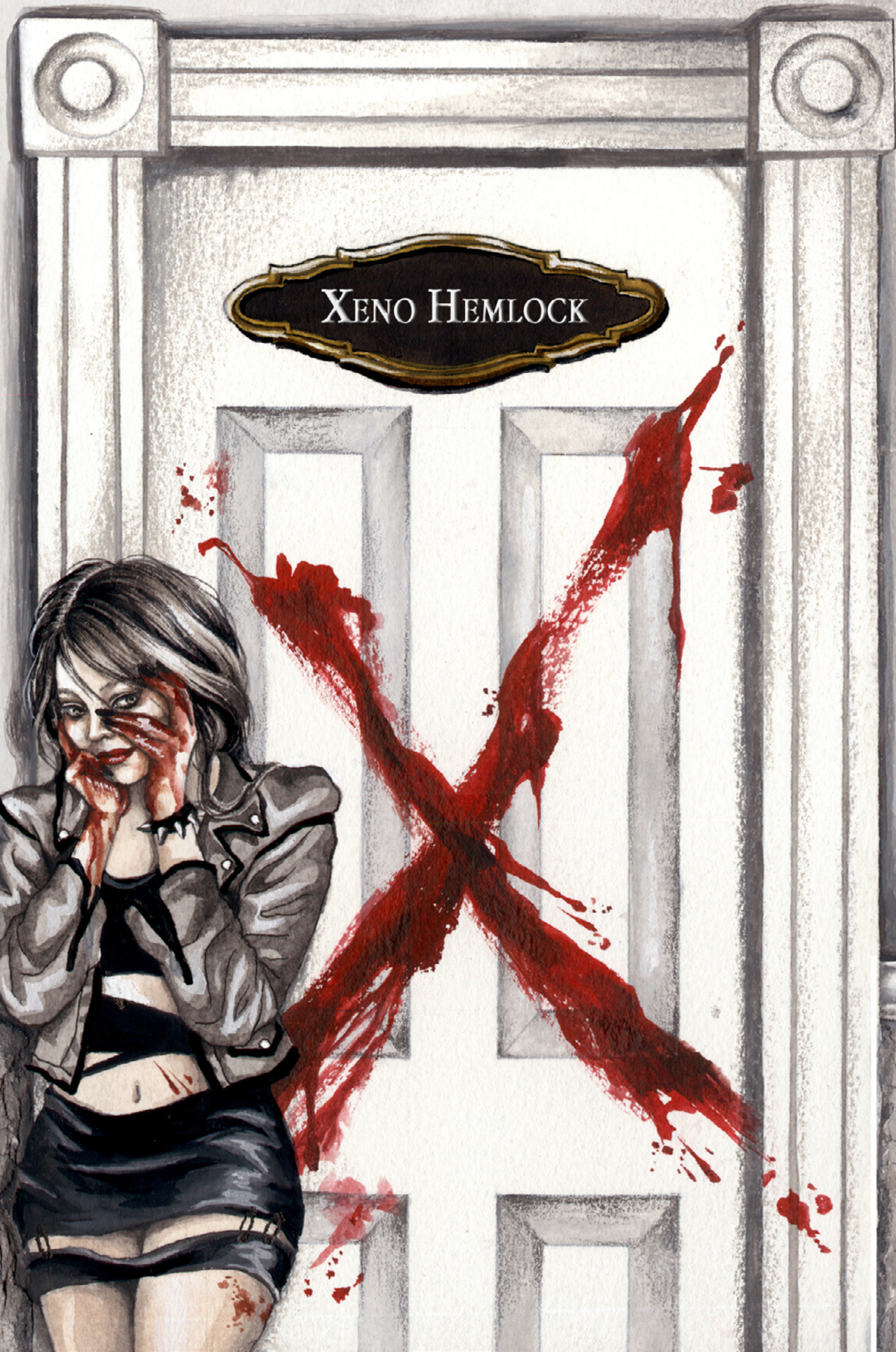


WALDEN AND HYDE

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES



Walden and Hyde

(and other short stories)

Xeno Hemlock

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Acknowledgment

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On my left was Green.
He told me to be mindful of my living.
He said the spirit could never exist without a home.
On his left was Black.
His real name was unknown.
In a low voice he uttered,
“Only for the strong, only for the strong.”
On my right was Blue.
He gave me a bucket of water where I saw my face.
He didn’t speak.
On his right was Red.
He had the boldest smile of all.
“With war, you bleed. With wounds, you heal,” said he.

- excerpt from *Xenflexio*

To Red.

Skinny Love and the Bagel

Mrs. Vaughn and the One That Got Away

Alexander the Great Fool

Walden and Hyde

Lucky

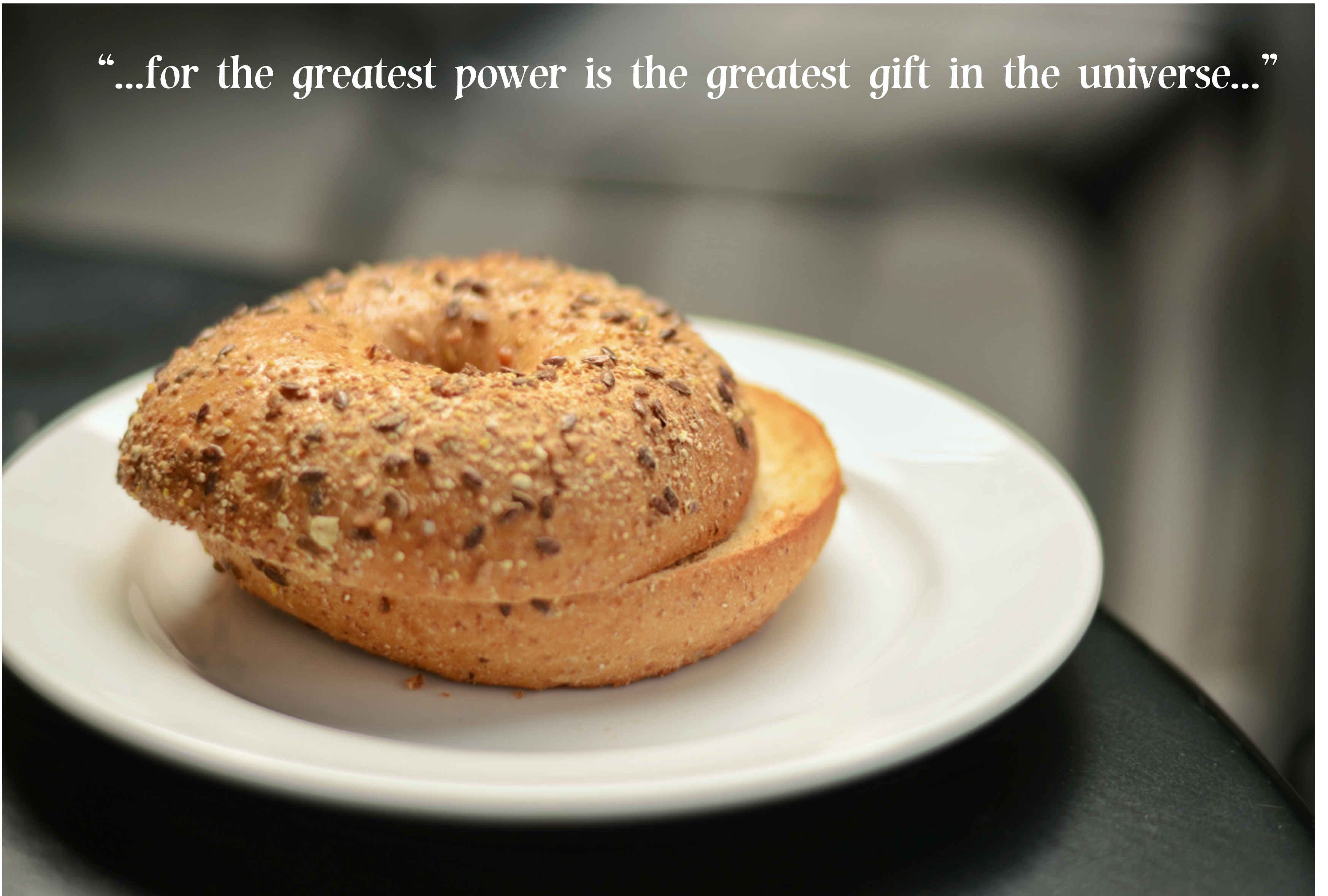
Little White Boys

Scarlet Forever

X

Skinny Love and the Bagel

“...for the greatest power is the greatest gift in the universe...”



Skinny Love and the Bagel

Gina Watson had fifteen minutes left before a fairy took away her life. After emptying her glass of water, she stood from the table and the bagel fell from her hat to the floor.

Danny grabbed his fiancée's arm. "Where are you going? I thought we were going to relax by the pool. The weather looks perfect."

Gina smiled and picked up the bagel from the ground, made sure none of the resort's guests and crew were looking, and stowed it back inside her brim hat. "I want to meditate in our room," she told him.

"Meditation after breakfast? Shouldn't that be done before?"

She looked at her Hello Kitty watch on her wrist. She only had a few minutes left. "An Internet guru said to give it a try. My digestion problems seem to be going away, been practicing it for a week. Nothing else worked for me except this."

He eyed her brim hat. "You're bringing food. We just ate."

She looked around to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. "It's part

of the technique. You eat. You meditate. Then you eat again, just a little, to put your stomach to the test right away. I need to cure my stomach problems before our wedding.”

He moved his grip from her arm and squeezed her hand. “All right. Whatever makes you happy, Bae. I’ll be there for the next hour to annoy some kids. If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Yes. By the pool. To annoy some kids.” She gave Danny a smacking kiss on the lips and let go of his hand. “Mind their parents, okay?”

“I will.” He winked at her as she walked away.

Sometimes she couldn’t believe she and Danny were together. When he confessed his love to her years ago, she had dismissed it as a joke. A Greek god and a fat mortal didn’t belong together. Danny hadn’t given up. He pursued her with patience until she gave in. The outspoken jeers and silent snickers from random busybodies didn’t affect Danny whenever they were outdoors together. Danny loved her, despite her weight, even when he ought to be with a stick-thin female model instead.

Four minutes remained when Gina arrived at their room. She stepped out on the balcony, placed a white hanky on a circular table, and arranged the food on it: the bagel, the small cup of cream cheese, blueberries she sneaked from the breakfast buffet, and a can of orange juice stowed away in the fridge. She added a small knife and teaspoon to the altar before taking her place on the recliner next to it. She straightened her brim hat, put on a pair of sunglasses, and waited.

A minute.

Less than a minute now.

Any second.

A cheery voice coming from two feet away joined her on the balcony.
“Hello, Miss Watson!”

He was right on time. Gina turned to her guest. “Butterbur!”

The fairy leaped from the floor to the armrest of Gina’s chair. He reeked of wet grass, disrupting the salty air of the beach by the balcony. Standing at two-feet tall, robed in red and green, balding head and long beard, he looked like Christmas spoiling summer next to her long, orange dress with patterns of sun, waves, and coconut trees.

“It’s been five years since we last happened upon each other,” said Butterbur.

Hiding behind her Guess sunglasses, Gina eyed him. “You have no problem finding me after five years.”

“Of course, Miss Watson. All I have to do is trace your scent to find you.”

Gina glanced to the food on the table next to her. “And what is my scent like?” She turned back to Butterbur.

“Cocoa.” He tapped the thick walking cane he brought with him on the

armrest. “And something sweet. Not of the earth, mind you, but very sweet indeed. I call it the Miss-Watson sweet!”

“Too bad I’m ignorant of my own scent.”

“Well it’s quite simple, Miss Watson. All you have to do is open your nose and be aware of your surroundings.”

Gina took a deep breath. “The sea, that’s all I can smell, and some kind of mud, I guess. No cocoa. Not even a chocolate candy or a chocolate drink. Not even Danny’s perfume.” She let out a sigh.

“That’s nothing to be sad about, Miss Watson!” Butterbur tapped his cane again. “The scent of the sea is very powerful. It’s splendid to have that be your last whiff of this earth before you go.”

“Well it’s quite simple, Miss Watson. All you have to do is open your nose and be aware of your surroundings.”

Gina took a deep breath. “The sea, that’s all I can smell, and some kind of mud, I guess. No cocoa. Not even a chocolate candy or a chocolate drink. Not even Danny’s perfume.” She let out a sigh.

“That’s nothing to be sad about, Miss Watson!” Butterbur tapped his cane again. “The scent of the sea is very powerful. It’s splendid to have that be your last whiff of this earth before you go.”

She took another deep breath, looked at the food altar, and then turned to Butterbur. “Time goes by mostly unnoticed and before you know it, it’s

almost gone.”

“Indeed, Miss Watson! Time is one of the most precious gifts humans take for granted.”

“Even with all the money in the world, we can never buy time.”

“An astute observation, Miss Watson! We fairies have no use for what you call money. Even after roaming the world for more than a hundred years, I still cannot fathom humans’ need for money.”

Gina took off her brim hat and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “That’s why I want to say thank you, Butterbur. You’ve given me the gift of time.”

He took a bow. “My pleasure, Miss Watson. We have a simple creed that grants us a very long life. Eat green. Sleep well. Do good to others. Be happy. It was my privilege to do good for you.”

She took another deep breath. “Eat green. Sleep well. Do good to others. Be happy. Still, us humans like making things complicated.”

Complicated indeed, exactly what the doctor told her five years ago. He said she didn’t have very long left to live. Gina knew what to blame. All those cakes. All those biscuits. All those pastries. All those sweet, yummy, colorful and tingling mouth delights.

For her they were symbols of freedom, of emancipation from her parents, Joe Watson, the fittest physical trainer in Verona, and Melinda Watson, the nutrition expert every mother in the neighborhood sought advice from.

If they found out that their only child who ran away as a skinny teenager turned out to be a carefree, pastry-loving balloon, they would dig her grave themselves.

She had left the doctor's office and took solace in the girls' washroom, locking herself in one of the stalls. After half an hour of bawling her eyes out, Butterbur had found her.

Butterbur proposed to her a simple offer. He'd grant her five more years of life in exchange for the greatest power in the universe. Gina had to find that power herself. At the end of her five years, Butterbur would visit her again to receive the greatest power as his rightful payment.

She found the greatest power, after more than four years of searching, thanks to the rise of computers. It was someone she knew. Herbert Novelli, her first true love from her teenage years.

But everything had changed since she was a teenager. Mustering the courage to see him again wasn't easy. She felt complicated things. Regret. Joy. Pride. Sadness. She reached out to a friend from her skinny days, Sarah Montgomery, and with her help found the best dress to wear and the confidence to knock on Herbert's door.

The last time Herbert saw her, she was thin. When they reunited, she was five pounds overweight. The last time he saw her, she was under the commands and wishes of her parents. When they reunited, she had become a full-fledged woman, independent and able to make decisions on her own.

And the last time he saw her, she knew he loved her. When they reunited, she feared the opposite.

Herbert had smiled at her and said time had cooled everything. She handed him her and Danny's wedding invitation, never taking her eyes off his blue pair. The following day, she returned to him, not as his former skinny love but as a friend, to start over. She returned again the day after. Then the day after that day. They rekindled a friendship with an engagement ring on her finger from a fiancé temporarily working overseas. In her mind, she imagined Herbert taking the ring off her finger, throwing it, and replacing it with a new one. So she waited.

When Danny returned from London, one look at his jolly face triggered her tears. All those years they'd been together, he made her feel beautiful despite what the numbers on the scale said. He could've left her and be with any of the hundred girls who offered their hearts to him. But he didn't. How dare she thought about leaving him months before their wedding? Walking away was easy for the thin teenage version of herself but that was many years ago and she wasn't skinny anymore.

"I just missed you," she said when Danny asked her what were the tears for.

On that day she'd rather not remember, the day she chose a path, Herbert said the words she longed to hear from him. She responded with bemusement, followed by a cold and stoic face. He was mistaken, she told him. He got it all wrong, she repeated. His blue eyes turned gray as he sarcastically wished her wedding luck. He accused her of being a complicated woman before he disappeared inside a cab, never to see her

again. She found herself in Danny's huge arms again as if no treachery ever happened.

Things returned to being simple.

