother for moving North. Her sisters all said it would come to nothing but trouble.

I heard the back door slam as I got out of the car. Kane was home. He’d been everywhere. I knew Kane from the pictures Aunt Linda kept on her bedside table and from a vague memory of being five and basking in the attention of a handsome teenaged cousin. Kane wasn’t quite as subordinate in family status as me, but he was down there. He picked

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up after high school and joined the army. That in itself was enough to set him apart, but what was more infernal was that by all accounts, he liked it.

"Can I help you with those?" he asked.

"If you wouldn't mind," I answered, handing him the largest of the cases I had set out.

"Not at all," he said, taking it.

He opened the door for me. I paused briefly, then made my way into the house. He put my bag in the room with my mom's things. I noticed she was in the back bedroom.

Again in the living room, I liberally spread hugs to middle-aged women who smelled of flowers with names I can't recall. For a while, I sat next to Mama...did nothing...felt nothing. But the false chatter got to me after a time. Ever mindful of scrutinizing eyes, I stared out the French doors, watching the leaves on the bushes outside twitch from the soft breeze.

Jack, Kane's younger brother, wandered in from the farms. I was sorting pictures in a room away from the worst of the hens when he found me. He hugged me with an enthusiasm that his mother would have frowned upon.

Kane came to the doorway and surveyed us expressionlessly. My black hair stood out vividly against Jack's meticulously white shirt.
Then his lips curved into a smile that never quite touched his eyes.

At his brother's stare, Jack moved away. He was never one to let his affection for me get in the way of his best interests. "You still in school, little brother?" Kane asked, sounding amused.

"I'll have my Master's in Theology next year." Jack sounded timid at best, not a Prophet of the Word.

"Know God personally, do you?"

The question was meant to intimidate. Jack's shifting eyes took in the white drapes, the long-pastel flowered sofa, the plush green carpet and all the other dangerous objects of value in the soulless parlor. Finally his gaze settled on the antique eight-chair dining room table. My eyes lifted to the miniature chandelier overhead. I'd never seen it lit.

Mouthing platitudes and scriptures that none of us quite believed, Jack scuttled from the room. Unlike Jack, though, a pair of cold black eyes was not enough to cow me. But Jack knew then what I did not.

"So you're the mulatto?" he asked abruptly.

I was startled; my guard down just far enough that I felt the stab of pain. "What about it?" Four years at Martin Luther High School in Gary taught me a lot about not buckling to pressure.

"You still in school, Leah?" he asked soft, ignoring my question.

"Last time I saw you, you were about five and more adorable than you are now."
I shrugged, answering his question. "I'm in my second year of college."

"Where's your dad?"

He had a knack for questioning to catch me off guard. "Back home in Gary. He works in the mills. He wouldn't come, not with the way he was treated when Mom and him first got married."

"So how come you were two already when it happened?"

"None of your damn business," I said and marched outside. I thought he was rude, but I liked it, upon consideration, better than the surface politeness and prompt backstabbing that had been my heritage.

I wandered through the orchards out back; the air was heavy with fruit and fertility. No less than two acres stretched out before me, smooth, soft grass. It was an invitation no neighborhood kid could refuse. I kicked off my shoes and wiggled my toes. It was so fine.

The apples were falling-off-the-trees ripe; I picked one up just to touch the hot, tender skin. It was battered until it bled sticky-sweet across my palm. The twilight began curving around the corners of the big white house, making shadows on the ground. If I stood still, I could just about feel the movement of the world, as the dark patches left me behind.

I explored the yard a little better, stopping at the old dog pen where the hunters used to be kept. Until people tired of them. I wondered
where they went and if they missed me at all. I could almost hear a
whimper from inside the half-rotten dog house. I ran a finger along the
wire fence.

I picked three apples off the trees and started juggling. Caught up
in the cycle that reminded me of television, Buddhism and the
laundromat at college, I never heard him until he was right behind me,

“Practicing your act?” Kane asked.

I jumped and the apples thumped to the ground in order like some
obscure code. “No. Just fooling around.”

“There’s nothing else to do,” he agreed, staring at me in a way I
could not gauge.

