



A Microcosm of Society

A MICROCOSM OF SOCIETY

No one appeared in the back half of the courtroom. Thoughts raced through Steven Kohl's mind as his eyes darted across the room. How did this happen? Was he really to blame? Will the jury members decide whether there is enough evidence against him to warrant a trial? Why are there cuts on his hands? Why can't he remember the last three weeks of his life?

Steve thought he might wake up soon, and discover that none of this had ever happened. That he wasn't trying to defend himself. That Erica wasn't dead.

He shifted in his chair. The wet cotton of his shirt collar burned against his neck. Like the branches of the trees in the ravine where Erica was found, the wool of his suit scratched his legs, his hands. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his forehead, but he was afraid that he would seem too nervous to the jury if he moved. He wanted to run out of the courtroom, stand in the February snow and feel his tears freeze as they rolled down his face.

He looked over at the papers in front of his lawyer. The names Stonum, Smith and Manchester embossed the top of the page. Steve couldn't bring himself to look at Stonum's face.

Stonum's face was chiseled and sharp. There was no room for emotion, unless closing remarks in a case called for a strong emotional appeal. The same thought kept going through Stonum's head: this boy couldn't remember who he was, much less where he was, for the last three weeks of his life. When Stonum suggested that Steve go to Dr. Litmann for a psychological examination, Steve broke down. He told Stonum that his cocaine use became daily about six weeks ago, and he started mixing drugs shortly before he lost his memory.

It was the beginning of the fourth day. The prosecutor stood.

"I would like to call to the stand a Miss Kathleen O'Connor."

Stonum jumped. “We have testimony from a Doctor Litmann, with whom she has been seeking therapy, that Miss O’Connor should not be able to testify in this case. I submit his report to you, your Honor, which outlines the fact that Miss O’Connor has been known to compulsively lie and that her perception of the truth is often distorted. We believe that it would be inappropriate and possibly detrimental if Miss O’Connor testified.”

The testimony for the case was beginning to rely on character witnesses, and because no specific reason was mentioned for having Kathleen O’Connor testify, the judge said he would review the report and decide whether or not to allow her to testify the next day.

Kathleen looked at Doctor Litmann seated next to her, then bowed her head. Her letters to him were in a pile on his lap. She stood up, adjusted her dress and solemnly walked away.

Dr. Litmann stared at the chair where she had sat. When he gained the strength, he looked at the letter at the top of the pile.

Dear Doctor Litmann:

I just had a session with you, and you asked me to start writing letters to a friend every day so that I could start to open myself up and understand myself more. Well, I don’t have any friends. I don’t know if I’ll ever let you see these letters, but I’ll write them to you.

You were asking me about my childhood in session today. Do all doctors ask about a person’s childhood? I guess you must figure that any patient of theirs must have been abused by their father or wanted to kill their mother or something. No, I wasn’t beaten, or starved, and I didn’t even know what the word “incest” was until I was checking the spelling of “insect” in the dictionary.

I know, I know, I’m avoiding the subject. Open up, you said. Open up, God-damnit. Fine.

As a child I wasn’t liked by other kids. I was too smart, you see, and I had been taught at an early age to respect authority. Actually, I don’t think I was ever taught that, because my parents didn’t seem to teach me much of anything. I just knew I had to listen to them when they yelled at me.

All of my life I was afraid of my father. He never really was a father to me, for he wasn’t home often, but when he was home, all he seemed to do was yell at me. I always figured that I must have done something wrong, because he was never happy with me. Hence the self-esteem problem, I guess. I think that’s why I got messed up with all those other men, too, doc. But you said we’d get to that in a later session.

The thing is, they always told me that I had to act a certain way, and that I had to do all of these things, but I never knew why I had to do them. If it was to be a good person, then I wanted to know who the hell decided what was good. From what I understood, good wasn’t fun. It wasn’t even self-fulfilling.

But I was going to do what they wanted. I got into a good school, and decided to

study in a field that I didn't like. But, you see, that would get me a job with good pay - even if I didn't like it -- and would make everyone in society think that everything was good in my life. If I just went through the motions, people would think I was happy, and then they might leave me alone.

But that didn't work.

Doc, I'm tired. The medication you make me take at night really knocks me out. I'll write later.

She never signed her letters, and she always typed them so that they could never be traced to her. She made sure she covered all of her bases.

Litmann pressed his right hand over his eyes, almost in an effort to hold his face together.

Dear Doctor--

Hi. I'm back. It's night again. I like writing at night. I write at the desk in my room by two candles. I could turn on the lights, but the candles make shadows on the walls. I like the shadows. They make me think of everything out there that I'm not supposed to do.

In our session today you wanted me to tell you about the turning point of my life. You figured out that there was some sort of event in my life that made me want to rebel against all the empty values my parents tried to shove down my throat. That event was a man.

You see, he was a boyfriend of mine -- a boring one that fit into my plan of having a boring future. I'd get a boring job, and I'd marry that boring man and we'd live in a boring house with boring children and act happy. I thought it would all be simple enough -- I mean, the man seemed harmless and all. But he wasn't.

He went away to school with me, and at the first chance he got, he got me drunk. And he raped me.

It occurred to me then that my boring life wasn't going to happen. Doc, I thought I could just float by life, going through the motions without feeling anything, whether it be pain or happiness. The rape tore me apart inside. This man was supposed to be the security in life, and he killed any security I thought I could ever feel. I knew that what he did wasn't right, but I also knew that there was nothing I could really do about it, because society seemed to ignore things like rape. Nothing seemed right anymore.

I looked into different religions. I read the new testament, and I tried to go through the old one, but the reading was just too dry. God just seemed like a joke to me. I deduced that religion was just a means to keep the masses in their place. But it wouldn't hold me down.

I wonder why I don't tell you all of these things while I'm in session with you. Maybe it's because you're trying to make me "normal" again -- normal in the eyes of society. Well, their rules don't make sense.

Dear Doc --

I can't love unconditionally.

I think everyone thinks I'm just very cold. But it's just that I can't love someone that I can't respect or admire. I don't think I love my family, because I can't respect their values, and I can't love other people because I can't trust them. That's where my value system comes in. I decided that the only person I could trust and love is myself. So my goals should be to make myself happy, right? If I do that, what more could I want? Why should I want to please others?

And I liked having those one night stands. I liked the power I felt when I could make a man want me so much and I had the power to do with him whatever I wanted. You could say that I wanted to get back at the man who raped me, you could say that I was looking for someone to care for me the way I wanted my father to when I was a child -- but I wanted the power. I wanted the control of others -- and it was an emotional control, which was even stronger than a physical control. I felt an emotional high from making them weak. I don't know which high was stronger.

Dear Doc--

I'm not afraid to tell you the next part, for even if I do give you these letters, you can't tell anyone about them. I've checked into the laws, and because of the nature of the case and client confidentiality privileges, you couldn't utter a word.

Now, I never got into drugs. I drank a lot, which I guess I get from my father, but I never touched drugs. But I had ways of getting a hold of them, and cheap. So I started selling stuff to some of the college students -- particularly the good looking men. If my plan was going to work, I had to pick the right kinds of people. I'd go to the men in the elite fraternity houses -- the ones that you needed not only good looks, but also a lot of money and a lot of connections to get in to.

Then I found the man. Steve. Gullable bastard, isn't he? Then I found the woman. A typical bitch -- bleach blond, sorority, stupid as all hell. The type that makes me look like something is wrong with me for not wearing designer clothes. I knew I could make Steve do something he normally wouldn't -- and maybe this would be my little way of destroying a microcosm of the society. It's destroying Steve. And it destroyed Erica.

Litmann looked up. He pulled his glasses from his face. He didn't know if the steam on the glass was from his sweat or his tears. He got up, clenching the letters. He left the room.

Portions of the story "A Microcosm of Society" appeared in the chapbook *People Today*, and this story has been previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, Linsey Woolsey, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, poets2000.com, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, the chapbook *Everything and Everything*, the chapbook *Perspectives*, the chapbook *Gasoline and Reason*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 11, 77, 85 & 94, the 1995 chapbook *Old Wives' Tales*, and in the book *Hope Chest in the Attic*.

Seeing Things Differently SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

I was sitting at Sbarro's Pizza in the mall taking a break from shopping and eating a slice of deep-dish cheese pizza when I caught parts of a conversation happening two tables next to me. It was two-thirty in the afternoon, so it was kind of empty in the eatery.

"So what's it like to be back?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, to be free again - I mean, to be back to the places you haven't seen for so long?"

"Well, of course I missed it. It's strange being back, actually."

"How so?"

"Well, everything looks different now."

"Well, it has been nearly six years, a lot happens, even to a suburb. There's been a lot of construction around here, and -"

"I don't mean it looks different because it changed. I mean it looks different because I have."

"How have you changed?"

"You mean how did being in prison for half a decade affect me?"

"Well, what do you mean you see things differently? Like colors look wrong? I don't get it."

"No, it's not like my vision is different, at least not literally. It's just that people seem different to me now. The places all look the same, one street looks the same as the next, it looks the same as it did five years ago. But I see things about people now, things I never noticed before."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, exactly. But I read people. It's like I know what they're thinking without having to talk to them, or even know them."

Then they both paused. I guess their timed pattern of one person eating while the other one talked finally got messed up and they were both eating at the same time. Oh, did I mention that they were both women? One had a baby in a stroller sleeping next to her, that one was the one that didn't go to prison. They both looked like they were about twenty-eight years old. Regular suburban women.

"You see, it's like this: when I was in prison, I was all alone. Being in a federal prison means the crimes are big time, so everyone in there had a big chip on their shoulder and wanted to either have you for their girlfriend or beat the shit out of you when you were on laundry duty. And of course everyone knew that I was the cop killer, and

everyone also knew that I swore up and down that I didn't do it. So when I went in there they all thought I was some big sissy, and I knew right away that I was going to be in big trouble if I didn't do something fast."

"So what'd you do?"

"Well, I figured they knew that I wasn't a tough bitch or anything, so the only persona I could put on that would make people scared of me would be to act like perfectly calm ninety percent of the time, calm, but tense, like I was about to snap. And periodically I would have a fit, or threaten violence in front of guards, timed perfectly so that I would never actually have to do anything, but enough to make everyone else think that I was a little off the deep end, a bit crazy. Then they'd give me space."

"So... did that work?"

"Yeah, for the most part. But the first thing I had to learn was how to make my face unreadable."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you can see someone walk by and know they're bored, or sad or angry, or happy, right?"

"Well, sometimes..."

"Well, I had to make sure that when people looked at me all they saw was a complete lack of emotion. Absolute nothingness. I needed people to look at me and wonder what the hell was going through my head. Then all I'd have to do is squint my eyes just a little bit and everyone would see so much anger in my face, you know, because usually there was nothing in my face to give me away."

"And when you got angry -"

"- And when I got angry and threw a fit and smashed chairs and screamed at the top of my lungs and contorted my face all over the place; I just looked that much more crazed and in a rage. Like out of control."

"Wow. That's wild."

"And I became completely solitary. I talked to two other people the whole time I was there, at least in friendship."

"Wow, two people?"

"Well, in a screaming fit, or in a fight, then I'd be yelling at people, but yeah, I had to limit the people I talked to. Couldn't let others see what I was like."

So I was sitting here eating my pizza listening to this, and then I remembered, oh yeah, I remember this story from a long time ago, they convicted this women of killing a cop, shooting him at point-blank range, and just in the local paper three weeks ago they found the person who really killed the cop, and they let the women they convicted of the crime five years ago free.

It seems the cop pulled her over and had her license in his car when the murderer came up in another car, and this woman managed to get away, but the cop died and her license was there on the scene. So I get up and go to the fountain machine and refill my Diet RC Cola and come back to my seat and I just start thinking that that's got to be rough, I mean, going to federal prison for over five years for a crime you did-

n't commit and then having them come up years later and let you out early and say, "oh, we're sorry, we had the wrong person all along." It's like, oh, silly us, we made a mistake, please do forgive us.

But how do you get those years back, and how do you get rid of those memories?

So I just spaced out on that thought for a minute and the next thing I knew they were talking again.

"And I knew from the start this one woman didn't like me, I could just tell from her face. We never spoke, she was like my unspoken enemy. And so once I was doing laundry work, and there are rows of machines and tables for folding and shoots for dirty clothes to fall onto the floor and pipes running all along the ceilings and steam coming out everywhere. And there were others there with us, and guards, too, but once I looked up and it was totally silent and no one else was around except for her. No other prisoners, no other guards, nothing. And she was just standing there, facing me square on, and she was swaying a bit, like she was getting ready to pounce. And I knew that she planned this, and got some of the other inmates to distract the guards, so that she could kill me."

"Oh my God, so what did you do?"

"Well, I turned so my side was to her, and I grabbed a cigarette from my pocket and put it in my mouth. Then I said, 'Look, I'm not interested in fighting you, so-', and then I reached into my pocket, the one that was away from her, like to get a lighter, and then I took my two hands and clenched them together like this, and then I just swung around like I was swinging a ball-and-chain, and I just hit her real hard with my hands."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah, I was hoping that I could just get in one good blow then get out of there, like teach her not to fuck with me again."

"Oh my God, so what happened?"

"Yeah, so here's the punch line, so when I hit her she fell back and hit her head on a beam that ran from floor to ceiling, and just fell to the floor. So I go through a back hallway and find everyone in the next room and just sort of slip in there, but then I hear a guard asking about Terry, that was the woman I hit. and everyone looks around and they see me, and I have no expression on my face, so they don't even know if Terry saw me or not, and so everyone starts to look for Terry and they find her dead, right where I left her."

