A Collection of Stories

by

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Honors 499
Fall 1995
During the semester as I wrote and revised this collection of stories, I was not concerned with finding a common theme that tied all the stories together. In fact, I gave it little thought until I was in the final stages of my thesis and a theme began to emerge. At first I thought maybe I was looking too hard, but I now consider that myself as a person comes through in my work. I almost expect to find ideas that link from one story to the next because they are all a part of me. Perhaps the idea that they were all written at a similar time in my life brings about this connection. I do not know.

The four stories I included here all share the idea that people are not always as we think they are. Even those people we are close to and know for years are often full of surprises. Also, it is easy to misjudge someone we do not know and jump to conclusions about him or her as seen in "The Barn Swallow." Another idea is that most of the stories in some way deal with a character leaving. I did not realize this until I was concentrating on finding connections. This idea I think stems from my fear of losing those I love. I fear this because I feel that in losing them, if not all, a part of me will be alone. All the understanding I share with a particular person is lost if they leave. In losing them, I lose a part of myself.

While I wrote, I occasionally thought about my own life and how just during this past semester I have discovered more about myself. This change was not brought about solely by myself. I have
been greatly affected by people I have come in contact with and those to whom I have recently grown close. This change has caused me to reevaluate my life and ask myself, "What do I really want?" There were times I was torn between two answers where neither one seemed entirely right, or even worse, both answers were ideal but I could only chose one. Looking back now, I think most of my decisions were for the best mostly because I have been a lot happier lately and feel understood by those who are important to me.

Though I have created all the characters, I find it interesting that I can learn from the very people I created. Perhaps it is a meaning that only I as the writer can relate to, or maybe you as the reader will find something for yourself. I ask you to take from it whatever you find and make it your own, and if all you find is the enjoyment of reading a story, then either way I will feel I have succeeded.
I pulled my knees up against my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. Perhaps this new position would be comfortable, at least for a few moments. For the last hour I had struggled to find a somewhat relaxing position in the dull gray vinyl chair with its rigid low back and hard narrow armrests. It screamed discomfort. I rested my chin on my hands and sighed.

I was waiting for my connecting flight to New York to see an old friend who I hadn’t seen in over five years. She had moved there less than a year ago with her new husband. However, the marriage didn’t last and she now was going through a heart breaking divorce. She wanted me to come immediately. Though I had never been through a divorce, I knew what it felt like to discover someone you love no longer loves you, at least not as much as you thought the person did.

Katie had been bursting with happiness when I helped her pack for New York. I knew I would now find a changed person once I arrived that evening. Having someone so close to you suddenly disappear from your world is difficult. I guess I considered it almost like coping with the death of someone you love. I hoped I could help her.

My eyes glazed over as I sat waiting, feeling the heaviness of sleep begin to steal over my body. I stared across the area labeled as gate D11. Everywhere people were waiting for their
flights. Most were sitting in the rows of seats or standing in line with their allotted two pieces of carry-on luggage. I watched the people around me, a stern-looking bearded man peeking over the business page of the day’s paper, a stout woman with dark circles under her eyes. I presumed she was tired from carrying her weight around or from the five children that constantly were talking and asking "Mama" something. The baby in her arms fussing. One child excitedly pointing at the arriving and departing planes he viewed through the large plate glass windows, now marked with his sticky fingerprints. Others’ heads nodding, trying to sleep, most sitting quietly with frustrated or blank expressions.

Across the wide walkway that separated one side of the concourse from the other, an object caught my eye due to its seeming familiarity. A worn carpetbag with a detailed embroidery design in dark brocade sat alone on the garish yet durable orange and yellow-flecked carpet that covered the entire area of concourse D. From where I was sitting the bag’s design appeared to be a swirling array of long-tailed pheasants and gaudy unnatural flowers. The leather-covered handles bent slightly and looked worn from many years of use.

I glanced around at the crowd of people, but no one seemed interested in the bag or was watching it as a wary owner might. Wearily, I leaned back in my chair and stretched my legs out in front of me. It had been a long time since I had seen such a bag, but I had carried a picture of it in my mind for many years.
I was tempted to nonchalantly stroll over and open the bag to see if there was stitched inside in red thread the name Mabel Winters. But, knowing the terribly slim chance that such a thing could be, I remained where I was. Yet, I kept my eye on the frumpy bag that resembled an exhausted mutt that had plopped down to rest.

Ma always said "The world has so many places to explore, and I'm going to show you the world, Elsa." It had been true when I was very young. Ma would get out her carpetbag and set it on her bed. Then she would get out a map of our destination and show me where she had decided we would go. Sometimes Dad would come too, but usually he had to work and was too busy to leave even for a few days.

When I was only five, Ma and I went to Chicago by train. I suppose I carried a small suitcase, but all I remember is Ma proudly clutching her carpetbag. Another trip led us to a small town in Minnesota near a lake. The carpetbag came too.

A certain fascination surrounded Ma's carpetbag. It was the place she carried lemon drops and sugar cookies, a good book she would read to me, and sometimes she brought with her games for us to play on the train which we usually took on our excursions. The bag always contained something to keep me occupied on our trips.

Though we went several places while I was quite young, I have hardly any recollection of our actual destinations. I have pictures and postcards, but somehow whenever I look through them, they seem to be someone else's souvenirs. It was the time with Ma I can picture clearly. There is one memory I have of her standing
at the depot where the train has just arrived. She is wearing a deep-blue coat with a fur collar and cuffs and on her head a smart looking fur hat. A genuine smile is on her face as she breathes in the air from the new city we have just arrived in. In her gloved hands she is holding the carpetbag which she refused to let the conductor carry. She looks so happy.

Another time Ma and I travelled to a large city. I recall craning my neck to see the tops of the skyscrapers when looking at them from the base. They seemed to reach through the cottony clouds and disappear. The city was alive with speeding cars, stores of every kind, street performers, and people dressed in some of the classiest clothing I had ever seen. It was wonderful except when we went back to the hotel that night.

Ma said, "I'm going out to experience some of the city at night. I'll be back in a little bit." She put on her coat, grabbed her small black purse and left with a smile on her face.

She didn't return until around ten o'clock the next morning. I had gotten in bed and huddled under the covers waiting and listening for her key in the door. At first I had been bored and went through most of the contents of the carpetbag trying to make the time pass. After she had been gone for over four hours, my imagination began to run wild, thinking something had happened to Ma. Where was she? I even ventured to call the front desk to see if they had seen Ma. I thought about searching the hotel for her. Maybe she couldn't remember which room we were in. However, I was
too frightened to open the door and subject myself to whatever was on the other side.