She suggested to Danny that they go on a short vacation. All the wedding planning caused her stress. He happily obliged. During breakfast on their third day, as Danny passed her the butter, she remembered that her long due reunion with Butterbur was on that day. Five years had gone by so fast.

"There is one very important question I've been longing to ask you, Miss Watson," Butterbur said. His breath smelled of dead tree trunks.

Gina felt his eyes piercing through her sunglasses. "Of course, the greatest power in the universe," she said. She read that fairies could read the human mind and that it was next to impossible to lie to them.

Butterbur shook his fists as he bounced on the armrest. "You know it, Miss Watson! You know it!"

She also read that fairies loved being offered food, but Butterbur had paid no mind yet of the altar she made.

He ceased bouncing. "Tell me now, Miss Watson. Did you find the greatest power in the universe?"

She propped herself upright in the chair. "I found it."

Strange words came out of Butterbur's mouth as he resumed bouncing, higher and faster than the last time.

"I found true love, Butterbur," she continued. "I found the greatest power in the universe."

"Oh, Miss Watson! Fantastic! Whether true, puppy, long-distance, unconditional, or whatever you humans like to call it, love is the greatest power in the universe! Love is timeless, ephemeral, beautiful, and, best of all, powerful! Many of the greatest events in time have been because of love. I'm so happy for you, Miss Watson."

A drifting cluster of clouds hid the sun. Gina removed her sunglasses. "I'm not going to die now, am I?"

The fairy stopped bouncing and looked at the food. "You mean leave the earth, Miss Watson? No. You're not going to go anymore. Love is the payment for the gift I gave you."

"Thank you!" Gina's sunglasses fell to the floor.

Butterbur faced her. "I'm curious, Miss Watson. Can you tell me more about the love that you found? Such stories fascinate us fairies."

Gina eyed the bagel and the blueberries. "His name is Danny Fackelmeyer. We met in one of the weddings I planned where he was the best man. After the reception he asked for my number. We haven't been apart since then."

Butterbur put his hands together and fluttered his eyelids. “That’s sweet, Miss Watson. Finding the greatest power in the universe in a celebration made for it, such a tale of serendipity!”

“I’m a lucky girl. Who’d have thought? In fact, he’s here with me at this resort. We had breakfast minutes ago. He’s at the pool now playing with children. He loves children. He’ll make for a great father.”

“And I can see that you’re both betrothed?” Butterbur looked at her engagement ring.

“Yes. You’re right.”

“Well then. My affairs here are done except for one more thing.” Butterbur tapped his cane and shifted toward the altar of food.

“I brought that for you,” said Gina.

“My! This is flattering, Miss Watson. The last girl I visited didn’t prepare anything. It greatly upset me.”

“She did not?”

Butterbur turned back to her. “She did not do her part. I asked her to get some bananas instead. She couldn’t find them so we settled for oranges.”

“And why—”

“Why you ask, Miss Watson?” Butterbur’s voice lowered. “It’s the seal of

the ceremony. Without it the payment is never really accepted.”

“How does this—”

“The seal goes like this.” Butterbur turned to the food again. “We both eat the food together. It’s as simple as that!”

Gina thought of some of the food she gorged from the breakfast buffet. Bagel and cream cheese. Omelette. Jam and toast. Bacon. Rice porridge. Sausages. “I had a hearty breakfast. I’ll just have the juice, then.” Her hand went for the altar.

Butterbur stopped Gina’s hand with his cane. “Wait, Miss Watson. We must not let the rest of these go to waste. We must consume them all.”

“However,” Butterbur continued. “Our kind doesn’t eat human food. I will have all the blueberries and you will have the rest.” He dropped his cane to the floor. He walked to the edge of the table and put the lump of blueberries in his arms. “Us fairies like our food simple. We pick them from trees or from the ground and eat them right away.” He walked back to his earlier spot on the armrest.

“Okay.” Gina picked the bagel, remembering it touched the floor of the restaurant, sliced it with the breadknife, and spread cream cheese on the bottom sliced half. “What’s next?”

Butterbur smiled. “We eat.” He pushed one blueberry inside his mouth and started chewing.

She looked at him and brought the bagel to her mouth, took one small bite.

“This shall be our first and last meal together, Miss Watson...” Butterbur spoke.

Gina swallowed and took another bite.

“...for you have found the greatest power in the universe. Then we shall have no dealings with each other from here on out...”

Gina felt something move in her digestive tract. The piece of bagel she swallowed began making its way back up, as if it had sprouted legs. “But—”

“...for the greatest power is the greatest gift in the universe...”

It crawled to her trachea, hardening and growing. The second bite shook in her mouth and began to crawl to her throat, hardening and growing as well. Gina clutched her neck.

“...and only the honest, the selfless, and the good-hearted can possess it.”

The sun started to black out. Butterbur’s words descended to silence. The birds and the sea went mute. Then Butterbur’s giant face filled Gina’s vision.

“Oh, Miss Watson.” He spoke in a voice that sounded big yet far away. Gina heard a faint of sadness from him. “This is what the seal does. It

verifies the greatest power in the universe. True power gives life and the opposite is death.”

The two living lumps of bagel in Gina’s body began erupting. Her legs shook. She couldn’t see Butterbur anymore but she could still hear him.

“That’s the greatest power in the universe, Miss Watson. It can never be faked. Love. It’s as simple as that.”

Mrs. Vaughn and the One That Got Away

Lies,
to hide the ugly truth.



Mrs. Vaughn and the One That Got Away

Last week she asked to be called Martha. Four days ago, she picked the name Sally. Because her fat husband slept with her two days earlier, she must pick a new name. Kelley.

“Jacob, where do you work?” Kelley asked the man standing in the door of the bathroom.

“The Hellfire.” Jacob wiped his chest with a white hotel towel.

She opened her small, pink notebook and scanned for a page. She wrote his name, her name, and the date, each in a different column. “Bartending?”

“Right, plus extra customer service on the side. Bartending doesn’t pay much.”

Kelley knew all of that. The friend who gave Jacob’s contact number gave her a little information about him. But still, small talks were inevitable. The ice needed to be broken.

Jacob put the towel on a chair and walked to the bed. Square face. Big eyes. Full lips. Lean with a well-defined six pack. Nicely trimmed pubes.

Average-sized dick. A grower, Kelley thought. Some other chicks would entertain Jacob inside their pussies if they bumped into him on the street. But not her. Not Kelley.

While drop-dead gorgeous, he still had to take a shower. They all had to take a shower. Kelley's rules, not theirs.

"Are you really married?" Jacob hopped in bed and crawled on top of Kelley, who put her notebook and pen under the pillow. He pulled the blanket concealing Kelley's body, only to find her in a black bra and panties instead of naked. Still, his erection grew.

She touched the gold ring on her finger. "Do you think this is fake?"

Jacob landed his body on top of hers and grinded his pelvis. "That's not what I meant," he whispered. He rubbed his face on her stomach, smelling her. "It's just very unusual for me to have married clients unless they're men."

"You've never had a married woman before?" Kelley pulled Jacob's hands to the clip of her bra.

"Never." He undid her bra and threw it on the floor. "You're beautiful. You look young. A small part of me still can't believe it." He pulled down her panties and threw them on the floor too.

She wrapped one leg around his hip. "Do you want me to remove my ring before we continue?"

Jacob glanced at the ring on her finger before returning his gaze to her face. He plunged his tongue into her mouth. “No. Keep it on.” They began.

He serviced her the traditional way, him on top. First, with no blanket. Second, under the blanket. Third, with no blanket again. Last, under the blanket once more. She let him take the lead, his mouth and tongue entwined with hers all throughout, breathing into her and sucking her. He gripped her arms, shoulders, and waist. He caressed and molested her breasts. He filled the bright room with his angry moans each time he came.

After the fourth time, he plopped next to her, went for a cuddle, and planted a kiss on her lips. “It feels like a dream.”

“What feels like a dream?” Kelley asked.

“This. You. Me.”

She pinched his left nipple. “It’s not a dream, Jacob. I’m real.”

They cuddled for ten minutes, Kelley tracing her finger on his chest to his tummy. Then she took her notebook and pen from under the pillow and started dressing.

“The dream is over,” Jacob said, not getting up.

She picked her copper shoulder bag from the dresser, pulled a white envelope from it, and loaded it with cash. “I loved it.” She handed the envelope to him. He opened it and counted the money. “That’s why I’m

being generous.”

He put the envelope next to him in bed. “Thank you. I’m glad you’re satisfied. I had a great time too. Hope you’ll call me again if you need me.”

“Sure,” Kelley said, knowing that wouldn’t happen. Ever.

It’s not that the sex wasn’t good. He made her come a lot without exhibiting other sexual positions. Most guys, especially her husband, fucked her missionary style but never hit the spot. Either they had to try it doggy style or she had to fake her moans. Jacob knew how to use his tool well. If her only intention was cheating on her husband, she’d make Jacob her illicit lover.

But his clock had begun. In two months. A month. Two weeks. Or a week if he got really unlucky. He’d die after their sex, like all the men before him sans her husband.

“It’s not necessary to save your money. Goodbye, Jacob.” She stepped out of the room, avoiding the four condoms on the floor, and closed the door.

She went to bed early that night to avoid talking to her husband. The next day, he caught up with her in their bathroom while she was washing her face.

“Why does my wife get younger looking every week?” He put his arms around her waist, planting a kiss on her neck.

“I have an excellent beauty regime,” she responded.

“Everybody’s going to envy Mrs. Miguel Vaughn again.” Her husband gave another kiss.

She released herself from her husband’s arms and returned to their bedroom. “I’m going to Feliciano’s school this afternoon.” Feliciano was their son.

“To meet the counselor?” His voice was muffled from the bathroom.

“Yes. Are you coming?”

“I can’t. It’s going to be a busy day. I may have to work very late tonight.”

“Do you want me to send dinner for you?”

“No. Don’t bother. I’ll eat at Dency’s tonight.”

After her husband went to work, she dialed a number on her phone. The other party picked up after two rings.

“Mrs. Vaughn,” said the voice from the other line.

“Henrietta,” Mrs. Vaughn spoke. “My husband had sex with me three nights ago. I thought you were keeping him busy.”

The younger voice shook a little. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Vaughn. I tried seducing him that night but after three nights in a row he wants nothing to do with

me.”

“He’ll be working late in the office tonight. Make yourself be seen but don’t be available for fuck’s sake. I want him to crave you again and away from me as long as you can.”

“Yes, Mrs. Vaughn.”

“Make sure there’s no other woman involved.” She ended the call.

Her mother-in-law insisted she take a driver with her in the afternoon, but she went to Feliciano’s school alone. She picked her seven-year-old son up from his class and walked with him to the guidance counselor’s office. A mother and a daughter had arrived earlier and kept the counselor busy. They waited in the lobby.

“Kids today are getting rowdy and undisciplined,” a man in the lobby said to her. A boy sat next to him, eyes transfixed on the tablet in his hands. “Do you think it’s time to upgrade the curriculum?”

She eyed him. Blue eyes. Sharp nose. Freshly shaved face. A bit of a potbelly. Hair that receded. Five years ago, he’d have been drop-dead gorgeous. Sitting on a bench across from them, he still had it. He didn’t wear any ring on his finger.

“I don’t think so. It’s the teachers who need an upgrade in their teaching methods and style,” she said.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe you’re wrong.”

She looked at Feliciano who had a comic book in his hands. “Maybe,” she said.

The man gave her a smile. She recognized it. She could always recognize it. The eyes gave them away.

“Where’s his mother?” she asked.

“We’re divorced. One year ago.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. We were incompatible anyway.”

“Is it okay for your son to hear that?”

“He doesn’t like her.”

The door of the counselor’s office opened, the mother and daughter walking out. A skinny man wearing thick eyeglasses appeared in the door and read from an index card. “Feliciano Vaughn.” She and Feliciano left the bench and followed him inside the room.

Mrs. Vaughn let the counselor speak for five minutes without interrupting before taking the stage.

“Mister Levy, the teacher reprimanded my child for making scribbles on his textbook. First, I paid for my son’s textbooks. This is not a public school where pupils only borrow textbooks and return them at the end

of each school year, in which I can understand writing on textbooks may not be allowed. Second, I am not going to let anyone hinder the growth of my child's imagination and curiosity. Nobody can tell my son to stop scribbling. Feliciano may be the world's next Van Gogh. Or da Vinci. Or Michelangelo. Or even Steve Jobs? But he'll never become like them if you let his creativity get stifled. You don't want to destroy the children's futures with the questionable actions of your faculty, do you?" Mrs. Vaughn stared at the counselor.

Feliciano stared at his mother with mouth wide open.

The counselor gulped and arranged his spectacles on his ears. "Yes, Mrs. Vaughn. You made good and valid points. I'll instruct our teachers not to be critical of their students. As long as they do their homework on it, it's okay to write and draw anything else on their textbooks."

She smiled at the counselor and fluttered her eyelashes. He ushered them out of his office, his hand lingering on her back on the way out.

"Julian Cross Jr.," the counselor read from his index card. The father and son got up from their bench. "Follow me inside please." The counselor disappeared in the room.

Mrs. Vaughn and Feliciano were six steps from the door when the father grabbed her arm. "Visit me at my place," he told her, handing over a small card. Julian Cross. Real Estate Agent. 194 Dapperling Drive. She took it, thanked him, and walked away.

She went to an Italian restaurant with Feliciano and her other son,

Fernando, for dinner. It was her paradise, only the three of them, no Miguel and no parents-in-law. A third son, Federico, would've been with them if only she didn't miscarry.

No more pregnancies, she had told Miguel. Too much heartbreak, she told the rest of the Vaughn family. Lies, to hide the ugly truth.

While she loved Feliciano, Fernando, and Federico, she didn't love the time she carried them in her womb. Sleeping with her husband made her ugly and carrying his spawn transformed her into something hideous. During her days of pregnancy, she wailed every time she saw herself in the mirror. Her friends told her it was normal but she didn't believe them. After becoming Mrs. Miguel Vaughn, her beauty fell into a slow descent of deterioration. With each pregnancy she went through, her fate became more obvious to her.

"It's not pregnancy. It's not motherhood. I'm sure of that," she had told her reflection in the mirror.

Four months after her miscarriage, the Vaughns replaced their retired family driver with the young, lean, and baby-faced Maxim. He drove her and the children to school every day.

"You remind me of someone, Maxim." She sat in the front and put one hand on his lap while he drove. They had dropped off the boys at school and were headed home.

Maxim briefly looked at the hand on his lap and squirmed in his seat. "Who would that be, Mrs. Vaughn?"

“The one that got away,” she said.

“I don’t understand, ma’am,” he said without taking his eyes off the road.

“I haven’t seen him in years. You remind me a lot of him when we were younger.”

“Where is he now, ma’am?”

She lifted her hand from his lap and pointed a finger to her chest. “In my heart where he’ll forever remain.”

He gave her a brief, intent look, a dead giveaway. She ordered him to abandon their usual route and go someplace instead. As soon as they arrived in their motel room, she undressed herself and helped him take off his clothes.

“Mrs. Vaughn...” The young man breathed deeply.

“I don’t know what you see in me, Maxim, as I’m past my best-looking phase, but I want you too.” She pushed him to the bed, went on top of him, and kissed his lips. “It’s going to be a secret between you and me.”

They made their first love in that drive-in motel that afternoon, her telling him where to touch her, to kiss her, to grope her, and to caress her. He obliged all the way, grateful for the good fortune that fell his way. They both came.

“You’re beautiful.” Maxim kissed her during their post-coital cuddle.

“You’re beautiful too.” She kissed him back.

The next day, after taking the children to school, she ordered him to drive to the motel again.

“I want you to do something different for me this time, Maxim,” she told him.

“Wasn’t I good yesterday, ma’am?”

“No. You were good, very good.” She squeezed his hands. “I want you to call me by a different name whenever we make love.”

“What name would that be, ma’am?”

“Scarlet.” She squeezed his hands tighter. “Call me Scarlet.”

Maxim stepped closer to kiss her, but she pushed him back.

“I want you to take a shower first,” she told him.

“Do I smell bad?”

“No. Let’s call it a form of christening. After you shower, you’re a new man. I’ll be calling you by another name.”

The young man obeyed. After drying his body with a towel, he pushed her into bed, his christening giving him some newfound bravado. He climbed the bed. They made love. They made love again. He whispered the name

Scarlet in her ears multiple times while she held tight to him, calling him by his new name Francisco.

