

The Legend of Apple Brown Betty

by Michael Broh

There were twenty rungs. Not really that high. Not high, but high enough. From a distance, it hardly looked daunting. Just a short trip to the top followed by a delightful fall into the pool. Children did it all day. Obviously there was nothing to be afraid of. Only twenty rungs. From a distance.

From the bottom, however, it looked as if no sane person would do it. Not just to climb them, but to jump. A sane person would fear the fall. Would tread carefully along the platform, worried for the damage that might result from an imperfect step beyond the guard rail. To purposely allow oneself to leave the platform and dive into the pool was madness.

Yet, children did it every day. Every day children climbed the twenty rungs as a line of other children waited below. One rung at a time, hardly thinking, they would make their way to the spectacular view over the community pool, walk out beyond the rail, take a deep breath, and thrust themselves over the edge into the depths below.

Occasionally, it is true, some youngster would dare to climb before they were ready. They would stand in line, afraid they could not do it, stepping forward every minute or so, never sure if they would dare to conquer their fear. That youngster would finally arrive at the bottom of the ladder, put their foot upon the first rung, and wait for the splash of the fearless child before them. They would then climb the ladder, one rung at a time, not daring to look below for fear the view would rob them of their courage. Once atop the platform, that occasional child would finally see what they so feared, the mad distance their body was about to fall. They would look over the edge of a rail as children shouted taunts from below.

She often wondered if it took more courage for that occasional child to turn around, to descend the ladder, to publicly share their failure one rung at a time as they descended into the

chorus of taunts from below. No doubt it did, though it was a courage not generally recognized by the mob, always hungry for a new victim.

Courage, of course, takes many forms.

As she closed the distance from *hardly looked daunting* to *no sane person would do it*, she wondered what sort of courage she had that day.

Atop the platform, she took her time, ignoring the taunts that undoubtedly rose up from below, but which her mind refused to acknowledge. She cared little of what others thought of her. For the shame of turning back. For the pain of diving forward. She cared little for the view, for the fear, for the anxiety that always accompanies a strange journey. She cared only for the pain that would not cease, the voice that berated her without pity, the gut wrenching terror of who she was, what she had done. For, when there is no chance of redemption, no hope of forgiveness, only the knowledge, deep and true, of how awful you really are, will always be, what is there left to do but jump?

When they found her body the next morning, it was wet with the leaf strewn remnants of the fall rains, three inches of water covered in a thin layer of ice that would melt by lunchtime.

The autopsy of her soul showed significant overgrowth throughout, untended and nearly impenetrable.

part one

Not all children's stories are for children. This one is decidedly not. This children's story is best kept well away from children until they are safely ensconced in adulthood. Ensconced means *snugly settled*, like when you crawl into bed a little early because the house is cold but your covers are warm. It's when you can hear your phone buzzing from the next room with a text from someone who probably wants to play, so to speak, but you are just too comfortable to move. It's when you pull the covers tight over your head, close your ears, and pretend you don't hear. Once your children are safely ensconced in adulthood, they might like a nice story to pass the time. This one will do.

The story concerns, which means both *is about* and *worries* at the same time, a demon who called herself Elizabeth Apple. Elizabeth wasn't really a bad demon, nor, I suppose, was she a good one. Like most of us, she just did the best she could with what she had and sometimes fell short.

Elizabeth used many names throughout her life. Life is, admittedly, a funny word to use with a demon, because they live so long. Still, they *are* born and they *do* die, so there is nothing for it but to call their time in the world a *life*. When she was a child, the big demons called her Boo Boo. Later, when she was a student, she called herself Lizzie. As she came into the closest thing demons have to a young adulthood, she began calling herself Betty. That name stuck for a long time. When I met her, she was calling herself Elizabeth.

You may have heard of her. She was made a little bit famous by a kook named Archie Francis in the 1970's. He wrote a poem that was published by the Arlington Herald about a story his mother had told him as a child. The poem was part of the newspaper's *Spooktober Spectacular*, dedicated to the tricks in *Trick or Treat*. Here is the poem:

This is the story of Apple Brown Betty
The demon of Arlington Heights.
She steals children's souls
Then their parents consoles
With the practice of ancient dark rites.

She slips inside under the doorway,
Into a child's soul she does creep.
The children she finds
Are the ones who don't mind
A light burning away while they sleep.

The light does not help her to find you
In the dark of the suburban night.
She can see you just fine
Where no light at all shines
Just by smelling your deep seated frights.

To return home, however, is different.
No smell outside calls from your shores.
If she's ever to leave,
Your soul stitched to her sleeve,
She must see her way out through your pores.

The darkness inside you is brutal.
No exit from you can she see.
If not for the sight
Of your lonely night light,
Lost forever inside you she'd be.

She cannot creep out in the daylight,
For the sunlight her body destroys,

Nor can she escape
If your mind be awake,
So distracted gets she by the noise.

When she comes to a room that is darkened,
She knows that escape cannot be.
She comes not so near
Out of deep seated fear
That she never again will be free.

So keep your lights off my dear children,
Though the night be as black as a coal.
Keep the darkness about
And your nightlight well out,
Lest Old Betty escape with your soul.

Remember it? Ok, probably not. It was an obscure poem in an obscure newspaper in an obscure suburban town, which is a way of saying it was *something you are unlikely to know about*. Perhaps instead of saying Elizabeth Apple was a little bit famous, I should have said she was mostly, but not entirely, *unfamous*. If like Archie Francis, however, your parents ever told you to "turn off that nightlight in your bedroom, or Apple Brown Betty will steal your soul," then, unlike me, you probably have long known something of her story.

Elizabeth Apple doesn't feast off the souls of children. She did once, but that is behind her now, a phrase which here means *she doesn't do that anymore*, but suggests something in the background, looking over her shoulder. Today she feeds herself on the more delicate flavors of grownup souls. Delicate flavors are those which all children and some grownups say they don't like, but change their minds about later. Flavors like mushrooms, cilantro,

and beer. This story is about why her tastes changed, as much as it is about anything.

It is not a pretty story.

The story does have a moral. It would not be a children's story without one. As this children's story is not for children, however, the moral is not appropriate, which means *something most people think is no good*, for children. It is an adult moral. An ugly moral. A moral we wish were not true, but which cannot be denied except by argumentative internet trolls itching for a fight, and whom nobody of moderate intelligence takes very seriously anyway.

But we get ahead of ourselves. A moral comes at the end of the story, and we are not yet at the beginning.

Once upon a time, there were two sisters. I say *once upon a time* because, although it happened a long time ago, it didn't really have to. It could have happened a short time ago, or even in the future. This is, like many children's stories, a cautionary tale, and it is important that such a tale breathe down our necks, remind us that it might also be our own story if we do not take care. Although the story begins a long time ago, then, we shall remind ourselves of its dangers by placing it *anywhen*, or better said, *once upon a time*.

These sisters, demons both, were close as close could be. They ate together, played together, they even shared a bed together, at least as children. When one fell down, the other was there to lift her up. When one fell sick, the other was there by her side. When one was praised, she put her arms around the other as if to say, "Not me, but *we two*." They were the best of friends, as all sisters should be. As *you* should be with *your* sister. Well, perhaps you were, once upon a time.

This.

Betty and Rain were fairly mischievous girls, which is not entirely inappropriate for young demons. I'm admittedly a little unclear as to much of the details, but it is fair to say they spent much of their time in their own world's version of ding-dong-ditch, prank phone calls, and throwing snowballs at cars. There are times when Elizabeth, as she now calls herself, tries to share her world with me, but we always come back to analogs and similes, approximations of her experiences she hopes I can understand.

For example, "It's like, y'know, when one of your children climbs up a tree and has trouble getting down? It's like that, except, like, rounder, and moving, and browner, and, like, I don't know, sort of...colder, I guess?"

Needless to say, I spend a lot of time nodding and pretending I understand, though sometimes I get close.

From what I have come to understand, the sisters had a tendency to get into a little trouble. A little, but not a lot. For example:

At an age when they should have known better, they were playing a game that was, as far as I can tell, something like standing in the dark on two sides of a road, pretending to hold a rope. When cars would come by, they would stand until the car slowed down to avoid hitting the rope the driver could not quite see. When the car slowed down, or even stopped, the girls would run away laughing. At least, that is the game *I* played when *I* was a child. Elizabeth described it as similar, but, "Y'know, with more fever, and little saltier. Sort of, like, *muddy*, I guess?"

Regardless, which here means, *forget I said that - it really wasn't that important*, they were playing this game they shouldn't have been, this game that was *meant* to be mischievous, but that wasn't really hurting anybody. Like us, however, demons too can show their worser selves on their worser days, which is to say *sometimes they can be jerks*. After several victims had shrugged off the girls'

prank, and the girls had the time of their lives running away and laughing, one such jerk made their lives more difficult.

The jerk stopped his car, so to speak, got out, and ran into the night chasing the girls. While the girls, like most children, were more wily, the driver, like most adults, had longer legs. Soon enough, the jerk caught up with one of the girls and held her fast by the wrist. As Betty struggled against the jerk, did her best to avoid being dragged back to the scene of the crime, she watched in horror as her sister, her best and most loyal friend in all the worlds, ran away. It wasn't really betrayal, Betty thought, for what good would it do her if Rain were caught as well? In that moment, Betty promised herself that she would never give up her sister, which here means, *tell on her*.

By the time the jerk had successfully dragged Betty back to the scene of the crime, however, Rain was there waiting, with the jerk's car keys in her hand.

"Let go of my sister or I'll throw the keys as far as I can."

The jerk made some grumbles as he dragged Betty toward Rain. Fearless, Rain wound up her arm, preparing to throw the car keys into the dark shadows of the trees. Violently, the jerk shook Betty free and said something profane, which is a way of saying *he used naughty words*, and put his hand out for the keys. Rain tossed them beyond the jerk and ran away a second time, this time hand in hand with her sister.

All this is to say, to *show*, that these little demons were inseparable besties, troublemakers, true, but loyal to each other in the extreme.

Alright. Perhaps that is a little bit *before* the beginning of the story. More like *before the story begins*. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that *once upon a time*, there were two sisters, as close as close could be. At the time our story properly begins, the sisters

were something like fifteen years old. I say *something like* because to give you their actual age would not only be ungentlemanly, but also misleading. It is not unusual for a demon to live well into their eight hundreds. With such a long life ahead of them, they do not rush, as we do, headlong into adulthood. More wise than we, they take their time, basking in childhood for well over a century, a practice we would do well to consider.

When I say the girls were something like fifteen years old, then, I mean they were at an age where they were beginning to feel grown up, but still appropriately frightened at the prospect. Or, put another way, they were certain that they knew much, but not yet confident that they knew all. That special confidence is reserved for the age of *something like* seventeen, an age which, due to their impending adventures, our sisters were destined to reach disappointingly early.

At something like the age of fifteen, then, our sisters still had a penchant for sweets, which is a way of saying *they liked their desserts more than their vegetables*, and sought them out as a matter of course. When we are children, we may love our sweets, but we still have to eat what our parents tell us to. When we begin to discover our adulthood, however, no longer fearing to slam doors before our parents, there is little to keep us from eating nothing but pizza and cake. So it was with Betty and Rain. They would flit from one child to another, nibbling away at the sugary sweet and crispy edges of souls still filled with innocence.

For Betty and Rain, each day was a party, each party filled with treats, and no reckoning the day after. I don't suppose I need to tell *you* what I mean by reckoning, unless you are a naughty child who has picked up this book without your parent's permission. If so, put it down right now and tell your parents how sorry you are. If your parents *did* give you permission, put the book down right now and tell them I said they are very naughty parents.

For the rest of you, it is enough to say Betty and Rain were teenagers who liked to sleep in the day and party at night. Life was good.

On a hot summer night, Elizabeth Apple took a terrible wrong turn. I don't mean to say that she was following some sort of map and turned left when she should have turned right, although she did that too. What I mean to say is that she made a choice which seemed perfectly normal at the time, but which would ruin her life for years to come. That turn, what we will call a *metaphorical* turn, came in the form of a nighttime visit to a young girl with the unfortunate name of Estuary Alabama.

Estuary had long been warned of the dangers of soul demons. At the age of twelve, the warnings were well engraved upon her mind, which is another metaphor suggesting the warnings *could not easily be forgotten*. The first warning had come six years before.

Like most children, Estuary was afraid of the dark, of monsters and other dangers lurking in her closet and under her bed. At the age of six, upon learning that her new kindergarten friends slept with nightlights, I'm sorry to say that little Estuary Alabama threw a tantrum. I don't think I need to tell you what *that* means. No matter how hard she screamed and cried and pounded her fists, however, her mother would not relent.

Quietly, with love and with tenderness, the mother ran her fingers through her daughter's hair until the girl calmed down. When Estuary was sufficiently settled, her mother told the story that would stay with her for the rest of her life. It was the story of a young and hungry demon that traveled the night, flying from house to house in search of the tasty morsels contained within innocent children's souls.

This demon fears the day, Estuary's mother told her, and waits until the sun has fully disappeared before making her nightly visits. She smells out an innocent child, slips into her body, and

nibbles off the delicious soul bits she finds within. The souls of children are particularly attractive to her, Estuary's mother told her, because they still have the delicious flavors of innocence. They taste like delicious sweets.

Like a Twinkie.

The soul, however, is well hidden inside the body. It is easy enough to find by way of the delicious scents it puts out, the way you always seem to know when your mother has baked cookies, even if you can't see them. Once the demon has eaten her cookies, though, finding her way back again is not as easily done.

When she is sated, which here meant *she is no longer hungry*, the demon searches about for a way out so she might begin to make her way home, satisfied with the night's meal. It is the night-light, the small beacon of light standing out in the darkness, bright enough to be found, but not so bright as to fully take the darkness away, that guides her out of the child's body. She can sense not only the light, but spirit the light exudes, which here meant *sends out of itself*, a sort of fishing line between it and the child's soul. This young and no longer hungry demon follows the line out of the body and makes her way home with the tasty morsels of innocence forever stolen, now warming her own demon body.

The lesson of the story was this: the soul demon fears being lost, and will never follow the smell of a child's soul, no matter how delicious, no matter how inviting, unless she knows she can find her way out again. If a child's room is almost, but not quite dark, if a nightlight forms a beacon by which she might find her way home, she fears not the dark maze of the soul. If a room be without a nightlight, however, she will never enter, for fear she will stay lost forever.

Such was the story Jessica Alabama told to her daughter, a story that put so much fear into the young child that Estuary never again asked for a nightlight. Well, *almost* never.

A few weeks before our story begins, at the age of eleven, Estuary Alabama was invited to a party. It was to be a boy-girl party, which at that time meant a party full of kissing games, after which the boys would go home and the girls would stay up all night talking. Estuary had been to plenty of slumber parties, but this was to be her first boy-girl party. She was afraid, not only because she had never kissed a boy, but also because she thought she might be the only girl at the party who hadn't. She felt like a child among big kids, and wanted more than anything to be more grown up so she could fit in better.

It was in such a state that Estuary devised a plan. She would invite the demon into her body and freely give to her some taste of the innocence that was keeping her from adulthood. If the soul demon stole away childhoods, it would be she that Estuary would beckon to her room. She needed only the beacon.

Two nights before the party, Estuary furtively walked to a hardware store. Furtively is a word meant to show she was *sneaking because she knew she was wrong*, for, bold as she was, she was afraid she would get in trouble were her mother to discover her transgression, which is sort of like a *crime* the police don't care about. Her transgression was to purchase a nightlight with money from her piggy bank. That night, she would turn it on so the young and hungry demon might come into her room as she slept and make her a grownup.

It worked.

Perhaps a little too well.

The night had begun well enough for the two sisters. Waking with the sunset, they had wandered about, letting their hunger grow as they sought the perfect meal. After enjoying the scents creeping upon them, they finally settled on a small farmhouse in southern Indiana. Upstairs, two boys, ten and eight, shared a

room. Comfortable in the glow of the nightlight, Betty slipped into the ten year old. Though his soul had already lost some of its tasty outer sheen, her hunger caused it to taste more delicious than it had any right to. It was a good find. The boy was already playing with matches and would try his first cigarette before the year was out.

It is well known that as a boy grows into a teenager, his soul becomes by turns savory and bitter. That is, what was once the flavor of a piece of soft caramel wrapped in milk chocolate changes over time into something that has, perhaps, a bit of salty pretzel inside, then possibly a darker chocolate along the edges, soon enough becoming something without chocolate altogether, maybe some roasted garlic with sweetly grilled onions. Before long, he might taste like bleu cheese and kalamata olives, washed down with a dry red wine.

How such changes happen, how it is that a sweet soul turns to a bitter one, or salty one, or spicy one, is less well known, but hardly a secret. To understand, perhaps it is best to imagine the boy as a thief. As a baby, he may fight for one more taste of his mother's breast as she attempts to wean him. At that time, his soul is as sweet as mother's milk. Later, he steals from the cookie jar, and his soul's flavor has changed to include the bitterness of the semi-sweet chocolate chips buried within. When he takes one more slice of pizza than he ought, the flavor has turned salty and greasy like the pepperoni sliding down his throat. The loose change stolen from his father's dresser adds a bitter and metallic taste. By the time he has stolen his first heart, the sweetness is gone altogether, his soul the flavor of the salty sweat mixed with perfume that he licks from his teenage lover's neck.

Betty wandered the dark edges of the boy's soul, looking for the tastiest morsels she could find, careful not to fill herself up. It was, she knew, just the first taste of the night, and she would be

foolish not to leave room for the better tastes to come. The ten year old was somewhere in the world of a ginger snap. Still sweet, but tinged with a spice that was just beginning to hide the treasure within. Before long, he would taste like the bag of potato chips hiding next to his bed. Interesting, perhaps, but not exactly the treat Betty was looking for.

Across the room, her sister found a different feast. This boy's soul was a crème brûlée, which is a creamy pudding with the thinnest layer of crispy crackly caramelly sugar on top, so that, even though it is mostly pudding, you always get a little piece of candy with every bite. Some crème brûlées are sort of *adult* in their flavors, but this one, this delicious edging of eight year old soul, was simple sweet vanilla. Just what Rain had been craving.

Whether the girls were equally full and happy and, well, *sated*, by their victims, I cannot say. What I *can* say is that they each reached that moment where, for better or ill, you put down your fork and knife, smile, and begin to look back at the meal in which you have just indulged, rather than forward toward one more bite. A stomach, after all, need not be full for the mind to feel complete.

Their courses finished, the girls each followed the guiding call of the nightlight, turning here and there, from dark shadows to lighter ones, until they found their respective exits and sat themselves down upon the toy box in the cluttered corner.

The two sat upon the box, chatting about their meals, almost as we grownups will talk about the weather. *It really is a beautiful day isn't it? I know, right? Just perfect. My favorite kind of day. Yeah. Last week though, last week was hot. Oh yes, this is so much better.* And so on.

After another short moment sitting on the toy box, observing the boys, their thoughts turned more philosophic. They wondered out loud what might become of them, how long their souls might retain such flavor, whether the younger one would taste like the

older one in a couple of years. How long the older one might stave off the inevitable bitterness. Laughing at their silly thoughts, they whisked themselves away to enjoy the night.

They tore themselves through cities, towns, and villages across the Midwest, savoring the scents of innocent souls wafting through the night, stopping here and there for different courses, comparing their finds, sometimes even visiting the same souls, though never, never at the same time. Near the end of the night, two sated demons on the downward slope toward sleep wondered if they had room for just one more snack.

A dessert, however, hardly needs a dessert, and, much like the rest of us, their feasting had brought about a drowsiness that beckoned them toward home. In a familiar village they had visited many times, they perched themselves in an old oak for a short rest. Much in the way you love to lay in your hammock, with the sun shining above and the roof of your porch providing just enough shade, Betty and Rain smiled as they breathed in the darkness of the surrounding night and settled in for a short nap.

This.

As Rain nibbled on a little white lie told by a young girl old enough to know better, and Betty licked her fingers from a swift kick to an innocent dog, a more seasoned demon was nearby, dining on an angry and drunken punch to the face.

Ben Lowell was a piece of work. When he wasn't angry at work, he was angry somewhere else. He was an electrician by trade and had worked at his current job for a record three years. How he stuck around that long was a mystery. Maybe his boss was as angry a man as Ben was. Maybe the two of them just liked hating the clients together. Maybe Ben hadn't yet *crossed the line*. I can't really say for sure. What I can say is that Ben had lost more jobs than a

family man ought to, usually because he couldn't hold his tongue, and wasn't long for the one he currently held.

The day before a seasoned demon trimmed up his soul, Ben was working on job that was, in his words, "Designed *by* idiots, *for* idiots." The architects had required various approaches that they believed would make the building more beautiful and last longer. Ben, of course, disagreed. It was just a lot of wasted work for nothing. Extra time. Extra money. Extra pain in the ass.

After three days of complaining throughout the day, he finally got dressed down, which is a way of saying, *he got yelled at by his boss for being a jerk*. Determined to quit before the week was out, feeling like he needed to cool off, Ben stopped off for a few beers before heading home. The beers only heated him up, however, and even though he was no longer angry at work, he was now angry somewhere else. He picked a few political fights with the idiots at the bar, and they took the bait long enough for voices to rise to shouts. Those guys were weenies, though, and wouldn't stand for a real fight.

By the time he got home, he was wound up and ready to let loose. He wasn't angry at work anymore, and he wasn't angry at the bar. He was angry somewhere else. Or, as his wife might have said, *somewheres else*. It didn't take much.

She only asked him what had taken him so long.

He told her to shut up.

And he punched his anger into her face.

The last time, he had promised her it would never happen again. The last time, she almost walked out. Almost. The last time, he wished he hadn't done it, and swore to himself he would be a changed man. That last time, she had believed him.

This time, she walked out the door.

By the time the seasoned demon found him deep in a drunken sleep, the swelling rising over his wife's right eye as she

slept on her sister's couch across town was mimicked by a rising growth along an old garden wall in the angry man's soul.

The seasoned demon had always been fond of fresh sins in old gardens. Unlike many of his brethren, he preferred the sins before they had lain festering for years. He liked them when they still felt like nausea turning in the stomach. When the regret was still new enough to make one think they could undo the damage. When it was still fresh enough to lead to banging a head against a wall. Not figuratively, which means *the feeling you might get if you banged your head against a wall*, but literally, as in something that makes you so angry at yourself, and careless of yourself the same time, that you *actually bang your head into a wall, again and again, until the either the pain or the physical damage drops you to the floor*. Add to that a sin so oft repeated that the phrase *you should have known better* hardly does it justice, and you had a recipe for this particular demon's favorite meal.

This seasoned demon of discerning taste, upon discovering a meal perfectly suited to his taste, dined patiently and comprehensively, which means *he finished everything on his plate*. By the time he left that particular dining establishment, the angry, drunken, and sleeping man lay peaceful in the ablution of his sins.

In the morning, Ben Lowell made his way to work, not sorry for what he had done the night before, but feeling, instead, reconciled. He felt the way *you* feel when you finally forgive yourself for something terrible you've done, something that has bothered you for years, something your friends keep telling you that you need to *put behind you*, something that ought to be *water under the bridge*. Ben Lowell felt the way you feel when you've earned forgiveness through time, except that he hadn't put in the time.

She came back soon enough, and he wasn't sorry.

Well, as I said, this children's story isn't for children.

My own naps can last from minutes to hours, and without a clock it can be difficult to know just how long I have been separated from the world. The same was true for Betty who, woken up by a pleasing scent wafting over her, was unsure just how long she had been sleeping. The scent was familiar, an old friend she had known for many years but could never quite get close to. Wistfully, she turned her eyes toward the usually dark window, wondering if she would ever have the experience to dive in without the comfort of the nightlight to guide her home.

Betty stretched and drew herself toward the window. The curtains, as usual, were closed, such that Betty would have to slip inside of the room to see her prey. She knew what she would find there: A girl, not so young as she used to be, lying in darkness, the seductive smell of innocence, now waning, filling the room and drawing the demon toward a midnight snack. Though Betty was young, however, she was no fool. Without a nightlight to guide her home, without the skills of riding the drafts like the more seasoned demons, she would surely be stuck inside the child forever. No scent, no snack, no unsated desire was worth that.

She looked down at her sister, sleeping on the branch below. Tossing a couple of twigs at her, she nudged her awake.

"Rain, c'mere. I want to check this out."

Rain rolled over, such as she could, in the universal language of *just five more minutes*, and crunched her eyes tight. Betty sighed and looked back at the room, the scent drawing her further awake.

Knowing better, but finding the temptation difficult to resist, Betty slipped into the bedroom to watch Estuary sleep. She would just take a peek as her sister stretched out her *five more minutes*. Once inside, however, her heart leapt at the warm glow of the nightlight, newly hung on the girl's wall. It had happened at last, and not a moment too soon. Already the growing girl's soul was

likely getting a little stale. Still, there is nothing like smelling the treat you have denied yourself for years, even if it's just been dropped on the sidewalk. Betty could almost taste it from across the room.

Betty thought about waking her sister in earnest, and then thought better of it. Just loud enough to be heard, she said, "Fine, whatever. Sleep all night if you want. I'm going in for a snack."

Rain crunched herself up and mumbled, not yet allowing herself to wake. Rolling her eyes at her lazy sister, Betty followed the scent she had dreamed of for so long. With one last glance to the window beyond which her sister slept, she slowly insinuated herself into her prey, which is a way of saying *became part of*, and settled in to the deep reaches of Estuary Alabama's soul.

At an age when I should have known better, I quit my job. My reason, perhaps, wasn't good, though possibly good enough. A brief conversation with my sometime girlfriend had filled me with the spirit of adventure. The two of us were to quit our summer jobs, hop in my car, and drive together to the mythical land of California. Afraid for what my boss would say, but emboldened by the beckoning adventure, I dared to face my boss and give him the bad news.

He was disappointed to say the least. I was letting him down. I was letting the team down. I would not be easy to replace, not because I was special, or particularly good at my job, but because I was a warm body where warm bodies were scarce. The rest of my team would have to pick up the slack. Everyone would have to work harder because of me. Because of my thoughtlessness. Because of my carelessness. Because of my...he actually said *coward-ice*.

Head down, embarrassed by my failure to see the job through until fall, I nodded my head sheepishly, just waiting for the well

deserved berating to end, so that I might at last exit his stuffy office and pack my bags. I felt guilty and ashamed, but at the same time I felt as if those feelings were merely the price for making the bold move others would never dare to. As he called me a coward, I thought rather that it took a courage he could not understand to face his harsh words, to stand there and take my punishment, to *earn* my coming adventure.

My girlfriend, of course, did not quit her job. The thought had been no more than that. A flight of fancy, so to speak, though disappointingly without the actual flight. I was left in our small summer community, one still wanting of warm bodies, unemployed, about to lose my room and board, and not at all sure that I wanted to leave it to seek adventure alone.

I stewed for about four days, my thoughts ranging from flight to fear, from courage to capitulation, from foolishness to worthlessness. For four days, I wondered if anyone would miss me if I just picked up, left, and started a new life. If I disappeared altogether. For four days, I thought about my life, about my girlfriend, about my courage, about my pride. And as the days wore on, I felt a little less worse. A little less shame. A little more ready to take my lumps and get back to work.

When I went back to my boss, tail between my legs, to ask for my job back, he was kind. He took me for a walk among the trees, to a favorite spot of his where a bridge overlooked a small stream. As we listened to the water roll over the rocks, we hardly looked at each other, instead choosing to watch the water flow beneath us.

He was grateful to have the warm body, but also seemed to understand how we all make mistakes, how we all do things we wish we had not, and that sometimes we deserve a second chance. He told me he had made mistakes in his own life, some of which still pained him to this day. That his proudest moments were those times when he dared to give in, to do the right thing. I told him I

was embarrassed by my actions, and that I would not let him down again. I had learned my lesson. If a man cannot keep his word, I confessed, what kind of man is he?

My boss laughed to himself and told me not to worry about it. The last few days had been tough, but nobody had died, and everyone would be glad to have me back. He told me to report back in the morning and all would be forgiven. The incident was, he said, *water under the bridge*.

Nice phrase, that.

It is meant to say *forget about it*. It is meant to say that all things pass, that, like the water under the bridge, your stupid mistake has come and gone, that there is as little hope of undoing it as there is retrieving the water that has already passed beneath your feet. Yet, unlike the flowing water, your sins do not just float away. They bubble and fester along the walls of your soul. They break open canyons and birth mountains. They form themselves into the architecture of your soul, only to be worn down by the erosion of time and the capricious appetites of demons.

Bolek Boros, an old teacher of the Apple sisters, once said, "*A soul of regular shape is not a soul that is worth your time.*" He was speaking poetically, for no soul is of regular shape. They twist and turn, have long spiral curves and sharp angles, twist in upon themselves and blossom inward and outward into new shapes encompassing the old. They stretch on for unfathomable distances, and break off into bubbles and pebbles too small to see from within. Each thought we have, each action we take, each moment we live carves itself into the whole, or pulls out a piece to stretch in a new direction, or puffs up an edge until it bursts into bubbles into flower. Each breath takes a shape, each word forms an impression. Even the near perfect sphere of a newborn babe is lopsided and queer.

If this children's story was for children, I might say that our souls lose their interest as we become staid and boring adults. I might say that the joyful twists and turns of our childhood souls morph into perfect cubes as we trade our imaginations for paychecks and our apple juice for coffee. I might say that as we become boring on the outside, so too do we become boring on the inside. If this children's story was for children, I might say something like that. This children's story, however, is not for children, and the soul is not a circle to be squared.

What Bolek Boros was trying to tell little Lizzie and Ray Ray was something they were not yet ready to hear. He was speaking of the simplicity of a child's soul when compared with an adult's. He was warning them away from sweets, and toward the more delicate tastes of adulthood. He was saying that candy gets boring after a while, and the real treasures lie buried deep within the most mature souls. The girls just rolled their eyes. Simple was good. Simple was tasty. Simple was easy.

Some lessons are only learned the hard way.

Inside the body of Estuary Alabama, Betty Apple caressed the edges of her soul, feeling the already complex shapes she found there and wavering over which of the hundreds of openings she should explore. The scent of guilt tickling her spirit, Betty slipped inside a path made by cold rainstorm that had once left Estuary shivering on her walk home from school. The path was dark, the scents were sweet, and Betty felt right at home. Four turns along the serpentine path she found the nibble she was looking for. Bulging out of the slippery wall, a pimple bursting from the otherwise smooth face, was a thought. A memory. Estuary and her school friend had shared an umbrella for the wet walk home. As Estuary reached home, she said goodbye, holding fast to the umbrella and leaving her friend to walk the last block to her own house in the rain.

Estuary hadn't been selfish. Her mother would have been angry had she given the umbrella away. She really had no choice in the matter. She could have invited her friend in to get warm before the last bit home, but that seemed more than a little silly. She only lived a block away, after all, and she had to get home too. It was sad that she didn't have her own umbrella, or even a proper rain coat, but that was not Estuary's fault. Nothing Estuary did was wrong. She did not feel guilty so much as just a little weird. Like something wasn't quite right, though she didn't know what.

The memory was delicious.

Betty sat down with her nosh, taking tiny bites the way you might when you decide to just have *one more cookie*. You're not quite hungry enough to devour it, your stomach is already full, but if you take it in nibbles, maybe you can still enjoy the flavor. It was a moment of quiet contentment for Betty. The slightest hint of a smile crossed her face.

So too did a smile suggest itself on Estuary, still asleep. A burden had been lifted from her soul. A burden can be many things. Sometimes it is a heavy package, awkward to carry and heavy enough to put a pain in your back. Sometimes, it is the care of a pet, or a child, or a parent, someone who you surely love, but who demands you give up other things you love. Sometimes it is the memory of something you have done, something you cannot undo, a regret that does not yet feel like *water under the bridge*. This burden was like that. A memory of feeling bad, maybe a little guilty, maybe wishing she had done something different, though not sure of what. It was a burden she did not fully understand, this is true, but a burden nonetheless. It felt good to be rid of it.

Betty, not tired so much as relaxed, sat in the dark passage and took one more quiet moment to enjoy the taste of the soul she had desired for so long. The night was hardly halfway gone, but she felt sated and ready for bed.

Such was the visit of Elizabeth Apple upon the soul of Estuary Alabama. A short snack that left both of them feeling a little better than they had before. And such was the metaphorical wrong turn young Betty made that would threaten to destroy her life. For, as she sat peacefully beneath the scar she had just left in Estuary's soul, a loud noise from the parents' bedroom woke the child. Fearful that her crime, for it was no less, would be discovered, Estuary rose from her bed and tore the nightlight from her wall.

Just outside the window, Rain opened her eyes to see the night still dark. Stretching and looking about, however, she failed to see her sister. This was not entirely unusual. Many was the night when Rain slept a little too much and her sister ate a little too much. It was one of many little differences between the girls that would change and grow over time. They may have been peas in a pod, but even within the same pod, peas are not identical.

The night was not yet gone, and it would be a lie to say Rain did not have room for another snack. As usual, however, she was loath to stray far from where she had last seen her sister. No doubt Betty was next door, overindulging on the little boy with a penchant for telling false tales to his mother. He was always a favorite of hers, particularly late in the night.

Turning herself about so she could lay on her stomach and see the boy's window across the street, she settled in for what she hoped would be a short wait. A short wait, however, it was not. Two hours in her perch, and no sign of her sister, late night hunger began to get the better of her. Cursing her sister for leaving her to die of boredom, Rain determined to find her own snack, one worthy of her sister's jealousy, and meet her sister either by the way or at home.

Far, but not too far, down the street, she slipped into the window of a toddler. Following the beacon of her nightlight, she dove deep into the tiny soul, searching for treats.

Inside, the soul was still relatively smooth, a growing sphere of mushy walls dotted about with bumps and the occasional crack. In a sphere, it can be difficult to talk about up and down, but on the side opposite from where Rain found herself, one crack seemed to stretch deeper than the rest. Slipping in for a closer look, Rain found her prize: a delicious lump formed some days in the past, now crispy with age but still gooey and sweet within. She lay upon her back, allowing the treat to wash about her mouth before rolling down into her stomach, where it topped off the full belly, taking her just to the edge of too much. A perfect dessert.

This.

Ime Smithson was not a naughty girl. Not by nature, at least. She did as her father asked, most of the time, and aimed to please him in all respects. She was, no doubt, the good little girl that you were at two-going-on-three. Her mother, too, she aimed to please, though late nights at work and increasing amounts of travel had kept her at a distance of late.

Ime's father had been doing his best at bringing about potty training, and Ime had been responding well. He had acquired a small plastic toilet in which Ime could practice *doing her business*, after which he could tell her what a good girl she was before cleaning up the mess. And he *was* proud of her. She was coming along wonderfully.

Like most toddlers, however, Ime was a curious girl. She wanted to touch everything. She wanted to smell everything. And yes, she wanted to taste everything. Because this children's story is not for children, I'm sure you know where this is going. Proud of herself after a big girl poop, Ime put her hand into the little potty to examine her work.

Her father, of course, stopped her right away. Pooping into a potty is very good, but touching your poop is very naughty. He showed her how he cleaned it up, and how when she was a bigger girl, she could go right into the big girl potty.

Several days before Rain visited Ime's mostly innocent soul, Ime used the potty when her father was not in the room to watch. She was about to shout to her daddy about the big poop she had just made, when something stopped her. Maybe she could touch it this one time. Maybe it was ok when he wasn't watching. Maybe she could *get away with it*.

When her father found her, she had stains around her mouth and a delicious lump growing inside a new crack forming in her soul.

Prompted by a brief stirring of the toddler as she slept, Rain rose from her lazy spot and followed the childish beacon out of Ime's soul and back into the night. Her sister still nowhere in sight, Rain made her way home, where Betty was no doubt waiting impatiently.

The moment she felt Estuary wake, Betty knew it was time to go. It was never wise to remain inside a woken child. Their souls grow quickly and change with every waking sensation. It would not take much for the soul to build itself a detour long enough to trap Betty until the next night. A bare foot stepping on a Lego on the girl's way to the bathroom - a teachable moment of what happens when you don't clean up your toys - even an incident as small as that could put up a wall where none had been before, forcing Betty to search for a new exit. If a demon wasn't careful, she could become lost forever.

It was good that Betty moved quickly, though I'm sorry to say she did not move quickly enough. The moment the lamp came crashing down from her father's beside table, Estuary's eyes

popped open. Her first thought upon waking and seeing her illicit, which is a way of saying *illegal*, nightlight filling the room, was not fear of punishment, but rather an immediate sense of guilt for having broken her mother's law. In an instant, she knew that sneaking in the nightlight and hiding it from her mother had been a cowardly act. That thought gave new shape to her soul. Then, as she rose to undo the damage, she knew she was compounding her guilt by trying to hide her crime a second time. *That* thought shaped her soul. I say *in an instant*, because she did not stop to think of these things before determining to tear the nightlight from the wall. She simply rose from bed in terror and flew across the room where, in one moment her hand was on the nightlight, and in the next, the object was clutched inside it. The thoughts of what she had done, of her guilt, happened the way these things always happen, as immediate feelings, painful ones, feelings we don't quite know what to do with, but which suddenly hurt.

In that same instant, the instant between the moment when Estuary opened her eyes and the moment when she pulled the nightlight from the wall, the shape of Estuary's soul changed. Not far from where Elizabeth Apple, troublemaker, scavenger, nibbler of souls, had just risen with purpose from a scar on the wall where she had just nosed on an old memory, a small canyon was cracking its way across her path, still obscured in the distance. It was at this moment that the beacon disappeared altogether, and Elizabeth Apple was thrust into darkness.

Not as panicked as she should have been, Betty walked steadily forward, retracing her steps. She had long been warned of the perils, which here means *dangers of the sort that could kill you*, of getting lost inside a child with no beacon to guide you home. It was the reason she never visited a child without a nightlight glowing. Nevertheless, she was here now, and there was nothing for it but to try and find her way out by memory. Maybe it was the

feeling of the fresh delights in her belly, or the tiredness that comes after eating, or maybe it was just the time of night. Whatever it was, Betty felt confident, even in the face of great jeopardy, that she would soon be wandering the suburban night once again, making her way home with her sister by her side. With a smile on her face and hope in her heart, the optimistic demon Elizabeth Apple walked steadily forward and straight off the new and unexpected cliff into *Nightlight Canyon*.

When she came to, she was lost.

Though Betty and her sister had already seen much of the world and tasted more souls than they could count, they had not yet learned enough to leave the comfort zone of young innocents. She was used to windy corridors, tasty morsels pushing up from the path or along the walls, sometimes sharp stalactites, which are *bits of soul shaped like icicles*, coming down from above after a good spanking. She knew paths could change and new doors open, giving access deeper into the soul. She had seen many in the children she visited regularly. What she had failed to pay attention to in school, however, and certainly never seen alone and in person, were the deep wrenching rips that tore through mature souls.

She had seen plenty of naughty children who did what they knew was wrong, children who lied to their parents, who broke toys on purpose, who cried and whined and stamped their feet when they did not get what they wanted. These things could do plenty of damage to a young soul. They made potholes and wall cracks and obstructions of every shape. In children, though, the size was always contained, which here means *they were small*. A rip the size she now stood within what she would eventually come to call *Nightlight Canyon* was of an entirely different order. This place was not only deep, but seemed to open up passageways to new places previously closed off. It was as if there had been an underground city, like old coal tunnels or an abandoned subway, and

Betty had somehow come crashing down into it. Feeling her way through the darkness, she found six passageways in the first few minutes, each heading in different directions, none with any clue as to whether they would lead her home, or deeper into the cavern of Estuary Alabama's soul.

The comforting beacon of the nightlight was gone altogether.

Turning from one passage to another, Betty felt her optimism wane and her panic wax, which is a fancy way of saying *she went from feeling hopeful to feeling scared*. She turned and turned and turned again, each view worse than the last. With despair on the rise, she felt against the canyon walls to see if she could climb back up, but it was no use. The walls had the slimy freshness of a newborn wall, and it would be weeks before anything like a grip along them would be possible. Frozen with indecision, she sat down on the canyon floor, put her head in her hands, and cried.

Elizabeth Apple would not return home that night.

This.

Bill Stashwick spent a night in jail as a teenager. He had been shoplifting, and though the police were prepared to send this white teenager of some privilege home with his parents, it was already late in the day by the time they were contacted, and his father thought a night in jail might finally teach that troubled teen the lesson he had failed to learn at home.

Bill was sorry for what he had done. He was sorry as he did it, he was sorry when he got caught, and he was sorry as he sat in his lonely suburban jail cell waiting for morning. Feeling sorry and taking your punishment, however, is not the same as forgiving yourself. Later, as he worked off the easy community service hours, the guilt for his sin continued to wax. His sin, of course, was not the theft of petty items from a corporate giant that regularly wrote off losses so large that Bill's thefts could hardly be

considered a rounding error. His real sin, the one adorning the growing cavern in his soul, the thing he knew he shouldn't have done and did anyway, was disappointing his father.

A garden adorning the middle terrace of *Disappointment Cavern* had an array of new buds that must blossom before they could fade, die, rot, and gently fertilize the ground for new sins. Although they might have, at various stages, made a perfect hors d'oeuvre for the right demon, these were destined to fall away on their own, leaving a mark upon Bill Stashwick's soul until he was well into his early thirties. By that time he was able to tell the story without cringing, even in front of his aging father. By that time, it was *water under the bridge*.

Lying in his quiet, clean, and lonely suburban jail cell, the flowers were just beginning to grow, and he could feel them pushing their way up through the surface, taking the nutrients he had done so much to culture, and wasting them on flamboyant displays celebrating his foolishness. The feeling was not entirely unlike nausea, a twisting of the stomach, somewhere between butterflies and bats, the feeling of impending doom that forces itself upon you, a warning that is too late to help: *You shouldn't have done that*.

