

Ophelia's Salvation

By Mary Borsellino

Tenth anniversary edition

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Tenth anniversary edition foreword

by Mary Borsellino

Let me take you on a journey to ten years ago, to the year two thousand. When cellphones weren't an automatic staple in everyone's everyday outfit, and weren't a function of typical communication. When it wasn't yet a given that the teenaged daughter of a high-profile lawyer would have a computer -- connected to the internet, no less! -- in her household. When Napster was only just starting to get noticed by the media, and kids still bothered to shoplift CDs. When I wrote a book called *Ophelia's Salvation*.

I released the book through a site called Xlibris, which at the time did not charge for basic publication, much as Lulu -- the publisher of this re-release -- now operates. As I was writing this introduction, I looked up that first version of the book on Amazon.com. It's got an average of five out of five possible stars there, though that's based on only two reviews: one from 2000, one from 2002.

But I shouldn't be dismissive of the impact it had on those two people. That's not fair. This story isn't mine to insult; it belongs to someone from ten years ago.

I've had to force myself, when putting together this tenth-anniversary edition, not to make any edits to the text beyond the fixing of stray typos and misplaced punctuation. Where things have seemed unlikely and nonsensical and stupid to my twenty-eight-year-old sensibilities, I've left them unlikely and nonsensical and stupid, because this isn't a novel I'm writing now. It's not the imagination and experience of a twenty-eight-year-old (give or take a fortnight) which created this story, it's the imagination and experience of an eighteen-year-old (give or take a fortnight).

That's not a weakness or a strength on the book's part, it's just a difference. *Ophelia's Salvation* was written in three months, three months which started about two weeks before I turned eighteen. I started writing this novel in that heady tipping-point summer between high school and university, and when I re-read *Ophelia's Salvation* now it feels to me to be shot through with a strong sense of *becoming*, with a guileless, earnest, impassioned way of responding to the world. Emphatic outbursts of half-formed ideas scatter wildly across the pages, rambling through the minutiae of high-school love

affairs and seemingly random road-trip diversions into volatile little towns full of perils and helpers, through shadowy conspiracy theories and improbable medical disasters.

It all seems so magnificently *teenaged* to me, with my ancient twenty-eight-year-old eyes, just as I am sure the *Wolf House* novels will appear as products of their time and my current age, when my thirty-eight-year-old-self some day looks back at them. *Ophelia's Salvation* could never have been written by anybody except a lonely, thoughtful, bright-but-not-brilliant teenaged girl just beginning to work out who she was. And if I change any of the words now, to suit the way my adult self thinks they should go, then it stops being the story that my teenaged self was so proud of.

That's one of the reasons I remain so fond of *Ophelia's Salvation* to this day, I think. Because it was *so exciting* to be writing a book, pages and pages of scrawled handwriting in the back of my lecture notebooks each day. It was the most exciting thing I had ever done, and nothing since -- no book, or project, or adventure -- has ever quite matched it. Because *Ophelia's* was my first book, you see, and a first book is sort of like a first love. We look back on our first loves with such sweet-bittersweet fondness because a first love is the only love we have that has no prior experience of heartbreak.

Writers learn to pick themselves up from disappointment and failure, of course -- well, those who write a second novel or short story or essay do, anyway. We learn not to care quite so deeply about our characters, about the way our words fit together. Rejections and criticisms stop hurting as much, or at least that's what we tell ourselves. You can't ever fall in love so bravely and wholeheartedly again as you do that first time, no matter how determined you are to remain undaunted -- for one thing, you have to stop being a teenager sooner or later, and adult love is very different to teenage love.

That's why it's fitting that *Ophelia's Salvation* is the story of a first love, among all its other stories. Amy and Jordan have gone through the same knocks and stumbles as any teenagers -- divorced parents, the miseries of high school, self-doubt -- but they are wide-eyed innocents when it comes to matters of adult pain, adult loss, adult disappointment. They can't know those things, yet. They're still teenagers, and adulthood is still lying in wait for them around an upcoming bend in the road. They aren't there yet.

Fictions can remain at whatever age we leave them, but people can't. After writing *Ophelia's Salvation*, I went around that corner. I grew up. I wrote other things, different things. I'm sure my thirty-eight-year-old self will

someday be equally condescending about my current owlish pretensions at wisdom as I'm being about the faded blush of my fevered youth. But the books I'm writing now, the *Wolf House* series, will stand as testament to who I am at twenty-eight, no matter who it is that I've become ten years from now.

And the same is true of *Ophelia's Salvation*: it was written by a girl who doesn't exist anymore, but she lives on through its words. There's ignorance along with the innocence -- my younger self's lack of knowledge about the subtler forms of fat phobia, racism, classism, homophobia and ableism make me wince when I revisit this book, as do most of the weirdly ruthless political views -- but there are also the beginnings of a distinct voice in the way a scene's created, a sense of promise for what might come next.

And that's the most beautiful, unconsciously profound aspect of teenagers, isn't it: the flashes of their adult song, starting to be audible amongst the noise.

Mary Borsellino
January 2010

First Clown:

Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?

Second Clown:

I tell thee she is: and therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial.

First Clown:

How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?

-Hamlet, Act V

“You’ve got a hell of a lot going for you when you don’t give a damn. Nowadays I do give a damn, and that puts me out of the Zen-archery range. I care a whole lot more than anybody guesses.”

- Orson Welles

Ophelia's Salvation

by Mary Borsellino

Silence is a funny thing.

Sometimes it's wonderful, a blissful thing filled with sleepy sunshine and a comfortable spot to read. Or it can be joyful, the space between laughter. It can be the second after you've been given bad news or the one where you emerge from sleep next to someone you love. The other end of a telephone call when they've hung up in anger. The silence you don't notice in front of a computer screen while you talk in a chatroom. The moment after a gunshot as the air settles, the silence of relief when a siren stops blaring. The thick nonsound of underwater. The dark whispers of your mind in the quiet of four a.m.

The worst kind of silence is the one when there's nothing left to make noise. No friends, no family, no unshakeable faith in the good and pure and true. That silence is the sound of the end of the world.

This isn't the story of two teenagers falling in love, although two teenagers do fall in love in this story. This isn't the story of an adventure, even though there is one of those. Nor is it the story of a woman with a kind heart, or of a sickly birthright to unlucky children. This isn't even a story about karaoke. It is the story of finding that final, worst silence, quieter than death, the deafening noise of loneliness. Like God did, on the first of those six days plus one the doddering old Sunday school teachers used to talk all about (when the children are too young to know it was all just another fairy tale). About standing on that edge of chaos at the end of the world. Shaping it into right and wrong, good and evil, today and tomorrow, and other such comforts.

This is a story about coming of age, although what that phrase really means remains one of the mysteries of the universe.

This is a story about truth. About being true to yourself, which is perhaps the hardest truth to maintain. It is not the only story about this. Being simply one face in a crowd of many is a truth that even the brave find hard to swallow. But this story, which is not the only one of its kind, is about the myriad of ways we are forced to face our truths and find out who we are in that chaos.

And when the silence stops, the rest is music.

Most people don't laugh very much. They may seem to—ask anyone if they laugh often and they say 'all the time', but it's only children that can be witnessed actually doing this on a regular basis. Everyone else just wanders in a fog of middle-of-the-road emotions.

Jordan didn't. When he was happy, he was super-super happy, hugging everyone and laughing all the time. He wasn't like that very often. When not happy, Jordan kept his head bowed, hands hidden in pockets. This was the posture he arrived at school in each day, and this being no different to any other day, he arrived in it.

It was no different to any other day except for the fact that it was the start of it all. Jordan didn't know that, of course. None of them did. But it was nevertheless.

This was odd in itself, because usually things don't begin on one specific day—there is the day when you think of something, and the day you first speak up, and the day you realise everything has actually been in motion for months—but everything began on one day, this time.

It was a Tuesday. A nice Tuesday, but nice is such a colourless word it can mean almost anything. It was a colourless day as well; Amy had thought that to herself when she woke up that morning. The sky was watery, the temperature slightly warmer than average.

The school was situated in a town called Theory, which made it sound far more interesting than the limp grass and dusty buildings actually were. Places with interesting names are not legally required to be interesting places, for if they had been then Theory would have been long ago taken to court by its disenchanting youth.

Amy was eating a cucumber sandwich, that most colourless of all foods. She wished it were a hamburger, bright in primary shades of red ketchup, green pickle, and yellow cheese. But instead she gave a little sigh and bit into it again.

Jordan watched her from the edge of the picnic area. He'd arrived halfway through the day. School was not his favourite thing.

This Tuesday was such a nice day nearly all the kids in their class were eating lunch outdoors, talking mindlessly about music and movies and the mall—the three m's of soul-crushing suburbia.

Jordan was in love with Amy. He didn't know how long he had been, but there it was. She was pale and delicate, like a china doll. Right now she was throwing her crusts to a bird, tearing the bread into little pieces for the creature. Jordan thought she was beautiful.

Amy had a different opinion on the subject. Cheerleaders are the only breed of fifteen year old girl who thinks they're anything above hideous. She thought she was fat, Jordan thought she was soft and smooth. She thought she was too tall, Jordan thought it would be nice to be eye level with a girl. She thought she was a wimp, Jordan thought she was kind.

The same conflict of opinion can be witnessed in their opinions on the subject of Jordan. Amy thought he was quiet and shy and mischievous and thoughtful. Jordan thought he was one of life's natural losers, the eternal victim of teasing, the black sheep of every group he'd ever been in. He felt very small inside.

Amy was in love with Jordan. She'd heard he had a crush on her, though, and Amy had a belief that relationships based on infatuation never worked because they were based on obsessive ideals and not reality.

When she'd said that to her friends, they'd laughed.

"Let me get this right," Lynette had said. "You like him. He likes you. You're not going to ask him out because you think relationships that start with mutual attraction never work?"

Put like that it had sounded sort of silly, but Amy was sure that Jordan wouldn't really want her anyway. Her uncle had once commented she would make a wonderful wife. Jordan didn't need a girl who would be a wonderful wife; he needed someone as interesting as him. Amy didn't think she was very interesting.

Jordan scowled at his salad sandwich. Revolting rabbit food. Why did Debra always buy these for him? She let Brighton take whatever he wanted. Jordan scowled at the food, hating it, hating his stepmother for buying it. With a muttered curse he balled it up in the paper bag it had come in and walked over to the trash can.

"Don't think. Don't think about it," he told himself through gritted teeth, walking from the garbage can over towards Amy and her little clique of friends. "Don't think about it, just go up there."

"Hi," Jordan said, twisting a strand of his scruffy brown hair between his fingers. "I'm going to skip English and go get a burger. Want to come?"

Amy realised after a second that he expected a reply. She nodded.

"Ok, sure."

"What are you so happy about?" Brighton, Jordan's little brother, asked, attempting to interrogate his older sibling, set the table and balance dollar coins over his eyes all at the same time. One of the dollars fell to the floor and Brighton swore.

"No language like that in my house!" Debra snapped, taking the rest of

the cutlery off her stepson. "You kids go see if your father's home yet."

Jordan gave the woman's back the finger, sending Brighton into a fit of giggles. They fled the room before Debra could ask what was so funny.

Dinner was easier; the presence of Bill Mitchell always softened tensions between his children and his wife. Brighton, as usual, filled any available silence with his voice.

"We were gonna play dodge ball today but Mr Mackenzie wouldn't let us cos the floor was wet and then we had to get vac— vacinna—needles." Brighton stumbled on the unfamiliar word. "But that was ok cos they gave us chocolate after." He paused to shovel more mashed potato into his mouth.

"If you hate needles maybe you should rethink that tattoo you're always talking about," Jordan pointed out.

"I'll be a brave boy for that needle," Brighton said, looking at Jordan across the table with a humourless expression. "I'll get it when I'm ten—ten's too big to be scared of needles."

"You can't get a tattoo until you're seventeen," Bill Mitchell told his son. Brighton looked heartbroken.

"But Dad! That's eleven years away! Jordan will be a grown up!" Brighton looked over at his brother. "Will you be married to Amy then?"

"Amy?" Bill asked, raising an eyebrow. "You have something to share, Jordan?"

Jordan kicked Brighton's leg under the table. "Thanks, twerp." He turned to his father. "Amy's just a girl at school."

"Just a girl? Or just a girl-friend?" Debra asked. Jordan couldn't work out if it was an honest question or needling him for fun. Either way, he didn't answer, looking down at his plate.

"Bring her over for dinner sometime," Bill suggested. Jordan nodded.

"Yes sir."

Brighton started talking about a frog he'd found squashed on the road and the conversation was over.

Amy had a pretty bedroom. Her coverlet, smoothed flat every morning before she went downstairs for breakfast, was a light cream color with a delicate rose pattern. The rose motif continued in her lampshade. There was a photograph next to the lamp of her and her father on a boat last summer. He loved to fish. Her mother hated the water; she refused to go out with them and had taken the photograph from the jetty.

Amy's mother was a very high profile lawyer; she worked late nearly every night. Amy didn't mind so much, it gave her time with her father.

Next to the picture frame was a china doll from the turn of the century

that had been Amy's great-grandmother's. On the wall was a *Lolita* poster. Amy liked old movies.

Everything in Amy's life was like the room. Her blonde hair, her blue eyes, her B average in school, her social life of hanging out at the mall and going to pop concerts—the only word for it all was 'pretty'.

Jordan wasn't pretty. He was very attractive -- Amy would be the first to volunteer that piece of information -- but not pretty. His hair was always, always messy, his clothes scruffy, crumpled and slightly worn. He was distrustful, quiet and moody. He fit into the puzzle of Amy's rose-motif life like a pork chop in fruit salad.

That's why Amy liked him so much.

Humming to herself, Amy brushed her hair in front of the mirror. Maybe she'd dye it bright green. Or shave it all off. She giggled. That would give everyone a shock, if sweet quiet little Amy Marsden did a turnabout. Shake them all up.

"Amy?" her father stuck his head in the door. "Oh good, you're still awake. Your mother's just gotten home, and there's a surprise for you." He smiled at his daughter. They'd had a little boy before Amy, but he had died at birth. Nearly taken his mother with him. Amy was the light of her father's life.

"A surprise? What for, Daddy?" Amy put the hairbrush down on the dresser. It had a rose painted on the handle.

"Just 'cos we love you. Come downstairs."

Amy jumped down the stairs two at a time, then halted halfway down the flight. She didn't like being perky, skippity-hopping when honestly she felt worn down and exhausted. So why did she do it? Because it was expected?

She finished her descent walking normally from stair to stair. Her mother, still in a light gray suit from work, was standing next to a new hardwood table on the wall of the living room. A computer, the screen displaying a rippling water graphic, was placed on the middle of the new table.

"It's connected to the Internet and everything," her father told her. Amy blinked, putting her hands up to her mouth. They were at her chin when her inner voice pointed out that really, putting your hands over your mouth when you were surprised was exactly what girls with rose-patterned lampshades did. Amy smiled and laughed, running her fingers through her hair and then touching the keyboard.

"Really? For me?"

"No, for our other daughter who came top in her drama class. Yes, of course for you!" Amy's mother said, flashing a rare smile at her child.

"Well. . . thank you!" Amy managed finally. "Can I try it now?"

“No, it’s too late to be staying up for hours playing. Tomorrow after school, eh?” her dad suggested.

“Ok,” Amy agreed with a nod. “I’ll go to bed now, then.”

Up in her room, lying in bed, Amy felt like a mindless baby, doing what she was told. Thoughts like that were nothing new, but they seemed to be in overdrive tonight. Getting together with Jordan had amplified Amy’s pre-existing dissatisfaction with her way of life. She wanted to stay on the Internet until two on a school night, dammit. But pretty girls didn’t do that. Amy sighed, turned over, and tried to sleep.

The first day ended.

Lynette looked up and down.

“Well, this is a new look for you,” she managed to say finally.

Amy shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.” It was hardly a ‘new look’ at all, much to Amy’s despair. She’d woken up wanting to wear something cool, alternative, basically not the usual bland Amy-clothes. The ‘new look’ was simply a few extra necklaces and bracelets, and her hair clipped back off her face. It made her feel naked to wear even this variation.

No matter how sick she was of the old her, at least it was a comfortable role that she knew how to play.

Amy was afraid of what Lynette was going to say next. Out of all her group, Lynette was the closest thing she had to a best friend, although she knew Lynette’s best friend was a girl at another school. It was a status quo that leant itself naturally in intense insecurity on Amy’s part.

“It’s. . . . no offence, but I wouldn’t wear it,” Lynette said, breaking the silence. Amy sighed with exasperated relief. For Lynette, the comment hadn’t been bitchy at all.

“Gee, thanks,” she shot back sarcastically. Lynette looked taken aback.

“You’ve changed since you started going out with him.” Lynette sounded like she had something sour in her mouth.

“We went for a burger yesterday, that’s it!” Amy looked at Lynette. “And you told me to in the first place.”

“Maybe I was wrong. I liked you better before.”

Amy could barely believe what she was hearing. She didn’t want to lose Lynette as a friend, although why exactly she couldn’t say. The things her friend was saying, however, cut her to the quick.

And at the same time, didn’t hurt her at all.

“It’s just the real me coming out,” Amy said, surprised at her voice. Maybe her words were truer than she realised. Two days ago Amy never would have stood up to Lynette. Now it felt like something that she should

have done a long time ago. Turning without another word, Amy walked up through the school gates. Half her brain was screaming at the other: *what the hell was she doing?*

Behind the school offices were two dead trees, making a loose V shape on the scruffy grass. That's where Jordan and his friends hung out, the misfits of the student body. When Amy made her way around the corner, Jordan was trying to prove that he could do a one-handed handstand and failing, sending the other two teenagers into fits of laughter. He was hamming it up for his audience, a look of exaggerated confidence on his face. It made Amy smile. It was a nice feeling to be able to look at Jordan and think 'mine, he's mine'. Amy had never had a boyfriend before and wondered if you were supposed to feel like that or if it was obsessive and possessive.

"Hi," Amy said shyly, stepping over nearer to where they sat.

Jordan was sprawled on the ground where he had fallen, he looked up at her and broke into a wide grin. It made Amy feel better after the fight she'd had in front of the school. She knew that gossip about her would begin to seep as soon as Lynette had been given time to think of some.

"Hey." Jordan got up, dusting his palms off on his shirt. It left sandy handprints on the dark fabric. "I like your jewellery."

"Thanks." Amy tried not to blush. Why did she always have to be so shy?

"Guys, this is Amy. Amy, this is Charlotte and Patrick," Jordan said, waving his hand to encompass the two people seated on the rotted wood.

"The Amy you haven't shut up about?" Patrick asked with a smile. As well as the corners of his mouth curling up, the smile made tiny crow's feet appear around his green eyes. It was something Amy had never seen in someone her age. She decided it was interesting and nice. Patrick mashed a cigarette out under his shoe and popped a piece of peppermint gum into his mouth, making the air smell like candy.

"Yeah, that Amy." Jordan sounded sheepish.

"You're in my Legal Studies class, aren't you?" Charlotte asked. Amy nodded mutely. She'd spent many lessons watching Charlotte mouth off at the teacher, fall asleep in class and still come top on tests. "Yeah. You did a talk on censorship. It was cool."

"Thanks." Amy smiled. Charlotte shifted over on the wood, her beaded Indian skirt making soft clicking noises.

"Here, sit down. There's ten minutes until class starts, which is enough for you to tell us everything that's happened in your life right up to the moment Jordan talked to you. We've heard every single second since then in detail already from him." Charlotte smiled warmly at Amy.

Patrick offered her a cigarette, which she declined. Maybe it wouldn't

be so bad to get away from Lynette for a little while. She had never thought it would be liberating to feel unsure.

Looking at her closet the next morning, Amy had no idea at all what she should wear. This had never been a problem for her before: Amy Marsden wore pretty, sweet clothes, the sort that would only need an extra poodle or two to be accepted at a 1950s malt shop.

Her usual outfit on Thursday was white shorts, pale green t-shirt and a green ribbon in her hair (yes, Amy's life was so predictable she had certain outfits for certain days of the week) but she was sick and tired of being Amy Marsden. Amy Marsden wouldn't have cut English to go have a burger with 'that freaky Jordan kid'. Amy Marsden didn't fight with her best friend Lynette, and certainly didn't hang out with Charlotte instead. Amy Marsden always wore green and white on Thursdays. Why? So she could look like toothpaste?

That made her giggle. Amy didn't want to be toothpaste anymore. She was sick and tired of Amy Marsden. She wanted to be Amethyst Marsden, which was her real full name. Her mother hated it, it had been her Daddy's choice and it was the only time she could think of where her father had gotten his way over her mother.

Amethyst Marsden wouldn't be toothpaste. She'd wear funky, bright stockings and t-shirts for obscure bands that were so tight they'd ride up and show a narrow strip of belly skin above torn combat shorts.

Amy looked ruefully down at her 'cute little tummy', knowing that was the only thing to call it—unless she wanted to lose her mind completely and use the word 'chubby'. She knew that Amethyst Marsden was a long way off, and most likely she'd be plain old Amy the rest of her life. But that still didn't mean she had to be toothpaste.

Eventually Amy found a black item in her wardrobe—a simple skirt, bought for a funeral two years ago. It had been for her great aunt Lillian, the only elderly relative Amy had known. Her grandparents had died long before her birth.

Lillian only had one eye; she'd lost the other in a train accident. When Amy was a baby she'd screamed at her great aunt, at the milky, sightless orb, a scar bisecting the skin above and below. Screamed and hidden behind an armchair. When she was older, Amy had always made an effort to spend time with Lillian, to be a good grandniece. Hoping it was enough to make up for her first childish, frightened reaction.

It must have been, because Lillian had left Amy a beautiful antique music box. Amy kept her money in it, loving the eerie, tinny chimes it made

when she opened the lid.

As well as the skirt, Amy put on a shapeless purple t-shirt reaching almost to her knees and elbows. It was supposed to be for her to wear over her swimsuit, partly for sun protection on her fair skin, partly because she was self-conscious. It was a good partner to the skirt, a casual, dark outfit so unlike the usual Thursday toothpaste.

After classes ended that afternoon Jordan and Amy walked back to her house. She'd invited him on impulse and was now afraid she'd left something embarrassing on the floor of her bedroom, dirty underwear or old toys. Of course, she hadn't, and when they walked up the stairs into her room it looked the same as it did every afternoon, pretty and impersonal.

Jordan looked uncomfortable in the surroundings, shifting nervously from foot to foot. It made Amy feel out of place by association, a stranger in her own life.

Thinking about it in those terms made her realise she always felt like that, whether Jordan was there or not.

A note stuck to the fridge, held on by a magnet in the shape of a star, informed Amy that her mother was working late tonight but there was macaroni and cheese in the fridge for her dinner. Amy wondered where her father was. Probably working late too.

“Why do they call it macaroni and cheese? I don't think this

has any cheese in it at all,” Amy said, inspecting the wrapped plate. Jordan shrugged, a smile forming in place of the uncomfortable look.

“No idea. What do you think they should call it, ‘macaroni and artificial yellow’?”

“It'd be more honest,” Amy said with a shrug, putting the plate on the countertop and bending down to pick up the soft gray cat twining between her ankles. “This is Oscar. Oscar, say hello to Jordan.”

The little puss mewed, batting a paw at his arm. They both laughed.

Next morning proved to be less easy, clothes-wise. Her outfit had surprised Amy's parents the day before, but there was no danger of a repeat performance today. A powder blue t-shirt with two cherubs embroidered on the front and a light pink skirt were the nicest clothes Amy could find. It was that or toothpaste. There wasn't a better option out of the two per se, but Amy didn't ever want to wear the mint and white ensemble again.

Her hair gleamed golden, falling softly around her face. Amy scowled. She looked. . . pretty.

Her mother had left for the office already, her father was looking at a fishing catalogue at the kitchen table.

“How’d you like to get a house by the beach, Amy?” her father asked, chewing on a blueberry bagel. Amy popped two pieces of bread into the toaster and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

“Yes Dad,” Amy said dutifully, listening to her father’s daydreaming with half an ear. He always said they would move nearer to the beach on the other side of town, but Amy knew her mother would never agree to it in a million years. That was no reason to stop her Daddy dreaming though, was it?

“What are you doing after school today Princess?” he asked as she smeared jam over her toast. Amy shrugged.

“Going over Jordan’s probably.”

“I like your top. Blue suits you better than that grotty old purple thing yesterday. You look very cute.” Amy’s dad patted her on the head and went to get ready for work.

Amy sighed and put down the second piece of toast. Cute? That was almost worse than pretty.

Jordan was surprised when Amy stopped by his house on her way to school, but he was glad. His family was in chaos. Debra and his father were both in with Brighton, who was throwing up anything he swallowed, including water and painkillers, which were vital because he was sweating and crying out in agony.

Jordan felt useless. When Amy turned up it gave him something he could help with.

“What’s wrong?” Amy asked when she saw him, his cheeks sunken and skin pallid from a rude awakening, still dressed in his green tartan pajamas. Jordan motioned his head towards the hallway, where from behind the door stuck with a picture of Superman childish cries of “Make it stop hurting Dad, make it stop” were punctuated by retching noises.

“Where’s that Goddamn piece of paper?” Debra asked them, rushing out of the room and scrabbling through the pile of letters on the kitchen table. Her hair was in disarray and she was dressed in a ratty old dressing gown.

With a young boy screaming in pain, her boyfriend and his stepmother looking like extras from night of the living dead, Amy felt like she’d fallen off the deep end and couldn’t swim.

“What piece of paper?” she asked.

“The one I found in Brighton’s bag with the information about that vaccination they got!” Debra snapped, sweeping half the stack down onto the

frayed carpet, where it fanned out like huge foolscap white feathers.

“This one?” Jordan held up a scrap, his other hand holding Brighton’s bag that he had been searching. Debra nodded and snatched it off him.

“Deb! He wants you!” Bill called from Brighton’s bedroom. Debra ran down the hall, stopping momentarily to point at the piece of paper, her long red nail stabbing the air like a talon.

“Call that number.”

Amy felt like she was moving a different speed to everyone else, slower. They were all frantic and she was just useless, cute Amy. She’d make a wonderful wife someday.

That most depressing of thoughts electrocuted her into action. She took the piece of paper off Jordan and punched the number into the phone that was stuck to the wall.

It rang for far too long for Amy’s peace of mind. Sure, it was only seven thirty-five in the morning, but when you’re fifteen and in the middle of a huge scary frantic crisis, the one thing you’re supposed to be able to rely on is that when you call for help, help won’t be having a lie-in.

Finally someone picked up, a man with a husky voice. Amy thought he sounded like a pervert, but then again she made that snap judgment on nearly every male she’d met.

“Hello?”

“Hi, look, um, my brother, well he’s not my brother but. . . he’s really sick from that injection he got at school,” Amy stumbled. So much for her efficient phone manner. The chaos continued around her, Debra looking for another bucket, Jordan running Brighton a glass of water and taking in more painkillers, and the shouting, the shouting that made every other frantic movement faster and more urgent.

Amy wondered how psychopaths could bear it, causing a child to make that sound. It was awful.

Jordan took the painkillers in to his brother. The bedroom was dark and airless, the smell of sickness hanging like a tangible creature in the air. Only a little of the morning light made it through the racing car curtains. Those curtains had been Jordan’s first, when he was eight and had thought they were cool. Now they were Brighton’s, and Brighton thought they were the best thing ever.

Jordan put the glass down on his brother’s nightstand, turning the lamp—also a racing car—on and flooding the room with cheap yellow glow.

“Here Bri, I brought you more water. Wanna try and drink some?” Jordan asked gently. Brighton shook his head emphatically, whipping his

sweat-soaked hair around on the pillow.

“Jordy, I feel yuck,” Brighton said, his lips cracking as he moved them.

“It’s ok, you’re going to be all right,” Jordan assured him. Bill came into the room.

“Jordan. Don’t you stay in here; you know how easily you catch things. Go wait with Amy for the ambulance.”

Jordan nodded silently, squeezed his brother’s hand and went to join Amy on the front yard.

“Sorry, I don’t deal well in an emergency,” Amy apologised. Jordan shook his head.

“You’re doing better than me. I can’t believe this. I mean, Bri gets sick, sure, with his asthma and all, but I’m the kid who’s always catching something. Not him.”

Amy grabbed his hand and squeezed comfortingly. Cries from Brighton drifted out to where they stood. An especially loud one made Jordan close his eyes in reflex, the noise of his brother in pain too much for him to bear. Amy squeezed his hand again.

If someone had taken a photo at that moment, it would have made for an interesting image. A cute/pretty/any other word for sweet girl in her baby-blue shirt and pink skirt holding tightly to the hand of a boy with a bird’s nest of brown hair, sallow skin, clad in tartan flannel pajamas.