"Oh my God, you killed her?"

"Well, she hit her head on the beam, my blow didn't kill her. But no one knew who did it to her, and of course no one bothered with an investigation, so there was no problem. But after that, no one ever bothered me again."

"Holy shit. You killed her. When did you know she was dead?"

"When they found her, probably. Not when they saw what kind of shape she was in, but the instant they saw her I thought, 'she hasn't moved.' And I knew then she was dead. It was kind of unsettling, but I couldn't react."

"Kind of unsettling? I think I'd be screaming."

“But that’s the thing, all these women had killed before, at least most of them had. I’d be condemning myself if I reacted.”

“Wow.”

They sat in silence, the young mother staring at the other while she ate the last of her pizza.

The murderer grabbed her soda and drank in between words.

“Yeah, so prison - and everything after that, really - seemed different. I figured out how to remove all emotion from myself when I had to.”

“...That’s wild.”

“And once I figured that out, how to make my face unreadable, it was easy to be able to read what other inmates were thinking. I could read anyone’s face. Someone could twitch once and I’d know whether they were afraid of me or not. Any movement made it obvious to me what they thought of me, themselves, or their life. That’s why I look around here and just see what everyone else is feeling.”

“Really? What do you see?”

“I see some dopey men and some bitchy women.”

“Shut up.”

“No, it’s true - and they care about little details in their life, but they don’t give a damn about the big picture. They scream if someone cuts them off in traffic, they freak out if they have food stuck in their teeth after a meal. But they don’t care what they’re doing in their lives.”

They got up and walked over to the trash can, dumped their paper plates and napkins into the trash.

“I see a lot of people walking around with a blank stare, but it’s not an emotionless stare. It’s that they’re all resigned, it’s like they all assume that this is the way their life has to be.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, it is. It’s like they all were in prison too.”

And they walked out into the mall, and I sat there, staring at my drink.

the twin within
THE TWIN WITHIN

The music was still blaring, even at 4:30 in the morning, it was a movie opening after-hours party, Hollywood style. All the top models were there, all holding cigarettes in one hand, drinks in the other. The lights were pulsating in time with the throbbing music, dancing in the smoke rising to the ceiling and the condensation dripping from the outside windows. Some movie stars were there, all in little groups, trying to look more important than the rest. Of the few musicians left, the ones that were not still on the dance floor were in corner booths of the club, tossing white bags at each other. Some of the cast made an early escape, but the leading actor was still there, at a corner table with a few agents and lackeys.

His date wasn't in this film, but her fame was great enough that she was still the most wanted at the party.

They were the perfect couple, the tabloid writers thought, two starlets of the silver screen, partying together, winning all the awards together. The young actress knew just as well as the young actor that their relationship was only for the cameras, they knew that this was the price they chose to pay for the lives they had.

For the money, for the fame. The loss of who they were.

It bothered Veronica less than it bothered Alan. He needed to cover his homosexuality in order to get the roles that would make him famous, and their relationship for the press worked perfectly. And she knew that with this man by her side at these parties, she would be guaranteed more media coverage.

Not that she needed it. She had won awards for two films in three years, her newest film hit the box offices three weeks ago and was still breaking records in ticket sales, and everyone under the sun wanted her in their new movie. She was gold, and she knew it. But she was a business woman at heart, a marketing agent, and Alan was added security.

She didn't have to mingle at this party; people came to her in waves. She knew she made enough appearances for the night, besides, it would be breaking up soon, and she

signalled for someone to make sure her limousine was out front, then walked over to Alan's table.

"Alan, honey, I'm going to go, are you going to be all right?" she asked.

"Sure, honey, go ahead. I'll talk to you when I get back." Alan usually used the same term of endearment for her that she used for him if he couldn't think of one on his own. No one noticed.

She left the building, and the two bouncers at the door escorted her to the door of the limousine. Even at 4:45 in the morning a small crowd waited for her.

She crawled into the back, opened her purse, found the half-pack of cigarettes and tossed them to the floor. She only smoked when she was at these damn parties. Thank God I don't have to go on the set tomorrow, she thought. As soon as one movie is over another one begins. Can't even enjoy the riches for a minute.

"At least I have tomorrow off," she groaned aloud to the empty back seat of her private limousine.

If there is a God, she thought again. She rolled her head back against the car seat and tried to find some stars in the early morning sky as she rode through Manhattan.

The driver escorted her to her door before he parked the limousine. She got into her home, kicked off her shoes, left them where they fell. She could do that, she thought, because she was famous.

"Maybe I am God," she said aloud to the empty, well-guarded house. She walked upstairs.

12:30 rolled around this particular Sunday afternoon when Veronica rolled over in her bed and reached over to her phone. She dialed her chef, asked for a good amino acid breakfast shake. She then dialed One World Spa, the best place in town, the only place that happened to have a standing reservation for her. She said she'd be there at 1:30.

At 1:40 her limousine driver escorted her out of the black Mercedes and to the front doors. The afternoon was needed for rejuvenation, she thought. She used facial peels, but avoided the mud baths and favored the massages and water tanks.

Back home she went, after shopping a little. She told her staff they could go home for the rest of the evening, so she could have the house to herself. She told her chef to have a pizza delivered before he left. That always irritated him.

She went upstairs to find her shopping bags waiting for her in her bedroom. One by one she pulled out her purchases and spread them across the bed. She tried on one straight silver dress and walked downstairs. The house was so quiet when she walked through it and no one was there. No chefs, no maids, no guards, no landscapers or decorators. The heels of her shoes clicked against the marble hallway floor. She stopped, watching the shadows her furniture cast over the walls. She turned around and watched her own shadow. It must be fifteen feet long, she thought, and then she stretched her arms over her head in a triumphant arc, watching the shadow stretch even further.

After surveying the house in her first outfit and seeing that no one was there, she walked upstairs, back to her bedroom, to her safe in her bathroom. In the back of the safe was the key she needed; she closed the safe door, covered the safe with the wall panel, and walked to the end of the hall to the top of the stairs.

Her staff knew the two doors at the top of the stairs; one was to the roof, which only she was to go on, and the other was for the storage attic. Tonight, instead of sipping champagne and watching the east coast from her rooftop, she opened the second door.

She told Monica the coast was clear. She reached over and turned on the light by the door; it was a small light that only half-lit the attic. The kitchenette and bookshelves were well-lit now, but the back half of the mini-apartment was still in darkness.

At last, as if making her own grand entrance the way only Veronica would, Monica slowly walked toward her, out of the darkness.

“God, Ron, could you have waited any longer to get me out of here?”

“Just come downstairs,” Veronica replied, “I bought some new dresses.”

They sat on her bed, three hours later, Veronica wearing her new silver satin dress and Monica wearing a black strapless cocktail dress, eating the last bites of the pizza.

“Oh, I’m stuffed,” Veronica moaned as she threw her body back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Monica got up, and walked over to the mirrors. “I think we look good in this black dress, but we have so many. No one can tell this one apart from all the others. Couldn’t you get something more contemporary?”

“They can tell it apart, Monica, and we can buy as many dresses as I want.”

“You’re being frivolous. And selfish.”

“I’m being whatever I want to be, because I can.”

For a while, the silence in the bedroom was only broken by Monica turning from one side to the other in front of the mirror. Veronica remained face-up on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Ron, why don’t you let me out more?”

“You know I bring you out whenever I can. It’s tough to get the entire staff out of here. We have to be careful.”

“I know, it’s always careful. But I fidget up there. I could take your place more - you know you could use the rest.”

Veronica looked at her twin sister in the mirror, and wasn’t sure whether or not she was looking at herself.

“Monica, you know that’s not a good idea. You’d go out there and look like me but not remember a thing that happened the day before. I can only brief you on so much. We agreed that the only time you’d replace me was when I was ill and needed some time to recuperate.”

“Well, you’ve been Veronica for a while. I can’t stand it up there. You’re getting to

call all the shots out there.” Monica walked closer and leaned over the comforter. “I want to live, too.”

Veronica sat up on the bed. “Monica, you know it’s better this way. We agreed.”

Monica sat on the bed next to her and looked at her twin sister. They looked over to the mirror and stared at themselves. Veronica put her arm around Monica’s shoulder and smiled.

“Besides, we both reap the benefits of this success,” Veronica told her sister. “You’re up there now, but when we get enough money for the both of us to retire we can get away from here and live in luxury and never have to worry about a thing again. You want that, don’t you?”

Monica paused. “Of course,” she said under her breath as her eyes darted away. She knew she couldn’t argue with Veronica, even if she wanted to. Even though they were twins, she always thought she couldn’t fight her.

“There, that’s better. Do you want to stay down here tonight? I can set the alarm early so that things are clear before the staff comes back.”

Monica didn’t know what to answer.

She realized it didn’t matter, that she’d still have to go back sometime, whether it was now or a few more hours from now. “I don’t care,” she answered.

The next day was back-to-the-set day, Veronica worked the next few days, but after the fourth day she felt very tired and wanted to stay home. This isn’t like me, she thought, I never get sick.

Monica pushed a little harder every night in her attempt to get outside. “Look, Ron, you’re obviously not feeling well, and you don’t want to mess up filming at this point. Let me fill in for a few days. I mean, you said that that is what I’m here for.”

Her arguments were winning Veronica over, and two days later Monica slept in the master bedroom while Veronica stayed in the attic. Before Veronica moved into her secret hideaway, however, she made a duplicate of the attic key.

“I’m making an extra key, Monica, so don’t get any ideas.”

“Did you really think I’d do that, Ronnie? I told you I’m doing this for both of us. Now, don’t worry, I won’t screw anything up, and I’ll check up on you tomorrow night when I call off the staff, just like we discussed. Now get some sleep, honey - you’ve been so exhausted, you probably just need to sleep this illness off. There’s vegetable soup for when you’re hungry, just use the hot plate to heat it up.” Monica paused.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Without another word, Monica walked out of the attic and became Veronica.

The new Veronica walked down to the basement, to the second bar, and dropped the wrapper from the jar of sleeping pills in the trash can. She couldn’t have Veronica find them while she was staying behind the second door upstairs.

For the next few weeks they went back and forth, and although people noticed a difference from day to day, the main difference was mood change and slight forgetful-

ness. That everyone attributed to the stress of filming. And possibly the trouble Veronica was having with Alan.

The tabloids were revealing the fact that Alan was getting more and more destructive in his lifestyle, and more and more depressed. Everyone else thought that had to be having some effect on Veronica.

And one day Monica - Veronica - went to see Alan to make sure he was okay. They usually didn't bother getting together unless it was for appearance's sake, but his behavior was starting to affect Veronica's appearance in the public eye, so off she went.

Alan was sitting in his living room. His apartment was clean to the point of being antiseptic - the walls were white, the couches were white with black accents, the tables and cabinets were black with white and chrome accents. The walls were bare, except for one black painting framed on the north wall, above the bar and adjacent to the entertainment center. Mozart was playing through Alan's speakers. Alan, holding a low-ball glass with his fingertips, was sitting in the center of his couch. The ice spun around with the thick, clear tan liquor when he moved his hand.

Monica - Veronica - walked into the living room. Alan sat slouched, head leaning back, instead of sitting upright, as he normally would, paying attention to his posture, his appearance, or his guests.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Don't do this to me, this affects me, too. Tell me what's going on."

"Oh, as soon as it affects little Veronica, oh, then we have to do something."

She stood in silence next to the couch. She didn't know if she should stand or sit.

A moment, or a minute, or ten, passed. She finally sat down on the couch next to him.

"Really, Alan, I want to know. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Alan turned his eyes toward her. He let his drink slip out of his hands on to the carpet, spilling all over the floor. He didn't move.

"Veronica, we put on this show for everyone, and all the while I have to hide my lover, hide who I am. Do you know how that makes me feel?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you know how it makes my lover feel?"

She could have answered, but didn't.

"I'm tired of this, Veronica. I don't know how much longer I can go on with this game."

She looked over and saw a shattered bottle on the adjacent floor; streaks of tan liquor dripping from the black painting on his wall.

Monica came home, ordered the staff out immediately. Within ten minutes they were gone, and she made her way for what was normally her bedroom.

"Ronnie - get out here. There's a problem."

Veronica stepped outside into the hallway.

"Alan is thinking about going public. He's freaking out."

"What - why? Was he going to tell me?"

“I had to fight to get it out of him. Ron, do you know what this means if he comes out?”

“It means I’ll be the laughing stock of Hollywood. ‘I didn’t even know my own boyfriend was gay, and had a lover.’ It’ll destroy me.” Veronica paused, in exasperation, and leaned her head against the hallway wall. “Shit, what do I do?”

“You mean what do we do, Ron. I got you this far, and -”

“And the more we mix roles the better chance we have of getting caught. We’ve got to stop this, so let me get to Alan, I can shut him up for a while, I can call him tomorrow and -”

“And nothing, Ron. We’re not playing it your way anymore.”

“And since when did you get so cocky?”

Monica paused, then turned to walk away. In a quick moment she turned back and pinned Veronica by the neck to the wall. “Remember, Ron, according to the rest of the world there’s only one of us. No one would miss us if one of us happened to disappear.” She let go of Veronica and walked down the hall to the staircase.

Walking down the hall, Monica continued: “A body floating down the canal two weeks from now wouldn’t look like Veronica anymore. It would be some Jane Doe, some runaway teenager, the police would think. Besides, why would anyone think it was Veronica? She’d be still alive, filming her best movie yet.” Her voice became more and more quiet, more and more calculated with every word she spoke.

