

Well

Written by Marcus A. Stevens

I guess that's just part of loving people: You have to give things up. Sometimes you even have to give them up.

Lauren Oliver, *Delirium*

Where did this all start?

I ask myself that too. And I don't know. Only theories. I can't fully understand how I am to tie all these together, how to make sense of what now feels like a series of images sprawled over each other. The one that stands out most prominent revolves around a girl, amazingly enough. It's funny, isn't it? Cliche, you might say, but nevertheless this is where it leads to. It's been some five years since I've seen her, but not long since I had last heard of her affairs, and I think that is what set me originally upon the brink. I then proceeded to push myself over the edge into this fucking dark space, this ravine I find myself in that hides in the blank corners of the maps maybe two steps from hell.

Her name was Allison. We met when we were 15. Well, I was 15. She was 14, and I believe it was shortly before I was 16. She was in Trigonometry with me, a smart girl. I was a year ahead in math, so she must have been two. It's sad, in hindsight, how little I paid attention to such things about her. They were, I've since found in my frequent, alcohol and despair induced moments of reminiscence, something to have known. Such trivial little facts at the time, meaningless really, until you realize that those are the things that make someone themselves, to stand out in those little ways that build up to you.

She had such a pretty face, dark hair, and a pale complexion. She was easily burned in the sun, I used to jest that she must be at least partially albino. Though at the time I was truly thinking she may very well have been: her eyes, though green, had a slight pinkish tint to them, I thought, if you could see them at the right angle. Of course, this may just be some falsification within my recollections, or perhaps even some form of mild hallucination that is honestly embedded in my memory. For at the time I was, some would say, more than a recreational drug user. Allison hated it. Perhaps the reason we didn't last long originally, in fact I fail to see how we ended up together to begin with considering her extreme dislike for the substances.

We first began to date when I was 16 and she was still 14, I know. It was late spring. I can still see the blue and yellow flowers in the field behind her as we walked alone, shrouded by the tall grass; she was running away from her abusive father, I was running away from my abusive self. We met along an old road that was scarcely used anymore, except by the locals who happened to have property in the far outskirts of the city and stoners going towards the mountain up the road to find a place where the police seldom came to keep themselves out of trouble. I often went up there with my friends, and knew a pretty little place we called The Shire. I saw Allison walking some distance ahead of me. I scarcely knew her, we simply had that one class and we almost never communicated, beyond during those short class discussions where we on occasion interacted. I did, however, used to look at her in class, and sometimes I am certain she stole glances at me as well. I cannot say if that was out of annoyance, disgust, or infatuation when it first began though.

Anyway, there she was. Wearing faded blue jeans that were tight against her legs with a short black and white dress over them. Her hair was in a beautiful braid, though I know not what kind. It had three strands that tied into different knots every other turn. Her bangs were held back with a dragonfly clip made with green stones for eyes. Her right bicep was bruised, her left forearm red, and her hand looked as though it wouldn't close all the way. She had a tear in the skirt part of her dress.

I didn't want to call out for her, for as I said we didn't really know each other. It would have been weird, would it not? Almost stalker-like, I think, considering the way she looked. So instead I sped up my pace, and after a few minutes I caught up with her. I could see her injuries more clearly. Her bruise was more black and brown and blue. I could hear her soft sniffles as she attempted to cry silently. I was only ten feet away, but she was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to notice. I followed her for a few hundred feet, wanting to say something but unable to come to a topic to start the conversation. What would I say?

"Hey Allison. How are you? Nice bruise."

"Hey. Remember me? We have math together."

"You're pretty."

"Want to make out?"

"You're beautiful, Allison."

"What the fuck happened to you?"

"What's wrong?" Yeah, what's wrong? Obviously she got the shit beaten out of her is what's wrong. I was more or less hopeless in the situation, but can I be blamed? Seriously, what the fuck is an appropriate conversation starter in that kind of situation?

Regardless it didn't matter because I tripped over a small rock as I wasn't paying attention to the road at that point, being occupied trying to figure out how to talk to her. I tried to catch myself with my hands but only managed to getting pebbles shoved into my palms and hit my face anyway.

Allison turned around, startled.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" She asked, rushing over to help me up. She had stopped crying instantly, but I could still see the marks run down her pretty cheeks. Her lip was cut and her right eye was dark. Her makeup was running from tears and her right temple had a dark tinge and a slight lump, like she hit her head against a wall pretty hard while losing a game of tug-of-war and punching herself in the eye at the same time.

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks. You're name's Allison isn't it? I think we've got a class together," I responded. Yeah, "I think?" I was obsessed with her, and my first real encounter with her I pretended not to know her. I brushed the gravel from my hands and face and rubbed the skin to remove the indents left in the pebbles' places.

"Yes, we are." She began to look embarrassed. "Uhm, so how long have you been behind me?" Her face reddened more.

"Uhh, not that long." I didn't know what else to say. Should I have been like "I've been following you for like ten minutes watching you cry. Sorry about that, I'll be on my way."?

No, that wouldn't do.

"Would you like to walk with me? I know a cool little place just a little further up the road that you might like." I don't know why I said it. I was talking about The Shire, where technically I was going anyway, but I don't know what prompted me to ask her to come. I suddenly felt dread, waiting for her to say no.

"Oh! Sure, I would love some company! How far is it though? I'm starting to get kind of tired, I don't usually walk this far," she said.

My dread suddenly turned around to stunned excitement. It was almost worse because now I almost had no response, having temporarily forgotten what we were talking about, when

there was no excuse not to. After a few moments hesitation I remembered. "Not far at all. Just around this next corner, actually, maybe a thousand feet up the road. It's a few hundred feet off to the side though," I said, realizing she was wearing black slip-on shoes that probably had no traction whatsoever. They almost looked like ballet shoes, I thought, but then I remembered I wasn't entirely sure what ballet shoes looked like. "But I can always carry you if I need to," I added without thought. She probably only weighed a hundred ten pounds, so it wasn't a lie, but still. A weird thing to add right?

"Okay!" She said. We started walking beside each other, both of us smiling. We didn't talk, I didn't know what to say. But, somehow, I didn't feel pressured to, because I felt I could tell she didn't mind the silence, and was in fact enjoying it. She wiped her face with her sleeve, and looked up at me. Her eyes were still watery, but they were clearing out.

An old truck rolled by.

"How old are you?" She asked.

"16," I said, dumbly.

"Oh. I'm 14. Where are we going?"

"Uhm, I don't really know what it actually is. It's this cool place I go sometimes with some friends, it's got a bunch of trees, and this little pond and waterfall. Sometimes it gets deep enough you can swim in it during the summer, it's too cold now though. We call it The Shire, I think you'll like it."

"Oh, that place! I'm sure I'll like it too; I've heard you talking about it to your friends in class sometimes. And I've seen you up here before, but usually I'm sitting in the field." She suddenly looked away as her face brightened from her embarrassment. She hadn't meant to say that, I don't think. My heart leapt, realizing she had the same feelings as I.

"How come you never said anything to us?"

"Usually you're driving and I'm too far away to make it to the road. I've only seen you walking a few times, but I was always too nervous. This is my first year at this school, we just moved here, and I still haven't made many friends."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. So I said, "What happened to you?" Fucking stupid question when everything is going so well, right?

She hesitated for a little bit, obviously trying to come up with an excuse.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, "Nevermind."

