

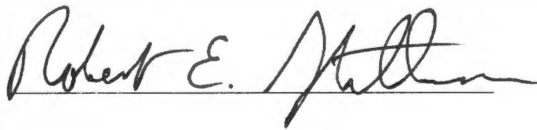
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Erika Leigh Andra entitled "The Rebel Collection." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

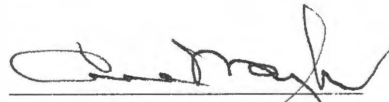
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Knight", written over a horizontal line.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert E. Stalder", written over a horizontal line.A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allen Wine", written over a horizontal line.

Acceptance for the Council:

A handwritten signature in black ink, written over a horizontal line.

Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

THE REBEL COLLECTION

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Erika Leigh Andra
May 2004

Thesis
2004
.A65

Copyright © 2004 by Erika Leigh Andra
All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, John Andra, Brady Flint, and Amanda Skelly, for giving up everything they have ever known so that I could follow my dreams; to the rest of my friends and family, for supporting me; and to my most cherished friend, Rebecca Brooks, for being my rock-- believing in me, encouraging me, and inspiring me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank all those who helped me complete my Master of Arts degree in English. I would like to thank Michael Knight for patiently leading me through this process. I would like to thank Allen Weir and Dr. Rob Stillman for their guidance and for serving on my committee. I would also like to thank Dr. Russell Hirst for being my trusted mentor and friend.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends, whose suggestions and encouragement made this work possible.

ABSTRACT

This collection of creative writing incorporates an introduction, three short stories, and a creative non-fiction piece, all of which represent my emotional exploration of both intense subject matters and an autobiographical impulse (blending the lines between fiction and non-fiction).

The introduction to “The Rebel Collection” pointedly scrutinizes my writing aesthetics and includes lists of authors and works which have profoundly influenced me. The creative non-fiction piece, “My Writer’s Eye,” relates my adventures from a mission trip to Mexico, during which I examined religion, writing, and class structures. The first short story, “Shells,” delves into the mind of a woman in graduate school who considers suicide. “Sultry,” the second short story, explores the unreliability of stereotypes and the unpredictability of death. The final short story, “Stages,” bookends the collection with a hard look at religion, death, and the afterlife.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	Introduction - The Rebel Collection.....	1
II	“My Writer’s Eye”.....	15
III	“Shells”.....	31
IV	“Sultry”.....	53
V	“Stages”.....	71
	Works Cited.....	99
	Vita.....	103

Chapter I

Introduction - The Rebel Collection

In Going to See the Elephant, George Garrett writes, “One good reason for writers to dissociate themselves from academe is to avoid the bad company there, including the bad company of each other. But there are some better reasons. One of these is the chilling effect on the freedom of speech and thought that is felt, not only aesthetically but also politically and socially by writers in an academic context these days” (39).

As a sarcastic, sometimes rude and arrogant Northerner with Southern Baptist religion, a conservative Republican voter registration card, and a soft spot for nostalgia living in a liberal academic environment, I sometimes feel conspicuously out of place (or, on occasion, in some more serious mischief) because of my attitudes. I identify closely with John Towne, Garrett’s fictional alter-ego, as I negotiate my way through the system, trying to find my place and my voice. I’ve found the atmosphere of the academe at the same time both confining and freeing.

I came to graduate school for two reasons. First and foremost, I want to teach. I have always held a passion for the English language and for communication through writing, and my dream of becoming a teacher seemed more attainable and practical than becoming an actress or an astronaut. Second, I want to write. I love writing, no matter what kind. Seriously. You name it, I write it. Short stories, creative non-fiction, really bad (atrociously bad) poetry, a novel I’ve been toying with for a couple of years now. I even write letters...the kind you mail with a stamp and everything (there is something very comforting and personal about a pen gliding across stationary as you’re writing to a

loved one far away—something email cannot duplicate). I currently make my living as a professional copywriter, a seriously more lucrative position than a traditional creative writer, but I hope to one day secure a cozy little office crammed with books and candles so I can spend my mornings writing and my afternoons teaching. Until then, I'm satisfied with any writing, even mushy greeting cards for Hallmark or a cookie-cutter romance novel, if the money is right.

Does this mean I don't take my writing seriously? Or that I don't consider my writing art? Am I selling out? Of course not. I'm writing a Civil War novel in a time when the market is saturated with Civil War novels. Why? Because there aren't any Civil War novels out there in *my* voice, with *my* storylines, *my* vision. I refuse to read the book or see the movie Cold Mountain because I don't want to be influenced in any way, so I can't comment directly on the latest big hit, but generally I find that there is very little contemporary historical fiction produced that is as concerned with being historically accurate as it is with being politically correct. This is where George Garrett and I see eye to eye, and I don't want to succumb to the pressures within academia to which he refers. Ann Renaldi, a popular writer of academic young adult fiction, has fallen victim, most notably with Mine Eyes Have Seen, a story in which the historical facts of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry are skewed by decidedly modern feminist themes.

To me, succumbing to the social and political pressure of academia is selling out. Thus, I don't feel I'm selling out at all. In fact, I'm sticking to my ideals and being true to myself, which, I believe, is an important aspect of art. If I were selling out, I wouldn't stay up late into the night working on a novel I may never finish, that will probably never

sell-- especially after I've spent all day making a decent living writing ad copy. I wouldn't reach deep down into the depths of my conscious and subconscious selves to fetch my obsessions if I weren't serious about writing. *Art is the creative expression of obsessions.* Many catalysts can trigger my obsessions, but I generally become obsessed after experiencing an extreme emotion, or a memory of an extreme emotion. The type of emotion doesn't really matter-- but the emotion must be intense. For example, do you remember being in love? First in love; deep in love? The kind of reciprocated love that causes behavior so irritating as to make those long-removed from such feelings roll their eyes or gag? Holding hands until the palms become sticky with sweat. Constantly looking at one another; whispering, giggling, touching. When completely engulfed in extreme emotions, many people develop highly acute sensory perceptions, allowing them to remember everything; the most minute and subtle details. This phenomenon happens to most people at some level or another. It must, or how could you account for so many couples having "their song" or that special place that makes them turn to each other and smile when they drive past. Sometimes certain perceptions lie buried, but not forgotten, like the smell of french fries on the boardwalk where you strolled, hand-in-hand on your first date. When, unexpectedly, you smell those fries again, it triggers memories of that moment and you pause, close your eyes, and relive that night on the boardwalk in your mind. Whether the lover is distant history or you've been with that person so long that you're freely passing gas in front of one another, you will remember. For some people, these memories simply provoke a moment of melancholy or nostalgia. For me, these memories trigger intense emotions. They are my inspiration, and then I write from my

obsession outward.

The story behind the conception of my novel illustrates my point in a personal way. Years ago, my then soon-to-be-husband handed me a small, beautifully wrapped box on Christmas morning containing this short, typed note:

TOGETHER WE WILL TRAVEL TO HARPERS FERRY, WEST VIRGINIA. WE WILL SLEEP IN EACH OTHERS ARMS AND WAKE AS THE ANCIENT MOUNTAINS DRAW THEIR BREATH. HARPERS FERRY, SITE OF THAT SO NAMED CIVIL WAR BATTLE, WILL BE OUR HOME FOR THE EVENING. WE WILL ENJOY EACH OTHERS PRESENCE, AND SHARE A HOT TUB TO RELAX IN. OUR MODE OF TRAVEL WILL BE RAIL, FOR I CAN THINK OF NOTHING MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THE REFLECTION OF YOUR FACE IN THE TRAIN WINDOW AS YOU GAZE AT THE HILLS AND MOUNTAINS.

We arrived in Harper's Ferry on New Year's Day on the edge of a snowstorm that threatened to shut us up in the mountains for the rest of winter, but did not deter us. The town, perched precariously on cliffs overlooking the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. The streets were desolate, partly because of the holiday and partly because of the impending storm, and we wandered them free from other tourists. For that day, the town belonged to us. Our shared passion for history drove us to climb the mountainside to Jefferson's Peak, to examine the museums which were open despite the holiday, to ponder the conditions of the armies and of the residents, and to imagine what had really happened there. We explored the cemetery, making pencil impressions of the grave markers with hands numb from the bitter cold, and strolled without speaking. We simply listened to the rush of the rivers, the leaves crunching under our feet, and the desperate whispers of the dead trying to have their stories heard.

Emotions as intense as new love leave strong impressions, and moments like these are where my stories are born. For example, the town of Harpers Ferry will be, for me, forever attached to hopeless romanticism. The characters in my story simply must fall in love; it's inevitable. But that's only one emotion. There's rage at the atrocities of war, sorrow for victims on both sides, curiosity, and a love affair with the time period in general. Emotion piled on top of emotion as I researched and wondered. I jotted down my notes and thoughts, and before I knew it, a story developed.

I believe that all human beings share an enormous treasure of emotions that allow us all to relate to each other. Fear, embarrassment, anger, rage, sadness, jealousy-- the negative emotions we share are just as powerful as love or joy. The stress of my first year at graduate school prompted "Shells," a story in this collection about suicide. I never had any intention of committing suicide, but my emotions allowed me to understand the inclination. My approach is not new. Sue Grafton's inspiration for A is for Alibi was the very noble desire to kill her ex-husband. My divorce from my first husband allows me to empathize with her motives, and my own associations with evil (my husband's ex-wife, for example) provide me with an endless supply of bad guys to liven up my stories.

But explaining my inspiration for writing doesn't fully explain why I write. The respectable answer is that I write to relive experiences, to share and express the common ground of human existence (blah, blah, snore...). The real answer is that I like to act out my imagination without actually having to serve jail time. The more simplistic, and still honest, answer is that I write because I love to write. Pure, selfish pleasure. I see beauty in language; the infinite supply of words and their connotations and the puzzle of sorting

through them to find the ones that perfectly convey my meaning. I don't purposely try to be innovative, although, in search of my individual voice, I hate being directly compared to this author or that author. I don't foresee or hope to become famous (keeping in mind that I never turn away honest cash). I don't set out to change the world or to be morally or politically responsible, or worse, politically correct. I follow authors closely to see how some approach subjects and succeed without pushing ideology and politics on a reader, authors like Toni Morrison. While she is the queen of the politically correct, Morrison's writing carries the reader on a aesthetic journey into her world, leading us to feel a genuine sympathy for her characters' conditions. Leslie Marmon Silko, on the other hand, seems to demand readers to feel sympathy simply because it would be politically correct to do so. In her creative non-fiction piece, "The Border Patrol State," Silko wants the reader to feel outrage at what she describes as an instance of racial profiling, but she expects us to completely ignore the important fact that she was carrying "a small amount of medicinal marijuana in [her] purse" when the cop pulled her over (175).

I write because I love to, and because I have something to say, but I'm working on being a great writer, rather than just a decent one. I'll consider myself a great writer when I reach the point where I can create an atmosphere in which I subtly guide my reader to what I want them to come away with, rather than one in which they're forced to completely suspend their own beliefs to even consider mine. That partnership between author and audience is what I believe makes for exceptional literature.

I've no doubt that someday, with a great deal of practice, I'll reach a place of

satisfaction with my writing. For now, I'm still relatively at the beginning of a life-long learning process, and even as I near the end of my Master's program, I look ahead an MFA or PhD program to further develop my skills. This is why I came to graduate school, isn't it? -- to learn *how* to write? My parents asked me "just how long does it take to learn rules of grammar"--the key, they think, to good writing. I've tried to explain, fruitlessly, that learning every trick and technique in the world won't make a great writer. If it were that easy, I'd already be great. The tricks and techniques can make you good, but never great. I continually learning all kinds of nifty techniques (in particular, the technical influences of Milan Kundera and Alain Robbe-Grillet), but even these great influences didn't make me a better writer. No, graduate school made me a better writer because, for the first time, I learned to sit down and look at my own writing. I discovered what was important to me and I started writing about it. I allowed my emotions to trigger my obsessions.

How do I write? It is elusive, I think, and changes as I mature as a person and as a writer. At times I can sit down and my mind communicates in some strange way with my fingers, causing words to appear that are so amazing I can't quite believe they came from me. Other times, like now, I stare at the screen as each word is slowly, painfully tapped. In this instance, the cause may be the personal nature of the essay. Despite my eagerness to be honest, some part of me holds back for fear that I'll never be allowed to teach on a college campus again. Actually, I almost never write in first person, even in non-fiction, because of my required comfort zone of emotional distance. When I used to write fiction stories that necessitated first person narration, I would write them out in third person first,

revising them to first person after I completed the first draft. I was sure that a certain amount of psychoanalysis would have revealed the underlying cause for this bizarre demand, but it worked for me so I never bothered. In graduate school, I realized that I needed the comfort zone because all of my stories are triggered by emotion.

“The Rebel Collection,” which incorporates three short stories with a creative non-fiction piece, represents my emotional exploration of intense subject matters (death, religion) with my recently discovered autobiographical impulse. What I’m learning, through writing on my own and in graduate school classes, is not so much the technical aspects of writing, but how to let down self-created barriers and learn to explore areas of interest, to figure out what is important to me and why, to become a rebel like John Towne and write about subjects that matter, even in the face of occasional academic censorship.

I’ve had both failures and successes in my experimental writing, and I’ve learned from both. I’ve learned that some technical aspects are very important to me. My stories require a beginning, a middle, and an end, in fairly chronological order, which knocks me out of the post-modern and absurdist categories. They must contain a strong voice, my voice, because if they don’t, I was never really interested in what I was trying to write about. I must know my audience, or have a vague idea, anyway, because I write various things for various purposes. I’m not always picturing a “real” audience-- rather I like to have an idea of the potential readership. I try not to allow a potential audience to limit my writing; but keeping them in mind helps control things like language. For example, I need to know if I should define words, such as in my story “Stages,” which make use of a

great many religious terms. Because my ideal audience is Catholic, I assumed they would be familiar with the vocabulary and I did not elaborate on the terms. There are other reasons to keep an audience in mind. When I write historical fiction, I am adamant about accuracy and research my subjects thoroughly. I cannot allow the Battle of Gettysburg to occur in 1874 simply because it would be more convenient for me. Besides, the American Civil War has more obsessed pseudo-experts ready to critique every detail than all other wars combined. If I don't get it right, someone will quickly and gleefully point out the error.

With the "musts" in mind, inspired by one emotion or another, I sit down at the computer or grab my journal, and I begin to write. The first thing I do is write very, very quickly - like notes or lists or phrases. I do this because I think very fast and I will forget what I wanted to say if I don't write it down. I then gather my notes and create a story. I don't believe I have ever written the same way twice, technically speaking, such as from beginning to end. I pick one thing and the rest of the story grows from there. For example, my Civil War book, Torn Blue and Tattered Gray was inspired by an emotion, but the actual "writing" started with a place (the setting), developed into a story (I like Forester's definition...the historical and then, and then), into which I placed newly invented characters whose personalities inspired plausible reactions to situations from which I generated the plot(s). In contrast, for the writing of "Shells," I began with the plot (someone driven to suicide) which led to a character capable of such an act, with the setting and story developing later. In any case, I sit down at my PC or laptop and type—always with a CD playing in my headphones. I do this for two reasons. First, I need to

block out the world so I can be absorbed into the one I am creating. Second, and more importantly, I listen to music that I select very carefully to match and maintain my mood or tone. Like Milan Kundera illustrates in The Art of the Novel, my fiction often takes its shape from music.