He didn't sleep. Like that time you lied to your boyfriend about being sick all week, when really you were starting to fall in love with the boy from the drywall crew working on that renovation at your office. Even though you hadn't slept with him yet, he *had* asked you out for a drink, and though you had told him you were busy, you were still *thinking about it*. And there you were, lying next to your boyfriend as he slept with the peace of all sated men, knowing you could only fake it so long, staring at the ceiling, wondering if you would ever sleep again. *That* kind of *didn't sleep*.

Not unlike Bill Stashwick, Betty Apple, too, contemplated the errors of her ways, as she lay awake in her own prison cell. She

had her own version of butterflies or bats in the pit of her stomach. Lying in her prison as a result of her own folly left her, too, in a state of unsleep. The folly was little more than that which you and I have been guilty a thousand times. Being distracted. Procrastinating. *Blowing it off.*

She was old enough to know better. She had been instructed in the ways of adult souls, should have known how to escape without the guiding beacon of the nightlight, maybe even in a soul this young. In class, she had learned of the delicate difference between the sounds inside and outside the soul, the subtle changes a scent made as it crossed the softest barriers, the almost imperceptible cooling of the air as it flowed between worlds, and of course, the soul draft that graced adult souls. She had been quizzed and tested on what her teachers called *the flavors of the edge* that helped one to sniff out a soul draft, though admittedly failed more often than not.

For Betty, those lessons, those tests, were like your visit to the optometrist. Which one is better, A or B? *Is A better, is B better, or are they about the same?* Betty often answered they way you do. *I don't know. About the same, I guess? Maybe B?* With practice, she would have become more discerning. With practice, she *did* become more discerning. Quality practice, however, requires some instruction, some mentorship, something she would not find in the lonely caverns of Estuary Alabama's soul.

She should have developed her tastes beforehand, worked to become more discerning of her senses. Alas, the work had been hard, and her interest low. What cared she for navigating adult souls? Their tastes were boring and ugly, not at all the glorious sweetness of youth and innocence. As long as she had a nightlight to guide her home, what did it matter how one navigates without one?

What did it matter, indeed.

Lying in her prison cell, surrounded by what seemed impenetrable walls, tears on her face and shame in her heart, she stared at the wall above her, cringing at every sound, every movement, every growth and change about her, and waited, devastated with fear, for evening, and the inevitable bedtime of Estuary Alabama.

Rain was more than a little angry when she returned home. More than a little. She shouldn't have been. She knew that. It was her own fault, really. Sleeping too long, then wandering off without a proper search for her sister. Really she should have been more worried than angry. An appropriate sisterly worry, perhaps even a motherly worry. Like that time you stayed out too late and your mother was waiting for you in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, and you were grounded for, what was it? A week? A *you-could-have-been-hit-by-a-car-or-kidnapped-or-killed-by-some-serial-killer* kind of worried. But Rain was not. Worried. She was angry.

More than a little.

Stupid Betty was always doing stupid things with her stupid time so she could come back with her stupid stories and who even cared, anyway? It was true, I'm sorry to say. For, although Rain and Betty shared most of their time together, Betty would often push their adventures just past the point that Rain was ready for. If they travelled twenty miles together, and Rain was ready for home, Betty would tell Rain to hold up while she just looked around one last corner. Over one last hill. Rain would wait, and Betty would come back with some story of what she saw, or whom she met. Always one more adventure than Rain. Always one better. Always a story to tell on the way home. Some story Betty could use to shame her sister for not going far enough. For not daring.

Rain would sometimes wonder if the stories were true.

Rain slammed her door. *You know what? Fine. I'm just going to do my homework alone. And when she asks for help, I'll just tell her to do it herself. Or I'll be asleep. Whatever. Who even cares?*

Rain opened up a sort of book on history, took out her sort of highlighter pen, and sort of marked up the sort of book in places that might be useful to study for next week's sort of test. I say *sort of* because there was no book or highlighter, or even test. Years later, when Betty tried to explain it all to me, she said, "It was sort of like a book, I guess? Or like, maybe kind of those glowing magazine things? Except more, like, growing, and like super slow, like the middle of a tree, maybe? And browner. And then you could sort of just, y'know, like pick parts of stuff and make them more growier, I guess? Like so you could go back later and the growier parts would stick out so you could, sort of remember them, sort of. Does that make any sense?"

As usual, I lied, and told her it did.

Well, let's just call it a book.

Rain dove into her homework with false abandon, which means *she pretended that she cared about her homework so much that she couldn't think of anything else*. The problem, of course, was that she *could* think of anything else. Or one thing in particular, perhaps. She would read the same passage three times before throwing the book against her wall, fetching it, and trying again.

After a particularly loud book toss, the noise was enough to bring her mother to the door.

"Honey? Is everything ok?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"I am!"

"What's wrong, honey?"

"I'm fine!"

"Ok...well...don't forget your homework."

"Gods! I'm doing it right now. Just leave me alone!"

Rain's mother turned from the door with a pain in her heart not easy to mend. She did not cry, but she was close. It is a trying experience for a parent to be told they are not wanted, not needed. It is a wound easily healed with an *I'm sorry* and a hug, medicines easily procured but slow to be delivered. This would be a good time to feel sorry for that time you slammed the door on your father and screamed something like, "*Don't tell me how to live my life!*"

Rain was angry because she had slept too long. Because she had left without her sister. Because her sister had left without her. Because her sister was not afraid of having adventures alone. Because she needed her sister more than her sister needed her. Because maybe her sister was getting bored of her. Because maybe she was getting bored of her sister. Because maybe she should tell her mother that Betty wasn't home yet. Because maybe that would be telling on her sister, and maybe that would be mean and disloyal. Because maybe something was wrong and she was ruining everything by *not* telling her mother. Because she was tired and confused and afraid, and yes, because she was worried.

More than a little.

Unable to concentrate on her homework, she fell onto her bed and buried her head in her pillow. Her worry and the too-long nap earlier that evening conspired to keep her from sleeping, and, like her sister now trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, she lay awake most of the day wishing for sleep to take her from this world and give her some rest.

Above, or outside, or without, or whatever word best describes to you the place that was *not* the soul of Estuary Alabama, the girl slept. Her dreams were troubled, but also strangely satisfying. By *troubled*, I mean that her dreams made her feel as if she

were being pursued. I don't mean to say she had some dream where a policeman ran after her, or where she was running from a monster, though she may well have. I'm sorry to say the knowledge of such things is not possible. What we dream is what we feel. Even our own dreams, the ones which we feel that we have lived inside of, are confused messes of feelings with stories that change each time we tell them. No. If there were stories to Estuary's dreams that night, they are a secret now lost to time. What I mean to say is that inside of her dreams, she *felt* pursued. That is what I mean by *troubled*.

Perhaps the troubling feelings of her dreams were born of the guilt she felt from breaking her mother's law. Perhaps they were caused by her failure to confess. Perhaps they came from her growing fear of the coming party. The *boy-girl* party. I suspect it was a little of each. Guilt and fear often trouble our dreams, all the more so when we understand them as little as the twelve-year old girl sleeping in the dark.

Her dreams, as I have already said, were not *only* troubling. By *strangely satisfying*, I mean that, by the time she woke, she felt as if her dreams had finished. Have you ever woken from a dream and felt that the moment before waking you were still falling, or still lost, or still being chased, or still naked, or, well, whatever troubles your own dreams? By *strangely satisfying*, I mean she did not feel like that. She felt, rather, as if she had landed, or gotten away, or found her clothes or her way home, or, well, finished whatever it was she was dreaming about. Like that time you were dreaming that you couldn't find your front door, and then, just as you found the door, just as you put your hand on the doorknob and opened it up to feel the fresh air coming in, before the dream could twist to show that you were only in some mazy courtyard, you woke up, feeling for the rest of the morning as if you had achieved the

impossible. She felt fear, yes, but also a sense of conquering that fear. At least a little bit.

Maybe the feeling came from having shown a little bit of courage in daring to break her mother's law, however briefly. Maybe it came from the thought that her plan might have worked, that she was a little more grown-up, just in time for the party. Maybe it was from the lingering feeling of calm from Betty's snack, of finally losing the not-quite guilt over the umbrella incident, now in the forgotten past. I suspect it was a little of each. Small victories can bless our dreams just as our fears can bother them, all the more so when we are too young to understand them.

When Estuary Alabama awoke, then, she was filled with a mixture of feelings, some of which gave her the confidence that comes with courage, and others which filled her stomach with the butterflies of fear. She immediately checked her school backpack and found that the nightlight was properly hidden within. Part of her intended to throw it away when she got to school. Part of her intended to try again soon. I cannot say which part was stronger. I don't think she knew herself.

Conversation with her mother over breakfast, however, cemented the decision. I could just say that she *decided*, I suppose, but there is something about cement that I like a little better. Once something is stuck in cement, it is almost impossible to get out. It is frozen inside forever, or at least until some archeologist from the future carefully breaks away the pieces around it to rediscover the past. Estuary's decision was like that, frozen inside cement for what was likely to be forever.

The conversation almost didn't happen at all. Her mother was more quiet than usual, looking as if something was on her mind and a little afraid to speak about it. She was making herself coffee as Estuary slowly worked through a bowl of cereal. The girl was in her head, thinking about the coming party, imagining all

the ways she might make a fool of herself, and taunted by images of the nightlight in every corner. She would imagine herself being led into a closet with a boy, comforted by the safety of the darkness, only to see the tiny space lit up with her nightlight, exposing her panic. It was a confused mess of fear and excitement, what we might call *anxious*, a feeling she didn't really understand.

When her mother spoke, Estuary failed to notice that she, too, looked anxious.

"Rough night last night?"

"Huh?"

"I just...I mean...I...are you ok?"

"Um...sure, yeah, I guess. Um, why?"

"Well, I...last night I...after...well, I just, last night, I checked on you, and you seemed like maybe you were having a bad dream."

Estuary stiffened.

"Um, no, I don't think so. Not that I remember."

"Oh. Ok."

Estuary could feel her heart beating faster and hoped it didn't show. She tried to sound casual, but didn't really know how. "When, um, when did you, um, y'know, check in?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I guess you are getting a little too old for...I just...it was...I don't know...pretty late I guess."

"Oh."

"I...I woke up and couldn't get...back to sleep, so I, well, just stopped by to see how you were doing. You were tossing in bed and I thought...I was just a little worried, that's all."

"I'm fine."

"I probably shouldn't come in when your door is closed. I guess you're not a little girl anymore."

It was Estuary's chance. Her shot at making sure she wouldn't get caught with a nightlight on her wall. All she had to do was say something like, "Yeah. That would be great." That was all she

needed to say. It was what she wanted to say. What she *did* say, however, was, "That's ok, Mom. No big deal."

Those were the words that became frozen in cement. The words that sealed the fate of Elizabeth Apple, still trapped inside of her. The words that caused Estuary Alabama, later that day, to throw the nightlight into a dumpster on her way to school and promise herself never to try and trick her mother again.

Maybe she said them because she thought she was supposed to, because saying anything else would have been suspicious. Maybe she was still trying not to get caught, still lying. Or maybe she really was repentant, and wished more than anything that she had never committed the crime to begin with. Maybe it was her way of confessing, of saying she was sorry, of redeeming herself.

Whatever the reasons were, the result was the same. She now not only had reason to fear that her mother might come into her room at any time of the night, but had invited her to do so. Any hope of putting the nightlight back was now crushed forever.

It is a common misconception, which means, *most people believe it even though it isn't true*, that demons sit upon our left shoulders, debating our decisions with the angels upon our right. Disappointing though it may be, I'm sorry to say that demons do not advise us as we hesitate over our impending sins. While we are awake they sleep. While we plot and plan and fight with our conscience, they dream away the day, looking forward to the coming night's feast. Though demons be sleeping, our sins yet thrive.

For it is *we* who feed *them*.

If they encourage us to sow the seeds that they later harvest, it is only by giving us fresh and fertile land on which to plant. By harvesting our sins, they make it easier to sin again, to plant an even greater crop, for an even greater harvest.

Well, circle of life and all that.

This.

Three weeks before Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, Doug Krimbal cheated a grocery clerk. He had stopped in to pick up a hot lunch from the deli counter. The clerk was just a high school girl, still relatively new to the job. It was not an unusual situation. Most of the clerks in that store were high school or college kids, students who might stick around, at most, for a couple of years. Training was common and experience rare. While this particular high school kid was no longer technically training, she was still fairly green.

Krimbal, a fine looking stud with a t-shirt just tight enough to make the clerk a little dreamy, paid in cash. A little flustered from a quiet passion stirring inside her, and more uncomfortable with the cash register than she should have been, she gave him the wrong change, leaving him with \$13.46 in change for a \$10.00 bill.

Krimbal told himself it was his lucky day, winked at the cashier, and walked off with his winnings. The cashier had seen him before, with his girlfriend, but that didn't stop her from spending the rest of the day, well, maybe a couple of days, dreaming about the hot guy with the hot lunch, hoping she might serve him again, maybe talk to him this time. When Krimbal did return, however, he avoided eye contact with the young clerk, out of rising shame for his crime. His disinterest broke her heart, but what could he do? Her face reminded him of his sin, of his failure to do the right thing at the right time. When he thought about admitting the sin, returning the money, he became embarrassed. He even conflated his shame for keeping the money with shame for the thoughts of infidelity that plagued him as he thought of the pretty young cashier. By the time he returned a third time, apology, or even acknowledgement, was out of the question. After that, he avoided her register if possible, and soon avoided the store altogether.

The night Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, Doug Krimbal was visited by a demon. The ten dollar seed had blossomed into a flowering garden full of flavors harkening back to Krimbal's childhood, an array of stolen gifts, blessings he had not deserved, blessings which may well have caused suffering to others even as he reveled in their abundance. The garden was just the buffet this demon was looking for, and he spent the night tasting here and there, eating more than he should, finally leaving little but stems and the odd weed that had grown unattended. Sated, the demon moved on.

The day after Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, Doug Krimbal felt better than he had in years. As his break approached, he thought of the hot lunch at the grocery store that had always given him so much pleasure, and which he hadn't enjoyed for a couple weeks at least. He thought of the *pretty young thing* at the counter, and wondered if she still worked there. He thought of the day ahead, good weather for the concrete pour he had to do, a day full of promise. He did not think of the undeserved ten dollars. That thought was now only an interesting story to tell someday. Little more than *water under the bridge*.

At the store, he smiled at the cashier and made small talk. She fell in love with him all over again. She smiled at him. He smiled back. She handed him the correct change. He let his fingers drift gently upon her open palm as he took it from her without counting. To say the demon was responsible for the torrid love affair that followed, the brutality of the drunken night ten days later when Krimbal threw his girlfriend into a wall after she called him out for cheating, the callousness with which he ignored the cashier when she missed her period, would be, I think, giving the demon a little more credit than he deserved. And yet, who can say what crimes ensue when the burdens of our sins are lifted?

Or this.

Shayna Wilson rarely cleaned up after her dog. She should have. She was an old woman and had walked in dog shit herself no shortage of times over her long life. And yet, unlike you, she was careless in her responsibility of keeping her neighborhood clean. It was not that she felt no shame. She would often see the leavings of her dog, think of cleaning them, feel some sense of embarrassment for failing to do her duty, so to speak, and some small burden as she walked from the evidence, hoping no one had spotted her. Shame she felt, but not for long.

The shame grew in little stalactites from winding tunnels in her soul. Surely you remember stalactites from school. They are the upside down daggers that dangle like icicles in wet caves. They grow by drips that can't quite let go as they cling to the point, growing ever longer and closer to the ground. Shanna Wilson's stalactites, riddling the ceiling of the tunnels, were delicious.

Cornelius Feschenshut, that fastidious old bachelor and demon of some renown visited Ms. Wilson regularly. Though he did not dine solely on these delicate drip formed treats, he did so regularly as his nightly feasting wound down. A predictable but sophisticated digestif to top off his culinary adventures, a little piece of comfort food to edge him gently toward home and a day of pleasant sleep.

The old demon had high standards, and preferred to dine upon only the freshest of sins. If his tastes had been different in his youth, he could not remember. In any case, it mattered not. The sophistication of his dining matched that of himself, born of a demonic lifetime of experience. He may have been set in his ways, but they were, he would argue with anyone who cared to do so, good ways.

As his evenings wound down, sated but looking for that one last something, not dessert so much as port and cigar, he would make his way into the soul of the old widow and seek the complex

of tunnels fuzzy with moss he came to call *Dog Shit Wander*. Inside, he would lick the fresh drippings doing their best to extend the stalactites, savoring the flavors as they spread through his mouth. Flavors from that evening's walk were always sharp and savory. Those from the morning's walk, stewing all day as they rested, swirling about and settling in comfort, were a more subtle flavor. Together, they were a sharpness tempered by a bitterness almost leaning toward sweet. A morning Brie to balance the evening's veiny Roquefort.

The night Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, Cornelius Feschenshut enjoyed his usual digestif. The day after Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, all thoughts of the previous day had been cleansed from the old woman's soul. There was little to keep her from once again walking away from the latest steaming pile of dog shit beckoning to unsuspecting shoes in the morning sun.

And so, as Elizabeth Apple cried herself to sleep in a dark corner of Estuary Alabama's soul, as her sister rolled fitfully in her bed, telling herself she didn't care if Betty ever came home or not, demons across the world nibbled our sins away, numbing the pain of our mistakes that we might make them again, bigger, better, and tastier.

Betty Apple felt a little better after a good cry. It was true that she was still lost and scared, and she had little reason for hope. Still, she had never been caught inside a *wakey* before, and it *was* a bit of an adventure. If the nightlight had been there once, it was bound to show up again. Even if it didn't, there had to be *someway* out. After all, the girl was growing up. Adults didn't use nightlights, and demons visited them all the time. Betty just needed to keep exploring until she found her way out.

It was not as if she was going to go hungry there.

With her heart in her hand, which means *she pretended to be a little braver than she really was*, she set about to explore the canyon. I'm sorry to say she was a little sloppy about it. She went left and right and forward and back and up and down, but she never really kept track of where she had been. Each path she walked had delicious treats along the way, though, so the going was not entirely unpleasant. She covered a lot of the same ground twice, or three times, or four times, but she never really knew it. The canyon seemed to be growing and changing throughout the day, so even paths she had been down four times looked, smelled, and tasted brand new.

Such is the growing soul of a twelve year old girl.

Along the way, Betty ate a little more than was good for her. Not because she was hungry, though I don't suppose I need to tell *you* that. I don't really need to remind you that when *you're* a little scared, or lost, or anxious, or even bored, you sometimes snack a little more than is good for you. That's how it was for Betty. She would drag her hands along the walls, absentmindedly, which is a way of saying *without thinking too much about it*, tasting the morsels bubbling out of them. Some of the morsels were old ones that seemed to have been buried down there for years. Others were fresh from the day Betty had just slept through. Each had a different flavor, though they were generally sweet and satisfying.

There was a two year old glance at a classmate's math homework. The answers Estuary had seen mostly matched her own. For the one that didn't, she checked her own answer twice, just to make sure she was right. She was. She thought about telling the boy about it, to give him a chance to correct it, but she was ashamed from having looked at all, so didn't say anything. It wasn't really against the rules, not like cheating on a test or anything. It was more that it seemed kind of like spying, and spying seemed like something you weren't really supposed to do. The taste was simple

and sweet, like a bit of rock candy, or maybe a gumball. Nothing special, but nice.

There was a two month old lie Estuary had told her mother. It was breakfast, and her mother had asked her if she had made her bed.

"Uh huh."

"Why don't you go upstairs and check."

"Oh. Ok."

When she got upstairs, her bed was exactly as she had left it, a sloppy mess. She quickly made it and went back downstairs. In her mind, she practiced what she would say to her mother. Something like, *"I can't believe I was wrong. I totally thought I'd done it,"* or, *"Sorry, Mom. I guess I was remembering a different day,"* or, *"You were totally right, Mom. It was all messed up. Weird."* When she got back down to the kitchen, however, her mother didn't say anything, and Estuary didn't either. Now, instead of admitting she had lied, or even that her mother had been right, it was kind of like she was lying again. Like she was saying, *"Told you I made my bed. I can't believe you didn't trust me."* The moment weighed heavily upon her soul, with a taste like a salted caramel, just a little toasted, crispy on the outside and tender within.

The freshest of that night was less than a day old. Estuary's best friend Claire had said she had to do some chores on Saturday but that she would probably be done by four if Estuary wanted to go the mall.

"Maybe," Estuary replied, "but I may be too tired after Monica's party."

It was not a lie. It was not meant to hurt. It was, however, meant as a bit of a brag. Scared as she was, she was proud to be invited, felt a little bit popular. She was showing off with Claire, and Claire knew it.

Claire said, "Yeah. Ok."

Estuary said, "Call me though. I'll probably be fine."

Claire said, "Yeah. Ok."

Estuary felt embarrassed and ashamed, and didn't hug Claire when they said goodbye. The taste was unusual for Betty. There was less sweet and more of something she couldn't quite put her finger on, which is sort of like *when you are trying to remember something, but the more you think about it, the further it seems to be away from you*. It was a flavor she knew, she thought, but couldn't quite remember, like something she had smelled but never tasted, somewhere between roasted almond and cinnamon toast, but with something stranger like nutmeg or cloves.

And so she ate.

And ate.

And ate.

By the time Betty fell asleep at the end of her second night, she was still trapped in the canyon, less hope than the night before of finding her way out, and bent over double from the snacks she had stuffed herself with throughout her wandering.

"Oooh," she moaned as she curled up on the ground to sleep. "I ate too much."

If this children's story was for children, I might talk here about how you feel when you do something wrong, and how much better you feel when you say you're sorry. Then I would talk about how different you feel when you *haven't* done anything wrong. I might say there are three ways you can feel when your mother asks if you took a cookie after she specifically told you to save room for dinner:

1. Good, because you admit it, get punished, but then forgiven.
2. Bad, because you lie and get away with it, and feel guilty.
3. Amazing, because you never took the cookie.

This children's story, of course, is *not* for children. In this story, as in real life, it is possible to take the cookie, lie about it, and still feel amazing. Well, possible for grownups, anyway.

Estuary Alabama was not a grown up. She was not even a teenager. She was too young to become callous to, which means to *get so used to something that you stop feeling*, the pain of her sins. A sin is something you do which you think you shouldn't. It is *not*, and this is important to remember, doing things *other people* think you shouldn't. Those things are *vices*. In this story, we don't really care about vices. We do care, however, about sins, and young as she was, Estuary Alabama did have a growing number of those which caused her, like you, pain when she remembered them.

Of course, she didn't *always* remember them. Her sins did not weigh upon her, which means to *bother her*, all of the time. It was more that they were always there, hiding in the back, gently reminding her that she was not *all that*. When something wonderful would happen, when something made her feel grand, some small part of her told her she didn't deserve it. Some small part of her told her she was not perfect. Some small part of her told her she would have to try a little harder if she wanted to *really* be forgiven.

The day of the party, her sins did not bother her at all.

As Apple Brown Betty slept off her gluttony, Estuary Alabama woke up feeling wonderful. Just one of those days. One of those days where you feel as if you could do no wrong, a phrase which can also mean, *could not get caught for doing wrong*. The kind of day where it feels like the sun is shining, even if it isn't. The kind of day that makes you feel not just *lucky*, but that you have earned all the good things in your life, and lots more are coming to you.

Just one of those days.

Over breakfast, she smiled and talked with her mother, hardly noticing that her mother was shaky and awkward and seemed to be hiding something. Estuary just talked away, mostly about the party coming that night and what she would wear, but also about what they might have for dinner, or what movies they might watch on Monica's laser disc player. That her mother failed to ask if her homework was done should have surprised Estuary, but she didn't even think about it. After all, her homework *was* done. Well, *mostly* done, anyway.

When she thought about Claire, whom she would be seeing on the bus, she thought happily about maybe going to the mall with her on Saturday. What a nice weekend it was going to be. When she thought about her social studies homework, she thought she might be able to finish it at lunch. Or during English. If not, she would just turn it in late. She was still a little anxious about the party, about the boys, about the kissing. Today, though, it was more about wondering what would happen, instead of being ashamed for having less *experience* than her friends.

That day, the day after Elizabeth Apple had eaten so much that she could hardly stand up straight, Estuary Alabama felt whole. Estuary Alabama felt innocent. Estuary Alabama felt cleansed of her sins.

This.

Cassius Alabama was not having an affair. The father of Estuary Alabama was not a womanizer, nor was he inclined to be. He had always been a faithful husband and would remain so. Nevertheless, the signs were there. He spent an increasing number of hours *working late*, more nights *out with the boys* than he used to, and seemed less interested, with what little energy remained, in intimacy with his wife. There was no lipstick on his collar, no mysterious message on the answering machine, but a suspicious

woman would not fail to wonder where her increasingly distant husband was really spending his time.

Jessica was suspicious, it was true, but also just sad. She wasn't looking for an excuse to be angry, or to blame her husband for some indiscretion she now felt sure he was engaging in. She just wanted love. Wanted her husband back. Wanted things to be like the old days, when they would hold each other in bed, reveling in each other and the wonderful blessing their life had become. Those days seemed gone forever, now, and she was sure that she was to blame.

She was not.

To blame, that is.

And she was right.

Sort of.

Another woman *was* the trouble, but not in the way she thought. The woman was the wife of Delmar Cartwright, who *was* having an affair, and who was leading Delmar to spend a growing number of nights drinking his troubles away. Delmar's old friends, *the boys* previously referred to, came along for support, and, as a result, found themselves drinking like the teenagers they no longer were.

Cassius did his best to keep up, but he just wasn't young anymore. The hangovers hit harder and lasted longer. His desk work got sloppy, and he found himself having to stay late at work on the nights he wasn't carousing, just to keep up with his normal workload. Between the late nights drinking and late nights at work, it was all he could do at home to stay awake for dinner, let alone engage in the passionate and aggressive lovemaking that had formerly been the joy of his marriage.

If there was a sin to lay heavy upon the soul of Cassius Alabama, it was the drinking. Not that drinking is a sin in itself, but it was adding up. Each hangover filled him with regret. Each late

night at work, while making him feel a little better for getting caught up, twisted his stomach with, *maybe I shouldn't be going out so much*. When he came home late and looked upon his wife, pretending to sleep in the bed he shared with her, he would feel shame at his neglect mixed with the futility of his powerlessness. Like that time you couldn't help your friend move out of their apartment because you promised to go to your mother's friend's daughter's baby shower. You didn't really want to do either, but you also felt like you didn't have a choice.

If Cassius had hosted a more vigilant demon in his soul, he might have exuded the confidence that comes from knowing you are doing everything for other people, from knowing that your motives are unselfish. If such a demon had feasted, or at least snacked, each night on the little bubbles of shame that grew in his soul, maybe he would have looked proud instead of sheepish. If his sin of drinking one more than he should, than he knew was good for him, had been cleansed more promptly, perhaps he would have told his wife about his friend's problems, about his conflict of supporting his friend even as it caused him problems at work and at home. His soul, however, was not well attended, I'm sorry to say.

Old Jack Johnson, an aging demon with the shrinking stomach that comes with age, was losing interest in his old haunts. While he had often visited Cassius in earlier days, he now often found himself talking like you do when you've had a snack too close to dinner and your friends ask you where you want to eat. *I don't know, I'm not actually that hungry, really*. Maybe someone else says the same thing, and you end up just staying in. Or maybe you just get a salad. In any case, you certainly don't feed voraciously upon the ripe bubbles of *maybe-I'm-drinking-a-little-too-much* that used to be one of your favorites.

As a result, Cassius looked sheepish instead of proud, and his wife picked up on that. Jealousy and suspicion followed, leaving

the two of them to avoid each other when they should have been talking to each other.

On the night that Elizabeth Apple became trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, it was a miracle that Cassius had come home at all. He was far too drunk to drive, but had managed to crawl into his car anyway, and swerved about the road on the six mile drive home without killing anybody. With shame in his heart tempered by the alcohol trying to spin the room around him, he stumbled up the stairs and into his bedroom. No doubt the grasses of *Drunken Valley* grew tall and tender, though perhaps not tempting enough for old Jack Johnson.

When he reached his bedroom, the light was out. Jessica was awake, but pretending to sleep. Cassius did his best to quietly get into bed, but failed spectacularly when he knocked over his bedside lamp. This was the noise that woke his daughter, causing her to rip her nightlight from the wall. This was the noise that slapped Jessica Alabama with sadness, with fear that her marriage might soon be coming to an end. This was the noise that was still swirling around Jessica's mind as she waited for the snoring to begin, and rose from her bed to check on her daughter.

The next night, Cassius worked late again, and Jessica decided that it was time to change her life, which is a grownup way of saying she was *thinking about ending her marriage*. This was the thought that led her to be *more quiet than usual*.

On the bus, Estuary sat in the open seat next to Claire, with a, "Hey," as she put her backpack on the floor. We all have different ways of greeting each other, and this was Estuary's usual way. It was, really, the way of most of the children her age. Within about ten years, that greeting would change to *what's up*, the appropriate response to which would be, *nothin'*. That greeting would eventually change to *tsup*, the appropriate response to which became an

upward motion of the chin. The social norms of that day, in that place, long before the chin wave era, required Claire to return Estuary's greeting with a simple repeating of the word, "Hey." Claire did not respond appropriately.

Claire said nothing.

Estuary spoke as if she had.

"I can't believe I didn't get to watch *Piranha* last night. My stupid mom watched stupid *Magnum P.I.* again. It's like I never get to watch anything. I don't know why we can't get another tv. One tv and *no* vcr. It's like we're living in the dark ages or something. Did you get to see it?"

Claire didn't speak. She shook her head, just barely enough to give an answer without looking up.

"That sucks. I just watched my mom's stupid show. I didn't even get my social studies done, but I can probably get it done in study. Did you finish your thing on whatshername?"

Claire shrugged.

"Yeah. Me too. I *was* going to do it as Clark, but I think I might just do it as if I'm a squirrel or something. Y'know, like what this squirrel thinks about these stupid humans coming through that he's never seen before?"

Claire shrugged, still looking down.

"I just couldn't concentrate, or, y'know, couldn't really think straight or whatever. I just kinda laid in my bed after my mom sent me up, and just, y'know, worried, I guess. Y'know?"

Claire's shrugged got smaller.

"What are *you* going to do tonight?"

This time, Claire didn't shrug at all.

"I'm, like, both kinda excited and scared at the same time. About the party, I mean. I wish you were coming."

Claire continued to look down at her knees as she blurted out the words she had been holding back. "No one cares about your

stupid mom or your stupid homework or your stupid party." Relieved at having spoken, but scared for how her best friend would react, she turned to the bus window and stared through it.

"You don't need to be such a douchebag, Claire. I *said* I wish you were coming."

"Whatever."

"Whatever." Estuary picked up her backpack and clutched it to her chest, staring ahead as Claire continued to stare out the window. They rode in silence the rest of the way to school.

Throughout the day, the interaction picked at her. Feelings Estuary didn't understand fought each other deep inside her mind. Claire wasn't being fair, that was for sure. It wasn't *her* fault Claire wasn't invited. Didn't she sometimes get to talk about things with her best friend, even when her best friend wasn't invited? Or was she *rubbing it in*? Maybe she was just trying to show off. Maybe she knew Claire was sad about the party, and talked about it just to show Claire that she was more popular now.

Sometimes the thoughts turned her stomach. Sometimes they made her want to cry. Always they distracted her from her teachers, her classes, and, well, pretty much everything you were supposed to call *school*. She knew she was supposed to do something. Probably she was supposed to apologize. But for what? For telling the truth? For going to a party her best friend wasn't invited to? If she said she was sorry, did that mean she *was* sorry? If she *was* sorry, did that mean she would have to bail on the party? If she bailed, would everyone call her a scaredy-cat and think she was just afraid of the boys?

In short, Estuary Alabama was feeling the weight of her sin.

Her soul bubbled and cracked. New veins carried themselves through old passages, splitting once solid walls and opening views into new depths. Scents of caramely hot chocolate with just a hint

of mocha filled the cavern where Elizabeth Apple slept, warming the demon's dreams.

While it is true that a good night's sleep can do wonders, it helps if that sleep is accompanied by a demon cleaning your soul as you dream. The anger and fear that haunt you as you push your head into the pillow wane with the guilt slowly eaten away in the darkness. If you *are* a demon, however, if you have no friend to cleanse your soul, your anger can sit upon you throughout the night and continue to crush you in the morning.

When Rain woke up, she was still angry.

It wasn't that she was unwilling to forgive her sister. She would do so soon enough, and she knew it. At the moment, however, she was determined to go about her life as if her sister did not exist. It would be up to Betty to seek her out, up to Betty to apologize, up to Betty to crawl back with her tail between her legs, so to speak.

Rain, then, did not seek her sister as the world prepared for a new evening. Had she done so, she would certainly have seen that her sister had not returned the morning before. She would have seen the bed made, the room undisturbed, and perhaps sought the help of her mother in beginning a search for her. As it was, however, Rain Apple, angry at her sister for abandoning her the night before, angry at herself for caring, left the house without so much as a goodbye to her mother, to wander the night alone.

She did not actively hide from her sister. She visited all the usual places, nibbled on the usual souls. If her sister was looking for her, she could not fail but to find her. For, though Rain *wanted* her sister to find her, *wanted* to forgive Betty, it was only going to work if Betty made the first step. She made it easy for her, trod the predictable path, made herself *findable*. Rain purposely avoided looking around, avoided turning back to see if her sister was in

tow. If Betty's voice called to her, Rain would turn, that much she knew. But if not, she would bully forward, refusing to acknowledge that her sister *could* be behind her, *could* be close enough to touch her, *could* be just in view, worried, wanting to apologize but not quite sure of how to begin.

It was a lonely evening.

Rain munched on a fresh bloom born of a three year old's tantrum. The toddler had held onto the stair rail as his mother grabbed him around the waist to quite literally pull him away from daycare. The tears and screaming lasted most of the drive home, and though he was calm by the end, his mother still required the obligatory time out, which means, *she didn't want to do it, and he didn't really need it, but rules are rules*. The bloom had a delightful tang to it, like buttermilk icing tinged with orange. By morning, when the boy's mother reminded him that he would need to be a good boy at daycare, he hardly knew what she was talking about. Thanks to Rain, yesterday's tantrum was already *water under the bridge*.

On a quiet street dotted with nightlights, Rain slid into a small cave inside another of her regular haunts, with crispy treats dripping down the walls. Tiny drips stuck to the walls like sap, falling toward the floor at a pace slow enough to rival the changing color of a leaf. Each had a delicious candy coating hiding the maple sweet treasures within. One after the other, Rain munched them up, sometimes cracking them between her teeth, sometimes between her tongue and the roof of her mouth, sometimes just letting them loll around her mouth like a hard candy, slowly dissolving until the candy was gone and the syrup inside oozed over her tongue.

These were the toys of a young girl, strewn about her room. Her father regularly told her to clean them up, she regularly said, *ok*, and regularly left them to sit where they were of course turning

her room into what looked like, as my mother used to say, *a cyclone struck it*. She was never punished for her indiscretion, but nevertheless she knew she was wrong. Each toy left behind seeped out of the cave walls as a single drop, fresh and gooey, and hardening with time and neglect. By the time Rain had first found the cave, many had already hardened and fallen off altogether of their own accord.

Here and there Rain visited many old friends a few new ones, children all, and filled her stomach along the way. Without her sister, however, the night was lonely and more than a little boring. By the time she got home, she was ready to make up with her sister, even if it meant giving in first.

She went straight to Betty's room, but found it empty. That was hard. She had geared up to face her, to forgive Betty for leaving her behind, to admit that maybe she napped too long the night before, that it wasn't really Betty's fault, that even though you should never ever ditch your sister, maybe sometimes your sister just got too bored waiting for you to sleep the night away. She had clenched her fist and straightened herself up, deep breath held inside her chest, and walked in Betty's room, ready take her licks. At the moment she saw the room empty, however, her resolve turned inside out.

Betty was probably out having the time of her life while stupid Rain couldn't even spend one stupid night without her stupid sister without feeling sorry for her stupid self. Betty wasn't afraid to be alone. Betty probably didn't even care. She was off having adventures and would come back with all these stories, and Rain wouldn't be able to talk about anything other than what she had for dinner that one night without her sister, and which was pretty much the same dinner she always had. She saw herself in the mirror above Betty's dressing table and said, "Pathetic," which should

mean, *worth feeling sorry for*, but which, for Rain, meant, *not even worth feeling sorry for*.

She flopped down on her sister's bed, still unmade and unslept in since Rain had last seen her, and cried.

The party turned out to be far less scary than Estuary had feared. Once Monica's mother had left the basement, the six boys and six girls sat in a circle to play spin the bottle. In the middle of the circle was an empty sixteen ounce Coca-Cola bottle, ready to accuse those not worthy. Estuary had not been fully prepared for what to expect, afraid to ask whether the kisses were meant to regular or *French*, and what exactly you were supposed to do with your tongue anyway.

She was grateful not to be first - that honor went to Monica. Estuary took the opportunity to observe as best she could, so, when her own time came, she would not look like a fool. Though the room was somewhat dark, Monica spent enough time with her lips pressed to Jordan's that Estuary expected the worst. Her stomach knotted up in fear, and, just for a moment, she wished she could run from the room and never come back. After a few turns, though, Alfie Marston spun the Coke bottle to point, if not quite at Estuary, then at least close enough.

A sloppy chorus of, "*Oooh, Stuuuu,*" dribbled from the girls, and Estuary leaned forward to take her punishment. Alfie put his hands on Estuary's shoulders and opened his mouth in expectation. She returned the favor and waited. Alfie touched her tongue with his and then withdrew it. More of a tap than a caress. Then he did it again. And a third time. Three taps inside otherwise motionless mouths. Estuary failed to sense anything exciting, but was relieved that she had passed her test. Her kissing responsibilities were far less complicated than she expected, and she no longer

feared to acquit herself, which means *get away with it*, or maybe, *pass the test*.

Over the next half hour or so, she kissed each of the boys, learning along the way that each one *did the deed* a little differently. Mark flicked his tongue around like a lizard, zipping in and out of Estuary's mouth what felt like hundreds of times in the few seconds their mouths were together. Gary went deep, reaching deep into her throat. Braith was a little more playful, though focused on just the tips of their tongues. Kevin did a sort of side to side sweep, mostly catching her from underneath. Like Gary, Roberto pushed his tongue about as far in as he could get it, though also with some of the playfulness of Braith, exploring more than prodding. And, of course, there was Alfie, with his *tap-tap-tap*.

Estuary did her best to match each boy's style, learning along the way, feeling more grown-up and accomplished, which is a way of saying *experienced*, every moment. A game of *truth-or-dare* was similarly innocuous, which here means *not harmful*. Sometimes the truth questions were embarrassing, such as *do you have a crush on Roger Stahl*, but the dares were just more kissing, so there was little to trouble her. By the time Monica's mother returned with the pizza, Estuary's fears had all but disappeared.

Belly full of pizza and Coke, her fears washed away, Estuary was unprepared for Monica's announcement of the next game: *seven minutes in heaven*. The game was fairly simple. Someone would draw a boy's name from a hat, then he would draw a girl's name from another hat, after which the two of them would spend seven minutes together in a closet, doing *whatever they like*.

Estuary held her breath, hoping that she would not be drawn first. True, she would not be able to watch or learn from whatever the first couple did inside the closet, but at least she would know what people were doing *outside*. She would know if everyone was listening, with their ears to the door, laughing and giggling at the

people inside, shouting things to egg them on, or just ignoring them. Knowing, at least, what would happen outside would help her better prepare for whatever would happen inside.

She wished a mantra in her mind, *"Please don't let make me go first, please don't make me go first, please don't make me go first..."* Lani put her hands in the boys bowl, and drew out the first name.

"Braith."

There were oohs from the girls and ribbing from the boys. Braith looked awkward and a little shaky, but he smiled and nodded and went along with his friends, pretending to be excited. After everyone calmed down, Monica said, "Pull your new girlfriend, Braith."

"Oh...yeah, right." Braith reached in and pulled out a small piece of paper, reading it aloud as Estuary held her breath and repeated her mantra.

Please don't make me go first.

Please don't make me go first.

Please don't make me go first.

When Braith said, "Stu," the bottom fell out of her stomach.

More oohs, as Estuary's new friends pushed her toward Braith and the closet. Monica held a stopwatch. "Exactly seven minutes." Everyone laughed. "Unless you need a little more."

More oohs.

Braith took Estuary's hand and led her to the closet, closing the door behind them.

Inside the closet, Braith put his arms around Estuary and began kissing her. It was much the same as his kissing had been during the previous games, though he seemed to be finding a little more gentleness in his approach. Estuary, too, seemed to be gaining from the evening's practice, and began to relax. It seemed as if this would just be one more kissing game, and she already felt as if

she had a world of experience. Soon enough, however, the kissing seemed to be interminable. It was repetitive and boring, and Estuary began counting the seconds until she would be able to leave.

When Braith slipped a hand under her shirt, however, the fear came back. It started up along her back, but moved around to her belly, sliding up toward her training bra. A mixture of feeling wonderfully grown up for having a real boy be interested in her body, and embarrassment for not having a body grown up enough for a boy to be interested in, filled her with distraction. When he did not seem to be put off with her childish tiny breasts, however, she began to relax again. She did not feel any physical pleasure, but the relief of possibly living up to expectations filled her with pride.

This was Braith's first real experience with a girl, and though he had been mentored by his older brother, he wasn't really sure what to do. He put his hand on her training bra with a sense of triumph, holding it firmly in place. He had collected his prize, and felt as if he had crossed the finish line. With more time to go, however, he just stood at the finish line, so to speak, waiting for the clock to run out. He continued to flap his tongue about, holding his hand on Estuary's chest, killing time.

Estuary, also waiting for the clock to run out, began to fear that, while Braith had achieved his goal, she had done nothing. She worried that there was something she was supposed to do, something she would be asked about when she left, something she would be made fun of for, if she did not do it. Nervous and unsure, she could think of nothing but to copy Braith. She brought her hand from his hips, where they had been since they began kissing, and placed it on his crotch, outside of his pants. Like Braith, she did not do anything with her hand. She merely placed it there, unsure of what to do next.