"No, it's okay. I got into a fight with my dad," she said, then quickly added, "he's not a bad father, though! My mother just died last year, and my brother committed suicide a few months ago. We've all been upset, and sometimes we all just take everything a little bit too far." She looked away from me as she spoke.

I really didn't intend on the conversation turning this way. I wanted to change the topic, but I wasn't sure that was allowed. I felt weird, almost wanted her to go away now. But I couldn't really take away her invitation. I'm pretty sure my fucking question took that option away altogether.

"Oh, nice story. I no longer like being around you, go away,"? Yeah... kind of a dick move.

The conversation died again, and I simply looked ahead, and took an occasional glance at her. I felt so bad, she was so beautiful and so damaged. I wanted to touch her face, her hair.

To hold her tightly and be her hero, but I didn't know how.

I almost missed the small path to The Shire. It was on the right, blocked from view by a large granite boulder. The path was poorly made and rocky, but Allison followed me about three quarters of the way over small windfalls and little streams that ran across the path just fine. Then we came to a large creek that ran over. It had a culvert to divert the water off the path itself, but it was usually clogged. The water was muddy and my feet sank almost an inch as I took a few steps into it. There were some stable rocks you could jump across on, but they were slippery and it was easier to just walk for me. Allison hesitated on crossing, and I looked back at her. She had a cute expression on her face as she twirled her braid in her fingers.

"Can you carry me please? I don't think I can make it."

"Of course!"

She later confessed to me that she was hoping there would be an adequate obstacle for her to ask me to carry her. When it came, she did her best to look like an innocent little girl that needed me, and with the way her face was, she looked the part doubly so. I felt like a hero almost. Not the one I wanted to be, but one nonetheless. She NEEDED me! I walked back to her, pulling my feet from the mud with a loud sloshing pop. She climbed on my back, she was so light, and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and chest and her legs around my stomach. I held her ankles as we walked across. For some reason I hurried. I felt anxious to get her off suddenly, and on my last step my foot came out of my sneaker and I began to trip. I ran forward, trying to keep my balance, and accidentally let go of Allison. She dropped from my back and luckily landed on her feet as I tumbled over a few steps later and rolled onto my back.

For a second that felt like a lifetime, I felt so ashamed. I had tripped in front of her TWICE today, in such a short time, while carrying her on top of it. But then she began to laugh, and pulled my shoe out of the mud as I stood back up. And then I laughed.

"You are so clumsy," she said, "but so cute." She handed me my shoe, and I put it back on, not really noticing she had called me cute. Kind of weird thing to say to a guy... but whatever.

The pond was only just ahead now. The waterfall was a small tributary off of the creek that fell across the road. The pond was about twenty feet in diameter, and almost ten feet deep in the middle usually. Sometimes it would get up to fifteen, but it was always too cold to swim then. It was too cold now, too, unfortunately, but it was still pretty. There were trees all around, overhanging and filtering the light to a dusk. The water was clear, with small pebbles along the shore and on the floor. The waterfall came off a small rocky cliff, perhaps five or six feet tall, that was hollowed behind it. In the summer when you could swim, you could get behind there into a small alcove where the water was only a few feet deep, and the light would reflect a startlingly and mesmerizing blue, waving with the caustics of the surface of the pond.

I began to wash my shoe off in the pond when Allison came and sat next to me. She watched for a minute or so, then quickly kissed me.

"I like you," she said quietly. It took me a moment to register what had just happened before I responded:

"I like you, too."

She grabbed my hand after I put my shoe back on, and we sat there and talked for a few hours. About school, about the weather, the places she used to live, even our math homework I hadn't done (she had and didn't want to let me cheat).

The sun was getting ready to set when we reached the road back to her house. I was walking her home. I would have to backtrack to my house, about a mile behind us, but it was worth it. I didn't want to let go of her hand.

Her house was down a short ways in a large field. It was, I think, at one point a farm, but long since neglected. It looked to have been ripped straight from a condemned Soviet farm commune. The white paint was peeling off to show what was soon to be rotting wood. Shingles were missing all over the place. The screen door looked to have been kicked off the hinges and left haphazardly as it fell over the weathered steps of the porch, and the front door looked to be a good shove away from coming down. There was a tire swing that looked like the tire would fall apart if I jumped on it, not to mention the rope would break and the tree probably turn to dust. One of the windows was broken, and a piece of plastic was poorly taped up over the hole. The porch had holes where the 2x4's had broken. Siding was falling off, and much of the trim had been ripped and broken off. I could scarcely believe anyone would live here.

About four hundred feet away from the house she stopped me.

"Just leave me here," she said quietly. She gave me a quick kiss again, and added "Goodbye! I'll see you at school soon!" And ran off towards her door before I could say anything back. So I stood watching.

As she approached the steps, her father opened the door. And I hated him right then. Before I didn't like him, but this is when I truly realized I wanted to kill him.

He was drunk as drunk could be. He had to balance himself in the doorway. He was a big man with a beer belly and a balding head and an unshaven and unbathed face and graying brown hair. He wore a disgustingly dirty tank-top and ragged blue jeans. He had suspenders clamped around his hips, hanging down his legs and what looked like a pair of some shitty steel-toed work boots. He held a leather belt in his right hand, the large metal fastener hanging on the ground.

"Where the hell have you been girl?" He slurred out. I could hear him.

"I was with a friend, Daddy!" Allison pleaded.

"Did I tell you you could go out?" He was screaming.

"I'm sorry, Da-"

"Get inside! Now!"

I hoped she would run back to me. I don't know what I would have done, but I hoped she didn't go back in there. Then he saw me. He looked up as Allison ran past him, and stared. Even at the distance, I could see the malice in his eyes, and I tried to return it. I tried to show him how much I despised him, from the moment I saw him, how much hurt I wished upon him, and how I longed to wrapped my hand around his throat and squeeze, to feel his beat stop. To let his dead body slump to the floor, defenseless like the only creatures he has probably ever known.

But then I turned. He scared me. I walked away and I heard the door slam. He was asking about me. She said I was her friend. She screamed I was only a friend, and he screamed she was a lying bitch. My hands were clenched. I walked away, faster, my heart raced, my knuckles were white. She was screaming no. He was yelling she's just like her mother. A slut that didn't know what was good for her. She screamed. No, please, Daddy. Daddy, no. I didn't do anything wrong. Please, Daddy. Stop, please, stop it. And then she just screamed.

And I cried. They fell out of earshot and I hit a tree. I jammed my middle and index finger. I didn't notice. I cried so hard. I should have done something. I could have helped her. I could have got the police. I could have got a gun and shot him. I should have. But what I do? I did what I knew. I didn't know how to deal with it, I didn't know what to do. What the fuck do you do? I was 16. I was in love, I was confused, I was hurt, I was angry, I was embarrassed, I was lonely, I was tired, I was excited, I was lost, I was broken, I was scared. I went and got high.

Several days past before she returned to school. I hadn't seen her since I let her go into that god forsaken house. Her face was covered in makeup and she wore long sleeves that fell just past her slender wrists. She avoided looking at me in class.

When school was dismissed, I caught up with her walking home. For some time I walked beside her, but she didn't say anything, and she refused to look at me.

"Hey what's going on?" I asked.

"Go away. I'm not allowed to talk to you anymore," she said.

"What? Why?"

"My dad says you're a bad influence on me. Please just leave me alone."

"But... Allison, I thought we were friends. Who cares what he says?"

"I do! Just leave me the fuck alone, okay?" She had stopped and was staring at me with strong eyes. Her face looked full of hate, but her eyes gave away her sadness and depression.