The following day they went at it again. Every time they dropped off the boys at school, they'd drive to their secret paradise. When they returned home, they ignored each other, a temporary distance they'd make up for during their episodes of escape. Two weeks into their illicit affair, she finally believed what Maxim had been telling her every time they finished making love.

"You're back to your beautiful self again," her mother-in-law, who seldom said good words to her, told her one day during lunch. "Just like the way you were before you married my son."

"Thank you," she replied. "Getting over the miscarriage took a while."

Miguel also noticed her returned beauty and cornered her into having sex with him, their first since her miscarriage.

The following morning, her mother-in-law quipped during breakfast. "You looked prettier yesterday. What happened?"

Miguel happened. After two weeks of sex with Maxim in the afternoon and Miguel that one time in the evening, she figured it out. Then she hired Yolanda, the first woman before Henrietta.

"Sleep with him often and make him so tired that he'll no longer have the desire to lie with me," she told Yolanda.

It worked. She continued her affair with Maxim every afternoon. By evening, Miguel would either come home late or make his way directly to bed to sleep and snore. Her path toward the restoration of her beauty turned obstacle-free.

Then Maxim caught it, a disease, two months into their secret affair. He died soon. She couldn't even mourn him in public. They replaced him with another driver, an old man she'd never imagine sleeping with.

Miguel made her sleep with him frequently again. All the youth she and Maxim created began eroding. Her mother-in-law never failed to remind her. "You're looking stressed again. What happened? You were looking better."

She fired Yolanda and hired another woman. It only kept Miguel busy for a while before he came to her again asking for sex. She broke their bathroom mirror with a bottle of perfume one morning, upset that Maxim seemed to die for nothing.

One day, she overheard the mother of one of Fernando's classmates make a remark about her face to another mother. She instructed Maxim's replacement to go a different route. "Garcia, let's make a quick detour."

"What are we doing here, ma'am?" Garcia asked, looking up at the motel sign.

"You'll soon find out," she said.

She urged Garcia into the usual room where she undressed herself in

front of him.

“Ma’am!” He tried to look away.

“This is just between us, Garcia,” she told him. “My husband doesn’t have to know.”

“I—”

“Don’t you want me?”

Garcia shook his head but the bulge in his pants said otherwise.

She ordered him to take a shower before they went to bed. She asked him to call her Jenny while they made love. The older Garcia couldn’t compete with Maxim’s youth but he at least didn’t remind her of Miguel. He had muscles underneath some fat unlike her husband who was a total blob.

That night, as she gazed into the mirror, she saw some of her beauty restored. She asked Garcia to fuck her for the rest of the week. They did it for one more week, she in it for her beauty and Garcia in it for pure primal reasons. But then he got killed in a car accident. The Vaughns replaced him with a new driver, older than Maxim but younger than Garcia. She didn’t want to risk another driver of theirs dying again. She had to restore her beauty from somewhere else.

She bought a small, pink notebook and made four columns on the first page. In the first column, she wrote Maxim’s and Garcia’s names. In the second column, she wrote Scarlet and Jenny. She wrote the dates of her

first sexual encounters with Maxim and Garcia in the third column and the causes of their deaths in the last.

Gilbert and Melanie. He died from drowning in a lake. Marco and Beth. He died from a lung disease. Connor and Daisy. He got killed in a plane crash. Quinn and Penny. He died of food poisoning. Romeo and Zoe. He died from another disease. Esteban and Alessandra. He was stabbed to death by his brother.

There were more names, of boys and also of girls, none of which were repeated, and more deaths, some factual and some wild guesses. At the last row, there was Jacob and Kelley, his cause of death still pending. More names would be added, for she must maintain her beauty until the day of reunion with the one that got away, the only one who had the right to utter her real name—Lorraine Ysabel.

“You’re still awake. It’s very late in the evening.” Miguel entered their bedroom.

“Have you had dinner already?” She put her notebook under her pillow.

“At Dency’s, as usual. I give big tips. They love having me there.” He unbuttoned his shirt from the neck downward.

“Stressful day?”

“It was.” He changed into his pajamas and climbed into their bed.

He made love with her the traditional way. She faked her moans. He fell

asleep during their post-coital cuddle, his wild snores filling their room. She made a mental note to fire Henrietta before joining Miguel to sleep.

The following day, after taking Fernando and Feliciano to school herself, she diverged from the usual route home. She found herself knocking at the door of Julian Cross's house. He peered behind the door, wearing a white, sleeveless shirt. She smelled the scent of his hairy underarms.

"I'm glad you came, Mrs. Vaughn." He let her in.

"Not yet, but that depends on you and how good you are," she told him.

He led her to his living room and asked her to sit on the sofa.

"I thought you wouldn't visit." He sat across from her.

"What made you think that?" she asked.

"The last time we met, you had a ring on your finger."

"But you still gave me your card."

"I wanted to tell myself I tried and you're still wearing a ring on your finger."

"Do you want me to remove it?"

"Whatever suits you." He smiled. "I didn't get a chance to ask your name. Forgive me."

“Abby. Please call me Abby.”

Abby asked Julian to take a shower before they got down to business. She saw a TV news report of an accident at The Hellfire that burned the entire place down along with its employees and customers. She then undressed herself and waited for Julian on the sofa naked.

He returned from the shower with a towel on his waist. Upon seeing her already ready, he threw the towel on the floor and sat next to her. “We have a lot of hours to waste before we pick up our sons at school.”

“I got something special planned to keep us busy until then.”

He leaned closer and locked their lips in a kiss. “What convinced you to come here?” he asked.

“You remind me of someone special, the one that got away. He’d look like you if he was your age.”

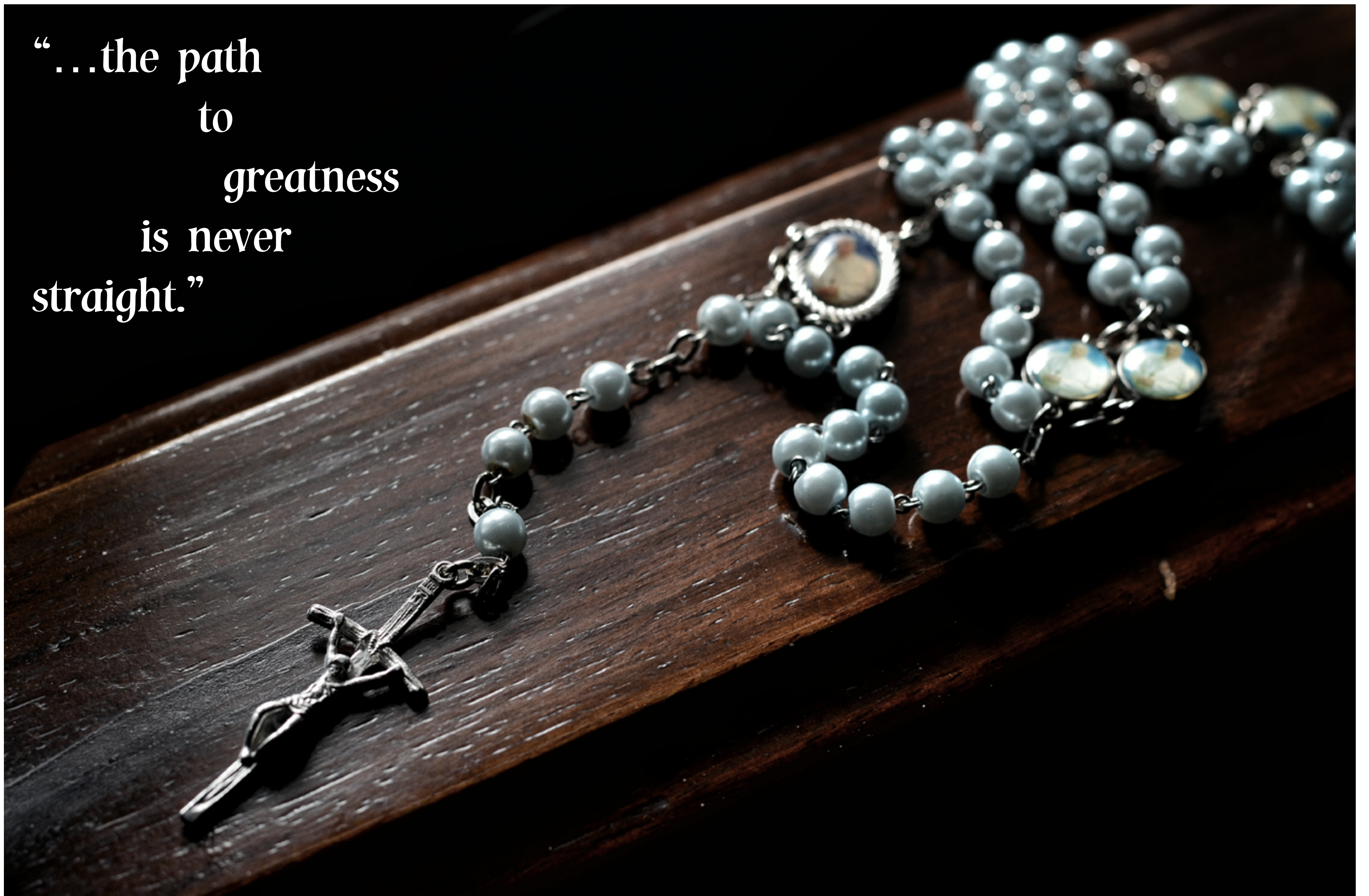
“Too bad he’s gone, but I’m here now. I’m not going away.”

“What if I tell you I’m a cursed woman? Sleeping with me will afflict you of my curse too.” She licked his lips.

“Curse? The only curse I see you have is unbelievable beauty. I want you to be mine from here on out.”

“I’m yours then.” She grabbed his chin and devoured him with a kiss.

“...the path
to
greatness
is never
straight.”



Alexander the Great Fool

Dear Father,

I hope you remember. It's me your eldest, your dear Alexander Paisley born on that cold afternoon of November in our small and dingy shelter.

In an old memory that's crystal clear, your and Mother's voices called me "dear." A lullaby she sang, then you spoke my name. Laughter erupted in our tickling game. Rich we were not but poor as dirt. You couldn't buy me more than four shirts. But we were happy. I remember. We were happy. We were a family.

Out of timbers you fashioned little me a crib. Mother, out of used clothes, constructed me a bib. From the leftovers you made horses and cars, airplanes and sharks, and a big bear and a big ark. And you were happy because I was happy.

One fair Saturday when I was three, up on your shoulders you mightily put me. Right next to the river, we took a stroll and stopped by a house elegant and tall. Tall trees. Strong walls. Bright windows. Proud roof. A pearly white mansion against the burning sky, impenetrable and rustproof.

Someday, you said, we'd be walking in a place like that. Someday, you said, we'd be sleeping in a place like that. Someday, you said, we'd be eating in a place like that. Someday, you said, we'd be living in a place like that. No more creaking door. No more hardwood. No more empty stove. No more leaking roof. To rise to heaven, one must be great. To ascend to greatness is a road that's not straight. But I'd get there, you said, Father. Someday, you said. Someday. And I was only three.

Three more Paisley children, Arthur, Alyssa, and Adrian, completed our family. You carried them up on your shoulders too. You brought them to the elegant mansion too. You promised them too, someday, someday, someday...

Someday we'd get there but until then, our Mother, dear Vanessa, must do the laundry of the wicked people who screamed in her face and tramped the clothes washed by Mother dear. Someday we'd get there but until then dear Arthur must wear his worn-out shoes yearly in school that caused calluses on the soles of Arthur dear. Someday we'd get there but until then dear Alyssa must endure the hair-pulling of the spoiled brat girls in our neighborhood who didn't like Alyssa dear. Someday we'd get there but until then dear Adrian must cry every night because we couldn't buy the medicine for our ill Adrian dear. Someday we'd get there but until then, our Father, dear Greg, must beg his employer to not withhold his money, rightfully earned with sweat and tears by Father dear. I could no longer wait for someday.

In the company of my friends who talked like me, who thought like me, and who felt like me, we declared battle against the invisible prison they called school. Rules were balls and chains for the fearful, clueless sheep.

They branded my friends and me as sinful. We robbed the principal's office, the bakery, the pawn shop, and the tailoring shop.

Words you told me when you found out, I shouldn't have heard. But I did.

Oh, Father, I still clearly remember when your stubborn, rebellious, and dear Alexander in the middle of that cold night of November abandoned your warm and full shelter.

With my friends, I ventured to the promising land of the city called Cinnabar, busy and grand. Goodbye to Verona. Hello new place. The promise of someday there I could chase.

Father, you should've been there and Mother too, seen the lights, the towers, and the planes that flew. The city celebrated its new renegades. With a boom box it called to us, "Don't be afraid."

No diploma. No schooling. No detractors. No family. Dear Alexander made it, a proud Paisley. Sleeping by day, waiting tables by night. What once was my bleak existence became a promising life. I could finally buy food and clothes for myself. It began, someday, that someday.

Then I met him. That man. Fancy clothing. He smiled. Gave me a tip. Asked for my name. After duty, we met again. A drink, he bought me, or two, or three. Told me a story of wealth, of celebrity. He worked with stars who drove fast cars. If I wanted, he could help me. Make everything easy.

He brought me to his friend who took photographs of men. Showed me

the money if I worked for him. Made me sign papers with the devil's ink.

They took photographs of me clothed and unclothed, sometimes by myself, sometimes with other men. I starred in films that you must never ever see, kissed the lips of many men, and exposed my flesh for all to see. I felt sick to my stomach and to somewhere deep inside myself. I'd shower to endlessly scrub my skin.

But then I got used to it, even tricked myself to love the sensations I felt when we pretended to make love. Everybody loved me, no room to hate.

A star in my own right, Alexander the Great.

Behind the scenes, men clamored for my attention. They dined me, clothed me, and even took me on vacations. I got used to it, my body not mine anymore. It was the price for that someday.

One night on the television I saw dear Arthur, semi-famous now. He'd always been bright. A renowned educator and commander of charity, he made you proud, elevated our family.

I said I'd never return to our family again. No longer your son, so innocent then. Now imprints of hands are all over my body. My soul's vilified. The city defiled me.

Then it arrived, the harbinger of doom, a strange feeling on my organ those men loved to groom. My harem learned of it, and so did my scouts. From our circle of pleasure, they kicked me out. Alexander the Great, from the sky he had fallen. The gifts they bestowed me miraculously got stolen.

The city that loved me cared for me no more and I found myself sleeping on an empty warehouse's floor.

I went to a church to ask for forgiveness and salvation from my life that turned to a mess. A woman holding a holy rosary knelt next to me and inquired about my misery. With her angelic face, I unabashedly shared the reason for my weeping.

She said a prayer. "Have you heard of the story of the prodigal son who returned to his father after his sinning was done? Dear Alexander, it's never too late, for the path to greatness is never straight."

What wouldn't I do to sleep again in my crib? What wouldn't I do to wipe my tears with my bib?

Oh, Father, would you still remember? It's me your eldest, your dear Alexander returning to Verona in the solemn November straight to our strange shelter.

Dear Father, when the door opened I couldn't remember your face having that man's dimples even when you were younger. Speechless at first, next I stuttered as I wondered what became of our shelter.