In addition to Milan Kundera, I'm influenced by a number of authors as to both my aesthetics and my philosophy about writing. The Faerie Queene is the single most amazing piece of creative writing I have ever seen, and I bow to Spencer's mighty talent and quote him extensively in "Shells." Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Maud" inspired me to allow my character in "Stages" the ability to think after dying, because I've never been completely convinced that the narrator in "Maud" is insane rather than dead when he hears footsteps overhead, as is often argued. George Garrett's Do, Lord, Remember Me convinced me that writing about religious experiences does not have to be taboo, even in an academic setting, and his influence is apparent in both the content of "My Writer's Eye" and in the structure of "Stages" (simultaneously viewing the external stereotypes of characters and their internal conflicts). Edgar Allen Poe's ability to create an ambiance with words (through word choice, repetition, mood, voice, etc.) influenced many of the choices I made when writing "Sultry."

Some of my other heros not directly represented in "The Rebel Collection" include: Mark Twain, the storyteller; George Orwell, the conveyor of fear (no matter how many times I read 1984, it still scares me to death); William Shakespeare, the formulator of humor, even in his tragedies and histories (through his fabulous sidekick/supporting characters and dry wit); Toni Morrison, the greatest living literary

writer of our time; Tennessee Williams, the playwright (fabulous at many things, but especially for creating characters that will live forever); Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the religious writers (their Left Behind series utterly fascinated me with their ongoing dramatic interpretation of the Book of Revelations). Other writers I enjoy, but do not necessarily see a direct influence from, include: Sherman Alexie, Leo Tolstoy, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Emily Bronte, Washington Irving, Kate Chopin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Eudora Welty, Isabel Allende, Alice Elliott Dark, Ernest Hemingway, Shirley Jackson, and John Steinbeck.

Obviously, I love to read. I firmly believe that anyone who wants to be a writer needs to read everything they can get their hands on. Even junk. Even a Harlequin Romance or a comic book. Like George Garrett says in Going to See the Elephant, “Unless you love to read and unless you read as much as you are able to, frivolously as well as wisely and well, you will not amount to much as a writer” (12). I appreciate his acknowledgment of the need, not only for constant reading, but for a wide, wide range of reading that includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you never read the frivolous stuff, how are you going to recognize it when you write it?

But even if, because of academic pressures to avoid “trash,” we stick to purely literary fiction, I would argue that a writer, to become the best writer they possibly can, must read beyond an American and British reading list. I don’t think there is anything wrong with fighting for the addition of Comparative Lit to the reading list, and if I’m accepted into the PhD program at University of Tennessee, I may make it my personal mission to help the Creative Writing program grow...keeping busy with this seemingly

innocent ideology may help keep me out of more serious mischief. However, I'll leave the subject of reading variety as a possible dissertation topic.

The painful process of attempting to articulate my philosophy of writing must, I suppose, end with some witty, parting conclusion that neatly wraps up my desired results or audience response. I don't think that is going to happen. I'd like to say I'm fabulous at what I do, but that would be egotistical. Besides, it would be a lie, as the file drawers full of failed attempts prove. Sometimes I get it right, or parts right...meaning I get to the point where something I wrote feels "finished" before I grow tired of it, and that I personally like it, or am at least satisfied with it...and sometimes I don't. I do hope other that people like my writing...I've never had *everyone* like something I wrote, but I've also never had *everyone* hate anything I wrote, either. I'm long past trying to please everybody, having come to the realistic conclusion that pleasing the masses is an impossibility and, thus, I write for me...for my own selfish pleasure. I write what I like to write about.

For me, right now, this means working toward finding my voice. I don't want my work to be classified right now, and most certainly not placed by me. I agree with Forster— that the classifications in literature must be removed in order to see the writing. People writing in the Victorian Era didn't *know* they were writing Victorian literature. My theory is that classifications were developed for the sole purpose of creating comprehensive exams so universities could award PhDs and proliferate. I deplore artistic and intellectual arrogance, and I'm confronted with it regularly as a graduate student, but I'll quietly put up with it and stay around for a terminal degree because I love to teach

(even more than I love to write) and I need a PhD for that. But I think I'll continue, too, because if I leave the university setting, I'll miss my opportunity to push back, to stretch boundaries, to rebel, to *grow* as a writer.

In workshops I'm critiqued often by dozens of students and teachers with conflicting opinions, but I write what matters, and I write with emotion. I write what most people can easily understand, but I don't stick to comfortable topics. I'm opinionated and I'm not shy...this should not be a shock to anyone who knows me. As my brother recently told me, it seems I look for the lines just so I can cross them. Maybe. But I'm having a lot of fun with my rebellion and this collection shows how diverse my writing can be, while still thematically related, which I read as signs of growth in my abilities.

I don't know if I'll be remembered in a hundred years, either as a great writer or at all, but it doesn't matter. Only the writing matters. Am I reaching that place inside of me and creatively expressing my obsessions? Am I forging a relationship with my reader? These are important now-- not whether or not I'll be included in an anthology a hundred years from now. I won't care, then, anyway. I'll be dead.

Chapter II

“My Writer’s Eye”

The morning, cool with a growing warmth that mimicked the coming summer, beckoned me to work outdoors amid the sounds and smells of the first lawn trimming of the season. I had recently acquired a renewed appreciation for the lush green that saturates my mountain home in Tennessee. And there I sat, poised and hovering over my laptop, convinced of topic, ready to write. And there I sat, savoring an elongated hit off my elongated cigarette, wondering if the elegance of my unusually long, slim, even sexy, cigarette was the only reason I maintained the nasty habit; even though I’d quit smoking indoors years ago, disgusted by the smell; even though my brand had become the most expensive on the market and I’d stopped being able to afford them when I accepted the status of indigent grad student. And there I sat, sipping a freshly brewed decaf and nibbling a vitamin disguised as a chocolate, marketed for women like me who are no longer allowed the pleasures of caffeine but indulge in such popular culture without guilt, some even believing they ingest the chocolate for the sole purpose of maintaining a healthy calcium level. But I, who sat poised over my laptop ready to write, who drank decaf, who lit another cigarette as the last chocolate melted and lingered sweetly, knew it was all total bullshit.

I had seen, experienced, too much in the previous month to believe any of it anymore. I had learned too much— about myself, about my culture, about my craft, about my faith— to believe that I believed anything, or to believe anything I once believed,

anyway.

And there I sat, poised and hovering over my laptop, realizing I could not possibly write, had no right to write, what I had originally sat down to say. My subject, a recent mission trip into the bowels of Mexico, had grown too immense in my philosophical wanderings to condense itself into some paltry few pages thrown together for a creative non-fiction essay. Oh, I could certainly describe the settings accurately— cramped adobe-shack villages weathered the same, faded beige color of the surrounding desert by the incessant blowing of sand, ruthless heat of sun, and bitter cold of night. I could describe the stark contrast of the tourist area lining Bahia San Carlos, just outside Guaymas on the Sea of Cortez— an area designed for and populated by “snow bunnies,” as the Americans and Canadians who winter there call themselves— with its yachts bobbing in the crystal aqua-blue waters, sailing to dock within the safety of private marinas in gated communities; with its brilliant white and salmon-colored adobe mansions dotting the mountainside.

My greatest fear in writing the essay had been my academic audience— the fear of appearing didactic. Having discussed this fear with many of my friends, it was decided that I had better leave out some details, such as the fact that I’m a Southern Baptist, born and raised. (Yes, odd, but handfuls of churches within the Southern Baptist Association exist in Michigan and Ohio, where I grew up). Also, we decided that it might be better to imply that the natives of Mexico were, in some way, pagan— not to admit that the area was predominately, and staunchly, Catholic, thereby avoiding any impression of moralistic superiority. But as I flipped through my journal and reread my thoughts, I

realized I need not fear didacticism, for I was writing a nonfiction essay (creative, yes, but implied to be, at the least, truthful). And if I was going to write the truth, I had to start being honest with myself. I'd have to describe how I spent my day off— all by myself, spread out on a blanket on a deserted beach, listening to the waves break and reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, wondering if I should take off my watch or if I should leave it on to mark the progression of my tan line; and doing all with the smug American justification of having earned it for a day or two of hard work. I'd have to admit that I'm a hypocrite, a spoiled-rotten American who *likes* her spoiled-rotten American life, her elongated cigarettes, her decaf, her chocolate vitamins. I'd have to admit that I am a Christian who doesn't witness to people in her first language yet travels 2500 miles to witness to people in her second; a Christian who can read the *Psalms of David* and the *Lord's Prayer* in four languages, recite them in two, but who had never prayed an earnest (un-recited) prayer aloud, until one amazing evening in Mexico, through tears, surrounded and encouraged by new friends. How can someone with so much to learn be didactic?

I look back on my journal now and appreciate its honesty; the honesty that comes from writing to an audience of none. My first entry relates instances of my crippling shyness— a shyness I'm easily able to control within the confines of an academic or manufacturing setting; where even there I must manipulate surroundings until I'm the supervisor, the teacher, the one in control, in order to overpower or conceal my shyness. I admit, there and here, that I took Dramamine so that I could read without motion sickness on the dreaded eight hour ride from Phoenix to Guaymas; so that I could hide in my book

(a common practice) without conversing with the nine other members of the trip— who, I might add, all knew each other. I also admit, in that first entry, that I had no idea why I was on the trip. I had never been “called” to service before. I had, many times, as good Christians do, looked back upon this decision or that decision, knowing that only by the Grace of God did I have so many things fall into place— propelling me in a certain direction; not always the direction I wanted, but always the direction that turned out right in the end. But called? Good Heavens, no; a frightening prospect for even the most devout, I think. But inexplicably called, I was, and this was my first lesson in just how little an educated person can know.

I studied about Mexico, looked at maps, read books, watched movies, studied a language I could academically read, but had never bothered mastering in speech. Yet, I was wholly unprepared for what I encountered there. I had pompously prepared myself to bring my enlightened views to a deprived country. I thought only of what we were doing for *them*, and never considered what would become of me. I am ashamed. Ashamed at my priorities, ashamed at my powerlessness...no, my unwillingness to change skewed priorities. I wrote in my journal how I could not bear to look at the first desolate, destitute village we passed; how I buried myself deeper in my book, away from nine strangers who would eventually— through their attempts, not mine— become my friends, away from the poverty, the smells, the garbage that lined every visible surface.

Oh, I glanced; I noted. I took lasting mental photographs with my “writer’s eye” to be filed away in my “writer’s mind” like note cards to be referred to at a later date when writing my great story about the mission trip. But like real pictures, they were two-

dimensional; unfelt or quickly judged at face value and pasted on a page of an album—without context except a heading: “My Trip to Mexico.”

We arrived in Mexico on Saturday afternoon, tired and dirty from the long drive, and I climbed out of the church van, thankful for the release of my cramped body and mind. The mission facility, a large parsonage built onto and around the side of an aged church, formed a large courtyard and was larger and more beautiful than anything I had pictured. Huge, healthy coconut trees shaded the portico, and the grounds virtually exploded in colors from the pink Plumeria, delicate Inca lilies, bright yellow desert marigolds, white bitter orange blossoms, and dozens of other species I couldn't dare to name. The mix of flowers and citrus aroma permeated the courtyard, broken only by an occasional salty-scented breeze, and I began to relax for the first time in several days.

Brenda, the mission director and hostess, directed us around the back of the complex to our quarters, two adobe shack row houses that reminded me quite directly of the migrant houses I'd once seen in California—spacious enough to be comfortable for three people per room for a week, but hardly big enough for three families for an entire growing season. By this time, my NicoDerm patch was both itching and failing, and I looked around for a place to sneak a cigarette. Crouching down behind the shower shack, I lit a cigarette and took a drag like a drowning person. I finished my smoke in about two minutes, but carefully covered the butt with stones and rushed back before I could be missed.

As the men handed out luggage from the back of the trailer I noticed, as did the

others, the number of bags I brought easily surpassed any other's. This is not unusual and the good-natured comments that followed were typical, but for some reason, this time they bothered me. Having no idea what to expect, I had stopped at Walgreens before leaving Tennessee and picked up medicine for every medical discomfort known to man—from constipation to diarrhea to migraine to backache to athlete's foot to snake bite. I even brought along expired prescriptions of antibiotics, pain killers, and cough syrup, and five different SPF levels of suntan lotion. On top of that, I packed for Arctic to sub-terrain weather, including six pairs of shoes, and I had brought enough food and water to keep the entire group alive in the desert for weeks. Packs of cigarettes were tucked into every hidden pocket in each piece of luggage, just in case the airline lost a bag, along with two value-sized packs of NicoDerm patches, a box of Nicorette gum, individual coffee filters, and two flavors of chocolate vitamins. If anyone had actually looked through my bags they would have realized I was Walmart.

Brenda placed me in a room with two very Christian women, a gregarious lady named Debra and a sweet woman named Susan— both old enough to be my mother. The only other woman on the trip, Phyllis, who is old enough to be grandmother, stayed in the main house with her husband. Among the men, too, I was the youngest by at least six or seven years, and I felt I had very little in common with any of them, despite the fact that we'd been attending the same church for over a year.

When the group leader offered to drive us around town before dinner, curiosity won over my desire to stay behind. I grabbed all three of my cameras (yes, I packed those, too— a video camera, a 35mm, and a panoramic) and jumped into the van. I spent

two hours hiding behind my cameras snapping footage and stills of the bay, the architecture, and the cliff-side craft market we happened upon.

The next morning we attended services at a small Baptist church, a group that collected at an abandoned community center until funds could be raised to renovate the building into a church. I read along in my *Santa Biblia* and took some more video footage so I wouldn't have to try to remember the faces from the congregation when it came time to write about them. The church consisted of a one-room common area loaded with folding chairs, the frontmost area reserved for the "choir" (a very loud marichi band). The congregation danced when they sang and, not being an acoustically sound building, the voices and music flowed out the open doors and windows and could be heard for blocks. Throughout the service, people continued to come in from the street, drawn by the energetic music. A woman stood by the door, welcoming each newcomer and handing each a metal chair from a stack in the corner. The American missionary director of the church told us later that the majority of the members had begun attendance in this way after he started holding services in his one-bedroom rented apartment with three followers. Eventually, he told us, so many people started to attend that neighbors complained and the missionary was forced to move. But, he added, the neighbors had recently joined the church, too.

Later that afternoon, the group leader proposed a trip to the work site that most of the men would be going to in the morning, the site of a future orphanage being built by a family of missionaries from Arizona. I stayed behind, feigning a headache--I'm ashamed to say, and I spent the afternoon reading in a hammock on the upper portico. As I found

out later, the man who owned the property donated it for the orphanage in exchange for a house on the property. He had been living in a shack built from abandoned billboards and sheet metal scraps, about the size, I'm told, of an average American closet. The missionaries had just completed the new house, a two-bedroom adobe of a charming peach hue, which had the first indoor plumbing and electricity the man had ever had in his seventy-some years. Our group was there, in part, to begin work on the orphanage by way of laying the concrete foundation, and to help the old man tear down his dilapidated shack. They had a fine, long conversation with the Arizona missionaries and the friendly old Mexican man, I'm told, but all the information I just reported is secondhand because I was, of course, lying in a hammock reading a book.

