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Revelations

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REVELATIONS

By

Serena Harms

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Professor Kelly Magee

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Serena Harms
10 May 2013

REVELATIONS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Serena Harms
May 2013

Abstract

In this collection of short stories, the main linking character is Shayla Collins, an independent woman who feels strapped in a second marriage with a husband who mistreats her son, Elliott, from a previous marriage and rapidly plows the family into debilitating debt. As a result, how she reacts to and interacts with others is affected. Each piece follows her through a different stage in her life with different people in her life, but especially with her two children, Elliott and Kelsey. The collection spans from Shayla's troubled marriage to the apparitions that appear in her middle age.

Oftentimes the journey through the life of a woman with children, married or not, is fraught with obstacles and communication is challenging. And communication is essential to Shayla's understanding of the events taking place in her life, and is a major theme of the collection. Shayla struggles with her divorce; with helping her daughter, Kelsey, through the divorce; with familial rifts that prevent her from having a normal relationship with her grandmother. When Shayla is in a life threatening accident, she is forced to become a better communicator with her then teenage children, and to understand the doubt and unhappiness in her own life. Shayla lives in fear of criticism and of being controlled which leads to isolation and deprecation. In the words of Dorothy Allison, "though it will not always make us happy to read of the dark and dangerous places in our lives, the impact of our reality is the best we can ask". Or as Shayla herself perceives it, "she didn't know if she'd been shoved in the way, or rescued."

Revelations follows Shayla as different parts of her character are exposed in each subsequent story. It is revealed to Shayla through her encounters with family and others that in order to move forward, she must claim her own voice.

The authors Margaret Atwood, Anne Tyler, and Tillie Olsen have influenced this body of work through their strong characters, haunting images in unusual situations, and the contemplative narratives inherent in their work.

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Alone

Riiiiing.

I look reluctantly to my left.

Riiiiing.

What if it's my husband? What is Keith going to yell at me about this time? Is he calling to check that I'm home? Or is it one of his creditors calling to harass me about wanting money? I should tell them, 'Yeah, you and me both.'

Riiiiing.

Sigh. I pull myself up from the worn couch, the same one we bought used when we married three years ago. I step to the left, stumble over My Little Pony, take another step, stand in front of my son sitting on the couch.

Riiiiing.

I look at the blinking red light on the base of the Panasonic, reaching out with my right hand, lifting the receiver from its holder.

Rii-I press the talk button and bring the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, I need to speak to Mrs. Collins." Grave female voice.

"Mommy, watch out!"

Scowl at my son peering around me at TV as I turn towards the kitchen.

"Speaking," I say, walking in front of the computer desk.

"Mrs. Collins." Pass the hide-a-bed piled with clean laundry. "This is Nurse Calloway from St. Sebastian's Hospital." Step onto cold linoleum, "I'm calling to tell you that your husband is in the ER."

Turn and lean backside against kitchen counter in front of the bread machine.

“What?”

“Your husband is in the ER here.” Lift left hand. “He is having an asthma attack.”

Put palm on forehead. “We have revived him, and he is currently on oxygen. We have called his allergist, Dr. Morrison, and he is evaluating your husband right now.”

Sigh, close my eyes.

He forgot his inhalers? Again? When is he going to learn?

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, I heard you. Thank you for calling to let me know.”

“If you’d like to come see him, we are going to be putting him in room one—”

“That’s okay, thank you.” Pull the phone away from my ear, still hear the nurse talking, take hand off forehead to press the off button. Turn towards the counter, set the phone down.

I look up and stare out the bare window at the dark November abyss outside. I feel like it is mirroring who I am inside. Dark, cavernously empty, unnoticeable.

How could he do this? Knit my eyebrows together. Why doesn’t he take care of himself? Cross my arms in front of myself. I don’t understand why he keeps the money from me by putting it into his accounts, but won’t take his damn inhalers himself.

I turn to my right and look towards the couch where my son and daughter are staring at the TV, watching *Ice Age*.

Elliott looks so much like his father, with his sable curls and slender nose. But he is from a previous marriage, and Keith is so mean to my son. He belittles him all the time and

doesn't understand that he is only four. He won't let Elliott drink water while eating dinner, causing him to cry. Keith tried forcing him to potty train before Elliott was ready, making him scared to use the bathroom. He severely reprimands my son when he grabs his tie before work and tries playing keep away because he wants daddy to play with him. But Keith acts like our daughter is a princess.

Sigh. Take a step onto the carpet. Pause. Look at the mountain of clean laundry strewn all over the couch. I should get to that. But most of the clothes there are his. Why should I do them? All I do all day, every day is chores. I'm just a sponge to him. And he doesn't do anything to help out around here. He makes the mess, I have to clean it up.

Look at all the papers that are his. He'll never file his damn taxes. And he needs to or we'll keep getting money taken away by the IRS. Money that we need to pay his creditors. But I don't want his money, or his problems, anymore. I need my own money. I don't know how to get it without Keith taking it away from me. But I need to find a way. I need to find an apartment I can afford on my own.

Walk past the printer and computer table. Kick the wooden Thomas the Train out of my way. Turn towards the TV before collapsing onto the couch next to my daughter. Pull both kids close to me. Sid, the sloth, is barreling in slow motion through the entourage of Dodo birds, clutching the last, prized watermelon. Gets past them, does a victory dance, throws the watermelon on the ground.

"Aw, Sid, now we have to find more food."

What Lives Within

Sunlight streamed in through the narrow windows set high up on the south wall of the school counselor's small office. Lining the entire north wall of the office were five four-drawer filing cabinets, holding a file for each of the students at Harper Elementary School. Hope got up to answer the tapping on her closed door, smoothing her grey slacks as she went.

"Oh, hi Lauren," Hope said.

"Hello Hope, can I talk with you for just a minute?" she asked. Lauren was a second grade teacher. And about to be a mother herself, swollen large with her first child.

"Sure, have a seat," Hope displayed a hand towards the tweed upholstered chair, "how's the baby?"

"Active! I think I've been kicked in the ribs twice already. I had to catch my breath the last time and all the kids became concerned – 'You all right Ms. Watson? Is he coming now? Should we call the principal?'" Lauren chuckled.

Hope smiled, "You must be excited."

"I would be if I weren't so scared, but I'm getting so heavy now that I'm just done being pregnant, all the aches and pains are getting to me."

Hope nodded, although she didn't know. She couldn't have children. Which is why she relished working with the children in the school, she could focus on them, and

for now, that was enough. But she wasn't sure how long that would last.

"I have a student," Lauren interrupted her thoughts, "who has become very reserved. Closed up really."

"Ok." Hope wrapped her slender fingers around a silver ink pen and grabbed her legal pad from the laminated pressboard counter attached to the wall that served as her desk. When she was at home, her slender fingers danced along ivory keys to relieve the stress of the day.

"It's Kelsey Collins." Lauren paused, twisting her wedding ring on her finger as she chose her words.

Hope leaned forward, catching the sunlight on her crown of long blonde hair, the sides and bangs held up by a clip.

"She's become really quiet. And this is a girl whom, at the beginning of the year, I had to constantly reprimand for excessive talking. I sent home notes to her parents about her inability to follow directions and then during our parent-teacher conference, her mother told me her daughter was bored in my class and that I wasn't challenging her enough."

"Mmhmm," Hope glanced at Lauren as she jotted down a couple notes.

"But a month after the conference she calmed down, was quiet, did what she was asked, although it was hesitantly. You know, I must admit, I was greatly relieved. I thought her parents had finally gotten through to her and I could get her to focus on completing her work. But when I started noticing that she was completely reluctant to participate in class, I started to get worried."

“Ok. Well I can pull her in and talk to her to see if there is anything going on.”

“Yeah, that would be great, Hope. I just don’t want to fail any of my students and if it’s something to do with my class I want to know so I can help her.”

“Of course you do.”