"Okay, I'm sorry," I said. She walked off, her backpack swung heavily on her shoulder. I stood there watching her as turned out of eyesight a few blocks down behind a row of small trees.

I was devastated. I almost felt like it was a dream at first, how could it be real? I walked aimlessly around town for some time and my sadness slowly turned to annoyance and then turned to anger. My bag began to feel heavy, so I turned back to go home.

I was walking for another few minutes in my numb hate when I ran into a group of people I knew smoking cigarettes outside their apartment complex. If that small town had a ghetto, this complex would be it. It was unmaintained, at one point painted blue and white. A sign said "Greenston Crossing", which was stupid because Greenston Street was five or six blocks away and this apartment was in no way connected to it other than by name. One of the chains had broken that held it up in a little box thing, so it sat slanted on the dirt, and the other chain was rusting away. About half the units had a piece of plywood covering a hole near the front door where an air conditioning unit normally was installed.

"Want a cigarette man?" One of them asked me. I walked over and mumbled thanks. He handed me a lighter.

I had fairly minimal interactions with most of these people. I had seen them at parties on occasion, sold weed to one of them, and had bought weed and heroin from two. They were a few years older than me, most at least 18. I knew one of them, James, was only 17, and a guy named Zach was 22. James used to have classes with me, but I think he dropped out because he didn't come to school anymore.

"What are you up to, Junior?" Zach asked. He was a cool guy, bought me cigarettes and alcohol a few times. He took a long drag of his black kretek. It popped as it burned and smelled heavily of the cloves. He smoked them because they mask the smell of heroin and meth better than normal cigarettes.

"Nothing, just going home. I was just taking a stroll around town, you know?"

James laughed. "With your bag, man? I know that fucking thing ain't light boss. Come inside and have a beer, get it off your back for a minute. You still smoke?"

"Yeah," I said. I hadn't since I met Allison the other day, I just hadn't felt like it. I thought would quit, she had said something about her brother having used to do drugs before he committed suicide and she clearly didn't like it. I said nothing about my habit, thinking it would

ruin us, but hey, that was then. Now? Fuck her, right? “Yeah dog, that sounds nice man.”

He gestured for me to follow him. A couple other guys followed, and the one girl that was there. I think her name was Samantha. She was a tweaker and looked every bit of it, probably 19 but looked 30. Her lips had light burn marks on them and her fingers were scarred and blistered from the pipe. She was one of those people that you might see and feel like if you touched her, you would get AIDS.

James led us into the unit. It was supposed to be a one bedroom, but there were no doors. The entire apartment consisted of five rooms: the living room, the first you entered; the kitchen, visible from the doorway as there was a small wall with a large window in it, a breakfast nook on the ledge. The dining room was about half the size of the living room and had a wall separating the two, with a large, open doorway between. When you went through the door, the kitchen was on the right. Directly back was the bathroom, and on the right behind the kitchen was the bedroom, but it also had no door, and the wall had a similar window so you could see into the dining room from it, and if you were at the right angle (pretty much any angle was the right one) you could see the front door, too. I threw my bag down by the air conditioner.

We went into the bathroom, and the door was shut behind us. There was like five of us in there, sitting on the toilet and the edge of the bathtub. Being the last one in, I jumped up and sat on the edge of the plastic counter. James tossed his cigarette into the sink next to me, which had no drain cover. The girl, Samantha, pulled a heavily used piece of tin foil out of her little purse and handed it to one of the younger boys with us. His name was Alex, I think... whatever, I don't care. He took it and folded it slightly as he put the black tar onto it.

“Anyone got a tutor?” He asked. Most everyone shook their heads and mumbled. Alex fumbled in his pockets.

“I have a pen in my bag, I'll be right back,” I said. I went to my backpack and took out a pen from the small front pocket where I usually kept a small bag of weed and a little bat pipe. I ripped the ends off with my teeth and threw them away in the kitchen. Zach and the others were inside smoking a round of weed. They offered it to me and I took a hit before heading back towards the bathroom when the guy next to Zach said:

“Hey asshole!” I turned around, confused. I wasn't sure if he was going to start a fight or not, my heart jumped into my throat. I wasn't much of a fighter and he was a big guy. “It's puff PUFF pass. Do it right motherfucker. No, Sean, give it back to him. Way to go jackass you fucked up the circle.” The circle was laughing a little bit, and could probably tell how suddenly nervous I became. He smiled at me. I took the pipe back, a little glass piece that changed colors as it got dirtier. This one was almost all black now.

I took a big hit, held it in for a second and blew a little out, then took a smaller second one. “Happy?” I asked.

“Yes I am. Don't let it happen again.”

I went back to the bathroom and Alex handed me the foil. “Want me to serve you?” He asked. I nodded my head with the tutor in my mouth. He held the foil and slowly ran the lighter under the tar, tilting it around to keep the heroin moving so it didn't burn until I started to lose the smoke. He stopped and I held it in. He served the girl next. After about thirty seconds I let it out, the smoke was still heavy. Like a cigarette you didn't hold in your lungs for long before exhaling. The next time it came to me, I held the tutor between my middle and index fingers. Alex stopped

once he noticed it.

“Why are you holding it like that dude? It’s not a goddamn cigarette,” he laughed and started again.

They were still smoking when I left the bathroom. I joined the safety meeting for a bit, and Zach handed me a beer. We all sat there bullshitting for a few hours before I realized how late it was. It was nine thirty, dark out, and I had school the next day.

“Hey guys, I gotta take off and get some sleep. Thanks for the smoke!” I said, and grabbed my bag, getting ready to leave.

“Want a ride, Junior?” The guy that took up an issue with my lack of proper puff puff pass etiquette asked. Not sure where ‘Junior’ came from, but kinda stuck for a while after this.

He took me out to his car. It was a white four door sedan. It sounded like one of the spark plugs wasn’t firing. The transmission was starting to slip. He had some hard rock music playing loudly. The subwoofer in the trunk made the mirrors vibrate.

I gave him directions. He was speeding. Maybe 15 or 20 over the speed limit. Altogether it wasn’t a very memorable ride. Well, it wouldn’t have been if not for what happened near the end.

To get to my house from Zach’s, we had to go by Allison’s. I looked at the desolate building as we passed. A boy, maybe 12, was running from it, into the fields. He disappeared in the tall grass. I found it to be of nothing more than mild entertainment for the few short seconds I saw him. I was lost in a lack of thought, my head was blank, just filled with sorrow as I looked at the place. A light was on in one of the second story rooms, lighting up the dark roof below it in a shallow light.

And then it passed from view and I came back to myself. I was still high, kinda drunk. He dropped me off the block before my house. I stumbled down the sidewalk and across the street into the driveway. My mom was home, probably asleep. My dad’s car was gone. When I got to the door, I fumbled with my keys to get them into the lock. I had trouble getting it to turn, you had to shimmy them just right or else the mechanics of the doorknob would lock up. Made all the worse by my insobriety, it took me about ten minutes to get the door open. I had to shove against it with my shoulder before the latch would disengage all the way, and I fell through into the entryway.

The lights were off and I didn’t want to turn them on, so I slowly made my way through the entryway into the living room and through the hall to my room. I balanced myself on tables and tripped over shoes left on the floor, and stumbled into the walls. Pushed my door open, and collapsed on the bed. I tried to kick my shoes off but gave up. I felt like I had a fever, it was a cool night but I was sweating. I managed to get my shirt off and fell asleep.