The evening came and we gathered in the coolness of the portico for bible study. Talk centered mostly around what the rest of the group had experienced that day and what we were to expect the next day. Most of the men were to go to the orphanage, while the rest of us would head out to a village to run a vision clinic, and we were advised to get to sleep as early as possible because the work would be hard and the hours long. Wrapping up the brief study time, the group leader began a closing prayer by asking the group to offer their concerns and requests and thanksgiving. Each member's heartfelt contribution increased my awareness of my own silence. "May their hearts be open to receive your promise"... "May we have the strength to serve"... "Be with our families back home, that they not worry about us; give them health"... "A prayer for our President as he prepares to decide whether or not to go to war as the tensions rise in Iraq"... "May you guide our mouths to speak words in Your honor as we witness." I prayed in my head... "Please,

Lord, don't let them point me out and ask me to pray aloud. Let this be over quickly. Don't let them notice that I am the only one not speaking. Let me shrink into this corner and disappear."

I was ready for our first work day to arrive-- I needed something to occupy myself with. And we did work. Awkwardly, at first, because only a small handful had ever worked a mobile vision clinic before. I was assigned, based on my (albeit limited) Spanish-speaking abilities, to the front-line job of initial vision screening and I plunged, headfirst and blissfully, into my work, herding my patients through with eventual precision. I noticed procedures that could be improved, streamlined-- my forte-- and hid behind my shyness-screen in typical form. That evening I headed a group back to the mission house to re-sort the donated glasses into a more accessible system. We found ourselves locked out, however, and I was cornered. I'd actually have to (gasp!) talk to these people. These very Christian people-- oh so much more devote than I-- who, I was sure, never missed church to go camping (like me) and who were absolutely sure of why they were in Mexico-- wanted to go on this trip, were the first to raise their hands when asked for volunteers.

The older woman named Phyllis, now my dear and treasured friend, took me aside and admitted she had been burdened (a Christian expression for whatever weighs heavily on our minds) with the idea (and the bible verses and daily devotional to go along with the idea) that one must look deep beyond the first impression of another. I looked into this kind, gentle face and, though I figured she meant the people in Mexico, I assumed

she also meant me— I poured out my heart. Mostly because she admitted to me that she hadn't wanted to go on the trip— had, in fact, fought tooth and nail until the last possible minute, unsure of what good she could possibly do, not speaking a syllable of Spanish. I'm not exactly positive, now, about the details of what I told Phyllis, her husband Conrad, and my roommate Debra that night, but I know I felt a crushing weight fly from my shoulders when I finished. Subjects too personal to detail here, but that included my shyness, my husband and his faith, my Northerner attitude mixed with Southern Baptist affirmations, my frightened wondering about being "called" when I knew darn well I was not capable nor prepared for witnessing. I admitted that I'd been sneaking cigarettes every chance I got. They said they knew that, and I felt so stupid that I blushed (I never blush). Eleven non-smokers in a van for eight hours with a smoker. Did I really think the smell wouldn't be in my clothes and hair? I got braver and started to confess. I admitted I swear. A lot. Debra said "You're shitting me." I thought it was a Northern thing. I told them I had my son when I was a teenager. They said they figured, considering I look so young and my son looks like a linebacker. I disclosed the secret that I have never made it more than a week doing a daily devotional time. Conrad said he didn't start praying daily until after he almost lost a child, whose recovery, the doctors admitted, could only be explained as a miracle, and Conrad gave up liquor and turned to God. All of us professed our fears about being in Mexico— fears about the people, about the filth and real possibility of disease that comes from filth, and about the guilt that comes with being with people who have nothing then returning back to a normal American life. I went to sleep that night at peace, with some of the group, anyway, as I finally realized

they weren't all as perfect as I expected myself to be.

We headed off in the morning to the next village, many miles from the city of Guaymas, and without fertile fishing waters or other industry, the poorest of all the villages we would visit. And, though released from my self-induced prison, refreshed in spirit, and surrounded by friends, I faced the hardest day of the mission. For with the lifting of the veils that shrouded me, I was forced to see, for the first time, this country that surrounded me. And I did more than see, did more than take mental photographs.

A woman from the village thought she would help us out by passing out numbers for the clinic. Schools were closed for such a rare occasion as seeing a doctor, and men stayed home from work (where they had work) in order to attend. In the process, the woman handed out numbers to more than 260 people, when we only had the facilities and personnel (one real doctor) to treat, at most, 160. We had no choice but to screen people at my station, ruling out those who had no obvious medical conditions and better than 20/40 vision.

I cannot begin to express what it felt like to turn away a hundred people. I have no words in my arsenal as a writer to convey the grieving I did as I designated who would get to see the doctor and who would be turned away. Had I been the person I was the day before I would have assumed it my job as a devote Christian missionary, perfect and without error, and selected methodically— yes, no, no, yes. But I *saw* the elderly man with the leathery face who sat on the wood bench, patiently, for five hours, holding number 234, shielding his face from the sun, waiting in case, just in case, el doctor could see just one more. I knew, now, that I was only a human being, only expected to be a human

being, and, that afternoon, I felt like they were asking me to play God.

I'd like to say that I witnessed a multitude of selfless acts— people giving up their low numbers to the elderly— but I can only report that a single little girl, a thin child of about 8 or 9 with long black hair and incredibly huge, dark brown eyes, shyly offered her number to the little old man. The rest of the crowd clutched their little slips of paper, looking around and down and up in the air, looking everywhere but at their elderly, needy neighbors.

And it didn't take long for the crowd to figure out that my group was screening them out. They began to lie.

“No veo nada,” they said, when I asked them to read the eye chart on the wall, “I see nothing.” They waved their hands and shook their heads, “Las letras son todos borrosas, todos, (The letters are all blurry, everything),” they said, refusing to even try.

One pretty woman in her late twenties at least bothered to act— to squint and lean forward dramatically, telling me “Ohhhh. Tengo dolor de cabeza, (I have a headache)” before she leaned back to close her eyes and rest. “Quiero ver el doctor (I want to see the doctor),” she pleaded. I watched her come back out and waited until she disappeared into the crowd to ask our optician, Patty, what her prescription was.

“Perfect,” Patty said. “She just wanted a pair of sunglasses.” I excused myself, telling everyone I needed a break, and found a quiet spot near the church van to sit down for a cigarette. Two, actually— the second one lit by the butt of the first. I found myself in a quandary. I had forgiven myself, at least partially, for not being perfect, but was sitting there, furious as hell, pissed, actually, at these people for acting...human.

Incredibly, selfishly, inherently human.

Someone in our group, I wish I knew who to give credit to, came up with a brilliant idea to offer sunglasses to those in the crowd who had decent vision but simply sought protection from the merciless sun and sand. One of our fluent translators made the announcement and the chaos that ensued shut down our operation, if only briefly, and totally depleted our supply of donated sunglasses, but promised to thin the crowd considerably. However, when I looked around (near our 4:30 quit time) we had just as many people crowded around as we'd had in the beginning of the day. Maybe more. In fact, I recognized many of the faces I'd seen early that morning, still waiting, still watching— some chatting with neighbors, others showing off their new glasses to a relative or friend. Even the pretty woman, the thin child, and the old man were still there.

Having waited all day, they determined to sit another 2 ½ hours more in order to watch the film we brought— a film in Spanish about Jesus (likened to the English version: *The Greatest Story Ever Told*).

Wait they did, and by the time the movie started, the sun had set. The difference in temperature between day and night in the desert is enormous, as much as 40 or 50 degrees, but these people waited, then watched, glued to the movie as it played on for more than two hours into the icy night. They listened, with rapt attention, as members of our group gave testimony during the reel changes of the film. And at the end of the movie, they lined up and waited again— this time for a chance to pray with the pastor; to accept Jesus and begin a personal relationship with God.

And I saw it all.

I began that day refreshed in spirit, then broken, then built up again, and I spent the next day alone on the beach. My journal doesn't speak of any of the events from that day. It simply states "I'm exhausted." But I don't need a journal to remind me of the details of that day— they are seared in my memory and will, there, forever remain.

I ended my week by spending the weekend in Phoenix before returning to Knoxville, where I visited with my brother and his wife, hitting the highlights of the tourist areas. Many people have asked: "How was your trip," including my brother, as we strolled along the streets of opulent Scottsdale.

"Complicated," I said, handing over \$4.60 to the clerk at Starbucks for my "grande mocha latte decaf with a touch of caramel" and wondering what a Mexican could buy for the 50 peso equivalent.

"Did you know," my brother said, changing the subject for me, "that Phoenix has one of the greatest concentrations of millionaires in the world this time of year?"

"I'm not surprised," I said. "Did you notice that none of the signs or menus are bilingual in Scottsdale like they are in the rest of Phoenix?"

"No, I never noticed that."

I'm noticing a lot more since I quit looking with just my "writer's eye."

The evening, growing cool after an afternoon of warmth that mimicked the coming summer, ushers me inside to grab a sweater. I ground my elongated cigarette in an ashtray spilling over with butts and take a sip of cold coffee, wishing I had a candy bar. I wonder if I'll ever be able to write a nonfiction essay about my mission trip to Mexico,

because, I realize, life is like writing, full of revisions and layers of truth, knowledge, and understanding. I could write, I think to myself, about the landscape. Or maybe the poverty. Oh, I know, I'll write about the last day of the clinic— the one on the day after the beach, that went so perfectly— how the people there were so patient and polite that we finished up a half-hour early. Isn't that what people will want to read about? What they'll assume? That these Mexican people are so poor and ignorant that they're grateful, meek demeanor makes them bow down before the mighty Americans who hand out their used wears? Isn't that, speaking honestly, what I had assumed when I arrived in Mexico?

“No,” I think as I pull the last cigarette out of the pack, hoping my husband will be home soon to fetch me some more. “It wasn't like that at all.”

Chapter III

“Shells”

For two days she scoured every last inch of the tiny apartment. Reorganized the books twice. Alphabetically by title. No, wait. By author - that's better. Poe and Twain shouldn't be next to each other. They'd have nothing to talk about. Spenser, on the other hand. Spenser she placed on the coffee table. Well, the blue, upside-down milk crate that sufficed for a coffee table, anyway. Next to the hide-a-bed. Yes, that's right.

The apartment had never looked so good. She covered up most of the smaller holes and stains in the carpet with black bathroom rugs she found on sale at Big Lots and scrubbed the big spots so hard with Tide that the cat-piss smell was hardly even noticeable. Not that anyone would know the difference. No one had ever seen the inside besides that creepy rental-repo guy that came for her TV. He told her he'd leave the TV if she gave him a blow job. But she didn't want the TV. She thought about giving him a blow job anyway. Why not?

She couldn't decide between bubbles and bath salts so she'd added them both. Her face, slathered with pink cream full of finely ground sea shells to exfoliate, quit itching, so she lit two more candles and eased down into the nearly scalding water. Grabbing the pumice stone, she started at her toes and worked up toward her heels, pausing occasionally to watch rose-scented steam roll off her leg, sip the wine, and wonder what they'd say on campus.

Michael maneuvered his sleek green convertible into a safe spot— farthest from any idiot that might ding his car. The winter sun, beginning to set, glared bright off the glass walls of the building. If it weren't for all the police cars in the lot, people would have thought the structure was a cosmopolitan art museum. Prompt as usual, Michael jogged up the concrete stairs two at a time and punched in his code. He paused at the security office, made sure his car was in full camera view and logged in, then took the elevator down.

Michael walked down the long hallway to the break room, feeling himself relax. He was good at his job and he liked the looks he got when he told people what he did for a living. Most of all, he liked the people he worked with. They were like his family, naturally, considering he spent more time with them than any other human beings on Earth. Reaching into his locker, he pulled out his notebook and headset.

“Hi, Mike, I'm glad you could make it in on such short notice. Hope I didn't ruin any big plans.”

Michael turned to look at his good-natured boss. Although they were both in their early 30's, Pat seemed much older. The extra strain of a supervisory role had begun to take a toll on the prematurely bald man, leaving scars of perpetually tired eyes and a ring of weight sagging heavily around his middle.

“Hey Pat. No, you actually saved me from one of those boring poetry readings Marcie's always dragging me to.”

“Yikes. She mad?”

“Dunno. I haven't called her yet. Figured I'd wait until I got here to call her so

she couldn't talk me out of working the overtime."

"I see her attempts at sensitivity training are working wonders."

"Ha ha." Michael smirked and placed the lock back on his locker. "She's trying to corner me into going with her tomorrow to meet her parents. There's no way I'm driving 300 miles to spend Christmas with a bunch of strangers."

"I can give you an excuse if you want. I'm going to have to order someone to work tomorrow. Want to volunteer and we'll call it an order?"

"Damn, Pat. Christmas Eve? Now you know I'm not going to turn down double time holiday pay. What's going on? Why all the overtime all of a sudden?"

"Jay went on sick leave this morning."

"Again? What's wrong with her this time?"

"Doctor insisted. I really think she's cracking, Mike. That call from the little kids in the fire really spooked her. I don't think she's going to make it."

"I was here that night. It wasn't that bad. The kids made it out." Michael scraped the charred remains of early morning coffee out of the pot and started a fresh brew.

"Yes, but the baby is still in the hospital. Jay went up to check on him yesterday."

"What the hell did you let her go and do that for? She's got to learn to distance herself. She's been here long enough to know that."

"The Incident Team thought visiting the hospital would help her. Give her some closure. I thought it might help, too. You know, seeing that the kids are alive. Big mistake. I guess Jay showed up right when the nurses were changing the baby's burn dressing."

“Jeez, Pat. Why do you listen to that psychiatric horse shit? You know as well as I do that we can’t let it get personal.”

“Spoken by Mr. Sensitivity, himself. No wonder Marcie loves you,” Pat said, laughing. “Well, tough guy. Thanks for taking her shift tomorrow. I really hate ordering people with families to work the holidays.”

“You know, one of these days I’m going to run out and get married just so you can’t talk me into working every holiday.”

“Yeah, right,” Pat said, walking toward the door. “You love this place too much.”

“Let me grab a cup of coffee and I’ll be in.”

“Thanks Mike.”

Michael picked up the break room phone and dialed Marcie’s cell number. Post-Traumatic Stress Incident Team. What a crock. Every day here is stress if you let it get to you.

“Hey Marcie,” Michael said to her voice mail, “I am so sorry, Honey. I’m not going to be able to make the poetry reading tonight. Poor Jay went on sick leave. Remember that bad fire I told you about? Anyway, Pat ordered me to work her shift tonight and tomorrow. I’m not going to be able to go with you to your parents for Christmas, either. Please don’t be mad, Marcie.” He was about to hang up but quickly added, “Make sure you call me when you get there, tomorrow. I worry about you driving that far alone.”

He smiled, pouring his mug full of steaming coffee. He could be sensitive.

Glancing at the clock, he headed out the door mentally adding up his overtime hours. After midnight it would be Christmas Eve, holiday pay is double plus overtime for working Jay's shift, then he'd come back for another eight in the evening. He paused in front of the plaque hanging in the hall. The deep mahogany base really set off engraved brass plates.

*Lenewee County 9-1-1
Operator of the Month
1994*

*January - Peter Montgomery
February - Michael Dobbs
March - Jay Stansberry
April - Brady Kipperling
May - Michael Dobbs
June - Kathy Wiseman*

*July - Amy Bower
August - Robert Zinc
September - Michael Dobbs
October - Thomas Friedman
November - Michael Dobbs
December -*

Not bad for a guy who barely made it through high school. He'll introduce Marcie to his family. Just as soon as he saves enough money to put down on a decent house and can buy her a rock the size of Gibraltar. Dad'll be impressed.

"Hey, Mike. You coming?" Pat stuck his head out the door. "We've got calls waiting in here. Pile-up on the expressway."

Michael dusted the plaque off with his shirt cuff and headed into the call center.