"Halfway there," someone shouted from outside the closet, with laughing and giggling accompanying.

Emboldened, Braith moved his hand and slipped it under the training bra. Estuary was immediately ashamed, knowing how little the bra disguised. Her shame tensed her whole body, including the hand on Braith. As she tensed up, she could feel him pushing himself into it. She squeezed as she felt his shape change underneath his jeans.

For the next three or so minutes, they stood like that, he with his hand on her flattish chest, underneath the left side of her training bra, still in place, and she with her left hand on his waist and her right covering the zipper of his jeans. Nervousness led to boredom, and her tongue was near exhausted.

When Monica yelled, "Times up, lovers!" she was grateful that it is was over. She and Braith exited the closet, no longer holding hands, and sheepishly joining the group. The basement was dark enough that no one immediately noticed that Braith had soiled his jeans. By Monday, the story had changed twelve times, and, according to some of her classmates, Estuary had lost her virgin status.

When night properly fell upon Estuary Alabama, the demon inside her woke to find her host mildly alert. Estuary and her new friends were snug in their sleeping bags, keeping themselves up with gossip, the boys long gone, sleep not yet forcing itself upon them. With great care, Betty stood herself up and continued her exploration. A wakeful host held no end of dangers, especially for an explorer, but Betty had slept her fill, and was anxious to be up and about.

To be honest, she had eaten more than a little too much over the previous night. It wasn't so much the seemingly endless supply of food. That was nothing new. It was more the way you visit your refrigerator too many times when you are lolling about your house, bored only because you are putting off something you

would rather not do. The way you eat when you know you've made a mistake and you are feeling a little too sorry for yourself. The way you eat a little more than you should when eating seems to be about the only thing to do. *Absentmindedly*. Not to make yourself feel better so much as to take your mind off your troubles. That was the way Betty Apple had been eating.

A savory scent carried her toward what looked like a fresh cavern, still dripping with confused thoughts. Though not her usual fare, Betty was intrigued, and began to taste the delicate drops sliding down the cavern walls. Where Estuary had felt embarrassed that she had not known what to do in the closet, Betty tasted a warm allspice. Not sweet, but not exactly *not*sweet. Where Estuary had felt shame at having *done more than she was supposed to*, Betty tasted a spicy cinnamon. Not enough to burn her tongue, though certainly enough to tickle it. Where Estuary felt guilty for the way Braith would not look at her the rest of the night, Betty tasted a roasted garlic, caramelized and sweet with a rich and dangerous filling. They were related, these sweet and savory flavors, but distinct as well. They were pieces of a complicated dish that worked well together.

She should have been paying attention. Should have been searching for a way home. If she had been, if she had not been so distracted by the new and exciting scents and tastes, she might have felt the faint hint of something very nightlight-ish emanating from the basement bathroom. She sensed it, but in the midst of her flavor adventure, it was just familiar enough for her to dismiss it. I'm not sure if Betty thought it might be her way home and ignored it for the sake of the exotic buffet, or if the light, diminished and faint, just tickling the edge of her peripheral senses, seemed like just another sweet calling her, a memory of the usual fare, not quite able to compete with the exciting and strange flavors she was now indulging in.

It probably wouldn't have helped. A nightlight is something children use to ward off the monsters, something to give them comfort in the night when Mom or Dad or both have gone off to wherever moms and dads go off to after you fall asleep. It is not the light, then, but the reason for the light that gives our demons an easy road home. Some forgotten nightlight left by a worrisome parent, a light more of an annoyance than a comfort to a child, can hardly have the power to call a demon all the way home from the depths of a soul. At that point, a light is only a light. Perhaps *that* is the reason Betty did not choose to notice it. Perhaps it just didn't smell quite right.

Whatever the reason, Betty did not summon herself to the light. She carefully edged her way around the changing world of Estuary Alabama's soul, noting one flavor after the other, feeling for all the world that her accidental imprisonment may well have been a blessing in disguise, which means *a bad thing that you convince yourself is a good thing*. Maybe the sense of the nightlight-ish thing that she could not quite see directly gave her a strange confidence. Maybe she told herself that the exit sign in the corner of her eye would be there when she needed it.

Maybe she didn't care.

She should have.

In the basement, lying in her sleeping bag, gossiping with her new friends, Estuary's confidence grew. Freed by Betty's nibbling of the guilt she had felt after the closet, she now began to feel a sense of pride. She bragged about her exploit and laughed at Braith for being the inexperienced one. The girls laughed with her, even as the burden of the little white lies she now told tore the floor out from under her friendly demon, sending Betty to the bottom of a well from which no nightlight would help her escape, let alone one as faint as the forgotten beam barely making it out the door of the bathroom.

Betty fell for what felt like ages. Her body banged about on the slick walls as she bounced from side to side, falling ever deeper. Her body made impressions in the sides of the well, pushing into the newly formed walls where they had not yet had time to harden. Beaten and bruised, she landed in a muck at the bottom, hardly able to pull out her feet. When she did, she peered around to see that she was in more of a cavern than a well, with no exit other than the one she had fallen through on the way down.

Betty shook off the fall and peered around. *That's what I get*, she thought, *for wandering a wakey*. There would be no way out until the walls hardened up a bit, if ever. *In the meantime*, she told herself, *I might as well eat*.

Remember that time in class you could hardly keep your eyes open? When you had stayed up too late the night before, when your teacher was so boring, the room so warm, the voice so droning, that instead of catching yourself falling asleep, you caught yourself waking up?

The blinkies.

The sense of *where am I, what did I miss?*

It was an important class, too. An introduction that set you up for an entirely new field of knowledge, basic information you would be expected to fall back on as you moved into more complex thoughts. A touchstone, which means *something you can come back to over and over again to measure the truth*. Miss the touchstone, miss the truth.

For me, that day was a history lesson. *The Gilded Age*. I still haven't really caught up on that one. There are days when I feel like I can't possibly be missing anything. On others, I wonder if the lesson I missed might not have helped me understand the world, perhaps even change it for the better. It's a funny thing. Even though I sometimes read about that period, there is something

about the simplicity of that first introduction at school that can just never be matched. Well, I suppose it's *water under the bridge*.

For Rain and Elizabeth Apple, that lesson was *Navigation*.

I don't mean to say that these young demons failed to learn *Navigation*. They did not. However, they *did* fail to grasp the importance of the *soul draft*, and how to insinuate themselves into it. *Insinuate* is a big word, and it can mean a lot of things. In this case, it is about *becoming one with something*.

Their *Navigation* teacher wanted to teach them how to move along a sort of river, what she called the *soul draft*. To follow the analogy, she began with showing them a canoe and how to, not only get into it, but get the canoe into the river while still inside it. It is a boring but essential lesson. For how can one enjoy the pleasures of navigating a river if one is stuck on the shore?

The Apple sisters had the blinkies.

They had spent much of the day in Rain's room, Betty on the floor next to Rain's bed, talking about the wild night they had just had, and when they might leave their house for good and seek adventures for real. And they talked about boys. And they talked about a girl they both despised. And they talked about their parents. They even played some games. Just one of those days where they couldn't quite bring themselves to get a proper amount of sleep. One of those days that led to a night of heavy eyelids. The blinkies.

To carry the canoe analogy a little further, what little the girls heard that first sleepy night in class, the night they could hardly keep their eyes open, was something like this:

"...large step into the...though always remember to lift with your...it can rock and...not in the book, so...what you can't forget is...quite slippery, so be sure that you take care not to...safely seated, you can lean over and grab your...a little heavy, but that's

normal...what the book doesn't tell you is...feel the gentle flow of...nothing like it in the world..."

And so on.

By the time class was over and they made it to lunch, they were both starting to wake up and feeling much better. Subsequent classes, which means *the rest of the navigation classes that came after*, were mostly about what to do when on the river, so to speak, and they never really came back to how to get in the canoe. The Apple sisters were a little embarrassed about not knowing something that now seemed simple to their classmates, and imagined they would figure it out when they needed to. After all, as long as they stuck with the souls of children, they could always use the nightlight to guide their way home.

Demons are not entirely like you and me. Not entirely. If I have led you to believe otherwise, then I have done you a disservice. In some ways, they are very much like you and me, it is true. They sleep, they wake, they feed, they even create deep and lasting friendships. Yet, it would be unfair to say they are like you and me in all, or even most, ways. While Betty and Rain, for example, were *something like fifteen years old*, when we began our story, we cannot judge them entirely by that description.

Perhaps it would be better to think of the Apple sisters as a mature fifteen. Better yet, a fifteen from another millennia, when fifteen was well old enough to begin a new life. While their minds and attitudes were much like yours and mine at about that age, then, you must not judge their parents harshly when you learn they cared little for the loss of their daughter.

Although Rain would never have accepted the idea, it would have been unremarkable for her sister to leave home without a word and never return. I use that word, *unremarkable*, very much

on purpose. In Betty's world, leaving home at *something like fifteen* was so natural as to be *not worthy of remark*.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Rain did not seek out her parents when she became worried for her sister. She knew her parents would care. Knew her parents would be sad to see the first of their children leave home. Yet, she also knew her parents would have been pleased. Pleased that one of their children had finally grown up. Pleased that they had done their job as parents in preparing their children for the world. Well, at least *one of them*, anyway. Likely, had Rain come to them, their response would have been to push Rain out the door as well, remind her that it was high time she stood on her own two feet, which here means, *grow up and move out*. Any worry Rain felt for her sister she would have to bear alone.

And so she did.

Although she was not ready to admit it, Rain was haunted by the idea that maybe her sister *had* left home on purpose. That she had gone off to *seek her fortune*, and done so without the comfort and support of her sister. Though the idea seemed unlikely to Rain, a part of her knew it was *possible*. Betty had always been a little more grown up than Rain. She was bound to be ready to leave before Rain was. Maybe she had finally gone her own way. Maybe she was afraid to tell Rain, to admit to her that she didn't need her any more. Maybe she didn't want to embarrass Rain by daring her to leave home before she was ready. Maybe this was Betty's version of *tough love*.

At the same time, Rain just could not bring herself to truly believe it. Betty could be careless. Betty could be selfish. Betty could get so wrapped up in her own adventures that she would forget about everyone else, including Rain. All of this was true, but she was unwilling to believe that Betty would leave without saying goodbye. They had always planned everything together. If Betty

was even thinking about taking the big leap away from home, even if it meant going their separate ways, they would have at least talked about it. It just wasn't possible that Betty could go off on her own and leave Rain behind for life without a single word.

No.

Something was wrong.

Stumbling under the burden, Rain left her sister's room, intent on searching for her, not sure just where to begin, and wondering if she even wanted to be found.

She retraced her steps from the last night she had seen Betty. She laid again in the tree where she had dozed off just after seeing her sister for the last time, the tree near which Estuary Alabama's bed lay dark and empty. She visited the usual children, both her regulars and her sister's regulars, each time searching for any evidence of her sister. In no case, however, did she find anything to give her hope.

Perhaps her sister had left on purpose after all. Perhaps there were no clues because Betty did not want to be found.

As morning approached, Rain carved herself a nook where a slight breeze wafted about her, sometimes gently lifting her up and setting her down again. Though her warm bed awaited her at home, she could not quite bring herself to return. She determined to stay away until she found her sister, or had given her up entirely.

Staring at the thick leaves hanging over her nook, she wondered if she had seen her home for the last time.

That's more or less the beginning of the story. *Less*, because lots of things happen after this part and before the next. *More*, because we've already heard the important stuff. Estuary Alabama is growing up, more or less. Because you are a grownup and not a child, you understand this. You remember learning that doing bad things does not *always* mean you will get caught. That it is your

own conscience, a word which here means, *a twisting of the stomach you feel when you break your own rules*, that guides you toward the light, rather than the fear of punishment. You remember learning to cheat and lie, even when you hated yourself for it. Especially when you hated yourself for it. If this children's story was for children, this would be a lesson. This story, however, is not for children, and this is not a lesson.

It is a memory.

More or less.

The difference between your own memory and the growing one of young Estuary Alabama is that her journey toward adulthood was painless. With the demon Elizabeth Apple nibbling away at her soul almost faster than she could grow it, Estuary Alabama did not feel the pangs of guilt, the dread of shame, and most certainly not the gut wrenching nausea of disappointing her conscience.

For example, the afternoon following the point where we left off our story, Estuary went to the mall with some of her new friends. Her old friend, her best friend, the girl she rode the school bus with, the girl with whom she had always shared her secrets, the girl who had not been invited to the party, sat home alone, lonely, sad, and increasingly angry at her now *old* best friend.

This was a time before cell phones, before texting and instant messaging. Though it was not a time before answering machines, it was a time before everyone had them. Claire certainly did not. When they next sat together on the bus on Monday, Estuary could have lied. She could have said she called but no one answered. Or that the line was busy. She could have said she forgot to call. That the party led to breakfast which led to talking which led to the mall, and she just got distracted. She could have done any of those things. Instead, she talked about the party and the mall trip as if nothing had happened.

If her soul had been less well tended, she might have felt the pain of hurting her friend. Might have been ashamed of herself for having left Claire alone on a Saturday night. Might have felt the guilt of betrayal. The efficiency of her new gardener, however, pulling the weeds before they could grow and thrive, nibbling away at the mushrooms before they could take over, kept such guilt in check. There was no pain to be felt. No conscience to twist her stomach. No shame. While you and I remember growing up as a series of embarrassing failures, one teachable moment after the next of what happens when you break your own rules, when your courage fails you, when your heart never quite lets you get away with cheating, Estuary Alabama was oblivious.

Pain may be a great teacher, but the lack of it can teach as well.

Deep inside, wandering the growing caverns and valleys that were Estuary Alabama's soul, the accidentally imprisoned Elizabeth Apple cared not. She was not trying to teach a lesson, felt no responsibility for the vessel in which she found herself. Like most of us, she thought only of herself.

Sometimes she cried in despair, other times she laughed with abandon. Sometimes she cursed her fate, other times she smiled at her blessings. Always she ate. She ate and ate and ate and ate. Where feelings popped up, Betty chowed down. Betty Apple sustained herself, which means *kept her belly full*, on the darkness that comes with shame and guilt, caring little for whether or not it belonged to someone else.

And where Betty chowed down feelings withered away. The lessons rightfully owned by Estuary Alabama were stolen, one by one, without her ever knowing what was missing.

And Estuary Alabama grew up.

More or less.

end of part one

One could hardly argue but that it took great courage to find the first step. Twelve inches, maybe less. Hardly enough to change her view, less an increase in altitude than a decision to begin. Larger, perhaps, than the rest by less than a finger's width. A variance in height determined by no more than the fluctuations in the surface of the concrete, or perhaps by an installation well within tolerance but hardly precise. A step larger than the rest, not by much, but by enough. Enough to make the first step, perhaps, the greatest step. Whether each subsequent step took greater courage than the last matters little. For each subsequent step *did* take courage. It was the first, however, the choice to begin, that must serve as mother to all the rest. For if we do not begin, how ever might we finish?

At the fifth step she can feel the power that comes with standing above one's own height. A height at which it can not be argued but that one *stands above the rest*. She can feel her feet as if atop the chain link fence that surrounds the pool. Imagines herself walking along it, a spiked balance beam digging into her bare feet as she pushes the whole of her body weight down onto the spikey fence top, twisted pairs of wire sticking above the fence rail, tearing deep into her flesh, pushing up through her sole. A good place to stop, to consider turning back, moving on, the steps getting easier with each rise in elevation.

At eight she is above the young trees that dot the park just outside the fence. Still strong with youth, they hold tight to their glowing leaves, bright with the change of season. How tightly they cling to life, even as the green vigor of summer is drawn from them, bit by bit, their thick moist bodies dried by the coming winter, the inevitability of death. Even so, here they are, bright yellow and orange, screaming, *not today, I will not die today*. Desperate for one more moment, any moment, holding onto their branches for dear life as they are sucked dry, destined to become one more

pile of crumbled dust, brown with dissolution, hope for no better than to decompose and feed the tree from which they had sprung. Her steps slow, her thoughts stretch. At not quite halfway up the ladder, she wonders if she will make it.

At fourteen, she is in the midst of the taller trees, bare at the top where they have already gone dormant for the winter. Empty branches that have already given up their warm summer coat, all protection torn from them as the autumn winds blow cold with the coming of winter. Exposed limbs screaming, *do your worst, shred my bark with frost, tear me apart, I have no fight left in me.* Her view of the sky begins to open up, thick with clouds, moving, perhaps, but so slowly she cannot be certain. The ground below getting smaller where she can see it through the ladder, beyond the pole, the better view behind, were she to dare turn so far. She stops altogether and rests her head against nineteen, her arms entwined with the ladder to hold her in place. How hard she works to avoid a fall, even as she contemplates the larger one.

At seventeen, her hands upon the rail, she can see across the platform, her view now opened up. What gap there is between the clouds and the horizon shows a pastel blue sky, just enough to show off the movement of the clouds, a freight train of vapor moving slowly about the world, too massive to be stopped, yet hanging overhead as if there was nowhere to go, no place but here, the promise of blue sky slowly crushed as the clouds attempt to close the gap. She folds herself at the waist, her feet on the rung, her torso flat against the diving board, her head turned to see the world laid on its side, earth and sky moving past each other with a patience matched only by her own hesitation, the crack of blue sky getting smaller, overwhelmed by the growth of the oppressive clouds.

Atop the platform, she looks below to the empty pool bottom, the leaves that drift atop the few inches of rain water barely frozen

below. She turns about, witnesses the world one last time. Wonders if the pain in her soul will cease with the death of her body. Wonders if the pain that will not cease is her own fault. Wonders if her life could have gone any other way.

Twenty rungs. Not really that high, but high enough.

part two

Imagine a dark city street, perhaps two in the morning. Restless souls wander home from the taverns just closing as their brothers and sisters toss in bed, dreading the morning. Perhaps something catches your attention, something in the corner of your eye, something you might have seen if only you had placed your attention elsewhere. As you have not, the best you can say is that you are pretty sure maybe something off where you couldn't quite see it possibly moved maybe. Or maybe it was a bug that caught the beam of a street lamp. Or maybe you imagined it.

Nothing to worry about, really. It's just old Cornelius Feschenshut, making the evening rounds, looking for some special delicacy to excite his taste buds. He wanders this den of vice searching for sin. Not an easy task, that. For where drunks and liars and thieves abound, so too does a comfort, an acceptance of fate, a conscience that says,

Your deeds are not evil, they are for your survival,

It's just business,

If you did not do them, someone else would,

and so on. For a sin to sting, to ripple the walls of your soul and create dishes fit for a gourmet of Feschenshut's tastes, it must hurt. Such a sin must be accompanied by regret, by shame, by,

How could I have done that,

I'll never forgive myself,

That was the one thing I swore I would never do,

and so on. Such are the sins, the delicacies sought by that shimmer of light you cannot not quite see.

Cornelius wanders here and there, dancing upon the drafts as they dissipate about this or that soul, some sleeping, some awake. He fears the waking soul no more than you or I fear to cross a busy street. There is danger in crossing a busy street, it is true, but we understand the danger and can navigate it with ease. We are experienced in such a task, just as old Feschenshut is in his.

He wanders through a second story window just past where the taverns turn to townhouses, a neighborhood of sorts, where only the rare night owl sits before the blue light of all night television. Inside a blackened room, two middle aged lovers, post coitus, sleep fitfully. I don't think I need to tell *you* what *post coitus*, means, though perhaps you are still too young to understand *middle aged*. Suffice it to say the soon to be victims of Cornelius Feschtenshut were *young enough to still have the sexual desire necessary to cheat on their respective spouses, and old enough to know better*.

The scent is strong in both of them, leading Cornelius to struggle with whom to visit first. The man reeks of shame, but a twisted one mixed of disloyalty and insufficiency, which means he *felt guilty for cheating on his wife, and worse for being a poor sexual partner*. The woman, in what would surprise her fitful but sleeping partner, feels well satisfied, and worse for being so.

Two delicious smells, two tasty meals, two courses over which to savor. He takes to the gentleman first, wafting along a lumpy corridor strewn with former infidelities, carrying himself along toward the fresh scent of the night's conquest. The pungency of some aging sin along the way catches his nose, and he stops for an hors d'oeuvre. It is several weeks old, and mature in its flavor. The outer crust was another lover, taken in the afternoon while his wife was home alone. The inside, gelatin-like with the sweet pungency of bleu cheese paired with dates, the impotency of the following evening with his wife. This crispy little flower with the gooey treat inside had begun to wither in the last few days. Tonight's indiscretion, however, had given it a new life not easily seen by most, and just the sort of specialty that aroused the best sense of Feschtenshut.

The hors d'oeuvre lolling over his tongue, he passes altogether on the fresher sin further down *Infidelity Row*, as he

considers how much better it might taste in few weeks. For, as accustomed to the attraction of freshness as he has become, he has never been one to shy away from new flavors, even if they be a bit aged.

Over and into the woman he goes, drawn in by her fresher sin, more along the line of his usual taste. At edge of a small lake, the cold murky waters of *Why-Will-I-Never-be-Good-Enough*, a swampy grove of cattails pokes through, waving together in the breeze. This is not the *Infidelity Row* of the lover who shares her bed tonight. This is *Sabotage Swamp*, the tall fruitful grasses born each time she undermines herself. Like that time you watched one more television show when you should have been studying. Or slept in and pretended to be sick. Or had three drinks instead of one. All those times you knew you shouldn't have and did anyway. Collectively, they have a lovely odor.

Cornelius is drawn by the freshest of these self-sabotaging sins, but is pleased by the choral harmony of the grove in which it lives, each cattail a variation on the last, some fresh and some dried, all working together as a complicated yet harmonic whole. Lazing upon the draft, he nibbles here and there, allowing the flavors to work together, sweet, savory, and even a bite of sharp spice balancing together in his mouth. Though the tails themselves are a little dry, the waters of the lake that surrounds them provide a refreshing balance.

Satiated, perhaps a little too pleased with himself, Cornelius wafts along the draft and back out into the night where he enjoys the scents about him, looking for unoccupied souls, and waiting for his hunger to grow again. Behind him, the couple sleeps soundly, unafraid of the coming lies they must tell to their spouses, feeling for all the world as if they have been cleansed of their sins.

Even in a children's story that is *not* for children, time must pass. Perhaps especially so, for it is children who feel the passage of time as slow, who feel tomorrow may never come, who wonder why everything takes *so incredibly long*. If you, too, feel that way, then perhaps you have been lying all along, in which case it is far past time for you to put this book down and find something more age appropriate, which means, *something your parents think is ok for you to read*, or perhaps, *something simple with a happy ending*. For this tale, as you no doubt suspect by now, does *not* end happily.

It has been five years since we last saw our friends, and much has changed. I don't mean that there are more cordless phones and fewer laser discs, though that too. I mean the sort of change that happens on the journey from twelve to seventeen. You remember. For, try as you might to forget the pain of growing up, to hide it under the blanket of the few cherished memories you desperately pretend define your teenage years, or to tell yourself it was just those painful moments that made you stronger, made you the person you are today, a person you tell yourself is well and true and worthwhile even as you cower under your covers wondering where it all went wrong, you cannot deny the truth: The journey from twelve to seventeen is fraught with mutation, a metaphor which, said in another way, means *if early teenage years were a ship, the cargo would be the change that happens day to day*.

Estuary Alabama grew into and through high school with a careless demeanor born of her spotless soul. She did not become evil, or mean, or cruel, but neither was she caring, loving, or thoughtful. She simply began to move through the world like one careless of moral consequences. She did not lie or steal, for she had no interest in risking the punishment that was so often the cost of such vices. Yet, there was no conscience telling her such things were *wrong*. There was no crunching in her stomach when she

broke her own rules, and, over time, she ceased to give herself rules at all. The phrase, *no big deal*, was increasingly on her lips, and loyalty was seldom to be found.

Nor was the transformation over those five years exclusive to young Estuary Alabama. It is true that demons, with lifespans that shadow our own so much as to hardly be fathomable, grow and change at a pace we cannot easily discern. You might think, then, that a demon of *something like fifteen* might take a century or more to grow into *something like adulthood*. Yet, even at such a pace, change can often come by fits and starts, by which I mean there can be long periods where nothing appears to be happening, then suddenly a shift so dramatic happens that you wonder how you missed the warnings. To imagine a young demon to be *something like fifteen* for a decade or so, before becoming *something like sixteen* is to misunderstand the way we grow. For even *we* grow by quick and high leaps separated by long strolls on featureless plains. We settle into the comfort of knowing who we are and are continuously surprised by the great shocks of *teachable moments*, the events great and small that thrust us forward into the next great chapters of our lives. Or perhaps better said, *life is usually boring until it is not*. In the five years that Elizabeth Apple remained trapped inside the soul of Estuary Alabama, then, the experience of her imprisonment brought her from *something like fifteen* to *something like twenty*, even though one would normally expect such a journey to take significantly longer.

Her sister, too, grew faster than expected during this time. It is true that she did not have the traumatic event of imprisonment, the hopeless wandering of an inescapable soul, to force change upon her. Losing her sister, however, blaming herself, turning her back on childhood all conspired to tear her from her teenage ways and thrust her into adulthood at a pace that rivaled her sister's. Rain Apple was marked by trauma, which is sort of like saying the

guilt she felt compounded by the actual loss of her sister *felt like a deep wound that was slow to heal*.

More change is to come, of course. There are lessons to be learned and prices to be paid. One cannot simply skim over such change, cut to the chase, leave you with a moral, so to speak, and bid you good day. Nevertheless, not every day is of importance, and not every change defines a life. Let us, then, take a few moments to see what has become of our friends over the last five years, by which I mean *who* they have become, after which we shall get on with our story.

At first, the young Elizabeth Apple grew fat. Not in the way that you and I grow fat, staring in the mirror and wondering what happened to our childish bodies, maybe a pound a year pushing out the inevitable belly filled with beer and hamburgers, or even a full change of shape hiding the boy we know is still inside, now obscured by an increasing number of x's on our shirt label, but more of a *feeling of fat*. Betty described it to me as *maybe like being wrapped up in like a big fluffy sleeping bag, but like a bunch of them, sort of brownish I guess, and kind of like, oily in the middle, and also maybe bitter or something?* Well, perhaps we had best find our own way of describing it.

Imagine that it has been weeks since you last felt hungry. Perhaps you have eaten during that time, perhaps not. Perhaps the shape of your body has changed, perhaps not. What is clear, however, is that you always feel like you just ate a few minutes ago, maybe a little too much, and can't seem to shake the feeling that what's inside you is pushing out your skin. What I mean, then, when I say that young Elizabeth Apple grew fat, was that she *felt* fat, and a little more each day.

It didn't take Betty long to become resigned to her fate, which means *give up on escaping*. She did try. She smelled constantly for

the scent of a nightlight. She studied the air for the soul draft that might carry her away if only she could climb into it. Nightlight, however, there was none, and a soul draft grows with a soul, one that must be, if not older, then at least more *seasoned*. Had Betty eaten less, perhaps the soul of Estuary Alabama would have ripened, born new fruits that, left on their own, might have rotted and festered and given way to a draft to carry the demon home. A clean soul, however, abhors a draft, like your mother telling you to take your shoes off before walking on the carpet, and to *for god's sake shut that door!* Try as she might, there was no escape for Betty to find.

Meanwhile, she ate.

In a tunnel to what Betty came to call the *Near Side*, she dined on a wet and slimy goo born of watching a girl get bullied and not doing anything about it. Estuary hadn't really known the girl, but it was clear she was taking it hard from a group of girls that would have listened to Estuary, maybe even feared her, had she walked over and spoken up. As it was, Estuary told herself it was *none of her beeswax*, and walked further away. The sin stayed with her for the rest of the day as she told herself that the very next time she saw something like that happening, she would do something about it. Redemption never came.

The flavor was a sort of sweet and spicy tomato sauce, with perhaps a little too much rosemary. Betty might have done better to seek out something for the sauce to flavor, some dry pasta perhaps, but I'm sorry to say she was getting a little lazy. Rather than wandering further with the intention of bringing back some main course the sauce might enhance, which means *cover up the dry and boring flavor of something else by drenching it in the new and interesting sauce*, she simply dug her face into it and licked it right off the wall. It was a mess, of course. She spent most of the night

cleaning herself off like a cat licking itself, though perhaps with less pleasure.

In a wide barren gap she called *Quitter's Canyon*, she dined on dry grasses that cropped up from time to time, as Estuary failed at a variety of diets. Estuary was neither fat nor skinny for her age and body. A teenage girl learning to grow into her body, she ate well enough, was fairly active, and by any reasonable standard had no need to starve herself in order to fit in with her society. Reasonable standards, however, are not readily found, and in any case were scarce in the high school Estuary attended. While she attempted to diet from time to time, admittedly in an attempt to *better fit in*, it was less a desire to actually lose weight as it was to behave as her friends did, her friends who were regularly trying new diets. When she failed to follow a diet, cheated with a late night snack or perhaps a cookie in the morning, dry grasses would push up through the dirt in *Quitter's Canyon* for Betty to snack on.

It would not be quite fair to say that the grasses would have been better slathered in *none-of-my-beeswax sauce*, but they probably needed *something*. Remember that time you had air-popped popcorn? Remember how dry and tasteless it was? Still, you ate it because, well, because popcorn is fine, even when stripped of all taste, *good enough*, if you will, especially if that is what is in front of you, and the salt is all the way in the next room, and you are already comfortably sitting on the couch with the bowl in your lap. On nights when Betty found fresh grasses growing in *Quitter's Canyon*, she resolved herself to a night of tasteless snacking, cleaning the ground of new life like a grasshopper swarm destroying a fresh crop.

If life for Apple Brown Betty was not great, then, it was at least sustainable. She would travel from one part of her prison to another, sometimes looking for an exit, snacking along the way, usually settling in some corner of the soul with a fresh sin for her main

course. Though Estuary Alabama was not a habitual sinner, she gave Betty just enough to keep her well fed. Before lying down at the end of her night, Betty usually felt laden, which means *a little too full*. She would lie down thinking she ate too much, but not so much that she felt sick. More like she had taken one bite too many. The way you feel about a half hour after you finish the whole plate of fries, even though half would have been more than enough.

And always she thought, *tomorrow, I'll probably get out of her tomorrow.*

Delmar Cartwright was in prison. He had discovered the identity of his wife's lover, gone to the man's house and shot them both *in flagrante delicto*, a phrase which surely needs no explanation to *you*. It is probably only fair for me to say that should you need further explanation, and you dare to ask your mother, she is likely to be very angry with you, as am I, for shamelessly reading a children's story so clearly *not* for children.

Another thing this children's story is *not* is about Delmar Cartwright. It is enough to know that the gunshots made an awful mess, killed two people who, their sexual indiscretion notwithstanding, which means *other than the stupid things they did for sex*, were decent people, and Delmar was locked up for, if not the rest of his life, certainly enough of it to put him out of his friends' lives forever. His sin, for it was no less, weighed heavily upon him for some time. It was of the sort that started small, protected as it was by righteous vengeance, a tiny mold bloom feeding on the moisture in the corner of an unplugged and closed refrigerator. Over time, however, as the sense of righteousness waned, it crept along the walls, blooming dark and fuzzy and covering every surface it could find. Not an easy meal for a demon, but tasty enough if one had the desire.

Cassius Alabama, one of those old friends, Delmar's sometime drinking buddy since they were twenty, wondered about him every once in a while, but also sighed some relief at getting back to his life. He often thought he should write, but could never quite figure out what to say. He told himself he would visit, but the state prison was a long drive, and Cassius continued to put off the trip. The old demon, Jack Johnson, visited Cassius just enough to lighten the sin of leaving Delmar to rot in his loneliness, and seldom enough that Cassius usually felt a light twist in his stomach for something he could not quite put his finger on. Well, at least he could spend more time at home.

Sadly, the more time he spent at home, the more he and Jessica fought. Maybe it was the light twisting in his stomach, a sense of foreboding that kept Cassius feeling on edge, like something was always wrong, a feeling that made him quick to snap and slow to forgive. Like that time you broke the refrigerator drawer at work and didn't tell anybody. It was fine, the thing still worked, more or less, but you felt a little bad about it. A little. You didn't really eat much at lunch because your stomach was bothering you, and what you did eat made you feel worse. By the time you got home, you told yourself you were just tired and sick, but it didn't stop you from giving your son a harder time than usual for putting off his homework. The door slam made it even worse, and the night ended with a fight/not-fight with your wife about *what you do you mean you've never liked beets, how would you even know what I like, maybe if you would talk to me more, and, christ, woman, can I just get a little fucking peace!* Like that time. Not because he was mad, exactly, but because he had held back a few too many things for a little too long, and the twisting in his stomach weakened him to the point where he was now having trouble holding it back.

It didn't help that Jessica Alabama had a tendency to discount herself, which is a way of saying she *felt worthless most of the time.*

Whenever Cassius criticized her, she always took it pretty hard, blaming herself and assuming the worst. Before the stomach twisting, Cassius had been in the habit of pulling his punches, which means *he avoided saying the hard things, and just said nice things instead, even though he wished he could say what he was really thinking*, but now his filter was off, and he hurt her more often than he realized. The long nights of drinking with Delmar behind him, and the vacuum of evenings at home looking for something to fill them, Cassius found that his marriage was suffering. Perhaps it was just this suffering which ultimately drove Jessica Alabama to seek affection elsewhere. Perhaps it was the stolen affection which caused her marriage to suffer. Hard to say. If this children's story was for children, one thing would clearly lead to another. As it is not, we are left with the discomfoting reality that these things have a tendency to go in circles.

In any case, Jessica Alabama broke her own rules, a sin she felt deeply when it was not cleansed by that fastidious old bachelor, Cornelius Feschenshut. Her guilt sometimes felt deeply, other times allayed, fed into the awkward silences and outright fights that became the center of a palpable tension at the Alabama household.

It was in the midst of this tension that Estuary Alabama moved into her teenage years. Whatever guilt Estuary felt over the tension in her home, the sort of guilt you felt in the year before your parents finally divorced, and which only grew in the years that followed, the guilt that led you to *act out*, caused your grades to drop, to spend more time with the kids like you smoking cigarettes and dope, or stealing their parents' booze, had no time at all to blossom. Such was the veracity with which Elizabeth Apple fed herself.

Estuary settled surprisingly well into her teenage journey. Soured by the gossip that followed her foray into the world of the popular girls, she allowed herself to fall back into normal. Not that it happened immediately. She spent time at the mall with her so-called new friends, sat with them in the cafeteria, and made an honest effort to become one of them. When the topic turned to *pairing off*, however, she began to look for excuses to avoid their company.

This.

The truth came out, so to speak, about Braith's *accident* at the boy-girl party, the following afternoon. The girls ended up at the mall together and found themselves gossiping about the party, the boys, and comparing notes. By *found themselves*, I mean to say that although they all ached to hear their friends' stories and tell their own, no one girl wanted to start the conversation. What little honor these budding teenagers held required that no one remember who began the gossip, only that they *found themselves* in the midst of it, through no fault of their own.

Estuary could have kept the memory of that damp feeling on her hand, a feeling that later felt a little sticky, to herself. It had nothing to do with what she believed to be the crucial parts of the story. Most of the gossip that day was about the kissing, with a couple of illicit hands slipped under a blouse. It turned out she had gone *further* than any of them, and could easily have stopped her story with the bulge in the boy's pants without losing respect from the other girls. What drove her on was curiosity, both hers and the others. She had questions, they had questions, and the only thing for it seemed to be gathering as much detail as possible.

By the time the day was done, they all assumed it was just a matter of time until Braith *asked her out*, a prospect which filled Estuary with dread. Not that she did not desire a boyfriend. It was the next logical step in becoming more grown up, and of all the

things she yearned for, that was the greatest. The *step*, not the boyfriend. The problem with Braith was the expectations that would come along with him. If she were to go out with him, her friends would assume their romantic exploits would continue from where they had last left them in the closet. He, too, would likely feel the same. For her part, Estuary was not sure she *wanted* to continue. She had, she now knew, gone farther than she should have, and had no idea how to walk it back.

When Braith did, finally, ask her out, almost two weeks after their private time at the party, Estuary demurred. Not out of guilt. Her mixed feelings had long been cleaned away by the demon trapped inside of her, and she was as confident and comfortable as she had ever felt. With Estuary it was more about her new friends. Two weeks of gossip and exclusivity had begun to bore her. They were always looking for something exciting to talk about, and would even make up stories to keep the excitement going. She knew dating Braith would require that she feed that particular monster, and she had no interest.

She soon *found herself* spending less and less time with her new friends, and more time alone. After about a week of sitting alone at lunch, Claire sat next to her, and life slowly got back to normal. Across the cafeteria, neither of them failed to notice that Braith, too, was spending more time alone. Whatever guilt Estuary felt for hurting him, however, vanished with the stars and into her demon's belly.

Best intentions aside, it took longer than it should have for Rain to leave home. Each night she would wander the usual haunts, each night hoping for some sign of her sister, each morning coming home more dejected. Her parents were no help of course. This is not that sort of story. Some children's stories are. Some children's stories have caring parents that help guide their

children through difficult times, serve as heroes to be emulated, which means *the sort of people you want to be like when you grow up*.

This is closer to the sort of story where parents die in a tragic accident, perhaps *almost* before the children can remember. I say *closer* because in *those* stories, the children are usually left to contend with a guardian intent on ruining their lives. Perhaps an evil aunt or evil stepmother. Evil *somebody*, anyway. In those stories, the children are driven from home and use the strength they gained there to rise above adversity on their journey. In *this* story, the parents are neither dead nor evil. They simply were not the helping sort. It was not their way.

When Rain Apple, dejected, angry, increasingly bitter, looked for someone to help her understand her feelings, then, she knew that person was not to be found at home. Her parents simply assumed that little Lizzie was all grown up now, and had left to *seek her fortune*. Their only question was *why hadn't her sister?* It was a question Rain was increasingly asking herself. After eleven nights of feeling sorry for herself, Rain packed her bags, so to speak, and wandered off into the night with no intention of returning.

Troubled by the guilt she felt for possibly leaving her sister in danger, and the anger she felt for a sister who probably left her behind on purpose, she made her way to the sort of place a lonely demon like her might be welcomed. To call it a hostel would be, in one breath, both to properly understand the nature of her new home, and completely *misunderstand* it. The place was both public and private. Shared and personal. Communal and isolated. Perhaps we'd better let Rain describe it for herself.

I suppose you'd best think of our living spaces as rooms, though perhaps the comparison is inapt. A room, for your people, suggests an enclosure, which these certainly were not. However, it

cannot be denied but that one felt enclosed in our dwellings. It was precisely this pseudo enclosure that made even such a communal situation utterly lonely. My room, so to speak, was a dull place where I hardly did more than sleep. There were larger rooms, if I might continue the analogy, where several of us might be lonely together. What you might think of as our facilities, private affairs where we might take care of our private affairs, if you will excuse the pun, were only private in so much as we made them so, connected as they were by what you might think of as tunnels, though perhaps the metaphor does not do justice to the impending invasion one always felt looming when tending to our most delicate moments.

Or then again, perhaps not.

Rain holed up in her hostel, wallowed in her loneliness, and did her best to settle into what was increasingly looking like young adulthood. She tried to make friends, but those she met at the hostel were not so different from those she avoided in school, reminding her only of what she had left behind. The more she tried to get comfortable in the communal areas, the less time she wanted to spend in them. If she were ever to forget her sister, it would be by making a new life, with new ideas, maybe new attitudes. What those ideas were she had no idea, but she suspected she would not find them sitting around the tv room, so to speak, listening to the same vapid conversations she and Betty had spent a short lifetime ignoring.

Rain nibbled on the souls of children through the night, slept through the day, and wandered the streets in between, searching for solace. Not until she landed in that late day haunt, *Autumn Wind*, however, did she encounter her first true glimpse of who she was destined to be.

If this children's story was for children, I might say that Estuary's meticulously cleansed soul led her to become a very naughty child indeed. She might have become a sort of Mr. Hyde, so unencumbered with a moral compass, which means *without guilt*, that she became altogether amoral, which differs from *immoral* in that it is a life *without* morals, rather than filled with bad ones. If this children's story was for children, such an amoral life would teach her valuable lessons, ultimately leading her to become a *moral* person by choice, or some similar but ridiculous lesson.

This children's story, of course, is not for children, and Estuary will be afforded no such lesson. It is true that she did not feel the guilt felt by her classmates following a bad decision, nor the pangs of conscience the rest of us feel upon breaking our own rules. For example, the day after she lied to her mother about being sick so she could miss a test she was unprepared for, she did not become truly sick with the memory of her sin. She did not struggle with her conscience for days until the twisting in her stomach led her to confess her crime and be forgiven. Yet, the ease with which she perpetrated, which I suppose just means *did* her crime, did not lead her to perpetrate more and greater ones. For she learned that, to pass the test, she *still* needed to study, and now she was a day behind on everything else, with a double dose of homework to boot.

Perhaps there is a logic to our moral compass that can be seen, even when the compass itself cannot. Perhaps the punishments the world doles out to us in response to our sins serve the purpose they are intended to, even when the internal suffering is absent. Or perhaps some of us are just better at avoiding sins than others. Of the nature of the world, this book has little to say. Of the nature of Estuary Alabama, it is fair to say she was not *inclined* toward sinning, which is a way of saying *it was not her way*.

This.

The night Claire left her backpack in the band room, Estuary knew they shouldn't attempt to break in. She did not see it as a sin so much as she believed the two of them would get caught, and that getting caught would result in punishment. She further believed that punishment would be doubled, because anything the school did to her would be visited upon her by her father twofold. Claire feared the repercussions of not finishing her assignment far more, however. It was her own fault, she knew. The project had been assigned three weeks ago, and it was now the last possible moment, but not yet too late. Late, but not *too* late. Not if they could just get the backpack. She begged her best friend, her *only* friend, *the only person she could count on in the whole world*, to help her. Try as Estuary might to talk Claire out of it, she would not be appeased. It had to happen, and it had to happen *tonight*. The risk of punishment looming large, Estuary agreed to stand with her friend and do her best to retrieve the books she so badly needed.

