The Boardwalk Novel

"In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself in the dark woods where the straight path was lost." ~ Dante Alighieri

For my entire family. Especially my sisters. I love you guys to death.

"I write sins, not tragedies." - Panic At The Disco

"Try to laugh a lot. The world is funny. The only tragedy in life is sin." - Mother Angelica

Prologue
There it was. What the hell was this place? Dark boards of wood rotting, endless trash bags piled high in rows, a decomposing ethereal stench oozing out. Deep death lingered in the air, dark matter of decay spreading its tentacles, rising.

Dino Durante presents
"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Chapter 1
Tires spin and kick up brown dirt as a brown conversion van approaches the cliff. The tires lock and skid as the engine grinds to a halt before tumbling over the steep ravine. A thick cloud of brown smoke from the rusted exhaust pipe blows from the rear as the van backs up. Moments later, the wood-paneled side door slides open violently, smacking hard against the back of the van resulting in a harsh metal on metal cacophony. A stout, swarthy bearded young man hops out. His sandaled feet land hard, scattering the dusty dirt. The sparse weeds remain undisturbed, however, as he lets out a slow and silent fart.
"I've been holding that one in for a while."

He murmurs to himself with glee and then stretches and yawns while parading over to the edge of the cliff. After wiping his watery, bloodshot eyes an outline of a beach, boardwalk and bay begin to emerge. It appears to be a narrow peninsula stretching northbound for miles. The waves break onto the
beach from the left. A boardwalk to the right of the beach extends at least five miles north and has one large amusements pier shooting out to sea. Row after row of single story cottages are lined along narrow, sandy roads to the right of the pier. The calm bay, just to the right of the cottages has a white mist hovering above, straddling the coastline. A vague, tower like rock structure is silhouetted within. The air is hot and muggy but a cool, crisp breeze breaks up the oppressive humidity. A black crow flies over to the conversion van, landing atop a mountain bike attached to it's rear. Suddenly, and without warning, the van shakes violently startling the bird of prey. It flaps its wings and takes off almost as fast as it had arrived. The young man looks back and screams.

"Hey, you guys! What the heck are you doing in there? Come, and check this out!"

He observes another young man arguing with a young woman through the front windshield. Soon she storms out in disgust before dashing over to the cliff's edge.

"Hey, hey, hey be careful. It's a long way down!"

He remarks anxiously while catching her in stride.

"I'm good!"

She remarks stubbornly while wiggling her way out of his arms, eager to peer over. Her body stiffens. It's a sobering and jarring site.

"I want to go home! I don't like it already!"
Casually stepping out of the van and apparently in no rush for anyone nor anything, a fair-skinned, tall young man breathes in heartily before gagging from the lingering foul odors. When finally reaching the cliff's edge, he glances over nonchalantly before laughing uncontrollably.

"Unbelievable!"

He smacks the short and swarthy young man on his shoulder.

"See, Tony, I told you! Our Saturday fun has just begun!"

Tony shakes his head with kindhearted confusion. He then gazes up and stares into the sun for a brief moment positioned just past high noon. He observes a few clouds float by like soft pillows and squints at the blinding sunlight penetrating his eyeballs like sharp needles digging into his skull. A strange sense of calm mixed with restlessness overtakes him as he shifts his attention to the young woman standing to his left, attempting in vain to lift her spirits.

"Can you believe how warm it is down here? Up by us it was freezing! Am I right, Staci?"

Staci ignores him completely as she throws off her hooded sweatshirt and hands it spitefully over to the tall, pasty young man standing to her left.

"Can you please put this in your bag, Danny?"

Danny is momentarily taken aback but her orange sports bra slays any contempt he may have had only moments prior. He
eyes her up and down and judges every last inch of flesh. The scorching sun beams off her olive face, accenuating mild, yet exotic features while her body, ripe and in full bloom, reflected golden brown freckles above a pale, white bosom. Silky and long brown hair tied back into a ponytail along with ankle high, cream-colored Bermuda pants tied it all together. A modern, refined, and slightly casual look. Staci, of course, would never let anyone know how much effort she put into looking this effortless. She did imagine herself as a young and sexy soccer mom in training. One whom on the surface at least had all of her crap together! For Danny's part he wore a short sleeved, green polo shirt hung loose off of a thin, lanky frame. It went along with khaki dress pants and a waterproof vinyl black backpack strapped over his wide shoulders. His light brown hair, trimmed neatly and short, gave his generic Caucasian features an even further upright quality. His father and grandfather were two generations of township lawyers on a rural patch of land with the hopes he'd keep the lineage going. Staci herself hoped to place her upward mobility eggs in his basket. Danny, on the other hand dreamt of a screenwriting career, which unfortunately included neither Staci's eggs nor his patriarch's patches! Sandwiched between these two stood good ole' Tony. His thick, hairy arms hung low off his lumpy shoulders while his stumpy and short legs gave his stocky frame a centered and balanced appearance. His eyes, drooped with deep, dark circles, apparently from both genetics and sleep deprivation, which helped give his appearance an eternal and
somber fortitude. If Staci was the icon of exterior fashion and Danny personified corporate cunning, Tony was more like the regular Joe, with gravy stained T-shirts. His face, three quarters Italian and one quarter Hispanic presented a sobering revelation that he couldn't be a good liar even if he tried. He'd only be fooling himself the most in the long run. The recent loss of a dear loved one had sunk him low. A flood of emotions were overwhelming him. Music and art in many ways were his saving grace. Well, at least in his mind. Perhaps his suffering did hold some merit even if he didn't yet understand what that was. He was also quite unaware that he'd be healing himself and everyone else around him each time he expressed himself truthfully and from the heart with love.

"Wish to rise? Begin by descending." - Saint Augustine

Chapter 2

"How'd you find out about this place again?"

Tony chuckles, questioning his buddy's better judgment.

"Remember? I told you. My uncle. He used to drive down every summer back in his day. When he was around our age!"

"Do you think it was as seedy back then as it is now?"

Tony asks curiously, peering over cautiously.

"Who knows?"

Danny further examines the decay and neglect.
"Knowing my uncle, it was probably worse!"

He pats Tony on the shoulder, chuckling curtly. Staci lets out a long and slow sigh. This place was unsettling and not helping her anxiety in the slightest! She observes rickety wooden steps angling down the steep, rocky ravine.

Danny appears excited to embark. Tony grows a bit eager as well.

"Bikes?"

Danny surveys the angle.
"It looks too steep to carry them down safely!"

Tony concedes his point and jogs over to the conversion van to chuck his sweatshirt back in. When turning back around he notices a tower shooting up to the left of his friends. Something he must have somehow overlooked. He also now notices a steel black cable, suspended in air, running over the van and towards this tower. He looks left and notices a second tower implanted several thousand yards away at the east end of the cliff. It's quite a bit taller and wider then the one next to his friends and faced out to sea towards a small but towering rock island positioned an eighth of a mile east of the cliff. Tony notices the steel cable splitting into three directions through three columns atop this second tower facing the island. Odd though, since the left and right columns were cracked. The split cable terminated after only several feet through, hanging lifeless over the deep blue sea. The center column was flawless, however, and the cable threaded through it and over the sea, unhindered, and ascended spectacularly towards the island. The last thing Tony notices before reuniting with his friends is there appears to be a lone house atop of the rocky island, surrounded by green grass, cut low and square! They now notice the threaded cable continue down the ravine, and reinforced by yet another tower at it's base. Towers, spaced about a football field's length from one another reinforce the cable as far as the eye could see. Tony figured it must be for some sort of sky tram and it did look pretty cool, he thought. Staci notices green vines wrap around the steps which grew thicker and more wild the further they
descend. She looks up and straight, witnessing a lighthouse tip peeping out just over the horizon above the boardwalk's north end, five or so miles away. She then looks right and back down towards those summer cottages which appear condemned. Her heart sinks. Tony notices her noticing the neglect and her interest peaks his.

"Do you think anyone still lives down there?"

He asks with genuine curiosity.

"I don’t know, but this place is really creepy. And the more I see, the creepier it gets!"

Staci confesses, voice trembling. If there were any people down there, they sure weren't the types she wished to encounter!

"Listen, I have a game plan!"

Danny remarks cocksure. Staci's eyes roll. None of what he was about to say could be any good. Danny, of course, is more than happy to share his crazy itinerary and whether anyone truly wanted to hear it or not!

"Okay, here's the plan. We descend down to the boardwalk. Walk to the north-end. Take in all of the sights and sounds. We'll then hike the remaining portion of the sand strip and head towards the lighthouse. Relax on the beach for a bit to re-gather ourselves. Besides, I have the perfect relaxation device!"

He unzips his backpack and pulls out a large bag of green, grassy material. Staci shakes her head in disgust and listens
intently but not receptively with arms folded tensely. Tony belches and blows his breathe into the wind as Danny looks at him blankly. He continues.

"Check out the locals, if there are any. Tony can reunite with his long lost, hairy and inbred cousins. It'll be like a great adventure and dysfunctional family reunion all rolled into one!"

Staci regains a bit of backbone and counters with a game plan of her own.

"This isn't my idea of an adventure, Danny! And besides this place looks deserted. And creepy! I just want to go home. I don't have a good feeling about any of this. How many times do I have to tell you, already?"

Tony looks torn but excited to embark. He attempts to calm the choppy waters between these two self-absorbed sailors.

"I see both your points but we did come this far; driving over seven hours for crying out loud. May as well finish what we started. No retreat, no surrender!"

He attempts a Bruce Lee karate kick but his short leg doesn't allow for much air time. Staci, upset he's siding with Danny, smacks his arm violently. They then stare at one another in a silent standoff for a few more moments before she finally concedes defeat. Outnumbered by these two man-children who apparently just wanted to have a little misguided fun, she'll play along. Albeit reluctantly! Danny's family was loaded after all which she did like to remind herself of anytime he
wanted to do things in which she didn't. She'll pay her dues and sacrifice. Her definition of sacrifice of course. The end game being weasling her way into his clan. A girl had to eat after all and she was sick of eating humble pie coming from a broken home with a pushover mother and an absent father. What fun was that!? So before long, these three lost souls far away from home begin their descent. Danny takes the first step. As his left foot touches down onto the wood a painful creaking noise is unleashed. This spooks Staci even further and she's already having second thoughts about going along just for his money. What good is it if you're dead!

"What about the storm that's supposed to be coming in?"

Staci asks, voice wobbling.

"Fifty-fifty chance the weather-man said. Which means we'll be fine. Now come on!"

Danny barks. Tony glances down at his cell phone.

"I don't have any reception. How about you guys?"

Staci frantically fishes for hers, soon fumbling it in hand.

"No, me neither! I don't like this!"

Danny casually pulls out his.

"Same. No signal. It's fine! Too much technology hurts true bonding anyway."

He hugs Staci aggressively.
"Come on, let's do this! We came this far. No turning back!"

Staci takes a deep breath and submits. She doesn't like it but can't compete with his controlling nature. It's best not to argue at this point and maybe the money will be worth it in the long run. She leans away and grabs Tony's arm. He's always been the gentler, more nurturing soul! Danny continues to lead the way down the creaky wood with the awful noise giving off the very real impression of each one falling through the cracks. Tony wisely shifts his weight up, stepping in back of Staci to prevent any further pressure from their combined weight. He didn't want to be the cause of her downfall and could picture it all in his head right then and there with the headline reading...

'Fat Boy's Daily Donut Consumption Leads to Dastardly Death of Ditzy Dame!'

Thank goodness they soon reach the bottom and all in one piece. Tony breathes a huge sigh of relief as Staci sets foot on the first plank of wood. Her heart nearly pounds out of her chest as her eyes dart in every direction for what may be lurking and waiting to pounce. To consume her, and without hesitation. Slowly and painfully mind you. She was sure! She scratches her arm. A tick she had picked up several years ago from anxiety right about the time she had started to go through puberty. Danny, on the other hand, appears to be getting more aroused by the moment with eyes beaming as if basking in his element. Tony looks on nervously but perhaps above all exhausted. All that he had been through in the past few months
had taken a severe spiritual toll and this crazy quest was giving him mixed emotions. Sure, it seemed like a thrilling escape and all but he wasn't sure of its long term merit. Heck, he wasn't even sure if any of them would be getting off alive in the first place! He focuses his attention towards Staci and notices how frightened and uncertain she was. He hesitates for a moment but then wraps his arm around her as if to let her know that he's right by her side and that there was nothing to be afraid of. It comforts her, little.

"Never judge a book by its cover."

Chapter 3

"Let's go back up, Danny, please!"

Staci pleads desperately once more but her voice appears to now have literally fallen onto deaf ears. Danny ignores her completely as he walks single-mindedly forward on the narrow stretch of wood, inhaling the aroma of rot and mating sea scum heartily, lingering in the gentle breeze coming off the waters. Tony and Staci are unable to keep pace and lag behind. Soon they pass a boarded up Beach Cinema with a rusted marquee displaying the last three films run before condemnation. The top bill is a general audience G-rated family film. The one in the middle appears to be a somewhat edgy and rebellious PG-13 teen comedy. The last one and with the most severely rusted
lettering is a triple X adult feature of all things. Such an odd selection and all under one roof, Tony thought quietly to himself as he scratches his head. It didn't seem entirely appropriate for families to have to constantly bombarded with so much filth, and in a supposed family friendly market no less! Danny's predatory eyes focus in on a large family-owned miniature golf course smack dead in the middle of his path. The boardwalk splits into two divergent paths around it, widening on both sides of the fenced off amusement in a state of abandonment. The east path looks in further ruins with boarded up game stands, storefronts and that amusement pier shooting out to sea first observed by Tony standing on the cliff. The cable line, running parallel and above the boardwalk, also veered east. Save for endless rows of trash and repellant foul odors, the west side had no ruins to offer since nothing seems to have been built on top of it in the first place. It appears to be a makeshift dumpster above all else. Danny notices some crystal shards with tips of blood scattered about and decides to stay left. He walks alongside the fenced-off miniature golf course on the east path underneath the cable line as Staci struggles to keep pace. Tony gazes through the fence and notices a blue and bloated sperm whale with a crack running through it's body at hole eight on the verge of collapsing. Danny spots where the cable leads down to and reluctantly stops to impatiently wait for the other two. Once the three are close together again they cautiously approach the entrance gates. A big sign from above reads...
'A Blue Sea and Sky Journey!'

It greets them with equal parts comfort and disquiet, as does an older, homely gentleman standing at attention in front of a Victorian beach house. He cheerfully attends the fully functioning sky-ride, destination northbound. Danny takes it all in with glee and swings towards Staci and blurts into her face.

"I have a new idea!"

"Here we go!"

Staci bellows back into his.

"Hang tight. Let me talk to this guy!"

He swings to the attendant and barks.

"Hey you!"

The attendant takes off his top hat and puts it close to his heart.

"Good day, good, sir."

His voice is slow and low, filled with gravitas. Danny spits fast and nasally.

"Does this thing go to the end of the boardwalk?"

"Why, indeed."

The man humbly retorts. Not in the least bit grumpy at being of service to others. Even those full of grump! At his post faithfully for over forty years and just as joyful today as many moons ago. Much had changed since then and had taken a turn for the
worse, this he knew, yet he never let it dampen his spirits. It seemed the lower someone sank, the more love they truly needed. He was always ready to oblige and do his small part in making things better in this world, not worse. Ready to pour his heart out in any given moment, and with dignity. He was alone but never lonely and kept a clear conscience. A soft pillow in death or sleep was quite nice he figured. It was a bittersweet lesson he had learned the hard way a long time ago due to one poor choice after another. Arrogant Danny eyes this warm and welcoming attendant with cold, plotting eyes. He swings back over to Staci.

"Here's the revised game plan!"

Staci's eyes roll.

"We'll hop onto this sky ride and take it to the north end. You should like that, Stay. It'll cut down on all of our walking. God only knows how much you complain!"

He chuckles like a hyena. Staci's blood begins to boil.

"We can then walk back after we chill for a bit by the lighthouse. Unless of course your feet still hurt."

He makes a sarcastic pouty face in her direction.

I'm thinking of you, babe!"

Staci knew he was full of it and wasn't thinking of her. She even suspected he had something wicked up his sleeve. It made her sick to suspect that this selfish sh*t was withholding something
vital. Biting her lip with all of his over thinking and plotting was exhausting. Even if she was primarily just going along for his money, she wanted to be in control! She musters up a bit of backbone and attempts to draw a line in the sand.

"That's your problem! All you ever do is think, Danny, but you never think if it's a good idea in the first place!"

She spins around and examines the decay and neglect. She felt above it all and that included that creepy homeless looking man standing to the right of her so called boyfriend.

"Why are we even here in the first place?"

She asks snobbishly, getting fed up with so much nonsense. Life wasn't one big endless joke. No matter how much her spiritually stunted, so called boyfriend wished it were. He was also getting fed up with her, of course. Anytime she nagged he dismissed it as typical woman on the rag nonsense. A woman who lacked the self discipline to control herself, let alone anyone else! Although he was unaware that many of her flare ups were enflamed due to his beligerent jerkiness IN the first place! He came from wealth and had a certain amount of misguided pride because of it despite having very few personal achievements of his own to be truly proud of. Likewise, Staci had her looks but she too hadn't achieved anything worthwhile through honest effort. Both were swimming deep in the shallow waters of spiritual adolescence. Puffed up on the things they were born into and through no merits of their own. The more one dug the more one instinctively sensed that these two
were indeed the perfect couple. A match made in selfish hell! Staci, of course, only saw her side of it, rightfully observing Danny's insensitive jackass moments but she was often blind to her own insensitivities such as her irrational contempt towards that filthy, on the surface at least, ride attendant. Women's intuition often didn't like to extend too far down into the dark recesses of their own worldly, wicked and evil hearts.

"Come on, babe! You said your feet hurt. I'm just doing you a favor!"

Danny pleads disingenuously.

"I'm not getting on this crazy thing! You're nuts! I just want to go home. How many times do I have to tell you? I don't have a good feeling about any of this!"

Staci thought about home often, yet she was unsure where that was. Or if such a thing even existed anymore. Danny, if anything, made her feel even more homesick. Maybe money wasn't everything!

"Yeah, but you owe me, babe. Remember!"

He eyes her spitefully. She did remember. It made her cringe every time she thought back to that incident.

"How bout we flip a coin? That's fair. Tails we stay, and hop on, heads we turn around and head back to the van and go home. I've heard your pleading, woman. It's exhausting! That sounds fair enough, right?"
Staci senses foul play but goes along anyway. What choice did she have? He pretends to have her best interest at heart but always seems to disappoint. A faint, distant image of a bloodied umbilical cord attempts to emerge into her mind's eye but it scatters into a million pieces and is gone before it can take on a permanent shape. Being in a relationship without trust was exhausting! She nods and prays its tails although her gut tells her it won't be. Danny flips his shiny quarter high into the sky, catches it and turns it over into the palm of his hand. It's tails! He beams a crap eating grin from ear to ear.

"Up, up and away!"

Staci may have literally stabbed him in the gut, letting him bleed out in that moment but thank goodness held no sharp object in hand.

"That will be twenty five cents, please."

The attendant remarks gently, extending his hand out, quickly overlooking all of the negatives. He realized a long time ago that nobody was perfect; not even himself!

"Oh, right!"

Danny quickly puts his coin flip quarter back into his pocket before hurriedly taking out his expensive leather wallet. He hands over a crumpled dollar bill while looking over to Staci, now paying him no further mind. It's been shifted out to sea. Something doesn't feel right. Slowly and meticulously, the attendant un-crumpled the dollar bill and just as slowly and
meticulously reaches into his own pocket. After what seems like an eternity to the impetuous and impatient Danny, the kind man hands him back seventy five cents for change.

"Keep your head up, son."

The old man remarks, grinning in Staci's direction. Danny looks down and notices three faces up on the quarters in his palm. He puts the loose change into his backpack just as the old man swivels right to pull a gear. A portable generator begins to sputter and then roar. Soon a jet engine sound is produced, ascending into a harsh and blaring feedback loop. Tony, Staci and Danny each hold their ears in agony while the old man appears unfazed. Perhaps due to his high frequency deafness from so many years of diligent laboring under that inefficient, poorly designed yet reliable generator? In some strange and inexplicable way a blessing in disguise. Staci looks over to the man with eyes pleading for mercy. He gazes back warmly. She examines his face and grows disgusted before looking away in shame. Unbothered, the man pushes three red buttons firmly in a row on the operator panel which causes a chain reaction. The three seater carriages shake as the steel cable begins its forward motion. The blaring noise mercifully decreases to a more reasonable level as he signals for them to hop on the next chair, steadily approaching. Almost in unison they oblige. The chair swings back and forth from their collective weight as the cordial attendant, who didn't look like much on the surface, joyfully waves them goodbye.
"Don't stay out too late! The darkness consumes indiscriminately!"

He grins devilishly, and unconsciously, for a brief moment. He truly wished them well in his heart on their journey of true self-discovery. The same one he himself began to make many years prior. When he decided to start learning not only from other people's mistakes, but primarily his own. He prudently walks back into his home, in a state of continual repair and bolts the safety lock shut.

"Everything is food!" - Popeye
Chapter 4

A black steel cage hidden behind the attendant's house reveals itself as they continue their ascent. It appears to be a cable car as well but hooked to the southbound line and apparently out of order. In the unlikely occurrence it were operational it would lead back towards the ravine and not northbound in the direction they were headed. The rusted cage is much larger in diameter than the cramped three seater they're sitting in and
has only one seat situated in the corner. A thick restraining chain dangling above only added to it's cold, metallic appearance lacking any sort of openness or warmth. They shift their attention away from such an unpleasant sight, Danny the most reluctantly, and look back towards the calming blue sea. Staci relaxes a bit. Their rickety three-seater chugs along at a leisurely pace above the planked boards with their feet dangling in the cool breeze. They gaze towards the gentle waves cresting from low tide rolling peacefully underneath the pier just ahead, soon gliding past a cracked and faded billboard. It's an advertisement for an hourly special at the Boardwalk Inn. A Luv Tub is prominently featured. The next billboard has a strange looking Jewish-Cowboy with a mullet and curly afro pitching the lowest prices for hospital beds on the entire coast.

'Just 'round the inlet!' He boldly proclaims in a cartoon caption. The third and final sign is for a super value, fast food chain.

'A Fist Full of Bologna!' A customer smiles with plastic eyes and gleaming teeth at the super value 98 cent satisfaction!

"You have got to be kidding me!"

Staci gags and has had her fill with such utterly absurd, relentless and undercutting nonsense. Her stomach turns. A menacing wooden loop coaster greets them as they begin sailing alongside the amusement pier. Staci notices that large
portions of its wood are missing, including the top portion of
it's loop which made it a more pitiful sight than anything. The
next ride she observes is an eight legged spider scrambler with
one of its limbs lying lifeless and limp on the cracked pier. It
taunts her impotently. No upkeep or maintenance to be found
anywhere save for a peculiar Ferris wheel situated in the far
right corner of the pier. It's carriages, illuminated immaculate
green, red and blue stuck out like a sore thumb. Somehow, and
in some mysterious way it seemed to be in a continual state of
repair. A labor of love from that old, humble gent? Who knew!
All Staci did know was that she'd be hard pressed to ever scrub
such a beautiful image out of her head. The carriage lights gave
her a sense of direction and movement. The primary focus
should always be on what lies in front and ahead. In her
particular case it was that peculiar lighthouse beacon at the
northernmost tip of the peninsula. After close to five miles of
chugging past further desolation and despair, their sky-chair
descends about an eighth of a mile south from the boardwalk's
northend. They hop off and are sort of relieved to be on
somewhat solid ground.

“Well that was quite an eyeful!"

Tony remarks stretching vigilantly to recover from such tight
quarters. He then charges mightily forward, spirits lifted,
bouncing goofy footed as Staci and Danny lag behind arguing
amongst themselves about some trivial nonsense. When
reaching the boardwalk's northend, Staci notices flimsy, dark
green twigs wrapping around the sturdy wooden steps leading to the sandy beach below. The vines appear to get not only thinner and lighter but also less thorny the further they descend. Tony leads the way down and when setting foot on the sun baked sand, approximately twelve feet below, takes off his sandals. From his point of view he can now see large beach rocks surrounding the lighthouse. He also notices that less than several hundred feet of sand separated the ocean on his left from the bay to his right with that width steadily decreasing the closer it got towards the tip of the peninsula. The three huddle close and head in that direction!

At around three hundred feet from the lighthouse, a wave rolls up, soaking their feet, and greatly unnerving Staci. She looks towards Danny and Tony for some sort of reassurance but they just shrug her off. The next wave breaks much further away which helps ease her anxiety somewhat and she's able to brush
the previous one off as a fluke. She then looks up to the sky, now darkened a hue, no longer baby blue, and once again becomes unsettled. She once again looks over to those two clueless man-children, oblivious to any concept of external threats to her bodily integrity, and they just shoot her another face which expressed a deep and profound desire that she would just get over it already. To stop being such a girl. Staci couldn't help it. She was a girl! And proud of it. A distant rolling thunder rumbles. Dark clouds begin to form above the horizon directly behind the lighthouse.

"Everything will be fine!"

Danny remarks cocksure.

"Those clouds are miles away. These storms dissipate just as fast as they appear!"

Staci remains silent. Her pleading to go home has fallen onto deaf ears time and time again. She was both too physically and emotionally exhausted to waste her breathe any further. Well, at least at this point. She knew Danny was full of it but he had worn her down with his stubbornness and she now just hoped his own exhaustion would lead him to want to go home sooner rather than later, as well. She knew how quickly he got bored due to his attention deficit disorder and was pretty sure that she'd get her way in one way or another. An exercise of restraint was in order. That way she could temper her own weariness at all of the disorder! Danny was a big jerk but he did give off a sense of masculine, albeit toxic, authority. His family
was well off, Staci liked to remind herself anytime dealing with his jerky behavior. If she was really honest with herself it did turn her on at times to be with such a domineering bully. Other times she hated it, however, and with all of her heart. This was one of those times where she hated it. Really, really hated it. Gosh, being such a young and beautiful woman seeking worldly power by attempting to marry a man for his money in this day and age was so freaking complicated and full of obstacles she thought to herself! Oh oh oh! They soon reach the base of the lighthouse. Staci puts her hands on her hips and squints. She looks up to survey the bright and grounded landmark. Something she was used to witnessing apparently! It appears to be seventy seven feet or so to the top. The single beam of light breaks through the fog and travels north as it dissipates in the direction of the horizon.

"Well, here we are!"

Staci's mood has perked. A strange calming effect was overcoming her. Even more so than after witnessing the calming blue sea and the illuminated Ferris wheel a short while back. This columned beam of light shining through the formless fog gave her even more hope. These two landmarks, odd as they were, stuck out like sore thumbs on this even more odd, and dastardly, strip of land. Maybe there was hidden beauty in everything. Even the most ugly and hideous things. She quietly ponders this while looking at Danny with scorn. Whether on the surface or within perhaps it first had to be truly loved before it
ever had the high hopes of being made loveable. Staci was surely learning, albeit slowly, as were her equally weary and weathered, worldly travelers. It seemed true discernment always came from within.

"One can tell the divine origin of common sense. It's always crucified." - G.K. Chesterton

Chapter 5

"What now?"

Tony asks peacefully. The same calming effect was overcoming him as well.

"We climb to the top!"
Staci screams excitedly and begins a dash through the entrance door up the winding steps. Danny looks quite pleased at the renewed zip to her step.

"That's the spirit!"

He claps and chuckles heartily before glancing back over to Tony.

"Women! What can you do?"

He runs in right after her. Tony has no one to crack jokes about women to save for a lonely sand crab baking in the sun and on the brink of death and decides it's best to just follow the others! Atop the lighthouse Staci gazes out to sea in blissful solitude. The light paints the sky ineffably. No more tears or sorrow for all of her weary travels. A heavenly gate, perhaps? Just then, Danny storms in cackling like a schoolgirl, knocking into her spastically. So rude! She quickly snaps out of her trance and for some odd reason the middle child from Full House pops into her mind. Tony soon follows in the midst of a severe wheezing fit. Danny looks at him a quarter concerned and three quarters mockingly.

"Are you okay, bro?"

"Good as gold!"

Tony responds, gasping for air.

"Do you have an inhaler?"
Staci asks genuinely concerned and highly amused. It wasn't a joke but was sort of hysterical.

"Not good for you. Bad for your health!"

Tony whistles while panting. Danny continues chuckling as he takes a seat on the bench before unzipping his backpack. He removes a large brown pipe and loads it with some green, grassy stuff. He then inhales deeply before coughing uncontrollably.

"You two are such a mess!"

Staci wisecracks. Danny forces a grin while clearing the phlegm from his throat.

"Love you too, babe!"

He takes a second hit and looks quite pleased that he's able to hold it in without coughing. The biggest accomplishment he has achieved thus far in his predominantly mindless life. He hands it over to his so called girlfriend who wasn't proud to admit it, least of all to herself, but was easily influenced by many of the so called men in her life. And for better or worse! She takes a small, dainty hit so not overpower her slight, girlie lungs. Her eyes bug out while attempting to hold in the smoke as she extends the pipe over to Tony, already forgetful of his wheezing fit only moments prior. She really did need to be more mindful and not only of my asthma but of other things in general, Tony quietly pondered. Staci was young and selfish and her motherly instincts went just as fast as they came, apparently! He politely
refuses while remembering how he had experimented a handful times in college but it always made him more paranoid and it just wasn't worth it with or without his asthma. Her side breast comes into view while holding her arm out, lost in her own thoughts and still unaware of his polite refusal. He involuntarily looks for a brief moment but catches himself and quickly focuses on more chaste concerns.

"That stuff will fry your brains!"

His voice booms fatherly with a gnarly phlegm whistle. Danny laughs.

"Brains! My favorite!"

He imitates a zombie, play biting into Staci's skull.

Tony just shakes his head and gives up. And besides, he wasn't their father. So before long, their bloodshot, water-filled eyes are dead giveaways. Tony doesn't judge, off course. Well, not too harshly at least. His eyes were often bloodshot and water-filled and people often mistook him for a pot-head. In reality he was often just tired and sad. That and seasonal allergies! He just hoped both were okay and neither fell out of the lighthouse for crying out loud! The three look out towards the horizon lost in their own thoughts. The beautiful specificity could all be quite overwhelming, especially for someone as falsely high and unsettled as Staci. Tony, on the other hand remains at peace while looking on awestruck.

"It's pretty amazing, isn't it?"
He remarks meekly with a warm face expressing a sincere appreciation of the moment. He had nothing to hide and was learning to be comfortably sober in his own skin. Staci, on the other hand looks on anxiously, attempting in vain to project a peaceful demeanor. Perhaps a revenant of the ugly side of her Irish blood. Often wishing to be British. To keep up appearances rooted in class status and vanity. When asked of her ethnic origins she often wouldn't reveal her southern maternal ancestry from Italy even though in the summertime she did love the golden tan it expressed through her flesh. So many unreconciled family issues and different beatings of the heart! She responds in a flowery, detached manner.

"It's really beautiful. But I'm getting dizzy. Really, really dizzzy!"

Danny isn't so impressed. The same substance that has Staci acting like a hippy ditz is ruffling his feathers.

"It's okay, but I'm getting stoned!"

He mutters gruffly.

"I feel like the entire ocean is gonna swallow us up. I don't like it! It's pissing me off!"

He huffs and puffs as his stiff and stoic half-Germanic face eyes the horizon begrudgingly, turning blue from refusing to exhale into the splendor. Staci smacks his arm and giggles.

“Don't say stuff like that! You're going to freak me out, lover!"

She squeezes his crotch and coughs violently.
“How is any of this real or even possible?”

Tony ponders with an expressive gratitude, unsettling high but paranoid Danny whose head was in the clouds but feet nowhere near the ground.

It seemed the more he inhaled the more closed in on himself he became. Boxed in and puffed with pride. His shallow, arrogant vessel of a mind became ever more thoughtless and self-seeking. Mind altering substances were used as a means to escape reality, not embrace it. True and humble introspection scared him and he sought to get lost in Danny's world. He alone was some sort of divine creator in his mind. Others who believed in something different, and more reasonable such as an all-powerful, loving God who gave us our minds in the first place were the unreasonable idiots. Well, at least in his mind.
All others be damned. He'd pay them no mind. One of those mindless thoughts was to think that his were detached from everything else in the first place. If he really thought about it, that green stuff was really making his mind mush! Danny wanted to be the lone vulture. No natural predators. Top of the food chain. Blare the trumpets for the king! That would be the perfect world for him to live in. It didn't make much sense and deep down he knew it. But that whole do unto others nonsense seemed so restrictive. Being a self-sacrificial dove just didn't seem like much fun. All it seemed to do was kill every primal manly instinct firing deep within his loins. Whether he believed it or not, however, even the birds were chained to the sky. Tony instinctively understood this. In those fantasy novels there were always good guys and bad guys, and weddings. Hearts broken and mended. And so on and so forth. It just seemed like common sense, really. For Danny, common relationships were an uncommon nuisance, however. A burden. Since, in his mind all they did was leave one with so much heartache and disappointment. What good was that? He thought he alone was in the world suffering. Staci to him was just a consumer good to be used and discarded at will. She was just a woman after all. He wasn't even sure they had souls to begin with let alone any true feelings! Her body made him feel good and that was as far as he liked to think about it. He had no intention of having good intentions with her down the line. She'd get over it. What choice did she have? An image of a stone statue flashes into his mind for a brief moment. He quickly thinks of something else.
Something less heart piercing. A scene from the movie Ghostbusters pops into his head. Dan Aykroyd's character imagines the most harmless thing possible; the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man! That's why he got high. To escape into the blissful absurdity of infinite regression. To bust any and all lingering ghosts that would ultimately make him remember all of the unpleasant stuff he was trying to forget. He was sure he could reason himself away from such pointless matters of the heart. That was holding him back he figured all while ignoring his own heartless actions towards Staci. No one ever accused good ole' Danny boy of being fully thought out or well-reasoned! These endlessly needy peasants were always slowing him down. A constant annoyance filled with so much chicanery. They all needed to become doves, or better yet sheep. Lead them to the slaughter! That would make his self-centered destiny so much easier and without any foolhardy resistance. The lone vulture. A super villain! He loved absurdity and mocking people yet his skin was pretty thin when anyone made fun of him. He despised not only Staci's weaknesses but also his own. He understood why women aborted their children. Such weak and worthless parasites, unable to pull their own weight. Get to work or die kiddo while I sit on my lazy butt and condemn you! Stop being so needy and clingy. Constantly begging to be fed and for a mother's warm affection. Nonsense! An image of sour whiskey seeping into rotted wood flashes into his mind for a brief moment. He gets angry at his mother but quickly thinks of something else. Less and less heart
piercing. These insignificant humans were such a burden and what ultimately held humanity back. Gosh, Danny was a dick. Intellect divorced from the heart was nothing if not cruel and inhumane! Danny grew paranoid in Tony's warm presence. His humble transparency was tolerable when levelheaded but it enraged him when stoned. He sensed that Tony could see right through him and was almost certain that at any given moment his false intent towards Staci was going to be revealed. He just knew he was being judged harshly and hypocritically by this greasy bastard! Being high sure felt low for folks with such hardened and hypocritical hearts. In reality, Tony wasn't thinking much of Danny, although perhaps his paranoia did hold some merit. Tony knew Danny was full of it and was only using Staci for her body but he didn't hate him for it. He just wanted what was best for Staci. Perhaps she was blind to Danny's selfishness because in many ways it paralleled her own. If she ever hoped for a true relationship down the line, she'd have to come clean with her own untrue intent in the first place. A true relationship was one of mutual giving and Tony was just the guy to lead her to that promised land. Well, at least in his mind! Now was neither the time nor place to reveal that to her. Who knew if she could truly ever love him? His recent loss really did a number on his self-esteem but deep down he did suspect that she already knew the truth about Danny, but perhaps just wasn't ready to face it head on. What she truly needed was perhaps the very fabric of the universe, time and space, to gradually accept reality as the way it was
and not the way she wished it to be. Tony treaded lightly with women. Especially her. He realized the dysfunctional home she came from created many dark corners in her heart. There were many things that she wasn't yet ready to handle in an emotionally mature manner. It was all too much at once and quite overwhelming and he wasn't a mind reader either of, of course, having no idea of what truly went on in her mind, but from the way Danny treated her and from what she allowed, Tony got the sneaking suspicion that neither she, nor Danny, were on the up and up. Danny ultimately seemed to be about Danny and even sadder yet Staci seemed to be about Staci. Danny's guilty conscience in his high but truly low state could sense Tony sniffing this out. Well, his bull at least. The personal and shameful things he was trying to conceal, in vain, from the outside world forces his hand. He attempts to act kinder and gentler towards Staci in front of this perceptive, greasy Meatball. Sincerity is something that can never be faked, of course, and his heart just isn't in it. He grows ever more certain that he's going to be called out and in a deep, fearful state takes another massive hit from his pipe. A giant Stay Puffed Up Marshmallow Man destroying everything in it's path forms in his mind from particles of dust. He grins demonically with contempt boiling deep within the pit of his stomach while turning to face good ole', goody two shoes, Tony.

"You know what's possible?"

Tony responds curiously.
"What?"
"This!"

Danny smacks him on the back of his head. Really, really hard.

"Weeping may tarry the night, but joy comes in the morning." - A Psalm of David

Chapter 6

"Ouch! That really hurt!"

Tony shouts with a fake British accent as he rubs the back of his head.

"See! That seemed real enough, didn't it?"

Danny mockingly rubs it into Tony's dark, handsome face. His lighter complexion was something he took pride in because of his average looks.

"Pain does seem to be the realest thing there is. For me at least. Lately. Unfortunately!"

Tony sighs.

“My mom told me that she was in labor with me for over twenty hours!"

Staci chimes in thoughtfully after witnessing the unjust pain inflicted upon her goofy friend. He looks impressed.
"That's a lot of pain!"

Staci fondly recalls the humble words her mom once spoke.

"She refused to take any pain meds. She was told it reduces the bonding between a mother and child."

A misty image of a mother nurturing a helpless newborn emerges in Staci's mind's eye. She grows teary eyed.

"She didn't want anything to diminish the true, undying love between a mommie and her little poop-poop."

Staci scratches her arm. Such heartfelt things made her anxious. She takes another hit from the pipe and wipes away a tear forming.

"That's beautiful."

Tony remarks while staring into her beautiful face. Danny notices the vulnerable position she's in and slyly reaches out his hand. She extends hers with trusting eyes. He leads her down the spiral steps away from the bright, transparent light. Tony watches silently before shifting his focus towards the vast blue sea filled with countless minnows and unfortunately all of those pesky and predatory hammerhead sharks. He reflects in silent awe at the saltwater and sky with a lone seagull hovering between. He breathes in the salty air and remains grateful for it all. Danny and Staci reach the bottom of the steps and set foot back onto the sun baked sand. Something suddenly dawns on Staci. How did Danny truly feel about me? How do I truly feel about him! She feels an inexplicable yearning to run back up to
Tony but ignores it. Danny's wealth and jerkiness had tight grip. Especially in her ditzy and stoned state. Taking the first step to soberly admit this fact made her a bit nauseous. The agony and the ecstasy of the uncertainty was perhaps all that she truly loved. It was too much heart and headache for her in that moment and so she surrenders to Danny's will on the sand, leading her over to the gentle waves breaking onto the shore. He takes out a large beach towel from his backpack and places it gently atop the battered rock pebbles. They sit atop it and face the ocean as the waves roll in steadily and at a safe distance. As he puts his arm over her shoulder she grins from cheek to cheek. Now this is more like it!

Danny shifts his attention away from the waves and towards his hot and sexy girlfriend as she puts on her sunglasses. She
observes the sea entranced while inhaling the salty beach air with a cool breeze blowing non-threateningly against her sun baked skin. He puts his hand on her cheek and slowly turns her face towards his before kissing her lips delicately. She opens herself up to his gentle advance and leans in, kissing back with butterflies flapping deep within her stomach intestines. He attempts to put his hand up her shirt and she immediately recoils in disgust.

"Is that all you ever want to do!"

She shouts in a scolding tone and flustered.

"What? What'd I do?"

Danny counters, oblivious to any offense.

"Can't you ever just sit and relax? Enjoy the moment? Or even stranger yet, have an actual conversation?"

Danny stares blankly. Something wasn't registering. Staci continues regardless.

"Get to know one another? Like a real relationship?"

A tiny light bulb goes off in his head. He gets it now. She's just playing hard to get! With a newfound confidence, he slowly runs his fingers through her hair. She swats it away like a fly. He wisely backs off and begins to take the hint.

"Ok, babe, I'm sorry! What do you want to talk about?"

Tears well up as she remains silent. Danny figures it must be that time of month again and treads lightly.
"I said I'm all ears, woman! Talk to me!"

He barks angrily nonetheless. Staci inhales deeply and ignores him completely as her hands shake chaotically from battered nerves. After jamming her headphone buds into her ears she begins scrolling unpredictably down the music playlist on her smartphone still without a signal. She then rubs her eyes underneath her sunglasses, wiping away any new tears that may have been on the brink of forming. She exhales and lays down on the beach towel, stiffening like a cold fish. She's over it! Danny looks like he's about to say something but even he realizes that silence is probably golden at this point. He cautiously lays down next to her. She immediately scoots up and away, rolling onto her side into a semi-fetal position with a sad, lonely and misunderstood face. If only she could be somewhere and with someone who would somehow treat her right. To escape. The retro music begins piping into her eardrums. She grins with bittersweet joy as it takes her back to a fond memory one fateful afternoon in that high school parking lot after class. The place they first met. Her first love. Her ex-boyfriend of three whole months. Oh oh oh! To this day she still blamed herself for not being pretty or good enough for him and wallowed in endless, negative and self-pitying patterns of thinking. Always the victim. She closes her eyes and lets the music consume her. To help her remember it the way it needed to be remembered. The way things should have and could have been. Back over by the lighthouse, Tony is now layed out on a white bench outside of the entrance with his legs spread and
bare feet implanted into the sand, sandals in hand. Danny's eyes grow heavy. Dreamland sure seemed to be the preferable escape from all of the bittersweet, all too human realities consuming each one of them in this very moment. Something that no matter how hard they tried none could truly escape from in the long run. The only way out was through but for the time being at least on that sun-baked sandy beach with the waves breaking gently and at a safe distance, it was nothing but sweet dreams.

"Perhaps one day it will be pleasing to remember even these things" - Virgil

Chapter 7

An hour or so has passed. A gentle yet forceful wave rolls up soaking Staci and Danny. She jumps up and flings off her sunglasses while her boyfriend barely budges. Her womanly intuition senses trouble.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Danny, wake up! He slowly rises and yawns obnoxiously while smelling his breathe, mumbling and then casually wiping his eye crust.

"Will you relax, woman!"

Staci doesn't look relaxed. There was nothing happening that would merit he, nor SHE should be for crying out loud! She
shrieks in Tony's direction, still laid out on the bench, sound asleep.

"Tony, wake up! Wake up! It's time we start moving!"

Her loud voice startles him as he overacts and pratfalls onto the sand. Dazed, confused, and fat, he witnesses a blurred image of a hysterical woman through his watery, bloodshot eyes shouting with a deep sense of urgency in voice and mannerisms.

"Come on! It's high time we start heading back!"

Her arms flail as she desperately signals for him to run the hell over already. The dark clouds have crept closer. The wind has picked up as well. This unsettles her further. Tony looks right, witnessing the waves breaking much further inland than before the three had taken their little beauty rest. He looks left towards the bay and realizes the exposed sand strip is now only half as wide from when they first arrived. High tide was coming in fast and it wouldn't be long before the waves would be spilling over the narrowing northern sandstrip and flushing out into the bay!

"Let's go, Meatball!"

Staci screams yet again and with even greater passion. Tony jumps up and dashes over once realizing that this hysterical woman may indeed have a point! Danny concurs and quickly throws all of their beach gear into his water-proof backpack
and without haste the three head south to get back onto the boardwalk's north end.

"Do you think we should take cover in the lighthouse?"

Tony asks nervously just as rolling thunder grumbles in the distance. Danny looks up and notices the sky has turned a shade of grey.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Sitting ducks. Lightning!"

"I thought you said these storms dissipate just as fast as they came."

Staci remarks snidely, taking pleasure in calling Danny out on his crap.

"Let's just keep moving, I don't want to get pulled out by the riptide!"

He snaps back humorlessly.

"Everybody just stay calm. Nobody's gonna get pulled out by anything!"

Tony screams hysterically. He then shifts his attention solely towards Staci.

How are your feet, Stay? Can you run?"

"No! Even just walking on them hurts! And really bad!"

She groans.

"It's fine. We'll all be fine! It's not that far. Let's just keep our focus straight ahead!"
Tony screams before swallowing hard, mustering up a bit of fortitude through crippling fear. He locks his eyes on the boardwalk steps and the saving grace they represented. About three quarters of the way there a large wave break rolls up and spills into the bay. With the three now submerged ankle deep, Staci panics even further.

"Let's run!"

"I thought you said..."

Before Tony can even finish his thought, she's off like a bandit! She splashes through the rushup despite her crippling pain as Danny and Tony struggle to keep pace. At about a thousand yards from the steps another wave breaks. This time sweeping them off of their feet violently. Danny is the first to get back onto his and ignores the others completely. Tony helps Staci and both are able to withstand the retreating rip tide but are now standing in a KNEE deep puddle!

"Come on! High ground! If not, we're all gonna get pulled out into oblivion!"

Tony yells with great terror.

"I thought you said...". Before Staci can even finish her thought Tony yanks her through the surf. Her heart races with dreadful anticipation of the next wave and of being literally swept off her feet. Forever separated from family, friends and everything worth having on God's green earth. It was a lovely thought when close to them and safe, but now in mortal
danger it truly scared her to death! Less than three hundred yards remained to the boardwalk's high ground. So close, yet so far away! The water level was slowing each of their strides down significantly but in a bit of good fortune no more unruly waves broke. Staci's spirits lift. She senses a light at the end of the tunnel.

"That's it! It's Him! There is a God! He's showing us mercy! Come on, we're almost home free!"

Just then, a slow and rolling rumble is heard right behind her. Tony looks back and witnesses a giant twenty-foot rogue wave picking up steam from the north, tumbling ferociously with the three of them directly in its merciless path! His heart drop like a ton of bricks.

"Hey, you guys."

Tony's castrated voice, one octave higher than usual, meekly attempts to gain the attention of his fellow forsakened, and about to be further soaked friends.

"Yes, goony, goo goo?"

Danny responds mockingly to Tony's meekness.

"What is it now!"