My alarm went off at seven in the morning. I couldn’t find the button in my blind grasps for it, so I just grabbed it and yanked it from the wall. I felt like shit, rolled over and fell asleep again. I woke up at ten, put a new shirt on, and was getting ready to go to school late when I realized I forgot my backpack in the car the night before. So I said fuck it, and skipped the day. I deleted the message on the home phone from the school saying I didn’t come in. Then went to Zach’s to get my backpack. I was pretty sure the two of them were roommates.

I got to his apartment at about one in the afternoon. The guy who gave me a ride, apparently named Zeb, wasn’t there, so I hung out for a few hours waiting for him to get back.

We smoked more weed and snorted a little bit of meth. I was never big on meth, but it is fun on occasion, I have to admit. When Zeb got back, I took my bag and walked home. It weighed like fifty pounds with all the books I had in it. I saw Allison in an oak tree in the middle of the field. She looked over at me, and I did a small waving gesture. She did it back and then looked away. I had at this point forgotten about the boy I saw running last night.

Allison wasn't in school the next day. The day after she was. Her bruises had mostly cleared up, she was wearing only a light layer of makeup. She still looked so sad, and still wouldn't talk to me. She avoided me at all costs, sat as far away from me in class as possible, and took a long route home to make sure I couldn't talk to her. This went on for several weeks.

The weather was warming up quickly. It was a hot day, humid. School was out for a few days because of parent teacher meetings, and my friend Jason and I were walking around outside. We were walking in the park on the other side of town. There was an old railroad track on the other side. It hadn't been used in years. A few miles down the tracks there were segments missing. It had been rerouted to bypass the town entirely a few years ago, stopping at the rail station about a half mile down the highway. On the other side of the tracks there was a heavily wooded area that ran down the river. There were small paths that led down there, leading eventually to the beach of the river a few hundred feet back. It got steep when you got close, and we had to hold onto the shrubbery to make our way down to this little plateau about ten feet above the river with a steep drop to the water. It was an outcropping rock, a big chunk of granite. It was an open area, a few hundred square feet on the top. A few hundred feet downriver there was a larger one that was about thirty feet above the river, with ledges that were a little lower going all the way down to the surface. When the water was warm enough we sometimes went there to jump off into the river, but we had to be careful. You had to get five or six feet out or else you would hit the bottom like three feet below the surface. Jason broke his leg there once and I had to carry him out. It took like two hours to get him to a hospital... poor guy. He didn't like going there anymore. So usually we came here to jump, since it was lower and the water was deep enough right up to the outcropping.

Jason had got some China White. He pulled out a little bag of the white powder and we put a little bit onto our foil. We were having issues because it was windy and we were afraid of losing the heroin. The shit's expensive, it was like two hundred dollars for a couple points. So we made a little box to block the wind, only to find that we still couldn't get the lighter to work. The problems of freebasing... such a pain in the ass sometimes.

So we retreated to the shelter of the trees. It felt like the wind was moving even faster, getting restricted through the narrow corridors between the trunks. We took refuge behind a small group of aspens. The powder turned black and burned to the foil. Most people don't seem to like the taste of heroin. Which really I think is the taste of the foil, but whatever. People don't like it. I do though. The thing I miss the most about heroin isn't the high, but the taste. Almost a sweet, but acrid flavor that sticks in the back of your throat. The smell was almost like vinegar, but so faint. We took small hits to make sure we didn't waste any smoke. Slowly the high came over me. I felt the warmth spread to my fingers, the mild discomfort in my back eased away.

We could hear people along the path near us. But we didn't pay much attention. We were

high on heroin, we felt safe. Then Jason quickly balled the foil up and shoved it in his pocket and ran up the hill to the park. I was late on the uptake, and it took me a few seconds to follow. It was a young family coming down to the rock to have a picnic.

We decided to go to The Shire. It was further out, more secluded, and might have been on private property. We cut across yards to avoid going by Allison's house, and came out on the right by the path. We raced down to the pond, jumping over windfalls and we leapt across the creek where the culvert was still failing to do its job. We came sprinting down the little hill and barely stopped before running into the pond.

Allison was sitting on top of the small cliff next to the waterfall. She looked surprised and sat there for a few seconds before running off. I tried to follow her and called after her, but gave up after a few yards.

"Who was that?" Jason asked.

I thought for a moment. What would I say? She never was really my girlfriend... we were together for like a day. "No one, don't worry about it."

"But -"

"I said don't worry about it. Forget it man." Jason dropped the topic, and pulled out his ball of foil again.

We unfolded it carefully, trying not to spill any of the heroin. It was hard to freebase it right, because the foil was so crinkled. When we finished smoking it was brittle and cracked.

We had brought some beer in our bags that Zach bought for me. We cracked a couple of them open and sat on opposite sides of the waterfall on little ledges that you could lounge on, albeit dangerously.

"Let's go swimming," Jason said. We were getting bored, and our conversation had died down, but we didn't want to go home.

We were both wearing shorts because of the heat that day. Jason rolled off his ledge and jumped into the water, swimming out to the middle and diving down. He came up with a handful of rocks and sand.

"So fucking cold..." he said. He had a slight shiver to his voice, but still paddled around. "Get in man." I jumped at him from the ledge, narrowly missing his head. We splashed around for a little while, then decided to smoke some weed.

We were standing in a shallow spot near the ledges, where we left the pipe. We blew smoke rings at each other and tried to make bubbles of smoke by exhaling under water, but it didn't really work.

Around seven, Jason took off. I still didn't want to go home, so hung out by myself. I was lying on a rock in a clearing close by The Shire drying off and fell asleep. I don't know what time it was after that but I woke up when I heard someone trip and tumble through the trees. I jumped up and shoved my cigarettes and pipe into my pocket and got ready to run. I was throwing my shoes on when I saw Allison's face appear through the brush.

"Hello," she said quietly. "I was hoping you were still here."

"You scared me," I responded.

She ignored it. "I'm sorry I've been blowing you off. I miss you."

I wasn't sure what to say. In reality I missed her too, but I was also pissed off at her, but she still won me over and I said, "I've missed you too."

She came over and sat next to me. "Can we talk?"

"Sure."

"My little brother ran away."

I said nothing.

"My dad hit me and he tried to intervene. But he's so small," she started to cry. "Dad threw him against the wall. He was knocked out. He was gone the next morning."

"I'm sorry, Allison." I moved closer to her and put my arm around her shoulders. She leaned into me and rested her head on my arm. She didn't say anything.

"Why do you stay there?"

She didn't respond for some time. "I don't know where else to go."

"Don't you have other family? Aunts or anything that you can move in with?"

"I don't know. I've never met anyone else in my family."

We sat there for over an hour. Me, holding her, and her crying on my shoulder. She fell asleep, and I lied down with her on the rock, and drowsed off to sleep too. We didn't wake up until almost midnight. It was still warm out.

There was a bright moon out, and the stars were brilliant. We jumped back into the water, and swam with each other for a while. She smoked a little bit of weed with me for the first time in her life, and we laughed at stories I told of Jason and stories she told of her late mother. We forgot about her problems, and were lost in our own little world where it was just us.

She jumped up on me when we were playing with the waterfall. I could touch the bottom, but she was too short. She kissed me and held onto my shoulders to keep at eye level.

"I love you."

I smiled and kissed her again. "I love you too."

I know. It was fast. But we were teenagers. And we did love each other. I still do... or at least I think I do. I mean, who finds their soulmate when they're 16? Apparently I did.