Brighton screamed again. The flashing lights of the ambulance were visible now at the end of the street, the siren drowned out by the boy’s pain. Amy gave a tight-lipped smile to her boyfriend.

“He’ll be ok, Jordy.”

She squeezed his hand in reassurance, and at the same second he squeezed her hand to comfort her.

This, also, could be the second it all began. Because although they eventually let go of each other’s hands, so Jordan could get dressed, that second where they both reached out to help the other was the start of something that lasted the rest of their lives.

And the sound of the siren at the end of the street, coming closer to take the sickly Brighton away.

That was the day it all began.

Four years later

“This is a tired day. It’s exhausted because it’s been crying. Wouldn’t you agree?” she asked her cat, who answered by licking at her hand. She scratched its chin and stared out at the gray ocean.

The sky was gray too, clouds obscuring anything else. A dark, unhappy, angry afternoon. Wind whipped across the gray sand of the beach. There was no better way to describe it than the way she had.

“I like to describe days. Today is tired. Yesterday was sleepy, which isn’t the same thing at all.”

She let the wriggling pet jump down from her lap and curled her knees up against her chest. The only color in the day was the glossy red chopsticks shoved through her hair, holding the shiny black locks off matt paper-pale skin. Out in the water, a plastic bag was being tossed between two waves, tumbling and dancing in the violent surf, until it filled with water and sank from view.

She wore a black fishnet shirt, the net of threads covering another net, this one of delicate pink scars, on her wrists and forearms. A short black denim pinafore and vinyl boots that would have been fetish-like if they weren’t so chunky, and the image of teenage isolation on a deserted beach was complete. The sandblasted wooden beach house she called home created the background.

Somewhere, a seagull cawed, probably being accosted by the just-departed cat.

“Today’s exhausted. But it’s still got some adventures left in it, I think.”

Just as she spoke a car horn shattered the calm of the moment. She whipped her head around to find its direction and one lacquered chopstick detached from her head and fell onto the sand. She grabbed it and ran out to the road.

A white station wagon, the paint chipping at the door handles and rusting at the tailbar, was parked outside her front door. Amy twisted her hair back up and stabbed the chopstick through, jogging over to the car.

“Your worthless boyfriend’s been arrested again,” the woman inside told her through the open window. Her voice was snappish, malicious. Amy sighed and climbed into the passenger’s seat.

“Hey Debra. How have you been?”

“Well I was just fine until I had to finish my shift early because the little shit’s got sticky fingers.”

Amy looked out the window at the passing houses. Long ago, she’d learned that the anger in Debra’s words wasn’t really aimed at Jordan, or at

her. It was anger with no direction or outlet, and spilled through any crack it found.

Thunder rumbled like a low bass note, signalling the start of a heavy summer shower. Amy traced a droplet's path down the window.

"Day's just been crying," she murmured.

"What?" Debra asked, making a sharp right-hand turn into the police station parking lot.

"Nothing," Amy replied.

"How's your father?" Debra attempted grudging small talk.

Amy shrugged. "He's good."

The inside of the police station always made Amy think of television shows. Always some two-days-from-retirement detective was getting a coffee from the machine, always a weedy little man in tweed lodging forms. As if the background roles of life, extras in someone else's movie, were always played by the same people. For a second Amy wondered if that's what she and Jordan were playing right now, supporting cast in someone else's story. The juvenile offender and his girlfriend.

One long leg stretched out across the cracked linoleum, Jordan was a matching double to Amy's looks. Messy long black hair, brushing the shoulders of a shapeless black t-shirt, black pants with a clunky silver wallet chain looping down from one pocket.

Debra went over to the counter to sign for his release while Amy went over to collect him. He was glaring sullenly at a poster advising that drinking and driving would lead to certain death.

Amy smiled ruefully at him. When he saw her, Jordan stood up and smiled a little in return. They brushed lips lightly, then Amy punched him playfully on the arm.

"You said you were just going to buy a magazine and go home," she scolded. Jordan grinned evilly and tickled at her ribs.

"Yeah, well, I was lying." He kissed her again.

"You two look like newlyweds," a middle-aged woman in a tight red dress and too much foundation piped up from the waiting area seats. "Or a brother and sister."

"Should that be a compliment?" Jordan asked with a laugh.

She shrugged, her shoulders thin and knobby through the fabric of her dress, her fingers curled in a way that told Amy instantly that the woman wanted very badly to have a cigarette between the talon-like red nails.

"So are you? Newlyweds I mean. If you're brother and sister then I've got Jerry Springer's number here somewhere."

Amy shook her head, causing the chopstick to dislodge again. She pulled it out, fed up. Her hair fell in her eyes.

"Nah."

“Good for you. Don’t make that mistake.” The woman coughed, a deep hacking sound that went on and on. Between that and the disturbingly jaded message she’d given them, Amy wasn’t upset to leave her behind when Debra came over and told them curtly to get in the car.

“I thought the bitch would never shut up.” Jordan scuffed at the ground with one sneaker, his hands jammed in his black jacket. “She’s always worse right after her week away. She should just go live with whoever she goes to see, he can have her all four weeks in the month for all I care.”

They were wandering the streets near Amy’s house, a ragtag collection of faded beach holiday houses, which now made up the safer lower-class district of the town. In Jordan’s neighborhood it was a very bad idea to walk around after dark alone.

“She does care about you, Jordan. She was just disappointed that you stole the CD. Why the hell did you take it anyway? You know I’d lend you my copy for as long as you like.” Amy rubbed her arms; the evening was colder than usual for that time of year.

“I took it when I realised security had an eye on me. I figured it was better to get caught for that than have them find this.”

Jordan pulled his hand out of the jacket pocket and dipped into the back pocket of his pants, bringing out a small red velvet box. He handed it to Amy.

“What’s this?” Amy asked, pushing her hair back from where it was fluttering on her cheeks. Jordan smiled shyly.

“Happy anniversary.”

She pulled it open, moving under a streetlight to see better. A thin silver band, with a purple gemstone shaped as a heart set into it. Amy took it out and examined it.

“This is amazing,” she said quietly, looking at the small ring.

Jordan plucked it from her fingers and grabbed her right hand, sliding it onto the middle finger. It fit perfectly.

“I got the right one, didn’t I? I thought if I asked which color was amethyst the sales lady might get suspicious,” Jordan explained. Amy nodded.

“Yeah, you got the right one, Jordy. I didn’t realise you knew the date we first went out.” She looked down again at her hand.

The little stone was obviously very very expensive, high quality and well cut. It stood out between the cheap trinkets Amy liked to adorn her fingers with.

“I’ve known it every year. I thought I’d wait for the fifth one before I

got anything, but when I saw the little hearts I knew I had to get you one,” Jordan explained. Amy slipped her hand around his waist under the heavy coat.

“It’s perfect. I love you.”

They kissed, this one as heavy as the police station brush had been light.

They walked in step with each other, happy to exist together in silence. Amy hummed under her breath, her head cocked to one side.

“I know.”

“Know what?” Jordan queried. Amy smiled secretively.

“What I’m gonna get you.”

“You don’t have to get me anything.” Jordan smiled and grabbed her in a spinning hug. “Just swear you’ll always be there when arrested streetwalkers suggest I go on Springer.”

Amy laughed, nodding. “That seems like a weird gift but okay. Can I give you the other one anyway?”

“If you like.” Jordan let her go from the hug, Amy stayed in close against his shirt.

“Okay, well, since I can’t exactly give it to you, I’ll tell you what it is now.” Amy looked up at Jordan, who stood half a head taller. “I’ll erase your record from this afternoon. Since you got it for me.”

“Aims, you don’t have to do that...”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. And since I’ll be there anyway, I might as well erase the rest of the file, right?” Amy grinned evilly. Jordan’s eyes widened.

“Really? You’d do that?” His police record had caused problems at job interviews many times.

“Charlotte says we make her sick,” Amy said. “She says it’s the most revolting display of desperate teenage muck she’s ever seen. To be honest, I think she’s got a point. This can be our reality check, hey? Most desperate teenage muck couples can’t say ‘for our four year anniversary she got rid of all my minor convictions’, can they?”

“No, I guess not,” Jordan agreed. “Charlotte said that?”

“Sure did.”

“Remind me to whop her ass.”

“How on earth did you remember the day, anyway?” Amy looked down at her hand again, sitting down on the edge of the road, her feet in the gutter.

“Because it’s the same week as Brighton getting sick,” Jordan said, sitting down next to Amy.

“Oh, Jordy, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Amy put her hand on his arm.

“It’s ok.” He shrugged, sighing. “It’s his birthday in two weeks. He’ll be ten this year.” Jordan snorted quietly in bitter laughter. “I remember him saying he was gonna get a tattoo at ten. Did you know I don’t even know

where he is?”

“Really?” Amy looked surprised. She’d always just assumed that Jordan visited his brother in hospital but never wanted to talk about it.

“Well, Dad left so soon after, and Debra hates thinking about me, much less another kid that’s not even hers that she’s supposed to take care of. Whenever I brought it up she’d just yell at me that she didn’t owe me anything, I should be thankful for a roof over my head what with the garbage I get up to.”

Amy smiled at that. “You little hell raiser you.”

“Hey, could you look up stuff about the hospital? I’d love to go see him.” Jordan leant against Amy’s shoulder. She kissed his cheek.

“Of course.”

Amy loved her computer. She’d gotten in by equal parts saving money, emotional blackmail on her father, and flirting with the computer salesman to lower the price. It wasn’t a very good model, but the way she saw it, the keyboard had all the letters and the modem worked nearly all the time, so it was good enough.

She’d had a better one, when she still lived with her mother, but after the divorce they’d lost everything. Amy didn’t care. She had her dad, and they got along most of the time. Some of the time anyway.

Amy connected to the Internet and typed in the address of the police’s website. It was just a small public relations exercise, ‘caring for your cyber community’. For people that had never learned how to hack, anyway.

She made short work of Jordan’s file, removing the little stains of shoplifting and teenage fist fights. He was a good person, Amy thought as she deleted the reference to an episode where Jordan had cut another boy. There was an explanation for every one of these. That boy had attacked Jordan unprovoked, picking on him and then swinging at him. Jordan had just raised his hands in self defence, forgetting he was holding a glass. Amy had been there when it happened. She’d tried to tell the police but they hadn’t cared. They knew who Jordan was and stories of his innocence weren’t taken seriously.

When she was done, Amy decided to check her own file. Checking for Marsden, A, brought up two people. One of the links was blue text, the other red. Jordan’s had been blue. Amy opened them both.

Her own file, the blue hyperlink, was a lighter version of Jordan’s history. A few counts of shoplifting, one for underage drinking from a few years ago, disturbing the peace—that had been from playing music too loud after ten pm. Amy left it, she had a job (no problems with interviews) and she

was almost proud of her record.

The other page was a man named Albert Marsden, who was cross-referenced under about two dozen aliases. Amy realised the link was red because he was wanted for questioning. Armed robbery, murder, terrorism. . . Amy left the site quickly, her spine crawling at the thought of someone like that in her area, maybe outside right now...

She took a break to check her email. Charlotte had sent her a bunch of jokes. Laughing made Amy feel a little better, she was tired by now. It was about two in the morning; the Internet was faster at this time of night and Amy's connection was cheap and slow.

Rubbing her eyes to wake them up a little, Amy went to find the hospital address for Jordan. This didn't require hacking; Amy worked at the school library and had access to the school's Intranet.

Brighton's file was short and impersonal, and made Amy feel a little weird again after the police entries. Snooping found some pretty depressing stuff. She did, however, find what she was looking for—an address for his 'schooling transfer'. Amy blinked a few times, making sure that she was reading it right. This place was days away.

Amy's interest was sparked. She wrote down the address and went to a search engine, deciding that it was high time she read up on Brighton's condition.

Four years of living had dimmed her memory of the events leading up to Jordan's little brother leaving, but she could still remember enough. The test had been for a peri-cardiovascular hyper allergy. It had stuck in Amy's head because she'd been able to understand what it meant a little. Something about around the heart and lungs.

Looking that up, though, yielded nothing. Maybe she'd gotten it wrong? Amy didn't think she had, but there wasn't anything on any pages she tried. Searching a second time, however, gave her an entry to a message board from two months ago.

To: Mina Caphen

I read your post about your child being diagnosed with PCVHA/Lander's Syndrome four years ago. My son died of it around the same time, and I feel like we have a connection from this. I realise your daughter is still alive but felt drawn to your story nonetheless, as information on Lander's Syndrome is so sparse. I feel so sorry that you can't travel the distance to see your child.

Please call me on 92-70-7870, you may use collect charges since I know the cost of telephone services nowadays. I need to talk to you.

Laura Dermott

Under the address of Brighton's hospital Amy jotted the number down, thinking that maybe she could find out a little more about the disease.

Jordan looked at the address. Most people couldn't read Amy's scrawly writing, but he was used to it. It was eight in the morning. Amy knew it could wait until the evening but loved the way Jordan looked when he first woke up.

"This is further out than I expected," he said finally. "I was hoping to see him on the weekend, get to know what he's like now so I can get him something he'd like for his birthday."

Jordan gave a little snort of amusement as he looked at the town's name again. "What a perfect storybook idea. A road trip from Theory to Potential."

"Well, you could be there by Saturday if you left today," Amy suggested. "Yeah. . . four days driving, you're there by the weekend."

"But I'd have to stay around there until after his birthday. Weeks away."

"So stay there. I'm up for it if you are," Amy said with a smile.

"Seriously?" Jordan's eyebrows were raised. "You'd take that much time off for me?"

"Of course." Amy nodded. "So pick me up from babysitting tonight. I'll have my bag with me, and we'll head off."

"You're the best," Jordan said. Amy laughed.

"I know."

Amy hated few things in the world as much as she hated her mother's sister, brother-in-law and nephews. The eight hours a week she spent babysitting, her entire day off no less, was more than enough to drive her insane.

Their house was like a graveyard for toys, every cheap, nasty, violent action figure and plastic gun ever manufactured was heaped in garbage piles on the playroom floor. Ugly pretentious art, the adult version of awful toys, hung on the walls like an expensive skin disease.

One of them was opposite her right now, next to the clock. It was ten past five in the afternoon, for the last few hours Amy had been telling herself 'only gotta make it until five, then you can escape'. She was going quietly mad. Crescent shaped indents from her fingernails were reddening on both her palms. She had to get out.

The painting currently holding her interest was a green square. A green

square. Not even a very well painted square.

Her Aunt Nora was doing something in the kitchen, creating some ridiculous yuppie dish for her children's dinner.

"Blake! Your soccer boots are under the couch, get them on, we have to leave in fifteen minutes!" she called out. Amy looked over at her primary charge, the two year old boy currently causing major play-doh carnage on the glass-topped coffee table. He seemed happy enough. His older brother, the Blake of the soccer boots, barreled into the room and looked for the shoes.

"How many sports does he play?" Amy asked, going into the kitchen to refill the baby's bottle.

"Let's see..." Nora thought about it. "Basketball, soccer, karate, gym, cricket.... Five."

"You're certainly fitting the hours into their day." Amy heard a shout of anger and sighed. Time to break up another fight.

"Well, you know what they say about the devil finding work for idle hands." Nora said with a grin. The sound of a car horn from the street made Amy's heart soar. Jordan! Now she could go. There was a God.

Amy looked at her aunt, fake smile still stuck on her face lifted mouth. Nora, like her sister, was a lawyer. Enough said. The children were brats—well, Amy had to admit she liked the littlest one. But he'd still be a brat when he was older. Jordan, her Jordan, no bullshit Jordan, was waiting outside for her. She could get away.

But unless she did something, she'd end up being back here every week, for who knows how long?

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean. I didn't have a spare moment in my childhood." Amy grabbed her coat off the countertop. "What with the masturbation and all."

Walking out of the house, hearing Nora trying in vain to calm a screaming child somewhere behind her, knowing that she would never, ever be asked back, Amy felt as free as a bird.

"Hey stranger." She sat down with a relieved sigh. "Ready to hit the road?"

"Sure thing." Jordan floored the pedal and they roared down the street. Amy laughed with exhilaration and excitement.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round!" She sang at the top of her lungs out the window, waving at the rush hour pedestrians on the footpath. Jordan shook his head.

"You're a lunatic," he told her. Amy just laughed.

"I'm so fucking happy. We're on a holiday!" she laughed.

"In like, three weeks you're going to have to come back," Jordan pointed out. Amy shrugged.

"So? That's three weeks away! Three whole weeks with no filing at

work or shitty bus drivers on the way home or fights with my dad or ANYTHING!” she yelled at a man in a suit walking near to the car. He just smiled. Amy smiled back, waving as they drove away from him.

“I’m going to give you homework. When we get back I want an essay, ‘What I did on my holidays’. Failure to submit the essay will result in being tickled.” Jordan kissed her on the cheek. Amy laughed again.

“We’re doing it, Jordy. We’re escaping. Even if only for a little while. Goodbye boring world!”

They stayed that night in a small motel. They’d cleaned out their bank accounts the day before. Between them they’d found they actually had enough to spend maybe a month away comfortably, plus petrol. Shoplifting everything left you with money to put in a savings account.

They shared the double bed, Jordan’s hand lying across Amy’s stomach, him on his front, her on her back. They wore the same thing to sleep in, oversize maroon flannel workshirts and black satin boxer shorts, courtesy the sleepy security guard outside menswear at the local Big & Tall.

Amy was stroking his fingers. The nails were covered in chipped black polish that she’d applied a few weeks before.

“You’re a darling,” she said quietly, thinking him asleep. Jordan cracked one eye open.

“Hmm? How so?” he asked.

“Oh sorry, I didn’t know you were awake.” Amy apologised.

“It’s ok. What didja mean? You were talking about me, weren’t you?”

“No, I was talking about the postman,” Amy said sarcastically, slapping his hand lightly. “Yes I was talking about you.”

“So why’m I a darling?” Jordan propped himself up on one elbow.

“Because you don’t pressure me,” Amy explained, turning to face him. “I find that amazing. Even lesbians would want some action by now. Aren’t guys supposed to be ruled by their southern hemisphere?”

“Speaking on behalf of my gender, hey,” Jordan replied. “And I’m not going to force you to do something you’re not ready for. I can wait.”

“Hence the calling you a darling.” Amy finished.

They were quiet for a while, drifting off to sleep, thinking.

“Why ‘even’ lesbians?” Jordan asked after a long time.

“Because girls are supposed to be caring and sharing and stuff,” Amy said with a horizontal shrug.

“You think that’s true?”

“No, mostly I think they’re bitch whores from hell with catty tongues. But that might just be my experience.”

Jordan laughed silently. “Night Aims.”

“Night Jordy.”

“Tell me a story.” Jordan ordered Amy. They’d both woken up in the night when a very large truck had rumbled by, and they had turned to the television to lull them back to slumber, except that there wasn’t anything viewable enough to fall asleep to.

Amy held the remote up and turned the set off. She was propped up on the pillows of the bed, Jordan lying across the double mattress so his head was on her lap.

“You’re a big boy, tell your own story.” Amy fed him an olive from the jar she was picking at. Neither of them had felt like dinner but were making short work of the minibar.

“No, I want to hear one of your stories. I like the ones you tell,” Jordan pressed. Amy rolled her eyes.

“Ok, ok, fine. I’ll tell you a story about... us in five years.”

Jordan smiled and closed his eyes as Amy began to speak.

“On Sunday mornings we’ll sleep in until ten, but the sun will come in through the big windows and make the house so light and airy we’ll want to wake up. We’re going to live in a little cottage with a nice front yard, where I’m going to grow bright red roses.”

“Do we live alone in this house?” Jordan asked.

“Are you telling this story or am I? No, we don’t live alone. We have a little baby girl, her name’s... Melissa.” Amy said, choosing the name of Jordan’s mother, who’d died giving birth to Brighton. “She’s the prettiest little thing... Looks like her Daddy with big brown eyes. And we live with lots of cats too of course. Anyway, after we wake up we’ll read the paper and eat croissants with coffee. By then it’ll be almost midday, and usually on Sundays we spend the afternoon at the park with Melissa, but this weekend we drive out to the country and show her some farm animals. She likes the cows best. We buy a bunch of wildflowers from a roadside stall and make garlands for our hair. The sun dances over everything and we laugh just for the sake of it because everything’s so right and good.

“In the evening we drive home and Charlotte and Patrick come over for dinner with their children Ainslie and Peter, the three toddlers get along pretty well except that sometimes Melissa and Peter pull each other’s hair. We cook spinach lasagna and drink red wine, and stay up late talking. We try to get the kids to fall asleep on our bed but they want to stay up with the grownups. That makes us laugh because we don’t feel any more grown up then we were at fifteen when we all first met. And then, perhaps, we’ll live happily ever after.”

Amy looked down at Jordan when she finished. He had his eyes closed and was smiling faintly. He looked up.

“That’s beautiful.”

Amy popped another olive in his mouth. He kept talking as he chewed. “Do you think anyone’s that lucky?”

“Ah, but we’re not just anyone. We’re Amy Marsden and Jordan Mitchell, and we can do anything.” Amy corrected him. “Except...”

“What?”

“Now that I’ve said it, I’ve jinxed it ever happening.”

That made Jordan laugh. “Aims, you’re a big looney, you know that?”

“Yeah, well, then you’re in love with a looney, which is worse.” Amy smiled in satisfaction. “We’re just a pair of incorrigible nutcases.”

“Yup.”

They’d only been traveling for a little while the next day when Amy felt like they were a million miles away. There were so many worlds out there that she knew nothing about, waiting for her to discover them. She wanted to see it all, experience everything. She wanted to pick crops from the fields they passed, hitchhike along the dusty roads, skydive through the milky clouds. It was as if the mundane world had stayed behind at home and they were on a great adventure. Some kids waved at them as they drove past a farmhouse; Amy waved back with a silly grin.

“That’s what today is, a sunburnt child.” she decided. Jordan just smiled. He loved the way she described the days.

For a few hours they traveled like that, talking about nothing and everything, sometimes not talking at all. It was the most perfect, liberating sensation. To be free and young and have money in your wallet and the road in front of you. They played I spy, and truth or dare, which didn’t work because they always chose truth and had no secrets anyway. By the time they realised how long they’d been moving, the sun was full and low in the sky, throwing a heat haze on the world.

Amy had been studying Jordan’s profile as he drove. She’d offered to take the wheel herself at times but he’d always declined.

His nose was basically straight; Amy had a bump at the bridge of hers that she hated, so she envied his almost-perfectly-formed nose. The only blemishes on his skin were three small pockmarks near his left eyebrow. Jordan had never really gone through an acne stage. The brows themselves were dark, not so dark as his dyed hair but still striking on the paler shade of his sunlight-deprived skin.

Amy’s favorite things about Jordan’s face were his eyes and his lips.

The eyes because they were always taking in information from the world, darting about, filled with energy and quiet intelligence. And vulnerable, like a puppy that's been kicked too often.

Amy loved Jordan's lips most of all though. They weren't particularly full, but they were well shaped and always slightly open, as if in deep thought or arousal. Over the years she'd known him, Amy had memorised every pore, every curve of Jordan's face. She didn't have to look at it to know exactly what it was like. But she liked looking. It was a nice face.

"I'm hungry," Jordan said, his voice sounding larger then it was after so long in quiet. Amy nodded agreement, and pulled out the plastic bag holding their supplies.

"We've got... lessee... two pieces of toast from breakfast today, a packet of cheese and onion chips... but I'd be wary of them because I found the packet in my cupboard and that means I don't know how old they are. A batch of brownies, though again I'd use caution because Patrick gave them to me and that means they're not really safe to eat while driving or operating heavy machinery. That's it," Amy finished with a sigh. "Wanna stop at a petrol station and get something else?"

Jordan nodded hearty agreement and handed Amy the map.

The closest town was a flyspot on the map, and barely more in reality, a few houses set back from the road, a cluster of shops the only thing making said houses a collective. They had no choice in which café to go to, but it was better then they expected.

A young woman with bright blue wavy hair and catlike hazel eyes came over to serve them. Her nametag read 'Boring'.

"Nice tag," Amy said with a smile. The woman grinned back.

"Thanks. I'm boring, and you are?" she held her hand out, after shoving her order pencil through her hair. Amy accepted the handshake.

"Also boring, but my parents called me Amy."

"Seriously? I'm Amy too!" the waitress laughed. "I know it's not an uncommon name, but you're the first Amy to pass through here in forever. You are just passing through?"

"Yeah." Jordan joined in the conversation. Blue-haired-Amy nodded.

"Of course. No-one sane stays around here. So what are you two having?" she retrieved her pencil from her hair and poised to write down their order.

"I'll have a piece of apple pie, please," Amy said, looking at the menu.

"Um. . . . yeah, same," Jordan said finally. Waitress-Amy wrote it down.

“You guys drink coffee?”

Amy looked over at Jordan then shook her head. “We can’t afford coffee, sorry.”

Blue-haired-Waitress-Amy shook her own head back. “I didn’t ask if you could afford it. Us Amys’ve gotta stick together. Coffee’s on me.”

“Thanks.” Amy and Jordan smiled at her. How come teenagers were usually nicer to each other than adults? They were the generation with the reputation for rudeness.

When she left to get their order Amy and Jordan lapsed back into silence. After a few minutes Amy started playing with the little paper envelopes with a spoonful of sugar inside. Jordan looked up to find she’d started making a card-tower out of them.

“What’s up?”

“Do you think I’m a good person?” Amy asked, as if musing over the question herself.

“What kind of question is that?” Jordan sounded almost offended to be asked.

“Well, I was just thinking. I don’t think I’m a good person.”

“Aims, you’re a vegetarian. You give money to charity. You’re there when your friends need you. I’ve never seen you be mean to anyone. You’re a better person than I am, and I’m ok, right?”

“But I’ve only been a vegetarian for a year. What about all the animals I ate before that? And I don’t always check my lipsticks before I buy them to see if they’re tested on bunnies and stuff. That’s not good. I don’t give as much as I could, to charity or my friends. I shoplift, I used to cheat on assignments before I quit school altogether. I should forgive my mother but I haven’t. I’m not good.” She sighed.

“Amy...” Jordan started softly, stroking her cheek lovingly. “You’re a good person. Trust me. Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” Amy smiled a little, putting the sugar back in the dispenser. Their food arrived and they fell back into the silence they shared so comfortably.

“What about this one? Does it suit me?” Jordan reached up and pulled down a leopard-print cowboy hat from the top shelf of the clothing store. Amy laughed.

“It makes you look like a pimp. How about I buy a pair of shorty-short denim cutoffs and I’ll be your white-trash ho?” she suggested. “We could live in the back of a trailer with our kids Wanda, Tasha and Billy-Joe. I’d collect Elvis plates and you could be a lumberjack. When you’d given up the

pimping, I mean.”

Jordan rolled his eyes.

“A simple no would have sufficed.”

“Well, then, no. Now stop kidding around, we’re here to get me a jacket because my old one’s falling apart.”

“I don’t see why you need a jacket in this weather anyway.”

“I get cold. Now look.”

“Ok, ok.”

After finding Amy a suitable jacket—long and black with deep pockets for her hands to stay warm in—and smuggling it out of the store, they decided to stay in the town for the night.

They ran into Waitress-Amy as she came out of the café. She smiled to see them again.

“Hey! I thought you guys were just passing through?”

“We’re gonna hang around for the night.” Amy explained. Waitress-Amy grinned.

“Then you have to come with me.”

“Where’re you going?” Jordan asked warily. She cackled with evil laughter.

“It’s karaoke night at the football club.”

“Karaoke?” Amy raised her eyebrows. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope, c’mon.” She led the way.

“Maybe you should have gotten the pimp hat. Fit right in.”

Amy whispered under her breath. Jordan grinned. They walked down the street hand in hand, the twilight playing tricks with the shadows.

Amy was relieved when they got to the club. She’d been afraid of being stuck in the middle of an unfamiliar world. But this was like being back at home. Torn lace, slashed skin, ripped fishnet, smudged eyes. These were tribal markings she recognised in her own looks.

It was a little disconcerting, seeing something so familiar. Waitress-Amy’s friends were like her and Jordan’s group at home. They even talked to same—“One day I’m just going to drive off too.” To these people Amy and Jordan were like cowboys in the old west, lawless heroes fading off into the sunset. It made Amy wonder if, just as the world had similar conformists everywhere, the rebels were cut from the same cloth. The cloth would be tartan perhaps, like Amy’s skirt, or velvet, like the two children of the night—Kyle and Cynthia—offering her a joint were clad in.

It didn’t matter, because they were all desperate to be the same and different all at once. It should have been mildly depressing, but it wasn’t. Amy felt connected to these people, her siblings in desperation. And karaoke.