She stood in front of the cracked mirror, leaning over the sink, carefully applying her makeup. First, medium beige cover-up to match her complexion. Blend with some light beige foundation under the eyes. Cucumber slices had taken most of the puffiness away but the dark circles were still a problem. Not much could be done with the chicken

pox scar, either. She heard hooting and a door slam in the downstairs rooms of the duplex. Jeez-us-crime-money. The landlord should not let underclassmen rent here. Obnoxiously loud little bastards, drunk all the time. Next, dark-brown eyeliner. No. Charcoal. More dramatic. Eyeshadow - bark écorse. What the hell kind of color is that? Looks brown. Dark brown on the outside corners. Lighter brown across the lid. Blend it gracefully with a dark beige, sweeping up toward the eyebrow. Mascara, black. Waterproof, just in case. Coral blush? No, coral would make her look like a corpse. She had to laugh at that. Better stick with the cool tones. Not too heavy. Makeup is supposed to highlight your features, not make you look like a streetwalker. Isn't that what Mama always said?

The shiny glass architecture of the building above was merely a facade to the beating heart call center hidden in the basement. The windowless crypt could withstand any force from a F-5 tornado to a nuclear explosion. The lighting was dim, of course. Some people complained at never being able to tell day from night, but Michael liked it, thinking it easier to work midnights having no idea what the time was. And who wants to look at Downtown Ann Arbor, anyway? Twelve cubicles in groups of four took up most of the 40 x 30 room, with a supervisor desk and tape vault tucked along the North wall. The sign under a digital clock on the opposite wall flashed 2...2...3...2. Calls waiting. Michael adjusted his headset so the microphone wouldn't hit his glasses then signed onto the computer. Plugging the headset cord into the phone, he took a sip of coffee and hit the flashing "not ready" button to release a waiting call to his phone.

“Lenewee County, 9-1-1.”

She sat down on the hide-a-bed with her manicure kit and selected a dark mauve polish for both her fingers and her toes. The last thing she had to do. Taming her wild, auburn hair had been easy, having splurged that morning on a \$40 shampoo, cut, and style. She put in on her credit card along with a new outfit, three CDs, jasmine-scented incense, 6 candles, some personalized stationery with little hearts down one side, and a bottle of diet soda.

She picked up the receiver to check it one more time. Yep. Dial tone. It was a good idea to have the phone shut off early last week and have it turned back on with the new number yesterday. It had to be a new number. Supreme Mauve. What a great color. She had lipstick to match but she'd do that last. Should she call and see if he's there? Later. Now what order? Oh, yeah. Shape, buff, conditioner, base, color, another coat of color. Have to remember to let that first coat dry really well. Top coat and buff. She hit play on the CD and skipped to “Sweet Home Alabama.” Turn it up.

“I need the cops out here. Now.”

Michael pushed a button on the Positron caller-id, making the address and phone number flash up onto the computer screen.

“What is your address, ma'am?”

“My baby's daddy won't leave. This is the last time, Sucker. Do you hear me, James? I ain't putting up with this shit no more.”

“What is your address, ma’am?” Michael typed in the code DOMVIO for domestic violence and added the familiar “F/C Mary Higgins” to indicate a female caller.

“You got the address right in front of you, asshole. You gonna send the cops or not?”

“I need to verify your address, ma’am?” This woman called like clockwork. The 1st and the 15th of each and every month. He used to give callers the whole speech about procedures to verify the Positron information because it could be wrong. Now he just repeats the question until they give the information or hang up.

“240 Elm St.”

“Does anybody need medical attention, ma’am?”

“They will if you don’t hurry your ass up!”

“Any weapons involved?”

“Yeah. The back of his hand. You’re goin’ *down* this time, James. I mean it. Do you hear me?”

Michael added the appropriate codes indicating the priority of the call and sent the information to the police dispatcher through the computer. He turned the volume down on his phone, anticipating the next round of shouting.

“The police have been notified and are on their way. I need your name and phone number, please.”

“Oh this is just bullshit. You don’t need to know my name, you nosey mother-fucker. Every time I call 9-1-1 you give me this run-around bullshit. You all are totally fucking useless.”

Michael hit the “not ready” button when she hung up. He got tired, sometimes, of trying to help people that wouldn’t help themselves and he needed a break. The calls rang in one after the other most of the evening but should be cutting down now. The operators were supposed to take a 10-minute break every hour, to reduce stress. Michael didn’t bother until his coffee became cold or he had to go to the bathroom. Working straight through made the time go faster. Four hours and his bladder stretched to capacity. Running his fingers through his sandy-blond hair, he stood up to stretch his lean, six foot frame and look around the call center. Only two people allowed on break at a time until eleven. He’d have to wait for someone to come back.

“Which one of you took the call from Mary Higgins?” Kathy stood up and asked. Michael enjoyed bantering with the heavy-set, personable brunette.

“What’s it to ya?” Michael leaned on the cubicle shell.

“She says you’re a useless mother-fucker.”

Michael laughed. She’s probably right. He disconnected his headset as another operator walked in.

“And she’s really, *really* pressing charges this time, right?” Michael walked to Kathy’s cubicle, smiling.

“How’d you guess?” Kathy winked and sat down to take another call.

“Hey Mike,” Pat looked up from the supervisor desk as Michael walked past.

“Some woman called for you while I was out taking a smoke. Brady took the message”

“It was probably Marcie. What’d she say?”

“According to Brady, she said she was just calling to make sure you were working

tonight. Didn't leave her name, though."

"Uh-oh. Marcie must think I'm lying to her. I'll call her in the morning. Thanks, Pat."

"What do you want me to tell her if she calls back?"

"Apologize to her for ordering me and ruining her Christmas, you ass." Michael laughed. "I'm going to go take a break, now. Call me back in if you need me."

With one hand, she pulled absently at the frayed edges of the arm rest, tapping her ballpoint to the music with the other. Which letter should she write first? Ten o'clock. She took too long with her nails. Couldn't be helped. She smudged one and had to start over. They had to be perfect. She only had a short while left to write the letters.

Dear Mom and Dad,

You told me graduate school was a huge mistake. You were right. I'm not going back next semester.

Merry Christmas.

Your daughter, Chelsea "The 16th Century Loser"

She carefully folded the letter into perfect thirds then looked at her exam. 73. It wasn't the grade that bothered her, really. It's Dad's God-Almighty crystal ball. She read the comments. "Perhaps you should re-think your focus." Perhaps she should. She didn't fit in there. Everyone was just so much smarter. Boy, this ought to send Dad right into one of his tirades, screaming about responsibilities. Sticking to something. You'd think parents would be *happy* that their kid wanted to further her education. No. Not

Dad. No idea how hard it was to get in. Has his union, blue-collar head shoved too far up his ass. She drew a balloon exclamation mark next to the 73 and folded the exam into thirds, shoving it into the envelope with the letter.

Michael walked in the break room in time to see Tom help himself to the last cup of coffee.

“Hey, dude. What are you doing for Christmas? Nice haircut. Here,” Tom said, grabbing the coffee off the shelf, “let me start a fresh pot for you.”

“You can quit sucking up, Tom. I can’t trade with you. I’m already working.”

“Oh,” he said, passing the canister to Michael, “I thought you had the Eve off?”

“I did. I’m working Jay’s shift.”

“Cryin’ out loud. You bucking for Operator of the Month again? Dude, you’re making us all look bad.”

Michael laughed, slapping his long time, beatnik-looking friend on the back.

“Not me,” Tom said. “I gotta get out of here. This place makes my head crazy when I’m here too much.”

“You gotta do whatever it takes to be a success, my man.”

“Hey. I got this party to go to New Years’ Eve and I need a date.”

“Sorry, pal. You’re not my type”

“Funny. No man. I was thinking I could take your sister.”

“My sister? She’s just a kid.”

“Mike. She’s 24 years old and drop dead freakin’ gorgeous.”

“Ok, so she’s not a kid. But she says you remind her of Ichabod Crane.”

“I thought that was a good thing?”

“No offense, buddy. She’s smart, pretty, together. And she’s outta your league.”

“Come on. We could double. Your sister likes Marcie, doesn’t she?”

“They’ve never met, actually.”

“You’ve been dating Marcie for a year and she hasn’t met your family?”

“You know I don’t see much of my family.”

“Wouldn’t Marcie see your sister around school?”

“No, Marcie goes to Eastern Michigan.” Michael raised an eyebrow to remind Tom he was hopping around a touchy subject. Why did Marcie have to go back to school after all these years? Didn’t she think he would be able to provide them a good living on his own?

“Besides,” Michael said, “I haven’t heard from my sister in over a month. She got all pissed off at my parents. Probably because they decided to go to Vegas for Christmas.”

“Why don’t you call and check on her, dude?”

“Now you sound like Marcie. She doesn’t need me. She’d call if she did. I’m busy, anyway.” Michael sounded gruffer than he intended, but Tom never noticed.

“I’m not busy. Not at all. Give me her number. I can soothe her broken heart. Comfort her lonely soul.”

“I bet. Come on. Break’s over.”

Dear Mr. Conklin,

Thank you for trying.

Sincerely,

Chelsea.

She had shown Conklin's midterm to her father at Thanksgiving. The pride in her 93 percent shot down by Dad's special, vulgar sense of humor, "Slept with him, did ya?" followed by a tirade of dumb blonde jokes. The English major in her was dying to correct his grammar but it wasn't worth the slap on the face. She picked up tattered, torn, and trusty old Spenser, reading:

In which amazement, when the Miscreant
Perceiued him to wauer weake and fraile,
Whiles trembling horror did his conscience dant,
And hellish anguish did his soule assaile,
To driue him to despaire, and quite to quaile,
He shew'd him painted in a table plaine,
The damned ghosts, that doe in torments waile,
And thousand feends that doe them endlesse paine
With fire and brimstone, which for euer shall remaine.

Michael took a quick lunch at eleven o'clock. They're supposed to take an hour, but Pat called him back in. Calls waiting. Just like every year. Some people get depressed and others celebrate by getting drunk and beating their spouses. Merry Christmas.

“That was a bad one.” Kathy had moved over to the cubicle next to Michael.

“Why. What happened?”

“Poor little kid. Called and said his grandpa wouldn’t wake up. I just checked the screen and EMS has him at full cardiac arrest. I hate those calls.”

“Kath, you’ve been here, what? Five years? We get those all the time.”

“I know. And they tear me up every time. Doesn’t anything get to you?”

“Not really,” Michael lied, shuffling a deck of cards, hopeful that the calls would back slow down after midnight so they could pass time playing UNO. Pretty soon, he thought, a supervisor position will open up...maybe another year. Supervisors don’t have to take calls every night.

“You know,” Kathy said, gazing sternly into Michael’s eyes, “one of these days you’re going to get that call that just yanks your heart out of your chest.”

“Doubt it.”

Chelsea glanced at the clock. Almost midnight. She lit the jasmine incense and placed her new *Blue Oyster Cult* CD in the player.

Dear John,

You were so smart, moving to California. I hope your band does great. Wouldn't it be awesome if my big brother turned out to be a rock star? Wouldn't it piss off Dad royal? It'd be worth it just for that. I wanted to let you know I love you. Merry Christmas.

Your youngest sibling, Chelsea

Uh-oh. A little too weepy on that one. Shit. Better go check the mascara. Got to look perfect. Not bad. Too bad there aren't enough brains to back up those looks, sweetheart. Careful with the lip liner. Now "Supreme Mauve" lipstick. Yes, that's right. Got to be perfect. Let's see if we can quote without looking:

The sight whereof so throughly him dismaid,
That nought but death before his eyes he saw,
And euer burning wrath before him laid,
By righteous sentence of th'Almighties law:
Then gan the villein him to ouercrow,
And brought vnto him swords, ropes, poison, fire,
And all that might him to perdition draw;
And bad him choose, what death he would desire:
For death was due to him, that had prouokt Gods ire.

Nope. Had to look. Just not good enough. Can't remember anything, anymore. Mmmmm....nice smell, that candle. Or the incense? Is it time? *All our times have come.* Not yet. Remember that time on the swings? Laughing. *Here but now they're gone.* Then that nasty bully Trisha came up and pushed her off the swing. What was she? Five? Six? Her brothers picked her up and brushed the snow off her jeans. Why did John have to leave? He used to protect her from Dad. He couldn't handle it. Is it time? Forgot to look. Yes, it's time. Christmas Eve. Running a little behind. Still have one more letter to write. That's ok. Just need to go slow. Open up the bottle. Pour them on the cushion. One at a time. Slowly. Green. Blue. Pretty blue. *We can be like they are.* Took a week to collect them all. Two dollars here. A buck fifty there. What did he say the little purple ones were? Darvaset? Something for pain. Took all her cash to buy them all. Sick of being broke. All the graduate students are broke. 'Cept that little rich

blonde girl from Harvard. Red and white ones. Tylenol? *Come on baby.* She picked up the phone and dialed. A woman answered. Chelsea hung up.

“Your deal, Kathy.” Michael stretched his headset cord around the cubicle partition.

“Hang on. Got a dead line here. Hello? Hello, Lenewee County 9-1-1. Do you have an emergency?” Kathy’s screen went blank. “They hung up. No info on the Positron, though.”

“They must not have wanted to talk to you,” Michael said, stealing a handful of peanuts from the Tupperware on Kathy’s desk. “Smart move.”

Kathy stuck out her tongue, tossing a empty peanut shell at his head and picking up the cards to deal.

Dearest Mickey,

You're the only one who's got his shit together. I can't do this anymore. I'm so sorry if I hurt you. I didn't mean to. I love you.

Chelsea.

She checked her makeup one last time. Sleepy, but not sleepy enough. Better wait a little while before calling again. He said it takes 15 minutes. Nobody came to check on her so they must not have her phone number and address information. Good. Fix the smudge from her tears. She’ll look perfect when they find her. She’ll be perfect

when they find her.

But when as none of them he saw him take,
He to him raught a dagger sharpe and keene,
And gaue it him in hand: his hand did quake,
And tremble like a leafe of Aspin greene,
And troubled bloud through his pale face was seene
To come, and goe with tydings from the hart,
As it a running messenger had beene.
At last resolu'd to worke his finall smart,
He lifted vp his hand, that backe againe did start.

Hard to read it. Blurry. One at a time. Did she leave the door unlocked? Um-hmm. *Came the last night of sadness.* Maybe she shouldn't call. Just want to hear his voice. *And it was clear she couldn't go on.* Got to call. They wouldn't find her for days. Be all bloated and nasty. Ruin everything. *And the door was opened and the wind appeared.* Don't want to be alone. *The candles blew then disappeared.* Maybe he won't be the one to answer. *The curtains flew and then he appeared.* He could handle anything. *Said don't be afraid.* She picked up the phone and hit redial. *And she had no fear.*

“Lenewee County, 9-1-1.” Michael answered.

“My turn?” Kathy stuck her head over the partition. Michael hit the mute button.

“I think I got your hang up caller back. No info. No talking, but I can hear someone breathing. Can you call Pat and tell him I need a trace on line 4?”

Michael, annoyed by the interruption and the prospect of waiting on the line fifteen or twenty minutes for a trace, sat back and took a sip of coffee before releasing the

mute button.

“9-1-1 do you have an emergency?”

“Hi there..” Michael barely heard the feeble female whisper.

“This is Lenewee County 9-1-1. Do you have an emergency?”

“Not really. I just needed someone to talk to.” *Don't want to be alone.*

“Ma'am. If you don't have an emergency, I'm going to have to disconnect.”

“No. Please. Don't want to be alone.” *Don't hang up on me, Mickey.*

Suicide call. Michael's third one tonight. Always a heap of them at Christmas time. He sighed and tried to sound pleasant and reassuring. People who really want to kill themselves don't call 9-1-1, they just do it. Obviously this one, like the others, is just playing the attention game.