Before I knew it, I blurted, “I can’t stand being cooped up with a
house full of people pretending to be happy.”

He said nothing for a while. Then, “I read somewhere that people
equate silence with death. At a time like this, crows like our need
chatter to keep them from the abyss.”

This time I read the playful irony in his voice as well as some
undertones I didn’t recognize yet. I considered his statement; it seems
to me now that our conversation was punctuated with a whole series of
significant pauses.

I shrugged, not wanting to give him any ammunition.

Unwillingly I said, “Whatever. I was really uncomfortable in there.”
“I noticed,” he said, quirking his lips. It was too dark under the trees to see his face clearly. “I feel relatively comfortable in either setting, though neither is ideal.”

Before I could respond, he moved away and picked up some apples of his own. “Now how do I do this?”

“The idea is to get them going up and over,” I instructed. “Get them going in a circle; one goes up as the other comes down, so you never actually have your hands on all three apples at once. Let gravity work for you.”

I laughed at his attempts to juggle, then stopped when I saw how quickly he caught on. It had taken me the better part of one summer to learn this skill. We played a while like children, winding down like spinning tops. We juggled closer together, until when we were side by side, we dropped the apples.

Suddenly I felt comfortable with him. That was something that had rarely happened outside of my immediate family. We began to talk as I have never talked to anyone on the first day of acquaintance. I sat down against a tree in the long grass, mindless of the bugs, and he followed my example. Sweat rolled off my forehead and slid down my face into my cleavage.

If the twilight had come a little slower, I might have answered the questions he had posed in the house...the questions that no one else had
ever had the courage or the interest to ask. Instead I replied to the hopes, dreams, aspirations series... the questions that people ask with a faraway look in their eyes (the more sophisticated version of the infamous: what do you want to be when you grow up?)

But as we talked, my cynicism decreased. I thought I detected genuine interest. In turn, my answers grew more candid. We both wanted to write the Great American novel. He had come home from San Francisco to settle where he had been raised. He missed the turning of the seasons, the slower pace, and the old man who sold papers on the corner, who also died that summer.

He was quite handsome, I noticed. His old high school pictures didn't really do him justice anymore. The long hair had been sheared off above his collar, but one lock in front couldn't seem to help falling in his eyes. His coloring was so dark I could only see the liquid shine of his eyes in the shadows.

Jack came out and strangely enough I resented him for intruding. When he saw that the conversation dwindled markedly because of his presence, he wandered back inside. I felt a small twinge, but I shoved it back relentlessly. He deserved it for being unable to pick a side of the family war and stick to it.

The luminous dials of Kane's watch showed that we had been outside nearly two hours. "I still need to get a suit for Sunday," he
murmured. "In San Francisco I lived in the artist community. I tried my hand at painting, sculpting, nude modeling, and even that live art."

He smiled. "Consequently I have all the beatnik black you could ever want, but no suits. I don't suppose you'd want to come with me to pick one out? To make sure I get conservative enough for the family?"

I stood up. "Sure. Anything to get out of the house."

Driving in the dark, I couldn't help wonder, if in different circumstances, we might have been friends. I'd never really know because we linked up as a matter of convenience. At least that was how it seemed to me.

Kane's face seemed to be perpetually in shadow, so despite the fact that I am proficient at detecting emotions, I couldn't read him. Gradually I understood this was an expression rather than a trick of the light.

The road twisted and turned in front of us like some long dead snake, blackened by ash. My silence was amiable, sprouting when conversation ceased to have meaning. His eyes turned to me frequently, dark as the night-dipped river that flowed below the bridge we crossed. I knew it wasn't beautiful bone structure that drew his gaze back to me. To my way of thinking, I had inherited the worst of both my parents. My skin is dark and swarthy. Not chocolate like my Papa's but darker substantially than Mama's. I have Papa's lips but not quite as full. I
have Mama's funny colored green eyes; they don't quite mesh with my wide nostrilled nose and broad, high cheek bones. I look like a collage that didn't quite work out right. My crazy mess of black hair I wear long. I had it straightened once when I was a little kid, and I guess I had enough of Mama's genes because it stayed that way, more or less. So the question-mark (about why he kept looking) swelled blood-full to bursting in the center of my mind.

