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CLOSER TO BONE

SPENCER WENDLETON

Brady Kerns memorized her father's features in the casket. Her life flashed before her eyes and instead of clinging to it, she lingered over the dead. Somehow, his memory would live on no matter what the cost.

Julie, her older sister, never knew of the secret tithing her father sent to her every month. The family didn't embrace Julie; her sexual excursions severed her from family ties. Her promiscuity burdened their mother up to her fatal stroke. In the confines of her apartment, Brady strayed from the light and sewed the day away, the only means to busy her from insanity alongside bargain liquor and cable television. The thought of having no one chilled the aspect of another tomorrow.

She tightened her shawl and bent closer to the coffin. "Don't you realize I need you?"

Her glasses slipped off and landed under his chin. She hunched down to pick them up when Julie snuck behind her. "Why are you touching him?"

"I dropped my glasses."

Brady studied her awkward body. Those huge blonde curls made her bean-pole frame shrink to an emaciated stance. Her smooth and slender legs popped out of her black skirt, her cleavage obtrusive in the funeral hall—or any place at that matter. It was ironic that it took a death in the family to see Julie again. They were well into their forties and still hadn't embraced sisterhood.

Julie pursed her lips and batted her eyes. "Is there any rich friends of Daddy's here?" Brady didn't answer. "How much is the 'ol windbag worth? Really, do you know?"

Brady still didn't answer. Julie nagged her even at a visitation.

"You better know," she said, tightening her chin. "That's the reason I came." Brady hid her face into the comforts of her own hands. "Isn't that why you came?"

"He's worth everything to me, Julie." Brady slid her glasses back on. "I miss him already." "No, Brady. I'm speaking of money," she lowered her voice, "stupid whore."

"No money I know of," Brady said, closing her eyes like her father's. "His will gave it to several charities." She bit her lip in the midst of a lie. She'd spent most of his money before he died on unpaid bills and her father's estate

taxes. "I'm sorry."

Julie pulled out her lipstick and spread it over her lips. When she blinked, Brady was blinded by neon blue eye shadow. "I think I'll stop by tomorrow after the funeral and figure this mess out with you, hey sis? Money or not."

"But—"

"—I insist." She glanced at him in the casket. Her eyes roamed over their father like a mortician would a corpse with no identity. Before she exited the foyer, she called out to her. "Tomorrow, don't forget."

The visitation ended several hours later. Brady never left her father's side. Old family members came and went in blurs of suppressed memories. Her father was the only one she needed. She had to move on and find something else to live for. There were no options except to wallow and wait for the next bourbon with a twist. A tall, slender man lurched from the corner of the room. His back was hunched forward; the effect stooped his entire frame. His thin, metallic hair was tied into a ducktail and his face was scathed with acne scars. Those sockets grabbed her attention. The shadows made trenches of his eyes. When he spoke, his throat projected low from lack of use.

"The visitation's over, mah'm."

Brady glued her eyes back to her father's face. The subtlety of his smile had suppressed tears until now. "I'm sorry. I'll leave." "Yes, you're Charlie's daughter." His words worked with a friendly intonation. "I'm sorry for being rude. I'm Ivan."

She shrugged him off. "Brady."

Ivan squeezed her shoulder. Her flesh sprouted with prickly goose bumps. The sympathetic touch made her relax. A stranger's hand was more comforting over the familiar. His mouth creaked open, a line of saliva stretched between his upper and lower lip.

"Your father was a good man."

Brady perked up. "How'd you meet him?"

"Never had the honor." He closed the head of the casket. She was about to make him open it back up, but he interrupted her. "But I know more than you think. More than you may ever know."

Ivan dragged the casket into the back parlor and Brady followed. The room was lined with lime green tiles. Through the double doors were two gurneys. The opposite walls were stocked with embalming fluids and chemicals. The odor cleared her sinuses. He rolled the casket to the side of the room and opened it back up. He propped her father's body up against the wall. He took off his suit and rolled up his shirtsleeve. Ivan smiled at the teeth-shaped bite mark.

“What is this?” Brady asked as though it were her body defiled. “What the hell is this?”

Ivan let his hair fall from the ponytail over his eyes. The silver deflected the orange from the light bulb. Brady marched right up to him. Normally she’d be afraid, but she couldn’t fear the unknown. She was too dense to interpret anything subtle.

“You’re father isn’t really dead,” he said, walking to a metal desk covered in puddles of water that dripped from the pipes above. In one of the drawers, he scavenged out a metal flask. “I know he’s a good man. He gave up everything so he could make a fortune and raise you right. He put you before any of the family.”

Brady wanted to speak, but her throat failed. How could he know such details about her father without meeting him? Maybe he was a conman or had been around so many dead people he created ludicrous stories to keep the living in his life. His needy eyes became a camera that memorized every feature. His interest never lifted.

Ivan opened the flask. A small flame shot out from the tip. It was a lighter. Ivan placed the neon-blue flame over Charlie’s forearm. His flesh didn’t burn, but turned white. Ivan’s eyebrows curved inward. Brady struggled to contain herself. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t burn the flesh. It just...softens it.”

“Softens?”

He clicked off the lighter. “The incandescent flame makes the skin tender. A dead man’s flesh contains everything. I tasted him last night. I know so much of him...and you. You’ve never had any friends, you love Dickinson’s poetry, you’re a virgin, Sinatra’s the only music you can stand, you’re an alcoholic—should I go on?” He absorbed her disbelieving stare. “Your father loved all your quirks. He doesn’t want to be forgotten. I’ve found the only way to hold onto the living. At least I’ve used it to hold onto forgotten strangers. Let me help you remember him.”

