

**SHORT FICTION CREATIVE WRITING:  
STORYTELLING WITH A FILM PERSPECTIVE**

A Thesis

by

JAMES FRANCIS, JR.

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2005

Major Subject: English

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**ABSTRACT**

Short Fiction Creative Writing:

Storytelling with a Film Perspective. (May 2005)

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The research and material contained in this thesis will examine short story theory from current perspectives in the field and provide a response to questions posed about the composition of short fiction. A critical introduction will take into account these theories and lead into a collection of five short stories written from a filmmaking perspective. The collection of work provided represents an attempt to break stereotype in the construction and formatting of what is considered standard short story material. Focus for the collection concerns sensory perception, elements of film (flashback sequencing and extended exposition) and gender/race identity. Through the critical introduction and short story collection, the completed thesis will prove that the study and practice of creative writing cannot be regulated by a set of technical guidelines.

*To Ethan*  
*The journey is impossible without your steady hands.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all the creative writers who have helped me adapt my writing abilities into something I can consider worthy of reading. My chair, Professor James Hannah, was instrumental in feeding my brain with short story writers I may have never been exposed to in the writing of this thesis. I did not think I would make it this far, but the experience is one I would not trade or attempt to do again.

Additional gratitude goes to: James Campbell, Sarah Gatson, Jimmie Killingsworth, John McDermott, Patricia Phillippy, Susan Stabile and my close friends in the Department of English and outside that den of maddening academics.

And it goes almost without saying, thank you to my family for supporting a reclusive oddball like me as son and brother all of these years.

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## INTRODUCTION

The creative writing thesis is the definitive result of a Master of Arts degree in English, under the Creative Writing track. Fiction for this thesis will aim to focus on elements of sensory perception, filmic adaptations of writing (flashback sequencing and extended exposition), and gender/race identity. Throughout the critical introduction, attention will be given to various readings from Charles May's *New Short Story Theories* and Susan Lohafer's *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. The work presented here will incorporate articles from these two texts in conjunction with my personal exploration of short fiction writing to obtain a better understanding of short story creation. The completed thesis seeks to place my work on a fluid model of creative writing for contemporary prose that defines itself as a crossover from screenwriting without breaking completely from basic short fiction elements.

I create short fiction with the camera of a filmmaker and the mind of a writer. Writers like to describe how they create work by saying what they see around them. The statement that we write what we know still holds true in my process, but the things I know are films, maybe more so than all the stories I've read throughout my higher education. I form a title for the work, and from that space my mind projects an image onto the screen of an empty theatre where I am given full reign over what will play. With film as my starting point, I do not always work with the idea that I should outline the beginning, middle and end of the story. I also do not make the plot sequencing my

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This thesis follows the style of *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*.

first priority when the creative process begins. Through that camera lens, following the projection of the title, I work with the image and the character. My main concern is what emotions are evoked from the design of that image and the movement of character within that created space.

When the story is set into motion, I evaluate the reader as a complex person who requires more than one static representation of fiction content. The work must avoid an approach with tunnel vision aspects of order, point of view, character construction and resolution. I work to create this fiction for the modern reader, much like the modern film audience, who wants nothing more than to break away from convention and still have a deep appreciation for the work presented. As a reader, writer and film appreciator, my influences have ranged from the classics that have mostly been revealed to me in formal class settings to avant-garde material that we sometimes simply discover on our own by way of connections to another work or occasionally on accident. I want the work I create as a short fiction writer to have the agency of film as its base. But before I go into the fiction I am submitting for consideration, it is necessary that I start with the theories of short fiction. I'll begin with a few basic questions that theory makes attempt to answer.

What is a short story? In "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition," Norman Friedman states that there exists a "fixed definition of the short story as a short fictional narrative in prose" (30). Although many theorists agree with this simple definition, even Friedman admits that it can only be considered a starting point; variations among types of stories are abundant and the physical length of the written story can only be considered as a variable in the definitive equation of what it means for

a literary work to be a short story. The word equation factors in to much of what is written about short story definitions and identifiers, but I will go into more detail about formulaic construction later in this introduction.

In some ways, we must submit that there is a need to understand what makes a story before we can decide what makes that story a short one, a long one, a simple description and so forth. A sentence can tell a story, as well as a poem, song lyrics, sign language, hand gestures and eye/facial expressions. If the work has a narrative – concrete point of view, physical setting, characters, etc. – then we have a story (Gerlach 75). The problem arises, however, in defining how much setting, how many characters, what type of voice and much more constitute the making of that story. John Gerlach’s “The Margins of Narrative: The Very Short Story, the Prose Poem, and the Lyric” states that there are “story proper” elements that we can look to in understanding what makes a story; length, fictionality, and plot are not necessary – only character and motive count in the formation of a story (80). I advocate simplification in theory; however, if we move toward an area of only character and motive in defining short fiction, this is a complete erasure of all the other elements that make story.

Mary Rohrberger has a similar approach when she makes a distinction between a simple narrative and the short story proper. As for the problem of length, Rohrberger feels that people should focus on density and amount of details instead of resorting to a physical page length of the work (44). With these two theorists, we try to understand the limits of what can and cannot be said to constitute short stories. Rohrberger is against the idea of creating theories for short fiction when scholars don’t have the same values about

boundaries, limits, variables and so on; strict policy must be set in her opinion. The major problem with Gerlach and Rohrberger's concepts is that they are working hard to calibrate a short story, which is a process that cannot be fully undertaken with any solid results. There can be no definitive answer to this until more questions are considered.

Why is a short story short? Friedman again makes his way into the forum to say that Charles May is a leading defender of the idea that "the short story is short because it deals with a special, brief sort of experience" (22). Like the earlier mention of short fiction definitions, the statements we are given deal in redundant wording that have a way of avoiding any direct explanations for the questions that are posed. And maybe there is not now nor ever will be a true short story, because to say that there is an absolute to its creation is to place a limit upon the already-constricted exercise of its existence. The experience that Friedman alludes to relates to story content. Although there are many factors that seek to limit short fiction in the desire to define it, many feel it has more freedom than the novel because its content owes no allegiance to a tailored structural form. In saying that the story content is a brief experience, Friedman forgets the way that freedom removes historical perspectives from short stories, allowing them to explore areas like science fiction where time can span millions of years for its characters. In this sense, the brevity of the page length finds itself a rival in its content.

The consensus seems to arrive at the distinction that a short story is short because it would not be if it were long. This is yet another statement that almost makes for a laughable reasoning, but the idea behind it has some validity. The split between short and long physical length of story is to create a separation of the various works in

literature. Scholars do not want a work like Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven* in the same category as his "The Tell-Tale Heart" for matters of length and construction. Both works are literary, yes, and they both have a story to tell, but they function in different manners. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* will not be grouped into the same category as Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" for the same reasons. All of these works make up a diverse line of literature, but the short story has to have its own place on that spectrum to distinguish itself from others. In particular, many have said, the short story is short because it is not its long form, the novel. This statement would support the idea that some works are better written in short story form than that of a novel, but I disagree. A short story can be expanded into a novel, and that novel can be translated into song lyrics. In another manner, the story content of a poem can be the basis for a novel that is later transformed into a short story. When I created a screenplay from an old short story I had written, I noticed a major change in the tone of the story; the form was different, no better or worse than the original short story, just different. Literature is a mutable entity, and adaptations between structures are able to retain story content, but theory demands a concrete explanation of how the multiple forms can be compared to each other.

How is the short different from the novel? The answer to this question requires no research if it is stated that a short story is generally shorter in physical length than that of the novel. However, in putting the hazy definition of short story aside for a moment to focus specifically on the wording, "short" is no more defined than "long" for the novel. With the two words falling into the same indefinable category, many scholars have come

to the conclusion that short fiction as compared to novels should be done so in degrees, not types or kinds. In this manner, a complete shift in genre does not have to occur, and this is a good thing because the battle between the novel and the short has existed for a long period of time as a sort of chicken versus egg argument – Did the short come from a long predecessor or did the novel expand from a shorter creation? The back and forth arguments about literary movements do not help much to solve such a question, but I agree with the concept of the short story being born out of traditional oral narratives. In this case, the short story is able to be viewed as one of the oldest forms of storytelling; the novel becomes a highly formulated work developed thereafter. To declare the short story as the predecessor to the novel, however, should not give it a hierarchical status over the other form and it does not mean that the novel grew out of it. The two forms are related by contents of dialogue, setting, plot and more, but one form does not deserve more academic respect than the other.

But in thinking and comparing the short story with the novel in degrees, although not a perfect solution to the problem of classification, this seems to be one of the more functional ways to view the two forms in relation to each other, or that of the short story to other literary forms. I cannot give a complete definition for short fiction – no one can. It is my speculation, however, that in reading literature, the mind experiences a general understanding of what can be considered a short story, a novel, and so forth. There is an emotional response trigger that allows the definition to come about from the examination of the material in its written form. These unseen, innate categorizations come from the one place most neglected in short story theory – the reader, whose connection to the

short story falls outside of the long fiction versus short fiction argument. Unlike the debate over which literary form came first, the reader represents a projection of judgment onto the material not an extension or development from it. But there is still a need to locate the relationship a reader has with short fiction.

What part does the reader play? Much of what is written about in Lohafer and May's texts veers away from integrating the reader into definitions, descriptions and understandings of short story creations. It is incessantly repeated and easily quoted by many theorists that one of the variables concerning the short story definition is the amount of time it takes a reader to complete the story. In "Poe on Short Fiction: Review of *Twice-Told Tales*," Edgar Allan Poe examined "the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal" (61). This limitation placed a physical time marker on the reading of a short story and helped influence a standard for its written length. Poe also stated that constructions of short stories and rhymed poems contain a measure of totality that "cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting" (60). The one-sitting rule doesn't sit well with me, however, because the variation of readers is not taken into account. There are readers who read and enjoy a full novel in one sitting, but that does not change the definition of the novel. There are also readers who live with learning disabilities, common attention deficit disorders and those who would classify themselves as slow readers, taking breaks at the first third or half-point of a short story to engage in another activity. It seems all too easy to concentrate on page length, story content, or genre relationship to the novel and dismiss the element of reader.

Over the passing years, the reader has been dumbed-down. This effect seems to result from a trend in writing that progresses more toward classical short fiction construction, where the reader is supplied too much form and structure; very little innovation is considered. Readers will agree with scholars that rules of writing exist, but stories should still be interesting for the audience. This is a hard concept to manage when – from a theory perspective – all which is studied or decided upon are the restrictions of short fiction. The reader is the first character of any story, but any considerations toward his or her response or actions to fiction have been too generic and stereotyped. In order for short fiction to continue to function as an important member of the literary scale, reader perspectives have to be allowed to broaden the technical aspects of short story classifications. One factor to consider is the emotional distance and connection a reader makes with the story's author and its protagonist. When a reader is given the barrier of overemphasized form and structure, and the content is too easily identified as a cliché storyline from other works, the reader loses interest because he or she is unable to engage in the material. If that same association between author, reader and protagonist is given more versatility in the arrangement of the short story, the reader better identifies with the content and is able to adapt to the author's intent and the plight of the protagonist.

Almost all of the questions I ask can be combined into one long, complex examination on what short fiction means. To define it is to know why we say it is short, where it fits along the spectrum of literary genre, how the reader response maintains it as such and how the writer constructs it. Is my sole desire to debunk everything that has

been written about short fiction theory? No. My purpose is to illustrate the way in which the simple concept for a short story becomes all the more complicated with each new limitation or definition that is applied. Theory hardly ever is a concrete science, nor should it try to attain such status. For an author, writing is an experience, a feeling, an emotional connection to characters, setting, plot, action, and so forth. For a reader, the experience works much in the same way, just from a different perspective in the process.

The research into short story theory can be quite interesting at times and extremely tedious and repetitive at others, but I think the work being done is important. I also feel, however, that it is completely impossible to define one set of short story elements that everyone will agree upon or one framework from which to understand what makes a short story into a specific form, genre or kind. As a writer, all I can do is keep current with what is being discussed, respect the work of writers past, present and future, and offer my work to be considered along a very long line of fiction history. With what I feel have been some of the basic questions behind short story theory taken into account, I would like to move into a more miscellaneous approach to some of the other topics that were presented in the readings.

My critical introduction and short fiction collection seek to document classic to recent trends of what scholars feel are the purpose and design of the short story. My interpretations of short fiction theory, from the May and Lohafer readings, thus far give me an understanding of work that seeks to exclude and disavow contemporary and future styles for short stories. The introduction to May's text states, "the primary way that short stories 'mean' anything is to become more and more...restricted only to those details

that are relevant to the systematic theme or purpose underlying the narrative” (xxii). I disagree with that statement because to view a short story as a depiction of human action and human nature is to see irrelevant events come into the narrative. Going back to my ties to film, if movies were only to focus on the theme, viewers would lose interest, because the depiction isn't as close to human existence as it can be.

When I see a film presentation, I look for visual content, audience participation and innovative storytelling that does not always progress toward closure. My evaluation of film stems from a modernist perspective and the influence of international cinema. I challenge the concept of closure because it prevents innovation; film becomes stereotypical and audiences are made to experience a cloned structure where all story elements come together in a tidy finale. One of the reasons behind an element like this happy ending syndrome in film speaks directly to an Americanized notion of filmmaking. This influence carries through short stories, as well, and the more it occurs it fuels theorists to think that short fiction has to present a story with a punctuated ending. A typical American audience sees a film and it has the possibility to engage that audience so well that a heroic finale may result in applause. When that same audience participates in the viewing of a film with an open ending, suddenly people are disappointed and reviews come back with negative commentary. I speak some of this in stereotype, because there is no other way around it, but it is a common enough occurrence that can be discussed. If short fiction writers take aim to create work that gives the reader even more field space for the imagination, this would be one way to start a significant change in how short stories are perceived. Most of what is said here is

only in hope that short fiction does not continue toward a predictable configuration of form and content. On many occasions, people enjoy fiction they can relate to or get a linear progression and definitive ending from, but writers should be held accountable for creating work that breaks that mold.

Life is a series of events, much like the short story, but to say that fiction has to focus intently on the relevant measures of theme escapes the notion that life exists as a series of related events, but irregularity and random action does exist. It is this act of nonconformity that presents a much richer and fuller picture of action, not just the pinpoint of theme. Theme in short fiction presents the reader with an issue, a subject, an action, etc. to focus on as its core, but without asides to strengthen the verisimilitude of it all, theme falls short of its purpose to create that snapshot in the short fiction genre. Julio Cortazar used the concept of a metaphor of photograph versus motion pictures to describe the difference between short fiction and the novel, and I agree, as the photograph presents a still-life examination of a situation – an event pulled from a series of events, but having its own structure and various happenings within the one view of it (and not all of those happenings relate to one theme) (May xvii).

Also in May's text is a discussion of narration. Early in the reading, H. Weinrich says, "The prototype of the *narrator*...is old rather than young; in fairytales he is the kind uncle or – if it is a woman – the kind aunt or grandmother...He likes to interrupt his story...he takes his time" (Stierle 18). When viewing short fiction as filmic, this is turned around; the narrator becomes multifaceted and not so constructed to fit type. From classic to contemporary film presentations, the narrator through lens is at times all-

knowing, innocent, a bystander and so forth. The viewer is asked to come along on the journey of a story or participate as a leader in the storytelling in two of the more common formulas. Innovations in film production have led the way for the development of new narration, one that transcends the celluloid screen into a written fiction. It is this connection between film and short fiction that displaces the idea of a formulaic narrator. I think that viewing the creation of short fiction through film production opens the door to breaking away from stereotypical narration.

One difference between written narrative and filmed narrative is the way in which short fiction can convey emotion and thought within in a manner that film cannot (voiceover narration in film not being a factor). Film has a more difficult task to present these elements by way of acting. To write from a film perspective, however, is to visualize with the lens and create emotion and inner dialogue within the writer. The work that results from this process has a different feel from that of processing short fiction through character sketches and plot outlines. Again, I am only emphasizing the way in which I create my own work; writing styles vary just like short fiction theories.

May's text compiles the research of many other theorists whose work purports to give a distinct theoretical approach to concepts narration and structure of the short story. Most of the interpretations, however, push toward a direction of formula, creating the short story through a workable equation, as mentioned earlier. Any attempt to place short fiction writing into categories of problem and solution or sequential writing steps of one, two, and three, limits the scope of creativity and turns the writing process into a cloned state. In saying that craft is the equation:  $A \text{ (character)} + B \text{ (plot)} + C \text{ (action)} = D$

(story), we lose sight that art is the answer. It may seem a bit too whimsical to say, but writing is about expression and reader response. If these two markers are not taken into consideration at the beginning stages of short fiction creation, all is lost. Before concepts of form, narrative, sequencing and more can be accounted for and detailed, there is the writer and the reader.

The equation to define short fiction is not the only measured concept. Theorists like Rohrberger call upon hierarchical diagrams by Thomas G. Winner and Robert Scholes to illustrate the division of genre and where short fiction fits on them (38-39). Lohafer offers her own work in the realm of preclosure and story processing to talk about the way in which short stories can have perceived endings by different readers. I mention this here and not in the discussion of the reader, because Lohafer is going through a system of measurement and percentages to gauge an element of fiction. I think that when we begin to examine short fiction with rulers and calculators, we have definitely strayed from the path of literary goal. As a theoretical discourse, studies such as these have every right to be conducted, but I personally feel that picking apart story like a science experiment takes away its focus as an art form.