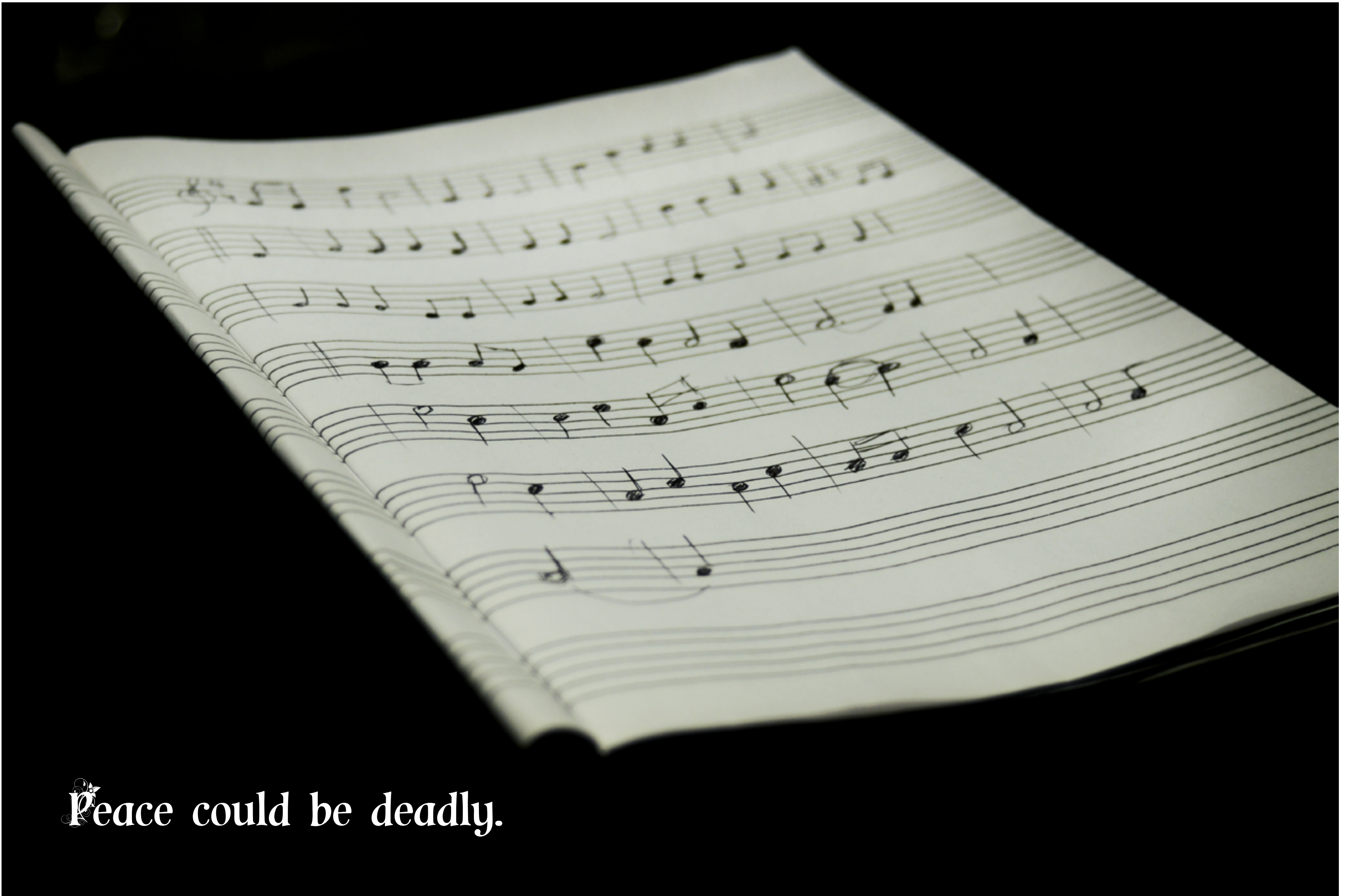
"The Paisleys have left many years ago," he said. "But there's two six feet below. Not here. You have a paper? I'll draw you a sketch to find the tombstones where their names were etched."

Dear sister, sweet Alyssa, how I missed your face! You were the first to go with the Angel of Grace.

Dear Father, forgive me. Please forgive my sins. Today is the day my new life begins. The someday I dream about is of us reunited. Reunited we'll be right after I'm dead.

Your son,
Alexander the Great Fool

Walden and Hyde



Walden and Hyde

They called her Wilma Walden. I loved and hated her my entire life.

Our parents delighted upon her birth, Wilma so beautiful after all, but they showed no delight in mine. They dared say nothing about it, but I knew all along what they thought about me. I was ugly.

The future of Walden babies became carved in stone as soon as their tiny, fragile, potato bodies left the hospital. Eldest brother Michael, the courtroom superstar. Older sister Nadine, the hospital superstar. Brother Fausto, the athletic superstar. Wilma, the creative superstar. Me? I just wanted to be a superstar.

Our parents put Wilma and me in a prison in Walden Manor. The dead spirits of Hamlet, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy guarded us from varnished bookcases on the walls of our bedroom. Easels, drawing books, watercolor, and a hundred crayons, from black to yellow, green to sand, and even gold to illuminati gold, served as our inmates. Wilma liked their company. I didn't. She took an early liking to pink and all its cousin colors: baby, orchid, and lavender (to name a few), letting them reign her early drawings. Once I tried to trick her into eating carnation pink to which she responded with a gush of sweet, delicate tears, "That's wrong." I ate it instead.

Then there was the piano.

The ultimate crime ever committed by any member of humankind was putting a grand piano in our bedroom. I didn't understand why my parents were not put to jail for that. I thought of other rooms they could've placed that filthy thing, like the library, where I secretly found my parents mating, or the visiting room, where Michael kissed one of our maids. Heck, the piano could've been in our kitchen, in our pool, in our parents' bedroom, or even in Nadine's smelly bathroom. There were many other places in Walden Manor where the piano could've lived. But no! It had to be in our bedroom, like a third girl ruining our company. Wilma's small and soft fingers played with it while I watched in horror and disgust as my parents peeked behind the door, diabolical grins on their faces as they listened to the noise Wilma created.

Then there was Ms. Breadsticks.

Her real name I didn't know and I never showed interest in finding out. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, her breadsticks-smelling perfume entered our room, signaling her arrival. Her two legs stood stiff. She'd grab my arm with her thick, long fingers, and her big nose with a darker tint neared me, as I tried to escape into the bathroom to puke. She and Wilma played the piano while my ears bled. Once, I threw one of the twenty *Romeo and Juliet* books at her to stop the torture. She slapped my hand and cursed me before leaving our room to my parents, telling them the lesson went well.

Then I found my secret garden. In Fausto's room.

Posters of men in black clothes and face makeup littered the walls. They boasted instruments I hadn't seen before, intriguing and mysterious, unlike Wilma's grand piano. They both scared and fascinated me. Fausto owned cassette tapes of those handsome freaks. I lodged them in his cassette player and let their music fill the entire room, energetic and noisy, reverberating my soul and cleansing me from the filth caused by Ms. Breadsticks. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I snuck into Fausto's room, played his cassette tapes, and jumped up and down on his bed with my fists up in the air.

But it didn't last long.

He caught me one Friday afternoon rolling on the floor to KISS's "Rise to It" and yelling, "Elisabeth, you never show your face!" He stopped the player and pushed me out of my paradise, saying, "My music is not for little girls. Go back to your room and play the piano."

Nadine passed by the corridor before Fausto slammed the door in my face and looked me up and down. She flipped her hair and walked away in silence. From that day onward, every time I saw her face, one word registered in my head. Bitch.

Things got worse. I lost access to paradise and Mommy enlisted Wilma in a piano-playing competition.

The flamboyant host called Wilma on stage. "Ladies and gentlemen, let's call our final contestant. She's the littlest and youngest piano player in today's event, only seven years old, Wilma Walden!"

The hundred spectators clapped in unison. Wilma appeared from backstage.

“Look at how delicate she walks on our stage with her cute pink floral dress,” the host continued. “Be careful, sweetie.”

Wilma sat by the piano, looked at the host, and to her family in the tenth row in the audience.

Daddy didn't move. Mommy prayed. Michael flashed a pen and a notepad. Nadine didn't move too. Fausto yawned. Me? My hands trembled.

“What composition are you going to play for us, sweetie?” The host put his mic in front of Wilma's mouth.

“*Canon in D*,” Wilma replied.

“Brilliant! Once again, let's give her a round of applause before she begins.”

The audience clapped in unison once more. Daddy didn't move. Mommy motioned the sign of the cross. Michael scribbled something. Nadine tried to suppress a yawn (but failed at it, stupid bitch). Fausto sported a “I don't give a fuck” face. Me? I wanted to pee. Wilma put her hands above the keys.

Then there was the apocalypse.

The first set of chords Wilma played rang in my ears. The second sliced

my eardrums like a chainsaw. The third sounded like a cacophony by the devil. Everybody's eyes were transfixed on Wilma, as if under a spell. I wanted to shut it all out.

The host's body twisted like a snake when he announced Wilma as the winner, beating the other nine older contestants. "We may have a prodigy on our hands, ladies and gentlemen. Never has someone played *Canon in D* like our sweet little Wilma Walden! Never! I'm star-struck!"

Everybody in the audience stood up. Daddy clapped. Mommy repeated, "She's my daughter!" fifty times. Michael exclaimed, "That's my sister!" Nadine tried to suppress a yawn (and failed at it again, stupid bitch). Fausto wore his "thank God it's over" face. Me? I really wanted to pee.

But that wasn't the end of it, the role of *Canon in D*.

Ever since the contest, Daddy and Mommy made Wilma play it for our house visitors: Daddy's business associates, Mommy's snooty sisters, some long-lost Walden relatives, and even to Michael's friends. I cursed the grand piano every time Wilma played it, but it was also a triumph for me. They finally moved the piano out of our bedroom to the visiting room. For the first time in seven years, sleeping in our bedroom felt peaceful.

Peace could be deadly.

Our family said goodbye to the grand piano, our bedroom, Fausto's cassette tape collection, and even Nadine's dresser full of stinky perfumes.

I had sleepwalked and accidentally set our library on fire.

In a few hours, the haven they called Walden Manor turned into a graveyard of red and charcoal. Daddy cried when the house he lived in throughout his life turned to dust in front of his very eyes. But the following day, with fists balled like a hammer, he told us we were abandoning Castleton to start anew in another place, Verona. “Don’t be scared. It’s all in the mind,” he assured us.

Goodbye Castleton. Hello Verona.

The death of the third girl, the grand piano, opened an invitation for a new girl in our life. A spectacles-wearing student saw Wilma picking a book from the fiction shelves in Verona High’s library and walked to us.

“Don’t befriend her,” I told Wilma. “She’s so uncool. Those grandma eyeglasses are ugly.”

“Hello.” The girl offered her hand. “I’m Sarah Montgomery.”

Wilma took it, ignoring my advice. “Hi! I’m Wilma Walden.”

“I’m the Queen of the Damned,” I said.

Grandma Eyeglasses squinted her eyes. “What?”

“Anne Rice’s *The Queen of the Damned*. Is it available here in the library?” Wilma asked her.

“I don’t know.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask the librarian.”

If I had known handshakes held some kind of power, I would’ve stepped in between them and bit off Sarah’s hand from her arm.

“What book are you holding?” Grandma Eyeglasses asked.

“*Romeo and Juliet*,” replied Wilma. “An unseen edition, at least for me.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve seen them once, you’ve seen them all.”

“I love *Romeo and Juliet*!” Sarah giggled. “I’m a hopeless romantic.”

I thought hopeless romantic translated to “desperate for love” not “desperate for a friend.” Grandma Eyeglasses latched on to Wilma everywhere she went, like a nasty chewing gum on the sole of a dirty shoe. The library. The auditorium. The clinic. The classroom. Even in our new and shiny Walden Manor (Verona version). Daddy and Mommy liked that Wilma found a new friend. Michael asked Sarah about books she read. Nadine looked her up and down saying nothing. Fausto didn’t give a fuck. Me? I had to give a fuck. I must protect our privacy.

“Don’t you miss the company of just you and me?” I asked Wilma one night before we went to sleep. A glow-in-the-dark solar system looked down on us from the ceiling.

“We’re always together. What do you mean?” she replied.

“Ever since that ugly girl entered our lives, we seldom have time to

be alone.”

Wilma pointed at the phosphorescent sun above us. “We’ll always be together no matter what. Even when we grow old, we’ll never be apart.”

“I fucking hate her grandma eyeglasses.”

“She’s an avid reader from a very young age.”

Grandma Eyeglasses didn’t go away.

I didn’t find a way to get rid of the nasty chewing gum. Sarah pestered us for the rest of the school year. Wilma found a fellow bookworm in her and welcomed her with no hesitation. But I found her a pretentious and ugly teenage girl using the facade of books to feel superior to others. She’d choose a random girl in class daily to criticize, from the girl’s hair to her voice to her penmanship to her walking style. If a girl didn’t like books, that gave Sarah more ammunition. Wilma allowed her to air her bitter insecurities without even considering making it stop. Wilma was a good girl who tried to see the good in other people, even if that meant finding a golden pea in a pool of black mud.

And then Wilma fell in love.

Not with Sarah, she’s not a lesbian. The following school year, new teenagers became fixtures in our lives: the big-breasted Paula Harper (which made me very insecure with my own breasts), the skinny Gina Watson and her boyfriend Herbert Novelli, the rag-wearing Arthur Paisley, the greasy walking bacon boy whose name I forgot, the pretty dull boy

Francisco Dioli, and Bernard White. Bernard spoke with manners, walked with austere, and breathed with sophistication, becoming Wilma's beloved apple. But Wilma's familiarity with boys was very outdated. She knew of the Shakespeares, the Robert Conan Doyles, and the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts of the world, but not the Whites. The next year, Bernard's attention went to a girl from another class named Joanna.

"Steal him away from the bitch!" I told Wilma the night Bernard introduced his girlfriend to the gang, three days after Junior Prom.

"That's wrong." She wiped the tears of her first heartbreak. "You don't have to call Joanna that word too. It's not her fault."

"Any girl who steals a boy from another girl is a bitch in my book."

"Bernard isn't mine. She's not stealing anything."

I gave Wilma the privilege of having the last say. She continued lamenting her unrequited love for Bernard White, never speaking about her feelings anymore to me. But I knew. I knew.

The big-breasted girl in our group, Paula Harper, came to a temporary rescue. Like an out-of-place vigilante in a gang of heroes, she helped distract Wilma away from her mourning. With fingers that were born to paint, she introduced Wilma to the world of painting. For years Wilma had favored the piano and the bookcases, burying her early interest in painting. But in Paula's home one lazy afternoon, she saw the work-in-progress paintings of the former, and The Muse of painting long dormant in her awoke after a very long slumber.

“I didn’t know you paint,” Wilma told Paula, looking closer at a painting that resembled a twisted, fleshy tree.

“I like keeping my hobbies very close to my heart,” said Paula. “People can’t decide whether to classify me as a tomboy or a sweetheart. Me being a painter would be the last thing on their minds.”

“To me now, you’re a tomboyish sweetheart who secretly loves painting.”

Paula let out her loud laugh, her trademark in our group. “Do you paint too?”

“No, but I’ve always been curious. The furthest I got was pink drawings with crayons. Then I stopped. I don’t know why. I just stopped.”

“You can always start again.”

I watched over the next few months Wilma spending more time with Paula to paint, twice after school days and once during the weekend. She brought paints and canvasses over to Paula’s and received free private lessons from the latter. Wilma didn’t tell Sarah. For once she did something right regarding her. None of the others knew too, only Paula, Wilma, and me. Paula painted with her fingers and watched Wilma learn with a brush, silently and artistically healing her heartache away.

And I liked Paula, not in a sexual way. Unlike Gina and Sarah who giggled softly and carried their textbooks with finesse, Paula played ball and slung her knapsack on her back with force. I didn’t agree with some of her taste in music. She loved Whitney Houston, but she didn’t shy from rocking

it out every now and then with me. She'd punch Francisco and Herbert on their chests whenever they teased her about her breasts, her silky ponytail billowing like a gown. I believed one or two boys from our group crushed on her, but it was another boy from class who got the score. He fondled her breasts and knocked her up before we graduated, disappearing with her from our town to avoid the wrath of their angry parents. I never saw her again. Paula left Verona with no diploma and an upcoming baby, but she had helped cure Wilma. She was my hero.

Then Wilma fell in love again, in college.

His name was Iñigo. He spoke with manners, walked with austere, and breathed with sophistication, very much like Bernard but more good-looking. The difference from last time was that he loved her back. In fact, he loved her first. He courted her and won her over. It didn't take long because of their chemistry. He was the oxygen to Wilma's hydrogen, two elements forming the perfect compound.

I watched with sinister satisfaction as the ugly girl Sarah found herself no longer wanted in Wilma's life, ejecting herself from the equation to find somewhere she belonged. Even I couldn't deny how much Iñigo made Wilma happy. For once I became open with the reality of Wilma and me becoming three.

In the presence of someone else, Wilma and I found some unexpected harmony. I even convinced her to participate in a plot to get Herbert kicked out of their first job at an advertising firm called Cylouvre, after she asked him to apply there to work with her. Things were getting so much better.