She thought her own secrets had spilled onto the floor. No one knew so much about her, not even Julie. Since her mother’s death, her father was the only one who could’ve known those details. The thought of eating her father’s flesh drove her to extremes, but what if she didn’t cede to her father’s wishes? How could she pass the chance to honor his memory? Why would Ivan wish to exploit her? She had nothing, money or inheritance. “I know what you’re going through. I learned this secret from my father who used to run this very funeral parlor. He taught me how to see the dead. That’s why he preferred to work alone. I’ve lived so many lives without stepping out of this place. Why live a mediocre life when it can be so much better? The dead

don't need their memories, so why not take a peek?" His eyes shook in their sockets and stemmed the flow of sentiment. "I'm a lonely creature." He put his hand into hers. She didn't resist the reassuring touch. "Just like you, Brady. I live through the dead just as you should live through your father. I think you deserve it. I think he'd approve." Even though she loved her father, she was disconnected from him. He never told her why he loved her. Her reclusive personality divided her from that information. She couldn't identify with him, but dreamed for the chance to be apart of him. If eating his flesh were the only way to be part of him, then so be it.

Ivan led her by the hand to the stool next to the casket. Ivan dragged out a little table, similar to a TV tray, and set it in between them to splay her father's arm across. "Try it. You won't regret it." She watched his pale and hairy arm. A horrible sensation came over her at the thought of desecrating his body. She lifted out of the seat, but Ivan seized her by the neck. He sent her face into his arm.

"Eat!"

His fingers bent deeper into her neck, the pain forced her to bite down. The morsel melted on her tongue and slid down in a liquid stream. The blood on the sides of her mouth tasted sweet. The rush of flavor opened her thoughts back to when her father gave her, her first bike with training wheels. She raced to him and kissed his cheek. Brady felt his eyes go to her smile. Those dimples made his heart spin. Her father hugged her back and whispered how much he loved her. It warmed her heart to know her father cherished this memory. The scene fizzled away. Blood dried out her mouth. She was thrown back to herself and the arm she'd eaten. The bite mark was so deep, the bone poked through. Brady whimpered. Her cheeks soaked up tears. The fulfillment of a loved one's thoughts compelled her to dig deeper. She bit down so far, her teeth clicked against bone. The next thoughts were of her father's final days. The brain cancer that ate at his mind took shape. His senses were dulled, his vision grainy and tarnished. The walls of the hospital room were the colors of a black and white photograph. She entered the room with a vase heaped with purple tulips. Her father's mind became immersed with joy. After she sat the flowers next to his bed, she bent down and kissed his forehead. His senses changed to brilliant colors, his retinas turned the room into multi-colored pixels. When her lips left his skin, his perception faded back to the grainy reality that locked him back to sickness. He wished to experience those epiphanies she evoked, but the cancer denied that wish.

Her face and hands was slick with blood and saliva. Ivan had joined in, his face dirty as well. His silver hair was matted in crimson. She didn't care. The feast brought jubilation. She'd never felt so ecstatic! The vibrant emotions were

set alight. Her father loved her in return. Her dull life abstained from burning out. The truth formed an endless source that emptied into her heart. She continued to ingest the meat. Her last perception brought her sadness to full closure. After he was pronounced dead, she felt responsible for his suffering. His last thoughts surfaced into hers. She didn't know he was watching before he died. She'd fallen asleep next to his bed. He watched and adored the luxury of his creation. His only trepidation in life was his lovely daughter, Brady.

Brady clutched onto her father's arm, but there was nothing left. His arm was empty of meat, colored with red remains and gristle. Ivan splashed water into his face in a sink across the room. When he came back, he offered her a warm towel. She wiped her face clean, the heat replaced her father's cold blood.

"Thank you, Ivan," she said with wet eyes. "I know my father in a new light. How can I ever repay you?"

"You let me share this experience with you," he said, locking arms with hers and leading her out of the room. "Your father is in good hands. I welcome you back anytime. The sooner the better, Brady. His funeral is tomorrow, but you'll never have to let him go." His eyes squinted as he smiled. His pleasure mimicked her own.

"Very soon, Ivan." She smiled so hard it strained the muscles of her face. "Very soon."

The next morning the casket was buried. Her world was hidden under six feet of earth. There was nothing left to piece together her father's life despite last night's events. The suffering that was healed was reopened at the sight of his grave. She wanted to be the one in the ground.

Last night she didn't sleep. His thoughts survived in her mind. The wound was driven deeper. Her need was unfulfilled. There was no moving on. She'd drift in the past and wish for the things she never found from the living. Her family didn't understand. Their lives continued despite the dead.

She left the funeral and drove back to her apartment. She poured herself a glass of Bourbon. The mouthful of spirits burnt her tongue, the aftertaste of her father's flesh backwashed from her throat.

The evening gave way to nothing. The afghan she'd knit kept the unrest at bay for the time being. She couldn't stop thinking about Ivan. He lived by dead memories. Brady wanted to live through anyone's but her own. The pound at the door shook her from thought. It was Julie. Brady kept quiet and hoped she'd leave. She pounded again, the knocks more adamant. When the doorknob twisted, Brady cursed herself for not bolting it. Julie meandered inside. The unwelcome guest didn't care about intrusions. She wore tattered blue jeans and a white shirt cut low to show off her belly button ring. "Why

didn't you answer the door?" Her sedated eyes remained insistent. "Huh?"

Brady cleared her throat. The stomach acids that tasted of her father returned. She swallowed it down in the hope it would come back up later. "Don't feel like guests, I suppose."

Julie's olive eyes widened at Brady's lack of interest. "You know what I want." She waltzed to the kitchen and stared dumbly at the blender on the counter. "Well?"

"I have nothing. I haven't seen you in years, how dare you accuse me of taking money without sharing it with you. Is that all you care about? What about Dad?"

Julie opened the freezer and pulled out the margarita mix. "You and the alcohol. Unhappy little woman, aren't yah?"

"Fuck off."

"Not until I see some money. Even if it's not Daddy's, I still want it."

Julie fumbled with the blender to figure out how it worked. She was so empty-headed she couldn't even work a blender! There wasn't anything funny about this moment. There was no money and she couldn't get rid of her. Both of them were broke and desperate. Julie put her hand in the blender and played with the blades at the bottom. A smirk broke across Julie's face. "Daddy always loved me more," Julie said, trying to cover resentment. She bit her lip and spat out a line of chapped skin. "At least he gave you a check once in awhile." The childish tone demurred to jealousy. "I didn't get a damn thing! I want some of that money. I'll move in if I have to."