In the morning she came back with a sprinkled doughnut and some milk for me. She never said anything about being sorry, but I didn’t really care. I was just happy that she was back. Besides, this wasn’t the first time something like this had happened.

My attention was suddenly drawn once again to the gate opposite mine. An older woman in a long olive-colored dress coat slowly walked toward the empty chairs next to the carpetbag. She looked unhappy as if she were in pain. Her eyebrows were drawn close together, and she squinted her eyes. She neared the bag. Could she be the owner? I was ready to jump up and run over to her, but when she turned her face in my direction, I realized she scarcely resembled the woman she should. Then she sat down four seats from the carpetbag. Her eyes never even glanced at it except to keep from stumbling over it.

I sighed. The clock above the check-in desk read that I still had at least half an hour before my flight was supposed to take off. Someone would surely come in that amount of time. No one would just leave luggage sitting around waiting to be stolen. I realized I was getting restless. Patience, Elsa, I told myself, patience.

I always had had the most difficult time remaining patient, especially once I came to learn that whenever I peeked in my parent’s room and saw Ma’s carpetbag out on the bed, a trip would soon follow. Sometimes I would get the feeling that Ma wanted to
travel somewhere else, and I would find myself checking several times a week to see if the bag was anywhere in sight. Ma, if she caught me looking for the bag, would at times say, "Be patient, Elsa. If we are going anywhere you will find out soon enough." Soon enough? I wanted to know right then. How much patience can a young child have?

One hot Saturday in mid-July when I was eight, I noticed the carpetbag beside Ma’s bed. Immediately I knew something exciting would ensue. Wanting to show Ma just how patient I had become, I didn’t say a word all day. I played outside and went to a nearby lake with a friend. Late afternoon I returned expecting Ma to tell me where our next destination would be.

Ma was fixing dinner and remained rather quiet. Inside I was ready to burst with anticipation, but I remained calm on the outside. Where were we going this time?

"Elsa, I want you to set the table."

Hurriedly I did so, all the time watching Ma to give me a sign or drop a hint about our next trip, but she never did. I kept thinking it must be someplace great, and she didn’t want to give it away.

I sat at the table arranging the flowers Ma had me cut from our garden out back. She still was so quiet.

"Those look real pretty, Elsa." Then, she sat down at the table across from me and looked at her hands which she folded together tightly. "I’m going on a trip, honey..."
I finally exploded. "I knew it! I knew it! Where, Ma where are we going?"

"Sorry, babe, but I can't take you with me on this one. I have to go alone."

My heart sank and I slouched in my chair. I didn't look at her, but kept my gaze constant on the daisies in front of me. I picked at the leaves, pulling one off I rubbed my fingers over it in a circular pattern. I couldn't go with her even after I had been good and patient for so long? It didn't seem fair.

"Maybe next time, Ma."

She didn't say anything but just nodded and swallowed hard like her throat was dry. "My train leaves in an hour. Your daddy will be home after I leave. Tell him I say goodbye won't you?"

"Sure," I whispered.

Half an hour later Ma pulled me to her and gave me a long hug. She kissed me on the cheek. "You be a good girl now." I noticed she was fighting to keep the tears in her eyes, but one escaped and trickled down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away.

"Your bag, Ma." I handed her the carpetbag hoping the next time we would go somewhere together would be very soon.

"Thanks, honey. See, you're a big girl and can take care of yourself," I felt some of my disappointment melt away. Ma seemed to think I was beginning to grow up and be a responsible person. "You're daddy should be home in a few minutes."

"Don't you want to wait to say goodbye to him?" I wanted to stall her. Perhaps he could encourage Ma to take me with her.
"No, I can’t miss my train." She smiled weakly through her tear-filled eyes. "I love you, Elsa. Always will."

"I love you too, Ma." She gave me another hug, squeezing so tightly I could hardly breathe. Then, she was gone. The door closed behind her; that was the last time I saw the woman I knew as "Ma."

Dad said she no longer loved him and couldn’t stay where she was and be happy. He said she needed to roam more than he cared to. She needed to be free. At least that’s the way he always told the story.

For a long time I blamed myself for not stopping her, but now I realize I was only eight years old and not that wise in the world. Besides if I stopped her then, wouldn’t she have found a way to leave later? I had to believe she would have.

"Flight 429 to New York is now boarding."

I continued to stare at the carpetbag across the room, but still no one claimed it. Whose could it be? I waited anxiously. There was so much about it that told me it could be no one’s but Ma’s bag. I stood up, not taking my eyes off the bag except to pick up my own briefcase and garment bag. My legs were shaking, and I began to feel a wave of dizziness and nausea. I breathed in deeply and shut my eyes for a moment. Should I go over there? Could it be her bag? Would she even remember me?

This last question caused me to hesitate. My eyes flew open as the old angry feeling crept into my veins. I could feel it seeping through my skin, slowly like red ink coloring cold water.
I shook my head attempting to ward off the emotion, but I knew I should just relax and let it come.

How could she have left us and me being so young? How could she suddenly tear herself from my world without asking me, let alone telling me? Ma, how could you break your little girl’s heart?

Dad must have had a hard time trying to explain to me that Ma was not coming back. I know he loved her until the day he died, and I think some small part of him always thought she would come back. She never did.

The next few days after Ma left, Dad remained very quiet. He probably knew long before I did. I suppose he didn’t tell me she might leave because it would just be something more for me to worry about. Dad tried his hardest to make my life a good one, but he was just as busy as ever. I think work helped him, and seeing me made him think of Ma, so he wasn’t around all that much.

God, Ma, why did you do it? How could you leave? How?

"Ma’am, aren’t you taking this flight to New York?" It was a short thin woman with Barbie-like features. She was dressed in a flight attendant’s uniform.

"Oh, yes. Thank you." She probably thought I was some freak, spacing it. I handed her my ticket and boarded the plane taking my seat by the window.

A few minutes passed, and the plane began to pull away from the gate. I leaned back in my chair as the flight attendants
whisked up the aisle with firm steps, their heads looking one way and then the other checking safety belts.

The same Barbie featured flight attendant pointed a hand full of long dark red nails at my lap. "Seat belt," she said a bit too cheerfully.

"Thanks," I mumbled securing the metal buckle. A picture of the lone carpetbag would not leave my mind. Its sagging tired features stayed in my thoughts.