One of the other compelling topics about short story writing developed through a discussion of history and its use in short fiction. This point was briefly mentioned earlier in one of the articles from Friedman, but there are a few more ideas concerning this issue to be taken into consideration. There is a marked division for those who feel that the use or elimination of history in short fiction writing is a beneficial way to classify it as a genre from other modes of writing. In my thinking, short fiction has a right to disavow

history, but to incorporate its use should not alter its perception as a genre. Writers construct short fiction from their own histories, no matter how fantastical or realistic the fiction. In simplistic terms, all writing acknowledges history and utilizes it to construct whatever form of fiction is being undertaken. Short fiction has an advantage in its stereotypically shorter length than the novel in pushing history aside to create innovative narrative, but the disappearance or recognition of history should not be a definitive element for classifying short fiction as a genre.

These are just a few nods to the most current writings on short story theory, but the goal of this critical introduction has been to take a full exploration of these ideas in effort to offer more thought and discussion to the area of study. The work of original short fiction supplied in my thesis and this introduction will contribute to contemporary research concerning the short story and promote diverse thinking in the field. I will always consider short fiction as an open field; it allows writers from different ages, ethnicities, regions, religious beliefs, sexualities and so forth express their creativity and present readers with profound material to incorporate into their own lives. To limit this realm of writing by upholding classic form and labeling innovative structures as unimportant or illogical is to waste a forum that should continue to strive for growth and evolution in its principles. I can only hope that the work I produce helps keep creativity in writing thriving.

To define my own work further, I turn to Suzanne Ferguson's "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form." In an eloquent and ordered manner, she writes:

The main formal characteristics of the modern novel and the modern short story are the same: (1) limitation and foregrounding of point of view, (2) emphasis on presentation of sensation and inner experience, (3) the deletion or transformation of several elements of the traditional plot, (4) increasing reliance on metaphor and metonymy in the presentation of events and existents, (5) rejection of chronological time ordering, (6) formal and stylistic economy, and (7) the foregrounding of style. All of these elements are associated with the literary movement called impressionism, or, more specifically in fiction, the tradition of Flaubert. (219)

The seven descriptors Ferguson lists apply to the work I present here almost in a perfect match. Most of what she writes, I may have already responded to in my discussions of writing through a film lens, but I will touch on more of these qualities as I go through and examine the fiction I have created. I do not compare my work to Flaubert by any means, but the mark of impressionism by Ferguson's standards runs throughout this collection I present.

The first work in the thesis collection is entitled "Fluid." It is a simple story about college friends taking a break to go to the beach. The protagonist, Charlie, is a girl who carries a not-so secret emotion of love for her friend and roommate, Steven. The title of the story relates to the water, the sand on the beach, and the way people come in and out of each other's lives. All of these elements are tied together by the sense of touch. The character is given to examining the very fibers of each sand granule, each water droplet that touches her skin or washes over her while surfing; she considers what these elements feel like to the others in the story, as well. As an aside, the protagonist was given the name Charlie to enhance the meaning of gender fluidity along with the perception of touch; gender-specific names for characters hasn't disappeared, but contemporary writing has embraced the idea of gender neutrality in fiction much more.

I wanted to investigate the way the sense of touch would be perceived through writing, and what kind of techniques would have to be employed to accomplish such. More attention had to be given to details and less to dialogue and dialogue tags. The descriptions of the water and sand dominate the fiction, enough to debilitate the classic form of short fiction most students are taught in school. This was my first attempt to translate the effects that film has on the senses, and to put that feeling into a written short story concerning the sense of touch.

Parts of this work were influenced by the Alfonso Cuarón film, *Y Tu Mamá También*, specifically the sequence of the three main characters reaching their destination of the beach. The development of the relationship between the three characters by the time they are upon the beach is one of nostalgia, like they have known each other longer than possible because two of them are young men and the third is a mature woman. From the film, I wanted to capture the essence of their frivolity and connection to the beach; it seemed like a reunited friend they were given the chance to connect to once again. These feelings from the depictions on the screen were the exact proximities I wanted my character of Charlie to have with the sand and the water. Her inner desire for Steven can be tied to much of the flirtatious nature of the characters in the film, as well.

“Over Coffee” is the next short in the collection. This piece, like “Fluid,” aims to concentrate on one of the five senses – sound, particularly hearing sound and not too much in the act of making it. The story takes place in a coffee shop and the action falls mainly on two situations. At one table, two male lovers discuss their relationship, and at

the table beside theirs, a woman carries on a conversation with her husband via cellular phone. The two conversations mix together as something the reader might overhear as a general observer. The idea is to have the dialogues intermingle and appear that the woman is a part of the conversation being held by the men. The exchange of dialogue she shares with her husband on the phone pairs well with the topic being discussed by the men. In a connection to film, this would be a short, shot with interplay of cameras to go back and forth between the three people having lunch and coffee. As a possible short film adaptation, the staying power of it would be the irony of revealing Carol's character sitting at a separate table from the two men as the dialogue comes to an end. The camera, much like the reader of the short, acts as an unobtrusive listener, giving full attention to the sense of sound and hearing the word exchange.

The concept for the short came about in thinking about the five senses and what a coffee shop would lend to that goal. I decided that the abundance of noise from a kitchen, wait staff taking orders, people having conversations at their tables, chairs moving about, the front door opening and closing, coffee cups being stirred with metal spoons and so forth would provide ample ground to examine this idea. The focus turned directly to the dialogue among the characters, and Rhonda the waitress became the division to separate the mixed conversation but not give away the situation that the story concerns two different tables. It's difficult to center a piece around dialogue only, but with allusion to film, I wanted the reader to hear the words the characters were speaking and to think about the different vocal intonations each would take, depending on the state of their emotions through these charged situations. I hesitate to call the story

a complete success from conception to final product, because there is room for improvement. In order to convey the mixture of conversations better, I would opt for a more minimal design with less description of action and fewer dialogue tags. A total removal of all of these elements would be too extreme, but without the distraction of some of their placements in the story, the reader is able to focus more on the element of sound (voice and tone).

I considered the Jim Jarmusch film, *Coffee and Cigarettes*, when writing this short, but for its bleak and skeletal setting only. The film centers on random conversations while people partake in coffee and cigarettes, with an intermittent interruption by the wait staff. In my work, there is barely mention of other patrons in the establishment and the focus remains on the two conversations with Rhonda as a division line like the tables. Jarmusch films the story in black and white with a tattered coffee shop setting, reminiscent of the remains from a war-torn concrete building. My setting isn't as stark as his film, but the Seattle backdrop, the dramatic content of conversation and the rain outside keeps the story gray and hazy.

The third short in the collection, "In a Timely Manner," can best be described as an exercise in extended exposition. This is the work of fiction that can act like the opening of a film by providing the reader (film audience) with a complete and intensely-detailed eye for the beginnings of a story. The camera lens for this story zooms in to find the main character, and at the end it zooms out to leave him. Elliott Jennings is the protagonist of the work, but he is not mentioned until two pages of details have been offered about the hospital he sits in awaiting test results. The process the reader takes

and the journey made is the same one Elliott has to go through just to get to his test results from the doctor. Although the work is easily identified for its overabundance in description, I feel that these are the elements that are left out of many works of fiction. In film, this is an easier process because the eyes follow what the camera displays; a million images can go by in a few seconds and the eyes will have processed most of them and applied them to the meaning of the story about to unfold. In writing, these elements are forgotten because too many of them give fiction a label of being boring, tedious, or providing unnecessary details that do nothing to further the plot. Readers, however, are specific about what they find interesting and what they consider a waste of storytelling. It is difficult to gauge the execution of this story with respect to reader response, but I consider it an effective product for what I wanted to accomplish.

From “Chekhov and the Modern Short Story,” Charles May discusses character as mood and the minimal story where there is “the expression of a complex inner state by presenting selected concrete details rather than by presenting either a parabolic form or by depicting the mind of the character” (202). In my story, Elliott is one person in a populated city of over 45,000 – he is but one story that can be told. I feel it’s important to bring a character like Elliott into this story because without him, there would only be description, but also because the minimal exposure he is given in the story allows the reader to create more of him through the monotonous actions that patients have to go through when visiting a hospital.

At the opening of the story, the progression from parking lot to examination room depicts the fear and trepidation Elliott has for hospitals and doctors’ offices. The

reader is not given a sense of urgency by finding out Elliott's condition in one paragraph, but must go through the process of arriving at the hospital, checking in, staying in the waiting room, and finally being left to think natural, random human thoughts while the doctor makes his way to the examination room. I feel strongly about this idea of pertinent story elements versus superfluous description and have already gone into detail about this during the discussion of short story theory in the earlier sections of this critical introduction. And although I had no specific film influences in writing this short, the concept behind the extended exposition and extreme detailing relates to hundreds of opening and closing film sequences I have seen all for different stories.

In an oversimplified statement, I will say that the everyday elements and situations of life are taken for granted in fiction writing and that people fear low readership from work that takes the time to investigate even the smallest of actions or minute details that humans experience because they are deemed boring or irrelevant to story progression. The focus is the stale and emotionless mood, the actions and processes that work through the story, telling the routine of each and every patient who has ever been to the hospital, going through the motions in a numb state of mind just like Elliott. His story belongs to all of the unnamed characters in the story and all of the readers of the work, and this is why only bits and pieces of him are revealed; readers will exact their own experiences into the story instead of being spoon fed the cliché of a single character's situation. The title of the work says it all, meaning we arrive at the place we are heading in due time, and however long that may be, it simply is.

“Scattered,” the fourth short in the collection, is probably the clearest example of translating film elements into my fiction. The story centers on Trevor, a young boy who likes the excitement of horror films but can’t finish them without getting scared or having to stop watching. His fear of horror films mixes with a general dislike of the dark; nothing unusual for kids his age. The short interplays two moments in Trevor’s life, one where he is watching a horror film with his mother and the other where he reluctantly participates in a game of hide-n-seek at camp with other kids. The movie theatre scene acts as a flashback for Trevor as he remembers how frightened he became by the film and the comfort he received from his mother after having a nightmare the same night. It works to push the character through his current situation of being in the dark on the edge of the woods alone by a tree, wondering what could be among the thick conglomeration of trees waiting for him.

One of the poignant moments for both the main plot and the flashback sequences is the relation that women have with Trevor. At the conclusion of the flashback, his mother kisses him on the forehead before letting him go back to sleep. Toward the end of the main story, Trevor experiences his first kiss from a girl playing hide-n-seek who shares his hiding spot at the tree. I wanted to relate in the short the safety that women provide men in overcoming fear, as recently seen with more female leads, and not generic scream queens, in thriller and horror films like Alexandre Aja’s *Haute Tension*. Women are a strong and growing force in the thriller and horror genre in this current market, and I wanted to bring just a small piece of this to the story. “Scattered” was an exercise in parallel storytelling, almost the way an audience sees split screens for dual

action sequencing in film. It was a way to show the similarities of experiences that characters face and how one situation propels them to either understand and change the outcome of a current situation or repeat past action. Through the agency of a newfound friend, Trevor is able to avoid falling into a cycle of fear. The story configuration achieves its goal to present a parallel story because the content is simple and details only one flashback. A future attempt to follow the same approach of storytelling with a more complex line of action should provide insight as to how better illustrate this design for use with other elements of short fiction writing.

The final short in the collection deals with all of the elements in the stories previous to it. It includes sensory perception, flashback sequencing, and even patterns of basic storytelling that give short fiction stories a beginning, middle, and end. The short also deals with the idea of gender and race identity for the main character of Sasha, a pre-operational transsexual who learns through death that the pursuit of a better life does not always end happily. The idea for this short came after the creation of the title, “Black Men Don’t Blush.” What started out as an introspective look at relationships that black men have with women of different ethnicities became a tragic tale of inner conflict and unrealized dreams. The act of blushing and the sense of makeup blush are two things not usually connected to black men. For either of those elements to relate to a black man, the concepts of masculinity and emasculation are called into view. I wanted the story to have an undercurrent of these ideologies to add depth to the character and to create a thinking model for understanding the hardships he as Sam or she as Sasha faced.

From a film perspective, Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* and Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* were instrumental in the creation of this work. These films gave me the inspiration for creating a character facing extreme hardships, identity conflicts and a most unfortunate assault. Almodóvar has a great vision for imagining the human spirit, creating characters with vivid color in personality and exacting dialogue. My characterization of Sasha can be linked to Agrado in Almodóvar's film. Both transsexual, they rely on a close friend for support and can be classified as somewhat unlearned and naïve about the environment surrounding. The violence that is depicted in my short does not compare to the brutal actions in Noé's film, but the story sequencing attracted me to construct my story as such, much like Christopher Nolan's *Memento* about a man who has no short-term memory; the action moves from Z to A.

As much as I wanted Sasha's personal conflicts to be the focus for the story, I could not let the form of the short go unnoticed. In this short, the action is told beginning to end, but the original frame for this story had these constructs set in reverse. With the revision, most of the story elements remain, but I would like to offer an explanation of how the story is made more meaningful by its reverse storytelling. At the opening, Sasha is dead, and by the time the reader gets to the end, Sasha is only just preparing for her day. The reasoning behind this deliberate reverse of storytelling is to embrace the act of general readership ideas that stories must have linear action and a tidy ending, one that gives closure to the storyline and allows readers to walk away happy. In my work, the reader gets the bad news at the opening which depicts Sasha's demise. At the end, however, the reader finds Sasha alive, contemplating her life and preparing to see where

the day will take her. The short is written with an omniscient narrator to give as much dialogue and inner thinking to present a full picture for the story. Sasha's voice, however, is written in two parts, one that progresses from her death back to her waking up one morning as Sam, the other taking the reader through an inner monologue from her childhood to her death. It is her own words that tell the story in full, beginning to end and vice versa, allowing the reader to fulfill the short's progression of reverse storytelling with a balance. More so than the other shorts in this collection, I am confident that "Black Men Don't Blush" represents a culmination of the mix of film elements and fiction writing that I wanted to produce.

Throughout this exercise in writing my collection and introduction to the work, I feel closer to the elements of short fiction than I have in the past. There are definite preconceived ideas about the components that make up short stories, but I do not believe we can ever provide one solid definition that all writers and theorists will agree upon. The work of short fiction theorists still has a long way to go in the various voices reaching common ground about some of the more basic concepts, and the work of fiction writers will no doubt move with them. From the current readings of theory and my personal beliefs about the way we should view the short story, I can only hope to be a part of these fields by offering my earlier perspectives and the work I now present.

## FLUID

“Hey, Charlie, why don’t you go catch the next one?”

This is the voice of reason, booming from above in that all-knowing godlike tone. Actually, it’s more like Steven, goading me to get up and prove my manhood by taking on some of the early big surf waves. He is hovering over me, hair like burnt string spaghetti rolling around on the fork that was his head. Water drips from the ends, slips down the waterslide strands and plunges deep onto my chin, my forehead, my nose; I hold out my tongue to catch a few of the drops.

“You taste like seaweed, dumbass, and you’re blocking my sun,” I say to him. My face feels the reprieve of hellfire when he eclipses the rays, and the water remains are like melted ice caps sliding around the surface of my face. But Steven just gives a simple gruff mumble and steps aside. The sun comes back to me like a strobe that has been on pause until Steven’s sidestep; it’s an eye shock, but I always think that people who wear sunglasses are just ruining the experience of everything that surrounds us.

“I’m the dumbass? You’re the one being a beach bum when we should be out there challenging Mother Nature,” he says.

“I don’t think she’s leaving anytime soon, so why don’t you go play with the other kids; maybe build yourself a sandcastle with a little plastic bucket.”

He smiles down at me and I think it combines a look of irritation, but when we nip at each other like this it has to be something more.

“I’ll go play with the sand alright. Just be careful when you close your eyes – you might open them and find yourself buried under some yourself.”

I turn my head to angle in his direction. He's got the goofiest expression that radiates from his sapphire eyes and full lips. I shake my head and watch him walk away, but not for too long. I don't want my eyes to linger so long that it becomes noticeable that I enjoy watching him. My head flops back into the sand and I breathe in the warm air.

This is a California summer, the first one I can remember in a long time where I have actually gone out and done something just to pass the time. Steven and I thought it would be a good idea to get the gang together, post finals, to just goof off like young generation hopefuls are always labeled as doing. With summer school approaching in less than three weeks, not a one turned down the invitation. Sarah and Richard are up to their usual antics, being social but secluded away from everyone, probably making out somewhere hidden from the rest of the group. They always stay within earshot, though, and I consider that kind of them – dorky enough to hang out with friends only to make out with each other, but nice enough to be in range in case of emergency. Colin and Rachel are over at the *Sand Dune*, enjoying life in the loudest fashion possible. Their voices are like bullhorns when it came to having fun. I lean my head back, chin to the sky, and watch them upside down for a moment.

“And Steven was there, too!” Rachel belts out.

“I remember that, because he was the one who came in and tried to be the big sober adult when he could barely stand up himself,” Colin says.