"Let me show you how to work that thing," Brady said, noticing it was unplugged. "I need...a drink." Julie shoved her hand deeper in the blender just as Brady plugged it in. The blender whined and churned apart her fingers. Julie screamed, unable to interpret the pain. Her fingers cracked against the spinning blades, her flesh liquefied before her eyes. Julie struggled to lift her hand out, but Brady shoved it back in and let the bones crunch even more. Julie unplugged it and escaped with a mottled and dripping hand. Ridges of broken bone and twisted flesh splashed on the floor as she waved it in horror. The end snapped off at the wrist.

Brady didn't resist the urge. She clamped her mouth over her arm. The cut veins unloaded their contents onto her tongue and flooded down her esophagus. Julie screamed as Brady ground her teeth around the bones and wrung out the telltale blood.

The contents of her life spilled into Brady's, her body shuddered with an orgasmic awakening. She experienced the men she'd seduced, countless faces without names. The sensations were distinguished by tastes and pleasures: faint

rubber, copper, blood, imported liquor, and a sudden soreness in her vagina. Julie's seductions, once effective, were rendered useless with disease and overuse. The meat stuck in the back row of Brady's teeth came down her throat. Images of her sister in a hotel room followed. Julie crouched on the floor and searched for her underwear waded up in the corner. Her lover was gone. Brady felt at ease with herself. Loneliness wasn't as bad as being a free whore.

"You're pathetic, sis." Brady laughed, her vindication dribbled down her chin. "Stupid tramp."

Julie tried to sneak away, but slipped in her own blood and crashed into the wall. Her weakened state kept her on the floor. The shock of blood loss brought convulsions. "Help me, Brady. I'm bleeding!" Her voice shot raspy and knotted. Her eyes beckoned Brady to give back the life she'd taken away. "Don't let me die this way!"

Brady knew her neighbors would hear the screams through the thin walls. She couldn't weigh the consequences in the flood of such powerful imagery. She had to finish her off before someone did show up at the door. She grabbed a skillet and beat it across her head until her screams ended. "Sorry, sis. I have nothing for you, but you gave me so much." Julie's eyes fluttered closed. A realization hit her. Ivan had said only dead flesh revealed a person's memories, but Julie wasn't dead. Maybe she'd discovered something he didn't know! The dead weren't the only ones who could give up their memories. She had to let him in on the secret. They could be together. How could he pass up such a revelation? She'd no longer have to be lonely.

She dragged Julie's body into the closet and rushed out of the apartment. Julie would begin to stink, but maybe she'd never have to come back. Let the whore rot. The misty air, thick with an incoming storm, sprayed her face. She was still drenched in Julie's blood.

The funeral parlor lights were off except for the back room. She followed the lime tiles inside. The light bulb flickered on its last hours of life, which made the double doors throb. Ivan carved up a naked corpse of an old man on a plastic stretcher. He used the bone saw from the ceiling that hung from a cord with a surgeon's precision. He cut across his chest then looked at her like a child caught masturbating.

"I thought you'd be back sooner," he said, looking at her stained clothes. "Busy?"

"I want to share something." The anticipation dropped her into a spell of tears. "A secret."

Ivan let the saw swing in the air and removed his gloves. "That's sweet of you to give so willingly. What is your secret, dear?"

She wet her lips. Julie's blood was lodged in the crevices of her tongue. "A person doesn't have to be dead in order to see their memories. Just eat them period and everything is yours. My sister tasted of the kinds of pleasures you'd appreciate. I'll take her body out of my closet and give her to you."

He brushed his hand across her cheek. His eyes brightened with compassion. She embraced the affection like any recluse in the face of understanding. She was a part of him. They'd shared the one thing that meant the most to her: her father, Charlie. "You showed it all to me, but why?"

Ivan's face tightened. His retina's revealed a passion within those dark, diluted eyes. "When I tasted your father, I could tell there was so much he wanted you to know. I had to let you in on the secret. Maybe it was irresponsible, but how could I let such a somber child suffer?"

Brady extended her arm. "Taste."

Ivan released his soft hold and punched her square in the nose. The clean snap inspired blood, the stream so thick it drained down her throat. The pain blurred her sight into blotches of color. "What have you done?" His face withered into bitterness. "There's a reason why I don't eat from the living. Those are bodies unaccounted for! The dead don't attract police. The cops will find the body and I'll be connected to you. Your mistake will ruin everything. They'll find my bodies. They'll shut this place down. It'll be the end of me."

"I'm sorry, Ivan." Brady cried, burning with guilt. "Please let me make it better. I'll never tell them about you. I promise."

"I'd rather you make promises when you're dead!" He reached for her with those massive hands. "I'll kill you, ignorant bitch! You can't repay the damage you've caused." Brady's sense of survival flared with unlimited resolve. Betrayal and shock spun her legs past her attacker to a rusty-orange door. The hinges squeaked open. A chill coiled itself around her after she threw herself inside. She bolted it locked at the same time his body collided into the door. His vocal cords resounded malicious. "Show yourself! You shouldn't have gone in there, Brady—BRADY!"

She absorbed the room, a crawlspace with another door. Spinach-green mildew attacked the walls. Brady wondered what was behind the next door. Ivan quit banging. The sounds of his footsteps disappeared.

She didn't know what he was talking about. He already knew about live flesh? Was he scheming against her the whole time?

The doorknob was slick with condensation. A cold draft threw her hair into her face. The room was larger than she expected, double the size of the funeral parlor. Rows of caskets filled the dark room. Hundreds of them lingered before her like an uprooted cemetery. The crisp and cool fog made it impossible to see.

The metal walls made her reflection dance off the surface. A mirror mimicked her every move. Fans spun cool air. The room was refrigerated.

She braved the numerous coffins. The fog uncovered a never-ending mausoleum. The coffins were broken apart to show the brutalized contents that dangled free. The horrid spectacle raced through her mind. She froze at the sight of her father in a coffin across the room. Her stomach dropped to her legs and her mind burned with horror. Ivan had buried an empty casket at the funeral! All the coffins in the cemetery were empty.