She took the first step down the stairs at the end of the hall, then stopped and turned back. “And I’m not disappearing anymore,” Monica said before she walked away, leaving Veronica bruised and shaken at the top of the stairs.

The next day Veronica was on the set, she got to the studio at four-thirty in the morning for make-up and was in front of cameras by seven. They filmed at the studio and on location in the morning, and by eleven-thirty she was starved and ready for a drink. She walked over to her trailer, her make-shift dressing room and second home. Inside she poured some bourbon into a glass and sat in the only chair not covered with costumes.

Someone knocked on her trailer. “Who is it?” she asked. A young male voice responded, “Hi, my name is John, I’m a really big fan. I just wanted to say hello and tell you how good your work was.”

She knew every male thought she was beautiful, and no male thought twice about her acting. She got up and moved her way to the door. As her door creaked open, she saw a handsome young man, nervously grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, you can say hello, but actually talking to me will cost you.”

The young man stood there, a few steps below the trailer, dumfounded.

“Look, kid, I’m starved. Get me a sandwich and I’ll talk to you while I’m eating before my next scene, okay? I could go for a falafel or something. There’s a place down the street that makes them - would you mind?”

“No problem - I mean - I mean, it would be my pleasure. Falafel - okay, cool, no problem. I’ll be back in a minute -” and the young man turned around and ran off toward the next block.

Waiting for some food was killing her. She rummaged through her mini-refrigerator and found some white bread and cheese slices and gave up on the young fan. She was getting used to fast food and hard liquor for her lunches, hard liquor and cigarettes for her dinners. She didn't want to go home much anymore. Monica got a hold of the extra key, so now anyone could take over, if one of them would slip up and let the other take over. The longer Veronica stayed away from the house, the longer Monica had to stay there to protect their secret - and the longer Veronica was Veronica.

Her fan never showed up with lunch, but she didn't care. Someone else will always get her food. But she liked the idea of talking to someone new.

At eight-thirty at night, after working sixteen hours, Veronica sat in her trailer again, this time eating a rice cake with her bourbon. A knock came on her door again.

John appeared as she opened her door and let him into her trailer, even without food.

It was nice, she thought, to have a fan adore her like this. Even if it was two in the morning.

For hours John sat there, leaning forward, eyes widened in amazement that he was actually talking to Veronica. He would ask a question, and Veronica would tell him all about life with fame, what this actor was like, how she got into show business. It was nice, she thought, to have someone think so much of her, to pay her so much attention. He was just some nobody to her, she couldn't even imagine what he looked like, even though she was sitting right there with him, staring him in the face.

But she didn't care what he looked like. What she cared about was that she was still loved, for one reason or another. And so she gave this fan what he wanted - time with her. And she talked.

And after two in the morning, John left. And Veronica passed out in her trailer.

The next thing she realized was that someone was knocking on her door. She woke up. Looked at the clock. It was already eight-thirty in the morning, she had no sleep, her make-up wasn't ready, and someone outside was expecting her to shoot the next scene. She couldn't even remember what scene the crew was filming today. She dragged herself out of her make-shift bed and got to the door.

"Ms. Phillips - are you ready for the first scene?" asked a young stage-hand. He was wearing a t-shirt, jeans, a baseball cap, a crew badge around his neck. He was holding a pot of coffee.

She looked at him in silence, leaning on the door frame. She was barely conscious.

"Oh, Ms. Phillips, did you hear the news already? Oh, you don't look very good. Why don't you sit down - I can get you some coffee."

"What news?" she managed to say.

The stage-hand then realized that she hadn't heard the news, turned and ran away.

It was the director who came to her trailer with the morning paper. He poured her coffee as she read that Alan died the night before of a drug overdose.

The next three days were a blur to Veronica. She had to act sad, and although she didn't want him dead, she really didn't care about him, either. So she put on her actress face and did her best mourning job, wore some of her best black dresses, and gave up being social. Besides, all she really wanted to do was stay at home and drink herself to sleep.

But Monica was more concerned about their future. "You don't think any of Alan's sexual past will be dug up, will you?"

Veronica leaned against her bar and rubbed her face in her hand. "You know, I really don't know. What would anyone have to gain from that?"

"Ron, you mean to tell me Alan's not going to have a bunch of male lovers popping out of the woodwork saying they have a right to part of Alan's estate? What do we do if that happens?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do now, is there? If Alan's reputation gets smeared there's really nothing we can do about it."

Monica paused, then went to the bar to get Veronica another drink. "There's got to be something. And if I were you, I'd mourn a little more. If some of his lovers do come out of the woodwork, you'll look like a jealous ex that found out he was gay."

"And what difference does it make?"

"Just keep our bases covered, and we should be fine."

"I have nothing to cover up, Monica. Besides, there was no foul play involved - he just killed himself."

Monica leaned back and lit a cigarette. "All I'm saying is that you could stand to look a little more clean."

Veronica put her head down for a moment, then got up the strength to get up and go to bed. She reached the end of the room when Monica spoke.

"Oh, and Ronnie - you look like hell. I'll cover for tomorrow."

Veronica just turned away and walked out of the room.

At 5:07 the next afternoon Monica slammed the attic door open. "Veronica, turn your television on. This is it."

Veronica walked over to the set, turned it on, and stood there for a moment while Monica changed the channel. Veronica tried to fix the reception while they both listened to the press conference on the evening news.

"I have every reason to believe that Veronica Phillips murdered Alan. Coroners found traces of cyanide in Alan's bloodstream, and Alan didn't do drugs - he was a drinker, but he never shot up."

The press standing below him roared with questions. "But why do you think it was Veronica Phillips?"

"She was nervous about her career being shattered if her boyfriend - Alan - came out of the closet - which he was contemplating doing."

Another roar from the crowd ensued. "And how do you know all of this?"

"Because I am his real lover," the young man said.

"Change the channel," Veronica said. When Monica did, the police chief of the

local county police department was being questioned. "With the findings from the Coroner's office, we definitely agree that there was foul play. As for Veronica Phillips, well, we'll be contacting her to answer some questions, but that is all we can say at the moment."

Veronica got up and turned off the television set, then sat back down on the bed. Monica lit up a cigarette. "Well, you better call the lawyers," Monica said as she took a long drag.

"But I didn't do it," Veronica mumbled under her breath. She dropped her head into her hands.

"No, of course you didn't, Ronnie," Monica said. She took another drag. "You know that, I know that -"

Veronica looked up. "Oh." She sat in silence.

Monica sat in silence with her.

Veronica figured it out.

"Oh my God," whispered Veronica. Veronica couldn't say any more. Monica picked up her head and looked at Veronica and waited.

"Monica, you did it, didn't you?" she finally asked.

Monica then looked down at the cigarette she was inhaling from. She pulled the cigarette away from her lips. "Well, honey, I've got to take care of you, now, don't I?"

Veronica jumped up from the bed. "I can't believe this! I can't believe you did this to us! Now you expect me to cover this up? What if someone saw you there, or saw you going there? Or what if someone from staff here saw you? God, Monica, this is why I'm the one on the outside most of the time, this is way out of control! You can't go around killing people! Do you think this is going to make my life easier? Monica, we need to have only one of us on the outside at a time - oh, God, and now I've got to figure out a way to get us out of this? Take care of me? You call this taking care of me? You've turned our life upside-down, you've possible destroyed our only chance for the future we wanted, and you call this taking care of me? And another thing, I'm the one that takes care of you, not the other way around. I've managed perfectly well so far, I've managed to not kill anyone, and then you go out when you're not supposed to and do this. And what if we have to go to jail?"

"First of all, Ronnie, only one of us can go to jail. The other one would have to go into hiding. Remember that there's only one of us on the outside. Second, this is a perfect time to have both of us on the outside. I went there at twelve-thirty or one in the morning, and since you weren't home I knew you were at a club, so you'd have a room full of witnesses to back you up. You have an air-tight alibi, Ronnie. Third, Alan was only going to be trouble for us later on, and -"

"Monica, I wasn't at a club, I was talking to a fan in my trailer until two in the morning. Jesus Christ, I can't even remember his fucking name, it was, oh shit, it was -"

"Veronica, you didn't go out that night? Damn it, Ronnie, you can - but wait, the fan, just remember his name and he'll come forward."

"Um, I think it was John."

Monica sat for a moment in silence.

“John.” Monica paused. “John - that’s all you can think of, John? No last name?”

“He never told me his last name.”

“So what we’re saying here is we’re supposed to go out on a search for a fan named John in all of California?”

“Well, don’t blame me, I’m not the one going around killing people.”

Veronica put her head back into her hands. Monica got up and walked to the door. “Well, you will be blamed if you don’t find this mysterious John. So tomorrow, you go to your lawyers, tell them the whole story about John. Then talk to the police, with the lawyers, of course, and tell them exactly what you did. The more details you give, the more convincing it will be. Then have a press conference, looking for the fan. I’m sure he’ll show up to get more fame, to see you again, and... To save his damsel in distress.”

Monica opened the door and checked to make sure the upstairs hallway was empty. She leaned back in the room. “And yes, Ronnie, remember that you aren’t the one going around killing people. I am.”

Monica turned away and shut the door behind her.

Veronica watched the cigarette smoke Monica left behind glide up toward to solitary ceiling light. “But if this doesn’t work, which one of us goes to jail?” she spoke out loud to the four empty, cold walls.

The next day went perfectly according to plan. Veronica got her team of lawyers together, and she explained everything. She put on her most conservative suit and went to the police without being asked. She had her lawyers set up a press conference for five o’clock in the afternoon that day.

As everything was happening around her, all she could think was that if this didn’t work out, if Veronica Phillips was going to go to jail, then she would go into hiding and let them drag Monica away.

But five-o’clock rolled around, and the room was filled at Veronica’s press conference with news reporters, photographers, other actors, anyone who could get a badge. Veronica looked out from the edge of the stage, and wondered if they all came because they loved her or because they hated her.

This would have to be her best performance yet, she thought, sound intelligent, look sweet, act conservatively, use emotion, but not so much that it is unbelievable.

Her head lawyer went up on stage first, delivered a seven-minute speech, then fielded questions from the press. They questioned him for nearly ten minutes. Then he handed the stage over to Veronica, and she started her carefully prepared speech. Explaining that she wasn’t alone but talking with a fan in her trailer on the set, all she asked was for that fan to step forward. Hot lines were set up, toll-free phone lines were activated, all he had to do was call. John was the only thing that could prove her innocence to her, and she was sure he would step forward.

At least that is what she said in the press conference.

Veronica went home that night feeling worse than in the morning. She delivered her speeches to the lawyers, to the police, to the media flawlessly, but no John had stepped forward. She waited at her lawyer's offices, waiting for John to call, for hours. He never did.

"What if he never comes forward?" she asked herself over and over again in her limousine ride home.

Hordes of media were waiting at the edge of her driveway, following her car in after eleven o'clock that night. The police cars that followed her home pushed the media away long enough for her to get into her home. She had her lawyers call for bodyguards and security for 6 a.m. the next morning.

Veronica went upstairs, and a moment later Monica came back down. She asked her staff to close all the shades that weren't already closed, then to go on a small vacation. The less people around, the better. "I'm sure you understand, and I appreciate your consideration during this time for me. When I need you again, I'll call you all back," she told her staff.

Within twenty minutes the house was empty. Veronica went downstairs to the bar and poured herself a glass of bourbon. She sat at a chair, with her elbows on the bar, her left hand on her forehead. She couldn't move.

Monica circled around her, pacing back and forth. "Well, we're going to have to come up with something. And you, Ronnie, you look like hell. That better be an act because we need your mind sharp when you're out there."

"Monica," Veronica responded, "Alan is dead, you killed him, and everyone thinks it was me. I look like hell because I'm in it."

She looked down, swirled the bourbon around the bottom of the glass, and finished her first round.

Veronica poured herself another glass. Monica started to walk out the room when Veronica spoke.

"So, cyanide, huh? How did you give it to him?"

"In his drink. He was already sloshed."

Veronica paused. "Did you take the glass with you?"

"Of course. And yes, I wore gloves. Don't worry, Ronnie."

Monica walked up the stairs.

Veronica wondered how many opportunities Monica had to lace her drinks, too.

For the next few days she had the lawyers call her at home and visit her instead of going out herself. She had security posted at every doorway, and a few monitoring the windows around her property. She felt like she was already in prison.

During the third night, while Veronica sat in her living room with a glass of sherry, Monica leaned over the back of the couch and whispered in her ear, "Are you beginning to see how I've felt all of these years?"

Veronica closed her eyes. She was afraid to say anything to Monica anymore. Monica walked away, whistling.

The fifth day was when the phone call came. John called at noon, and they immediately arranged a press conference for five o'clock in the afternoon. By three-thirty, John was at the police station with Veronica's lawyers. Veronica stayed at home and prepared for the press conference.

She only first saw him when he came on stage to join her. Her eyes turned into saucers when John walked on stage, but she quickly regained her composure. They answered a few questions, then Veronica took her lawyers, and John, out to dinner. By eight o'clock that night, the police issued a formal statement that Veronica Phillips was not considered a suspect in Alan's death. A celebration was in order.

Everyone went back to the lawyers' offices and drank from their private bar. At nearly two in the morning, they decided to leave.

Veronica stayed in the parking lot with John while her lawyers, one by one, drove away. In a few minutes, the two of them were alone.

She turned to him. "You're not John."

"Yes I am, Veronica, John Lowry. I-"

"Sure, you're John, but you're not the John I met."

"I know." He paused. "I was wondering what you'd say."

"What are you doing? Why did you come forward and say you were the man I was with?"