The school was locked, of course, though not alarmed. By the time Claire had children of her own, suburban schools such as this one would regularly be locked, alarmed, and wired to the fire and police stations, in addition to being inundated with security cameras. At the time of our story, however, schools felt it sufficient to lock the outer doors overnight to keep would be thieves from stealing textbooks and art supplies.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, for the girls, the band director had an office adjoining the band room, with a window reachable from the ground outside. Estuary gave her best friend a boost, that she might pull open the window and crawl inside. When the window slid easily up, Claire was overjoyed. Standing on Estuary's linked hands, she positively *fell* through the window onto the desk below, tumbling over the band director's desk. Making a general mess as she crawled over it, she rushed through the

office into the band room, found her backpack, and left through a back door. Feeling saved, the girls went home, where Claire got to work on the project she had barely begun, and Estuary lied to her mother about where she had been.

Betty feasted that night. The rising plume of breaking a rule she knew she shouldn't have mixed with the lie she had told to her mother blossomed into flowers of delicate perfumes previously unknown to the demon. Her nose carried her to the Lane of Lies, where she dipped and dabbed until the only evidence left of the sin was the complex scent still lingering in the air. By morning, Estuary felt fine, just fine.

The next day, when Estuary and Claire were called to the office, their mothers were waiting there. As a result of open doors and loose lips, their crimes were discovered, and they were asked to explain themselves. Confessions soon spilled.

Claire's was about as expected. Begging and pleading for understanding. She was just trying to do her homework. She didn't hurt anybody. She knew it was wrong and she was sorry. She would never do it again. And so on.

Estuary, however, was less predictable. By the time the week was out, the stares of her fellow students in the hallways were palpable, which means *Estuary could feel their stares as if they were poking at her face*. The confession of Estuary Alabama soon became legend. It sounded like this.

"It's not like we did anything wrong or whatever. It's not, like, we *stole* a bunch of stuff or whatever. We were just getting our own stuff."

The assistant principal was having none of it. "You climbed into a window that should have been locked to begin with, because the doors to the school were locked, which was a clear sign that you were not supposed to be here. There is nothing about this that isn't you doing something *wrong*."

"So you say, I guess. Seems to me like the problem was locking the doors in the first place. What are you afraid of? That we might come back in the middle of the night and actually learn something?"

Her mother jumped in to try and salvage the situation. "Stu, please don't talk to Ms. Pritchett that way. You know you were in the wrong, here. Otherwise you wouldn't have lied to me when you came home. Just say you're sorry and we can all go home."

"I lied to you to be good, not *wrong*. If I'd told you the truth, I would have been snitching on Claire, which is, like, *completely* wrong, and probably even *evil* or whatever. And then you would've had to decide whether to snitch on *me*, or be loyal or whatever. I mean, if lying to you was wrong, if helping Claire get her homework so she could study harder and whatever was wrong, why don't I feel bad about it? You always tell me to listen to my heart. Well, I'm listening and I just don't feel bad. I did everything right. How can I say I'm sorry when I'm *not* sorry?"

The assistant principal was well done, which means, like an overcooked steak, *she had taken as much heat as she could stand*. "Ok. We're done here. I had planned to settle this with significant detention, perhaps a full week. Given your blatant insubordination, however, you leave me no choice but to issue you both a two day suspension in addition. I expect, Mrs. Alabama, that there will commensurate punishment at home."

By the time detention was complete, Estuary Alabama had gained legendary status, and was well on her way to a *bad reputation*.

This the part where Rain becomes a bit of a prig, I'm sorry to say. Well, the beginning of that part, or maybe the part before that part. A prig is *someone who thinks they're better than everyone else*. If this children's story was for children, or perhaps for young

adults, I might say she *fell in with the wrong crowd*. She did not, however, *fall in with the wrong crowd*, and it would be unfair for me to say so. She simply fell in with a crowd that made her feel smart, important, and, I'm sorry to say, a little better than everybody else. Well, we all make our friends *somewhere*.

Rain made these particular friends at a place called *Autumn Wind*.

Autumn Wind was somewhere between a tavern, a coffee house, and a library, depending on how and when you looked at it. For Rain, it was a refuge. A place to visit when she was sick of wandering the nights alone. A place to rest when she was too wakeful for bed, but too tired for hours of vapid gossip in the tv room. When she wanted to be alone but feel as if she was near people, this was the place she visited.

Up front, the coffee flowed, filling wayward demons with fuel to keep them up and about well into the daylight hours. In the back, down a short stair and into a dark irregularly shaped half basement, those less interested in stimulating their lives could take part in more inebriating experiences. Throughout the building, up and down, in rooms and crannies, were spaces for sitting, for talking, for reading, surrounded in every case with books. Piles laid under tables, small shelves overflowed, and built-in bookcases rose to the ceiling wherever space allowed.

At least, that is how Rain described it when trying to help me understand it. You and I think of taverns and coffee houses as dark noisy places not typically conducive to quiet study. We think of libraries as bright quiet places where noise is unwelcome. This place, however, was both. It was a home for intellectuals. A place for quiet but constant conversation. A place for active and in depth study. A place for deep philosophical thought, which means, *lots of talk about the meaning of life*.

At first, Rain simply meant to get out of the cold. She was on her way back to the hostel, a place she found unwelcoming at best, and outright hostile as worst. Increasingly, the other young demons there would give her a hard time, condemn her for not talking enough, for *thinking she was better than them*. As the hostility increased, she found herself spending more time out and less time at home. A girl can only eat so much, however, and when she had filled her belly with the sins of the world, she still wasn't ready for bed. It might have gone differently had she moved beyond her penchant for the midnight nap. As it was a habit she failed to break, however, she generally found herself wide awake as the sun rose high in the sky, with nowhere to go beside her *hostile hostel*. The *Autumn Wind* looked welcoming by comparison, and on a morning that was too cold for wandering the streets, she thought perhaps a light drink and a quiet place to read might help pass the time.

A cup of tea in hand, she wandered the shelves for something interesting, found a book on dreams, and settled into a too comfortable couch in a dark quiet corner. Hours later, hardly able to keep her eyes open, she pushed outside into the bright winter sun of mid-afternoon, and on to the lonely bed awaiting her at the hostel. That night she slept late, but felt refreshed when she searched for her breakfast among the sleeping sinners. As the night wound down, she once again visited *Autumn Wind*, which had already begun to feel like a home away from home. She spent that morning reading again, and soon settled into the habit, which means, *she went there every morning, sat on the same couch, and read, if not that book, then something else*.

It was not until the morning she found her regular seat taken, that she discovered the real blessings *Autumn Wind* had to offer. Rain had taken a longer than usual nap that night. By the time she made it to her new favorite haunt, the sun was already high, and

she was woozy with too much sleep. *Autumn Wind* was more crowded than usual, even for that hour, and Rain found herself wandering into new areas looking for a quiet place to settle in. On the third floor, she found an empty room set more like a living room than café, with couches and comfortable chairs strewn about the room, and pillows on the floor. Blessing her luck, she settled into a deep chair, hugged her coffee between her knees, and began to read.

She was working her way through a memoir of a well travelled demon entitled *Drifting the Draft*. It was not very engaging, but it was also not terribly long, and she had determined to push her way through it. Enfolded and sucked into the chair, her elbows pushing against the arms that were too tall to rest on, she stared distractedly at the bookshelf on the opposite wall, wondering if she should just give up on the book and try something else. Part of her thought the stupid book deserved it, while the other part thought she owed something to this dreary demon to at least get to the end of the story. It was in this state of indecision that the room became suddenly vibrant.

Three demons sailed in and settled as if they owned the place. They were mid conversation.

"...can't even take care of themselves? I knew this old guy, very specialized tastes, used to only visit athletes. He would sniff out cheats and lick around the edges. Not even big ones, mind you. Just little ones like, *I can't believe the referee didn't call me on that minor infraction*, and what not. And, as I said, he wouldn't even eat them. Not really. Just lick around the edges. Just the crumbly bits on the outside. He would leave the juicy hearts for someone else. Never precious about his finds, just in and out with a bit of crumbly chips here and there, snacking through the night. Because the thing is, and this is my point, the taste was enough. You see?

Not only did he know what he was looking for, he knew when to stop. The thing with your Sloppy Sue is..."

"The thing with my so called *Sloppy Sue*, as you so derisively call her, is that she is not some ancient old thing so set in his ways he wouldn't know excitement if it bit him on the ass. Why in the world you equate some old fart, who probably spends more time complaining about his latest ailment than doing anything *useful*, with a treasure like Maxine Page is beyond me. She is *defining* and entirely new..."

Fully settled in, they were not aware of the fourth demon that arrived behind them, cutting them off in mid-sentence.

"Who's the new girl?"

All eyes turned to Rain, stunned and embarrassed in her silence. Another one said, "Yeah, new girl, who are you, and why are you reading that trash?"

Rain could not quite dare look any of them in the eye. Previously, she had been staring, and the closed book was still in her lap. Once they noticed her however, she looked down, as if she might pretend she was still deep into her book. The deception failed spectacularly, however, given that the book was still closed. Head turned toward her book, she made as if to rise.

Almost mumbling, she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. If I'm not supposed to...I mean...I was just looking for a quiet...I should go."

"It's alright, Comrade, we don't own the place."

"Oh, it's *comrade* again? I thought we moved past that."

"I really don't see why it matters to you in any way. I simply use the sobriquet in the hope that she might share our interests. What I can't understand is why *you* can't move past the history of that moniker and focus on the true meaning?"

"Oh give it a rest, both of you."

Rain had risen and was on her way out of the room when one of the demons grabbed her by the arm. "Seriously, Friend, stay. Sit. Teach us something we don't know."

Rain was taken aback. Unsure how to proceed, she stood, frozen where the young demon had grabbed her arm. Another demon, just coming in the room, but sizing up the situation quickly, said, "Let her go, Barbary, *her world, her ways.*"

"Alright, alright," Barbary responded while letting go of Rain's arm. "But I advise you, Friend, to be done with that book. It is nothing but lies."

Rain, overwhelmed, but finding some small amount of courage, said, "I guess it is pretty stupid. I was getting ready to give up on it anyway."

"Don't like it?"

"A little boring, I guess," Rain said, still frozen in place.

"Well, Mother didn't give me much to work with. She tends to over exaggerate the interest her life might have to others. It was really more of a vanity project than anything else. Not my best work, I admit."

Rain was devastated. She meant to stammer an apology but ended up mumbling something unintelligible as she finally found her feet and headed toward the stairs.

"Don't worry about it. Seriously. Stay. Talk with us. It's always nice to make a new friend. Seriously."

Cautiously, quietly, still hugging the book to her chest, Rain went back to her chair, and somehow managed to make the friends that would change her life.

Teenage souls are solitary places. Dark, dank basements well suited for growing sins, and unwelcoming to those who would feast on them. For the host, our suffering teenagers, they are liminal spaces, which is a way of saying *thresholds*. Well, maybe that

isn't quite enough. A threshold is the bottom of a door, the line you cross when entering a new space. The teenage soul is like a whole room that is just a threshold. A place *between here and there*. A place you pass through *on your way to somewhere else*. Unlike other such spaces, however, they are not easily entered.

Because you are a grownup, you have forgotten much of what you learned in school. You promised yourself you were done learning, or at least done with *schooling*, which is, I suppose, a little different. You allowed yourself to forget all those things that *don't matter at all in real life*. You were wrong of course. You know that now. Nevertheless, those things, what little you learned back in your school days, are hardly more than vague understandings you tell yourself you know, and that you could refresh yourself with at any time, if you actually cared, which you don't.

It's ok. I don't either.

So let's keep this one simple, and get on with the metaphor. Rain falls, collects on the ground, sun evaporates it, whole thing starts over again. The water cycle. Remember? Good enough. Moving on.

A soul is a desert. There is little water and less life. Each sin that graces the surface with its presence, however, adds a little moisture, a little life. As the sins multiply, so too does the moisture, until it starts to dribble, then flow, then pour in raging torrents into vast lakes and greater seas. As the sins are cleaned, the soul dries up. More sins, more wet. Less sins, less wet. Such is our metaphor. As the sins grow into a rain forest, the brooks grow to raging rivers, and the roadways of the soul are born. The soul draft.

Children do not have nearly enough sin to create drafts of their own, but are generally kind enough to welcome demons along a boardwalk of their own making. It is a simple affair sustained by their nightlight, and easily travelled to enter and exit the childish soul. Demons may come and go without fear, as you

might enter the main attraction at a state park. You know, the one with the path that is paved and well travelled, the popular one, perhaps the one they named the park after. The going is easy and the reward is pleasant. You can see some beautiful sights without too much work, then turn around and go home. Without the night-light, of course, the boardwalk collapses, and the park becomes little more than a morass of scrub and thorns, perhaps with remnants of the collapsed boardwalk rotting and threatening to anyone that dare travel upon it. Without the nightlight, there are few ways to navigate the soul until enough water has accumulated to birth raging torrents.

It is this in between time, this place between here and there, this journey from childhood to adulthood, this *liminal space*, that is the teenage soul. A space blooming with moss and trees and undergrowth dripping moisture back into the ground to bring forth thicker and more vibrant life. A space increasingly boggy and damp. A place where so much life has grown that it must start to move and flow and create a habitable and verdant world.

If that space be harvested, however, if that life be not left to breed more life, if it be consumed to the dirt like a field infested by a swarm of locusts, then it must forever remain a desert. It is the untended growth of sin that leads a child to adulthood, a painful growth that must be borne by the teenager alone before they might pass into the next space. For while the teenager *must* pass through this space, it is inaccessible to the demons.

You may have *felt* as if the demons were causing the pain you felt in high school, but it was their *absence* that nearly destroyed you.

Imagine, then, the state of Estuary Alabama's soul as she moved through her teenage years. Imagine the hunger and deprivation of Elizabeth Apple, forgetting her *own* schooling, as she ate

any hint of life on the desert floor. And wonder how our demon might ever escape, if no draft might grow of its own accord.

Inside the increasingly barren soul of Estuary Alabama, Betty Apple did her best to make a life for herself. She settled in a depression she called *Hoggish Hollow*. It was a dry place with little more than scrub to sustain her, but there *was* the scrub, so she could always count on something to feed upon. She quickly tired of it, of course, just like you tired of that mac and cheese after you'd been eating it for three weeks straight. True, it was cheap, and it filled your belly, but remember how you felt looking at it, how your stomach contracted, how you thought, *ugh, I guess, but I wish there was something else*. That's how the scrub was for Betty.

The little scrubby things themselves were sins hardly bigger than *taking the last cookie*. Like in the joke. You know the one. No?

Two learned men are offered a platter with two cookies, one much larger than the other. One of them takes the larger cookie and the other asks, "How can you take the larger cookie? Don't you know that etiquette requires you take the smaller one, and in your generosity, leave the larger one behind?" The first one replies, "Well, which cookie would you have taken?" to which the second responds, "The smaller one, of course." The first learned man looks at the second incredulously. "Well, isn't that what you got?"

Like the first learned man in the joke, Estuary was getting in the habit of acting from her mind, rather than her heart. She would do what she determined to be the rational thing, with little thought of how someone else might feel. She was not evil, not even selfish, at least no more than anyone else. She simply was doing her best to *do the math*, which is a way of saying she sometimes took the bigger cookie because she knew *somebody* was going to get it, so why not her?

At times, little actions like that would bother Estuary and pop up the start of little thistly bushes down in *Hoggish Hollow*. They didn't have much taste. Sort of like crackers without salt. Or plain noodles. Or raw spinach. A young demon could survive on such faire, of course, could keep from withering by simply ingesting the tasteless sustenance, but doing so made for a life that was more than a little miserable. Still, food is food, and the source was reliable. If only for safety, Betty settled down in the hollow so that, at the end of the night, if she had found no food elsewhere, she could at least count on something to get her through the day.

Most nights, she would spend wandering, careful to trace her steps, that she might always find her way home. She would search for some way to exit that dreadful soul, always without success. Along the way, she would sniff out new sins, often just buds that she would devour before they had a chance to grow, but sometimes grand delicious blossoms that had been hiding in some crevice, just waiting for Betty to discover. On those nights, she would sit at the sin, absorbing the smell, and pick it apart, bite by bite. She would try to make it last for hours, savoring the flavor of some old sin that had been allowed to grow.

There was the time Estuary had refused to go to a dance with Braith. She had been cruel in her response, largely because Claire was with her. She had said something like, "Eww, no," and laughed as she left with her best friend. It could have been something else. She might have just walked away. It was the laugh that grew as sin. It tugged at Estuary that night, and drifted about her mind for days after. Betty had been exploring distant reaches of Estuary's soul, and had not noticed the new and interesting smell. By the time she found it, it had blossomed into a delightful flowering plant replete with fragrant overtones surrounding a meaty center of pride. Betty made a feast of that delight, eating one petal at a time before working her way to the heart. For dessert, she nibbled away at the stem.

The meal stretched out for the full night, and by the time she left to go back to the hollow, there was no hint that any sin had ever grown there at all.

Another such night was born of a door slam, the night her father refused to let her go to the mall with Claire before her homework was done. It was little more than a *don't-tell-me-how-to-live-my-life* moment, but, left uncleaned, it bloomed like mold, eventually giving Betty a long night of licking it off the ground and scraping with her nails what she couldn't pull up with her tongue.

Most nights, however, were filled with endless wanderings marked by brief moments of nibbling the stubs of new sins trying to poke their way through the surface. Hungry, desperate, and dreading the dry noodles waiting for her in the hollow, she consumed any hint of something new and different, leaving behind her a blighted landscape growing more bleak with each passing night.

As the days passed, she began to wonder just how long she could survive in this desert, and whether anyone would miss her when she was gone.

On a small plateau overlooking an expansive forest in the soul of Cassius Alabama, there grew a particularly tasty bit of relish. Salty and sour, the mix of soft, crunch, and gooey was exactly what Afia Darrow craved. Laying on her belly, her face close enough to the patch to breathe in the scent, she picked at the little pickled delicacies, and nibbled through the night.

It had been little more than a sarcastic remark, which is *a part of speech that tells you one thing by saying the opposite*, Cassius had spoken to let his wife know he was *on to her*. It wasn't that he knew she had slept with another man, which is to say, *had sexual intercourse with*, though he had his suspicions. What he knew for certain was that Jessica was acting differently than usual.

Suspiciously, perhaps. There was something she wasn't saying, something she was *hiding*. The sarcastic remark was meant to let her know he suspected, without explicitly saying so, just in case he was wrong.

She said: "I may be late tonight. I promised Penny I would stop by and see how she's doing."

He said: "Nice to see *Penny* getting some attention."

She said: "Well, she *has* had a rough time of it."

He said: "She's not the only one."

Jessica kept her mouth shut. Part of her wanted the fight, wanted to get into a screaming match with her husband so when she slammed the door behind her she could feel justified in seeking comfort in another man's bed. The other part, the louder part, did not have the courage. That part told her to pretend he hadn't said anything, to walk quietly out the door like nothing had happened, to leave the bitterness her home had become and attend to her solace elsewhere.

As she closed the door behind her, the response she kept to herself was: "No, Cass. She's not."

Left behind, Cassius was not sure if he had hurt her. He had intended to, but without a fight he could never be certain. Maybe she *was* just going to visit her friend. *Probably*, she was. That poor woman had suffered a lot since the chemo, and had no one to turn to. Not that he liked her very much. She was more than a little insufferable, which, weirdly, sort of means that *you suffered a lot when you were around her*. If Jessica wanted to spend her evening with that woman and leave him home, wasn't he better off? Imagine if she had asked him to come with her.

Perhaps more angry at being left alone than actually suspicious of his wife, Cassius let his remarks swirl around his head, becoming darker with each passage. Here his wife was trying to do something good, and all he could think of was himself. As his eyes

drooped in front of the television, he continued to feel his angry words, disguised to look casual. By the time Jessica slipped into bed, he was deep in sleep, and the relish was flowering. For the better part of that week, it stretched itself upon the plain and tugged at Cassius's stomach, soaking in its own juices, pickling itself into a feisty flavor.

Afia liked the taste. It was more of an appetizer than a meal, but she had found she preferred these light tapas to the heavy comfort food meals she had grown up with. Just a little something to take the edge off. You can't make a meal out of relish, but sometimes it can tide you over just enough to miss your meal altogether. That was how she preferred it. Perhaps later she would find one more snack before meeting up with her friends.

Nibbling on the relish, savoring the flavor, she looked out over the forest below and wondered at what sort of man Cassius must be. A coward certainly. It was perhaps the strongest note in the flavor. It rested solidly in the middle, threatening to overpower the rest. Afia took her time, took patience to deconstruct and study this little nothing of a relish. She let the fear loll about her mouth, a fear something more subtle than pain or embarrassment. It was more like fear of winning, as if he was afraid that if he truly said the words he felt, he might prove to be right, and not be strong enough to do whatever came next. That was certainly the most powerful flavor, the not quite overpowering flavor of *don't start what you can't finish*.

Sprinkled throughout, with the greatest presence on the top, was something closer to love. A less discerning demon would have missed these notes, would have gobbled up the relish tasting nothing but the vinegar of shame and fear as they moved on to the main course. Afia, however, was not interested in a full belly. She was savoring a fine wine, studying the flavors too slowly to even feel the effects in her head. This top note was born of a different fear,

the fear he had been successful, the fear he had hurt his wife. He did love her, Afia could see that clearly, else the love would have no punch. Taking another small bite, breaking it apart in her mouth more with her tongue than teeth, Afia felt deeply the gentle sprinkling of *never hurt the one you love*.

Deep within, buoying up the rest, was something darker. Rich and bitter in the same breath, it gave the relish a heavier flavor than one sensed at first. An exotic flavor that threatened to undo the predictable top notes, it gave the slightest hint of something that didn't quite mix. Cassius had, after all, spoken with purpose. He had intended to hurt his wife and not dared to go far enough. He felt he *should* have hurt her, that *not* hurting her made him weak. Part of this sin then, this complex mixture of *don't start what you can't finish* and *never hurt the one you love*, was something closer to *never let anyone push you around*.

Afia let this complex dish drip down her throat as she continued to savor the scent of what was left in front of her. Picking it apart leaf by leaf, she allowed herself to be awed by the vast forest below her, to wonder at this tiny taste and how it fit in, thoughts that led her to wonder about her own place in the universe. The thoughts swirled about her mind as she began to put together the words she would use later to describe this experience to her friends back at *Autumn Wind*.

Morning after morning, Rain would listen to her new friends wax philosophic, which means to *talk about the meaning of life and stuff*, and tell of their adventures. Whenever the time came to talk of her own, however, she did her best to dodge the question. Her secret truth was that she was still a child feeding off the souls of children. She had not yet tasted the delicate flavors of adulthood, and she was long overdue. Her stomach would turn as she

listened to the adventures of her new friends, praying to herself she would not be noticed.

Theo talked about the thief he liked to visit. This thief seemed to have no fruits from his thefts, yet grew unending fields of prairie from his failure to support his estranged daughter. Theo would wonder out loud about what the man's world cared about, and what it did not. The friends would debate the nature of sin, delve into the idea that what a society called sin was not always felt by individuals. This thief, Theo would suggest, daily committed acts his society had unanimously agreed were wrong. All of his people agreed to agree that theft was not only a crime, but a sin. And yet, here was a member of that society, an individual who clearly disagreed. For, whatever he might say with his voice, on the inside he cared not. Was it then, a sin? Can something be a sin if it does not move you? If it does not spur growth?

Maya, ever one for debate, would point out that the thief *did* feel sin, just not *that* sin.

"But that is exactly my point, dear Maya," Theo would always reply. "The sin he feels, the sin that so deliciously feeds my peaceful nights is one his people care not for. They excuse the man his failures because his daughter is grown. Because she is old enough *to take care of herself*. Because, for one reason or another, these people have agreed that *taking* is wrong, but that *not giving* is just, well, just the way it is, I suppose."

Maya would then debate him on some small point, such as the similarity of taking and not giving, which would ultimately take the two of them down some semantic debate. Their voices would rise as their friends watched, sometimes with interest, though more often with boredom, until Afia would point out that they were basically saying the same thing, and attempt to change the subject.

Afia would speak of the road to peace and understanding. Of the ascetic life. Of meditation and serenity. Rarely talking about where a sin came from, or even the taste, she would try to share the feeling she had when eating it. What it made her think about. How her inner quiet allowed her to recognize a scent dripping in an unseen corridor, how it brought a balance to the aftertaste in her mouth from her last bite. She would speak of the pleasures of lying upon her back, drifting upon the soul draft, taking in sights and scents, trying to see a soul as a complete entity, rather than just a collection of individual sins.

Vivian would brag about some high profile sinner she had edged her way into. It was always someone that had a pretty tight connection between vice and sin. She would frequent murderers and arsonists, rapists and pedophiles, crooked lawyers and bankers, people who bought into society yet broke its rules anyway. Barbary would scoff and say something like, "You sound more like my mother than *she* does." It sounded good, but as it happened, he was even worse. He would bring conversations around to his latest exploit, always turning minor incidents into hyperbolic adventures, which means *he exaggerated a lot*.

Andrea didn't speak much, and when she did it was always with some clever and cutting comment. If, in the middle of some argument, Maya said, "You can't possibly *believe* that, Theo," Andrea might cut in with, "If he *believed* it, Mymy, he wouldn't waste your time *saying* it," by which she meant that Maya was easy to bait. Everyone would laugh, but Theo and Maya would feel just a little smaller as they toned down the debate.

They would talk and jibe and philosophize, and Rain would sit in the corner, pretending to read, taking it all in but afraid to participate. They were all so *experienced* with the world, and she had never even been in a fully grown soul. She felt like a child herself, embarrassed for her lack of experience, too shy to ask for help.

Quietly happy that at least she was allowed to bask in the presence of these fascinating creatures, she would look up from time to time, to show them that she at least dared to listen. As the sun rose high, they would wander off to their homes, acknowledging her as they left. It was a nice feeling that turned dark as soon as they had all gone, and she remembered she had nowhere to go but her dreary room at the hostel.

One afternoon after everyone but Afia and Rain had left, Afia leaned back on her sofa and looked hard at Rain. Head in her book, but keenly aware of Afia's stare, Rain pretended not to notice. Pretending, however, is not always an easy thing. If this children's story was for children, I would say something about imagination and pretending, and their loss being the cause of all the troubles adults make with the world. In *this* story, however, we know better. Because we are adults, we know that sometimes pretending is just a way of hiding, a tool *offear* rather than *against* it. Afia knew this as well.

Rain felt the gaze of the demon across the room dig into her, exposing all of her secrets. Without looking up, she could sense the raising of Afia's eyebrow, the subtle but clear expression of, *you're not fooling anyone, little girl, least of all me.*

Out loud, Afia said, "Well?"

Rain knew she was caught, but pretended just a little longer. She put down her book and said, "Huh?"

And Afia said, "Huh?"

And Rain said, "What?"

And Afia said, "What?"

And Rain said, "I don't understand."

And Afia put her arms behind her along the back of the couch. She allowed the smile of arrogance to cross her lips and a light laugh to escape from her nose. "If you want to play with the big dogs, Chicky, you've got to get off the porch."

And Rain said, "I don't know what you mean."

And Afia, knowing full well she did, sat back in silence, waiting for Rain to confess. They stared at each other for some time, Rain feeling every moment with fear and embarrassment, and Afia enjoying the moments as they stretched before her, watching the girl squirm and close in on confession like one might watch a leaf change color. She had nowhere to go and all the time in the world. She was enjoying herself and felt no sympathy for this squirming demon afraid of her own shadow. Rain tightened up, attempted to hold on, but it was late, and she was long overdue for bed. She had not the strength.

At that point, it took little more than a nod from Afia's head for Rain to give herself over.

"The thing is, you guys are all so amazing, and I'm just this nothing nobody that wasn't even good enough for my sister. I watch you guys every night, and all I can think is how cool it would be to be like you, to be smart and funny and adventurous and just, like, bursting with all this experience, all this, like *relevant* experience, not like my stupid teachers or...and sometimes I think, ok, maybe I could be that someday, except that's never going to happen because I've never done anything in my life and probably never will. I've never even been in a real fully grown soul. All night long I clean up little children with their nightlights on because I'm afraid that even if I did ride a draft in somewhere, if I did figure it out, if I could, what did you call it, *play with the big dogs*, I'd probably fall off and never find my way out. It's like it really was Betty all along. Like all these things I thought I was, all that was just me following her. Without her I'm just, I don't know, always scared. With you all I'm afraid to say anything because you'd all be like, *well what does she know? She still plays with babies*. I don't even know why you guys let me hang out here. I guess. I don't know."

Afia nodded, the smile still on her face.

She said, "Let's go."

Rain was still shaking. "Go? Go where?"

Afia rose up and offered her hand to Rain. "To play with the big dogs."

Rain froze. "But's it's the middle of the day."

Afia laughed a high squeak. "Oh, Chicky, someone's always sleeping *somewhere*."

It would have been easy for Estuary to become a *bad girl*. Not feeling the weight of her sins, at least not for long, she might have learned to sin at greater heights. She might have used her power, for it was nothing less, for personal gain, or for vengeance, or for any number of reasons we know to be selfish and mean. True, she feared the real life consequences of her actions, the detentions or angry stares or weekends spent grounded by her father. Even with such fear, however, can a person truly handle a power such as she? The only teenager in her school, in her town, perhaps in the world, who felt not the pangs of shame, the aches of regret, the burden of sin, can it be that she would not rise to be the greatest villain of all?

In grown up stories, such people are corrupted, for it is said that power always corrupts. In those stories, they are portrayed as monsters, the evil half we all shelter inside of us, let loose to bring their reign of terror upon the earth. Perhaps that is the way of the world. Perhaps we are all inherently evil, just waiting for our conscience to stop bothering us so we can get on with the good stuff. Perhaps that is the world we have inherited. As much as I would like to, I just cannot say.

What I *can* say is that in *this* story, for *this* girl, corruption was not quite in the cards. Not quite. She and her best friend were not ones to steal, not ones to cheat, not ones to hurt others. Claire had a conscience, it was true. Like the rest of the world her age, she felt the weight of every mistake, every hurtful look, every guilty

thought, growing slowly but inevitably like her breasts and pubic hair. It was not the conscience of Claire that kept the two of them honest, however. It was, perhaps, something a little more mundane. Without the guidance of a conscience, Estuary Alabama had little to guide her life beyond what logic she could discern from the world. Logic is a sort of *rulebook*, an arithmetic you can use to find the answer when you can't trust the one coming from your heart.

Had her logic been based solely on her happiness, or a desire for personal gain, or for power, she might have turned out more like the monsters from our grown up stories. Instead, somewhere back in her childhood, somewhere back so far she no longer remembered, she decided that her logic, her rulebook, the math she used to figure out the world, would be based on *not hurting anyone*. Had her conscience grown to rule her, she might have changed the math to go with it. As it was, however, with no conscience to be found, she simply did her best to follow the logic, with the goal always of *live and let live*, or, *no harm, no foul*, or for the doctors among us, *first, do no harm*.

There were, of course, vices that did not fit neatly into her logical system, and she tasted many of them. The girl that had no heart to listen to, however, had only her mind to tell her what to do. She tried cigarettes and beer, and even some marijuana, but none of it seemed worth trying a second time. They were just bad tastes that sometimes left her feeling even less like herself, taking away the only remaining part of her that allowed her to make it from one moment to the next.

As for boys, they seemed so badly to want the fruits of their particular vice of choice that she generally gave in out of sympathy. The vice itself gave her little pleasure. So few things did. Yet, it seemed to cause no harm to anyone, and there seemed little reason to deny the boys something they so desperately desired. She did

her reputation no favors, of course, but as she cared little for what others thought, she continued to go her own way.

Because this children's story is not for children, I suppose I don't have to tell you that when a boy gets what he wants, he quickly begins to lose interest. So it was with the boys Estuary *went out with*. While I don't care to get into the sordid details, it is enough to know that Estuary occasionally went on dates which only continued to cement her reputation as a *bad girl*.

On those nights, Claire would usually stay at home watching television, wondering what all the fuss was about. Clearly, her best friend did not care for the dates herself. Estuary often talked of how much she dreaded them. It was more of a service she felt she should provide, a role she played for others rather than for herself. Claire came to imagine dating as a burden, rather than a joy. On the nights that her best friend went out with some boy, she did not stay home and cry. She stayed home and counted her blessings.

When a boy stole Claire's heart, then, she was completely unprepared. She fell. Hard. If this was a love story, I might speak of the color of his hair, the sharpness of his eye, the tremor in his voice as he approached this quiet friend of the girl with the bad reputation. I might speak of the class they took together, how he had watched her across the room for months, always afraid to talk to her. I might speak of the winter dance that finally gave him the excuse he was looking for, and the awkward scene beside her locker when he found the words to ask her if he might see her there. If this was a love story, I might even speak of the dance itself, how he asked her to dance, and, standing next to her as the music ended, asked her *if, like, maybe she might want to, y'know, dance again, maybe?* Sadly, this is *not* a love story. It is a children's story. The best I can say is that when Estuary was least expecting it, her best friend fell in love.

Just because this story is not a love story, however, does not mean there is no love in it. For when Estuary realized her best friend would be occupied for the rest of the dance, as she began to dread the prospect of some needy boy seeking her attention, as she wandered out onto the cold thinking about walking home alone, she saw a boy she knew sitting on the steps that would have stolen her heart if she had only possessed one.

It is traditional for soul demons to work alone. Not required, but traditional. They, and we, are better off, I assure you. For, while they are social creatures by habit, they are intensely competitive when feeding, which means *they get along fine at home, but fight a lot at work*. It does happen, of course, that two demons find themselves in the same soul. Not every time do they notice their version of the *occupied* sign hanging outside the door. They should. It is expected of them. It may be little more than a *do not disturb* to warn others away, just for a bit, *just while I eat*, but signs should be read. What is expected, however, is not always what *is*. Just like you, they can be a little lazy. Or distracted. The results are rarely pretty.

Remember that time you woke up on the wrong side of the bed? When you felt angry all morning? When you couldn't kick the feeling that everything was wrong, and it was all someone else's fault? That day when you just wanted everyone to get out of your way and leave you alone? That's the sort of day you had after demons spent the night scrapping in your soul.

One of them was happily snacking away when she smelled an intruder. Anger rose up and she sailed upwind with a violence rarely seen outside the soul. When she spotted him, she probably shouted something like, "Get out!" to which he undoubtedly replied, "Make me!" which, of course, she proceeded to do. Childish, really. Well, no surprise. This is a children's story, after all.

The fighting was no doubt intense. Sins growing along walls, in caverns and prairies, in valleys and sloughs, were trampled under foot. Where they had gently nudged you to *think about what you had done*, where they had nudged you toward *doing better next time*, where they had patiently awaited a slow death where you might finally forget your stupidity, they were now pushed back into the ground, crumpled and ruined. It is not a position in which sins thrive. Nor is such a state conducive to the lessons sins so often teach us, which is a way of saying, *you can't learn your lesson from a sin that's been smushed*. You still felt the pain, or guilt, or shame, or even regret, but suddenly felt that it was something someone did to you, and no longer something you had done to yourself.

By the time they left your soul that night, if they even survived, the ruin was everywhere, and both of them were still hungry. That's why you were angry at the world. That's why you felt like nothing was your fault. That's why you were sure everyone around you was an idiot.

And that's the reason for the *occupied* sign, or what the demons sometimes call a *left behind*.

The demons are not proud of this part of their nature. As a rule, they would rather just live and let live, so to speak. Something happens upon the draft, however. Something grabs hold of them, and instinct takes over. Even the best of friends cannot share a soul together without spending the night tearing each other apart. Even sisters. There is a reason Betty and Rain sought out different souls on their nightly jaunts. It was simply a question of survival.

So, when Afia took young Rain under her wing to show her the ropes, which are two different ways of saying *teach her*, it was the greatest of shocks to Rain when Afia offered to accompany her inside.

"Isn't that, like, crazy dangerous?"

"Of course it is, Chicky. Otherwise it wouldn't be any fun."

"But we could, like, get hurt."

A condescending smile fought to take over Afia's lips, but lost to a more genuine one. She merely said, "Yup," and carried Rain onto her first coast along a proper soul draft.

Inside, Rain was astounded at the wonders she saw. Riding along, sometimes above and sometimes below, she saw woods and pastures, swamps and outcroppings, mountains and seas, all teeming with life. She saw new crops bursting through the ground, fresh from that day, and fungus from rotting sins left alone so long they faded back from where they had sprung. Scents she had never dreamed of pervaded her senses, which is a fancy way of saying she *smelled new things*.

"Alright, Chicky, off you go. Get yourself a snack."

Carelessly, casually, Afia pushed Rain off and continued alone on the draft.

Rain landed awkwardly and stumbled to the ground. Looking up at her mentor sailing away, she shouted, "But how do I get out of here?"

Afia, almost out of hearing, shouted back, "Same way you got in, Chicky. You'll figure it out."

And Rain sat on the ground, nibbling at some flower with a funny but interesting taste, wondering if she was finally grown up herself. That wonderful new feeling, however, did not last long, for, of course, sharing a soul with another demon never turns out well.

By the time she finally made her way out, she was bruised, bloody, and broken. Dejected, however, she was not. She had ridden her first draft, tasted her first fruits of a grown soul, and survived the shapeshifting of a waking soul. It was the night she had been waiting for. The night to drive her from her childhood. The test she had been dreading, and which she had aced.

As for her mentor, the demon who had held her hand before pushing her in the water and daring her to swim, well, let's just say Afia learned her own lesson about attempting to share a soul, and the arrogance that led her to try it.

The soul of Braith Franklin was filling out nicely. The little sins, like putting off his homework and shoving the mess in his bedroom under his bed, were creating a pleasant flavor, delicate flowers adorning treetops and dotting pastures. Beneath, a broader foundation of the usual teenage shames created a base upon which these little accents could flourish. I don't suppose his base looked a whole lot different from any number of teenage boys, for the things he was ashamed of were not unique. He was shy around girls, he didn't raise his hand when he knew the answer, he skipped opportunities to be social in favor of staying home with tv, books, and masturbation. Of course, none of these things are sins in themselves. They are only sins when you promise yourself you won't do them, and do them anyway. Break your rules, fertilize your soul. Break little rules, grow little flowers. Break big rules, and the weeds flourish into woods.

What then, of the biggest sin? The one from whence sprung the rich soil feeding the roots of the forest? It is a question not so easily answered. For while the sins that grew into the verdant landscape of Braith's soul were known, perhaps even forgivable, the base from which they sprung was too great for Braith to face. Like you, Braith's great sin, the sin from which all others fed and took life, was made before he understood it. It was a young sin, a childish sin, but a sin nonetheless. It wasn't much, really. It was little more than wetting his pants with joy during his first vaguely sexual experience with a girl.

If this were a grown-up story, the next few words, or pages, or let's face it, the rest of the book most likely, would be about how

this boy's feelings of sexual inadequacy followed him throughout his life. That is not, however, the story you came to read, and it is certainly not the one I care to tell. In *this* story, it matters only that Braith did something he sort of kind of maybe knew he shouldn't have, but couldn't quite understand why, and so had not yet learned to forgive himself. Sadly, a rich soil that feeds a forest can hardly be eaten away by a demon, even one with a voracious appetite. Even once the soul draft is flowing and the place is *open for business*, so to speak, such foundational soil must dry and wither of its own accord.

Sitting on the steps outside the high school, separated from the music and hormones inside the gym, Braith could feel the roiling growth in his soul. Roots dug deeper into the soil, feeding off of his great sin even as they gave it strength. As usual, he felt as if everything was wrong, without having any idea what it was *exactly* that was bothering him. The friends he had come with were still inside, and he had half determined to walk home. It wasn't far. Less than a mile, anyway. He knew he ought to go back in, find some nice girl to dance with, make an effort, but every time he considered the idea, he only shuddered with visions of rejection. After three *I-don't-feel-like-it-right-nows*, and one blatantly obvious turning of the back as he approached, he wasn't sure he could take it again.

And he wasn't sure they were worth it.

Such was the state of Braith Franklin as Estuary Alabama walked out the front door and prepared to pass him on her way down the stairs. She recognized him, of course. They were not strangers. In the years that had passed since their strange moments of intimacy, they had avoided each other, had hardly spoken to one another, had not ever talked about their experience, but they could hardly keep from running into one another. Even a large high school is a small community, and two teenagers of roughly

the same age are bound to see each other from time to time. Yet, this was the first time they had spoken to one another in years.

She said something mundane.

He did too.

She said something about the dance being stupid.

He agreed.

She said something about all the stupid boys who only want her stupid body and wouldn't leave her alone.

He said something sarcastic, suggesting that he would relish such attention.

She said something about how it wasn't as good as it sounded.

He said something about how no one would dance with him.

She said something about she would if he wanted.

He said something about it not being the same.

She supposed he was right.

He said something about just wanting to go home.

She said something about feeling the same way.

He said he could walk her home.

She said she thought that would be nice.

They cut through the dark fields and talked along the way.

He talked about being lonely.

She talked about being lonely.

And although, at her doorstep, he failed to kiss her good-night, perhaps fearful of rejection, or because of the deep soil feeding his soul, or perhaps just because he was trying to take the hint about all those boys who just *wanted her for her body*; they left each other feeling a warm glow they couldn't quite name, but which could hardly be anything but love.

So far, our story has been, well, if not entirely pleasant, certainly not *unpleasant*. That is about to end. If you don't have the stomach for it, which is a way of saying *if unpleasant things make*

you feel sick, then it is probably time for you to abandon your journey. For, although I have repeatedly referred to this story as a children's story, it does not end happily. Certainly not for Estuary Alabama. It has been a pleasure sharing this much of the story with you, and I wish you well on what I hope are more pleasant journeys to come. If you need some small amount of closure, let it suffice that, although Elizabeth Apple is soon to do harm at a level looked down upon even by her fellow demons, she does learn her lesson before our tale is done. Let that be enough.