We slipped behind the waterfall into the shallow cave. She pushed me down and sat on top of me. Her makeup was running down her face, but there were no bruises. Her father hadn't hit her in a few weeks, mostly because he was passed out most days since her brother ran away. Her skin was perfect. Her eyes were bright, her chest was heaving from her deep breathes.

She was so beautiful.

We were in love.

We sat in that little cave until the morning holding each other. Her skin, her hair were so soft. She rested her head on my shoulder and chest, and my head on hers. I had put my shorts back on because I was somewhat self conscious, even then, and felt embarrassed unclothed.

The sun was starting to rise, its rays that managed to find their way through the trees glistened off the water.

"Do you think my brother is okay?" She asked.

"I'm sure he's fine. Maybe he knows someone that took him in?"

I didn't really feel this way. Though I hadn't any real attachment to the boy, I did for Allison, and because of that I was filled with a kind of disembodied sadness about his disappearance.

In reality I was right. Allen was a brave kid, tried to stand up against his father, but was too small to really do anything. His body would be found in a few years over a thousand miles away in a swamp by a hiker, rotting away, forgotten, with no one looking for him. He was picked up on the side of the road somewhere, by God knows who. The report said he was probably raped and strangled to death. The poor boy... never lived a day in his life where he was safe. His murderer has yet to be found. It's unlikely that the police will ever find him.

And then we talked again. When the sun was fully up, high in the eastern sky, we got ready to leave. I walked her nearly home, but we decided it to be in everyone's interests if we retained some level of secrecy, primarily to ensure her father thought that she was still avoiding me. So I left her about a quarter mile from her house and went on my way.

This plan of ours worked well for the duration of our short relationship. We managed to keep it hidden from both our parents, and even most of our peers at school remained, to our liking, unaware. It made the entire thing that much more exciting; perhaps that was the contributing factor to my, let's say, fascination with Allison that eventually would take me over the edge into what has become a pure obsession that seems to lie at the very core of me.

I even opted to keep her secret from my parents. Though I'm unsure why; they didn't seem to really care what I did. I would come home more or less whenever I pleased, go to school at my leisure, and more or less do whatever the hell I wanted. I did keep the drugs quite secret, though I'm certain they had an idea and just didn't want to intervene, they didn't want to be *those* parents. I sometimes wonder why we are so unattached with one another, but that's of little concern now.

School was soon released for summer. Allison and I would spend much more time together over these next few months. She knew that I smoked weed and didn't seem to care, but I hadn't told her of the harder shit. She seemed to be getting some idea, I think, and eventually knew outright. She had become slightly withdrawn, but hardly of notice at the time. Her home was also getting worse now that her father was getting back in his normal state after Allen left.

We would stay out at night and wander in the woods, look at the stars. On warm nights we could go swimming. When my parents were gone, like they were most of the time, we could chill at my house and play video games.

In the second week of summer I got a part-time job with the grocery store getting carts from the parking lot and fixing the ones that locked. All the carts had a lock that was engaged when you brought it outside of the limit, making it really hard to push. I hated this job. When it rained especially people would be like two spaces from the racks and would push it off into the

lot somewhere else in the opposite direction. At night, there would be no one in the store, and weird people park as far back as they can, and leave the cart there. And then the guy on the shift before me wouldn't get it while he's there, so I had to. It was so fucking annoying.

Later in the summer, Allison and I ran away for a few days. We didn't tell anyone. I had stopped doing drugs altogether, with the exception of some weed on occasion.

The addiction was still there; anyone that's done heroin for more than a few weeks will tell you. It's always there, a shadow in the back of your mind. But I had the resistance, the willpower to push through the worst of the withdrawals. I actually found it not that bad, I was sick for a few days, but I never felt the feelings I've been told of, the feeling of despair, the absolute necessity for a hit. I didn't tell Allison about them, I had wanted to, but never really thought it important. I had quit; why did she need to know? It would only make her feel less for me, think less of me.

We went hiking away from town into the mountains, past the Shire, to a clearing on the summit of the tallest one nearby. They had a large radio tower there, a red light blinking. It made me dizzy looking at the top of it, made my stomach turn, like when you look down a large cliff and see an unexpected canyon below.

Allison was wearing these blue jeans with a few tears in them. She had a purple shirt on. She was so pretty that weekend. She was trying to help me set up the tent, but hadn't ever done it before and didn't seem to understand that the poles came apart in their sleeves if you just pulled on it. It was irritating at the time, but looking back, she was so cute in her cluelessness. Always so eager to help, not wanting to feel like she wasn't contributing. She was such a smart girl in school, but she just didn't have the common knowledge like most people, and she can't be blamed, having lived most of her life in an isolated hell with her father.

"Can we build a fire now?" She asked. She had never been camping before and was so excited for that fire, she wanted to roast marshmallows.

"We will in a little bit sweetheart. We have to get wood first."

She ran off to find small pieces of wood and bark in a different direction than me. I had come back with a small load of sticks and some logs, and waited for like ten minutes before she came wandering back up, trying to drag a small tree.

"What the hell Allison?" I said, starting to laugh. The tree was almost twice her size, and probably weighed a significant amount more than she did. Her hands were scraped, and she ended up with a couple of blisters.

I walked up and kissed her and took the tree, dragging it over to the small pit. She helped me rip the bark off and break the branches. We whittled the ends of two of them for roasting sticks, and then I grabbed some matches from my bag.

Allison came to watch me as I struck the matches and set them around the pile of leaves and sticks. As the flames began to roar up, she threw a big log onto it that I had to roll off to keep it from putting the fire out. It was so funny watching her try to do things, so far out of her element.

Night fell about an hour later, and we threw some blankets down outside to lay and watch the sky. There were meteors falling that night, and we sat there watching them, and making shapes out of the stars. We made s'mores and hot dogs for dinner for the next two nights. The stars at night were so beautiful, we would stay up until sunrise, and wake up for sunset.

I looked in a raw amazement at the radio tower; for some reason it drew my attention, and burned into my memory as the backdrop to Allison's figure in my recollections of her.

It was the morning we were getting ready to leave. I was working on taking the tent down when I got a text message from James. My phone was on a rock, near where Allison was sitting. She picked it up and looked at.

"What's it say?" I asked. She looked up at me with a look of mixed anger and confusion. She threw the phone at me.

Hey man party at zaks 2nite got some h, u shud come, wil b fun dawg.

"What's H?" Allison asked.

I hesitated, trying to figure out how to explain it in a way that wouldn't make me look so bad.

"I know it's heroin idiot. You're doing fucking heroin?" I had never seen her like this. She was in a pure rage almost instantly..

"Allison, no! I... I used to, before we were together!"

"Oh, okay! Yes that makes it better! Way fucking better! I used to use heroin, Allison, but I stopped like two fucking minutes ago! You are so stupid, I should have known!" She started to cry and turned away.

"Baby, please, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Allison, but I haven't been doing anything but smoking pot, and you knew about that." I walked over to her to try and get her to look at me.

"Don't 'baby' me! Just get away from me. Don't touch me!" She walked off, and I followed. "Leave me alone!" She was bawling. Her big eyes were so wet, tears streaming off her face like a river. "I hate you!" And she ran.

I stood there and watched her. I could feel the tears building up in my eyes. She ran down the ridge as fast as could. I watched her pass out of sight, and stared at the spot for God knows how long. Waiting for her to come back. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed? An hour? I don't know, but she didn't come back.