"Fireflies," he said suddenly, eyes directed out my window. Obediently I looked. They seemed to be dancing, tiny fairies. It made me want to rent Peter Pan. "Light without heat," he murmured.

We had long since passed the point where I knew where I was going. The roads were unfamiliar. A tear slipped down my cheek. I didn't need to cry really. The old man had never loved me. I thought of being young and visiting them with Mama. Grandma would take me out back to the garden and tell me about her plants because Grandpa couldn't stand the sight of me. Then she'd get some paper, glue, popsicle sticks, and yarn, making me a paper doll. She'd get some markers and make the doll beautiful. I'd curl up under the big tree with the hound dog and play, safely out of Grandpa's way. I missed her. And I hadn't realized how much until this moment. Mama was so like her.

I thought of Grandpa. All I could remember was cold blue eyes and a thin mouth that was always full of wads of tobacco. How he
liked to pretend he wanted a kiss just so he could put some of that sludge on my face. It made me scream and cry.

More tears were rolling down my face, but I didn’t realize it until I felt his hand slide down my cheek, catching a droplet. “You were close?” His tone sounded disbelieving.

My laugh was shaky. “I think I hated him.” I said.

“Then why are you here?”

That was simple. “Mama might need me. She doesn’t deserve what she gets from this family.”

His voice rang hollow, as though he was speaking through a tunnel, though I might have imagined it. “She should be strong. She must learn to stand up for herself. Everyone must.” He sounded as though he was no longer talking about my mother.

“But she didn’t do anything wrong,” I protested, suddenly passionate. “They treat her like dirt and all she did was fall in love.”

“That’s something few people in this family understand much about.”

“My Papa’s so good,” I said, wiping away the tears. “It’s true they were lovers before they were married. I’m proof of that. He was drafted before Mama knew about me. He would have married her before he went, if he’d known. I was two before I met my Papa for the first time. Mama told me how he cried when he saw me. He loves us so
much. But Mama prepares herself to come down here as if she was going
to war. And it's just not right." I couldn't seem to stop crying.

He was crying too. At the first wide spot in the road, he pulled
over and hauled her into his arms. "You'll have to teach your children
better," he said, rocking me just a little. "Teach them love so they'll
never learn war like this."

I smiled, pulling away. I glanced at his wrist. "I think all the
stores are closed," I murmured.

He shrugged. "I guess I can always get up early tomorrow and go
shopping. The wake isn't until two."

My hand lingered on the back of his neck briefly. The skin was
smooth and warm. It gave me a strange sensation, tingly and a little
nervous. I realized as he made a skillful U-turn that I would very
much like to slide across the wide seat of the car and lay my head on his
shoulder. In defense I leaned against the door instead.

I didn't want to care about this man, my cousin. I didn't want
him to understand me. I was used to being on the outside, and it scared
me to think he was right there with me. He looked like he might be able
to write a book on pain that I couldn't even begin to imagine.

I looked out the window and wouldn't talk, not after crying in
front of him. I didn't want him to think that gave him rights. But I
never saw more out of that window than his reflection.

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When we got back to the house, I bolted inside and headed off down the hall. Usually I stopped to see how Mama was doing, to see if she needed my support. But Kane was right. It was time she learned to stand up for herself, if she hadn't by now. And I needed to get away from that man for a while.

I knew I'd be sleeping in the water bed tonight. My Aunt Linda and Uncle Clem had to give up sleeping on it because he has a bad back. I shut the bedroom door and lay down in the dark. I was lucky. It was the master bedroom so I had a bathroom all to myself. I ran a hand through my hair, which I knew to be sticking out all over from the day's drive. I thought about Kane.

So dark and shadowed. He looked like I felt a lot of the time. Eventually, I put him out of my mind and slipped into my nightgown. It was thin cotton because I'm a hot sleeper. In summer, I sweat even with the air conditioner on fifty degrees. In winter, sometimes I don't even turn on the heat. I think its metabolic. I used to think about that when I was a little kid and the white kids from Munster would drive past and yell, "Go back to Africa, nigger." I'd melt into a pile of grease the first day.

Eventually I drifted off to sleep.