"Miss Phillips, your fan wasn't coming forward. I know you didn't do it. I know you couldn't do it. And I'm sure you were with a fan. I couldn't let the police drag you over the coals, and they were about to do it."

"But where were you then? Could someone identify you as being somewhere else at the same time?"

"Miss Phillips, I live alone, I have no family around here, and not many friends, either. I work as a pool cleaner in Beverly Hills. No one knows anything about me, and no one saw what I was doing that night. I was alone, in my darkened apartment, on the phone with no one. I was reading a book, in my bedroom, which doesn't even have any windows. You have nothing to worry about."

"But what if the real John comes forward?"

"Miss Phillips, if he were going to come forward, don't you think he would have done it by now? I think you feared that he would never show up. If you didn't, you wouldn't have remained silent during the press conference."

Veronica leaned against her Mercedes in the parking lot. A street light illuminated the ground behind her car, leaving the two of them just out of the spotlight.

"But why did you do it?"

"I told you. I know you're innocent. I know you wouldn't do that. And -"

"And what?"

"And... I'm a big fan, too."

They sat in silence together, both leaning against her car.

"I don't know, just to be able to meet you, to talk to you, that's a big enough thrill, but I thought, hey, it would be an honor to help you when you needed it."

"But I don't know how to thank you, I mean, I could give you something, but then

it would look like I was paying you off, and -”

“I’m not asking for anything. I mean, I got something - I’m the only person that could save you, and I did.”

John looked up at the insects circling around the street light.

“Maybe, Miss Phillips -”

“Yes?”

“Maybe you could keep in touch. A phone call, or dinner once or twice a year.”

“I think I could do that, John. But one thing -”

“Yes, Miss Phillips?”

“You have to call me Veronica.”

John looked down as a sheepish grin came across his face. “Sure, Veronica.”

She gave this stranger a hug before she got into her car and drove away.

Veronica called her producers the next day and told them that she would have to take a few days off from filming to recuperate. She stayed in bed late.

Monica walked into the master bedroom at eleven-thirty in the morning. “Why aren’t you on the set?”

“I called in and told them I needed a few days for myself. They understood. I told them less than a week.”

“Ronnie, why the hell did you do that? I could have covered for you. You don’t want people to wonder what’s going on.”

“Monica, people will wonder if I’m able to just go right back to work after all this happened. It’s natural to need some time off after something like this. It’s traumatic.”

“You are such a whiny bitch, Ron. You should have checked with me first.”

Monica walked out of the bedroom, but popped her head in for a brief moment.

“Oh, and get this, Ron, the morning news updates say that Alan’s lover is now the primary suspect. What a riot. Now the little fucker will get his for pointing the finger at us, right?”

Monica started to laugh as she left Veronica’s bedroom and walked down the hallway.

Veronica spent the afternoon drinking. By four-thirty in the afternoon she decided to make a phone call.

“Doctor Wolcott’s office.”

“Yes, I’d like to make an appointment to see Doctor Wolcott as soon as possible. It’s a bit of an emergency.”

“Have you visited with Doctor Wolcott before?”

“Yes, but it hasn’t been for a few years. Look, is there anything available in the next day or two? Tell him it’s Veronica Phillips, he’ll remember me.”

“Oh, Ms. Phillips, let me check with the doctor and see what we can do.”

She made an appointment with her psychiatrist for the next afternoon.

“Remember, Ron, according to the rest of the world there’s only one of us. No one would miss us if one of us happened to disappear. A body floating down the canal two

weeks from now wouldn't look like Veronica anymore. It would be some Jane Doe, some runaway teenager, the police would think. Besides, why would anyone think it was Veronica? She'd be still alive, filming her best movie yet."

For the rest of the evening Monica's words kept pounding through Veronica's brain.

From the living room she heard Monica walking down the stairs. "Veronica, I'm going out to the clubs tonight. Don't go anywhere, will you?"

"I won't," Veronica answered. "Try to look like you're shaken up, will you?"

"Don't worry, darling. I'm a great actress." And with that she turned around and headed for the door.

As Monica walked away Veronica listened to her footsteps. The heels of her shoes clicked against the marble hallway floor. The front door opened, closed. Veronica looked around at the shadows her furniture cast over the walls. She sat with her feet up on her couch. Her drink was almost empty. She reached over for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tony?"

"Yeah, who is this - Veronica?"

"Yeah, hope I'm not calling too late."

"No, honey, I was just going to go out in a bit. What do you need?"

"Well, after this whole fiasco with the police I feel like everyone's watching me a little more closely. I feel so unsafe, even in my own house. I know you offered this to me before, so -"

"You want a gun for your house?"

"Yeah, Tony."

"Well, first you gotta learn how to shoot the thing."

"Would you be interested in teaching me?"

"Sure, Veronica. When do you wanna do this?"

"As soon as possible. Can we get together tomorrow?"

"Yeah, but only at like noon. Do you want me to pick you up?"

"Sure, Tony. And thanks."

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, Tony. Oh wait - I might be going out to the clubs, so if I see you out tonight, don't talk about this. I don't want other people knowing I'm getting a gun."

"Got it, honey. See you later."

"Bye, Tony."

She laid the phone down on the cocktail table. She got up and walked into the bathroom. She turned on the light and stood in front of the medicine cabinet. She stared at herself in the mirror, noting the new wrinkles she gained over the past two weeks. She opened the cabinet, found every package of codeine and lithium, as well as two jars of sleeping pills. She walked upstairs and did the same in the master bathroom. She then walked down the stairs into the kitchen and hid everything in a crock pot, and put it in the oven. Monica couldn't poison her, she thought, if she couldn't find the drugs.

She straightened herself up, left the kitchen, walked into the living room. She looked

around her quiet house. She used to like it when she let the staff go for the night, she like the feeling of being alone. Never before did it feel unsafe, or even lonely. She got her glass, and walked to the bar. She had twelve more hours to kill before seeing Tony.

The next morning went perfectly. Since Veronica was in bed when Monica came home, and probably because Monica was still drunk at dawn, she went to the attic to sleep. Veronica got up, took some aspirin, and got ready to see Tony.

When she saw Tony pulling into her driveway, she walked outside. She got into his car and they made their way towards the shooting range.

“Hey, Veronica, in the back seat - do you like it?”

She looked in the back seat and saw a .38 special laying in the back seat. It looks like it was just thrown there nonchalantly, she thought, by someone who didn't know what it was capable of doing.

“Is it loaded?”

“Nah. Thought I'd teach you how to do that once we got to the range.”

She reached to the back seat and picked up the gun.

“It's a beauty, ain't it, honey?”

She didn't answer; she just sat there in amazement at how heavy the gun really was.

Tony explained everything to her, and after two-and-a-half hours she felt calm and focused when she shot her new gun. He brought her home by three-thirty, which gave her just enough time to hide her gun in the pot in the oven, change clothes, and take her limousine to her doctor's appointment.

She walked through a back entrance into the office to avoid the exposure. She walked in with a calm she thought she couldn't have until after she talked to her old doctor.

Doctor Wolcott's previous appointment had already left, so he was waiting for her when she arrived. She walked into his office and immediately sat on the couch. He got up from his chair, walked around and sat on the corner of his desk.

“Ms. Phillips, it's good to see you again.”

“Monica's getting out of control.”

Doctor Wolcott paused. “The last time we talked was a few years ago, but then you said that Monica wasn't bothering you.”

“Well, she's come out of hiding, and she's on a rampage. I'm scared of her. I'm afraid she's going to try to take over me.”

“Why would you say that Veronica? You're a strong woman. You know you can handle her, you've done so before.”

“You don't get it, Doctor Wolcott,” she answered. She paused, took in a deep breath. “She killed Alan.”

Doctor Wolcott leaned his head back. His smile faded.

“It was her, doctor. I swear, it wasn't me. I wasn't there. She did it, and I had to cover it up.” Her eyes started to water; she put her hand to her cheek, brushed her hair

back behind her ear. "And she's been threatening me, saying she's not going to stay in hiding anymore, that no one will miss me if I'm found floating down the river two weeks from now by the police. God, I really think she's going to kill me."

"Veronica, she's not going to kill you. She needs you. She needs you to be alive. What she wants is to take over your spirit and rule your life. What you have to do is fight that, fight her will."

"No, Doctor Wolcott, you don't understand. I think she fed me sleeping pills a couple of weeks ago. I keep finding codeine and lithium in the medicine cabinets that I didn't put there. I've had to hide it from her. I'm really afraid she's trying to kill me off."

"Veronica, I'd like to admit you somewhere to get some rest. You could be away from Monica then, you'd have time to recuperate, time away from work, time to fight her and win yourself back."

"Doctor Wolcott, if I do that, then she'll definitely take over my life. She'll get out, there's nothing I can do to stop that. And she'll make it so I can never get back out. She'll never let me out."

"Then you have to fight her will now, Veronica. Let me help you."

Veronica's tears slid down her face in quiet desperation. "I have to fight her. I have to get rid of her."

Doctor Wolcott responded to her comments, but she no longer heard them. For the rest of the hour all she could think was that she had to confront Monica, do it reasonably and rationally, make it a test of wills. She always won in the past. She has to do it again.

At six o'clock, Veronica left the office and stepped into her limousine. She checked to make sure there was some liquor in the back. She told the driver to drive around. She didn't want to go home yet.

After two hours, she told her driver to stop at a liquor store and buy her a bottle of red wine. Then she asked him to drive her to the shore.

He drove her to a hill near the shore, so that she could watch the sunset without having to leave the back of her car. Veronica sipped her wine as she watched the glowing red sun slide down into the cool blue waters, illuminating the sky with oranges and purples.

"You know, I haven't watched the sunset in years," she told her driver as they pulled away from the hill and headed back to her home. Inside, she wondered if it would be her last.

Veronica walked into her home at nearly ten-thirty that night. She heard classical music playing from upstairs. She hoped she could avoid her confrontation for just a little while longer. She kicked her shoes off at the front door and started to head for the bar when she stopped.

"God, I haven't eaten all day," she thought, and turned around and headed into the kitchen.

The light was on in the kitchen, and she walked around the island to her refriger-

ator to grab a piece of cheese. She set the block of cheese down next to the refrigerator and grabbed a piece of french bread from the counter, ripping off the end and shoving it in her mouth. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the oven door slightly open.

A wave of fear fell over her. In a mad panic, she ran up the stairs to her bedroom.

She grabbed the door frame at her bedroom to stop her forward motion. Monica sat in the center of the bed, bottles and packages of drugs and boxes of bullets fanned around her. Veronica's gun was resting in Monica's lap; Monica gazed intently at it as she repeatedly ran her fingers along the handle. She didn't look up to acknowledge Veronica's arrival.

Veronica stood in the doorway, holding herself up with the door frame, panting.

Monica continued to stroke the side of the gun.

"I'm so disappointed in you, Ronnie. Did you really think I wouldn't find this?" Her eyes never left the gun in her lap.

"I just bought it. I was afraid of freaks trying to hurt us because of Alan's murder."

"And that's why you were collecting the drugs, Ronnie?"

"No, I was afraid you were going to hurt yourself. We've both been under a lot of stress, and I didn't want you resorting to -"

"Do you really think I'm stupid, Ronnie?"

Veronica stopped making up an explanation and just looked at her. Monica picked up the gun from her lap and got up from the bed.

"I mean, do you really think I'm that stupid?" She asked again, this time louder, almost screaming.

Veronica stood motionless in the doorway. Monica walked up to her. Their noses almost touched.

"I'm smart enough to know that the two of us can't do this any longer, that the two of us can't go one being one person any longer. One of us has to die tonight, for the sanity of the both of us."

They both stood in silence, waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Remember, Ron, according to the rest of the world there's only one of us. No one would miss us if one of us happened to disappear. A body floating down the canal two weeks from now wouldn't look like Veronica anymore. It would be some Jane Doe, some runaway teenager, the police would think. Besides, why would anyone think it was Veronica? She'd be still alive, filming her best movie yet."

Thoughts raced through Veronica's mind. She finally spoke. "You're the one who decided that one of us has to die tonight, not me. But I'm not going to -"

In mid-sentence, to catch her off-guard, Veronica pushed Monica down and ran out the room toward the stairs.

Monica quickly jumped to her feet, picked up the gun and ran after her. She caught up in the living room. Monica started to yell.

"What, Ronnie, getting another drink? You can't drink yourself away from this one, Ron. I'm not going away. I'm not blowing my entire career because you can't handle it."

Veronica started to cry. "I thought we were a team. I thought we needed each

other.” Veronica slid to the floor and leaned against the bar.

Monica crouched down next to her. “It’s got to be this way, Ronnie. You know it does.”

“But I don’t want to die,” Veronica whispered. She looked down at the carpet.

“One of us has to go away in order for the life of Veronica Phillips to move forward. All of her work will be forgotten if we’re fighting on the sidelines.”

Veronica looked up. “I’m Veronica Phillips,” she said as she swung her right arm and punched Monica. Monica fell back, but jumped back and lunged for Veronica.

From two blocks away, a pair of joggers heard a single gun shot during their daily run.

It was two mornings later when the police entered the home of Veronica Phillips at the request of Doctor Wolcott. They found assorted pills and drugs scattered on Veronica’s bed. And they found Veronica Phillips laying dead on her living room floor next to her bar, with her gun in her hand.

“I should have done something,” Doctor Wolcott said under his breath.

“Did you have reason to believe she was going to kill herself?” one of the police officers asked while a plain-clothes officer took photographs of the scene.