“Ma'am, are you there?”

“Yes.” *His hand did quake, And tremble like a leafe of Aspin greene.*

“What is your address, Ma'am?”

“Can't tell you that.” *At last resolu'd to worke his finall smart, He lifted vp his hand, that backe againe did start.*

“I can't help you if you don't tell me where you are.” Geez, Michael hated games. Why did she sound so familiar?

“Zactly,” she slurred her whisper, “you'll never get number traced in time. Got a new number. Can't find me. Not 'til it's over. Thought of everything. Yes, that's right. Perfect.” *Quit talkin' idiot. You're so stupid, Chelsea.*

“Ma'am. Please give me your address. Everything's going to be okay.”

Something was really wrong with this caller. How could she know that much about the trace? Most people think the emergency crews just magically know where the call is coming from or that a trace can occur in a matter of seconds, even on a new line. This girl knew too much. Michael felt the hair crawling around the back of his neck as he pressed the mute button.

“How long on that trace, Pat? I think I’ve got a suicide here.”

“Phone company’s working on it, Mike. It’s only been a couple minutes.”

“Ma’am, have you done anything to hurt yourself?” Michael asked, releasing the mute.

“Not going to hurt anymore. S’ all going to be perfect. Just a little while.”

Thanks, Mickey. Pretty candle.

“What did you do to yourself? Please. Let me help you. Won’t you let me help you?” He felt his pulse quicken. Why did he feel so drawn to this woman? If she would only speak above a whisper.

“Nothin’ you can do, now. Pills are all gone. All gone. Been gone. Getting sleepy now. It’s almost over, Mickey. Just stay with me.” *Now ya did it, stupid loser.*

Had to go an say it. Selfish, stupid bitch.

Michael felt bile creep up his throat. Only one person in the world ever called him Mickey.

Kathy watched the color drain from Michael’s face. She slammed down her “not ready” button and shouted to the supervisor desk.

“Pat, come here. Mike. Mike, what is it? Pat, hurry up and get over here. Mike,

what's wrong? Do you need me to take over your call?"

"I'm sorry," Chelsea said, softly. *Just no excuse for you.*

"I'm here," Michael choked on his words, tears falling freely. "Chelsea. Oh God, Chelsea. Please tell me where you are." A duplex. A duplex near campus. He didn't know where. He'd never been there. Oh God. Who would know?

"Can't, Mickey." *Hurt him like you hurt everyone.*

"Chelsea. I don't know where you are." Did she have a boyfriend? Can't call the university. No one would be there over Christmas break. He hit the mute button.

"Kathy. Go get on the Internet and do a people search on Chelsea Dobbs on the University of Michigan website. Hurry." The call center was eerily silent, everyone watching Michael's red, tear-streaked face.

"I'm here, Chelsea. I'm trying to find you."

"Nothing, Mike." Kathy called, typing feverishly at the supervisor computer.

"Her name is here but it says 'unknown' for her address and phone number."

"For God's sake, keep looking! Chelsea. Please. You've got to tell me where you are. Just tell me what street you're on." Michael placed his face in his hands, sobbing. Mom and Dad are out of town. John would know her address, but what was his number in California? What city? Can't even call information.

"Don't cry. Don't want anybody to cry." *What did you expect? Stupid, selfish bitch.*

"I have to help you, Chelsea. Please let me help you." Any friends. Did Chelsea mention any friends? Jesus. Why didn't he know anything about his little sister?

“Not scared. Just sorry. Goin’ to sleep. Gonna rest now. Gonna be perfect.”

“Chelsea. Stay awake for me, sweetheart. Talk to me a little while longer.” She didn’t answer. Michael could hear her breathing on the line. He didn’t bother hitting the mute button, shouting, “God Dammit, Pat. I need that fucking trace NOW.”

A maraud of questions pelted his mind, like a voice in a dream, as he stood poised at the mouth of the cave of despair. Why don’t you know her? Why can’t you help her? Why have you failed her?

Chapter IV

“Sultry”

Green? Blue? Blue would match her eyes.

“Hey, woman.” Jennifer flopped onto the end of the bed and casually slid down onto floor. “Would you just pick something out, already? Wear that sexy red number I brought. Come on! This is a celebration!”

Norma looked at the flaming red slut suit hanging on the doorknob, the micro-short dress Jennifer always wore to turn heads or, if she felt saucy, to get laid. Jennifer loved the staple red color of her wardrobe because it highlighted her long, chocolate brown hair and creamy pale skin, but then Jennifer’s tall, shapely figure would look good in a potato sack. Norma preferred neutral colors.

“It’s just a little too...well...not me,” Norma pulled a short sleeve white blouse off its hanger and snatched a pair of jeans off the shelf.

“You’re gonna sweat your ass off in that.” Jennifer stretched out on the cool hardwood floor and looked up at Norma. “You’d better bring a pair of shorts or something. And wear a tank top.”

“Yes, *Mother*,” Norma laughed as she pulled a navy blue tank top over her head, straightening out the spaghetti straps. It was pointless to argue with Jennifer, and even though she’d rather curl up with a trashy romance novel, she squeezed herself into an old pair of faded Calvin Kleins.

“Why are you so against finding a guy?” Jennifer asked, grabbing Norma by the

hand to drag her into the tiny bathroom. “Aren’t you bored sitting here after work everyday? I mean, I know I’m *fabulous* company and all...” she said, laughing as she handed her a brush and a hair clip, urging Norma to finish up.

Norma gazed at their reflections together in the mirror. They were both pretty girls-- Mutt and Jeff, their mothers called them; best friends since elementary school. They were absolutely nothing alike, in looks or personality. Norma pulled the brush through her shiny blonde hair, piling it up on her head and securing it off her neck with a clip. Then Norma watched in the mirror as Jennifer shaped her lips with an effortless sweep of dark red lipstick. Everything came so easy for Jennifer. She oozed with confidence and was fun, which is why Norma liked being around her.

“I’m not *against* finding a guy,” Norma said through the difficulty of pulling her mouth down while she applied light mascara around her bright blue eyes. “I guess I’m just waiting for Prince Charming.”

“Oh, pull-eeze,” Jennifer rolled her eyes. “Could you be more cliché? Girl, you’re almost 30 years old. When are you going to realize there’s no such thing?”

Norma pulled her white car into the gravel parking lot next to the tavern, carefully choosing a spot between a telephone pole and the road. The popular bar was the only landmark on the lonely country road running along the lake, and the lot, nearly empty now, would soon fill and overflow into the grassy areas. She got out and leaned her butt on the hood as she lit a cigarette, dragging it hard. The soft beat of an old rock ballad drifted out of the open doors, blending with the cicadas in the surrounding trees. The sun

paused at eye level in the magenta sky to throw its dark golden red rays across the lake, shattering the smooth surface of the water into a burst of burnt orange and violet sparkles, before beginning its descent into the tree line. Norma wondered how many times she and Brad had sat on the deck hanging off the side of the tavern over the water.

“You ready, girlfriend?” Jennifer smiled. Norma grinned in return, finding it difficult to fight Jennifer’s enthusiasm. They loved the bar, a comfortable, homey place that most of the locals in Coldwater knew well, but that the rest of Michigan, let alone the world, had never heard of. When they were kids it was a pale blue, but over years of being whipped with wind off the lake, the wood shake siding had become a worn gray. Norma paused in the lot, watching two small boats tethered to the dock as they bobbed gently in the water. A woman’s laugh as it bounced out over the lake and back, the echo mingling with the original.

“As ready as I’m gonna get,” Norma said, sliding her hand through Jennifer’s looped, waiting arm. “Let’s do it.”

**

Smoke danced in the air, caught in the low beams of dim ceiling lights; the musty smell clinging to the humidity, creating a dreamy effect. Norma made her way across the wide-planked wooden dance floor, buffed smooth with years of use. Brad hated dancing, so she hadn’t danced in years.

“First one’s on me,” Jennifer said as they reached the bar.

“What’ll it be, ladies?” The haggard barmaid asked, her voice deep and husky.

“I’ll have a Fuzzy Screw and she’ll have a... rum and Coke?” Jennifer raised her

eyebrows at Norma.

“Great.” Norma smiled and climbed onto the tall barstool. The barmaid nodded, wiped the bar down, sat a fresh bowl of pretzels in front of the women.

“Ok, so I have this sort-of confession to make,” Jennifer said, swiveling her barstool to survey the room.

“Uh-oh.” Norma closed her eyes. “What did you do?”

“I met this really cool guy down at the mall today. He’s supposed to be here tonight and he’s bringing his friend.”

“You just never quit, do you?” Norma said with mock anger. “Don’t you remember what happened *last* time you deemed some ‘cute guy’ worthy after five minutes?”

“How was I supposed to know was such a jerk? Besides. I didn’t tell you to marry him. Oh shit. I think that’s them. Don’t look.” Jennifer swirled around to face the bar.

“You *think*?”

“Well, he was wearing a suit at the mall.” Jennifer pulled some bills out of her purse and paid for their drinks. “He was there during his lunch hour to pick up a card for his sister and we got to talking about his bike. Do you have any idea how hard it is to picture a guy in a suit on the back of a Harley?”

Norma stared at her in amazement. Jennifer knew how to play the game, acting completely disinterested in whether or not these guys ever showed up, casually sipping her drink then flipping a long brown lock of hair over her shoulder when she laughed.

“Jennifer?” A male voice said from behind them. Jennifer turned on her stool.

“Oh.” Jennifer paused, acting as if she had to place him. “Oh, hi Dave! I was wondering if I’d see you here tonight. How are you?”

“Doin’ great.” He smiled at Jenn then looked at Norma without turning his head.

“How rude of me,” Jennifer said. “Dave, this is my friend Norma. Norma, Dave.”

“How’s it going? This here is my buddy, John. You guys want to go grab a table?” Not waiting for a reply, he headed toward a booth, shouting to the barmaid who was busy with a customer. “Send over a pitcher of Budweiser, honey. And keep ‘em coming.”

John smiled at Norma but looked nervous, his eyes darting around the room before settling on Norma’s. She smiled back, hoping to reassure him that she hated being set up, too, and grabbed her drink off the bar, shrugging as she followed Dave and Jenn to the booth.

Jennifer and Dave chatted but Dave dominated the conversation, talking in detail about his motorcycle and a trip to Daytona for Biker Week that he and John were thinking about taking. Jennifer hung on every word and, at times, asked for further explanation, as if she hadn’t lived around motorcycles her entire life. To Norma, he seemed arrogant.

“Harley’s are nice looking and all,” Norma said, jumping in when Dave took a drink, “but a Honda Goldwing is much easier on the ass for a long distance ride. And, they don’t break down nearly as often.”

The silence at the table and Dave’s stare, as if he thought Norma was an idiot, seemed to mortify Jennifer, who quickly stood up to snatch Dave from the table,

suggesting they dance.

“Incidentally, I agree with you,” said John, seeming amused. “I brought my Dresser tonight, but I have a Goldwing at home. How is it that you know about motorcycles?”

“Oh, I was raised with them,” she said, curious why he hadn’t said anything in her defense a moment before. “My dad and my brother always had a few around. I guess way back in the day bikes were cheaper than cars and everybody had one.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” John said, laughing. “I have more invested in my bikes than I paid for my house. I remember when you didn’t have to get on a waiting list or anything. You just walked onto the shop floor and picked one out.”

Norma liked the way John’s eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. He was handsome, about ten years older than her, she guessed; shorter than average for a guy, only a few inches taller than herself, but with the large, muscular forearms of a serious biker. She couldn’t help but notice his tight butt and pretty hazel eyes. It had been a long time since she had found a man attractive.

“Are you really going to Biker Week?”

“Oh, probably not,” John said, motioning toward Dave and Jennifer on the dance floor. “He’s quite a talker. We’ve been ‘gonna go’ for the last five years.”

“How do you know Dave?”

“He’s my boss, actually,” he said, taking a swallow of his beer and wiping off his hand with a napkin. “He’s the Plant Manager over at the factory in Hillsdale. He’s actually an okay guy, but he can get on your nerves until you take the time to know him.”

“Are you talking about the transmission factory? I know a girl who works in the

office there. Michelle Grandberry. Know her?" Norma asked. John hesitated.

"Hmm, I don't think so."

"She works in payroll, I think. I haven't seen her in a few years; maybe she doesn't work there anymore. What do you do?"

"I'm a line supervisor. What about you?"

"I work for an insurance agency."

"Like it?"

"It's a job." Norma felt mostly at ease talking to him, but noticed he kept turning the conversation back to her.

"Hey, look. Pool table's open. You play?" John stood and motioned her to come along.

"Play or play well?" Norma said, scooting out of the booth. "If I lose I'm blaming it on the table. It's about a hundred years old with the original surface, I think."

He paused to refill his glass from the pitcher and they laughed as the foam ran down his arm. Norma picked a cue stick off the wall and chalked the tip while he racked. She had no idea why people put the chalk on, but she had always done it because she'd seen other people do it. John arranged the balls inside the triangle and then rolled it, clicking the balls and bracing them tight toward the tip with his fingers.

"Uh-oh. I think I'm in trouble," she said, blowing off the excess chalk. "You look like you know what you're doing."

"Something tells me you're going to give me a run for my money," he said.

"Ladies first. Take the break."

Norma hit two fabulous shots in a row, redeeming her from an abominable break. She noticed him checking out her backside during her turn, so she purposely bent a little farther, taking extra time in setting up her shot and liking the attention. She was impressed by John's shots, and equally impressed that his masculinity wasn't injured when she won in the end, John having scratched on the eight-ball. He bowed deeply and graciously offered to buy the winner a drink, giving up the table to a couple waiting to play. John ordered a rum and Coke from the barmaid and refilled his glass with the beer from the table, then suggested they step out onto the deck.

John leaned his elbows back onto the railing and looked at her. Norma breathed in the familiar fishy smell from the lake, listening to the water lapping rhythmically against the docks. The night had not done much to cool the sultry air, but there was an occasional hint of an autumn breeze coming in off the lake. They stood in silence for a long moment, and Norma lost herself in the melancholy end-of-summer feeling, watching the fog roll and slowly curl up around the deck.

"This is what a Bob Seger song feels like," she said quietly. He nodded and took her hand.

"Hey you guys...there you are." Jennifer stumbled out the door holding onto Dave. Her loud voice and laugh rang back off the water. "Where've ya been? I'm starving. Aren't you so starving? Wanna order something to eat?"

"Are you hungry?" John asked Norma.

"I could eat some cheese sticks." Norma squinted her eyes to scowl at Jennifer, and received an air kiss in return.

“Me, too,” John said.

“Come on Bob,” Dave said. John caught Norma’s puzzled look.

“Just a nickname,” he said, hitting Dave on the back of the head. “Let’s get those sticks.”

“I think Dave and Jennifer might just close the bar,” John said, handing his empty beer glass to the barmaid and accepting shot glasses.

Jennifer and Dave had barely eaten a handful of fries when another classic rock tune started to play and Jennifer grabbed Dave, dragging him back out onto the dance floor.

“Did you want to leave?” Norma asked, wondering if he’d grown tired of her company.

“No, I don’t want to go home or anything,” he said quickly. “The smoke just gets to me after a while. Maybe we’ll go for a drive later?”

“Maybe a walk?” Norma watched him slam the tequila.

“That’d work.”