The opening of my door was what woke me I think. There was no sound, but a shaft of smoky light crept inside. The curtains had been
pulled so the room was in utter darkness. I glanced around for a clock but didn’t find one.

“Mom?” I whispered, sitting up.

“Not Mom,” Kane whispered and I almost screamed. I’d never expected this from him. Jack, his brother, had learned his lesson when I was only 16. He’d sneaked into my room hoping for some sex with the cheap half-breed one night. He still has the scar on his thigh. My heart dropped to my stomach because I had thought more of Kane. He was ten years older than me, and he had seemed to care, if only a little.

“What are you doing in here?” I hissed, overtly hostile.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

Sure you did, I thought with revulsion. But then I heard the slight huskiness in his voice. And the one minute fraction of me that wasn’t a total cynic melted at the idea he might be in pain and needing me.

I yanked the covers up to my neck, cursing this impulse, and said roughly, “Well talk away.”

“Can I sit down?” he asked quietly.

I foolishly nodded in the dark, then voiced my permission. “Sure. Go ahead."

“Leah, I’m sorry if I scared you in the car. Or if I was too pushy. I guess the novelty of having someone making me feel...like I belong...after all this time...just made me a little over eager. I don’t blame you
for thinking I was rude. I understand how it feels to be on the outside and I should have realized... Well, anyway, I had to apologize tonight. I wasn't sure I'd have a chance tomorrow. I wouldn't want to cause any bad press for you..."

At his hesitant, soft-spoken words, something in me started to melt. There was a hard knot in me that I hadn't even known was there until I met him. There was something in Kane that made me feel like I was coming home.

"It's all right," I murmured.

I could see just his outline across the bed from me. The sound of his breathing was slightly harsh. Out of impulse, I reached across and touched his face. It was wet.

I closed my eyes, feeling tears well up in response. It had been out of character for me to let him stay without attacking first. I acted oddly again. I put my hand on his shoulder and drew us both down toward the pillows. I felt the tense way he stretched out beside me, slowly bringing both feet on the bed. It was strange the way the waveless mattress scarcely moved under our weight.

I kept my hand on his shoulder, moving my fingers lightly, I knew he wouldn't take advantage of me.

"You trust me?" The wonder in his voice made my throat tighten just a little more.
“Yes.” The one syllable swooped around and between us. I felt his whole body relax beside me.

“I need to talk,” he said. “Somehow—I don’t know why, but I know you’ll understand the things I tell you and not condemn me for telling the truth.”

“I’m listening,” I whispered, arching my back as the air conditioner beside the bed kicked back on. I pulled the cotton nightgown away from my sticky flesh and smiled. A blast of supremely chilly air crossed my body.

His bald words shocked away my next breath. “I have AIDS, Leah. Still want to listen?”

I tried to still my thundering heart and dredge up everything I had ever heard about the disease. “How?” I asked, playing for time.

“Does it matter?” I felt his shrug slightly alter the rhythm of the bed. “I was young and wild. I had a lot of sex, most of it indiscriminate. I had blood transfusions before anyone knew to check and I’ve done drugs. So it doesn’t really matter how I got it, does it? The fact remains that I have it. And once its here...well, it means what marriage used to mean...”

Till death do us part. It was witty, but the humor fell flat. I discovered in that moment that what I dreaded most had come to pass. I cared. “Well, talk and keep on talking, I won’t sleep tonight.”
"You're the only one who knows. Except my immediate family. And Jack thinks it's a punishment from God."

I laughed though it was a mottled sound. "When were you diagnosed?" My questions were morbid and useless.

"When I was in the service. I was also discharged right after that. I was one of the first people to be tested for the disease. Such an honor."

His voice rolled over me in waves. I heard the despair more than the words. He told me how alone he felt. I ached when I heard him speak of how it felt to be a modern day leper. A new-age plague bringer.

"People are honest to God afraid to touch you. My own mother is afraid of me. Jesus, it's been medically proven that it is safe for a clean person," the stress on the word clean sent a knife through my heart, "to stick her tongue in my mouth. Christ. Do you know that in order for there even to be a chance that someone else might get from me that way they would have to drink a gallon of my spit?" He laughed. "Or be exposed to my blood, piss or cum. And all I want is an occasional hug."