Staci yells back enraged and fed up with these jokers. Even though she cared about them deeply; well Tony at least! People just needed to stay focused like her. Not everything was a punchline. It was all going to get them killed for crying out loud!
Tony squeezes her hand tighter than ever before screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Run like hell!"

He resumes pulling her through the surf as she looks back and gets a brief and shaky glimpse of the tidal wave bearing down on them with all of it's reckless, senseless fury. She goes into full on, freak out mode.

"We're all going to die! I knew this was a mistake! I hate you, Danny! I hate you! You're going to be my downfall, you sick and selfish son of a bitch!"

"No time for a lover's spat!"

Danny spits while gaining ground ahead of the two. The rogue wave barrels through the lighthouse, splashing around the column with it's forward motion only trivially impeded by the deeply rooted landmark, itself shaken but ultimately unmoved. Something to the effect of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object!
They struggle mightily through the water with Danny ahead of the pack. Their primal survival instincts are heightened to the extreme which creates an almost out of body experience as they desperately attempt to outrun this abomination quickly closing in on them from the north. Suddenly, and without warning, another wave breaks. A five foot 'normal' one from the east once again knocks them off their feet. The retreating riptide now has Staci firmly in its grips as it begins mercilessly pulling her out to sea. Tony's heavy weight keeps him grounded and the thought crosses his mind that perhaps eating all of those frosted covered donuts did serve some sort of cosmic purpose! He rises, figuring now was as good a time as any to burn off some of those excess fried carbs, and begins a relentless chop against the tide towards lightweight Staci, no match for the nasty, bullying current. He soon reaches her and leaps, submerging their bodies underneath the water. Before long he reemerges with her firmly in his grip, a bit crushed, but
still breathing! His stoic, donut loving face appears to have no intention of letting her go. He remarks concerned and fatherly. "Are you okay?"

She doesn’t look okay. A blank and dissociated stare has her looking quite defeated. He lifts her up.

"Come on! We're almost there! Don't give up, and don't look back! Focus on high ground!"

Tony's hopeful reassurance snaps her out of her withdrawal and an unexplainable survival instinct is once again lit within her deepest innards. Danny, now quite ahead of the pack, runs up the steps with glee, giggling giddily. Only when reaching the top does he turn back around to see how those other insignificant peasants, including his so called girlfriend were making out. The rogue wave closes in fast. Staci and Tony are still at least twenty feet from the steps, fighting with every fiber of their being to reach them in time. To hopefully get above the wave's crest, safe from impact and the ensuing riptide. The foamy water wall builds to a peak less, and less than fifty feet away as Danny, standing with his nose up and a false sense of security, realizes it's trajectory has it crashing down directly on top of him! He was neither safe nor secure and hotfoots it southbound just as the other two reach the bottom of the steps. The wave hangs over them. Staci trips and falls up the first step. Tony frantically picks her up and throws her over his shoulder. He imagines himself a pro wrestler putting a finishing move on his opponent but in reality Staci was more like his tag
team partner, of course, and someone whom he'd truly give his life to protect. He powerwalks up the steps and just as they reach the top, the white water wall comes crashing down. The water drains through the planked wood and both appear safe and secure, relatively speaking at least. A bit bruised and battered but will perhaps live to see another day. Once the coast looks clear Danny races back. Staci unloads on the selfish bastard as Tony helps back to her feet.

"Why didn't you help me, Danny! You're such a worthless piece of crap!"

"Babe, I thought you guys were ahead of me after the wave knocked us over! Honest! I was disoriented and confused!"

She gets choked up.

"I told you this was a bad idea. I just want to go home. I want my mommy!"

She bursts into tears and falls into Tony's arms.

"I'm soaked!"

Tony hugs her as Danny's eyes light up.

"The towel should still be dry!"

"How thoughtful Danny!"

Danny grabs the large beach towel out of his waterproof backpack and wipes his face while ignoring her completely. She gives him the most evil death stare this side of the Atlantic. He notices her gaze from the corner of his eye and pauses for a
moment to think it through. What could this clingy and hysterical woman want from me now? After a few more moments of pondering, he realizes his slight and cheerfully reaches into his backpack for a second towel. He tosses over a tiny dish rag to his so called girlfriend from afar. She stares at him with scornful, merciless eyes while quietly whispering to herself.

"I hate you, you motherless whore."

Tony gently rubs her shoulders, continuing his attempt at consoling this neglected little lady.

"We're safe now. We're on higher ground. The ocean poses no threat to us anymore. I got you, Stay!"

It didn't make her feel much better. She did tend to take Tony for granted after all!

"We'll just hop back onto that crazy sky ride and get the hell out of here, and the sooner the better!"

Tony remarks with great resolve.

"I’m so cold."

Staci’s teeth chatter as she attempts to warm herself up, futilely, with the flinty rag. They trek back to the spot where they had gotten off the sky-ride earlier. Unfortunately the cable is no longer in motion. There was no tall and pasty ride attendant, nor any buttons and gears to start it back up. Frustrated and exhausted, Staci sits down on the motionless
chair to give her feet a much needed rest. She swings back and forth anxiously wondering what they're next move was when, just then, the grey sky flashes brightly from another flash of lightning. Soon, another rolling thunder rumbles. The storm is creeping closer.

"It looks like we’re walking back as originally planned!"

Danny remarks quite satisfied with the turn of events. He'd make it all fit into his game plan one way or another. If he was really honest with himself, however, he didn't really have a game plan. Other than seeking to mindlessly amuse himself to death. Staci still hated him with every fiber of her being but was both too exhausted and comfortable to respond with any further contention. He and all of the other unruly elements had worn her down. Full of grief, but at peace she rubs her feet. He resumes.

"Besides, with the storm rolling in we're much safer down here. If we all stick together, everything will be fine!"

Staci rolls her eyes and half-sighs. She didn't have the strength for a full one. The irony of that last statement wasn't lost on her. She gets choked up, overwhelmed with a deep sense of soul crushing rejection, thinking how he was the one always distancing himself from her! He always went on and on. Lots of talk but little true action. Danny, oblivious to her sorrowful reflection continues on with his so called game plan.
"The high tide is no threat to us up here, like Tony said. Even with the storm approaching. The water will just flow underneath us. If there's any further inland surge."

He points below and between the narrow gaps of the boardwalk wood.

"The lightning will be grounded by the metal poles above; if any were to strike."

He looks up and eyes row after row of the sky-ride tram support towers, stretching southbound as far as the eye could see.

"So if you really think about it, we're in the perfect spot. Right in the center of all the action! We'll be home free in no time!"

It didn't feel perfect to Staci. She liked excitement and adventure but not if it meant danger and suffering. This was a bit much. It was all too real. Her skin was in the game and she didn't sign up for this when attempting to marry a man for his money. What a world, what a world! They look back towards the lighthouse and marvel at the sand strip's complete submersion. The ocean and bay were now indistinguishable and as one.

"Come on, let's move it or lose it!"

Danny shouts like a military sergeant trying to boost morale. Staci is floored at the arrogant presumption of this impetuous and selfish bastard. The same dude who nearly let her drown only moments prior. Holy hell! She reluctantly abandons her
cozy yet idle three seater, ironically figuring that her best chance at survival, in that moment at least, was in listening to this entitled piece of garbage! The same one she herself was tagging along with for many selfish reasons of her own. It was all beginning to bite her in the butt and there was nothing truly funny about that! She squeezes the tiny, insignificant dish rag with rage as Tony looks on exhausted but determined. He held onto hope, however small, ragged and flinty, that he'd be able to rub off on these two spiritual adolescents. He did realize that they had certain qualities in which he lacked as well, of course, and perhaps the two could even influence him. Well, the good aspects at least! Nobody was perfect and we could all learn from one another's mistakes. Life was too short to make them all by ourselves.

"Only the chaste man and chaste woman are capable of true love." - Saint John Paul II

Chapter 8

They resume trekking southbound, five miles north from the foot of the ravine. After hiking a quarter mile or so along a barren stretch of wood, they walk up to a storefront which appears open for business.

"Let's see if someone in here can help us!"

Staci pleads as she bends over to rub her feet. It appears to be a seedy, run-down strip joint. Danny obliges without hesitation.
"Fine by me!"

Tony peaks in and pretends to care less either way but he was more than happy to take a look as well. As they walk in the first thing they notice is a single woman sitting on a plastic chair facing a small stage surrounded by cheap strobe lighting. Brown splotches are on the ceiling. A dusty bar to their right has a small thirteen inch black and white television mounted above it in the top right corner, muted, and broadcasting out a closed captioned Spanish soap opera. A pinball machine with cracked glass sits below and to the left with a dozen or so plastic red cups, filled with cigarette butts and ashes, lined across the out of order amusement. A neon sign on the center of the wall reading Schlitz flickers barely while flashing lights from a 1950's style jukebox in the far left corner are bright and inviting. The lone woman seated on the fold out chair facing the stage appears to be the only occupant in the entire establishment.
Tony cautiously approaches, hoping that she could be of some assistance.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. Do you work here?"

She slowly turns around and looks up with a vacant stare. She appears to be in her late seventies. Sitting in the shadow of death patiently waiting for her name to be called? Just then, a shadow emerges in front of her against the wall above the stage. A voice echoes.

"No, that would be me!"

Tony's heart drops. He swings around and there a second woman stood, between him and his friends. A spring chicken compared to the other one. Only in her mid fifties. Her getup and act, however, reflected a woman who thought she was much younger, lacking any sort of modesty or restraint. A red, bedazzled g-string and matching sequin bikini top went right along with her 'tude. She was quite the looker. At least in her mind! Her leathery, sunburnt skin gave her face an even more aged appearance which looked neither tired or drawn from warm nurturement but rather ripe and pickled from countless years of hard partying. Her loose stomach had stretch marks cutting through wrinkled, faded tattoos including one of her childhood hero, Madonna. Her look was neither very flattering nor age appropriate to say the least!

"Oh, hello there!"
Tony politely greets her, taken aback at such a jarring, unexpected appearance. She eyes him up and down, puffing away at her cig while chomping on her chewing gum like no tomorrow. This baby face looked like a homeless wet dog in desperate need of shelter.

"Little cold for a swim?"

The bedazzled woman remarks sarcastically. They stand there in utter silence. She senses their seriousness and becomes more forceful and direct.

"What are ya'll drinking?"

She asks authoritatively before taking another deep drag of her smoke while sauntering over to the bar. They follow behind and sit down on the bar stools. Tony leans over assertively.

"Let me ask you a question."

She stares at him with slight contempt at his presumption. He softens his tone.

"If you don't mind..."

She continues eyeing him stone-faced. He pauses nervously to clear his throat.

"I’m sorry, excuse me...Ma'am."

Her forehead rises slightly which gave the impression that she did mind but would play along anyway. He continues.
"This peninsula. Is there any other way off? I mean other than those cliff steps miles away?"

Staring vacantly into space, she responds as thoughtfully and seductively as she imagines.

"That's the only way to get on...

She licks her cigarette and circles it around her lips.

"And off, sugar."

She winks and grins while putting the butt of her smoke into the ashtray on the bar top.

"That is, unless you have a boat."

She thrusts her body back and forth, mimicking paddling a boat. Staci’s eyes widen.

“That's it! A boat!"

A newfound hope overcomes her at the thought of such a possibility.

"Are there any?"

The woman snaps out of her cradle rocking fantasy and does a poor job of hiding her contempt at this menacing mynx stepping onto mama's turf. She puts another piece of gum into her mouth as she stares down Staci hard.

"A few, pussycat. This is the off season, however. Plus with the storm rolling in, ya'll be lucky to find any boats docked at all!"
The woman coughs into Staci's face after taking a deep, slow drag of her smoke.

"What's the rush? The three of ya'll been here a while? Time to go home?"

She spits phlegm into the trash can before wiping her lipstick caked mouth with a leathery hand filled with gaudy rings.

"Excuse me."

She grabs a full bottle of bottom shelf liquor off the nearly empty and barren bar shelf behind her. It looks like whisky.

Tony replies firmly.

"No, we just got here but, well, you know, with the storm coming in and everything. It just seems to be getting a bit out of control. We just want to get home, and safe...and all in one piece!"

This kid is such a wuss the woman thinks to herself.

"Relax, kid. Have a drink. This storm is nothing!"

She pours out some whisky into the first of the three shot glasses. It overflows.

"I really need to invest in bigger cups!"

She exclaims clumsily. Her customers were like family and always needed them coming back for more!

"It’s nothing?"
Tony's not the slightest bit convinced at her nonchalant and quite wreckless attitude towards the entire situation.

"Every three years we get storms like this, sugar."

She tops off the third, final shot glass before swigging the remaining portion all for herself.

"So you're saying this is normal?"

Danny asks sarcastically, leaning in, elbows implanted onto the bar.

"Nothing around here is normal, honey. Let's just say for this place, it's not out of the ordinary!"

She throws her head up with a bit of sass and slides the three shot glasses filled to the brim beneath their freshly weathered faces.

"Here, listen, first round's on the house. Sit and relax for a few. Enjoy the show. Our business is pleasure!"

She opens the hinged bar top and clomps ungracefully in her six inch heels over to the jukebox before proceeding to scoop up a handful of quarters from the dusty wall counter. She feeds them into the freshly painted jukebox before methodically paging through the playlist, puffing away at her cig. After much deliberation she narrows her selections down to three and appears quite satisfied with her choices. She stomps over to the stage, winking at Tony followed by a sourpuss face towards Staci and when reaching the center pole, tilts her head back
while wrapping her arms and legs around it. She remains frozen and patiently waits for her cue. The music starts. The strobes start to strobe. She lights up and starts working hard for her money. Hardly! The song wasn't from the Flashdance soundtrack and no water seductively fell on top of her, although from the looks of the brown splotches scattered about, it did give off the impression of significant water damage! The music, rather, was some odd B-side from an obscure 1970's country-Midwestern record. A folksy stoner tune from her angsty and somewhat privileged American adolescence. It was taking her back to those dusty, distant memories. Teenage years of bittersweet, hormonal bliss in that high school parking lot. Staci looks over to Danny with a disappointed face.

"Can we please leave?"

He ignores her completely as he stares entranced at the woman up on stage. In her fog of reckless adolescence, drinking cheap beer and smoking green weed. A rocky mountain high! The attention the cute boys with their thick mustaches and long golden brown hair would give her. The fights that would break out over her youthful bosom. A future opened wide, lying out on a red Dodge Challenger hood under the night stars, spread eagle. Still dazed, confused and intoxicated and still loving every moment of being fawned over. Her audience had greatly diminished over the years, this she knew, yet she was still truly thankful for it all and for all who were left. In her case it was
those three weary travelers along with that old-school feminist sitting all by her lonesome with ancient, greedy eyes. The strobe further reveals her drawn, vampire-like face, absent of motherly warmth.

"This isn't right."

Staci remarks from the gut, noticing a recent poster of an aging Madonna behind the shameless bartender now dancing up on stage. The woman in the plastic chair below on her throne with the illusion of control and stubbornly set in her selfish ways was in many ways the matriarch. The younger woman, relatively speaking of course, would do nearly anything to entertain her. This downward spiral of the flesh not only paid the bills but was also so edgy and rebellious to boot. Stick it to the man! Two more casualties in the sinking ship known as sex positive feminism. Heck, any movement without solid rock principles inevitably headed in the wrong direction. Hell! There was truly nothing new under the sun. The woman onstage exposes her saggy breasts and Staci nearly falls off of her stool. The glory days of her youth were still being relived in her mind and that was good enough for her. Just happy to be alive. These abominations with penises always got what they wanted and then never wanted it again. These two waves of feminists had to stick close together to bring imbalance back to the force. Ball breaking sisterhood. Viva la feminism! Vagina's rule!

"You're both probably poisoned!"

Staci snickers after watching Danny and Tony take their shots.
"How freaking great is this?"

Danny remarks while scratching his crotch. Tony shakes his head in utter disbelief.

"Great? You are disturbed man!"

Danny chuckles.

"You love it! And to just think that when we get home and tell everyone about this place, no one will believe us!"

"Not sure if we should be telling anyone!"

Tony remarks, quite ashamed and self aware. Staci’s had enough.

"I'm serious, let's go. I'm gonna throw up!"

Danny grows defensive.

"Wait a minute, Stay! You have absolutely zero patience. Let's just re-gather ourselves and figure out a game plan. Give your feet, and mouth a rest, woman!"

Staci’s eyes grow deranged. He softens his tone.

"Five more minutes, babe!"

He strokes her lips with his slimy hand.

"Don't touch me!"

She swipes it off her and quickly glances over to that sad, exploited stripper up on stage. She passes on her shot as well. She then glances down to that even sadder, and even older
woman sitting in the chair below the one up on stage. The creepy B-side from the 1970's record bridges into a strange Moog solo with one note being played methodically at a time. Along with the artificial strobe shutter it was all starting to pierce Staci's skull. She felt a massive headache coming on and now sensed, quite vividly the stench of rot, mold and dysfunction lingering. Everything was mutating into something intolerable, pathetic and within each and every moment. Her heart grows heavy. The song fades out. The woman steps down from the stage. The woman in the chair claps with great anticipation. A sexually explicit gangsta rap song from the late 1980's fades in. The two smile rebelliously. Their crotches grow closer. Staci throws her crusty earbuds to the floor and hotfoots it towards the exit.

"It’s time to get the hell out of here!"

The whole scene was quite chastising to her senses to say the least!

"Let no one flatter themselves. Each person is Satan." - Saint Augustine

Chapter 9

Danny and Tony look at each other and figure it's best not to push one's luck. Just as they're getting up, however, an exotic young women walks out from the back wearing a black two
piece, covered over with a sheer white top. Her large, pillowy pail breasts are barely contained and her full lips covered in red lipstick contrasted sharply with her milky white skin. Her stocky, soft build had much more cellulite than there should be for a woman her age, barely twenty, and a bit of a loose stomach fat also hung over her bikini bottom. A large tattoo of a fallen angel imprinted onto her lower back severely lacked artistry to say the least! She approaches Tony with a seductive gate, gazing with dark eyes.

“Lap dance?”

She asks with a heavy and almost unrecognizable accent. Now uninhibited due to the whisky poured out for him by that bartender, and apparently now stripper, he humbly obliges without hesitation.

"Okay!"

Danny looks over wondering if he had heard correctly. Once realizing that he did, gives an uproarious clap of approval. Staci turns around in shocked silence right before reaching the exit. Tony stands up and looks over to her apologetic.

"Just give me five minutes, Stay!"

He pleads, woozy with eyes half shut. She takes a deep breath, huffs and reluctantly walks back to her bar stool signaling for him to go.

"I have such an effin' headache."
She murmurs under her breathe as she sits back down, eyeing him from the corner of her eye. The harlot pulls Tony away towards the back as Danny hoots and hollers.

"You go, you animal!"

Staci smacks his arm.

"Don't encourage him, a*shole!"

They enter a walk in closet which doubles as a private couch room the young woman immediately pushes him down onto the burgundy colored love seat. It creaks as he sinks in.

"That will be twenty dollars."

She whispers quietly. He urgently digs into his cargo shorts pocket to fish out his wallet, soon handing her over a twenty with shaky hands. She remains seductively stone-faced as she
puts the crumpled bill into her sequined rhinestone pocketbook placed on the table to Tony's left. She leans closer. Her shadow forms over him.

"Are you from around here?"

He asks nervously with heart racing. She remains silent and removes her sheer top, eyes still fixed on his.

"Do you speak English?"

He continues probing as she picks up a bottle of body oil and rubs it all over her stomach and chest.

"Little."

She places the bottle down and unstraps her bikini top before scratching her lower back. Flakes of dry red skin float down to the floor. She then flips a switch on the wall, turning on a black light. The gangsta rap song fades out and soon the next one fades in. It pipes through the tinny speaker in the corner surrounded by cobwebs. She lowers herself onto his lap and begins grinding back and forth to the sexy and repetitive trance song from the 1990's. Any shame he may have felt only moments prior has now turned into arousal.

"You're very beautiful!"

He yells confidently.

"Dank you!"

She smiles loosely, revealing stained, crooked teeth glowing from the black light.
"What is this place?"
Tony asks roughly through labored breathing.
"Dis place?"
She looks around and observes the coarsened sandpaper walls.
"It's Rusty Clam!"
She chuckles while continuing her grind.
"No, I mean the boardwalk. This penis, I mean peninsula."
Tony laughs at his Freudian slip. Almost immediately, however, he grows annoyed. He and this beautiful yet shallow flesh vessel of a woman could never blossom into anything true or significant! She pauses for a moment and turns her head slightly left and looks at him with confused doe eyes. Something wasn't translating. Her English was broken just as badly as her home apparently. She quickly brushes it off and goes back to what she knew best. Tony continues on with his thought.
"Everything just seems off."
Her gaze projected a complete confidence in the power she wielded over men like him. Poor schmucks who lacked the fortitude to be true providers but took no issue with objectifying women when the selfish need was aroused so to speak. She knew the game. This wasn't her first rodeo after all. She had responsibilities and children to feed for Christ's sake! A job like this paid better than anything she could ever hope to
find back over in her broken down motherland. Most of the women back home were treated like little more than third rate prostitutes anyway. At least here in America she could act like one in the open and get paid handsomely for it to boot. She was nobody's fool. At least in her mind. She still held a lot of subconscious bitterness and resentment towards her father, of course. Maybe one day she'd be able to cross that bridge and forgive him. But today was not that day. She begins massaging creepy Tony's thigh. His eyes light up in anticipation. She whispers into his ear. He listens intently. Ready for the climax.

"You're all going to die."

Tony's pleasure grin quickly retracts.

“Wait, what?”

She removes her hand from his crotch area, smiling with conflicted emotions.

"Did you just say we're all going to die?"

She remains silent and at peace with her words. Tony, on the other hand, was growing more paranoid and unsettled by the moment.

"What are you talking about, woman? Is that some kind joke or something?"

She responds firmly and almost apologetically in passable English.
"You can't escape. None of you can. I wish that you could but it's hopeless."

She reaches over to her purse for a cigarette as Tony remains frozen in fear.

"At this point they know you're here. You chose this destination. What's started must always be finished."

She lights her cigarette and takes a deep drag before blowing the smoke into his face. He bats it away, coughing violently.

"Who are they? Started? Finished! What the hell are you talking about, devil woman! This whole trip wasn't even my idea!"

Tony shoves her off his lap. She nearly falls to the floor. She's able to regain her balance, barely, and stands up straight wobbling in her six inch heels. More flakes of dry red skin fall off as she puts her black top back on as the sexy and repetitive song fades out.

“Would you like another one?”

She asks directly. It was a business after all!

"Are you crazy!"

Tony fires back overcome with despair, desperate desire to get to the bottom of what killed his carnal lust. The entire vibe was completely dead for Christ's sake! The sad-faced, young and confused mother with many un-reconciled father issues gathers up all of her material belongings.
"You seem like such nice people. You should never have come here. I'm so sorry."

She clings to her purse, veiled underneath her sheer top, held loosely, and quietly departs. Tony jumps to his feet and scans the room with great paranoia. He storms out and bee-lines it back to the bar.

"How was it you creepy maniac!"

Danny inquires like a sleazy sailor. Tony's face appears pale and drawn.

"What's the matter bro, the herpes kicking in already?"

Danny remarks, chuckling curtly. Tony paces for a minute as the wheels continue to spin slowly in his mind. He ignores Danny's droll half-wit and marches back to the back to find the dancer and interrogate her further. He looks in every direction but she's nowhere to be found. He peaks into the couch room and notices a torn up People magazine on the table. Something he must have overlooked only moments prior whileed consumed in lust. He walks over and picks it up cautiously. A clue, perhaps? He scans the cover with fearful eyes, noticing a celebrity couple with a page tear font separating them. The headline reads;

'Bitter Custody Battle Breaks Up The Beaverbills of Beverly Hills!'

In the corner of the page is a nostalgic Polaroid of two young children, broken up with sad faces. The torn up cover has a story covering a torn up family and when Tony opens it up,
notices many pages are torn out. No clue here! Not wanting to waste any more time chasing unicorns he chucks the clueless and irrelevant magazine back into the corner. It falls behind the crusty loveseat breaking up dusty cobwebs in the process. He stomps back out to the front with a renewed consuming sense of urgency. He signals for that middle aged bartender, stripper, or whatever the hell she was to help him get to the bottom of this deeply troubling concern, spinning through his mind.

"Where'd she go! The stripper! I mean dancer. The one I was just with less than five minutes ago!"

The bartender, stripper, aka dancer ignores him completely while keeping her eyes fixed on the Spanish soap opera. She reads the closed captioning with glee, resting her elbows on the bar counter.
Apparently on break from her stage work and following the highly entertaining exploits of so many sad and scorned lovers. Tony flails his arms in a desperation. This time she looks over, albeit reluctantly. Slightly annoyed that someone has so rudely interrupted her viewing pleasure but quickly gets over it, however, and thoughtfully, and seductively, as she can imagine, responds.

"Fantasia? Probably went home on break!"

She informs him while sipping her tequila on the rocks.

"Kids to feed. Son of bitch father. Took off with Bambi last week."

She takes a drag from her smoke.

"Her eldest daughter from a previous engagement!"

Tony responds urgently.

"Where does she live?"

The woman thinks it over for a moment.

"That's a good question, my dear!"

She looks into space with a vacant gaze before putting her hand near her throat, coughing and hiccuping.

"Excuse me, darling. Hell, if I know! Fantasia and I have a strictly professional working relationship around these parts. We don't discuss the more intimate and personal details of our lives in this establishment. Unbecoming of a woman!"
She cackles while adjusting her bedazzled g-string, flopping her rogue breast back into place.
"There’s too much drama around here! Everyone can go #%#@ themselves for all I care!"

She responds a bit raw and uncensored. As she finishes off her tequila on the rocks her eyes sparkle at the handsome young Latin man seducing a married woman away from her more straight laced but boring accountant husband. If only she could be that woman. Oh, how she fantasized! She pours herself another round of Jorge Cure-whore-hoe tequila and involuntary rips out a huge fart.

"Okay well, thank you for everything, Ma'am!"

Tony looks down at the refilled shot glass and prudently passes. He then takes out his wallet and throws some singles down before signaling to the others. Time to say adeui! Staci is more than happy to oblige but Danny doesn't seem to want to budge.

"Is everything okay, man? You sure you don't want to stay for just one more drink?"

Danny asks loosely. Staci grows furious. Her patience was shot!
"Let's go! And now! Life isn't one big (bleeping) joke, Danny!"

Tony doubles down on her scorn.
"Listen to your woman for a change! Stop being such a selfish son of a bitch!"
Tony storms out. Staci quickly follows. Danny just casually shrugs it off and downs Tony's shot. He sighs and slowly rises from his stool. In no rush for anything or anyone, apparently. He throws one single onto the bar and a quarter falls out.

"I would just like to thank you for all of your wonderful service, Ma'am!"

He quickly grabs the quarter and throws it back into his pocket.

"It's been a great pleasure!"

The woman forces an extra wide fake smile, revealing wicked crow's feet.

"Come back anytime, sugar. Mama will always take care of you, and the rest of her darlings!"

Then with hard, sad eyes she looks back up to her trashy soap opera. Danny stumbles away with great hesitation. She was cool he thought. Made him feel at home. Her silhouette becomes a misty shadow in the thick smoke as her coughing cackle fades away.

"The cure for anything is saltwater, tears, sweat or the sea."

Chapter 10

The wind has picked up and a slight rain now fell. An eerie whistling sound through the Rusty Clam’s stained window decreases in volume as they head southbound. Dusk was fast approaching. Tony walks swiftly ahead of the pack through the misty fog. Danny runs up and throws his arm over his shoulder.
"You cool, man? What happened in there?"
Tony ignores the interrogation and keeps a laser focus ahead. All of these detours were making everything spiral out of control. Staci looks worried for his sake.

"Is everything alright, Meatball?"
Tony glances back for a brief moment.

"Everything is fine. Stay. Let’s just get home, and all in one piece!"

"That's fine by me!"
After walking for about five minutes Danny grows distressed, putting his hand over his stomach.

"I gotta take a crap!"
Staci looks over in disbelief.

"I'm serious!"
He responds as if he could read her mind through her half Italian yet fully expressive face.

"Can't you just hold it?"
His poker face was extremely hard to read at times even when attempting to express sincerity. Staci was never sure. Such an emotionally stunted jackass! Danny pleads.

"No, I really can't. I'm really about to crap my pants!"
"Then crap your pants! We have no more time to get sidetracked. The three of us have to stick close together. Man up!"

Tony chimes in unsympathetically. Danny's stomach woes appear to grow within each and every step. Luckily for him they soon reach another establishment open for business.

"I'm going to run in here real quick!"

He waddle runs over.

"I promise!"

"Hurry the hell up ya' son of a bitch!"

Staci yells. Tony scopes out the perimeter to make sure their surroundings were safe. Each time they stopped and lingered it made him even more paranoid then he already was. Especially after that sweet lap dance had gone sour! Danny runs up to a man sitting behind the checkout counter.

"Bathroom!"

The man, with eyes fixed deep in a Hustler magazine chewing away at tobacco slowly looks up, revealing a severely weathered face. Danny examines his thick grey mustache with crumbs imbedded and his strong, wide chin bone. He notices one large mole on his left cheek with several gnarly hairs growing out of it. A faded Schlitz baseball cap atop his aging, leathery face, pickled due to countless years of hard drinking intermingled with hard laboring under the sun, added to the grizzled appearance. An old school working class man of
Bavarian Germanic roots stubbornly set in his ways? Who knew! Either way, he looks visibly pissed. Someone has so rudely interrupted his most urgent and important reading session. In a deep, booming smoker's voice he curtly asks Danny his intentions.

“Do you planning on buying something, son?”

Danny scans his eyes around the store, paying little mind to all of the scattered mannequins lying about.

"Sure thing, pops!"

He replies disingenuously.

“Go back and make a left.”

The old man gruffly mutters just as Staci and Tony walk in.

"Hang tight. Quick! I promise!"

Danny reassures them as he waddle runs over to the john. Staci’s face expressed a profound desire to strangle the bastard. Tony immediately notices the strange assortment of mannequins lined in and around the filthy store and tries his darndest to figure out what the heck was going on in here. Some of the mannequins had happy facial expressions while other look disinterested. Some look quite distressed. Many had wigs on. Some didn't. Most seemed female or androgynous and some wore disco leisure suits while others wore country sundresses. Many were naked and displayed in odd postures atop cracked wooden pallets. The incident in the couch room flashes
into Tony's mind for a brief moment. He remains poised for Staci's sake. What on earth was going on in here? Her concerns echo his almost to the tee! This place sure was creepy! One of the objectified mannequins with a torn sundress and exposed breast vacantly stares up at her. A torn up disco leisure suit beneath her foot in a puddle of pinkish water shakes Staci to her core. She eyes Tony, signaling for them to leave. To hell with Danny! Let him flush himself down the toilet for all she cared at this point. Tony makes small talk with the man behind the counter to help ease the tension crawling.

“Excuse me, sir. But what kind of store is this?”

He asks politely. The man's mood perks when noticing the beautiful young woman now gracing his presence.

“We sell wigs!"

He proclaims proudly and signals their attention over to a beehive bop wig resting atop a glass shelf near his magazine rack. This answer doesn't relieve Tony in the slightest!

“What’s up with all the mannequins?”
"You need them to show off all the hair pieces!"

The man states matter of factly, chuckling curtly. This young man sure wasn't the brightest bulb in the batch! Meanwhile back in the bathroom, Danny puts a layer of toilet paper over the toilet rim and looks around. Everything is moldy and dank. He involuntarily takes a deep whiff and gags. Staci and Tony browse awkwardly trying to pass the time as painlessly as possible.

“We do sell the mannequins too by the way!”

The man proclaims excitedly. Tony's eyebrow raises.

"Who buys mannequins?"

“The retail shops on the boardwalk. To display their latest fashions!"

The man informs him with great confidence. Staci can sense his leering from the corner of her eye which only unsettles her further. She pretends not to notice and continues browsing; albeit poorly. Danny slowly lifts himself up from the toilet seat
with his pants down to his ankles and shuffles over to the sink. He uses his elbow to turn on the faucet.

"Are any of them still open? This place seems nearly deserted."

Tony responds contentiously. He sensed this man was bluffing and had ulterior motives up his sleeve.

"Not all of them!"

The man retorts aggressively and stands, eyes locked on Staci's flesh. Danny flushes. The toilet becomes clogged and soon brown tissue water teeters on the brim. He lets out a guttural groan. The man slowly approaches.

"Tell me something, gorgeous? You look young. Ever done any modeling?"

Staci gulps. Her eyes dart towards Tony. He gulps as well. He's no help! She looks left. A naked and contorted mannequin stares back with a devilish grin.

"Nope. No modeling for me."

Staci responds almost robotically. Danny plunges the toilet. The water splashes onto his leg. He methodically thrusts the plunger up and down until the clog is cleared. The water gets sucked into the vortex and the relief on his face is palpable.

"Oh come on. I don't believe you! A beautiful, young woman like yourself? Never done any modeling? You're being too modest! Perhaps you need an older, more mature gentleman to show you the ropes."
He licks his rotted tooth and spits tobacco into an empty applesauce jar held in his left hand. Tony's had enough. He steps between Staci and this over-stepper.

"Listen, pops! She said she wasn't interested!"

Staci exhales with a huge sigh of relief.

"Besides, she's already taken!"

He grabs her arm and pulls her close to his side.

"She's with someone more age appropriate!"

He gives her a big wet kiss. She goes right along. Tongue even!

"I love you, Tony!"

She overacts and commits herself to the moment. Tony's heart melts. Oh, how he wished it were true! The man chuckles hardly and spits some more chew into the jar before staring hard into Tony's bastard face. Tony and Staci freeze in terror before slowly turning back towards the gruff man, and with the humble hopes that he wouldn't be cutting them up for his chew! He relaxes and appears at ease much to their relief. He then nods ever so slightly with a humble, self-effacing grin.

"Okay, whatever you say, brother. She's all yours!"

He pats Tony firmly on the shoulder as his eyes soften. He struts back over to the checkout counter goofy footed while scratching his face. Tony notices the greasy paw print the man was gracious enough to leave behind as a souvenir of affection, and on his brand new t-shirt no less, but wisely lets it go. Danny
wipes the sweat off his brow and pulls up his pants, flushing once more for posterity before reaching for the exit handle. Crusty goo! His hand recoils. He reaches for some toilet paper and rolls it around his fist. After exiting the John, he flicks the paper off his hand and onto the floor, casually strolling past the man behind the counter, once again settled at his post, face deep into his Hustler. Danny trips over a broken wooden pallet and his foot accidentally snaps off a sharp piece of wood. It splinters in Staci's direction.

“Alright, I'm all set. Let's go, babe!”

He gives her a big kiss on the lips and yanks her out of the store. Tony stands alone for a brief moment, and just shrugs at the man behind the counter before hot-footing it right behind them!

"I thought you said ya'll were gonna buy something!"

The man screams. He shakes his head with great amusement while muttering something unintelligible under his breathe. He then resumes his chew and continues flipping through page after page of one of his prized 'possessions'.

"Women!"

One of the colored mannequins, lying lifeless on the floor and with a 1970's style afro, stares at him with scorn. His curt chuckle fades into oblivion.

"We have to get the hell out of here!"
Staci screams on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Will you just relax!"

Danny responds with a lighter tone, feeling quite refreshed after taking that massive poop. His domineering, controlling nature now wore a smile!

"Let's go to the bay and find a boat! It's only a few blocks west. I need to get home! And take a shower!"

Staci screams into his phony face.

“You heard what that lady said! There aren’t going to be any boats!”

Staci’s had enough. She starts to literally see red and is about to strangle this impetuous bastard, when just then, a huge wind gust knocks her to her knees. While down, she notices a wave roll underneath the boardwalk. Her heart sinks. Danny yanks her up and begins to bark.

“We stay here on the boardwalk! We have to stay safe on high ground!”

He stares vindictively and with a sense of toxic authority.

"Stay!"

A single teardrop rolls down her cheek and through a narrow gap between the wood. Into the foamy saltwater rush-up below.
"All stand equal at the foot of the cross."

Chapter 11

The dusk has turned to darkness. The fog has thickened, limiting their visibility to less than several yards in any direction. Beyond that a white out. The rain is now coming down steady and in sideways sheets with the temperature quickly dropping. Staci rubs her arms in an attempt to regain some warmth.

“This all just seems like a bad dream. I want my mommy."

They march onward.

Soon a woman appears out of the mist, approaching from the front. They freeze for a moment but quickly realize that she
poses no threat. A night walker. And one in really bad shape at that. Emaciated with thin, veiny limbs and a sad, gaunt face. “Any of you creeps want to have some fun?”

She looks at Staci.

“That includes women too, honey!”

Staci's mind races with anger and disgust. Be gone peasant whore! She didn't pity this poor woman, she despised her. She could never cry for her the way she cried for herself. She was a only caricature and not real. Well, at least in Staci's mind. In a similar way Danny pitied himself and looked at Staci as someone who wasn't real either and therefore didn't merit any pity from him. So much evil rationalization across the board and all to assuage so many self-centered, all consuming and quite dulled consciences. Tony, on the other hand was being overwhelmed with genuine compassion. He tried to look at everyone through this lense. It helped remind him of the universality of suffering and got him out of his own pity party due his own recent loss. Yeah, it sucked big time but there were plenty of other things happening in the world that sucked big time as well. This sad and lonely prostitute roaming about could surely attest to that! Tony remembered the time that he was left all alone by those who supposedly loved him and how unexpected was the betrayal. How crummy it made him feel. It wasn't right when it happened to him and it sure wasn't right for this prostitute, regardless of how many poor choices led her to the current situation she faced. He truly felt bad for her and
from the bottom of his heart. He humbly refuses while gazing into her eyes with soft, merciful one's of his own.

"Thank you, Mad'am. But we're okay."

“Lame suckers!"

She cackles and huffs before strutting past them, nose up.

"You fools aren’t my type anyway. Ha!"

She fades back into the white mist as the three look at each other dumfounded.

"Let's just keep walking."

Tony grumbles while shaking his head at the seeming futility of it all. After hiking another third of a mile, faint music is heard. Emerging from the fog and sitting underneath a wooden canopy sat a woman in a wheelchair with a specialized harness wrapped around her armless and legless body screwed into a plate above her chest. She had a sad, lonesome song and was determined to play it come hell or high water and whether anyone listened or not, or so it appeared! She was abandoned a long time ago and her music took her to a better place. As she plays one note at a time with her nose, getting pounded by the sideways rain she happily cuts short her bizarre carnival melody when noticing the three approach from the corner of her eye. She proceeds to extend her nose and by extension hospitality in their direction.

“Hey there, sugars."
She speaks softly with a nurturing warmth.
"You got any special requests?"
Tony begins to walk over but Danny yanks him back.
"We have no time for any of this nonsense!"
It seemed Danny was now the one focused on the straight and narrow when anything on the peripheral didn't suit his selfish interest. She was worthless in his mind and therefore a complete waste of time. Staci reluctantly agrees even though she was ashamed to admit it. Everyone has their own problems she figured and what could they do for her? They continue to walk right past her, avoiding eye contact as Tony looks down disheartened. He witnesses the rain drop on row after row of the planked wood. This isn't right. He turns back around and screams.
"We're okay! But thank you. I love your music by the way! Keep up the great work!"
He runs over and gives her the most heartfelt hug this side of the Atlantic. And then a big smooch on the cheek. His true act of affection has her flying over the moon. She wishes that she could hug him, but since she had no arms or legs, the best she's able to do is bless him, and from the bottom of her heart.
"Walk by faith! Not by sight, my child! God bless you!"
She shouts with unfathomable goodwill. A more lively and upbeat tune is soon heard as the sideways rain relents. A small
rose to the right of a dying one breaks through the wood and angles towards the sea. While marching forward, Tony feels much better about himself. A young man leaning against the railing next to his bicycle soon emerges from the fog. His effeminate high cheekbones and beard stubble along with a yamica atop a large, un-proportioned head, tilting slightly right above narrow shoulders gave him a traditional, domesticated and masculine appearance. He looked greatly concerned and distressed about many things, countless really, but the rain pelting down on top of his head didn't appear to be one of them!

“Look, a bike!"

Tony exclaims while wondering.

"Maybe there’s an open bike shop?"

“Why don’t you go ask him? Become friends? Shave each other’s back hair?”

Tony ignores Danny's droll half-wit and goofy foots it over towards the boy and his bike. He withdraws, distrusting the intruder's intent. Tony senses his skittishness and tries to make small talk. To let him know that he truly meant no harm.

“It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

Tony calmly reassures the boy who doesn't appear convinced. He remembers that bully who not too long ago came over and tried to take advantage of his weakness. He didn't like that. Not
one bit. It didn't make him feel good or right. It took away his manhood.

"Listen, you can trust me. I'm not here to hurt you."

His true benevolence did have an ulterior motive, however. He was trying to find out if the boy knew where more bikes could be found. "It's a really nice bike. Did you get it in a shop on the boardwalk?"

The boy warms up to the fraternal benevolence. This big man didn't want anything ugly from him. Nothing disgraceful. Nothing that took away his manhood. He was just an honest business man. Fatherly. Trustworthy. Safe! He wanted to talk about bikes. Maybe he would trade me that pretty girl for my bike. Business sure could be fun! Maybe he will want to play catch with me as well. The boy thought of such things and smiled. Women, sports, and dads! Life could be good. But young man didn't have old man growing up. No father figure to play catch with. This made young man feel bad. Other men would come by and make him feel worse. Make him pull down his pants. He didn't like that. Not one bit. Old man would never do such a thing. If he had one. Young man sighs. Old man father dad would never make him feel so ashamed, unlike a beloved one. Tony was almost like an old man father dad. Or maybe like young man's brother's son. He would pull down my pants and make me feel less like a father or son. Young man didn't like that. Not one bit. Never had and never will. He forgave his selfish intruders but could never forget. They would get what was coming to them.
Young man giggles. Just then, Danny storms over and places his hand aggressively on the boy's shoulder.

"Hey buddy! What's up? Nice bike!"

The young man freaks out.

"Get away from me! You big homo!"

He hops onto his banana seat and peddles north. He will take no more abuse from anyone, anyhow! No matter how big, strong and attractive!

"What? What did I do?"

Danny, taken aback, glances at Staci who just shrugs.

"I don't know. You just have a certain way with people, I guess."

"But you still love me right, babe?"

He gropes her mindlessly.

"Right."

Staci murmurs faintly.

"Just forget it. Come on. We can't stand in one place for too long. We have to keep moving. It seems like we're surrounded by spiritual quicksand in every freaking direction!"

Tony remarks with great trepidation as he observes the boardwalk from every angle. He was becoming increasingly annoyed at Danny's mindless trespassing for Pete's sake! After trekking south for another quarter of a mile, an orange three-
seat bicycle emerges. It's chained to a bench near the railing underneath another wooden awning. They run over.

“I think our luck is turning!”

Danny shouts, aggressively stroking the bike.

“We can’t take that! It’s not ours. Stealing is a sin, Danny!”

Staci responds hysterically and close to delirium.

"What? Look at you! Look at us!"

Danny grows mocking.

"You can barely walk! And look at this weather! Would you rather we die?"

"I don't want to die, Danny. But I don't want to steal either."

Staci retorts ever more faintly, overcome with severe lightheadedness and on the brink of passing out. This journey was starting to take a tremendous toll, sinking her low into the deep recesses of her heart and to places in which she didn't even know existed. She began to sense that survival at any cost could indeed be too costly. What good was it to gain the world and lose your soul in the process!?

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Danny. My mother always told me that. I don't know why I never listened to her. Look at where it has gotten me!"

She scopes out the neglected boardwalk and looks into Danny's cruel, manipulative face.
"This place has broken me down. But just because I'm broke doesn't mean I get to break down others. It's not who I am or who I ever want to become. I'd rather die!"

She breathes heavily, looking increasingly pale and gaunt.

“You've lost your mind!”

Danny screams in a high pitched, nasal whine. It pierces her skull. She cringes.

"And since when did you become so moral, Miss Five Finger Discount!"

Staci doesn't believe he's going there. This son of a bitch truly knows no boundaries! She regains a bit of backbone and musters up all of the energy she had left in defending against his nasty judgments which often came fast and furious. Eyes of
scorn didn't take much effort and jagged ice crystals spontaneously emerge behind her quickly shrinking retinas.

"Forgive them father. They know not what they do." ~ Jesus

Chapter 12

“Stealing clothes from a store and stealing someone’s bike are two different things, Danny!"

“A thief is still a thief!”

He fires back. Staci inhales and exhales deeply. No use fighting fire with fire. Despite or maybe because of all of the inner turmoil she was currently going through it finally dawned on her that perhaps she didn't want to continue sinking further down to his level. She responds as thoughtfully and tactfully as possible.

"That doesn't mean one should keep on thieving, you stupid son of a bitch!" She was trying! She grows nauseous and puts her hand over her stomach. "Look, we've all made mistakes, but that doesn't mean we should keep making the same ones over and over again. What sense does that make? We need to learn from our mistakes not repeat them. We're only human after all and can't keep beating ourselves up over the past but at the same time we can't move forward until we confront it truthfully in the first place. Denial is what allows us
to keep walking along this same path over and over, and over again. IN the first place! It's madness, I say!"

Staci looks down at the splintered wood rotting from within.

"Perhaps we can get back on the right path. Feeling sorry and ashamed for our selfish ways is the first step. We can then let it go and start making better choices in the first place!"

She takes a deep breathe and continues on with her heartfelt rationalization.

"Regardless of one's position in life and at any given moment. If you're still breathing you can choose to change for good. That's true progress!"

She gasps for air and rubs her sore legs in agony. It was all so freaking simple; and painful! Especially for a young and spiritually immature woman like herself. As with many things in life, things were often easier said than done. There was to still much for each one of them to witness along this beaten down path before these deep truths had any hope of taking root for good, but Staci's complete earnestness in that moment had taken a tremendous weight off her shoulders. She felt much better about herself even if she did want to drop dead from exhaustion! Her conscience was clear and she was at peace. A tremendous gift for the time being. Danny isn't swallowing any of it, of course, and counters with great contempt.

“What choices do we really have, Stay?"
He shoots his left hand out from the awning, palm up and lets the hard rain pelt down onto his exposed flesh.

"Sink or swim? Live or die! It's a cold and cruel world out there, baby!"

Spit flies. Staci puts her head down and folds her arms. What a stubborn prick. Always needing to get the last word. He continues to heartlessly reason everything away.

"Survival is my choice, darling!"