Norma bit into a hot breaded mozzarella stick and laughed when she pulled to arm’s length but the cheese refused to break. John reached over and looped the cheese with his finger, pulling it apart for her, chuckling. Embarrassed, she grabbed a napkin to wipe the grease off her chin. “Thanks.”

“Do you want to go now?”

“Let’s wait for Dave and Jenn,” she said. “She’d get pissed if I left without telling

her.” Norma watched Jennifer hang on Dave near the pool table and realized her dislike for Dave had evolved into a sizable distrust of the man, but she could not figure out why.

“So, did you always want to be a supervisor in a transmission factory?” Norma tried get John to talk a little bit more about himself.

“Actually, I wanted to be a cowboy,” he said, laughing, “but when I finally got out West I discovered I hadn’t acquired the skills I needed to rope a calf.”

“I think you would have made a fine cowboy,” she said. “You kind of look like the Marlboro Man, all rugged and handsome, and everything.” Norma felt the prickling on her face as she blushed, surprised at her boldness. John smiled and took her hand, playing with her fingernails.

“Why don’t we move to that table over there in the corner,” he said, pointing at a tall table farthest from the jukebox. “Maybe we can get your friend’s attention.”

Norma waved at Jennifer but she was listening to something Dave said and laughing.

“What about you?” John asked, sliding an arm around her waist and walking her to the secluded corner. “What did you want to be when you grew up? Let me guess. You were going to be an astronaut after you became famous as an actress but before you won the Nobel Peace Prize?”

“How’d ya guess?” Norma laughed.

“No, seriously. Did you have any dreams of what you wanted to be?”

“Yeah, I had dreams, once. I wanted to teach high school. A really fun subject, like drama. Or maybe English.” Norma took a sip of her rum and Coke as she stared at

the neon Miller Light sign in the window. Moths repeatedly tried to get at the light but bounced away or tumbled to the ground when they hit the window.

“And?” he asked, the seriousness of his tone matching her distant.

“I met my husband, or the guy who would be my husband, right after high school,” she answered, accepting another rum and Coke from the barmaid but not drinking. “He was dark and dangerous, and I was young and stupid. Pretty typical.”

“So what happened to the dream of being a teacher? Did you ever go to college?” John tipped the bench forward to grab a handful of pretzels and handed her some, waiting for her answer.

Norma couldn’t believe that he actually seemed interested. She took a sip of the drink she hadn’t planned to touch, then placed a pretzel on her tongue, allowing the salt to mix pleasantly with the taste of rum before chewing.

“Well, I took a few of classes at the community college here, but only for a couple of semesters.”

“And hubby?”

“History,” she said, staring out the window, anger and disappointment festering and surfacing physically as bile burned her throat. “He decided he’d rather be a rock star. It’s for the best, really. My divorce came through today. That’s why we’re out tonight. *Celebrating.*” She stopped talking to look at John and blushed again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be laying all this on you. You’ve been so nice, and I hardly know you.”

“It’s okay,” he said, handing her another shot. “I’ve got all night. I like listening to you talk.”

Norma looked up to try to catch Jennifer's attention and noticed Dave had lured her to a secluded area near the rest rooms. She saw her dad's friend, a local sheriff deputy, walking in.

"Do you want to dance?" John asked.

"Sure. Just let me say hello to Mike," she said, nodding her head in the deputy's direction.

"Could it wait? I really like this song."

"Sure." Norma smiled, accepting his lead to the dance floor.

"I really like talking to you, Norma," he said, squeezing her hand gently as he wrapped his other hand around the small of her back, swaying to the music. As they danced, he lead her further toward the back of the room. "I'd like to get to know you better. Let's go for that walk."

"What about Jennifer?"

"She'll never know you're gone."

"Let me just go talk to her for a second. I'll be right back." Norma pulled her hand away and John sat in the nearest booth with his back to the door.

"Hey woman." Jennifer laughed and staggered as Norma grabbed her arm to drag her to the ladies' room. "I met a really nice one this time. I think I'm gonna ask him to come back to my place."

"Are you stupid?" Norma turned Jennifer around and pushed her to sit on the sink.

"No offense, but Dave really gives me the creeps. Something about him. Besides, sleeping with a guy the first night you meet him has not been a successful battle plan for

you.”

“Come on, Norma,” she slurred and pulled back, “don’t you go startin’ preachin’ at me. There ain’t no such thing as Prince Charming. At least not living in Coldwater. Hell, there’s probably none in Michigan at all. He’s okay. I’m not going to marry him or anything, I just want to have some fun.”

Norma paused and looked hard at her best friend. Her thick mascara had racooned itself in the humidity, contrasting grossly with the redness of her eyes. A mere six hours ago she had envied Jennifer. Norma stared, overwhelmed with disgust. “Jenn, if you aren’t careful, you’re going to pick up the wrong guy. Do you want to get raped or killed or something? Use your fucking brain.”

“And who the hell are you? My father?”

“No, but Mike’s here, and if he sees you, he’s going to tell your father.”

“Shit. Mike’s here? Where?”

“I saw him by the bar. Came in just a minute ago.”

“Bitch. You win. You better not be lying to me; I’ll kick your ass if I find you you’re lying to me.” Jennifer splashed some water on her face and began rummaging through her purse. “Damn. I left my makeup bag in the car. Do you have yours?”

Norma handed over her bag, amused that Jennifer would have to fix herself with shades of beige.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” Jennifer said. “If Mike tells my dad...he’ll take the car back for sure, this time.”

Norma was quiet for a long time, trying to decide what to do. She could just give

John her phone number; they could try it again some night without the drunken elephant on her back. Norma looked at Jennifer, who was watching her in the mirror, and wondered if she'd spoken her thoughts out loud, Jennifer was looking at her so oddly.

"I don't believe it," Jennifer said, turning. "Miss-priss doesn't want to go, does she?"

"Shut up, Jennifer."

"Miss-goody's got a hot one." She poked Norma's chest, teasing.

"I said, give it up."

"I'm just kidding you. You know I'd love it if you found someone. Even someone for a while. Why don't I have Dave drive me home?"

"Are you nuts? He's been drinking like a camel."

"No, he really hasn't. He's been carrying the same beer around all night. I took a drink of his by mistake; it's warmer than shit."

Norma looked at her reflection, conflicted. Thirty years old.

"Will you be careful and call me in the morning?" Norma asked.

"Sure," Jennifer promised and crossed her heart. She tilted her head and smiled.

"Will you be careful and call me in the morning? Or afternoon?"

"Don't get racey. He just asked me to go for a drive with him, but I hardly know him. I'm not getting into a car with him. We're just going to go for a little walk to sober up, then I'm going home."

"You are *such* a prude," Jennifer said. "I hope you at least give him your phone number. He bought your drinks all night. Never be a tease." Norma smiled but thought

it more dangerous to be a slut.

“Maybe I shouldn’t leave you with Dave,” Norma said. “Maybe the four of us can run up to the truck stop for some coffee.”

“I’m okay, Norma. Really.”

“We could just go back to your place and eat Chocolate Cherry Chunk right out of the carton like we used to.”

“Go for your walk. For once in your life, will you *please* go have some fun.”

“Okay, but I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“I’ll be fine.”

**

Norma found John talking to Dave by the door. Dave grabbed Jennifer around the waist, spilling his beer.

“Ready?” John held open the screen. Norma looked around to say hello to Mike, but he wasn’t in the main bar.

“You’ve spent all night hearing my dreary life story,” she said as she walked out. John quickly guided her past the cars in the lot. She noticed Mike’s was still there when she saw John staring at it. “Why don’t you tell me a little more about yourself?”

He cupped her chin gently in his hand and touched his lips to hers. Norma closed her eyes, breathing in the musky scent of his aftershave, allowing herself to enjoy the pleasant tingling that rippled through her body. He pulled away slightly to look at her face, kissed her gingerly on the forehead. “Let’s go down by the water.”

Norma took another glance through the screen at Jennifer, sitting at the bar. Dave

was putting money down for the waitress, so they were apparently getting ready to leave.

“Is your buddy,” she hesitated, “is he all right? I mean, is Jennifer safe with him?”

“Believe me,” John said, taking her hand to help her over the rock walk leading around the side of the lake. “He’s harmless. It’s pretty out here, isn’t it?” John stopped by edge of the water to toss in a rock.

“I’ve always loved this lake.”

“I take it you grew up around here?”

“All my life.” They strolled along the path that wound in and out of the woods near the water. “Did you grow up here? It seems like you have a little bit of an accent.”

“Very observant; I try to hide it. I actually grew up in Kentucky.”

“I’ve been camping in Kentucky a few times,” she said.

John paused, tossing another rock. They had walked quite a distance, the bar was almost directly across from them now.

“John?” He didn’t answer.

“John?”

“Uh, yeah?” He was watching a car pull out of the lot across the water. The music from the jukebox was distant and garbled.

“Do you think we should head back? They’ll be having last call pretty soon.”

“It’s pretty out here, isn’t it?” He threw another rock.

“Yes, but we should get back.” Norma started back down the path but John wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her hair.

“You’re very pretty, Norma.” He smelled her hair.

“I’m worried about Jennifer. She’s really drunk. Let’s go back.”

“She’s a big girl. She can take care of herself.” John rubbed her stomach then started moving his hands up to her breasts. Norma pulled away.

“We need to go.”

He ignored her. Taking her hand, he pulled it to his face and kissed her fingertip. She snatched back her hand.

“Don’t play with me, Norma,” he said, taking her hand more forcefully.

“I’m just worried about Jennifer. That’s all. Let’s just go check on her real quick and we’ll come right back.” Norma tried to move down the path.

“I think we’ll stay right here.”

A cloud moved overhead, blocking the moonlight.] The music stopped coming from the bar, leaving only the sound of cicadas in the trees and John’s breathing. He grabbed her, pulling her toward him and kissing her hard on the neck. She tried to push his chest with her forearms. He held her tight.

**

Jennifer stopped by Norma’s apartment on her way to her afternoon shift at Walmart, needing her makeup bag. Nothing in the apartment seemed disturbed. Jennifer called Norma’s cell phone, leaving a message:

“Damn, girl. You surprise me. I guess, for once, I was the good one. Dave drove me home and I passed out on the livingroom floor. How boring. Anyway, chickie, I left my makeup bag in your car. I’ll swing by the bar and see if it’s still there, so if you see someone has been in it, don’t worry...it was just me. Call me when you get outta bed,

sleepy-head.”

Jennifer pulled into the lot and parked next to the white Neon. Using Norma’s hidden spare key, Jennifer opened the door and grabbed the little bag off the front seat. She locked the door and replaced the key on its magnet. Giving the little car a pat, she headed back to her car and drove off to work.

**

Norma’s bruised, naked body was found a week later by a couple of kids fishing for sunfish off the far docks.

Chapter V

“Stages”

Mrs. Sullivan held the child close and breathed rhythmically, deeply, to savor the sweet scent of the freshly bathed and powdered newborn. The child, sighing softly after receiving its mother’s breath upon its sleeping form, crossed its arms and tucked its legs into the comfortable womb of its mother’s arms.

“The dust’s kicked up something fierce again. Wrap it tight and let’s get on with it.”

Mrs. Sullivan understood her husband’s anxiety, for the difficult birth had kept them home in recovery and away from this important task for far too long already. Careful not to disturb it, she swathed the child a blanket of light blue, as was fashion for a child of its sex at the time, and obeyed with hurried movements out the door. Mr. Sullivan climbed behind the wheel of his 1926 Essex Tourer, a gift from his father upon receipt of a degree from Harvard Business School, and drove cautiously, aware of his cargo. But he generally drove slowly through town, giving everyone a chance to turn and nod and say to one another, “There goes that Sullivan, what a successful young man,” or so Mr. Sullivan assumed, and this, the arrival of his first child, marked another auspicious and perfectly timed milestone.

“I hear the Governor may make a bid for president,” Mr. Sullivan said. Mrs. Sullivan smiled and seemed to pay attention, but she had little idea who Mr. Roosevelt was, Mr. Sullivan thought, much less the amount of damage he was capable of doing to

this country. She was much too busy learning to mother and thank goodness for Aunt Helen, who'd reared twelve children to adulthood and Godmothered at least another twenty.

"Hello, Aunt," Mrs. Sullivan offered as they pulled up to the church. Aunt Helen had been waiting, all hoped not long, covering her face against the dust with a lace kerchief, near the chapel door. Aunt Helen nodded, stating something of a greeting, without taking her eyes off the bundled child.

"You've kept the gown spotless, Mrs. Sullivan?" she asked, reaching to take the child from its mother. Once inside the door, Aunt Helen removed the blanket to inspect the newborn for imperfections and pick invisible specks of dust and lint from the pristine white fabric. "You know the gown must be spotless."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Child smells sour, but I suppose all the unclean ones do," Aunt Helen said, speaking to herself, not desiring response and meaning no harm, "Shouldn't have waited so long. The great risks young people take, I simply cannot understand." She knew, personally and painfully, the penalty for waiting too long and would never forgive herself for the lost soul of her third child. So thorough was the lesson that even in moments of frighteningly dangerous sickness she never again summoned the doctor before the calling for clergy. Directed now to Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan she said, "Come along. We mustn't keep Father Patrick."

Aunt Helen carried the child to the door of the grand sanctuary where the round, elderly priest, stately in his full ceremonial attire with violet stole, stood waiting. The

child, fully awake now, followed the light and movement of the flickering candles with bright eyes. It cooed and reached for Father Patrick's shiny cross and Mrs. Sullivan smiled affectionately at its pink cherub cheeks and innocent, blue-eyed gaze.

Aunt Helen, as a pious woman ought, spoke in Latin as she asked faith from the Church of God in the child's name. Then, as witnessed to by St. Augustine, the priest breathed upon the face of the child to exorcize the evil spirits from the unholy creature, and spoke, also in Latin, as he signed the infant's forehead and breast with the cross as a symbol of its redemption. Following the imposition of hands, the priest placed the blessed salt in the child's mouth, which the child took trustingly and without incident. Placing his stole over the child, the priest introduced it into the church, and on the way to the font, Aunt Helen, as the child's sponsor, made rapt professions of faith for the infant.

After reaching the font, the priest touched the tiny nostrils and ears of the child with spittle then anointed it with the oil of catechumens on its breast and between its shoulders. The child, staring now at the sunlight burning through the dust storm outside and through the great stained glass figure of the Holy and Blessed Mother Mary, accepted all that was imposed upon it without dispute, and lay mute while, through its sponsor, it made a declaration of faith and asked for baptism.