Like most things teenagers classify as too dorky for words, karaoke turned out to be fun. Waitress-Amy demonstrated the right way to go about it

with a kicking rendition of an old Cure song. They fooled around on the microphone for hours, singing their favorite songs, doing ridiculously bad versions of ones they hated, generally acting like losers and loving it. The eighties hits were the most fun, stupid little four minute bursts of synthpop insanity. Standing in a crowd of freaky black-clad teenagers singing the Go-Go's was an interesting experience.

Around nine Amy jumped down off the stage, feeling through the pocket of her new coat for change. Waitress-Amy asked where she was going.

"To call my Dad. Tell him I'm still alive and all."

There wasn't any answer at her house. Amy smiled—parents, they were so irresponsible—and dialed in her Dad's girlfriend's number. She and Rachel got along ok, but Amy thought her Dad was too good for someone who had a subscription to three different women's magazines.

"Hello?" Rachel's voice sounded sleepy.

"Hey Rach, it's Amy. Is Dad there?"

"Oh my God! It's Amy." Rachel said to someone else in the room with her. Amy realised, hearing the woman say more words, that it was grief, not tiredness, in her words.

"Rachel? What's wrong?" Amy felt sick.

"We thought you'd been kidnapped. Where are you?"

"Where's my Daddy?" Amy could hear the edge of hysteria in her own voice. "Rachel, where's my Daddy?!"

"Amy. . . . I'm sorry. Where are you sweetie, we'll come get you."

"No, don't be sorry. Please don't be sorry." Amy's hysteria gave way to a lump in her throat. "I need to talk to my Daddy."

"Amy, your Dad was killed this morning. Someone shot him in the neck."

Amy's fingers lost their grip on the handset of the public phone. It clattered down against the wall it was mounted on. The tinny sound of Rachel asking where Amy was sounded far away. Everything sounded far away. Amy looked down at the still-swinging phone as if uncomprehending of what it was.

"Aims?" Jordan came over and put his hand on her shoulder. She realised she was shaking like she never had before. Tears were coming too. She blinked them back, swallowing the sob.

She couldn't speak, or move, or think. Amy let herself be led out to the car and driven back to the motel, her crying tapering off into silence.

She went into the tiny, green-tiled bathroom off the bed area, telling Jordan she needed to wash her face. He nodded, obviously concerned. Amy had broken her quiet long enough to explain what was wrong. Standing in front of the mirror, before a cracked sink with stains around the drain, Amy

scrabbled in the bottom of her bag and found an unbroken sheet of small white pills. Her Valium.

The doctor had given them to her—what, two years ago now?—for her anxiety and insomnia, after her parents had split up. Amy had never taken even one. She didn't want to be a pill popper. Now, she looked at them as the minutes ticked by. Then she took a deep breath and shoved them into her jacket pocket, running the water a little to rinse her face, then going back out to where Jordan sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for her and looking worried.

“Wanna watch some TV, Jordy?”

He seemed to think about it deeply, then nodded. “If you want to.”

Amy plugged the set into the wall, wondering for a second who had unplugged it and why, and turned it on. Her own face in the reflection of the room was overlaid with a grainy, overbright image from the late night news—also of her own face.

This was an old photo, she looked perhaps fifteen or sixteen, her blonde hair shiny and clean, a smile, complete with dimples, across her face.

“Amy Marsden, wanted in relation to a double slaying that happened earlier today...” the newsreader was saying, the static image of Amy's smile flickering a little under the bad reception of the motel television, before it was replaced by photographs of her father and his girlfriend.

“Not Rach too...” Amy said softly. “I talked to her tonight. Only an hour ago. She was fine. Who would want to kill her? Who would want to kill my Daddy?” Amy's voice broke on the last word and tears spilled down her face again.

Jordan enveloped her in his arms, wordlessly stroking her back. Amy cried and cried, Jordan reached behind her back and turned off the television.

“We'll drive back in the morning,” Jordan promised. Amy started shaking her head violently.

“No, no no no. I can't deal with this yet, I can't. We'll go see your brother and go back in a few weeks, like we planned. No sense in travelling for two days and then turning back, right?”

“But Aims... you can't pretend like nothing's happened. That's not good for you.”

“Don't worry, Jordy.” She looked up at him, smiling a little through her tears. “I'm not repressing like you do so well. Just... putting it off a little. Ok?”

Jordan looked unconvinced. “Amy, I'm not going to help you do something that's unhealthy, ok? But if you really need to put it off, we'll put it off.”

“Thank you,” Amy said quietly, before dissolving into heartbroken sobs.

When they were seventeen, Amy had gone to visit Jordan after he was hospitalised for bronchitis. He'd been in a fair amount of discomfort and pain, but surprisingly upbeat about the whole thing.

"There's a perk that only the most awful things in life carry. Nobody expects anything of you. I can just lie here, and the world will wait for me to recover," he'd explained to her.

Amy knew now that Jordan was talking about. She was lying with her head on his lap, listening to the others speak. Waitress-Amy had stopped in at the motel early in the morning. Amy had wanted to spend the day outside, so Waitress-Amy had called in sick and now the seven of them were sprawled out in a loose circle on the grass to the left of the local football field.

Amy had asked them to talk about their families, and since the world was waiting for her to recover, she knew they would. Nobody ever says no to someone in that much pain.

Cameron had never known his father, Estella felt smothered by her happily married nuclear family, Lydia couldn't talk to her mother at all without fighting. Now it was Waitress-Amy's turn to talk. She took a deep drag from Todd's joint and began to speak.

"My parents were both heroin addicts when they were younger. Actually, they're not my real parents, but I don't remember my birth set. Anyway, because they were smack heads, they do this whole 'we understand what kids are going through, we support their need to try things, blah blah blah.'" Waitress-Amy snorted. "It's really fucking hard to rebel and fly out of the nest when your parents have done almost everything already."

Amy closed her eyes, letting the words curl around her like smoke on the wind. Some moments seemed to her to be more real than others. This moment seemed real, and the night before seemed like an awful dream. She missed her friends back home, Charlotte and Patrick. In the lazy heat of the morning, the cloying smell of marijuana lingering in the air even as the rolled herb burnt down to nothing, Amy remembered the moment she'd known that Charly and Rick were going to be her close friends for the rest of her life.

Very late in the night, so late it can really be called early morning, Jordan, Patrick, Amy and Charlotte have been hanging around in a playground. There is something obscene about swings and slippery slides at night, a perversion of innocence. They are hanging around in the playground

because they had started the evening at a concert with a group of friends from school, then progressed back to one of the friend's houses, gotten a little tipsy, and decided to get back to Charlotte's house while they still had the foot-eye coordination to make it there. They are sixteen, happy from the night's activities, and therefore it seemed natural to hang around in the park.

During the years between fourteen and eighteen, people change so much it is difficult to believe. A progression straight from point A to point B does not occur. At this point on the road between pink-and-preppy Amy of fifteen and velvet-and-vinyl Amy of nineteen, she is a girl with longish blonde hair that is always held off her face with combs and rubber bands, clad in a black denim jacket over a gray singlet and dull blue satin skirt with a dragon embroidered on the hem. Her feet are protected from the chilly autumn night by gray ballet slippers with fairy stickers all over them.

She sits on a swing, Charlotte taking the one next to her, and they pump their young legs with the practice of someone who can still remember being six. After a few minutes the motion makes Amy woozy and she lets the momentum wind down, watching Jordan and Patrick engage in a mock fistfight. Patrick takes a mistimed swing and hits Jordan on the nose far harder than he had intended. Blood trickles out over his upper lip.

Amy winces in sympathy pain but Jordan laughs, bringing his fingers up to the blood and high-fiving Patrick at the same time. Charlotte makes a clucking noise with her tongue.

"It's a guy thing. Seriously a guy thing."

Watching as Patrick and Jordan begin to experiment with how a broken nose can be moved into different positions, Amy has to agree wholeheartedly. Even after spending almost a year in Jordan's company, she still finds the way in which boys think a mystery.

But isn't it that way on both sides of the mirror? Books and comedians she's been exposed to suggested to Amy that men didn't understand women that well either.

"Amy, what's that?" Charlotte changes the subject, looking at Amy's arm. She's holding onto the chain of the swing, and her jacket sleeve has slipped down towards her elbow. On the pale flesh of her wrist the parallel lines of a ladyshave razor are repeated over and over again.

Amy drops her arm down, pulling the sleeve to her hand.

"Nothing," she says quietly. "Oscar scratched me."

"Amy." Charlotte sighs. "Why'd you do that again? Is it still your mother and father? Because I keep telling you, parents are insane. It's like, in the job description. Every couple fight."

"It's not just that." Amy says with a shake of her head. "I tried so hard on the last legal studies exam and I still fucked it. I'm a stupid cunt."

Charlotte looks concerned. "Nah, Amy, that test was pathetic. Nobody

in the class had a clue. You are one of the smartest people I know."

"Whatever." Amy dismisses the praise. "And my family is falling apart, Char. Daddy sleeps in the spare room every night and I can't remember the last time that I heard him laugh. I think my mother's having an affair." Tears sting her eyes.

"So what? That's not your fault. Don't punish yourself just because your gene pool has a few gray nurse sharks swimming in it." Charlotte puts a hand on Amy's shoulder in a gesture of sympathy.

"It's just. . . everything! My parents and school and I feel so miserable and I don't know why, because I've got it pretty good, considering. I mean, I have at least one parent who really cares about me, and I go to a good school I suppose, I'm not disabled and we're not poor, and if I wasn't such an ungrateful little shit I'd be happy but I'm not I'm not I'm not. I'm so fucking unhappy and without you and Jordan and Patrick I'd would fucking die, I know it, but I put so much shit on you that I know pretty soon you'll get sick of me, and then everything will be in hell and that's why I got my razor and pushed it into my skin and made the blood come up, because I can understand why that hurts, and I can make it stop. I don't understand the other hurting, and it won't stop."

Amy's outburst ends in sobs, her hands balled into fists and striking down on her thighs over and over again.

"Shhh. . . Amy, it's ok." Charlotte gets up off the swing she was sitting on and crouches next to her friend. "And why on earth do you think I would get sick of you? I love you like a sister."

"Because I make you deal with all my problems." Amy is still crying. "You can't like that."

"Friendship isn't just about having fun. I would be a... a... a Lynette!" Charlotte finally finds a word with horrible enough connotations to use. "I would be a Lynette if I was only your friend when it suited me. Am I a Lynette? Oh look at me I'm Lynette and I'm going to be a famous singer, really I am, even though my voice is crap. Because I'm so insignificant the only way I can possibly think to validate myself is to be in the public eye," Charlotte says in a whiny voice, mocking Amy's ex-friend's dream of stardom and getting a snuffly laugh from Amy for her trouble. Charlotte's witheringly disdainful views of Lynette always make Amy feel better.

"Jesus I hate that bitch." Charlotte continues. "She's made you believe that you're not important. Well she's wrong Amy, she's fucking wrong, and your mother is a dickhead too because she's missing out on what a wonderful person you are. And if you keep cutting, then that's them continuing to hurt you. You're better than that."

Amy hugs Charlotte tightly.

"Love you, Charly," she whispers into the other girl's thick red hair.

“You’re so smart and deep.”

“So are you,” Charlotte assures her, then rolls her eyes. “But if we’re so smart and deep, what’re we doing with dumb and dumber over there?”

Amy glances over at where Jordan and Patrick are still fascinated by Jordan’s nose. It seems only a little way up the evolutionary ladder from lowering their heads and charging each other.

Charlotte sits back down on the swing next to Amy’s and they begin to pump their legs again, up and down, up and down, the world tilting wildly as they arc back and forth. Amy laughs, her hair flying around her face.

For just that second, the world is all right. Everything is perfect as Amy and Charlotte laugh for the sheer joy of being young and happy, waving at the two young men sitting just a little way away, the obscenely innocent playground seeming suddenly perfectly poetic, a place where it is still possible to have fun and laugh and be with friends even after the daylight of childhood is over.

“Aims?” Jordan said gently, stroking the hair on her temple.

She opened her eyes, realising that she must have fallen asleep.

“You awake?”

“Yeah.” She nodded groggily and sat up. Waitress-Amy stood and held her hand down to help Amy to her feet.

“Do you guys wanna come back to my place? I should go check in with my mother, show her I’m still alive,” she explained.

Amy and Jordan exchanged a look, then nodded. Amy couldn’t go back to the hotel yet, couldn’t pack her things and let the world start moving again, because so long as she didn’t think about it, didn’t participate in the world, she could pretend that it wasn’t anything to do with her. That anything that had happened to her father and his girlfriend was disconnected from her.

“That’d be cool, thanks.”

Waitress-Amy’s house reminded Jordan of the daydreams Amy created for him sometimes, of houses they would live in. She always made up perfect little utopian futures for them, wildly fantastical in their everyday happiness, and if any of them had ever eventuated, it would have been in this house. The smell of calligraphy ink, burnt toast and sunshine was exactly what happiness would smell like, in Jordan’s opinion at least.

“Oh mother dearest darling one, I have returned!” Waitress-Amy called,

her tone one of good-natured sarcasm. She left the front door open, kicking her shoes off and plonking down on the couch.

A woman in her early forties came into the room, pushing her hair back off her face and leaving a smudge of navy ink where the ball of her thumb came in contact with her forehead. Her hair itself was a riot of different colors, a sketch done in ochre, black, and gray, with raven-colored dye revealing a regrowth at scalp level of dark brown with a few streaks of gray beginning.

The final color on Waitress-Amy's mother's face was a bright, fiery green, her eyes sparking as she smiled at Jordan and Amy.

"Hi. I thought I knew all of Amy's friends," she said, holding her hand out and then realising it had royal blue all over it, withdrawing the offered palm and wiping it self-consciously on the hem of her dark t-shirt. Jordan began to understand what Waitress-Amy had meant about an inability to rebel. She seemed more like an overgrown kid herself than a mother.

"They're just going through town on the way to somewhere else, only pathetic losers actually live here you know," the woman's daughter said with a smile at her mother, flicking through channels on the television with the remote control she'd found on the armchair beside where she was sitting.

Finding nothing of interest, Waitress-Amy pressed the power-off button, sending the picture of the television back into a white pindot that disappeared.

"I'm Amy," Amy introduced herself. "And this is Jordan."

"Pleased to meet you," she smiled. "I'm Kate. Would you kids like something to drink?"

"Nothing for me thank you," Amy said quietly. Waitress-Amy got up off the couch.

"I'm gonna go check my email just quickly."

"Can I come too?" Amy asked. "I should take a look at mine as well."

"Sure." Waitress-Amy nodded, leading the way through the kitchen to the hallway stretching down to the back area of the house.

"I'll hang out here," Jordan said. He liked computers ok, but was more interested in this woman so unlike the stepmother who had raised him.

"kay." The two girls departed. Jordan trailed Kate, Waitress-Amy's mother, into the kitchen where she seemed to be painting pictures, coloring clothes and staining a set of ceramic dishes all with the same bowl of dark ink.

"You her girlfriend?" Kate asked him, flicking her head towards the bedroom. As she did, a few strands of hair escaped her plait and fell into her eyes, making her sigh with exasperation.

"Yeah." Jordan nodded.

“You make a cute couple,” she said with a smile. “Where’re you from?” Jordan told her. Kate looked surprised.

“What are two little kiddies like you doing this far from home?”

“Gonna go see my brother. He’s staying at a place a few towns

Away,” Jordan explained. That made Kate smile again. She’d turned the kettle on and was getting mugs out from a cupboard.

“I never had any siblings. I suppose that’s why I’ve got four kids.”

“Really?” it was Jordan’s turn to be surprised. He couldn’t remember meeting someone with a family that big.

“See for yourself.” Kate inclined her head towards the wall of the living room, which was dotted with pictures. Jordan went over to inspect them.

The image of Waitress-Amy at around age nine made Jordan smile; she was wearing fairy wings and looked exceedingly proud of the fact. Jordan remembered Waitress-Amy mentioning that she was adopted, and while you couldn’t tell instantly looking at Kate and her side by side that they weren’t actually related, the other children were obviously from the same stock as the woman in the kitchen.

The photos were sweet and, made Jordan think again of the pretty little futures Amy created, although she never, ever would have described them as ‘pretty’ herself.

“And then, perhaps, we’ll live happily ever after,” he whispered quietly to himself, looking at the photos with a soft smile. Jordan’s smiles really were pure light to look at.

There was one picture that made him pause for a few moments. It was Kate, that fact was obvious at first glance. Her dark hair fell around her face in the same way, a characteristic of it that obviously annoyed the woman. Jordan studied the picture, trying to work out what seemed so strange about it. When he realised it another smile, this one a huge grin, appeared on his face.

The clothes weren’t the same -- the picture was at least twenty years old -- but still torn and black, so they weren’t very different. The eyes were dissimilar, a light green instead of pale blue. Kate was much thinner than Amy, almost anorexic. But the picture still reminded Jordan of his beautiful girlfriend. From what he could tell, Katherine at twenty had been very like Amy now.

Turning from the pictures, Jordan looked around the room. That smell, that wonderful sleepy afternoon smell, with the screen door banging gently in the breeze where Waitress-Amy had left it open, and Kate humming away as she stained the pottery. Jordan looked at the photograph again. There were even pale scars on Kate’s wrists.

Maybe people like them really did get happy endings, sometimes.

Amy thought she would start crying again when she heard Charlotte's voice. It reminded her of every little thing it meant to be home.

They were back at the hotel after staying for dinner at Waitress-Amy's house, having made a decision to get at least to the next town before stopping for the night. Amy's time with the kids in this town had made her miss her best friend more than she could bear, so she was braving long distance charges on a tight budget and talking to her, sitting on the floor in the tiny bathroom to get some privacy while she chatted.

"Charly?"

"Aims! I heard about your father. Christ I'm sorry."

"I can't talk about that yet, please?"

"Are you sure?" Charlotte asked. Amy was overwhelmed with an almost painful feeling of love for her best friend. Charlotte and Jordan loved her. She was important to them.

"Yeah, I can't deal with it yet. Although trust me, when I am ready to deal with it you're going to have to endure hours of me crying on your shoulder."

"Of course! That's my job," Charlotte said with feeling. "Whenever you need me I'll be there."

"Thanks." Amy swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

"So how have you guys been? How's university?"

"It's ok." Amy could hear the little noises of Charlotte moving around her bedroom, picking up magazines and flicking through them, playing with trinkets. It wasn't a sign of disinterest in the conversation; it was just her friend's way. Amy didn't mind.

"Just ok?"

"Yeah, just ok."

Amy knew that Charlotte thought university was more than 'just ok'; psychology was her friend's dream job. But Charlotte downplayed it because she didn't want to make Amy feel bad, since Amy wasn't studying. It made Amy feel worse that Charlotte tiptoed around the subject, but her friend's concern for her was a comforting feeling nonetheless.

"What about Patrick? How's he?"

"Oh he's ok. He got a job working at North's Department Store."

"Ewwwwww!" Amy laughed. "Yuppieville. Wait.... They hired Patrick? He of the eyeliner and eyebrow ring and studded dog collar?"

"Hey, I was just as shocked," Charlotte agreed.

"I'm guessing then that he didn't wear his kilt to the interview?"

"He probably would have if Jordan didn't still have it at his house."

Charlotte laughed. "It's just weird, him working at a place like that, although I don't have any objections to seeing him in his uniform. He looks very lickable in a shirt and tie."

"You randy little thing," Amy teased. "I didn't think you even had a sex drive."

"Oh, this coming from Amy! A NUN wouldn't have held out as long as you have with Jordan and sex. How is mister tall dark and grumpy anyway?"

Amy was so glad she had a friend like Charlotte, who would cheer her up at the darkest hour of her life so far. No wonder she had stopped cutting herself -- it was hard to hate yourself when there were those who loved you dearly nearby.

"He's good. We're good. How are my kitty cats?"

"They're great, I spoil their little furry asses rotten."

"Did you write a story today?" Amy asked, changing the subject abruptly. Charlotte made a humming sound. "Was that a yes?"

"Yeah," Charlotte admitted grudgingly. "But it's crap."

"Hey, fuck you. I love your writing. Now read it."

"Fine." Charlotte really didn't think her writing was any good. Amy wished there were a way she could really reassure her friend that it was. "It's called 'The Bus'."

Amy settled down to listen as Charlotte began to read.

"The bus was fifteen minutes late today. The woman next to me at the stop was upset about this, because she was going to meet her son at his school and he's only seven so if she's late he'll get worried. Her headscarf had yellow and blue flowers on it. It was made of cheap fabric and made her brow get dotted with sweat, although that might have been from worry. When the bus did get to where I was waiting with the worried mother in the cheap headscarf, it was empty. That surprised me, because usually there's already a man sitting up in the back corner. His name is Richard, but he likes it when I call him Dickie. He has Down's Syndrome, and talks more than anyone else on the bus ever does. Smiles more too. I don't know anyone in the whole world who smiles as much as Dickie does, and only one other person who makes me automatically smile back. That's my friend Jordan. I was thinking about him at the bus stop, because he's away at the moment with his girlfriend, Amy. I miss Amy a lot, even though I know she'll email me or call me in a few days. I was thinking about Jordan and Amy because I was eating burger-flavored chips and I couldn't finish the packet. I wished Amy were there to help me finish it before the bus came, but then I remembered that she's a vegetarian, although I doubt burger-flavored chips have meat in them.

"Dickie wasn't on the bus, so I sat near the middle. The bus pulled off from the curb before I sat down, the motion made me stumble a little. It was

hot, but the air conditioning made it cooler. It was sunny, but my sunglasses made it dimmer. I can't read on buses because they make me car-sick so I passed the time watching all the people who got on at each stop. There was an old man with a crooked back and a felt hat, he only stayed on for about ten minutes, getting off at the ice cream store. There were two kids of about thirteen, a girl and her brother. They might have been twins, although she seemed a little bit younger. They only talked to snip at each other. I wished that Amy or Dickie was there. Sometimes the bus seems like the loneliest place in the world, although I suppose that the loneliest place in the world is inside your own skull. Unless you're telepathic or insane, I guess it wouldn't be lonely then. Telepathic and insane at the same time would be interesting, then the other telepathic people could see what it's like inside a crazy person's head. Unless they were insane too. I wonder if insane people are telepathic. I'll have to ask the next one I meet. Maybe I'm insane. I'm certainly not telepathic.

"There was graffiti in thick black marker on the back of the seat in front of me. A drawing of a man holding a spray can next to an elaborate word, as if he had sprayed it, which I thought was funny since the whole picture was in ink. The word was 'salvation', which I'm sure meant something to whoever drew it. I meant something different to me. I guess everyone has their own salvation, just as everyone has their own bus trips and their own stories.

"Thinking these kinds of thoughts used up the forty-five minutes until my bus parked seven blocks from my university campus, where I jumped down from the doorway onto the footpath and started walking to class because I was late by fifteen minutes because the bus had been."

"I like that one," Amy said when Charlotte finished. Her friend made a non-committal sort of noise. "I do!"

"Whatever," Charlotte said. Amy let it pass. Charlotte knew that Amy loved her writing, there was no point having a yes-no tug of words.

"What's tomorrow's going to be?" Amy asked.

"I'll decide when it gets here," the reply came finally.

While Amy called Charlotte, Jordan packed their things. They'd only been there a night but it looked as if their suitcases had exploded all over the room. Neither of them were very tidy people.

Waitress-Amy sat on the bed, watching Jordan fold Amy's lace blouse. He wasn't folding very neatly; the fine fabric was going to crumple.

"I'll do that if you like," Waitress-Amy offered, taking the top from his fingers. Her palm lingered on his hand. Jordan's expression when her looked

at her was surprised and quizzical.

“She’ll be on the phone for hours and you know it,” she whispered to him. Jordan turned back to the suitcase.

“Yeah, she always talks up a storm with Charlotte,” he agreed.

Waitress-Amy got up off the bed, walking slowly over to where he was.

“What’re you going to do with the time?” she said into his ear.

Jordan swallowed nervously. “Uh, Amy, I’m with Amy.”

The sentence sounded funny but neither of them laughed.

“Not right now, you’re not,” she whispered, pulling him into a kiss. Jordan put his palms on her shoulders and pushed her away.

“I’m with Amy,” he repeated firmly. Waitress-Amy, her lipstick smeared a little, looked at him in disbelief. Then her eyes narrowed.

“How on earth can you turn me down for that skank!?” she spluttered. “She’s fat. And I bet she’s awful in bed.”

“She is not fat,” Jordan muttered through gritted teeth, going back to packing.

“Is she a good fuck?” Waitress-Amy asked.

“Keep your voice down,” Jordan snapped, trying to keep his voice level.

“You haven’t had sex with her? Why do you stay with her then?”

Jordan didn’t turn around. He knew if he did then he’d lose control and kill the blue haired girl.

“You’re probably a fag,” she sneered. “I bet that’s it.”

“I think you better leave,” Jordan told her.

“Fag. Have fun with you skanky frigid girlfriend.” Waitress-Amy slammed the door on the way out.

Jordan let out a sigh of release, if not relief, and paused in his packing. His shoulders were shaking.

A few minutes later Amy came back in.

“I thought Amy was hanging around to see us off,” she said, seeing Jordan alone in the room.

“She had to go. She told me to tell you bye,” Jordan said, turning and giving her a little smile. “Ready to go?”

Amy was browsing through Jordan’s wallet. A little passport sized photo of her fluttered out. She scabbled on the floor, looking at it as she picked it up.

“I didn’t know you still had these.”

She hadn’t kept any herself. Back when they were first going out, Jordan had asked Amy to pose for a set of four pictures in a photo booth. She’d grudgingly agreed and the two sheets of photos, doubles of the same

images, had turned out very well. Amy wondered where her copy had ended up.

There she was, with her short blonde hair and lightly freckled nose, a pale pink shirt visible at the bottom of the frame. Her mouth was smiling but something in her eyes was sad. Amy thought it was mildly ironic that embracing darker things like rock music and gothic clothing had made her a happier person. How much happier Amy wasn't sure; her arms had been scar-free back then.

"Am I still her?" she asked Jordan, holding the picture next to her face and looking in the rear-view mirror. Pale pink lip gloss and dark red lipstick, sandy lashes and clotted mascara. The two faces in the mirror didn't have much in common. "The Amy you fell in love with?"

"No." Jordan glanced over and smiled. "But I'm not either, so that's ok."

"Yeah, you're not the Amy I fell in love with," she smirked.

Jordan rolled his eyes. "Smartass. I meant, I'm hardly the same as I was then, right?"

Amy thought about it and shook her head. "No, I guess not. Do you like me as much now? How come you've got this photo if I'm not the same person?" she asked teasingly.

"Because you never let me take any photos of you! I've only got those four!" Jordan cried, snatching it out of her hand. "Let's see what you've got in your purse, smarty."

Amy got hers out and unfolded it. There were two photos in the window pocket, one was of her, Jordan, Charlotte and Patrick at the senior formal. Since Amy had dropped out, everyone in their school grade had assumed she'd attend as Jordan's date. The four of them had decided that since it was the end of their final year, for them to do what everyone expected would be a tragedy. So Amy had gone as Charlotte's date, with Jordan and Patrick booking their tickets as a couple. It had been nice to cause the biggest local controversy of the year when it had been discovered that same-sex relationships were prohibited at their school.

It had been a wonderful night, not much like the proms on TV, but better in a lunatic way.

The other photo was from the same day as the picture of Amy in Jordan's wallet. This one showed Jordan himself, his hair messy even by his standards, looking into the camera with the biggest, cheesiest grin ever.

It still made Amy laugh when she looked at it.

"You don't smile enough," she said, gazing at the old picture. "You almost never smile at all. You unhappy?"

"I'm not unhappy—I just save my smiles," Jordan said.

Amy looked back at the photo. "Why me, Jordy? What was it about

me?” she looked at the image in her wallet, then at the corresponding one of her. “We were nothing at all alike—I know we are now, people tell us we look like brother and sister—but we damn sure weren’t then. I’m not as pretty as lots of girls.”

“Yes you are,” Jordan assured her.

Amy shook her head. “No. Why didn’t you fuck Amy when I was on the phone? I’m not deaf, I heard the fight.”

“Why? Because you’re my girlfriend, stupid!” Jordan gave Amy a concerned smile. “Because I love you, I didn’t love her.”

Amy looked doubtful. “You love me? Why? Because I still won’t have sex even after four years? Because I’m emotionally dependent? Because I’m an ugly fat cow?”

“Dammit, Amy, you are not fat!” Jordan snapped. “I’m sorry that horrible things have happened to you this week, do you know why I’m sorry? Because I LOVE YOU. Don’t you love me?”