Rachel and Colin have a way of working people into their conversations as soon as they spot you in proximity to them. Steven grabs a seat at the little drink hut and

immediately laughs with them. With Rachel's porcelain doll face and Colin's square-cut jaw and chiseled body, I think the three of them look like an advertisement for a bad reality show about summer vacations. The worker brings out what looks like peach, coconut and strawberry frozen smoothies no doubt. Rachel and Colin are like addicts when it comes to fruit and sugar mixes. I bring my head back to a resting position; the voices from the *Sand Dune* will continue to fill my ears without me looking over at them.

And here I am, stretched out in the sand, no blanket, no towel beneath me. I'm not much for the big picnic setup or doing the whole lounge chair exercise where you get up after a few minutes and look like someone has constructed mini-blinds across your body. I just like the feel of the ground beneath me. It's gritty and warm, like sand should always be, massaging you with its tiny crystals that hold you like a bed of earth. I picture myself in a heated pan of oatmeal or some other grain, tiny in relation to all around me and someone shakes the handle to redistribute my place among the sand underneath. And that's just what I do, turn and twist slightly just to get a small fraction of a new position to keep the sand refreshed, to keep the heat from fading to too comfortable which always leads to cold.

I am away from school. I am removed from the apartment that Steven and I share. We're both pigs when it comes to upkeep, but out here on the beach none of that really matters. I lift my head from staring at a passing ghost of a cloud to check the water. Out at the horizon, it's just a pencil line of blue, dividing the open sky from the wet below it. When I was a kid, the line meant that somewhere the water and the sky

touched. After I got past my childhood understanding of geography and the atmosphere, it just makes me laugh to think of how I used to imagine things like that. I guess when I was younger, places like this held magic for me, made me think the sky had a tangible form and that maybe I could go out far enough to reach the place it touched the water. I still feel the same magic when I look out over the water, but it's much more open and fluid now; everything melds together and I don't worry about definitions or separations. Out here, the water, the sky, the sand, me, my friends...we all mix, and I want nothing more than for Steven to comfort me like beach does now.

But today it's new. Today, I allow myself to look at the horizon like I used to and think how much that line makes a greeting card out of existence. It's a hard division, a fold between where we live and where we could go. I wonder on which side of the card I am, the empty space or the sarcastic wit of well wishing through hard times. There is no water out at that point, just still-life photography of something that resembles water, frozen at its fading point. I start to rein my eyes in from the water before me when Rachel comes over, flaps out a towel and stretches out beside me.

"Ugh, this weather," she says.

"Ugh? You're kidding, right?"

"I hate it it's so good," she says with a smile.

"If you were serious, I was going to have to pinch you," I say.

Rachel is the reason most of us laugh. She's a black comedy, filmed in the late 80s when things in the world were uncertain but everyone knew how to play it cool. She's also the most well-read out of all of us combined. I think we had to tie her

bookshelves down just to keep her from bringing something to read. I turn my head to see her profile gazing upward, eyes closed behind her Audrey Hepburn sunglasses; no movie star, but sometimes she likes to look the part. Her cocoa bean straight locks fly about her head, breaking the neon rainbow stripes on the towel. Her lips are slightly parted and each breath she takes flows in, conducting the rise in her chest and deepening the dimple at the base of her neck. I'm sure there's some medical term for that location, but dimple on Rachel makes her fit to perfection. The black two-piece bathing suit conforms to her body and shows it well, but she's not here for a tan. This is Rachel, fitting the scene, skin as naturally bronze as it comes, showing that she, too, can enjoy herself. She's beautiful. I wonder what the sand feels like to her.

"Only you could complain about a day at the beach from enjoying it too much," I tell her. I recline back into the sand, the spot that held my head before still holding form to support me again. I close my eyes and the heat of the sun with a few clouds going by paint electric red movement across the back of my eyelids.

"Relax, Chuck, you know I can't say anything good unless I sprinkle it with a touch of honesty," she says. "Besides, there is that whole balance of good and evil going on out there."

"Don't call me Chuck," I say. "It always makes you Peppermint Patty and me Charlie Brown, which you don't get to call me, either." I raise a finger to shake at her in shame, and although neither of us sees it, I know she feels its presence.

"So, Charlie, what's going on with you today? You seem quiet. Is it Steven?"

"Is what Steven? Nothing's wrong, I'm just taking it all in."

“Nope, you can’t fool me. That’s the sound of someone contemplating life. C’mon, spill it.”

Rachel finger fumbles through the sand, never bothering to open her eyes for guidance, and finds my hand. She’s got a strong grip, and the sand she brings between us makes our hands cheese graters for the beach grounds. Even if there were something wrong, her touch pushes it all away in that short time. She gives my hand a shake before taking hers back to the towel. I twist the grit remains between my fingers and palm, smiling that I now know what it feels like for Rachel. The sand feels the same to her as it does to me; maybe different pictures or thoughts flash through her mind, but it’s the same texture, the same landslide of sand morsels sliding past the skin.

“It’s just nice to have all of us out here, ya know?”

“What, you mean Steven and Colin sucking down their mystic tropicanas or Rich and Sarah narrowly escaping an unwanted pregnancy behind some beach thicket?”

“You know what I mean,” I say. “We’re not all here sitting in a circle, telling stories or playing truth or dare, but you could name everything that was going on with your eyes closed in under ten seconds.”

“Gotcha,” Rachel replies. She makes that wink-and-a-smile tsk tsk noise like she’s shooting a toy gun, which for Rachel means she won’t press the issue any further. “It is a nice day, I won’t argue with you there.”

“Took long enough to get to one.” I think about stopping there and just enjoying the sounds around us, but I can’t help myself. “What made you ask about Steven? Did he say something?”

“I knew this was coming,” Rachel says and chuckles to herself. “No, silly, he didn’t say anything.”

“So what made you bring him up?” I try to keep any sound of frustration out of my voice but I know I’m failing miserably.

“I have eyes, ya know. I may not endanger myself like you by not protecting them, but you’d be amazed at what I can see behind these little tinted windows.”

“Ok, so what did you see if nothing was spoken?” I’m breathing out like this is a regular conversation and I have no extreme interest in it.

“Let’s just say that if you ever feel like someone is watching you when your back is turned or you’re not really paying attention to anything going on, you might be correct in your assumption.”

“He was watching me, like out of the ordinary watching someone?”

“Not another word, Charlie,” Rachel says. “I thought we were going to get some sun today, not ramble on about your roommate.”

“I just think I should know if anything is going on,” I say, hoping she’ll tell me that something is.

“I said no more, silly.” Rachel’s hand finds mine again and lightly taps it. “We can talk about that like we do everyday when we get back into town.”

I know she won’t say anymore so I don’t press the issue. I’m sure she doesn’t even know what she’s talking about. If Steven has something to say to me, he’ll say it; he’s not the kind of guy who keeps secrets or anything. I guess the same could be said about me, but Rachel’s right – I won’t think about it right now. I’ll just enjoy the day.

We fall silent, sounds of kids laughing as they build sandcastles, parents yelling at them not to go into the water past their knees. And the kids are screaming unchained happiness for a first-time experience at the beach. Most people try to find a quiet strip to tan on or hang with friends or read and think about things that have no personal ties to their own lives. But I like the noise; I like knowing there are people around who feel such a connection to others and our small place in this corner of the world. I can hear Colin at the bar, telling some wild fraternity party story that Steven has heard a million times. If I had super hearing, I could probably just barely make out Sarah's post-coital laugh we all had the pleasure of listening to on more than one occasion when hanging out.

I flip over, placing my hands over one another to support my cheek, keeping my face off the ground. I like the sand, but I don't want to eat it.

"Watch where you're flinging that stuff," Rachel growls out. Her speech is slow, like she's starting to fall asleep.

"Sorry," I say. I turn my head away from Rachel, keeping myself in the dark as I go. The sand fills my bellybutton, making the run of my stomach a complete plane. I dig my toes in, getting them heated up in between, and I take a deep breath then exhale to sink as much as I can into the moment. No longer does the sun focus its energy on my eyes, and I frown and lift my brows to adjust to the heat release. My once warm backside is now exposed to a breeze, waiting for the sun to win it over. A small chill sends some of the sand crystals tumbling off me and back to their own population.

I hear Rachel breathing deeply, fast asleep, even with my head turned away from her. Part of me feels like it's going to be headed in the same direction. Rachel was right; it is a nice day. My eyes remain closed and the beach, the sand, the screaming kids all start to fall away.

I was probably only asleep for a few seconds before I hear multiple sets of feet coming toward me and feel sand landing on my arm. I don't know if they are trying to be sneaky, but it isn't working on me. I can feel the air space between one of the people and myself shrink, kinda like closing your eyes and bringing your hands closer to your ears until you can feel them cracking through the invisible bubble of personal space. There are lips closing in on me, and I can tell because there is an air rush of breath right at the elf point of my ear. Before the mouth can play some childish prank of yelling point blank into me, I decide to make it aware that I am no longer asleep.

“Yes, Steven?” I open my eyes and roll my head in his direction to see that look of denying he was about to do anything stupid.

“What are you going to do, sleep all day?” He shrugs off the attempt to scream in my ear well, his fog-speckled eyes looking earnest, showing that he cares for me in some oddball sort of way.

Sometimes I think it would just freak him out if he ever knew what I'm feeling; everyone else would get weird, too – except Rachel. I'll just keep it to myself until we're all forty and can laugh about it.

“We're going out to catch some of the last good waves, you coming?” he asks.

I look past him and realize maybe it was more than just a few seconds of sleep. The sun is lower now, no longer reigning king of the summer beach pageant. Things are a little hazy and I turn over to sit up. Steven stands straight, giving me room. I look over and Rachel is gone. So much for me making sure she didn't sleep and sunburn.

"Yeah, I'll go," I say, finally rousing myself out of a cloud. "You got the boards?"

"Colin and Rachel are unloading now." He stares out at the water.

"Did anyone ever find the lovebirds?" I'm staring with him.

"Yeah, they're in the hot tub over by the *Dune*," he says, holding his gaze to the water like he's tethered to the ocean floor.

I turn my head toward the juice bar and see Sarah and Richard reclined in the water. They look exhausted and I know it's not from swimming. Richard wears his staple black tank top and swim shorts, shy about showing his upper torso too much. Sarah, in true supportive girlfriend fashion, wears her black two-piece. She slinks into the arm Richard has about her shoulders and they look like the most peaceful people at the beach. They wave over at me and I do the same, only I'm a little stiff and immediately know this means I'll be in a death of flushed pain tomorrow when my burn sets in.

Rachel and Colin return with the boards, staking them into the ground like poles from a volley ball net. Rachel doesn't surf, but again she likes to look the part, walking with it, posing next to it. If any of us got hurt, however, she'd be the first one out, swimming like the school champ we all know she is but never likes to brag about.

“Someone’s going to feel like an *Easy Bake Oven* tomorrow,” she says.

“Yeah, thanks for waking me up.” I turn my neck side to side and rotate it a couple of times. I might not be able to do this very well tomorrow.

“You just looked so calm with all that drool rolling out of your mouth,” she says.

“I do not drool.”

“Umm, yeah, you do,” Steven pitches in and gives me a soft shove to the head.

“Well it’s nice to see you took a break from juicing yourself to come over here and comment on my sleeping habits,” I say. We’re all smiling at each other. Today isn’t a day to be serious or talk politics or worry about school.

“Speaking of juice...” Rachel says as she walks off toward the bar.

“I better make that my cue,” Colin says. “It’s starting to cool down out here and I can’t let Rich and Sarah take up all that hot water. I’ll let you two settle this duel out in the water.”

Colin walks off and now it’s just Steven, the boards and me. We both look out over the water. I cross my arms about my knees and leer toward the horizon again. It’s changed somehow, blurred like a flat image of color, not so defined as water and atmosphere anymore. I guess it’s fitting with me coming out of sleep, somewhat foggy and unclear. I think how nice it would be to sail out there on a board, making some unrealistic attempt to reach that imaginary line.

I stand up and shake off the sand, now permanently attached to my body from sleeping in it for so long. I stretch my arms up and over my head, trying my best to get rid of some of the muscle tension I’m sure to face tomorrow. I bend with my knees back

down and hear a nice slip of a bone click at my left. This is just one of the few things my body does to remind me I'm not in high school anymore. But even as I grow older, I can't think of the last time I've had so much fun. I stand again and breathe out, ready to catch the last the day has to offer. I turn my head in Steven's direction. He might have been thinking the exact same thing. I watch him blink his eyes hard, bringing himself back to the present. He looks over at me.

“You ready?”

“Born and raised,” I respond.

We go over to the boards, stop and give each other that look of pseudo competition. Neither one of us is a professional, and we probably only picked up the hobby from watching too many movies with water. We've got sex wax to rub on our boards for optimum performance and know how to position ourselves for great sets and so on, but there's no Hawaiian big wave contest in either of our futures.

Steven heads out to the water; I'm close behind. The sand gradually changes from sprinkled salt to sugar mulch as I walk. And it's cold. The water rushes in and clears the top of my feet, satiating the sand enough to cause a sinkhole. I look ahead and Steven is already on his board. How he manages to bulldoze through the water so fast I'll never know. But I like to take my time and feel the water pull me in; I don't want to fight it.

My board is flat on the water now, slinking along beside me as I continue to wade in. I can feel the smaller currents underneath the surface, swirling about my legs like schools of fish darting aimlessly around. As soon as the level reaches my chest, I

slide on top, gaining balance and composure. If there were a way to strap myself down and just drift, I would. But I have to catch up to Steven who is even farther away from me now. I lift and turn my head to my feet to see almost everyone relaxing in the hot tub. Rachel is seated at the bar, smiling in my direction. I don't know if that's a smile of encouragement or if she's half-laughing at me for competing with Steven. I turn back and push ahead.

I'm paddling now. The rhythm of my strokes falls into place and this time I have to go against the water or I won't get anywhere. I paddle with steady hands. Steven is waiting for his first wave up ahead and I'm still trudging in. I continue with balanced and exacting hand movement. My hands are cupped like the halves of a fortune cookie. The water fills and disperses from the cups with every stroke and I'm starting to break from the pull of the current. If I didn't have any arm strength, I'd still be on the beach now, taking in the last glimpse of sunlight and warming my toes in the hot tub.

I paddle faster now. It's a harder push now, going past the break point. The waves are starting to rise and fall below me but nothing too hard just yet. The harder I paddle, the more water sprays out on me. It's the same taste I got when Steven stood over me, only now it's no longer a single drop of salt water. I feel like I should be gargling to get rid of a sore throat with this stuff. I try to keep my mouth closed but pushing along takes a lot out of me. There's a swell heading toward me and I think if I can just get over it, I'll be set. I make a few more strokes then float.

The water careens over me, my breath stilted, eyes closed and reserve oxygen passing through my nose. I hear nothing. The silence isn't deafening, but I hear the

bubble of bathwater about my ears and I cling to my board to pull me through. The wave carries me along, my board riding the waves out instead of being pulled backward to the beach, and I plunge back out into the open air. I blow out and shake water from my face. Slowly and with little effort, I get myself into a seated position. I forgot to see where Steven went.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Steven sitting, waiting. I could think that he was waiting for me, but I know how picky he is about waves. He could be out here for hours before he tried one he thought to be worthy of riding. We don't talk out here. This is the space of quiet. This is where water takes over and we take a back seat to it driving. Looking out toward the horizon, I don't feel any closer, but in the water I feel stuck. I'm bobbing over tiny mounds of wet, not really moving in one direction or another, but facing the waves that will soon carry me back to the sands. It's like they work with each other, playing tennis with the humans. And the game is always a tie, allowing the water to settle and the beach to empty when the night comes around.

I watch Steven start his turn, preparing to hop and ride the blast heading toward us. I let him go first because he's got something to prove maybe; first one out, first one to ride. The wave catches underneath his board and he's up with the fluid motion of lava devouring everything in its path. He's strong, muscles tensed but his feet play a classically-trained dance to balance his weight. I watch him start to smile as he floats away from me. I can almost make out cheers from the beach, the gang resembling colored spots on a faded background. They'll all be waiting for me next.

I let Steven enjoy his ride without scrutiny and return to the water wall. The waves aren't coming in very strong and I consider paddling back in, but I always do that. The sun is glowing now, no longer beaming. Its warmth is more general now, unlike the feel of being an ant under some magnifying glass. I close my eyes for a brief second and open them again, ready to take the next wave. There's a swell forming directly in front of me. I can't hear the guys cheering anymore and I can't turn to find Steven or I've lost it. All I can do now is let it come to me.

It starts to build up and I turn to paddle away, finding the channel of its push. I can feel it rising behind me as I paddle until it starts to carry me along without my tiny cups. I grip the rails of my board, breathe out hard and pop. My knees slide in and under, heading rolling from feet to the beach line. My right foot slides back, gliding over the water rushing in, trying to separate me from the board. My left foot extends up a bit, holding fast to the flat while my arms spread like a plane. I feel it, the balance of me on board and board on water – we're all working together to make our motions one. One move outside of this alignment and the wave will show me what it's like to be coughed out of the sea, like the horizon greeting card is closing and the wind flow sweeps me out. I hold tight and lift my body, just short of vertical. It's only been three seconds since I grabbed the rails but the movement feels like a year of constructed perfection. I finally release the breath I've been holding and look for the group.

Steven waves me in with a smile, but I'm still far from through with this ride. I look about me, watching the board cut through, making its own path. Water sprays up and into my face like rain from below. The sun is at my back, warming me as I go along.