“That sonofabitch.”

His eyelids were cut open. Those yellowed eyes watched her in desperation. He was stripped of clothing. The bones across his chest were broken apart, his heart stolen beneath the debris. She wanted to communicate with him without Ivan’s intrusion. She lifted a hunk of meat off his sternum and swallowed it, but her perception was unaltered. There was nothing left. Ivan stole it all.

She wept, the tears icy against the continuous draft. The bodies peered at her and burned responsibility for their demise. She cringed at the thought of giving herself to Ivan. The bastard wanted to make her a future corpse to strip of memories. Maybe some of the bodies still had some shred of life untaken. Ivan would pay for desecrating her father’s corpse. They watched and egged her on. Their glossy eyes begged her to partake of what they had to offer. Brady shrieked and raced to savor flesh. She broke open coffins with her bare hands and yanked them out. Her teeth stripped the last remnants of their memories. Her fingers, soft meat hooks capable of cutting into the dead, were thick and sodden with passion. The fruits of labor delivered her to a new plateau. The corpses came alive in her mind. Their last moments came to the surface. Contempt arrived into her image-ridden state. There were no happy memories left inside them. The wretched man sucked them all away.

Bitterness ensued digestion. She flung herself back onto the corpses and wrenched away more and more, her thirst never slaked in an unending stomach. The hatred for Ivan was inflamed with every spice and flavor. The taste would never sicken her. They were purer than she could ever be. She was no longer herself, but controlled by the dead. Her new mindset impelled her to carry out their final wishes.

She navigated through the fog back to the entrance. She tossed open the door with a power beyond her own. Ivan waited with the bone saw in his hands, his eyes demented and ready.

“You’re all mine!” He crowed. “Just like the rest of them. You’d be foolish to taste them.” He denied the truth. His face resisted what stood before him.

“You’ll never find yourself again. You’ll be lost forever!” He studied Brady’s eyes and the dead stared back. “You didn’t taste them, did you?”

Brady’s voice hummed with satisfaction. “Yes. Now I’m going to take back the memories you’ve stolen.”

“Never! You’ll never see what is rightfully mine!”

He swung the bone saw, the blades drug across her stomach. Bits of skin showered the air with human dust. The warmth of body fluids empowered her along with their hatred. They fed her their last bit of strength. She seized his arm and squeezed it so tightly his bones cracked apart, his nerves sent in upheaval. He bawled and collapsed. The bone saw slipped from his hand and swung propelled by the cord connected to the ceiling.

Brady grabbed it and studied the rotating blades. She dug it across his throat. Brady moaned and watched his trachea split apart. She couldn’t resist a taste of what streamed out of the wide laceration. Happy memories flooded into the bitterness that lived inside her. Her limbs quivered and evolved into seizures. Her mouth came open and her stomach ejected its contents onto the lime-tiled floor. An unknown energy impelled her to force her teeth upon her own arm. She felt nothing as she ate into herself. Brady didn’t anticipate the obvious. Her only memory was a realization. She was a lonelyretch. With all the flesh she’d eaten, she was still pathetic and depressed. But there was still so much to learn, so much to discover. The bone saw dripped. She was the only one who knew the secrets of the flesh. She picked up the bone saw and cut deeper into Ivan’s throat. The memories were potent closer to bone.

NO CLUE

MAX EVANS

Woke up this morning butt-naked next to some fat chick. She was wearing an oversized Raiders T-shirt and her left eye was cocked open. She said that would happen before we passed out. How I wound up in her bed was simple: Corona, Heineken, a shot of Patron, back to Corona, two shots of Jager, and finally the kicker, an Adios Motherfucker.

Her walls were covered with old bouquets tacked upside down and magazine pics of Vin Deisel and Ben Affleck. I wanted to slip away but her big-ass arm had me pinned. After I bench pressed that log off me, her other eye popped open. “Hey,” she grogged out, “where you going?” “Bathroom,” I whispered.

While taking a leak and scratching the flea bites her cat gave me, I remembered it was Sunday. Shit, Shaleen’s gonna fuckin’ kill me! I thought. I rushed into the front room without shaking. My gear was on the couch all mixed up with her’s. I threw mine on and made sure to be quiet with the belt.

Curious to see how big she really was, I picked up her drawls. I gave them a stretch and inside my head, Chris Tucker went, “Daaamn!” Then I chucked them and they floated out wider than a family-sized pizza.

Before I did the creep, I took a peek in her room. All she’d done was turn away from the sun. The back of her legs had so much cellulite, they looked smothered in chunky peanut butter. There was a magnet-picture of her boyfriend on the fridge. He was a straight dweeb in a Navy uniform.

I sealed the front door shut and booked it to my car. I had to keep clicking the clicker to find it. Stuck under the wiper blades were flyers for 420 festivals and raves. I snatched them off and stuffed them in the glove with old

parking tickets. Burrito wrappers covered the floorboard but I couldn't recall going to Del Taco after the club.

As I was picking out the morning boogs, I could smell that chic's stuff. I checked my finger and something like dried marinara was on the cuticle. I thought about it more and figured what it had to be. Before the light turned green, I racked my brain praying I never went down on her.

The whole night flashed through my head as I floored it to Shaleen's: getting to the club late with the fellas, checking out who was there, a big girl buying me a beer, and later, faded as hell, sneaking out the back door with her.

Her name was Margarita, or Maria, or something Mexican like that. Her eyebrows were toothpick-thin and arched high like a Mickey D's sign. Her lips were two-toned, red and brown, and she was wearing this fuzzy black sweater that V'd deep into Cleveland. I remember staring once and thinking, If that bra were some rims, she'd definitely be rolling on D's! The more we drank, the more the rest of her disappeared.

The most messed up part of the night was when she gave me a smack. We ended up in her bathroom somehow and were way past being kissy-kissy. So while she was giving me head, I melted out, "Ahh bitch." She stood up, slapped me and said, "Don't call me no bitch!"