“Of course I do.” Amy looked offended to be even asked. “All I wanted to know is, why’d you pick me? Sweet little Amy.”

Jordan looked down at the photographs.

“Maybe it’s because you make me smile.”

This stop was more like a city than a town. Before they checked in, Amy wanted to go for a walk, revive some life into her lethargic legs. Jordan offered to go with her, but she could see how tired he was. So she shook her head and started off by herself.

The winds were heavier here than they had been in the last town. Amy wondered if there was a cyclone brewing offshore. Her hair flew around her face.

The buildings here were old, not in the same way Amy’s neighborhood was with its run-down beach houses. These were the same blocks of houses that people had ridden carriages past.

Amy liked them; there was a romanticism in the air, as if the stones still held the glow from the gaslight. Amy thought about going to church. She’d never been religious but right now she just needed something to believe in. But she didn’t know where the closest church was, and it this time of night they would probably be shut, the ever-loving compassion of her creator over for today.

An art gallery across the street caught her eye. Perched atop the roof was a beautifully carved statue. Far prettier than a gargoyle, it showed a tumbling pile of little cherubs, falling over each other like real children. Watching over them was a stately adult angel, a woman with upturned palms.

Amy stopped to look at it.

There was something very real about it; she could almost hear childish giggles. The mother angel, though, looked sad, the sightless granite eyes gazing up for some miracle, the upturned palms catching the first droplets of a coming storm.

The hair on Amy's neck stood up. Suddenly she felt as if the antique buildings might hold sad, lost ghosts. She ducked her head against the rain and walked back to the motel quickly.

Night made the city sparkle even through the tail end of the rain, office windows and streetlights glowing in a huge collection of glittering dots, as if God had shaken the velvety sky, millions of stars falling down into a puddle.

Amy watched it with her head lying on the table, her cheek pillowed by her right forearm. She'd slept a lot of the night through already, tired with suppressed grief. Her dreams had been filled with sad-eyed angels and choppy waves, the sea in a rainstorm.

Now she stared out at the fallen stars of a city they would leave behind tomorrow and never return to. They expected to be at the address by mid morning. It was surreal to think of the actual amount of time it had been since they left home as only two and a half days.

Amy couldn't think properly. She'd be fine for a few hours and then her stomach would feel like it was falling out of her body and her heart would feel like it had a hole in it the size of a bowling ball. Her daddy was gone.

There haven't been many good songs written about fathers and, even if someone has a great relationship with their dad, it usually comes second to the mother. Not for Amy. Her Daddy and her had been close since she was a little girl; he'd always called her princess. And now he was gone forever.

It was an emotion incapable of articulation. 'Sad', 'angry', 'grieving' are all just words. This was something else. There was no way to make it better in her mind. Everything she looked at reminded her of him. How could she ever look at the ocean and not remember how much her father loved fishing? How could she ever laugh when he was gone? How could she ever cry at anything, if she wasn't still sobbing at this?

But tears always dry eventually. Anger, rage, white-hot fury, still remained, but it was wrapped in cotton, like the grief. After hours of blind agony, Amy began to feel like she could breathe again.

She knew it would be a lot longer before she was done mourning, but she hoped that was the worst over perhaps.

Part of her felt guilty, for being able to smile a little when Jordan made her hot chocolate. Her Daddy had meant so, so much to her, how could she

forget so fast?

But Amy wasn't forgetting. She never would. She'd remember when he bought her a Rainbow Brite doll for her eighth birthday. She'd remember the dollhouse he built her. She'd remember the time he waited with her outside a concert for hours because she wanted to meet the band. She'd remember fighting over her outfits, wheedling for more money. They had fought and argued and had a wonderful friendship between them. And now he was gone forever.

Amy wondered how anyone could survive, missing someone this much.

Outside the motel room, it began to rain again. Heavy torrential summer rain, not the violent chilly winds of the earlier storm.

Amy looked out numbly. Then she pushed her chair back from where she was sitting at the table, the metal legs making a coarse scraping sound on the brittle linoleum, and walked out the door onto the balcony.

Jordan watched as she tipped her head up towards the gray sky, heavy droplets falling onto her cheeks, washing away tearstains.

He was afraid the drops would bruise her soft arms, stretched out either side. She stood like that for almost ten minutes, unmoving.

Inside her head the memories swirled, but under the beat of raindrops it was hard to hold onto the ache that came with them. The memories softened into sepia, sweet images of a time that was gone.

The water seeped into her purple silk dress, turning the thin fabric translucent and sticking it to her skin, following the curves Amy had never shed from her baby fat.

Jordan swallowed, his tongue feeling thick. She was so beautiful, fragile and strong all at the same time. He wished he could stop her hurting.

When she came back in she shook her head to dislodge the water in her hair and smiled at Jordan, a bittersweet smile.

"Can we keep going? I'll drive if you want to sleep." Amy offered. "I don't think I can stay here."

Out in the rain, the cold rock of a motionless angel held out her hands, in case any more stars fell tonight.

The road whipped underneath the tires, wet and darkly slick with rain that had preceded them. It was one, perhaps two in the morning by now, the highway lonely in a way that has nothing to do with lack of company.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Jordan asked, watching the road from the passenger seat. He hated letting her drive, not because she wasn't very good at it, but because he felt like there were some things that a guy should do for a girl. He didn't want to be some shitty little man when he got older like his

Dad had been.

Amy sighed, not a theatrical sigh but a real sigh, which is much rarer.

“Love. My parents. Yours didn’t split up, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t have eventually. They just didn’t get the chance. I don’t know anyone whose parents are together. I’m not sure love’s real at all.”

“You’re thinking about all that? And you say you’re not smart?” Jordan put his hand on her thigh, rubbing the denim of her jeans, not sexually but reassuringly. Amy put her hand over his, her skin cool against the top of his wrist.

“But I think I love you. And then I think, so what? I wanna punch out two kids with him? What does that prove? I want a house with a garden and a dog and I want him to go drinking every Friday night and come home and beat me up, then take me out to McDonalds every Saturday lunchtime to make up for it?”

Amy’s voice was rising, Jordan had seen her like this before. She got impassioned about things sometimes, he’d always loved it. Caring wasn’t a common trait in beautiful teenage girls. “I want to screw around with my kid’s math tutor and move in with my cousin when my husband catches me out? Love isn’t worth it.”

“You think that’s what love is?” Jordan asked. Amy shrugged, sinking lower down into her seat, so she could barely see over the wheel. “Because I don’t.”

“Ok, what’s love to you?” she asked finally.

“Love.... Well, love’s when I always look to find you when I go out. Love’s when you’re the one I want to tell any news to, when I honestly don’t mind missing a party to stay home with you. Love is when I think of you before I think of me.” Jordan looked over. A look of quiet happiness broke the sad expression Jordan had been upset to see on Amy’s face since her father’s death. “Love is working the shit out. Saying that we can overcome anything to be together.”

“Damn you and your perfect answers,” Amy said softly. Jordan smiled, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. “Not even romantic movies have a guy like you in them, Jordy.”

That was the moment Amy decided she was ready to lose her virginity. She told him at the motel that he forced her to stop at, when he thought she was too exhausted to drive any further despite her protests. Jordan looked surprised, since people in mourning aren’t supposed to have that sort of thing top in their minds, but Amy explained that she couldn’t pretend she was still a little girl anymore. Her childhood was over.

She looked so sad after she said that, so naturally Jordan kissed her frown away as hard as he could.

Jordan had never looked more beautiful to Amy. That was the only surprising thing. Amy found it almost strange to think about the concept of losing her virginity—she'd hardly been an innocent; it was hardly as life changing to the same extent as, say, getting a drastic new haircut. But he looked wonderful, the sweet expression on his face as his back arched, skin beaded with sweat.

It occurred to Amy that, technically, Jordan was losing his virginity too, except that it wasn't a term she'd heard used about boys or men. She wondered why that was. Maybe because girls were supposed to have something to lose—a hymen, an innocence, a purity. Maybe it was generally assumed that by the time a guy had sex, he'd already lost his innocence to something else. Amy thought that everyone she knew over the age of twelve had lost their innocence one way or another, virgin or not.

Putting it off until she was ready took away some of the symbolism too—the actual act was more an afterthought, although, she was willing to concede, a nice afterthought, since she'd reached the point in her life where it was something she wanted to happen.

It was good to know what all the fuss was about, anyway.

“Well,” Amy said finally, when they were lying together in a tangle. Jordan smiled softly and kissed the end of her nose. Amy smiled back. “It was nice.”

They fell asleep, exhausted and content.

Amy woke up in the early hours of the morning, before the world was awake but after the sun had slid up into the sky, like a slippery bar of golden soap that will always slither between your fingertips.

She rummaged through her suitcase for something that wasn't too rumpled, settling finally on a dress that was positively crushed, but that still looked ok.

As she was putting on her eyeliner, Amy could see Jordan in the little mirror she'd propped against the kitchen counter, walking up behind her. He slipped an arm around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“Morning.” His voice was sleepy. It was a nice sound to hear early in the morning.

“Mmmm.... Morning.” Amy rested her own head against Jordan's. “Can I put some eyeliner on you?”

“Sure, why not?” Jordan shrugged, closing his eyes dutifully. Amy drew the thick black pencil across the lid, careful not to injure the thin skin.

It didn't seem like very much, but Amy was struck once again by how scary love could be. Jordan trusted her enough to let her do this, because he trusted her enough to let her do anything.

Amy put the pencil down, only one of his eyes rimmed in the black makeup. Jordan opened his eyes quizzically and Amy grabbed him into a feverish kiss.

Amy didn't need him, this was something different. Of course she needed him, but she always needed him. He was her Jordy. But this was a different feeling altogether. She *wanted* him.

Responding to this kiss, Jordan pressed Amy up against the low countertop that ran the edges of the kitchen area. It cut a line into her just above the small of her back. She ignored it.

The kisses got deeper. They'd made out like this before, of course, but never before had Amy felt this urgency. This burning.

Just as Amy was thinking of the heat inside her as a burning, Jordan's arm accidentally knocked over the cup of coffee she'd made earlier and left to cool while she finished dressing. The scalding water flooded over the countertop, which still retained a chill from the night. Amy stepped away from beside it before her dress could get wet. They both laughed.

"I think we should move away from the boiling water and the knives and everything," Jordan suggested, but Amy merely recaptured his lips. Any further protest died somewhere between Jordan's mind and his mouth, both of which were otherwise occupied.

There were no contemplations on the nature of virginity this time around. Amy felt like a bratty little child—she knew what she wanted, and dammit, she was going to get it.

Amy's hip touched the edge of the counter again, the spilt water soaking through. It had cooled a lot in just a few minutes, and Amy couldn't care less if her dress got wet. She'd find something else to wear.

The kisses went on and on, a war of the best kind. Amy's hip bumped the wet countertop once again. "Perhaps you have a point. Bed?" Amy asked Jordan, hating to have to speak at all when there were much better things she could be doing with her mouth.

"Mmmhhmmm." Jordan hummed the affirmative and they made their way out of the kitchen. The little mirror, having been bumped several times and had water seeping around it, slipped off its perch propped against the wall and fell onto the floor, where it shattered.

"Seven years bad luck," Amy said with a sigh. Jordan shook his head, pointing down to his foot, where a pindot of blood was welling up from a nick sustained from a splinter of the glass.

"Nope. If the mirror draws blood, it's only seven days."

"Oh, good," Amy said absentmindedly, going back to kissing.

Jordan and Amy found the edge of the bed, and then their reality became like the mirror that had just fallen—fragmented and glittering and beautiful.

Kisses are a curious thing. Christ was betrayed with one.

Romeo sealed his lips, and his fate, with one. It has become a mark of innocence, perhaps an innocence out of place in the modern world, to say you are sweet sixteen and have never had one. And the deadly bite of a vampire is almost always compared to the swirling, melting, warm wet slippery thing that is a kiss.

Kisses, kisses of love at least, not ones of betrayal or suicide or undead bloodlust, are the most perfect thing in the world. They are perfect because they are insubstantial and useless. Because they create nothing, achieve nothing, symbolise everything.

There are more kinds of love than there are stars reflected in the ocean. Not all of them are pain-free, in fact no real love is free from pain. Affection can be, but love and affection are not the same thing at all. They can exist at the same time in the same people, and do so quite often, but each is capable of thriving without the other. Affection is a nice feeling, but nice is such a colorless word it can mean almost anything. Love isn't nice. Or pretty.

Love, like a kiss, is more curious than anything else. It can strike when it is nothing but inconvenient, is often nowhere to be found when needed. Love isn't nice or pretty because these are just wisps of smoke in the air. Love is stunning and destructive and world-shaking and beautiful and overwhelming and magnificent and heartbreakingly sweet, fragile and strong as diamonds, darkly pure.

Love is the feeling in your hand as it rests against the sleeping flesh of a lover, the ache of knowing the perfection under your fingertips and being separate from it, feeling the organic insubstantiality of somebody more important in your life than yourself.

Love is a kick against the inside of a mother's stomach, a creature made entirely of this magical thing.

Love is the knowledge that without this single constant you are nothing. Without this man with messy hair and the most honest smiles in the world, or without this little girl with cinnamon skin, or without this faith in human nature, you will not be able to draw breath again.

Love is the force that cracks your suffocated lips open again in the moment of total loss, and breathes life back in despite the thorns coating your thoughts and heart. Love opens wounds, time turns them into scars. Time is always seeking to destroy love, yet never succeeds where love truly exists.

The Bible offers the suggestion that, perhaps, God is Love. This, when mulled over, rings true, because love is anger and sadness and grief and pain and joy and promise and life and hope. People who play God never do a convincing job in the role, because people cannot control love. It controls them.

And love is never nice.

PART TWO

It was a building to match the mood of the morning. Amy and Jordan felt alive and happy, but the weather was flat and humorless. Amy decided her daily description for this was ‘Cypress’, after a teacher she’d once had, the personification of overcast skies, unseasonal cold winds, damp air and a constant threat of a downpour.

Mr. Cypress would have been right at him at the Lindsay Care Hospice. It was made of gray cinderblocks, the moisture in the air making the large bricks radiate cold.

“Care Hospice?” Amy mused. “Isn’t that where terminal patients go to die in peace? Maybe this is the wrong place.”

It certainly didn’t look like a facility for the nursing of sick children. But it was the right address, so Jordan climbed out of the car. They both had a bounce in their steps. Jordan had a Band-Aid on his finger from picking up broken glass.

“All we can do is ask,” he pointed out. Amy reached for her door handle, then paused.

A strong feeling in the pit of her stomach was telling her not to go near the building *under any circumstance*.

Amy didn’t believe in premonitions, but it was an unsettling feeling nonetheless.

“Is it ok with you if I wait here?” she asked Jordan apologetically. “Just until you check if he’s here. Come get me as soon as you’ve talked to the receptionist or whatever.”

He nodded. “Sure. I’ll be back in a flash.”

Amy smiled at the hokey term and watched Jordan as he walked up the short path to the door. The building was a little way out of the town; it would have been possible to walk there in an hour.

Amy still couldn’t imagine that anyone would come here by choice. It didn’t exactly give out a welcoming vibe. Squat and broad, it was a blot on an already depressing landscape.

Amy hummed to herself as she waited for Jordan to return, examining her face in the rearview mirror.

Rachel had told her that she could spot someone who’d had sex at first sight. Amy wondered if she looked any different now. She didn’t feel different, although it struck her that there had only been a few events in her life that she had consciously known were shaping her—the rest had just altered her a little without her realising. Perhaps she was different. Perhaps the whole notion was a crock.

A pimple was forming on her chin, just a little red bump now, but one had held the promise of a full blown zit in a week. Amy sighed and resisted

the urge to fiddle with it. She knew it would do more harm than good. Her hair needed a little maintenance. Amy was very bad at remembering to dye her roots. A few millimetres of blonde at the base of the black locks gave the impression that she had a very wide part.

Apart from these irritating imperfections, Amy decided she was basically happy with her looks, something she'd never been able to honestly claim when she was younger. Amy had always known she was pretty, but had felt like a stranger in her own skin.

Now, Amy knew she was attractive, if a little outlandish, and she felt comfortable. A deep hatred for the word *pretty* remained.

Looking down at her watch, Amy was alarmed to see she'd been indulging in vain teenage musings for nearly an hour. Where was Jordan?

Biting her lip, Amy looked over again at the care hospice. She'd been afraid to go near it herself, why hadn't she warned Jordan?

She knew he wouldn't have paid any attention to her 'bad feeling' anyway. And thinking about this *wasn't helping anything!*

Knowing that she was getting worked up, Amy stopped and took a few deep breaths, closing her eyes and trying to think clearly.

Thinking clearly is not the easiest thing to do when you're in the situation Amy was in, so she found the task difficult. After thirty seconds of terrified panic, Amy shifted over to the driver's seat and sped back into the town, biting her lip until blood stung the tip of her tongue.

Amy sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress cutting into her thighs at the edge of the not-so-springy springs. She thought she might be in shock. She didn't feel like she could move, that was for sure. Only she knew she had to move.

But where?

Amy didn't know what was going on, just that she wasn't happy with it.

Inability to function at all left her frozen, staring at the bedside table blankly. She couldn't process any of it, just stare. There was a black telephone, the old rotary kind, the receiver in its cradle looking heavy and menacing. A glass of water, with a perfect purple lipstick print on the rim. Amy had put that there herself the night before, when she'd woken up with a dry throat.

Her car keys, which she'd dropped there in a daze before sitting down for this quiet breakdown.

Whatever was going on, Amy wasn't ready.

"Where are we going, and why am I in this hand basket?" Amy murmured, quoting a phrase that Patrick was often heard to say.

Patrick. Charlotte. She could call them. They could help her.

Amy rejected the idea almost before it occurred to her. She couldn't pull them into something that for all she knew could be life threatening. This was one war she'd have to fight on her own.

Like all the bravest soldiers, Amy lay down on the bed and sobbed.

Later, when she'd gotten her composure back, Amy weighed up the options. She could charge back out to the hospice, storm in, and demand an explanation. And possibly get killed in the process.

She could report it to the police. Report what exactly? And how did she know she could trust the police?

She could call someone for help. Who? There was nobody she trusted enough that wasn't also someone she wanted to protect from trouble.

Amy's throat hurt from crying for so long. Lifting the lipstick stained glass to her mouth, Amy spluttered and spat the water back into the cup. Dust had settled during the night into the drink and made it taste vile.

Amy put the glass back down abruptly, spilling some of the dry, dusty water over her keys and the telephone. The keyring tinkled as she shook the droplets off it, before attempting to salvage the phone.

It wasn't very wet, a fine film of oily grease on the handset prevented the water from clinging. The motel phone number was scrawled in white-out under the dial.

Something about the number was familiar, but the knowledge was just slightly off Amy's mental plane, like a dream you can almost remember.

Staring at it, a worry crease appeared between Amy's eyebrows, one line of pensive thought.

Like a blurred image coming into focus, everything became clear all at once. Well, not everything, but Amy still half-expected a light bulb to switch on over her head. She knew where she'd seen the number before, or one like it anyway.

Scrabbling in her bag, Amy found the slip of paper she'd written the address on. Under it was a phone number, the woman who'd written to the Internet message forum.

Looking from the piece of paper to the telephone, Amy's suspicions were confirmed. It was the same local area code. The person was in the neighborhood.

Amy suddenly felt like she'd drunk four cups of coffee on an empty stomach, jittery and nervous and in a fluster. She still didn't know what anything meant, but at least she'd found a corner to start the jigsaw in.

Amy dialed the number, listening to the ringtone with a breath she was almost afraid to hold. Putting her hopes on this wasn't smart; even in shock Amy knew that. It might be nothing, or she could end up dying the horrible, painful, conspiracy-ridden death she'd been fearing.

The moment of silence before the answering machine was enough to

make Amy feel doubly worse. Now she'd have to work out what she actually wanted to say, and still be cagey enough to satisfy her paranoia.

"Hi. Could you call me on 92-70-3634, extension four? It's important."

Amy put the phone back down and sat. She couldn't sleep, but knew concentrating on a book or anything else would be a futile exercise. Until the person she'd called called her back, there was nothing to do but wait.

So she waited.

It took Amy two rings before she worked out what the shrill interruption of her nervous silence was.

The sun had gone for the night, but she hadn't turned on any lights. In the darkness, the phone seemed impossible to locate.

Amy's palm was slick as she lifted it to her ear. "Hello?" her voice sounded rusty, rough and dry. She hadn't refilled her glass of water, instead enduring the thirst that at least distracted her a little.

"Hello?" a woman replied. The voice sounded like a European femme fatale, but faded, like someone who has lived in a country for many, many years. Amy had no idea what to say next, so she just trusted her throat to spill out the right words.

"Do you know what the Lindsay Care Hospice is?" Amy decided to go with the easiest route. Whether the woman was who she had claimed to be on the Internet or not, she would know about the hospice.

"Well, yes, I work there." The voice's tone was exhausted exasperation. "Who is this?"

Amy paused for a beat, then shrugged. It couldn't get her into any worse a predicament than she was already in.

"My name's Amy. My boyfriend Jordan's little brother is a patient there and today we went to visit him..." Amy trailed off, angry with herself for babbling and dreading the response.

"Oh you poor thing." The tone changed to one of sympathy. It was the voice little children hope will come hug them when they scream in the night. A voice that made everything better. "You must have been so scared and confused."

Amy swallowed back tears. "Yes."

"I should introduce myself. My name's Shellyanne Richardson, and I was at the hospice today when your boyfriend came in. We had no idea there was anybody with him, otherwise we would have come out and explained what was going on."

"What's happened to Jordan?" Amy pressed. If something had happened to him, Amy didn't know if she could cope. So much of her was a part of him.

“He’s fine.” Shellyanne soothed. “You poor thing, I can’t imagine what awful things you’ve been imagining all day.”

Normally Amy would have been annoyed at the mildly patronising tone, but it was so true, and Shellyanne’s concern seemed genuine.

“I just want to know what’s going on,” she said helplessly.

“Well, the Lindsay Care Hospice—usually we just call it the hospice—is a medical facility set up for children with Lander’s Syndrome. You know what that is, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” Amy hummed the affirmative. “Jordan’s brother has it.”

“Well, Jordan has it too. He suffered an allergic reaction to the air inside the hospice and was unconscious before he could tell us that there was somebody else waiting.”

“Is he all right?” Amy got worried again. This was so surreal, this didn’t happen outside the dumber kind of spy movies.

“He’s perfectly ok, Amy,” Shellyanne assured her. “I can take you over there first thing tomorrow morning so you can see with your own eyes. The air that gave him the reaction will make him even better than he was before, once his body adjusts.”

Amy didn’t know where to steer the conversation next. She was so tired, so worn out. A lump in her throat made it hard to speak, tears forming in her eyes and blurring the darkened view she had of her motel room. She was confused in a way she’d never felt before.

“Amy?” Shellyanne asked when she’d been quiet for half a minute. “Are you ok?”

“What time can you pick me up in the morning?” she managed to say finally.

“Is nine all right?” Shellyanne suggested. “There’s an old bookstore in town that I have to drop some things off at anyway. Meet me there?”

“Ok.” Amy couldn’t reply any more than that; it was difficult to speak while she was so confused and exhausted.

“He’s *fine*,” Shellyanne repeated. “Ok? Trust me.”

“Ok.” Amy was far too worn out to do anything else.

The weather was still getting colder. The morning felt icy on Amy’s nightmare-sweat soaked skin. She couldn’t believe how long ago the summer of just a few days before felt.

Getting dressed, Amy pulled one of Jordan’s t-shirts over her head. His smell made her feel better and worse at the same time.

She was glad they’d gotten her a coat. She shrugged down low into its scant warmth.

This wasn't butterflies in the stomach. This was a huge angry nervous frog crouching above her liver. Amy thought she was going to throw up.

Stumbling into the bathroom, Amy was shocked to see how wasted she looked. Dreams of fear and loneliness that didn't go away when she opened her eyes had made for a restless night. Dark shadows bruised her eyelids.

It was seven in the morning. Two hours of nerve-wracking... no, *soul*-wracking impatience before anything could happen. Amy paced. Back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back.

At seven-fifteen Amy left the motel, walking into the town, each time her foot connected with the pebbled ground the worry became more deeply ingrained in her.

Two helicopters chopped the air up violently, whipping Amy's hair about as they roared overhead. She watched them diminish into the distance. Was Jordan in one of them? Would she ever see him again?

It was seven-thirty-eight and Amy was almost insane with worry. What possible reason did she have to trust this Shellyanne person, to believe her? She got into town and paced there too, until eight-oh-nine when the coffee shop opened late. She sat and stared at nothing while her worry screamed inside her until the boy behind the counter told her she had to buy something if she wanted to stay.

Back out on the street at eight-twenty-five Amy decided she couldn't kill any more time in this mental state, so she walked down to the secondhand bookstore and settled down to wait on the footpath.

An old man shuffling by at a quarter to nine muttered 'guttersnipe' at her but Amy was too anxious to do anything more than give him the finger in reply.

Shellyanne hadn't arrived by nine-fifteen and Amy couldn't handle waiting any longer. She walked six blocks until she found a payphone, then four more until she found one that actually worked.

There was no answer at the number Amy had used the night before, not even a machine. Amy swore, slamming the phone back in its cradle with such force the booth shook. Despite her worry, Amy was too exhausted from lack of sleep to walk back very fast. It was nine-thirty-three by the time she got back to the bookstore.

Amy didn't know what exactly the voice from the phone led her to expect, but it wasn't this.

Shellyanne wasn't tall so much as willowy, a fairy-queen figure to go with long wavy auburn hair and eyes that turned down at the outer corners. The face of Mother Nature... post-worldwide desecration of the earth.

Her looks made her clothes seem incongruous, a gray skirt and pink shirt, a look sometimes called 'power casual'. To Amy it had always been called 'too much of that stupid evil pale pink', but she thought it looked all

right on Shellyanne. Also detracting from the Queen Mab look was the thought Amy couldn't help having that the queen of the fey folk probably didn't smoke Lucky Strikes. Shellyanne was tapping one hand with the box of cigarettes, looking around. She caught sight of Amy and walked over, replacing the cigarettes in her bag.

"Amy?" she asked. Her voice didn't fit with the face or the clothes, the accent was a little less pronounced than it had sounded on the phone, but still noticeable.

"Would Jordan's girlfriend look any different?" Amy liked to make jokes when she met people. First impressions were important, this one especially so. "Should I call you Ms. Richardson or Shellyanne?"

"It's Doctor Richardson, and call me Shelly," she replied with a friendly smile. "Ready to go?"

"So what's the deal?" Amy wriggled in her seat. The car was stinkingly hot; she missed the rattling air conditioner of her and Jordan's old contraption. This was a neat, personality-free bubble of plastic and metal. Shelly obviously liked her car to feel like a microwave inside, because she made no move to turn the air on. Amy was surprised that the car could feel so hot after the chill in the air outside. "This some super-evil government thing? Oh wait, I knew that bit." She scowled over at Shelly.

"It's not evil."

Amy interrupted her with a sarcastic snort. Shelly ignored her. Any instant liking Amy had had for the doctor over the phone the night before was replaced by panicked animosity. A night of bad dreams and paranoia will do that to a person. "We're a hospice to care for children with Lander's Syndrome. You know that. And a medical research facility. The manufacture of medicines, treatments, things like that."

"Well maybe you can help my dad out. He's suffering from being shot in the neck," Amy spat back, putting her feet up on the dashboard. Shelly's politeness and calm was rubbing her completely the wrong way, annoying her to the point of dangerous rudeness.

"What?" Shelly turned the steering wheel over as she rounded a corner. She drove like a stunt actor from a car chase scene.

"Oh yeah, like I'm going to believe you didn't do it," Amy scoffed.

"We didn't." Shelly shook her head. "We don't kill people."

"You know what? I could almost believe you, if I didn't think it was a lie."

"You talk a lot, you know that?" Shelly asked, checking the rearview mirror. There wasn't much traffic in this area but the drivers were insane.

“No I don’t.” Amy looked out the window. “It’s a pretty clean coincidence that my dad got killed just after all this started, isn’t it?”

“We had no idea that you and Jordan even existed. How exactly could we have killed your Dad?” Shelly asked. “Really, be sensible.”

Amy snorted at that one. “Me? I need to be sensible? That’s rich. So if you’re not some evil government thing, what the hell are you?”

“Do you talk to everyone this way or are you treating me extra nice?” Shelly asked, undaunted by Amy’s attitude. “You’re just lucky there’s not going to be anyone else there today, if you got off on the wrong foot with everyone it would make visiting Jordan harder for you.”

“Did you shoot them all too?” Amy asked, hoping her voice wasn’t so hostile that Shelly wouldn’t let her see Jordan.