“But I can’t seem to reach her. So I thought maybe she needs a different listening ear to try.”

After Lauren left, Hope went to one of the filing cabinets and retrieved Kelsey’s file. Above average student, smiling face on her school picture, no reprimands, no complaints, no tardies, only two absences – nothing that set off any alarming behavior.

She was walking on the grass before reaching the sidewalk that lined the circular bus zone driveway, when she stopped short. Where the driveway sidewalk intersected the sidewalk that led to the gym, there was a single flower popping out of the ground, seemingly oblivious to its ill-conceived location. Usually the grounds were meticulously kept, with the lawn regularly mowed, the evergreen and rhododendron bushes lining the brick buildings routinely trimmed, and the beds neatly layered with bark to thwart rogue plants from coming through.

Hope stepped over to the flower and squatted down. It was a single purple crocus. Hope reached out her right hand and gingerly cupped the beautiful bloom in her palm and felt the silkiness of the petals.

“Yeah, I couldn’t bear to pull it,” said a soft male voice standing beside her.

Hope straightened, “Owen, you startled me.”

“You like it?” the grounds man asked.

“The crocus? Yes, it’s lovely.”

“I knew you would, that’s why I left it there.” He grinned.

“You’re the only one who notices little things like that,” he said as he walked away.

Hope watched the retreating slate blue coveralls of the elderly man. He had thick grey hair that she always thought looked like soft grey flannel and he was often unshaven with grey and white stubble protruding on his sanguine face. For a man, he was short, just three inches above Hope’s 5’4” frame. She would often see him talking with the shy children as they waited for their bus, trying to go out of his way to make them smile. Hope couldn’t help it, maybe it was the counselor in her, but she felt a little suspicious of him. Predatory men were always talking to the shy or outcast ones, trying to earn their trust. He had said she was the only one who noticed things like a misplaced flower? Was he watching her? She decided she was going to keep an eye on him.

She continued on her way to get Kelsey. As Kelsey trailed behind, Hope noticed that she seemed to be eyeing her warily.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Kelsey?” Hope asked when they had gotten back to her office.

Kelsey plopped into the chair and crossed her arms. Hope saw Kelsey glance briefly at the poster on the wall with a small terrier wearing heart-shaped glasses that said Acceptance above the dog and below said, is seeing with your heart, not with your eyes.

“Kelsey, how have you been doing lately?” Hope sat in her office chair and leaned

towards the little girl with her elbow resting on her knee and her chin in her palm.

The seven-year-old sat there, jaw set. Hope removed her chin from her palm and cocked her head.

“Your teacher tells me that you’ve become really quiet in class. Do you want to tell me about it?”

Kelsey narrowed her eyes, but still said nothing.

Hope softened her voice, “Kelsey, you can talk with me about anything,” a knot of dread started forming in the pit of her stomach. When students didn’t want to talk, it was usually something serious. And that is when Hope felt the most protective of children.

The little girl rolled her eyes and started kicking her feet back and forth. Hope leaned back in her chair.

“Well, maybe I should call your parents for a group–”

“NO!” Kelsey screamed.

“Why is that Kelsey?”

She became sullen again.

“Kelsey, is there something going on in your family?” Hope paused. “Your father works in real estate, doesn’t he?”

Hope waited.

“How about your mother? She’s a nurse?”

Kelsey looked down at the floor. “No, she bakes.”

Hope craned her head downwards to try to look her in the eyes.

“Ok, that’s good. What about your dad?” Hope tried.

To give Kelsey an opportunity to think, Hope forced herself to wait. A lot of the children who came in didn’t need to be cajoled too much to confide in her. It was often a relieved look on their small faces that she found when they shared the big burdens of their little worlds. Some would be angry, some would cry, some would be fearful of getting into trouble for what they told her. Hope always tried to give them encouragement, to make them feel safe, to point out their strengths, and those of their family if a group meeting became necessary. She helped in any way she could, even at times, involving the school’s social worker to help the families find the resources they needed to support them. But it was always the child who was walled up inside and didn’t want to talk that Hope became anxious about the most. They were the ones for whom Hope had to intervene. They were the ones who kept her up at night, wondering if they were safe.

“Kelsey?” Hope pressed.

“Shut up!” Kelsey yelled, “Just shut up! I can’t talk to you!”

“Why?”

Suddenly the little girl burst into tears.

“Kelsey,” Hope wanted to gather the little girl in her arms, “you can tell me, you can tell me.”

Kelsey walked over to Hope and buried her face into Hope’s soft angora short-sleeve sweater.

“My daddy’s gone away,” she managed in between sobs. “My mommy said he

was a faggot and that's why he's gone."

Kelsey swiped at her tears.

"My mommy said she hated my daddy. She said he was a horrible person and that's why I can't see him anymore," Kelsey started trembling even more and crying harder.

"Oh, Kelsey....." Hope stopped; she almost started crying along with her. It was always hard to see children go through such confusion that caused them pain. But it also made her angry. If people were going to become parents, Hope thought they should put their children first. These people who get pregnant by accident and go "Ooops, guess I'm having a kid!" and they don't even realize how lucky they are, Hope thought.

Hope pulled Kelsey away from her so she could look at her. She brushed the little girl's blonde hair off her face.

"Kelsey, listen to me. I know it's hard for you to understand, but your parents are going through a very difficult time right now. And though they may not be showing it right now, they both love you very much, ok?"

The little girl's teary eyes looked doubtfully back at her.

"I know you're scared. But no matter what happens, you do not need anyone's permission to love your daddy, okay?"

Kelsey nodded, but looked down again.

"Kelsey. This is not your fault. You did not cause this to happen."

She sniffled, "But I was bad in school."

"No, this has nothing to do with school. This is not your fault at all."

Although still tearing up, the girl nodded.

“This is not your fault,” Hope repeated firmly.

Sitting back down, Hope took a deep breath and grabbed a couple of tissues from the box on the desk and handed them to Kelsey. She sat there silently; face etched in concern, and watched Kelsey wipe her small crumpled face. Hope decided to explain what Kelsey’s father was going through, about being scared to tell the truth about himself, and then she pulled out the book, *Daddy’s Roommate*, and read it to her.

“I want to be able to help you in any way that I can. Will you let me do that?”

Kelsey nodded. Relief flooded her face.

“Would you like me to call your mother so she can pick you up early today and the three of us can talk together before you go?” Hope asked gently.

Taking a little bit to consider it, Kelsey nodded her head again.

“Ok,” Hope held out her hand for Kelsey’s hand so she could give her a reassuring squeeze.

As Hope listened to the phone ring in her ear, she could feel spring’s afternoon sun warming her through the window. She could hear birds somewhere chirping joyfully. This is what she loved most about spring; the renewal, the awakening. Transitions of change never cease, and Hope always welcomed the signs of beauty, growth, and regeneration. Spring is like a promise kept; a promise that no matter how harshly winter mistreats us, there is always another chance to push through and gradually bloom again.

“Hello,” she heard a hollow voice answer.

“Hello, Mrs. Collins?”

The woman on the other end hesitated before saying, “Yes?”

“My name is Hope–” she heard the woman snort, but ignored it and continued, “Hope Carter, I am the school counselor at Harper and I am calling about your daughter, Kelsey.”

“What has she done now?” There was exasperation in her voice.

“She has done nothing wrong, I assure you. I would just like a conference with you to discuss Kelsey’s well-being–” She was about to say, “and yours too” but she was cut off.

“Kelsey’s well-being?! You don’t think I take care of my daughter? What are you accusing me of?” Mrs. Collins almost yelled into the phone.

“I am not accusing you of anything, Mrs. Collins,” Hope shook her head, pinched the bridge of her nose. “Kelsey’s teacher was concerned that she was withdrawn and I met with her to ask her about it. I am concerned about getting both of you through a tough transition, and I would like to help.”