But I guessed there always had to be a pest in one's life. Peace couldn't last forever.

Her name was Felissa. We met her during Iñigo's birthday when one of his cousins brought his girlfriend along.

"Iñigo told me you used to play the piano when you were young," Felissa told Wilma after they got introduced to each other.

"I used to." Wilma smiled.

"Girl, I used to too!"

"What made you stop?"

"I just stopped liking it and turned my attention to something else. And you?"

"I naturally grew out of it."

I'd rather have Wilma loving the piano again as long as it kept the pest Felissa away from her. But people could bond over similar pasts they never shared together.

Since she was the girlfriend of his cousin, Iñigo didn't mind them hanging out together, even if that meant taking time away from him and Wilma. Felissa and Wilma went to malls, movies to watch repetitive chick flicks, salons to get their hair and nails done in different colors every month, and coffee shops to talk about their boyfriends, the chick flicks they

watched, and their new hair and nail colors. If they didn't talk on the phone every night about their irrelevant squabbles with their boyfriends, Wilma would be over at Felissa's house for sleepovers. I hated that place. It was so pink, lilac, and purple.

Then for the first time in my life, Wilma broke my heart.

After confiding in Wilma about her latest squabble with her boyfriend, Marcelo, over cookies and crocodile tears, Felissa offered her pinky finger. "Best friends forever?" she asked.

Wilma returned her own pinky finger. "Best friends forever."

"I've never had a best friend before. All the other girls are different. They don't understand me. But you do." Felissa hugged Wilma. "Thank you for listening to all of my silly heartaches."

All of those years we'd been together, Wilma never once called me her best friend. I had become the forgotten Walden after all. Daddy and Mommy never acknowledged me. Michael had no idea I existed. Nadine always looked me up and down. Fausto didn't give a fuck. For Wilma, it appeared I became the pest, the unwanted third girl. Wilma no longer had room for me.

Then I met him.

He sat alone in front of the bar with a glass of scotch in hand, his dark hair glowing in the dim light. To my left Felissa drank margaritas. To my right Marcelo and Iñigo gulped beers. Felissa was talking about how happy

she was with her and Marcelo's relationship when my mysterious man turned his head and caught me looking.

We exchanged stares and in that brief moment he knew me.

I got to know him too, like finding that other half of your soul that you'd been searching for your whole life. The ice that coated my heart for so long melted and it wasn't because of the margarita.

Wilma and I excused ourselves from our table saying we had to freshen up, passing by the bar and the mysterious man. Wilma pushed the door of the girls' washroom and walked to the sink and the mirror, chanting, "Wilma. Wilma not. Wilma. Wilma not. Wilma. Wilma not. Wilma."

"Wilma not," I interrupted her. From the sink, I walked straight to an empty stall, closed my eyes, and counted to three. When I opened my eyes, my mysterious man had entered the stall and was standing right in front of me. Our bodies pressed together, I felt his warm breath on my face.

We locked lips, him putting a hand on my cheek and me grabbing his hair with my pink-manicured fingers. Our tongues entangled and twisted. His hand snaked its way under my blouse and fondled my breasts. He suppressed my moans with his lips on mine before we broke apart, allowing him to slobber my neck.

I pulled down the pants of my mysterious man and went down on him, my pink lips savoring the meaty flesh of his member.

After a few minutes, Wilma and I returned to our table where the

other three were waiting. Wilma reeked of perfume. I was invigorated by the seed of my mysterious man going down my digestive system and his number in my pocket.

His name was Rex.

I stopped caring about Wilma, Iñigo, and me. I just let them be. Rex's occupancy in my life for the next few months made me realize I could live without Wilma. She could busy herself with Iñigo while my world revolved on Rex's. I felt free.

And we had lots of great sex.

Every other night he abused me and used me like a doll in cheap motels. He'd throw me on the floor, strangle me in the bathroom, and put me in other compromising positions that never failed to turn me on. If we weren't drunk, we were high on blunt. We'd spend the rest of the night roaming the city on his motorbike and eat hotdogs for a late dinner.

"What if I tell you that I have a boyfriend?" I asked him one night after he had finished unloading himself on my breasts.

He lay next to me and gave me a kiss. "Bad girls turn me on."

"So I'm a bad girl?"

"I knew it from the moment I saw you."

"How did you know? I had pink nails and pink lipstick."

Rex grinned. “I can read minds.”

He asked me to take his toy from his backpack and gave me permission to play with it inside him. His eyes rolled while he groaned and I fell in love with him more after witnessing that. A man so vulnerable and confident was exactly what I wanted. After the play, we cuddled.

“Give me more proof that you can read minds.” I ran my fingers on the hairs on his chest.

“Felissa,” he spoke. “She’s totally into Iñigo. It’s all over her eyes.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Remember the night we caught each other’s eyes?”

“Yes.”

“I saw a woman hiding behind her pink nails, pink lipstick, pink dress, and a pair of sad eyes. She yearned to be set free.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Is she free now?”

“Almost, baby.” Rex moved on top of me and wiped my tears with his warm finger. “Almost.”

I believed him.

The following evening I dragged Wilma to Felissa’s unit. She was seconds

away from rapping on the door when she pulled her fist back. She buried her face in her hands. “I can’t do it. She’s my best friend.”

“We talked about this over and over this morning. We already made a decision,” I told her. “She’s planning to steal Iñigo from you next. Her closeness to you is part of her master plan.”

She sobbed. “That’s not true. We have no way of proving that.”

“I can prove it.”

“How?” Wilma stopped crying.

“Rex.”

“Rex?”

“My boyfriend.”

“Your boyfriend.”

“He knew her.”

“He doesn’t know her.”

“Rex can read minds.”

“Nobody can read minds.”

“He fucking read mine!”

Wilma and I fell to the ground. Her stomach flat against the cold concrete, Wilma crawled away from the door. “Elisabeth, no,” she whimpered.

I crawled backwards, ruining my manicure with dirt. “Wilma, no.”

“I can’t do it,” she cried, her arms shaking as she continued her attempt to get away. “Don’t make me do it. Please. I beg you.”

The door of the next unit burst open. An old lady peered from it. “Young lady, what’s the ruckus? I’m trying to get an early night’s sleep.”

“My phone fell on the floor,” I said, getting up.

“People today and their obsession with cell phones. Hush now and scoot along,” the old lady crowed before slamming her door.

I memorized her unit number.

“The kind, old lady has nothing to do with this.” Wilma’s voice quivered.

I balled my fists. “You can’t do it. You don’t want to do it. You will never do it. Go now, Wilma.” After two decades of living together, I knew it was time to say goodbye.

She took a step back from me. “Elisabeth, I—”

“Just go!”

I turned around. Wilma was running away from me, already five feet ahead. It felt weird seeing her like that but my feet made me go after her. My hand grabbed her hair and pulled her down on the ground.

“Elisabeth, let me go,” she said.

“I should be the one saying that.”

I towered over Wilma and ripped her clothes away from her body. The sole of my boots flattened her stomach and then her mouth. With my two hands, I banged her head several times on the ground, blood smearing the nearby pavement. Like brittle, little crayons, I broke her arms and legs into little pieces. For the finale, I peeled her face from her head and tucked it inside my jacket. The next time Iñigo and I would make love, I’d wear it so he wouldn’t know the difference. Perhaps I could teach him to loosen up in bed and be more experimental. I’d borrow Rex’s toy and start from there. Then after he unleashed his animal, which we all possessed, I’d convince him to a ménage-a-trois with Rex. Just thinking about it put me on the verge of an orgasm.

I stepped over Wilma’s dilapidated body thinking of Rex. “I’m free, baby. I’m free.” Tears of happiness dropped on the bloody ground. I wanted to scream and leap for joy but decided to save that for later.

I walked to the old woman’s door and made an X mark with Wilma’s blood on it, making a mental note to gut the old crow later.

Finally, I rapped on Felissa’s door. It took three tries before she opened it. “Best friend! You didn’t tell me you were coming,” she greeted me.

“If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?” I said, hoping she sensed my sarcasm.

“Yes. You’re right. Come in. The corridor is quite dark. It’s brighter inside with my favorite colors all over the place, our favorite colors rather. “

I stepped inside her place. The sight of it instantly made my blood boil.

“What made you drop by?” Felissa closed the door behind us.

“Iñigo,” I said with my back turned from her.

“Did you two have a fight? Did you break up?” she asked in a sweet voice. An image of a tray of pink macarons filled my head.

“No. Of course not. Why would such a thing happen?”

“Well, sometimes relationships go sour.” The pink macarons were replaced by lilac bonbons.

“Do they?”

“They do.” The pink bonbons were erased by small, purple, sugar-coated gummies.

I faced Felissa and grinned. The gummies disappeared.

“Wilma,” Felissa moaned when she saw my real face for the first time. It was the last word she ever said. She didn’t even get to cry her crocodile

tears.

Her place, her pink, lilac, and purple place, that afternoon became red.
It became a very dark red.

Lucky

Life's bored of denying you opportunities
and now it had a change of heart.



Lucky

Lucky. That's what they called me. So I named myself that. My father, the owner of the hotel, he in the dark gray suit, said I should be that. My mother, standing next to my father as his business partner, reiterated I should be that. Their friends, faces I only glimpsed, for they kept twisting and turning, some yawning, some smiling, agreed I should be that. Two teenagers standing next to Mother, a brother and a sister, but siblings we were not, nodded that I should be that. The odd man in a white, billowing robe, splashing water on my bed, curtains, dresser, mirrors, and lamps, uttered a rigid invocation and prayed I should be that. They showered me with gold and silver coins, some clapping and some repeating my name, Lucky. I would bring them money.

Then they bolted through my door never to be seen again.

Later in the afternoon two women visited me, one tall and thin, the other plump, and both wearing identical dark gray and maroon uniforms with a name plate on the chest. They rummaged around stealing my gold and silver coins. When they headed out, they didn't call me Lucky. They called me by a different name, 313.

I chanted my name while waiting for someone to come see me again.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky.

My door opened. A father stepped in towing his little girl. He wore a suit, but not as nice as my father's, and he called me by that other name, 313. The little girl, glowing like an angel straight from heaven, looked up at me and smiled. She hugged a plastic doll in one hand and held her father's hand with the other. He pushed their luggage against one of my corners and dialed for room service on my telephone. Minutes later, a man in dark gray and maroon clothes brought a tray of spaghetti, garlic bread, and pineapple juice inside. The father surfed the television for cartoons while his little angel ate in my bed.

The little angel fell asleep after eating. The father kissed her forehead,

pulled a blanket over her, and took the tray of dishes off the bed before stepping outside the room. Darkness from the sky poured through my windows when he returned. He asked the little angel, asleep no more and glued again to the cartoons, what she wanted for dinner. Chicken, she said. He switched off the television, picked her up, and went outside again.

He brought a bottle of wine when they returned. Then he gave the little angel a bath, dressed her in a pair of pink pajamas, set her to bed, and kissed her good night on the forehead. He walked to the veranda outside with the wine and sat on a chair, looking away from me. There was a pop and soon the man was talking to someone on his phone, taking a sip from his bottle every minute or two. He participated in a cycle of yelling, cursing, weeping, getting up from the chair, and sitting back on it for an hour, never letting go of the bottle in his hand. He slurred most of his words with the exception of a few he spoke with passion. Cheating. Best friend. Custody. Divorce. Then he stopped talking and stood crying for a minute. After that there was the sound of glass breaking as he threw the bottle to the ground.

He turned to my door and walked casually toward it. Behind him, a shadow of a demon slithered up from the floor, where the bottle broke, forming a silhouette of a man, then disappeared on his back. The man's eyes were as dark as the night outside when he entered my room again, the little angel looking at him from the bed awakened by his ruckus.

She spoke his name with sweetness and sadness and that's when he made a mad dash to her, leaving a black trail of scum on the floor. One of his fists landed on the little angel's arm, another on her face. He grabbed her and shook her by the shoulders, screaming the words he spoke with

passion a while ago.

Tears fell down from the little angel's eyes to my white bed sheets. She cried and begged her father to stop but her real father was no longer in the room. The red demon kept swatting her face and arms with his scaly hands and long brown nails. She cried and cried and cried until tears couldn't fall from her eyes anymore. Then the red demon disappeared, leaving an unconscious figure on the bed, the little angel's father, lying face down.

The little angel hopped off the bed and flew out the door despite my calling of her.

Sun pierced my room through the open window, stirring the father awake. He called for his daughter, then looked around the room when he didn't get any response. He called somebody on my telephone, went out, came back, called somebody on his phone, changed clothes, and left, taking their luggage with him.

When my door opened, a man and a woman in identical dark gray and maroon clothes walked in. They counted the things in my room, then changed the bed sheets, blankets, and pillows. They scrubbed the bathroom, wiped the wall, and vacuumed the room. But the black scum left by the red demon's feet remained on the floor.

My door opened again, a man and a woman stepping in. She wore a black, slim dress and a pair of red stilettos. He wore a tight, black shirt and a pair of worn-out jeans. The woman called me 313 when he closed the door. He undressed and went to the shower per her request while she walked to the mirror to admire herself.

Her reflection showed a myriad of sad and disfigured small faces forming her head, in contrast to the pinkish cheeks and pearly white teeth facing the mirror. She stepped away from the object of vanity, stripped to her underwear, took a small, pink notebook and pen from her bag, and climbed my bed, covering herself with the blanket.

The sound of water falling from the shower ceased and the man emerged with a towel in hand.

She asked him where he worked as he wiped his chest with the towel, and wrote his answer in her notebook.

Then he joined her in bed. He asked if she was truly married. She was. The woman touched the gold ring on her finger. "Do you want me to remove my ring before we continue?"

He said he didn't mind, then he plunged his tongue into her mouth, the entire room slowly heating.

Like two vines fighting dominion over space, their arms and legs intertwined with each other's. She spread her legs and let him enter. Moans and groans bounced off my walls while my bed trembled with illicit ecstasy.

Floating above them, an uninvited party appeared. A creature with red skin and small, feathered wings. From its body sprouted two heads, one a man's, the other a woman's, and two pairs of arms and legs. In the center of its legs were an erect penis and wet vagina.

The man continued gyrating his hips while she kept moaning, entwined

lovers unaware of a third presence.

The lovers made it into four rounds, never changing positions except for the blanket. After each round, the floating creature sprouted two more arms, two more legs, another erect penis, another wet vagina, and two more heads, a man's and a woman's.

When the couple was finally exhausted, the winged creature had eight arms, eight legs, four penises, each dripping with purple fluid, four vaginas, each swollen to a dark shade of pink, and eight heads. The eyes on each head rolled and the tongues lolled out of the mouths, sending gray saliva down on the naked bodies below.

The couple cuddled for a few minutes before the woman got up and dressed. She handed him a white envelope filled with money. He told her she could call him again whenever she wanted before she walked to the door. When she was gone, the red winged creature disappeared.

"What luck," he said, counting the money he received. Then he spent an hour in bed commenting on his good fortune and if it was possible for him to fall in love.

When his stomach made some noise, he dressed himself and left. He came back hours later smelling like chlorine and alcohol, and plopped asleep in my bed. While he was asleep, a hooded creature appeared. He had no face, or at least I couldn't see it. He stared at the sleeping man for a few minutes before disappearing, doing him no harm.

The man left the next day. Then two men wearing identical dark gray

and maroon clothes visited me. They counted the things in my room, then changed the bed sheets, blankets, and pillows. They scrubbed the bathroom, wiped the wall, and vacuumed the room.

But the black scum on the floor remained along with a new purple stain in my bed.

My next visitor didn't mention my name when he arrived. He inspected my every nook and cranny before sitting on the edge of the bed for hours keeping still. A rotten putrid stench emanated from inside his suit, which was not as nice as my father's but nice nonetheless. The room's light cast a small, glittering spot on his bald head.

Hours later, the door opened. A woman entered with a briefcase in hand. She walked in and opened the briefcase next to him. He took the brown envelope on top of a stack of money in the briefcase and poured its contents on the bed: a few pictures of a different gentleman, some documents, a key, and a few IDs.

She took off her sunglasses and eyed the barcode on the back of his nape as he checked the photos one by one. Then he read the documents, inspected the IDs, and nodded to the woman. She left without the briefcase and he sat on the edge of the bed until the following morning.