It's saying goodbye to all of us for the day. It takes a few moments for the ride to slow and before I chance losing my balance, I release back into the water, securing my hand to my board so I won't drift from it. The rest of my body filters under; the water accepting me like an ice shard piercing its surface, waiting to bobble back up. There's no sound down here. I can feel the water against me and it gives the impression of sound. Air bubbles drift upward from my nose and some are released from the trap of my bathing suit. It's funny how they don't just explode and scream into the water. I feel like I have earplugs in, watching the glimmer of the surface get closer as I follow the bubbles up. The pin holding my hair up is gone now, a treasure to the ocean floor. I break the surface and the muffled suspension of sound becomes an uproar of scattered applause, droplets of salt water being flung from my shaking head, riding their own waves down the threads of my hair.

I look ahead and see the group closing in on the beach. There's no doubt the day is over and it's time to pack up, but I just want to float out here. I see Rachel heading toward the cars as the rest of the group gather their things from the sand. I just brought myself and the beach provided everything else. I turn to the right and see Steven looking in my direction, smiling. I give him a quick glance and think to turn, but he's holding my eyes. He knows.

## OVER COFFEE

The small Seattle diner sits on the street corner with a steady flow of business. The rain is light outside and most passersby don't even bother with umbrellas. The door opens with a chime and in walks a late-30s woman with a washed-out brunette mop of hair on top of her head. She comes in with a rush, wiping a bit of moisture from her face and scouting a table inside the establishment. She walks over to a table just as the sound of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* begins to ring inside her purse.

"Hey, what's up?" Carol says flipping open her cellular phone from her bag.

She pulls a chair out to sit down, wooden legs scratching against the dull concrete slab of a floor. The gray makes everything standing on top of it look like objects floating in a sea of tornado skies. There are grooves set into the floor where the chair has seesawed back and forth before. The chair has permanence here, a set in stone pun intended belonging at its table counterpart. It also has the scream of unkempt fingernails scratching over chalkboard planes.

Her slingshot movement eases the stretch of noise, sliding and slumping down into the chair, zipping back up to the table with only the aid of her left hand. The tabletop is littered with condiments: salt & pepper shakers, ketchup and mustard bottles, three different kinds of sugar substitutes, a plastic bottle equipped with pouring snout for syrup, laminated and quality disinfected two-sided menus with breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and one of those rustic metal napkin dispensers whose purpose to issue you something clean for your hands is ruined by the grime on the metal you have to hold to rip out the fallout-shelter-secured paper.

A starched brown and orange uniform walks up to the left of Carol, pant legs crunching like a sheets of sandpaper rubbing against each other.

“Can I get you anything to start off with, maybe some coffee?” The waitress stands ready to draw her pad. Reaching into the front pocket slash trough of a waist apron, her fingers slide over the grease-stained order book. A few strands of hair gathered in one curl, extend down the forehead and rumple at the cheekbone from her upswept do. She has an earth tone lipstick smile on her face appointed to her by job description. The nametag says “Rhonda.”

“Yes, with low-fat non-dairy creamer if you have it.”

“Ok, I’ll be back with your coffee and give you a few minutes to look over the menu if you want anything else.” Rhonda smiles as she walks off, her hands swinging at her sides.

Carol looks around to see what everyone else is having. Smells ok, looks better.

Roger and Nathan sit at a nearby table, finishing up the food they ordered earlier.

“What are you guys doing for dinner?” Carol continues her phone conversation.

“I’m not sure what to do,” Nathan says.

“Don’t look at me,” Roger says. “I was thinking of seeing that new movie downtown.”

“Maybe we could go out to *Empanadas* tonight; I don’t think all of us have gone there in a month or so.”

Nathan looks down at his hands, fingers tapping on the tabletop causing the entire structure to wobble a bit; the legs are always uneven here, or some tables have

napkins, gum, and even small doorstoppers to keep them balanced. He is wearing a corduroy blazer the color of burnt grass in a high summer sun. Black-rimmed glasses fashion his face to match the chunky choppy midnight-dyed hairstyle he sports this week. Gradually, his hands come together from the tapping and he begins to pick at what is left of his nail remains.

“Hello?” Roger snaps his fingers together. “Earth to Nate. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Nathan looks up to see Roger waving his hand, snapping away the trance he must have fallen into by gazing at his jagged nail tips. He sighs strong enough for everyone opposite him to smell the chocolate mint he’s been sucking for the past few minutes. His eyes catch Roger whose own eyes seem to be looking on with irritation.

“Look, we don’t have to go there if you don’t want to,” Carol fires back.

Rhonda walks up. She brings a trail of scrambled eggs and buttered grits behind her. She places the coffee on the table and smiles at Carol.

“Can I get you anything else, ma’am?”

Carol shakes her head and returns the smile. Rhonda goes over to stand by Roger and Nathan.

“Feel free to answer me any day now,” Carol says. Her voice is shaky, like there’s more than just dinner riding on a response. She looks directly ahead, across the table.

Rhonda interrupts the conversation. “And can I get you gentleman anything else today, another refill, sir?” she asks.

Roger places his hand over his coffee cup and shakes his head.

“I’ll be back with your checks in a minute,” Rhonda says. She walks back toward the kitchen, hands and arms still swinging by her side.

“Nevermind, I don’t care what we do,” Roger says. He leans back into his chair, the wood creaking like the front porch floorboards of an old southern plantation home. He continues to look at Nathan. “How about we let you make the plans?”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Carol says. “Go ahead, I’m listening.” She takes a small selection of coffee in, pouring it slowly over tongue, instead of inhaling until the drink reaches the vacuum and gets sucked up into the mouth. Her bottom lip holds the cup rim and her top lip keeps the flow of liquid from going all over.

“Roger, I need to talk to you,” Nathan says.

“Ugh, not this again,” Carol says. She pauses to put down her coffee cup. “Sorry, I won’t interrupt again. Continue.”

Roger leans back in toward the table, resting his elbows on the top and cupping his hands under his chin. This time, he is the one who sighs. The stubble atop his head is peppered with silver linings and the scruff on his face is fit to match. The jade in his eyes compliment the navy canvas jacket he’s wearing. Nathan bought him the jacket after they had been dating for about three months.

“I don’t even know how to say what it is I need to say to you,” Nathan says.

“Just say it, Nate.”

Nathan looks down at his plate. There’s a strip of bacon still on it and a corner piece of toast. The bacon is shriveled like ribbon candy, but tighter, smaller distances

between each wave crest of sizzled pig. It looks blackened, well-done and saturated with oil. Nathan reaches for the bacon, distracting himself from the conversation. The bacon breaks in several places, snapping like knuckles cracking behind the ears. He drops the bacon and rounds the oil remains between his thumb and index finger, like he's examining its consistency.

“Nate?” Roger says. He leans closer, breaking his face into Nathan's personal sphere of distraction. He reaches over and slaps the side of Nathan's hand with his own. “Say what you have to say.”

He stops the oil inspection and looks back up at Roger.

“I've met someone else,” Nathan says. He looks up at Roger with shaky eye movement, but desperately trying to hold focus.

“What?” Carol says. Her tone is low and raspy, urgent in pace but quiet enough as not to cause a scene. “How could you do that?”

Roger's eyelids falter, not closing but just short of a full blink before lifting them up again. Tears do not form, but there are noticeable twitches in his face now. He clenches his hands together, tight, forming a fused fist and presses his chin deep into it. His jawline is pronounced, defined by the seal his teeth are forming to each other. They interlock and grit side to side as his eyes glare into Nathan.

“When did this happen?” Carol asks.

“It's Franklin, isn't it?” Roger asks, his finger pointed to the tabletop like he's asking someone to pick out a circle drawing in a line of squares.

“I don't think we need to talk about who it is,” Nathan responds.

“Oh, we’re gonna talk about it. If I have to sit here and listen to you tell me you’re seeing someone else, you can bet we’re gonna talk about it.”

“I’m not seeing him or anyone; I just, we’ve just talked.”

“And when did your little talk take place?” Roger follows Nathan with his eyes, not allowing him to turn his head away from the conversation.

“I dunno, a couple of weeks ago.”

“I can’t believe you would do such a thing,” Carol says. She sits back in her seat and looks around the diner to see if anyone is looking at her. She knows that when she talks on the phone her voice has a tendency to be louder than she thinks it is.

“When were you going to tell me about this, Nate?”

“I’m telling you now.” His head has gone back to looking at his plate.

Carol parks her forehead into the palm of her left hand. She closes her eyes and shifts her head left to right and back. She pulls her fingers together, tracing the lines above her brow, massaging hard enough to pinch blood to the surface.

“And that’s it?” Roger says. “That’s all you have to say? You couldn’t have just dropped that off in a greeting card under my pillow or something? Where is this coming from?”

“I don’t know, babe.”

“Babe?” Roger pushes back in his chair, the friction squeaking throughout the diner, but no one turns to look. The sound catches Roger off guard, but he regains composure to address Nathan again. “No, you don’t get to call me Babe anymore.”

“Roger, just listen to me, please.”

“No, Nate, you listen. I think I’ve heard just about enough from you, so why don’t you just let me say a couple of things.”

A tear makes a run down the slope of Carol’s nose. It catches at the tip holds its position just long enough to tickle. She brings her hand from her forehead and wipes it away. She then reaches for one of the napkins from the tin, but when she pulls to free one of the tiny rectangles, it snags and the entire holder bounds over to her, almost knocking over the small amount of coffee left in her cup. She lets a nervous laugh escape.

“Sorry,” Carol says.

“Randal saw you with Franklin last week,” Roger says. “You two were talking, right outside the chemistry building on that ruddy old bench you like so much. He told me it looked innocent enough, but when he saw you smile, he knew. He told me he remembered that same smile on your face when you thanked him for introducing us. He then tried to tell me that it was probably nothing and he didn’t know why he even brought it up. I don’t know if he was trying to convince himself or me, but he didn’t have to – I already knew.” He sits back in his chair and folds his arms, satisfied with his own revelation about the situation.

“What do you mean you knew?”

“And you didn’t say anything?” Carol says. The rough napkin holds her tear and she keeps any others from falling.

“I mean I saw you, too, Nate,” Roger says. “Sunday. And I didn’t say anything to you about it because I wanted you to come to me. I was also hoping it wasn’t true. So what, I haven’t meant anything to you?”

“No, you know that’s not true.”

“Do I?” Roger shrugs his shoulders with exaggeration and keeps his arms folded.

“You should.”

“I don’t know what I should know right now, Nate. I know my lover is telling me he doesn’t want to be with me anymore. Is that about right?”

“But I do wanna be with you.”

“Are you kidding me?” Carol says. She turns to look out one of the diner windows. There is a young couple walking together under an umbrella, snuggled together and smiling as they go up the sidewalk.

“You want both of us?” Roger laughs.

“I don’t know what I want,” Nathan says. “I’m just trying to be honest with you.”

“Kinda late for that,” Carol says, turning back from her window watching.

“Nate, it’s easy. While you’re finding out what you want, I’ll make it easy for you and not be around.” Roger begins to stand from his chair. He places his hands on the tabletop and bends toward Nathan awaiting a response.

“You’re just gonna leave?”

“What choice do I have, Nate? Give me one stupid reason to stick around.”

Nathan allows his hands to fall to the table. He begins to extend a hand in Roger’s direction, but Roger pulls back. Nathan retracts his hand and curls it into a fist.

His other hand comforts the shy fist, shielding it from Roger's glare. Nathan simply shakes his head, lips parted. He brings his mouth to a close and hangs his head.

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

Rhonda walks up to Carol and puts her bill, floating in a plastic holder, next to the salt & pepper shakers.

"There ya go, ma'am," she says. She walks around to stand next to Nathan and Roger. She places the bill between them. Roger and Nathan keep blank stares at each other.

"I'm sorry; did I need to make this separate?" Rhonda asks.

"No, he'll take care of it," Roger says with a look downward at Nathan.

"You two have a nice day."

"Will do," Roger says. He doesn't look over at Rhonda. Nathan doesn't look over at Rhonda. Rhonda walks away.

"So what do we do now?" Carol asks.

"I guess we should get outta here," Nathan says. He pulls a checkbook from his coat pocket and with the other hand, he pulls the bill close enough to read it. "Thirteen dollars."

"I'm leaving," Roger says. He stands up straight and steps to the side of his chair.

"Wait. I want to walk out with you," Nathan says.

Roger sinks back into his chair from the side. He continues to stare blankly ahead, watching the rain outside while Nathan hunches over to write out a check. The

perforated paper slides out of the pack, ripping across like a plastic zipper. Nathan places the check next to the bill and opens his coat to replace the checkbook.

“Sam, I can’t do this right now,” Carol says. She pauses. “Ok, we’ll talk later.”

Roger and Nathan stand up from the table, their chairs the only noise between them. Roger removes his jacket and grips it firmly in his hand; his arm falls to his side. The jacket almost touches the floor, but he doesn’t make a move to correct its position. Nathan faces the other direction, avoiding the scene with the jacket. The two walk toward the door and head outside, Nathan following behind Roger. A tiny bell jingles as the door closes after them.

“Bye,” Carol says. She flips down the cover on her phone and breathes out a huff.

Carol lifts her purse from the seat of the chair next to her. She opens the side zipper - the incognito secret agent hideaway storage facility - and pulls out two dollars. It was only a cup of coffee, but the waitress was prompt and never let the smile fade from her face. Into the same slender pocket, she lets her cell phone slide past eyeliner to the bottom. Before heading home, she will stop off and pick up a pizza for the boys. The indecision of her husband always leads to a night of junk food and television. She turns sideways to slink out of her chair, keeping the noise level to a minimum this time. Purse in hand, Carol walks by the neighboring table and notices a check written for the exact bill amount. No tip is left for the waitress.

“Typical,” she mumbles.

Carol steps back to her table, lifts the two dollars from the bill tray and places them in her pocket. She opens her purse, pulls out a five and places it where the two dollars once rested. Not everyone has to have a bad day she thinks. Still sniffing, she turns and walks out the exit doors. The door chimes behind her, signaling another satisfied customer.

## IN A TIMELY MANNER

Lion's Health Memorial Hospital is located in a small downtown community in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The residents of Pittsfield, population 45,793, have family physicians and emergency care through Lion's, minus the few thousand who are steady patients at Gibson County Physician's Center on the opposite side of town. There are small clinics and other specialty medicine facilities throughout Pittsfield, but the size of the city is compact, making it a town of personal connections and rumor mills.

From the outside, the facility looks tattered, brick sides and pillars chipped away from neglect and overgrown landscaping yearning for a designer touch. There is a wide concrete walkway that leads from the main lot to the crosswalk to the entrance of the family practice automated doors. The sick enter through here, or those helping others with ailment. Inside the light is dense, an opaque fluorescence hovering about the walls and crowned at the ceiling like invisible chandeliers.

A reception desk is directly ahead, and a busy nurse sets her charts aside and offers a sign-in sheet, half-rising out of her chair and directing her arm to the right where a waiting room is located. The chaotic maze of dodging nurses, patients and wayward kids running from play station to play station is treacherous, but there's a muted wall-mounted television in the corner of the waiting room to display all the terrors of war ravaging throughout nations across the global climate.

Sofa chairs are arranged in rows, back-to-back with rubber plants breaking the arrangement into shapes of the letter L. There's a magazine rack on the opposite wall from the television and old volumes of *Time*, *Highlights*, *Life* and *People* magazine

spilling about the tops of two large coffee tables in the open angle of each L shape. The patients sit and wait until a nurse appears from the blind corridor that extends from the waiting room to call a name. Like any waiting room, most of the patrons try their best to avoid each other, hoping that whatever the stranger seated to the left has they don't catch.

Once a name is called, the patient is taken through the door, walked down the hall with light conversation about the cloudy weather and brought into one of the rooms on the side. The nurse instructs the patient to take a seat by the corner desk and relays that a doctor will stop by in a few minutes for the examination. The door is closed behind the nurse, giving the patient time to observe surroundings and contemplate sickness.

The desk in the exam room is a favorite visual wasteland for patients in wait. One of the initial eye attractions is the glass jar full of large tongue depressors. The mind at once creates two perceptions for the wooden sticks, one of model house building and the other of old-fashioned stamp adhesive upon the tongue. The visual alert to cotton swabs triggers a bodily reaction, but different from the tongue depressors; the ears tingle slightly with perception of cotton filaments swirling about the deep canal down to the drum. About this time, when the sweep of desk distraction has come to an end, a light knock sounds and the doctor enters. There's a casual hello exchange, avoiding the etiquette of handshakes to deter the spread of germs. The doctor notes the patient's current health, and if any testing has been conducted, this would be the time to give the results.

Two months ago, Elliott Jennings came to Lion's for such a follow-up exam, a process that takes only a couple of minutes. Although the occurrences of these exams take place in over fifty percent of the appointments at the hospital, the results are not always what the patient wants to hear. When Elliott came in that day for his test results, he received a terminal diagnosis.

“Your blood work came back positive for HIV, Mr. Jennings,” the doctor said.