“No, I did not shoot them all,” Shelly said, winding her window down and lighting a cigarette. “I’ve never owned a gun in my life. Did you see those helicopters go by this morning?” Amy nodded. “Well, they had the rest of the staff onboard. There was an accident at another hospice and they needed help over there. I, of course, got babysitting duty.”

There was a parking lot at the back of the hospice that Amy hadn’t noticed the day before. Twelve spaces, two filled with sleek, expensive, forgettable cars. She was momentarily terrified that the car’s owners would storm out and shoot her before she could ever see Jordan again, but then remembered what Shelly had said about the helicopters and her being the only person there.

“Oh, watch your step.” Shelly warned too late as Amy’s sneaker connected with a low rise in the concrete. The stubbed toe inside the shoe throbbed with fiery pain. Amy bit her tongue and bore it.

The air conditioning was actually warmer than the chill outside, and the dull, menacing exterior hid what was actually a fairly pleasant ground floor. A framed print of a seascape was on the wall above two couches, the oil paint waves frozen forever in static crashes, the sky above them dark. It reminded Amy of the view from her window during storms. Flecks of white paint were seagulls, buffeted forevermore by an imaginary wind, their cries silent under the soundless roar of the brushed-on ocean.

Amy began to cough. The tickle in her throat burst out, making her whole body shake under the force of the spasms. After a few seconds it passed as abruptly as it had come.

“That’s why we didn’t come out to get you from the car yesterday,” Shelly explained. Amy noticed the woman was holding a small inhaler in her hand, obviously having just prevented a coughing fit of her own with it. Amy was momentarily annoyed that Shelly had let her go through even that brief second of pain so that she could make a point, instead of letting her use the inhaler too.

“When people with Lander’s Syndrome come in here they cough so badly we have to sedate them to stop it. Their metabolisms need time to adjust—so do ours, but as you can see it only takes us a few seconds instead of a few hours. Jordan was sedated, so we had no idea you were out there waiting.”

Amy nodded, letting her annoyance slip away like the pain still shooting from her bruised toes. There were more important things afoot. Or along as the case may be, with the coughing.

Amy hated her brain. It would come up with the worst puns at the most deadly serious moments.

Shelly was walking over to a set of burnished aluminium doors. They looked like they belonged on a science fiction film set. She slipped an access card down a slot to the right of the doorway and the silver doors slid back quietly.

Amy had been to children’s wards before. They always had pictures of red balloons and things like that, as if one spot of bright color could make up for all the gray. The blank, flat, dead gray.

She was almost right too. The balloon was green.

“Jordan’s still sedated, but you can still see him, check that he’s all right,” Shelly said with a smile, walking swiftly down the hall. Amy’s original liking for her returned slowly.

This was how it happened; the grown up telling her slightly patronising things to reassure her. Life was going back to normal. The nightmare that had begun when she called her home a few days before was drawing to a close. They crossed a room strewn with toys—just like her cousins’ playroom back home—and entered a room that opened off it. There were several other doors around the walls of the play area.

The feeling of security increased when Amy saw Jordan again. All her fears for him—the sweat-soaked dreams of the night before, the rhythmic terror of the helicopters above her only hours before—fell away. The room he slept in was bright and airy, like a vision from one of Amy’s future-stories. The sky outside was a bright blue, no sign of the rain and cold that hovered as a promise and a threat. Jordan’s hair was a dark tangle on the clean white pillow, his face relaxed in sleep. Amy had always known Jordan to sleep fitfully, with his eyebrows knotting and lines creasing his brow as he dreamed. If his face had been completely smooth she would have been afraid and distrusting once more, but a telltale twitch of his eyebrow let her know that this was her Jordan, nothing bad had been done to him. She leant over and kissed his forehead.

“Hey baby,” she whispered. Shelly smiled at the small display of affection.

“He should wake up in an hour or two. If you want to hang around until then, we can leave him unmedicated for a while, but in general he’ll have to stay under for a few days. His body needs time to recover from the air in the lobby.”

“Why is the air like that anyway?” Amy asked, rubbing her neck in memory. Her eyes didn’t leave Jordan’s face. She didn’t ever want to stop looking again, seeing him after so much worry was like rain in a drought.

“A side-effect of the monitoring apparatus we use to keep check on the kid’s health. They’re pretty terrible machines, really,” Shelly said with a resigned sigh. “They even combust on occasion. That’s what happened at the sister hospice, where the helicopters were going.”

Amy looked back down at Jordan. “So he’ll be ok?”

“Oh yes, this is completely temporary,” Shelly assured her, being cut off on the last word by a shout.

“Shelly! Come look at me!” a childish voice called. Shelly rolled her eyes and opened the door, beckoning Amy to come with her.

“You can meet the other kids.” Shelly offered. They crossed the main playroom to one of the doors on the far side. In this room, which was laid out in the same way Jordan’s was, a little girl of nine or ten was upside down on the desk chair, her hair touching the floor lightly. Shelly bent down and turned her head a little, looking into the girl’s face with a sunny smile.

“Well aren’t you a little monkey today? I guess you’re feeling better, then?”

“Yup.” The girl nodded, still upside down, then looked at Amy. “Who’s she?”

“This is Amy. She’s Jordan’s friend,” Shelly explained. “Amy, this is Jenny.”

“Hi.” The girl waved, the releasing of one hand unbalancing her position on the chair and sending her tumbling onto the floor. She bounced back up with the resilience only children have.

“Did you bring me a present, Shelly?” Jenny asked, putting her hands on her hips. Shelly smiled and held up her empty palms for inspection.

“Little monkeys don’t play with toys,” she told Jenny. The girl looked at Shelly with a smirk.

“No, really, what’d you get me? I told you that I’d only let you leave us if you brought me something back.”

“Good thing I have this then.” Shelly reached into her pocket and pulled out a sheet of shiny stickers. Jenny’s eyes lit up at the sight. “You have to give half to Brighton though, ok?”

“Ok.” Jenny nodded in quick agreement, eager to get to the prize. “He

“Ok.” Sarah seemed satisfied.

“Brighton’s got the chicken pox. Jenny can visit him because she’s had it already, but Sarah hasn’t.” She ruffled the little girl’s springy hair.

“Where do you keep the Lander’s kids when they’re sick?” Amy asked. This was like something out of a movie.

“There’s another set of rooms on the other side of the building,” Shelly explained, obviously happy to answer questions. This place was so unmenacing it nearly made Amy laugh with relief. “The kids are kept in quarantine when they’re ill. Otherwise we’d have epidemics.”

“But you said he recognised Jordan yesterday,” Amy said. She wasn’t looking for holes in the story; her mistrust was nearly dissipated completely. Just trying to make sense of it in her mind.

“He recovered two days ago. We had to induce a relapse because the treatment we’d tried on him left him with the sniffles, and we wanted to see if we could get rid of that side effect.”

“Wow.” Amy smiled at Sarah and then at Shelly. “Sounds like a pretty cool area of work. Doesn’t Brighton mind getting the chicken pox again? All that itching. Yick.” Amy shivered, making Sarah giggle.

Amy smiled at her again. The world seemed pretty great at that second. She couldn’t wait until Jordan woke up.

“Shelly always gives us presents when we get sick,” Sarah said, removing her thumb from her mouth momentarily. “Last time I got a dolly with pretty hair. Wanna see her?”

Amy nodded. “I’d love to see your dolly. Why don’t you get her and show me?”

Shelly let Sarah back down onto the floor where the little girl scampered off.

“I wish I’d had a doctor like you when I was a kid.” Amy said to Shelly. “I’d have liked to get toys whenever I was sick... Oh, I’m sorry about this morning.” Her voice was sheepish.

Shelly shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. You were scared. I’m just glad you seemed satisfied with our treatment of your boyfriend.”

They smiled at each other and Amy got the feeling she’d made a friend for life. It was odd; she’d noticed it on the phone the day before. Shelly was just instantly connected to Amy.

Amy had felt it with a few people in her life, individuals that she’d had an instant rapport with. Jordan was one, and Charlotte. And Amy Winton, the waitress from three towns ago—although, Amy thought ruefully, that hadn’t exactly ended well. But there were just some people she could talk to right away. The other person always felt it too.

After Amy had oohed and ahed at Sarah's doll, Shelly had shown her a page of a medical book detailing Lander's Syndrome.

Amy read it through twice, absorbing the clinical language. She understood it fine—dropout or not, she wasn't stupid—but there was something strange about reading about it in such bloodless terms when she could hear Sarah singing softly to her doll in the playroom.

Amy was sitting in Jordan's room again, wanting to be there when he woke up. She looked back down at the words.

Lander's Syndrome :

Common name for peri-cardiovascular hyper allergy, also known as PCVHA. Named for David and Regina Lander, first known sufferers of the condition. Occurs when fetal growth of protective tissue around the heart and lungs is impeded by chromosomal abnormality, leading to a severely weakened immune system.

Recessive genes for Lander's Syndrome are found in an estimated 72% of the general population, with a higher occurrence in areas situated close to the ocean. Incidents of full-blown Lander's Syndrome are less than 1/1000th of this figure however, as spontaneous miscarriage of affected pregnancies is common. Abortion of Lander's Syndrome fetuses is highly recommended as childbirth leads to maternal death in over two thirds of the documented cases. Infant mortality is equally high, with the death rate reaching 100% of Lander's Syndrome sufferers by age 15. Secondary conditions such as anemia or muscular dystrophy are most often the cause of death, or childhood illnesses such as measles or chicken pox. Unofficial records of treatments show that some patients lived to almost 17 but these may be a case of mis-diagnosis of a similar condition.

Lander's Syndrome itself is not a fatal condition. Isolation measures can prolong the lifespan of afflicted persons but unlike other hyper-allergy illnesses the treatment cannot offer indefinite sanctuary, as conditions such as leukemia and other cancers are also highly common in the typical case of Lander's Syndrome.

"Wow." Amy said after reading it for the second time. "I don't know what else to say."

Shelly shrugged, as if there wasn't anything that could be said anyway.

"You and Jordan were driving down for Brighton's birthday, weren't you?" she asked. Amy nodded.

"Yeah."

“Well you’re welcome to hang at the hospice as much as you want. You’ll have to sign in properly tomorrow, though. I bent the rules a little because no one else was around,” Shelly said with a smile. Amy smiled back. It had been a very smiley day.

“Ow.”

They both turned as Jordan sat up in bed groggily. “Did anyone get the number of that truck that ran me over?” he asked them.

Amy flew to his side, grabbing him and squeezing him tight until he made a strangled noise in protest. “Hey, Jordy,” she said, slackening her grip only minimally. “How are you feeling?”

“A little dizzy,” he admitted. “I hate to be predictable, but I gotta ask: where the hell am I?”

Shelly was jotting notes on a medical pad sitting on the desk. She smiled at Jordan, walking over and extending her hand.

“Hi Jordan. I’m Doctor Shellyanne Richardson. You’re in the Lindsay Care Hospice, and your body suffered an allergic reaction to several chemicals in the air. We had to sedate you so that you could heal up.”

Jordan shook Shelly’s hand and slid his feet down off the side of the bed slowly. Amy noticed that Jordan was dressed in the same thing Jenny and Sarah had been, loose, practical pants and a shirt with Velcro fasteners up the back. It was practical except for the color, which was a crisp white, totally inappropriate for anything but convalescence.

Amy quite liked white clothes. Liked every color of clothes, although she nearly always wore black, her wardrobe carried one thing or another of nearly every shade known to fabric. Every shade but pink, anyway. Purple, she would wear, and light red. But never, ever pink. Amy had a loathing for pink. White she was fine with, even if the dormant voice of domesticity pointed out the ease with which white can turn scummy with just a few spills and stains.

As Jordan stood up, he started coughing for a few seconds. Amy rubbed his back until the spasms passed. Jordan held his stomach.

“Erg. I feel like shit, ‘scuse the language,” he commented.

“You’ll feel all right in a few days,” Shelly assured him. “Would you like something to eat?”

Jordan nodded. “Yes. I’m starving.”

Brighton was allowed out of quarantine in the afternoon, rejoining the group without the contagious virus or the sick stomach. Amy was surprised at how familiar the boy looked—he was ten now, not six, and she hadn’t seen him apart from in pictures for years, but his face was instantly recognisable

to her. He recognised her too.

“Hey Amy,” Brighton greeted her with a wave as Jenny and Sarah ran over to greet him.

“Looks like you’ve got a few admirers there,” Jordan said to his little brother. Brighton gave him the finger, which caused Shelly to walk over and give him a gentle smack on the head.

“That’s no way to greet your brother after four years. Honestly,” she cast her eyes heavenward, speaking now to Amy and Jordan. “You try and teach them manners...”

“Sorry.” Brighton grinned at Jordan. “I said hello properly yesterday but I guess you don’t remember.”

“BriBri.” Sarah was pulling on his arm impatiently. “You gotta come see my game. Barbie and Ken got kidnapped by ghosts and pirates!”

“Ghosts AND pirates? Wow, sounds like they’re in trouble.”

“Nope.” Sarah shook her head. “Barbie killed em all with a laser. But now she’s gotta find the dolphin princess to help her save Ken. Come play with me.”

“Aw, Sarah,” Brighton whined. “I wanna talk to my brother. Jenny can play with you, girls like Barbies.”

“Hey!” Jenny objected, punching Brighton on the arm. “Not all girls like Barbies.”

“I’ll play,” Amy offered. “C’mon Sarah.” She held out a hand. “Now explain to me again how the dolphin princess can help Ken?”

Bedtime in the ‘ward’—Amy didn’t know what exactly to call it except the children’s section, since it wasn’t a ward, nor a dormitory, but more like a wing of the building. Bedtime was an interesting experience.

Jenny and Brighton went without too much protest, arguing about who would have cooler dreams, the thin walls of their bedrooms allowing them to continue the fight once they were in bed. Sarah was more of a problem: she wanted Shelly to read her a story, then once the story was over, she wanted to hear it again. And again. As Amy and Jordan watched, Shelly seemed endlessly patient with the little girl. Finally, Sarah asked for a goodnight kiss and settled down. Shelly came back out and joined them.

“Jordan, you have to be sedated again. Your body will enter the second stage of metabolic adjustment in a few hours. I can bring Amy back tomorrow before you wake up.”

Since there didn’t seem to be much choice in the matter, the two of them agreed to Shelly’s plan.

“Can you drive me back to the motel?” Amy asked, keeping her voice low. She knew there wasn’t any reason to, Jordan was out like a light. Amy wondered where that expression had come from.

“Sure.” Shelly nodded, flicking the light in the playroom off so that the entire collection of rooms was plunged into blackness, save for a soft glow under Sarah’s door, the outward sign of a tiny nightlight, protecting a little girl from the dark. “I’d get my ass kicked if anyone knew I’m leaving them alone for the second time today, but they all seem all right and the night nurses won’t be on for an hour or two. Enough time for me to run you home and get back.”

“Thanks.” Amy smiled. She was exhausted and looking forward to sleep, but something was niggling at the back of her head. She hoped it would become clear to her soon so Shelly could answer any questions it raised.

Relief, Amy decided as the car moved quietly from golden puddle to golden puddle, the streetlights shining down on the rain-slicked streets, was the nicest feeling in the world. A swimming pool in summer, a painkiller in a headache. No other feeling matched the one where you woke up terrified and discovered that everything was just fine.

Just fine... the words brought back the niggle in the back of Amy’s head. She remembered how *wrong* it had felt when she and Jordan first saw the hospice the day before.

With a chill, she realised the pothole in the entire day. Shelly had mentioned that Amy was welcome to come back and forth, had explained that Jordan needed to be kept sedated until he recovered.

Had never said anything about when he could leave.

Keeping her paranoia to herself, Amy watched the road as they drew closer into the town.

“So you checked every school in the state to find these kids?” Amy asked, sitting on the edge of her bed.

She’d invited Shelly in, keeping up her outward appearance of sunny relief. It wasn’t that difficult. Amy found that whatever evil scheme she’d stumbled on, there was still an honest liking for Shelly in her. And maybe it was nothing. She’d wait and see.

“No, just the ones in high-likelihood areas, like Brighton’s. The rest of the times, we’d follow the patterns of the condition.”

Amy looked quizzical. Shelly explained. “The Lander’s children who

survive birth have certain traits that we can look for. A lot of illnesses in childhood—98% of positive individuals die before age seven from normal viruses like colds or the flu. The illnesses taper off as the kids get older; that's why it's important to find them so young, before the immune system compensates for its deficiencies. If we check large urban hospitals we can get hundreds of names of likely sufferers."

"But you've only found four." Amy's feeling of dancing on the edge of something dangerous was growing. Why find the kids before their immune systems strengthened naturally?

Shelly shook her head. "Over the years I've been here, which is ten, there have been close to a hundred and fifty subjects. I think the overall total for the country is about five hundred."

Amy looked astounded. "Whoa. I can't believe this. So this place is supposed to be a place where they can grow up healthy, until their bodies get strong?"

Shelly wasn't about to walk into the trap she could see Amy mentally constructing. Moral ambiguities were something she'd lived with every day for a decade, and their language was one she knew how to speak.

"Kids with Lander's don't grow up." Shelly's voice was gentle, imparting a sad truth. "If they don't catch a cold and die from that, then they have a secondary condition like asthma or epilepsy and that gets them. You read the paragraph in that book I showed you."

Shelly kept her gaze steady on Amy's eyes. Where logic isn't on your side, confidence can sometimes win you the fight.

This time it didn't, Amy was too aware of the holes in the argument.

"Jordan's still alive. He grew up. And he's *not sick!* So why in God's name have you been trying to convince me that he'd be better off... and, if that were, true then why would you have to sedate him?" Amy was getting angrier.

Then her expression changed.

All the propaganda bullshit she'd swallowed all day—playing with little kids, reading textbooks, waiting for Jordan to wake up only to see how sick he was—it had all just been a big advertisement for not interfering.

"You don't believe it any more than I do," Amy said slowly, the penny dropping in her mind. "All that stuff about helping the kids—you know it's a lie as well. If it were true you wouldn't be holding Jordan there."

"We have government approval for the forced holding of subjects," Shelly said, trying to keep her voice calm against Amy's fury.

"For God's sake, it's bullshit and we both know it. The hospice just runs to test disease cures on the kids—you don't give a damn about prolonging their lives or any of that shit." Amy spat the last word out like a bad taste in her mouth, glaring at Shelly.

“You’re wrong.” Shelly sighed, rubbing her eyes.

“No. No I’m not,” Amy laughed, shaking her head. “I can’t believe I was almost suckered in! This is just like those experiments the Nazis did on poor little Jewish kids.”

“It isn’t like that at all. I love those children like they were my own. And even if it were true -”

Amy turned her back, her shoulders shaking. “I’m not listening. You can’t turn this into the right thing to do. Five hundred kids...” she trailed off, her voice fading to a shocked whisper.

“Have you ever been sick, Amy? *Really* sick?” Shelly’s eyes were narrowed, her cheeks flushing. So much for staying calm. “Pneumonia? Anything like that? Polio?” Amy shook her head. “That’s because we have vaccines now. And antibiotics to cure those we can’t prevent. A lot more than 500 kids are still alive because of the hospices.”

Amy whirled back around, her sneaker squeaking slightly on the linoleum flooring. The sound made her think for a second about the canteen that she’d bought her school lunches from as a child. For that moment she was seven again, waiting impatiently in the heat of high summer in a small room with small windows and a large number of other small children. Fifteen cents clutched in her sweaty palm, the price of a fruit ice block.

Then the memory passed, falling back into the dark recesses of things never thought of. Amy glared at Shelly.

“Amy, please think clearly. There’s no reason to get so worked up.” Shelly’s voice was calm and kind. It was always calm and kind.

Amy’s shoulders drooped in defeat and she nodded in compliance with the idea. Then, bunching her fist as tightly as it would go, her nails cutting into her skin, she punched Shelly’s face as hard as she could.

“I learnt how to do that at kickboxing. My shrink’s idea of anger management was teaching me how to punch properly,” Amy said, her voice the sound of ice. Shelly just looked at her dumbfounded, as if she couldn’t believe Amy had really punched her. It made Amy angrier. She punched again, this time Shelly made a small grunting sound and took an instinctive step back. Amy uncurled her aching fingers.

“Are you religious, Amy?” Shelly put her fingertip to the split on her lower lip, a thin trail of blood beginning to work its way down her chin. She didn’t look angry. That made Amy feel lousy.

“No.” She almost felt bad for punching Shelly. Almost.

“Neither am I. So we both believe there’s no God up there, no Karma, right?”

“Yeah...” Amy was really sick of feeling wary of every time she had to answer a question.

“All there is, really, in the universe, is us. There’s no God and the Devil

or Jedi and the Dark Side of the Force. No all-encompassing rulebook that says 'this is good and this is bad'. Just people. People who have to choose to do the right thing themselves, not because it's the Christian thing to do or it's what your government tells you. Because it's right."

"So what's your point?" Amy's hand fidgeted, she kept it hidden behind her back so Shelly wouldn't see the tic and interpret it as nervousness.

"This is the right thing for me to do." Shelly dabbed her lip with the hem of her sleeve and stood up. "If you get caught, I'm not going to help you. I wash my hands of you."

"You're not doing the right thing! You're *the bad guy!*" Amy yelled at her back as she walked off.

"You honestly think anybody casts themselves as the villain?" Shelly called over her shoulder. "In their own minds, everyone's the good guy."

Amy was planning to march back into the hospice the next morning and demand to see Dr Richardson, but that wasn't necessary. Shelly turned up at the motel early in the morning, at eight-thirty. Amy climbed wordlessly into the car and they drove to a local coffee shop.

"So what stuff do you have to show me in your defense?" Amy began to play with the sugar packets on the table, piling them up. "The wonderful medical leaps that make me realise this is all for the betterment of the human condition."

Her eyes didn't meet Shelly's, concentrating on what her hands were doing.

"We've made cheaper vaccines, allowing millions of third world babies to be protected against disease," Shelly said, playing with an unlit cigarette. They were both fidgeting, wanting to distance themselves from the difficult conversation. Their iced coffees arrived, neither touched the one in front of them, the cream slowly melting down the sides as they talked.

"So the things you create in children with Lander's Syndrome work in normal people?" Amy asked. Shelly nodded.

"In final form, the inoculations work equally well in positive and negative subjects."

"I just said that, only in normal people language," Amy pointed out. "So why not just use condemned criminals?"

Shelly looked surprised at Amy's suggestion. Amy stared up in exasperation.

"I know it's unethical, but isn't it. . . . less unethical, than what you're doing?"

Shelly nodded, putting down the unlit Lucky Strike, then picking it up

again.

“Personally, I’d so much rather do that,” she admitted. “But I said in final form, they work equally well. Until then, the ‘Lander’s kids’ as you called them, are far better to work on. Their immune systems are more receptive. We tried to replicate it in other people...” Shelly’s voice was quiet and her eyes slid away from Amy’s. “But it didn’t work.”

“What—“ Amy started, then stopped abruptly, her eyes widening. “No. You can’t mean that.”

“I was trying to save kids like Jordan,” Shelly pleaded. “I wanted to help them.”

Amy shook her head. “I can’t deal with this.” she pushed her chair back and stood up. Her leg wouldn’t stop shaking violently. Shelly stood up too.

They left the café, full iced coffees still melting on the table. Amy tried to walk away from her then turned around.

“You care about the kids? Really care about them?”

Shelly looked at her steadily, not replying vocally, her eyes saying all that was needed. It was the answer Amy was looking for.

Amy was not the type to seek comforting often. When she did come to Jordan, it was because the hurt inside her was so bad she couldn’t even breathe around it. That happened even less often than might be expected. Jordan loved to protect her, but never felt it was enough.

She was always there for him—the number of times Jordan had woken up from a fever-nap to find Amy had stopped by the house to check on him when he was sick, or the instances where she’d listened to him bitch about his parents for hours on end. But Amy tried not to need Jordan in return at all.

He could remember the first time she had, though. They’d been going out almost a year and a half, Amy had been suspended from school for the fourth time in as many months. Remembering, Jordan realised it was the last time she was suspended before she just left school altogether.

He stops by her house in the early evening, seeking any excuse to get away from Debra even for half an hour. Planning to pick Amy up and then go over Patrick’s for a while, Jordan arrives at the beach house to find that Amy’s Dad is out late again. The building is unlit save for Amy’s bedroom window, which shows a faint blue-green glow, the tinted bulb Charlotte had made for her.

Amy never locks her front door when she is home alone, dismissing Jordan's concern with flippant remarks like 'if a rapist really wanted to get me, he'd break a window'. Jordan pushes the weather-beaten wooden door in, hearing the hinges squeak with seawater rust.

Sitting on her bed, Amy looks up as Jordan comes in. The floor is littered with half-unpacked boxes. The room is still at that stage where she hasn't lived in it long enough to really claim it as her own space, but trinkets of her identity are strewn across every surface. An open packet of ladyshave razors sits on the chest of drawers next to the bed.

"Hey, Jordy," Amy greets him, like she always greets him, pulling her skirt straight over her legs. It is a pretty skirt, a dark velvet material cut like a thirties evening gown, with a long split up the side. As she moves a little the split falls open, exposing her legs.

Jordan only gets a second's glance but he knows what is there anyway. Words. Words like scum and virus and demon and whore. Ugly words, carved in ugly lines that weep with ugly trickles of teenage blood. Jordan looks up from her unhappy ankles to her face, where Amy is trying to smile. The smile falls in on itself and she begins to sob.

Jordan sits on the bed next to her and just sits, with his arms around her, rocking her. He doesn't need to hear about the day she's had, with her father shouting at her for getting in trouble again, or the lonely morning sitting in this room by herself. He doesn't need to hear about the mail man coming at eleven thirty, and mentioning in the casual conversation which Amy had begun to break the quiet for a little while that her mother was pregnant by her new lover. Jordan doesn't need to hear the feeling that news had given her. He just holds her while she cries, thankful that he'd come over before she'd taken out any more grief on her own skin.

Now, he had the chance to do it again. While Amy cried, Jordan made small comforting noises and stroked her hair. She made some self-depreciating remark about this was stupid, him comforting her when he was the one who needed the help. Jordan didn't reply, just kept stroking her hair. Amy hadn't yet mourned properly for her father, shoving it back further down into her 'to do' pile of things to think about. Jordan held her as she cried, tears her body needed to release.

Amy hadn't yet given herself a chance to think fully about the situation she was currently caught in, so Jordan held her as her thoughts arranged themselves into something like an opinion. All he could do was hold her, protect her as she sobbed. He hoped it was enough, at least for now.

“I always said I’d be a Marxist. You know?” Amy was still sitting on the end of Jordan’s bed, Shelly had given them some time alone together when they’d gotten to the hospice. Jordan was too sedated to try and make any getaway, and Shelly knew that Amy was still trying to work out what to think.

“I can’t say I do,” Shelly admitted, sitting on the edge of the desk. She was surprised that Amy was even speaking to her, and Jordan was regarding her without any kind of malice at all, considering what Shelly represented in his future.

She thought that might be the sedative at work, although from what she’d seen of Amy’s personality Shelly would have put money on any boyfriend of the girl being pretty easygoing.

“The whole being more important than the individual,” Amy explained, the second idea being almost as vague as the first, but Shelly understood.

“I guess it gets easier when you’ve been here for years,” she said to Shelly, who shook her head.

“Never easier.”

“Jordan’s over the age of eighteen,” Amy pointed out. “You can’t keep him here against his will.”

“The government says we can.” Shelly felt nervous having this conversation, nervous at the surreality of the situation. Amy wasn’t getting angry or upset, just sitting on the end of the bed, almost as docile as Jordan, who was lying propped against pillows. Perhaps Amy’s sobs had sedated her as much as the injection had Jordan.

“You admit you don’t believe in God or Karma. But defying the government, *that* gives you trouble.” Amy raised her eyebrows.

“Jordan.” Shelly turned from Amy to the boy, who really did look like the girl’s half-brother at least. “If you could leave, would you? Leave Brighton here?”

“Dr Richardson, with all due respect and everything, I wouldn’t leave a sick dog here if I knew what was going to be done to it,” Jordan said, not moving from his semi-horizontal posture. The force of the words surprised Shelly. Twenty-four hours ago Amy and Jordan had seemed very happy with the hospice.

All the parents were happy with it at first, Shelly’s treacherous back-brain whispered. It was true. They all oohed and ahed, just as Amy had done. Then the realisation dawned of what the hospice was. It took longer in some; Amy was the quickest to put two and two together out of all the visitors Shelly had seen. But the parents never fought like Amy was fighting.