I walked back up to the campsite and sat on a rock for hours. I felt so lost, I was so used to her being by my side. We had never really fought, we just had fun. I cried to myself, thought myself to be such an idiot. I was so mad at James, what the fuck was wrong with him? Sending shit like that in a text that any fucking person could pick up and read? But then I forgot James, and only thought about myself. My problems, my losses. Look at what I've brought myself: nothing. Just bitter memories I had already. And I missed Allison so much, from the moment she disappeared in the trees.

I slowly started to pack up the camp. I folded the tent, tied it to my bag. I spent far longer checking the fire than necessary to make sure it was out, kicking the ashes and dead coals with my foot, kicking up the black dust. I lit a cigarette, and watched the sun move over the sky.

The sun is so... majestic. It's amazing, an hours drive to exit the atmosphere. Looking at the sun, and knowing that what you are seeing isn't actually there anymore. It's moved, maybe just fractions of degrees over those eight minutes the light takes, but still, it's moved. To see the stars as the fireball sets. Years, hundreds, thousands, even millions of years, behind. It's so humbling, and yet almost depressing. But it made me feel better, though insignificant. But that insignificance is what made me feel better. To know that there is so much more, to ponder that,

and let the impression sink in, I felt that, though I missed Allison, and was devastated, I could only think it doesn't matter. In the end, where are we? We all, after all, live on a small planet, orbiting an insignificant star, on the outskirts of an ordinary galaxy, in a cluster of thousands others. What can any one person ever do that will make the slightest difference in how this world goes on?

I picked up my phone. I went to the messages and found the one from James, and responded:

What time?

I left the tent and my bag at home, and walked to Zack's. I knocked on the door, and Zeb opened it. I found Jason and James in the kitchen taking knife hits. The smoke smelled so good. They offered it to me, and it was only with hesitation and, I will admit, peer pressure that I gave and took it.

"How you been, man? Haven't seen you for a while," Jason said.

"Yeah... been busy bro. You know, I got that job now at the store."

"Yeah man I know. Good for you, I've been looking for a job too. There's a little body shop near my house that might hire me to keep the place clean and play bitch for the mechanics, you know? Getting them whatever tools they need and whatnot."

"That'd be pretty cool, would they teach you how to do everything?"

"I don't know. Probably, I hope at least. I could see myself as a mechanic... I fixed your parents lawnmower that time you took it apart, remember?" He laughed a little, and got me to smile.

"Yeah, I remember." It was true; I had gotten high and taken the motor apart for some reason and couldn't get it back together. Jason had come over and helped me before my parents got home.

He handed me the knives and set the tutor in my mouth. I pressed the knives together, and sucked in the smoke. It was hot, and burned the back of my throat a little bit. I handed them back. And the circle continued for some time, and at some point turned into weed.

And the circle went on until I got way too high. I stumbled off through the house and sat against a wall. I didn't feel alive. I could hear everyone talking, but couldn't understand them. I didn't seem to notice as several people started crowding around me. I was falling in and out of dreams, and not really understanding it.

"He's just nodding man, he should be fine," I heard one of them say. It seemed to bring me around to reality, and in an instant I felt wide awake, almost sober.

"I'm fine guys. Just sitting down for a minute," I said.

"A minute? You been there for like three hours dude, looking all fucked up and shit. Was getting worried about you."

It was Zeb. I don't know who the others were. He helped me up, and lit a cigarette for me. I was dehydrated and my mouth was dry, didn't really want a cigarette, but took it anyway. He got me a beer, and took me to the living room, where they had lines of shots out. I took one after everyone else, not really sure if I was supposed to be hanging out with them. They were like the elite group of the party. That cool group that made you feel better about yourself if they talked to you, but for whatever reason you don't go start talking to them first, even though they were

technically the ones who had me come over.

My high was starting to come back in force, and I suddenly felt very introverted and nervous. I didn't feel like I belonged there. Admittedly I rarely got that high so wasn't used to it, it was making me sick. But I just felt so weird, after having passed out in the middle of the party, to the extent that people were worried about me. I felt like they were thinking I shouldn't be there.

Like, what the fuck is this lightweight doing here? The faggot probably overdosed. We better not have to take him to the hospital. Is he alive? Let's make sure he's alive.

Zeb raised his glass and took his shot in one moment. Everyone else followed; I took it far slower than everyone else did. I was still drinking when everyone else had set their glasses down. A couple of them were looking at me with mild interest.

"Little bit slow buddy."

"How'd that taste dog?"

"Kid's a balla. I can barely shoot this shit Zeb got, let alone fucking hold it in my mouth."

I started to feel more welcome, and they became far more ingratiating as the night went on. I took a few pills, I wasn't sure what they were, and smoked what I believe to be meth, though I'm not entirely sure.

I started to black out at some point, there are gaps in my memory. Well, more like gaps of memory in a field of darkness. Images that just kind of flash, disorganized and without order, but clear and perfect. I remember being in the kitchen, smoking weed. I wandered off outside for a cigarette and some air. Wandered off to some other unit with someone. Another guy was there, I wouldn't recognize him. The unit had no furniture, and no lights were on. There was a piece of plywood over a hole, where an air conditioning unit was. I'm pretty sure that unit was supposed to be vacant.

He looked at the man that brought me there. His name was Q or something. Then at me. He didn't look happy. He had a joint and handed it to me. He didn't hand it to me like he was just offering though. He did it in a way that just says take a hit. You're not allowed to say no. See what happens if you don't take it. That kind of handed it.

I inhaled the smoke. At first, nothing. Then I tasted it. It tasted awful. I coughed.

"What is this?" I asked. "It doesn't taste like weed."

The other man looked at me. He didn't smile, or chuckle. He looked angry. Like fuck you faggot, fuck you for not knowing what this is, and another fuck you for asking.

"Angel Dust."

We sat there, smoking his PCP. They talked. I tried to listen, but couldn't comprehend it. I was running. There was a car. People were yelling. Concrete. Sirens. I fell in a field of tall grass; As tall as I was. An engine that sounded like shit. More yelling. Crying. Crawling. Despair.

I woke up a field. I was hurt. My face was covered in dried blood and swollen, painful to touch. My arms were bruised, and my chest sore. My knuckles were scratched and beat. I stood up and my leg gave out, and I fell back down in pain. Someone had kicked me in my leg, just below my knee, too low to break it.

My clothes were torn up. I felt like crying, but couldn't. I felt sick, dehydrated. The sun was up, nearly noon. It was bright out that day, just a few clouds, not too hot.

I forced myself up and walked in the opposite direction of the disturbed grass. I walked for maybe twenty minutes before the grass started to fade out, and I could see ahead. A small electric fence, and a few cows roaming inside.

I was on a farm, on the opposite side of the Shire. I went left, towards the forest. There was a path a little further up that led to the path that went right by the Shire that comes out on the road, near where I lived.

But I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to go to the Shire. I wanted to go somewhere unfamiliar. Somewhere far away. Some distant cave. Isolation and loneliness. I was embarrassed. I still don't really know what happened. I have since formed my memories together, and I have some idea. We left the apartment to do something I can't remember. I got scared. I ran. They chased me. They beat me and then left me. A memory that haunts me, a memory I can't get rid of. I wish I could, I wish I could take back whatever happened.