He looks at his calloused hand and grows content. Staci looks up defiantly and goes on the offensive. So much perpetual adolescence divorced from the heart cannot be left unchallenged. Not anymore! A fire ignites in her belly. She unfolds her arms and puts her hand over her stomach once more. Her face begins glowing with a nurturing warmth.

"Is survival at any cost dependent on wronging others?"

Danny eyes her cockeyed with cruelty oozing out of every pour. Staci, meanwhile continues earnestly defending her true beliefs with a humble yet fierce spirit.

"If my only choice in survival means that I have to hurt someone else in the process, then it's not right and I choose to not to survive!"

Staci feels defeated yet at peace after speaking those heartfelt and well-reasoned words. She walks out into the rain with her head up and soaks it all in. She could live and die with her
choices in that very moment. It was all good. She felt free and at home. Danny grabs her by the arm and yanks her back. Tony remains silent, eyeing Danny bitterly with a clenched fist and just hoping that this dark cloud would soon pass. And in one way or another. Danny barks back like a big dick.

"I just want to get off of this boardwalk alive, Staci!"

"Yeah, with or without me!"

She screams, getting choked up. He pauses for a moment and chuckles with a shameful self awareness.

"Oh, come on! That's not true! Stealing this stupid looking bike is harmless enough. It's a freaking three-seater for crying out loud. I mean talk about Divine Providence! There's enough room on it for all of us!"

Staci laughs.

"I thought you said you didn't believe in God, Danny!"

He pauses again and thinks it over before growing ever more defensive.

"Just let me finish. Jesus Christ, woman! You guys really are so God-damned mouthy sometimes!"

He eyes her with patronizing scorn.

"Whether He exists, or not is irrelevant. My point being is that your feet are mangled and it's raining like cats and dogs out here. It just seems like a bad time to be worrying about some
phantom ghost creeping around on this God forsaken boardwalk in the first place. It makes no sense!"

Staci quickly counters.

"Love doesn't make any sense, Danny! You're so stubborn and thickheaded. But it is what it is. Whether you believe it or not! Love exists! Just like you're a selfish bastard. It's true! Whether you believe it or not. Where do you think your reasoning comes from in the first place? I bet you think Danny just spontaneously combusted and created himself, and all of his self-centered and 'brilliant' ideas, which of have no other source of inspiration other than sprouting like weeds, miraculously mind you, out of that so called idiotic brain of yours! Because the more I think about it, for someone who claims to be so thoughtful and intelligent, you really are a thoughtless piece of crap. No offense! The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of. Lover! Phony! Wake the hell up, you insensitive, heartless hyena!"

It must be another flare up in the monthly cycle. Eggshells. Kids gloves. Time for some tact and grace, Danny style!

"I don't want to hurt anyone, Stay, but if anyone gets in my way, that’s another story!”

She bursts into laughter.

“What's so funny?”

“You hurt me every day with your words and actions!”
She shouts earnestly as Tony gazes at her with merciful eyes. He silently prayed in his heart that each one of them would come clean with one another, and the sooner the better. Danny thinks over the truth that Staci just spoke, conceding in his mind that perhaps this overly emotional creature known as a woman may indeed have a point. It was hard for his ego to swallow, of course, and he could never give her the humble satisfaction of soberly admitting it to her face, and so he continues on with a defensive jerkiness bordering on narcissistic sociopathy. There was a tinge of subconscious humility in his voice but nothing truly contrite, since that would crucify him and he had little time for any of that nonsense!

"Well, I'm not trying to kill you. I'm just a little selfish, that's all!"

He wasn't going to change, or couldn't. Not for her at least. Deep down he knew, or at least suspected and hoped that she was just as big of a spiritual phony as he. They were both in it for selfish reasons. Take me as I am or leave me. Perhaps that's what made them so distrustful of one another. Staci gazes at Danny with a heavy heart. She walked right into the lion's den in seeking his wealth. It was on her. What she allowed was what would always continue.

"Well, your selfishness is going to kill me. If I let it!"

“Here we go again! We'll discuss it if, I mean when I, I mean WE get off of here alive!"
His patience was wearing thin with such female clinginess. She counters harshly.

“I guess we'll find out!”

Tony takes a deep breath and does the sign of the cross before kissing his crucifix necklace. Danny continues mindlessly reasoning everything away divorced from the truth that everything he did affected her, and for better or worse!

"I'd rather steal this bike and beg for God's forgiveness afterwards. If He even exists in the first place!"

"You may have to eat your words someday, Danny."

Staci counters contritely. Danny glances around and laughs.

"I mean, come on! Look at this place! All of the chaos and needless suffering. What's the point?"

He yanks the bike violently away from the bench. The chain snaps.

"Either way, hop the hell on, lover!"

He stares with disaffected, hateful eyes.

"I did always want to ride one of these things!"

Tony remarks lightheartedly, immediately followed by another sign of the cross. He looks up to the sky painfully.

"Father, forgive me!"

The Sea Mister, I Can Hear The Sea - Daft Punk
Chapter 13

They pedal south underneath the pink sky-tram cable cars, stationary and swinging in the wind. Staci is in the rear, Danny's up front and sandwiched between the two? You guessed it. Good ole' Tony. Staci looks right and marvels at the beauty of the natural beach and then left to the ugly, broken down man-made 'amusements'. Garbage is piled high and in rows. She thought of how judgmental she had been towards that prostitute earlier. Always judging based outward appearances, even if there was some validity to her perceptions as this boardwalk's faded exterior seemed to attest. With that said, the inhabitants were still human and worthy of dignity and respect. No one was perfect. Not even Queen Staci! A sobering yet true revelation if there ever was one. A whiff of rot unsettles her further as a thought re-crosses her mind; Danny's selfishness in many ways reflected her own. The more she thought about it the more the parallels emerged. The argument they just had underneath the awning helped further reveal his true or rather untrue intent towards her. Staci truly loved her mother more than anything else but at the same time feared becoming like her more than anything else! This wasn't the type of world she wanted to live in. The kind where good-hearted moms got walked on and over by unfaithful men of all stripes. Doormats galore! In many ways Staci feared truly opening up to any man. The fallout from a broken home really did a number on her self esteem. She played it safe with men whether fully realizing it or not. She had to be in control. She
didn't truly love Danny but loved the idea of a fairy tale life she believed his family's wealth could offer her. True love was too scary. So fragile. It would only break her heart in the long run anyway. Screw that. Best to just go for the sucker with the bucks! That was the only safe bet she falsely reasoned due to her own unreconciled family issues in the first place. Look at my poor mother! She had little patience for any of that nonsense. To be truly vulnerable and to open your heart to another was to have the very real possibility of it being shattered into a million pieces. No thank you! Just show me the money. But at what cost? Chasing Danny for selfish reasons seemed to be blowing up in her face. It seemed that he was only using her for her body. This made Staci feel like crap. Her selfishness was okay, relatively speaking, since she had severe father issues for crying out loud but to hell with Danny if he didn't truly love the Queen! Who the hell did that selfish bastard think he was? Stupid adolescence ruined everything. Puberty and self-awareness. If only Staci could go back to a state of innocence. Where were all of the humble families? Since she started liking boys all hope was seemingly lost. Perhaps some of the folks on this boardwalk were broken but not defeated, however. Such as that elderly ride attendant who seemed full of joy. Staci was right when thinking twice with that creepy middle-aged creeperton over in that mannequin/wig shop, of course. He obviously wasn't on the up and up. No good could come from sticking around those parts! Staci thinks back to those kind, merciful eyes the sky ride attendant gazed at her with. She
grows disgusted once more but now with herself. She was coming to realize, in hindsight, that she misjudged him based on shallow, exterior surfaces, now fondly recalling how innocent and kind he truly seemed to be. He didn't want to consume her sexually. He was just a harmless, gentle old man. Why did she hold such kindness in contempt? She knew her youth and beauty wouldn't last forever and that scared the crap out of her! Maybe his face was a testament to that, unsettling her vain ego. A sobering reality in which she perhaps wasn't yet ready to face. It seemed like so much work, and not much fun, always being of service to others. A young, beautiful queen seemed the superior path in life! But deep down she knew that just wasn't possible. At least not forever. The ride attendant seemed cheerful with a detached yet sincere, empathetic compassion. That was nothing to be truly afraid of. She smiles. She then thinks about how her Xanax addiction could easily spiral into something out of control. That sad, lonely prostitute roaming about flashes into her mind. Staci frowns. What kind of woman takes that path? Looking in vain for her next thrill. Staci cringes. She must truly hate men after being objectified her whole life. A caring, selfless gentleman with a heart closer to a sponge with room to absorb hers rather than a steely-wooled bottom scraper abrasively rubbing off her just didn't seem to be in the cards for at this juncture in her life. Staci begins to presume that this was the bitter, harsh result of an unholy matrimony of lust, helping create a point of view in this woman that no good men existed anymore. Her poor choices
constantly led her into the den of wolves and away from any chance at settling down with a true provider. Her willing choice to be consumed night after night and year after year marginalized her in the shadows of these selfish takers. Indifferent to anything fragile and delicate beneath her flesh. Such as a heart. She grew spiritually despondent and most of the money she made just went towards more vice anyway, only hastening her demise. A vicious downward spiral of drug abuse and fleeting sexual pleasure leading to ever increasing despair. Staci grows ever more terrified while soberly reflecting on her own lazy choices in life. It was all beginning to truly strike a nerve. She thinks further back to those three women deep in the flesh way down low in the Rusty Clam. She shudders. An everlasting snake in the bush but never reaching true satisfaction. Shame and running but nowhere to hide. They weren't much different than her. There were no ugly women in this fallen world, only lazy ones. A true horror story if there ever was one! Only God knew the whole story, of course, but either way Staci was growing more compassionate not only towards those pitifully selfish women but also herself. The recurring theme of two wrongs never making a right once again spun gently, like tumble dried and fresh cleaned clothes sandwiched between that twilight space of her body and mind. A bittersweet pill to swallow but helped her instinctively understand what true forgiveness really meant. She was caught in sin, and in part due to over-reacting to the sins of her earthly father. In certain ways she was becoming like him. Looking at
others to be used for selfish reasons. In a similiar way Staci's father used Staci's mother, Staci was using Danny. Similarly Danny was using Staci due to his own family skeletons! Staci's mother wasn't off the hook either, of course, since it always takes two to tango. But Staci didn't want to become a pushover like her mom so in many ways overcompensated by seeking to become a heartless tyrant. She'd yet to realize that there was a happy medium between charity and prudence. By allowing herself to feel empathy for those poor prostitutes it opened up a doorway to grace which allowed her to re-discover this eternal truth. In her way and at her pace. She hoped and prayed that God would pour His peace out into the hearts of those bitter women. The ones who had allowed themselves to get walked on and over by so many untrue men through a combination of their own selfish and selfless reasons, and to somehow make something sweet blossom from the bitter. To help them forgive those who so mindlessly objectified them regardless of their free will allowance of it. Sin dulls conscience and a good man would never take advantage of a such compromised, weak-willed women in the first place, regardless of his own carnal lust. Danny's fake smile with dollar signs pops into her mind. She grows disgusted with herself. All of these untrue men with all of their untrue intentions and all of their wicked, all-consuming ways would get their comeuppance. She believed it. This abomination of a boardwalk somehow and in someway attested to that. It was for God to avenge, not her. He would wipe away every tear. He'd better! Maybe money wasn't
everything and maybe wanting to marry Danny for his money made Staci little more than a beautiful yet uppity, lazy, and entitled whore! If she wanted true mercy for her selfishness it was always wise to become less selfish in the first place. She did perhaps want to be with a man who didn't use her for her body but it wasn't fair to expect something you yourself refused to give. Instead of hoping for fancy dinners every night at expensive restaurants maybe she could learn how to cook and start feeding others. Even just one. Her stomach growls. She had to become disillusioned. To see marriage for what it was truly was. Not a fairy tale based on looks or wealth but something real and rooted. A sacred covenant between one man and one woman and all for raising well adjusted children. To make this world a bit better than how it was found. Nothing good came easy, Staci thought. A large wave breaks onto the sandy beach which startles her. She looks forward towards Tony and Danny in a new light. Others suffered just like she did. It was something no human could quantify and it was all truly sacred. Somehow this made her feel better, especially when she allowed herself, through empathy, to relate to the sufferings of others. It only made her feel worse when focusing solely on her own miseries. Staci, Staci, Staci. So hellish! It was all too much for her to think of at once and so she undivides her attention to focus exclusively on the present moment. Chained together on that curious three-seater above the rickety wood on this crazy quest. Hoping to get home safe and sound. A strange new sense of gratitude overwhelms her. Even though
there were a lot of terrible things surrounding them and a lot of terrible things inside of them they were still like a family. Staci didn't want to neglect anyone anymore and didn't wish to be neglected. No one should ever take their loved ones for granted, and if one did it was ultimately their loss! Danny's head bops violently as he peddles harshly. Staci shakes hers with humorous disgust. She was scared to death but also excited and didn't feel alone. Tony scratches his head with a kindhearted confusion. She giggles and smiles warmly. He turns his head back towards her and gives her a big thumbs up as if to let her know that everything was going to be alright. And in one way or another. She was starting to truly believe it herself. Another inexplicable seed of hope in the midst of utter despair. She scratches her stomach with a mild anxiety and ponders that maybe Danny and her can work things out. Only time would tell. He ultimately had free will to choose for better or worse just like she did.
Just then, Danny's grating voice breaks up her blissful stream of consciousness.

“Survival of the fittest, baby! If you can't hack it, you're worm feed. That's life!”

With newfound confidence, Staci fires back with an even greater defiance than his.

"Oh, shut the hell up, Danny!"

Just then, out of the mist a stray dog runs up from behind, wagging its tail and panting.

"Sex or violence, which do you prefer? Neither actually, I'll stick with my sax and violins."

"The thrill of the chaste."

Chapter 14

The filthy mutt, medium sized with thin, straggly brown hair thinks to itself; are these humans my masters? Or better yet, my loving parents! He wasn't sure. Maybe both! Either way, he
had a deep longing for affection from these three passerbies since he was left abandoned by his bad master and was looking for a new one. And with the hopes that he or she'd be less masterly and more parental. It was only fair that he love and be loved. What else was the point of living? That was all that his simple dog brain truly understood. He gallops towards them, tongue flapping in the wind and dog drool flying out of every corner of his mouth. Staci looks back, noticing his spirited chase and frantically longing to catch up. What a loveable little creature she thinks to herself. She signals for Danny to stop but since he hates dogs, pedals even faster. That was usually how he handled any and all situations which made him feel uncomfortable. By running away! Staci often wondered what his family issues were. He always seemed angry. His German father seemed like a big corporate phony and Staci was sure that his Irish mother had a severe drinking problem, in part, because of it. She began to sense where he got his bitter and cruel heart from. Once in passing he mentioned his Nazi grandfather and didn't seem too proud of it at the time but lately seemed obsessed with turning into one. It seemed violence never truly died but just laid dormant until something triggered it. There were good things in Danny's heart of course but his father's poor example with the mother instilled in him a sort of sentimental cruelty towards women. Tony lacked a father figure in the home but his Catholic upbringing was a much needed blessing. His mother was too much of a pushover in many ways and it would have done him a world of good to
have had a disciplinary father. Not an abusive one of course. Tony could perhaps learn from Danny's confidence. Not by become conniving or abusive but rather more manly in some sense. To stay sensitive but to also grow a pair. So much of our disordered ways seemed rooted in the shadows of our own personal family dysfunction. Discipline without love was child abuse but so was love without discipline. For all of Tony's shortcomings he did have a certain amount of humility in which Danny lacked. The insecurity within Tony's heart was in part due to the lack of social capital invested into him by an earthly father. Tony invested himself in the truth by discovering it through creative yet limited means. He wasn't afraid to pour his heart out in a contrite manner in spite of or maybe because of his deep rooted family wounds, both seen and unseen. Danny's family wealth gave him a false sense of security and this abundance of material resources compelled him in a way to place all of his trust in that. He had faith that his corporate dad would always provide, and it never really crossed his mind to soften his heart towards women, especially his mom. His dad was a big jerk and she stuck around. That was the pattern set forth in his father's house. One in which Danny, consciously or not, began to emulate. All women were ultimately greedy golddiggers through his mother's spineless example. In his mind. There was little true communication between father and son at home. Neither had reconciled to the truth that all women were fallen sexual creatures to some degree or another, with one striking exception of course. Holding onto
anger at sexual sin was ultimately futile since it's tainted all of our blood, save for Madonna (the sober one!) and child. Only if and when Danny is able to soberly reflect on his own personal sins will he be able to cross that bridge towards a bittersweet healing; softening his heart towards the family he was born into and through no fault of his own. Life was aspirational after all. To let our better angels lead us towards spiritual maturity. Danny denied any concept of personal wrongdoing and that's why he was so drawn to atheism, aka slavish worship to the created world! He assuaged his materialistic conscience and rationalized his faith in his earthly father's compounding business assets. That was his ticket to the kingdom. Danny's own personal harem! The crucifix reminded him of his selfishness towards others, especially Staci, and it just seemed upside down. Meaningless sex detached him from emotional vulnerability but it was the best he thought this dog eat dog world had to offer. He never truly opened his heart to another woman. In many ways he didn't know how. In time he would just leave Staci for another when the opportunity presented itself. With his family's wealth, that was all but assured. Well, at least in his mind! A sad thought since it echoed the same intention and action Staci's dad had with her mom. Abandoned for a homewrecking harlot who in turn didn't think much of how her actions harmed Staci, let alone Staci's mom. It's all so sad. So while Staci's hunger at finding a sugar daddy was morally wrong, it was at least understandable considering the hole left in her heart by a lousy earthly dad. Never justifiable of
course! You have no control of what family you're born into. You're stuck with them even if they live halfway across the world. Family matters still pierce the heart. Blood would always be thicker, and therefore more binding than water. These sacred family wounds thrust upon your lap with the hopes of reconciliation. Casting away dark shadows. It only seemed possible with the help of a heavenly Father. One filled with deep and true affection for his entire creation. To help undo the self inflicted knots with the best interest of all his children at heart. Like a humble mom! Danny's tragic loss in his family several years ago did make Staci feel compassion towards him but at the same time he grew more cold and cruel towards others, her especially, and therefore his selfish behavior wore her goodwill thin. She took the emotional abuse, however, in part, because she sought him for her own selfish reasons. There was no such thing as a free lunch down here on earth, of course, and so women who use sex as a weapon should always expect a viscous blowback in some way, shape or form. Danny continues pedaling away like a madman, attempting to distance himself not only from this mangy mutt but also from the idea of softening his heart towards his own family skeletons, and by extension Staci. Just then, the cute pooch on her tail turns vicious. He snaps at Staci's leg, rotating in unison with jackass Danny up front. She panics and pedals faster in a desperate attempt to create a safe space between her and the bastard. Her effort proves futile. The dog leaps and lock jaws onto her pants. Thank goodness it doesn't penetrate the skin. Staci still
screams in horror as it swings back and forth with it's testicles dangling alongside her white Bermuda pants.

"Danny, do something! Help me!"

Never being one for chivalry, he keeps pedaling with the wind but is thoughtful enough to give her some sound advice, two seats up front and safe!

"Just swing your leg and fling him off, babe!"

"Thanks for the help, you useless turd!"

Staci screeches with furied fright. Tony comes to her rescue once again and gently attempts to shoo the mutt off with his foot which only angers it further. It swings and locks onto Tony's exposed calf flesh. Blood pours out. He screams in agony.

"Son of a bitch!"

Lightning flashes. The rain begins coming down in a torrential downpour, once again in sideways sheets. Tony swings his leg and the filthy mutt flies off, bouncing hard onto the boardwalk wood. It yelps and limps away, hoping to see another day. Staci's mothering instincts kick in, witnessing Tony's wounded calf flesh.

“Are you okay?”

Tony reassures her, face in agony.

"I'm okay."
"We should stop so I can take a look at that!"

“No, I'm good. We have to keep peddling. When we're safe and sound on higher ground, I'll take a look!”

Danny continues pedaling, indifferent to the other two. Staci loved dogs but was trying to convince herself that humans were even more loveable despite our greater complexities. Dogs didn't have free will and knew no better when they pooped and ate it. There was something endearing about that. Their innocent mindlessness. Yet us humans should know better. Something these creatures who ironically ate their own poop could teach us. You make the mess, you clean it up. Eat your own crap. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Don't make your selfish poop become someone else's poop sandwiches! Even if you didn't make the mess, clean it up. To the best of your God given abilities Don't repeat the same mistakes of your father. Scorned women? Not pretty! Scorned daughters? Even uglier! Metaphorically speaking, of course! Any moral guilt you have should never be inflicted upon others. Self-pity and cruelty did indeed go hand in hand and both were rooted in denial of sin and a refusal to take personal responsibility in the first place. Stop taking out on others what you should be cleaning up within first and foremost. Loving one's family deeply despite each individual's shortcomings truly did cover over a multitude of sins. In some ways these faithful and loving mutts had bigger brains than us. At least when they weren't starving and rabid! Folks like Danny with his heartless machinations never took
personal responsibility for anything. He let his environment mold him rather than humbly reflecting on all that was wrong with his environment to begin with. The apple never falls far from the tree. All women struggle with the flesh. It's in their fallen nature. Pray, don't prey. If you can't lead her in a godly manner then let her go. A true man neither condemns nor condones but rather says go and sin no more. Danny had deep, repressed anger. Subconsciously he knew his mother only stuck around because she needed a house to call a home. His wealthy yet verbally abusive father was better than no husband, and therefore no home. In her mind. Staci thought of how grateful she was that her mom didn't abort her even though the man who impregnated her was a real snake in the grass, aborting his husband and fatherly duties. Selfish bastard! Two wrongs never make a right, of course, and raising Staci was the best thing to happen for Staci's mom. She had it going on; sanctified through all the years of patience and giving. Suddenly the wind shifts. Danny grimaces and now finds himself pedaling against it. The rain sheets pound onto their flesh-pickled faces as the waves break closer than ever, rolling underneath the boardwalk wood at a steady clip. This helped create an increasing sense of urgency, and for all parties involved!

"We’ll all laugh about this once we get home!"

Danny wisecracks as he attempts to navigate through the blinding rain.
“I don’t know what I was thinking when I agreed to come down here with you. I deserve this!”

Staci fights back tears while scratching her arm.

"I should've known better!"

She looks up to the sky and squints.

"Mommy, I'm so sorry I never listen to you. If I get off of here alive, I plan on changing that. I promise!"

“We’re making good time! We’ll be back to the end, I mean beginning, in no time!”

Tony shouts, hoping it to be true. As they pedal over a rickety portion of the boardwalk, the bike begins to vibrate violently. They soon roll over a row of nails sticking up from a plank. The bike wobbles left to right as the tires deflate. They jump off right before it tilts over, crashing down hard.

“Son of a bitch!”

Danny screams as he kicks the deflated front tire. The three stand there despondent and stare at the bike, and then one another.

"What now?"

Staci asks with a heavy heart.

Danny kicks the bike a second time. Then a third for good measure.

“Too good to be true!”
Danny screams.

“What can we do? We just have to keep our heads up and keep moving forward.”

Tony responds calmly on his knees tending to his flesh wound. He tears a piece of his shirt off and wraps it around his calf. Just then, the wood creaks from behind. Someone is approaching!

Chapter ends here

Chapter 15

The thick fog has grown ever more dense, shrinking their visibility to less than twenty feet in any direction. Staci remains frozen with a fearful hope that it's someone innocent. She needed that sort of reassurance at this point. The encroaching chaos was scary!

“Maybe it’s that harmless kid we spooked earlier!"

She remarks while staring bitterly at Danny, trying to convince herself more than anyone else. Danny steps close as a piece of boardwalk wood splinters below his foot into a sharp object. He whispers into her face with sinister glee.
"Maybe it's the phantom ghost coming back. To haunt you. For his bike!"

He cackles like a third rate Fright Night pitchman.

"I hate you, you heartless bastard."

Staci whispers with chills shivering up and down her spine. Tony grabs her arm.

“Come on, we walk.”

They pick up the pace and continue southbound towards the base of the ravine. The creaking noise resumes and grows closer with each and every step. Once again they look back and once again all they can see is the thick, impenetrable fog.
Tony takes several deep, slow breathes before reaching into his cargo shorts pocket. He then pulls out a six inch hunting knife before beginning a courageous march northbound.

"We'll be right here. After you kill the bad guy!"

Danny remarks matter of factly as Tony disappears into the mist. As he approaches the creaking noise it seems to mirror the cadence of his steps. With his heart racing he lifts up his
knife and begins a full blind charge. No retreat, no surrender! The creaking grows faster and closer. Suddenly, Tony smacks face first into something stony. He lands hard and soon finds himself on his fat ass. The noise stops and when the stars clear he realizes what was causing the commotion. A water bucket well of all things! Mechanically uplifted, pouring water onto a baptized baby statue, the culprit. By blindly and indiscriminately running into it, he dislodged the mechanical pulley which somehow and in some mysterious way the strange weather must have made echo, giving the unsettling illusion of approach. Delerium from the compounding physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion sure didn't help either! The well, dug through and under the boardwalk apparently pumped beach water out from below the sand into the fountain. This unlikely landmark was not only fully functional and quite irrational but completely and utterly fantastic! Tony just shakes his head with utter confusion but was quite relieved nonetheless. He gently puts the knife back into his pocket and fixes the dislodged pulley. It should once again work as it did before he had so mindlessly charged into it. All set! After jogging back over to Danny and Staci he firmly reassures them that everything was okay. Well, for the time being at least! Faint disco music echoes just south of their current position. Soon they stumble upon another open bar, adjacent to a seedy motel. A U in the Luv Tubs neon signage flickers on and off and below it is an old man sitting at the lobby front desk. He's seen through the window with hands resting behind his head and leaning back into a
leather office chair, laughing with his beady eyes fixed on a small countertop television set. He fiddles with the large antenna sticks inside of the cozy work environment as they walk past him and enter the bar filled with over the top, gaudy touches everywhere. Staci looks around and notices around thirty or so occupants, all men, and with at least twenty dancing. Not a single woman in sight. She felt strangely at home in such an emasculated yet wealthy environment. Tony, on the other hand, was growing more unsettled by the moment. While ashamed to admit that he did feel right at home in that sleazy strip club, until the stripper ruined it, he now felt a deep repulsion in his gut. This different type of sleaze was making him queasy but for Staci it seemed to be just the opposite. A gleeful and giddy look on her face showed that she wanted to hang around these parts a little while longer. Danny's neglect was creating an indescribable greed in her heart. All men were dogs so why not become one herself? Or better yet, castrate the unleashed bastards in the first place. Feminism. Progress! Viva la Staci!

"We can't stay in here much longer!"

Tony remarks stonefaced. She grins wickedly while watching the men do shameful things to one another. Tony bumps her on the shoulder to help snap her out of her trance.

"Are you okay?"

He asks amused but terrified.
"Yeah, I'm fine."

She puts her head down and sighs, shamefully self aware. Danny orders three beers from the severely obese bartender. Tony looks at him cross eyed.

"At this point why the hell not, bro?"

Danny remarks sassily.

"I'll pass."

Tony remarks soberly.

"More for me!"

Danny counters greedily. He leans back onto the bar and stares at the prancing men with a tinge of excitement sparkling in his eye. Tony senses something isn't right and judges it's as good a time as any to chastise everyone. To tell them the tale told to him by that eastern European harlot back over in the Clam. The one where his bum sunk ever further into that crusty and infectious love seat. They were all going to die! A fair warning of impending doom perhaps would get everyone's mind out of the gutter.

"Listen, there's some news I've been withholding from the two of you."

Tony proclaims nervously. His anxiety rubs off on Staci, still struggling from her nervous condition.

"What! What happened now?"
Danny ignores these two overly empathetic and warm blooded partial Italians as he continues staring at the dance floor, further consumed by the predatory vibe. He notices a poster of Hitler in pink above all of their deviant shenanigans. Tony begins to confess.

"That lap dance I got earlier..."

"A tale of debauchery!"

Danny screams gayly. He seductively looks over to Tony.

"Prey tell."

Tony looks at him blankly.

"In the bar. The stripper. Something happened.."

"What happened? What did she tell you? Did she tell you we were all going to die?"

Staci begins to hyperventilate. Tony gently responds. He didn't want to give her a heart attack for Christ's sake.

"No! Don't be silly!"

He tries his best poker face even though she stepped on the truth with her woman's intuition. Holy crap, women are good! Danny is expecting some wild and debauched tale of filth. In his mind, he couldn't get enough of the nihilism it entailed. He thinks back to his pathetic, alcoholic mother and becomes aroused. He chugs his beer and belches. All smut was good smut according to King, and apparently sometimes Queen narcissus Danny!
"What happened?"

Danny asks and hopes for the worst. Tony lightens his tone while trying to come up with something less damning for Staci's sake.

"She just told me something but it's nothing really. I didn't mean to alarm you Staci. I'm sorry!"

"What did she tell you?"

Staci asks nervously. Before Tony can respond, Danny grows disappointed and surly.

"Told? Told you something? That's it? You mean she didn't do something? Hint, hint!"

Staci smacks his arm.

"Is your mind never not in the gutter?"

She takes a sip from her penis shaped beer glass. Danny chuckles loudly.

"What?"

Staci asks, quite seriously.

"It's nothing, Stay."

So predictable, Danny thought to himself. Yawn! He shifts his attention back over to handsome Tony.

"Please continue on with your sexy story, Tony. The one where the naughty stripper, wait for it...told you something. Yawn!"
Danny cracks himself up before looking back over to all of the colorful, flamboyant men gyrating about.

"You are becoming such a diva!"

Staci remarks playfully while grabbing his crotch.

"It's funny because it's true."

"Laugh your way to grace."

Chapter 16

She wipes her foamy mouth and adjusts her orange sports bra before belching.

"I need a friggin' cigarette!"

Danny forces a fake smile before reluctantly looking back over to Tony.

"Let's hear it."

He rolls his eyes. Tony debates in his mind just exactly what he should reveal and how. The truth was necessary but always in
love or else it became brutal and harsh. Just as love without truth was wishful thinking. Soft soap. Staci's heart was fragile but also quite cruel and unpredictable! The naked truth was we're all going to die one day. Whether on this boardwalk or fifty years down the road. That was inevitable. But to be filled with utter despair and without hope seemed neither loving nor truthful. What did that mindless whore know? The stripper, not Staci of course! Perhaps she was just projecting her own unresolved family issues on others in the first place. Tony grew ashamed for preying on such weakness. He scratches his arm nervously. He did have to say and more importantly do something for everyone's sake. The wheels spin in his mind, which took considerably longer than Danny's wheels. Staci gazes at him patiently while Danny becomes frustrated at his snail like pace.

"Any day, chief!"

Danny lifts his hand up and is ready to smack him but Staci stays his hand.

"Have you ever heard the expression patience is a virtue?"

Danny looks back over to all of the impatient men frolicking about.

"What fun is that?"

Staci often got impatient with Danny's impatience towards Tony. Fast brains weren't always good brains. The more she got to know Danny the more she instinctively sensed this. Danny
thought Tony was slow and stupid yet Danny's behavior showed who the true moron was! Back over in Tony's mind, he ponders slowly yet efficiently. He often became distracted, however, whenever donuts and fried chicken popped up. Quite often, mind you! He was starving and couldn't help himself. Danny's cruel eyes grow ever more predatory, observing a man bend over another with detached cynicism, taking glee at the emasculating antics. He imagined himself a helicopter pilot in drag bombing the crap out of all the brown and yellow peasants, setting up a sex-positive, free market mercenary-merchant capitalist/commune within each village; and then crowning himself queen. Screw any concept of boundaries, sacred spaces or sovereignty! Danny begins thrusting his hips back and forth. Tony wills himself to stop thinking of such mindless madness! He didn't want to get too full of himself. It wasn't gluttony until you got sick and just the thought of so much over consumption was beginning to make him nauseous. He refocuses on plotting out a game plan which was truly a win-win for all parties involved. Something to protect the most vulnerable first and foremost. Maybe they would be safer around other people, even these overly flamboyant ones since they'd being sitting ducks on that boardwalk at dusk with the weather taking a severe turn for the worst. There was security in numbers. On the other hand, such an emasculated and wealthy environment wasn't something truly secure. Tony looks over at Staci with her eyes shadowing Danny's almost to a tee. Tony is overcome with despair for a brief moment. He looks out
the window. The U flickering between Luv on the neon signage gives him an idea. A lightbulb pops into his head. That's it! A third alternative. A win, win, and for all parties involved! They would neither have to walk the boardwalk in pitch dark with the storm raging nor be surrounded by bottom feeders in this sinful den of debauchery. They can lock themselves up in the motel room next door and stay faithfully fortified until dawn. That way in the morning when all of the slimy nightcrawlers are out of their way, and the storm has relented, they'll be home free! Tony thought of those cheesy but cool retro sounds from that Casio Diva and could strangely relate. The loud, obnoxious music in this bar was giving him a massive headache. No true soul suffering. These so called men seemed to be doing everything in their power to forget about their souls in the first place! A whiff of rotten perfume lingers as a man dressed as a homewrecking harlot passes by. Tony had made many poor choices in life and still struggled on a daily basis with extreme selfishness but this boardwalk was starting to make him feel the way he did after eating one too many donuts. Literally sick to his stomach. He felt his teeth rotting and had had his selfish fill. Not necessarily of donuts, of course, but of so much indiscriminate consumption. By morning he would lead Staci to the relative safety of higher ground. Danny was getting too comfortable in and around these parts. Maybe Tony wasn't the fastest thinker but he was a good thinker. A chaste thinker. A Catholic thinker! All he needed was a little time and space to untangle it all in his mind. To figure out something merciful and
just. All of the selfish people on this boardwalk only helped reaffirm his faith. He'd feed off his own pain and give of himself. A helpless baby in the womb flashes into his mind. Then a dog wagging its tail. Finally Staci's love/hate relationship with her mother. It seemed we're all truly fallen sinners yet deeply and profoundly loved by our Heavenly Father. Tony would give everything he had to those he loved even if it killed him and whether he got anything in return or not. It was the only way he knew how through his selfless mother's example. Her heart was always in the right place. Well, at least in his mind! She couldn't protect him from the cruel world forever, of course, and prayed he'd become strong enough to withstand it's onslaught. To teach him hard work and thick skin with a soft heart. Tony recalls with joy how his recently departed mother spoke fondly of Staci many times, always saying such kind and heartfelt words about her. He felt her spirit guiding him in some strange way and couldn't dishonor her nor Staci. These creepy bastards on this crazy boardwalk were like absurd caricatures of her so called caring boyfriend, Danny. His self-centerededness wouldn't think twice in using and consuming a wounded lamb laying helpless along the beaten path. He had gone through a loss of his own many years prior but that was no excuse. True givers always give even when battling their own storms. Tony prayed to God to protect Staci from others and most importantly herself. Thank goodness this journey had already begun, unbenownst to Tony, in part due to his selfless example. He did of course trust in Divine Providence to perfect any
goodwill he had in wanting to protect her and by extension the rest of his family. His controlling nature trusted God the Father's grace more than anything! All good things truly took time and all that mattered to him in that moment was to get Staci off of this boardwalk alive. Danny was a big jerk and a terrible boyfriend but that didn't mean he couldn't be redeemed. Tony did like him as a friend but he did love Staci as a sister. He would have a heart to heart with Danny when the time was right. Now was not that time. The time now was for Tony to take the lead and get them checked into the motel next door. To fortify themselves until dawn. Tony's mind was made up and he had a plan. His conscience told him it was a good one and for all parties involved. Each one of us is going to die but today was not that day. Well, if Tony had anything to say, or more imporantly, DO about it! Perhaps, even stranger yet, death wasn't truly death but just another path we all must take. Tony felt good about that. It seemed both truthful and full of love. The suspense was killing him and he hoped it would last!

"Never mind, Stay, it's nothing. The dancer just told me that she hoped to stop using her body for money and that one day she'd be able to forgive her lousy father. I just found that amusing. In a bittersweet sort of way, of course!"

Danny yawns. Staci looks down at the empty, penis-shaped beer glass. It's a sobering and jarring site. She rubs her belly and gets a little choked up. Tony remarks brotherly.
"Let's just hang out in here for a few more minutes and then call it a night next door. Fair enough?"

He stares at Staci fatherly.

"Besides, we can't get much further in this storm. Not safely at least. It's getting pretty nasty out there!"

Staci signals the bartender away, refusing another round.

"Okay."

After a minute or so, the music cuts off and a gentle man's voice is heard over the PA system. They turn right and see an emcee standing atop a small stage in the far right corner of the bar. A single beam of light shines down onto his handsome, fatherly face.

“Okay, may I please have everyone’s undivided attention?”

He announces in a game-show host cadence; plastic, cheesy and quite masculine. The men dancing prance over to the tables surrounding the stage and delicately take their seats. A voice of reason and entertainment. How kitsch and edgy!

“As many of you may or may not know, tonight we have two very special performers rowing all the way back here from Fatuus Island. Will everyone please give a warm welcome to the two hearts that beat as one; the infamous and fabulous Tip and Alan!"

The man's cheesy voice grows somber.
"They'll temper your irresponsible butts in no time. Forgive your mother for crying out loud. Slap her in the face. Metaphorically speaking of course!"

Chapter 17

The men think it through for a moment and concur that this cheesy game show host may indeed have a point. They erupt. Hoots, hollers, whistles and claps galore. A lone man walks up on stage wearing a black and white checkered blazer, a bad black hairpiece and thick black spectacles. He looks normal enough except for an odd queen's crown atop his head. He forcefully yanks the microphone from the announcer's hand and waves to the crowd, cocksure.

“Thank you! Thank you! It’s great to be back!”

Tony looks around, Where's the other performer? Is that Tip or Alan?

"Boy I tell ya! We rowed all the way down here from Fatuus Island and boy, I tell ya... our arms sure are tired. I tell ya, isn’t that right my boy, Tip?"

The man looks down to his left and a gnarly head pops out from the side of his blazer.

"Hoo, hoo!"

The crowd erupts in applause.
"We love you Tip!"

One tipsy patron proclaims. Tip, a parasitic siamese twin protruding from the side of Alan's chest between his lower abdomen and stomach waves to the adoring onlookers with his thin, bony arm. His skull, about the size of Alan's fist and a thin featured face with a pencil drawn mouth, made him resemble an underdeveloped fetus more than anything else. He hoots triumphantly. Not everyone is happy to see him, however. Tony over hears one particular patron sitting close by grumble.

“That son of a bitch has got some nerve."

The crowd settles down as he responds to his cue.

"That’s right Al and it's high time you started to pull your own weight around here!"

He rolls his eyes after remarking in a gargly, strained tone. The crowd pops with laughter. Alan humbly retorts.

"Very funny Tip, very funny. If you keep that up I’m going to have to cut you from the act!"

Alan pulls out a long butcher knife from the back of his pants and looks down at poor, helpless Tip.

"So much dead weight inside my parts!"

The crowd chuckles. Tip quickly says his line.

“Touché, Alan! I guess it's good to be Queen!"
Tip looks up at Alan's crown covered over his bad hairpiece. Staci and Danny look at each other dumbfounded. Tip, physically overpowered, instinctively sensed it was always best to defeat such selfish trespassing with a self-effacing sense of humor. It did usually get him out of any and all situations where his bodily integrity sought to be compromised by bigger, and more shameless men. He takes out a long stick from the side of Alan's checkered sports coat and feebly attempts to flick off the crown. Alan guides Tip's stick like digits, struggling mightily, and not only does the crown piece fall off but so does Alan's bad hairpiece, exposing a balding, lumpy cranium. The crowd erupts into laughter. Alan wasn't looking to truly emasculate Tip. It was all an act after all and Alan truly loved his twin like a brother. Perhaps even more so like a son. He'd never do anything consciously to make him feel less like a real man. Tip grunts while giving a hundred ten percent effort, and out of breathe, but maintains his professionalism nonetheless. The daily struggles he faced day in and day out he chose to live well. Rarely complaining even though he had more to complain about than most. Life was a gift after all and he tried not to take anything for granted. He catches a single breathe through tremendous physical effort and grins with great contentment. He gave his all despite it all and delivers his punchline with perfect comedic timing. The pop of the crowd's applause helps validate all of his hard work and sacrifice at refining his skill over the years. His face said it all. In that moment there was no pain only joy. He's able to catch a second breathe and starts to
feel more alive than ever. Even though on the surface he appeared to be a masochist he never let the pain penetrate his flesh. No matter what bitter lemons life threw his way. He turned it all into lemonade. More of a true man than most. A humble thorn in the flesh that upheld the dignity and honor of all parties involved. His father would be proud!

"Or should I say, toupee, Alan?"

Tip zings his big brother, exhaling a third time, and now bursting with life. These two had a deep circle of trust after all. Tip glances down at Alan's foot next to the fallen crown, covered over by the fake toupee. Quite an absurd proposition attempting to hide anything from one another in the long run. May as well make the best of it. Two sour lemons being squeezed. The crowd is in stitches and is loving this irreverent, comedic and chaste duo. Such a breathe of fresh air in their nihilistic den of debauchery! Alan pulls an orange clown wig out of his pants. More laughter ensues.

“Good one Tip, good one! Okay, enough of the comedy. How about a little song and dance number for all of the kind folks brave enough to come out and weather this nasty storm tonight?"

Tip puts his head down in shame while Alan adjusts his new hairpiece.

“Yes, dad.”

Alan looks at him fatherly.
“You are like a son, Tip. And I do love you dearly."

Tip smiles.

"But I do have to ask you one simple and everlasting question."

Tip looks up and at his complete mercy. Alan's voice lightens up.

"When are you getting the hell out?"

The crowd bursts into uncontrolled hysterics. One gay patron leans over another.

"Reminds me of my father. Always pushing me away!"

He laughs through the tears. Tip responds with bitter snark, gazing towards the infusion point.

“No rush, dad! I am getting quite comfortable being your left hand man!"

Tip farts.

"That was a wet one! Hoo, hoo!"

The crowd poops their pants from hysterics. Tip fist pumps. Alan shakes his head with comedic disgust and grows quite disappointed at both Tip and the crowd.

"So irresponsible! It's not going to be an easy split now is it?"

Alan raises his eyebrow and draws his knife up to Tip's nose.

"Intentions are everything to a father, my boy!"
Tip thinks quick, trembling in fear. He spastically reaches into Alan’s side pocket and pulls out a bottle of disinfectant.
"Excuse me, papa!"

He sprays it into Alan's eyes.
"Son of uhh!"

Alan cringes as the sting takes root onto his exposed nerve endings.

Tip feels much better about himself and soon pulls out a miniature orange clown wig. One fit for a pinhead! Fumbling it in hand, he places it atop his lumpy cranium filled with thick, curly hair and before he can blink, a drunk patron does a spit take. Tip yanks a tiny sausage-shaped microphone out of the infusion point, cueing an old-timey Vaudeville tune.
"I’ve got you under my skin!"

Tip croons while Alan does a two step.
"Stop the music!"

Alan retorts in anger, waving his hands flamboyantly.
"I thought it was Me and my shadow!"

It appears this is all part of their act; a Z-grade Vaudeville routine by two working class nobodies attempting their best Jerry and Dean back and forth. Two hacks. Two stinkers. Two poop heads!
Tony jumps up and heads towards the exit. Staci gives a spirited chase.

"I thought you said we were going to stay next door for the night!"

She screams following right behind. Tony stoically marches past the adjacent motel through thick sheets of rain coming down in waves.

"Changed my mind! We have got to get the hell off of this God forsakened boardwalk...and now!"

Greatly traumatized by all of the unfolding and out of control antics, Tony thought quietly to himself that maybe Staci was right. Life wasn't just one big endless joke. It was literally going to get them all killed for Heaven's sake! Staci takes cover under the motel awning and shouts with deep, motherly conviction.

“I think getting a room is our best hope at this point!”

“No way, no how! This place is giving me the heebee-jeebs!”
Just then, a lightning bolt strikes the top of the sky-ride support tower directly in front of him, causing a sonic boom. He changes course immediately and sprints into the motel lobby screaming like a little girl with pee running down his leg.

"I want my mommy!"

Danny and Staci look at each other flabbergasted and then without haste follow right behind.

"Show hospitality to strangers."