I told myself I could not have faced the woman I called Ma if indeed she was somewhere in the airport. I couldn't. Could I?

The plane raced down the runway, the air whistling passed. My fingers dug in the arms of my seat. I turned my face toward the window not seeing anything but a blur of the world though my watering eyes.

Had I come so close to Ma to ask her all the questions I had as a child that Dad could never begin to answer? I wiped a tear from the corner of my eye. If it was you Ma, where are you traveling to now? Or maybe, I should ask, are you still running away?
entertaining people from all over the world. Mrs. Kittleman would play the piano some evenings and Mr. Kittleman was a great storyteller. They were regular church goers and every Friday evening went to someone’s house to play cards. Occasionally the card club was held at the inn. They always encouraged the guests to play. I usually would join them on these nights.

Mrs. Kittleman was a wonderful cook and I especially enjoyed her cinnamon rolls she’d bake for Saturday breakfasts. I told her that if I forgot what day of the week it was I could always be reminded on Saturday when I smelled the sweet rolls as I walked downstairs. She would smile and her cheeks would slightly redden. “My son Paul always loved my sweet rolls,” she would say with a far off look in her eye. Sometimes I thought she was going to cry when she spoke of her son who died before reaching the age of eight. I don’t know how he died, and I never felt I had the right to ask.

One Sunday in mid-June I went up to the attic. Mrs. Kittleman had difficulty going up the steep staircase because of arthritis and was interested in cleaning out some of the old things that had been hoarded up there for years. I pulled the chain of a solitary dust-encrusted bulb which gave off an eerie dim glow. Shadows leaped up on the walls surrounding me like black creatures waiting for the right moment to attack. A shiver went up my spine, and I pushed any threatening thoughts aside. “A stupid dark attic doesn’t scare you, does it?” I asked myself. I avoided looking around too much and headed for a corner of the long room.
After sorting through boxes of papers and old clothes all morning and into late afternoon, I came across an old trunk that was rotting through on the bottom. It too contained several papers and a maroon leather photo album. I thought this might be something worthwhile to look at and set it aside for later. I continued to go through things until I heard Mrs. Kittleman calling me.

"Mr. Willows! Mr. Willows, supper is ready," she called up the stairs.

"Thanks!" I said loudly, my voice sounded small in the cluttered room. "I'll be right down."

I put the photo album in the crook of my arm and bravely pulled the light off. The room darkened except for the corner lighted by the small round window on the west end of the attic. Due to years of dirt and grime caked on the glass, I noticed that it was impossible to see the maple tree or lilac bushes that decorated the yard.

It was not until three days later when I finally took the time to sit down and look through the photo album. Mrs. Kittleman was playing the piano while Mr. Kittleman watched her proudly from his solid oak armchair covered with thick upholstery. He sat very still, puffing on his lion's head pipe that he had received from a man who was of real English blueblood, a regular visitor of the bed and breakfast.

I listened for awhile. A past opera singer and her companion, a professional cellist, listened intently as Mrs. Kittleman's
nimble fingers slid up and down the black and white keys. Occasionally she would smile at her husband with her special smile, the one she reserved for him.

After listening for about half an hour, I stood up from my chair and feigned a yawn.

"Mr. Willows, why don't you stay awhile," said Mr. Kittleman. "I plan to tell our guests here about the time I went spelunking down south and got lost but ended up rescuing that gorgeous model."

I smiled. I had heard the story several times. "Thanks, but I think I'll have to hear it some other evening."

"Very well then." Mr. Kittleman nodded at me and gave me a wink. Though I had recently celebrated my thirty-eighth birthday, he treated me like a son or close relative. After knowing each other for ten years we had gained a certain bond that was rather agreeable.

I climbed the stairs that led to my room and got ready for bed. Going through my nightly ritual, I brushed my teeth, washed my face, and put on what I call my old man pajamas with their thick horizontal stripes. I slipped between the thin cool sheets and spread out the blue and cream muslin quilt that had belonged to Mrs. Kittleman's mother. I had once commented on how much I liked the design. The next afternoon I found it in my room neatly folded at the foot of my bed. Every year Mrs. Kittleman always lovingly remembers to place it in my room.

I began leafing through the fragile pages of the photo album. I now saw that it was more of a scrapbook with several samples of
a child’s labored writing. The first page was a picture of a baby wrapped tightly in a blanket. This was followed by pages of handwriting, probably the mother’s, that gave a description of the child’s first words, first steps, growing rate, endearing moments, etc. I flipped quickly over these; I would return to them later.

There was a green kite of construction paper and twine glued to one page, and a bright yellow giraffe with orange spots. As a child I too make such crude looking objects in pre-school. I smiled at the crooked grin drawn in thick black crayon for the giraffe’s mouth. Then, I turned the page.

A young boy of about five stood in the shadow of the large red barn behind him. The child looked to have been caught in mid-motion; his legs were turned toward the barn, but his body and head were turned toward the photographer. He stared at the photographer with piercingly sad blue eyes, and in one pudgy arm he clutched a ragged stuffed puppy.

It wasn’t the child that I recognized. It was the stuffed animal. I remembered having such a toy as a young child. I had called him Billy. I examined the picture more closely, trying to see if the animal was identical to the one I once owned. I couldn’t be certain.

Responding to a sudden urge, I found myself leaping up the attic steps, feeling for the lightbulb’s chain, and throwing back the lid of the trunk I never finished going through. I found a pink cotton bag filled with a small child’s clothes and in the bottom
found a worn stuffed dog with only one shiny black eye. My dog had lost one eye. Which one had it been?

I was crying because I had been playing with Billy at my friend’s house. I believe his name was Charles. Charles and I had gotten into a rough wrestling game and Billy had lost an eye when Charles decided to bite it off. I ran home, which was next door, and came to Mom in tears. "Mom, Charlie bit off Billy’s eye!"

"Let’s see," Mom surveyed the damage. "I think we could get him a new eye. I’ll be right back."

Mom went off to look in her magic sewing box of wonders that could cure so many things. I sat sniffling on the front porch with Billy in my lap. My father heard me I guess. He never liked it when I cried. Told me I should behave like a man. "A real man doesn’t show his tears," he would tell me over and over again.

"Jacob, what you cryin’ for?" my father shouted.

I was about to hold up Billy and explain, but I didn’t have time. My father’s hand hit the side of my head first. Then he grabbed my chin roughly in his fingers making my teeth ache. "I told you not to cry. You want to be a man like your daddy don’t you?"