With sad eyes, the parents kissed their children as hard as they could,

and Shelly could see the pain. Pain of watching your baby grow up ill, the milestones of childhood being marked not by first teeth and first word but by first hospital visit, first specialist's house call. Pain of knowing that this had always been the inevitable conclusion, and the pain of knowing that to buy their children a little extra time the price would be hope. Because once a child was admitted into the Lindsay Care Hospice, they never got discharged.

And the parents understood that. The tests, the monitoring, weren't something they protested. Because all it cost them was their vain, irrational hopes. Which were the hardest things for a parent to relinquish, in the end.

But Amy and Jordan weren't from that world, a world of pain that Shelly understood. A doctor had never drawn Amy aside as Jordan struggled to breathe and given her a little piece of paper with the hospice's number on it. Amy had never looked down at that piece of paper and then back over at Jordan, tears in her eyes, her head moving in a small, sad nod.

Shelly had never been that parent either, but could understand them. Understanding Amy and Jordan wasn't hard either, but it was different.

"We'll have to break all of them out, then," Amy said to Jordan, ignoring Shelly's presence completely. Or maybe not ignoring, just not caring if she heard or not. "Sarah, Jenny, and Brighton. We can take them to my place, no one lives there now."

For a moment, Shelly thought Amy's face was going to collapse into a fresh vale of tears, but the girl remained calm.

Jordan nodded thoughtfully, chewing on his lip. "Am I really a statistical fluke, or does the hospice lie about the natural death rate?" Jordan asked Shelly.

"For one thing, it's not just 'the hospice'." Shelly pointed out, unfolding and re-crossing her arms across her chest. It was disconcerting to discuss this, but it was nice to have someone to talk to who wasn't a child or a passionless doctor.

It was less nice to know that the person you were speaking to regarded you as the enemy.

"We're a fully funded government network of stations. For another, you really are just a statistical fluke. I never even knew it was humanly possible for these kids to reach nineteen until I saw you," Shelly said, hoping they would be able to see that she was being honest.

"Hmmm..." Jordan seemed to ponder over that. Amy was watching his face, waiting to see what conclusion he was drawing. "Aims, I think we gotta hang here a little while. Until I think of a way we can make sure they stay healthy."

"No." Amy shook her head. "They'll give you cancer or something."

"Escape isn't as easy as just walking out the door, you know." Shelly glanced up at the clock. Nearly time to give Jordan another sedative. The

eager young medical intern that still existed some where inside Shelly balked at the idea, wanting to help this gothed out Romeo and Juliet on their quest for freedom, but the more powerful part of Shelly, the part that had grown up and watched children in so much pain they didn't remember their names, dumped a bucket of water on her internal flame. "The only way a Lander's Syndrome sufferer gets out of here is if they have a time of death written down somewhere."

Shelly had to leave the hospice early, because she had to do a lot of paperwork she'd left at home. Amy hitched a ride back to the motel again, because that was so much easier than trekking the hour's walk back to the town. When they got to the parking lot, Amy thought of something.

"Can I give you Jordan's walkman? He'd probably like to have it."

"You'll see him as soon as I will," Shelly pointed out. "Unless you don't want to come back to the hospice with me tomorrow."

"Of course I do!" Amy exclaimed. "What else am I gonna do, sit here? I wasn't thinking, that's all. I'm overtired."

"Not sleeping well?" Shelly was sympathetic.

Amy nodded. "Yeah. Hey, do you wanna come up anyway? You can see the horrible conditions I'm enduring until I can vanquish the evil Lindsay Care Hospice."

Her voice was light, but they both knew how deadly serious she was being. Shelly admired Amy for her strength of will, but felt sorry that the girl would have to learn the harshest lesson of life—there isn't a way to outwit the inevitable.

The motel room was much neater than any of the other ones Amy and Jordan had stayed in on the trip. A midnight cleaning frenzy by Amy had kept the nightmares at bay for a little while.

Amy's suitcase was open on the bed. Shelly could tell it was Amy's by the jumble of velvet and satin and denim. Another suitcase, presumably Jordan's, was sitting closed on the floor beside the kitchen counter. A few shards of broken mirror were piled carefully on the sink.

Amy sat on the bed, looking around.

"I'll give you the tour... there, that's the tour."

Shelly smiled and sat on the broad windowsill. "I was here the other day, you know. It's a lot cleaner now."

Amy didn't answer, reaching into the suitcase in front of her and drawing out a rectangular object.

"What's that?" Shelly asked.

Amy's fingers traced over the smooth lid of the music box, the wood

worn to satin from age and care.

“This was my mother’s jewellery case,” Amy explained. “When she was twelve. Her aunt gave it to her. But after a while my mother decided she was too old for it and gave it back. My great-aunt left it to me when she died.”

“It’s very pretty,” Shelly volunteered, knowing Amy wasn’t really telling her about the music box, just bouncing thoughts in her direction.

“I hate my mother.” There was no malice behind Amy’s words. She was just speaking quietly, her fingertips still resting on the smooth wood. “Her daddy used to hurt her, when she was a child. I feel sorry that it happened to her, but I still hate her. Being hurt young doesn’t excuse then wrongs she did to her own child. She abandoned me when I was sixteen years old. So I can cry for Jill Sanders who was abused by her father, but it doesn’t make me forgive Jillian Marsden for being a soulless bitch. We don’t excuse good deeds with ‘of course he won a Nobel Prize, his parents loved him’. So why should a painful childhood be a scapegoat for evil?”

“You think about good and evil a lot?” Shelly asked. Amy aimed a half-glare, half-nod at her.

“Yeah, for some reason I’ve been dwelling on them lately.”

Her voice softened as she turned her attention back to the music box. “This is my special keepsake place. I put things in it that I want to keep safe.” The interior of the box held three movie ticket stubs with particular memories attached, a lock of blonde hair she’d snipped off before the first time she used black dye, her father’s wedding ring that he had thrown away after his wife left, a tiny Mickey mouse figurine Charlotte had given her, and a business card from the music store Patrick’s uncle had let them all work at the Christmas before. Plus her remaining money. “I often wished I could put Jordan in there. Keep him safe. He’s like a puppy that gets kicked all the time. It’s probably deeply nuts to feel this maternal about my boyfriend, but I do. I just want to keep him safe.” Amy closed her eyes with a sigh. “I still can’t believe all this is happening.”

“What are the movie tickets from?” Shelly queried. She wasn’t in any great hurry to rehash the same old moral ambiguities and personal dilemmas. They had God knows how long ahead of them for that.

“They’re all for *Citizen Kane*.” Amy ducked her head a little as if she was embarrassed. “It was showing at a local classic cinema and I kept going and going. I didn’t start keeping the tickets until after I’d seen it about twenty zillion times.”

Shelly smiled. “Really? That’s sort of cute. Sort of weird in a girl your age, but sort of cute. Is that your favorite movie?”

Amy shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. Do evil mad scientist doctors have a favorite movie?”

Shelly didn't rise to the insult, shrugging one of her own shoulders. "I don't know about them. *My* favorite movie's *Labyrinth*."

"Yeah, I love that one too," Amy admitted.

"That's where Sarah's name's from," Shelly explained.

Amy raised her eyebrows. "You named her?"

Shelly nodded. "Her mother died in childbirth. Recessive carries of Lander's Syndrome most often do. Since we took her so young, she didn't have a name."

Amy was quiet for a minute, adding the new information to the mental database, as she termed the picture she was attempting to create of the people behind the Lindsay Care Hospice. Some of the puzzle pieces didn't fit well together, this new revelation certainly made for some re-evaluation.

Shelly would have loved to stay and nurture this, but her paperwork called.

"I've got to be heading off," she told Amy regretfully. "I'll pick you up at the same time tomorrow, ok?"

"Sure," Amy said, and Shelly was almost heartbroken to hear how lonely and alone Amy's small reply had been.

Cards. Bright cards, with simple pictures of family scenes, and birds, and green squares that made Amy think for a second of her cousins' house, and simple mathematical formulae. The components of a child's IQ test.

"Ok, Jen, which card comes next in the sequence?" Shelly was sitting in the center of the spread of cards, Jenny opposite her.

"That one." Jenny leant over and grabbed one of the mathematical ones. Shelly nodded with a smile.

"Yes, that's it! You're so smart I should call you Brainiac-Jenny." That made Jenny grin.

"You can go play with Brighton if you like," Shelly told her.

"Thanks Shelly." Jenny ran off.

"What were you doing?" Amy asked.

"An IQ test." Shelly began to gather the cards off the floor.

"I can see that," Amy snapped. "Why?"

"We have to test all the effects drugs have, not just physical ones."

Amy thought about that, then nodded, deciding it made sense. She hesitated for a second, standing in the doorway, then walked over, kneeling next to Shelly.

As Amy began to pick up the cards and sort them, Shelly looked over in surprise.

"Don't think this means anything," Amy warned with a tiny smile.

“We’re still going to get out of here. But I think you’re pretty cool.”

Shelly smiled in return. “You’re not so dorky yourself.”

They picked up the rest of the cards in silence, agreeing to cooperate for at least a little while.

“How’s Jordan this morning?” Shelly asked when they were done, walking down the hall to put the cards back with the other testing equipment. Amy shrugged.

“All right I guess, considering. Is this your office?”

There are some rooms that are like a favorite t-shirt or pair of sneakers. Time softens them until they fit the owner like a second skin. Some rooms are sterile, the living room on the front of a lifestyle magazine, the operating room filled with stainless steel.

Shelly’s office was neither of these. It was merely unused. An impersonal little room to keep papers in. It made Amy disconcerted, because the children’s section was so lively and colorful. It made her wonder if Shelly wasn’t more emotionally involved than Amy gave her credit for—the office stood testament to the natural state of the hospice, as boring and gray as the outside look of the place. But somebody, and Amy was willing to bet on who that somebody was, had bought toys and picture books and paintings of blue balloons for the playroom.

“Whose is that?” Amy asked, gesturing to a little gold crucifix lying on the desk, the thick dust over it showing that it hadn’t been touched for a very, very long time.

“That was Sarah’s mother’s.” Shelly picked up the fine chain, brushing some of the dust off. “I’m keeping it here until she’s old enough to appreciate it.”

“It’s pretty. I don’t believe that stuff, but I think it’s sort of nice,” Amy admitted.

“I hate religion.” Shelly put the little cross back down and sat in the chair behind the desk, which looked comfortable, if very unworn. Amy sat in the chair facing the desk, which she was surprised to find was also comfortable, because regulation chairs in medical offices usually aren’t.

“I remember being five,” Shelly continued. “And being shown a picture of the devil, with red wings and horns and a pitchfork. It didn’t scare me half as much as the pictures of Jesus crucified had. That’s when I decided that religion was a crock.”

“At five?!” Amy shook her head with an expression of amused disbelief. “Yikes.”

“Five-year-olds can think about pretty deep stuff,” Shelly told her. Amy thought about her little cousins, and was about to say she found that very hard to believe, five year olds thought about ugly plastic action figures and red food coloring, but didn’t, realising Shelly had met a lot more five-year-

olds than Amy. They sat in a sad sort of silence for a few minutes.

“I think Lucifer would look like Orson Welles. If the devil existed, I mean,” Amy mused. “Bucket loads of charisma. He would order you to do things and you would hate him, for being so smug, so God dammed sure you would do what he wanted. With all your heart, you despise him. And you still end up doing what he ordered. Because he’s so heartbreakingly wonderful and confident and exasperating.”

Shelly looked at Amy with her head cocked to one side. The girl blinked with infuriated embarrassment.

“What?!”

“There aren’t many people like you left in the world,” Shelly said after a second.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t like me. You’re stressed and afraid and lonely. But your thoughts keep bubbling up and spilling. You can’t stop them. That’s a rare talent nowadays.”

“I’d hardly call it a talent.” Amy drew her knees up to her chest, playing with a shoelace.

“I would.” Shelly didn’t stop looking at Amy. “If the devil looks like Orson Welles, who’s God?”

Amy blushed again. She hated blushing, it was such a babyish, twee thing to do. “Actually, sort of like you.”

“Oh yeah?” Shelly broke into a cynical grin. “How so?”

“Your hair, your figure. That caring earth-mother thing. And by the way, I don’t hate you, I just. . . . I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.” Amy sounded angry, but the anger was directed inwardly, at herself.

“Welcome to being a grownup,” Shelly said.

“I don’t think I like it so much.” Amy put her foot back on the floor. Her father had always told her it was a really uncouth thing to put your foot up on your chair.

“I always liked police TV shows better than the ones in hospitals,” Shelly told her. It occurred to Amy that they both seemed to have an inability to keep their mouths shut. Perhaps it was a way of coping with the surreal. “In the police shows, it was just bad guy does bad thing—good guy catches bad guy—the world is saved. The hospital ones are so much harder, because sometimes good people die, or there are impossible choices that have to be made. I should have become a police officer.”

“No, you had to work here.” Amy shook her head. “Because otherwise the kids wouldn’t have anything.”

The sheets of names went on and on. Shelly had explained that this was the time list—when each child had come to the hospice, and when their stay had ended in death. The list was used as a cross-reference guide. Amy wondered why Shelly had given it to her; all it could do was make Amy’s convictions stronger.

Maybe Shelly wanted Amy’s convictions to be as strong as they could be, while her own were wavering on the opposite side of the issue. Amy didn’t know and she couldn’t be bothered working the real reasons out.

A handful of names were absorbed off the page by Amy’s eyes—Bernard Williams, Layla Wolder, Faith Wotton, Trevor Wunderstein. Faceless names, labels for dead children. Each name in each column on each sheet in the pile was a marker for a life.

Amy thought of all her memories—like the time when she was five, sitting in church, the rain outside so heavy the streetlights were glowing in the morning. The combination of torrential downpour and artificial light had distorted the shadows, throwing the refractions through the stained-glass windows onto the floor in surreal, abstract patterns, patterns five-year-old Amy thought had far more to do with God than whatever the sermon had been about.

Memories like that, a short lifetime’s worth, reduced to a line on a list, for every one here. What right did the workers here have to choose some children as worthy of life and some fit to die? It was playing God.

But if they didn’t play God, who would?

“Amy, come help me paint,” Sarah ordered. Amy looked up from her reading at the girl, who was staring at her with an impatient expression.

“Ok Sarah, what do you wanna paint?” Amy asked, putting the sheet aside and following the little girl over to an easel in the corner.

“I wanna paint a picture of you.”

“Why do you need my help?” Amy unscrewed the lids on a few of the paint pots.

“I need you to pose for the portrait, silly,” Sarah said with a big smile. Amy smiled back, but her heart was breaking. This little girl was someday going to be another name on another list. Nobody would ever know what her smile had looked like, or her scent, that soap-and-shampoo smell that always seems a little different on children. Little things, useless things, that were so important.

Amy pushed the thoughts into the back of her brain and locked a door on them. They weren’t important now. Sarah was healthy, and happy, and

wanted to paint.

“Now stay still,” the little girl ordered her with a very serious expression. Amy did so, keeping her smile to herself. Sarah attacked the paper ferociously, getting black paint everywhere. Amy couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen something so cute.

“There,” Sarah said finally. “Come see.”

Amy was surprised at how accomplished the picture was. Most children as young as Sarah couldn’t create a likeness of anything, paintings of trees and dogs and houses tended to all be the same green-gray blob. This scribble had arms, legs, a black dress and black hair. And a wide red mouth, wobbly, half a smile and half a frown.

“I look sad,” Amy said, looking down at Sarah. “It’s a very good picture, really terrific, but I look so unhappy.”

“That’s how you looked,” Sarah said defensively. “What do you think about, Amy? Shelly looks that way sometimes too. Is it really awful, being a grownup?”

Amy was about to protest that she wasn’t a grownup, but decided she was more interested in Sarah’s mention of Shelly.

“Is Shelly sad when you kids get sick?” Amy suggested. Sarah nodded, unclipping the painting and laying it flat to dry.

“Yuh-huh. Sometimes she cries. Being a grownup looks yukky.”

“You’ll think differently when you’re older,” Amy assured her. “You’ll like being a grownup then.”

“Nope,” Sarah said with a big, mischievous smile. “I’m never gonna grow up. I’m gonna be an angel with pretty wings and a trumpet. Jenny says angels have harps, but I want a trumpet that I can blow and blow and wake everyone in the world up with.”

If Amy’s face had looked unhappy before, it was nothing to now. “Did Shelly tell you that?”

“Nope,” Sarah said again, tidying the painting area until it looked as if she hadn’t used it at all. “Shelly cries when I talk about the trumpet I’m gonna have. I don’t know why. When I’m an angel my tummy’s not gonna hurt, or my head, and it means I’ll never ever be a grownup and look sad like you and Shelly do.”

“Don’t talk about it anymore, ok?” Amy asked, trying to smile, her eyes stinging with the promise of tears.

“Ok.” Sarah hugged Amy’s leg. “I didn’t mean to make you sad. I wanna go play with Jenny now, ok?”

“Sure,” Amy said absently as Sarah scampered off. The little girl seemed so vibrant, so alive. There was something about her so bright, like a light in the middle of the dark.

Amy wondered if it was possible for someone’s heart to break more

than once in one week.

The chill from the day before seemed almost preferable to the morning weather Amy awoke to the next day. The damp of cold had morphed into the humidity of heat—the climate couldn't seem to decide in what season this drama was taking place. The morning's oppressive, sweltering temperature reminded Amy that it was still summer, back in the world she no longer felt a part of.

One week is not a very long time, usually. A week is the space in which the television networks show an order of programs before resetting to repeat in the week after. A week is the amount of minutes and hours in which most people fit five days worth of work or study, two days rest.

A week can sometimes be longer than that, if you are waiting for news of someone missing, or fighting off death, or just trudging through a routine that you despise.

In a week Amy had gone on a road trip, tried karaoke, lost her father, lost her virginity, and now, become embroiled in something so much bigger than her or Jordan that she could hardly contemplate it, much less accept it.

That's a lot to fit in a week. And it wasn't over yet.

Amy looked through her suitcase, searching for something suitable to wear in the heat and finally deciding on a pair of loose red drawstring pants made from light cotton, and a black singlet top with 'fragile' in tiny white letters across the bust.

The bathroom mirror was spotted with rust and a little distorted, but it was the only reflective surface in the motel room since Amy and Jordan had broken the small travel mirror. The short amount of time in which everything had occurred struck Amy again. How could so many weeks, months, years go by with very little happening when all this could fit into just a few days?

Her reflection dissatisfied Amy; the singlet top exposed her upper arms, which in her opinion were hideous. But there wasn't any other option in this heat.

Amy wouldn't have been very surprised by Shelly's apartment. It was a lot like her office, in fact the motel room had more of Amy's personality in it already than Shelly's home had after years of residence. It was just a place for her to put things.

The heat was just as bad here but less noticed. Shelly didn't pay much attention to the weather: inside the hospice the whole year was the same

temperature, so all Shelly's clothes suited that atmosphere. Dressing in the morning didn't require her to pay attention to the heat outside, so she didn't.

What troubled Shelly was far more important than the fluctuating state of the weather. Sarah had burst her appendix during the night, and already secondary infections were racing through her body.

It was a lucky coincidence, really. Sarah had contracted naturally a type of infection they had planned to test her with that week anyway.

The doctors on duty had called Shelly to tell her, but assured her there was no point in coming in until the normal time. That made Shelly wonder. There was no 'normal' time for her -- most weeks, Shelly was at the Lindsay Care Hospice for at least 120 hours. Her apartment looked un-lived in because she barely lived there.

Shelly scribbled on her hand with a ballpoint, a reminder to herself to keep an eye on the other kids. One case of appendicitis could lead to a breakout; Lander's Syndrome seemed to include a deeply empathic immune system.

Another 'lucky' coincidence.

Before she left to collect Amy and drive to the hospice, Shelly transferred a bottle of alcohol from her cupboard to the freezer, so it could cool. It would get her drunker that way.

"If you had told me how many types of rain there could be, I don't think I would have believed you," Amy mused, looking out the window in Jordan's room at the dribbles of hot, lazy rain. The condensation of her breathing on the glass was running in rivulets, an indoor mirror of the trickles outside. "Will it ever stop, you think? When it's cold, it rains. When it's hot, it rains. When the world is ending, it rains."

"The world's not ending, Amy," Jordan said, hugging her tighter. She was sitting on his lap, the two of them perched on the sturdy desk. "No matter what happens, the world isn't going to end."

"It might as well." Amy leaned back against him. "If anything happens to you I don't care if the world ends. I hope it ends then, because anything less than a galaxial explosion will be insufficient to express my grief." She half-turned and smiled at him, a wordless apology for turning her very visceral feelings into hackneyed words.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," Jordan promised her. Persuading Amy that she would still continue to breathe and think and live without Jordan would be a pointless exercise, so he didn't try. He hoped that she'd never have to find the truth in reality. For her sake, and of course for his own. Jordan liked being alive, thank you very much.

“I love you,” Amy said quietly, after they’d watched the rain for a while longer. She didn’t mind the silence, in fact it was her favorite thing in the world, the moments when she and Jordan just sat and existed together, with no need for language between them. But sometimes she liked to make it verbal, too.

Jordan didn’t reply, and Amy was even happier than if he had. He just tightened his grip around her waist a fraction, clinging to her out of adoration and affection and friendship and desire and unhealthy obsession and healthy concern and every other shade of emotion that gets bundled into ‘love’.

The rain drummed down, and inside the little room in a little hospice in a little town, a boy and a girl kissed. They kissed out of love, kissed out of hope for a future they didn’t know if they still had a claim on, kissed to prove to themselves that the world wasn’t ending yet.

“Rain, rain go away,” Jenny chimed in a singsong voice. “Come again some other day.”

“Why do you care if it’s raining?” Brighton asked, trying to pull the head off a doll that looked very worse for wear, possessing only one eye and very little hair, one of the little plastic hands chewed into a pock-marked blob. “We don’t go outside.”

“The rain is sad. I like it better when it’s sunny. Then I pretend we’re going to the beach,” Jenny said, looking up from her coloring book. “Hey! Don’t hurt Max!”

“I don’t see why you called it Max anyway. It’s a girl doll,” Brighton said with disgust, putting down the toy and looking out the window at the lethargic downpour.

“She looks like a Max.” Jenny smoothed the matted locks of brown synthetic hair as best she could.

“Jen, do you miss going outside?” Brighton asked, his voice sounding wistful. “Going to the beach?”

“We couldn’t go today. It’s r-a-i-n-i-n-g,” Jenny sang, dropping her doll onto the cushion she’d been sitting on and skipping around the playroom.

“Yes, but...” Brighton said, exasperated at her refusal to join his mood.

“But what, Bri? Just because Sarah’s really sick and Shelly’s really upset and Amy and Jordan are always going on about getting out of here, you want me to go all sad too?” Jenny stopped skipping, looking at the boy with her hands on her hips. “Sorry, but I’m not gonna do it. I’m in remission, so I’m not really sick like Sarah.” Jenny’s eyes darkened for a moment but she rallied quickly. “According to Doctor Franklin, who I heard talking to a nurse a few weeks ago, I’m too young to cope with grief, so I’m not sad like

Shelly. I like being here with you to play with all day and Shelly to give me toys... I never had toys back home, 'cept for Max. I'm not sad." Jenny shook her head.

Brighton looked at her, trying to decide if she was telling the truth.

"Although." Jenny looked back out the window. "I'd love to see the beach again, just once more."

The vital sign monitor screen showed jagged lines, rhythmic as a heartbeat, uneven as breathing. Shelly couldn't look at it. Those glowing green lines, like lightning bolts in a rough ink scribble of a storm, had nothing to do with the world. They were as disconnected as Amy seemed to believe Shelly was.

She wasn't disconnected. Staring down at the small body on the bed, Shelly had never felt more connected in her life.

Sarah was dying. Shelly had to admit that now. In a way, she'd been dying since she was born. Everyone is dying from the moment they're born. But this wasn't some promise of a far-off fate, this was a matter of hours. At best.

Her body looked like a small brown moth, caught in a spider's web of ventilator tubes, intravenous painkiller lines, EKG monitors, and a plethora of nameless wires going about their oh-soimportant, oh-so-useless functions.

Sarah couldn't speak now. The tube helping her the breathe didn't permit talking around it. So she lay quietly, as she had done for so much of her life, brown eyes blinking every so often. Shelly sat by her, holding the little girl's hand.

It wasn't just that Sarah was young, she really was little, tiny. The pad of Shelly's thumb stroked Sarah's palm. Careworn, pale thumb, Shelly thought, so unlike Sarah's small cinnamon colored hands. Hands that had never tried mummy's nail polish, or worn pretty plastic rings. Sarah's hands were burning with fever.

"I'm sorry Sarah-Bear," Shelly said quietly, still moving her thumb in small stroking motions. She didn't even know if the child could still hear. "I always told myself I was doing something good for the human race. But I'm just selfish. I made choices for you, and for Brighton, and Jenny, and Matilda and Natalie and Ben and Darla and all the other children. Choices no human has a right to make for any other." Shelly was nearly crying now, her thumb still making the small tender movements. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Sarah's little hand moved, shakily, slowly, the sore fingers curling tight around Shelly's thumb and squeezing. Shelly looked up at Sarah's face. The

eyes were staring at her, bright with pain, serious and old beyond her age.

That's when the first tear slipped down Shelly's face. Sarah squeezed again, harder. Shelly understood.

There had been a Lander's syndrome child a few years before. Totally deaf. Due to the nature of the research facility, there hadn't been anyone who understood sign language, and at three years old the boy had only a minimal grasp of it anyway. So for the six months he had been a patient there, Shelly had learnt how to read body language and expressions.

Sarah was lying motionless in the bed, her face blank, but Shelly understood.

Reaching over the bed—*don't do that the spider will catch you in his web*—Shelly turned off the respirator. It wound down with a long hissing sound, leaving an empty quiet.

Sarah squeezed Shelly's thumb one last time, her eyes fluttering closed. Thick eyelashes fanning out over tired bruises under her eyes, little smudges of heartache Shelly wished she could kiss away.

Outside it began to rain. It showered almost constantly in the colder months but not this time of year, usually. Shelly hoped it wouldn't thunder. Sarah was afraid of storms.

As the little girl died, thick dark silence crowded in. A silence Shelly couldn't bear, and couldn't bear to break.

Amy was sensitive enough to say nothing as Shelly drove her home. She'd discovered this week how personal and private grief can be, how important it was to let the mourning person seek comfort when they were ready, and Shelly certainly didn't look ready.

Amy sat on the edge of the balcony, threading her legs between the cheap aluminium railings erected to stop children and overzealous adults tumbling the two stories down and splattering themselves on the gravelly carpark. There were two cars parked there, a mongrel car, the Frankenstein of vehicles, made up of a rainbow of discarded parts. Amy thought it belonged to the man she'd seen walk past her room earlier, he struck her as the type to own a car like that. The other one parked below was Amy's own.

She picked up a small stone from the tiles next to her and threw it down, hearing it click against the windscreen on the driver's side. It was four in the morning. The lights of the motel reception and her room were the only breaks in a sea of darkness, they threw puddles onto the forms of the cars in

the lot. The chrome reflecting up to the sky, dingy beacons to any aliens that felt like dropping in and sampling the undercooked porridge. Amy hadn't even known it was possible to undercook porridge until she'd tried it here.

Amy was afraid to go to sleep. She knew that when her head rested against the pillow her demons would come back. The term had always puzzled her: how could someone really have 'demons'—things inside their head so bad they couldn't face them? Sure, she had been at a stage once upon a time where she'd cut herself with knives, but even then it hadn't been a case of 'demons' or anything. Now she understood all too well.

She threw another pebble onto the roof of her car, hearing the resultant tap. She was exhausted, but didn't want to go inside. Amy had to see the dawn.

It wasn't the first time she'd felt like that. Sometimes at home she'd stayed on the Internet all night until the sun came up—it was just something she had to do. Now, she had the need for it again. There would be no sleep until the sun had risen.

No thoughts of Jordan or her father or Shelly or anything else clouded Amy's mind. They were things that belonged to the morning, and it was yet to arrive. They were things that would whisper to her if she tried to sleep. For a moment the image of a computer screen flashed across her mind—a police file, of a killer yet to be caught. Had he killed her Daddy? Would she ever know? It didn't matter right now. She wouldn't think of it.

Amy wondered what it would feel like to slash her wrists.

Maybe with one of those circular things they use to cut pizza—run it up her arm and watch the thin ribbon of red well up after a few seconds. Flowing across her skin in a flood, washing everything away. Or maybe she could use a bent paperclip, the skin puckering and tearing unevenly, stinging and turning red as she broke through the flesh.

Slitting her wrists would give the demons free reign over her thoughts for those last minutes—or perhaps even an eternity with them, unable to escape their whispered truths. She felt as if she was drowning. Ophelia had drowned, hadn't she? Suicide would be an escape right now for Amy. A secret passage away from all this. But wouldn't it take more courage to swim for the surface and breathe in again, to turn away from salvation and keep fighting?