Best believe I was hella-stunned like Glass Joe on "Mike Tyson's Punch Out." I grabbed her by the wrists, gritted my teeth and said all-hard, "Fuck's wrong with you?" She shook me loose and came right back at me with, "Well, don't be calling me no mother fucking beetch then." We argued a little bit more and then went back to macking. The tile was cold at first. The mats smelled like cat piss.

I was only about ten minutes late to Shaleen's. I knew I had to get in there fast so she wouldn't shove the Irresponsible Card in my face. I looked in the rearview and my eyes were red as rug burns. Zits jumping out. Hair jacked. I wanted to try and fix it but wasn't about to lick my fingers for nothing.

Shaleen opened the door with sleep lines on her cheek. It looked like she made the Penny Saver her pillow for the night. She stared at me and said, "What the... Nice hickeys, guy." I was like whatever and stepped past her.

On the couch chillin' out was our son Bailey. He was in his diaper and Kobe Bryant T-shirt. I said, "Wassup, Bail'-Bail'," but he was too busy watching "Blues Clues" to even notice me.

I stepped over Lego's, clothes, bills and old juice cups to get to the kitchenette. As messy as Shaleen's studio can get, it's better than the looks I got when Bailey was just born and Shaleen was still living with her parents. I moved dishes around in the sink and washed my hands with orange dish

soap. Wet the hair a little. Drank from the faucet.

Then I heard from the doorway behind me, "I don't even wanna know." Shaleen ripped down a gang of paper towels and said, "Here, just take these. I don't know where those hands've been."

While I dried off, Shaleen said Terrell was picking her up at nine so they could go to California Adventure. Terrell's her boyfriend. He's cool-people. Last Saturday night after Bailey knocked out, me and him ran to Vons to split a twelve pack. I'm just glad she found someone to nag on instead of me.

Shaleen went into the bathroom to curl her hair and said, "Eric, change his diaper. He just woke up." I grabbed Bailey's bag and sat next to him on the couch. His plastic cell phone was under my butt so I grabbed it and flung it away. When it hit the ground, it kept going, "Sorry, wrong number. Sorry, wrong number."

Bailey stared at the tube while I took off his heavy diaper. He's probably seen that tape a million times already. He loves it when Blue finds a clue cause she'll spin around fast like an AOL-logo. One time, Bailey spun around too and bonked his head into Shaleen's coffee table, right at the corner. That scar above his right eye will probably never go away.

While I was swiping a wipee around everything, Bailey's little wee-wee flipped up. He looked at me and half-smiled like when he poots. He's got blonde hair like Shaleen and hazel eyes like mine. His head's shaved for the summer and some people say he looks like Eminem. Others say more like Mini-Me. I say his nickname should be Mini-Em.

After I strapped a fresh diaper over it, Bailey asked me in his high-pitched voice, "Pee-pee gone?" I lunged to kiss his soft Buddha-belly and told him, "Yeah Bail', your pee-pee's covered now." But while sliding on his shorts for the day, I couldn't help but think, Little man, you ain't got a clue what that thing's gonna get you into. Not one single clue.

PAINKILLER

JEFFREY GIANELLI

I don't think of myself as someone who knows everything or who has it all together just because of my age. I could have been that boy once. I am the older one, the one who knows better, the one who can look the situation up and down and take it for what it is. I can see past the pit of my stomach or look over the length of my biceps. I can ignore all of these things completely if I choose.

He sleeps with the covers up over his head and only the lower half of his face is showing. It is almost comical, the nose and the pair of lips still claiming their breath while the rest of him has given up everything. I pull my arms away, wondering how things got to this point.

If I were more subtle about things, it would have been easier. He might have been expecting it. I could have easily been more of a bitch, just ask any of my friends. Why I have held back so much in this relationship, I don't know. Normally I would expect perfection from my lovers; do your dishes immediately, don't even think about leaving your clothes on the floor, get up off you ass and help when it's time to do the cleaning. I let Ethan break all of my rules.

He rolls over and pulls the covers off of his face. He is still asleep and his bare chest rises too abruptly; he's smoked five packs of my cigarettes so far this weekend. Sometimes I wish there were hair to run my fingers through in the place between his nipples where the hard, well-developed muscles rise and fall in a noiseless crescendo. I run my lips over his cheek, then climb out of bed.

The shower is too many feet away. I walk towards it, imagining I am in a marathon and it is the grand prize. If I make it, this is one more day, if not, who knows. The room becomes blurry and I start to get dizzy, but it soon passes and I stumble over toward the toilet. It takes me a very long time to go.

I still have several hours before my flight leaves, so I decide to take a bath instead of a shower, even though the tub hasn't been cleaned in over a week. Just goes to show how far I have compromised my standards with this entire situation. As the tub fills, I sit on the edge and try to picture what it would be like to slip into the water and cut my wrists open, staring blankly ahead as it slowly turns crimson. The funny thing is, I can't even imagine myself doing something like that. I am simply not capable of it. That is something that he would do.

I slip into the tub slowly, letting the warm water cover my body inch by inch. The dizziness hits again and I fight it as hard as I can. Just think if he found me lying here naked with my head under the water. I picture a white light running down from my head to my toes, penetrating all of my cells, restoring my strength. I let my mind go completely blank and before I know it I have been sitting in the tub so long that the water has started to get cold, then I notice the clock above the sink. It is almost 9 a.m. and I do have a lot to do today. I get out and dry off quickly, feeling almost renewed.

I return to the bedroom to find Ethan in the same position he was in when I left. Oh yes, I could go over there right now and pull his legs up to his cheeks and take it all out on him one last time. He would deserve it. He would almost deserve it even if I didn't use protection.

"Ethan," I say. He doesn't stir. His ruffled black hair makes him look as if he were some young, talented musician who could play beautiful music but has completely lost his mind. And it is entirely possible that he has done just that. If only he had something to keep him occupied, like music or acting or some sort of hobby. But he has nothing, nothing that is, except me.