I closed my eyes, but the words didn't stop.

"I'm totally cut off from everyone. Just when I need somebody most... This disease makes everyone hate you for being around. People are afraid it's somehow going leap from you to them. If I had to die young, why couldn't it be some nice romantic disease like leukemia?"

"You're not cut off from everyone," I said, sliding across the bed to
hold him. "You were right. I'm not condemning you for telling me, and
I know I won't catch AIDS by hugging you." His shoulders quivered a
little, and he burrowed his head into my neck. We were both silent a
while, letting the darkness hide the pain. Letting the warmth of our
bodies block out the threat of morning.

"I know now why I came," I whispered, kissing his tear-wet face.
"You needed me. Not Mama."

"Glad you got your priorities straight..." Kane murmured huskily.
His hands stroked my back, and I ran my fingers through his soft black
hair.

The combination of cool air blowing on the back of my thighs and
his warm hands on my back caused little raised goose bumps all down
my body. Little tingles of pleasure.

Then I realized I wasn't the only one responding. I felt him
pressing hard against my stomach. Perceptible little tremors ran through
him. "Don't be afraid," he said dryly. "I haven't had a beautiful
woman touch me this way in a long time. I won't hurt you.
Unfortunately, you don't lose your lust when you gain the disease."

I smiled and because I knew he needed me, I stayed right there. I
held him until his breathing evened out.

"I could just about love you," I whispered.

He moved away. "Don't say things like that in bed with a
desperate man," he cautioned, only half-humorously.

"Thought you were asleep," I mumbled, wishing to disappear under the covers.

"Don't even tempt me to stay here," he groaned softly. "I feel a lot better. You've already done more for me than I had any right to ask."

When he got up, I did too. "Where are you going?" he asked, as I stood up.

"Home," I muttered. "I've decided I'm not enough of a hypocrite to stay. I'm not going to pretend I cared for that man. Mama just better learn to deal without me."

"I'll wait up to see you off, then."

He slipped from the room, and I noiselessly gathered up my few belongings.

I crept through the darkened house. Hurriedly, I scrawled a note to Mama about some emergency at school. Never again would I attend a funeral for someone I didn't love. Never again would I forget who loved me. Papa would always come before this Southern part of the family who had never learned to love each other.

Kane walked with me outside. Under the full moon, his face looked both pain-filled and buoyant. "I'll never forget tonight and how you made me feel."

His words rang in my ears like poetry, both beautiful and final.
Like some great artist somewhere had designed them for us and this night. "You could always write me...and visit occasionally. Or I could stay and spend the rest of the weekend here...for you I would."

He shook his head. "Don't stay. Stick to your principles. Besides, I'd never be able to look at you after tonight without some kind of...light... in my eyes. And wouldn't that just be food for gossip... 'the plague-bringer and the half-breed developin' THOSE feelins for each uhtha'." His voice reflected the die-away airs that my Aunt Velma liked to pretend she possessed.

"Yeah, you're right..."

I'm not sure who moved first. In the first light before dawn, he held me, ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me full on the lips. It was longer and more tender than a cousinly kiss but not quite loverly. It could have easily become one. Our lips broke apart; our bodies rested together warmly for a few seconds. Kane dropped a kiss on my hair. I stroked his cheek,

"I could just about love you," he whispered, pressing a book into my hands. He spun me around and helped me into the car before I could decide to stay. I began to drive. I didn't look back. It was two hours before I could read the title. FIRST LIGHT. And my tears rolled free.

Its six months since from the first time I wept on this hill, the March wind cutting through my dress. My boyfriend Jake stood with his
strong muscled arm around my shoulders. His dear, chocolate colored face was somber, creamy dark eyes taking in pain I don’t think he understood. How could he when I don’t?

Jake’s my soulmate. I love and trust him more than anyone alive. But there will always be the tiniest piece missing that even I can’t reach. Its buried right here where I’m sitting. I thought if I came back for a solitary good-bye I might find it.

“I just about loved you,” I whisper, tightening my grasp in the book in my hands, I lean back against the gravestone.

I’m supposed to be married in May.