"Love must be sincere."
Chapter 18

The front desk clerk looks up briefly before resuming his blissful television viewing session. A syndicated marathon of The Golden Girls. His face looks like it couldn't be happier even if he tried. A graying, trimmed beard above a blue buttoned work shirt along with a pink, polka dot tie presented a benevolent, high class and gentle-manly appearance. His thick black spectacles over a warm, wrinkled face didn't hurt either. Gay, celibate and perhaps in his mid to late 60's, he realized a long time ago the inherent dangers of the lifestyle. The act wasn't true and led to emptiness and despair, and not to mention all of those pesky and in many cases incurable stds. He had lost many close friends along the way, whom he loved dearly, and it was only by the grace of God that he was still breathing. He truly believed it. He grew disheartened when pondering this new generation living with even more reckless abandon, indifferent to the bodily integrity of one another. He too had made many poor choices in life but an std scare many years prior had set him straight. Each and everyday he saw more clearly that he couldn't get back at his controlling mother by emasculating himself or other men. What good would come from that? To somehow rub it in her face. She could give two craps either way! He squints through his thick black spectacles and laughs hysterically at the out of control antics on the television set. He also made peace with the absent father he barely knew. A good man who wanted to give it a shot with the emotionally unstable mom but was rejected due to her own
unreconciled father issues. He grew weary thinking it all through. He blamed his mom more than anyone. She initiated the divorce, only thinking of herself and unaware or unwilling to think of the long term consequences for her son. She'd laugh and laugh, and laugh, like a giddy little schoolgirl when he'd put on her makeup and party wigs. How hysterical this bitter, hardhearted woman thought it to be! The twisted joy that filled the dark recesses of her heart after dressing him up like a little ballerina. One whom she could mold or better yet bend to her heartless and quite abundant British crown whims. He just wanted to make mama proud, of course, and put his complete trust into this over-educated, amoral and sociopathic maniac of a woman. Her heart was always in the right place, little Chococate Charlie figured. She was my mommy after all. She had all the right stuff! Well, at least in his mind. He'd endlessly practice his gay dance routines which she quickly grew bored of and so he'd become ever more flamboyment, Nazi-like and hard on himself, attempting in vain to satisfy this wordly, irreligious and secular materialist who never could seem to get her selfish fill. No matter how much her cup had runneth over. He gave it his all and it never seemed to be enough. The man's limp wrist grows tense when thinking of what a fool he had been. Such a greedy son of a bitch! This deeply flawed earthly vessel. Dollar signs spin in his mind. One who would never think in million years to do anything to compromise my bodily integrity. Oh oh oh! What a greedy Queen I was, the celibate old man contritely thinks to himself. What dignified mother
who truly loved her son would in her right mind push such gender neutral nonsense? Sounds like bitter and vindictive child abuse against the Queen's subjects if you ask this polka dotted chap who's been humbled through chaste living! Mommy's little play monkey all grown up. He tightens his fist with rage. As long as she was laughing he must have been doing something right. He crushes a bag of trail mix in his palm. There was no father figure around so who was going to stop her? In her subconscious scorn she was doing all of the other scorned women a favor. Castrating her son. They wouldn't have to go through what she did. Abandoned when a younger and more perky temptress came along to steal my daddy. Screw that! You homewrecking harlot! The man loosens his fist. He looks at a nearly empty red lipstick underneath the television set broadcasting out grainy black and white images of those old, sassy yentas hamming it up. He grows at peace. Progress, not perfection, Charlie! His mind drifts as he inadvertently places himself into his mother's shoes. High heels, expensive tastes and crushing toes. Oy vey! What deep family skeletons must she have had in the first place to make her that way? He shudders! Not that it made any of what she did or didn't do to him right but at least he now understood where she was coming from. And for a while in his reckless youth he was becoming like her as well. The horror! If only she had been able to soften her heart and forgive her abusive or neglectful father before giving birth to poor Charlie. It would have reduced the dark shadow he had to live under. Oh well, what doesn't kill
you makes you stronger, he figures. He just had to always remind himself gently but sternly to make sure it always transformed itself into compassion rather than cruelty. All water under the bridge at this point and no use crying over spilled milk. He snaps back into his own shoes and grows exhausted. Too much so for either complete rage or mindless compassion. He was feeling prudently charitable after all was said and done. He didn't choose his mother. This upset him but made him feel better at the same time. Her sin affected him but her sin was ultimately her's alone. Just as his was his. In that moment all he truly cared about was getting lost in another joy-filled episode of those lighthearted, old bags of bones! They seemed more motherly than queenish and that was a breathe of fresh air! He didn't want to be overshadowed by Mother Superior who made him feel so inferior anymore. She was a miserable wretch and he didn't envy that in the slightest. He could never truly forget but could truly forgive since he wasn't perfect either. Humpty Dumpty could never be completely put back together again but the cracks could be filled with gold. He'd tied up much of his family's loose ends and was usually at peace with himself but no matter how hard he tried and how busy he kept there was always a pebble of conscience that he couldn't seem to shake. He hadn't yet mustered up the courage to tell his fellow customers about the inherent dangers of their lifestyle. Deep down he knew that they knew but every so often it bothered him that he didn't speak up. To perhaps give them some words of encouragement
to seek whatever they sought in a chaste, humble manner. The Inferno nightclub next door did keep the motel in the red and by extension him employed and was perhaps one big reason he held his tongue. His snobbish English background didn't help either, of course! He often guarded his heart against these carnal goats by being warm yet standoffish. He did personally like many of these young and misguided men, he himself was once one, but he didn't have the fatherly conviction to tell them firsthand with humility and to their faces that these acts were a literal dead end. He was always saddened when hearing of the latest casualty but quickly grew stoic, chalk ing it up to the law of the jungle. They were adults after all and the weakest ones would always perish, dying based off the choices they made in life. He liked to focus on bureaucracy, order and paperwork. He gave up one bad habit only to replace it with another. When on the rag he'd often condemn folks for doing the very same things he once did. No mercy! His primary concern was to do his job well enough by crossing every T and dotting every I to afford an idle, leisurely existence surrounded by material excess. If this motel attracted the unchaste...oh, well! Not his problem. Nothing personal, brother! Perhaps that was his latest devil's bargain. His golden calf. He tried not to overthink things especially when two inebriated men would walk in seeking to emasculate one another with the very real possibility of spreading an std along with long-term regrets. He did sometimes pray for them, however, from a safe distance. Especially the one's he felt a strong familial connection with.
Usually the one's sharing similar facial features as he. He could only hope that they would see the error of their ways before it was too late. In a similar way he had after his own scare. When in a shameful yet hopeful mood it did cross his mind to leave this filthy motel and start a Christian outreach program for all of the bitter, angry men struggling in the flesh. Life was a true miracle and gift after all and he wasn't God and neither was his mother. What a relief! Patience with others and more importantly himself was something Mother Blanche would probably tell him. He smiles. If he was really honest, however, he just wanted to be entertained his whole life and not be bothered by anyone! He frowns. He looks back up to those three annoying folks seeking shelter and forces a kindness. Ugh, annoying customers! He's over it. These sassy old yentas will be on all night, he figures, and let's just check in these filthy peasants. And as painlessly as possible!

“May I help you!”

He asks with a forced graciousness.

“We’d like one room, please.”

Staci humbly requests.

“The hour special or the night!”

He snaps back.

"For the night please."

Staci responds slowly.
"Twenty nine dollars for the night. Cash only!"

He bites while fiddling with his red lipstick. Danny takes out his wallet and gives the man a twenty and a ten. He hurriedly puts the money into an ancient, rusty cash register with eyes still on the television.

"Oh, Blanche!"

He chuckles as he rushes to hand back the wrinkled dollar bill, adoring those schlamtzy yentas.

“You little rascals have fun. A filthy whore thrown in for good measure? Kinky! If you party animals want any company, I’ll be down here all night!"

He winks at Danny.

“Not that kind of company, of course! I'm married!"

He shows them his big, gaudy ring.

"Married to my Golden Girls! Get your minds out of the gutter, you filthy fags!"

His voice deepens and grows more forceful and direct.

"The room number's on the key. Check out's at eleven. Tootles!"

He shoos them away and continues laughing hysterically at Blanche's latest sexual rendezvous. Two drunk gay men wobble in. One grabs the other by the crotch.

"Tag, you're it!"
“Oh, Nigel!”

Tony grows pale and puts his hand over his stomach before reaching over to grab a complimentary toothpaste and toothbrush from the counter. He pulls Staci out the lobby, observing the antics with glee. As they walk underneath the first floor awning and past a swimming pool filled with black sludge they witness a handful of guests laying on decrepid beach chairs. Tony looks curiously at a thickheaded, working class Italian-American couple mindlessly soaking up the moon rays. They push and pull each other while attempting in vain to get underneath a single umbrella to take cover from the falling rain, oblivious to fact that another empty umbrella chair is right next to them.

“Anyone care for a dip?”

Tony remarks sarcastically.

Staci holds her breathe.

"I think I'm gonna hurl."

Danny chimes in.

“I bet the rooms here are disgusting. Isn't it great!"

Staci stares at him cross-eyed as they walk up the cracked, concrete blue steps to the second floor. Danny reaches the room first and unlocks the door. It creaks horrendously. He looks over to Tony, gesturing for him to cross the threshold first.
"Ladies, first!"

"Very funny."

Tony remarks dryly. And then enters first.

"Grace does not destroy nature, it perfects it." - Saint Thomas Aquinas

Chapter 19

Staci rushes to the phone.

"I'm calling my mother!"

She grabs it like a madwoman and swings it towards her ear. No signal! She slams it down, looking over at Danny enraged. Tony scopes out the humble abode and is surprised that it isn’t as bad as he was expecting. The single full bed has folded sheets and the pillows are arranged quite nicely. Everything smells fresh and clean, giving the impression of recent and tidy maid service. So many hard working, foreign domestic workers really did a ton of thankless, largely unnoticed work he thought quietly to himself. Dark green wallflower wallpaper along with a
big bamboo hand fan next to a Mona Lisa knockoff over the bed helped flesh out the room's humble and kitschy appearance.  
“It’s not so bad!”
Tony remarks while stroking the hand fan.
"It's homey. I can dig it!"
Staci's eyes roll.
"Do you plan on going into tacky and outdated interior design in the near future, Senor Tony?"
She remarks snarkily and is unimpressed with such a modest, motherly and boring look. It was creepy! Tony laughs it off. Her loss he figured; unwilling or unable to see such humble splendor.
"I need a shower!"
Staci remarks orgasmically. Her face showed a huge sigh of relief after just saying those words.
"I'm next!"
Tony yells as he hops onto the bed which breaks immediately from his heavyweight. The hand fan and Mona Lisa knockoff crash down on top of his head. Danny points and mocks while Staci nearly jumps out of her skin.
"You clumsy knucklehead!"
Danny remarks and laughs.
"Luckily I have two blow up rafts in my backpack. Staci and I can sleep on top of those. The broken bed is all yours, you hairy greaseball!"

Tony stumbles his way back to his feet and prudently picks up the hand fan and painting before gently placing the homey relics back into their proper place. Danny looks at Staci in a bossy manner. "You can blow up the rafts, Stay. Put that mouth of yours to good use!"

Danny mimics a head bobbing up and down, chuckling. "I'm not your slave, asshole!" Staci responds angrily as Tony looks over to the corner and notices a chair. "Thanks, but I think I'll just sleep over there."

Staci's had enough of these two lunatics and happily slams the bathroom door shut. A half hour later she's putting on red chap-stick, reaching for a tissue to blow her nose and is all dried off except for damp hair with a towel wrapped around it while in her bra and panties sitting on the green raft next to Danny in his boxers. He's lying on the red raft flipping through page after page of a bikini magazine. He's taken the white sheets off from the broken bed and spread them across both rafts, positioned on the floor next to one another in the space between the bed and television stand. Tony, now sitting in the corner chair situated to the left of the front door and in tighty-whites with his blood-stained wife beater tied around his flesh wound, cuts shapes into an snack sized Oreo box with his hunting knife. He was mindful enough to clean both the wound and his torn shirt
first with soap and water with the hopes of preventing any infection, of course. Danny's big towel is his blanket, and the big blanket, the one everyone knows motels rarely wash is crumpled up in the far right corner of the room. Staci pulls out a small incense candle from Danny's backpack situated between his legs, checking to see if it's dry, which it is, before placing it atop the night stand directly next to empty bags of trail mix and water bottles. Just as she lights it Tony looks over. Above her head the television set broadcasts out a grainy signal without any volume. Tony's able to make out an image of a little Hispanic boy walking to school. His imagination wanders.
The boy has a sad yet determined look on his face as he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; along with a heavy backpack filled with books, pencils and erasers! His unfaithful father and forgiving mother made him an unlikely instrument of reconciliation in all of his unfolding family drama. The faithfulness of his mother gave him a tremendous fighting spirit. One of overcoming any and all obstacles thrown his way. Tony's heart grows heavy and he changes the channel with the hope of finding something lighter and less depressing! Channel after channel there's nothing but white noise until finally he stumbles upon the Golden Girl's marathon. He smiles. It seemed with the storm raging these were the only two signals coming in with any sort of clarity. The Spanish soap opera marathon was only a daytime affair apparently and all of the unfaithful men left quite a hell of a mess for their children to clean up. Tony fumbles, remote in hand, attempting in vain to increase the volume but without any luck. He does inadvertently turn on the closed captioning, however. He reads Blair's dialogue with Blanche. A bittersweet and shmaltzy back and forth about how Blanche's husband would have sex with her every night for ten years before things cooled off. Tony shakes his head, chuckling to himself with that image now stuck in his head. He puts his knife down, away from the cookie box before looking below the television set at Staci. She blows out her match and ponders.

“You know, maybe this is karma.”
Danny shrugs her off while chewing trail mix, thumbing through his magazine.

“Nonsense, babe.”

She puts the extinguished match down on the nightstand and shivers, sliding underneath the sheets, attempting to regain some warmth.

“Maybe we deserve this!”

“That's crap! Bad things happen to good people all the time!”

Danny barks, irritated, and without even looking up from his beloved bikini rag. Staci grabs it out of his hand and throws it down forcefully.

"Are we good?"

She asks earnestly, staring into his eyes. Taken aback at the directness of her gesture, he lightens his tone.

"Me and you? Of course we're good! You know I love you, babe!"

He counters unconvincingly while gently caressing her cheek.

"No, I mean are we good people? Look at how we ignored all of those poor and helpless people out there!"

She puts her hand gently over his. Danny pulls his away, growing annoyed.

"What about us! Who's helping us face our problems!"
He turns his back and scoops the magazine up off from the floor. He resumes flipping through, and now violently. Staci sighs.

"I know that. But did you ever stop and think that maybe other people have it even worse than us?"

Danny laughs maniacally.

"Okay! So what are you going to do about it?"

His tone is mocking and cruel.

"Go! Go, outside, Mother Teresa! In this weather? Here, take some trail mix!"

He throws the nearly empty bag into her face.

"Go feed the homeless and despondent! Just try not drowning to death while out there, you ditzy broad!"

He gruffly mutters. Page after page of scantily clad celebrities with daddy issues. A bottomless pit of greed. Selling their souls for a quick buck. He lets out a gutteral scream, chucking the magazine against the wall. He punches the pillow, staring at Staci enraged. He quickly re-composes himself, however, and then punches the pillow once more but in a softer manner. As if to puff it up for his head. He lays down, breathing heavily and closes his eyes stubbornly.

"Good night!"

Staci sits there in somber silence. She was starting to feel quite ashamed but still couldn't face it squarely. After a few moments
she reaches over to the nightstand for her Xanax bottle. Tony shakes his head, utterly disappointed.

"Stay, you don't need that stuff!"

She ignores him completely as she breaks a pill in half before popping it into her mouth and chugging what's left from a nearly empty water bottle. It was becoming ever more apparent just how self-centered Danny and her truly were. The writing was on the wall. The crumpled up bikini mag gives her a flashback. She felt a migraine once again coming on. She grew nauseous as well. Like a vice grip clamped in and around her head, and heart. Tony looks over at the incense Staci is burning and senses the tension building.

"What's that smell?"

Staci's mood lifts when she hears Tony's nurturing voice. She responds just as gently. "It's oak!"

He responds smiling.

"By the way, thanks again for feeding me, Tony!"

Staci yells with sudden gratitude, gazing at empty trail mix snack packs crumpled alongside the rows of empty water bottles on the nightstand.

"My pleasure! I would have cooked for you but vending machine snacks will have to suffice. For tonight, at least!"

With nostalgia in his eyes, Tony thinks back to an ineffable childhood moment. One of pure innocence and fun.
"Reminds me of when I was a little kid."

Tony thinks back to little Tony....

Chapter 20

Tony is up to bat playing whiffle ball with six of the neighborhood kids in a lower income development court. Three giant oak trees in a triangular formation tower over the grass and double as first, second and third base. The pitcher flings the ball and seven year old Tony smacks it clean over the center fielder's head. The children clamor as he sprints towards the first oak and quickly dashes to second. The center fielder picks up the ball and lobs it into the infield just as Tony is racing to third. The third baseman catches the ball and tags him right after his hand touches the base. He’s safe! He leans over and pants with his hand firmly on the tree bark.

“I can picture it now like it was yesterday.”

He remarks with great joy back in the motel room. Staci listens intently while Danny wonders quietly to himself, does this guy ever shut the hell up? A beautiful woman in her mid-thirties stands near the screen door behind home plate smoking a Virginia Slim cigarette. She beholds the children at play. Her hair is big, curly and brown, and her fashion sense is quite casual and contemporary. Her face shows great concern. She hoped the heat and humidity wouldn't be getting the best of her little boy's asthma. Of course she didn't want to embarrass him in front of his friends so she leaves him be but was ready
and alert if at any given moment things got out of hand. She did pride herself at being on guard against all of the unruly elements seeking to consume so indiscriminately and without warning. Behind her, and seemingly overlooked sat a young girl in the far left corner of the living room; hunched over playing intently with Barbie dolls. She arranges them around an empty doll house. One Ken doll is smeared with lipstick and his body is broken in half. The little girl looks down at him with glee before staring at the back of her mother's big head of hair with great resentment. All of the attention her sickly little brother was getting was making her sick! There was no father figure to be found save for the broken bride of Barbie, Ken. The living room, decked out with peeling red wallpaper surrounds her.

To her right sat a corded cable box remote sunk low into the carpet with a wire running towards a 19 inch color Zenith atop
a mahogany entertainment center. The ending of a kitschy Mount Airy Lodge commercial broadcasts out. Two lovers embrace in a heart shaped Jacuzzi filled with soap suds and God only knows what else! A female quartet sings the Come to Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge jingle in perfect harmony. The next commercial has a sharp dressed man wearing a business suit and a large Jewfro humbly imploring his viewers to purchase his children's furniture, guaranteeing it's the best value on the local market. Just round the corner, he boldly proclaims. An 8-track player gathers dust on two shelves below the TV set, and a newly manufactured top-loading VCR sits on the shelf just above it. A handful of Panasonic branded video cassettes are scattered about with handwritterns label categorizing their recently recorded broadcasts. A wood-veneered VCS game console with a Pac-Man cartridge loaded in, and tangled joystick cables remain unused on the thick burgundy rug below the TV, VCR and 8-track. The Rooms Plus commercial ends. The WPIX 11 station identification break appears with it's character font overlaying above the lower manhattan skyline. The twin towers are prominently displayed. A masculine voice over announcer boldly proclaims.

“And now back to our regularly scheduled Saturday Matinee, which as always, the whole family can enjoy!"

The little girl grabs Ken's lower torso and throws it against the wall. The 1933 black and white classic King Kong resumes. The
giant gorilla peers through the high rise bedroom window at Anne Darrow.

“This all just seems like a bad dream.”

Darrow proclaims, deeply unsettled. She had a sneaking suspicion of being observed by big, predatory eyes. Just then, Kong’s ginormus banana hand smashes through the glass, shattering it to pieces. He snatches up the heroine as she screams in despair.
Tony eats the last Oreo back in the motel room. A new sense of longing overcomes Staci. She remarks quite smitten.

“That’s amazing how one smell can flood the brain! So many vivid memories!”

Tony smiles when he sees Staci smiling. She inhales the aroma of fresh oak and recalls her own fond memories of youth which sadly seemed so long ago. Sweet innocence where have you gone, she wondered. She looks over to the Danny laying lifeless
on his red raft next to his crumpled bikini rag. She swivels back to Tony and her contempt is quickly tempered as she watches him continue cutting triangles into his snack sized Oreo’s. So trivial but cute she thought to herself. Such a goof!

"It’s really great to see you by the way! I’ve tried getting in touch with you countless times but I never got any response!"

Tony looks up momentarily forcing a slight smile but doesn’t say anything. He resumes his box cutting.

“What's new? Small world, huh? Reunited because of Danny!"

She pauses to make sure her words are thoughtful and true.

"Believe me, I completely understand. But I miss you. We all do. How are you?"

Tony looks up again and thinks it over.

"I'm okay."

He looks back down.

"I guess."

He remarks unconvincingly.

“How’s school going?”

Staci asks curiously. Tony chuckles.

“Not so good!”

“Are you still going to classes?”

"No, not really."
Tony chucks the empty Oreo box into the garbage can.
"Except Latin. I’m probably going to fail out at the end of the semester."

“What have you been doing with yourself?”

She asks gently. He sits up and gives her his undivided attention.

“Not much. Working on my music a lot lately. Writing a bit as well. Trying to figure it all out, I guess. Have to get a job. I'm holding onto the hope that all of this isn't in vain."

He pauses and thinks back briefly to his mother and sister. The image of him playing wiffle ball with his friends in the courtyard fades forward to those recent college days. Alone in his filthy dorm room filled with despair.
"Every rose has a thorn."

Tony sits hunched over a silver synthesizer wearing oversized deejay headphones attempting to coax emotions out of an expensive and indifferent piece of music technology. An altar of sorts prostrating himself towards. He's pale and pasty with long messy hair and by the looks of it hasn’t showered or shaved in weeks. He tweaks an assortment of knobs to filter and oscillate
the arpeggiated loop, and also adjusts the volume levels with eight sliders at the center of the unit; one for each track. The harsh digital signal does a poor job at emulating any sort of analogue warmth while blasting into his eardrums at an unhealthy volume. The filthy dorm room is filled with empty food containers, unwashed shirts and cracked CD cases strewn about. A small millipede, about an inch long in the lower left corner observes. In still silence.

“Usually I’ll stay up all night. Taking a couple breaks here and there but I've been pretty obsessed lately!”

The digital clock radio on the night stand reads 3:01 A.M. Tony lays on his messy bed watching a syndicated rerun of Small Wonder. The fake laugh track amuses him more than anything.

“In the morning, I’ll listen to some Howard.”

The digital clock radio now reads 6:01 A.M.

“Good morning, everybody!”

Howard's deep and booming voice squeals through the tinny radio alarm clock.

“I'll go to breakfast at seven. When the dining hall opens.”

Tony wanders alone on a paved campus walkway right before dawn. He enters the dining hall in pajama sweatpants and with deep, dark circles under his eyes, greeted by a campus employee still getting settled at her post. She looks at him with
slight pity and after swiping his dining hall card he walks up the stairs with a furious indifference to her or anyone else.

“I’m pretty much the only one there.”

He picks up various breakfast items from the buffet line and sits at an empty table. He looks out the window and notices the sun rising. The dining hall clock reads 7:03 A.M. He digs into the huge amount of food on his plate, including eggs, French toast, bacon as well as a heaping serving of home fries. This does cheer him up a bit. He chugs a large glass of orange juice and attempts to remain stoic and strong after being unexpectedly blindsided by the recent events.

“I’ll head back to my room after breakfast and listen to some more Howard.”

With his stomach quite full he walks along another concrete campus trail. Two attractive college girls approach. He puts his head down and doesn't look back up until they pass. Before long he's back in bed all alone listening to Howard, along with a few after breakfast donuts thrown in for good measure! The clock radio reads 7:33 A.M and by the time it's 8:22 A.M. he's out like a light. Staci looks quite distressed after hearing these sad state of affairs. She also now suspected where much of his weight gain has come from!

“Have you been going out? Keeping in touch with the rest of your family?"

She looks over to the empty Oreo box in the garbage can.
"Brushing your teeth before bed?"

“No, not really. Pretty much all by myself lately. I usually go to the library when I wake up in the evening to read. Nothing to do with any of my classes, however!"

Tony looks over at Danny's lifeless body on the raft, imagining him drifting aimlessly out to sea.

"I sleep through most of them anyway."

Tony, alone in the college library on an empty floor with endless rows of shelves has his head buried in an autobiography of one favorite filmmakers, Stanley Kubrick. He reads intently, wanting to learn everything about the behind the scenes processes of some of his favorite films. Other books are piled up as well. The vast majority are filmographies or biographies of his other favorite filmmakers such as Spielberg and Gilliam. He puts his hand over his stomach and powerwalks into the bathroom holding the making of the Raiders of Lost Ark. Right after finishing his doody and chapter 3, he flushes. He brings the book back to the desk and chucks it as the water whirlpool gets sucked down. He exits the library steps and walks to his 1987 Honda Accord hatchback parked in front of an expired meter. He's greeted by yet another parking ticket which he crumples up and discards with the others in the back seat. It's late.

“I drive around thinking I’m going find something, or someone to end the way I feel.”
He night drives with emotional trance music blasting out of his subpar car stereo speakers.

"Something ultimate and fulfilling."

The trees glide by softly as cars wiz past violently. He pulls into a Blockbuster parking lot. A used tissue floats down softly onto the pavement when he opens the door. He steps onto it unknowingly. It remains stuck to his sneaker as he walks into the store, soon passing by a beautiful and brown haired young woman with bright blue eyes standing behind the counter sorting through returned rentals. Their eyes meet for a brief moment. He continues right past her and begins to casually browse. The VHS video cassettes sitting behind their cases are arranged by genre and sub-sorted in alphabetical order. After scouring a good while and thoroughly examining the front and back covers to obtain their viewing merit, he narrows his selections down to three. Stanley Kubrick's 2001's Space Odyssey, the George Lucas produced Howard the Duck, and last but not least the low-budget 80's cult classic Reform School Girls. He walks up to the checkout counter, quite satisfied with his choices and places the boxes below the beautiful, and young clerk's face. She glances over his selections and nods her head in approval while gazing at him with a sparkle in her eye. He smiles warmly and hands her over his mother's Blockbuster card. She proceeds to ring him up professionally before he goofy foots it out the store, hopping on his toes with a renewed zip to his step. Quite anxious to return back to his dorm room
and pop one of these choice flicks into his top loading and quite durable VCR taken with him from home. It was either Howard the Duck or 2001, he wasn't sure, but would figure it out on the drive back! Danny sits up in the motel room, unable to drift off due to Tony's long-winded tale and now felt compelled to share something personal as well. Perhaps to get him to shut the hell up already!

"I think about Rob all the time."

He remarks without emotion. His eyes harden.

"I try not to. I try to block it out of my mind but it’s always there. Ready to resurface at any given moment. Like a barbed wired fence implanted deep under my skin."

Staci begins scratching her arm nervously. Danny continues.

"It was over five years ago but I remember it like it was yesterday. If I’m really honest, I still blame myself for what happened."

Chapter 21

"You said you never cried after that day. That can't be healthy, Danny. It wasn’t your fault, you know that!"

Staci pleads with great concern. Danny responds bitterly.

“I didn’t accept him for who he was.”
He thinks back to his identical twin Rob standing next to him in line for a brand new rollercoaster at an amusement park a short drive from their home town.

The park, celebrating it's ten year anniversary has countless families strolling about. The rides are filled, the lines long and the whole scene is bursting with positive energy. A little girl walks past Danny and Rob, hand in hand with her father. An aroma of deep fried carnival food fills the air. Happy families are consumed in good, clean and wholesome fun. Danny isn't impressed. Their parents had dropped them off earlier and trusted him to look after his younger brother. A tad of resentment stewed within. Until recently, they were like two peas in a pod. Rob was born several minutes after and
moderate oxygen deprivation was the most likely explanation for his clinical slowness. Whatever he lacked in neuron firing power, however, was made up a hundred fold by the size of his heart. He wanted to give smiles to other people who frowned. Or at least try. He was so self doubting that he thought these efforts were in vain but continued trying nonetheless since deep down he knew that it was the right thing to do. He was becoming increasing manic since the onset of puberty, though, and he and his brother were slowing drifting apart. Danny grew more serious and self aware, chiefly concerned with impressing the ladies. Rob didn't seem too interested in that. He was more concerned about what was truly going on. On the inside. He didn't understand why some the girls who used to be so kind and gentle towards him were becoming increasingly nasty and controlling. Ever since they started to develop lumps they were becoming big lumps themselves! He giggles and spins around impatiently while waiting to get on the new rollercoaster. This line is moving so slow. It's taking forever! After twirling for some time he becomes quite dizzy and falls flat onto his butt. Dazed, confused and consumed with too much sweets, he looks over to another adolescent boy with a similar mental capacity as he. The boy, eating cotton candy with half of it getting into his ears, air kisses over to Rob.

"I wub, wub, wub you."

Rob gets excited and farts while winking back. Danny grabs his arm, scolding him harshly.
“Right at the age when I was becoming interested in girls he was becoming interested in boys. I didn’t accept this. How could I? Besides we were identical twins. What would people think about me?”

Tony rolls his eyes.

"I’d have friends over and he'd always be up to something to embarrass me.”

The bedroom door swings open. Rob charges in with oversized headphones and tightie whiteys. Two Of Hearts crackles into his eardrums as Danny watches in petrified horror as this trespassing pest fast approaches. His girlfriend ducks underneath the covers as Danny jumps up enraged.

“What's the matter with you? Get the hell out of here you freak!"

Rob runs out of the room with his arms flailing.

"Two of hawts, two hawts that beat as one. I wub, wub, wub you, my big bwudda!"

"He always needed to be around me. To be taken care of. I felt like he was a parasite sometimes.”

Staci gently caresses his arm.

“He was his own person, Danny. Even if he was a bit slow.”

Danny grows a bit teary eyed.
“He did want to make me proud. He knew I was the normal one. He wanted to be normal, too. But he wasn’t. And was beginning to sense it. Well, at least since he started to go through puberty. He was the hardest on himself."

"Pubic hairs ahr stupid hairs!"

Rob mutters, looking down his underwear and growing angry at his sprouts.

"All I do is huht peopul now. My big bwudda wilb neva wub me, anymahhr!"

I was very judgmental with him at times. Wanting him to act a certain way. So not to embarrass me. Or himself. Or the family."

Staci sighs.

"He only wanted me to accept him, and to love him."

Flashback Danny yells at Rob locked in the bathroom.

"Stay out of our room when I have company! Go spin off a cliff, you freakin' cookoo bird!"

"I wub you, Danny! I'm so sawry, my big bwudda! Please wulb me!"

Rob gazes at his reflection in the mirror. He senses he's different and begins sobbing uncontrollably.

"Stewped penis head. Why you so stewped! Be smaht and more normull so big bwudda Danny wilb wub you."
He hits the glass with a closed fist, grunting in rage.
"He grew more depressed and alone. I was the hardest on him."

Danny inhales.

"I would always make fun of him. Call him names. Stupid or gay. To get his act straight already."

He exhales and bites his lip.

"One morning, Rob woke up sick. Or so he said. Mom let him stay home from school that day."

Rob stares at the ceiling on the top bunk. Danny ignores him completely, fixing his hair in the bedroom mirror, marveling at his fair and chiseled, Germanic-Celtic features. He puts his brush down on the dresser next to a photograph of Rob and him as infants. It's corner is slightly torn. Finally he touches the dresser three times before leaving the room.

"I remember coming home from school like it was yesterday."

Danny walks his bike across the street after a quick stop at the neighborhood Rec center. A loud thump is soon heard. He freezes.

"I caught it from the corner of my eye."

He swings left. A body is laid out. Twisted. Head implanted into the concrete.
"Either the spirit must trample on the flesh or else the flesh will trample on the spirit."

Danny rubs his eyes and grows ever more stoic.

"I’ll never forget the site of the body. The way the legs and arms were laid out. Odd and anatomically incorrect. Blood pooling out from the skull. I froze."

Staci lets out a slow sigh. A television commercial begins broadcasting above their heads for a new and improved Barbie doll. She gently places her hand on his shoulder. The
commercial is followed by King Kong resuming. Poor Anne Darrow is flung around like a rag doll. Danny passes over the tragic moment in his mind's eye once more and fixes his gaze onto the lifeless body. Deep dread overcomes him. He lets go of his bike. It drops to the ground. He approaches.

"I realized it was him when I recognized the hooded sweatshirt. Rob always wore one. That's when I knew for sure. I didn't want to know. I wanted to wake up. This wasn't really happening, I kept thinking to myself. It was just one of those really bad dreams where you wake up right before they get you. But it wasn't me they had come for. It was him. And it wasn't a dream. It was all too real. And cruel. A nightmare that I live every day."

A large thorn bush sticks out in the foreground. Danny approaches. Staci tries to console him, and from the bottom of her heart.

"You have to stop living in that moment, Danny. You keep playing it over and over in your mind. That's not good, or healthy. You can wake up from the nightmare. He's in a better place. Why can't you truly believe that?"

Danny isn't convinced. His voice grows cold and monotone.

"One of the nicknames I gave him was Robbie Rob 'n' hood. He hated that. He thought I was making fun of him. But I wasn't. It was a term of endearment that he had a hard time grasping due to his slow mind."
Rob kneels next to the body.

"I turn him over. Blood is pooling out of his mouth and onto his favorite sweatshirt. He was still alive."

Rob looks up to his big brother. The jumping killer whale logo, blood stained and ruined, just like him it seemed, was all too much for thirteen year old Danny. This wasn't part of the game plan. His soul is shattered and he doesn't know what to do except to never let go. Robbie, Rob 'n' Hood hopes that he never does.

"He looked up at me so desperately."

With all of the strength he can muster, Rob whispers heartfelt words through labored breathing.

"Danny. I. I. I wub you. Wid all ma haht. My big bwudda."

He closes his eyes and passes away in his big brother's arms.

"More than anything he wanted me to help him. To love him. All he ever wanted was for his big brother to accept him and to love him for who he was. Unconditionally."

Danny fights back tears once more and swallows hard. The coldness creeps back as he recalls the events robotically and stiff.

Danny's eyes are dead in the motel room as he recalls sobbing uncontrollably with Rob's lifeless body in his arms. Life is too much. Love is too hard. He wasn't sure he wanted to be a part this nonsense any longer. He calculates in his mind that his heart couldn't take the abuse.

"The sick thing is a large part of me at the time felt a huge sense of relief. A weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I wasn't going to have to take care of him any longer. For whatever scientific, and mathematical reason, nature decided that I was the stronger of the two and that he was expendable."

Danny grins slightly.

"Survival of the fittest. That scene plays out in my mind almost daily. I try to change the channel but it won't let me. It's all the same. His face and the fall. Like a endless, syndicated sitcom rerun. Absurd and ultimately pointless."

Tony looks over to those old yentas sassing it up and thinks what a poor analogy that was. But he did understand the point Danny was trying to make!

"It's just mother nature revealing her true face. Indifferent to our pain and suffering. Only the strong survive, and with no help from her, mind you!"

Staci raises her hand off of his shoulder and softly hugs him with tears streaming down her face, truly empathizing with his pain and suffering.
"You know it was an accident, Danny. He didn’t jump. It was the screen. One of his manic episodes! It got away from him. He loved you more than anything. He didn’t want to end his life. You have to make the decision to let it go. You can't spend the rest of your life beating yourself up over it. You've grown cold. And indifferent. And you've become very nasty to other people. Especially those who care about you. Hint, hint!"

She puts her right hand above her chest, next to her heart.

"We only want to help you. To see you forgive yourself. And to forgive your brother. And your parents. And God! He's in a better place, Danny. Believe it!"

Danny's eyes cross. He looks disaffected and deranged.

"The only thing I really believe is that Mother Nature can be a real cold hearted bitch. Adapt or perish. He was slow and had little or no value according to the laws of the jungle."

Even though he was a big jerk, Staci still held onto the hope that they both could change for the better. Self pity and selfishness did indeed go hand in hand. Truly the pits.

"He was a human being, Danny. You just can't discard that truth. Or his memory. Or all of the joyful memories that he and you shared together while he walked alongside his big bwudda, right down here on earth."

She caresses Danny's hair.
"He's your mother's son, Danny. He's your twin. Perhaps it's more of a garden than a jungle."

The valve appears to have been completely sealed off from Danny's heart, however, and he doesn't bite off much of what she's asking him to chew.

"You're right, I can't. But I must."

He swipes her arm off and turns his back on her.

"He was a thorn in my side when he was alive. Now he's gone. Forever. I just have to evolve past it. Once I get all of the thorns out I'll be home free."

He lays on his back and stares at the ceiling. What happened to Danny was heartbreaking and beyond words but it wasn't a manifestation of God's evil, cruel indifference or even non-existence but rather something ultimately bittersweet and mysterious. God is love but His ways are not ours. The good Lord gives and the good Lord takes away. All for our sanctification. A battle of spirit and flesh. It perhaps didn't seem fair to Danny but his continued negative choices due to his own unreconciled family wounds would have negative consequences in and of themselves down the line. Perhaps the death of Rob was some mysterious act of Fatherly mercy and he was now truly in a better place. Staci's emerging mothering instincts tried to lead Danny into this somber revelation but his thickheaded stubbornness refuses to budge. Just then, a new Mount Airy Lodge commercial broadcasts above their heads
and with an even sleazier heart-shaped Jacuzzi. Consumed with his own miseries, Danny is unable to look beyond himself and towards the big picture. That without fail, the safest direction home is that every sorrow will lead to greater joy IF one chooses to offer it up and live suffering well. You can't go on hurting others and expect to heal yourself in the first place! The sacred wounds verbalized by Danny and Tony unearth some of Staci's own, hidden deep within. She starts to think that perhaps by not dealing with the cruelty imposed on her in an appropriate manner it only made the folks around her suffer more than anything. She hated the way Danny made her feel when being mean and selfish, and it suddenly dawned on her that perhaps other folks didn't like it when she acted that way towards them. Duh! Her pushover mentality would often swing into utter and despicable tyranny by wanting to bite someone's head off with vicious verbal venom and she had yet to learn what true, humble and assertive behavior really meant. Not a doormat to be walked on, nor doing the walking on, high above on a pedestal. Common sense, really. She couldn't bury her demons. They couldn't be wished away. She sits there silently somber. Downcast. One thorn in her flesh she didn't like to think about, let alone discuss, but always seemed to resurface in one way or another, and was casting a dark shadow upon her soul, she now wanted to bring to light. Get it out into the open. Offer it up. A hunger to get onto that yellow brick road of true healing was beginning to consume her. The hour was getting late.
"I have this recurring nightmare which I can't seem to shake. I’m watching TV and getting ready for bed when my step-dad walks in."

Chapter 22

Staci lays atop her New Kids sheets above her twin sized bed gazing at her pink, 13 inch color television set. The room is filled with pink and purple pop culture artifacts, giving everything an innocent and flowery character. The local station's identification break wishes everybody a happy 4th of July, ending with a brief display of spectacular fireworks before the regularly scheduled program resumes. It's an old black and white Hollywood romance film with the scene picking up on the
beach. A newly wedded couple stands hand in hand below a lighthouse at sunset.

"Use your imagination. Hold onto my love."

The narrator's voice booms in an old fashioned, authoritative manner over a sweeping romantic string orchestra recorded in patented, low-fidelity two-track electra-phana-fone technology. The man embraces his bride in a magical kiss as they fall gently onto the sand. A perfect wave rushes up and soaks them, and the scene freeze frames as the credits roll over their warm embrace. Staci's imagination soars, her eyes sparkle, and tears of joy stream down her face as she pictures herself as that deeply cherished woman being swept off of her feet. How special will her honeymoon be. The bride and groom’s undying love finally consummated. Her purity lost to a good man. Someone she appreciates and never takes for granted of course! Perhaps one day they'll even have an overpriced summer home overlooking the beach just like in this schmaltzy Hollywood romance! It was magical, broadcasting out timeless images over a cable running through the ground, up and into her bedroom. Everything just seemed right and perfect to twelve year old Staci's eyes. Life was good and couldn't get much better. Just then, the door creaks open. A gruff man stumbles in wearing worn blue jeans and a ragged hunting cap along with a thick, unkempt mustache next to a big mole on his left cheek. As he clings to a Schlitz beer can, appearing drunk and wobbly, he chugs what's left in the aluminum and crushes
it in his pink, pickled and greasy palm. He belches viciously before grinning and revealing missing teeth imbedded loosely into rotted, purple gums. He's wearing a brown gravy stained T-shirt advertising a local mechanic shop. A decal with a kart breaking through a chain linked fence with a slogan above in bold font, reads..

"Get Turbocharged!"

It's the last clear image Staci remembers before disassociating herself. The rain begins to fall. The credits come to a close. Sinister, imposing music from the Saturday Night Frights preview fills her room. Lightning flashes. A thunderclap shatters the window glass. Her bed is shaken to the core. Her voice is muffled with the man's filthy paw before she can scream.

"I try to get up and run but my feet and legs cramp. I try to pull myself out of the window but he grabs me before I can reach it. I grow numb. I don't fight it. I usually wake up in time but not always."

She begins to cry hysterically back in the motel room. Her memory fades to black.

"God damn you, John! Rot in hell, you sick and evil son of a bitch!"

She reaches over to the nightstand, hands shaking, nicking her finger on the corner in the process before grabbing her Xanax bottle. A splinter digs in as a single blood drop co-agulates on the surface of the flesh. She huffs before popping another half
of the anxiety reducing pill, which ironically causes more
anxiety in the long-run due to reducing the body's natural
capacity to produce dopamine in the first place. After chugging
some water she wipes the blood onto a tissue and attemps, in
vain, to pull the splinter out.

"I try to block it out of my mind. I've cried and cried and cried,
but I'm still so angry at him. The injustice! I can't even
remember his face anymore. The only clear image left in my
mind is that God forsakened, stupid go-kart t-shirt he wore!"

She folds her arms over her chest.

"I hate him, I hate him, and I wish him to hell!"

Tony sits like a deer in headlights as she continues to sob her
eyes out. Danny sits up and gently puts his arm over her
shoulder. She looks at him and smiles through her tears and
uncrosses her arms before putting her hand near his crotch.

"You know, there's something I have to tell you."

She whispers, eyeing him coyly. He looks over curiously and
aroused.

"Oh yeah, what is it babe?"

"I'm pregnant!"

She shouts through tears of joy. Danny's smirk quickly fades.
She squeezes him tightly. He hugs her back loosely. She
affectionately pecks at his neck while Tony looks on nauseated.
Danny softly, but insincerely asks.
"When did you find out about this, babe?"

"Not even a week ago!"

She screeches, keeping at her aggressive pecks. Tony literally wants to vomit.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Danny asks while trying to hide his discomfort at the unwelcome news and her pecking.

"I don't know. I didn't know if I was going to keep it or not!"

She shrieks. Danny tempers his response with some more false gentleness.

"Are you, sweetheart?"

Staci responds cautiously but excitedly and wholeheartedly.

"Yes! I want to! And I want us to be together!"

After what seems like an eternity, Danny forces some more fake responses out of his pie hole.

"Me too baby, me too!"

"I love you. Soon to have your baby, baby."

Staci whispers into his ear. He whispers back disingenuously.

"I love you, too."

He didn't truly mean it and perhaps neither did she. Although a bonding hormone called oxytocin is released after a woman has sex which ultimately attaches the bride to the groom, preparing
her for nurturing motherhood. Danny was going to be 'it's' father after all and all of this bi-polar clinginess was in part rooted in a desire that he'd man up and do the right thing for her and the child's sake. That and chasing him for her own selfish reasons, of course! The chemical is absent in men and they have to decide through free will if they wanted to become faithful husbands and fathers, or not. Danny didn't sign up for this when meeting Staci at the local bar but figured he was trapped for the time being and would make the most of it. In one way or another. At least until an opportunity for permanent escape presented itself. The local abortion clinic flashes into his mind for a brief moment. Progress! He becomes aroused thinking of all the shameful things she let him get away with. He's sure that he'll be able to convince her to abort the parasite in the near future, and all through the powers of his almighty reasoning. Quite ignorant of the fact, however, that much of this reasoning depended on where the blood was flowing at any given moment. That was too deep a thought to ponder since his was running low. Her flesh will suffice for the night. He looks over to Tony, flushed.

"Do you mind going outside, chief?"

Tony responds in utter disbelief.

"Are you serious?"

Danny laughs.

"Just give me five minutes!"
Staci shoots over a disapproving look.
"Better make it ten! Don't want to disappoint the old lady!"

He chuckles. Staci, bitterly aroused, smacks his arm. Tony reluctantly rises up and off his chair. He figured he didn't have much of a choice. Nature was calling and he didn't want to get caught in the line of hellfire!

"We're all in a stormy sea and owe each other a terrible loyalty." - G.K. Chesterton

Chapter 23

It's now morning. Tony rises up from his chair and opens the shades. The darkness has lifted. The sun is shining. The storm has passed! Everything is peaceful. He doesn't believe it! He heads outside to double check. The weather is indeed wonderful and warm. What a grace! He yawns and stretches with a big grin on his face, quite content at this beautiful turn of events. He walks back inside with a renewed zip to his step to wake his fellow travelers up to the good news. He calls out their names but neither budge. He calls out a second time, and much louder, but still the same. Nada, nothing. Zero. They lay motionless on the red and green rafts covered over in white sheets. Tony panics. He shakes Staci violently, screaming into her face. His heart drops. She's dead! Just then, an avalanche of water comes crashing through the window. The two rafts
slowly drift apart from the rising sea water. Suddenly, a loud banging is heard. The water, now up to Tony's waist, has him wonder; do I bail without her? Maybe she's still alive! He heartwrenchingly pulls her off the raft and away from Danny, attempting to escape out of the shattered window with her by his side. He glances at Danny's rigomortus hand just as the force of the incoming rapids submerges Staci underneath the vortex. Escape seemed futile! Before long the room is filled to the brim like a fish tank. Danny's body is pushed off the raft and into the water when reaching the ceiling. He floats aimlessly above Staci as Tony kicks and screams against the current. His body is pulled back into the chair he was asleep in only moments prior, and like a feather he loses his grip on the woman he secretly loved, and clung to. He watches helplessly as her body floats back to Danny. Tony's no match for the tide which soon has him curled up in a fetal positon against his will. The two lifeless bodies animated by the water float above him. His eyes fade. He'll let this mysterious force have its way with him. Fighting it only made things worse. He gave it his all and he had nothing left to give. Staci was dead. His mother was dead. Everything worth living for was dead. At least in his mind. There was nothing left to suffer for. He lets go and is at peace. He closes his eyes and grows weary. He drowns. Staci and Danny disintegrate into particles and float around his illuminated body somewhere between a twilight space of magnificent hues of blue. Crystal blue faces. Crystal blue
animals. Crystal blue emotions. Everything was blue. Some bright and some dark but there was no other color.

It seemed this blue world was safe from the extremes of the black void of nothingness and the blinding white light of everything. It was somewhere between too little and too much. Tony felt more loved in this one moment then he ever thought humanly possible. But in this netherworld he worried about the other two, cast deeper into the void. Tiny and insignificant firmaments. He wanted them to feel the love that he was receiving. The closest he'd ever come to this unconditional acceptance was when being fed supper at the dinner table by his loving mother when he was a toddler. He was there with the
others, but also alone and for the first time in his life deeply understood his mother's infinite joy and well as her deep and incalculable sorrow. Impossible to adequately describe but ultimately he felt safe and protected as long as little Tony kept his heart in the right place. God never promised us freedom from suffering but did promise the freedom redemptive suffering would bring. Then all would be well. Never doubt and always have faith in Our Heavenly Father's grace. Trust was, is and always would be the road to everything joyful and worth having. One is more blessed when giving after all. Tony was truly starting to believe it. No fear. It was all in God's hands. He would always make a way where there seemed to be none. The finite human perception tended to doubt since life could be scary and unsettling after all. Mankind's fall from grace and the subsequent sin begot a world filled with selfish goats. Tony reaches for the dust. He wanted to save his friends. Now more than ever. Just then, his eyes open. He's in the same chair in the same motel room with the same uncertainty he had right before his pleasant, reassuring vision of endless hope. Life was aspirational after all! He kicks, screams and jumps up. The window isn't shattered! The motel room isn't filled to the brim like a fish tank! Danny and Staci aren't dead! Confused and disoriented, Tony observes his surroundings to see what the heck was going on! The two were still sound asleep on their separate rafts covered over with white sheets and both dry as a teetailers. Staci's heavy snoring and Danny's nightmare farts lets Tony know that everything was alright. Relatively speaking
at least! Tony looks outside and soon realizes, however, that the unrelenting storm was still raging, they were still stranded on the boardwalk, and it was still nighttime. You take the good, you take the bad...oh well! The water rushing in was only in his dream but the very loud knocking was, and is very real. The knocking is soon accompanied by screaming and then shrieking. Someone's at the door! Danny and Staci jump up. Echos of a weak, passive gentleman begging for mercy bounce off the four walls. With eyes locked on the door handle, the three are overcome with dread.