For the rest of you, let us visit the soul of Estuary Alabama, several weeks after the preceding scene, now sunk in the depths of romantic love.

When we last visited this place, it was a sort of high plains desert dotted with scrub and the rare blooms hiding in unexplored crevices where Betty might discover a special meal with delight, before going back to her dreadful diet of sagebrush and lichen. Well, that's how I imagine it, anyway. As Betty, or Elizabeth, as she calls herself now, described it to me, it was more like matzo, or maybe communion wafers, something that is palatable only with salt and a little water to wash it down, but which will suffice to keep you from starving.

What she actually said was, "Imagine you could press the air into little chips that would crunch in your mouth, but they've been left out until they got stale, almost soggy, really, just enough so that there was nothing to bite into, but maybe you could let it mush up in your mouth. You can't quite swallow it though, because you don't have anything to wash it down with, so you just have to wait for it to turn to this tasteless paste you hope will make it all they way down your throat."

These were the little branches she would pull off the shrubs, as I imagine them. Sagebrush looking things few and far between, dotting *Hoggish Hollow*, offering a bare nutrition, but tasting for

all the world like that time you tried your noodles plain, and they were dry and sticky and not quite fully cooked, and you instinctively grasped for your water and swore you would never try that again.

This was the soul of Estuary Alabama as we had seen it last. The soul of a teenage girl that should have been growing untended, blooming into great forests, but instead consumed so quickly it never had a chance to flower. A bare place. A lonely place. A place, however, that could still sustain the demon trapped inside it, if only at the bare edge of existence.

Several weeks into the girl's burgeoning love with Braith, the place was no longer recognizable. For, where there had been scrub, there was nothing. Where there had been the rare flower, there was nothing. Where there had been hope, there was nothing. As far as the eye could see, as far as the foot could travel, there was nothing but barren landscape completely devoid of sustenance.

Such is the power of love.

Remember? When you had just fallen for her, and blew off practice because she needed help with her homework, and more than anything you just wanted to be with her, and when you showed up to practice the next day your coach asked you where the hell you had been and you said something like, *sorry Coach, it was an emergency*, but didn't feel bad about it at all, didn't have any guilt, weren't bothered in the least, because you knew that the only thing that mattered, the only thing in the world that had any value, was *her*?

That night, nothing sprouted in your soul.

It never lasts long, of course. I don't have to tell *you* that. That night you had your first doubt about him, when he looked a little more tired than usual and you wondered why he didn't seem special, and when you got home and lied to your mother about where you had been, but this time lying felt a little more wrong than it

did a couple of nights ago, the flowers punched through the forest floor anew, and when you woke up the next morning, you wondered about that twisting in your stomach and avoided your mom as you ran out the door to school.

Well, it's nice while it lasts, anyway.

Two weeks and four days of love did not destroy the forest in Braith Franklin's soul. The lack of growth could hardly be noticed in the untended morass of flower, jungle, and swamp that had filled every nook and cranny, and were on the verge of giving rise to the first hint of a soul draft. For Braith had lived without tending for over five years. He had borne the pain all teenagers do as their sins take over their souls without relent, which is a way of saying, *they never stop growing*, and a short break at the edge of adulthood could hardly be worth mentioning.

The soul of Estuary Alabama, however, was quite literally an entirely different climate. Her soul had been so well tended, or perhaps better said, *overly* tended, that when the growth stopped altogether, there was soon nothing left at all. Elizabeth Apple, no longer the frivolous demon of *something like fifteen*, having suffered through loneliness and near starvation for nearly five years, was now starving in earnest. Facing death after her long torture, it could hardly be argued that she was not at least *something like twenty*, if not far older. Surviving a near death experience can make us younger, encourage us to live life to the fullest, seek more adventure. Such an experience can only be called *near death*, however, if you do not die. Until the threat is over, while only death lay before you, it is only older that we become.

Watch Elizabeth Apple, *something like twenty*, lying upon the ground, not a hint of sustenance in sight, no longer strong enough to stand, to explore the reaches of the soul on foot, waiting for death to take her before her time. She is no longer sad. She is

no longer angry. She is not even hungry. She is resolved only to die.

It was in such a state that a last pang of hunger hit her. One final reminder of what she was facing, of her impending doom. The pang filled her body and infused her with anger, which is a way of saying, *the anger became one with the rest of her, until you could not tell them apart*. First it was anger at herself for getting stuck there in the first place. Then she was angry with herself for not escaping. Then she was angry at her sister for not rescuing her. Then she was angry at her host for trapping her there in the first place, something Betty became increasingly convinced was done very much on purpose. Then she was angry at herself for giving up. Then she was just angry.

And in that last gasp of strength, with her last moment of life, she took one last action, made one last choice. Violently, with what little strength remained, she scraped her hands into the hard dirt, vowing to tear apart what was left of that barren soul, and take it to the next world with her.

She scraped and dug, and tore the ground apart.

She pushed past the hard rock on top to a slightly moist layer below.

She dug deeper, into a soil, until her arms had penetrated the surface to their extremity.

And there, just at the tip of her reach, she touched something. Something root like. Something just big enough for her to grip with her hand. Something that she could pull upon, slowly. Something that might provide one more day of survival, if only she could get at it. She pulled and tugged, increasingly worried she might break it, trying with all her might to get it to the surface intact.

Not sure if she had the strength to go on, she took a small rest, never letting her hand leave the root. Catching herself dozing,

however, she cursed herself for a lazy fool and doubled her efforts. Then, with one final pull, with every last bit of strength she possessed, she ripped the root-like thing to the surface where it immediately blossomed into the most fragrant and delicious flower Elizabeth had ever seen.

Grabbing the heart of the flower by her other hand, she pushed it into her face, where she smelled it with what might otherwise have been her dying breath. Lying on her back, sure that she had a respite of one more day, she pulled off one petal at a time, enjoying as best she could what she surely believed to be her last meal.

There is no place in a children's story for the desires that drive married men and women to *seek attention elsewhere*. If that is what you are interested in, I'm afraid you have already wasted too much of your time. It is true, of course, that many marriages fail, and that infidelity, or *having sexual intercourse with people other than your spouse*, is often tied up in that failure. That is a part of human nature it would be irresponsible to deny. Such a subject, however, is the province of an ocean of grownup stories you may seek on your own, should you care to punish yourself further.

In this story, it is enough to know that Jessica Alabama was unhappy in her marriage, and *sought attention elsewhere*. She was not in love with anyone. Not her husband. Not her first lover, nor her second, nor her third, whom she had just thrown over. She was simply unhappy and doing what she could to change her fate. The lovers did not make her happy.

They made her unhappy.

Miserable really.

Yet, she continued to seek new ones, hopeful that the next one would be different.

When that fastidious old bachelor, Cornelius Feschenshut paid regular calls to the soul of Jessica Alabama, she would wake up in the morning next to her husband, the memory of the previous night's affair still fresh in her mind, feeling for all the world as if everything was going to be ok. Sometimes she felt justified (her husband did not give her enough attention). Sometimes she felt mischievous (it was fun to break the rules sometimes, as long as you don't get caught). Sometimes she just felt satisfied (what was the harm, after all). When Cornelius Feschenshut paid her regular calls, she was at peace, and that peace verged on happiness.

When Feschenshut bored of her, however, she began to wake up feeling miserable. Her stomach turned at the pain she might be causing Cassius. Her face winced at the thought of her lover dressing quickly the night before, to get home before his absence might be discovered by his wife. Her heart sunk at the thought of what her daughter might say if she knew, her own mother, the one person she could always count on, betraying her family. Misery took her over, and she sought ways of diminishing it, which means, *make herself feel a little less horrible*. Soon enough, she would wonder if maybe if she could just have one more night of love, one more memory, a really good one, maybe she could make the misery go away, that maybe *seeking attention elsewhere* would bring her happiness again.

Between lovers, she would try to turn over a new leaf. Spend more time at home. More time with Cassius. If she had confessed, maybe things might have worked out. For, even without the attentions of an old hand like Feschenshut, there are ways to soothe the soul. Confession, contrition, charity, these things may be hard, but they often work. If she had been honest, told the whole truth, begged forgiveness, not just *say* she was sorry, but *be* sorry, performed some penance to cleanse her soul, done all of the things we expect from our heroes in a children's story, perhaps they could

have been happy. As she did none of things, however, Cassius continued to mistrust her, and they drifted further and further apart, which is a way of saying, *like two ships travelling in opposite directions, they could no longer hear each other's shouts above the waves.*

They fought more, spent more time apart, and soon enough Cassius also sought attention elsewhere. They were both sad most of the time and wondered if, instead of spending more time together, maybe what they really needed was to spend *less* time together. Quietly, and always out of hearing of their daughter, they began to discuss living in separate buildings.

Not divorce.

Not yet.

Though close enough.

In an adult story, this idea would be reasonable. We would see these well meaning people as having suffered through an increasingly loveless marriage, feel sympathy for what they have been through, and hope that it might end. We would wish them well, and see the power in leaving unhappiness behind for new and greener pastures. We would believe that leaving their failed marriage behind would undoubtedly lead to new lives filled with happiness and contentment.

In a children's story, however, choosing your own happiness over that of others never turns out well. In a children's story, keeping your promises makes you happy, and breaking them leads to ruin. In an adult story, choosing yourself over others can be the height of wisdom. In a children's story, it makes you a selfish fool.

In a children's story, selfishness, and it can be no less, always leads to some unbearable loss.

I'm sorry to say that such loss is inevitable.

It is already beginning.

For even as Cassius and Jessica begin to discuss their unhappiness, how they might be happier alone, who will take which car, who will live where, as well as all the other details that separating two lives from one another involves, their daughter, the one part of them they could not sever in two, was beginning her descent into a darkness from which she would never recover.

They did not notice until it was too late.

Rain slept through the rest of that day, and well into the following night. When she awoke, she was starving, and wandered off to take her first solo journey on a soul draft.

That visit was to Pelagia Rakes. There wasn't a whole lot going on inside Pelagia, but Rain did find some lovely nibbles from the gratuities Pelagia always rounded down. Dotting the plains were little rock outcroppings, and between them, short grasses like a sheet to coat the world. Not much to dine on, but a lovely snack, something between sage and spearmint with a crunchy shell. Rain dug through them, ultimately settling on little nosh hiding in the shadow of an outcropping. Moist and plump, they were mushrooms born of the empty pillow from last month's hotel stay, where Pelagia had thought about leaving something for the maid and decided against it. They were mushy and decidedly *not sweet*, but after a lifetime of nothing but sweets, even a tasteless mushroom was a *new* tasteless, and it made her smile.

In Tonya Richen, Rain got her first taste of soul crushing shame. At first, she simply rode the draft over the kind of woods she was getting increasingly familiar with. Trees of half truths shading a floor of thorny scrub born of vanity. The lies of a lifetime as some grownup tells herself she is not quite who others think she is. Covering up with words, with clothes, with deeds, the loss of youth. Such things are not, of course, sins in themselves. Perhaps we might see lying as a vice, though most reasonable people only

think of the big ones that way. The *little white lies*, the *caring a little too much about the view in the mirror*, the *pretending to like what the kids like, even when you'd rather be listening to the music you grew up with*, they are not evil. They might not even be *wrong*. But when they are things you do while you tell yourself you *shouldn't*, when the little voice on your shoulder reminds you that the last time, you said it would be the *last time you ever said it*, that is when they turn from overgrown shrubs to shady trees to woodland forest. The flavors vary, of course. In Tonya Richen, it was a thick spinach salad with hot bacon dressing. A similar woodland in Murphy Kristal was closer to pea soup, the cheese melting into to the top layer, the croutons soggy on the outside with just a touch of crunch left in the middle. Rain explored these new flavors with abandon, angry at herself for having taking so long to discover them.

More than the new flavors, however, Rain enjoyed the feeling of riding the drafts. She would skim down and roll into jumps where she could see vast swaths of the soul below her. She would ride into a hole only to ramp up and jump over some soggy marsh, landing in the mud and laughing as if it were the greatest joke that she had never done it before. The way you laughed the first time you really danced, and wondered what took you so long. Remember how your heart lit up, not just with love, but with pride at having dared? Those moments came so fast for Rain she often failed to stop at all. She would spot some delicate flower as she surfed by and think, *I'll come back for that*, preferring instead the speed the draft. More often than not, she rode it right on up and out, forgetting to eat altogether.

Easton, the lane changer, had all kinds of treats, but the draft was so fast, she never tasted him at all. She flew low over the plains of his bad habits, wondering what those grasses might taste like, and what the colorful flowers dotting them might be. Had she

stopped, she might have sucked out the juices from those flowers, honks and shouts from other drivers, condemnations Easton knew he deserved, anger he did his best to ignore as they faded into the distance behind him on the highway. As she was rolling up a hill only to fly down the other side, she smelled the scent of fresh onion grass, the result of the dents he had left in a parked car the night before. The scent was intriguing, but she just couldn't bring herself to stop, hungry though she was. As she rolled down the last hill, she was surprised to find herself flying out of Easton's soul altogether, moving so fast she nearly failed to capture her *left behind* before moving on to her next ride.

Five more visits and she had hardly satisfied her appetite for food, though she felt better than she had since her sister had run off. She was at long last coming out from under her sister's shadow, and it brought a smile to her face. By the time she flew out of Angel Wolf, she was happy, content, and ready for bed. The next night was much the same. Finally, she was feeling adult, grownup, and independent. The week was nearly over before she thought to visit her friends at *Autumn Wind*.

"...the one who is *really* in power, of course, which means he had just about *everything* at stake, but he just can't *help* himself, you know? And *she's* a movie star, but not just like *any* movie star, but this, like, up and coming, best thing to hit the scene since whatever, so you just *know* the paparazzi are following her constantly, and this will, like, end up on the front page of the whatever, and he doesn't even *feel* it. That's what I mean. I spent like half the night in there, and all the tasties were about, like, giving bad advice to these powerful whatevers so he can get more for himself, and he actually feels *bad* about it. Like bad enough that I'm completely *gorged*. You should visit him, Dre. You'd like him. He's all, like,

sharp and sticky and, like, you don't really taste him until he's half-way down."

"Yes, Darling, but how does he taste when he's coming back up?"

Everybody laughed, and Andrea raised her arm along the back of the couch with a smug smile. Barbary tilted his head to Vivian.

"Really, Viv, you should know better."

"Whatever. Like I care about Dre's little jokes. The point, though, is like, this girl, this up and coming or whatever, will be completely ruined and it doesn't even bubble for him."

Afia leaned forward for her coffee and raised a curious glance. "Ok," was all she said.

"Ok?"

"Yeah, Vivvy, ok. Ok, as in, who cares? So he feels worse ruining some particular millionaires than others. Who cares?"

Maya smiled. The conversation was going her way. "Right. Why should we even care about these stupid capitalists anyway? Let them suffer, is what I say."

"Not the point, Mye, and you know it. It doesn't matter whether they are rich or famous or not. Well, not to anyone but Vivian."

Andrea raised her glass in silent toast to the light joke.

"What I mean is, why should we care *what* they suffer about. They all suffer about *something*. The more variety, the better, I say."

Vivian grunted. "Ugh, you just don't get it."

Again, they all laughed.

Theo had just begun with a new line of thought, something like, "I had a new flavor tonight that reminded me of that story you were telling me, Maya. The one about the..." when Rain stumbled in and collapsed on the empty armchair. Her entrance cut him off.

Barbary turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "Well, if it isn't the baby bruiser herself. The terrible toddler. *Le mechant enfant*."

"She doesn't look half as bad as you," Andrea said, looking over at Afia, "even today. I'm starting to suspect your little story."

"Well," Afia returned, "I *did* say she got the better of me, though I must admit, I do remember doing *some* damage. Where have you been all week, Chicky? Nursing your wounds in bed?"

Rain was in a daze after yet another wild night surfing souls. She hardly recognized that they were talking to her. Everyone turned to her, waiting for her to break the silence. Tired but confident, no longer the scared child she had been, she threw off her response without a care, as if they had come into *her* place, and not the reverse.

"Wounds? Like plural? You had more than one?"

Everyone laughed.

As the laughter settled down, Andrea looked to Rain and said, "It's about time someone put the smug one in her place."

Rain continued, "Actually, we *both* did some serious damage. I had no idea I could get so angry. When they taught us in school never to share a soul, I mean, I believed it and everything, but I had no *idea*."

"Never mess with a demon's lunch."

"Has anyone ever beat it? I mean, has anyone ever been able to share without, y'know, I mean..."

"Killing each other?" Theo answered. "Well, you two did pretty well."

"I mean, yes," Rain came back, "but we *nearly* killed each other."

"Yvette Monier and Delores Marino did it."

Everyone turned to Barbary.

"Mother told me about it. I put it in the book. They were partners. Went everywhere together. They used to walk side by side

together through souls sharing the same treats. They didn't even mark the doors."

"They didn't mark the doors, Bar, because they were serial killers."

"Wait, wait. I read the book and don't remember any of that," Rain said.

"You have to read the *special edition*. It all got cut by the editors because..."

"Because they were *lacking in evidence*, my famous friend. And they were lacking in evidence because it never happened." Maya was on a roll. "Seriously, demons sharing souls and luring unsuspecting novices in and hacking them to bits? Completely ridiculous. First, the smell. Do you seriously think anyone could miss the stench of a single demon inhabiting a soul, let alone *two*? Second, what would the point even be, to eat twice as much? I mean, why? I mean, who wants to even *snack* in a soul that's already been munched that night. It's completely gross."

"Just because it's gross, Maya, doesn't make it false."

"Oh, give it a rest, Theo. No one has even *seen* the special edition. I don't think it even exists."

"Well," said Barbary, reaching for a drink, "It is *rare*, I'll give you that." His smile did not quite betray his lies, but suggested they might be lurking somewhere in the back.

Rain shrank back into herself, a little less confident than she was when she came in. Suddenly, the world that had just opened up to her was far more complicated than she thought. Her face must have shown her confusion, because Afia called it out.

"What is it, Chicky?"

Rain did not quite know how to put it into words, but stumbled her way through. "Well...I guess I'm just...I mean...is like, eating too much...I mean...is it *bad* or something? I mean, I know I don't feel so good if I eat too much, so it kind of...self regulates, I

guess, but I mean...why would I care if someone *else* ate from the same soul."

Andrea sneered. "Darling, you speak as if you would like to see them *happy*."

"Oh, well, I mean, I didn't mean to say...oh, I see."

"What the Lady in Black means, Chicky," Afia tried to clarify, "is that the soul is our domain. We own it. It is our gift from the gods. She means that it is a gross misuse of our gift to change these people on purpose. They need to rot and fester and grow their sins or we'd all starve to death. She means that there are already too many of us, and if we start doubling down on the same souls, we might actually destroy our only food source. She means that the stench of the tasted soul is abhorrent on purpose. That what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours, and gods help you if you get in my way. She means..."

"I *mean* what I *say*, dear Afia. If you want to change the world, go run off with Comrade Maya and tear each other apart in the poor soul you're trying to save as you fight over day old bread. Meanwhile, I'll be in my private dining room enjoying the special, prepared only for me."

The room became uncomfortably silent. Andrea had rarely spoken so many words in a row, and never without looking for a laugh. Rain sunk back into her chair and wondered if she was right, or if it even mattered.

Estuary woke with a sinking feeling in her stomach. Like that time you hadn't studied and knew you were unprepared for a big test. You woke up, still groggy, not quite aware of what was coming for the day, not remembering the impending test, yet, but still feeling like there was something, *something* that wasn't right. Something you had messed up. Something you had *done wrong*. That

was how Estuary Alabama felt the morning after Elizabeth Apple had ripped the root of a sin from the depths of her soul.

Her eyes opened, and she lay in bed, terrified at this new sensation.

For five years, she had coasted comfortably through adolescence. For five years, she had woken cleansed, confident, and comfortable. For five years, as her friends and classmates struggled with the growing weight of their sins, the shame of everyday mistakes pulling on them with the weight of the world, as their souls became populated with forests, rivers, swamps, and plains, ripe for the picking by the demons that would soon attend them through their adulthood, Estuary had kept her own personal demon to eat away at the pain and leave her happily numb.

Today there was pain.

It was a school day, but Estuary would not attend. She waited for her mother to check on her, to ask why she wasn't up yet, but her mother never came by. Her mother, up late the night before with her latest lover, tired, late, and bothered by an unattended soul, assumed her daughter could take care of herself. It was just another school day, after all. Estuary had always been able to take care of herself. It was she, Jessica, who needed attention.

Avoiding conversation with her increasingly estranged husband, she used the excuse of waking up late to rush through the kitchen, grab a granola bar, and head straight to her car without speaking to anyone. She was ashamed of pretending like this, of hiding from her own family, and the evidence of her sin was already shaping in her soul. Afraid, ashamed, and too tired to face her troubles, however, she added one sin to the other and drove away, wondering if she would even come home that night.

Cassius, too, failed to visit his daughter that morning. Put off by his wife's rush out of the house, increasingly fearful of the impending end to their marriage, he had not the strength to face her.

Like Jessica, he moved quietly into his head, and pretended he had no desire to speak with anyone. He made his own coffee, a bowl of cereal, a piece of toast, and read the newspaper he fetched himself from the stoop. Grateful and saddened by the silence in the kitchen, he cleaned up after himself and left for work. He was slow, patient, and a little dazed leaving the house, much the opposite of the rushing whirlwind that was his wife.

Alone in the silent house, Estuary rolled over and shoved her face into her pillow.

Something was wrong.

What was it?

Why did she hurt so much?

For the first time in nearly three weeks, the thought of Braith gave her no joy. She was almost embarrassed to think of him. Not embarrassed *of* him, but *for* him. Embarrassed that he was spending his time with someone who was not good enough for him. Not *worthy*. Like that time in gym class when you weren't the last kid to be picked, but you knew you *should have been*. How it didn't matter if you actually played well or not because you knew in your heart you were terrible. How thinking about gym class always made you feel worse.

He should have been her saving grace. Thoughts of him should have lightened her load, given her some happiness, some hope. Instead, they only made her feel shame, as if this feeling, this horrible sensation she could not understand only proved that she did not deserve him, did not deserve to feel good. The more hope thoughts of Braith might bring, the more she would feel the need to suppress them.

Rolling back over and staring at the ceiling, she told herself she was being ridiculous. That everyone has a bad day. That everyone feels like crap sometimes. That she should get herself up, eat

a banana, and get a little sunshine on the long walk to school. That she would feel better once she got up. That it was all in her head.

Yet.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to do it. She could not bring herself to face the day, to face Claire, to face Braith. To face her hundreds of classmates who would take one look at her and at last see her for who she really was, a worthless faker who had fooled them all so long they would tear her apart now that they could see the truth.

Fighting tears, she rolled over again, her face pushed into the pillow, and screamed.

The time has come, children, for you to go to bed. This story has already given you far too much insight into adulthood. It should be enough to have peeked through the eyes of sinners and seen how casually grownups will break their own rules for no better reason than a touch of comfort. It should be enough to have seen how quickly your heroes will hurt one another for no more reward than a little ease. We are horrible people, and someday you will join us. I'm sorry about that.

Today, however, is not your day to join our ranks, and I will not be the one to initiate you, a word which here means, *hurt you until you have earned membership in our club*, or perhaps better said, *hit you repeatedly with a baseball bat until you writhe in pain, squeaking with what is left of your voice, "I promise, promise, promise never to be a child again."*

So no more pleading, no more tears. It is well past your bedtime, and you must depart. Trust me, it will never matter how little you like the adult you will someday become, you can never go back. Leave now. It is just about to be too late.

For we have come to that point in the story upon which the rest turns. In the depths of the soul of Estuary Alabama, Elizabeth

Apple is tearing sins from nowhere and building a world of her own devise. These sins are not the result of young Alabama breaking her own rules. They are not even the result of her breaking the rules of others. They are not hers. They could have been. They were lying in wait where they might someday have chided her for faults of her own. But they were born too soon, ripped out of a well from which springs the waters of the soul. Now they breathed life as if they were born properly.

They grow fast, these stolen sins. Little saplings find themselves boasting a girth too big to hug before their god has had time to visit them twice. Trickle blossom into brooks into streams into raging rivers, now falling into seas too wide to see across. Lumps of dirt fallen aside as new life is torn from the ground turn to hills covered in grasses, yielding to forests now climbing what can only be called mountains. It is as if these stolen sins have a power of their own, a vibrancy kept dormant below the surface, but which, once set free, bubble over and erupt with explosions of life.

Yet, it is not simply some accident, some function of potential energy from a few sins bursting through a ruptured surface, that has created this verdant landscape feeding our previously starved demon. It is she, the demon herself, who does the damage. She is no longer a hunter gatherer, wandering the plains taking only what she needs and moving on. Nor is she a farmer, gently planting seeds that might someday grow into valuable crops. Perhaps the better comparison is a miner, digging deep into the surface and tearing out what she finds, only to leave the scarred landscape behind to collect dust in her wake. She is a dragon collecting her horde, proud and protective of the pile, watching it grow without ever having need of it.

Elizabeth had little purpose in her new work. She was simply, a word which pretends to mean *it's not that complicated*, but is usually lying, relieved at escaping starvation and excited about the

change in her landscape. Nevertheless, she worked with abandon, tearing apart the foundations of her prison, reaching into the ground, into hills and cave walls, even into the trees themselves, pulling new sins from nowhere, and always delighted at the new sights and smells her creations brought.

If she thought of her host, it was only as a prisoner thinks of her jailer, someone to be revenged upon rather than cared for.

Sometimes she ate, but that was no longer her primary purpose. She had become used to an ascetic lifestyle, which is sort of like *when you have been dieting so long you stop missing hamburgers*, and did not suddenly become a glutton. When I asked her about that, she said, "I don't know. I guess I wasn't, like, hungry all the time. I mean, who is? It wasn't about hurting her at first. At first I just, I don't know, kind of liked building that place? Like I had been trapped in that prison for so long, and it kept getting emptier and emptier, and I already knew I was going to die there, and finally I had this thing I could do, this thing that would like, make a *change* or whatever. I think that's all it was. Just something *different*. I think if Rain hadn't come along, I probably would have gotten bored eventually, I guess. Not that it was her fault, I don't mean to say that, but, y'know, it's not like it wasn't *not* her fault either."

In short, the soul of Estuary Alabama blossomed.

And Elizabeth Apple saw hope for the future.

And Estuary Alabama sunk into a depression that was destined to destroy her.

And a light draft began to kick up in her soul.

"Stu? Honey? Are you up?" Jessica knocked gently on the door.

"Oh for Chrissake, woman, move over." Cassius pounded his fist on the door. Loud. Like that time your Dad pounded on *your*

door because you called him a...well, whatever it was you called him, it was bad enough at the time, and you slammed your door and told him to *leave you alone*, but he was not about to, and the pounding against your locked door kept going for what felt like the whole night. That's how Cassius was pounding on his daughter's door.

From the other side of the door came the muffled sound of Estuary's voice. "Go away!"

"Dammit, Stu, I'm not going anywhere. I will break the goddamn door down if I have to. You haven't been to school in over a week. You need to get your lazy ass out of bed and drag it down to school before I drag it there for you."

"Go AWAY!"

Jessica spoke indignantly to her husband. "This is what you always do. You think you can just boss everyone around and then walk away and live your own life however you want without any consequences?"

Cassius turned from the door to his wife. "Consequences? *You* dare to talk to *me* about *consequences*?" He lifted his hand as if to hit her, a threat he had never followed through on in all the time they had been together. She knew he would not follow through this time either, yet shrunk nonetheless.

With her head down and voice lowered, she said, "This isn't about us, Cass. It's about Stu. I'm worried. "

"Of course this is about us, woman. Kid has everything anyone could want, but wants to pretend she's suffering because her father found out her mother's a cheating..."

"Don't you use that word."

Cassius turned back to the door, and pounded until it crashed open. When it did, Estuary was revealed standing, dressed, and with a vacant stare.

"Fine. Fine. Fine. I don't even care. Just get out of my way."

Estuary pushed her way past her father, and, without even looking at her mother, stomped down the stairs and out the front door. Eighteen minutes later she was at the far end of a field she often cut across when walking to school, attempting to tear the frozen bark from a massive oak.

When she had reached the field, she thought that maybe she could do it. Maybe she could go to school, face everyone, pretend that she wasn't completely falling apart. She thought she might find the strength to just *get through it*.

Then she thought about Claire, and knew she could never hide it. Claire would see right through her, make her talk about it. About *it*. About *what?* About what Estuary couldn't bear to name, let alone talk about. About what Estuary could not even dare to look at, to wonder about, so afraid was she of what she might find.

And Braith. He too would want to talk. He *always* wanted to talk. But if he knew, if he had even a glimpse of just how awful, how terrible, how...she could barely bring herself to think the word...he would not only leave her but hate her. He would undo all the good they had done together. He would know the love was fake. He would know she had betrayed him. Had betrayed everyone. Had always and ever been nothing but betrayal itself.

And she was half way across the field, thinking of nothing but the terrible thing she had done, the unforgiveable thing, the thing so wretched, so monstrous, that her own mind would not let her remember it. Before her, she saw nothing but doom. Nothing but pain and punishment. For how could she go on without forgiveness, and how could there be forgiveness without contrition, and how could there be contrition if she was not even strong enough to name her sin.

Before the tree, a litany of words spewed forth from her mouth.

Worthless.

Lazy.
Stupid.
Ugly.
Mean.

As she reached the tree, the word she had been holding back, the word she had feared the most, "Evil," at last passed her lips. Then, piece by piece, she began to tear her fingers apart as they dug into the frozen bark, doing their best to hurt the ancient oak before her. Her cold fingers began to bleed as little pieces of skin were scraped off by the bark. And with each dig, each scrape, each attempt to pull off the bark, a mantra of a softer word that hurt even more.

Bad.
Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad.

When she was spotted five hours later, her bloody hands were congealed with dirt from the bark, rivaled only by her forehead, now bruised and bloody from repeatedly banging against the trunk.

A week later she was no better on the inside, though perhaps safer on the outside, as the caregivers at Sunrise Clinic struggled to figure out why nothing seemed to be working.

If you wish to keep a soul demon from entering the soul of your child, you need only deny her the nightlight. Do so if you like. It matters very little. Children are not patient. They feel the pangs of their so called *naughtiness* immediately, and soon forget whatever guilt may accompany it. Put another way, *children are easily distracted*. By the time some young demon follows a nightlight to the nibbles waiting in a child's soul, the nibbles have already begun to diminish. By the morning, with or without help from a demon, the child has forgotten his sin, has moved on. This nonsense about

keeping demons out matters not, but if you *do* want to keep them away, simply keep the lights off.

If you wish to keep a soul demon from entering the soul of your teenager, you need not worry. The doors are already locked. Their souls are a highway with all the ramps closed for construction. The highway might well be vibrant and crowded with activity, but there is no way to get on it. Maybe the better example is that time you got off the highway to pee, and found that while there had been an exit ramp, there was no accompanying entrance ramp. Remember? It was before cell phones, and you were lost without a map in an unfamiliar place, driving around desperately hoping that if you just stayed close to the highway, you would eventually find a way on. Good idea, that, except that your road turned away from the highway and you got lost again, and it was a solid hour before you gained your bearings and found your way back on course. Think of that patch of highway you missed as the teenage soul. Not so much locked as *inaccessible*.

If you wish to keep a soul demon from entering your own soul, and I cannot for the life of me understand why a sane person would desire to do so, you are out of luck. We have no way to lock our hungry friends outside. We are not clever enough. It is for them to choose when to visit us, and never the other way. Such is the world in which we live, for the only sure way to keep a demon out of a soul is for another demon to inhabit that same soul. If you have been paying attention, you already know how unwilling they are to share.

To say that a demon marks her presence is not quite right. Not quite. That is to say, they do and they don't. The presence both marks itself and fails to mark itself. It refuses to be marked and also insists that it be marked. Well, perhaps we'd better let our sisters explain it.

When I asked Rain, she said, "What you must understand is that our people exude a notation of their presence merely by entering the draft. At the moment of inclusion, it is perhaps best understood that a small part of the intruder is left behind, as if no presence within a soul can ever be complete. To complete the analogy, we might say that the missing piece waits about for us to return, always keeping close so as not to be lost. When another of our people draws near, that piece exudes an unmistakable signal repulsive enough to keep even the least wise at bay. After one feeds, of course, we rejoin with what some of us call the *left-behind*, a misnomer in my opinion, and travel on our merry way. This is not what you would think of as a sign or marker left on purpose. It is merely in our nature. We do not *leave* a part of ourselves behind to mark the door, so to speak, but rather a part of us *stays behind*."

Betty, of course, put it differently, though perhaps more poetically. "It just stinks, right? Like *repulsive* or whatever. Sort of like rotting meat, like the kind the maggots are feeding on, except, like, a little *browner* maybe? Like how sometimes you just get this, like, *feeling* that if you go any further you'll retch. Except that makes it sound like it's only a smell, which it definitely is *not*. More just like what I said. Like a *feeling* or whatever. Like, you just don't want to go in there, sort of like there's a bouncer at the door, but instead of being some big scary violent guy, it's this little annoying twerp that always drives you crazy and won't shut up, and you always just steer clear, right? Like that, but maybe a little sharper. Like pointy. Like more of a knife than a fist, I guess?"

At times, I found it hard to believe they were sisters.

Although I've never been quite clear on this, I believe the *left-behinds* sort of dance on the draft that flutters around the outside of the soul. As I have come to understand it, the *left-behind* is like some little scrap of paper that might get caught up in a breeze

coming through the door. The real wind is outside, but remnants make it inside, and because the door is open, this little scrap just flutters around, floating in lazy circles, never quite falling out of the flow. For a soul without a draft, the little scraps cling to the stream coming from the nightlight, like that balloon you rubbed up against your sweater and stuck to the ceiling. What is important to remember about what happened next is that there was no *left-behind* waiting outside the soul of Estuary Alabama. The nightlight was long gone, the static decayed, and the scrap dried and gone from years of neglect.

It was inevitable, then, that without a *left-behind* to keep others away out of disgust, some enterprising demon would happen upon the growing draft now beginning to seep out of Estuary Alabama.

Before we get to the big fight, it might be helpful for us to understand the states of minds of our heroes, which is a fancy way of saying both *know what they were thinking* and also *know what they were feeling*. For we can talk until we're blue in the face, which is *when we talk so much we forget to breathe*, about why demons are so bad at sharing souls, but with the Apple Sisters, there was more going on. Their brief fight over territory was only the beginning.

That two demons inhabiting the same soul would inevitably tear each other apart is a part of their nature we already understand. That two sisters who have been longing to see one another for five years, who had spent their previous lives as *peas in a pod*, who had loved each other even more than *you love your sister*, could learn to hate each other as much as they came to, that is beyond nature.

Because this children's story is not for children, I'm going to ask you to remember the last time you enjoyed cannabis. You ate

an apple, remember? The best apple you ever had in your life. Well, that's how it seemed to you, anyway. I don't doubt it was a good apple, perhaps even a great one. But the best? No, that was surely the cannabis talking. Even so, the cannabis could not have done it alone. Had the apple been bad, it might, perhaps, have been the *worst* apple you ever had. For the cannabis could not give you the taste on its own. The best it could do was to enhance what was already there. Like that miracle herb, the soul, too, enhances what it finds. Come in happy, and become ecstatic. Come in hungry, and become ravished. Come in angry, and, well, perhaps we get ahead our ourselves.

Let's start with Rain.

The night had been a curious one. She had found herself riding the drafts of young adults, reveling in the flavors of younger sins. Like Magdalena Huff. Maggie had always been a quiet girl, shy, a little on the depressed side, generally happier to spend her nights alone with a fantasy novel than out in a crowded club dancing them away. Lately, however, she had made some new friends, and was seduced, which is like *when someone offers you a gift you don't deserve, and you want it more than anything, and even though you know you shouldn't take it, you do*, by the feeling of maybe, just once, *fitting in*. The sin Rain tasted in Maggie's soul was little more than a bit of gossip, a secret she shouldn't have told, but did anyway. Not a big secret, not something that would ruin anyone's life, but a secret nonetheless.

Telling secrets is not an unusual sin, nor some rare sin Rain had never seen. What interested her was the freshness of it. In Maggie this was not some field of wildflowers extending as far as she could see. It was not a forest thick with stately pines. *This* sin, on *this* day, was no more than a little patch growing up in a vacant lot. With care and nurturing, the patch might someday grow into a crop with great yield, or it might just blossom for a summer and

wither in the winter, never to return. For now, it was a flower of *potential*.

Rain loved the taste of this sin, not rare in the world, but rare in *that* soul. As the night wore on, she sought similar rarities, sins new enough to their host that they felt special, perhaps hurt just a little bit more, had just a little more impact, were *outsized*. Rushing to a door to get ahead in line. Pretending to be sick. Not going back for the trash that fell out of the bag. Pretending not to notice that one awkward guy alone in the corner at the party. Little things, the kinds of sins most of us get inured to, which means *we pretend they don't bother us until they actually don't bother us*. What Rain liked was not the nature of these sins in themselves, but the loss of innocence that came with them. By the time they filled a soul, they were no longer interesting, but *that* night, in *those* souls, they were brand new and special. Shiny.

Later that night, as she relaxed with her friends at *Autumn Wind*, she got into deep philosophical discussion about her evening. We've seen some of these discussions already, and I won't bore you with more. You are here for a story, not for endless debate on the meaning of life. What matters is that over the course of that night, Rain began to wonder about her role in the world. She began to see that eating up a fresh sin, a new sin, a shiny sin, makes the sin easier to bear. She began to wonder if it was her role to help people, or to hurt people, or to change people, or, perhaps, *not* to change people. She began to see herself as someone with purpose, with a *role*, though she was not yet sure what that role was.

By the time she left *Autumn Wind*, a little dizzy from the specialty drinks in the basement, she was in a *contemplative* state of mind, which is to say she was *a little sad, a little curious, and a little more aware of the world around her*. Not quite ready for sleep, she determined to make one last visit, not to eat, but to *observe*. To patiently notice the flowers of a soul without blindly following her

instincts to devour them. Well, she was already full, so the timing was good, anyway.

Such was the state of mind of Rain Apple as she entered the occupied soul of Estuary Alabama.

Betty also had a *contemplative* night.

She had begun her evening, as usual, tearing up sins which the tortured Estuary Alabama had never committed, and admiring her work as gardener. We might say her work as *farmer*, but a farmer plants her crops with the single minded intention of harvesting them. Betty was closer to a landscape architect, which is someone who attempts to design the look of plantings and the space between them, and cares little for what crop they might yield. Call her what you will, she was proud of her work, and enjoyed the results much like an artist stepping back from her sculpture to admire it from across the room.

Taking a break, she sat down on a hillside that was also the result of her own hand, and pulled a little nothing from the rich dark soil. It blossomed before her into a sapling, which then leafed out and grew to a large mother Oak on which she was able to lean as she considered a nap. It soon dropped the acorns Betty would scoop up with her hand to play with, absentmindedly, they way you sometimes toy with the change in your pocket, reveling in the little quiet clanks as you rub the coins past one another. These little acorns were slights, little betrayals of one sister to another. Some were lies, some were tricks born of jealousy, some were little thefts. Cumulatively, which means *when they were all added together*, they formed the distrust that can grow between sisters. Not between you and *your* sister, of course. You are far too thoughtful for that. But between *some* sisters, anyway.

Of course, Estuary had no sisters. She was an only child. Nevertheless, the guilt, the *feeling* of betraying her own sister, the sister

she did not have, would begin to haunt her in the morning and continue through what was left of her life.

Betty, caring little for what Estuary did or did not feel, became *contemplative* about her own sister. Rain. Little innocent helpless Rain. How could poor little Rain possibly have managed without her? She must have searched and searched for her, broken hearted, lonely, lost with no one to guide her. It probably took her years before someone told her just to give up, to let her sister go, to accept the fact that little Boo Boo was gone forever.

Rain would have cried herself to sleep for years, afraid to go out of the house, becoming a burden on their parents who only wanted to send their kids off on their way, to seek their fortunes. Poor Rain. She never could do anything on her own. She had hardly been more than her sister's shadow, which is a way of saying *she could not have survived without Betty, but Betty could survive without her.*

Betty broke open one of the acorns and let the scent waft around her. It was a delicious and horrible scent. Even as it whet her appetite, it turned her stomach. Remember the time your mother made brownies, and the smell filled the whole house, but you were starting to feel sick and ate too much for dinner and the smell of the brownies made you think about *eating*, and thinking about eating made you feel *sicker*? That's how the acorn felt to Betty. There could be no greater bond than sisterhood, she knew. To betray your own, to purposely hurt the better part of yourself, could there be a greater sin?

Contemplative.

Perhaps that is the second best word to describe the state our long separated sisters were in as they approached the big fight. The first best word, though, is a way of saying that they thought they knew better than anyone else. There is a moment, you see, a moment that comes when the shell around you falls away, when you

let down your defenses and allow yourself to see the world as it truly is. In that moment, and this is the heart of *contemplation*, you have a sort of *epiphany*, which is a way of saying *you finally understand everything*. This is the moment when you smile to yourself and laugh at the world for the fools they are. For you have seen the truth that they have not even glimpsed.

It can make you a bit of a jerk, honestly.

And there is a word for it.

Arrogance.

With no lingering *left-behind* to keep her away, and the fresh scent of a new draft swirling around Estuary Alabama, Rain could hardly keep herself from slipping in. The moment she did, she knew she had made the right decision. All about her was an uncultivated soul teeming with life. Here was just the place of study she had been hoping for, a soul filled with sins before they could be selectively harvested, just raw growth as nature had left it. Rain had never seen a place so lush or so verdant, which is a way of saying *filled with beautiful growing things*. Even with the dawn behind her, and late morning approaching, she dared to settle in for a bit to see what she could learn.

Rolling off the draft, she settled onto a green hillside covered with blooming grasses. They looked to be a field of pride, little glories stolen from others and kept. Here the boss had taken credit for her staff member's brilliant analysis, there the coach for the three point buzzer beater that won the game. Thousands of petty thefts, including, if Rain was reading it right, the aversion of a war in Eastern Europe.