“No,” Doctor Wolcott responded, “but she was afraid her other personality was going to kill her. She saw me two days ago, she made an appointment for the first time in years. When I worked with her before I knew she had multiple personality disorder, but she had been in extensive therapy with me and she said that Monica - the second personality - wasn’t around anymore, wasn’t bothering her. So, I never admitted her anywhere. And just two days ago she came to my office, saying Monica was back.”

Doctor Wolcott stood back while the paramedics carried a stretcher into her home.

“And now she destroyed both of them,” Doctor Wolcott whispered.

On the set, her director got a body-double to finish the film.

On the other side of town, John was waiting for Veronica Phillips to call.

crazy
CRAZY

This dialogue is transcribed from repeated visits with a patient in Aaronsville Correctional Center in West Virginia. Madeline*, a thirty-six year old woman, was sentenced to life imprisonment after the brutal slaying of her boyfriend during sexual intercourse. According to police reports, Madeline sat with the remains of the man for three days after the murder until police arrived on the scene. They found her in the same room as the body, still coated with blood and malnourished. Three doctors studied her behavior for a total period of eight months, and the unanimous conclusion they reached was that Madeline was not of sound mind when she committed the act, which involved an ice pick, an oak board from the back of a chair, and eventually a chef's knife. Furthermore, she continued to show signs of both paranoia and delusions of grandeur long after the murder, swaying back and forth between the two, much like manic depression.

For three and a half years Madeline has stayed at the Aaronsville Correctional Center, and she has shown no signs of behavioral improvement. She stays in a room by herself, usually playing solitaire on her bed. She talks to herself regularly and out loud, usually in a slight Southern accent, although not in a very loud tone, according to surveillance videotape. Her family abandoned her after the murder. Occasionally she requests newspapers to read, but she is usually denied them. She never received visitors, until these sessions with myself.

The following excerpts are from dialogues I have had with her, although I am tempted to say that they are monologues. She wasn't very interested in speaking with me, rather, she was more interested in opening herself up to someone for the first time in years, someone who was willing to listen. At times I began to feel like a surrogate parent. I try not to think of what will happen when our sessions end.

** Madeline is not her real name.*

I know they're watching me. They've got these stupid cameras everywhere - see, there's one behind the air vent there, hi there, and there's one where the window used to be. They've probably got them behind the mirrors, too. It wouldn't be so bad, I guess, I mean, there's not much for me to be doing in here anyway, but they watch me dress, too, I mean, they're watching me when I'm naked, now what's that going to do to a person? I don't know what they're watching for anyway, it's not like I can do anything in here. I eat everything with a spoon, I've never been violent, all I do, almost every day, is sit on this bed and play solitaire.

Solitaire is really relaxing, you know, and I think it keeps your brain alive, too. Most people think you can't win at solitaire, that the chances of winning are like two percent or something. But the thing is, you can win at this game like over half the time. I think that's the key, too - knowing you can win half the time. I mean, the last four rounds I played, I won twice. Now I'm not saying that's good or anything, like praise me because I won two rounds of solitaire, but it makes a point that as long as you know what you're doing and you actually think about it, you can win. The odds are better.

I think people just forget to watch the cards. Half the time the reason why you lose is because you forget something so obvious. You're looking for a card through the deck and the whole time it's sitting on another pile, just waiting to be moved over, and the whole time you forget to move it. People just forget to pay attention. They got to pay attention.

You know, I'd like to see the news. I hate t.v., but I'd like to see what acts other people are doing. Anything like mine? Has anyone else lost it like me? You know, I'll bet my story wasn't even on the news for more than thirty seconds. And I'll bet the news person had a tone to their voice that was just like "oh, the poor crazy thing," like, "that's what happens when you lose it, I guess."

But I want to see what's happening in the real world. I just wanna watch to see what, you know, the weather is like, even though I haven't seen the sun in a year or two. Or, or to hear sports scores. They won't let me have a t.v. in the room. I think they think that I'm gonna hot-wire it or something, like I'm going to try to electrocute the whole building with a stupid television set. They let me have a lamp in the room, like I can't hurt someone with that, but no t.v. They won't even let me have a newspaper. What can a person do with a newspaper? Light in on fire or something? If I had matches or something. But it's like this: I've never been violent to nobody in all of the time I've been in here. I haven't laid a hand on a guard, even though they're tried too many time to lay a hand on me, and I haven't cause one single little problem in this whole damn place, and this is what I get - I don't even get a t.v. or a newspaper.

You know, I don't really have a Southern accent. See? Don't I sound different with my regular voice? I picked it up when I started sounding crazy. See, I'm not really crazy, I just know the kind of shit they do to you in prison. I think it's bad enough here, I would've had the shit kicked out of me, Id've been sodomized before I knew what hit me. I think this voice makes me sound a little more strange. I'm actually from New York, but I mean, changing the voice a little just to save me from going to prison, well, I can do that. Here it's kind of nice, I don't have to deal with people that often, and all the crazy people around here think I'm some sort of tough bitch because I mutilated someone who was

raping me. Oh, you didn't hear that part of the story, did you? Those damn lawyers thought that since I wasn't a virgin I must have been wanting him. And he wasn't even my boyfriend - he was just some guy I knew, we'd go out every couple of weeks, and I never even slept with him before.

What a fucked up place. You see, I gotta think of it this way: I really had no choice but to do what I did. In a way it was self-defense, because I didn't want that little piece of shit to try to do that to me, I mean, what the Hell makes him think he can do that? Where does he get off trying to take me like that, like I'm some butcher-shop piece of meat he can buy and abuse or whatever? Well anyway, I know part of it all was self defense and all, but at the same time I know I flipped, but its because of, well shit that happened in my past. I never came from any rich family like you, I never even came from a family with a dad, and when you got all these boyfriends coming in and hitting you or touching you or whatever, you know it's got to mess you up. Yeah, I know, people try to use the my-parents-beat-me line and it's getting to the point where no one really believes it anymore, but if a person goes through all their life suppressing something that they shouldn't have to suppress then one day it's going to just come up to them and punch them in the face, it's going to make them go crazy, even if it's just for a little while.

Society's kind of weird, you know. It's like they teach you to do things that aren't normal, that don't feel right down deep in your bones, but you have to do them anyway, because someone somewhere decided that this would be normal. Everyone around you suppresses stuff, and when you see that it tells you that you're supposed to be hiding it from the rest of the world, too, like if we all just hide it for a while, it will all go away. Maybe it does, until someone like me blows up and can't take hiding all that stuff anymore, but then the rest of the world can just say that we're crazy and therefore it's unexplainable why we went crazy and then they can just brush it all off and everything is back to normal again. It's like emotion. People are taught to hide their emotions. Men are taught not to cry, women are taught to be emotional and men are told to think that it's crazy. So when something really shitty happens to someone - like a guy loses his job or something - and he just sits in front of a friend and breaks down and cries, the other guy just thinks this guy is crazy for crying. Then the guy rejects the guy that's crying, making him feel even worse, making the guy bottle it back up inside of him.

I think people are like Pepsi bottles. You remember those glass bottles? Pop always tasted better in those bottles, you could just like swig it down easier, your lips fit around the glass neck better or something. I wonder why people don't use them anymore? Well, I think people are like Pepsi bottles, like they have the potential for all of this energy, and the whole world keeps shaking them up, and some people lose their heads and the top goes off and all of this icky stuff comes shooting all around and other Pepsi bottles want to hide from it and then the poor guy has no Pepsi left. And how can you do anything when you have no Pepsi left? Or maybe you do lose it, but you still have some Pepsi left in you, and people keep thinking that you don't have any left, and then they treat you like you shouldn't be allowed to tie your own shoelaces or you should be watched while you're getting dressed.

Can't you turn those cameras off?

I heard this story in here sometime about Tony, this guy that was in here for murder, and after he was in here he went crazy and cut off his own scrotum. I don't know how a man survives something like that, but I guess he did, because he was in here, and from what I hear he was using the pay phones to call 1-800 numbers to prank whoever answered at the other end. Well, I guess he kept calling this one place where these women would answer the phone, and they got fed up with it, I guess, and traced it or something. They got the number for this hospital, and talked to his doctor. I think he told them that Tony cut his balls off, now I thought doctor-patient records were private, but I suppose it doesn't matter, because we're just crazy prisoners, killers who don't matter anyway, but he told these girls that Tony cut his balls off a whole two months ago. And then he called them back, talking dirty to them, not knowing they knew he was a murderer with no balls and they laughed and made fun of him and told him they knew, and he hung up the phone and never called them back. True story, swear to God. Can you just imagine him wondering how they knew? Or were they just making a joke, or...

Did you know that I write? I figured that if they won't let me read anything, maybe I could put stuff down on paper and read it to myself, I guess. I try to write poetry, but it just don't come out right, but I've been trying to write a thing about what I went through, you know what I'm talking about? Well, I just figure that if other people that are in prison can get best sellers and make a ton of money, then so can I, I mean, my story is better than half the stuff that's out there, and I know there are a lot of women who have a little part of them that wants to do what I did. I think all women feel it, but the most of them are taught to suppress it, to keep it all bottled in like that. But now that I think of it, what am I going to do with a bunch of money anyway? I'm never going to get out of here to enjoy it or anything. Anyway, how would I get someone to want to read it in the first place, now that everyone thinks that I'm crazy?

Sometimes I get so depressed. It's like I'm never going to get out of here. I think I wanted to have kids one day. It's easier, I guess, not having to see kids, I guess then I don't miss them too much, but...

For the longest time they tried to get doctors to come in here and talk to me, and you know what they did? They got men doctors - one after another - and then they wondered why the Hell I didn't want to talk to them. Amazing. People really just don't think, do they?

I guess it's hard, being in here and all, I mean. I was going to go back to school, I had already taken the GED and graduated high school, and I was going to go to the local community college. It was going to be different. Sometimes I wonder, you know, why this had to happen to me, why I had to snap. I really don't think I could have controlled it, I don't think any of this could have happened any other way. It's hard. I have to find stuff to do, because otherwise all I'd want to do is sleep all day and night, and I suppose I could, but then what would happen to me? At least if I write a book about my life, about this whole stupid world, then maybe everyone would at least understand. It wasn't really my fault, I mean, I think we women have enough to deal with just in our regular lives and then they keep piling on this sexism crap on us, and then expect us not to be angry about it because we were taught to deal with it all of our lives. Maybe this guy



was just the straw that broke the camel's back or something, maybe he was just another rapist, maybe he was just another drunk guy who thought that he could do whatever he wanted with me because he was the man and I was his girl, or just some chick that didn't matter or whatever, but shit, it does matter, at least to me it does.

I know I've got a lot of healing to do, but I haven't really thought about doing it. I mean, what have I got to heal for anyway? To get out of here and go to prison? Then I'll just get abused by guards over there, have to watch my back every second of the day. At least here people watch my back for me. They think everything and anything in the world could harm me, even myself, so they're so overprotective that nothing can go wrong, unless it goes wrong in my own mind.

Previously Published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Malcontent*, *Out of a Maze*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, *my-diary.org*, *poetry-today.com*, *poets2000.com*, *poetryboard.com*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, <http://www.yatko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, the chapbook *Gasoline and Reason*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 11, 69, 75 & 90, and in the books *Domestic Blisters*, *The Window* and *(Woman)*.

NICK DISPOLDO, SMALL PRESS REVIEW

Kuypers is the widely-published poet of particular perspectives and not a little existential rage. One piece in this issue is "Crazy," an interview Kuypers conducted with "Madeline," a murderess who was found insane, and is confined to West Virginia's Aaronsville Correctional Center. Madeline, whose elevator definitely doesn't go to the top, killed her boyfriend during sex with an ice pick and a chef's knife, far surpassing the butchery of Elena Bobbitt. Madeline, herself covered with blood, sat beside her lover's remains for three days, talking to herself, and that is how the police found her. For effect, Kuypers publishes Madeline's monologue in different-sized type, and the result is something between a sense of Dali's surrealism and Kafka-like craziness.

Gabriel

GABRIEL

She had lived there, in her fourth floor apartment on the near north side of the city, for nearly three years. It was an uneventful three years from the outside; Gabriel liked it that way. She just wanted to live her life: go to work, see her new friends, have a place to herself.

But looking a bit closer, it was easy to see what a wonderful life she had. Her apartment was impeccable, with Greek statues and glass vases lining the hallways, modern oil paintings lining her walls. She was working at her career for a little under two years and she had received two hefty promotions. She served on the board of directors for the headquarters of a national domestic abuse clinic and single-handedly managed to increase annual donations in her city by 45%, as well as drastically increase the volunteer base for their hotline numbers. She managed a boyfriend, a man who was willing to put up with her running around, working overtime for her job, visiting clinics. A man who loved and respected her for her drive. Not bad for a woman almost twenty-five.

Yes, life seemed good for Gabriel, she would dine in fine restaurants, visit the operas and musicals travelling through the city. And she had only been in the city for three years.

Eric would wonder what her past was like when he'd hit a nerve with her and she would charge off to work, not talking to him for days. She had only lived in the city for three years, and he knew nothing about her life before then. In the back of his mind, he always thought she was hiding something from him, keeping a little secret, and sometimes everything Gabriel said made him believe this secret was real. She told him her parents lived on the other side of the country, and even though they dated for almost two years there never was talk about visiting them. She never received calls from her old friends. There were no old photographs.

This would get to Eric sometimes; it would fester inside of him when he sat down and thought about it, all alone, in his apartment, wondering when she would be finished with work. And then he'd see her again, and all of his problems would disappear, and he'd feel like he was in love.

One morning he was sitting at her breakfast table, reading her paper, waiting so they could drive to work. "Hey, they finally got that mob-king guy with some charges they think will stick."