Elliott stared into the mouth of the doctor, words forming and tumbling out that he could no longer hear. The doctor was hugging Elliott's chart to his chest, a comfort for some doctors when delivering news of terminal illness. Elliott turned away from the doctor, to his right where a mirror no bigger than a compact disc case hung on the wall. In the tiny space of the reflection, there was only his face. He was a man in his mid-40s, paintbrushes of gray running through his eyebrows. Even with his near perfect vision, the reflection seemed cloudy to Elliott, like he couldn't define the image he was seeing. His nose fell asymmetrical to the left, and although it wasn't too big or too small, the off setting made it one of the first things to notice about him. The corners of his mouth turned upward slightly; they seemed to want to smile and push away what the doctor had said, but the struggle proved too difficult to achieve the muscle movement. Elliott had a kind face with deep-set laugh lines and a moustache the color of tree bark to match the hair on his head. He blinked to clear away the fog settling over his eyes, but it only blurred more of his image together. Elliott had become something of a wet painting, colors and lines and shapes running together. He closed his eyes and shut out any muffled communication from the doctor.

When Elliott reopened his eyes, he realized that his head had been moving in agreement with statements the doctor had been making; his mouth had been answering questions posed by the doctor about his exposure to other people, namely his wife. It was as if seeing the doctor and the examination room made everything valid and comprehensible. With his eyes closed, the rest of his body could continue to function and work with the doctor on understanding what would come next now that he had been given his diagnosis. He had already agreed to make an appointment with the hospital psychiatrist for counseling by the time he could focus on the doctor's face. They shook hands as the doctor stood to open the door and allow Elliott to walk out first. The doctor gave Elliott a copy of the full test results analysis sheet and his business card if he had anything else he wanted to discuss at a later date.

Elliott walked along the corridor, his form bobbing an uneven left and right past other exam room doors. His right shoe made a huffing sound as he pressed heel to the carpeted floor; it was worn but comfortable. At the end of the hall, a nurse wished Elliott a good day. He stopped for a moment to turn toward her and say thank you. His dry tone and frozen expression gave the nurse a reminder that people visiting a hospital usually aren't having the best of times. Elliott watched the nurse return to the side station before he continued his walk to the door leading back out to the waiting room. As he turned the cold handle to return to the open room, Elliott was still unaware of the sounds about him. He pulled the door toward him and stepped out into the waiting room, patients and friends looking up in his direction in hopes that he would be the nurse to call their names. Elliott observed the disappointment in the people's faces as he made his way

down and around the corner of one of L-shaped seating areas. He passed the reception desk on his left, the nurse still at work with charts and filing, and headed toward the family practice exit.

The vacuum seal of the hospital unzipped as the automated doors pulled apart for Elliott. Fresh air washed over his face and into the quiet heaving breaths of his nose, but he couldn't tell the difference; he was in a programmed stride. Fluorescent light evolved into a bright haze, but he couldn't tell which made his eyes glass over more. Over the crosswalk, down the emptying lanes and at the corner of a parking lot intersection was Elliott's four-door compact. He paused at the driver side door, pulled his single key on chain from his pocket and unlocked the door, sliding into the seat and closing the door in a fluid and controlled move. The inside of the car smelled like wet raincoats, dank with the crumpled noise of waste paper unfolding. Elliott inserted the key into the ignition but went for his seatbelt before turning over the engine. The clink of the belt locking into place startled Elliott back to his surroundings. The car smell became more intense to him and the clink echoed against the silence of the unpopulated lot through his windows. He looked ahead at a small shrub in front of his car before his eyes were drawn up and over to the rearview mirror. Unlike the exam room mirror, he could only see his eyes this time, wide with anxiety to match his labored breathing. The blurred reflection was averted as Elliott moved to let his forehead fall to the steering wheel. The safety on his seatbelt triggered at the forward motion, holding Elliott confined to his seat. He felt his head continue to angle down and the silence was once again shattered by the pulse of his tears.

The drive home proved successfully uneventful for Elliot. After regaining composure in the parking lot, he decided to take the back roads home. The midday haze was fading to a dull evening; thunder bowled at the horizon. It was quiet going through the surrounding neighborhoods. Some houses had cars parked in driveways, others looked vacant, desolate. He didn't live far from Lion's, and the short drive gave him no balance of time to think about what the doctor had said to him. After a four-way stop where there seemed to be a young brother and sister playing on the lawn of a corner home, Elliott continued forward another three blocks until he reached the two-story canary box that was his home. As he pulled into the drive, Elliott reached for the garage opener affixed to the visor above him. He pushed the single, oval button and the door lifted, retracting back on its track until coming to a shaky halt. He took the car in slowly, keeping a safe distance from the sport utility vehicle parked on the left. With a shift of the car gear into park, a turn and removal of the key, and another soft click of the device, the garage door crept back down on track to enclose the space. The fading light from outside grew smaller and smaller until the door reached ground level. Elliott sat in the car, his seatbelt still holding him in place, and he stared at the doorway ahead. His breathing was paced, almost mechanical.

The next sound he would hear when he walked through the door would be his wife. He thought about how he would tell her then realized he wouldn't be able. The two of them didn't have much and Elliott thought if he just packed a few things he could leave; his wife would be better off without him. They were random thoughts, but the high speed processing of his mind was there to counter the stalemate position of his

form. Elliott knew if he sat in the car any longer, his wife would come out to the garage to check on him. She had suggested he go to the doctor for a full physical a week ago and Elliott could feel her questions about his follow-up appointment coming before he even considered undoing the seatbelt. He just wanted to start the car again, reverse through the garage door and hit the street with no particular destination.

Elliott reached down and unlatched his seatbelt. The durable nylon scraped across his torso as he pulled the door handle to get out of the car. He grabbed the steering wheel with his right hand to balance himself while planting a foot to the ground and pushing out of the seat. Once out, Elliott turned and closed the door, the reaction of metal to metal echoed throughout the dark garage walls. The lights from inside the house created a vertical rectangle to frame the door. In the dark, it looked like some portal out of a science fiction book. Elliott thought it looked like a gateway to hell.

He opened the door and light from the short hallway flooded his field of vision. Elliott walked in and into the kitchen, the garage door closing behind him. He could smell chicken baking as he walked over to the kitchen nook to sit down. At his left, his wife busied with pots on the range, stirring briefly before allowing a glass top to clang down to its counterpart. She turned from the stove to see Elliott smiling at her.

“How was your checkup, hon?”

Rhea walked over to her husband to give him a kiss on the forehead. The pots on the stove rumbled like murmured conversation behind her. Elliott watched her approach through unwavering eyes. She was slightly younger than Elliott, the gray in her chunked chocolate hair not yet noticeable. Rhea’s eyes sparkled a royal green with flecks of

amber around the iris. Her thinly arched brows crowned her eyes like rainbows, their shape framing the oval pattern of her face. Her nose and mouth were smallish, creating almost a doll-like quality about her physical construction. Unlike Elliott, Rhea had even features, the left hemisphere of her body an exact copy of the right hemisphere. Her arms swung in unison to her footsteps, the waist apron bunching at the inner thighs making the stenciled rooster retract and expand in motion. She reached Elliott and looked down at his face. His eyes had not looked up to meet hers.

“It was ok,” he said. Rhea leaned in and pressed her lips to his forehead. “The doc had a few things to go over with me.” She stroked the back of his head and leaned back to peer into his eyes with a smile before turning to go back to the stove.

“What kinds of things?” she asked.

“Just some results from the tests he ran last time I was there.” Elliott was slumped over, the weight of the conversation pushing down hard on his shoulders.

“X-rays?” Rhea continued to stir in the pots. She pulled off the lid to a simmering mix of vegetables on the back right burner. They smelled steamed from a fresh garden.

“No, it was blood work,” Elliott said.

“Well, I hope nothing serious.” She pooled a small amount of liquid from the pot onto her spoon and brought it to her lips to sample.

Elliott looked on as his wife sipped from the spoon. She made a sound that let him know the spoon content was too hot to taste without blowing to cool it. He stared at

his wife's form, shadowed by the overhead range light and thought how good it would feel to walk behind her, wrap his arms about her waist and just hold on.

"I might be slightly anemic," he said. Elliott struggled to control the measure of his voice, but it didn't work. As the lie spilled, so came the return of his blurred vision. His body remained slumped and stiff as a board, his voice shaken by the unspoken words he knew he would have to speak later. His face was streaked before Rhea could look up from her food.

She dropped her spoon to the range top and turned toward Elliott. The pot top had already been set aside after she opened it to stir. She walked quickly to him, her fitted slippers scratching across the kitchen floor. Rhea extended her arms to grab Elliott's shoulders and pull him up, but his hands found her waist and made their way to lock behind her back, the apron strings tangling around his fingers. He was suctioned to her, his head just below the breasts, his voice deep and rolling wails between coughs. Rhea could do nothing but allow herself to be held. She put one hand at the top of his back and the other behind his head to support him against her body. She looked down at the top of his head, her own tears starting to form.

"Elliott, what is it?"

He rocked back and forth against her form, the low wailing stretching out with each exhale. Rhea closed her eyes and held Elliot close. The oven timer beeped five chimes in succession for the chicken to be removed. Elliott and Rhea never let go of each other. She felt like a rope to Elliott, strong and tethered around him. Rhea didn't go back to the stove, not at first. The food on the range continued to simmer and the chicken

wouldn't burn. Elliott needed her. Rhea held onto her husband that day until the tears stopped for them both. They talked about what they could, mostly his condition, and restrained from questions they knew neither would be strong enough to ask. For the time that followed, it was a time to comfort, not blame.

Today, Elliott is back at the hospital. He's not visiting a doctor for a checkup, but is now an admitted patient. He tells any of the staff that he feels fine, but in the pit of his stomach there's a pain like piranha eating from the inside. Elliott was hospitalized for pneumonia a few days ago. His white blood cell count had fallen low, so the doctor wanted to keep him for observation and to get his levels up to fight off the cold. Elliott's doctor, a specialist, is different from the one who diagnosed him two months ago. He's also two cities away from home, but for HIV-related pneumonia, this doctor is the best recommended physician anywhere near Pittsfield.

The private room is boxed and white. To the left of the door is a bathroom, fully equipped with a deep-set sink and towels, toilet and trashcan, and bathtub with built-in seat rest and railing. It's a basic hospital setup, disinfected, cold, immaculate. Beside the bathroom in the open space of the room is a tall locker for storing clothing and other patient essentials from home. The floor spreads about the square, tiled and breaking the large parallelogram into hundreds of smaller cloned shapes. The bed juts out from the wall opposite the locker, a small side table next to it with a hard plastic yellow water pitcher and clear cup atop. On the other side, a long pole hangs a contained fluid, dripping down into a pool that flushes its way methodically along a winding soft plastic

straw. There are white curtains covering the glass panels on the side, but first morning light glows behind them to the halfway mark where the wall begins.

Rhea sleeps on the stuffed vinyl bench below the window. Her black trench coat covers her like a blanket, only her bare toes and head poking out from each end. She is facing Elliott's bed, her head parallel to his feet. It's a heavy rest for Rhea; she stayed up until early morning just watching Elliott breathe. He makes small jitters with his hands when he dreams. Her face is wrinkled with concern, even as she sleeps.

Elliott turns his head to the right to see his wife. He stares at her unmoving form, wondering if she's warm enough. Her white cell count has been stable over the past two months, but he still worries about her. He pushed away his thoughts of her infidelity weeks ago and she has never questioned his loyalty to her. They have shared their lives for over a decade and without words to disrupt their union, they continue to live, one watching over the other through this time of confusion and illness and quiet strength.

Elliott closes his eyes, the drip of antibiotic from bag to tube matches his breathing intakes and exhales. Rhea shifts position slightly, tucking her toes under the coat, but continues to sleep. Elliott wants to sleep and wake up the day before he went to the doctor. He wants his wife to smile again and hold him in celebration, not fear. He wants to die.

Outside of Elliott's private room, nurses, doctors and patients walk the halls, intersecting with each other for questions, requests, light conversation, and others just pass by. To the right of the room and down the hall, a nursing station is located by the elevator. This is the third floor. The elevator chimes as it goes up to surgery, neonatal,

radiology and administration; down to intensive care and admitting, where the busy rush of incoming patients mixes with the slow motion process of waiting rooms. People watch over loved ones and friends during the wait, nursing staff furiously checking in patients, scheduling appointments and filing away charts. A frosted wind carries to the reception area from outside where many go to smoke, pacing the cracked concrete walkway in effort to forget their own sickness or that of someone they helped get to the hospital. The front entrance columns give the hospital a daunting appearance; it seems to loom over the tightly packed parking lot, cars driving around rows in search of a free space. In lit white letters, the name Charter Regional Hospital shines out from the red brick construction. The facility is located a short distance from a major highway, and the sound of traffic drowns out the blow of the wind. It is a hazy blur of a day.

## SCATTERED

Trevor opened his eyes and looked up to the clouded night sky. His hands were behind his back, caressing the rough tree bark on the thick pine keeping him hidden. This was Trevor's last week of summer camp and the kids had wanted to play hide-n-seek. He had reluctantly agreed, leaving behind the safety and illuming features of the campfire. A dark campground wasn't Trevor's idea of great fun, but he didn't want to be labeled as the kid afraid of the dark. There were three other campers playing with Trevor – Chris Farmer, Lily Sullivan and Roger Pitts, the seeker.

He didn't know how long he had been behind the tree but it felt like hours. It was a location at the outset of the campgrounds, just before the thicket of trees became too dense to enter without a flashlight. Trevor's hiding spot was far away but in a straight line back to the safe tree from where Roger counted before going out in search of everyone. He hadn't heard any noticeable sounds since Roger took off running, screaming Chris' name. Leaning on the trunk, Trevor looked out into the tree thicket, imagining what kind of world lived among the wild grass and tall pines. There was a rustle some distance in front of Trevor, but he told himself it was just a night bird searching for insects. He was starting to grow tired of the game and somewhat anxious about his surroundings. Another rustle sent Trevor's eyes snap shut, his fingers digging into the grooves of the bark. The pace of his breathing increased to shallow inhales and exhales from the mouth. In the blacked-out space Trevor had created by closing his eyes, he began to think back to the spring when he and his mom had made one of their trademark movie outings.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the Friday night showing of *Suspiria*, the 1977 influential Hitchcockian horror film created by Dario Argento. Cineplex 12 theatres had gone into having month-long weekend genre film presentations, and this month it was avant-garde horror. Sedona, Arizona had one of the mid-sized theatres that housed twelve screens, but none were as big as other Cineplex 12 theatres in major cities around the nation. The theatre drew a decent crowd of teenagers, families and singles on Friday nights; seniors made up the largest audiences for Sunday matinees. There were approximately twenty-five people in the seventy-five seat screening room waiting for *Suspiria* to start – most patrons were in the main theatre drooling over the latest mainstream film to be released. The room was dimly lit and the rows of seats were not tiered. Cineplex 12 was in the process of renovating its theatres, but Sedona wasn't very high on the list. There were navy blue velvet curtains aligning the side walls from the far away ceiling to hovering an inch or two above the thinly carpeted floor. The curtains rippled along the front wall, as well, cloaking the large screen behind. The house lights, which were really regular sixty watt bulbs inset into the ceiling, were on the dimmer at level two. When the curtain pulled back to reveal the screen, the lights would go to five, full black.

From front to back, there were three high school students sitting in the first row, couples and singles spotted throughout the others, and an older man at the very back of row eleven – the square-cut window for the projector was directly above him and the operator was busy loading the reel into place. A row or two behind the midsection of the theatre, a thirty-something mom and her almost-teenage son sat in their seats, a large bag

of popcorn held between them by the mother. An instrumental song played over the speakers as the two munched on their movie snack.

Robin handed the popcorn over to her son. She reached down to grab her soda from the floor and take a sip. One of the new renovations to the theatre would be armrest cup holders, but for now patrons had only the floor, their hands or the lap to secure a fountain drink. She slurped through the straw and replaced the durable paper cup to the ground, sitting up and shifting in her seat to get more comfortable. Robin stared toward the front curtains, awaiting the presentation of the screen. She had straight, thick hair, down past her shoulders the color of oxidized copper. Some of it fell over her shoulders and the rest streamed trapped behind her back. Her eyes were dark like fudge and in the right light; they could seem black as the eclipsed nighttime sky. The space just above her top lip protruded in a wave of her tongue trying to release popcorn from the separation of two teeth. Her lips parted and the suction from her tongue made a small mouse squeak.

“Mom,” Trevor said. He turned away from her in embarrassment.

“Sorry sweetie,” she said. “You know how popcorn gets stuck like that.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to be so loud about it.”

“I’m sorry. Ok? Are we still friends?”

Trevor turned to see his mother’s face. She was leaning toward him, her hair falling over her eyes and her lips pouting outward. He laughed.

“Yeah, we’re friends.”

“Good,” she said.

They both turned to face the front again just as the curtains started to retract. The house lights faded and before the curtains reached full separation, the theatre was immersed in darkness.

Trevor held the popcorn with his left hand, keeping it between his mother and himself. He reached in for a few kernels with his right hand, the concession stand butter adhering to his fingertips. He brought the popcorn to his mouth as the first image appeared on the screen. Trevor liked movie trailers almost as much as the actual movies sometimes. This one in particular was a space movie about a mind-controlling virus picked up on an expedition to Mars. It seemed silly to Trevor.

“What’s *Suspiria* about?” he whispered to his mom.

“It’s about a girl who goes to a boarding school and then weird things start happening while she’s there.”

“Sounds kinda boring.”

“Hey, remember what we said?” Robin asked.

Trevor turned to look his mom directly in the face.