I nodded, closing my eyes smelling the stink of his breath. I prayed that no more tears would stream down my face. I would have to remember better. Next time I wouldn’t cry.

He pushed my face away saying, "You make me sick. Get outta my sight."
I looked at the pile of clothing that now sat on my lap in a wrinkled heap. I picked up a yellow shirt with a green turtle sewn on the collar and rubbed my thumb over the turtle with its brilliant blue eye and silly smile. This had been mine.

I wanted to think that some other child had paradoxically owned not only the same stuffed animal but also had a mother who sewed a turtle onto a yellow shirt. I buried my face in the shirt. There was too much evidence. The sad-eyed child was me.

Back in my room I continued paging through the album of memories. There were very few pictures. In one picture I was seated on whom I guessed to be my mother’s lap. However, the woman’s head had been cut off by the picture taker. It was the only picture of either of my parents. All I could see of my mother was her lemon yellow dress with its white buttons and her hand wrapped around me; on her finger she wore her blood-red ruby set in a simple gold band. I shivered at the sight. How many times had she held me so tight and how many times had I longed to see her again once I was taken away to live with my foster parents? The memory of her face had become a blur and eventually was replaced with the people who adopted me three years after I was first removed from my home. My new mother and father became my world and helped me forget about how life had been before.

Mostly the album contained papers, drawings, and artwork from my pre-school years. The person who put it together had made an effort but never finished. The last half of the book was empty.
A gleam of moonlight softly shone across my room disguising the scrapes and bruises on my bedroom floor. A nubby black and blue throw rug concealed one long gash in the floor beside the bed that I had discovered only two years ago. I stared at the rug for awhile and then reached down to reassure myself that memory served right and the gash was still there. It was.

I tossed and turned for over an hour struggling with memories and visions of my past, memories I had thought I had erased from my mind. No, they rose to haunt me again. I gradually slipped into a semi-dreamlike state thinking of the first man I had called father. It was difficult knowing which was reality and which parts my imagination had filled in over the years.

A tall man with dark skin and hair looks down at me. His large hands are balled into two powerful fists. The eyes are two narrow slits gleaming ebony. The man seems unnaturally tall. He says something, but what I hear sounds only like the growl of wild beast ready to make an attack.

I scrunch down protecting myself from the fated blow. My head is tucked deep inside my body. I try to swallow my thoughts and prevent as much initial pain as possible, but I can't escape the evil laugh that slips from the man's cracked lips. I try suffocating all sounds, but the slap of the belt makes me wince. Please, I'll be good! Please, don't hurt me!

The growl comes again and reverberates around me in pulsating waves. No! No! I didn't mean it! I tilt my head to see the dark
figure behind me. I know I must escape, but when I attempt to rise from my fetal position, it is as if I am frozen and have no control over my actions. I open my mouth to scream, but no one can hear me. I can only think, God, please help me!

I awoke with a shudder. My body drenched in a cold sweat. A robin outside my window sang promising a beautiful day. However, I had reached a conclusion that today would not be beautiful.

It was not until late afternoon that I saw Mr. Kittleman come up the front walk. He had just finished mowing the lawn; his pant’s cuffs were sprayed with fine shreds of grass. I inhaled the sharp fresh scent from where I stood on the front porch. Mr. Kittleman was whistling "Molly Malone."

"Hi there, Jacob," he said scraping off his boots on the welcome mat. "You look a bit disturbed. Something wrong?"

Funny he should say that, but I knew better now. I watched him pick up the red handled pruning shears and force open the blades. "Hand me that rag there will you?" He pointed to an old piece of cotton diaper folded neatly on the porchswing. I turned to pick up the cloth, my back to him.

"Stupid kid, hand it to me!" My fingers fumbled for the object in the middle of the table. I was too short to reach so far in the center without using a chair. So, I moved the closest chair which was a high stool usually used at the bar in the kitchen. The
legs didn’t sit evenly so that at any one time only three legs touched the ground.

I hopped up on the top and leaned over the table. I grasped the cellophane wrapped package of cigarettes. But as I began to return to an upright position, the stool became unbalanced and tipped forward. I lost my balance and fell to the floor with the stool in a deafening crash. My head nicked the table as I fell and I immediately felt it begin to throb.

"Dumb, good-for-nothin’! You better not have crushed my cigarettes!" The cigarettes, where were they? They were no longer in my hand. I lifted myself to my knees and looked under my body. Sure enough, they had been flattened in the fall. I picked them up and timidly lifted them in the air so my father could see.

Bam! I again fell to the floor, but this time from the fist that dug in my back. My arms sprung up around my head, and I balled up my body. I bit the sleeve of my shirt as I felt the steel toe of a boot drive into my shoulder blade and side. Crying would only make it worse. I wiped my face on the arm of my shirt.

"You smashed my cigarettes. Never do that again! You’ll never learn will you, you damn worthless kid!"

I stayed on the cold linoleum floor staring at the gray and white flecks. I never notice that there were a few hints of pink hidden among the gray and white until then. Closing my eyes I tried to concentrate on wishing myself somewhere else. Usually I imagined I was rescued by Superman or other super hero or that I took my father’s shotgun and pulled the trigger as I looked him
square in the eye. I would say, "This is for everything you ever did to me, but I'll be nice and let you suffer only for an instant." I didn't think I would be able to torture any human being, so I always imagined it happening very clean and quickly.

Mr. Kittleman's hand slowly rubbed the blades of the shears with the soft cloth. He picked out all the little flecks of weeds and dirt in the grooves, making the metal shine. Turning them over, his forefinger ran over what looked liked rust.

"Jacob, did you borrow these and leave them out in the rain?" Mr Kittleman looked at me accusingly.

"No, sir," I said.

"Well, I hope I can find that rust remover in the basement." He opened the screendoor to the porch and slammed the door. "Damn."

I was about to sit down on the porch step, when I realized now would be the best time to act. The cloudless sky boasted a brilliant blue, and the air was still. The only sound was the thud of Mr. Kittleman's boots as he crossed the entryway and the hallway toward the basement door. Act quickly, I told myself.

"Mr. Kittleman!" I needed to stall him only for a moment. I found him at the top of the stairs. Perfect.

"What?" he snapped.

"For all you've done for me, I want to do something for you."

A shrill scream from the cellist told me Mr. Kittleman had been found. The cellist came bounding in the parlor where Mrs.
Kittleman was serving tea. Panting he spoke, "Mr. Kittleman-bottom of the stairs-shears-he fell on them-he dead!"