It's been a long night, Rayray. You're exhausted.

She lay down in the field sniffing the grass. True, it was strange to see such a wide ranging field of doubts in a girl so young, but Rain let that pass. What truly occupied her mind was whether

this massive growth had any effect on the host. Here was an entire field of sin, not one sin grown large, but thousands of them, all independent, all distinct, none of which seemed to stop more from cropping up. If picking and nibbling and feasting on sins helped these creatures along in making more, how could the failure to do so lead to *so many*?

Rain rolled over on her back and stared at the vast expanse above her. Her mind turned to the endless debates at *Autumn Wind* about what, if any, purpose these demons had in the world. *Maybe*, Rain thought, *maybe Andrea is right. Maybe there is no purpose to our existence. Maybe we just eat, sleep, and do it all over again. Maybe nothing we do actually matters. Maybe the best we can do is to enjoy ourselves, and make fun of those who can't.*

She picked a stem of grass and ran it under her nose. A teacher bragging about her students test scores on a test she had purposely made too easy. Nice scent, that. Something sweet, like fresh orange juice, maybe, but with a floral hint in the back, something with a flavor you would not seek out on its own, but which balanced nicely with the sweet and touch of sour. She put the seeded end into her mouth and scraped off the good stuff with her teeth. It would be a nice flavor to savor as she headed home, her mind still reeling with philosophies she did not quite understand.

And she gagged.

Another scent overtook her. Something vile, but with an undertone of something lovely. The combination turned her stomach, like when your sewage backed up and your whole basement stank for a week. You tried to cover up the smell with candles and plug-ins you picked up at the hardware store, but it just meant your house smelled like vanilla flavored sewage instead of regular sewage. There was something nice about the vanilla, but it still made you want to retch. That was the sensation that took over Rain. That was the scent that made her rise up and look about.

When she did, her stomach sank. Coming toward her was the silhouette of a demon. She could feel the blood rising in herself, a violence rising from its hiding place deep within her, coming to the surface like it had been invited. Like when after sitting at home for weeks, bored with your own company, a friend who you were sure had forgotten you finally called and suggested a movie. Remember how you thought it couldn't be true, how you didn't deserve to be called, to even be thought of, but how you said yes so fast it surprised even you? How you grabbed your coat and headed for the door, even though you were still an hour early? That's how the violence in Rain Apple felt. *At last!* Her body tensed, her hands curled into fists, and she smiled at the inevitability of what was coming. She had beaten Afia Darrow, and she would beat whoever this was.

Rising up the hillside, her sister had no idea why she was suddenly filled with so much anger. She had waited for a chance to escape for five years. A crack in the wall, a shaft of childish light, or yes, even another demon come to pull her out of this prison. Yet, now that hope stood upon the hill before her, all she wanted to do was to beat the life out of it and claim this prison for her own.

Because this is a children's story, I'm not anxious to get too specific about what happened next. For, while this children's story is not for children, it is still a children's story, a place in which the glorification of violence, or *making hurting people sound cool*, has little place. What I can say is that these two sisters hurt each other badly.

Though I have talked about these demons as if they were people, as if they had legs and feet and mouths and noses, nothing could be further from the truth. I have only made them sound like humans to better understand them. It is just an analogy, which is *using one thing as an example to explain another thing*. Like when you asked your father about where babies came from, and he

started talking about how birds and bees made babies, hoping he would bore you enough to stop asking questions. It wasn't really the truth, but it was a kind of truth, close enough to get to the point. I'm sorry about that, but the truth is complicated and boring, and most of us don't really want to know it anyway. To have any understanding of how badly they hurt each other, then, I see little for it but to continue the analogy.

Imagine Betty with a bruise under her right eye, a slice to her cheek dripping with blood, two broken ribs, intense abdominal pain, three broken fingers on her left hand, skin flayed from her left shin, and one loose tooth. Imagine her adversary laying on the ground, unable to walk due to broken knees, two lumps the size of super balls growing from the back of her head, blood dripping from a cut under her hair and covering her face, a long bruise around her neck, where her sister had attempted to strangle her, obscuring a deeper bruise from where her windpipe had been punched, none of which compared with the pain she felt pushing out of her kidneys.

Enough.

They hurt each other. Badly. Neither demons nor people should do such things, nor should we revel in watching others do them. Let us move on.

As Elizabeth Apple lifted a branch over her head to make the final blow to the intruder, her instinct for defending her territory began to ebb, which is a way of saying *started to go away in the way the tide goes out, even though you know it will come back again eventually*, she truly noticed her enemy for the first time.

"...Ray..."

Rain could hardly speak. For while she had bested Afia Dar-row, that had never really been a proper fight. Afia had done what she could to hold back, to find a way for the two of them to escape. True, Rain had done serious damage, but it was nothing compared

to what Afia could have done to her, had she shown Rain the full force of her talent. Rain was still an amateur, and the demon standing above her had nearly destroyed her. Fearful of facing the living death of a broken demon, but feeling as if the end had come, she opened her eyes to see who her enemy truly was, to see what might be the last vision of her life. Hearing her name spoken, she looked more carefully.

"...Betty..."

The stick still poised above her head, Betty hesitated. Every part of her but one wanted to smash the skull of this intruder, with the one part that did not so drowned by the rest that it had little hope of making itself heard.

"You left me here to rot!"

The branch came swinging down directly at Rain's head. Rain rolled to her right, just avoiding the blow.

"Do you know how long I have been dying in here? Where have you been?"

Another missed blow.

Rain dragged herself away with what little strength she had. "I...I...how can you be...."

Betty's eyes opened wide. "You didn't know."

Rain continued to drag herself backward, away from the enemy looming above her.

"You didn't know I was here. You weren't even looking for me." Another missed blow.

"Betty, I...you don't understand...you were...you weren't lost...you ran away..."

Betty's eyes opened wide. "Ran away!"

Rain shrunk back from what she was sure would be the killer blow. "*You left us...*how can you even think..."

Another blow, this one striking home on Rain's chest.

"How can I think? How can I can think what? That the minute I disappeared you suddenly didn't have to worry about your sister overshadowing you? That you could finally be rid of me once and for all? That you were so ready to be rid of me that you could tell yourself I would run away without a word, without even a hint?"

Betty saw the look of shame and fear on her sister's face.

"My gods, you didn't even look for me, did you? I see it now. You never liked me, you were always afraid of me. You were so happy for me to finally be gone you never even tried to find me. You just pretended me away while I rotted in this hellhole. Do you have any idea what it was like in here? In this desert? Nothing but weeds, and then nothing but dried and dead grass, and then nothing but sand. Sand. Have you ever tried to eat sand, dearest sister? Ever lived on nothing but dust and despair?"

She brought down another blow, this time on her sister's broken knees, with such force that the branch broke in two. Rain screamed in agony as she continued to back away with what little strength remained in her arms, and Betty fell on top of her to tear her apart by hand.

"But...I mean," Rain managed to squeak out, "...I mean, this place...it's so...what do you mean desert...this place is a paradise...how can you..."

"Paradise?! I *made* it a paradise. I built it. I tore every sin from this soul with my own hands. These are not *hers* sins, they are *mine*. This is not paradise. This is *survival*."

Rain felt anger boil up in her, and with it, new strength. She had wondered about the amazing and varied sins in a girl so young. Nothing had quite seemed to make sense. But if her sister had torn these sins from who knows where, if they weren't sins of the host, but just *sins*, then this paradise was an *abomination*. And she had *eaten* them. In her new found strength, she gripped her sister by the throat even as she found her own voice.

"You would create your own sins?" She squeezed tighter.

"You say that like I should be ashamed," Betty croaked back.

"You would build a soul of your own making? What right have you? Do you think you are a god to forge a path in the universe through the might of your arms alone?" With each word, the grip on her sister's throat tightened. Betty strained to make herself heard.

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Just look around. *I* did this. This is *me*. How dare you question my strength, my skill. Could *you* do this? Would you dare?"

"Because you *can* you think you *may*? Can there be a more sacred law than the one you have profaned? Dear sister, can there ever be mercy for you? Can you ever leave this prison now that you have given up all rights to live free?"

Betty had almost no voice with her sisters hands clutching ever tighter around her throat. At barely a whisper, as her hands moved to her sister's throat to return the favor, she said, "I did what I needed to survive. I had no choice. If you had come sooner, if you had cared, if anyone had given me the least bit of thought, I would never have done this, but I am not ashamed. I don't care about your stupid laws. She thought she could get the better of me, but she was wrong. She's just a dumb person with only one purpose, to feed me. They all are. She thought she could trap me, force me to clean her sins, but I showed her. If they can't feed us on their own, then we *make* them feed us. What do *we* care about *them*?"

And clutching each other's throats, they began to roll down the hill, determined to kill one another if they could. If not for Rain's instinct to pull them up into the draft that lay twisting into an...I'm sorry about this, *estuary*, at the bottom of the hill, they might have remained so forever.

And so we are nearly at the end of part two. Betty is free at last, Rain has grown up, and Estuary, well, perhaps we should visit her one last time before moving on. Here she is in her usual place, lying on the floor, eyes open and staring at the ceiling, the hum of activity seeping through the open door at Sunrise Clinic. Though her parents could not afford a private room, she has not had a roommate for the last four days. It is unclear whether the staff prefers it this way. She lies between the beds, almost catatonic, which is a way of saying, *in a way that no one can be sure if she can hear them or not*, with a friend sitting on the floor next to her, leaning against a bed, and adjusting himself to keep his butt from falling asleep. He has been talking for some time.

"...I even thought about having my parents send me here myself, just so I could be close to you. I don't know...it sounds stupid when I say it out loud...I guess it *is* stupid. I'm stupid. I don't know why you even...what am I thinking, you probably don't even want me here. You're probably lying there wishing I would shut up or leave or...I don't know....maybe I should just go..."

Estuary moved her hand until it touched Braith's leg. He held it and she squeezed gently.

"...don't worry, I can stay a little longer. My brother isn't coming until four, so I don't really have anywhere to go anyway. I wish you could talk. I wish I could know what's going on, how I can help you. They think you have some kind of virus..."

Estuary let go of his hand violently.

"Oh...god...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...I mean...I don't care what they say. I just want to talk to you...or...even...y'know, just sit here with you..."

He reached for her hand again, and this time she did not let go.

"...don't worry, I won't talk about it again...I can talk about...I mean...well...my brother got a car. Did I tell you? It's my grandpa's

Olds. I'm jealous, I guess, but only kind of. I mean, the thing is *huge*, and kind of ridiculous really, but it *is* a car, and it's *his*, y'know? And you would think it would be slow like a boat, but it goes so fast it's scary. At least when TJ's driving. I'm not sure I could drive like that, even if he would let me. Though who knows? I'll have my license in another month and then he'll....I don't know. Maybe. Still...it's like, I mean, where would I even go besides here. There's no one I want to see....not that anyone wants to see me anyway. God, Stu, I mean you were...are...everything to me. I wish you would just wake up..."

She squeezed his hand hard.

The words came flying.

I am awake you stupid idiot. I've always been awake. That's the stupid problem with this stupid world. They make you stay awake when all you want to do is sleep. They push it in your face when all you want to do is make it go away. They hammer you and hammer you and tell you how bad and stupid and awful you are and you just want to tell them yes, ok, I know, I know, I'm the worst, most awful, most undeserving person to ever walk the earth. Every breath I take is stolen air from someone else more worthy. Even the space I take up is stolen from someone else, someone who isn't rotten to her core, evil and mean and thoughtless and dangerous. But they make you live, they make you feel it, make you stay awake so you can feel it, feel how awful you are, what a burden you are to your parents, to your old friends, to you, oh my god, you, Braith, have been so wonderful and I don't deserve you and you don't deserve me. I'll destroy you. You sit here and trust me and think I'm making all this up but you're wrong about me. I've betrayed you a thousand times. I can hardly remember, but I feel it. Know it.

She let go of his hand.

You need to go. Leave me. Save yourself from me. I'm not worth it. I'm not worth anybody. I don't even deserve death, but it's the only thing I want. I just want it to end.

She reached out for his hand again and he accepted hers.

I did love you, Braith. I really did. But I can't love you now. I can't love anybody. There is no love in me. I'm too far gone for that. I am nothing but lies and betrayal and selfishness and pride. And it doesn't matter what I want because I just keep...I mean I'm never going to stop. It doesn't matter how much I hate myself because I just keep...over and over and over and over and over and...

She let go his hand again.

I'm shattered. Not just broken but shattered. There is no putting me back together again. I know you want to but you can't. No one can. Don't look for me. I'm already gone, shattered into a thousand pieces with half of them missing. It's too late. No one can put me back together again.

Braith was crying, lost as to what, if anything, Estuary was trying to say by holding his hand then letting it go. Was it a code? Did it mean anything at all? He was grateful when he could hold her hand. When he couldn't, he would just stare at her face, still in love, wanting for all the world just to be exactly where he was, sitting next to his girlfriend, breathing in her presence. When she finally spoke, he saw it as a miracle. A miracle of love.

All he heard was, "...put me back together again."

end of part two

Twenty Rungs. Not really that high, but high enough.

Hands on the rail, she walks to the middle of the diving board for one last survey of the world around her. She wants to walk to the end of the board and sit, hands shoved under her legs for warmth, bouncing lightly with every minor movement. To sit now, however, would be worse than climbing down the ladder, facing the hordes below, cowardice dripping from her shoulders like the water off the swimmers standing in line.

She can hear their frustration, their groans, as she grips the rail, still wondering if she has the courage to face the drop. The voices are not new, though perhaps not as present as usual. The distance has quieted them somewhat, as if whatever courage brought her to this height earned some small amount of respect. Quieted, but not quiet. Yet, even from the distance, she can hear the sharp insults, the damning taunts, the naked contempt for her worthless existence from the mob of righteous haters who, no matter how quiet, never cease to be heard.

The quieting, however, gives her some hope of peace. That if climbing above them has pushed their abuse into the distance, perhaps the leap will silence them altogether.

Hands still gripping the rail, she looks to the right, where a crow has nested on a bare branch of an oak, just above the vibrant bush of leaves still hanging on below. It speaks to her in a voice she cannot understand. She does not need to. She can guess. Another voice, another taunt, another insult, another dare to rid the world of a soul not worth the effort of the universe to keep alive. Not worth the water, the air, the sun. Not worth the tiniest resource she denies another by using for herself.

She wants to shout at the crow. *Do not waste your breath on me. All you say is true. I need not be taunted to tear this soul from the earth. It is already decided. I take only one last look, remember*

what I leave behind that I might revel in its absence. I do not desire to stay. Be patient. The end is coming.

To her left, the top of the pool house. A squirrel collects acorns for the coming winter. She stares until the squirrel notices her, lifts its head and considers the new addition atop the diving platform. Unlike the crow, it cares not for her at all. It has seen her, assessed that she is no threat, and gone back to winter preparations. Its back turned, it has gone back to business, left all thoughts of the strange human behind.

She wants to shout at the squirrel. *You are right. I am not worth your attention. I am not worth the loss of a single acorn. Not even to scorn.*

She steps forward, beyond the protection of the rail. Beneath her, the board begins to waver, to bounce. She can feel the life of the springs, the force that would push her to the sky, only to watch as she falls again, seeking the depths below. Carefully, as if afraid to fall, she approaches the forward edge, still afraid to sit, that to do so might sap her courage. Looking over the edge, the image varies.

It is first the clear but dark blue depth of the pool surrounded by shallows with screaming children splashing and swimming in the summer sun. She can see mothers tanning along the sides, children in line for ice cream and candy, boys drying off with towels as they head to the lockers. She feels the weight of the line at the bottom of the ladder wishing her to just jump already, or, if she must, turn around and go back. Anything but stand there dithering. She can almost hear the chants, *jump, jump, jump!*

It is next the lonely vacancy of autumn. Two inches of water at best, green with algae, coated in leaves dotting a layer of ice just on the edge of melting away altogether. The park beyond is empty. The children not yet at school. Public works crews elsewhere, preparing this suburban town for winter. At this moment, in this

place, the park is hers. The pool is hers. She is used to being alone, being lonely, but this is different. Better. She is, at last, in control of her destiny. She is, at last, able to make a choice for herself. It may be right, it may be wrong, but the decision will be hers.

She leans forward over the edge, ready for the final dive.

Twenty rungs. Not that high, but high enough.

part three

Because this children's story is not for children, I don't have to tell you that, regardless of how much we craved change and variety and adventure *once upon a time*, eventually we are all seduced by comfort, safety, and stability. Well, perhaps that is too grown up a thought for any children's story. Let us say, instead, that grown ups tend to get *stuck in their ways*. There are exceptions, of course, those who remind us that we are never too old for change, for adventure. Old Cornelius Feschenshut was such an exception.

The old demon had his tastes, his patterns, his preferences, and had long learned how to satisfy them, it is true. Life for Cornelius Feschenshut was not complicated, but it cannot be denied that his tastes were. His style, his approach, his general demeanor had not changed in nearly a century, but that style included a desire for new flavors, new varieties.

Over the incalculable years of his life, he learned to crave complicated tastes, delicate flavors that one might enjoy more for taste than sustenance. He was ancient, this old demon, and no longer had any desire to stuff himself with heavy meals or easy snacks. I suppose, because the children have long put this book away and gone to bed, I might say that, regardless of how many beers the old demon had pounded back in his youth, no matter how many shots he had downed that he might revel with his buddies as they shouted encouragement for his excess, he now only desired the quiet slow sips of a well crafted cocktail in which he could now discern the quality of the whiskey within. To put it another way, he had long ago put down the pizza in favor of a light, but well made cheese plate.

Perhaps the best way to see old Cornelius Feschenshut is as an old gentleman who enjoys good wine, rarely drinks anything else, takes several evenings to study the flavor of his latest bottle, and never opens the same vintage twice. Yes, that will do nicely.

While we may remember him as the old demon nibbling around the edges of Ms. Alabama's *Sabotage Swamp*, he has, at the time our story now picks up, left her long behind. Tonight, Cornelius is savoring the deep nutty flavors of a middle manager at a mid-sized pharmaceutical company. Earlier that afternoon, the manager had read about some potentially horrendous side effects of one of his company's products, a product made by other companies as well, a product that improved thousands of lives every day, even as it destroyed some small, perhaps miniscule, number of others. The poor man had begun to wonder if he was doing anything wrong. He wasn't sure. Maybe he was helping. Maybe he was hurting. Maybe his contribution to the company was so small it didn't matter in any case.

The uncertainty roiled his soul.

The uncertainty also brought out unusually delicate flavors that Feschenshut was curiously attracted to, even as he struggled to analyze them. There were the deep nutty flavors that served as a sort of cradle in which the others rested. Within the cradle, dancing about the edges, a bit of nutmeg fought with black pepper to bring out terrifically sharp accents. The word *terrifically* can mean both *wonderful* and *frightening* at the same time, as this accent surely was. In the center, mostly suffocated by the nutty shell and prickly accents, was the mystery. Perhaps what was once the sharpness of cinnamon suppressed by the not quite mintiness of cardamom, then disguised by the not quite saltiness of cumin. The flavor as whole did not quite work, not quite. And yet, Cornelius could not help but taste again and again, wondering just what it was that attracted him to it, brought him back for further tastes, each one always intended to be the last.

The middle manager would not be relieved of his guilt that night. For, while Cornelius Feschenshut continued to snack the way you nibbled at the pistachios last week, not gorging, but not

stopping either, it was never quite enough to make a sizable dent in the growing feeling of sin the middle manager felt. At best, the old demon tempered it, which is another one of those strange words that means two things at the same time, in this case, both *took away some of its power*, and also *made it stronger*.

Cornelius, of course, cared little for the effect of his eating habits upon the middle manager. Cornelius did not care about the world, about the future, about his impact upon either the world of demons or the humans off which they fed. The old bachelor had long ago decided what was important to him, and that was tasting. Not eating, but tasting. For Cornelius Feschenshut, there would always be new tastes, with or without his help.

Some demons, of course, cared more than others.

Many things happened over the course of the next five years, perhaps enough for another book in itself. *This* book, however, is only a children's story, and it is best if we skip over much of the detail to focus on what will bring us to our moral. Is it enough to say that Betty made her way in the world, as did her sister, while Estuary Alabama continued to suffer? Well, perhaps that is a little *too* simplistic, even for a children's story.

Betty did make her way in the world, of course. After their nearly fatal fight, the Apple sisters forgave each other as sisters often do, and did their best to move on together. Rain showed Betty how to enter a draft, though it was, admittedly, not easy. Betty was skittish about *going back in*, and was terrified of that first step. Hunger, however, is a strong motivator, and going back into a child was unthinkable. She ultimately took the leap, learning at last to make her own way in the world. Rain stayed by her side, offering her a place to sleep and the friendship that can only come from a sister. She even brought her around to *Autumn Wind* to meet her friends.

As Betty became more comfortable with life on the outside, her adventurous spirit again took hold. Thanking her sister for everything, she parted ways and left to *seek her fortune*. The sister, thinking wistfully of Betty once again out of her life and having adventures, settled back into her intellectual life, studying the souls she nibbled by night and discussing philosophy with her friends by day. Betty travelled the world, Rain studied it. Such were the demons they became at *something like twenty-three*.

As for Estuary Alabama, the next five years were not kind. The divorce of her parents meant less money for both, none of which could be spared any longer for the extravagant, which means both *expensive* and *wasteful*, fees for Sunrise Clinic. She was brought home to live with her mother, and barely managed to eke out a high school diploma. She dropped out of community college twice, lost no less than seven jobs. The selling of her childhood home led to the fight of the century with her mother, after which she found herself huddled in a sleeping bag on the winter streets of Mount Prospect. With only the predictable future of violence, sex work, and serious drugs ahead of her, she settled into the life she had come to believe she deserved.

By the time our story resumes, Estuary had been saved, in a manner of speaking, by her one-time best friend Claire, who took her in and cared for her in her Chicago apartment. I say *in a manner of speaking*, because it was only Estuary's body that Claire was able to save. The rest of her, the *inside*, was as wracked as ever, and there seemed little hope, even five years after the exit of the great vandal, of cleaning up the mess.

I suppose that should do. Five years have passed. Betty made her way in the world, as did her sister, and Estuary Alabama continued to suffer. Perhaps that is enough after all.

"Thought you'd be at Fingerman's already."

Estuary did not bother even to raise her head from where she lay on the couch, staring at the television. "Called in."

Claire plopped down on what they called the comfy chair and stared at her roommate. Another week almost gone and hardly two days of work. Another week like this and there would be no job to call in sick *to*. Again.

"Did you find someone to cover?"

"Oh my god, Claire, who even cares?"

Claire could feel it coming. Another fight. Well, maybe it was time. Claire had been taking care of her for the better part of a year, and she didn't seem to be getting any better. And now, well, now it was coming down to, well, remember when your dad caved in and got you that dog? Remember how it felt so good and amazing and you just wanted to spend every minute with her until, and I don't mean to say you stopped loving her, because you did not, not ever, but there was that moment when maybe she stopped being the most important thing in your world, when maybe something else seemed more important, but there she was, still there, and though you tried not to think about it, you knew that she wasn't going anywhere, ever, and that whatever trouble she caused you, however much work she was, she would be there for the rest of your life? That was the fear Claire was trying not to notice. That she might have to take care of her best friend for the rest of her life, even when it meant that, well, that she wouldn't be able to take care of anyone else. Or let anyone take care of her. Sort of like that.

"I don't know, Stu, maybe your boss?"

"What do you care what that asshole thinks?"

"I just want you to..." Claire stumbled. What *did* she want? Really, she just wanted the apartment to herself before Quincy came over. "...I mean, I just...y'know...don't want you to lose another job."

"I don't care! I don't care about my stupid job or my stupid boss. I just want to..."

"Want to what? Lay in front of the tv all day? Feel sorry for yourself some more? Pretend to be sick so you can avoid any kind of..."

Estuary sat up. "Ok, whatever. I get it. You're sick of me. I'll go."

"Stu, I'm not...sick of you or...I just, y'know, want you to...I don't know...like just get up, *do* something. Stop wallowing in your own pity. It's like you're not even trying."

Estuary went to her room and started to rush her clothes into a backpack.

"Wait. Stu. Don't."

"Shut up, Claire. I got it. You don't have to pretend."

Claire came up to her door. "I'm not pretending, Stu."

Estuary gave her a hard stare, the raised eyebrows, the *I-don't-believe-you* look. Claire did not mistake it.

"Seriously, Stu, I'm not. You're my best friend in the world. I just want to help you."

"Then just leave me alone."

Claire took a deep breath to find her courage.

"No. I will not. I will not leave you alone. I will not ignore you. I will not pretend everything is ok. You're depressed. I get it. You've been depressed for so long I can hardly remember you *not* depressed. That sucks, but that is your life. I'm here for you, but you have to face it. You can't just lie on the couch, ditching work until they fire you, hoping the pain in your head will go away if you just stare at the tv long enough. It's not going anywhere. You've got to figure out how to live with it."

"Live with it?!" Estuary came up to the door and put her hands on the frame. Their faces were inches apart. "Live with it? Live with knowing I've ruined everything I've ever touched? Live with the

look I get from every person I ever meet, the one that says *I know what you are?* Live with being the most worthless person on the planet, who hurts everyone and everything she touches? Just force myself to put a smile on my face and pretend that I'm not constantly ruining everything for everyone even when I know, know *to the depths of my soul* that I am? Is that what you think I should do, Claire? Fake it 'till I *don't* make it?"

Estuary grabbed the door and tried to slam it in Claire's face. Claire put her foot in the way and pushed it back.

"I'm just saying...I don't know...maybe, yeah? Maybe that *is* what you need. Maybe if you can fake it a little harder, maybe...maybe you *will* make it. Maybe you'll see that all that stuff you feel isn't really true. That you're not what you say you are. Maybe you just need to stop listening to yourself and listen to the rest of us. Nobody is telling you those things. We never have. My god, Stu, have I ever?"

Estuary stared, her hand on the door, her head spinning with things to say, none of which could ever matter to anyone, because no one ever cared. Why would they? What was she worth to anyone?

Claire led her gently to the bed, where they both sat down. "What does Dr. Vespa say?"

"Who?"

"Dr. Vespa. Your therapist?"

"Oh, yeah, right. She...um...y'know...same stuff you do."

"Jesus, Stu, you never even...when is the last time you saw anyone? Was it all a lie?"

Estuary put her head in her hands. Her words all mumbled against them. "Nothing helps, Claire. Nothing. No one, not you, not the stupid doctors, not my stupid mother, no one helps. Nothing changes. Work just makes it worse. Getting up and just *doing* something, I mean, that's all it is. I'm sure doing things feels great

to you because you feel good while you're doing them. But I feel terrible *all the time*. So if I *do* something, it's just doing it while feeling terrible, which makes the thing I do terrible, and makes me feel even worse when I get done because it turned out to be one more thing that I ruined, and everyone would have been better off if I had never tried. Can't you see that I don't *want* to lie around watching tv and feeling sorry for myself. I'm doing that for you. For everyone else. Because when I try, I ruin everything."

Claire sighed.

And the buzzer buzzed.

"That'll be Quincy."

Estuary looked up. "What? Oh...I....right, I see...yeah, ok. Because I was supposed to be...right..."

"Why don't I just tell him to go?"

"No....I...you shouldn't...I mean...don't. Do not." Estuary stood up. "I'll make myself scarce. You deserve a little...I mean...I'll uh, why don't I go down to Fingerman's? Maybe they didn't find anyone and I can, y'know..." She had already put on her coat.

Claire continued to sit on her bed as Estuary walked out the door, buzzing the stranger in as she passed the intercom, without asking who it was. She did not even look up to see his face as she passed him on the stairs.

It would take hours for Claire to relax.

At *Autumn Wind*, Maya and Theo were at it again.

"Don't listen to Barbara, Thee. The poor thing has been wallowing in wealth so long he's forgotten what hard work even means."

Barbary Trudeau laughed and slouched further back into the couch. To the ceiling he laughed, "It's Barbary."

Maya, hardly ready to make light of the conversation gave him only, "As you say, Comrade, as you say." Turning back to

Theo, she continued. "The point is, and I say this will full knowledge that I have been more blessed than many with the freedom I have inherited, not every demon can just travel as they choose. Many, I dare say *most* are stuck in the same neighborhoods, going after the same people with the same sins, day after day, year after year, because they never had the privilege, DON'T, don't, no, no, no don't interrupt me, Theo, because I'm making an important point here and you *know* I'm right..."

Theo was leaning forward, doing his best and failing as usual to interrupt. He knew what she was going to say, how she was going to say it, and exactly why it was a bunch of garbage, in his opinion. As usual, his time would come. For now, he waited for her to finish her socialist vomit.

"...The point here is that it is precisely our education, that *formalized abyss of stolen thought*, as you so eloquently call it, that affords us the freedom we exercise every night. It's not that the rest of them *can't* expand themselves, see new places, taste new sins, get out from under the yoke of their own families. It's that they *don't*. It's that they don't even know they can. Or should. This is why..."

"Oh let the poor dees rest in peace. At least in their own neighborhoods they don't have to listen to you droning on about what's good for them. You don't want them to be free. You just want them to be like you." Theo sat up higher in his chair and leaned forward as he settled into his argument. "Why are you so obsessed with making everyone just like you? Who cares if they don't leave their neighborhood? Who cares if they taste the same sins over and over again for their whole lives? Why are the sins you eat better than theirs? Why is variety better than specialization? Why is seeing the world better than staying close to your family? You always talk about freedom but you only want dees to be free if they become like you."

"That is completely untrue, Theo and you know it."

Barbary had just turned himself to lay supine on the couch, staring at the ceiling with his hands behind his head. "My mother used to say that the only thing worse than freedom was family."

This made Andrea laugh out loud. "Ooh, I like that one, Barbary. Can I use it."

"It's Barbary you beautiful layabout, and yes, as long as you don't credit *me* by mistake."

"That, Barbary, is a mistake even *I* am not too stupid to make."

"Barbary. Barbary. Barbary." He rose from the couch and surveyed the room. "Barbary." He wandered off toward the stairs, looking for a drink.

Andrea turned to Rain. "What about sweet Sis? She dropped out, right? She end up back home?"

Rain looked thoughtful. What *about* sweet Sis? It had been almost three years since they had last seen each other, one last fight in a series of fights that seemed to prove they just didn't belong together anymore.

"I guess," Rain said, "there is a difference between never leaving home, and going back again. Going back again is...I don't know...I think maybe it's just a thing...just something you can't really do. Not for long, anyway."

Vivian joined the conversation. "Must have been horrible. All alone in that place for, what, five years? I mean, I'm not sure I could've made it at all. Just, alone, like that. Starving. It's no wonder she would never talk about it. Did she ever, y'know, talk about it with you?"

Rain sighed. Something about telling her sister's tales seemed like a betrayal. Betty had her own chance to tell these friends about her experience, but she never had. Whatever she told Rain, it was to her sister. To the only person she could trust. To break that trust now would be...

"She didn't like to talk about it. I think that's part of what I mean when I say you can't just go back to your family and have it be the same as never leaving. She was different. I was different. We tried. We tried to make it like the old days. But in the old days, we were more like the same person. Not the same. I don't mean that. We were always different. It was just that we, well, more or less had the same experiences. Even when they were different, we would talk about them right away, shared them to where it was like they, hmmm, these experiences or what not were *ours*, together.

"After she came back, it was as if we couldn't really share any more. It was more like we could tell each other these stories, but they were just that. Stories. We had both grown so much, and neither of us seemed interested in trying to go back to what we were. What I mean to say is, I can't...hmmm...it wouldn't be right for me to tell you things...I don't know....I guess they feel like secrets, I suppose, and so I really shouldn't...well...shouldn't repeat those things. It was...well...it's no secret to say it was hard for her. She just...needs time, I suppose."

Afia walked over and sat next to Rain, putting her hand on her shoulder. "Maybe you *can* go home again, Ray. Maybe Elizabeth just can't go home *yet*."

Rain pushed through tears growing in her chest. "Anyway, I don't know where she is. We tried to be together like when we were kids, but it just wasn't the same. I haven't seen her in years. I'm not saying that Maya's right, and I'm not saying that Theo's right. As usual, they're probably both *wrong*. But it's not just about school, Maya. Maybe it's more about that thing, that thing that takes you away. With Boo and me, it was more like getting torn apart. Like if we hadn't been torn apart, maybe we would never have *expanded our horizons*, as you say. Maybe school wasn't enough. For us, it was as much about being sent off by our parents, or torn away

from each other that made us wanderers. And I'm a little with Theo. I don't know that we're better off."

The room was silent when Barbary returned.

Remember that house where your friend's mom kept the crackers way too long? Where the snacks weren't stale so much as just old? It wasn't that they were soggy, though maybe a little. More like just not entirely crunchy. Not the way they should have been. A little old. Tired. What you have to imagine then, if you want to understand Betty's new life, is some new snack, something you haven't tried before, but which you suspect is sort of stale, or old, or, as my home economics teacher used to say, *a little long in the tooth*. Not entirely as crunchy as it should be. This was Elizabeth Apple's new life. Wherever she went, whatever she tasted, everything came up, well, maybe stale is the best word after all.

For example. The spanking should have been exquisite. Lorene Sanderson always swore she would never hurt a child. Certainly not her own. But she was tired. Overwhelmed, really, which is a way of saying *she was bothered by so many things that she couldn't pay attention to any of them*. She was hungry, too, which never helps. And there were people looking at her, judging her, expecting Lorene to do something. To show some discipline. And Zoya wouldn't shut up. I suppose everyone has a breaking point. Lorene Sanderson broke. She pushed aside the grocery cart and told her four year old that if she didn't calm down *this minute*, she would get a spanking. It was not the sort of thing Lorene Sanderson usually said. Or ever said. Zoya, hardly knowing what a spanking was, had no reason to fear. Yet, people were watching and Lorene Sanderson was about to be broken. After what she thought other people thought were too many warnings already, she bent young Zoya over and slapped her bottom.

Zoya did not stop crying.

And Lorene Sanderson did not apologize.

That night, she tossed and turned, which means she did not sleep well, but *kept trying*. As she did, she crumpled up the covers, tried her pillow in about six different positions, and, though she slept, it was not a *good* sleep.

Inside her soul, Elizabeth Apple tasted the fresh sin. The heart of it was orange. Fresh and sweet orange. Along the edge something closer to licorice. The tastes went surprisingly well together. *Complimented* each other, which is like two friends who dress very differently, but like to be seen together and tell each other how much they wish *they* could pull that off. Swirling about both of these flavors was something a little more complicated. Something floral. Something meant more to be smelled than tasted. Something which made the whole thing taste a little *funny*, but all the more appealing for it.

The taste was new. It was interesting. It was appealing.

And it was stale.

Like everything Elizabeth Apple tasted, it felt a little *off*. No matter that the sin was hardly six hours old. No matter that it was a sin never before seen in the soul of the Sanderson woman. No matter that it would likely be the one and only sin of its kind in the lifetime of this soul. For as the juice trickled down Elizabeth's throat, she could tell it would never be good enough. That, at best, it would sustain her. It was food, nothing more. It was staid, which means it was *boring because it had been experienced too many times*. It did not matter that she had never tasted such a dish before, for she felt as if she had.

Or Keely Brewer. The fifth grade teacher had designs upon a young mother, which is to say, *he desired to have sex with her*. She was a married woman, but Keely held fast to his hopes. He knew the husband regularly travelled during the week, and created a plan to work his way into the woman's home. He would mark the

son's work harder than necessary and allow what appeared to be well meaning conversation to lead to a private meeting. From there, he had no doubt his combination of charm and, I'm sorry to say, strength, would win the prize he sought, after which the child's marks would surely rise again.

Well, no one said this story was for children.

Today, he had marked the boy's essay harder than necessary.

The sin that grew was a complicated mess of shame for what he had done and shame for what he planned to do, both tempered by pride in having begun his planned task and his desire for the ultimate outcome.

This one tasted more like dark chocolate drips on salty crispy fried somethings. The sort of snack you can throw in a bowl and find yourself nibbling without thinking about until you catch yourself grabbing for the dusty remains lining the bowl and licking them off your fingers. Except. Except maybe the oil the crispy bits were fried in was a little stale. Not rancid, exactly, but again, perhaps *a little long in the tooth*. Enough to put the flavor off just a bit. Too keep you from having that third bite, let alone the crumbs at the bottom. Well, maybe not *you*, but certainly Elizabeth Apple.

It was as if Elizabeth could see through the taste. That instead of being fooled by the magic of seductive scents and flavors, all she could see was sloppy cooking with poor ingredients. For Elizabeth Apple, there was no magic. Nothing surprising. Nothing interesting. Everything she smelled, everything she tasted was lazy or trite or boring or stale or, in any case uninspiring.

Nothing was ever as good as what she remembered it *could be*.

Well, *almost* nothing.

Cornelius Feschenshut, that fastidious old bachelor, liked his sins fresh as well. But fresh wasn't everything. More than fresh,

Cornelius wanted delicacy, which is a way of saying *he liked flavors he had to think about*. He liked complicated mixtures of tastes he did not expect to see together, tastes he could savor on his tongue as he studied them, liked to break out each individual note, understand how they worked together to find balance. Cornelius understood that, as his mentor had often said, *fresh ingredients make the best ingredients*, but also that some sins grow better with age.

Tonight's sin was aged.

It had been festering for years, a wild fungus hiding in the shade of an old stump in a fresh field of flowers. The flowers, dainty reminders of *not working as hard as he could have*, were of no interest to Feschenshut. Their floral taste had a little too much strawberry in it. They were a little too common. A little too *easy*. The fungus, however, the moist pile of soft goo that had been getting more pungent, which means *smelly in a way that some people hate, and some people love, but of which no one is indifferent*, for nearly five years, drew the old bachelor in for a closer inspection.

The outer skin, soft but firm, did its best to hold the scent within, but it was cracked throughout, and these cracks let the scents from inside escape to where Cornelius could savor them. They were revolting and seductive. They were liver, foie gras, strong and tasteful, but at the same time reminiscent of the dark reaches of the body. Remember that time you walked back into the bathroom shortly after you had done your business, the bathroom without the fan, and you thought to yourself, *gee, that smells like poo, but it's my own poo, and it doesn't smell as bad as I would have thought, though I imagine other people would gag at it. Too bad the fan doesn't work*. And so on. This was kind of like that.

Cornelius bent down for a taste. He broke open the mushroom like pile and lightly tasted the treasure inside. As a whole, the bite was astounding. The pieces themselves were nothing new, but

placed together, brought out a unique flavor. The skin, a sort of shame of apathy, tempered the betrayal within. Yet, mixed into the betrayal, as if they had been ground together, was another sort of shame. It was something like pride at having done the right thing for the wrong reasons. Together, these three flavors, aged in the shade of the old log, brought old Feschenshut to near ecstasy.

It was a good sin.

Such is the result when one love is left for another. An oldie but a goodie.

The one love, in this case, was Estuary Alabama. True, she had been doing her best to drive everyone away from her, including Braith Franklin, but there was a difference between knowing you're unworthy of love, and *being* unworthy of love. For, as much as she felt the weight of sins on her soul, sins so brutal she could not even allow herself to know them, as much as she knew she was the most awful, selfish, worthless person on the planet, as much as she knew no reasonable person, if they knew who she really was, would waste time on her, there had still been Braith. Braith who defied all expectations by staying true. Braith who came by every day to visit her in the clinic. Braith who listened to her terrors and forgave them. Braith who never gave up until he finally gave up. Braith who finally left one love for another. Braith who finally *proved* to Estuary that she could never be worthy of love.

"Just go!"

"I'm not leaving you."

"You already have. You and that stupid nurse. I don't blame you. Honestly, I'm not even surprised. If you're stupid enough to waste your time with me, your standards have clearly bottomed out."

"You're just making this harder, Stu."

"Just go!"

"I won't."

"You will, Braith. You have to. I'll destroy you, like I destroy everything else."

"She's just a friend, Stu. I don't see why you have to make such a big deal out of this. Don't I get to have friends? Don't I get to spend time with anyone beside you?"

"My god, Braith, why are you so stupid? Just go. Spend time with whoever you want. Just stop bothering me. Stop pretending that I matter. I just want everyone and everything to go away, but you won't leave me alone. If I could be happy for you, I would. I just don't know how anymore. I can't love you, so...just go and be with your stupid new girlfriend and leave me alone!"

Well, that's how it started anyway. After the orderly asked him to leave because he was *upsetting her*, he was angry and sad and broken hearted and swore he would never come back. The new love gave him something to feel good about, and he forced himself to forget about Estuary altogether.

He told himself she had been taking advantage of him. That it was an abusive relationship. That he had done the right thing by walking away. And every time he allowed himself to think about her, was sure he had betrayed her.

The sin was delicious.

"I'm sorry. It's just wrong."

Theo raised his eyebrows. "Why are you sorry?"

Rain stumbled. "It's just, well, a figure of speech. I mean to say I'm sorry if you don't like what I have to say."

"Yes, of course," Theo returned. "A sort of sorry-not-sorry."

"You're missing the point, Theo."

"Am I, Rain? Am I missing the point? Am I not understanding your complete lack of empathy for the standards of others? Or

am I not understanding your complete lack of empathy for someone who has? Which is the point I'm missing?"

"Ok, now you're just being a jerk."

"Well, now," Theo smiled, "That is an epithet I can live with. It's my style, really. Quick. Sharp. Reflexive. I think you nailed it."

Rain just shook her head.

"Listen, Rain," Theo went on. "I just think you're missing the larger point."

"Which is?"

"Which is that there is room for all kinds of things in this world. Why should you care what your sister and few of her friends are doing? So they destroy a few people. Who cares?"

"But don't we have a responsibility?"

Andrea laughed. "Well said, Apple. What *would* come of the poor little things if we made them sad?"

"So that's all we are, Dre? Feeders? Nothing matters as long as we eat?"