Gabriel minded her business, put her make-up on in the bathroom mirror, hair-sprayed her short, curly brown hair.

"Hey, Gabriel, get a load of this quote," Eric shouted down the hallway to her from his seat. He could just barely see her shadow through the open door to the bathroom. "My client is totally innocent of any charges against him. It is the defense's opinion that Mr. Luccio was framed, given to the police by the organized crime rings in this city

as a decoy,' said Jack Huntington, defense lawyer for the case. 'Furthermore, the evidence is circumstantial, and weak.' What a joke. I hope this guy doesn't get away with all he's done. You know, if I—"

Gabriel stopped hearing his voice when she heard that name. She had heard Luccio over and over again in the news, but Jack. She didn't expect this. Not now. It had been so long since she heard that name.

But not long enough. Her hands gripped the edge of the ceramic sink, gripping tighter and tighter until she began to scratch the wood paneling under the sink. Her head hung down, the ends of her hair falling around her face. He lived outside of the city, nearly two hours. Now he was here, maybe ten minutes away from her home, less than a mile away from where she worked, where she was about to go to.

She couldn't let go of the edge of the sink. Eric stopped reading aloud and was already to the sports section, and in the back of her mind Gabriel was wondering how she could hurt herself so she wouldn't have to go to work. She would be late already, she had been standing there for over ten minutes.

Hurt herself? What was she thinking? And she began to regain her senses. She finally picked her head up and looked in the mirror. She wasn't the woman from then, she had to say to herself as she sneered at her reflection. But all she could see was long, blonde straight hair, a golden glow from the sun, from the days where she didn't work as often as she did, when she had a different life.

She had to pull on her hair to remind herself that it was short. She pulled it until she almost cried. Then she stopped, straightened her jacket, took a deep breath and walked out the bathroom door.

Eric started to worry. As they car-pooled together to work, Gabriel sat in the passenger seat, right hand clutching the door handle, left hand grabbing her briefcase, holding it with a fierce, ferocious grip. But it was a grip that said she was scared, scared of losing that briefcase, or her favorite teddy bear from the other kids at school, or her life from a robber in an alley. If nothing else, Eric knew she felt fear. And he didn't know why.

He tried to ask her. She said she was tired, but tense, an important meeting and a pounding headache. He knew it was more. She almost shook as she sat in that car, and she began to rock back and forth, forward and back, ever so slightly, the way a mother rocks her child to calm her down. It made Eric tense, too. And scared.

Work was a blur, a blur of nothingness. There was no meeting, the workload was light for a Friday. But at least the headache was there, that wasn't a lie. She hated lying, especially to Eric. But she had no choice, especially now, with Jack lurking somewhere in the streets out there, winning his cases, wondering if his wife is dead or not.

She never wanted him to know the answer.

Eric called her a little after four. "Just wanted to check if we were still going to dinner tonight. I made the reservations at the new Southwestern place, you said you wanted to go there. Sound good?"

Gabriel mustered up the strength to respond, only coming up with, "Sure."

“Do you still have the headache, honey? Do you want to just rent a movie or two and curl up on the couch tonight? Whatever you want to do is fine, just let me know.”

She knew at this point he was doing all he could to make her feel better. She didn't want to put him through this. He shouldn't have to deal with her like this. She searches for her second wind. “No, Eric, dinner would be fine. We can go straight from work to save the drive. Thanks, too. You really have a knack for making my days better.”

Eric smiled at the end of the line. And Gabriel could feel it.

They got off the phone, she finished her work, turned off her computer, started walking toward the elevator when it finally occurred to her: Jack might be there. She can't go. Even if he's not there, she could see him on the street, driving there. She just couldn't go.

She pressed the button for the elevator. And he could just as easily see me walking out of work, getting in Eric's car, she thought. I have to stop thinking like this. This is ludicrous. And he won't be there, he won't see me, because, well, the chances are so thin, and Hell, it's a big city. I have to try to relax.

But she couldn't. And there was no reason she should have.

At the restaurant, they sat on the upper level, near one of the large Roman columns decorated with ivy. She kept looking around one of the columns, because a man three tables away looked like Jack. It wasn't, but she still had to stare.

The meal was delicious, the presentation was impeccable. She was finally starting to relax. The check arrived at the table right as the place began to get crowded, so Gabriel went to the washroom to freshen up before they left. She walked through the restaurant, feeling comfortable and confident again. She even attracted a smile from a man at another table. She walked with confidence and poise. And she loved life again.

She walked into the bathroom, straight to the mirror, checking her hair, her lip stick. She looked strong, not how she looked when she was married. She closed her purse, turned around and headed out the door.

That's when she saw him.

There he was, Jack, standing right there, waiting for a table. He had three other men with him, all in dark suits. She didn't know if they were mob members or firm associates. Or private eyes he hired to find her. Dear God, she thought, what could she do now? She can't get to the table, he'll see her for sure. She can't stare at him, it'll only draw attention to herself.

And then she thinks: “Wait. All I've seen is the back of him. It might not even be him.” She took a breath. “It's probably not even him,” she thought, “and I've sat here worrying about it.”

Still, she couldn't reassure herself. She took a few steps back and waited for him to turn around.

A minute passed, or was it a century?, and finally he started to turn, just as they were about to be led to their table. She saw his profile, just a glimpse of his face. It was him, it was Jack, it was the monster she knew from all those years, the man who made her lose any ounce of innocence or femininity she ever had. She saw how his chin sloped into his neck, the curve of his nose, how he combed his hair back, and she knew

it was him.

By the washrooms, she stared at him while he took one step away from her, closer to the dining room. Then she felt a strong, pulling hand grip her shoulder. Her hair slapped her in the face as she turned around. Her eyes were saucers.

“The check is paid for. Let’s go,” Eric said as he took her jacket from her arm and held it up for her. She slid her arms through the sleeves, Eric pulling the coat over her shoulders. She stared blankly. He guided her out the doors.

She asked him if they could stop at a club on the way home and have a drink or two. They found a little bar, and she instantly ordered drinks. They sat for over an hour in the dark club listening to the jazz band. It looked to Eric like she was trying to lose herself in the darkness, in the anonymity of the crowded lounge. It worried him more. And still she didn’t relax.

And she drove on the expressway back from dinner, Eric in the seat next to her. He had noticed she had been tense today, more than she had ever been; whenever he asked her why she brushed her symptoms off as nothing.

The radio blared in the car, the car soaring down the four lanes of open, slick, raw power, and she heard the dee jay recap the evening news. A man died in a car accident, he said, and it was the lawyer defending the famed mob leader. And then the radio announced his name.

And she didn’t even have to hear it.

Time stopped for a moment when the name was spread, Jack, Jack Huntington, like a disease, over the air waves. Jack, Jack the name crept into her car, she couldn’t escape it, like contaminated water it infiltrated all of her body and she instantly felt drugged. Time stood still in a horrific silence for Gabriel. Hearing that midnight talk show host talk about the tragedy of his death, she began to reduce speed, without intention. She didn’t notice until brights were flashing in her rear view mirror, cars were speeding around her, horns were honking. She was going 30 miles per hour.

She quickly regained herself, turned off the radio, and threw her foot on the accelerator. Eric sat silent. They had a long drive home ahead of them from the club, and he knew if he only sat silent that she would eventually talk.

While still in the car, ten minutes later, she began to tell him about Andrea.

“Three years ago, when I moved to the city, my name wasn’t Gabriel. It was Andrea.

“Seven years ago, I was a different person. I was a lot more shy, insecure, an eighteen year old in college, not knowing what I wanted to study. I didn’t know what my future was, and I didn’t want to have to go through my life alone. My freshman year I met a man in the law school program at school. He asked me out as soon as he met me. I was thrilled.

“For the longest time I couldn’t believe that another man, especially one who had the potential for being so successful, was actually interested in me. He was older, he was charming. Everyone loved him. I followed him around constantly, wherever he wanted me to go.

“He met my parents right away. They adored him, a man with a future, he was so

charming. They pushed the idea of marrying him. I didn't see it happening for a while, but I felt safe with him.

"And every once in a while, after a date, or a party, we'd get alone and he'd start to yell at me, about the way I acted with him, or what I said in public, or that the way I looked was wrong, or something. And every once in a while he would hit me. And whenever it happened I thought that I should have looked better, or I shouldn't have acted the way I did. This man was too good for me. And I had to do everything in my power to make him happy.

"Eight months after we met, he asked me to marry him. I accepted.

"We were married two years after we met; it was a beautiful ceremony, tons of flowers, tons of gifts—and I was turning a junior in college. My future was set for me. I couldn't believe it.

"And as soon as we were married, which was right when he started at the firm, he got more and more violent. And instead of thinking that it was my fault, I started thinking that it was because he was so stressed, that he had so much work to do, that sometimes he just took it out on me. I was no one's fault. Besides, if he was going to climb to the top, he needed a wife that was perfect for all of his appearances. I had to be perfect for him. Take care of the house and go to school full time.

"Money wasn't a problem for us, he had a trust fund from his parents and made good money at the firm, so I could go to school. But he started to hate the idea that I was going to college in marketing instead of being his wife full time. But that was one thing I wasn't going to do for him, stop going to school.

"He'd get more and more angry about it the longer we were married. After the first year he'd hit me at least once a week. I was physically sick half of my life then, sick from being worried about how to make him not hurt me, sick from trying to figure out how to cover up the bruises.

"I'd try to talk to him about it, but the few times I ever had the courage to bring it up, he'd beat me. He'd just beat me, say a few words. Apologize the next morning, think everything was better. I couldn't take it.

"I threatened with divorce. When I did that I had to go to the hospital with a broken arm. I had to tell the doctors that I fell down the stairs.

"A long flight of stairs.

"When it was approaching two years of marriage with this man, I said to myself I couldn't take it anymore. He told me over and over again that he'd make me pay if I tried to leave him, I'd be sorry, it would be the worst choice I could ever make. This man had power, too, he could hunt me down if I ran away, he could emotionally and physically keep me trapped in this marriage.

"So I did the only thing I thought I could do.

"I wrote a suicide note. 'By the time you find my car, I'll be dead.' I took a few essentials, nothing that could say who I was. I cut my hair—I used to have long, long hair that I dyed blonde. I chopped it all off and dyed it dark. Then I drove out to a quarry off the interstate 20 miles away in the middle of the night, threw my driver's license and credit cards into the passenger's seat, put a brick on the accelerator, got out

of the car and let it speed over the cliff. Everything was burned.

“So there I was, twenty-two years old, with no future, with no identity. My family, my friends, would all think I was dead in the morning. And for the first time in my life, I was so alone. God, I was so scared, but at the same time, it was the best feeling in the world. It felt good to not have my long hair brushing against my neck. It felt good to feel the cold of the three a.m. air against my cheeks, on my ears. It felt good to have no where to go, other than away. No one was telling me where to go, what to do. No one was hurting me.

“I found my way two hours away to this city, came up with the name Gabriel from a soap opera playing in a clinic I went to to get some cold medication. I managed a job at the company I’m at now. Did volunteer work, rented a hole for an apartment. Projected a few of the right ideas to the right people in the company. I got lucky.”

She told him all of this before she told him that her husband’s name was Jack Huntington.

She brought him home, sat on the couch while he made coffee for her. He tried to sound calm, but the questions kept coming out of his mouth, one after another. Gabriel’s answers suddenly streamed effortlessly from her mouth, like a river, spilling over onto the floor, covering the living room with inches of water within their half hour of talk.

She felt the cool water of her words sliding around her ankles. And she felt relieved. Gabriel, Andrea, was no longer Mrs. Jack Huntington.

Eric told her that she could have told him before. “I’d follow you anywhere. If I had to quit my job and run away with you I would.” It hurt him that she kept this from him for so long, but he knew he was the only person who knew her secret. He smiled.

There was a burden lifted, she felt, with Jack’s death, the burden that she didn’t have to hide who she was anymore. She didn’t have to worry about public places, cower when she felt his presence, following her, haunting her. It’s over, she thought. She can walk out in the street now, and scream, and run, and laugh, and no one will come walking around the corner to force her back to her old life, to that little private hell that was named Andrea.

But sitting there, she knew there was still one thing she had to do.

She put down her coffee, got on her coat, told him this was something she must do. Gabriel got into her car, started to head away from the city. As she left, Eric asked where she was going. She knew she had done what she could for the last three years of her own life to save herself; now it was time to go back to the past, no matter what the consequences were.

He thought she was going back to her family. She was, in a way.

She drove into the town she had once known, saw the trees along the streets and remembered the way they looked every fall when the leaves turned colors. She remembered that one week every fall when the time was just right and each tree’s leaves were different from the other trees. This is how she wanted to remember it.

And she drove past her old town, over an hour and a half away from the city, passing where her parents, her brother could still be living. She didn’t know if she would

ever bother to find them. Right now all she could do was drive to the next town, where her old friend used to live. Best friends from the age of three, Sharon and Andrea were inseparable, even though they fought to extremes. And as she drove toward Sharon's house, she knew she'd have to move quickly, if her husband was still there.

She double checked in a phone book at a nearby gas station. And she turned two more corners and parked her car across the street. Would she recognize her? Would she believe she was there? That she was alive?

Gabriel saw one car in the driveway, not two; she went to the window, and looking in saw only Sharon. She stepped back. She took a long, deep breath. She was a fugitive turning herself in. She was a fugitive, asking people to run with her, running from something, yet running free. She knocked on the door.

Through the drapes she saw the charcoal shadow come up to the door. It creaked open. There they stood, looking at each other. For the first time in three and a half years.