Mrs. Kittleman's eyes turned a cloudy gray-blue before she sank into the plush loveseat. Trembling she said, "He's hurt?"

"Mrs. Kittleman," the wide-eyed cellist spoke in an enunciated whisper, "He dead!"

The rest of the summer I watched Mrs. Kittleman as she began to deteriorate. The light in her eyes disappeared, and she started turning people away who wanted lodging. Occasionally a week would go by with only two or three visitors. She would wander about the house in the evenings after a supper fixed for too many people. The piano collected dust and the card club stopped calling after she turned them down four weeks in a row. "I'm just not in the mood for playing," she'd say.

Near the end of August after packing my car to go home, I went back in to tell Mrs. Kittleman goodbye. I wanted to tell her the world was better off with this man who hurts innocent people, but I knew she wouldn't accept my words. Besides, she needed to experience the pain she had caused me.

She stood on the front porch her hands wrapped around one of the pillars as if it was supporting her. "Mr. Willows, I don't know what I would have done without your help these past weeks. I also, don't know how I'll get by on my own." She looked down at her sandals covering her calloused feet. She rubbed one foot over the other. "I'm thinking of closing the bed and breakfast."
“Why?”

She pushed the mousy gray strands, that had fallen from her bun, out of her face. She lifted a pale and tired face to mine. “I need time to be alone. Walter was the one who always loved the bed and breakfast so much. I did too, but I think I did because it made him happy. It was something we did together. I can’t do it without him.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I love to come here, and you always have done such great business. Your home was special.”

“It was.” Mrs. Kittleman seemed to blend in with the dullness of the house.

Picking up my last bag, I nodded at her. “Maybe I’ll see you next year. Maybe not.” I turned toward my car.

“Wait, Jacob. I found this in your room. Is it yours?” She extended the red leather album.

“It was in the attic. In that old trunk. I forgot to put it back. I can now if you’d like.”

“Trunk? I had no idea. I’ve never even looked through that since we got it.”

I cocked my head and took a step back toward the porch. A crow in the yard cawed loudly interrupting the stillness of the afternoon. Its beady black eye examined the two of us before it spread its wings, cawed again, and flapped away into the air.

“Mr. Willows, why are you looking at me so queerly?”

“Never looked through it?”
Mrs. Kittleman shrugged. "Walter bought it and some other things at an auction years ago. He used to love going to auctions to find antiques or stuff to furnish the guest rooms. You know quaint fixtures, old furniture, the like. Mr. Willows, are you all right? You look pale, like you’ve seen a ghost."

"An auction?" It was all I could get out as I collapsed on the step of the porch. "Where?"

"Auction. Let me think." Mrs. Kittleman stepped back from me. "I think it’s the same one he got this ring at. I hardly ever wear it. It’s a little tight." She held out her right hand with the ruby stone set in the gold band. "It was over at McCavern Tower in Thorton City. Local from up there shot his wife and then himself. Gruesome. That’s why I remember it so well. This ring was hers I think. That’s what Walter was told anyway. Who knows how stories go. Anyway, Walter bought a victorian chair and the trunk was thrown in along with it. I thought it was probably a bunch of someone else’s junk and never took time to sort through it. Now I guess I have time. Maybe I will."

"You will?" I asked. I eyed the ring. I had seen Mrs. Kittleman wear it before; it had been evidence I only had assumed had been accurate. I felt lightheaded and rested my head against my hand.

"Probably not. I can’t get up the stairs all that well. Some days I can of course. Just depends."

"Thanks. I need to go. Sorry about Mr. Kittleman." This time I meant it. I took one last look on the Kittleman’s Bed and
Breakfast and got in my car. I knew this was my last visit to the Inn.
The Barn Swallow

The dim stained glass lights hanging above several booths and tables cast a musty golden glow throughout the Old Barn Tavern. It was Friday night, and people from town were drinking drafts and smoking cigarettes. Frank the bartender smiled behind his mustache at the regulars, handing some a drink before they even asked for one. Though not full, the bar was well attended with people relaxing and trying to forget the week they had just lived through.

The tavern had previously been a barn which supposedly had a terrifying history. Frank on rare occasions would tell the story about the farmer who once owned the barn and seven hundred surrounding acres. The farmer did not approve of a man whom his daughter loved. Because the farmer would not let them get married, the girl had hung herself from the rafters in the barn. When saying this, Frank would point to one of the highest rafters in the barn near the loft. "Sometimes when I lock up I see her ghost climbing up a ladder that ain't even there! Then she'll smile at me with a face that has no eyes." He'd hide his smile as he spoke of the ghost.

This particular evening there was a new member in the crowd. She sat on a stool at the bar and listened to Frank tell his tale. Her long dark blond hair fell down her back in waves and her green eyes viewed the lone dark rafter with respect. She squinted at a frayed thin rope wrapped around the rafter.
"You new round here, Miss?" Frank asked as he ran a hand through his thick dark mass of curls.

"Hello. I'm Libby." Her voice was almost lost in the noise of the crowd.

"Frank," he shoved up the sleeve of his shirt and offered his hand. Libby, looking the bartender square in his face, shook his hand.

The girl turned her attention to the front of the room. It was karaoke night and a young man who appeared obviously comfortable with the crowd, perhaps due to his slightly inebriated state, was singing a poor rendition of Elvis's "Blue Suede Shoes." He was trying his hardest to imitate the actions of the King, and though he was miserable at it, the crowd cheered him on.

The bartender eyeing the young woman's interest in the singer asked, "You know Mathews? Always doing Elvis. The people like it I guess."

"Can anyone sing?" she shyly asked.

"I personally don't. I prefer to talk to my customers." He left for a moment to fix an amaretto sour for another regular who had just entered. Then, he came back over to Libby. "You know anyone here? You alone?"

"I'd like to sing." She looked at him with clear green eyes.

"Sing?" The bartender lifted his eyebrows in immediate interest. "Sure. Go ask Jimmy over there. Got a big whale tattooed right on his forearm." The bartender nodded at Libby as
she slid off her stool and thanked him. She walked over to the man whose skin art made him easy to distinguish.

Frank changed his focus to the people standing at the bar. He talked to them as he cleaned off the dark polished surface and continued to mix and serve drinks. It was about twenty minutes later that he froze in place and cocked an ear toward the small stage at the front of the bar.