Hope was starting to worry about meeting with such a hostile personality face-to-face. She could see now that Kelsey was intimidated by these traits in her mother.

Mrs. Collins let out a loud, annoyed sigh.

“Would you be available to meet with me?” Hope asked.

“I have to come in right now?” Mrs. Collins was perplexed.

“You can come in now, or after school today, or if this is an inconvenient time for

you, we can always schedule a later time--”

“Oh, no!” Mrs. Collins interrupted. “I wouldn’t want to put *you* out! So I’ll be right there,” she finished.

Then Hope heard the phone click and the line go dead. She stared at the receiver in anger for a few moments before hanging it up. Hope couldn’t stand it when people were rude. She could excuse some of the anger as it was often attributed to other stressors in their lives, and in Mrs. Collins’s case it was her divorce, but Hope felt she deserved the professional courtesy of being treated like she knew what she was doing. She sighed and lowered her head and rubbed the pressure points on her temples.

After making herself a cup of tea and giving Kelsey a fruit cup from the cafeteria, Hope looked out the window over to where the crocus was sitting and saw the petals bend in a breeze. She heard a car door slam from in the direction of the bus zone. A slightly overweight woman in khakis and a light blue polo shirt came marching up the walk. Her angry face twisted even more when the woman realized she would have to step aside to continue marching past Owen, who was edging the lawn.

Hope furrowed her brow when she realized what was about to happen. At that moment the woman’s foot trampled on the delicate crocus.

Hope looked disappointedly at the crushed flower. The petals were askew, broken and dangling stem, and the torn leaf. How could she not have seen it there? She heard the door swing open behind her.

“Kelsey!” the voice from the telephone scolded.

Hope set her jaw and took a deep breath through her nose as she turned around.

She tried to remain calm as she walked over to Mrs. Collins.

“Mrs. Collins,” Hope said.

“So you’re the counselor,” Mrs. Collins’s eyes narrowed.

“Mrs. Collins,” she said again, “I think we should shut the door.”

“Oh, you think so, huh? Well, I don’t see the need to keep things private now, since Kelsey’s already blabbed my problems to everyone!” the woman retorted.

“She has not blabbed. And she has not told everyone about anything. She has only confided in me. Privately,” Hope said firmly.

Mrs. Collins turned and glared at her daughter. Hope followed her gaze and saw shame and fear on Kelsey’s face.

“Mrs. Collins,” Hope said quickly to avert her.

When the woman was again fixed on her, she continued, “I understand that you are going through a very rough time right now and that you are angry. You have every right to be upset and to mourn. But your daughter should not be a target for your anger.

Mrs. Collins stared at her and crossed her arms, “How I handle parenting is my business!”

“And I can respect that, but I would like to help you—”

“Help me?!” Mrs. Collins seethed, “Of all the ridiculous things! If you want to help someone, why don’t you go try to fix that faggot husband of mine?!”

“Mrs. Collins, you will please refrain from using such derogatory language,” Hope said harshly.

Kelsey burst into tears.

“Oh, Kelsey,” Hope knelt down in front of her.

“Don’t you dare touch her!”

Hope looked up incredulously at Mrs. Collins who was still planted in the same spot and still had her arms crossed.

“Your daughter is in pain! Like you, she is hurting too!” Hope said, “This divorce does not affect just you!”

“Look at your daughter,” Hope told Mrs. Collins. The woman still stared at her.

“Look at her!” Hope said more sternly than she had intended.

Mrs. Collins rolled her eyes, but did as requested. She and Hope looked at Kelsey, the tears streaming down her face, the fear in her eyes. Mrs. Collins looked at her for quite a few moments. To Hope it was like she was seeing, actually seeing, her daughter for the first time in months. She seemed to soften as she uncrossed her arms. Kelsey got up from her chair and ran to her mother.

Hope was almost surprised, but greatly relieved, to see Mrs. Collins enfold her arms around Kelsey. The little girl squeezed into her mother. Hope stood up. Mrs. Collins bent her head over her daughter’s shoulder and started to sob.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t been there for you, honey,” Mrs. Collins whispered. Kelsey clutched her even more.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Collins looked up at Hope with bloodshot eyes.

“Can you really help us?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, Mrs. Collins—”

“Please, it’s Shayla.”

Hope smiled at her, "Yes, Shayla. In any way that I can." She cocked her head.

Shayla reached out her hand to Hope. Hope walked over and boldly embraced them both.

"Things will get better. I promise."

Ties Unbound

Shayla felt the need to escape. To get away from the smell of the future, the thought of growing old was repulsive. But the future was a circle, tied in knots, the same as the past, strung together by family. She needed to ask for the down payment money to open her bakery. And the only one to ask was her grandmother.

Shayla strode down the hallway in the assisted living facility where her grandmother had her own apartment. The place smelled of decay and urine, which lemon-scented disinfectant attempted to mask. After she yelled for Shayla to come in, she motioned to sit at the table. It was a one-bedroom apartment with an open living, dining room, and kitchen area. Shayla thought the kitchenette was just for show, but her grandmother had milk in the fridge and a box of crackers in a drawer. Shayla had no idea why her grandmother put them there because she used to put crackers in the cupboard at her house. Instinctively Shayla reached out and straightened the scattered papers on the table. It reminded her of how her grandmother used to habitually straighten fabric squares for her quilts when she sat at this table in her house.

“Did you get that Word Search book I sent you in the mail?” she asked.

“No. I got one from your stepmom, though. It’s right there, on that side,” her grandmother pointed to the opposite side of the worn table.

Shayla furrowed her brow. “Did Eliza bring it in for you? Does she grab your mail for you?”

“No, but your dad does. I think. Maybe it’s one of those nurses, the one that doesn’t steal.” She shrugged. “Well, it gets in here anyhow. I should thank her when she

comes in here again.”

Shayla sighed. “You do that, Grandma.”

Shayla got up from her seat and walked to the other side of the table. She picked up the newsprint booklet to see if it was the one she sent. Sure enough, the familiar red cover promising hours of fun was what she found. Shayla flipped it open to see if her grandmother had worked on any of the puzzles and found no pen or pencil circles anywhere. She had sent this to her three months ago.

Shayla looked up, scanned the room. In her grandmother’s house her furniture looked at home. But not here. Here her furniture looked like the old, worn-out antiques that they were against the white walls of the newer construction building. Shayla’s grandmother looked much older and out of place here too. Although, she didn’t look so old and decrepit as someone who had one foot in the grave, as her father had led her to believe.

He had called, which was unusual, and left a curt message that if Shayla wanted to see her grandmother while she was still alive that she’d “better get yer ass up here.” Shayla stood there, unsure of what to say to her grandmother, and realized that her father had said it like that just to guilt her into coming up to see her grandmother. She should have figured. Her father was always a master manipulator.

Shayla noticed the picture frame that she’d sent her grandmother that she bought at the culinary school bookstore and walked over to the antique cabinet to pick it up. It was just a trinket frame with her culinary school’s name and logo on it. Her

grandmother had put her graduation picture in it. She stood next to her father, she in the black robe and tassled cap and he in a short-sleeved mint green button down shirt and blue jeans. They were standing in front of the library doors, so they could get away from all the crowds of proud parents taking pictures with their kids. She was smiling, he wasn't.

"I didn't know you'd kept this," she said.

"Hm? Let me see that."

Part of her did feel guilty for staying away after graduating culinary school. Shayla felt guilty for leaving her grandmother here with just her father and his wife to take care of her grandmother. They were not the ideal people to take care of anybody; they were two selfish people. But there too Shayla felt guilty. Shayla had moved away from her hometown, the only place she'd ever known, just to put physical distance between her father and herself. Shayla felt guilty because he had tried to be a better parent than her grandfather.