Chapter 24

"What the hell!"
Staci screams, rushing to cover up her nearly naked body.
"Shhhh, don't yell!"
Danny yells as he fumbles to find his pants.
"We have to do something!"
Tony shouts, scrambling to gather up his own possessions.
"Yeah, get the hell out of here!"
Danny counters contentiously.
"No, I mean what if he's being killed? We have to help him!"
Tony remarks as the guttural screams pierce his eardrums. Staci dresses with great paranoia as the others follow suit. "If we go out there and try to help him we'll be next. Now shut the hell up!"

Danny whispers loudly and throws an empty bag of trail mix into Tony's bastard face. The man continues pounding on the door, pleading. "Please, please help me! I know somebody's in there! Please help!!"

Just then, a blood curdling cry is heard as the man begins choking on his own blood. Staci begins to hyperventilate. The man is being murdered! She and Danny quickly, but quietly, move off their rafts and tippy toe towards Tony near the front left corner of the room. Out of sight from the window and the half opened blinds. Tony holds up his hunting knife, attempting to remain steadfast. They huddle close and remain stone-still, waiting and anticipating the intruders next move. Staci labors to remain silent as she clamps her mouth shut with both hands. Footsteps approach the window. A sense of foreboding overcomes her. Someone, or even stranger yet something is looking through the glass. Each moment feels an eternity. Her bodies stiffens like a corpse. The footsteps depart. She exhales. Just then, a loud thud. Staci screams in horror. The killer is breaking through the glass! A second thud. Then a third. Danny and Tony eye each other desperately. What do we do? The
knife falls out of Tony's hand, clanking hard onto the dingy floor. He scoops it up while screaming.

"What now?"

"You've got the knife! I thought you overcame your fears, chief!"

Danny mocks, pounding his chest like a gorilla. Staci facepalms. So much for chivalry! Apparently Tony's courage went just as fast as it came. The thumping stops. An eerie silence. Tony’s head turns. The door knob is turning. The killer has a skeleton key! It creaks open. Tony lunges, slamming it shut and immediately re-locking it. Without hesitation, he pushes the chair in front for an extra layer of protection.

"Let's jump out of the bathroom window!"

Just as he's finishing offering that humble, chaste suggestion, the window shatters.

"Good idea!"

Staci shouts and once in the bathroom, they lock the door, beelining it towards the window. Tony's heavy foot accidentally knocks over the complimentary love lotions neatly lined up across the Luv tub’s rim but he ignores the fallout from his heavy foot while frantically attempting to open the window. It doesn’t budge. Crusty goo! Just then a gentle knocking is heard outside of the bathroom door. The creep is creeping closer! Staci retreats to the corner. She grabs a large bathroom towel, grasping it tightly as some sort of improvised security blanket.
Her face is overcome in fear and tears as Tony and Danny struggle mightily, loosening up the crust binded window. Only after applying a hefty amount of elbow grease does it budge. Danny reaches his hand out to Staci in a bit of change of character. She thinks to herself that maybe things will work out between the two of them after all! If they're not hacked up into pieces first! She throws the large and comfortable towel at Danny's a*shole face with both joy and rage.

"You go first, lover! In case someone is down there waiting. You can die while protecting me. Like a real man!"

She shoots Tony a controlling look.

"Tony has my back up here! Right?"

His big, expressive face is genuinely more frightened by her than the unruly intruder closing in fast.

"Of course, Mister Sister!"

He responds, knife trembling in hand. She smiles with great contentment before barking militantly back over to her so called caring and considerate boyfriend.

"I'll go second after you. After I know the coast is clear!"

"Love you too, babe!"

Danny hops, wiggles, and shoots his way out the window. He plummets head first into the garbage dump one story below just as the gentle knocking morphs into loud banging. Staci shoves Tony to the side and frantically squeezes through the
window next, leaping out like a madwoman, landing like a ton of bricks onto Danny below. Tony attempts to swiftly follow, but his fat, donut loving body gets stuck! The banging stops. Suddenly the wood splinters. The trespassing menace is chopping through with a pick axe! Tony rips out a huge fart from anxiety and as luck would have it, it deflates his stomach just enough for him to wiggle his way through. He plummets and nearly crushes his two friends but thank goodness barely misses. They clumsily scramble up and out of the water soaked trash heap and almost in unison hop out. They hit the ground. Water splashes before they can start running. The entire peninsula is beginning to flood! Staci swats garbage off her body as Danny wipes sludge off his face and Tony pulls spaghetti out of his hair. Staci's had enough and unloads on the bastards!

"I'm leading! I'm not going back onto that boardwalk. There's gotta be another way!"

"Has to be...wait nevermind. You heard what that stripper, bartender, or whatever the hell she was, is, said!"

Danny, disheveled and disheartened screams into her face. The rain continues to downpour.

"I don't care! What the hell does she know? Why do listen to skanks like her and not me, anyway? Let's go find a boat! I'll steal one if I have to! I'm heading towards the bay, and with or without you, lover!"
Staci yells with cold, bitter eyes penetrating the very depths of Danny's self-absorbed and manipulative soul. He wisely backs off and give her some much needed breathing room, letting her lead the way.

"A*shole!"

They sprint towards the bay through the ankle deep water, heavy winds, foggy mist and torrential downpour when suddenly, and without warning, solid silver chrome gates appear out of the mist. It stops them dead in their tracks. At least thirteen feet high, and with sharp arrow tips up top, Staci sticks her head between the gaps to get a closer look at to what secrets were locked away and just beyond her reach. She vaguely makes out row after row of glassy, condo-style townhouse units attached to one another. A mystery only enhanced by the pale blue moonlight refracting off their crystal white surfaces. Angular and with sharp edges, and themselves partially veiled due to the foggy mist, these two-story units encircled a single ivory tower shooting up at least three hundred feet into the air. Staci had never witnessed such stunning and symmetrical architecture before; dreamlike and majestical to her eyes. She just had to get in. Come hell or high water!
"Not all that glitters is gold."

Chapter 25

She begins banging on the gate door furiously, screaming and pleading for someone to let her into this most beautiful and unexpected sanctuary!

"You've got to help us! Someone is trying to kill us! Let us in! Please!"

A young woman rises from her bed. The commotion has shaken her out of her peaceful, solitary slumber. She sits up slowly and lifts her arm majestically, turning on the light from the lampstand. It reflects off of her odd, striking and triangulate face as she stretches and yawns before proceeding to run her hands down her silky white pajamas. The light reveals the room's interior; an odd marriage of 17th century baroque
merged with 1960's mod-futurism. Everything is a different shade of white. White chrome statues with white flowers in sleek white vases. There's also a peculiar, crystal doll house, all white, in the far left corner of the room. Four white bunk beds lined the walls. In every bed lay another woman a brighter shade of white than the next. Eight in total and each face triangular, humanoid and resembling a human, but slightly off. An uncanny valley perhaps. Ruthless competition for external beauty killed something deep within. Something more fundamental and below all fleshy surfaces. Hidden, yet ever so apparent. Spiritual and maternal. Kind even. A mother's warm, nurturing heart! There was something truly stiff and cruel about these cold and calculating fem-bots! The plastic woman rises from her white-lined bed and like a mechanical mynx marches to the window. She peers down at the three helpless peasants below in desperate need of mercy, standing behind the gates, observing them with detached eyes. They were the brightest aqua blue. Blue veins snaked just below the surface. A cold, cunning flow of sorts under pail, plastic flesh. Desperately clinging. A vicious lightning bolt snakes above the translucent tower as she continues looking down, nose up, towards those helpless wretches, exposed. She smirks, barely. Something to be observed from at safe distance. Just then, a loud thunderclap shakes the foundation of the tower, awakening the Queen. She purrs, growls and suddenly roars with a deep metallic cadence, shaking the room to its core. The woman by
the window turns in subordinate dread towards her matriarch master.

"What's going on. Out there? Disruptive noises!"

She growls robotically. The woman by the window responds similarly stiff, and with a cadence slightly higher pitched and a bit more feminine.
"Peasants. Seeking. Shelter."

A third woman joins in on the interaction; on the top bunk above the matriarch. Her cadence is similar to the others but with a timbre not only a tad more feminine but also with a tinge of compassion. Something seemingly lacking with the other two.

"Perhaps, help? Them. Yes! No?"

The matriarch chimes in aggressively.


The woman by the window agrees. Her retinas shrink. The woman on the top bunk, however, continues having small bytes of compassion.

"Wouldn't we help us? If one of us were. Trouble in? Yes, no?"

The matriarch will hear none of it.


She mechanically fondles her breast and without passion. The woman by the window resumes watching Staci and her companions huddled close in a triangular formation, attempting to stay warm. It tugs at her heart, albeit from a cold and detached distance.

She looks into her crystal mirror, gazing unmercifully at such a beautiful flesh filled creature. One would always be such a lonely number. Her singular nature truly longed for something more. Outside of itself. In which reason had no hope of ever truly comprehending. The slightly compassionate woman on the top bunk now not only felt bytes but also bits of shame, emerging spontaneously from just beyond her memory banks. Her conscience was attempting to resurface.

"Aren't we all created be-ing. Of Father? Creator! Yes! No?"

Unaware of any of this high and cerebral humanoid banter being processed up above, Staci remains down low, feet stuck in the mud, echoing heartfelt, sincere, and above all human pleas for help. With her feet sinking slowly in the saltwater from the incoming tide, she becomes demoralized, slouching over and leaning face first against the sleek, chrome gate. Tony steps behind her, putting his hand gently over her right shoulder.

"It's no use. There's no one in here. Or they just aren't letting us in. Either way, it appears we're not welcomed!"

He looks up and marvels at the wicked beauty of the crystal palace, piercing effortlessly through the dark clouds passing over the peninsula. He was highly doubtful that the workers who built such a striking structure were eating the fruits of
their hard earned labor, however! His gut told him that the occupants were the entitled daughters of exploitative wealth living it up in secular autonomy propped up by the boardwalk's low skilled, deviant masses of unfaithful laborers. Such an unsustainable, viscious cycle of sin! Staci isn't ready to concede defeat just yet. This was life she wanted to live. She really could get used to living in such a self-centered, motherless environment. It felt like a home to her! Something way more grand, glorious and 'white' than anything those tacky, self-centered and broken gay men could ever hope to muster. Sisters over brothers any day! Viva la feminism! Staci drools!

"Maybe I can climb in!"

Her retinas shrink as she looks up, gazing stiffly, computing in her mind what needed to be done to get into the club. She violently swipes Tony's brotherly hand off, figuring she'll just scoot her way up, clutching the pole with her clammy crotch but the sharp edges atop of each pole chastises her to the futility of it all. She huffs, puffs, and begins to throw a tremendous big cry baby tantrum for seeming to not get her way.

"There's no way! Do these people think they're better than us or something?"

Laughter bursts forth from Tony's pie hole. Staci swivels her head, eyes bulged and confused.

"What! What'd I say?"
"You were quite judgmental with that prostitute earlier!"
He not so gently rebukes her.

"I saw the disgust on your face. You couldn't even look her in the eyes!"

Staci concedes he does have a bit of a point but her pride was oscillating furiously with her humility in that moment. This wicked, crystal palace was so freaking inviting after all!

"I mean look at her! She was a mess!"

Staci yells back. Tony eyes her up and down as if to remind her of her own, melted down, current state of affairs. She sees what he's getting at.

"Oh! Okay. I get! Right. Like, who I am I to judge? That's good! You're such a saint, Tony! Why don't you go back and console that diseased ridden prostitute! Guido! Stud! Phony bologna! I know you'd like that, you twisted freak. I saw your creepy eyes in the strip club!"

Tony doesn't believe she's going there, but okay. What's done is done. He remains silent and let's her rip.

"Give me five minutes, Stay! You're such a class act. You're so much better than me! Let me bow down to high and mighty, short and fat Tony! Let me go fetch you some donuts before you start eating me. Or Danny. You pathetic loser. You'll probably just start eating yourself. Greasy monkey. Cannibal!"
You're nothing but a dog-faced, sh*t-headed turd. You're disgusting and I hate you!"

Tony remained poised. Her self-pitying, manic cruelty just deflected off of his thick skin anyway. He knew she was coming from a place of despair and forgave her. It was his duty, however, to be assertive and to stand his ground truthfully but with love. He responds brotherly and sarcastically.

"For better or worse, sister!"

Staci sees red and wants to strangle this impetuous bastard. How dare he continue contending with the Queen!

"Go jump off a cliff you worthless piece of garbage!"

After spitting those words of venom, Staci turns around and notices row after row of garbage, piled high and in rows behind Danny's face. What she said and how she said it echoed Danny's hate and scorn for his brother who did fall out of a window soon after he was wished dead. Her heart drops. Danny puts his head down, growing ever more bitter. Tony gets choked up but swallows hard and regains his composure. He silently ponders all that had gone wrong since his mother's passing, realizing what a cold and cruel world it could be. How the women in his life could be very nasty and unforgiving. It just made him miss his mom all the more. But he had to cut the cord in one way or another. He had to start showing Staci genuine compassion. Tough love. She needed it most! Anything she ever said to or about him could never make him feel any
worse about himself than he already did. He knew who he was and was striving everyday to get out of his father's shadow. To heal his family wounds. He didn't want to become sexually emasculated but at the same time knew his sexually exploitative Guido ways were only following in the same self-centered footsteps of his lothario dad! Perhaps that's why the women in his family had so much subconscious scorn towards him. Tony, of course, wasn't helping matters by becoming LIKE his dad! If he wanted true and everlasting legs in this world he'd have to become faithful to one woman, and until death due them part. It was the only truly right thing to do in the long run. For everyone's sake! The current situation was putting a tremendous amount of stress on each one of them but he's over it. He didn't want to be a Guido anymore. He wanted to take the journey towards humble, chaste family centered life.
His silent, forgiving face only enrages Staci further! Who the hell does this dude think he was? My daddy issues are sacred and I get to crap on whoever I want, whenever I want, and wherever I want! Regardless if they're looking out for my best interest or not. I want it all, and want it now!

"strive for progress, not perfection!"

end chapter here

"I did feel bad about it afterwards just so you know!"

Staci fires back.
"And look at us now!"

Tony yells back sarcastically. It suddenly dawns on Staci that perhaps the mercy she withheld from everyone was coming back to bite her in the butt. Up and over her head, the puffed up princess continues shunning the wretched filth.


She stares indifferently before staining the glass black with ink from her fingertip.


A spring pops from her brain. A cartoon slide whistle is heard. The wicked witch of the west theme plays for a passing moment. She walks stiffly over to her Queen, prostrating herself with passionless mechanics. The woman on the top bunk climbs down and is about to join in on the petting but looks over to the stained window instead. The fiber optic cables of her heart were still signaling beeping bytes and bits. A tiny red flash flickers above her breast. She desired something deeper. Beyond the pale flesh. The matriarch sees this and barks.

"Here, now! Bow down. Prostrate. Yourself. True. Sacrifice."

The woman looks at her and frightened out of her wits yet defiantly continues glancing through the window. A grey fog emerges. Her circuits were crossed! Greatly confused and
overloaded with conflicting input requests, she pleads with a bit more com-passion.


Her bits were being torn to bits! A tiny blue water droplet crystallizes above her plastic eyeball. The matriarch bitch responds with another deep, metallic growl and with her eyes flashing red.


Her legs open wide revealing an inverted golden triangle dripping blood.


A picture of Monica and Bill, shredded and sliced on the cold, crystal floor vibrates as the matriarch's growl morphs into something sensual. A rocky purr. Dollar bill signs, implanted into the crystal white tile, spread like fractal sperm bits from the side of Bill's torn up, and in decay, photograph. The matriarch looks over to a portrait of an Aryan king with a beautiful harem of young women, hanging over the dollhouse, in the far left corner. Wives, daughters; a mixture of both? Who
knew! In the right hand corner of the portrait was another portrait. Something small and seemingly insignificant. An old photograph of a peasant family with one man, one woman, and one child. How the heck did that sneak into here? So outdated and stifling, Queen Thunder-puss thinks to herself. She reaches over, laughing, snatching it away before ferociously crumpling it up into the palm of her plastic hand. She discards what remains without a second thought into the all consuming, white fire. "Filthy peasants. Keep reminding us. We'll keep forgetting."

The woman with the bits and bytes of compassion concedes defeat and draws close to her master. She prostrates herself alongside the other, joining in on the cold and ritualistic petting. Staci stands broken down in the pouring rain. Her heart breaks as she thinks back to all of the mercy she withheld from everyone on the boardwalk. That poor, roaming prostitute was just one sad example. When anything goes sexually it was truly women who lost the most in the long run. To be a nobody to anybody sure was rotten. Staci now wished that she would have opened up her heart to that broken down woman. Even just a warm ear to listen to her story. Staci herself had a lot of repressed anger at the neglect from her own biological father and was beginning to realize just how cold and heartless it was making her towards other women. One's on the margins especially. This present situation was now making her feel like one of them. The pits! So insignificant and unworthy. She thinks back to the man outside of the motel room. Refusing to let him
in. Survival at any cost. But at what price? His blood curling cries for help. Ignored. And now she felt tormented, thinking back to that old and gentlemanly sky-ride attendant looking at her ever so warmly. She grew disgusted once more, but now with herself. How mean and selfish she could be towards her poor mother, and to the rest of her family and friends. It was all becoming quite overwhelming. The weight of the world was beginning to crush her. She falls to her knees and begins to sob uncontrollably but this time for others.

"I'm so sorry, God! I'm so sorry for my selfish heart. Please forgive me!"

Her tears stream down into the salty sea puddling around the gates.

"I once was blind but now I see! Please Lord, my God, please, help me change! I can't do it myself! I don't want to live like this. It's not worth it. From the bottom of my heart, I'm truly sorry!"

Her tears mix with the rain falling into the muddy puddle, creating concentric circles that spread out and cancel themselves out almost as fast as they're formed. Staci wipes her eyes. One more teardrop falls.
Tony reaches his hand out and lifts her up. The blood stained onto the palm of his hand from tending to his calf wound earlier dilutes from her tears and the rain. The five other women observe the three petting as their pale, plastic flesh begins sticking to their beds. Underneath the portrait of the patriarch and his harem, scattered Barbie dolls are caked with white dust. Ken is nowhere to be found, save for a slightly modified version atop the dollhouse and wearing a wig, keeping an ever so watchful eye over his Queen-dom.

"Our purity. Utmost importance."

The matriarch purrs while adoring him. A minor queen in the shadow of the major.

"Men!"

Her stiff giggle clanks harshly. At the threshold of the dollhouse entrance lay shards of Ken's torn up leisure suits. His glory days
of using and abusing women were ancient history, never to be repeated. These fem-bots fixed him real good. Caught onto his game. It was their duty to stop things and more importantly people from being humped so indiscriminately. An empty Barbie carriage sits to the left of his worn-out apparel. The five other women slowly rise from their beds, converging towards their Queen who was drawing them to her hive. She turns off the lights and the last words heard are..
They continue their snow white filth in pitch black darkness.

"Neither a lofty degree of intelligence, nor imagination goes into the making of a genius. Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius!" ~ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Behind the gate and down below, Tony comforts Staci.
"Listen Stay, what's done is done. Let's not dwell on it. Instead, let's head towards the bay like you said. And start making better decisions going forward. One's that are good for everybody. We're all in this together; for better or worse!"
He hugs her tightly before gently kissing her on the forehead.
"Morality is all about boundaries. Let's all start re-learning them for Heaven's sake! We're usually blind to our own transgressions. God loves you, and so do I. Let's do this!"

Danny takes it all in and remains silent. All he was really thinking about was how he needed to take another crap. They dash along and around the high and mighty gate with Staci marveling at the sharp edges, trying to hold back her disappointment that no secret backdoor entrance existed to weasel her way in. Ultimately it was filled with cruelty and excess, however, and something in which she should never ever seek, ever so carelessly! There were no shortcuts in life to any places truly worth going.

They continue racing through the flood water, which seemed like nothing compared to the rising tide they successfully, and barely waded through earlier. They were well aware, of course, that the whole peninsula was beginning to flood. They soon reach the bay and look left, and then right. No boats, no houses, no nothing save for the rocky edge of the coast and the
choppy waters spilling over from the bay. From both the north and south. It made no difference. The storm was raining on everyone's parade! Their visibility, still severely limited due to the foggy mist has Staci offering up a new suggestion.

"Let's run up and down the coast. To see what emerges!"

Danny and Tony wisely let her take the lead, and after running a few hundred yards north a large rock boulder, hanging precariously over the bay, facing east, comes into sight. Staci gazes close and notices steps leading up from it's west face. It's a dwelling! The bay waves continue splashing savagely against the other side but immediately roll back down and quickly re-mix with the surf. No match for the rock abode's side slope built low and at a right angle, and deeply rooted despite all outward appearances. The three weary, wet and weathered travelers run up the steps. Tony bangs on the door and almost immediately, as if expecting company, a middle aged woman opens up to greet him. She looks worn and tired but truly welcoming. These three looked filthy and unworthy, by all outward appearances, but thank goodness, by the grace of God, this merciful woman overlooks all of that. Overflowing with a deep, non-judgemental and motherly warmth, she welcomes them into her humble abode with open arms. Each one's broken down condition only meant that they needed her help that much more! Tony breathes a huge sigh of relief as he leads the way in.

"Come in! Come in! You've finally made it!"
What a joy!
End chapter here
chapter 26

She smiles deeply with genuine concern for each of their wellbeing. Their pain was quickly becoming hers.
"It's getting really nasty out there children!"

Staci glances right and notices a dignified older man sitting on a green carpet leaning over a brown mahogany coffee table playing cards with a young boy. Just behind them in the far right corner sat a baby crib. An aroma of food and family warmth permeated the air and everything smelled fresh, clean and joyful. This tiny, yet tidy living room doubled as a kitchen and tripled as a nursery. So full of true life and the living, and such a stark contrast to the outside world.

"You came just in time!"

The gentle woman informs them with glee, paying extra special and close attention to Staci. So motherly and thoughtful! She gently hands over several equally sized towels to each one, smirking at Danny briefly before quickly shifting her attention back towards Staci.

"There are fresh clothes in the bedroom, children. Clean up first before getting too comfy!"

She humbly winks. None argue and the three rush into the bedroom to change. Danny mindlessly pushes his way to the front. The more things change! He soon finds himself sitting on the crapper once more as Tony and Staci throw their filthy clothes into the hamper, and then patiently waiting to run some hot water. Amazed, and much happier at it's cleanliness, Danny almost felt bad for dumping in such a nice place. But nature was calling. He is thoughtful enough to spray some
orange scented air freshener and open the window. Saltwater splashes onto his face and he quickly closes it before flipping the switch for the ventilating fan instead. What a neat and irrational location for a dwelling he thought to himself. A short while later the three are being pampered like children at the corner table. Their eyes glance over at one another, faces lit from the flickering candle at it's center.

"This storm is really something else, huh?"

The mother asks in a high pitched tone. She calms herself down by whistling a sweet melody and dusting off the bookshelf. There was no television set but many children's books. She knew how hard both her and her husband worked and wanted her children to work hard as well. Not to be exploited nor to do the exploiting, of course. There were many family centered games that showed the pitfalls and perils of getting too consumed with one's self. Seeking to reduce human beings to mere commodities due to one's own stone-hearted and selfish greed.

"This storm should be over soon. I do sure hope!"

She crosses her fingers and puts the wooden duster atop the dust free book shelf before praying silently with her head down, eyes closed and hands folded above her chest. Finally she looks over to the meal cooking on the tiny stove and hopskips over.
"Hungry, children? We are poor but we don't starve! In our home we feed children rather than eat them!"

The father chuckles. The son gulps hard. Staci, Tony and Danny seem relieved that they would be getting fed by this woman rather than being consumed mercilessly for some false and meaningless secular lifestyle! There was nothing motherly about that! They humbly nod yes and look well-mannered around the supper table. A must for any loving, giving and ultimately forgiving family circle after all.

"It's almost ready!"

The mother exclaims estastically while stirring the pot. Tony looks over to the father and son bonding, wishing he had had moments like that with his old man. Oh well. All water under the bridge. His dad's loss more than anything, he figured. The boy notices Tony looking over and runs towards him, sensing a longing. He looks up and smiles, asking Tony to join in on the very important and pompous festivities unfolding in the living room. A game of cards.

"Do you want to play, Mister Sir?"

Tony laughs. Made him feel old. And odd. He politely declines.

"No thank you, Mr. Little Sir!"

The boy's sincere smile becomes forced and he does a poor job of hiding his obvious contempt at this big baby's reluctance to humble himself to quality family time. He felt sorry for him
more than anything else. Oh well. His loss, not mine, the boy figured!

"Suit yourself, little jerk face!"

The boy runs back over to old man, giggling hardly. As he picks up the new hand dealt to him, his hair becomes disheveled after his father rubs it while gently but sternly rebuking him.

"Now, now. Is that how we talk to our elders, son?"

The boy giggles and is so in love with the thought of being loved.

"No, daddy."

He slowly glances back over to Tony with guilty eyes, trying his best to humble himself before this selfish butt face. The same one who then had the nerve to arrogantly refuse a seat at his table. After mindlessly trespassing onto his turf, no less!

"Suit yourself, MISTER jerk-face!"

The boy yells, smiling devilishly, showing his teeth.. He proudly looks over to his mother to let her know that he'd always have her back. Her heart melts.

"Now, now son. Patience is a virtue!"

The son farts. She immediately turns on the air ventilation system, shaking her head with humorous disgust.

"Please, excuse him. He's a work in progress. As we all are! Do you have to go poopy, my son?"
"No, not yet, mama!"

"Okay, well, then just try to be respectful around our house-guests. Make them feel at home!"

Danny follows with a fart of his own. He and the boy laugh in unison.

"What's the matter with you two?"

The father mutters with a slight gruff under his breath but quickly wills some patience. He puts his hand gently over his son's shoulder. He and Danny freeze in fright.

"Thank you, my dear!"

The humble mother remarks with gratitude, thankful for the disciplined love her decent husband brought to the table. Helping to wrangle the out of control antics in her well-kept home! Tony admires the dignified father with his true and deep affection for his family. It's bittersweet since he never had that but at the same time he was truly happy for the boy. A much needed blessing. If only every mom was as lucky to have such such a faithful spouse by their side. The mother and son never doubted the father's words because he proved them day after day through humble deeds. He felt it was his duty and sought no praise.

"Dinner's ready!"
The motherly host screams with contented delight. She didn't mind feeding anyone as long as they were truly contrite for family's sake. Danny and Staci jump from nerves.

"What about your husband and son?"

Staci asks anxiously as the mother begins placing crystal yellow plates around the table.

"They ate already. They're full!"

The mother replies with confidence. Staci looks over and they indeed looked full. Full of joy, warmth and familial affection. The son has just defeated his father's hand and does a celebration dance. Such a goofy, love-able mini version of me, the father, home after a long day of work, thought quietly to himself. He hugs his son tightly.

"Good game, son. Pops loves you!"

The son, beaming with contented delight hops over to his baby sister's crib. He picks her up and gives her a big hug. Danny looks on confused. All of this familial affection was quite unfamiliar to him. His father was a cold hearted, verbally abusive disciplinarian rarely home for supper and probably off philandering while claiming to work late. Danny’s mind races with disgust.

"If they already ate, then why was more supper being cooked right before we arrived?"

The mother sees right through his ingratitude.
"Love doesn't calculate, my son. Only narcissists do. A loving mother is always ready to feed her children. No matter what time of the day or what kind of weather. Don't ask so many questions, my poor child. Only question your heart and the love, or lack of love within it. Love is something none of us can truly do without! Self sacrifice and hard work is key!"

Danny is frightened by such a gentle yet strong maternal rebuke and prostrates himself before her, meekly placing out his hand out for some bread.

"May I, ma'am?"

She senses his sincerity and gives him permission.

"Yes, you may, my child."

He takes a big bite and swallows hard.

"Good! That makes me very happy. You all must be very thirsty, as well."

Staci, dehydrated from all of the smoking and drinking, thinks how true that was. She felt terrible! The mother walks back over to the kitchen and brings back some wine and water. She puts only a drop of wine in each glass before filling the rest with water. Danny feels jipped.

"Hey, where's all the wine!"

"Here we're careful not to overindulge in anything other than unconditional love. We drink very little wine with our meals. Anything that harms humble family love must never be
condoned. My father was an alcoholic. It tore him away from his fatherly duties."

Staci's interest is peaked. The mother notices and continues speaking from the heart.

"But I forgave him. It doesn't mean that I can ever truly forget, however. Unfortunately. Pesky little thing called memory!"

Staci's face lights up. I love this old bag of bones!

"But it can be purified through forgiveness. An act of the will which you repeat over and over again. Like a new pattern. The feelings will catch up eventually. I would pray to God every night, asking Him from the bottom of my heart to help soften it. The hidden, deep anger towards my earthly father. I didn't feel much different right away but over time God had truly worked a miracle. He continues softening my heart each and every day. Motherhood is a sanctifying journey, let's not forget!"

Staci listens intently, appearing to take mental notes.

"Without such a new and improved pattern, this humble abode could never have existed in the first place. I had to forgive him for my sake. And his! It has allowed other people who cross my path to be safe from my own dormant cruelty. Especially my kids and husband. Their father is a good man. No good man should ever have to be punished for the sins of a bad one. I could only be with someone so decent when I became decent myself. It allowed me to see the real him. Finally. I fell in love with his heart!"
She looks over to her faithful husband, adoring how loving and patient he is with their son. She truly appreciated this immeasurably. The quiet and humble sacrifices made day in and out for his family. Just like her. She'd truly die for each and every one of them.

"Before then, he was just invisible. He would walk by me every day on his way to work but I never noticed. Too puffed up with myself, seeking those seeking themselves. There's another word for all of these self-seekers in the world. Selfish butt poops!"

Staci nods in total agreement. Amen, sister! The mother does the sign of the cross and looks up to the ceiling.
"Father, forgive me!"
She kisses her crucifix necklace.

"It was such a sad and lonely state of affairs. I only began to see my selfishness when I soberly sought to forgive. It became very easy to forgive when I realized how much forgiveness I truly needed as well. We're all sinners in need desperate of grace, and mercy. Stuck in the mud, chasing after the wrong things, or worse yet, wrong types of people!"

Danny belches. Staci cringes.

"Like a sinking ship! Reliving the past over and over again. Re-opening old wounds. Pouring salt on them. Whether these folks were neglectful, abusive or somewhere in between, it matters, but what matters more is that nothing hurtful that happened to you gives you the right to hurt others. Forgiveness doesn't make whatever the other person did or didn't do right but it sets you free. We've all done selfish things to others, let's not forget! Many bitter women seek spiritual fulfillment in all of the wrong places. Chasing after wolves. Almost as if chasing after their own fathers. The horror! Roaming. Desolated. Own worst enemies. Women need to put God the Father first. Through chaste living, these women will then arrive at a sober, self assessment, leading them in the right direction. Mutual reciprocity for Heaven's sake! My husband is true provider, working an honest living and coming home day after day after a hard day's work. He's truly happy to be the head of the
household. God's goodness ultimately saved me from myself. He's truly great, but more amazingly good!"

Staci is blown away at these humble words rooted in humble deeds. She smells a faint whiff of red gravy on the stove. Odd. She looks over. Nothing! She ponders this mother's joyful love for her entire family, echoing deep within these four walls. A circle of trust. The parents have each other's back which benefits their children greatly in the long run. Two givers. Two rights. What a concept! How Staci truly wanted this more than anything. This selfish, clingy fallen world can go jump off a cliff for all she cared at this point! Wait, that's not right, Stay. Progress, not perfection! No one in this warm abode was centered on themselves but rather one another. Staci looks over at the warm son playing cards with his father in the shadow of the mother. It was all too much for words. Actions always spoke louder. She becomes overwhelmed with ineffable emotions. Too much for words. She breaks bread and takes a huge bite. Tony chews on his and swallows.

"So you nice folks are staying down here and riding out the storm?"

The mother chuckles lightly.

"What choice do we have? We are family. Stuck together, for better or worse!"

Tony responds directly.
"No I mean, aren't you and your family evacuating to higher ground?"

The mother responds directly but with heartfelt sincerity.

"Our hearts are on high ground. We put our complete trust in the Lord's mercy. My husband has also built a drainage system around our home. It's completely flood proof. There's also an extra protective layer of roofing and siding if things get too hairy out there! We're safe and sound, God willing, inside of our humble abode fortified with prudent charity. You three are more than welcomed to stay until the storm passes!"

She looks over to the baby crib behind the father and son playing a new round of cards, and smiles joyfully. Tony, in astonishment and adoring her true nature, responds respectfully, and as thoughtfully as he can imagine.

"Thank you, ma'am. That is very kind of you. But we can't, or rather I should say we don't want to impose any further than we already have. We have to get back to our own homes. Or to the roads that will lead us to them. One day. If that's what's in the cards for us. We were looking for a boat before the waves got too hairy but there doesn't appear to be any. So we have to head east, back to the boardwalk and then southbound towards the ravine up to our conversion van to go west. The mother looks confused at all of the criss crossing directions but above all seems genuinely concerned for their safety and well-being. She had her priorities straight after all. She humbly implores each once, including Danny, to stay close to her heart.
"I don't think that's a very good idea, Tony. This storm should be gone by dawn. It's no trouble for the three of you weary travelers to spend the night with us. I trust you. You have a good heart. I can tell. Really, I insist. Never doubt a good woman's intuition. We do have extra inflatable air mattresses in storage for expected, and unexpected visitors. Separate beds until marriage, of course!"

She winks sternly at Staci. Danny chokes on his bread. She hands him some watered down wine.

"Here, my child. Talk is cheap!"

He chugs the entire glass, eyes darting around the tiny dwelling. Where the heck was all of this extra storage space? He felt the four walls closing in. He longed to get back onto that crazy boardwalk. It was a lot more fun, he figured. Settling down was too much of a burden. He wasn't ready for it, nor was he sure he ever wanted to be.

"Home is where the heart is. Never forget those words!"

"It's really okay, but thank you from the bottom of my heart. Honestly."

Tony responds heartwrenchingly. He felt it just wasn't their time. Staci looks at him like he has two heads.

"Are you nuts? Why don't you want to stay until dawn? A sanctuary!"

Before Tony can respond, Danny chimes in.
"Tony's right. The offer's cool and all but these quarters are quite tight. This is a close family. Let's not do anything to screw that up!"

"So you'd rather we all drown to death out there!"

Staci yells, rubbing her stomach anxiously.

"It'd be a lot more exciting to be quite honest!"

Danny wisecracks like a carnival clown.

"Seeking too much excitement is what's going to get us all killed in the first place!"

She fires back with disgust. She was going to have this heartless bastard's child. Holy crap! Tony resumes.

"I would love to stay with you and your beautiful family. Honest. But it doesn't matter if we leave tonight or if we leave tomorrow morning."

Staci interrupts.

"Uhh, we may die if we leave tonight, Tony!"

Tony inhales deeply and looks at her fatherly.

"Sooner or later we all have to leave and start our own families. Stay. Familiarity can indeed breed contempt."

Danny looks down at the stripped chicken bone on the table and deadpans.

"And cannibalism!"
"Not now, Danny!"

Tony yells angrily before shifting back to the mother.

"Besides, you have already done so much. Look at your face. You look exhausted. You need rest!"

Tony grows exhausted himself.

"Let's show this humble mother and her fine family some mercy ourselves. We'll just become more of a burden than anything, and wear out our welcome. Sooner rather than later, I'm sure!"

He eyes Danny stone-faced.

"We all have to grow up someday and learn what true self-sacrifice and personal responsibility really means. The hour is getting late!"

Tony looks at the chicken carcass and forces vile back down his throat. He reaches for the bread, chews and takes a small sip from the watered down wine.

"Contentment is the only true wealth. To plant our own seeds of family reconciliation and pray that they blossom into something everlasting and true. If this family is safer down here as you say then I believe you. I take you at your word. Please believe me when I tell you that I truly believe we're safer out there. In our current state at least. We'll get to our own higher ground. God willing. Boundaries. We're all selfish butt sh*ts!"

The little boy giggles and parrots Tony.

"Selfish butt sh*ts!"
Tony looks on horrified.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry, ma'am! Excuse me for my language! I got it from my father. Well, while he was still around. It rubbed off on me!"

Tony does the sign of the cross and kisses his crucifix necklace.

"See what I mean. Let's get out of here before I do anymore permanent damage!"

The mother looks at him mercifully.

"Now, now, my child. Don't be so hard on yourself. Just try to remove the curse with a blessing."

She looks over to her devilish son, murmuring underneath her breathe.

"Selfish butt poop."

She quickly snaps out of the negativity.

"See! Always look on the bright side!"

Tony feels somewhat relieved.

"You can have all the right beliefs in the world, my child, but if you don't act on them, what good is it? Don't ever take people for granted. If you truly love someone, tell them. Show them. Your heart has to be in the right place. Don't mindlessly consume. Marrying for looks, or money, for example."

Staci and Danny shamefully glance at each other above the chicken carcass.
"You must be true in your love or else it's not truly love. I know this all sounds like common sense but that's because I'm a mother. It's kind of what we do. Tell you the obvious things but in not so obvious ways. I like to keep things fresh!"

Suddenly, and out of the blue, Tony smells another roasting chicken in the oven. This time with Mexican herbs and spices.

"If you're truly contrite, great graces will come pouring down to bless your entire family. A good mother knows best!"

Staci looks over to the merciful woman, eyeing the strong and silent father. Such a good influence! It was softening her heart towards the bitterness she had against her absent one. Anything she lacked she didn't want others to be deprived of. No one likes a homewrecker after all. As Danny wolfs down his mashed potatoes Staci wonders if he'll ever learn. She thinks back to the tiny dish rag Danny tossed her from afar and tears begin to stream down her face. No one deserves to feel that unworthy. The son pulls a wrapped gift out from under the mahogany table and walks back towards his baby sister's crib. She's been neglected long enough. He quietly thinks to himself what an honor it is to be her big brother. He'd always protect her no matter what. A snot flies out of her nose and they both giggle. She was funny but only because he truly loved her. His mommy nods her approval. He unwraps her gift.

"I know you're too little to know what's going on but today I bought you a gift with my chore allowance. It's your six month
old birthday. A very special and grand occasion for the princess in our castle!"

He takes out a stuffed Barbie and Ken doll. Not the typical plastic ones, stiff and easily breakable, but made for babies and the young at heart. Soft and pliable on the inside with hard shells. The interior was stuffed with straw and could always be refilled, even if living in the shadow of the sins of our earthly father didn't always make that so easy. Perhaps that's what made it extra special. The ability to overcome any and all obstacles standing in one's way. No matter what, and no excuses. True love would find a way. It always had and always would. Never stop believing that, little sis. This is ultimately what he wanted her to understand. That problems made life interesting and overcoming them, meaningful. Never give up hope. A mother's heart is an inexhaustible treasure chest of it. The stuffed dolls are dressed for a wedding. He places them by her side. She gazes warmly. From Ken and Barbie's point of view this precious little baby was the center of their entire universe. It was all for her. Everything they did was for her. She was loved beyond measure. There was a humble father and a humble mother and that's the way it was always supposed to be. No matter what any of those goblin-hearted goons who had the nerve to call themselves grown-ups would ever try and tell you otherwise, little sis. Listen to big bro! Even if the earthly father wasn't anywhere to be found, the Heavenly One will provide sufficient grace. He puts a toy baby carriage inside the crib and could only hope for everyone's best efforts in the
matter. Maybe one day he'd even add big uncle to the expanding character roles in this world alongside big brother. Perhaps one day even father! His mother gazes at him with joy. There was something truly sacred and immaculate between a mother and son. She glances over to the selfish adolescents sitting at her table with a stern gaze.

"Always be filled with true love in your heart and you can never go wrong. Even if your head is on a little screwy. That can always be worked on!"

The little boy farts again before running into the bedroom.

"I gotta take a poop now, mama!"

Danny fist pumps.

"I know the feeling, bud!"

The mother quietly whispers to herself.

"Have to my son. Not gotta. How many times have I told you?"

She looks at the two males who seemed to reflect all males, something screwy yet loveable, and felt a migraine coming on. The son slams the bedroom door shut. She looks over to the wine, growing tempted, but quickly overcomes it. She shifts her focus to Staci, exhausted but content.

"Get the heart right first and foremost. That's the most important thing. Patience is truly a virtue!"

She rubs her eyeballs and takes a deep breathe.
"Be truthful about your selfishness but always in a loving manner. A true mother wants her children to speak and more importantly do what is right. Sometimes this is easier said than done!"

Staci empathizes with the mother's exhausted delerium, wondering why her husband didn't help rebuke their boy for his wife's sake. He lays there, face deep in a book swiped from the dust free book shelf above the wine rack, intoxicated with the words but oblivious to his surroundings, and unaware of her weariness.

"We have to live in the present moment and give life and love a chance. Progress, not perfection!'

The wife gazes at her husband slightly annoyed.

"Look at how much our Heavenly Father has done for us. Let's keep a good thing going!"

Staci touches her stomach, feeling more joyful than ever at being pregnant and regardless of Danny's intentions towards her and their baby. She wanted to call her mother and thank her for not only being a friend but more importantly for feeding her with love. Life was a gift which could be freely rejected or embraced. Staci sees the light. Greed destroys all relationships. By giving thanks she was growing grateful. She'd rather die than kill an innocent child. Regardless of how much cruelty she had gone through in her own life. Her child would live a better life than she, and not only that, her child would help her live a
better life going forward, as well. If Danny didn't stick around, his loss! Such bittersweet sentiments overwhelm her heart. She grows ever more appreciative of how much unconditional love her flawed earthly mom gave. Just because. She gets it now. Staci jumps up and runs over to the warm and nurturing woman and gives her the biggest hug this side of the Atlantic. They both cry tears of joy. A real Golden Girl's serious episode moment. Thank you for being a friend! Moments like this made it all worth it for the exhausted mother. Tony looks on humbled while Danny grows confused. Staci and the mother, now on the same page, look out the window.

"The storm has let up, my children!"

The mother exclaims ecstatically. Staci thinks they're out of the woods and is about to jump up and fist pump when the woman soberly reminds her that they were just in the eye of it. Staci grows disheartened. Mother-daughter relationships may indeed be the most complex on earth but there's usually mutual understanding. Don't castrate my son for Christ's sake! Staci regains her inner peace recalling what a true home looked like, and more importantly what it felt like. Something that could only exist through a mom's undying love for all of her children.

"You mean it's not over?"

Staci asks disappointedly but with a sobering acceptance of this reality.
"No matter what happens, or how bad the storm gets, never forget it too shall pass. The sun always rises. It's always just 'round the corner!"

A salesman with a ridiculous Jew-fro pitching the lowest prices for local kid's furniture pops into Staci's mind for a brief moment. She laughs before quickly thinking of something less schmaltzy!

"Never forget the true center, my selfish daughter!"

The bright, but more importantly warm mother remarks sincerely while glancing over to her son. She puts her right hand above Staci's heart. And then on her stomach next to the womb.

"Two hearts that beat as one!"

The baby kicks with excitement. All of the love and adoration that he or she rightfully hungered and thirsted for. Staci surely didn't want to disappoint! She turns her attention back towards the crib. Whether it was the lowest price or not never crosses her mind. The value of what it held was of the utmost importance! It's contents truly priceless. When they first walked in, it had scared her to death but not anymore. There was some invisible yet everlasting force pulling her close. She approaches with great reverence, getting choked up while looking down towards this beautiful, baby girl. So helpless. Eyes so trusting. In need of a true presence. To live in a world where she was cherished and uplifted, not discarded. The newly-
wedded Ken and Barbie dolls remind Staci of an old nursery rhyme her mommy used to sing to her in a gentle, soothing voice. It was the most beautiful lullaby. Their sanctuary. Best friends. Worst enemies. Protecting and competing against one another. Often at the same time. Two hearts beating roughly, then ever so gently. Sailing with the wind, and against it.

Staci now deeply understood that her mother just wanted her to make better choices than she had. To be with a good man. Someone who would treat her right. She didn't want Staci to go down the same path as she. Chasing after the wrong types of men who would only wind up betraying her trust in the long run. Staci never told her about the incident with John. Another poor choice by her mom which unfortunately left the daughter
scarred for life. Staci no longer blamed her mother for what happened, and never really did, and John did soon leave the mother after that incident, but Staci loved her mom so much that she didn't want to impose any further guilt on her then she knew she already had. This better life wanted for Staci was given many obstacles by the mom's poor choices and Staci now seemed to be echoing them. Danny was a secular sack of crap who didn't care about anyone, let alone himself. How could he truly care about Staci? It seemed we assuage our consciences by believing, or not believing based on how we live our lives. Danny was living his quite poorly! His shallow, egotistical belief system ultimately shadowed his selfish, nihilistic lifestyle. Staci still held onto hope, however dim and distant, that he would change and not only for her but ultimately their child. Tony would always be there to help if Danny floated away like the sea scum he seemed to be becoming. All men were sinners but not all were content with sinning. If Danny did change, it'd be on him to decide. Staci becomes nearly certain that she couldn't marry someone just for their money. No man with zero ambition would ever appeal to her either, of course, but a greedy heart with material things was a greedy heart with the flesh. Staci was downgraded and commodified as a mere piece of meat. There was no true long term value in that! Those old-timey romantic films were perhaps onto something, even if a bit schmaltzy and over the top. First comes love. She wanted to see a ring on her finger. Make her an honest woman! But she had to be honest with herself. Everything that disturbed her in
Danny could help shine light into her own selfish heart. Chasing him for his wealth was quite scummy in and of itself. All water under the bridge, of course, since she was now pregnant with his child and now truly hoped that they both could change for the better. Only time would tell. Whether Danny committed, or not, Staci was strapping on a chastity belt. A kinder, gentler, domesticated pussycat! Children suffer greatly due to the sins of a harlot mother. Discriminate righteously, woman! Staci grew weary yet excited at the prospect of this tremendous responsibility placed on her shoulders, standing in contemplative silence adoring this beautiful baby girl. Her humbled face reflects in the baby's blue eyes, gazing up, thinking to herself who the heck is this crazy woman? She's not my mommy, but she's pretty cool. Perhaps my loveable, loony Aunt! Tony gives one final thank you to the angelic mother, gracious enough to take them all in. It was up to them to follow her lead. This dark-skinned Hispanic woman who had sacrificed so many years, laboring in silence, all for her children's sake helped Staci rediscover her true humanity. A heart of stone turned flesh! She often felt invisible and like a ghost in this judgmental North American land, obsessed with power and privilege, often judging based off externals rather than what was truly going on on the inside. Those queenish men at the Boardwalk Inn where she worked thanklessly day in and out cleaning up their messes every morning were always indifferent to her plight. Overworked, underpaid and unappreciated, yet she never complained. Her family kept her warm, helping her
get through each day. Folks running from self-sacrifice had some nerve shunning her. Satan always hates the family because of its true creative powers. Unpredictable but good! Mary's universal motherhood is truly colorblind. God is always testing our hearts above all else!