"Ethan," I say, louder. His eyes open. He appears to be dreaming still. I pull the covers completely off of him. I had forgotten he was naked. His boyish hips lure at me. I turn my eyes away.

"What time is it?" he asks, rubbing his eyes. I notice there is a spot of crusted blood on his left earlobe.

"The sun is up," I say. "Get your ass out of bed." He turns over on his side.

"God damn it!" I shout. He flinches. "How many pills did you take last night?"

"None," he says. I already knew this would be the answer, it is always the answer, yet the supply in my medicine cabinet has to be replaced weekly now. I am unsure at this point of which pain is stronger, mine or his. I say nothing more. As I climb onto the bed, he smiles and rolls over, eyes still closed.

"Hi," he whispers. He slides towards me. Soon his lips are sliding all over my body, drawing out my weakness.

"Get some sleep," I say, pushing him off. I don't know why I got into the bed in the first place. If I make love to him again I'm too afraid I'll change my mind. I get up off the bed and go into the bathroom and shave, then get dressed. When I am through combing my hair, I return to find him asleep once more, so I decide to go get some coffee. Before I leave I place a bottle of Vicodin on the night stand next to a glass of water, then blow him a kiss.

It is not as warm today as I expected it to be. The moist air is too obtrusive. I wish I would have moved back to California years ago. San Francisco,

maybe even San Diego. Well, in a few hours I will be gone anyhow, quite possibly for good.

The skyscrapers lean over me, full of spies. I wonder who is watching from their corner office ten stories above. I wonder if anyone can see what goes on in my bedroom through the blinds at night when I leave the lights on. I suppose there is some guilt in thinking about this.

The coffee joint is crowded and I wait in line behind well dressed, middle aged ladies who stare at the menu for five minutes before they place their order, and even then only after asking how much fat is in the 2% milk, or whether preservatives are used when the coffee is imported, and is it imported from Belize or Columbia? I want only a large drip and I don't understand why there isn't a separate line for people who have their shit together.

I finally get my coffee from the heavily tattooed young lady with the pierced eyebrows. She is wearing a pink bow in her hair today. Her voice is girlish and sweet.

"Same old thing again?" she asks as she hands me the coffee. Her eyes move down my chest.

"It's probably time for a change, isn't it?" I say. She shrugs. "But I'm leaving for Rome today anyhow."

"Wow, can I come with?" she asks.

I realize that I must look ridiculous to her in my too-tight shorts and my white tank top, bulging muscles refusing to deteriorate along with the rest of my body. I have all of my hair and not one strand has turned gray. The lines on my face are subtle enough to go unnoticed still, yet I am undeniably pushing forty and therefore should appear absurd to someone her age in anything other than Khaki slacks and a Polo shirt. Unfortunately, Ethan is too naive to see that.

"I guess I could stow you away in my suitcase. Just make sure you take out all of those piercings so you don't set off the metal detector."

"Forget it then!" she smiles. "Well you have a great trip Joe."

"Thanks, see you when I get back," I say, dropping a generous tip in the bucket, knowing I will never see her again. I walk back outside, past a mob of European tourists pointing in the direction of where the World Trade Center used to be and talking in loud, excited voices.

I decided to go on this trip last week after seeing a bum try to sell the ring of a bombing victim to a tourist for ten bucks and the tourist ended up buying it. I need a place where nothing so crass would exist, where I will be surrounded by architecture that has gone untouched for hundreds of years, where nothing can take away the feeling that you have traveled back in time.

I decided to go first to Rome and then Venice. From there, who knows. I am told I have up to three years left, and there's no telling what sort of miracle drugs might pop up during that time. I plan on making the most of it, however long it is.

I walk home slowly, avoiding eye contact with anyone. I don't want to run in to a neighbor or an old acquaintance now. To do so might bring me out of the mindset I am in and I want to feel nothing other than self-loathing. The coffee cup is too full and hot liquid sloshes onto my wrist, burning me. I rub it against my other arm. There is too much chaos here, but I am not prepared to go back. I rehearse everything in my mind, how I am going to lead up to it piece by piece. I tell myself that he will go easily, that he really doesn't care enough not to go easily. Soon, I have walked all the way up Battery and the mob of tourists has grown even thicker. I decide to head back.

I can hear the loud thump of my stereo blaring some hip-hop CD the moment I get off the elevator. I have had so many noise complaints the past six weeks, I am probably only one more away from eviction. I open the door slowly. The smell of bacon fills the room. Ethan is standing over the stove in the kitchen wearing a pair of my boxer-briefs. I set my coffee down on the counter and go to turn down the music.

"I'm making French toast," he announces. From the looks of it, the pills have already kicked in. He turns his back to me and throws an egg-battered piece of toast on the too-hot grill. It immediately starts smoking.

"Shit!" He grabs the pan and flips it over into the sink. The sound of cold water hitting the pan hurts my ears and I wince. "Sorry," he says. This is not the first time Ethan has attempted to cook, but it usually ends up with one of my pans getting ruined.

"I'm really not hungry," I say. He turns to get a new pan out of the cupboard, then grabs a pair of tongs and takes the bacon off the grill.

"That's nice."

"Just stop what you're doing for a minute and come here," I say.

"Why? I'm busy."

"Please, Ethan." I turn and walk into the living room. He sighs and turns off the stove, then saunters over towards me in his usual fashion. He leans over to kiss me and I pull away.

"Sit down," I say. I realize that the boxers he is wearing are the same pair he wore our first morning together. He had cooked breakfast that morning as well. Pancakes, I think it was. What the hell was I thinking letting him stay?

We had met the night before at a club in the Village. Not somewhere I

usually go, but I was in the mood to dance that night for some reason. He approached me as I was standing on the edge of the dance floor, debating whether or not I was drunk enough to make a complete ass of myself in front of all these people half my age. He grabbed my hand without saying a word and dragged me out onto the floor.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. He had taken his shirt off and had on a pair of tight black stretch pants. His chest was boyish, yet toned, and his lengthy black hair hung in his eyes in a way that made him look like a teen idol in the early 80's. His face was well proportioned and his features perfectly set into place, with bright green eyes that stood out in contrast against his black hair.