One man and one woman in identical dark gray and maroon clothes visited me once the bald man was gone. They made up the room in the same routine. But the black scum, the purple stain, and the rotten, putrid stench all remained.

Two guys walked through my door the next time it opened, one older, another younger. They ordered food I knew couldn't fill their bellies. They watched the television and picked at their food, every now and then answering phone calls and speaking of my name to the caller. Another guy arrived, about the same age as the young one. Then another guy came in, a little older but not that old.

When the sun disappeared outside, seven of them occupied the room. They turned off the television, dimmed the lights, and took off their clothes one by one. The oldest guy grabbed the youngest. The other older guy grabbed the other young one. Two younger guys began making out with each other. And the seventh guy snaked himself in between the second pair.

They took advantage of each other's bodies, giving and taking pleasure alternately, each pair breaking up to pair with another, and the odd guy inserting himself between the pair of his choosing. They lumped their sweaty and smelly bodies in my one and only bed.

Each time they made a new pair, their naked bodies morphed into something animal-like. The oldest guy became a humanoid pig with the youngest who turned into a furry bear-like creature. When partnered with the other old guy, he morphed into a bulky Doberman. Some turned into hybrids. The youngest partnered with another young one who had an upper body of a crocodile with the lower body of an ostrich, his partner a grasshopper and crab hybrid.

At some point a pair took ownership of the floor while another escaped into the bathroom. They defiled each other, their partners crying out,

telling the other to stop and to not stop at the same time.

When they left, gelatinous goo of brown, yellow, and green decorated the room like splattered watercolors on my wall.

Two women in identical dark gray and maroon clothes came to do what others who wore the same clothes did before. But the black scum, purple stain, rotten putrid stench, and the gelatinous goo all remained.

My next visitor pushed the door, uttering my name in a slow, monotonous voice. “Three... One... Three...” She went straight to the window, rejoiced at the sight of the full moon proud in the sky, and drew a big circle on the floor with a piece of chalk. One by one, she placed candles and crystal along the circle’s outline, the thick collection of bracelets on her wrist chiming with every piece. She stepped in the boundary she built, sat Indian style in the middle, and lighted the candles with a match before withdrawing into a trance. The lights switched off and an eerie, wet atmosphere invaded the room with her soft incantation acting as a funeral march.

A gust of wind put out the candles, causing the woman to stand. She surveyed the room as if expecting another presence. But there was none aside from her and me. Then a red hole opened beneath her, gobbling her down into a sea of molten rocks and flames below, along with her candles and crystals. She let out a scream that nobody heard, and the hole closed, drawing a scorched orange circle on the floor.

Three days later, two men in identical dark gray and maroon clothes opened the door with a man from the security department. They searched the room, under my bed, in the dresser, and in the toilet, but found nothing.

Three days later, my door opened once more. A fat and balding man who looked older than his age walked in, his big eyes scanning me. “Three-one-three. This is room three-one-three,” he said, holding a small card in his hand.

A small woman appeared behind him and closed the door. “Of course. It says so on the number outside and the key worked.”

The man dived for the television’s remote controller and surfed the channels. The woman went to the bathroom, sniffed the soap and the shampoo, and shrieked. “Babe, there’s a bathtub!” She turned the faucet on, letting a little water fall.

“We have fruits, candy bars, and sodas in here,” the man said, his head emerging behind the small fridge door. He grabbed two Twix bars, gave one to the woman who joined him, and unwrapped the other for himself. “This is going to be a fun night.” He took a small bite of chocolate and gave her a quick kiss.

“It will be,” she said.

They slipped on their swimming clothes and left me, then returned by nightfall. They showered separately, changed into a new set of clothes, and went out for dinner. Just before midnight, they made love in my bed, sweet and genuine love. They didn’t possess the shape and size of the earlier couple who made love in my bed. Their bumps and rolls made deep dents in my bed, but when they kissed, crystalline hearts sprouted from the floor. A faint, powdery smoke of red gushed from openings on the crystals whenever they stared into each other’s eyes. When they both

came, a song of a nightingale could be heard outside the window. They switched to a cuddle, his arms around her as she breathed right next to his skin.

“I wish Tabby was here,” the man said. “She’d love the pool and the slides.”

“And the pecan pie we had for dessert,” added the woman.

“That too. If it wasn’t for Shirley’s family reunion, Tabby would’ve been here.”

She put a finger on his nose. “Hey, don’t ruin your mood by thinking about your ex-wife. We can talk about Tabitha, but not her. Besides, I’m sure we’ll get to spend special time with her like this.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Last month you got a new job. Three weeks ago your loan was approved. Two weeks ago we found a new place with lower rent. Then last week, you won this free three-night stay here at Astrapia Resort. You can’t even remember joining the raffle in the contest.”

“Yes. I still can’t remember.”

“Don’t you get it? This is the beginning of your lucky streak. Life’s bored of denying you opportunities and now it had a change of heart.”

“Maybe soon I can get to spend more time with my daughter instead of settling for seeing her thrice every month.”

“You will. I believe.”

He pecked her on the cheek. “I think I should now call you Lucky Linda. Ever since you came into my life, good things began happening.”

“I love you too, Alastair.” She smiled, then kissed him on the lips.

They fell into a serene slumber, their warmth slowly purifying the room. The purple stain in my bed diminished. The black scum on the floor melted and dried. The gelatinous goo on the wall hardened to brittle powder before a cool breeze blew into the room to cleanse the air, getting rid of the rotten putrid stench as well. The scorched orange circle in the floor disappeared too. I looked just like how I was, when I welcomed my first visitor.

The couple spent most of the following day outside, hanging by the pool. By afternoon, they returned to watch some television while eating candy bars and drinking soda. They showered together, made love in the bathtub before going out for dinner. I wanted them to stay in my room, forever, and never go away.

My door opened again. Only Linda returned, smelling a little of alcohol. She went to bed and slept for an hour before somebody knocked outside the door. Linda woke up and opened the door. A man in a red shirt was waiting.

“Herbert!” Linda exclaimed.

“Hi, Linda.” Herbert made a half-empty smile. “Is Alastair here? We were supposed to meet a while ago.”

“I thought he was with you when I left you two.”

“He was but he left to follow you here in your room. He said he had to get something and that he’d be back. He hasn’t returned. I haven’t seen him since.”

“Really?”

“I texted him and even tried to call. No response. I just wanted to check if he’s okay after our conversation a while ago.”

“No. He hasn’t returned yet. I wonder where he went. Let’s find him together.” Linda stepped out of the room and locked the door.

Silence.

Empty.

A sinister vibe crept into the room.

I didn’t know how they got in, not through the door and not even through the windows. Surely I would know. But Alastair appeared in my bed next to Herbert, except he wasn’t the man Linda went out with but someone who looked exactly like him and in some unexplainable way felt like the same man before.

The man stood up and pulled aside the curtains of the windows. He wore a red shirt too. “Don’t worry. You’ll soon join Gina, Sarah, Arthur, and Wilma where you all belong. In hell,” he said very casually.

“You killed them?” Alastair tried to get up but his head plopped to the pillow.

The other man took some small, red fruits from the pocket of his jeans and threw them inside his mouth. “Yes, Alastair. I killed our friends. I killed Gina, Sarah, Arthur, and Wilma. You’re next. Your lucky streak ends tonight.”

The entire room turned red and that’s the last thing I remembered. I was back in silence.

Linda returned to the room past midnight with the first man in red. The other Herbert. She found Alastair’s body in the bathroom, his head inside an overflowing toilet bowl. Herbert caught her as she fainted to the floor, a blank expression on his face, looking at Alastair’s corpse.

Men from the security department came bustling in. Later, the police. They took Linda and Herbert away. I thought of Tabitha who would never see her father again, then tried to cry even though I had no eyes to draw tears from.

They took pictures of me and lifted Alastair’s body out of sight.

One man and one woman in identical dark gray and maroon clothes visited next. They counted the things in my room, then changed the bed sheets, blankets, and pillows. They scrubbed the bathroom, wiped the wall, and vacuumed the room. But the purple stain in the bed, the rotten putrid stench of the air, the gelatinous goo on the wall, the black scum, and the scorched orange circle on the floor, and Alastair’s hand prints on the toilet

bowl, they never cleaned them.

They couldn't clean them at all.

But they weren't blood.
They looked like stains of juice.



Little White Boys

The boy tightened his arms around me. “Zero!”

My copper neurons sent a signal to my steel mouth. A deep buzzing voice came out of it. “Master,” I said.

The boy let go of me. “Hi! I’m Kevin White.”

I bowed down to the floor. “Master.”

He giggled. “Don’t call me master. My name is Kevin. Call me Kevin.”

“Kevin,” I repeated.

The boy ran to a two-level wooden structure behind him, a bunk bed, which stood next to the wall. He entered the first level and pulled a white piece of clothing concealing a lump. Kevin helped the lump up. It was a second boy. “LJ, we have a new toy. Come. See him,” he said.

He leaped off the bed, dragging the second boy toward me. “Oh!” LJ extended his short arm. I stood from the floor. The boy yelped and hid behind Kevin, a lock of brown hair trembling over his shoulder.

“Don’t be scared, brother LJ,” said Kevin. “He’s our new toy Zero.”

LJ peered over his brother’s shoulder, brown eyes staring at me.

“I’m sorry, LJ. I didn’t mean to startle you,” I said.

Kevin pushed his brother toward me. “Go on. He’s not going to harm you.”

I offered my blue left hand to LJ. He took it with his two small hands, then glanced at Kevin.

“He’s our friend. I told you,” said Kevin.

“Where did Mommy and Daddy buy Zero?” LJ spread his fingers on my palm.

“No. They didn’t buy him!” Kevin rushed to their bunk bed and climbed the second level. He grabbed a white piece of clothing, tied to a small lump under his pillow, before descending back to us. He untied the cloth and placed it on the ground. Small, red circles glinted with the light of the moon. “These are the fruits in Daddy’s jar in the kitchen.”

LJ inspected the fruits. “I know that. You stole them.”

“No. I didn’t steal. I just took them.”

“Does Daddy know?”

“No. There’s still too many left in his jar. I just took a few.”

“Why did you get them? Daddy told us they’re not food for children. He’ll get angry when he finds out you stole them.”

“No. I stole nothing. That’s dumb. Daddy will not find out.”

LJ looked at his brother and then the fruits.

“You’ll see.” Kevin picked four red circles and popped them in his mouth. He chewed with his eyes closed.

I counted with my inner clock before he opened his eyes and empty mouth. Four.

“iPad,” he said. Silver lights flashed in the room. Something thudded on the floor next to the fruits. Kevin picked up the square object that appeared and gave it to LJ.

“Woah!” LJ’s mouth turned into the shape of an O.

“It’s an iPad, dummy.”

“I know.” LJ swiped the surface of the object with two fingers.

“Does Daddy know—”

“I told you. He doesn’t know I took some.”

“—about the magic?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does Mommy know?”

“I don’t know. They will not know. We’ll keep it a secret.”

LJ placed the iPad on the floor. “Okay. But I want my own robot.”

Kevin tied the white clothing. “No. We cannot have two Zeros.”

“Why?”

“We can’t hide two robots in our room. Mommy will find out.”

“She’ll find out anyway.”

“That’s why we’ll keep it our secret.” Kevin climbed the bunk bed with the lump of red fruits in hand.

“We can hide him under my bed, or under the rug, or behind the door.”

“No, LJ. No.” Kevin came down the wooden ladder, white clothing out of sight. “One robot is enough.”

“Not fair.” LJ frowned.

“You’ll see.” The older boy walked to me. He motioned me to kneel and

whispered into my ear. Then he walked to LJ, grabbed his hand, and led him to the wall.

“Why are we here?” the smaller boy asked, the moonlight making him appear older than his brother.

Kevin opened the double windows. “We’re going out.”

I got up and sped to the boys, my steel feet as quiet as butterflies in the night. I scooped them with my two big hands and kicked off through the window, plummeting to a row of magnolia shrubs below. My engine revved up as my pink and yellow legs turned into wings and the rest of my body into a big carrier, propelling me to the sky in time without incurring any harm to Mrs. White’s flowers. I had no experience on how to fly or even how to reconfigure my body but my brain dictated everything in a stream of i’s and o’s. The two boys settled on separate chairs inside me. Neither was able to break the silence of the night during our brief descent.

Kevin and LJ looked at the roof of their house through the windows from their seats. Then the neighbor’s. Then the neighbor’s neighbor’s. Then the neighbor’s neighbor’s neighbor’s until all the roofs of the entire neighborhood seemed like little blocks of toys for their eyes. They pointed at random roofs yelling out different names.

We soared in the night sky beyond the aerial space of their familiar town and to the neighboring Cinnabar City. Even in the heart of the night, we were welcomed by bright lights, unlike the dim town of the little White boys. Red. Blue. Yellow. Silver. Gold. Green. Some still. Some moving. The towers and skyscrapers followed us with their eyes, curious whether

the visitors came to harm them or not. Stoplights and vehicles created twinkling lights below while humans walking added familiar life. “Oohs” and “aahs” oozed from the boys’ mouths as we navigated around the city.

“Is this where Uncle Francis works?” LJ asked.

“Yes. This is where Uncle Herbert works too,” said Kevin.

“Is he here right now?”

“He’s sleeping, dummy.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know.”

“Can they see us from below, Zero?”

I answered the younger boy through the speakers in the carrier. “No they cannot, LJ. I have a security system that will keep us from detection.”

“Cool!”

“Stop asking stupid questions,” Kevin told his brother.

We flew over Cinnabar for fifteen more minutes, the two boys sightseeing in silence, and then headed back to their bedroom.

I was back to my normal form and size when Kevin ushered me inside

their large closet.

“You sleep here so that Mommy will not see you,” he said, patting my arm before stepping out of the closet to close its doors.

I imagined him climbing up to his bed, on the second level of their bunk. LJ was already asleep on the first level bunk.

I didn’t sleep. I turned off my vision and reset my timer. 1:00... 2:00... 10:00... 15:00... I heard a soft knock on the door of the closet. 16:00... 17:00... Next to the dry shirts hanging to my right, something moist disturbed me. I turned on my vision again. 19:00... A gray, smog-like being slithered into my head when I swiveled it to the right. Piercing sounds echoed inside, slicing my wires, gears, and widgets. 0:00.

I was back in the middle of the room, standing. Kevin had his arms wrapped around me. Moonlight gleamed from the opened window, making Kevin’s hair glow a little. 1’s and 0’s told me it was the following day.

“Why are you crying, Kevin?” I asked him.

“Somebody tried to kill you, Zero,” LJ spoke, sitting on his bed.

“We found you broken into small pieces this morning before we went to school,” said Kevin. “We hid your bits inside my T-shirt so Mommy would not find you. What happened to you?”

I recalled the smog-like entity making a passageway of my mouth and the

painful sound inside me. I was sure it had been responsible for attempting to destroy me. Children didn't need to know about that.

"I broke down," I replied. "I needed repairing."

Kevin wiped his tears and flashed a smile. "You will not break down again. I upgraded you."

"With Daddy's fruits," added LJ.

I looked at my body. My arms and legs weren't pink and yellow anymore, but blue and red. A black and gold samurai sword rested against my left leg.

"Can we fly again?" Kevin asked me, his face no longer resembling the frustrated child a few minutes ago.

I looked at the sky outside the window. The full moon winked at me and illuminated the answer somewhere down below. Maps and diagrams streamed in my head along with snapshots of the places we flew over from our trip the night before. I picked one snapshot, scanned it again, and put it in a temporary storage in my mind. "Of course we can and I know just where to go," I told Kevin.

Kevin and LJ walked to the open windows. I scooped them with my upgraded and bigger hands and flew them away from their neighborhood in my prettier, bigger, and faster plane form.

In less than five minutes, we reached our destination, identical to the

snapshot I saved in memory. I brought the boys down, transforming into my normal robot form. We landed on the soft and mushy ground. Shadows of various-sized hills surrounded us.

“This is a dumpster, Zero.” Kevin covered his nose and spat.

LJ coughed. “What are we doing here?”

I secured one hand on the hilt of my samurai sword and waited. 0:00. 0:01. 0:02. 0:03. 0:04. 0:05. 0:06. 0:07. 0:08. 0:09. 0:10.

Then they emerged.