Father Patrick, in preparation of administering the threefold ablution, exchanged his handsome violet stole for his white one. Aunt Helen, taking all of her duties seriously but this one most of all, made sure to keep her hold on the child through the sacrament. With care, Father Patrick poured the stream of holy water onto the child's head, making the sign of the cross three times, while he said,

“Margaret Catherine Sullivan, I baptize thee with my hands in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Father Patrick then anointed the crown of her head with chrism before placing there a white veil, as pure a white as the gown she’d worn all morning, and recited, “Receive this white garment, which mayest thou carry without stain before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have eternal life, Amen.” He then placed a lighted candle upon the infant girl’s hand, saying, “Receive this burning light, and keep thy baptism so as to be without blame. Observe the commandments of God; that, when Our Lord shall come to His nuptials, thou mayest meet Him together with all the Saints and mayest have life everlasting, and live fore ever and ever. Amen. I bid you go in peace.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

i feel nothing and yet every pain pierces me like a thousand razors...i suffer from it, yes like they said, the calefaction, it can't be...it just can't be, and yet the cold, an empty endless cold, penetrates the space around me, so cold...so small, can't move, penetrates the space and through and around...i do not belong here, i know i don't belong here...where am i..save me i do not understand...it isn't supposed to be like this...wasn't supposed to be like this...pray, i must pray...glorious saint anne, filled with compassion for those who invoke thee, and with love for those who suffer, heavily laden with the weight of my troubles, i cast myself at thy feet and humbly beg of thee to take the present affair which i recommend to thee under thy special protection...vouchsafe to recommend it to thy daughter, the blessed virgin mary, and lay it before the throne of jesus, so that he may bring it to a happy issue...cease not to intercede for me until my

request is granted...above all, obtain for me the grace of one day beholding my god face to face, and with thee and mary and all the saints, praising and blessing him to all eternity...good saint anne, mother of her who is our life, our sweetness and our hope, pray to her for us, and obtain our request...help me...burning hot burning oil and ashes, ashes...i don't know what to do...so cold...yes, repeat...three times...i remember...glorious saint anne, filled with compassion for those who invoke thee...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Margaret knew she would find Aunt Helen in the sanctuary, lighting candles. News from the front was coming in cryptic and scattered at best, and Aunt Helen suffered in her way, composed and stifled, knowing that the three youngest of her five sons were in Normandy and all anyone could do was pray and wonder what was happening over there. Margaret had witnessed Aunt Helen break with emotion only once, when the telegram boy delivered a message about a sick relative in California. When Aunt Helen heard the boy's bicycle bell, her face twisted and paled. Margaret had stared into her milk, nibbled her biscuit and pretended not to notice Aunt Helen's hand shaking as she accepted the note, but in that instant, a weight of knowledge about fear and war and death came over Margaret as a sensation she would not soon forget.

“Come, child,” Aunt Helen said after having crossed herself, “help Aunt up.” Holding onto Margaret's thin forearms, Aunt Helen struggled up from her knees.

“May I light a candle after the Easter Vigil, Aunt?”

Aunt Helen took Margaret's small face in her pudgy hands. “Only if your mind is pure and your is heart truly open.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Margaret replied, “I am ready.”

“Very well, then,” Aunt Helen said, allowing a slight smile and releasing the youngster who stood obediently for inspection. Margaret’s new pink dress itched around the middle and at the backs of her arms, but she never fidgeted. Mrs. Sullivan had tailored over the dress for nearly three weeks, and even drove all the way to Edgerton to find matching pink ribbon to hold back Margaret’s sometimes unruly, light brown curls. Aunt Helen straightened the collar and recovered a small white string off the back before giving the nod and telling the girl to meet the rest of her catechism class in the schoolroom next door. Margaret rounded the corner, out of Aunt Helen’s view, then broke into a skip to enhance the clicking sound of her new patent leather shoes.

Following the sermon, which, thanks to her extra Latin lessons, Margaret was beginning to understand, Aunt Helen stood with Margaret in the narthex as the Bishop called the names of the catechumens. Holding the hand of a favorite catechism mate, a lovely girl by the name of Virginia, Margaret tried her best to stand straight and not giggle. The girls were excited, however, in entering this phase of young adulthood, and their occasional whispers brought on reprimanding glances from their respective sponsors.

When Margaret’s turn finally came, Virginia gave her hand a final squeeze and Margaret stepped forward. She felt no nervousness, for her catechism, and Aunt Helen, of course, had prepared her for the questions the Bishop would ask her.

“Do you turn to Christ?”

“I do,” Margaret said.

“Do you repent of your sins?”

“I do.”

“Do you renounce evil?”

“I do.”

“You must now declare before God and His Church that you accept the Christian faith in which you have been baptized and in which you will continue to live and grow,” the Bishop paused to smile at his good friend whom even he, with his stature in the Church and community, called Aunt, and rested sure that not an effort had been spared in fixing indelibly this blessed sacrament upon the mind of this young communicant. He turned back to Margaret and continued, “Do you believe in God the Father who made the Earth?”

“I believe and trust in him.” Margaret spoke slowly, with a loud clear voice, just as Aunt Helen had instructed during their many rehearsals.

“Do you believe in His Son Jesus Christ who redeemed mankind?”

“I believe and trust in Him,” she recited.

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God?”

“I believe and trust in Him.”

The Bishop laid his hands upon Margaret. “Confirm, O Lord, your servant Margaret Catherine Sullivan, with your Holy Spirit. Defend, O Lord, your servant with your heavenly grace until they come into your Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.”

Margaret held her hands crossed to avoid fidgeting and looked at the Bishop’s chin when she spoke. She felt her parents looking at her from their seats in the front pew

behind her. The Bishop dipped a finger in the oil of the chrism, making the sign of the cross on her forehead. Margaret glanced at her parents. She would surely receive a great reward, maybe cake and presents, for behaving so well during the ceremony.

“Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit,” he said as he sealed the sign. “Peace be with you.” Margaret was dreaming of a puppy and almost didn’t remember her line:

“And also with you.”

Margaret and Aunt Helen joined Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan in the pew for the creed and bidding prayers, and when the offertory plate passed, Margaret added her usual ten cents from her dollar allowance, plus an extra nickel because Aunt Helen said she should give more on special days. Margaret proudly recited the congregation’s Eucharistic prayers in Latin, knowing well the rites, having taken first communion at seven years old, but she had just recently begun study of the translations in class so she didn’t fully understand what the Bishop was saying. She did know, however, that the three transubstantiation bells marked a nearing of the end of the Mass, and that the Bishop would soon bring her the patina and chalice as she knelt at the altar rail, and that afterward she would go for tea sandwiches with Virginia at Aunt Helen’s house; but beforehand she would finally get to light her first candle, and she was given the Eucharist while still wondering what she should wish for.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

i am sleeping, merely sleeping...drifting, waiting, simply sleeping...my saints will not abandon me, my faith is strong...do not abandon me—release me from my prison of tears o holy mother...hail holy queen, mother of mercy, my life my sweetness and my

*hope...to thee do i cry, poor banished child of eve; to thee do i send up my sighs,
mourning and weeping in this valley of tears...turn then, most gracious advocate, thine
eyes of mercy toward me and after this my exile show unto me the blessed fruit of thy
womb, jesus...o clement, o loving, o sweet virgin mary! pray for me, o holy mother of god
that i may be made worthy of the promises of christ...sleeping, merely sleeping...drifting,
waiting, simply sleeping...my saints will not abandon me, my faith is strong...*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Most of the arrangements had been secured by the Priest and the women, of course, and Mr. Sullivan's main duty was simply to empty the savings he'd created years ago for the occasion. He knew it wouldn't be long after his daughter's coming out, and still the day's arrival caught him quite by surprise. He stood on the ambulatory, toying with his cufflinks while waiting for his daughter to emerge from the vestry.

"What did you make of it?" An usher, a distant cousin, continued their conversation about a recent article in *The Times*.

"I doubt Eisenhower will ever take a genuine liking to the office, Rubert," Mr. Sullivan glanced again at his watch, for once disinterested in political talk.

"I was worried after the election, of course, with him having been abroad for so long. I mean, what could he possibly know about domestic policy? Did you know," Rubert lowered his voice, "that Eisenhower's a Jehovah's Witness?"

"You don't say," Mr. Sullivan said, although he knew. A change in music signaled that the time had come, so he knocked on the vestry door. "Well, maybe next time around we'll get a Catholic."

“It’ll be about time,” Rubert laughed, taking the arm of a bridesmaid. Mr. Sullivan didn’t hear.

“Are you ready, Daddy?” Margaret stepped out in her mother’s gown and the vision ripped Mr. Sullivan’s words from his throat, leaving a hollow ache deep in his chest.

“Are *you* ready, Margaret?”

“I am. I found the one I’ve been looking for, Daddy.”

He nodded and took her arm and led her, at the tail of the parade, around to the front of the church.

Just inside the vestibule, Margaret paused to light a candle for Aunt Helen, saying a short prayer of healing and remembering the first candle she ever lit. She would go to the hospital before leaving for the honeymoon, of course. Aunt Helen had insisted on being posted at every step and kept a scrapbook for Margaret, stuffed full of everything from catering menus to the banns of marriage posted in the parish bulletins.

Despite the two hour length of her traditional Nuptial Mass, the sacrament seemed, to Margaret, to be over in moments. She was quite fond of George, her new husband, who came from a good family with a strong Catholic background, and hoped for the blessings of children quickly, for she believed their arrival would strengthen the relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan, along with Aunt Helen, were naturally pleased with the arrangement.

As Margaret laid her Mary bouquets at the base of the Holy Mother’s statue, the words of the Gradual rang in her ears: *Uxor tua sicut vitis abundans in lateribus domus*

tuae (Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine on the sides of thy house) and she prayed:

“Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen. O good St. Gerard, powerful intercessor before God and Wonder-worker of our day, I call upon thee and seek thy aid...Beseech the Master of Life, from Whom all paternity proceedeth to render me fruitful in offspring, that I may raise up children to God in this life and heirs to the Kingdom of His glory in the world to come. Amen. Dear Mother Mary, speak to Jesus for me.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

i prayed to you, i begged you...and still you left me in the darkness for the fires to lick my frozen soul...when i trusted you...remember, o most loving virgin mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided...inspired with this confidence, i turned to you, o virgins of virgins, my mother...to you i came, before you i stood, sinful and sorrowful...o mother of the word incarnate, why do you despise my petitions?...why in your mercy do you not hear me and answer me?...i did everything i was told to do, everything, everything, yet i, your faithful servant, was left in the valley of shadows...why you have forsaken me?...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Margaret hesitated, running a slim finger down the intricate carvings on the dark wooden door. She felt hopeless, and alone. So many people lost in such a short while. Aunt Helen gone over two years now, Mrs. Sullivan just after, and Father Patrick only recently passed. She sighed, opened the door to step inside, and knelt on the kneeler.

Sliding the barrier, the priest began:

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen,"
meanwhile Margaret made the sign of the cross.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been," Margaret paused, "eight months since my last confession. My sins are numerous, I have been proud, especially of my home. I neglected Mass on two occasions for reasons other than sickness. I....."

"Go on, my child."

"I harbor anger, Father...anger and hatred." Tears found their familiar paths down Margaret's cheeks. "I have rage in my heart and I'm not sure I have the power to overcome it."

"Explain and know you are never alone, child."

"My husband has filed for a divorce. I'm so embarrassed. Humiliated."

"On what grounds has this divorce been requested? Have either of you been unfaithful?"

"Oh no, Father, we haven't. At least, I think he hasn't, not physically yet, anyway. George, my husband, has filed on a claim of irreconcilable differences, which he knows is not a valid reason in the eyes of the Church." Margaret gave in to her tears.

"But there is another."

"Yes, Father. And I believe that when the divorce is final, he's going to marry her. He claims, however, that the blame is mine, that he has a Christian obligation to father children and we have been married nearly six years now. Not a single pregnancy, Father."

“And you’ve prayed to St. Gerard?”

“Almost daily, Father.”

“It is right of you to confess your sins of anger and hatred, child, but I ask you to remember the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:27-28 and 31-32: ‘Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.’ The tissue page rustled as he turned it. ‘It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.’

“Therefore,” the priest continued, “the grievous fault is your husband’s, if it be true that he has searched for and located another. However, you must release your hatred, as difficult as this may be, child, for failing to abandon your sins will cause even greater guilt in your heart.

“Your penance, child, is two Hail Mary prayers for your prideful sins, seven days of the rosary for each of your abandoned Masses, and, for your anger and hatred, a period of almsgiving and fasting one day per week until the divorce is complete. Are you prepared for your penance, and, more importantly, are you prepared for an act of contrition.”

“Yes, Father,” Margaret said.

The priest extended his right hand through the break in the screen and touched Margaret. “God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has

reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

what have i done...in heaven's name, what have i done...help me, my saints, for i have cursed the name of the mother of god...o blessed saint clare, your life shines like a beacon and cast its light down the ages of the church to guide the way of christ...look with compassion on the poor and humble who call on you for help...as you bow before your eucharistic lord in heaven, speak to him of my broken spirit...ask him to heal me and to wash away my sins in his precious blood...great servant of christ, remember my needs and defend me from everything that would threaten our holy catholic faith...hear the cry of the poor and make it a song of intercession, rising from your poor heart to the eucharistic heart of jesus, our healer, our savior, and our lord...forgive me, o blessed saint clare...my answer, i know...i deserve my fate, my soul should rot in hell, but i cry to you, saint jude, glorious apostle, faithful servant and friend of jesus, the name of the traitor has caused you to be forgotten by many, but the true church invokes you universally as the patron of things despaired of; pray for me, who am so miserable; pray for me, that finally I may receive the consolations and the succour of heaven in all my necessities, tribulations and sufferings, particularly the rescue of my afflicted soul...and deliver me from my purgatory so i may stand before saint mary to beg her forgiveness for my transgressions, and that i may bless god with the elect throughout eternity...saint jude,

apostle, martyr and relative of our lord jesus christ, of mary and of joseph, intercede for me...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“So do you think your father will attend, now?” Frank asked, looking at the freshly signed paper.

“I hope so,” Margaret said, taking the paper from Frank and holding onto his hand. “Yes, I’m sure he will.”

“I love you. You know that, don’t you?” Frank wrapped his arm around her and drew her close.

“Yes,” she said, kissing his nose. “You’ve proven that a hundred times over.”

Conversion to Catholicism had not been easy for Frank, having grown up in the Protestant faith, but he would do anything for Margaret. Waiting had been the hardest; the many long months of catechisms and the setbacks in obtaining Margaret’s annulment from the Church. They had thought the annulment process would be simple, but the diocesan tribunal office launched an investigation into George’s claim that Margaret hindered the procreation of children with frigidity, a claim that caused Margaret a great deal of pain and embarrassment. George had married outside the church, so he took the intrusion of the Church as an offense and made it as difficult for Margaret as possible, perhaps because his second marriage had not yet resulted in any children, either.

Frank did not really understand the whole annulment process other than it cost a tidy sum of money, but it seemed to allow Margaret the closure she required for that dark period of her life. Now, finally, holding the Pre-Cana papers, Margaret was fairly

incandescent with joy.

“I’m so glad we decided to go with the simple ceremony, Frank,” Margaret said.

“Me, too, darling. We’ll be sure to receive, um, what is it called again, communion?”

Margaret laughed. He was trying so hard. “Eucharist.”

“Yes, that’s it. The Priest said to be sure to receive it at the closest opportunity since we’ve left it out of our ceremony. I must admit, I’m thankful the service doesn’t have to be in Latin. I remember all of three Latin words from high school.” Frank paused, took her hand and kissed each of her fingertips as he spoke: “*Amo, amas, amat,*” causing them both to laugh. “Hey, I’m starving. Let’s grab a bite to eat, then we’ll head downtown for some window shopping.”

“Should we invite Daddy?”

“Why not. I love meals chock full of discussions about ‘Johnson’s ruination of the government, the communist situation in Vietnam, and the general putrescence of young people today.’” Frank imitated Mr. Sullivan quite well.

“Don’t be naughty,” Margaret said, laughing and lightly slapping his arm.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

i’ve got to get out of here...i’ll do anything...penance, the rosary a million times, twenty years of alms, anything...i’ll never sin again...good and gentle saint anthony, your love of god and concern for his creatures made you worthy, while on earth, to possess miraculous powers...come to my help in this moment of trouble and anxiety...your ardent love of god made you worthy to hold the holy infant in your arms...whisper to him my

humble request, allow me to face him and accept my judgment and to bear my punishment, any punishment but this...if it be for the greater glory of god, and the salvation of my soul...but hurry, please forgive me, i am afraid...i am afraid i'll make a deal with the devil to rest a while...have mercy...amen...