Shayla's father had loaned her money so she could make it through culinary school. She had two kids to support and when financial aid left her short on funds, she'd had to quietly and humbly ask him for a loan. But Shayla's stepmother couldn't find out because she would have forbidden it. Her father had given Shayla money and food when she needed it, even when asking for help had felt like her gut and heart were melding together in an acidic clump. She hadn't wanted to ask him for a loan. She had wanted to make it on her own so he wouldn't have something to hold over her head. But two failed

marriages had left Shayla with two young children, no money, and no future. Knowing that her father didn't earn much money at the cheese processing plant made it even worse to ask.

But her desire to get away from her father had started a long time ago, when he had put emotional distance between them after her mother passed away. He would look the other way while her grandfather mentally, emotionally, and verbally abused her. "You'll never make it in the military, you know that Shayla? You ain't strong enough. You're too picky." "Why you always gotta have yer nose in a book fer?" "Goddammit Shayla, go help yer grandma set the damn table, we gotta eat!" "You better enjoy those candy bars now, y'know that Shayla? You get diabetes like me, boy, and you won't be able to have that shit no more." "You won't amount to anything Shayla, because you gotta work for it, and you don't work!" "You know what pisses me off, Shayla? Hmm? It's you don't make supper for your dad when he come home from a long day at work!"

There was more than one occasion when her grandfather had come very close to striking her. She would like to say that's when her father stepped in, put an end to it. But that's not what happened. Instead, he ended up being abusive too.

One time, she and her sisters were goofing off while in the department store and their father got so angry that they wouldn't "settle down" that he dragged them into a clothing rack and beat them so hard that their bottoms were black and blue. Other times she would get yelled at, insulted, put down, swore at, and made to feel as if she never mattered if for no other reason than her father was angry that one of his get-rich-quick schemes wasn't working out. Shayla would be emotionally manipulated to feel

sorry for him after the incidents of abuse. “You didn’t tell me you wanted to go to town with me, that’s why I just left.” “You didn’t vacuum this week so you don’t get to see the play yer friend’s in.” “How am I supposed to know I’d hit ya that hard, you didn’t tell me, I can’t read yer damn mind!” He had her believing that his actions and reactions to her were entirely her fault. Shayla learned not to trust her father, her grandfather, herself.

Her grandmother handed the picture frame back to her. “Yeah, I kept it. Why? You want it? You can have it. Take it with you. Take it with you when you leave.”

“No, Grandma, that’s ok. I’m just glad to see you still have it.”

“You can have it if you want it.”

Shayla set the frame back down in its spot, next to the wedding photo of her father and his wife, Eliza. He wore a black tux, white bow tie, white cummerbund that protruded over his beer gut. But she wore a Sunday dress, beige linen with a white silhouette flower pattern, and a matching short jacket that covered her shoulders. She was half a foot shorter than her father. They were both smiling.

“You can have that one too,” her grandmother said.

Shayla gave her a half-smile and shook her head. “Thank you, though.”

After her father married his wife, the emotional distance increased even more. Shayla’s stepmother, a woman her grandfather called “that nosy bitch” – the only thing he and Shayla ever agreed on – never wanted Shayla around, or calling. In an already torn and dysfunctional family, her stepmother had wanted an even greater divide. To this day Shayla still did not have her father’s phone number after they changed it so she couldn’t call them. Not that she had before they changed it, except to check on her

grandma.

Shayla sat back down, staring at her grandmother, gray and white hair, cataracts that made her eyes look vacant. She wanted to ask her so many things. She wanted to ask her about the uncle she'd never met because he'd left their home in Iowa as soon as he'd turned eighteen and never looked back. Shayla wanted to ask her why she had put up with her grandfather for so many years. But she didn't want to deal with her grandmother crying.

She had left him, once. Her grandfather, a wretched drunk, would spend all their grocery money on booze at the local bar and then go to a friend's to continue drinking. He would go home in the early morning when most people were waking up to get ready for the day. When Shayla's father and uncle, who shared a bed in the living room, got up to get ready for school and made noise doing so, her grandfather would wake up from just falling asleep. Pissed off he would grab his belt and whip her father and uncle with it.

The same man, years later at Thanksgiving would tell Shayla, "I'm thankful ye ain't goin' into the military because you wouldn't never make it, y'know that? Huh?" An insult aimed at her for not being born a boy who would go into the Army, Navy, or Air Force like all her male relatives had done, including her father. Shayla was thankful too. She didn't want to end up like them, but she didn't dare say so.

Shayla wanted to ask her grandmother, why didn't you stay gone? But she knew that would upset her grandma and she never wanted to do that. Sometimes, without meaning to, she would make a comment about her grandfather or ask a question about

them together and her grandmother would get flustered and start weeping. When Shayla's father found out, which he usually did by grilling her grandma about everything that was said during her visits, Shayla would get an ass chewing. An icy glare, then the cold shoulder for weeks, sometimes months. Not that she cared. She just felt bad for upsetting her grandma. She hadn't wanted to keep doing that to her, so Shayla moved away.

Shayla looked at her, smiled uneasily, wondered how many minutes had passed while they sat there silently. Her grandmother worked her jaw, up and down, trying to breathe as if she were continually gasping for air. To her grandfather, her grandmother had been a true woman: she cooked, cleaned, and stayed quiet except for the expected "Yes dear, yes dear" when he yelled insults or barked instructions at her. Oftentimes Shayla wondered how a woman who had been strong enough to leave her grandfather once had become such a passive spectator in her own life. But back in the '40s and '50s women didn't leave their husbands. They didn't, couldn't work outside the home once they had a family. And so she imagined there must have been pressure applied to her from her parents and Shayla's grandfather to go back to him. When Shayla was younger, she would go over to her grandparents' house a lot just so she could help her grandma with her chores. They sat on the patio together and shucked corn and shelled peas in the summertime. Shayla remembered the kerplunk sound the peas made as they plopped into the white enamel bowl, and her grandfather cussing and swearing to high heaven, banging the garage door to come out onto the patio. He wanted to know why Grandma hadn't canned "the goddamned fish I went and bought from that fuckin'

seafood guy.” Only once a year a man in town who’d been fishing in the Columbia would sell salmon for cheaper than the stores. He would set up temporary shop in the building across from the old cannery. Always the penny-pincher her grandfather bought a large quantity in order to get a discount on the already cheaper than store prices. That meant Grandma was responsible for preserving the food since the kitchen was her domain.

Shayla’s grandma responded with her usual “yes dear, yes dear” platitude. Shayla became angry with her grandfather. What was stopping him from doing it? Why was he ordering her grandma around when they were already doing something? He’d only gotten back five minutes ago. He looked at Shayla, spit his wad of tobacco on the concrete and told her to keep shelling. “By God, you don’t know what real work is, ye know that, Shayla?” She was twelve, babysitting a lot in order to buy her own clothes because Shayla’s father didn’t want to buy them for her anymore, and taking care of the house and her siblings. Who the hell did her grandfather think he was to be saying that to her?

When Grandma came back after the bowl was nearly overflowing, she had another bowl ready in her hands. While they listened to the kerplunk sounds again she asked her grandma why she had married her grandpa. “At the time, he had money.” She shrugged and then under her breath, “But I wouldn’t do it again.”

Shayla was shocked to hear that confession from her grandma. Her grandma had never said anything like that before. Later that day when her grandma searched for another western novel that she thought appropriate for Shayla to devour, it occurred to her that her grandma didn’t read the western novels too. She always saw her pick out a

romance novel, the ones she wouldn't let Shayla read. Shayla walked out to their backyard to climb the tree, her usual reading spot. Remembering that now, Shayla asked her grandmother if she had read the last book she brought her.

"Oh, not yet. It's over by my chair there," she pointed towards a small end table by her green rocking chair.

"Have you started it? What do you think of it?" Shayla asked.

"Big letters, I can see it," she smiled.

"Yeah, I got you the large-print version."

"I thank you, I thank you."

"It's my favorite book, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, so I wanted to get you a version you could read."

"Mmmhmm. I thank you, I thank you."