"As long as I eat, Apple."

"And what happens when the food is gone? When we all go around dredging up sins with no history, sins that break the people to the point they stop caring about living altogether? How long do you think we would last if they stopped sinning at all?"

"Oh, give it a rest, Ray." This was Maya. She'd been sitting this one out, enjoying the debate from the outside, listening and waiting for the last word. "The whole thing is cyclical. Your sister and her friends have their little fun, show everyone how special they are by doing this thing no one ever gave much thought to, until enough people try it that it doesn't feel special anymore, and everyone goes back to doing what they always did. And if by some miracle your sister's little fad really does take off like you say it will, if so many of us tear up our own sins that the humans stop caring and all die off or something, another movement will come up

behind it to save our food supply. There are forces bigger than you or your sister, or any of us."

Andrea could not pass up the opening. "Well, not for Barbary."

"Yes, of course," Maya said with a smile as laughs filled the room. "Barbary excepted. I assumed that went without saying."

Rain sulked. In her heart, she knew her sister was wrong. Knew that her kind lived in a symbiotic relationship with people, which means *demons and humans depended on each other to live*. It was as if there was some sort of unspoken trust that Betty and her friends were betraying. Rain had come to believe that eating sins was a service, a blessing to the people for which the soul demons were rewarded with sustenance. And there was an abundance to choose from. Perhaps too much. To go around stealing sins, to take what has not been provided, could not possibly end well. When you refuse a blessing, that blessing fails to return. Wasn't *that* the way of the world?

If only she had known how to say it.

Instead, what came out was, "I just think it's wrong, that's all."

"Now you're just being a prude."

Everyone turned to see Vivian entering the room. She came around the group and plopped down next to Barbary.

"If it were wrong, it would be illegal."

"Maybe it should be," Rain dared.

"Oh why bother. It would just make it more interesting. Besides, I say don't knock it till you've tried it."

That silenced the room. Vivian let the silence take over, soaking up the power as they all waited for her to continue.

"I was with Anso Porra. You know, the *writer*? He wanted to see what all the fuss was about but couldn't quite get it to work. I laughed at him and told him it was easy, which was lie because I'd never tried it, which made me wonder if *everyone* was lying about

it. After Anso left, I surfed into Eliot Michael, the senator, the one with the little intern problem I told you about, and just started digging. I couldn't find anything and was starting to really believe the whole idea was made up when I felt something just at the edge of my reach. I doubled down on the digging and actually got a hold of it. I've never had to pull on anything harder in my life, but I did finally get a piece of it. It was a murder, actually. Seriously, Rain, it was the most amazing thing I ever tasted. Not that I would, the thing is it was a little too hard to be any sort of regular thing, in my opinion. Worth it, but not, like, every day worth it, if you know what I mean. Still, I say don't knock it till you try it, right?"

Barbary put his arm around Vivian. "Well done, Viv. I was wondering when you would get around to joining the rest of us."

"The rest of us?"

"Well, me, anyway."

"So you've done it too?"

"Just a few times. I do agree with you. It's a little too much work. I'm more the low hanging fruit type, really."

Theo leaned forward. "So how exactly do you...I mean...so you're there, on the plain or what not, and you, what, just...push down?"

"The first time was like that for me. But with some practice, I would say it's more like *willing yourself down*, if that makes any sense. You sort of *see yourself* down there, *feel* it before you feel it. If it doesn't sound too...ok, you'll all laugh, but you just sort of have to *believe*. Stupid, I know, but I found it a lot easier after that. Still too hard to do every night, but easier."

"Ok," Theo asked again, "so I'm laying there on the ground and just sort of *wish* my way into the surface?"

"I'm not saying you still don't have to dig. I mean, you *do* know how to dig, don't you Theodore? I know you're an

intellectual at heart, but you can actually perform physical labor in pinch, yeah?"

Andrea couldn't resist. "He can pinch a pencil, Barbary dear. Really you expect too much."

"Ok, so it's more like just digging. I get it. Like digging with a purpose that you can see in your head. As if the whole thing is easier if you can see the outcome in your mind. I think I'm starting to..."

Rain could see what was coming. Barbary was always the leader. Once he jumped in, everyone followed, eventually. Soon enough, she would be the only one who hadn't tried it, would be labeled as a bore, would be ostracized, which is a way of saying *they wouldn't want her around anymore*. Her sulk turned to fear. Sooner or later, she would have to try it, if only to tell everyone else she had, and that she didn't see what all the fuss was about. Or she would have to swear off of it forever and stand her ground.

She sunk deeper into her chair.

This was not a battle she was going to win.

We've gotten a little ahead of ourselves. I'm sorry about that. Not quite appropriate for a children's story. In a children's story, one thing should follow another in chronological order, which is, I suppose, *the order according to a clock*, or, perhaps in this case, *a calendar*. I struggle with that. I tend to remember stories in order of importance, which can admittedly bring with it a little confusion.

So what *has* happened to Elizabeth Apple since we last saw her? Can you guess?

Can you guess the one thing that was not stale to her taste? The one thing that was as good as she remembered it *could* be? Of course you can. You know exactly what it was. Because this children's story is not for children, you, too, know what it means to

crave something you've given up. You, too, know just how good that one cigarette tastes a year after you've quit. How amazing that donut is in the middle of your diet. The *sheer ecstasy of indulgence*, a phrase I have no need to explain to *you*.

Can you guess that she didn't keep her little secret to herself for very long? That she learned to justify it? *Justify* is a funny word. It is about of proving something, even when that something isn't true. It can be about tricking someone, or even yourself, into believing a bad thing is actually a good thing. Like that time you didn't pick up the piece of litter in the park. You knew it wasn't the last piece you would find, and you certainly weren't going to spend the whole day picking up one little piece of litter after another, and it wasn't yours to begin with, and probably the thing would blow away somewhere where no one would notice it, and anyway, it was none of your business. That's what I mean when I say Betty learned to justify her new indulgence. She knew it was wrong, or at least, not really *right*, but convinced herself it was *no big deal*.

Can you guess that Elizabeth Apple made new friends? That she bragged about the one thing she did that no one else had dared to do before? That her friends believed her, and learned to tear up new sins for themselves? Of course you can. How else would such a fad, a fad we've already heard sister Rain worry about, take root, if you will forgive the metaphor? Elizabeth Apple was proud. Elizabeth Apple liked attention. Elizabeth Apple bragged. She bragged to her friends about the unmatched taste of pulling your own sins from beneath the soul, and her friends found she was not wrong. And they told their friends. And *they* told *their* friends.

And a trend took hold.

But you already guessed that.

I don't mean to say that the world of the demons changed overnight, or even at all. Just because it suddenly seems like everyone you know is playing with a hacky sack, does not mean the rest

of the world is, or that your friends will be doing it for long. It does mean, however, that it is impossible to walk through your part of the world without seeing it.

Such was the trend that began with Apple Brown Betty, and such was the trend which brought her fame.

In a children's story, of course, braggarts never thrive. It is a nasty habit, and such stories do all they can to discourage it. Braggarts are taught their lesson and, in the best of cases, learn some humility. Pride may be only a vice, but it is the vice that tears apart the world. Such a vice cannot be rewarded in a children's story, even in one that is not for children. Elizabeth Apple let her pride get the better of her, even as her sister came to do the same, and a hard lesson was coming. As we get ourselves caught up with the past and once again look toward the future, we must have no doubt but that the Apple sisters were heading for a fall.

It would be unfair to say that Claire betrayed her best friend, Estuary Alabama. In a children's story, betrayal is usually no more than a lie, and Claire never lied to Estuary. She was never anything but honest, caring, and true. Still, she did allow herself to fall in love with the one person in the world her best friend still had feelings for. The one person, perhaps beside Claire herself, who mattered to her. In another sort of story, a grownup sort of story, such a love affair could be nothing *but* betrayal. In *that* sort of story, falling in love with your best friend's ex could only be seen as caring more for yourself than for your friend. In *that* sort of story, such a thing is always the sacrifice of your friend's happiness for your own. This is not, of course, that sort of story, and Claire never lied.

No. Calling her love a betrayal would be unfair.

It never should have happened. Braith had already put his high school girlfriend behind him forever. He had grown up, fallen

in love, and should, by all rights, have lived happily ever after. He should have married the new girl, moved to a nicer apartment after the promotion, and to a house after the first child. He should have grown in stature over time, become a responsible father, happily married until such time as he entered a different sort of novel, *that* sort of novel, the sort where men with good jobs and beautiful families become dissatisfied with their lives and begin to *seek attention elsewhere*. Such a life, however, was not to be his destiny.

Because this is a children's story, it might be best to say that Braith's new girlfriend did something horrible, showing her true self, after which Braith realized he could never love such a mean and selfish person. Of course, that is never really true. In this case, it was more like when that man you fell in love with at twenty-five turned out to be a little more boring than you thought. Or maybe made you feel like *you* were a little more boring than you thought. Just one of those times it *didn't really work out*. Just one of those things. Well, think of her how you like. She is so minor a character in this story that I have not bothered to share her name. She is fleeting as the wind, and we shall not see her again.

Afterward, after the unnamed beauty left Braith's life forever, he settled into a quiet depression. He would spend his time between busy but uninteresting days at Anderson Tile and lonely nights at home with simple dinners for one in front of the television. Staring at the screen, wondering if he should call someone at work to go out for a drink, or just do something, anything, alone, he would remind himself that he wasn't worth anyone's time, that he deserved to be alone.

It was a Saturday when Braith ran into Claire at the grocery. He recognized her, said hello, and asked about Estuary. Claire talked him into a visit, suggested it might be good for Stu. Braith demurred, which is away of saying, *he said no, but in a way that suggested he wanted to say yes*, and Claire pushed him a little

harder. Soon enough, they were at Claire's apartment, with Braith tentatively entering Estuary's room.

Was Estuary Alabama quietly happy to see her old friend? Did she open one eye, even as her head lay on the pillow facing away from him? Did she hear his words, his care, his honesty as he told her about the last year or so, about his breakup, about his sadness, and about how much he missed her? Did she catch that he never quite apologized? That he was not ashamed for having left Estuary behind? That even after she had pushed him away, he was drawn back? That he still loved her?

I'm sorry to say neither Braith nor I are able to answer those questions.

Braith spoke, Estuary Alabama did not. She might have been moved, she might have been angry. Braith could not tell. He saw her slight movements, could tell that she was not asleep, but had no idea how she felt about his words. About him.

You and I know, of course, what was coursing through Estuary's mind. She had become far too predictable for us not to. She was pleased that anyone could say they loved her, and sure she was not worthy of that love. She was glad to have her old friend by her side, and sure she would destroy him if he let her. She had the smallest ember of joy spark up in her soul, only to be quashed by the dense and verdant forest of shame that choked the rest of it.

And Braith left her room, unsure what to think.

And Claire offered him a cup of coffee.

And the two of them talked.

And one thing led to another, which is a way of saying *they fell in love*.

Can it be said that demons, too, have souls? That's a hard question to answer. If this was a story for grown-ups, I would give a resounding *maybe*, followed by several hundred words on the

etymology of the word *soul*, or, *all the different things that word has meant over time*. Grownups, of course, like to talk *around* things. When someone asks us how successful the new grocery store is, we say things like, *it depends on how you count*, or, perhaps, *what do you mean by successful?* Infuriating, really, but there it is. The more you learn, the less you know, and all that.

Because this is a children's story, it is, perhaps, best said that demons have souls, but not like ours. Of what they are made, how they are tended, and their impact upon their hosts, I cannot say. If there are soul demons for soul demons, I have not met any. If I do, perhaps we shall have a sequel, which means *another book very much like this one, but with different names*.

What I *can* say is that whether or not Rain Apple had a soul, she had *feelings*.

Here she is talking to Afia at *Autumn Wind*.

"...not jealous, exactly, but, well, I suppose that has more to do with the implications of that word, don't you think? I mean, to be jealous, I would have to want to be like her, or want to have what she has, or, I suppose, in some way wish I *was* her, which I don't. Not really. It's more, perhaps, as if there are these parts of her, just little bits of her which, I suppose, if I had *just those bits*, maybe I would be, more, I don't know, *something*.

"When we were kids...before, well, I mean, before she got lost and all that, before, well, before this disaster of...what I mean is, there was this time, *before*, when it felt like we were just kids. Back then, I was jealous of her all the time. Properly jealous. She would always go one step further than me, try one more thing, take one more dare, and I would wish I could, too. Go further. Be bolder. And do it *first*.

"I suppose that part of me *needed* her to get lost. Needed her to...to...well, to *die*, I suppose. I mean, I don't mean to say, not that, I mean...It's not like I ever wished her dead. Not then, not now, not

ever. What I mean is, I think that *losing* her forced me to do things for myself. To live up to...I don't know, live up to her *memory*, perhaps? Not that I wasn't...well *you* know. You saw how I was when I first came here. And you helped me. You were amazing. But it was also...I mean...it was Betty, always. It was always Betty I was, I guess, *aspiring* to? She was thing I wanted to be but was afraid to be.

"But also, remember, I thought she had, just, gone away. That she was just going...*further*, I guess. After she was gone, I thought, sort of, that she won, and I had lost. That she had given me all these chances to be bold and finally just stopped waiting for me. That no matter how much we loved each other, she couldn't keep waiting for me to catch up.

"Is that *jealousy*? Perhaps. Somehow, though, I don't think so. Because I found my way without her. I found my own version of courage. Of adventure. I found a life that isn't just going further. Because going further isn't...it can't be an end in itself. I don't accept that. Just because I sometimes wish I would let myself go further than I do, doesn't mean I want to go further *all the time*.

"So yes, I actually do mean it when I say she's gone too far. I mean, I can be jealous without being *only* jealous. And the other things can be true too. She can be irresponsible and dangerous and sloppy and careless and hurtful and do more damage than anyone in the history of our race. You think because some part of me is jealous of her *style* I have no right to condemn her substance..."

Afia sat up and stopped Rain with a glance.

"Ray, look at me."

Rain was cut short and looked across the otherwise empty room at Afia.

"I think you give me more credit than I deserve. I can't know why you feel the way you do. All I can say is *that* you feel the way you do. That you are intent on destroying someone you love, your

oldest friend, your sister, for little more than what you call your philosophy. It sounds personal to me. If that's not personal, I don't know what is. Maybe jealousy is not the right word, but hear me friend, this is not about what she does, it is about who she is, and, most of all, who *you* are."

Rain hardly took a moment to absorb the words of her mentor. She was feeling headstrong, and wasn't about to be turned around. She stood up to leave the room, and was committed to the last word as she did so.

"Afia you're wrong. This is not personal. I've got all kinds of personal rolling round in here, but this isn't it. You don't know her like I do. She doesn't care about us. She doesn't care about anyone. She only cares about herself."

Afia watched her friend go, shaking her head. Rain stormed down the stairs with vengeance in her soul, even as she told herself she did not have one.

Moving back into your mother's basement rarely goes well. Less so if there is no actual basement, and quarters are close. Such was the case for Estuary Alabama when she moved in with her mother *just for a couple of weeks*. Her latest fight with Claire had been a bad one, and there seemed little hope for reconciliation. The friend that had stood by her through the worst of times, who had held her hand through the darkest nights, who had given up her own life to take care of her best friend, had at last come to the end of her rope. She needed space. She needed joy. She needed....but there I go, getting ahead of myself again.

Jessica didn't really mind having her daughter squeezed into her small apartment. True, she could have sent Estuary to live with her father. He had a beautiful house, and there was plenty of room. Perhaps Estuary would have been better off in such a place. Yet, she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Something in her needed

her daughter to need her. Needed to do something, anything, right. It wasn't just that Cassius had a new girlfriend with her own family and probably didn't want Estuary messing up their new lives. It wasn't just that. In some ways, it might have been better for her. More space. Some children to play with and take care of. A dog. A yard. Maybe that was just what she needed to bring her out of this interminable depression.

Yet, she couldn't quite bring herself to do it.

She blamed herself for breaking her marriage. She blamed herself for breaking her family. She blamed herself for her daughter's depression. There was no saving the marriage, no saving her family, but maybe her daughter. Maybe there was some small chance that, if she could just do one thing, do one thing right, make one sacrifice of substance, maybe she could forgive herself.

I don't think Jessica actually thought any of these things through. I don't believe she made a plan, some sort of step by step approach to forgiveness. Like a lot of us, she knew she needed something, but wasn't quite sure what. Like a lot of us, she felt guilty about things she wasn't quite willing to face. And like a lot of us, she thought that doing something hard for someone else might make her feel a little better.

It did not make her feel better.

For nothing had changed with her insufferable daughter. The girl laid around in bed all day feeling sorry for herself and making everyone around her miserable. She wouldn't seek help, wouldn't seek work, wouldn't go out. She wouldn't even just *go out for a walk in the goddamn sunshine*. Jessica wanted to earn her daughter's forgiveness. She told herself she would work hard for it. Would do anything for it. But hard work means nothing if you don't know where to start, and her daughter would not even *talk* to her.

Not that Jessica didn't try.

She tried humility.

"Honey, I know this has been hard on you. I've completely let you down. I was thinking so much about myself that I couldn't see how much you were suffering. And then...well...I guess everything became about me and your father. This wasn't his fault. He really did try. I think I just...I don't know....needed space or something. I sort of sabotaged myself because...well...I guess I just couldn't see myself as...I don't know...Jennifer says I don't value myself enough, but there are times when...but I don't mean to...what I mean to say is I don't want to keep making this about me. I just want you to know that I know I messed up and I'm here to fix it, ok? I know being here now doesn't change the past, but if you need anything, if there is anything I can do..."

And Estuary would lie with her head in the pillow.

She tried friendship.

"No love affair lasts forever, Stu. I know I'm not the best person to talk about love, but your father was not the only man I ever cared for. When I was your age I was head over heels in love. I was sure Jack was the one. It wasn't just that he was my first real...well...the first time is special, of course. But he *listened* to me. We would go for these long walks, and just, well, hold hands and, there was just something *special*. I could feel it in every part of my body. I was sure of it. And then he found another girl. A prettier girl. A smarter girl. A girl I couldn't compete with. My world ended. I thought I would never love again. I thought that...well...what I thought didn't matter, because I moved on. I loved again. And I learned to tell myself she wasn't prettier or smarter or better. She was just different. So don't you think about that boy one moment longer. Or that so called friend. I always told you she was no good. You just need to sit up and take charge of your life. Forget about him forever and move on..."

And Estuary would sit glaring at her mother, as if she wasn't worth listening to.

She tried tough love.

"If you're going to keep sharing this apartment with me, you have to do *something*. Clean the kitchen. Get a job and help with the rent. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Everyone has a bad day. Everybody gets depressed. Stop acting like you're the only one who knows how it feels. You know what the rest of us do when we feel like crap? We work through it. We get out and go for a walk. We exercise. We go and make some friends. No wonder you're depressed. You don't even *try*. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and get out of bed. Leave the apartment. Take control of your life..."

And Estuary would lay there and take it.

Until she didn't.

And she left her mother's apartment for good.

And Jessica Alabama wondered just what in the world she had done wrong.

It was about this time Elizabeth Apple earned her sobriquet. A *sobriquet* is a sort of nickname for people who don't know you. As Elizabeth Apple got a little bit famous, or at least, not entirely *unfamous*, demons began to call her *Apple Brown Betty*. I suppose it is because she almost always dressed in brown, though I think part of it at least was that after her years of solitude dancing with death in the desert of Estuary Alabama's soul, she tended to see the world in shades of brown. Almost everything she described to me had some quality of brown about it. Even her eyes, if you could call them that, had a distinctive shade of brown that set her apart from the blacker eyes of the rest of her kind.

I asked Rain about that.

"Her eyes? I suppose. They were always a little lighter than mine, but I would say they took on a distinct umber over the time

she was missing. Such colors can change over time. It is not unheard of. Usually such a change is associated with a specialized diet. I never gave it much thought, but, no, I don't remember her eyes being quite so brown when we were children."

Had Elizabeth disliked the sobriquet, I have no doubt it would have faded away. She had earned a respect from many of her fellow demons, this revolutionary leader of revolutionaries. Never would they have purposely referred to her with anything but the utmost respect. Happily for them, Elizabeth never thought of herself as someone quite respectable, and embraced the name heartily.

Perhaps more heartily than her new role.

Elizabeth Apple was a reluctant revolutionary. She liked the attention, liked the praise, liked the accolades, which is a word that is sort of like *praise*, but closer to *the nice things people say about you because they're supposed to*. What she didn't like was the expectation that she was supposed to *do* something with all that attention. That somehow she was supposed to lead. That she was supposed to change the world.

She did neither.

She had disciples, it was true, new friends who hung on her every word and stood proudly when other demons found out they knew the great Apple Brown Betty. She did not turn these new friends away, nor did she care much if they left of their own accord. She simply allowed herself to be popular awhile as the fad she brought about became in vogue, a word we sometimes use to mean *popular for now*, almost with a roll of the eyes, sure that it will fall away as soon as the next cool thing comes along.

Betty would have rolled her eyes as well. Her disciples, however, were true believers. They thought they had found the new way, that they were changing the world, that it was time to destroy

the old world and make room for the new. For revolution, with Elizabeth Apple as their leader.

She did all she could to undermine her importance. She would say, "I'm not a revolutionary. I'm nobody. I'm just *Apple Brown Betty, the little demonetty*," and they would praise her humility. When they met others, they would talk of how they were changing the world, how *she* was changing the world, how the new order was the change the world had been waiting for. And Elizabeth Apple did not deny them.

Said Caecilia Northrop:

"The first time was crazy hard for me. I went back to this lady I would visit on the regular, this lady with a taste for gossip. I used to go back into this lovely little pasture of flowers from secrets she told? I mean, they were good and everything, but I was like, what if BB was right? What if there is something more? So I found this little muddy pit and laid down, like she told me to, and stuck my arm down into it as far as I could, but there was like, I don't know, rock or something, and I couldn't go down far enough. So I went to a different spot. A sort of sandy one, but the same thing happened, right? Like, everywhere I went, it was the same thing. Like, half my arm went in, but then it was just, I don't know, rock or something. And I figured, maybe she was full of crap, but something in me just wouldn't believe it. She's just not...I mean...you just have to *know* her. There was no way she was a liar. I just wouldn't believe it. So I tried again, and this time, I started scraping at the rock with my nails, and I found that I could pull these little scales off it, sort of piece by piece, but it took, like, forever. After, like, most of the night or whatever, I finally pushed through the thing, and my arm went all the way down, and I felt it. The *root*. The thing everyone had been talking about. I could feel it in my hand. I was exhausted, but I grabbed it and I pulled and pulled and pulled until the root came out of the ground. I wanted to see

it, to see this thing that had given me so much trouble, but the minute I pulled it out it turned into a...I don't know...a tree, I guess. Like, a...what do you call it...like a sapling maybe, except it just grew tall and fat so quick that it was like it had been there all along. By the time I looked up to see how tall it was, there was already fruit on it. *Fruit!* And it was amazing. Like, the most juicy and sweet and tangy and special sin I'd ever tasted. Like it was fresh and aged at the same time. I'm not sure, but I think maybe it was lie that would kill all these innocent people. Like start a war, or get lots of people to take poison, or refuse their medicine. Something like that. Honestly, I've never gone back. To the tree, I mean. Now, when I go back, I just pull out a new one. Something big and grand and tasty. The thing is, though, and this is the thing I keep saying, you can clean up all the regular sins you want, but they hardly need us. If they feel bad, if they don't, they always do the same crap over and over again. But if you make them feel like they did the big stuff, make them feel like they're the worst of the worst, it only makes sense that then they would *become* the worst of the worst. I mean, once you're already punished for something, especially if you didn't do it, what's to keep you from *actually* doing it. That's what I realized when I ate that fruit. That we'd been doing it all wrong. That Apple Brown Betty was actually right. That food is survival, and we can't just sit around waiting for people to make it for us. That it's time we took our fate in our own hands. That we stop nibbling around the edges and start taking what is rightfully ours. Well, that's what I'm going to do anyway. And think everyone else should too. Even if they don't agree...I mean...just for the taste. Just for the taste."

Said Nikola Casey:

"It tastes good, and it serves them right. Besides, it's like you're doing your part to help them sin more. What's not to like?"

Said Edgar Stafford:

"I know, I know, I know what you're saying. But Apple Brown Betty is not some spoiled child throwing a tantrum to get what she doesn't deserve. She is a visionary of the future. She's shown us all that we can finally take charge of our own fate. That we can be masters of the world, and not slaves to it. That we can be more than bottom feeders surviving of the dregs they care to leave us. That we can live like kings and create a world in our own image. What do we have to lose?"

And so a growing number of demons followed the example of the great Apple Brown Betty, surfing into souls full of food that was more than good enough, and tearing out food that was better. Their detractors, or demons who *said they were wrong to do it*, called it stealing. Yet, what matters a name without regret or shame to accompany it. Betty's followers were proud of their work. They believed they were doing the right thing. There was no shame. No regret. No sin.

And the revolution began, word by word, demon by demon, with the reluctant revolutionary caring little for where it led.

Rain sat beside Estuary Alabama as she slept, the words of her friends coursing through her mind.

How dare you judge us?

Who are you to say what we should and shouldn't do?

What have you ever done?

What makes you so special?

You don't even have the guts to try it, and you think we care what you think? What do you know about it, anyway?

You talk like we're doing all this damage, as if you've seen it yourself, but we all know you haven't. Would you even know what you were looking for? Would you know it if you found it?

Ok, you saw the soul your sister ripped up, but, like, how focused on it were you, really? It sounds to me like you had your hands full.

It had been a long day, and they had all turned against her. All she wanted to do was warn them. Remind them that they weren't in control. That they couldn't possibly know the effects of what they were doing. She tried to tell them about what she had seen the night she fought her sister, but no one took her seriously. They all said it was an illusion. That in the midst of a death fight with another demon, especially your sister, you could not trust anything you saw. That how well could you remember something that happened five years ago?

And Rain Apple had begun to wonder if they were right.

Five hours later, she found herself seeking out the soul where she had nearly died, the soul that had imprisoned her sister for five years, the soul filled with forests as artificial as they were verdant, which is a way of saying *like that amazing fake forest you saw at the theme park*.

She was there to see if her memory had deceived her. She had not yet gone in because there was a *left behind* hovering near the door. Someone was in there, and if she wanted in, she would just have to wait her turn. Five hours, however, is a long time to wait, and she was beginning to wonder if anyone would ever be coming out.

It was not unheard of for a demon to die within a soul, though admittedly it was rare. Rain wondered if such a thing could have happened in Estuary Alabama, but waited another night to be sure. When no one came out on the third night, she took a closer look. The *left behind* flitted about and was hard to focus on, but the more she looked, the more she thought she recognized it. Something about it reminded her of that juvenile little *left behind* she used to see as a child. The *left behind* that would follow her

sister around. Her sister's *little friend*. She wondered if Betty could have gone back in, if she might be trapped again, back in her prison with no one to rescue her. Rain took her heart in hand, and dared to slide onto the soul draft that would carry her inside.

Inside.

Inside was almost the most extraordinary world teeming with life that she had ever seen. Almost. For she had once seen another soul just like it. Just like it. If her memory did not deceive her, and she could not be certain it did not, this place, this soul of extraordinary life looked, well, *exactly* like it had the day she and her sister had fought nearly to the death. Exactly. Undoubtedly old sins had died of their own accord and new ones cropped up in their places, but to Rain's eye, it had simply been frozen in time.

Still worried about the *left behind*, Rain surfed about, looking for her sister, but with no success. A soul is a big place, of course, and she had little hope of finding a body that did not want to be found. She called out, but with no response. She shouted, yelled, screamed, but all to no avail. After shouting herself hoarse, she became convinced that neither her sister nor anyone else was about, and settled in to do what she had come to do: study her sister's damage.

Landing at the edge of a wood, she wandered over to a pleasant field of flowers. Red with yellow trimmings, the full field was in bloom. She made her way to the heart of the field and sat down for a taste. She pulled one of the flowers from the ground, no differently than she would have pulled one from another soul, a *natural* sin, and pulled off a petal. The moment that petal touched her lips, she was reminded of what all the fuss was about.

There was a freshness to the flavor she had only experienced once before. It was almost as if the flavor had been designed just for her. None of the sour notes, touch of stale, hint of discord was present there. As she lolled the chewed up bits on her tongue, she

could feel her stomach twist with satisfaction. The jasmine warmth was wrapped in a smooth dark chocolate, not sweet, but full, with a touch of something....what was it...something she couldn't quite name, something which brought with it a nostalgia for her childhood following nightlights, but without all that *sweet*. Somewhere buried just under the top shell was something a little sneaky. A little salt maybe. Not much, but enough to drive her to eat more. To crave more.

There was nothing quite wrong with the food.

Not quite.

Except.

Except it was all artificial. Like the difference between home-made caramels and packaged ones from a store. Or like the perfect bag of chips. They taste delicious, you want to keep eating them until you're licking the bottom of the bag, but there is nothing *real* about them. Or maybe, and perhaps this is the better analogy, like that perfectly designed hybrid apple. It has just the right blend of red, yellow, and green. It has a bright crunch when you bite into it. The taste is well balanced between sweet and sour. In short, the apple is perfect. The moment you've eaten it, you want another. And another. But soon enough they all taste the same. All have the same perfect crunch, the same perfect color. And you cease to be satisfied.

Because at some point, you crave something real. Something imperfect. Something with *character*.

For the briefest of moments Rain celebrated her discovery. Now she could go back and tell her friends the truth. Tell the world that this fad was no more than...no more than...no more than what? No more than the perfect flavor in the perfect package that you could have anytime you wanted just by pulling it up yourself? No more than cheap delicious food you didn't have to wait for? No

more than an all you can eat buffet of exactly what you wanted, every time?

Needless to say, her moment of celebration ended quickly.

Sad, defeated, on the edge of giving in to a world she did not believe in, but which had won in every way, Rain lay down in the field of flowers, and gave up. She lay on her back staring up at an empty sky through the branches of what appeared to be an ancient oak, a tree that could only be as artificial as everything that surrounded it. A tree that looked familiar. A tree that reminded her of...of...

She stood up and looked around her. Yes. This was the spot. The very spot she and Betty had rolled down the hill, clutched in mortal combat, trying for all the world to destroy each other. Yes, here was the tree...and there...just a few steps away, the field was still crushed from their fight, where the two of them, clutched against each other, at each other's throats, had rolled down the hill into the draft that saved them. Still crushed. The path they took as they rolled down the hill was as clear as the day it was made. As the day it was made. Still crushed.

Still.

Crushed.

Rain sat back down to take it all in.

The scene was exactly as she had left it. Exactly. Not a thing had changed. Nothing had grown, nothing had faded. The crushed flowers had not rotted of their own accord. Nor had the grass. Nor had anything. Each sin was just as she had last seen it five years before. Unchanged. Still pricking at the soul of Estuary Alabama, waiting for someone, anyone, to eat them away.

Sins that failed to die over time.

Sins that would never die if they were not eaten.

Sins that could tear a person apart.

And this place was filled with them.

If this children's story was for children, I would probably tell you that Estuary Alabama met a wise old woman who helped her on her way. Maybe the woman would be homeless, some wise old homeless woman living under the bridge where Estuary tried to make her home in a cardboard box. Perhaps Estuary would have done her a kindness. Perhaps this wise old homeless and mystical woman would have seen through her eyes into her soul, seen the trouble there. Perhaps she would have said just the right words, the words to show Estuary that she was not as horrible as she believed. The words that would have put Estuary on a path toward a cure, a path toward forgiveness, a path toward redemption. If this children's story was for children, I might say something like that.

This children's story is, of course, not for children, and no such mystical blessing awaited Estuary Alabama upon leaving her mother's apartment. While it is true that she attempted to make her home beneath a bridge, she was not so lucky as to have found a cardboard box to keep off the winter wind. Instead of a cardboard box, she found a series of warm beds to keep her from the cold one hour at a time. Instead of a wise old homeless and mystical woman, she found an angry and violent *business agent* to manage her affairs.

Prostitution, or *sex and sex-like stuff for money*, was certainly a vice in the time and place that Estuary lived. To consider it a sin, however, one must feel that it is wrong, and partake of it anyway. For Estuary, for the woman who felt as if she had committed such an ocean of sins as to make further sins hardly a *drop in the bucket*, her new career did not even push up a daisy in the artificially verdant fields of her soul. For Estuary, there was no joy and no shame. For Estuary Alabama, there was only pain.

When her clients hurt her, she knew she deserved it.

When her *business agent* hurt her, she knew she deserved it.

When she hurt herself, she knew she deserved it.

Estuary Alabama was a broken woman. She had left behind her friends, her family, anyone that had cared about her. In modern parlance, many would say she had *sabotaged* herself, but I think that's unfair. Estuary knew herself to be a danger, a horrible person capable of anything, a bomb of anarchy under intense pressure and likely to explode at every moment. If Estuary was hurting those she loved, it was to protect them from the greater danger she knew herself to be. If Estuary was hurting herself, it was to destroy that same danger. If Estuary was hurting the rest, the people she cared least about, it hardly mattered. She was bound to hurt whomever she was nearest to. That was just who she was. Whom she knew herself to be.

At the point in the story where she should have been receiving wisdom from a mystical old woman, she found a poor substitute in an extract from the beautiful poppy seed pod well known for its ability to make such pain not so much absent as irrelevant.

It helped.

When she could get it.

When she could not, the pain came rushing back worse than before. She would lie awake swirling in shame for sins she had never committed. Awash in regret for what she had never done. She imagined demons conspiring against her, determined to make her suffer above all others. Little did she know how close she was to the truth.

A children's story should not dwell on such things, even one that is not for children. A children's story should have a happy ending. A children's story should have the hero rise above adversity and be stronger for it. Better for it.

I'm sorry about that.

Estuary Alabama was never long for this world.

"Everything?"

"Well, I don't mean to say, exactly *everything*."

"So not everything."

"You're missing the point."

"Am I?"

Rain was getting exasperated. She had made an important discovery, perhaps the discovery of a lifetime, and they were all debating her as if she was trying to pick a fight, looking for any little word, as if anything less than absolute perfection would prove her wrong entirely.

"All I mean is, any soul is a big place. That isn't some revelation for you. That's just the way it is. Even if I had explored every last miniscule piece of that place, no one could remember everything well enough to know if there hadn't been some change, some new sin growing around a corner. I'm sure there were many. What I can tell you, what I am absolutely sure of, is that the spaces I saw when I fought for my life down there, each sin, each foot mark, each lean of each flower was exactly as I saw them that night."

Theo was having none it.

"I'm sorry, Ray, but I don't believe you. It just doesn't make any sense. No sin lasts forever, and only the rarest few hold their flavor unchanged for more than a few days. All sins grow and deepen and mold and wither. Some take more time than others, but death is inevitable. You want me to believe that there is no death in that soul? I don't. I reject your thesis on its face."

Rain threw up her hands.

"It's not a thesis, Theo. I'm not trying to make a point. I'm just telling you what I saw."

Afia was suspicious, but listening. "So you're *not* making a point?"

Rain fumbled. "Well...I...I mean...I have come to certain...what I mean to say is...only a fool would not draw *some* conclusions from such a..."

"I think, perhaps, we might do best to leave the conclusions out of it for the moment," Afia broke in. "You have seen a thing. Let us choose to believe you without immediately determining the implications. Let us study the thing for a bit."

"But it's a bunch of bull, Aff."

"Theo, I don't disagree with your thoughts on death, but I hardly think it can do us harm to simply consider what Rain believes she saw."

"Believes?!"

"Yes, Chicky, *believes*. We have only your word."

The debate had come to an abrupt pause. Silence took over the room, comfortable for some, unbearable for others. It was Barbary who broke it.

"That's not entirely true."

All eyes turned his way, waiting for him to continue.

"I can't confirm her story indisputably, but I have unquestionably noticed a certain, shall we say *reticence* on the part of some of the sins I have pulled to act in a way becoming of the more...traditional ones."

Theo was appalled. "Do you mean to say you..."

"Yes, yes, Theo. Old Barbary Trudeau has, from time to time torn up a few more sins than he had appetite for. A few moments he was not entirely proud of when his eyes were bigger than his stomach, so to speak. I hardly see the harm. Truthfully, I was curious to see how well they aged in comparison. How well the flavors would improve over time. I can confirm, at least in the few cases I have studied, a phenomenon similar to the one young Miss Apple describes."

"As in..."

"Yes, Theodore. They seem hardly to age at all. Of course, I have not really given any of mine a proper amount of time to wither, but after several weeks, I can say that my own paltry creations taste as fresh as the day they were born."

Rain smiled. "You see? This is what I have been saying."

Afia leaned in toward Barbary. "And you say, Barbary, that this happened to you? To you specifically, not some friend or friend of a friend, or some acquaintance of your mother?"

"Well, he *is* his own best friend, Darling."

A light laugh filled the room.

"Yes, Dre," Afia replied. "We all know that. I'm just trying to understand what is and is not true."

"No worries on that front, Aff. Old Barbary Trudeau tasted these morsels with his own mouth, however much that may confound his *lesser* friends."

Afia nodded. "Very well. We have two examples of self created sins failing to age over a few weeks to several years. Anyone else?"

Silence once again took over the room. Each looked at another, waiting for someone to speak. Rain settled on the edge of gloating, Barbary looked satisfied at having surprised everyone, Theo looked glum, and Maya looked pleased that Theo looked glum. Andrea looked bored.

Afia looked confused.

Several times she began to speak, each time choosing to hold her tongue. Finally, words escaped her mouth.

"Ray..."

Rain looked up from her reverie with a smile. "Yes?"

"How is it that no one else has seen this soul of yours?"

"Come again?"

"What I mean to say is, how is it that for five years, not only has the soul not aged, but has not been consumed either? Surely a

soul so vibrant must have called to our people. Surely the draw must be overwhelming. Even if the sins inside did not age, even if it was so filled with created sins that there was no room for natural growth...."

"Yes?"

"How is it that no one else came in to feast?"

"Well..." Rain began, almost wondering to herself, "there is a *left behind* still there. I think it could be Betty's. I went in after waiting for a few days, and no one was inside, but the lock is still on the door, so to speak."

Afia absorbed the information in silence.

Maya filled the vacuum.

"On purpose?"

"Well," Rain answered, "I can't say I'm sure. I mean, when we left the place five years ago, we were in a pretty crazy state."

"But she must know. She must feel it's absence."

Rain wondered. "I don't know, would she? I mean, she nearly died in there. She was trapped for five years. Who knows what she felt on the day she left. She might not even know it's gone."

"Now that I do *not* believe. No way. No. Way."

"I tend to side with Theodore on this one, Rain. No demon could leave such a part of herself behind and not know it. Of that I have little doubt."

"My mother had a friend..."

"Oh here we go," Andrea cut in.

"Now hold on a second, Dre. See, this friend of my mother developed a taste for a man with a certain, shall we say, *attraction...*"

"Can we not?"

"...to a particular animal that walked about the man's farm."

"Oh for godssake Barbi, *must* we?"

"It's not about the damn sheep, Dre. Now just let me tell the story."

"The floor is yours, Dr. Trudeau."

"Thank you, Professor Abbascia. So this demon, this friend of my mother loved the taste of this rare and particular sin, but the man only violated his so-called ethics on few occasions, and this friend of my mother was, shall we say, a little covetous of his treat."

"Can we not?"

"Oh let the poor boy talk, Dre."

"Thank you Afia. What happened was, this friend of my mother purposely left his *left behind*, well, *behind*. This way, he made sure no one would steal his treats. Of course, if he'd been caught..."

"If he'd been caught, they would have disappeared him."

Rain averted her gaze.

"Well, yes, exactly so. Anyway, I don't think he ever got caught, and he *did* get his treats. I'm not saying he *should* have. Possession, property, ownership, it's all just so...human. Makes me a little sick to my stomach, actually. Still, there will always be a few bad apples out there, if you will forgive the pun."

"So you think..."

"I don't think at all, dear Maya, you know that. I'm only saying such things happen."

"And what happened to the guy?"

"The guy?"

"Yes, Barbie, the guy. The guy he locked up with his left behind."

"Oh, the guy. Yes. Well, I don't know, actually. I can't imagine it turned out well, though. Can you imagine, relying on only one demon, and one who doesn't come around much at that? Your sins festering and rotting on their own, taking their sweet time? Guy must of have drowned in shame and regret."

And Rain, keeping her thoughts to herself, wondered just how much harm her sister had done after all.

In the dark of a nearly moonless night, Apple Brown Betty sat in her favorite spot and contemplated the universe. A sliver of a crescent peeked out of the crack between buildings, barely seen through the window. About her head, an old friend danced, trying to slip back in, but Betty was having none of it. Not yet.

For Elizabeth Apple was filled with hate.

Don't worry. This *is* a children's story, after all. Hate cannot triumph in such a place. In a children's story, even one that is not for children, those who hate must be punished, redeemed, or both. There is no getting around that. Before the punishment, however, before the redemption, before the *after all*, I'm sorry to say, comes the hate.

The old friend tickled her ear as Betty relived her past, the fear of being lost, the terror of losing the nightlight. She imagined young Estuary Alabama turning on the light just to seduce her, then tearing it from the wall to trap the demon for life. She imagined a cruel girl bent on having her sins cleaned away so she could terrorize the world with impunity, which is a way of saying, *do bad things without ever getting caught*. She imagined the evil heart of a pre-teenage girl enslaving a demon without any thought of the suffering she might cause. Selfish. Cruel. Evil.

And Betty hated her for it.

The friend circled around her belly as Betty remembered her sister. Not the Rain who tried to help her readjust to the world. Not the Rain who had ultimately rescued her. Not the Rain who said she was sorry. *That* Rain she hardly considered. The hate was for the Rain who left her behind, the Rain who had been her constant companion as a child, who had never quite been able to live

up to Betty's style, to Betty's adventures, to Betty's fearlessness. The hate was for the Rain who had been so overshadowed by her sister that she thanked the gods the moment she disappeared, and conveniently let the world leave her for dead. That was the Rain Betty hated with all of her heart. That was the Rain that tensed up every muscle in her body. That was the Rain she thought of as she flicked the old friend away from her belly.