I was never contacted by police in relation to that night, so I can at least hold on to a dear comfort that nothing bad happened to another person, though in the back of my mind the thought nags, some suppressed knowledge that we hurt someone, or they at least did. Like a thorn, it tears at me, when the rare occasion occurs I can tell myself that everything is fine it comes like a knife through my core, to remind me of what a piece of shit I am. I assume I'm safe from whatever events took place that night, but how can I know? It races to the front of my mind whenever I see a cop, and I panic. I wonder, what if they know me, they're looking for me, for something?

I walked into the woods. I left the path, and wandered aimlessly. I sat on a rock for a while, went down the steepest hills I could find. Kicked at trees, and threw rocks at birds. I wanted to make something as miserable as I was. I wanted to damage something that could feel, to watch it struggle and cry for freedom, to feel for once powerful over some other being.

I wanted Allison.

Later that night I walked home. No one was there. Of course not, no one was ever home. There was a note.

Where have you been?

I ignored it, and took a shower. I watched television, played video games. Neither interested me for long. I read a few pages of a book and took in a few sentences. I looked at pictures of Allison for hours.

The next day I had to go to work. I suddenly understood why Allison never wanted to go out without makeup, she didn't even want to be around me. She was so pretty even with bruises, but it's embarrassing. I didn't want to go. But I did anyway. I told everyone I got in a fight. Which technically wasn't a lie, though glorified on my behalf.

This went on for a few weeks. I ignored Jason and James, trying to make sense of my scattered memories. Allison would come by the store sometimes, just walk by, and glance at me. She wouldn't talk to me and I didn't dare talk to her first. But I watched her go by until she walked out of sight every time.

The summer dwindled away, lonely and depressing.

It wasn't for several weeks into the next school year that I spoke with Allison again. It was a weekend, a Saturday I think. I was out for a walk, a newfound hobby of mine due to the sudden lack of drug abuse on my part. The withdrawals had mostly died down, and I had been so busy that I scarcely had time to fully notice it with both work and school.

I was walking through the fields near the mountains we had camped at. I was looking at the radio tower, standing like a beacon of civilization on top of the mountain. A monument, almost, of human achievement, there to show that civilization exists, painted red and white in bright contrast to the blue sky behind it and the brown and green earth that it dominated.

I was, as I had often began doing I noticed, thinking of nothing, lost in a moment of nothing.

"Hey," someone said. It startled me, and I turned around to see her wearing a purple dress with a passion flower in her hair.

"Hello, Allison. How are you?" I hadn't really gotten over her, but had gotten used to it. Or thought I had, until she stood before me.

"I've been alright. I see your face cleared up from your... fight?"

"Yes, it has." I wasn't looking at her eyes. I just couldn't.

We stood in an queer silence for some time. She was playing with her hands, I was looking everywhere but her. But then our eyes caught, and I felt the sudden emotion, the rush of regret, and the longing desire to touch her hair and hold her hands.

My eyes started to tear up slightly. "Allison, I'm so sorry." She didn't respond, but gave me an almost cold look. I wasn't sure what else to say. A tear ran down my face. Her tension lessened as I cried, and turned into the soft, loving look I remembered.

She rubbed my shoulder and wiped the tears from my face with her light fingers, and wrapped her arms around me lightly. I buried my face in her shoulder and squeezed her so tight. She patted the back of my head and shoulders.

"I stopped Allison, I swear I stopped. I love you...."

It took a few seconds before she responded, "I love you, too." And she hugged me tighter, holding me until I regained myself. We sat in the field and I told her what had happened the night I went to Zach's. She didn't say anything, just listened and held my hand as we sat in the field.

When I finished my story, she rested her head on my shoulder and I fell onto my back. I felt worn out, like I had stayed up for too many days. We lied there for a while before she picked her head up to kiss me, then rolled on top of me.

We spent as much time as we could together over the next few weeks, usually only getting time on the weekends. We didn't have any classes together, and I worked four hours after school most days.

I had saved up enough to buy a small blue sedan. It had fabric seats and smelled like cigarettes in it from the previous owner, though I smoked in it too whenever I was alone, as Allison had decided she didn't like me smoking cigarettes very much either, however I knew that I was pretty heavily addicted to the nicotine and wasn't exactly a pleasant person without them usually, so we came to the conclusion that cigarettes would be tolerated, just not when she was in the car with me.

We would drive around mostly when we were together, getting further out of town.

Everything had suddenly seemed to repair itself so perfectly. Her father had lightened up as well, having gotten a job building trusses the next town over. He hadn't been abusing her, and didn't mind as much when she wasn't home. Though, Allison said, his alcoholism was also beginning to get worse again, and he would normally be sleeping if she was there.

And, like all good things, it would shortly come to an end. She began to become more withdrawn, and didn't want to spend time with me. We would go out every few weekends, but we had almost no contact with each other otherwise, even in school she seemed to keep to herself, and our only interactions were short hellos in the hall between class. She rarely let me drive her home after only a few weeks.

When I asked her why, she closed up even further, and would become cold and unresponsive, and anything she said was short and deliberately ended the conversation. Then she stopped coming to school or seeing me altogether.

I was upset, and didn't understand why she would so suddenly push herself away from me. No one seemed to know why she had stopped coming, and the staff wouldn't tell me anything.

I eventually built up the courage and went to her house. I knocked; no one answered. I knocked again and heard footsteps; the windows were all covered in blinds and I couldn't see in. Her father opened it.

He looked almost surprised, and probably was, that someone was coming to his door. I doubt many people came over here; most people seemed to think the house was vacant.

He looked at me for a few moments but didn't say anything.

"Hi, sir," I said, "I was hoping I could see Allison?"

He sighed and blinked a few times in succession, and opened the door.

"Yeah, she's in her room," he said, pointing towards a door in the back of the house. He went and sat down in a big chair, and laid his head back, and his eyes closed most of the way. He appeared to be falling asleep again.

I had never met him before, and he seemed almost remarkably nice from my imagination of his personality, based on my experience of him through Allison. His name was Aaron, and he was an extreme alcoholic that beat his children, and that was about the extent of my knowledge.

The house was a mess. There were bottles of beer and liquor on tables and counters and the floor. I counted four different ash trays in different parts of the house. The TV had a lot of static, and was turned to a local news channel. You could barely see the video.

Allison's door had some stickers on it of bands, some postcards of mountains and pictures of animals. She had taped her last report card up, of mostly A's with one or two B's.

I knocked lightly on her door and called her name quietly.

She answered it, pulling the door up quickly and moved the air, blowing her hair back. Her stomach was bigger than it used to be.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, Allison. Can we talk?"

She let me in, but didn't say anything, and slumped onto her bed, where she had been reading a book. Tissues littered the floor and nightstand, many of which were covered in

mascara and eyeshadow.

“Well?” She said impatiently.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you being like this to me?”

“Why does it have to be wrong with me? Maybe there’s something wrong with you that I don’t like.”

“Fine, whatever. What’s wrong with me then?”

She tightened her jaw and pointed at her stomach. It took me a moment to understand and I started to stutter.

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yes, I am.”

As I always seemed to be, I didn’t know what to do or say. I had a sense of happiness, somewhere in me it glowed, but was shrouded by a thick cloud of fear that took over.

“So what are we going to do?” She said. I didn’t respond. “Well? You wanted to be involved with me, what am I going to do?”

I stood there, dumb with the sudden weight that fell. Slowly it got heavier, I felt sick. My legs became suddenly sore, and I sat on the far side of the bed, away from Allison. As far away as I could be. I almost wanted to walk away. I could. I could’ve walked right out of the house and had nothing to do with it. I thought about it. I even wanted to for a while, but I couldn’t seem to get the motivation of getting my legs to bear me.