"Why don't you take your shirt off too? It's hot!" he yelled out over the music.

"No thanks," I smiled. He was swaying his hips wildly and I was barely moving mine.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Joseph," I said.

"I'm Ethan." He put his arms around my waist and swung my hips in sync with his. We danced like that for a long time but after awhile his rhythm started to become broken and he began to slow down his moves until he finally pulled away from me.

"Man, it's so hot," he said again, fanning himself. His expression went to one of confusion, then what looked like exhaustion. "I think I need to go sit down for a moment. You stay here," he said, wagging his finger. "I'll be right back. Don't dance with anyone else," he called out over his shoulder as he was walking away.

"I'll go with you," I said.

"No," he panted. "I'll just be a second." I turned and watched him stumble over to the barstool and after a moment I followed. I figured he must have been high on something but I didn't have much experience with drugs, other than all of my prescriptions.

"You all right?" I asked. His face had gone pale and his eyes were glassy and dilated.

"Yeah, hang on," he said. He leaned over, nearly falling out of his chair, then got up and stumbled into the bathroom. I waited for nearly five minutes before I went in to check on him.

I found him lying on the floor near the sink. Luckily, he hadn't slipped in his own vomit. It looked like he had simply fallen over. His eyes were still open. I leaned over him in panic.

“Ethan,” I said, shaking him. I had never been in a situation like this before and I didn’t know if I should call for help or just try and draw him back.

“Look at the snowflakes,” he said, his voice drowsy and guttural. He held up his hand and gazed at the tips of his fingers.

“You have to get up,” I said, shaking him. “You don’t want anyone to find you here like this.” He looked up at me and nodded. Slowly, he leaned over on his arm, then pulled himself into a sitting position. I grabbed a paper towel and wiped the rest of the vomit off of his chin, then helped him to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said, then to my amazement he started to walk away.

“Wait!” I called. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the dance floor, come on” he called, as if nothing had happened.

“Wait,” I said again, running up behind him and grabbing him by the shoulder. He turned towards me and the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. “Why don’t you come with me.”

He had been close to incoherent most of the night, unable to finish one thought before he moved on to the next. Like when he was telling me about how, as a little boy, his mother used have sex with her boyfriends while he was laying in bed next to them, which I thought was pretty serious, but a moment later he was laughing hysterically about how silly Japanese soap operas were. I just sat and listened for hours, holding him, fascinated by everything he said. Somewhere around 3 a.m. he stopped talking and asked if he could use my shower. When he came out of the bathroom he was completely naked and I just gazed at his body, mesmerized, not caring what was going on in either of our heads.

“The bacon’s getting cold,” Ethan says, breaking me out of my daze.

“It can wait,” I say.

“Why are you so serious looking?” he asks, eyes shifting nervously. He leans forward and grabs the remote, then turns on the television and starts rattling on about what happened on *The Young and the Restless* the day before. I sit back and stare, tuning out his voice completely. I picture myself standing in front of the Coliseum, haggling with a Gypsy vendor over the price of some gaudy Catholic souvenir.

“This is serious, Ethan,” I say when he finally stops, sounding more authoritative than I ever have with him. “At some point, it has to be.”

“Whatever,” he says, eyes lowered. I lean back into the couch and sigh. I hate the way I sound talking to him right now, as if he were a child. I never wanted to treat him that way.

“I’m going on a trip. I need to clear my head and not have to worry about anything, or anyone, for awhile,” I pause looking at him. “I’ll proba-

bly be gone a few months.” Ethan just stares at the floor. “I can help you find a place to stay,” I mutter, my voice starting to choke, which I absolutely cannot allow to happen again. I try to pretend like none of this is real, it is just a scene from movie or one of Ethan’s soap operas. All I have to do is say the lines I have rehearsed so carefully and it will all be over. Ethan says nothing. The tears come sooner than I expected and as I watch him, he seems utterly pathetic to me as he cries. Emotions I have never felt before swell up from somewhere inside of me. Ugly emotions. Cruel emotions. He looks up, not bothering to wipe his eyes.

“This is bullshit,” he whispers, glaring at me. I want to slap him. Instead, I get up and stand up over him, then grab his chin and try to force him to look at me, but he turns his eyes away.

“I’m sorry,” I say, firmly. He pulls back and covers his face with his hands. There is a long period of silence, then finally he asks,

“What this, all of a sudden? Are you fucking someone else?”

“Maybe I am,” I say. “Maybe it’s a lot of things. Like the drugs, for one. How can I trust you when you go around popping my pills behind my back all the time?” The expression of guilt on his face is terrific, but he surprises me by lifting up his head and looking me in the eyes.

“Your right,” he says. “I don’t know what to say, other than to tell you that I’ll stop.”

“Just like that? Well great, let’s just forget about all this and go have a celebration fuck,” I say, smirking.

“I’m serious,” he says, eyes wild. The desperation in his voice is making me sick. I sit down.

“Bullshit, and it’s more than that anyhow.” I tell him. “It’s the fact that you like hip-hop music and I like Nat King Cole. Or that you enjoy taking ecstasy and dancing all night until you fall over and I enjoy a quiet evening at home with a bottle of Merlot and an old movie. And it’s the fact that if I let you stay here then I’m doing nothing but enabling you to keep throwing away your life.” He wipes the tears from his face. The sun has risen high enough so that light is streaming in through the blinds and surrounding him completely. I can’t see him clearly.

“The age difference doesn’t mean shit. And neither does our differences,” he says. The pain in his eyes is so deep, I have to look away. “I love you,” he says. “I don’t want to live without you. Just take me with you. We can get past all of this.” If he only knew how much I would love to do just that. I have visions of him going back to the hotel room he had been staying at before I took him in, stripping off all of his clothes, then wrapping a noose

around his neck and hanging himself. I become enraged.