“You pick one, then I pick one,” she said.

“I know,” Trevor replied.

“Ok, then.”

Again, they returned to the screen where another trailer was playing. It was a sequel to a slasher film about kids whose car breaks down off a back road, shrouded deep in an eerie woods setting. Trevor leaned over to pick up his soda, avoiding the trailer. He brought the straw to his lips without sitting back upright and then replaced the

drink to the ground. By the time he went for more popcorn and looked up, the trailer had ended. The screen displayed a quick promo for Cineplex 12 and urged its patrons to keep quiet during the film presentation, to turn off all cell phones and to take crying babies out into the lobby area. At the conclusion of the promo, the feature film began.

Drums pounded throughout the theatre as the black screen displayed the production company's name in white lettering. The beat was in the pace of a brisk jog but gradually grew into a feverish run of sound. Soon after the director and main actor names came up, the bowing of wailing violins mixed in. Trevor squinted his eyes at the sounds, his hand stuck in the popcorn bag. At the sound of a final drum beat, the title flashed up on the screen. Trevor twitched at the halted drum.

"You ok?" Robin asked.

"Yeah, I just had an itch," Trevor responded.

He didn't want his mom to know the opening had scared him. The song of an open music box began to chime as supporting actor names were revealed. A voiceover briefly described the character of Suzy Bannion, her journey to ballet school in Germany and her trip to the boarding facility. The voice was deep and crusted, like it had been smoking cigarettes for days on end with nothing to drink but hard liquor. Trevor closed his eyes. He didn't like the dark. He didn't like being alone in the dark. He had a thing for horror films, but only if he saw them with his mom.

Somewhere toward the middle of the movie, Trevor shifted in his seat to be closer to his mom. There had been a few moments of startling music and characters running into each other unexpectedly, but so far nothing extremely horrifying for a

movie of this type. The theatre began to slowly close around Trevor, however, as tension in the movie grew with each scene building upon the next. By the time the main character had realized something sinister and evil was occurring at the boarding school, the action of the movie progressed into breakneck speed.

Robin looked over at Trevor who was now conjoined to her right arm. His eyes were locked to the screen as a screaming girl ran about a wooded area in the rain. She was being chased and trying to get back to the boarding school. She turned to see her stalker right behind her and screamed. Trevor jumped and squeezed Robin's arm tight enough for her to feel an interruption in blood flow.

"Hey you, you ok?"

Trevor looked at his mom, shaking his head side to side with a panicked look on his face.

"You wanna go?" she asked.

Trevor nodded furiously in agreement to the statement.

"Ok, c'mon. Grab your stuff so we can throw it away on the way out."

"I'm sorry, mom," Trevor said. He reached to pick up his soda.

"It's ok, c'mon let's go."

Robin stood up. She had placed her soda in the half-empty popcorn bag. Her right hand extended to Trevor and he slid his into the comfort of her palm. She led him down the row and up the aisle to the exit. The woman on the screen continued to run, screaming as she went, rain pelting her soaked body. Trevor closed his eyes once more and stayed close enough to Robin for her to lead him out.

Later that night, Robin folded laundry in her bedroom while Trevor slept down the hall. Their house was simple: two bedrooms, two baths, living room, dining/kitchen area and a small one-car garage. Robin's bathroom was attached and the other was stationed in the middle of the hallway, dividing her room from Trevor's at the opposite end. She was listening to a classical music compilation when she heard a sound come from the hallway. She put down the towel she was holding and turned down the music; her door was half open. She heard a high-pitched squeak that sent her from her bed and down the hall to Trevor's room in a split second.

"Sweetie, are you alright?" Robin had turned on Trevor's night table lamp and was at his bedside a moment after opening his door.

"I was running," he said in huffed breaths.

"Here, drink some water." She handed him the glass he kept on his table and watched him sit up to take a few sips.

"I couldn't find you," he said. Trevor collapsed back to his pillows.

"I'm right here." Robin took the glass and placed it back on the table. She rubbed her hand over Trevor's head, smoothing down his frantic hair. He was sweating slightly from the dream. She smiled at him.

"Thanks, mom," Trevor said.

"You want me to stay in here with you for a while?"

"No, I'm ok."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Robin leaned in and gave Trevor a kiss to the forehead. She pulled his covers about his torso and gave them a pat before turning to shut off his lamp. She walked over to the door and pulled it halfway closed.

“Night, sweetie,” she said.

“Night, mom.” Trevor watched his mom slip away from his room. He turned onto his side, let out a long breath and closed his eyes to get back to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trevor felt something crawl over his shoulder and he jumped aside, opening his eyes, to get away from it. The memory of horror film faded quickly and he realized instantly that he was now vulnerable to being tagged.

“Shhh,” a voice said.

Trevor focused toward the tree. It was Lily. She was standing with one hand on the tree trunk and her other by her mouth with finger raised to lips. Her hair was sun yellow and straight down to her shoulders. She turned her ocean set eyes in the direction of the campfire and motioned for Trevor to come back to the tree. He walked toward her until he reached the edge of the tree trunk.

“Sorry I scared you,” she said.

“I wasn’t scared,” Trevor responded. “I just thought you were Roger.”

“Do I look like Roger?”

“No.”

Lily laughed. She reached out and grasped the middle section of Trevor's shirt. He looked down at her hand, but was already being pulled close to her before he could interpret the gesture.

"Stay close," she said. "You don't want to get caught, do you?"

"No."

The two stopped talking and let the sounds around them echo through the night setting. The surrounding trees were high, blocking out much of the dark sky. A soft smell of honeysuckle hung in the air like an aromatic fog. Trevor looked straight ahead but allowed his eyes to glance at Lily from the peripheral. His feet shifted about the moist soil beneath. Lily turned toward him and his eyes rolled away from her.

"Have you seen the other guys?" Trevor asked.

"I heard Roger running around where Chris was hiding. I thought I might come and hide with you."

"But, how did you know I would be out here?"

"It's one of the best places to hide. Roger would be too chicken to come out this far and look for any of us."

"Yeah, I guess so."

The sound of twigs snapping underfoot came a few yards behind them.

"Shhh," Lily said. She placed her hand over Trevor's mouth. The two stared at each other, listening. In the distance, multiple footsteps could be heard running around.

"I'm gonna get you!" they heard Roger scream in the distance.

Lily removed her hand from Trevor's mouth. She let out a small laugh from hearing Roger chase after Chris.

"I think we should make a run for it," she said.

"To the safe tree?"

"Yeah, I think we can make it."

The sounds of the chase had silenced almost as abruptly as they had started. There was only the sound of breathing now, Trevor's airflow a bit unsteady but Lily's face was calm with a slight smile directed at him.

"I don't hear Roger anymore," Trevor said. "He could be waiting for us."

"I don't think he's close by anymore; let's do it."

"Ok."

Trevor looked around the tree, preparing for a run. Lily reached to touch his shoulder and he turned back; she was standing closer to him than he remembered.

"Trevor, thanks for letting me share your hiding place."

"Yeah, it's cool," he said.

"I like your name," she said.

"Thanks." Trevor always thought his name sounded like it belonged to an old man. He smiled at her compliment.

Lily placed her hand on Trevor's right shoulder. He looked at her with an awkward expression, not knowing what to expect next. She leaned in even closer to him and Trevor pulled back.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“Nothing, silly. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m wasn’t, I mean I’m not.”

Trevor regained his upright composure and looked into Lily’s eyes. She drew closer to him quicker this time and gave him a rushed peck on the lips. The two closed their eyes in the two seconds the kiss lasted and when Lily pulled back, Trevor’s eyes were slow to reopen. He smiled at her again.

“Go!” Lily screamed and she disappeared around the tree trunk.

Trevor turned the other direction, slow to return from the kiss and started a track run back to the campfire. Roger was waiting for Trevor halfway back and jumped from behind a tree to tag him. He grabbed at Trevor so clumsily that the two of them toppled to the ground, both laughing at the collision. Trevor couldn’t see where Lily went, but he was sure she made it back. After that summer, the two never saw each other again. He never did make it to the safe tree that night, but Lily’s kiss had given him the protection he needed.

## BLACK MEN DON'T BLUSH

*I was born, raised and killed in New Jersey. When I was younger, my cousin Lisette and I would watch the women walk down the street by my house. People called them painted ladies because they wore so much makeup; they seemed created, not real. I thought they were beautiful, and even if it meant people would call me a painted lady one day, too, I wanted to be just like them.*

Sasha woke up to sunlight pouring through her open blinds. It looked hazy outside so she reached for her contacts from the night table to clear it up. Her hand brushed against a piece of paper on the table and it fell to the carpet. It was the letter from her mother she read last night before bed – her father didn't approve of the way she lived, and his word governed her mother. She hadn't seen her parents in almost a year, but the letters from her mother helped; she knew that she still cared for her, no matter what. After she cleared up her vision, Sasha turned in bed to see Chico still sleeping beside her. He was the smallest bulldog she had ever seen when she picked him up from the animal shelter and he never really grew much from that day. He was tan with droopy eyes and stumpy legs, but she loved him – he was her family.

Sasha pushed back the covers and stood naked to walk over to the answering machine before going into the bathroom of her small apartment; Chico continued to sleep. Somewhere around three in the morning, she remembered hearing someone call and leave a message but she had been too exhausted to fully wake up. She pressed the playback button to hear the message. The digitized voice announced that the call did come at half-past three before playing.

“Pick up the phone Sasha, please. I know it’s late, but we need to talk. I need to talk to you. I didn’t mean for things to end up how they are. Pick up if you’re there? Ok, I’ll try you again tomorrow. I miss you. Yeah, ok, bye.”

“Asshole,” Sasha said. It was the voice of her ex-boyfriend. This was the eighth message in three days from him. The machine stated there were no other new messages and Sasha walked into the bathroom. She thought about changing her phone number.

She stood before the large mirror behind the sink and saw the reflection of Sam, a pre-operational transsexual. She looked down at her breasts. The hormone injections and pills she had been taking were working better than she thought they would. The mirror also showed her a penis and she looked at it, confused over its configuration on her body. She never liked Sam, and every morning she saw him fade a little bit more. He had strong cheekbones and intense light brown eyes. His skin was the color of rich desert earth after heavy rains; smooth and silky. He didn’t smile. He never smiled until Sasha made an appearance. He reached for the makeup bag to start the day.

*We played jacks on wet summer days sitting on the stoop of my parents’ brownstone. The bounce of the ball and swoop of our hands marked unison sounds with the ladies’ heels. The ladies would walk by us and whisper, then giggle to themselves. Lisette always stood up, ready for a fight; she didn’t care how much bigger they were. Sometimes the ladies would turn around, walk up to her and just stare. Lisette never backed down. She hated people making fun of me.*

It was an early October night and the parking lot at the *BNG Club* was packed with cars. It was Bobby “Nookie” Garcia’s place, but most people referred to it as the

*Boys N Girls Club*. There was a light shower earlier in the evening, so the ground shimmered and glowed with flashes of headlights and parking breaks. Tuesdays weren't usually big crowd days, but it was the end of a pay period for a lot of customers. Inside, men and women stampeded the bar, ordering martinis, beer, the hard stuff straight up and more. The tables were all full of early birds who grabbed them for the shows, but most of the standing crowd would block out their view. Some of the regulars remained in the corners, playing pool or sitting on the plush sofas talking with friends. It was a mixed club, a little something for everyone; bright, upbeat music and smiles and laughs booming all around. And every night there were strip shows – classy ones that never fully revealed the performer – and drag performances.

Sasha was up next to perform. She had just finished watching Lisette from backstage; it calmed her jitters to see her friend out there, moving among the men and dancing with ease. A flash of material, shiny like polished bronze, flew past Sasha as Lisette came bounding from the stage. She gave her friend a squeeze of the shoulders and whispered good luck in her ear before heading back to the dressing rooms. The club emcee called Sasha's name before the crowd could settle down. He made mention that it was her first night performing and when she heard that, all the nerves came back again. The crowd clapped and Sasha ran out to greet them.

By the time she made it to the stage, the music was already playing. She was doing her first performance to Big Maybelle's "Candy," a slow but sexy jazz number. She knew every word and had the grace of a ballet dancer but performing in front of this crowd was different from the post-shower shows she put on in her bedroom. Her eyes

locked on patrons holding out dollar bills, just like Lisette had told her to do. She looked up and out over the massive group and saw Georgia and Racine behind the bar slinging drinks. They had been keeping an eye on her and both looked her way, as well. Georgia gave her a quick wink before returning to a customer and Racine blew her a full-lipped puckered kiss.

Sasha wore a deep blue fitted dress, off-the-shoulder with zipper slits on each side from ankle to arm; it would fall into two separate pieces if she undid both. She carried through her performance, making a slight bobble toward a man in the audience outside the stage ring when her heel buckled beneath her. She recovered well but felt heat rise in her face from embarrassment. At every big wailing note of the song, Sasha would unzip the sides of her dress a little more until she came to just about the rib cage. After she returned to the stage to mime her lips to the final words, Sasha turned sideways to give the crowd a view of her sleek physique through one of the slits; she wore underwear, but they were bikini and it gave the men in the audience something to think about. She threw her arms up when the song finished and let the money fall to the ground. Without any hesitation, Sasha turned and made her way to the back. She was relieved to be done. Lisette waited for her backstage and gave her a hug when she approached.

“So proud of you,” Lisette said.

“I was so nervous, you have no idea.” Sasha sank into Lisette’s arms.

“You did good. Now take a breath, get changed and meet me by the bar. There’s plenty of people out there who need drinks and more than that who wanna tip us.”

“Ok.” Sasha let Lisette head back out front while she went into the dressing room to change. The other girls were busy getting dolled up and going over their numbers. Sasha smiled at their hectic preparation. Her first night of performing had finally come to pass.

*There were times when we were growing up that I didn't understand myself. I guess that's normal for most people but it seemed different for me. The girl I thought I was and the woman I wanted to become were personal battles I fought everyday with my family. I was a little boy, and that's all they could see was the physical. Inside, there were screams and headaches and imagined suicide attempts. But I put on my happy face for everyone; even Lisette never knew all that I was feeling back then.*

A few weeks later, Lisette and Sasha sat eating chicken salads at their favorite restaurant. It was a little breezy outside, but they had their meals in the open garden court so they could watch people and cars go by. They liked to get dressed up and go shopping before lunch at least once a week to keep in touch outside of the club. This was a ritual for them.

“I don't wanna hear no more about Michael,” Lisette said.

“But he sounded different; really you should have heard him.”

“Girl, that man has you messed up in the head. Are you forgetting that right hook he took to your ribs last week?”

“It was over three weeks ago. I know you haven't forgotten, but you do forget that he didn't leave the apartment looking too good, either.”

Lisette laughed and smiled at Sasha. She was there to take care of her the night Michael lost it and smacked her around. Sasha had to do everything in her power back then to keep Lisette from tracking him down and putting him in the hospital.

“I taught you well. I just want you to be safe. If you think he’s changing, I can only hope for the best and pray I don’t have to see him again.”

“Ok, ok, you’ve had your say,” Sasha said.

“My say? I haven’t even begun to talk about that little puta bitch with his tiny penga, but it’s a nice day, so I’ll leave it at that.”

“Thank you, I think.”

A whistle came from a car stopped at the sign with tinted windows. Lisette and Sasha turned toward the sports utility and smiled. They were used to getting attention in public, sometimes good and sometimes not so good. The car drove away and they went back to their lunch. Lisette noticed Sasha wasn’t rambling on about random things as usual; she was actually eating.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lisette asked.

“What? I’m just eating.”

“Exactly.”

“Nothing, I’m just thinking.”

“Well think out loud, silly.”

“Some of the girls were talking about maybe going down to *Nico’s* to see if there were any positions open, you know for extra work.”

Lisette dropped her fork into her plate; it clanged. Sasha's eyes opened wide at the noise.

"You are not going there, Sasha. You don't even have to bring that up."

"It would only be a few hours here and there, just some extra work to pick up some more money."

"That place is not worth any money it can give you – it's a pervert joint and not somewhere you should be going."

"Lisette, it's been almost a month," Sasha said. She, too, had put her fork down. "Chico and I aren't going to make it this way."

"You need to get rid of that mutt. You take better care of him than yourself. And what does working at *Nico's* have to do with him anyways?"

"You know I'll never get rid of Chico, so get over it. I just want better, you know?"

"I know, sweetie, and it will come for both of us. You just have to give it some time. But right now, I don't want you going anywhere near *Nico's*, ok?"

Sasha picked at the lettuce remains in her place. She always stopped eating once all the chicken was gone.

"Ok?" Lisette asked again.

"Ok."

"So what are you gonna wear tonight?" Lisette asked, changing the subject.

The two continued lunch, talking sparingly. Sasha stirred around her salad remains and Lisette ate what was left of the focacia bread and drank her water. The cars

streamed by the restaurant; the one other person who had elected to sit outside for lunch had already gone, leaving behind a coffee cup and a few strands of angel hair pasta in his dish. The cool breezes came to a halt and silenced the two friends.