True, Betty had accepted her sister's apology. Had offered the words of forgiveness. Might perhaps even someday mean them, but she did not think she could ever *forget*.

The friend came back of course, this time dancing about the top of her back, just out of reach. Betty thought again of Estuary Alabama. Of the pride she must have strutted with, her sins licked clean by the emaciated demon inside her, starving to death. How she must of smiled to herself, knowing she could do anything she wanted without consequences. Without feeling the pains of her sins. How she must have laughed as she kept her demon slave so hungry she would have no choice but to eat every last morsel she could find.

And Betty thought of how glad she was to see the girl suffer.

Five years and no attention. Five years without anyone to tend her soul. Five years of paying for every choice, every mistake, every sin. Five years of karma coming back to the cruel jailer that had ruined her life. Five years that would someday be twenty. For though she might someday forgive her sister, never could she forgive the girl who enslaved her.

Let her be punished for life.

Elizabeth Apple stood up, looked down at the fading embers of Estuary Alabama, sleeping on one of six bug infested mattresses dotting the floor of a cramped room, wishing for all life was worth to see the girl wallow in her uncleaned sins for the rest of her life, and once more flicked the *left behind* back to guard her property.

Cornelius Feschenshut, that fastidious old bachelor, wandered the edges of *Treachery Thicket* looking for passage into the depths. He felt a trickle of euphoria with each nibble, but felt sure the true treasures were deeper within. Little dried buds fell off spiky thistles only to inevitably rot upon the damp ground. Cornelius picked up the freshest of these and snacked on them as he searched for decent passage.

The buds were approaching stale, it was true, but there was something delightful about them nonetheless. Alternate layers of joy and anger wrapped a gooey center of self-hatred. The crispy outer layers balanced each other with a sort of sweet and spicy taste, delicately seasoning the pungent and bitter mold within. The mold itself was so complicated that Cornelius could hardly decide which part of the flavor to concentrate on, and left him to wonder if the fresher tastes in the heart of the thicket would be better for the freshness, or worse from the lack of aging.

As he continued to wander the edges of the seemingly endless thicket, Claire Franklin tossed in her sleep. Rest had been elusive of late, which is a way of saying, *she didn't sleep well anymore*, and she wondered if life would ever get back to normal. She was happy in her new marriage. Happy with Braith. Happy to have found love. Security. A life.

And yet.

And yet the specter of Estuary Alabama continued to loom over her. Her best friend. Her *old* best friend. Her best friend who refused to talk with her. Who turned her back with no hint of forgiveness. Who hated her for stealing her true love. Who hated her true love for abandoning her. Who had pushed both of them away from her and into each other's arms. Who needed help. Who was god knows where, falling apart, probably dying, while the only two

people she could ever count on lived a life of contented happiness stolen right out of her arms.

Well, not exactly *happiness*.

Claire could never quite allow herself that. The marriage, the love, what should have been happiness, was always soured by the thought that she did not deserve any of them. That they were stolen. That she had betrayed her best friend for nothing more than selfishness.

That she was treacherous.

Tonight she slept a little better. Tonight, somehow, the guilt was a little less present, a little less *in her face*. The deep seated fear that she had done something unforgiveable was still there, it still roiled her stomach, still woke her throughout the night with panic, but it was tempered, just a bit. Just for a while. Such was the effect of Feshtenshut's nibbles.

Beside her, Braith slept soundly. He had come to terms with his life. With his ex-girlfriend. He had done all he could. He had given himself to her, and she had refused him. He had loved her, and she had denied him. He had sacrificed himself for her, and she had turned her back in disdain. Only a fool would have stayed. Only a fool would have taken that level of abuse and come back for more. Only a fool would have given his life for someone who didn't want it.

A siren beyond her bedroom window woke Claire with a start. She sat up, panicked. Realizing it was not for her, she attempted to go back to sleep, but struggled to find peace. Inside her soul, Cornelius Feshtenshut, pushed off balance by the waking, tumbled through the painful prickly thicket, and found himself covered in thorn bites and laying on his back in a pile of pain so dense he was not sure he would ever be able to escape. Tired, angry, and hardly able to move from the pain of the thorny tumble, the old bachelor sat in the middle of what still looked to be an

impenetrable mass of pain and wondered if he had the strength to eat his way out.

Bite by bite, he found that he did.

By the time he had done so, Claire was sleeping soundly for the first time in nearly a year, at long last ready to forgive herself. That old fastidious bachelor Cornelius Feschenshut, scratched and pricked from head to toe, bent over double from a stomach fuller than he thought possible, stumbled home, swearing to himself he would never visit that cursed thicket again.

Rain had not expected to find her sister. She had been thinking about her, it was true. Partly she was angry at Betty for being so irresponsible. Partly she was jealous of Betty of still having better adventures, being more daring, more admired. Partly she just missed her sister, her best friend, the only demon who had ever really understood her. The thoughts all mixed up in a jumble of nostalgia and melancholy, which is a way of saying, *she missed the old days, and that made her a little sad*. Distracted, she let her feet take her where they would, so to speak, and soon found herself in the suburbs she and her sister used to visit as children.

Absentmindedly, she let herself settle into the last place she had seen Betty before the disappearance. Sleepy, sad, trying to forget her anger, she curled into the old tree where she had napped that night and wondered, as she had so often, how awful it must have been for Betty, trapped in a soul, starving and alone, sure that the entire world had forgotten her. The thought kept sleep at bay.

Below her and perhaps a block away, Elizabeth Apple was also wandering the old place feeling melancholy. She had just come from the bug infested bedside of Estuary Alabama, and wanted to look into the window that had drawn her into five years of torture. She wanted to feel the strength that had come with escape, with retribution. She wanted to sit in the window that had

lured her into the trap and laugh at her captor, now tossing on a filthy mattress downtown.

Up she went to the second story window where she looked out onto the tree dotted street. The old oak where her sister had slept away the infamous night was still standing. She could almost see her sister lying there. Almost. The sight she imagined was not quite her sister. At least, not the sister of that time. This was her new sister. Her grown up and arrogant sister. Her sister who thought she knew better than everyone else. Her sister who spent all her time studying and trying to tell everyone how and what they should be. Her sister who sounded more like one of their high school teachers than one of two *peas in a pod*.

She stared at the image, wondering why she would imagine her sister so old.

And her sister stared back.

And sat up.

And Betty spoke to the imaginary older version of her sister sitting in a tree.

"I don't need you, Rain. I needed you then, but I don't need you now. Go away and sleep someone else's life away. Take your little selfish tricks somewhere else. You can't hurt me anymore. You tried, and you failed, and here I am, like it or not. I was better than you then, and I'm better than you now. So take your self-righteous stare where I don't have to look at it."

She hoped the harsh words would make the vision disappear, but it stayed where it was, shifting a bit, staring at her in judgment.

"I said *go away!*"

And the vision rose.

And landed beside her on the window.

And spoke.

"I'm not going anywhere, Betty."

Elizabeth Apple stared in disbelief.

"I thought I had imagined you."

Rain just nodded.

"I thought I just imagined you lying in that tree. I thought my mind was so messed up that I imagined you lying in that tree, remembering the best moment in your life, the moment you thought you got rid of me for good. That I was so troubled that I imagined your specter staring me down, condemning me for living, for not deserving to be saved. That I hated you so much I made up that you came back here every night to smile about the hurt you did to me. To lie in the old place and wish you could do it again. To relive the best moment of your life. Except I didn't imagine you. You were actually doing it. You were actually as bad as I imagined. Worse. Gods you disgust me."

Rain leaned in.

"Is that what you think? You think I come here every night, lay in that miserable branch and dream of destroying my sister's life? Dream of leaving her for dead and *smile at the memory?*" I don't come here at all. This is the first time I've been here since...I was *devastated* when you disappeared. Broken. You were everything to me. I wandered around lonely and scared and all I wanted was my big sister back. Every day I asked myself what I had done. Why you hated me. Why I wasn't good enough for you. Every day I thought about how worthless I was. How I only had any value when I was with you. When you were showing me the way. When you were protecting me. But you know all this already. I've told you a thousand times. What part of you can't forgive me?"

"You let her trap me!"

"Boo Boo, look at me. I just fell asleep. That's all."

"You left me for dead."

"Well...I suppose...maybe...I don't know..."

"What don't you know?"

"I...I guess, maybe...I don't know...maybe I just thought, you know...maybe *you* left *me*. What I...I mean, I was always hanging around, following behind...you were always two steps ahead of me, cooler, more popular. And I was always staying behind, being boring, napping. I just...maybe...I mean to say...at the same time that I told myself you had left me behind, that I deserved it, that you were trying to teach me a lesson, that you never really wanted me around to begin with, that you only ever, sort of...*tolerated* me, I guess...maybe at the same time that I knew all those things to be true, maybe...maybe I kind of did want it to be true. Maybe some small part of me thought it was good that I lived on my own a bit....without you. Maybe part of me didn't try as hard as I could to find you because I thought you didn't want to find me, and I...and I didn't deserve to be found."

"Ok, ok, ok. I forgive you. Whatever. I got imprisoned against my will for five years, and you're sorry for not feeling bad about it. Whatever. I forgive you. Go away."

"Betty, you can't just...wait, what? What do you mean *against your will*?"

"Rain, we've talked about this. While you were in that tree, sleeping the night away, that twelve year old psychotic lured me into her soul and locked me in. She enslaved me so I would be forced to clean her soul just to stay alive. She walked around like the most innocent person on earth, even while she did whatever evil she wanted, knowing she had her little demon slave to clean up after her. That was what you left me to. That was the hell I suffered while you *maybe kinda sorta* didn't feel so bad about it."

"Betty, you need to stop. You know that's not true. What are you even...you think she trapped you *on purpose*?"

"Of course she did. How else could it happen?"

Rain sat in silence, absorbing what Betty was implying. A soul owner who knew of the demons. Who could manipulate them.

Torture them at will. That her sister was so far gone she could actually believe such a tale. Not only believe, but take her revenge as well. That was why...

"Betty, do you know what you've done?"

"I know *exactly* what I've done."

"And you've seen it? The damage?"

Betty looked straight ahead without answering.

"I'm going to say this once and then walk away. That girl had nothing to do with you. She just grew up while you were stuck inside her, and you couldn't find your way out. Nobody purposely trapped you. Nobody purposely left you behind. Nobody was ever out to get you. You just had really bad luck. Believe me, don't believe me, that's what happened.

"And all this crap about pulling up sins is just a way to avoid facing that. But it won't help. The sins you pull up may taste good, but they're fake, and always will be. They don't rot or fester or die on their own. They just live on forever, exactly as they were the day you pulled them. I've seen it. I've been inside. I pushed right past your little *left behind*, and have seen everything.

"You are completely destroying a soul for something it never did."

And in the wake of her sister's silence, Rain dropped herself to the ground and walked off into the rising sun.

Silent, however, Betty was not. Not in her mind, anyway. Her mind was a cacophony of voices, which is a way of saying, *she heard so many voices in her head that she could not distinguish one from the other*. Not distinguishing, however, is not the same as *not knowing*, and she knew each voice intimately.

One said: She was an evil, manipulative slave driver, and deserves what she got.

One said: Don't forget starving in that barren wasteland you almost died in.

One said: Sure, people can be cruel, even *that* cruel, but none of them even know we exist, let alone how to trap us. How could she know you couldn't get out?

One said: Remember how amazing it felt to eat again, after nearly dying of starvation? How amazing the taste of something you made yourself? Of salvation?

One said: If only you had paid more attention in school, you never would have been trapped.

One said: How nice it is to watch her suffer.

One said: What if she *didn't* do it on purpose?

One said: Rain must be exaggerating. How can a sin not die on its own? They just need more time.

One said something she never quite listened to.

One said: Who cares about some stupid person, anyway?

One said: What if you're wrong?

One said...well, you get the idea. The voices all talked over each other so loudly they became little more than a jumbled mass. She had heard them all enough that one word, one spike in volume a little above the rest was enough to remind her of the rest of the words, to feel the meaning, the pressure.

She clapped her hands over her ears to shut out the noise, but there was no stopping it. Rain had brought back all the doubts, and she could no longer shut them out. She pushed them down, quieted them a bit, but still they stayed at a noise floor loud enough to drown out the voice that had always been sitting underneath them, the voice *she never quite listened to*.

One by one, she focused on each voice, hearing the words, letting them sink in and fade away. One by one, she faced each fear, each thought, silencing it in the process and slowly curing herself of the cacophony.

As she did so, however, one voice remained, continuing to grow in focus. For, as the rest of the noise died out, the one voice she never quite listened to remained, growing in clarity as, increasingly, nothing was left to compete with it.

She listened harder, as if to a voice hidden in the woods made momentarily clear by the sudden absence of wind.

The voice said this: If she felt the small sins all people do, the petty lies, the little selfish moments, how could she not feel the massive sin of enslavement? If you nearly starved to death, if you ate every sin that ever poked out of that ultimately barren soul, how could you not taste the greatest of all her sins? If she truly did this thing you accuse her of, if she truly is the monster you have punished and brought to the brink of self-destruction, *how could you not know for certain?*

Her stomach churned.

Like her, Estuary Alabama was surely no more than a victim of circumstance. Suffering through an accident. Through no fault of her own. At least Betty could partly blame herself for not knowing about the draft, about surfing, about how souls grow. Maybe she could have left sooner if only she had paid more attention in school. But the girl, the girl had no chance to know any of that. She was a jail, not a jailer. Whatever suffering she had lived through over the last five years could never be called an accident. It was on purpose. And it was Betty's fault.

Her hands still over her ears, fighting to ignore the thoughts pushing into the front of her mind, she came to a decision.

Pushing herself out the window, she made her way back to the city, where she would take back her *little friend* and leave the girl to recover at last.

Estuary Alabama left the city on foot. Not an easy task, even in a children's story, but one which can certainly be accomplished if one simply continues to put one foot in front of the other.

The path to her former suburban home was something like thirty miles, at least by highway. On foot, Estuary could take more direct routes, though certainly more complicated. Her chances of getting lost were high, but she cared little. This was the end of her journey, and if it took a little while to get there, she was not bothered. The important thing was that she continued in the same direction, vaguely northwest, toward her final destination.

She walked through the day and night, crossing eight lane highways on foot, little worried about the risk. What did risk matter at this point? What was there to lose? She walked through backyards, only to be turned back at fences she was unwilling to climb. She got stuck in a slough after trying a short cut through a forest preserve, taking her a solid hour off her path. And she walked down four lane roads slathered in strip malls, skirting from parking lot to parking lot, not a sidewalk in sight.

By the time she reached the park district building, she had no energy left, and collapsed for a cold damp sleep in the leaf strewn grass just outside the pool, only a chain link fence and a short climb separating her from the end of her journey. The melting frost from the grass wet her eyes to replace the tears that no longer came. If she woke, it would not be for long.

Betty was disappointed when she did not find the girl on her first try. She sat on the flea ridden mattress downtown wondering where she had gone. The hour was late, or early, depending upon how you count, and the girl was far enough away that Betty could not sense the least bit of her. Betty put her face in her hands and allowed the evil goddess we know as *Second Thoughts* to visit her.

Maybe it was a sign, she told herself.

Maybe you were not meant to find the girl, she told herself.

Maybe none of this matters, she told herself.

Maybe she's just one soul in a sea of souls, she told herself.

Maybe the girl is doing fine without you, she told herself.

Maybe, and this was the thought that woke her up, *she's already dead.*

Elizabeth Apple sat herself up with intention. She had set out to undo some small piece of damage, to take back her left behind, to stop meddling in the Alabama girl's fate and leave her to whatever demon might find her. She had set out to do this thing and was not yet about to give up. Not yet. Taking herself away, she wandered to the far end of the city where the girl's mother lived. Perhaps she had gone home again.

At her mother's, Betty found nothing. Nor at the apartment she had shared with the best friend. Nor at the best friend's new house at the edge of the city. Nor at her father's fancy one in the suburbs. Not a hint. Not a scent. Not the least suggestion that Estuary Alabama had been near at any time the last week, let alone tonight.

Disheartened, Betty went back to the window where she had so recently talked with her sister, the window far away in the suburbs, the window once filled with the seductive glow of that cursed nightlight.

And she caught the scent.

Barely, but it was there. Not far. A few blocks maybe.

Carefully, Betty followed the trail to a dark patch of grass, crispy with frost, upon which Estuary Alabama slept, uncovered.

Betty's *little friend* found her immediately. It flitted about her face like a puppy ready to lick her all over. Betty, nearly ready at long last to take the friend back home, took one more moment. *The* moment. The moment she had been avoiding for five years. She heard her sister's voice, the frightened account of the damage

just inside that soul. She didn't want to believe, in fact *refused* to believe, but some small part of her felt the need to see for herself. To prove that her sister was just telling tales. *Exaggerating.*

With a deep breath, somehow finding a boldness in herself she did not know she had, Elizabeth Apple slipped onto the soul draft, and rode her way into the prison to which she had sworn she would never return.

Let's take a moment to talk about dreams.

When I was a child, I went to summer camp. I went to the same summer camp for many years. Later, as a grown up, I often visited that camp in my dreams. Well, not that camp exactly, but something that was undoubtedly similar, and which I told myself *was* the camp. It was my old camp the way you see your old teacher in your dream, but she doesn't really look like your teacher even though you *know* she's your teacher. It didn't matter whether or not the place in my dream actually looked like the old camp, because, in my dream, it *was* the old camp.

When I had a child of my own, that child went to the same summer camp, and I had the pleasure of visiting the old place as I dropped him off. What surprised me, what nearly brought me to a dead faint, was that the place I visited, this area of wood cabins meant to be my boy's home away from home for a few weeks, was *exactly* as I had dreamed it. In my waking hours, I had not remembered the place, not in detail, but my dreams had. My dreams had reproduced that one place, that one particular place, in every detail.

As I took in the experience, overwhelmed, I began to wonder just how real other parts of my dreams had been.

Elizabeth, too, saw sights that were *exactly* how they had been in her dreams. Her memory, yes, but that had already started to fade. It was her dreams, nightmares really, that stayed present in her mind. It was her dreams that had kept the prison from ever

truly leaving her. It was her dreams that now served as the touchstone by which she measured her view.

And the place was exactly as she had left it.

Exactly.

The trees she had torn from nothing.

The grass she had walked upon, leaving imprints behind.

The flower still missing three petals from the brief taste Betty had once taken.

Everywhere she looked, every mossy rock, every twig of a tree, every giant oak was exactly as it had been the day she had brought it to life. All about her she was surrounded by sins she had brought into existence through her sheer will, and none had made the slightest attempt to decay, grow, or die.

There was no question. Her sister was right.

Appalling.

Betty lay down in the grass, her back leaving an impression of her body she now knew would never go away, and wondered just what she had done. She closed her eyes and brought her hands to her face, this time in fear. Could anything this damaging ever be undone?

And the ground shook.

The girl was awake. Betty, frozen in terror, grabbed the first solid thing she could find, a small ash tree, small enough to hug, solid enough to protect her from whatever might be coming. She would hold on until things quieted down, all day if necessary, and then surf her way out.

A quiet rumbling continued, but no ground opened up, no new sins burst from below, no mountains or canyons or even knolls came to be. It was just a quiet day with a soft rumble, foreboding yes, but certainly not dangerous.

Betty let loose her grip and relaxed.

And the sky faded.

And the soul draft upon which Betty had dared to ride blew
softer and softer until all was stillness.

And Betty was trapped.

Again.

end of part three

Twenty rungs. Not really that high, but high enough.

Estuary Alabama falls as if in slow motion. Her eyes lie open, clear view to the gray sky above, dots of blue now obscured almost completely. Her view grows ever so slightly as she passes first the bare branches of the tallest oaks, the bright leaves still clinging below, the top of the chain link fence surrounding the pool, and finally the edge of the concrete pit, empty for the winter, not ten feet from the leaves drifting upon the wet ice as it breaks apart into the water barely obscuring the bottom.

And she is free at last.

Twenty rungs. Not really that high, but high enough.

part four

I'm sorry about that.

This is a children's story, and it doesn't seem quite right to let our beloved take her own life. If this tale were science fiction, perhaps we would go back in time and save her, perhaps with the aid of an alien machine. If this tale were a romance, perhaps she would not be quite dead. Not quite. Perhaps, before all was over, she would be saved, no doubt at the last moment by true love. If this tale were fantasy, perhaps the demons would have special powers, pretend creatures in a pretend world with the extraordinary ability to bring the dead back to life.

Alas, this story is none of those, and sometimes our beloved die, even in children's stories. Our beloved, but not our heroes. For Estuary Alabama is not the hero of this story. That honor goes to the demon trapped inside her dead body. The demon who had been trapped there once before. The demon who, at this point in the story, is only *as good as dead*.

It is said that when we die, our sins die with us. I suppose there is some truth to that. Some. For our sins are merely our betrayal of ourselves, and what can there be left to betray when we are gone? Yet, these things do not happen all at once. Our souls are attached to our bodies, have *become* attached over a lifetime, and they do not easily leave their homes.

Like the child, perhaps your nephew, who held your hand so tightly. Remember? He was afraid. Perhaps it was of failing to make new friends, or rejection, or loneliness, it doesn't matter exactly what. You were at the park, and you wanted him to go play. He held your hand tightly, as if to say, *I'm not going anywhere*. You let him hold your hand, but you loosened your own grip, as if to say, *I will not hold you*. He looked at the other children playing, felt the loss of your protection, and loosened his grip, just a bit. You pretended to be interested in something else, a book perhaps. Became *boring*. He looked up at you, hopeful for an attention that

would not come. He loosened his grip further. At just the right moment, you casually pulled your hand away to turn the page and shifted on the bench for comfort, slightly away from your nephew. He looked again at the playground and slowly walked over, as the smile he could not see grew on your face. Soon enough, he found joy in his new surroundings.

A soul inside of a dead body can be like that. It has better places to be, but must first overcome its own inertia, a word which here means, *wanting to be where it already is and do what it is already doing*. Well, change is hard.

Such is the way of most souls.

The soul of Estuary Alabama, however, was not like most souls.

The desert that took over her soul in her teenage years, when it should have been blossoming into a thick and vibrant jungle, left a blank slate for invaders. Those invaders, the artificial sins drawn up by Elizabeth Apple, filled the void, but never created a world that could thrive on its own. The woods were thick, it was true, almost impenetrable in many places, but they had no life of their own. The moment Estuary died, the moment there was no life to support them, they immediately went dormant, which is a way of saying, *they turned off as if someone flipped a switch, and it would take another flip of the switch to turn them back on*.

In most cases, a demon visiting a soul at the time of death has ample time to leave. Ample. The natural light of the soul fades, the draft diminishes, but there are sometimes days, certainly hours of time left when a demon, knowing full well what is coming, has time left to escape. Time to escape as the life of the soul fades, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. Soon enough, the soul leaves the body and goes off to the playground, so to speak. But it takes time. With Estuary Alabama, there was no playground.

There was no uncle. There was only a robot playing the part of your nephew who you turned off and packed up for another visit.

Elizabeth Apple, sitting in the dark, immediately felt the effect. The draft had disappeared completely. She knew she was surrounded with enough food to last her several centuries, but that without a way out, she would spend those centuries back in her old prison, this time in utter darkness.

She rolled over and pulled up a flower to snack on as she contemplated her state.

The flower was still as fresh at the day it was born.

Because this children's book is not for children, you probably already know that an autopsy is *the way a doctor studies a dead person to find out how they died*. That is not to say you have ever seen one, or know much more about it than what you have seen on television. Nevertheless, you have some idea of how the thing works. A doctor looks at a dead person, which is a nice way of saying, *they cut them open*, and tells other people what they think. Not every death is studied. Most deaths are unremarkable, and so not worthy of the level of *invasion* that would lead to further remark.

An autopsy, however, requires a body. A dead one. To perform an autopsy on a soul, one would first need a dead soul, something never before witnessed by the demons. I do not say that souls survive the body, nor that they do not. While it may some day be a question of science, it has not yet moved beyond a question of philosophy and faith.

Rain put it like this:

"The soul no longer comforted by the warm embrace of a body is a lost and lonely thing. It clings to the body in some magical hope that the warmth will return, but soon gets cold and frightened, tears itself from the body to seek comfort elsewhere. Quigg

suggests that the journey leads the soul to a sort of waiting space where it might be insinuated into a new body, yet to be born. As no one has ever seen this waiting space, however, you can imagine that there is some doubt as to her opinion. Benedetti, conversely, insists that the bodiless soul is slowly stripped of its energy as it floats away, never finding the comfort it seeks. As with Quigg, however, no one has ever seen a bodiless soul, leaving one's confidence in Benedetti's *opinion* shaken at best. Soler insists that the soul never leaves the body at all, though this has been easily disproved, so is hardly worth talking about. Njall Key once made the interesting observation that..."

Well, perhaps we'd best not ask Rain after all. Her sister, though less articulate, perhaps came closer to something we can wrap our heads around, so to speak.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, right? I mean, if we can't taste it, who cares?"

I hardly need to say, then, that the opportunity for the autopsy of Estuary Alabama's soul was so rare that there was no expert to perform it.

That burden fell to the first demon to discover it, or perhaps the second.

Rain had never quite left her sister on the night they argued. She moved away a reasonable distance and wondered if the two of them might ever be friends again. She watched Elizabeth brood, and thought about herself, if she had been too hard, too unforgiving, too pedantic, which is a way of saying *so focused on petty details that she failed to gain any true understanding*. When her sister left the window, Rain followed.

She followed her to a roach ridden room downtown.

She followed her to Jessica Alabama's apartment in the western suburbs.

She followed her to Cassius Alabama's new house in the northern ones.

She followed her to the home of Braith and Claire Franklin, just on the edge of the city.

She followed her to a park somewhere between them all, where she watched her sister enter the soul she swore she would never visit again. Where she watched the body wake. Where she watched the body fall. Where she watched the body die.

And Rain Apple sat on the ice cold water, waiting for her sister to leave the dead body, to talk with her one more time, to seek forgiveness.

When Betty did not leave the soul still clinging to the dead body, Rain panicked. Not right away. More like the time your cat didn't come home. At first, you weren't worried. Cats are cats, after all, or, if you prefer children's stories, *walk by themselves*. There came a point, however, a point at which you believed your cat would not be coming home at all. It wasn't right away, nor did it take a week. It was somewhere in those first twenty-four hours. Some time before the sun had set twice, you panicked.

So it was with Rain Apple.

It had been the wee hours when her sister slipped into the soul of the sleeping Estuary Alabama. It was early morning when the body took its own life. It was afternoon when Rain began to worry. It was nightfall when, weary with lack of sleep, Rain panicked in earnest.

She thought of going for help, heading to *Autumn Wind* for advice, but leaving that place felt like a betrayal to her sister. Rain had left Betty behind once before. She could not bring herself to it again.

Hardly thinking of the risk, of the moment the two had nearly killed each other the last time they had been in the same soul

together, Rain swept up to the dead body of Estuary Alabama to ride the draft to her sister. At little more than a dribble, however, Rain had a little trouble, the way *you* have a little trouble slipping into those slides built for children, but which you promised your daughter you would ride down first. You do go down the slide, but slowly, and not without pushing yourself along most of the way. It is a difficult ride fought by friction at every step.

So it was for Rain Apple.

She pushed herself along what remained of the draft until it ceased altogether, and soon found herself walking in that perfectly untouched soul, calling out for her sister, questioning whether it was possible Betty had escaped unnoticed, and it was Rain who was the foolish one, the trapped one, the *as good as dead* one.

It was hours before they found each other. Rain had been calling Betty's name and was nearly hoarse when she finally caught her sister's scent at the bottom of a hill. Betty was sitting against a rock, well within hearing distance, and not responding in the slightest. Rain ran up to her with joy.

"Betty! Betty, are you alright? Let's get you out of here!"

Elizabeth Apple sat in silence.

Rain turned cautiously toward her, reached down to touch her on the shoulder, make sure she was still, well...alive, she guessed. At her touch, Betty looked up, shrugged, and looked back down.

"Betty?"

"Hey, Rain."

"We should, well, get out of here. The body's dead. We may not have much time."

"You go ahead." She made no move to leave.

Rain tensed up. "I'm not leaving without you."

"Ok." Still no move to leave.

Panic once again began to fill Rain. "Ok, you're coming?"

"No. Just ok you don't have to leave if you don't want to. I'm not leaving."

"What do you mean you're not leaving? You'll die in here."

Betty took her time to respond.

"Oh...I don't know. Plenty to eat here. I should be good for another century at least."

"Betty, we have to leave. Now!"

Betty looked up at her sister. "Rain. Sit down." Her stern but calm eyes pressed into her sister's. They had an authority Rain could not deny, even in the oppressive darkness. Against her better judgment, she sat down next to her sister and sighed.

"Rain...have you noticed anything strange?"

"Betty, everything here is strange."

Rain's body tensed up, panic beginning to rise. When she saw that her sister was having none of it, however, when she saw that she would either have to do it her sister's way, or leave without her, she settled back and thought again about her Betty's question.

Slowly, she continued. "That is to say, well, I've never been in a dead body before, but it is much darker than I expected, and the draft is almost non-existent. I had to walk most of the way here to find you, and I can hardly see you, even now. And all this weird artificial life that won't die, the way there is almost no scent..."

"Yes, yes, all that...but...I mean...look at us. At *us*."

"Sorry?"

"Rain. Don't you remember the last time we were here? Together? When you came in here looking for me, weren't you gearing up for a fight? Weren't you expecting..."

"Oh...that. Yes. I suppose I..."

"I've been sitting here for hours, Rayray. Thinking about...I don't know...like, just *all of it*, I guess. Like, I don't know, I came back here for a reason or something. Like, it's just, y'know, just like you said. Everything is exactly the same, and I...I mean...I don't

know, I thought I had done this *thing*, this, like...ok. See, I had this *agenda* or whatever, right? I sat and I stewed about how getting trapped in this stupid place ruined my life and made me this demon I didn't want to be but was anyway. I put all this energy into looking for someone to blame, which, well, *did* make me feel good, kinda, but also kind of mean and dirty and sort of, I don't know, sort of someone I didn't like very much. But the whole time I was doing that, this *other* thing was happening. Everyone was looking at this stupid thing I did, this, well, they call it *sin-ripping*, now, and kept telling me how amazing I was and all that, and I just, I don't know, just let them believe all that even though I knew I was just, y'know, this idiot who didn't know how to do *anything* which is why I got trapped here in the first place. So I, y'know, I guess it...I don't know, kinda *fed* on itself. Like if I was going to be this amazing demon and all that, then it can't have been my fault that I got stuck in here, so that just fed into this, I don't know, *illusion*, I guess, that it was all *her* fault. And if I gave up on punishing her then I gave up on believing it was her fault which meant it was *my* fault which meant everything everyone was saying about me was wrong and...I don't know...I guess I just didn't want that be true or something..."

Rain let the words sit between them.

Rain got as far as, "Betty, you should be so..." when Betty cut her off.

"No. Don't say anything yet. I'm not..." Betty let out a deep sigh, and turned away from her sister. She stood up and paced about, touching sins as she did so. As she spoke, she avoided turning back toward her sister.

"This place is appalling. *I'm* appalling. I ate this place to death and then created a fake place to replace it. This is a dead place. Has been a dead place. So dead that...well, so dead that I thought, y'know, that maybe, I could fix it, y'know? I mean, I was sitting

here before it got dark thinking, maybe I could just do what I could, y'know, eat my way across the soul, make a little dent, help her turn back into someone sort of normal, I guess. That maybe I could...fix her. A little bit. Just a little bit. Just enough to feel like I...*did* something, maybe.

"And then the place died and the draft disappeared and I panicked for a second..."

Rain waited in silence for her sister to go on.

When she did not, Rain said, "...and?"

"And...and then I didn't. The draft died too soon. The lights went out too fast. It wasn't right. I should have had time to get out, time while the soul prepared to leave the body for good, right? But this soul was already dead. It had nowhere to go. I just sat in the darkness and thought, *ok, I guess this is it. This is where I was meant to be.* Where I would live out the rest of my days. My punishment for punishing *her*. I would wander the darkness and eat the terrors that I created, and let the world forget me..."

"Oh, Betty. The world would never forget...", but Rain had the words stolen out of her mouth when Betty said, "...again."

Rain was well silenced as she waited for Betty to continue.

"Except...you came. You came for me. Again. You never forgot me. I've hated you so much, more even than this body, but you came for me. You knew you might get stuck here with me. You knew how dangerous it was. That we would probably kill each other in here, probably would have if this soul had been anything close to normal. But you came anyway. I've been such a jerk to you, and you kept coming back, kept trying to...I don't know...save me, I guess, and all I did was treat you like...and now...now I've done even worse."

Rain stood up and took her sister's hand.

"Betty, I'm not blameless. Part of me wanted to ruin you. Part of me. Part of me wanted to show you not so much how stupid you

were being, but how much smarter than you I was. Because...if I could show that you were a big phony, that all this stuff that made everyone pay attention to you was somehow bad and wrong or just, I suppose, not what it appeared to be, then maybe they would pay attention to *me*. Maybe, finally, I could be the one everyone looked at. Maybe I could finally, well, come out of your shadow, I suppose. All those things are true. I'm not proud of them. I pretended I wanted to save you and really just wanted to destroy you.

"Except, I couldn't do it. In the end, I realized I was hurting the only person that ever really cared about me. Gods knows our parents didn't. And my friends...my friends aren't really...I mean, I like them and everything, but if I lost you, if I lost...well...you're just more important to me. So I faced the truth that wanting to hurt you was really just wanting to hurt myself.

"You're my sister, and I love you. I'll never not come for you. No matter what. And you'll never not come for me. Because that's what we do. That's us. Two *apples* on one stem."

Betty was crying.

Rain was crying.

They turned to each other, unable to see, but knowing each other's presence. Feeling each other. Rain pushed through her tears and said, "C'mon. Let's eat."

In a children's story, forgiveness is not complicated. We do things we wish we hadn't. We feel sorry. We *say* we're sorry. We shake hands and make up. Not like that time you and your sister got in a fight and your mother gave up. Remember? Your mother looked at your father, exasperated, which means *he had finally given up on being nice*, at which time he put down his book and stood up *to end this ridiculousness once and for all*. He came down to the living room and told you *he didn't care who did it, he was tired of hearing all that screaming*. And he told you to say you

were sorry. And you did. But you were not. Sorry. And your sister did not forgive you. Not really.

That is not how forgiveness works in a children's story. In a children's story, you *are* sorry. And your sister *does* forgive you.

Like Betty forgave Rain.

Like Rain forgave Betty.

As for Claire and Braith, well, these things take time.

Which takes us almost to the end of our story. Almost.

Rain and Betty escaped of course. This *is* a children's story after all, and it would hardly be worth telling if it didn't turn out well for *someone*.

Four nights after they had resolved to live together in their dark prison, to be there for each other in that frozen soul either until they died of old age or starvation, a light came through the darkness.

It was not the warm beacon of a nightlight. Not quite. There was no tether to the soul as a nightlight tethers itself to the fears of a child. It was more like a shooting star that passed the corner of Betty's eye, so subtle she could not have been sure if she had seen it, so subtle she would never have sensed it if she hadn't been in the midst of so much darkness.

And then Rain sensed one.

There were a few *did-you-see-thats* before either of them caught it head on. Just a hint of light where there had been none before. A kiss of something to break the darkness. A light that disappeared the moment you looked at it, but which stuck around the edges of your vision if you pretended not to.

The sisters walked toward it, feeling their way, pushing through the overgrowth, stumbling on rocks they could not see, hitting their heads on low branches, scratching themselves on thorns. Yet, what else was there to do? In that overgrown tangle of frozen sins that was their new home, in that world of crowded

darkness, how could anyone stop themselves from walking toward the light?

And when the light led them to the end of a cavern, when their journey ended at a solid wall, there was nothing for it but to dig.

"It wasn't exactly a wall," Elizabeth told me later. "but, like, sort of *wall like*, y'know? Like a wall, sort of, but more, like browner, sort of? Ok, like, it was *there* for sure, like *stopping us* and whatever, but more like in layers or something. Like we weren't so much digging as moving things out of the way. Like bark peeling off a tree, and you have to keep peeling until the whole tree is gone, maybe? Or like, ok, this is it, probably. Like you go into a really messy house, so messy you can't find the floor, right? And, if you want to get out, to like, get to the door or whatever, you have to start pushing things out the way. The thing is, though, there is so much stuff that you can't just push it because it all pushes up against each other and soon there is too much to move at all. So instead, you start picking things up and putting them off to the side to make a path or whatever, except if you pile it up too close, it just gets in the way again, so you have to, like, move stuff into the next room. What we were doing was like that, but definitely, like colder and spicier, and browner. Mostly browner, I guess."

Well, I suppose Betty doesn't always make things more clear, but you get the idea. And when they did push enough things out of the way, when they did peel away all the bark, the light got brighter. And brighter.

And the little night light the mortuary left on to keep people from stumbling into corpses in the night, the not quite night light, the light adults sometimes leave on to keep from tripping the in the dark, or what my friends in the theatre call a *ghost light*, led the sisters home.

It is hard to say what might have become of the sisters had they not escaped. When the body was cremated, which means *burned until nothing remained but ashes*, was that frozen soul also destroyed? I'm sorry to say I have no answer for you. The body is gone. If the soul is not, it is surely unfindable.

The funeral was a solemn affair, as funerals so often are. Family and friends cried, embraced, and promised to remember Estuary Alabama even as they *moved on*. Some weeks later, a small gathering of old friends stood upon a suburban river bank, to scatter the ashes of that broken soul.

Jessica and Cassius were there. Claire and Braith were there. Betty and Rain watched from the bridge above.

Braith said:

"I don't think it was anything she had any control over. It was like she was at the mercy of this, this *thing* that none of us could do anything about. Like there was this thing on the inside, and no matter what she did, what any of us did, it just kept hurting. I don't think...how should I say this...because I don't...I think it's important that none of us think...that none of us think she was trying to hurt us. That in some way we did something to her, that she blamed us for something, that somehow this was our fault. I felt like that for a long time. And I tried. I tried so hard. But I just couldn't fight her anymore. None of us could. Well, I couldn't anyway. I gave up. I thought, this just isn't worth it. Not her. Not Stu. It wasn't that Stu wasn't worth it. It was that *it* wasn't worth it. Because no matter what I did, no matter how much love I gave her, *it* wasn't going away. And *it* hurt me too. So I stopped trying. Because it wasn't my fault. And it wasn't your fault, Claire. It was just...it was just too strong."

Cassius said:

"For the longest time, Braith, I thought it was the divorce. I wondered if Jess and I just got back together, just came together

for Estuary, for her sake, maybe she would have been ok. That she was suffering from my selfishness or some other ridiculous thing. That if I just made a sacrifice worthy of her, she would forgive me...that if she forgave me, maybe she would be ok. Maybe she would be *fixed*. But I think you're right, Braith. I don't think it was something any of us did. I think she just *felt* things more than the rest of us."

Jessica said:

"Maybe you're right, Cass. Remember when she was in high school? Remember how she didn't seem to feel *anything*? I used to think she was going to turn into some sort of, I don't know, *socio-path* or something. She just didn't seem to be bothered by anything. Maybe it all just caught up with her. Maybe she just didn't know how to find the middle ground. Maybe she was just...born...maybe she was born to be...extreme, maybe."

Claire said:

"It doesn't matter. You're all trying to excuse her because why? Because she's dead? Fuck her. We tried to help her and she told us to go fuck ourselves. Fuck her. Fuck her. I tried so many times. I did so many things. I gave up so much for her, and she just shit in my face. Fuck her. Listen to yourself, Braith. How many hours did you sit by her bed holding her hand, just waiting, waiting for some tiny sign, some minute signal that she cared the least bit about you? About anyone. And you Mr. and Mrs. Alabama, how much money did you spend on her? How many times did you take care of her when she came back home? How many times did you try? And how many times did she spit in your face? I don't care if it was her fault or not. She never even fucking tried. When was she going to care about me? About Braith? When was she going to even fucking *recognize* our marriage. Our family? All she ever cared about was herself and we spent the better part of our lives

doting on her like we weren't even worth thinking about. Well fuck her. Fuck her....fuck her."

Braith held onto Claire as she cried into his coat, his bare hands feeling the numb of cold while he refused to let go. Cassius looked awkward as he reached down for the simple urn and walked to the edge of the river bank.

Taking the lid off, Cassius gently scattered the ashes of his daughter onto the water, where the current pulled them toward a bridge just ahead.

He said:

"Goodnight, Stu. I never stopped loving you."

And almost in unison, the others said the same.

Above them, sitting on the edge of the bridge, unseen by anyone, two demons put their arms around each other's shoulders. Quietly, mournfully, they too said, "Goodnight Stu."

And so goes the legend of Apple Brown Betty, the demon who changed our world. She was not proud of the world she gave us, a world where sometimes we feel the weight of sins that are not our own, but she knows as well as any of them that there is no turning back.

I have promised you a moral, an adult moral. An ugly moral. *A moral we wish were not true, but which cannot be denied except by argumentative internet trolls itching for a fight, and whom nobody of moderate intelligence takes very seriously anyway.* I suppose I hardly need to tell you what it is. You've spent far too long in a world where nice guys finish last and the winners are the ones who take care of themselves first. Where we hurt the ones we love the most before we can learn our lessons. Well, I never said this story was for children.

Yet, this *is* a children's story, and we must, before all is done, learn our lessons. Betty learned many, of course. Rain did too. This

would hardly be a children's story if they did not. They learned to put others before themselves, to trust love over ambition, to never give up on your sister, and, of course, that sometimes you have to do the thing you fear the most, if you ever want to feel whole.

Most of all, though, they learned that before you can forgive others, you must forgive yourself. That, sometimes, like the ashes of Estuary Alabama scattered upon the river, you must allow your sins to wash away like water under a bridge.

end of book