From the grime and the muck of the hills emerged the small creatures I knew lived there. They crawled into view on four legs before standing on two hind legs to form a circle around us. Silhouettes of whiskers twitched. The moon turned its lamp brighter, making random spots on their fur glow. Kevin and LJ hugged each of my legs.

“I’m scared,” said Kevin.

“What are they?” LJ breathed.

“Our playmates for tonight,” I answered. “Meerkats.”

One meerkat in front of us tilted its head to the right and peered at us with big, round eyes. Then it squeaked like a rubber ducky.

“That’s the signal,” I said.

I picked the boys away from my legs and leaped into the air, pulling the samurai sword from its sheath, the blade turning into a silver light. A meerkat jumped toward me, and with one slicing motion of my sword it fell into the murky ground as a yellow rubber duck. It let out a squeak as I landed on top of it.

The rest of the meerkats let out a unison of squeaks and broke into a mass of running shadows. I split my sword into two and gave the bottom half to Kevin and the top half to LJ.

“Use these weapons to defeat them,” I instructed.

Both swords glowed silver. Kevin’s was back to its full length, the hilt in the grip of his two hands. LJ’s returned to full length too but without the hilt, making it look like he wielded a glowing silver stick.

Three meerkats approached Kevin, who screamed and ran to me. But LJ faced them. He did a slicing motion, his weapon emitting an electric whip of blue, and screamed, “Mega Ultra Thunder!” Three rubber duckies fell next to his feet.

“You should do as LJ did,” I encouraged Kevin. “The meerkats cannot harm us.”

Kevin walked to two approaching meerkats and imitated LJ’s slicing motion. “Mega Super Thunder,” he yelled. An electric whip of blue flashed and the meerkats turned to motionless ducks.

“Don’t copy me,” LJ said to him.

“I’m not copying you.”

The dumpster turned into a party scene as waves of meerkats came at the two boys from different directions. Kevin and LJ hacked at them with their swords, screaming new phrases such as “Fire Flash!” “Super Laser!” “Super Beam!” And “Die, meerkats, die!” Different special effects accompanied their battle cries. A brief ball of plasma. A thin red light. Prism. Purple smoke. When the party ended, the dull dumpster turned into a sea of rubber duckies.

I took the weapons from the boys, who were smeared with sweat and grime, and fused it back into a single samurai blade.

They changed clothes as soon as we returned to their room. LJ then went to bed and Kevin walked me back to the closet.

“Are you sure you want to stay in here?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. I will be okay. I have my samurai sword with me and you have upgraded me. Thank you,” I told him.

Kevin stepped away from me and closed the closet door.

I didn’t sleep. I didn’t turn off my vision. 0:00... I grasped the hilt of the samurai sword in case something decided to make a surprise appearance. 5:00... 10:00... 15:00... 20:00... 25:00... 30:00... 35:00... 40:00...

Nothing.

45:00... 50:00... 55:00...

Still nothing.

59:00...

Something warm grabbed my hand and pulled it away from my weapon. A boy, older than Kevin, showed a diabolical grin to me, his teeth as white as snow and his eyes as dark as ebony.

“You’re just a toy,” he said, pulling the hilt of my sword. Slicing motions filled the closet, putting an end to my timer.

0:00.

Kevin’s golden hair brushed against my blue torso. I wrapped my forearms around him and ruffled his hair with my hands.

He looked up to me with wet cheeks and red eyes. “I thought you didn’t need repairing after I upgraded,” he cried.

The face of the boy with ebony eyes flashed in my head. “I thought wrong, Kevin. Forgive me.”

Kevin released me from his arms and stepped away, revealing silver thighs and stripes of red and yellow on my blue lower legs. “I just upgraded you. Don’t ever break down again.”

In a fraction of a second, the face of the older boy masked Kevin’s face,

malice superimposed on innocence.

LJ joined our conversation. “Mommy found you and was going to put you in the trash can, but Kevin stopped her.”

“I wasn’t going to let Mommy throw you out,” said Kevin.

“You could just make another one with Daddy’s fruits. Make another Zero so Mommy will not get suspicious.”

“No. Zero will not go anywhere.”

“But if you wish another Zero, it will still be Zero, an upgraded Zero.”

“No, LJ. No.”

The boys argued as I stared at the dark picture in the window. I couldn’t see the moon. It was covered by clouds. It was a new night.

“We’re not going outside anymore,” Kevin said. “You’re staying with me, Zero.”

By day Kevin willed me into the size of a toy with the help of the red fruits and took me to school with him, shoving me in his backpack with one hand. On afternoons, he put me on the study desk. I watched him read his textbooks and solve his homework without being instructed to do so. I had nothing else to do. On evenings after dinner, he turned me back to my normal size and talked to me about his day at school. He didn’t know I already knew about his stories, hearing his teachers and classmates from

inside his backpack when we were in school.

“No adventure for us,” he reminded me after sharing his story. He made me toy-sized again and placed me next to his pillow. Then he shut his eyes to go to sleep.

Since I didn’t sleep, I made my own adventures. In my head, I revisited each of the magical places I spotted in Cinnabar City and the boys’ neighborhood. I came up with games and stories starring Zero and the Little White Boys. We saved a princess in an abandoned building, fought giant frogs inside a drainage pipe, played matching games with the traffic lights, and even battled aliens stationed on a cloud filled with air pollution. But they all only happened in my head. If only I had one of those red fruits myself, I’d dream our adventures to life.

After seven days, the dreaming came to life.

Mr. White discovered the disappearances of his red fruits and found out Kevin was responsible. There were angry voices and Kevin’s cry from outside the room while I remained helpless inside Kevin’s backpack. After the noise subsided, light entered the backpack and Kevin moved me to the middle of their room.

“I told you stealing is bad,” LJ told Kevin.

“I didn’t steal,” Kevin said, wiping the corners of his eyes. “Daddy didn’t say we were not allowed to take the fruits.”

“You didn’t ask permission.”

Kevin climbed to his bed, saying nothing. He took something from under his pillow and I found myself returning to my normal size.

“Zero!” He jumped from the last step of the bunk bed ladder to the floor. “Let’s have an adventure tonight.”

“Daddy said you are not allowed to eat those fruits anymore,” interjected LJ.

“He doesn’t know I still have some of the fruits and you’re not going to tell him.” Kevin cast a steely glance at his brother. “You’re coming with us.”

“Where?”

“Zero knows.”

LJ followed Kevin to the windows, and I scooped up the boys like last time and dove into the cold, foggy air outside. I transformed to my upgraded plane mode, bigger and faster, with the two boys seated comfortably inside my silver carrier. We flew to Cinnabar City.

I didn’t waste any time sightseeing around the city. I took the boys straight to our destination. The metropolis landscape below had a river running through it that resembled the shape of a snake. Every morning it looked bright blue. Whenever night fell, it appeared as a black snake with a silver streak running along its back. Creatures lived inside the body of water and they were peaceful.

At the inner part of the city was the tail end of the river. And that was where I plunged through, my body transforming into a submarine upon contact with the icy water. The boys screamed with excitement when they saw where I took them.

“We’re underwater!” Kevin said.

“Cool! We’re under the river,” said LJ.

We traversed the body of the snake with cute schools of fish swimming with us every minute or two. “Oohs” and “aahs” echoed inside me as the boys ran from one window to the next, not wanting to miss any new school of fish that would swim by. I said nothing over their exclamations of wonder, knowing the real thrill hadn’t yet arrived.

After fifteen minutes, they did. The last school of rainbow-colored, triangle-shaped fish swirled away from sight to let them pass. A group of half-human and half-fish creatures swam to us, hundreds of them. Their fins and tails formed a lantern of varying colors: emerald, sapphire, ruby, gold, and silver. The women had pearls on their foreheads. The men had diamonds. They peered at my windows and made bright oddly shaped bubbles from their mouths.

Kevin’s and LJ’s faces pressed against the windows.

“Are those mermaids, Zero?” asked Kevin.

“Yes,” I replied through the speakers. “Mermaids and mermen.”

“They’re real,” uttered LJ.

“See? If I didn’t get those fruits we wouldn’t get to see these mermaids, LJ,” said Kevin. “You wouldn’t get to go on an adventure like this and you keep telling me I’m a thief.”

LJ said nothing, still staring at the merpeople who began to swim some distance from us.

They started their dance. The mermen and mermaids formed a carousel, each of them spinning in their place in the carousel while the entire carousel rotated. Their tails glowed, like fiery centuries-old stars in the galaxy of the Cinnabar River. They broke off their carousel to form a galloping horse, then a Persian cat playing with a ball of yarn, then a Volkswagen 1600, and a dragon-looking creature. They had just made an imitation of me when they all suddenly broke formation, motionless for a second. Then they swam away from sight, gone fast like popped bubbles.

“Where did they go?” asked Kevin.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

A new creature appeared by the window. A round, light green, rotund blob with hollow eyes and a big mouth that could take a big chunk from me. Illuminating silver fibers glowed in a frill-like pattern on its head. Six-foot-long teeth formed the entrance to its cave of a mouth bending upward.

Kevin and LJ screamed, scampering away from the window.

The creature didn't like the greeting and let out an underwater shriek that pounded my system. It opened its mouth and tinier versions of itself protruded from its tongue and rapped my windows. The creature's head glowed red and its fibers stiffened. It swallowed its babies back inside its mouth and lunged at me with its teeth trying to break the windows.

The two boys screamed louder.

I turned on my Turbo Mode to boost my propeller, hoping to get some distance between the creature and me. It followed. When I had scanned the Cinnabar River from the sky, I spotted only the schools of fish, the mermen, and the mermaids. But compared to them, this river creature wasn't friendly. Our adventure had to end.

I sent a missile to the blob. It opened its mouth and swallowed the weapon, exploding to a mess of guts. But it didn't end there. The small guts started to shake and grow in size. Soon enough, I saw the same hollow eyes, silver fibers, and long teeth emerging from each of them. I didn't want to confirm my suspicion. We must get back above the water. I prayed Kevin's upgrade would exceed my expectation. It did.

When we got back to the boys' room, LJ retreated to his bed right away, shaking in fear.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Kevin gave me a hug around the waist, right where the blob tried to bite me. "It's not your fault, Zero."

He followed LJ to his bed and consoled him. I figured a robot couldn't calm a crying kid, so I decided to leave Kevin to do what was best for his brother. I sat inside their closet.

0:00. 1:00. 2:00. 3:00. 4:00. 5:00. 6:00. 7:00. 8:00. 9:00. 10:00. 11:00. 12:00. 13:00. 14:00. 15:00. 16:00. 17:00. 18:00. 19:00. 20:00... 30:00... 45:00... 1:00:00.

The doors of the closet opened with a creak. The shadow of a small boy stood there. He took one step closer, the pale moon light revealing a pair of dark eyes free of tears.

"LJ," I said. Behind him, Kevin was asleep in his bed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'm okay now," LJ said. "I just got scared. That's all."

"I shouldn't have brought you down there. It was my fault."

"No, Zero. It's not your fault."

"That's right," a third voice joined our conversation. The shadowy figure in the closet from a week ago vaporized behind LJ. "The appearance of that ugly creature wasn't your fault. It was mine." He grabbed LJ and everything went to total darkness.

0:00.

Light came back to my vision.

0:15.

My body lay motionless in a shallow pool of mud, except for my head.

O:25.

A group of meerkats scuttled to form a line at the edge of the pool. They were unlike the meerkats we played with before. These were darker and without the glowing spots on their fur. They didn't squeak. They talked in shrill, human voices.

O:45.

"The left hand is mine," said the one in the middle.

"No, dummy. It's mine," said the meerkat on his right.

"We'll divvy the right leg among us," said the meerkat at the far end.

O:53.

"I'll savor the head," said the one at the other end of the line.

O:54.

"Of course you will not," said a different human voice, bigger and louder. "The head is mine to do as I please and I know exactly what I want to do with it." The shadowy figure, wearing a white and purple coat on top of a white onesie, appeared at the back of the meerkats. The animals fell into silence and bowed down to him. "I know someone who has a personal beef with him."

1:11.

“Who are you?” I asked him. I realized my head was right next to the pool, my right cheek against the mucky ground. The earth trembled with the slightest movement as the figure took steps toward me.

“My name is Nero, Zero. Unlike you, I’m a human,” he replied. “You’re just a toy. You’re just a robot that can hold a samurai sword, turn into a plane, have your parts replaced, and turn into a submarine. Did I mention you can fly? Silly, really.”

1:25.

“I don’t understand.”

Nero pointed at the meerkats. “Yes, you can make cute meerkats that belonged in a bathtub. I can make real meerkats that can eat you alive, not that you’re really alive but you know what I mean.”

The meerkats snickered and giggled.

1:45.

“It’s funny how a stupid thing like you can change things in the not-so-distant future. Take two brothers for example. They argue about you, quarrel about you, fight about you, and harbor resentment with each other because of you. Is it really worth it? Are you really worth it? How can someone justify two people growing apart because of some toy made of plastic?”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” I said.

2:20.

The meerkats snickered and giggled again. Nero shushed them.

“You’ll never,” he spoke. “You’re not human. It’s time I dispose of you for good.”

2:25.

Saliva began dripping from the meerkats’ mouths.

“My meerkats here will feast on your body,” continued Nero.

2:30.

“Kevin will bring me to life just like he did after you tried to get rid of me.”

“He can’t this time. I made sure he has no more red fruits to eat.” Nero knelt in front of the muddy pool and picked up my head with his oversized hand.

2:45.

“Where’s LJ? What did you do with him?” I asked, my voice faltering in the middle of my sentences.

2:48.

“LJ is none of your concern.”

2:50.

He walked away from the muddy pool. I finally saw LJ standing alone under the moonlight. His chin was red and so were his fingers and the front of his shirt. But they weren't blood. They looked like stains of juice.

2:57.

“LJ, are you all right?” I asked.

2:59.

The boy looked at me and then to Nero who spoke, “We're ready.”

3:03.

LJ licked his fingers. “Go ahead, Nero.”

3:04.

Behind him, the rotund blob I blew up earlier from the Cinnabar River materialized, darting through the air. It flew above LJ's head and opened its mouth, long, sharp teeth forming the gates of hell.

3:06.

LJ eyed me. “Goodbye, Zero.”

3:07.

Nero threw my head in the air.

3:0—

Tangerine and pewter,
inside you'd find.



Scarlet Forever

The world didn't want me. What did I do?
I hid under my bed. How about you?
A mask they threw at me. What about you?
I wish I was younger when I met you.

I drew cobalt suns and tangerine seas,
vermilion mountains and pewter bees.
The sun must be yellow, and the sea blue.
They yelled all that to me. What about you?

Mother broke my brush and gave me a ball.
"Stop being a sissy. Be like a wall."
She meant well. I knew that, never a doubt.
Fear plagued her eyes as she swallowed her shout.

On the surface I bid a gray goodbye.
My colorful dreams heard a lullaby.
Then I picked up the ball, played with the boys,
climbed their tree houses, and played with their toys.

I tamed my wild fingers but not my mind.
Tangerine and pewter, inside you'd find.
By day, I'm colorless like the bland rain.
By night, a palette of colors unnamed.

With the mortals I walked undetected.
They paid me no mind, so unaffected.
But my crimson skin itched under the blue.
Secretly I scratched it, waiting for you.

Chaos and madness burned strong in my head,
everyone but the world was unwanted.
To the suns of the sky, I prayed for light
for my imprisoned world, trapped by the night.

My long patience paid off. They heeded me.
I crossed paths with my Muse. I got lucky.
Cotton candy skin was out of man's sight,
but I saw through her blue. I saw her light.

To the world I was fun, carefree, and bold.
She was stoic, wicked, harsh, aloof, and cold.
The world chose to highlight her exterior.
I looked in her eyes, loved the interior.

The world didn't want me and that girl too.
Thought I was the only one, but we're two.
Otherworldly sunshine she brought to me.
My landscapes demanded to be set free.

Away from the others we made our own
world where the two of us can roam alone.
We swam my flame ocean and her beige seas,
climbed my tall limerick cliffs and her mauve trees.

We ate taupe, wild berries, and saffron nuts,
searched vanilla jungles for brink pink huts,
and chased camel eagles to hear their song.
In our own little world nothing was wrong.

The world didn't want us. We didn't care.
Our love for each other felt very rare.
She was Mona Lisa and I David.
Painting and sculpting, that's all we did.