"I need to go alone," I say. "And you know nothing about what it is to love someone other than yourself." This is a lie, but it seems the best way to put everything back on him, and he just might believe it too. It is so easy to make someone in his position think that they are being selfish. His tears come back and I shut my eyes. In my mind I see only an endless array of pill bottles, so many pills you had to have an electronic organizer to tell you when to take them all.

"You have to leave," I say. "Now. My flight takes off in three hours"

"But..."

"Now!" I shout. "Get dressed and go. I'll give you plenty of cash to get you by." I am expecting him to fall to his knees, have a temper tantrum, pull a knife on me. Instead, he climbs on top of me and starts kissing me, then I feel him grab my hand and press it to his crotch. I want to pull it out and suck him off, but instead I push him away, me so hard that he falls head first onto the floor. He tries to get up. My vision becomes blurry. I try and focus on something but cannot. All I can think about is hurting him. Never in my life have I been violent with anyone, but suddenly I lift up my leg and kick him in the side as hard as I can. He grabs his chest and begins sobbing hysterically. I turn and walk into the bedroom.

There is a safe in the wall behind the tapestry. I have been hiding my morphine supply in there ever since Ethan moved in. The pain that runs all throughout my body is almost constant now, but I refuse to take the morphine, despite what the doctor says. There is also a few thousand dollars in cash. I open the safe and grab the cash, then tear open a syringe pack and dip it into a vial of morphine, and then another, until the syringe is full. I am so dizzy now that I can barely manage to close the safe. I see colors swirling in the air, forming rainbows. It is almost beautiful.

Back in the living room now. Ethan is still on the floor, his sobs growing louder by the moment. When he sees me he starts beating himself on the head with his fists, then tears his fingernails into his forearm so hard he draws blood. I want to kick him again. I want to hurt him so bad. He hurt me just by being here, how could it hurt so much?

"Stop it!" I yell, dropping to my knees on the floor next to him, the syringe in one hand and the cash in the other. I put down both and grab his arm.

"I'll follow you everywhere you go. I won't stop," he says. "You can't just get rid of me."

"As if you could even figure out how to get the fucking plane ticket. Jesus!" I stop and double over, clutching my chest, pain shooting through my

rib cage. "Here," I say, grasping his arm just above the elbow. "This will make it all better." I hold the syringe out to him. He grabs it and looks at it for a moment, then smiles and lowers the needle into the vein on his forearm, letting the morphine enter his body slowly. That's when I notice there are quite a few red marks on his arm and his eyes become cloudy and his body is limp in my arms.

"I was in the safe earlier today too," he whispers. "Thanks. It's just what I needed."

"What? How the fuck did you know about the safe..." I say, my voice quivering. The colors have turned to black and the room is so cold. So dizzy now. I can barely hear him, his voice has become childlike.

"You keep the combination in your address book. Found it a few days ago. I slammed..." he pauses, catching his breath. "Two vials while you were gone." He smiles. "Felt great with the Vicodin."

"You..." I stutter, so hard to speak now. "You slammed two vials?"

Eyes roll back into his head and he's breathing strange now mouth just drops open like an old man's, why do I feel so dizzy? It's almost funny, his expression and the white light glows from my chest, it is healing me. I can heal him too, he looks sick. Try to heal him but it doesn't work let myself try but his eyes oh god what the fuck is wrong with him have to do something.

"Ethan," I shake him. His head slides back and forth in slow motion. Have to say something, bring him back. "Open your eyes," I plead. He barely manages. Darkness falls all around me. I collapse to the floor. The tears, why I am I crying? I don't cry, not ever.

"Now you won't have to watch me die," I whisper, holding him. My voice is shaking. He touches my cheek. I lose all sense of time looking down at him, his beauty as his breath stops and his eyes sink back into his head. Blood dribbles from his left ear and his pulse is slowing now, it has stopped. I kiss him on the lips, put the syringe in his left palm. Have to get out of here.

I am getting out of here. Left the plane tickets on the counter and the suitcase is packed. Can't stay here now. Will take a cab, fuck the shuttle. Grab the suitcase the cash, he won't need that now got my coat. Want to leave but they'll think it's murder, you know, they'll be after me. My God, it was murder! Make sure it looks like suicide. Looking back at him now blood dribbles on the carpet, it will stain and someone else will clean it up and his body, what will they? Never mind. Have to go now. Head out the front door, there is no need to lock it, don't want nothing here. I am out the door now. Nothing but the pretty dead boy on drugs and the pills, oh god all of those pills, they stay behind in the medicine cabinet like a child's forgotten toys.

A LETTER

WRITTEN 1992

I was looking through some old photographs of mine the other night, and I came across a photo of you. A snapshot, by the pool in Florida. Years ago. Those were the days when you thought you were cool, when another gang broke your ribs, when the cops chased you down the street for trying to steal a car. They caught you because you slipped in your two hundred dollar boots. You had to sell your stereo to pay your lawyer.

And things do change. You wanted to go back to school, you worked full time, you kept away from the drugs. And your back hurt all the time, you felt too old, you wanted to start over again.

I still remember that photograph. I was dating you then, but you never told me you had another girlfriend. She wrote me a month later, telling me you were engaged.

It's funny to see that I lasted longer than her, that I still have a hold over you.

Did you ever give her an engagement ring? Was it an emerald, too?

I remember once, in the hall, after you took a drag from your cigarette, leaned over the pool table and made your shot, you told me that you would do anything for me. I asked if you'd give me the diamond earring in your ear. You remember the one, the one a married thirty-five year old woman gave you when you were sleeping with her. Yeah, that one. And you told me that if I needed it, you'd sell it and give me the money.

Christ, the pool table, and the pool cue that was your grandfather's that you got after he died. You loved him, and he wasn't even related to you, your step mother's dad. But you never liked your family.

You never liked anyone, unless it was convenient. You never liked anyone, unless you weren't alone.

Someone told me last spring that they heard you say, "Have you ever decided that you wanted something so much, but you knew you could never have it?"

They thought you were talking about me. I think you were, too.

You once knew a pharmacist, one who liked to steal stuff and mix it with anything else he could find. You befriended him quickly. You think I don't know these things, but I do.

You think I don't know you, but I do.