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Margaret? Margaret Sullivan?”

Margaret turned, puzzled, to the voice stating a name she hadn't heard in a very, very long time. A woman, Margaret guessed her age to be somewhere around her own fifty-six years, sat in a leather easy chair in the recovery area of St. Vincent's Dialysis Unit, wrapped in a thin hospital blanket. Drawn by the familiarity of the woman's smiling eyes, Margaret pushed her book cart over for a closer look.

“It's all right if you don't recognize me. I've been watching you for several days, trying to place you myself, and it came to me just this minute. ‘Why Virginia,’ I told myself, ‘I do believe that lovely lady is my old friend Margaret Sullivan.’”

“Oh my.” Margaret's thin hand came up to cover her surprised smile. “Virginia Marsh. I don't believe it. What are you doing in Toledo?” Margaret leaned over the chair to hug her, careful not to disturb the IVs embedded in both the woman's arms.

“My husband's family is from here, originally. We moved here, oh, around ten years ago. We're actually living down in Bowling Green. What about you, dear? You were always so fond of New York. Did you ever move to the city?”

“I lived there for a while, but when the children were born, Frank, my husband, had a transfer offer. We jumped at the opportunity to raise the children in a smaller town.

At least it was a small town we moved here; not so much so now, though.” Margaret sat down in the recliner next to Virginia.

“You look wonderful, Margaret. How long has it been?”

“It has to be,” Margaret thought a moment, “oh, around forty years or so. Could it really be that long?”

The women chatted for a long while, catching up on each other’s lives. Virginia, Margaret discovered, suffered from advanced kidney disease and required dialysis several times a week. Following their initial meeting, Margaret revised her schedule of volunteering at the hospital to coincide with Virginia’s dialysis.

“Seven children...all teenagers!” Virginia leaned back on the dialysis bed and laughed. “I may have to recommend you for sainthood.”

“We’ve been very blessed. They’re all really good children, actually. Most of them are all finished with the rebellious stage. I hope. Frank Jr. and Patrick are both attending seminary; we couldn’t be more pleased. The younger boys attend St. Francis de Sales High School, and all the girls are at Central Catholic. The tuition has drained the bank, but it’s all worth it, I think.”

“How do you even raise a child in the Church in these days? Everything is so different from when we grew up. So much evil in the world, so much temptation.”

“It isn’t easy, I admit. I try to describe how it used to be-- there is such beauty and comfort in tradition-- but the younger ones are so interested in their own business, cars and music and such. When they were small, I had better luck instructing them. I had to

teach them Latin at home, of course.”

“I must admit,” Virginia said, “I haven’t been to a Mass or to Confession for a number of years. I’ve been down to the Chapel here a few times, though.”

“It’s all changing, even the Church, I’m afraid. They don’t hardly use the confessionals anymore. They’re just for us old folks, now, I imagine. Confessions are held out in the open, sometimes with a screen to block view, but many times they’re face to face. All so different. I feel like I spend all my time searching for something. Probably the old ways, but something is missing.”

Virginia grew quiet, grimacing. Margaret laid a hand on the woman’s arm. “Is there anything I can do? Should I fetch a doctor?”

“Pray for me, Margaret.”

Margaret continued to visit her friend, now admitted for inpatient dialysis as her kidneys persisted in failing, and prayed with and for her daily. She also arranged for a Priest from her Parish to visit, providing Virginia the opportunity to perform the sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Penance.

Margaret increased her giving past the tithe, as she always did in times of any extreme need, and, in addition to adding two shifts of volunteering at the hospital, began reading to the blind on Tuesday afternoons and her works, as reported to the Priest, were openly praised. Weekly, Margaret visited The Lady’s Altar at the Cathedral, lighting a candle and kneeling in front of the statue of St. Anne, to recite aloud a prayer for healing. “Dearest St. Anne, it is you I wish to honour in your statues and images. They are the

tangible representations of the mysteries of divine love that were accomplished in you. The sight of your holding the infant Virgin Mary brings to my mind a clearer understanding of your role in Christ's Redemption of mankind...Saint Anne, the reason for your holiness is your closeness to God. You are the privileged one who has been chosen to be the mother of the Mother of God. Dearest Saint Anne, pray for me, and for my dear friend Virginia, have special prayers and blessings for the sick and afflicted, for the hungry and needy. Obtain for all men the priceless gift of mutual love in God and for peace. Amen.”

Margaret had the pleasure and honor of holding her friend’s hand as the Bishop himself administered the Extreme Unction, and of watching the good woman, re-substantiated in her faith and in her Church, pass peacefully, Margaret was sure now, onto Heaven.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

i must make peace with myself and my situation...i resolve that there must be a god, or else i would not be anywhere...and yet my soul exists, however in the middle place, for why, i do not know or understand...i live every moment of my life again and again and find no single justification for my circumstance...i've done something against the church, i know it...o glorious saint peter, who, in return for thy strong and generous faith, thy profound and sincere humility, and thy burning love, wast rewarded by jesus christ with singular privileges, and, in particular, with the leadership of the other apostles and the primacy of the whole church, of which thou wast made the foundation stone, do thou obtain for me the grace of a lively faith, that shall not fear to profess itself

openly, in its entirety and in all of its manifestations, even to the shedding of blood, if occasion should demand it, and to sacrifice of life itself rather than surrender..obtain for me likewise, a sincere loyalty to our holy mother, the church; grant that i may ever remain most closely and sincerely united to the roman pontiff, who is the heir of thy faith and of thy authority, the one, true, visible head of the catholic church, that mystic ark outside of which there is no salvation...grant, moreover, that i may follow, in all humility and meekness, her teaching and her advice, and may be obedient to all her precepts, in order to enjoy a peace that is sure and undisturbed, and to attain one day in heaven to everlasting happiness...amen....

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The recent renewed enthusiasm for reviving the Sacred Rites pleased many of the elders in the Church, and Margaret sat with her husband in the front pew, wiping tears away with an embroidered handkerchief, watching the ordination ceremony with consummate interest. All of her children were in attendance, including Victoria, the youngest, who had, sadly, converted to the Baptist religion of her new husband.

Presented with the shaved head of tonsure and holding a lighted candle in his right hand, Margaret's oldest son, Frank Jr., having reached the proper age for partaking in the Sacrament of Order, carried also the vestment for the order of priesthood, to which he was to be raised. As the Archdeacon called his name, he answered properly, "Adsum."

Margaret waited, however improper, with a certain amount of impatience, as the minor orders were given. Finally, after the Tract of the Mass, the Archdeacon summoned those who were to receive the priesthood. Frank Jr. looked very handsome, despite his

shaved head, wearing his amice, alb, girdle, stole, and maniple, his folded chasuble laying neatly over his left arm. Moving forward, Frank Jr. bowed, then knelt before the Bishop.

“Is this candidate worthy of being admitted to the priesthood?” the Bishop asked.

“Yes, Bishop Reynolds,” the Archdeacon spoke as the representative of the Church, and offered testimony as to the outstanding moral character of Frank Jr.

“If anyone here has anything to say to the prejudice of the candidate, come forward now and state it,” the Bishop said, addressing the congregation. Following the silence of the congregation, the Bishop instructed Frank Jr., admonishing him as to the duties of his new office, then knelt himself in front of the altar. Frank Jr., along with the other candidates, lay himself prostrate on the carpet during the chanting of the Litany of the Saints:

“Lord, be moved by our prayers. Anoint Your servant with the fullness of priestly grace, and bless him with spiritual power in all its richness. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Following the Litany, the candidates rose and came forward, kneeling in pairs before the Bishop, who laid both hands on the head of each candidate in silence. One by one, all the priests present came forward and laid both hands, again in silence, on the head of each candidate, and, as the Bishop and Priests kept their right hands extended, the Bishop recited a prayer, inviting the congregation to join him, for blessings on the candidates. Margaret, tears rolling freely now, joined the chorus with a shaky voice, her husband’s full of pride.

After the Collect, the Bishop said the Preface, then crossed the stole over the

breast of each candidate, hooding each with his chasuble, arranged to hang down in front and folded behind and carefully guarded from contacting the skin by the amice. Calling down God's blessing on the newly-ordained, the Bishop intoned the 'Veni Creator,' joined in singing by the choir, and, in what Margaret believed to be the most beautiful moment in the ceremony, the Bishop anointed the hands of each candidate with the oil of catechumens before handing the chalice, containing wine and water, with a paten and a host upon it. As the Bishop sat before the middle of the altar, each of the newly ordained priests made an offering of a lighted candle to him, reciting the Mass with him.

According to tradition, the Bishop was to choose one of the candidates to receive the kiss of peace just before the Communion. Rising, the Bishop walked slowly in front of the line of the newly-ordained, pausing before Frank Jr. to offer his kiss, and the moment was the most joyous of Margaret's life.

The new priests accepted the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist before approaching the Bishop to recite the Apostle's Creed. The bishop, again laying his hands upon each new priest, said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

Frank Jr. carefully folded his chasuble, made a promise of obedience, and received a second kiss of peace before returning to his place, and from this moment forward, Margaret forever and proudly called her son 'Father.'

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

it is the time of acceptance, acceptance of my fate, acceptance of my punishment...i come before You to acknowledged my sin to You, and i resolve to not hide

my iniquity...i will confess my transgressions to the Lord...i am a sinner...Jesus, guide my words...My Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name...Thy Kingdom come...Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven...Give us this day our daily bread...And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors...And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever and ever...Amen.

YES, MY CHILD?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Margaret pushed her head back into the pillow, an act that required more energy than she possessed, in an attempt to readjust the uncomfortable oxygen mask. The morphine curbed the pain, and Margaret, in her home and surrounded by her children, felt calm. She knew she would see her dear husband again; very soon.

Frank Jr., Father Frank, as his siblings called him, Father Midoni, as his congregation called him, held the oil, specially blessed by the Bishop, and struggled with the momentousness of the situation. His mother's eyes, trusting and teary, but happy, encouraged him to continue, for she was unable to speak.

First, Father Midoni administered the Sacrament of Penance, allowing, due to circumstances, Margaret's blinking to suffice for answers. She closed her eyes and, in her mind, faithfully recited "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen!”

With the oil, Father Midoni anointed Margaret’s eyes. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by sight.”

Father Midoni then anointed Margaret’s ears. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by hearing.”

And then her nostrils. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by smell.”

And lips. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by taste.”

Breaking down a bit as he held his elderly mother’s delicate hands, he anointed them. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by touch.”

Carefully removing the slippers from her swollen feet, he anointed them. “Through this holy unction and His own most tender mercy may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed by walking.”

Father Midoni then cautiously administered the Viaticum, the Eucharist of the Sacrament of Unction. Each of the children held vigil over the next few hours and, when it was time, all gathered around Margaret, touching a hand, an arm, or a leg. All of her children were with her when the pious, faithful servant of the Church passed peacefully, Father Midoni was sure, into Heaven.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

YOU HAVE BEEN TOLD: JESUS CHRIST IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE. NO ONE CAN COME TO THE FATHER EXCEPT THROUGH HIM. I SENT HIM TO BEAR YOUR SINS, TO PAY YOUR PENALTY, SO THAT YOU ARE FORGIVEN, IF YOU ACCEPT THE GIFT, TO HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH ME. I HAVE WAITED A LONG TIME FOR YOU TO SPEAK TO ME, CHILD.

forgive me, Father, for i have sinned...but i don't understand.

SALVATION IS FOUND IN NO ONE ELSE, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN TO MEN BY WHICH THEY MUST BE SAVED. YOU ARE MADE RIGHT IN MY SIGHT WHEN YOU TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST TO TAKE AWAY YOUR SINS. AND YOU BE SAVED IN THIS WAY, ONLY IN THIS WAY, NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE OR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE.

i'm sorry, Father...i was taught, my whole life, to do good works and perform the rites...

IT IS NOT THE WORKS OR THE RITES, MY CHILD. IT IS WRITTEN: "I WARN EVERYONE WHO HEARS THE PROPHETIC WORDS IN THIS BOOK: IF ANYONE ADDS TO THEM, GOD WILL ADD TO HIM THE PLAGUES DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK AND IF ANYONE TAKES AWAY FROM THE WORDS IN THIS PROPHETIC BOOK, GOD WILL TAKE AWAY HIS SHARE IN THE TREE OF LIFE AND IN THE HOLY CITY DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK." ALMS AND PRAYERS WILL STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ME, BUT "TAKE HEED," AS IT IS ALSO WRITTEN, "THAT YOU DO NOT DO

YOUR CHARITABLE DEEDS BEFORE MEN, TO BE SEEN BY THEM. OTHERWISE YOU HAVE NO REWARD FROM YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN. THEREFORE, WHEN YOU DO A CHARITABLE DEED, DO NOT SOUND A TRUMPET BEFORE YOU AS THE HYPOCRITES DO IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND IN THE STREETS, THAT THEY MAY HAVE GLORY FROM MEN. ASSUREDLY, I SAY TO YOU, THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD. BUT WHEN YOU DO A CHARITABLE DEED, DO NOT LET YOUR LEFT HAND KNOW WHAT YOUR RIGHT HAND IS DOING, THAT YOUR CHARITABLE DEED MAY BE IN SECRET; AND YOUR FATHER WHO SEES IN SECRET WILL HIMSELF REWARD YOU OPENLY. AND WHEN YOU PRAY, YOU SHALL NOT BE LIKE THE HYPOCRITES. FOR THEY LOVE TO PRAY STANDING IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND ON THE CORNERS OF THE STREETS, THAT THEY MAY BE SEEN BY MEN. ASSUREDLY, I SAY TO YOU, THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD. BUT YOU, WHEN YOU PRAY, GO INTO YOUR ROOM, AND WHEN YOU HAVE SHUT YOUR DOOR, PRAY TO YOUR FATHER WHO IS IN THE SECRET PLACE; AND YOUR FATHER WHO SEES IN SECRET WILL REWARD YOU OPENLY. AND WHEN YOU PRAY, DO NOT USE VAIN REPETITIONS AS THE HEATHEN DO. FOR THEY THINK THAT THEY WILL BE HEARD FOR THEIR MANY WORDS. THEREFORE DO NOT BE LIKE THEM. FOR YOUR FATHER KNOWS THE THINGS YOU HAVE NEED OF BEFORE YOU ASK HIM.”

~~*~*~*~*~*~*

Margaret prayed. For the first time she prayed, talked, laughed, cried, and confessed, directly to her Father in Heaven, and she went to the Light.

Works Cited

WORKS CITED

Blue Öyster Cult. "Don't Fear the Reaper." Agents of Fortune. Columbia Records, 1986.

Garrett, George. Going to See the Elephant. Huntsville, Texas: Texas Review Press,
2002.

Spenser, Edmund. The Faerie Queen. Ed. A. C. Hamilton. London-New York:
Longman, 1980.

Vita

Erika Leigh Andra was born in Toledo, Ohio on July 15, 1971. Raised in Samaria, Michigan, Erika attended school in Bedford, Michigan, graduating from Bedford High School in 1989. She earned her Associate of Science in English from Monroe County Community College, Monroe, Michigan, in 1992. After spending several years as a 9-1-1 operator and several more as a warehouse supervisor, Erika returned to school and earned her Bachelor of Arts with honors in Interdisciplinary Studies, majoring in English and Communications, in 2001. She went on to receive her Master of Arts in English with a Creative Writing emphasis in 2004.

5990 2949 4
06/23/04 HFB 