*My parents were good people. I had no brothers or sisters and I guess that made it hard for them to raise me, always wanting me to be so many things other than trying to help me fulfill my own wishes and dreams. They treated Lisette like she was their own; I was the stranger. But she moved away with her parents one summer and I was left alone to watch the ladies go down the walk. They stopped once, right in front of me, and before I could do anything, two of them held my arms and another one put lipstick on me. They walked away, cackling like they always did. I ran up to the bathroom, tears building up in my eyes, to wipe it off before my parents could see it. But when I looked in the mirror, I smiled at myself. The tears fell, but I wasn't crying. I was happy seeing that person look back at me.*

It was Thursday night and Sasha had been working her regular shift at the club. She made a little over fifty dollars and only had a few minutes left to work. She headed back to the dressing room and took a seat against one of the lockers. Her head hung low, arms falling between her legs; she exhaled and rotated her neck. She hadn't eaten anything since lunch and felt lightheaded. Her dress sparkled in ruby red sequin, but it only made her feel more constricted. She yawned and sat upright, slapping her hands against her knees to perk up. Lisette would be there to start her shift in a little over an hour. As always, Sasha planned to change back into some regular clothes and go have a drink at the bar.

“Hey girl, you leaving?” a voice rang from around the corner; it was Lace.

“No, I’m just gonna change and hang out till Lisette gets here.”

“That’s all you ever do.”

“Girl, I am tired.”

Lace walked into the room from the hall. She was bundled up to go out, but Sasha could see the black strips of fabric from her designer outfit poking out beneath her coat. She placed a hand on her hip and gave Sasha a playful look.

“You’d wake up if you came downtown with me,” Lace said.

“There is no way I’m going downtown with you. I’m already tired and besides, I know how you are.”

“What do you mean how I am?”

“Lace, you would leave your mother on the side of the road if the train to heaven came by and only had room for one more person.”

They both laughed, but Lace soon revived the conversation.

“Ok, so maybe you know me a little. But seriously, I know you need the money and you’d be doing me a favor if you came. I told them I would try to bring someone with me tonight.”

“Girl, I dunno,” Sasha said. She turned her head away from Lace and stared into the lockers. “Lisette already told me about that place and I need to get home somewhat early tonight anyways; Chico is probably going crazy.”

“For one, Lisette is a little priss and still has that money her abuelita left her – she’s not like us. We have to work harder for our money.”

Sasha looked at Lace again with an expression of concentration. As tired as she was, her mind ran over everything they were talking about with delirious speed. Lace could tell she was considering the idea so she knelt beside her and pressed harder.

“Look, we’re never going to get anywhere if we keep working our asses off for nothing,” she said. “Do this for yourself. Hell, do it for Chico; he might be the closest thing you get to having a baby some day. Even I like the little bastard and he peed on my favorite heels.”

Sasha curled a quick smile and nodded.

“So c’mon, you gonna do it?” Lace asked.

“Ok, I’ll go,” Sasha replied, “but just this one time.”

Lace gave Sasha a peck on the cheek and stood up.

“Alright Miss Thang, let’s go.”

“I need to call Lisette first, so she won’t go crazy looking for me.”

Lace stopped at the doorway and turned around.

“Is Lisette your mama?” she asked, giving her best sarcastic tone.

“I just don’t need to hear anything from her later,” Sasha said. “I’d much rather just tell her where I’ll be and get it over with.”

“Sasha, Either you’re coming or not. Just tell one of the guys you went home early and they can tell Lisette when she gets in, ok?”

The look in Lace’s face was one of irritation. Sasha opened her mouth to say something, but pushed out air instead. She put on her coat and headed out the back door with Lace to Nico’s, making a quick stop to tell one of the workers what message to

leave for Lisette. Around the corner, in one of the side makeup areas, a woman clad in an emerald evening gown and jade earrings peered into the dressing room. It was Asia. Her midnight black hair was slicked down and curled about her porcelain face. She had been listening to their conversation the whole time.

*I remember when my father found me in my room with the boy from down the street. I didn't think we were doing anything wrong, but I could tell by my father's face that his love for me broke that day. He didn't hit me or yell at me; he just told the boy to leave and closed my door on his way out. We didn't talk much after that. I was probably the loneliest and most confused fifteen year-old in Jersey.*

Lace entered the club with Sasha. She was stopped at the front by a squirrely white guy.

“I.D., please,” he said.

“Just tell Nico that Lace is here,” she responded.

The little guy went beyond the entrance arch and was gone for only a few minutes before returning with the club owner. Nico was as shiny as his cheap suit. The gray dulled against his dark skin, but his neon blue tie directed attention to his head like an arrow. He wore a matching gray felt hat with a band – same color as the tie – circled around like a planetary ring. He looked like a pimp.

“Nico, this is Sasha, the girl I told you about yesterday.”

“Hi,” Sasha said.

“Show me your tits,” Nico responded.

Sasha wasn't shy or offended; in the business, no girl could afford to be that way. She glanced at Lace before facing Nico again, pulled at her top from strapless lining and exposed herself to him.

"They look real enough," Nico said. "Ok, put your top back on and I'll start you on the floor – you'll be a table tease."

"What all does that mean?"

"It means you entertain the men at the tables, sweetie," Lace answered for Nico. "You talk to them, you cocktease them; if someone needs a drink refill or places another order, you bring it to the bar, got it?"

"Yeah."

"If you can handle that, we'll try you in the cage later," Nico said. "I'm short on floor girls, so give it a shot and we'll see. We can talk money later tonight."

Sasha smiled in response and Nico walked away. She was left with Lace to guide her through the rest.

"What did he mean when he said the cage?" Sasha asked.

"C'mon girl, you'll see soon enough."

*The last year of high school was crazy. Lisette came back to live with her abuelita and finish school. Her parents were divorcing and her mom didn't want her around with them fighting all the time. It was like a big reunion for us. We played games again and she would come over to the house all the time. Lisette even gave my parents something to smile about again. When she was there, I could see my dad want to say*

*something to me, but he would always find something around the house to distract him. Still, it was like my guardian angel had come back to protect me.*

There was only a sharp corner that separated the front entrance from the main club area. Lace led the way with Sasha only a foot or two behind. She stopped at the opening to lean on one side of the doorway and light up a cigarette. Sasha came around to stand at the other side and was met by a full view of the club. She blinked with a deliberate slowness and took a deep breath, like a swimmer preparing for a dive. When she opened her eyes again, Lace was already puffing away on her cigarette.

“You got your tables, your cages and the show area,” Lace said. Her cigarette hand gestured about the room.

Sasha looked at the stage area first. There was a girl lip synching to an old eighties song. She was dressed in man’s pinstriped suit jacket, buttoned at the middle, black heels and nothing else. Her hair was long and stringy. Sasha saw a hat by the girl’s feet and wondered if it were a prop or belonged to one of the men at the surrounding tables. There were dollar bills scattered on the stage floor and the girl had a few in her hands, tossing them up in the air like confetti. Nothing seemed different to Sasha compared to work at the other club.

The tables of men were scattered around the stage area to the back wall of the room. Girls walked from table to table, sometimes high-fiving each other as they passed at intersections. The men ranged in age and appearance, but most seemed to be in their late thirties to early fifties.

“And over there are the private rooms, but you shouldn’t have to worry about those yet,” Lace said.

Sasha directed her eyes from the girl performing and tables of men toward the extreme right of the stage. There was a muscular guy standing with arms folded in front of what looked like a long hallway. She had heard about private rooms in clubs before, but never saw one in person. She decided not to worry about it much when her vision pulled back from the man to see one of the side dancing cages. She had also known about these specialized cages, but seeing one now stopped her breathing for a moment.

The cage, one of two in the club that flank the stage, was actually a rectangular room made of bulletproof glass. The walls of it were thick and the girls, two or three at a time, danced topless within its confines. There were large, circular holes at two different levels on the front glass panels where men could approach the cage and reach in to touch or be teased by the girls; some could reach in for the breasts, others could reach the midsection and touch various parts of the body, depending on how the girl was positioned or how she allowed the men to touch her. There was room in the cage for the girls to go to the back of it if a guy became too grabby or exposed himself to put through one of the holes. Most guys walked by the cages on the way to the bathrooms and tried not to look interested, but there were a couple of guys playing with the girls at present. Sasha thought the cage looked like there would be no air in it; her stomach fluttered at the thought.

“You ready, hon?” Lace asked.

Sasha heard Lace's question but didn't reply. Her eyes turned from the cage and continued to roam and circle the room in blurred washes.

*School ended and Lisette and I got jobs doing nails and hair at CeeCee's Glamour. It was her aunt's shop and she took us both, making us work harder than everybody else so no one would complain. I was really good with hair and Lisette could do nails like nobody's business. I thought about trying to get in to the local school, but it was too expensive. My parents wanted me out of the house and paying rent on my new apartment didn't leave me money for anything else other than some food.*

Sasha walked away from Lace who had already headed over to flirt with a table of men calling her over. She passed by men slamming down their drinks to the tabletops; there were beer nuts and pretzels scattered all around. Sasha looked at the men and realized most of them weren't drunk; they were dirty. The men whistled and hollered as she walked around them. Lace was across the room, sitting on one man's lap and leaning over to tap another's nose like her finger was a wand. A couple of men at the back corner waved Sasha over. They weren't under any of the club lights like the other tables, so it was darker and seemed less rowdy to Sasha. She walked slowly to the men who watched her with kind eyes. As she approached, one of the men turned in his seat, allowing his knees to point in her direction. Sasha accepted the invite and slinked into the man's lap, her arm went around his shoulders.

“What's your name, sugar?” she asked.

“Jorge,” he answered.

He smelled of chocolate mint and didn't say a word when she stroked his ear; he just looked up at her and smiled. The other watched Sasha and Jorge interact with each other while taking small sips of a bottled beer. Sasha looked down to see the Jorge's hand come around her waist with a five-dollar bill between his fingers. She turned to him and smiled, thinking tonight might not be so bad after all.

*We turned twenty-one the same year and were still working at the shop. CeeCee thought my work was good enough to give me my own chair that year, and customers could schedule appointments just for me. I felt important and that I had a place to belong in the shop. The routine kept me from having to guess what was coming next in life, but sometimes it got to be too repetitive. I felt old and I was only twenty-one.*

When Sasha finished making rounds at the tables, it was time to go to the cage. She walked toward the left unit with trepidation and stopped by the side entrance.

“Hey, Shasta,” a voiced called from behind.

“It's Sasha,” she replied. She felt more comfortable letting her natural personality shine through with this new crowd. Sasha turned to face the man – it was Nico. “Sorry, Mr. Nico, I thought you were one of the guys.”

“It's just Nico. And if I was ‘one of the guys,’ that's how you would answer me?”

Sasha hung her head down slightly at his tone.

“Don't worry, sugar, a little attitude can take you a long way in here,” he said.

“Listen, table number five wants a private dance and I want you to do it.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’m ready for that, Nico.” Sasha scanned the room over Nico’s shoulder. She didn’t know the exact numbering for the tables yet, but thought she saw a couple of men – at least the tops of their heads – behind a larger group of guys, facing her direction.

“This is your first night, and those are some of my best customers,” he said. “I wanna try you out in all the areas tonight, so you need to do this, if you really want the job.”

Sasha had returned attention to Nico.

“What do I have to do?” she asked.

“Whatever they ask you to do.”

Sasha’s eyes widened at Nico’s words. Her lips parted to speak, but nothing came.

“Look, it’s nothing to be afraid of, ok? Papi will explain all the rules to you before you even go back to the room. Ok?”

Nico grabbed Sasha above the elbows and gave her a firm squeeze. His hands were cold, and when he smiled, it turned his usual angry expression to sinister. Sasha nodded and looked in the direction of the table she noticed earlier – it was empty. The men had already disappeared into the hall, and there was Papi, coming out of the darkness and stationing himself back at the entrance. She walked over to him.

*Not too long after, Lisette quit the shop and took a job serving drinks at a club downtown. The nails she had been doing weren’t looking like the works of art she used to do, so I could tell she had grown tired of doing it. She told me she didn’t like the bar*

*crowd much, either, but it paid about the same as the nail shop and she made a lot of money in tips. We still hung out when we could, but we were always tired from working. I missed seeing her at work all day. We were starting to grow apart.*

Sasha could sense the difference between the front club area and the hall maze of private rooms. It was in the smell. The air in the main showroom congested the lungs with cigarette smoke, whiskey mixers and overpowering cologne. It was loud, filled with catcalls and slurring words telling the girls to shake their stuff and take off more. But here, coming into the backrooms, the smells were filtered out and the noises muffled. Along the concrete corridor, like a walk through prison, the intermittent dim lights above cast warm glows. The air was thinner, tighter the farther Sasha walked; her fingers trailed the rugged terrain of the wall. She passed steel doors, left and right, winding down the hall; they were all closed. Somewhere on her left, she heard a quiet cry but that sound was drowned out by the clap of what could only be a hand contacting skin with strong force. She turned the corner and saw Papi standing by the last door on the right. He was at least a full twelve inches taller than Sasha and stared down at her when she approached.

“You ready?” Papi asked.

Sasha nodded. This was the simple question Papi asked all the girls before they went into a private room, but she had no idea. She didn't even know that Papi's real name was Juan de Lorca; everyone called him Papi because he was stern like a father and kept people from getting out of line. Sasha heard laughing coming from beyond the door. She closed her eyes as Papi took a step aside to open the door for her. The harsh

light fell over her face and forced her eyes open. She walked in and felt the vibration from the door close behind. All laughing stopped. This was her first time.

*After a couple of years, things seemed to settle into place and our lives were made of patterns. Lisette and I would meet for lunch and talk about work, always thinking of how we would get out of the city and move somewhere, become famous like the women we watched on the telenovellas. I met two men that year – Chico and Michael. Chico was the puppy I adopted from the pound on my way home from the shop one day. He latched on to me instantly. And Michael I met at the new club where Lisette got a job dancing. He was handsome and accepted me for me. Lisette thought he looked shifty. She always had a way of thinking negative about something I liked. She was usually right though.*

There were three men seated on a small bench at the wall opposite Sasha. Their faces were without expression, but the eyes roamed all over her body. Her sequin dress shimmered with the nervous tremors that ran under her skin. By the time the men's eyes had reached her face, Sasha had replaced any jitters with a passable smile. She felt safe with Papi walking the halls; he was big enough to pick all three of these guys up with one hand and smash them together if needed. Two of the men looked to be in their early-to-mid forties, but the third couldn't have been more than twenty-one. Sasha focused on his face as she made her way to the center of the room. He looked as outwardly nervous as she felt inside, but his face was smooth, tender, kind. She placed a hand on the back of a single chair next to her for balance, shook her head slightly to throw the hair off her

shoulders and closed her eyes a bit to give a more concentrated look at the men. There was a soft salsa playing in the background.

“How are you gentlemen doing tonight?” she asked.

The youngest of the three nodded his head with an awkward half-grin. He sat between the other men.

“Oh we’re doing just fine little lady,” said the man who looked to be the speaker for the group. Sasha’s attention turned to him. There was that word again – lady. “This here’s Damien, that’s Freddie and I’m Lou. Freddie don’t speak much English.”

The men shifted a bit in their positions when Lou called out their names. Sasha could tell from the look in Damien’s eyes that none of those names were real. Lou slapped Damien on the shoulders and rocked him back and forth. It almost looked like he was preparing the young man for a boxing match. Sasha walked over to the bench and stood in front of Damien. She surveyed the men with the most confident look she could give them. Freddie licked his lips when Sasha glanced in his direction.

“Que lindo,” he said.

Sasha’s smile faltered slightly as Freddie spoke. The man was creepy enough, but it was always men who spoke to her in Spanish that had that effect. She knew the language well, but preferred to speak English – it was just her way. Sasha took a step back, still standing in the middle of the three, and ran her hands from her breasts down to her hips.

“Damien, is this your first time?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He looked over at Lou, seeking assurance.

“It’s my first time, too,” Sasha said. She put her head down, but kept her eyes on Damien; his nervousness kept her calm and in character. “Why don’t you come over here and have a seat, Damien. I can do a dance for you, if you’d like.”

Lou pushed Damien from the shoulders; he almost slid off the bench and onto the covered floor. He gained composure and walked past Sasha to the chair. She let her eyes scan over the two men on the bench again. They closed the gap that Damien left and sat grinning like a couple of Cheshire cats. Both men kept hands in their laps and Sasha could see that Freddie was excited. She turned to Damien to keep her mind settled.

“How are you doing, Damien?” Sasha asked.

“I’m ok.” He looked up at her from the chair; sweat stains marked his shirt at the underarm folds.

“Good. Just listen to the music and relax, ok?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sasha didn’t have to say anything more. Before anyone comes to a private room, they are given detailed instructions about what they can and cannot do. The most important rule is that a dancer can touch the customer but not the reverse. Papi made sure people understood all the rules before allowing them into a room.

*I went to the shop wearing a dress Lisette helped me choose to drive Michael crazy when he picked me up from work, but CeeCee told me she had no customers for me that day and that she wouldn’t need me working at the shop anymore. I guess she could handle me making the women who came to the shop look pretty, but it was too much for me. I walked home that day, my dress feeling like a rubber band, and just*

*watched TV with Chico. Lisette had meetings with the bar staff all day, so I wouldn't see her until she finished her shift. At least Michael thought I looked nice that day.*

Sasha moved in close proximity to the chair. She circled Damien and tried to get him to relax by running her hands through his hair, over his shoulders and down his chest. After one rotation, she lifted her right leg slowly and planted her heel on the open space between Damien's legs; the tight dress slid up and revealed her thigh to the men on the bench. Damien could see all the way up, and turned his head, embarrassed; he breathed heavily. Sasha leaned in and pulled his face back to her. She offered a comforting smile to assure him it was ok to look.