Then, out of nowhere, I said, “I can drop out and get a GED. Go to full time at the grocery store.”

“Don’t be stupid. I can’t have a baby!”

“What other choice do we have?”

“We? No, not we, what choice do I have?”

“What? What do you mean? It’s mine too, Allison.”

“Nothing is yours because I’m not keeping it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I am not keeping it. What else would I mean?”

“What, like a --?”

She cut me off. “Yes, an abortion. I’m fifteen, I can’t have a baby, how would I take care of it?”

“I would work full time! I can a second job.”

“God you are so stupid. You’re not being realistic. It’s not a debate, it’s decided.”

I tried to respond, but I couldn’t think of what to say, and I doubt she would let me anyway. So I sat there, looking at the ground. I reached over and rubbed her leg. She cuddled closer to me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She just sat there for a few minutes. “I am too,” she said. Tears fell from cheeks to my shoulder. “I am too.”

Two weeks later, I drove her to a clinic. It was three hours away. We drove in silence, no radio, no conversation. I smoked cigarettes the entire way and Allison said nothing.

The clinic did the procedure for free because of the circumstances. She barely had to give them any information. I sat in the waiting room for her. It felt like days went by, alone and scared. I looked up every time the door opened until she came out. Neither of us said a word. She walked past me, giving no recognition I was even with her. I got up and followed her, and we drove home.

I stopped at her house, and we sat in the car for some time. She didn't make a move to get out for several minutes at least, just stared ahead at the street.

Then, she slowly pulled the handle and pushed the door open. She undid her seatbelt, and began to get out of my car.

Halfway through the motion, she stopped, and looked at me. She was holding back tears; so was I.

"Goodbye," she said. I looked at her and gave a weak smile, and looked away. And she walked to her door, and disappeared inside. And I understood.

I would never see Allison again. I went on to drop out of school anyway and got my GED. I went to college early; my parents were so pleased with me. I majored in structural engineering, but never went on to work in the field. When I graduated I kept my job at a men's clothing store.

I have since then dated other women. Most of which I was with for a longer duration than Allison. But, none of them seemed to fill a gap in me. I would, on occasion, look for her halfheartedly, doing some Internet searches or whatever. But I never found anything about her.

I received a phone call one day, from an old friend in high school. I hadn't talked to him for some time previously.

"Hey man, how's everything been?" He asked me.

"Good. How are you?"

"I've been alright, you know? Moved back home, got a little house. Got a little girl now, named her Alexandra."

And so we bullshitted for some time, before he came to his true intentions of the call.

"So, I have some news. You remember Allison?"

It hurt to listen to him suddenly. I clenched my eyes when he said her name. I had moved on, sort of. I could cope with it, but my method was to avoid thinking about her. And over the period of time, it had become easier to do, but still, the memory of her was a power that I was afraid to confront. "Oh course I do."

"Well, uhh, she died... recently."

I didn't say anything. My voice was gone and tears built up in my eyes. I opened my mouth and my voice cracked.

"I'm sorry, man," he said.

"How?" I asked. I demanded.

"Oh," he was hesitating.

"How?" I asked again.

"She built up a drug problem after you left I guess, and she overdosed from what I was told."

"How long ago?"

"A couple weeks. The funeral is in a few days"

I couldn't respond. I pushed buttons on the phone until it hung up and dropped it. I fell to the floor and covered my face. I threw my phone at the wall.

I made the trip to her grave a few weeks later, on her birthday. I had tried to go to the funeral, but couldn't handle it. I brought flowers, and I stood in front of the grave, and didn't say anything, and didn't really think anything. I prayed for her, for a little while.

Her father came by while I was there. I didn't notice him at first, though he stood next to me, with a small bouquet, and when I did finally notice I didn't really care.

"I know you," he said.

After a few moments, I said, "Yes. I know you too."

"You have no idea how much I miss her. And all of my family."

I didn't respond. I didn't want to talk to him. I wanted to kill him.

"I had everything a man needs to be happy around him. And I threw it away. I know you

hate me, but also, you should know that I regret it. I did love them all, especially her, after her brothers and mother. I should have protected her, but I abused her or ignored her,” he continued. “And now I haven’t the chance to make it right. It took so much for me to come to grasps with my wrongs...”

“You never would have been able to fix it, Aaron.” I looked at his eyes. “You never would have tried. You didn’t deserve her; you don’t deserve to be here at her grave. Get away from me, you sick fucking faggot. Just get the fuck away.”

He left, and went on to kill himself that night. Hung himself in the shower. His blood alcohol content was at 0.32%. An entire family, gone. He was the last. Allison’s grandparents on both sides had died, and both her parents were single children. And the deaths of her and her father come directly back to me.

I often wonder, could I have saved her? And, through much debate in my lonesome, I have come to the opinion that I could have. I am confident that, if I had been given the option, I would have made the necessary sacrifices to keep her.

And this leads me to where I sit now. In a dark room, one window with the blinds down. The lights are all off, and I am very high. I have been, for several days. Since Aaron’s suicide. I think about her as an angel sometimes; not because I wish to enlighten my memories of her any further, but because it’s the saddest of things when angels have to die.

This is where it all concludes. This is where I stop, and I look back, at everything that happened these past few years. And you see, this is the part I find most interesting, even most enlightening. Because, I had loved her. And love... it has limits. That is what so many people don’t understand, it’s what I certainly failed to grasp for some time. You will go to the ends of the world for someone you love. I do not doubt you will. But you see! That... is where you stop. You don’t follow them, when there is literally nothing in front of you. You may think you will, but let me tell you, it is so much different when you stand upon the precipice, staring into the void! But you don’t go over; you just linger on the edge of its glory, and on occasion you might sneak to the face of the void and shout. And eventually, you leave that dark place, that dangerous place, and you go home, you return to normal, you accept.

And I, finally, have realized that is where I was. Before I knew of her death. I let her go, and I was okay with it. I loved her, deeply. But, then, no... I did not step into the abyss, no. I went as far as love’s limits, to the ends of the world with her, and that is where I stopped. And then when I heard of her death... that is where everything changed. I blame myself, and some may attempt at comforting me to some extent. But that is not possible; for there is no where else for blame to go. I was the catalyst. I was the cause, my actions led to these events.

That is where I am now, far from love, but regret. Because regret... regret has no limits. You will leap into those blank corners of the map, chasing. And that is the weirdest thing. Because regret is a lot like love, but it’s like the inverse. I still love her, you see. But I hate myself. And I need her, to even myself out. Before I knew she had died, I was alright, because, in my mind, I knew she was somewhere around that edge, and maybe, if I tried hard enough, you know, just maybe, I could find her if I needed to. But now... now I know she’s gone from there,

and I need her.

That is it: I regret it. I regret every single thing. That is what's important. Not that I loved her, because love is weak, love was fulfilled. But regret will remain unfinished, never to come full circle, because I can *never* make it right, I can't take anything back... I can't bring her back. So, there's nothing else to do but take that leap, to cross the veil into the unknown, in pursuit of her.

This is my story, and it has ended. Prayers I have spoken. And it is time for me to go searching for her, over the edge, into darkness.

I pick a pistol up off the floor. It's against my temple and I don't know if I want to do this. I lower it. But I have to, to make myself well.

So here I am, and I have made my decision to load my gun and fly away.

I open my mouth, close my eyes, say goodbye.

Click.