"Are you going to read it?" She already knew the answer, but asked anyway.

She shrugged. She seemed dismissive of the book, but Shayla knew she still read because she would read the Bible and her Lutheran prayer booklet, both in large print.

"Have you read any other books lately?" Shayla thought maybe her grandma had grabbed a book from the library upstairs.

"Nope," she shook her head vigorously.

"Do you want me to bring you a different book?"

"Nope."

Shayla sat there. She sighed.

"Grandma, do you do any more reading?"

“Nope,” she shook her head again, “Not since Grandpa died.”

Shayla remembered that phone call from her father. It was two years ago. He’d said that she only had a grandma now. Shayla asked him what happened.

“I dunno,” he choked.

“Is he still at the hospital? Can I say good-bye?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“He’s been dead three days, funeral’s tomorrow.” And he hung up. Shayla couldn’t believe him. He hadn’t *wanted* to tell her, he had done so out of obligation. He might have thought Shayla wouldn’t care, that she wouldn’t come. But after her grandfather became sick and was put in the assisted living facility he had started to change. Shayla started to think he felt sorry for how he’d treated her all those years just by the look he’d give her as he sat helpless in his wheelchair. Shayla was pissed that her father hadn’t told her on the day of his passing. But she would admit; it felt like a burden had been lifted.

When Shayla got to the funeral, her grandmother was sitting in between her father and stepmother. She couldn’t sit next to her. Her grandmother was crying. A lot. Afterwards when a friend from her church shared her condolences, she asked her grandmother if she would go back to the house now. “Nope! I’m staying there in that assisted living place ‘til the day I die, just like him!” Her grandmother, upset, had made that statement with ferocious conviction. Her grandmother’s friend and Shayla were

shocked. Shayla had thought her grandmother would be relieved that he was gone.

And now, sitting at the oval wood table that had been in her grandparents' house, Shayla realized she didn't know what to say to her grandmother because she didn't know who this woman was without her grandfather there. Her grandmother was so different now. She didn't seem to want to do anything that she used to enjoy. The uncomfortable and heavy silence blanketed them like the quilts she used to sew. Shayla got up from the table and walked over to her grandma and hugged her.

"Well, I should get going, Grandma, I've got work tomorrow."

"Ok, honey. I thank you for coming. I'm real glad to see you."

"Me too. I...I'll bring you another book."

"Ok, honey. I thank you, I thank you." She kissed Shayla on the cheek.

Shayla smiled awkwardly and backed out the door of the apartment. Shayla stood there a moment, sighed heavily, wishing she had more of a reason to be there, regretting not having the courage to ask if her grandmother would like to be part of her business endeavor. She wanted to be close to her grandma again, the way they had been when she was twelve, sitting on their porch as her grandmother set out sun tea to brew for the day, and talked about school and boys. She wished she could talk about books with her again. Shayla heard the 20" TV that she'd given her when she moved away flick on and the loud theme music for Jeopardy! permeated the air. Shayla wondered if it felt liberating for her to be in charge of the remote for the first time in her life. When Grandpa had had the TV on she would just sit and read. Realizing that her grandma didn't want to do that anymore Shayla thought, perhaps she doesn't feel the

need to escape anymore. But Shayla did. She didn't like the long, torturous silences that had settled between them. As she walked down the hallway once again, Shayla couldn't help thinking, maybe it would be easier if she just stayed gone.

Over the Surface

Shayla didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay sitting in her bakery. And sip her coffee at a bistro table amongst her customers. But she knew that her two teenagers would be there soon to collect her for physical therapy.

She stared into her coffee. She blew on it again to send more ripples over the surface. Shayla looked up and saw Manuel, the Sous-Chef Pâtissier she'd hired only two months before her accident. She saw him hand a raspberry Charlotte Russe to a customer. It was Shayla's personal favorite. The lightness of the ladyfingers and the Bavarian crème melt in the mouth, evaporating like a summer day with the aftertaste of raspberry sweetness still on the tongue. It was that moment of a customer's eyes widening in surprise as the Charlotte dissipated in their mouth that brought Shayla the most pleasure, even more so than the ensuing satisfied smile.

Shayla sighed. What she wouldn't give to be back in her kitchen preparing the 2" individual cakes that she'd developed from the regular 6" cakes she'd learned in culinary school, or frosting a batch of cupcakes. Looking down at her wheelchair, she cursed it, and the negligent college girl who put her in it.

It had been a month since she was released from the hospital after the multi-car pile up on the Interstate. While in the hospital, a blood clot lodged in her brain had caused a stroke. Not only did she need to heal from the accident, she also had to recover from the damage caused by the stroke. It all increased the amount of physical therapy she needed. She carefully brought the cup of coffee to her lips, noticing a slight tremor in her hand. Manuel came over, carrying a plate.

“Here you go. A croissant while you wait,” he said.

“Oh, thank you Manuel.”

“Everything is running smoothly. Morning sales are at \$446. Three deliveries today.”

“That’s good! Can you make sure to take extra dough sheets out to thaw tonight for the cinnamon roll special tomorrow?”

“Yes, Chef. Anything more?”

“No, I think that’s it,” Shayla smiled, “Thank you, Manuel, you’re doing a great job.”

“Thank you, chef. I hope your therapy goes well today.”

Shayla smiled and nodded at him. If only they didn’t work together. She’d like to sit across a white clothed table from him, enjoying a steak dinner, and talking about their mutual interests, such as horse racing. As she got to know him more, the more she was interested. But she figured with her luck, she shouldn’t be mixing work with pleasure.

It bothered her that she couldn’t be back there, taking inventory with him. If she could have her way, all her appointments would be at the same time every day so she could plan her days around them. Shayla liked to plan her days. Pastry chefs are taught to use exact measurements, exact cooking times, and to maintain control and cleanliness in the kitchen. Where carpenters measured twice and cut once, pastry chefs scaled twice and baked once.

She had naturally inclined toward that regimen after her mother died from

Guillan-Barré syndrome when Shayla was eleven. Her father never had to do the housework while her mother was alive. Afterwards he became reluctant to work the washer and dryer, except when everyone ran out of underwear, or to run the noisy dishwasher so they would have a drinking glass. Clutter in their house had been evident everywhere from the kitchen table that had never been cleared since the day Mom died, to the pile of cracked and hole-worn work boots that grew in the corner of the entryway, collecting dust, to stacks of used papers, unread books, ancient magazines, and scratched vinyl records found on every open available space everywhere else and in between.

There were piles of old cardboard boxes from TV dinners and Pasta Helpers thrown to the side of the pantry or left on the counter near the microwave. Sometimes they would be taken out to the trash to make room for others to take their place or her dad would finally get sick of them falling over into his narrow clutter-lined walkway and would take them out. But usually they remained there to be walked over, crushed in his pathway until they were considered part of the carpet. The clutter plugged the hole of hurt until there was nothing left.

It had left Shayla, the oldest of her three siblings, to bathe them, make their school lunches, and launder their clothes. And she had done so by keeping a list with her and checking off her tasks as she went. She plugged their holes of hurt with keeping busy and with food.

Before her accident, Shayla kept a black date book with her at all times. It was essential. There were supply deliveries to her bakery and deliveries her bakery did for

customers, school functions to attend, and her kids' extra-curriculars to schedule. She'd had her date book in the car with her, as she always did when making a delivery, on the day of her accident, but it had been destroyed. And no matter how much she reminded Elliott that she needed another one to keep track of her physical therapy appointments and the scheduling for the bakery, her son laughed and never bothered to grab one at the store.

"Mom, I'll remember to take you," Elliott had said.

Shayla glanced at the clock on the wall. They were five minutes late. Which worried her, she just wanted them to show up. So she would know they were safe.

She heard the jingle of the bell on the door, and stiffly turned to find Elliott and Kelsey hurrying in. Elliott, short smoke brown tousled hair, some heavy metal band t-shirt on, a dangling chain attached to his wallet and jeans. Kelsey, blonde hair, chipped blue polished nails, small hoop earrings, thick black eyeliner across her upper lids.