Freddie and Lou sat on the bench, more involved in the show than Damien. Sasha rolled her hips and threw back her head. She let go of Damien's face and looked at the other two with half-closed eyes. Lou leaned in from the bench as far as he could. Freddie had his back against the wall; he was unashamedly masturbating and staring directly at Sasha's exposed thigh.

In a quick motion, Sasha brought her leg down and turned away from Damien. She swiveled her hips again and lowered onto his lap. Lou let out a drunk man's holler, but Sasha focused her eyes on the mirror wall before her. She could see Freddie still touching himself; his eyes were closed and his mouth hung open. Sasha threw her head down to avoid the sight, her body continued to grind against Damien's crotch. He was stimulated and she figured he wouldn't last another minute. The touch of a soft hand fell between her shoulder blades and Sasha stopped her motion.

"Damien," she said.

“Sorry,” he breathed out and placed his hand back at his side.

“That’s better.”

Sasha returned upright and leaned against Damien’s chest; her head fell back to touch his cheek. She reached up and unsnapped the hooks to her dress at the shoulders. As she brought her hands over the sequin terrain and pulled down to reveal her breasts, Lou shattered the low-key sounds of the room again with a piercing whistle. Sasha closed her eyes tried not to appear startled. She arched her back and ran her hands over her nipples – the dress straps dangled as she moved. In another fluid movement, Sasha turned in Damien’s lap, her back to the other men and let herself cascade over his legs. She kept her eyes closed in fear of seeing Freddie masturbating only a small distance from her, but held their attention by licking and pursing her lips. Damien looked down at the exposed torso before him and his body trembled. His hands were raised from the sides of the chair, twitching above Sasha’s body.

“Don’t forget about us,” Lou said.

Sasha opened her eyes. Lou was looking at Damien and following his eyes to her body. Freddie looked on, as well; he had stopped masturbating but his penis stood at attention out of his jeans. He didn’t seem to observe Lou or Damien’s presence in the room, just Sasha.

“You’ll get your turn guys, don’t worry,” she said. “This is Damien’s dance.”

“Our turn now,” Freddie said. Sasha had yet to close her eyes and go back to her routine. Those were the only words in broken English Freddie spoke the entire time they were in the room.

“Ok, ok,” Sasha said. She used a hand to push back up into Damien’s lap and turned away from him to stand. He was still hard. “I can handle three at a time.”

She smiled uneasily and started toward the other men, her hands pushed her thick brunette locks into the air. Damien grabbed her before she could get too far from the chair; he was only able to reach her at the hips.

“Hands off, junior,” Sasha said. She slapped away Damien’s hands and her smile faded immediately.

“Wait,” he said.

“No touching, remember? I already had to tell you once. This whole dance is over. I’m sorry.” She felt relieved to be done with it and get out of the room – she didn’t care about the money anymore.

“No!” came from the bench.

Sasha turned to see Freddie leap from his seated position, his fist aimed directly for her face.

*Lisette convinced me to try out as a server at the bar. I had no money coming in, so I tried it and the manager hired me. I was actually making more at the shop with all the customers I had, but I felt relieved just to be around my friend again and to get some steady money going. The people I worked with were nice and the customers made me feel good about myself. Michael visited me at work a couple of times, but said he always felt like people were staring at him. It was funny because to me he was so normal, and here I thought everyone was always staring at me, a young man with breasts.*

Lisette entered the *BNG Club* from the dancers' entrance. She had been running late to work that night. After talking to one of the guys who worked security for the dressing areas, Lisette went to the back to change. Most of her outfit she was already wearing underneath her trench. She didn't see Sasha anywhere around, but Asia was at the vanity applying gobs of eyeliner as usual.

"Have you seen Sasha?" Lisette asked. "Rickie said she went home early?" She walked over to a bench and put her purse on the floor beside it.

"Oh, I overheard her talking to Lace," Asia replied. "I think they went downtown."

Lisette had just removed her coat and was fixing a strap on her shoe when she stopped to look at Asia.

"You don't mean *Nico's*, do you?"

"Yeah, the both of 'em took off there after Sasha's set."

Lisette bolted from the room and headed toward the exit. She didn't bother to put her coat back on over her clothes.

"I thought you knew," Asia called after her. She went back to batting her eyelashes and sucking in her cheeks, turning her head back and forth like she was being photographed.

*Almost two weeks went by and Michael had stopped coming to the bar. We argued in my apartment one night and it ended with me nursing my side with a heating pad and Michael telling me he didn't want to see me again. He didn't want me working at the bar anymore, like I was supposed to be some circus show that only he got to visit*

*and be with in my apartment. I think being around all the people at the bar got to him and made him question some things about himself he wasn't ready to deal with. I just couldn't believe he would raise a hand to me like that; I wasn't scared, just sad. It was one of the only times I heard Chico really bark at someone.*

She was on the floor before she could realize what had happened. Her eyes stung like hot pepper. Sasha blinked and pulled herself to the wall; she did her best to focus on the men approaching.

“What are you doing?” Damien yelled at Freddie. He jumped out of the seat to stand in front of Sasha. She seemed small on the floor.

“It's ok Joe, all the girls like it like this,” Lou said. He kept a hand on Freddie's chest, holding him back.

“I thought your name was Damien?” Sasha managed to get out.

“Shut up, bitch,” Lou said. “Don't talk to her, you hear me?”

“I didn't want this,” the boy said. He turned to look down at Sasha.

“You're a liar. I don't even know your real name.”

“It's Damien,” he said and looked back to Lou for confirmation.

Sasha didn't know if he was trying to help or just trying to get away without getting in trouble. She could make out Freddie's face looking at her; his pants remained unzipped but the heightened emotions must have pulled his sex drive back into place.

“Look, you guys just go. I'll tell Papi to make sure you get your money back, ok?”

Lou pushed Damien aside like paper. Freddie was unrestrained but held back and watched Lou kneel in front of Sasha.

“I told you to shut up. We already paid and we’re gonna get our money’s worth.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she said. Lou returned with a light slap on her cheek and the stinging started in her eyes again.

“You don’t listen, do you? We made a little deal with Nico. He told us this was your first time and we said we’d be more than happy to break you in. Now you can play along and have fun with us, or you can act like the freak slut you are and have it rough. Either way, we’re having you.”

Sasha was scared. Her eyes were inches away from his, and while she tried to blink and focus, he never twitched. She looked past him at Freddie who smiled back at her. She was afraid to turn and look at Damien.

“I’m getting the fuck out of here,” she said.

Sasha lifted her head, prepared to spit into Lou’s face and make a run, but his firm hand was on her neck before she could gather the saliva. He lifted and dragged her up the wall into a standing position with the one hand.

“Make a sound,” he said. It was a dare, and the most frightening words Sasha had ever heard. She didn’t move.

Lou squeezed around Sasha’s neck tighter, her head held motionless against the wall. He brought his mouth down to her breasts and took each one into his mouth, alternating with pinching bites and wet suckling. His left hand slid down the side of Sasha’s dress and moved toward the front. His hand disappeared up between her thighs

and Sasha tried to pull her legs together. She brought her hands to his shoulders and tried to push him off, but his stance was planted. She clawed at his hand about her neck with no success.

“Don’t move,” he said, and went back to her breasts.

Sasha’s hands fell helpless at her sides. She had closed her eyes and tears were blurring the makeup all over. Damien had taken a position on the floor, his head shook in disbelief of the situation. Freddie had regained his erection and took a place by Lou’s side. Had Sasha’s eyes been open she would have seen him wipe away the drool gathered at the corner of his mouth. Lou pulled his hand from under the dress and turned to Freddie.

“You want some?”

Freddie made a simple head nod and moved in for his turn. He made a downward stirring motion with his finger. Lou held his grip to Sasha’s neck and spun her around. This time he added his other hand to the back of her neck to keep her in place for Freddie. She whimpered slightly as Freddie lifted her dress from the back and pressed himself against her. She could feel him out of his jeans and burning hot against her. The girls were told not to wear anything under their clothes for private dances.

Without warning, Freddie pushed himself inside Sasha and she cried out. Heat ran up her body and into her face. His hand wrapped over her lips before she could make another sound. Outside the room, the sounds were no different from what could be heard coming from the other rooms. Damien looked up and hit his head against the wall, physically shocked by the scene before him. Freddie was having his way with Sasha,

quite violently, while Lou held her and looked on with a gnarled smirk. She screamed into Freddie's hand.

“Que lindo, puta,” Freddie whispered over Sasha's ear. The words sent her thrashing against the wall in attempt to free herself.

Damien stood from the floor, an involuntary movement of his body. He listened to Lou and Freddie; his fists grew tighter with every muffled scream from Sasha. The he raised his head, the sight from floor to ceiling, but he stopped at Sasha's legs. There was blood. Damien rushed over to the group and crashed into Freddie. He and Lou were pushed away in the collision. Sasha fell to the floor, doubled on her side in pain. She gathered the strength she could and crawled toward the door.

“Get back here,” Lou called after her. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her down toward the base of the mirror wall.

Freddie had Damien against the opposite wall in a flash. He punched him in the stomach with great force, but Damien fought back. Lou almost laughed at the two of them before returning to Sasha. He had unzipped his pants before going back to her fallen body.

“My turn,” he said. When Lou turned, he was greeted by a barely standing Sasha. She had one hand on the mirror wall for balance but the other rammed one of her spiked heels into the side of Lou's neck before he could block it. The heel broke the skin and lodged in his neck. Lou wailed at the pain and went for Sasha before the full force of what she had done could set in. He took both hands to her face, twirled her around and plunged her face into the mirror wall. The shatter was like a hailstorm of pennies. Sasha

twisted to the ground and Lou banged against the wall. Freddie lifted himself off Damien to see the heel at Lou's throat. He made a move to the center of the room, picked up the chair without caution and brought it down on top of Sasha. The legs of the chair caught her at the square of her back and one part to the back of her head. She didn't move and the chair settled next to her on the floor.

Freddie ran over to support Lou. He draped one of his arms around his shoulders and pulled him to the exit door. Damien scrapped over to them, bellowed coughs from his fight with Freddie.

“Venga!” Freddie called.

Damien made his way to Lou's other side to support him. Blood ran down the front of Lou's shirt, but it was easy to tell that the shoe was keeping it from gushing out. Freddie swung open the door with a free hand and pulled Lou and Damien out with him. Damien tried to look back as they left. He was only able to see her hair sprawled about her before being yanked down the concrete hallway.

Papi met the guys at the turn in the corridor.

“What the fuck happened?” he asked.

They continued past him and Papi watched for a moment before going down toward the room. He made quick paces, but remained smooth in his stride. He saw light pouring out of the room with the door wide open. Papi came to a stop at the entrance to the room. His eyes surveyed from the demolished mirror wall to the bench before he could focus on the floor of the room.

Sasha was bleeding and her head twitched in forward motions. She breathed like a goldfish out of its tank, her eyes fixed on the exit door. The tiniest of popping sounds came from her mouth; air tried to escape. She made attempt to lift her head when she noticed there were feet by the doorway. A drop of blood made its way into her eye; Sasha blinked but her vision only became more blurred. She stopped twitching.

*My first night to perform came only a day after the fight. I had enough body makeup to cover the bruise but I felt stiff and numb. I was glad Michael hadn't hit me in the face; makeup covers a lot but a swollen face for performing won't get you any money. Lisette was there to cheer me on, but all I could think about was change. I wanted to get out of the city; it didn't matter for how long. I wanted Lisette, Chico and me to just run away and start over, living better and not working so hard to get so little in life. I needed more money, and so far the one club wasn't doing the trick.*

Sasha was dead. She was the victim of a brutal assault. The police report would describe her death as a violent physical beating and rape. Her body lay on the wood floor, sprawled on her back like a heavy sleep. Her eyes were closed and her hair ran its strands across her face, some falling over her half-parted lips. There was more red about her thighs and behind her head than the fabric of her dress – dime and quarter-sized sequin patterns, dulled out from the humid climate of the room. The clothing, seeping wounds and her skin mixed like dark chocolate and strawberries. The floor remained unstained, a thick plastic sheet between her body and the floor paneling wrinkled to the four corners of the room. A metallic chair lay turned on its side by Sasha's feet. One red spiked heel continued to cling to her left foot, the other nowhere to be seen. A small

bench, same material make as the chair, held a diagonal slant from the north wall; it looked moved from its natural parallel position. There were glass shards on the floor. Under the single bright light hanging from the center of the room, this was a murder scene. It was messy.

*When I decided to see if I could work on the side at another bar downtown, against my best friend's advice, I knew it was a bad idea. The place was more like a sideshow than a bar, but I figured it wouldn't be a big deal, and maybe it would be for just one night. I can't say I would do it the same all over again if given the chance, but everything has a reason for happening the way it does. Lisette is gonna be so upset with me. I can hear her yelling already. I should have listened to her, and now Chico's all alone, too. No matter what they called me when I was growing up, no matter what I went through with my parents, I still like to think of myself as a lady. I was twenty-four.*

Lisette barely applied the parking break to her car before running from the parking lot toward *Nico's* and dodging a vehicle that almost sideswiped her. There were men cursing at the top of their lungs in the car, driving like maniacs, but she got to the door and was let in by a familiar bouncer.

Lisette ignored the whistles and hands reaching for her as she made her way past the tables in the nightclub. Her chiffon wrap slid off one shoulder in the quick pace of her steps and exposed the tassel pasty clinging to her skin. She passed the cage on her right and started into the dim hall, but Papi caught her by the arm as he was coming from the opposite end.

"Lisette, long time," he said.

“Let me go, Papi, I know she’s back here.”

“Who?”

Lisette pulled her arm under Papi’s grip but couldn’t free herself.

“Papi, just tell me what room she’s in, ok?” she said. “I don’t want trouble.”

It was dark, but she could see his eyes twitching under the lights. He looked unsettled.

“The rooms are for paying customers only, you know that,” he said. “Nico would kill you if he saw you back here.”

“Why’s that, Papi? Is there something back here I shouldn’t see? Like maybe my best friend turning tricks for Nico’s nickels and dimes?”

Papi turned his eyes from Lisette’s face. His black attire – shirt, pants, belt and shoes – cloaked him against the wall.

“He put her in the cherry room, didn’t he?” she asked. Lisette relaxed her pull from the tightened grip around her bicep; her voice was calm.

“Let’s go back out to the front,” Papi said. He started to lead Lisette back to the hall entrance when she made a sharp movement and jerked herself free. Papi turned on her instantly, but she had already drawn back to catch him right across his nose with a clenched fist. He must have been completely surprised by the move, falling against the wall and down to the floor; the weight of Lisette’s fake diamond and gold jewelry aided in the delivery.

She ran down the hall, turned the corner and stopped at the door on the end. It was closed and Lisette couldn’t hear any noises coming from inside. She pressed her ear

to the cold door and listened again; Papi could be heard cursing his injured face where she had left him.

“Sasha,” Lisette called. She tapped on the door with an open hand; her rings clanged against the metal. She remembered the doors opened from the inside but decided to pull the handle anyway. The door latch clicked and she pulled the handle toward her.

Lisette peered inside and squinted at the released odor. The air was sweaty like a locker room, humid with a stale stench of musk cologne. The room looked empty. She looked down at the floor and without thinking, dropped to her knees, crawling to the center of the room where she saw the body. She reached a hand out to touch the matted hair over Sasha’s face. No words came from Lisette at first; she had her friend in her arms and on her lap instinctively.

“Wake up,” Lisette breathed out. Tears ran over her face and onto the sequin of Sasha’s dress. She sat staring down into the peaceful expression of her friend as time slowly spun away. “We’ll never grow up to be little old ladies with you lying on the floor like this.”

Lisette cradled Sasha’s body like a newborn.

## CONCLUSION

A creative writing thesis represents the culmination of academic study and original short fiction work for a Master of Arts graduate student pursuing English with a short fiction emphasis. This compilation of short story theory and personal short fiction writings serves as a working model to inform its audience on the current state of short fiction and the future theoretical approaches to its creation.

My thesis seeks to place past and current short story theory on a fluid scale of interpretation. Instead of short fiction adhering to one set of directives and form that all theorists can agree upon, I hope to provide an open forum for short fiction writing; a field that recognizes innovation in the written content and the structured form. The five short fiction pieces that I included in my thesis represent visual aspects of filmmaking and classic storytelling content – sensory perception, flashback sequencing, extended exposition and gender/race identity. I take into account that these works can be manipulated further to fit questions that arise from reading them in comparison to the goals I have set out to achieve, but for the focus of crossover writing between film (screenwriting) and short fiction, I am satisfied with the outcome.

The future of short fiction writing is in the hands of the authors and the studies of the theorists, but the mind holds no limitations on creativity. It is my hope that more writers will continue to experiment with writing techniques, varied storytelling structures and strive for diverse approaches to short story theory. Maybe one day there will be a common ground for writers and theorists. Until then, we can only celebrate the work of the past and anticipate the coming of the new.

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Text translation – short fiction to screenplay writing  
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SCENE Magazine, Managing Editor; 2003 – present  
 The Eagle Newspaper, city reporter; 1998  
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