And she couldn't kill herself. Because Jordan needed her to be alive. So did Brighton, and Jenny, and Shelly, perhaps Shelly most of all. Amy would stay alive. It seemed a hard choice. How much harder would it be to die for people you didn't know?

It was a case of apples and oranges—on one hand, the children with Lander's should live, to grow up and do good things, and on the other, they should die here so other children could grow up and do good things. Amy

thought it sounded a pretty revolting decision to have to make. No-one, not even Shelly, who liked to think she was, was equipped to make it. Amy knew she couldn't.

So she sat, and threw pebbles down into the dark, until the sun came up.

Shelly's fingers weren't strong enough to turn the thin metal cap of the heavy glass bottle. The friction hurt her, turning the skin of her palm angry red. She sighed, pulling the cuff of her shirt down for added leverage. The bottle top moved grudgingly.

"Vodka. Vodka is my friend," Shelly muttered, pouring the clear fluid into a glass. She didn't stop the flow until the cup was nearly filled. Her friend Grace had been the one who used to say that. Vodka hadn't been Grace's friend, it had left her alone at the bottom of a pit with a long way to climb up. Shelly and Grace hadn't spoken in a long time. Shelly hoped that Grace hadn't fallen back down.

The glass of vodka remained untouched as the stars moved slowly across the sky, while she waited for sunrise. She sat, motionless, Lucky Strike after Lucky Strike crumbling to ash between her fingers, never touching her lips. There was a tremor in her hand, just a slight one. It had been there for years. So had the scars on her wrists.

These weren't scars like Amy's. There was no teenage angst, no vague depression. These were the marks of someone who wanted to die, and fast, and knew the way to achieve that.

Shelly had sewed and dressed the wounds herself. It was as if she'd let herself commit suicide by slashing the veins, then gotten on with the job of life, with everything good inside her, everything soft and pure, gone with her 'death'. It made getting up in the morning easier.

Shelly could remember exactly why it had happened. Danielle had been such a darling, sweet child. Big almond eyes, smooth dark skin. Like a little doll. Danielle had been the first Lander's child Shelly had seen die. They had learnt a lot about leukemia, but that hadn't been a consolation. Shelly had wanted to die, for taking this little girl's life, for justifying her actions to herself. So she'd cut her wrists and tried to bleed out the pain, her soul, and then stitched the wounds and typed up her findings.

Sarah had looked so much like Danielle. Shelly could remember the first time Sarah smiled, the first time she had walked. 'Shelly' had been her first word. 'Needle' had been the second.

Sarah had meant the world to Shelly, the cliché holding a universe of truths. The other doctors had known that; she hadn't been allowed to work at all on the last few case studies involving the girl. Just watch, like a mother whose child is in hospital. But unlike a mother, Shelly had known there

would be no happy ending here. She'd known she'd never hold Sarah again.

Another cigarette fell to ash. Shelly looked at it. She was only thirty-eight. Old enough to know so much, young enough to have done so little. She'd wanted to work in an emergency room. Save people's lives.

Shelly focused her eyes on the large plate glass window facing her from the other side of the table she was seated at. A ghostlike reflection of herself, stars winking through the image like priceless freckles, stared back from the shadows of the night outside. She wondered if that idealistic young medical student would have recognised the face.

Shelly's eyes took in the vodka in front of her. She'd forgotten it was there. Bringing it to her lips, she swallowed quickly, grateful for the burn in her throat. That sensation would start a placebo numbing of her brain even before the alcohol reached her bloodstream.

The half-empty glass made a loud clicking sound as it reconnected with the tabletop, a little of the liquor sloshing out onto the wood. It reminded Shelly of the candy she'd loved when she was little. There had been the bright green jellies, like some of the melon liqueurs she'd had a taste for in high school. There had been the creamy milk bottle lollies, like the super-trendy alcoholic coffee that she'd loved in college. There had been basic jellybeans, the beer of hot summer afternoons with friends. But Shelly's favorite lolly as a little girl had always been the colorless sherbet, the super-sweet candy that had more sugar than any other. The vodka in front of her.

They'd always let the kids have as much painkiller as they needed, once the needed information had been collected. Shelly had often pondered why none of them became morphine addicts.

Well, this vodka was her God damn painkiller. It was like the razor scars on Amy's wrists. A way to take your mind off the hurt, away from the agony.

No matter how much vodka Shelly drank, the ache was still in exactly the same place.

The lights were off in Jordan's room. It should have been totally dark—that shade where your eyes cease to function, as if your head was submerged in thick fluid (it isn't just called pitch black for the color). But a crack of green had seeped through the bottom of the door. Just enough to see the darkness by.

Jordan felt like an unwilling Jesus. He was being forced to die to save other people. It didn't matter how much the doctors talked about natural life expectancies and prolonged lifespans within the hospice, Jordan certainly hadn't felt like he was dying in his normal way of life and he knew that none

of the Lander's kids ever left alive.

If someone had asked Jordan if he was willing to die for his country, he would have laughed at them. He was no patriot. If he'd had any say in this, instead of being imprisoned against his will, what would he have done? Was he willing to die, not for his country, but for humanity? To help other people for generations to come?

Jordan thought about his personal experiences with the human race. The jocks that'd beaten him up at high school, would he die to save them? Or women like Amy's mother, all desiccated and loveless inside?

But he wasn't here for them anyway. This place was just a big potential, no specifics. It had to be a leap of faith, because the children who were being saved could never be the ones in the hospice.

The kids who would benefit from the research could grow up to be doctors and teachers and leaders. Or killers and rapists and dictators. There was no reason to assume that they were worth saving, or that they would be good people. The same could be said for Jenny and Brighton. No one would know what they could have been, good or bad. There was no easy answer. Perhaps no answer at all.

It was the age-old paradox, wasn't it? Jordan wanted the research to happen, for cures to be found. But a little cry in the back of his mind repeated the thoughts had by any soldier at the front lines, any civilian caught in a disaster, anyone told they have a terminal illness. Jesus himself had probably screamed this silently to himself as they hammered the nails in.

"This can't happen to me. I can't die like this. I'm not a bad person."

Jordan and the other children with the syndrome weren't bad people. Neither were the doctors performing the tests, or people in hospitals all over the world praying for a cure. Perhaps they weren't good people either. But that alone didn't mean that they should die.

And the little voice inside, the only thing that's always honest, the part of everyone that's sometimes called a conscience, the only person who will ever know if you cheat at solitaire, kept screaming. What it screamed was the thought that everyone has in the end. The unshakeable foundation of what it is to be human—flawed, selfish, desperate. Jordan somehow knew that even Jesus would have heard a little voice saying this inside. He hated himself for thinking it, for not being noble enough to die bravely, but it was still there, and is in everyone.

"Dear God, don't let this happen to me or to anyone I love."

Out of all the people waiting for morning that night, Jordan was the only one who cried.

“This week has seen Jordan coming to join our group, and Sarah leaving us.” Shelly said, her hand knotted together as in prayer. They were all sitting around the table, and for once Amy didn’t have the feeling of waves in her stomach. For the first time since the whole surreal business at the hospice started, she felt as if it could all wait. The world had to stop until everyone had recovered from this.

“And I think we would all agree that Jordan’s time here has been exciting so far.” Shelly looked over for a moment at Amy, speaking without words of the girl’s refusal to just lie down and go along with everything. There was no emotion in the gaze; the woman’s eyes were dead and bruised with sleepless shadows. “It made us all feel something, good or bad.”

Got that right, Amy would have thought at any other time. Made some of us feel bad, or angry, or confused. She didn’t think it now, because she felt dead too.

“But we have no right to feel anything for this. Because this isn’t about us, our grief would be selfish. Sarah can’t feel our loss of her. So any tears we shed would not be for her, but for ourselves. It would be wrong.”

That was all Shelly said. Jordan, sitting next to Amy, thought that it sounded like a piece of propaganda. Teaching children not to be selfish even after they had lost what was basically a sister. The notion carried with it the scent of self-sacrifice, the expendability of the individual for the greater good. Not that he needed to find specific examples of that sentiment in the Lindsay Care Hospice.

He looked down at his hands. No matter what Shelly tried to make them feel, he mourned the little girl. He’d only known her a short amount of time, but she had seemed very beautiful on the inside and out, and he regretted never having the chance to know her.

Jenny’s thumb moved up to her mouth as Shelly continued to sit silently. Brighton rubbed Jenny’s back and hugged her with one arm.

“It’s ok Jenny-Monkey. It’s ok,” he said quietly. Jordan could see that they were both substituting Jennifer in Sarah’s place, just until their childish hearts could grasp the loss. Jenny was playing the role of a much younger child as best she could, and Brighton was helping.

Jordan’s heart ached, and he had the feeling that Amy and Shelly’s did too. Partly for Sarah, whom it was impossible not to mourn, and partly for the children left behind that missed her more than they could understand.

Later that morning, Jenny and Brighton were playing on the game console hooked up to the television, and from what Amy could see Jenny was winning by a large margin. She sat down next to them, staring at the

flickering screen for a second. It gave her a headache, which she thought was odd considering how much time she spent in front of the computer.

“Hey, guys, can I talk to you for a sec?” Amy asked them.

Jenny nodded, hit one of the buttons once, and smiled in satisfaction as Brighton died a gory death. The boy howled in mock fury.

“What’s up?” Jenny asked, picking up a doll from where it sat next to her on the floor and brushing its hair. Amy thought it was the one Sarah had shown her on the first day.

“Does it make you sad when your friends here die?” Amy asked. Jenny looked at her skeptically. Brighton was tidying the game up, but Amy could tell he was listening.

“Amy, we’re ten, not four,” Jenny said. Amy loved the way the girl pronounced her name, giving the two syllables inflection so it sounded like Ai-me, a singsong name.

“Ok, sorry.” Amy smiled. “But does it?”

Jenny twisted the doll’s blonde hair around her small fingers, looking down at it.

“Yeah,” she said quietly with a shrug. “course it does.”

“Isn’t it lonely here? Don’t you miss your families?”

“My mother writes a lot,” Jenny said, looking back up with a smile. Amy was glad she’d changed the subject, it had been insensitive of her to ask about the Lander’s children that had died. “She visited once. I gave her a tooth that had fallen out. She showed me pictures of my brother. He was a little baby when I came here, but now he’s bigger.”

“So your mother has been here?” Amy looked surprised. She’d never entertained the notion that the parents could know what was going on.

“Debra comes every single month,” Brighton piped up, looking at them.

“Why didn’t she ever say anything?” Jordan asked when Amy retold the story later.

“Because she knew this would happen,” Amy suggested, sitting on the end of Jordan’s bed, her knees drawn up to her chest.

That was her favorite way to sit, as if she could make herself smaller and smaller and hide from the world. “Debra would have guessed you had it too, God knows you were in hospital often enough. If you knew, you’d rush here like a knight in shining armor. She was trying to protect you.”

“Never would of thought she had it in her,” Jordan said, looking as surprised as Amy felt. “I guess you can never really know people, know what they’ll do.”

“I thought I knew Shelly, even though I only met her a few days ago,” Amy admitted. “I don’t think I do, though.”

The day was only half over and already Shelly felt like she was run to the point of collapse. She'd not slept at all the night before, waiting for morning, so this was her thirty-second hour awake in a row. When Shelly had last slept, Sarah had been alive. She felt like resting would mark some end point, so long as she stayed awake it hadn't really happened, there wasn't the finality she would feel when she woke up.

Shelly knew this was crazy thinking, but also knew that crazy thinking was the only kind left to her right now.

She was sitting in the waiting room, looking at the painting of the ocean hanging on the wall. Sarah would have loved the beach; the little girl would have been fearless of even the biggest wave. Nothing in the world had ever scared her. Nothing in the world had ever had the chance to scare her.

Shelly turned as the aluminium doors leading to the kid's wing opened and Amy came out. She'd been in there all morning; Shelly had heard the murmurs of conversation drifting out when she went nearer to the walls.

"What, no attempt to break them out this time?" Shelly attempted to snap, although the wetness on her cheeks and the catch in her voice made the attempt a little pointless.

Amy shook her head. "No. It can wait."

"There isn't always going to be a tomorrow, you know." Shelly looked back at the painting. Inside, she was screaming. If Amy had tried to smuggle the kids out at that moment, Shelly would have let her. There was nothing to fight for anymore.

Amy put her hand to her stomach, wincing. Shelly noticed the movement out of the corner of her eye.

"Hey, are you ok?"

"Yeah." Amy nodded, wincing again and bending a little. "Just a stomach ache."

"You're not pregnant, are you? Because the atmosphere changes in here that cause the coughing will make you miscarry if you are."

"No." Amy shook her head. "I'm not pregnant. Ow, fuck." She closed her eyes against the pain.

"Are you sure?" Shelly looked doubtful and ran her key card through the reader, opening the doors again and ushering Amy back into the playroom.

The pain stopped. Amy breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm not pregnant," Amy repeated. "It's something else."

Shelly shrugged and led Amy over to one of the huge cushions that served as places to sit.

"Well, you wait here and I'm just getting my test kit, ok? Even if you're not, it's something wrong."

Shelly walked as fast as she could make her lead-heavy legs move, which wasn't very. The bright cushions and childish prints just looked like shades of gray to her—dead, broken gray. She hoped Amy wasn't pregnant. What right did any life have to ever flourish again?

“You're very lucky.” Shelly told Amy, looking at the readouts on the small handheld scanner she was passing over Amy's torso.

“What is it?” the girl queried, leaning over to see the screen.

“You're lucky you didn't miscarry. Lander's Syndrome pregnancies are very unstable, the stomach spasms from the metabolic changes was almost enough to terminate it.”

“Uh, I'm not pregnant.” Amy shook her head.

“Uh, yes you are.” Shelly replied, showing her the large positive sign on the small readout screen.

“Pregnant,” Amy breathed, testing the word on her lips. “My baby. Jordan's baby.” A smile spread across her face as she decided they were words she liked hearing.

“You have to stay here,” Shelly said, standing up. “You can move in with Jordan if you like, or have a room of your own.”

“Fuck off.” Amy stood up too. “You can't keep me here. You have no power over me, I don't have the syndrome.”

“We do over the child.” Shelly pointed out. “It does.”

Amy searched the doctor's face for any vestiges of the kind woman that sometimes existed there. But all she saw was a very tired person who was heartless with grief.

“Shelly,” Amy said quietly. “You don't want to do this. Let me go.”

“Security.” Shelly walked over to the intercom and pushed the speech button down. “We need a sedative in the playroom.”

Shelly was so tired. She breathed in again, dragging the smoke out of the cigarette and down into her lungs, hoping the gray screen of nicotine cloud could hide her away from her thoughts.

In one second she'd been ready to let Amy take the kids away, the next second she'd locked the girl herself in this nightmare of right and wrong, good and evil. She was too exhausted to know what she thought about anything anymore.

Shelly let the smoke waft out of her mouth, colorless ghosts moving silently around her head.

She was so tired. If she could just sleep for a little while, she'd know what to do.

With part of her brain, the part that never needs to sleep, Shelly knew that she never knew what to do, whether she'd gotten sleep or not. But, right now, she could lie to herself and say that. She was so tired. Things would look better in the morning.

Shelly dreamt of blue and black moths, trapped in a jar and beating their wings against the glass.

Jordan dreamt of bright red roses, growing in the garden of a little cottage filled with laughter and sunshine.

Amy dreamt of jumbled things, puzzle pieces she was trying to put together with fingers made thick and clumsy by knockout drugs. The puzzle pieces were all the same, a picture of the corner of a stone angel's wing. Amy knew she was supposed to hate the angel, but all she wanted to do was finish her puzzle and slip back into dreamless darkness.

She was sitting in a boat, a boat made out of paper. All around her in the water, people were trying to climb onto the boat. Amy didn't know who any of them were.

"I'm sorry," she told them. "I'm not allowed. Daddy says the boat can only hold so many."

When she looked back at the water, the people had turned into puzzle pieces, all of the angel's face. She was saying something.

"Amy. Amy, wake up. Amy, can you hear me?"

"Yes," she replied, hoping there was room in the paper boat for a granite angel.

"Has Jordan complained of stomach pains?" Shelly shook Amy awake, asking the question before the girl was fully out of dreaming.

"What?" Amy asked muzzily, sitting up in her bed and brushing her hair out of her eyes.

"Had Jordan had stomach pain recently?" Shelly asked again.

Amy shook her head.

"He hasn't mentioned it to me if he has. What's going on?"

"He's got bad pain now, we're trying to work out what it is."

Amy jumped out of bed, glad that the sedative had worn off enough that she just felt a little groggy, which might have just been from waking up.

Jordan's appendix had burst; the doctors had to perform emergency surgery. Amy felt like this was the story of her life, waiting nervously until someone could reassure her that Jordan was going to be fine. The hospice was so different from the other places this scene had taken place, but the

script was just as it had been at the hospital back home, with its ancient issues of ‘home and garden’ and ‘women’s digest’. Or like Jordan’s ear-nose-throat specialist, with the huge leather chairs in the waiting room and dark wood walls that looked more like an old English sitting room than a surgery.

Instead of medicine or cleaning fluid, the hospice smelt like a school nurse’s office, the cloying smell of candy and sugar tainting the edge of the alcoholic antiseptic.

Amy wished she had something to give him when he woke up. It had become a running joke between them; at various times she’d given him a big balloon in the shape of a devil, a stuffed toy of a devil, and several different ‘get well soon’ cards featuring devils.

Amy mentioned that to Shelly, who nodded her head.

“See? He’s always sick. You just said it yourself. That’s the Lander’s Syndrome.”

Amy looked at Shelly silently for a long beat and shook her head. “Don’t tell me you’re still trying to convince yourself of that garbage,” Amy said, chipping away at the vestiges of nail polish left on her fingertips.

“No.” Shelly shook her head. “I’m not. But I’ll make you a deal, hey? I’ll agree to see things the way they are with this, if you’ll agree to see things the way they are with Jordan. He’s a very sick kid.”

“Not as sick as he once was,” Amy refuted.

Shelly let a few minutes of silence pass. “Sarah died in the room just down the end of the hall.”

Amy stayed quiet, letting Shelly continue to speak.

“If there’s one thing I can’t say, it’s that she died in vain. But I still feel like she did. And if, even with all that was gained from it, her death was still in vain, do you know what that means?”

“Nothing means anything,” Amy said dully.

“Yes.” Shelly nodded. “I think they call this despair.”

“Remember what you told me?” Amy’s eyes opened a little, regaining some of their usual spark. She couldn’t stop herself from connecting thoughts and finding truths. “There’s no point. Nothing means anything. There’s no good or evil. Just us, and chaos.”

Shelly looked at Amy, her head cocked to one side. “If Sarah was alive,” Shelly said. “I’d hope she’d grow up just like you.”

The doctors weren’t supposed to let Amy in, but no one tried to stop her following Shelly into the room. One of them caught Amy’s eye as she walked past. The expression made her pause for a second. The man’s eyes

were dead. It was as if he couldn't see anything, even though the pupils darted around alertly. He wouldn't meet her gaze, because then she would exist as a person inside his mind, and he couldn't let her do that, because that would make it harder to do his job.

Amy had wondered why Shelly was always beating herself up over everything when it would be so much easier not to care, but now she understood. Not caring took all the life out of you. Shelly might have the scars on her wrists from attempting to bleed that life out, but it was still inside her.

The only way to bleed it out was to stop seeing people, and Shelly could never make herself do that.

Jordan looked so sweet and small on the white bed, his eyelashes fluttering as he emerged from sleep. It struck Amy suddenly that the time must be about nine in the morning; it had been dawn when Shelly woke her. The clocks were insane, just like everything else.

His breathing was a little scratchy, a slight rattling noise that seemed to be worse than it had been the nights Amy had slept next to him in motel beds on their journey here.

His hair was messy, but then it was always messy. Amy sat there, waiting for him to wake up.

Shelly sitting next to her, thinking about how different their hair was. Both of them dyed it black with the same type of dye, but Amy's was 'liquidy', according to Jordan's description. It was true, the straight black locks were shiny and slippery, too slippery to keep clips in place. Jordan's was coarse, tying itself into knots almost without him moving.

Shelly checked the various monitoring equipment as Jordan came round from unconsciousness. His hand moved up from where it was lying on the edge of the bed to rest against the dressing on his stomach, then his eyes slid open.

"Hey, Jordy," Amy said softly, brushing his hair off his cheek. "You feeling ok?"

Jordan nodded, looking a little disoriented.

"Aims. . . what're you doing here?" he asked, his voice dry.

Amy could tell he needed a drink and looked around for a glass of water. There wasn't one.

"The evil mad doctors caught me," she said by way of quick explanation. Jordan's brow furrowed with worry. Amy shook her head. "Don't worry about that now, just concentrate on getting better, ok?"

"How come you're in here though? I thought it was only Lander's Syndrome people in here?"

Amy wished she could just get Jordan to be quiet and rest, but knew he couldn't just be placated with soothing words. He wasn't a child.

Amy smiled and put her hand over her own stomach. The smile was genuine, because no matter what ‘scary horrible twisted mad doctor stuff’ was going on in Amy’s life, she wasn’t anything but happy about the cause of a lot of the trouble.

“If I was a lesbian, I wouldn’t be in this mess right now. Should we call her Melissa?”

Jordan’s eyes widened and he tried to sit up. Shelly helped him prop the back half of the bed up so he could be raised.

“Aims?” Jordan said, his voice filled with disbelief. Amy nodded, taking his hand in hers.

“Yeah, Jordan, we’re gonna have a little girl. She’s going to be beautiful.”

Shelly watched as they squeezed each other’s hands in reassurance at the same moment.

Although the words were simple, and Jordan didn’t reply, Shelly was almost overwhelmed by the depth of power in the room at that moment, the invisible lighting she could almost feel crackling from Amy and from Jordan. These two were everything Shelly had always told herself she was fighting for—love, youth, belief in the future. Shelly watched them as they sat there silently, gripping each other’s hands tightly, promising themselves that they would not go quietly into the night.

Hours later, Jordan slept, dozing fitfully, murmuring and frowning his brows on occasion. Amy watched him. The sedative had worn off, and she wanted at least a few hours where she could think without the sensation of wading through cotton wool. Shelly sat next to her. The room was silent, except for Jordan’s breathing.

Shelly just waited, and finally Amy spoke.

“Shelly?”

“Mmm?” Shelly asked. Amy was just like the others, really. Fragile, vulnerable. Shelly wished she could make it better.

“Have you ever seen ‘Peter Pan’?”

“I did a paper on it for high school.”

“I was thinking about it today.” Amy looked down at her hands, resting on her lap. Chipped nail polish, white tan lines where her rings had been. She wished she could have them back, especially the little purple heart. Had it really been only a week ago that Jordan had given it to her?

“Seems like a strange thing to think about.” Shelly pointed out. Amy shook her head.

“No. It was the right thing to think about because it made me

understand some stuff. There's a scene near the end where the pirates kidnap Wendy and they say to her 'you can work for us or walk the plank' and she very nobly goes to walk the plank. I was thinking 'That's bullshit, she shouldn't have done that. She can't do any good dead. She should have stayed with the pirates and done the best she could.'" Amy looked up at Shelly, her eyes smeared with mascara that had run earlier and glittering with new tears. "Because that's all good people can do, isn't it? The best they can."

Shelly nodded, her own eyes misting. They hugged tightly, two good people doing the best they could. After a little while Amy spoke again.

"No-one ever knows what they'll end up doing," she said.

"What do you mean?" Shelly asked. Amy sighed.

"When you're playing 'what would you do if?' with your friends. No one ever knows. You know the game I mean. The questions start off sort of easy, 'if there was one person on a sinking ship and twenty people on another sinking ship and you only had enough time to save one ship, which would you save?' . . . everyone knows the answer to that one. Then it's 'if there was one person on a sinking ship and your best friend on a sinking ship and you only had enough time to save one ship, which would you save?' and you still know the answer, but it's harder. Then your friends ask 'if your best friend was on a sinking ship and twenty people were on a sinking ship and you only had time to save one ship, which would you save?' . . . and everyone always says 'I don't have to answer that. It'll never happen.' Because they don't know. Inside no one knows which one they'd pick. So we never answer."

"That's because it's a trick question. There's no right answer." Shelly looked down at her hands. Pale hands, careworn hands— careworn is just a nice way to say wrinkled. Hands that would never hold tiny cinnamon fingers again.

In a few weeks hospitals all over the world would have new drugs to treat little girls with tiny hands and sore tummies. A hundred thousand mothers would cry with joy and hug their daughters, their careworn thumbs stroking patterns on their little girl's palms. None of them would know about these pale hands, with no baby to hold. Shelly would never know the hundred thousand children who would survive because Sarah did not.

"I made a cure." Shelly was playing with her cigarette lighter. She'd taken it out but showed no sign of using it to light a cigarette, just turning it between her fingers, the smooth blue plastic shape moving from hand to hand and back again, over and over.

She would never have smoked near someone recovering from surgery, but the texture was familiar between her fingers.

"What?" Amy didn't understand.

“I made a cure. For Lander’s Syndrome. Two years ago. I wanted to use it on Sarah. I’ve helped hundreds of thousands of kids, but I’ve never met a single one of them. I thought if I could help her, know I gave her a chance at a happy life, then I would be able to keep doing this.”

“It would have put a face to your cause,” Amy said quietly.

Shelly nodded.

“Exactly. Of course they didn’t let me. I knew they wouldn’t. . . . I just hoped irrationally.” Shelly smiled ruefully, sadly, still playing with her lighter. “It was nearly perfect, too. The neuralising drug. She would have been healthy. As healthy as any little girl. The only flaw was that it would have made her have a bit of an upset stomach for a few days. And with more research I could have fixed that. But they said no. I guess it was the only cure I ever created that wasn’t needed.” She snorted with laughter, the shoulders shaking with built-up tears. Amy put an arm clumsily around Shelly’s shoulders, holding her as she sobbed.

Another night, another untouched vodka. Shelly sat. Somewhere outside a cat yowled. The seconds slipped by silently. Shelly couldn’t stand the tick-tock of clocks.

She knew ethics were just a choice. Impossible to make sometimes, but in the end, just a choice. God didn’t care.

It wouldn’t matter to God if Jordan and Jenny and Brighton died, like Sarah had, like Danielle, like Matilda and Natalie and Ben and Alex and the rest of them. God had no preference in what Amy’s fate would be after her baby was born.

Shelly couldn’t play God anymore. She cared too much.

Shelly was lonely. Even if it wasn’t the sort of love Amy and Jordan had, she wanted someone to care about and be cared about by. Maybe nobody in the world except Amy and Jordan had the kid of love they did.

Real love or some false way to stem the tide of solitude, Shelly needed to be with somebody. She was lonely.

Perhaps Shelly had never known what it was like to be in love with someone, really. But she knew love, and heartbreak. That was something she couldn’t live with again. She had to stop giving her heart, soul and mind away to a world that didn’t really care. Perhaps that’s why God became so unreachable: the divine creator had looked at the world and realised that unless you give every drop of love away, the love left inside you clouds your eyes and makes you see things differently.

But if you give your love away completely, the world will devour it and suck you dry, alone in a lonely world. What Shelly was giving wasn’t even

hers to offer. In an insane world, there was no sane choice. Just two sinking ships and only time to save one.

And Shelly would not let the fire she had seen today be quenched by the rising tide. Not even God could be that heartless.

When morning's light touched the half-filled glass of vodka, Shelly was lying in bed, a contented smile on her face, sleep smoothing out the worry lines, just a little.

The night crept in like a small, skulking animal, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, edging around the periphery of the room and hoping that it would slip by unnoticed. Amy liked small animals; she would have treated any that found their way into this room with compassion and kindness. The night, though, she hated.

The night was when the day stopped happening and she couldn't hide from thoughts with actions.

"I give up," Amy whispered to herself, feeling the heavy cloak of despair strip any warmth from her body. This was the way the world ended, in the quiet of the night with your demons whispering the truths and nowhere to hide from them. "You hear me, world? I give up."

All her determination earlier was gone. She couldn't put on a brave face for herself, even if she could for Jordan. The little voice inside you always quenches the spark of hope if you don't really believe it. Countless parents could attest that there was no place within the walls of the Lindsay Care Hospice for dreams.

Jordan was drowsing, sleeping lightly in the bed beside her. The doctors had tried to force her into going back to the bedroom area, threatening and cajoling, but she hadn't even entertained the notion of leaving Jordan's side. They hadn't sedated her, so she supposed the threats hadn't been serious after all. So Amy sat next to the bed, wishing the night was over so morning could rush in like a flood of icy water, with things to be done, conversations to be had and no space at all for this quiet, hopeless timelessness of night.