"Sorry, we're a little late..."Kelsey said.

"Why are you late? Are you okay?" Shayla asked. She looked at Elliott, who had just learned to drive a year and a half ago. Then at Kelsey who still had two years before she took driver's ed.

"I had a report I was researching for," Kelsey rushed to say.

Shayla looked from Elliott to Kelsey.

"Oh, a report, huh?" Shayla said. "Did you meet a boy?"

"I was at the library." Kelsey shifted in her seat, lowered her eyes.

“Elliott?” she asked.

“She was, Mom. That’s where I got her.” Elliott rolled her eyes, then glared at Kelsey.

“Knock it off,” Shayla said.

“What?” Elliott said.

“You know what. Stop being hostile towards your sister. So what’s this report you have to do?”

“Well, my history teacher just gave me this assignment and it’s due day after tomorrow,” Kelsey said.

Shayla sighed. “Why can’t your teachers give you more time? They need to allow things like that to be scheduled for. What if you’d had a swim meet tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know.” Kelsey looked off toward the cashier counter.

“God, Mom,” Elliott said.

“What do you say that for?”

“It’s not like she can control her teachers!”

“I don’t know where this attitude is coming from, but you need to quit it right now.”

“Whatever. Can we just take you to physical therapy now?” Elliott said. He grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and pulled Shayla around to the door.

“Please stop, Elliott. Stop it right now.” Shayla seized the wheels with her hands, “I’m perfectly capable of handling my own chair, thank you.”

Elliott snorted. "Have it your way then."

He brushed past Shayla, almost tripping over the wheelchair. Elliott threw the door open, clanging the bell, and briskly walked to the car. He slammed the car door shut.

"Kel, go hold the door open for me. Please."

Shayla caught the look of a woman sitting nearby. "I'm so sorry. Teenage angst." Shayla chuckled slightly.

Kelsey walked around her, kept her eyes averted, but held the door. She walked slowly behind Shayla as they made their way across the parking lot. After Kelsey watched Shayla struggle into the front passenger seat, she put the wheelchair in the trunk. Shayla glanced over at Elliott who was texting on his phone.

"Put that thing away. Those damn things cause accidents."

Elliott looked squarely at Shayla. "We're not even moving, Mother!"

"Don't say Mother like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're gonna put another word after it." Shayla adjusted her seat belt. "We're late, let's go."

Shayla pretended to smooth out her pants. Looking ahead out the windshield, she waited. When she didn't hear the car starting, she looked over at Elliott who was staring at her.

Elliott shook his head. "Un-freakin-believable!" He grasped the steering wheel and hastily threw the key in the ignition.

“Ok, so maybe the phone thing was a bad joke...” Shayla said.

“Pssst!” Elliott let out.

Shayla sighed heavily. “Ell, I know. I’m sorry.” Shayla reached over and rubbed his shoulder.

“You know, Mom, it’s not funny what happened to you. I wish you’d quit making light of it, or quit acting like it didn’t happen. Do you realize Kelsey wouldn’t stop crying for two days when the doctors weren’t sure if you’d come out of it or not?”

“Kelsey? Is that true?” Shayla asked and turned to look at her daughter.

“Well, yeah, Mom. We were both scared,” Kelsey said, “We thought you were going to die.”

“Well, I’m sorry, I guess I didn’t realize how much it affected you two. I’ve been so absorbed with getting life back to normal this past month that I guess I didn’t stop to look at how you guys were doing.”

Elliott exchanged a look with Kelsey in the rearview mirror.

“Sure, Mom,” Kelsey said quietly.

“Look,” Shayla turned and rubbed Kelsey’s knee. “I realize now you guys were scared. To tell you the truth, so was I. I couldn’t help but wonder if I would make it out of the hospital so I could take care of you two. I didn’t want you to have to grow up too soon, the way I did. I’m here to take care of you, not to have you take care of an invalid. It’s...I’m your mother...I have to be here, I need to be here for you. But, you’re right, I, of all people, should’ve known better about what it’s like when your mother is lying in the hospital. I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier, Elliott. You have no idea how frustrating it is

for a mother to be reliant on her children. And that's not something I want."

"We don't mind, Mom," Kelsey said.

Elliott chuckled, "Yeah, just so long as you don't get used to it!"

"Very funny, smart Alec." Shayla smiled.

Kelsey gave a small giggle.

Elliott leaned over to give Shayla a hug.

"We should probably get going now. We shouldn't be rushing to get there,"

Shayla said.

As they maneuvered out of the parking lot toward the traffic light, a semi truck came rumbling up the lane into the lot. As it passed in front of them, they could see the Sysco logo on the side. The truck kept going even as a car, unable to see past a big SUV parked next to it, backed up. The car slammed on its brakes, barely missing the trailer.

Shayla looked back over to Elliott.

"Let's just get there in one piece. I don't want you to end up with a hole in your life the way I did."

Sanctimony

Shayla wasn't sure how long he'd been following her. She first became aware of his presence while at the grocery store when she saw him duck behind the crackers shelves while she was picking up tangerines. That was the day her divorce had been finalized. Then when she was out in the parking lot a red Sunfire swerved to miss her, but it didn't miss the cart. She didn't know how she got out of the way. When she looked behind her all she saw was his shadow. Shayla didn't know if she'd been shoved in the way, or rescued. That had been the same day she'd stopped herself from selling her wedding ring at the pawnshop.

There was another time, down at the water's rocky edge where she was watching the boats trying to relax after the litany of special orders, several deliveries, and a late rush before closing up her bakery that day. Sensing someone standing behind her, she looked and caught him moving behind a tree. When she asked a jogger if she'd seen that man the jogger looked at her questioningly and shook his head. Shayla walked over to the tree prepared to yell at him, but nobody was there. That had followed a night of crying into her pillow because she had realized that day had been her wedding anniversary.

She saw him again in her apartment, behind the refrigerator door, but when she backed away and the refrigerator light went out, so did he. Gone, like that. She wished her ex would disappear from her life like that. Unable to explain it, she told her friend Andy. She didn't want to be alone anymore. He suggested going away to a religious retreat with him and his wife that weekend. So she jumped at the opportunity.

It was cold out. It had snowed earlier. Shayla looked out the window of the bus as it rumbled up the mountainside, at the white fluff that looked like blown-in insulation, except the only insulation this snow offered was to keep the cold in. She hated the cold most of all, especially the way it crept into impossible places. Places not even a curious lover's tongue could find.

Shayla looked across the aisle at Andy. He had said it would be a good way for Shayla to bond with Talia. She valued her threadbare friendship with Andy. It hadn't always been this way. Not until Talia. Shayla had been surprised when Andy had joined a church. It was one of those community churches that had a band that played Christian rock songs for their congregational singing. One where Talia already belonged.

The Andy she had grown up with, who had shared orange creamsicles with her in sixth grade while lamenting his parent's splitting up, had distanced himself from all things religious when his church-going parents eventually divorced. She and Andy had gone to parties together in high school. They even crashed a college party once where the entertainment came in the form of an eight-foot scarecrow stuffed with fireworks. After a lot of Miller Draft Lite had been drunk, the scarecrow was lit on fire by one of the college students who rented the house. Firecracker fingers burst and caught the scarecrow's flannel shirt on fire. Roman candles shot up out of the head. When one of the lit Roman candles fell and then shot off in their direction, Andy had pulled Shayla towards him, out of the way.

"I think that's our cue," Andy had said.

When heading to his Firebird, she shivered against the autumn air and Andy had taken off his hooded sweatshirt to let her put it on. She remembered it had smelled like sandalwood and nachos.