"Thank you for kind and abundant mercy, mother! I truly believe it is now our turn to return the favor by truly listening. We all need to truly grow up eventually. The hour is getting late!"

Tony remarks estastically from the heart, adoring Staci, the mother, and the daughter. He grows sad and empathetic when reminding himself that Staci didn't have an earthly father growing up. There was a good chance her child wouldn't either. Tony stares at Danny with a deep and profound disappointment. It was getting harder for him to bite his tongue but he quickly re-composes himself, looking back over to the protective mother, gazing at Danny sternly herself. He'd take care of the Danny situation a bit later if someone else didn't first!

"You've fed us beyond anything I can ever truly imagine, and for that I am eternally grateful!"

Tony stands up and hugs the kind-hearted, gentle woman in a true platonic fashion. She hugs him back maternally.

"Forgiveness, my son. Lead with love and you can move mountains. It will not only heal your own personal family
wounds but it will spread out into the community as a whole, helping others on their journey as well!"

Tony buzzes with a familial warmth, overwhelmed with a hunger and thirst to give more and more, and all from a place of self sacrificial love. It was pouring out of his skin.

"We must go now. We have to get back to our own higher ground. Safe from the flood. We know you are safe down here, in the house built by your husband's strong and gentle hands which you have made a home. One in which each of you continue to sacrifice for, rooted deep into the ground. Weather-proof to boot!"

He marvels at the waterproof window sealing. A hammer and nail sits below it.

"But like I said before, in my current state I just don't want to do anything to corrupt that innocence. I'm just not ready for it. Not yet."

The mother looks at him with unconditional love.

"I completely understand, my child. But always just remember to be patient with all things. First and foremost yourself!"

Tony smiles and pictures the front desk clerk and Mama Blanche.

"You three are always welcomed in my home!"

She points up.
"The Good Father will never despise a contrite heart. Be merciful to others and you too shall receive it. Never doubt it and truly believe it. From the bottom of your heart!"

She points her finger directly above her chest. Staci gives one final heartfelt gaze down at the baby girl in her crib. She kisses her fingertip and bops it ever so gently onto the little girl's cheek.

"Love is pretty grand, huh?"

The girl looks up to her with wonder and awe. They share a deep, ineffable moment in which no words could ever hope to adequately describe. A familial bond. A sisterhood of mercy. Two daughters of the King. Just then, the baby girl farts and craps her pants. Staci hotfoots it towards the others. One day she'll be ready for diaper changing service but today was not that day! The cure for selfishness sure was smelly! The father puts his book down to get his butt up off the couch. Finally! The mother looks well pleased! He walks over to the crib and picks up his little stinkster ever so delicately. She grins devilishly. Your turn to clean up my mess, papa! Tony watches the father hold her in his right hand, next to his beating heart, and at great peace. Safe and protected. One warm, steady heartbeat at a time. Danny doesn't bother to look. It wasn't something he cared for. Plotting his escape. Tony looks back over to the mother one final time. Parting is such sweet sorrow!

"Thank you for everything. I will never forget you. Your light has pointed us in the right direction!"
He looks at Danny with merciful eyes and for the first time in his life truly pitied him. He then rises from his chair before walking slowly towards the door, not quite ready to depart this warm and welcoming abode. The all-consuming elements were exhausting!
"We cannot destroy the family, we can only destroy ourselves if we disregard it." G.K. Chesterton

“When does a dream become a nightmare?”

Chapter 27

The warm mother wishes them well as they walk down the rock steps. She slams the door shut, bolting the safety lock while whistling a bittersweet melody. The rain has relented. A mild, comforting breeze blew. The dark sky, streaked pink and purple through the lifted fog is now in clear sight. The pale moonlight reflects off the peaceful waters of the bay as an eerie quietness surrounds them. They stand in ankle high, still water.

"We have to get back as fast as we can! Before all hell breaks loose again!"

Tony screams with exhilarated terror. Staci agrees wholeheartedly.

"The three of us have to stick close together. Like a team!"

She eyes Danny seriously and puts her hand over her belly. Danny responds insincerely.

"Of course, babe!"

Maybe they weren't being punished so much for their sins as by them. This revelation was becoming clear as day to Staci.
Selfishness was ultimately a self-inflicted wound. Refusing to give back to one's family and community as a whole was truly a dead end in the long run. No man, or woman, for that matter, was, is or ever will be an island. Most of the residents stranded on this peninsula seemed to be hanging on by a thread. Much of the perceived cruelty from a higher power was in reality just consequences of their poor choices allowed to be played out in the first place by a God who disciplines his selfish and cruel children with tough love. He's neither selfish nor cruel but rather suffers in unspeakable ways from our own self-inflicted demise. The crucifix is kind of the whole point. Ultimately a mystery. God is love and sin is ours alone. He doesn't cause evil but mysteriously allows it for a time to mysteriously bring a greater good from it. This never justifies the evil deed with the hopes of His goodness emerging from it, of course. The evil doer still suffers spiritual consequences of the poor choice and the evil act itself never becomes good. When we die, we die. That's it. One mortal sin and hell. No exceptions! Sanctification is calling us all. When you know better it's always wise to do better for Christ's sake! God promises forgiveness today through contrition but hasn't promised tomorrow. The three rush back towards the boardwalk and to the relative safety of the high ground it offered. The flooding was sure to resume once the storm did. There was a bittersweet comfort in the narrow, symbolic nature of it all. Evil is a privation of good. It's shadow. It was all so simple. But that's what made it so difficult. Doing good through sincere deeds took quite a bit of effort. It
was clear as day to Staci when a little girl, like a beautifully scented sunflower, but slowly drifted in the wind through the years, and especially since puberty. It seemed sin was nothing other then selfishness ruling in our hearts and minds. A nasty, carnal, vile, hellish and ultimately self-inflicted grave. Yuck! True survival would always require morality. Discernment between good and evil. Without such righteous judgements the whole world would literally consume itself into oblivion. A selfish person's view of the matter, survival at any cost, denied the concept of good and evil all together. Will to power nonsense. To worship will was to negate it in the long run, however, and overcoming evil with good through doing God's will was always a good start to renounce our fallen human nature. Impossible without the grace of God! Deep in paranoid fear, Danny was still a spiritual adolescent running from this sanctifying grace. His German-Irish ancestry loved British Queens and German Nazis, but humble and self sacrificial family life? Not so much! Saint Joseph's firm but gentle fatherly authority was a foreign concept to both father and son in the Dahnhold household! They believed that might made right at any cost. His father got to where he was by stepping on folks in the outside world and just extended that selfish, controlling nature to his wife and children at home. That was sure becoming too costly, and not only for his family but also for every other person who crossed his path. They run as fast as they can through the ankle high water. Away from that self-righteous, ivory tower with it's gated off inhabitants thinking themselves
so superior, high above the wretched masses when in reality they were only clean on the outside. Hearts as rotten if not more so than those impoverished boardwalkers. A paradoxical sense of self-pity and entitlement rooted in a bottomless pit of greed. Slave-driving whores! As Staci approaches she once again grows pissed that she can't climb in. But as they pass, the lifted fog reveals more of it's true colors. Shivers run up and down her spine as she witnesses tainted blood running through the ventilation shafts mixed with seawater pumped in from rusted pipes. Staci felt a growing solidarity with that humble madre rooted deep in her humble stone abode. It was all beginning to truly tug at her heart. The sweat and tears of invisible mothers on the margins laboring for the entitled daughters of secular wealth was truly an unsustainable concoction in the long run. To overcome all worldly vanity was a true lifetime journey of sanctification if there ever was one. Especially for western feminists. A true dead end if there ever was one! Once near the boards they sprint up the wheelchair ramp as Danny charges to the front, yet again. Daughters of Eve. Sons of Adam. Off course. Staci shakes her head and just brushes it off. It was to be expected at this point. She feels much better now. We really are all so broken and damaged. Another deed revealing the truth of his heart. One can only hope and pray for Staci and child's sake that she'll start reacting prudently to these signal graces. Tony reaches his hand out, never thinking in a million years to let her fall behind, and no matter what. The amusements pier is directly in front of them.
A towering crane, terrifyingly sinister and serene, lit up neon green, greats them menacingly. Unfolded onto the boardwalk at dusk? New creatures emerging from the grave? Bones dug up at dusk to haunt this self-inflicted, hell of a palisade? Who the hell knew! Either way, it was standing tall before them above the rotting pier atop the sandy coast. Something that they could no longer ignore and no matter how hard they tried. Sometimes God removes obstacles, sometimes He puts them in our way. Either way, the only way out as with all things in life, it seemed, was through. Danny pictures his twin brother plunging from that tower for a brief moment. Instead of taking this opportunity to soften his heart and finally be at peace with it, he grows ever colder. He just couldn't move past it. And that was sad since he'd only be torturing himself the most. All they have to do is get on the boardwalk, turn left, walk past the pier and bungee tower and they'll be home free. Well, almost. The only thing left to travail would be that narrow quarter mile portion of wood past the boarded up Beachfront Cinema. Tony often wondered if the pendulum in society would swing back towards family friendly entertainment. From the looks of this boardwark, it seemed things couldn't get much worse! Or could they? At the top of the wheelchair ramp they cut left and powerwalk intently southbound to the foot of the ravine. They were closer than ever. Just then, a group of six Carnival workers appear out of the shadows. An odd bunch; wearing ripped blue jeans, sandals and each had beards of differing lengths. In shades of black and grey. They also wore colorful caps with
greasy blue-collar t-shirts advertising local shore businesses such as a sewage drain plumbing service and a sailboat repair shop. They all look vaguely related. Their crazy, Carned antics seemed to be one of brotherly love for the protection of the insider, or close kin. Not universal. The outsider was a perceived threat to their particular way of life. Not part of the clan. They had to protect their livelihood from any and all trespassers. But so they could be humble providers for their families, but rather to take advantage of their liberty for license. Amusing themselves into oblivion. Another shade of hypocrisy, deceit and ego-centric duplicity on this seemingly endless and family averse madness known as The Boardwalk!

One of them wore a bigger hat than the rest; giant, red, and greasy and only resembling a train conductor's cap. The self-
proclaimed patriarch of this motley crew of Carni-vile misfits doesn't look like a very nice person.

"Where's your ticket?"

He asks in a high pitched, menacing weasle whistle. Much more shrill than Danny who was now faced with a Darwinist colder, older and more ruthless than he. Danny responds weakly in this shark's long shadow but also a bit contentiously. He wasn't going down without a fight!

"I'm sorry. Come again?"

The Carnie leader reacts rapidly and greatly unnerved.

"Your ticket! No one's allowed on our pier without a ticket!"

The Carn cackles in a deranged manner. Danny's own cocksured behavior is put to shame by the maniacal echoes. Realizing this man isn't playing with a full deck and full of viscious courage, and for all the wrong reasons, Danny, like a dog with it's tail between it's legs, responds with tact and fawned mercy.

"No, you don't understand, we're just passing by. We don't want to go on any of the rides. Please let us through, sir!"

The Carnival Carns collectively laugh in unison, and then stop abruptly before staring mercilessly. The leader continues.

"No, you don't understand. No one's allowed to pass through our pier after sundown without a ticket. This is our home turf. We control the resources. You can call me the most honorable and highly exalted, Carnival Larry!"
Staci bursts out laughing but quickly composes herself. She didn't want be cruel with her words after all. Not motherly!

"Where are your wives and children, Larry?"

She asks mockingly. She was trying! Carnival Larry puts his face directly in front of hers and blows out his bologna breathe. She gags.

"It's Carnival Larry to you, lassie. Learn to respect your elders. They're home. Cooking and cleaning, of course. Proper place. Fun, fun, fun!"

Staci blows her breath back into his and responds just as contentiously.

"And this amusement dump, I assume is yours!"

Carnival Larry's mouth drops.

"What nerve! Mouthy female. Garbage in, garbage out! Talking and thinking so much!"

He signals for her to zip her lip as he licks his lips and gags.

"Salty talk from such a dainty creature. You don't know your place!"

Danny hands her some binaca and gum from his backpack. Tony squeezes some toothpaste onto a toothbrush and hands it over to her as well.
"My place? Locked up, cooking and cleaning? Just curious, how many wives do you have? The most honorable and highly exalted, carni-vile Larry?!

"Five!"

He proclaims proudly. Staci just shakes her head as she freshens up her breathe.

"Thank you, Danny!"

He remains silent and scared out of his wits.

"Thank you, Tony!"

Tony stands right by her side, eyeing the Carn-man hard.

"This so called patriarchy of yours? It sure loves hoarding resources, huh, Mister Larry?"

He backs away and thinks it over for a moment. He then looks around the dumpy pier, and finally responds, like an overgrown baby.

"Yeah, well, you should see what they have! We keep whatever crumbs they leave for us on the table. Those fem-bot, butch bots have worldly appetites that ain't cheap! Them dames ain't interested in us men though. Not sexually at least. We're slaves to them. High above in their gated off ivory tower. They seek greed instead of warmth, and rather die than prostrate themselves towards a man. They kill peasant children, AND their own. To feed their standard of living. But it never seems
to be enough. Heartless broads. They intruded on our turf. They drew first blood!"

Staci gargles some water after brushing her teeth and remembers missing her period. It was at that point she realized her likely pregnancy. The very real human baby in her womb. She indeed needed to clean up her act, and in more ways than one. A heartwrenching sorrow pierces her heart. What kind of world is this to bring a child into? A strange sense of guilt also overcomes her. She pitied Larry. Her gut told her that his current situation in part was due to unreconciled mother issues. On top of poor choices in dealing with them, as well, of course! Staci also feared for her life.

"This whole island is absolutely mad!"

She screams in agony. Carnival Larry cackles while conjuring up carnage deep within his cranium.

"Madly in love!"

Just behind him and out of sight stood a cracked billboard with a faded father, mother and child. Danny looks through a small crack below on the boardwalk wood and notices the floodwater rising. The storm was creeping back with the eye slowly passing over. He glances over towards Carnival Larry. A strong wind gust nearly knocks off his conductor's cap. The bastard goon squad, standing in his shadow, eye their prey with jittery aggressiveness. The three passerbies had no other choice if they
wanted to get off of this boardwalk. The only way out was through.

"Okay, man you got it! How much is a ticket?"

Danny asks with feigned humility, attempting to placate this sociopath's irrational wishes.

"That's a good question. How much do you think a ticket is?"

Carnival Larry asks quite cerebrally.

Danny silently thinks it over for a few moments. He was sure that right reasoning would get him out of this pickle. He didn't want to answer in haste. Carnival Larry grows impatient.

"Today, junior!"

Larry smacks him on the back of his head. Really, really hard. Danny's stomach turns. It reminded him of his own impatience and contempt towards Tony. He begins to sense that this is all some sort of cosmic comeuppance. The knot in his stomach tightens like a vice grip.

"Listen, take all of my money! I'm sorry for our intrusion!"

Danny frantically reaches into his pocket and a quarter flies out, landing hard onto the boardwalk wood. Larry bends over to pick it up as Staci watches curiously. He thoroughly examines both sides and soon realizes that both sides are tails!

"Two sided tails coin, huh? I wonder what that's worth!"
The Carns once again laugh in unison, and once again like clockwork stare unmercifully. Tony, filled with disappointment buries his face into his palm. Carnival Larry, highly amused cackles while waving his hands around like a maniacal maestro. It quickly dawns on Staci that that was the coin Danny used to trick her into getting onto the sky-tram. It was all an act! She looks at him like he ran over her mother. He acted like she had a chance at going home with him by going out of his way to come up with such a stupid idea in the first place. He just did something to placate her constant nagging. This half assed scheme was only a pretense at empathy towards her. Such a selfish, manipulative and exhausting bastard! She should have known. She just knew that his mother was a cold and conniving word, resentful of her own personal abuse. She wanted to strangle the deceitful, self-centered son of a bitch but wanted to strangle herself even more, since she's been the one who's been chasing him this whole time for all of the wrong reasons! She thinks it through and finally takes to heart that a mother's merciful gaze towards her children could truly mean the difference between life and death. Ideals were always easier said than done, of course, and she attempts, with some success, to temper her rage but is still unable to look at the impetuous bastard. She bites her tongue. Her taste buds cringe from the bitter vile. While flailing his arms, Carnival Larry continues.

"Put your wallet away. That's how all of you greedy folks think. That money talks. But we have no use for it here. Look at us!"
Look at me. I was thinking more along the lines of an old fashioned barter."

He eyes Staci up and down like a piece of meat. Her eyes bug out. Here we go again! The wolves were always ready to pounce. At least when women kept running away from their better angels in the first place! Thank God humble and brotherly folks like Tony still existed in this crazy, selfish world. He huffs.

"Listen man, we're just trying to get home. We're not here to disrespect your territory or what not, and cause you and your fine traveling caravan of con-men, I mean Carn-men, any trouble. Trust me, I got your back, brother. Just let us through and we'll leave you be. Promise. Respect our boundaries and we'll respect yours."

Tony pulls Staci gently to his side, eying locks on the Carn bastard. One wrong move. Carnival Larry laughs in a high pitched squeal and doubles down on his edge of the bargain.

"See, you don't understand. There is a problem, and you are causing trouble. You came onto our pier without a ticket, and now it's nearly too late. We're not uncivilized. We are reasonable people. You trespassed against us and now it's our turn to trespass against you. I said we were reasonable. I didn't say good. Where there's a will, there's a way. And the way I see it, I want her. What else can I say?"

He oggles Staci with creepy eyes.
"You're insane!"

Tony screams, shoving Staci further away from Larry's lunacy.

"Over my dead body, bub."

He sizes up the bigger, better built Carn-man with hand hovering over his cargo short's pocket, ready to pounce. Even to the death if it came down to it.

"Just for an hour. I'm not greedy. You can then all be on your way. I'll give you each a golden ticket for all your troubles. You can then come back anytime you like. That's the offer. If you don't like it...well. I guess it really doesn't matter what you like. It's what I want and I always get what I want. I was a spoiled child after all!"

He shrugs and laughs like jackass on a sugar high. Staci knew Tony's heart was in the right place but she lacked confidence in him. Let alone Danny! Just then, a police officer walks up behind the Carns, putting his hand firmly on Larry's shoulder. Staci breathes a huge sigh of relief. A true authority figure. Finally! Larry and his anarchic goon squad freeze, sensing fascist trouble. The police officer calmly asks Staci about her present situation.

“Are these young boys harassing you, young lady?"

"Yes, officer! He's trying to tell us we need a ticket. And he's trying to take her in exchange for one!"
Tony screams like a hysterical woman before Staci can even open her mouth.

The police officer looks down at Carnival Larry with an imposing face.

"Is this true, son?"

Larry prostrates himself towards this secular law and order authority figure and responds respectfully.

"It's true, sir."

The police officer shakes his head with great disappointment. He then silently ponders for a few moments. Just how should I handle the situation? Soon, he reaches down to his belt, near a pair of handcuffs to grab a nightstick. He violently lifts it over Larry's head before screaming like Michael Jackson.

"Ohhhhhhh!"

He high kicks and lowers the nightstick to his mouth, singing into it like a microphone. It's a jarring, unexpected turn, and for a police officer no less.

"Well that's just grand, that's just marvelous!"

Singing like a schmaltzy, Streisand loving fem-Nazi queen, who at this point in life only sought to amuse himself to death, he prances along merrily towards his next Broadway audition.
Staci's heart drops. A half dozen more Carn-men jump out of the shadows. Tony is quickly put into a v-submission hold, arms tied behind his back, before he can grab his hunting knife to defend his lady's honor. Carnival Larry takes out his own nightstick, pink and purple, and proceeds to smack each one over the head. Their unconscious bodies drop like a ton of bricks. Larry tap dances underneath the pale moonlight enveloping his 'amusements' pier of comedies and horrors.

"Fun, fun, fun!

“Men are generally the carpenter of their own crosses.” ~ Saint Philip Neri

"When I find myself in trouble, Mother Mary comes to be. Whispering words of wisdom, let it be." ~ Paul McCartney

empathize, don't enable

Chapter 28
As Tony comes to...

're all in this together'

..repeats over and over in an infinite variety of fonts circling his mind. After shaking off the cobwebs he realizes he's tied up to the front of a bumper car in an enclosed figure eight circuit. The car antenna's metal flag scrapes the metal roof and sparks fly. Danny whizzes past Tony strapped to another bumper car. Tony remains silent as he slowly regains full consciousness after that viscous blow. He thinks back to the vision he had in the motel room. God promised to make a way. Tony and Danny collide and let out guttural screams of agony. The two Carn-men behind the wheels continue driving in circles, cackling demonically while back over on the boardwalk, Carnival Larry walks along a dark stretch of wood with Staci. He takes out the binaca from Danny's backpack, now over his shoulder, and freshens up.

"Sorry about the whack over your noggin' earlier. If it makes you feel any better, I did hit intentionally you the lightest!"

He feels genuinely relieved after getting that off his chest. He then rubs her head. She cringes.

"My name is Darion by the way. Carnival Larry is just my formal name."

He takes off his conductor's cap, revealing a white bandana drenched in sweat. He smiles widely, revealing yellow, crooked
teeth glowing from the moonlight. Staci stares blankly into space, quite traumatized to say the least.
"Would you like to get a drink?"
Darion asks flirtatiously.
"Get to know one another?"
Staci continues staring into space and doesn’t react.
"On me of course! Let's go. It'll be fun. I know this place!"
He takes out a leash and puts it around her neck.
"Follow me."
As they walk up the boardwalk, they approach a shattered Virgin Mary statue, head is face down on the wood.
"Watch your step!"
He warns but not before it's too late. Staci trips, falls and lands face first, and soon finds herself face to face with the Virgin. The mother's eyes, looking up to Heaven, seem to be staring directly into Staci's soul. A concrete blue tear from the Virgin's cheek reflects in Staci's pupil, welling up with countless ones. This dens of wolves. They didn't truly care about her. Reduced to a mere object. She allowed it. A commodity. To be used and discarded at will. That sad, motherly face was drawing her in but she had no power in that moment to break free and draw close. The controlling patriarch Larry, aka Darion, aka Danny, aka John, aka her absent father, who abandoned her poor mother in the first place, aka whoever 'he' was, truly cast a dark
shadow. Staci was a victim of her own worldly desires. A fall from grace. Rotting apples. It was becoming hellish! She truly prayed in her heart that God would somehow rescue her from being preyed upon any further and not only from all of the creepy men lurking, but primarily from her own disordered desires in the first place. If she wanted boundaries to be respected she had to start respecting herself first! Darion pulls her up and duct tapes her mouth shut.

"Don't get any ideas."

He sternly warns her while tying her hands together.

"Women! So much yappin'! I love 'em and hate 'em!"

He carefully tippy toes over the remaining portions of the Virgin Mary statue with fear trembling deep within his soul. This poor woman gave him the creepy crawlies and was such a sobering buzzkill. He didn't want anyone, least of all a praying mother raining on his predatory parade. He drags Staci on her short leash with her hands tied and mouth duct taped, into a nearby bar, ignoring a hardworking Mexican father and son putting together a new and improved Virgin just to the right of the shattered one. It's karaoke night. An overweight, middle aged woman wearing a tacky, orange sundress with big, curly hair sings her heart out in the back of the room.

"Some men take a beautiful girl and hide her away from the rest of the world. I wanna be the one who walks in the sun. Cause girls just wanna have fun!"
So many strange couples are in the bar. One woman is nearly naked and her shady, cosmpolitian boyfriend could care less as he casually scopes out the other women. Another woman is completely veiled in a black burqa while being stared down mercilessly by her controlling boyfriend, ready to pounce if even one passing glance is noticed. Staci humbly reflects back to that shattered statue of Mary on the boardwalk wood. She feels her heart splinter. An indescribable sorrow. As soon as the bartender notices Darion walk in, she looks pissed. Son of a bitch. She forces a fake smile as they approach.

"I see you caught another one, Darion. Real smooth operator!"

She grabs a gold chain from below the bar top.

"You know you can tie me up anytime. The offer's still on the table. Lover!"

She winks and then belches before caressing a bloated bottle of middle shelf tequila. Staci's eyes bulge.

"I told you, a one night stand means a one night stand, woman! Don't go and get any crazy ideas and go falling in love with me! I ain't no good for you!"

Darion spackles with spit, laughing hardly.
The bartender grins stiffly and when Darion turns around she picks up a cutting knife. He was a sour lime, alright. She loved and hated such aggressive manliness. She didn't truly love him but she'd be damned if other women were to be used and abused by him. It wasn't fair! The bartender sourly studies Staci while squeezing her limes. He'll probably just use her one time the same way he used me, she thought. That made her feel better. Stupid bitch deserved it. What was I thinking in being with such a heartbreaker? The bartender was obviously having conflicted emotions and that timeless truth of only a chaste man and chaste woman being capable of true love rang true yet again. She liked to hitch rides with the big shots, of course. It was exciting. At least for a short while. After being consumed and discarded, however, she'd become consumed with rage, lashing out at others. She thought she was so much better than a prostitute, or stripper since she worked a so called honest job bartending, yet she slept with many of her wealthy, or athletic patrons for free. They used her just the same. She had many unreconciled father issues (obvious at this point!) and didn't want anyone to have a stable home. In large part because she
lacked one herself. Everyone needed be just as miserable as she was. That was only fair! She continues examining Staci with bitter, harsh eyes. The crushed lime juice drips onto the cracked wood beneath her steel-toed stripper boots. The duct tape and leash has her envious of the kink. She admired Darion's classy, domineering ways with women. He knew how to keep in line. Well, at least in her mind! As she places the squeezed lime on the rim of a glass, she wonders what had to be done to win his affection back. She lifts her arm to reveal her side bosom and her elbow knocks over the tequila bottle, shattering it to bits on the cold wood floor.

"Lay off the booze!"

Darion barks.

"She's a real looker, you selfish son of a bitch!"

The sourpuss bartender shouts, fighting back self pitying tears.

"Are you just gonna have a one night stand with her as well?"

She questions spitefully as she grabs another bottle of tequila. This time from the bottom shelf!

"No, I think this may be the one. We're really hitting it off!"

Darion rubs it into her face.

"You mean number six!"

The scorned woman replies, crying while swigging from her downgraded bottle. Darion laughs.
"Well woman, if you ever learn to shut your trap one day you may get to be number seven!"

She stomps onto the shattered tequila glass, inhaling hard before re-composing herself. She grabs an old, worn out broom stick handle to violently sweep up her mess. What a world, what a world! Oh well, she's over it! She won't take any more of these smart-alekkie remarks from such a creepy sleaze, but oh how she 'loved' him! Darion ignores this cookoo bird and pulls the bar stool out for Staci like a perfect gentleman. He turns towards the tacky orange sundress wearing woman singing the last verse of 'Girl's Just Wanna Have Fun' and smiles loosely.

"Do you sing karaoke?"

He asks Staci with overly controlling eyes, guiding her steps towards the stool. She doesn't fight it and sits against her will, shaking her head no. He ties her leash to the bar railing.

"Make yourself at home."

He discreetly takes out a whiskey flask from his pocket and swigs it. The bartender catches him and bites her lip with fury. He mindlessly shrugs it off. Not in the least bit concerned with any concept of a cosmic come-uppence from a circle of disappointed conquests. He finishes off the whiskey from his flask and gasps.

"That ought to do the trick. What next? Oooh! Let's sing a duet!"
Staci shakes her head no.
"Okay, suit yourself. But I won't let you rain on my parade!"

He hops up and strolls over to the karaoke table. soon thumbing through the song selection binder with glee. Before long his eyes light up as he tells the woman in the orange sundress who was also apparently the karaoke MC, the song he wanted to sing. He then walks back to the bar beaming with twisted delight.

"This is gonna be fun! I'm dedicating this one to you, babe!"

Staci looks shocked at the amount of twisted presumption from this stunted and deranged man-child. Finally, after a few more agonizing moments, the MC announces the crowd's next victim over the PA system.

"Will Darion please make his way up to the stage?"

He jumps up and skips over, forcefully grabbing the mike away from the gentle woman's hand. He points towards Staci.

"This song is dedicated to my new girlfriend. I really think she's the one!"

He crosses his fingers.

"The beautiful, Tracy!"

The crowd applauds with oohs and awws. Staci, leashed to the bar railing with her mouth duct taped and hands tied, glances around in horror. One of the poorly treated, faceless women in the crowd is sincerely touched by the song dedication. She gets
choked up when thinking of her own thoughtful and caring boyfriend. Together for over seven years and still no ring on her finger. Oh oh oh! Lyrics begin to scroll on the 27 inch Zenith, doubling as a karaoke monitor below Darion's face overlooking the crowd. He scans the lyrics greedily with self centered eyes and begins to sing off key.

"I'll stop the world and melt with you. I've seen the future and it's getting better all the time. It's opened wide!"

He stares at a drunk, trampy woman to the left of 'Tracey' with her legs spread, and begins to drool.

Danny and Tony are now tied up inside an enclosed, spinning centrifuge called the Gravitron. The rate accelerates as the two become glued to the padded wall due to the invisible, yet rising v-Gine forces. They look over to one another and think, this doesn't seem so bad. Just then, sharp knives drop down from the top and in the center. Those crazed, Carni-cons appear to have another wicked trick up their sleeve! Compelled by their carnal lust to modify the family friendly ride into something sinister, and more complex. Choosing not to use their mechanical ingenuity for the common good but rather chaos. It now resembled some sort of mad, twisted torture chamber.

Danny and Tony were sitting ducks. One of the blades whizzes by Danny's head, imbedding itself into the red padding, barely missing his skull. And only by a few inches. Another one quickly follows. It's trajectory lands a bulls-eye into Tony’s meaty quad. Bright red blood splatters out for a brief moment, hanging
weightless before quickly splashing back down onto its donor. Tony lets out a deep, guttural grunt. The six inch blade remains imbedded as the blood flows down his leg to the bottom of the centrifuge. The woman in the orange sundress laughs maniacally back over at the Karaoke bar as Darion continues singing mindlessly off key. His voice and her mocking echo out of the bar and over the Gravitron ride as Danny and Tony continue spinning out of control.

maybe end chapter here

Five minutes later...

The sky is pitch-black. A single, heavy gust of wind blows as Darion looks over to Staci while walking out of the karaoke bar.

"That was fun, right?"

Withdrawn, Staci looks catatonic.

"Hey, I got an idea! Best view of the ocean is on the Ferris wheel!"

His eyes light up.

"Whatta ya say?"

Staci hated rides but figures, what choice did she have? Danny never listened and this madman obviously wasn't going to either. And besides, her mouth was duct taped shut. Danny at least let her speak even if he did usually just ignore her. Filled with despair, she doesn't fight it. He pulls her along on his tight
leash and they soon pass an opened game stand with three crossbows lined up, chained to the front. The object of this game is to knock an apple off a mannequin's head. Darion looks down at the bucket full of rotting apples near the foot of the lifeless mannequin.

"How bout this one?"

He senses her disinterest.

"Yeah, they're a waste of time. Lame prizes anyway!"

He swivels in the opposite direction.

"Hey, the arcade’s open! Let’s go in there before hopping onto the Ferris wheel!"

In Staci's mind's eye, an image of a giant and crusty crane hand comes into focus, hovering above tortured mannequin faces trapped inside blood stained glass, labeled 'prizes'.

"The love of Christ knows no limits. It does not shrink from ugliness and filth." ~ Saint Edith Stein, aka Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

"The only way out is through!"

Chapter 29

Darion yanks her past a row of crane machines with mannequin heads piled high atop one another behind the glass. This
ominous sign was something Staci visualized only moments prior. A sort of de-ja-vu, or cosmic coincidence so to speak which somehow, and inadvertently, re-ignited an inexplicable hope deep within Staci. She was walking in the shadow of death but could sense a true light at the end of the tunnel. Her despair is lifted. Once again she begins trusting in a higher, benevolent force despite the chaos she presently faced.

"They really need to get different prizes on this boardwalk!"

Darion cracks while zipping past the crane machines as he attempts to mindlessly sniff out his next thrill, and without anyone's permission. Beaten down and with their arms and legs now tied up, Danny and Tony stand atop that crane machine re-worked as a bungee tower a hundred and forty four feet or so above the ground. Standing on the ledge's edge accompanied by two Carn-men, they look at each other with dread. Harold is tall and fat while Carl is short and skinny, and the brains of this operation. Thoughtful enough to let Tony wrap his latest flesh wound with his stained T, but not out of mercy, but rather to extend his punishment. Carl looks down and over towards the Ferris wheel and announces the Carni-vile festivities.

"Okay ladies and germs, here's the proposition. There are six bungee cords; five are the correct length. You go down, you come up. Good times are had by all! One of the six cords, however...well, let's just say, one is a bit longer, and looser, than the rest!"
Tony and Danny look at each other in utter disbelief. Does the madness ever end?
"If you're unfortunate enough to pick that one."

The vile Carn smiles crookedly, revealing a handful of brown teeth.
"Well, let’s just have a little demonstration."

He signals over to tall and fat Harold who pulls out a cantaloupe from his burgundy and brown bowling bag before dropping it over the ledge. It plummets and soon explodes on impact. Mushy Goo!

"Good luck, gentlemen!"

Carnival Carl spits ecstatically. This clever game was his concoction, after all. His mother always told him he was stupid and would never amount to anything. Well, he sure showed her. At least in his mind!

"Don't be a melon head!"

Back down and over on the boardwalk, Darion and Staci are now standing inside the arcade. He bowls a skeeball up an inclined ramp to three holes up top. After finishing with a new high score, he signals that it's her turn.

"Go ahead. Don’t be shy. It’s easy."

He puts a quarter in the coin slot. Nine hardwood skee-balls come rushing down. He clumsily places one into her hands, still tied up.
"Do it now. Or else."

His grows controlling. She feebly attempts to bowl the ball up the ramp. It reaches only halfway before rolling back down, dropping to the floor and bouncing three times before heading outside and curving right. Darion just shakes his head with utter disappointment at such a half-baked effort. And by his supposed better half, no less! Back over and atop the bungee tower, Carnival Carl asks with sinister politeness who'd like to take the first plunge. Neither volunteer.

"Okay, then. We'll flip a coin. You know the amazing thing about chance is? Sooner or later it always ends up fifty-fifty!"

He takes out a coin from his back pocket and raises it up in front of his face, admiring both sides. Danny's stomach turns. The same coin he used to trick Staci! Such false hope. His reason obsessed duplicity divorced from the heart put anything she could ever hope to muster to shame. Carnival Carl's tongue slides across his stained, rotted gums.

"I'm just pulling your tail!"

He pats Danny on the butt.

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's someone who's full of it!"

He fiddles his butthole.

"We like to crack ourselves up!"

Danny gulps hard, nearly swallowing his Adam's apple.
"We are sick son's a-bitches 'round these parts but we do play fair. What is life without honor? I'd rather be dead!"

He looks over the ledge. The one hundred and forty four foot drop to the boardwalk pier tingles his woody. He pretends to put the quarter back into his pocket but chucks it over the ledge instead. He then takes out a shiny and new silver half dollar, vainly admiring it's bigger size. He places it in front of Danny's face to show him that there's a head and that there's a tail.

"See, I'm nothing if not transparent!"

Carl remarks soberly to this treacherous fraud, Danny. Two lowest rings of hell were these two. He flips the coin and it lands hard into his hand. The two-sided tail quarter crashes down onto the pier wood below. Carl slowly turns it over. In no rush for anyone, nor anything apparently. He gazes at it bitterly and ice-veined. Always a bigger shark.

"It's tails. That means you, pretty boy!"

Danny's heart drops. Carnival Harold gleefully ties the bungee cord around his ankles. Tony looks upset. He thought he was the pretty one! Carl pats Danny on the butt once more for posterity and wishes him well.

"Good luck!"

Harold laughs in a familiar, maniacal laugh. Danny pleads.
"No, please don't! I'll do anything! I'm afraid of heights! I just want to go home. I'm sorry we came here. I can give you lots of money. I thought you said that if we gave you the girl everything would be okay! A square deal!"

Carl looks at Danny mockingly.

"You didn't give her to us. We took her. You didn't hold up your end of the bargain. You have no honor. Look at this place! We have everything we want. We don't need money. We don't want it. We're content in our ways. Those princesses up in their ivory towers take most of our resources anyway. We just try to humor ourselves with the crumbs they leave for us on the table. They leave us alone on our tiny pier and we leave them alone behind their fortified gates. As long as they don't venture. You ventured. Oh, and one more thing, if you don't jump we're just gonna throw you off."

Danny's body stiffens. His head swivels back and forth between these two crazed Carns, becoming cross-eyed. They quickly close in. He begs for mercy. Something he didn't give much to anyone, least of all to his so-called girlfriend. They throw him over immediately. He rapidly dives head first and thinks this is it. At least while he still had time to think. Before all was splattered into haggis guts. With eyes squeezed shut, he screams out for his mother. Suddenly, his body ricochets up after plunging to within five feet of the wood. He's alive! He screams in agonizing ecstasy knowing that his cord wasn't too
Carnival Carl looks over the ledge, witnessing his narrow escape. For the time being at least.

"Looks like you're up, shorty!"

Tony remains stoic. Insult after insult. What's next? Snide anti-Italian remarks?

"Well, greaseball?"

Tony figures. He jumps over and without hesitation. As he plunges head first, a deep sense of peace overcomes him. Almost as if he wanted to die. To end all of his suffering. His head gets to within five feet of the pier and shoots back up just as Danny's did. He breathes a huge sigh of relief. Maybe living isn't so bad! Carnival Carl shouts down to these two dangling knuckleheads hanging onto their lives by the skin of their teeth.

"Round two!"
Meanwhile, Darion and Staci are now sitting inside of the immaculate Ferris wheel carriage at the pier's edge, overlooking the ocean. Danny’s backpack is below Darion's foot, discarded on the floor of the carriage slowly revolving upwards and to the left. When reaching the top, it abruptly stops. Darion looks down at the Carn-man standing at the controls and signals his satisfaction.

"Perfect! Come back in a half an hour!"

"Anything you say, boss!"
The subordinate cheerfully remarks, lighting a smoke and strolling away. Darion inhales deeply and takes it all in with glee. He gazes out to sea. A heavy wind gust rocks the carriage. The eye of the storm was continuing passing over. The rain once again fell mildly, and the waves were once again creeping in slowly.

"It's beautiful isn't it?"

Darion asks. Staci thinks back to earlier in the day when the sun was high in the sky and she shared a similar sentiment, looking out towards the deep blue. This deranged lunatic was like a dark shadow adoring the same ocean, but at dusk. The overcast, moonlit sky reflected off of the black and blue current. Darion felt right at home.

"Mother nature! Powerful. Beautiful. Destructive. It's only destructive, however, when you get too close to her."

He rubs Staci's arms sleazily. He then scratches his arm. A tick Staci often would do herself, from nerves.

"Calm down, you look nervous."

She remains frozen. And nervous.

"That's what the people want. They want to get too close to Mother Nature. But then when she gets angry and all hell breaks loose, suddenly people call it a disaster!"

Rolling thunder rumbles. Staci's eyes harden. She was so much more than a piece of meat. Lightning flashes above her head.
More than an object to be objectified. A wave crashes hard onto the beach. She was starting to truly believe it herself! Darion takes his hand off of her arm and looks back to the horizon.

"People think creation is beautiful. That’s one side of it. But the way I see it creation is filthy, dirty, disgusting and bizarre."

Darion wipes his filthy face with his filthy hand.

"Beauty is just a false perception of chaos. A tremendous and comforting lie. Most people can’t handle the truth since it’s ugly. People are ugly. Even the most beautiful people. They're often the ugliest."

Darion looks right and over towards the bay to the fortified ivory tower, piercing the dark grey clouds ever so effortlessly. It's height, towering at least three hundred feet into the air, easily dwarfed the Ferris wheel.

"They claim they're so superior and it's their birthright to rule above us. Yet, they medically terminate their own. So shortsighted. Soon there won't be any of the so called 'master' race left. Survival of the fittest sure is dumb sometimes!"

He chuckles.

"Some say it’s in our nature to fight our nature."

He takes a swig from his flask and grows longing and desperate..

"I say, f*ck nature!"
He views the same contradiction in Staci that he viewed in himself. The veil was being lifted. Staci was seeing the light. Through the clammy darkness. Each one of us is corrupt and selfish by nature. To compete with selfish men was ultimately futile. All the sex positive feminists were only fooling themselves the longer they tried. Delusional wounded lambs for the biggest, baddest wolves. What was Staci thinking in submitting to these selfish trespassers? Eve and those three temptations. Where was good ole' Tony when you really needed him? She really had to stop taking the good one's for granted! He wore his heart on his sleeve even if his head was a bit screwy. That could always be worked on! A lousy heart wasn't as easy to repair. So many fakers who only looked at her as a piece of meat. Such goats. A charitable mother's prudence never feeds a wolf in sheep's clothing. They still had a chance of being redeemed in God's sight, of course, but Staci was no longer going to be anybody's fool. Her heart sings with bittersweet joy.

"I have a good heart. Deep down I'm a good person."

Darion remarks in a monotone voice.
Staci tries to laugh but the duct tape stifles any true or reflective human emotion. Selfish men could truly care less about the heart of a woman, let alone the longsuffering of a humble mom. Darion senses he's smothering her and removes the tape from her mouth. She looks at him for a brief moment but quickly turns away.

"But I come from around here. That kind of stuff gets you dead around here. Bad decisions have consequences. Being too good, especially in a place like this is a bad choice. These sharks would eat me for lunch if I showed any signs of weakness. Chomping at the bit at the scent of first blood. A lot of people don’t understand that cold, hard fact. Survival of the fittest!"

Darion puts his hand out of the carriage, letting the cold rain pound down on his cold flesh. Staci flashes back to the argument her and Danny had underneath the awning. Everything was one big joke to these two. Danny and Darion
didn't cry for others. They preyed on their weaknesses. Staci's stomach turns. Mourning sickness. Darion takes off his white bandana revealing a balding, lumpy head with thin, straggly hair. It gave him a sickly appearance. Almost like a chemo patient. A two inch millipede scurries from his scalp, and out of sight down his back.

"I see right through their hypocrisy. We're two sides of the same selfish coin. They're not going to change, so why should I?"

Staci thinks back to the Rusty Clam. And then The Inferno Nite Club. She loved being around gay men because they too were broken. It felt good to see men become objectified the way she had been. They emasculated one another rather than other women. Staci, the prostitutes, the strippers, the bartenders, the poorly yolked girlfriends, all consumed with bitter vengeance after being so mindlessly consumed, and for so long by so many untrue men liked that! These fem-men had no interest in degrading us poor women any further. They only sought to degrade themselves. Serves them right. Stick it where the sun don't shine! Viva la Staci! Her imagination wanders while visualizing that emaciated prostitute and her high fiving it on the boardwalk's north end as the scene freeze frames. Staci's song plays as the credits roll. God would wipe away all of the filth. Starting with her own. Mary had a little lamb. There was something spiritually satisfying in seeing other men emasculate one another. It tempered her scorn and desire at cosmic
vengeance in the first place. Selfish men getting a taste of their own medicine. It made her believe that for every selfish act done to harm another human being there was always a true spiritual consequence, and whether one truly believed in God or not. She liked that idea. However, the more she thought about it, the more she started to feel bad for those overly feminine, broken men. Mary had a little lamb. Surely, they had severe mother issues. Overly controlling, cold-hearted fem-bots who broke their son's balls due to their own unreconciled father issues in the first place. That wasn't right. She thinks of her own broken home and starts to truly feel bad for everyone. Jesus Christ! This fallen world seems like such a broken mess. Cold mothers, cold men. Absent or abusive fathers that create the cold daughters who in turn turn into the cold mothers who helped create the cold men in the first place! Staci's head hurts from such a knotted thought! A vicious cycle. Mary had a little lamb. Everyone needed to learn the thrill of the chaste. Staci was never going to run from this bittersweet truth anymore. She wanted to live more than ever but now for all of the right reasons. She smiles warmly thinking back to that idiot-savant, Jewish adolescent boy peddling away from Danny's mindless trespassing. He was a brighter bulb than most! Staci needed to give him more credit. Stupid is as stupid does, after all. Staci feels a slight kick in the womb. Her heart melts. Good moms sought to protect their sons from bitter, scorned women seeking to castrate them in the first place. Good moms also didn't want to see their sons emasculate themselves or other
men due to unreconciled family issues in the first place. Good moms also knew that to raise good sons properly was to groom them for chaste fatherhood in the first place! A good father figure was desperately needed in every home to help break the vicious cycle of unfaithful men who created the next generation of bitter, scorned women seeking cosmic vengeance due to so many unreconciled family issues due to poor earthly father figures in the first place! Life was aspirational after all. Unchaste men led by carnal lust only left a trail of tears for the whole family circle in the long run. Obsessing over faces but blind to the true face buried deep within each and every family unit. The heart of a humble mom! These secular men had no shame; emasculating one another through sodomy, social climbing and greedy duplicity. Such sin. Their Father in Heaven would never condone such acts, nor would he condemn but rather He'd say go and sin no more, my son. Before it's all too late. Danny was morphing into an angry, alt-right Nazi secretly wishing to be queen of the colonial castle. He loved to dominate in the boardroom but then secretly desired to be submissive in the bedroom. So much selfish and imbalanced power dynamics!

"It's always darkest before dawn."

Chapter 30
Darion stares intently with deranged and disaffected eyes out into nothing.

"They dream such beautiful dreams. But they don’t understand the consequences. What good is the dream, if the dream is no good?"