Sharon paused for what seemed a millennium. Her eyes turned to glass, to a pond glistening with the first rays of the morning sun.

"Andrea." She could see her through the brown curls wrapping her face. Another long silence. Sharon's voice started to break.

"You're alive," she said as she closed her eyes and started to smile. And Gabriel reached through the doorway, and the door closed as they held each other.

They sat down in the living room. In the joy, Sharon forgot about the bruises on her shoulder. Gabriel noticed them immediately.

They talked only briefly before Gabriel asked her. "Is Paul here?"

"No, he's out playing cards. Should be out all night."

"Things are the same, aren't they?"

"Andi, they're fine. He's just got his ways," and Sharon turned her head away, physically looking for something to change the subject. There was so much to say, yet Sharon couldn't even speak.

And then Gabriel's speech came out, the one she had been rehearsing in her mind the entire car ride over. The speech she gave to herself for the years before this very moment. "Look, Sharon, I know what it's like, I can see the signs. I know you, and I know you'll sit through this marriage, like I would have, this unending cycle of trying to cover the bruises on your arms and make excuses—"

Sharon moved her arm over her shoulder. Her head started inching downward. She knew Andrea knew her too well, and she wouldn't be able to fight her words, even after all these years.

"I went through this. When Jack told me I'd never be able to leave him, that I'd be sorry if I did, that I'd pay for trying to divorce him, that's when I knew I couldn't take it anymore. No man has a right to tell me—or you—what you can and can't do. It hasn't gotten better, like you keep saying, has it? No. I know it hasn't. It never does.

"I know this sounds harsh, and it is. If I was willing to run away, run away so convincingly that my own family thought I was dead, then it had to be serious. Do you think I liked leaving you? My brother? Do you think this was easy?"

Gabriel paused, tried to lean back, take a deep breath, relax.

“No. It wasn’t easy. But I had to do it, I had to get away from him, no matter what it took. In spending my life with him I was losing myself. I needed to find myself again.”

They sat there for a moment, a long moment, while they both tried to recover.

“You don’t have to run away,” Gabriel said to her. “You don’t have to run away like I had to. But he won’t change. You do have to leave here. Let me help you.”



Within forty-five minutes Sharon had three bags of clothes packed and stuffed into Gabriel’s trunk. As Sharon went to get her last things, Gabriel thought of how Sharon called her “Andi” when she spoke. God, she hadn’t heard that in so long. And for a moment she couldn’t unravel the mystery and find out who she was.

Sharon came back to the car. Gabriel knew that Sharon would only stay with her until the divorce papers were filed and she could move on with her life. But for tonight they were together, the inseparable Sharon and Andi, spending the night, playing house, creating their own world where everything was exactly as they wanted.

And this was real life now, and they were still together, with a whole new world to create. They were both free, and alive, more alive than either of them had ever felt.

“I want you to meet Eric. He’s a good man,” Gabriel said.

And as they drove off to nowhere, to a new life, on the expressway, under the viaduct, passing the projects, the baseball stadium, heading their way toward the traffic of downtown life, they remained silent, listened to the hum of the engine. For Gabriel, it wasn’t the silence of enabling her oppressor; it wasn’t the silence of hiding her past. It was her peace for having finally accepted herself, along with all of the pain, and not feeling the hurt.

Andrea. Gabriel.

The next morning, she didn’t know which name she’d use, but she knew that someone died that night, not Jack, but someone inside of her. But it was also a rebirth. And so she drove.

“Gabriel” was in a self-titled chapbook (1993 the chapbook *Gabriel* was released), and it was also previously published in *ArtLife Limited Editions*, *poets2000.com*, *ilovepoetry.com*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 8, 71, & 87, <http://www.yotko.com/jkl/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, *poetryboard.com*, the chapbook *Everything and Anything*, and in the books *Domestic Blisters*, *The Window* and (*Woman*).

CHRISTINE, ON “GABRIEL”

All I can say is wow. This story is so moving. So many emotions went through me reading this. thank you for sharing it.

A Fe(male) Behind Bars
A (FE)MALE BEHIND BARS

January 29, production room, Seattle Magazine

For only two weeks she had been preparing for this interview. She struggled to get it approved at the magazine she worked for. See, Chris Hodgkins was a flash from the past, there was no current interest, no timeliness in doing an article on her. In fact, she knew from people who have checked on her whereabouts that she was just living in an apartment on her own, occasionally working, usually not in politics or her usual seminars. The public forget about her anyway - no one wanted to hear what she had to say anymore. Not that she had fallen out of favor with the American public - in fact, she was loved by most women when she decided to leave the public eye. If anything, the American public had fallen out of favor with her.

But Melanie wanted to write about her, find out why she left, why she really left. The editors knew Chris didn't grant a single interview since she decided to leave her work in the women's rights movement. Besides, even if she got the interview, Chris knew how to deal with the media, with audiences, and she would probably manipulate Melanie into asking only what she wanted asked.

But the writer said she was sure there was something more, she could feel it in her bones, and the editors always told her to follow that feeling, so please let her do it now. So the editors and the higher-ups told her to try to get the interview, and get back to them with her progress at that task.

They expected to never hear about the matter again.

But she came back to them not one week later, saying one phone call was all it took. She called Chris directly, and not only did this elusive leader grant her an interview, but in Chris' own home. Editors were a bit stunned. They let her go ahead with the interview, told her to focus on the "where are they now," "why did she leave" angles, and they'll put together a long piece for a future issue. A long fluff-piece, they thought, but they had to

let her go ahead with it, after having no faith in her ability to get an interview.

Maybe it was just because no one tried to get an interview with her anymore, the writer thought. Maybe the editors were right, that there's no story here, at least not anymore. But now, even after feeling this fear which began to grow into a dread, she had to go through with it. She had to research this woman, inside and out, and talk to her. See what makes her tick. What made her decide to give it all up.

And the more she looked, the more questions she had. Maybe it was the journalist inside her, to question everything put in front of you, but she couldn't get those questions out of her head.

writer's tape recorded diary entry, February 11

I didn't know what I was getting into when I decided to interview her, Chris Hodgkins, feminist leader. I did all the research I could, but for some reason I still don't know where to start, and I have to walk into her apartment tonight.

The more I studied her, the more I was interested. She became a prominent figure in the women's movement when she wrote her first book, *A Woman Behind Bars*. The theory was that all women in our society were behind bars, in a sense, that they were forced into a role of looking beautiful, into the role of mother for children, servant for husband, employee for boss, sexual object for single (well, probably all) men.

The chapter that interested me the most was the one on how women adorn themselves in our society in order to please men. Women put on make-up, they grow long hair and long nails, both difficult to work with. They shave their legs, they shave their armpits. They tweeze their eyebrows - they pull hair out of their face from the follicle. Perfume behind the knees, at the ankles, at the chest and neck, in the hair. The list goes on.

But that's not even the point of all of this. The thing is, a few years ago she managed to pull together the majority of twenty- and thirty-something women out there into her cause. Everyone loved her, in a strange sort of way. She had a great command over audiences. She would hold rallies in New York, then San Francisco, then Chicago, and before you knew it, everyone was talking about her, she was running seminars all around the country, she was appearing on morning talk shows. She was the first real leader in the feminist movement, a movement which for years was felt in everyone but laid dormant because it had no Hitler.

Did I say Hitler? I just meant he was a good leader. I didn't mean she was Hitler, not at all, she's not like that, she's not even calling anyone into action, she's just telling people to educate themselves. She's not even telling people to change, because she figures that if she can educate them, they would want to change anyway. And usually more radical feminist and lesbians are leery of that, they want more action - and she doesn't do that, and they still support her. A movement needs a strong leader, and she was it.

Chris is an interesting looking woman. You'd think she was a lesbian by her appearance - she was tall, somewhat built, but not to look tough, just big. She had chin-length hair, which seems a little long for her, but it looks like she has just forgotten to cut it in a while, and not like she wants to look sexy with it. She almost looks like a little boy. Sharp

bones in her face, and big, round eyes.

That was all I knew before I started doing research on her. I started looking into her childhood first, found out that her parents were killed in a robbery when she was fourteen, so she started high school in a small town where her aunt and uncle lived. Her aunt died a year later, and she lived with her uncle until she moved out and went to college. Her uncle died a year before she began to gain fame. In essence, there was no family of hers that I could talk to, to find out from if she played with Barbie Dolls with her best friend in her bedroom or played in the ravine in the back yard with the other boys from all over the neighborhood. To see if her theories were right - even on her. All of that was lost to me.

She took honors classes in high school, kept to herself socially. In fact, most of her classmates didn't know whether or not she was a girl, she looked so boyish. Even the other girls in her gym class didn't know sometimes, I mean, they knew she was a girl because she was in gym class with them, but she never even changed in front of them. She wouldn't take a shower and she would change in a bathroom stall.

So I started hearing things like this, little things from old classmates, but as soon as they started telling me how they really felt about her, how they thought she was strange, they would then clam up. But it was in my head then; I started wondering what happened in her early childhood that made her so introverted in high school. Maybe the deaths of her parents did it to her, made her become so anti-social. Maybe the loss of her aunt, the only other maternal figure in her life, made her become so masculine. It was a theory that began to make more and more sense to me, but how was I supposed to ask her such a question? How was I supposed to ask her if her parents molested her before they died, and that's why she's got this anger inside of her that comes out seminar after seminar?

the interview, Friday, February 11

The apartment building was relatively small, on the fringes of some rough neighborhoods. Not to say that she couldn't take care of herself, she had proven that she could years ago. The interviewer followed the directions explicitly to get to the apartment, and Chris' door was on the side. She knocked on the door.

Snap one, that was the chain. Click one, that was the first dead bolt. Another click, and the door was free. With a quick jerk the door was pulled open half-way by a strong, toned forearm. Chris stood there, waiting for the interviewer to make the official introduction.

"Hi, I'm Melanie, from Seattle Magazine," she blurted out, as she tried to kick the snow off her boots and held out her hand. Chris nudged her head toward the inside and told her to come in. The interviewer followed.

She followed Chris down the stairs, looking for clues to her psyche in her clothes, in her form. Grey pants. Baggy. Very baggy. Button-down shirt. White. Sleeves rolled up, make a note of that. Not very thin, but not fat - just kind of there, without much form. Doc Maartens. She had big feet. She was tall, too - maybe five feet, ten inches. But her feet looked huge. The interviewer stared at her feet as they walked down the

dark hall. I'll bet no one has looked at her feet before, she thought.

Chris lived in one of the basement apartments, so they walked past the laundry room, the boiler room, and then reached a stream of tan doors. Hers was the third. Chris opened the door, the interviewer followed.

She looked around. A comfortable easy chair, rust colored, worn. Walls - covered with bookshelves. Books on Marx, Kafka, Rand. History Books. Science books. No photos. No pictures. A small t.v. in the corner on a table, the cord hanging down, unplugged. Blankets on the floor. Keep looking, the interviewer thought. A standing lamp by the chair. The room was yellow in the light. Where were the windows? Oh, she forgot for a moment, they're in the basement. Sink, half full.

"May I use the washroom?" she asked, and without saying a word, Chris pointed it out to her.

Check the bathroom, the interviewer thought. No make-up. Makes sense. Generic soap, organic shampoo. Razor. Toothbrush. Colgate bottle. Hairbrush. Rubber band, barrette. Yeah, Chris usually sometimes her hair back, at least from what the interviewer can remember from the photographs.

"Wanna beer?" Chris yells from the refrigerator to the bathroom. "No, thanks," the interviewer says. She turns on the water.

She wants to look through the trash, see what she can find. No, that's too much, she thought, besides, what's going to be in the trash in the washroom that would surprise her so? Nothing, she was sure of it, and from then on she made a point of avoiding even looking in the direction of the trash can.

This was getting out of hand, she thought. There was no story here. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that Chris decided to give up her cause, and now she's living life in this tiny, dark basement apartment.

The interviewer walked out into the yellow living room. Chris was stretched out in a chair, legs apart, drinking a beer with no label.

"I really appreciate you offering me this time to talk to you."

"No problem."

The interviewer sat there, suddenly so confused. Chris was terse. She didn't want to talk, yet she accepted the interview and offered her home as the meeting place. They sat in silence for a moment, a long moment.

"What kind of beer are you drinking?"

"My own." Chris sat for a moment, almost waiting for the interviewer to ask what she meant. "You see, the landlord gave me some keys for a storage room on this floor, so I converted it into a sort of micro-brewery. I've come up with this one -" she held the bottle to the interviewer - "and another one, a pretty sweet dark beer. I call this one 'Ocean Lager.'"

The interviewer felt she had to take the bottle. "Ocean Lager, that's a nice name," and she took a small sip and passed the bottle back to Chris.

"Yeah, I used to be a photographer, back when I was in high school and college, and I loved working in the dark, timing things, and I loved the stench of the chemicals. I've given up on the photography years ago, so I thought that this would be a hobby like that.

You know, it smells, it's dark, you have to add things the right way and wait the right amount of time. I like it. And it's cheaper, too," she said, and with that she took another swig. "Cheaper than photography as well as buying beer from the store."

The interviewer tried to listen to her voice. It was raspy, feminine, almost sexy, but it was very low; she didn't know if she'd ever heard a woman's voice this low before.

"I was looking at your great career," the interviewer finally started, "and thought it surprising that you just decided one day to leave. You had everything going the right way. People were listening to you. What happened?"

She thought she had dropped a bomb.

No one ever got a straight answer for that question.

"Well, it was my time to go. I couldn't take the spotlight anymore. I wanted to become who I really was, not what the world wanted me to be, not what the world perceived me as. I still haven't done that. I haven't become myself yet."