Libby was singing a song with which Frank was not very familiar. She confidently stood on the stage and belted out a song with a voice like nothing Frank had ever heard before. Now and then someone from the community who could sing would entertain the audience, but this girl was different. Her voice captured Frank’s attention like no one else’s ever had. He didn’t know what she sang about, but the words held meaning. Maybe it wasn’t the words so much as the feeling and power in the voice.

The bartender stared his mouth hanging open. This girl is magnificent, he thought. She has something I’ve never heard before. He was mesmerized by the sweet yet strong soprano voice that resounded through the barn. He felt drawn to the compassion he heard in her song. Nothing could disturb his focus. He was transfixed on this one individual.

Libby came to the end of her song and stood there wide-eyed looking at the audience who stared back. The room was silent, a sound not often found in The Old Barn Tavern on Friday nights. The stillness surrounded the room and everything seemed to stop. Her eyes shifted around the room looking from the tables to the counter.
then back to the people at the tables right in front of her. Silence. No movement.

Finally a member of the crowd put his hands together and was soon joined by all in loud applause. A glowing smile spread across Libby’s face, and she bashfully bowed. She was just about to walk off the stage when Jimmy shouted, "Why don’t you sing us another song!" How could she refuse when the crowd began to holler and whistle for more?

Libby sang another song. After this she sang a country song requested by the man the bartender called Mathews. Then a woman asked for a well-known pop song. Libby graciously agreed, her smile continuing to grow and brighten. She sang song after song, only taking breaks, now and then encouraging other to sing, but no one did. Everyone only wanted to hear her voice.

As the evening lengthened, Libby sang her last song saying she had to go. When she sang the final note, again the room was filled with a silence as if soaking in the memory of her voice. Only when she stepped off the stage did the crowd begin to cheer enthusiastically. She was about to sneak out the door when the bartender gently grabbed her arm.

"Libby, you truly are amazing. Will you be coming back? Tomorrow perhaps?"

"Maybe next Friday." She appeared to be about twenty-five and now seemed much smaller and delicate up close. The bartender released her arm and smiled.
"The people love you, you know. I could hire you to sing every Friday. How would you like that? You could have a Friday show. More people would come if they knew you were here. It would help me out, and I'm sure you'd love the singing part."

Her only answer was, "I'll return. Probably next Friday."

Libby did return the next Friday to find an even larger crowd. Frank had told anyone who came to the bar that she would most likely be there and not to miss the show. The people cheered as before, and she sang like a songbird. It soon became a ritual on Friday nights. People went to the bar to socialize at first and then to hear the woman with the stunning voice. For the first few weeks, she refused any pay, but eventually she shyly accepted a small wage.

People began to show up to the bar early to make certain they could see and hear Libby. It wasn't long before she was the talk of the town and even had a picture on the front of the local paper. The little town was filled with a new excitement over this woman who seemingly appeared from out of nowhere.

Every Friday night the bar was packed tight with people. Besides all the regulars, those who came only occasionally were now there on Fridays. Even people who never went to bars or who never drank showed up. No one wanted to miss the chance to hear her voice. Several times she was approached and asked if she would sing at one of the town's churches or for the children at school. One lady said to Libby, "Everyone should hear your voice, child."
It does things to a person." But Libby always said she was sorry and that she only sang at the bar.

The Old Barn Tavern's holding capacity eventually wasn't large enough to contain all the people who wanted to see Libby perform. So, Frank decided to buy an old building three blocks away. It would be a wonderful chance to make even better profits. With a girl like Libby to bring people in, there was no telling how popular his bar would become.

Three months later, Frank's Bar held their grand opening. It was a Friday night and the town's people came in a constant flow. People from nearby towns came too. Frank had publicized this moment and word of mouth spread quickly about the singer who was blessed with a voice unlike any before it.

However, no one could find Libby. Frank asked all the customers at the bar, but no one had seen her since her last performance a week ago. The crowd was growing anxious and questioning where Libby was, but there was no sign on her.

A man who worked at the bar came and tapped Frank on the shoulder. "Frank, hey. She's here. She's at the back door."

The bartender sighed deeply; his face relaxed. "Good."

"No, I don't think you understand. She wants to talk to you."

Frank found Libby standing outside in the alley. He could see she wore an elegant long black dress under her overcoat. Her green eyes were still brilliant, but now they seemed to hold sorrow. Frank thought he saw Libby wiping a tear from her eye when she
brushed her long hair from her face. When asked, she said she couldn’t come in.

"I’m sorry, but I can’t sing here," she said.

"What do you mean? There’s a whole mess of people waiting for you. You’ve gotta sing." There was desperation in his voice.

"I’m sorry," she said again. "I can’t sing here." The singer looked extremely pale in the cold evening air. The bartender noticed her skin appeared almost translucent. He thought it was probably from the strange glow from the light that hung outside the backdoor of the bar or maybe just from the contrast of her pale ivory skin against the jet black dress. He could not be sure.

"Please, Libby. Sing for me," Frank softly spoke. He placed his hands on each of her shoulders and peered down into her face, searching for some sign. Without blinking, she met his gaze. He waited for her answer. Say yes, he thought. Say, yes. She looked so beautiful tonight standing there with the wind blowing her hair. He wanted to hear her voice that was just as amazing and wonderful as the woman he saw before him.

"Frank," she said. He couldn’t remember her ever calling him by his first name, and the single word sent a thrill through his body.

"Yes."

"I can only sing at the other place, in the barn."

"Are you sick? Do you feel okay?" He moved forward to put a comforting arm around her. She let him hold her for a moment that
was ever so brief. Then her body became rigid and she stepped back from his touch.

"I'm sorry, Frank," she said in almost a whisper. "I can only sing in the barn." She turned then and walked down the alley disappearing once again in the shadowy evening. Frank listened to the click of her heels on the wet pavement, listened until they faded away. Libby was not to be seen again by Frank or anyone else in the little town.

The success of Frank's Bar was nothing like the bartender had anticipated. It was supposed to have been the best place to go to for local entertainment. Once Libby left, it wasn't long before the customers were the old regulars again, and there were rarely any faces that weren't familiar. Frank managed to downsize his bar. He had put a lot of money in the new place, but being a good manager, he eventually broke even. It seemed he was back where he had been in his business before he had ever met Libby. Soon he was once again used to the constant loud muffled sounds that spread throughout the bar on Friday nights, but he couldn't help thinking back on the times when the bar had been in perfect silence after Libby ended a song. Those moments were full of magic.