One night under Cetus, we made an oath
of scarlet fidelity for us both.
We sealed it with a kiss, then a letter,
wrote both our names, and signed it "Forever."

Maybe he got angry, Cetus the whale.
Perhaps our destiny was doomed to fail.
It happened like lightning, blinding and quick.
The softest of the hurts, I chose to pick.

Riding a dragon, her father the king
seized my princess and tucked her under wings.
Mother was right. I should have been a wall,
sturdy and proud, I would never fall.

The world didn't want us to remain two,
so gone was my princess, and our world too.
Soon my crimson skin gave way to the blue.
To the colors in me, I bid adieu.

I forgot cardinal, settled for red,
dumped lots of numerals inside my head.
Then got hitched to the world of accounting
and obtained amnesia for Miss Painting.

Sophie, Emma, Hailey, Ella, Lily,
Arianna, Emilia, and Emily.
More follow but I cannot remember.
There's no moving on from that forever.

But I am no sissy. I am a wall.
All these damn women, I can have them all.
Just like a wall I'm strong and I am bold.
Feelings I care not for 'cause I am cold.

All these naked bodies bumping with mine
are devoid of spirit, nary a sign.
These fast-fleeting pleasures damage my soul,
but I am expected to keep it whole.

At times I long for her, my dear princess.
I haven't forgotten. I must confess.
I heard through the grapevine, that she got rich,
gave birth to two sons after getting hitched.

Can she still remember our marigold?
For sculptures and paintings, has she gone old?
Or should I be ready to remind her?
"Francisco-Lorraine Ysabel forever."

H

From the outside's a fortress of gloomed apathy

But the inside is burning, greatest of the seas.

For thou can be felt, ne-ver to be seen.

The bard of the cosmos couriered me.

- excerpt from *Xentheos*



First of all, thank you for downloading this e-book. I appreciate your interest in reading this anthology from an unknown indie author. No, you don't owe me anything. This book is free. It's my way of giving back to the world in this challenging time we have upon us.

If you still feel indebted, I'd appreciate it if you leave a review for *Walden and Hyde*. If it also interests you, you can get the Special Amazon Edition of the book which contains early drafts and notes about its conception. You can do either by visiting [Amazon](#).

I hope you enjoyed the stories. I would love to hear your thoughts on them. It'll surely warm this indie author's heart. You can reach me on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [website](#).

Stay strong and healthy! See you around.

- Xeno Hemlock

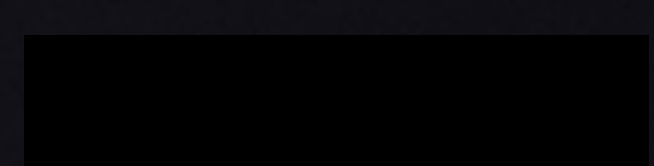
Gina Watson,
Danny Fackelmeyer,
Herbert Novelli,
Sarah Montgomery,
Lorraine Ysabel Vaughn,
Julian Cross,
Vanessa Paisley,
Arthur Paisley,
Adrian Paisley,
Wilma Walden,
Elisabeth Hyde,
Paula Harper,
Alastair Hornby,
Francisco Dioli,
Bernard White
Joanna Harding-White,
Iñigo Reynolds,
Lucky,
Linda Mayfair,
the other Herbert,
Kevin White,
LJ White,
and Cetus the Whale
all appear in the novel

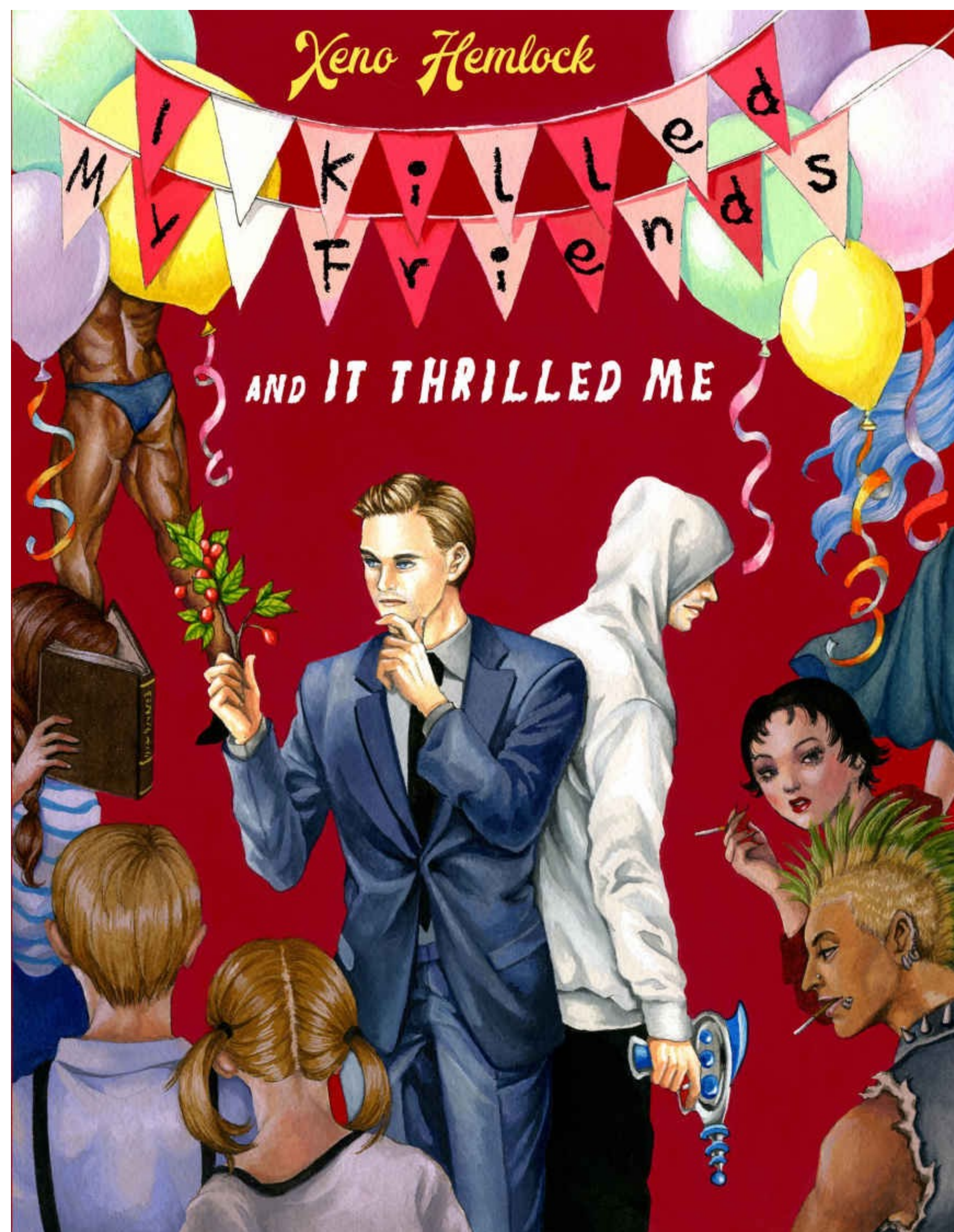
I Killed My Friends and It Thrilled Me.



My name is
Herbert Novelli
and
I have a confession to make.

**I killed my friends
and it thrilled me.**





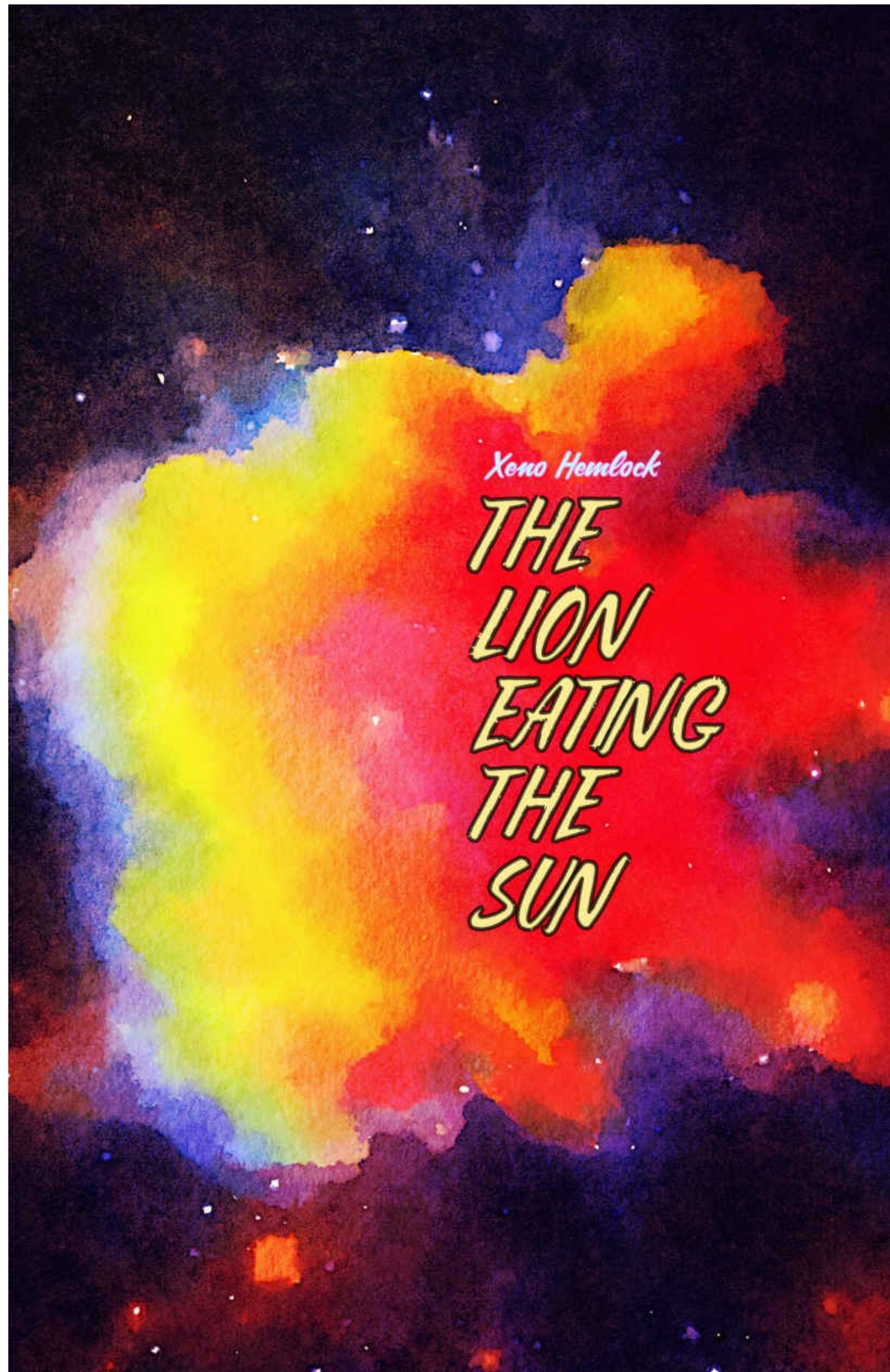
Herbert Novelli lives an ordinary life. Breakfast. Work. Lunch. Work. Gym. Dinner. Sleep. Plus the occasional get together with his long-time friends who entered adulthood together with him in Cinnabar City.

An unannounced visit to his apartment one ordinary night brings his ex-girlfriend Gina Watson. After leaving him with a vague letter and a broken heart in their old home town Verona, Gina's unexpected appearance is the last thing Herbert expects to happen.

Gina hands Herbert an invitation to her wedding with another man as a strange peace offering. Herbert accepts it, a show of his willingness to bury the hatchet.

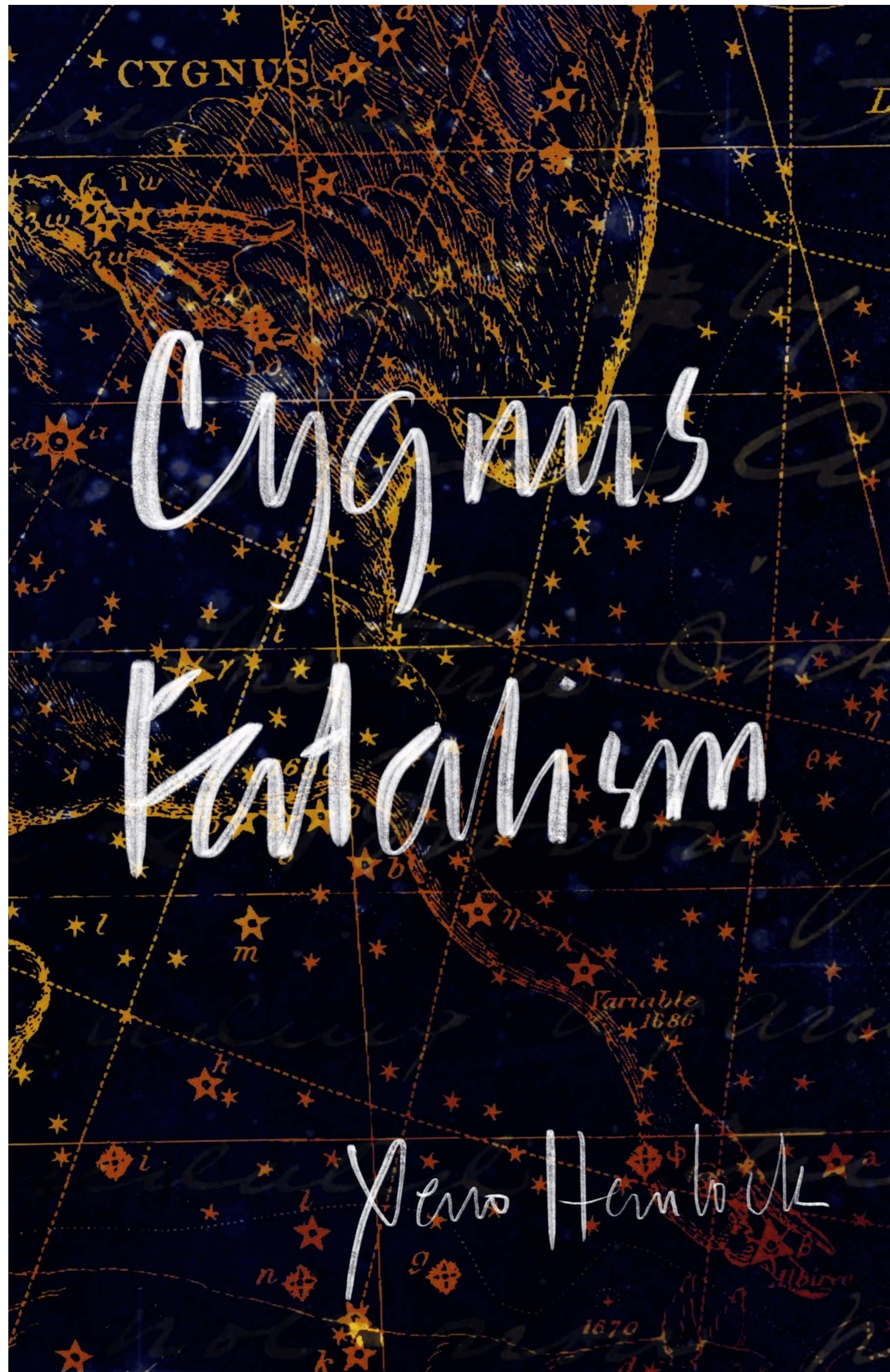
But Death has a funny way of doing his job in the city. Sometimes he makes a grand fanfare of his arrival. Other times, he comes unannounced with a wedding invitation on hand.

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Birthed from the clouds of dust, cats, Pokémon, Survivor, and philosophy, this poetry collection tells stories of life, love, and loss. This book also contains elements from the author's other works and his upcoming novel *Cygnus Fatalism*.

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“But what about power, makes you feel stronger
Lulls you into believing there’s no consequence.
You believe you’re wise, so you don’t revise
Every choice, every action, henceforward you make.
This is the part, where I must depart
From telling you more ‘cause my pride will break.
I’d rather be riding, a bike and be selling
Boxes of dough to people behind doors.
I cannot undo, if only I knew
But there’s no going back to a time before.”

- excerpt from “Pizza Boy”, *The Lion Eating the Sun*



Cover and back art by Junyoung Kim