So when Andy invited her along, Shayla had jumped at the chance to spend time with him again. Shayla had reservations about a Christian retreat. Was God real or was he a made up entity used to control the masses, especially women? When she was younger, she'd believed everything the Bible said, no questions, because good people didn't hurt you. Then after her husband started hurting her, she began to question her beliefs. She began to question if she was good or someone who deserved being hurt because God punished those who deserved it.

And she wanted to know. Especially with the man who was following her. She couldn't explain it, but she knew he wasn't a man. She was scared. It was ethereal, but she didn't believe that crap. But in college she had been taught about binaries. Did evil need to exist for good to also? She planned on asking the pastor that. She wanted to know how God could allow her husband to cheat on her and leave her for the other woman. Shayla briefly wondered if asking the questions she wanted to ask would alienate Andy from her if he somehow found out what she was asking the pastor.

She shifted her weight, looked up at the bare trees that looked as if they had calcified with bone. Glancing over at Andy and Talia's seats, she noticed that Talia was talking to her friend Glen. He was one of those freaks that thought everyone should follow the Bible to a tee. He once posted on Facebook a link to a blog that blasted *Twilight* as an evil story and he'd commented on how anyone who enjoyed those

movies “was wanting to get in bed with the devil.” He had even criticized one of her comments on Talia's post when Shayla had used a French word because she wasn't speaking English like “we Americans do.” She didn't really know Glen, except by those posts, but she didn't care for him.

She looked at Andy and Talia again. They were the only ones she knew on the bus, besides Glen. Andy caught her glance this time and smiled. He leaned across the aisle towards her. He was a bit overweight now, stocky, like an out of shape ex-athlete. He still had his sandy brown hair that he'd now started to let grow out a little. When they were younger, Shayla's hair had been blonder and now it was a much darker brown.

“What's up?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just wishing global warming would hurry up and get here.”

He chuckled.

Shayla nodded her head toward Glen, “What's he saying?”

“He's asking Talia about whether or not she's going back to Kenya this summer for another mission.”

“Oh. Is she?”

“She hasn't decided yet. It takes a lot of money.”

“I bet. So let me guess, he's offering up some fundraising ideas.”

Andy smiled and gave her a knowing look. Shayla raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, something like that,” he kept smiling.

“What about your kids?”

“Oh, we'll find a way to make it work. Like last time. My mom will most likely help babysit while I'm at work and my sister will probably throw some of her casseroles in the freezer for us to have. Glen's wife offered to sit too, in case my mom needs a break.”

“Mmmhmm,” Shayla said.

“Glen is good people.”

“If you say so.”

“You'll get to know him, you'll see.”

Shayla sighed. She felt like she had to play nice just so she could play second string in the band of favored friends. She thought about Talia and her mission work, building a school for kids whose lives would be very short because vaccines weren't available there to prevent malaria and AIDS. Shayla understood wanting to help people through the missionary work, although she herself would never leave the country.

“I should probably volunteer more to help out. That's what good people do, right?” she asked Andy.

Andy chuckled, “Only if it's something you believe in.”

It scared her to think of the kind of danger that would be there: human trafficking, thievery, losing her passport and not being able to return home. But there were a lot of people to help here too. The homeless, hospice, animal shelters, foster kids. She wondered what compelled Talia to leave her kids, husband, and home to help others in other countries.

They heard Talia laugh loudly and Andy turned towards his wife again. Shayla

watched them for a second. Talia calm and agreeable, Andy attentive and sociable, and Glen relishing their camaraderie. Shayla turned her gaze out the window again. As she watched the evergreens with their piped vanilla frosting limbs reel by, she saw something move quickly in the brush, disturbing the snow and sending it into a white cloud. She tried to glance up to see if snow had fallen from the tree above the shrubbery, but they passed before she could be certain. It was him. She hadn't seen him, but she knew.

Turning back towards Andy and Talia, she leaned over and said, "I just saw something move in the brush out there."

"Oh?" Talia asked.

Shayla leaned closer to Andy to whisper, "I think it's him again."

Talia and Andy exchanged a look.

"Well, you're with us," Andy said. "Nothing bad can happen."

Glen turned around in his seat to look directly at Shayla. She gave an upward nod to acknowledge him. He immediately looked at Talia instead and said, "I've heard that there are bears and cougars up there. But the bears should definitely be hibernating now and the cougars are rarely seen, only their tracks. We have nothing to worry about. God will keep us safe."

Shayla rolled her eyes.

Talia nodded in agreement, "Hmmm, yeah."

"So... do you guys think that it's safe to hike through the woods with predatory animals out there? You don't think one will attack us, do you?" Shayla asked Andy,

ignoring Glen.

“Nah, we're in a large group. They'll be scared off if they are out there. But we'll be fine, Shayla,” Andy said.

“Okay,” she said, still feeling a little unnerved.

“Folks.” The director, a man in his mid-30's, nearly baldhead and the lightest hazel eyes she'd ever seen, stood up at the front of the bus. “Please gather your belongings, as we will be arriving in about five minutes. We will need to unload quickly as the bus is needed back in Edmonds, since they graciously let us borrow it. We will need to stay together on the trail as we head up to the lodge. The forest ranger has asked that we not trample anywhere that is not the trail as the ground is delicate. He said we should also be aware of falling trees.”

“Oh great,” Shayla said, “I come on a retreat to get away from the insanity only to have to worry about impaling trees and cougars that may or may not be making snow move.”

“Shayla!” Andy chuckled, “We'll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

After the bus left, gear strapped to their backs and heavy coats zipped up, they started down the trail. It was wider than she expected. She thought they would have to single-file it down there. It quickly became apparent who knew whom as they broke into little groups for the walk. Shayla walked behind as Andy, Talia, and Glen walked ahead as a threesome. It made her wish she had someone to walk by her side.

It's just a weekend... It's just a work thing... We're just friends... all the excuses,

and she had believed her husband because he was a God-fearing man. She thought she was safe with a man like that, someone who was supposed to take vows seriously, someone who was supposed to believe in marriage. It was too bad that too many of them betrayed their own faith by going against God's wishes like her ex had done. It made her not trust religion or men. Although she felt like there was a void in her that faith had filled before her husband left, she wasn't so sure anymore.

She doubted religion could help her understand men at all, especially the ones like Glen. But she couldn't help but wonder, if Andy and Talia seemed so happily married, could there be hope for her? Shayla wished she had been there more for her husband when the creditors started calling and the IRS garnished their wages instead of yelling at him and making him feel more horrible about their situation. She wished she hadn't made his niece cry on Thanksgiving Day when she'd left without a word after he yelled at her, loud enough for his family to hear him from the basement. She had been banned from his sister's house after that. She didn't blame them; she knew they were protecting their daughter. But she never got to apologize to her niece, or ever hug her again.

The cold was settling around her shoulders like an invisible shawl. Shayla looked forward to the cup of hot cocoa the director had said would be waiting for them. She would've preferred coffee, but that's what was offered. A cracking noise sounded above the chatter somewhere up ahead. She heard a few people gasp in front and she and the threesome sped up to see what it was. The top half part of a tree, laden with wet snow, crashed to the ground.

Shayla was just behind Andy. "Weird."

"Yeah," he said.

They glanced at one another and he cracked up. Glen smirked, rolled his eyes, shook his head. Talia looked at both of them, Andy a little longer, then continued walking. The director, ahead, was telling them to stick close together and be alert. Watching the trees, Shayla couldn't help feeling something was amiss. Maybe it was too quiet. The loudness of destruction had silenced the newcomers, as wilderness once again froze into place. It was uncanny, like a wax museum where everything seemed alive but unmoving. Like death had put a beautiful veil over the living. Shayla kept watching the brush, looking for movement.