"When were you yourself? Or were you ever?"

"I suppose I was, when I was little, but by the time I got to high school, I started hiding from everyone, because no one seemed to want to know who I really was. I didn't fit in as who I really was. So then I started with my seminars, started trying to work my way to success, and people started to like me. But in all of that time that I was working on women's rights, I wasn't who I really am deep down inside. Not that I didn't believe in the cause, but I was doing it because it seemed like the best route to success. And when I reached the top, people still wanted more out of me, more that I wasn't ready to give. I wanted to take some of myself back."

"Have you gotten any of yourself back since you've left the spotlight?"

"Some." Chris paused. "I can sit at home by myself and act the way I want to, without having to project a certain image for everyone else. People have begun to leave me alone." She paused, then looked at the interviewer. "Not that I consider you and interruption; I wouldn't have accepted the interview if I didn't want you here. In fact, I think I really wanted to be able to tell someone how I feel, what I've gone through. I don't talk to many people nowadays. This is like a confessional."

The interviewer wondered for a moment what Chris was planning to confess.

Chris paused, swirled her beer in her bottle, then looked up. "Sometimes I think of getting a pet. I'd get a cat, but then I think of this stereotypical image of an old woman in an apartment alone with forty cats, where she keeps picking a different one up and asking, 'you love me, don't you?' I don't want to be like that. Maybe a dog. But a pet requires too much care, and I think I'd end up depending on it more than I should. I should have another human being in my life, not an animal. But I'm so afraid I'll be alone."

"Why do you think you'll be alone?"

"I carry this baggage around with me everywhere. People know me as Chris Hodgkins, and that's not who I am. I don't want anyone liking me because I'm Chris Hodgkins. That's not real. Chris isn't real, not the Chris everyone knows. The only way I could escape her is to go off to another country in a few years, maybe, and start life all over again."

“Isn’t that a scary thought, though? I mean, you could ride on your fame for a while longer, make more money, be more secure. You wouldn’t have to work as hard at anything. And people respect you.”

“People respect a person that I’m not. Okay, maybe that person is a part of me, but it’s not all of me. The world doesn’t know the whole story.”

“What is the whole story?” the interviewer asked. By this time she put her pen and paper down and wasn’t writing a word. She was lost in the conversation, like the many people who had heard her speak before. Suddenly she felt she was thrown into the middle of a philosophical conversation, and she was completely enthralled. “Can anyone know the whole story about another person?” she asked.

“Do you really want to know my story?” Chris asked.

“I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t.”

“You realize that if I tell you, it goes off the record. Besides, you won’t be able to substantiate anything I say. More than that no one would believe it, especially not your editors.”

At this point, she didn’t even care about the interview. “Off the record. Fine.”

the confession, February 11, 10:35 p.m.

Chris sat there for a minute, legs apart, elbows on her knees, beer hanging down between her legs. She kept swirling the liquid in the glass. She took the last two gulps, then put the bottle on the ground between her feet.

“I wanna take a bath,” she said, and with that she got up and walked toward the bathroom. Halfway there she stopped, turned around, and walked to the refrigerator. It creaked open, she pulled out another beer, let the door close while she twisted the cap off. She walked into the bathroom.

The interviewer could hear the water running in the bathtub. She didn’t know what to do. Was she supposed to sit there? Leave?

Chris popped her head out of the bathroom. “I hope you don’t mind, but I really need to relax. Besides, it’s cold in here. Sorry if the cold is bothering you. We can continue the interview in the bathroom, if you want,” and she threw her head back into the bathroom.

Melanie didn’t know what to think. She edged her way to the bathroom door. When she looked in, she was Chris with her hair pulled back, lighting one candle. “The curtain will be closed. Is this okay with you?” Chris asked.

The interviewer paused. “Sure,” she said. She sounded confused.

“Okay, then just wait outside until I’m in the bathtub. I’ll yell through the door when you can come in.” And Chris closed the door, and the interviewer leaned against the door frame. Her note pad and pen sat in the living room.

A few minutes passed, or maybe it was a few hours. The water finally silenced. She could hear the curtain close. “You can come in now.”

The interviewer opened the door. The curtain to the bathtub was closed. There was one candle lit on the counter next to the sink, and one glowing from the other side of the

curtain. The mirror was fogged with steam. Chris' clothes were sitting in a pile on the floor. There was no where to sit. The interviewer shut both seats from the toilet and sat down.

"Okay, I'm here," the interviewer said, as if she wanted Chris to recognize what an effort she went through. "Tell me your story." She almost felt as if she deserved to hear Chris' story at this point, that Chris had made her feel so awkward that she at least deserved her curiosity satisfied. She could hear little splashes from the tub.

"You still haven't asked me about my childhood. You're not a very good reporter, you know," Chris said, as if she wanted the interviewer to know that it didn't have to come down to this. "You could have found out a lot more about me before now."

They both sat there, each silent.

"It must have hurt when your parents died."

"I suppose. I didn't know how to take it."

"What was the effect of both of your parents dying at such an early age in your life on you?"

"I was stunned, I guess. What I remember most was that my mother was strong, but she followed dad blindly. And dad, he had his views - he was a political scientist - but no one took him seriously because he didn't have the background. He wasn't in the right circles. I just remember dad saying to mom, 'if only I had a different start, things would be different.' In essence, he wanted to be someone he wasn't. He failed because he wasn't who he needed to be."

"Did it hurt you to see your father think of himself as a failure?"

"He had the choice. He knew what he wanted to do all of his life. He knew the conventional routes to achieving what he wanted - he knew what he needed to do. But he chose to take a different route, and people thought he didn't have the training he needed, that he didn't know what he was talking about. But he made that choice to take that different route. He could have become what he needed to in order to get what he wanted. But he didn't, and in the end, he never got anything."

"But you, you got what you wanted in your life, right?"

"Yes, but that was because I made the conscious choice to change into what I had to be in order to succeed. If I didn't make those changes, no one would have accepted my theories on human relations and no one would have listened to my speeches on women's rights."

"How did you have to change?"

The interviewer finally hit the nail on the head.

"I'm not ready to answer that question yet. Ask me later."

The interviewer paused, then continued.

"Okay, so your parents died and you had to move in with your aunt and uncle. How well did you know them?"

"Not at all. In fact, they didn't even know I existed. You see, my father had no family in the States, he moved here from England, and he lost contact with all of his family. Mom's family didn't want her marrying dad, I still don't know why, so they disowned her when she married him. She never spoke to any of them. In fact, my mother's sister didn't even know my parents died until the state had to research my family's

history to see who I should be pushed off on to. When my aunt and uncle took me in, it was the first time they ever saw me. It was the first time they even knew I existed.”

The interviewer could hear the water moving behind the curtain, and then Chris continued.

“My parents were in New Jersey, and my aunt and uncle were in Montana. It was a complete life change for me.”

“How did you get along with other kids from school?”

“Before my parents died, fine. Once I changed schools, I didn’t fit in. I didn’t know how to fit in. I thought it would be too fake if I tried to act like all the other girls, even the ones who were like me, who didn’t fit in. I just didn’t know how to be a girl. I wanted to, and I tried, but it was so hard.

“I just wanted to be looked at as a girl. I didn’t want anyone to question it.”

“Why would they?”

“Because I looked so boyish. Because I didn’t go on dates. Because I was so anti-social.”

“Do you think that has something to do with the fact that your mother died, then a year later your aunt died? They were your maternal figures, and you lost them both at a crucial age.”

“Yes. But my aunt didn’t know how to deal with me. She never had children. She left me alone most of the time. She knew that was what I wanted. I remember once she asked me if I had gotten my period yet in my life. I didn’t, but I didn’t want her to think that, so I said yes, so the next day she bought me pads. I didn’t know what to do with them. The day after that I told her that I would buy them myself from now on, so she didn’t have to, but I thanked her anyway. That way I knew she would think that I was still buying them, even if that box in my closet was the same box that she bought me.

“Relations with her were strange. And when she died, I only had classmates and my uncle to take cues from. I wanted to be like the girls in school, so I tried not to take cues from my uncle. I tried to avoid being like my uncle. But sometimes I couldn’t help it.”

“Why did you want so hard to be a girl? Did you want to fit in? Or do you think it had more to do with your mom?”

“No, it wasn’t that at all. There wasn’t a part of me that said I needed to be feminine. But at that age I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and that was work in political science and sociology - specifically, in women’s rights. I knew I wanted that, and I knew that I’d have a better chance of succeeding in that field if I was - well, if I was a girl.”

“But you were a girl, no matter how much you didn’t fit in.”

And that was when Chris decided to drop the bomb.

“But that’s exactly it, Melanie - I’m - well - I’m not a woman.”

“There are sometimes when I don’t feel feminine - when I want to go out and drink beer, I know what you -”

“No, you’re not listening to me,” Chris cut in. “I’m not a woman. I’m a man. My name is Chris, not Christine. I am a man, I have a penis, I’ve got testosterone running through my body. Just not a lot of it.”

“You don’t really expect me to -”

“Look, when my parents died, I knew what I wanted to do with my life - I knew

before they died. But I also knew that I wouldn't be taken seriously in the field unless I was a woman. So at fourteen, when they died, I had a clean slate. I told everyone I was a girl. I was given to my aunt and uncle as a girl. I went to my new school as a girl.

"And I went to gym classes and I didn't have breasts, and I had to hide from all the other girls. Although I was boyish-looking, I wasn't manly, so I got away with it. I shaved only occasionally, only when I had to. And once I got out of high school, acting like a girl was easier. No one questioned who I said I was. People accepted me as a woman.

"Then I started doing the work I did, and people loved me. I got a lot more fame for it than I ever anticipated. I was succeeding. It was wonderful.

"But then it hit me - I'm all alone, and I can tell no one about who I really am. I've been doing this all my life, and people would look at me like I was a freak if I went out and told them the truth now. I'm a man, and I like women, I'm not gay, and I could never tell any women that exists that has ever heard of me the truth, because then they will no longer trust me or anything I have ever said regarding women's rights. I would take the whole movement backwards if I told the world who I really was."

"That you were a man."

"You still don't believe me, do you? I'm telling you this because you wanted to know, you wanted me to tell you this. And because I needed to tell someone. But I can't destroy women's chances of being treated with respect in this country by telling everyone."

"So what you're telling me is that at age fourteen you decided to become a woman so you could do the work you wanted to do in your life."

"Yes."

"But that's a lot to do to yourself, especially at fourteen. What made you decide to do it?"

"My mother's strength, but her submission to my father, made me want to go into the field. My father's desire to do what he wanted, but his failure to achieve it because he wasn't what the world wanted, made me decide to become a woman. I realized then that I could never succeed in this field if I wasn't one.

"And look at the success I've had! Look at all of the people I managed to bring together! I was famous, people were reading my books, people wanted my opinions. I was succeeding.

"But even with all my success, people still expected a messenger for the welfare of women all over the world to be a woman - even the other women expected this. No one would have listened to me for a second if I was a man."

"And so you stopped because -"

"Because there's a price you pay by becoming what the world wants you to be. My father knew that, and he didn't want to pay that price. He didn't, and he failed at what he wanted to do. I was willing to pay the price, I made the sacrifices, and I actually beat the odds and succeeded. But then I realized that I lost myself in the process. I'm a man, and look at me. People think I'm a woman. I wear fake breasts in public. I have no close relationships. I have nothing to call my own other than my success. Well, after a while, that wasn't enough. So this is part of my long road to becoming myself again.

“I’m going to have to change my identity and move to another country, I’m going to have to start all over again, I’m going to have to more completely separate myself from working on women’s rights, but it’s the only way I can do it. I’ll know I did what I wanted, even if it cost a lot. The next few years will now have to be me correcting all that I changed in myself in order to succeed. Correcting all my mistakes.

“I want to have a family someday. How am I supposed to be a father? There are so many things I have to change. I couldn’t go on telling the world I was a woman any more. But I couldn’t tell them I wasn’t one, so I just had to fade away, until I didn’t matter anymore.”

The interviewer sat there in silence.

“Do you have any other questions?” Chris asked.

The interviewer sat there, confused, not knowing if she should believe Chris or not. She could rip the curtain open and see for herself, she thought, but either way they would both be embarrassed.

“No.”

“Then you can go,” Chris said. “I want to get out of this bath.”

Melanie walked out of the bathroom, closed the door. Then she started thinking of all the little things, not changing with the other girls in school, looking so boyish, the low voice, the way she sat, her feet, the razor, the toilet seats. Could she be telling the truth? Could he be telling the truth, the interviewer thought, is Chris a she or a he? She didn’t know anymore. But it seemed to make sense. Her birth certificate would be the only thing that would prove it to anyone, unless she somehow got it changed.

She could have had her birth certificate changed, the interviewer thought, and therefore there would be no real proof that Chris was lying, other than looking at her naked. It was such a preposterous story, yet it seemed so possible that she tended to believe it. It didn’t matter anyway, because she couldn’t write about it, proof or not, she offered this information off the record. She grabbed her pencil and note pad from the living room and walked to the door.

Just as she was about to leave, Chris walked out from the bathroom. She walked over to the front door to open it for the interviewer. Melanie walked through the doorway, without saying a word, as Chris said, “Good story, wasn’t it?”

The interviewer turned around once more, but didn’t get to see Chris’ face before the door was shut. Once again, she was left with her doubts. She walked down the hall.

“A Fe(male) Behind Bars” was previously Published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, *ilovepoetry.com*, <http://www.poet-rypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 50, 81 & 92, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, and in the books *Domestic Blisters*, *The Window* and *(Woman)*.