Staci looks out to sea. Her anger softens. She pitied Darion more than anything at this point. Whatever selfish act he imposed on her, and against her will, would come back to haunt him. God counts a woman's tears, after all. She's at peace knowing that he'd only be harming himself the most in the long run if he did decide to cross her. And whatever suffering God did allow would be limited, and in some mysterious way a greater good would come from it. The evil itself never becomes good, of course, and the evil-doer still suffers consequences for their poor choices in the first place. So Staci prayed for Darion's sake that he would see the light. Men are generally the carpenter's of their own crosses. Her spirit grows stronger with this revelation even while being at the complete mercy of Darion's foul hand in that moment. She wasn't going to be a doormat any longer. The way she perceived her mother to be. On the other hand, she wasn't going to be selfish, hard hearted, and worldly either. A self-righteous and hypocritical queen B who only sought men for their money. That wasn't right. She starts to get angry once more but this time at her own wickedness and deceit. Anger at her own personal selfishness and sin. She was getting really
angry now! Angry at how she would often get angry at Tony, or her mother, and for no good reason. Righteous anger! Pray as if everything depended on God, work as if everything depended on you. She didn’t want to be abused anymore. Not by the memory of her past abuse by her step-father, nor by the abandonment of her biological one, which sadly led to the further abuse from her step-father to begin with. Talk about being kicked while down! Sadly many of us can truly relate. This author first and foremost! The untrue motives from her self-centered boyfriend, Danny, were ultimately even further abuse! She sure as hell didn’t want to be consumed so indiscriminately by this pitiful, man-child Darion on his broken down 'amusement' pier of horrors. There was nothing truly funny about that! She was getting really, righteously angry now! Fuming! She started to desire honor and desired a man who desired to defend it. She wasn’t looking to hurt others who hurt her but to escape, relatively unscathed at least, through the sword of the spirit. To make them feel ashamed for their sin. To make them understand that a woman's body is sacred and deserved to be honored and respected. She did want to get married. She did want children. She did want a faithful husband who would die for her, and for their family's honor. She knew for that to happen, however, that she had to become honorable in the first place! A joyfully chastisement! God was great, but more importantly good. She felt more empowered than ever. Not a doormat, nor a bully but rather an assertive daughter of the King. She would do everything in her power,
while trusting in God the Father's grace to fight for the right things and for the right reasons. Even if it killed her. There were some things truly worth dying for with dignity and honor! Her baby kicks with a greater force than ever. New and eternal. She felt an instinct to survive like never before. Closer than ever to Mother Mary in Heaven, ever virgin, ever pure and ever ready to crush that slimy serpent's head, for both her and her child's sake. Forever more! Staci had to get out of this self-inflicted garden of Eve. This lustful carriage of sin. This self-centered flesh dominated world view. The flesh of her flesh, her child, was giving her a true fighting spirit. She'd only be harming herself the most in the long run if she continued following these rebellious men into oblivion, refusing to humble themselves towards familial giving. This gift of life in her womb was teaching her what true self-sacrifice really meant. Life is a gift when freely given to others! Something Darion seemed to have forgotten a long time ago. Staci pitied him but also feared for her life, and more importantly feared losing her dignity at the hands of such a pitiful, merciless evil. She prayed to God that He'd forgive her for everything that she was about to do. Nothing vengeful, cruel and Darwinistic but rather self-defensive and familial in nature. Survival of the fattest! Mother and child! What a grace! She enters a profound place of determined, silent fortitude and patiently waits for her moment to break free. Trusting with all of her heart that God will act when she does. Darion continues on with his sick and twisted
soliloquy, oblivious to the transformation occurring deep within her.

"They erect their walls. They think we want in. Sure, why not? I would love to screw every single one those beautiful, blue blooded princesses. But it would be shallow. They could never love me. I could never truly love them, either. They say a man who marries for looks and a woman who marries for money both get screwed in the end!"

He laughs in a high pitched squeal.

"You know what true love is?"

He stares at Staci with detached, intimate eyes.

"It's when you look into someone’s eyes and see your shadow."

She catches a glimpse of her reflection in his dilated, black pupil and dry heaves.

"The inside is what counts. Those women have no soul. Money and power is all they long for. What do you have inside?"

Staci once agains tastes her vile and ponders how her selfish choices led her into this den in many ways. We do create our own nightmare scenarios by letting our fantasies of the so called good life, such as wealth and privilege, but divorced from moral responsibility, dictate our carnal choices. We then assuage our consciences by believing that good and evil are only concepts in the mind in the first place. Wanting to lord it over the deviant masses while being deviant ourselves just one
glaring example of this universal hypocrisy. Those sex positive, childless secular women living off the corrupted fruits of exponential capital were little more than entitled princesses of selective reasoning more than anything else! Little different than Darion and his motley crew of hard scrabbled, labor heavy Carn-men who themselves reasoned their self-centered, debauched behavior. Leading not by example, but rather by sheer, misguided will. Do as I say, not as I do. Pharissees! If Staci really knew what went on inside of that crystal tower, she'd want to stay as far away from them as she did from this creep, Darion. Which is to say, very far! Good things are worth repeating after all. Two wrongs in the history of the world have never, ever made a right but often do point us in the right direction. Confess your sins contritely for Christ's sake! Staci needed to find true contentment between too little and too much. A chastised, spiritual adolescent growing into responsible adulthood, allowing herself to be courted by a chaste provider with the intention of raising well-adjusted children in a loving home. In the first place! That didn't seem like such a difficult penance. Simple! But not so easy. Using people and loving things were our default human nature after the fall, after all. Danny used Staci for her body but Staci used Danny for his wealth. Worldly kings and queens full of you know what! Sleazy. Snobbish. Incestual harems. Yucksville! The charade of being dishonest, self-serving and manipulative never ended well for anyone in the history of the world. The heart knows these things, of course, and those fairy tales seemed
nothing more than the sunny country of common sense when all was said and done. Staci felt tremendous guilt for supporting a friend's abortion in the past but no poor choice, or sin, or selfish whim that she herself ever committed in the past or present made her feel deserving of this current predicament, next to this deranged lunatic filled with carnal, vile lust in which she had no desire to fulfil. She continues to pray silently in her heart that God would somehow come through and shower her with His grace. In His way and in His time, of course. But the hour was getting late! It was more of a groaning then anything, and in which no words could ever hope to adequately express. She suffered selfishly long enough. She contritely accepts what a wretched sinner she truly was, and grows at peace, not with sin, but with the brevity of our fallen world. Even if Darion did kill her, she trusted in the Father's mercy due to a contrite heart. If she were to live, she trusted in Mary's spiritual guidance towards a lifetime of sanctification. Darion pulls out Tony's hunting knife, admiring his face reflected in the blade.

"You would never be able to love me. I mean, not after tonight. I definitely didn't give off a good first impression!"

He laughs, highly aware, and only slightly ashamed of every boundary he's plowed over.

Back over at the bungee tower, Tony yo-yo’s up and down once again.

"You two knuckleheads sure are making this fun!" exclaims Carnival Carl with glee. "Only two more cords left!"
Harold yanks the bungee to pull Tony back up. Danny pleads. It was down to a fifty-fifty chance he'd meet his doom on this third and final tumble over the edge. Carl shakes his head and screams snidely down to Tony.

"Your friend is such a cry baby!"

Danny gets thrown over, nose diving into oblivion, soiling himself and crying hysterically. His head gets closer to the pier at breakneck speed. It looks like its lights out for good ole' Danny boy. Fade to black. But no. Wait! Three inches from the wood his body shoots back up. A miracle! It seemed the bungee was a few feet longer than the others but a wee bit shorter than what would have spelled certain doom for this duplicit, Dan-man. A Carn-man miscalculation which turned into a blessing in disguise. One could only wonder if the final bungee, for Tony's sake, wasn't longer than this one! Not that any of this was of any concern to Danny, of course, who was just happy to save his own skin. He screams through tears and thanks a God that perhaps did exist, from the top of his head. To worship will was to negate it eventually and divine mercy was indeed a good thing. Something truly great, unexpected, seemingly random and beyond our control. The best way to survive a fall from grace is to soberly admit how continuously dependent we are on it. Danny reasoned that if he did get off of this boardwalk alive that perhaps he could learn to give more than he took. His position of weakness, being at the complete mercy of more ruthless folks than he did humble him a bit. He
wanted not only their mercy but ultimately God's. There by the grace of God goeth Danny!

"Thank you, God! Thank you so much, my God! Thank you, thank you and thank you!"

After feeling safe and secure in His arms, he was already starting to backslide, however. He now falsely believed that no matter what he did, God's grace would save him, regardless, and if he truly felt bad about a selfish act afterwards, or not. Such a sin of presumption, once saved, always saved. Once you get married, are you allowed to cheat? Try reasoning that to your wife! Some Protestant schisms have this heresy which ultimately was wishful thinking to assuage poorly developed consciences in the first place. God's grace should keep us humble in not wanting to intentionally hurt others. The crucifix is kind of the whole point! But Danny grows cocky once more and now believes that if God did exist, He was him! The wheels once again start spinning in his mind as his heart quickly shrinks to a tiny, insignificant stone. A baby crib attempts to emerge in his mind's eye but a different image overpowers it. Marshmallows and destruction. He wasn't sure he wanted to sacrifice for Staci, let alone their child. That seemed like so much work, and effort, and not a lot of fun. It would only ruin all of his self-seeking plans of humor filled consumerism, and now God-like nihilism! Where no matter what selfish thing he did, he'd manifest a safety net underneath himself. Ultimately then, his prayer and giving thanks to the Lord for saving him
rang hollow. He wasn't going to make a sincere effort to change for good. His mind was made up. Well, at least in that moment! A bloodstained raindrop falls between his legs as he dangles upside down. Staci's teardrop falling into the saltwater rush up below the boardwalk wood flashes into his mind for a brief moment. He quickly wills himself to think of something less heart piercing. The Stay Puft Marshmallow man re-emerges stronger than ever, crushing everything, and everyone in his path. He then escapes the boardwalk all by his lonesome. Danny grins devilishly and imagines himself worming his way out every stifling duty towards every stinkin' human being on the face of this stinkin' earth!

"The suspense is killing me, I hope it lasts!" ~ Willy Wonka and The Chocolate Factory, widely attributed to Oscar Wilde

Chapter 31

Tall and fat Harold smiles.

"I guess today isn't your lucky day, brother!"

Tony looks like he has a million conflicting thoughts running through his mind but ultimately just hopes Staci is okay. Back over on the Ferris wheel, Darion has Tony's knife up to the edge of her heart.

"How do I get inside your.. your...heart?"
He stutters, attempting to get the right words out of his sick and twisted mind. The one he enclosed himself in upon.

"I mean inside of your heart. Listen to me. I'm so nervous. You're making me nervous!"

The knife pierces Staci’s sports bra. A droplet of blood forms above her chest. He swiftly tears her shirt open with the knife, exposing the top portion of her right breast. He begins pecking at her neck. She growls like an enraged lioness and bites his left ear off. It lands atop Danny's backpack before bouncing like a piece of rubber out of the carriage, sailing down at the edge of the pier. Blood pours out of the side of Darion's head like a lava flow. Staci swings her arms upward, cutting the rope tying her hands together using the blade still held in his hand. She quickly adjusts her sports bra, re-covering her exposed breast and physically unloads on the creepy bastard, repeatedly kicking him in his crotch.

"You sick and twisted bitch!"

A thunder clap muffles his gruffly muttered agony. She cracks up as white lightning flashes brilliantly above the crystal tower, in sight from Darion's perspective right behind her face. The rain starts to down-pour once again. Timeless concepts such as self-respect, modesty and above all healthy boundaries were once again re-emerging whole-heartedly in Staci's heart and mind!

"You sick, sick, sick mother@%&#@%!"
She spits. Darion soon becomes unconscious. Once realizing he poses no further threat, she stops the offensive. Tony's knife, with a single drop of blood gathered from above her chest drops to the bottom of the carriage. She quickly snatches it up, along with the backpack, and swiftly throws it over her shoulder. Almost like second nature, she begins her descent. Her mountain climbing skills were finally coming in handy!

Harold and Carl, meanwhile are startled at the faint echoing screams coming from the shadows below. They pause tying the remaining bungee around Tony's ankles and look over towards the Ferris, witnessing Staci climb down ever so effortlessly.

"What the hell!"

Carnival Carl spits as he spastically takes out a pair of binoculars. He observes Darion slumped body in the carriage, bloodied and unconscious. Maybe even dead!

"We've got to stop this bitch!"

He raises his binoculars and scopes out the towering palace overshadowing the wheel. A bitch-bot, butch ambush! The bastards are under siege! Carl runs in circles. His day of reckoning had finally arrived! Well, at least in his mind! Harold, whose disposition was more slow and cow-like, and more prone to reading comic books rather than objectifying women so indiscriminately looks over towards Tony with a strange, brotherly affection.
"What about him, boss? Can't we just let him go? He seems harmless enough."

"No! Push him over!"

Carl's words are fast and merciless. He was sure they were coming for his peas and carrots! Harold felt that he had no choice and had to listen to his quick-minded boss. He looks over to Tony and just shrugs.

"Nothing personal, brother."

He didn't get paid to think after all. He begins his marching orders to terminate the weak. Just like that weak man at the front desk didn't stop those weak men from emasculating one another. Just like that weak old woman didn't stop that other weak old woman up on stage from objectifying herself. Just like that weak mother didn't let weak Staci into her humble abode. Wait a second! That so called 'weak' mother did let her in. In fact, she welcomed her with open arms! The more one thought about it, the more it seemed she didn't seem weak at all! Just then, Tony squares up, and with his hands and feet still tied, hop skips over like an enraged bunny rabbit, shoulder thrusting into tall and fat, Harold. Nothing personal, brother! Harold, being nearly twice his size has Tony imagining him as a football practice pad, recalling in his mind what coach would always say. Stay low. Thrust up. Great, and more importantly good things always emerge from the grassroots. Always be humble. About ourselves, not the truth. Selfish butt-heads in our fallen world tend to reverse the two! Tony's low center of gravity, and more
importantly good form allow him to get the upper hand. Soon Harold sails over the ledge. Thank goodness Tony is able to regain his balance right before tumbling next. Carl knows he's next and goes on the offensive, attempting to imitate Tony's low blow against the bigger Harold. He charges with his shoulders down but with an undisciplined, spastic form. His efforts prove futile. Tony hops, turns and digs his heels in. Their bodies collide. They struggle mightily. Carl does soon get the upper hand, however, wrestling him to the ground and unloading viscous blow after viscous blow onto his handsome and pretty face. This enrages Tony. Just as Carl pulls out his switchblade, Tony throws up his arms ferociously in a fit of rage, echoing Staci's maneuver over on the Ferris wheel almost to a T. He's able to cuts his hands free with the very weapon used against him. Spiritual ju-jitsu! With his arms now free, he easily overpowers Carl, bench pressing him over his head like a featherweight before tossing him over, and without a second thought. Carl sails down and shoots past Danny before landing head first onto the wooden pier only a few inches from where he had Harold drop the cantaloupe earlier. All Danny can think of is haggis guts. Stupid melon head! Hoo hoo! Tony pulls himself up with freed arms, and unties the rope and partially tied bungee before sprinting down the tower steps. Soon he converges underneath Danny's dangling body with Staci, who herself had just sprinted all the way over from the Ferris wheel. Both are out of breathe. Tony's chief concern is with her first and foremost.
"Are you okay!"
She stares at him shell-shocked and responds weasely.
"Do I look okay?"
Tony hugs her and kisses her forehead.
"We need to get you an inhaler!"
"Not good for you, Tony!"
Tony's eyes light up.
"Ahh, you do listen!"
He puts her into a playful headlock and gives her a nuggy.
"Everything's going to be okay. I promise!"
She looks up at Danny, still dangling twenty feet above.
"What are we going to do with him? Please tell me we can leave him!"
"I heard that, babe!"
Danny yells down and not in the slightest bit amused.
"I have an idea!"
Tony's screeches as he reaches into his cargo pants, hunting for his knife. He begins to panic.
"Holy crap! Why didn't I swipe the Carn's switch-blade while I was still up on the ledge?"
"Stealing is a sin, Tony!"
Staci screams as she digs into Danny's backpack, fishing out Tony's knife before handing it back, handle first. He looks up and surveys the situation.

"You're going to have to jump! I'll catch you! Cut yourself free with this!"

He flings the knife up and Danny miraculously catches, handle first.

"Try lifting your body and untieing the cord!"

Staci looks left towards the Ferris and notices that it's rotating once more. It then stops. She witnesses a Carn-man removing Darion's lifeless body at the bottom of the ride. The Carn-man looks up and over towards the bungee tower and catches sight of Danny's dangling body. He looks below and spots Staci and Tony standing close, directly underneath the selfish bastard. He smiles devilishly, signaling five other Carn-men spread out in the food section on the pier. They chuck down their cotton candy and begin a furious sprint with eyes locked on something more nourishing. Staci's flesh! The one Carn-man remains, tending to the flesh wounds of his fallen master. Staci observes these mad-men quickly approaching, all sorts of Carnival crazed, and screams at the top of her lungs.

"And hurry the hell up, you selfish son of a bitch!"
"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

"The name Salt-water taffy originated in Atlantic City after a shipment of taffy was 'ruined' by the ocean water."

Chapter 32

Danny, still struggling with the cord, yells to Tony below.

"You better catch me, you greasy bastard!"

Tony shakes his head with kindhearted confusion.

"I'm sorry, come again?"

Danny screams with even greater venom.

"Greasy! Bastard! Catch. Me!"

Tony sees red. He not so humbly retorts.

"No time for jokes, pants pisser!"

"It was water!"

Danny responds unconvincingly.

Tony let's it go and just tries to help Danny for Danny's sake at this point.

"Cut the cord! If you want to live!"

Danny undoes the cord and drops like a ton of bricks, falling sideways onto Tony, braced for impact twenty feet below. After a few moments of struggle, Tony jumps up and shoves Danny's dead weight off of him. His heavyweight softened the impact
and perhaps it wasn't gluttony until you got sick! Adrenaline has taken over. Tony's blood sugar was running low. He felt shaky but trusted in a power beyond his own. He sneezes and begins wheezing. Staci unties the remaining rope around Danny’s legs. Tony catches his breath and frees up his wrists. It seemed we truly were only as strong as the weakest link. Danny, disoriented and traumatized, ponders loudly.

"Wuss iz hahpenin'!"

"Time to go home!"

Tony yells like a bat out of hell. They start running. Staci stumbles onto her knees in agony.

"Come on! What’s wrong? What are you doing!"

Tony yells into her face.

"My feet and legs are cramping up again!"

She shouts through labored breathing. Tony picks her up and throws her over his shoulder, coughing violently while continuing to clear his breathing passage. Danny runs towards two go-karts lined up on the boardwalk and hops into one, taking off without even looking back. The more things change! Tony runs up to the remaining kart and gently but urgently places Staci in. She adjusts herself in the front seat. Tony puts one foot in. Something stops him dead in his tracks.

"What are you waiting for? Come on. Get in!"

Staci breathes with a renewed spirit.
"Hang on!"

With his eyeballs laser focused onto a nearby game stand, he pleads.

"Please, don't leave without me!"

He races over and yanks a chained crossbow savagely. He was in survival mode as well but for something familial. Like a cornered mother bear protecting her cubs. The chain breaks. He's free! The stand attendant, napping in the dark and moldy corner wakes up alarmed.

"Hey, what are you doing over here? You can't take that!"

Tony ignores his command and jumps over the stand, grabbing a bunch of arrows, pointing one at the attendant's throat.

“I'm taking only what I need, brother."

He throws some loose change down in front of his foot.

"Hopefully this will cover the costs. Don’t get between me and my family and I won't get between you and yours. Kapeesh? You slimy night-crawler!"

Tony looks simultaneously deranged and at peace. This filthy stand attendant takes his passionate plea to heart, gulps and concedes defeat. Tony sizes up the Carn-men quickly approaching and races back to the kart. The attendant murmurs under his breath.

"Greasy bastard."
Now beaming with a furious spirit of life, Staci shouts at the top of her lungs.

"Come on! Let's go, Meatball!"

Tony jumps into the back seat.

"You drive!"

"You don't have to tell me something I don't already know!"

Staci counters sarcastically and with a new, deep-seated confidence. She felt right at home in the driver's seat! She turns the key, miraculously still in the ignition, and hopes for the best. But nada! Nothing. Zero! They each let out huge sighs. Should have known! Tony jumps out and slides his head underneath the kart.

"It's got gas but it's stalled. Something's blocking the ignition!"

"Well, you're the grease monkey. Fix it already!"

Staci remarks with endearing snark. Tony ignores her droll half-wit and pulls out his hunting knife to tinker with the loose wiring.

"Try it now!"

She turns the key a second time. Still nothing.

"Wait a second. I see something!"

Tony reaches his right hand underneath her crotch area, focused on the task at hand, and delicately uses the tip of his knife to remove a piece of a rock metal shard crushing the
ignition coil, preventing the fluid from reaching the engine. The tube expands as it's removed. The knife creates a small slit. Viscous ooze begins to leak out. Tony doesn't notice and yells up once more for Staci to rev the engine. She exhales.

"Try it again, Stay!"

She figures the third times a charm and turns the key with an extra amount of confidence. But still nada, nothing and a big fat zero! Tony notices the leaky slit and figures it has to be plugged with something thick. It was creating a hell of a mess, draining the gas tank of it's much needed, life saving fuel!

"Give me some change, woman!"

Tony shouts earnestly. Staci looks down at him confused.

"Huh? What?"

"Change! A penny! Come on Stop being suck a thick-headed Queen!"

"Oh!"

Staci furiously digs into her pants pocket, hands shaking violently. A bunch of rusted pennies fly out, landing hard below her foot to the right of Tony's bastard face.

"You're welcome!"

He scoops up a penny and jams it into the hole. The one he made with his hunting knife in the first place!

"One more time! Come on, sister! I know you got this!"
He does the sign of the Our Father and begins praying a Hail Mary.

Staci turns the engine. It over! Fourth time's a charm! Lightning flashes and the thunder claps, shaking the foundations of the boardwalk to it's core. Maniacal cackles close in from the devilish Carns. Tony jumps up, grabs his bow, sets an arrow and lets it fly. It strikes one square in the chest. He lets out a visceral groan and drops face first onto the boardwalk wood which only impales him further. The four remaining Carn-men take cover behind the bow and arrow game stand, cheered on by that hypocritical, anti-Italian white trash attendant. Tony sits behind Staci's awakened mother spirit and trusts her behind the wheel.

"Floor it, queen-sister mister!"

She puts the pedal to the metal and they're off like bandits! The base of the ravine and the steps leading back up to the conversion van are within sight! Survival and longing for home did indeed go hand in hand! Tears of joy well up in Staci's eyes. Home free! Well, not yet. Those four Carn-men still remained, determined to give chase. One notices two bows left hanging. Another spots the figure-eight go-kart circuit several yards away.
"We're almost there!

Tony assumes, when just then, two go-karts smash through the circuit fence, slam down hard, and cut a sharp right with the rubber peeling out.

"Spoke too soon!"

Staci remarks, disheartened. A foggy, gravy stained kart repair t-shirt flashes into her mind for a brief moment. Almost as quickly as it appears, however, it disperses back into the mist.

"You really had to go and jinx it now didn't you, Tony?"

She remarks sisterly and with a bittersweet pathos.

maybe end chapter here.
Each goblin-faced kart has one Carn behind the wheel and the other riding rear, bow locked and loaded.

"Keep a straight line on Danny's tail. Let me worry about the pests on ours!"

Tony proposes, seeking to take control of the chaos. They whiz by piles of trash bags piled high and in rows. This only reaffirms Tony's deep seated conviction that this boardwalk's pitiful and family averse fate was ultimately a self-inflicted demise. A whiff of cheap perfume waifs into his nostrils as they dart past a boarded up novelty shop advertising an assortment of shiny and neatly packaged home-wrecking harlot gear. Vile forms in the back of his throat. The tires on Staci's kart grip the planked wood riding rough-shot over muddy puddle after muddy puddle. The waves are now crashing near the side of the boardwalk, splashing over the railing. The rain, coming down like a waterfall and the wind, blowing with the force of a tropical storm, was making navigation a chore to say the least! At least the fog had cleared up. Always look on the bright side! Endless webs of lightning snake across the sky as the rumbling thunder rolls savagely and uninterrupted. Arrows, cocked by those devilish bows soon fly past, narrowly missing the two.

"We should've stayed home!"

Tony squeaks.

"Seriously!"
Staci concurs, focused on Danny just in front. A goblin-kart pulls up to her side. Tony swivels; propping his bow and arrow, when just then, the wheelman bumps hard. The ensuing impact causes Tony to lose his grip. The bow flies out of his hand, thumping several times onto the hard wood. In his latest pit of despair, all he can do conjure up is one word.

"Fudge!"

He catches himself before saying the f word, quietly pondering that perhaps his mother's spirit was still guiding him. A seed of hope. The second Carn-kart pulls up. The two backseat Carn-men aim their arrows straight at Staci's head. Tony whispers intently into her ear.

"On my count, slam on the breaks; and please, for once, trust me for Heaven's sake!"

She gulps hard.

"Yes, sir."

Tony turns his head rapidly from left to right between these two cock-eyed bastards. He wasn't surrendering without a fight. His Hail Mary in a sense. A last ditch effort. Outgunning the gunner. A spiritual karate chop. No retreat, no surrender!

"One..."

Tony continues swiveling, giving each one a stone-faced death stare, refusing to show any sign of weakness, let alone fear, even though he was truly scared to death! They had two arrows
and four hands while he only had two hands and one arrow. He figured they had the upper hand. But he also knew that Staci had the ability to bump into either one of them, of course. On the other hand, either wheelman could bump into them, as well! Tony prayed to his Heavenly mother in his Heavenly father's house to give him the strength and courage to carry out his mission in helping protect Staci. For everybody's sake!

"Umm, I'm right here, Tony. I'm way ahead of you!"

She gazes back with merciful eyes.

"Let's protect our family's honor. Or at least die trying!"

Staci remarks off the top of her head and from the bottom of her heart. Tony is more than pleasantly surprised.

"Right!"

Something good to die for, to make it beautiful to live.

"Two..."

He decides to focus on the Carn to his left. The more evil and intimidating one. Always best to cut the head off the serpent.

"Trust me, Staci, and no matter what. Stay focused on Danny!"

Whatever happens, Tony was doing everything in his power to save his lady and help restore her honor. This made him, and her, feel worthy. He didn't plan on blinking, come hell or high water. He stares down the bullying Carn-man. Sweat forms on the bastard's forehead. He blinks. A wave breaks on the edge of
the boardwalk. The foam splashes down onto the kart-riders, giving Tony his cue.

"Three!"

He wheezes with passion, struggling mightily to catch his next breathe.

"Break! Now!"

Staci joyfully obeys his command since she now knew that he truly had her best interest at heart. If at some later date he did something to betray her trust, she'd reconsider listening, of course, but held no doubts in that moment; finally realizing that time and time again he truly showed how much he cared through humble deeds, even above words. She'd be a fool to think twice. At least at this point! She violently slams onto her breaks. The two Carn-sharpshooters release their arrows, impaling one another. One gets it in the throat. The other in the eye. Both tumble out of their karts; bloodied and out of commission. Staci hits the gas pedal once more and darts past a condemned Burger Queen stand before making a hard right, shooting through the entrance gates of the abandoned, family owned miniature golf course. A large porcelain statue of Glenda the Good Witch greets her benevolently, holding up a magic wand in her right hand. The two wheelmen quickly re-compose themselves. One continues straight-away on Danny's tail while the other cuts a hard left and smashes through the miniature golf fence and resumes giving Staci chase. She makes another sharp right and then a quick left, zooming in and around the
large obstacle course sandwiched between the boardwalk's east and west paths. The goblin faced Carn-kart ruthlessly mimics her every move. Back on the boardwalk's straight-away, Danny gets bumped from behind. He giggles for a brief moment. Oh, Nigel! Staci rubs her belly motherly before quickly cutting another hard left to avoid impact with the moat drawbridge at hole three. Then a swift right to avoid smashing through a towering sawmill at number five. The Carn-man zigs while zagging left, right behind her, managing through unscathed as well when just then, from Staci’s point of view, a big and fake porcelain sperm whale at hole eight rapidly closes in. She fiercely turns right and is able to dodge it, barely, while the goblin on her tail isn’t as lucky. He cuts the wheel but his kart loses traction, drifting into the bloated, cracked whale. Denny, the upright and honest whale collapses on impact. Tony looks back between fear and excitement as he pats Staci on her shoulder.

"Great maneuvering! That was close!"

"All in a day's work!"

She proclaims with great confidence, now soaring through the roof. Each time she confronted her demons head on truthfully and with love she grew immeasurably. The only way out was through. No retreat, no surrender! She now felt a sense of ownership of this kart, joyfully plowing it through the fenced off, abandoned family amusement. And once again valued what truly mattered most; healthy boundaries for family's sake.
Christ! No more sad faced, self-pitying, selfish Staci chasing after all the wrong things and for all the wrong reasons. Some things are worth defending. Especially a woman's honor! In time, perhaps she could even forgive John even if she could never truly forget. Despite, or maybe because of all of the sorrowful daggers thrust deep into her heart she no longer wanted to hurt others out of hurt. Tony's brotherly love helped shine much needed light into her dark corners. Places she didn't even know were so broken and hard to begin with. She wanted to return home now. She had a reason to live. This assumption made her gentle, yet really, really strong. In a nurturing way. Her entire body buzzed with a familial warmth. What an honor it was to be an expectant mother. It made her less afraid to die than ever all while wanting to truly live more than ever. As long as her child had a fighting chance to survive and thrive in this fallen world, she was on board! She puts her hand over the womb and could only pray for a better hand dealt to her baby who kicks harder than ever. She spots Danny just ahead. The goblin-face is still on his tail. Sperm donor my ass! Always attempting to outrun his duties and responsibilities. The selfish prick was going to come clean in one way or another. She quickly narrows the gap, not completely giving up on him yet. It was also his child after all. His day of reckoning had come. Mary had a little lamb. Go home to your family. The angel rebuked Joseph.

"We have to help, Danny!"
Staci pleads while staring visciously at the goblin wedged between her and her so called caring and considerate boyfriend. If only she could get him away from so many bad influences. Tony agrees. They have to do everything in their power to help him since neither could live with themselves in good conscience otherwise.

"I'm gonna take him out. Are you sure there this thing doesn't go any faster?"

"My foot's completely on the gas!"

Staci screams. Tony looks over her shoulder and notices a green button they both must have overlooked earlier. Trapped in their own minds? Trying to remember certain things, trying to forget others? Only God knows! Underneath the green button it reads...

'Get Turbocharged!'

Tony puts his hand above her chest and points.

"Hit the green button!"

Staci looks beneath the gear box and there it is. Clear as day. She fearlessly snakes her right hand through the gear sticks, and with her right index finger presses down on it with an unburdened heart. The kart jumps, picking up speed. She's given it life! She pulls up next to Carn-man.

"Hell-oh, brother!"
Tony grins, gazing devilishly at the devil. Staci cuts her wheel hard, knocking into the bastard. He quickly returns the favor. Soon they're trading vicious blow after blow as Danny, several yards ahead, looks quite content at not having to be a part of any of this nonsense! The only skin he cared about saving was his own. If they destroyed one another, that would only help clear his path towards world domination! The waves, now crashing repeatedly onto the edge of the boardwalk has Staci, Danny and the Carn angle left and away from the railing, trying to avoid the encroaching chaos foaming deep within the abyss. Tony leans out and prepares to jump into the Carn-man's kart to end this madness once and all when something suddenly stops him. A hard smack on the side of his head. This time it wasn't from Danny but rather a flying grouper fish! It lands between Staci's foot and his inside of their kart, spastically flopping about.

"What the..."

Tony remarks dumbfounded.

Staci glances down and remarks with horrified humor.

"Must be from the waves!"

Soon dozens of these fish fly past their heads. Tony turns his gaze towards the ocean and then shouts in terror.

"It's not the waves!"

"Huh?"
Staci, confused looks back with a grimace. She does a double take. A huge water spout, flinging the fish out from its quickly forming vortex, picking up speed and angling directly towards them has her feeling ever more chastised to say the least!

"Holy, Mary, mother of God!"

Staci spouts before doing three signs of the cross followed by a chaste kiss of Tony's crucifix necklace. Tony then puts his foot over her foot, over the gas pedal.

"Floor it, ma' lady!"

A deep hunger overcomes her as they zip past the Carn and pull up alongside Danny. She has it in her heart to give him one final chance, seeking to save him with some sound motherly advice.

"Shift up you maniac! The green button. Give life!"

She puts her hand over her belly.

"Get turbo-charged!"

Never one to be a good listener, least of all with women who weren't his mother, he has a hard time making out her words. The raging storm was helping matters either, of course! He's able to discern the first part, however, and obliges. He grabs the gear shifter as if yanking his own chain. It accidentally downshifts and slows him down, putting him neck to neck with the Carn-man who laughs maniacally before smashing a red button on his front panel. The goblin face on the front of his kart blinks on and off with blood pouring out of it's mouth and
green vines growing out it's nose. A blaring, cackling tone echoes out of it's ears. Danny covers his in agony, screaming bloody murder. Anything in the path of this Carn was just an obstacle. Like Danny! Staci looks greatly upset at all of his backsliding. Any flickering hope she may have had with him changing for the good seemed extinguished in that moment. So much duplicity. Her heart grows heavy. But she did feel relieved at the same time. Danny was a big boy after all.

"Don't look back, Stay. Keep your eyes forward! Danny's a big boy and can take care of himself. We make our choices and then our choices make us! For better or worse!"

Staci wisely listens even though she felt quite horrible about his own self inflicted demise. His loss more than anything! She forgave him and put it all in God's hands. The water funnel, now morphed into a viscious cyclone gains rapidly over the boardwalk on its own path of merciless annihilation. It shatters condemned game stands to bits while whirling rotting piles of garbage back out to sea, drawing near the kart-riders at a breakneck pace. A single lightning bolt strikes down directly in front of Staci's kart, splintering a single plank of wood into three pieces.
Bright orange sparks fly. A deafening sonic boom quakes. Staci sails over the wood as it disintegrates from the surgical strike. The front tire is able to regain it's grip, barely, and continues it's forward motion.

Tony, flabbergasted, screams like a hysterical woman.

"Faster!"

"I already hit the green button, and I'm flooring it!"

Tony notices a small and pesky rock pebble underneath the pedal, preventing a full acceleration. He reaches down feverishly and flicks it away, allowing Staci's foot to give it a complete throttle. The kart picks up speed, slowly but surely. Tony sighs with huge sigh of relief.

"Teamwork!"

Danny and the Carn-man are slowly left in the dust. Staci doesn't look back. Nor does she intend to any longer. Her baby kicks hard. Almost painful, even. Staci smiles warmly and rubs
her belly. They'll get home. In one way or another. Sailing. Meanwhile, Danny and the Carn-man futilely duke it out in another law of diminishing returns. Toxic masculinity! An earsplitting bellow is heard just over the sea as a huge sperm whale, eighty feet long, rocks back and forth above the relentless tide. Things weren't looking too bright for these two spiritual adolescents consumed above all with themselves. The chaos was about to swallow them whole!

"Daughters of Eve long for Sons of Adam to lead themrighteously. When men fail in self donation, these women become disordered themselves."

Chapter 33
Danny and the Carn take a brief moment from their mindless fighting to look over towards one another in utter disbelief. Fireworks begin erupting over the lone house atop the rocky island cliff. The single lightbeam from the lighthouse turns towards the Ferris wheel's illuminated carriages. The sperm whale see-saws on the surface of the tide, giving off a deafening whale cry. Infinitely more terrifying and higher in decibels then anything that man-made sky-ride generator could ever hope to muster. Mother Nature was pissed! A white water geyser bursts the top of it's head, angling right on course towards Danny and the Carn. Lightning bolts vein below the tri-
colored fireworks above sperm whale's water shoot. The boardwalk wood begins crumbling underneath their dead end path. The eighty foot long whale slams on top of them. It's point of impact is only several hundred yards north of the sky-ride's southern entrance. The steel black cage, below the Victorian bedroom shakes violently, along with the house but both are able to withstand the shockwave. Three support towers north of the landmarks collapse on impact, however. The gentle ride attendant jumps up from bed and peers out his window. He can't believe his eyes. So much sperm filled carnage! He's a bit shaken but ultimately unscathed. It hit so close to home. He knew this day would come. The boardwalk's day of reckoning had arrived. He was in serious peril. An escape hatch opens. Soon a single-seated tele-copter with the old man sitting underneath it's whirling blades shoots up and out of the attic! Using his mechanical ingenuity for good, he maneuvers the gyro-stick to pilot his frail bones to the relative safety of higher ground. He was due to retire in a week anyway and was quite content to let it all go. He just prayed for all of the folks stuck down low as he sought to make a new life somewhere in someway while he still had the time. The section the whale collapsed on is crushed to bits. At a full rest on the beach, it remains unmoved in the sand as the water funnel zips through it's body. As luck would have it, the funnel soon turns right after passing through. It heads back out to sea, evaporating into the relentless tides. Danny was a goner, however, and Staci looks conflicted. No one deserves this
inglorious fate, not even selfish butt poop Danny, but there was nothing that she could do about it. He kept running away from his responsibilities time and time again. Of course, she did forgive him prior to his demise and didn't feel the slightest bit of guilt for what just had unfolded. She quickly realizes that she wasn't out of the woods either. With eyes locked in the present moment, she calculates in her mind how they were now safe from the Carn, the twister and the whale, but the sea was quickly rising. Before long the entire boardwalk would be underwater! They had to get to higher ground and as soon as humanly, and humanely possible! She races down the remaining and narrow portion of wood. The kart soon sputters before grinding to a halt only a few hundred feet from the bass of the ravine. Out of gas! They hop out and sprint. Something isn't right. Staci notices a deep blue strip cutting across the boardwalk which wasn't there earlier. A newly formed inlet! She looks up and also notices the wooden steps leading up the ravine have been destroyed. A lightning strike, most likely. To her right, she notices the ocean looking like someone shook it up like a cheap tequila chaser with it's flow getting ever more reckless. She knew they had to get off right quick before sinking further down with the rest of the rot!

"Of course!"

Tony remarks sarcastically as Staci looks at the incoming streams of the inlet, spreading wider and wider. She closes her legs tightly.
"There’s no way we can even get over. We'd be pulled right out to sea!"

The fireworks have ceased. The rain was still coming down but there was a lull with both the thunder and lightning. Staci looks back towards the boardwalk pier and notices a peculiar flying bird zooming across the sky. She realizes that it's the gentle old sky-ride attendant flying over the house where the fireworks had been above only moments prior. His flight of fancy gives Staci an idea. That's it! The only way out is through! All who wander, or wonder aren't lost. She locks her sights onto that sinister black cage next to the attendant's house below the bedroom window. It all starts to come together in her head.

"Maybe there's another way!"

She shouts and yanks Tony along, and was now the one trying to save his life! More than happy to return the favor after all. A little thing called personal responsibility and looking out for the ones you loved truly went a long way. They run towards the sky-ride entrance through the heavy rain as Tony struggles to keep pace, panting and wheezing.

"I guess your feet and legs are feeling better!"

Staci looks at him like a warrior princess charging into battle.

"No pain, no gain!"

Mothers and sons, daughters and fathers. From chaos to order. Love saves the day, but not before each one of us loses our way. No crucifixion, no resurrection!
They soon reach the sky ride entrance. Staci races over to the steel black cage, sitting below the recently retired worker bee's bedroom window.

"This one's connected to the cable leading up the ravine. Southbound! To the conversion van!"

She shouts in ecstasy with adrenaline coursing through every inch of her veins. In the meantime, Tony scopes out the beached sperm whale to his right, marveling at its sudden and furious impact. He looks back over to Staci with a heavy heart.

"I'm so sorry."

Staci looks at him confused. What did Tony do to her? She loved this little grease-monkey to death!

"About Danny."

Her eyes light up. She looks over towards the giant sperm, greatly amused. Her so called caring and considerate boyfriend was somewhere underneathe it all, crushed to bits. Haggis guts. She responds matter of factly.

"It's okay."

She pauses for a moment.

"Butt he was a selfish sh*t!"

Grins slowly form on each before both faces burst out into uncontrolled, hysterical laughter. Staci was overcoming her bitter, unforgiving nature. This gift of life in the present
moment was a true miracle of the Father's grace. Her heart overflowed with sincere gratitude!

"Goofball!"

She smacks Tony's arm like a bratty little sister, once again remembering all of the good, clean, wholesome fun she used to have as a kid.

"Tag, you're it!"

Tony just shakes his head and laughs. He was just truly happy that she was!

"Maybe we can get this thing to work!"

She shouts with glee.

Tony looks at her in utter disbelief.

"Surely you can't serious?"

"My name's not Shirley!"

Staci remarks dryly, cracking herself up before growing more solemn.

"At this point brother, what do we have to lose?"

She looks at the water flowing onto the boardwalk.

"Except our lives!"

Tony concedes this young woman's point. The one blossoming into a responsible and family centered adult. Sometimes women do know best! Even when they didn't it's best not to
argue. At least not directly. That's what writing was for! A mild wave knocks them gently against the steel black cage. Lust would always feel like love until true self-sacrifice is required! Redemptive suffering is painful! They race to get up and this time Staci is the first one back onto her feet, graciously helping Tony back to his. A true win-win. She races over to the ride controls, frantically scanning the various levers and buttons with anxious eyes. The wheels start to spin in her head. She takes a deep breathe, slows down and re-centers herself. She's able to re-connect the gears of her mind firmly to the heart.

"It's gotta be one of these!"

Tony humbly corrects her.

“Has to be!”

Staci is a bit taken aback.

“Well excuse me, Shakespeare!”

She quickly yanks a lever and mindfully pushes down three buttons in a row. Things had to be done the right way after all. The heart needed the head and vice versa. The loud, booming jet engine sound is heard once more and Staci has never been more excited in her life to hear such an earsplitting, man-made noise in her life. She pulls a second lever. The cable begins to move. The noise reduces to a more reasonable level. She's flying over the moon. It's working! The black steel cage begins to slowly ascend southbound. Staci is head over heels!
"See, I told you, Meatball! Come on! Before it's too late, ya' big baby!"

She flings open the cage door and without haste leads the way in, pulling Tony along with her before it lifts off. They're in! They head towards the summit of the ravine from whence their journey first began.

"There are two ways to get home. Travel around the whole world and arriving at the same destination is one way. Staying there is the other." - G.K. Chesterton

Chapter 34

Gliding along shakily in the cage, Tony looks utterly amazed.

"How did you do that?"

Staci smiles with humble confidence.

"Never doubt a woman's intuition!"

In reality she had just watched the sky-ride attendant earlier, recalling his pattern with all of the gears and buttons and just did the reverse of what he had done. It was basically an educated guess that it would lift the steel cage in the opposite direction. She also now felt much better about herself, recalling that she didn't completely ignore that ole' fleabag. Perhaps she
wasn't as awful and selfish as she originally thought. Hey, we all remember it how we need to, right? They look down at the beached sperm whale as the full scale of its destruction comes into clearer view. Suddenly, and unfortunately, Darion also comes into view, climbing over the carcass and standing on it's blubbery, water soaked head. He himself looked bloated and blue, just lucky to be alive and breathing.

"Hey, babe! Can we talk things out?"

Staci is in utter disbelief. Skeletons of the past die hard. She didn't think that she was better than him but ultimately did judge his sinful acts. His in fact, helped convict hers. Darion limps over to the base of the sky ride. If he was going down, he was taking her with him. He starts yanking the levers randomly. No patience for doing the right things in the right way and for the right reasons. Darion wanted it now! Just then, a huge wave barrels over the boardwalk, crashing into his body violently, shooting him mercilessly through a bobbing for apples game stand. The wood and his bones crack, splintering into countless pieces as the condemned buildings on each side of the stand collapse. The foundations were shaky to begin with and soon skeleton after skeleton surface atop the foamy rushup. Tony gulps hard. Apparently that was where the bodies were hidden. Used, abused and then discarded at will. Indiscriminately. It was all coming to light. A true tourist trap of death. Mindlessly indulging in the flesh was truly a law of diminishing returns. Tony shudders, thinking back to that stripper whispering into
his ear while his bum sunk further into the crusty and infectious 'love'-seat. She wasn't joking. He and Staci were lucky to narrowly escape it all. Or have they? All of the skeletons were being exposed. The purification would begin. Darion clings to an empty apple crate like a life preserver as the huge riptide retreats back, pulling his broken body out along with the skeleton bones surrounding him. Themselves encircled by rotten apples. From dust they came and from dust they shall return. To the bottom of the sea. As it was said in that old-time Frankenstein film, all is forgiven. Staci and Tony remain frozen in fear. After a few long moments, they exhale. Now near the top of the cliff and with the conversion van in sight, something suddenly dawns on Tony.

"Holy hell! What about the car keys!"

Staci’s eyes bug out. She flings Danny's backpack off her shoulder, wondering if the keys were still in there or crushed along with the selfish bastard. She unzips the bag frantically and fishes around before furiously tearing out a skeleton pair. Her Xanax bottle, along with Danny's bag of green, grassy stuff, along with a bunch of loose change fly out. It all plunges through the bottom of the cage below her foot. Down into the deep blue. Staci panics for a brief moment and on the brink of another anxiety attack but calms herself down, realizing that she didn't need that stuff anymore. She just had to stop surrounding herself with a*holes who gave her so much anxiety in the first place! That would be a big step on the
journey of true recovery and healing. She looks at Tony and smiles warmly. A mother's intuition would always help guide her steps along the true and right path. Once she got her cell phone reception back, she was calling her mommy, and a.s.a.p! No more green, grassy stuff, Xanax or heavy boozing for her. Rather contrition and the confessional! Maybe a glass of wine here or there, of course. She waves the keys in front of Tony's donut loving face and bursts out into a tempered cackle. Shamefully self aware. Sweeping in front of her own door with a firm and gentle hold on her broomstick handle. She truly did have the power all along, and all because of God's grace. Tony stares at the keys stonefaced. And then down through the cage below her foot. The tide continues pouring over the boardwalk. He chuckles curtly in a castrated manner before giving way to uncontrolled hysterics. Broken. Mad. But healed! They hug and embrace tightly. Staci cries through the laughter. They begin to passionately kiss. It seemed coming so close to death always brought men and women together in one way or another! Tony gently wipes away her tears flowing down her face and attempts to console her. This time she's open to his gentle advance. It was all for her, after all.

"You know, I'll always be there for you and the baby. I've been learning a trade, and mixing concrete for extra dough. College isn't really my thing. Nor debt! Cold hard cash any day! Not being greedy of course, but well, you know!"

He put his hand over her stomach.
"And you know how much I love to cook. I'll only feed the two of you unconditional love and the support of a self-sacrificial provider!"

Tony flexes his arm. A combination of fat and muscle jiggles. Staci giggles at his warmth and sincerity before hugging him tightly.

"Use your powers for good, Tony!"

"Of course! I'm a good wizard!"

Tony remarks, squeezing her, and inadvertently restricting her breathing. From the looks on her face she never wanted him to let go. Within reason of course. He loosens his grip when noticing her face turn blue.