After one evening when the noise level seemed to be more disturbing than usual, the bartender was walking home passed the now vacant Old Barn Tavern. The dark barn looked lonely silhouetted against the starlit night; its walls seemed to sag heavily. Frank crossed in front of the former bar and was almost
passed it when he thought he heard her voice soft and sweet but now with a sad tone. Stopping where he was, the bartender cocked his ear to listen, but only the wind answered. He closed his eyes and breathed in the fresh night air. Then, he waited a moment longer and heard the familiar silence. Satisfied, he hurried home.
A Reason to Kill

I entered the small cement-block room with its harsh fluorescent lighting. The walls were a cold gray decorated only with a large red lever and the switch for the lights. In the center of the room stood the chair ominously waiting for its next victim. Thick leather straps loosely hung at the arms and the legs of the chair. Along the back of the chair a large metal plate was positioned. From the very top and on one side of the chair near the bottom, two thick black cords snaked their way to a hole in the wall beneath the red lever.

Thoughts ran through my head of how the 2000 volts of electricity must feel when they first course through the body. The anticipation must be nowhere near the reality of the actual occurrence. I had heard that during the gruesome event the skin often burns in the places where it is in contact with the electrodes. I wondered how long the pain lasted or if it happened so fast the victim was brain dead before experiencing the true excruciating heat.

So, this was it. The time had finally arrived. I had envisioned this moment in my future, knowing it could not be far away. I had waited and planned so carefully. However, I wondered if it had been worth it.

My mind raced back to the moment in my past when things had changed, forever. The day and events are held in my memory
like a photograph, but it is one that constantly hangs on the walls of my mind. Its garish events have caused such significant turmoil that my life has been structured forever around the occurrence of that one summer afternoon.

It was the end of June, June 23rd to be exact. I was eleven and my younger brother Sam was eight. Before Mama had called us in for lunch, we had been playing outside in our fort we had constructed from old logs found in the woods that edged our property line. Sam and I got along well for being siblings, and I usually enjoyed acting as the older and wiser brother. As we ate lunch, Sam had talked about reinforcing our fort to protect it from all the evil villains we might encounter.

"Why don't we put in a secret entrance so we can get in and out without anyone knowing?" Sam suggested.

"Yeah!" I agreed. "We could put it on the side where the bushes are so no one would know where it was!"

"Yeah!" Sam nodded enthusiastically.

"We need to protect ourselves too. I know what we need. I'll be right back!" I ran upstairs to my bedroom, leaving behind my unfinished lunch. I searched my room looking for the ideal weapon to keep out the bad guys from our fort.

Mama, Sam, and I all lived in an old two-story farmhouse out in the country. The house was small but just right for the three of us. I shared a room with Sam that was located directly over the kitchen.

While in our room, I heard someone knock on the back door, so I ran over to the window to see who it was. It was a man
sloppily dressed in a blue-and-white, grease-and-dirt stained, flannel shirt and torn, faded jeans that looked as if they were falling off his scrawny body. He covered his head with a navy baseball hat that read "Jack's Bar." I couldn't see his face, but I guessed that it too wasn't all that clean.

Mama answered the door holding a dishtowel in her hands. They exchanged a few words. Then Mama stretched open the screen door, and he entered our home.

I was still in my room digging through Sam's and my toys when I heard something going on downstairs. I heard a loud bang followed by a thud as if one of the kitchen chairs was suddenly pushed over. I was about to run downstairs to see what was the commotion, but for some reason I stayed in my room and strained my ears to see if I could catch some of the conversation.

Only seconds later I heard Sam. He let out a soft cry like he was trying to hold back his tears. Then I heard his whimper and a trembling breath. I knew his jaw was probably quivering like it always did when he was frightened, and his brown eyes would be wide trying to take everything in.

Suddenly, Sam loudly screamed, "Mama!" The sound pierced me deep inside and echoed in my ears. Though it was humid in my room, I shivered from where I now kneeled on the floor, listening. Holding my breath, I balled my hands into two fists to stop them from shaking.

I realized I had to do something to rescue Sam from the villain who had entered our house. I turned my head quickly,
panning the plastic swords and brightly colored toys. I kept thinking, Sam, hold on. I'm coming. I slowly and carefully crawled to the corner of the room where I thought I might find something to help Sam whose cries seemed to be getting louder. A man's gruff voice mumbled something which made Sam stifle a cry.

Don't you dare hurt him, I thought. I knew it wouldn't help the situation if I made myself known, and I prayed that Sam wouldn't give the man any reason to believe that I was in the house. What could I do? Somehow I had to surprise the man terrorizing my brother. My mind raced with thoughts, all the time listening, listening for any sign of hope.

However, any ideas I had disappeared when I heard a silence that told me Sam was not crying any more. I knew with that eerie silence that Sam would never cry again. It was over. I hadn't even heard the weapon.

The man rummaged through the house for a few minutes and then left the way he came in. All the time he never set one foot on the stairs that led to my hiding place. I watched him leave, but I couldn't see his face, only his hunched-over frame weasel away. With a blood-stained hand he carried Sam's yellow backpack stuffed with the goodies this stranger now claimed to be his own. It wasn't until that moment that the truth really hit me. I knew what must be waiting for me downstairs.

I sat by the window watching the weeping willow wave her arms in the summer breeze. The sun struck the windshield of the family station wagon creating a brilliant glare that hurt
my eyes. After sitting there watching for several minutes, without moving a muscle, I knew the man wasn't coming back. I got up and pulled myself to the stairs. My feet felt heavy, and my heart pounded in my ears as if it might explode any moment. I stumbled over the first few steps, so I gripped the railing with sweaty palms to steady my descent.

Then, I was in the kitchen staring at the lifeless bodies of Mama and Sam. Both had been shot in the head, and the sight made my already trembling legs weak. I collapsed on the floor and cried. Tears poured from my eyes as if there would never be enough to rightfully honor my brother and Mama. My head began to hurt but still I continued to cry. I screamed, "Mama!" as I had heard Sam say it. It was his last word. I repeated both their names over and over as if somehow their spirits would magically rejoin their bodies if I said their names enough.

As the shadows lengthened and the sun began to fall, I found I still had no strength to stand. When my tears finally ran out, I stared at the swirling pattern of the carpet. I looked at the shades of reds, browns and oranges and how they all blended together to become one. Studying this pattern I fell asleep.