It was as she was doing this that she caught sight of something move behind a tree several yards beyond the trail. She looked ahead at Andy walking with Talia and Glen and thought about calling to him. But she thought he'd shrug it off. It was him again. It had to be. Alert, she slowed her pace a little and looked at the spot where she'd seen the movement. She glanced towards Andy again to make sure they weren't too far ahead. When she turned her attention back to the white landscape, Shayla saw something move slowly behind a tree that was closer to the trail. Her heart thumped uncontrollably in her chest and she felt the adrenaline shooting through her bloodstream. Fixated on the thing that was moving, she herself couldn't move. She was curious, it was like a car crash where one shouldn't be looking but it couldn't be helped, like it was an involuntary response. As he came around the side of the tree, she realized he was tall.

“Andy!” she shrieked and ran to catch up with them.

Andy whipped around, “Shayla?”

“He's out there!” She felt herself about to start shaking.

“Where?” He looked over her head, searching.

“Near the trail, over there,” she turned and pointed where she'd been standing.

“I'll go take a look,” Andy said.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” Talia said.

Andy leaned over and kissed his wife on the forehead, “I'll be okay.”

As Andy walked over to the spot, Talia snorted, glanced at Shayla, and then crossed her arms. Glen made a pssst sound and shook his head noticeably so that Shayla wouldn't miss it. Shayla scrunched her face into a frown as she watched Glen. What is his problem, she thought. She rolled her eyes, which Glen caught.

“You know, this isn't one of your movies. This is a waste of time,” Glen said.

“What?” she asked. Andy was approaching them.

“You. And your movies. You're always going on about the storyline of this movie or that movie,” he threw his arms in the air for emphasis, “we live in the real world. If it's an animal, it's more scared of us than we are of it!”

“There's more going on here than you know Glen,” Shayla said and looked at Talia who avoided eye contact.

“Andy?” she asked.

“I didn't see anything, Shayla. I don't know what you saw, but I didn't even see any depressions in the snow from any footprints or animal tracks,” Andy said.

“Ha! There – you see?” Glen said.

“What is wrong with you? I can’t be concerned about my safety?” Shayla asked Glen.

Glen glared at her, but made no response.

“Shayla, there’s no need to panic. We’re in a large group. You’re safe. Trust me,” Andy paused. “Are you ok?”

Shayla swallowed hard, “Yeah, sure.”

Glen shook his head again and muttered something, then louder, “Let’s go.”

Walking to keep up with them this time, she thought about what Glen said. Andy must have told Glen about how much she liked movies. But what was he talking about her to Glen behind her back for? She considered that they may have been talking about movies and then she came up, or rather her opinions came up. I bet that’s what Glen disagrees with the most, my opinions, she thought. She knew she was an opinionated woman and that she shared them freely, which people didn’t always like. But, damn it, she had a brain and she intended to use it. She glanced at Andy. Still, it didn’t make her feel comfortable that it was Glen that he’d been talking to about her. She didn’t know why, but it made her feel disappointed in Andy. He never talked about Glen to her on the few occasions that they’d had a conversation. Maybe that was why – they only had a few occasions to talk on the phone whereas, according to Andy, Glen was over at their house all the time.

“Watch it!” Glen said.

Shayla jumped. She’d been so lost in thought that Glen’s exclamation startled

her. She jerked her head around, looking for the animal.

“What?” she asked.

“You're not on the trail!” Glen said.

Shayla looked down and where the snow had been trampled down for the trail, the rest had been shoved off to form a white curb alongside the trail. This is where her left foot had landed.

“It's barely off the trail, Glen,” Shayla said.

“You keep walking like that and you're going to damage the delicate forest bed. It takes forever for it to return to normal.”

“It's one footprint!” Shayla said. She looked to Andy for support. He avoided eye contact. What the hell, she thought. Shayla shook her head in disgust. Glen started marching ahead and Talia was quick on his heels. Andy looked at Shayla, shrugged, and then he too turned and in a quick pace caught up to Glen and Talia. Andy put his hand on Talia's back and she turned to him. Shayla could see their lips moving.

Her shoulders slumped. She shook her head again and slowly put one foot in front of the other. Shayla couldn't believe that Andy wouldn't stand up for her. What was it with guys and their solidarity? Glen seemed very nit-picky towards her, and she didn't know why.

She trudged on, feeling the betrayal set in like the cold that wrapped itself around her bones. She shivered, noticed that one of her hiking shoes was untied and bent to tie it. As she was tying she heard running behind her. She whipped around. Nothing. She turned slowly around, preparing to run in case the thing or person that'd

been running was now in front of her, like in the movies. Nothing. Shayla glanced around furiously; trying to find what had been running. Nothing. She went to take a step to run and catch up with the others when she froze.

On the ground in front of her a small patch of snow was melted away, exposing the dirt and brown pine needles on the trail. In the middle of that, growing up out of the ground was a small cluster of blue hydrangeas. Her favorite flower. Full, bulbous blooms, each petal with four rounded cutouts on the sides before ending in a heart-shaped bottom. The leaves a deep rich green unlike she'd seen before. The center of the flower, the stigma, was white and looked like the looped thread on a quilt. They were the flowers she'd wished her husband had bought her while they were together. It was the only piece of unfrozen earth anywhere, the rest of it was all snow. But no tracks led to or away from the flower.

Rotating quickly, she scanned everywhere to find something, anything that was responsible for this. She looked down at it again, bent down to touch it to see if it was real. She felt the soft petals in her hand, little swatches of velvet, admired how the blue was so deep it turned violet at the tips. Then she bounded over it and ran to find her friend. What the hell? kept racing through her head.

"Something really weird just happened!" she said when she caught up to Andy.

"Really?" Andy said.

"There were flowers that just grew out of the ground and the snow melted and they weren't small buds either, it was a full-grown plant!"

“You’re crazy!” Glen said.

“I’m not kidding! It really happened! Something’s going on and it’s freaking me out! There was running and then the plant and...”

Andy glanced at her. “Shayla,” he smiled.

Talia yanked on his arm again and he stumbled into her. Glen walked straight past her, eyes ahead. She knew it sounded crazy, she couldn’t even believe it as she told them. They must think I’m joking and taking it too far, I know I would think that, she thought. Shayla turned around, walking back the way she’d come. She wanted to double check, to make sure the plant was actually there. Then she’d call them over, so they could see she wasn’t messing with them. She kept looking around. She was sure it wasn’t this far back, but she kept walking.

The cold stung her eyes. And she was scared. Was she losing her mind? Hot tears welled up, blurring her vision. She tried blinking. Through the blurriness she saw the man in front of her. He was reaching out to her face; he was wearing something red. She wiped at her face. She blinked again to clear her sight. He wasn’t there. She jerked her head around and pivoted. There was no man anywhere near her. There were just the retreating figures of the three friends. She searched around for movement again. She looked down at the ground. No flowers, just snow. What the hell is going on? Shayla thought. She turned around to catch up with her friends.

She froze.

There he was, standing in the middle of the path. The man, but not really a man. He was red. His skin. It didn’t look like paint. He had red skin and shoulder-length raven

hair slicked back. He reminded Shayla of a cross between Loki and Hellboy. She didn't see any horns, but she was sure it was the devil. His skin looked real, the red a part of him and not costume makeup. She couldn't explain it, but there was an ethereal presence about him. Like a force that bends from a hurricane. Like the assured power inherent in a lion. Like he could see right through her and knew her. Shayla's heart started pounding. He stepped towards her. Shayla ran towards the trees to get around him. Shayla ran after Andy and Talia. She glanced back to see if he was following her.

As she neared them she saw that they were crossing a log over a river. Without stopping, she reached out a hand to climb up on the log. Shayla lost her balance and stumbled toward the river. Losing her footing in the snow, she fell into the river.

"Shayla!" Andy shouted from across the river.

Shayla gulped in water and gasped for air. It was so cold it shocked her body. Her arms flailed, looking for something to grab. And then she knew. As if the cold had galvanized realization into her. He was her demon. He was only there for her. He followed her as long as she allowed him to, because it was she who hung onto him.

She tried using her freezing legs to find footing.

But the river kept moving her.