"Sorry, babe! Sometimes I don't know my own strength!"

Now at the top of the ravine, the conversion van is within sight.

"We better jump out! It doesn't descend!"

Tony quickly realizes, figuring the worst that can happen is a of couple broken ankles from the twenty foot plunge. He'd jump first and then help break her fall in a similar way he had with Danny, dangling like a clueless knucklehead earlier. It was well worth the cost of finally getting home safely and all in one piece. He thrusts his body over to the cage door but it doesn’t budge. They've unknowingly locked themselves in! He furiously tries tearing the door off, but with solid steel hinges, that proves futile. Like a caged animal, he roars like a gorilla,
pounding on his chest. Staci screams in horror. A booming thunderclap drowns her voice out as lightning diabolically snakes above their cage. If it wasn't someone, it was always something!

"Tony!"

Staci's meek voice wobbles. He holds her tightly while shaking himself uncontrollably. Commitment to anything was scary let alone family and kids! The wind gusts shake the cage violently as it continues towards the sixty foot tower facing east and out to sea. Tony and Staci get a close up look of the left and right concrete columns which did indeed look like ancient Roman ruins. No turning back at this point. What's started must always be finished. Viva la chastity. Family rules! Tony regains some fortitude as they glide towards that single house above the steeply inclined rock face which one could only hope they'd make a proper home.

"Relax, Staci, everything will be okay. I'm by your side and I'll protect you and your child. With my life if I have to. That deserves no praise. It's my duty. And besides it's the right thing to do!"

The steel cage chugs over the water as the mechanical pulley system continues pulling them along, upwards and onwards towards itself. The neatly trimmed, square green lawn was all within their sights, growing bigger. They arrive. The cage ascends to the top of the island, stopping in front of the house, directly on the lawn. An attendant is waiting for them. His
appearance made Staci presume that he was related to the other gentlemanly sky-ride attendant they had encountered earlier. This man was a bit younger and shorter, however, and with of a slightly darker complexion. He also wore a priestly collar of all things. Perhaps, something to do with brotherly love? Without saying a word, he unlocks the cage and offers Staci his hand. She reaches for it desperately and allows him to gently pull her out of the black cage. Talk at times could be cheap. King Danny? Ha! Queen Staci! Ouch! Actions over words all day, everyday. If you say I do, do! The true test of character. In silence, the priestly host guides them to step into the home directly behind him, and directly in front of them. He decided a long time ago to use his brokenness to help others heal. Whatever he lacked, he never wanted others to. This healed him as well. They look left and notice a fireworks barrel sitting precariously at the edge of the green lawn right next to the cliff's drop off. This startles Staci at first but the priestly man's sincere presence reassures her that everyone's feet were indeed on solid ground. He thought quietly to himself and with great earnestness how he hoped that they'd make it a suitable home, and one for raising well adjusted children. That was his truest, deepest and most honest intention. Their well-being! Filled with dread they take the first step. Faint wedding music echos from the inside. Both are already having second thoughts. They stop dead in their tracks and turn back to the man and plead. Show us another way. Please, sir! What's a father? I never had one of those! He reassures them that this
was truly right and just. He signals one final time for them to step into the house and make it a home. Their home. Would they rather drown in self inflicted misery way down low on that sinking and stinkin' boardwalk? What fun was that? They turn back towards the door, albeit reluctantly. A strange pull was drawing them in. Against their fallen human wills. Tony enters first. Right foot forward. There was only one place to go and that was down the concrete steps into the basement below. All of the other rooms were locked at this point. They descend cautiously. The door creaks behind them. Tony runs up but just as he reaches the top, it slams shuts and appears to lock itself! No escape! Staci cries both tears of sorrow and joy.

"Tony!"

He tightens his grip.

'I got you, Stay! And I'm never letting go. We're in this together. For better or worse!"

"I know our filthy hands can wash one another's, and not one speck will remain." - Death Cab For Cutie

Chapter 35

They continue down the concrete steps with great trepidation. Staci notices yellow crud splotched about the walls. She yanks Tony back, feeling another panic attack coming on. He
reassures that everything was under control. Well, least in his mind! When they reach the bottom, they notice a tunnel. One with three sealed doors on each side and a final, seventh door at the end of the narrowing, crusty corridor. Tony kisses Staci on her forehead like an attentive and caring father figure before walking towards that final door, slightly ajar with a single ray of light shining into the hall. He prepares for whatever encounter awaited him just past it's threshold. Right before entering he notices above the door, three faded words engraved. Each below the next and angling left.

Deed."
Dad.
"Dead.

He opens the door. It creaks painfully. He witnesses an old man sitting alone in a wooden chair facing nothingness. Tony walks over slowly as Staci stands at a safe and sound distance, frightened out of her wits! Tony gently puts his hand on this man's shoulder. He turns around in a similar way that the old woman, down low and deep within her own despair, did earlier in the Clam.

"Pop-pop?"

Tony remarks in utter disbelief. It’s his deceased dad!
The man, in tremendous turmoil tries to speak but no words come out of his mouth. This was the man who had abandoned Tony and the rest of his family, chasing one younger woman
after the next. It had finally caught up with him. The worst! He sits there deeply broken filled with indescribable regret and for the first time in Tony's life, he truly felt bad for his old man. He really screwed the pooch! The abandonment of those entrusted into his care ended with being abandoned in this self inflicted hell-hole. A lot of the things he said in life rang hollow and his whole life was a struggle to be a man of his word. Now no matter how hard he tried to speak it was irrelevant. Nothing would come out. Nothing could. Not anymore. Just like he promised his family he'd be there for them but wasn't. It was all too late. He looks greatly ashamed to be in Tony's presence. Just one of the children whom he imposed so much needless suffering upon. The one who took it upon himself to clean up his father's mess in the first place through whatever heartfelt means he could. He now pitied his father, seeing firsthand his human flaws through spiritually mature eyes. His poor choices and weak character hurt himself the most in the long run. Tony didn't want to see him suffer any longer. We all make mistakes, Pop-pop. Tony knew how difficult it was to be faithful himself, struggling to control his own carnal nature, and it was one of the reasons that up until recently he had decided to remain single. Wisdom from perhaps his father's own poor example. Never give your word if you can't keep it, Pop-pop. It's a journey. Like father, like son.

"It is okay daddy, I forgive you. We all make mistakes!"
Tony hugs his old man. The man he barely knew. But did look up to in ways that no words could ever hope to adequately describe. Out of the black nothingness countless rays of bright sunlight emerge. The weight of the world was being lifted off both of their shoulders. The father, now able to move his arms and speak, jumps up to hug his son.

"Thank you, my son! I love you, and your sisters and brothers too! I'm so sorry I let all of their mothers down. I am the one who has suffered the most because of it. I just hope that you all can have it in your heart to forgive me one day. Even if each one of you can never truly forget. I made my choices and have faced terrible and just consequences because of them. I just want to lift my shadow off of everyone and for once be a blessing. Forgive me for your sake! You can then make good choices and not go down the same selfish path as I. Cruelty begets cruelty. Each one of us has to break the cycle and I now understand deeply how forgiveness truly heals both parties!"

The sunlight blinds both of them. Tears stream down their faces when, just then, the old man's body evaporates into the sunlight above Tony's body. He takes a deep breath and attempts to temper his overwhelming emotions. A red rose filled with thorns blossoms through the concrete just below Staci's right foot. Tony takes her by the hand and is about to lead her out of the door when she freezes once more.
"I can’t. I can’t go any further. It’s too much. You don't have to make any promises you can't keep, Tony. I understand. I don't deserve any goodness or happiness, or stable men in my life!"

"Everything is going to be okay, Stay. A vow is a vow. And if that vow is broken, then it is I who ultimately will be bringing judgment upon my own cheating heart!"

He looks back over to the chair his father was sitting in only moments prior, collapsing into the concrete floor and folding in on itself. Staci feels so relieved after hearing those heartfelt words rooted above all in humble deeds. Her body loosens. She allows him to lead her back into the hall of the seven doors. The yellow crud has transformed into yellow crystal. He leads her back up the steps with a firm yet gentle grip. The door to go outside is still locked but the living room entrance has now opened. He sweeps her off of her feet, leading her over the threshold. She marvels at the beautiful crystal dollhouse in the right hand corner with shades of golden yellow. Ken and Barbie stroll along a yellow brick sidewalk with their baby in a yellow carriage. A 'Just Married' banner hangs off the yellow Barbie mobile parked near the yellow Barbie family/community center. A golden retriever runs behind them, tail wagging but not in the least bit viscous! A pale, white crucifix hangs in the living room. The centerpiece. Tony and Staci gaze at it warmly. He caresses her shoulder with great affection as she rubs her belly. Both overflowing with contented joy. All that they have been through only made them appreciate this moment all the
more! A pink Barbie phonograph, sandwiched between the family entertainment center, plays a baby blue record. A chorus of heavenly women sing in perfect harmony as the gentle melody echoes inside the four walls. All love on earth truly began and ended, and God willing began again with a loving mother's merciful justice for all her children. Mary, star of the sea pray for us to love the right things in the right way and for all the right reasons!

"First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage!"
Staci pulls away from Tony and walks peacefully over towards the window. She peers down and overlooks the peninsula, not with her nose up but rather with great concern. Tony walks over and they watch the apocalyptic scene unfold. Wave after wave of the relentless tide. The boardwalk being swallowed whole by the sea. They take it all in with humility and awe. Perhaps every end truly is a new beginning.

maybe end chapter here.

The tide flows into the Rusty Clam. The old school feminist, still facing the stage, becomes submerged by the rising seawater. The other two women are nowhere to be found. The mannequin shop fills up as well and soon all of the mannequins are flushed out the back door. The gruffly muttering man, however, has vanished. A faint, curt chuckle echos somewhere in the abyss. A wave comes crashing down onto the roaming prostitute. Her body disintegrates on impact. A single seagull, perched on the railing where her body was only moments prior, flaps its wings and ascends over the wav. Towards the horizon. Safe and at rest in her Heavenly Father's loving arms? One can only hope and pray. The water rushes under and through the Casio Diva's awning, collapsing it on impact. Thank goodness she was no longer there, however. Where could that slow yet wise boy and his bike be? A mystery! The water rushes into the gay bar flamboyantly (hey, girlfriends look at me!), trapping and
drowning many of them in the process. The gay but celibate front desk clerk hotfoots it up the steps to the second floor as the wave comes rushing into the motel lobby. He locks himself into room 225 and gets down on his knees to pray. The dark woman in the Mona Lisa knock off painting lays upside down, face up on the broken bed, staring at him sorrowfully. Some of the gay men are fortunate enough to escape, thank goodness, and make it up to the second floor themselves. The contrite clerk immediately opens the door to welcome them in with sincere hospitality. The woman in the portrait grins ever so slightly. They head back out to the balcony and watch in horror as the foamy sea-water continues pouring through their den of debauchery. They sob uncontrollably. Many of their close friends, whom they loved dearly, and like family, were trapped and dead. Tip and Alan are seen rowing a boat past the tide towards Fatuus Island several miles off the coast. A humble Mexican-American father and son hitch a ride in the spacious, rugged and well built canoe. Four working-class nobodies who seemed to always rise above the situation. They did tend to stick close together after all. Fart noise. Poop smell. Hoo, hoo! The sour and scorned bartender whizzes past, zooming over them on a broomstick, cackling through self pitying tears. The son looks up to his father scared to death. The man assures the boy that he'll always be there for his mother! The water continues rushing further inland, soon flooding the abandoned single level summer cottages before reaching the fem-bot’s crystal enclave. Row after row of the townhouses, encircling
the towering centerpiece shatter like rock candy. The rushing rapids easily overpower their flimsy foundations, cracking them like twigs.


The fem-bot's circuits cross as their ivory tower, built high into the sky but with no solid foundation of it's own, comes crashing down. Their hard, plastic flesh divorced from a mother's heart shatter into crystal dust. In case anyone is wondering what happened to that heart of gold Casio diva, well as luck, or chance, or perhaps even grace would have it, she felt so good and refreshed after Tony's heartfelt hug that she no longer felt the need to torture herself. She wheeled off soon after, zipping over to an old friend's stony palace. Tony's merciful embrace made her once again feel worthy of receiving, as well as giving true love.

"Welcome home!"

The steps fold out into a wheelchair ramp. The Diva ascends up and into the humble abode. The warm, and above all welcoming Mexican mother gives her the biggest hug this side of the Atlantic. Always one to return a good thing, the Diva blesses the humble home and all of it's humble inhabitants several times over! Grace always begot grace after all. Get it? Got it. Good! When everyone is safe and warm inside, the handy father hits a green button which triggers a cagey steel waterproof layer that wraps around the egg shaped outer shell of his home. All of the unruly, harsh elements seeking to
destroy all of the goodness he labored so long and hard for didn't stand a chance. The rushing, and apparently drunk ocean tide indiscriminately flows over this true fortress, dumping itself out, and into the bay. The little boy farts and laughs as the prudent father wisely turns on the waterproof ventilation system. A large periscope type tube shoots up from the roof, snaking through the saltwater passing over, before re-surfacing to let the fresh air in. Everyone inside remains dry as teetalers and breathing easily as the rot dissipates. The humble mother looks over towards her son with eyes of disciplined mercy.

"Next time, excuse yourself to the bathroom, my son!"

The son is about to ignore her rebuke but notices his strong father has her back on this one.

Listen to your mother, my son!"

The boy gulps hard.

"Yes, father!"

His mom smiles and dusts off the full bottle of wine from the shelf, whistling a sober-headed tune. The son, upset at his wicked and overly controlling parents, in his mind at least, runs over to the Casio Diva. Two and a half feet away! He's grateful for some fresh company. The more the merrier. My new aunt! He sits on her lap and marvels at her waterproof keyboard case. He then begins to read her a fairy-tale. One that his mom would read him. When she was being a good witch. One's written by his trustworthy Pop-pop. When being a good wizard! A tail that
would make him feel worthy and significant in a world which could so often be cruel and judgmental. Especially to those who seemed weak and worthless to it's greedy, ancient eyes. The boy himself, born with partial down syndrome had empathetic parents who knew what a tough uphill battle he would face. They made every effort to shower him with love and discipline, always tilting towards love. Leading by example. Never pity yourself and to stand up for others when they're being bullied. But never become a bully yourself when defending the defenseless. We all need to learn assertive goodness! The boy giggles to himself and softens towards his parents as he reads the new fairy tale to his new Aunt Diva. His snot filled baby sister, snoring soundly in the corner, and at great peace, smiles with great contentment.

"Okay mommy and daddy. I do have to take a poop. Please, excuse me!"

He jumps off of his aunt's lap and hops towards the bathroom.

"Hang tight, Auntie! The story will resume when I finish my doody!"

The mother, father and Aunt Diva look at each other with warm hearts. Evil has its hour but God has His day. Motherhood rocks!

"Good grammar, my son!"

The tide continues passing over and the boardwalk pier soon collapses. The bottom third of the Ferris wheel is submerged
under the tide and gets implanted into the sand, keeping it upright. The last of the Carn-men gets pulled out while mindlessly chomping away on some cotton candy. The Beach View Cinema is completely flooded as schools of fish of all shapes, sizes and colors swim through each theater. Dead corpses of unwed couples float aimlessly in the submerged Karaoke bar as the tide pushes some of the splintered boardwalk wood inland and pulls other portions further out to sea. The sandy peninsula grows ever more ever desolate and barron. But not without hope. The concrete foundations remain. Many of survivors hole themselves up in the Boardwalk Inn and take refuge on the second and third floors. On bended knee, the cheesy gameshow MC proposes to the orange sundress wearing karaoke DJ. She says yes! This fatherly man wanted to make an honest woman out of her before it was all too late. They peer over the ledge and witness the sperm whale decomposing into the sand. Flowers sprout from it's fertilizer.

"Fathers be good to your daughters. Daughters will love like you do. Daughters become lovers who turn into mothers." - John Mayer

Chapter 36
Staci looks away from the window, and quite overwhelmed.
"Is this all one big dream?"
Tony shrugs.
"I don't know. But either way, I still love you, babe!"

She feels slightly relieved but grows slightly nauseous after hearing the word, babe. She rubs her belly anxiously but then smiles hopefully. Tony squeezes her cheek playfully. She gazes into his eyes, unflinching. He returns the favor. Her fear was fading. She gets woozy and falls into his arms. He lays her gently on the couch and stays by her side as she slides into and out of consciousness. She witnesses a vision of mothers, fathers and children sprouting from the flowers growing from the sperm whale guts. One family appears to have a mother with a black hue while the father's hue is white. Their son's hue is somewhere in between. All of this is irrelevant to these three self-givers, of course, since they each looked at one another from the heart. The beauty and grind of self-sacrificial family life would always perfect our fallen human nature and restore us to God's original intention; the salvation of all mankind! A lifetime of sanctification was calling us all. This 'black' mother is truly only a mother to her 'mixed' son. Her warm, giving nature is a true miracle of grace in his trusting eyes. One that thirsts and hungers for righteousness. Staci then sees every shade, and color imaginable, self-sacrificing for one another in their respective family circle. This spreads organically out into the community as a whole. Not far left and communistic with sex positive queens seeking to rule with iron thighs, nor far right and fascist with sexually repressed man-children and iron fists.
Two wrongs. Have you heard this one before? Chastity in the humble family unit would always help set the community straight. Joseph and Mary, pray for us. Two rights! It's the best example to teach impressionable youngsters of all complexions in the first place. Not known to be good listeners but tend to repeat the very same patterns of their parents for better or worse. An image of that humble Mexican mother, who had so graciously welcomed Staci into her humble abode appears in her mind for an extended period of time. Their faces overlap under the sun. They were truly more alike than different, desiring what every good mother did. The safety of their children. The eternal father in Staci's mind was very Irish by nature since when she looked in the mirror it's what she had always imagined. She tried to distance herself from her mother's Italian ancestry even though her olive complexion and bold Mediterranean features, which ironically her dark Irish father had as well, albeit to a lesser degree, was something she enjoyed quite shamelessly in her more clammy moments! Working class folks were ripe grapes after all. Many living in the shadow of generational bastardry. Saint Joseph was an ideal in which all men, regardless of complexion, levels of masculinity, or income levels needed to aspire to. Strength. Gentleness. Chastity. Virility. Faithfulness. To the best of their God given abilities. All men were called to spiritual and/or actual fatherhood which would always go quite a long way in taming the next generation of unpredictable Thunder-pusses! Tony leaves Staci's side for a brief moment and walks back towards
the window. It's all fogged up now. He wipes it clean with his right hand. He then witnesses the Immaculate Ferris wheel rolling towards the lighthouse, protected by those large beach rocks, absorbing the unrelenting tides, and without seeming effort. He feels burdened, yet capable. Staci was truly depending on him. The joy of the family! He looks over at her snoring and only slightly unsettled. Both he and her! Shattered crystal from the ivory tower is pulled out by the retreating rip tide. The bloodied shards float out to sea as the Ferris wheel continues rolling north towards the deeply rooted beacon of light. Tony remains contrite and humbled, taking it all in with sincere gratitude. Human nature, he figures. You take the good, you take the bad, and sometimes things get a little ugly! There by the grace of God goes I, Tony ponders. No use stressing over the big picture since it seemed it would always be the simple choices that truly counted in the long run. Selfish or selfless? Me, myself and I, or Father, Son and Spirit? Are my choices tearing down the humble family unit or building it back up? He feels sick to his stomach and feels a migraine coming on. He's exhausted! He races to the bathroom. Too much sweets. Staci grows anxious from the separation anxiety and drifts further into a fever dream. The image of that Ferris wheel remains.

end chapter here maybe
All of the colors are tainted like a decaying postcard. Staci is standing in line with her little brother and poor mother waiting to get on the brand new Ferris wheel at Family Pier. She grows angry and impatient. Not at the long line per se, but rather at the absence of her heroic daddy! Well, at least in her mind. The little brother senses trouble brewing.

"Mother Superior! We cannot pass the entrance gates until Father Superior arrives!"

The fearful, timid son in the shadow of his angry sister screams up to his loving yet pushover mother in a terrible British accent. In the corner of his eye, he witnessing a blurry image of Sister Superior, cold and plotting. He shudders. Not only did the daughter miss papa's attention but also grew resentful of the seeming abundance given to her snotty little brother. All of this calculating brain work occurred while being gazed at with true nurturing affection from her mom. She calmly strokes the daughter's hair while gently re-assuring the son.

"It's okay, dear. You know how he's always late!"

Here we go again, the son thinks to himself.

"It's not okay, mother!"

He responds with loving firmness. This pattern of fatherly neglect did create a bit of empathy towards his sister, mind you, but it didn't excuse her poor behavior, of course. Someone had to be the man of the house. He sensed that his sister was bound to explode ever more dramatically at a later date. This
wise young man wanted to contain the fallout to the best of his ability. He would do everything in his God given power to fill the void. Perhaps he'd crush his own grapes like wine, metaphorically speaking, but that was for him to decide. He didn't need, appreciate nor want his sister's bullying and domineering ways to further emasculate him, and against his will. Her anger at the father's absence was understandable but the young son liked his nuts!

"Mother Superior! We wait!"

The young man once more rebukes his mother, and with extra amount of firm conviction. This time she concedes his point. They step out of line and patiently await for Father Superior's arrival. The wooden bench creaks as the three, minus the father, take a seat. Never in a rush for anyone or anything, the so called caring and considerate father unfortunately makes them wait a good long while! The mother knew what was up. Lothario bastard. She was in the process of figuring out her next move. What was best for my kids? Can I truly forgive his cheating heart? Will he leave me before I leave him? All of that yucky and dysfunctional adult stuff. She prayed silently in her heart that her son wouldn't follow in his footsteps and also prayed that her daughter would forgive him when finding out the bitter truth. Daddy wasn't a super-hero but rather a flawed human being just like the rest of us. She hoped that her daughter would accept this with God's grace. It would give her a chance at having a true relationship with a good man down
the line when all grown up. It's always hard to stay mad at someone you’re constantly praying for. It never makes what they did or didn't do right but ultimately it sets you free. Big sister wasn't perfect either, of course! God rewards every sincere effort His way and in His time. Forgive but don't forget and don't blame the son for the sins of the father! What good can come from that? Nada, nothing, and a big fat zero! This will truly create a new beginning in the present moment. A clean slate. The son will help fix it all through the example of a prudently charitable mother. The crucifix is the perfect example. Truth and love personified. A humble, obedient mother praying for her humble, obedient son. Not possessing one another but possessing hope in God the Father's loving grace. The foot of the cross is a true miracle of it; proving His undying love for each and every one of us. Two selfless givers. To count our blessings and to truly love each other like Jesus loved us through his mother. A lifetime of sanctication. For everyone's sake! The angel rebuked Joseph. Mary had a little lamb. Life's ultimately a gift after all. Every single one of us is in desperate need of mercy. As a show of gratitude and thanks for all of this undeserved grace Our Father in Heaven bestows upon us selfish sinners, it's always wise, and in good form, to extend whatever grace and mercy we're capable of giving cheerfully to others who need it just as desperately as we do. As the sun sets the lothario father finally arrives at the Ferris wheel. The mother looks up and is surprised that he actually showed up, smelling the cheap perfume on his Leisure suit. She
wonders if it's new or recycled trash. No one likes a home-wrecker. She remains silent. The daughter is too young to understand what was going on underneath the surface and is just thrilled, and over the moon, to see her father. She runs over to him and falls into his arms with complete trust and perfect confidence.

"You smell like a carnival dump, Papa!"

Two balloons pop behind him. Her shrill voice and the loud bangs shake him to his core.

"Pop! Pop! I like that! love you, Pop-pop!"

She hugs him tightly and gives him a big smooch on the cheek. The son looks up at his 'pop-pop' with cold and disaffected eyes. This unfaithful bastard had some nerve to call himself daddy. A lot to contend with spiritually. Casting such a dark shadow over the entire family. Not leaving us with much social capital. It was all beginning to weigh heavily on the son's conscience.

"Great for you to finally show up, 'pop-pop'!"

The son nearly pukes some vile out of his pie hole.

"Don't let any of us down for Christ’s sake!"

He looks over to his poor mother and his scary sister, quickly realizing the futility of his words. Actions always spoke louder. He had no control over his father's selfish deeds. His old man looks down at him with both love and resentment. Such a goof!
Then towards his wife. What a pushover! And finally to his daughter. So aggressive! The son's pushover mother and domineering sister proved to him the need for a true balance in the feminine genius. He feared the monster emerging in his sister's heart. She was like Cassius Clay and her father, Mr. Potter. Her life will be shaped in many ways by how he lives, and loves. In many ways it's how she will. For better or worse. This scares the living crap out of the son! Living in the shadow of so much overwhelming estrogen fueled melo-drama! His big sis squeezes Ken with furious scorn in one hand while placing Barbie delicately atop the boardwalk bench with the other. She looks up to her 'pop-pop'. Your move sucker!

"Actions speak louder than words, daddy."

She remarks with bittersweet pathos. She knew that he had a way with words but often was filled with you know what. Just like Danny! I really need stop chasing the wrong types of men, Staci thought to herself, slowly drifting back into consciousness in the living room. But for some reason Staci no longer felt like Staci. No longer sad and self-pitying. The father gets teary eyed, hugging and kissing the mother stiffly with a guilty conscience, and going through the motions. His heart wasn't truly in it. He can now finally smell the cheap perfume on his tacky Leisure suit (vomit green), catching the foul odor with a whiff from his over the top, popped collar, up to his nostrils. Something he must have overlooked while foolishly consumed way down low in carni-vile lust. Dark matter of decay. Spreading it's tentacles.
Rising. The father pulls each one close and begins to sob uncontrollably. Each choice has a consequence. No two sided tails coin in life, pop-pop; and no matter how much the selfish butt poop men consumed above all with themselves wished it to be. Mother Mary knows all. The horror!

"I think it okay for us to go on the Ferris wheel now, daddy."

The daughter whispers assertively. She firmly places Barbie next to Ken. She takes her father by the hand and leads him into the carriage. Directly behind her stood a small, two-story princess castle. It filled her imagination with all sorts of things. Her father’s choices would greatly decide if those flights of fancy would be used for good or evil. A gust of hot air blows Ken off the bench, head first into a big pile of dog crap. Too much doody and not enough duty it would seem. He chose poorly. Barbie sits there sad and alone, high above poor Ken, face deep in dog crap. The daughter's retinas shrink. Calculating; growing ever colder. And greedy. She imagines a crystal tower emerging from the dog poo. Oh, well. What's started must always be finished. A phoenix always rises from the ashes. Queen Thunder-puss! Staci rules!

"I think I'm going to be sick!"

The father puts his hand over his stomach. A bizarre carnival tune echoes to his left. Scared out of his wits, he notices a slowly revolving carousel with a young African-American woman in the center. A woman that he recently had a secret rendezvous with while claiming to be stuck at work late. She
pokes a somber rendition of Mary Had a Little Lamb one note at a time with her right index finger on a high end modular organ synthesizer built into and around the carousel. A giant dead snake, curled in and around the amusement, head underneath her foot has the cheating father gag on his Adam's apple. The neglected and abused woman wasn't truly alone, however. With her were all shades of mannequin arms, legs and torsos. Discarded and torn up bikini and nudie mags were spread out as well, while a single People magazine, still completely intact, buried deep within, and nearly invisible, was all but overlooked. The little daughter sees it all. His cheating heart was eating him alive and justice was coming whether he truly believed it or not.

The final chapter.

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you." - Nirvana

"The Trinity is there for us to ponder in the details of Christmas." - Scott Hahn

"Family isn't only the most important thing. It's everything." ~ Michael J. Fox

Chapter 37

"I'm just a girl in the world."
Staci wakes up in a living room but Staci isn't her name. It's Stephanie. Gwen Stefani's 1990's classic 'Sunday Morning' album plays on the 1980's retro boom-box in the corner of the living room layered with a nostalgic spin on 1970's wallflower wallpaper. 'That's all that you'll let me be' echoes throughout the four walls. Girls did just want to have fun, and it seemed motherhood was the perfect balance of fun, responsibility and above all sanctification. As love grew lust diminished. Stephanie was slowly coming back to her senses. She smelled something simmering on the stove. Red gravy. It's Sunday dinner! She opens her eyes. Everything is blurry. The sun, positioned just before high noon beams bright rays through the open curtained window. She squints. Not helping her pounding headache in the slightest! The decor is very middle American and normal except for the odd choice of wallpaper. She rubs her noggin' with an icepack already placed there and felt quite dazed, confused, and nauseous. As everything comes back into focus she realizes there's some more tidying up to do. Her legs are spread wide. A blood stain is splotched on the brown couch. She quickly crosses her legs and rises slowly before pacing lethargically to the first floor bathroom adjacent to the living room. Time to wash up and feed the family. She gazes into the mirror. An image of Darion's blue and bloated face greets her menacingly, surrounded by blood stained shards of crystal glass, fragmented skeleton bones and rotting apples. All decomposing at the bottom of a saltwater well. This jolts her back to life as she rushes to clean up her blood-stained mess. Just then, a loud
shriek outside the bathroom door give her a second jolt. She thinks back to her absent father for a brief moment and cringes. No more rebellious tears, Stay. I mean Stephanie.

"Steph, you're up! You hit her head hard! Are you okay?"

"I'm well aware! Yes, I'm fine! I'll be out in a minute! Stop being so over-dramatic. Can you please get me a pair of clean pants and underwear?"

Stephanie screeches hysterically, and with a deep knot in the pit of her stomach. It sounded like her good ole' friend Coleen whom she loved but was loud!

"Ma, are you okay? This isn't funny. I'm gettin' hungwee!"

"Will you relax! Your mother isn't just a cooking and cleaning machine!"

Coleen chastises Stephanie's impatient and impetuous twelve year old son, Daniel-son while rushing up the steps to get her bestie some clean and fresh garments.

"Hang tight, Steph!"

"No rush!"

Stephanie shouts sarcastically before splashing some cold water onto her face and cleaning her privates. She gazes back into the mirror and this time the only image reflected back is an aging, exhausted middle-aged Italian woman. A warm, caring, mother. Quite tanned to boot! She creaks the door open and swipes the clean clothes from Coleen's filthy paws.
"Gracias, mi amore!"

"What are ya, Spuh-neesh now?"

Coleen laughs while doing the Jose Curewhorehoe chacha. Soon after changing, Stephanie is greeted by her son, wearing his sister's makeup and blush along with an orange clown wig outside the bathroom door.

"Ma, yaw alive!"

Daniel-son screams, squeezing her tightly and inhaling deeply.

"You smell so fwesh and cwean! I wike it awot! Like the ocean bweeze! Are you okay? Wuh happuhn?"

"Daniel-son, lower your voice. She hit her head hard. You're not helping!"

Daniel-son's older sister Dinina remarks condescendingly, staring him down with her nose up.

"You, on tha odder hand smell like a doyty douche!"

He screams into his nasty sister's face.

"Children! Behave!"

Stephanie yells through her pounding headache.

"Dirty douche. HA!"

Coleen laughs maniacally, continuing on with her mindless chacha.

"I'm okay."
Stephanie responds exhaustedly. She runs her fingers through Daniel-son's orange clown wig.

"Although a bit confused, and nauseous. And I do have this pounding headache. Good question, my son. What DID happen?"

Coleen takes a swig from a dusty wine bottle clenched in her fist.

"Ya, crazy bitch! Me n' you were bode danzin' to Madonna's Material goil when you slipped and fell. Hit your noggin' clean on the corna u'duh couch. Owwwwch. CHA-CHA! Knocked out cold! Ain't that a bitch, ya bitch!"

For some odd reason Coleen now reminded Stephanie of that middle-aged bartender, stripper, or whatever the hell she was way down low in the Clam. The horror!

"Were we drunk?"

Stephanie wisecracks.

"Drunk on nostalgia I guess!"

Coleen deadpans and then belches.

"Okay ma, I'm glad to see you seem to be okay now."

Dinina remarks, observing Coleen's crazy antics.

"I'm going over to Ricardo’s house."

She struts towards the door. Stephanie finally notices the overly revealing top she's wearing. One with a mindless twerk
position, odd and anatomically incorrect, and quite shameless. Stephanie thinks back in horror to all of those tequilas on the rocks, trashy Spanish soap operas, sour limes, gruffly muttering menaces, roaming prostitutes, and commodified plastic body parts. Sinking. With little, if any regard for the children's well-being within a humble mother's abode. She thinks back to that poor, fatherless Hispanic boy walking sad and alone to school on that late-night, afterschool special. The Spanish soap opera marathon was apparently only a daytime affair. Overworked, underpaid mothers. Slaves to the flesh. The madness had to stop!

"Hold it right there, missies!"

Stephanie screams, swiping the nearly empty bottle from Coleen. She pours the remainder down the sink. Three whole drops! She then focuses solely on her daughter.

"Put on something a little less triple X and a little more PG-13, young lady!"

The humble mother gently yet sternly informs her raging and hormonal teenage daughter. Stephanie would have a heart to heart with Coleen later. Dinina stands there for a brief moment, arms folded and tense before huffing and then rushing up the steps to change.

"I hate you!"

She screams down to her overly controlling wicked witch of a mother. Well, at least in her mind! Daniel-son giggles. All of the
melo-dramatic estrogen encircling him was quite humorous. Stephanie grins and bares it, gazing into space with soft eyes of motherly mercy, whispering "I love you, Dinina" as her hormone saturated daughter spat words of venom that she'll no doubt come to regret one day. Stephanie knew deep down that her daughter didn't truly mean them. The opposite of love wasn't hate, but use, and Stephanie would rather be 'hated' by her spiritually immature daughter for trying to protect her from folks who could truly care less about her long term well-being, then be falsely 'loved' for being such a cool and hip secular 'mom'. That was spiritual quicksand if there ever was one! America and it's obsession with youth culture really had it upside down. It would do us all a world of good to start respecting humble elder's wisdom for family's sake. Word up, yo! The more Stephanie thought about it the more she truly loved the Pope and Mother Teresa. If Stephanie had her daughter running the show the complete lack of discipline wouldn't be doing her daughter any favors in the long run! She cringes when thinking back to that hell hole of a boardwalk. So many selfish goats. She couldn't live with herself if she remained silent and let all of the family averse folks attempt to control the narrative! She smiles when recalling that cheesy gameshow host proposing to the sundress wearing woman. There seemed to always a light at the end of the tunnel even after horrific carnage if one kept a chaste focus on God. Never give up hope. Her daughter would see the light and come around, God willing, the more she was chastised in love by her
chastised and loving mother. Learn from other people’s mistakes, you can't make them all yourself for Christ’s sake! Daniel-son runs over to the boom-box in the corner of the living room and ejects the Gwen Stefani cassette. As he puts in his own personal mix-tape Stephanie finally becomes aware that he's wearing his sister's lipstick and blush along with that crazy, carnival clown wig. His music echoes through the four walls as he flamboyantly shows off his latest and trendy dance moves to his impressionable mother. The song is a cover of the 'Right Stuff’ from a next generation boy band. The ‘new’ New kids are even sassier than the last. The next generation of pizazz!

"Guess what, ma? On ABC Family, they had two thirteen year old boys kiss and it won an award!"

He thrusts his crotch into the side of the couch."

The mother looks on horrified.

I wub pop culture!"

He starts to twerk and pops his butt into the air.

"It's the trendy thing to do!"

Stephanie is about to pass out.

"Uh, oh. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

He lip syncs and starts to undress. Definitely not the right stuff!
"What's the matter, ma? Don't like the sawng? Next one is I'm a Bawbie Gurwell" "Nooooooo!" Stephanie screams and grabs him by the arm, yanking him to her side. In a warm but
disciplinary manner she rebukes his excessive bodily gyrations with love.

"I love the song, my son, but please, for Christ's sake, tone down the moves several notches. In art, less is more!"

The son gets angry.

"What do you mean, ma?"

She shows him a really chaste and humble two step. Kind of like the one Tip and Alan demonstrated above those dandies in her dream turned nightmare, turned chastisement.

"What kinda dance moves are that, maw?"

Daniel-son looks over to wild Coleen, standing in her shadow.

"And besides you and your sister in arms over dair were dancin' around like desperate twamps earlia! That's what made you fall and hit your head on the corna of the couch in da first place!"

He screams earnestly. She puts her hand over her head. This big and lousy lump. Her head, not her son of course!

"I understand that now, Daniel-son, No more excuses. I take responsibility. I'm sorry for my bad impression. Things are going to change around here going forward. Let's keep our heads on a swivel and our hearts on our sleeves so we can do our duty and not to be so mindlessly consumed with the doody!"

Coleen hiccups.
"I love you my son. My Daniel-son. Go outside and play. Maybe less television and more reading?"

"Fifty Shades of Grey?"

"No, I was thinking more like Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. Good, clean wholesome fun. Be a boy. Don't be in such a rush to grow up. It's not all rainbows and waterfalls. Spend some quality time with your father this afternoon! Where is that selfish bastard, anyway?"

She wipes the lipstick and blush off his face before gently removing the wig. She hugs him tightly with tears streaming down her face.

"I love you my Daniel-son. And from the bottom of my heart. Unconditionally. No matter what."

He hugs her back with tears streaming down his.

"I know, ma. I wub you too. So stop dancing around like a senseless tramp! It's not 1985 anymore. The gold teeth Madonna look isn't hip. You'll just be liable to break one if you keep going at that pace!"

Stephanie's face grows contrite and quite ashamed. After a brief moment of awkward silence they both crack up. It was a goofy and maniacal sort of laughter. One of a deep and ineffable understanding between mother and son. And no matter what!

"I gotta take a crap, ma!"
Daniel-son screams while swatting a fly away from her nose.

“Have to take a crap son. Have to, not got. Remember good grammar!”

He pulls away, humbly correcting himself.

"Excuse me, Miss Shakespeare. I HAVE to take a massive doody!"

Stephanie nods her head in approval and is quite proud of her boy. He bows in honor like a good karate ninja would. Mr. Miyagi would be proud! He opens up the refrigerator.

"Anymore fudge, ma?"

"Fudge? We haven't even had supper yet!"

His mother puts her hand over her stomach and feels extra nauseous.

"Besides, I ate it all."

She contritely confesses. Coleen laughs.

"Ha! You're definitely the Eye-tie. I'm more the Irish lass!"

She belches even louder than before.

"It's okay. We can get some more next weekend. After the beach!"

Daniel-son responds enthusiastically and is just extra grateful to be blessed with such a loving home. He grabs a fistful of bologna before running up the stairs.
"Don't ruin your appetite before supper! And open the window, use air freshener and don't forget to flush. I just cleaned the upstairs bathroom for crying out loud! Cake for dessert!"

"I wub cake and I wub you ma!"

As he darts up the stairs with a piece of bologna dangling from his mouth his five year old niece Beenz appears at the top of the steps.

"I love you too, my son!"

The mother screams as he bops his niece on the top of her head.

"Tag, you're it!"

Beenz reaches the bottom of the stairs just as Daniel-son slams the bathroom door shut. She hugs her grandmother tightly. This was the woman raising Beenz like her own. Beenz was also the love child of a lothario father. Beenz's mom was Stephanie's eldest daughter, Vanessa, and was very close to Stephanie's heart for this reason, as well as many others.

"I'm so glad you're safe, Nana!"

"I'll be as good as new, and in no time. Just a slight fall and bump on the head. It was nothing! Where's Pop-pop?"

Beenz looks around and just shrugs.

"I don't know, Nana, you tell me!"
A house isn't a home without a mother's heart. There's no love without forgiveness and there's no forgiveness without love! They hear creaking coming up from the basement steps. They tremble, squeezing each other in utter terror. The door swings open. It's Barnie! Stephanie's terrific and handy husband. Beenz's terrific and handy Pop-Pop!

"Barnie, you selfish bastard! Where the hell have you been? What did you let happen to me!"

Stephanie yells through her head and heart-ache. But it was all water under the bridge at this point.

"Steph, you're awake! I just went down to the basement to fix the bathroom. Lingering foul odors! I was by your side for hours and hours. Did Coleen tell you all of the damage your youthful rebellion got you into?"

Stephanie looks over to Coleen standing in front of the tabletop Virgin Mary, oblivious, inebritated, and continuing on with her chacha.

"I get it! I'm okay now. Jesus Christ, sometimes girls just want to have a little fun! Is that so wrong?"

"We have daughters and granddaughters now. If we don't climb, they'll only fall."

Barnie humbly, faithfully and cheerfully informs his bride, as if attempting to groom her. He puts his right hand on top of Beenz's head and sighs with a heavy heart.
"I love you girls to death. Now just don't go and give me a heart attack for Christ's sake! Intentions are everything to a father!"

He remarks gently but filled with true strength. A humble and self-sacrificial father figure was desperately needed in every home. Stephanie looks over to the heartwarming bonding moment between Pop-pop and Beenz, grandfather and granddaughter, and it was something truly beautiful beyond words. She heads to the kitchen to stir the gravy.

"I guess I'm still cooking!"

She wisecracks with bittersweet joy.

"I can help."

Barnie calmly remarks, putting his other hand on her shoulder. He did want to do everything in his power to help these two in any way that he could. What an awesome, giving and considerate husband and grandfather!

"No, I'm good. Really. I have Coleen to help me. We'll put on our Amish cooking gear and learn the River-dance while breaking the Menorah. Have to keep the home humble, chaste and narrow!"

Stephanie's tone is bitter but above all sweet. She's been chastised through love and was always ready to return the favor in her own unique, homey Italian snark. Pop-pop goes to lie on living room couch and figures best not to argue with the old lady. Happy wife, happy life! Beenz jumps up on the couch next to him and soon they're catching up on a Sunday Matinee.
Stephanie and Coleen cook up Sunday dinner while listening to the ‘new’ New Kids as one of their guilty pleasures. While Beenz and Pop-pop aren't looking they do an updated and trampy 80's dance move. Hey, sometimes girls did just want to have a little fun! Beenz and Pop-Pop, oblivious to any of their deviant shenanigans, lay lazily on the living room couch and begin to watch a historic black and white fiction entitled ‘The Steel Pier”. A timeless and classic tale set in the midst of the Great War. It had everything. Greed, sex, betrayal, violence. Redemption. This terrible and adventurous tale told of the attack on the decadent and excess filled Atlantic Citians filled with a motley assortment of Brits, Italians and Spaniards during the grand opening of it's amusements Pier. The attack, by those cruel and merciless mercenary-merchant German-Jewhadi-Nazi bastards were an axis of ruthless violence against an axis of libertine sexual debauchery. Each rooted in insatiable greed. An eternal snake eating its tail seeking to bring imbalance back into the force; the humble family unit! Beenz's universal, chaste face witnesses these events unfold with terrible dread. The suspense was killing her and she hoped it would last! But it was all too much for her young eyes and Pop-Pop wisely changes the channel to something more age appropriate. Soon they're catching up on the grand opening of the Great Adventure family theme park in Jackson, New Jersey. It was a docu-drama nearing its end on the family friendly network. The founder of the park was a grandson of one of the producers of the Wizard of Oz. Three generations of men with huge hearts and sharp
minds who knew that if you dreamt big enough and kept your feet on the ground, anything worth having in the long run was possible. His father left a good impression on him! Beenz, it seemed was an instrument of reconciliation. God loved her as if no other human bean, I mean being existed in the entire universe. This was not only fantastically great but more amazingly, and unexpectedly, truly good! She was drawing all of her family closer to the true center. Giving for the sake of giving. Agape, Christ-like love. Like Dr. Seuss once said, adults were just obsolete children and to hell with them! They had the choice to shape up and become humble, family centered individuals themselves or they could choose through God given free will to sink further into selfish oblivion! True love never imposes. It only proposes. Sort of like a humble groom courting a humble bride. Beenz and Pop-pop watch transfixed to this clean and wholesome family program which was also greatly educational. It spoke of the importance of fathers and Beenz tells Pop-pop how she liked this show so much better than The Steel Pier. Instead the two wrongs, sex and violence, duking it out for greedy supremacy, this one had family centered homes, and regardless of complexion, having a good and great old time together. After cutting the pink ribbon, an eighteen year old black woman welcomes the assortment of families of all shades into the park. They rush past her filled with joy, ready to enjoy the park's rides and festivities. Sporting her 1970's fabulous afro, she watches them with high hopes and soon she is paid an unexpected visit from her mother and grandmother. These
three generations of women stay close as thuggish, African American man-children walk past, attempting, quite poorly mind you, to "rhyme" words over in their direction, and in a derogatory manner. This tight knit family unit will hear none of it. Pull up your pants you selfish butt poops! And learn some real music; Italian opera! How a man treats a woman ultimately defines his character. Ave Maria! The young but wise black woman had already forgiven her absent father due to the good example shown by her matriarchial bloodline. It would never make what any of these clueless man-children did, or didn't do right in the first place but ultimately, however, it did set the women free. They were sinners as well, of course, and chastity was calling us all! A true work of a lifetime if there ever was one! The eighteen year old park attendant was played by none other than Maya Angelou. Like she always said, forgive everyone. It heals you the most in the long run. And to always trust love one more time, and always one more time. But remember not all that glitters is gold. Lust feels like love until true self-sacrifice is required. Discernment! All of the absent, lothario fathers were ultimately full of you know what! Have the book end with an aerial overview of Great Adventure, fish lensed, and with humble families of all complexions walking about. The owner and grandson walks arm in arm with the gentle and strong Italian Pop-pop surrounded by his own family who are all truly grateful to be taken under his gracious wing. He'd truly die for each one of them. They blend together as the camera zooms over the park. Ave Maria plays at an appropriate
volume through strategically placed loudspeakers hidden in the neatly trimmed bushes, cut low and square. Beenz jumps, fist pumping in front of her Pop-pop as the scene freeze frames onto her heavenly, timeless face. Roxette’s nostalgic 'She's got the Look' begins to play on Daniel-son's mix tape as Dinina runs down the steps with a more age appropriate outfit.

“I love you, ma!”

She shrieks as she runs out the door.

“Show me, don’t tell me. Actions always speak louder!”

Stephanie shouts before gruffly muttering under her breathe as she continues to stir the pot.

“I have such a f*cking headache.”
"Cha cha!"

Her quite tipsy friend Coleen smashes her hand against her crotch and pukes into the sink. Stephanie witnesses her despicable action with utter, complete horror.

"Let's think of the children first for Christ's sake, Coleen!"

"Good idea! I'm starving!"

Stephanie imagines smacking her over the head with the gravy spoon but restrains herself. No one was perfect. Not even the Queen! Her good old fashioned realism was quite intact as was her home. She ponders deep within the silent corner.

'Go to Mary for Christ’s sake!'

    ps

    She's more MOTHER than queen!

    The End! Or just the Beginning?