Her arms tingled, not exactly an ache -- there was no physical sensation. Just an almost overwhelming mental urge. To find something sharp and clean, something that would sting as it drew blood.

Amy refused to define herself by one thing. She would not be merely a child whose mother had left. She would not reduce herself to a teenage girl who dressed in black lace and old velvet. She would not become a statistic of adolescent self-mutilation.

In the stealthy night, promises are hard to keep.

It takes a scare to wake Amy up. A water-slicked blade slipping and cutting a deeper line than she intends. It is only a moment before she assesses the damage and sees it isn't life-threatening, but that moment is enough. What is she doing? She likes her life, and certainly doesn't want it to end in a bathroom with mould in the tile grooves.

So she packs all her ladyshave razors into a small paper bag, scrunches it up tight, and walks to Charlotte's house, her arm still dripping under the sleeve of her shirt. She can't do this anymore. To her friends, to her life, to herself. Dropping out was something she had to do to keep her sanity, but the cutting is taking that sanity in little red inch-long measures.

Charlotte calls Jordan when Amy explains the reason for the visit. Patrick turns up with his friend; they've been tinkering with the rust bucket Jordan pretends is a roadworthy car.

The four of them walk down to the beach behind Amy's house, the moon staining silver shadows on the gray sand. The waves hiss, the sea calm but somehow eerie, like it is lying in wait for tender prey.

Amy is crying, just a little. She doesn't know if she's strong enough to do this. She grips Jordan's hand for support, and at the same second he gives her a reassuring squeeze.

At the waters edge Amy takes the paper bag out, looking down at the crumpled brown surface for a few moments, then hurling it as far as she can out to sea. It's further than she would have thought herself capable of throwing a light little object like the bag.

Amy leans against Jordan as they walk back towards the house, her wrist stinging in the dark recesses of her jacket. Charlotte and Patrick are bickering a little, the harmless insults of unconditional love. They adore each other, but it isn't a romantic infatuation so much as an utter comfortableness. Amy is beginning to feel the same way about Jordan, and sometimes fears they'll turn into simply best friends. Then she'll glance over at him, or hear his voice on the phone, and a painful need to be near him in her gut will remind her that she could never be simply best friends with Jordan Mitchell.

As if he can hear her thoughts, Jordan squeezes her hand again. The cut on her arm throbs under the slight pressure to her hand.

For the first time since she began putting little slits of hurt into her skin, Amy wishes the gash would stop hurting.

Sitting next to the bed, Amy felt the dull ache of almost-cured

addiction, the same feeling a long-sober alcoholic gets in their throat in times of stress. She stood up, her legs aching. How long had she been sitting in the same position? Amy didn't even know.

Curling up on the edge of the bed next to Jordan, Amy closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She felt Jordan's arm slide around her waist as he shifted to give her more room. Her arm felt a little better, the compulsion under her skin lessening as that skin rested against Jordan's.

How could she have thought she had anything like real problems back then? This was the worst thing that had ever, could ever happen to her. And she'd used up all her allowances to crash and burn on stupid little things like her mother and her schoolwork. Now she'd have to face real problems, and she didn't even know how.

As sleep mercifully gave her a temporary escape route, Amy despaired for the futures she'd dreamt up and would never even get to attempt. They were supposed to live happily ever after. Perhaps fate would make it happen, despite all of this. Perhaps there wasn't any fate but the one people found for themselves. If that were true, then it was up to Amy.

Her last thought before dreaming made all thoughts incoherent was that perhaps she was not going to give up after all.

"Four." Shelly said absentmindedly, picking strips off the head of lettuce and eating them slowly. She was starving, couldn't remember the last real meal she'd had. The kitchen at the hospice didn't have anything particularly appetizing, but lettuce was better than nothing. "There are four kids, not three."

The cook she'd been chatting to looked at her sympathetically for a moment. The expression made Shelly angry with exasperation. Did they think she'd lost her mind? That the loss of Sarah was something she couldn't accept?

"Amy," Shelly prompted. The cook smiled in understanding, adding another plate to the line of dishes he was preparing.

"Oh yes, the pregnant girl. I forgot about her." The small, thin man began to put food on the plate. "So even though the little girl's gone, you've got a baby coming your way to do tests on. You know what they say, when a door closes, a window opens."

Shelly stood stock still, a limp piece of lettuce halfway to her mouth. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard.

Amy had been right. The staff thought of the children as pincushions.

Perhaps it was a defense to stop them having to think about the things that went on, to understand what the Lander's kids went through. Perhaps it

was a disgusting lack of empathy.

Shelly felt as if she'd been speaking the wrong language for years. How could these people fail to see the children for what they were? Did they turn a blind eye because it was too painful to see?

Shelly wished she could inflict some pain. Ball her fist up, pop the cook in the mouth.

But it wouldn't do any good, even if it was an enticing prospect. Shelly, unlike Amy, knew that anger management was sometimes a good idea.

In a way, she was glad the cook had said what he had. It made it easier to understand why her job seemed so much harder than the other doctors': Because she brought the children stickers and talked about old movies with them. They weren't human pincushions in her mind, as was expected.

It didn't change her plans for the children, because those had already been morphed by the events of the last few days. It just made her feel very, very weary. She wasn't sure if she'd ever be able to convince herself of the goodness in the human race again.

"Hey, are you ok?" the cook asked, gesturing to the piece of lettuce frozen halfway to Shelly's mouth. She shook herself back from her thoughts.

"What? Oh." Shelly put the lettuce down. "Suddenly I'm not hungry."

"Amy, do you remember when you told me the devil would look like Orson Welles?"

It was mid morning, Shelly had come to check how Jordan was healing, and had stayed to talk. She found it curious and wonderful that Amy and Jordan seemed supremely content to spend their time together in silence, despite the fact that Amy couldn't stop talking when she was with Shelly. A quick introspection made Shelly realise it was the only time she herself spoke very much.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah." Amy nodded.

"Was that based on *Citizen Kane*?"

That made Amy duck her head in embarrassment. "Not really, it was more another movie he was in. I'm kind of madly in love with Orson Welles," she admitted.

If their continuing discourses had seemed odd before, they were downright surreal now. Amy seemed to be utterly confident she would not end her life here.

Mentally, Amy knew it was basic human denial, but emotionally she just... knew.

"Was it *The Third Man*?"

"Yes actually." Amy had learnt that Shelly would usually find the heart

of a topic quickly.

“Have you ever heard of the academic thesis that examines the antichrist metaphors in Orson Welles in that movie?”

Amy gave a surprised smile. “No, I haven’t. Other people think that too?”

“You thought of that all by yourself? Amy, how on earth did someone like you end up a dropout?”

“After my mother left, I just gave up.” Amy shrugged.

Jordan moved in his sleep. He never seemed to stay restful for very long.

Shelly motioned silently for them to move into the playroom. There, they sat on the large colorful floor cushions. Amy noticed that the bright fabric only came in shades of blue, green, purple and yellow. No red.

“When I was a little girl I always wanted to go on adventures. I was so upset when I realised I would never have the chance to slay a dragon—I wanted a big, huge, noisy, exciting life,” Amy mused. “And now that I have one, I just want to go hide in the suburbs and live a quiet, unnoticed life.”

Shelly shook her head with a smile, the sad, small, affectionate grin that had become the main form of communication between them.

“There are some people in life who’ll always be called on to slay dragons, Amy. Your life will never be boring, I can promise you.”

“Hey Shelly, have you ever been in love?” Amy couldn’t stay on one thought for very long. The curse of the MTV generation.

Shelly shook her head with another wry smile. Amy wondered if they’d get repetitive strain injury from repeating that action so often.

Shelly thought for a moment about the aching memories she’d thought of just the night before. Had it ever been love? “No. I’ve had lovers that I cared about, but I’ve never had the connection you and Jordan do. Hold onto that, it’s special.”

Amy looked down at the space on her finger where the purple heart had been.

“I know. Sometimes I wonder if I should try other people before I settle down, since teen relationships aren’t supposed to work. And then I think ‘Why? I know this is real even with nothing to compare it to.’”

“That’s sweet.”

“How long since you’ve been in a relationship?”

Shelly sighed. “Too long. I never have time, to go anywhere social. I’ve been single for eight years.”

“Who was the last person you were with?”

“Another doctor here. We started around the same time. Her name was Fern. After three years here she applied for a transfer. She couldn’t do this anymore. Still sends me cards at Christmas with her phone number and a

short message pleading for me to transfer. But, even if she was the one to go, I was the one who left her. I thought my work here was more important than being happy.” Shelly sounded unsure of the truth in her words. “Life takes pretty funny turns sometimes.”

Amy thought about that for a few minutes, staring off into space like she always did when she was pondering.

“This isn’t supposed to happen to me. I’m Amy, the cute little prep who started dyeing her hair black. My mother left and I dropped out of high school. I got arrested once with my friend Charlotte when we had eight pairs of stockings on each to smuggle them out of a clothing store. Those are the sorts of things that happen to people like me.

“Charlotte writes these things every day—she calls them her ‘extra extra ordinary stories’, because they’re all about how extraordinary the totally ordinary really is. She calls them things like ‘The park bench’ or ‘the calendar on my toilet door’ or ‘the bus’. Those little stories make me so happy. Stop me feeling really depressed about how small and insignificant my life is. That’s all I am, one of the little ants you see out of the plane window. I’m supposed to live a life of quiet desperation. Alice never really went to Wonderland, Dorothy lived in Kansas her whole life. This doesn’t happen to people like me.”

Amy’s eyes were wide as if she really could comprehend how insane her life was at that second. “There’s been a mistake. I’d like to go home now.”

Her words were jokey but Shelly could see how homesick Amy was for the normal life she’d lost. “

And my Daddy’s dead.” Amy blinked rapidly as her lip began to tremble. “Shelly, I’m not ready to grow up.”

Shelly was about to move over and hug the girl, try and make her feel a little better. Amy seemed to catch herself and recover on her own, though.

“It’s so weird to think of it all in the past tense: I lived with my Dad and my cats. I have two—my friend Charlotte’s got them at the moment.”

“What’re their names?”

“The cats? Orson and Oscar. As in Welles and Wilde. They’re darling. I worked at the library, it’s this building from the thirties I think, with this big arch over the door that dips down in the middle like a huge metal eagle. Every time I walked through that door I expected it to bite at me or something. And I used to babysit my cousins—I used to say shit all the time about it but really I adored them. That’s it. Amy Marsden, this is your life.”

“Sounds like a wonderful story,” Shelly said softly. The mood was sadder now, quieter.

“Yeah. It was,” Amy said with a sigh. “Hardly blockbuster material, but I liked it.”

“A movie of this would be really lousy,” Shelly said, replying to the blockbuster idea. She couldn’t bare to see Amy upset any longer. This entire drama had been played out in such a short space of time anyway, it couldn’t really hurt anything to fast-forward this section too. Her plans to wait a little while were rejected in favor of immediate activity. “All we do is talk. I think we need some action.”

“Oh yeah? What do you mean?” Amy asked, ready for an insane future-daydream such as the ones she herself was so prone to.

“The monitoring equipment we use here is unstable. The risks were known at the time of manufacture, but considered acceptable.” Amy nodded, not sure where the line of thought was going. “It wouldn’t be hard to escape here, especially with someone on the inside helping, like a doctor,” Shelly continued on, not stopping to comment on the warily hopeful expression growing on Amy’s face. The girl wore her emotions on her face so unguardedly.

“It wouldn’t take long for them to find you again, if that happened. But what if the ‘Lander’s kids’ were undergoing tests and the monitor suffered critical failure, blowing the room apart? They wouldn’t even look for remains if the damage was bad enough.”

The look of thankfulness that Amy gave Shelly then was so utter it was almost a tangible thing.

“I knew you were one of the good guys,” Amy said, a huge smile on her face like a sunbeam breaking a storm-clouded sky. Then the clouds closed in again. “But what about the cameras?”

“The cameras will go off twenty seconds before the explosion; I can rig that. Everything will shut down then. Lights, air conditioning. You’ll have just enough time to climb through the vent in the store room, go as far along as you can and then to the right. It should take you straight to my office. Hide there until nightfall, then go back through the vents down to the kitchen and out the door there, it has a latch on the inside.

“Hide somewhere for three days, then get back to the motel you were staying at. I’ll be there, hopefully,” Shelly said, speaking quickly and quietly. There were no security systems in the playroom but that was no reason to take risks. Amy nodded.

“Ok, I got it. But won’t they look for us, just to be on the safe side?”

“No, they know from experience that a malfunctioning unit can cause fatal accidents. And they’ll have an injury to prove that the room collapsed before anyone could get out.”

“What do you mean?” Amy was worried of what Shelly would do to herself.

“I’m going to pull that filing cabinet in the hall onto myself, say I was thrown out the door by the blast,” Shelly explained.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes.” Shelly shrugged. Amy realised that her question had been beside the point.

“Thank you,” Amy said with another of their bittersweet smiles. Shelly returned it, then stood up.

“We should go before anyone notices how long we’ve been in here.”

“Oh, they know the two of us could talk the ear off a camel,” Amy said dismissively, then paused. “What off a camel? Are their ears particularly more attached? More so than, say, a giraffe?”

It was one thing to have a step by step plan, quite another to carry it out. The smoke after the explosion filled the ventilation shaft they were crawling through, setting off Brighton’s asthma.

Amy was afraid someone would hear the boy’s coughing and discover them, but nobody did, so she supposed they had other things to worry about than noisy air conditioning.

They made it to Shelly’s office, their hands and knees rubbed red from friction against the metal. Shelly had obviously thought ahead very comprehensively, which shouldn’t really have surprised Amy -- the woman was a genius. An asthma puffer was sitting on her desk, as well as a larger nebuliser for more severe attacks, a few sandwiches and a bottle of water. The four of them looked at each other, the stress of hiding equaled by the elation of escaping. Jordan caught Amy in a crushing hug, as if he wanted to hold her so tight they merged and could never be apart again. She returned the embrace with equal force.

Jenny was hugging Brighton from behind his back, holding him carefully as he drew another breath through the inhaler. His hair tickled her nose and she sneezed, burying her face in his shoulder to keep the noise quiet. That gave him the giggles, his mouth covered by one hand. That set Amy off in turn, which made Jordan and Jenny laugh too. The four of them stood in the middle of Shelly’s office, the smell of smoke still overwhelming on their clothes and skin, laughing as quietly as they could.

Finally they sat down, Jenny tried to get some sleep resting her head on Amy’s thigh. Amy herself wanted to get a light doze in if she could, but a commotion in the hallway made her stay alert.

“Richardson’s gone into cardiac arrest.”

Amy looked at the door, listening to the voices on the other side, as if staring at the pale yellow rectangle of wood that made up the door would make their conversation more clearly audible.

“Does it look like she’ll make it?” a second voice asked.

Please let her be ok, Amy prayed silently to a God she didn’t believe in. She doesn’t deserve to die.

With a wry smile, Amy realised that that was probably the most naïve thought she’d ever had. Her smile disappeared as she continued her soundless begging.

Shelly can’t die. That’s not how it’s supposed to end. Please don’t make her death the price for our freedom.

“They’ve got a heartbeat!” a third, female voice exclaimed. Amy smiled at the featureless corner of the ceiling, the vague area she’d been praying to.

Brighton began to wheeze, coughing heavily. Amy glanced over, terrified.

I didn’t say I’d make a trade to keep her alive, that’s not how it’s supposed to end either.

Jordan rubbed his brother’s back and administered a dose from the nebuliser Shelly had left. Amy waited, not daring to move until the voices faded and the sound of footsteps walking away reached her ears.

Thanks God, I guess I owe you one.

Waiting for dark was nerve-wracking, every footfall outside in the hall making them freeze and try not to breathe, even as hyperventilation from fear threatened to overtake them. Shelly had locked the door from the outside with a key that only she had, but the irrational fear of discovery remained.

But, eventually, night fell like a security blanket and they slid back into the air tunnels, scrambling towards the open air and safety.

Amy nearly burst into tears when the motel came into sight.

Three days of hiding in the sparse vegetation surrounding the hospice and the town had been exhausting. She’d been scared that they would get here and there wouldn’t be anyone waiting, that Shelly had died in trying to save them. Or that there would be the scary secret agents with guns that Amy continued to fear irrationally were really responsible for the setup at the hospice, no matter what evidence and logic told her otherwise.

But when the motel came into sight, Amy could see a female silhouette in the doorway of their room. It was all going to plan. They really were gonna be ok.

Shelly was dressed in the gray skirt and pink top Amy had first seen her in. Sunglasses rested on top of her hair, which had been cut short and

bleached to a honey blonde. Amy decided that if she lived to be forty she wanted to look just like Shelly did.

Well, except for the suicide scars, tremulous hands, broken arm and sad eyes, anyway.

“Hey there, my darlings,” she said with a wide grin. “You all look like you’ve been run over by a train.”

They did look a wreck, the clean white hospice outfits stained and crumpled, their hair matted, skin bruised.

“But I suppose for four dead kids you look ok,” Shelly conceded with a smile. Jordan started to speak but Shelly interrupted. “Yes, you’re all quite dead. Four rooms burnt down, killing the test subjects inside. It was quiet a large crisis. Apparently, I’m lucky I survived.”

That made them smile, Jenny and Brighton giggling at the concept of the hospice marking them as dead.

“So you’ll be safe leaving the area tonight; no-one’s out looking. You can take the car out front, it’s mine but no one knows I’ve got it. I’ve packed some clothes and other essentials in suitcases for you. They should all fit in the back. I couldn’t carry them myself.” The last sentence was directed at the bulky cast covering one arm from wrist to elbow. The hand at the end of it looked all right but Amy noticed Shelly barely flexed the fingers, leaving them curled in an unnatural half-fist. “So could you guys do it?”

“Sure. C’mon squirts.” Jordan held his hands out to Jenny and Brighton. Shelly held her good hand up.

“Hey, hey, hey not so fast there! I want to say goodbye, y’know.” Shelly smiled at them. “I didn’t know you for long, Jordan, but you’ve got a poet’s soul. Don’t lose that.”

“Thank you.” Jordan smiled in return. Amy wasn’t sure she’d ever seen him look at Shelly with anything but distrust. Shelly hugged him clumsily, the cast getting in the way. Then she turned to Brighton and Jenny, the little children she’d seen grow up inside colorless little rooms. She knelt down to a lower level, touching Jenny’s hair, running her fingers over the tangles that had sprung up over the last 48 hours.

“My little life-savers,” Shelly said quietly, not a doctor to her patients but a mother to her children. “Never forget how special you are, or how magical and important everything in the world is.”

“You look really pretty,” Jenny said, reaching out to touch Shelly’s own hair.

Brighton rolled his eyes. “You girls are weird.”

Shelly laughed, the laugh only people who are coming out of grief can laugh. The laugh of rediscovering simple things you forgot were there at all.

“Oh Bri. I’m so glad that you’ll have a chance to learn how weird girls can be.” Shelly stood up slowly, looking down at them. “Can you kids go

help Jordan pack the suitcases into the car? I need to talk to Amy for a minute.”

“Ok.” The two of them nodded. Shelly gave them each a long, tight hug, which were returned with equal love and gusto, and then Brighton and Jenny went to argue over who was stronger and who could fit more bag straps over their arms.

Soon it was just Amy and Shelly in the doorway of the motel room, two people who hadn't been able to shut up for a moment in the short time they had known each other. Amy was the first to speak.

“I like it. Your hair. It looks nice.” Amy said, unsure of where their continuing conversation would be now.

“I got tired of being Mother Nature,” Shelly explained. “Think the color suits me?”

Amy nodded. “Is your arm going to be ok?”

Shelly shook her head, looking down at the bright blue cast. “No. I've been transferred to the synthesis division, where I won't need to use it,” she told Amy, her voice quiet but more hopeful for the future than Amy had ever heard it.

“Where's that?” Amy asked, glancing over at the others carrying the bags out to the car. In about two minutes they would be ready to go.

Amy thought back to their first meeting. She certainly hadn't thought she'd ever be upset to say goodbye to Shellyanne Richardson.

“I can't tell you that,” Shelly smirked. “Classified information. Amy... are you going to have the baby?”

Amy put her hand on her stomach, a reflex action whenever someone said ‘the baby’. She nodded.

“Yes. I don't think I could bear to have an abortion.”

“Your chances aren't that fantastic, you know.” Shelly looked worried. Amy shrugged.

“Well, they're something, right? No-one knows what's going to happen next.”

“I suppose so.” Shelly looked up at the sky. “I think the storms have finished. There can't possibly be any water left in the clouds.”

“Well, it can't rain all the time,” Amy said with a small smile.

Shelly smiled back, recognising the movie reference. Out of all the films they had talked about, this seemed the most appropriate for Amy to be quoting.

“So in synthesis you don't deal with the kids, I'm guessing?” Amy asked, keeping her hand against her stomach.

“Yeah.” Shelly nodded. “I'll be altering the drug compounds from original forms into one that is effective population-wide. Or, in normal people language.” Shelly smiled. “I turn goop into little pills. I've been given

a desk job. They were so upset to lose me at the hospice. But I think I'll be really good at playing with beakers and test tubes."

"Sounds like fun." Amy rolled her eyes. "You're such a science nerd."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." Amy stepped forward and gave Shelly a quick hug. Shelly smiled at her.

"There's some more stuff in the glove compartment, too."

"I'll be sure to check it out," Amy promised. "Shelly..."

"Yes?"

"Why? I mean, I'm seriously not looking this gift horse in the mouth or whatever, I'm just curious."

"Why did I help you escape?" Shelly prompted, reaching up to smooth her hair behind her ear. Amy recognised the movement. People who have worn long hair for years take a little time to adjust to short clipped styles.

"Yeah. Unless there's something else you've done that's saved my life and the lives of nearly everyone I care about."

Shelly smiled at that. "I saved you because if I didn't choose that ship, I was going to drown myself."

Amy opened her mouth to reply but Jordan called from the car.

"Aims, we're all packed here."

This was it, final moments, last goodbyes.

"You better get going," Shelly said before Amy had a chance to speak.

"Well Amy, I hope I never see you again."

"Same to you."

They hugged for a moment, then Amy ran out to the car, waving one last time as they drove away into the darkness.

When they were well on their way, feeling resplendent and free in their street clothes, Amy opened the glove compartment.

Her music box was in there. She opened it, the familiar tinkle of notes almost sending her into a fit of tears. It was such a little trinket, but it meant so much to her. It was a wonderful surprise to have it back.

The contents were a huge surprise and nearly made Amy's almost-tears turn into a torrent.

"Thank you," she breathed.

Under the passing streetlights in the dawn air the hypodermic needles seemed to glow faintly, lit internally with the powerful meaning of their properties. This was the kids' real freedom. They could be healthy and happy, like normal young people.

There was a neatly folded piece of paper in with the needles. Almost

obsessively folded, the creases perfectly straight on every side. It had instructions on how to administer injections. That made Amy smile. She'd never injected anyone before, but she knew how to, even if not in the usual medical way. Teenagers who dress in black and paint their eyes with kohl have a tendency to pick up useless skills like how to tie off at the elbow.

She'd never done it, to herself or otherwise, but she knew how. Shelly had overestimated her innocence.

Amy looked down at they syringes again. There were four of them in the box, neatly wrapped in sterilized plastic. One for Jordan, one for Brighton, one for Jenny.

And baby makes four.

Amy put her hand on her stomach, her eyes lingering on the precious cargo in her hands. Moving her hand from her belly, Amy lifted three of the hypodermics carefully. Then she snapped the lid closed, cutting the tinkling song off abruptly.

Jenny cried a little when Amy administered the cure. Amy promised her that this was the last needle ever, and that they could have waffles for dinner. The promise wasn't fulfilled that night, however, because when they finally pulled into a motel at dusk and checked in they fell into an exhausted sleep without a passing thought of food.

The morning was still, quiet and warm. Amy couldn't sleep, lying on the edge of the pullout couch and looking through cheap curtains at the watery sunlight of the dawn. She and Jordan were on the couch, Jenny and Brighton on the real bed, curled up together in the center of a pile of covers. They looked perfect together, two children asleep in the first minutes of the day. They looked alike, their hair was similar, the straggly brown color Amy could remember Jordan having before he dyed his black. Mirror-image fingers, long and delicate. Jordan's fingers, curled around her shoulders as he dozed comfortably, were the same again. Amy looked down at her own hands. They could move like lightning over a keyboard, could sort books at the library, apply makeup with ease. They were good fingers, short and thick around the base. Her hair was blonde under the rinse. She wasn't one of them, at least not physically, or genetically. Emotionally and mentally, she was one of the group now and forever.

Amy sat up on the edge of the bed, pulling her skirt down to cover her thighs. Brighton stirred in his sleep, a pensive murmur of a nightmare. Jenny,

her face inches in front of his, opened her eyes and planted a kiss on Brighton's nose. He murmured again and settled back into sleep, their arms wrapped around each other.

Amy knew it was innocent; they were just children. There were even toys on the bed with them, two dolls, one with blonde hair, the doll that had been Sarah's, and one with brown, that Jenny seemed to love to chew on the right hand of. Just little children who loved each other.

But, really, hadn't she and Jordan been children when they started going out at fifteen? She still felt like a child now, nowhere near ready for what her future held. Standing up, Amy walked over to the window, looking at her reflection. It didn't look like the person she felt like inside anymore.

For the longest time she'd been happy in her own skin, felt it fitted her perfectly. Much better than pink and powder blue. But it didn't anymore. She wasn't the girl in the glass now.

Letting a handful of hair slip through her fingers, Amy wondered what she could do to make herself this new person she had become. Perhaps she'd go back to being blonde. Or dye her shiny locks red, maybe.

That seemed right. Amy smiled softly at her reflection. It was sad to let that era of her life end, but she felt ready for whatever came next. Not that she had much choice—she had to face it, ready or not.

Jordan sat up in bed, looking at her quizzically.

"Just going for a walk, Jordy. Go back to sleep," she whispered. He shook his head and came over to join her, grasping her hand. Amy smiled and they opened the door quietly.

They walked in silence for a while, coming eventually to the local shopping district. Amy ordered two coffees at a sidewalk café and they sat down.

Amy watched in early morning traffic go by, joggers and people walking their dogs, garbage collectors and newspaper delivery. People passing in the street, never connecting.

She looked down at Jordan's hand interlocked with hers. All

their lives, people look for a way to forget how lonely they are. For some, it's always elusive, and they're always alone. Some find the way.

As if he knew what she was thinking about, Jordan squeezed her hand. She looked over at him and smiled softly, then rubbed her other hand against her stomach.

"I hadn't exactly planned on this... but then again, I didn't plan on the rest either."

Jordan kissed her cheek.

Amy stirred her coffee, watching the liquid swirl. A radio in a parked car was blaring out the weather report. "Looks like the weather of the past week was just a cold snap, it's back to summer sun now. Say goodbye to

wind and rain.”

It then began to play an old Beach Boys song.

She would always wonder ‘*Was that the right thing? Was that the best we could do?*’ but Amy thought perhaps the hardest choices are the ones where there isn’t a right thing or a wrong thing, just two choices that could be made. Impossible choices. But everyone has to make them.

The waitress, who’s tag informed the world her name was Linda, picked up the coffee cups. The kids who’d sat here had left her a nice tip, and she was grateful for the few dollars. They’d seemed like a sweet couple. Linda wondered why she couldn’t find a guy like that, kind and sensitive. They’d both been quiet, the girl had seemed sad.

That was the impossible choice in life, wasn’t it? Be a flake, or be thoughtful—and with that option came the promise of a lot of heartache.

A crumpled napkin was balled next to one of the cups. There was writing on it, the ballpoint pen had punched through the thin serviette a few times. Linda smoothed it flat.

What I did on my holidays

by Amy Marsden

A lot of growing up.

Linda looked back up at the two of them walking away. A boy and girl, most probably the younger siblings of the boyfriend, judging on looks, had bounded up and joined them, the little girl tugging on Amy’s hand and pointing at everything, wordlessly asking questions. Amy -- Linda assumed it was Amy, since it must have been her to write on the napkin -- looked at where the girl’s hand was pointing, then across at her boyfriend and his younger brother, the four of them looking like a little family out for a morning walk in the sunshine.

And for a split second, Amy turned and looked back at Linda, a wide smile breaking the unhappy look on her face.

Then the moment passed, although the smile did not, and the sweet couple, along with the children, walked around the street corner and out of Linda’s life.

Linda looked down at the napkin and balled it up again, slipping it into her apron pocket. It would always help remind her that sometimes making impossible choices can be ok.

And then, perhaps, they lived happily ever after.