The next few months were a blur. I went to live with a sister of my dad's. I lived there with Aunt Becky, Uncle Bill, and their five children for the next seven years of my life. They lived near a large city so my life abruptly changed since I was used to living on ten acres of land that was my family's alone. I didn't care for my cousins. The older kids had their
Gap and L.L. Bean clothes and their trendy friends who were cheerleaders or student council members. The younger ones had their Barbies and Fisher Price toys which they seemed to constantly receive after whining to Aunt Becky that they needed to have such and such toy because all their friends did.

As for me, I never really found a place for myself in that family. I kept to myself at first. My aunt and uncle assumed that's how I wanted to be, so they let me do whatever, never really keeping track of where I was going. I frequented the nearest strip mall which was less than a mile away. I'd spend my time at the arcade or more often I'd go to the electronics store. This is where I met Edward of Edward's Electronics.

Edward was in his early thirties. He was a clean-cut guy who always wore a tie that he tucked in between two buttons of his shirt while he fixed the electronic equipment that people would bring in. He'd sit in the back room of his store with his tools, carefully making adjustments on some of the oldest electrical pieces I'd ever seen.

Once an old lady brought in a television that was the exact model Mama had. I eyed the thing, angry that it brought up so many memories that I could never erase. Edward saw my expression and me asked about it. I eventually told him, though it was almost four weeks later.

"Dustin, what ever happened to the man?"

Clenching my teeth, I shook my head. "He was never found. They kind of forgot about the whole thing," I said, "but I never did."
"Look, Dust, I can tell you're smart. You have a lot of potential. You need to do something to deal with how you're feeling. Go to school and learn to do something you've always wanted to do."

I looked at him, "Anything?"

He nodded and said, "Anything. Whatever it is you want most, strive for it, and do it."

Trying to cut the seriousness of our discussion, Edward reached over and playfully messed up my hair. "Now you want to help me with that radio that came in yesterday?"

"Sure," I muttered. Preoccupied with my thoughts that were just beginning to form, I sat and stared wrinkling up my face the harder I thought. I realized then that there was only one thing I wanted more than anything in the world, revenge.

I was fourteen at the time Edward and I had that talk. I was tired of living in a house where I was hardly acknowledged. Bill and Becky were occupied with raising their children, and I was treated more like a pet dog that they cared for only out of charity's sake. I decided that they probably were counting down the days until they would be rid of me, so I did all I could to stay away.

At sixteen I got a job at Edward's store. By this time he had already taught me quite a lot about televisions, radios, turn tables, and the electronic stuff necessary to be considered something of an expert, at least in his store. I continued to work there until I graduated from high school, then I went
to a tech school to become an electrician. All this time my ultimate goal was in the back of my mind.

I knew I had to form a plan that was flawless. There had to be some way to seek my revenge upon the man who still haunted my dreams. Those times when I was uncertain what to do, I would close my eyes and focus on that summer day. I would clench my hands so tightly that they would ache for an hour afterward. I imagined the man in the navy cap holding the gun in his greasy hand getting ready to shoot Mama or Sam. This vision always worked. It inspired me.

Today I would find out if my plan had worked. This was all I had thought of and strived for since that fatal day. There was a moment when I realized that the man with the navy cap would most likely never come across my path again, but this was the only other way I could think of avenging my family. I had become the executioner for victims of the electric chair.

He was brought in the room. His head had been shaved, and he glared at me with dark black eyes. I felt the urge to say something but remained silent. The guards led him to the chair and buckled him in using the dark leather straps. I set the electrodes on his body where I had learned they were most effective. He made no resistance.

This man was large boned with a wickedly smiling skeleton tattoo peeking out the collar of his prison uniform. He wore a scowl and showed no remorse. He had been convicted for the murder of two teen-age girls and another woman who was thought
to have been his girlfriend. I envisioned the terror he must have caused when he attacked his victims.

My heart beat quickened, and I felt adrenalin running through my veins. My palms grew sweaty, and I breathed in deeply through my clenched teeth. Soon I would draw the lever down and see my electrical masterpiece. I would be the youngest electric chair executioner ever in this state. The man now sitting before me was my first victim. I felt as if I was precariously waiting at the top of a roller coaster just before it plummets down the first hill. The rush would come and, finally, I knew that I could be at peace.

I saw his labored breathing as the death mask was set in place. I grasped the lever as soon as I was given the all clear signal, rubbing my thumb back and forth over the lever which was the pathway to damnation.

I inhaled, knowing within seconds I would be experiencing a feeling like I had never known. At the same time, the man in the chair would be experiencing a new feeling too. The moment was mine, and I watched my fingers knowing what they were capable of. Then, with the slightest movement of my hand, the volts coursed through the wires into the criminal's body. I began with the full voltage for less than ten seconds. I reduced this to 200 volts for almost two minutes. Only five minutes after the prisoner entered the room, the coroner came in and pronounced him to as dead. That was all. The rush never came.

Numbly I left the sight of death. I found a chair in a room down the hall, and I sat to think about what had just
happened. I had killed someone, but it made little difference to me. I didn't know the man or the people he had killed. Knowing their families could now be at peace helped to ease my pain only slightly. How many more people would have to be executed, I wondered, before I had gained all of my revenge?

In the quiet of the afternoon, it occurred to me that nothing could replace my family. No man's death even if he was the one who came to our doorstep when I was eleven would ever give me back Mama and Sam. What was I to do now? I stared at the gray cement walls of the small room I was in, massaging my forehead with my hand.

I don't know how long I stayed in that ghostly stillness waiting for my mind to be charged with an answer. Then, as if I was peering through a lifting mist, I realized I needed a new goal, a goal that would satisfy my hurt and anger. This one goal had failed, but why should another not work? The reason acting as an executioner had not worked was because there must have been some flaw in my plan. But what?

I was in my truck driving home when I realized the mistake in my previous plan. The man I had killed looked nothing like the man who viciously murdered my family. I believed I needed to find someone who resembled the scrawny, greasy man who I had seen from my upstairs window, someone who could cause the fierce feelings of anger to culminate.

I sped down the black highway that was even darker in the evening rainstorm. My apprehension of never finding some sort of relief was creeping away. I had an uncanny faith in my new
goal. Tomorrow I would begin my search. I wasn't certain where I would find this perfect substitute, but I knew I would. It was only a matter of time which was something I had. I would find this man and make him suffer, only to take his life from him.

While I waited at a stoplight, I glanced in the rearview mirror at the grin I now wore. I noticed how my eyes sparkled. All the years I had planned everything carefully had not been a waste. If it had taken the moment in the execution cell to reach this epiphany, then it was well worth it. If my new plan worked, soon the haunting cries of Mama and Sam would be at rest.